

of the role of music and sung poetry in shaping Hmong identity, transforming the drab tapestry of life into an object of beauty born of the joys of love or the laments and sorrows of separation, death and the dreaded fate of being orphaned, an experience twice-doomed because one not only has no parents in the real world to give love and shelter and to help negotiate and pay a future "bride price," but also no opportunity to feel good about "feeding" the homeless spirits of one's own unknown parents and ancestors. "The Story of the Orphan Mu Hu," told originally in Hmong by Xia Long Mua, is but one tale among many of the genre of orphan stories so common to all Southeast Asian cultures. This one is delightfully picaresque, filled with talking otters and crabs, flying tigresses and multi-headed dragons. Anything becomes possible in the imagined and real Hmong world and is made entertaining and believable through magic and transformations between the human and animal world. The middle article is an annotated translation of excerpts from an "Outline of Marriage Rites" by Yay Txooy Tsawb and David Strecker. One of the rites is "marriage by abduction," which is not quite as awful as it sounds, and actually and "logically" occurred in the life of May Xiong, transmitter of the last and most dramatic piece in the collection of articles.

The publication *The Hmong World* is auspicious in many regards. It is solid scholarship of an area and a people that have been neglected, misunderstood, mistreated, and misused for military ends. Through this series, we will continue to be better informed and inspired by a remarkable and resilient people. The publisher, Yale Southeast Asia Studies, would do well to print subsequent volumes with proportional spacing to improve the esthetics and ease of reading. The editors should likewise consider including an appendix giving some instruction in how to pronounce the opaque romanized spellings of Hmong dialects, White, Green or other hues. Otherwise, the publisher and editors have shown themselves to be true connoisseurs of detail and quality. Several of the authors have been supported in their work, which might not have been fundable elsewhere, by grants from the Indochina Studies Program of the Social Science Research Council. Likewise, the Luce Foundation is to be commended for its support in the actual publication. *The Hmong World* can be ordered directly from Yale Southeast Asia Studies, Box 13A Yale Station, New Haven, CT 06520.

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#### THAILAND

MILLER, TERRY E. *Traditional Music of the Lao: Kaen Playing and Mawlum Singing in Northeast Thailand*. Contributions in Intercultural and Comparative Studies, No. 13. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985. Xxii+333 pages. Photographs, maps, appendix, glossary, select bibliography, discography, and index. Hardcover US\$47.50; ISBN 0-313-24765-X.

This book is the first major work in English or any other language on the traditional singing and mouth organ playing of the Lao. This music has until now only been treated in shorter articles, and therefore this book is a most welcome contribution to the understanding of one of the interesting musical cultures of Southeast Asia, of equal

importance to the reader interested in the music and in the traditional culture and literature of Southeast Asia. It is a very detailed study which describes the musical, organological, poetical, cultural and economic aspects of this unique tradition of the Lao, the dominant ethnic group of Northeast Thailand.

The book is based on data gathered during Miller's field work in rural Northeast Thailand, mainly in the Roi-et Province, from 1972 to 1974. During this period he witnessed a great number of traditional song performances and recorded and interviewed many singers and mouth organ players. He presents his material in what may be called a "folk systematic" way. He uses the local genres, terms, and categories in the way his informants explained them to him, but combines local classification with his own Western analytical thinking. He hands his empirical material forward to the reader honestly and does not squeeze it into any preconceived analytical framework. The many case studies concerning genres, repertory and musicians, and the use of local nomenclature enable the students of traditional Lao music and literature to use his information now fifteen years later and to evaluate to what degree the traditions have changed or disappeared. Readers not interested in details can easily jump over the many Lao terms and concentrate on the aspects of Lao music that interest them most.

After an introductory chapter on Northeastern Thai music and its cultural context, the book is clearly structured in two parts: Chapters II-IV deal with the song traditions and chapters V-VI with the mouth organ and its music. Readers not acquainted with the Thai language and mainly interested in the musical side may be well advised to skip over the song chapters and return to them later after having read the two last chapters.

The book's first chapter gives a short but informative description of the cycle of agricultural and religious festivals which call for musical performances. There follows an introduction to the Lao language, scripts, and traditional literature—a much needed frame of reference for the reader for whom these subjects are new. Central Thai is a tonal language of five tones, while the Northeastern dialect of Roi-et carries seven tones with natural consequences for the way this language is sung. The Lao mouth organ—the *kaen*—is the dominant traditional instrument of the Northeast, but Miller also briefly describes the other musical instruments of the area, among others the lute *sing*, the free reed buffalo horn, and the various drum types also used elsewhere in Thailand. Miller's use of "folk classification" is demonstrated in his first short presentation of the terms used by the Lao in describing their songs and singers: "The definition of song as heightened speech best prepares the reader for understanding the various Siamese and Lao words which are usually translated 'to sing' . . . *Lum* is a kind of song in which the words are primary, the melody being adjusted to fit the sound and grouping of the words . . . A Lao singer is called a *mawlum* . . . *maw* means a skilled person" (22-23). But when it comes to the analysis of the musical structures as such, Miller has to apply western analytical categories: "Lao musical theory is neither written nor articulated systematically. Players and singers imply the distinction of scales and rhythms in nontechnical language which grows out of their classification of vocal genres. In the minds of performers, however, there are no abstract concepts of scale or meter and thus no exact terms for them" (23).

In Chapter VI Miller describes and analyzes the *kaen* playing of Northeast Thailand using a combination of local and western concepts. "The . . . discussion is a Westerner's attempt to interpret this material according to Lao practice" (228). The Lao *kaen* players recognize and name five modes all based on pentatonic scales extracted from the fifteen tones available of the *kaen* with sixteen pipes most commonly used today in the Northeast. Pieces are improvised in all modes and each mode has

its own typical melodic figures and sustained tones which give it its own character and sound. Shifts from one mode to another occur. Some modes are rather close and impossible to distinguish for the untrained ear. Based on the good musical transcriptions from his field recordings Miller analyzes in detail the characteristics of the improvisation in the different modes. He also investigates the differences between a slow and rather dignified style represented by old players and a faster, more brilliant style incorporating new material found with younger musicians. The best and most versatile of Miller's sixteen *kaen* players was a blind musician with a repertory that covers all *kaen* genres.

Besides the improvisation in the five modes most players also know a number of fixed melodies which are used for solo playing. But formal solo performances are very rare. The *kaen* is primarily an instrument of accompaniment for *mawlum* singing. The musicians receive a much lower fee than the singers and they have to farm to make a living. However, good *kaen* accompaniment is absolutely necessary to produce a good *mawlum* performance, and in the early seventies, when Miller did his field work, good *kaen* players still abounded in the villages of the Northeast. In the cities the *kaen* tends to be considered a rustic and somewhat backward instrument.

The instrument itself is described in Chapter V: sixteen tuned bamboo pipes with free metal reeds inserted in a windchest of wood. *Kaens* with six, fourteen and eighteen pipes also exist, but are now rarely used. The tones are produced both by inhaling and exhaling, but only when a fingerhole on the pipes is covered. The pipes are ordered in a seemingly illogical order, but Miller clearly explains this arrangement from his analysis of the tone sequences of the melodies: "The *kaen's* pitch arrangement might be compared to a typewriter keyboard whose order of letters makes as much sense as the *kaen's* pitch arrangement but fits the fingers for a given language" (192-193). Miller has investigated the tuning of the instrument and finds it close to the Western seven tone scale. This sets Lao music clearly apart from central Thai music which uses intervals, some of which sound false to the Western ear. Miller reproduces the well-known assumption that "there are seven equi-distant intervals in an octave" (214) of Thai music. This theory formulated by Western musicologists has been severely criticized (see Fuller 1979), but Miller's observation of different tuning systems in Central and Northeast Thailand is important nevertheless.

Chapter V also contains a very detailed description of how the *kaen* is made, documented with good photos, and a section on the myths and history of the mouth organ. The history and origin of the instrument is very sketchy perhaps because the written and iconographic sources are few. But a discussion of the *kaen's* connection to other mouth organ types in Southeast Asia and China would have been appropriate. Mouth organs with windchests of calabash or wood are used by several of the ethnic groups in the hills of Northern Thailand—the Lisu, Lahu, Akha and Hmong—and the calabash mouth organ was one of the old Chinese instruments documented as early as 1100 B.C.

The important central chapters of Miller's book concentrate on the various styles and genres of *mawlum* singing in the Northeast. This way of singing has changed rapidly in recent years and Miller's material documents the situation in the early seventies. So "it is likely that as time continues, more and more of what I have written about Northeast Thai culture will change from contemporary to historical description" (xvii). Even so, Miller's descriptions and analysis of *mawlum* singing is a must for anyone who wants to approach the subject today.

In Chapters II and III Miller treats the nontheatrical and the theatrical genres of *mawlum* singing. He has found fifteen different varieties of *mawlum*, some of which he describes in detail. The old *mawlum plün* performed by one singer accompanied by

*kaen* is epic in character and based on written Buddhist stories. It is now a nearly extinct genre but was formerly very common in the Northeast. Much more vital is the *lum glawn* performed by two singers—normally male and female—on a little platform in the village and accompanied by *kaen*. The song texts are based on written poetry, contrary to what many Westerners who have heard this music think. The poetry treats subjects of Buddhist moral and Lao history. However, “the more characteristic type of *lum glawn* heard today consists partly of questions and answers but dwells more on love, usually an imagined love affair proceeding between the two singers” (50). The singers are professionals and travel extensively in the Northeast even if most of them also farm. Miller vividly describes the *mawlum* performance which lasts from 9 p.m. to close before daybreak. He follows the behavior of the singers and the reactions of the audience and analyzes the development of the performance from a textual and musical point of view. He outlines the structure of traditional Lao poetry in which the poetic effect is created mostly by alliterations and regular sequences of word tones, and he explains the overall musical design for a whole night of *mawlum* singing. With the help of long musical transcriptions he follows the music through the night and demonstrates how the change of melodic mode close to the end of the performance is applied as a formal device. A very interesting question is how the singer generates his improvised melody—the text is memorized—and how this melody corresponds to the word tones. “It might be assumed that the *lum* principle, with melody generated from word-tones, indicates complete coordination between these two elements” (142), states Miller. However, he gives the reader no possibility to compare word tones and melodic line as he does not give any tone indications in his romanized transcriptions of the Lao texts. We have—willingly—to trust him, when he gives statistics which show a very high correspondence but not a complete coordination.

Urban dwellers who are heavily influenced by Western norms and culture hold *mawlum* in low esteem, but in the villages it is still a living and popular art. So popular, indeed, that it has been used by politicians in their political campaigns. The Thai government and the United States Information Service also have used *mawlum* for information and propaganda. Miller treats his subject in great detail and he gives many case stories of single singers and teachers which demonstrates how the *mawlum* singer is an integrated part of rural life—a fellow farmer who is esteemed for his creative abilities. “Their most significant role is that of preserver of tradition. Though they are under great pressure from urban-oriented audiences to abandon their traditions in favor of more progressive trends, they yield no more than is necessary to maintain their competitive edge” (62). The old and strong position of *mawlum* in the villages is demonstrated by the fact that a special kind of *mawlum* is still used for spirit ceremonies for diseased persons. Miller has witnessed and recorded some of these ceremonies performed by old women accompanied by *kaen* and he describes the ceremony and its relation to the spirit beliefs of the Northeast.

The *lum glawn* was still popular in the seventies among older people, but it was losing ground to the more modern theatrical genres *lum moo* and *lum plin*. These genres are much more open to modern trends because they compete with movies and popular music groups. Theatrical *mawlum* is of recent origin, developed as a Lao adaptation of the Central Thai popular theater. The troupes consist of approximately twenty-five persons. The performers are in colorful costumes and act on an interim stage put up in the village with many lights and electric amplification. They are accompanied by *kaen* players but also by modern instruments such as conga and drum sets. The stories, however, are of Lao origin and Miller gives some of them in résumé.

The most recent and musically least demanding of the theatrical *mawlum*—the *mawlum plün*—also uses stories of Central Thai origin. They are performed in a style heavily influenced by modern pop music, and Miller expresses fears that this degenerated genre will be even more popular in the future. It is a pity that he has not visited Thailand since he did his fieldwork to report on the actual situation today.

Miller's own spelling of Thai and Lao words has been used in this review which gives only very few of the hundreds of local concepts, titles, names, and terms used in the book. Miller uses a transcription system of his own invention suited for English readers, but it must be considered a shortcoming that the many Lao and Thai terms are not transcribed in a more strict linguistic fashion. The typical user of this book will have some previous knowledge of Thai or Thai terms and will be confused to see them spelled in a very individualistic manner. Especially the lack of tonal indications is a problem when an essential part of the study deals with the relation between words and melody. Fortunately all Lao and Thai terms are listed in a glossary at the end of the book with the spelling in the Thai alphabet and transcriptions in the Haas romanization with tonal marks. This glossary at the same time is a small dictionary as it gives a short explanation of all the terms listed.

While reading the book one often wants to be able to hear the impressive sound of the *kaen* and the dynamic drive of the *mawlum* singing and one feels the need to follow in sound the observations explained in the text—even the best transcriptions cannot replace the actual sound of the music. It is a pity that the book is not accompanied by a music cassette with examples. One must rely on the records listed in the discography.

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1979 Book review: David Morton: The traditional music of Thailand. Berkeley. University of California Press, 1976. *Ethnomusicology* 23: 339-343.

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MISCHUNG, ROLAND. *Religion und Wirklichkeitsvorstellungen in einem Karen-Dorf Nordwest-Thailands* [Religion and concepts of reality in a Karen village of northwest Thailand]. Studien zur Kulturkunde 69. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag Wiesbaden, 1984. Xv+362 pages. 16 plates. Paper DM 74.—; ISBN 3-515-03227-4. (In German)

The volume under consideration presents the results of eight months' research, especially in one Sgaw (*Cgaū* in the transcription used by Mischung) Karen village in Chiang Mai province in northern Thailand. Through close and friendly relations with many of the villagers and perspicacious observations, Mischung has managed to collect an impressive amount of material which he presents in a clear and enlightening way.

Yet to the present reviewer, the book has been difficult and depressing to read, because the tragedy of the doomed minority cultures of Southeast Asia is made very clear in the work.