

'TALK TO HER': COURTSHIP POLITICS BEHIND THE TAIWANESE ABORIGINAL JAW'S HARP

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THE AMIS TELEPHONE

THERE is an old, pseudo-romantic tradition among the Amis aborigines of Eastern Taiwan, involving a bamboo jaw's harp called the *datok*.

Also known as the *tiw tiw* and sometimes *fijiq*, the *datok* is almost exclusively an instrument performed by males.¹ It was said to have been employed by eager young lads who, in the evenings, would play secret tunes outside their beloveds' windows as a prelude to asking the girls out for a rendezvous. Sometimes unmarried lads were also said to have kept themselves amused, playing the *datok* when they were lonely.²

This was a very convenient arrangement in the days before electricity and telephone (pre-1940s Taiwan). Playing the *datok* served the purpose of allowing the lad to "talk to" or "serenade" his love - perhaps in a fashion some might associate with sixteenth century troubadours in Europe. It also served as the perfect opportunity for asking the girl out on a date without hemming and hawing over a real face-to-face conversation which did not befit "proper" Amis society of the 1940s. To the outsider, at least, this might seem a much more "romantic" and couched way of suggesting a private assignation.

Scratching away at this somewhat "mythical" and sentimental surface, however, we find that the courting ritual behind the making and playing of the *datok* has deeper implications upon Amis culture at large. There is significance here, in particular, on the gender politics that drive the community.

Who are the Amis? Consisting of a population of 140,000, they are the largest of nine official aboriginal groups living in Taiwan, these aboriginal groups are the original settlers of the island before the arrival of the Han Chinese in the sixteenth century. A matriarchal community that is also segregated according to age-grade (*kaput*)³, the Amis live in some few hundred villages scattered along the East Coast from Hualien to Taitung (Fig A). In reality of course, the figures are not quite stable. Many young Amis have moved to the larger cities of Taipei and Kaoshiung in search of work in construction and other

The Distribution Map of The Aborigines on Taiwan Island

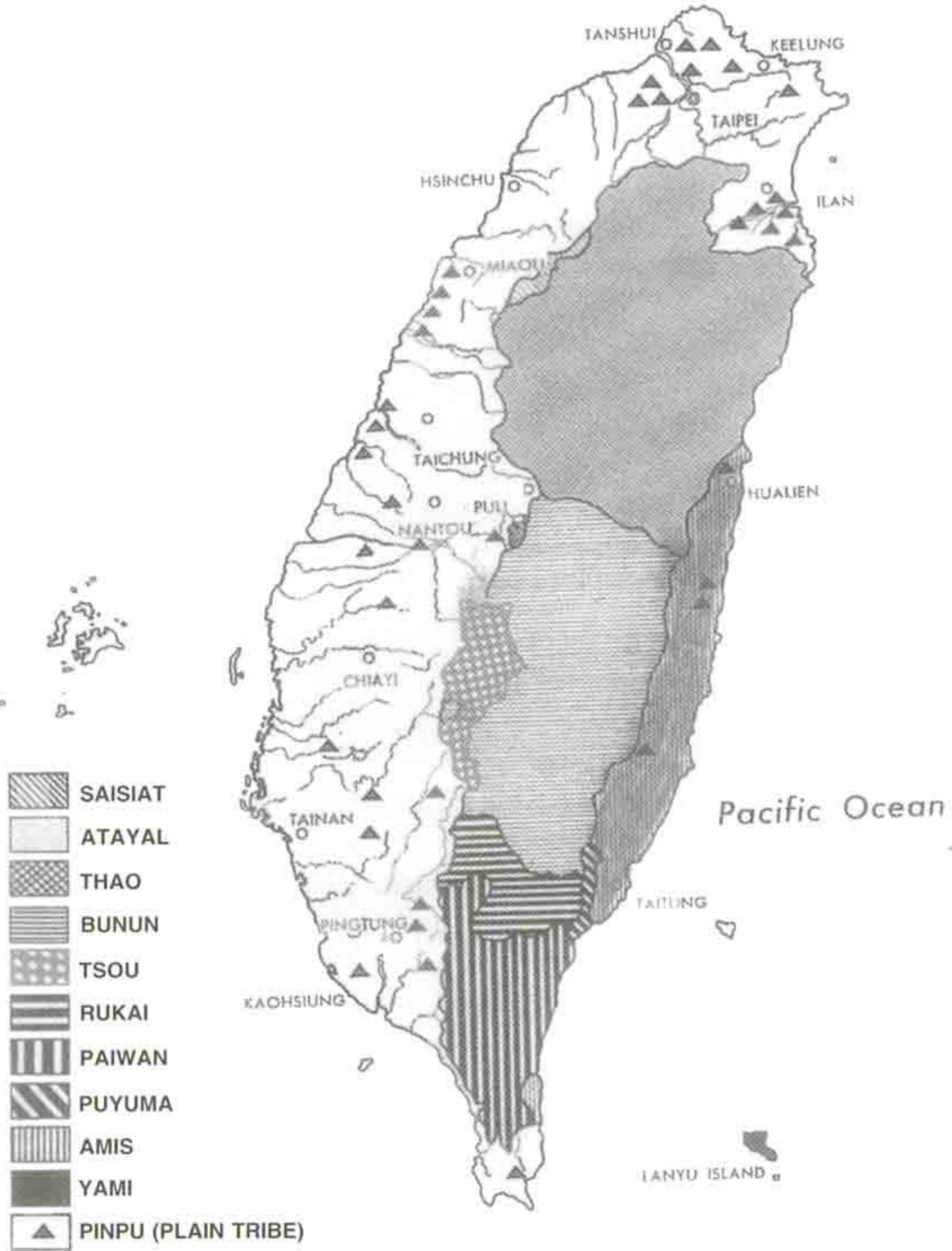


Fig A:

The Amis make up the largest community of indigenous peoples of Taiwan, shown here in the Eastern stretches of a distribution map with other "official" communities.

industries. There is also considerable intermarriage between the Amis and other ethnic communities such as the Puyuma and Bunun people, and also with the Han Chinese.

Once a year at least, however, the Amis return to their respective villages to celebrate the Kiloma'an. ⁴This usually takes place during the July - September period⁵ (Fig B). The Kiloma'an is sometimes referred to as a Harvest Festival of sorts - depending on which village you visit and what its respective mythology subscribes to. But very often, all generations of each Amis family are found returning to their village to celebrate the rice harvest in a few concentrated days of circle dancing, singing, drinking and other rituals. The young men, who congregate in age-grade groups (*kaput*), sometimes also hang out and revert to the so-called "traditional" ways. This would mean the hunting - sometimes of a pig; often it is also fish. These elements are sometimes inbuilt within festival rituals per se.

Outside the Kiloma'an and non-calendrical events such as weddings (Fig C), funerals and the opening of a new house, most "musical" activity as we understand it - by no means in the same way that an Amis villager might - is concentrated in occasional post-dinner singing and drinking held in the patio of some of the older folk (Tan 2000).

This kind of life, however, is often mourned by the Amis themselves as "dying out" in the face of urbanisation, industrialisation, sinicization and other usual suspects. In some cases, such as the making and playing of the *datok*, the "traditional" way of life is sometimes considered extinct.

Indeed, through the course of my fieldwork held through March, June - August 2000, July 2001 and March 2002, while I could find ready singers - mainly in their 40s and above - who would regale me with folksongs, it was difficult if not almost impossible to find living Amis who could make or play the *datok*. Most practitioners of the so-called "instrument" were already dead. However, many Amis villagers I spoke to about the subject did have something to say about it as far as its use and its iconic value as a symbol of times gone by - "our version of a prehistoric telephone"⁶ was concerned.

WHO PLAYS THE *DATOK*?

In the course of my fieldwork, I managed to track down three very old men separately in Taitung, Kaotai and Pa'ong.⁷ They claimed to know how to make and play the *datok*. One of them was an Amis cultural expert living in Taitung

Fig B:

Circle dancing takes place over a Kiloma'an festival in Fafokod, Taitung.

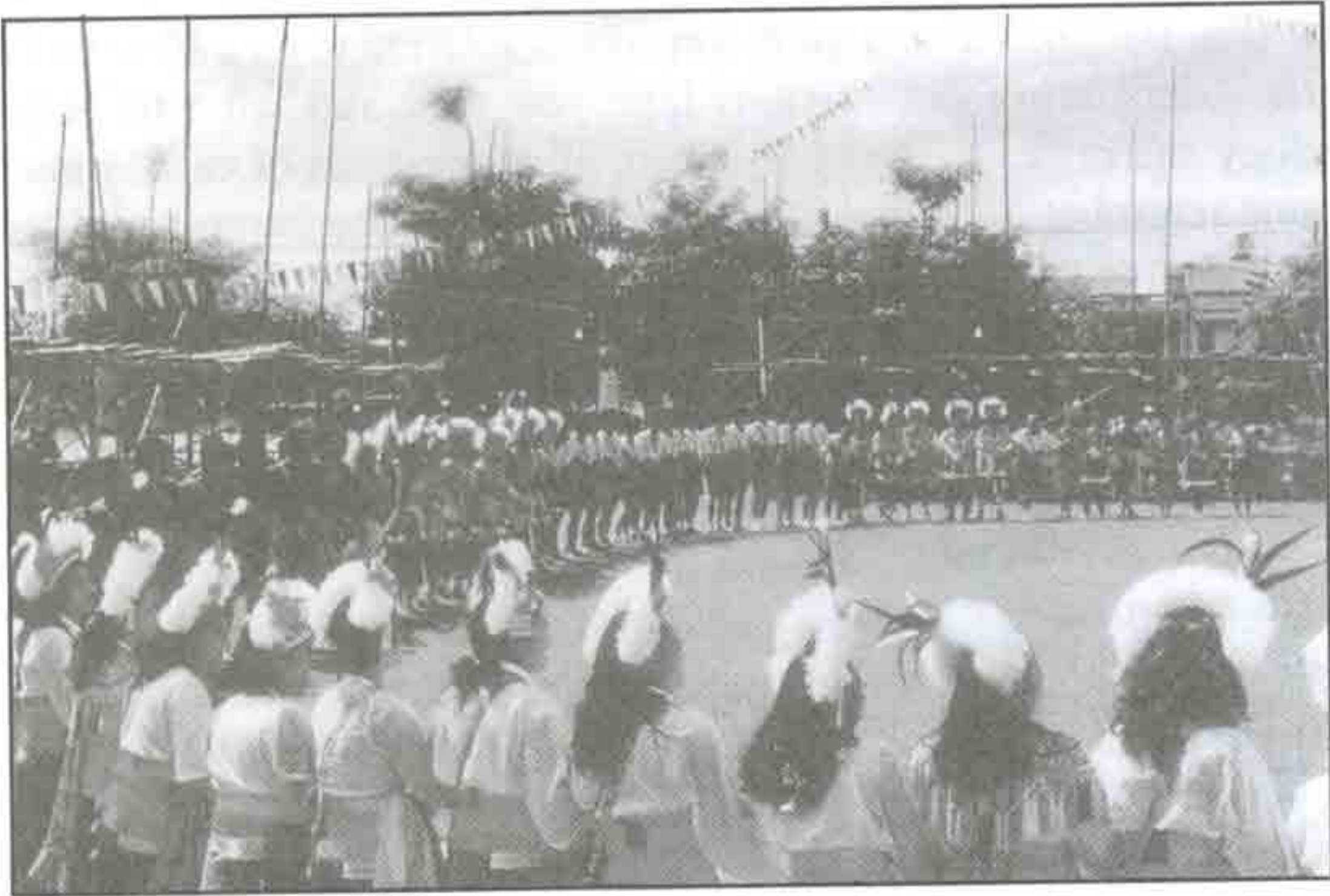


Foto oleh SE Tan

Fig C:

Amis weddings have grown to feature choreographed dances featuring artists in neo-traditional costumes, moving to folk-pop beats.

called Lifok (Huang Kuei-chao) (Fig D) who has also published a valuable essay on the *datok* itself.⁸

It was from interviews with these three, and others who knew about or heard or saw the *datok*, that I have pieced together the following construct of courting rituals in Taiwan of the 1940s and before. I would like to qualify, however, that the picture that I am painting of Amis society is one of a pre-modern society. Some of these traditions have “died out” or have been adjusted with the advent of cultural societal change; other elements continue to be manifested today in re-contextualised forms - more on this will be discussed later.

For now, first consider that I posed as many interview subjects as possible the question of why it was always the man, and not woman, who played the *datok* and who had to carry out the “courting” at night. Here, everybody seemed to have a different answer.

Some said the instrument was “too difficult for women to play”⁹, others said “the girls never learnt how to make it”¹⁰ - not a reason per se, but an interesting explanation anyhow, as we will find out later.

A very telling comment was that “women shouldn’t go wandering alone by themselves at night in the first place”,¹¹ hence no need for the *datok*.

This distinction of gender roles here in the practice of the *datok* is especially interesting, given that Amis society is officially matriarchal, whereby the man marries into the woman’s family and lives there, after an extended period of staying in the community’s Men’s Lodge and being treated as “public property”. Until he is married, he is in theory a person or helper that any family can call on to carry out backbreaking tasks.

The woman, on the other hand, is the head of the household who inherits each family’s property. It would thus not be unusual to wonder if she also takes lead in courtship matters concerning finding a suitable husband to continue the family line.

This was certainly true of Amis communities in the 1940s and before. Relations between unmarried men and women were not encouraged in public. Pre-marital sex, for one, was not condoned and it was said to be punishable by stripping and flogging in public.

But tradition decreed that a woman could set about courting a man by volunteering to help out with daytime chores at the home of her object of interest, while he himself lived and worked at the Men’s Lodge.

“Matriarchy” in Amis society, however, does not automatically mean that the balance of power is always tilted towards the woman. While the woman is lord of the household and of all private domain - somewhat fulfilling her classic role of the Nurturer - the man is lord of the forest and sea where he hunts and fishes; he controls village politics and all other public matters.

This balance between the two male and female spheres of influence are seen in how the two different sexes control a village’s linealogical construct in schemes which make cross-sections of each other. While the woman determines the family name, the man rules through the age-grade system (*kaput*): The captain of each age-grade that governs the one before it, according to history and sequence of birth, is always a man.



Foto oleh SE Tan

Fig D:

*Amis elder
Lifok gets his
hands on a
datok.*

HOW DOES GENDER POLITICS, AS SUCH, RELATE TO THE DATOK ITSELF?

The public versus private roles of woman and man are articulated through the former’s claiming of the domain of the family, in visiting the household of her intended in bright daylight, as opposed to visiting the men’s lodge (public domain) itself.

The man, who defers to the woman on all family matters, is discouraged from making the first move in the open - whether in approaching the woman or going to her household - except on official occasions such as festivals. But he

is allowed to “counterstrike” and equalise the power-play in the evenings. He “hunts” her (*sapi-kiyarok*) in the dark as he might hunt animals at night, still remaining in the safety of public (though darkened) domain, when he plays the *datok* outside her window.

There is an amount of secrecy involved in the manoeuvre. The identity of the jaw's harp player remains anonymous, in accordance with taboo around open courtship. The player is only recognised by the receiver - the intended girl - who “deciphers the code”.

This camouflage of identity and the otherwise quiet/discreet value of the *datok* are important attributes which prove it more effective than shouting a beloved's name or singing an actual lovesong to her as a serenade. More conventional methods of communication, such as throwing stones through a window or sending love notes do not work as well here, simply because “there were no glass windowpanes to hit and most of the Amis community were illiterate anyway”.¹² Of course, instances of mixed-up identities occurred during the *datok* assignments, whereby a girl could end up stepping out of her house to meet the wrong guy, sometimes to her horror and his subsequent damnation by way of a good scolding.

Thus, the uniqueness and secret nature of each boy's melody would have to be safeguarded from imitators. A woman could sometimes attract more than one suitor, whereupon she could choose “the boy who plays the most beautiful melody”¹³ to be her love. In the perfect world, she steps out upon hearing a good tune, discovers her suitor for the first time and accepts him. They then decide upon a regular telephone “code” by which he signals her for her future evening dates. It is, as many Amis say, quite like a “pre-historic telephone”.

A NON-REPERTOIRE OF NON-MUSIC

What might constitute a good enough tune for a “code”, then? And how does one go about learning these tunes?

As with all jaw's harps of the world, the basic principle of playing the *datok* is simple. Its execution, however, is a little more difficult.

A brief explanation can first be given. The fixed end of the *datok*'s tongue is held tight by a binding which, in turn, must be gripped even tighter by the player's left hand in “performance”. His right hand vibrates the free end of the tongue by jerking the *datok* body itself, through pulling an attached string.

Harmonics and changes in volume are achieved by putting the *datok* up to the mouth cavity and varying the shape of this space.

A survey among the three known *datok* players, however, reveals no formal scheme whereby one is taught to play the *datok* - whether in the Men's Lodge or in other public contexts. The consensus seems to be that there is no "repertoire" of songs, or even known names for tunes or consistently identifiable melodies.

Lifok¹⁴ explains that this is partly caused by a lack of consolidated memory in the face of a very narrow "window period" of the *datok's* usage: the few years between early adulthood to marriage. As he remembers, for some couples, it was not so much a matter of learning entire tunes but simply snatches of melodies. "The girl who knew her regular boy friend would just need to hear a few twangs of the *datok* to figure out he was around before she went out to meet him."¹⁵

Among the three players and those who had heard of the *datok*, learning was attributed to one or more of four main sources:

1. Experimenting freely;¹⁶
2. Stealing glances and listening to contemporaries and seniors practising by themselves in the Men's Lodge at night, or in the outdoor in the evening¹⁷. (Daytime practice was unheard of, given its secret nature);
3. Learning from their fathers¹⁸; and
4. Listening to their mothers.¹⁹

The final category is especially interesting, given that it is the man who plays the instrument and not the woman. But the answer as to why all three *datok* players have consistently named their mothers as their "teachers" is obvious. While a man would play perhaps at most a small stock of melodies and probably settle on the single secret code with his love, the woman would have been exposed to several different types of tunes, depending on the number of suitors she received.²⁰

Lifok remembers: "With the *datok*, because it's a secret instrument that men play to women at night, you've got to get your mother to sing the songs she heard your Dad play. Mother always knows best. She didn't only get to hear Dad, but all the male suitors' songs!" (Tan 2000).

Even within the so-called male-influenced and controlled sphere of playing the *datok*, it can be seen that the woman is not simply a passive recipient. In the

short-term reference frame, she responds immediately to the invitation to an assignation. In the long-term frame, she stores up the “tunes” for future use and secretly passes on their power to her son, who will respect her as head of the family through childhood and adulthood until marriage. When a man finds a wife, his allegiance to his mother finally loosens, coinciding with the functional achievement - and by extension, exhaustion of effective period of usage - of the *datok* itself. Its first life cycle is over.

A new life cycle, including the in-built courtship cycle, begins. The beauty of this system is that at any one time, there is a constant balance of power between the male and female spheres of influence, spelt out through the usage of the *datok* - even indirectly among the women, who sing and pass on tunes although they cannot play the instrument.

Through the course of fieldwork, getting the old womenfolk of today to sing in the real time - or anyone else for that matter - proved to be a totally different task.

For one, there was the curse of ailing memories, which just about wiped out most recollections of so-called “tunes” which went round each village.

But more importantly, there was the question of what constituted “song” (*ladiw*) versus “music” (*yinyue*) versus “art” (*yishu*) versus “sound” (*soni*), and which of these so-called categories the *datok* might fall under.

I have written on how *ladiw* is a song concept involving ritual or social meaning that is quite different from the aesthetics of the other three categories (Tan 2001), which can be rather performative and conceived of as an abstract “thing” in itself. These concepts are unconsciously and consciously distinguished by the Amis themselves.

I would like to extend this discussion to focus on the kind of ground the *datok* stakes within this schematic construct. I return to the anecdote about mothers not willing to sing *datok* “songs” to me. When pressed, eventually, these women begged off my requests with a simple, uncontroled rendition of “*tiw tiw tiw tiw*” or “*dan dan dan*” which they claimed to be *datok* tunes, but were clearly onomatopaeic ditties. Some felt “uncomfortable” or “strange” or “embarrassed” about singing the *datok* tunes in the first place because “it doesn’t sit well on the tongue”²¹, even though they may have or would consider singing to their sons in private, whether they remembered the tunes or not.

The reaction towards requesting a “sung” *datok* tune was similar with men who claimed to remember these tunes, and also among those who actually could (or claimed still to be able to) play the instrument.

Whatever twangs emanated from the *datok* was not “song” - or at least not the ritually or socially significant traditional *ladiw* of Amis society.²² The two categories of “song” and *datok* tunes are traditionally not interchangeable. Just as it was awkward to ask male *datok* players to sing instead of play their tunes, it was equally strange for them to play known folksongs from the village’s repertoire on the *datok* itself. Lifok himself had volunteered a dance song on the *datok*, but he qualified it with the disclaimer that the song was known primarily in its vocal form, and was not usually meant to be played and certainly not part of any known *datok* repertoire (the concept being unheard of, anyway).

Likewise, when asked if *datok* twangs constituted “music” (*yinyue*) or art (*yishu*), a performative genre quite different from Amis “song” (*ladiw*) per se, the response was mostly negative.

Here, the few Amis folk who pronounced *datok* sounds “music” - “beautiful sounds made to please the ear”²³ - distinguished them from the sounds of a guitar or piano. The latter, in turn, were proper “pieces” - or “things”, whereas *datok* twangs were not so much performed in isolation for their own sake but with the purpose of courtship in mind.

When pressed as to what category a *datok* tune might fall under, given a choice of “music”, “art”, “song” or “sound”, most opted for “sound” (*soni*). Indeed, the *datok* was, at the end of the day, simply “the prehistoric Amis telephone”.

SYMBOL OF AFFECTION AND BADGE OF CULTURE?

If the *datok* did not play “song” or “music” but only “sound”, perhaps one should altogether cease to think of it as a musical “instrument” as such.

In fact, there are several interesting possibilities as to what the *datok* actually is or stands for in a non-musical context.

Much has been said already about how it functioned as a “telephone” and circumvented taboos over physical communication between unmarried men and women. But a second hypothesis, which Lifok puts up, is that it was valued for its visual appeal as an ornament. The making of it required a certain degree of craftsmanship.

Just as the learning of *datok* “non-repertoire” is a slightly complex issue, constructing the jaw’s harp proves even trickier.

For one, it is not a simple case of carving out and lifting a flap or two out of a sliver of bamboo but actually securing the *datok's* tongue to its body as a separate piece of metal with a shaved coil of thinner bamboo. Sometimes the tongue would be made of bamboo (*yatake*) if the *datok* maker was poor; other times it would be possible to have more than one tongue, metal or otherwise.

But that was not the end of making of the *datok*. The body and tongue was usually also attached and presented in an intricately-carved case. This doubled-up as a grip for the left hand when the *datok* was played. Some *datok* have an extra grip on the right hand: Lifok claims this to be his own invention, a personally-driven bid to “improve and popularise the use of the *datok*”²⁴.

However, one might ask here; why go to the tremendous trouble of making the *datok* in the first place? This might seem even more confounding, considering that the sound produced by the *datok* does not actually amplify well - at least not with the instruments found today. Compared to its so-called “simpler” South and Southeast Asian prototypes, the sound the *datok* produces can at most travel, on a windless night in the hands of a good player, 10 meters.

Lifok's response to this puzzle is that the *datok* was not only valued for the sounds it made, but more importantly, for the fact that it was made at all.

Alongside its functional value, the *datok* was valued as a physical object to be admired for the amount of workmanship involved, somewhat like a prized ornament. In a chart issued for a regular workshop on *datok* craftwork he holds for young Amis teens,²⁵ he points out further uses of the *datok*, including:

“A test of the woodwork abilities of the Amis youth”;

“A symbol of love”;

“A gift (to his lover)”.

That the *datok* was not easy to make has been ascertained by the lack of Amis men today who have learnt to construct it properly and the lack of extant specimens. The three *datok* craftsmen I tracked down who have acquired the skill explain that it “seems easy but is actually very tedious work. You have to go up into the mountains to find the right kind of bamboo for the different parts. There are also many steps involved and you cannot do everything quickly in one day; you have to dry the individual parts over several days”.²⁶

Most learnt and spoke of having seen Amis lads learn the craft through three main avenues:

1. Formal lessons taught at the Men's Lodge;
2. Demonstrations given by fathers;
3. Experimentation upon seeing models lying around.

Thus, when the *datok* had exhausted its “sonic” function and the girl involved had become a wife or steady girlfriend, it could find second life as an ornament worn by the very subject it had helped to “hunt”. The Amis boy could give his girl the *datok* as a trinket, a symbol of his love evidenced through fine, painstaking handiwork, much in the same way a Welsh lad might give his lass a hand carved Love Spoon. *Datoks* of this type were usually said to be carved with intricate patterns (Fig F). In the past, those which possessed a metal tongue were especially valued, in comparison with *datok* bearing bamboo tongues - metal being a precious element.

Today, of course, *datoks*, if made at all, hardly bear intricate grip designs. In the case of the three aged *datok* makers mentioned, one might argue that there was no more real object of interest for which to invest the required time and sweat of painstaking craftsmanship - the girls having become their wives already, or irretrievably, someone else's.

Many will agree that the making and playing of the *datok* has become a dying trade in the face of the usual suspects; urbanization, industrialisation and sinicization. And here, one of course must also not forget competition from the advent of the real telephone itself, alongside the rise and popularity of chocolates, roses, earrings and radio dedications.

But just as the *datok* has managed to find second life as “ornament”, it is also trying to seek a third life through feeble resurgence in the name of preservation and promotion of culture and identity.

This complicated process has obviously meant that “performance” contexts and function of the *datok* have totally changed - it is now gradually becoming “music” or “art” and sometimes “folksong” and “pop song”.

For one, *datok* master Lifok himself has been holding regular *datok* workshops, and “improved” *datok* construction with the introduction of the extra right-hand bamboo grip. He has been giving many *datok* away, as well as recruiting and training new *datok* disciples into spreading information about the jaw's harp in various ways such as talks, magazine, articles and demonstrations.

Just as he has taken to playing more popular and accessible folksongs and dance songs on the “instrument” instead of traditional, simple twangs, he is also turning these sessions into “performances” - at tourist cultural-exchange

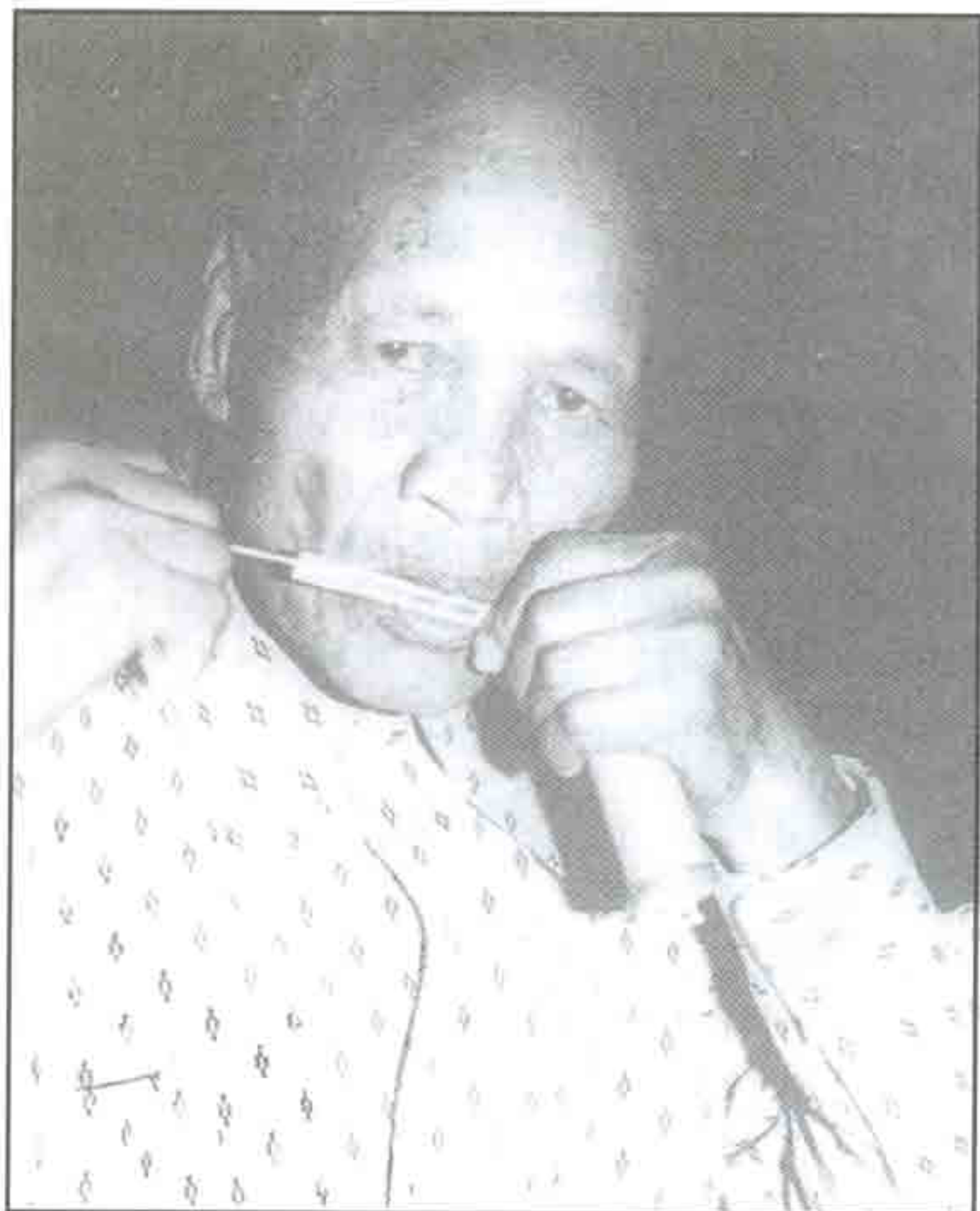


Fig E:

Amis elder Monoh plays the datok.

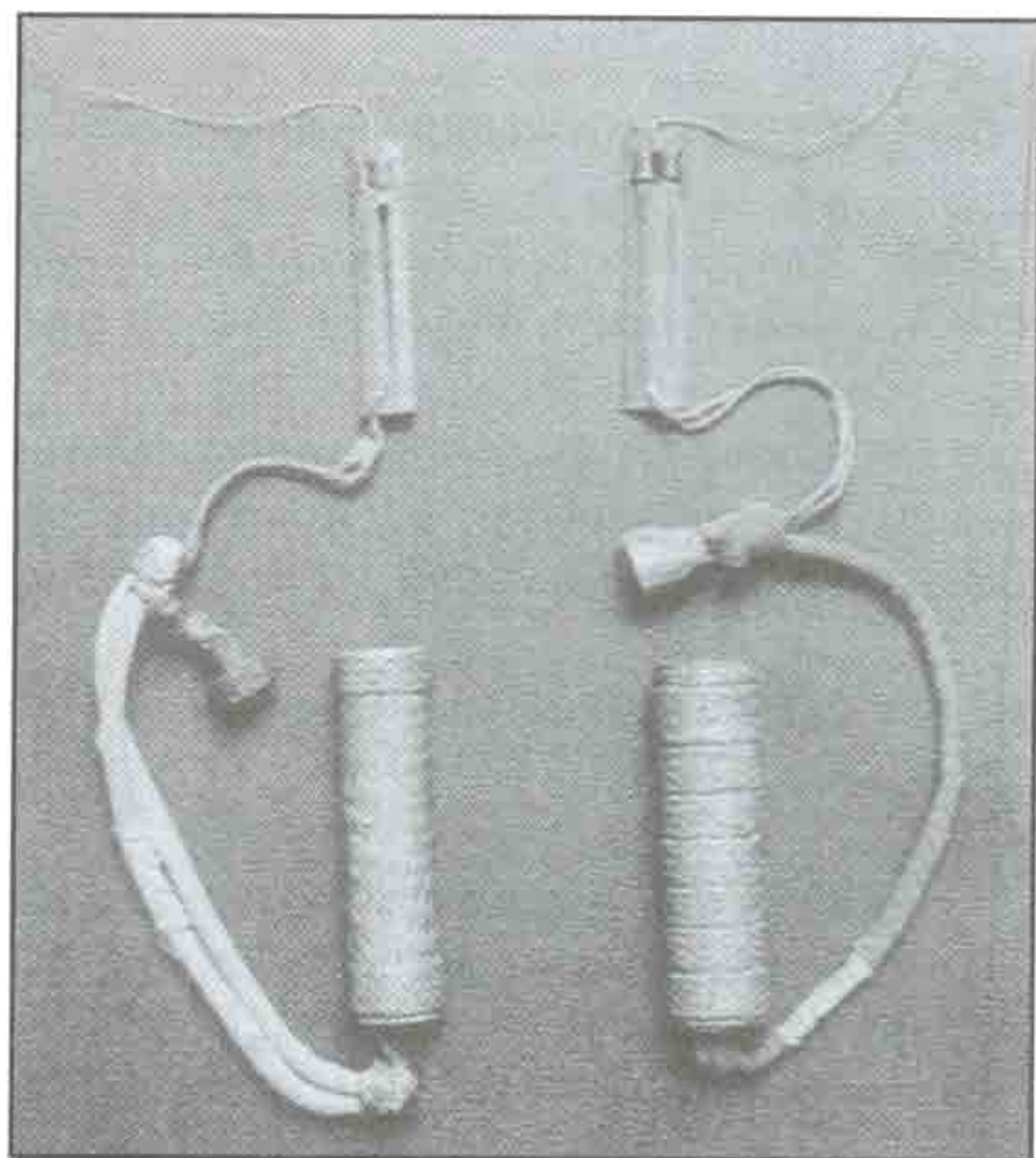


Fig F:

Traditional datok were said to be valued more as ornaments, featuring intricate carvings or woven patterns, than as musical instruments.

Foto oleh SE Tan

events in and outside Taiwan, and at aboriginal-themed concerts and get-togethers. “Scores” (Fig G) are written to notate the *datok* tunes. Recordings are made for documentation and academic essays are written on the subject.

Even other Amis professional musicians - those who play at wedding bands or work for the humbly-thriving Abo-pop industry - have also taken to learning the *datok*, if in spirit only, as they seem to be picking up similar instruments from other ethnic communities (e.g. Atayal or Bunun) and using them in different musical contexts - mixing genres and styles in Abo-pop tracks.

Some use the *datok* for amusement and to “show it off”, imitating animal sounds such as birds singing or trees whispering. Others synthesize its twang electronically and treat it as just any other “instrument” to be used for symbolic value as an indigenous Taiwanese Aboriginal construct.

One might perhaps ask here: Would the *datok*, known by its different and revamped guises now, still be called the *datok* today, by users of the past?

As far as the Amis people themselves seem to be saying, it is a qualified affirmative: They don't have any problems calling the *datok* anything else for that matter, as long as it seems to be staking its survival space amid a changing world.

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NOTES:

¹ As used by the Amis people. The Jaw's Harp of a slightly different variety is known to be used by both men and women in the Atayal, and sometimes, Bunun people.

² Personal communication (pc) Fotor, Feb 20, 2002. Also Lifok, 2001.

³ The *kaput* system is a social construct of Amis communities, which sees males of an entire village segregated into social and organizational groups according to their ages. Males under the age of 18 are not considered adults, but upon coming of age they are initiated by ritual into a new social group with members of their same age-set (give-and-take a three or five year range). Each age-grade, or *kaput*, is a self-contained social unit making a cross-section of Amis society and is given an official name. As its members mature in age, the social activities and public duties of a *kaput* will change. Females may join a *kaput* only when they marry a male in an established *kaput*.

⁴ Sometimes called the Ilisin or Malikoda, or the homogenising Fengnianji in Mandarin.

⁵ Actual dates differ from village to village, depending on when the rice ripens. Villages nearer the South hold the festival earlier in July, when the rice ripens early.

⁶ pc Lifok April 10, 2000, also Kaysang & Imay, July 10, 2000. Also Siku, July 12, 2001. And Utor, Feb 19, 2002; Fotor, Feb 20, 2002.

⁷ pc Lifok, Fotor & Wang.

⁸ Lifok, 1998.

⁹ pc Imay July 10, 2000.

¹⁰ pc Iko, July 10, 2000.

¹¹ pc Langi, July 10, 2000.

¹² pc Lifok, July 5.

¹³ pc Lin's wife, July 10, 2000.

¹⁴ pc Lifok, Feb 21, 2002.

¹⁵ pc Lifok, Feb 21, 2002.

¹⁶ pc Lifok, July 5, 2000; pc Wang, Feb 20, 2002; pc Lifok, Feb 21, 2002.

¹⁷ pc Wang, Feb 20, 2002; also Fotor, pc Lin, July 10, 2000.

¹⁸ pc Fotor, Feb 20, 2002; pc Dogi, Feb 18, 2002.

¹⁹ pc Wang, Feb 20, 2002; pc Lifok, July 5, 2000; pc Lin's wife, July 10, 2000, pc Fotor, Feb 20, 2002; pc Dogi, Feb 18, 2002.

²⁰ pc Wang, Feb 20, 2002; pc Lifok, July 5, 2000; pc Lin's wife, July 10, 2000; pc Fotor, Feb 20, 2002; pc pc Dogi, Feb 18, 2002.

²¹ pc Lin's wife, July 10, 2000.

²² pc Lifok, Feb 21, 2002.

²³ pc Kaysang, Langi, Iko, July 10, 2000.

²⁴ pc Lifok, July 5, 2000.

²⁵ *Datok* workshop, Aug 10, 2000; Lifok, 2000.

²⁶ pc Fotor, Feb 20, 2002.

FIELDWORK: INTERVIEWS

April 6 2000, Taitung: Lifok

April 10 2000, Taitung: Lifok

July 5 2000, Taitung: Lifok

July 10 2000, Fafokod: Amis farmers Kaysang & Imay, Iko & Langi. Also Village headman Lin and wife.

July 31 2000, Taipei: Amis/Abo-pop queen Lu Jingzi

Aug 10 2000, Taitung: Lifok; *datok* workshop

Aug 10 2000, Malan: Amis pop singer Difang

July 7 2001, Fafokod: Kaysang, Imay

July 11 2001, Pa'ong: Kaysang, Kiloma'an at Pa'ong, Farmers Shinbin and Kasang

July 12 2001, Fafokod: Elder Siku

July 13-16 2001, Fafokod: Kiloma'an Festival, nightly sessions with La-Hsinchiao kaput (age-grade)

Feb 18 2002, Iwan: Farmer/retiree Dogi

Feb 19 2002, Tolan: Farmer Tanaka, Utor

Feb 20 2002, Pa'ong: Two farmers from Wang family, also Aunt Wang (farmer)

Feb 20 2002, Pa'ong: Farmer Fotor (originally from Kaotai)

Feb 21 2002, Taitung: Lifok, screening of *datok* video.

