

Taiwanese Indigenous Contemporary Art: Polyphony and Mipaliw

Guest Editor: Dr. Ching-yeh Hsu

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INTRODUCTION Polyphony is a musical term referring to multiple melodies, or voices.

“Eight-part-polyphony” is a unique vocal music sung by the Bunun, one of Taiwan’s indigenous nations. Recognized by the UNESCO as world cultural heritage, the Bununs’ complex harmony celebrates the millet harvest and offers respect to the ancestral spirits. It is sung by several singers facing inwards in a circle, arms interlocked, who separately initiate the different notes with the vowels a, e, i, o and u. The diversity of voices and tones is related to M. M. Bakhtin’s theory of polyphony as a metaphor for a literary work with a plurality of narrative voices. In the Bununs’ song as in Bakhtin’s theory, no single voice is subordinated or submerged. Rather, each individual voice remains distinct and necessary.

Nowadays, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the crisis has made us more aware than ever before of the importance of mutual collaboration among human beings. Yet Taiwanese indigenous culture has long been based upon cooperation in life. For example, the Amis, the largest Taiwanese indigenous nation, uses the word “mipaliw” to describe women’s mutual collaboration in farm labor, and even to cope with sexual harassment on the farm. That same exchange of labor reflects and nourishes works in Taiwanese indigenous art and culture, so that one regional art festival took the word “mipaliw” for its title. The collaboration of labor, the diversity of voices - these are also seen in the work of Taiwanese indigenous contemporary artists. Polyphony and mipaliw are central to cultural diversity in art and life.

For this edition the authors’ essays address issues such as how do the Taiwanese indigenous artists cope with the sociocultural crisis in contemporary art and life through mutual collaboration? How is the metaphor of polyphony demonstrated by the diversity of voices in art and how art reflects the polyphony.

Dr. Ching-yeh Hsu
Guest Editor

BETWEEN MIPALIW AND PASIBUTBUT: REFLECTIONS ON THE CULTURE PHENOMENON OF POLYPHONY IN TAIWAN INDIGENOUS ART

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BIOGRAPHY

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ABSTRACT

The custom of helping each other with work is a mode of thinking and expression, and a mechanism of social operation. But does this type of operation also exist in polyphonic singing and art? Does a nation or ethnic group have its own thinking and operating system to classify, explain and construct their world? In other words, can we see the structural methods and thinking principles in the types and operating rules of music, art and culture?

The indigenous people of Taiwan belong to the Austronesian language family. Although polyphonic music exists in all nation groups, its form and structure present many different appearances. In art and music, the content and creativity derived from myths and legends are full of metaphors in operation, the close and harmonious division of labor and cooperation is a metonymy of kinship and interpersonal relationships in tribal society. Among them, the similarity between different systems and the partial similarity in the same system constitute various subconscious axes in the development of indigenous art. In an environment of post-modern society, Taiwan indigenous artists continue to challenge and dialogue in the trend of national consciousness and glocalization.

KEYWORDS

pasibutbut, *mipaliw*, metaphor, metonymy, polyphony, Taiwan indigenous people

Mipaliw and *pasibutbut* are two terms and concepts with different categories of meaning. As a framework for discussion, in theory, I hope to amplify the difference in meaning, and use this to explore the diverse cultural background and forms of expression of Taiwan indigenous art and the contextual relationship between them.

The traditional customs of Taiwan indigenous people, many ethnic groups have customs similar to the Amis *mipaliw* (or *malapaliw*, exchange help for work), This is different from the activities and work (such as rituals and celebrations) in which all the villagers participate, but belongs to the clan or family (such as weeding in the fields, harvesting, building houses, etc.). There are even ceremonial activities related to the theme of this kind of mutual aid work (such as the *mukamut* of the *Pinuyumayan* people), which is a celebration of the women after the weeding of the millet fields is completed (Ming, 2012:79-153). This is not only a cultural activity often seen in matrilineal ethnic groups such as the *Amis* or *Pinuyumayan*, but also in patrilineal indigenous societies.



Figure 1.
The *mukamut* ceremony of the *Pinuyumayan* people



Figure 2.
A *mipaliw* group on Amis tribe

The custom of helping each other to work is a form of thinking and expression, and a mechanism for social operation, but does such a method of operation also exist in polyphonic singing and art? Is there also an explanation like Levi-Strauss's—that is, the rhetorical techniques of metaphor and metonymy in cultural phenomena? That is to say, are there possibly the same or similar ways of thinking and expression among different cultural levels and types? Among different nation groups of indigenous peoples, these issues have many different situations, and even have various meanings in operation.

Does a nation group have its own thinking and operating system to classify, explain and construct their world? In other words, can we see the structural methods and thinking principles in the types and operating rules of culture, music and art?

Let's take the *pasiputput*, the song of the *Bunun* people praying for a good harvest of millet, as an example to make an analysis and explanation.

The song was recorded for the first time in 1943 by Japanese musicologist Kurosawa in Kanding Village, Haiduan Township, Taitung County in 1943, and in 1952, the recording material was sent to the International Folk Music Council (IFMC) under the UNESCO. This recording material was valued by several famous ethnomusicologists at that time: Andre Schaeffner, Curt Sachs, Yaap Kunst, and Paul Collaer. etc. (Lu, 1979) This event had an important impact on both the musicologists and the *Bununs*.

According to the myths and legends of the Bunun, the reason for creating this song of *pasiputput* is the inspiration from the sound of waterfalls and bees. This song must be an adult man who has lived a good life, a good job, and no unfortunate events during the year to be eligible to participate. The movement of the singing team slowly moving from the outdoors into the indoors symbolizes that the millet in the farmland can pour into the indoor barn. The rising melody of the song symbolizes the action and state of harvesting the crops. (Kurozawa 1973,1974. Lu 1979,1982. Wu 1988,1989). The sound of bees is a metaphor, because it is considered from the similarity relationship of different systems (human society/bee society); the sound of a waterfall is a metonymy, because it is a partial selection of multiple combination relationships of the same system (sound itself). The *Bunun* people used metaphors and metonymy to expand and construct the thinking and meaning between beliefs, taboos, myths and legends.

The song *pasiputput* has been described by several scholars (including Kurozawa, Lu) as “a gradual rise from the lowest pitch by half tones, near-half-tones, or microtones,” Wu Rung-shun used a sona-graph to analyze the singing phenomenon related to Mongolian Hoomii’s throat singing. But such “etic” interpretations didn’t give us a real idea of how the song is sung. Based on the above reflections, I made another explanation from the perspective of the concept and terminology system of the *Bunun* people in an emic way. In addition to analyzing the rules of this polyphonic music, I also explained the singing methods and principles, as well as the ritual significance of such a phenomenon, and used “destruction and reconstruction” to imply the divination of this song function, and the sacred meaning contained in it. (Ming, 1990:79-92)

The “tetrachord” (or the four-tone scale/the interval relationship group of four tones) do, re, mi, and sol of *Bunun* music are the main intervals used in various songs (Lu, 1982: 63). Even the performance of musical bow, jew’s harp and four strings instrument of *Bunun* has a set of humming melodies corresponding to the use of this set of scales (Ming, 1995 ; Tseng, 2015: 39-80). For such a system of rules and classifications, if it is a symbolic representation, then theoretically there should be other aspects of culture presenting the same and corresponding phenomena, and it seems that such a correlation seems to be seen in the belief system of the *Bunun*.



Figure 3.
Musical bow of *Bunun* tribe



Figure 4.
Pasitbutbut

In the belief system of the *Bunun* people, according to my fieldwork investigations, The *Bunun* sub-ethnic groups *Take Banua* who resides in the Nantou County classifies their *hanito* (spirit system) into four kinds of ghosts: Ghost of Water (*sisas*), the Huge Ghost (*tangavayi*), the Fierce Ghost (*kanasilis*), and the Big-Ear Ghost (*vangvangtainga*). (Ming, 1995) I asked the elderly reporter: “Are there any other ghosts?” The elderly said: “No!” I asked: “Why are there only these four types of ghosts and no other types of ghosts?” The elderly said: “I do not know either”

Ying-Kuei Huang continued Mabuchi Tōichi's theory in his research on the Bunun people's concept of human beings. He found that the Bunun divides the whole of a person into four parts: body (*logbo*); mind, ego, will (*isang*); the evil spirit on the left shoulder (*makwan hanito*); the good spirit on the right shoulder (*mashia hanito*) (Huang, 1989a). I did not find such a concept in the investigation of the sub-ethnic group *Take Banua*. But there is also the way of quartering

Classification is a kind of selection and naming, and it can also be a kind of composition and operation of form and structure. We can clearly see the consistent relationship among the above classification phenomena of the extremely stable and important elements in the *Bunun* culture.

The *Bunun's* prayer song for the millet harvest (*pasibutbut*) is not a quadruple principle phenomenon in the use of scales, but a different vocal part of the singing process and interaction. This traditional ritual song, which only exists in the *Bubukuen* sub-ethnic group of *Bunun*, clearly presents the classification and division of labor of the four singing voices.

The table and score below shows the classification concept of the *Bunun* (Ming, 1991:70-91).

A Bunun Terminology System on the Classification of Pasibutbut Vocal Parts

village	First part (Start tone)	Second part (lead singing)	Third part	Forth part
Mingde	<i>tutangus</i> <i>latulu</i> <i>labruva</i>	<i>mancinin</i> (or <i>lacinin</i>)	<i>lamailulu</i>	<i>madaingad</i>
Rhona	<i>kalintangus</i> (or <i>mahusngas</i>)	<i>manda</i>	<i>mapongpong</i>	<i>kalikinuth</i>
Taoyuan	<i>mahusngas</i>	<i>manda</i>	<i>mapongpong</i>	<i>mangisngis</i>
Wulu	<i>mahusngas</i>	<i>banlian</i>	<i>mapongpong</i>	<i>lakinuth</i>

The first part is a gradually rising melody. The second part plays the role of lead singer, and is led by one person (*cini* in the *Bunun* language means “one”). In the concept of *Bunun*, it has to be sung “different” from the other sounds (represented by a “1” on the score). The third and fourth voices are marked with 2 and 3, showing the continuation and sequence relationship of these three tones, and the interval between them will not exceed a major third.

PASIBUTBUT

Recorder: Li-Kuo Ming

Transcription: Li-Kuo Ming

Place: Mingde Village, Xinyi Township, Nantou County

Date: 1990.11.12

The figure displays a musical score for the song 'Pasibutbut'. It consists of three systems of staves. Each system has a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The first system starts with a '0' above the first measure. The second system has '1'44', '2'21', and '3'' above its measures. The third system has '3'38', '4'18', and '4'51' above its measures. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and accidentals. Below the staves, there are annotations with numbers 1, 2, and 3, and arrows pointing to specific notes, indicating voice parts or sequence relationships. Brackets connect these annotations across measures, showing the continuation of tones. The key signature has one sharp (F#).

Figure 5.

If the research on the song *pasibutbut* ignores the classification, rules and meanings inherent in its culture. It is possible to make the recording and interpretation work operate in a way that suits one’s own habits.

How to discover the concept, classification, and form of expression hidden in the music of a nation and culture, and use it as a symbol system to correspond to humanity and nature? Steven Feld's research on the *Kaluli* people of Papua New Guinea, talked about the symbolic significance of birds and waterfalls to the music performance of the *Kaluli* people, (Feld, 1982) and this song *pasibutbut* of the Bunun people also provides the possibility of thinking from another perspective.

The *Bunun* language of "*pasibutbut*" originally means "pull each other", "*sibutbut*" means "pulling", and the prefix "*pa-*" means "mutually". The *Bunun* people use this singing performance as a symbol of praying for a good harvest of millet. The mipaliw custom of the *Amis* is also used as the theme of the art festival --- through art to present the relationship between people, nature and ecology. It is a kind of metonymy to name parts of relationships with the same attributes (division of labor, cooperation and sharing) as meaning connections. However, the *Bunun* people sing together in harmony as the way of expression, while the *Amis* people use the singing method of one person leading the singing and the others answering the song as the main structure and form. (Ming, 2000) Although the *Amis* have polyphonic performances in the answering part of their singing, their polyphonic singing is completely different from that of the *Bunun*.

Therefore, metonymy thinking can be used as an interface for transforming meanings, but it cannot provide norms and restrictions for the form and structure of expression. Because for other indigenous groups who also have this customs, they still display them in their own different characteristic styles. The logic of the form and structure of expression seems to be dominated by the conventional symbol system, which is always wandering outside the metaphor and metonymy with causal relationship.

Facing the post-modern society of multicultural communication and impact, if a dialogue with the "Heteroglossia" proposed by M. M. Bakhtin comes from "polyphony", according to Vyacheslav Ivanov's interpretation of heteroglossia, it means the simultaneous use of different kinds of speech or other symbols, the tension between them, and their conflicting relationships within one text (Ivanov, 2000).

If according to F. Farmer--- The term heteroglossia refers to the qualities of a language that are extralinguistic, but common to all languages. These include qualities such as perspective, evaluation, and ideological positioning. In this way most languages are incapable of neutrality, for every word is inextricably bound to the context in which it exists (Farmer, 1998). In the field of indigenous culture and art, which are diverse but expressed separately, such an interpretation seems to return to the basis of Saussure's semiotic theory.

If the content and development of art are analyzed according to the principles of semiotics, in the production process of works, creation and performance present a relationship of syntagmatic axis. Elements such as materials, colors, shapes, etc., produce various styles of works through a relationship of paradigmatic axis. However, in terms of the meaning of the work, background factors such as myths, legends, beliefs, cultural characteristics, social structures, and lifestyles of Taiwan indigenous groups are symbolically connected by means of metaphor and metonymy, presenting a diverse and rich meaning and content. However, the form and structure presented by the works may not only be affected by the above factors, but also related to the established cultural experience and habits. These axes of consciousness and unconsciousness, in the intertextual environment of post-modern society, are still in the trend of emphasizing national self-consciousness and glocalization, and are constantly conducting dialogues and challenges.

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