



Håkan Lundström, *I will Send my Song: Kammu Vocal Genres in the Singing of Kam Raw*

Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2010. 237 pages + compact disc. Hardback, £50.00; paperback, £18.99; ISBN 978-87-91114-23-6 (hardback); ISBN 978-87-91114-32-8 (paperback).



Håkan Lundström and Damrong Tayanin, *Kammu Songs: The Songs of Kam Raw*

Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2006. 303 pages, illustrated. Paperback, £18.99; Appendix 1: Comments on the Songs; Appendix 2: Index of Kam Raw's Repertoire. ISBN 978-87-91114-24-3.

How to describe a repertoire which is constantly changing? How to write songs which have never existed in fixed form but rather are combined and interwoven depending on the circumstances of performance? How then to elaborate a standardized system of transcription of this repertoire without betraying its fluid and flexible nature? These are a few of the questions underlying the two books under review, which are the latest publications of the Kammu Language and Folklore Project of the Institute of East Asian Languages at Lund University. Founded in 1972 and directed until recently by the late Kristina Lindell, this project has produced major achievements in folklore, linguistics, and ethnomusicology and published numerous books and articles on Kammu culture and oral literature. The Kammu (sometimes also written Khmu or Kmhmu) are a Mon-Khmer speaking population of Laos and the largest minority in the country (11 percent of the total

population). They are mostly found in the northern provinces (where they constitute the overwhelming local majorities), as well as in neighboring regions of Northern Thailand, South China, and Northern Vietnam. The Kammu Language and Folklore Project originated in fieldwork conducted in 1971–1972 in Lampang, a city in Northern Thailand where numerous Khmu laborers from Laos come to work for few months or years (EGEROD and SØRENSEN, 1976). There, Kristina Lindell met a Khmu man named Kam Raw, who became her translator, assistant, and finally her most important informant. In 1974, Kam Raw moved to Sweden where he was known under his Thai name, Damrong Tayanin. He died in April 2011.

Håkan Lundström began his research on Kammu music in 1976 after meeting Kam Raw and has published several articles on the topic, focusing mainly on the relations between music and the farming year (LUNDSTRÖM and TAYANIN, 1982), on the gongs and drums (LUNDSTRÖM and TAYANIN, 1981a and 1981b), and on singing and music terminology (LUNDSTRÖM, 1984). The first of the two books under review here is also his PhD dissertation and was first published in 1999 as a printout and was then published in 2005 by the University of Hawai'i Press. It focuses on the relations between Kammu orally transmitted poems or “songs” (*trnəəm*, low tone, thereafter *trneem*) and their vocal genres, especially the most sophisticated one called *təəm* (high tone, thereafter *teem*), through the study of Kam Raw’s repertoire (around five hundred records representing one hundred and forty songs). This first book is a prerequisite for the second one, which is more concerned with the presentation of Kam Raw’s repertoire and is also worth reading. The nonspecialist will appreciate the first part which summarizes in very simple language the findings of the first volume, while researchers or students engaged in fieldwork in a Kammu environment will focus more on the second and third parts where they will find the complete texts of songs translated and commented on in English as well as an index of Kam Raw’s repertoire.

Singing was, and in many respects still is, a very important part of Kammu social life and it is performed in many different contexts in or outside villages. Young children learn to sing poems and to play certain musical instruments especially while living in the field huts during the rainy season in August and September. They usually start singing *trneem* under the *brlii* vocal genre (low tone, thereafter *brlii*), which is simpler than *teem* and can also be performed in the village when no feast is going on. Other genres include lullaby songs, weeping songs, or songs of longing, and all are based on short, characteristic melodic motifs which are repeated with variations. They can be seen as various techniques for performing *trneem* though many poems are nonetheless closely linked to specific situations and therefore not sung in more than one vocal genre. As far as the *teem* genre is concerned, there are also regional variations in rhythm and melodic movements which parallel more or less the cultural and/or dialectal subdivisions, known as *tmoy* among the Khmu of Laos (EVRARD, 2007). A similar pattern of area melodies is found among neighboring people, as with the *lam* and the *khap* of the Laotian tradition. Examples of these various vocal genres and area melodies are given in the CD inserted in *I Will Send My Song* which also contains records of *teem* dialogues as well as examples of pronunciation for many of the Kammu words used in the book.

The vocal genre called *teem* is the most sophisticated since it allows the singer to use a variety of musical and poetic techniques to perform the *trneem*. The words of the *trneem* normally fall into two stanzas, each of which contains four lines, tied together by parallelism and rhymes. The first stanza is metaphorical and serves as a poetic parallel to the second one which has a more concrete meaning. These characteristics serve to memorize the poem and to recreate it according to the social and ritual context of the performance (time, place, singer's sex, audience, and so on) using a large repertoire of embellishment words, segments, suites, and interwoven combinations. The major reference source for poetic imagery is nature, with plants and animal names used for association and parallelism between the stanzas. Chapter 6 of *I Will Send My Song* provides an interesting list of Kammu nature symbols which the author explains and compares to similar examples of nature symbolism in ancient Chinese poetry. However, the many aspects of associative qualities in nature images make the interpretation rather open and closely related to contextual factors: the same *trneem* is likely to be given different meanings in different contexts, which means that even a rather limited repertoire may cover a wide range of situations and opportunities.

One important function of *trneem* is to establish or reconfirm social relations between peoples or groups of peoples and for that reason, they are rarely sung alone but rather are performed in dialogue. In that respect, they belong to a widespread mono-melodic singing style known as *shange* (mountain songs) in China or "alternating songs" in Western terminology, though these are not limited to situations of singing exchanges or courting songs. Feasting songs are clearly the dominating category in Kam Raw's repertoire and can be subdivided into many genres such as greeting songs, praising and self-depreciating songs, songs for special rituals (such as the rice soul feast, the weeding feast, the harvest feast, or the drum giving feast) and finally songs about departure and longing. Interestingly, this last genre has gained in importance during the last decades since it is now used widely by the Kammu who stay abroad in Europe or in the USA. Such songs are often recorded by cassette tapes, compact discs, or video discs, and sent as letters to relatives, mixed with spoken messages.

The development of these new social forms of singing leads Håkan Lundström to share interesting ideas in the last pages of *I Will Send My Song* on the ambivalent consequences of globalization and national integration for Kammu culture. Indisputably, the knowledge and the use of *trneem* are slowly disappearing among the Kammu in Laos, especially among the young generation who tend to adopt the Lao language. In official performances, *teem* singing becomes secondary to so-called "traditional" dances recently choreographed with the help or under the influence of professional groups of artists funded by the state. Simultaneously however, other tendencies are going in the opposite direction. While radio and television bring new musical forms and constitute powerful vectors for cultural assimilation in the Lao (or Thai) social space, they also allow the perpetuation of an ethnic and/or regional sense of identity, as shown with the daily broadcast of a program in the Kammu language by Lao national radio. They also lead to the increasing communication of local genres of *teem* and to the propagation of the

most popular ones, such as the *ceeməəy*, the Luang Prabang style of *teem* (CD, track twenty-one). Similarly, these new media also facilitate the communication between the Kammu from Laos, whose culture is changing rapidly, and those living abroad who keep alive the old *teem* styles. In that respect, Kam Raw's itinerary epitomizes both the "freezing effect" of exile on one's own repertoire and the simultaneous increase of expertise brought by the constant interaction with academics as well as Kammu from other areas. Paradoxically then, the same factors which endanger the transmission of sung oral poems (globalization, new media, cultural assimilation, exile, and so on) can also provide a cultural reflexivity which ultimately contributes to their revitalization. Hopefully, Håkan Lundström will now have the opportunity to carry on his research directly in Laos in order to provide us with more contemporary examples of *teem* usage, transmission, transformation, and performances in the Kammu villages of the country.

REFERENCES

- EGEROD, Søren, and Per SØRENSEN
 1976 *Lampang Reports*. Special publications no. 5. Copenhagen: The Scandinavian Institute of Asian Studies.
- EVRRARD, Olivier
 2007 Interethnic systems and localized identities: The Khmu subgroups in North-West Laos. In *Social Dynamics in the Highlands of Southeast Asia: Reconsidering Political Systems of Highland Burma* by E. R. Leach, François Robinne and Mandy Sadan, eds., 127–59. Leiden: Brill.
- LUNDSTRÖM, Håkan
 1984 A Kammu song and its structure. *Asian Folklore Studies* 43: 29–39.
- LUNDSTRÖM, Håkan, and Damrong TAYANIN
 1981a Kammu gongs and drums (1): The kettlegong, gongs, and cymbals. *Asian Folklore Studies* 40: 65–86.
 1981b Kammu gongs and drums (2): The long wooden drum and other drums. *Asian Folklore Studies* 40: 173–89.
 1982 Music in the fields. In *The Kammu year: Its lore and music*, Kristinal Lindell et al., eds., 60–160. Scandinavian Institute of Asian Studies, Studies on Asian Topics no. 4. London and Malmö: Curzon Press.

Olivier Evrard
Institut de Recherche pour le Développement, France