

THE KHAEN: PLACE, POWER, PERMISSION, AND PERFORMANCE

by

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B.Mus., The University of British Columbia, 2011

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

in

The Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
(Ethnomusicology)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

Vancouver

June 2016

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Abstract

While living in the Isan region of Thailand I had the opportunity to start learning the traditional wind instrument the *khaen* (in Thai, แคน, also transliterated as *khène*). This thesis outlines the combination of methods that has allowed me to continue to play while tackling broader questions surrounding permission and place that arise when musicians, dancers, or artists work with materials from other cultures. Through an examination of the geographical, historical, and social contexts of the Isan region I have organized my research around the central themes of place, power, permission, and performance. My intent is to validate the process of knowledge acquisition and the value of what one has learned through action, specifically musical performance, and to properly situate such action within contemporary practice where it can contribute to the development and continuation of an endangered art form.

Preface

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Anne Greenwood.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Preface.....	iii
Table of Contents	iv
List of Figures.....	vi
Acknowledgements	vii
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Chapter 2: Place.....	8
2.1 Isan as a Physical Place.....	8
2.2 Isan Over Time	10
2.3 Thai-ification.....	12
2.4 Colonization Period	13
2.5 Isan in Literature.....	13
2.6 Isan Today.....	16
2.7 Isan-ness.....	19
2.8 The Khaen as an Isan Object	22
2.9 The Khaen in Musical Context	24
Chapter 3: Power and Permission.....	28
3.1 Power	28
3.1.1 The Subaltern.....	28
3.1.2 Hegemony.....	29
3.1.3 Isan as Subaltern	31

3.1.4	Achieving Gramscian Catharsis.....	33
3.1.5	Consequences and Implications of Power on Research.....	38
3.2	Permission.....	39
3.2.1	Permission and the Khaen.....	39
3.2.2	Finding Permission in Scholarly Sources	41
3.3	Permission and Analysis.....	45
3.3.1	Additions from Agawu and Adorno	50
3.3.2	The Exchange of Permission	52
3.4	Charting a Course of Action	55
Chapter 4: Performance.....		56
4.1	My Khaen.....	56
4.2	Learning by Book	59
4.3	Learning by Ear.....	61
4.4	Online Engagement.....	62
4.4.1	Another Western Voice.....	62
4.4.2	Watch and Learn: A Western Perspective	63
4.5	The Ethics of Performance.....	71
4.6	Learning by Heart	76
Chapter 5: Conclusion.....		79
Bibliography		81

List of Figures

Figure 1: Map of Thailand with Isan shaded in dark red (Markalexander100).....	10
Figure 2: Pitches of the lai yai mode.	59
Figure 3: First four pitches of Olsen's rendition of the lai yai pattern.	66
Figure 4: First five pitches of Olsen's rendition of the lai yai pattern.	67
Figure 5: Olsen's rendition of lai yai without any grouping.....	68
Figure 6: Olsen's rendition of lai yai with grouping marked according to the line breaks in the text that accompanies the video.	68
Figure 7: Olsen's rendition of lai yai with grouping marked according to what he identifies as a transition.	68
Figure 8: Olsen's rendition of lai yai transcribed in 4/4 time.	69
Figure 9: Olsen's rendition of lai yai transcribed in 6/8 time.	69
Figure 10: <i>Lai yai</i> transcribed in triplets within a 4/4 meter.....	70

Acknowledgements

I am immensely grateful to have so many wonderful people to look up to. Dr. Hesselink, Dr. Tenzer, and Dr. Gbolonyo, thank you for strengthening my love of music by encouraging curiosity, hard work, and kindness in equal measures. Don Tan, thank you for welcoming me with open arms, for teaching me, and for making me feel at home. Matthew, thank you for being there for me, no matter where I am. Mum and Dad, thank you for always telling me to do what makes me happiest. Finally, thank you to everyone in the ethnomusicology program for your support.

For my ever-supportive parents.

Chapter 1: Introduction

The cool shade embraced her as she walked into the forest. Beneath her feet the dirt path broadened into rich soil out of which life grew. Here, flowers burst forth from the ground and out of lush shrubs, perfuming the air. She admired them, relaxing into the stillness of the humid, green grove. The noises of everyday life were replaced by the gentler sounds of the forest. If she listened closely she could hear the drone of bugs as they flew from bloom to bloom, the soft footsteps of animals who preferred to remain unseen, the rustling of leaves and vines, and the flapping of a bird's wings overhead. With her face upturned to the sky, she listened as the garawek bird sang. Its melody was sublime, expressing joy and mournfulness in equal parts. The bird continued and she wished she could listen forever. But, she knew she could not stay in the forest, for not all who dwelled under its green canopy were as friendly or tranquil as the flowers or the insects. As soon as the bird had finished its beautiful song, the woman yearned to listen to it again and again but she knew that would not be possible either.

She started to walk home, wondering how she could live happily without the garawek bird's melody. By the time she reached her house she had arrived at a solution to her quandary. She would learn the song, thereby ensuring that she would be able to hear it whenever she wanted to. The woman remembered how it went so she sang it to herself. Although what she sang was technically correct in the notes and rhythms, it lacked a certain something. She was not ready to give up. Rather, she went back outside where she wondered what she could use to build an instrument. She cut lengths of bamboo and strong pieces of grass, then fit them together with a hollowed-out piece of wood. When she breathed out into her new instrument it sounded just like the garawek bird, like a being who had not just the capacity for conflicting emotions, but

who had lived with joy and heartbreak simultaneously. Satisfied with her invention, she decided that she would bring it to share with the royal court the next day.

After a sound sleep she gathered her things and set out for the palace. When she arrived she explained that she had found a way to replicate the garawek bird's amazing song. Once the attendants relayed that information to the king he gave the woman and her instrument an immediate audience. The woman began to play in spite of her nervousness and the king listened with rapt attention. Her version of the bird's song filled the room and all who heard were transfixed by its beauty. She finished playing and the king gestured for her to come closer. Once she was near enough, he suggested an improvement. With his subtle refinement in mind, she began to play for a second time. This time the resemblance was uncanny. Her performance captured everything the garawek bird's song conveyed. With each passing phrase, her audience was more and more moved. When she was finished, she put her instrument down slowly, waiting for the king's commentary. After a long pause he exclaimed, "It is much better!" And that is how the khaen came to be.¹

Today the khaen² (แคน, also transliterated as *khène*), a bamboo mouth organ, and the music it plays, are icons of Isan culture.³ The instrument's reedy timbre, lilting melodies, and

¹ The myth as it appears here is a retelling of the version that appears in Terry Miller's book *Traditional Music of the Lao: Kaen Playing and Mawlum Singing in Northeast Thailand*. The liner notes from *Laos: Molams et Mokhènes: Chant et orgue à bouche* by Véronique de Lavenère include three other myths that also include birds, an element of the magical or divine, an imitative process, and royal approval. In my reading of myths, I have interpreted that the garawek bird is a mythological figure, not a real kind of bird.

² The khaen (แคน) that I play is made from 16 bamboo tubes with metal free reeds inside that are joined with a wooden windchest. It is commonly played in Laos and Thailand as part of traditional performances, ritual ceremonies, and popular music.

³ Isan is the northeastern region of Thailand; if you imagine the country as shaped like the letter "P," Isan would be the round part that sticks out.

rich chords complement its strong ties to the natural environment of the region in which it is played and the complex historical, geopolitical, and social forces that have shaped the identities of those who play it. Similarly, the actions of the mythical protagonist carry forward into the present day. Not only does the narrative arc of the myth resemble prototypical ethnographic accounts in the way it documents a period of separation in which knowledge is obtained and the protagonist's synthesis of new ideas into everyday life, as demonstrated masterfully in *Sounding the Center: History and Aesthetics in Thai Buddhist Performance* (Wong: 2001), *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language Among the Western Apache* (Basso: 1996), *One River* (Davis: 1997), and *Sound and Sentiment: Weeping, Poetics, and Song in Kaluli Expression* (Feld: 2012), but many of the qualities the woman exhibits resemble professional skills and personal qualities that ethnomusicologists try to cultivate.

When this mythical woman walks out of her everyday realm and into the forest, she is expanding her experience to include something outside the bounds of her usual existence. While fieldwork does not necessitate a geographic relocation, it requires the ability to step from perspective to perspective, to act as a conduit for information to pass between two or more ways of being in the world. As an ethnomusicologist this can mean taking academic skills, theories, and hypotheses out into the world at large to apply and test, or bringing such elements into a more scholarly setting.

Note that when she is in the forest, she is not trying to sing one of her songs or perform any of her usual human actions. She simply listens. In this setting, her role is to be receptive to the beauty of the offerings of the natural world, and it is in this state that she is able to hear the magical song of the garawek bird. She does not compare or evaluate, but listens closely enough that she is able to gain a high level of understanding, as she demonstrates by being able to

replicate the song perfectly later on. Being able to replicate the song is important to her because she recognizes that she cannot stay in the forest and listen forever. She knows that even though she can spend time there, her home is elsewhere. Neither the forest nor the garawek bird are under her command; she cannot transform the forest into a hospitable place for herself, nor can she instruct the garawek bird to sing over and over again. Anyone engaged in fieldwork must come to terms with this lack of control in order to recognize and preserve the autonomy of others while retaining a sense of self.

When she returns home, the woman wants to find a way to merge her new knowledge into her daily life. Motivated by beauty, she diligently works to create a solution. It is as if by combining her imagination and experience with the materials she has around her an alchemical transformation takes place, with the result being an instrument that can be played as beautifully as this mythical being can sing. After this process of replication through imitation, it makes sense that the woman wants to share her findings. I would suggest that it is not pride that drives her to seek an audience, but a desire to share the experience she had listening to the garawek bird: one of transformational beauty. Then, when the king offers his opinion it is a form of editing. With his expertise she can refine the musical experience to be more true to its original form, and thus more powerful. In an ethnographic narrative, scholars put their ideas forward for constructive critique to better their final product. The resultant work makes use of input from expert voices, whether found in the library, the classroom, or in the “field.”⁴

⁴ Human-bird interaction through mythology is explained beautifully in Steven Feld’s seminal text, *Sound and Sentiment: Birds, Weeping, Poetics, and Song in Kaluli Expression* (2012). It is also interesting that other mouth organs from Asia share a link to birds. The Japanese *shō* is said to imitate the call of another magical bird, the phoenix.

The narrative of the origin myth and the story of how I came to the khaen can be condensed into a few simple sentences each:

1) *A woman leaves home for an unfamiliar destination.* I went to Thailand in April of 2015, employed through a non-profit organization to teach English as a Second Language at a large rural high school near the city of Mukdahan in the Isan region.

2) *Upon arrival there she is mesmerized by the beauty of her surroundings, so she watches and listens as much as she can.* For three months, I participated fully in the school community, which gave me the opportunity to play music with my coworkers.

3) *When it becomes clear that she cannot stay, she is upset because she knows that what she loves about this new place cannot be photographed, that recordings will not do it justice, and that what she wants cannot be bought at the market or a souvenir shop (it wouldn't fit into a suitcase anyways).* I was supposed to stay for a full year, but had to return to Canada in July of 2015 because my employers could not complete the necessary paperwork for my visa extension in time.

4) *Back home she works to forge a connection to this past experience through the process of replication through imitation in order to share this special thing with others.* Since I did not have the opportunity to learn to play the khaen while I was in Thailand, I took matters into my own hands, using a variety of online sources to acquire not just an instrument, but the practical skills I needed. In combination with the cultural information gained through informal fieldwork, the khaen is not simply a musical instrument, but an essential tool for exploring Isan culture more deeply.

Now, when I sit in my living room and play the khaen, I can feel a frisson of connection to these parallel streams of musical and cultural knowledge. The labels on the pipes remind me

of my neighbour teaching me how to write my name, the tan colour of the instrument is a touchstone back to the dry heat, and when I breathe into the instrument and taste and smell the air, it is like I am right there again. The smoky sweetness that scented my mornings when women were cooking, or my evenings when I would bicycle past smoldering fields, is what the music my khaen plays is made from.

In addition to this more personal type of connection, the instrument and the act of playing it connect to a broader context than just me, alone in my Vancouver apartment. The khaen for me became a jumping-off point to examine how ideas of place, power and permission, and performance inform an understanding of the instrument and interact with each other in a part of the world where little has been studied, documented, or analyzed. I begin in the second chapter by exploring the geographical and historical information needed to explain the formation of Isan as a region and as an identity. I then shift to a more ethnographic focus to consider Isan as a region with a specific ethnic and cultural identity, and how this is reflected in the khaen as a material object strongly associated with this place and cultural emblem.

Next, instead of a prescriptive/descriptive method that attempts to outline the potential procedures of participant-observation, the third chapter is devoted to explaining the necessity of permission amidst differences of power and how permission can be given or found through personal experience or in specific sources. This will provide a sense of the thought processes that led to my decision to play the khaen, not just write about it. The fourth chapter explains how the internet has facilitated my learning process, all the way from discovering the instrument to having one in my hands, as well as a discussion of modern khaen performance in Thailand and abroad.

By examining the khaen through these three lenses — place, power/permission, and performance — its musical and social significance becomes more apparent and more powerful. At this stage, my goal is to share the beauty of this musical tradition from the context of contemporary Thailand in order add to the Western academic world's understanding. It is also my desire that such research will be built upon and extended by others.

Chapter 2: Place

When my coworker saw the drawstring cloth bag over my shoulder she exclaimed, “You play khaen?! Take it out, I need to take a picture to send to my mom!” I protested, “But I can only play a scale.” She reassured me, “No problem — it is very good for you to learn an Isan instrument.” At the market, when I requested my *somtām*⁵ to be made “Isan style,” the ladies smiled and their grins widened when I took a bite and complimented the dish in the Isan dialect. It did not matter that those words were my only Isan words; the important part was that I used them.

What does it mean to be Isan? What does the descriptor demarcate, and how is it applied to create a specific place-based identity? This chapter will provide historical and geographical context to explain how the term came into usage, and how Isan identity carries positive and negative connotations in contemporary Thailand. This provides a basis for further remarks on the khaen as an emblem of Isan identity, as well as for comparison to my online experience.

2.1 Isan as a Physical Place

Northeast Thailand, the Isan region, is the agricultural centre of the country. On the banks of the Mekong, crowing chickens and tinny cowbells break the dawn in small villages and towns. Farm equipment fills mechanic shops and the trucks that pass on the highway are loaded with livestock. Women wake up early to steam baskets of sticky rice that will be eaten at every meal of the day and children help with farm work before school. Rice paddies stretch to the horizon.

⁵ A savoury salad made from green papaya pounded in a mortar and pestle and dressed with fish sauce, garlic, lime, chilies, sugar, MSG, and peanuts. If it is made Lao-style, it is more salty and sour, but the primary difference is the use of a more pungent fish sauce.

Fifty years ago, those children would have travelled to school in an ox cart, but now they ride motor scooters. Rice cultivation, a major source of livelihood, has shifted from subsistence farming to a commercialized industry, which has dramatically changed the physical and economic landscape in the Lower Mekong Basin. People here enjoy the economic benefits of tourism, the convenience of plastic utensils, and the connectivity of smart phones, but poverty abounds.

The Isan region spans the Khorat Plateau, separated from the rest of Thailand by the Petchabun, Dong Phrayayen, and Samkampaeng mountain ranges, and from Cambodia by the Phanom Dong Rak range. On maps, it lies between latitudes 14° to 18° north and longitudes 101° to 105° east. The gently rolling fields, scrubby forests, and dusty villages are drained by the Mekong River and its tributaries. The mountains that separate it from elsewhere create a rain shadow over the plateau, making it the driest part of the country. Isan is the largest region in Thailand, covering 20 provinces that make up about one third of the total land area of the Kingdom (Keyes 1967: 1-2; see Figure 1).

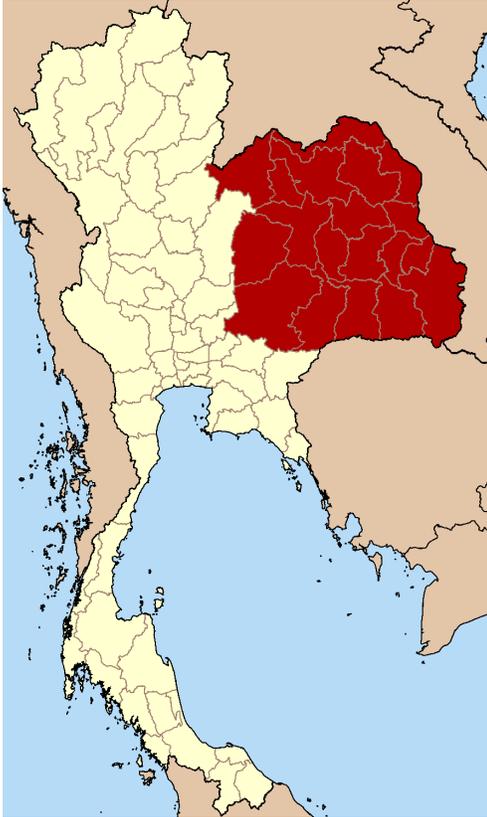


Figure 1: Map of Thailand with Isan shaded in dark red (Markalexander100).

2.2 Isan Over Time

The kingdoms of Lan Chang and Ayutthaya vied for control over the region from the mid-fourteenth century until the French colonization of Laos at the end of the nineteenth century. For the most part, Lao interest in the Isan region was limited to the fertile banks of the Mekong River, in the present-day Thai provinces of Loei, Nongkhai, Nakhon Phanom, and Mukdahan. The Lao kingdom of Lan Chang established only one important cultural-political centre in the region, That Phanom, which today is the site of a temple constructed during this period of Lao rule that is said to contain the Buddha's breast bone (Keyes 1967: 7). Lan Chang's dominance would not last – by the end of the sixteenth century, war with the Burmese brought about a shift

in the power dynamic between Lan Chang and Ayutthaya, with Ayutthaya coming out stronger (Ibid.: 9). Lan Chang splintered into anarchy while Siamese expansion into the northeast intensified. It was not until after Ayutthaya fragmented into smaller parts due to another war with the Burmese that the Lao Kingdoms of Luang Prabang, Vientiane, and Champasak regained control over the land along the Mekong.

Even though Ayutthaya did not extend its control past Khorat at the time, a holy man named Bun Khwang spearheaded a peasant revolt in Khorat at the end of the seventeenth century. With four thousand men, a hundred horses, and almost as many elephants, he tried to liberate the region from Siamese rule. He marched towards the capital, but was captured and killed a mere 60 kilometers away (Myers 2005: 28).

After the Burmese sacked Ayutthaya in 1767, King Taksin knit together the fragments of the kingdom and established a capital at Thonburi, across the Chao Phraya River from present-day Bangkok (Myers 2005: 28). From there, he expanded the borders of the kingdom, annexing Battambang and Siam Reap and securing the Kingdom of Lanna in the North. His successor, known as Rama I, ascended to the throne as King of Siam, and moved the palace to its present day location on the other side of the river (Ibid.: 29). At the end of the 18th century, provinces beyond Khorat (Nakhon Ratchasima) accepted an increase in Central Thai control. In exchange for tribute and manpower, local rulers were promised security and protection and ranked as governors (Ibid.).

During the reign of Rama III, Cao Anu, the vassal king of the Lao Kingdom of Vientiane from 1804 until 1827, threw the region into chaos in a curiously similar fashion to Bun Khwang. In 1827, during the reign of King Rama III, Cao Anu moved his troops toward Bangkok. His son joined the offensive at Champasak, and their combined forces made it as far as Saraburi, just

over 100 km from Bangkok (Myers 2005: 29). The fighting lasted for one and a half years, during which locals in the Khorat Plateau were conscripted or forced to supply troops with food (Keyes 1967: 10). When the Lao were finally defeated, King Rama III ordered the destruction of Vientiane and the public humiliation of the treacherous Cao Anu and his family (Ibid.: 11).

2.3 Thai-ification

The Central Thai governance of Isan began by establishing semi-feudal principalities known as *hua muang* under the rule of King Taksin (1767-82). King Culalongkorn (Rama V) fully unified this system of governance with the Monthon system, which entailed amalgamating the *hua muang* into *amphoe*, or districts. It was during this time that when local rulers ended their term, they were replaced by Central Thai-appointed governors (Keyes 1967: 14-16). To complicate things further, what began as a messianic movement in French Laos in 1901 turned into a series of uprisings in Northeastern Thailand (Myers 2005:30). While prophecies that gravel would turn into gold and that gold would transform into gravel circulated through the region, locals rebelled against the new administrative system, not just because of corrupt officials, but because they believed the centralization would deprive them of their livelihoods (Ibid.). Rebels attacked government officials, but their aggression was quelled with immediate reprisals (Ibid.). Uprisings continued into the twentieth century in 1924, 1936, and 1959, but they were not large enough or widespread enough to cause the government serious concern.

A railway between Bangkok and Khorat was built in 1900 and two major telegraph lines were installed in 1907, but more than any technological development, the reformed and centralized education system brought Isan residents ideologically closer to Bangkok (Keyes 1967: 18-19). The educational reform had lofty goals, many of which it failed to reach, but it

brought “traditionally isolated people into a Thai frame of reference” by replacing monks with secular teachers who taught Thai history, geography, and language from a Central Thai perspective (Ibid.: 20). Language was a major force in the Thai-ification of the region, as the 1871 Primary School Act and subsequent reforms demanded that schools abandon the Isan language (and other languages of instruction present in the region) in its written and spoken forms in favour of Thai.

2.4 Colonization Period

Though Thailand was never colonized, the colonial presence in Southeast Asia affected the nation. The Chakri dynasty of Bangkok was stable and effective, partially due to the effects of colonization in Southeast Asia. A major contributing factor to this sense of stability came from the neutralization of any threats posed by the Burmese through British colonization, though that did prevent Thai expansion to the south and west. It was in the Northeast that the Thai suffered the most territorial loss, as the French colonization of the newly-formed Laos prevented any expansion to the east and north. In a series of concessions made under the Franco-Siamese treaty of 1893, Thailand ceded its territory in present-day Cambodia and Vietnam, and then, under the threat of military action, Thailand ceded all Lao areas on the west bank of the Mekong River, and finally Sayaburi and Champasak in 1904 (Keyes 1967: 17).

2.5 Isan in Literature

Nobel Prize nominee in literature, Pira Sudham, is known for his books written in English that depict Isan life. His writing is semi-autobiographical, drawing on his experience as an impoverished child living in a small village who is able to elevate his position through

educational opportunities that came through Buddhist monkhood that changed his relationship to modern Thailand. Such a perspective reflects his personality as an Isan person and a Western-educated man.

Sudham writes of the Isan landscape with a sense of love and respect, for it is a powerful force that shapes the lives of his characters. The men and women of his books spend days and weeks waiting for the dramatic rainfalls that will nourish their crops in depleted soil. But in his depictions of the landscape as inhospitable, he offers a counter-image that reveals beauty:

April is the year's hottest month. The marshes dry up. Water in the remaining waterholes becomes brackish. Herds of water buffaloes roam far afield for food and water. Their skins assume the colour of the burnt and dusty country. The landscape is that of an endless flat, desolate plateau broken only by clumps of trees.... Normally, the monsoon season starts around May when the heat of summer lessens and the moisture returns to the air and cumulus clouds appear in the skies. Rain begins to soften the sun-backed soil and blades of grass paint the landscape green. (Sudham 1983: 8-9)

The prominent role of belief in everyday life is present in the short story "Rains" in which a young boy observes a ritual intended to alleviate drought. The child does not want the onus of responsibility to fall entirely on the elders of the village, so he offers himself. At the end of the story, the young boy has prayed to the spirits and, having yet to reach his objective, he offers his blood as an offering to the earth (Sudham 1983: 15-22). Readers are left hanging, unsure if he lives or dies. This reinforces the depiction of the Isan landscape as brutal and depleted, but also sheds light on a sense of environmental desperation present in the populace.

Sudham's characters are rooted to their home, either clinging to their disappearing traditional way of life or returning from the city to their village home, in spite of the challenges they will face there. Such hardships are many and severe, as outlined in the short story "A Food Vendor and a Taxi Driver" (Sudham 1988: 40-72). Belief, whether animist or Buddhist, governs

characters' actions, which are geared towards survival. Because of his background, Sudham gives ample attention to the power and influence of the monkhood. At the end of the novel *Monsoon Country*, the protagonist has returned to his home village after studying abroad to repay the generosity of the teacher and monks who enabled him to pursue his goals by becoming a teacher. He becomes a monk, and in doing so brings great honour not only to his former teachers, but to his family. As the abbot says to the protagonist, "You have blessed your parents with great happiness by becoming a monk. It is one of the highest acts of gratitude towards the parents who share the merits gained from your ordination" (Sudham 1988: 231).

For the characters who are farmers, mothers, or prostitutes, a lack of education impacts their lives negatively. Illiterate mothers are unable to read and write letters to their faraway sons. Less educated siblings live under a shadow of self-doubt, and try to prove their worth by overextending their vocabulary in writing to their foreign-educated brother. Fathers who toil without complaint are forced into bad deals when they sell their crops. Sudham's stories illustrate the role of the education system in eradicating the Isan language from use outside the home and informal interactions. Characters are portrayed as ashamed of their poor command of the Thai language, unwilling to converse with some others in Lao (Isan), and as being forced to use Thai in a school setting.

These three issues — belief, sense of place, and education — relate to the broader themes of modernity and development. Sudham's characters are autonomous, yet tied to tradition and place in a way that could confound modern Western readers as they read of characters who return to rural poverty or who do not stand up to oppressive or corrupt governance. In the excerpt below, an elderly farmer laments how his children have rejected a traditional lifestyle in favour of modernity:

I wanted to have a lot of children and grandchildren around me but now cities and foreign lands have attracted my children away from me and it seems that none of them will ever come back to live here again. Who shall I give these paddy fields to when I die? For hundreds of years this strip of land has belonged to our family. I know every fissure and every mound on it. My children grew up on it, catching frogs and mud crabs and gathering weed flowers. Still the land could not tie them down or call them back. When each of them has a pair of jeans, they are off like birds on wings. What has happened to them I don't know, but they must think that what is ahead of them is better than getting bogged down in the poverty of our land. (Sudham 1988: 38)

From the vantage point of my experience in the region, Pira Sudham's literary depiction of Isan captures the dualities Isan residents grapple with. Life is hard if they stay and seek a meagre living from the land, but if they seek their fortune elsewhere, they are not at home. The strongest ties are to place, family, and belief, but those are being weakened by modernization and development as those forces bring the prospect of a better life, through education or mechanization, but show people what they have been missing. These texts corroborate the primacy of place in Isan life and demonstrate how Isan people are perceived as Other (and feel themselves to be Other) within the context of the modern Thai nation state.

2.6 Isan Today

Movement from Isan to Bangkok is also a move from the old to the new, and vice versa. For economic reasons, men and women have left the Northeast to work in industrial, construction, or service sectors in Bangkok for decades. In Sudham's fictionalized accounts, they work as taxi drivers or food stand cooks. They send money home to supplement their family's farming income and return home for a few weeks a year to work during rice-planting and harvesting, and during major holidays, like Songkran. McCargo sees how seasonal residence

patterns, minority status, and low earning power add to the “self-image of Isan people as marginalised and disadvantaged group which has missed out on the benefits of Thailand’s remarkable economic growth since the early 1960s” (McCargo 2004: 221). Movement and migration patterns are present on a larger level, as women from Isan who marry foreign spouses often send money home, and return for long periods of time, often around major Thai holidays. While mobility between Isan and Bangkok has increased, cross-border movement between Laos and Isan is more restricted. Though there are border crossings for Thai and Lao nationals in addition to the bridges between the two countries that other nationalities can use, when I was living in Mukdahan Province, market vendors commented that their Lao counterparts were no longer able to cross at the checkpoint nearest to the town. As such, they were no longer coming to this market because the cost of crossing farther away cut into their profits too much.

Tension between old and new plays out in the political arena as well. In the 2010 protests, redshirt protestors who supported Thaksin Shinawatra, the Prime Minister of Thailand between 2001 and 2006, were portrayed as subsistence-level farmers, perhaps in conflation with the Assembly of the Poor demonstrations in the 1990s (Thabchumpon and McCargo 2011: 1013). The redshirt protestors were in their forties and fifties, with almost a third having finished high school or vocational college; though they were not rich, almost half (42%) had monthly incomes of over 10,000 baht (Ibid.: 1002).⁶ As members of the modern Thai nation, they drove pickup trucks and owned cell phones. They were not all from peripheral provinces, either; many of the redshirt protestors in Bangkok were migrant workers who spent most of the year in the capital (Ibid.).

⁶ 10,000 baht is approximately \$360 Canadian dollars at the time of writing.

The redshirt protestors were incorrectly identified as poor farmers from Isan, when in fact they occupy a different stratum of society. Protestors used the term *prai* (literally, slave or serf) to describe themselves, but Naruemon Thabchumpon and Duncan McCargo explain that their usage was a criticism of the inequalities of social class and political power, not economic status. Their informants said that *prai* referred to “grassroots people, farmers, the lower middle class, low ranking government officers, secondary and middle school graduates, sticky-rice eaters, small-traders, semi-skilled self-employed workers, people selling food from their pickup trucks, or traders selling fresh goods at weekend markets” (Thabchumpon and McCargo 2011: 1006). They do not see themselves as marginalized: “...their lives were not marginal: they had access to irrigation, roads, and electricity. They were not rich, just poorer than the yellowshirts” (Ibid.). That is to say, they might have been from the geographical periphery of the country, but they were not necessarily economically marginalized.

The redshirts stand with their feet in two worlds: one of rural agriculture, the other more urbanized and market oriented. Their attitude towards development was largely practical, different from the yellowshirts, who supported the royalty and bureaucratically promoted idea of a “sufficiency economy” and nationalist ideas about rediscovering and preserving “Thai-ness.” The redshirts were not interested in nongovernmental organizations’ ideas of returning to a “pre-consumerist, non-monetary lifestyle” (Thabchumpon and McCargo 2011: 1005). As one informant said, “One reason I come to protest its that the villagers are now using pickups [i.e. trucks]; we are not going back to riding motorbikes” (Ibid.). Modernity beckons in the form of economic benefits, and this segment of society wants to be able to participate fully. The protestors were optimistic: they remembered the social changes that electricity and television had brought in their youth and saw the potential for similar positive changes in their children’s

lifetime (Ibid.: 1002-3).

2.7 Isan-ness

With a sense of the political and geographical forces that shaped the region in question, it is more possible to define what makes something or someone Isan. Even as early as when Keyes was writing *Isan: Regionalism in Northeast Thailand* the term was being used to describe a distinct ethnoregional identity. He writes: “Northeasterners have been known to speak of themselves as being *khon isan* or *phu isan* (‘Isan people’) as using *phasa isan* (lit., Isan language) and as living in *phak isan* (‘Isan region’). The increasing usage of ‘Isan’ by Northeasterners bespeaks their growing sense of regional/ethnic identity” (Keyes 1967: 3).

If it is that straightforward and is merely a question of ethnicity, language, and place of residence, why do I suggest that the term is more complicated than it seems? As I will explain in this section, Isan is a coded way of self-identifying to avoid the negative implications of Lao culture. As a term, Isan has managed to grow and perpetuate two meanings: first, a put down that emphasizes one’s naiveté, poverty, rural roots, and overall backwardness; and second, a way to stand in solidarity with the working class people of a region who comprise a sizeable share of the population. This is partially the product of the shared history of the space I discussed earlier, but also due to the active process of Thai-ification.

In its most neutral form, Isan is a word of Pali-Sanskrit origin to describe location that means “Northeast.” But as Keyes notes, Isan is used to describe both the Northeast region and its inhabitants, unlike any other region of Thailand, which have separate terms for places and people (1967: 3). Nonetheless, it is a useful and accurate name for a place.

The Isan language is a “conceived variety” of Lao “associated with those who are

geographically and politically defined as Isan people,” but the actual differences between the Lao, Isan, and Thai languages are slim, and made even slimmer by the fact that there is no standardized version of Lao and no standardized version of Isan (McCargo and Hongladarom 2004: 224). Instead, Lao and Thai can be thought of as points along a linguistic continuum, on which Isan occupies a space between the two languages (Ibid.). Language as an expression of culture and heritage is an important topic, as it was used by the Thai state to superimpose Central Thai culture and ideals over the region while homogenizing the area. Isan people used Tai Noi script in schools and temples, until the 1871 Primary School Act, and subsequent monastic reforms in 1898 demanded a change to the standardized Thai script (Draper 2013: 17-18). Tai Noi script is being maintained and revitalized by a dedicated few; it is similar to Lao script, though without tone markers, but only somewhat comprehensible to modern Thai readers (Ibid.: 17).-

There is flexibility in the way the term is used to describe people. Theoretically, Isan can be used inclusively, encompassing anyone who is a resident in the region, regardless of their ethnicity or preferred language. More typically, it is used to describe the majority of the populace of the region, who self-identify as ethnically Lao, speak a version of Lao, and are Thai citizens (McCargo and Hongladarom 2004: 219). Duncan McCargo and Krisadawan Hongladarom assert that “[describing] yourself as an Isan person [is] a means of obfuscating the real choice between being Lao and being Thai, of giving priority to your ethnicity and heritage, or giving priority to your legal nationality and citizenship” (2004: 228). He continues, stating that people who live in the Northeast would not be able to invoke the identity of Isan to explain their identity to people in Laos. I am doubtful of this, for he does not provide a compelling case to explain how these hypothetical Lao citizens would completely ignore the aspects of Thai culture that come with

being a citizen of modern Thailand. Thus, it is more accurate to say that to be Isan is to be neither Thai nor Lao, but both.

Used in this way, the term is an ethnoregional identity that recognizes that the differences between Central Thai people and Isan people are not just a question of geographic distance. Isan is the geographically largest as well as the most populous region in the country, but it is also the poorest. Policies imposed by Bangkok-based leadership have prioritized Central Thailand's interests over Isan's, despite the fact that Isan retains parliamentary representation proportional to its geographic size and population and that Bangkok relies on migratory workers from Isan. Moreover, negative stereotypes about Isan people prevail. Not only are Isan people portrayed in Thai comedies as the butt of the joke, but the Isan language is not perceived to be as beautiful or educated-sounding when compared to Standard or Northern Thai (Draper 2013: 15).

How can the term be used positively? Can the meaning of Isan be turned around and used to celebrate that which it represents? McCargo and Hongladarom state that the Thai state's version of Isan is a "sanitised ethnoregional identity firmly subordinated to Thai-ness" that appeals to younger, more educated youth in the Northeast (2004: 223). When it is used in this way, it is often part of the hyphenated designation, "Thai-Isan." These designations might not sting as much, but they are not quite embracing the distinctness of the term. However, more politicized use recognizes the ethnic, cultural, and historical differences between the region and Bangkok, as well as the struggle of the underprivileged (Ibid.: 222).

To summarize, the term Isan designates a specific geographic area in addition to describing people of Lao ethnicity, culture, and heritage who speak a version of Lao and maintain Thai nationality and citizenship. When someone self-identifies as Isan it can be considered "insider" usage, and can be a coded way of identifying with a marginalized group, or

a way of resisting being subsumed into the Thai majority. If someone from outside the group uses the description it has a range of negative meanings. It could be used as a means of control, by derogating Lao and minority identities present within the region; a catch-all term meant to homogenize a large group; shorthand for rural poverty, hardship, and naiveté; or as a device of oppression or Othering. I would suggest that as the term is used more, its definition will solidify, rather than continuing to splinter into opposing meanings.

2.8 The Khaen as an Isan Object

In its mythological inception, construction, function, and reception, the khaen is a thoroughly Isan object. Furthermore, I would suggest that the instrument's close ties to the environment can be likened to the Isan people's strong attachment to their geographic home that persists in spite of unfavourable growing conditions, patterns of economic migration, and the negative connotations of being Isan.

The instrument's creation is explained through different myths that share common themes. Bird song and the natural world figure largely in many, with the khaen meant to imitate a birdcall the inventor heard while he or she was in an idyllic landscape. The restorative properties of the instrument are mentioned in some stories where just hearing the instrument is enough to cure listeners of fatigue. Finally, approval from a monarch or divine being is the final stage of all the narratives (de Lavenère 2009: 21-32).

Just as the comparison between the mythological protagonist can be carried into the present day, these themes can be found in Isan culture today. The tweets, trills, and twitters of birds are prominent sonic cues that suit the pastoral landscape of the region. In fact, it was not the traffic on the highway or my neighbours' radios that woke me up in the morning, but rather

the chickens or other pet birds in the neighbourhood. Residents of Bangkok may look down on Isan people, but city occupants idealize the soundscape of rural life for its peace and quiet, for it is still possible to stand quietly there and hear the wind blow through trees, raindrops falling on the river, or the flap of wings overhead (Tausig 2013: 154).

Veronique de Lavenère's liner notes for *Laos: Molams et Mokhènes: Chant et orgue à bouche* (2009) include myths in which the khaen is used to restore a tired or ill person back to health. Today, the khaen acts as a conduit between the human world and the spirit real in the *phi faa* ceremonies that continue to be conducted in which music is used as a cure (Miller 1985: 63-70 and Yaowapan 2014: 256).

Finally, the hierarchy of respect that governs regular interaction matches the way approval is sought from a monarch or divine figure in the myth. In everyday encounters deference is expressed physically through the *wai* gesture and lowering of the body, as well as linguistically in the addition of the particle *krap* and *ka* to the ends of sentences.⁷ The majority of the population of Thailand is Buddhist, thus respect is given to monks through many of the same actions: by lowering oneself even in passing, or by performing the *wai* with the hands held higher. At the national level, Thailand is a constitutional monarchy in which a *lèse-majesté* law ensures residents and visitors maintain a level of respect for the royal family and elected officials. When the national anthem is played, people stand; when people are sitting they do not direct their feet towards an image of the King; if someone drops money, they do not step on it, because that would be stepping on an image of the King. It is in these practices — the

⁷ The *wai* is a greeting gesture that combines a slight bow with the raising of the hands with palms together. The lower the bow and the higher the hands are held in front of the face, the more respect is being shown.

romanticized position of the rural landscape, the ceremonial use of the restorative properties of music, and the praxis of respect in everyday life — that the themes from the khaen’s origin myths are present today.

In its materiality, the instrument is a product of the place it comes from. The khaen is constructed mostly from natural materials found in the Isan environment. Sixteen bamboo tubes are fitted through a hardwood reservoir that the musician blows into. The reeds inside the tubes are pieces of flattened metal alloy and the sticky substance used for sealing the pipes in place, *kisoot*, is a waste product from a local insect (Miller 1985: 197). Thus, with little modification, the commonplace natural components are transformed into a popular instrument.

2.9 The Khaen in Musical Context

Today the khaen has a place in traditional and popular musical genres. It is used in ceremonies to engage with the spirit world, accompanies *molam*⁸ and *lam sing*,⁹ and can be heard in *luk thung*.¹⁰ Even when the instrument is not physically present, its sound is imitated with keyboard settings in popular music.

Beyond its immediate musical function, the khaen signals Isan-ness by prompting the embodied sensory memory of a place (Chapman 2006: 6). Though Adam Chapman is writing

⁸ *Molam* literally refers to a traditional Isan or Lao singer, but it commonly refers to a genre of music in which a performer sings works from a corpus of traditional writing accompanied by a khaen player, and possibly more instrumentalists. The text might refer to love, general knowledge, or religious information, or a combination of all three of these subjects. There are more specialized sub-genres of *molam*.

⁹ A modernized version of *molam* that uses the staging and instrumentation of Western rock and roll.

¹⁰ A genre from Isan developed in the twentieth century that combines texts about a rural lifestyle, Western instruments, and local musical styles.

about the Lao diaspora in Australia, I would suggest that the khaen holds just as much meaning for Isan people, whether they live in Isan, in Bangkok, or abroad. The instrument's sound is as distinctive as the fermented fish sauce or intricately woven textiles of the region, and is just as strong of a connection to Isan as a place. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Isan people may move elsewhere in search of better paying work or in pursuit of education, but they maintain a connection to their home by returning regularly during holidays (when possible) to help with the planting and harvesting of rice. Now, with the rising popularity of *lam sing* and *luk thung*, it is increasingly possible for Isan people to listen to music from their home even when they are away and foster a cultural connection. Benjamin Tausig writes of a musician, Pom Krongthong, who in one of her performances during the 2011 protests sang that the khaen “connoted the ‘heaven’ of rural Isan,” which I interpret as a powerful statement of the instrument's ability to transmit the sentiments of place and significance (2013: 87-88).

Isan music genres like *luk thung* and *lam sing* have gained popularity outside the region, Isan language is experiencing a revival, and the silk textiles produced in the region are available for tourists to buy; nevertheless, being perceived as Lao is still a bad thing. Catherine Hesse-Swain provides evidence in her article “Programming beauty and the absence of ‘Na Lao’: popular Thai TV and identity formation among youth in Northeast Thailand” by explaining that even though the surface level celebration of Lao culture, particularly of food and literature, preserves cultural integrity (2006: 260) and that Isan people successfully code-switch between Thai and Lao or Isan identity, a Lao appearance is at odds with Central Thai standards of beauty as reinforced by the mass media (Ibid.: 266). The “international look” that is thought to be beautiful is paler than the usual Lao or Isan complexion; it is not necessarily derived from

Western imperialism or globalization, but from pale skin and refined features being markers of aristocratic heritage (Ibid.: 267).

If markers of Lao-ness, and therefore of Isan-ness, can be so easily perceived as negative attributes, how does that impact music that includes the khaen? Terry Miller's article "From Country Hick to Rural Hip: A New Identity through Music for Northeast Thailand" paints a rosy picture of how Isan cultural products are gaining traction all over the country. He is referring to the genres *luk thung* and *lam sing* when he writes, "With the exception of Bangkok, where most modern entertainments naturally begin, the rest of Thailand could mount no response as effective as that of Isan, resulting in the latter's music and theatre coming to be seen as the 'coolest in the kingdom'" (Miller 2006: 97). Later, he uses the mass availability of Isan food in higher status locations like malls, sit down restaurants, and McDonalds to prove that attitudes have changed towards Isan culture (Miller 2006: 105). In his opinion, music has changed people's minds since "virtually all luk thung are isan derived and focus on the lives of rice farmers and their descendants, they have raised Isan's profile to a prominent level and, since the songs are extremely popular, they give the region's image a lively, up-to-date makeover" (Ibid.: 100).

Furthermore, he writes:

[T]he projected image of Isan has become a positive one that connects with people outside Isan. True, Isan is still not the destination of choice for Thai seeking greener pastures, nor has migration to Bangkok slowed, but at least the Isan people living there and elsewhere no longer need feel embarrassed about their origin. The region's image has been dramatically transformed, and much of this came about through its music and theatre. (Miller 2006: 106)

I am not so optimistic, however, for the parts of Isan I have seen lag behind the rest of the country in infrastructure and development, and even though the people I have spoken to are optimistic when they speak of future opportunities, they remain conscious of their lower status in

the eyes of the nation. How is it that Isan can be a source of acclaimed cultural products and yet be “extremely hot, poor, and undeveloped” and populated by people who are “lazy, stupid, and dirty” (Miller 2006: 96)? The positive reception of Isan music is in sharp contrast to the discrimination Isan people face, and as the next chapter will show, this stems from an unevenness of power within Thailand.

Chapter 3: Power and Permission

3.1 Power

In addition to the discrepancies of power contained in the sphere of geopolitics, an unevenness of power often exists between the researcher and his or her field of study that this chapter seeks to address and lessen. The previous chapter gave an overview of how historical events and geographical features have shaped the Isan region, giving its inhabitants and their cultural output a unique ethnoregional identity that persists, either supplementing or contradicting the national narrative of the Thai state. This chapter will continue along those lines to establish a working understanding of the state's practice of cultural hegemony and its relationship to its subaltern subjects in order to emphasize the necessity of permission for researchers working in similarly sensitive areas. I will then outline how permission can be found in scholarly sources and in personal experience so that musical research can continue to progress instead of being stymied by ideological problems. Finally, I will provide an outline of my course of action that addresses the unevenness of power distribution without becoming mired in conceptual conflict.

3.1.1 The Subaltern

Gayatri Spivak divides colonial society into four broad groups. In the first tier are the members of the dominant foreign groups, and in the second, members of the dominant indigenous groups at a national level. These two groups comprise the elite. Members of the dominant indigenous groups at the regional and local level make up the third tier. The fourth tier is occupied by the subaltern: those who are of lower status or subordinate to the tiers of society above them (Spivak 1988: 274). The subaltern includes the farmers and unskilled labourers, the

people of colour, the mothers, sisters, and daughters. They exist on the margins, pushed to the periphery of power from which they are ill-positioned to change the paradigm.

3.1.2 Hegemony

This tiered society is by no means exclusive to colonial and post-colonial nations. In fact, Antonio Gramsci drew upon his experience of the rise of fascism in Italy in the 1920s and the consolidation of fascist power over the next decade, resulting in a theory of hegemony that explains cultural or political dominance of one group over another in cultural and historical terms as well as economic and political ones (Girling 1984: 385-86). In Italy, the “dichotomy of industrial and agrarian sectors; the ambiguity of the peasantry, conservatively attached to the ownership of land but capable of becoming a revolutionary force if deprived of it; the persistence of ‘feudal’ ways of thought and behavior; and the crucial role of the state, especially where the institutions of ‘civil society’ [were] either immature or inadequate to play a leading role” resulted in a political situation that reflected a society in which some lived in the past and others in the present (Ibid.: 386). It could be said that contemporary Thailand exhibits the same tendencies.

In an interview with the *Bangkok Post* on January 4, 1975, General Saiyud Kerdphon said, “Indeed the royal absolutism of the Chakri dynasty is said to have functioned as a form of ‘internal colonialism’” (Girling 1984: 388). During the fiscal and administrative reorganization under King Chulalongkorn the efficient collection of taxes, government ministries organized along functional lines, railways constructed, and the “transformation of the customary levy into a professionally trained armed force” modernized practices in Thailand (Girling 1984: 388). When the 1932 economic crisis of the Great Depression ended royal absolutism, the bureaucratic elite inherited the power and authority of the monarchy (Ibid.: 388-89). So, while Thailand was never

colonized, an indigenous elite — based in Bangkok — ruled with the same oppressive tendencies as a colonial regime, thereby making themselves just as “alien” to the majority of the populace (Ibid.: 387).

The favourable conditions for sustaining power also endured through practices like small-holder cultivation and the specialization of labour by ethnicity (Girling 1984: 389). As the middle class grew during the economic boom of the 1960s, the number and influence of professionals rose. Factories built up in and around Bangkok, new cash crops were cultivated, and demand for universities increased, all while the rising middle class was forced to confront a “barrier of political immobility” (Ibid.: 390). Civil society was not content with the status quo and organized to demand a change, culminating in the protests of October 1973 (Ibid.: 390-91). Though a coalition government was able to continue in the aftermath of the uprising, political polarization threatened its stability. In October 1976 the military staged a coup and ended the first genuinely democratic period in Thai history (Ibid.: 391). The heightened political consciousness corresponding to economic development has played out in the protracted struggle for autonomy that has taken the shape of regular coups and protests that continue today.

Cultural hegemony governs people’s everyday actions in Thailand. The cooperative work of building houses and harvesting, as well as avoiding conflict through saving face, the use of intermediaries, and practicing deference correspond to the values of the dominant group (Girling 1984: 393). For example, making the *wai* and determining the height at which one’s hands are held, lowering one’s body, and carefully positioning one’s feet away from others are all used to show deference to a superior, which, in turn, requires that there be a hierarchy for determining status, which is often determined by calculating age, occupation, and religious affiliation. From a liberal perspective, this would fall into the realm of civil society, “a nongovernmental realm of

freedom,” but from Gramscian perspective, civil society is a type of hegemony, because the cultural elements of conformity display the way in which a dominant group’s values and ideology become everyone’s values and ideology (Green 2002:7).

The visible adherence to culturally hegemonic power structures extends past physical gestures and into one’s wardrobe. It is in the colour-coding of the days of the week that a shift from astrological or religious practices to national identity building can be more strongly detected. Like the students, teachers’ dress is carefully regimented to fall in line with a message of uniformity. On Mondays across the nation, government officials, including teachers, wear their khaki coloured uniforms to work. For the school’s scouting day, in this case, Wednesday, male teachers wear a similar khaki uniform and female teachers wear either a blue top with blue pants, a blue blouse and skirt, or a blue dress, all made to fit the specifications of a scout uniform. At my school, Fridays were for blue or orange clothing and on Thursdays teachers would wear some kind of traditional dress, either made from local textiles or in the local style of dress. Tuesdays were the most complicated. Usually people wear yellow on Tuesday to show their respect for King Bhumibol, whose lucky colour is yellow because he was born on a Monday. However, given the unpopularity of yellowshirts in an area that supports redshirt protestors, most people chose to wear pink, which is the astrologically lucky colour that corresponds with the day. For the month of May, Tuesdays were devoted to the colour purple in order to celebrate Princess Sirindhorn’s birthday.

3.1.3 Isan as Subaltern

The Isan region and the Isan people can be described as subaltern for political and cultural reasons, therefore, any cultural materials from the region must struggle against the

oppressive frameworks in place. Geographic facts, such as variable weather and poor soil quality, have contributed to the economic poverty of the region. In turn, the region's lower economic power gives it less clout at the national, or even international, level, where economic capital can be converted into political or cultural hegemony. Political events, such as the internal Communist insurgency in the Northeast in the 1970s and the present-day support of Thaksin and Yingluck Shinawatra,¹¹ indicate how Isan diverges from the Central Thai national ideal (Girling 1984: 399; Kuhonta 2016). Culturally, Central Thai dominance over the region has been asserted through the language reforms that curtailed official and educational use of the Isan language, as well as an arts curriculum that teaches Central Thai music and dance rather than local forms.

The ethnically-based prejudice against Isan people stems from the belief that Central Thai culture and values are superior to Lao culture and values, which then compounds the economic woes of migrant workers who are unable to find higher-paying or higher-status jobs in Bangkok because of their accents, to name one circumstance (Buripakdi 2014: 106). It almost goes without saying that when those workers take jobs as maids, taxi drivers, or food cart operators, they are still looked down on. Unfortunately, the negative perception of Isan is by no means limited to Thai people. When Roger Crutchley visited his maid's family home in Yasothon province — located between the provinces of Roi Et and Amnat Charoent, to the south of Mukdahan Province — he wrote, “All in all, we had a typically hectic Isan schedule – sleep, get up, eat chicken, doze, eat more chicken, drink, doze, try a bit of chicken. These people in Isan aren't stupid” (in Miller 2005: 96). As a columnist for the *Bangkok Post*, his colonial-style

¹¹ Thaksin Shinawatra was the Prime Minister of Thailand between 2001 and 2006. Yingluck Shinawatra, his younger sister, was the Prime Minister from 2011 until 2014.

description perpetuates the stereotype of the Isan people as lazy, a viewpoint hard to fathom when one considers the backbreaking labour of an agrarian lifestyle.

3.1.4 Achieving Gramscian Catharsis

According to Gramscian thought, the desired outcome of the struggle for autonomy as a result of the growth of political consciousness is “catharsis,” the movement away from being entirely motivated by economics to the being driven by the “ethical-political” (Girling 1984: 392). As individuals achieve this goal, they transcend from “common sense” to “good sense,” or, from a “subordinate conception of the world imposed by dominant social groups” to a “critical awareness of society that gives a ‘conscious direction’ to one’s activity” (Girling 1984: 392). In order to support my theory of Isan as subaltern and to demonstrate the viability of this framework as applied to music research, this section will outline the stages of progress within this method.

Gramsci divides the trajectory of this development into six stages:

1. the objective formation of the subaltern class through the developments and changes that took place in the economic sphere; the extent of their diffusion; and their descent from other classes that precede them
2. their passive or active adherence to the dominant political formations; that is, their efforts to influence the programs of these formations with demands of their own
3. the birth of new parties of the ruling class to maintain control of the subaltern classes
4. the formations of the subaltern classes themselves, formations of a limited and partial character

5. the political formations that assert the autonomy of the subaltern classes, but within the old framework
6. the political formations that assert complete autonomy, etc. (Gramsci Notebook 3: §90 in Green 2002: 9)

The first stage, in which the subaltern group maintains a practice in the face of change, corresponds to the manner in which musical traditions have continued through the changes brought about by globalization and the introduction of technology, whether it is in the form of the oxcart or the iPhone. Certainly, musicians still play traditional music on traditional instruments, but even the genres that have developed or adapted to suit modernized tastes retain the elements that are integral to their identity (Kittiarsa 2006). *Luk thung* and *lam sing* discuss themes pertinent to the Isan lifestyle, ranging from the struggles of farming to political ideology, but they also make use of the *phin*¹² and *khaen* in combination with Western guitars, keyboards, and drums (Mitchell 2015). Traditional and local music has been maintained through the advent of recording technology and, more recently, the introduction of cellphones and other devices as personal music players and recorders in combination with the rise of the internet as a connected platform for sharing music. In particular, homemade recordings retain the values of the subaltern group rather than those of the modern globalized or Central Thai group with their over-amplification of instruments, scratchy instruments, and rustic vocals (Tausig 2013).

Many actions dwell under the umbrella of the second stage, marked by the passive or active adherence by the subaltern group to the dominant group's political formations (and therefore to dominant cultural values). An easy example would be the presence of provocatively

¹² A pear-shaped lute with two or three metal strings. The head is often carved to resemble a *naga*, a mythical serpent.

dressed women dancers in *lam sing* (Kittiarsa 2006: 47). Though *lam* and *lam sing* have never shied away from exploring sexual topics, they were not well received by more educated and urbanized audiences. However, when the performance is presented in the manner of a Western pop-rock concert, the sexualized elements of performance are wholly acceptable, because they are markers of the sort of cosmopolitan modernity the contemporary nation of Thailand strives for (Kittiarsa 2006). Similarly, when artists produce music to fit the mould of the recording industry, they are following the artistic expectations laid out by the dominant group, whether they are politically or economically motivated.¹³

The rise of processes such as dialogic editing or the increased emphasis on reflexivity in ethnomusicological scholarship matches with the third stage: the formation of structures by the dominant group to maintain control of the subaltern group by attempting to meet their increasing demands (Girling 1984). These strategies mark a departure from strict participant-observation or comparative methods, but they still operate within the framework determined by the dominant group — in this case, the values of academic research and publishing take precedence over the values of the subaltern.

More recently, the proliferation of online repositories like Monrakplengthai and Awesome Tapes from Africa mark the development of a new hegemony to control cultural flow. Both of these sites were built by privileged outsiders with the objective of bringing this music to an audience of other privileged outsiders. They operate in a digital realm that has uneven access. In places like Thailand or Ghana it is more common to access the internet on a mobile device than on a computer, a fact due to infrastructure and of individuals' buying power. Thus, social

¹³ Some recordings are targeted to regional audiences using regional styles.

media and apps are used more than a dedicated internet browser. Therefore, a website for downloading music has less impact at the local level than at the international level.

On the Awesome Tapes from Africa site, decisions about the presentation of information align with what I would describe as a hipster aesthetic. A grid of album covers on a white background makes up the main page; one can click on a cover to be taken to a page dedicated to that album. There, it is possible to listen to the album or download it (track-by-track or each side of a tape) on a chic, modern platform. Both Monrakplengthai and Awesome Tapes from Africa share very little information about the recordings they are disseminating. Monrakplengthai usually sticks to a paragraph or two about the artist, where the recording is from, and the genre it belongs to, in addition to providing a transliterated title and track list. Awesome Tapes from Africa provides more idiosyncratic commentary and the track titles. The musical product itself is the intended focus, which is in accordance with the sites' intention of making music more widely available outside its spatial-temporal region of origin.

Another problem arises when the economic impact of these projects is considered. Awesome Tapes from Africa acknowledges that it does not own the rights to the tapes it shares, and artists who licensed their music in collaboration with the site get 50% of the profits.¹⁴ If an artist wants their music to be taken down, he or she must contact the site. The notion of taking music with the implied understanding that it is acceptable to do so relies on an attitude that is uncomfortably close to both the colonial forces who plundered the continent of Africa of its bountiful natural resources while imposing harsh political control, and the white saviour complex that allows people to think that the subaltern requires their aid and that their worldview is what

¹⁴ <http://www.awesometapes.com/about/>

the subaltern should aspire to. Both websites deserve to be commended for garnering mainstream attention for (admittedly) niche musical interests, but not without withstanding criticism for their role in perpetuating cultural hegemony to some extent.

Patina Kitiarsa's interpretation of *lam sing* recognizes the genre as an expression of Isan people's autonomous agency that situates *molam* within the context of their daily contact with "modern global forces (e.g., modern life style, consumption, employment outside their village domain)" (2006: 55-56). Kitiarsa argues that *lam sing* has reinvented *molam* traditions into a modern source of entertainment that reflects a conscious choice on the part of Isan artists and audiences from within the framework of a Thai cultural system that values Western pop-rock (Ibid.: 56). By retaining markers of identity in the song texts, namely the bawdier language and expressions and narratives of migration that tie the music to both *molam* and Isan experience, *lam sing* asserts Isan identity in a way that redefines the relationship between tradition and modernity away from being a linear movement from one to the other (Ibid. 2006: 54).

The *lam* has also been used in the political arena, challenging the norms of communication and the structures of power leveraged against the subaltern. During the 1940s and 1950s, pro-democracy politicians including Khaisaeng Suksai, an MP from Nakhon Phanom, used *lam* verses and melodies in the national Parliament to describe the suffering and social injustice the Isan people had faced for generations to supplement their emotional debates (Kitiarsa 2006: 42). With this meaning and usage in mind, *lam sing* can be considered a structure created by the subaltern, however partial or limited it may be.

Within the field of ethnomusicology, initiatives, strategies, and actions are in place that are meant to assert the autonomy of the subaltern in the old framework. At a very basic level, bringing more types of music into the academic fold could be considered one way in which

ethnomusicologists strive to use their power to help better the subaltern's position. More specifically, the process of asking permission and seeking input and continued consent throughout the research process recognizes that power of the culture-bearing people.

Fortunately, the sixth and final stage, characterized by political formations that assert complete autonomy, seems within reach. Though some would argue that achieving catharsis would entail dissolving ethnomusicology as a discipline, I contend that research can still be conducted, though within a framework determined by those whose culture is being studied instead of one determined by the researcher. For example, a research project determined by the subaltern group in which the researcher played a supporting role — taking a backseat in the decision-making process of how research would be conducted, the aims of the research, and in the distribution of results — would achieve this goal.

3.1.5 Consequences and Implications of Power on Research

Unlike the previous section, the intent of what comes next is not to create some kind of tool to measure the differences of power between the globalized cosmopolitan West, Central Thailand, and Isan, but to draw attention to what I perceive to be a problem in order to suggest possible solutions. In order to be rigorous and thorough, ethnomusicological research should strive to address the implications of the uneven distribution of power at all levels: from the researcher-subject relationship; as it plays out on a local, regional, or national level between different groups, whether those distinctions are ethnic, economic, or political; and within the context of the globalized cosmopolitan world.

Explaining the power dynamics in contemporary Thailand illuminates the importance of supporting attempts at dismantling the hegemony that negatively affects people and their culture.

Within the bounds of this project, I decided to concentrate on the necessity of permission in order to recognize and support the autonomy of the music and people being studied.

3.2 Permission

My permission to stay in the Kingdom of Thailand ended on the date written into my passport. Someone else's failure to fill out and submit the requisite forms for an extension meant that I needed to hastily pack up and get on a bus to the airport in order to stay within the bounds of the law. Human travel is governed by permission granted by the paperwork that is passports and visas, but culture, especially music, is not necessarily subject to the same rules and restrictions. Although I had to leave Thailand, I did not have to leave behind what I learned, or what I still wanted to learn. In this section I will trace a line of thought that addresses the need for permission and how to obtain it, first through documents and customs that directly address playing the khaen, and then in a broader academic framework.

3.2.1 Permission and the Khaen

As its origin story made clear, the khaen comes associated with beliefs that affect the way the instrument is performed. It is the product of someone's resourcefulness and initiative, which has transcended its humble roots to play for kings. Today, the instrument's performance is not bounded by geopolitical borders, nor is it confined to a single genre.

In *Traditional Music of the Lao: Kaen Playing and Mawlum Singing in Northeast Thailand*, Terry Miller remarks that unlike the vocalists, khaen players are self taught (Miller 1985: 43). The instrument lacks prestige, in part because it is thought that anyone can learn to play it (Ibid.: 61). As the accompaniment for *molam* singers, the khaen is a supporting

background player, as reflected in the instrumentalist's compensation, which is usually a fraction of what the singer gets paid (Ibid.: 221). While the khaen is capable of virtuosity, a lack of structured opportunities curtailed its performance to moments in everyday life in the distant past: boys playing while walking towards their sweethearts' homes; beggars outside of stores, at evening markets, and at fairs; or ensembles at school (Ibid.: 222). Today the khaen has found an enthusiastic audience on the internet, which I will fully address in Chapter 4. With audiences and performers uploading, listening, and interacting online, the khaen is less confined to its geographic region of origin and reaches a new, connected audience.

King Mongkut broadly revoked permission to perform Lao music, particularly khaen music, “on Friday the fourteenth day of the Waning Moon in the twelfth Lunar Month, in the Year of the Ox,” or 1865 by Western reckoning (Miller 1985: 38). He wrote:

The situation has now changed. Thai have abandoned their own entertainments including *beepat* ensemble, *mahori* ensemble, *sepa-krüing-tawn*..., and *lakawn rang*... Both men and women now play *laokaen*¹⁵ [mawlum] throughout the kingdom. How who play in the *beepat* or *mahori* ensembles must sell their instruments because they are no longer hired. *Laokaen* is always played for the topknot cutting ceremony and for ordinations. The price is as high as ten to twelve *dum-lüing*... His Majesty the King finds this kind of situation unfavorable. We cannot give the priority to Lao entertainments. *Laokaen* must serve the Thai; the Thai have never been the Lao's servants. Thai have been performing *laokaen* for more than ten years now and it has become very common. It is apparent that whoever there is an increase in the playing of *laokaen* there is also less rain. This year the rice survived only because of water originating in the forests. In towns where there was much *laokaen* it rained only a little and there was little rice growing. Even though the farmers were able to plant rice near the end of the season, too much water from the forests destroyed the rice in floods. Consequently the King now requests all Thai who remain loyal and grateful to him to stop performing *laokaen*. Please do not hire *laokaen* or perform it yourselves. Try this for a year or two. Thai entertainments including *lakawn*, *fawn*, *rum*, *beepat*, *mahori*, *sepa-krüing-tawn*, *brop-gai*, *sukrawah*, and *pleng-gai-ba-gio-kao* ought to be revived. They should not be forgotten and finally lost. You are requested to stop performing

¹⁵ In this piece of writing *laokaen* refers to the instrument I have transliterated as khaen in other instances.

laokaen. Try this for a year or two and see whether the amount of rain becomes sufficient again or not. (Miller 1985: 39)

This source reveals sentiments that were discussed in the previous chapters, for Thai nationalism and Lao culture have clashed in Northeastern Thailand for centuries, producing the complicated identity of “Isan.” But, on the topic of permission, this document raises questions. Who is allowed to play what kinds of music? What are the consequences for playing the wrong music? The king tried to address these questions: people living in the geopolitical region of the Kingdom of Siam should play Central Thai music or suffer by way of drought and crop failure. Today the consequences for musicians are usually less grim, but as this chapter will explain, permission is still one of the first steps taken towards musical understanding.

3.2.2 Finding Permission in Scholarly Sources

It takes a certain amount of boldness to decide that one is able to study other people’s music in a meaningful way. My initial source of permission came from the well-intentioned motivation expressed eloquently by John Miller Chernoff:

To arrive at the point where one sees the life of another culture as an alternative is to reach a fundamental notion of the humanistic perspective, and to accept that one has become part of their history. This insight can become a pathway to responsibility and an opening toward one’s own human love. On that bus ride, while I felt that what I was doing in Ghana would probably have no consequence, academic, financial, or personal, if I returned to the United States, I was ready to begin the kind of education I wanted to get in African music. When there was no reason for me to be trying to learn the music except for my love of it, and when in my training I realized through my personal self-consciousness that I could be socially and aesthetically criticized every moment for what I did, I began to understand what involvement with music meant in Africa. (Chernoff 1979: 9)

Instead of being seen as unscholarly biased or overly emotional, love and kindness are explicitly stated as influential factors within Chernoff’s work. With these texts as support, it becomes

easier to see the possibility of carrying out fieldwork with the sensitivity and respect it demands, even amidst the doubts of an increasingly critical institutional or disciplinary environment. In the day-to-day life of fieldwork, I would posit that it is not just simpler, but more beneficial, to your results to remember to treat everyone around you well and find the joy in learning instead of trying to implement a rigid methodology that fails to acknowledge the individuality of moments and people. If these tenets — positive attributes like kindness, joy, love — govern the data-collection process, then it makes sense that they could be incorporated into an analytical framework and its subsequent application.

Compared to hotspots like Bali or Ghana, mainland Southeast Asia is underrepresented in Anglophone ethnomusicological research. Why? Factors ranging from political instability, underdevelopment, and distance from the West to the difficulty of language learning or the extreme climate might have been acceptable excuses for choosing to do research elsewhere at some point in time, but they are invalid when we consider the region's position as an acclaimed tourism destination today. The small number of English language sources should spur contemporary scholars to do the work required to understand the music of this region more fully, and the challenges posed by the criticism of earlier texts are not insurmountable.

For example, *Apprenez le khene: Essai d'une méthode moderne*, by Kham-Ouane Ratanavong, first took form in sections published in serialized form in the newsletter *Bulletin des Amis du Royaume Lao*, and was published as a book in 1973. As a manual for musical instruction, it is written in French and English, indicating that its intended use would be by aficionados not capable of reading Lao text. Admittedly, it is not the kind of ethnographic research one might expect — the repertoire includes “Frere Jacques,” but it serves as a kind of permission for those outside the usual sphere of Lao culture to pick up an instrument and learn

how to play it. In writing this book, Ratanavong is inviting others to join him and willing to teach those who opt in — another instance of permission. Its omission from *Traditional Music of the Lao* does not have to be interpreted as a slight against Lao scholarship, but perhaps serves to remind us to look for local sources that can serve as an entry point.

David Morton's book *The Traditional Music of Thailand* (1968) has stood as one of the foundational texts for decades, but there are three reasons for it to be called into question that tie into the idea of permission. First and foremost, it portrays a version of Thai music that is limited in scope to Central Thai classical music at the expense of other musical traditions of the country. This reinforced a *piphat*-centric narrative, in which the ensemble's function in important rituals has resulted in an "unambiguously elevated social position" (Garzoli 2015: 9). Part of that status is based on the perceived complexity and uniqueness of the theory of 7-tone-equidistant-tuning, which Morton's study strengthened. Though many explanations of the development of the tuning system exist, one relates it back to the *khaen*. John Garzoli writes that Worayot Suksaichon, an acclaimed Thai musician, explained that before the 7-tone-equidistant-tuning was established, instruments were tuned to a diatonic scale like the *khaen*'s. The scale was modified when a member of the nobility demanded the removal of large and small intervals in order to make the ensemble match his vocal range (Garzoli 2015: 10). The gap of information on music from other parts of Thailand means that there is room for more work to be done.

Second, the theory of 7-tone-equidistant-tuning Morton perpetuated has been disproven in a recent article by John Garzoli, who has found methodological problems with Morton's study. According to Garzoli, Morton's hypothesis is incorrect to presuppose a Thai octave ratio of 1:2, the technology he used to collect the data was unreliable and susceptible to human and environmental influence, and the averages derived from measurements taken from unrelated sets

of musical instruments is less than meaningful (Garzoli 2015: 19). Today's improved technology might allow scholars to redo studies of intonation like Morton's with more reliable equipment or compile results in a way that allows for more locally relevant comparisons.

Third, when Garzoli is discussing musical concepts that relate to intonation, he brings up a practice in Thai musical culture known as *huang wicha*, in which information is intentionally withheld, or false and misleading information is provided to those who are considered outsiders (Garzoli 2015: 3). It is for this reason that others doubt the honesty of Morton's primary informant, Montri Tramote (Ibid.: 3). Garzoli also acknowledges the "absence of a credible historical record [which] leaves a gap that is filled with stories of uncertain historical accuracy" (Ibid.: 6). What these stories lack in veracity, they make up for with a sense of the importance gained through myth and the position of the teacher as an authority (Ibid.: 6). If readers are more aligned with Chernoff's positive lenses for critique, admitting fallibility is one more element of thoroughness instead of a personal shortcoming.

To step away from philosophical orientations, the timeliness and specificity of the existing sources can be problematic, but it makes more sense to find a way to build off the foundation that texts like *The Traditional Music of Thailand* and *Traditional Music of the Lao* provide than to discard them entirely. Given the small number of English language sources devoted to Thai music, let alone Isan music, the information we have is valuable. By extending the same gentle kindness that Chernoff and others endorse to these sources, their drawbacks can be reframed as opportunities on which to improve.

3.3 Permission and Analysis

An article by Martin Scherzinger, published in the Winter 2001 issue of *Perspectives of New Music*, is an early source that makes the case for alternatives to the very personal ethnographic texts that dominated the 1990s. Books like *Seize the Dance! BaAka Musical Life and the Ethnography of Performance* (2006) by Michelle Kisliuk read more like diaries due to an emphasis on the specificity of context (the “particulars of time and place”) and the amount of attention given to “the role of the ethnographer.” To Scherzinger, a methodological division has been created between texts devoted to social context and those that study “music’s formal autonomous aspect” (2001: 10). In his opinion, the bias towards socio-contextual centred texts based in a corrective stance is unwarranted, as they hinder certain options for progressive political application of the study of African music.¹⁶ His suggested alternative is to recognize the power structures extant within institutions and disciplines and strategically deploy research to call them into question.

In my reading of Scherzinger, three main themes emerged: structural power imbalances within ethnomusicology as a field of study, the role of politicized action within scholarship, and the concept of possibility. Each theme relates to permission differently, but all of them reinforce its central position within any method, while giving researchers permission to reach for loftier goals.

To begin a discussion of the structural power imbalances present in ethnomusicological study, it is necessary to situate the researcher within the institution and in the world at large. The ethnographer occupies a position between the various objects of his or her study and within a

¹⁶ Although Scherzinger is writing about African music, the net can be broadened to include most, if not all, genres of non-Western music.

hierarchical institutional framework. If the researcher is sensitive to his or her position of relative power gained simply by being the person studying rather than the person who is being studied, but is not cognizant of the inherent social context contained within the aims of the discipline itself, then he or she is perpetuating a structural power imbalance. It is unfortunate, then, that there is a bias towards scholarship grounded in socio-contextual thought even when it omits the backwards glance towards scholarship that a fully reflexive account would include.

One aspect of this structural power imbalance is the manner in which a broad category of music is confined to being studied in one very specific way. The institutional divisions allow Western music to be “immanently aesthetic,” historical, a living practice, and as an anthropological object when studied in music theory, musicology, composition, and new or critical musicology; non-western musics, in contrast, are confined to ethnomusicology as a single discourse (Scherzinger 2001: 12). Obviously, this reflects the unequal position of non-Western music in the university setting. As non-Western music is bounded within a dominant methodological framework grounded in the aforementioned socio-contextual perspective that prefers process to form, context to musical sound alone, totality to component parts, and the orientation of the student to the boundaries set out in discourse, aspects of the music go unstudied or remain understudied (Ibid.: 8).

There is another prevalent bias that sees attempts at portraying socio-cultural context as more sensitive than more musically-focused texts. What started as a corrective reaction to the global imperial order that privileges Western researchers and their status as knowledge producers, which ethnomusicologists would account for, has escalated and been skewed into something more sinister. To Scherzinger, “the widespread critique of the ideology of musical autonomy...and formal analysis...has limited the way in which socio-contextual considerations

have been elaborated in ethnomusicology, and thereby immobilized a host of progressive political options” (2001: 10). To begin with, there is an unavoidable shadow of social context upon any formalist model used for analysis (Ibid.: 11). In other words, what we choose to study (or omit from study) is a reflection of our own societal values, which may be an imposition in other settings. To use Scherzinger’s example, the kind of thinking that places African musicians within a remote and isolated setting instead of within a “living musical world, peopled by historical agents in contemporary experience” is limiting (Ibid.: 20). Furthermore, researchers are taking a political stance when they decide to “see Africans thinking [only] African thoughts” that not only ignores colonization and decolonization, but excludes people from the debates of global modernity (Ibid.: 16). When limits are imposed on what kind of musical thoughts people may have, the possibility of multiple perspectives disappears.

Devoting more space to formalist-analytical musical thought recognizes the musical autonomy of the people whose music we study. It turns the music back into a fully-fledged subject, whereas other approaches relegate it to an object. A discourse that uses dichotomies like “Western thing in itself” and “African interaction” to categorize and separate what and how we study denies the music within an “African interaction” the ability to be seen as a “thing” in and of itself (Scherzinger 2001: 32). If, as Scherzinger writes, “analytic formalism is an ideological trick designed to support a specific repertoire of music and to construct and uphold a purported continuity in a certain Western tradition,” why can’t ethnomusicologists apply analysis to other genres of music for the same beneficial reasons (Ibid.: 26)?

Scherzinger’s call to action is well-reasoned, well-meaning, and well-timed. This article predates the rise in popularity of analysis, as marked by Michael Tenzer’s 2006 edited text, *Analytical Studies in World Music*, and the formation of the Analysis of World Music Special

Interest Group in the Society for Ethnomusicology. It makes a case for analytical thinking, partially built on specific issues in African music, but its applicability extends over most, if not all, genres. Furthermore, one of the actions he is encouraging can be done by any scholar: politicizing one's work. Scherzinger asks progressive scholars to divest themselves of the "impossible quest for the 'African cultural reality'" and instead become constructively complicit, meaning that instead of denying or trying to rid themselves of their position of relative privilege, they use it to advance a cause (2001: 20). Such work would identify a political problem and then propose an enframing method that would attempt to remedy it (Ibid.: 20).

Scherzinger argues that socially and historically informed formalism reveals the music as part of living traditions that are located within global modernity; ethnographic realism risks merely providing "an account of other people's customs and beliefs" (2001: 26). When our Western training interacts with other ways of thinking about music, it creates friction, but not in a way that destroys the aim of the work. As Scherzinger writes:

There is a deliberate friction between the language of engagement and the elusive reality it is trying to reveal. By building this friction into the very architecture of such a method, the writing is a persistent reminder of its limited purview. Unmasking alone cannot ensure our writing from getting on with the business of realistic accounting as usual. The weight of acknowledging the enflaming limits should be borne throughout the text; a strategy that replaces the ritual unmasking of our partiality and positionally as investigators at the beginning of our ethnographic accounts. (2001: 26-27)

This mode of study requires that ethnomusicologists stop simply depicting in the texts they produce. It is no longer good enough to introduce yourself, and tell a story in which you are revealed to be a worthy student. The motivation to "do better" must continue into the way findings are presented and shared.

With such an overtly polemical article, Scherzinger risks alienating and offending readers, but the concept of possibility is applied throughout the text, lending an appealingly

optimistic tone. The changes he suggests are not off-the-cuff propositions: they are revisions he sees as possible. The possibility that there are multiple ways of hearing music is central to this paper, and Scherzinger harnesses the political potential of multiple interpretations to challenge the imperialist legacy of analyses that focus on particular musical aspects at the expense of others, and to reject the idea that African musicians do not think about music in the same way as Western musicians, thereby excusing the Western musicians from thinking for themselves (2001: 23-24). Less inflammatory possibilities are scattered through the article. When he writes that comparative musicology needed (or needs) the results of systematic study that has not been completed yet, he suggests that both ways of studying music are valid and useful. The possibility that “world music” could be studied separately from its various social contexts would open up the discipline of ethnomusicology immensely, and could lead to an explosive rise in the amount of knowledge that could be shared, preserved, and used. Likewise, if the focus on production spread outward from the way music is depicted in ethnographic texts, would it be possible for us to join in and play?

Although it could seem contradictory, Scherzinger frees scholarship more by using the term “supplementary.” He states that his alternative method is “meant to supplement, not depose, the ethnographic body of research” (2001: 21). It will not replace existing structures, but will stand alongside them. Thus, it is possible for all of our highly individualized tactics for studying music to be seen as valid options. Researchers can pick and choose what works for them, adapting methodology to best suit their purposes. Deeming all research to be supplementary recognizes the limitations of any methodology by itself, but implies that mixing and matching techniques is an acceptable reaction. Scherzinger presents the radical idea that we can distance ourselves from the ongoing methodological trends, especially those that require corrective action

from contemporary scholarship. By his measure, it is time to start doing things differently — whether it is writing an (African) music theory, seeing modernity in fieldwork sites, or adopting a politicized stance.

3.3.1 Additions from Agawu and Adorno

Kofi Agawu’s “How We Got Out of Analysis and How to Get Back In Again” was published in 2004, nearly 25 years after Joseph Kerman’s seminal article “How We Got into Analysis, and How to Get Out” (1980). With the benefit of hindsight, Agawu first provides an overview of the disciplinary shifts towards (and after, away from) arguments about the place of cultural studies and postmodernism in music theory (Agawu 2004: 267). He suggests that scholars have reached an uneasy truce, motivated either by their adherence to a philosophy of pluralism or a desire to participate in “active praxis” (Ibid.: 267). Although Kofi Agawu’s article was written in response to someone else, two main points support Scherzinger’s arguments in favour of analysis and my own performance-oriented path.

Agawu draws upon Theodor Adorno’s idea of truth content (“*Warheitsgehalt*”), in which an art object gains meaning from dialectical interactions that concern the internal dynamics of the work — its form and structure — and the “sociohistorical totality” that surrounds the work (Zuidervaart 2015). Truth content is contained within the work; it is neither a metaphysical presence nor an entirely human construct. Thus, analysis examines form and structure as an investigation of the internal elements of a piece of music that leads to finding some sort of truth content. The analyst is not concerned with the piece’s external relationships, but rather with what exists inside the work (Agawu 2004: 272). This supports Scherzinger’s desire to explore music as music, gaining objective and empirical knowledge through analysis and then using it in a

politicized way. Agawu presents the notion of truth content as “a constantly receding target, an object that becomes more elusive the closer one gets to it,” which is in accordance with Scherzinger’s insistence on the need for multiple avenues of study (Agawu 2004:273.) If truth content is revealed through the dialogue that arises between dichotomous ways of thinking, then by extension, supplementing one’s work with more approaches creates more and different opportunities for intersection and convergence. Finally, Agawu describes truth content as the “surplus in a composition,” or the irreducible secrets of a composition that remain inexplicable after close examination. Its intangibility does not diminish the piece, and an inability to fully explain it does not detract from an analysis.

In my opinion, Agawu’s explanation of analysis as a type of performance supports the role of performance as analysis. If analytical knowledge is gained through primarily oral hands-on activity that resists verbal summary and is not necessarily cumulative, the close observation of the act of playing an instrument can provide the same kind of results (Agawu 2004: 274). The standard image of a someone analyzing music as someone at a desk with a score might need to be revised to include more ways of finding musical information.

Divisions between the disciplines of musicology, music theory, and ethnomusicology are becoming less clear as time passes. Music analysis is a useful tool, but as Robert Walser explains, it is not impartial. Analysis abstracts and reduces information in order to show relationships, like a map does, but analyses are crafted with a purpose or motive in mind (Walser 2003: 24-25). It might seem tiresome to clearly indicate the boundaries of one’s research, and to admit to limitations might feel like disclosing a shameful inadequacy, but this creates meaningful transparency. If the intention and process are as clear as the results, each component serves to strengthen the others.

3.3.2 The Exchange of Permission

We take it for granted that asking for and giving permission are exchanges of power between those who are studied and those who study. When someone asks, “May I please learn?,” they recognize that their potential teacher has a metaphorical key that will unlock the gates to knowledge that they want to acquire. What is not always recognized, however, is that the potential teacher is aware the power of his or her response, too. When I asked a local music teacher for khaen lessons, I knew that as a welcome guest in the community and as a fellow teacher, he would be inclined to say yes.

What I could not predict was the enthusiastic response to my participation in a musical tradition that is associated with poverty, rural living, and backwardness by the rest of the community who became aware of my musical inclinations. On my way to work or bicycling around town, sometimes I carried my instrument in a cloth bag over my shoulder. Whenever I did this I worried that I was marking myself as even more of an outsider: someone who was trying to hard to fit in, or as someone unaware of the reality of being Isan. Almost the opposite was true — the instrument on my back acted like a shortcut for people to see me as someone who appreciated local culture, and as someone who tried to understand local circumstances and act accordingly. Based on this positive reaction, I felt that I had a kind of permission. However, when I left Thailand, it felt like I left that permission behind. The sense of possibility and need for purposeful action that Scherzinger expresses, supplemented with the practical and elegant reasoning found in Michael Tenzer’s introduction to *Analytical Studies in World Music*, were the sources I needed to find the permission I needed to continue learning.

First, both authors endorse omitting the ritual unmasking that is supposed to be a substitute for reflexivity. Scherzinger points out the real and disheartening fact that self-consciousness “displaces the authority of the ethnographer”; in its position of prominence, the tendency to elaborate on what the researcher is bringing to the context has superseded the musical topic at hand (2001: 28). Tenzer reveals that this style is not new, for “introspective autocritique” has existed in Western culture since Socrates (Tenzer 2011: 10). He suggests that “[perhaps] only we analysts see the stakes as high enough to merit pondering our actions in terms of a moral or ethical quandary” and that “interest and willingness to share” are the widely-held beliefs governing the exchange of musical knowledge between individuals (Ibid.: 10).

Being situated outside the normal geographic range of the khaen allowed me to see my fieldwork and online experience with the instrument as informing and building on each other, supplementary as opposed to contradicting each other. Such an inclusive approach requires that no one is excluded from today’s globally connected world. Still, it seems necessary to justify choosing to study music in a different context because the idea of musical autonomy or independence is contentious to those who place more value on socio-contextual information than on the music itself. Tenzer provides an excellent response:

But is the metaphor of analysis-as-discovery valid for all music? Is it all right to analyze music independent of its political, geographical, or cultural distance from the analyst or reader? Shall we allow ourselves to become absorbed in music’s sound, conceiving of it as if in isolation from the world? Polemics and traditions of debate surround these questions ... but no clean resolution exists. The response proposed here is nonetheless that yes, it is valid to do so, and anticipation of pleasure and refinement to be had is sufficient rationalization. (2011: 5)

With this permission, it became possible to choose a course of purposeful and politicized action. Music analysis is a creative interpretive act, but it supplements the practice of making music. For my research, the practice of music analysis — of structural listening, reflection, and

synthesis — is a means to a specific end: being able to play the khaen. As Scherzinger notes, there is a need for researchers to inhabit instead of describe, to make use of the most “unguessed at” methods, and to re-enchant that which we demystify (2001: 28, 21, 26). Learning an instrument has given me a lens through which I can understand the musical process differently; playing the instrument gives me a new perspective on the instrument and music as objects of study.

My need for permission increased in tandem with my distance from sites of performance and learning. On a person-to-person scale, it is easy to think the best of one another; musical sharing is easy. However, when more and more individuals are brought into the equation, directly or indirectly, the perceived impact is greater, and thus, the need to examine the implications of one’s actions is heightened. In Thailand I was an outsider, but it was the relative privilege of my socio-economic background, level of education, citizenship, and appearance that marked me as such. In short, since there was no risk of anyone thinking I was Isan, I could do Isan things without experiencing any sort of stigma. In a Canadian context, there is a risk of criticism from many differently motivated parties, but the line of thought presented here is a robust rebuttal. Examining the transactional nature of permission yields insight into the idea of authenticity-as-commodity that has pervaded contemporary ethnomusicology. Nonetheless, it should not surpass music as the primary subject of research. After the preceding introspection and philosophizing, I would now like to present my course of politicized action, as it relates to playing the khaen.

3.4 Charting a Course of Action

After taking this theoretical knowledge into consideration, a methodology started to take shape that would focus on depicting power in the transmission of knowledge, recognize music and musical objects on their own terms, and place my findings amidst multiple ways of knowing. The internet — social media, websites, online purchasing, and streaming technology — has been as much of a “field” for research as the village I lived in. Allowing my accounts of using digital media to be present alongside depictions of my time in Thailand somewhat mitigates the risk of creating an ahistorical narrative that omits some people from modernity. Most importantly, I reframed my attitude towards how I could use information that came from online sources. Though it is intellectually stimulating to consider the implications of the wealth, diversity, accessibility, and immediacy of online sources, it is not musically satisfying. It is entertaining to be able to click around the world, listening to new music all the while, but not all of my musical experiences should be able to be distilled into bits and bytes of data. Playing the khaen is an exercise in concentrating on the joy of the musical process as an embodied practice while forging a connection that creates an opportunity to reflect on extramusical issues.

Chapter 4: Performance

4.1 My Khaen

The opportunity to play khaen did not just fall into my lap. I knew the basic facts about the instrument before I went to Thailand — that it was made of bamboo, that it was associated with the Isan region, and what it could sound like based on field recordings. That information was enough for me to decide that I wanted to devote time, energy, and resources to learning how to play it. Everyone within my initial circle of contact knew that I was enthusiastic and motivated; they sometimes acted as intermediaries on my behalf, explaining this to people when they introduced me. It was my neighbour, a dance teacher, who introduced me to the music teacher and translated our first conversation.

After that, it was simple. The music teacher indicated for me to sit down at an electric keyboard and opened a binder to a Thai pop classic that I had never heard of. He flipped through more sheet music until I told him I could read music, at which point the flipping stopped and the spotlight was on me. In front of an audience of 13-year olds, I sight read the music on the stand. My rendition was clearly recognizable, since people sang along, but after I finished, the teacher sat down and pressed a combination of the effects buttons. He proceeded to play exactly what I had played, but with midi drums and chord effects and to a more enthusiastic response. After that, he pointed to a khaen propped in the corner, and then at blank spaces on my timetable and indicated that I was to come to the music room at those times and have lessons. Our lessons took place two or three times a week for six weeks. We started with a Western scale, since the range of the instrument corresponds with the pitches of A natural minor between A3 and A5, and progressed to breathing and articulation patterns, and touched on the *lai*, the modes that are the building blocks of traditional khaen performance. Generously, I was allowed to take the

instrument to my home, where I practiced what I had learned, but also played little melodies by ear.

There were a number of challenges in the learning process. When lessons started, I was not fluent in the vocabulary that would be useful in a musical setting, and my teacher was shy to speak English in front of a native speaker. Our lessons were free-flowing, and he took the time to let me try other instruments that were available, like the *ranat ek*,¹⁷ or his main instrument, the *saw duang*.¹⁸ Based on his zest for string instruments, I suspect that this was an effort to convince me to play *saw duang* or *saw u*.¹⁹ As mentioned earlier, the *khaen* is an instrument that you teach yourself; taking lessons is not normal unless you are coming from outside the traditional sphere. The biggest challenge, although I would not be aware of it at the time, was the limited time. The unhurried pace of the lessons did not bother me at all, until I had to leave suddenly due to paperwork and visa problems. Time had run out. Just as I was getting to the more serious musical information, I would not be able to keep learning. I certainly did not have time to buy an instrument. While I made my way back to Canada, everything seemed like a sign to leave Thailand, stop playing *khaen*, and never look back.

But I still wanted to play. I missed eating green mangos from the tree in my yard dipped in chili and salt, I missed being able to bicycle to the market and chit-chat with people, I missed the soft light on the red dirt road outside my house early in the morning, and I missed playing *khaen*. When the frustration of plans falling through wore off, my recollections were positive overall. My experiences could be a point of reference as I read through books and articles, and

¹⁷ A member of the Thai xylophone family with wooden bars and a medium range. The *ranat ek* is used as a leading instrument in the *piphat* ensemble.

¹⁸ A bowed fiddle with two strings.

¹⁹ A one-stringed bowed fiddle with a mellower sound and a lower range than the *saw duang*.

my lessons could be a strong foundation to build on. As I discovered, there were recordings and videos available for those who wanted to learn to play; the only thing I was missing was an instrument.

One day I clicked on the “Buy it Now” button. After searching more specialized sites, it turned out Ebay had exactly what I wanted. I typed in my message to the seller, “Sawatdee ka, I would like my khaen to be in A, please.” I followed my package’s progress as it moved from step to step in the postal system. I would type the tracking code into the Thai Post website, slide the button to the right, and it would take me to a page of characters that, when translated, still were not quite right. Still, I could recognize place names, and once it was in the Canadian Customs system, I knew it would be a matter of days before I had it. As I was leaving my house one morning, I ran into the mailman, holding a long cardboard box covered with labels in Thai and English. I was so happy to have received my instrument at last, and he was glad to have the fragile package out of his truck. I went back to my apartment, where I opened the box and started to remove balled up newspaper around the instrument until I could lift my khaen out and unwrap the bubble wrap from it.

Cross-legged on the kitchen floor, I held it between my palms, reaching my fingers up to cover the holes to make pitches sound. The gesture felt familiar, but not for the reason that I expected. In my Canadian life, there are not many occasions for clasping both hands in front of my face, but in Thailand, it was an oft-repeated posture. At that moment, I could not help but feel the similarity between the *wai* hand gesture and how the khaen is held. Palms together, raised so that my thumbs were approximately the same level as my mouth, , just like I would offer a *wai* as a gesture of humility, respect, and human connection, I offered a wheezing scale that gained strength as my body remembered how to play.

4.2 Learning by Book

When I wanted to learn more about the instrument, I went to the library in search of books that would have some kind of instructions for playing the khaen, like any good student would. After I signed out Terry Miller's *Traditional Music of the Lao*, I flipped to the section on playing the khaen, which contains an explanation of the modes, repertoire, ethnographic information, and transcriptions.

The first mode that a khaen player learns to play in is *lai yai*, literally “big song” (Miller 1985: 256). *Lai yai* is built up from the lowest pitch on the instrument (A) and follows the *yao* scale, which enables the instrument to resonate more than it does in a higher register (Ibid.: 257). Figure 2 shows the pitches that make up *lai yai*. In addition to these pitches, a player would use *kisoot* to stop the highest A pipe if he were accompanying, and the A and E in solo playing, providing drone pitches that are characteristic of the instrument (Ibid.: 257). *Lai yai* is said to be easier to perceive or identify because of the “plainness” of its pitch content, which I found to be true in my own listening. This mode is “appropriate” for the emotional expression of grief, longing, disappointment, or recollections and reminiscences of better days gone by.

Figure 2: Pitches of the *lai yai* mode.



Miller writes that there are a number of categories of repertoire that use *lai yai*: pieces associated with *molam*, pieces for courtship, and pieces that depict nature. The pieces associated

with *molam* are from the second section (or *lum tang yao*) of *lum glawn*, a genre in which male and female singers alternate, sometimes feigning a developing love affair (Miller 1985: 256, 315-16). There are also short pieces that are played to begin and end radio broadcasts of *molam*, pieces that tell the story of a trip down the Mekong River, and the piece in which the singer says his or her farewell to the audience (Ibid.: 256). The pieces associated with old-fashioned formal courtship are in three different styles. While the young man walked to meet the young woman he wanted to court, he would play his *khaen*, both to bolster his spirits and announce his arrival. Her parents would either allow them to meet, and they would trade proverbs and quotations from Lao literature back and forth, or they would deny him the opportunity and say that their daughter was sick and had gone to bed. If that happened, it is said that the young woman might pinch her mother out of lovesickness. The genre *lai yai sao yik mae* (“the girl pinches her mother”) is said to imitate that pinching through its percussive rhythm (Ibid.: 257). The last group of pieces, those associated with nature, are the oldest and resemble the “old styles” of playing in *lai yai* (Ibid.: 268). They are played at a slower tempo and with a less varied rhythm, but the performer can add interest by varying his articulation or adding breathing noises to imitate the sound of the wind.

Khaen performances are improvised within an established framework. Older players adhere to this plan more than younger players do, but it was possible for me to hear the basic outlines of this structure in newer recordings. The piece starts with a series of clusters that go back and forth between ones that include most of the pitches from whatever *lai* the piece will be in, and an open fifth between A and E (Miller 1985: 257-58). The player then improvises in a faster tempo that utilizes changes of texture and tessitura to add interest before closing that section with another set of clusters. The next section will be another improvisation in the same manner as the first that ends with clusters again (Ibid.: 258). The performer can keep adding to

the piece, using the same parts of the overall framework, or he can finish the piece after two improvised sections that each end with clusters. Rhythmic variation is limited; instead, Miller states that faster playing makes use of continuous fast, isochronic passagework and slower playing might use continuous dotted patterns. More interest is derived from the stylistic alternation between passages that imitate the tones and rhythmic accents of sung poetry and passages that Miller describes as “tempo giusto” (Ibid.: 258-59).

This information has informed how I listen to recordings as much as it has influenced my own renditions of what I have heard. It was only by chance that I started with *lai yai*, but maybe I was drawn to its simplicity of musical materials and was able to recognize pieces that employed that mode more easily than pieces that use other modes. Reading gave me a type of road map.

4.3 Learning by Ear

Recordings from the Sublime Frequencies label were astonishingly close to the radio programs the mechanic shop across from my house had played at all hours. The pop songs on *Isan Country Groove* had the same twang and lilt, and some of them even had khaen in the backing band. A track of solo khaen playing a slow and haunting melody on *Ethnic Minority Music from Southern Laos*, simply titled “Khene,” fully captured my imagination. A descending melodic motif is played through the whole track, slowly sighing over and over again. The timbre of the instrument is breathy; it is as if the reeds stutter for lack of air at times. The difference in tone quality between inhaled and exhaled phrases is more easily discernible than in other recordings. This track makes the physical effort of the performer present in the sonic product. Based on what I read, I would cautiously categorize this piece as an example of the “wind through trees” group of pieces that depict nature. It lacks the bouncy fast-paced melodies, except

for a short section in the middle of the piece, and the cluster sections are missing. Obviously, my interpretation lacks a lot of the contextual information that would really allow me to state what kind of piece it is, but the little I have is better than none.

My online engagement increased as I found websites about Thai music, but soared once I found instructional videos. Through an initiative centred at Khon Khaen University, researchers have made videos of traditional Isan performances. Of course, these are perfect for learning by ear if you have the inclination and ability to do so, even though they do not have an explicitly-stated pedagogical purpose. However, there are instructional videos available on Youtube, as a later section will explain.

4.4 Online Engagement

4.4.1 Another Western Voice

On the more academic end of the spectrum, my Google searches led to Christopher Adler's website. An acclaimed composer and performer, Adler has written a composer's guide to the instrument, as well as solo and ensemble pieces for the khaen. Quite a few videos and recordings of his pieces and performances are available on Youtube. It was useful to me to see how little the playing technique changed between traditional Isan performers and a modern Western performer. While other Asian free-reed mouth organs have garnered attention from well-known Western composers — John Cage wrote for the *shō* and Unsuk Chin has written for the *sheng* — the khaen has not received such high profile compositional attention, but Adler's pieces cover a broad range of influences to create new musical possibilities for the instrument.²⁰

²⁰ The *shō* and the *sheng* are free-reed mouth organs from Japan and China, respectively.

In another example of online engagement, I purchased the sheet music for five pieces for khaen written between 1997 and 2002. They blend traditional elements, primarily the use of drones, and both small-scale improvisation based on confined sets of pitches and large-scale improvisation that allows the performer to decide the structure of the piece. As well as being beautiful, these pieces advance the khaen's status within the hegemony of contemporary Western classical music.

4.4.2 Watch and Learn: A Western Perspective

Whether on the internet, in Southeast Asia, or in North American performances, Jonny Olsen is regarded as a musical novelty. After becoming enamoured with Southeast Asian culture while working at a Thai restaurant, Olsen travelled to Thailand, where he gained not just a deeper appreciation for the cultures of the region, but purchased his first khaen (Simonini 2008). He interpreted his dreams of playing for princesses as a “prophetic signpost toward his future” and began his musical study in earnest. Through Christopher Adler, Olsen learned of the Thai khaen teacher Ratre Sivilai, and went to the village of Huasai in 2003 to study with Sivilai (Simonini 2008). Simonini writes that through his intensive study of the instrument, Olsen “learned how to sing the sounds of the language before he learned how to speak” (2008).

Olsen won a respected music competition in Khon Kaen, released his first album in 2006, and achieved a level of fame within Thailand and Laos. Since then, his recordings have become hits on the radio and in karaoke bars. He has supplemented his performance career with a role resembling that of a cultural ambassador. According to Simonini's article, “When he dug into the history of his instrument and learned of its Laotian origins, Olsen decided he wanted to become a proselytizing spokesperson for Laotian culture; he abandoned all Thailand connections to focus

entirely on the lesser-known underdog style of *Morlum*” (Simonini 2008). When he plays for enthusiastic Laotian audiences all over the US, he thinks of himself as an ambassador or preservationist: someone who is playing an instrument that has been cast aside, even in its home country.

Perhaps through some fault of the article (though the same tone is present in other press), Olsen seems to cast himself in the unnecessary position of someone who is doing Lao culture a substantial favour. He is incorrect to say that the khaen is a “lost art [that] only appears in pop music,” and his pride for being the first Western player to acquire a high level of fame within Thailand and Laos seems misplaced or ill-advised (Simonini 2008). The khaen is not a lost art, and though it is possible to appreciate his musical contributions, his pride falls closer to self-importance. When he speaks of working with the Lao Heritage Foundation he calls himself “an inspiration to the kids” who say, “Hey, that foreign guy is not Lao but he plays khaen!” Then they get interested and say “Hey I want to play too!” [sic] (Examiner.com 2012). Perhaps it would be more comfortable if the music he was performing was inspirational to the audience, not just to him as a foreign, and therefore higher-status, individual.

Olsen makes instructional videos available on Youtube, though they try to steer viewers towards private khaen lessons conducted over Skype. “Lao Khaen Educational Instruction Video by Jonny Olsen” provides important information and then attempts to teach viewers a common melody. For the first half of the video, questions appear as white text on a black background and the answers are written out over a picture that relates to the topic. For example, when he defines a free reed, it is over a close up of the tuning slot in a single bamboo pipe lying on a woven textile. His instructions for playing the khaen are strangely general, focussing on posture.

The last question posed in the video is “How do you breathe to make a rhythm on the khaen?” Though the question is poorly phrased, this is the most useful part of the video, as he finally demonstrates technique by playing part of a “Lum Tuey Melody.” Olsen suggests that viewers start by singing the melody with nonsense syllables that start with a “d” and practice inhaling and exhaling for four counts each. This should result in something that sounds like unpitched whistling with changes in pitch articulated with a “d” syllable. Viewers are encouraged to develop strong breath support; the text states that “No matter what style of playing your air needs to be in very tight clear bursts” in order for the instrument to sound. There should be no audible difference between inhaled playing and exhaled playing. It is helpful that the khaen plays in the background while Olsen sings and huffs to retain a sense of the melody being learned. The last shot of the video is just the note names written out as letters, with no rhythm given, before it gives way to credits that encourage viewers to contact him to arrange lessons.

The second video is geared more towards teaching viewers how to play a specific song. There is no overview of the instrument or any broad cultural/historical/geographical context given, but the description box has some specialized information about the mode being taught, melodies that use this mode, and how different modes are better suited for different singers. Olsen starts by stating that the purpose of the video is to teach about “khaen tonguing and breathing” using simple notes from the *lai yai* pattern. After showing a picture of a fingering chart, he jumps right in, teaching articulation by telling viewers to say “doodle.” The video progresses through the simple melody, alternating playing khaen with singing and unpitched whistling, while text ensures that viewers know what pitches to play, and in what order. Olsen performs the piece well, but his instructions undermine his message, most clearly in the way line

breaks in the text and his explanations of sections do not correspond with section breaks or phrasing I have determined to be true from a music analysis perspective.

Olsen breaks the short piece into smaller segments, ostensibly for ease of learning. The first segment consists of four pitches with an alternating rhythm that I have transcribed as an eighth note followed by a quarter note; his rendition is heavily swung, but my focus is on grouping, not microtiming (refer to Figure 3).

Figure 3: First four pitches of Olsen's rendition of the lai yai pattern.



He says to articulate this short-long-short-long figure with “doo-doo-dle-doo” and that this should be played on one exhale or inhale. This sense of grouping is undone when he changes the fourth pitch from A to E and extends the next segment to include one more pitch, stretching the length from six eighth note pulses to seven (refer to Figure 4). Perhaps his intent is to help students practice moving from E to A to E to G. It is implied in the video that students will practice these segments (Figure 3 and Figure 4) before moving on to learn new material.

Figure 4: First five pitches of Olsen's rendition of the lai yai pattern.



He sings the section in Figure 4 with the articulation “doo-doo-dle-dah-dle,” but goes on to contradict what he said about the form of this brief piece of music by saying that the “transition section” starts on E, the fourth pitch, articulated as “dah” even though people watching and playing along would have been practicing the first five pitches in sequence as one segment. He spends less time explaining the rest of the piece, even though it does not have segments that repeat, and does not say where the “transition” leads to. Olsen does not define what he describes as a “transition” — whether it is a transition to the next melodic fragment or something else entirely. Given that this is an instructional video, he could be trying to help viewers parse his rendition of the whole melody into sections. Since it is unclear as to what the transition really is, I have considered it to be important simply because he identifies and discusses it. As such, it is necessary to ignore the grouping taught in Figure 4 in favour of a grouping that is structured around the transition section, as shown in subsequent figures. For reference, Figure 5 shows the melody Olsen plays in its ungrouped state. Based on the line breaks that appear when the notes are shown with text, the eighth note groupings are 6+6+7+18 (refer to Figure 6); if we take the transition to start on E like he says, the grouping is 6+6+4+21 (refer to Figure 7).

Figure 8: Olsen's rendition of lai yai transcribed in 4/4 time.



In order to segment the music into smaller groups for learning and performance, I would suggest using a time signature of 6/8 and starting on the sixth eighth note pulse, as shown in Figure 9.

Figure 9: Olsen's rendition of lai yai transcribed in 6/8 time.



Conceptualizing and transcribing the music this way conforms to Western and local grouping rules as I have learned them in a way that the other possibilities Olsen presents do not. It conforms to the way Miller has transcribed examples with the longer durations at the beginning of the bar, as well as to the way I learned in lessons, and what I hear in other examples. The short-long arrangement can also be found at a structural level in pieces that begin with an shorter introductory section that leads into the longer passages that make up the body of a piece. In this transcription (Figure 9), measures always start with the onset of a quarter note duration, and the second half of the bar is marked the same way; this repetition strengthens the case for making these segments. Also, it ends with a full measure. Olsen does not provide an end boundary for what he describes as the transition section, but if we consider it to be the second half of the third complete measure, it allows the second section to begin at the beginning of a bar. This seems to be the most productive way to forge a compromise between what Olsen says, the style that he plays in, and my interpretation. What I hear as the most accented pitches are written as the typical strong beats in this transcription (Figure 9). A transcription in 4/4 using triplets

would yield similar results, but does not allow what I understand to be the section that follows the transition to start at the beginning of a measure, but rather on the third quarter note beat in the second complete measure (refer to Figure 10). Terry Miller's transcriptions of pieces in *lai yai* are written in 2/4 or 4/4 time, but his examples include the opening cluster chords so that the passages that are most similar to what Olsen plays begin on the last quarter note of a measure. Although Miller's transcriptions use dotted rhythms rather than compound time, this choice could be explained by his choice to notate "old style" performances (1985: 259-61). Furthermore, Miller's examples have more repeated notes and passages, which gives me the impression that the music Olsen is playing in this video is best thought of as an excerpt for students to practice before tackling larger pieces of music.



Figure 10: *Lai yai* transcribed in triplets within a 4/4 meter.

The point of my borderline pedantic analysis is not to condemn Olsen, but to illustrate the manner in which his attempt at explanation muddies the waters further. This video makes no claim to Lao, Isan, or Thai authenticity, choosing to use specialized Western language instead, and then using it inconsistently and/or incorrectly. For most viewers, that is probably not an important problem; if you imitate and recreate what he plays, your rendition will be faithful to his original. However, if a student were to try and question his instructions to gain a different, more abstract understanding, they would maybe be left not just confused, but confounded. I would contend that Olsen is teaching in the style that he was taught: he is playing manageable segments that the student can first learn through repetition, and then string together to play the

complete piece. It is the addition of faulty Western theory, maybe used for its legitimizing force, that causes a problem. Theorizing and abstracting are an excellent way of getting to know music, but like any tool they must be used properly to get the best results.

Fortunately, this video is not my only exposure to ideas about how to play the khaen. When taken in combination with the partial information from books, lessons, and recordings, I can start to ask questions that will hopefully lead to productive ways of learning more. As this section demonstrated, Olsen's explanation of *lai yai* is confusing, especially as rhythm and overall structure are concerned. In order to really understand what he means by "transition" sections, I would need to find a source that explains the structure of a khaen performance at a more detailed level than Miller does — probably a khaen player or teacher. On the other hand, it is more possible to solve the question of rhythm and meter that this example poses. To start, Miller established that performers favour either continuous sixteenth notes or dotted figures, based on what tempo they are playing at. His transcriptions support this, and do not use compound time signatures. Other musical examples use a mixture of rhythmic patterns, moving between what could be described as continuous sixteenth notes and dotted rhythms. Originally, I thought this might be a modern development, but it can be heard on the first track, "Suksanaen," of the 1959 album *Music of Thailand* just as prominently as on the album *Musique Pour le Khène/Lam Saravane*, which was recorded in 1978. With this in mind, Olsen's rhythm can be interpreted as a personal stylistic choice made by an informed artist.

4.5 The Ethics of Performance

The task of an (academic) ethnomusicologist is to represent the richness and beauty of a culture through music while not only acknowledging but working to resolve the distance

between two cultures: ours and theirs (Solis 2004:1-2). When we choose to perform, distance is magnified and amplified in the process of transmission when we step on stage to play, or when we take on the role of culture-bearer or teacher. Discussion of the issues at hand is one way to work through them. Gabriel Solis writes that “we ethnomusicologists often flatter ourselves that we are somehow different, countercultural multiculturalists more attuned to the wider world than many of our compatriots, ethnocentric, monolingual folks who always ‘order it mild’ (whereas we always ask for it spicy)” (Solis 2004: 4). In examining Solis’ words and reflecting on my own experience, I can see a type of vulnerability. Being perceived as speaking on behalf of a people, usually a group of people who have less power than me in many ways, or as serving as an ambassador when ill-qualified to do so, places pressure on an individual to be not just an expert, but a sensitive expert who caters to notions of authenticity as dictated by an audience (Ibid.: 11-12).

When I ask myself, “Can I play?,” I am not questioning my technical ability to learn to perform a piece, but questioning the implications of doing so. David Locke provides a very critical viewpoint of teaching and learning in academic world music ensembles: “The very act of teaching an African ensemble fulfills the basic condition of Orientalism: an empowered Occidental subject isolates an Oriental object from its context and then assumes control” (Locke 2004: 185). Though I agree with his statement, my values align more closely with Gabriel Solis and Gage Averill. Solis believes that performing or teaching the music one studied as primary research explains, justifies, and positions what ethnomusicologists do better than any other activity (2004: 2). Averill writes: “I think music performance sensitizes a scholar to aspects of musical performance. I think one has better access to the terminology the musicians use, a better

window into the experience of the musicians, perhaps an advantage in understanding musical sound and in being able to translate that sound somehow or other for an audience” (2004: 96).

The intrinsic value of performing music was recognized in the early formation of ethnomusicology as a discipline. Of course, participant-observation during fieldwork became the norm, but scholars recognized the value of learning to play another kind of music even within the bounds of an institutional setting. As Mantle Hood believed, if students learned from master artists from around the world at a university, they would be better prepared for later fieldwork because they would have a head start on bimusicality (Averill 2004: 97). Ricardo Trimillos cites Charles Seeger, who in response to Hood’s and Alan Merriam’s proposed pathways of study, “[advanced] a corollary notion: learning (and by implication, teaching) through performance commands parity with, if not superiority to, the logocentric processes of conceptualization, reflection, and analysis, which he [characterized] as ‘armchair study’” (in Trimillos 2004: 24).

The struggle with authenticity and credibility is more salient at a theoretical, rather than practical, level. Trimillos categorizes world music ensemble leaders into three types, each with a specific relationship to authenticity, credibility, and ethnographic purity. First, the native culture bearer is presumed to be all-knowing, carrying a broad knowledge of an entire culture, when in actuality, he or she might be unfamiliar with or not a participant in certain practices (Trimillos 2004: 38). His or her non-Western appearance provides visual credibility (Ibid.: 38). Performing ethnomusicologists become suspect when they appear to be “going native” or “playing ethnic” (Ibid.: 42). For example, some audience members would probably be skeptical of my intent if I offered flowers and candles before performing, even though that would be acceptable, even expected, in a Thai musical setting. Trimillos suggests that when these individuals become aware of their lack of perceived cultural credibility, they react by grounding themselves (maybe

immovably) in tradition through an emphasis on older repertoire (2004: 43). The last group of musicians are the foreign practitioners who “[study] and [establish] a performance career within the host society” (Ibid.: 45). They gain credibility by proving their skills in competitions and performances that are geared towards them, and can transfer that to success at home and abroad. Jonny Olsen, the American khaen player who has won competitions in Thailand and performs in Laos, is an excellent representative of this group.

By some standards, performances are supposed to convey a “staged authenticity,” the “conscious, often idealized re-presentation of a cultural setting” that ensembles may struggle to achieve or have a limited desire to provide (Trimillos 2004: 38). David Locke writes of the inappropriateness of costuming, noting how the clothing fits Western bodies differently, how the colour of the costumes reinforces the ensemble’s Caucasian appearance (Locke 2004: 178). In Michelle Kisliuk’s BaAka ensemble, the performers’ non-pygmy appearance is a signal to the audience to expect interpretation rather than representation (Solis 2004: 12). This idea is key; if performers are expected to merely replicate the musical material instead of building on it, especially in today’s connected world that allows prospective audiences to have unprecedented access to recordings, videos, texts, and global travel, they will miss the point of performing. Whether this attitude is applied to costumes or to musical practices like improvisation and composition, the result is harmful. Performances are a stage for the politics of race, power, and representation, but they are equally a sites for cultural development, transmission, and appreciation (Solis 2004: 10).

Gage Averill writes of his positive experience playing with Je Ka Jo, an Afropop band that “retained a focus on dance grooves, politics, and fun, much of which [he] found lacking in

the otherwise extraordinary lesson program ensembles in the department itself” (2004: 102).

Based on his variety of musical experiences he suggests the following:

My solution – which is temporary and partial at best – is to replace mimesis with a self-conscious distantiation; to involve student ensembles in the discourse about cultural representation; to use our rehearsal and performances as platforms for raising questions; to reimagine our musical performances as spaces of dialogic encounter; to problematize the very nature and existence of these ensembles; and to use ensembles to provoke, disrupt, and challenge complacency. In this way, we can make the ensemble encounters a part of a student’s intellectual, personal, aesthetic, *and ethical* transformation. (Averill 2004: 109)

Performance is not only about the sonic product, even when taken in combination with the learning process required to get to that point. The production and transmission of music and culture is an opportunity to advance the ideals of ethnomusicology just as much as those same ideals can be conveyed in a book or article.

The best example I have of this sense of understanding derived from musical experience comes from the way my perception of phrasing has been changed by the different breathing required in khaen performance. As a brass player, I am accustomed to inhaling a large volume of air quickly and then exhaling it over an extended period of time. Since the khaen sounds on the inhale and the exhale, the need for a fast intake of breath disappears. Instead, it is possible to spin an unbroken musical line, with only slight variances based on air direction that are created purposefully, rather than out of physical limitations. Playing this way feels so different; it requires me to have a different relationship with the cycle of my breath, and that consciousness carries over to my listening. Since phrases are not separated as obviously with the breath, I must listen more carefully for other signals. This specific musical understanding could be gleaned from reading about it, but the feeling in my body gives me a concrete, rather than solely conceptual, understanding of what it means for a performer. Subtler ideas have made their way

into my consciousness or been reinforced as I play, like the rootedness of the instrument in a physical place, or the peripheral position within its role as an accompaniment instrument or within the broader context of Thai culture.

To return to the myth from the introduction, ethnomusicology is a method that uses imitation and replication, hopefully accomplished through well-intentioned methodologies. The woman wants to share the beauty of her experience with others, and her way of doing so involves inventing and building an instrument, then getting feedback from others on her performance. Within her process (and mine) are mechanisms of self-discovery. Playing khaen allows me to put abstract ideas into practice – to gain a sense of what different *lai* sound like, what it feels like to inhale over the course of a passage instead of exhale, or to understand how the instrument’s layout determines what pitches can and cannot be played together. Just as a sense of self-discovery can be obtained through living somewhere else, self-discovery comes from playing something else.

4.6 Learning by Heart

My breath ebbs and flows with regularity, my tongue tastes each note, and my fingers stretch to cover the right hole. The khaen’s voice is my voice, translating my thoughts from the familiar back to foreign. Music rises and falls like a bird playing in air currents.

Adam Chapman writes that members of the Lao diaspora living in Australia can “never recover the sensory world of their lives in Laos” (2005:7). Without co-opting those people’s experience, I would agree that in my experience, it is impossible to fully recreate a multi-sensory experience in a new place. Each new place brings new experiences, which accumulate over time to shape the way we relate to the world, whether through sound, sight, or smell. I may not be

able to completely replicate the sensory experience of being in Thailand when I am actually situated in Vancouver, but I can embody aspects of that experience through the practice of performance.

In the West, power derived from knowledge is associated with the head or brain, but in an abstracted way, compared to Thai cultural practices. The head is both a physical and sacred part of the body in Thai culture and bodily gestures are performed in accordance with the power it merits. The higher your *wai* reaches, the more respectful the gesture is and bowing your head is a sign of respect. Conversely, unclean objects should remain as low as possible, and touching someone on the head is considered very rude. For example, when hanging laundry it is best practice to hang socks and underwear below shirts, pants, and dresses because higher space is for “clean” items and socks and underwear are unclean and associated with parts of the body that are closer to the ground.

In *Sounding the Center: History and Aesthetics in Thai Buddhist Performance* (2001), Deborah Wong describes the relationship between bodies and power in the context of music, ritual, and performance as follows:

The habits and practices described above point to a Thai aesthetic of materiality and the location of teachers (actually, their bodies) in a physical present that opens up the material past. Teachers interact with students in wonderfully physical terms. When learning a piece, I (like any Thai music student) interacted not with a sheet of notated music but with my teacher’s body: I followed his sounds and his movements in space as best I could with my hands — that is, with *my* body. In ritual performance, the teacher’s body is occupied — no, *is* — the body of a being from the ancient past. Teachers put power into the bodies of students by touching them meaningfully — with writing objects, with instruments, with water and breath. Knowledge-as-power is material and materialized. (2001: 71)

Power resides somewhere, whether in an object, a symbol, or a person’s body, not as a purely abstract, disembodied idea (Wong 2001: 71). In Thai culture, power is acquired, applied,

and acknowledged differently than in a modern Western context; the body is not something to be transcended, but rather to be fully occupied and used. Like Wong, I had to change my relationship and use of my body when in Thailand to fit into cultural expectations (Wong 2001: 219). My clothing and grooming needed to be more polished in order to show a proper amount of respect to those around me with more power and so that I could access the power I was supposed to have and use. For the first time, I wore make-up every day and became accustomed to commentary on people's outward appearance. My body language had to change; making *wai* and bowing became second nature, replacing waving to a neighbour. I accepted my students' *wais* and bows at the beginning of every class and in passing, and during a *wai kru* ritual, conferred my power as a teacher and the power of knowledge when I rubbed their heads as they knelt before me. Even inward qualities are described in embodied terms; if someone is generous, they are "*naam jai*" (literally, water heart), meaning that things flow from their heart. Therefore, by restoring a physical presence to the exchange of musical information, I am restoring power in accordance in a culturally appropriate way.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

In light of the relatively shallow pool of ethnomusicological research on Southeast Asian topics compared to other parts of the world, work that adds to or updates that body of knowledge can be considered significant. The research herein adds a different voice to the existing discussion. As a female scholar, my experiences are different from men's, especially those from within gendered Thai culture. It is not just that women typically do not play the khaen, it is that the Thai feminine value of *khwaamwaan* (sweetness) conflicts with the idea of a rigorous and meticulous Western scholar, as do the importance of deference and respect.²¹ Whereas other scholars have positioned themselves in major Isan cities that are much closer to Bangkok, I lived in a small village on the banks of the Mekong River, less than an hour from one of the bridges to Laos. I would suggest that the rural geography of the area where I lived shaped my thinking about the presence of nature in Thai culture. My experience as a teacher gave me a sense of the disparity Isan faces, which, therefore, developed my political perspective. Perhaps as a result, teaching children and teenagers reinforced a sense of urgency and importance for this kind of work, because I want my former students to have not just a sense of pride in their culture, but access to the same opportunities and benefits as everyone else has.

As the most influential book written in English on the khaen was published in 1985, I see the need for updated research. Ethnomusicology has an ever-widening scope, thus, my research tackles a broader range of subjects in a different reflexive light than Terry Miller's. As a foundational text exists, one of the aims of my research was to build on that in order to reveal the

²¹ See "The *Wai Khruu* as a Gendered Cultural System" in Deborah Wong's *Sounding the Center: History and Aesthetics in Thai Buddhist Performance* (2001) for a detailed and nuanced perspective on gender and research experience in Thailand.

social and musical significance of the khaen, which, in turn, would legitimize my decision to perform. Moving forward, I would like to devote the equivalent amount of time and effort to develop my proficiency on the instrument as I devoted to creating a piece of more academically-oriented scholarship.

I would acknowledge that this project was limited by time and language. Simply put, I would have moved more quickly in my lessons, asked more questions, and used every moment more efficiently if I knew that my time in Thailand was going to be a quarter of what I intended. With more knowledge and faculty with the Thai language, I could have interacted with people more while I was there, and been able to use Thai language sources in my research.

Still, these potential shortcomings allowed my focus to move towards the digital realm. Developing a method for studying online topics seriously is a challenge that many others have taken on, and this project has tested one possible avenue for future study.

In an increasingly globalized, developed, and connected world, it is essential that we remember the power of our individual efforts to celebrate the accomplishments of human creativity. Information and ideas travel at a startling rate, racing around the world even faster than modern transportation. As this document intends to show, in addition to the study of human interaction through firsthand experience, and by analyzing the factors that contribute to knowledge acquisition and dissemination — history, geography, technology — applied musical performance is a mechanism for understanding the world we live in. When we make music, we re-enchant instead of reduce.

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