

THE MUSICAL TRADITIONS OF NORTHEAST THAILAND

by

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and

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Although Thailand has been among the most accessible countries in Southeast Asia to scholars, its musical traditions constitute an underworked field. Dr. David Morton of the University of California at Los Angeles has written a thoroughly accurate study of central Thai classical music (1964), and a few articles have appeared from time to time in this journal concerning certain theatrical traditions, but scholars have not yet published studies of the regional musics of the south, north, and northeast. The first-named author, Professor Miller, has completed a doctoral dissertation on the music of northeast Thailand¹, with the extensive help of Professor Jarernchai Chonpairot of the Srinakharin Wirot University branch in Maha Sarakham Province, northeast Thailand. It is our desire that northeastern Thai music become known to the world, for it certainly has rich and elaborate traditions.

Culturally, the northeastern region (*pak isan*), which comprises 16 of Thailand's 72 provinces and at least 12 million people, is Lao. Although this area following the right bank of the Mekong River from above Wiangjun (Vientiane), Laos, to the border of Cambodia in the south was never really an integral part of the old Lao kingdom of Lan-sang ("million elephants") or even the princedoms which succeeded Lan-sang in the early eighteenth century A.D. (Luang Prabang, Wiangjun, and Jumba-suk/Champasak), it maintained a cultural identity quite separate from the central region, old Siam. In the twentieth century with the advent of development, especially improved roads, radio, television, and government schools, the character of the culture has changed slightly, but old Lao traditions still survive in the villages, while in the provincial towns progress is more apparent. Being Lao means eating a distinctive diet (glutinous rice and fermented fish), speaking a different dialect (*pasa isan*, a modern form of Lao), following certain farm practices dictated by the dry environment, and having distinctive traditions in literature, music, and dance.

The music of northeast Thailand is little understood in the West both because of a lack of literature on the subject as well as errors in the few articles and books which discuss it. For example, James Brandon's otherwise impressive book, *Theatre in Southeast Asia*, includes material about northeastern Thai music and theatre which is at best incomplete and at worst naive or wrong, but many of these problems probably

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1. Terry E. Miller, "*Kaen playing and mawlum singing in northeastern Thailand*", unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University, 1977.

Aerophones. Similar to the *kaen* in principle is the *look bee kaen*, a free-reed tube played by the hill-dwelling Pootai in both northeast Thailand and southern Laos³. The pitches of this instrument are similarly generated from a metal free-reed, but the single tube is fitted with six or seven finger holes allowing the player to blow seven or eight pitches. The player's mouth placed over the reed acts as the windchest. The *bee sanai* is a water buffalo horn with both ends open, and a metal free-reed larger than but similar to that of the *kaen* fitted over a hole cut in the concave side. The *bee sanai* is capable of only two or three pitches and is said to be a favorite noise-maker at the *bung-fai* (rocket) festival, though we have not seen one. Its pitch may be changed by opening or closing the larger end.

The *klui*, a vertical bamboo flute, while well known, is actually of more significance in central Thailand where it functions in the *kruang-sai* and *mahori* ensembles. Of less musical importance is the *wot*, a children's toy constructed of eight bamboo tubes each about eight to 21 cm long (see figure 6). The tubes are formed into a circular bundle around a longer handle and sealed into place with *kisoot*, a type of black, sticky beeswax that also seals the *kaen* tubes in place. At the bottom end the tubes remain sealed by their unpierced nodes but are open at the other. A rounded mound of ordinary beeswax or *kisoot* is formed over the open end, but not closing the pipes completely so that air blown over the ends causes whistle-like pitches to be sounded. Although an old man from Kalasin Province named Pao has in recent years become locally known for playing the *wot*, in fact it is normally thrown by children in the fields as a musical toy. The two remaining wind instruments barely deserve mention. The *bee goo fuang* is a child's toy flute made from a green ricestalk, and the *bee bai dawng glui* is a cone-shaped kazoo made from a banana leaf. Of these wind instruments, only the *kaen* and *klui* are mentioned in old Lao literature.

Two instruments mentioned in literature are unknown today, the *kai* and *suan-lai*, but may have been aerophones. Several older singers whose texts were drawn from such literature felt that the *kai* (which also means "elephant trunk") may be the *kaen* although the *kaen* is also named. Among the aerophones no longer used are the *sung* (*hsiang-lo* in Chinese), a large conch-shell trumpet, and the *bee tae*, probably an oboe-type instrument used to signal the time during certain periods of the night, especially from 9.00 p.m. to 10:30 p.m., the period known as *yamtæ*. *Tæ*, however, is derived from *træ* (*tæ* in Lao), meaning a metal trumpet.

Chordophones. The most important of the chordophones is a plucked lute called *pin* or less commonly *süng*⁴ (see figure 7). There is no standard form for *pin* other than its having a wooden corpus and neck with five to eight frets. There may be from two to four metal strings, one of which is a melodic or 'singer' string, the

3. The *look bee kaen* is called *bee-saw* in northern Thailand where it is used to accompany *saw* singing.

4. It is called both *süng* and *sung*, the former being the northern Thai word. *Süng* is probably derived from *saung*, the Burmese harp.

others tuned a fifth lower being drone strings; they are plucked with a piece of buffalo horn. While the *pin* repertory is severely limited to three or four pieces, players have nevertheless created a very distinctive style in which one drone string is stopped and consequently parallels the melody in fifths, while the remaining string or strings produce unstopped drones. *Pin* combined with *kaen* has become the standard accompaniment for *mawlum plün*, a type of traditional theatre, and in fact the best-known *pin* solo today is '*lum plün*'. The antiquity of the instrument cannot be doubted however contemporary the northeastern *pin* repertory may appear. The word *pin* in Tai is based on a Pali-Sanskrit word meaning "plucked instrument", and may be related to the Indian words *viṇa* and *bīṇa*⁵. The northeastern *pin* is possibly related in form to the Siamese *grajupbee*, a four-stringed long-neck lute, and to the northern *süng* whose form is somewhat more standardized than that of the northeastern *pin*. There is no significant relationship, however, to the *pin num dao* or *pin pia*, chest-resonated chordophones found in the north.

Of secondary importance are two types of bowed instruments, the first called *saw bung mai pai* ("bamboo fiddle"), the second *saw bip* ("metal can fiddle"). The former is very similar to the two-stringed Siamese *saw oo* whose corpus is also a coconut shell, but the more common today is the *saw bip* whose corpus is a metal can such as for kerosene or Hall's Mentho-Lyptus lozenges fitted with a wooden neck and two wire strings. Unlike the bow of the *saw oo* or *saw bung mai pai*, whose hairs pass between the two strings (as in the Chinese *hu-ch'in* as well), the bow of the *saw bip* is often separate from the instrument except in the largest one used to accompany an early type of Lao theatre. Last is the *sanoo*, a musical bow which is attached to large kites. As the wind changes the tension on the bow, random melodies are produced by a strip of dried palm leaf or rattan.

Membranophones and idiophones. The most widely encountered membranophone (drum) is the *glawng yao* ("long drum"; see figure 8) or *glawng hang* ("tail drum"), a single-headed drum whose hardwood body is shaped somewhat like an hourglass. The *glawng yao*, which is played with the hands, is usually combined with a pair of cymbals called *saeng* (*chap* in Siamese; see figure 8) and a pair of finger cymbals called *sing* (*ching*) usually to accompany dancing. Sometimes a small bronze gong with a boss called *kawng* (or *mong*) is used, as well as a large flat gong suspended from a horizontal stick called *pang hat*. Another drum, of barrel shape called *glawng sun* (see figure 8), may also be added. All of the above instruments are known in central Thailand as well, including also the *rummana lum dut*, a large, flat frame drum called *glawng düng* in the northeast. Smaller drums such as the *ton*, also known in central Thailand, are sometimes found in the northeast as well. Lastly, pairs of long frame drums called *glawng jing* ("jing drum"; see figure 9) or *glawng seng* ("contest drum") are beaten in competition to attain the highest pitch, a din that defies description.

5. Dhanit Yupho, *Thai Musical Instruments*, trans. David Morton (Bangkok, Department of Fine Arts, 1960), p. 87.

Two northeastern idiophones are not known in other Thai regions, the *kaw law* (or *bong lang*; see figure 10) and *hoon* (or *hün*; see figure 11). The latter is a bamboo jaw harp approximately 25 cm long, and the former is a vertical wooden xylophone peculiar to Kalasin Province. A few Thai, seeking proof of their culture's local origin, have cited the *kaw law* as a possible ancestor of the *ranat*, the xylophone found in Siamese court ensembles. The *kaw law*, however, is a recent invention whose form, tonal material, and repertory are nearly as young as the men playing it. Its more common name, *bong lang*, derives from its best-known piece referring to a wooden cow bell (*bong lang*).

A more traditional idiophone is the *mak gup gaep* (or *mai gup gaep*) consisting of pieces of hardwood about 13 cm long, 5 cm wide, and from 1 to 2 cm thick. These are played in pairs, one pair in each hand, clicked in varying patterns to mark the rhythm. A similar instrument in the central region is called the *grup sepah* and accompanies *sepah* recitation⁶.

Lastly, the Pootai, especially in southern Laos, use an instrument which may be called *mai-bawk-baek*. Although we have never seen one, Dr. Carol Compton, a linguist who has conducted research in Laos, has described the instrument. According to her the instrument consists of two sticks of wood perhaps 30 cm long, the lower side of one being scalloped or cut into saw teeth. The upper piece has at one end three French coins held in place by a nail which pierces them. As the player clicks the two pieces of wood together in one hand, he rubs the saw-toothed portion over a stone producing a combination of clicking, jingling, and buzzing. The instrument is often heard in the ensembles which accompany certain kinds of southern Lao singing.

Singing

"Intended as it is to be read aloud or sung, Laotian poetry, or verse, is essentially musical and rhythmic."⁷ The ethnomusicologist's definition of song as heightened speech best prepares the reader for understanding the various Siamese and Lao words which are usually translated "to sing". Four words must be discussed in this regard, though only one is commonly used by northeasterners. The standard dictionary definition in Thai of "to sing" is *rawng*, which is usually combined with *pleng* meaning "to sing a song"; this implies a set melody to which the words must adjust themselves regardless of their tones. Singers *rawng* Siamese classical songs, popular songs, and Western songs, but when rendering Siamese folksongs one uses the term *wah*. *Wah* has various shades of meaning from simply "to say" to "to insult", "to scold", or "to speak out". The Siamese also use the word *kup* for certain types of recitation, particularly *kup sepah*, the reading of poetry to a set melody accompanied by two pairs of wood

6. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

7. Thao Nhoy Abhay, "Versification", in *Kingdom of Laos*, ed. René de Berval, trans. Teissier du Cros et al. (Saigon, France-Asie, 1959), p. 348.

castanets called *grup*⁸. According to Mosel⁹, *kup* literally means "to eject" or recite words with voice modulation or melody. While birds and animals may *rawng*, only humans can *kup*.

The Lao, however, use the word *lum* that in a musical sense is unknown in Siamese in spite of Mosel's claim to the contrary. *Lum* neither appears in the Haas *Thai-English Student's Dictionary* nor under "sing" in any major English-Thai dictionary. *Lum* has often been confused and misprinted by the Siamese as *rum* meaning "to dance" because both Lao and Siamese, finding the consonant "r" difficult to pronounce, often alter it to "l" (e.g. "*lawng pleng*" rather than *rawng pleng*). Mosel, however, correctly states that *lum* is a kind of song "in which the words are primary, the melody being adjusted to fit the sound and grouping of the words (as in setting a poem to music). The rhythmic intervals are necessarily irregular in that they must accommodate to the word groups and their meaning."¹⁰ Mosel, however, implies incorrectly that *lum* is to *kup* (*kup lum*) as *pleng* is to *rawng* (*rawng pleng*), for *pleng* is a noun and *lum* is a verb.

A number of other meanings further complicate the term *lum*. It may mean "a story according to the rule of verse", such as *lum pra wet*, the story of Prince Wetsundawn, the penultimate life of the Buddha before Enlightenment. It may also refer to the body of a human, animal, or anything, living or inanimate, minus appendages. Similarly it is a classifier word for tubular objects such as boats, airplanes, and bamboo, e.g. *hūa sam lum* ("boat—three tubes"). This latter definition together with its meaning as a trunk or stalk (e.g. *lum pai*: "bamboo stalk") is known to the Siamese. Lastly it refers to Lao singing generated by word-tones.

While the term *lum* is usual throughout the northeast as well as southern Laos, the word *kup* describes central and northern Lao styles, such as *kup sum nūa*, *kup ngūm*, and *kup siang kuang*, referring to place names. While *kup* also means "to drive a car or animal", in its musical meaning it too implies that the tones of the words generate the melody.

While *lum* implies a direct relationship between tone and pitch, there is in fact no hard-and-fast system in this regard. There are many different kinds of *lum*, each with different possible modes, rhythms, and moods, and yet all are *lum* in principle. The word therefore has a very general application as in *lum isan*, meaning northeastern singing. As a fundamental concept in creating melody, *lum* may be as old as the Lao people although the resulting melodies will have changed drastically over the years and from region to region.

8. H.H. Prince Bidya, "Sebhā recitation and the story of Khun Chāng Khun Phan", *Journal of the Thailand Research Society* (Siam Society series), 33 (March 1941), pp. 1-22.

9. James N. Mosel, *Trends and Structure in Contemporary Thai Poetry*, Southeast Asia Program Data Paper no. 43 (Ithaca, New York; Cornell University Press, 1961), p. 51.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 50.

A Lao singer is called a *mawlum*. *Maw* alone means "medical doctor" and while some translate *mawlum* as "singing doctor", this is more innocent than helpful. *Maw* means a "skilled person" as in *mawyah* (*yah*: "medicine"—folk-medicine doctor), *mawdoo* (*doo*: "to see"—fortune teller), or *maw-kuam* (*kuam*: "law"—lawyer). Northeast singing has also been called *lum kaen* in reference to the bamboo reed organ which accompanies the singing. In central Thailand, especially during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, *lum isan* was known as *aeow lao*. While some Siamese dictionaries translate *aeow* as "love song", in fact it has no meaning except that erroneously applied to Lao singing. *Aeow* in Lao means "to implore" or "to cajole", as a child nags its mother for milk. In northern dialect, however, it means "to court a girl" (*aeow sao*), and this may have influenced the Siamese knowing that *mawlum* often sang love poems.

Lao musical theory is neither written nor systematic. Players and singers distinguish scales and rhythms in nontechnical language which, when not understood, must be explained in descriptive terms. Today singers and players distinguish metrical and nonmetrical rhythms with the words *sun* and *yao*, the former meaning "short", the latter "long". In certain singing forms the two rhythms are distinguished as *lum tang sun* (metrical) and *lum tang yao* (nonmetrical), *tang* meaning "route" or "way". These terms, however, are of recent origin and would not be encountered, for example, in old literature. The terms may have come into use as recently as 1945 when northeastern vocal music reappeared in Bangkok, and the singers used these terms for the benefit of the central Thai.

Today in northeast Thailand there are two basic nondramatic singing genres, *mawlum pün* (figure 12) and *mawlum glawn* (figure 13). The latter, however, constitutes at least 95 per cent of all such musical activity today, since only four singers of *mawlum pün* were performing actively in 1974. *Mawlum pün* reached its apex of popularity more than a generation ago before the rise of *mawlum glawn*. In *lum pün* one singer, normally male, performs extended poetic versions of favorite Jataka, Lao epic tales (*nitan pün müang*), and stories from Lao history. These require from one to three nights and demand considerable concentration on the part of the audience. *Mawlum glawn*, on the other hand, features two singers, one male and one female, in competition primarily performing amorous poetry but also poems concerning religion, history, geography, and other didactic matters in a question-and-answer format. A complete performance of *mawlum glawn* begins about 9.00 p.m. with one of the two singers introducing himself in *lum tang sun* and the *lum* scale (G, A, C, D, E) followed then by the other. The pair then continues to alternate asking each other questions, teasing, attempting to impress the other, but using previously memorized poetry whose order is determined according to need.

Lum tang sun continues throughout the night without stopping until near daybreak, by which time for stage purposes the singers have fallen in love and must then part. *Lum tang yao*, also called *lum lah* ("goodbye") or *lum lawng* ("to sing along a

river") and sung to the *an nungsü* scale (A, C, D, E, G), takes only 15 or 20 minutes but is the emotional highpoint of the performance. After World War II younger singers began adding a third portion, *lum dōi*, in which the *an nungsü* scale is maintained but the rhythm is metrical (*sun*) and the poetry often light-hearted and even bawdy. *Lum dōi* includes three types, *dōi tumadah* ("ordinary") whose melody is generated according to the principles of *lum*; *dōi kong* ("of the Mekong"); and *dōi pamah* (Burmese), the latter two of which use patterned melodies. Singers usually string these together in no particular order while alternating between male and female.

Singers are usually classified as either Ubon style or Udon-Khon-Kaen style (from the Provinces of Ubon Ratchathani, or Udon Thani and Khon Kaen). The distinction primarily concerns *lum tang sun*, for the differences disappear in *lum tang yao* and *lum dōi*. The most obvious differences are those of subject, for Ubon-style singing inclines more to love poetry called *glawn gio* ("courting poems") than Udon-Khon-Kaen style whose origin may be traced to the sharply competitive *lum jot*, a variation of *lum glawn*, in which questions and answers often involve multisyllabic Pali-Sanskrit words which do not fit readily into Lao poetic patterns. As a result Ubon singing has clearer phrases than Khon-Kaen style. In reality few singers may be classified as pure Ubon or pure Khon-Kaen, for elements of both styles influence most singers today. In terms of popularity, Ubon has tended to dominate Khon-Kaen but there is no shortage of the latter in Roi Et, Maha Sarakham, Khon Kaen and Chaiyaphum Provinces.

In addition to *lum jot*, there are or were other permutations of *lum glawn*: primarily *lum sam sing ching nang* ("three lions compete for a girl"), *lum sam glü* ("three professions"), and *lum ching choo* ("compete for a lover" - perhaps a 'minor wife'). *Sam glü* features three male singers, a farmer, merchant and government official, discussing politics and other matters. *Sam sing ching nang* is like *sam glü* but a female is added for romantic interest. *Ching choo* is sung by two males and a female, the former two competing for the latter. None of these is very common today.

Today there are two basic theatrical forms of the *lum* type as well as *nung daloong* or *nung bra mo tai* (the shadow-puppet theatre; see figure 14) which came originally from southern Thailand but in recent years, especially around Roi Et, began to incorporate the more popular styles of northeastern singing. *Mawlum moo* ("group mawlum"; see figure 15), the more serious of the two, primarily uses *lum tang yao* though in a more ornate form than found in *mawlum glawn*. Some forms of *mawlum moo*, particularly among older troupes from the Khon Kaen area, also use a type of *lum tang sun* called *dün dong* ("walking in the forest"), and all troupes sometimes use *dōi hua non dan*, a slow pastoral melody in 6/8 meter. Though *mawlum moo* popularity began to eclipse that of *mawlum glawn* during the past 10 years, just as *lum glawn* had overshadowed *lum pün* some 25 years earlier, the second theatrical form, *mawlum plün* ("spontaneous") is now swiftly overtaking *mawlum moo* in popularity. The main expression of *mawlum plün*, *lum tang sun*, is the most energetic of all northeastern styles but shows strong influence from popular music both in its catchy rhythms

and accompaniment which includes a Western drum set (*glawng choot*) and various other Western percussion instruments. *Lum tang sun* always follows an abbreviated version of *lum tang yao* which has become stylized to the point that it can be instantly recognized as *lum plün*.

Lao singing is often said to be "improvised", and the implication is that there are hundreds if not thousands of skilled poets performing in the northeast who compose both poetry and song simultaneously every night of their performing careers. The melodies are generated, more or less, from the word tones, though many standard phrases can be isolated; still, it could be said that the melody is improvised. While highly predictable in general structure, details change from singer to singer and even performance to performance.

The poetry, however, is not improvised; it is memorized from written sources. All but the older singers (who long ago memorized their repertory) have notebooks into which are written by hand the poetry they sing; theatrical troupes similarly play from fully written-out scripts, not scenarios as do *ligeh* troupes in central Thailand. The only improvised portions might be the jokes spoken by the *dua dalok* ("joke man"), a comic character.

While this is not the place to go into great detail about Lao poetry and the techniques of setting it to melody, a few remarks ought to be made. First, the language is Lao, very close to that spoken across the Mekong River, but sometimes different in vocabulary because of local usage and influence from central Thai, the official language of Thailand. Because Lao is no longer taught in schools, and the writing of Lao using Lao script is little known in the northeast, the dialect has come to be written and printed in a makeshift form using Thai letters. The difficulties are immense, because unless one actually knows Lao, this written form cannot be accurately read. It is inconsistent in regard to consonant clusters, tones and spellings, and furthermore some Thai words are thrown in using correct spelling and meant to be read that way. To make matters even more complicated, tonal inflections vary from province to province in the northeast. There is a way to write northeastern Lao consistently, using Thai letters, but this system is unknown to the poets and *mawlum* singers who can only read the makeshift system. Obviously there is the requirement that, to be a *mawlum* singer, one must be literate. The image of the northeastern musician as an uneducated peasant singing 'folksongs' is quite untenable.

Though there is little published material to explain Lao poetry, there is a great deal about Siamese poetry. In reading the latter studies two factors confuse the uninitiated. While certain terms for poetic styles such as *glawn* and *gap* are common to both literary traditions, they are not actually equivalents, yet the parallel forms have completely different names. The word *glawn* means not only poetry in general to the Lao, but one type of poem in particular, at least in everyday usage. Maha Sila Virawong describes six types of *glawn*¹¹, but northeastern singers generally speak of only one and refer separately to *gap*, which is far less important than the former.

11. Maha Sila Viravong, *Sunta-luksana* ("Versification"), (Vientiane, Laos; 1961), pp. 16-22.

Glawn consists of stanzas each having four lines called, in order, *wak sa-dup*, *wak hup*, *wak hawng* and *wak song*. Each line has seven syllables (feet) divided into two hemistiches, one having three, the other four feet. While most stanzas have four lines, many have only two, beginning either with the first or the third lines. In constructing his lines, however, the poet may affix a variety of adverbial or conjunctive expressions of an exclamatory, interrogative or supplicatory nature before or after the basic seven syllables which complete the thought. Expressions preceding the line are called *kum boopabot* (prefix) and those following *kum soi* (suffix). In counting syllables these added words are not included, nor are the auxiliary *si* ("well"), certain unwritten vowels especially in words of Pali origin, or the auxiliary *gaw* meaning "do" as in "I do have".

Furthermore, each phrase of a *glawn* stanza must obey a pattern of tonal signs (see figure 16). The rules, as summarized by Thao Nhouy, are (a) the third syllable (end of the first hemistich) of the first, third, and fourth lines, and also the last syllable of the second line, must be given the accent *to* (ˊ); (b) the third syllable of the second line, and also the last syllable of the fourth line, must not have any accent; (c) the last syllable of the third line must always be either given the accent *ek* (ˋ) or formed with a consonant of the lower series and a vowel composed with the finals *k*, *d*, or *p*¹². Thao Nhouy neglected to mention that the fifth word of the last line must also have a *to* accent.

The following stanza is drawn from the Lao epic poem *Sung Sin-sai* by the poet Bang-kum.¹³

ທຸກທັນນ້າ	ນອງເນດຕ໌ໝອງໄຫລ	<i>took tee nah</i>	<i>nawng net nüang lai</i>
ເປັນປາງທຸກຂໍ	ຊວາດປະມານມືນ້ອ	<i>ben bang took</i>	<i>suat baman mee mua</i>
ຄຳຮັກທັນ	ຖືກວຽງທົວລະຍ່າວ	<i>kum huk ton</i>	<i>tü tuang tua la tao</i>
ແມ່ຫອດແຫ້ງ	ຫິວມ້ອຍມອດຕານ	<i>mae hawt haeng</i>	<i>hui mawy mawt dam</i>

Everyone's tears are flowing
For it is a time of great sorrow.
Love floods the mother's heart;
She feels so sad that she would like to die.

Alliteration and interior rhyme are integral to *glawn*, but external rhyme is not. While two and three repetitions of a consonant or vowel are cultivated, four exceed the limits of good taste, though such cacophony may be used for special effect.

12. Thao Nhouy Abhay, *loc. cit.*, p. 353.

13. Bang-kum, *Sung Sin-sai*, ed. Sila Viravong (Vientiane, 1972), p. 61.

เข็มนบากบ้าว	ທັງແຮງໃສ່ບ່ອງ	yüan yak tao	tung haeng hoi haeng
เดินดอบตามวง	ກວ່າໃກລີໄກ້	dün dawy luang	gua gai lü gai
เดินดูจวน	ເຂົ້າອຸບເມືອງຸບ	lòi kio kün	kao ngawn müa ngawn
คิดถึงแม่	ບຸນໄຫ້ຮ້າໄສ	küt mae bah	boon hai hum hai ¹⁴

His great fatigue makes it difficult to continue travelling;
 He crosses through a large forest,
 Then reaches the top of a hill.
 Thinking of his mother, he begins to cry.

It should be noted that the pairs *haeng*, *gai*, and *hai* are different words by virtue of differing tones. A good poet strives to achieve a great variety of rhythms by adding uncounted syllables which alter the flow of words, or he may divide words over the caesura or from the end of one line to the next, a technique called *yutdipung* ("enjambment") according to Thao Nhouy.

The second and lesser style is called *gap* or *glawn gap*, the word being derived from the Sanskrit *gawaya*¹⁵. Although the number of syllables per line may vary, seven is usual. The last word of each line must rhyme with a word in the following line, the third being most common. These pairs whose vowels ordinarily rhyme have matching tone marks as well, but pairs with tone marks often alternate with pairs lacking such marks. While Siamese *glawn dalat* also uses this rhyme pattern, though less strictly and combined with other patterns into stanzas, Lao *gap* runs continuously without separate stanzas. *Gap* is commonly used for introductions in singers' poetry as a contrast to *glawn*, but a few works have been written entirely in *gap*. A further variety of *gap* poetry called *süng* is sung by roving bands of revelers, usually inebriated, as they parade around town during certain festivals seeking whiskey money. The best known is *süng bung-fai*, songs for the rocket festival in June.

◦ โอมพุทโธนะโมเป็นคำ ข่อยซิเว้าตั้งแต่เดิมมา
 นะโมนะมาวันทาวันทอง น้อมเกศก่องไห้แก้วทั้งสาม

om poot to namo ben kao
 koi si wao dung dae düm mah
 namo na mah wun ta wun tawng
 nawm get gawng wai gao tung sam¹⁶

Om Buddha namo must come first.
 I will tell the old story
 with the words namo na mah ta wun tawng.
 I bow my head to the Three Gems.

Old Lao literature is the basis for *mawlum* texts, especially *mawlum pün* and the theatrical genres. While a study of this literature has yet to be done, there are apparently several possible classes of stories. Among the most important is the Jataka, the corpus of tales of the Buddha's lives preceding Enlightenment. These, however,

14. *Ibid.*, p. 148.

15. Maha Sila Viravong, *Sunta-luksana*, p. 14.

16. Tawng-poon Ponsawut, *Gap süng bawng-fai* (Khon Kaen, Klungnah-nawitayah, 1962), p. 1.

are known in local versions in which the characters and setting become Lao; association with the Indian versions is often difficult. There is also a class of stories called *nitan pün müang* ("local stories") which were probably modeled on Jataka literature, although some are historical in nature. These include "Sio-sawut", "Boo Sawm Lan", "Jumba-seedon" "Galaget", and "Nang Daeng-awn". Perhaps the best-known is the epic *Sung Sin-sai* (sometimes spelled *Sang Sin Xay*) written by the Lao poet Bang-kum about 1650. This story is to the Lao what the *Ramakian* is to the Siamese, and is probably the finest poem in the Lao language. It is moreover noteworthy that *Sung Sin-sai* has a known author, for all other poems and stories remain anonymous. Divided into 15 chapters, each with its own title, *Sung Sin-sai* resembles the *Ramakian* not only in its breadth but in plot outline. The latter epic, called in Lao *Pa Luk Pa Lam* (for its chief characters, Pra Luk and Pra Ram), is well known but lacks the central literary importance of *Sung Sin-sai*. The versions of these stories heard on stage, however, are rarely if ever those found in the old literature written on palm-leaf manuscripts. Modern poets, many of them hacks, make new versions for each troupe; the addition of extraneous material is normal in these vulgarized versions.

Mawlum glawn depends much less on the old stories, for most of the poems heard today center around love and nature. Formerly when *lum jot* was popular, the *mawlum* were required to memorize vast numbers of poems dealing with learned subjects such as history, geography, religion, literature, and customs. The format of *lum jot* was a competition between the two singers who asked each other questions. A singer lacking an answer might have to leave the stage humbled. This aspect of *mawlum glawn* is now subdued to the point that it is unknown to many singers. Some *mawlum glawn* poems also include episodes from old literature.

No one can say with any certainty how old the various forms of *lum pün* and *lum glawn* are, though certain variations can be dated precisely such as *lum sam sing ching nang* which began in 1963 in Khon Kaen Province. It is unlikely, however, that these forms have not changed over the previous 1,000 years from southern Chinese origins, as some informants have claimed. Within living memory change can be documented, though with the advent of modern communications the rate of change has no doubt accelerated.

Only the origins of the two theatrical genres can be accurately dated. A detailed discussion of this history cannot be included here, but the primary visual influence on northeastern theatre was Siamese *ligeh* (*likay*) theatre, though *lum pün* contributed the earliest stories. At least by the early 1930s there were *ligeh* troupes playing in parts of the northeast; these were called *ligeh lao* because northeastern players had adapted *ligeh* to their own tastes. This in turn gave rise to local variants which are mostly extinct today. *Ligeh lao* influence in the northeast seems to have been primarily through the 'Khmer provinces' of Surin, Si Sa Ket and Buriram, ending in Roi Et Province. Another route was into Khon Kaen Province when central Thai *ligeh* began playing about 1944. But informants from this area also point out the equally strong influence of *mawlum pün* and *mawlum hüang*, a variation of the latter in which the solo singer acts various parts by changing hats, voice qualities, and so forth.

The first *mawlum moo* troupe was founded in 1952 in Ban Lao-na-dee near the Khon Kaen provincial capital. The founder's brother, Tawin Boot-ta, still manages a troupe playing in that region. It was in 1956 that *mawlum moo* began resembling the modern form, because only then did *mawlum moo* troupes begin copying the costumes and stage of Thai *ligeh*. Today, for the uninitiated, telling the difference between *ligeh* and *mawlum moo* is difficult, and when James Brandon described northeastern theatre, he missed the important distinctions in terms of instruments, stories, and acting conventions.

It is also difficult to distinguish today's *mawlum moo* from *mawlum plün*. Except for their musical styles, there are few obvious differences. Yet *lum plün* began quite separately from *lum moo*, in 1950 in Ban Non-kaen in Tambon Sangtaw, Muang Samsip District, Ubon Ratchathani Province. The second *lum plün* troupe, Kanah Paw Roongsin, was founded in 1953 and still plays in northeast Thailand. It was about this time that *lum plün* too came to imitate *ligeh*. By the 1960s *lum moo* and *lum plün* were difficult to distinguish visually. Musically, though, they remain separate. While both may play the same stories, those of *lum moo* tend to be more serious, while those of *lum plün* are less so. The infiltration of Westernized popular music is more apparent in *lum plün*, but both types tend to be preceded by about an hour of popular music to attract and warm up the audience.

Performances of all genres take place at night, beginning at about 9.00 p.m. and lasting until nearly 5.00 a.m. or slightly later. Troupes and singers are hired for a variety of occasions, both by private individuals and organizations sponsoring events. A temple fair or Red Cross fair in the northeast almost always includes entertainment, formerly *mawlum glawn* for sure, now *mawlum moo* or *plün* because the theatrical genres are tending to supplant *lum glawn*. Having two or three troupes performing simultaneously is not uncommon either. Since all troupes and singers today use amplification equipment (turned always to maximum volume), such performances can be ear-shattering experiences. Troupes and singers may also be hired to entertain neighbors and friends after an important event in someone's life, such as ordination, promotion, or a major *tumboon* held in a home. Whoever the sponsor, watching the *mawlum* is normally free to all, except at fairs where a general admission to the grounds might be charged.

Formerly, before roads were very good, troupes and singers could perform over a small area only. In recent years not only have the improved roads encouraged wider travel, but the advent of *mawlum* associations which act as booking agents has helped stimulate demand and consequently the number of groups competing for engagements is growing rapidly. Troupes or individuals join one or several *mawlum* associations which act as clearing-houses for persons seeking to engage performers. The association receives usually 10 per cent of the gross; its responsibility is to notify the performers of the engagement and little more. Many larger associations, however, have small recording facilities and produce 30-minute radio programs broadcast over local stations.

Performers of *mawlum* almost always come from villages and farming families. Both men and women sing *mawlum*, but only men play the *kaen*. Few of them can be called professional in the Western sense because most cannot rely on their performing as their sole means of support; some, though, receive a substantial income which may approach that of a 'star'. Except for the better performers, who can afford to remain idle by virtue of their larger incomes, most must return to their villages to grow rice during the planting season when performances are suspended anyhow, in observance of *kao pansah*, the Buddhist monks' rainy-season period of retreat. Female singers, after training which lasts perhaps a year or two, often begin their careers under the age of 20. The same is true of men, but when men marry they may continue to perform. Audiences do not like to see married women on stage, and thus it is rare to find a practising female *mawlum* in her 30s or older. For the females, singing offers an interesting diversion from village life for a few years, but many tire of this way of life—travelling constantly from one engagement to another—and leave the troupes to marry. Many say, however, that having been a singer, the chances of finding an attractive husband are increased.

Many Western writers have implied that music in Asia is timeless, and group it with that of ancient Greece and Rome. Some forms of Asian music are indeed very old, such as Korean court music, but others are of recent origin and can be so documented. *Mawlum* as a fundamental type is probably hundreds of years old, but the lack of documents insures that we can never know the answers to these questions. Specific types of *mawlum*, however, had their origin within living memory and have changed, sometimes drastically, over the past 40 or 50 years. Without doubt there are dynamics of change at work in the northeast. Since *mawlum* singing, especially the stage varieties, is essentially commercial (for the financial support of those involved), it must follow fashion or lose its audience. Within recent memory *mawlum pün* has lost its audience, being supplanted first by *mawlum glawn*, then *mawlum moo*, and now *mawlum plün*. The impact of popular music emanating from Bangkok, and of regional television and radio stations, is increasing each year. The popular songs that have preceded *mawlum moo* and *plün* during the past 10 years or so are now being heard sometimes within the play. If this is what pleases audiences, this is what audiences will hear. There is little nostalgia for the past, and no attempt to reconstruct lost genres or revive dying ones as our *collegia musicae* do in the West. The future holds only more change. It is possible that attitudes will change, that students of northeastern culture will recognize the destructive forces presently at work, and will encourage more indigenous performances. Whether this will be enough to reverse the processes now underway is another matter. There is no doubt that music will continue to thrive in the northeast, but its nature is changing, changing so rapidly that only five years can make a major difference. Much field work remains to be done before the old styles become extinct.

(In order of appearance in the text)

sanoo : ស្រុក

lum lah : ล่ำล่ำ

mawlum rūang : หมอคำเรื่อง

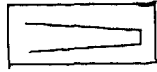


Figure 1. The free-reed of *kaen*.



Figure 2. *Kaen* played by Tawng-koon Siaroon.

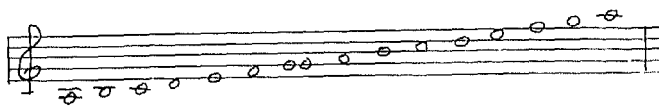


Figure 3. The 15 pitches of the *kaen baet*.



Figure 4. The two basic Lao scales : (a) *lum*, (b) *an nungsü*.

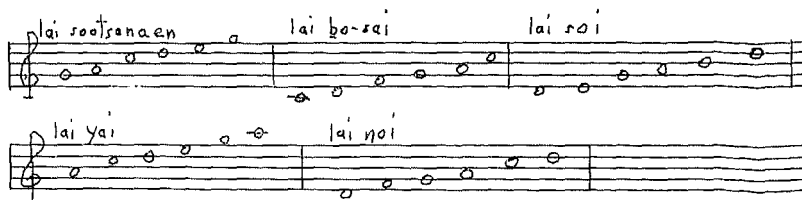


Figure 5. The five basic modes of Lao *kaen* music.

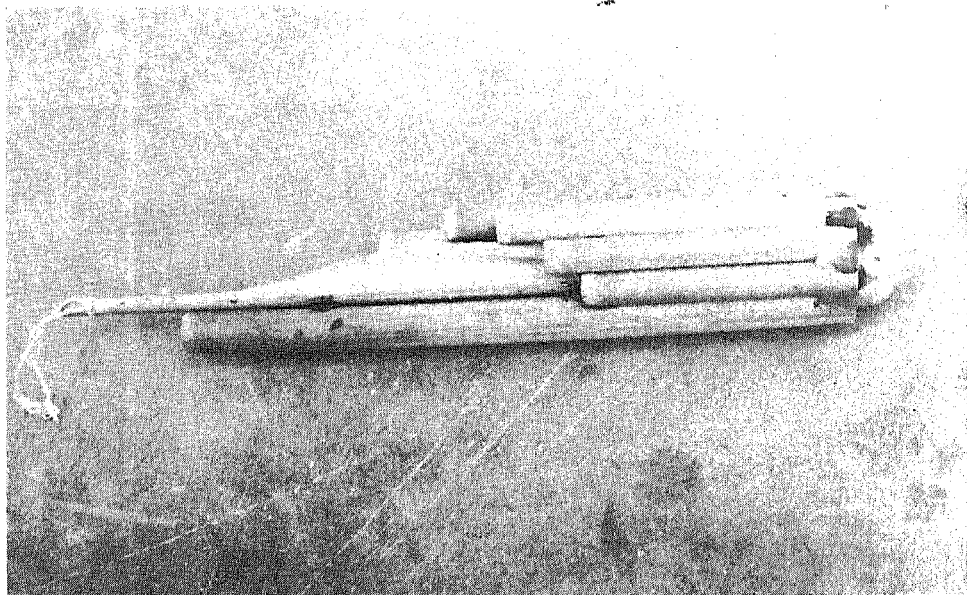


Figure 6. A wot.



Figure 7. A pin being played at a country performance.

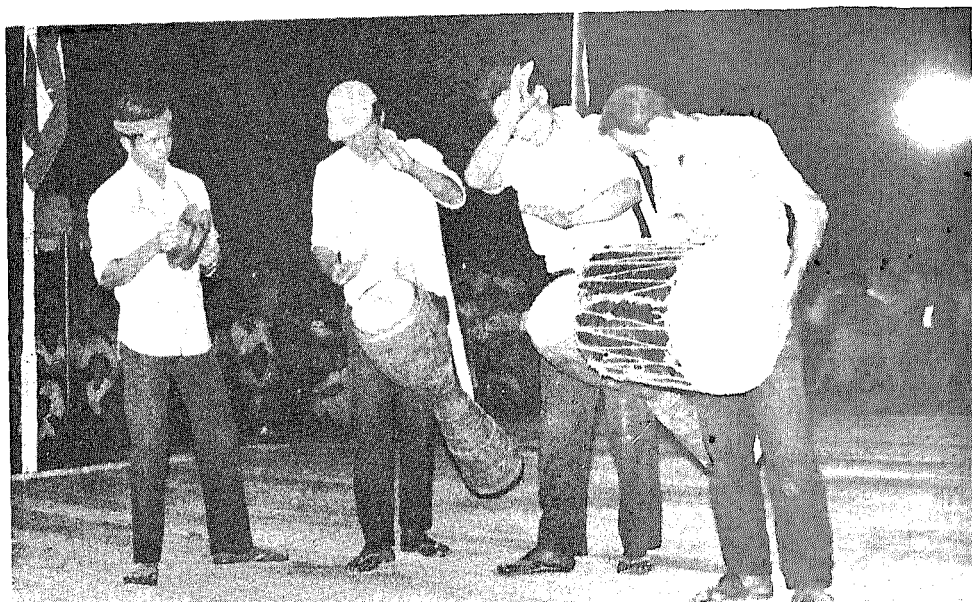


Figure 8. From left to right : pair of *saeng* accompanying two *glawng yao* and a *glawng sun*.

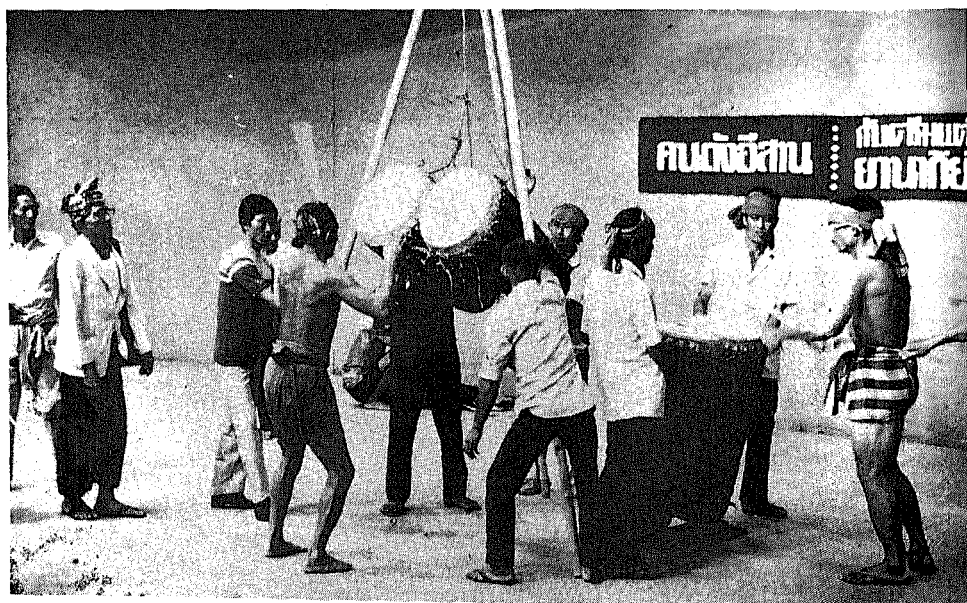


Figure 9. Suspended *glawng jing*.



Figure 11. The hoon played by Sootee Chaidilüt.

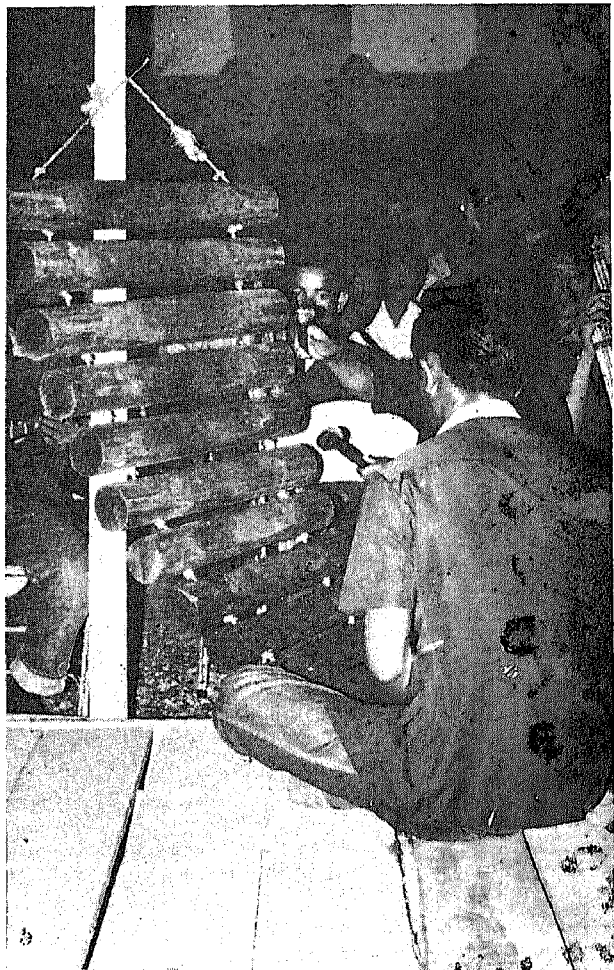


Figure 10. The relatively young kaw law.



Figure 12. Two of the few remaining mawlum pün performers.

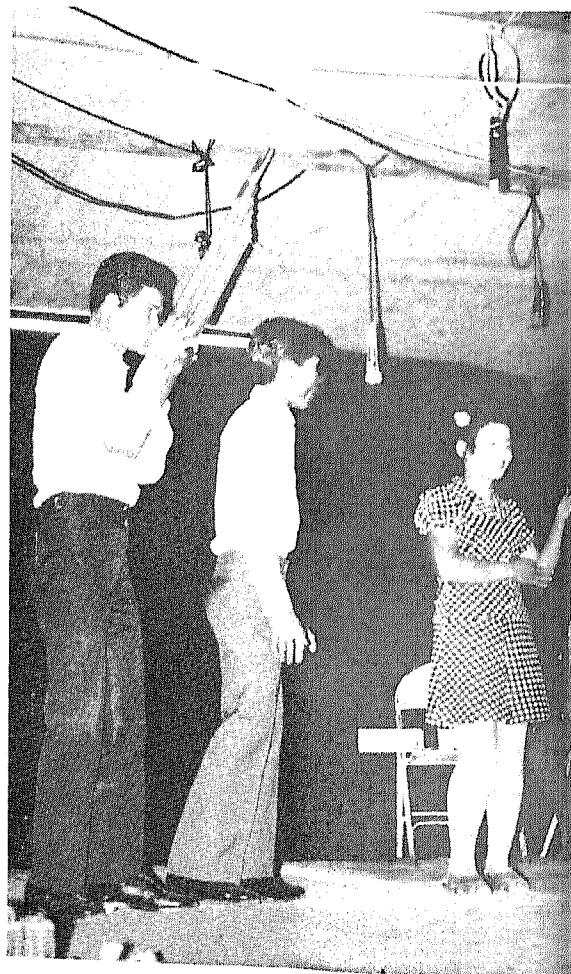


Figure 13. A team performing mawlum glawn.



Figure 14. A performance of nung bra mo tai.



Figure 15. Group-style mawlum moo.

1.	<u>wak sa-dup</u>	—	—	✓	—	—	—	—
2.	<u>wak hup</u>	—	—	<u>none</u>	—	—	—	✓
3.	<u>wak hawng</u>	—	—	✓	—	—	—	1
4.	<u>wak song</u>	—	—	✓	—	✓	—	<u>none</u>

Figure 16. The tonal form of a Lao *glawn* stanza.