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Mon Music for Thai Deaths

Ethnicity and Status in Thai Urban Funerals

Abstract

In the past seventy years, Mon musical practices have completely replaced Thai music at funerals. Death ritual is perhaps *the* rite of passage, yet the performance practices surrounding death are always deeply tied to worldly concerns. Why, then, do Bangkok Thais use a (seemingly) foreign music in their own funerals? This article focuses on the three-day funeral of a musician's wife. Drawing on fieldwork conducted in 1994, I situate this event in terms of contemporary funeral practice in Bangkok and its historical development. Many Thai dance-drama traditions and much of its music is closely tied to ritual in general. For centuries Thai Buddhist funeral practices have included many forms of entertainment and performance. I examine a clear but gradual change in funeral music practice, and suggest that this change is directly linked to the growth of the Thai middle class. I also suggest that a convergence of the past, present, and the Other within the performances at funerals is at the heart of contemporary Bangkok funeral practice.

Key words: Thailand—Mon—funeral music—death ritual—funerals—the Other

WHEN I WAS growing up,” a Thai music professor said to me,¹ “performers used to joke that if they needed to find a musician friend, they would just look at the sky and see which temple crematory towers had smoke coming out of them.”

These friends were not dead; rather, they were performing at Thai funerals, probably on Mon instruments. This essay focuses on the confluence of class, ethnicity, and the performing arts in the funerals of central Thailand, especially Bangkok.² I will try to explain why the traditional funeral music of central Thailand has virtually disappeared and been replaced by a music ensemble of Mon origin. Performance of any kind, anywhere, is always intimately linked to other cultural domains, and the performance traditions of Thailand (as elsewhere) speak to differential class, status, and power, shaped by gender, ethnicity, region, etc. I began my research in 1994 with a fairly simple set of questions: When did the Mon instrumental ensemble enter Thailand? When did it become the preferred form of Thai funeral music? Why do Thai musicians play it today? I soon realized that to answer these questions, I would also have to address the history of royal funeral practices, the changing architecture and economics of urban temples, and Thai attitudes toward the strange, the foreign, and the ethnic.

Though I focus on death ritual, I am more broadly concerned with the cultural dynamics of Thai practices of enculturation and appropriation. Thailand has long been a cultural crossroads, and the Thai enthusiasm for exploring and then absorbing outside influences is frequently remarked upon. I would therefore argue that the Thai adoption of a foreign musical practice is related to broader cultural practices of Thai nationalism, capitalism, modernization, and the social factors created by all three.

Quite a few ethnographies of Southeast Asian expressive cultures have addressed questions of culture contact, appropriation, and assimilation. Almost all note how the emergent modern nation-states of Southeast Asia have influenced expressive cultures. Some also show that the ways in which

the Other (e.g., smaller minority groups) absorbs the cultural technologies of colonialism or the nation-state, or the ways in which the nation-state absorbs the Other, is always shaped by specific histories. Several ethnographies offer detailed portraits of performance in Indonesia (especially Java) as a means to consider the social and aesthetic forces of modernization. SUMARSAM's extended study of Islamic and colonial influences on Javanese gamelan provides a historical perspective on "the localization of foreign elements" in a musical tradition self-consciously maintained and constantly refashioned as part of traditional Javanese culture (1992, 11). Similarly, Marina ROSEMAN shows how the Temiar, an indigenous people of Malaysia, absorb "airplanes, parachute drops, perfume oils, wristwatches, Malays, Chinese, British, Japanese (during World War II), and anthropologists" into their landscapes of ritual healers and dream revelation (1991, 68), and thus actively engage with different manifestations of the Malaysian nation-state. Finally, James PEACOCK has shown how *ludruk*, a genre of urban street theater in the Javanese city of Surabaya, is almost entirely devoted to questions of modernization and social mobility: as he puts it, "a favorite *ludruk* fantasy depicts a *kampung* [urban slum] person becoming an elite *kota* [city] person" (1968, 140). Javanese street theater thus enacts key narratives of social possibility.

Several scholars have also provided salient warnings that ritual, performance, and modernization should not necessarily be read as mutually or automatically interconstitutive. John PEMBERTON struggles with the concept and construct of ritual (*upacara*) in New Order Indonesia, finding that it is closely linked to post-1965 political constructs like "tradition" and "origins," which in turn are linked to colonial ideas of Java as a place, a culture, and a history. Pemberton insists that the very attempt to discuss ritual in a New Order environment necessitates an examination of the political discourses that "contain and enframe" such events. He writes, "no sooner is this kind of critique initiated, than it begins to turn back on itself, troubling its own moves by much the same logic that might question New Order discourse" (1994, 15). Questioning the discourses of a politicized modernism, in other words, is a process that folds back on itself and, in this case, implicates the entire study of ritual.

As I turn to Thai death ritual and consider its musical enactments of social status, I am mindful of Michael TAUSSIG's pointed reminders that the material manifestations of social relations are not easily "read" (1980). Rather than succumb to a simple social analysis of Thai funeral music as an esoteric practice or as a behavior that directly symbolizes particular social relations, I try to 'read' it historically over time as well as between times, places, and peoples. In an urban Thai funeral, more is more—the quantity

of material goods and the length of performance(s) quite literally “speak” status. But status in late-twentieth-century Bangkok is emergent and contingent, based on odd mixtures of wealth, education, militarism, and other hallmarks of this Newly Industrialized Nation (NIC). Taussig urges us away from simple one-to-one interpretations, noting that earlier symbolic anthropologists tended to

analyze symbols and collective representations as emanations of something they call “social structure,” reify structure, and in so doing uncritically accept society’s distorted projection of itself.... But unless we realize that the social relations thus signified are themselves signs and social constructs defined by categories of thought that are also the product of society and history, we remain victims of and apologists for the semiotic that we are seeking to understand. (1980, 9)

I believe the Mon funeral ensemble is a sign of material relations between Mons and Thais, and among Thais themselves, but I will resist any easy interpretation of the instruments and their music as embodying authentic historical realities. Rather, these instruments and the sounds they make are a ritual technology set in motion by changing class structures. They represent one historical moment (out of many) when Thais used expressive culture to speak to other concerns—in this case, making a life passage ritual “count” for all it was worth.

CENTRAL THAI FUNERAL PRACTICES IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Theravada Buddhists cremate their dead, and central Thai Buddhist funerals are flexible rituals of varying length that lead up to the actual cremation of the deceased. Cremation rites always take place at temples (*wat*),³ but the specific customs surrounding this climactic moment have changed considerably in the last century.

Until the early twentieth century, cremation was forbidden within Bangkok’s city walls for rich and poor alike (TAMBIAH 1984, 71; 357, n.45).⁴ The Norwegian natural-scientist-cum-explorer Carl BOCK noted that in 1881–82, Wat Saket, just outside the city walls,⁵ was a major crematorium for the poor (1985 [1884], 53–60). He stated that individuals of means were cremated anywhere from five days to six months after death, but that the poor were generally cremated the day after death. From his account, it seems that specific funeral practices in the late nineteenth century, as in the present, depended on the status and the amount of money that a family was able to spend. He described a “middle-class funeral” as follows:

In the case of an ordinary individual, the corpse is taken to the cremation ground in a wooden coffin of the commonest make, plastered outside with wall-paper—sometimes with a loose lid, or sometimes merely a piece of white calico serving as a covering. The body is invariably borne two or three times round the cremation-altar, which is prepared for the reception of the coffin by a wood fire being laid, over which a kind of grid-iron is placed, upon which the coffin is finally deposited. Sometimes a sort of canopy is constructed over the coffin, of white and yellow cloth, supported on bamboo sticks, and ornamented with tinsel. All the while the priests murmur prayers until the signal is given to light the fire. (1985, 56)

BOCK also noted that “it will easily be seen that the atmosphere of the charnel-ground of Wat Sikheth [i.e., Saket] is not of the sweetest, and the sights are not of the most delightful” (1985, 60), and he provided gruesome descriptions of the cremations of paupers and criminals, and of the victims of the cholera epidemic of 1881. The corpses of criminals and the poor were ignominiously taken to a particular part of the temple grounds and their bodies were cut open to attract a waiting crowd of vultures, crows, and dogs, who then removed most of the corpses’ flesh; later, the remaining bones were gathered and burned. During a cholera epidemic, Bock noted that between 60 to 120 bodies were brought to the temple every day and buried in mass graves with quick lime (1985, 57–60).

Today, in the mid-1990s, Wat Saket is a very different place: though the temple still holds funerals, the vultures are long gone and the dead are treated with considerably more decorum. Most temples now have crematoriums, which are tall stately buildings with ovens discreetly concealed inside a small room. Bangkok’s landscape is punctuated by their tall, slender chimneys; even in the Thai countryside, nearly every temple has a small crematorium. These structures are a twentieth-century architectural addition to temples. In the old days, a simple pyre of wood was built on the temple grounds for each funeral, and the dead were burned in full view of onlookers. As one monk said to me, “You could see everything in those cremations—the skin, the bones, etc. It was a reminder that we will all come to that.” In other words, the Thai Buddhist attitude toward death was matter-of-fact, and the movement from life to death to ashes took place simply and publicly.

Thai funeral practice has changed considerably since the reign of King Rama V (1868–1910). Today, temples with crematoriums are found everywhere except within the old city walls where the injunction prohibiting cremations is still maintained. Funerals have become big business in Bangkok, and the customs surrounding death ritual are quite commercialized: every

thing from coffins, to flower wreaths, to gifts for the monks who chant the necessary prayers, are produced by specialists and craftspeople in the neighborhoods around major funeral temples. The one thing that has not changed, though, is the practice of including music, dance, and other forms of entertainment at funerals.

It is hard to say how old this custom is, but it has certainly existed throughout the Ratanakosin era (1782–present), and probably extends back at least through the Ayutthaya period if not much earlier indeed. The famous murals of the Ramakien at Wat Phra Kaeo contain a large, busy scene from Totsakan’s (Ravana’s) funeral showing at least five kinds of entertainment (figure 1), including acrobats, Chinese opera, shadow theater (*nang yai*) (figure 2), and several kinds of dance drama (including *khoon* and *lakhoon chaatrii*). Totsakan’s funeral procession contains detailed paintings of instruments used only in royal contexts (figure 3).⁶ Although the preferred performance genres have changed since the early Ratanakosin era depicted in these murals, late-twentieth-century Thai funerals still often include music and dance, and sometimes even a late-night outdoor showing of a movie in the funeral area of a temple. All such forms of entertainment are watched with pleasure and appreciation by funeral guests as well as by passersby and temple workers.

Many forms of traditional Thai performance essentially constitute ritual. Performance—especially various kinds of dance-drama—is the preferred offering to any number of spirits and deities.⁷ When Thais ask the Buddha, a Hindu deity, or a spirit of a particular place for help, they often vow in return to sponsor a dance-drama performance for the deity’s pleasure. Many Buddhist temples and Hindu shrines have dance troupes on site, ready to perform in return for payment. Music and dance are thus viewed as highly appropriate offerings to the deceased who is poised between this life and the next. Like most ritual gestures, the practice operates simultaneously on several levels. One common-sense explanation offered by Thais is that funerals are not mournful events but are traditionally quite upbeat, with an emphasis on *sanuk sanaan*, or fun. Buddhism teaches that death is a release from suffering and a gateway to the next life. Entertainment generates an atmosphere of gaiety. At another level, music and dance are intended not for the living guests but for the deceased. In fact, the most elaborate performance—nowadays usually the masked dance-drama called *khoon*—is saved for the hour (about 4 p.m.) immediately before the actual cremation which is usually carried out at 5 p.m. When performed in this context, the dance-drama is called *khoon naa fai*, or “*khoon* in front of the fire,” and the performance itself is held directly in front of the coffin, which is placed at the top of the steps in the crematorium.

Music has been central to Thai funerals for centuries, and playing at funerals has long been an important source of work for musicians and, along with monks' ordination rituals, continues to form the bulk of most musicians' engagements. Until the early part of this century, a Thai ensemble called *naang hong* accompanied death rituals, but it has virtually disappeared today and has been replaced by an ensemble called "*piiphaat Mon*," or the *piiphaat* ensemble of the Mon people. Although it is now possible to hold a funeral without any music or performance (funerals are increasingly streamlined in the rushed, time-pressed world of Bangkok), music was traditionally felt to be essential for a death ritual. Certain musical pieces that punctuate the stages of a funeral are not just mere accompaniment but are, rather, musical pieces that embody ritual actions that release the dead from this world.

THE *PIIPHAAT MON* ENSEMBLE

The funeral ensemble now known as *piiphaat Mon* is a combination of Thai and Mon instruments, and its music is a rich mixture of Thai and Mon musical influences. It is difficult if not impossible to pull apart the Thai and Mon elements that are now joined in this ensemble, though Thai musicians and Mon musicians alike regard the ensemble and its music as more Mon than Thai. Still, four instruments are clearly identified as Mon; indeed, their very names include the word "Mon."

A *piiphaat Mon* ensemble requires a minimum of nine musicians, but fewer can serve in a pinch, and the ensemble can also be expanded considerably. The core ensemble, and in fact the configuration most frequently encountered at funerals, is called the *wong piiphaat Mon khruang khuu* (the *piiphaat Mon* ensemble with "paired instruments") and contains the following instruments:

Front row, from left to right:

- Three vertical knobbed gongs, hung on a single frame (*moong*)
- Large 15-knobbed-gong rack (*khaung Mon wong yai*)
- Small 17-knobbed-gong rack (*khaung Mon wong lek*)
- Quadruple-reed wind instrument (*pii Mon*)
- Circle of 7 tuned drums in a single frame (*poeng maang khauk*)

Back row, left to right:

- Principal xylophone (*ranaat eek*)
- Xylophone with bamboo keys (*ranaat thum*)
- Laced double-headed drum (*taphoon Mon*)

Seated anywhere:

Large pair of cymbals (*chaap yai*)

Medium pair of cymbals (*chaap lek*)

Small pair of cymbals (*ching chap*)

Pair of wood blocks (*krap*)

The most distinctive instruments in the ensemble are the tall standing gong circles: the *khaung Mon wong yai* and the *khaung Mon wong lek*. Unlike the Thai *khaung wong yai* and *lek*, these circles of knobbed pot gongs stand upright rather than flat on the floor, and their beautifully carved frames add much to the spectacle of any funeral (see figure 4).⁸ Although a *piiphaat Mon* ensemble must have at least a pair of gong circles, additional pairs are possible, and the unmistakable sign of a truly grand and important funeral is a large number of supplementary gong circles, sometimes up to ten or more.

The *khaung Mon* frames are always elaborately carved and decorated. They also feature the head, arms, and torso of the mythical creature *kinnaun*, which looks like a woman but has wings and the legs of a bird (see figure 5). The *kinnaun* on *khaung Mon* frames wraps around the instrument, with its head and torso on the left side, and its long tail on the other. It is increasingly popular to decorate the *khaung Mon* (and sometimes all the instruments) with peacock feathers, small Thai flags, and even blinking Christmas lights; musicians feel that such touches add to the grandeur of the instruments themselves.

Although not physically positioned as such, the instruments fall into two groups: those that play melodies, and those that mark out metric structures.⁹ The main melody, known as the *thamnaung lak* (foundation melody) or the *luuk khaung* (*khaung wong* pitches), is played by the *khaung Mon wong yai* player who generally begins pieces with a short solo phrase. If at a point in the funeral ritual the piece to be played is not prescribed and is left to the discretion of the musicians, it is generally the musician playing the *khaung Mon wong yai* who will choose the piece; he will simply begin a short introductory phrase, and the other musicians will join in without discussion. The *ranaat thum* also plays a very similar version of the main melody.

The *khaung Mon wong lek*, or the small gong circle, plays an embellished version of the melody that is more scalar than the *khaung Mon wong yai* version, with fewer fourths, fifths, and octaves, and more passing notes. The *ranaat eek* plays the most embellished version of all, elaborating on the main melody in the so-called *kep* (pick up) style—a stream of sixteenth notes—mostly played in octaves. Its structural pitches—known as *luuk tok* (literally falling pitches)—align with those of the main melody on strong beats. The *pui Mon* plays a long melismatic version of the main melody, and

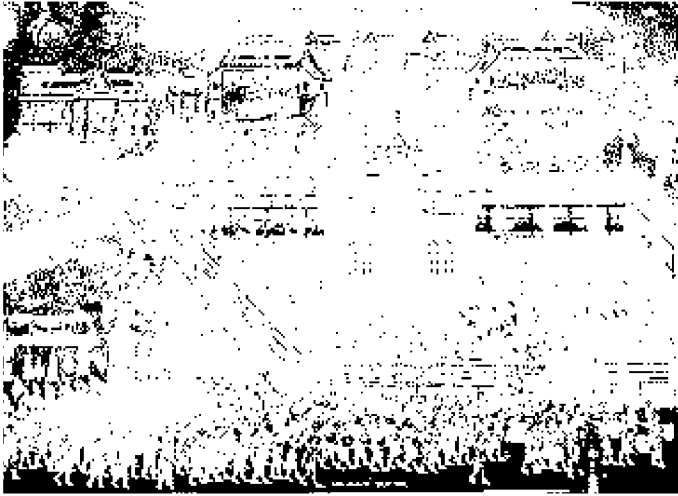


FIGURE 1. Mural at Wat Phra Kaeo, Grand Palace, Bangkok, depicting Totsakan's funeral.*



FIGURE 2. Mural at Wat Phra Kaeo depicting Totsakan's funeral with a *piiphaat* ensemble.



FIGURE 3. Mural at Wat Phra Kaeo depicting the procession with royal instruments at Totsakan's funeral.



FIGURE 4. A contemporary Thai *khaung Mon wong yai*.

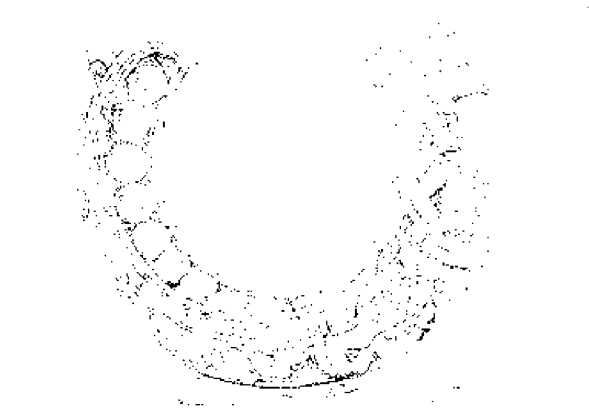


FIGURE 5. A line drawing of a contemporary Thai *khaung Mon wong yai*.



FIGURE 6. *Pii Mon* player at a funeral.

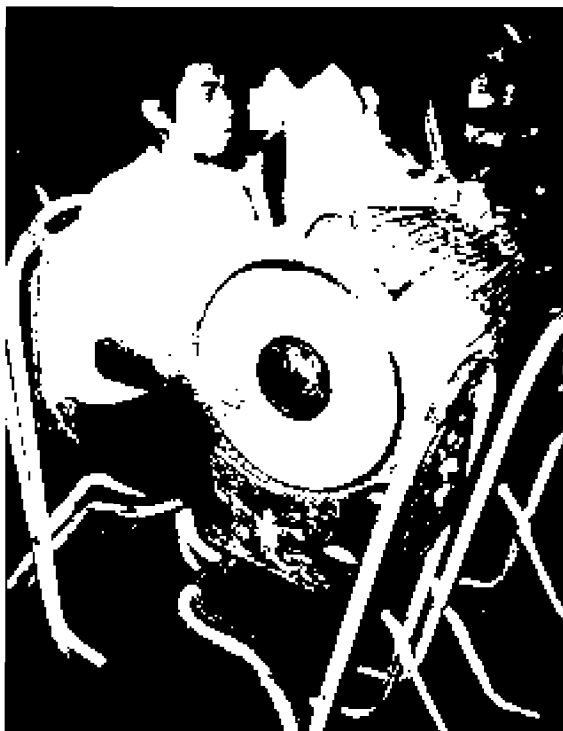


FIGURE 7. *Taphoon Mon* played at a funeral.



FIGURE 8. *Poeng maang khauk*, the drum circle at a funeral.

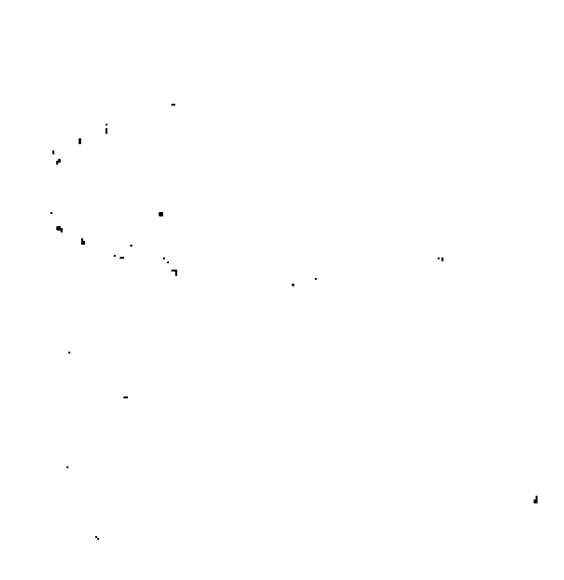


FIGURE 9. A line drawing of a contemporary Thai *poeng maang khauk*.



FIGURE 10. The cover to a cassette of funeral music. The text reads: “*Piiphaat Mon* performs classical Thai works.”

is heard continuously because it employs circular breathing and literally never stops (see figure 6).

The rest of the instruments mark out the metric structure. The *taphoon Mon* (see figure 7) plays fixed metrical patterns known as *naa thap*, which often interlock with the patterns played by the *poeng maang khauk*, the drum circle (see figures 8 and 9). The drum circle is certainly one of the most striking instruments in the ensemble. Its player is a dramatic sight as he pounds out long descending riffs that are melodic flourishes rather than metric patterns. The drum circle is considered to have a whimsical, joking nature by musicians, and they usually play it with great panache.

Throughout a funeral event, a *piiphaat Mon* ensemble alternates between secular pieces (*phleng pracam baan*, musical pieces of the home) and the repertoire of ritual pieces (*phleng pracam wat*, musical pieces of the temple) that are used only in funeral contexts and played only by *piiphaat Mon* musicians. This repertoire consists of some thirty pieces that, like all ritual works, embody physical ritual action; in one sense, they accompany such action, but in other ways they are clearly seen as enacting it. Such musical pieces are found throughout Southeast Asia as well as other parts of Asia, and usually originate in ritual dance-drama or shadow puppet theater. A particular piece may “mean” that a refined character is travelling from one place to another, or that characters are battling or sleeping or making love, etc. “Action” pieces, as they are often called, generally accompany onstage dramatic actions, but they can also set a scene or refer to something happening offstage. In other words, Southeast Asian audience members familiar with a theatrical tradition and its music will know from the music itself what dramatic action is implied. Similarly, Thai participants in a funeral service will know from the sound of a particular musical piece that monks are on their way to chant prayers, or that it is time to stand up so that the pyre can be lit. In this sense, the Mon funeral repertoire contains powerful pieces indeed—pieces that may “accompany” ritual action, but at a symbolic level *are* those ritual actions.

Thai musicians believe that at least some of these pieces in the funeral repertoire were adapted for Thai contexts by the famous performer and composer Luang Pradit Phairo and the Mon musician Khruu Sum Dontricaroen who lived in Pathumthani (a major Mon community) in the 1920s and 30s. More than one musician told me that Luang Pradit “studied” Mon pieces with Khruu Sum and that the two then “composed” a number of the most famous *piiphaat Mon* works together (see ANOTHAI 1987 for a similar account). Some of the following pieces are heard at virtually every funeral at specific points during the ritual process:

<i>Phleng Choen Sop</i> “inviting the corpse”	Played on the first day of a funeral when the deceased has been brought into the temple and the coffin is arranged in state. It “invites” the soul of the deceased and other divine beings to enter the funeral area.
<i>Phleng Yam Kham</i> “walking into dusk”	Played at dusk on any evening of a funeral.
<i>Phleng Rap Phra</i> “receiving the monks”	Played when monks arrive at the funeral site to chant or to give a sermon.
<i>Phleng Song Phra</i> “sending the monks off”	Played when monks leave the funeral site after chanting or giving a sermon.
<i>Phleng Taun Cut Thuup Thien</i> “when the incense and candles are lit”	Played on the first night of a funeral while incense and candles are lit before the coffin.
<i>Phleng Phra Chan</i> “the monks eat”	Played when the monks eat.
<i>Phleng Yam Thiang</i> “walking into noon”	Played at noon on the day of the cremation.
<i>Phleng Wian Meru</i> “circumambulating the pyre”	Played while carrying the coffin three times around the pyre.
<i>Phleng Yok Sop</i> “elevating the deceased”	Played when the coffin is carried up the steps of the crematorium or placed on the pyre.
<i>Phleng Prachum Phloeng</i> “assembling at the flame”	Played when the deceased is sent into the flames.

Although *piiphaat Mon* troupes are called *khana* (literally group, body, or organization), the Thai musicians who play in them generally come and go. In fact, the two stable elements in most such “troupes” are usually the leader and the instruments themselves. The leader usually owns the instruments, and, upon being engaged to play at a funeral, contacts the musicians he will need. Some of the major funeral temples offer almost daily work to

a troupe leader and allow him to keep his instruments stored at the temple. This is an ideal situation for a *piiphaat Mon* troupe leader. Most musicians, however, do not have a single troupe or temple for which they perform, but move between a number of engagements and ensembles depending on their personal network. Still, many “troupes” have a core of related male musicians. A typical *piiphaat Mon* ensemble is headed by a middle-aged or even elderly male musician, while most of the other musicians are young relatives generically referred to as *laan* (nephews, nieces, or grandchildren). Some of the more well-known ensembles record cassettes that are bought by the general public and then played over temple public address systems during lulls in funeral services (see figure 10); such cassettes, it should be mentioned, are never listened to outside funeral contexts for pleasure.

Before I discuss the history of this ensemble and the beliefs surrounding it, I will give some background information on urban funerals and their variations to help explain why musical practice has changed over the past seventy years or so.

CONTEMPORARY FUNERAL PRACTICE IN BANGKOK

Although Thai funerals, like most rituals, include fixed practices, they also allow for some variation. Certain activities can be elaborated or simplified by a family to reflect their economic status—or their attempts at upward mobility. In Thai death ritual, more is more. The longer and more costly and elaborate the funeral, the more the status of the family is raised.

Funerals last for three, five, or seven days and (ideally) take place at least one hundred or more days after death. Criminals and the very poor are still cremated within a few days of death. Upon death, a body is usually embalmed (though not as thoroughly as in the United States) and kept in either a morgue or at the temple where the funeral will be held. Most temples have a special building for this purpose, usually called the *saalaa saathit*, or “the dwelling hall.” At any given time, this structure (usually one large room) will contain quite a few coffins awaiting cremation and will usually be surrounded by flower wreaths, candles, and small offerings from relatives. Immediately outside the hall is a small area with chairs where family members and friends can come and listen to monks chant prayers at set times during the one hundred days. This period leading up to the actual cremation is a time when friends and family can make merit for the deceased; this is their final chance to help the dead accrue a little more merit toward his or her next life.

Keeping the body for more than one hundred days is a sign of status and affluence, since the family must pay for the privilege of using the *saalaa saathit* and for the monks’ services. In general, the economics of funerals

seem quite contradictory to anyone except a Thai: the passage from life to death is marked as much by the display of affluence as by Buddhist ritual. Funerals are big business, and temples that host many funerals will usually have a separate office to handle all the details and payments. Any money paid to the temple, however, is technically regarded as an offering rather than as the settling of a bill, and families will speak of how they will *thawaa*i (ritually offer) money to a temple in exchange for the monks' prayers and sermons. The conflict between doctrinal Buddhism, which forbids monks to handle money, and temples as profitable businesses is an old one, and it has been discussed elsewhere;¹⁰ the funeral business is but another manifestation of such contradictions between doctrine and practice.

Any temple with a crematorium will have at least one or two halls (i.e., three-walled rooms with adjacent sitting areas) next to the crematory tower itself. Temples that have made a business of funerals can have anywhere from five to over thirty such halls surrounding the crematorium. Inside each hall is a small platform for the coffin and a long raised area where monks sit to chant. Depending on the number of guests and wreaths expected, the chosen hall can be either cramped or quite spacious, and its rental price depends on its size as well as on extra services such as additional flower arrangements and so forth. Busy temples must schedule funerals very carefully, and it is not unusual for several funerals to be going on at once, or for a particular hall to be booked with two funerals back to back.

When a death occurs, family members decide on a particular wat for the funeral events, and this decision may be based on any number of factors, such as the proximity of a wat to their home, cost, whether or not the family has connections with the military or police (discussed below), and the family's perceived status. Almost immediately, they must contact the wat and make a number of arrangements. Wats that host lots of funerals have a special office just for this purpose, usually in the area of the funeral halls; here the family schedules the many events that make up an entire funeral, from monks' chanted-prayer sessions to the cremation itself. They also choose the type of coffin, the hall size (i.e., they must decide how many guests will attend), the flower arrangements, the food and drinks for attending guests, and so on. Some wats have a book of sample photographs for the family to peruse, showing different kinds of coffins and flower arrangements. Every decision—whether the guests will be offered weak tea or soda to drink, whether the coffin will be rather plain or elaborately carved and painted, etc.—affects the total cost of the funeral, and wats usually have all of this available in itemized form. Funerals are about money, and each decision not only affects the total cost, but makes statements about the family's (and the deceased's) wealth and status.

When all of this has been arranged, the coffin sits within the chosen hall for the entire three, five, or seven days of the funeral. The coffin is usually unattended except during the evenings, when the family members come to listen to monks chant special prayers. Regardless of the length of the funeral, the last two days are the most eventful. On the last evening of chanted prayers (i.e., the night before the cremation) all family members generally make a point of attending the prayers, and a light meal of rice porridge is usually served after the monks have finished. In the old days, this final night was long and full of music and performance—often throughout the night, as with wakes in many parts of the world.

The final day of the funeral begins around 10 a.m., when a senior monk comes to the hall and, after seating himself in a special elevated chair, gives a sermon to the assembled family members, who each sit listening with their hands pressed together in a respectful *wai*. This sermon is usually on the nature of death, and it lasts about half an hour or so. When the monk has finished, his seat is removed and seven to ten monks arrive and seat themselves inside the hall to chant prayers one last time. While this is going on, the family members are usually busy arranging tables and setting them with plates and dishes of food. One of the basic ways of making merit is to feed monks, and their major meal must be consumed before noon. When the monks have completed several sets of prayers, the family invites them to sit and eat; when the monks have finished eating, they chant one last set of prayers, and the family members then present them with offerings (usually new robes and other household items). By then it is usually noon, and the monks depart.

After the monks leave, the family and guests eat their lunch, and the next few hours are quiet; family members sit and chat or go home for a while. By about 3 p.m. the family has returned, and the final stages of the funeral begin. A small wheeled cart, usually finely decorated and often dominated by the carved head of a *naga*, is brought out and the coffin is carried out of the hall and lifted onto it. A small procession is formed, headed by a family member holding a large framed photograph of the deceased, followed by the immediate family, then a senior monk, then the coffin, and then the rest of the family. They walk three times around the crematorium in a counter-clockwise direction, and upon completing the third circumambulation, the coffin is raised from the cart and carried up the crematorium steps, where it is placed on a artificial pyre (carved to look real but usually reusable); the photograph is displayed beside it.

This part of the ritual is called *wian meen*; *wian* means “circumambulate,” and *meen* evokes Mount Meru, the mountain at the center of the Hindu-Buddhist cosmos. Circumambulation is of course central to much

Hindu-Buddhist ritual, but the practice of equating the pyre-crematorium with Mount Meru has strong connotations of class, as I will discuss below.

After the coffin is set in place, there is another lull in activity. If dance is featured, it takes place about an hour later. Cremations are generally held at 5 or 5:30 p.m.; this is considered convenient for guests, who often come straight from work. Cremations for the deceased who were of high status are held later at night, anywhere between 8 and 10 p.m., to ensure a high attendance. The cremation itself is quite dramatic. By 4:30 or so, guests begin to arrive and seat themselves in the long rows of folding chairs provided by the wat, which face the crematorium; this part of the funeral ritual is attended by friends and acquaintances as well as family members. As people come in and sit down, they are offered drinks by temple workers; a couch or several padded chairs are arranged in the front row of the seating area, and when the highest-status guests arrive, they are escorted by family members to these seats of honor. Just before 5:00, family members distribute small wooden flowers, called *dauk mai can* (moon flowers), to all the seated guests. Between 5:00 and 5:30 an electric buzzer inside the crematorium is rung, and the guests rise and surge toward the *meen*, ascending the steps as a crowd and placing their flowers one by one under the coffin. As they go down the steps on the right and left of the coffin, family members give each guest a small keepsake (a pin, for instance) inscribed with the name of the deceased and the date or a commemorative booklet printed for the occasion.¹¹

Most of the guests leave as soon as they come down the steps, though some may stay for a few moments, chatting with friends. For the immediate family, however, the final moments have arrived. Sometimes the coffin is opened, and close family members place their “moon flowers” inside; sacred water may also be sprinkled on the deceased one last time. When the coffin has been reclosed, the family stands at attention, the furnace doors are opened, the heap of “moon flowers” placed under the coffin by the guests is thrown into the waiting flames, and once again the electric buzzer is rung by an attendant. The coffin is then ceremoniously rolled into the oven and immediately begins to burn.

Once the cremation is in progress, the event is over. Most guests will have already left, and at this point the family too goes home. After so many days, and so much sitting and waiting, funerals end quite quickly. Since it takes hours for the coffin and corpse to burn, family members do not return until the next morning, when they collect the now-cool ashes and listen to the monks chant one last time; this coda is never attended by anyone except the immediate family. Later still, the ashes are poured into a river or the ocean, or may be interred at a wat in a wall or a *cedi*; if so, a small stone

plaque with the name, birth and death dates, and a small photograph of the deceased is installed at the spot, and the family may visit the spot on the deceased's birthday to light incense and pray, or may leave small offerings such as flowers.

This is the general outline of a middle-class Bangkok funeral in the mid-1990s, but like all generalizations, it lacks the particularities that make ritual meaningful to participants. I have deliberately left out any mention of music and dance because their roles when performed at a funeral are simultaneously dramatic and esoteric. The sound and sight of funeral music and dance are deeply moving for most Thais, instantly evoking feelings of sadness, nobility, and poignancy, but it is also arcane and its history is understood by few. The esoteric and exotic nature of music and dance is part of their performative power, which relate to Thai attitudes toward the foreign, particularly the Mon.

THE MON IN THAILAND AND MON MUSIC IN THAI FUNERALS

The Mon have been in Thailand for many centuries; successive waves of immigration have created a complex history of assimilation and the maintenance of ethnic identity. Charles KEYES (1987, 16) estimates that about 0.2% of the Thai population is Mon. To be Mon in Thailand can mean many things. Many contemporary Thais know that they have some Mon blood, but do not know how much; others know that one or more parents or grandparents were Mon; still others know themselves to be more or less completely Mon even though their family has been in Thailand for three or four generations. Continuing political turmoil and terrorism in Burma have led to the presence of many Mon refugees in Thailand, some legal and some not. To be a Mon refugee is a kind of double exile, not just from Burma but also from Monland, the Mon State that many Mon would like to see emerge as an autonomous nation.

The first record of a large influx of Mon refugees is from the reign of King Naresuan (1590–1605) during the Ayutthaya period (1350–1767); the reigns of Kings Prasart Thong (1629–1656) and Narai (1656–1688) similarly recorded waves of Mon fleeing the Burmese, with most resettling in the Ayutthaya area. Pathum Thani (then called Samkhok) was founded during the late Ayutthaya period as a Mon settlement. In 1757, the Mon capital of Hongsawadi was sacked by the Burmese army, and thousands more Mon resettled in Samkhok. Ongoing warfare between the Mon and Burmese resulted in large-scale Mon emigration to the Chao Phraya river area below Ayutthaya during the reigns of King Taksin (1767–1782) and Rama II (1809–1824).¹²

Writing in the late twentieth century, anthropologist Charles KEYES

(1987, 19) states that “mutual assimilation between Mon and Thai in Thailand... has resulted in the almost total eclipse of Mon as a distinctive identity.” I would, however, argue against such a totalizing characterization of the ethnic politics of being Mon in Thailand. Keyes himself notes that

Western Thailand and the area around Bangkok retain... small Mon populations, consisting mainly of descendants of refugees from Burma in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. These Mon continue to speak their own language, although they are almost universally bilingual in Thai, and continue to observe some distinctive customs that are mainly associated with their own Buddhist temple-monasteries. (1987, 19)

For an immigrant group to maintain its language for over two hundred years suggests something less than a “total eclipse” of ethnic identity, but of course such terms as “assimilation” and “appropriation” work only in relative contexts. Indeed, the entire study of ethnicity has shifted from models of boundedness to models of contact and context, and the examination of the Mon as a minority ethnic group in Thailand remains largely untouched by more recent scholarship. The fact that some Mon continue to see themselves as ethnically distinct from Thais is a political as well as cultural issue. WYATT (1982, 264) notes the presence of a Mon separatist organization in Bangkok in 1947, and separatist Mon literature was readily available in Bangkok during my fieldwork (see EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE INDIGENOUS MON COUNCIL OF BURMA, 1994a and 1994b).

The maintenance of Mon identity is (and has long been) challenged by Thai appropriations of Mon cultural practices. Despite the widespread use of the *piiphaat Mon* ensemble in contemporary Thai funerals, the practice is relatively recent. Until the early twentieth century, central Thai funerals were accompanied by the Thai *piiphaat* ensemble or by a special ensemble called the *naang hong*, which plays music of the mythical swanlike creature known as the *hansa*, which serves as Brahma’s steed. This particular kind of *piiphaat* ensemble has almost disappeared, although traditional musicians have deliberately attempted to revive it for special occasions. It is therefore fairly clear that the *naang hong* ensemble began to be replaced by the *piiphaat Mon* ensemble in the early twentieth century.

The *piiphaat Mon* ensemble was first mentioned in Thai sources in the mid-nineteenth century. One of King Rama IV’s wives, Queen Sirm, was Mon; when she suddenly died, her funeral in 1862 (according to correspondence between Prince Damrong and Prince Narit in 1940) involved four *piiphaat Mon* ensembles (one at each corner of the funeral pyre) in addition

to many other kinds of music and dance.¹³ This is the earliest mention of a *piiphaat Mon* ensemble used in a funerary context. It must be noted, however, that the royal chronicles themselves do not specifically mention the presence of Mon ensembles.¹⁴ Chronicle accounts of the funerals for Kings Rama III and IV, however, indirectly corroborate the Prince Damrong–Prince Narit account, explicitly noting four *piiphaat Mon* ensembles (one at each corner of the pyre) at the funeral of King Rama IV, and stating that the funeral entertainment was identical with that of the funeral for Rama III. We can infer from this evidence that *piiphaat Mon* ensembles may have been used in royal funerals as early as 1851. In their correspondence, the princes agreed that the use of *piiphaat Mon* ensembles in royal funerals was well established by the reign of their half brother, Rama V (r. 1868–1910). In 1906, the funeral of Prince Woraphinit definitely included *piiphaat Mon* ensembles. And by 1940 Prince Narit was able to write to his brother that “in the end, all funerals use the *piiphaat Mon* ensemble.”

Central Thai royalty has had special funerary music practices since at least the Ayutthaya period involving special instruments and special pieces. Several musicians interested in historical matters told me that they thought Queen Sirin’s funeral was the origin of the Thai interest in the *piiphaat Mon* ensemble; musicians have kept alive the memory of this event, whose music made such a big impression that other members of the aristocracy (*cao naai*) began to use it as well.

But not only matters of class consciousness led to the adoption of the *piiphaat Mon* ensemble beyond the royal family. By the turn of the century, quite a few Mon musicians lived in Bangkok. Among them were two brothers named Khruu Sum and Khruu Coen Dontricaroen, who headed a number of quite famous ensembles that rivaled those of the leading Thai musicians of the day. One of these leading Thai musicians, Luang Pradit Phairo, was particularly open to innovation and began to adapt some of the Mon melodies played by the brothers’ ensembles. Even at that point, the modes used in Mon music were apparently perceived by Thais as deeply sad and majestic. Luang Pradit Phairo capitalized on this feature and began using his versions of Mon pieces in funerals for minor Thai aristocrats, along with the traditional Thai *piiphaat* and *naang hong* ensembles.

Contemporary musicians say that Luang Pradit Phairo was also the first to actually use the *khaung Mon wong* in his ensembles, though this is impossible to substantiate. In fact, since Luang Pradit Phairo was regarded as such a great innovator, a number of changes in musical practice are attributed to him. It is clear, though, that Luang Pradit Phairo’s greatest Thai rival musician, Caangwaang Thua Phatayakosol, was also fascinated by the *khaung Mon wong*. Caangwaang Thua lived from 1881 to 1938, and his

descendants are still mostly musicians; they have maintained his traditional Thai house in Thonburi, which is adjacent to Wat Kalayanimit on the bank of the Chao Phraya River. His grandsons still lead a highly regarded ensemble much in demand for funerals.¹⁵ One room of the old family house serves as a storeroom, altar, ritual space, and museum, and in the summer of 1994 it contained no fewer than twelve *khaung Mon wong* of different styles and ages. One of Caangwaang Thua's great-grandsons, Uthai Phatayakosol, showed me one that he said was carved from banyan wood by Caangwaang Thua himself.¹⁶ Caangwaang Thua, however, wasn't really a maker of musical instruments, even though he enjoyed woodworking and liked to experiment. Uthai noted that everyone was curious about Mon instruments in those days (the 1920s and 1930s), and that their design then was much simpler. Indeed, the older *khaung Mon wong* in the room were very plain, with no gold paint or mirror inlay; some of the Mon-style instruments were made by Mon craftsmen, and others by Thais.

Other elderly musicians told me that the really old, authentic *khaung Mon wong* had only five or six gongs, and that one sign of an old instrument is the absence of spaces carved out behind the head and arms of the mythical *kinnaun* whose body forms the frame of the instrument. At some point, Thai instrument-makers began to build Mon-style instruments, probably in response to the growing popularity of the ensemble in Thai funerals as well as the increasing demand for them by Thai working musicians. In fact, the iconography and design of the Mon ensemble as made by Thai craftsmen continues to evolve. I was told that one family of instrument-makers in the town of Suphanburi has begun to make *ranaat* [xylophones] with elaborate upswept arms in imitation of the *khaung Mon wong*. In short, it is difficult to decide whether to treat the *piiphaat Mon* ensemble as Mon or Mon as imagined and reworked by Thais.

What makes this process of acculturation even more difficult to tease out is the continuing presence of Mon people and of Mon communities close to Bangkok. Some of these communities are over three hundred years old. The town of Phra Pradaeng and the island of Ko Kret are two of the better-known Mon communities, and they are generally regarded by themselves and outsiders as authentic Mon. I visited Ko Kret in the summer of 1994 to attend what was described to me as an authentic Mon funeral, with Mon musicians playing Mon music on Mon instruments.¹⁷ The musicians were indeed Mon, and they and their families had lived on Ko Kret for many generations. The troupe leader, though, told me that his instruments were made off-island by Thai craftsmen, and he brusquely added that they played all the same pieces as musicians in Thai *piiphaat Mon* ensembles.¹⁸ In fact, he gave me an on-the-spot history lesson and explained that the Thai musician

Luang Pradit Phairo had enlarged and adapted many of the Mon pieces for the ensemble. He and his musicians proceeded to play several pieces from the Thai *mahoori* repertoire as well as ritual works for the *piiphaat Mon*. Later, I discovered that the young *pii Mon* player had just graduated from Chulalongkorn University with a major in Thai music, though he himself was a Thai-born Mon. Clearly, what is Mon and what is Thai in a *piiphaat Mon* ensemble is not at all distinct, yet Thai musicians in particular were always quick to encourage me to go hear “real” *piiphaat Mon* ensembles in the Mon communities near Bangkok. Whether an authentically Mon style exists or not, it is important to Thai musicians to believe that it is out there—somewhere.

A FUNERAL FOR A MUSICIAN’S WIFE

In the past, any funeral of note necessarily included many performance activities. Today, wealthy Bangkok families may or may not arrange for music and dance at their relatives’ funerals, and when they do, it is a much pared-down version of the exuberant performances that once surrounded the passage from life to death. Still, musicians remember how it used to be, because it was not that long ago that funerals meant music all day and late into the night for several days. Not surprisingly, musicians’ funerals today are still filled with music and dance, and they maintain customs that were once common practice.

The funeral for Khun Yüan Wongkhaung, which took place at Wat Somanas in central Bangkok over three days from 2 to 4 July 1994, was the most performance-intensive funeral that I attended in my three months of concentrated fieldwork. Khun Yüan had a long but uneventful life: she was born in 1908, and died on 10 December 1993, some seven months before the time of the funeral. Her major claim to fame was her husband, known as Khruu (Teacher) Saun Wongkhaung, who died in 1975. Khruu Saun was an extremely famous performer, known especially for his virtuosity on the Thai *khaung wong yai*, or the great gong circle; he was of the last generation of court musicians, and later taught several generations of students at the College of Dramatic Arts (WONG 1991a). His wife, Khun Yüan, was not a musician, but his son and several grandchildren are. Khun Yüan was therefore known and loved by the large number of musicians who studied or performed with Khruu Saun, and they turned out in force for her funeral.

I learned about her funeral from my teacher, Nikorn Chantasorn, who was one of Khruu Saun’s disciples and later the teacher of Khruu Saun’s grandson Tum. Nikorn teaches at the Prasanmit campus of Srinakharinwirot University in Bangkok, and Tum received his bachelor’s degree from Prasanmit in music education. On the second day of Khun Yüan’s funeral,

3 July, the *piiphaat Mon* ensemble from the Prasanmit music education department was brought to Wat Somanas and set up in the late afternoon.

By the time I arrived at Wat Somanas around 5:30 p.m., about thirty musicians had already gathered and begun playing. Khun Yüan's children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren were milling around preparing food and welcoming guests, but the atmosphere was quite informal. Khun Yüan's coffin lay in state in Hall 5, surrounded by flower wreaths, but no one paid much attention to it and all the activity was outside the hall. The *piiphaat Mon* ensemble was set up directly across from Hall 5, facing the coffin. The musicians were a large, amorphous group of students and alumni from Prasanmit who had, at one time or another, studied with Nikorn; most were in their twenties and thirties, and none had studied under Khruu Saun himself except for the grandson Tum. In other words, these musicians' link to Khun Yüan was through Nikorn, who had known her as the wife of his teacher.

At 6:15 p.m., as dusk approached, the group began to play *Phleng Yam Kham*, a great piece in the *piiphaat Mon* repertoire; its name literally means "walking into dusk", and it marks the passage of time within the funeral from day to night. The piece takes about half an hour to perform, and has many short sections that feature solo instruments, giving the musicians a chance to show off their virtuosity. By the time the piece ended, it was nearly dark, and the mood was quite upbeat: the musicians were playing well, and there was much joking. Two secular (i.e., nonritual) pieces followed, and with each new piece, musicians switched instruments or went home and were replaced by others. In fact, people were constantly coming and going; few musicians spent the entire evening, but came for an hour or two to play, to express their respects to the family, and to catch up with old friends.

At 7:30, four young monks from Wat Somanas arrived, and the musicians abruptly ended the secular piece they were playing and began *Phleng Rap Phra*, the ritual piece that accompanies the monks' entrance during funeral activities. The monks settled themselves in Hall 5 and began to chant prayers. Between 7:40 and 8:00 the monks alternately chanted prayers and paused while the *piiphaat Mon* ensemble played secular pieces with soft mallets.¹⁹ At 8:00, food was served to the guests, and by then the musicians were passing beer bottles around among themselves; nearly all the female musicians had left, and the musicians became more informal, switching the instruments they played. At 8:10 the monks chanted one last prayer as the musicians began to eat supper, and the family presented baskets of offerings to the monks while many snapshots were taken. At 8:20 the monks stood up and filed out, and the musicians snapped to attention, grabbed their hard mallets, and played the ritual piece, *Phleng Song Phra*, that enacts monks'

exit from a ritual event. All over the area, other funerals were finishing as well. Within moments, the guests and musicians packed up and left, leaving only a few members of the immediate family to clean up the dinner dishes.

Monday, 4 July, was the final day of the funeral, culminating in the cremation. When I arrived around 9:30 a.m., very few guests were present, but some musicians were already playing secular pieces on the *piiphaat Mon* ensemble, which had been moved over directly in front of Hall 5. At 10:00 a senior monk arrived, seated himself in an elevated ritual chair, and began delivering a sermon.²⁰ The family members sat listening respectfully. Meanwhile, at least thirty male musicians suddenly arrived and began to carry more instruments into the courtyard. By 10:30, two more ensembles were set up: a Thai *piiphaat* ensemble (i.e., not an ensemble used specifically for funerals) beautifully decorated with mother-of-pearl inlay and owned (I was told) by a well-known teacher, and another *piiphaat Mon* ensemble owned by the College of Performing Arts. The three ensembles, set up side by side, took up the entire length of almost three funerary halls and were an impressive sight. Various musicians continued to play on the first set of instruments as the sermon ended and ten more monks arrived in single file; meanwhile, the family was busily setting up tables for the midday meal. The monks chanted for almost twenty minutes, finishing at 10:55; they were immediately served their final meal of the day at a table set up inside Hall 5, and, as they began to eat, the musicians sat down at the Thai *piiphaat* ensemble and began to play secular pieces. Many of the musicians were from the Department of Fine Arts, and were therefore full-time professional musicians employed by the government; others were unfamiliar to me but were probably connected to the family and participants through friendship and teacher-student bonds. At 11:25 the monks finished their meal and chanted one more time, and, once again, the family placed baskets of ritual offerings in front of them, aided by some of Khruu Saun's main disciples (including Nikorn). The monks rose to leave at 11:35, and musicians now seated at the *piiphaat Mon* ensemble of the Fine Arts Department swung into *Phleng Song Phra* to accompany their departure.

For the next three hours, everyone relaxed, ate lunch, sat around and chatted, and generally killed time. Lunch was served, and people pulled chairs into small groups in order to talk; the musicians ate among themselves. Still, despite the lull in activity, the music was continuous. At least fifty high school and college students arrived from the College of Performing Arts, and the three ensembles alternated secular pieces with scarcely any break between numbers. I chatted with various musicians, catching up, like everyone else, with people I had not seen for awhile and finding out about upcoming musical events. By 1:00 p.m. most of the musicians had vanished.

An old man wandered into the courtyard and asked me whose funeral it was. When I told him, he admitted he had not known Khun Yüan, but had heard there would be a lot of good music that day at Wat Somanas; he was a string player, and had suspected that it would be a musician's funeral.

By 3:00 many of the musicians had returned. The high school students were bumped off their instruments and the college students took over, led by some of the most highly-regarded adult musicians in Bangkok. Several monks appeared, and Khun Yüan's coffin was taken out of Hall 5, placed on a wheeled cart, and carried three times around the crematorium in ritual procession, followed by all the family members while the musicians played *Phleng Wian Sop*, which means "circumambulating the deceased." At the end of the third circumambulation, the musicians went right into *Phleng Yok Sop*, "elevating the deceased," and the coffin was carried up the crematorium steps and placed on top of the steps with a framed photograph of Khun Yüan beside it. Several vans delivered dancers from the College of Performing Arts, who took over Hall 6 and began putting on their costumes and make-up. Khun Yüan's family reappeared in formal clothes, most of them wearing civil servants' (*khaaraachakaan*) white uniforms with black armbands to show they were in mourning. Guests began to arrive in earnest, filling the rows of folding chairs facing the crematorium. By 4:30, at least 150 guests were in attendance.

At 4:45 the musicians began playing music from the *khoon* repertoire²¹ and the dancers appeared. They performed one of the most famous *khoon* episodes, *Phra Raam taam Kwaang*, "Prince Rama Pursues the [Golden] Deer," in which Rama is lured away from his forest home by a magical deer, enabling Totsakan to kidnap Sita. As the guests watched, schoolboys distributed the small wooden flowers called *dauk mai can* among them. By 5:20 Rama had killed the deer and Totsakan, disguised as a hermit, had carried Sita off to Langka. The dancers left, and four of the most highly regarded ritual musicians from the Department of Fine Arts seated themselves on a low wooden platform near the bottom of the crematorium steps and began to play the beautifully sad music known as *bua loi*, or the "floating lotus ensemble." This music was once used only for aristocratic or royal mourning services, but here it was used as an expression of deep respect for Khun Yüan and her husband (the musicians' teacher), Khruu Saun. Accompanied by this music, the guests rose and swarmed up the steps to lay their flowers under the coffin, exiting down the side steps and receiving a small commemorative book about Khun Yüan from a waiting family member. As the last few guests returned to their seats, the *bua loi* ensemble finished playing and Khun Yüan's family gathered around her coffin. An attendant opened the crematorium door, revealing the furnace already burning hotly. An elec-

tric buzzer was sounded, and the guests rose to their feet simultaneously. Everyone stood in respect as the coffin was rolled forward into the flames and all three ensembles began to play in unison *Phleng Prachum Phloeng*, “assembling at the flame.” Surrounded by tumultuous sound, the guests immediately began to leave, almost hurrying. I stayed where I was, trying to take in all the activity, nearly deafened by the roar of three *piiphaat* ensembles moving in and out of sync as they played Khun Yüan into oblivion.

APPROPRIATING THE OTHER

The Thai practice of appropriating foreign nationalities and ethnicities into art, drama, and music is longstanding. Depictions of Westerners and Chinese abound in temple murals of the Ayutthaya and Ratanakosin eras, and the aboriginal peoples of southern Thailand have been the subject of at least two dance dramas.²² Thais tend to depict foreign peoples as curious, whimsical, and even fantastic—in short, as deeply different. The Other in the Thai imagination is rarely threatening, but more often amusing and even comical; the Other is, paradoxically, a means for defining what the “Thai” is not, and yet Thais have long been engaged in creatively enfolding, appropriating, and absorbing foreigners and elements of foreign cultures.

Why are Thai funerals centered around music that represents the Other? The word *samniang*, which can be translated as “sound,” “pronunciation,” or “accent,” is used by musicians to indicate the mode and ethnic identification of any piece; this practice of categorizing pieces according to ethnicity, mood, and mode is absolutely central to Thai court music, particularly to the secular (*mahoori*) repertoire.²³ Not coincidentally, an encyclopedic presentation of ethnic music has long been central to Thai funerals: the major work in the *naang hong* funeral ensemble called *Phleng Sipsaung Phaasaa*, “the twelve languages.” This long medley literally goes through twelve different *samniang* demonstrating the Lao, Khmer, Chinese, Burmese, and many other modes. Its performance at any funeral is always a high point: its virtuosity and gradual buildup in tempo is simply thrilling. Although the medley can take up to forty-five minutes to perform, it is still a crowd pleaser: it is accessible and exciting, and it tends to transport funeral participants from somberness to gaiety. In short, *Phleng Sipsaung Phaasaa* is fun, and its mood and character is fundamentally linked to its association with Otherness—the non-Thai, the exotic.

Fun and gaiety—the *sanuk*—are central to the aesthetics of death ritual in Thailand. Thai funerals traditionally were not mournful affairs,²⁴ and although the *piiphaat Mon* ensemble’s sound is now to some extent coded for sadness by Thai listeners, much of its music is frenetically upbeat. Many Thais (and not just musicians) told me that the *piiphaat Mon* ensemble is “a

friend to the deceased” (*phüan sop*), that it keeps the dead company. Others said that the very sound of its music creates a feeling of “high spirits” (*khümcai*, be highly pleased and bursting with happiness). A dancer told me that, for her, the sound of the ensemble has “a cool feeling” (*aarom yen*) and that just hearing it makes her feel “content” (*sabaaicai*). In short, the music and the sound of the Mon instruments creates a particular aesthetic of sadness that makes sense to a Buddhist but is probably hard for a Westerner to understand: sadness, happiness, joyfulness, and contentment join powerfully in this music. The *piiphaat Mon* ensemble literally does several things at once: it speaks status (via its historical connection with the aristocracy) as well as sadness (via its timbre and mode), and whimsy (via its musical “languages” enacting Otherness). It is indeed a multivalent symbol, and a loud one at that.

RAISING THE STAKES: TEMPLES, THE FUNERAL INDUSTRY, MUSIC, SOUND, AND STATUS IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY BANGKOK

Middle- and even lower-class Thais are now able to hire a *piiphaat Mon* ensemble for their funerals, and this shift in use and availability, from the aristocracy to “common people” (*khon saaman*), is the result of a number of political and cultural changes. Much of this is closely related to the economics of temples themselves. When King Rama V abolished the institution of slavery in 1873 and then *corvée* labor in 1905 (WYATT 1982, 192, 215), temples lost the workers and drafted laborers that had formerly been their right. Each temple had to raise much of its own revenue, and strategies for doing so have gathered momentum in the past century (NETNAPIS 1982). One way that many temples have done this is by renting out their funeral areas. Although some temples manage their own funeral businesses, others have business partnerships with certain arms of the government. Wat Somanas, for instance, rents its funeral area to the Thai army (*thahaan pok khraung*, “land soldiers”), and Wat Trii to the police.²⁵ While these arrangements are not always completely satisfactory to the temples’ resident monks, the environment of temples has become directly linked to civil and bureaucratic life, and strategies for performing status have become enmeshed with the temples’ needs to make money.

The Thai laity’s search for status—and the monkhood’s attempts to respond to it—is reflected in the very design and arrangement of temples themselves. During the decade after World War II, many temples began to build crematoriums with tall towers—i.e., the structures now surrounded by the halls rented out for funerals. These crematoriums replaced the simple traditional pyres used by common people. Unlike the traditional pyres, the crematoriums are used to burn the bodies of the dead away from the view of

onlookers, and in furnaces that burn fiercely and efficiently. But the crematoriums serve another purpose too: they emulate the elaborate funerary structures of the aristocracy known as *meen*, which is considered the physical embodiment of Mount Meru, the cosmic mountain at the center of the Hindu-Buddhist universe. *Meen* are beautiful structures with multitiered roofs, built to house the aristocratic dead. These large, flamboyant, expensive buildings were central to the death ritual of the Thai theater-state; meant to be ephemeral, they enacted wealth and pomp.²⁶ *Meen* for the royal family were often commissioned by famous craftsmen; Prince Naris was well known for his designs. During the past two hundred years, the open field in front of the Grand Palace, now called the Sanaam Luang, has been the site for royal cremations, and was formerly called the Phra Meen Ground. During the nineteenth century, countless *meen* were designed and erected for the royal family and then immediately dismantled after the cremation. The vastly simpler, permanent structures now known as *meen* were constructed at many Bangkok temples in the 1940s and 1950s.²⁷ Today the use of *meen* is a direct imitation of an aristocratic practice, and is one of the most recent architectural additions to most temples (NETNAPIS 1982, 229–34).²⁸

“Explaining” the presence of the *piiphaat Mon* ensemble in Thai funerals is thus a process of combining many strands of evidence. Central Thai attitudes toward death, the traumatic displacement of the Mon people from their own region over many centuries, the need for temples to support themselves financially, the growing urban middle class, and the ethnic politics of central Thai aesthetics are all parts of the explanation. Late twentieth-century Thais are likely to include a *piiphaat Mon* ensemble in funeral ritual because it speaks sadness, status, and fun. The music bespeaks gaiety through its association with a non-Thai Other. The elusiveness of “real” Mon *piiphaat* music is of little concern to them; rather than regard their death music as the result of at least a century of concentrated intercultural exchange—as a Thai-Mon music—they prefer to think of it as Mon. Its identity as music from an Elsewhere is central to its affective power.

Last but not least, as important as the *piiphaat Mon* ensemble is, it functions at yet another aesthetic level in which particular kinds of musical sound are meant to come together in noisy ways. Sending off the dead in a sonic burst of almost deliberately discordant musical sound is the highest sign of status, and is presumably all the more powerful. At Khun Yüan’s funeral, three ensembles plunged together into *Phleng Prachum Phloeng* in a way that was musically dysfunctional but ritually effective: they didn’t sound “good” as much as they sounded powerful.

I am reminded of another funeral I attended at Wat Somanas, a *phithii*

luang, or “royal ritual,” in which the deceased, a lieutenant general in the Royal Army, was sent off with a drum corps from ancient Ayutthaya and a Western military band. Both bands played at the same time, but each played completely different music from different ages and from different military worlds.²⁹ The result was a powerful sound.

All of this is linked to centuries-old beliefs about the role of performance as a ritual offering—as a way to connect cosmological spheres—yet it also allows urban Thais to enact status in perhaps *the* rite of passage. In death, any Thai can become an aristocrat for a moment—can be sent on his or her way out the chimney of Mount Meru, literally dematerialized through flame and the sound of a foreign music.

NOTES

* Photographs for figures 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, and 8 were taken by the author. The line drawings in figures 5 and 9 are by Suthichai Suwiranuwat. Figure 10 was produced by the recording company Rota.

1. Dr. Chalerm Sak Pikulsri, who teaches in the Department of Humanities at Khon Kaen University, told me this. He grew up in Pathum Thani, just north of Bangkok, and was referring to the 1950s and 1960s.

2. The research for this essay was supported by the SEAC Small Grants to Isolated Southeast Asian Scholars Program (funded by the Luce Foundation) and by the Research Foundation of the University of Pennsylvania. I am grateful for their support.

3. I use a modified form of Mary Haas's system of romanization.

4. The notable exception to this rule is royal funerals, held in the past as today on the Phramene Ground (Sanaam Luang), across from the Grand Palace.

5. Bangkok's city walls have been restored in places. They delimit only a small portion of the contemporary city, which of course is one of Asia's largest. Even by the nineteenth century, however, the walls did not contain the entire city. Rather, they demarcated its oldest areas, and many of Bangkok's oldest and most sacred structures were (and are) within their perimeter. Going outside the walls did not mean leaving the city as much as it meant entering a different part of the city—i.e., neighborhoods further from its sacred center, as defined by temples, the Grand Palace, and the walls themselves.

6. The murals at Wat Phra Kaeo have been continuously “restored” over the past two hundred years, and it is commonly acknowledged by art historians that such restoration has sometimes substantively changed the original murals. I therefore regard the murals as a kind of historical record as well as a twentieth-century interpretation of early-Ratanakosin-era customs and practices.

7. For more on Thai and Khmer performance as a ritual offering, see GROW 1991, WONG 1991b, and CRAWFORD 1985 and 1986.

8. In traditional Mon ensembles, this instrument is known as the *pat kayng*. See *En Thaïlande* in the discography for a photograph and recording.

9. The instruments' musical roles and functions are nearly identical to those in the Thai *piiphaat* ensemble, probably as a result of Mon cultural contact with Thai culture, as well as a result of broader Southeast Asian patterns linking certain kinds of instruments (especially gongs) to specific structural roles in musical ensembles.

10. See, for instance, FAIRCLOUGH 1995, SRICHARATCILANYA 1987, and BUNNAG 1973.

11. See OLSON 1992 for an excellent history of these commemorative books, called *anusauṇ*.

12. This information is a synopsis of PONGPET 1994, WYATT 1982, and HALLIDAY 1986.

13. One chronicle source specifically mentions a Chinese *gong tek* procession that played “day and night.” The same source also indicates that all the usual royal instruments were played and that there were performances of shadow puppetry.

14. I am indebted to Wimala Siripongse for this information. She went through accounts of royal funerals during the reigns of Rama III, IV, and V and found that, while accounts of royal funerals during the reign of Rama III (1824–1851) consistently noted the precise number of royal processional instruments in every case, there was no mention of *piiphaat Mon*; there was, however, one reference to a “Thai *piiphaat* ensemble,” which suggests that non-Thai ensembles were present, as the adjective “Thai” is not normally used with “*piiphaat*” since the word “*piiphaat*” alone would indicate that it is a Thai ensemble.

The word *piiphaat*, however, can be used in two ways: first, and most commonly, to connote the specifically Thai ensemble comprised of particular Thai instruments; or second, more generically, to connote any Asian musical ensemble. “*Piiphaat Java*,” for instance, is used by Thai musicians to mean the Javanese gamelan. Specifying a Thai *piiphaat* is thus redundant except in circumstances where the term is used both generically and specifically. In short, marking the ensemble as Thai is a redundancy brought about by culture contact and the Thai practice of explaining foreignness in terms of Thai cultural norms.

15. This ensemble is called *Khana baan phin phaṇ Wat Kalaya* [the Phin Phaṇ Troupe of the House by Wat Kalaya] and is in residence at Wat Prayutwongsaawaat, though they played at Wat Somanas until about 1984 or 1985.

16. He said the wood came from a banyan tree at Wat Kalayanimit that blew over in a storm.

17. I would like to thank Phaireote and Pisarn Boonpook for showing me Ko Kret. Pisarn is a historian and a Mon cultural activist; he has made his family home on Ko Kret into a ceramics museum called “Kwarn Ar-Marn” (in English “The Ancient Mon Pottery and Mon Cultural Center”).

18. That is, *wong piiphaat Mon khaung Thai*.

19. Secular pieces are generally played with soft, padded mallets and ritual pieces with hard mallets. This often results in secular works having a softer, sweeter effect while ritual pieces have a more percussive, brilliant sound; such distinctions are part of aesthetic differences related to broader differences of social function.

20. These sermons are quite standardized and formulaic, and printed versions of them can be purchased.

21. The musical repertoire that accompanies masked dance-drama is called *phleeng naa phaṇ* and is comprised of about 300 pieces considered very old by Thai musicians. None of the composers are known, and all are considered sacred works as they are used in ritual contexts. The repertoire is grouped hierarchically, and musicians undergo ritual initiation into successive levels of the repertoire. Only the most accomplished musicians can thus accompany full-blown performances of masked dance-drama, as it takes years to learn and to be initiated into the complete repertoire.

22. These two dance-dramas are Sangthong (see INGERSOLL 1973) and Rama V’s drama, *Ngau Paa*. Both feature a central character who is a *ngau*, the Thai word for the indigenous peoples of southern Thailand and Malaysia, also referred to as the Senoi, the Semang, Negrito, Orang Asli (Original People), or Aboriginal Malay in the anthropological literature. Many indigenous peoples are small in stature with dark kinky hair. In Thai dance drama,

ngau were generally depicted as childlike, innocent, ugly, and humorously unmannered. The drama *Ngau Pua* was based on a *ngau* brought to the court of Rama V

23. The *mahoori* ensemble and its repertoire is expressly secular. Thai musicians generally distinguish two large categories of music: the ritual and the secular. Each is played by different ensembles. The secular repertoire is open and nonhierarchical and, unlike the ritual repertoire, anyone can play it.

24. The historian and publisher Sujit Wongthes told me that Thai funerals of the past were much more upbeat than now. He felt that the introduction of Victorian values from the West led to some of the contradictory elements in Thai funerals, especially somber customs like wearing black.

25. I am indebted to Phra Thepwisutthikawi (Phicit Citwanunoo), chief assistant to the abbot of Wat Somanas, for kindly providing me with the history of his temple. King Rama IV established Wat Som when his young wife Somanas died in childbirth at the age of nineteen, in 1853. The temple was built with her money, as an act of merit since as the niece of Rama III, the young queen possessed considerable property and wealth. Rama IV decided to build something in her honor that might be useful to many people, and established Wat Som as a royal temple. The temple owns seven *rai* (about two acres) of land. The funeral area was established in the 1950s. Since that time the Royal Army has occasionally paid the temple rent and a percentage of its profits from the funerals held in the area it rents. In other words, the Royal Army rents a portion of the temple's land, makes money off it, and returns a small portion of this income to the temple. Phra Thepwisutthikawi told me that, all together, the temple receives about 10,000 baht per month from the army for their use of the land. The price of the Army's rent was clearly a source of irritation, since other land in central Bangkok costs literally hundreds of times this amount to rent.

26. Similar aristocratic cremation rites are observed in Hindu Bali; see HUNTINGTON and METCALF (1979, 121–32), and GEERTZ (1980, 98–120). Much has been written on Thai royal funeral practice, including WALES (1931) and ANUMAN RAJADIION (1986).

27. *Meen* now dot the Thai countryside as well, in the central and northeast regions and beyond. I suspect that the use of these structures followed their establishment and popularity in Bangkok, but have yet to find any sources on this.

28. For example, Phra Thepwisutthikawi told me that the *meru* at Wat Som was built just a year or two before he arrived there in 1952.

29. This was the funeral of Lieutenant General Samraan Kaanpraphaa on 4 August 1994. The Ayutthaya-era ensemble is called *klaung chana*, and is maintained by a special division of the palace. The "musicians" were actually soldiers in a particular brigade that are trained to play an extremely limited repertoire of the ensemble. Soldier-musicians are assigned to perform in the funerals of high-ranking military officials, the highest-ranking monks, and of course members of the royal family.

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