

REVIEW ABOUT THE CURRENT SITUATION OF H'RÊ PEOPLE'S MUSIC AT DIFFERENT LOCATIONS IN QUẢNG NGÃI PROVINCE, VIETNAM

Nguyễn Thế Truyền

Culture and Arts Magazine (Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism of Vietnam),
Visiting lecturer at HCMC Conservatory of Music,
contact: thetryenvhnt@gmail.com

Abstract

Segmenting H'rê music regions in the mountains of Quảng Ngãi is very difficult. In reality, the differences in music practices between the H'rê people and the H'rê regional dialects are unclear, as well as the problem of cross-cultural relationships in music taking place with neighboring ethnic groups. However, some scholarly approaches (Tô Ngọc Thanh, 1995; Lê Huy and Minh Hiến, 1994) still boldly segment the H'rê music with the desire to provide some scientific information about a cultural phenomenon of the H'rê people in a specific location. The article divides H'rê music practices in Quảng Ngãi into two relatively different regions: the center region and the suburban region. In particular, the center region includes the districts of Sơn Hà, Ba Tơ and Minh Long; The suburban region includes places that preserve, promote, reconcile music practices that are at risk of disappearance. In addition, the article also highlights the different elements of H'rê music practices in different regions of Quảng Ngãi province.

Keywords

H'rê music, Gongs of H'rê, Musical dialects, Quảng Ngãi province

INTRODUCTION

The H'rê people speak a language that is part of the Môn - Khmer language group and the South Asian language family, living mainly in the mountainous regions of Quảng Ngãi province, with the 19th largest population out of 54 ethnic groups in Vietnam. They also have other names: Mọi¹ Đá Vách, Mọi Sơn Phòng, Thượng Ba Tơ, Mọi Lũy, Chom, Chăm Rê, Chăm Quảng Ngãi, and others (...). In Quảng Ngãi, the number of H'rê ethnic people live along the H'rê River is more crowded than in other places. The article contributes to the study and comparison of H'rê music values in different regions within Quảng Ngãi province.

Currently, the writing style of this ethnic group's name is not yet unified: H'rê, Hre, Hrê, Hore, Horê. It is agreed upon to adopt the term with which the H'rê call themselves "H'rê". This is the name associated with the name of a river in their supposed homeland (H'rê river), which would probably be more exactly understood.

LITERATURE ON H'RÊ MUSIC PRACTICES

Some documents mention music practices of the H'rê ethnic group such as "*Vietnamese traditional instruments*" by Lê Huy and Minh Hiến, World Publishing House, Hanoi - 1994.

¹ "Mọi" comes with the meaning of "the wilds".

Due to the wide scope of the study, some of the H'rê instruments were not mentioned in sections.

“Introduction of Vietnamese Ethnic Musical Instruments” by Tô Ngọc Thanh (1995), consists of some examples of the H'rê people.

A journal article under the title *“H'rê Folk Music”* by Thế Truyền (2000), and one under the title *“Folk Music and Dance of the Cadong, Co, H'rê Ethnic People in Quảng Ngãi Province”* by Lê Toàn (2001) show some more evidence. In these documents, Thế Truyền and Lê Toàn dedicated a larger part to the topic. The folk songs and instruments of this ethnic group have been mentioned in later field work reports of the author about “H'rê Folk Music” that are based on long term observations in ethnic minority regions of western Quảng Ngãi from the year 2000 to 2001. The reports were followed by *“Instruments of the H'rê ethnic group in Quảng Ngãi”* by Nguyễn Thế Truyền (2010). This book is a fairly completed and detailed monograph about H'rê musical instruments. However, H'rê folk music in different regions of Quảng Ngãi province is not mentioned in this document.

METHODS OF RESEARCH

This paper used methods of music research, sociology, field surveys in specific communities of musicians (P'lây² H'rê), as well as methods of synthesizing, analyzing materials and documents.

Through doing fieldwork, it is very difficult and not feasible to divide H'rê music in the Quảng Ngãi mountainous region into different groups. Due to the fact that the differences in music between several H'rê regions are not clear, as well as the problem of cross-cultural events in practicing music which are taking place among neighboring groups of people.

However, academically, H'rê music can be further segmented with the goal to provide some more detailed information about music practices of the H'rê people in a specific location.

CENTRAL REGION AND SUBURBS

H'rê music practices in Quảng Ngãi can be divided into two relatively different regions, temporarily called: center (crowded) region and suburbs.

CENTRAL REGION

Based on the H'rê population density in Quảng Ngãi province, the densely populated region includes districts of Sơn Hà, Ba Tơ and Minh Long.

² “P'lây” = group of musicians that know each other, friends, family members, the meaning of coming from the same hamlet.

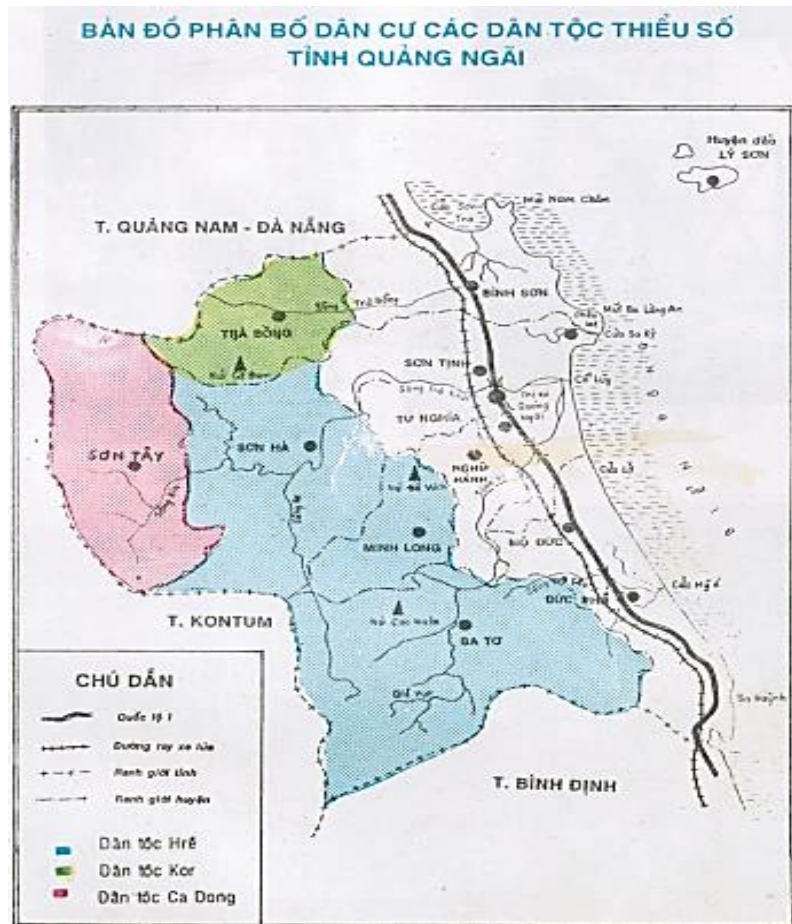


FIGURE 1: Map of Population distribution (ethnic minorities in Quảng Ngãi). (Source by courtesy of Office for Culture and Information. 1996).

SƠN HÀ

Most of H'rê instrumental music and songs are found in this region. Traditional practices include: calêu (love songs), kachôi (autobiographic songs), t'jeo (worship songs), taoi (lamenting); musical instruments used include: *chinh* (3 units), *tàlía*, *akhung*, *pênhpút*, *amó*, *rangói*, *rôđoang*, *b'rooc*, *k'râu*, and others. This information could be collected over a longer period of time by the author.



FIGURE 2: *Rangói* (canister-left, *rangói*-right); Figure 3: The stacking set of *chinh* with 3 units; Figure 4: *Amó* and canister for preservation of H'rê people (photos by the author).

BA TƯ

Here, the Ba Thành commune is chosen (Ba Thành commune has 4 hamlets: Teng Village, Trường An, Huy Ba 1, Huy Ba 2) to focus on. This commune is about 10 km far from the district's center, to the South. Here, is the capital of H'rê culture, and this includes music

practices. There are a number of H'rê artists well-known among the country's majority such as Đinh Thị B'rát, Đinh Văn Ước, Đinh Thị Nứa, Phạm Văn Cường, Phạm Văn Nin, and others. One can see the prominence of the *túc chinh* (playing the *chinh*) and a number of folk music genres such as *talêu*, *kachôi* that no other H'rê region can provide.



FIGURE 5: Artist Đinh Thị B'rát (photo by the author).



FIGURE 6: Artist Đinh Văn Ước making instruments (photo by the author); FIGURE 7: Instruments made by artist Đinh Văn Ước (photo by the author).



FIGURE 8: H'rê people's *chinh k'la* (photo by the author).

MINH LONG MUSIC REGION

In the middle of Minh Long, there is the Long Mai community, which lives very close to the district centre. As in Ba Thành (or Ba Tơ), people at this place may try to represent the music of the Minh Long region. There are found H'rê musical assets that are not easily to find in other regions, such as singing during worshipping *Cham Voray*, or singing *Dam Hoa*. The H'rê people in the "Rvá" are very passionate about their *pênhpút* (made from two neohouzeaua, a specific type of bamboo).



FIGURE 9: H'rê people's set of *chinh* (photo by the author).

SUBURBS

For a long time, in folklore studies (i.e. Nguyen Trac Di, 1972) was often talked about that this zone is the peripheral region of died out habits. However, in reality, the music survey of the H'rê people in Quảng Ngãi did not entirely result in confirmation. There are suburban regions to store and promote cultural activities. The suburbs of the music practices and the suburbs in general are seemingly in danger of disappearing.

There is the Sơn Thượng community, which is in the suburban region of Sơn Hà. Although called suburban, the resources of music practicing among the H'rê in Sơn Thượng are quite intense. In Tà Pa hamlet, there are very talented singers and performers, such as Đinh Ngọc Su, Y Véc, Đinh Văn Dát, and others.

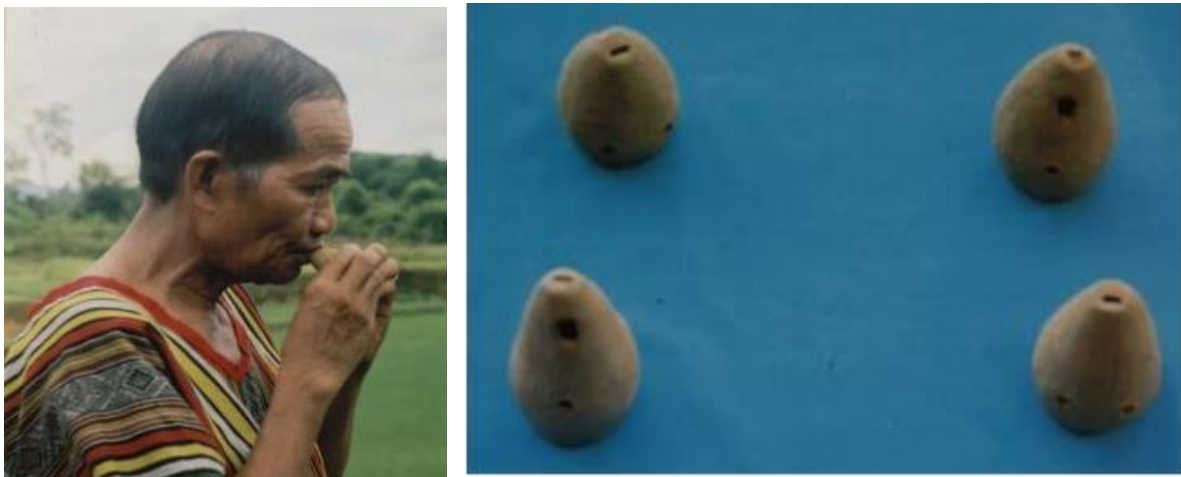


FIGURE 10: Artist Đinh Ngọc Su playing *tàvố*; Figure 11: *Tàvố* made of soil (photos by the author).



FIGURE 12: H'rê people's *akhung* (photo by the author).

Especially, artist Đinh Ngọc Su, who knows a lot about customs and habits as well as about H'rê music, can reproduce many folk songs and music by heart, as well as creates and performs almost all kinds of musical instruments. Being recorded and introduced widely within the country artist Đinh Ngọc Su and has been recognized as one of the "Folk Artists" by the Vietnam Folk Arts Association.

The suburb of Mang Cà Muồng hamlet, Sơn Bao commune, Sơn Hà district has a very special position adjacent to the residence of Xơ Đăng people (Cadong group) in Sơn Tây district and Co people in Tây Trà. According to artist Đinh Văn Ca, most of the Xơ Đăng people in the hamlet identify themselves as H'rê people. Music activities in the hamlet are mainly gongs. Besides using *chinh* (3 units), the H'rê and Xơ Đăng people play gong sets, each with 2 to 7 or even 10 single gongs.

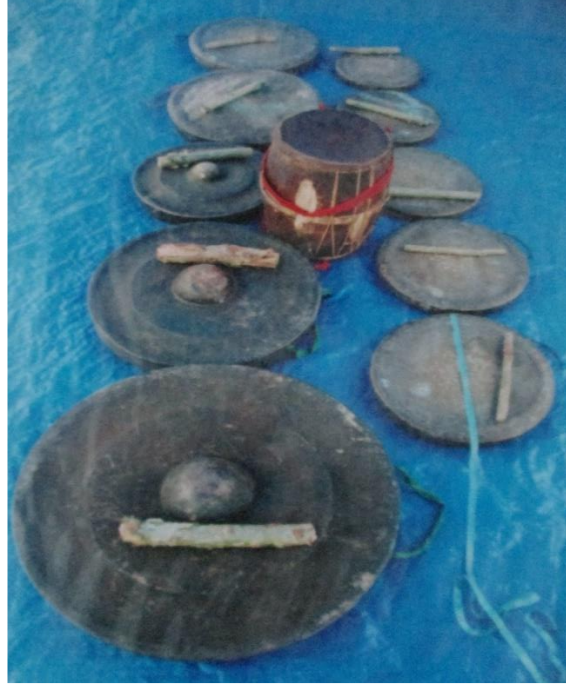


Figure 13: The set of *ching* with 7 units + 1 drum; Figure 14: The set of *ching* with 10 units + 1 drum (photos by the author).

Also, there are some suburbs such as X'râu hamlet. The Ba Nam (Ba Tơ) community is located adjacent to the residence of Ba Na (Kriêm group) in two communities called An Toàn and An Nghĩa, situated in An Lão district, Bình Định province. Here, in addition to the traditional 3 units *ching*, the H're people also performed the five units *ching* along with a dance team made of girls in beautiful embellished costumes.



FIGURE 15: *Ching* dance team at X'râu hamlet, Ba Nam commune; Figure 16: 5 units *ching* team at X'râu hamlet, Ba Nam commune (photos by the author).

In the suburban region of Trà Tân commune (Trà Bông, Quảng Ngãi), there are four hamlets: Tà Ót, Tà Ngon, Trường Biện and Trường Giang. In particular, Trường Giang hamlet (local people called p'lây H'rê) is a H'rê hamlet. Trà Bông is a mountainous district adjacent to Sơn Hà district, where many Co people reside already for a long time. Through our surveys and investigations, the current situation appears as follows:

An exchange of cultural activities, especially for the Co, did not take place. It can be explained by the cultural coagulation, the complexity of having to live separately, or because of individual group pride. According to the author's observation, the cultural exchange does not take place between the H'rê and the Co in P'lây H'rê due to all of these reasons.

According to the elderly artist Đinh Thị Sa (born in 1939), P'ây H'rê has not been a place of cultural activities such as requested by earlier visitors for a long time. Therefore, nobody owns any *chinh*. Elders are unable to sing *kachôi* and only know a few *talêu* songs³, but it is difficult for them to remember the text and melody. This strange phenomenon possibly shows that there has been a cultural disruption which must have happened to them and the H'rê community here.

The suburban region in Trường Lệ hamlet, Hành Tín Đông commune, Nghĩa Hành district (Kinh people district), in the midland region of Quảng Ngãi, adjacent to Minh Long district⁴. In particular, Trường Lệ hamlet has H'rê people who have lived there for many generations, but the population is very sparse. Their current state of music practices is alarmingly at the risk of loss. According to the old artists Phạm Thị Hè (born in 1933) and Phạm Thị Bum (born in 1945), the H'rê people here only have a few *chinh*s, only used for art festivals, the rest of the time is almost forgotten.

In general, in these suburbs, H'rê music has faded a lot compared to the middle regions. Many elderly people and young people in the suburbs sang revolutionary songs (during the first and second Indochina War); some folk songs in the Central Highlands are quite popular: "Celebrating new rice", "Sanitary chopsticks", "Ơi anh ơi"⁵; The song "Nhay sạp" and "Chap pa flower" are absorbed by the Kinh people; some of the songs follow the boléro scheme as propagated by the Saigon regime (before April 30, 1975); some famous French songs have been translated as well. The local songs and instruments only exist through the memory of a few elders.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN MUSIC REGIONS

Some of the different factors between H'rê music regions in Quảng Ngãi, are: some different names, strengths of music regions, and some different songs.

The names of H'rê folk songs and instruments differ in the named regions. In Ba Tơ, Minh Long, the genre of love songs is called *talêu*, and in Sơn Hà, that genre is called *calêu*. While in Sơn Hà the music instrument is called "*vàpút*", in Minh Long it is called the "*pênhpút*".

Regarding the strengths of the music regions, it can be seen that each H'rê region in Quảng Ngãi has its own strengths. While the strengths of the Sơn Hà region are the use of *b'rooc*, *pênhpút*, *akhung*, *tàvố*, and *rođoang*, the strengths of the Ba Tơ region are *chinh* (three units), *chinh k'la* (made from bamboo) and other types of local songs like *talêu* and *kachôi*. The H'rê in the Ba Tơ region along the Liên river have a very good tradition of *túc chinh*, but not the habit of using other instruments. Many valuable patterns of *túc chinh* were kept in this region, such as those of Phạm Văn Cường⁶.

The strength of the Minh Long region is the *pênhpút* and the *t'jeo* genre⁷.

There are instruments that are present in one region but not in others. Like *akhung* and *tàvố* in Sơn Hà, which cannot be found in Minh Long and Ba Tơ. Another example is *pênhpút* consisting of two pipes in Minh Long, which cannot be found in the Sơn Hà region - although for H'rê people, these instruments are easy to make. There are differences between the three -

³ Local people call it "calêu" – similar to the people in the central region.

⁴ There are seven hamlets: Thiên Xuân, Nguyễn Hòa, Đồng Giữa, Nhơn Lộc 1, Nhơn Lộc 2, Khánh Giang, Trường Lệ.

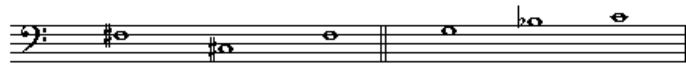
⁵ Which possibly belongs to Ba Na.

⁶ Secretary of Ba Thành Commune Party Committee.

⁷ Singing during worshipping.

túc *chinh* set scales in the region. For example, the scales in the Ba Tơ region is different from that in Minh Long as follows:

The pitch in the scales in Ba Nam and Ba Tơ:



While the pitch in the three-túc *chinh* set scales of Long Mai commune is different as following:

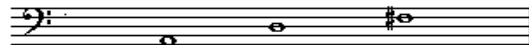


FIGURE 16: Reserchers and Prof. Tamura Fumi at H'rê region (Photo by courtesy of Tamura Fumi).

FINAL THOUGHTS

Regarding H'rê music in Quảng Ngãi province, there are different regions, which are the central region and the suburbs. They consist of varied features regarding their music practices and their knowledge about traditions. This can open up many different research directions, not only for music studies but also for a number of other social sciences such as cultural anthropology and history. These studies may allow for first insights as a point of departure and can then step by step analyse a suggested relatedness of these differences.

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