

Comparing Material, Performance, Transmission, and Preservation Traditions in Three Nose Flute Cultures

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Abstract

Nose flute cultures are struggling to survive in different parts of the world, and variations among regions' materials, performance, and transmission conventions may affect the instruments' local preservation. For this study, the researcher traveled to Malaysia, Taiwan, and Hawaii and spoke with makers and players of three nose flutes: the *pensol* (peninsular Malaysia), the *paringet* (Taiwan), and the *Ohe Hano Ihu* (Hawaii). The study identifies differences and similarities in the studied nose flute cultures, including materials, performance, and transmission, and discusses how these are affecting preservation efforts, especially in ethnic minority cultures on the brink of rapid cultural change. In each location, the researcher gathered qualitative data by interviewing local experts regarding their flutes, including their instruments' construction, performance methods, and approaches to transmission. With urbanization and other global forces affecting younger generations in indigenous communities where traditional musical forms once flourished, nose flutes are being played less frequently today. To help ensure the continuance of nose flute culture, some are advocating for nose flute performance to be transmitted to young people as part of their formal education. But, as this research shows, regional beliefs and taboos sometimes stand in the way of incorporating new methods of transmission. Taken together with modern educators' lack of interest in including traditional musical practices in today's curriculum, the preservation of nose flute culture beyond the generations of players interviewed in this study is far from ensured. The research seeks to deepen scholars' understanding of nose flute cultures and underline the importance of working with the people of the studied cultures to find ways to preserve nose flute performance traditions.

Keywords: ethnomusicology; nose flute; *pensol*; *paringet*; *Ohe Hano Ihu*; Malaysian tradition music; Taiwanese traditional music; Hawaiian traditional music; endangered musical forms

Introduction

Nose flutes can be found today in different parts of the world, including Oceania, East Asia, Southeast Asia, and Africa. This paper describes three types of nose flutes: the *pensol* of peninsular Malaysia, the *paringet* of Taiwan, and the *Ohe Hano Ihu* of Hawaii. The study compares the differences and similarities in nose flute cultures and identifies variations in the three examples, including issues regarding materials, performance, and transmission traditions and how these relate to preservation of the nose flute, especially in ethnic minority cultures on the brink of rapid cultural change.

Building on my experience as a mouth flute player, I traveled to Malaysia, Taiwan, and Hawaii to gather qualitative data in interviews with experts on the instruments and their construction, performance methods, and approaches to transmission. The results of the interviews are reported in detail here. I have been conducting research in Malaysia since September of 2011—in peninsular Malaysia, Sabah, and Sarawak—on nine research trips so far. For this research, I visited Taiwan in August of 2010 and Hawaii in November of 2011.

In general, nose flute culture is on the decline. Many researchers are advocating for nose flute performance to be transmitted to the younger generation or to be included in the education of school children. However, as regional taboos and the beliefs behind them clash with modernization, preservation of cultural practices is not always of primary concern to the people involved.

I offer this paper as part of my effort to deepen scholarly understanding of the importance of nose flute culture and to encourage others to work with the people of the studied cultures to find ways to preserve nose flute performance traditions.

1. The Malaysian *Pensol*¹

1.1. *Cultural and Historical Setting*

The *pensol* is a transverse bamboo flute (about 43-48 cm long) played on the central Malaysian peninsula by the Semai people of the Senoi culture. Sound is produced by the structure of the free air reed-form, with a 6 mm breath hole for the nose. In the interviews, I recorded and transcribed songs with deep spiritual connections, having been received in dreams from the “holy spirit” of a departed person.

1.1.1. Central Malaysia’s indigenous minorities

Orang Asli (or “OA”), the general term for indigenous minorities living on the Malayan peninsula, are classified into three groups distinguished by language, occupation, and administrative customs: Negrito, Senoi, and Proto-Malays. At the time of the 2000 census, the population of the Orang Asli was about 133,775, thus comprising a very small minority of about 0.5% of the entire Malaysian population.

The Senoi population is divided into three ethnic groups: Temiar, Semai, and other Senoi. The 2000 census counted 73,166 Senoi of whom 23,074 were Temiar, 38,574 Semai, and 11,518 other Senoi. The Semai are further classified into 44 smaller ethnic groups, with different transmitted traditions and speaking many different dialects of the Semai language in the various villages. There is a theory that these dialects originated in Cambodia (Salleh 2006: 20-21).

1.1.2. Halaq: Shaman of Semai

A shaman, who carries out communication between God and persons, in this region is called a *Halaq*. A *Halaq* casts spells and tells fortunes and, accessing methods of treating diseases caused by the anger of God in a special ceremony, grants medical treatment. A *Halaq* gives advice regarding good places for hunting or how to achieve success in love

¹ This section is revised and updated from my 2013 publication *A Study on the Nose Flute of the Semai People of Malaysia*.

and also protects against foreign enemies by bringing them illness and death. All *Halaq* can talk to spirits. One or more spirits will appear in a *Halaq*'s dreams to grant and perform healing. The life of the Orang Asli is strongly interwoven with the holy spirit, healing, and ritual. The spirits inform people about problems in the area and forecast disasters in dreams.

The Semai people maintain several temporary farmlands among which they move every few years. A *Halaq* will divine which direction they should move in next. The shaman must interpret a divine message received in a dream and perform it without a mistake. *Halaq* are people of desirable character, selected carefully.

1.2. Interviewees

1.2.1. Raman Bah Tuin (43 years of age)

I interviewed Raman in Bukit Kala, a village in the Gombak district, Selangor, about 40 minutes by bus from Kuala Lumpur. He is an excellent Semai flute maker who works with Gerai OA (Orang Asli), a volunteer group that supports the indigenous minorities of Malaysia. In addition to his flute-making craft, he is also a nose flute player. He is left-handed and holds the nose flute to the left.

Photo 1.1. Raman Bah Tuin



Photo 1.2. Bah Muda



Raman (shown in Photo 1.1) learned nose flute manufacturing and performance traditions from his uncle, Bah Muda (Photo 1.2), who is now in his 60s. Bah Muda and his wife have converted to Islam from the traditional religion. Raman has retained his traditional Senoi beliefs, even though, in his society, one's social treatment varies according to one's chosen religion. He learned traditional dancing, healing culture, etc., from his grandmother and has seen the rare *Sewang* divine spiritual dance.

1.2.2. Bek Terus (54 years of age)

Bek Terus, (Photo 1.3) a renowned shaman, lives in a comparatively large house in the village of Chang Kuar, Perak state, with his wife, four sons (two sets of twins), and two daughters. This family was introduced in the book *Orang Asli Women and the Forest* (Nicholas 2010: 117-123), produced by Colin Nicholas as coordinator for the Center for Orang Asli Concerns (COAC). As a shaman, Bek Terus has earned the respect of villagers living in the traditional culture of the Orang Asli.

Photo 1.3. Bek Terus



Photo 1.4. Bah Sali



1.3. *Materials and Construction*

1.3.1. Holy bamboo

The nose flute shall be made from holy bamboo, which translates as bamboo that has been recognized by a holy spirit. Holy bamboo should be used not only for making *pensols*, but also for blow pipes for hunting and for building houses. A shaman has the ability to identify holy bamboo. According to Bek Terus, “Faith is most important. Only a shaman knows where to find holy bamboo. When you play a *pensol* during free time in the woods, you do not need to play a *pensol* made from holy bamboo, but for use in healing or at the festival of Sewang, you must play an instrument which has been made from holy bamboo.” Bek Terus also told me, “I do not expect to make a good sound when the moon is not out. Going to find holy bamboo is restricted to the time of the full moon. It is the law of the forest.”

Figure 1.1. Measurements of Raman’s *pensol*

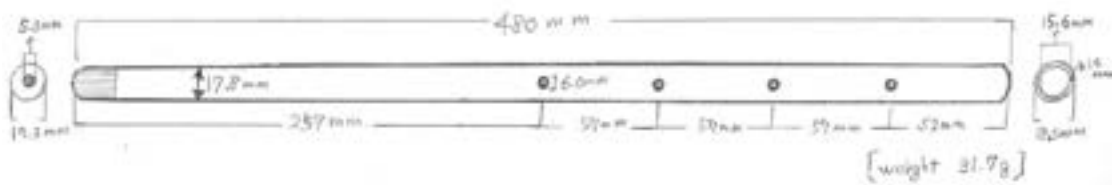


Figure 1.2. Measurements of Bek Terus’ *pensol*

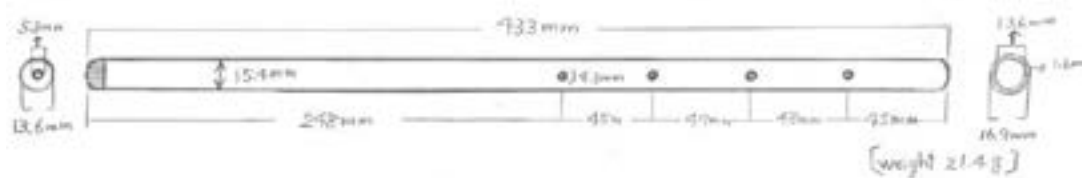
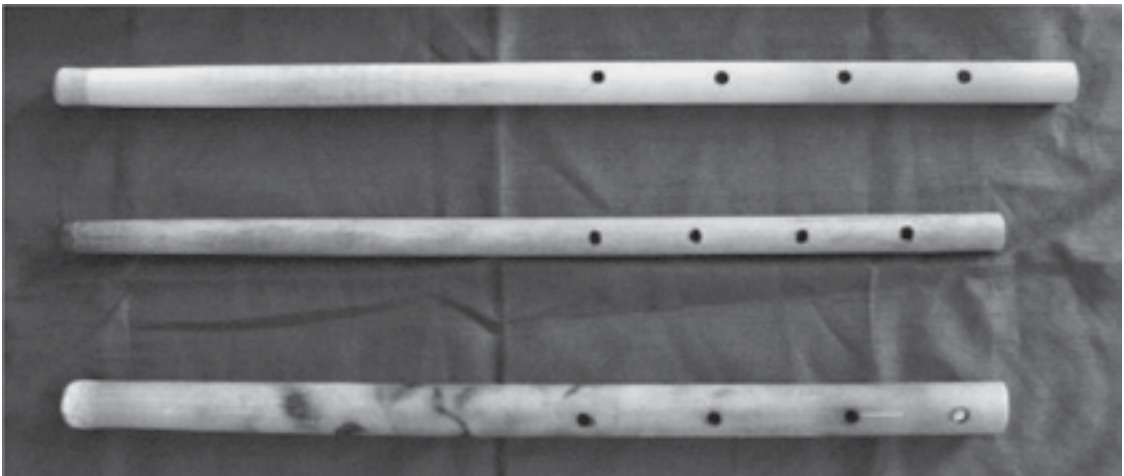


Photo 1.5. From the top, *pensols* of Raman, Bek Terus, and Bah Sali



1.4. *Performance*

1.4.1. The nose flute player and the holy spirit

Bek Terus explained, “When you play *pensol* in the evening or at night, spirits will descend. You have to exert all your power when you play *pensol*,” he said, adding “when I see people playing *pensol* for fun, I become anxious that the holy spirit will come down.”

As shown in Score 1.1, in *pensol* performances by Bek Terus, the D below the staff is consistently low.

Score 1.1. Scale and transcription: *pensol* melodies played by Bek Terus



Bek Terus played an old song for me that he had “learned from my predecessor. The holy spirit appeared and taught it to me in a dream.” Later, I asked Raman Bah Tuin about the meaning of this song. He told me that he could not understand it, since the words were sung in an ancient traditional language. He also noted that Bek Terus’ intonation is different than his.

Score 1.2. Transcription of a song sung by Bek Terus



1.4.2. Taboos

It is taboo to play a nose flute when someone has died or gone into mourning. This is to respect the dead, since the *pensol* is played for enjoyment.

The time of sunset is the most dangerous time in Semai society. It is said that at sunset the spiritual power rises to its highest, and it is when spirits appear. One does not play after sunset, because playing the *pensol* is an act that summons a tiger. People should not break this ban, especially those who were selected by the holy spirit. The forest at night is especially dangerous. It is said that, even if a tiger is seven hills away from a Semai village, the sound of the nose flute will be audible to that tiger.

1.4.3. Expressions of love between men and women

Raman told us that, in relations between men and women, a holy spirit appears in a dream to speak about love. It is said that this comes to a person at a certain psychic level. At such times, there are no prohibitions against men and women playing nose flutes or making musical instruments.

1.4.4. Commercial *pensol* performance

There are several examples of people who have connected the nose flute to business, including Bah Sali (shown in Photo 1.4), who lives in Gombak village, and receives payment to appear in shows or events. This is one example of nose flute performance having commercial value. Cases of people who perform for pleasure are likely to decrease as the urbanization of villages progresses and the desire to play and opportunities to perform decrease. However, commercial nose flute performance is not endowed with traditional meaning. This is a dilemma.

1.5. *Transmission*

1.5.1. Appearance of holy spirit in dreams

At one time, a person could not simply choose to be a nose flute player, but had to be selected by a holy spirit of Semai who appeared in the player's dream. According to Bek Terus, "A holy spirit appears in a dream. It is said that a holy princess appears in a dream and teaches a song. There are some people who have permission from the holy princess to play nose flutes" (*see, e.g.*, Score 1.2). A selected person has to sing correctly the song thus learned. Only people who have received this teaching can play this melody, which is then transferred to the nose flute. Based on this process, the grant from the holy spirit will then be complete.

1.5.2. Teaching *pensol* to children disfavored today

One member who accompanied me in this fieldwork asked Bek Terus, "The music of *pensol* is in the crisis of a decline. What do you think about teaching *pensol* to the children of the village as part of their education?" He seemed to have a very negative attitude about this idea. He is opposed to teaching *pensol* to children because of its religious significance. As Raman told us, "To know the *pensol* is to know the *Halaq*. And to teach about *Halaq*, we must teach what heaven is. . . . Most of all, playing *pensol* communicates songs that were received in divine messages from a holy spirit. Since the song has high spiritualism, people listen to it and are cured."

Though both of these speakers disfavor teaching *pensol* to children, they note that the presence of the shaman, the customs, and the spirit of dialog still operate strongly. People of Semai recognize the need to explain their traditions to children. The music of *pensol* is indispensable to the festival of Sewang and the belief in holy spirits, which everyone in the village recognizes as important.

2. The Taiwanese *Paringet*

2.1. *Cultural and Historical Setting*

The people of Paiwan play both mouth flute and nose flute, and both are called *paringet*. Many stories are told about the origin of the *paringet*, several of which relate that the breath from the nose has a magical power that can contact the soul. Similar stories are told in the Melanesian and Polynesian islands (Tjuvelevem 1998: 221). To this day, to have the nose *paringet* played in one's funeral procession is considered an expression of high honor.

The Paiwan tribe has a strict social class system, which is strongly connected to *paringet* culture. After the second World War, the system of government changed, and the noble class, which had played an important role in the education system, was abolished. The system that replaced it is incompatible with the traditional social class structure. The racial culture has also changed dramatically, as well; however, I saw the musical culture of the Paiwan people still being transmitted. People take pride in their daily lives being rooted in tradition.

2.2. *Interviewee*

Pavavalung Pailang (78 years of age):

Pavavalung Pailang (Photo 2.1), who also uses the Chinese name Hsu Kun-Chung 許坤仲, belongs to the Paiwan tribe, a minority group in the South of Taiwan. According to statistics of the Administrative Aborigine Organization, in June 2007, the population of the Paiwan tribe was approximately 82,000, making it second in size only to the Ami. Pailang studied the craft of carving and the technique of nose flute playing spontaneously from his grandfather. His family belongs to the nobles of Paiwan; thus, I understand he has been a leader of an organization for, and has had the opportunity to become skilled in, martial

arts. Pailang accepts orders not only to craft nose flutes, but also to make scabbards for swords, grips for bows, and so on.

Photo 2.1: Pavavalung Pailang (right) with author



2.3. Materials and Construction

Both the mouth and nose *paringets* are made up of two pipes tied up in a bundle (see Figure 2.1 and Photo 2.2). In the type played by mouth, there is no gap between the two pipes, while in the type played by nose, a small block of wood is placed between the two pipes and sized individually to match the nose hole distance of the player (Photo 2.3).

Figure 2.1. *Paringet* measurements

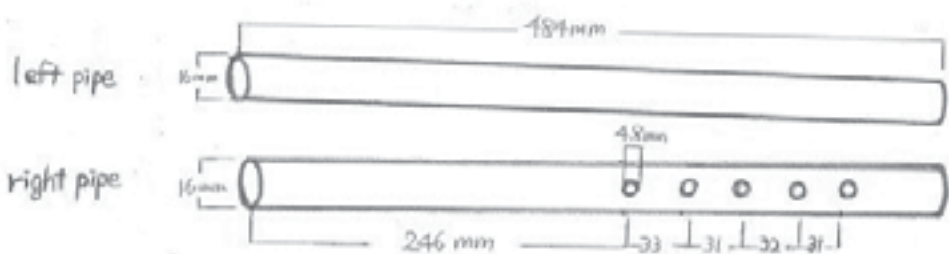


Photo 2.2. Two *paringets*: above, for mouth playing;
below, for nose playing

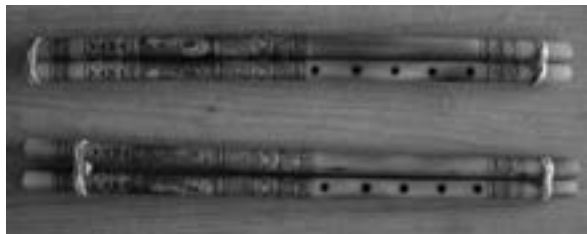


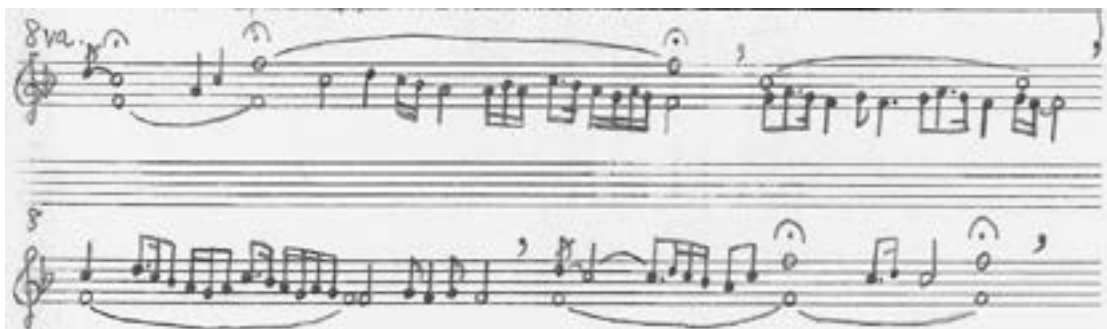
Photo2.3. Blowing
holesnose *paringet*



2.4. Performance

Sound is produced by a fipple flute system, in which the air is directed to the sounding edge by blowing into a fixed channel (Tjuvelevem: 1998). The left pipe has no finger holes and thus can play a continuous drone note. For the right pipe, there are five finger holes. Melodies are played on the right pipe using both hands (see Score 2.1).

Score 2.1: Transcription of *paringet* played by Pavavalung Pailang



2.4.1. *Paringet* in courtship ritual

The *paringet* is sometimes used in courtship rituals. The man plays a *paringet* quietly outside his lover's window to express his feelings (Tjuvelevem 1998: 225).

2.5. *Transmission*

The culture surrounding the use of the *paringet* is changing. In the past, the *paringet* was traditionally played only by men; however, at the present time, it is being taught to men and women. Pailang has opened his *paringet* class to both boys and girls.

3. Hawaiian *Ohe Hano Ihu*

3.1. *Cultural and Historical Setting*

The *Ohe Hano Ihu* is a nose flute traditionally played in the Pacific, most notably on the Hawaiian islands. Traditionally, its sound was thought to convey romantic emotions. Today, the *Ohe Hano Ihu* is primarily played by men, though there is no prohibition on women playing or making it. Some players are taught by others, while others pick up its sounds from their natural surroundings without an intermediary like the holy spirit that plays such an integral role in nose flute culture on the Malaysia peninsula. Compared to the nose flute cultures of the other studied regions, the manufacturing, performing, and transmission of *Ohe Hano Ihu* is relatively unconstrained.

3.2. *Interviewee*

Anthony Natividad (1964 - 2012)

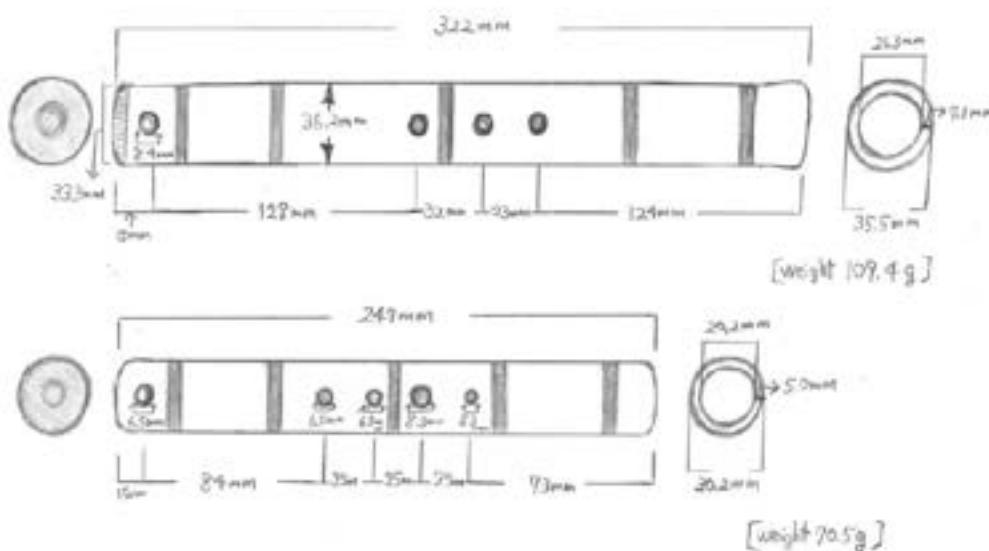
Anthony Natividad (shown in Photo 3.2), who passed away a few years ago at only 48 years of age, started making his own original musical instruments as early as in his school days. He started his musical career in music therapy, which, for him, was related to his interests in Hawaiian nature sounds and in the music of Polynesia. Musically, he was self-educated and conducted his own ethnomusicological research across the Polynesian

islands, including Tahiti, Tonga, and New Zealand. On October 9, 2012, his life was cut short by a heart attack in his home on the island of Maui.

3.3. Materials and Construction

Anthony made instruments casually, allowing the material to shape the design of each instrument. He made both of the *Ohe Hano Ihu* pictured below for me, which took only about 20 minutes for each instrument (see Photo 3.1). He worked the bamboo with a kind of playfulness, deciding on the placement of the finger holes with a nonchalant attitude. He was likewise flexible with respect to the number of finger holes, making flutes sometimes with three or sometimes with four holes and occasionally placing an additional finger hole near to the blowing hole, to be reached with the left hand (while still holding closed the left nostril). He said, “It will be fun to use the left hand for playing, if the left hand is resting.” His attitude was not to require any theory about the tuning or the resulting scale: “To be free in mind is our tradition,” he said.

Figure 3.1. Measurements of *Ohe Hano Ihu*



On the last day of my stay in Anthony's home, he presented me a nose flute while smiling; he had made it out of a cola can. This was his symbolic joke, made to illustrate for me the flexible way of thinking the Hawaiians have toward transmission of traditional ideas.

Photo 3.1. Two *Ohe Hano Ihu* made by Anthony Natividad



3.4. Performance

Ohe Hano Ihu is played by holding the instrument to the right nostril and closing the left nostril with the left hand to direct all of one's breath out of the right nostril. It is held perpendicular to the body, angled slightly to one side, as shown in Photo 3.2. In *Ohe Hano Ihu*, much use is made of vibrato, mordent-like grace notes, and trills. When playing for the Hula dance, people sing by the guide of the melody from *Ohe Hano Ihu*, as if the singers and flutist are making a conversation with each other (Uchizaki 2003: 86-89).

Photo 3.2. Anthony Natividad playing *Ohe Hano Ihu*



Some think that the long and low melodies of the *Ohe Hano Ihu* convey an expression of mutual love. When a man or woman starts to play this phrase, it is carried to the beloved. It is said that the partners entrust the *Ohe Hano Ihu* to convey the phrase that only the two of them can understand.

Anthony related to me that both men and women are allowed to play the *Ohe Hano Ihu*, but that he had not seen any women other than researchers play the instrument.

3.5. Transmission

At the time we spoke with him, Anthony was practically the only nose flute player in Hawaii who played professionally. His playing was not transmitted to him from teachers. He told me he loved to play in the forest and created musical experiences inspired by the sounds of nature. The roar of waterfalls, songs of birds, cries of animals, and so on taught him the essence of the *Ohe Hano Ihu*. (Score 3.1). Thus, Anthony explained to me, “each player is free to find their own way of playing; this is the tradition on the *Ohe Hano Ihu*.” Another nose flute maker on Maui, Calvin Hoe, said something similar—that the people of Hawaii expect nose flute players to be able to freely grasp musical ideas from the past rather than receiving them through specific musical transmission.

Score 3.1. Scale and transcription: melody of *Ohe Hano Ihu* by Anthony Natividad



Table 1. Comparing the Nose Flutes of Peninsular Malaysia, Taiwan, and Hawaii Natividad

Nose Flute	Materials & Construction	Performance	Transmission
<i>Pensol</i> of Raman peninsular Malaysia	The major axis ≈48cm, blowing hole ≈19mm, played in a transverse position.	Festival, healing, courting, and pleasure. Not to be played when someone has died, out of respect for the deceased. Not to be played at sunset or at full moon. A tiger will come if this taboo is ignored. Men and women may play or make.	Traditionally, the ability to play the <i>pensol</i> was conferred on a person by a holy spirit in a dream. The recipient of the song must learn to sing the piece, then play it on the <i>pensol</i> to complete the received ritual.
<i>Pensol</i> of Terus peninsular Malaysia	The major axis ≈43cm, blowing hole ≈19mm played in a transverse position. Made from holy bamboo.	Healing by conduct of the holy spirit. Not to be played unless the moon is out. If played when one is lost in the forest, the holy spirit will come down and teach the way.	It is still believed songs should only be received from a holy spirit. Because <i>pensol</i> playing carries such power, teaching the art of <i>pensol</i> to young students is discouraged.
<i>Paringet</i> of Taiwan	Two pipes are tied up in a bundle, right for melody, and left for drone. Both pipes around 48cm; sound production via fipple.	For funerals, for pleasure and for courting. When courting, a man will play beneath the window of his lover.	Once the province of privileged men, after the caste system ceased to be predominant, men, women, and children began to be taught <i>paringet</i> .
<i>Ohe Hano Ihu</i> of Hawaii	The major axis ≈ 25cm-30cm, width ≈ 30mm, blowing hole ≈ 6-8mm, played in a vertical position.	Mainly for pleasure. There was a tradition of use for courting in the past. Still primarily played by men.	Transmission is traditionally loose, with many self-taught. Few accomplished <i>Ohe Hano Ihu</i> players are still living today.

4. Related Question: Why Do People Play Flutes through the Nose?

Though not a central subject of this paper, many observers have made efforts to deal with the philosophical question “Why do people play flutes through the nose?” and have achieved some success. The following points summarize this work.

In ancient India, Brahmins represented the uppermost class of the priestly caste. Since there was a custom for lower class people to play flutes through the mouth, and since the higher class people disliked being associated with them, they developed the practice of playing flutes through the nose (Uchizaki 2003: 90).

Among the Botocudosno race in the eastern part of Brazil there was a custom known as *tembeitera*, in which the lower lip was greatly extended by insertion of a wooden disk, rendering playing flutes with the mouth impossible (Uchizaki 2003: 90).

There is also a text that considers ideas on the origin of the human nose. According to people living in the islands of Southeast Asia, Melanesia, and Polynesia, the concept of breathing through the nose is regarded as more important to consciousness than the sense of smell. Moreover, breathing through the nose is said to have greater supernatural powers and magic than breathing through the mouth. With that way of thinking in mind, in these cultures it is said that the musical act of playing a flute when a person dies is not an expression for an audience, but will be a dialog between self and God (Nishioka 1992: 67-70).

Conclusion and Subjects for Future Research

In the course of conducting interviews for this research, many differences were observed among the studied cultures, instruments, and players: 1) transverse or vertical structure; 2) single or double pipes; 3) free air reed-form system; 4) cultural norms about when playing the instrument is and is not appropriate, especially regarding funerals; and 5) restrictions on a performer’s gender.

However, we also uncovered important similarities among the studied nose flutes: 1) all are connected in some way with spiritual power; 2) they are played for healing people or for personal acts; and 3) they are played while courting to express one's love.

It is possible to say that the culture of nose flutes varied as it moved from culture to culture and as cultural groups themselves changed or relocated. However, some beliefs regarding the nose flute, including the similarities listed above, have endured, even in disparate countries.

Study results reveal an overall decline in nose flute culture, and native cultural life more broadly, in countries and locales like those discussed in this paper. It would seem that the main reason for the decline is the modernization of cultures in which the nose flute has traditionally played a significant role in ritual and religion. While this may be so, on-site researchers interested in preserving aspects of other cultures must be careful to consider the position of the people they are visiting. For example, among the Orang Asli, the mouth-blown whistle used to report a successful catch while hunting has been replaced these days by the cell phone. But when I asked these hunters why they used cell phones now instead of their own traditional whistle, they laughed at the question; to them, the cell phone is obviously much more useful and can send more precise information. Preservation of their traditional culture was not their primary concern in that situation, and researchers from abroad must remember that these kinds of situations occur.

Many researchers are reaching out and making efforts to preserve the cultural inheritances of traditions they recognize as endangered. As future goals, I would recommend examination of education, transmission, and dissemination systems, especially with respect to whether the systems in place will aid the preservation of the cultural traditions concerned.

I would like to consider this research as a starting point, and have gotten to know people from several nose flute cultures with the goal in mind of continuing research into the preservation of their traditions.

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