The Cultural Blueprint of Laotian Society from the Contexts of Traditional and Modern Music

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The Cultural Blueprint of Laotian Society from the Contexts of Traditional and Modern Music

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Social Studies and The Arts
of Bard College

by
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Dedication:

This project is dedicated to all Laotian-Americans who strive to connect with Lao culture and create strong Lao identities and communities throughout America. Moreover, I wholly dedicate this project to my family, who have shown me what it means to be proud to be Lao.
Acknowledgements:

I’d like to thank my senior project advisors, Professor Dominique Townsend and Professor Peter Laki, for their patience, kindness, and for guiding me throughout the writing process. I’d like to thank my mother and father for their unconditional love and utmost support in my upbringing and during my journey as an undergraduate. I wouldn’t be where I am today without them. I’d like to thank the rest of my family members, my significant other, and my close friends for their encouragement and for always believing in me.
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Introduction

Although he who walks behind an elephant may feel very secure, he is likely to get splattered with elephant dung.1

The music of Laos is the blueprint of Laotian identity and artistry.

Culture, in all nations, is a melting pot of all the unique customs, habits, and practices a society has created and maintains—it’s the phenomena that brings life and purpose to the human experience. The arts, beliefs, manners, languages, religions, and behaviors of a population all contribute to the makeup of that population’s overall culture. The overarching system of a group of people creates a familiar conduct amongst everyone in that society. Conduct manages behaviors, and behaviors manage power. Power in a society can be viewed in both an authoritative and proletariat point of view. Governmental powers rule the widespread socioeconomic conditions of a group of people. However, it is almost a fact that the societal traditions curated by the people themselves is what provides congenial entertainment, life, and restoration in such said society. How can this power be defined and exercised through the means of music to cultivate a firm cultural identity in Laos?

Laos’ low population density and lack of economic resources has placed a barrier in global representation and prominence. It’s clear that Laos remains a continually developing

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country, slowly constructing reform. Jobs are limited, education is not widely available, and environmental insufficiency contributes to less access to food sources and sanitary, safe water sources. One-fifth of the Laotian population does not meet their daily dietary needs. Such stressors can generate serious mental health issues, physical hindrances, and emotional boundaries. The COVID-19 pandemic has only worsened these concerns, creating additional environmental and economic decline that affects the country as a whole. Laos faces a serious challenge in this unforeseen period: extended lockdowns and the closing of borders depleted economic growth.\(^2\) Laos is a well-enjoyed destination amongst Southeast Asian travelers, however, with a year plus of non-negotiable travel restrictions, Laos’ tourism industry suffered. Laos’ current and future policy decisions will become an important factor in post-pandemic recovery and returning to gradual economic growth across the country.\(^3\)

Tourism isn’t the only financial contributor to Laos’ wealth. Another crucial factor in Laos’ source of economic and environmental growth is the geographical land of the country. Laos is located along the Mekong River, the largest river interconnecting multiple countries of Southeast Asia like Laos, Thailand, and Cambodia. The river offers unique resources that have been in high demand for centuries, for those in both the East and West. Historically, agriculture, trade, and hydropower, are amongst the reasons for numerous countries to source out of the Mekong River, opening up opportunities in the Chinese market for Europeans in France, the UK, and other travelers out of Europe.\(^4\) Of course, it’s not just outside colonizers who use the river to their advantage. Most Laotians live in rural areas, further away from popular, tourist cities like


Vientiane and Luang Prabang. The rural community is joined with the common profession of rice cultivation. Laotian village men and women have access to the river for fishing purposes, water, and transportation. Fish, a delicate, nutrient rich food that the Lao people love to eat, is called ທໍ່ (pronounced “Pa” in English tones, with an emphasis on a “p” and “b” sound spoken simultaneously). In Laotian culture, food is an experience shared with others. Families will often gather together to eat on a floor mat called the ອ້າພົມ (“pa phom”) and set food on a low-rise table designed intricately with plumeria flower art (the national flower of Laos). The entire fish is consumed and eaten with sticky rice, vegetable salads, or traditional Lao dipping sauce.

Food is a fundamental component of Laotian culture within their cultural rituals and relationships with others. It’s the aspect of the culture which has broken barriers between Laos and its foreigners, inviting all travelers and lovers of a good meal to learn about the close-knit and communal way of Laotian life through the magic of food. This goes hand-in-hand with religious practices and spiritual importance, holiday traditions, and language. However, an often overlooked facet of the culture is the value of artistic expression and, specifically, music.

Laotian music shows up in many different areas of the society by influencing communal living and bringing the Laotian community together, from across the world. Music is an artistic method that has kept Laotians living in America and elsewhere and Laotians on the homeland stay connected. One of the most popular and significant forms of modern Lao music, karaoke, is a prime example of this. However, other traditional genres of the music such as classical royal court music, Mor Lam, or the musical theater genre Lam Luang all have significant importance on the modern sound and what it is today. Music is a reflection of Laos’ attributes and qualities, expressing the language in a way that is artistic, gratifying, and well-sustained. The traditional

roots and musical traditions unite the Lao group during holidays, in the temple, and in the home amongst the company of dearly loved friends and family. The condition is simple: music allows us to communicate religious proverbs, language, and cultural values; all shaping the overall behaviors and customs that define the society as a whole.

My own family has played an important role in the development of my appreciation for the traditions of Lao music. Familial culture in the Laotian lifestyle is an incredibly close-knit and family-oriented way of life. Everything is shared: all meals are a communal experience, immediate families often live with or near extended members, and these moments within the home and the community are forever cherished.

Above is an image of my grandmother. My grandmother’s strength reveals itself amongst many facets of her life, both previously in Laos, and now in America. Before the Vietnam War, my grandmother’s upbringing in rural Laos was one of a typical nature for her time period: she worked on rice fields with her family, grew up in the temple as a Theravada Buddhist, and later
married and had children with her husband (my grandfather), a member of the Laotian military. However, when conflicts arose in 1964 and over two million bombs were dropped by the U.S in Laos over a time period of nine consecutive years, the lives of my family were changed forever. While my grandfather fought for the Royal Lao Army, my grandmother and her six children were forced to escape in order to flee such horrendous conditions in this new 20th century Laos. They first traveled a dangerous route along the Mekong River (the largest river in Southeast Asia bordering countries like Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and Cambodia), settling in a Thai refugee camp for multiple years. My family learned Thai at this time, and I can remember all the distinct stories my mom has told me growing up about the lifelong friends she made at the Buddhist temple and at her camp. It’s enthralling how children can have an innocence that protects them in even the most extreme and dire circumstances. Eventually, my family immigrated to America where they found an entirely new life, leaving aside the fear, emotional turmoil, and scarcity in Laos that would unfortunately be their last memory of Laos for a long time. Though five decades have passed since the Vietnam War, the remnants of survival, pain, and ultimate misfortune will always be a memory ingrained in me and my family's hearts.

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How does my family and many other Lao families stay connected, and keep high spirits even in times of despair? The answer is simple: music. Music helps those distraught in emotionally destructive situations to reconnect with themselves and their own identities. It’s a healing practice that is accessible, transformative, and communal. Music is an integral part of the shared and collective Laotian experience, and I can see how music has healed my own family during dark times before and after their immigration to America. From ritual music in the temples, to popular songs that my mom and her friends in the Thai refugee camps would sing to themselves, to something as simple as nursery rhymes that soothe babies and children alike, numerous facets of my family's experiences are indulged with music in some way. Now, from family karaoke at parties and events, to prized Laotian albums kept within my family for two generations, to the Laotian church hymns my grandmother sings at home that I know so well, the magic of music has not diminished, but has grown stronger.

The experience of traditional and modern Lao music is one of the preservation of culture, riveting change, and a representation of the Laotian experience.
Chapter One

Laos gains much of its cultural richness through the means of social interaction and religion. Laos’ political voice in international affairs is significantly small, however its historical events and crises as a communist ruled country is important. From the Vietnam War, to civil unrest caused by the Pathet Lao, and the extremities of poverty within the country, Laos struggles in multiple areas, both within the community of its citizens and the power of its leaders. However, Buddhism in Laos has provided an outlet for the people throughout history, and continues to be a vital element of Laotian tradition to this day. Buddhism influences daily Laotian life and certainly in the cultural contexts of the arts and music. The music culture of Laos must first be understood from a Buddhist lens, as so much of the music encompasses a spiritual purpose.

Buddhism was officially introduced to Laos in the 14th century. The establishment of a Buddhist presence was discovered in Lan Xang, following King Choa Fa Ngum’s unification of Laos. King Fa Ngum comes from a long line of rulers, leaders of now popular cities in Laos like Luang Prabang. Following in his family’s royal footsteps, he became king of the kingdom of Lan Xang (translated in English as “a million elephants”) in 1350. Fa Ngum’s empire extended across nearly all the vast areas that would become modern Laos, making his rule a verifiable attestment to his union of Laos. Fa Ngum’s family line heavily influenced Laos’ Buddhist nature during these centuries: Theravada Buddhism was introduced during his reign and, at a point, virtually all Laotians had converted to Hinayan Buddhism. The term of Theravada Buddhism is used interchangeably with Hinayana Buddhism, but such use is considered an insult as it expresses

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that the Theravada Sector is not as important as Mahayana Buddhism. Following King Ngum’s
death, his son and grandson eventually built numerous notable temples still existing in modern
day Laos, such as the Wat Manoram, Wat Keo, Wat Souan Than, and Wat Bot. Wat Ho Phra Keo
can be found in modern-day Vientiane, Wat Manoram in Luang Prabang, and Wat Souan Than
and Wat Bot are situated in landmarks around Southern and Eastern Thailand.

Temples themselves are representative of a sanctuary of music served for the purpose of
meeting religious or spiritual expectations. Though previously prohibited because music was
associated with material desire (an outlaw of Buddhist practice), music over centuries has found
its place in Buddhist rituals and other means. The temples in Laos are spaces of musical worship
for monks and the Laotian community as a whole alike. In the terms of spiritual ascension, a
Laotian Buddhist monk may sing chants, dance, or play instruments with their hand as a way to
make an offering to the Buddha. Buddhist chants are a central practice in Buddhist music,
preserving teachings and oral history through the means of these musical verses. Chants are often
a ceremonial practice where words are recited to invoke spiritual awareness and protection.
Additionally, such chants are often direct translations and phrases curated by the Dharma, the
central teachings of Buddhism. The chants are central in creating a unified connection between
monks, and in Laotian temples, the chants are significant in ritual Buddhist practices that serve
the community, specifically during a “Baci” ceremony. Baci (ං ກ າ) is held to celebrate
important life events in one’s family such as marriage, the birth of a new baby, or a family
member’s new achievement in an area such as career or education. This ceremony is an ancient
practice, present in Laotian culture even before Buddhism was introduced. Often the ceremony is

9 Mark J. Joshua. “A Short History of Buddhist Schools.” worldhistory.org. 29 September 2020,
https://www.worldhistory.org/article/492/a-short-history-of-the-buddhist-schools/#:~:text=The%20Theravada%20school%20is%20sometimes%20not
%20as%20important%20as%20Mahayana. Par 4
Par 3.
held in a temple or within the comfort of one’s home, as long as there is a monk present to make
the ceremony itself official. Laotians believe good luck comes from spirits, and this ceremony
cultivates luck to whatever and whoever the family may be calling it on for. During a Baci, the
Buddhist monk invited into the home performs a chant in order to call on the spirits and bless the
family with luck. Everyone remains silent during the monk’s chant, which is a requirement in
order for the monk to focus and bless the family with high spirits. The monk will generally chant
some excerpts from Lao poetry or proverbs, traditionally read in the Pali language. Laotian
monks are multilingual, speaking in their native tongue of Lao and chanting in the language
native to India and Buddha himself. Culminating the end of the chant, everyone sitting around
the Pha Khuan (ພູຄູນ), the gold pyramid piece used as a centerpiece during the ceremony,
will commence the near-end of the practice with a mutual group saying chant: “Please come high
spirits.” In Lao, this translates to ເມນີ້ຄົມໄອຍ. Such ceremonial practices are crucial in
Buddhist and spiritual culture in Laos, and the monk’s musical role in it is necessary. Chants are
critical in many spiritual practices amongst other religions as well, such as Judaism, Hinduism,
and Islam. It offers a passage in connecting spiritual people with their higher powers, and
creating a religious community through this musically centered speech.

Khene

Aside from liturgical choral chanting, instruments play a very key role in Buddhist worship
music. Percussion instruments are a prominent ritual instrument, which are unique to different
regions of Asia. In the Vietnamese music tradition, such players make use of the “lute,” a
wooden stringed instrument struck by a bow or coconut. In the Korean tradition, woodblocks are
often played in a rhythmic fashion in order to signal prayer time for monks in the temple.12

Laotian monks will often strike large hand drums and percussive melodic instruments, which will be further explored. However, the most significant and revolutionary traditional Lao instrument that has prevailed its influence throughout history is, without doubt, the Khene, a culturally revolutionary instrument whose imprint has remained on Laotian culture for years. This is an instrument often seen being played by monks in the various temples of Laos, making it a key instrument in Buddhist worship music.

The Khene (spelled ຫໝໜໍພິ່ມ in Lao), a mouth pipe organ made of bamboo, is the national renown instrument of Laos, the Isan people, as well as other regions of Southeast Asia. The instrument originated in the lowland areas as well as Northeastern regions of Thailand, home of the Isan people. Isaan serves as this bridge between the Thai and Lao people, being primarily ethnically Lao but sharing common cultural practices of both countries. As time passed, the instrument was adopted by other parts of Southeast Asia including Cambodia and Thailand, often by the Lao ethnic groups in these countries but also by those who are ethnically Cambodian and Thai. It closely resembles that of other free reed mouth organs of Southeast Asia such as Thailand’s “Naw,” China’s “Sheng” (笙), and Vietnam’s Kupuot. Similarly, each of these instruments has revealed its impact on its influential musical spread to other neighboring countries.

The free reed mouth organ is specific to the traditional cultures all around Southeast Asia and East Asia, but adapted forms of the instrument have been invented in the Western world. These include the current-day accordion, harmonica, concertina, and harmonium. Another example of this East and West cultural music exchange is through the accordion. The Francophone culture has allowed for Western instruments to be brought to past Indochina countries which include present day Laos and Vietnam. The French colonization of Laos
provides this element of cultural exchange in which the Laotian people have adopted some
French qualities such as language and this music. Free reed instruments are different from its
common reed counterpart, the beating reed made of cane commonly built into instruments like
the saxophone or clarinet. Free reeds are often made of bamboo, metal, or plastic (bamboo being
the most environmentally efficient considering its abundant availability in Southeast Asian
regions) and sits over another “slot” that is wider than the reed instrument itself.13 Sound is
produced by the reed moving in a free motion through this slot to create a vibration that produces
that noise we hear. Now, the mouth organ component of this instrument consists of multiple
pipes that are each tuned to a different pitch; the number of pipes varies depending on the type of
mouth organ. Each of the pipes is made purely of bamboo usually within the range of six to
eighteen, and it’s placed into a component called a wind chest, Most wind chest rectangular
boxes store the wooden pipes from which sound is generated from. However, here the wind chest
is simply the part of the Khene into which the pipes are horizontally inserted into. There are
different names associated with the Khene depending on the number of pipes. The Khene Jaet
has fourteen pipes, Khene Baet has sixteen pipes, and the Khene Gao has eighteen pipes.14 It’s
imperative to note that the English translation of “Khene” may appear to be spelled differently
amongst different academics such as “Kaen” or “Khaen.” With Lao being a tonal language, one
may oftentimes see words spelled out in the manner in which they best understand the
pronunciation. The most commonly used Khene is the Khene Jaet.

The free-reed inventions of the Southeast Asian regions all adhere to a similar concept, however, each instrument is uniquely distinct in its own way. Some are made of wood while others like the Korean Saenghwang are made of metal material, the tuning systems on these instruments vary, and each free-reed in each country serves similar as well as different purposes as it relates to religion, culture, or spirituality. The tuning system and principal scales played on the Khene are not a formal written arrangement. Oral tradition plays a key role in music education in Laos—one who desires to learn how to play the Khene would ultimately learn by observing a fellow player in the community. Oral tradition is critical in the preservation of cultural material amongst many societies, past and present. This is how knowledge, ideas, history, and art are passed onto future generations. In a developing nation like Laos where access to technology and informational resources is limited, this method of education is immensely impactful. However, there are two technical scale forms that can be identified with Western notation. This includes the sun scale (C D F G A) and the yao scale (D F G A C). The yao scale quite closely resembles the D minor pentatonic scale defined in Western music; both the yao and

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D minor pentatonic are ascending, and the “A” note in the middle of the scale is the turning point in which the rest of the notes continue to arise. The linear ascension in this phrase illustrates a unique quality of Asian music, and its texture resembles the sound quality of significant Southeast Asian instruments like bells, zithers, or melodic percussion. Musicians of the Northeast Thailand region mostly utilized this written arrangement. Even though lowland Laotian Khene players did not necessarily adopt the official names and written form of the scales, this does not mean they didn’t apply it as so. It just so happens that the passing on of learned playing techniques and styles was an observed, informal, and visual learning experience, not a written one. This is similar to the literary traditions of Laos in the fact that these stories are passed down orally. Though some stories were written, their importance and utilization depended on story retelling. Consequently, oral tradition is a significant part of Laotian culture among multiple aspects.

The Khene plays a key role in the musical history of Laos and its importance is just as prevalent in a Buddhist context. Liturgical chanting may be a solo vocal activity, however, when accompanied by a Khene, the texture and quality of a piece will change immensely. Suddenly, the weight of a set of lyrics in a piece will feel more impactful, exhibiting a supportive and complimentary dynamic between the Khene and the singer. Years of music documented in records of Lao music exemplify this approach of instrumentation and composition. Almost always, a contrast in rhythmic and melodic styles between the two create a methodology to the music that is energetic, moving, and captivating. The Khene in a way will take a sort of “call and response” approach, while soloing under longer passages of lyrics. This type of music would be categorized under traditional folk music, in which vocalism plays a role in conveying some sort of thematic or literary message as the Khene supports it. This folk music is traditionally
characterized as “Mor Lam” (written in Lao script as ທໍາລະ). Love, heartbreak, and village life in Laos are the primary themes of these songs. Generally, no other instruments accompany the Khene and vocalist with the exception of background vocalists. A traditional Mor Lam tune will be further translated and explored below.

**Further Buddhist Musical Contexts, Celestial Harmonies**

A less vocal-focused style of playing is ceremonial music, in which Buddhism plays a key role in. Ceremonial music falls under the category of more “classical” music, and its presence can be found in major events like weddings, funerals, New Year celebrations, amongst other various gatherings at the temples.¹⁶ This music is often instrument based using instruments such as melodic percussion like various bells, ringing instruments like triangles, and the Khene (of course). Unlike the tradition in folk singing and tunes, these pieces sometimes excluded the use of voice. Just like with other instrumental music genres, this allows for depth to the music, allowing the listener to create their own experience with the song and enjoy the effects of decreased anxiety and relaxed nervous systems. An exceptional album titled, “Music of Laos: The Buddhist Tradition” produced by Gisa Jahnichen captures the essence of Buddhist music styles in Laos. The recording is published by “Celestial Harmonies,” a record producing company representing recordings from over forty countries since 1972. The recording is split into tracks organized in three sections: ceremonial music, choral chanting, and celebratory music (in the combined form of both folk-style and instrumental pieces). For the ceremonial side, Jahnichen recorded a ceremonial ensemble based in the Champasak province, the most Southwestern region of Laos. Though no specific description of the instrumentation is provided, it’s clear which ones are most likely used in the piece. Two percussion instruments and an organ can be detected-most likely including a bell, a “Lannat” (ລ້ານນາທ), and a Khene.

The Lannat is a key percussive element used popularly in traditional instrumental/ceremonial pieces. It most similarly resembles that of the Western xylophone. Just like a xylophone, the keys are wooden blocks connected by string, the instrument itself is shaped like a boat, and it’s played with two different types of mallet sticks, leather and wooden. The shape of the Lannat contributes to the type of sound it produces. Four tracks are included in this section, and the most puzzling part of it is the fact that nearly each song sounds the same. The same instruments are used, they follow the same tempo through most parts of the pieces, and the key of the melodic instruments (the Lannat and the Khene) remain the same. Yet, each song has a clear ending; the beginnings of a few of them are not as clear, but this just could be a result of the style or quality of the recording itself. While the Lannat seems to play a continuous eight bar phrase, the Khene artist solos over these phrases, often matching up in tone with the Lannat at various notes. At a

few points of the songs, the instrumentalists often speed up for a few minutes at a time. This change in tempo seems to be intentional, and it builds up intensity that either rises to the end or falls back. The next section is a series of songs recorded at a temple, presenting a prime example of liturgical choral chanting. These pieces are incredibly expressive, showing a creative side of the music using only percussion. The first song is an interlude, a percussion solo likely featuring the “That Phon,” a hand drum used to emulate bass and treble sounds that generally accompanies chants, and a gong cymbal used with muted sounds. The percussionist plays a spacial rhythm with a lot of rests and forte notes. The gong player plays sparse notes on the cymbal sporadically. This level of musicality is one that is very simplistic, however, there’s a lot to be said in the simplicity. It’s only a fifty-six-second recording, but in this short amount of time, there’s a lot of anticipation that is revealed in the music. It provides the listener with a sense of curiosity, expecting something to appear with no idea of what it is. The recorded chants themselves are so similar to the instrumentation displayed here. When the monk or another performer chants, they may sing in a way that is monotone, speaking like in a conversation, or melodically. The chants may come from scripture readings, a prayer, or another religious passage. “Pi Mai” (new year), the last section of the recording, exemplifies celebratory music pinpointing an integral cultural tradition in Laos, where music serves as the heart of celebration during the New Year and other events. The tracks in this section represent a gratifying mix between choral chanting and instrumentalism, and in two of the songs, these two elements come together effortlessly. The first three recordings seem to be introductory pieces, following the same style as that of the choral chanting. It leads up to the next few pieces that bring other voices, new instruments, and energy to the album. A few instruments include the Lannat and Khene, as well as a tambourine. The

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most significant addition here, however, are the background voices because they add an element of excitement, togetherness, and enthusiasm in the music. This perfectly matches the scene—one can imagine this group performing for a crowd of people coming in and out of the temple hosting the New Year celebration.

**Regional Traditional Styles**

As evident, Buddhism plays a key role in the music of Laos. Between ceremonial traditions to celebratory events that center religion and spiritualism as the core commemoration, Buddhism is central to the basis of Laos’ musical genre. Within the overarching umbrella of Khene music, vocal styles are an incredibly important component to the methodology and approach of the instrument.

There are a variety of styles of vocal music defined by different regions in Laos. The terms for these styles are often based off the primary terms, “khap” (ຄໍາບ) and “lam” (ລາມ). The Khap correlates to the Northern area of Laos, while Lam generally is used to describe music in Southern Laos. The interchangeable, extended forms of the terms are Khap-Lam and Mor Lam. These styles of singing generally convey the following three common themes: Buddhist rituals, rural life, or love and courtship. In the south, there are lam forms which rely heavily on spiritual substance and belief: “Lam Phi Fa” and “Lam Soen”.

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The tradition and ritual experience of the Phi Fa is similar in both Thailand in Laos. The ritual takes place for an ill member of a community, and it is believed in folklore that spirits must be called upon to heal the member if they are unable to recover from traditional medicines. The “Phi Fa” (ພີຟ້າ) itself is thought to be a spirit who can grant the wishes of humans, resides in the sky, and is in fact closer to God than regular ghosts. Since “other ghosts” are considered to be found in places on Earth like mountains and trees, the Phi Fa is seen as a much higher deity than the preceding ones, and possesses a greater spiritual power which escalates a community’s vulnerability toward this ritual/belief. While there are a few different rituals involving “Phi Fa,” like Liang Phi in which the ritual becomes an observatory experience where the next generation learns how to perform Phi Fa rituals, “Lam Phi Fa” utilizes music in order to achieve a remedying purpose. The singer, ritualist, who leads the song is almost always a woman (women are believed to have more soft voices, inviting natures, and friendlier demeanors than men).

Those participating in these rituals want the lead to have a higher voice tonality and motherly,

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sympathetic nature to encourage the healing ambience of the ritual in order to communicate with the spirit effectively. The singer is always accompanied by a Khene. Usually, the ritual is performed indoors (similar to a Baci ceremony) in a place like the home or various designated spaces in temples and key objects like candles, plants, or headwear is used throughout. The music of the Lam Phi Fa ritual combines both movement and sound: song and dance. The classic dance of Lao culture, the “Phon” (ໂພນ), is a movement done by pressing your thumb and index finger together, fanning your hands out, and moving them in a circular motion while swaying your feet and body side to side, often while moving around in a larger circle among other dancers. In Lam Phi Fa, the ritual involves a series of songs, often with a group of people dancing along to a few of them at different points of the event. Most of the music is paced at a slower tempo, in order to keep with the manner of the ritual. The songs begin with the Khene player, and the vocalist will chime in at any point to begin her lyrical verses and calling upon the spirits. The approach of the blend between the instrumentalist and vocalist is almost like a conversation. Like in a lot of Mor Lam pieces, the Khene player is meant to complement the voice, matching her tone, melodious tempo, and extending his or her notes whenever the vocalist also emphasizes a word or phrase. Hence, a pattern is established in the music, creating a sense of harmonial and rhythmic unity between the Khene and vocalist.

The “Lam Soen” is a similar healing, ritualistic experience. While the Lam Phi Fa is used to bring healing to a living person who is sick via a spiritual entity, the Lam Soen is even more of a spiritual experience, where one attempts to revive the “soul” of an ill member. 22 Similarly, the ritualist invokes this entity via designated phrases in their singing, and turns to the help of the

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spirits to resuscitate the spirit of a human. Both rituals are examples of principal Laotian procedures, and both exemplify the use of vocal focused music in cultural practices.

The regional styles of the Lam and Khap music are dependent on the areas or provinces which the genre originates from. Oftentimes, the name of the style itself directly reflects the location. The first distinct difference between Khap and Lam itself lies within the vocal patterns. Lam pieces are written with seven syllables per line while Khap is written with four to five syllables in each line of the song. Melodically, it’s dissimilar to the melodic patterns in Thailand, with these arrangements being more limited and seldom alternated. In fact, while Thai and Laotian traditional music have similar qualities, there are direct differences in the production, capabilities, and popularization. For example, traditional vocalists in Laos are well respected for honing their craft and mastering the art. However, their status in popularity is nowhere near the musical sensations that Thai singers become. To this day, popular Thai music overshadows the local Laotian radio stations. Many instruments used in Laos are manufactured in Thailand, and this is a direct result of the economic deprivation in Laos.

In addition to maintaining the four to five syllable line structure, Khap vocalists may often, in some regional genres, sing in a rhythmically free fashion amongst these lines. There’s also less of a focus on descending melodies on the Khene, as it’s generally done in the Southern Lam tradition. The Khap Thai Dam, music that can be located in remote locations of Northern Laos, is one of the few regional styles that do not involve the Khene in its music. Rather, an instrument called the “Pi Bap” (ປີບາບ) is implemented which is essentially a free reed flute. While the vocalist and instrumentalist perform simultaneously in free rhythms, they also create consonance under two different scales. The vocalist sings in the yao scale while the Pi Bap

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player uses four of the notes in that scale, D, G, A, along with C#. This methodology keeps within the overall style of the Khene and vocalist melodically free arrangement, except with a different instrument and an even greater freedom within the cadence of the music. Another popular Khap style is the Khap Ngeum, named after the Nam Ngeum river in Laos. The Nam Ngeum is a river that runs from Northern Laos through the South, and at some point it joins the Mekong River that runs throughout the country itself. Those who sing this style are generally descendants of the Xiangkhoang province, a Northeastern region of Laos. A Khene is normally always accompanied in the music, and usually a Khene Jaet (fourteen pipes) or a twelve pipe Khene is used. Rhythmically, the songs are set to a slower tempo and the vocalist and Khene player match up in speed and rhythmic phrasing. The vocalist slowly expresses each line of text, articulating each word in an elongated fashion, and these phrases are often separated by long moments of pauses.  

A unique technique with the Khene which is often used in other traditional and modern pieces is the “trill.” Similar to a lip trill which may be used by listeners or singers in exciting or celebratory songs, which will be mentioned in a translated and analyzed modern piece in chapter three, the Khene player does the same in Khap Ngeum music to instead create intensity and dramatism. This trill closely resembles the sound of a “shake,” in which two or more notes are vigorously played back to back in a fast, repetitive fashion, producing a trembling, wobbly sound.

“Lam Salavane” is another major Lam genre, encompassing those originating from the Saravane (another way to spell the name of the region) Province. The Saravane province, of course, is located in Southern Laos, bordering right along another major Laotian province to the North, Savannakhet. The area is in fact also inhabited by the Mon-Khmer

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group, a minority group originating from different countries bordering Thailand, Burma, and Cambodia. Musically, this style is played in somewhat of a quicker tempo and various other instruments are usually included. This includes the Khene, a fiddle, a lute, and an assembly of smaller percussion instruments. Many other geographical styles exist under the Khap and Lam traditions, and each one possesses its own unique differences, encompassing the artistry of those who occupy these areas.

Traditional music in Laos is more than just a form of expression. It’s a gateway to a plethora of customs and historically inaugurated practices that formulate Laotian culture into what it is. Rituals depend on music to perform properly and connect with entities successfully. Music is the foundation of these procedures and gives those participating in the ritual something to believe in. Frequencies found in certain tones, waves, and sounds of music ignite chemical reactions in the brain that invoke all feelings of calmness, peace, and spiritual interconnections. Traditional music, chants, and performances are the heart of years of documented festivals and celebrations in Laos, bringing life, exhilaration, and joy to these events. Laos’ history combined with centuries of traditional music practices embodies the art of expression that contributes to the formation of cultural identity, societal distinction, and a collective sense of pride for Laotian people themselves and their country.

**Traditional Music Translation**

*ອ້າຍ* *(My Brother)*

*ໄສງານເດ* *(sai ngan dai, The River Flows…)*

*ໄອຍນໍ* *(ai yan, Ohhhhh…)*

*ນາຫີວກອນບູນມີນ້ອງເດ* *(na heo kon boon nee nong dai, Come talk to me)*
ໄອນໍອ້າຍຈານໂຊເອ້ຍ (o noh ai jahn sai euhy, You belong to someone)
 Johannesburg (jahn seuh paen sohn khong pai, Whose son are you?)
 ໄທທິດ (yahk ho parn khong nong, I yearn to belong to you)
 ໄ່ມ່ວ່າ (maen va ho nong ham sam boon sang, Even though you’ll look and wander away)
 ປາງໃດຊຶໂດ້ຣ່ວມອ້າຍເດ (pang daih seuh do loan ai dai, Will you pick the right choice?)
 ໄອນໍອ້າຍຈານໂຊເອ້ຍ (o no ai jahn sai euhy, You belong to someone)
 ຜອຍເອົາບຸມຊໍາກວ້າງໆ (hai aow boun sahm vang vang, Release your troubles)
 ຜອຍເອົານ້ອງຢູ່ນໍາອ້າຍແດ້ເນີ (ho aow nonh yoo nahm ai dah nuh, And allow me, brother, to take you)
 ໄອນໍວ່າຈັ່ງໃດແລ້ວລະອ້າຍ (o noh va jang dai laow la ai, Oh, brother, how are you?)
 ທ່ອຍແມ່ນເງຶນຄໍາຂອງ (ai bo keuhd yahk dai, I do not think)
 ທຶ່ງເວນ ກັບຂາຍ (saehd bo ay, You should walk the journey alone)
 ພາບແມ່ນຈັກ (saen bo ay, Worry not, and let it be.)
 ປາຈັ່ງ (o noh khan maehn ngeun kham khong, This offering is greater than gold)
 ແລະທ່ອນ ຈັກ ແຄຣ່າ (ka hahk neuh po sai va theuh, Accepting a lending hand.)
 ທາມນ້ອງເພີ່ມຍັງໄດ້ແຊຍ (maeun va ay yak dai neuy, Every brother wants a companion.)
 ທີ່ຢູ່ໄວ້ສືບມູນ (sam paeng kao, And I speak this with such conviction.)
 ທ່ອຍຍາກດານ ການຄົ້ງຢູ່ (ay yak dai nad ta noh nong, I, too, want a companion)
 ທີ່ເຊັນ (seuh muah vai seuhb moon ay bo dah day, You may not know what to do)
 ປາຈັ່ງ (ay noh ai jan soh euhy, But, remember, you belong to someone.)
មក​ឈើដើម្បីលុង ដែល ឈើ សាធារណ៍ (aye yadai sam mon nong, You’ll need a touch as loving as a baby)

ដើម្បីដែល ដែល សាធារណ៍ (yadai mon man, This is true)

ដើម្បីតាមត្រឹមត្រូវ (seuh yadai sang peuh sai euhy, It may be hard to find)

ដើម្បីតាមត្រឹមត្រូវ (seuh yadai sang peuh sai euhy, Oh, my brother, just be strong)

ថាហុយមកតាមត្រឹមត្រូវ នៅ (ka yadai taih bo, Still, it’s hard to believe)

ថា សេេឈើ (ay keen pi, That this could take years.)

ថាហុយមកតាមត្រឹមត្រូវ (ka yadai tang kab, As hard a journey it may be)

ថា សុេេឈើ (ay ab nam, Shower yourself with strength, brother.)

ថាហុយមកតាមត្រឹមត្រូវ ឃុំបំប្លែង នៅ (ka yadai nam khohn bo ay, It will be difficult to lead and find your way.)

ឈើ បំប្លែង (o noh bahd nee, Oh.)

ថាហុយមកតាមត្រឹមត្រូវ (ka yadai sohn nong, It’s time to find your alliance.)

ថាហុយមកតាមត្រឹមត្រូវ (kheud yadai sahm non nong, time to create a family.)

ថាហុយមកតាមត្រឹមត្រូវ (yadai yahdai nong seuh hai, with every part of you.)

ថា សុេេឈើ (peuh sai euhy, becoming a husband.)

ឈើ (o noh, Oh.)

ថាហុយអរីមូល ដែល ឈើ សាធារណ៍ (hod tang kai sam non nong, Your body is your temple)

ថាហុយឈើ រីេជាគោលដៅសម្រាប់ (yak yo hai mob ta vai, I’d like for you to listen to me clearly)

ថា បំបូង ពាក់ នៅ (khan bo kha nam oon, You will get warm with worries,)

នៅ ឈើបំបូងមួយ ឈើ (nong yahdai nohib thoai ta vai, But you shouldn’t give up,)
សາວ (ay maeh, My dear brother.)

អាចឈ្មុះ (o noh ay jahn sai ohb, You belong to someone.)

ការការណ់ (khan bo kha ham vai, Don’t carry the burden of fear.)

អាចក្អាក្អាយ (nong yahk mohb sahm thea hai, Allow yourself to find peace.)

គឺ (seuh tham jai ay seuh thang sa noh, You are my dear brother-in-law.)

អាចធ្វើអាចឈ្មុះ (o noh yahn thea meuh sahm yoo laeh. I’m scared you may fail, but my hands are already full.)

ឈ្មុះស្រាប់អាវស្រាប់អារម្មណ៌ (tang bahn peuhn seuh khong ay day. So on your way to the village, take care of the family)

អាចធ្វើអាចឈ្មុះ (va day meuh jao phoo ma meuh nee, Come today with great strength.)

ជាមួយនឹង (jao phoo hang heun pha, Look to the sky)

ដោយយូរ (jahn ta la lohm loong euh heam eun, And you’ll see Chanthalam who has passed)

ដេលទាំងសង្គម (leuh va meuh phoo hoang laoh bo ay, His caregiving hands which were never ashamed)

មីយូរ (seuh ma yeuh yohk euh vyan, Nor made silly jokes)

ស្រាប់បាន (maen va ay jahn sai euh, Just content where he belongs.)

ស្រាប់បាន (nong dai yeuhn sahm peuhv sahm va, I repeat once again)

ស្រាប់បាន (seuh sao meung khao san, To everyone of Khao San village.)

ដេលទាំងសង្គម (sa va ay non puk hak keang, To protect our brothers)
This piece is a traditional Mor Lam song with focus and attention to one female vocalist, who brings attention to core familiar values crucial to traditional Laotian domestic culture. The song’s designated video title is “Lum Lao.” The Lao Lum (also pronounced Lao Loum) is historically the major ethnic group in Laos, in direct reference to those living in the lowland valleys of Laos. It’s therefore likely that those in the video come from the area, revealing the regional musical style of those inhabited here, the Khap-Lam (ຂັບລາມ) vocal music, a general term combining the two umbrella terms which Lao vocal styles fall under. Mor-Lam, the term referring to the male and female singer of a performance, is apparent here, with the lead male singer singing in descants, similar to the method of supportive melodic lines sung in church

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hymns today. Though both the male and female singer complement each other fluidly, the female vocalist is the lyrical propeller of the piece as the “Mor-Lam.” The literal translation of Mor Lam is “the singer,” and this song encompasses the unique concept of the Lao lead vocalist as accompanied harmoniously with the Khene organ. As discussed previously, the Khene provides a firm, continuous melodic line that allows the singer to vocalize within the time signature at a rhythmically free pace. Though some Lao Mor Lam pieces are mixed with Thai and Isaan, this piece is spoken strictly in Lao. The lyrics here seem to be done without preparation and are rather improvised, as with many traditional Mor Lam pieces, and it’s a buildup of free poetic verse, without attention to meter.\(^{26}\) Here, the lead singer repeats the phrase “you belong to someone” (ໄອນໍອ້າຍຈານໂຊເອ້ຍ)-the repetition allows for stability in the lyricism. Even though the singer is improvising, she can always have an idea of where she is in her story by coming back to this one phrase. Although the subject of the song is not clearly revealed until the end, early on the singer refers to a “brother” which could easily represent Laotian men of all kinds. There’s the sense of familial familiarity between the singers and the subject of her lyrics, encompassing the idea of family values in the Lao cultural tradition. Historically, the typical household of that of a Lao family is a married couple, their large number of children, and grandparents; most households had between six-eight children while some had even more. The patriarchal nature is apparent in traditional Lao family structure, with the husband or man of the family representing the family in all aspects.\(^{27}\) This includes village meetings, temple rituals, and community projects. Often, the grandparents included living in the household come from the wife’s side of the family, which makes sense for this singer to be singing from the perspective of a future or current sister-in-law. As a soon-to-be added member of the family, there are

\(^{26}\) “Mor Lam.” academickids.com, 2022, academickids.com/encyclopedia/index.php/Mor_lam. Par.2.

\(^{27}\) “Families, Men, And Women in Laos.” factsanddetails.com, May 2014, https://factsanddetails.com/southeast-asia/Laos/sub5_3b/entry-2954.html#:~:text=The%20Lao%20have%20great%20respect,has%20six%20to%20eight%20members. Par. 3.
expectations needed to be met in order for this man to be accepted and dependent on. There are numerous daily tasks expected to be carried out by the “man” of the family which often include hunting, caring for the buffalo and other grazing land animals, plowing fields, and selling such meat and products at nearby village markets. Though the men in the family make most of the important family decisions and primary responsibilities are divided by gender, some duties are a collaborative job for both men and women. For example, women have the rights to land and work, and they also cut and carry firewood just like men.  

Although there are gray areas with room for improvement in gender equality in Laos, women play a key role in the family and in the husband’s life. In this song, the singer says “ແມ່ນວ່າອ້າຍຢາກໄດ້ເມຍ (maen va ai yak dai nai),” Every brother wants a companion,” stressing the importance of cooperation and companionship between a husband and wife in all aspects of the family.

Musically, this piece encompasses an effortless blend between the Khene and the vocals. Throughout the song, the Khene instrumentalist improvises with the singer within the poetic verses, nearly matching her every note in a sense. If this piece was pre-written, there’s a clear form in structure: every verse is followed by a repeated phrase played by the Khene alone, and each verse is rhythmically correspondent between the Khene and the vocal notes. Each note that’s held out by the singer is also elongated within the Khene notes, and a compacted series of notes sung by the singer is also played by the Khene artist in a rhythmically rapid fashion. Furthermore, the singer sings in a conversational manner and at many points vocalizes her words in a way that one would in an ordinary way of speaking. Considering the fact many Khap singers of the lowland, Lum Lao region attribute their vocal texts to literature pieces and writings,

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28 “Families, Men, And Women in Laos.” factsanddetails.com, May 2014, https://factsanddetails.com/southeast-asia/Laos/sub5_3b/entry-2954.html#:~:text=The%20Lao%20have%20great%20respect,has%20six%20to%20eight%20members. Par. 11.
there’s the possibility that these lyrics are therefore influenced by a literature text. This level of poetic interpretation impacts the flow of the vocalization and, ultimately, the song as a whole. The Khene scale here most resembles that of the “yao” (ເຍົາ), one of the two primary scales consisting of the notes D F G A C. A clear example of the scale can be heard in the phrase played consecutively after many of the singers’ finished verses throughout the song, producing instrumental continuity and uniformity.

Chapter Two

The modern musical era of Laos can be divided into two segments: the modernization of traditional methodologies and the transition to a period of Lao music influenced by Western trends. In order to understand the shift to a current-day period, it’s critical to understand the modernization of the early music traditions. Cultural music habits change when environmental, economic, or societal changes take place in a country or region. If a nation continues to be impoverished, this will result in the stronger preservation of traditional habits across all realms of that group’s lifestyle. For example, although Laos has seen some gradual economic growth in the past years, it remains one of the poorest countries in Asia. Consequently, modern developments in technology are limited compared to other neighboring countries in Asia. This results in the

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continued implementation of traditional methods and ways of living, which can be advantageous in preserving cultural customs.

Thailand, the neighboring country of Laos, initially saw the modernization of traditional music through changes in agriculture. In multiple countries of Southeast Asia, members of the community who worked in rice cultivation used music as an outlet to endure the work days. Thailand is a prime example of this, and is also an example of local songs that were lost due to economic changes after a period of war. These were vocal songs that used minimal instrumentation that was sung during breaks or during work. After World War II, the Thai government invested its financial growth into practical uses such as the development of highway systems, electricity in villages, gasoline power, and television and media. Consequently, it was no longer necessary for people to work in the rice fields due to developments in agricultural technology such as digital solutions like seed attachers and crop management. With a removed need for people to work in the rice fields, the presence of local work songs disappeared with it. The cultural significance in local work songs is similar to that of the jubilees ("slave songs") specific to the African-American experience. Work songs were incredibly important for those who were enslaved to express their feelings, worship, pray, and connect spiritually with their community. These were also oral traditions that were passed down for multiple generations. Although Thai and other Southeast Asians were not enslaved to work in the rice fields, the concept in principle is similar. The lyrics and melody of these Thai work songs were associated with what work they were doing: “transplanting, cutting rice, threshing, husking, raking.” Weather conditions in these areas were probably not great — extremely hot in the summer

months and colder during the winter. There was no advanced A.C nor heating system, and working as a rice farmer is an immensely labor-intensive activity. Therefore, stabilizing your mind and spirit during strenuous work through the means of music is both advantageous and a notable aspect of culture.

Historically, traditional music in Southeast Asian countries is often specific to certain regions or villages, as previously discussed. For example, the music of the Lowland region, Lum Lao, may differ from villages in the Champasack province. The least wealthy countries in Southeast Asia like Laos and Burma possess one of the most regional areas divided into various communities and villages. 33 As it will be soon discussed, the loss of regionalism affects the transition from traditional to modern music. Regionalism depends on places that are lacking in strong road networks that connect the villages and regions of that country and differences in language/dialect. It will always be present in nations that don’t have as well-developed geographic boundaries. Although this can create a slight divide in national affairs as it relates to politics or states of affairs, regionalism is significant to the varying cultural practices in a designated country. It’s important to understand regionalism in Southeast Asia in its bureaucratic context to better grasp the context of regionalism in music and culture. On the technical side, by definition, regionalism brings together a political development based on a specific region and is less “central” in its administration. This translates into regionalization, a process in which power is shifted from central governments to regions. Its implementation affects the economy just as much as the geopolitical space. For example, economic activities in different markets and communities in different regions may be increased. This process is driven by factors from the private sector rather than large governments and the official term for it is “market-led.”34

Market-led growth serves the interests of the consumers and contributes to regional economic growth. Consequently, regional formation and practices cannot be done without the people or the public: “... it seems inconceivable to narrowly base regional formation in formal government agreements, institutions, or macro-culture as sole factors, while ignoring a range of various dynamic socio-economic centered processes and developments, such as in fields of consumption, technology, and ecology.” Simply put, regionalization and the idea of regionalism depends on the consumers—the community itself who drives the market, serve and act as the majority, and are the heart of the culture that the authenticity of a society depends on. Similar to how the concept of Southeast Asia as one region could not have transpired without the acceptance of the people themselves, regionality simply would not exist without the beliefs and customs of the communities themselves that drive regionality.

Now, the loss of regionality in developing countries in Southeast Asia contributes to the modernization of traditional music. In Laos, the presence of regional styles is still more prominent than in neighboring countries like Thailand, but the modernization of these specific regional styles are still evident. In contrast, Thailand is an increasingly modernized society, so regionalism here has eventually dissipated along with some traditional practices. With regionalism comes variations of traditions specific to each region, and eventually some customs in chosen regions became unacceptable and rejected. The Thai government since the 1970s has moved the country to a more uniformed, national identity. Central Thai culture is much more profound than that of the culture in the North and South, for example. Consequently, the traditional music, way of dressing, and local dialects eventually disappear in order to fit the

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Thailand, unlike Laos, is a wealthier, well-developed country in many ways that Laos still has a lot of catching up to do. There are thousands of villages spread among the 142 districts in Laos, where each may differ slightly from the other in lifestyle and traditions, but the concept of community, camaraderie, and fellowship remains strong. As a result, regionalism remains strong in Laos, conserving a sense of traditionalism in the culture and a continued preservation of history. The influence of modern practices on these regional approaches is one of the ways that modernization takes place. For example, the vocal traditions of Laos such as the Khap-Lam and Mor Lam are long-standing traditions with extensive importance in the musical culture. Laotian vocal music in Laos today sounds parallel to the way the music was sung and played in previous years. While the tradition remains more or less the same, the quality and caliber of performance have favorably developed. An outsider can now find performances in video form on the internet, rather than just relying on in-person performances in villages that they must visit Laos for.

Additionally, some music produced in Laos or music produced in America dedicated to Laotian traditions can be found on popular streaming services like Spotify, YouTube, and Apple Music. This is an important tool when it comes to accessing Laotian music archives and resources. Furthermore, this connects the Laotian community on a global scale, bringing music conducted or recorded in Laos to America and vice versa.

The royal court music of Laos is closely associated with that of Laos’ classical genre, a tradition historically only serving those of the elite and prosperous. It’s a firm example of a modernized traditional style in the fact that this particular style of music is no longer performed nor accepted due to Laos’ current political climate. Royal families and the courts of kings
popularized court music, ensuring that this genre was prevalent in spaces of wealthier people.\textsuperscript{37} Laos is currently a communist state, however, during the period in which the Royal Lao Government reigned, classical music was considered the genre of most prestigious value. The king during this time encouraged musical compositions and creativity in the classical style. He preferred this over the popular Lao music tunes at the time. Classical music was associated with revolutionary songs during the colonial period in which the French overtook Laos for nearly one hundred years. During their rule, Laotians had made multiple attempts to regain independence, which encouraged the formation of revolutionary songs. Revolutionary music, among numerous cultures and different points of history, is critical in generating revolutionary action, unifying political interests, and bringing communities together. Classical music in Laos became linked to revolutionary music, but it became an academic style in which folk traditional instruments were studied and compositions were closely preserved, studied, and performed in ceremonies and other various performance settings. Even following the period that socialists overtook Laos, classical music was closely related to the ever-changing national identities of the country and the struggles that come along with it.\textsuperscript{38}

However, Laos’ communist government eventually banned court and classical music and “established institutions” that would manage music and art. This limits how well the original classical compositions can be preserved and passed down, what skills can be shared with the community, and what musical knowledge of the classical style could be taught in formal settings. Previously, this classical music may be written down as compositions or taught in educational settings, but without people who are willing to go against the political agenda and risk their reputation or even life, the tradition simply dies down. As Laos retained its traditional folk styles


like the Mor Lam and current-day karaoke music, court music disappeared. Such circumstances have occurred in other neighboring Southeast Asian countries as well, such as Cambodia or Malaysia. When bureaucratic entities infiltrate the cultural facets of a society in an attempt to achieve a specific national identity, previous traditional methods will simply dissipate. It’s disheartening as much as it is necessary because change and adaptation shapes modern music into what it is now. Upon the prohibition of the genre, much of the Laotian court music artifacts remain undiscovered or lost, however there are few musical groups in America who preserve the tradition and aim to keep the music alive via a few recordings and past performances.

Such modernization of traditional music resulted in the loss of older genres as well as the preservation of these genres crafted into new angles. Following this period, the Lao Karaoke style flourished, presenting an upholding of traditional vocal styles with a new energy, excitement, and visualizations. Between the late 90s to early 2000s, many singers and performance groups recorded music, in both audio and video format. Most of these recordings can be found in VCD (video CD) or regular CD (Compact Disc) forms. Producers are generally smaller groups based in Laos, however, some CDs have the labels of small American companies, exemplifying groups based in the Western world who aim to preserve and share the music. This includes a group like ASTM Music Distribution. There are no known big name production brands coming out of Laos, partly due to the lack of financial resources and the third-world economy. Such circumstances automatically affect the quality of the video and music production, and, consequently, nearly all the music and videos produced at this time share similar characteristics. Laotian Karaoke music follows the same technical approach of traditional vocal styles under Khap and Lam, but it places a modern, early 2000s twist on the music by adding elements which bring enthusiasm and spirit to the music. The first way this is done is through the
use of more instruments. Unlike the standard Khene and vocalist combo known in regional and
traditional songs, Lao karaoke often involves drum sets, synthesizers, electric guitars, hand
percussion, or more traditional instruments like the Lannat and Pipa. This brings a larger volume
to the overall sound produced in these songs, allowing the vocalist to project and bring
enticement to the music. Videography also plays a major role in the transition to the karaoke era.
Many CDs are accompanied by complimentary videos, bringing life to the music and a face to
the name. They are generally low-budget quality videos with minimal editing, cheaper cameras
and equipment being used to film the videos, and a lack of such tools like SFX used in
mainstream videos among popular American artists today. However, the ability to convey a story
through these videos are definitely still prevalent and well executed. In many of these
performances, the singer is often placed in the “background” while a group of people chosen to
act in the video play out the story of the song. In other cases, the singer may be performing with
a group of background dancers, performing the classic Laotian Dance, the “Phon.” These dancers
serve this sole purpose and are hardly seen contributing adlib or backup vocals. Phon dancers
can move to either slow or fast music, however, most of the slow songs in karaoke are
complimented with simpler videos, with the singer generally staying in one place and the actors
engaging in a storytelling montage. Attire in these videos for the performers follow Laotian
guidelines of formal dress, men wearing business casual clothing while women wear the
traditional Laotian skirt, the “Cint.”

The era of Laotian pop emerged in the early 2000s, leading to the culture of the music
now, as it also fits within a Western context. Before modern styles became popular, the
continuation of indigenous traditions were often a result of the communist reforms and
regulations that the Laotian community were required to adhere to. This shows up in multiple
facets of their life, including art, political freedoms, and economic inequality. The banning and resurfacing of classical Lao music is one example of this, but later, capitalist reforms in the country (while still under communist rule) occurred. Such reforms allowed for previously forbidden measures. Music enthusiasts were able to start their own smaller, private record label businesses and musicians were able to perform at live venues and get paid gigs. Consequently, opportunities had risen for pop singers, resulting in larger communities who now listened to or participated in the music. The first Lao music awards were even held in 2008. While modern Lao pop music is on the rise and many artists are gaining prominence in the Lao music scene, K-pop and Thai-pop influences remain important. Thai media already dominates a lot of the Laotian entertainment area; many Laotians keep up with Thai dramas on TV, they listen to Thai music, and they follow Thai trends. Similarly, K-pop music has infiltrated the music industry in both Asia and the Western world. Well renown groups like “BTS” and “Blackpink” are major influences on the music tastes of younger generations. These groups have gotten so high up in the charts that many Korean producers and directors incorporated more English lyrics into their songs, catering toward their extensive Western audience. Today, the Western influence on Laotian pop, R&B, and rap/trap genres are evident, and the current musical climate is a representation of this cultural exchange. Historically, Southeast Asia influenced Western composers in a multitude of ways: “European expansion, colonialism, and the experiences Europeans had in far-off, “exotic” places stimulated the exoticism seen in painting, architecture, decoration, furniture, fashion, and, to a slight extent, music.” This perception of such countries in Southeast Asia as “exotic” results in the emulation of traditional musical styles that Western

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visitors learn about and use for their own compositions. Composers like Claude Debussy as early as the 1800s were influenced by such “exotic” ensembles they heard, and they were also introducing Asian instruments to Europe. Often, many of these composers would spend a few years or less in these various countries, absorb what they’ve learned, and they’d be inspired to embrace new Asian elements into their music back home. Specific examples include Colin Mcphee’s toccata “Tabuh-Tabuhan” written in 1936 after he spent five years in Bali and Francis Poulenc’s Concerto in D minor for two pianos written in 1932 which has direct influence on Indonesian music traditions.  

The corporate presence in the music industry in Laos today remains relatively small and is still developing. However, social media has completely transfigured the distribution of music in Laos and its global presence, making up for the lack of substantial corporate resources and funding. If one does not already own a collection of karaoke CD’s or VCD’s, Lao karaoke videos and songs could only really be accessed via YouTube, uploaded by those who download the videos from the CD’s themselves. Similarly, up-and-coming artists now use YouTube as well, however platforms such as TikTok and Instagram have created new sharing and outreach capabilities for these artists. Through these platforms, Laotian musicians can have access to Western music, and they could also create and popularize their content for fans in Laos. Additionally, these social media connections play a large role in uniting the Laotian American community with Laos itself, allowing members from both sides to communicate, network, listen to one another’s music, and organize large events. A leading Instagram account bringing together Laotians from all over the world is “laosupply.” The account’s aim is to spread awareness about Lao culture across the platform, reveal up-and-coming artists, and give back to the community.

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through purchased merchandise and volunteering groups. Due to the demographic of users on social media platforms, the newer artists coming out of Laos and the Laotian community in America are in their 20s or younger. The music they are creating is clearly inspired by Western sounds of rap and R&B, likely due to the fact that the audience of these genres as a whole are dominated by millennials and the younger generation. Lao rap is a small, but growing art form. Young rappers utilize instrumental tracks likely created on American music platforms like “SoundCloud”, called “trap loops,” and they blend it with Laotian lyricism. Hence, an entirely new, fresh sound in the Lao pop music paradigm is born, with a lot of potential to further bridge the gap between Laos and the rest of the world.

Many Lao pop singers retain a continued relatively large fan base in Laos. This includes Alexandra Bounxouei, a half Bulgarian, half Laotian pop singer known as the “Queen of Lao Pop.” Her vocal range, kind demeanor, and ability to entertain a variety of audiences has brought her songs to the top of the charts for years. While Alexandra and other artists of her age like Alluna or Ola Blackeyes remain notable, the new generation is most certainly running the music scene. A few female groups have been established, becoming the “K-Pop” girls of Laos. The groups “Diidy. Dao Poui.Nut” and “HURT” have written two songs “ໝ່ຍ້າຍ່າຍ” (hey boy) and “ໝ່ຍ້າຍ່າຍ່າຍ” (oh boy) which are their more popular tunes. Both songs incorporate influences from the Mor Lam tradition by using popular phrases used in older Mor Lam tunes, but conceptualize it in a modern context via the instrumentation and arrangement. New female pop groups play a role in the reform of pop music culture in Laos, since previously a lot of the artists that dominated the genre were men. Singer Sophana is one of the few Lao artists to surpass the 100 million view mark on YouTube. His song, “ໝ່ຍ້າຍ່າຍ່າຍ່າຍ່າຍ່າຍ່າຍ່າຍ” (I want to


be a son-in-law) is a well produced video with exceptional footage and high camera quality. It’s up there with just a few other videos that have reached such a large audience, from Laos and beyond. Thematically, the content of Laotian pop songs resemble the themes of traditional Mor Lam or Khap Lam music. Both eras of music express ideas about love, family, and heartbreak. The main difference now is that the modern pieces aim to fit in with the popular modern and Western context by including themes about luxury or materialism.

Modern music in Laos is an emerging industry. Previously, Laotian modern music was infiltrated and determined by Thai music and Thai trends. For Laos to start finding its footing in the current and pop music world is an example of Laos’ capability to completely begin immersing themselves in the world, resulting in key cultural exchanges and interactions. The modern artistic period, however, is still very much rooted in traditional approaches. Musicians are discovering ways to blend contemporary ideas with traditional techniques, allowing for new traditions to form while catering to older audiences. As the music industry around the world continues to change, many Lao musicians’ development and potential to succeed further partly defines Laos’ power in cultural heritage and global entertainment affairs. Their identity formulated by history and traditions that have been established for centuries are maintained, but new and exciting changes are now embraced in order to form new identities for generations to come.
Chapter Three

The first CD of the Lao musical archive is an outstanding testament to the Laotian Karaoke-style pop music. The singer and performer of this tape is Thongdam Khamlo (ທອງດໍາ ເໜ່ອງ in Lao), a well-recognized male singer and Lao pop artist of the early to mid 2000s. Recognized by his chic white and black blazer street style and speech-inflicted lyricism, Thongdam Khamlo creates music that is invigorated with emotional and lyrical passion, makes people want to dance, and directly reflects Laotian culture by cultivating community through both music and dance. Thongdam Khamlo is acknowledged under the TS Studio Incorporation in Laos, a large Personal Development Record company in Laos having produced over ten thousand songs with over thirty music artists. A few of Thongdam Khamlo’s music videos can be found on youtube, with over one million views and an audience made up of primarily Laotians as well as Laotian American lovers of popular Lao karaoke tunes. The name of this CD is ແ່ປ່ ດໍານໍ້າ (translated into “Yo, yo, yo” in English), an expression to culminate excitement among a group of people when performing or speaking. The album explores themes of Laotian celebrations of the New Year holiday, complications in romance, and specific men and women who have cultural significance or personal significance to Thongdam Khamlo’s life.

**Track One:** ທ່ວນຊື່ນບຸນຜຣະເວດບ້ານເຣົາ (moun sun bun pa vaed ban lao, Joyful New Year in our Valley)

ໝາຍຂອງໝາຍມັການ້ອງ (phi nong pe nong, Cmon, everybody, everybody let’s go!)

ຂ່ຽວຂູ້ນ້ອາມາ (seun pe naw ma, Come here, come at once)

-(vocal inadvertent sounds)

ລົກຊາລົກຊາບັນຂ່ວ (lok sa lok sa ban kouh, If you need some fun)
Come shake it, with all of us)

Everybody here is feeling good all getting down here on this morning)

Old or young, it doesn’t matter)

Even on a rainy day)

We’ll dance and be happy)

No matter how you’re feeling now)

Join us now because we all represent each other)

It’s time to celebrate)

Making and giving money at the Lao New Year)

Oh, all my ladies)

Oh, all the men)

Oh, old and young people)

Let’s all come together)

We’re not strangers)

Let’s dance in our circle)

We have no problems with alms giving)

The music will make us all happy)
Just be careful when we’re having fun.

You can request any song you’d like.

We’re offering you some dance music.

C’mon everybody, my friends and family.

Let’s drink some Lao beer.

But don’t get too addicted.

And don’t start fighting each other.

Alright, friends and family?

We can do the disco, the electric slide, all the likes of it.

Listen to me my friends.

This new year will be so fun.

We’re all getting along.

Let’s drink some Lao beer.

But don’t get too addicted.

Drink until you’re drunk enough.

(instrumental solo section)
The title alone of the very first track of the first CD, ມ່ວນຊື່ນບຸນຜັກເວດບ້ານເຣົາ, already brings in greater detail and attention than any of the other recordings within this set. Though this was not recorded as a VCD, imagination and individual visual imagery comes alive through the music in this first track. Thong Dam Khamlo brings this piece to fruition through his exuberant personality, verbal banter throughout the song, and a dynamically lyrical style that is both lively and relatable.

In the first ten seconds, Khamlo ushers his audience to the dance floor and commences the beginning of the song with ວີນ ລຶງ ວີນ ວີນ (phi nong pe nong), encouraging all listeners to get both excited and attentive. Immediately following these words, he yells once in almost a melodic manner, and he does a loud lip-trill that lasts a few seconds. This is a common gesture in a few of Kham Lo’s songs in this CD—a likely attempt to build excitement amongst his audience and prepare them for the music to come. Thong Dam Kham Lo is the sole singer of this piece and in just about all these recorded pieces, eliminating any use or reference to background singers. Since this is purely a pop concentrated song, the use of a Khene is not depicted here. A cowbell which provides rhythmic balance, a drum set, a synthesizer keyboard, and a guitar are the main instruments used throughout the song. An important cultural reference to note is that the adaptation of some Western instruments in Laos used for the purpose of creating modern music is not formal nor standardized. Consequently, the names of some of these instruments in Lao do
not have a direct translation into the Lao language. Rather, they have translated words that sound similar to the original English word in pronunciation. For example, “guitar” in Lao is “ກີຕ້າ” which is pronounced “gi da.” Another common example is “piano”, which is spelled “ປີອາໂນ” and pronounced “pee ah no.” The presence of Western instruments is thus still a foreign activity in the music world of Laos, yet it still invokes creativity and helps to bring new dimensions to the modern Lao tunes.

Kham Lo stimulates his audience through the passion and exhilaration surrounding the Lao new year celebration in this village. Lao new year as Kham Lo presents it is full of joy, dancing, music, and bringing a community together regardless of age or gender. A key motif that he always comes back to is Lao beer (ເບຍ) and all the sentiments that come with feeling “drunk.” He mentions that his fellow audience, whom he refers to as his friends and family, should drink until they feel good, but not to the point where they’ll become violent amongst others. The most popular and widely produced beer in Laos, called “Beer Lao,” is produced by the company Lao Brewery Co in the capital city Vientiane, owned by the Carlsberg Group of Denmark. The Beer Lao brand is prominent amongst the Lao community, shared between fellow family members and friends during parties, events, holidays, and of course, during Lao new year. A Dutch beer Brand, Heineken, is popular amongst Laotian-Americans, a common staple during parties and events held at temples and personal arrangements in numerous Lao central communities in this country. The history of the establishment of beer in not just Laos but across Southeast Asia is a rich one, exemplifying a way in which Asian culture became intertwined with Europe’s. The creation of early Asian beers were met with evaluations by European brewers, and

more often than not, these were negative assessments. Beer culture in Laos and other parts of Asia mirrors that of the Eurocentric and universal approach to alcohol: maintaining enjoyment and engagement while avoiding the overuse of drinking. There’s this sense of community built around pleasure, with the use of beer and alcohol to contribute to it. Competition in both international and domestic beer markets only further this exchange between the East and West, cultivating a trade of resources and opportunities, especially to Southeast Asian countries where such industries are not as extensively developed. Lao Brewery Co’s partnership with the Dutch is a prime example of this. Their role in beer distribution and promotion is critical in helping maintain the lifestyle in traditional cultural recreation associated with alcohol.

Although there’s no sole use of the traditional Khene in the song-nor is the traditional way of playing it—the synthesizer seems to have audible influence from another free-reed mouth organ. A Korean free-reed mouth organ, the “Saenghwang,” is a distinctive instrument, with tones so unique it seems to belong in a modern context. The Saenghwang was originally introduced to the Koreans by the Chinese, where the instrument is known in China as the “Sheng.” In physical form, the Saenghwang is similar to the Khene, presenting the similarities between the two free reeds from two different countries. Both free reeds are mounted and played in a vertical manner, unlike the Hmong mouth organ and the Roglai Kupuot which are both built in a more horizontal fashion. The most distinct feature in appearance between these two is the mouthpiece—the Saenghwang has a more elongated metal mouthpiece, whereas the Khene’s mouthpiece is situated on the wind chest itself. Furthermore, It’s made of seventeen pipes, similar to the Laotian Khene Baet and Khene Gao with sixteen and eighteen pipes. Other Korean mouth organs derived from the Chinese tradition include the “U” and the “Hwa.” The metal

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pipes of the Saenghwang provide a captivating sound quality; each note vibrates in a way that gives it a buzzing quality, creating a noise that is similar to that of other electric instruments like an electric horn or guitar. The synthesizer used in this Khamlo song mirrors that of the Saenghwang in sound quality and tone. Electronic music processes itself can be found today in modern music through the use of sound recording and editing and virtual performance. However, both the synthesizer and Saenghwang here bring this element of contemporary quality through the texture and tone built into the instruments themselves. The synthesizer is an important device in constructing the modern approach to the Laotian contemporary genre.

CD Two, starring Ma Ni Vahn Kham Ma Nee, is both an impactful and intuitive performance that delves into both the manner and creativity of the female voice. This solo production brings in a rich mix of energy, modernism, and lyrical romanticism all in one. Introducing a blend of upbeat pop sounds, lyrical rap verses, and mezzo-soprano tones, the musical approach to this album is one that taps into thematic depth with respect to previous traditions through instrumentation. The overarching narrative of this album is love, overcoming heartbreak, and hope-somewhat distinct from the varying concepts expressed on the traditional side. Often we see themes of religion, spirituality, and cultural heritage in those traditional tunes. Although these two concepts vary, Ma Ni Vahn pays homage to her traditional musical roots by bringing out the art in singing and solo accompaniment. The solo vocalist accompanied by the Khene is such a prominent piece of the traditional sound, and its influence on the modern sound is immensely apparent: many solo tracks take that older form and modernize it with upbeat rhythms, quicker tempos, and larger orchestration. Though this is not the level of orchestration compared to something like that of a symphony, the use of percussion and other melodic instruments are still a big step from the one Khene accompaniment approach. This is exactly
what Ma Ni Vahn accomplishes here. Furthermore, her use of more unconventional techniques, less presented in Laotian music of the older form, including rap styles and some instrumental bits that seem to have influence from the jazz and blues technical styles. For further example, in track nine of the album, translated into English as “The Voice of a Sad Soul” (ຫ້ອງພະລາຊາການສຽງສັ່ງຄົນເສົ້າ), there are riffs similar in musical texture to that of this jazz technique. Just like a riff made up of a short melodic phrase that is repeated to express continuity and progression, “The Voice of a Sad Soul” uses this technique of repeating short phrases with an instrument that sounds almost like a horn in order to create movement and excitement in the piece. This album represents both heartache and resistance, speaking on behalf of many other broken-hearted hearts. This most certainly is a compilation that a young Lao girl, or any woman for that matter, can connect with and experience a wide range of both warm and passionate emotions in this big world full of and lacking in love.

Track Three: ຂອງຊາວຊາວພາສາ (seyhd nahm that na ngam dong, Wiping My Tears at Their Wedding)

ເພີ່ມກາລາພຽງກາຣາກາລານ (van gin dong kong ay, My past lover’s wedding day)

ພະລາຊາການສຽງສັ່ງຄົນເສົ້າ (phai nahm tha khao ma sooy, My sister is here to help me)

ຫມີພະລາຊາການສຽງສັ່ງຄົນເສົ້າ (vad sa na nong nee noi, I’ve searched far and long for this man)

ມາຈະຍຸ້າຍແລ້ວ (pai phoy pha mahm kai, But now it’s time to go)

ຜອງຊາວຊາວພາສາ (boon khong nang peang thae dai, So she can have her only need)

ລາງຈານຊ່ວຍກະບຸນທາຍ (lang jan sooy ka boon lai, I’ll be here helping wash the dishes)

ໄດ້ເຮືອນພະລາຊາການສຽງສັ່ງຄົນເສົ້າ (po dai mai thae ma kwan, They disappeared)

ໃຈອັນຊ່ວຍກະບຸນທາຍ (dai huam ngan go por laew, It’s okay to work together, just us)
nong khoum suan keun (The others are damaged goods)
thong deun lang namth vong (But we must be guided on our own)
tha neuh vahn dong soohe thie ja hong oo (The true wedding to be proud of)
ma nai vahn thang (Is the date we’ll have ourselves)
leuh haeng khoung nong mahk ha (The strength we hold is true)
thong tohn nang seehd nam thia (Sit and wipe those tears away)
khao ma neuh vahn ngan (Come enjoy this new day)
nai meuh nan ja bahn jai leuh keun (Because on that previous day, too much weighed on my heart)
haen khao peun sah deuw yu la pae pahn (They saw me blowing my nose)
khao khoung mee suuk (He must be happy)
sa tuhk huam keu bahn vahn ngan (As I’m mourning this day)
leuh thie ja kan leuh tahn laow noh thao jai (It’s hard to mend the heart)
jeed jai la (My mind is lost)
deun saed dahm thia nai neuh vahn thang (I wiped my tears on their wedding day)
poh bo sahn nad naeng (It’s just not fair)
ຄືດ້າມດັ່ງໝາຍ (keuh dan dang mai, Cannot be handled)

ສານສານສຸກທັງຫມື້ (haen pahb ay kiang khu suhk san, Seeing the image of him with happiness)

ມານມານການການແກ້ຄວນ (mahn paen kan ta loon, Is abuse)

ແມ່ນໃຈນ້ອງໃຈ (maehn non jai nong, Of course you’d do this to me)

ນ້ອງທົນເຈັບຈິດ (nong tohn jaehb jeed, Pain is an illness)

ຮົມປາດຖະໝາອຸລາສາຍ (som pad ta na oo la man mai, I wish you the best)

ດັດແພ່ເຖີດສາ (od bo dau haen pab tham tha, I don’t want to see this memory)

ຍົດບໍ່ໄດ້ເຫັນພາບຕໍາຕາ (od bo dau haen pab tham tha, I don’t want to see this memory)

ຫວັງປອງໝັ້ນຄັນຕາ້ອຍຍາວໄຫຼ (vang pong mahn khon thai tao sooah, I hope you suffer)

vaehn pahb ay kiang khu suhk san, Seeing the image of him with happiness)

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ຫວັງປອງໝັ້ນຄັນຕາ້ອຍຍາວໄຫຼ (vang pong mahn khon thai tao sooah, I hope you suffer)
Say your goodbye with pleasure.
Freedom for eternity.
This is simply how it will be.
He’ll become someone else’s.
May the old memories fade.
I endured too much.
When I was invited to this wedding.
He stared with sadness.
But I’ve come full circle.
It is enough for me.
I continue on, even with tears.
Now and forever.
I’ll take medicine for the gulp in my throat.
After all this trouble, I’ll take a leap.
This third song in the CD essentially sets up the theme and tone of the rest of the tracks following on the album. Similarly, the title of the album itself, ມັນ ລາວ ໃ່ງ ໃ່ງ (translating into “Don’t Touch My Sacred Husband” in English), sets up the third song. “Wiping My Tears At Their Wedding” exhibits the tragedy associated with infidelity. Every emotion revealed throughout the track references disappointment, depression, grief, and, ultimately, acceptance. It’s a whirlwind of intense responses to a miserable situation, and Ma Nee Vahn Kham Ma Nee does a great job of conveying this experience in a way that is poetic, passionate, and heartfelt.

Musically, the instrumentation and stylistic method of this piece is unique to the type of theme it represents. We can compare the two songs, “Joyful New Year In Our Valley” by Thong Dam Khamlo and “My Brother” to understand how music supports and matches the words of the vocalist. In Khamlo’s piece, the electric keyboard and other melodic instruments are played in higher pitches and faster tempos. There are major qualities that are detectable by ear in the song: though the lead instrument is primarily improvised, there’s one melodic phrase that it always comes back to at the end of Khamlo’s vocal verse. This phrase almost always resolves in a central note, the note that the phrase begins on, emulating a sound that is happy and strong. Fabricating the melody in this way supports the celebratory, excited, and joyful energy that Khamlo has when singing this piece. With “My Brother” the musical composition is essentially the opposite. First off, there’s a minimal amount of instruments used; only the Khene and main
vocalist play throughout the song while the backup singers periodically add ad-libs. The main vocalists’ phrases seem to usually end in descending notes that are flat, producing lower pitches and a sense of sentimentalism in the music. An example includes all the lines that usually come right after the repeated line, “ໄອນໍອ້າຍຈານໂຊເອ້ຍ.” Furthermore, the Khene instrumentalist’s sustained, uniformed playing with the vocalist demonstrates this simple technique that overall creates a more somber, serious mood in the song. Mah Nee Vahn’s message is possibly even more heartbreaking and melancholy than “My Brother,” yet none of the instrumental and musical attributes of the song reflect that of a more sad song. This contrast between the music and the lyricism is what makes the piece more distinctive and interesting. Mah Nee Vahn’s sorrowful words that communicate pain and heartbreak are accompanied by upbeat, optimistic and hopeful music. At the end of the song, she says “ຊີວິດຄົນຜິດຫວັງ/ຫຼັ່ງນໍ້າຕາມາງານອ້າຍ” (life can be disappointing, here’s to the tears I shed). Though the previous lines in the rest of the song convey her healing process and the emotional agony she feels in the moment, it’s almost as if the instrumental tone of the song was leading up to this moment of resolution.

The relationship between Lao literary performance and music signifies the relationship between the theme of this song and how its musical accompaniment is structured. How performance is executed is a crucial aspect of the music, and this is shown in both traditional styles and the karaoke era. Khap-Lam music of the lowland region (Lao Lum) focuses on the creativity of a performance and how a story is told. The audience is not particularly interested in the plot of the story itself, rather, they’re impressed by how this story is told through musical composition. Traditionally, this is done through poetic language. If a performer has memorized poems in literature and communicates these poems in the song, the more successful or
Often, the themes in these traditional Khap-Lam tunes were concerning love and heartbreak, therefore, an audience expects originality and artistry in the progression of the music because they already know how the story will end. In a modern context, this emphasis on performance quality can be seen in the creativity of Laotian karaoke music. A singer’s execution of the song is important in how the video/performance is enjoyed and perceived. The lead singer should portray a high-energy approach (regardless of whether the song’s mood is set in a positive or negative context) and support a sense of movement in the music by physically changing scenes, dancing, and offering different visual perspectives by moving around the space while holding the microphone. Ma Ni Vahn does an incredible job of this because the video itself tells a story. One would be able to understand some fragments of the song by just watching the video and not listening. In the beginning, she comforts a young woman who reads the invitation letter to her ex-husband’s wedding. This sets up the song and lays the framework for the personal story Ma Ni Vahn is about to tell. The method of introducing a third party into the narrative contributes to the artistry of the performance; telling one’s own story from a third-party perspective creates interest, clarity, and intrigue for the audience. This piece is both lyrically and visually alluring, providing a video graphic foundation to the meaningful lyrics of the story that Ma Ni Vahn tells, all while still following the classic modern song structure (vocal intro with electric keyboard and chronological verses).

“The Complaints of My Life,” CD three, almost combines the two thematic components of the previous two CDs and blends them in a way that is approachable and creates a connective story. While Thong Dam Khamlo’s album (CD one) focused on exciting events and bachelor-like experiences, Mah Nee Vahn’s album (CD two)
explored the extensive experience and emotions associated with heartbreak and love. These are two vastly distinct themes, and the third CD, titled “ລັດດາຈັ່ງໍ່ ເມື່ອ ການສຸລາດ ທ່ານ” (the complaints of my life), is like a happy medium between the two. It’s the first album in the archive featuring two vocal artists, a male and a female. The songs are distributed between songs they sing solo on and pieces they duet on. This twelve song album is centered around common Laotian practices of family living and the hardships that come along with it-this isn’t limited to heartbreak and emotions surrounding personal relationships as represented in the previous CD. Both Suhd Tee Da Pa Noy and Poh Vahn See Suh Lahd do an incredible job of bringing to life the videography capturing Laotian families from the perspective of a female and male voice. Furthermore, the use of traditional instruments is maintained, while more modern instruments like the electric guitar become more prominent in a few of the songs. Considering the video graphic quality and karaoke style, this album was certainly produced in the early to mid 2000s.

Track One: ເພີນາຈາກພົວພົວຂອງຂ້ອຍ (The complaints of my life by Suhd Tee Da Pa Noy and Poh Vahn See Suh Lahd)

Verse 1x

ເວົ້າພື້ນເມັຍຂ້ອຍ (vao peuhn nay khoy, Talking to my wife)

cາຕື່ນເຊົ້າພົາຫົວທຽນໂລດ (theun sao pao hua tean lohd, Waking up having to flip on the candle)

ກະຈັ່ງແມ່ນໂພດ (ka jang maehn pohd, It’s too much)

ໂກດຣ້າຍມາແຕ່ມື້ໃດ (kohd haiy ma thah neuh dai, There’s some anger every day)

ເສື້ອພ້າອາພອນພົວກະຊັກໄວ້ (seuh pha ah phon phua ka sahk vai, That wedding dress is history long gone)
强硬的热水（thak nahm neung khao pao fai, Pour the boiling water over the rice）

家庭很穷（khob khua lang ngay bo dai khad kheun, The family is poor）

事情会变坏（baid mai khong moo keuh va dee ow ka do, Things will fall apart）

没有力气（bo bood bo ngo, Without strength there’s no point）

我的脸满是泪水（na tha soh sai peuhn veuhn, My face is full of tears）

走走看看（ngam bad yang yaey, It’d be nice to walk around and have a break）

妻子笑容满面（yeuhm yaem jaem sai taeh nor mia peuhn, My wife smiled with joy）

但当有钱时（meayh tho soh sohn thae ngeun, But she’s only the happiest when there’s money）

哪里都可以拿去（ow mian yoo sai ka sohk nahm tahn, You can take it wherever you find it then）

副歌 2x

每过现在我发抖（khoy sahn vak ma kahk tae noh bad nee, Every now and then I tremble）

妻子还会追着我（miyewy lai nahm thm jee, And my wife will still chase after me）

我们忙于卖食物（bee phua han fod sa nun, We just get so busy selling food）

无尽的拖曳（lahk sak ka beuh, It drags on）
ເບຶອໃສ່ໜ້າແຂ່ງຈົນປົບບໍ່ຫັນ (beuh sai ha kaeng jogn pob bo than, It’ll be done this way until it can’t be done anymore)

ຊ່າບ້ານຊ່າເມືອງເນືອງນັນ (sa ban sa meung neung nan, Our little village home in Nuang Nan)

ລົດຢາກອາຍ (khoy lod yahk ay, I don’t want to be ashamed)

ມັນໂຕບໍ່ຄືເມັຍໜູ່ (meahy tho bo keuh neuhy moo, My woman is not like other women)

ກະພໍກະເທີນຢ້ານບໍ່ມີຄູ່ (ka poh ka teun yan bo nee khu, With love, you must not give up if you are afraid of losing your partner)

ເມັຍອົງກວມເຮົາເອົາຮ້າຍ (meauhy keung kuam how ow hai, But with a good woman I’m covered)

This song is one of the shorter pieces in comparison to other songs in the archive, and its focus on the instrumentalism supports the style and concept of the piece. Marked at 4 and a half minutes, it’s a bit shorter than the previous two pieces, however, with the use of videography to convey a story, thematic development is not compromised. The tempo is the first noticeable feature of this piece since it’s more of a slow-burn song. Since this is the first track in the CD, it
automatically sets up the tone for the rest of the songs, previewing to the listener that the album is going to invoke more heartfelt, sympathetic emotions over exciting and joyful ones. The tempo is about 68 beats per minute and the official term to describe the tempo would be closest to “Adagio”, the Italian term for a slow and steady piece “at ease.” The music certainly feels steady and doesn’t shift all too much in the vocal range and chronological development. For example, the lyrical organization of the song is very simple-it follows an ABB format, implementing only one verse and repeating the chord section twice back-to-back. The verse begins and ends with the phrases “ເວົ້າພື້ນເມັຍຂ້ອຍ” and “ເອົ້າມ້ຽນຢູ່ໃສກະຊອກນໍາທັນ” and the chorus begins and ends with the phrases “ຂ້ອຍສັ່ນວັກໆມາຄັກແທ້ນໍບາດນີ້” and “ດິ້ນດັ່ງກະປູຍາມແລ້ງແດ່ວໆ.” The lyrics in the verse are more direct than the chorus, and by repeating the chorus section simultaneously, the symbolic message in this section is prioritized and clearly demonstrated.

There are four main instruments in this piece: a synthesizer, electric guitar, drum set, and, of course, vocals. In this song, the presence of a Khene instrument is absent. The drum set, synthesizer, and electric guitar don’t fall under the umbrella of traditional Lao instruments. Therefore, this piece has Western instruments yet a traditional, Eastern vocal melody. This contrast in periodic style within the instrumentation and vocals contributes to the modern texture of this Lao music. Often, when the electric guitar is used in these karaoke Lao tunes, one could immediately detect the theme of the music. Naturally, the electric guitar is an instrument producing sounds of energy, greater dynamics, and feelings of enthusiasm. Lao Karaoke songs that aim to invoke this feeling to its listeners that want to dance or simply enjoy the music implement the electric guitar to create just that. Modern Lao musics’ use of some of these
instruments is a direct link to the Western influence on Laos. Even after communists took over the Laotian government in 1975, Western ties and influence still remained in the country. Soviet, French, and American presence could be found as large foreign communities in Laos at the time.\textsuperscript{48} In fact, France’s colonization of Laos between 1893-1907 is a direct predecessor of the continued Western influence on Laos following the communist period. Such circumstances are bound to establish cultural interconnections in the realm of language, attitudes, and even the arts. This is evident in common use of the Western style instruments. Performers may be seen in clubs or bars singing Laotian tunes along with guitars, pianos, and drum sets as accompaniment.\textsuperscript{49} This arrangement between Laotian vocalism and Western instrumentation accentuates the modernism of the piece. No true traditional Laotian piece is accompanied by Western instruments. Most of the traditional tunes of the various “Lam” styles are almost always accompanied by the Khene or another customary instrument like the Lannat or That Phon or Kong Wong, gong and hand percussion instruments that amplify the texture and articulation of a tune.

The context of this song resembles that of the previous traditional Mor Lam tune, “My Brother.” They both explore questions of marriage expectations and describe the difficulties surrounding domesticity and tasks related to maintaining a home. Suhd Tee Da Pa Noy, the singer who performs this track, narrates the life of a young man and his life with his children (there seems to be four total, two girls and two boys). The scenes are organized in chronological order that describes the day in the life of this family: setting the scene, conflict, and resolution.

\textsuperscript{48} Humanitarian Problems of Southeast Asia, 1977-78: A Study Mission Report. \textit{United States Congress, Senate, Committee on the Judiciary}. Books.google.gr. March 1978, Retrieved from https://books.google.gr/books?id=eQeDQWQRN9hMC&pg=PA127&lpg=PA127&dq=laotian+guitar&source=bl&ots=ISY3HU7iA&sig=ACfU3U0fOq9g8Dg8D3anfOU9Q_rPDEV-wQ&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwiXspTCuZ37AhXTQeUKHWLqCYIQ6AF6BAgUEAM#v=onepage&q=laotian%20guitar&f=false. 127.

\textsuperscript{49} Humanitarian Problems of Southeast Asia, 1977-78: A Study Mission Report. \textit{United States Congress, Senate, Committee on the Judiciary}. Books.google.gr. March 1978, Retrieved from https://books.google.gr/books?id=eQeDQWQRN9hMC&pg=PA127&lpg=PA127&dq=laotian+guitar&source=bl&ots=ISY3HU7iA&sig=ACfU3U0fOq9g8Dg8D3anfOU9Q_rPDEV-wQ&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwiXspTCuZ37AhXTQeUKHWLqCYIQ6AF6BAgUEAM#v=onepage&q=laotian%20guitar&f=false. 127.
This directly reflects the order of the lyrics in the piece, from the verse to the chorus. In the beginning of the video, the man and his wife could be seen preparing their kids for school-getting them ready, giving them money, preparing food (“pouring water over the boiling rice”). Following these back to back images of the man and his wife’s scenes of preparing their children, there’s a quick moment of sentimentalism between them as they watch the kids walk away for school. Immediately after comes the conflict; the two begin to argue. The wife beings the altercation with yelling, and even gets to a point where she physically hits the man out of anger. In between scenes, he can be seen taking time for himself, looking out into the distance, and even contemplating something, maybe his marriage. Eventually, the audience is led to the end of the video where we see both parties beginning to ground themselves, calm down, and show appreciation and contentment even when they’re apart. This is a direct association with the resolution section in the chorus as evident in the lyrics such as,

“ເມັຍເກັ່ງກວມເຮົາເອົາຮ້າຍ” (but with a good woman I’m covered), or “ຄັນຊິປະຖິ້ມກະພໍກະເທີນຮ້ານບໍ່ມີຄູ່” (With love, you must not give up if you are afraid of losing your partner). There are a few points of the video that exemplify Laotian culture in terms of family and character. First, when the wife began hitting her husband in public when they were arguing, she did so in public in a crowd of people at a restaurant. While many who have grown up in various cultures may find this odd or repulsive, Laotians don’t value privacy as much as their foreign counterparts. They live in an environment where most of the population living in the countryside or villages knows everyone else’s business, and there’s a level of closeness between these communities that outsiders like foreigners may find strange or unusual. Therefore, it’s understandable that the man’s wife expressed her anguish in a public

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50 “Families, Men, And Women in Laos.” factsanddetails.com, May 2014, https://factsanddetails.com/southeast-asia/Laos/sub5_3b/entry-2954.html#:~:text=The%20Lao%20have%20great%20respect,has%20six%20to%20eight%20members. Par. 7.
place. Furthermore, the system of extended families in Laotian culture is very prominent, and this was indirectly implied within the context of the video. Other members of the home like the grandparents were present, and the community came together in common places such as outdoor-style eating spaces. Most likely those in this community include members of the extended family like aunts, uncles, and cousins. This first track of the CD is an apparent example of Lao family living, and the internal hardships that may come along with it. However, the overarching theme and narrative of the song communicates that family, at the end of the day, remains a dominant part to one’s lifestyle and success.

Conclusion

The musical archives that were studied, listened to, and researched formulated as the purpose and heart of this project. As the use of older film devices like VCR tapes declines, similarly, classic Laotian karaoke CDs are a less recognized and difficult to locate medium. The world is moving toward a digital age, in which paper/hands-on archives documenting millions of moments of history will soon become more of a neglected subject than just a rarity. The movement toward a globally and technologically elevated era has many positive expectations to come, however, the possible loss of historical methods that have existed for generations is an unfortunate consequence of the future.

Lao music is more than music itself. In comparison to its Western counterpart, Laos is far behind in musical academia. Programs dedicated to teaching and studying music are a much smaller number than the amount of conservatory institutions established in the United States, the
documentation of pieces and scores are difficult to come by, and there’s far less rigid
expectations in how the music should be played. Yet, this is the beauty of the music. A Khene
instrumentalist accompanying a Mor Lam singer is not fixated on the exact notes he’s playing or
following a direct script or score. Rather, his attention is on supporting the vocalist in tonality,
rhythm, and influxes and de-fluxes of intensity, connecting the two musicians musically and
spiritually. Similarly, demonstrators of the Phi Fa ritual are not focusing on a script. They instead
need to vocalize what they’re experiencing emotionally in that spur of the moment. The Phi Fa
ritual can be a matter of life or death. The ritual vocalist is singing what’s coming from her heart
and empathetic concern for the patient, not what is written on a page.

I hope that this project can serve as a starting guideline to traditional and current music in
Laos for music enthusiasts and all other learners. I hope that this project contributes to the
current lack of education and resources available pertaining to the music of Laos. Furthermore, I
hope that through my project, my Laotian family and other Lao communities in Sacramento and
beyond can be inspired to learn more about their heritage, connect with Lao music, and preserve
the history and systems that represent the Lao music genre and who we are as people.

Appendix

**CD One:** ບໍລວງ ’ວ ແ ’ວ່າ, ບໍລວງ ບໍລວງ (Yo, Yo, Yo by Thong Dam Khamlo)

*Production: Lao Ban Na Music, 2006*

*Instrumentation: Electric keyboard, drum set, vocals, Khene, hand percussion (woodblock,
triangle, tambourine), electric guitar*
01. ເມຍແມ່ຄ້າຜົວບ້າໄກ່ຕີ (meah may kha phou ba gai thee, Life as the Wife of a Gambler)

02. ຄອງຂ້າຢ່າມາຕ້ອງ (khong kha ya ma thong, He’s Mine)

03. ຄອງຂ້າຢ່າມາຕ້ອງ (khong kha ya ma thong, He’s Mine)

04. ປຸດຜົວຂ້າໄຜຢ່າມາຕ້ອງ, ເມນວັນຄໍາມະນີ (Don’t Touch my Sacred Husband  by Ma Nee Vahn Kham Ma Nee)

Production: ASTM Music, Master Music Distributor in the U.S.A

Instrumentation: Electric keyboard, drum set, hand percussion (rattle, whistle, woodblock), Khene, Phin, electric guitar
05. ແສ່ງສານທົວໃຈ (sohng sahn toua jai, My Broken Heart)
06. ມາຫາວີສາຫັກ (sahd ha ta ma, Maybe In the Next Life)
07. ປາກນັກຍອງ (tua khao khoy teo, Rice Wonderland Ready for Harvest)
08. ແສ່ງສານ (seeng sang khon sao, The Voice of A Sad Soul)
09. ກາຍເຫຼືອກ່ຽວ (ohnk pahn saa san ya sen, It’s the End of Our Hopes)
10. ກາຍເຫຼືອກ່ຽວ (jaep po khon jai dam, Cold-Hearted because of You)

CD Three: ແສ່ງສານທົວໃຈ ຍ່າງເອທາຄົນ ແສ່ງສານທົວໃຈ ຍ່າງເອທາຄົນ (The complaints of my life by Suhd Tee Da Pa Noy and Poh Vahn See Suh Lahd)

Production: PK Productions

Instrumentation: Percussion (drum set, lannat, cowbell), electric guitar, synthesizer, Khene, vocals

01. ມາຫາວີສາຫັກ ວິຫານ (houm hao sao noy la deun, Young, Active Little Girl-A Mystery)
02. ແສ່ງສານ (seeng johk jahk pao sa loh boh leeh loh, The Objections of Loh Bolilo)
03. ເຂົ້ໃຈພິດສາມຊ້າ (saeh jai peed sahm sa, The Three Poisons)
04. ມາຫາວີສາຫັກ ດາວີ (mahk sao seeng khoung lahm poon, He likes the other Girl, Seeng Khoung)
05. ກາຍເຫຼືອກ່ຽວ (bao veng jahn sao luang praband sah lohb, Sao Viengjahn A Girl From Luang Prabang)
08. ເວລາວ່າງ ຂັ້ງ ເຫມດ ແຫວ່ງ (sao veeng jahn lahm ma da, Viengjahn Girl Hunts the Donkey)

09. ບານນຳ ຕອງວ່າງ ກ່ອນ ແຫວ່ງ (pa nohy vohn paehn lahm deuhn, This Little Fish Won’t be Hunted)

10. ການທາງ ເອນ ທ່າເມືອງ (mahk aiy taeh thang huay, I love my Sweet Brother)

11. ພາຍໃນ ທ່າຂອງ (tao vai luhm la peuhn, Old or Young, The Energy Remains Strong)

12. ເສັດອີດ ເມ ເມືອງ ແຫວ່ງ (sa bai dee pee mai sahm sa, Happy New Year)


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