

Khap, Timbre, and the Non-Lexical Vocable

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This presentation explores timbral characteristics of the Tai Dam vocal genre Khap, focusing on its use of the non-lexical vocable. The Tai Dam are a distinct ethnic group with communities in Vietnam, Thailand, Laos, Southern China, and Des Moines, Iowa. While a number of studies have been published on the language and culture of the Tai Dam, few have focused specifically on their music. Khap is the most important vocal genre for the Tai Dam, performed either solo or accompanied. From original fieldwork conducted in Thailand, Vietnam, Laos, and Des Moines, Iowa, I analyze a variety of khaki performances focusing on timbre in relation to non-lexical vocables. Spectral images are used to visualize the acoustic signal and aid in the timbral discussion.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Tai Dam khap is the frequent presence of non-lexical vocables, or wordless sounds, dominated by the “e” vowel, as heard in the English word “her”. Regardless of village, province, or country, these vocables are consistently present in Tai Dam khap. I argue these vocables function formally as signifiers of phrasal, sectional, and thematic shifts within a performance. The “e” vowel, in particular, emerges as a timbral signpost for listeners, highlighting both the ends and beginnings of phrases and sections, as well as the shift of textual themes. While the “e” vowel is a sonic constant, timbral variety is still achieved through the invention of each individual performer. Indeed, the variety of timbre displayed for the non-lexical vocables is one of the main determiners for khap expertise.