

Representing the Lao as the Other: *Luk Thung Morlam* and Traditional *Molam* Music in Northeastern Thailand

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Introduction

This paper examines the representation of the Lao-Thai people, also called the I-san people, in Lao traditional Molam music in northeastern Thailand. The Lao, whom I will discuss in this paper, inhabit Thailand and the Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR). The 'Lao' in this paper means the people who live in the Kingdom of Thailand and especially in northeastern Thailand, who sometimes are described as the Lao-Thai. On the other hand, the Lao living on the left side of the Mekong River are called in this paper "the Lao in Lao PDR."

In the process of the modernization of nation-states and economic development, the Lao have gone through the migrant worker phenomenon, in which they fled from their villages to work in Bangkok. This migration brought the Lao into contact with the Thai people, especially the Siam who inhabit Bangkok, and caused them to recognize that the two peoples have similar but different cultures, food customs, and linguistic systems. Through the process of Lao's encountering the others, differentiation amongst the Thai, the Lao and the Lao people in Lao PDR has become to be emerged in respect of the appellations. The Lao from northeastern Thailand have many appellations since the regional appellation of 'I-san' has officially replaced 'Lao' in domestic policies and media representations of the group. Given this situation, the appellations of the Lao-Thai shift depending on the context (Hayashi 1998, 2000). Nowadays, the Lao-Thai call themselves the 'I-san', not the 'Lao', except when they speak to their neighbors who speak Mon-Khmer or another language in the Tai Kadai family. Moreover, they do not mind calling themselves and being called the Lao among the Lao, but being called the Lao by the Thai and policymakers or intellectuals does bother them. This complicated situation of appellation has been repeatedly explained with respect to regional history and external relationships among several ethnic groups. Its complexity is reflected in the representation of the Lao in their local music, Morlam, from northeastern Thailand.

Just as the Thai have changed the way they represent the Lao in the Thai media,² the Lao-Thai themselves also have changed their own representation in the musical industry

over the past several decades. This change also will let us address the interpretation of the collective representation of the Lao in which they themselves have changed. This paper examines how the representation of the Lao by the Lao-Thai themselves in the process of nation-state building and the migrant worker phenomenon or other political arenas has been transformed by analyzing the lyrics of *Luk Thung Molam* music and traditional *Molam* music produced between the 1970s and 2000s. All the data were collected and recorded during my anthropological field research in northeastern Thailand for a total of four months between 2004 and 2006. All the lyrics were transcribed from audio recordings.

1. *Luk Thung Molam* and Traditional *Molam* Music in Thai Society

The Thai music industry is opening the door to new genres like Thai-pop, hip hop, and jazz, but Thai music is usually classified into four categories: Thai popular music (*Pleang Thai Sakol*), music for life (*Pleang phua chiwit*), Thai country music (*Pleang Luk thung* or *Pleang Luk Thung Molam*), and *Molam*. In this paper, I will examine only *Luk Thung Molam* music from the 1970s to 1980s and traditional *Molam* music written in the 2000s.

Luk thung is well-known as Thai country music; it is the popular form of a style of music heard in Thailand. Since the name is short for *Pleang Luk Thung*, which means a song of a child of the field, it addresses many issues that attract the Thai people. It is applied to country music that is often similar to Western music. The songs of *Luk Thung* are basically sung in the Thai language. In addition, since the 1980s, the *Luk Thung* music singers from northeastern Thailand have started to insert the melodies of the original *Molam* partially into *Luk Thung* music. They named the new genre *Luk Thung Molam*. Its melodies are derived from traditional *Molam* music that is barely recognisable. As the melodies are partially inserted, only someone who knows many of them used in *Molam* music could perceive the original folk melodies from which *Molam* music is borrowed.

Molam music is a traditional Lao form of the songs from northeastern Thailand and Laos.³ The term *Molam* is comprised of two words. *Mor* is an expert, while *Lam* means the song that the folklore singer performs using local melodies. *Molam* performances last all night when social or religious ceremonial occasions take place. In this paper, I will examine *Molam Kloan*, in which a singing battle waged between male and female singers is held to represent a rhetorical discourse in a public space. The Lao in northeastern Thailand inhabit the upper area of the Khorat plateau. The Lao living on the left side of the Mekong River also live in Lao PDR. The Lao who live in these two countries have common cultural characteristics: They practice Theravada Buddhism, eat sticky rice, live in houses with raised flooring, and play an instrument called the Khean that is used in *Molam* performances.

In particular, representative music of the Lao such as *Luk Thung Molam* and traditional *Molam* folklore leave much room for discussion about singing in Laotian dialects. Both these

forms of music are considered audio-perceptible cultural icons that represent the Lao orientation and are sung in a mixture of Thai and Lao languages. Usually the singers perform *Lam* in the Lao language, and with respect to the dialectical songs, the listeners are generally confined to the ethnicity of the Lao speakers.

In the next chapter, I will demonstrate how the Lao have changed their own representation through the public representation of *Molam* songs as their own.

2. Encountering the Other in the Migrant Workers Phenomenon

—*Luk Thung Molam* Music in the 1970s

The population of the Lao counted in the 2000 census of Thailand was approximately twenty million people. In comparison, the population of the Lao in Lao PDR was only six million. This twenty million made up one third of Thailand's population, which is highly remarkable even though Thailand is home to a large percentage of the Lao population. The ethnic categorization of 'Lao' in Thailand is unofficially recognized on these people's ID cards. The geographic and climatic conditions of the area are not suitable for farming, so those who live in the northeastern area of Thailand are poor. In the 1960s, the influence of the Cold War spread through the countries of Southeast Asia. Thailand also got involved in the economic battle waged between capitalist and socialist countries. The Thai government was concerned about the growing number of communist collectives in northeastern Thailand, so it initiated the National Economic Development Plan for four-year periods beginning in 1963. This program moved many migrant workers from northeastern Thailand into the capital of Bangkok or other provincial cities. As the population of these migrant workers gradually increased, *Luk Thung Molam* music began breaking through as one of the dominant genres of the Thai music industry. The migrant workers brought this music with them from northeastern Thailand into Bangkok. *Luk Thung* and the succeeding rise of *Luk Thung Molam* in the 1980s became well-known among migrant workers in Bangkok. Most migrant workers work 3 D (dangerous, dirty, and difficult) jobs. They finish work at the end of the day and go to bars or discotheques to listen to *Luk Thung Molam* or *Molam* music. Not only do they understand the regional dialect, but they can also appreciate the common or similar experiences described in the songs. An analysis of the songs on Lockard's survey of 730 *Luk Thung* songs produced between the 1960s and 1980s determined that 34% expressed individual messages (seeking love); 8% were about tradition, customs, and beliefs (including religious, folklore, and supernatural phenomena); 37% were about the disappointment and depression caused by a broken heart or unfavorable emotion; and the remaining 10% were about unrequited love due to poverty, conscription, and prostitution (Lockard 1998). The contents of the *Luk Thung* music show the individual or collective experience of the Lao and migrant workers from northeastern Thailand.

This migrant movement of the Lao caused them to reflect on how they perceived central Bangkok as an unknown world in which everything differed from their way of life in northeastern Thailand. Bangkokians were regarded as “Others.” Without any cash, the Lao could not obtain anything to eat, a place to stay, or clothing, which differs from the village life, where they had to only do what was necessary to obtain food to survive. In Bangkok, they became fascinated with obtaining cash, earning money, and being able to purchase the daily necessities for the ‘more convenient life’ (*siiwit saduak kwaa gaw*).

One *Luk Thung* song named *Siang Bua Long Krung* (‘The Sound of the Lotus Flower Goes Down to the Capital’) sung by Sak Siam Phetchomphuu was broadcast in Thailand in 1973. It describes a Lao male migrant to Bangkok who left the lady he loved to earn money so they could have a big wedding. His departure to work in Bangkok is expressed as going down to ‘Thai’, which is not what the Lao call themselves at all. ‘Thai’ in this song means the unknown world for the Lao, which also seems to be something different waiting for them.⁴

3. Locating Self between Thai as Others and Lao as Self

—*Luk Thung Molam* from the End of the 1970s to the 1980s

From the 1970s to the 1980s, the number of migrant workers from northeastern Thailand immigrating to Bangkok or other cities reached its peak. Because of its economic and social environment, northeastern Thailand had held people in complete psychological isolation and inner conflict in terms of different lifestyles and languages for a long time. At the same time, during this period the regional identity known as *I-san* that was given to the Lao by the government gradually spread throughout northeastern Thailand. This was the beginning of the so-called penetration of the people’s daily lives into part of the Thai.

The following three songs can be analysed within the social context that the government assigned to people with the *I-san* identity in northeastern Thailand. These songs were produced as a means to express some of their messages. In the 1970s, Theppaphorn Phetubol was the first singer and writer of *Luk thung Molam* music to use the term ‘*I-san*’ in the *Luk Thung Molam* music industry, but the Lao language is still used in all lyrics. The subjects of songs such *I-san Ban Hao* (‘Our Motherland *I-san*’) and *Khong Seab I-san* (‘*I-san*’s Delicious Food’) are plants for food, scenery, natural fragrances, and the sounds of animals found in the landscape of *I-san*. Herbal plants used in Lao cooking referred to in the lyrics of the songs are dispensable. The analysis of the lyrics of these songs shows that eating habits, dialects, and different languages as key elements for the Lao’s lives are included in these songs that use the term ‘*I-san*’ in the title of the songs as the external and artificial politically sanctioned identity of the Lao. In other words, beneath the veil of the use of the term ‘*I-san*’, many kinds of Laoness are found. However, in most cases, those are the things the Lao migrants lost or had no choice but to adjust to the style of their new life after they

left their hometowns and moved into the city.

In the cities where the Lao moved and worked as laborers (*reang ngaan*) they tend to be mocked or despised by Bangkokians for deviating at all from ordinary Bangkok life. According to my Lao informants' personal experience or even TV programs in Thai media, because they came from low economic status and a poor region with lower educational achievement, the Lao are described as fools and oddities. In light of this complicated and unfair situation, the function of the term '*I-san*' in the title of these songs is to assert the Lao's choice of maintaining their own way of life and a kind of little resistance to the new identity of '*I-san*' assigned to them by the government.

Molam music is a cultural medium that captures the Lao ethnic group's language, custom, and religious culture. The scenery, the smell of the rain, plants and herbs, eating habits, and the language can be represented as the cultural medium—in other words, the expression of the primordial ties described by Clifford (1973), which combine and sustain the Lao in the two countries such Thailand and Lao PDR, and help them express their thoughts and emotions about being Lao. However, recent anthropological discussions on the ethnicity boundary theory of Birth (1969) provide some new approaches to understanding ethnicity in situations in which several ethnic groups cohabit. What has sustained an ethnic group is not necessarily objectively a cultural indicator such as a common language, religion, or custom, all of which place much importance on the boundary between ethnic groups and the ethnic identity that sustains the boundary. The Lao encounter the Thai through immigrating into Bangkok and accept the label of the regional identity of *I-san* given in the process of nation-state building. For one singer singing about his or her own life, language remains in the lyrics, appealing to the representation of the Lao and also maintaining the ethnic boundary with the dignity and pride of the Lao.

4. The Differentiation between Self and Other

The Lao encountered one another through migrant work. Through this experience, how have the Lao relocated and represented themselves in their musical work? The song *I-san Krab Thin* ('*I-san*'s Homecoming') is composed of two parts: the solo sung by the performer and a skit performed by some comedians, written by Theppaphorn Phetubol.⁵ The song tells the story of migrant workers' returning home to help with farming, which reflects the collective experience of the Lao migrants once in Bangkok. In the song lyrics, Phetubol describes Lao workers confronting the reality of linguistic problems. The Lao have to speak the Other's language of Thai in places where migrants congregate in Bangkok.

The song describes the Lao workers' attempt and failure to speak the proper Thai language. But they speak the Lao language in a flash of sudden unconsciousness. When such small mistakes occur intermittently, the speaker suddenly becomes a target of mockery,

using humor to dispel embarrassment, hesitancy, and frustration. That is to say, the people have no choice of which language they speak and consequently feel oppressed. In other words, the Lao live with a choice of languages that symbolize the economic power structure. However, *Molam* music has a mystical function in converting such oppressed and negative emotions into positive ones by prompting laughter from subtly verbalized expressions of one's mistake or failure.

In his book, Berger (1997) offers a prolonged reflection about the nature of the comic as a central human experience. Human beings have the capacity to perceive something as being funny. Expressed differently, humor is an anthropological constant and is historically relative. But beyond or behind all the relativities, there is something that humor is believed to perceive. This is the phenomenon of the comic, which is the objective correlate of humor. The comic typically appears as an intrusion in ordinary everyday life. It intrudes, very often unexpectedly, into other sectors of reality (Berger 1997). The intrusion of the comic also occurs in the Lao's daily life, in which they get tense about having to carefully speak the Other's language. The Lao as migrant workers live in a suppressed environment because they cannot speak their original language under the existing economic power structure. In spite of the language barrier that the Lao face, the language-oppressed environment sets up a situation in which the Lao are able to describe themselves as comic. Sometimes the comic distracts them from the serious issues of their daily lives, causing a deep catharsis by laughter and cheering them up. The migrant labor phenomenon is set against the social background, the Lao convert the language, and negative feelings are converted into positive feelings splendidly.

5. Relocating Themselves between the Lao as the Other and the I-san in the 2000s

The Lao's *Molam* music produced after 2000 is also a suitable example of the representation of the Lao. The traditional *Molam* performance I describe here is an example of the so-called *Molam Kloan* style that is used in singing battles waged between males and females. It is a similar performance style to African-American hip hop music in the United States. There are two elements in the lyrics: fixed written texts and improvisational linguistic play in which the participants have a vigorous argument to answer each question. This section handles the lyrics of the *Molam Kloan* as the public discourse. The element in the lyrics in which the singers handle the divergent or contradictory replacement in which the Lao represent themselves compares what they are like in the present with what they were like in the past, indicating political content by using skillful rhetoric in the public domain of their singing battle. *Molam Kloan* performances are held in public places and link teaching rhetoric to the political arena.⁶

The reason the contradictory replacement of self is present in their performances might

have its source in the nostalgia phenomenon in recent literature on medical anthropology (Jo 2003; Stewart 1988; Davis 1979). Nostalgia had been traditionally conceptualized as a medical disease and a psychiatric disorder since the seventeenth century in Europe.⁷ Nowadays, the term 'nostalgia' is everywhere in our mass consumption society. In the fashion industry, the new fashion is produced under the name of 'nostalgia' in the style of a decade ago, and in tourism, skillful magical idealization is given to the space that becomes a marketable product. Just evoking a feeling of belonging can determine the success derived from nostalgia. Such belonging compares a past self with the self who lives now (Davis 1979). The discussion of the relationship between nostalgia and belonging could develop the understanding of continuous human identity between the present and the past. The lyrics of the songs can be thought of as nostalgic narratives that reflect more positively than negatively when they are embedded in a social context. As I have observed, the Lao have always faced choices in their daily lives, such as the language they will speak and the customs they will follow. Sometimes nostalgia is triggered by dysphoric states such as negative moods and loneliness. However, nostalgia generates positive effects, increases self-esteem, fosters social connectedness, and alleviates existential threats (Trost and Ethofer et al. 2011). Davis remarks on this tendency (Davis 1979): The inclination that starts fostering an appreciative attitude to a past self is closely related with the tendency to two nostalgias described next. One is a tendency that tries to be enclosed as its own shadow, lurking in the mind before it is driven away. Another tendency improves the intention of continuousness of the identity by which nostalgia makes the self realise that 'it is the same as those days'. It encourages people to realize they are worthy, competent, and can completely surmount fear and uncertainty. In respect to the Lao's seeking their position, these two tendencies of nostalgia can be seen in the traditional *Molam Kloan* style performance.

As the relevant literature indicates, *Molam* takes an important role in addressing political messages as government propaganda of its promotions or policies (Bunsai 1990, Sathanak 1993, Mankham 1996, Worajinda 2005). Through the development of reproductive technology such as records, film, cassette tapes, and VCD, its influence and speed improved. *Molam Kloan* singers were becoming a politicized subject and perceived to circulate the public 'truth' in their performances on discourse condition because they are living in the periphery, pulling the usual public entertainments into the political arena so that they can take themselves to the center or sometimes get them into the cultural evaluation system to obtain social credit or occupational prestige. Therefore, we can understand that the Lao singers also revalue and relocate their own standing in the Thai society by overlapping it with the place where their own culture stays alive in the nation-state.

Also, as I argued in the theoretical explanation, there are much deeper investigations of

the overwhelming nostalgic emotion of the brooding Lao singers. At the beginning of this song, the singers locate themselves as missionaries who aspire to preserve the Laotian culture and gradually relocate themselves between the past (*samai booraan*) and present (*patjuban*). They refer to the contrasting ways in which *samai booraan* codes the old farming implements, the role allotted to a woman, her costume and appearance, use of Lao textiles, dating practices of boys and girls in the old days and in which *patjuban* encodes the new government administration system (*raboop mai*), as well as the technologically developed Thai society (*jaruen, than samai*), which is considered state-of-the-art. However, starting in the middle part of the singing battle and moving through its end, the rhetoric presents contradictory images of the people. Although they reminisce about their 'old' way of living, they detach themselves from it and try to relocate themselves in Thai society by remarking on political issues, legitimatizing their current state in which the *Molam* performance provides the singers a moment during which they can live in the present.⁸

Conclusion

This paper has argued how the representation of the Lao has been created and changed by the Lao-Thai themselves within the social and cultural context and appealed to the possibility of a change in local music consumption. The Lao's awakening to ego was caused by the experience of encountering the Thai as Others following the migrant workers' movement to Bangkok. The acceptance of the new administrative and regional identity of I-san brought the Lao people an occasion to choose their own appellation, either Lao or I-san. Some of the songs I presented above are regarded as a way of expressing resistance to the new identity of I-san assigned to the people by the government by referring to the cultural contents such as language, scenery, and eating habits which are comprised of the Lao.

Between the 1970s and 1980s, *Luk Thung Molam* music was created under the social background that the Lao encountered Thai people as migrants who moved from the countryside to Bangkok. There, the Lao first realized that they were different from the Thai people, who spoke a different language and had different customs. The Lao people were obligated to speak Thai or risk being mocked by the Thai people. In spite of it, the Lao's *Molam* music shows it has the mystical power of the comic, which is able to convert the negative feelings such complex or embarrassment into positive feelings splendidly.

However, in the 2000s, in place of traditional *Molam* music's access or link to politics, the *Molam* singers took the role of promoting the government's political purpose, expressing nostalgia for the old days which replace what they were ever 'the Lao' as the Other who could not return to the past anymore. Seemingly, the Lao in northeastern Thailand faced an inner struggle regarding their relationship with the Lao on the left side of the Mekong River,

and at the same time the *Molam* singers who live in Thai society today legitimize and locate themselves positively in their new way of living, rather than viewing their choices negatively.

Acknowledgements

With the academic advice and invaluable discussion under my supervisor, Professor Tosa Keiko, I was empowered to write the paper. I would like to express my gratitude to her. With the understanding and great help of the OFIAS committee, especially the great support from Professor Toru Aoyama, I was given a wonderful opportunity to give a presentation and exchange ideas with foreign scholars from many backgrounds in SOAS, London in 2012. In addition to the above, my paper writing work has been supported by my colleagues and friends. I really appreciate all of them who have always encouraged and supported me.

Notes

- 1 Doctoral Course, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies (Research Fellow, Japan Society for the Promotion of Science).
- 2 To strengthen the friendship between Thailand and the Lao PDR and establish further promotion of tourism, a film called *Sabaaidée Luang Prabang*, a romantic drama directed by Sakchai Deenan, who was born and grew up in northeastern Thailand, and starring a Laotian-Australian mixed-blood Thai actor named Ananda Everingham, who was born in Thailand, was released in 2008. The plot of this film is simple: A Thai photographer named Sorn who is visiting Laos falls in love with his beautiful Laotian tour guide, Noi. The film contrasts two cities, showing the busy life of Bangkok and the slow and relaxed atmosphere of Laos. What is novel in this film, much less what I consider the 'change', is how the Lao are represented in the 'new' way by Thai people in the modern Thai cinema. Not only have historical documents or discussions among Thai politicians used negative remarks that aroused controversy between the two countries, but works produced by the Thai entertainment media industry have also made the Lao the objects of mockery and insults by Thai policymakers and intellectuals for many decades. However, the negative impression of the Lao that has been created by the Thai was erased in this film. The Lao are represented rather positively, as warm-hearted, kind, and relaxed people, while in contrast, the Bangkokians have forgotten their humanity. It may be no exaggeration to say that this remarkable image of the Lao was revolutionary in Thai media. The reason for this change is considered in another paper.
- 3 Found in northeastern Thailand, *Molam* can be classified into four genres: *Molam Phuun*, *Molam Phii Faa*, *Molam Muu* and *Molam Kloan*.
- 4 (The lyric) ...Train whistle making repeated sounds of bububu, pipipi spreading out. I gave my big smile and left my girl alone with a good-bye. I've got to be in a rush to buy the train ticket to go down south to *Thai* for work for a certain time.... Will just work for wages and earn money let

my girl long for me, my girl. Until coming to next spring on new sky and nice rain showers day, I will be back to hold the grand wedding. Also will get some alcohol and give it away with grilled chicken....

- 5 The year when the song was released cannot be specified. But at least it can be surmised to have been around the 1970s to 1980s in point of the view of the collaboration work period of Nok Noi Uraipohorn's troupes and the boom of Phetubol.
- 6 In particular, this tendency had been enhanced through the process of nation-state building in Thailand. We watched the *Molam Kloan* performance that supports the Red Shirt group at the protest meeting in Bangkok in 2010 and 2011. Some literature has also discussed its effectiveness.
- 7 Among mercenaries who were sending troops in the war between the autocracies, the situation of a high temperature, depression, and an uncertain cause of sometimes reaching even the unsuccessful suicide attempt happened frequently in Europe of the seventeenth century. Hoffer regarded this symptom as a phenomenon seen in someone who caught united 'Homecoming' of Greek and 'Pain', and coined the term 'nostalgia' (Imafuku 1996).
- 8 (The lyric) ...Since a long time, I have admiringly looked at you. I, the *Molam Kloan* expert, am going to the temple where the Kathin will present the robes ceremony. What a developed age now. I have seen the evolvement from *Molam Klone* style to *Molam Sing* style. Because of this, I, the *Molam Kloan* master, will sing for our grandfathers and grandmothers, fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters, siblings and our descendants....

A long time ago (*samai booraan*), our country did not develop so much like nowadays. Recently? Answer, Teacher Sombat? Men of old times did not wear trousers like the Europeans still put on in the present; instead they put on a tight loincloth. Women of old times (*samai booraan*) did not wear the skirts to which we are accustomed nowadays. Instead they put on red and white textile skirts. Colourful dyed sashes hung on their shoulders with a slope. The hairstyle was the dumpling knot on the top of the head...They didn't have any shampoo...Of course, we have no combs made of plastic sold in the market in the present!

Yo, elder sis, and where have you come from? How many people are you hanging out with? Just go if it's time for the wedding. Where do you live, sis? Is there a married person? Or still a bachelor? When the man persuaded the woman, he composed a poetic letter and sent it to her in the old times (*samai booraan*). The female who received it gave a response to his feeling with her letter with the poetry of the love.

And nowadays (*patjuban*), it is the age that had already been developed! The reform and revolution have been changed repeatedly. Neither a modern child nor grandchildren hear what their parents are saying at all. Their clothes are not the same as those in the old times (*samai booraan*) and they pamper themselves. Recently (*patjuban*), they have started to wear the new clothing such as camisoles. I prefer telling more recent topics, not merely for recalling the past that we went through. In recent years, a new social system has been administrated and new movement consolidated. For instance, the One Village One Product Movement should be watched by everyone...Next let me talk of Vientiane....

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