MODERN ISAN MUSIC AS IMAGE: A POSITIVE IDENTITY FOR THE PEOPLE OF NORTHEAST THAILAND

A Dissertation Submitted to the College of the Arts of Kent State University in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

by

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Although more than one system of romanization has apparently appeared in this study, most of the new words and terms have been romanized according to the modifications of the Royal Thai Institute. It has not always been simple to apply a single romanized system to this study for many reasons. First, there are many Thai words and phrases long romanized in English writing to which English readers, writers, and even the current author have become accustomed. These terms, special names, do not all necessarily follow the same system of romanization. For example, Phra Chen Duriyang (พระเจา ดุริยางก), The Chao Phraya River both use “ch” instead of “j” according to the Royal Thai Institute. It would not be practical or useful to re-romanize such pre-existing terms just to fit them into a currently popular system. Second, other pre-existing and preferred romanizations as in proper nouns for the names of persons and places will remain in their original forms of romanization. Finally, a few terms are romanized according to the current author’s preference as in natasin instead of nattasin. The term Vientiane, the capital city of Laos, was previously so romanized by the French; in this study, I prefer to use Wiang Chan (เวียงจันทร) instead of Wiang Jan.

Based on the system of the Royal Thai Institute, consonants and vowels are romanized based on this classification scheme:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initial</th>
<th>Thai letters</th>
<th>Romanized</th>
<th>Thai words</th>
<th>Examples</th>
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<td>จังหวา</td>
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Final

Five groups of final consonants are selected for the usage in this study:

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ก ข ฃ ค ฅ ฆ

k

ลูกท่อง

luk thung

(ii) t

ต

ส ศ ษ ส สะ ศ (ทร)

t

เพลิงตาแล้ว

phleng talat

(iii) p

ป พ ผ ฝ

p

ลบ

chap

(iv) ng

น น ง น ง อ

ng

ลาวเริง

Lao Wiang

(v) n

น น ญ น ร ล

n

เพลิงสากุล

phleng sakon

(vi) m

ม ผ ฟ

m

หมอแล้ว

Mawlam

"O Sao Chao Rai"
Thai language is not always effective in romanization. The current system provides only a compromised version that allows non-Thai readers to read Thai phonetically through the system with a minimal degree of consideration of its sounds and meanings. In order to retrieve the meaning of a given word from the romanized form, one must convey the original Thai spelling, which is not easily done from its romanized configuration. That is because with 44 consonants (with 21 sounds) in the Thai language, only 21 “English” alphabetic elements are used to denote them. Furthermore, among the

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<th>Examples</th>
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<td>อ</td>
<td>awi</td>
<td>Laojawi</td>
</tr>
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<td>ก</td>
<td>ru</td>
<td>rusi</td>
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</table>
Thai consonants, many are silent as word terminals and thus basically fall out of the romanized system. In regard to vowels, Thai has 32 vowels (although mostly only 30 are used) that contain rising, falling, short, and long tones; and the romanized system cannot express them well. As a result, to benefit Thai readers, every romanized form is written alongside Thai script except for words or phrases that have already become common among Thai readers such as names of towns, cities, districts, and provinces.

Among Thai sources, within the sections of footnotes and bibliography, a dual dating system noting both the Common Era year and the Buddhist Era year are written together beginning with the “Christian year” followed by the “Buddhist year.” For example:


As in this example, the two dates are separated by a slash, e.g., 1998/2541. When looking at the footnote and bibliography sections, within this system of dating, the reader will recognize that the source is from either a Thai or English language source simply by looking at the written date.

In the footnotes, among Thai sources to make a more a confined version, only the original written Thai and the English translation are provided. On the other hand, in the bibliography section, both romanization and English translation of the Thai source are provided.

As befits Thai custom, I present the first name of a Thai person as the primary name rather than the last name as in Western custom. On the other hand, a Western name remains as in the Western custom of usage.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

Isan (อีสาน), a Pali-Sanskrit word meaning “Northeast,” indicates the region and people of Northeast Thailand. Because of their historical and political background and their cultural distinctions, the people of Isan have long suffered from a negative image among other Thais, especially those in Bangkok. Northeast Thailand is ethnically Lao in culture and history but has long been controlled by Siam. In the late eighteenth century, Siamese called the main cities of the region “the head cities of the Lao.” In the late nineteenth century, during Western colonization efforts, the region officially became a part of the nation of Siam, and the name “Isan” was coined to differentiate the area, its people, and its culture from the Kingdom of Laos, which became a French protectorate. During Thailand’s modernization in the mid-twentieth century, thousands of Isan people began migrating to Bangkok in search of employment, resulting in close cultural interaction between natives of the capital city and people from Isan. Bangkok natives looked down on people from Isan because of their poverty and their cultural and historical differences. In the last thirty years, however, as evidenced in the rising popularity of Isan music and food in Bangkok, the image of Isan and its people has “improved” from backward to acceptable, if not fashionable. Stimulated by Westernization, modernization, and globalization, the Isan people have built upon their musical heritage, moved from traditional to contemporary, and created both neotraditional and new popular music genres. This dissertation examines and explains
the ways in which Isan people have developed and used their music to project a new identity, thereby transforming their previously negative image into a positive one.

**Review of Literature**

Lao Isan traditional music attracted the interest of only a few scholars until the second half of the twentieth century. Earlier in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries, only a few European travellers had mentioned it. *Lam*, a vocal music style, and *khaen*, a bamboo free-reed mouth organ, the region’s primary musical instrument, have been the subjects of studies by scholars interested in Lao traditional music. Some were scholars from the region such as Jarernchai Chonpairot, the first native Isan scholar in music who later earned the Ph.D. in Musicology-Ethnomusicology at Kent State University, along with Jaruwan Thammawat from Mahasarakham University,¹ and Udom Baosri, a professor at Khon Kaen University. Except for Jarernchai Chonpairot, these pioneer scholars were interested in Isan culture generally but not specifically in music.

Terry E. Miller, however, conducted the first intensive and comprehensive study of Isan music based on fieldwork from late 1972 to 1974 for his 1977 Indiana University dissertation. Miller later published his material as *Traditional Music of the Lao: Kaen Playing and Mawlum Singing in Northeast Thailand* (1985). His research covers the entire range of Isan traditional music including vocal, instrumental, and theatrical genres. It has now been nearly forty years since Miller’s initial research. In the meantime, Isan musical forms have developed into new musical phenomena that have mutated within the contexts of modernization, globalization, and commercialization. This dissertation,

¹Formerly a branch of the College of Education, Srinakharintarawirot University.
essentially a follow-up to Miller's dissertation, is a study of Isan music in these new cultural contexts.

Few other Thai or Western scholars have done serious research in this field, especially on modern Isan music. Several have focused on Thai popular music in general including Ubonrat Siriyuvasak, 1990; Pamela Myers-Moro, 1986; Deborah Wong, 1989; Craig Lockard, 1989; and Daniel Ledingham, 2000. In recent years, Isan music has attracted little attention from Thai scholars. The few foreign scholars who have done fieldwork in Thailand were only there short term and failed to clearly differentiate between luk thung, a general term for “Thai country music,” and luk thung Isan, the type specifically from Northeast Thailand. In 2000, John Clewley, a newspaper music columnist, wrote an article on Thai music in World Music: the Rough Guide, vol. 2 and devoted most of it to Isan popular music. Recently, Pattana Kitiarsa, a native Isan sociocultural anthropologist who earned a Ph.D. from the University of Washington, has written on Isan popular music but has mainly focused on the texts.

In this study, I collected most of the materials on Isan modern musical genres including its popular genres, luk thung Isan “Isan country music,” luk thung mawlam “Isan pop-folk”; neotraditional music, wong ponglang “ponglang ensemble,” wong klaawng yao “(Isan) long drum ensemble”; and the neotraditional-popular hybrid that is mawlam sing “modern repartee mawlam.” Besides modern music, traditional music and a few materials involved with the issues of identity and musical identity are also brought into the review. The literature review is divided into two sections, Thai and Western Language studies.
Thai Language Studies

The review of this section is mainly organized into the overview of *luk thung* and *luk thung Isan*, *luk thung mawlam*, ponglang music, klawng yao music, and mawlam sing. In *luk thung* and *luk thung Isan*, two areas will be reviewed. First, *Luk thung Isan: Isan History and the Legend of Popular Songs*, ลูกทุ่งอีสานตำนานเพลงลูกทุ่ง by Waeng Plangwan (แมง พลังวรรณ 2545/2002), was the first comprehensive study of Isan country music. Waeng, a native of Isan from Udon Rachathani Province, has spent most of his adult life in Bangkok working as a journalist. His interest is in Isan country music and its original audience, the Isan economic, and academic migrants in Bangkok. His book is an account of early Isan migrants in Bangkok and the origins of Isan country style. It emphasizes Isan singers and song writers from the 1940s to 1980s. Second, the Office of the National Culture Commission and the Public Relations Department of Thailand organized a *Half Century of Thai Luk Thung Songs II*, ทศวรรษเพลงลูกทุ่งไทย ภาค ๒ (2534/1991), a concert and exhibition of *luk thung* songs along with program notes. As a result of globalization, American popular music has had a strong influence on Thai popular music, including *luk thung*, “Thai country style.” The Thai government considers *luk thung* a part of Thai musical culture because it contains fewer Western musical elements in comparison to other Thai popular music genres. *Half Century of Thai Luk Thung Songs* was organized to promote *luk thung* style as a part of Thai culture. The accompanying concert program provides some valuable information about *luk thung* history, development, musical elements, and relationships to other country music literature.
In terms of *luk thung mawlam*, two country music periodicals are valuable for this study: *King of the Golden Voice*, ราชานิยมทอง (2545/2002), provides current news on several aspects of the Thai country music industry such as singers, song writers, concert announcements, and newly released albums. An advertisement section in this periodical mentions old and new top hit albums that are historically valuable. The music recordings include CDs and VCDs, of which the liner notes provide useful pictures and information about the singers, song and album titles, prices, and associated country music literature. The other is *Inside Concerts: Luk thung- Mawlam*, อินไซด์คอนเสิร์ต ลูกทุง-หมอแล้ว (n.d.) a periodical focused specifically on Isan folk-pop genre. The journal title includes the term “Mawlam,” an Isan term that refers to mainstream Northeast traditional vocal music that the editor uses intentionally to appeal to native Isan readers. Besides selections by music critics and news of Isan popular music and singers, the contents include accounts of Isan people in Bangkok. This periodical includes some photographs of Isan pop singers and their albums, both useful for this study.

Two materials on *ponglang* music are selected for review. “Folk Intelligence in *Ponglang Performance of Roi-et Dramatic Arts College*, ภูมิปัญญาเพื่อนบ้านในการแสดงงานponglang โป่งลางวิทยาลัยนาฏศิลป์ร้อยเอ็ด,” a master’s thesis by Wittaya Suttijan (วิทยา สุทธิ จันทร์ 2543/2000), focuses on an Isan neotraditional genre. He emphasizes the role of the ensemble in an academic setting rather than its origin and development. Wittaya discusses the role of pioneer *ponglang* teachers, basically folk musicians with no academic degrees in music who were invited to teach in the *natasin*, modern Thai

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2VCD is an abbreviation for “video compact disc,” a format popular in Asia. VCDs are the same size and shape as DVDs but have much lower quality video and audio output. As VCDs are less expensive than DVDs, they are more popular for the majority of the population who cannot afford to purchase videos in the more expensive format.
conservatory schools in the Isan region. He examines from several points of view the roles and abilities and the “intelligence” of the teachers who initially founded the schools’ ponglang ensembles in order to present the process of invention of modern neotraditional Isan musical culture before it was projected to the rest of Thailand.

Second, *Ponglang Ensemble of Kalasin Province, โปงหลวงจังหวัดกาฬสินธุ์*, is a master’s thesis by Songdet Saengnin (ทรงเดช แสงนิล 2536/1993). It contains documentation on the ponglang style. This musical genre has drawn considerable attention from Thai graduate students, and several master’s theses have been written on this topic. In this particular one, Songdet provides information about the origin and development of this type of ensemble, which started as a village activity in the 1960s and became academic music in the 1980s.

*Status and Survival of Klawng Yao Ensembles in Wapipathum District, Mahasakham Province, สถานการณ์การดำรงอยู่ของคณะกลองยาวอำเภอวปปทุ่ม จังหวัดมหาสารคาม*, by Sombat Thapthimthawng (สมบัติ ทับทิมทอง 2544/2001) is the only review on klawng yao music in this study. The writing examines strategy in the survival of the klawng yao. Unlike ponglang music, popularized by the Thai academic system, Isan klawng yao music has been “preserved” among Isan villagers. Similarly to mawlam sing, Isan klawng yao has gained interest among graduate students, and they have produced some articles on it. In this particular study, Sombat examines the process of its development and new stylistic characteristics in its music and dance performances. As a genre of Isan music that has contributed greatly to the positive image of Isan, klawng yao is included in this dissertation. Sombat provides some valuable primary references for this musical genre.
In *mawlam sing*, Sanong Klangprasri (สนอง คลังพระศรี 2541/1998), one of the earliest Thai scholars, wrote *Mawlam Cing: a Survival Strategy of Isan Folk Singer(s)*, หมายชีวิต: กระบวนการปรับเปลี่ยนทางวัฒนธรรมทางดนตรีของมวลลำในภาคอีสาน, a master’s thesis on this subject. The author touches upon important evidence related to this development regarding belief systems, history, economy, education, technology, and commercialization. This work provides a valuable addition to the literature as well as a distinctive theoretical approach. A group of researchers led by Suriya Smutakup, ศรียาสมุทกุปต์ (2544/2001) from the Thai Studies Center of the Institute of Social Technology, Suranaree University of Technology, Nakhon Ratchasima Province, have presented *Mawlum Cing Isan: Bodies and Voices in a Modernized Performing Art from Northeast Thailand*, ดนตรีอีสาน: อัตลักษณ์และเสียงสะท้อนของคนทุกข์ในมวลลำชีวิต. The researchers use postmodern and other critical theories as their approaches to interpret the meaning of musical activities practiced in Isan. They provide valuable information on the origin and development of this modern music genre, descriptions of performers and music marketing, and some analysis in the context of cultural globalization. *Mawlam sing* was an important topic among Thai scholars in the 1990s. Several M.A. students in Thailand focused their theses on this genre.

**Western Language Studies**

Most Western writings are involved with Thai popular in general, among which some include some references to Isan modern tradition, but not directly. No Western writing focuses on modern Isan music (e.g., *luk thung Isan*, *ponglang* music, and *klawng yao* ensemble) specifically. Thus, most literature review in this section is primarily on
modernization, identity, musical identity, and Thai popular music in general. However, there is one review on Isan traditional music and another on *mawlam sing*.

Charles F. Keyes has written two articles about Isan identity: Who Are the Tai? Reflections on the Invention of Identities” (1995), serves as the initial reference for theoretical approaches to modernization, globalization, and identity for this dissertation. Although identity has generally been a popular issue among postmodernists, Keyes devotes most of his attention specifically to Northeast Thailand. In this article, Keyes emphasizes the Tai language and the writing system that evinces Tai traditional identity among all Tai speaking people in today’s modern Thailand. Currently, however, Thai identity is based on modern politics and nation statehood rather than on the Tai linguistic and writing system. In *Isan: Regionalism in Northeastern Thailand* (1967), Keyes discusses the emergence of the Isan region in terms of the issues of history, geography, political conditions, and identity, attributes that have formed Isan culture. These approaches provide historical, social, and political background from the nineteenth century for the forming of the relationship between the Siamese of today’s Central Thailand and the Lao people in the Khorat Plateau, today’s Isan region. This relationship forms the paradigm of socio-cultural and political regionalism in Thailand today.

*National Identity and Its Defenders: Thailand Today*, edited by Craig Reynolds (2002), is comprised of articles on several aspects of Thai identity within the modern context of economic boom and financial crisis. He shows how the modern sense of identity reflects globalization in its local cultural perception. Ubonrat Siriyuvasak wrote “Popular Culture and Youth Consumption: Modernity, Identity and Social Transformation,” an article on Thai popular music (2004). She discusses Thai middle class youth during the 1990s and
their consumption of Japanese pop culture, especially pop/rock music and television dramas. Ubonrat reviews Thai cultural globalization previously dominated by American culture in the 1960s and 1970s but by the Japanese in the 1990s and shows how Thai youth were drawn into the circle of global popular culture. “Lanna Music and Dance: Image and Identity in Northern Thailand,” a Ph.D. dissertation by Andrew Shahriari (2001), does not directly involve Isan music but does touch on popular music in the Northern region. His study draws attention to the subject in terms of a theoretical approach to musical identity. Shahriari focuses on traditional Northern Thai music and analyses current musical phenomena within the context of modernization.

Many Western writings that involve with Thai popular music are selected to review in this section. First, “The Development of Thai Popular Music in the Twentieth Century: Politics, Modernization, and Cultural Change in Post-1932 Thailand,” an M.A. thesis by Daniel Ledingham (2000), is one of the most comprehensive writings on Thai popular music among Western scholars. Ledingham discusses the rise of Thai popular music and the mass media as a part of modernization (globalization) and political influence in music. In Dance of Life: Popular Music and Politics in Southeast Asia, by Craig Lockard (1998), the author devotes a whole chapter to Thai popular music entitled “Song for Life, Song for Struggle.” The author views Thai popular music through the window of Thai politics. He describes how politics affects the music and how a political situation can shape music in specific ways. His chapter, “Song for Life,” focuses on phleng phua chiwit, an urban popular genre created in the early 1970s. The music developed out of political conditions in which Thai students demonstrated against the Thai military for the sake of democracy. The author mentions many groups that called
themselves *phleng phua chiwit* but were not directly involved in Thai politics. He comments on then current socio-economic conditions in regard to poverty and urban migrants, especially Isan migrants from Northeast Thailand. He states that among many *phleng phua chiwit* bands, Carabao was the most famous group in the 1980s. They presented their music as political opposition and gave voice to oppressed people in Thailand. In “Song for Life: Leftist Thai Popular Music in the 1970,” Pamela Myers-Moro (1986) discusses the role of *phleng phua chiwit*, “song of life,” the politicized form established during the student-led revolution in Thailand in 1973. Myers analyzes the origin and role of the Thai “song of life” under Thai social and political conditions in the early 1970s.

Deborah Wong’s article “Thai Cassettes and their Covers: Two Case Histories” (1989-1990) focuses on her interest in Thai classical music and is distantly related to her book, *Sounding the Center: Historical and Aesthetics in Thai Buddhist Performance* (2001). In her article, she compares two kinds of Thai cassette tape covers, those for popular music and for classical music, and uses postmodern and critical theories to analyse them. Based on the designs for the two types of cassette tapes, Wong argues that the cover of the classical selection represents an aristocratic and ritual context which omits photographs of the musicians and even the names of the performers while the covers of the popular music present a commodity focused on the performers. In the paper “Commercializing the Sound of the People: Pleng Luktoong and the Thai Pop Industry,” Ubonrat Siriyuvasak (1990), Professor of Mass Communication at Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, discusses changes in the Thai music industry. She concentrates on

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3In this dissertation, the term “*phleng luk thung*” is used rather than “*pleng lookthung*” or “*pleng luktoong*.”
the importation of Western pop/rock recordings and their influence on Thai country music, _luk thung_, which appealed to the new, young, middle-class audience in Thailand beginning in the 1950s. The author explains how and why Thai young people came to prefer their own styles of music in modification rather than the original Western forms themselves. Her discussion also covers the role of the Thai music industry in the promotion of Thai country music. Last, _World Music: the Rough Guide 1st_ (1994) and _2nd_ (2000), edited by Simon Broughton and Mark Ellingham, is a collection of world music essays, mostly on popular or modern styles of music. In the section on Thai music, John Clewley (2000) summarizes several kinds of Thai popular genres and some information on Thai classical genres. Although it provides only a brief review, his article is useful as a preliminary reference for this dissertation since only a small number of articles on Thai popular music are currently available. More importantly, Clewley emphasizes Isan popular music throughout the section on Thai music in the _Rough Guide_.

_Traditional Music of the Lao: Kaen Playing and Mawlum Singing in Northeast Thailand_, by Terry E. Miller (1985), derived from his doctoral dissertation (discussed earlier), is one of the earliest writings on Isan traditional music. This work includes most genres but especially emphasizes _lam_ and _khaen_ vocal and instrumental music, the primary traditional music of Northeast Thailand. The work provides a great deal of information on fundamentals and music literature in Isan traditional music. Miller’s works are the foundation that must be viewed as a starting point for research on Isan traditional music, although the present dissertation focuses more on current musical phenomena including popular, neotraditional, and commercialized neotraditional music that developed subsequent to Miller’s research, which ended in 1974.
The only English writing on Isan neotraditional-popular hybrid music is “Modernity, Agency, and Lam Sing: Interpreting ’Music-Culture’ in Northeast Thailand” by Pattana Kitiarsa (2006). The author provides a fine preliminary document on this musical genre including definitions, derivations, singers, musicians, dancers, stage management, and performance practices within the cultural context. Modernization is the main consideration of his study in which he views lam sing as “creative transformation,” a “modern invention” belonging to modern Isan culture. Pattana also discusses the preferences of Isan people in their adoption of some “modern” musical elements from the West while keeping aspects of their own musical tradition. Lam sing is a new cultural product of the Isan people who are no longer exclusively attached to their old way of life in rice-cultivation but prefer a more modern urban life in the context of industrialization.

Audiovisual Material

Audiovisual materials are important documents in this study. They are useful for analysis of musical form, style, structure, and instrumentation. Audiovisual materials also contain some historical information such as names of singers, bands, producers, and dates. In the study of popular music, these audiovisual materials are available and conveniently accessible in libraries, commercial music stores, and on internet websites.

Four audiovisual formats have been useful and accessible to this research including audio cassettes, compact discs, VHS videotapes, and video compact discs. Few of the old Thai recordings from as far back as the 1950s are still readily available especially today in its CD reproduction format, namely Maemai Phleng Thai (แม่ไม่เพลง เทพบ) “the Model of Thai Songs.” Many music stores in Bangkok specialized in this kind

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4The DVD, “Digital Video Disc,” is not yet popular in Thailand because the price is high for Thais.
of old Thai popular song. The original production, however, is in the old format of the LP phonograph record. Rabbit was one of the best known record trademarks, and those recordings used to cost about 100 baht ($5) in the early 1970s when the minimum wage for a day’s work was less than 100 baht. In this study, however, luk thung is the main focus, which was primarily circulated in the form of cassette tapes rather than the phonograph record format. The cassette tape first appeared in Thailand in the mid 1970s but did not become popular until the early 1980s. Among the many companies, Rota Record and Tape Co., Ltd. produced a wide variety of music recordings including country styles such as luk thung. In Northeast Thailand, in addition, there was a local cassette company, Ratchabut (รัตนาบุตร) Stereo in the City of Ubon Ratchathani. This company still produces many types of recordings, and Isan styles dominate their market.

The CD, or compact disc, has become common throughout Thailand since the 1990s. Although it was costly when it first appeared, it has recently become quite affordable. In the late 1990s, it superseded the cassette, the older format. Due to technological improvements, the CD provides better sound quality than the earlier formats. Today, consumers can buy a CD for less than 100 baht, although they cost 300 to 500 baht in the late 1980s and early 1990s. This product, while now inexpensive, uses CD covers that provide little information about the artists or other details about the music. Some inexpensive CDs do not provide even the production date, an inconvenience for historical study.

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5Terry E. Miller, personal communication.
The VCD, video compact disc, is of lower quality than the video cassette tape or the DVD but inexpensive and more convenient to use on current home players. In Thailand today, the VCD has become the most popular visual format and has replaced the conventional home video cassette tape. Basically, consumers can spend the same amount of money for a VCD as for an audio CD. Most households do not have personal computers to play their VCDs, but they do have a VCD player compatible with the audio CD format, and it is quite affordable for Thais. In short, the cassette tape, CD, and VCD are valuable and accessible. All the above-mentioned audio and video formats have been useful in this study.

Research Methods

Personal Experience

I am a native Isan citizen who grew up in a village in Wapipathum District, Mahasarakham Province. Like our neighbors in the village, my parents were rice farmers. In the farming season, people used to take their water buffalos and cows out to the rice fields in the morning. The water buffalo was important in that Isan farmers used the animal to plow the land. In the 1970s, Isan villagers still caught fish and picked vegetables in the fields. At that time, most villagers had no electricity or running water. They used firewood for cooking and kerosene lamps for light at night. Music, Buddhist festivals, life styles, clothing, food, social norms, and rites of passage still functioned in the context of the old traditions. Villagers gathered to help each other in various circumstances.

During the late 1970s and early 1980s when modernization came to remote Isan villages, society began changing quickly. In my village, we received electric service in
1979 and people started to obtain televisions, refrigerators, and electric fans. During the dry season, instead of staying home to raise cattle, young people went to Bangkok to work and to earn extra income for their families. The influence of Westernization and modernization created a new negative attitude. Villagers began to look down on their own traditional ways of living. They thought that being a farmer was “hard,” “poor,” and “low class” compared to modern professions in the city. The lack of good schools and of educational funds in such remote areas meant that few parents could afford to have their children pursue higher education leading to a modern life style, and as a result the majority of Isan youngsters became factory and service workers in Bangkok.

In the mid 1980s, I was fortunate in being one of a small percentage of Isan children who had opportunities to pursue higher education. The study of music was and is still not a popular objective among rural Isan parents. In addition, although it was available in secondary school and pre-college as an elective or extra-curricular activity, music, as a program of study, was also not common in most Thai academic institutions at that time. In schools, most music activities were an imitation of Western marching bands playing monophony and simple harmony to Thai tunes in fancy European-American style military uniforms.

Playing Thai pop tunes in a semi-rock band was also a privileged activity among youngsters. These were taught by teachers who were themselves self-taught or by a few who actually had academic degrees in music. Western music used to be the only kind of music of “value” in Thai schools. Thai classical music was a genre that was available primarily in some large schools in the main provincial cities in Isan. The majority of
Thai classical music teachers learned the music from joining Thai (classical) music clubs during their college years.

I began my first Thai classical music lessons by joining a Thai music club as an extra curricular activity at Rongrian Wapipathum, my hometown secondary school, in my first year, 1982. My first music teacher there was an English teacher who had joined a (Thai classical) music club during his college years where he learned the music. After attending the music club for a year, I knew that music was what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. By the end of that year, I realized that I could pursue my dream when my music teacher introduced me to a brand new school of music and dance, founded in 1979, a natasin (high school for the arts) in Roi-et City, Roi-et Province, about thirty kilometers northeast of my hometown.

The natasin system is a kind of conservatory combining middle school, high school, and the first two years of college. In the first level, they admitted students who had graduated from elementary school, similar to finishing the sixth grade in the U.S. I decided to redo my first secondary school year by going to the natasin, and I began that first year as a music student in 1983. I studied piphat music, a “classical” ensemble of xylophone, gong circles, and with a quadruple-reed aerophone as my major. Studying “Siamese” classical music on that regional campus was not really appropriate to the local Isan culture, while outside the school walls most Isan people preferred to listen to their own “Lao traditional” music.

I began studying Isan music at the school in 1985 by taking lessons and participating in the school folk ensemble called wong dontri phuenmueang Isan, “Isan folk music ensemble.” Today this kind of ensemble is best known as wong dontri
ponglang or wong ponglang and refers to the ponglang ensemble cited in this study. I actually studied the khaen, a bamboo free reed mouth organ, as my first Isan traditional instrument, privately and informally with one of my natasin friends before I took lessons as a part of my minor program in the fourth year of study at the natasin. I also joined the school ponglang music troupe, where I could learn the khaen and other traditional instruments outside of class. During four years in the school’s ponglang troupe, mainly as a khaen player, I had numerous performance experiences from 1985 to 1989. Our natasin school troupe accepted hundreds of performance invitations each year and traveled to perform throughout the country and even abroad. Thus, I was trained as a professional music performer in my later youth.

I seriously turned myself towards music scholarship when I came to Kent State University in 1998. In this field, I have learned to view music from different perspectives rather than limiting myself to performance only. The scholarly study of my own music is particularly well-suited to me personally since I already have extensive experience in its performance. This dissertation includes research not only on Isan traditional music but also on current musical genres, especially popular music, a mainstream Isan development. I did my first fieldwork during the summer of 1999 by collecting information on current Isan music. In that year, I finished some documentation and collected audiovisual materials. The second stage of fieldwork was carried out in the summer of 2003 when there was more time available to concentrate on research. I compiled extensive documentation, travelled widely to interview people, and observed musical phenomena both in Isan and in Bangkok. More than fifteen interviews of informants involved in all kinds of musical genres in the region and in Thailand as a
whole and information on Thai country music written by Thai scholars published in occasional concert or conference programs proved useful for this investigation. My last two field trips were conducted in the summers of 2007 and 2008. Most field activities for the final trips were focused on recollecting and updating the same kinds of data gathered earlier. After some analysis and the writing of some chapters, it became clear that I needed more information in certain areas, which I then pursued.

Theoretical Issues

Both musicological and ethnomusicological approaches have been applied to this study. A musicological approach, that is, research based on library sources, has been applied to the study of the musical developments such as music fundamentals and historical influences. An ethnomusicological approach, research based on fieldwork sources, has been useful in utilizing interdisciplinary theories in the interpretation of the music in relation to its society. I have used theories of modernization, globalization, and identity as models to pursue this study. To begin with, in The Sociology of Modernization (1981), Gino Germani provides a foundation concept of modernization. Germani asserts that modernization comes about through changes in three social factors: economics, politics, and social organization. Economic factors lead agricultural peoples directly into industrialization associated with commercial production and capitalism. In politics, a modern society tends toward democracy rather than communism. Finally, the organization of a modern society changes in all social sectors: personality, norms, social relationships, and institutions, in various directions. In this study, these theories have been useful as a conceptual framework to examine how the nation of Thailand and its Northeast region have become modern.
Globalization is a major concern in the study of popular music. In *Global Culture: Media, Arts, Policy, and Globalization* (2002), Diana Crane summarizes four theoretical models of cultural globalization including cultural imperialism, cultural flow, reception theory, and cultural policy. In this dissertation, I have applied Crane’s cultural policy in terms of cultural preservation as it appears in Northeast Thailand. According to Crane, a cultural or ethnic group, threatened by a dominant culture through mass media and in fear of losing its own cultural heritage, sometimes evolves a policy of cultural preservation. A policy of cultural preservation involves venues such as museums, exhibitions, and competitions. In this study, I describe uses of the *ponglang* ensemble as a means of cultural preservation promoted to preserve the traditional music of Northeast Thailand. The Thai national government has supported this music in several ways. Most importantly, the government adopted the music into an academic system where youngsters can study it within the state-sanctioned school system. Local governments, business sectors, and other organizations support the music by organizing music competitions for all levels of *ponglang* music performers.

The primary purpose of this dissertation is to describe the process of how Northeast Thai people have used their musical tradition to change a widely held negative stereotype to a positive image. Culture for the people of Isan strongly involves their musical identity. In this study, I have applied theoretical concepts of music identity based on *Introduction: Ethnicity and Music*, edited by Martin Stokes (1994), as my basic framework. Stokes states that “places” and “boundaries” define musical areas, and these musical areas define the identities of people as cultural groups. “Ethnicity” refers to the consciousness of a person about their own group identity. Musical ethnicity can
determine “authenticity,” that is, how people think about their own musical sounds and heritage. Based on this theory, I have described how Northeast Thais have developed and modified their music to harmonize well with the modern social environment of Thailand. They have projected their music in such a direction that it conveys a positive view of the region and its people among Thai audiences. At the same time, it still contains major elements of Northeast musical culture in order to effectively appeal to the people of that region.

**Organization of Chapters**

Chapter 1 provides an introduction to the whole dissertation including a statement of the problem, review of literature, research methods, and organization of chapters. I have organized the review of literature into two sections, differentiating Thai and Western language sources following with a review section of audiovisual materials. The research method begins with *personal experience*, describing my musical background in this particular field from an early age. *Field methods* discusses the ways I have collected information both in fieldwork and through library documentation. Finally, *theoretical issues* cover three methodological approaches: modernization, globalization, and music identity, which serve as primary models for this study. The introduction finishes with the organization of chapters that summarizes the outline of materials and contents included in this dissertation.

Chapter 2 describes the traditional culture of the Northeast Thai people. I divide the chapter into two main sections: cultural context and musical zones. The former reviews Isan culture in general, summarizing geography, population, ethnic identity, and religion. The latter is a brief description of Isan traditional music beginning with Isan
minority music including Khorat, Phutai, and Khmer music in Southern Isan. It provides a summary of both vocal and instrumental music of the Lao culture, the primary ethnic culture source for Northeast Thainders. This chapter closes with a short introduction of modern Lao-Isan music, the main musical emphasis of this dissertation.

Chapter 3 concentrates on the origins of the negative image imposed upon Isan. It provides the historical relationship between the two relevant ethnic groups of Tai-speaking peoples known as the Siamese and the Lao prior to the late nineteenth century. This chapter carries the account of the two ethnic groups into modern history, at which time they become known as the Thai people of the Central Region and the Thai-Isan (Lao people) of the Northeast Region. In this study I examine the political situation that initially brought a negative image to the Lao culture during the nineteenth century and how Westernization and modernization reinforced that image during most of the twentieth century. I discuss the economic and cultural differences that brought about a serious economic gap and social prejudice that resulted in suffering for Isan people in relationships with the people of Central Thailand and especially the urbanized population of Bangkok as, after World War II, the national government rushed to develop Thailand into a “modern” country.

Chapter 4 discusses the rise of Thai popular music beginning in the 1930s and how the Isan (regional) style developed. This chapter begins describing the influence of Westernization in the late nineteenth century when the Siamese court first adapted a Western brass band into their military music and how Siamese aristocrats began to embrace some Western musical elements in Siamese music from the late 1800s to the early 1900s. I discuss how Phleng thai sakon (เพลงไทยสาคง) appeared as the first Thai
term created to label Thai popular music in the mid 1930s and how, by the mid 1940s, the genre had become well established. Continuing chronologically, I survey musical styles that developed one after another through the second half of the twentieth century.

Changes in culture and music came about continuously as population mobility increased with industrialization and as the urban centers, especially Bangkok, drew more and more people away from rural living and its traditions from the 1960s through the 1990s.

Besides the historical developments mentioned above, I include mention of some other cultural signifiers such as popular singers, songwriters, and well-known country bands and performance troupes.

Chapter 5 provides specific information on the development of the Northeast region after World War II, in that modernization, one of the primary waves to raise Isan culture from a negative to a positive position, has transformed Isan itself from a traditional to a contemporary culture. The first section focuses mainly on transportation, communications, infrastructure, and education. The second half points out reflections of modernization in Isan in social changes there. Farming life style, language and identity, family, spirituality, and religion as well as gender relationships are all examined in this section. These developments have greatly affected Isan traditional music, which is discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 6 examines in detail the influences of modernization that have transformed the music of Isan into its modern forms. The discussion is divided into two sections, vocal and instrumental music. The first section begins with many of the Isan traditional styles of mawlam including narrative, repartee, and theatrical genres, all of which were most popular prior to the 1980s. This section finishes with a discussion of
the more recent genre called *mawlam sing*, a neotraditional-popular hybrid style created in the mid 1980s that continued to be popular in the 1990s. The instrumental section also begins with the pure traditional style of solo instruments. These are the *khaen*, a bamboo mouth organ, and the *phin*, a three-string plucked lute. The discussion continues with the most common traditional and informal grouping, that is, the *phin-khaen* ensemble. The rest of the chapter is reserved for more recent Isan instrumental ensembles, *wong ponglang*, the *ponglang* ensemble, and *wong klawng yao*, the long drum ensemble. They are considered examples of Isan neotraditional music.

Chapter 7 depicts the role of music in redefining the Isan image. Although each Isan musical genre mentioned in the previous chapter has played a part in the creation of the positive image of Isan, the neotraditional ensemble, *ponglang*, and the Isan country genres, *luk thung Isan* and *luk thung mawlam*, are most involved in this discussion as they have contributed more to the projection of the new image than the other genres.

Finally, chapter 8 concludes with a summary of the whole study while the second part points out aspects of culture other than music, and representative Isan people themselves who have contributed greatly to the redefinition of the Isan image. I describe how Isan citizens in Bangkok have learned how to protect themselves from public disdain and how to present themselves positively within Thai society. They continue to present themselves and their special culture in a positive light.
CHAPTER II

NORTHEAST THAILAND:

MUSIC AND ITS CULTURAL CONTEXT

Cultural Context

Geography of the Northeast

Isan, or Northeast Thailand, is geographically situated on the Khorat Plateau (Ti
rab sung Khorat, ที่ราบสูงโคราช), on the west bank of the Maekhong River (called Mae
Nam Khong, แม่น้ำโขง, in Thai)7 bordering Laos on the north and the east, Cambodia on
the south, and Thailand’s Central Plain on the southwest. Isan is the largest of Thailand’s
four regions, some one third of the nation’s area, and is comprised of nineteen provinces.
Geographically, the area has five main mountain ranges, including the Phetchabun
(เพชรบุรี) and Dong Phayayen (คงพบายั้ย) in the west and the Sankhamphaeng (สัน
กวาง) and Phanomdongrak (ผ่อนมโรงมาก) in the south, which create the Khorat Valley
(Aeng Khorat, แองโคราช). The valley covers almost three-quarters of Isan and is
situated about 120 to 180 meters above sea level. Two main rivers in the Khorat Valley
are the Chi River (แม่น้ำชี) flowing from northwest to southeast about 765 km in length
and the Mun River flowing from west to east, about 750 km in length. Last, the Phuphan
Mountains (เทือกเขาภูพาน) separate two valleys, the Khorat on the west and the Sakon
Nakhon (แง่งนกขมคร) on the east which runs to the Maekhong River.

7 This river is more commonly spelled Mekong, but Maekhong, following the conventional Romanization
of Thai, will be used in this study.
Thailand has a tropical climate, with temperature and humidity varying to a small degree depending on the season (dropping to an average of 60° F in the winter months, in the lowland areas). In Isan, however, the temperature is more extreme than in Central Thailand. In the winter it gets very cold, in some areas down to 40° F and in the summer up to 100° F. There are two main monsoon winds that occur each year for the most of the country: one from the Indian Ocean in the southwest from May to October, creating conditions of nearly consistently high humidity and a great deal of rain, and another from China in the northeast from October to mid-February. The latter wind, although it brings less humidity, brings lower temperatures from 56 to 92° F; the lower end of this temperature range is considered cold by Thai people. Isan, which usually experiences less rainfall than the other regions of Thailand, can in some years receive too much rain, which causes serious flooding.\(^8\)

Thai meteorologists divide the climate of the country into three seasons. The first of these, called \textit{Ludu Rawn} (ฤดูร้อน), literally, hot season, also referred to as Thailand’s dry season, generally begins in mid-February and continues through the end of May. April is the hottest month in Thailand, and it is thus often referred to as the Thai summer. The second season, \textit{Ludu Fon} (ฤดูฝน), rainy season, usually lasts from May to October, although global climate change has been affecting its length. Due to the fact that most of the nation’s annual rainfall comes in this season, \textit{Ludu Fon}, the season during which farmers plant their rice crops, is particularly crucial to Thais, who have historically

\(^8\) About 1270 mm or less per year while the other regions, Northern and Central, receive 1500 mm, and Southern, 2500 mm per year.
engaged in wet-rice farming. Finally, *Ludu Nao* (ฤดูหนาว), cold season, the Thai winter, lasts from approximately November to mid-February.

### Populations and Ethnic Identities

The population of Isan, like the physical area of the region, comprises approximately one third of the country. In 1997, there were approximately 21,086,501 people in the region.⁹ Out of a total of nineteen provinces, the province of Nakhon Ratchasima has the largest population, approximately 2.5 million.¹⁰ There are numerous ethnic groups living in Isan. According to *Ethnic Groups of Mainland Southeast Asia*,¹¹ these groups are from two main linguistic families, Tai-Kadai and Austroasiatic.¹² Mostly living in mainland Southeast Asia, these two families comprise several subcategories each with numerous ethnolinguistic groups. In this study, only a few of the most significant groups found in the Isan area will be considered.

Tai-Kadai ethnic groups together comprise over 90 percent of Isan’s population. These groups include the Phuan (พวน), 98,605, Phutai (ผู่ไท), 156,000,¹³ Khorat Tai (*Tai Khorat* ไทโครา), more than 400,000, and Tai-Lao or Isan (ไท-ลาว อีสาน), 14 million,¹⁴ as well as smaller Tai groups such as the Thai-Nyaw (ไทยญว), 50,000, Saek

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¹⁰ Ibid.


¹² Besides the groups mentioned above, there are also a small number of Vietnamese, Chinese, and Indian business people and their families who live in many of the provincial and district towns throughout the region of Isan. Many of these people have lived in Isan since the early twentieth century and intermarried with local women. Their descendants have become Thai citizens.

¹³ Phutai may also be spelled ผู่ไท or ผู้ไท, although ผู่ไท is the most common spelling.

¹⁴ Generally, when referring to the Thai nation, people, or culture the word “Thai” (ไทย, with the final letter yaw yak) is used. When referring to the broader ethnolinguistic orientation, the term “Tai” (without “h”) is usually used to avoid confusion with the Thai nation. This latter term is rendered in Thai script as
( francais), 11,000, Yoy (ย่อย), 5,000, and Tai Dam (ไทดำ), 700. Because the population of these latter groups is so small and because they have lived in close proximity to Lao-speaking people for so long, they have gradually adopted the Lao language, especially in modern times.

The Phuan have their origin in Xieng Khouang Province of north-central Laos. The term phuan was earlier used in Laos to refer to people originally from upland regions of Xieng Khouang who had migrated to the lowland regions of Luang Phrabang and Wiang Chan.

The Phutai, whose language is closely related to Lao, number approximately 156,000. The term Phu (พื้น), literally, person, is sometimes written in Thai using the initial letter “พ” instead of “ภ” with this latter term meaning “mountain.” Few Phutai, however, live in upland regions. In fact, their culture is similar to that of the lowland Lao, who also engage in wet rice paddy farming. The Phutai originally emigrated to Isan from the Sip Song Chu Tai region of northwestern Vietnam and northeastern Laos, including the modern-day province of Houaphan, at least as early as the sixteenth century. Over the course of subsequent centuries, they moved down and spread into northern Laos and Isan. In Northeast Thailand, the Phutai can be found in many provinces including Nakhon Phanom, Sakon Nakhon, Kalasin, Mukdahan, and Roi-et. Compared with other ethnic groups in the region, the Phutai are, along with the Lao-Isan, considered to have the longest history and greatest cultural development.

\(\text{ไท} (\text{Thai})\) (without the final yaw yak). Both “Thai” (ไทย) and “Tai” (ไท), however, are pronounced the same in Thai.

\(^{15}\) Sip Sawng Ju Thai (สิปสองจุดไทย: Xip Xong Chau Thai in Vietnamese) was a region of northwestern Vietnam controlled by a confederacy of Tai tribes dating back as far as the fifteenth century.
The Khorat Tai, also known as “Tai Khorat” or Khon Khorat, literally, Khorat people, among Thai speakers, live mainly in the province of Nakhon Ratchasima (Khorat), and the nearby provinces of Buriram and Chaiyaphum. This area is situated in southwest Isan, bordering the Central Plain of Thailand. By the late nineteenth century, the Khorat people still considered themselves Lao, but they were not quite the same as the rest of the Lao living in Isan, as they had their own distinct dialect and customs. According to Seidenfaden,¹⁶ this ethnic group is believed to have originated from Siamese soldiers who intermarried with Khmer women. In Five Years in Siam: From 1891 to 1896,¹⁷ H. Warington Smyth mentions that the Thai Khorat people called themselves Lao klang, literally, Middle Lao. However, by the early twentieth century, perhaps during the reign of King Rama V (1868-1910) when the Siamese began increasingly to enforce their administration over the Isan area, the Khorat people gradually ceased to identify themselves politically as Lao, and, like the Isan people as a whole, eventually identified themselves politically as Thai. The Khorat people’s distinctive culture, however, is closely associated with the accent and idiomatic pronunciation of their dialect, which is called by the vernacular name Thai Doeng (ไทยเดิ้ง), which probably implies that it is neither Thai nor Lao, but a blend.¹⁸ The dialect and accent sounds closer to the Thai spoken in the Central Plain, which shows more Mon-Khmer influences in its vocabulary and pronunciation than to the Lao language spoken in Laos and Northeast Thailand.

¹⁷ H. Warington Smyth, Five Years in Siam: From 1891 to 1896 (London: John Murray, 1898), 236.
¹⁸ Doeng (เดิ้ง) means “in between” in Thai. The language is sometimes also referred to as Thai Boeng (ไทยเบ็ง).
The Tai-Lao people (commonly referred to simply as “Isan people”), the main focus of this study, comprise the majority of Isan’s population, and, while Thai citizens, are considered culturally and linguistically Lao. They are descendents of the inhabitants of the former Lan Chang kingdom who migrated to Northeast Thailand in large numbers beginning in the fourteenth century. In the traditional culture, the Isan people show a considerable degree of cultural similarity to the people in modern-day Laos. In their modern culture, however, they have large cultural differences from the Laotians. Isan are oriented to Bangkok, Central Thailand while Lao people are connected politically and culturally to Wiang Chan (Vientiane). Today all Isan can speak Central Thai but native Lao in remote areas may not. The Isan region developed in terms of its education system, infrastructure, and business at least 40 years in advance of the nation of Laos, which made the Lao more old fashioned and/or conservative than were Isan people. There are also many negative feelings between the Lao and Thai (including Isan) that date back to invasions and wars in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.\textsuperscript{19} Isan considered themselves better than the Lao people in Laos. Central Thai were still hegemonic over the Isan and Lao peoples although in history, there had been an on-going insurrection in Isan against Bangkok, with some advocating joining Laos. Isan is now totally integrated into Thailand, and Laos is resisting being pulled into that orbit and in doing so remains poor.

The Isan region has a rich musical culture, and a population 3.2 times larger than that of Laos, of which about half of the population are upland ethnic minorities. Although the musical traditions of the Lao originated in what is present-day Laos

\textsuperscript{19} See chapter 3.
(originally the Lan Chang kingdom), political events beginning in the late nineteenth century with a 52-year colonization by France, followed by decades of war, led to severe underdevelopment and a consequent cultural stagnation. Conversely, Northeast Thailand suffered no such crises; like the rest of Thailand it was never colonized and, although comparatively less developed than Central Thailand, benefited most beginning in the 1970s from an increasing infusion of capital and development from Thailand’s central government. These conditions led to a greater flourishing of modern music in Isan as compared with Laos.

Isan is also home to several small ethnic groups speaking Austroasiatic and Hmong-Mien languages. These include the following:

1. The Kuy (กู่ or กู), also called Souei, (ส่วย) or Kuay, (กวย), of whom about 300,000 live in the Buriram, Surin, Sisaket, Ubon, and Roi-et Provinces, with another 50,000 living in the Savannakhet and Saravan Provinces of southern Laos.
2. The So (ซอ), who speak a Kautic language, number 58,000, and live in the Nakhon Phanom, Sakon Nakhon, Nong Khai, and Kalasin Provinces.
3. The Bru (บระ), who number 25,000 in Thailand, speak a Katuic language and live in Sakon Nakhon Province of northern Isan.
4. The Thavung, who are called So (ซอ) in Thailand, number 750 in Thailand, live in Sakon Nakhon Province, and speak a Vietic language.
5. Some Mon (ม่วง) live in Khorat Province.
6. Some Nyahkur, called Chao Bon (ชาวบอน in Thai), live in Khorat Province.
7. Some Hmong (ม้ง) live in Loei Province of northern Isan.
8. Some Kula (คู่) are found in many provinces including Roi-et, Yasothon, Kalasin and Ubon. The term Kula, however, is not the ethnic name. It is a common term among Isan people referring to “the trading vendors” who came to the region to trade and some of them resettled in the region. These people actually are among the descendants of Burmese, Mon, Khareng, and Tai Yai from Northern Thailand and its adjacent areas. Today, while some of their cultural aspects have been preserved, most blended to the dominant Lao-Isan culture.

The Khmer (Khmen, កម្ព្រី) of Thailand, who are also referred to as Northern Khmer, (Khmen Nuea, កម្ព្រីនៃ) to distinguish them from the Khmer living in Cambodia, number 1,117,588 as mentioned earlier, with most, 1,096,100, living in the Isan region. Although there are smaller pockets of Khmer scattered elsewhere in Thailand, their population is greatest in three provinces of southern Isan: Surin, Buriram, and Sisaket, with a smaller number in Roi-et, a neighboring province in central Isan. They are descendants of the Khmer of the ancient Angkor civilization and speak a dialect similar to that of the dominant group of modern Cambodia. They are traditionally agriculturalists who grow rice and other crops. The Khmer language belongs to the Mon-Khmer branch of the Austroasiatic language family, related to the language of the Mon, who live primarily in Western Thailand and in large areas of Burma, as well as to the languages of many upland groups residing in Burma, Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia. Most Northern Khmer living in southern Isan can speak Thai, Lao, and their own Khmer dialect. The latter is sometimes written in phonetic Thai.

The Khmer have a long history and were historically one of the most powerful ethnic groups in Southeast Asia, as evinced by the numerous Khmer ruins found in many
parts of Thailand dating from the eighth to thirteenth centuries. The first known major kingdom of mainland Southeast Asia, known as Funan, was founded by the early Khmer and existed from approximately the first to sixth centuries; this was followed by the Chenla (550-802) and Angkor (802-1431) dynasties. Following the destruction of Angkor’s capital of Angkor Thom by the Siamese in 1431, the Khmer were ruled by several relatively weak dynasties that were subject to their more powerful neighbors, Siam and Vietnam. From the seventh to the mid-nineteenth centuries, Cambodia suffered a severe decline, eventually becoming a French protectorate in 1863. There is no conclusive evidence about the Khmer who live in modern Thailand to indicate whether they immigrated from Cambodia recently or have lived in the area since the Khmer long ago held power in the region. When the Khmer people were at the zenith of their power (during the Angkor Empire, between 802 and 1431), their empire stretched from the South China Sea to the Gulf of Siam, including all of modern Cambodia, East-Central Thailand, southern Vietnam, and some of southern Laos. On the other hand, there are/were some Lao people then living in Cambodia as well. The political boundary between modern Thailand and Cambodia has been arbitrary.²⁰

**Religions**

The Isan people are ethnically and culturally descendants of the old Tai-Lao people of the Lan Chang Kingdom. Although, since the late nineteenth century, Isan’s socioeconomic and political systems have been under the umbrella of the Siamese and later the Thai nation (since the country changed its name in 1939), many old Lao

²⁰ Terry Miller, personal communication.
religious and ceremonial traditions dating back to the Lan Chang period continue to function in a similar cultural context up to the present day. Until the twentieth century, due to the increasing modernization and westernization that have affected all regions of Thailand, the Isan way of life for most people has changed dramatically. As a consequence, the degree of religious and ceremonial activity, as well as the practical purpose of such activity, has declined and changed to some extent. One can, however, trace such rituals back to ceremonies of the past by examining the religious activities that do continue.

The spiritual beliefs of the Isan people combine elements of animism, Buddhism, and remnants of Hinduism. Each of these came to the area at different points over a long period of time. When they encountered newly introduced religions of Hinduism and Buddhism, Isan people continued to maintain animistic beliefs. Historically, all three of these systems have blended, making the exact origins of any single ritual difficult to ascertain.

Animism is the oldest system of spiritual belief among the Lao. It originated in the Tai populations who migrated to Southeast Asia in ancient times. While animism may be considered autochthonous to the Tai, Hinduism and Buddhism were introduced later, arriving in Mainland Southeast Asia at least as early as the sixth century AD.²¹ The Tai-Lao presumably learned about Hinduism and Buddhism from the Mon and Khmer following their arrival in Southeast Asia. Isan people believe in a chief spirit called Phi Fa (ฝีฝน), Phi Thaen (ฝีฝน), or Phi Phaya Thaen (ฝีฝนผาแน่น), which lives in the sky;

²¹ Both Hinduism and Buddhism were introduced to mainland Southeast Asia and assimilated by the Dvaravati kingdom of the Mon in the sixth century. While Dvaravati is generally considered to have been a Buddhist kingdom, its culture also contained elements of Hinduism.
hence, its name, “fa” (ฟ้า) meaning “sky.” Also living in heaven or the sky are the
thewada (เทวดา), which are often equated with angels. Therefore, the Phi Fa may be
considered either a god or a chief angel. Phi Fa is considered the most important spirit
because it is the one believed able to assist people in their daily lives, blessing their
births, marriages, and deaths.\(^\text{22}\) Phi Fa is also believed to have power to control nature or
impart fertility to the land in the form of rain, which is most important to the people for
their agriculture. Each year throughout Isan at the start of the rainy season, villages
organize a ceremony called Bun Bang Fai (or Rocket Festival), to ask Phi Fa to provide
rain for the coming year to ensure an abundant harvest. There are also many other kinds
of spirits, but all of them are lower in rank than Phi Fa. Isan people believe that many
objects, such as rivers, mountains, and very large trees, have phi living in them.
Examples of such phi include phi tahaek (ฟ้าทะอัก) or phi na (ฟ้านา), which may be
considered guardians or ghosts that live in rice fields), and phi phrai (ฟ้าพระ) or phi pa (ฟ้า
ผา), forest ghosts believed to assume animal forms, emerge from the forest, and haunt
people when they are severely ill. There is also phi pao (ฟ้าปา), a spirit that likes to eat
raw food, and phi pawp (ฟ้าป元左右), a violent spirit that eats the liver, stomach, and
intestines of people by possession. All of these varieties of phi are believed to interact
with people in their daily lives, especially in traditional life.

In Isan, animism is most closely associated with agriculture, primarily wet rice
farming, which until the late twentieth century was the primary means of survival for the
vast majority of the population, most of whom lived in rural farming villages. By the late

\(^\text{22}\) Terry E. Miller, *Traditional Music of Lao: Kaen Playing and Mawlum Singing in Northeast Thailand*
twentieth century, fewer Isan people maintained and practiced such animistic beliefs; and, where such ceremonies continue they are performed more for the sake of tradition than in a sincere belief in their effectiveness in ensuring good harvests, which are today accomplished primarily through mechanized agriculture. Since the 1970s, an increasing number of people have abandoned wet rice farming, as they prefer to move to cities and begin careers as factory workers or professionals in various non-agricultural fields.

Hinduism, another of the oldest religions in Isan, travelled from India to Mainland Southeast Asia before the Buddhist era. While Mainland Southeast Asia was historically influenced politically and culturally by the two major civilizations of India and China, in the area of religion, India exerted a stronger influence with both Hinduism and Buddhism derived from there. In order to understand the manner in which these religions came to Isan, one must examine the history of the four kingdoms in the greater region: Dvaravati, Angkor, Siam, and Lan Chang. These were the main kingdoms situated in and around the Khorat Plateau from the first millennium to the early eighteenth century. The strong and enduring influence of these Indian-derived religions on the Khorat Plateau stems largely from the legacy of those four kingdoms, each of which incorporated elements of Hinduism and/or Buddhism to a greater or lesser degree. Until the fourteenth century, when what are now Thailand and Laos were both part of the Khmer Empire, Brahmanism, a form of Hinduism, was a primary religion, especially among the aristocracy. In the concept of devaraja (देवराज, from Sanskrit devarāja, literally “divine ruler”), a central tenet of the kingdom of Angkor, the king was an earthly incarnation of a Hindu god. As a god, the king was the proper object of a cult conducted by royal Brahmins, who became officials in the king’s retinue.
In the centuries prior to the establishment of the first major Tai kingdoms of Southeast Asia, Sukhothai, Lanna, and Lan Chang in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Tai peoples had been moving into Southeast Asia, where they learned about and gradually absorbed elements of Khmer religious culture. Brahmanism and Buddhism flourished side by side in the early history of those Tai kingdoms. In the early Ayuthaya Period, during the U Thong Dynasty (1350-1569), the Siamese court adopted Brahmanism. This was a period during which Siam was at war with the Khmer Empire. Nevertheless, the Siamese admired the Khmer civilization, and it is likely that members of the Siamese ruling family learned about Brahmanism from captured Khmer prisoners of war, including artisans and high officials. Because Lan Chang had formerly been a territory of the Khmer Empire, which also practiced both Hinduism and Mahayana Buddhism during the first millennium, Hinduism influenced the culture of the region that comprises modern-day Laos.23

Buddhism also played important roles in the civilizations of Dvaravati, Angkor, Siam, and Lan Chang. Of the two primary schools of Buddhism, Theravada and Mahayana, the latter is more prevalent in Northeast Asia, that is China, Korea, and Japan, while Theravada is the primary branch practiced in most of Mainland Southeast Asia, particularly in Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia.24 However, there is some evidence that Mahayana Buddhism preceded Theravada in Mainland Southeast Asia, particularly during the Angkorian Empire in its early centuries, before the introduction of Theravada Buddhism from Sri Lanka in the thirteenth century. The Khmer played an

23 While Hinduism was brought by the Khmer, Buddhism was brought into mainland Southeast Asia by the Mon. Thus, the earliest Buddhist doctrine was written in Pali using the Mon script.
24 Vietnam, with its historically close relationship to China, is the exception, with most Vietnamese Buddhists adherent to Mahayana Buddhism.
important role in spreading not only Hinduism throughout their territory but also Mahayana Buddhism.

Beginning in the fourteenth century, Theravada Buddhism assumed an increasing importance in the kingdom of Lan Chang, particularly during the reign of King Wichon (1501-1520), who adopted it as an integral part of the kingship system. Wichon adopted the Lao Buddhist worldview to provide legitimacy to his kingship and the core ideas for the structure of Lao society. In doing so, he commissioned many of the sacred Buddha images used for sacred rituals.

The foundation of this worldview consists of three elements. First is the belief that all Lao subjects descend from a common ancestor, represented by the Lao royal family. The Lao royal family line is believed to have descended from an original mythic king, Khun Borom, via Fa Ngum. Second is the acceptance of Buddhism as a superior truth, especially the notion of karma (kam,  กษัตริยา in Thai) leading to rebirth and the making of merit as central to Buddhist morality. Finally there is the belief in the king’s right to rule both by reason of descent and by right of his merit. It is believed that he accumulated the necessary merit in previous lives to be reborn a king and conspicuously continued to make great merit during his lifetime through generous gifts to Buddhist monks and by building notable temples.

Prior to the second millennium, the Isan region was occupied primarily by Khmer and Mon populations. Archaeological evidence of both Hinduism and Buddhism remains in the area. Throughout southern Isan, there are numerous ruins of Khmer temples, most of which were built between the fifth and ninth centuries. One of the well-known temples located in southern Isan is Prasat Hin Pimai in Pimai District Town in Nakhon
Ratchasima Province. According to the Thai archaeologist Srisakara Vallibhotama, this temple was built before the kingdom of Angkor to serve Mahayana Buddhism rather than Hinduism.\(^{25}\) While the early Khmer practiced both Mahayana Buddhism and Hinduism, during the latter era of the Angkor Empire, its political emphasis was more on Hinduism.

The main archaeological evidence for the early practice of Buddhism in Isan is Phra That Phanom (พระธาตุพนม), a stupa\(^{26}\) in Nakhon Phanom Province next to the Maekhong River. It was originally erected no later than the sixth or seventh century, probably during the early Khmer kingdom of Chenla (550-802) prior to the Angkorian Empire.\(^{27}\) All the decorative artwork on the exterior of the stupa, reliefs in Khmer style, are considered the earliest Buddhist sculptural elements discovered in ancient Chenla. There is, however, little evidence to indicate how common people practiced either Hinduism or Buddhism. Similarly, there is no clear evidence regarding the ethnic identity of the main groups living in the Isan region at that time. The successive waves of people to the kingdoms in the region indicate that the population inhabiting the region at that time may have included Mon and Khmer but perhaps also Tai-Lao people and other ethnic groups who were culturally and politically under the Khmer civilization of Angkor. Since the area is far from any other Khmer ruins, the Khmer ruins in Isan especially provide evidence of cultural influence and Lao imitation of the Khmer.\(^{28}\)

While it is clear that the people of various kingdoms and communities living in the region

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\(^{25}\)Srisakara Vallibhotama (ศรีศักะกร วลีบดี), A Northeastern Site of Civilization: New Archaeological to Change the Face of Thai History (openhagen: Oxford University Press, 2003), 458.

\(^{26}\) A stupa is a dome-shaped Buddhist reliquary.

\(^{27}\) The Stupa had been restored several times in the past. Most importantly, the entire Stupa was rebuilt in 1975 when it fell down during a big storm. The currently standing stupa, then, is technically not considered original.

\(^{28}\) Terry Miller, personal communication.
before the arrival of the Lao people from Lan Chang in the fourteenth century practiced a variety of religions, it was the Lao who brought Theravada Buddhism with them, making it the main religion of the Isan people of today.

Three Music Zones

Although there are a number of ethnic groups making up the population of Isan, Thai musical scholars generally divide the region into three primary musical culture zones, based on geography and culture. These musical zones are focused on the region’s three largest ethnic groups: Khorat Tai, Khmer, and Tai-Lao (Isan) whose musical cultures are more dominant and have been studied by a number of music scholars. The first of these, the Khorat Musical Zone, comprises the traditional music of the Khorat Tai of Khorat (Nakhon Ratchasima) Province; the second, the Southern Isan Musical Zone, comprises the musical traditions of the Khmer people living in the three aforementioned provinces; and finally, the Northern Isan Musical Zone covers the rest of the region, which is inhabited mainly by Tai-Lao (also called Lao-Isan) and Phutai. The remainder of the smaller Tai, Austroasiatic, and Hmong-Mien ethnic groups mentioned earlier, whose music has not been accorded as much study and some of which (e.g., that of the Hmong) is more prevalent in other regions, are not included in this system of categorization.

Khorat Music Zone

The Khorat Musical Zone includes the music of the Khorat Tai ethnic group, who comprise the vast majority of the population of Khorat Province. The Khorat Tai not only have their own dialect, similar to that of Central Thailand, but also their own distinct
musical traditions. Chief among these are the use of the *piphat* ensemble as well as the folk genres *likay* and *phleng Khorat*.

Their primary musical ensemble, called *piphat* (ปีพหัท),\(^{29}\) consists of *khawng wong* (ข่วงวง), gong circles, *ranat* (ระนาด) xylophones, *pi* (ปี), quadruple-reed oboe, *taphon* and *glawng that* (กลองทัค), drums, and other percussion such as *ching* (จี้) small, high-pitched cymbals, *grap* (กําบ), clappers, and *chap* (chap), flat cymbals. This classical ensemble is found not only in the Khorat region but also throughout present-day Thailand. This type of ensemble is also common to Cambodia, where it is called *pinpeat*, and Laos, where it is called *pinphat*. Although there is no conclusive evidence to indicate its origin, stone relief carvings at Angkor Wat and Angkor Thom depict ensembles comprising gong circles, oboes, drums, and cymbals.\(^{30}\) Therefore, it is possible that this kind of ensemble is common in the Khorat area because the area was part of the Khmer Empire from the fifth to twelfth centuries. However, the *piphat* of the Khorat Tai may have derived directly from that of the Siamese because its musical style is closer to that of present-day Central Thailand than to that of Cambodia.\(^{31}\) The ensemble can be seen in most local cultural events such as Buddhist festivals and ceremonies, and it also accompanies various theatrical performances.

\(^{29}\) Historically this term derives from the older term *phinphat* (ฟินฟะทัต).


\(^{31}\) To some degree Khmer classical music was also influenced by Siamese music. In 1930 particularly, Luang Phradit Phairaw, a well-known Siamese musician and composer, went to Cambodia with the Siamese King, Rama VII. The composer was invited by the Cambodian king to “restore” Cambodia’s classical music. Today the modern Khmer repertory consists almost entirely of Thai compositions.
Likay (ลิเก) is a form of folk theater most strongly associated with Central Thailand.\(^{32}\) It has been the most popular folk dramatic form in Central Thailand since the reign of Rama V (1868-1910). The origins of likay are obscure, but many scholars, such as Prince Damrong Rajanubhab (1862-1943) and Montri Tramote (Montri ตรามโท, 1908-1995), seem to agree that likay first developed from the religious recitation of Muslims from Southern Thailand, Persia, or elsewhere, who came to perform for the Siamese royal family in the late 1800s. Although likely derived from Muslim tradition, likay eventually became an entirely Central Thai art form, with accompaniment provided by a piphat ensemble played in a unique style of likay. A popular form of entertainment in the Khorat area until the late twentieth century, likay was introduced to Khorat from Bangkok beginning roughly in the 1920s. Although it is presently in a state of decline, it may still be seen in some festivals.\(^{33}\) Especially in the city of Khorat, there were until the late twentieth century many likay troupes, most of which were founded either by Khru Bunyang Ketkhong (ครูบุญยง เกิดคง), 1924-1997, a famous likay performer from Bangkok who introduced this tradition to Khorat.\(^{34}\)

Phleng Khorat (เพลงโคราช) is the region’s most prominent genre of local narrative singing. In Thailand it is grouped, along with phleng choi, phleng i-saeo, and numerous other forms, under the heading phleng pheun ban (เพลงพื้นบ้าน), local vocal music. Phleng means “vocal music” or “singing” and Khorat refers to both the area and its people; thus, this term literally means “the vocal music of Khorat.” The defining characteristic of phleng Khorat is vocal repartee performed by male and female singers in


\(^{33}\) Prayoonsri Nippita (ประยุส นิปปิท), personal communication, New York City, summer 2003.

\(^{34}\) Bunyang Ketkhong should not be confused with the eminent ranat thum player and teacher Bunyong Ketkhong (บุญยงก เกิดคง), 1920-1996, who was the elder brother of Bunyang Ketkhong.
alternation. The origin of this genre is unknown, and it has traditionally been taught and transmitted orally. Other than the hand clapping of the performers, there is no instrumental accompaniment. The text is improvised according to poetic and rhythmic formulae deriving from traditional literature as well as reflecting local customs and folklore. The text may sometimes have double meanings, often expressing sexual innuendo.

Before the 1980s, *phleng Khorat* was still very popular throughout the area, mostly as local entertainment. People of all ages in each village could sing *phleng Khorat* at that time. Unlike *likay*, *phleng Khorat* is not generally performed by professional troupes but instead by local farmers with skill in singing. The performers dance in-place while they sing in repartee style. At least one or two couples perform in alternation with only one singer singing at a time on an open square stage surrounded by the audience. Formerly, *phleng Khorat* was performed as an all-night entertainment at many kinds of Buddhist festivals, ceremonies, and other celebrations. Today, however, it is becoming rare but is still performed regularly at the statue of Thao Suranari, a nineteenth-century Thai heroine, in the city of Khorat as an offering to her spirit.

*Phleng Khorat* is the only musical genre of the Khorat people that seems to have had an origin in its own region and remains a musical symbol of Nakhon Ratchasima Province.

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35 Prayoonsri Nippita, personal communication
36 Thao Suranari (ท้าวสุรนารี), also called Khun Ying Mo (คุณหญิงโม), was the wife of the deputy governor of Khorat during the reign of King Rama III. According to Thai legend, she managed to save the city from the invasion of the Laotian army in 1826. To commemorate her heroic actions, a statue of her was erected in the city of Khorat in 1934. Local people believe that the statue embodies her spirit, and they often come to leave gifts, pay their respects, or redeem a promise made to her spirit.
Southern Isan Music Zone

The Southern Isan Musical Zone covers the southern portion of Northeast Thailand bordering Cambodia, and includes three provinces: Surin, Buriram, and Sisaket. There are many ethnic groups in this area, but the Khmer are the dominant group. Therefore, the Southern Isan Musical Zone refers only to the music of the ethnic Khmer. The five most prominent traditional music genres of the Khmer in this zone include *kantruem* (ก้นตรีม), *mahori khamen* (มาฮอริกะเมน), *piphat khamen* (ปิหะที่่่กะเมน), and *jariang* (เจริญ).

The *kantruem* ensemble (wong *kantruem* in Thai), the most distinctive musical ensemble of Southern Isan, is unique musically and is common throughout the Khmer-Thai cultural area. The name *kantruem* comes from the sound of a pair of drums called *kantruem*, which dominates the ensemble: a small, higher pitch male and a larger, deeper pitch female. Their sounds are referred to onomatopoetically as “*kan*” and “*truem*.” There are four kinds of instruments in the ensemble, including a pair of *kantruem*, drums; *kapkaep*, a pair of wooden clappers; *trua*, a two-stringed fiddle; and *pey-aw*, a double-reed bamboo oboe. The size of the ensemble can be larger or smaller depending on the number of musicians available. The ensemble traditionally performs a series of brief tunes, with each piece repeated many times. *Kantruem* ensembles play for many occasions, but not funerals.

The *mahori Khamen* ensemble consists of *trua*, a two-stringed fiddle; *sralai*, a quadruple reed oboe; *takay*, a two-stringed zither in crocodile shape; *krap*, a pair of hardwood clappers; and a pair of *kantruem*, drums. The texture of the music is polyphonically stratified in which each instrument plays different realizations of the same
melody. Panya Roongruang, one of the first scholars to study Khmer music in Thailand, points out that one of the best-known groups is Mahori Koktachai (មូហ៍រីកកោតាំបូ), founded in the Koktachai Subdistrict of Buriram Province by a performer who migrated from Cambodia in 1920.37

The Piphat Khamen ensemble consists of a roneat tauch, a xylophone with twenty-three keys; a khong wong thom, a gong circle with sixteen tuned gongs; sralai, a quadruplereed oboe; and ching, a pair of small, thickrimmed cymbals. This ensemble is nearly identical in instrumentation and repertory to the piphat ensemble used in Central Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos.

Thum mong or thum mung is funeral music. The ensemble consists of thum, a large gong; and pi-jaruang and pi-phuk, small and large bamboo freereed pipes. When someone dies, the players borrow the drum and the gong from the local Buddhist temple to join with either or both pi-jaruang or pi-phuk players and other local instrumentalists. The music is played throughout the night until the body is taken to the temple for the funeral ceremony and cremation.

Jariang is a genre of solo narrative vocal music. The singing may be accompanied by either a solo instrument or an ensemble. Normally, jariang is accompanied by the japey (ចាត់បោក), a two-stringed long-necked lute sometimes called jariang-japey, while the singer accompanies himself on the japey. Later, the khaen (ចំណ), a bamboo freereed mouth organ, was borrowed from the Lao and adapted to replace the japey to accompany a subgenre called jariang breun. The texts are of many

types, including *jataka* (stories of the Buddha’s previous lives), Buddhist doctrine, and courtship.

**Northern Isan Music Zone**

The Northern Isan Musical Zone covers the remaining area or thirteen provinces. Although this region is inhabited by several different ethnic groups, scholars generally focus their attention on the two most prominent cultures: the Lao-Isan and the Phutai. Of the former, the Lao-Isan (also referred to in ethnolinguistic terms as Tai-Lao or in political terms as Thai Isan) provide the majority population of this area. There are three subgroups who all speak the same language and are closely related but who may be differentiated by their accents and historical backgrounds. The Lao Wiang (ลาวเรียง), who have an accent close to the Lao of Wiang Chan, Laos, from which they were forcibly resettled in the nineteenth century, are the dominant population, and they live throughout Northeast Thailand. The Lao Kao (ลาวเก่า, or “Old Lao,” believed to have dwelt in Isan longest, are smaller in number than the Lao Wiang and speak with a distinctive accent. They live primarily in the provinces of Ubon and Roi-et. The Lao Phuan (ลาวพวน), originally from Xieng Khouang, Laos, where they were originally simply called Phuan, also speak with their own accent. Over the past century these three subgroups have increasingly mixed and are thus less culturally distinct today. Their traditional musics are also very similar. The latter group, the Phutai, are smaller in number than the Lao-Isan. Thus, they represent an ethnic group of secondary political importance in Isan, but nevertheless possess a rich musical tradition.

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38 The Thai term for *jataka* is *chadok* (ชาดก).
Traditional Music of the Northern Isan Music Zone

Vocal Music

The *su khwan* (สุขวัณ) ritual is a Hindu-derived ritual performed to restore or enhance a person’s spiritual, physical, or mental health, and is considered a rite of passage. The ritual is also called *bai sri* (บาทศรี) or *bai sri su khwan* (บาทศรีสุขวัณ). *Khwan* (ขวัญ) refers to the set of spiritual essences of a human, believed to sometimes leave the body due to various forms of spiritual imbalance, stress, or ill will. When performed under such circumstances, the purpose of the ceremony is to call this *khwan* back. The rite is also frequently conducted in positive situations including ordination, marriage, and pregnancy. In such cases it serves to enhance, support, or replenish one’s *khwan*. The ritualist who conducts the *su khwan* ceremony is called a *maw khwan* (หมอขวัญ), *phram* (พระมณี), or *maw phram* (หมอพระมณี), terms derived from Brahmanism. Usually he is an older respected lay male who was formerly a Buddhist monk and who is literate in learned scripts.39 The *phram* recites manuscripts in Pali,40 in Lao, or often in a mixture of the two languages from memory.41 The melodic style of the recitation is related to those of other secular vocal genres of the region such as *lam*, but the recitation itself is not considered a form of singing or entertainment.

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39 A *phram* often possesses skill in reading Buddhist texts in such ancient scripts as Tua Tham, Thai Yai, Thai Noi (also called Tua Wiang), and Khmer.
40 The Pali language, though originally recorded in India using various Indic scripts such as Brahmi or Devanagari, was originally written in Thailand using either the Khmer script or Tua Khom (ตัวเขมร), a script derived from the old Khmer script, but was later also written using the Mon-derived Tua Tham (ตัว ธรรม), or Dharmic script. By 1893 Chulalongkorn had the entire Pali Canon (also known as The Tripitaka, or Phra Trai Pidok, พระไตรปิฎก in Thai) printed in modern Thai script, and soon after the use of the Khmer-derived script to record Pali texts was abandoned in Siam.
Another vocal tradition, called *saraphan* (สาระพันธ์) or *sut saraphan* (สุตรสาระพันธ์) meaning “sutra,” referring to the text, is performed by a troupe of mostly female singers (which is also referred to as a *saraphan*) who perform during the festival that takes place at the beginning of Khao Phansa (เข้าพรรษา), the Buddhist Lent. Each village has at least one troupe whose purpose is to sing at this festival, which lasts for between one and three days, as a representative of the village. The *saraphan* entertain people using religious poetry set to a simple repeated melody, without instrumental accompaniment. As with the recitation of the *phram* mentioned earlier, *saraphan* is not considered a form of singing, although it is considered more light-hearted and entertaining. Sometimes there are competitions as well, in which *saraphan* from neighboring villages compete.

A third vocal tradition, called *thet lae* (ทเนสนแหล, also called *lae*, แหล, for short), is a style of melodic preaching. The term *thet* (เทสน) refers to preaching done by Buddhist monks (either spoken or chanted), and *thet lae* refers to the specific style of preaching that takes the form of poetic storytelling, which is chanted in melodic fashion. This tradition is reserved for special occasions and is most commonly encountered in the Bun Phawet (บุญผาเว) ceremony that takes place each year in early March. At this ceremony, a group of monks (often four or six) take turns telling the *jataka* story of Pha Wetsandawn (พระเวสสันดร), the most important previous life of the Lord Buddha, which was the final human life before he was reborn in enlightenment as the Buddha.

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42. This term may also be spelled สาระพันธ์ or สาระคุณภู.
43. This observance, which lasts for three lunar months, takes place annually during the rainy season.
44. This style of chanting is also referred to as *thet phawet* (เทสนผาเว), *thet bun phawet* (เทสนบุญผาเว), or *thet mahachat* (เทสนมาชาติ), the latter term being used particularly in Central Thailand.
45. This figure is called Phra Wetsandawn (พระเวสสันดร) in Central Thai.
released from the cycles of reincarnation. Each monk takes a different role in speaking the parts of each of the characters in the *jataka*, often in dialogue with one another. The chanting of such stories also varies in style, from chant on a single pitch to virtuosic displays with extensive melismas. The tradition does not utilize stock melodies but instead follows the tones of the Lao language, and the melodic material is thus not generally repetitive, although each performer may possess their own identifiable style. The chanting is also not considered to be singing, as with the *su khwan*, as monks are prohibited from singing according to their religious discipline. Although the primary function of *thet lae* is the teaching of Buddhist tenets to the general public, it is considered more entertaining than the chanting performed in *su khwan* rituals.

*Mawlam* (มволำ) is the most important musical genre of Isan. In the Lao language, *maw* (มำว) means “skilled person.” This term may be applied to a person possessing any kind of skill; for example, *maw muay* (มำวมวย, a boxer) or *maw ya* (มำวยา, a folk doctor who uses herbal medicine and ritual texts).46 *Lam* (ลำ) is a verb meaning “to sing.”47 Therefore, the term *mawlam* literally means “skilled in lam [singing],” and a person who has skill in singing *lam* is also referred to as a *mawlam*. The music is centered on its Lao-language lyrics which are associated with storytelling (both secular and Buddhist) and courtship, often incorporating topical elements or local

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46 This term is used to refer to anyone possessing such a skill, not simply those who are considered masters. This is because, in earlier days, such skills were commonly held by many more members of the population, and there was thus less of a concept of a given individual holding any special status as a “master” at any of these skills.

47 This term is only applied to the traditional *mawlam* singing of the Lao culture; when other types of singing are referred to, the borrowed Central Thai verb *rawng phleng* (ร้องเพลง) is used. When used as a noun in Lao, *lam* may also refer to the poetic text used in *mawlam* singing or the genre itself (thus, *lam* can be used as a synonym for *mawlam*, and various styles of *mawlam* can be referred to either as *mawlam* or *lam*; for example, *mawlam klawn* or *mawlam mu* may also be called *lam klawn* or *lam mu*).
gossip. Although the vocal component of *mawlam* traditionally includes a great deal of improvisational freedom, some performers utilize pre-composed texts.

There are five main subgenres of *mawlam*. The first of these, *mawlam phuen* (หมอละวาด), is narrative singing where secular or Buddhist stories are sung by a solo male (or occasionally female) singer accompanied by a *khaen* mouth organ. The texts used for *mawlam phuen* are mostly drawn from the body of old traditional literature in the Lao language, called *wannakhadi Lao* (วรรณคดีลาว), from which some stories contain Buddhist elements especially, the ones drawn from various *jataka*. Although the origin of *mawlam phuen* is unknown due to the scarcity of sources, it had already declined by 1940, and by 1974 there remained in Isan only four known active performers.

*Mawlam klawn* (หมอละวาดออก) is a style of repartee singing that developed after that of the *mawlam phuen*. It is usually performed as a dialogue between male and female singers, who sing in alternation (never singing at the same time). Each is also accompanied by the *khaen*, and the genre was the most widespread and popular type of

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48 These texts are recorded in various ancient scripts on palm leaf manuscripts called *nangスุ phuk*, many of which are hundreds of years old, and preserved in temples throughout Isan.
50 Ibid.
51 Before the twentieth century, when the modern educational system allowed females in Isan to learn to read and write (and thus be able to learn long and complex sung narrative texts), *mawlam klawn* seems to have been performed as a dialogue between two male singers (often discussing aspects of Buddhist doctrine), or sometimes by a solo male singer.
52 Unlike *mawlam phuen*, *mawlam klawn* usually uses two *khaen*, a larger one that is matched to the female singer, and a smaller one for the male singer.
mawlam until its popularity gradually decreased, beginning with the rise of popular music and cinema in the late 1970s.\textsuperscript{53}

*Mawlam phaya yoi* (หมอลาผายหยอย) is another repartee style that originated in Mukdahan Province, located along the Maekhong River across from Savannakhet, Laos. This singing style, which is accompanied by the *wong phin-khaen* (วงฟืน แค่น) ensemble consisting of the plucked fretted lute *phin* and the *khaen* mouth organ, is related to two other local mawlam styles: *mawlam khawnsawan* (หมอลาค่อนสวาร์) that originated in Savannakhet but which is also found in Isan; and *mawlam toei hua non tan* (หมอลาเตี้ยหัวโหนนเต้น).\textsuperscript{54}

*Mawlam phi fa* (หมอลาพี่ фа) is the only style that is not associated primarily with entertainment, but rather is performed for healing sicknesses. By the twenty-first century this style had become so uncommon as to be considered essentially extinct.

Lastly, *mawlam mu* (หมอلاءหมู่) and *mawlam phloen* (หมอلاءพลีน) are the two genres of Isan theatrical music. The traditional style consists of a group of singers of both genders (often between six and eight, depending on the story to be performed). The performers sing and act in costume, often acting out stories from either various *wannakhadi* or *jataka*, similar those of from the *mawlam phuen*, a narrative genre. They are typically only performing a single story on a given evening.\textsuperscript{55} The *mawlam mu* is also commonly known as *mawlam rueang* (หมอلاءเรือง), “a story mawlam” due to the fact that they perform a story. Although both *mawlam mu* and *mawlam phloen* share

\textsuperscript{53}At present, several prominent *mawlam klawn* performers, most of whom are over sixty years of age, continue to perform and teach, and thus this style of *mawlam* has not disappeared completely.

\textsuperscript{54}A short composed local tune, this style is usually called simply *toei hua non tan* (เตี้ยหัวโหนนเต้น) in Isan vernacular.

\textsuperscript{55}A typical *mawlam mu* performance lasts for at least ten hours, beginning at sundown and continuing until dawn.
some common elements, they have their own uniqueness. The former emphasizes the beauty of the poetic text, less metrical singing through the use of longer note values and melisma, while the latter is characterized by a faster, more metrical and syllabic vocal style. This latter style is more conducive to dance, and the vocalists in *mawlam phloen* often dance while singing as well as between vocal selections. In the beginning the musical accompaniment includes *khaen*, congas, and drumset appeared in the *mawlam mu* while *phin* was always as another additional instrument featured in the *mawlam phloen*. Since the advent of Western popular music in Isan beginning in the 1970s, a band of electrified rock instruments often opens the evening’s performance of both theatrical genres with an hour-long set of *luk thung* tunes.56

*Nang pramothai* (นั่งปราโมทย์ or หนังปราโมทย์)57 is a form of shadow-puppet theater in Isan that derives from the *nang talung* (หนังตะลุง) shadow theater of Southern Thailand, and it is often also referred to in Isan as *nang talung*. It is likely that this theater form was introduced to Isan from Central Thailand, as evidenced by its performance style, which integrates elements of Central Thai music, including instruments such as *ranat ek*,58 a hand drum, *ching* (small, high-pitched cymbals), and sometimes other percussion, as well as typical Central Thai melodies. In addition, the vocalist accompanying the shadow play (who is usually also the puppeteer) sings and speaks in Central Thai dialect, using a singing style that is strongly influenced by

56*Luk thung* (ลูกทุง), a genre of Thai popular music based on traditional melodies, will be discussed at greater length in the following chapters.
57*Nang* (หนัง) means “shadow puppet,” and “*pramothai*” (ปราโมทย์ or ปราโมทย์) is a term deriving from Pali meaning “enjoyment.”
58Because this high-pitched xylophone was not readily available in Isan until the late 1970s, prior to that time most *nang pramothai* troupes used homemade *ranat ek*.
traditional Central Thai vocal music. Most of the time nang pramothei troupes perform scenes from the ancient Hindu epic Ramakien, which was introduced to Mainland Southeast Asia from India in ancient times. There are some troupes that use an entirely Northeastern style, using khaen, singing and speaking in Lao, and performing stories drawn from various wannakhadi, such as the Lao epic Sang Sin Chai (สังสรรค์สินชัย).

Musical Ensembles

The traditional Isan instrumentarium is comprised of a large number of musical instruments, some of which are played independently and others used in musical ensembles--called wong dontri (วงดนตรี)--throughout the region. Isan musical ensembles originated both within and from outside the region. First, wong klawng yao (วงกログยาว) is an ensemble used primarily for public processions. This ensemble consists of a large number of (usually male) musicians playing klawng yao, or “long drums,” which are played with the hands; one or two klawng tum (สตรอกลองตั่ม), a single-headed bass drum played with one hand, a number of chap yai (XP6YX1), and chap lek (XP6YX3), large and small flat cymbals. This ensemble plays sophisticated rhythmic patterns to accompany processions of various kinds, such as Buddhist and animist festivals, and is always accompanied in such processions by a group of female vocalists.

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59 The only exception to this is when the vocalist plays the comic characters; he speaks and sings in the Lao language, often with a local accent.
61 Wong dontri means “music ensemble,” as wong (วง) literally means “circle” or “getting together as a circle” and dontri (ดนตรี) means “music.”
62 A typical wong klawng yao features between four and ten klawng yao, always in even numbers to facilitate symmetry while marching. The klawng yao used in Isan differ from those used in Central Thailand, being less slender at their waist.
63 This drum is also called ramana (รัมนาน), although it bears little resemblance to the smaller ramana used in Central Thai classical music.
dancers; the ensemble and dancers are together referred to as khana klawng yao (คณา กล่วงยา). The wong klawng yao is the most important public ensemble of Isan, in that it is considered to belong to a community having a temple as its center and played by inhabitants of that village. Formerly a popular procession ensemble, every village maintained at least one khana’ klawng yao to perform for festival processions until this tradition began to decline in the 1980s.

The phin-khaen ensemble, called wong phin khaen ( werk phin khaen) in Lao, is an informal ensemble consisting of two main instruments: the phin, a three-stringed plucked and fretted lute, and the khaen, a bamboo-free reed mouth organ. These are the two primary melodic instruments of the Lao culture, and this ensemble is ubiquitous throughout Isan, except in majority Khmer and Khorat Tai areas. Sometimes a hand drum and/or chap lek (small flat cymbals) are also included. Originally it was an informal ensemble of villager-musicians getting together after dinner to entertain themselves, rather than an organized ensemble like the wong klawng yao.\(^{64}\) The repertory played by such ensembles is small, the composers are unknown, and the music is transmitted by oral tradition. The phin-khaen ensemble was also sometimes formerly used in courtship rituals,\(^{65}\) as well as in Buddhist and animist festival processions. In the 1950s the ensemble, its manner of playing, and repertoire became more formalized due to its having been selected as the primary accompaniment for mawlam mu, but its use in such a context is very rare today.

\(^{64}\)In keeping with the informal nature of this ensemble, the term wong phin khaen is unknown in Isan, such ensembles simply being referred to as siang phin-siang khaen (เสียงฟิน เสียงխ่าน, literally “the sound of phin and the sound of khaen”) or phin-kap-khaen (พินกับข่าน, literally “phin with khaen”).

\(^{65}\)Such rituals, which largely became obsolete after the 1950s, involved a young, unmarried man going to the home of a young woman in the evening, in order to court her under her parents’ supervision. During the young man’s walk to the young woman’s home, as well as upon his arrival there, he would very often play either a phin or a khaen, sometimes accompanied by a friend who would play the other instrument.
The *Isan mahori* ensemble, called *wong mahori Isan* (วงมโหระยิสาน), is a much rarer, regional ensemble primarily found in rural areas of central Isan, particularly in the provinces of Mahasarakham and Roi-et. It consists of two or three different sizes of *pi* (quadruple-reed oboes); *saw*, a two-stringed fiddle with a coconut shell body; *klawng tum*, a single-headed bass drum played with the hand; *ching*, and *chap lek* and *chap yai* (small and large flat cymbals). Although the origin and history of this ensemble is still unclear, it likely derives from the Khmer music in southern Isan. Because central Isan is almost completely culturally Lao, it is possible that this ensemble was developed by Lao speakers who found the music of their Khmer neighbors to the south exotic and intriguing; it may also have been inspired by the small number of Khmer speakers who live in central Isan, who may have brought their music in past times. *Isan mahori* music is performed primarily for Buddhist and animist festival ceremonies as well as special occasions at private homes but has been in decline since the late 1970s. Although there are some *Isan mahori* musicians still living, some of them have stopped playing because few festivals or private individuals hire them to perform. Occasionally, local or provincial governments subsidize *Isan mahori* performances by the remaining ensembles, or by student groups trained by master musicians, for the purposes of cultural preservation. These events sometimes take the form of competitions, in which several ensembles compete for cash prizes.

*Wong ranat khawng wong* (วงศ์ระนาดข้องวง) refers to the *piphat* ensemble of Central Thai classical music; the name *ranat khawng wong* is applied to this ensemble only by Lao speakers in Isan. As with the *piphat* of Central Thailand, this ensemble consists of *ranat* (xylophones), *khawng wong* (gong circles), and *pi* (oboe) and may have
been adopted in Isan during the zenith of its popularity during the reign of Rama VI (1910-1925), although some scholars believe it may also have been influenced by the pinphat tradition of Laos.\textsuperscript{66} However, this kind of ensemble effectively died out in Isan at least by the late 1970s. In my village (Ban Non, Kham Pom Subdistrict, in Wapi Pathum District of Mahasarakham Province) as of this writing, there was only a single ranat khawng wong musician still living, the ensemble having stopped playing following the death of some of the members at least thirty years ago. At the temples of some villages in Mahasarakham Province, the instruments remain but without enough musicians remaining to play them as an ensemble.

**Phutai music**

*Wong dontri Phutai* (งวงดนตรีพุทธ) or Phutai music, is the traditional instrumental ensemble music of the Phutai people. Phutai ensemble music has its own style, even though most of the instruments in the ensemble are shared with the Lao musical culture. Like Lao traditional ensembles, the number and types of instruments used in Phutai traditional ensembles may vary or appear in different combinations, depending on the circumstances. The main melodic instruments, however, include one or more of the following: *khaen, phin, or krachappi* (กระจับปี่), a three-stringed plucked lute essentially the same as the *phin* used by the Lao; *saw bang* (ซอเบ่ง or simply *saw* (ซอ)), a two-stringed bowed bamboo tube zither; *pi Phutai* (ปี่พุทธ) or simply *pi* (ปี่), a small, slender bamboo-free reed pipe; *klawng* (drum), and *chap lek*. The *pi Phutai* is similar to a single tube of a *khaen*, being made of the same material and having the same structure except

\textsuperscript{66} Terry Miller, personal communication, 2009.
that it has five finger holes67 rather than one. Sometimes it is called *pi luk khaen* (ปีลูกแคน), literally “khaen-child wind instrument.” Since the 1990s the *ponglang* (ปองกลาง), a pentatonically-tuned vertical log xylophone that gives its name to the *ponglang* ensemble, a neotraditional ensemble of Lao origin, has also been integrated into Phutai ensembles.

*Lam Phutai* (ลำพูทน), a vocal genre of the Phutai, is similar to the *mawlam* of the Lao in that the text is more important than the melody. While the vocal music of the Lao of Isan has several melodies depending on local regions and styles, Phutai vocal music has only a single melody. In other words, Phutai music is performed in a manner similar to strophic form in the Western tradition, utilizing one melody that is repeated with different texts over many stanzas. The vocal melody usually had a strong emphasis on improvisation in terms of ornamentation, melisma, and variation, although there were also stock melodic phrases that could be integrated into a given performance. The level of experience of a singer could be determined by their skill and technique of improvisation.68

**Isan Modern Music**

Modernization initially grew in the region of Northeast Thailand beginning in the late 1970s. Modern transportation, education, and communication at first developed gradually from a few main cities, then eventually spread to the entire region from that time until the present. Modernization came within westernization and later globalization has affected Isan socioeconomic society. Traditional music has declined while modern

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67 Providing several pitches.
68 Most information regarding Phutai music is from Jarernchai Chonpairot (เจริญชัย ขอนไพโรธ), an ethnomusicologist from Isan, in particular his "*Dontri Phutai*" (Music of Phutai People, ดนตรีพูทน). Mahasarakham: Srinakarintraravirot University, 2529/1986.
music—new forms of music that developed within a context of modernization—have largely replaced traditional ones.

Unlike the traditional music of Isan, which was categorized above into three cultural zones, the region’s modern music cannot be easily classified according to such criteria. The distinct boundaries of the ethnic groups that make up the Isan region are no longer obvious in the context of modern music. Due to the influence of modernization and globalization, the dominant Lao population of Isan has exerted a strong influence over the rest of the region. The other musical cultures of those secondary ethnic groups such as the Khmer or Phutai, however, have also created modernized versions of their music, but in doing so all were influenced by the mainstream Lao-Isan music. Isan modern music, the main focus of this study, comprises four main genres.

First, mawlam sing (มอลามซิง) is a recently developed style of modernized mawlam created in 1989, which derives from mawlam klawn. It was created by combining luk thung (ลูกท้ง) country music with mawlam texts. The term sing (ซิง), derived from the English word “racing,” implies speeding (associated with motorcycle or car racing), and hence refers to something fast and modern. It is accompanied by a band made up of Western rock instruments including electric guitar, electric bass guitar, drum set, and sometimes also electronic keyboard and electric phin. A khaen may also be used but primarily as a cultural icon, usually drowned out by the other instruments.

Second, wong klawng yao (วงศ์คลองยาว) is a public-procession ensemble developed by combining a traditional wong klawng yao and wong phin khaen with electric amplifier. In some villages an electronic keyboard replaces the phin and khaen. Unlike the traditional wong klawng yao, this musical ensemble emphasizes the louder
melodic movement, with the *klawng yao* being of secondary importance and playing simpler rhythmic accompaniment than the traditional rhythmic patterns. It is a newly created ensemble developed around the early 1990s and is still used today.

Third, the *ponglang* ensemble, called *wong ponglang* (วงโป่งлага) in Thai, is a modernized form of Isan ensemble music that began to develop in the 1960s. It was created by bringing together several previously isolated Isan instruments to play as an ensemble. The melodic instruments in the ensemble include the *ponglang*, a vertical log xylophone from which the name of the ensemble is derived; the *phin*, a fretted plucked lute with three strings; the *khaen*; and the *wot* (หวด), a round panpipe. The percussion instruments include a set of *klawng yao*, *chap lek*, and *chap yai*, and sometimes also other small percussion instruments such as cowbell, bamboo lit drum, and wooden clappers.

Finally, *luk thung Isan* (ลูกทงอีสาน) is an Isan country music that combines traditional Isan music with Western musical influences, which originated in Bangkok after World War II. An earlier form of Thai popular music called *phleng luk krung* (เพลงลูกกรุง), or simply *luk krung* (ลูกกรุง), had been created in Bangkok in the early 1940s by Central Thai musicians. At approximately the same time, also in Bangkok, a new genre of “country-style” Central Thai popular music, called *phleng luk thung* (เพลงลูกทง) or simply *luk thung* (ลูกทง), was created in contrast to *luk krung*, the later considered urban because of its sophisticated lyrics and *luk thung* rural because of its less sophisticated lyrics focusing on the lives of rural people. Both genres primarily used instruments associated with early Western dance bands (such as piano, accordion, violin, saxophone, double bass, and drum set) rather than traditional ones, although occasionally traditional instruments such as *ching* were used. By the 1960s, *luk thung* and *luk krung* bands began
to utilize rock instruments (electric guitars, electric bass guitar, electronic keyboard, and drum set) and began dropping the acoustic instruments used in previous decades. Out of the Central Thai-style luk thung, Isan people eventually began to create their own version of luk thung, which came to be known as luk thung Isan.\(^6^9\) Homesick Isan migrants living in Bangkok could assert their regional identity and pride through these songs. Luk thung Isan groups included local instruments, especially the khaen, phin, and saw Isan (ข้อฮีสวน, a two-stringed vertical fiddle with a body made from a coconut shell or metal can) alongside Western ones, calling their bands wong dontri luk thung Isan (วงดนตรีลูกท่องฮีสวน), meaning “luk thung Isan band.” Today luk thung Isan is considered the most successful consumer-driven form of commercial popular music throughout Thailand, which represents Isan in terms of language, cultural context, melody, and instrumentation.\(^7^0\) Most famous singers are represented by record companies, while luk thung Isan troupes mostly remain independent.

In short, the Khorat Plateau, which refers to Isan or Northeast Thailand today, comprises one-third of the Thai nation both geographically and in terms of population. Although the region holds the majority of Lao people who represent Isan culture as a whole, many other ethnic minorities also live there. While Theravada Buddhism is the main religion, animism and Hinduism are also blended into Buddhism. Although many musical genres from numerous ethnic groups in the region have been summarized, only music of the Lao tradition will be the focus in this study. As citizens of Thailand, Isan people share their cultural roots with Lao kingdom, which is today’s nation of Laos. Due

\(^6^9\)Over subsequent decades, other styles of luk thung based on the music of Northern and Southern Thailand also developed, although these are much less popular than the Central Thai and Isan varieties.
\(^7^0\)Although in terms of sales, luk thung Isan dominates the Thai market, most consumers of such music are working-class Isan people, living both in Isan as well as in other regions of Thailand (primarily in Bangkok).
to historical, cultural, and political influences associated with their Lao heritage, Isan people, thus, have long been treated as a lower class in Thai society. All these issues will be discussed in the next chapter.
CHAPTER III
ISAN MIGRANTS IN BANGKOK: THE ORIGINS OF A NEGATIVE IMAGE

Over the course of Thailand’s modernization and since the abolition of the absolute monarchy in 1932, Bangkok has been Thailand’s economic and political center. The city and its people have long considered themselves role models of modernization for all Thais. As a result, Bangkok residents often judge people living in the nation’s other regions negatively and tend to describe them as “out of date,” ill educated, uncivilized, rustic, and poor. Northeast Thailand, historically the poorest region in the country, used to be the most convenient target for disrespectful behavior by Bangkok residents.

This negative image of Isan had its origins in the historic cultural, ethnic, and political conflicts between the two Tai brother kingdoms of the Siamese and Lao. The image was reinforced and amplified, especially in modern times, as the two cultures interacted to a greater degree. Under the impact of modernization around the Second World War, thousands of Isan people migrated to Bangkok to find employment. This gave Central Thais a greater opportunity to meet and interact with Isan people on a first-hand basis, which, unfortunately, allowed them to further develop their negative cultural stereotypes.

Due to its political dominance in Mainland Southeast Asia, Siam held a position of superiority over the Lao for centuries. With few exceptions, Siam’s rulers and people considered the Lao inferior and treated them as if there were no relationship in terms of culture or history between their two Tai groups. Based on archaeological evidence, Srisakara Vallibhotama (ศรีศักการ์ วัลลีรัตน์), a well-known Thai archaeologist, asserts that
the two ethnic groups indeed have historically had a close relationship. In *The Civilization of Northeast Thailand*, Srisakara,\(^7\) who is a Central Thai citizen, criticizes previous Thai governments for excluding the Isan region and its people from the “family” of Tai through the national education system. He explains that Thai school history books generally do not include the Lao culture of Isan as a part of Thai history. Furthermore, previous Thai governments routinely neglected Isan people, particularly those living in the Northeastern region. As Srisakara mentions:

> It is unknown why it happened that all Thai governments in the past have had an extremely negative mindset toward Isan people. The Thai Ministry of Education even wrote a Thai history textbook stating that: Isan “had its historical and cultural development separately from the story of the Thai people living in the Jao Phraya Delta, [including] the Northern area [of the delta], the Central area [of the delta], and the Southern region of the country.”

He continues:

> What the Thai government did in eliminating all mention of the social and cultural narrative of the people and civilization in the land of Isan from Thai history without any concern has provoked an insult toward Isan-ness. The people of the society and culture of Isan have fallen under the situation of underdevelopment in all aspects compared to the other regions... After all is said and done, the ancient Isan people, from antiquity, are another of the descendants of the Siamese people, who are called the “Thai people” today.\(^7\)

In *Ethnic Groups of Mainland Southeast Asia*, Frank M. Lebar, writing in 1964, also mentions the conflict between the two ethnic groups under the entry “Laotian Thai,”

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\(^7\) In this dissertation following Thai custom, the first name will be noted instead of the last or family name.

\(^7\) Srisakara Vallibhotama, ศรีสกุล วัลลิบหตุมา, *The Civilization of Northeast Thailand: New Archaeological Evidence to Change the Face of Thai History*, แฉอรารบรมย์รสาน แฉหลักฐานโบราณศิลป พลิกใหม่หน้าประดิษฐสาธารไทย (Bangkok: Matichon, 2546/2003), 12-13. Translated by the present author.
saying that “the Siamese tend to regard all Lao as rustics, and in return, the Laotian Tai [Isan] admire the Siamese but do not altogether trust them.”

**History of the Lan Chang Kingdom and the Lao (Isan)**

“Isan” before the Kingdom of Lan Chang

The history of Isan is extensive and not easy to summarize in any brief fashion. The toponym “Isan,” which literally means “Northeast” in Pali, was originally based on a geographical definition; however, in its current usage, it also refers to the residents living in the region and their Lao language group. The region’s history, then, should refer to all these three aspects: geography, population, and language. A chronological history is problematic since the term Isan was coined only in the late nineteenth century. Should we begin examining the region’s history prior to or from the time the term Isan was actually coined? In this study, I will endeavor to cover all these aspects, while placing greatest emphasis on the hundred plus years since the term was coined.

Geographically, Northeast Thailand, also known as the Khorat Plateau, was home to human populations as early as the Neolithic period, c. 10,000 years ago, although there is no evidence indicating their genetic or ethnolinguistic origins. The most extensive evidence of early human settlement in the Isan area was discovered in 1966 at the archaeological site of Ban Chiang (บ้านเชียง), a Bronze Age village of approximately 3600 BC. In subsequent centuries, during the Bronze and Iron Ages,

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74 A language of ancient India, Pali is used as the primary sacred language for the texts of Theravada Buddhism.
75 When referring to people from Isan, the term “Isan” may be used on its own as a proper noun (as, for example, saying “those people are Isan” or “I am Isan”), or used as an adjective (for example, khon Isan, คนอีสาน, literally “Isan person,” or chao Isan,ชาวอีสาน, “Isan people”).
Mon-Khmer peoples gradually spread into what is now Thailand from the north and west, primarily from Burma; Mon-Khmer populations, including the Mon, Khmer, Khmu, and several other ethnic groups are still discretely identifiable in Thailand, as well as elsewhere in Southeast Asia.

During the first millennium AD, the Mon and Khmer had already developed civilizations in Mainland Southeast Asia in the territory of most of present-day Thailand and Laos. Some Mon and Khmer toponyms are indicated in Chinese chronicles of the Tang period, 618-907 AD, in which several scholars tried to identify Southeast Asian place names by transliterating them into Chinese characters. The Japanese historian, Tatsuo Hoshino, mentions in an article in which he discusses seventh and eighth century settlements in the territory of modern day Thailand and Laos, several places in the Tang records that were located in or near the area of Isan. First, Qian Zhi Fu or Gan Zhi Fu refers either to Lopburi or to Sri Tep, a settlement on the Pasak River, located in present day Wichian Buri District of Phetchabun Province, in the eastern part of the Central Plain just west of the Khorat Plateau. Hoshino believes that this was one of the first inland settlements of South Indians in that region. Second, Zhan Bo refers to a place in central Isan, south of the Phuphan Mountains and between the Mon and Chi Rivers. Finally, Wen Dan was probably situated around the present-day provinces of Roi-et, Mahasarakham, or Kalasin.76 These places have provided important information for archaeologists and historians who are interested in Mainland Southeast Asia. There is no clear evidence, however, to indicate that Tai-speaking people had already migrated to

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those places during that time. Most archaeological evidence indicates that those areas were occupied by Mon and Khmer people.

The history of the people of Isan is inextricably tied with the broader Tai peoples prior to the thirteenth century when they arrived from their homeland in present day southern China. By the thirteenth century, after the fall of the Mon and Khmer empires, a number of Tai kingdoms appeared in former Khmer territories of Mainland Southeast Asia, in what is today Thailand and Laos. They made their new homes in the northern part of the Khmer Provincial Empire. In the mid thirteenth century, they established the kingdom of Sukhothai, 1238-1438, in what is today the northern part of Central Thailand and, by the end of the thirteenth century, the Lanna kingdom of Chiang Mai, 1251-1939, in present day Northern Thailand. In the mid fourteenth century, shortly after Sukhothai began to flourish, the Tai-speaking people extended their rule by establishing the Lao kingdom of Lan Chang, 1271-1946, in present day Laos and the Khorat Plateau, and finally the Ayuthaya kingdom of Siam, 1351-1760, in the Jao Phraya Valley of the Central Plain. The latter was succeeded by the Siamese kingdom of Thonburi, 1767-1782, and, finally, the present day kingdom of Bangkok, 1782-present.

This division of the Southeast Asian Tai into distinct kingdoms, whose languages and cultures increasingly diverged, led to centuries of rivalry and war and, eventually, in the case of the Siamese and Lao, a lack of common identification. The complete history of these kingdoms is too complex to cover in a short discussion in terms of politics and the transformation of rulers from the past through to the present. Chronologically, the dates indicated here are approximate, based on the known demise of the various
kingdoms. Politically the history of the kingdom of Lan Chang is quite complex in that it eventually split into three smaller kingdoms.

Lao Kingdom of Lan Chang

Because of cultural and political conditions, Isan’s history is closely tied to the Lan Chang Kingdom, founded by King Fa Ngum, r. 1353-1373. Chiang Dong Chiang Thong in northern Laos was the capital of the kingdom in the mid fourteenth century; however, the Lao changed the name to Luang Phrabang. Lan Chang, or “Million Elephants,” became one of the most powerful kingdoms in Mainland Southeast Asia, and sometimes had conflicted relationships with the neighboring kingdoms of Siam, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Burma. It had active diplomatic relations with China.

The son of Fa Ngum, King Samsaenthai (สามเสนไท), r. 1374-1416, was one of the great rulers of the Lan Chang Kingdom. He had close relations with the kingdoms of Ayuthaya and Lanna. Among his wives were princesses who came from both kingdoms. Samsaenthai also established diplomatic relations with the Angkor Empire, which enabled him to further expand his power. Srisakara asserts that it was roughly during the time of King Samsaenthai that the Lao people of Lan Chang began to expand into the area of what is now Northeast Thailand.77

It was not until the reign of Wichon (วิชล), 1501-1520, that the entire area of today’s Isan became clearly incorporated into Lan Chang. While it is difficult to determine the exact boundaries of Lan Chang’s western frontier, they generally follow

the Phetchabun Range, roughly parallel to the Maekhong River approximately 300 km west, down to Cambodia and across to the Siamese Kingdom of Ayuthaya. The Northeastern and Northwestern regions of Lan Chang bordered Vietnam and the Lanna Kingdom (Northern region of modern Thailand).

In 1560, for military security, Chetthathirat (เชษฐศิริราช), r. 1548-1571, another important king of the Lan Chang Kingdom, commenced a strategic alliance with Ayuthaya and moved the capital south to Wiang Chan. The demographic, economic, and strategic balance in the region changed as Lao settlers moved south along the Maekhong River as far as the region of Champasak on the east bank of the river and into the Khorat Plateau on the west. In so doing, they moved the center of Lao political power. In 1569, Ayuthaya fell to the Burmese, and Lan Chang was pressured by the great Burmese conqueror Bayinnaung.

Beginning in the late 1630s, during the reign of Lao King Suriyavongsa (สุริยา วงศ์), r. 1637-1694, whose 57-year reign is considered Lan Chang’s golden age, the kingdom had its first contacts with Europeans. In November, 1641, the court in Wiang Chan received emissaries from the Dutch East India Company and eventually established a lucrative trade relationship with the company, which was based in Batavia, now Jakarta, Java, Indonesia, and also had trading posts in Cambodia.

In the early eighteenth century, the unified kingdom of Lan Chang that had maintained its capital in Wiang Chan since 1560, divided into three smaller kingdoms,

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78 This city is more widely known in its French romanization of Vientiane.
79 Called Burengnawng, บุรีนวล, in Thai.
80 Milton Osborne, *Southeast Asia: An Introductory History* (Singapore: South Wind Production, 2010), 54-55.
each named for its own seat of power: Luang Phrabang, 1707-1946, the old central city of Lan Chang in the north; the new capital of Wiang Chan, 1707-1828, and Champasak, 1700-1946, in the south. These three kingdoms originally enjoyed good economic and political relations but later fought one another. From the mid sixteenth to early nineteenth centuries, Lan Chang was at the pinnacle of its power and its territory included all of modern day Laos as well as all of modern day Northeast Thailand.

Lao Settlement in Central Thailand\textsuperscript{81}

During the reign of King Siribunyasan of Wiang Chan, also known as Ong Bun, r. 1767-1778, Siribunyasen asked King Taksin, 1767-1782, of Thonburi (Siam) to support him against his own brother’s kingdom of Luang Phrabang. This political turbulence led to instability in all three Lao kingdoms; and they finally all fell to the Siamese during the wars of the military leaders Jaophraya Chakri and his brother Jaophraya Surasi who invaded and defeated the three Lao kingdoms in 1778-1779.\textsuperscript{82} The city of Wiang Chan was thoroughly looted. Its most sacred artifacts, including the “Emerald” Buddha, \textit{Phra Kaew} (พระแก้ว), were carried to Bangkok along with hostages from the Lao royal family.

Lao people, thus, became subordinate to the Siamese of Bangkok. Following their defeat, members of the royal family and court of Wiang Chan, the most powerful among the three former Lao kingdoms, were sequestered in Bangkok. Some of the former Lao nobles served the court of Siam in Bangkok for several decades. To augment

\textsuperscript{81}Because Siam did not change its name to Thailand until 1939, the use of the term “Central Thailand” to refer to the Jao Phraya Valley region of modern-day Thailand is anachronistic, and, when referring to this region in regard to events taking place prior to 1939, the term “Jao Phraya Valley” is preferred.

\textsuperscript{82}Four years later Jaophraya Chakri became King Rama I of the Bangkok period.
the Siamese population and to provide a labor force for the expanding kingdom, the
Siamese also forced many hundreds of Lao families from Wiang Chan to resettle in what
are today the provinces of Saraburi, Nakhon Nayok, Lopburi, and Ratchaburi of Central
Thailand. Because these provinces were already inhabited by the Central (Siamese)
Thai, the newly resettled Lao now lived in close proximity to the Central Thai Siamese.

As a result, by the late eighteenth century, the Siamese already dominated all the
ethnic Tai groups within what is today Thailand and Laos. The area of Isan took shape as
many people of Lan Chang began to immigrate to the Khorat Plateau because of their
wish to escape the cities which were in constant turmoil due to warfare and because Isan,
which was at that time largely forested and uninhabited, contained a huge amount of
empty, fertile land where they might start new lives.

The second resettlement of Lao people from Wiang Chan to the territory of the
Siamese kingdom, Bangkok in particular, took place during the rebellion of King
Anuwong, r. 1804-1828. After Wiang Chan fell in the war in 1779, the King of Wiang
Chan, Siribunyasan, the First, r. 1767-1778, and the Second, r. 1780-1781, fled to
Vietnam while other members of the family were brought to Bangkok, including three
sons, Nanthasen, Inthawong, and Anuwong. These three Lao princes served the court of
Siam and were allowed to go back to rule Wiang Chan as a vassal state of the Kingdom
of Siam. The oldest son of Siribunyasan, Nanthasen, r. 1781-1795, was the first allowed
to go back to rule Wiang Chan. After more than a decade of rule, he was accused of

83 Unlike European military conquest, which emphasized land and treasure as its objectives, a primary aim
of military conquests in the history of Mainland Southeast Asia was the capturing of large numbers of
people from the defeated side. Rather than becoming slaves, the captured population, which included men,
women, and children, were often relocated en masse to the territory of the conquering nation where they
became new citizens and provided manpower for agricultural output as well as a pool of new soldiers for
the military.
conspiring against Siam. The Siamese took him to Bangkok where he died in 1795. His brother, Inthavong, r. 1795-1805, was allowed to assume the throne of Wiang Chan together with his youngest brother Anuwong, who was appointed Uparat, or Second King. When Inthavong died in 1805, Prince Anuwong proclaimed himself King of Wiang Chan.

King Anuwong was ambitious; he planned to gain independence from Bangkok during the reign of the Siamese King, Rama III. The Siamese captured Anuwong and executed him in public in Bangkok in 1825. The Siamese then completely destroyed the city of Wiang Chan. During the invasion of Wiang Chan, the Siamese army rounded up thousands of inhabitants from that region for forcible resettlement in the Jao Phraya Valley of today’s Central Thailand including the Nakhon Chaisri District of Nakhon Pathom Province, the area of greatest concentration of resettlement, as well as the provinces of Lopburi, Saraburi, and Suphanburi. They also systematically regrouped and reorganized the remaining Lao populations in Wiang Chan, as well, forcibly resettling them across the Maekhong River on the Khorat Plateau, the present day Isan region of Thailand.  

This situation allowed for a greatly increased population on the Khorat Plateau, formerly very sparsely populated. The newly resettled Lao, thus, became the ancestors of most of the Isan people of today.

In conclusion, as a result of the wars between the kingdoms of Siam and the Lao, thousands of Lao people from east of the Maekhong and primarily from the area of Wiang Chan, were dragged across the river for resettlement in areas of what is today

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84 Because the term “Isan” was originally applicable (since 1909) only to a portion of the Khorat Plateau, and because “Isan” was only applied to all of the Khorat Plateau after the abolition of the absolute monarchy in 1932, in reference to events in the region prior to the twentieth century, the term “Khorat Plateau” is preferred.
Thailand. This occurred twice, in 1778 and again in 1825. The second invasion brought more people than the first. It is possible that the Siamese forcibly removed Wiang Chan’s entire population, as the historian David K. Wyatt states, “Even forty years later, when a party of French reached Vientiane,” they found nothing but forest and decaying ruins.” The Siamese-Lao wars created conditions that would lead to a cultural and political rift among formerly more or less equal members of the Tai family who became more and more unequal as the Lao came under the cultural and political domination of the Central Thai as the conflicts brought large numbers of Lao people to territory that was under Siamese political and cultural hegemony. This history provides a likely basis for a bias the majority of Bangkok people developed against the Lao/Isan people in which they feel culturally and politically superior.

However, in the forced migrations, the Lao people were able to bring their culture with them. Although the two peoples shared a common origin and were closely related linguistically, the culture of the Lao was in many ways distinct from that of the Siamese, especially as regards music. In spite of the negative bias that developed against the Isan Lao, a fashion developed early in Central Thailand for Lao culture; and Lao music soon became dominant in Bangkok until it was banned during the reign of King Rama IV, r.1851-1868.

Lao vs. Siamese Music

By the time of the reign of King Rama IV of Bangkok, known outside Siam as King Mongkut, the Lao who earlier had been forcibly resettled in the Jao Phraya Valley

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85 Although French spelling conventions render this city’s name (เวียงจันทน์) as “Vientiane,” in this study, I spell it “Wiang Chan,” which more accurately reflects its pronunciation.
were established there for over seventy years in the case of the first group of immigrants, and for over a generation in the case of the second. As a new minority group in Bangkok and adjacent cities, the Lao did not remain isolated from the Siamese but instead enjoyed significant cultural and commercial interaction with them. As the Lao have long been recognized as being fond of music (a folk expression defines a Lao as one who eats sticky rice, plays the khaen, and sings lam), Lao people in the Jao Phraya Valley frequently performed their traditional music in their new surroundings. Such informal performances took place at homes, markets, festivals, and temple fairs. Mawlam, a term of recent vintage referring to the primary genre of Isan traditional vocal music, was known as Lao khaen (ลาวแคน) among inhabitants of Bangkok and the surrounding area in the nineteenth century. Lao khaen, literally “the khaen of the Lao,” which often implied Lao singing with khaen accompaniment, became very popular among the general public, especially in Bangkok. In the mid-nineteenth century Lao khaen, which was also referred to at that time as aew Lao (ผู้มาละมุน) or “traveling to see Lao [music]”), was said to be more popular even than most Siamese entertainments. Not only common people but the royal family also appreciated Lao music. Phra Pinklao (พระปิ่นเกล้า) the younger brother of King Mongkut, who held the position of Second King, could play the khaen

87 Or another common version, “Eats sticky rice, lives in a house on stilts, and plays the khaen.”
88 Although Lao poetry (both spoken and sung) has long been referred to as lam, the term mawlam (“one who has skill in lam”), refers to Lao vocal music accompanied by khaen and seems not to have been used in this context until the twentieth century.
90 King Mongkut (1804-1868), known as Rama IV, who reigned from 1851-1868, restored the custom of appointing a Second King, a practice not followed for some 250 years. He appointed his brother, Phra Pinklao (1808-1865) to this post in 1851 and gave him nearly equal status and a coronation of great splendor.”
and also had skill in singing Lao style vocal music. He often went to Lao communities in towns around Bangkok, such as Nakhon Chaisri and Saraburi, to visit the local Lao inhabitants and play music. Despite the fact that he was not ethnically Lao, his level of skill in playing the *khaen* and singing *lam* was said to be high. Writing in 1972, a Thai historian specializing in the Thai royal family, Natawut Suttisongkhram (นัตรวาต สุทธิสังคม) stated that “While playing, one who did not see his face [to see him] might think the music was played by a native.”

Rev. Dr. Dan F. Bradley, an American missionary who was a close friend of King Mongkut, once described how skillful the second king was in the performance of Lao music. Bradley expressed his impression when he heard the sound of music played by the prince as well as a description of the prince’s musical ability. The scene was noted in an entry from his journal from January 8, 1836:

> While preparations were making to introduce us to the Queen, who had never as yet admitted an adult American or European into her presence, the Prince amused us by his musical performance on a Lao organ. We had heard something about the sweet tones of this instrument and being desirous to judge for ourselves of its merits we inquired if anyone present could play upon it. Upon which the Prince promptly replied, “Yes, I can.” He took the instrument which one would have thought to be only a small bundle of fish poles and inquired if we would have a vocal accompaniment. In hearing our answer in the affirmative he called one of his servants, who came crouching before him, and having paid his respects to his Lord by raising both hands together before his eyes several times in quick succession, then sat erect on the floor and waited for the symphony from the organ which the Prince performed in a style that would almost compel one to believe he had been trained in the music schools of some Christianized country.

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Both the vocalist and the organist displayed much musical taste. The music was peculiarly sweet and spirit stirring.93

It took nearly a century, from the first large resettlement of Lao in the late 1770s until the mid 1860s, before Lao music played an important role in Bangkok, especially in the court of Siam. However, its popularity declined precipitously when the second king died in 1865. Mongkut feared that Lao musical culture might completely supplant Siamese genres; and in the same year he issued a proclamation banning performances of Lao music in the Siamese capital.94 This document was later translated into English by Professor Sakon Sonsenah95 of Mahasarakham Teacher’s College, Mahasarakham, Thailand:

His Majesty the King directs this royal decree to all government officials and all citizens in and out of the capital: Thailand has long been an assembly point for foreigners from near and far. Alien singing and dancing have occasionally been performed alongside ours, and this adds to the honor of our country. Since they are alien entertainments, however, the propriety of imitating them is questionable. It is of course good that Thai are able to imitate others such as monks who can chant Mahachat [the story of Prince Wetsundawn] in other styles such as that of the Lao, the Mon, the Burmese, and the Khmer. Still, alien singing and dancing should not have priority over ours. Ours should maintain their priority and others should be a little less important.

The situation has now changed. Thai have abandoned their own entertainments including beepat ensemble, mahori ensemble, sepa-krüng-tawn [a kind of story telling in sing-song accompanied by pairs of wood blocks called grup], brop-gai, sukrawah, pleng-gai-ba-gio-kao [three types of folksong], and lakawn rawng [a play with singing]. Both men and women now play laokaen [mawlum] throughout the kingdom. Those who play in the beepat or mahori ensembles must sell their instruments because they are no longer hired. Laokaen is always played for the topknot cutting ceremony and for ordinations. The price is as high as ten to twelve dum-lüng [forty to forty-eight baht]. His Majesty the King finds this kind of situation unfavorable. We cannot give the priority to Lao entertainments. Laokaen must serve the Thai; the Thai have never been the Lao’s

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93 Dan F. Bradley, Abstract of the Journal of Rev. Dan Beach Bradley, M.D., Medical Missionary in Siam 1835-1873 (Cleveland: the Multigraph Department of Pilgrim Church, 1936), 17.
95 Miller did not provide the Thai script for this professor’s name, thus the exact Thai spelling is uncertain.
servants. Thai have been performing *laokaen* for more than ten years now and it has become very common. It is apparent that wherever there is an increase in the playing of *laokaen* there is also less rain. This year the rice survived only because of water originating in the forests. In towns where there was much *laokaen* it rained only a little and there was little rice growing. Even though the farmers were able to plant rice near the end of the season, too much water from the forests destroyed the rice in floods. Consequently the King had been worrying about this, and through his authority he now requests all Thai who remain loyal and grateful to him to stop performing *laokaen*. Please do not hire *laokaen* or perform it yourselves. Try this for a year or two. Thai entertainments including *lakawn, fawn, rum, beepat, mahori, sepa-krüng-tawn, brog-gai, sukrawah, and pleng-gai-ba-gio-kao* ought to be revived. They should not be forgotten and finally lost. You are requested to stop performing *laokaen*. Try this for a year or two and see whether the amount of rain becomes sufficient again or not.

Anyone who disobeys this proclamation will be taxed. Both the player and the owner of the house will be assessed a stiff tax. Those who play secretly will be fined by two or threefold.  

After this proclamation, Lao music in Bangkok declined; and the image of the Lao among the majority population of the Jao Phraya Valley also diminished. The Lao living in that region suffered, especially in Bangkok, because their music, apparently the only attractive feature in their culture, was no longer accepted by the Siamese. This situation did not affect the Lao who lived in the Northeast, however, since this area was far from the capital and little attention was paid it until 1888, during the reign of Rama V, King Chulalongkorn. There is evidence that traditional Lao music was still performed during the reign of Rama V but in areas outside today’s Central Thailand. According to Luang Phatthanaphong Phakdi (หลวงพัฒนาพงษ์ พักดี), a court official during that period,

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Lao khaen music was performed in the city of Khorat for the Buddhist ordination ceremony of the grandson of the city’s head in 1875.\textsuperscript{97}

Although it was clear to the Thai inhabitants of Bangkok during the reign of Mongkut that Lao khaen music was associated with Lao people and their culture, they originally accepted this music, as well as their Lao neighbors who had lived among them for generations. However, Mongkut’s proclamation, which painted the Lao and their culture as foreign and somehow destructive, essentially broke down the mutual respect that had begun to develop between the Siamese and Lao, the example for which had earlier been set by his own second king. Mongkut ordered his subjects to avoid Lao music and culture which had, in fact, originated outside Siam. The dominant Central Siamese then assumed a prejudice against Lao music due to its association with the conquered and despised former kingdom of the Lao. At the time of Lao music’s greatest popularity in Siam prior to Mongkut’s proclamation, the Isan region was as yet a remote area to the Central Thai and had not yet been officially constituted into provinces by the Kingdom of Siam. Thus, the music could survive there as representative musical culture of the Lao although their status was severely damaged \textit{vis a vis} the dominant cultural group in the area of the capital of the nation.

**Westernization and Separation of Isan from the Lao**

Some Westerners had already travelled to Siam as missionaries, traders, and travellers as early as the sixteenth century during the Ayuthaya period, 1350-1767, first the Portuguese, followed by the Dutch, French, and English. Despite more than two

\textsuperscript{97}Sanong Klangprasri (สนอง คลังพระศรี), "Mawlam’ Cing: A Survival Strategy of Isan Folk Singer (มอลง่าเชียง: กระบวนการรับรับเปลี่ยนทางวัฒนธรรมทางดนตรีของหมอล่าในภาคอีสาน), (M.A. Thesis, Mahidol University, Bangkok, 1998/2541), 94.
hundred years of such contact, the Siamese were not strongly influenced by Western
culture until the Chakri dynasty, also called the Bangkok period, 1782-present. Under the
impact of Western colonization in Asia, the kingdom opened to Western visitors and
adopted some aspects of Western culture into the Siamese court. This was largely a
strategy to save the kingdom from Western colonization and to prevent potential
colonizers from claiming that the Siamese were uncivilized and thus in need of
colonization, as had been claimed by European nations elsewhere in Southeast Asia.
Most importantly, Westernization had the effect of separating the Lao populations living
on the two sides of the Maekhong River one from another. The Lao people with culture
and spheres of influence attached to the old kingdom of Lan Chang, including Luang
Phrabang, Wiang Chan, and Champasak, were separated into two groups. The first
group, living to the east of the Maekhong River, were originally subjects of Siam, but, by
1893, the area was ceded to France and by 1954 became the nation state of Laos. The
second group, (Isan) in Khorat Plateau, Isan region, west of the river, remained under
Siamese rule and are today citizens of Thailand.

Siamese Kings and the Adaptation to Westernization

The Western powers who successfully colonized many areas of Southeast Asia by
the nineteenth century began increasingly to turn their eyes toward Siam, particularly
during the reign of Mongkut (Rama IV). Faced with this encroaching colonialism, the
previous king, Rama III, r. 1824-1851, once said to his royal ministers that Siam was no
longer concerned about neighboring powers such as Vietnam and Burma98 but instead

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98Burma (Myanmar) was historically the most powerful enemy of Siam, especially during the Ayuthaya
period, 1350-1767, during which time the kingdom was twice destroyed during wars with the Burmese.
with the West. The threat perceived by Rama III became more concrete during the reign of his successor, Mongkut, probably the first king of Siam well known among Westerners and the first to study Western culture. He became interested in learning about the West while in monastery as a Buddhist monk. During that time, he studied English and Latin from Western missionaries and eventually mastered the former. One of his first English teachers, an American missionary, Rev. Dr. Dan B. Bradley, eventually became the king’s closest foreign friend. Certainly, Mongkut was the first king, not only in Siam but also probably anywhere in Southeast Asia, who could use English in the course of his political diplomacy as a tool to defend his kingdom from Western colonization. Due to his great knowledge of both Thai and Western culture, as well as his many years of living a Buddhist lifestyle, which has compassion as one of its central tenets, the king became known as comparatively open minded and tolerant.

Westernization during the reign of Mongkut primarily comprised cultural and administrative reforms. The reforms were all initiated by Mongkut himself as, prior to 1932, the king held absolute power in Siam. Traditionally, Siamese kings were considered by their people to be gods, and commoners were never permitted to see them. Mongkut began to appear in public and allowed his people to see him. Regarding marriage customs, he issued a decree allowing Siamese women to marry the men they loved instead of following their fathers’ decisions. In matters of the court, he permitted foreigners to address him in the same manner as they addressed their kings, rather than

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The second of these invasions led to the destruction of Ayuthaya in 1767 and forced the Siamese to found new capitals, first at Thonburi in 1767, then at Bangkok in 1782.

100One of the three fundamental concepts of Theravada Buddhist practice is *panya* (pañña), or wisdom, which involves the scientific examination of things in order to find the truth based on cause and effect, rather than make judgements based solely on belief or faith. This outlook gives Buddhists a reputation for being open minded.
forcing them to crawl on the ground according to Siamese custom (in order to keep one’s head below the king’s at all times), with which they were not familiar. He also decreed that anyone who needed to see him must wear a shirt.\footnote{In Thai tradition, a male commoner or courtier of lower rank went to see the king without a shirt on. This may have been due to the tropical climate, tradition, or reasons of security for the king (to make sure they were not carrying any weapons). In modern days, at least since the abolition of the absolute monarchy in 1932, appearing in public without a shirt, or even wearing short pants, although the latter is acceptable for children, in urban areas is considered against modern Thai custom.}

He was the first Siamese king to hire Western military advisors to train Siamese soldiers in the Western manner, the most prominent of whom were Captain Robert Impey and Captain Thomas Knox, two English officers. In the realm of education, Mongkut had his children study English\footnote{King Mongkut had eighty-two children born from thirty-two mothers, thirty-nine sons and forty-three daughters in all, the most children of any king of the Chakri Dynasty.}; the best-known English teacher at his court was Anna Leonowens, 1831-1915, who remained in the position for six years from 1862 to 1867.\footnote{Leonowens recounted her time at the Siamese court in two memoirs: *The English Governess at the Siamese Court* (1870) and *Romance of the Harem* (1872). Her story was later made famous in Margaret Landon’s 1944 historical novel *Anna and the King of Siam*, a 1946 Hollywood film of the same name, as well as a popular 1951 Broadway musical, *The King and I*. Most recently, a Hollywood remake of the 1946 film, *Anna and the King*, was released in 1999.}

After Mongkut’s death in 1868, his eldest son, Prince Chulalongkorn was selected by the accession council to be the next king at the age of fifteen. Chulalongkorn studied English from missionaries and court English teachers, and even continued studying English after he became king. Leonowens and her successor, the Englishman Francis George Patterson, were among Chulalongkorn’s English teachers. Beginning early in Chulalongkorn’s reign, the king had an interest in continuing the modernization initiated by his father. One of the most significant areas of Westernization was in education. Unlike Mongkut, who hired European English teachers to teach in the court, in 1885,
Chulalongkorn began to send most of his own sons to study in European countries, mainly England, Denmark, and Germany, and one son to Russia. The king later allowed and supported the sons of common people to study abroad as well. An important result of this change in educational policy was that these young, European-educated Siamese acquired a direct and thorough knowledge of Western culture and brought it home with them. Their influence in the kingdom as adults led to a further Westernization over subsequent decades. Chulalongkorn was the first king of Siam to travel abroad. He first visited several Asian countries that had already been colonized by the Dutch and British, including Singapore, the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia), and British India, in 1871. After the king visited these colonized countries, he wanted to visit the countries of the colonists and made a trip to Europe in 1897. After these two trips, the king applied his increased knowledge and understanding of Western culture to his nation.

In education, Chulalongkorn began to adopt a Western style system of compulsory primary public education for both boys and girls throughout the country. He founded a great number of schools not only in Bangkok but also in all other regions of the country, including remote areas. Prior to this, formal education and literacy were generally reserved only for males who obtained their education during childhood and adolescence in Buddhist monasteries. This new model of education had a significant negative impact on the traditional system of monastic education, as, for the most part,
children who had formerly studied in the monastery were now occupied with public education.\textsuperscript{107} This resulted in a decreased influence on the part of the monastic educational system throughout Thailand including the Isan region, which continues to the present.

Chulalongkorn was also the first Siamese ruler to adopt Western style dress for the nation’s armed forces as well as for officials of the court; prior to this, traditional Thai dress was worn. In the early 1870s, he also reorganized the nation’s administration based on the British model, and established a number of new krasuang (กระทรวง), or ministries, which included the Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Education, and Ministry of Commerce. In addition, he established a system of military schools and the Royal Thai Police, a national police department. Unlike his predecessors, he accepted common people rather than only those of royal or noble lineage in his cabinet and administration. As a result, by the early twentieth century, late in the 42-year reign of Chulalongkorn, Westernization was already well-established in Siam.

In short, although concerted efforts to westernize Siam, beginning with the reign of Mongkut in 1851, did not immediately have a significant impact on Isan, by the early twentieth century the administrative, educational, and cultural reforms first applied in Bangkok were also extended to Isan as well as to the other regions of Siam.

\textsuperscript{107}Until the mid twentieth century, some remote rural areas of Thailand still did not have adequate public schools. In addition, while education up to the age of twelve was free, tuition was required for the higher grade levels. Thus, for both of the above reasons, and, in the latter case, for parents who could not afford tuition costs, the traditional system of monastic education continued for boys in those areas.
Siam as a Nation-state and the Rise of Isan

Before Chulalongkorn began to centralize Siamese authority over the area of Isan in the 1890s, the Siamese had already conquered several ancient kingdoms, including Lan Chang, the old northern kingdom of Lanna, with its capital at Chiang Mai, and Angkor, which included all of modern Cambodia and much of southern Vietnam along with other parts of adjacent kingdoms, during about a century. The Siamese for the most part allowed these kingdoms to govern their territories as vassal or tributary states. Although the vassal states had to contribute taxes to the Siamese sovereign each year, they still had their own internal governments and continued to practice their own ways of life. The kings of those kingdoms continued to rule their territories, although it was understood that they had to obey any orders that might come from the Siamese king.

Prior the French colonization of Laos, Lao people living in the Khorat Plateau to the west of the Maekhong had a strong feeling of cultural and political connection with the heritage of the old Lao kingdoms and a way of life similar to those living east of the great river.

The ancient administration of the kingdom of Lan Chang, passed down over many centuries, did not differ significantly from the administration of other historical kingdoms of Mainland Southeast Asia. A kingdom was divided into communities and provinces according to population rather than geography. Such communities were generally divided into two types: ban (บ้าน), villages, and mueang (เมือง), cities, with a hierarchy of influence and power arranged according to the size of the community.

108 The only exception was the case of the Lao court at Wiang Chan, destroyed following the rebellion of Anuwong in 1825.
Each ban had a village headman called phuyai ban (ผู้ใหญ่บ้าน), generally a senior member of the community who commanded the respect of his fellow villagers. Even today, an Isan ban may consist of only a few houses. Villages were often widely distant from one another so that it might take from a few hours to a full day to walk from a given ban to its nearest neighboring ban. Formerly, in some sparsely populated areas, it could take as many as four or five days to walk from a ban to the nearest mueang as, prior to the mid-twentieth century, Isan was heavily forested and largely without roads. In Isan a large ban might consist of many tens of houses; in such cases the phuyai ban could ask the king to redesignate the village as a mueang; such a case was the change in designation from Ban Kaengsamrong (บ้านแก่งสำโรง) to Mueang Kalasin, now a provincial capital.109

There are several types of mueang (เมือง), including hua mueang (หัวเมือง), “main city” or “primary city” or nakhon (นคร), with krung (กรุง), “capital city,” a more formal term, applied only to the capital of the kingdom or nation. Each mueang had a Jao mueang (เจ้าเมือง), or governor, such as Jao Mueang Roi-et, “the governor of Roi-et City.” The term Jao (เจ้า) was also a prefix before the governor’s name to signify his rank and position. Nakhon is used only before the names of major cities. Because nakhon and krung were formerly ruled by kings, emperors, and other nobles, the terms Phrajao Nakhon (พระเจ้านคร) or Khun (ชุม) formerly referred to such rulers in both the Siamese and Lao kingdoms, as, for example Phrajao Nakhon Wiang Chan, “the king of Wiang Chan.” Phrajao (พระเจ้า) was also a prefix before the king’s name to indicate his

status, for example, *Phrajao Suriyawongsa* (พระเจ้าสุริยวงศ์), “King Suriyawongsa.”

Both the positions of *Jao Mueang* and king were often passed down through families.

The ancient administrative pattern in Lao culture was called *Ayasi* (อาяสี) or *Acha yasi* (อาชาอาสี), “the authority of four.” It was divided into four levels: firstly *Jao mueang* or “head of the mueang,” one who could be a king on a larger scale; second, the *uparat* or “second head of the province”; third, the *rachawong* (ราชวงศ์), “relative of the head city,” who could work on behalf of the head; and finally the *rachabut* (ราชบุตร), “son of the head,” presumed to be the future head of the mueang. This ancient form of administration was common among Tai-speaking peoples in Mainland Southeast Asia including the kingdom of Siam. For example, it appeared in the Ayuthaya period during the reign of King Boromma Trailokanat, r. 1448-1484. By the time of the reign of Mongkut in the nineteenth century, the Siamese had abolished this ancient system of administration; but, among other Tai-speaking groups especially the Lao of the Khorat Plateau, it was maintained until the last quarter of the nineteenth century.  

During the Western colonization of Mainland Southeast Asia, the Siamese began to take political control over their tributary states; and they replaced the ancient system of administration with their new political administration, including over the Lao population in the area of modern day Isan. This involved the division of the area by geography rather than by population.

Under the impact of Western power, the new Siamese administration was first applied to the Isan region and replaced the ancient one simply as part of the political strategy to save the territory of Siam from the West. The Siamese learned this style of

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110Ibid.
administration after their first loss of the territory of Cambodia to the French in 1867. At that time the French claimed that the Cambodians were not the same people as the Siamese. Cambodia was formerly a territory of Wiang Chan, but now Wiang Chan belonged to the French; therefore, Cambodia should belong to the French as well. The new political administration was established in the 1890s when Chulalongkorn began to group Siam’s main vassal provinces into *Monthon*, or “circles,” to indicate the specific areas for administration by the nation state of Siam. At first, Chulalongkorn’s nation-state included all of modern day Thailand, all of modern day Laos, and some parts of Cambodia.\footnote{Since some parts of Cambodia were already ruled by the French in 1867.}

First, in 1891, Chulalongkorn began to reorganize Siam’s main Lao provinces called the Lao vassal states into *Hua Mueang Lao* (หัวเมืองลาว) or “Lao main cities” which indicated the territory or region of the Lao. He also sent his administration from Bangkok to replace the old *Jao mueang*, or local lords and begin his new centralized polity to the kingdom. They gave the new names of the Lao vassal states based on both ethnic groups and geographic locations which consisted of four *monthon* in total.

1. *Monthon Lao Chiang* (มาทนลาวเชียง) or “Diagonal Lao *Monthon,*” implied its diagonal orientation from Bangkok and comprises modern day Northern Thailand.

2. *Monthon Lao Phuan* (มาทนลาวพวัน), “*Monthon* of the Lao Phuan [ethnic group],”\footnote{Lao Phuan refers to the Tai Phuan (ไทพวน), a Tai speaking ethnic group of northern Laos and Isan, whose language is similar to Tai Dam (ไทดำ) and Tai Loei (ไทเลี้ย).} referred to the northern most part of Laos from Wiang Chan northward and the upper part of the Khorat Plateau.

3. *Monthon Lao Kao* (มาทนลาวก้าว), “*Monthon* of the Lao Kao,” referred to the
southern part of modern day Laos and the lower part of the Khorat Plateau.\footnote{113}{“Lao Kao” (Kao meaning “old”) is a term formerly used to refer to what is believed to be the oldest population of Lao people living in Isan. They originally came from Luang Phrabang, the former royal capital of Lan Chang, and settled hundreds of years ago in Wiang Chan and Northeast Thailand.}

4. Monthon Lao Klawng (มณฑลกลาง), “Middle Lao Monthon,” referred to the area of modern-day Nakhon Rachasima Province along with other adjacent provinces.

The most effective portion of Chulalongkorn’s centralized administration appeared eight years later with a more advanced system called \textit{Thesaphiban} (เทาภิบาล). His elder half brother Prince Damrong Rachanuphap implemented the new policy under his newly created position as head of the Ministry of the Interior. At that time, the king not only sent his officials to replace the local lords but also expanded his power over more local areas including provinces, districts, subdistricts, communes, and down to villages through a “new centralized pyramid of bureaucratic administration.”\footnote{114}{Chris Barker and Pasuk Phongpaichit, \textit{A History of Thailand} (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 54.}

In the European conception, a nation was a political expression of “race,” and as a result, in regard to Siam’s claim over the Lao-speaking territories, the French claimed that the Lao were not the same race as the Siamese. They argued that, although the Lao were related linguistically to the Siam, they were a distinct race. They further argued that the Siamese were not a pure race because they had mixed with the Chinese.\footnote{115}{Ibid., 63.} In 1893 with the Franco-Siamese Treaty, Chulalongkorn ceded to the French most of the area of modern Laos. The old heartland of Lan Chang thus became a protectorate of France. In the words of Peter and Sandra Simms, “The real losers were the Lao people who had lived
on both sides of the Maekhong and suddenly found themselves divided from their relatives and friends.”

As a consequence of this experience, the Siamese government developed new administrative policies as a strategy to avoid further European colonial interference in its territory. First, the Interior Ministry began to enforce a new law forcing all members of the many ethnic populations within the Siamese territory to register under the same nationality, namely the “Thai nationality” (ชาติไทย) or Chat Thai. The term chat (ชาติ), of Indic origin, means “nation,” “race,” or “country,” or literally “life,” “birth,” or “incarnation,” was selected for use in this context as a Thai equivalent of the European concept of “nationality.” Thus, all individuals born within the nation of Siam including the Lao and all other ethnic groups became Chon Chat Thai (ชนชาติไทย) or “people of Thai nationality.” The law further prohibited all people living in the territory of Siam from indicating their race as Lao, Khmer, Lawa, Phutai, or any other as they had done in the past. They were instructed to identify themselves solely as “Thai” instead.

Prince Damrong, the Interior Minister, is known to have paid close attention to the matter of distinctions between the terms “Lao” and “Thai.” Credited as the father of Thai history, Damrong wrote in his posthumously published book Thesaphiban that the Lao and Thai basically spoke the same language, with the only difference that of accent, and even in this case, he opined that the Lao accent was not far from that of Bangkok. Therefore, he argued, the two groups could not be different races. If accent could determine race, he said, then the people of the southern province of Nakhon Si Thammarat must also be considered a separate race, as their accent differed even more.

116Peter and Sanda Simms, the Kingdoms of Laos: Six Hundred Years of History (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1999), 210.
117Ibid.
markedly from that of Bangkok people. He asserted that even the Lao themselves considered themselves Tai,\(^{118}\) and pointed out that the term “Lao” actually properly referred not to the Tai people of Laos and the Khorat Plateau but instead to the Lawa (ล้าน or ละว่า), a Mon-Khmer speaking indigenous ethnic minority living in Laos and Thailand before the time of the Kingdom of Siam.\(^{119}\)

In 1899, due to the aforementioned question of race and as he wished to abandon the official use of the term “Lao,” Chulalongkorn began to rename his outer *monthon*, as follows:

1. Monthon Lao Chiang, “modern day Northern Thailand,” was changed to Monthon Tawantok Chiangnua (มณฑลตะวันตกเฉียงเหนือ) or “Northwest Circle.”

2. Monthon Lao Phuan, the northern part of Laos and northern part of today’s Northeast Thailand, was changed to Monthon Fai Nua (มณฑลฝ่ายเหนือ) or “Northern Circle.”

3. Monthon Lao Klawng, the area of Nakhon Rachasima and a few adjacent provinces, was changed to Mueang Nakhon Ratchasima (เมืองนครราชสีมา), Nakhon Rachasima Province.

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\(^{118}\)Although Damrong here uses the spelling “Thai” (ไทย), he refers not to the political identification with the Thai nation, renamed from Siam to Thailand in 1932, but instead to the wider identification as “Tai,” spelled in Thai as ไท, held by most Tai-speaking ethnic groups.

4. Monthon Lao Kao, the southern part of Laos and the lower part of modern Northeast Thailand, was changed to Monthon Tawanawk Chiangnua (มาณฑลตะวันออกเฉียงเหนือ) or “Northeast Circle.”

In 1909, as certain parts of its former territory including Laos and Cambodia had been absorbed into the protectorate of French Indochina, the Siamese government, still under the leadership of Chulalongkorn, again reformed the administration. The monthon of the Khorat Plateau were again reorganized and renamed, in keeping with the fact that France now controlled the eastern portions of two of the original monthon. Basically Siam still held the old four monthon, but they were now smaller.

1. Monthon Tawatok Chiangnua was renamed Monthon Payap (มาณฑลพยัพ).
2. Monthon Fai Nua was renamed Monthon Udon (มาณฑลอุดร).
3. Mueang Nakhon Ratchasima was renamed Monthon Nakhon Ratchasima (มาณฑลนครราชสีมา).
4. Monthon Tawanawk Chiangnua, the southern part of Laos and the lower part of today’s Isan region, was renamed Monthon Isan (มาณฑลอีสาน).

The Reaction of the Lao People

As far back as the Siamese-Lao wars of the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries, the Siamese ruling establishment regarded the Lao people as inferior, second class, and servants. They referred to Northeastern and Northern populations as “Lao” to distinguish themselves as the ruling class. In other words, those

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120 The monthon system was retained in official usage until at least 1932 when the absolute monarchy was abolished. It was eventually replaced by the present system of provinces, or jangwat (จังหวัด). All of Thailand’s seventy-five provinces are now officially designated as jangwat. The term “Isan,” derived from the name of the easternmost monthon, called Monthon Isan, however, has come to refer to the entire area of Northeast Thailand.
others who were not of the ruling class must be Lao. Thus, they called the rest “Lao,” including people in the Lanna Kingdom, in the area of modern-day Northern Thailand. They named Lanna people the Lao Phung Dam (ล้านนาพงดำ) or “black belly Lao,” as Lanna men were elaborately tattooed from their legs to their abdomens with sacred tattoos called sak yant (สักยันต์). The inhabitants of Luang Phrabang, Wiang Chan, the Khorat Plateau, and Champasak were referred to as Lao Phung Khao (ล้านนาพุทธขา), or “white belly Lao,” based on the fact that these people did not tattoo their stomachs, although they often did tattoo their legs or other parts of their bodies.

Beginning in the late nineteenth century when the Siamese government sent officials out from Bangkok to replace local rulers who had theretofore governed the outer regions, they excluded Lao subjects. The cultural conflict between superior and inferior was enforced on the local level. “Lao” became a pejorative word, especially for people whose culture was linked to the kingdoms of Lan Chang and Wiang Chan, as Tem Wiphakphojanakit (เต็ม วิภาคพจนกิจ), well-known author of the History of Isan, asserts:

> Both Thai and foreign historians know that the Lao are Thai and the Thai are Lao; one cannot separate them. This is a correct statement, because the Thai descend from the same ancestral stock (Ai Lao [อาลัยลาว]). Lao also call themselves Thai… Those inhabitants of the nation who regard themselves as Thai or Thai people [Khon Thai] are people living in the Central and Southern regions only. When these people (not all of them) moved to live in the Isan or Northern regions, [they] would classify themselves [by saying] “I am Thai,” and insult their countrymen who share the same blood in their veins in some negative ways, [by calling them] “Lao,” as one who eats frogs, eats fermented fish [pla ra, ปลารา], and eats one’s food without washing one’s hands. When moving there to become a Jaonai [lord] in Isan or in the Northern region, [they] liked to express their

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121 This tradition has largely died out, although a tattoo festival is still held each year at Wat Bang Phra in Nakhon Pathom Province.
power and authority that they are Thai, coming to govern the Lao, or be a lord over the Lao, or something of this sort.\footnote{Tem Wiphakphojanakit (เต็ม วิภักพจนกิจ), \textit{History of Isan}, fourth ed., (ประวัติศาสตร์อีสาน พิมพ์ครั้งที่ 4) (Bangkok: Thammasat University Press, 2546/2003), 343. Translated by the present author}

Although by the reorganization of 1891 all of the Khorat Plateau had been officially annexed by Siam into \textit{monthon}, a significant proportion of the local population still felt a spiritual kinship to the Lao kingdoms to which they had formerly been vassals. Their culture and folklore, including traditions of Buddhism and animism, oral histories, and epic poetry, were tied to the Lao cultural narrative rather than to that of Siam. Their political attitudes were also still strongly attached to their original centers and leaders which included both the old Lao kingdoms as well as noble \textit{Jao mueang} in the Khorat Plateau who were connected to the courts of those Lao kingdoms. The sweeping changes instituted by Chulalongkorn in Siam’s Lao-speaking areas, particularly as regards the imposition of central authority and the consequent loss of local control, provoked a strong backlash there against the Siamese government. A number of rebellions occurred during that time among those Lao people who felt their identities linked with Wiang Chan or Champasak rather than Bangkok. Although some lesser rebellions had occurred prior to Chulalongkorn’s reign, the most significant \textit{kabot} (กบฏ), rebellions, took place beginning in the early twentieth century. These included the following:

1. The \textit{Phumibun} (ผู้มีบุญ), or men of merit uprising, which took arose in many areas throughout Isan (1901-1902).

2. The Nawngmakkaeo (หน่วยมาจากแกว) uprising, which took place in the village of Nawngmakkaeo, in Puan Phu Subdistrict (ตําบลปวนพุ), in Phu Kradueng District (อำเภอถิ่นพลู), Loei Province of northern Isan (1924).
3. The Mawlam Noi (มawlānāw) or “Mawlam singer Noi,” uprising in Mahasarakham Province (1936).

4. The Nai Sila (น้าศิลา) or “Mr. Sila” uprising in Ubon Ratchathani Province (1949).123

Each of these rebellions was based on the religious beliefs of the participants, especially the millenarian movement of Phra Sri Ariya (พระศรีอารีย์), also called Phra Sri Ariya Metrai (พระศรีอารีย์เมตรไธ).124 These rebellions were a reaction against the Siamese governance of the Lao people. The millenarian Phra Sri Ariya movement came out of beliefs associated with Buddhism. According to Buddhist practice, everything in the universe is impermanent, without absolute self or none-self,125 and in a continual process of transformation. Based on this truth, sometime in the future, Buddhism will also be “lost” from the human world, which will bring the world and the universe into an era of disaster. After this period of disaster, there will be a hero or man of merit, Phra Sri Ariya, who will come to turn all into a better world, one of plenty and peacefulness referred to as “the world of Phra Sri Ariya” (โลกพระศรีอารีย์) or “the world of Phra Sri An” (โลกพระศรีอารย์). “An” in this case is an abbreviation for “Ariya.”

These rebellions adopted the theme that the Lao world had already entered an era of disaster under Siamese rule. The rebellions then objectified Phra Sri Ariya who would bring the Lao world out from the era of disaster and throw off Siamese rule. However, every rebellion that took place in the Khorat Plateau, besides expressing a focus on the

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123 Aphisak Somin (อาทิสัก สมอินทร์), Isan Worldview (โลกทัศน์อีสาน) (Mahasarakham, Thailand: Srinakarintaravirot Mahasarakham University, 2534/1991), 132.
124 Metrai is the Thai name for Maitreya, a bodhisattva who, it is believed, will return to earth at some future date and teach the pure dharma.
125 The Buddhist concept of anatta (อนันต์), which is the state of flux in which all individuals and objects are believed to be, has usually been translated into English as “none-self” or “not-self.”
man of merit, called *phumibun* or Phra Sri Ariya, also emphasized the issue of the Thai (Siamese) invasion of the Lao regions and the hope of a re-flourishing of the kingdom of Wiang Chan.\(^{126}\)

**Modernization and Isan Laborers in Bangkok**

**Old Siam**

Modernization and the adoption of Western technology as well as sweeping social, educational, and political changes, particularly urbanization, followed Westernization into Siam. Modernization initially arrived in Bangkok in the form of new social environments based on technology and industrial capitalism. Politically, modernization appeared as a form of the administration of Chulalongkorn, the centralized nation state, nationalism, and modern governmental bureaucracy.

Bangkok was the epicenter of Siamese modernization. Chinese immigrants, often referred to by the term *lukjin* (ลูกจีน) or “sons of China,” were the main group who initially created Bangkok’s urbanization through their traditional focus on commerce. Chinese immigrants and the Siamese have had a close relationship in Thai history dating back centuries. The Chinese, most from southern regions of China such as Guangdong, Hainan, and Fujian with more than half from the Chaozhou region of eastern Guangdong, came to Siam to trade; and some married Siamese women and stayed permanently. As traders, they sometimes also held political power in the courts of Siam. In fact, King Taksin, r. 1767-1782, of Thonburi, the king who reunified Siam after the Burmese invasion and just before the Chakri Dynasty, was half Chinese. Sujit Wongthet, a well

\(^{126}\)Ibid., 132.
known Thai poet and essayist, described the modern Thai people as *Jek pon Lao* (เจกปอนหล้า) or Chinese mixed with Lao. He suggested that such mixing was typical of true “Thai” ancestry. Nowadays, most native Bangkok people are mixed Chinese-Thai. Indeed, they were the first group to form a middle-class urban society in Bangkok.

In the 1850s, there were roughly 100,000 people in Bangkok; but, by the 1910s, the population had increased twenty times. Certainly about 97 percent of the population was Chinese-Siamese. The government had many new roads and canals built and they were lined with Chinese shop/houses along the roads as well as by mansions of the Siamese bureaucracy. This was perhaps the common urban scene in Bangkok, while the majority of the rest of Siam’s inhabitants still lived in small rural villages and practiced traditional agriculture.

Chulalongkorn established the first railroad in Siam. Actually an electric tram system entirely within Bangkok’s city limits, it was built and operated by a Belgian-Danish company in 1892 and ran over a course of twenty-five kilometers from central Bangkok to the district of Paknam just to the west, part of modern day Phasi Charoen District. The first regular railroad built by the Siamese government, however, was completed in 1897 and ran from Bangkok to Ayuthaya. It was extended to Khorat in 1900. By the end of the reign of Chulalongkorn, Siam had about 520 miles of

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127 This is a somewhat derogatory epithet, as the term *Jek* (เจษ, derived from the Chaozhou 叔, meaning "uncle" or "father's younger brother") is a pejorative term used to refer to Chinese people.
129 Ibid., 99.
130 Ibid., 102.
131 Ibid., 99.
railroads, and many roads were built to connect them.\textsuperscript{133} The king also established international postal and telegraph services, both in the 1880s, as the first modern communications systems in the nation.

By the 1910s, Siam had become even more thoroughly modernized under the rule of King Vajiravudh. In 1921, he announced a law mandating compulsory primary education, and that led to an expansion of the educational system at all levels.\textsuperscript{134} The kingdom’s first-ever Western style institution of higher learning, Chulalongkorn University, was founded in 1917. In addition, the first hospital, Chulalongkorn Hospital, was founded in 1914, and the International Committee of the Red Cross recognized the Siam Red Cross Society.\textsuperscript{135} As a further indication of the changes imposed on Siamese society, Vajiravudh, in 1913, ordered people in Siam to adopt surnames. The modern national flag resulted from a royal decree in 1917 as a part of the king’s campaign of nationalism before he died in 1925.

**Modern Thailand**

In 1932, a \textit{coup d’etat} was carried out by Thai who had been educated in the West. When they returned home, they worked in the kingdom’s administration and military services. They organized themselves into a “People’s Party,” and staged a coup while King Prajadhipok, Rama VII, r. 1925-1935, was away from Bangkok on his summer vacation. The People’s Party forced the king to accept a constitutional monarchy form of government in which the king continued to reign but under the control of a provisional parliament. To avoid bloodshed among the Thai, Prajadhipok accepted the

\textsuperscript{133}Ibid., 243. 
\textsuperscript{135}It actually had been established in 1893 as the Red Unalom Society.
arrangement and continued to reign under the new system until he abdicated the throne in 1935.

Siam became the modern nation of Thailand when the absolute monarchy was replaced by a constitutional democracy. This period epitomized a further rise of modern nationalism. In 1939, the government of Prime Minister Phibun Songkhram changed the name of the nation from *Phrathe Siam* (ประเทศไทย) to *Phrathe Thai* (ประเทศไทย). *Phrathe* means country, and, therefore, *Phrathe Thai* is equivalent to the English title “Thailand.” The Phibun government continued to develop the country, following Phibun’s drive for Thais to become fully “civilized,” and consequently equal to all other “civilized” nations. Military governments ruled Thailand for many following decades although constitutional democracy was the official label of the new Thai system.

In 1940 under his cultural mandate, Phibun also announced that the Thai New Year, which had begun in mid April until 1888, when Chulalongkorn changed it to April 1, did not conform with the way the rest of the “civilized” world did things. He changed the official Thai New Year from April 1 to January 1, which meant that the Thai people had only nine months in the year of 1940. In addition, by that time, more importantly the term “Isan,” first created as *Monthon Isan* in 1909 to refer to only a limited area, came to define the entire region of Northeast Thailand.

During the early Thai administrations, although Thailand nominally continued as a monarchy, the military governments effectively eliminated the power of the throne.

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136 Luang Phibun Songkhram, also known as Plaek Phibun Songkhram as his given name was Plaek, was the third prime minister of Thailand. He is often referred to in writing in English simply as Phibun. He served as the leader of the Thai government during two periods, Phibun I, 1938-1944, and Phibun II, 1948-1957. He was a military officer trained in France.
The successors of Prajadhipok, King Ananda Mahidol, Rama VIII, r. 1935-1946, and King Bhumibol Adulyadej, Rama IX, r. 1946-present, continued in place under the new regime. During the first two decades of the new system, the role of the monarch was mostly forgotten, especially during the eleven years of Ananda’s reign. In the second decades of the reign of Bhumibol, however, the monarchists began to rebuild the power of the throne by recreating the myth of the king as father of the country. People behind the throne carefully crafted the image of the current Thai king. They have featured the king as essential to the constitutional monarchical democracy in which the king is supposed to have less political power and yet continue to present himself as the father of the country, a source of goodness and morality. Under the royalist powers, Bhumibol has widely been projected as a great king. His role as *pater familias* has held firm in people’s minds in the country for many decades until recently, as his status has become an important question for anti-royalists. A currently ongoing political battle between royalists and (undercover) anti-royalists began in 2009.

Isan Migrants

Prior to the period of modernization, because of transportation difficulties, cultural interactions between Isan people and the people in Central region were relatively infrequent. Few Northeasterners had opportunities to travel long distances. Thai traditional society was localized as most people lived in small communities and were engaged in wet-rice agriculture as the primary lifestyle. Even within the Northeast region itself there were local accents that created distinctly local styles of vocal music. Some people, however, did travel long distances. In Isan, *naihoai* (นายฮ่อэ) or “men-cattle traders,” were well known for the great distances they traveled. They would travel in
large groups comprised of oxcarts, cows, and water buffaloes over long distances, especially in the dry season when they did not need to grow rice in their home villages. Such caravans traveled from one region to another, especially to the Central region, but they did not stay permanently. They would trade their goods and return home for the rainy season.

The second group who typically travelled beyond the Isan region were Buddhist monks and their companions. The advent of their travelling lifestyle came about during the reign of Chulalongkorn in the centralized nation-state, after the railroad was built from the Northeast to Bangkok. Some monks traveled to Bangkok to study along with young laymen who wanted to have better opportunities for education. These laymen travelled with the monks in order to assist and serve them; and, in return, they were able to have food and a place to live in the temples while they studied elsewhere in Bangkok. This was the best way to survive as country boys who had little or no financial support from their families. They would serve the monks and spend their extra time in going to school in Bangkok. Before the Second World War, only a few families sent their sons to Bangkok, however. Most ordinary Northeasterners continued to live in their home villages engaged as they always had been in wet rice agriculture.

The first major waves of Isan migrants appeared in Bangkok as laborers. During the reign of Mongkut, Siam began to export rice. By the time of the reign of Chulalongkorn, Chinese traders increased in number in the population of Bangkok. Besides trade in rice, they traded tin, timber, and sugar. These Chinese businesses developed in the form of shops or private enterprises which flourished within Chulalongkorn’s development plans. As Barker mentions, “By 1900…a rapidly
expanding road network was lined by the palace and mansions of the bureaucracy, and the shop houses of the mercantile Chinese.”

When the economy began to grow through the Chinese, they required urban labor to work in their businesses. Some early workers were recruited from China because it was cheaper than hiring local Thais and because common Thais were neither interested in nor familiar with the new paths of commerce.

Urban laborers were needed for city construction projects such as port facilities, markets, residential suburbs, streets, roads, and railway networks." It was not only Chinese entrepreneurs but also the Siamese government who employed mostly Chinese laborers. The number of Chinese immigrants increased every year, from 3,000 per year in the 1820s up to 15,000 per year in the 1870s. By 1904, there were approximately 600,000 Chinese immigrants resident throughout Siam. At the beginning, half of these laborers returned to China after working for a few years; but, later on, they brought their families with them and stayed in Thailand permanently, which created some political conflict with the Siamese governments during the first half of the twentieth century.

During the reign of Vajiravudh, 1910-1925, the nation continued to modernize, its development promoted by official government policy of which the main focus was the creation of a strong national economy. From the 1930s onwards, especially in urban Bangkok, the economy grew very rapidly. The city expanded and new administrative and commercial districts were built as were new public utilities. This created new classes

139 Ibid.
140 Ibid., 175.
of bureaucrats and merchants in the city and required a large-scale work force. In terms of industry, many kinds of factories appeared. These included “match factories, a brewery, liquor distilleries, tanneries, cigarette factories, metal workshops, soap plants, and mosquito coil factories” as well as rice mills, sawmills, and other basic functions.\footnote{141} All these establishments demanded large numbers of urban laborers, and that drew people to the city. This flux also created thousands of service sector jobs to serve the workers themselves such as buses, taxis, rickshaws, food vendors, barbers, and people in “the pork trade, and slaughterhouse[s].”\footnote{142}

By the 1940s, a variety of new public enterprises, mainly run by bureaucrats, appeared including craft industries, waterworks, electrical infrastructures, tramways, and railway networks. All of these required large labor forces, for which the hiring of Chinese laborers had become inefficient. Nationalism and the policy of expanding the national economy among rural peasants was seen as a way to increase extra income for Thai citizens after the harvest season. As a result, the Thai military government began instituting anti-Chinese policies in seeking to reserve employment for Thai workers. The impact of modernization and the support of the government drew many Thais from the countryside to the city. The blue collar jobs preserved for migrant peasant laborers were partly those in state enterprises and infrastructure companies. By the end of the Second World War, Thai workers had already entered the main state enterprises such as electricity plants, tramways, and railways. Although Chinese entrepreneurs early

\footnote{141}{Ibid., 178.}  
\footnote{142}{Ibid., 179.}
preserved work for their Chinese laborers, Thai laborers were also common by the end of the war.143

The first group of Thai workers initially came from adjacent provinces in the Central region near Bangkok and only gradually were people from all regions of the country included. While some Northeastern laborers had previously immigrated to Bangkok for work, the earliest massive migration of Isan workers to Bangkok did not take place until 1946, followed by a second wave in 1951, when a serious drought occurred in Isan. These Isan workers were mostly from the provinces of Roi-et, Ubon, Mahasarakham, Surin, and Sisaket. The best way to travel to Bangkok in those days was by train,144 but it was convenient only for those who lived near the two train lines. Other Isan people were not interested in coming to Bangkok yet due to the inconvenience of transportation.145

The first remarkable movement of Isan laborers that affected the entire region occurred during the 1970s for two main reasons. First of all, in 1949 after the communist party took over China, that effectively resulted in the end of Chinese immigration to Thailand. Second, at the same time, the Thai government encouraged entrepreneurs to produce for export. They supported common people in business in the city, which brought great numbers of people to Bangkok. The Bangkok population increased rapidly from 2.6 million in 1960 to 5.9 million in 1975.146

143Ibid., 179.
145Construction of the Friendship Highway (ถนนมิตรภาพ), Thanon Mittraphap, also called Thailand Route 2, was started in 1955 and finished in 1957.
In rural areas throughout Thailand, government policy which favored the growth of export crops brought about expansion among farming communities. People began to destroy forests to create arable land on which to grow their new cash crops, and that created the next problems of lack of land for cultivation and land exhaustion. As a result, that impelled a greater influx of peasant laborers into Bangkok. Finally, the end of the Vietnam War, 1965-1975, also took many jobs away from Isan people. During the war, the Thai government agreed with the United States to establish several U.S. military bases in Northeast Thailand, the largest of which was located in Udon. At the same time, the U.S. provided millions of dollars to support the Thai government in various development programs such as building roads, highways, dams, and U.S. air bases. Isan quickly experienced urbanization, especially in the areas around U.S. military bases in Ubon, Udon, Khon Kaen, and Nakhon Phanom. Many jobs were created to support the demands of American service men during the war. After the war, however, the U.S. troops went back home and they “took” some of the jobs with them. Isan people ended up having to search for new jobs in Bangkok. When he arrived to Isan to conduct fieldwork for his dissertation in 1973, Miller witnessed that the U.S. Marines in Udon were gone; but the hotel, the bowling alley, and the clubs remained. An American fast food restaurant such as Burger King still continued in business although the food no longer maintained its original American taste.147

U.S. patronage affected the increase in Thailand's development policy, especially in regard to communications and the economy. After the Vietnam War, as a result, Bangkok became a boom town, the epicenter of the expansion of the Thai

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147 Terry Miller, personal communication.
economy. By the end of the war, the building of new and expanded electrical, water, and telecommunications systems around Bangkok demanded large numbers of urban laborers. The central government’s policies of urban investment were supported in large part by the generation of trade in rice and other cash crops such as cassava, rubber, sugar, and jute. However, the government ignored social investment in the countryside. Rural farmers did not have much power to bargain for the prices of their products especially as commodities dealers who purchased their goods often colluded with government officials to keep prices low. Similarly, such farmers had very little power in terms of social justice and participation in political activity and thus felt exploited in the new economic system.

While rice was the primary cash crop in other regions, that was not so for Isan people. As they had deficient natural resources in terms of the problem of unfertilized soil and drought, Isan people did not cultivate ordinary “white rice,” as an export crop. They ate glutinous or “sticky” rice. After the Second World War, the Central region produced enough rice to export to neighboring countries while only a small amount of exportable rice could be produced in Isan. Until the last quarter of the twentieth century, difficulties in transportation were another factor that made it harder for Isan farmers to initiate commercial farm production.

As a result, Isan farmers were poor and neglected in the government’s plans for development. Prior to the 1980s, while Bangkok became an urbanized society, Isan peasants still conducted their lifestyle based on a subsistence economy, and their region remained Thailand's poorest. Based on those factors, Isan people ended up going to Bangkok to look for jobs. In the late 1970s and 1980s, after finishing their compulsory
education, most young Isan men went to Bangkok. About seventy percent of my classmates did not make their way to high school, and most of them, if not all, experienced work in factories in Bangkok. According to the historian Charles F. Keyes, who specializes in Thai history, “in the village of Ban Nong Tun in Mahasarakham, in which I carried out field work, for example, 49 percent of the men twenty years of age and over or 67 percent of the men between 30 and 39 had worked in Bangkok (only one woman had ever worked in the Thai capital).” Because the economy grew rapidly, the numbers of jobs and workers increased with equal rapidity.

Cultural Prejudice and Negative Image

Modernization was probably the strongest factor to contribute to the construction of a negative image of the Isan region and its people. As Thailand's center of capitalism, Bangkok has been the model for other regions in the country in terms of modern ways of living. It is the center of everything, including the nation's politics, economy, communications, and education. The capital city is considered Mueang Fa Mueang Sawan (เมืองพ่าย, เมืองสวรรค์), literally “city of sky, city of heaven,” among rural people, especially those in Isan.

Bangkok people, thus, looked down on people from the countryside, whom they considered low class, stupid, uneducated, and lazy. People who came from the Northeastern region, especially, were worse off due to cultural differences. Speaking Isan dialect in Bangkok was considered “Lao,” a pejorative word. Certainly the

148 Finishing ชั้นพระธรรมสุข (elementary school), sixth grade (1982).
repurposing of this word as an insulting term derives from the differences of culture as well as the historic background of the ethnic Isan people. In Bangkok, some native people would say really condescending things when they had a chance to do so. Besides “Lao” there were other common pejorative expressions. *Lao takhao* (ลาวต้าแหว่) or “white-eyed Lao” means “stupid” and “coward.” *Sio* (เสียะ) in the Isan language means “friend” or “friendship.” *Ai* (ไอ) is a Central Thai prefix which refers to a male person. *Ai-sio* (ไอเสียะ) is a term invented by natives of Bangkok to mean “stupid,” “coward,” or “cowardly” in reference primarily to people from the Northeastern region.

**Language**

Language is the first factor that distinguishes one cultural background from another. Unlike some Asian countries, such as China, where the population speaks numerous languages often mutually unintelligible, such as Mandarin and Cantonese, the majority of people in Thailand speak the same language as they are all come from the same root of the Tai language family. Regional dialects, which have some certain degree of variety of accent and vocabulary different from Central Thai, however, are used politically to separate people into sub-ethnic groups. People from the four regions of today’s Thailand can be identified by their dialects.

Under nationalism, the central government made Central Thai the official language. Throughout the country, Thais were required to speak in “standard Thai,” that is, the Bangkok accent, at schools, in businesses, government offices, or at any kind of event that could be considered a formal activity. The Bangkok accent, thus, became an “urbanized,” “high class,” “educated” language, while the other regional dialects came to be widely regarded as “folk” and “low-class.”
The Isan dialect of the Lao, as well as Northern Thai, *Kham Mueang* (คำเมือง), and Southern Thai, *Phasa Thai Tai* (ภาษาไทยไท), became *pha sa thawngthin* (ภาษา ทองถิ่น), “regional languages”, or *pha sa phuenmueang* (ภาษาพื้นเมือง), “local languages.” Due to the fact that these dialects derive from the same base of the Tai language family, most vocabularies of the dialects in everyday speech are the same but may contain some differences in terms of vocabulary, pronunciation, and certain special usages. This allows people from the city who consider themselves to be of “higher class” to ignore or pretend not to understand rural people’s dialects.

Even in the Central region, people living in different locations might speak with fairly different accents. Early Isan migrants in Bangkok certainly used their own dialect occasionally, especially when conversing with each other. Living in Bangkok, however, Isan people could not avoid speaking in the Bangkok accent, which gave some Bangkok natives easy opportunity to insult and ridicule new Isan migrants who could yet not speak the Bangkok accent “perfectly.” In this context, it can be seen that accent, dialect, and language can be significant markers of ethnic identity and social status.

Isan Cuisine

Rice is the main food in Thai culture. Thais eat rice with a variety of side dishes at virtually every meal. The main differences between the cuisines of Bangkok and Isan begin with rice. People in Bangkok and Central Thailand eat ordinary rice, called *khao jao* (ข้าวเจ้า) or “noble rice” as the staple food, while Isan people eat *khao niao* (ข้าวเหนียว) or “sticky rice.” The former is traditionally cooked by boiling with water in a pot. When the rice is done, excess water is poured off. Since the late twentieth century, the use of electric rice cookers in most of Thailand makes the cooking of ordinary rice
even easier, as the exact amount of water needed is specified by an indicator line within the pot, and there is no excess water after cooking.

On the other hand, to properly cook sticky rice it is necessary to soak the rice in water for a certain length of time depending on how old the rice is. Usually old rice must be soaked longer than new rice. Then, the rice must be steamed in a basket. Sticky rice is denser and heavier than standard white rice, and it takes more time to digest it. The side dishes served with sticky rice and ordinary rice are also different. Central Thai food is more influenced by Indian and Chinese cuisines. The former is more focused on curry flavors while the latter emphasizes heavy, oily, stir fried combinations. Isan food, however, places a greater emphasis on various kinds of salad-like dishes, which emphasize vegetables and alternate between salty and sour flavors. Fish sauce, salt, and lime, lemon, and other kinds of acidic fruits such as tamarind, green mango, and Java plum, are also utilized. These ingredients are mixed into different kinds of vegetables and meats with herbs; and, therefore, different dishes result. More importantly, one of the salty ingredients unique to Isan food (and a Lao traditional as a whole) is *padaek* (ปลา แเตก), also called *pla ra* (ปลารา) in Central Thai, a variety of salted, fermented or pickled fresh water fish traditionally prepared for food preservation. The *padaek* can be eaten as a side dish into which sticky rice is dipped, as well as an ingredient in a mixture which results in different salty dishes.

Among natives of Bangkok, the eating of sticky rice and *padaek* is a marker of the Isan or Lao people. In particular, the pungent aroma of fermented fish is judged quite negatively among many outsiders. Most Bangkok people, for example, will not even try
to taste it. As a result, this seasoning became a target for natives of Bangkok to demean Isan culture in terms of food.

Isan Music

Music was another factor that caused cultural conflict between native Bangkok and Isan people in the city and brought a negative image to Isan people from the time of the Second World War onwards. Isan migrants brought their music with them; and it certainly differed from urban Bangkok music, especially the popular music that was functioning in that society. Although by the 1940s traditional music in Central Thailand had not completely disappeared, it had declined significantly in popularity from its heyday in the early twentieth century. Traditional music had largely been eclipsed by commercial popular music. Under modernization, the urbanized music of Bangkok, although it retained some elements of traditional music, was largely influenced by Western popular and dance music in its forms, instrumentations, and use of harmony. The transition from traditional music of the former Siamese had little to do with the new urban pop music of Central Thailand compared with Isan pop style/Isan country style.

The music style of Isan migrants to Bangkok in the 1950s and 1960s comprised both traditional and popular genres. The latter, however, was not labeled “Isan country music” until the mid 1970s although the lyrics and other musical elements were equivalent to today’s Isan popular music. For the most part, Isan workers listened to their music via radio, and later disc and tape recordings, although occasionally live performances by the workers themselves or by groups brought in from Isan also took place. The more traditional the music sounded, the more strongly natives in Bangkok would insult it. Isan music was initially brought to Bangkok, but eventually some of the
migrants began to create and record their own music in Bangkok. Traditional music in particular served Isan people as entertainment as well as an expression of “homesickness,” especially prior to the 1970s before pop became the mainstream music among Isan audience. Lam klawn “Isan traditional vocal music” was one of the most common styles in Bangkok among Isan laborers.

The earliest mawlam klawn troupe in Bangkok was Suntharaphirom (สุนทราภิรมย์), organized in the early 1960s by Khru Suntharaphirom (ครุสุนทราภิรมย์), who was born in Nakhon Nayok Province of Central Thailand located just to the east of Bangkok. Khru Suntharaphirom was a Lao descendant who had moved to Bangkok to work as a policeman. He founded a lam klawn troupe to perform for mainly Isan migrants in the metropolitan area. It was most active from the 1960s through the early 1970s and enjoyed immense popularity among Isan people in Bangkok and among Lao settlers in Central Thailand. They performed at temple fairs wherever large numbers of Lao resided for the Isan Association of Bangkok (สมาคมชาวอีสานกรุงเทพ), Sama Khom Chao Isan Krung Thep and for radio broadcasts. They also produced many LP recordings. The mawlam singers in Suntharaphirom’s troupe were descendants of the resettled Lao from the second resettlement from Wiang Chan who lived in the provinces around Bangkok including Prachinburi, Nakhon Nayok, and from the Isan region in Pak Thong Chai District, Nakhon Ratchasima Provinces. These singers were more familiar with Siamese culture than most people from Isan as most had grown up in the Central

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150 This troupe was also called Mawlam Khana Suntharaphirom (มволำคมสุนทราภิรมย์). Waeng spells the group’s name คณะสุนทราภิรมย์ (with the final yawn ying), but most sources spell itคณะสุนทราภิรมย์ (with the final yawn yak).

151 The Thai term khru (ครู), from the Sanskrit guru literally meaning “teacher,” is an honorific description given to teachers as well as to individuals who are highly respected in their fields.

152 Although he was commonly known as Khru Suntharaphirom, his real name was Sunthawn Aphisuntharangkun (สุนทราภิสุนทราภิรมย์).
region. They could speak standard Thai fluently and knew how to interact with Bangkok people better than did Isan natives. “They could speak in the Bangkok accent more clearly than we could. This was convenient for them when they needed to communicate or have a conversation with government officers. They would not be insulted.”

Suntharaphirom later introduced native mawlam singers from the Isan region which opened the door for native Isan singers to perform in Bangkok. In fact, becoming a mawlam Krung Thep (หมอละกรุงเทพ), or Bangkok mawlam singer, was what native Isan traditional singers dreamed about during the mid 1960s. Due to the influence of modernization, a singer who performed in Bangkok could be considered a higher-grade singer than one who “only” performed at home in Isan. The early native Isan singers were from Ubon Rachathani Province. That province was especially considered the place of (Buddhist) education, scholars, arts and literature in old days’ Northeast Thailand, which developed numbers of well known mawlam singers.

Under modernization in general, traditional instruments are symbols of all that is “out of date,” “ancient,” and “unfashionable.” Among city people in the country including the Isan region, regarding Isan traditional instruments, it was even worse. In Bangkok, besides the negative image as a whole, Isan music would directly appear as part of a musical identity representing the ethnicity of Isan. Prior to the late 1970s among most Bangkok or Central Thai people, Isan music was considered “Lao music,” or “music of the Lao,” for which is “Lao” was already an insult. In those days, when they travelled to accompany mawlam klawn in cities like Bangkok or even in provincial cities near their villages, the khaen players would hide their instruments from passersby.

153 Chawiwan Damnoen (ชวีวัน ต้านเนิน). Interview by the present author, Thailand, summer 2003.
Showing their instruments might elicit strange looks or verbal insults from people in those cities.

Thus, during the time of “development,” Isan traditional music was considered in a negative light by city people. This image, in fact, was prevalent not only among outsiders but among insiders as well. Urbanized Isan people, especially those who had opportunities to obtain higher education, which certainly could be accomplished only in the cities, often brought back home with them Western instruments. They preferred to play guitar in the way of “modern people” for their enjoyment in their current lifestyle. They never wanted to learn how to play traditional instruments and look down upon them.

Among urbanized Isan people, some Isan instrumental music was considered the music of beggars. It was true, in fact, that some traditional instrumental music encountered on the streets in Isan was performed by people with disabilities, people who could not do anything else, especially the blind. Musical beggars in modern Thai society, then, are considered something poor, low class, and unappealing; and most people do not wish to associate with them. The three Isan traditional instruments, *khaen*, a bamboo free-reed mouth organ, the *phin*, a three-stringed plucked lute, and the *saw bip* (ขล้อง or ขล้อง), a two-stringed bowed lute, are commonly encountered among Isan musical beggars. When such a musician appeared in the city, it gave a negative image to Isan music. Such musicians often made their livings in cities, rather than villages, where the larger population might bring a greater income. Not only was the player demeaned, but also the instrument was labelled an “instrument of the beggar.”
Conclusion

When the border between what today’s Northeast Thailand and Laos was established under the French-Siamese treaties of 1893 and 1904, the term “Isan” was created to represent the Northeastern people and their region. The Siamese selected the neutral term “Isan” rather than the term “Lao,” to avoid any claim France might make on the region, as they had already annexed all of Laos. Among Central Thai people, however, no distinction was made between the people and culture of Isan and Laos. To them, these were still the same group of people, considered “low-class,” inferior, and fit only for servitude, based on the historical narrative initiated by the Siamese-Lao wars of 1778 and 1825, and amplified by the 1865 proclamation of King Mongkut.

During the twentieth century, the negative image of Isan, its people, and its culture was primarily constructed by the people of Bangkok. Interaction between the two groups intensified in Bangkok when the Isan culture was brought to the city by Isan economic migrants after the Second World War. Historical and cultural background, economy, politics, Westernization, and modernization have contributed factors that resulted in a negative image of Isan natives among Bangkok people. The policy of building a Thai nation from the 1930s to 1970s Central Thai culture was used as the primary model to centralize local cultures in order to unify the people of the nation, which, resulted in local culture being suppressed, ignored, and demeaned.

Aside from all the aspects from prior to the 1980s already mentioned, there are some other miscellaneous issues that caused Isan people to feel inferior or conveyed negative images. For instance, Isan people tend to be darker than Central Thai; and, in Thai culture, dark is not beautiful. Isan people did not have modern clothes. Many
villagers, especially old women, still wore their traditional styles of clothes. When an Isan street musician wore a *phakoma* (ผ้าก้าวหน้า), traditional clothes that most Isan men used for multiple purposes, it gave him away as a farmer. There is also a broader issue of urban-rural rivalry. The city person always depends on the farmer or he will starve, yet city people disdained the rural man and his culture. Many Isan men are heavy drinkers, including country musicians. When they were/are drunk in public, especially among outsiders, they draw a negative reputation to Isan culture. In the cities, many street people are Isan and that also negatively affects the Isan image.

Over the decades the standard of living for Isan people has increased little by little, accompanied by a concurrent increase in status in the eyes of Central Thais. By the late 1970s people throughout Thailand fully accepted the Isan people as Thai politically, although they were not always treated as equals by all Central Thais. Since the 1990s Thais seem to celebrate their regional cultural diversity rather than centralizing it into the “standard” of the Central region, former Siamese rulers and today's Central government. The transition from negative bias to celebration of cultural diversity took many decades. The people of Isan in particular, coming from the poorest region in the country, faced great challenges in turning the negative image to one of desirable cultural diversity and celebration. In spite of the fact that in earlier times the traditional music of Isan was judged inferior by central Thais, Isan music became a “weapon” that Isan people could use to forge the negative image into a positive one. The remaining chapters will explain this process, in which I will focus primarily on musical elements.
CHAPTER IV

THE RISE OF ISAN POPULAR MUSIC AND THE SPREAD OF ITS INFLUENCE

Introduction

The term “Isan popular music” refers to all Thai genres that combine elements of traditional Isan music with modern, Western-influenced popular music disseminated via the mass media in Thailand. The focus of this study is the two most popular genres produced, promoted, and listened to in Isan as well as throughout Thailand and around the world. 1) *Luk thung Isan* (ลูกทุ่งอีสาน), also called *phleng luk thung Isan* (เพลงลูกทุ่งอีสาน),\(^{154}\) means “Isan country music.” This genre, recognized in the early 1970s, is distinct from Central Thai style *luk thung* from which *luk thung Isan* developed.\(^{155}\) 2) *Luk thung mawlam* (ลูกทุ่งมволำ), also called *phleng luk thung mawlam* (เพลงลูกทุ่งมволำ), a folk-pop version of traditional *mawlam* music developed in the mid-1980s, draws on many styles of Lao traditional song styles combined with some Western musical elements.\(^{156}\)

Both of these genres derive partly from *mawlam*, Isan’s most important and fundamental root music. Although both of these genres include many elements of Western pop, they remain less diluted by such influences than do contemporary Central Thai styles. These two Northeast genres evoke the traditional way of life of the Isan

\(^{154}\) *Phleng* is a generic term literally meaning “song” or “vocal music,” and is often omitted both in speaking and writing, as in this study, in reference to certain musical genres.

\(^{155}\) Central Thai *luk thung* is usually called *phleng luk thung* or simply *luk thung*. Since it is the older and original version of this genre, we understand that the term *luk thung* refers to the Central Thai style; when we refer to Isan style *luk thun*, the modifier *Isan* must be added.

\(^{156}\) In reference to the two genres of *luk thung Isan* and *luk thung mawlam* I have found it helpful to devise equivalent English terms to better allow foreign readers to obtain a sense of stylistic differences; therefore I refer to *luk thung Isan* as “Isan country music” and *luk thung mawlam* as “Isan folk-pop music.”
people as well as the concurrent urban life style of Isan people in Bangkok where large numbers have settled since the end of the Second World War. The lyrics of these genres reflect various aspects of Isan life, such as happiness associated with Isan culture and festivals, romance and lost love, economic hardship, and nostalgia for home. Although the musical style and lyrics of Isan popular music have Isan culture as their source, the music originated in Bangkok, Thailand’s capital city, where Westernization and modernization were first accepted in the nation. As such, like all other genres of Thai pop music, Isan popular music reflects the changes Westernization and modernization have brought to Thailand since the middle of the twentieth century.

Bangkok, as Thailand’s political, economic, and cultural capital, as well as the nation’s most international city, has, since the mid-nineteenth century, fostered the creation of many hybrid musical genres that combine traditional local and Western influences. These new genres came to be grouped under the heading phleng Thai sakon. The term phleng Thai sakon or “universal Thai music,” carries the implication that Western musical elements, including instruments, harmony, and forms, are a kind of international standard that the Thai people integrated into these new, modern genres. Among other Western musical influences, the use of Western musical instruments to accompany Thai singing, using Thai melodies and language, is one of the most obvious elements commonly encountered in most Thai modern music styles. We cannot hold a discussion of Isan popular music without noting the historical influence of Western music on that music.

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157 In this study I will use the term “modern” to refer to hybrid genres which combine elements of Thai and Western music, although in the Thai language the term “modern” is not generally used in this context. 158 Such musical practice began in the late nineteenth century when Western instruments including piano and strings began to be used by members of the urban upper class to accompany Thai songs.
Before moving on to Isan popular music in particular, I will examine the development of modern Thai music as a whole, since Isan popular music is one derivative of modern Thai music. I will also examine the development of Isan popular music as a process that began with early Thai popular music and eventually acquired a style and identity of its own as Isan musicians and composers reshaped the music to fit their own culture and their ideals. The chapter will be divided chronologically into three sections including: 1) the period during which elements of Western music were first adopted from the 1850s to the early 1940s, 2) the “golden age” of Thai popular music from the early 1940s to the 1970s, and 3) Isan popular music, which deals with the entire history of Isan country and folk-pop associated with Thai popular genres from the early 1940s to the present.

The discussion of the first of these periods, from the 1850s to the 1940s, covers the manner in which Western musical elements were first adopted to create phleng Thai sakon. This process began with the reception of Western music in the courts of Siam. The most notable early examples included the establishment of the Royal Brass Band (วง แดรงห์หลวง), Wong Trae Farang Luang, in 1850 and the Royal Western String Ensemble (วงเครื่องสายฝังหลวง), Wong Khrueang Sai Farang Luang, in 1911. Elements of Western music also featured prominently in lakhon rawng (ละครรอง) or “singing drama,” a hybrid theatrical genre which combined elements of traditional Thai lakhon theater with Western opera invented in 1908 by members of the Siamese nobility and upper class. By the 1920s, Western music exerted an even greater influence on Thai music when European ballroom dance music and American jazz came to Bangkok. The
use of Western musical elements became even more common in popular songs that appeared in Thai films and radio dramas during the 1930s.

The second period, referred to as the “golden age” of Thai popular music, lasted from the early 1940s to the early 1970s. This period began in an era in which Thai culture, particularly in Bangkok, had already evolved from traditional patterns to modern ones. By the 1940s, Thai popular music had become common in radio broadcasts and live performances in the city. The best-known figure in this early era of Thai popular music was Eua Sunthonsanan (เอื้อ สุนทรสนาน), 1910-1981, leader of the Suntharaphon Band (Wong Suntharaphawn วงศ์สันทาราภรณ์) which he founded in 1939. The band continued to be influential in promoting the urban style of Thai popular songs which were informally called *phleng phudi* (เพลงผู้ดี) or “elite songs” for many decades. During the same period, a country style informally called *phleng talat* (เพลงตลาด), market song, created under the influence of the Suntharaphon Band, blended with *ramwong* music or circle dance songs, folk music common in Bangkok in the 1940s. *Phleng talat* became one of the mainstream genres of Thai popular music and remained popular from 1950 to the mid 1960s. In 1964 the formal term *phleng luk thung* (เพลงลูกทุ่ง) or songs of the country child (meaning country music) was created to replace the previous term, *phleng talat*. This genre’s counterpart was a more sophisticated urban style called *phleng luk krung* (เพลงลูกกรุง), songs of the city child, which was simply a new name for what had earlier been called *phleng phudi*. *Phleng luk krung* continued to be the mainstream

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159 See chapter 3.
160 This group is also referred to as Wong Dontri Suntharaphon (วงศ์ดอนตรีสันทาราภรณ์), or simply as Suntharaphon (สันทาราภรณ์), from the first part of the leader’s surname, *Sunthara* (สันทrar) meaning beautiful, plus *aphon* (อาภรณ์) or ornamented.
161 The term *phleng tala* or market song implies that this genre is intended for a wide general audience of common people, those who may regularly be found at Thai marketplaces.
162 *Thung* (ทุ่ง) or field refers to a rice field but in this context implies country or countryside.
urban pop style for several decades before several new popular genres appeared, most sounding quite different from their predecessor; these new genres now dominate today’s urban Thai pop music. *Phleng luk thung*, a country genre, however, continues with its original country sound and characteristics.

The final aspect of Thai popular music, which is the focus of this chapter as well as of the study as a whole, is a discussion of the entire history of contemporary Isan popular music, including a country and a folk-pop genre, *luk thung Isan* and *luk thung mawlam*. The discussion is divided into three sections. The first section begins with a narrative of the root of Isan country music labeled “Lao style song” from the time in Thailand the term Lao still commonly referred to Lao culture as a whole, including Isan, from the late 1940s. That term is associated with the Thai popular genres, *phleng ramwong* (뻐ונגราว) from the late 1940s, *phleng talat* of the early 1950s, and *phleng luk thung* from the mid 1960s. The second section continues focus on the roots of Isan country music except that the term “Isan” began to displace the previous term “Lao” in Thai society during the late 1950s to the early 1970s. The term “Isan style song,” as a result, will be used to describe the roots of the Isan country genre. The influences of Westernization and modernization are of overwhelming significance in the discussion of Isan style country music during that era. Finally, the third section begins with the discussion of the continuing development of the Isan style including major singers who brought the style to prominence and of the formal term “*luk thung Isan*” which was finally coined to replace the previous term in the early 1970s. The section ends with a discussion of another Isan popular genre, *luk thung mawlam*, which became popular in the mid 1980s and remains so today.
Figure 2. Development of Thai Popular Music

1. Western Music Influence, 1850s-1940s
   - 1850: Royal Brass Band
   - 1908: Lakhon Rawng
   - 1911: Royal String Orchestra
   - 1920s: Films/Ballroom Dance

2. Thai Popular Music, 1940s-present
   - 1940s: Suntharaphon Band + Bangkok Ramwong Music
   - 1944: Ramwong Matrathan

3. Isan Popular Music, 1970s-present
   - 1964: Phleng Luk thung coined
   - 1973: Luk thung Isan coined
   - 1980s: Luk thung Mawlam established

The roots of Isan country music
Western Music Influence

Although the earliest records of Western visitors to the nation of Siam date to as early as the sixteenth century, there is no evidence of Western music or the influence thereof in Siam until the reign of King Mongkut, r. 1851-1868, the first king to introduce Western culture into Siam. The first known Western music to have been adopted by the Siamese was an ensemble of European brass instruments called The Royal Brass Band (วงดนตรีผู้ฝรั่งใหญ่), Wong Trae Farang Luang, organized during King Mongkut’s reign and an official performing ensemble of the royal military. During that time Mongkut wished to train his army according to Western principles, and brass band music, an aspect of European military training, was brought to the court in order fully to achieve the proper military decorum and to accompany marching. Music performed by The Royal Brass Band imitated music played by military bands earlier brought to Siam by European and American delegations.

Jacob Feit, an American of German ancestry, was one of the earliest Western music teachers in Siam. He served as Director of The Royal Military Brass Band from 1858 until 1909, from the reign of Mongkut until late in the reign of Chulalongkorn. He composed the melody of what is today the King’s Anthem. Feit married a Siamese woman and spent the rest of his life in Bangkok. He died there in 1909. The Royal Military Brass Band performed not only for military functions but also gave public performances as entertainment, especially for the Siamese elites. As the author Valentin

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165 Ibid.
Chu mentions: “Thai melodies with Western-style harmony first appeared in the late nineteenth century when, at a gala ball honoring the visiting Crown Prince of Russia, a military band played a ‘Quadrille on Siamese Airs.’”

During the reign of Chulalongkorn, r. 1868-1910, Western music became more widespread in Siam. An increasing number of Siamese musicians learned to play Western instruments; and chamber music concerts were presented for the kingdom’s elites, mostly in Bangkok. When Western music became a fashionable form of entertainment for the elites, many nobles, even including the king’s sons, began to become involved in Western style musical activities. In addition, during this period, some elements of Siamese classical music began to be combined with Western music. This phenomenon marked the beginning of the process of hybridization that later developed into today’s modern and popular Thai music.

The influence of Western music on Siam’s musical landscape further increased during the reign of King Vajiravudh, r. 1910-1925. Among all of Thailand’s kings, Vajiravudh is known as greatest promoter of the arts and is often referred to as “The King of the Arts.” He earned this appellation through his love of music and the arts, and he sponsored and participated in performances of music and dance in his court more than had his predecessors. Through the Department of Royal Entertainment (กรมพระราชวัง), Krom Mahorasop, the king supported Western music. In 1911, he founded the first Western symphony orchestra in Siam, known as The Royal Western String Ensemble (วงเครื่องสายฝังหลวง), Wong Khrueang Sai Farang Luang. Two Western instructors were

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invited to establish the ensemble.\textsuperscript{167} One was Mr. John Innokay while the other’s name is unknown.\textsuperscript{168} The pair served for only a very short period. Later, Alberto Nazari, an Italian instructor, took over the ensemble for a few years before he had to return to Italy on July 22, 1917, to serve his country as a soldier in the First World War.

The Royal Western String Ensemble was well established when Jen Rotharat (เจนโรทาระ), 1883-1968, became the next director on August 1, 1917. In fact, he was a son of Jacob Feit and his Siamese wife, and his Western name was Peter Feit. He held the position of Director of The Royal Military Brass Band. Certainly, he learned Western music from his father Jacob Feit and became a skilled musician. At that time in Siamese culture, however, a full-time career in music for anyone but a musician of the court was not a viable lifestyle choice, as even members of traditional troupes, such as lakhon (ละคร) musicians, could perform only seasonally and had to return home to tend their crops during the rainy season. Furthermore, musicians as well as dancers, puppeteers, and other performers were considered “low-class.” Before taking the aforementioned positions at the court, Peter Feit worked for the Royal State Railway. When he was appointed Director of the Royal String Ensemble, Feit received an honorific name from the king, Chan Duriyang (เจนดุริยวงศ์), literally “skilled in music”, and the rank of “Phra” (พระ); thus his name became Phra Chan Duriyang (พระเจนดุริยวงศ์).\textsuperscript{169}

\textsuperscript{167}Panya Roongruang (ปัญญา รุ่งเรือง), “Thai Classical Music and Its Movement from Oral to Written Transmission, 1930-32: Historical Context, Method, and Legacy of the Thai Manuscript Project” (Ph.D. diss., Kent State University, 1999), 140.
\textsuperscript{168}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{169}Prior to the abolition of the absolute monarchy, commoners were addressed by the title Prai (ไท). The court could bestow titles to men of the court, with Nai (นาย) the lowest and most junior rank. The second through ninth ranks were Pan (พัน), Muen (หมื่น), Khun (ขุน), Luang (หลวง), Phra (พระ) Jamuen (จุมบัน) Phranai (พระนาถ), Phraya (พระยา), Chao Phraya (เจ้าพระยา), and Somdej Chao Phraya (สมเด็จเจ้าพระยา).
Throughout his life, Phra Chan Duriyang accomplished a great quantity of work, much of it devoted to the promotion of Western music in Siam. During his lifetime, Western music became available not only to Siamese elites and the military but also to the general public. King Vajiravudh sponsored regular live performances of Siamese and Western classical music for the public in Bangkok. The king built a pavilion called Norasing (นราสี) in what is today the Dusit District of central Bangkok, which provided coffee and live musical performances to the general public every Sunday from 5:00 to 7:00 p.m. Although Siamese classical music was included in such performances, Western music was also presented by such ensembles as The Royal Western String Ensemble directed by Phra Chan Duriyang as well as by The Royal Brass Band. Such performances of Western music were a novel and welcome musical experience for

Figure 3. Royal Western String Ensemble
audiences of that period. Audiences of three to four hundred people, including natives and foreigners, regularly attended the performances for many years.\(^{170}\)

**Emergence of Phleng Thai Sakon**

*Phleng Thai sakon* (เพลงไทยสากล), universal Thai song, is considered the first modern Thai musical genre. It emerged as a mélange of Western and Thai musical elements in the early 1900s, during the reign of Vajiravudh, with a few earlier examples of such music extant from the first years of the twentieth century, late in the reign of Chulalongkorn. Because a thorough discussion of the structure of *phleng Thai sakon* would require a lengthy digression, the term will be defined simply. *Phleng* (เพลง) is a generic term that literally means “song” but which can also be used more broadly to mean “music.” In traditional practice, the term may refer to either vocal or instrumental music, although it is more often used for the former.\(^{171}\) In modern practice, especially in popular music where vocal music is predominant, *phleng* is more commonly used to refer to a tune in which lyrics are more dominant than melody. Based on the fact that Thai is a tonal language, each word of the Thai language already has within it an aural inflection or tone (or tones, in the case of polysyllabic words) that carries part of the meaning. Thai speech, then, contains an innate implication of built-in melodic contours that can be utilized in composing or improvising a song. This factor accords a greater importance to a song’s lyrics in that the melody must conform to the tones of the language. Thus, in the Thai conception, a *phleng* is usually thought of as referring to a text which carries a vocal melody and can be either accompanied or unaccompanied by instrument(s). Whereas


\(^{171}\)In reference to instrumental rather than vocal music, the term *dontri* (ดนตรี) is more often used.
traditional Thai vocal genres have their melodies shaped by the “melodies” inherent in the texts sung, the singing styles utilized in Thai popular genres are quite different. While in Thai classical music vocal melodies are often highly melismatic with a single syllable often drawn out for a long duration with quite an amount of complicated melodic embellishment, popular singing styles are generally more syllabic, with less ornamentation, allowing the song’s lyrics to be more easily understood. The Thai ethnomusicologist Panya Roongruang provides a clear explanation of the earliest singing style used in Thai popular music, called rawng-nuea-tem (ร้องเนื้อเต็ม) or syllabic singing: “…the musical and voice parts are performed together and each syllable of text matches each note of the instrumental line without melisms.”

While the terms phleng sakon (เพลงสากล) or dontri sakon (ดนตรีสากล), universal music, are used to signify Western musical affects, and the terms dontri Thai (ดนตรีไทย) or phleng Thai (เพลงไทย) refer to any instrumental or song style indigenous to Thailand, the term phleng Thai sakon refers to the earliest forms of Thai modern music that combines traditional and Western elements. Such modern Thai music usually consists of Thai-sounding melodies within a Western musical framework, including Western tonality, harmony, and instrumentation. The adjective sakon implies the addition of Western musical instruments, tuning system, tonality, harmony, notation and other Western elements that give this music a “universal” quality, as now heard in most places around the world.

173 Dontri (ดนตรี) is a Sanskrit-derived term which means music, while phleng (เพลง) means song or, by extension, song style or music.”
Since the nineteenth century, Western instruments have been welcomed by Thai people with great honor. Due to the successive campaigns of Westernization initiated by Siam’s rulers beginning in the nineteenth century, Thai people began to internalize a belief that their own traditional musical instruments were somehow inferior and primitive while musical instruments from Europe represented modernization and “being civilized.” Middle- and upper-class Thais began to hold the opinion that all civilized cultures in the “universe” should utilize Western instruments to represent their own civilizations. The term khrueang dontri sakon (เครื่องดนตรีสำก) or Western instruments literally means “universal musical instruments.” Western harmony and notation were also applied to some kinds of Thai music by the turn of the twentieth century. The addition of a Western harmonic structure made Thai melodies seem to be “universal music,” while the use of musical notation was seen as a symbol of civilization in Thai modernized musical conceptualization. Thai people, however, still preferred and even now prefer their own melodies to Western ones, and thus it is the melodic portion that is least transformed in modern Thai music.

One of the first composers to compose a Thai-sounding melody with Western instrumentation, harmony, and form was Prince Boriphatra\(^{175}\) of Nakhon Sawan, 1881-1944. One of King Chulalongkorn’s sons, he became an important military and government official in the early twentieth century.\(^{176}\) Skilled in music, he is known as one of the most important figures in Thai classical music of the twentieth century. His numerous compositions include works in both Thai classical and modern classical, i.e.,

\(^{174}\) It is interesting to note that in China, the Chinese had opposite feelings. One does not say they Westernized but that they internationalized, although that really means Westernized.

\(^{175}\) Boriphatra’s name is often romanized as Paripatra.

\(^{176}\) Chulalongkorn had 37 wives and 77 children.
Western-Thai hybrid, styles; and the latter compositions contain Thai-sounding melodies within a Western harmonic framework. Some of his compositions, particularly those in Thai classical style, are still performed today.\textsuperscript{177} Like other sons of Chulalongkorn, Prince Boriphatra was sent to study in Europe at an early age. He attended the German Staff College, a military training school, with Emperor Wilhelm II as his guardian. The prince, however, was also interested in music. While in Germany, he learned to play many Western instruments and also studied the art of musical composition.\textsuperscript{178} Among his numerous compositions, in 1903, he composed a Thai-sounding melody in Western waltz rhythm called “Waltz Plueamjit” (วอลท์ซันภิมจิต) with plueamjit (ปลิมจิต) meaning “happy mind.” The Thai music writer Chakat Ratchaburi states that this composition is assumed to be one of the earliest \textit{phleng Thai sakon} or Thai modern compositions. The Prince is, then, regarded as the “father of \textit{phleng Thai sakon},”\textsuperscript{179} although the term \textit{phleng Thai sakon} was not actually coined until the 1930s.

Dramatic Music

The emergence of \textit{phleng Thai sakon} was influenced not only by Western instrumental music brought to Siam or learned by Siamese citizens who traveled abroad, but also by Western opera, which Siamese elites first encountered during their travels to Europe in the late nineteenth century. As the conventions of Western classical music began to influence Siamese music in the early twentieth century with the establishment of royal ensembles, formal concerts, and competitions, Western music also began to

\textsuperscript{177}Among the most famous of his Thai classical compositions are \textit{Khaek Mon Bangkhunphrom} ( wybraรหญ้าขุนพรหม), \textit{Sutsanguan Song Chan} (สัตสังวัณ ชัน), and \textit{Khmen Phuang Sam Chan} (เขมรพบก สามชัน).


influence Siamese court drama, called *lakhon* (ละคร), during the latter part of the reign of Chulalongkorn. *Lakhon* is a generic term that signifies all types of theatrical performances, including Western opera.\(^{180}\)

Influenced by Western opera, Prince Narathip, 1861-1931, was the originator of a new Siamese style of drama that imitated the theatrical form of Western opera, which he named *lakhon rawng* (ละครร้อง), literally “singing drama,” in 1908. One innovation that set *lakhon rawng* apart from traditional Siamese drama was that, instead of basing his dramas on ancient Siamese or Indian stories, the Prince selected stories based on current events. For example, he imitated such well known Western stories as *Madama Butterfly*, adapting it for his *lakhon rawng* and called it *Sao Khruea Fa* (สาวครีอีฟ้า), literally “Miss Khruea Fa,” a love story set in contemporary Northern Thailand. This story has as its main male character Second Lieutenant Prawm (พระยดี พระอม), Roitri Prawm, a Siamese soldier who falls in love with a young woman from Chiang Mai. Upon returning home, he is forced by his parents to marry an elite woman in Bangkok. Khruea Fa (ครีอีฟ้า), the main female character, upon learning of Prawm’s marriage, becomes heartbroken and commits suicide by jumping into a ravine. The scholar Mattani Mojdara Rutnin describes some of the new Westernized aspects of the *lakhon rawng*: “The dialogue in *lakhon rawng* can be in prose, poetic-prose, or poetry. It is spoken or sung by the actors. The language is modern and colloquial with a less strict rhyming pattern…”\(^{181}\) More importantly, the music employed to accompany this type of drama usually consisted of traditional and newly composed Thai melodies accompanied by

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\(^{180}\) Although Western opera is considered a type of *lakhon*, it is also often called *uperakawn* (อุปราคาวน์) or *opera* (โปลายการ).

ensembles of Western instruments using Western harmony. As Rutnin explains, “The innovations in the *lakhon rawng*…were the Western style band and courting songs which continued to be the main features in later popular Thai music.” Rutnin emphasizes that the use of a Western style band to accompany Thai classical singing represents the original form of today’s most popular Thai music style. Chakat also gives a similar opinion on the *lakhon rawng*, speculating that it might be the root version of today’s Thai popular music: “The musical style that characterized this drama is very close to that of today’s *phleng Thai sakon* which emphasizes the song text. The actors sang more syllabically while the chorus supported the melismatic portion. This style of singing was very pleasing to Thai audiences.”

![Figure 4. *Lakhon Rawng* Performance in *Sao Khruea Fa* Imitating the Western opera of *Madama Butterfly*](image-url)

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182 Ibid., 184.
183 Chakat Ratchaburi (ฉัคท รัชตระบูรณ์), “The Origin of *Phleng Thai Sakon*” (กำเนิดเพลงไทยสาคก์) วารสารครุศาสตร์วัฒนธรรมปีที่ ๕ ฉบับที่ ๒ (มหาวิทยาลัยเกษตรศาสตร์, 2549/2006), 34. Translated by this author.
By the early 1900s, lakhon rawng had already become common as a form of entertainment among the middle and upper classes in Bangkok, with many troupes active in the city. Juangjan Jankhana (จ้างเจ้าหน้าที่จั่นทร์ศักดิ์), known by the stage name “Phranbun” (พรรณบุรุณ), was the most prominent lakhon rawng composer. He created both music and librettos for many troupes in Bangkok. In 1927, he created a new style of music for the lakhon rawng, which was characterized by a new style of singing called phleng nua tem (เพลงนูแอ่ที่), phleng Thai nua tem (เพลงไทยนูแอ่ที่), or rawng nua tem (ร้องนูแอ่ที่). This style was more syllabic, in contrast with the highly melismatic style of singing of traditional Thai classical music. Besides composing original music for Western ensembles, Phranbun drew on the repertoire of Thai classical compositions and used the piphat ensemble to accompany some of his lakhon rawng productions.184

While lakhon rawng, from its inception, commonly used ensembles of Western instruments such as piano and bowed string instruments, in 1931, because of the increasing popularity of American jazz, Phranbun began utilizing a Western-style jazz band to accompany his new phleng nua tem style of composition, with syllabically sung vocals. This phenomenon first appeared in the accompaniment to the drama entitled Rosita (โรสิต้า), first performed in the same year by the Sriophat Troupe (ลังก์โภชน์ศิริโอรสสาส), Lakhon Khana Sriophat. According to Chakat Ratchaburi, Phranbun added lyrics to “Waltz Plueamjit,” the composition that Prince Boriphatra had composed in 1903. The song became very well known among elite audiences in Bangkok in the 1930s. It was recorded at the studio of Taw Ngekchuan (อาจารย์ ต.เบิกชวล) or “The Store of Mr. Taw Ngekchuan,” one of the earliest phonograph

184Ibid., 36.
recording studios in Bangkok;\textsuperscript{185} and it achieved great popularity through frequent broadcasts on the P. J. 7 Saladaeng (ศาลาแดง) Radio Station in Bangkok.\textsuperscript{186}

In the same year, Phranbun created another lakhon rawng for the Sriophat Troupe entitled Janjaokha (จันทร์เจ้าข้า), “Oh, My Moon,” which became the most famous lakhon rawng of all time. The troupe traveled around Bangkok performing it at many theaters around the city, at least four to nine times. Most of the songs that Phranbun composed for this drama had lyrics centered on the theme of the moon and in a sweet and romantic vein. These included the title song, “Janjaokha” (เพลงจันทร์เจ้าข้า), Phleng Janjaokha, “Oh, My Moon,” as well as “Jansawat” (จันทร์สวาย), “Charming Moon,” “Janloi” (จันทร์ลอย), “Flowing Moon,” and “Janja Fajan Faengmawk (จันทร์เจ้าฝาจันทร์ แผ่งหมอก), “Oh, My Moon in the Foggy Sky.” One of the show’s most famous songs, which can still be heard today, is “Khwan Khawng Riam” (ชวัญของเรียม), “Khwan Belongs to Riam.”\textsuperscript{187}

The songs in these kinds of productions already featured most of the elements of the early style of what would later come to be known as phleng Thai sakon. The two primary elements are the syllabic style of singing and the utilization of Western instruments and triadic harmony in accompaniment. These two elements made the music sound modern in comparison to traditional Thai singing styles, especially those of Thai classical music, which emphasizes monophonic melismatic singing and which always appears with traditional instruments. By the end of the Second World War, with the growing popularity of films, lakhon rawng completely disappeared, although the form

\textsuperscript{185}Ngekchuan’s record label was called Tra Kratai (ตรากระเตย) or “Rabbit Brand.”
\textsuperscript{186}P. J. are the initials of Prince Purachatra Jayakara (พระเจ้าพุทธชัลย), 1881-1936, the Siamese radio station founder.
\textsuperscript{187}Khwan is the name of the male lead in the drama, and Riam is the lead female character’s name.
had lasting significance because its music served as another root element of all later Thai popular music.

Film Music

As mentioned above, the first genre that brought phleng Thai sakon to popularity was the Western style sung drama called lakhon rawng, but phleng Thai sakon also appeared in songs composed for Thai films after abolition of the absolute monarchy in 1932. According to Rutnin, the first movies introduced to Siam were films from Japan called nang Yipun (นางยิปุน) or “Japanese films” first screened in Bangkok in 1902. The Company of the Wasuwat (วงศ์) family was the first importer of such popular films. Around 1922, however, the family began to produce its own silent films. In the same year, Henry MacRae, 1876-1944, an American director who worked for the Universal Film Manufacturing Company188 based in Hollywood, also came to make a film in Siam called Nang Sao Suwan (นางสาว สุวรรณ) or “Miss Suwanna of Siam” which premiered in Bangkok to much fanfare in 1923.

In 1926-1927, a silent film called Chok Sawng Chan (โชคส่องชัน), “Double Fortune,” the first film to be made by an all Thai crew, was produced by the Wasuwat family’s Bangkok Film Company. In 1931, the family produced the first Thai sound film, called Long Thang (หลวงทาง), “Lost [My] Way,” using Western filmmaking techniques but shot in the Wasuwat family’s own studio. The film, which premiered in 1932, is considered the real beginning of the Thai movie industry.189 In 1934, the Wasuwat family incorporated its company as the Sri Krung Film Studio (สถานีภาพยนตร์

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188 This company is today called Universal Studios.
The increasing popularity of films led to the building of many movie theaters in Bangkok, of which Sala Chalome Krung (ศาล.seconds) on Charoen Krung Road (ถนนเจริญกรุง), built in 1931, was the best known.

The period from 1933 to 1942 is considered the “Golden Age of Thai film,” during which time the Wasuwat family’s productions had great influence on Thai popular music. As Rutnin states: “The Sri Krung Studio produced numerous feature films with sound and music and also released phonograph records of popular songs and tunes from box office successes.”

According to Chakat Ratchaburi, the 1932 film Long Thang is notable for having been the first Thai film to feature music played on Western instruments, pieces in a light Thai classical style with songs sung in syllabic style and without the use of melismatic techniques in their vocal lines.

In 1933 the term phleng Thai sakon was coined in reference to the new style of music in Thai films. Khun Wijitmattr (ขุนวิจิตร มาตรา), an artist, columnist, songwriter, screenwriter, and film director, wrote a screenplay, Pu Som Fao Sap (ปูเสาม่ พระประสิทธิ์), “Grandfather Spirit Guarding the Treasures,” which became successful as the first Thai color film upon its release in 1933. Lieutenant Junior Grade Manit Senawinin (เรือโทมาเน็ต เสนาวินิจ), Rueatho Manit Senawinin, an officer in the Royal Thai Navy, composed a song entitled “Kluai Mai” (กล้วยไม้), “Orchids,” which was used as the theme song for the film.

According to Rutnin, this song, composed in 1933 one year after the absolute monarchy was abolished, is widely considered to be the first phleng

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190 Ibid.
192 Born Sanga Kanjanaphan (บรอง กาญจนาพันธุ์).
193 Similar to Indian films, some Thai films present action interspersed with songs.
Thai sakon. Although songs in similar style, dating back to “Waltz Plueamjitt” and the music used in lakhon rawng, had been composed earlier, “Kluai Mai” was the first to be widely disseminated outside elite circles in Bangkok. The song was deemed by the public to represent the “new Thai [people]” with their newly written democratic constitution and modern system of administration. The end of the old Siamese absolute monarchy represented for the Thai people the beginning of the nation’s “modern age,” during which Thailand joined other “civilized” nations. During this period, the term sakon (สากล, literally “universal” or “international”) became a widely used metaphor referring to “civilized” countries, especially those of the West, which the new government and educated elites aspired to join via programs of Westernization and modernization. In the years following 1932 up through the 1940s in Bangkok, there was a very strong emphasis placed on becoming sakon, that is, “modern” and “civilized” with the term heavily promoted among the populace and applied to all aspects of society. For example, common people in Bangkok started to abandon their traditional modes of dress and began to dress in Western style.

In 1934, under the influence of the nationalism promoted by the government at that time, the composer, Manit Senawinin, composed three patriotic songs for the film Lueat Thahan Thai (เลือดทหารไทย), “Blood of the Thai Soldiers.” Chakat writes that the main songs in the movie include “March Trai-rong” ( маршตรอง ), “Tricolor [National Flag] March,” “Khwam Rak Nai Maenam Chao Phraya” ( ความรักในแม่น้ำเจ้าพระยา ), “Love on the Chao Phraya River,” and “March Lueat Thahan Thai” ( марш ข้าเลือดทหารไทย ), “Blood of the Thai Soldiers March.” In subsequent years, the three

patriotic songs became familiar to schoolchildren in urban areas across the country who learned them from their teachers and sang them at school. Rutnin lists two additional songs from the film, “Lueat Chao Na” (เลือดชายนา), “Blood of the Farmers” and “Tawan Yaw Saeng” (ตะวันย้วยแสง), “Shining Sun.”

At the Sri Krung Film Studio, Thailand’s primary film production company during the “Golden Age” of Thai cinema, another composer of film music, Nat Thawawnbut (นารถ ภารบุตร), replaced Manit Senawinin as the most renowned composer of popular film songs, upon the latter composer’s death in 1936. Nat created many songs for the studio’s films over the next several years. Many of his songs became well known during that time, a number of which were sung by Jamrat Suwakhon (จารัส สุวรรณ), the most famous male Thai movie star of his day.

Because of the vigorously nationalistic campaigns carried out by the Thai government during the 1930s and early 1940s, many phleng Thai sakon with patriotic themes were composed during this period. Luang Wijit Wathakan (หลวงวิจิตรวาทการ), 1898-1962, was one of the best known composers of patriotic songs. He also served as Director of The Fine Arts Department and later held other high government positions including Foreign Minister, Finance Minister, and the Minister of Culture. Some of his best known patriotic songs include “Lueat Suphan” (เลือดสุพรรณ), “Blood of Suphan,” “Rak Mueang Thai” (รักเมืองไทย), “Love Thailand,” and “Laem Thawng” (ทะเลทวัง), “The Golden Peninsula.” Such songs were frequently played over the

197 The Fine Arts Department (กรมศิลปะการ), Krom Silapakawn, founded in 1911 by King Vajiravudh, is Thailand’s preeminent institution for Thai and Western classical music, dance, and visual arts.
198 Suphan is a shortened form of Suphanburi, a city and province of Central Thailand.
government’s radio stations, and were also presented from 78-rpm recordings in movie theaters prior to the showing of films.¹⁹⁹

**Ballroom Dance Music**

One can say that ballroom dance music has been the most significant influence on Thai popular music due to the fact that Thai popular music developed during the time that ballroom dance flourished around the world from the 1920s to the 1940s. Ballroom dance music, which included dances from the Western world such as the European waltz, Argentinian tango, and Latin American cha-cha-cha, was one of the earliest forms of world pop music. Those dances achieved great acceptance in Thailand before influencing many later genres of Thai popular music over the next century. From the 1940s to the 1970s, while ballroom dance music was at its pinnacle of popularity in Thailand, the mass media, recordings, films, and radio broadcasts made it possible for ballroom dance music composed in Thailand to become another form of Thai popular music. One of the most obvious indicators of the strong influence of ballroom dance music on early Thai popular music is the fact that most Thai popular music from the 1940s through the 1970s used ballroom dance rhythms, especially the cha-cha-cha. This was also true for popular musics of some other nations in Southeast Asia and in the rest of the world.²⁰⁰

Ballroom dance seems first to have appeared in Siam during the reign of Mongkut, r. 1851-1868, during which time it was referred to as tenram (เตนราม) or the

“jumping dance.” In the Thai classical repertoire, there exists an instrumental ensemble composition named *Farang Ram Thao* (ผู้วงรำท้า), “The Westener Dances with his Feet,” probably composed during the nineteenth century, the title of which suggests Western-style dance, although the piece itself does not display much Western influence. The reference to feet in the title of the piece suggests Western dance movement, which places a greater emphasis on foot movements than does Thai dance, which more emphasizes hand gestures. In 1857, King Mongkut sent a group of twenty-seven emissaries to the court of Queen Victoria of the United Kingdom, r. 1837-1900, which included Mawm Ratchawong Kratai (หม่อมราชวงศ์ กรศ์ดย์). In Victoria’s palace he saw the queen dance with Prince Albert, her husband and Prince Consort from 1840 until his death in 1861. As an outsider it must have made a strange impression on Ratchawong Kratai to see Westerners dancers use vigorous movements of the legs while in his own culture dancers tended to dance more with the hands. In the poetic travelogue he composed about his experiences in England, he used the term *farang ram thao* to describe the dance, and the phrase was later used as the title of the aforementioned Thai classical piece, whose composer and exact date of composition are unknown.

During the reign of Chulalongkorn, many royal children were sent to school in Europe. They returned with a basic understanding of Western culture including the music and other arts. As mentioned earlier, in 1908, a number of Western-educated princes and other nobles created a new genre of Western-style music drama in Bangkok called *lakhon rawng*. Although European dances such as waltzes were featured in the productions, ballroom dance had as yet not been adopted as a form of social dance in

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201 Phoonpit Amatayakun (พุ้นพิตร อมตะยักษ์) Ballroom Dance in Thailand, 2006. Interview by Terry E. Miller, March 2006, Salaya Campus, Mahidol University, Thailand.
202 Chulalongkorn had 77 children with 92 wives including King Rama VI, r.1910-1925.
Siam. However, during the reign of Vajiravudh, r. 1910-1925, the king employed large numbers of Westerners in many fields including architecture and engineering. Those Westerners were the first to introduce ballroom dance as a social activity in Bangkok. They would get together and dance to music from recordings. On occasion they would hire musicians from Malaysia, the Philippines, and Hong Kong to play for them.\(^{203}\)

Although at that time Vajiravudh had established a small Western string orchestra at the Siamese court, it was not made available to provide music for ballroom dance. In fact, Phra Chan Duriyang, the director of The Royal Western String Ensemble, is known not to have enjoyed ballroom dance music.\(^{204}\) Ballroom dance, and the Western music that accompanied it, was still new and foreign to the Thai elites of the time.

It was not until the reign of Prajadhipok, r. 1925-1935, that ballroom dance first appeared in the social circles of wealthy Thais. Some Thai students who studied in the United States and Europe during that time learned to enjoy ballroom dance, jazz, and popular music; and they brought these interests back to Bangkok with them after finishing their studies. They would get together and dance, and the ballroom of the Phya Thai Hotel became the most popular gathering place for this activity. Most likely they first danced to recorded music from Victrola records, although live music provided by \textit{ad hoc} dance bands was sometimes available at the Phya Thai Hotel, which finally closed in 1932.\(^{205}\)

\(^{203}\) Phoonpit Amatayakun (พุนพิน อมตะยุคล) Ballroom Dance in Thailand, March 2006. Interview by Terry E. Miller, March, 2006, Salaya Campus, Mahidol University, Thailand.

\(^{204}\) Ibid.

\(^{205}\) The hotel was located in part of the Phya Thai Palace built in 1909 by King Chulalongkorn, which after 1932 served as a radio station and military hospital. The main part of the palace is now preserved as a museum.
In 1933, a new term, *lilat* (ลิลัต), was coined to refer to ballroom dance, by the government official Mawmchao Waitayakawn Wawrawan (หม่อมเจ้า ไวยากร วรวรรณ), 1891-1976. This new term was invented to replace the term *tenram*, which was considered unsuitable because occasionally some people, for fun, reversed the syllables of this word and pronounced it *ramten* (รำเต้น), “dance-jumping,” which was considered impolite. By that time, ballroom dance was presumably already well established among Thai students who had returned home from the West. The waltz, quickstep, and tango were the most popular dances at that time used with Western composed repertoire, as Thai composers had not yet begun to compose music for ballroom dance. It is likely that the foxtrot, an American dance that enjoyed immense international popularity from the late 1910s through the 1940s, was also danced by the pioneers of ballroom dance in Thailand. By the late 1930s, an interrelationship developed between Thai film music and ballroom dance. Modern Thai songs originally written for films began to be played at bars and hotels by Thai jazz combos, both for dancing and listening. Many of the songs were also influenced by ballroom dance, in that they featured ballroom dance rhythms. By the late 1930s, the melodic style characterized by Thai film songs and *lakhon rawng* had merged with the rhythms of ballroom dance resulting in the newly established style of *phleng Thai sakon*, which was to remain the nation’s most popular music for decades to come.

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207 Phoonpit Amatayakun (พุนพืช อมยลภัท) *Ballroom Dance in Thailand,* March 2006. Interview by Terry E. Miller, March, 2006, Salaya Campus, Mahidol University, Phutthamonthon District, Nakhon Pathom Province, Thailand.
208 Terry E. Miller, personal communication.
In brief, although early Thai popular music drew heavily on the rhythms of ballroom dance, which became common among Thai elites in the reign of Prajadhipok in the 1930s, it also derived from the melodic style of the *lakhon rawng* singing drama that had been created two decades earlier. With the advent of Thai sound films in the early 1930s, the music of *lakhon rawng* was utilized and further developed in Thai films. As of 1932 and the abolition of the absolute monarchy, films and recordings allowed film songs to be heard in urban areas in some parts of the country other than Bangkok, making such songs the first form of *phleng Thai sakon*, or Thai modern music, to achieve widespread national popularity. When ballroom dance became popular, the bands began to adopt and adapt specific ballroom dance rhythms. All of those elements combined to form the fundamental style of *phleng Thai sakon* that served as the formative influence on most subsequent Thai popular music. Although the term *phleng Thai sakon* was coined in 1933 to refer to modern Thai music that combined indigenous and Western elements, today the term *phleng Thai sakon* is no longer widely used as numerous more specific terms are commonly employed to identify discrete popular genres (such as *luk thung* or *string*), and because the English word “pop” or *phleng pop* (พอลป์) has been appropriated to refer to current Thai pop music. When the term *phleng Thai sakon* is used, it most frequently indicates the music of Thailand’s “golden age” of popular music, especially as exemplified by the Suntharaphon Band.

**Thai Popular Music**

Suntharaphon Band: Thai Ballroom Dance Music

Although modern Thai music originated in the 1850s with the adoption of Western music at the court of Siam, and developed in the twentieth century into *lakhon*
rawng or “singing drama” and film music, it did not become a genre of mainstream popular music until the early 1940s when popular culture began to expand in Thailand. Prior to the 1940s, modern music was primarily used in lakhon rawng and films. When ballroom dance first became popular among Thai elites in the 1930s, ballroom dance musicians used Western repertoire.

In the early 1940s, phleng Thai sakon developed into the first mainstream popular music genre in Bangkok. The public increasingly began to request phleng Thai sakon play on the Saladaeng Radio Station, which had been established in the early 1930s and which was still the only radio station in Bangkok. At first, the only popular music broadcast on this radio station was Western ballroom dance songs. After massive continual exposure to this Western music on the radio, Bangkok inhabitants began to complain and asked to hear Thai songs. The solution was, first of all, to look for some oldish modern Thai songs composed for films to broadcast. Second, the station management began to hire Thai songwriters to compose more songs specifically for radio broadcast. Through the radio medium, phleng Thai sakon became the first mainstream popular music in Thailand.

When the songs were written, a musical band was needed to play the songs. In 1939, the Thai government founded the Department of Public Relations (กรมPropertyDescriptor)(krom khosanakan). Wilat Osathanon (วิลาร์ โอสถานนท์), the first Director of this agency, established the first “modern” music band under the department’s auspices. The band was called the Wong Dontri Krom Khosanakan (วงดนตรีกรมPropertyDescriptor)(krom khosanakan), “The Department of Public Relations Band;” and its main duty was to produce music for radio broadcast in Bangkok. The composer and musician Bun-Uea
Sunthonsanan (บุญเอื้อ สุนทรสาสน), 1910-1981, the band’s first Director, became the main figure in Thai popular music at that time. He became even better known through his own band, the Suntharaphon Band, which he founded independent of the Department of Public Relations in the same year. By 1943, after the band had functioned for several years, it was very well known throughout Thailand. The Suntharaphon Band, considered one of the earliest Thai popular bands, had instrumentation similar to Western big bands, comprised primarily of brass and woodwinds with a rhythm section of piano, double bass, and drum set. Similar to dance orchestras of the time in the United States and Europe, a violin, played by Bun-Uea himself, was added to the band. This instrument served to give the band’s ballads a romantic sound and contributed to its unique style.

Bun-Uea Sunthonsanan, who became known among Thai people later in his life as Khru Uea Sunthonsanan (คุรุเอื้อ สุนทรสาสน), khru (คุรุ) literally “teacher” or “master,” was also a prolific songwriter. He wrote about fifteen hundred compositions
for his band. Most compositions for the Suntharaphon Band written during the late 1930s and 1940s were relatively short, around three to four minutes in length; and, aside from the Thai vocals, all sound similar to other dance music of the same period on records and in films made in the United States and Europe. The music was characterized by a “swing feel” within relatively simple chord progressions; and the band’s instruments were organized into sections, including saxophones and trumpets. The melodic instruments included violin, clarinet, piano, and sometimes, also, electric organ, supported by the drum kit and the double bass as main rhythm providers. Similar to Thai popular songs of today, most of the music the Suntharaphon Band was comprised of songs featuring male or female vocalists with the vocal line and lyrics considered more important than the instrumental portion. Miller points out that one thing about the the Suntharaphon Band that native Thai audiences never did perceive was how out of tune they performed. As a Westerner, however, Miller, who first experienced the band in 1972, mentioned that the out-of-tune sound of the band did not please him.\textsuperscript{209} In fact, that defect is still quite common in all Thai pop music, although it has improved somewhat today.

In the early 1940s, the Royal Thai Army established a jazz big band called the Duriyayothin Band, Wong Duriyayothin (วังคดุเรียyoทิน) or Army Band, which became well known for its performances, particularly those accompanying ballroom dance. Such performances were most often presented for gatherings of army officers and their wives although the band also occasionally performed for the general public. The Duriyayothin Band was one of the first Thai bands founded for the express purpose of accompanying ballroom dance, unlike the Suntharaphon Band of the Department of Public Relations, which had originally been formed to record music for radio broadcasts. The latter band,

\textsuperscript{209} Terry E. Miller, Personal communication.
however, became more famous, not only because their music was widely disseminated via radio broadcasts and commercial recordings but also because most modern Thai songs of that period were written and produced by the band’s Director, Khru Uea Sunthonsanan.

The Suntharaphon Band was the first Thai band to achieve wide popularity throughout the nation. Over the course of its existence, it recorded hundreds of original phleng Thai sakon, which combined influences from Western music, lakhon rawng, film music, and ballroom dance music. Among all of these influences, ballroom dance has had the most significant and lasting influence on Thai popular music, in which ballroom rhythms, particularly that of the cha-cha-cha, still be heard. Most of the Suntharaphon Band’s songs were composed using ballroom dance rhythms as Thai popular music developed during the period when ballroom dance enjoyed its greatest worldwide popularity.

Ballroom dance was seriously promoted by the Thai government, especially during the first Phibun Songkhram regime, 1938-1944. Under the regime’s nationalism campaign, which it promoted in tandem with its cultural mandate of building the nation based on the Western model, ballroom dance was presented to the public as one of the activities that characterized “Siwila” (ศิวิไล), a Thai-ification of “civilized” which expressed the desire to “progress” on the model of the West.” In order to be considered a good government worker, either male or female, one had to possess skill in Western-style social dance. The government so wished to promote ballroom dance that it even allowed officials to leave their jobs early so that they could spend time practicing

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ballroom dance at a number of government provided dance clubs, at which the government also provided dance teachers without any required lesson fee. The acquisition of skill in ballroom dance eventually came to be viewed as a kind of required social accomplishment among members of the Thai upper and middle classes. This situation propelled *phleng Thai sakon*, the newly created genre of Thai modern music, to become the most popular genre in the country along with the modernized folk dance/song genre *phleng ramwong* (discussed below).

For the Thai people of today, the Suntharaphon Band conjures an image of Thai ballroom dance music, as well as the early style of Thai popular music. Although ballroom dance is no longer as popular as it once was, enthusiasts throughout Thailand, particularly those of the older generation, including members of the Thai diaspora in the United States, continue to meet and dance regularly at dance clubs and studios. However, ballroom dance also still exists among some native Thais who are interested in the dance. In addition, Thailand is officially part of the International Dancesport Association which has a big headquarters near Silom, Bangkok. They participate in international competitions, which sometimes are held in the United States. As a part of their educational curriculum, the young generation also has a chance to study ballroom dance in many secondary schools and colleges. Suntharaphon music certainly is still popular in revived form on the CD format available at regular record stores. Certainly, the songs can be heard among the ballroom dance groups as well.

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211 In fact, it may be more common to see Thai ballroom dance activity in the United States rather than in Thailand. Most Thai immigrants in New York City, for example, are of the generation who grew up during the time of ballroom dance and the Suntharaphon Band. Whenever they organize a party in their community, ballroom dance and the Suntharaphon songs serve as the main entertainment activity.

212 Terry Miller, Personal communication.
**Phleng Ramwong**: A Genre of Thai Folk Dance Song

*Phleng ramwong* (พหลสงคราม) or “circle dance song” was another significant influence in the development of Thai popular music. *Phleng ramwong* can best be understood not only as a musical genre but also as a dance activity. The term *ramwong* (รำวง) means “circle dance;” that is, *ram* (รำ) “dance” and *wong* (วง) “circle.” In contrast with Western ballroom dance, *ramwong* is an indigenous Thai folk dance, which in the 1940s began alongside ballroom dance to be promoted by the Thai government. While ballroom dance was most common among members of the Thai high society, *ramwong* achieved mass popularity among common Thai people who lived in rural as well as urban areas. Of greatest significance for the history of Thai popular music, ballroom dance music was utilized to shape the original form of Thai popular music: a classy, urban style that later came to be called *luk krung* while *ramwong* music became the basis for the country style of Thai popular music that eventually became known as *luk thung*.

*Ramwong* was originally called *ramthon* (รามโทน) or “dancing with the *thon*” in its original form as a traditional folk dance. The *thon* (โทน) is a single-headed goblet-shaped hand drum with a hardwood or clay body. It is used as a traditional instrument in Thailand as well as in Laos and Cambodia. Besides its use in *ramthon* in Thailand, this drum is also featured in a variety of other traditional genres in all three countries.

During the first Phibun government, 1938-1944, as part of a national cultural mandate, *ramthon* was modified to become a Thai national dance, which is called *ramwong*. Along with the regime’s nationalism campaign, a main focus of the government was to build a modern Thai nation and push the idea of a supra-ethnic “Thai”
political identity to encompass all ethnic groups in the nation but based on Central Thai and Western norms. Under this new concept of identity, members of all ethnic groups in Thailand were referred to as *Chao Thai* (ช่างไทย), literally “Thai people,” rather than as “Northern Thai,” “Northeast Thai,” or any other regional designation and ethnic group. In practice, this cultural mandate was enacted through state edicts. One such edict referred concretely to this specific policy, reading: “We must remember there are many new Thai. Now [that] we have Thailand, we can mix the true Thai together with the new Thai to work together in friendship for the united nation.”

In addition, in the early 1940s, Thailand as well as almost all other countries around the world suffered from the Second World War; and trying to get the people’s minds off the war was another reason for the Thai government’s promotion of the circle dance.

In line with this policy, the government promoted the national flag adopted in 1917. They adopted a national anthem (1939), and simplified and standardized the national language, alphabet, and writing system. People in other regions of the country were required to speak in Bangkok dialect rather than their local dialects or foreign languages in formal or official communications. In addition, a standardized manner of greeting, *sawatdi* (สวัสดี), was established.

All of the aforementioned standardizing aspects of culture have become ingrained elements in today’s modern Thailand.

The traditional version of *ramthon* is a communal activity consisting of folk dance accompanied by singing and percussion which was common in Central, North, and

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215 Traditionally each of the nation’s four regions had its own distinctive mode of greeting.
Northeast Thailand. In performance, male and female dancers danced together as partners. Each partner, without touching the other, danced around a circular area in a counterclockwise manner, while gesturing with the hands in a graceful manner.

Traditionally, communities organized this kind of dance activity on an occasional basis, at events such as festivals and celebrations, with the dance usually taking place in the open air, most often in a temple yard. The choreography and musical accompaniment differed slightly from one community to another.

The elevation of this folk dance to a Thai national dance was probably impelled by the fact that Western ballroom dance, a foreign social dance, had already become popular among elites and government officials in Bangkok in the 1940s; but no indigenous form of social dance enjoyed a similar popularity; and no one dance of any sort united the nation as a whole. Although the Phibun government believed that ballroom dance, of Western origin, was representative of the “civilized” and “universal” ideals they favored, ramwong, as an indigenous form of Thai folk dance, and thus less “civilized” than ballroom dance, might be useful and suitable if adopted throughout the nation, particularly in rural areas where ballroom dance might not readily take hold. Through governmental promotion, ramwong became popular throughout the country. As Valentin Chu wrote in 1968, “Dancing in Thailand is just as much a part of everyday life as music. The national folk dance, called the ramwong, can be seen at country festivals, where all the villagers join in.”

216 Waeng Phlangwan (แวง พลางวรรณ), Luk thung Isan: Isan History and the Legend of Popular Songs, (ลูกทุ่งอีสาน: ประวัติศาสตร์ตำนานเพลงลูกทุ่ง) (Bangkok: สำนักเรียนบิณฑารูญ, 2545/2002), 111.

217 It is important to note that ballroom dance allowed men and women to touch, which was normally taboo in Thai traditional culture. Most ballroom dance choreography was not acceptable to the majority of common Thai people who were still conservative. Thais did create a few ballroom dances that involved no touching, such as talung.

The promotion of *ramwong* began when the Fine Arts Department began to standardize the dance movements, song texts, and melodies of that dance form in 1944. As a part of the campaign, they released two albums on 78-rpm discs of the standardized dance songs. The first album was called *Phleng Ramwong Matrathan* (เพลงร่างมาตราฐาน) or “Standardized Ramwong Songs.” It is likely that the popularity of that recording brought about the replacement of the older term, *ramthon*, with the newer one, *ramwong*, at that time. The album included ten songs, of which the first four were composed at the Fine Arts Department, while the other six were credited to First Lady, Khunying La-iat (คุณหญิงละอียัด), Prime Minister Phibun Songkram’s wife. Waeng Phlangwan, a journalist from Isan, asserts that the first lady did not really compose the songs herself but borrowed them from a village in Phetchabun Province, Northern Thailand, bordering Isan. The second album consists entirely of old folk songs whose composers are unknown, in a style called *phleng ramwong phuen-mueang* (เพลงร่างวงพื้นเมือง) or “folk circle dance songs,” songs derived from the original folk dance. Lyrics and Western staff notation for all twenty songs may be found in a 1971 publication of the Fine Arts Department.

On the recordings, the Fine Arts Department also used different musical ensembles to accompany the songs rather than using only the *thon* (โทน), pairs of cymbals *ching* (ชิง) and *chap* (ฆาม), and clappers *krap* (กระทบ), which provided the original accompaniment. Two ensembles were used: a Thai classical *piphat mai nuam* (ปี
Paay (ไม่ถนน) ensemble, and a Western style ensemble which featured strings, brass, clarinet, and the aforementioned Thai percussion instruments. The former ensemble was referred to as *wong dontri Thai* (วงดนตรีไทย), “Thai music ensemble,” while the latter was called *wong dontri sakon* (วงดนตรีสากล), “universal music ensemble,” but with the actual meaning of “Western [-style] music ensemble.” Although neither type of ensemble was actually traditional to the original genre, the original percussion instruments were retained to accompany the songs in order to maintain somewhat of an authentic flavor.

*Ramwong* was the first and most important early popular musical activity to take hold among the common people of Thailand. Miller recalled seeing *ramwong* troupes at

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222 The *piphat mai nuam* is a version of the *piphat* ensemble in which the xylophones and gong circles use softer mallets and a *khlui* (กลี) to substitute the *pi* (ปี).
temples and Red Cross fairs where people paid money to dance a number with a troupe girl in 1972 or 1973.\textsuperscript{223}

![Image of a band performing Ramwong](image)

Figure 7. “Western Ensemble” of the Fine Arts Department created to accompany Ramwong or “Circle Dance” in 1944

There is no evidence to indicate to what extent early ramwong became common in Bangkok prior to the first Phibun government, 1938-1944. This folk dance, however, seems to have already become common in the capital city before the Fine Arts Department released their recordings in 1944, as it was a popular form of entertainment during the Second World War.\textsuperscript{224} The production of the ramwong songs arranged by the Fine Arts Department was part of a trend toward purposely increasing the popularity of ramwong, as a number of ramwong groups were already well established in Bangkok by the mid-1940s. The Bangkok ramwong groups regularly performed around the city and in other nearby cities such as Thonburi and Ayuthaya.

Most Bangkok-based ramwong troupes in the early to mid-1940s still presented their performances in the old village style, which usually utilized only the thon along

\textsuperscript{223}Terry E. Miller, Personal communication.
\textsuperscript{224}The Fine Arts Department, Ramwong (Folk-Dance) Songs (ฝูงวง) (Bangkok: Fine Arts Department, 1971), 9.
with ching, chap, and krap as instrumental accompaniment for the vocalists who sang for the dances. Some newer troupes, such as the Samyan Ramwong Troupe (ศันษาส่วยแรมว่อง ทาน), Khana Ramwong Samyan, substituted a frame drum called a ramana (ร้านมนา) for the thon, since the ramana is small and inexpensive.225

Figure 8. LP record cover of the Samyan Ramwong Troupe

In the 1940s, ramwong playing was not considered a professional musical activity. Rather, it was an amateur cultural activity practiced mainly by youths, since in Thai culture such entertainments were considered inappropriate for older, married

225Waeng Phlangwan (วงศ์ พลั่งวรรณ), Luk thung Isan: Isan History and the Legend of Popular Songs, (อุกทุงอีสาน: ประวัติศาสตร์คำนำเพลงลูกทุง) (Bangkok: สานักเรียนปัญญา, 2545/2002), 133.
people. Many young men, commoners of the younger generation from age fifteen to twenty-five, would get together in their free time to organize their own *ramwong* troupes. *Ramwong*’s increasing popularity led to a profusion of *ramwong* troupes in Bangkok during the 1940s. They often competed formally with one another, with those that won competitions gaining a heightened reputation and garnering more invitations to give performances.

Unlike traditional *ramwong* music, which was more of a communal musical activity, the *ramwong* as it developed in Bangkok during the 1940s became a commercial endeavor similar to other forms of public entertainment such as *likay* or *lakhon*. It became a form of entertainment that could be “sold” to young men. As it existed in Bangkok, this commercialized form of *ramwong* was performed by troupes comprised of two sections: a group of female dancers called *nang ram* (นางร่า) or “young lady dancers” and the musical performers, both vocalists and percussionists, called *kawng chia* (กองเชียร์), a “cheering section.”

For the reason that typically, in the commercialized form of *ramwong*, only male fans would buy tickets to dance, the more beautiful and skillful the dancers were, the more tickets a troupe could sell. It became *de rigueur* for dancers to dress formally, often in Western style hoop skirts called *kraprong sumkai* (กระโปรงสุ่มไก่), considered quite

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226 Adulthood traditionally was not an appropriate time for expending effort in musical performance as music was not considered a profession as it is today. Participating in musical activity was considered a waste of time among family people who were concerned about the family economy.

227 In many cases, the vocalists in a *ramwong* troupe also played percussion instruments both while singing and during breaks between songs.

228 *Kawng* (คณะ) means “band” or “troop,” while *chia* (เชียร์) or “cheer,” is a loan word from English.

229 Prior to the mid 1970s, Thai society was conservative in regard to dating; and it was not considered proper for women or girls (except those in a troupe) to dance at commercial *ramwong* performances. Participation in this form of entertainment was, however, considered acceptable for young men.
fashionable at that time. The dance movements were usually based on traditional styles, some of which were those that had been standardized by the Fine Arts Department.

The *kawng chia*, those who provided the music for the dance, were mostly male. While singing, some of them would also play hand drums, cymbals, and clappers as accompaniment. Some *ramwong* troupes played their own compositions as well as those from the Fine Arts Department. The Samyan Troupe’s repertoire, for example, included forty to fifty original songs composed by its members.\(^{230}\) The more cheerful the music a troupe provided, the more fans would buy tickets to dance with its young women.\(^{231}\)

This modernized form of *ramwong* became a part of common entertainment at temple fairs, the most important and popular type of festival before the advent of such modern diversions as the cinema and shopping malls. During the 1940s, when *ramwong* was at the height of its popularity, if a temple fair in Thailand had no *ramwong* performance, that temple fair was considered disappointing. At performances the sponsor, typically a member of a temple board or a community leader, sold the tickets; and he gave a portion of the proceeds to the troupe. In the mid-1940s, when he hired a *ramwong* troupe, the sponsor paid three to four hundred *baht* for the *kawng chia* plus another fifty *baht* per *nang ram*.\(^{232}\) Because it was desirable to employ many *nang ram*, as the more *nang ram* a troupe had, the more tickets it could sell per dance, a greater number of dancers raised promotion costs.


\(^{231}\) Today *ramwong* songs are still occasionally heard. Phleng Loy Kratong (เพลงลอยกระทง) is one of the *ramwong* songs that most people in Thailand can sing today.

At ramwong performances in the 1940s, a single ticket typically cost about one baht.\footnote{In 2009 one baht was the equivalent of three cents U.S.; but in the 1940s it was enough to purchase a full meal and thus not a negligible amount of money for common people.} For this price, the buyer could dance one rawp (รำพ) or round, which usually lasted two to three minutes and involved going around the circle a few times. To dance again, one had to purchase another ticket. The length of each dance was not standardized but was dictated by the kawng chia. If a long line of prospective dancers appeared, each dance might be made a little bit shorter. The ending of a rawp, called mot rawp (หมวด รำพ), might be indicated when the kawng chia finished playing a song; but in many cases the music continued without stop for many dances in a row; and, in the latter case, the mot rawp was signaled by the sound of a whistle.

In summary, ramwong was the most popular musical activity among common people in Thailand during the 1940s. It thus became the first genre of popular music
among common Thai people as opposed to earlier popular genres that appealed mostly to elite, urban audiences. Because of the Phibun government’s promotion of *ramwong*, it achieved popularity not only in Bangkok but also throughout the country. It was unlike later other genres driven primarily by the commercial music industry, mass media, and consumer demand.

City and Country Genres: *Luk Krung* and *Luk Thung*

*Phleng Thai sakon* was a hybrid of Western and Thai music that developed within the urban high society of Bangkok, and of which early subgenres comprised *lakhon rawng* music, film songs, and ballroom dance music. Prior to the mid 1960s, *phleng Thai sakon*, a term coined in 1933, was the first term to denote Thai popular music with reference to both city and country styles. The primary difference between the two styles lies in the song texts. Without considering the lyrics, it can be difficult to distinguish between them. The lyrics of the city style deal with the experiences and lifestyle of city dwellers within an elite society. Conversely, the lyrics of the country style speak of the lives of farmers and ordinary rural people. While some city songs have texts dealing with rural life, they are, unlike country song texts, composed in formal, elegant language. While city style became the popular genre of choice for most urban Thai people, country style, its country-flavored counterpart, was eventually embraced by common people throughout Thailand. This was largely due to the fact that common people, in both rural and urban areas, could more easily identify with the themes of the country songs, which usually dealt with everyday life, as well as the genre’s lyrics, which were more direct and less rarefied and artificial than those of the city style.

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234The term *phleng*, literally “song,” is often omitted when referring to Thai music genres. Thus, the terms *luk krung* and *luk thung* are commonly used in place of *phleng luk krung* and *phleng luk thung.*
The city style of Thai popular music seems to have developed first under the influence of Westernization and modernization in the urban environment of Bangkok rather than in the rural areas of Thailand. However, the country style, in fact, was created nearly as early as its city style counterpart. By the late 1930s or early 1940s the two genres already existed side by side. One good example is the song “O Sao Chao Rai” (โอ สาวชาวไร), “Oh, the Farmer’s Daughter,” which was written by Khru Hem Wechakon (ครูเหม เวขาวร) for a radio drama called Sao Chao Rai (สาวชาวไร), “The Farmer’s Daughter,” and sung by the male singer Kamron Sompunnanon (คารณ สมบุขนานนท) in 1938. It is considered one of the earliest Thai country songs due to the fact that the text alludes to the way of life of people in an agricultural environment in the country.235

While whatever styles of Thai popular music created with urban Bangkok themes easily fall into the category of the city style, e.g., ballroom dance music of the Suntharaphon Jazz Band, the most significant influence on the development of the country style came from phleng ramwong, the music for the circle dance that achieved immense popularity throughout Thailand in the 1940s. From the 1940s onward, many of those songs, with the help of radio and commercial recordings, became popular outside the context of the circle dance and launched the Thai country music industry. Phleng ramwong itself was already considered “country music” due to its musical characteristics and origin as a folk dance from rural areas. By the mid-1940s, many singers and composers who had formerly performed with ramwong troupes and who came from rural areas of Thailand began writing and recording ramwong songs. By the late 1940s,

235Half Century of Thai Luk thung Songs II, (หงส์ศรีวงศ์เพลงลูกทุ่งไทย ภาค ๒), (Bangkok: สำนักงานคณะกรรมการวัฒนธรรมแห่งชาติ, 2534/1991), 34.
ramwong music began to appear on records. Unlike the Fine Arts Department’s recordings, which were sponsored by the government and intended for instructional purposes to promote the dance, these new records featured ramwong songs that had become popular and could be listened to as a form of home entertainment.

By 1947, phleng ramwong, which was increasingly composed for listening rather than for dancing, reached the pinnacle of its popularity in Bangkok and had already developed into another style which people called informally phleng talat (เพลงตลาด) or “market song.” Thai country music was referred to as phleng talat from approximately 1949 and for about the next two decades. The modification from phleng ramwong to phleng talat involved adoption of elements of ballroom dance music and featured the use of a ballroom dance band in the late 1940s. While new ramwong song texts continued to be composed, typical ballroom rhythms such as rumba and cha-cha-cha began to be adopted to accompany such texts. As a result, the new ramwong lyrics, without the rhythmic accompaniment of thon and other traditional Thai percussion instruments, lost their identifiable characteristics as ramwong music, and began to be referred to as phleng talat. This newly recognized genre became the music of choice for most common people in both rural and urban areas throughout Thailand during the 1950s. In contrast, the style of Thai ballroom dance songs exemplified by the music of the Suntharaphon Band was, also around 1949, labeled phleng phudi (เพลงพูดี), literally “elite song,” implying that this genre was most suited to elite urban audiences.

The development of phleng talat from ramwong music entailed changes in three primary aspects, instrumentation, rhythm, and musical context. First, a greater number of instruments, both Western and Thai, accompanied the songs. The most commonly used
Western instruments included saxophone, trumpet, accordion, guitar, double bass, and drum set. Sometimes, a traditional instrument such as the saw u (ช่วน), a two-stringed fiddle with coconut body, ranat ek (ระนาดเอก), xylophone, and/or khlui (ขลัย), vertical flute, was used to give a particular song a flavor representing the country lifestyle, in contrast with the Western instruments, which were seen as representing modernity and urban life. Second, ballroom dance rhythms were adopted to accompany the songs; those of the Latin Caribbean such as such as the rumba and cha-cha, were particularly popular.

During the 1950s, ramwong music both for the dance as well as for listening, which had experienced a decline with the emergence of phleng talat, still retained some of its earlier popularity. However, since ramwong groups had now borrowed the instruments of ballroom dance, often substituting the drum set for traditional percussion instruments, it became increasingly difficult to distinguish between phleng ramwong and phleng talat. The primary difference was that phleng ramwong groups usually retained the traditional ramwong rhythm, called jangwa ramwong (จังหวะรำวงศ์) or “ramwong rhythm,” while most phleng talat bands accompanied their country song texts with ballroom dance rhythms. Most of these rhythms were of Caribbean origin and included the rumba from Cuba, beguine from Guadeloupe and Martinique, and calypso from Trinidad. By the 1950s, the cha-cha-cha (called jangwa sam cha or jangwa cha-cha—

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236 In the Thai sense, most traditional instruments, whether classical or folk instruments, that “sound Thai,” represent local or country themes in comparison to the Western instruments that represent urban themes.
237 Such rhythms are still popular in Thai country music; and one possible reason for their enduring popularity is the fact that such Latin rhythms feature the use of a variety of percussion instruments (including hand drums, cowbells, and claves) similar in sound to percussion instruments in Thai instrumentarium.
238 See phleng ramwong.
239 The term sam cha (literally “three chas”) shorthand for “cha-cha-cha.”
*cha* (จังหวะ ช่า ช่า) in Thai became the most popular. While most *phleng talat* groups used ballroom dance rhythms, they sometimes also used the traditional *jangwa ramwong*, although this rhythm was played on the drum set rather than on traditional percussion instruments. Although by 1947 the *ramwong* dance had lost much of its earlier popularity, *ramwong* dance performances still took place throughout the country; however, most such performances were now accompanied by *phleng talat* bands rather than traditional percussion ensembles. Most often, however, *phleng talat* was considered music for listening on radio, recordings, and in live performance rather than for *ramwong* dance accompaniment, as in the previous context.

Prior to the early 1960s, the two styles of music, *phleng talat* and *phleng phudi* were equally strong but the former had gradually increased in popularity by the mid 1960s. In 1964, the Television Producer, Prakawp Chaiyaphiphat (พระกษา ไชยพัฒน์), and Jamnong Rangsikun (จำานง รางสิกุล), Director of the Channel 4 television station (สถานีโทรทัศน์ไทยทีวี ช่อง 4 บางขุนพรหม), Sathani Thoratat Thai Thiwi Chawng 4 [Si] Bangkumphrom, created a television series devoted to *phleng talat*, because of the genre’s great popularity. Jamnong named the program *Phleng Luk Thung*, “Songs of the Country Child,”240 which emphasized the idea that the program featured country music.

In the same year, the 1964 American music film entitled *Your Cheatin’ Heart* showed in Bangkok. The film covered the life story of the prominent American songwriter and country music singer, Hank Williams. The film’s title was translated into Thai as *Phleng Luk Thung*, presumably to let audiences know that it was about country music.

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music. Due to the popularity of the aforementioned television program and film, the term *phleng luk thung* quickly replaced the older, informal term *phleng talat*; and the term *phleng talat* finally superceded *phleng luk thung* (or simply *luk thung*). It is the defining term for Thai country music still in use today. On the other hand, all songs that had previously been labeled *phleng phudi* were subsequently called *phleng luk krung*, invented as a counterpart to *luk thung*. The two additional terms, *phleng luk krung* and *phleng luk thung*, came into use to differentiate the two main styles that had come to comprise established Thai popular music. *Phleng luk krung* literally means “child of the city” suggesting music for city people while *phleng luk thung* means “child of the country,” suggesting music for country people.

In summary, between 1933 and 1964, all Thai popular music was referred to as *phleng Thai sakon*. However, once the term *luk thung* was coined to refer to the country style that had overtaken the urban style in popularity and had spread out to a broader segment of the Thai population, the term *luk krung* was invented in order to differentiate the urban style from the country style. After the terms *phleng luk krung* and *phleng luk thung* were invented, usage of the term *phleng Thai sakon* had decreased. Today, rather than indicating both the city and country genres, *phleng Thai sakon* collectively refers to *luk krung* because both developed in the city and reflect the lives of city dwellers. The Suntharaphon Band is the ensemble that best represents this urban style that no longer serves as the main stream city style.

New Genres of Bangkok City Style

Since the 1970s, the (city) *luk krung* music has declined steadily. Of course city styles have gradually changed. Most of these changes have been prompted by
international trends, mostly in American music, beginning with ballroom dance music and jazz from the 1920s to the 1940s, and continuing with rock and roll with Elvis Presley in the 1950s and the Beatles in the 1960s. In the 1960s and 1970s, American soldiers stationed in and visiting Thailand brought hard rock, and in the 1980s and 1990s music videos and TV programs allowed hip hop and other more current styles to become popular.  

The newer, Western (American) derived genre that initially appeared before the decline of *luk krung* in the early 1970s, gradually replaced it in urban Bangkok musical taste from the 1970s onward. The new genre is called *phleng string* (เพลงลิงสตริง), derived from the fact that the songs were accompanied by a rock band commonly called a“string combo” (วงสตริงคอมโบ), *wong string kawmo*, in Thai as the electric guitar and electric bass guitar are stringed instruments. One of the early *string* groups is “The Impossibles” (ตี อิมพอสซิเบิ้ล), which Setha Sirichaya (เศษพระ ศิริชาญ), b., 1944, is the lead singer. They mostly covered songs from American jazz rock or rock n’roll groups, e.g., Kool and the Gang, who released their first record in the early 1970s.

In the 1970s another urban Bangkok style, called *phleng phuea chiwit* (เพลงเพื่อชีวิต) or “songs for life” appeared. This genre was a political protest song style, related to the New Folksong Movement in the U.S., e.g., Woody Guthrie, that arose as part of the political activity among college students fighting for democracy in Bangkok. Unlike *phleng string*, a full rock band is not necessary for this genre, and in its earliest version it was performed simply with acoustic guitar accompaniment. The lyrics of *phleng phuea chiwit* generally took the form of social commentary, with the most common themes

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241 It is important to note that as a demand for American pop music before and after the Vietnam War developed, the majority of performers for GIs in Vietnam and perhaps in Thailand were from the Philippines.

242 Terry E. Miller, Personal communication.
speaking for the poor and criticizing the government. This style was popular not only among college students but also among those who supported the students’ aims. Although it achieved great popularity during the 1970s, its popularity began to wane after the political crisis of 1976, although some groups continued to create new music in this style. Such groups include Caravan (คาราวัน), formed in 1975, and Carabao (คาราบาว, formed in 1976, with the latter the more famous phleng phua chiwit band many decades later.

![Image of The Impossibles, Early “String (combo)” group in the 1970s](image)

Figure 10. The Impossibles, Early “String (combo)” group in the 1970s

Unlike the city style, which has undergone numerous changes according to the many social and economic changes and new international trends, the country style, phleng luk thung, has maintained a constant level of popularity among common people in Thailand, until now. Unlike many urban genres of Thai popular music which are essentially imitative of Western styles, luk thung has kept its original function of representing a modern identity for Thailand’s rural majority. Although the country style
has retained its popularity, a few “substyles” have appeared and developed. Among them, a significant “Lao style” country music came about early in the history of Thai country music.

**Lao Style Song**

Within about three decades from the late 1940s to the early 1970s, styles of country genre developed in all four regions, although they were not yet identified as such. They could be distinguished from one another by the use of local dialects in the song texts. As a result, Thai country genres have long been discussed as associated with “Central Thai style,” as the dominant, “regular” or “original style” in relation to other regional styles.

A few *luk thung* songs which described the lives and cultures of Northern and Southern Thai people appeared; however, as they never achieved enough popularity to become major parts of the music industry prior to the 1980s, they were less significant in comparison with the Northeast (Isan) and Central Thai styles. Therefore, besides the original (Central) style, the Northeast style has been most widely recognized in terms of the history of Thai country music.

As the concept of regional style in Thai country music was not recognized early on, the closest style considered the root of today’s Northeast country music was present in the “Lao elements” that were perceptible in the country style. Unlike today when most people in Thailand do not much associate Lao culture and Isan culture, the term “Lao” then referred to Lao culture in general, whether among Lao descendants in Central Thailand, Isan people in the Northeast region, or even Lao in Wiang Chan, the country of Laos. I will use the term “Lao country style,” “Lao style” or “Lao style songs” not as an
actual country genre but simply as a reference to Lao elements interchangeably to
describe the roots of Northeast country music at that time. Prior to the early 1970s, all
Thai country songs that contained Lao cultural elements: words (dialect), subject matter,
melodies, rhythms, and instruments, composed over the entire history of luk thung dating
back to the mid-1940s are considered the roots of Northeast country music. In other
words, phleng ramwong, phleng talat and phleng luk thung, discussed earlier, all more or
less a part of Lao and/or Isan culture, are all considered the roots of Isan music today.

Originally, Lao style country songs, in ramwong, phleng talat and the earlier luk
thung genres that enjoyed popularity, were mostly recorded by Central Thai artists who
portrayed either the native people or the Lao descendents living in that region. Prior to the
early 1970s, it was only a small number of native Isan artists who presented Lao style
songs in the Thai country music industry.

Benjamin’s Phleng Ramwong

Of major importance among the significant early contributors to Thai country
music is one of the most prolific and successful phleng ramwong songwriters and
performers in Bangkok as far back as the 1940s and 1950s, a native Isan musician,
Benjamin (เบนจิมาร์ท), 1921-1994. Beginning in the late 1940s among Thai country
music audiences and as a Bangkok-based Isan singer, songwriter, and actor, he was
known as the “King of Phleng Ramwong” due to his large output of phleng ramwong
songs, many of which became popular throughout Thailand via recordings and radio
broadcasts. Most of his ramwong have lyrics sung in Lao dialect mixed with Central
Thai which focus on various aspects of Lao culture.

243 His pen-name.
Benjamin’s full name is Tumthawng Chokchana (ตูมทอง โชคนะ); and he was born in Ubon Ratchathani Province in 1921. His mother, who had come from Wiang Chan (Vientiane), Laos, was Roman Catholic and served as the lead singer in her church. Weang Phlangwan, a journalist from Isan, surmises that he acquired his love for music and singing from her. He attended high school in Ubon Ratchathani and, upon his graduation in 1939 at the age of nineteen, moved to Bangkok where he found a job as a schoolteacher. He soon began singing with various ramwong bands including the Jaruknok Band (วงดนตรีจากรกนก), Wong Dontri Jaruknok, in which he sang with his singing partner, the female singer, Waranut Ari (วรรณุช อาริย์).244 He began to compose original ramwong songs in 1944 after ramwong was promoted as a national dance during the first Phibun government. Most of his songs were recorded for the Kamon Sukoson

244Waeng Phlangwan (แวง พลังวรรณ), Luk thung Isan: Isan History and the Legend of Popular Songs (ลูกทุ่งอีสาน: ประวัติศาสตร์คำานานเพลงลูกทุ่ง) (Bangkok: สำนักเรียนปัญญา, 2545/2002), 193.
Company, with another forty to fifty songs recorded for the Cathay (กะเทียม), Khathe Company.

As the most significant composer of phleng ramwong, Thailand’s first country genre, Benjamin can be credited as one of the first important songwriters of Thai country music. His work is of further significance in that he was the first native Isan songwriter to popularize Lao style country music, becoming so popular in the process that he was acknowledged as the “king” of Thailand’s earliest country music genre.

Because the melodic and rhythmic styles of regular style and Lao style phleng ramwong and phleng talat were often quite similar, the main distinguishing elements for songs in these genres were the use of Lao subject matter and Lao dialect in the lyrics. Benjamin is especially notable as one of the first Thai country music artists to include Lao words in his song texts. Following his example, both Isan and Central Thai phleng ramwong and phleng talat artists began adding Lao words to their lyrics (which were always sung primarily in standard Thai) as a means of adding a Lao flavor to their songs. The more Lao words that could be found in a song, the more obvious it was that the song was intended to be in Lao style, the root of Northeast country music.

One of the first of Benjamin’s ramwong songs to become successful was “Ram Toei” (ร่าเตีย) recorded in 1945. The song’s lyrics contain a few Lao words, and in fact its title is derived from the Lao-Isan dialect. It derives from lam toei (ลำเตีย) or “courtship singing,” a style of lam that had first appeared earlier in the century. Because Benjamin composed primarily for a Bangkok audience, he changed the Lao-Isan word

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245 In phleng ramwong and phleng talat, the usual amount of Lao dialect that appeared in the lyrics of any given Lao style song usually added up to no more than five to fifteen percent.
lam (ล้ม), meaning "to sing," to the Central Thai word ram (รำ), meaning "dance," in order to make the title more intelligible for the majority of his listeners as well as to tie the song to the ramwong genre. Because ram means “dance” or “dancing,” Benjamin’s title literally means “courtship dancing.” The song’s text contains a few Lao words scattered throughout its standard Thai lyrics: yamlaeng (ยามแหล่ง), “dusk,” yak hu (อีPhoneNumber ซึ่ง) “want to know,” yu sai (ยูไซ), “where,” as in “where are you from?” or “where do you live?,” phu dai (พูได้), “who” as in “who is it?,” baw (บัว), “no” or “none,” and ai (อา), literally “older brother,” used as the first person pronoun “I.” Many of these Lao words, as well as other similar terms, became quite common in Lao style country song texts of same period, and continue to be so today.

Suraphon Sombatjaroen’s Lao Style Songs

In traditional phleng ramwong as well in as the modernized version promoted by the Fine Arts Department, the defining characteristic is a specific rhythmic pattern, played by the thon and other percussion instruments. All ramwong songs originally used this rhythm, although the lyrics or tempo of a given song might vary. In traditional phleng ramwong this pattern is called jangwa thon (เจงทางโทน) or “thon rhythmic pattern,” named for the goblet drum, the primary instrument in the percussion ensemble that accompanies ramwong singing. This rhythmic pattern became known as jangwa ramwong or “ramwong rhythmic pattern” following the standardization of ramthon into ramwong by the Fine Arts Department.

The jangwa ramwong is a four beat rhythmic pattern similar in some ways to many Latin ballroom dance rhythms, especially the cha-cha-cha, which is closest in terms
of tempo. The *jangwa ramwong* comprises two distinct drum strokes, which are called by the mnemonic syllables *pa* (ฝ่า) and *thon* (ธน). *Pa* is a short, stopped sound produced by slapping the center of the drum head and keeping the hand on the drum head so that it does not ring. *Thon* is a deep-sounding stroke, produced by striking the drum head with the full length of the fingers and letting it ring. It is this stroke that gives the instrument its onomatopoeic name. The *ramwong* rhythm is made up of these two strokes, arranged in the manner "pa-thon-pa-thon-pa-thon-THON," in a duple meter of four beats, with the last *thon* being twice as long as the other syllables.

Originally, if this rhythmic pattern was used to accompany a song, that indicated to listeners and dancers that it was *ramwong* music. At the same time, if another rhythmic pattern was substituted for the *jangwa ramwong*, the song was no longer considered *phleng ramwong*. As in ballroom dance, the rhythmic pattern for a given song in Thai country music determines the musical style of that song. Thus, when ballroom dance rhythms were adopted by *phleng ramwong* composers, the music lost its essential characteristic as *ramwong*, necessitating a new name, *phleng talat*, for this transformed

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247 Thai musicians of this era found that the aforementioned Caribbean dance rhythms are similar to traditional Thai rhythms in the fact that both types are in duple meter, as well as because both traditions utilize hand drums played with similar techniques, including open, damped, and slapped strokes. In addition, the metal and wooden instruments used in Caribbean music, including cowbells and claves, also are similar in timbre to those used in Thai music (*ching* and *chap* cymbals and *krap* clappers).
style which would eventually be called *luk thung*. *Ramwong* became a subcategory of *phleng talat* alongside all the other new rhythmic patterns borrowed from ballroom dance music; thus, at a *phleng talat* performance, one could hear songs in *jangwa sam cha* (จังหวะสามช้า), *jangwa beguine* (จังหวะเบกีน), *jangwa rumba* (จังหวะรุมบ้า), and *jangwa ramwong*, among others. Most early *phleng talat* singers began their careers as amateur *ramwong* singers as did Suraphon Sombatjaroen (สุรพล สมบัติเจริญ), 1930-1968. 248

Largely due to the increasing influence of radio broadcasts and recordings, Thai country music, known then as *phleng talat*, quickly grew in popularity between the late 1940s and early 1950s. By 1953 the singer Suraphon Sombatjaroen had become the star of Thai country music with his first album, *Namta Lao Wiang* (น้ำตาลาวัง), “Tears of the Lao of Wiang Chan,” which became a hit. His music became so popular and influential throughout Thailand that in the late 1960s people started calling him the “King of *Luk Thung.*” The title song from his career launching first album was composed in a style reminiscent of Lao style song and included many Lao words in the lyrics. Even the song’s title, which refers to the Lao Wiang, the Lao people from the Lao capital of Wiang Chan, suggests Lao culture, and therefore this song can be considered part of the wider trend of an increasing acceptance and popularity in Thailand of country songs composed in “Northeast style.” 249

Nearly half of Suraphon Sombatjaroen’s more than one hundred recorded songs show the clear influence of Lao culture either in their lyrics or musical style. 250 It is notable, however, that, unlike Benjamin, the “King of *Ramwong*,” Suraphon was neither

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248 His real name is Lamduan Sombatjaroen (ลำดวน สมบัติเจริญ).
249 In Central Thailand until the adoption of the term “Isan” in 1973 (not widely accepted until the mid-1980s), the term “Lao” was commonly used to refer to the culture and people of the Isan region.
250 Other songs, which did not reflect Lao or Lao-Isan cultures, mostly reflected Central Thai culture.
a native of Isan nor a Lao descendant but was instead from Suphanburi Province in Central Thailand.\textsuperscript{251} Based on the fact that such a large number of his songs are composed in Lao-style, Waeng Phlangwan assumes that Suraphon may have hired a native Isan songwriter to write those songs for him.\textsuperscript{252} Suraphon’s familiarity with Lao style music, however, is not so surprising in light of the fact that he closely followed, and even imitated, the music of Benjamin, whose music enjoyed wide popularity for nearly a decade before Suraphon’s rise to fame. The “King of Luk Thung,” unfortunately, died at the young age of 38 when he was murdered following a performance in Nakhon Pathom Province in 1968.

Phloen Phromdaen and his (Lao) “Spoken Song”

During the 1950s and 1960s, in the early days when the term luk thung began to replace the previous term phleng talat in Thai country music, most singers were male, and the vast majority were of Central Thai background. During that time, Lao-style luk thung songs became increasingly popular, most recorded by singers who were not native Isan speakers. One of the most common themes in the lyrics of such songs is love between Central Thai men and Lao women, either Lao women in general or Lao-Isan of the Northeast region. Lao-style luk thung songs often depicted the simple life in the Northeast countryside, and often focus on negative aspects such as the poverty and hardship of the people of that region, while at the same time presenting city life in Bangkok as a kind of paradise where one could live in a happier manner and enjoy a great life in a more civilized environment. Noticeably, unlike earlier, by the 1960s in

\textsuperscript{251} Although there are large numbers of Lao descendants in the province, he is not one of them.
\textsuperscript{252} Waeng Phlangwan (แวง พลังวาน), Luk thung Isan: Isan History and the Legend of Popular Songs (อุกทุงอีสาน: ประวัติศาสตร์คำานเพลงอักขระ) (Bangkok: สานักเรียนปัญญา, 2545/2002), 163.
Thailand, the term Lao referred more to Isan people and their culture rather than to Lao in general. From this point on, the term “Isan style song/music” or “Isan style country music” will be used interchangeably with “Lao style song/music.”

The negative images typically projected in such songs served to reinforce stereotypes of rural Thai life held by urban dwellers. In addition, the popularity of such songs led rural people throughout Thailand, the majority of the nation’s population, over the course of those two decades, to view themselves as second-class, out of date, and poorly educated. From their understanding of those song texts, they increasingly began to see their own way of life as substandard and deficient in contrast to modern life in Bangkok where people did not have to toil in the hot sun on the farm and could enjoy luxuries like beautiful clothes and fancy cars. The promulgation and resulting internalization of such stereotypes led to an increasing tendency on the part of rural Thais to regard Bangkok natives as superior in terms of culture, economics, and power. This trend led rural people across Thailand and from the Northeast region, historically the nation’s poorest region, in particular to try to escape their rural way of life by going to Bangkok to seek employment.

In the 1960s, luk thung songwriters began to take note of the rural workers who had immigrated to Bangkok, the majority from Isan, and wrote many songs that poked fun at their awkwardness in their new urban environment. This theme would persist in luk thung music into the 1960s and even the early 1980s, in songs recorded by both Isan and non-Isan singers. The first such songs that described the difficulties and culture shock encountered by Isan men who did not fully understand the way of life in their new urban environment portrayed them as ignorant, unrefined, and out-of-date based on the
typical Bangkok native’s point of view. Although those songs were comparatively gentle in their humorous depiction of Isan migrants, in real life, as discussed in Chapter 3, Isan men in Bangkok during that period were frequently subjected to insults and ridicule by native Bangkok people. Although most of the early Isan migrants to Bangkok were male, by the 1970s an increasing number of women also began to migrate to Bangkok looking for jobs. Songs poking fun at Isan people eventually focused on both genders, although lyrics about Isan men remained more common.

Many of the best known humorous *luk thung* songs of the 1960s and 1970s were composed in a style called *phleng phut* (พหลภูท) or “spoken song.” *Phleng phut* refers to country-style songs which contain brief sections of humorous, unaccompanied dialogue interpolated at several points in the song. Such dialogues usually take the form of conversation between two (or rarely, three or more) characters in the song. In this kind of song, the “funny man” role was very often played by an Isan character speaking in Isan dialect, while the “straight man” role was most often taken by a Central Thai performer. The sung portions were usually performed by the “straight man,” in either Central Thai or Isan musical style, but usually sung in standard Thai dialect although sometimes with some Isan words included. In such songs, the use of the Lao language was generally received by listeners as funny. That was due to the aforementioned ingrained associations of the Isan accent with backwardness and ignorance. Much like the Southern accent is often associated in the United States with those traits, the colloquial speech of Isan characters in such humorous songs led to those stereotypes being unconsciously extended to Isan culture as a whole; and the comic portrayals enjoyed wide popularity among both Central Thai and Isan audiences.
The *luk thung* singer who earned the title the “King of Phleng Phut” (ราชาเพลงพู), Ratcha Phleng Phut, from his fans is Phloen Phromdaen (พลีน พระดาเน), b. 1939. Although born in Prachinburi Province, central Thailand, located to the east of Bangkok and bordering Khorat Province, he was a Lao descendant. He understood Isan culture well and used the Isan dialect in many of his songs. Although he also recorded regular *luk thung* songs without spoken sections, in his spoken songs with Isan themes he usually had an Isan native perform the Isan role in the spoken dialogue sections while he played the “straight man” and spoke in standard Thai. Certainly this song style is considered a root of Northeast country music.

**Isan-Style Pop Songs: the Influence of Westernization and Modernization**

Westernization and modernization are two of the most important factors to have influenced the creation and development of Thai country music. While Westernization exerted its influence on the genre in the form of new instrumentation, musical practices, and modes of performance, modernization through the media in the forms of recordings and radio broadcasts of *luk thung* music disseminated the new music throughout Thailand.

Westernization had a significant effect on the listening public. The increasing prevalence of *luk thung* led many members of the younger generation, especially those under the age of 25, increasingly to ignore their own traditional musics, which they came to regard as old fashioned; and they chose to listen to and participate in musical activities they considered “modern.” This process began among youths in Bangkok with the popularity of *ramwong* after the Second World War and spread to Northeast Thailand as

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253 His real name is Somsuan Phromsawawng (สมสาน พรหมสว่าง).
*phleng talat* made inroads into urban areas of the Isan region. Recordings of such music had been introduced to the three largest cities, Khon Kaen, Ubon Ratchathai, and Nakhon Ratchasima (Khorat) by the late 1940s; and, by the mid-1950s, it had achieved some popularity among those affluent enough to purchase phonograph record players. As *phleng talat* caught on in the rural regions of Isan in the early 1960s after the first radio stations were established there, some young listeners began to dream of moving to Bangkok to become country stars as most of their favorite singers had done. This trend served to steadily increase the influence of Westernization, which before the 1950s had been nearly nil due to the region’s remoteness and lack of access to radio as well as to the strength of its indigenous musical traditions, on the region’s musical culture.

**Pawng Prida: “Wanna Be a Singer”**

One of the first native Isan *luk thung* singers to gain widespread fame in the commercial Thai music industry was Pawng Prida (ปาง ปักดา), b. 1932. Born in Khon Kaen City, now Isan's largest city, he was a teenager at the time that Thai popular music was first appeared in Isan. His enthusiasm for the music was such that he resolved to become a singer of popular music himself. Pawng Prida later described his dream in one of his songs, entitled “Yak Pen Nakrawng” (อยากเป็นนักร้อง), “Wanna Be a Singer:”

…I’m too lazy to go to the rice field, daddy. [I] wanna be a famous singer who everybody knows throughout Thailand. Whenever you speak to me, [you just] want me to plow the land. I’ll be too tired to plow the land every day. People have been saying every day that whoever is a famous singer, girls will flock around [you], [your] name will smell good, [you will] have a big car …

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254 His real name is Khampan Phiukham (คำบัน พิศิษฐ์).
256 Translated by the current author.
While Benjamin, another Isan singer born eleven years earlier, had already achieved success in the Bangkok music industry, the fact that Pawng was able to follow in his footsteps made clear the reality that Westernization and modernization had begun to exert an increasingly strong influence on musical life in Northeast Thailand, something that would lead to even greater changes over the course of subsequent decades.

During Pawng Prida’s time, the only way to become a professional singer of Thai popular music was to go Bangkok where the Thai popular music industry was based. Most activities connected to popular music took place in Bangkok, with most popular songwriters, singers, musicians, bands, singing coaches, and recording studios located there. In contrast, through the end of the 1950s, before radio stations were established in Isan, popular music was relatively uncommon there although some recordings could be found in the largest cities. A further reason for the lack of a pop music culture in Isan was that transportation both to and within the region had not yet become convenient. At that time only two passenger railway lines\(^{257}\) ran between Bangkok and Isan’s major cities, so inhabitants of those cities, as well as of smaller cities located near the train stations, were the only people for whom a trip to the nation’s capital was practical. Even so, before the 1970s when large numbers of Isan people began to travel to Bangkok seeking employment, it was mostly young people who were enthusiastic enough about the new, modern way of life about which they had learned from the lyrics of Thai popular songs, who make the trip to Bangkok in an effort to become singing stars. It should be noted, however, that despite the increasing influence of Westernization and modernization on music in Isan, until the 1980s, most people in the region continued to

\(^{257}\)See chapter 5.
follow their traditional way of life, and traditional music still enjoyed wider popularity than did commercial pop music.

Pawng Prida made his way to Bangkok in the late 1940s and by the late 1950s had become the first native Isan singer in Thai country music to gain fame throughout all of Thailand. One of his earliest hits, entitled “Sao Fangkhong” (สาฟังโขง), “Maekhong Riverbank Girl,” was recorded in 1957. The title of this Lao style song refers to young Lao-Isan ladies who lived along the banks of the Khong River. After that song’s success, most of his subsequent songs that became popular also had lyrics about the Maekhong area. Pawng Prida, unlike luk thung singers of the 1970s and later, never returned to live or tour in his home region despite the fact that much of his output comprised Isan-style country songs.\textsuperscript{258}

The Drum Set: Symbol of the Isan Style Country Bands

While modernization meshed with the development of the media that led to the diffusion of Thai popular music, Westernization has been the main specific influence on development of the music itself. The idea of doing as Westerners do and adopting Western technologies and behaviors, which began in earnest under reform minded Siamese rulers of the nineteenth century, is probably the simplest definition of Westernization in Thailand. In the realm of music, Thai musicians of all popular genres have drawn on Western elements for the purpose of bringing their music up to date, to become sakon (สากล), part of a so called “universal” musical standard. Even the use of the term dontri sakon (ดนตรีสากล), which literally means “universal music” but which

\textsuperscript{258}Many of Pawng Prida’s songs are not composed in Lao style and may thus be considered “regular country” songs.
was in practice widely used since the 1930s to refer to Westernized music, indicates that, for the Thai, their own indigenous musical traditions, both folk and classical, had come to be considered as somewhat provincial and of limited appeal in comparison to Western musical genres including classical, ballroom, jazz, pop, and even rock, which were believed to be more “universal.”

The fact that the term *dontri sakon* was selected to refer to Western music is significant in that it created the situation in Thai musical life of an unspoken value judgement, namely that any music of Western origin was “universal,” whereas any music of indigenous Thai origin must then be considered “not universal,” i.e., provincial. According to this definition, Thai music must then be treated as somehow less significant and of lesser value or, at best, an exotic curiosity compared with music of the West. Most importantly, the fact that this culturally loaded term was created by Thai people themselves, has led the vast majority of Thais, over the course of the twentieth century, to internalize this feeling of inferiority and inadequacy about their own musical traditions. The tendency of Thais to look down on their own music was augmented by the policies of prime minister Phibun Songkhram between 1938-1944 and 1948-1957 as he took a hard line against traditional Thai music, even going so far as to suppress the playing of Thai musical instruments. Unfortunately, the judgemental term is still commonly used although another term, *dontri tawantok* (ดนตรีตะวันตก) or “Western music,” is often used as a synonym.

In Isan-style *luk thung*, the phenomenon of Westernization is most apparent in terms of instrumentation, musical practices such as the use of triadic harmony, and stage presentation style including dress. Among these elements, the use of Western
instruments was and is the most important indication that a band is “modern.”

If an Isan ensemble has no Western instruments, it cannot be considered modern and thus cannot be called a *luk thung* band. In contrast to traditional instruments such as the *khaen, phin, or klawng yao*, mass produced Western instruments were and are believed to appear more “high-tech” and to look “nicer” than traditional instruments, which have a simpler and rougher appearance, as they have typically been homemade for use by families and communities, and not for commercial sale like Western instruments. Because of their more professionally polished appearance, Western instruments were thus accorded a higher monetary and cultural value than locally made traditional instruments.

In the early 1970s as Isan-style *luk thung* music began to replace traditional music as the music of choice for many young people, the drum set became essential for all *luk thung* bands in Northeast Thailand. Since a drum set, as the largest and most complex instrument in a band, was a centerpiece for that band and often had the band’s name emblazoned on the outer head of its bass drum, it easily caught an audience’s attention. For those reasons, native Isan *luk thung* musicians liked to have drum sets in their bands. Country musicians from Isan found that, in comparison to learning Western melodic instruments such as the electric guitar, electric organ, and saxophone, learning to play the drum set was relatively faster and easier. The main obstacles in acquiring a drum set

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259 While for scholars, the adoption of Western musical instruments by Isan-style *luk thung* ensembles represents the phenomenon of Westernization, for the musicians themselves such instruments do not necessarily signify that they are in any sense copying Western culture. Rather, they see such instruments as giving their group more credibility as being “modern” and high class as opposed to groups using only traditional instruments whom they see as rustic, out of date, and low class.

260 Isan musical ensembles composed entirely of traditional instruments were referred to by two terms: groups performing traditional repertoire were called *wong dontri phuen-mueang* (วังดนตรีพื้นเมือง), while groups performing popular songs were called *wong phuen-mueang prayuk* (วังดนตรีพื้นเมืองปรยุกต์); both of these terms are still used today. In the 1970s, as Isan-style *luk thung* gained popularity in the Northeast, some ensembles without access to Western instruments, who nevertheless wished to play Isan-style *luk thung*, called themselves *luk thung* bands, but would probably more properly be referred to as *phuen-mueang prayuk* bands.
were high cost and the fact that stores that sold such instruments in Isan existed only in the larger cities. The cost made purchase of a drum set especially difficult because at that time the annual income of Isan villagers was typically meager, usually less than US $200 per year. When musicians formed a band, one of their first priorities was to save money for a drum set. Because of the difficulty involved in obtaining a drum set, it became equipment of great prestige among all band members, as well as among audiences.

In a compilation of his writings about Isan country music, Waeng Phlangwan discusses the early life of a famous native Isan luk thung singer, Dao Bandawn (Dao น่านคำ (ปานคำ)), b. 1947, whose songs became popular throughout Isan by 1973. At the beginning of his career as a country singer but before his rise to stardom, Dao sang with a local luk thung band that he had formed with his friends in his home village of Bandawn, Yasothon Province, in eastern Isan. As Waeng notes, the drum set was the first Western equipment that all of the band’s members agreed to acquire. The group traveled around giving many performances in order to save enough money to purchase it. The drum set then became the band’s center of attention, which attracted audiences because of its novelty in the region at that time. Band members handled the drum set with extra care and stored it in a “proper place” when it was not being played. Unfortunately, one day while they were on the way to a performance, a mishap led to their prized instrument’s being damaged beyond repair. Most roads in Isan in the 1970s were dirt, rough and often

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261 His real name is Taim Saksiri (เทียม สักศิริ).
262 Reverence for musical instruments or other objects of culture such as books is an ingrained part of Thai culture. Thai musicians regard their instruments as embodying “teacher spirits” that will assist them in their study and performance, as well as bring them good luck. Thus, it is taboo to step over any musical instrument because the foot, which touches the ground, is considered the worst part of human body. To prevent instruments of particularly high status from being accidentally stepped over, a common solution is to place them on high shelves when not in use. In addition, in Thai classical music, musicians always perform a formal greeting called wai, which involves placing one’s hands together and touching them to the forehead between the eyebrows in an address to their instruments prior to rehearsal or performance in order to honor the spirits embodied therein.
rutted to a greater or lesser extent. While on such a rough road, the band’s vehicle began swaying back and forth with enough force to cause the drum set, tied to the vehicle’s roof, to fall to the ground. As a result, the drums were broken and impossible to repair. The incident was bad enough that band members aggressively blamed one another to the point of the breakup of the group.²⁶³

To Be a Country Star

Before the 1980s, becoming a luk thung star was not a simple task. There was no school where one could learn to sing country music. There was also no tradition of group or congregational singing as found in churches in predominantly Christian countries where those who wished to sing could hone their skills. In the 1970s, most native Isan singers taught themselves to sing by singing along with and imitating Bangkok-produced luk thung or luk krung songs heard on the radio or via a communal record player in the village temple.²⁶⁴

Most early Isan country singers grew up and learned to sing surrounded by traditional music of which the most prominent and pervasive genre was the repartee style known as mawlam.²⁶⁵ Although few singers sought to study mawlam singing with master teachers, such music was an integral and ubiquitous part of the culture; and those young singers who saw themselves as performers of modern rather than traditional music were, nevertheless, unconsciously influenced by the mawlam singing style. Aspects of this

²⁶⁴Although it may seem surprising that Buddhist temples in Isan had phonographs, this may be explained by the fact that the temple formerly served as the center of most village communities before radios and televisions became common in every household in the late 1980s. Therefore, many temples that could afford them had phonographs used to provide entertainment for the public, primarily during temple festivals, weddings, and other significant events.
²⁶⁵Since the 1990s, luk thung singers from Isan have even less of knowledge of mawlam as traditional singing had by that time become much less pervasive than in earlier decades.
traditional style became the basis of how Isan style singing became distinguished from ordinary luk thung.

As is still the case today, in order to become a luk thung star, an aspiring singer had first to attract the attention of the mass media in the form of a manager or record company. After the release of an artist’s first recording, the next step was to get radio stations to play his or her music. In the 1970s, when luk thung began to become popular in Isan, radio broadcasts were the most important factor in bringing an artist’s music to the widest possible audience. Although commercial recordings and live performances were important, broadcasts made it possible for songs to be disseminated much more widely throughout the entire region as well as the country. Just talent and a good voice and being the lead singer of a local luk thung band was not enough to qualify one as a “luk thung star” if an artist had not released recordings or received radio airplay.

In order to have their songs recorded, singers had to be outstanding. As an unknown singer from a village or small town, there were two ways one could gain recognition for one’s singing ability. The first method was to win a singing contest. Such contests, at which competitors sang popular songs in both luk thung and luk krung styles, became common in Isan, Central Thailand and in other regions through the country in the 1950s but now since the 1980s have declined somewhat. The singing contests, sponsored by local communities and often held during temple fairs and holiday celebrations, also took place at the provincial and national levels. The second way of becoming a luk thung star was to join a recognized professional luk thung troupe. A singer who won first prize at a singing competition at any level might as a result be invited to join a well known luk thung troupe as a professional singer. Such an aspiring
singer needed to be willing to accept any position available in the troupe at that time, such as road crew, ticket seller, bouncer, or drum set player. Someone who served in one of those positions might later receive an invitation to become a singer for the troupe. Although some singers led their own bands or troupes, most prominent luk thung troupes in Isan, of which there were only a few before the 1980s, were owned by business people and featured multiple singers, both male and female, who took turns as soloists in live performance although some presentations took the form of male-female duets. Although a given troupe’s live performances might feature up to four or more singers, its owner would give the best singer a chance to record his or her own solo record\(^{266}\) under his/her own name rather than that of the troupe). If the record became popular, it would allow the singer to attain fame as a country star. Such fame served to enhance the reputation of the singer’s troupe as well as bring substantial financial rewards to the troupe’s owner, who had arranged for and invested in the recording. Such owners usually kept the lion’s share of the returns for themselves, and payed just a fraction to the star singers who often left the troupes once they became famous enough to do well on their own.

Once a singer decided to record a solo record, he or she first needed to determine which songs to sing. As the listening public expected that such records would contain new songs rather than popular versions of traditional songs or covers of other artists’ songs, a singer had to either compose the songs or seek a songwriter to write new material for him or her. Those songwriters, called khru phleng (คุณเพลง) or “song teachers” not only wrote original country songs but also served as vocal coaches. They coached singers in techniques such as melismatic singing and served as arrangers and

\(^{266}\)From the 1970s until the mid-1980s a singer’s first recording was often released as a 45-rpm record containing two songs, rather than as a full-length LP.
promoters. Many *khru phleng* were formerly famous *luk thung* stars. After their “retirement”\(^{267}\) from performing, some became *khru phleng*, in Isan and/or in Bangkok. Although in some cases a singer or a manager might seek the services of a *khru phleng*, it was more often the case that a *khru phleng* would first write a song and then select a singer he or she felt could best interpret it. From the beginning of Isan style *luk thung*, most songs of that type were composed by native Isan songwriters who possessed intimate knowledge of the language, customs, and lifestyle of Isan people. Although most singers who recorded the songs were also Isan natives, in some cases a *khru phleng* chose to give a song to a prominent non-Isan singer who had recognized skill in interpreting Isan style songs. Beginning in the 1990s, some non-Isan *luk thung* singers who wanted to capitalize on the increasing popularity of Isan style *luk thung* engaged *khru phleng* to create songs for them.

Before the 1980s, the primary source of income for *luk thung* singers lay in live performances. Most singers were members of *luk thung* troupes that traveled around Isan, as well as other parts of Thailand with Lao-speaking populations, on concert tours. The troupes toured all year round except for the rainy season during which most of the audience members as well as most of the performers and crew were engaged in farming. That season also covers the three months of Buddhist Lent.

As mentioned above, in order to become a *luk thung* star, a singer had to have recorded at least one hit song. The fastest way to become popular was to have one’s song played on the radio with the hope that the listening public would embrace it. *Luk thung*

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\(^{267}\) Years after a *luk thung* singer’s initial popularity, new releases would often fail to sell or become hits, as the new crop of younger singers (supported by young listeners, the largest record-buying public) would tend to eclipse them in popularity due to changing musical tastes. Therefore, the older singers tended to stop singing and recording and instead begin working as songwriters, creating songs for and supporting younger *luk thung* singers.
songs were distributed to radio stations throughout Isan and in Bangkok in the form of long play records until cassette tapes gradually replaced them in the 1980s. The radio broadcast system carried luk thung songs to people not just in the large cities as in earlier decades but also to inhabitants of small towns and villages. By the mid-1970s, it had even become common for farmers to listen to battery powered portable radios while they worked their fields. If a listener liked a particular song, he/she would often write a letter to the DJ, asking him or her to play it again. The song that received the most requests became a “top hit,” and any singer whose song achieved this status instantly became a luk thung star.

_Luk thung_ stars of the 1970s earned the bulk of their income through tours with their troupes; and the troupe’s owner earned his or her income directly from the sale of concert tickets. Since the 1980s, record companies have replaced entrepreneurial luk thung troupe owners as the dominant force in the Thai music industry, selecting, recording, and promoting artists, and organizing tours. 268 This change has meant that today a luk thung singer or other Thai pop singer no longer has to go through all the steps formerly necessary in order to become a star but instead simply attracts the attention of one of the major record companies which will do all that is necessary to turn that singer into a star. 269

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268 It is important to note that the royalty and copyright system in Thailand has been not serious. Music business people tend to take advantage of the artists and deprive singers of income.

Traditional Instruments in the Isan-Style Country Bands

*Khaen in the Samai Awnwong Band*

Traditional Thai musical instruments, which previously functioned as solo or accompanying instruments in folk and classical contexts, were gradually integrated into a modern context over the course of the development of Thai popular music. Since the development of regular style Thai country music in the early 1940s and on into the early 1970s, traditional melodic instruments such as *khlui, saw,* and *ranat* or percussion instruments such as *ching, chap, krap,* and *thon* were used only occasionally to give a traditional flavor to specific songs. The bands which accompanied such music, however, consisted almost entirely of Western instruments, befitting the “modern,” “universal” quality desired by the musicians and listeners of the time.

In the earliest Isan-style country music, beginning in the late 1940s with the work of the *phleng ramwong* artist Benjamin, traditional Isan instruments such as the *khaen* or *phin* were never used, although instruments such as the accordion were often heard creating a sound reminiscent of the Isan mouth organ. This avoidance of the use of traditional Isan instruments probably occurred because, at that time, all Lao style songs came from Bangkok for general audiences, and because at that time Lao traditions were still looked down upon by the majority of Thais. Over time, however, as Lao style country music gradually increased in popularity among both Lao and non-Lao listeners, Lao instruments were gradually incorporated into Thai country song recordings and live performances as a means of better representing Lao musical culture. The use of such

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270 Of course, Benjamin’s music did feature the use of some traditional Thai percussion instruments, but these are not distinctively Isan in flavor.
traditional instruments served as one of the primary elements other than the lyrics to distinguish Lao style from regular style.

The first Lao instrument used in Thai country music was the *khaen*, the free-reed bamboo mouth organ that typifies Lao culture. It was a Lao Song (ลาวโอ_ck) by Samai Awnwong (สมัย อ้วนวงศ์), 1931-1996, from central Thailand which first brought the instrument into Thai country music in 1957. Samai was born in Phetchaburi Province, one of the areas where old, established Lao communities still can be found in Central

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271 The Lao Song people, also called Lao Song Dam (ลาวโอ_ckเต้า), Tai Song (ไทโอ_ckเอ), or Tai Song Dam (ไทโอ_ckเต้า), are a relatively small ethnic group (numbering about 32,000) descended from the Tai Dam of the area east of Luang Phrabang, Laos, who were resettled in the Chao Phraya Valley in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Although they have lived in Thailand’s central plain for centuries they have maintained their Lao language and culture more or less intact.

272 Samai Awnwong is also his real name.
Thailand. He came from a family in which some members played the *khaen*; and as a young man he organized a *khaen wong* (ก้านวาง), an ensemble of many *khaen*.

In 1957, Samai Awnwong founded a *luk thung* band called Wong Dontri Samai Silapin (วงดนตรีสมัยปั้น), the “Band of Samai the Performing Artist.” His ensemble combined Western instruments such as accordion, quite commonly used as the main melodic instrument in Thai country music in the late 1950s and 1960s, with traditional instruments such as the *khaen* and Thai percussion instruments. As a result, he became known as the first *luk thung* artist to integrate a *khaen* into his music although not all of his songs featured the instrument. This novel usage of a well-known traditional instrument, which came to be called *khaen prayuk* (ก้านประยุกต์) or “modernized *khaen*,” earned Samai Awnwong the reputation of a pioneer. His first recording was released in 1966, and his country songs quickly earned a solid fan base among Lao speakers in Central Thailand and Isan from the late 1960s into the early 1970s, with his music eventually also gaining some measure of popularity among general audiences throughout Thailand. In 1970 he toured Laos and Vietnam, and was invited to Japan for a month-long tour where he received an honor in the form of a helmet. Upon his return home, he earned the title “Khunphon Khaen Daen Sayam [Siam]” (ชนพลคนแดนสยาม) literally “The *Khaen* Warlord of Siam.” In 1971, he gave a concert tour in Europe, performing in England, France, Belgium, Germany, Switzerland, and Italy. He also

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273 See Chapter 2.
274 *Prayuk* (ประยุกต์) literally means “apply,” “adapt,” or “make practical use of,” but in this context the implied meaning is “modernize.”
275 “Samai Awanwong: the *Khaen* Warlord of Siam from the Famous Lao Song [Ethnic group].” (สมัย อ่อนวงษ์ ชนพลคนแดนสยาม ชาวไร่ของผู้ใดครึ่ง) Phetphum Newspaper, หนังสือพิมพ์เทพภูมิ, 16 April, 2550/2007, 16.
presented concert in the United States for three months. He visited 36 states and 42 cities in order to perform for Thai and Lao communities in 1983.276

To bring the *khaen* into the modern context, it was first necessary to find a way to amplify the instrument. Samai is credited with having invented the “electric *khaen*” (คณะไฟฟ้า), *khaen faifa*, in 1965, although there is no information on exactly how he did this. Most likely, he simply amplified the instrument by use of a microphone, although it is unclear whether or not the microphone was installed in the instrument’s body.277 Miller experienced players’ simply taping the microphone to the instrument, which allowed the players to move around while performing on stage.278 Samai’s efforts to incorporate the *khaen* in a modern context brought the instrument to new audiences and created new interest throughout Thailand, as well as elsewhere in Asia during his international tours, in an instrument that had formerly been associated primarily with rural life and consequently neglected in the popular context. As mentioned earlier, for well over one hundred years, modernization has been something that Thai people have been eager to apply to all aspects of their lives. When someone modernized something Thai, others admired his or her creativity. In the case of Samai Awnwong, his modernization of the *khaen*, by placing a spotlight on this traditional instrument, became a point of pride for Lao speaking Thais; and it attracted a great deal of notice among music lovers throughout the country. The popularity of the *khaen* engendered by Samai Awnwong’s efforts lasted through the end of his career in the mid 1980s; but, because no other *khaen* country singer became as successful as he was, by the mid-1980s, the *phin*,

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276 Ibid.
277 Today, musicians still prefer to amplify the *khaen* with a microphone. Unlike some other traditional instruments, the electrified *khaen* has not been a success. The natural sound of the instrument does not really create a sound preferred by musicians.
278 Terry E. Miller, Personal communication.
another traditional Isan instrument, began to be embraced to a greater degree and surpassed the *khaen* in popularity in Thai country music.

**Phin in the Phet Phin Thawng Troupe**

The *phin*, a three stringed fretted and plucked lute used in the traditional music of Lao culture, is another traditional instrument that has come into the realm of Thai country music, gradually transforming its function from traditional to modern since the early 1970s. Among all the Lao instruments integrated into modern Isan style genres, the *phin* has been most favored because it is perceived to fit best with the other instruments in such contexts. Although the *khaen* remains the iconic symbol of Lao culture, in modern Isan genres it more often serves primarily as a visual representation of Lao musical culture and is usually drowned out by other, louder (and amplified) instruments. The *phin*, on the other hand, especially when electrified, has been found to adapt much better to modern musical contexts; and it has become a popular instrument in Isan since the late 1980s. While the *khaen* retains some negative associations with the old way of life of Northeast Thailand, i.e., low class, rustic, and “Lao,” the *phin* does not conjure up similar stereotypes because, as a secondary traditional instrument in Lao culture, it was less well known throughout Thailand than the *khaen*.

One of the main factors which contributed to the increase in popularity of the *phin* in modern Isan-style music is that, unlike the *khaen*, it is much easier to amplify. The

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279 These negative associations are similar to those still held by many Americans about the banjo, which they associate with stereotypes of Appalachian “hillbillies” and uneducated African Americans.

280 A major reason the *khaen* is less popular than the *phin* is because the instrument is more difficult to amplify. For example, most Isan style musicians prefer to substitute an electric keyboard for the *khaen*, with a resulting accordion sound, or, when both *khaen* and keyboard are used, to have the keyboard predominate with the *khaen* sometimes audible only for a short, traditional style introductory section. Even when amplified with a microphone, the *khaen*, due to its mellow timbre, is simply not as effective as a keyboard in cutting through the sound of a full *luk thung* band.
phin, like the electric guitar, can produce a clear, strong tone when it is electrified by means of pickup microphones.\footnote{In traditional Lao music, the roles of the khaen and phin are reversed, with the khaen the primary instrument, often drowning out the phin.} A likely further reason for the upswing in popularity of the electric phin is its resemblance in its appearance, sound, and style of playing to the electric guitar, a Western instrument many younger Isan people have aspired to learn because it, as a product of the Western world, it has been seen as modern and sophisticated. While in former days, skill in playing the khaen brought a musician admiration, by the 1990s the electric phin largely replaced it as a musical instrument that could draw positive attention to its player.

Yet another factor leading to the success of the phin in modern Isan music is that, as an instrument created to play traditional Lao music, it is easier to play Isan melodies on the phin than on the guitar, which Isan musicians also adopted in the 1970s. With its primarily pentatonic fret system, the phin has fewer frets than the guitar, on which the frets are arranged chromatically.\footnote{Like the Appalachian dulcimer, the phin has unequally spaced frets that produce a primarily pentatonic scale, although since the mid-1980s it has become common for phin to have several additional chromatic frets added to allow for playing of the diatonic pitches 2 and 6 (equivalent to E and B). The traditional tuning system comprises pitches 1, 3, 4, 5, and 7, equivalent to D, F, G, A, and C).} Because Isan music, both traditional and modern, is based on five tone modes, it is much simpler to find these tones on the fingerboard of the phin than on the guitar. More important, the phin reinforces a sense of Isan tradition while, at the same time in its electrified form, it fits well with modern musical tastes. This allows it to serve as a source of pride for Isan people.

The pioneering group that first brought the phin into the realm of Isan style country music was the Phet Phin Thawng Troupe (เพทพินทาวง) from Ubon Ratchathani Province. Unlike the khaen, introduced into Thai country music by a Lao descendant
from Central Thailand, the *phin* was brought into the popular context in 1970 by an Isan native, Naphadon Duangphawn (นพดล ดวงพร), b. 1941. Largely because of the efforts of Naphadon and his musicians, the instrument is widely used today in several modern Isan genres and serves as a musical icon representing Isan culture to the nation. While the *khaen* continues to be the prime symbol of Lao musical culture as a whole, the modernized *phin* is felt to better represent the upwardly mobile region of Isan which has so eagerly embraced modernization since the 1970s. Today, for this reason, the electric *phin* is the most popular traditional instrument in Isan popular and semi-neotraditional music.

The Phet Phin Thawng Troupe, in Thai Khana Phet Phin Thawng (คณะเพชรพินทอง), the “Diamond-Gold *Phin* Troupe,” means a “troupe” in which all members such as managers, singers, dancers, musicians, comedians, sound technicians, and road assistants are involved in the business of performance. When referring to it as a musical band, (not as a whole troupe) the term Wong Dontri Lukthung [Isan] Phet Phin Thawng (วงดนตรีลูกท่งอีสานเพชรพินทอง), The Lukthung [Isan] Band Phet Phin Thawng can be used. The troupe was founded by Naphadon Duangphawn, who served as owner and leader. Although he was not famous in the same way as most Isan country singers in that he was not known primarily for his singing, he was known as the founder of his own famous *luk thung* troupe and as a songwriter, movie actor, comedian, and concert announcer. In the mid-1960s, Naphadon began a career in entertainment as a radio music announcer at the government radio station in Ubon City. During that time, he joined a small local *luk thung* troupe. As a radio DJ, he naturally gravitated toward the position of concert announcer. However, he knew that simply joining a local country troupe would not
automatically lead to nationwide popularity. To pursue his dream, he relocated to Bangkok in the late 1960s. There he joined several luk thung troupes in succession and thus gained valuable experience in the Thai country music business before he returned home in 1969 or 1970. Back in Ubon Ratchathani, he decided to found his own troupe, based on the idea of featuring traditional Isan instruments rather than Western ones as the primary melodic instruments with the intention of performing traditional music as well as luk thung. He placed his main focus on the phin, possibly from a suggestion by Samai Awnwong, who had earlier integrated the khaen into his country music.

Once at work as a DJ at the radio station in Ubon City, Naphadon Duangphawn began to recruit the musicians for his troupe through his radio program, on which he played Thai popular music. During his program, he announced that he was forming a luk thung troupe and invited traditional musicians who played the phin and the khaen to come to audition for him. Thawngsai Thapthanon (ทองใส่ ทับถัน), b. 1947, who was chosen as the first lead phin player of the troupe, and acknowledged as the first and most famous player of the electric phin, states that, at the first audition in 1970, more than seventy musicians showed up to play for Naphadon.283

The troupe, which Naphadon first named Wong Phin Prayuk (วงศ์พินประยุกต์), the “Modernized (or Applied) Phin Band,”284 was initially founded as a means of earning a living while presenting Isan culture throughout Thailand. The troupe started with twelve musicians and included several players of the khaen and phin, accompanied by several percussionists who played both Thai and Western instruments. Their repertoire consisted

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283 Thawngsai Thapthanon (ทองใส่ ทับถัน), interview by author, summer, 2003, Walin Chamrap District, Ubon Ratchathani Province, Thailand.
284 This name was similar to that used by Samai Awnwong who had described his band as a wong khaen prayuk (วงศ์เกณประยุกต์), the “modernized khaen band.”
primarily of *luk thung* songs as well as a few traditional tunes played as instrumental selections. The ensemble very quickly became well known throughout much of the Northeast region and appeared several times on Channel 4 TV in Khon Kaen City, which when founded in 1962 was the first TV station in the region.

In 1971, the troupe was invited to perform for King Bhumibol Adulyadej and the royal family when they stopped in Nam Phong District, Khon Kaen Province, on a visit to the Isan region. After the performance, Naphadon, as leader of the troupe, presented a special *phin* to the king. As soon as the king picked up the instrument, he plucked the strings a couple of times and said, “It’s so wonderful. [This instrument] really should be considered their finest diamond.”\(^{285}\) After that day, Naphadon changed the troupe’s name

\(^{285}\)Thawngsai Thapthanon (ทาวงใส่ ทับแทน), interview by author, summer, 2003, Walin Chamrap District, Ubon Ratchathani Province, Thailand.
to Phet Phin Thawng. “The Gold-Diamond Phin,” to commemorate the king’s first impression of the instrument.\footnote{Ibid.}

The transition of the phin from its traditional context to that of popular music in the early 1970s represents the first significant example of the influence of modernization on music in Isan, as did Samai Awnwong’s modernization of the khaen in the 1960s in Central Thailand. More important, by the late 1970s, the phin was further successfully developed when Naphadon electrified the instrument. As some Thai musicians had earlier done for their acoustic guitars, Naphadon installed a small pickup microphone in the instrument to amplify the sound of the traditionally acoustic plucked lute.\footnote{It is unclear which type of amplification device Naphadon used in the first electric phin, but regular pickups such as those used for electric guitars became standard on the electric phin in the mid-1980s.} This instrument, which by the mid-1980s became standard in many genres of modern Isan music, was known as phin faifa (ไฟฟ้าพิน), literally “electric phin.”

The Phet Phin Thawng Troupe remained famous in the realm of Isan style luk thung for more than three decades. They finally disbanded in 2005. The sound and appearance of the electric phin as presented in the troupe’s live concerts, radio broadcasts, and recordings, were important factors in the widespread acceptance and popularity of this instrument in the region. The troupe also played an important part in indirectly promoting the modernized phin’s adoption by musicians of other genres in the Isan region.

In modern Thailand, traditional Thai instruments have increasingly been adapted for use in new musical styles. This allows them to serve functions different from those of the past. In Isan, traditional instruments such as the khaen, phin and other string, wind, and percussion instruments have also been used in Isan style popular music to provide an

\footnote{Ibid.}
authentic flavor to the region’s music. Of all these, the electric phin has been the most successful.

**Isan Popular Music**

*Isan Country Music: Luk Thung Isan*

By the early 1970s, Isan style country music had attained a high degree of recognition and popularity throughout Thailand; and its popularity reached a level close, if not equal, to Central Thai style country music. From the early 1960s until the early 1980s, the regular (Central Thai) style luk thung was the mainstream popular music throughout Thailand because, by that time, common people, the majority of the nation’s population, had many opportunities to hear and consume such music. *Luk krung* still retained a degree of popularity, though on a smaller scale due to its smaller audience base, since it appealed mainly to educated urbanites and older members of elite society in Bangkok.

Because Bangkok had long been the center for all Thailand’s modernizations, it followed naturally that Central Thai luk thung singers, who had the benefit of being born and growing up in the heart of modernization, became dominant in the field of Thai country music from the early 1960s to the early 1970s. Beginning with the earliest famous Thai country singer, Suraphon Sombatjaroen, (สุรพล สมบัติจริย์) 1930-1968, who earned the title “King of Luk Thung,” and whose music became extremely popular in the early 1960s, and continuing through Sayan Sanya (สาญ สัญญา), b. 1952, who became the most popular luk thung singer in the early 1970s and 1980s, the majority of

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288In this context, the term “common people” refers to both rural agriculturalists and urban working class people (keeping in mind that many rural people migrated to the cities seeking employment mostly during the dry season when farming was not practiced).
successful *luk thung* singers from the early 1960s to the 1970s were natives of Central Thailand. During that decade, such *luk thung* stars increasingly began to integrate Lao style *luk thung* with Lao and Lao-Isan cultural themes into their lyrics.

Although some native Isan popular singers had already made their way to Bangkok during the 1950s and 1960s, the most successful of whom was Pawng Prida who reached the peak of his popularity in the late 1950s, the number of native Isan pop singers was very small in comparison with those from Central Thailand, who continued to dominate the industry well into the 1970s.

Beginning in the early 1970s, some of the ever-growing number of native Isan country singers became quite popular. This growth can be attributed largely to the fact that by this time transportation from Isan to Bangkok had become convenient because many new roads were built. Another important reason was that by the 1970s there were already large numbers of Isan workers in Bangkok who were enthusiastic about supporting the music and singers from their home region. This new situation, from the 1970s onward, in which increasing numbers of native Isan singers achieved popularity, marked the beginning of the flourishing of Isan country music within the larger realm of Thai popular music.

One of the first and most significant figures in Isan popular music was Saksayam Phetchomphu (สักสิทธิ์ ปทุมพร), b. 1952. His rise to stardom in the early 1970s, the first ascent of an Isan popular singer, marked a turning point in the history of Thai country music in that his fame, driven by his devoted listeners, led to an increasing

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289 His real name is Bunchun Senalas (บุญชู เสนลาส).
acceptance of Isan popular music itself. His success also encouraged the trend of an increasing number of native Isan singers inclined to enter the music industry, following his example, over the course of the next decades. His huge success as one of the first Isan native pop singers to become a household name throughout the country, brought pride to the region.

Saksayam was born in Ban Nanok-khian (บ้านนานกุ้ย), a village in Mahasarakham Province. Like most other Isan country boys, he grew up in a poor family of wet-rice farmers, and his childhood was spent around the rice fields herding cows and water buffaloes. However, as Waeng Phlangwan notes, what set Saksayam apart from other boys of his age was the fact that he loved to sing. He would sing wherever he was while riding water buffaloes, planting rice, walking around paddy fields, or during any other activities.

By the late 1960s, country music had already reached some rural areas of Isan. Young children growing up in farm villages would sing along with country song broadcasts via AM radio from radio stations in nearby cities and heard on portable radios. A communal record player, often kept at the village temple, was another way that village boys could hear country music. Both lay people and Buddhist monks would occasionally play records of country music at village festivals and celebrations through the temple loudspeakers which were loud enough to be heard through the entire village and in the nearby rice fields.

Although Benjamin and Pawng Prida had earlier achieved fame as Isan-born country singers, their music did not exclusively represent Isan culture and identity; and both were considered mainstream Thai country artists, although both recorded some songs with “Lao” themes. 

Waeng Phlangwan (แวง พลังวรรณ), Luk thung Isan: Isan History and the Legend of Popular Songs, (อุทรกิจลิฟท์: ประวัติศาสตร์ความร้อนเพลงลูกทุ่ง) (Bangkok: สำนักเรียนปัญญานุ, 2545/2002), 397-399.
Similar to other Isan country boys growing up in the 1950s and 1960s, country music was a part of Saksayam’s life. He loved to imitate the styles of many different Thai popular singers he heard on the radio and on recordings. One of his favorite country singers was Waiphot Phetsuphan (ไพบูลย์ เพชรสรรเสริญ), b. 1942, and he enjoyed singing many songs popularized by Waiphot, most of which enjoyed popularity in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

On the road to becoming a country star when he was a teenager in the late 1960s, Saksayam first joined Dao Isan (ดาวอินทร์), a village ramwong troupe founded in a nearby village. He became one of the troupe’s singers, and sometimes also played a drum for ramwong performances. He traveled around the province with this troupe for a few years in his youth before he eventually followed his older brother into several troupes that performed mawlam mu, a traditional genre of theatrical singing. During that time, he moved from one troupe to another. He held a similar position as a drum set player in each troupe with an occasional chance to sing. One of the most famous of the mawlam mu ensembles he joined was the Phetsayam Troupe (คณาพระสยาม), Khana Phetsayam, based in Ubon Ratchathani Province. This was one of several troupes owned and managed by Thepphabut Satirawtchomphu (เทพภูบูด ศิริวัฒน์), a prominent Isan music businessman during the late 1960s and 1970s. Thepphabut also managed the

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292 Waiphot Phetsuphan was born into a Lao family in the Suphanburi Province of Central Thailand. He was one of the most successful Thai country singers of the late 1960s and early 1970s, specializing in Isan-style songs.

293 Two of Waiphot’s best known songs are “Lakawn Bangkok” (ลาควร้าวบางกอก), “Farewell Bangkok,” and “La Nong Pai Weadnam” (ลาคงไประดับผืน), “Farewell My Darling, [I am Going to] Vietnam.”

294 This is one piece of evidence indicating that ramwong music, which was popular in Bangkok in the 1940s, was still practiced in Isan as late as the 1970s. In fact, in the late 1970s I was still able to see ramwong performances at festivals in my village on a number of occasions, but the form of this type of ramwong differed somewhat from the earlier style found in Bangkok in the 1940s. The style that I experienced had more luk thung influence as there were more luk thung songs with a luk thung backup band.

295 See chapter 6.
Rangsiman Troupe (รังสิมันต์), Khana Rangsiman, another mawlam mu ensemble from Ubon City that was considered the best and most famous music troupe in Isan at that time. The Rangsiman Troupe, most popular between 1963 and the late 1960s, featured the most famous Isan singers: Chawiwan Damnoen (ชวีวรรณ ดาเนน), b. 1945, Thawngkham Phengdi (ท่าวังชม เพ็งดี), 1927-1996 and Banyen Rakkaen (บานเย็น รักแก่น), b. 1952. Before becoming a luk thung star, Saksayam was invited by Thepphabut to move from the Phetsayam Troupe to the more prestigious Rangsiman Troupe.²⁹⁶

![Figure 15. Saksayam Phetchomphu with his first hit song, “Tam Nawng Klab Sarakham” on LP record cover, 1973.](image)

In 1972, with the support of his manager, Thepbabut Satirawtchomphu, Saksayam gained his first chance to record several Isan style country songs. As was the case for all Isan singers of that time, he had to travel to Bangkok to make the recordings. His first hit song, which brought him nearly instant popularity, was “Tam Nawng Klab Sarakham” (ตามน้องกบสะราค), “Looking for My Darling [To Take Her] Back to

²⁹⁶Waeng Phlangwan (วัง พลังวรรณ), Luk thung Isan: Isan History and the Legend of Popular Songs, (ลูกทุ่งอีสาน: ประวัติศาสตร์นานาเพลงลูกทุ่ง) (Bangkok: สานักเรียนบัญญัติ, 2545/2002), 400.
[Maha]sarakham,” written by Thawin Thitabutta (ถวิล ทิตะบุตตา), a schoolteacher from Yang Sri-surat District, Mahasarakham Province.\(^{297}\)

After the record was released and first played on the radio, so many listeners began to request the song that soon all the luk thung programs on radio stations throughout Isan were playing “Tam Nawng Klab Sarakh” repeatedly, day and night. This led to Saksayam’s becoming a country star virtually overnight. Thepphabut capitalized on Saksayam’s new popularity by quickly moving to establish a new troupe named for Saksayam, which he called the “Saksayam Phetchomphu Troupe” (คำแซกเสรี สยาม เพชรชนะ), Khana Saksayam Phetchomphu. He thus established Thepphabut’s first luk thung troupe. Because radio airplay did not generate much if any revenue for singers and composers, and because record sales were minimal among Isan audiences, a touring troupe was the primary means of securing a steady income. The Saksayam Phetchomphu Troupe, like other troupes that followed, traveled throughout Isan giving outdoor performances to large paying crowds. Along the way, the troupe promoted itself by hanging numerous posters and putting up billboards that advertised upcoming performances, displaying the name of the troupe on the side of its tour bus as well as at the back of the stage at its performances.

Weang points out that the Saksayam Phetchomphu Troupe was the first Isan music ensemble to present itself as a “pure” country music troupe, in contrast to earlier ensembles that were primarily concerned with theatrical performance based on traditional

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\(^{297}\)The song alludes to the theme of the disruption of traditional culture brought to Isan by American GIs during the Vietnam War. During that time, many bars and clubs were built to serve the soldiers of the military bases in cities such as Udon, Ubon, and Khorat. Large numbers of naive young Isan women left their homes seeking employment in such establishments, which went against the old Isan morals and customs. This song depicts the love story of a young Isan man who is looking for his lover in such an establishment as he hopes to convince her to come back to their home village in Mahasarakham Province.
styles of *mawlam*. Prior to Saksayam’s rise to popularity, Isan audiences demanded a theatrical component to their entertainment, and thus *mawlam mu* was the most profitable genre for music troupes. Typically, a selection of *luk thung* songs would be performed for a couple of hours as a prelude to the actual *mawlam mu* performance, which lasted for the rest of the evening or even all night. By the time of Saksayam’s rise to fame, it had become clear to Thepphabut that country music had become so popular that Isan audiences would support performances of *luk thung* songs without any theatrical element, hence his establishment of the *luk thung* troupe which bore Saksayam Phetchomphu’s name.

*Luk thung Isan*, literally “child of the fields of the Isan region,” was coined in 1973, soon after the rise of the first Isan country star, Saksayam Phetchomphu. The term suggested a new, independent genre within Thai country music, which replaced the previous term “Lao/Isan style country music” that implied only a substyle of the regular Thai country genre. Saksayam’s popularity, primarily among Isan audiences but also among listeners in other areas of the country, was extremely high, equal to that of Sayan Sanya (สายนะ ซ่านยาน), b. 1952, a Central Thai country singer the same age as Phetchomphu who had already become the most popular young country star throughout the country.²⁹⁸

According to Weang, the term *luk thung Isan* was coined by Surin Phaksiri (สุรินทร์ ภักศิรี), b. 1942, a prolific native Isan songwriter and Isan music radio programmer in Bangkok.²⁹⁹ The new country style from the Northeastern region was

²⁹⁹Surin Phaksiri was one of the primary figures to project a positive image of Isan through Isan music, and his life and works will be discussed thoroughly in Chapter 7.
identified as another country genre which could be differentiated from the original (Central Thai) version of *luk thung* as *luk thung Isan*, since the former was referred to as “pure *luk thung,*” (เพชรวัสดุ *, *phiao luk thung), “Central Thai *luk thung,*” (เพลงลูกทุ่งภาคกลาง, *luk thung phak klang*), “regular *luk thung,*” (ลูกทุ่งธรรมชาติ, *luk thung thamada*), or simply *luk thung*.

In 1973, the new term was created when Surin organized one of the most important concerts of his life at Ratchadamnoen Boxing Stadium (เวทีมวยราชดำเนิน), Weti Muay Ratchadamnoen, in Bangkok. For that concert he invited the nation’s two most popular *luk thung* stars, Saksayam Phetchomphu and Sayan Sanya, to participate in a kind of competition between Central Thai style and Isan style *luk thung* singing. Surin wanted to devise a concert title that would draw the largest possible audience. In order to differentiate between the two styles featured in the concert, he invented the terms *luk thung Isan*, “Isan country music” and *luk thung pak klang* (ลูกทุ่งภาคกลาง), “Central Thai country music.” The full title of the concert was *Luk Thung Isan Patha Luk Thung Phak Klang*, (ลูกทุ่งอีสานประทับลูกทุ่งภาคกลาง), “*Luk Thung Isan vs. Luk Thung Phak Klang,*” with *Phak Klang* meaning “Central Region.”

Weang asserts that at the concert, on the Isan side, there was not only Saksayam Phetchomphu, leader of the Isan “team,” but also several other invited Isan singers, including Thepphon Phetubon (เทพพร เพชรบูรณ์), b. 1947, Roi-et Phetsayam (ร้อยเอ็ดเพชรยาม), year of birth unknown, and Banyen Rakkaen (บันเย็น รักแก่น), b. 1952. On the Central Thai “team,” in addition to Sayan Sanya, the leader, there were also a

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300 Of these, “pure *luk thung*” is the most widely used, especially among radio announcers.
301 The Ratchadamnoen Boxing Stadium has been known as the venue for Thai kickboxing for decades. Use of the stadium is normally limited to kick boxing but it sometimes can be used as a giant concert venue.
number of other supporting Central Thai singers including Chai Mueangsing (ชาย เมืองสิงห์), b. 1939, another one of the most popular singers of that time.\textsuperscript{302}

The concert was very successful. In addition to a great number of native Central Thai audience members who came to support the luk thung singers from their region, thousands of Isan fans, mostly migrant workers living in Bangkok, came to cheer the singers from their home region. As a result of the enormous success he enjoyed from this concert, Saksayam earned the title Khunphon Phleng Luk Thung Haeng Khwaen Daen Isan (ขุนพลเพลงลูกท้งแห่งแคว้นแฉนมีสาน), literally, “Country Music Warlord of the Isan Region.”\textsuperscript{303}

Surin continued to use the term luk thung Isan widely in subsequent years and included it in the names of two of his radio programs. One was called Luk Thung Isan Yam Chao (ลูกท้งอีสานยามเช้า), “Isan Country Music in the Morning,” and the other was Luk Thung Isan Song Jai Pai Naewna (ลูกท้งอีสานสงจัยไพบน์นาหว่า), “Isan Country Music to Support the Front-Line Troops.”\textsuperscript{304}

At the time of this writing, more than four decades have passed since the term luk thung was coined. Of the two main genres of Thai country music, Central Thai luk thung has declined in popularity since the mid-1980s while luk thung Isan maintains its place as the music of choice for most Isan listeners today. In the mid-1980s, a third genre of luk thung...
thung which had also been developing since the early 1970s was recognized with yet another newly invented term, luk thung mawlam. That new genre, a style of Isan folk-pop music influenced by traditional mawlam music but backed by primarily Western instruments, gradually increased in popularity. By the mid-1990s, it had become another one of the most popular forms of Thai country music.

Isan Folk-pop Music: Luk Thung Mawlam

In the early 1970s, some mawlam singers in Isan began to experiment with putting their music into a popular format. Up to the mid-1980s, radio DJs in Bangkok who played Isan music referred to this modern style simply as mawlam, since even though it integrated Western instruments and harmony, the vocal part remained essentially the same as in traditional mawlam. By the mid-1980s, the Bangkok DJs, who were Isan natives, coined the term luk thung mawlam, “Isan folk-pop music” to identify the modernized mawlam pieces. The name luk thung mawlam suggests two musical genres: luk thung, country music, and mawlam, traditional vocal music, combined into a single style.

In academic writing, the term luk thung mawlam has been little used. In his master’s thesis on the subject of mawlam sing, a Thai musicologist, Sanong Klangprasri (สนอง คลังพรสิริ), is one of the few who has used the term in his Mawlam Sing: a Survival Strategy… (2541/1998). In World Music: the Rough Guide (1994), John Clewley discusses luk thung mawlam artists variously as singers of either mawlam (in the case of Chalermphol Malaikham) or luk thung prayuk (in the case of Pimpa Pornsiri).305 Among Thai radio DJs and music journalists, the terms luk thung mawlam and mawlam

have been used interchangeably. Some DJs occasionally add the unnecessary extra word “Isan,” calling the music *luk thung mawlam Isan*. In this study, however, I prefer to use the term *luk thung mawlam* since the term *mawlam* already indicates the genre’s origin and tradition.

Basically, *luk thung mawlam* originated from traditional *mawlam* music. As Westernization and modernization began to affect Isan’s musical culture in the 1970s and 1980s, some traditional *mawlam* singers, faced with declining performance commissions, began exploring the possibility of developing their music along the lines of *luk thung Isan* by creating a more modern version of *mawlam* that could break into the Thai popular music industry. While *luk thung mawlam* singers essentially maintain a traditional singing style, the genre’s more modern instrumental accompaniment, which usually includes Western rock instruments such as electric guitar, electric bass guitar, electric keyboard, saxophone, and drum set, sets it apart from the traditional style. In some cases, amplified traditional instruments such as *khaen* and *phin* are also used in order to highlight the music’s origins. Thus, more than *luk thung Isan* which is more modern, *luk thung mawlam* embodies tradition in its vocal lines as well as in the occasional use of traditional instruments with modernization through Westernized instrumental accompaniment in more or less equal proportion.

The primary difference between the singing style of *luk thung Isan* and *luk thung mawlam* is as follows: In *luk thung Isan*, the vocal line, although it may sound traditional on the surface as it is sung on a pentatonic scale, is not rendered as in *mawlam*, but is instead more song-like, having been pre-composed with a generally syllabic text. On the other hand, the characteristic vocal style of *luk thung mawlam* is essentially the same as
that of traditional *mawlam* but with modern instrumental accompaniment. The sound of the traditional *lam* is quite complicated to describe in a few sentences. It has a certain musical timbre that is closely related with the Lao language. In fact, most *lam* uses Lao dialect while, within any given song, a *luk thung Isan* song contains only a few Lao-Isan words but depends on Central Thai dialect. The sound of traditional *lam* also depends on a poetic structure which shapes its rhythmic patterns, tempo, and form.

It should be noted, however, that the vocal lines of some early *luk thung mawlam* songs and most of those composed since the early 1990s are not sung exclusively in *mawlam* style but also contain sections sung in *luk thung*; the former are called *lam* (ลำ) and the latter are called *phleng* (เพลง). *Lam* is a traditionally sung section, melodically improvised based on a certain poetic structure while *phleng* is a country style song that is melodically fixed. A given song may alternate between *lam* and *phleng* sections. In addition to the marked difference in vocal line between the *lam* and *phleng* sections, the accompanying rhythm also serves to indicate whether a section is *lam* or *phleng*, with the former accompanied by a traditional rhythm derived from hand drum patterns, and the latter almost always accompanied by a *luk thung* rhythm such as cha-cha. A further trait that serves to distinguish *luk thung mawlam* from *luk thung Isan* is the frequent appearance, in *luk thung mawlam* songs, of a brief free rhythm introduction which usually features only voice and *khaen*, *phin*, or electric keyboard, but no percussion, and which sounds as in a traditional *lam thang yao* (ลำทางยาว) selection.\(^{306}\)

\(^{306}\)See Chapter 5.
The Origin of _Luk Thung Mawlam_

Angkhanang Khunnachai (อังคณาวงศ์ คุณไชย), b. 1955, 307 was one of the first well known Isan folk-pop music performers. She was a traditionally trained Isan singer of note who made her way to Bangkok and successfully transformed the traditional acoustic roots music of her background into the modern style of _luk thung mawlam_. She was born in Chanuman District, 308 Ubon Rachathani Province, and began learning _mawlam klawn_, a traditional genre of repartee singing, with her teacher, Ajan Thawng-lue Saenthawisuk (อาจารย์ทองลือ แสนทวีสุข), in Ubon City in 1966. After two and a half months she began studying with another teacher, Ajan Amphawn Sa-ngajit (อาจารย์อัมพร สังจิด), under whose tutelage she remained for several years.

During the late 1960s to the early 1970s in Northeast Thailand, under the influence of modernization, some traditional singers, especially singers of _mawlam mu_ or Isan traditional theater, 309 began to perform through the mass media, by making recordings that were then played across Isan via radio. One of the first theatrical ensembles to achieve fame throughout Isan in such a manner in 1968 was the Rangsiman Troupe, a _mawlam mu_ troupe, of which the _luk thung Isan_ musician Saksayam Phetchomphu had been a member in the early 1970s, from Ubon Rachathani Province.

The great popularity attained by the Rangsiman Troupe encouraged many singers who specialized in other styles of _mawlam_, primarily the repartee style of _mawlam klawn_, to switch to performing the theatrical style, _mawlam mu_. Angkhanang was one of those who decided to change from learning _mawlam klawn_ to _mawlam mu_. In 1968, at the age

307 Her real name is Thwangnang Khunnachai (ถ้องนาง คุณไชย).
308 Chanuman District today belongs to Amnat Charoen Province (จังหวัด อานาชรพิบูล), a newly created province that was split from Ubon Ratchathani Province in 1993.
309 See chapters 2 and 6.
of thirteen, she moved with her teacher Amphawn Sa-ngajit to the city of Khon Kaen and they formed a new mawlam mu troupe called the Ubon Phathana (คณบดีปลัดปัทมา), Khana Ubon Phathana. In the troupe, Angkhanang played several roles, from minor parts to leading female roles (called nang ek [นางเอก] in Thai). Due in large part to her talent and charisma, the troupe went on to become famous throughout Isan, and won first prize in the mawlam mu competition organized by the Khon Kaen TV Station in 1971.310

Production of the first large-scale Isan music film in 1972 marked a significant milestone for Isan culture. Entitled Bua Lamphu (บัวลำพู), it was named for Nong Bua Lamphu, a district of Udon Thani Province in Isan,311 where its story takes place. The film’s director, Bangkok-born Rangsi Tasanaphayak (รังสี หัศนพยัญช์), 1926-2003, needed to cast someone to play a mawlam singer in the film. He selected Angkhanang Khunnachai, who at the age of seventeen was already the most prominent mawlam mu singer in the region. One of the songs she sang in the movie, called “Isan Lam Phloen” (อีสานลำเพลิน), was composed by Surin Phaksiri, a well-known Isan songwriter and radio DJ in Bangkok who, as mentioned earlier, is known for having coined the term luk thung Isan in 1973. The song’s vocal line alternates between lam and phleng sections and begins with a free-rhythm introduction. Its instrumental accompaniment is similar to that of luk thung Isan, and uses primarily Western instruments except for a khaen and the phin in the introduction and with a melody and rhythmic structure derived from mawlam

311 Nong Bua Lamphu has been a province since 1993.
phloen (หมอแสงเพลิน), a theatrical genre of mawlam similar in its manner of performance to mawlam mu.\textsuperscript{312}

After the film was released, “Isan Lam Phloen,” which had been originally composed for the movie, was broadcast on several radio programs devoted to luk thung in Bangkok. The song quickly became popular, primarily among Isan listeners in Bangkok, and its popularity eventually spread to Isan as radio stations there also began to play it. As a result of the success of this song, Angkhanang became the first mawlam singer to become famous in the new “folk-pop” genre, luk thung mawlam. Many other Isan singers quickly began to record songs in the new style. The early style of luk thung mawlam represented by “Isan Lam Phloen,” with its emphasis on the lam vocal style derived from mawlam phloen, lost popularity in the 1980s as the general style of luk thung mawlam began to change. New luk thung mawlam songs began to feature melodies derived from other styles of mawlam such as lam doen (ลำเด่น) and lam toei (ลำเตย).

Unlike luk thung, in which most vocal melodies are original compositions, although some may derive from mostly Central Thai folk melodic fragments, e.g., likay (ลิเก) and lae (แหล)\textsuperscript{313} or classical melodies, the lam sections of luk thung mawlam songs are derived from traditional mawlam melodies. Because there exist only a small number of thamnong lam (ทำนองล่า), “melodic styles” in traditional mawlam, only three basic melodies are in common use in luk thung mawlam: thamnong lam phloen (ทำนองล่าเพลิน), thamnong lam toei (ทำนองลำเตย), and thamnong lam doen (ทำนองลำเด่น). Of

\textsuperscript{312} The theatrical aspect of mawlam phloen, which included the use of multiple singers in various roles and singing in dialogue with one another, is of course dispensed with in mawlam phloen-style luk thung mawlam songs, since luk thung mawlam is a non-theatrical solo tradition.

\textsuperscript{313} See chapter 2.
these three, the latter two are part of the mawlam klawn repertoire. The small number of thamnong in mawlam may be explained by the fact that the genre emphasizes the significance of the poetic text rather than the melody. The fact that the few thamnong, always short and memorable, are well known to singers allows them easily to put a new text to a familiar melody. For example, thamnong lam phloen, the melody used to sing mawlam phloen, is a short, repetitive tune, which nevertheless can be used endlessly in terms of singing poetic stanzas. A fourth thamnong lam, lam thang yao (คำแอนล่าหาง ยาว), sometimes used for the introductions of luk thung mawlam songs, is sung in free rhythm and sounds in traditional lam style.

The thamnong used in mawlam is usually a fragment of a traditional vocal melody which derives from some specific location of Lao tradition both in Northeast Thailand and in Laos. Among mawlam styles of Laotian origin, most have names which signify their local origins such as lam Salawan (หมอลา salaวัน), lam khawnsawan (หมอคำค่อน สราวศร), or lam Siphandawn (หมอลาสิพพ์ดอน). Conversely, most lam styles from Isan are not named for the area of origin but instead for the moods they project through their lyrics and/or musical accompaniment or for extra-musical aspects associated with them. For example, in lam phloen, phloen (เพลิน) means “happy,” “fun,” or “joyful;” in lam toei, toei (เดียร) means “courtship” or “flirting,” especially while dancing; and in lam doen, doen (เดิน) is “walking”; and most lam doen texts describe the sights one might see while walking or wandering in the forest.314

Following Angkhanang Khunnachai’s rise to fame, a number of Isan singers began to sing in the new luk thung mawlam style. Those singers, and the composers who

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314 The lam doen in luk thung mawlam derives from the longer poetic section, called “doen dong,” (เดินเดิน) walking through the forest from mawlam klawn, repartee singing. See chapter 2 and 6.
wrote songs for them, used only the melody and rhythmic pattern of *mawlam phloen*,
which had proven immensely popular as used in Angkhanang’s song “Isan Lam Phloen.”
In 1973, the *luk thung* singer Dao Bandawn (ตาว บ้านตอน), b. 1947, mentioned earlier in
the context of the early use of drum sets in Isan-style *luk thung*, decided to compose a *luk
thung mawlam* song. Unlike Angkhanang, Dao had no formal training in *mawlam*
singing. However, due to his lifelong love of singing and the fact that he was born and
grew up at a time when traditional music was still common in his region, he possessed a
degree of intuitive skill in *mawlam* singing. Following his primary school education,
Dao was ordained at the age of twelve as a *nen* (เน็น), or Buddhist novice, and remained
in his temple in the village of Bandawn Mayang (บ้านคดเนนบาง) near Yasothon City
until the age of eighteen. While there, he learned to perform the melodic Buddhist
preaching style known as *thet lae* (ทศนาแห้ว)315 and eventually became well known
throughout the area for his ability. Learning to sing *thet lae* amounted to preparational
training because this tradition serves to a certain degree as the foundation for traditional
Isan vocal music including *mawlam*.

At the age of eighteen, Dao, who had become fond of the Thai popular music he
had heard via radio and recordings, decided to become a country singer and left his life as
a Buddhist novice. At that time in the mid-1960s, the influence of popular music had
already become quite powerful in Isan, with those under the age of twenty-five most
enthusiastic about *luk thung* and other forms of modern music. Amateur country bands
began to proliferate throughout the Northeast, and Dao Bandawn joined one such band in
his village.

315 See Chapter 2.
After performing for several years with his local village band, Dao decided in the early 1970s to make his way to Bangkok in pursuit of wider fame. Instead of seeking a manager for advance support and promotion, as was the norm for most other Isan country singers starting their careers, he, himself, invested in the production of his first recording. At that time, a well produced recording played on the radio provided the most important avenue to popularity. However, getting a recording made was not a simple endeavor for most Isan singers, because such recordings had to be done in Bangkok and were expensive. According to Waeng Phlangwan, Dao Bandawn had to do agricultural labor to acquire enough cash for his project.316

By 1973, Dao had saved enough money to travel to Bangkok for his first recording session. He recorded only one song and shared the cost of the session with his friend, Thet Thasapawn (เทศ ทศพร), who was also an aspiring country singer from Yasothon. The result was a two sided 45-rpm single of which the pair received two hundred copies. Dao brought a copy of the record to Chai Chomphu (ชาย ชมภู่), an influential DJ at the Roi-et Radio Station (สถานีวิทยุกระจายเสียงจังหวัดรอยเอ็ด), Sathani Withayu Krung Kraji Siang Jangwat Roi-et, and requested that he broadcast his song. The song, composed in luk thung Isan style and entitled “Num Yasothon” (หนูมะยะสอน), “A Young Man from Yasothon,” became successful. Country music fans throughout Roi-et Province asked repeatedly and continually for several weeks that the song be played. Before long, it became popular throughout Isan and made Dao Bandawn the newest luk thung Isan star.

316 Waeng Phlangwan (แวน พลังวาน), Luk thung Isan: Isan History and the Legend of Popular Songs, (อีสาน: ประวัติศาสตร์ลำนำเพลงอีสาน) (Bangkok: สำนักเรียงปัจจุบัน, 2545/2002), 430.
Later that same year, Dao recorded more songs, most in *luk thung Isan* style but with at least one in *luk thung mawlam* style, entitled “Lam Phloen Jaroenjai” (คำเพลงเจริญไ équipé) or “Joyful Lam Phloen.” Isan listeners so enjoyed the cheerful-sounding song with its lively tempo, flirtatious lyrics, and syncopated vocal line sung in *thamnong lam phloen* that it became the second *luk thung mawlam* hit after Angkhanang Khunnachai’s “Isan Lam Phloen” of the preceding year. Of significance is the fact that Yasothon Province, where Dao grew up, is the area where the *mawlam phloen* style originated, and thus he had grown up surrounded by this tradition. His familiarity with *mawlam phloen* allowed him to sing comfortably and naturally in this style, as well as to compose *luk thung mawlam* songs in *thamnong lam phloen*.

The new style of *luk thung mawlam* represented by the successful early songs “Isan Lam Phloen” and “Lam Phloen Jaroenjai” was characterized by the novel mixture of traditional vocals with modern accompaniment which proved the perfect combination for Isan audiences of the early 1970s. The genre’s popularity increased and took its place alongside *luk thung Isan* by the mid-1980s as a mainstream element of Isan popular music.

**Mainstream of Isan Popular Music**

Although the basic template for today’s *luk thung mawlam* had already been developed in the early 1970s with Angkhanang Khunnachai’s “Isan Lam Phloen” and Dao Bandawn’s “Lam Phloen Jaroenjai,” the style did not develop significantly until the 1980s, when songwriters began to experiment with more modern themes in their lyrics and a more up-to-date sound in their accompaniments. Between 1973 and 1980, most new *luk thung mawlam* songs simply followed the models of the aforementioned earlier
hits rather than breaking new ground in terms of their lyrics or musical style. What would bring this genre into competition with the better established genre of luk thung Isan was the incorporation of lyrics that focused more on the realities of modern Isan life, particularly the experience of migrant workers in Bangkok as well as a more modern-sounding instrumental accompaniment borrowed from luk thung Isan. Both of these served to make the genre more relevant to the majority of Isan listeners. In contrast, most luk thung mawlam songs prior to 1980 had lyrics that dealt with village life and courtship and were nearly indistinguishable from those of traditional mawlam, as well as instrumental accompaniments that were often more traditional than modern sounding.

The transition of luk thung mawlam from a new and marginal “subgenre” to a mainstream style of Isan popular music began in 1980 with the efforts of Thawngmi Malai (ทองมี้ มาแลย์), b. 1944, another singer from Yasothon Province. Well trained in traditional mawlam phloen theatrical performance, he sang professionally with a mawlam phloen troupe for many years before he decided to record his first album in modern style. The album, released in 1980, was entitled Chomrom Thaeksi (ช่อมรมเทพซี), “The Taxi Drivers’ Club,” and was comprised of mawlam phloen-style luk thung mawlam songs with modern accompaniments. The songs featured Western rock instruments, with a saxophone as the lead melodic instrument, to a greater extent than had earlier luk thung mawlam songs. Due in large part to its title song, “Chomrom Thaeksi,” the album became a hit. The song described the carefree lifestyle of Isan taxi drivers in Bangkok:

Walking, walking around sightseeing, [I] meet a club of old taxi drivers drinking liquor [while] sitting in [their] favorite restaurant. After [they] return [their] vehicles to the taxi station, [their] darlings [i.e., wives or girlfriends] come sit and listen to lam [singing]…

317Translated by the current author.
At the time of the song’s release, most of the countless thousands of taxi and tuk-tuk (รถตู้กู้) drivers in Bangkok were Isan natives. *Tuk-tuk* is a tiny three-wheeled motorized vehicle used as a taxi in Thailand and other parts of Southeast and South Asia. In its Thai name, *rot* means “vehicle” and *tuk-tuk* is an onomatopoeic representation of the sound of its loud two-stroke engine. The migration of Isan workers to Bangkok, which had begun in the 1950s and increased exponentially in the 1970s, particularly after the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, led to taxi driving’s becoming, along with factory work, one of the most commonly held jobs for Isan migrants. When the recording appeared, it became a kind of theme song for the male drivers who listened to it over and over both in their taxis and at local roadside Isan food stalls during breaks between shifts. In fact, their behavior was much like that of the drivers described in the song’s lyrics. They enjoyed themselves at their favorite local hangouts and listened to *mawlam phloen*-style music while they ate and drank together.

Most Isan cab drivers returned to their home villages several times a year, usually for festivals or holidays such as Songkhran or the New Year. In my own home village, I recall that many of them, up to several dozen, appeared for holiday weekends in 1980. They brought home store-bought cassette tapes of *Chomrom Thaeksi* and played them while eating, drinking, and dancing all day in the front or back yards under the trees of homes of their relatives and friends. Those gatherings were attended not only by the drivers themselves, but by other male friends who would often join in as well. That brought the new style of music to a new group of listeners.318

318Women usually did not participate in such parties at that time. They were generally considered all-male events.
Although *luk thung mawlam* had achieved a degree of popularity among Isan audiences after its first releases in 1972 and 1973 and increasingly with the release of *Chomrom Thaeki* in 1980, the genre did not begin to flourish and become prevalent in the Thai music industry until a greater number of Isan singers began to record *luk thung mawlam* songs in 1985. The change in fashion may have occurred because Isan audiences became bored with the *luk thung Isan* style that had dominated since the 1960s and were receptive to a new sound experience. The novelty of *luk thung mawlam* was enhanced by the fact that, in that year, a new melody, *thamnong lam doen* from the *mawlam klawn* style of repartee singing, was added to the *luk thung mawlam* repertoire, whereas all previous *luk thung mawlam* songs had been based on *thamnong lam phloen*.

Sathit Thawngjian (สาทิต ทองจินทร์), b. 1960, was the first *luk thung mawlam* singer to come to notice for singing in the *mawlam doen* style on his first album, *Yut Numta Waithoet Nawng* (หยุดน้ำตาไว้เก็ดน่อง), “Please Wipe Away Your Tears, Honey,” which was released in 1985. After the album’s title song became a hit, a number of other singers sought to capitalize on its popularity by recording their own songs using *thamnong lam doen* in order to serve audience demand for the new sound. Some of the most notable include Somphot Duangsomphong’s (สมโภค ดวงสมฟง), b. 1960, “Mia Pa Phraw Sa-u” (เมียป้าเพราะสะอุด), “[My] Wife Ran Away Because [I Went to Work in] Saudi [Arabia],” 1986; 319 Phimpha Phawnsiri’s (พิมพ์ พะเวศรี), b. 1969, “Numta Mia Sau” (น้ำตาเมียชาว), “Tears of a Wife [Whose Husband Works in] Saudi Arabia,” 1987; Sommainoi Duangjaroen’s (สมมัยน้อย ดวงจรรย์), b. 1962, “Pawn Pawn Sing,” (ป่าน... “

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319 This song is based on the real-life experiences of Isan workers who lived abroad during the 1980s. In that decade, in addition to migrating to Bangkok for work, thousands of Isan men also left home to work in places such as Singapore, Japan, Taiwan, and even Saudi Arabia.
In 1987, yet another lam melodic style, thamnong lam toei (ทอเมีดี), was adapted for use in luk thung mawlam songs. Like thamnong lam phloen and thamnong lam doen, thamnong lam toei is similar in character, with brief metrical tunes in fast tempo and associated with happiness and fun. Along with thamnong lam doen, thamnong lam toei is derived from the mawlam klawn repertoire; but the latter has a special function in traditional mawlam klawn repartee singing as it is used for sections in which the singers perform “dance courtship,” that is, they flirt while dancing together at the end of a performance cycle in the style of the malwam klawn “form.” In traditional mawlam toei, either male or female singers sing; and, then when finished singing, they dance together, often in a suggestive manner, while the accompanying instruments continue to play the thamnong lam toei. As adapted for luk thung mawlam, however, the association with dance does not carry over and the melodic and rhythmic structures are the primary components borrowed for use in the popular style.

The first singer to bring lam toei to the folk-pop music industry was Phawnsak Sawngsaeng (พจน์วลัย ส่องแสง), b. 1960. Born and raised in Khon Kaen Province, he started out as a luk thung Isan singer and released three albums between 1981 and 1984. His first luk thung mawlam album, entitled Sao Chan Kangkop (สาวจันทร์กังโกะ), “Miss

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321 See chapter 6.
Chan’s Broken Heart,” was released in 1986. Like Dao Bandawn, Phawnsak had no formal training in traditional lam singing but simply absorbed the style as he heard it while he grew up in the 1960s and 1970s. His choice to adapt a new form of lam to the luk thung mawlam context, influenced by earlier successes in mawlam phloen and mawlam doen style by other singers, proved equally appealing to then current musical tastes, and the album became a huge success in 1987.

By 1987, luk thung mawlam had achieved its present form, with the three primary melodic styles thamnong lam phloen, lam doen, and lam toei the basis for most songs, although a few other thamnong, including thamnong lam Phuthai (ทำองหล้ายไทย), thamnong lam tang wai (ทำองลำต่างワイ), and thamnong lam khawnsawan (ทำองลำคอนสวรรค์), may occasionally also be encountered.

**Conclusion**

More than two decades have passed since luk thung mawlam, at first an experimental combination of traditional Isan singing with modern accompaniment, began gradually to become a dominant force in the Thai country music industry. As the Isan listening public’s taste began to favor this new “folk-pop” genre, both the number of singers and of new songs in this genre increased rapidly during the 1980s and 1990s. By the mid-1980s, Central Thai style luk thung had already declined in popularity to such an extent that for the first time the two mainstream country music genres which accounted

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322 This is a poetic translation of the song’s title, in which the Isan word kangkop (กังกอป) means “to shade one’s eyes.” In the song, the female protagonist is continually looking into the distance for her disappeared lover and uses her hand to shade her eyes from the sun.


324 When any of these latter three are used as the basis for a luk thung mawlam song, it generally contains no phleng section.
for most sales for Thailand’s music industry, *luk thung Isan* and *luk thung mawlam*, were Isan based. The primary audience for these genres, Isan natives living in Isan as well as in Bangkok, fully one third of Thailand’s population, has supported their music of choice consistently with their purchase of cassettes, CDs, and the more recent VCDs, as well as through concert attendance.325

The relative popularity of these two genres has fluctuated. From 1973 to 1985, *luk thung Isan* enjoyed its greatest popularity; and, from 1985 to 1995, *luk thung mawlam* surpassed it as Isan musical tastes changed toward the latter style’s more traditional sound. Since 1995, both genres have been roughly equal in popularity, alternating according to which singer is most popular at any given point in time.

The rise of Isan popular music, from its first manifestations in the Lao flavored *phleng ramwong* of Benjamin in the late 1940s and the early *phleng luk thung* of Suraphon Sombatjaroen in the mid 1950s to the late 1960s to the mainstream *luk thung Isan* and *luk thung mawlam* of the present day, mirrors the development and modernization of the Isan region and its people over the same period. Due in large part to the ever increasingly prevalent trend in which Isan people leave their rural homes to seek employment in Bangkok, this formerly marginalized population gradually has become more acclimated to a modern, urban way of life. As the migrants sent money home and took back many modern conveniences to their home villages, economic conditions in Isan began to improve. At the same time, the region, formerly neglected by the central government, benefitted from significant development projects of the Thai government.

325 Among the other regions of Thailand, many Southern Thai migrant workers in Bangkok also enjoy listening to *luk thung Isan* and *luk thung mawlam*. Smaller numbers of Central and Northern Thai people also listen to Isan style *luk thung*, with most Bangkokians preferring Thai and Western pop, R&B, rock, jazz, and hip-hop.
from after the Second World War and through the Vietnam War period. The people of the Isan region have gradually modernized and modified their traditional culture, all of which will be focused on in the next chapter.
CHAPTER V

DEVELOPMENT AND MODERNIZATION OF ISAN: TRADITIONAL LIFE TRANSFORMED

Although the area of the Khorat Plateau, known today as the Isan region and comprising all of Northeast Thailand, under Siamese control as early as the late eighteenth century, the time of the defeat of the Lao by Siam, the Siamese did not formally govern the area as a part of the kingdom of Siam until the reign of Chulalongkorn (Rama V), r. 1868-1910, when the area was integrated into Siam through the *hua mueang* (หัวเมือง) system, later replaced with the *monthon* (มณฑล) system and then by the *jangwat* (จังหวัด) or province system of today. Prior to the fall of Wiang Chan in 1778, the Siamese government exerted control over the region as a vassal state under nominal control of the Lao kingdoms. During that time, each main city in the region was able to govern itself independently, except for the demand to send taxes to the Siamese monarch each year. Not until nearly another century had passed and Western powers began colonial efforts in Southeast Asia, did the Siamese begin to think about protecting their territories against Western incursion. As part of that effort, Chulalongkorn began to reform the kingdom’s administration. He then officially designated the Lao territories of Siam, which amounted to modern day Isan and Laos, as four *mueang* (เมือง), each with a capital city called a *hua mueang Lao* (หัวเมือง), and divided the remainder of the kingdom’s land into *mueang*. Subsequently, he assigned a
number of bureaucrats from Bangkok to go out and govern these *hua mueang Lao*. The new system of administration, when established in the Isan region, was significant in that it was the first time the entire area of the Khorat Plateau became an official part of the nation-state of Siam.

Following in the footsteps of his father, King Mongkut (Rama IV), r. 1851-1868, who had begun to adopt elements of Western culture, Chulalongkorn worked to modernize the Siamese kingdom during his own forty-two year reign. The policies of Westernization and modernization first instituted in the Bangkok metropolitan area gradually spread throughout Siam, first to the rest of the Central Plain and later into the Northern, Southern, and Northeastern regions of the kingdom. From Chulalongkorn’s time to the present, as a part of government policy as well as because of socioeconomic factors, Isan’s population has gradually and inexorably shifted away from an identification with Lao culture and traditions toward a new identity as “Isan-Thai.” The new identity has induced the people of the Northeast region to combine a political affiliation with the modern nation-state of Thailand with a retention of many aspects of Lao culture.

**Early Development**

Prior to the reign of Chulalongkorn there was little development of any sort in the Khorat Plateau. During his reign some development was initiated, though on a much smaller scale than that undertaken since the 1970s. Nevertheless, the early development programs were significant in that they opened the door to increased transportation and communications between the Isan region and the capital city of Bangkok. Chulalongkorn focused his attention on extending the national rail, telegraph, and education systems to
Isan, as part of an effort to turn all of the kingdom’s regions toward Bangkok. The first railroad from Bangkok to the Isan region was an extension of the rail line that had formerly ended at Saraburi, 108 kilometers northeast of Bangkok in Saraburi Province, then at the border of the Central region. Upon its completion in 1900, that line, then extended 306 kilometers, ran from Bangkok to Khorat or Nakhon Rachasima City, at that time the largest city in the Isan region. Khorat was the first train station in Isan until the 1930s, when two additional rail lines running in other directions were built. The first ran east, ending at Warin Chamrap District, Ubon Ratchathani Province; and it remains the last province in Isan before the Maekhong River and Laos. The Siamese government took thirty years to finish the construction of this 575 kilometer line, which began operation in 1930. The second of the new lines ran northeast from Khorat to Nong Khai, with one of the major stations along the route at Khon Kaen, in the center of the region. The construction of that rail line, which at first ran only from Khorat to Khon Kaen, was completed in 1933. It was extended to the city of Udon Thani in northern Isan in 1941 and finally reached Nong Khai, the last station before the border with Laos, in 1956, a total distance of 624 kilometers from Bangkok.

During the same period, from the late 1800s to the 1950s, the railway system expanded significantly to connect Bangkok to the nation’s other regions. That allowed inhabitants of Northeast Thailand, as well as people from Northern and Southern Thailand, all of whom had previously traveled only by foot, oxcart, or horse, to travel longer distances and to go to Bangkok in large numbers for the first time.
After World War II

The two succeeding monarchs, King Vajiravudh, r. 1910-1925, and King Prajadhipok, r.1925-1935, pursued further development in Isan until the absolute monarchy of Siam was abolished in 1932.\footnote{326 Although the absolute monarchy was abolished in 1932, the king was allowed to remain as a king in the new system, constitutional monarchy, until he decided to abdicate his own throne in 1935.} The government of the newly established Thai nation then assumed power, with little progress in development directed to the Isan region over the next decade. During the Second World War, most development in Thailand was suspended; but after the war massive progress in development included the Isan region and that formerly neglected area of the nation was gradually transformed into the developed region it is today. Although some modern facilities were initially brought into the region earlier, most roads and highways, telephone, electrical, and water systems, airports, and radio and television stations gradually appeared after the World War II.

The most significant factor to influence the transformation of Isan from an underdeveloped backwater to a semi-modern and developed region was aid provided by the United States during the Cold War and the Vietnam War, beginning in the 1950s. The Cold War, which began at the end of the Second World War in 1945, affected Southeast Asia in the ongoing power struggles between communism, as promoted by the Soviet Union, and democracy, as supported by the U.S.A., in most nations of the region. By 1948, communism had spread to East Asia and Mao Zedong’s revolution was ready to transform China from the Republic of China into the People's Republic of China. The new and powerful Chinese Communist Party began to provide support to communist revolutionary movements in many East and Southeast Asian nations, while the United States tried to prevent that influence from leading to the communist overthrow of those
governments. That rivalry led to a full blown war in Korea (1950-1953). Thailand was one of the countries in Mainland Southeast Asia that had a good relationship with the United States as a loyal ally during the Korean War. Thailand sent more than six thousand military personnel to support the United Nations and United States effort in Korea.

The United States became involved in warfare in Vietnam as early as the Second World War, when the U.S. Army Air Force took action in 1942 to challenge the Japanese in Vietnam, who in the preceding year had begun to occupy the country with the blessing of the Vichy French government. Ho Chi Minh, who in 1941 established the Viet Minh (short for Việt Nam Độc Lập Động Minh Hối, literally “League for the Independence of Vietnam”), a revolutionary organization formed in southern China with the purpose of seeking independence from foreign domination, saw an opportunity in the Japanese occupation of Vietnam in that it could serve to weaken French colonial power. By 1944, the United States Office of Strategic Services, the predecessor of the Central Intelligence Agency, had taken notice of the Viet Minh’s anti-Japanese efforts and began to provide assistance to the group, which established a military wing in the mountains of northern Vietnam in the same year. After the Japanese defeat in August, 1945, French officials began to return the following month; and, by 1949, they had regained much of their control over Vietnam. They supported a nominally independent Saigon based government called the State of Vietnam, within the French Union.

By 1945, the Viet Minh had achieved wide popularity throughout northern Vietnam, particularly among peasants in rural villages. By the time World War II ended in August, 1945, the Viet Minh already occupied the northern and central areas of the
country; and they then seized central government offices in the August Revolution which forced the abdication of Emperor Bao Dai. Ho Chi Minh declared independence from France on September 2, 1945. That led to the outbreak of the First Indochina War (1946-1954) between the Viet Minh and the French who still occupied southern Vietnam and attempted to save its remaining area of control there.

Alarmed about the growth of communism in Asia, the United States, which had supported the Viet Minh against the Japanese during the Second World War, ignored Ho Chi Minh’s pleas for assistance against France. In 1949, the United States began actively to provide military aid to France in its effort to protect its colonial areas from the Viet Minh. That reversal was motivated by the United States’ increasingly strong anticommunist foreign policy. As set out by United States President Dwight D. Eisenhower in his “domino theory” speech of April 7, 1954, people in the United States government believed that if Vietnam became independent through a communist independence movement supported by nearby communist states such as The Soviet Union and The People's Republic of China, the latter of which had just recently become communist, that would mean Vietnam would become yet another Asian nation to fall to communism. If that were allowed to happen, the United States government officials believed communism might eventually take over all the countries in Southeast Asia, one falling after another like dominoes; and that would lead to massive opposition to democracy in a large, strategic part of the world.

Although the United States provided massive economic and military assistance to the French between 1949 and 1954, the Viet Minh delivered a resounding and

327 At that time, there were “Two Chinas,” of which the smaller was the Republic of China (Taiwan) that was not and is not part of the communist state.
humiliating defeat to the French at the Battle of Dien Bien Phu in the spring of 1954. A peace agreement between the French and the Viet Minh was arranged at a conference in Geneva in the spring of the same year. The resulting Geneva Accords specified that France had to withdraw immediately from Vietnam. According to the negotiated agreement, however, Vietnam would be divided temporarily. The Viet Minh had a right to retain political control over the half of the country north of the seventeenth parallel while the French supported State of Vietnam, renamed the Republic of Vietnam in 1955 and which covered the portion of Vietnam south of the seventeenth parallel, would control that southern area. The two sides were to form a unified national government through a supervised nationwide election that was supposed to be held in 1956.

However, Ngo Dinh Diem, the Prime Minister of the State of Vietnam, refused to participate in the election as he opined that it would be impossible for a free and fair election to take place in the north. As a result, Vietnam remained divided into two states: the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam) and the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam), established on October 26, 1955. While Ho Chi Minh held political power in North Vietnam as both President and Prime Minister, Diem, supported by the United States, was appointed the first President of South Vietnam.

In 1960, the North Vietnamese communists began a vigorous military offensive to “liberate” the South. In an effort to check the spread of communism in Vietnam and neighboring Southeast Asian nations, the United States government decided to take action to bolster the democratic governments of South Vietnam and Thailand.

Beginning in the early 1960s, the United States funded the establishment of several military bases in Thailand, including several air bases in Isan, to be used as the
primary area for launching bombing attacks on North Vietnam. In 1967 and 1968, Thailand, as an ally of the United States, sent soldiers to South Vietnam to assist the United States in the Vietnam War. During the war, the United States not only strengthened the Royal Thai Armed Forces but also helped Thailand in terms of improving its national economy and paying for such things as roads, health clinics, water and electrical systems, agricultural development, and improved radio communications between the capital city and remote areas of the Northeast. During that period, in addition, the Thai government worked to develop the rural economy and communications in Isan. The actual reason for the rural development programs was to support internal and national security. The government believed that an improved life for the inhabitants of villages throughout the region would keep them happy and prevent their joining a communist insurgency based in Isan. Both Thai and United States governments’ development efforts in Isan during the Vietnam War era can be seen as part of the anticommunist strategy to suppress the communist insurgency in the region and to win the war in Vietnam.

Roads

Prior to the 1960s, the majority of Isan people traveled on foot, by oxcart, or on horseback through the region’s rice fields and forests. Consequently, common people normally did not travel long distances because of the inconvenience and discomfort of those modes of transportation. By foot or oxcart, it might take an entire day to travel thirty kilometers; and oxcarts were used primarily to carry goods rather than passengers. Normally only the elderly and children rode in oxcarts. Most young adults and middle
aged people preferred to walk alongside. With the exception of merchants and peddlers, most people traveled only short distances. Farmers typically traveled each day during the growing season from their villages to their rice fields, usually a distance of one to five kilometers at most. A few times a year for important festivals and celebrations, people traveled to nearby villages to visit friends and relatives, perhaps two to five kilometers away.

In Isan prior to the 1970s, merchants were among the few people who traveled long distances with their oxcart caravans; and it could take them up to a month to reach a destination, perhaps a city in Isan or even in another region of Thailand. To travel about 200 kilometers from Roi-et to Khorat City, for example, took a month, whereas today it takes only about three hours by car. It took even longer to reach Bangkok, which was another destination for Isan merchants. By the 1930s, after the first rail systems reached the Isan region, one from Bangkok to Ubon Ratchathani and the other from Bangkok to Khon Kaen, some Isan merchants began taking their goods to Bangkok by train rather than oxcart. The rail lines also allowed common people who lived near the railway stations to travel more easily to Bangkok and other parts of Isan. Although the rail system served to encourage people to travel longer distances, those who lived far from the railway were for the most part unable to take advantage of the new mode of transportation.

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328 Traditionally, those healthy enough to walk did so in order not to drain the energy of the oxen, whose primary purpose was to carry goods in the cart rather than passengers.
In *Isan Muea Wan Wan*, “Isan in the Past” (2533/1990), Kaw Sawat(ti)phanit (คำสั่งการเชี่ยว), a well known Isan native who held the position of Minister of Education from 1975 to 1980, tells a story about Isan during the 1930s and 1940s. He writes about his travel to study in Bangkok from his Province of Roi-et before the system of paved roads was established in Isan. In 1942, according to Kaw, the most convenient way to get to Bangkok was by train. From Roi-et City, his provincial city, the closest train station was the Ban Phai Station in Ban Phai District, Khon Kaen Province. In order to catch the train to Bangkok, he had to wake up early to catch a lorry from Roi-et City to Ban Phai Station. Although only 108 kilometers, the trip took an entire day on extremely poor dirt roads with many small, narrow wooden bridges across streams and canals. Today this route is a four lane paved highway and the trip takes only about one and a half
hours by automobile. At that time travellers had to stay overnight in Ban Phai and rise early to catch the train to Bangkok the next morning.\(^{329}\)

![Image of a typical “bus” in 1962](image)

**Figure 17.** Typical “bus” on its way to Bangkok in 1962 stopped to pick up goods from a broken ox-cart on a main road in Isan. Reprinted from Francis Cripps, *the Far Province* (New York: Hutchinson & Co LTD, 1965), 152a.

In Northeast Thailand, development programs instituted during the period between 1954 and 1960 focused on transportation with some funds coming from the U.S. aid organization, United States Operation Mission (USOM). From 1955 to 1957, the first paved road from Bangkok to Isan was built. Called the Mitraphap Highway (ถนนมิตรภาพ), Thanon Mitraphap or “Friendship Highway,” it ran from Bangkok through the major cities of Khorat and Khon Kaen to the Maekhong River at Nong Khai. The highway was constructed to run more or less parallel to the railway established

during the late monarchic period. It cut through the center of the Isan region from its southwestern edge to the Maekhong River in the north. Since the 1960s, the highway has replaced the railway as the primary means of passenger transportation from Isan to Bangkok.

![Image of a bus](image)

Figure 18. *Sawng thaeo*, a Japanese-made vehicle, which became Isan local transportation used for “everything” since the late 1970s.

Over subsequent decades, many secondary roads were built to link towns all over Isan to the Friendship Highway. Today, to travel from Roi-et City to Bangkok takes only seven to nine hours by passenger bus or a little less by automobile. By the 1960s, bicycles became popular in Isan, although they were largely replaced by motorcycles by the mid-1980s. By the 1970s, the use of oxcarts began to decline as motor vehicles became more common in both urban and rural areas of the region. By the early 1980s, most villages had at least one heavy motor vehicle, usually a *siplaw* (สิปแลว), “ten
wheeler” and sawng thaeo (สองแถว), “two rows (of seats)” a Japanese made “pickup truck” to serve inhabitants’ transportation needs. Those who wished to travel to the city paid a small fee to the vehicle’s owner/driver.

Transition of Isan Economy Due to U.S. Aid

During the Vietnam War, with USOM assistance, of the many military bases that were built throughout Thailand, the largest were located in Nakhon Rachasima, Khon Kaen, Udonthani, Ubon Ratchathani, and Nakhon Phanom to serve as staging platforms for attacks on North Vietnam. As many as 45,000 United States military personnel in Thailand were stationed at those bases, and that led to the creation of thousands of new jobs for Isan inhabitants, both inside and outside the bases. Most of the new job opportunities required low skilled labor but provided an attractive alternative to the traditional occupation of wet rice farming. The pay for the jobs was fair, although not extravagant. They paid better than a farmer’s average yearly income when he sold his rice at the end of the harvest year. As an example, the aspiring luk thung Isan singer, Thepphawn Phetubon (เทพระพ เพรรูบด), b. 1947, worked for six years on the Ubon Ratchathani Air Force Base. He began as a janitor, a position quite common among Isan workers, was later promoted to the position of houseboy, and eventually worked his way up to the position of supplier, in charge of procurement.\(^{330}\)

The many new businesses outside the bases included bars, restaurants, barbershops, souvenir shops, and, especially, prostitution facilities to serve the demands of the U.S. servicemen. In addition, many U.S. supported development projects, the most

important of which was the building of new roads, also led to the creation of many new, non-agricultural jobs that paid cash wages. Those who filled the new jobs gained their first experiences of modernity. They became acclimated to a new way of life based not on concern for one’s family and farm but instead on individualism and the acquisition of money and material goods. That period represented a turning point for Isan people in that the economic changes led to a transition from the traditional way of life based on subsistence agriculture and barter to a new, capitalist system based on the buying and selling of goods and services. As progressively more people became accustomed to being paid cash wages, they became interested in spending their wages on newly available consumer products such as modern clothing, cosmetics, and motorcycles. Along with the economic changes came a greater urbanization in many parts of Isan which resulted in workers’ attempting to imitate the Bangkok life style although, of course, on a smaller scale. After the Vietnam War ended in 1975, thousands of Isan laborers lost their jobs as the United States military forces withdrew. Miller noticed that some bases had vanished by that year. One in Khon Kaen was already gone in 1973 and probably one, also, in Ubon Ratchathani Province. He said that the Kosa Hotel, Rongram Kosa (โรงแรมโตรงราม) in Khon Kaen City, for example, was built especially for the GIs. The hotel, however, is still in operation today. Workers there had grown accustomed to the new and more comfortable way of life and did not want to return to their family farms; thus, they comprised the majority of the wave of Isan migrants who relocated to Bangkok for employment in the modern capitalist economic system beginning in the early 1970s.

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331 Terry Miller, Personal communication.
332 See chapter 3.
Radio and TV

In February, 1931, King Prajadhipok established the first radio system for the Kingdom of Siam. At first it consisted of a single radio station, called Sathani Withayu Krung Thep Thi Phaya Thai (สถานีวิทยุกรุงเทพ ที่พญาไท), or “Bangkok Radio Station at Phya Thai,” located in the Waikun Thepayasathan Hall of the Phya Thai Hotel in Bangkok. In 1932, the new Thai government converted the hotel for use as a clinic for the Kawng Senarak (กองสนามรักษา), a branch of the Royal Thai Armed Forces; and the radio station moved to the Bangkok Subdistrict of Sala Daeng which is today part of Bang Rak District. That radio station served the people of Bangkok for many decades; and, after World War II, several more stations appeared in Central Thailand before the system was extended to other regions of the country. In Isan for example, the first radio station was not built until 1960 in Khon Kaen City.

The radio broadcast system served an important function as a device facilitating internal communications in the nation during the Cold War and the Vietnam War. The Thai government used it as a tool to send propaganda to rural areas to promote the government’s anticommunist policy. Beginning in 1964, the national government provided inexpensive transistor radios to rural people throughout the country. Approximately eighty radio stations were built in the country during the 1960s, of which more than fifty belonged to the Royal Thai Armed Forces. Moreover, during the war, the Thai government also allowed the United States to build many more radio stations as a part of the U.S.’s Radio Free Asia Program, established in 1950. The primary purpose of these stations was to promote the anticommunist ideology of the Thai government and the United States. By 1972, there were already sixty-four radio stations that belonged to
the Royal Thai Army but only twenty-one stations that belonged to the Public Relations Department (กรมประชาสัมพันธ์), Krom Prachasamphan. Besides airing prodemocracy and anticommmunist propaganda, a number of other programs that featured traditional folk and popular music, radio dramas, and local news were also produced for radio stations throughout Thailand. Many commercial products, like Coca-Cola, toothpaste, over the counter medicines, and small appliances such as electric fans and irons, were introduced and promoted for purchase by Isan audience members for the first time through those radio broadcasts.

Khon Kaen City, centrally located in Northeast Thailand, had the first radio station in the region. After that, more radio stations were established in the other main cities, including Ubon Ratchathani, Udon Thani, Sakhon Nakhon, and Nakhon Rachasima. The radio stations served to link remote Isan villages with each other and the outside world. In addition to airing local content, the regional radio stations also broadcast many programs produced in Bangkok for distribution throughout the country, including even remote areas of Isan. For example, every morning and evening at 8 a.m. and 6 p.m., all government radio stations throughout the nation played, and continue today to play, the Thai National Anthem, at which time everyone in a public place is supposed to stop whatever activity in which he/she is engaged, and stand silently for the duration of the anthem. Miller experienced this in 1973 and noted large bullhorn-shaped loudspeakers for the broadcasts on every main corner of Mahasarakham Town. Every morning and evening, the government also broadcast local and national news as well as

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333 Established under the name Publicity Division (กรมประชาสัมพันธ์), Krom Khosanakan, in 1933 and retitled under its current name in 1952, Thailand’s Public Relations Department was charged with promoting the government’s position through the media of radio, television, and short wave radio broadcasting.

334 As it was a high power AM station, Khon Khaen Radio’s signal covered large portions of the Isan region.
the national anthem. The number of radio stations throughout the country has increased exponentially since the 1980s. Each of the nineteen provinces in Isan now has at least one radio station. Although some nationally syndicated programs produced in Bangkok are still broadcast on every local station throughout the country, many programs of local interest, soap operas, news, and advertisements are locally produced and broadcast. Since the advent of radio in Isan, many DJs have chosen to use Isan dialect rather than standard Thai in their programs. This has had the effect of helping listeners feel more comfortable purchasing the various products the DJs encourage them to buy, in addition to making the programs more intelligible to local audiences. Thus has developed an increasing acceptance of modern commercial goods in Isan, with such items seen as both normal and essential.

Figure 19. Main street of Mahasarakham, provincial capital city of Mahasarakham Province in 1962, which was just a small town with approximately fifteen thousand people. Today it is one of the modern cities in Isan. Reprinted from Francis Cripps, the Far Province (New York: Hutchinson & Co LTD, 1965), 88a.

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335 Terry Miller, personal communication, 2008.
Television came to Thailand only in 1955, with the first TV station established in Bangkok. That station, located in Bangkhunphrom District, now part of Phra Nakhon District, was called TV Channel Four Bangkhunphrom, Sathani Thorathat Thai Tiwi Chawng 4 Bangkhunphrom, (สถานีโทรทัศน์ไทยทีวี ช่อง 4 บางขุนพรหม); and it was operated by the Public Relations Department. The second station, Channel Seven (สถานีโทรทัศน์กองทัพบกช่อง 7, Sathani Thorathatsi Kawng Thapbok Chawng 7, the “Royal Army Television Station Channel 7,” was built in 1967. This station, which still exists, was established by the Royal Thai Army. Its primary purpose originally was to support the Cold War agenda of the Thai and United States governments by airing prodemocracy and anticommmunism programs.

In the Isan region, the first TV station, established in the city of Khon Kaen in 1962, was called Channel 4 Khon Kaen TV Station (สถานีโทรทัศน์ ช่อง 4 จังหวัดขอนแก่น), Sathani Thorathat Chawng 4 Jangwat Khon Kaen. At first, however, few people within the station’s broadcast range were able to watch its programs because few even in the cities had television sets, which were quite expensive. Most villagers had neither television sets nor the electricity needed to power them until the 1980s. In the city of Roi-et, for example, TV sets began to appear in homes around 1967 and 1968, with programs available only via one single channel, the aforementioned Channel Four Khon Kaen TV Station.336

In my village, television sets first appeared around 1980 as a few families purchased them after the first electrical system was installed. Prior to that, inhabitants of some small cities and towns that did not yet have electricity used diesel powered

336 Chumdet Detphimon (ชุมเดช เด็ยภิมณ์), personal communication.
generators for the power needed to operate TV sets. At first, most families did not have enough money to buy their own TV sets, and people often visited the homes of neighbors who did have TV sets to watch their favorite programs. In the villages, those few who had stable jobs, usually with only low incomes, such as schoolteachers and shopkeepers, were the first to own TV sets. Unlike today, in the 1980s, there was no wide selection of programming available in Thailand. Programs were broadcast at only quite limited times during weekdays, with somewhat more programming on weekends. Thus, it became common for villagers throughout Isan to gather to watch TV on weekend evenings from seven o’clock to around ten o’clock. The programming they watched consisted primarily of news, movies, made-for-TV dramas, and Thai boxing, all punctuated by advertisements for consumer products. The boxing shown on Sunday, especially, was and still is popular among Isan men.

The majority of households in villages throughout Isan had TV sets by the 1980s. The ubiquity of televisions had a strong effect on the region’s culture. TV became the main entertainment in the villages, with multi-part dramas particularly favored. Instead of chatting about farming or fishing or exchanging local gossip, villagers instead began to discuss the programs they watched on TV. Another result of the newfound popularity of TV was that traveling cinemas, formerly a popular form of village entertainment throughout Isan, became markedly less popular from the late 1980s.\(^{337}\) Since that time,

\(^{337}\) Such film showings were presented by companies that traveled from village to village in hopes of organizing showings, and they sold tickets directly to audience members. This type of traveling cinema was called nang rei, (นั่งเรีย), “peddling cinema.”
aside from occasional outdoor film showings at local festivals, a way for Isan villagers to see movies on a big screen is to travel to a city to watch a movie in a movie theater. Because of the inconvenience and expense involved, most villagers have come to prefer watching movies at home rather than going to see them elsewhere. Movie rental became common in Isan cities from the early 1980s in the VSH format. Even in Bangkok, the movie on tape killed most theaters, and they have disappeared. However, a few of the great Bangkok movie theaters are still able to maintain their businesses in big malls. Renting a movie in Isan has become common not just among city people but also among villagers within the last decade. The VCD is the current format and is quite affordable for most people. People can, if they wish, watch TV twenty-four hours a day; and there are many more channels, local, national, and international, for those who have satellite dishes. The extended range of programming allows inhabitants of even the most remote villages to see what life in the city and around the rest of the world is like.

In short, since the 1960s, radio, television, and movies have been important factors influencing the region’s gradual transformation from a traditional to a modern society. By exposing Isan’s populace to urban and international lifestyles, these media have served to encourage Isan people to adopt modern ways and to solidify acceptance of a consumer based culture. Moreover, although a telephone system was already established in Siam in the late 1880s, it was then limited only to Bangkok City and adjacent towns. In 1954 under the Ministry of Transport and Communications, the Thai

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338This kind of outdoor film showing, called nang klang plaeng (นังกลางแจ้ง) or “central area cinema,” takes place in a temple yard, school athletic field, rice field, or other open area, similar to a drive in movie in the United States, though with audience members generally seated on straw mats on the ground rather than in cars. Such showings are presented by companies hired by the inhabitants of a village, town, or city for festivals and celebrations, in addition to or in place of musical entertainment. Usually the company sets up a temporary screen, often supported by a huge metal frame, and shows movies with a 35mm film projector.
government founded the Telephone Organization of Thailand (องค์การโทรศัพท์แห่งประเทศไทย), which still mainly served the Bangkok metropolitan area, including Thonburi, with extended service. It was not until 1964, that Isan and other outer regions received telephone service although it was still limited to only a few numbers available in the major urban centers. Among Isan villages it was not until the mid 1990s that phone lines were finally installed. Even then it only one line was available for a whole village, often installed at a village headman’s home. It was a public phone line for villagers mostly to receive phone calls from their children at work in Bangkok. It was not convenient as the person who first picked up the phone was usually a family member of the village headman or someone else who lived close to the telephone booth. It took at least a few minutes to bring the intended recipient from his or her home to the phone at the village headman’s house. As a result, anyone who wanted to make contact by phone had to call at least twice to actually talk to whomever they called in the village. It was not until the mid-2000s that the more convenient new mobile cell phone system became well established throughout the country. Today most families in a village have at least one telephone to keep contact with their children, friends, and/or relatives who live away from home, perhaps in Bangkok. Certainly prior to the mid 1990s, the telecommunication system was not efficient for Isan villagers in comparison to the radio and TV systems.

Although the home computer is not common among villagers, the internet is available in most cities in Isan today. Beginning in the early 2000s, internet services became common in Isan. While a personal computer is still expensive for Thais, everybody can go online by paying a small fee for internet service at an “internet shop”
or an “internet café.” It is a new kind of business that is extremely popular even in every small subdistrict town; and one can find at least one such shop there today. This system allows Isan people see and consume whatever the rest of the people of the world are consuming.

Electricity

The first electrical system was established in Siam in the 1890s and was confined at first to Bangkok. It powered the city’s early tram lines and streetlights; and it supplied electricity to the homes of the privileged. Until the Second World War, electric power, in cities and in remote areas, was generated by small diesel dynamos operated either by private companies or the government. Electric lights were used only at night, particularly in Bangkok and other larger cities. In 1954, the government developed plans to extend the electrical system to the whole country; and, by 1960, the Provincial Electricity Authority (องค์การไฟฟ้าส่วนภูมิภาค), Ongkan Faifa Suan Phumiphak, was in operation. It rapidly brought electric power to provincial cities, and district and subdistrict towns in all the nation’s regions. In Isan, Khon Kaen was one of the first cities to obtain an electrical system in 1958. Some other provincial cities such as Nakhon Ratchasima, Ubon Ratchathani, and Udon Thani received electrical systems by 1963.

In the 1960s, the national government developed a plan to begin generating electricity for Isan through hydropower rather than rely solely on fossil fuels. In order to do that, the newly established North-East Electricity Authority (NEEA) developed a plan

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to dam tributaries of the Mun River, itself a tributary of the Maekhong and one of the
most important rivers in the region. They began to build the first, Ubonrat Dam
(เชื่อมลุมรัตน์), Khuean Ubonrat, across the Nam Phong River in Khon Kaen Province
in 1964. It became operational in 1966. That dam, still in operation, produced enough
electric power to satisfy nearly the entire Isan region except for the most southerly
provinces: Surin, Buriram, Sisaket, and Ubon Ratchathani.

Because of Isan’s ever increasing demand for electrical power, in 1971 and 1972,
two more dams were built: Sirindhorn Dam (เชื่อมสิรินธร), Khuean Sirinthawn, across
the Lam Dom Noi River in Ubon Ratchathani Province, and Chulabhorn Dam
(เชื่อมจุลภัณฑ์), Khuean Julaphawn, in Chaiyaphum Province. These two dams
produced enough electrical power to supply the provincial cities and subdistrict towns of
all the region’s provinces. Today the region has a total of six hydroelectric dams and one
pumped storage power plant, which generate enough power not only for all of Isan’s
inhabitants but also surplus electricity distributed to other regions. Since the 1970s, with
World Bank support, the government of Laos has also built several large dams to produce
electricity, most of which they sell to Thailand.341

Electricity is an important factor in the movement away from Isan’s traditional
way of life to the faster paced modern lifestyle. Until the 1980s, very few Isan villagers
had access to electricity.342 Most villagers used to light their homes with kerosene lamps;
and electrical appliances such as refrigerators, electric fans, stereos, and TVs that had
become common in urban areas could not yet be used.

341Today, even more dams have been built, especially one in China. That has caused the Maekhong River
literally to dry up.
342For example, my village and other villages nearby did not have electrical power until 1982.
After their homes were wired for electricity, villagers began to spend more time listening to music and watching TV. They went to bed later. Electricity also allowed for the amplification of live musical performances, which could often be heard throughout a village late into the night, especially during festivals and other celebrations. Electricity led Isan villagers increasingly to adopt a way of life based on materialism. Instead of leading materially simple lives as they had in the past, the availability of electricity encouraged villagers to purchase electrical appliances as they gradually became accustomed to the convenience such devices provide. People began to purchase refrigerators, electric fans, stereos, televisions, electric irons, rice cookers, and more recently even microwaves ovens, among other things. In some cases, families did not really need such electrical devices but acquired them simply because they wanted to show their neighbors how thansamai (ทันสมัย), “up to date,” they were. For example, many villagers at first used their refrigerators primarily to chill water rather than meat or vegetables, since they could readily purchase fresh meat and they could collect fresh vegetables from their own gardens year-round. Electric appliances and other devices came to represent wealth, modernity, and sophistication among Isan villagers.

Education

Formal education in Thailand formerly was available only at Buddhist temples. Such education was restricted to males, who could obtain an education from monk-teachers called upatcha (อุปัชชา). Monastic education, which continues to the present day, was offered to novices as well as ordained monks and took place in temples.

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343 Such appliances were available only in cities, so villagers traveled to the city by bicycle, motorcycle, or truck, although sellers sometimes delivered to villages.
Students learned how to read and write by studying scriptures which focused on the teachings of the Lord Buddha, written in Pali and various old Khmer, Mon, and Tai derived scripts. It was not until the reign of Chulalongkorn that a modern system of secular public education, adapted from Western models and with equal opportunity for both boys and girls, was established outside the Buddhist temple system.

In Isan, the Siamese ruling class had already begun to exert control over the educational system even before Western style modern education was adopted in the kingdom. In 1833 Prince Mongkut, a monk since 1824 with an excellent education for that time, established a new sect of Theravada Buddhism called Thammayut Nikai (ธรรมยุติกาย). Previously there had been only one single sect, called Maha Nikai (มหานิกาย), which still remains the larger Buddhist order in Thailand today. The new sect, founded in Bangkok but eventually dispersed throughout Siam, emphasized reform and placed great emphasis and seriousness on the practice of Buddhism rather than philosophical study. As the founder of this new order, Prince Mongkut was in charge of its system of monastic education; and he directed senior monks throughout the kingdom to instruct all monks of lower rank and novices in their local areas according to the sect’s principles. Because senior Buddhist monks were traditionally accorded great respect by common people, they had great influence over the population, especially in

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344 It should be noted that, in traditional Thai Buddhist education, all monks, including even senior monks, are considered students of Buddhism for their entire lives. An important part of the practice of being a Thai Buddhist monk is continual study until one reaches Nirvana (Nipphan in Thai).

345 In the twentieth century, with the increasing prevalence of the modern Thai script, the teaching of the old scripts including Khmer script; Dua Khom, a script derived from the old Khmer script; Mon-derived Dua Tham script; and Dua Thai Noi, or old Lao script, declined: and, at present, only a tiny minority of Thai Buddhist monks is able to read these scripts.

346 Examples of such reform include the banning of folk religious customs and superstitions as well as the mandating of only one meal per day, which had to be obtained through traditional alms-seeking.
terms of morality. His actions consequently distinguished Mongkut, later King Rama IV, among Thai Buddhists as a respected moral authority.

After he ascended to the Siamese throne in 1851 at age forty-seven, King Mongkut continued to lead the Thammayut Nikai order and to promote its growth throughout the kingdom. In 1853, twenty years after the order’s founding, he established the first Thammayut temple in Isan, Wat Supattanaram Warawihan (วัดสุปตานารามวรวิหาร), in the City of Ubon Ratchathani. The king appointed the temple’s abbot to direct the education of monks throughout the province. Because the curriculum of the Thammayut monastic system was based on the order’s tenets, the king, as the order’s leader, became a powerful authority in the Isan region. Subsequently, many Thammayut monks from Isan began to travel to Bangkok for further Buddhist education. After the completion of their studies, those monks were given high rank and assigned to various areas of their home region where they served as abbots, administrators, and/or teachers. In those positions, they supervised other monks and oversaw monastic education. That gave the king even greater control over education in Isan.

Siam’s first system of modern secular education, based on the Western educational tradition, was established by King Mongkut’s successor, King Chulalongkorn, in 1871, after he visited several Dutch and British colonies in South and Southeast Asia. The new secular system began with a single school located in the Grand Palace in Bangkok where the mission was the training of royal pages recruited from the ranks of princes and sons of noble families. The system was gradually extended to common people in the rest of the kingdom. By 1887, the year King Chulalongkorn
established the Siamese Department of Education which became the Ministry of Education in 1892, there were thirty-four lower schools and four advanced schools in and around Bangkok.\textsuperscript{347}

It was not until 1921 that the modern educational system was first extended to the Isan region. In the same year, King Vajiravudh established the Compulsory Primary Education Act, by which all Siamese children were required to attend school for four years. This was increased to seven years in 1960. At first, only a few schools were founded with most situated in the main cities of Khon Kaen, Ubon Ratchathani, and Nakhon Ratchasima. Following the end of the Second World War, the Thai government rapidly expanded the network of elementary schools throughout the nation and provided more educational opportunities to children in remote areas. By 1958, there were 9,239 elementary schools in Northeast Thailand alone.\textsuperscript{348}

Thailand implemented a program of rapid development during the Cold War era, that is roughly from the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s. Government leaders, who realized that the development plans required a force of highly educated personnel, created a new and expanded national educational infrastructure which included secondary schools and institutions of higher learning intended to produce a corps of educated citizens. In particularly high demand during that period were teachers, accountants, physicians, nurses, and engineers. Among those professions, teachers were considered the most important to recruit at first, since they would be the ones to create a new generation of educated young people who would then go on to make up the skilled work force for the rapidly developing nation. In 1951, the first two teacher training schools, \textit{rongrian}

\textsuperscript{347}`History of Thai Education" http://www.moe.go.th/English/e-hist01.htm (date accessed: October 29, 2009).
\textsuperscript{348}Ibid.
fuekhat khru (โรงเรียนฝึกหัดครู), were founded in two provincial cities in Isan: Nakhon Ratchasima and Ubon Ratchathani.

In 1956, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), under the Thailand UNESCO Rural Teacher Education Project (TURTEP), helped the Thai government to found many more teacher training schools. By 1964, twenty-six Higher Teacher Training Schools, Rongrian Fuekhat Khru Hansung (โรงเรียนฝึกหัดครู.rs), had been established throughout the country. In the sixteen provinces of Northeast Thailand, there were already eight Higher Teacher Training School campuses in 1973. In 1975, those schools were renamed “Teacher’s Colleges,” Withayalai Khru (วิทยาลัยครู), and in 1995 were renamed again, “Rajabhat Institutes,” Sathaban Rachaphat (สถาบันราชภัฏ).349 In 2004, the Thai Ministry of Education changed the institutions to Rajabhat Universities, (มหาวิทยาลัยราชภัฏ), Maha Withayalai Rachaphat. There are forty such institutions throughout Thailand at present, with twelve in Isan.

In addition to highly skilled labor, during its Cold War development phase, Thailand was also in great need of less skilled workers. The Ministry of Education extended the national system of vocational education established in Bangkok in 1910 to Isan in the mid-1960s to ensure rapid growth of such careers, with the first school established in Khon Kaen in 1965. Referred to as sai achip (สายอาชีพ) or “career path” schools, those institutions train students in practical skills for various careers in a shorter period of time than that required by teacher’s colleges. A student who has finished either seventh or ninth grade, depending on the institution and program, is admitted to a three-

349Rajabhat (Rachaphat,ราชภัฏ), “government official,” in Thai.
year program in the career of his/her choice and graduates with a vocational certificate called Praka-sani-yabat Wicha-chip (ประกาศนียบัตรวิชาชีพ) or “vocational certificate,” abbreviated (ปวช) Paw Waw Chaw. After receipt of this certificate a graduate who wishes to continue his/her education has the option to remain at the vocational school to pursue a further certificate called Praka-sani-yabat Wicha-chip Chansung (ประกาศนียบัตรวิชาชีพชั้นสูง) a “higher-level vocational certificate,” abbreviated (ปวส), Paw Waw Saw, which usually takes another two years. A student who holds both certificates has the further option of going on to earn a bachelor’s degree which takes another two years.

Today most public vocational schools are classified as withayalai (วิทยาลัย) which loosely translates as “college” but which is equivalent to the last three years of high school. They accept students who have completed ninth grade. Many withayalai also offer two-year or four-year college level degrees. While some withayalai provide general education, many others are vocational. There are hundreds of the latter in Thailand, with at least one in every provincial city in Isan. The names of such institutions usually indicate their focus. For example, withayalai teknik (วิทยาลัยเทคนิค), technical colleges, provide instruction in many traditionally male fields of skilled labor such as construction, electricity, carpentry, welding, and mechanical work. Withayalai achi-wa seuksa (อาชีวศึกษา), on the other hand, offer programs in fields typically associated with females such as sewing, embroidery, cooking, secretarial work, and hairdressing. Withayalai kaset (วิทยาลัยเกษตร), agricultural colleges, offer degrees in farming technology, animal husbandry, and related fields. Yet another kind of vocational withayalai is the withayalai natasin
(วิทยาลัยนาฏศิลป์), or performing arts college, of which there are only twelve in Thailand, and three of which are in Isan. The instruction in such institutions, which accept students as young as twelve, is directed toward practical aspects of performance rather than theory.\(^{350}\)

Universities in Thailand are called *maha withayalai* (มหาวิทยาลัย), in which the adjective *maha* (มหา) means “great.” Siam’s first, Chulalongkorn University, was established in Bangkok in 1917 by King Vajiravudh, in honor of his father. The first in Isan, Khon Kaen University, was founded in 1966. The second in the Northeast, Mahasarakham University, was established in Mahasarakham City in 1974 as a branch of Srinakharinwirot University.\(^{351}\) Today there are four major universities in the region\(^{352}\) as well as numerous public and private colleges.

In terms of culture, the modern education system, which includes all levels from elementary to university, has been one of the most significant factors driving the region’s modernization in the twentieth century. Whereas previously the vast majority of Isan people received only an informal education by learning agricultural techniques, spiritual beliefs, and morality from their parents and the elders in their communities and only Buddhist monks had the opportunity to receive formal, though rudimentary, institutional educations, the advent of compulsory public education has all Isan youth involved in a modern, standardized curriculum with little relevance to either the traditional agricultural way of life or Buddhism. Similarly, the systems of vocational and higher education, with

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\(^{350}\) See chapter 6.

\(^{351}\) This university began in 1968 as a small college called Mahasarakham College of Education (วิทยาลัยวิชาการศึกษามหาสารคาม), Witthayalai Wichakan Sueksa Mahasarakham. In 1974, it became a branch of Srinakharinwirot University, whose main campus is located in Bangkok but which also maintains branch campuses throughout Thailand.

\(^{352}\) These include Khon Kaen University (1966), Suranaree University of Technology (1988), Ubon Rajathane University (1990), and Mahasarakham University (1994).
their emphasis on the production of skilled workers, have caused most graduates of such institutions to move off their family farms and into provincial or larger cities where most of the jobs are and where they can enjoy comfortable, modern lifestyles. The move away from traditional and toward modern education has led to a radical shift in Isan culture and society, from subsistence agriculture to capitalist materialism.

Even more important, the education system has been used by successive Thai governments as a political tool to create national unity. At all educational levels, the culture of Central Thailand has been used as the model for the new Thai nation. Especially, in terms of language, with standard Thai, the Bangkok dialect as the official language all schools, colleges, and universities are required to use and are imposed throughout the country via the system of public education. This has led to the invariable use of Thai script by Isan people to write texts in the Lao language, only fully comprehensible to native speakers of Isan in Thailand.

Other aspects of the dominant culture that have been inculcated through the public schools of all regions include a primary emphasis on Central Thai history, literature, and performing arts, to the exclusion of local cultural affects. The national education system, under the direction of the Ministry of Education, has worked consistently and effectively to create among Isan people, who have their own unique culture and identity, the sense that they are an integral part of the nation of Thailand and that they share a common “Thai” identity. This policy, however, has also had the significant negative effect that the nation’s regional cultures have increasingly come to be regarded as subordinate to that of Central Thailand, with that mindset internalized even among many

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This situation has changed somewhat in regard to the performing arts since the 1980s, with more local music and dance integrated into school curricula in Northeastern, Northern, and Southern Thailand.
Isan people themselves. The exclusion of local components in school and college curricula has effectively caused entire generations to be essentially ignorant about their own region's history, literature, and traditions. It has also led to the decline of the Isan language among some sectors of the population as many educated city dwellers prefer to speak only Central Thai in their homes. Miller confirms that a friend of his, who is from Roi-et Province but worked as a college professor in Lopburi in Central Thailand for many years, became a “Central Thai person,” who only speaks Central Thai although he loves Isan instruments such as the *khaen*, *phin*, and *ponglang*.354

**Social Change**

**Changes from Rice Farming Lifestyle**

Rice is the primary food in Thailand, and the vast majority of the population eats rice at every meal. The phrase *kin khao,* (กินข้าว) “to have a meal” or “to eat,” literally means “to eat rice.” *Kin* (กิน) means “eat” and *khao* (ข้าว) means “rice.”355 There two main types of rice grown in Thailand: ordinary rice, usually polished into white rice, and glutinous rice, also called sticky rice. As members of the Lao culture, Isan people prefer to eat sticky rice rather than ordinary rice.356 Thus, as a culture based on subsistence farming, most Isan people used to be primarily engaged in the growing of sticky rice. *

*Het na* (เห็นนา), literally “working [in the rice] field” in Lao, was the most important occupation in the traditional Isan way of life. Although rice has been the main export crop for the Thai economy since the early twentieth century, and despite Isan’s large area,

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354 Terry Miller, Personal communication.
355 This use of a phrase translated literally as “eat rice” to mean “eat a meal” is common to several languages of East and Southeast Asia, including Chinese, Khmer, and Vietnamese.
356 See Chapter 2. Isan people also eat ordinary rice on occasion, but only for particular dishes like fried rice or congee and not for every meal. The use of ordinary rice by Isan people can be attributed primarily to Central Thai influence and began to be widespread among common people in the 1970s.
because of persistent problems of drought and poor soil, it has never been a primary region for the growing of rice for export. In addition, most Thai eat only regular rice and know sticky rice only as the main ingredient for making Thai whiskey and some kinds of desserts. Those Thai tend to associate sticky rice with the Lao culture. In short, people who eat sticky rice are viewed as different and out of the Thai mainstream.

After World War II when large-scale development plans began to be applied to the region, the pursuit of a modern lifestyle, with its emphasis on materialism and the acquisition of manufactured products, gradually became the primary ambition for the majority of Isan people. Rice farming, formerly the norm in Isan society, increasingly began to be viewed as a “low” occupation even by those who continued to engage in that way of life. Farmers, who until the late 1980s formed the majority of the region’s inhabitants, were stereotyped as poor, “low class,” uneducated, provincial, and backwards, while those who pursued new careers in teaching, police work, or government bureaucratic employment came to be considered “high class,” educated, and up to date. In comparison with workers with modern skills, farmers began to internalize the derogatory stereotypes directed toward them and felt ashamed of their dirty clothes and rustic appearances when they came into contact with those holding newer careers.

By the 1970s, farmers throughout Isan began to wish their children would be able to obtain employment off the farm, i.e., in a city, rather than continue the traditional way of life, which had begun to be regarded negatively by all sectors of society. A Thai expression, jao khon nai khon, (เจ้าคณ นำคณ), “lord of men and boss of men,” began to be widely used to refer to the higher status of such modern professionals as physicians, nurses, policemen, military officers, civil servants, teachers, and college professors,
which many farmers hoped their children might become. In the 1960s during the period of Isan’s development, the national government began for the first time to promote higher education in the region; and Isan people began to encourage their children to pursue higher education so that they could obtain what appeared to be “better” careers. One generation later, by the mid-1980s, the majority of Isan men and women under the age of thirty no longer worked on farms as had their ancestors but instead worked in other occupations, usually in urban areas of Isan or other regions of the country.

Figure 20. Typical scene of traditional wet-rice farming in Northeast Thailand

Despite the availability of higher education in the Northeast, the majority of Isan youth choose not to take advantage of such opportunities, which may allow them to become successful in professional modern careers. The main reasons young adults from
Isan choose not to study beyond the end of their compulsory education\textsuperscript{357} are lack of funds and lack of interest in study. At the same time, they have little interest in following their parents’ occupations in wet rice farming. In addition, with rapid growth in the region’s population, there is not enough land for every family to make a living growing rice. Population’s growth was much too high in the 1970s. Dr. Mechai, one of the first Thais to promote birth control in Thailand, worked on that problem and helped to reduce the birth rate; but even so, Isan's growth rate remained high and land was increasingly subdivided so that there wasn't enough land for all to farm productively. The surplus population had to go to Bangkok to work on non-farm jobs.\textsuperscript{358} Furthermore, because of the region’s poor agricultural conditions, rice does not produce much profit, especially in years with insufficient rainfall. As a result, farmers in Isan do not have stable incomes. Disinterested in pursuing either an agricultural career or higher education, most young people from Isan are left with only one viable alternative, to make their way to Bangkok and other cities to find jobs, most of which are in lower skilled fields such as factory work, taxi driving, maid service, and food sales. At first, in the 1970s, young Isan men and women traveled to the cities, primarily Bangkok, to seek temporary jobs during the dry season and returned home to help their families plant rice during the rainy season. Since the late 1980s, however, many of those people have chosen to stay in Bangkok permanently and come home to visit only a few times a year, especially for celebrations and festivals coinciding with national holidays such as Songkran, Thai traditional New Year.

\textsuperscript{357}The Thai government formerly mandated only four years of compulsory education, from first through fourth grade with first grade beginning at age seven. This was later extended to six years and is now nine years.

\textsuperscript{358}Dr Mechai Viravaidya (ดร. เมชัย วิรวัฒน์) introduced and successfully promoted the use of condoms among common Thai people for safe sex and birth control throughout the country. In the 1970s due to the popularity of the new method, whatever brand name of the condom they used, people called them all “thung mechai” (ถุงเมชัย) “Mechai bag” after his name. His name, Mechai, means “victory. Thung mechai, then, is literally “bag of victory.”
Year in mid April, and the modern New Year on January 1. Some have even pursued jobs overseas. Saudi Arabia was the nation that gathered in the most Isan workers in the mid 1980s.

Those who continue the traditional rice cultivation in Isan include members of the older generation as well as a small number of younger people who have remained in the village to look after their elders. In past times, growing rice was more complicated than it is today. Farmers and their assistants, usually family members, remained in the fields for a longer time to tend the crops; and they performed a number of rituals and ceremonies and held recreational activities along with the farm work, from before planting through post-harvest time. Rice farming, in which all members of the family worked together in the traditional way, is no longer the primary occupation of the majority of the population. The process of growing rice is conducted in a much simpler manner, with a shorter planting period, enabled by the sowing of seed rather than the planting of individual seedlings by hand; and fewer people can accomplish the work on the farm. In addition, since the 1980s, tractors called Kwai lek (ภาษาไทย) literally “metal water buffalo,” have been in use instead of the actual animal to plow the fields. Along with the decline of traditional agricultural practices, the ceremonies, celebrations, and recreational activities, including the singing of work songs and the flying of kites, formerly an integral part of the farming season, have also nearly disappeared.
Figure 21. Traditional use of water buffalo to plow a paddy fields

Figure 22. *Kwai lek* “metal water buffalo” in paddy field
Perhaps most importantly, the value of rice has changed. Formerly the basis of
the entire culture, the grain was accorded great respect and treated as sacred. Today,
although still the staple crop, rice has come to be regarded as little more than a cash
commodity, since traditional values have been replaced by modern, capitalistic ones.
Traditionally, one’s harvest was kept in a granary located next to one’s home and used to
feed the family for a full year. Although rice was also often shared with other families in
the community or with the local temple or bartered for other goods, selling one’s rice was
not socially acceptable. A family that chose to sell its rice crop in order to buy “non-
expensive luxury” goods, or, in the case of very poor families, to purchase necessities,
would be ashamed if others learned that they had traded such a precious commodity for
cash.\footnote{Waeng Phlangwan (แวง พลังวงาน), \textit{Luk thung Isan: Isan History and the Legend of Popular Songs}, (อุบลราชธานี: ปราบดิษฐ์สารานนทานวลภัทร, 2545/2002), 427.} In the modern era, since the late 1970s, however, the selling of rice has become
a normal everyday activity and has lost its social stigma.

Language and Identity

In Thailand most people speak the same language, which only a few ethnic
minorities, especially the hill tribes living in mountainous regions of the North, who
comprise only about one percent of the national population, speak non-Thai languages.
The majority of ethnic Thai people in each of the nation’s four regions do have their own
distinct dialects. These four primary dialects: Central Thai, Northern Thai, Southern, and
Northeast Thai derive from the same root and share similarities with standard Thai,
although each has its own recognizable accent; and there are also some local differences
in vocabulary, pronunciation, and tonal inflection. The dialect of the central region is
called \textit{phasa klang}, (ภาษากลาง, with \textit{phasa} meaning “language” and \textit{klang} meaning
This standardized Bangkok dialect has been adopted as the national language or the Thai language in the common sense. Each of the main dialects of the nation’s other three regions, *phasa nuea* (ภาษาเหนือ) in the North, *phasa dai* (ภาษาใต้) in the South, and *phasa Isan* (ภาษาอีสาน) in the Northeast, is named after the region in which it is spoken. These are referred to collectively as *phasa thin* (ภาษาทั้งหมด) or *phasa phuean-meueang* (ภาษาพื้นเมือง) meaning “local language” or “folk language.” The hierarchy is implicit in this classification. The designates the Thai (Bangkok) language as well as the other subdialects spoken in the central region as the nation’s “central” standard language while the others, as “local” dialects, are relegated to the periphery which indicates that “Central Thai language” is superior to those of the Northeast, North, and South. The Bangkok language is, thus, universally considered the most formal and sophisticated\(^{360}\) and the only one suitable for official communication and scholarly use. It is common for Bangkok natives to claim that the dialects of the nation’s other regions are too difficult for them to learn or understand. Another likely reason they avoid such dialects is their own bias against the cultures in which those dialects are used as Bangkokoians believe them to be less sophisticated.

In Isan, nearly everyone speaks a dialect that is referred to officially as *phasa Isan,* “Isan language,” regarded both in the region and throughout Thailand as one of the aforementioned three dialects of the Thai language. As such, its status as one of the three *phasa thin* is that of a “local” or “folk” dialect rather than a full-fledged language. Nevertheless, *phasa Isan,* except for the influence of Central Thai, “the Thai language,”

\(^{360}\) Particularly among educated Thais of the middle and upper classes, the mixing of some English-language terms into one’s standard Thai speech is believed to indicate one’s greater sophistication and erudition.
is the same as the Lao language, which gives the people of Isan an important link, specifically along the border, with the majority population of Laos. After nearly a century of government efforts to downplay the link between the two peoples, the culture and history in common between Isan and Laos, a recognition among Isan people of their Lao identity and heritage remains conscious and active only in a small number of people who are interested in Isan history and culture. While most Isan people either have never thought about or have ignored it, this acknowledgement of the Lao heritage of Isan is most prevalent among highly educated individuals, primarily historians, students and professors who are in the fields of cultural studies.

Although, both in Isan and elsewhere in Thailand, the adjective “Isan,” rather than “Lao,” is used when referring to the language, food, and music of the Northeastern region, the terms “Lao language,” “Lao food,” and “Lao music” are still in use among both Isan scholars and villagers in informal communication. In addition, the term khon Lao, (คำลาว) meaning “Lao person” or “Lao people,” is still more commonly used among Isan villagers than the term khon Isan (คำอีสาน) “Isan person.” Because the latter term is of relatively recent vintage and became common only in the 1970s, it is used primarily by middle class inhabitants of the region’s cities who have been influenced to a greater degree by the terminology promulgated by the national education system as well as in official settings and in the media. In terms of politics, Thai nationalism has also contributed to this outcome. Isan means “northeast,” in reference to Bangkok, “northeast of Bangkok” while the term “Lao” orients people towards Wiang Chan, the nation of Laos. Finally, another reason for the substitution of “Isan” for “Lao” may be that, because of the ever advancing development of the Isan region in contrast to
the nearly total lack of development in Laos, many young Isan natives have come increasingly to feel superior to Lao people living across the Maekhong River in Laos. As they are accustomed to Thai culture, national identity, and economic preferences, young Isan refer to themselves as Isan rather than Lao. The fact that the term “Lao” is as yet used by the majority of the Isan population, still composed primarily of peasant farmers living in rural villages, to refer to themselves and their culture makes clear that, aside from those living in urban areas, the Isan people retain somewhat of a sense of their Lao identity.

Similarly, among Isan people, the choice of which language one chooses to speak indicates whether one feels a closer affiliation with Isan or with Central Thai culture. Central Thailand, historically the seat of power for the former Siamese ruling class as well as the subsequent governments of the Thai nation, has imposed its dialect in official settings as a means of solidifying and unifying the Thai nation. Before the reign of Chulalongkorn, when the Siamese first began to send officials from Bangkok to govern Isan, there was only one single primary language among the region’s population: Lao. Following Chulalongkorn’s administrative reforms, use of the Bangkok dialect was mandated throughout the kingdom, including Isan, for use in all government and bureaucratic offices although many of the people employed in those offices were part of the local population. By the twentieth century, as modern schools and larger places of business such as banks were established, the use of standard Thai was similarly required. By the mid-1960s, it had begun to commonly be used in official settings among the new class of educated Isan natives who lived and worked in the region’s cities.361 By the

361 This was especially true among families in which either or both parents were teachers. (Teaching is the profession with the largest number of educated people in the region.)
1980s, many of those people not only spoke Central Thai in official settings but had also adopted that dialect as their preferred means of communication in most informal situations. Among those Isan natives who prefer to speak standard Thai, those born in urban areas in Isan to parents who received higher education in the 1960s use Thai exclusively both at home and in public except when they speak to villagers or elderly people.\textsuperscript{362} On the other hand, some middle class couples who live in cities in Isan, particularly those born in Isan villages, commonly speak Isan dialect among themselves but, strangely, in standard Thai to their children.\textsuperscript{363} Now that many of these children have reached college age, standard Thai has become the preferred means of communication among native Isan college students even in the Isan region itself.

Family

Traditionally, people in Isan lived together as extended families, although not in absolutely every case, usually with parents, children, grandparents, aunts, and uncles typically together in a single house. All members of the family were expected to respect and obey the family's elders who included parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents. The elders, particularly parents, also held the economic power, especially over the land, usually rice fields; and older landowning parents made the most important decisions in

\textsuperscript{362}Many of these middle class urbanites are the descendants of Chinese immigrants who arrived in the cities in Isan beginning in the early twentieth century and usually learned to speak standard Thai rather than Isan dialect. In the case of mixed marriages between Isan and Central Thai natives, which represent a small but significant population as such Central Thai immigrants in Isan often hold important positions in society, they typically use standard Thai as the primary means of communication among all members of the family, both in the home and in public.

\textsuperscript{363}This is probably because of the perception, on the part of upwardly mobile Isan natives, that their own dialect, although it is their natural mode of communication, is unsophisticated and suitable only for villagers, while standard Thai enjoys higher social status.
regard to land distribution and in decisions about which portions of the land would be inherited by whom in the family.\textsuperscript{364}

In Lao culture, sons and daughters, except for the youngest daughter,\textsuperscript{365} upon marriage, moved with their spouses into their own newly built homes. Other married daughters stayed in their parents’ village, and sons moved to live in the villages of their wives’ parents. A newly married couple sometimes chose to remain in the home of the wife’s parents for a time before relocating to their own new home. The new home was usually built on property given to the couple by the wife’s parents for that purpose, either next door to the parents’ home or on a parcel of land owned by the parents, though within the village limits. Because daughters always remained in their parents’ village, it was common that, in a given village, a significant number of its inhabitants were all interrelated in some way.

Since the late 1970s, most of these traditional practices have broken down through the sweeping changes which have altered all aspects of Isan’s society and culture. The increasing scarcity of available land because of the region’s ever increasing population, has meant that landowning parents have much less economic power than before. As they subdivide their agricultural lands for their daughters upon marriage, the parcels of land have become smaller and smaller and are in most cases insufficient to grow enough to feed a family. As a result, most members of the younger generation do not, or cannot, earn their primary income from farming; and they prefer to become

\textsuperscript{364}Unlike the typical situation in the West, this allotment of land is traditionally executed prior to the death of the senior family member, often at the time of the marriage of a child; and the land is usually given to a daughter and her husband in order to provide them an adequate livelihood.

\textsuperscript{365}After marriage, a youngest daughter was expected to live together with her husband in her parents’ home, with the understanding that the couple would take care of the wife’s parents until their death. Upon the death of both parents, the couple would inherit the house and other property.
laborers working in Bangkok although some return home each year during the rainy season to help other family members with the rice crop.

As those young people no longer need to rely on their parents for support and land, elders have lost not only economic control but also some measure of the respect and obedience they formerly commanded from their children. For example, in 1988, Miller was told that those with money were the Bangkok children who came back and dictated what kind of entertainments would be held for festivals. The preferences of the parents were ignored. This situation has also afforded parents less opportunity to pass on the old morals and customs to their children. When young migrant workers return to visit their home villages, they bring with them aspects of the fast paced, materialistic, and individualistic modern life to which they have become accustomed in Bangkok. This leads to a further erosion of traditional values as village residents, particularly children, become impressed by and wish to emulate this urban lifestyle.

**Spirituality and Religion**

The increasing modernization of Isan has also significantly altered the region’s traditional spiritual and religious systems; and that has led to changes in beliefs and religious practices. Although modernization is associated primarily with concrete changes such as the adoption of new technology and infrastructure, it also involves significant changes in the worldview of the society that undergoes modernization. Whereas Tai societies traditionally viewed the world as one based on agricultural cycles, with human beings affected by invisible supernatural forces such as phi (spirits) as well as Buddhist beliefs in reincarnation and karma, the mode of thought that underpins modern science and technology is more positivist. In the scientific mode of thinking,
which forms the basis of the modern educational system, objective truth can be ascertained only by means of a human being’s five senses, through the rational scientific method based on experimentation and reproducibility. On the other hand, in the traditional Tai belief system, reality comprises an interconnection between worldly and supernatural forces; and “truth” relies on the belief in spirits and forces derived from animist and Buddhist beliefs which are not observable or provable in the Western rationalist manner.

Beginning with Siam’s initial period of development during the reign of Chulalongkorn, during which time the kingdom wholeheartedly began to adopt Western technologies, the worldview of those who lived in areas affected by such changes, particularly educated people in Bangkok, began to shift away from traditional spiritual, religious, and moral beliefs toward an ideology based on the science and technology which formed the basis of their new, modern way of life. Also fundamental to this new way of life was an economy based on materialism and capitalism, concepts that are also largely incompatible with traditional ethics. As the Thai nation extended its development plans to Isan, the modern worldview similarly came to take precedence over traditional spiritual and moral beliefs, although that has been a gradual process. In reality, no matter how advanced a given society’s technology, spirituality may remain as an integral part of human life. As such, spirituality remains an important part of Isan culture. However, under the increasing prevalence of the modern worldview, traditional religious and spiritual practices such as ceremonies, rituals, and joining the monkhood, the Sangha (สังฆา), are questioned and even abandoned by many members of the younger generations.
One of the most important changes in the spiritual life of the Isan region is the increasing pursuit, particularly among members of the younger generation, of material gain rather than spiritual enrichment. As a predominantly Buddhist nation, most Thais consider themselves Buddhists, although many do so simply for tradition’s sake or because their parents raised them in that religion. In contrast to earlier generations, when Buddhism formed the backbone of Thai society and all males were expected to become novices or monks for a period of time, most Thais now have only a superficial knowledge of the principles and practices of Buddhism. As science, technology, and materialism began to dominate Thai society, Buddhist teachings began to lose their relevance for an increasing number of people and now are viewed by many young people as something ancient and boring.

One of the clearest indicators of the decreasing importance of Buddhism in Thailand is the decreasing number of Buddhist monks. In the mid-1970s to mid-1980s, there were fifteen to twenty individuals, both monks and novices, who lived in the temple in my own village. Today, however, most village temples in Isan house no more than three to five monks. This may be explained by the fact that fewer and fewer young men prefer to follow the monastic life. They wish instead to seek employment or higher education. In addition, many choose to forego even the formerly obligatory minimum of three months in the Sangha. Although village temples no longer support large numbers of monks, most have been rebuilt since the late 1970s, many on a rather grand scale in comparison to the simpler wooden structures they replaced. Such projects are nearly always led by village residents who have relocated to Bangkok and have acquired enough wealth to return and give contributions to their communities as a form of merit making.
The disparity between the extravagant outward appearance of these temples and the lack of activity therein makes apparent the trend, over the past thirty or so years, of according greater importance to the material rather than the spiritual. It is similar to Thai education, in which many modern school buildings have been built among old and new campuses throughout the country, while their libraries are “empty,” with no budget allotted for books but only for buildings and other modern facilities.

The manner in which traditional festivals and ceremonies are conducted has also changed since the late 1970s. Such festivals, which have origins in animist, Hindu, and Buddhist traditions and are closely associated with the agricultural way of life, were generally organized according to the lunar calendar. Although most festivals were held on full moon days, believed to be particularly auspicious, these days, in order to accommodate those attendees who work in the city during the week, they are usually moved to the nearest weekend instead.

At the same time, traditional festivals and their rituals have also been simplified to some extent. Many celebrations formerly took place over a period of two to three days. Today they take place over shorter periods, often only a single day or half day. One festival that has been simplified in such a manner is the Bun Phawet Festival, which used to take three days to complete but which is now usually conducted over one day at most.

The Bun Bang Fai (บุญ绑飛), or Rocket Festival, common to both Isan and Laos, is a good example of how a traditional agricultural festival has changed in function and meaning from an animist ritual to a more materialistic observance. The term bun (บุญ) is a prefix used for numerous annual festivals and rituals in the Buddhist and agricultural calendars, each of which has a spiritual origin in that it is primarily
concerned with attracting and collecting beneficial energy for oneself, one’s family, and one’s village. Bun (บุญ) literally means “merit” but implies “festival” in that those events are always communal in nature. A bang fai (บังไฟ) is a homemade rocket traditionally made from a bamboo tube packed from bottom to top with black powder. Bun Bang Fai, then, may be translated loosely as “Spiritual Rocket Festival.” Nowadays, the bamboo tube is often replaced by one of metal or PVC plastic, which allows rockets to be larger in diameter than traditional ones made of bamboo. A bang fai may be up to ten meters in length, and also include a bamboo tail assembly to help stabilize the rocket’s trajectory that may itself be up to ten meters long.

The Bun Bang Fai is based on the belief in a supreme sky spirit named Phi Fa (พีFa), who is believed to have the power to control rain. Each year as the rainy season approaches, Isan people prepare for this festival, which usually takes place over a period of two full days and nights, most often on Saturday and Sunday, although it often also includes musical performances beginning on Friday evening. Each village, town, and city across the region schedules its own Rocket Festival at some time between mid-May and mid-June to allow participants and spectators to attend festivals in neighboring villages as well as their own. The primary reason for the Bun Bang Fai firing of bang fai rockets into the sky is to induce Phi Fa to send enough rain for the coming planting season. In another more modern scientific interpretation, the rockets have phallic implications and pierce the clouds to release the rain.

While bun means “merit,” this term is usually combined with a verb to indicate the making of merit. In Isan, the most commonly used term, ao bun (เอาบุญ), actually translates into “taking merit,” although two other terms, het bun (เอ็ดบุญ) and tham bun (ท่าบุญ), the latter derived from Central Thai, are also used. Both phrases really mean “making merit.”
In the weeks prior to the festival, men busy themselves constructing and decorating their rockets. On the first day of the festival, each village, or in the case of larger villages or towns each neighborhood, sponsors a procession to show its decorated rockets to everyone in the village as well as those from other villages who have come to watch or participate. The processions, which often last for hours, start from the outskirts and continue through or around the village before they end at the yard of the village temple, normally located in the village center. The processions feature many

Figure 23. Firing off a rocket at the Rocket Festival
Performances of traditional and/or popular music and dance by local troupes with audience members, often dressed in outrageous costumes, who join in the parade by dancing, playing music, or engaging in comical behavior. Because the festival is associated with fertility, and hence sexuality, many participants engage in bawdy humor. Some men dress as women and both men and women carry crude sculptures of phalli or vulvae and, sometimes, copulating puppets.

The villagers fire off the rockets on the second day. Typically, each sector of the village\(^{367}\) brings its rockets to the firing station which formerly consisted of a tall hardwood tree, of which the larger branches were cut off and with a ladder-like scaffold around it, but today is sometimes limited to the scaffold itself, in a fallow field a safe distance from the village. In some cases, inhabitants of nearby villages are also invited to bring their rockets as a form of friendly competition. The rockets, braced against the tree used as the firing station, are fired off one by one. Large groups of spectators watch the launches from a safe distance, many under the shade of trees. The event has a carnival-like atmosphere, and those in attendance play music, dance, sing traditional rocket festival songs called *kap soeng* (กาพย์ซ่ำ), drink, and buy food from vendors while they wait for the rockets to be fired. Men also wrestle in the mud and go around grossing out the girls with the copulating puppets. Some rockets misfire and travel erratically for only a short distance while others fail to fly into the sky at all. The latter may either fizzle out or explode in spectacular fashion. The builders of such malfunctioning rockets are then subjected to summary “punishment” at the hands of other village men. The punishment

\(^{367}\) In Isan, most villages are large enough to be divided into two or more *khum* (คุ้ม), or sectors such as *khum nuea* (คุ้มเหนือ), “northern;” *khum tai* (คุ้มใต้), “southern;” and *khum klang* (คุ้มกลาง), “central,” each sector comprised of at least thirty houses.
for lack of success in constructing one’s rocket involves being thrown into a pool of rainwater in a nearby field and covered completely with mud.

Although the Bun Bang Fai remains popular throughout Isan and has even become something of a tourist event in some areas, especially the city of Yasothon, its spiritual aspect has declined significantly, largely due to the increasing dominance of science and technology. Although the event was originally driven by the imperative to have a successful rice crop in a culture based on subsistence agriculture, many participants, particularly younger and better educated people, many now living in cities, no longer truly believe in the efficacy of such rituals. Instead, they view the festival primarily as an enjoyable time to visit their home village and have fun with their family and friends. Similarly, the firing of bung fai has become for many more of a game or sport in which local people often gamble on which rocket will remain in the sky longest before falling to earth.

Gender Relationships

Traditionally, relationships between unmarried people in Isan were bounded by morality and custom; and young people were less independent than they are today in regard to dating. Touching, kissing, and holding hands, common in Western culture, used to be taboo before marriage, and sexual intercourse before marriage was unthinkable. Those who violated the taboos against such behavior were punished in various ways. For example, a boy who touched a girl at an inappropriate time or place
would often be fined by the girl’s parents. A boy and girl found to be engaging in sexual intercourse were usually forced immediately into marriage.

Prior to the mid-twentieth century, courtship activity between young people aged fourteen to approximately nineteen typically took place during the dry season when people were not busy working in the fields. Although boys and girls were free to speak together at festivals or in other public places, such locations usually did not provide enough time or privacy for them to get to know one another well on a one-on-one basis. The only socially acceptable manner of courtship involved courtship rituals which provided an opportunity for a young man and woman to select a marriage partner. Such rituals, called long khuang (ลองหัวงา), took place on full moon nights throughout the dry season. After dinner, at around sunset, groups of teenage girls, usually numbering between three and five, got together in the backyard of the home of one of the girls or that of a neighbor and made a fire, next to which they did some communal task, particularly spinning cotton or silk thread. In a given village on a particular evening, there might be several such gatherings of girls at various houses. After some time, a group of young men the same age or a little older, although usually not older than twenty, would come to visit the girls, sit on the ground on straw mats or wooden platforms and talk. As befitted custom, even at those gatherings, which were monitored by parents, interaction was restricted to conversation with no touching permitted. While he walked to the gathering and sometimes also after arriving there, a young man would usually play a traditional musical instrument, either a khaen, phin, or both. The recitation of

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368.“Appropriate” touching between boys and girls might be allowed usually one time a year, during a celebration of Songkran, a Thai traditional New Year in April.
unaccompanied repartee courtship poetry called *phanya* (ผ่านยา), by both young men and women, was also common during such meetings.

Before the 1960s, most people in Isan married early, with most women marrying between the ages of fourteen and eighteen and most men marrying between the ages of twenty and twenty-one.\textsuperscript{369} Because of the relative inconvenience of communication and transportation in the region, most people found their mates in their home village. With the prevalence of such early marriages, couples typically had many children. My grandparents, for example, had eight children, and some of their neighbors had up to twelve. Modern birth control did not become available until it was introduced as part of the nation’s development policy and began to be widely used only in the 1970s.

Beginning in the 1970s, the traditional manner of finding a mate gradually gave way to a more modern, less ritualized method. As late as that decade most young men and women from Isan did not continue their educations after completing the six years of compulsory education (usually at the age of twelve). They tended to remain with their families and help around the farm until they were old enough either to travel to Bangkok in search of employment or marry and start a family, often as young as age fifteen. One of the most popular jobs for such young Isan migrants in Bangkok was unskilled factory work such as packing or assembling products. The factories, usually owned by Chinese Thais, were often large, and sometimes employed over one thousand workers. The largest numbers of factory workers were Isan natives although there were also workers from the nation’s other regions. The employment situation allowed the workers to meet

\textsuperscript{369} The reason young men married at an older age than young women was largely due to the fact that all males were formerly expected to spend some time as Buddhist monks, usually for at least three months, and that was usually done at the age of twenty, most often during the period of Khao Phansa (Buddhist Lent).
their future spouses at their workplaces, a practice that remains common to the present day. Because of this, the spouses of most married Isan natives under the age of forty are no longer people who grew up in the same village or another village nearby, and some even find mates from different regions of Thailand. As it is difficult to raise children in Bangkok with both parents working full time, Isan migrants to Bangkok who have children often send their offspring home to be raised by their maternal grandparents. Such parents typically send money home to assist the grandparents in raising the children and return to visit several times a year.

Those who have the chance and inclination to pursue higher education at a vocational school, college, or university usually choose to get married later in life than those who forego higher education. Since the 1980s, it has been increasingly common for such students to have relationships as boyfriends and girlfriends as in the West; and some couples live together before marriage. This is in contrast to those who travel to Bangkok as migrant workers rather than for higher education. The academic migrants tend to be more conservative and often do not marry early. Despite this, even today public touching, kissing, and hugging between members of the opposite sex are not as common as in Western nations.370

In the 1980s for the first time, homosexuality, especially male homosexuality, became relatively open in Isan and in Thailand as a whole. Although homosexuality has probably always been a part of human culture, in the Thai and Lao traditions such identity and behavior did not begin to reveal itself overtly until the second half of the twentieth century. Miller witnessed that in 1973 there was a prominent phra ek

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370It is interesting to note that in Thai tradition, boys holding hands with boys and girls with girls, is common.
(พระเอก), “male leading role” in traditional theaters of both mawlam mu and mawlam phloen who alternately played men's or women's roles. As a part of his dissertation fieldwork, Miller took a photo of a performer in drag and invited the actor for a privately recorded session. Miller asserted that the phra ek was clearly gay although Miller did not recall much about homosexuality in Thailand at that time.\textsuperscript{371}

In Thailand the societal acceptance of homosexuality was quite limited before the mid-1980s, with homosexuals (or those suspected of being homosexual) routinely subjected to discrimination. Within a couple of decades, largely due to the increasing influence on Thai society of Western attitudes regarding individual freedom of expression, homosexuality became a commonly encountered and mostly tolerated phenomenon throughout Thailand, including Isan; and male homosexuals then began to identify themselves openly as gay, with some cross-dressing, and engaging in typically feminine behavior.\textsuperscript{372} Although this shift in social attitude may seem surprising, it is actually just one aspect of the huge changes in the mindset of the people of Thailand that have accompanied the nation’s move from traditional culture to modernization and development. It is also indicative of the willingness of Thai people to accept new things. That may be due to the subconscious influence of Buddhist concepts, whose worldview emphasizes tolerance and openness.

Although male homosexuals who openly display their homosexuality have historically been referred to by a variety of informal terms, the somewhat derogatory term kratoei (กระโทง) has been the most widely used. Today, Thai male homosexuals commonly and freely express themselves in public, to a degree greater even than in the

\textsuperscript{371}Terry Miller, Personal communication.  
\textsuperscript{372}Lesbianism remains relatively less conspicuous as female homosexuals currently display fewer behaviors that would allow them to be identified as homosexual.
West. This phenomenon even extends to formal social settings, in which many male transvestite college students since the 1990s even go so far as to dress in female uniforms, often with long hair and makeup. Artistic professions such as dance, theater, and music are often favored by male homosexuals, and in the dance departments of natasin (arts high schools), colleges, and universities in particular there are more male homosexuals than in any other programs in the performing arts. Fortunately, so far, there have been no prominent issues about pressure on students from homosexual teachers to form relationships.

By the later 1980s, divorce had become common throughout Thailand, including Isan. Traditionally viewed as something shameful, with divorced individuals usually denounced by the community in former times, under the impact of modern culture and its accompanying new social norms, the social acceptability of divorce has increased significantly. Divorce first appeared after World War II among Western-influenced educated people in Bangkok. Today it has become common in all regions of the country, even among village people.

The most recent example of social change in Thailand, and in Isan society in particular, commonly encountered in village areas, is the growing trend for ordinary Isan women to marry a farang, a Western man (most commonly from Europe, the Americas, or Australia). Some of the men are middle-aged while others are older, retired men who are sometimes widowers or divorcés who can afford to take a new wife. Those who move to Isan are usually working men whose pensions are small. Living in Europe can be tough economically, but their money goes far in Isan. They usually also want a younger woman to take care of them and consider Isan women to be docile, while some

373 Every Thai student from kindergarten to undergraduate level is required to wear a uniform.
Isan women are happy to escape the village even if it means marrying a fat, ugly alcoholic *farang*. In most cases Westerners interested in Asian women seek wives in the Isan region of Thailand because they know that Isan women interested in marrying wealthy foreigners are plentiful. After marriage some men take their new wives back to their home countries and come back to visit the wife’s parents’ occasionally. Others prefer to live with their wives in the region, often in homes built on land handed down by the wife’s parents through the “son in law” custom. They cluster in Isan in the provinces of Roi-et, Khon Kaen, Kalasin, and elsewhere.

A Western husband gradually has become something of a fashion among Isan women. Of those in the region choosing to marry Western men, some are single while others may already have native husbands with whom they may already have had children. An increasing number of Isan women, upon receiving a proposal of marriage from a foreigner, are happy to divorce their husbands in anticipation of the better material life they believe a Western husband can provide including such things as a car and a new house. Most parents are also quite pleased to have a Western son-in-law for the same reasons despite any cultural differences. The usual mixed couple does not know much Thai or English when they start their relationship. Communication, however, does not usually seem to be a problem between them. A few words either in Thai or English as well as sign or body language is usually sufficient for them to start their “romantic” relationship. As the time goes on, verbal communication grows between the couple. Either English or Thai will be used depending on circumstances. If a local person sees a new, large, modern house in a village in Northeast Thailand today (such a house stands out because it looks expensive and modern as compared with the rest of the houses in the

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374 Terry Miller, Personal communication.
village), he or she may assume that it belongs to a lady who is married to a Westerner or an older couple who has a “son-in-law.”

In conclusion, Isan culture has changed dramatically beginning with the Vietnam War. Westernization and modernization grew rapidly in the region basically with American aid during the war. The United States built roads, highways, airbases, and radio and TV systems to support their soldiers on the American army bases located in many areas in Isan during the war. This infrastructure also created jobs through which local people who had been long attached to their traditional agricultural life styles could experience a new way of living for the first time. After the war, modernization continued to influence Isan people, pushing them to Bangkok to seek employment. Modernization not only appears as modern infrastructure, technology, and communications but it also affects the society as a whole in changing it from a traditional to modern culture. It has affected Isan society in occupations, education, family and social norms and values, spirituality and religion, and in gender roles. In music, all Isan music has been affected and changed under the umbrella of modernization including the two genres of Isan popular music, luk thung Isan and luk thung mawlam, as discussed in the previous chapter. Similarly, all traditional music genres have been affected. While some became obsolete, others have changed in different aspects to fit into the new cultural environment. The next discussion will focus on some of the prominent Isan traditional and neotraditional music genres within modern contexts including vocal music: narrative, repartee, and theatrical mawlam and the neotraditional-popular hybrid of mawlam sing. Instrumental music includes traditional genres: the individual “solo” instruments, the
*khaen* and *phin*, and the *phin-khaen* ensemble; the neotraditional genres of instrumental music, the *ponglang* and *klwang yao* ensembles, will be also included.
CHAPTER VI
INFLUENCE OF MODERNIZATION ON TRADITIONAL MUSIC

Modernization in Isan during the twentieth century has led to significant changes in the musical traditions of the region. Although mawlam, the most characteristic musical genre of Isan’s majority Lao population, developed gradually from its origins in the distant past, radical changes in the region’s culture caused by national and local development, economic changes, rural-to-urban migration, and external influences from the West has led to rapid changes to its narrative, repartee, and theatrical genres. While some of these genres, including mawlam phuen, lost their relevance and disappeared, others such as mawlam mu and mawlam phloen adapted to modern tastes through the integration of elements of popular music and mawlam sing (หมอหลานชื่อ), a commercialized, neotraditional-popular hybrid of mawlam meant to recapture the attention of the generation of listeners born after 1970 who were attuned to popular commercial music. Similarly, the region’s instrumental music developed by moving away from the more informal, traditional context of music making toward a neotraditional style of performance better suited to modern stage presentation.\(^\text{375}\)

\(^{375}\) In this dissertation I use the term “neotraditional” to refer to musics based on indigenous traditions, usually employing traditional or modified traditional instruments but shaped by modernization in the adaptation of Western modes of presentation. While Western scholars such as Miller use this term to describe such musics, an exact translation does not exist in the Thai language. Thus, Thai scholars typically regard ponglang ensemble music as traditional rather than neotraditional while the traditional-popular hybrid genre of mawlam sing or the modernized klawng yao ensemble with its electrically amplified melodic instruments is often referred to as dontri prayuk (ดนตรีประยุกต์), “modernized music” similar to “neotraditional,” that is, something traditional that has been brought up to date. The terms dontri samai mai (ดนตรีสมัยใหม่), “modern era music,” or dontri rock (ดนตรีร็อค), “rock music,” are also sometimes used to refer to mawlam sing, although these terms may also be used to describe luk thung or Thai popular music in general.
Twentieth century performers modified traditional instruments such as the *phin* and began to electrically amplify them, while they adopted others such as the *wot, ponglang*, and *hai* as novelties. First created in the 1960s, the most prominent neotraditional ensembles came to be known in the 1970s as *wong dontri phuen-mueang* or *wong dontri phuen-mueang Isan* (วงดนตรีพื้นเมืองอีสาน). From the 1980s to the present, we know these ensembles as *wong ponglang* or *ponglang* ensembles and consider them to be “pan-Isan” ensembles, representing Isan music and culture as a whole. Finally, *wong klawng yao* (วงกลองยาว), the long drum ensemble, an older traditional grouping, adopted a neotraditional style beginning in the 1980s through the addition of melodic instruments, although it still retains its former function of processional music performance for festivals and celebrations.

Vocal Music: *Mawlam*

Among the several genres of traditional Isan vocal music, musicians and scholars regard *mawlam* as the most important. In his seminal study of the genre entitled *Traditional Music of the Lao: Kaen Playing and Mawlum Singing in Northeast Thailand* (1985), Terry E. Miller presents a thorough treatment of *mawlam*, both in its historical context and in its musical structure.376 In my examination of this genre here, however, I will concentrate primarily on the musical and cultural changes it has undergone since 1973 and will de-emphasize the musical sound and structure.

Society in general has changed and in doing so has modified *mawlam* over the course of the twentieth century. Today we divide the genre into many distinct styles,

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376 An abridged version of his 1977 Ph.D. dissertation of the same title, this work is based on field research conducted in Thailand in 1973-74.
each with its own name. In current usage, the Lao term *lam* is used either as a verb meaning “to sing,” or as a noun referring to the genre itself. The term’s original meaning, however, refers to the genre’s literary origins. In its original and archaic sense, *lam* carried two meanings. First, *lam* referred to a story or teaching presented as stanzas in poetic form, for example, *lam Mahawet* (ล้านหาเวส), the “poetic story [of] the great *jataka* of] Wet[sandawn],” or *lam Sin-sai* (ลำสีนัย), “the poetic story of *Sin-sai*.”

Scholars also refer to poetic texts as *klawn* (กلون), “poem,” “poetry,” or “stanza,” a *klawn lam* (กローンลำ), “a poem [divided into] stanzas.” In its second meaning, the term refers to the type of traditional palm leaf book in which the stories were written, and which in modern Lao is called *nangsue phuk* (นังสือผูก), literally “tied book,” or *nangsue bailan* (นังสือใบลาน), “palm-leaf book.” The recording of poetic texts in such books, which include Buddhist sermons and teachings, *jataka* tales, Lao epics, and local stories, dates back centuries in the Lao culture. These texts include a variety of poetic devices such as end rhyme, alliteration, and internal rhyme of vowels and tones within fixed verse patterns. *Klawn lam* include *jataka* tales, Lao epics, and local stories, referred to specifically as *nithan* (นิทาน), or “folk tales,” while rhyming texts for chanting and teaching Buddhist sermons are referred to as *nangsue tham* (นังสือธรรม) or “dhamma books.”

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377 Dating to the seventeenth century, the Sin-sai Epic, Wannakhadi Sang Sin-sai (วรรณกษัตริย์ สิโนสัย), became the most important of the Lao epic tales. It followed the story of the hero Sin-sai and was used as the basis for many *mawlam* performances.
378 *Nangsue* (นังสือ) means “book” and *phuk* (ผูก) means “tied.” The name derives from the manner in which such books were made: by cutting palm leaves into rectangles 40 to 50 centimeters in length, perforating them with two holes, and tying them together with cord.
379 *Bailan* (ใบลาน) means “palm leaf.”
380 Palm leaf books were also used to record non-poetic texts, which included both Buddhist teachings and secular stories. Such texts could be referred to as *loi kaew* (โล่แก้ว), pronounced *roi kaew* in Thai.
381 Like the Thai language, Lao is tonal, with five distinct tonal inflections (high, low, medium, rising, and falling) which influence the melodies sung in both traditional and popular idioms.
Since the acceptance of Buddhism in the fourteenth century, Lao culture has been characterized by an interplay between its oral and written elements. However, dating back to antiquity, the oral tradition has been fundamental to all Tai cultures continuing even after the Lao adopted written traditions from the Mon and Khmer. After that, we find the culture’s important texts written onto palm leaf manuscripts. The Buddhist monks who wrote them and their successors used such books primarily for reference and study as traditional religious and secular texts and for recitation or singing from memory. Although the term lam originally had a strong association with the written tradition, in its modern usage it has essentially returned to being an oral tradition, since mawlam performers always perform their texts from memory and rarely learn them directly from palm leaf manuscripts.

Whereas in the past either sacred or secular lam could be sung, currently the term lam, or the more current term mawlam, commonly refers to traditional vocal music consisting predominantly of secular texts, although these may include Buddhist elements such as fragments of jataka stories or thet lae style singing. However, monks who present religious texts, such as pure jataka or sermons, although the presentation is similar in vocal style, call this genre thet lae.

The term mawlam has similarly changed in its meaning. Mawlam originally referred to a performer skilled in singing lam or poetic texts, with maw meaning “skilled person.” Since the 1970s, it has come to be used, in addition, in reference to the genre itself or to any of its various styles such as mawlam phuen, mawlam klawn, or mawlam mu, although in the latter context mawlam may be shortened to lam. Since mawlam was the mainstream musical entertainment in both Isan and Laos for probably at least a
century and a half prior to the rise of popular music, many distinct styles have developed over the course of its history. The influence of modernization on several styles of *mawlam* including the narrative, repartee, theatrical, and neotraditional has been profound. Performers have adapted certain of the styles to modern demands and some, unadapted, have died out.

**Narrative mawlam**

Scholars who specialize in Isan traditional music believe *mawlam phuen* (หมอละพื้น), a narrative tradition usually performed by a solo male vocalist with *khaen* accompaniment, to be the earliest extant form of *mawlam*. It likely came out of *an nangue* (อ่านหนังสือ) or *thet nithan* (เทศณิทาน), both unaccompanied vocal genres. The term *phuen* (พื้น) has several meanings, including “floor,” “foundation,” “tradition,” and “traditional.” The style’s name derives from the fact that it involves the singing of poetic texts called *wannakhadi Lao*. Such texts include *nithan phuen-mueang* (นิทานพื้นเมือง), secular Lao folk tales and epics, the authorship of most anonymous, as well as Lao versions of *jataka* stories. Formerly this genre was also referred to as *mawlam rueang* (หมอละเรื่อง), with *rueang* (เรื่อง) meaning “story,” which is pronounced *lueang* (เลือง) or *hueang* (เขือง) in Lao. However, since the mid-twentieth century *mawlam rueang* also refers to a theatrical genre derived from both *mawlam phuen* and *likay Lao*, performed by troupes of singers and instrumentalists.

*Thet nithan*, historically performed primarily by Buddhist monks to entertain at

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382 Other words deriving from this sense of *phuen*, shared by both Thai and Lao, include *phuendin* (พื้นเดิน), “ground,” “earth,” or “soil,” *phuenhawng* (พื้นห้้อง), “floor,” and *phuenti* (พื้นที่), “land,” “area,” or “territory.”

383 The Thai and Lao word *phuenmueang* (พื้นเมือง), “folk” or “local,” derives from this sense.

specific religious functions, usually tells a single jataka story. *Mawlam phuen*, in a primarily secular musical style with a much wider selection of stories from the corpus of wannakhadi Lao, has served a number of different purposes according to the text selected by the performer for a given presentation. As such, this newer style has functioned as a kind of grand narrative which encompasses the totality of the culture’s important traditional knowledge, including social norms, history, and Buddhist teachings. Until the modern era, *mawlam phuen* singers usually based their performances, which ranged from one to several hours or, some stories, over several nights. *Mawlam phuen* singers developed their own versions of the stories which they passed from one generation to the next both in oral (sung as well as spoken) and written forms. They would memorize the entire text in preparation for a public performance. Because *mawlam phuen* was a solo tradition, the singer usually sang the story in the third person acting as a kind of narrator although some singers were skilled in portraying a wide variety of characters of both genders and of various ages. In scenes featuring dialogue, such a singer would change his voice for each character to make the storytelling more interesting. Some singers would even make small costume changes to reflect different characters.\textsuperscript{385}

Although, by the twentieth century, female *mawlam phuen* singers could be found in Isan, the narrative singing was more commonly performed by men, since historically only boys had the opportunity to obtain the necessary formal schooling through the system of Buddhist education. During their time as novices or monks, they learned to read and write and, in that process, absorbed a great deal of knowledge about Buddhism, social norms, literature, and history. Conversely, the majority of girls was not afforded such opportunities and was thus illiterate before the initiation of the new system of

\textsuperscript{385}Ibid.
modern education established in the late nineteenth century in Siam and extended to the rural regions in the 1920s.

Mawlam phuen grew in the context of traditional Lao culture in which the performing arts were not considered a true profession. Because most mawlam phuen singers practiced agriculture as their primary occupation, farming took up most of their time during the planting season; thus, they were unable to make a living solely from their performances. Mawlam phuen performances took place only infrequently, usually for special occasions and most often during festivals in the dry (hot) and cool seasons. Very few festivals took place during the planting (rainy) season, partly because people are busy planting in their fields and partly because performances are out of doors and it would be adversely affected by the rain.

Because of the lack of written documentation about the history of folk traditions in Lao culture prior to the twentieth century, it is impossible to determine when mawlam phuen originated. According to Miller, mawlam phuen has had a close and significant relationship with two other unaccompanied vocal traditions: An nangsue (อ่านหนังสือ), or “reading [from] a book,” a tradition of reading from palm leaf books by educated laymen in a heightened speech that follows the contours of tones; and thenihan (เทศนิทาน), the singing of Lao traditional tales and epics, usually by Buddhist monks.

Mawlam phuen draws its stories from the same manuscripts as an nangsue, which most likely predated mawlam. Although an nangsue, which had become extremely rare by 1974, involved reading directly from palm leaf manuscripts whose Lao texts are in a poetic form, mawlam phuen texts are usually modified versions of old stories, either

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386Ibid., 25.
wannakhadi Lao or jataka, which have been shortened, added to, or otherwise edited as well as altered to fit poetic conventions in order to make them suitable for performance and singing. In other words, they were rewritten in a form of klawn lam (กลอนล่า), “lam poetry.” A mawlam phuen singer was expected not only to develop his own versions of traditional stories but also to improvise on such texts in performance while he maintained the general theme of the story. After singing the same story many times a performer might become bored and begin to add some of his own embellishments to the text while performing on a spontaneous basis, rearranging it using stock phrases. Such poetic improvisation, which occurred especially among more skillful and experienced singers, is a natural and unavoidable part of oral tradition, particularly in epic poetry and narrative singing traditions found worldwide, as noted by Albert B. Lord in his theory of oral-formulaic composition, The Singer of Tales (1960). According to this theory, when new text is added to a well known epic poem, it generally derives from an inventory of formulas held by the poet/performer and is integrated using basic, formalized patterns and structures.

The fact that the term an nang sue contains the verb an (อ่าน), “to read,” indicates this genre’s literary origin. Because of its primarily secular context, and as it was usually performed in private homes at occasions such as funerals, birth celebrations, and housewarmings, as well as due to the fact that it could use either secular or sacred texts, educated laymen rather than monks commonly performed an nangsue.387 Former monks, who learned to read and write while resident in their monkhoods, were often respected

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387 In Thai Buddhism, a common man can be ordained a monk and stay in the temple community, or sangha, as long as he wishes before returning to secular life again if he so chooses. During his time as a monk he has opportunities to study many kinds of texts including both Buddhist teachings and traditional secular literature. When one decides to “graduate” and return to the secular world, he becomes a layman with a deeper understanding of his culture and life.
members of their communities, especially in regard to spiritual matters. In traditional Lao culture, an nangsue also referred to nangsue lam [อ่านหนังสือลำ], “reading a poetic book,” with lam used in its original sense of “poetic text;”\textsuperscript{388} and it was one of the primary forms of entertainment in Isan and Laos probably until at least the early twentieth century.\textsuperscript{389} According to Sanong Klangprasri, since in Lao culture Buddhist monks or Buddhist laymen traditionally wrote down, preserved, studied and taught literature of all types, all the manuscripts necessary to perform an nangsue, even ostensibly secular ones, had at least some association with the Buddhist tradition.\textsuperscript{390} This also implies that in Lao tradition the dividing line between sacred and secular is not clear. There are Buddhist texts, but anything that is a “jataka” is from the Buddhist tradition.

In the Lao tradition, an nangsue and mawlam phuen were usually performed from a seated position on the floor in a private home although in Isan mawlam phuen was often performed outdoors by a standing singer who had memorized his text and was free to express himself through arm and hand movements accompanied by a khaen with the performers usually standing on a straw mat on the ground at least after the Second World War.\textsuperscript{391} The khaen kao (ถนนแก้ว), a long type of khaen with eighteen pipes, used to be common in the accompaniment of mawlam phuen. By 1973, Miller found that the khaen paet (ถนนป่าเต๊ะ), which has sixteen pipes and is today considered the standard size khaen, had become the most common instrument used in this context.

\textsuperscript{388} Because lam in this sense can be used as a verb meaning the reading of poetry, an is not necessarily placed before lam, as in an nangsue.

\textsuperscript{389} Due to the rise of the modern education system, which uses the Thai language and script exclusively, and the decline of Buddhist temple schools, which stopped teaching the old scripts by the early twentieth century, the ability to perform an nangsue declined to such an extent that, by the 1970s, only a few elderly men could still do it. At present it can be considered an extinct tradition.


\textsuperscript{391} Ibid., 58.
As with *mawlam phuen*, no conclusive evidence has been found to indicate exactly when *an nang sue* appeared and became common in the Lao tradition. However, according to Miller, before the decline of these genres, both coexisted in Isan. Although they served different functions, the latter was more commonly performed at funeral wakes. The former was more of a general entertainment, a possible part of any festival and many ceremonies, including ordinations and memorial services. Like *an nang sue*, *mawlam phuen* fell out of favor during the second half of the twentieth century. It had already experienced a significant decline in popularity by 1940; and, in 1974, Miller found that there were only a few *mawlam phuen* performers still alive, most of advanced age.\(^392\) By then there were few opportunities for them to present their art form due primarily to a lack of interest among the public and, thus, lack of invitations to perform.

Modernization in the twentieth century affected *mawlam phuen* as it did all other musical genres in Isan. Before Isan began to undergo development, which began most significantly in the region’s towns after the Second World War, the inconvenience of communication and transportation meant that *mawlam phuen* performers were unable to travel long distances. They most frequently performed in their home villages and in nearby villages\(^393\) although they sometimes also traveled on an itinerant basis to more distant villages in hopes of being hired to perform; a journey of 30-40 kilometers could take up to an entire day on foot. By the 1960s, improved systems of communication and transportation allowed *mawlam phuen* singers more easily to organize and travel to performances. Also during that time, *mawlam phuen* performers, who had formerly worn


\(^393\) The distance from one village to another in Isan usually ranges between two and five kikometers.
traditional clothing, began to dress in modern style, with Western style button down shirts and neckties, trousers, and leather shoes.\textsuperscript{394}

![Image](image.png)


The performance context changed as well as the performers more commonly appeared on raised stages rather than on straw mats and began using microphones and amplifiers. Despite the adoption of these modern devices, by the early 1970s, the popularity of *mawlam phuen* had decreased precipitously.\textsuperscript{395} Today no professional *mawlam phuen* singers remain although some traditional *mawlam klawn* singers, in a revivalist performance, can still demonstrate the genre; and they may occasionally include a brief excerpt as part of their performance.


\textsuperscript{395}Ibid.
Repartee Mawlam

Mawlam klawn (แลวกローン), pronounced in Lao mawlam kawn (มาแลวกローン), is a form of mawlam performed as repartee between two singers, normally one male and one female, with khaen accompaniment. Unlike an nangsue and mawlam phuen, one can still see mawlam klawn performances in Isan at special festivals today, although their popularity has diminished since the rise of pop music in the region. As mentioned earlier, klawn means “stanza” or “poem,” synonymous with the original sense of the word lam which also meant “poem” prior to the development of mawlam music. Because lam in the current usage means “to sing,” lam klawn can be translated as “sung poetry” or “poetic singing.”

One important difference between the two styles is the fact that mawlam klawn texts can cover a much wider variety of themes than those of mawlam phuen. Whereas mawlam phuen, also known as mawlam rueang or lueang, or “story mawlam,” drew primarily on pre-existing stories from palm leaf manuscripts, the texts of mawlam klawn repartee singing incorporate many other topics, some derived in part from such manuscripts although usually excerpted rather than presented in their entirety. A single mawlam klawn “text,” called a klawn lam or klawn, consisted of “sub-styles,” or a series of alternations. Within a given performance, during the long period of singing, in a certain style such as lam thang san, one of the prominent sub-styles in lam klawn, a performer could discuss many topics. The performance, possibly as short as forty-five minutes or as long as eight hours, may touch on such things as Buddhist teachings, social norms, local news and gossip, discussion of the daily lives of members of various occupations such as farmers, soldiers, policemen, or schoolteachers, or politics, and the
changes in village life engendered by modernization, often in a lighthearted, humorous manner. A long performance, however, is often a variety show rather than a countuous story. In addition, because male and female singers perform mawlam klawn in alternation in a form of repartee, it usually has an element of staged courtship as one defining characteristic. Although some mawlam klawn singers write their own texts, they most often obtain their material either from their teachers or by asking someone skilled in poetry to write texts for them on a specified topic or theme. In the early 1970s, Miller was informed that there were also many printed books of applicable poetry but no serious singer used them.

As with mawlam phuen, there is no evidence to indicate the origin of mawlam klawn. However, the repartee style of mawlam klawn seems to derive from another earlier kind of improvised singing called mawlam jot (หมอละโสภา) or “questioning mawlam” or mawlam jotkae (หมอละโสภาเกี่ยวก้า), “question-and-answer lam.” The mawlam jot was performed by two male singers who competed with one another in debating Buddhist philosophy. Although it is also not known when lam jot originated, Miller notes that it was still performed in parts of Isan as late as the first quarter of the twentieth century. In addition, although it is no longer performed, it was usually grouped together with mawlam klawn because of the similarity of the two genres.

No evidence survives to indicate when women singers began to perform in this repartee singing. At least by 1920, two women singers, names Nang Phat (นางพัด) and

396 Prior to the 1980s, mawlam klawn singers looking for new texts often sought the assistance of Buddhist monks who, due to their training, were considered particularly good at composing poetic texts, although this is no longer the case. New mawlam klawn texts are now usually written by mawlam klawn masters or former monks.
397 Terry Miller, Personal communication.
399 Ibid.
Nang Ua (นางอัว) who performed with a man singer named Mawlam Khen Banphrakue (หมอเล่า เคน บ้านพระครุ), are known to have made a recording which is assumed to be the first evidence of female singers on a mawlam klawn record. In Ubon Province, mawlam klawn is also known as mawlam khu (หมอเล่าคู่) or “couple singing” (khu [คู่] “couple”), as its performance requires two singers, usually one male and one female, to sing in repartee style. An Ubon native, Jawmsi Banlusin (จอมศรี บรมศิลป์), is another early female singer who appeared on a commercial recording in 1940. Her first 78 rpm record was released by the Tra Kratai Label (Rabbit Brand), by which time she was already well known in Isan.

The famous Isan mawlam singer Chawiwan Damnoen suggests that one of the reasons that more women began to participate in mawlam klawn singing was the greater opportunities available to girls for education under the reforms instituted by Siam’s monarchs in the late nineteenth century. She emphasized that traditionally in Siam only boys had opportunities to obtain formal education and become involved with literature in terms of reading and writing. After Chulalongkorn introduced modern education to Siam in the late 1800s, girls began to have a better chance to obtain an education, and that made it possible for women of all social classes to gain skill in reading and writing for the first time. This new found literacy brought more women into the field of mawlam singing.

It is important to note, however, that female singing is not dependent on

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401 Formerly, a similar traditional presentation could be performed by three singers, two males and one female, called mawlam ching su (หมอเล่าชิงซุ). Ching su (ชิงซุ) means “competing for a lover.” It involved the two men singers sparring verbally with one another for the woman’s attention. By the late 1970s, however, mawlam ching su had largely disappeared, in large part because its theme was restricted to competition over a lover, besides the fact that it was more expensive to hire three singers instead of two.
literacy; some illiterate women also attained success in the genre. Miller asserted that female singers memorized texts dictated by their (male) teachers and they have always been able to memorize. In southern Laos he recorded at least one female singer who was illiterate. 403

As mentioned earlier, a pair of singers, one male and one female, usually perform *mawlam klawn*, each with his and her own *khaen* player; and they perform in alternation. 404 The male and female singers in *mawlam klawn* are not usually partners who rehearse and perform together regularly. Instead, patrons select their favorite individual male and female singers in hopes that the pairing will be exciting and spontaneous, in a manner similar to a boxing match.

A full *mawlam klawn* cycle is comprised of three sub-styles: *lam thang san* (ส่าทางสัน), *lam thang yao* (ล่าทางยาว), and *lam toei* (ล่าเดี้ย), which are generally sung in succession, although the singers may repeat some sub-styles in actual performance. First performed is *lam thang san*, a metrical style in which the singers improvise the melody according to the structure of a major-sounding pentatonic scale. *Thang* (ทาง), “way” or “path” in a musical sense, means “scale” or “mode,” while *san* (สัน) means “short.” *Thang san* refers to the rapid tempo and steady beat of the style’s melody in comparison with its slower counterpart, *lam thang yao*. In a *lam klawn* performance, performers often sing many poems (*klawn*) in *thamnong lam thang san* (ท่าน้องลาทางสัน), “singing on a scale of san,” (*thamnong* has broad meaning including melody, scale and mode, and sub-style of *lam*); and each exchange takes up to thirty minutes or more. Next is the *lam*

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403 Terry E. Miller, personal communication.
404 The reason two *khaen* are used is because male and female voices require different sizes of *khaen* as female singers prefer to sing with a low pitched *khaen* and male singers prefer to sing with a higher pitched one. When two *khaen* players are not available, a single *khaen* player can accompany both singers, either by changing *khaen* or mode (or both) between singers.
thang yao, a style of improvised singing in semi-free rhythm that provides a contrasting mood from lam thang san with its slower tempo and minor-sounding pentatonic scale. Yao (Դարմ) means “long” and refers to the song’s low melodic density and melismatic idiom. Klawn sung in thamnong lam thang yao, “singing on a scale of yao,” are generally reflective or sad in nature in contrast to those sung in thamnong lam thang san and thamnong lam toei. As in lam thang san, mawlam klawn performances often feature several klawn in thamnong lam thang yao with singers sometimes returning to thamnong lam thang yao after a klawn in one of the other styles. Last, lam toei, unlike the other types, uses a memorable, short, semi-fixed tune called thamnong lam toei which employs a metrical style in a minor-sounding mode\(^{405}\) with a tempo as fast or faster than thamnong lam thang san. Performers, both singers and khaen players, usually perform a simple dance while they perform lam toei. To create a sudden change from a sad to a happy mood, performers launch into lam toei in attacca fashion directly after finishing a klawn in thamnong lam thang yao, although not all lam thang yao sections actually require a lam toei section to follow. Because of its function as a concluding section after a klawn in thamnong lam thang yao, lam toei is traditionally regarded as part of lam thang yao rather than as an independent style of mawlam. In a typical mawlam klawn performance, klawn in thamnong lam thang san generally comprise approximately 60 percent of the

\(^{405}\)It should be noted that although the Lao tuning system and scale is essentially the same as the Western diatonic scale and certain Lao modes sound either “major” or “minor” to Western ears, the concepts and extra-musical associations of major and minor are not exactly equivalent. In Lao culture “major” sounding modes are usually considered happy, as in the West (although not all minor music in the West sounds sad), but “minor” sounding modes may be used for either sad or happy pieces.
performance, while lam thang yao and lam toei make up approximately 30 percent and 10 to 15 percent, respectively.  

In commercial recordings of mawlam klawn, first issued in the 1940s but more numerous by the late 1960s, the music most often appeared in partial form with only a few klawn in greatly shortened sections on individual tracks. Unlike luk thung recordings, commercial recordings of mawlam klawn do not feature Western instruments but instead use only the khaen as accompaniment. Following the conventions of recorded popular music, such recordings were released on 45-rpm disks which contained two klawn, one per side, or on album-length 33-rpm recordings, which typically included many short klawn, each approximately three to five minutes in length, rather than the thirty to forty minutes typical in stage performances. A track might be sung in either thamnong lam thangsan or thamnong lam thang yao; and the latter sometimes also included a final lam toei section. Individual tracks on such commercial mawlam klawn recordings nearly always featured a solo singer performing independently rather than in repartee style with another singer although a recording may have had different singers on different tracks. Despite the fact that there is no repartee, the singing style is still considered mawlam klawn. Whereas in stage performances individual klawn are not introduced by name, on commercial recordings each klawn has its own title. Although singers continue to give all night performances with each klawn lasting thirty minutes or

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406 These percentages are most typical of performances since the late 1970s. Prior to this lam thang san comprised an even greater percentage of mawlam klawn presentations, sometimes up to 90 percent of a given performance. 
407 Although a few mawlam klawn recordings date back to the early 1960s, integrated percussion (hand drums and chap) in lam toei sections did not prove popular and such percussion is rarely encountered today.
more, they also sometimes perform shorter klawn from their commercial recordings when requested to do so by members of the audience.

From the late 1970s to the early 1980s, when mawlam klawn still retained a measure of popularity, pairs of singers also recorded abridged samples of their performances which usually lasted about an hour instead of the six to eight hours or more typical of stage performances and which were not for sale but were instead used for promotional purposes. Such recordings were intended for radio broadcast in Isan as a way of advertising the singers in order to obtain more performance commissions. The recordings required no title, either for the entire performance or the individual klawn. The DJ would simply announce the names of the sections, either lam thang san or lam thang yao, along with the name of the singer. Unlike commercial mawlam klawn recordings, these promotional records were in the traditional repartee style featuring both male and female singers in alternating klawn.

Today, although mawlam klawn is no longer a mainstream style of Isan music in terms of the music industry, it is still one of the most important surviving genres of traditional music and the only style of mawlam that we can commonly hear in performance. Some well known performers, such as Mr. Khen Dalao (คเณ ดาแล), b. 1930, Mrs. Bunsawong Denduang (บุษบัชวงศ์ แดงดวง), b. 1945, and Mr. Thawngjaroen Dalao (ทองเจริญ ดาแล), b. 1942, are still able to make a living based on their performances and recordings. The majority of famous mawlam klawn singers enjoy more comfortable lives in economic terms than most village farmers or even some of those who pursue more modern careers such as teachers, policemen, or factory workers, since

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408Khen Dalao is a cousin of Thawngjaroen Dalao, and Bunsuwang Denduang is the wife of Thawngjaroen Dalao. All three are originally from Ubon Ratchathani Province.
the honorarium for a single performance can be up to 5,000 baht which is between half and three quarters of the monthly salary of someone in one of the aforementioned professions. As in the past, most mawlam klawn performances take place at festivals and celebrations during the cool and hot seasons with fewer opportunities to perform during the rainy season. In the latter season, those singers who still rely on rice farming for part of their income or food, which includes most mawlam klawn singers, return to their villages to work on their farms while the most successful performers may rent their farmland to others.

Before the 1950s, all types of mawlam were performed on the ground without a raised stage. Performers usually stood on straw mats in temple yards or in yards or roads in front of private homes for relatively small audiences. In the second half of the twentieth century in both villages and cities, Isan people began to build temporary raised stages for mawlam performances, primarily for mawlam klawn and mawlam phuen. This allowed a larger number of audience members to see the performances by sitting around the stage, usually on straw mats brought from home. Performances often lasted the entire night, from dusk to dawn.

As previously mentioned, with the spread of Westernization into Isan during the 1970s and 1980s, mawlam klawn singers began at that time to dress in Western style clothes. Performers chose to wear such formal Western outfits in order to project the impression that, although they were performing in a traditional style of rural origin, they were more sophisticated and modern than common villagers. This stylish look gave performers a feeling of greater significance and generated greater interest on the part of rural listeners who were fascinated by all things modern. Today, however, Western
outfits do not necessarily have the same function because, since the 1990s, it has become fashionable for mawlam klawn performers to wear neotraditional outfits based on traditional clothing, although fancier and flashier than that normally worn in the past.

The modernization of the Isan region had several positive effects on mawlam klawn. By the 1960s, mawlam klawn singers were able to travel longer distances to perform than in the past, as the region’s new road system made travel quicker and more convenient. Furthermore, the advent of commercial recordings, as well as the new region-wide radio network that disseminated such recordings, enabled singers for the first time to become well known throughout the wider region rather than just in their home provinces. As a result, patrons were able to hire any singers they liked from any part of Isan to perform for their celebrations through the Samakhom Mawlam (สมาคมหมอลำ) literally “Mawlam Association” or mawlam agency located in towns or cities in most

parts of the region. Singers signed up with the associations. When someone wanted to hire them, they simply went to the office and chose their favorite singers. When singers listed their names in many *samakhom mawlam*, they had more chances to obtain a greater number and a wider geographic range of performance commissions.\(^{409}\)

The new media systems also allowed *mawlam klawn*, a traditional genre, to enter the popular realm, albeit in somewhat altered and abridged form. Although it has never been a mainstream popular music genre, from the late 1960s to the late 1980s *mawlam klawn* was one of the traditional genres that achieved a degree of commercial success in the music industry. It received maximum support from those people who still lived in villages and who were more attached to their traditional culture than those who lived in cities. According to Miller, in 1974 *mawlam klawn* as well as other traditional vocal genres such as *mawlam mu* and *mawlam phloen* still enjoyed wide popularity in the region. By the time of my childhood in the late 1970s and early 1980s, however, live *mawlam klawn* performances had already ceased to be a mainstream form of entertainment as they had been largely displaced by theatrical performances like *mawlam mu* and *mawlam phloen* that could be “jazzed up” with *luk thung* and other popularized versions, and other kinds of modern entertainment such as outdoor cinema. Nevertheless, the genre continued to enjoy popularity among some segments of the population, particularly those of the older generation; and performances could still occasionally be found at village festivals and celebrations. Those in charge of such festivals would often hire *mawlam klawn* performers along with others, such as *mawlam mu* troupes, who

\(^{409}\) Today the association is known as *Sam-nak ngan mawlam* (สันนักงานหมอลำ), “The Office of Mawlam.”
traveled to outdoor cinema showings, and *luk thung* troupes. The former two appealed more to the older generation and the latter two to younger people.

During the period of Isan’s development and modernization, an increasing number of the region’s inhabitants, especially those in urban areas, began to look down on traditional music including *mawlam klawn*. This was largely a matter of class image, as urban dwellers in urban/industrial occupations saw themselves as modern, sophisticated, and educated; and they sometimes regarded rural villagers still living in relative poverty as “backward.” It was mostly the rural people who still supported traditional music. This prejudice extended to the nation as a whole, with traditional musics accorded a lower status than Western or Westernized Thai music such as *luk krung* or *luk thung*. As a result of the increasing prevalence of this mindset and since urban, educated people had a great deal of influence in society, most *mawlam klawn* singers in the 1960s and 1970s were no longer proud of their careers. Because of that, few members of the younger generation were interested in pursuing a career singing *mawlam*, and few professional *mawlam* singers encouraged their children to follow in their footsteps. Over the course of the 1980s, young Isan people almost completely lost interest in (traditional) *mawlam*. They overwhelmingly preferred *luk thung* and other forms of Thai pop music along with commercial movies.

**Theatrical Mawlam**

*Mawlam Mu*

Theatrical *mawlam*, performed by many singers rather than just one or two, was an innovation that arose in the mid-twentieth century as a combination of traditional *mawlam* with elements of *likay*, a form of traditional theater from Central Thailand. Such
theatrical mawlam genres, which include mawlam mu and mawlam phloen, have also been affected by the changes in Isan culture since the second half of the twentieth century.

The more important genre of theatrical mawlam is called mawlam mu (หมอละครหมู่). The term mu (หมู่) means “group” or “troupe.” Thus, mawlam mu refers to mawlam performed by a troupe, and that lets the audience know the performance is theatrical in nature rather than narrative or repartee. The genre can be described as a kind of sung drama complete with costumes, props, and painted backdrops; and the performers act out the stories in a singing style similar to that of mawlam phuen. Rather than having a single performer portray all the characters in such stories as in mawlam phuen, mawlam mu requires several singers, usually at least six depending on the story, to play all the roles. Mawlam mu performances were originally based on the same traditional stories used in mawlam phuen, but by the late 1970s troupes began to create new stories based on daily life in the modern era.

The early history of mawlam mu was closely associated with likay, a local theatrical singing from Central Thailand, because of similarities between the two genres and supported by the fact that Siamese-style likay, formerly called likay Thai (สีเกไทย) in Isan, enjoyed popularity in Isan in the early twentieth century, especially in the area in and around Nakhon Rachasima Province. The Isan people of that time recognized two distinct styles of likay, likay Thai (สีเกไทย) and likay Lao (สีเกลาว), both of which existed in the region but died out once mawlam mu developed. The former term refers to the original version of likay, as presented by troupes from Bangkok and other parts of the Central Plain who visited Northeast Thailand and gained great popularity among rural
audiences by the 1930s. The latter term refers to the Lao-ized style of likay performed by native Isan troupes who probably created it by imitating likay Thai performances.

Miller proposes that likay Thai first entered Isan via four southern provinces: Nakhon Rachasima (Khorat), Surin, Buriram, and Sisaket some time between the late 1920s and early 1930s, through the more convenient transportation provided by the new Siamese railway system. Because Khorat borders Central Thailand, it can be safely assumed that it was the first Northeastern province Siamese likay performers visited. Because likay was considered primarily an urban entertainment, troupes mainly performed in the large city of Khorat, although they also performed in other towns in Nakhon Ratchasima Province. That province has proximity to the nation’s central region, and its people shared elements of both the Central Thai and Isan cultures. As the Khorat dialect is a hybrid of Central Thai and Lao, this may explain how such a form of Siamese theater could attain popularity so quickly. By the 1930s, likay Thai, as well as the Lao-ized style called likay Lao, had both become common in many parts of the Isan region as it moved north towards the Roi-et and Mahasarakham Provinces.

Likay Lao, which achieved widespread popularity in Isan alongside likay Thai, may be described simply as Siamese likay performed by Lao people. According to Miller, the earliest known likay Lao troupe was established in 1929 in Ban Kutnamsai (บ้านกุดน้ำใส) in Jaturaphak Phiman District of Roi-et Province (although today Ban

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410 The first train line from the capital city initially reached the Isan region at Khorat (Nakhon Ratchasima) in 1900, and the line was continually expanded through the Northeast’s southern provincial region from Korat to Ubon until 1930.
412 See Chapter 2.
Kutnamsai is located in Phanum Phrai District).\footnote{Ibid.} At first the primary difference between the two genres, as their names simply, was cultural rather than musical. According to Kaw Sawattiphanit, the performance practices for likay Thai and likay Lao were essentially the same, comprised of Central Thai-style likay singing accompanied by a piphat ensemble. The only difference was that likay Lao performers, although they did their best to sing in Central Thai dialect, inevitably did so with a Lao accent. As the genre grew in popularity and spread to other parts of Isan, likay Lao troupes increasingly began to utilize the Lao language and music in their performances. Kaw remarks that, although the sung portions still used Central Thai, the Lao language mixed with some Central Thai was increasingly used for the stylized spoken dialogues, often comedic in nature, which appeared between sung sections. According to Asian theater scholar James R. Brandon, likay Lao troupes also began to replace Central Thai style melodies, dialogue, and dance with mawlam-style singing and movement for which the khaen was used as accompaniment,\footnote{James R. Brandon, \textit{Theatre in Southeast Asia.} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 70.} although the piphat ensemble, the standard accompanying ensemble in both likay Thai and likay Lao, also continued in use for at least two more decades, especially for combat scenes. According to Miller, these developments were characterized by a process whereby Isan natives gradually localized the formerly alien genre of likay.\footnote{Terry E. Miller, \textit{Traditional Music of Lao: Kaen Playing and Mawlum Singing in Northeast Thailand.} (Westport and London: Greenwood Press, 1985), 76.}

In the 1930s when likay became more common in Isan, most performers were natives of that region rather than of Central Thailand, suggesting that the likay Lao style had already developed. Although some Central Thai likay Thai troupes still traveled to
perform in the Northeast, most well-known troupes were likay Lao owned by and made up of Isan natives. Kaw Sawattiphanit mentions that both likay Thai and likay Lao troupes existed in Isan in the 1930s; but, due to the increasing popularity of the genre and because there were not enough likay Thai troupes to meet audience demand, more and more likay Lao troupes were established. Young men and women from villages in many parts of the region who were interested in forming their own troupes would attend likay Lao or likay Thai performances and then do their best to copy the performances. In that process, they acquired the necessary skills in singing, acting, and dance. The well known senior mawlam klawn singer Khen Dalao (คำน ดาเหล่า), b. 1930, for example, mentions that in his youth he and others his age used to teach themselves to sing likay songs they had heard. Sometimes they would invite a well-known likay singer from another village to come to teach them, or they would travel to find a teacher in another village for singing lessons.

As Lao elements began to replace Central Thai ones in likay Lao, the genre eventually developed, approximately between 1935 and 1940, into a new genre, mawlam mu, although this term was not applied to the genre until the 1950s. In this new style, mawlam mu incorporated most of the local style performance conventions of likay Lao, such as mawlam singing, acting and fighting styles, costumes, props, and backdrops.

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417 When I was a child of about ten in the late 1970s, I noticed that a disused khawng wong (gong circle) was stored in the rafters of my village temple. In response to my inquiry about it, a few elders in the village told me that our village used to have a piphat ensemble until approximately the 1940s. In 1981, while attending my first year of secondary school in the nearby town of Wapi Pathum, I joined an after-school music club where I first began to study Thai classical music. We borrowed the instruments we used, which were old and apparently homemade, from the temple of a nearby village. These two experiences prove that Siamese musical culture used to exist in the Isan region.

Although likay Lao is believed to be the origin of mawlam mu, Miller mentions the existence of another related theatrical genre from the same period called mawlam mu maeng tap tao (หมอลงมาช่วย แมงตับตา) which probably appeared about 1928 in the area around Mahasarakham Province several years prior to the appearance of likay Lao in that area.\(^\text{419}\) The name maeng tap tao refers to an insect, the water scavenger beetle (Hydrous cavistanum), which is edible and prized as a delicacy although the performance genre is most likely named for the beetle’s enthusiastic mating behavior. That genre was also called likay samai boran (ลิเกนมายโ_DBG) or “ancient likay,”\(^\text{420}\) although it was originally referred to as mawlam maeng tap tao, with the term mu most likely added later.

Because mawlam mu maeng tap tao existed in only a few provinces of central Isan: Roi-et, Mahasarakham, and Yasothon, it is unlikely that it influenced mawlam mu to a significant extent, in contrast to likay Lao which was common in most of Isan. In fact, mawlam mu maeng tap tao died out by the 1950s due to the increasing popularity of mawlam mu.\(^\text{421}\)

Whereas likay Lao developed in imitation of likay Thai and integrated Isan elements such as mawlam singing and khaen, mawlam mu represented a further development as more Isan elements such as local stories were added; and most Central Thai elements, such as likay-style singing and the piphat ensemble, were abandoned.

Within that gradual process, the evidence indicates that mawlam mu came into its modern form between the late 1940s and early 1950s.\(^\text{422}\) Despite the fact that mawlam mu was

\(^{419}\) Ibid.
\(^{420}\) Ibid.
\(^{422}\) Phawnthaph Wiraphol (พรรณฑ วิรัพหลา), *Dances in Mawlam Mu Performance.* การแสดงทางเครื่องมการแสดงละ (M. A. thesis, Srinakarintaravirot Mahasarakham University, 2535/1992), 42.
almost completely Lao in its performance practices, early *mawlam mu* recordings show that, as late as the late 1940s, some performance practices from *likay Thai* were retained. For example, a rare 78-rpm recording by the Asawin-Simawk Troupe (คะน้าอังศิน สิมอัก, Khana Asawin-Simawk) dated approximately to the late 1940s begins with an *awk khaek* (อวกเข็ก), literally “Indian style [probably Malay] opening” section which was originally used as an introduction for all *likay Thai* and appeared as well in *likay Lao* performances. According to Suphine Patsungnoen (สุพิน พาสุ่งเนื่อง), b. 1927, a *mawlam mu* performer who was known professionally by his comedic stage name, Kao Noi Kluai Nao (เก้าหน่อย กลิ่นเน่า), literally “Nine Rotten Bananas,” still used the *piphat* ensemble alongside the *khaen* in some early *mawlam mu* performances. Rather than use it to accompany the singing throughout the performance, as in *likay Thai* and early *likay Lao*, the players restricted it to the accompaniment of certain stage movements such as running and fighting.

During the course of its history, the theatrical genre that is today generally referred to as *mawlam mu* has also been called by several other names. The term *mawlam mu*, although in limited use since the late 1940s, including the aforementioned recording by the Asawinsimawk Troupe in which the announcer introduces the performance as *mawlam mu*, was not widely employed throughout Isan until the late 1950s, by which time the genre had eliminated nearly all Siamese elements. Between the 1950s and late 1970s, *mawlam mu* was also referred to as *mawlam rueang* (or *mawlam lueang*, a local pronunciation) as or *mawlam Wiang*.

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423 This section featured unison group singing performed behind the stage in imitation of the Muslim chanting from which *likay* is believed to originate (see Chapter 2).
We see the term *mawlam rueang* first applied to theatrical *mawlam* in Khon Kaen Province in the early 1950s. The first theatrical *mawlam* troupe established in Khon Kaen Province and the first to rise to prominence in Isan was the Ratanasin Inta Thaiyarat Troupe (คำแระดันศิลปินเตาไทราษฎร์), Khana Ratanasin Inta Thaiyarat, founded in Ban Laonadi (บ้านนาดี), a village located 14 kilometers from Khon Kaen City, in 1952. The troupe called itself a *mawlam rueang* troupe in reference to the storytelling form of narrative *mawlam* which it saw itself as presenting in a new way. The use of the name *mawlam rueang* for a newly developed form of theatrical *mawlam* indicates that, in addition to being derived from *likay Lao*, the theatrical version also derives, significantly, including musical style as well as the stories used, from *mawlam phuen*, a narrative genre. While telling the same story, the narrative style presents it with a solo singer while the theatrical version requires many singers, each of whom plays a different role and character.

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425 Miller refers to this troupe by the shortened name “Kanah Indah.”
According to Miller, prior to 1956, all forms of mawlam were performed on straw mats on the ground without any raised stage. Once theatrical mawlam began to be performed on permanent stages in Khon Kaen, audiences responded to this new form of entertainment with great enthusiasm; and the genre began to spread rapidly to other parts of Isan as similar troupes sprang up in cities, towns, and villages throughout the region. Because theatrical mawlam troupes of that period typically had between five and twelve members, singers as well as instrumentalists, it was expensive to hire such a troupe. Nevertheless, the increasing popularity of theatrical mawlam led to a consequent decline in popularity for mawlam phuen as audiences found the new genre to be more exciting because its stories were acted out by an ensemble of costumed singers rather than by only one performer singing the stories.

The modernization of Isan led to further developments in theatrical mawlam. Sound amplification and electric lights became common when electrical service became available in Khon Kaen in 1958. In the late 1960s, in part due to the increasing popularity of luk thung music, Western instruments such as congas, drum sets, electric organs, and electric guitars were sometimes added to the traditional khaen and percussion. The most significant development in the 1960s came when theatrical mawlam troupes began to organize their performances in a more cohesive manner by pre-composing all spoken and sung dialogue and lam texts. The change was spurred by the introduction early in that decade of broadcast media to Isan when radio and recordings

426 The musical ensemble of a typical mawlam mu troupe featured either one or two khaen players and usually two percussionists, who played a set of congas, as well as chap lek and other similar small percussion instruments. These percussion instruments were generally used only to accompany sections in metrical thammong such as thammong lam phloen and thammong lam doen.
quickly became common forms of entertainment for the general population. When
*mawlam rueang* began to be recorded for release on 33- and 45-rpm disks intended for
radio broadcast as well as for sale around 1963, the genre’s theatrical components:
acting, dancing, costumes, make-up, and scenery, were necessarily omitted as the focus
of such recordings was the vocal line. As a result, troupes found it necessary to
“improve” their singing texts. This new style was called *mawlam rueang taw klawn* (คำ เรียงตอกอลอน). 428 *Taw klawn* (ตอกอลอน) literally means “continuous verses” and refers
to the new manner of performance in which each singer utilized only a pre-composed text
without interpolating any improvisation. 429 Chawiwan Damnoen (ชวิวาน ตานเนิน), a
well known *mawlam* singer best known as the lead female singer of the Rangsiman
Troupe (คณาวิลลิสมันต์), a prominent theatrical *mawlam* ensemble from Ubon Province
that pioneered the style, states that the term was coined by Thawnglue Saenthawisuk
(ทองหล่อ แสนทวิชัย), the troupe’s leader. 430 A troupe’s leader or a senior *mawlam* master
known in *mawlam* circles for his skill in writing librettos prepared the sung and spoken
text for any given *mawlam rueang taw klawn* performance. The text was hand- or
typewritten in modern Thai script but represented Isan language, and each performer had
to memorize his or her part. 431 This created greater continuity by ensuring that all texts
served to further the stories performed without the frequent improvised digressions that

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428 This term seems to have been coined by the troupes themselves as evidenced by the fact that, prior to
performance, troupe leaders often announced that they would like to offer the audience a *mawlam rueang
taw klawn* performance.

429 Although the texts utilized by actors playing the main roles in *mawlam rueang taw klawn* were always
pre-composed, the comedians continued to improvise their parts as in earlier *mawlam mu*.

430 Waraphawn Kaewsai (วรภพ แก้วไส), “Forms and Characteristics of Comedians in *Mawlam Mu* Troupes

431 In all forms of traditional *mawlam*, “composers” (called *phu-taeng klawn* or *phu-taeng klawn lam*, ผู้แต่ง
กลอนเล่า), “*klawn* authors,” wrote poetic texts but did not compose the melodies to which they would be
sung. The singers themselves were expected to contribute songs according to the rhyme scheme and tonal
structure of the text, as well as the modal style required for a given genre.
characterized earlier theatrical mawlam. This change swept rapidly through Isan, and theatrical mawlam troupes throughout the region quickly adopted the new style.

The Rangsiman Troupe, established in the early 1960s and based in Ubon Province, was one of the first theatrical mawlam troupes to achieve great success and renown throughout Isan by means of its recordings. The troupe began recording around 1963, and represented the beginning of mawlam rueang taw klawn. Its records were broadcast on radio and purchased by those few members of the public who owned phonographs. At that time, such devices were mostly common in Isan’s cities where there was electrical service available to power them. However, some villages also had such devices, usually purchased collectively and kept at the local temple which served as a community center, for use at village festivals and celebrations. Until the establishment of electrical systems in Isan’s rural areas, village phonographs were powered by portable diesel generators. As more radio stations were established and inexpensive portable radios became widely available in Isan by the mid-1960s, people were able for the first time to listen to mawlam all year round, even during the planting season. In addition, farmers could take their battery powered radios with them into the fields to provide entertainment while working.

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432 Early theatrical mawlam rueang performances, although ostensibly based on traditional epics or folktales, did not have a text written as a unity to tell an entire story from start to finish. Performers used an assortment of pre-composed, or sometimes improvised, poetic texts, some of which were directly linked with the story while others had little apparent relation to it. Despite the incoherence use of such an eclectic variety of texts might seem to create, the narrative was, nevertheless, usually clear to the audience as the story would be well known and the basic skeleton of the story was adhered to through the performers’ acting and narration.

433 In the early 1970s Miller experienced how Isan people used batteries to power their radios. A Tandberg 11 reel to reel, his field recorder, also used a cheap Thai battery, the 10 D. However, it did not last long in a big recording device like his, which took more power than a regular home radio that most Isan people used. When no longer useable on his machine, Miller handed them out to people who could still use them for their radios. I was “battery man,” Miller said as he recalled his fieldwork conducted in the early 1970s for his dissertation. (Terry Miller, personal communication).
Isan natives began to use the term *mawlam Wiang* in the 1960s to refer to theatrical *mawlam* that showed the influence of the *mawlam* style of Wiang Chan, Laos. From the 1960s, although efforts may have begun as early as the late 1940s, a number of Isan theatrical *mawlam* performers, like Suphine Patsungnoern from Nakhon Ratchasima Province, traveled to Wiang Chan where they founded theatrical *mawlam* troupes.\(^434\)

That theatrical genre, which had not previously existed in Laos, achieved great success there, and the troupes made recordings that were played on the radio both in Laos and in Isan. Because many of the troupes’ members were Laotian, this style of *mawlam mu* had a sound distinct from that of Isan. Specifically, to Isan ears its style resembled the older *sangwat* (สังวาส) style\(^435\) of *mawlam* which involved a more strident vocal timbre and more formal and conservative use of language and which avoided Isan neologisms.\(^436\)

In other regards, including stories, costumes, and acting, *mawlam Wiang* did not differ significantly from Isan-style theatrical *mawlam* of that period. The term *mawlam Wiang*, although it eventually gained recognition throughout Isan, seems to have arisen in Yasothon and Ubon Provinces.

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\(^434\)During that period the people of Isan and Laos enjoyed relatively close relations, traveling back and forth and trading with one another with ease. Thus, to *mawlam mu* troupes, Wiang Chan, located just across the Mae Khawng River from Isan, was simply another city in the Lao cultural sphere to which they could present their art.


\(^436\)The particular *sangwat* of a given *mawlam* singer or troupe is strongly affected by the dialect or accent used. Although the Isan people speak the Lao language, there are several distinct accents that vary according to locale. Because Lao is a tonal language, these accents create differences between the *mawlam sangwat* (called *sangwat lam* [สังวาสลาม] in Lao) of each region. In Northeast Thailand, there are four primary *sangwat lam*, each of which is named after a local area: *sangwat Ubon* from the area of Ubon Ratchathani Province; *sangwat Khon Kaen* from the area of Khon Kaen Province; *sangwat Kalasin* from the area in the provinces of Kalasin, Mahasarakham, and Roi-et; and *sangwat Chaiyaphum* from Chaiyaphum Province. A fifth *sangwat, sangwat Wiang*, originated outside Isan, in Wiang Chan, Laos, but is known in Isan through recordings, particularly of *mawlam mu*. 
**Mawlam Phloen**

The second major style of theatrical *mawlam*, called *mawlam phloen* (มะลัมเฟล็น), originated in Yasothon Province, a part of Ubon Province until 1972, with the first troupe founded in 1950, two years before the first theatrical *mawlam rueang* troupe in Khon Kaen.\(^{437}\) Although in many respects such as stories, costumes, backdrops, and manner of performance onstage it is quite similar to theatrical *mawlam rueang*, scholars classify it separately due to its use of a unique semi-fixed melody called *thamnong lam phloen* (ท่านองละเฟล็น) “melody of lam phloen.” *Phloen* (เฟล็น) means “joyful,” “joyous,” or “enjoyable,” indicating that *thamnong lam phloen*, generally performed in metrical style in a brisk tempo, although sometimes preceded by an unmetered introduction, is happier and more fun-sounding in comparison with the unmetered *thamnong lam thang yao* (ท่านองลำทางยาว) used as the primary *thamnong* in theatrical *mawlam rueang*. Another difference is that, in addition to the *khaen* and percussion used in theatrical *mawlam rueang*, the *mawlam phloen* ensemble usually adds a *phin* to the mix; and percussion is used much more prominently.

The first *mawlam phloen* troupe was the Phaw Rungsin Troupe (คณะ ผ.ร.งสิ้น), Khana Phaw Rungsin, founded in 1950 by the singer and composer Phan Silalak (ผันศิลลากษณ์), from Ban Dongkhaen Yai (บ้านดงแคนใหญ่), then a village but today a Subdistrict), Kham Khuean Kaeo District, Yasothon Province.\(^{438}\) Phan performed with the troupe in leading male roles\(^{439}\) and likely wrote most of the texts for the dramas.

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\(^{438}\) Ibid.

performed. Whether Phan invented *thamnong lam phloen* or borrowed it from a local *mawlam* style from Yasothon Province, within a decade it spread to other parts of Isan and became popular not just via radio and recordings but also through *mawlam phloen* troupes that performed in such provinces as Mahasarakham, Roi-et, and Khon Kaen. During my childhood in Mahasarakham Province in the 1970s and early 1980s, we could often see *mawlam phloen* troupes perform for festivals and celebrations along with *mawlam mu*.440

*Mawlam phloen* represented a break from the prevailing modes of traditional singing in Isan in its almost exclusive reliance on a metered, slightly fixed melody used to sing poetic stanzas, no matter how long or short.441 Because *thamnong lam phloen* is much like a folk tune repeated over and over, the form of *mawlam phloen* is similar to strophic form found in Western music. Conversely, the vocal parts of most other genres of *mawlam* in Isan, including theatrical *mawlam rueang*, are largely improvised according to the two pentatonic scales of *lam thang san* (ล้าทางสัน) and *lam thang yao* (ล้าทางยาว), in which the melody generally follows the tonal shifts of the language.442 This gives improvised *mawlam* singing in each part of the region its own distinct character, due to the fact that the melodic style, or *sangwat*, of each area is influenced by the local accent. The melody of *lam phloen*, on the other hand, was not affected by such

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440 Theatrical *mawlam rueang* troupes also came to perform for such events, although, due to the high expense of hiring theatrical *mawlam* troupes, usually only one or the other type of troupe was featured at a given event.

441 *Mawlam phloen* performances featured spoken dialogue as well as unmetered singing in *thamnong lam phloen*, although the latter usually appeared only in brief introductory sections.

442 Other than *thamnong lam phloen*, there are only a few other semi-fixed melodies common in *mawlam* in Isan: *thamnong lam Phuthai* (ท่าบองสุริยาไทย), *thamnong lam toei* (ท่าบองสุริยาเตี้ย), *thamnong lam tang wai* (ท่าบองสุริยาสวาย), *thamnong lam Khawnsawan* (ท่าบองสุริยาค่อนสารศรี), and *thamnong lam doen* (ท่าบองสุริยาเดื่อน). These melodies only occasionally occur in performances of *mawlam klawn* or *mawlam rueang* to provide a little variety from the predominant style of modal improvisation.
differences in accent and appeared in standardized form as performed by troupes throughout Isan.

Another important difference is the fact that, before the development of *mawlam phloen*, *mawlam* in Isan emphasized the beauty of the poetic text. The human voice was accorded the most prominent role, while accompanying instrumentation, usually only a single *khaen* sometimes in tandem with light percussion, played a secondary role. In *mawlam phloen*, however, the percussion section played a more significant role. Based primarily on a metrical *thannong*, this genre was much more upbeat and danceable; and the stronger beat distracted the listeners from the subtleties of the vocal line and its poetic text. Onstage, *mawlam phloen* singers often danced during the metrical sections. Overall, *mawlam phloen* sounded more modern and lighter than *mawlam mu* as it emphasized metrical patterns, prominent instrumental accompaniment, and dancibility close to those of popular music styles. Most *mawlam phloen* also presented their female performers in Western style short skirts, intentionally to show their “sexy” legs while they danced on stage.\(^{443}\) In the 1970s, *mawlam phloen*, thus, drew younger audiences often from 15 to 30 years old, while *mawlam mu* drew an older audience since the music and the style of presentation was closer to the old Isan/Lao tradition.

### Changes in Theatrical Mawlam since the 1960s

By the late 1960s, modernization led to significant changes in theatrical *mawlam* in Isan. When popular music, especially *luk thung*,\(^{444}\) began to become a music of choice over traditional music around 1967, both theatrical *mawlam mu/rueang* and *mawlam phloen* troupes began to adopt more musical instruments typical of *luk thung* for use in

\(^{443}\)In *mawlam mu*, most female performers wore traditional skirts which completely covered their legs.

\(^{444}\)See Chapter 4.
their performance.\textsuperscript{445} The primary reason for this is that Western instruments such as the drum set, electric organ/keyboard, electric guitar and electric bass guitar were believed to make a troupe appear more up to date, and audiences began to demand that troupes use such instruments. Of the Western instruments, the drum set became prominent, fitting especially well into mawlam phloen, where rhythm is important. In theatrical mawlam rueang, the electric organ increased in use in place of the khaen to accompany singing. By the early 1980s, also due to the influence of luk thung, the electric guitar, electric bass guitar, trumpet, and saxophone began to dominate. These four Western instruments, however, proved more suitable for accompanying mawlam phloen than theatrical mawlam rueang, by fitting better with the predominantly metered style of the former than with the predominantly unmetered style of the latter.

Beginning around 1968, a few theatrical mawlam mu and mawlam phloen troupes, in order to attract the audience, began their performances by gradually having their singers perform covers of current luk thung songs prior to the start of the actual theatrical performance. By the early 1970s, the majority of theatrical mawlam troupes began their performances in this manner;\textsuperscript{446} and by the end of the same decade when I was growing up in Isan, nearly every theatrical mawlam troupe I observed started its performance with a luk thung concert which lasted at least two to three hours often beginning around nine p.m. and ending around eleven. The troupe’s band, which included both Western and Isan instruments, accompanied the singers.\textsuperscript{447} Such pre-show concerts usually lasted two

\textsuperscript{445}Congas were the first Western instrument already in mawlam troupes prior the mid 1960s.


\textsuperscript{447}The instrumentation varied according to that in each song’s original recorded version. For example, while most songs featured electric organ, electric guitar, electric bass guitar, and drum set, some only featured traditional instruments such as khaen, phin, or saw Isan.
or more hours and, like luk thung concerts, usually featured, in addition, a chorus of dancing girls in flashy matching costumes.

Figure 27. Rangsiman, one of the first mawlam mu troupes who adapted a popular concert show before presenting their traditional theatrical performance for the rest of night. Photo by Terry E. Miller, 1974.

Figure 28. Lam phloen performance during a luk thung show (late 1970s). The picture portrays a female luk thung singer in front with a group of dancers behind her. The performance is backed up by a “rock band” further behind.

Figure 30. Gigantic stage of a mawlum mu performance today
Today only a handful of theatrical *mawlam* troupes survive in Isan, most of which were founded in the 1960s or 1970s. These include the Ratanasin Inta Thaiyarat Troupe (mentioned earlier), the Rabiapwathasin Troupe (คณะ רבีปวัฒนศิลป์), Khana Rabiapwathasin, and the Prathombanthongsin Troupe (คณะพรหมบัณฑิตศิลป์), Khana Prathombanthongsin, all of which are based in Khon Kaen Province and perform Khon Kaen style *mawlam rueang*. Although at least one *mawlam phloen* troupe, Khana Sao Noi Phet Ban Phaeng (ชนะสานอิ่มเพชรบ้านแปง) from Mahasarakham Province, has survived to the present, none is as prominent as the aforementioned *mawlam rueang* troupes. In order to adapt to the changing tastes of their audiences, who were increasingly accustomed to largescale musical extravaganzas which typified live and televised performances of *luk thung* and other forms of mainstream pop music, the changes were made among some troupes. Beginning around 1990, those troupes, which had formerly enjoyed great success and still had enough savings, were able to adjust or “improve” their manner of performance. Although theatrical *mawlam rueang* performances even now still begin with a set of *luk thung* songs, the theatrical performance itself, which comprises the second half of the performance, is no longer done in pure traditional style. The most significant difference is that *luk thung* songs as well as songs from other Thai pop genres are now interspersed throughout the actual theatrical performance rather than presented only in advance. The standard mode of performance for modern day theatrical *mawlam* troupes follows the format of a large-

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448 The fact *mawlam phloen* has not survived while theatrical *mawlam rueang* has may be explained by the fact that the rhythm of *thamnong mawlam phloen* is very similar to the beat of *luk thung Isan*, while the traditional singing style of theatrical *mawlam rueang* provides a contrast to the more metered fixed melody. This allows vocalists to show their vocal artistry to a greater degree. In addition, *mawlam phloen* troupes were never as successful as theatrical *mawlam rueang* troupes; thus, *mawlam phloen* troupes were unable to invest in “improving” their performances. As a result, most simply went out of business.
scale pop music concert performed on a huge temporary outdoor stage without
background scenery but with extravagant lighting, a large backup band, and a dozen or
more dancers. When the troupes were no longer supported by private sponsors, they
began to put a cloth fence up and sold tickets for people to get in to see the show. Such
performances are sometimes aired on national television and are widely available on
VCD and on video websites such as You Tube today.

**Neotraditional-Popular Hybrid: Mawlam Sing**

**History and Context**

The newest form of *mawlam* is *mawlam sing* (มอลัมซิง), a commercialized
musical style that combines *mawlam* with popular song, which developed in the context
of recently modernized Isan culture in the mid-1980s. Unlike *luk thung*, which appeals to
audiences throughout Thailand, *mawlam sing* is generally favored mostly by Isan people
due to its strong local flavor. Because it is commercially driven, it is not considered a
form of traditional music in need of preservation. The genre is eclectic in its influences,
drawing in equal amounts on elements of traditional *mawlam klawn* as well as popular
styles such as *luk thung* and Thai pop music generally. *Mawlam sing* also embodies
globalization in its mode of performance; it is most often presented in the manner of a
pop concert such as one might find anywhere in the world. Solo singers are accompanied
by a band of mostly Western electric instruments and a large contingent of costumed
dancers on a huge stage with elaborate lighting.

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449 As mentioned in chapter 1, VCD is an abbreviation for “video compact disc,” a video format popular in Asia. VCDs are the same size and shape as DVDs, but have much lower quality video and audio output. VCDs are consequently less expensive than DVDs; and that makes them more popular for the majority of the population who cannot afford to purchase videos in the more expensive format.
Unlike older forms of *mawlam*, whose early histories are often obscure, the basic facts of the origin of *mawlam sing* are fairly well known. Because the performers who created the genre had a background in traditional *mawlam klawn* repartee singing, *mawlam sing* can be considered to have developed directly from *mawlam klawn*, although with many influences from *luk thung* and other forms of Thai popular music.\footnote{See Chapter 5.}

Before considering the specifics of the development of *mawlam sing*, however, a discussion of the social conditions in Isan at the time, especially in regard to music, is in order.

From the early 1970s, popular music significantly affected traditional styles of *mawlam*, including *mawlam klawn* and *mawlam mu*, as the increasing popularity of *luk thung* gradually drained the audiences for the older art forms. In traditional practice, audiences sat and listened to *mawlam* quietly and with great attention; and they occasionally expressed their appreciation to the performers through laughter or shouts of encouragement. For example, in performances of *mawlam klawn*, repartee singing listeners focused their attention on the beauty of the poetry as well as the vocal quality and skill of the singers. In contrast, *luk thung*, the popular style that became the music of choice for most young listeners, encouraged an entirely different mode of listening. As with rock and roll music, the danceable beat of *luk thung* caused its listeners to want to move their bodies rather than simply listen quietly. Within a decade, few Isan people under the age of thirty enjoyed listening to traditional music in the quiet, focused manner that had been usual in the past. Since the advent of *luk thung*, audiences have become accustomed to listening with less attention to the subtleties of the music and lyrics. Instead they prefer to let themselves be carried along by the music’s stronger beat, which
encourages them to dance or at least move their bodies in some way. This level of listening, focused primarily on diversion, is not conducive to serious musical appreciation and leads to the use of less refined lyrics or poetry than in traditional mawlam.

As mentioned earlier, theatrical mawlam troupes were able to maintain a measure of their former popularity by presenting, prior to the actual theatrical mawlam performance, a selection of luk thung songs as a way to satisfy younger members of the audience who were accustomed to the new way of listening. During the same decade, however, mawlam klawn performers made little effort to modernize their performances or to adapt elements of Thai country music other than by wearing fancy Westernstyle outfits and occasionally integrating a few bars of a current luk thung hit into their klawn, usually in the thammong lam thang san sections. This was most likely because many mawlam klawn performers still enjoyed sufficient audience loyalty, especially among older listeners, to generate enough performance commissions to get by, and thus they did not feel it necessary to adopt elements of a musical style they felt was not really relevant to or compatible with their own performance practice.

By the mid-1980s, however, it had become clear that mawlam klawn was in a state of decline, as the remaining performers received fewer and fewer invitations. The genre’s older fans were dying off while the younger generation had for the most part lost interest in all types of traditional music since a wide variety of more modern entertainments, including luk thung concerts, open-air discotheques, and TV programs, were readily available. Faced with the realization that they might eventually lose their audiences entirely, a few mawlam klawn singers decided to add elements of popular music to their performances to appeal to younger listeners.
One of the singers was Ratri Sriwilai (ราชรี ศรีวิไล), b. 1952, a mawlam singer from Khon Kaen generally credited with having created a new genre, although she acknowledges her brother Sunthawn Chairungruang (สุนทร ชัยรุจเรือง), b. 1938,\(^{451}\) who was also a professional mawlam klawn singer in neighboring Chaiyaphum Province, as co-creator. Ratri was born into a mawlam family and grew up in Mahasarakham. She learned to sing mawlam klawn from her parents who, along with several other close family members, were also mawlam klawn singers. Beginning around 1970, she began a career as a mawlam klawn singer. At that time, she performed locally but did not acquire any special degree of fame. By the 1980s, she noticed that the public was increasingly moving away from her genre in favor of more modern entertainments such as theatrical mawlam, open-air traveling cinemas, luk thung concerts, and especially open-air discotheques. Young audience members, particularly young men, had become accustomed to dancing in front of the stage at popular music concerts;\(^{452}\) and, in 1985 and 1986, mobile discotheques, known locally as thek (เทพ), became popular among young people throughout Isan. This kind of discotheque, consisting of a sound system with large speakers and a set of records or tapes, traveled to the villages in the back of a large truck supported by a crew of four or five men, one of whom served as the DJ, another as the lighting person, and the others as “roadies” to set up the equipment. When invited to a festival or celebration in a village or city, the group usually set up in an open area such as a rice field, temple yard, or school athletic field, a large tent-like structure with a frame of metal tubes, a small stage for the DJ and his sound system, and an arrangement of

\(^{451}\)His real name is Sunthawn Chairatthanasot (สุนทร ชัยรัตนโชติ)

\(^{452}\)Because Thai society was still conservative in many ways, it was (and is) not socially acceptable for young women to dance with young men in front of the stage at popular music concerts; instead, they usually watch such concerts while seated further back on straw mats.
colored and flashing lights complete with a disco ball suspended from the metal frame. They usually received their power by plugging an extension cord into a nearby electrical outlet. The DJ of the mobile discotheque played a wide variety of music, including Thai pop, *luk thung*, and Western popular music although whatever he played was fast and loud to appeal to the audience. \(^{453}\)

Faced with the situation that the tastes of young people had changed so radically, Ratri came up with the idea to add more modern elements to her performances in an effort to hold their interest while at the same time retaining as many traditional elements as possible. The young listeners had become the most important sector of the concert going public due to their relative affluence from working full-time in Bangkok which gave them a consequently stronger influence over which entertainers were hired for their village festivals. Ratri’s strategy paid off once she began integrating more popular elements into her performances. Younger audiences reacted with great enthusiasm, as she had hoped.

We can see *mawlam sing*, her new commercialized hybrid genre, less as an invention and more as a phenomenon, the creation and development of which was driven by audience demand. The importance of the audience to the genre even extends to the origin of its name. In a 2001 interview, Ratri explained how the term *sing* came to be applied to her music. She said that one night in 1985 as she was performing *mawlam klawn* on an outdoor festival stage, in a few *klawn*, particularly those in *thamnong lam toei*, she sang with the traditional accompaniment of *khaen* but with the non-traditional

addition of congas and *chap lek*, a pair of cymbals. As it happened, a group of young racing enthusiasts ranging in age between eighteen and twenty-two were watching the performance in front of the stage. After the performance, Ratri overheard these individuals talking to one another about how impressed they were by her performance and recommending that her troupe be hired again in the future because it was so “*sing,*” which, translated loosely as an adjective, means “hot” or “rockin’.” The term *sing* (ซิ้ง) itself derives from the English word “racing.” Used first as a slang term by teenagers in Central Thailand sometime between 1982 and 1984 and later adopted in Isan dialect, it has, like many other youth slang terms, now fallen out of fashion and today survives primarily in reference to the genre of *mawlam sing*. Originally used to mean “fast,” as in automobile or motorcycle racing, it eventually also acquired an implied meaning that is difficult to translate but which connotes ideas such as “hip,” “modern,” and “exciting.” When Isan musicians began using the term to refer to their music, they did so to indicate to listeners that all elements of their performance including singing, dancing, and musical accompaniment were particularly intense, lively, exciting, and loud.

After that evening, whenever Ratri performed non-traditional *mawlam klawn*, i.e., when she employed percussion and amplified instruments, she used the term her fans had applied to describe her music, *mawlam sing*. In the years after 1985, Ratri’s *mawlam sing* style developed further as she began to integrate more elements of popular music into her performances. In 1986, she adopted the drum set for use alongside the *khaen* to

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454 For a few years in the mid-1980s, informal racing, mostly of motorcycles rather than cars, was popular among teenagers in Thailand.

455 Siriyaa Smutkupt et al., *Mawlum Cing Isan: Bodies and Voices in a Modernized Performing Art from Northeast Thailand*, คำชื่อถึงคำว่า: อัตถ์กฤษณ์ และเสียงสะท้อนของดนทุกข์ในมวลละ ซิ้ง (Nakhon Ratchasima: Thai Studies Anthropological Collection, Suranaree University of Technology, 2544/2001), 98
accompany her singing and, in the same year, also began to feature a group of costumed dancing girls as a standard part of her performances. Within a year or two, she also added several other Western instruments typical of rock music, although she still included khaen and electric phin for more traditional-sounding selections. She thus built a band similar to those playing luk thung and other forms of popular music.

Within a year or two of the genre’s creation, mawlam sing troupes sprang up throughout Isan, most led by mawlam klawn singers who had, for the previous several years, had few performance opportunities and in order to survive decided to reinvent themselves and their students as mawlam sing performers. By 1990, also as a result of audience demand, it became common for mawlam sing troupes to integrate songs in a wide variety of popular styles into their shows. Although they still included a number of mawlam klawn style selections, they also performed luk thung Isan, luk thung mawlam, Central Thai-style luk thung, Thai pop songs, and instrumental pieces derived from the ponglang ensemble repertoire. Of these styles, the mawlam sing performers composed only the mawlam style sections which often comprised only about thirty percent of a given performance. They copied (i.e., “covered”) the songs in popular styles from original artists and their recordings.

By that time mawlam sing had become an established genre. A large troupe that included at least two lead singers, one male and one female (although some troupes had up to four pairs of singers) accompanied by a band of amplified instruments and a group

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456 The interest in mawlam klawn has continued to decline. In the summer of 1999 after living in the United States for nearly five years, I traveled to my home province of Mahasarakham to be ordained as a Buddhist monk. On the day of the ceremony, held in the afternoon, my family hired a pair of well known traditional mawlam klawn singers with their khaen player to perform for the celebration later that day in the temple yard and open to the public. That evening, aside from my family members, only about twenty people of a thousand or so residents of the village, most of them elderly, came to see the mawlam klawn performance.
of dancers performed the elaborate show on an outdoor stage. Usually such troupes have been named after either their lead singer, founder, or the teacher who trained its singers or, in some cases, after both the lead male and female singers. The most prominent troupes include the Ratri Sriwilai Troupe (รัตรีศรีวิไล), Khana Ratri Ratri, based in Khon Kaen, the Jum Thawng Siangsanae Troupe (คณาจุฬามอง เสิร์สนาถ), Khana Jum Thawng Siangsanae, also based in Khon Kaen), and the troupe of Phaibun Siangthawng (โพยบุญ เสิร์สนาถ), based in Mahasarakham. Mawlam sing singers, both male and female, dress either in a modern style similar to that favored by most Thai pop singers of all genres, with females in tight tops with miniskirts, often revealing the midriff, or in minidresses and boots while the men wear stylish Western suits, often white or in bright colors.

Although mawlam sing achieved great popularity among Isan people (those in Isan as well as in Bangkok), people enjoyed it primarily through the mode of live performance. Mawlam sing did not replace luk thung Isan or luk thung mawlam in popularity, as these genres remained dominant in the recording and broadcast music markets. Instead it has served more as a party music genre that must be experienced live rather than on recordings. Because the majority of the songs performed by mawlam sing troupes are covers of songs by artists of other popular genres, they generally do not release CD recordings, although the live performances of some troupes are available on VCD. This means that the Bangkok-based Thai pop music industry has not easily been able to capitalize on mawlam sing in the way that they have previously exploited most other Isan-style popular genres. This is despite the fact that young Isan natives are acknowledged as the industry’s most important demographic due to their relatively huge
percentage of the overall population and the importance of music in their lives. *Mawlam sing* performances take place regularly at festivals throughout Isan as well as occasionally in Bangkok, of which we can sometimes find the latter live on national television. They usually draw thousands of attendees, but they rarely generate revenue from ticket sales because there is usually no entrance fee. The only real way for Bangkok-based music promoters and companies to make money from the concerts is through the sale of advertising for companies that underwrite concerts in return for prominent display of their names and logos on large banners hung at the rear of the stage. However, advertising may also appear on screen during the broadcast. Because *mawlam sing* provides only limited returns for the Bangkok-based Thai popular music industry, it is significant in that it is the first genre of Isan-style popular music where the vast majority of the revenue is collected by Isan natives themselves. The main way *mawlam sing* generates revenue is through the collection of performance fees from the hire of troupes for festival performances either by the managers of the troupes themselves or by their performance agencies, which are usually located in the same city where the troupe is based. While the amount of money that a *mawlam sing* troupe can earn is nowhere near the amount earned by a famous *luk thung* artist, the genre’s continuing popularity and the demand for festival performances ensure steady employment.

**Composition of Current *Mawlam Sing* Troupes**

Unlike *mawlam klawn* performances, which were relatively easily organized due to their impromptu nature and the smaller number of performers, *mawlam sing* shows are complex affairs which necessitate the employment of large numbers of people and large amounts of equipment. The five main components in putting together *mawlam sing*
performances include singers, musicians, dancers, equipment, management and marketing.

Generally, as in *mawlam klawn*, a pair of lead singers, one male and one female, present a *mawlam sing* performance. Patrons typically select their favorite male and female singers and hire them as a pair since *mawlam sing* retains some elements of repartee style. Of the two singers, one usually brings his or her entire troupe and the other, who is often not a member of that troupe, is still able to fit in with a minimum of rehearsal since performances usually adhere closely to well known formulas. If a patron wishes to make the event he or she is organizing more spectacular, he/she may ask a troupe to bring more singers. In most cases this is no problem because most *mawlam sing* troupes maintain a number of younger singers who are apprentices to the lead singers and are sometimes given the opportunity to gain practical experience by singing in live performances.

As mentioned earlier, the main thing that sets *mawlam sing* singers apart from *mawlam klawn* singers is that the former have to be able to sing various kinds of popular songs. Once the inclusion of popular songs in *mawlam sing* performances became *de rigueur*, many older troupe leaders without much experience singing current popular songs saw the need to bring their troupes’ younger singers onto the stage to fulfill the audience’s demand for such songs. Most of the younger singers have no difficulty singing in a wide variety of popular styles as they have grown up with the music. At the same time, despite the fact that most of them study traditional *mawlam klawn* with their troupe leaders, they usually cannot do so as well as senior *mawlam klawn* singers in the traditional pieces as they know a much smaller repertoire of *klawn* and have less well
developed skills in vocal technique and improvisation. This may be explained by the fact that, because the traditional component of *mawlam sing* is small compared to the popular elements, younger *mawlam sing* singers direct more of their practice toward popular songs and less to honing their *mawlam klawn* techniques. Sometimes a young singer in his or her teacher’s troupe can attract enough interest from audiences that people may wish to hire him or her as a primary singer for a future festival. In such cases this younger singer may perform in one of three ways: he or she may be assisted by his/her current troupe leader in organizing a performance with the troupe leader finding the musicians and dancers; he or she may be hired on his/her own, performing with the troupe of the other hired singer; or, in some cases, he or she may start his/her own troupe.

Another important aspect that sets *mawlam sing* apart from *mawlam klawn* is the use of a greater number of instruments, most of Western origin. The rise of popular music in Isan went hand in hand with modernization of the region. That began most significantly with the adoption of Western instruments by theatrical *mawlam* troupes in the late 1960s and continued with the development of *luk thung Isan* in the early 1970s; and that, in turn, eventually led to the development of *mawlam sing* from *mawlam klawn* in the mid-1980s. The first and most significant of those instruments, the use of which was crucial to all of the following musical developments, was the Western drum kit. In the early days of *luk thung*, a band’s use of a drum set created the impression among audiences that it was sufficiently “up to date;” and, as a result, the presence of a drum set became essential to generating audience interest. Because Isan audiences had by the early 1970s become enamored of its more powerful sound, varied timbres, greater rhythmic density, and the fact that it covered all registers from high (cymbals) to low
(bass drum) in contrast with traditional percussion instruments, the drum set had by 1973 become a fixture of popular genres such as luk thung; and both luk thung bands and theatrical mawlam troupes used the Western drum kit for luk thung performances. Unlike theatrical mawlam troupes, which perform mostly in unmetered style and, thus, use the drum set only to accompany the occasional metrical thamnong (ท่านอง) or melody, mawlam sing rarely features unmetered sections except for the occasional section in thamnong lam thang yao (ท่านองลำท่างยาว). That makes the drum set compatible with both popular songs and traditional-style sections in thamnong lam thang san and thamnong lam toei, the most commonly used thamnong in mawlam sing.

By the time of the development of mawlam sing, the drum kit had become essential to the new genre. Ratri Sriwilai, the creator of mawlam sing, often emphasizes that the use of Western drums to accompany mawlam klawn-style singing was a revolutionary development in that the faster beat. The drum kit contributed served to transform mawlam klawn into mawlam sing. In her opinion, this brought mawlam fully into the modern age. She feels sure the drum set drew the attention of audiences and became an important selling point for mawlam sing troupes and that it gave the genre commercial viability. Following Ratri’s innovation every mawlam sing troupe had to have a drum set. New mawlam sing troupes, usually formed by mawlam klawn performers as previously mentioned, knew that if they went onstage without a Western drum kit they would immediately be subject to criticism by listeners, and that would lead to a loss of face. In addition, many patrons, before hiring a troupe, would ask if they had

*Suriya Smutkupt et al.,* Mawlam Cing Isan: Bodies and Voices in a Modernized Performing Art from Northeast Thailand, หนังสือสารานุกรม ศิลปะและวัฒนธรรมของกลุ่มทุศยานมุลอ ชื่อ (Nakhon Ratchasima: Thai Studies Anthropological Collection, Suranaree University of Technology, 2544/2001), 103.
a drum set. If they did not, the troupe would usually not be hired to perform.\textsuperscript{458} In response to the pressure, the leaders of \textit{mawlam klawn} troupes increasingly began to acquire drum sets, and that in itself led to rapid growth in the new genre of \textit{mawlam sing}.

As theatrical \textit{mawlam} troupes had earlier done, within a year or two of the genre’s establishment, \textit{mawlam sing} troupes began to adopt several other Western instruments for use alongside the traditional ones. Beside the \textit{khaen}, the main instruments of this new type of band, which became known as a \textit{wong [dontri]} \textit{mawlam sing} (วง[ดนตรี]มอลำชี้ง), were the drum set, electronic keyboard, and electric bass guitar, in order of importance.\textsuperscript{459} Performers and audiences consider this “combo” to be the smallest possible backup band. Since the late 1980s, the electric lead guitar has also become ubiquitous in \textit{mawlam sing} bands. Although it was originally of lesser importance and considered optional, today most \textit{mawlam sing} bands have at least one. The instrument is favored because it can play pentatonically, imitating the style of the \textit{phin}, for traditional-sounding selections; and it can also play in a more conventional chordal style for pop songs. Since the late 1990s, many \textit{mawlam sing} bands have also featured an electrically amplified \textit{phin} alongside the electric guitar(s). The musicians use it primarily in \textit{luk thung mawlam} songs and \textit{ponglang} ensemble style instrumental pieces which usually accompany dances.\textsuperscript{460} The bands of some larger troupes, which can number as many as

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\textsuperscript{458} Ibid., 106.
\textsuperscript{459} The reason these instruments are listed in this order is that the drum set is considered the most essential as it was originally used as the only Western instrumentation alongside the \textit{khaen} in early \textit{mawlam sing}; and it continues to be the only instrument used along with the \textit{khaen} in \textit{mawlam}-style sections. Of the remaining two instruments, the keyboard is more important in its role as a rhythmic, melodic and harmonic accompaniment instrument.
\textsuperscript{460} Because the electrified \textit{phin} may only be used a few times during a typical \textit{mawlam sing} performance of five hours or more, most troupes do not hire a full time \textit{phin} player but instead have a \textit{phin} player who can double on another instrument such as the electric guitar.
ten musicians, may also feature a horn section with one or more saxophones and trumpets.

The addition of so many Western instruments to the *mawlam sing* ensemble means that the *khaen*, originally the only accompanying instrument in traditional *mawlam*, has lost much of its importance. Because all traditional *mawlam* features the *khaen* as the primary accompanying instrument, *mawlam sing* has continued its use, although usually only for *mawlam*-style sections, that is, in *thamnong lam thang san* or in *thamnong lam thang yao*, in the introductions to some *luk thung mawlam* songs, and rarely in some *luk thung Isan* songs. In all other situations where it is used, including in *luk thung mawlam* songs after the introductory section, the *khaen* can be very difficult or even impossible to hear as, once the full band enters, it is usually drowned out, although the player continues to play or pretends to do so at the center of the stage and behind the singers.\(^{461}\) Since the full *mawlam sing* band usually accompanies the *mawlam* style sections in *thamnong lam toei*\(^ {462}\) as well as *luk thung* and pop songs, during such selections, the *khaen* player may either take a break or dance about the stage while playing, pretending to play, or simply holding his instrument. In this light it can be seen that the *khaen* is retained in *mawlam sing* more for symbolic than for practical reasons. As a result, *khaen* players in *mawlam sing* do not need as high a level of skill or endurance as they do in *mawlam klawn*.

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\(^{461}\) Most *mawlam sing* troupes probably do not even wish to have the *khaen* heard following the introductions of the *luk thung mawlam* songs in which it is featured, as the instrument can almost never be heard in the original recorded versions of the songs that the troupes cover.

\(^{462}\) Because *thamnong lam toei* is one of the three main *thamnong* used as the basis for *luk thung mawlam* songs, and because *thamnong lam thang yao* (the *thamnong* that traditionally precedes *thamnong lam toei* in *mawlam klawn*) is so rarely encountered in *mawlam sing*, it can be considered that *luk thung mawlam* has largely taken the place of traditional selections in *thamnong lam toei* in *mawlam sing*. 
Most members of *mawlam sing* bands play their instruments as their primary profession rather than as a sideline from factory or farm work. Some are self taught while others may have begun their careers by studying informally with one or more skilled musicians for brief periods during their youth. Most such musicians have a great deal of experience and skill, gained from playing in a wide variety of contexts, bands, venues, and styles other than *mawlam sing*. The members of a *mawlam sing* backup band are usually not considered actual troupe members but are hired either as individuals or as a group for specific performances on an *ad hoc* basis. With the exception of *khaen* players, most *mawlam sing* instrumentalists make their primary livings by playing regularly in places such as restaurants, bars, and discotheques. Among these opportunities *mawlam sing* performances are particularly lucrative. For one *mawlam sing* performance, a musician will generally earn between 600 and 1,000 baht,\(^{463}\) a good wage compared to other jobs such as construction or factory work in which he might earn the same amount or only a little more for a full week of work.\(^{464}\)

Another of the most important elements of *mawlam sing* is dance. In addition to the dance movements used by singers and *khaen* players, most *mawlam sing* performances feature a contingent of between two and ten, or in exceptional cases more, dancers in matching costumes, usually in multiples of two. According to Ratri, dancers were featured in *mawlam sing* soon after the genre’s inception, from about the same time

\(^{463}\) As of 2010, 33 baht is equivalent to one U.S. dollar. Thirty baht is enough to buy a medium-sized bowl of noodle soup or a simple meal of rice and curry in Thailand.

the drum set was adopted.\textsuperscript{465} Due to the massive popularity of *luk thung*, from which *mawlam sing* borrowed this performance element, audiences became used to seeing such dancing at large scale musical performances, and dancers came to be expected by most patrons who hire *mawlam sing* troupes. Having dancers as an option gives troupes a better ability to negotiate performance commissions as they can charge a higher price according to the number of dancers requested by a patron. *Mawlam sing*’s use of dancers is one of the things that makes the genre more attractive than *mawlam klawn* for most modern audiences, especially in that the dancers are believed to enliven and beautify a performance and help fill up the stage, which is often quite large.

*Mawlam sing* dancers are most often teenaged girls, usually from fourteen to eighteen years in age, although some may be nineteen or twenty. They are expected to be slender, attractive, friendly, and, most importantly, responsible. Most dancers are high school students who enjoy dancing and want some extra income. While, like the members of *mawlam sing* bands, the dancers for a given *mawlam sing* troupe are not usually considered full members of the troupe, they are generally hired as a group. Usually a troupe leader or dance coordinator will locate a group of schoolmates or close friends who are often relatives of one or more of the troupe members and invite them to join the ensemble for a series or season of performances. Following such an invitation, they usually get together for a few weeks, either after school or on weekends, and practice as a team to learn the synchronized movements, usually from the troupe’s dance coordinator, before appearing on stage. Unlike most musicians in *mawlam sing* bands, who are hired on a freelance basis and feel no particular loyalty to any given troupe, *mawlam sing* dancers usually perform only for a single troupe in their local area. This is

\textsuperscript{465}Ibid., 206.
largely because, as young women, both they and their parents prefer that they work for relatives and close friends as that will help to assure that they are well taken care of. Like the members of mawlam sing bands, mawlam sing dancers are paid relatively well. A dancer with at least one year of experience on stage will usually receive about 600 baht per night plus “tips.”

Dancing can generate good tips; a dancer may earn up to two thousand baht on a “busy” night. Mawlam sing dancers usually dance with a troupe for only a few years because dancers beyond their teenage years are considered “too old” by most audiences. Thus, following their graduation from high school, most choose to move on to other things such as obtaining full time jobs, getting married, or pursuing higher education.

The stage, sound equipment, and lighting are also important aspects of mawlam sing performances. Prior to the development of mawlam sing, patrons who hired mawlam klawn singers were expected to provide a stage and sound system for the performance. The stage was usually a small, simple, temporary platform, sometimes covered by a tarpaulin, which the patron would ask local residents to help construct prior to the performance. The sound system usually consisted of a single microphone and one or two huge bullhorn speakers which belonged to the community and were borrowed from the village temple. Since the late 1980s, however, when mawlam sing troupes grew larger and began to present their performances in a manner similar to pop music concerts,

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466 In a mawlam sing performance, as in most types of folk and popular performances in Isan and Thailand as a whole, it is common for audience members to tip singers, dancers, and/or instrumentalists. During the performance of a given selection the audience member wishing to give a tip will signal to the performer of his or her choice who will come to the edge of the stage, receive the tip, and then resume performing.

it became necessary to have a huge stage with complicated sound and lighting systems. Such equipment has become an important concern for *mawlam sing* troupes, who need to spend a great deal in transporting the stage, sound and lighting systems, and instruments to each performance. Few *mawlam sing* troupes own all of this equipment themselves because of the great expense involved.

![Mawlam Sing Performance](image)

*Figure 31. Mawlam Sing performance*

The rental of such equipment to *mawlam sing* troupes, thus, quickly became a big business; and rental companies became fairly common in the region. Most cities and larger towns have at least one such enterprise. Because such companies rent to many different *mawlam sing* troupes, as well as *luk thung* and other popular music groups, they usually have several sets of equipment from which to choose, some larger and of higher quality and others smaller and of lower quality. They usually rent their best equipment to
those first-rank *mawlam sing* troupes who have a greater ability to pay,\textsuperscript{468} with the second best equipment going to second-rate troupes and the third best going to third-rate ones.\textsuperscript{469}

Finally, marketing is one of the most important ways for *mawlam sing* troupes to promote themselves and become successful in a competitive environment. Most *mawlam sing* singers are members of *samnak ngan mawlam* (สำนักงานหมอละ) or *mawlam performance agencies*. Such agencies, which did exist before the creation of *mawlam sing*, act as brokers who connect *mawlam sing* troupes as well as theatrical *mawlam* troupes and *mawlam klawn* singers, although these are not as popular to patrons. Troupes and singers usually must pay a fee to become members, depending on the policy of each agency, with the understanding that the agency will assist its performers to find performance engagements. Upon joining a *mawlam* performance agency, each troupe or singer generally leaves a portfolio of photographs and audio and video demos of their performances at the agency for prospective patrons to evaluate.

Most large cities in Isan have several such agencies. A patron who wishes to hire a *mawlam sing* troupe for a festival performance typically visits its agency instead of approaching the troupe’s leader directly. If the patron is interested in a troupe that is not available, he or she will be presented with a list of the other troupes represented by the agency. The patron will ask questions about each troupe and the quality and popularity of its singers and performances and ask to see photos and videos before making a decision to hire the one they prefer. Some agencies are susceptible to bribery and thus

\textsuperscript{468}Some rental companies classify *mawlam sing* troupes in three ranks according to the amount of money they command for performances. “Grade A” troupes are those that are paid 25,000 baht, “Grade B” troupes get 20,000 baht, and “Grade C” troupes get 15,000 baht.

\textsuperscript{469}Suriya Smutkupt et al., (ศรียา สมฤทธิ์) *Mawlum Cing Isan: Bodies and Voices in a Modernized Performing Art from Northeast Thailand*, นครชัยสี: ศิลปักษ์ และเสียงสะท้อนของคนทุกข์ในหมอละ ชอง (Nakhon Ratchasima: Thai Studies Anthropological Collection, Suranaree University of Technology, 2544/2001), 242.
favor certain of their troupes which they push more aggressively than others. The agency usually takes about ten percent of a troupe’s performance fee. Most of the people who run mawlam performance agencies are fairly well known in their areas. Some of them are radio DJs who use their programs to promote their agencies and the troupes and singers they represent either through announcements of upcoming performances and/or more formal paid advertising spots.

Social Context of Mawlam Sing

The genre’s blend of traditional and popular music appeals primarily to young working class Isan natives, most of whom live and work in Bangkok. Those young people often begin their employment as young as age seventeen or eighteen. The first fans of mawlam sing were born in Isan between 1960 and 1970, and most of today’s fans were born after 1980. Because economic situations have led most of them to live in Bangkok rather than in Isan, they are essentially urbanized and quite used to a modern lifestyle, although most of them are also familiar with rural life as they typically grew up in farm villages. Such young people are thus familiar with many styles of Thai and Western pop music which they see and hear on television, VCD, CD, and the Internet, as well as at live concerts held almost every weekend in Bangkok. As a result, mawlam sing’s context in terms of performance and interaction between audience and performers largely imitates the international norms of popular music to which listeners have become accustomed from their experiences via the media systems. However, although they live in Bangkok for extended periods, it never feels quite like home for most Isan emigrants. Because of their working class roots and their nostalgia for village life, they retain a
feeling of connection to the music and culture of their heritage. *Mawlam sing* developed to satisfy the tastes of this new generation of listeners.

When they watch *mawlam sing* performances, young audience members behave as if they were at a pop music concert. Many enjoy dancing in front of the stage, giving money, “tipping” the dancers or singers with whom they sometimes also shake hands or offer a kiss on the cheek, as well as taking photographs or videos of their favorite performers. Performers generally accept this kind of audience behavior which they acknowledge as typical of *luk thung* concerts, and, indeed, of pop concerts of any type.

The increasingly rowdy and disruptive behavior of some audience members has led, since 2000, to a gradual decline in the popularity of *mawlam sing*. As a genre favored by young migrant workers, village *mawlam sing* performances attract large groups of these workers who, when they come home to visit for holidays, want to have fun above all else. Because beer and liquor are widely available at village markets and from vendors on the festival grounds, many young men become intoxicated and begin behaving boisterously in front of the stage. This almost invariably leads to fights which sometimes end with serious injuries if the combatants carry weapons such as knives. According to Miller, such fights can be “fights over a woman, fights over someone’s attraction to a singer, fights over nothing.” He continues that “at a performance in a small village in the early 1990s, we were forced to pack up and flee when a major fight erupted in spite of pleas for calm from the stage.”

To solve this problem some village headmen have decided to no longer allow *mawlam sing* performances in their villages or communities. Others have come up with a different solution. They allow *mawlam sing*

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performances, but only during daylight hours with a dozen or so police officers to provide security. This is a significant change because village celebrants traditionally saved their main entertainment for the evening, and the most prominent performers and groups started after nine p.m. For villages that have only enough funds to hire a single troupe, this means that there will be no evening performance, a situation most unusual and disappointing for many villagers.

Conservative members of Isan society have roundly criticized *mawlam sing*. These people, most of whom are over fifty years of age, are outspoken in their belief that the genre is destroying the art of *mawlam* and the musical culture of Isan. In their view *mawlam sing* is *mawlam* in name only as it has abandoned the most important elements of traditional *mawlam* such as sophisticated poetry, the transmission of Buddhist teachings and social mores, and advanced aspects of singing technique and *khaen* performances. These conservatives feel that *mawlam sing* is essentially hedonistic and of little value other than a simple celebration; and they criticize its overemphasis on sexuality both in its lyrics and the movements, which can often be highly suggestive, and in the costumes of the female singers and dancing girls which are usually tight and sometimes revealing. On the other hand, supporters of *mawlam sing*, who see themselves as cultural progressives, including most prominently the performers themselves, argue that *mawlam sing* is an appropriate development in that it allows the *mawlam* tradition to continue in the culture, albeit in modified form. They see the new genre’s invention as a

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strategy for preventing the Isan region’s most important art form from dying out in the onslaught of modernization and globalization.472

Instrumental Music

Traditionally there was no fixed, standard ensemble of melodic instruments in the Lao musical culture of Isan and Laos. Amateur musicians most often performed instrumental music. They would either play by themselves or gather with others on an informal basis to entertain themselves and their friends, families, and communities whenever they desired, although they also often performed for events such as festival processions and mawlam performances.473 The free reed bamboo mouth organ called khaen (คำน) is the primary traditional instrument of the Lao culture and is in fact part of the traditional definition of a Lao person, that is, one who eats sticky rice, plays the khaen, and sings lam. It is the “basis” of all Lao melodic instruments in that its repertoire, theory, and performance practice embody most of the fundamentals of Lao and Isan instrumental music. The phin (ฟิน), a three-stringed plucked lute, is another of the culture’s most important instruments. It was formerly an instrument secondary to the khaen with consequently fewer players; but, since the development of the electric phin in the late 1970s, it has surpassed the khaen in popularity. While traditionally the khaen and phin were played as solo instruments, they were sometimes also played together as a “duo.” The two instruments as a duo are referred to as wong phin-khaen (วงฟิน-คำน) or “phin-khaen ensemble” with a drum, either klawng yao or thon, and other small

472Ibid.
473Although amateurs likely originally played mawlam while they made their primary living from rice farming, by the mid twentieth century professional mawlam players made the majority of their income from performing the music, although most of them continued to farm part of the year for a portion of their income.
percussion instruments such as *chap* often added to the ensemble. The *phin-khaen* combination is one of the oldest informal musical groupings in Isan/Lao culture and the closest thing to a standard ensemble in traditional terms. Since the 1980s, however, it has become rare outside the academic musical environment in Isan, as part of the *ponglang* ensemble, because Western instruments used in *luk thung* and other forms of popular music such as the guitar, electronic keyboard, and drum set have grown so much in popularity that it has led to a consequent waning of interest in learning traditional instruments other than the electric *phin*.

**Khaen**

The *khaen* mouth organ has pipes made from a slender species of bamboo that is called *mai phai hia* (ไม่ไพ่เขียว) or *mai hia* (ไม่เขียว) in the Isan dialect.\(^\text{474}\) This plant grows in certain mountainous areas of Isan and in Laos to a length of up to five meters with stalks of a diameter usually no greater than 1 centimeter.

There are four distinct types of *khaen*, each with a different number and arrangement of pipes:

1. *Khaen hok* (ハンホク, “six-khaen”), with six pipes in three pairs/two rows
2. *Khaen jet* (ハンジェット, “seven-khaen”), with fourteen pipes in seven pairs/two rows
3. *Khaen paet* (ハンプレゼント, “eight-khaen”), with sixteen pipes in eight pairs/two rows
4. *Khaen kao* (ハンカオ, “nine-khaen”), with eighteen pipes in nine pairs/two rows

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\(^{474}\)This species is *Schizostachyum virgatum* or *Cephalostachyum virgatum*.\footnote{This species is *Schizostachyum virgatum* or *Cephalostachyum virgatum*.}
Other than the *khaen hok*, the smallest version with the fewest pipes (which may represent the instrument’s original form, but which today is used primarily by children as a kind of musical toy), each type of *khaen* is named according to the number of pairs of pipes employed. Although each of the four types has its own fixed tuning\(^{475}\) and arrangement of pipes, there is no standard pitch level; thus *khaen* are made in a wide

\(^{475}\) Although traditional *khaen* music is primarily pentatonic, all *khaen* have a heptatonic tuning similar to the Western diatonic scale.
variety of sizes, with longer ones lower in register. Of these types, the *khaen jet* and *khaen kao* are rarest, and we only rarely find either a small *khaen kao* or a large *khaen hok*.

To make a *khaen*, a craftsman first cuts tubes of air dried *mai phai hia*, referred to as *mai ku khaen* (ไม้กุ้บแคน),\(^{476}\) into several different specified lengths and then pierces all of the nodes lengthwise with a long, heated metal spike to produce pipes that are roughly cylindrical. He cuts a rectangular hole about halfway down the length of each pipe and makes a small free reed for each pipe. To make a reed, he cuts a tongue\(^{477}\) into a small, usually not longer than 1 or 2 centimeters, thin rectangular plate, usually an alloy of copper and silver. Incidentally, most makers smelt and forge their own alloy sheets. He then slides each reed into the rectangular hole of its corresponding pipe and makes an air-tight seal. Reeds are longer for low pitched pipes and shorter for high pitched pipes.

Next, he arranges the pipes in order from long to short, following the conventional design of the instrument. He cuts two long, narrow, rectangular tuning holes called *ru phae* (รูแพะ) into the opposite sides of each pipe at fixed distances, one above and one below the reed. These holes determine the actual sounding length of the pipe, with small adjustments made later to fine tune the pitch.

He then places the pipes side by side in pairs of equal length through a single elongated hole in a round, hand carved hardwood windchest, in two parallel flat rows in a raft configuration. Because the tuning holes are turned toward the inside of the rows, they are not visible. This means that in some cases a long pipe may actually produce a high pitch if the tuning holes give it a shorter sounding length.

\(^{476}\)This term translates loosely as “*khaen bamboo*” as this type of bamboo is not considered durable enough for any use other than the making of musical instruments.

\(^{477}\)The reed is called *lin khaen* (ลิ้นแคน), literally “*khaen tongue,*” in Isan dialect.
The instrument maker makes the windchest, called *tao khaen* (เต้าแคน),\(^{478}\) from any one of several types of dense grained hardwood, with Burma padauk (*Pterocarpus macrocarpus*), called *mai du* (ไม้ดู่) in Lao and *mai pradu* (ไม้ปราดู่) in Thai, the most popular due to its relative softness as it is more easily carved than other tropical hardwoods.\(^{479}\) On one end of the windchest, he makes an opening called a *ru pao* (รูป้า) or “blowing hole” and on the other end he puts a small, decorative knob called a *hang* (หาง) or “tail.”

Once the instrument maker arranges the pipes properly, he seals them into the windchest both on the exterior surface and between the two rows with a sticky, dark brown material called *khisut* (ขีสุด), a wax secreted by a species of stingless bee called *maeng khisut* (แมงขีสุด), species *Trigona collina*, to produce an airtight seal. Then he

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\(^{478}\) *Tao* (เต้า) is a classifier used to refer to round objects that hold liquid, such as gourds or breasts.

burns a small finger hole called a *ru nap* (รูนับ) or “counting hole” into the outer wall of each pipe just above the windchest which silences the reed when left uncovered. He separates the two rows of pipes at four points with thin bamboo shims and ties them together at three points, one below and two above the windchest with a few windings of cord made from the dried vine of a climbing plant called *Tiliacora triandra* or *khuea yanang* (คำเอียนาง) in Isan dialect or vine-like stems of rattan called *wai* (หวาย).

When playing the instrument, a *khaen* player holds it more or less vertically with the palms of both hands held against the windchest and the fingertips of all ten fingers upright near the finger holes. He presses his lips firmly against the windchest around the blowing hole. Although he may hold the generally *khaen* vertical, the musician usually tilts it slightly to the left or right, with the portion of the instrument below the windchest parallel to and resting against the opposite forearm. The player both inhales and exhales to play any given pitch on the instrument. Since at least the 1940s, it has become most common for *khaen* players to stand while playing when they accompany *mawlam,* although in earlier days it was not uncommon to find *khaen* players sitting cross legged on straw mats; and that performance practice remains common in informal settings today. The performer may also play the *khaen* while walking in festival processions.

Amateur Isan performers originally used the *khaen,* probably for many centuries, primarily to accompany animist rituals such as *mawlam phi fa,* but over time they increasingly used it also for entertainment on an informal basis for their friends and families and in courtship rituals. It was more popular than other instrument because of its ability to sound polyphonically, with a drone and the melody in parallel octaves, fifths,

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480 See Chapter 5.
or fourths, as well as diatonic tone clusters. People often played the khaen in the evening after they had finished dinner and after a day in the rice fields. Most people, however, preferred to play it primarily in the dry season when farming had ceased and they had free time. Before 1950, nearly every man in Isan probably possessed at least some skill on the instrument, but women did not play. Khaen players gained skill either by studying formally with a khru (ครู) or teacher or, more commonly, by picking up techniques from other musicians, including relatives, on an informal basis.

In addition to the aforementioned informal uses, the instrument’s most prestigious role for at least a century has been in accompanying mawlam. Mawlam was the primary entertainment for most Isan people until the 1970s. Until that time, festivals and celebrations throughout the region almost always included some type of mawlam. The function of the khaen in mawlam differs depending on the type of mawlam performed. Mawlam phi fa (หมอสักพัก) uses the instrument to accompany female ritual singing to intercede on behalf of someone believed to have been made ill by spirits, mawlam phuen uses it to accompany narrative singing, and mawlam klawn uses it to accompany repartee singing. Theatrical mawlam, including mawlam mu and mawlam phloen, also use the instrument usually in conjunction with percussion and, in the case of mawlam phloen, with phin to accompany male and female vocalists.

Acoustic Phin

The plucked lute called phin has a body and neck carved from a single block of hardwood. Its thin top, also made of hardwood, is glued, or in former times nailed, to the body. Traditionally, phin makers preferred to use jackfruit wood, called mai bukmi (ไม้
They preferred jackfruit wood for its relative ease in carving using simple hand tools as well as for its resonant tone. In 1985, faced with a scarcity of jackfruit wood because of depletion of jackfruit trees due to local deforestation, Songsak Prathumsin (ชองศักดิ์ ปั่นสมสิน), b. 1955, a phin, wot and ponglang maker and teacher from Roi-et Province, began to use other woods to make the instrument. His substitution of new hardwoods encouraged other makers to do the same. Because modern phin makers have contemporary equipment that can carve any kind of wood with ease, this allowed them to make instruments out of more readily available types of hardwood. However, doing so results in change in tone quality as instruments made from woods other than jackfruit generally produce a less resonant tone because of greater density.

Traditionally there were two types of phin, one with three evenly spaced strings and another with four strings in two double courses. Since the 1980s, we can see only the former type. No evidence exists regarding the material used for phin strings before the modern era, but originally they probably consisted of twisted silk. Since the mid twentieth century, phin makers have used strands of unwound steel bicycle brake cable. The phin player plucks the strings with a thin arrowheadshaped plectrum made of water buffalo horn. The instrument originally seems not to have had a standardized shape and size.

Phin could have rectangular, round, or oval bodies. However most phin today have oval bodies, and some are tapered to a point like a leaf. A phin’s size formerly depended on its maker, who was also usually a player of the instrument as well. If he desired a phin with a low register, he made a larger instrument; and, conversely, if he

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481 Mai kanun (แม่กานุน) in Central Thai.
wished to have a higher-pitched *phin*, he made a smaller instrument. In some cases a *phin* was made to match the range of a specific *khaen*. Since the 1980s, *phin* have become largely standardized; and most modern *phin* measure between 81 and 83 centimeters in length and between 52 and 53 centimeters in width.

Traditionally the *phin* maker cut frets from either wood or bamboo and affixed them to the fingerboard with *khisut*. Traditional *phin* had six or seven unequally spaced frets which produced only five pitches per octave in the same pentatonic scale as the *khaen*, with modulations to other pentatonic modes possible if one retuned the strings. The most common tuning was 1-1-5 with the two lower strings tuned to the same pitch. Usually only the highest string was fretted and the other two served as drones. Some makers added fanciful carved heads, most often in the form of a *naga* or auspicious mythological serpent, *nak* (นัก) and *hong* (หงส์) or swan, to the ends of the necks of their *phin* although most traditional *phin* were much simpler in construction. ⁴⁸²

According to Buddhist belief the *naga* is a powerful serpent-like being who lives in the desire realm or underworld. The *naga* is also symbolic of prosperity. During the rocket festival, the *naga* is used to decorate the rocket in the hopes of initiating abundant rainfall. The *naga* decoration is certainly not limited to the *phin* but can be found as decoration on other objects such as banisters of temples or other Buddhist architecture. This association of the *naga* with Buddhism is based on a particular story common throughout Isan:

After the Buddha received enlightenment, he started teaching. After hearing his teachings, one particular *naga* was filled with the desire to be ordained as a monk. This *naga* transformed himself into a man in hopes that the Buddha would not recognize his true identity. The Buddha, however, was not fooled by

⁴⁸²Further discussion on an acoustic *phin* and the conversion to electric *phin* under Academic Ponglang Ensembles.
this disguise and would not allow the naga to be ordained, as only humans could become monks. The naga was disappointed, but he asked the Buddha if he could have his name associated with all novices not yet ordained as monks, and the Buddha agreed. Thereafter, Buddhist novices were referred to as nak or naga and first asked “Are you human?” before being ordained as a monk.483

The hong is an attractive bird common in Thai literature. It is a mythological creature used to transport one of the gods, according to Hindu beliefs. Thai people consider the hong the most beautiful and noble bird, especially the female. They often use the hong as a metaphor to describe a beautiful girl, while an ugly girl or an ugly poor man who falls in love with a beautiful noble girl is described as a ka (กา) or crow, considered the opposite of the hong. This association with beauty makes the hong a very common decoration in Thailand, including on the headpiece of the phin. One of the royal boats is named suphannahong (สุพรรณหงส์), which means the golden swan. The hong, on the other hand, is not directly associated with Buddhism.

*Phin-Khaen: Traditional Ensemble*

Although the *khaen* and *phin* were probably primarily solo instruments, musicians eventually began to play them together for friends or families on an informal basis. At first there was no specific name applied to this type of “duo” ensemble. Those wishing to hear such music would simply suggest that players gather in an informal performance by saying something like, “Bring [some instruments to play] together with the *khaen,*” *Ao pai sai khaen,* (เอาไปใส่แซน). Eventually, as occurred with the fiddle and banjo in American traditional music in the 1800s, the *khaen* and *phin* became so closely associated that in modern times the term *wong phin-khaen* or “*phin-khaen* ensemble” came to refer to this instrumental combination which became the most common melodic ensemble in Lao tradition.

Prior to the 1960s, young unmarried men would often get together in the evening to socialize, have some snacks, smoke cigarettes, or chew betel nuts while chatting. At such gatherings a few men sometimes brought instruments usually including both *khaen* and *phin* to play together. Because this type of ensemble was organized on an informal basis according to the instruments available, it had no standard number of players or instruments. Thus, some ensembles might have more than one *khaen* or *phin.*

While impromptu, such ensembles usually did not feature any other instruments besides the *khaen* and *phin,* although a *saw Isan,* a two-stringed bowed lute with a body made from a coconut or a metal can, might occasionally appear. Someone might also bring small percussion instruments such as *thon* or *chap lek* when *phin-khaen* ensembles performed as processional music at more formal occasions in festivals and temple celebrations. In such contexts, this larger kind of *phin-khaen* ensemble constituted a
somewhat more formal variety of Isan folk music. This led, by the 1950s, to the phin-khaen ensemble with added percussion as the standard musical accompaniment for mawlam phloen troupes, perhaps the first time this ensemble appeared in formal stage performances. However, as previously mentioned, during the 1970s under the influence of Westernization and urban popular music, some mawlam phloen troupes began to adopt Western rock instruments including drum kits, electric organs, electric guitars, and electric bass guitars to accompany their theatrical performances. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, the modern instruments replaced traditional ones in mawlam phloen performances. Combined with the increasing popularity of the guitar and popular music in Isan and the consequent loss of interest in traditional music, fewer and fewer young people wanted to learn to play the khaen and phin; and that led to a dramatic decline in the prevalence of the phin-khaen ensemble.

Although the term wong (วง) means “ensemble” in a musical context, today it functions as a noun to refer to any type of Thai instrumental ensemble. It seems to first have appeared in a musical context in Siam during the nineteenth century in one of two ways: either as a “classifier” for musical ensembles of any type, as in the phrase piphat nueng wong [ปิพัทธ์ วง] or “one piphat ensemble,” or as a noun referring to formal ensembles of Western type or those inspired by Western ensembles in the context of phleng Thai sakon such as brass bands, called trae wong, or khaen wong, khaen ensembles that played Central Thai repertoire in unison as inspired by Western brass bands. A synonym for the second sense is the term wong dontri (วงดนตรี), “musical ensemble.” On the other hand, as late as the 1930s, most indigenous ensembles such as

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484 The term for “musical ensemble” is wong dontri (วงดนตรี), but with dontri omitted in reference to a specific type of musical ensemble.
the *piphat* or *mahori* were called *khana* (คณา) “troupes” or “groups” \(^{485}\) in reference to the instruments of the ensemble which implies by way of synecdoche the ensemble itself. \(^{486}\) The term *wong dontri*, which appeared in Isan in the 1970s, implies a formal rather than informal ensemble in a preplanned rather than impromptu context.

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\(^{485}\) In Isan dialect the term *khana* continues in use to refer to larger traditional ensembles such as *khana klawng yao* (คณาคลองยาง), “klawng yao troupes,” or *khana mahori Isan* (คณาเมหารียาน), “mahori Isan troupes,” with these ensembles referred to generically as *khana dontri* (คณาดนตรี), “musical troupes.” For modern ensembles, as well as more informal ensembles, we commonly encounter the term *wong* instead of *khana*.

\(^{486}\) In most cases *krueang* refers to specific instruments or ensembles, as in *krueang piphat*, although this term is no longer widely in use; however, Thais still call the classical ensemble of strings, flute, and percussion *wong krueang sai* (วงเครื่องสาย) or “string instrument ensemble.”
The term *wong* or “circle,” also appears in various non-musical contexts to indicate a literal\(^{487}\) or figurative\(^{488}\) circle. It is significant that Isan musicians traditionally played music seated on the floor or ground in a circle, as such music was a communal activity in which participants performed for one another rather than for an audience. Such a configuration is also typical of the folk cultures of Tai peoples in general who regard a wide variety of social settings such as meals, meetings, and dances as communal activities.

It was not until the late 1960s when *luk thung* began to take hold in Isan, however, that people thought of the word *wong*, commonly used at that time to refer to *luk thung* bands whose members faced the audience in a more or less semicircular arrangement, as applicable also to local ensembles. Prior to that time, people thought of folk ensembles as *khana*. Within a few years, people accepted the word *wong* as a generic term for any folk, classical, or popular instrumental ensemble that utilized either traditional or Western instruments.\(^{489}\) The process by which the term *wong* was appropriated to refer to local folk ensembles shows the increasing acceptance of the norms of stage performance among Isan people, who during the process of modernization must have realized that their own traditional instrumental music could be presented to audiences in a similarly formal manner and thus accorded an elevated status. Simultaneously, an increased interest came about on the part of folk musicians in establishing formally named instrumental ensembles that rehearsed regularly with the aim of obtaining professional performance commissions, on the model of the *luk thung* bands with which they were

\(^{487}\) Terms using *wong* include *wong khojawn* (วงโคจร), “orbit”; and *wong phai* (วงไพ), “a circle of players sitting around a card table.”

\(^{488}\) Examples of terms that include *wong* figuratively include *wong kan* (วง cận), “consortium.”

\(^{489}\) It is likely that this use of *wong* as a generic term for any type of instrumental ensemble already existed in Central Thailand possibly as early as the 1940s.
familiar. We can see, thus, that in modern times the definition of the term *wong* in the context of Isan music has been modified to fit with the Isan people’s new conceptions of their own instrumental music and its place in the national and international cultural sphere.

**Isan Neotraditional Ensembles**

In the late 1950s, there arose in Isan a new type of ensemble called a *wong dontri phuen-mueang* (วงศ์ดนตรีพื้นเมือง), a “local music ensemble,” or *wong dontri phuen-mueang Isan* (วงศ์ดนตรีพื้นเมืองอีสาน), a “local Isan music ensemble.” We know them more commonly since the 1980s as *wong ponglang* or *wong dontri ponglang*, “ponglang ensembles.”

Although this grouping came out of the traditional *phin-khaen* ensemble and maintained many traditional elements, it featured an expanded instrumentation and was intended primarily for stage performance. By the time of this new ensemble’s development, *luk thung* and *luk krung* were making inroads in Isan, and the idea of performing as a formal group on stage, typical for bands in popular genres, became attractive to local folk musicians, some of whom had opportunities to experience such music firsthand during visits to Bangkok. Because it was created within the new contexts of Westernization and modernization, *dontri phuen-mueang Isan* had a musical function and manner of presentation different from the former traditional ensembles. Unlike *phin-khaen* music, usually made by musicians who gathered informally to play for their own enjoyment, *dontri phuen-mueang Isan* functioned on a more formal basis with organized ensembles, often officially named, that rehearsed together on a regular basis with the aim of presenting performances on stage, often in matching folk style costumes. In the new

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490 Although such ensembles are most commonly known by the latter terms today, in official usage such as in the names of academic ensembles, we encounter the former terms.
context, this type of ensemble music represents the earliest example of the transformation of Isan music from traditional to neotraditional.\textsuperscript{491} By the mid 1970s, \textit{dontri phuen-mueang Isan} gradually increased in popularity and enjoyed a measure of government sponsorship during the Cold War era anticomunist campaigns. It became even more popular in the 1980s when it was brought into the academic system as a cultural symbol of the Isan region and people, both in Isan and Thailand as a whole.\textsuperscript{492}

For an overview of the origins and development of Isan neotraditional ensemble over the past half century, I will concentrate on two primary ensembles. Firstly, \textit{wong dontri phuen-mueang Isan}, “Isan local music ensembles,” which consisted primarily of amateur instrumentalists enthusiastic about the new possibility of presenting their music on stage in the manner of pop music groups. Secondly, \textit{wong ponglang} or (academic) \textit{ponglang} ensembles whose instructors may have been members of some of the original \textit{wong dontri phuen-mueang Isan} but whose members were students ranging from elementary school to college level and of both Isan and non-Isan heritage.\textsuperscript{493}

\textbf{Isan Local Ensemble: \textit{Wong Dontri Phuen-mueang Isan}}

The earliest \textit{wong dontri phuen-mueang} started with the instrumentation of the \textit{phin-khaen} groups which included one or more each of \textit{khaen}, \textit{phin}, and traditional percussion, although usually supplemented with additional melodic and percussive

\textsuperscript{491} Although scholars such as Miller and I classify \textit{ponglang} ensemble music as neotraditional, some Thai scholars as well as the general public tend to identify it simply as a form of \textit{dontri phuen-mueang} or “folk music,” which also carries the connotation of “traditional music.” However, Thai classical music, associated with royalty, is never referred to as \textit{dontri phuen-mueang}, but instead as \textit{dontri ratcha-samnak} [ดนตรีราชสัมนัก] or “court music.”

\textsuperscript{492} Government sponsorship of the \textit{dontri phuen-mueang Isan} ensemble will be discussed further in chapter 7.

\textsuperscript{493} There is no specific term in the Isan dialect or Thai language to refer to \textit{ponglang} ensembles in academic settings. They are usually referred to simply as \textit{wong ponglang}, although professional ensembles unaffiliated with educational institutions are also referred to by the same term.
instruments for a total of up to ten musicians.\textsuperscript{494} The additional melodic instruments, some of which had been previously played only as solo instruments, included the \textit{wot} or circular panpipe, the \textit{hai}, a set of earthenware jars with flexible bands over the open top, and sometimes a \textit{saw Isan}, a two string-bowed lute. Additional percussion instruments might include congas, \textit{ching} or a smale cymbal, and a drum kit. By the late 1970s, a fairly standardized instrumentation for the \textit{wong dontri phuen-mueang} developed. Most of the ensembles included one or more \textit{khaen}, \textit{phin}, \textit{ponglang}, and \textit{wot} accompanied by congas, a drum set, or \textit{klawng yao} with the other aforementioned melodic instruments optional. Because among most ensembles the \textit{ponglang} served as the center of attention and leading instrument,\textsuperscript{495,496} by the 1980s, people commonly referred to \textit{wong dontri phuen-mueang} as \textit{wong ponglang}.

The most notable \textit{wong dontri phuen-mueang}, which served as the models for all later ensembles, were the Wong Ponglang Kalasin (วงปองกลางกาฬสินธุ์) from Kalasin Province and the Wong Wot Siangthawng (วงไวด์เสียงทอง) from Roi-et Province, both founded in 1968.\textsuperscript{497} The former was the first well known instrumental ensemble to integrate the \textit{ponglang}, while the latter was the first to utilize the \textit{wot}. An overview of the early history of Isan neotraditional instrumental music must give special attention to

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{494} Some early \textit{wong dontri phuen-mueang} had as many as two \textit{phin} or three \textit{khaen}.
\textsuperscript{495} Until the late 1970s, when the instrumentation of the Isan local ensemble became fairly standardized, most ensembles did not yet use the \textit{ponglang} itself and, instead, used only \textit{khaen}, \textit{phin}, and percussion, either traditional percussion instruments such as hand drums and cymbals or Western instruments such as congas or the drum set, sometimes in combination with other traditional melodic instruments such as the \textit{saw Isan}.
\textsuperscript{496} In the context of \textit{wong dontri phuen-mueang}, “leading” refers to the fact that the player of the log xylophone is usually the group’s leader, and, like the harpsichord in Baroque music, the piano in a jazz big band, or the \textit{yangqin} in a Chinese ensemble, he uses the instrument to signal beginnings and endings, tempo changes, and other technical shifts. Since all the melodic instruments generally play the same melody together in heterophonic fashion, there is no real lead instrument in the Western sense although it is true that the log xylophone is usually the loudest in the ensemble.
\textsuperscript{497} According to its founder, Songsak Prathumsin, the latter ensemble did not actually have any specific name until he formally dubbed it Wong Wot Siangthawng in 1972.
\end{footnotesize}
the three new instruments introduced by these groups: the ponglang, wot, and hai; and the ponglang is the most significant instrumental influence on the development of neotraditional music.

![Image](image.png)

**Figure 36.** Late style Isan local ensemble (early 1980s) before the advent of academic ensembles or wong ponglang in the mid 1980s

**Ponglang: History of the Instrument and Its Ensemble**

The modern ponglang is a pentatonically tuned, vertically strung xylophone, usually of thirteen hardwood logs or “keys” called luk ponglang (ลูกโป้งกลาง). The keys, graduated in length from high to low tone, are strung together in a row with heavy

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498 Some modern ponglang have one or two added pitches, to allow for the playing of repertoire in the diatonic scale (usually luk thung songs).

499 Luk (ลูก) usually means “children” but in this context is understood to mean “keys.”
cord\textsuperscript{500} through holes drilled at the acoustical nodes near the ends of each key. The instrument maker ties a single knot in the cord between each key to hold them in position. The instrument is suspended obliquely on a wooden or metal stand called \textit{ka ponglang} (ข่าปงกลาง) or “ponglang leg” from a vertical post to the horizontal base. The keys are usually suspended with the larger, deeper toned keys on top, although this can be reversed depending on the player or ensemble. Unlike \textit{ranat} (รนาด), a Thai classical xylophone or Western xylophone bars, which are flat, the keys of the ponglang are round, but with a flat playing area cut into them, and have a rough hewn appearance similar to logs. Although the keys are today turned from sawn lumber, they were originally made from actual straight branches without bark of diameters between 6 and 12 centimeters. The maker or player shaves off the top and bottom ends of the key in a flat manner, leaving a few centimeters at each end unhollowed. In other words, the maker shaves flat areas into the middles of the keys and leaves the ends unaltered. The thirteen logs or keys from low to high consist of E G A C D e g a c d e' g' (a').

The musician uses a pair of heavy, unpadded beaters of dense hardwood to strike the keys. This gives the instrument its characteristic loud and penetrating sound. There are a few distinctive beater designs, each slightly different in one of several regional ponglang styles. We can observe these differences even in academic ensembles. There is no standard size for this instrument; some are larger than others, and the larger ones are lower in register. On any given ponglang, the keys are similar in diameter from high to low; larger instruments have keys of greater diameter. The ponglang’s keys are tuned

\textsuperscript{500}While probably rope of twisted hemp or jute fibers was formerly used for this purpose, today ponglang makers most commonly use twisted nylon or cotton rope.
either by sanding the tips which raises the pitch by reducing the length or by shaving away indentations on the top and/or bottom to lower the pitch.

The earliest known version of the ponglang dates back at least a century in Isan; and the instrument was known until 1957 by the name khawlaw (ขอล้), as well as by several other local names (see below). Although vertical xylophones with hardwood or bamboo keys exist in some other parts of Mainland and Insular Southeast Asia including Vietnam, Malaysia, and Indonesia, no such tradition prior to the six-key khawlaw is known to have existed either in Thailand or Laos. It is assumed by most Thai scholars who have written their master’s theses on Isan music and about this instrument that the instrument is derived from elements of three earlier sound producing devices: the pong (โป่ง), a large slit drum, made from a hollow hardwood log with a slit in both sides, suspended vertically from its top by a wooden frame and struck with a large wooden mallet, most commonly found at Thai Buddhist temples where it was used as a signaling device in a manner similar to large bells, gongs, and drums; the mak khik (มหาคิก, a smaller version of the pong with a pair of exterior wooden or bone clappers hanging down from the top of either side, which is hung around the necks of cows and water buffaloes where they produce sounds as the animals walk; and, finally, the khawlaw (ขอล้), a slit drum made from a length of bamboo of wide diameter and traditionally used by village headmen to send various signals to villagers.

The earliest known vertical xylophones in Isan had six keys. Plueang Chairatsami (แปลก ชัยรัตสามี), 1932-2007, a native of Kalasin Province and acknowledged the “inventor” of the modern ponglang, stated that the original six-key khawlaw was created

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501 Although specimens of this instrument may still be found at temples throughout Thailand, they are no longer commonly played.
by his father’s teacher, Thao Phromkhod (ทาวาพรโมโคด), who came from Wiang Chan (Vientiane, Laos) to the village of Ban Klang Muen (บ้านกลางม่วน) in Kalasin District of Kalasin Province in the late 1880s. The fact that the six-key xylophone was given the same name as the bamboo slit drum indicates that the latter instrument was an important inspiration in the invention of the xylophone. Another similarity is that both the bamboo slit drum and six-key xylophone were used as signaling devices. According to Miller and Jarernchai Chonpairot (เจริญชัย ชนะไพโรจน์), the latter a U.S. trained ethnomusicologist from Mahasarakham Province who conducted interviews with three elderly informants in Kalasin Province in 1973, the six-key khawlaw was in use as early as 1904.\footnote{502} During that decade, according to an elderly monk interviewed by Miller and Jarernchai, Thai classical ensembles visited the area to perform for a governor who was not an Isan native. Miller surmises that the khawlaw may have been influenced by the ranat, a Thai classical xylophone during that time.\footnote{503}

Thongsak Prathumsin (ทรงสกุล ประทุมสิน), b. 1955, a well known Isan neotraditional musician and teacher from Roi-et Province, recalls that the log xylophone, already known in his province during his childhood in the 1960s, was used by some musicians in his village who made them using simple tools. They played the log xylophone both as a solo instrument and in combination with the khaen and, sometimes, with other traditional instruments in small informal ensembles.\footnote{504} A farmer who had a log xylophone often kept it in a tiangna (ติ่งนา) or tiny, simple, open walled rice field hut made of four posts and a thatched roof. Most fields in Isan have such huts, used by

\footnote{503}{Ibid., 149.}
\footnote{504}{Songsak Prathumsin, interview, 2003.}
farming families as a place to eat lunch, take breaks from working in the fields, and take shelter from the rain or sun.\textsuperscript{505} When anyone wished to play the instrument during a work break,\textsuperscript{506} he simply hung it from a tree or even a hook or nail on one of the hut’s vertical beams and played music consisting of short, repetitious melodies. Players typically sat cross-legged on the ground or floor while playing. In the old style, there were often two players, one for the melody and the other to provide the drone on two keys at the interval of a fifth in the middle register. Since the mid 1980s, it has become more common for the instrument to be played by just one player.\textsuperscript{507}

Although the log xylophone was at that time considered a kind of musical toy used primarily as a means of diversion, another important role for the instrument was to scare off dangerous wild animals such as tigers or elephants as well as animals such as birds that might raid the crops. During the dry season, when groups of young people spent their time looking after the cattle and water buffaloes, they might hang the instrument from a branch of a tree in a shaded area frequented by their herds, and leave it there overnight for the next day. Because rural land including both farmland and wooded areas, even if owned by a given family, were treated as public property during the dry season, anyone who passed by was free to play the instrument. The xylophone took on yet another role, that of a signaling tool, to inform others of the player’s presence whenever it was played. Unlike the \textit{khaen}, the xylophone might be played by either males or females, although males usually had a greater interest in it than did females.\textsuperscript{508}

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\textsuperscript{505} Prior to the 1970s in Isan, during the farming season entire families except for the elderly and infirm typically worked together in the fields from sunrise to sunset.\textsuperscript{506} The xylophone was usually played only during times when less work was required, such as the several weeks between planting and harvest.\textsuperscript{507} One old solo piece, \textit{Lai Ngua Khuen Phu} (ลายวัวขุนภู), “Melody of the Cows Walking Up the Hill,” still requires two players the second of whom provides the drone.\textsuperscript{508} Songsak Prathumsin, interview, 2007.
Because of the log khawlaw’s strong association with the fields and other rural areas, a taboo developed regarding its use in inhabited areas. According to folk belief, if someone brought one into a village during the farming season, the rain would cease and growing rice would become impossible. If someone brought it into a village during the dry season, rain might not come during the next year’s farming season. Thus, the instrument remained strictly in the fields and other rural areas and was not played alongside the khaen and phin in villages.

After he invented the log xylophone or the six-key khawlaw, Thao Phromakhod passed on his knowledge to his son, Pan Kanjanaphirom (ปาน กาญจนภิรมย์), who later added three more keys to make a nine key khawlaw. That gave the instrument a wider range and greater capability for musical expression although it also continued in use for the aforementioned functions of signaling people and scaring off animals. Pan shared information about the making and playing of this instrument with his son, Khan Kanjanaphirom (ชำ กาญจนภิรมย์), who later became Plueang Chairatsami’s primary teacher in about 1943, when Khan was eighty-five years old. The fact that Kalasin Province had such a high concentration of skilled players and craftsmen made it a center for khawlaw making and playing, a status that is today celebrated as one of the province’s points of pride (along with silk making, dinosaur fossils, and Phuthai culture). The neighboring provinces of Roi-et and Mukdahan also had significant khawlaw traditions.

In addition to being called khawlaw, the instrument was formerly also referred to by four

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510 Ibid., 64.
other local names: *mak toet toeng* (มากเต็ตเต่ง) in Nawng Phawk District, Moei Wadi District, and Roi-et District, Roi-et Province; *mak king kawm* (มากกียงก้อม) in Ban Non Yang Subdistrict (formerly a village), Nong Sung District, Mukdahan Province, Khao Wong District, Kalasin Province; *mak toe toen* (มากเตี้ยเติน) in Kham Muang District, Kalasin Province; and *mak kaloeng* (มากกลายเลง) also in Kham Muang District, Kalasin Province.\(^{512}\)

In 1947 Plueang Chairatsami brought the *khawlaw* from the fields and into his village of Muang Na (ปางนา), Kalasin District, Kalasin Province.\(^{513}\) To avoid any possible recrimination on the part of his fellow villagers, he first made a formal offering to Muang Na’s *jao phaw pu ban* (เจ้าพ่อป้าน) or “village paternal grandfather spirit” or “village spirit.” He went to the village’s spirit house\(^{514}\) and informed the spirit of his plan to bring the instrument into the village. He then asked for the spirit’s blessing in order to erase the taboo. He also expressed a wish that whenever he played it it should please the audience. By 1957 after he had played the instrument in the village for ten years, he added three more (higher) keys to the instrument for a total of twelve keys and at the same time changed the instrument’s name from *khawlaw* to *ponglang*. Two years later, he added another key to give his instrument a total of thirteen keys. This number had

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\(^{512}\) The rest of all four of these names are onomatopoetic representations of the sound of the instrument.


\(^{514}\) In Isan and Thailand as a whole, in addition to having a spirit house called a *san-phra-phum* (ศาลพระภูมิ), for some family homes, there was also a spirit house in the village for a grandfather spirit (ศาลเจ้าพ่อป้าน), believed to inhabit that spirit house and act as a guardian over the village.
become standard by the time the instrument was adopted in academic settings in the early 1980s.\textsuperscript{515}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{ ponglang_diagram.png}
\caption{Development of the Ponglang}
\end{figure}

The new name, which by the 1980s had become generally accepted, was borrowed from the name of a type of cowbell. The cowbell *ponglang*, now obsolete, was a medium sized bronze bell with a clapper suspended in a freestanding, semi-oval wooden or rattan frame. This assembly was placed on top of a cloth slung over the back of a cow and baskets hung from either side. The bell, named for the sound it made while the cow walked, helped the cowherds keep track of their lead cows. Traders traveled long distances to market with herds that numbered as many as 1,500 to 1,800 cows.
guided by up to 100 or more men. The herds were divided into many subgroups each of which had a lead cow identified by the ponglang on its back. When any subgroup got lost or strayed from the herd, the bell would let the cowherds know how close or far away it was. Other than the fact that the xylophone borrowed its name from this cowbell, the two devices have no mutual relationship. However, Miller argues that he was told that the khawlaw players performed a piece they called “ponglang” that imitated the rhythm and the sound of the cowbell, and because that piece was so common, the name stuck for the instrument.

According to Plueang, the instrument’s bars were originally made from a hardwood called mai mak lueam (ไม้มากเหล็ก). After he began making his own khawlaw, he got the idea to use mai mak hat (ไม้มากห่า), commonly named lakoocha or monkey jack, another kind of hardwood in the same family as the jackfruit and breadfruit trees traditionally used to make pong, the large slit drum used as a signaling device at Buddhist temples. Experimenting with this kind of wood, he found that it was more durable than mai mak lueam, and the sound it produced was not appreciably different. That wood, aged for several years and evenly dried, had the best and most ringing tone quality.

Prachum Intaratun (ประชุม อินทรคุล), a park official in Yang-talat District, Kalasin Province, formed the first Isan ensemble known to feature the log xylophone for

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517 Because one of the best known ponglang pieces is entitled Lai Ponglang (ลาโปร่งกลาง), “Ponglang [Cowbell] Melody,” it may be that this piece served to give Plueang the idea for the instrument’s new name.
518 Terry Miller, personal communication.
a performance in 1959 in the village of Ban Na Khu (บ้านนาคุ) to welcome Prime Minister Sarit Thanarat and his entourage. The ensemble, about which documentation is scarce and whose name (if indeed it had one) is unknown, played a selection of local tunes and provided music for several troupes of local female dancers at the event. That ensemble was notable as the first to combine the newly developed log xylophone with the instruments of the phin-khaen ensemble in a formal performance, although it is unknown how many keys that xylophone had. We can consider this group the first Isan neotraditional ensemble because of its use of the (log) ponglang and because the band gave a formal public performance. We do not know if the ensemble continued to perform in public after that signal event.

In 1962, Pleang, already well known in the area of Kalasin City for his work in developing the ponglang, invited a group of men who played traditional instruments as amateurs to found another ensemble. The group met to rehearse in the evenings whenever they had free time and then began to play for festivals and celebrations in their village and in nearby villages. Because he was a part time employee of the Lam Pao Dam Project, the ensemble frequently performed for public relations events promoting the development work of the national government in that region. His ensemble is the first

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520 Na Khu has been a minor district since 1995 and a full district since 2007.
523 Ibid.
524 Between 1963 and 1968, the Lam Pao Dam was built for irrigation in the Lam Pao River region. It flows from Nonghan District of Sakhon Nakhon to Udon Thani and Kalasin Province and finally merges with the Chi River in Mahasarakham with a total flow distance of 250 kilometers.
one known to have been referred to as an Isan local (neotraditional) ensemble or *wong ponglang,*” the common name today for such bands.

On August 12, 1968, Plueang brought his ensemble to perform at a celebration for the birthday of Queen Sirikit in the town of Yang Talat, Kalasin Province. When they arrived, there was already a *mawlam mu* troupe performing onstage. The Isan local ensemble had an opportunity to perform on the stage while the *mawlam mu* troupe was on a short break, and they paid the *mawlam mu* troupe a small fee for the use of their drum set. Because of the ensemble’s novelty as well as the fact that the music it played consisted of well known traditional tunes, it received an enthusiastic response from the audience. At the celebration, Plueang had an opportunity to meet Prachum Intaratun who was so impressed with the group’s performance that he proposed that the two of them start a new “*ponglang* ensemble” together. Prachum hired Plueang on a temporary basis as a park employee under his authority, and together they founded *Wong Ponglang Kalasin* (วงป่างลานกาฬสินธุ์), the “Kalasin Ponglang Troupe.” This band, funded and administered by officials of the Royal Thai Forest Department to represent Kalasin Province, became the first well known Isan neotraditional ensemble in the region. Plueang served as the ensemble’s director, and as such he taught the instruments and repertoire and supervised rehearsals. The troupe quickly attained fame in Kalasin Province, and eventually throughout Isan, as the foremost ensemble of its type. They frequently received invitations to perform for festivals, official celebrations, and Buddhist

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ceremonies throughout the region. Because of its status as the preeminent neotraditional ensemble, Wong Ponglang Kalasin eventually began receiving invitations to perform in Bangkok and other parts of Thailand, including performances for Princess Sirindhorn in Bangkok in 1970 and at the Siam Society in Bangkok in 1972. They produced a 45-rpm recording in 1973.527

In 1973 while he was still directing Wong Ponglang Kalasin, Plueang founded his own ensemble which he named Wong Ponglang Somphamit (วงโป่งลำismetมหรท), the “Somphamit Ponglang Troupe.” The name of the band referred to Thao Somphamit, the leader of the early Lao settlers in Kalasin Province in 1793. The new troupe probably included most or all of the same musicians of Wong Ponglang Kalasin. The ensemble grew so in popularity that it was invited by the Thai film industry to travel to Bangkok to record music for the soundtracks of two films with Isan themes, Khaen Lam Khong (แคนลำไวยของโขง), “The Khaen of the [Mae]khong River,” in 1972,528 and Phaendin Mae (แฟนดินแม่), “Motherland,” in 1975. Plueang played the ponglang parts on those recordings. In addition, also in 1973, his troupe performed abroad in nations that included Malaysia, Singapore, Iran, and Greece.

Prior to the inclusion of traditional music in the curricula of academic institutions in the 1980s, the playing of traditional music was a sideline occupation, one on which most musicians could not rely in terms of making a primary living. Such was the case for Plueang Chairatsami who, between 1968 when he first met with Prachum Intaratun and

528 Although Plueang did not officially establish Wong Ponglang Somphamit until 1973, it is probable that at least as early as late 1971 (Khaen Lam Khong was released in February 1972), he began performing with his band on an unofficial basis for such things as this film score.
1982 when he assumed a position as a teacher of traditional instrumental music at the new Natasin Music and Dance School in Kalasin City, held a series of government positions, first in the Royal Thai Forest Department in Kalasin Province as a full time employee in 1973, then at the Ubon Rachathani Province Irrigation Service (ขั้นประหยัด จังหวัดอุบลราชธานี) for six months in 1976, and in Nakhon Phanom Province in 1978. He returned to Kalasin Province where he worked for the Huai Mano (ทรายมะโน) Reservoir in Na Khu District in 1981. His experience as a seasoned musician and teacher with the ability to direct ensembles was the primary reason that he found employment in all those positions and why, at each new job, his supervisors asked him to start a new ensemble. The primary purpose of these ensembles, as for Prachum Intararatun’s first ensemble in 1959, was to serve a public relations function to help bring awareness of the various government development projects to the local population. The performances took place alongside speeches by government officials and the distribution of information leaflets. Whenever Plueang left one of his positions, however, the ensemble he directed there came to an end, due either to a lack of continuing support or lack of commitment among the remaining members.

**Wot and the Standardization of Isan Melodic Instruments**

Since the 1970s, the circular panpipe wot has been another important instrument in wong dontri phuen-mueang Isan or Isan local neotraditional ensemble. The modern wot consists of a central spindle of sturdy bamboo approximately 3 centimeters in diameter and 20 centimeters in length around which thirteen slender bamboo pipes of

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graduated length, their upper ends open, are affixed with khisut. The central bamboo spindle is cut at the far end to form a hang (งาน), or “tail.” Their intonation ranges from low to high in clockwise fashion if we look into the blowing end. The pipes, roughly 12-15 millimeters in diameter with the higher pitched pipes slightly narrower than the lower ones, are made of mai phai hia, the same material as the pipes of the khaen because that variety of bamboo has the proper diameter and produces the clearest, strongest tone.530

There is no standard pitch for a wot, and the instruments vary in length by only a few centimeters. The tuning is usually standardized in a minor pentatonic scale which can be represented, from low to high, as E G A C D e g a c d e’ g’ (a’). The largest pipe is approximately 25 centimeters long and the smallest approximately 4 centimeters. Each of the pipes is stopped at the bottom with a small lump of khisut which can be moved up and down for tuning purposes, and each pipe is cut diagonally on the upper, blowing end. The player holds the instrument in one hand, usually the right, rests the lower lip against a raised central mound of khisut, and blows diagonally across the pipes’ edges, while he rotates the instrument slightly to change pitch.

Unlike other traditional instruments such as the phin, khaen, and saw which were common not only to Isan but also to Laos as well as among Lao descendants in Central Thailand, prior to the 1970s, the wot’s usage was restricted to only a few provinces of central Isan. Although little evidence exists to shed light on this instrument’s origin, Songsak Prathumsin, the first notable wot player, recalls seeing it used during his childhood in the 1960s. In my youth, I heard elderly members of my community in

530 Prior to the mid-1970s, some villages also used other varieties of bamboo, depending on what could most easily be found.
Mahasarakham Province speak about how they played the instrument when they were young in the 1930s and 1940s.

Before Songsak’s efforts to make the *wot* into a serious instrument, which he undertook in 1971, it was considered more of a toy rather than a serious instrument suitable for performance for others. In the areas where it was used, the *wot* was traditionally employed by young men in two ways: as a noise-making toy that sounds out well in a rice field, and as a semi-musical instrument played as a way to pass the time while they watched their animals.

Villagers generally played the *wot* during only two seasons, hot and cool dry times. During the farming (rainy) season, when the rice crop had grown to maturity and no further rain was needed, the *wot* functioned as a noise-making toy. Many a young boy ranging in age from approximately nine to nineteen, who spent the days in the rice fields with his family, would take his *wot*, tie a cord to its bamboo tail, and swing it through the air around his head, to produce a flute like whirring sound as it swiftly rotated due to the twisting and untwisting of the cord. Typically the boy would then let go of the cord and allow the *wot* to continue to sound as it arced through the air into the shallow water of the rice field. A boy generally launched his *wot* out over a water covered field rather than over hard ground as impact with the latter could break the instrument. Since the instrument, made from hollow bamboo, floated and the player could see its cord among the rice plants, he could easily retrieve it and throw it again.

According to traditional belief, the *wot* had the power to stop rainfall, and its use prior to the end of transplanting the rice seedlings was prohibited. After enough rain had

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531 It was this sound that is believed to have given the instrument its possibly onomatopoetic name (*wot* or *bot*).
fallen, the *wot* was used to bring rainfall to an end. During the dry season, when there was not enough rainfall to grow crops, women stayed home to weave cloth and perform other household tasks, while boys and men of all ages went out to the dry fields to graze their animals (cows, oxen, and water buffalo). During that season they also often collected various kinds of wild vegetables, greens, or bamboo shoots to bring home in the evening. During such excursions some boys liked to play the *wot* to entertain themselves during the long hours spent outside the village. Rather than play full fledged tunes, they usually played short, repetitive patterns similar to those played by khawlaw players, though without the use of a drone. In contrast to the khawlaw, however, the *wot* was favored in such settings because of its light weight and portability.

In 1971, Songsak, who had learned to play several instruments during his childhood in Nawng Phawk District of Roi-et Province, altered the *wot*, previously used just as a toy, into a serious instrument. To the traditional five to nine pipes tuned in a pentatonic scale, he added three to four higher pitched pipes, to give the instrument a wider range. Songsak made another change. He no longer used the bamboo’s nodes for the closed bottom ends of his pipes; instead, he sealed the open end of each pipe with *khisut* to allow for finer tuning. Basically, he standardized and modernized the instrument into today’s form with twelve or thirteen pipes that cover just over two

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532 The practice of throwing a *wot* in order to stop the rain from falling was not considered an important, obligatory ritual like the Rocket Festival, and its prohibition during the planting season was most likely motivated by a desire to keep young people working rather than let them become engaged in less productive activities. It is important to note that in traditional Isan culture most musical activities were avoided during that season by people of all ages for the same reason.

533 Prior to the 1970s, young men older than nineteen generally refrained from playing the *wot* as they thought of it as a toy more or less and unsuitable to be played by adults. More importantly, grown men, in those days usually married by the age of twenty, were expected to spend their time in a productive manner; and they wished to avoid others’ viewing them engaged in a pursuit perceived to be childish and a waste of time.

octaves. Although the tuning is usually pentatonic, some players use instruments with thirteen pipes that have an additional diatonic tone, i.e., E G A C D e g a (b) c d e’ g,’ making the performance of popular music possible.

In 1972, Songsak added a wot player to the wong dontri phuen-mueang he had already formed in Nawng Phawk Subdistrict in 1968 with fellow musicians from his village. By adding the modified wot, his ensemble became the first of its type to feature the instrument. As he knew the new instrument gave his group a distinctive sound, he gave it the name Wong Wot Siangthawng (วรงค์วัสดุเสียงทอง), “Golden Sounding Wot Troupe.”\footnote{Ibid.} Before that, like many other Isan local ensembles of its type, it did not have a specific name.\footnote{Songsak Prathumsin, interview, 2010.} As mentioned above, wong dontri phuen-mueang first appeared in Kalasin Province in 1959, and, by the late 1960s, such ensembles had also become
common in Roi-et Province which bordered Kalasin Province to the south. The fact that none of the Isan local ensembles active in Roi-et Province seem to have used a log xylophone before 1968 indicates that Plueang Chairatsami’s use of the instrument in his ensembles from that time influenced the instrumentation of the other bands, too. Unlike the other Isan local ensembles that employed log xylophones, however, the log xylophone Songsak played in his group was the lead instrument in the Wong Wot Siangthawng, which performed music derived from an eclectic body of sources including traditional instrumental and vocal melodies along with popular songs (usually luk thung). As was common for wong dontri phuen-mueang, his ensemble often featured singers and dancers for particular performances.

Over the next two years the ensemble performed actively for festivals in and around Songsak’s home district, and in 1974 it was invited to perform for a television broadcast on Channel Four TV in Khon Kaen. The program, viewed throughout Isan, represented the first time the wot was introduced to the public via the mass media, and showed that the instrument could be used seriously in an ensemble context. During the period from 1976 to 1978 when the ensemble enjoyed its greatest popularity, it became well known and received frequent invitations to perform within Roi-et Province as well as in other nearby provinces including Ubon Ratchathani, Kalasin, and Nakhon Phanom. The ensemble then consisted of eleven musicians with Songsak himself as well as his brothers and sisters.

537 From lai, lam, and phlen, of which the latter indicates popular song.
Wong Wot Siangthawng’s popularity was due mainly to the fact that, among wong dontri phuen-mueang or Isan local ensemble, it was unique in its use of the wot. As it caught on with other bands, it became the fourth primary melodic instrument, after the khaen, phin, and ponglang. Songsak recalls that, by 1978, the second year of the competition in Sakon Nakhon, the organizing committee required that all participating ensembles have at least one each of these four primary melodic instruments. The fact that this competition was the most important event for neotraditional music led to standardization of the wong dontri phuen-mueang instruments, although each group might use a different number of such instruments, and some groups featured additional instruments such as the saw Isan, an Isan bowed lute.

**Hai: Bass Line Provider**

The Wong Wot Siangthawng ensemble not only introduced the wot but also the hai, a bass instrument that is a set of two to seven earthenware jars over whose mouths thick rubber bands are stretched. In Isan culture the term hai (ไห) actually refers to a bulbous shaped earthenware jar with a narrow mouth and base but a large body. Different shapes and sizes of hai are commonly used to store several kinds of food and/or drink, especially padaek (ป่าแดด), fermented freshwater fish, fish sauce, or alcoholic beverages such as sattho (สาททอง), fermented rice wine, or lao khao (เหล้าขาว), distilled rice liquor. Among these vessels, the hai sawng (ไหซอง), a type of earthenware jar

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540 The hai, an instrument of secondary importance, with inherent drawbacks including lack of volume and difficulty of amplification as well as difficulty in tuning, was consequently used by a few ensembles but was not required by the competition.
without handles commonly used to store rice wine, tobacco, or sliced, salted bamboo shoots, is the one most commonly used as a musical instrument.

As is the case in many other parts of the world, Isan natives often played jars, common household items in every village home, as percussion instruments when real drums such as the *thon* were unavailable. Because one usually played on a jar by beating the palm of the hand or some flat, flexible object such as a sandal against the open mouth of the jar to produce a deep, drum-like sound, it was often referred to as a *klawng hai* (กลองไฮ) or “jar drum.” Often, drunken men, who might earlier have emptied the jar of rice wine, played the *klawng hai* informally at occasions such as parties and festivals while other people sang, danced, or played other instruments. In addition, young boys without any other instruments sometimes played on them as a kind of musical toy.

A year or two after he added the *wot* to his presentations in 1973 or 1974, Songsak decided to add the *hai* to his ensemble when he heard a villager playing one at a Rocket Festival at Ban Nawng Mek (บ้านนาวงแม่ก) about 15 kilometers from his hometown of Nawng Phawk. Rather than strike the open mouth of the jar, that villager plucked a rubber band cut from a bicycle inner tube that was stretched across the mouth of the jar. He secured the rubber band by tying another one around the mouth of the jar to press the previous one firmly to the jar’s mouth. Songsak was amazed by the deep and mellow sound of the instrument and realized it could be a valuable addition to his ensemble. As mentioned earlier, *luk thung* and other forms of Thai popular music enjoyed immense popularity in Isan during the 1970s and exerted an influence on the neotraditional ensembles. Thus, Songsak saw the *hai* as a suitable substitute for the

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541 Songsak Prathumsin, interview summer, 2010.
542 Ibid., 2003.
electric bass guitar he was currently using to provide bass lines for the pieces his ensemble played. In order to do this, however, he realized he needed several jars because each jar could produce only a single pitch. First, he utilized two sizes of hai sawng to produce tonic and dominant pitches and later added three more jar sizes to provide all five notes of the pentatonic scale. The player typically placed the jars on the floor in a semicircle and sat there cross legged to play them.

By the 1980s when the Isan local neotraditional ensemble was accepted into academic settings, performers and scholars adopted the name phin hai (พินได้), “jar phin,” to identify the instrument, as a reference to the phin, the most important plucked

\[\text{Figure 40. Hai}\]

\[\text{Ibid.}\]
instrument in Isan culture. Today, however, we commonly refer to the set simply as hai. Before the establishment of academic Isan neotraditional ensembles in the early 1980s, the image of this instrument was less than serious, and Wong Wot Siangthawng was the only notable ensemble to use it. Its appearance in the newly established academic ensembles, however, as a plucked bass instrument came a few years before it was replaced by the new electric bass phin. Nevertheless, the hai, which were often beautifully handpainted, which made it something of a showpiece for the group, had become an indispensable part of the “look” of such ensembles. By the mid-1980s, musicians no longer actually played the hai in academic ensembles but instead used it as a prop for a female dancer.

Isan Academic Ensemble: Wong Ponglang

In 1979 and 1982, the Thai National Fine Arts Department of the Ministry of Education established two branches of the national system of schools of traditional music, theater, and dance, called Withayalai Natasin (วิทยาลัยนาฏศิลป์) or “Colleges of Dramatic Arts,” in Isan. This system had begun in Bangkok in 1934, and, from the 1970s when regional branches were created throughout Thailand, each branch taught both classical and folk arts. The institutions underwent several name changes before adopting the current one in 1972.

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544 This name was used in a figurative rather than literal sense, similar to the term “thumb piano,” as the phin hai actually has nothing to do with the phin other than the fact that both instruments are plucked.
545 The discussion of the hai will be continued under the Hai and its New Status in the Ensemble.
546 Originally these two branches taught only traditional arts, but branches in Central and Northern Thailand also taught some Western music. In the mid-1990s the two branches in Isan also began teaching Western music.
547 Withayalai (วิทยาลัย) means “College” and Natasin (นาฏศิลป์) means “Dramatic Arts.” In Thai natasin (from nata [นาฏ], “drama” or “dance,” and sin [ศิลป์, “art”), usually carry the added implication of theater, drama, or acting, as most classical dance is connected to dramatic forms such as khon or lakhon. The official name in English is “Dramatic Arts College.” However, the term “college” here refers not to an institute for college level study but a secondary school plus the first two years of college.
The first such institute in Isan, Withayalai Natasin Roi-et, (วิทยาลัยนาฏศิลป์ร้อยเอ็ด) or Natasin Roi-et (นาฏศิลป์ร้อยเอ็ด), the “Roi-Et College of Dramatic Arts,” was founded in Roi-et City in 1979. The second, founded in Kalasin City in 1982, was the Withayalai Natasin Kalasin (วิทยาลัยนาฏศิลป์กาฬสินธุ์) or Natasin Kalasin (นาฏศิลป์กาฬสินธุ์), the “Kalasin College of Dramatic Arts.” As at other branches all over Thailand, these schools admitted students who finished the sixth grade, between the ages of eleven and thirteen, who wished to start learning traditional classical and folk music and/or dance in preparation for a career. The system, thus, is vocational in nature with less emphasis on other subjects. The program was originally divided into five majors, two in Thai classical theater and dance and three in Thai classical music. The dance program included majors in lakhon (ละคร), a genre of classical dance drama which trains mostly female students, and khon (โขน), a genre of masked dance drama which trains only male students. The music program includes majors in piphat (ปิพัทธ), gong circle, xylophone, and vertical flute or oboe, khrueang sai (ครื่องสาย), stringed instruments, and khitasin (คัดศิลป์), classical vocal music.

One of the objectives in founding these two branches was to preserve and develop Isan music and dance; and, by 1980, Kalasin Roi-et began teaching Isan local music and dance. Courses originally entitled dontri phuen-mueang Isan (ดนตรีพื้นเมืองอีสาน), Isan folk/local music, have become best known today as wong ponglang or ponglang ensemble. Fawn phuen-mueang Isan (ฟ้าฝนพื้นเมืองอีสาน), Isan folk dance, and khaprawng phuen-mueang, (ชีพรื่องพื้นเมือง), Isan folk singing, were offered as elective

548 A third branch, Withayalai Natasin Nakhon Ratchasima (วิทยาลัยนาฏศิลป์นครราชสีมา), was founded in Khorat City in 1992 and, although the teachers there give instruction in ponglang ensemble, its program largely follows those of the two earlier branches.
courses to provide practical instruction in those traditions. By the mid-1980s, these courses were all integrated into the curriculum as minors and, in the late 1990s, as major programs along with the aforementioned Thai classical music, classical dance, and Western music.

With the establishment of the first two Natasin branches in Isan, officials of the Thai Ministry of Education planned to include classical and folk music and dance in the curricula of these institutions, as was the case for branches in the nation’s other regions. The first Isan folk music and dance style brought into the Natasin system was that of the Northern Isan Musical Zone, largely because that zone embodies the region’s dominant musical culture and in many ways represents Isan as a whole. Although many distinct traditions of folk music and dance existed in the Northern Isan Musical Zone, it was decided that the new Natasin in Isan would focus on teaching folk music and dance primarily as found in the ponglang instrumental ensemble and ponglang dance. There are several reasons for this. Other folk genres, for example mawlam klawn, mawlam mu, and nang pramo-thai, did not fit into the curriculum because they were too difficult to teach and necessitated the student’s starting at a younger age. That training required

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549 See chapter 2.

550 The musical traditions of the Khorat Tai of southwestern Isan and the Khmer of southeastern Isan are practiced by much smaller populations and thus were not originally included in the curricula of the Natasin. See chapter 2 for more about the musical zones of Isan.

551 The tradition of ponglang dance, not actually referred to as “ponglang dance” in the Isan or Thai languages, instead called fawn phuen-mueang Isan, fawn phuen-mueang [ฟ้าลงพื้นเมือง] or folk dance, or kan-sadaeng phuen-mueang Isan [การแสดงพื้นเมืองอีสาน], or “Isan folk performance,” began in the late 1950s with the first wong dontri phuen-mueang which accompanied folk dancers who performed both old traditional dances from a variety of sources and included klawng yao procession dance or Rocket Festival dance as well as newly choreographed dances based on aspects of village life such as cultivating rice or collecting wild foods. Thus, because of the new contexts in which these dances are performed, those accompanied by ponglang ensembles can properly be considered neotraditional rather than traditional.
significantly greater amounts of time. The klawng yao ensemble, another prominent type of instrumental folk group of the Northern Isan Musical Zone, was not included because, like mawlam klawn and mawlam mu, it was not felt to be in need of preservation since it was still widely taught and performed on an independent basis throughout the region during the 1970s and early 1980s. Perhaps more significantly, there were insufficient numbers of students interested in learning these other styles which, in any case, were thought to be less sophisticated in comparison with ponglang ensemble music, more popular during previous decades as it fit well with current tastes. Finally, ponglang music was thought to be the most suitable tradition for inclusion in the academic curriculum because, unlike mawlam or klawng yao, its varied instrumentation allowed students to gain experience playing several different instruments.

The first teachers of Isan music and dance hired by the Natasin in Isan were traditional artists with long experience in their fields who were able to perform as well as teach classes. The directors of the newly established ponglang ensembles at these institutions had both led their own village ponglang troupes. Songsak Prathumsin, who led the Wong Wot Siangthawng, was invited to teach at Natasin Roi-et in 1980, and Plueang Chairatsami, who led the Wong Ponglang Kalasin until 1976, was hired at Natasin Kalasin in 1982. Because these two teachers came from different areas, the slightly different styles in their music in terms of pitch level, repertoire, and

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552 Actually, although neither mawlam klawn nor mawlam mu were taught in the Natasin, vocal music derived from these traditions, although greatly abbreviated and lacking any improvised component, was integrated into ponglang ensemble music to provide a vocal element to ponglang ensemble performances. Since the mid-1990s, mawlam, specifically mawlam klawn, has been added as a major of the Natasin in Roi-et and Kalasin although the mode of instruction available in these institutions has proven somewhat less effective than the traditional training methods.

553 Although the Natasin in Isan did have klawng yao instruments, klawng yao ensemble music and dance was not taught as a central, required part of the curriculum, but was instead featured only occasionally when needed for a particular performance.
instrumentation consequently became the two distinctive styles of the Natasin ponglang ensembles. By the late 1980s, however, these ensembles’ musical styles had grown more similar in instrumentation and repertoire, still with slight stylistic differences, through mutual contact and borrowings between them. In addition by the late 1980s, several graduates of the music and dance programs at Natasin Roi-et gained positions teaching at Natasin Kalasin where they introduced some elements of the performance practice of the ponglang ensemble of their former institution.

Within a few years after it came into academe, that is, by the mid 1980s, the instrumentation and musical style of the ponglang ensemble had become standardized. The ensembles utilized four main melodic instruments, khaen, phin, ponglang, and wot, and two accompanying percussion instruments, klaawng (actually a set of four modified
klawng yao plus one bass frame drum called a klawng tum (กลองตั้ม) all played in turn by a single performer) along with the chap lek (chap lek). A few other percussion instruments, such as chap yai (ชุดใหญ่), large cymbals, and khawlaw, the bamboo slit drum played with a wooden stick, were occasionally played in certain specific pieces. By 1983, the electric bass phin also became standardized, eventually replacing the hai in its role of providing bass lines and, rarely, in addition, a saw Isan, a two string-bowed lute.

As mentioned earlier, during that time, most of the aforementioned melodic instruments also underwent a certain amount of development and gradually became standardized in their construction in terms of size, key, tuning, and appearance/decoration.

**Phin and its Developments in Academic Setting**

Since its introduction into the academic setting, the phin, among all the melodic instruments of the ponglang ensemble, has undergone the most alteration and standardization. Although like khaen earlier phin varied in size, some better suited to higher or lower tunings, in the environment of the ponglang ensemble it was necessary that all other melodic instruments match the tuning of the ponglang. Thus, in the early 1980s, Songsak Prathumsin, who was also an instrument maker, standardized the body size, length, and fretting of the phin he used in his ensemble at Natasin Roi-et. Although traditional phin had seven frets at most, Songsak increased the number to twelve to fifteen to accommodate several non-pentatonic tones. He thus increased the compass of the melody strings from a twelfth to two full octaves. This wider range allowed for the

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554Because ponglang ensemble music had moved out of the village context and into the new, academic setting, it was important to musicians that their instruments not only sound good but also look beautiful on stage. Thus, the instruments produced for use in academic ensembles are more finely crafted and decorated than those used earlier by village musicians. Villagers did not really decorate their phin but left them simple. In academic ensembles, however, the phin always has a decorative headpiece in the shape of a naga (นาถ) or nak, an auspicious mythological serpent, or a hong (หงส์), a swan.
playing of more virtuosic melodies and the addition of diatonic tones for the playing of melodies from pop music. The frets are usually made from bamboo for acoustic instruments and metal for electric ones. Whereas traditional *phin* had hardwood tuning pegs, most modern instruments utilize factory made, mechanical guitar tuning machines. Guitar strings replaced bicycle brake cable during the 1970s. The performer traditionally plucked the strings with a thin arrowhead shaped plectrum made of water buffalo horn. In the mid 1980s, most *phin* players in the academic setting, however, either made their own picks by cutting plastic water jugs into triangular shapes or using modern guitar picks.

One of the most significant steps in the development of the *phin*, and one which most clearly shows the influence of modernization, was its electrification. By the time the *ponglang* ensemble was brought into the academic environment, there was already a famous *luk thung Isan* band, the Ubon based Phet Phin Thawng Troupe, which had pioneered the use of an electrified *phin* in a lead role. At first, the Natasin *ponglang* ensembles used acoustic *phin*; but those *phin* players found they could not compete in volume with the *ponglang* and percussion. In imitation of the Phet Phin Thawng Troupe, around 1982, Songsak began amplifying acoustic *phin* with the use of pickup microphones. Around 1984, he built the first solid body electric *phin*, based on the solid body electric guitar. It produced a stronger and more reliable tone, although the timbre differed slightly from that of the amplified acoustic *phin*. The Phet Phin Thawng Troupe not only influenced academic *ponglang* music in terms of the adoption of the electric

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555 It is not known exactly when strands of bicycle brake cable came into use for *phin* strings, but it must have been after the advent of the bicycle in Isan in the early to mid-twentieth century. It is likely that silk, formerly used throughout East and Southeast Asia for musical instrument strings, was used for *phin* strings before the advent of bicycle brake cable.  
556 See chapter 4.
phin but also helped to establish the current style of playing the instrument with faster sound production conducive to single string melodic playing with less drone and a more soloistic virtuoso style of play like that on an electric jazz or rock-and-roll guitar.

By the late 1980s, an increasing number of public schools across Isan started ponglang ensembles, and that led to a great demand for phin. Such schools usually ordered instruments as a set including phin, khaen, ponglang, and wot, all tuned together, often from Songsak’s workshop. By the early 1990s, however, Songsak could not keep up with the demand, and a number of new makers began selling phin using his design.

**Hai and its New Status in Ensembles**

When Songsak founded the first academic ponglang ensemble at Natasin Roi-et in 1980, he pushed the development and standardization of the hai. Songsak based his ensemble on his previous one, Wong Wot Siangthawng, and modified both the instrumentation and musical style. Thus, among the other instruments, the phin hai first appeared in the Natasin Roi-et ponglang ensemble in 1980, and it also appeared later, in the ensemble established in 1982 by Plueang Chairatsami at Natasin Kalasin. By 1984, the phin hai in these ensembles comprised up to seven jars in order to produce all seven pitches of the diatonic scale.

The Natasin Roi-et ensemble also modified the hai in about 1984 by creating a metal stand for it which held each jar in a circular holder. Instead of sitting on the floor the performer now stood up to play the instrument. In 1983, with the introduction of

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557 Songsak became very successful in the 1980s and 1990s selling sets of instruments to new ponglang ensembles across Isan. His workshop in his home village at Nawng Phawk, Roi-et Province, produced phin, ponglang, and wot. When he sold sets of instruments, he would order khaen of the appropriate size and pitch from a separate maker.
electric instruments, the electric *phin* and electric bass *phin* had amplified sound, and the *ponglang, khaen, wot,* and *hai* also each came to be amplified with microphones. But the *phin hai* was no longer adequate for the bass line in the *ponglang* ensemble. It was difficult to amplify the *phin hai* because a single microphone could not pick up all the jars, and the pitches were not stable because the rubber bands stretched so that it went out of tune during performance. Although the *phin hai* and electric bass *phin* appeared alongside one another for about a year, by 1984 or 1985, the *ponglang* ensemble at Natasin Kalasin had decided to replace its *phin hai* performer, heretofore male, with a beautifully costumed female dancer called a *thida hai* (สีดาไท), “jar daughter,” or a *nang hai* (นางไท), “jar woman,” who danced behind and around the instrument and mimed playing it but without actually touching it or producing any sounds. Although, since the genre’s inception, neotraditional ensembles had accompanied groups of local dancers, this marked the first time a dancer was incorporated into the act as a member of the *ponglang* ensemble. The troupe leaders and promoters believed that this innovation, which the ensemble at Natasin Roi-et also adopted by 1985, would provide an added attraction for audiences. By the late 1980s, a dancing *hai* “player” became standard for academic *ponglang* ensembles at all educational levels both in the Northeast and throughout Thailand.

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558See below.
Electric Bass Phin

Songsak, while at Natasin Roi-et, also invented a bass instrument in the shape of a phin which he called phin bet (พินเบต) or “bass phin” for his ensemble. The current term, phin-bass, derives from the English, “bass phin.” Isan musicians always call it phin baet or simply “bass” because the instrument imitates both the sound and range of the Western electric bass guitar. Because of its shape, the instrument appears to be a larger size of the electric phin with a leaf shaped solid wooden body and a head decorated with a naga; but it is not considered a real phin. The size of the phin-bass is approximately the same as an electric bass guitar. It has twenty-one metal frets arranged in half steps.
and four regular electric bass guitar strings. The strings are plucked with the index and middle fingers in the same manner as the electric bass guitar.

After two years of teaching at the Natasin Roi-et, Songsak began using bass *phin* in the school *ponglang* ensemble. At first, Chawalit Manirat (ชวลิต แสนรัตน์), Director of the School from 1980-1988, disapproved of the *phin-bass* because it did not belong to traditional Isan music. Later, because the school ensemble also performed some popular songs to please its audiences, the director allowed its inclusion.

![Figure 43. *Phin-bass* in comparison with electric bass.](image)
**Drum Set in Academic Ensembles**

The *klawng* (กลอง) or “Isan drum set,” appeared at Natasin Roi-et in the early 1980s. Before the local Isan ensemble was brought into academia, each *wong dontri phuen-mueang* used whatever kind of drum it pleased. The *thon*, a goblet drum, is the oldest to have appeared in the traditional *phin-khaen* ensemble; and it may have been used in some local ensembles as well. Sets of conga drums appeared in some *wong dontri phuen-mueang* in the 1970s through the influence of *luk thung* music groups which usually use them. In the academic setting, there was agreement among ensemble directors and institution administrators that all instruments had to derive from Isan tradition. Songsak stated that a set of four *klawng yao*, long drums of slightly different sizes and pitches, were first used in the Natasin Roi-et *ponglang* ensemble. In the creation of a new kind of drum set, Songsak modified the traditional *klawng yao* to make it a little shorter. In use, it looks like two pairs of congas standing beside each other on metal stands. The *klawng tum* (กลองตูม), a round, low pitched drum, was included in the set, which became the “Isan drum set” or “the drum of the *ponglang* ensemble.” Once the *klawng* had been added, the instrumentation of the *ponglang* ensemble finally stabilized into its current form.

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559 Congas had already appeared to accompany *phin-khaen* ensembles in *mawlam phloen* performances at least by 1970.
560 See *klawng yao*.
561 This is usually called just *klawng* or *klawng yao*; but, to distinguish between the Northeastern and Central or Northern versions, the term *klawng yao Isan* (กลองยาวอีสาน) may be used.
562 More details about the long drum under the heading of *klawng yao* ensemble.
563 Ibid.
The most common arrangement of the academic ponglang ensemble is in two rows. The front row includes five instruments: klawng (Isan drum set), khaen, ponglang, wot, and hai. The khaen and the wot always stand on either end although they may switch sides. The second row consists of two instruments, electric phin and bass phin. These two instruments may switch sides as well. All players typically stand except for the ponglang player who either sits cross legged on the stage or, if his or her instrument is raised high enough, on a chair or stool while playing.
Figure 45. Common arrangement of academic ponglang ensemble.
The Performance of Wong Ponglang

Ever since the origin of the ponglang ensemble, dance has been an important aspect of performance to provide additional entertainment for audiences. In the Natasin schools, most ponglang ensemble performances begin with five or ten minutes of instrumental music to get the audience’s attention. After that, ponglang dancers are featured along with the musicians for much of the remainder of the program although the instrumentalists may be featured alone or as soloists several times, usually between dance numbers while the dancers are changing costumes. Because the dancers are situated at the front of the stage and are present during most of the program’s length, audiences direct their attention mostly to them. Thus, the instrumental function is viewed as an accompaniment, not the major aspect of the performance. When discussing ponglang ensemble music, as well as earlier wong dontri phuen-mueang, it is assumed that the music and dance go together; and it is rare to see such a performance without dancers.

Each dance has a different name and purpose and usually consists of an even number of dancers (from four to twelve) per dance, not counting the dancing hai “player.” Female dancers predominate, although both men and women may also dance together. The number of dancers employed depends on the size of the stage. The larger the stage, the more dancers are added. The troupe knows the stage size in advance and thus prepares for the appropriate number of performers. The dance movements typically represent aspects of daily life including customs, rituals, and occupations. Some dances are newly choreographed although most are derived from traditional movements. Each dance represents aspects of the theme of the musical number. For example, in the Rice Farming Dance called Soeng Tham Na (ข่มท่าน), the movements represent the process
of nurturing rice production from the first planting of the rice seed to harvest. The duration of each dance varies between four and fifteen minutes.

During the first decade of academic Isan neotraditional music, the Natasin ponglang ensembles increasingly received invitations to perform all over Thailand. The invitation ranged from a monthly Buddhist festival in the home city of the Natasin to other special occasions including performances in hotels and conference centers for tourists, meetings of business organizations, government officials, and trade groups, as well as for cultural festivals in Bangkok and other large cities. Performances in concert halls were rare, and neither Natasin has a Western-style concert hall, instead they have an open, outdoor, covered pavilion for performances. In 1988, the Natasin ponglang of the Roi-et School received its first invitation to perform in Europe, specifically in Germany and the Netherlands. As the style of music became standardized, the players’ techniques and virtuosity advanced rapidly, and they added many new pieces and arrangements composed within the new parameters.

**Isan Long Drum Ensemble: Wong Klawng yao**

One of the most important musical traditions in Isan culture is the wong klawng yao (วงกลองยาว) or klawng yao ensemble. Prior to the region’s modernization, almost every community in Isan had its own klawng yao ensemble. The primary instruments consisted of a set of four or more klawng yao long drums and one or more klawng tum bass frame drums, as well as other percussion instruments such as chap cymbals. This ensemble typically performed together with a group of female dancers for festival

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564 However, there are a few concert halls in Bangkok where ponglang ensembles occasionally appear.
565 A community may be a neighborhood of a city or a sector of a village. A large village or town may include two, three, four, or even five different communities, each of which may have its own set of klawng yao instruments.
processions held periodically throughout the year. Significant changes came to this tradition during Isan’s modernization beginning in the late 1970s.

The instrument from which the ensemble takes its name, the *klawng yao* (กลองยาว) or “long drum,” has long been used in the traditional music of Isan and has counterparts in Central Thailand where they are also used for festival processions. The variety used in Isan, distinct from the others in its construction, manner of play, playing context, and repertoire, is usually referred to simply as *klawng yao*, although it may also be called *klawng yao Isan* when necessary to distinguish it from the long drums of Central Thailand. The term *klawng hang* (กลองหาง), “tail drum,” a synonym more frequently used by elderly Isan natives (who are now mostly at age 70 or more), is an older name for the instrument. This suggests that *klawng yao* was adopted more recently from Central Thai speech and refers to the distinctive body of the instrument with its wide, long “head,” slender “waist,” and shorter, flaring “tail.”

As with most Thai musical instruments, we know little of the origin of the *klawng yao*. However, elderly Isan citizens reported that they saw *klawng yao* ensembles when young. This suggests that the ensemble already existed in Isan at least before the 1920s. Most Thai scholars assume that the instrument derives from Burmese tradition, where it

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566 In Northern Thailand, there are four slightly different sizes and appearances of long drum. However, Northern Thai people do not regard these long drums as *klawng yao* as they give them different names such as *klawng luang* (กลองหลวง), *klawng aeo* (กลองเออ), *klawng Buja* (กลองบูจา), and *klawng mongserng* (กลองมองเซิ้ง). The *klawng luang* is the biggest in terms of its body length (about 3-4 meters) and the diagonal measurement of its head membrane (about 71 centimeters). The *klawng aeo* is about 3 meters long and 50 centimeters diagonal of its membrane. The last two appear to be similar in sizes to those of Isan and Central Thailand’s *klawng yao*. Unlike the way Isan performers play their Isan *klawng yao* as members within a set of several *klawng yao*, Northern Thais combine all of theirs as a single drum with other instruments to form an ensemble. Long drum is also common in the Khmer tradition called *chayyam* and in Burma, where they call it an *ozi*. 
is called an *ozi*, since it is common and has a longer history there. A similar type of long drum is also common among ethnic minorities such as the Shan in northern Burma and the Dai people in China.

The Isan *klawng yao* is made from the hollowed out trunk of a hardwood tree, traditionally jackfruit, with a single head made from cowhide or sometimes water buffalo hide. The head, usually 22 to 25 centimeters in diameter, is attached to the body with nylon cord (formerly strips of cowhide), which passes through the edge of the head every 3 centimeters and is crisscrossed around the body of the drum to a metal ring, about 15 centimeters above its waist. The wooden body, carved in an elongated goblet shape with a significant waist about one third of the distance from the bottom, is usually 87-90 centimeters long, although any individual drum may be slightly longer or shorter. In performance, the drum is decorated with matching colorful skirts tied around the upper half of the body of the drum.

A *klawng yao* must be tuned every time it is played. Although the cord must be sufficiently tight to maintain the proper tension of the head, it is adjusted only when needed. Before rehearsals and performances, however, the head must be fine tuned by applying a tuning paste, called *khaotit naklawng* (ข้าวตัดหน้าคลอง) or “rice [for] attaching [to the] drum head,” made from non-glutinous white rice mixed with fine ash from burned hardwood and pulverized to form a sticky, dark gray paste. The paste is applied to the center of the drum head in the shape of a disc, thinned out to the edges, from 6.35 to 7.62 centimeters in diameter. The application of this paste has several advantages.

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567 In common usage, most musicians refer to this material simply as *khao* (ข้าว) or “rice.”
568 In the late 1980s, *klawng yao* players discovered a more convenient alternative which does not need to be laboriously mixed, a type of dried, sweetened banana snack called *kuai tak* (กลิ่นของคา). This material is also used to tune hand drums from other Thai musical traditions, such as the *taphon* (ตะโพน), *klawng sawngna* (คลองสองหน้า), and *perng mang khawk* (เปญผังชะก) used in Thai classical music.
functions. First, without it, the pitch of the head is too high; and the application of this material serves to weight the head, thereby lowering the pitch to the desired frequency. The thicker the paste, the lower the pitch will be. Further, the paste serves to focus the tone by making the head produce a more fixed pitch with a ringing, almost bell-like timbre. The amount of paste is finely adjusted to ensure that the pitch resonates well with the proportions of the interior cavity of the drum to produce a louder, more sustained sound than the flat sound produced without any paste application. In a given ensemble, all klawng yao are tuned to the same pitch. Generally, each player is responsible for tuning his own drum, although all ensemble members will check to make sure the tunings of their drums match before they begin to play. After a performance, they always scrupulously scrape off the paste, often with the edge of a cymbal and a cloth dampened with water, lest the drum head be damaged, possibly by creatures who may try to eat it off the membrane.

Each player carries his or her instrument with a shoulder strap tied onto the drum at the head and base. This strap passes around the back and comes around the waist on the other side of the player’s body and holds the drum either to the right or left side of the player’s body at an angle of about thirty-five degrees so that all of the performers in the ensemble match in carrying style. The head of the drum is generally struck midway between the center and edge with the clenched fingers of both hands to produce a clear, open tone.

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569 See the picture.
Along with the drum itself, another essential element of the klawng yao ensemble is the klawng tum (ก hoog ต้ม) or klawng teng (ก hoog เด้ง), a large bass drum, of which most ensembles have at least one. The name of the instrument is onomatopoeic, imitative of its deep, booming voice. It is technically a frame drum, with a heavy cylindrical or nearly cylindrical frame carved from a single hardwood log, usually jackfruit, and a single head usually of cowhide although water buffalo hide is sometimes used. The head is attached to the body by means of a thin nylon rope that is stitched all the way around the head and tightened by crisscrossing it through a metal ring the same diameter as the frame. The rope is embedded in a groove carved into the bottom of the body. Historically, strips of cowhide were used for this purpose before the advent of nylon. Like klawng yao, in performance klawng tum are decorated with colorful fabric usually matching that of the skirts on the klawng yao and tied around the instrument’s body.
While the early history of the *klawng tum* is obscure, we can be reasonably sure of its use in *klawng yao* ensembles since at least the early twentieth century. The *klawng tum* is also called *ramana* (รำนะ), the name of a small frame drum used in tandem with the *thon* (โทน) in Thai classical music, although the two instruments differ in shape and construction. Another Central Thai instrument also called a *ramana*, a large frame drum used in the Central Thai folk repartee tradition of *lam that* (ลำทัด), is similar in construction although it is smaller and lighter than the Isan *klawng tum*. It is interesting to note that the Central Thai *klawng yao* ensemble does not use the *klawng tum*. It is perhaps unnecessary in that tradition because Central Thai *klawng yao* are tuned low enough so as to not need a bass voice.

Whereas *klawng yao* must be tuned before playing, the *klawng tum* does not have to be tuned unless the head is excessively loose, in which case the cord is untied, pulled tighter, and then retied. Tuning paste is usually not necessary; but, if two or more *klawng tum* are used and their pitches do not match, paste may be applied to one or more of the drums when the pitch is too high. The *klawng tum* is usually suspended from a bamboo pole carried on the shoulders of two men, and the man in the rear plays the instrument. It may also be held by one player alone by means of a strap slung over one shoulder and around the waist to the other side of his body. When held by the player in this manner, the drum hangs in front of his body with the head usually facing right, either vertically or, more commonly nowadays, with the head tilted at an angle ranging between 15 and 45 degrees from horizontal. The drummer strikes his drum with the palm of his right hand midway between the center and edge of the head and thus produces a full, deep tone.
Since the 1990s, an increasing number of players use a padded stick rather than a bare hand because this produces a tone that is louder, although lacking in subtlety.\textsuperscript{570}

Unlike other ensembles in Isan musical culture, of which the instruments were privately owned, most communities own and keep the instruments of the \textit{klawng yao} communally.\textsuperscript{571} Villages and communities that have their own sets of instruments usually keep them at the local temple which also functions as a community center. A typical set of instruments includes an even number of \textit{klawng yao}, typically between four and twelve but up to twenty-four or more in larger villages, and between one and three \textit{klawng tum} as well as at least one pair of \textit{chap yai}, large cymbals, and \textit{chap lek}, small cymbals. There may also be a pair of \textit{ching}, although this instrument is rarely used. The \textit{klawng yao} in a given set of instruments are usually of similar length and diameter although it is not necessary that they all be identical or constructed by the same maker.

Traditionally, a village’s or community’s \textit{klawng yao} ensemble, called \textit{khana klawng yao}, (คณาคลาดอย่าง), consists of young, unmarried men who range in age from sixteen to twenty, although an ensemble might also include players as young as twelve or older than twenty. Late in the cool or, more commonly, early in the dry season, each village headman makes an announcement that young men are needed as volunteers to join the community’s \textit{klawng yao} ensemble. In a village, young men gather to learn and practice \textit{klawng yao} music in the evening in the temple yard, especially during the dry season. For most ensembles, rehearsals take place every few days or as often as every

\textsuperscript{570}The use of padded drum sticks in the playing of \textit{klawng tum} comes from their use in Western marching bands for bass drums. In any case, the use of sticks by \textit{klawng tum} players serves to produce a higher volume, desirable with highly amplified instruments. Most older \textit{klawng yao} musicians think of the playing of \textit{klawng tum} with a stick as an inappropriate technique, one which produces the wrong kind of sound and is also hard on the instrument, which is designed to be played with the hand.

\textsuperscript{571}This is aside from Thai classical instruments such as gong circles and xylophones, used in ritual contexts in temples and kept in temples, the use of which died out throughout Isan by the mid-twentieth century.
evening, depending on the number of new members and the imminence of upcoming performances. A leader called the *huana klawng yao* (หัวหน้ากลวงยาว) or “klawng yao leader,” also a performer, supervises the rehearsals. Along with the leader, those who have played with the ensemble in previous years assist in training new members. If there are not enough experienced members to perform or teach effectively, someone from the village or another village nearby already married and “retired” from playing, might be invited to instruct, but only rarely to perform with the group.572

Dance is an important element of the *klawng yao* ensemble tradition. Most communities have a group of female dancers, called *khana ram fawn* (คำนาเพื่อน) or *khana nang ram* (คำนานางร้า), who perform with the ensemble. Although for smaller events such as ordination or wedding processions the ensemble may perform without the dance troupe, it is part of most large events, including major communal festivals. Like the musicians of the *klawng yao* ensemble, the dancers are volunteers recruited from the ranks of the young, unmarried women of the village or community, of the same age range as the musicians. A dance leader called *huana nak fawn* (หัวหน้านักเพื่อน), normally one of the dancers with the most experience, leads them. However, if necessary, an older, married woman with greater dance experience may be asked to instruct. The number of dancers maintained by a given community depends on its size, possibly as many as forty dancers in a large village. Festival processions usually feature at least twice the number

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572 As with most amateur musical pursuits in Isan culture except *mawlam*, considered a professional activity, playing in a *klawng yao* ensemble is something engaged in by young people. In a culture where courtship has been highly regulated, playing in a *klawng yao* ensemble is one of the rare means for young men (musicians) and young women (dancers) to have an opportunity to interact closely in frequent rehearsals and performances. *Klawng yao* ensemble musicians, thus, may expect that their playing may help attract a potential mate, either from the pool of dancers or from among the public audience that view the ensemble’s performances. After marriage, one generally does not continue playing in a *klawng yao* ensemble because one already has a mate and more “mature” activities in which to engage.
of dancers as musicians, and, the more significant the event, the larger the number of dancers required.

After all the new musicians and dancers gain competence, the two groups begin rehearsals together several weeks before their first performance. Musicians wear matching local-style outfits, while dancers wear more colorful and formal matching traditional dresses. Dancers usually also have their faces made up and hair coiffed identically, and they wear jewelry with a flower in one ear or a flower garland around the neck. In processions, dancers and musicians perform in long lines, two, three, or four abreast, down the main road of the community, with the dancers in the lead followed by the musicians. A community or village usually organizes celebrations and festivals throughout the year, at least once a month during the dry season and about two or three times during the farming season. The communal \textit{klawng yao} ensemble sometimes performs with its dance troupe as a musical procession in the festival.\footnote{Within the circle of the year, while many festival and celebrations require processions, some do not, in which case the \textit{klawng yao} ensemble and dancers are not featured. These events are usually tied to Buddhist ceremonies such as Visakha Puja, “the Lord Buddha Days of “birthday,” “enlightment,” “nirvana” and Magha Puja “Sangha Day.”}

Traditional \textit{klawng yao} ensembles use a number of traditional rhythmic patterns called \textit{jangwa klawng yao} (จังหวะคลองยา) or \textit{jangwa klawng} (จังหวะคลอง). A given ensemble may use eight to ten of these in a performance, although the specific patterns vary from ensemble to ensemble.\footnote{Originally, each ensemble invented a few local rhythmic patterns and some of these eventually spread throughout Isan. The patterns gradually became common throughout Isan and have now become traditional rhythmic patterns.} These patterns are short and repetitive and are characterized by interlocking style interplay between the \textit{klawng yao} and \textit{klawng tum} with all \textit{klawng yao} and all \textit{klawng tum} playing the same thing. The \textit{chap} play parts are derived roughly from the resultant rhythm of the \textit{klawng yao} and \textit{klawng tum}. In
performance, ensembles play a given rhythmic pattern for several minutes before switching to another without pause and without counting the rhythm patterns; but they usually mark the switch with the *chap* or cymbals. They may return later to a pattern that has played earlier. Each of these rhythmic patterns has a corresponding movement for the ensemble’s dancers, although the exact movement used for each pattern varies from ensemble to ensemble. In addition to the movements of the dancers themselves, the musicians are expected to dance while playing their instruments with certain movements of the hands, arms, hips, and/or legs for specific rhythmic patterns. However, the musicians’ movements are inevitably restricted, as they must carry and play their instruments. Some *klawng yao* ensemble leaders give a name to each rhythmic pattern while others simply use numbers to refer to them, such as “pattern one,” “pattern two,” “pattern three,” etc.

Thus, although the *klawng yao* ensemble is named for its primary instrument, native listeners do not focus their attention just on the drums themselves but also on the choreography that all the ensemble members, dancers, and musicians need to learn and perform together. *Klawng yao* performances require a high degree of cooperation and coordination among performers. Although listeners may make remarks about the beauty of the drum sounds in terms of timbre and volume (*siang di* [เสียงดี] or *dang di* [ดังดี]), the real beauty of the *klawng yao* performance in the traditional context is the togetherness shown by its performers.
Beginning in the late 1970s, due primarily to the changes brought about by Isan’s modernization, *klawng yao* ensemble music began to experience a noticeable decline which served to undermine this traditional spirit of togetherness. The ever increasing migration of young Isan natives to Bangkok for employment meant that many communal ensembles had difficulty finding enough volunteers to play all of their instruments, as well as enough dancers. By the 1980s, as the number of young people remaining in the villages continued to decrease, many villages found their pool of young men had become so small they could no longer continue to support a community ensemble.⁵⁷⁵ Among

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⁵⁷⁵In most cases these villages have kept their instruments, although after many years of disuse they are often in a state of disrepair. The last time I saw the instruments in my home village temple, in 1999, they had not been used for over ten years and were being kept in a storage room, covered with dust, with some of the heads broken. This situation is fairly usual in many villages across Isan.
those few young men who chose to remain in their villages and complete high school, most were either too busy with school or simply not interested in playing due to their greater interest in modern forms of entertainment such as television, movies, or pop music. In spite of these difficulties, the klawng yao ensemble tradition, as an essential element of village festival processions in Isan, did not die out entirely. Many village ensembles continued to rehearse and perform, though with a greatly reduced number of players and dancers. Most of these found it necessary to bring in older volunteer musicians and dancers, perhaps in their thirties and forties, who had performed with klawng yao ensembles when they were younger and unmarried, to supplement the depleted ranks of the younger performers. In those villages where an actual ensemble had ceased to exist, men of any age often simply grabbed drums from their village temple on the day of a festival to play them in the procession for the dancers on an impromptu basis and with little coordination or sophistication.

In addition, in response to demand, there arose for the first time, beginning in 1982 and 1983 and most often in villages without functioning amateur klawng yao ensembles, private klawng yao ensembles that performed for profit. Such groups were generally founded by older, married men with experience playing klawng yao ensemble music, who bought a set of instruments, gave their group a name, and sought invitations to perform for festival processions as well as private celebrations such as ordinations or weddings. They could find more opportunities by traveling from village to village because even different villages in the same area hold the same festival on different weekends. According to tradition they usually performed without payment for festivals in their own villages. Performing klawng yao music is not considered a profession, or

576In my village, in 1981, I was one of only thirteen out of sixty who remained to do this.
even an activity for which players expect to receive any financial remuneration, although they are usually given free food and drink. The reason for this is that the performers think of their work as a type of community service with aspects of merit making according to Buddhist belief. Taking money in the new context was not a problem, however, because they were paid only when they performed in a village or community other than their own and because their expenses had to be covered if they traveled to and performed in an outside venue.

While it is clear that modernization exerted a negative effect on the *klawng yao* ensemble during the 1980s, it also had another effect which changed *klawng yao* fundamentally, namely, the use for the first time of electronically amplified melodic instruments. The first two instruments used in that way were the electronic keyboard, usually small and inexpensive, and the electric *phin*, brought to festivals by young players who wished to join in the procession. Most of these were musicians between the ages of sixteen and twenty who had learned to play the new instruments by themselves or as former members of a school *ponglang* ensemble. They wanted to gain more playing experience through performances. They also wished to demonstrate their skill in a new, public forum for all to see on a regular basis throughout the year. They generally were some of the minority of young people who had chosen to remain in their villages in order to finish high school and pursue higher education rather than go to Bangkok to seek employment.\(^{577}\) While the identities of the first musicians to incorporate foreign instruments in the *ponglang* ensemble are unknown as is the year that this was first done, the electronic keyboard appeared a few years before the electric *phin*, which likely first

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\(^{577}\) These electric *phin* players were either high school students or students of a local vocational institute, college, or university, or those who had just finished high school and were employed either as musicians or in other jobs.
took place no earlier than 1985.\textsuperscript{578} The influence of modernization clearly came about because the modern educational system allowed \textit{ponglang} ensemble music to be taught on a systematic basis in public schools throughout Isan, and that led to the training of hundreds of electric \textit{phin} players by the late 1980s. Of course, the invention of the instrument itself, modeled on the electric guitar, would also not have been possible without modernization.

Melodic instruments such as the \textit{khaen} or acoustic \textit{phin} did frequently appear in village festival processions although they did so on an informal basis separate from the \textit{klawng yao} ensemble.\textsuperscript{579} Until the mid-1970s when electronic amplifiers became common in villages throughout Isan, these melodic instruments were difficult to find in such a setting. As a result, some players began amplifying their performances by means of a public address system which used one or more bullhorn-shaped speakers powered by a gasoline powered generator. Because the equipment was large and heavy, it was necessary to place it on either a two-wheeled pushcart\textsuperscript{580} or on the back of a truck which could travel behind the players in a procession, although the musicians might also ride in the back of the truck while playing.

When young electronic keyboard and electric \textit{phin} players began to join festival processions in the mid-1980s, they first needed to borrow their village’s sound system, usually kept in the local temple, since the solid-body instrument is inaudible without amplification. This equipment, which allowed for the production of an extremely high

\textsuperscript{578}The first high school \textit{ponglang} ensembles were established around 1985.
\textsuperscript{579}Beginning in the early 1980s, amplified \textit{ponglang} ensembles mounted on the back of flatbed trucks sometimes performed in processions but usually only in festivals held in larger cities, and, again, not in ensemble with \textit{klawng yao} troupes.
\textsuperscript{580}Such carts, locally called \textit{law} [ล้อ], “wheel,” or \textit{lot nyu} [ล้อหน้า], “pushed vehicle,” were originally made of wood and later more frequently of metal with two large wheels similar to bicycle wheels. They were commonly found in Isan villages. Each family usually had one which they would use to move such items as firewood, fertilizer, and/or sacks of rice.
volume, was similarly carried in the procession either on a pushcart or a truck. In a given procession, when there were two kinds of ensembles, one was a traditional *klawng yao* rhythmic ensemble and the other was a melodic “ensemble” of electronic keyboard or *phin* played nearby in the same procession. The highly amplified melodic ensemble of the electronic keyboard or electric *phin* could be heard above an entire traditional *klawng yao* rhythmic pattern. As a result, it was unavoidable for the traditional *klawng yao* musicians to play their rhythmic patterns automatically to match or “accompany” or “follow” the melodic line that they heard over their shoulders. That was how the first style of moderned *klawng yao* music was created by adding the melodic section in the ensemble.

Prior to the addition of melodic instruments, *klawng yao* ensembles had no melodic component, but once the electronic keyboard and electric *phin* were added the most common melody these instrument players used in the processions along with *klawng yao* was *thamnong lam phloen* (ท่านมองลำเพลิน), although, of course, without the vocal line. This traditional melody, popular throughout Isan (with slight variations), was found to be suitable in this context. The fast tempo and repetitive nature of the melody could fit well with a few traditional (or slightly modified) *klawng yao* rhythmic patterns. When some people hear this melody, they feel compelled to join in the procession and dance along with the ensemble’s performers.

The first experiment with the innovation of integrating these electric instruments with a *klawng yao* ensemble was probably limited to a single player in a single village; but the idea proved successful with audiences and spread rapidly, becoming common throughout central Isan by the late 1980s. This innovation probably spread at first as
musicians visiting other villages’ festivals saw it being done or heard about it through word of mouth and decided to try it themselves. Probably the most important way the use of either electronic keyboard or electric phin (or both) with klawng yao ensembles became common was that, beginning around 1986 or 1987, pre-existing private klawng yao ensembles saw how much audiences liked it and got the idea to hire these melodic players for their own performances, either on a freelance basis or as full members of the ensemble. It then became de rigeur to feature electric instruments in klawng yao ensembles, as audiences had come to expect the melodic component. If one ensemble had one, then all others would need to do this as well so that they could get hired. When professional klawng yao ensembles began to add these electric instruments they needed to make the further investments of purchasing a cart, amplification equipment, and usually the instrument(s) as well.

This addition of a melodic line to the klawng yao ensemble was an important innovation, in effect modifying the ensemble from its older, traditional form to a newer, modern form, which is still by far the most common form today (as melody has become expected and inseparable from klawng yao ensemble music). Further, by 1986 and 1987 the use of these electric instruments had gone from just something “fun” to do at processions in one’s home village to a money making opportunity. By the late 1980s, most private klawng yao ensembles found that they did not always need to perform with a large number of klawng yao (a full set usually consisting of five or six drums) to accompany the melodic section, either electronic keyboard or electric phin. If a village did not request a large number of klawng yao, private ensembles found that they could perform with a reduced number of klawng yao and that allowed them to divide their
performance commissions among fewer musicians. Nevertheless, even if they only brought two or three actual *klawng yao* to a procession, they still called their ensemble a “*klawng yao* ensemble.”

By the early 1990s, *klawng yao* ensembles, most of which were by this time private and for profit, found that it was not even necessary to use any *klawng yao* in their performances. They discovered that a Western marching multi-tom set with three, four, or five drums, which had come to Isan through the addition of the Western-style marching band tradition to Isan high schools, was an effective substitute for *klawng*.

581 These multi-toms may at first have been borrowed from the local public school band in which the drummer played, but most private *klawng yao* ensembles have their own sets which they purchase in music stores.
yao. The multi-tom set can produce several different pitches and is lighter and easier to carry. Thus, it is more convenient, practical, modern in appearance, and similar to the drum set used in luk thung music (as the multi-toms can be used to play tom fills). The multi-tom set usually has a single attached and suspended cymbal which produces a sound similar to chap, so that a group no longer needs chap. In addition, it sometimes has a cowbell instead of or in addition to the suspended cymbal. Along with klawng tum these percussion instruments together serve as a surrogate for the drum set as used in luk thung music. However, most of these private ensembles have kept their klawng yao.

This meant that the villages doing the hiring now have two options: if they want to pay more (usually for only very big festivals) they can ask the private ensemble to bring their full set of klawng yao plus their amplified melodic instruments. In other cases, usually for smaller festivals, a village may request that a private klawng yao ensemble perform without any klawng yao—just melodic instruments plus a multi-toms and klawng tum, although sometimes a village may bring its own klawng yao to join in. In the latter case, where a processional ensemble has no klawng yao (or very few klawng yao), Isan people refer to this kind of group, a melodic cart plus small number of drums including multi-toms and klawng tum or Western marching bass drum, by the informal names bak lente (บักเลนเต้), bak iteng (บักยิ่ง), or bak lilae (บักลิลัย), which for the purposes of this study will translate as “melodic cart.”

It should be noted that when a melodic cart performs together with a klawng yao ensemble, that is with at least three or four klawng

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582 In the Isan dialect, the term bak or mak (บัก มัก) is a generic classifier used to refer to things (including both humans and inanimate objects). In this context, bak specifically refers to the cart that carries the sound equipment, but figuratively, using synecdoche, refers to the full ensemble that walks along with the cart. The terms len tae, i-teng, and lilae have no meaning in and of themselves, but are onomatopoeic representations of the musical sounds produced by such ensembles.
Isan natives still consider and refer to the entire assemblage as a *klawng yao* ensemble, even if the level of performance of the *klawng yao* is not as high as in the past.

During the decade of the 1990s, additional instruments were added to these private *klawng yao* ensembles. While at first two melodic instruments, the electronic keyboard and electric *phin*, were played singly or sometimes together, now others: bass *phin* or occasionally electric bass guitar and electric lead guitar have become common in the ensembles, with all the amplified melodic instruments, percussion not amplified, plugged into the cart sound system. Typically ensemble leaders purchase all the instruments for the ensemble and allow the players to use them for rehearsals and performances. Because of the increased number of instruments, many bands have also

![Mobile sound system cart in *klawng yao* performance, Mahasakham University, Summer 2007.](image-url)
added more bullhorn-type speakers to the carts, usually mounted high on a tall metal pole attached to the cart. By the mid-1990s heavy car batteries were sometimes used instead of gasoline powered generators. Along with the additional instruments came a consequent expansion in repertoire encompassing traditional tunes (*thamnong lam toei*, *thamnong lam doen*, simple *lai* [tunes] from *ponglang* music) and melodic lines from any other type of Thai popular music. On the other hand, with all the changes, focus on the *klawng yao* rhythmic pattern has been reduced. When the *klawng yao* rhythm players have to depend on whatever melodic styles are played, the freedom to play a variety of rhythmic patterns is lost. Most modern *klawng yao* ensembles play only two to three traditional rhythmic patterns that fit the melodies to be accompanied. This also affects the togetherness of the drummers as they perform with dancers to the highly amplified melodies played by the cart musicians.

In processions, private ensembles usually use the aforementioned melodic instruments along with one set, sometimes two, of multi-toms, with mounted suspended cymbal and/or cowbell, and one, two, or three *klawng tum*.

For larger events a village may request that the ensemble also bring a set of *klawng yao*. With its amplified instruments and drum set-like percussion, this combo, without the *klawng yao*, has become something like a mobile pop music band. Most players are young adults as the electric *phin* players originally were. The percussion instruments, played to accompany the “push-melodic cart,” with a minimum of two players who use multi-toms with added suspended cymbal and possibly *klawng tum*, provide a simulation of a Western drum set.

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583 In the 2000s it became common for one or more Western marching bass drums, played with a padded stick, to be used along with, or in place of, the *klawng tum*. 
Players have liked this because they can imitate *luk thung* beats without using an actual drum set which is both expensive and difficult to play while walking in a procession.\textsuperscript{584} Thus, the modern *klawng yao* ensemble (with or without actual *klawng yao*) can be seen as a kind of traditional-modern hybrid because of the mixture of traditional and Western instruments as well as because these groups play some traditional style rhythmic patterns and the cha-cha beats typical of *luk thung*. The versatility of the musicians in such groups allows them to play in a variety of styles, popular and traditional. Although traditional tunes are preferred in this context by both performers and audiences, a few popular tunes, usually *luk thung* songs, also are usually included for variety, especially

\textsuperscript{584}In some rare instances, a full drum set may be used, in which case the instrument and its player are pushed along on a second cart.
when the cart is stationary.\footnote{In addition, in the procession, the music and dance do not always move; if a large audience gathers at a certain point in the procession, there can be a performance for the audience at that place for a while before the ensemble moves on; this was also true of the traditional klawng yao ensemble.} Various popular songs are sometimes requested by audience members. Although the music is generally instrumental, they can occasionally also integrate vocals, sung either by a member of the ensemble or spontaneously by an audience member, with a microphone. This means that most melodic cart musicians have to be able to play any song requested.

For a given performance, a private ensemble can include as few as three musicians, one playing electric phin or electronic keyboard and the other two playing multi-toms and klawng tum (perhaps for weddings). For a larger performance, they may bring as many as seven musicians to play electric phin, electronic keyboard, bass phin or electric bass guitar, and electric lead guitar, along with multi-toms and klawng tum. For even larger performances the band sometimes adds several klawng yao and chap although villagers may also join the professional group with instruments from the temple. When a village chooses to use its own traditional percussion instruments on an impromptu basis (now rare), it may choose to forego the hire of an ensemble but simply to invite a single electric phin or electronic keyboard player to join them with their own local percussionists for a procession. This invited musician may be either a local resident, often a high school student, or a professional player from elsewhere working freelance. Because the people of a village that continue to play their klawng yao ensemble instruments usually also have a cart with amplification system, the invited musician can simply show up and use the village cart.

Although melodic cart musicians are in the business to get paid, it is not enough to live on because it serves as only a small percentage of a career as a professional
musician; and those who are still in high school or members of the community and play melodic instruments for festivals do not expect payment at all. Unlike mawlam sing or luk thung performers, musicians in professional klawng yao troupes definitely cannot make a living exclusively by playing this music. Because klawng yao ensemble music is primarily associated with processions, the musicians have low incomes especially because not all festivals and celebrations include processions. In addition, to fit with modern lifestyles, these events are mostly limited to weekends.

In the past twenty years the tradition has spread beyond the Isan region. Since the late 1990s, some Isan migrants as well as native Bangkok communities have begun to support private ensembles to perform for their festival processions. These new private klawng yao ensembles/carts have been formed by school ponglang ensemble teachers in Bangkok, and their student musicians make up the ensembles, playing music to earn extra money.

Briefly, unlike the traditional practice, most modern klawng yao are commercial enterprises rather than local communal groups. Since the late 1980s, most modernized versions of the klawng yao ensemble are private troupes who accept performance commissions. The current musical style places most importance on the melodic cart rather than on the traditional rhythmic klawng yao section, which has been displaced into a secondary role, as a sort of an accompaniment to the melodic cart. Changes in gender roles have also taken place in this kind of musical activity as in Thai culture generally in the late twentieth century. While traditionally males were the drummers and females were the dancers, since the late 1990s females can sometimes be found playing in klawng yao ensembles. The equality between genders in terms of music performance may have

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586 See mawlam sing.
come from the attitude in the educational system that for groups such as in the *ponglang* ensemble either boys or girls can/may learn any instrument. It has also become not unusual to encounter one or more males in a communal dance troupe; however, these are usually transvestite individuals who also dress and act as females in their daily lives.

**Conclusion**

Modernization has brought about extreme changes in Isan traditional music. In vocal music, the narrative *mawlam phuen* died out in the 1960s as it fell out of fashion when new, younger audiences lost interest in it and preferred to listen to newer, more modern styles of music. In the mid-1970s, to fit with the new tastes of modern audiences, the theatrical music of *mawlam mu* and *mawlam phloen* had to be developed into a modern form and began to encompass the elements of popular music. It became more like popular concert performance with some traditional story singing. In the mid-1980s, the traditional repartee, *mawlam klawn*, has grown to a modern genre called *mawlam sing*, which contains a mix of many kinds of popular genres. *Mawlam sing* retained its popularity fairly well during the 1990s. Instrumental music, the traditional *phin-khaen* informal ensemble, played at home for the mutual entertainment of the musicians themselves along with their friends and families, developed to a formal and imitative popular music band that performed on stage for audiences called a *wong dontri phuen-mueang Isan* “Isan local music ensemble” by the mid-1970s. By the 1980s this ensemble was brought into academia and gradually became known as *wong ponglang* to the mass of the public in the late 1980s. Finally, in the mid 1980s, *wong klawng yao*, processional music of the long drum ensemble, was transformed to a modern style by adding a melodic line to the traditionally pure rhythmic patterns. These traditional and
modern genres exist within the realm of modernization mostly associated with consumer capitalism as the culture and economy have changed, and along with that musical tastes of the modern progressively more and more urbanized audience which treats music as a casual commodity rather than a meaningful artistic expression. Perhaps more important, all the Isan musical genres that have been mentioned herein have contributed in redefining the new image of Isan which will be the primary focus of further discussion.
CHAPTER VII
FROM NEGATIVE TO POSITIVE:
THE ROLE OF MUSIC IN REDEFINING THE ISAN IMAGE

Introduction

Because of the socioeconomic and political background of Isan, Thais in the Central or Bangkok area regarded the Isan people of the Northeast negatively for a very long time. However, since the second half of the twentieth century, Isan music performers have made significant contributions toward a more positive image for Thai citizens from that region. Politico-economic conditions and music as a commodity are the two primary components that have brought Isan music, Isan culture, and the Isan people a new and more amenable image. During the Cold War and prior to the 1980s, the Thai government used *mawlam klawn* and *wong dontri phuen-mueang Isan* \(^{587}\) as musical entertainment and propaganda vehicles in support of the national policy against communism. Within that framework, Isan folk music, formerly regarded as “low class,” gradually began to gain a better reputation, not least of all among Isan people themselves who had formerly felt deeply inferior even within their own musical culture. The Thai government’s response to communist agitation in the 1960s and 1970s brought strong government support for *wong dontri phuen-mueang Isan* performances in the Isan region itself. In addition, by the early 1980s in reaction to the impact of Western culture, the Thai government began to call for a program of cultural preservation and promotion across the nation which had a positive effect on local music traditions. The officials of the National Ministry of Education then introduced the local music of Isan into the

\(^{587}\) See chapter 6.
academic system through the establishment of the first two Thai music and dance schools in Isan. This clearly demonstrated that Isan music had, by that time, gained respectability by showing it worthy enough to be taught in the formal academic realm alongside Thai classical music. By the mid 1980s, Thais generally came to know ponglang music, previously called wong dontri phuen-mueang (Isan), as the “traditional” music of the Isan people and a primary musical icon for representing Isan culture and identity across the nation and even on the international stage.

Music as a commodity brought Isan popular music, especially luk thung Isan, into Thailand’s popular media as early as the 1970s; but, by the 1990s, it was clear that Isan music had become dominant in the Thai pop music industry as a whole. For Isan people, capitalism in Thailand and its attendant consumerism has served as a useful “engine” to drive their music into the media; and, as Isan popular music is now broadcast via the Thai media day-in and day-out, even non-Isan Thais have become familiar with it as something positive and enjoyable. Although some Thais may still regard Isan based pop music as “low,” they cannot avoid it as it appears everywhere and all the time. In this way, Isan people have used the media to “advertise” their musical culture; and this has gradually brought about an acceptance of “Isan-ness.” That the popular media are powerful is unquestionable, but how one can or may influence the media is an interesting question. Isan people have managed to influence and utilize the Thai media in a drive to satisfy their deeply felt need for acceptance among other Thai citizens.
Political Conditions and Rise of Isan Music in Thai Society

Anti-communism during the Cold War

The political situation in Thailand in the late 1950s provided the first driver to push Isan music into the Thai popular media. In the 1950s, Thai politicians then in power made a major shift in attitude from that at the beginning of the constitutional monarchy as it was established in 1932. For almost three decades after the establishment of a putative democracy in Thailand, the military government of Prime Minister Plaek Phibun Songkhram dominated the nation during the two periods known as the first Phibun (1938-1944) and the second Phibun (1948-1957). Within a highly nationalistic outlook, one of Phibun’s objectives was to build Thailand into a modern nation. Because he viewed Siam as an “old, uncivilized” country in comparison with Western models, he imposed a number of Western practices. Phibun began to develop the country first by changing its name from Siam to Thailand. He then reduced the monarchy to merely titular status and set up certain superficial cultural reforms such as encouraging people to adopt Western clothes and setting a “Westernized” social standard in which, for instance, a husband was expected to kiss his wife goodbye before going to work in the morning.

In addition, his government discouraged old Thai cultural practices such as chewing betel nuts and men’s use of tattoo patterns on their skin. The government also rejected certain customs associated with the monarchy in replacing former bureaucratic rankings with newly named systems. In addition, Phibun’s government eliminated most rituals, ceremonies, and all kinds of formal activities associated with the absolute monarchy. More fundamentally, Phibun worked to prevent Thai royalists from regaining power. When King Bhumibol ascended to the throne in 1946, although he did not
actually come back to Thailand from his study in Switzerland to occupy the seat until 1950, he did not have much of a role in the nation. Instead, he spent his time in “painting, sailing, photography, and jazz.”  However, in the next political phase, Sarit Thanarat’s administration (1959-1963) restored the role of the king as well as the suspended royal customs of the old Siamese monarchy. Naturally, restoration of the monarchy was a primary goal of the royalists and of the Bangkok elites who had continuously tried to regain the power they had lost after 1932. They were not successful until the regime of Sarit, a politician who was sympathetic toward them. Because of U.S. aid during the Cold War, the Sarit government was stable and flush with American dollars budgeted into Thailand’s development plans. In addition, the king represented himself as a supporter of democratic ideals; and, in the late 1950s, he began visiting democratic countries including an entire month in the United States in June, 1960.  

During the Cold War, the national government was forced to confront highly aggressive communist agitation within Thailand itself, which directly affected national security. The communist agitators paid special attention to Isan region, the most poverty in the country due to poor soil, frequent drought, lack of natural resources, and long term governmental neglect. Those factors made the Isan people possibly more sympathetic to communist influence than the people of some other regions. In addition, with their cultural differences compared to Bangkok Thais and with their special historical background, Isan people had been directly and negatively impacted by the policy of centralization in favor of Bangkok's power during Phibun’s modernization drive. At that time, the few Isan political leaders, intellectuals, and socialists who opposed national

government policy were labeled “communists.” Although the philosophic definition of communism is impossible to describe explicitly in a few sentences, the system was intentionally created for human rights and peace. In other words, the system was said to benefit human beings if “we can follow the principle.” During the Cold War and without a clear understanding of communism, the Thai government labeled anyone opposed to their will a communist in a manner similar to many other governments around the world.

Beginning in the late 1950s, the king reappeared in public ceremonies as he would have in the old monarchical days. The government revived many royal rites and public activities. From 1960 onward, King Bhumibol became the primary visible evidence of national identity in Thailand. He traveled the nation extensively, visited people in different provinces throughout the year, awarded all university degrees, participated in religious activities, and directly helped the poor. By so doing, he represented himself as the father of the country. After the termination of the Sarit administration, the resurrected role of the King as a unifying force continued to be effective. Today, the monarchy

seems ever more deeply revered in Thailand. Mass media have played an important role in reinforcing the significance of the Thai monarchy to the people. The long standing practice of beginning most TV news broadcasts with the royal news continues to this day. All media and government institutions prominently display an image of the monarch which identifies him as the figurehead of one of the most important institutions in Thai society; and the Thai monarchy has now served as a major unifying force for more than half a century.

In terms of political tactics, Phibun discounted traditional Thai cultural values in favor of a Western model, but Sarit turned back and sought to reinforce traditional Thai values and national identity. In terms of music, while Phibun’s government suppressed and even banned Thai traditional music, Sarit “urged” the restoration of Thai musical traditions along with the reinvigoration of the Thai monarchy. From U.S. policy directives, Sarit adopted the term “development,” initially mentioned by President Truman in a speech in 1947 as a purposeful political goal of the United States government. The term carried strongly within it the idea of “progress.” Sarit translated “development” into a Thai term, phatthana (พัฒนา), as his own political theme in governing the country beginning in 1961. He said, “Our important task in this revolutionary year is development, which includes economic development, educational development, administrative development, and everything else.” Sarit popularized slogans such as “Work is money. Money is work. This brings happiness.”

His term, phatthana, appeared everywhere in the country in all kinds of media. Sarit’s overriding political strategy was to convince the people to be happy in their ethnic

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identity with faith in their future as Thais so that they would approve of the government and not join the communists or other anti-government factions. His development plans strongly emphasized “highway construction, irrigation, rural electrification, and agricultural research and extension work” in order, of course, to pacify the common people. His major projects attended to rural needs, especially those of the Isan region. Sarit’s development policy included promotion of traditional cultural affects including folk music. Through promotion of the traditional music of Isan, the program aided in drawing the Isan people’s attention toward resistance against communism. This was crucially significant for the national government in relation to the large Isan region.

*Mawlam Phatthana: “Singing for Development”*

From the late 1950s to the late 1960s, *mawlam phatthana* (หมอละแพททนา), literally “development mawlam,” was a musical genre designed to encourage development through its sung poetry. It was technically a kind of *mawlam klawn* in which singers added themes about government development in support of the government’s policy to their regular performances. Both this style of *mawlam klawn* and the performers themselves were called *mawlam phatthana*. *Mawlam klawn* including the *phatthana* style first appeared in radio broadcasts in Bangkok, where most music records were produced, for Isan laborers in the city as well as in Isan itself. Besides providing entertainment, the music had embedded in it blatantly pro-government propaganda. Sarit understood the Isan people and their culture quite well as he was a native of that region. His mother was a Lao-Isan from Mukdahan District, Nakhon Phanom Province. He

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594 See chapter 6.
595 Mukdahan is now a province.
understood that the people of the region usually did not listen to other kinds of music outside their own traditional styles, among which *mawlam klawn* was the most popular at that time.596

In 1960, Sarit began to give commissions to Khana Suntharaphirom (คณาสุนทราภิรมย์), a *mawlam klawn* troupe in Bangkok, for performances promoting the *phatthana* program. As mentioned earlier, Sunthawn Aphisuntharangkun was the founder of Khana Suntharaphirom in 1959. Although he called it a troupe, it was actually a kind of performance agency in Bangkok to which he invited singers at first from among Lao descendents in Central Thailand and later from Isan. In the early 1960s, Sunthawn managed up to two hundred *mawlam klawn* performers, both singers and *khaen* players.597 He also accepted commissions and made arrangements for *mawlam klawn* artists to perform in Bangkok and in adjacent provinces as a regular and pro-government propaganda.

Although they did not perform solely on behalf of the Thai government, the Suntharaphirom troupe was considered the first to perform *mawlam phatthana*. From the early to late 1960s, the government employed the “troupe” for performances throughout Isan. Chawiwan Damnoen, who had early connections with the Suntharaphirom singers, stated that the government mobilized *mawlam phatthana* as a discrete unit that travelled with a 16 millimeter-film of news and information about the government prepared precisely for rural people. During those years, especially during Sarit’s regime, an organized trip took from five to seven days. Sunthawn arranged for each repartee couple with their *khaen* players to go out on the performance trips. He allowed Khampun

597 Ibid., 2010.
Phungsuk (คำบูน พงษ์ชย), a famous *mawlam klawn* singer from Ubon who was also his own minor wife, to be the leader of this *mawlam phatthana* group. At every performance as leader of the *mawlam phatthana*, Khampun had the honor of singing to open the event.\(^{598}\)

*Mawlam phatthana* was not substantially different from other *mawlam* performances in providing entertainment for the audience except that in this program the performers larded their singing with government messages. Certain members of the Suntharaphirom troupe wrote texts for the *lam phatthana*. Chawiwan said that Sunthawn organized his *mawlam phatthana* composers into three groups based on the hometowns of the singers, including groups from Nakhon Nayok (Central Thailand), Buriram, and Chaiyaphum Provinces. In addition, Khampun was one of the main composers of *phatthana lam* texts.\(^{599}\) Unfortunately, as most of those compositions were not preserved in any way, we have no access to them today.

That kind of musical propaganda, in fact, took its main support from the United States Information Service (USIS). The USIS supported and encouraged the Thai government and the Lao and Vietnamese governments as well during the Cold War. According to Suphine Patsungnoen (สพัน ผาสุคนธ์), b. 1927, one of the well-known *mawlam* singers from Isan\(^600\) who lived in Laos for ten years from 1965 to 1975 before emigrating to Elgin, Illinois, as a “Lao” refugee in 1980,\(^601\) stated that while living in Laos, he once accepted a commission to work as a *mawlam phatthana* for six months during 1966-1967. Rather than from the Thai government, the commission came directly from the

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\(^{598}\) Ibid.

\(^{599}\) Ibid.

\(^{600}\) He was born in Sung Noen District of Nakhon Rachasima Province.

\(^{601}\) Today he lives in Brattleboro, Vermont.
USIS. Suphine stated that his female singer was from Isan, and that singer was Khampun Phungsuk who had been mawlam phatthana leader in the Suntharaphirom troupe.

Instead of performing in Northeast Thailand, Suphine and his female partner performed mostly in Laos, particularly in Pakse across the border from Ubon Ratchathani Province. For a mawlam phatthana performance, Suphine wrote text based on information provided by the USIS and in which the text contained a combination of Buddhist flavored material mixed with propaganda. During the project, Suphine and his female singer performed seven times a month for about two hours a day.602

Besides the mawlam klawn labelled mawlam phatthana, the theatrical singing of mawlam ruang or mawlam luang in Lao pronunciation603 also appeared as USIS musical propaganda in the 1960s. According to James Brandon, the theatrical version was created by the United States Information Service. There is no evidence whether this kind of theatrical propaganda was labelled mawlam phatthana or not, but Brandon simply referred it as mawlam luang according to its musical genre. He asserted that mawlam luang was the best medium to promote USIS propaganda against communism in Laos because that nation was the least developed in Mainland Southeast Asia. There were only a few roads, few newspapers, and few radios; and most of the population was illiterate. Most modern media had little relevance to the situation in that country. Brandon mentions that the USIS sponsored over six hundred of mawlam luang performances within a twelve-month period from July 1960-1963. Three mawlam luang troupes signed contracts during that time. They travelled to perform in every part of the country under control of the Royal Lao Government, about 40 percent of the whole

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602 Suphine Patsungnoen, Interview by author, Brattleboro, Vermont, October 2003.
603 See chapter 6.
The primary themes that the USIS committed the troupes to include in their performances were ones that reinforced Lao national identity and announced direct economic support from the United States, most of which involved practical community development projects. This method of propagandizing local people was very successful. Brandon affirms that the average number of presentations was approximately three times as large as that of USIS motion pictures shown during the same period. Although the information Brandon provides about theatrical propaganda is more focused on Laos, with the USIS present in Bangkok with the Thai Ministry of Information, that effort was also applied to Isan. There was no regular program of exchange, but the mawlam luang troupes were assigned to perform in Isan from time to time. More importantly, most of the mawlam luang artists who participated in the project were from Isan because only a few Lao citizens were actually engaged in that kind of performance at that time.

In Bangkok and the adjacent provinces, the Suntharaphirom players from time to time added government development themes to their regular presentations both in live performances and in radio broadcasts. The latter of which provided additional opportunities for non-Isan outsiders to enjoy both the music and the propaganda. Under those political conditions, mawlam was firmly within the government orbit and became a quasi-“official music;” and so its status improved. On the other hand, it is obvious that the Thai government intentionally was using Isan music to manipulate its citizens during that time. The support of the government, however, was the main factor that brought mawlam klawn to Bangkok. Besides propaganda themes, the music also encouraged Isan

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604 In the early 1960s, 60 percent of the land area of Laos was already controlled by the communist party.  
605 Support for the Lao royal government involved pro-Buddhist literature and Lao history.  
people, especially those in Bangkok, spontaneously to be conscious of their musical culture and identity.

*Mawlam phatthana* was highly successful as the voice of the government. The music was an appropriate medium to communicate the coming benefits of national loyalty, particularly for Isan people since they had especially deep emotional ties to their own musical culture. *Mawlam* music, as it was brought into use as an official government tool, provided a big leap in terms of cultural value for Isan natives. The *mawlam* became not just a folk music for “low class,” poor people but gained a kind of official status. Thai governmental officials, similar to bureaucrats everywhere, tend to form a social and economic class of their own. People who work for the government in Thailand are *karatchakan* (ข้าราชการ), bureaucrats, and considered to be “honorable” and of “high” class compared to common peasants.\(^{607}\) Isan natives, when their music was brought into bureaucratic officialdom, felt it had gained greater value. The *mawlam phatthana* performers, although they worked for the government only for a limited period, were considered *karatchakan*, “officials” or “bureaucrats,” at least during the period of their employment by the government. Chawiwan asserted that, “It improved its value and status when *mawlam* was brought into the government place.”\(^{608}\)

**Isan Local Ensembles and Anti-communism**

In addition, political forces significantly shaped innovation and development of neotraditional Isan ensembles. The Thai government began also to support *wong dontri*...
phuen-mueang Isan during the 1960s and 70s out of fear of communist agitation in the Northeast. This support primarily involved the presentation of stage performances of folk music and dance by local Isan (neotraditional) ensembles, many of which had been started by employees of government offices. The performances took place at special state-sponsored events as well as at traditional holiday festivals although, at either of these types of events, the music and dance were part of a public relations campaign aimed primarily at generating the largest possible crowds for whom pro-government and pro-development speeches could then be given between musical selections. Basically the government officials’ primary motivation in pushing this activity was the desire to suppress the threat of communism.

Within the nation’s borders, the USIS presented the programs to the general public as “pro-development” in order to unify local people behind the efforts of the national government. Despite the fact that, by the 1970s, the United States was providing most of the capital behind this development, the propaganda presented at these pro-development events was not overtly pro-American as the Thai government preferred to take credit for the results of these projects. Due in part to the government-sponsored performances during the 1970s, the wong dontri phuen-mueang grew in popularity and many new ensembles started to appear. Thongsak Prathumsin (ทรงศักดิ์ ประทุมลินธ์), b. 1955, a well known Isan neotraditional musician and teacher from Roi-et Province, mentioned that he knew of two or three thriving wong dontri phuen-mueang in his area, all of which performed actively for those kinds of events in the late 1970s.609

The wong dontri phuen-mueang provided yet another “traditional” music which could represent Isan culture within the same political environment. While Prime Minister

and Field Marshall Sarit supported the primacy of Thai national culture as exemplified by the Central Region culture of Bangkok, which tended to alienate rural people and make them more vulnerable to the communists, he actively encouraged *wong dontri phuen-mueang* as musical events to unify the people. Sarit himself made an effort to visit ordinary people in their home regions; and he expressed interest and pleasure at the local people’s presentations for him of folk arts and crafts such as music, dance, food, and costume displays. As mentioned before, in 1959, the earliest this Isan local ensemble appeared in Kalasin Province, was organized specifically to welcome Sarit as Prime Minister of Thailand when he travelled to the countryside to visit the people of Khaowong District.\(^{610}\)

Many local Isan ensembles were founded by, or at least gained approval from, local officials who acted in concurrence with the national policy promoting traditional values. Buri Phromlakkano (บุรี พระหลักโคน), Governor of Kalasin Province in 1968, supported Wong Ponglang Kalasin. He ordered Phrachum Intaratul (ประชุม อินทรศุล), a park ranger in Yangtalat District and the Head of Park Rangers in Muang District, Kalasin Province, to form the ensemble. As mentioned earlier, Phrachum also invited Plueang Chairatsami to be the director of the band. The ensemble performed successfully for five years, during which time it made quite a name for the governor and the province under the auspices of the National Parks and Dams Agency, with the express purpose of promoting the government’s development efforts including the construction of a new national system of dams. The ensemble was disbanded when Plueang Chairatsami moved to a new job in 1972.

\(^{610}\)See chapter 6.
In Roi-et Province, the District Chief of Nongpawk District began to sponsor Wong Wot Siangthawng (ไหวคำเสียงทาง) or Wot Siangthawng Phet Songserm (ไหวคำเสียงทางเพชรสงเสริม), directed by Thongsak Phrathumsin, in 1972. Part of the troupe’s title, Songserm (สงเสริม), was the surname of District Chief Thanawm Songserm (กนอรมสงเสริม), b. 1944, District Chief at that time.611 Like the Ponglang Kalasin Troupe, the Wot Siangthawng also served up an official music representing Roi-et Province in support of the government’s anti-communist drive. In Nongpawk District, Roi-et Province, the district chief ordered some of his female office workers to participate in the music troupe as dancers. Thongsak said it was only the musicians in the ensemble who were common folk from the villages. Although a common villager could participate, most of the female dancers were from among those who worked in government bureaucracies in the district such as clerks, secretaries, and receptionists.

The primary task of the troupe was to perform on behalf of the government within another governmental unit which was a kind of information service called kan pha-tibat- ngan jit-wit-thaya thaw-tan commanit (การปฏิบัติงานจิตวิทยาต่อต้านคอมมิวนิสต์), “The Psychological Mission for Anti-Communism.” Indeed, the ensemble did not directly provide any information on anti-communism but only some entertainment to attract people to a rally. The district officials who appeared with the music troupe were the ones who actually provided information or spoke for the government. The troupe traveled from one place to another for one event or another; and, at the performance venue, the officials also helped the villagers with certain meaningful services. They issued and renewed identification documents for the villagers, provided them medical assistance,

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611 Usually the troupe’s name was shortened to Wot Siangthawng.
and vaccinated farm animals such as cows and water-buffalo.\textsuperscript{612} Basically, the government worked hard to convince people to stay with them rather than join the communist party. To draw the people to attend, Wong Wot Siangthawng provided the major entertainment for the event.

As another part of the government’s promotion of this type of music, more than a dozen \textit{wong dontri phuen-mueang} from several parts of the region appeared for the Prakuat Wong Dontri Phuen-mueang Isan (ประวาดวงดนตรีพื้นเมืองอีสาน) or “Isan Folk Music Ensemble Contest,” which took place annually from 1977 to 1979 at the Army Radio Station in Sakon Nakhon City.\textsuperscript{613} The government’s approach to anti-communism during the 1970s certainly helped to promote Isan music. Support of Isan culture, especially music and dance, was one of the most effective ways to draw people in and convince them not to sympathize with or join the communist party.

The Thai Army organized the Isan Folk Ensemble Contest and broadcast it on the Army Radio Station, AM 909, Sakon Nakhon Province. The contest in Isan instrumental folk music, \textit{wong dontri phuen-mueang Isan}, was one of the first activities organized by government officials in coordination with the Thai Army. In the beginning, the main objective of the music contest was to promote unity among Isan people, more for political purposes than for the sake of musical art. At first, the contest had no specific musical rules other than encouraging villagers to bring their ensembles to participate in any kind of Isan folk presentation. By the end of the 1970s, however, the contest began to emphasize certain aspects of musical art. As such, the organizers stressed contest rules regarding the size of the ensembles, types of repertoire, and instrumentation. People who

\textsuperscript{612}Cows and water-buffalo were considered important animals, especially the water-buffalo which Isan people used to plow the land.

\textsuperscript{613}Thongsak Prathumsin. Interview, 2007.
recall the contests consider them quite successful. Many neo-traditional Isan ensembles participated. More importantly, the event provided formal opportunities for Isan musicians to show off their musical culture. That event was the starting point for the *wong dontri phu-en-mueang* which Isan musicians further developed into the *ponglang* music of today, an Isan neotraditional music representing Isan culture and the Isan people’s pride in their musical traditions within modern Thai society.

The Thai royal family contributed encouragement by promoting *wong dontri phuen-mueang Isan* as a function of government policy. The revitalized Thai monarchy, as it grew in visibility during Sarit’s administration, also influenced Isan music during the Cold War and the anti-communist drive of the 1960s and 1970s. The official tours of King Bhumibol Adulyadej, Rama IX, r. 1946-present, to visit provincial people have been recognized as significant to all Thais. The encouragement of “traditional values” was an important theme that permeated the king’s and the royal family’s activities. The Isan local ensemble was one of the effects of Isan musical culture that Bhumibol and his family had opportunities to see and hear. The king often made short provincial visits around the nation, sometimes traveling to many places in one day. During a visit, people sometimes offered him a short performance of local traditional music and dance. On some occasions, especially when he and his family came to stay at the Phupan Isan Regional Palace, officially called the Northeast Palace of Sakon Nakhon Province, an

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614 Thongsak Phrathumsin mentioned that some of the village local (neotraditional) ensembles that participated in the contests included Wong Dongsan Santisuk (งดงสัน สันติสุข) from Bandong District (บ้านดง), Udon Province; Wong Maphioha Kudwawng (วงมาพิข่า ว่า่วนกุดมาจาก) from Kudwa Nonghang District (กุดว่า นองหาง), Kalasin Province; Wong Saw Wunwai (วง uvw วุฒิ) from Kammarat District (กมมרא), Ubon Ratchathani Province; Wong Saw Sguansin (สกวางสิน) from Nakhon Phanom Province; Wong Kao Aeawn (วงเขาว อาувอน) and Wong Kao Namhla (วงเขาวน่าหล้า) from Ubon Ratchathani Province; Wong Sai Pothawng (วงสายอบ โพธิ์ทอง), Wong Haisong Kongisan (วงไชส่อง กองอิสาน), and Wong Wat Siangthong (วงวัดเสียงทอง) from Roi-et Province.
Isan traditional music ensemble performed for the king. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the king and his family came to stay in the regional palace at least once a year. That occasion made it possible for Isan music and dance performers, such as the wong dontri phuen-muean who supported the government’s anti-communist drive, to arrange a performance for the king.

Thongsak stated that it was a great honor for his ensemble to have multiple opportunities to perform for the king over several years. At any given performance, other troupes performed, too. Sometimes at such an event, musicians had an opportunity to offer their instruments to the king. Thawngsai Thapthanon, a well-known player of the phin, said that, when he went to perform for the king with his troupe, he had an opportunity to offer a phin to the king. Thawngsai mentioned that the other troupes also had chances to do something similar.

Offering musical performances for the king was a truly significant honor for those musicians. They thus had a chance at least one time in their lives to approach the king, an extreme rarity for common folk. The musicians felt their musical culture had gained high value in their being able to offer it to the king. It is certain that not only performers but also common Isan farmers who heard about it felt greatly honored as well. In interviews, friends and relatives of the performers spoke repeatedly about how deeply honored they were to perform music for the king. The new policy which made the king and royal family accessible in such a way actually turned tradition topsy-turvy from the past as, during the reign of King Rama IV in the mid-1860’s, Lao music was banned.

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615 The King built subsidiary palaces in every region including Phuping Palace in the North (1960), Taksin Palace in the South (1972), and Phuphan Palace in the Northeast (1975).
616 See chapter 4.
outright by royal edict.\textsuperscript{617} Although politically the performance activities arose out of political necessity in the struggle against communism, they presented an opportunity for Isan people to express their musical creativity and helped to promote deep pride in their musical tradition. In addition, that kind of event was the beginning of opportunities for Isan people to propel their music into a positive position in Thai society.

**Cultural Preservation in the 1980s**

During the Cold War (1947-1989) and the Vietnam War (1965-1975), Thailand was closely allied with the United States. The military forces of the two nations acted in close cooperation. The Thai government allowed the United States to build army, marine, and air force bases in several locations in the country. The United States, concerned about a policy of internal Thai security, also became a strong supporter in many areas, especially of the economy and development. U.S. economic aid mainly started at the beginning of the Sarit government, 1959-1963, and continued into the period of the Thanom government, 1963-1973. The United States supported the building of many roads, radio stations, and other kinds of communications facilities in remote regions for use during the war. Ironically, while other nearby nations suffered terribly from the Vietnam War, Thailand received benefits for its development plans from U.S. aid that sped up modernization of the country. In fact, Isan was the region that profited most directly from this aid as, for example, several airports, radio stations, and the first highway from Bangkok to Isan were built by the United States during the war.\textsuperscript{618}

As many American soldiers arrived in Thailand, commercial establishments such as hotels, bars, souvenir shops, and massage parlors appeared in large numbers in

\textsuperscript{617} See chapter 3.
\textsuperscript{618} See chapter 5.
Bangkok and in the Isan region, especially in Udon Thani and Ubon Ratchathani Provinces. The influx of foreign troops created many new jobs. Young Thais began to learn English in order to serve the American soldiers. They worked as bartenders, masseurs and masseuses, tour guides, waiters and waitresses, hotel clerks, sales clerks, and prostitutes. This created a new kind of commercialized society that suddenly affected traditional culture including social and business relationships, morality, family values, and even dress styles.

In the 1930s when Western culture was first introduced to Thai elites in Bangkok, people in the central region, especially, adopted elements of Western culture. By the late 1960s, many more aspects of Western culture, ideas, values, and fashions were broadly adopted by common Thai people. That brought with it new ideas of social relationships including those regarding sexual morality and ideas of romantic love. In music, most of the younger generation neglected their traditional music much as Wyatt explains, “…when aspiring musicians found a much readier market for their talents performing Western popular music than traditional Thai music, and when cassette tape audio recording could spread their achievements almost everywhere.”

Natasin Ponglang Music

Government officials began to grow concerned about problems regarding the overwhelming influence of Western culture. By the late 1970s to early 1980s, the threat of communism had declined and mostly been forgotten. The Thai government decided to include culture as another aspect of their development plan. Potentially, traditional culture had enduring value that could be used to unify the people in order to reinforce

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national security. As briefly mentioned earlier, during the 1970s, the government began founding regional music and dance schools, Withayalai Natasin (วิทยาลัยนาฏศิลป์), “Colleges of Dramatic Arts.”\(^{620}\) The first regional school was founded in the North, Natasin Chiangmai (วิทยาลัยนาฏศิลป์เชียงใหม่), Chiangmai Province, in 1971, then in the South, Natasin Nakhon Srithammarat (วิทยาลัยนาฏศิลป์นครศรีธรรมราช), Nakhon Srithammarat Province, in 1976. The last schools were finally founded in Isan at two regional campuses. The first branch was Natasin Roi-et (วิทยาลัยนาฏศิลป์ปราจีนบุรี), Roi-et Province, founded in 1979, and the second was Natasin Kalasin (วิทยาลัยนาฏศิลป์นครพนม), Kalasin Province, 1982. Additional branches of the *natasin* system were later established around the country during the 1980s.\(^{621}\)

In the beginning, the schools offered mainly Thai classical music and dance from the old Siamese royal court as major programs of study. The classical arts were projected as Thai national music and dance. In other words, centralized Bangkok power was applied in the countryside through emphasis on royal classical music and dance. Folk arts including folk music and dance, however, were only added to the academic curriculum as elective, then minor, and finally as major subjects in the late 1980s and 1990s.\(^{622}\) The early objective of the schools was to support the government’s policy in preserving and promoting the arts of Thai music and dance, eventually not only classical but also the folk genres of all four regions.

\(^{620}\) Before the 1970s, the only music and dance school in Bangkok was the Department of Royal Entertainment in the era of the absolute monarchy. In 1934 it became part of the National Fine Arts Department.

\(^{621}\) Natasin Nakhon Ratchasima (วิทยาลัยนาฏศิลป์นครราชสีมา) or Natasin Korat (วิทยาลัยนาฏศิลป์โคราช) was founded in 1992 as the third branch in Isan.

\(^{622}\) Only Isan music has been available as a major program thus far.
Wong dontri phuen-mueang Isan, “Isan local ensemble,” was at last brought into the academic system. Within the decade from 1980 to 1990, it was best known as ponglang music and reached a major stage of development. The music became standardized and grew in popularity among school and extracurricular ensembles both inside and outside the Isan region. The music now no longer functions only as a home or village entertainment as did wong phin-khaen in the old Lao culture; but, since its acceptance in academic settings, it serves to preserve and enrich all of Isan culture. Even more important for those who play in higher level ensembles is the possibility of earning real income through performance opportunities. Many skilled ponglang musicians practice their music more to earn extra income, either as professional performers or educators, than to informally entertain themselves or their communities. The music, then, was also sought to “objectify” culture as a certain chosen icon. It was a matter of stereotyping identity. Ponglang music equals Isan. The Isan people were circumscribed by this ensemble. Through its performance, the music has been a nice, safe way to depict the happy Isan peasants as befits the expectations of outsiders.

Today, ponglang music is accepted as “Isan traditional music” not only among Isan natives but also among people throughout the nation. The music is also regarded as part of the broader Thai musical tradition. Thus, Isan music can be used to represent Thai musical tradition as a whole. Outside the natasin schools, some schools and colleges both in and outside the Isan region now include ponglang music in their programs, at least as extra-curricular music clubs. Furthermore, ponglang music has also begun to

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623 Only a few ponglang band musicians can make their whole living from playing (not including teaching). I know of only one such group, Wong Ponglang Sa-Awn (วงปองLANGส่าอ่วน), which has a busy performing and recording schedule.
624 Terry E. Miller, personal communication.
appear outside Thailand in overseas Thai communities. In the United States, for example, the music has become part of the Thai and Lao communities in Los Angeles, New York City, Chicago, and outside Washington, D.C., in Virginia where Thais actively participate in their culture for the benefit of Thai-American children, usually at Thai Buddhist temples. Participation in *ponglang* music means accepting this musical culture as representative of Thai culture generally. In Thailand, while classical court music does represent Thai music, *ponglang* music also represents both the musical culture of the Isan people and Thai musical culture as a whole.

![Ponglang ensemble of Vajiradhammapadip Temple in performance in New York City, 1998.](image)

Figure 51. *Ponglang* ensemble of Vajiradhammapadip Temple in performance in New York City, 1998.

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625 The latter ensemble is based at Wat Lao Buddhavong Temple in Catlett, Virginia, which was actually founded by Lao Americans.
New Image of Isan Musical Tradition

Due to the influence of popular music after around 1980, most of Isan traditional music has faded in its functions. Youngsters who have grown up since then have little understanding of their own musical heritage. They play guitars and sing pop songs which they consider “up to date,” “sophisticated,” and indicative of “high society.” Having seen only their elders play traditional music, younger people tend to consider it “farmer music,” “rustic,” “folky,” and “out of date.” Most local Isan ensembles also declined by the end of the era of “resistance to communism” in the early 1980s. Some bands that local governments had supported to help the anti-communist effort saw their support dry up completely.

Historically, one could hardly expect to make a living playing folk music; and performing ponglang music had never been a full time job. Traditionally the only Isan musicians who tried to play music as the mean of making a living were a few with major disabilities, such as the blind, who were blocked from other careers and might become musician beggars most commonly as khaen or phin players. As a consequence Isan traditional music had a reputation as a “beggar’s music” and was considered very low in society. The natasin schools lifted Isan’s musical image in the social hierarchy. This official institutionalization of regional music has been effective in the preservation and promotion of Isan music as well as other traditional genres from around the country. Institutionalization not only preserved the music but also raised its musical status. In the case of Isan music, academia has aided in the transformation of the image of this “folky,”

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626 Ponglang had never been seen as a beggar’s music.
627 I also grew up during those years; and studying my own music was something really against mainstream musical fashion. The last thing I would ever do was carry an Isan instrument in public. In that case, even if there was nobody there to look down on me, I might spontaneously look down on myself. I would feel un-confident and uncomfortable.
“rustic,” “out of date,” and “beggar” music into Isan’s pride and one of Thailand’s significant musical cultural artifacts. *Ponglang* music serves as an “objectified” and commercialized artifact of Isan culture in that what is heard in the *natasin* is not “traditional” in the strict sense. It has been created (or recreated) as an “Isan traditional ensemble” which projects an image of “folksiness” in the costumes and in on-stage behavior. The ensemble has become a symbol of Isan quite apart from the reality of being Isan. It is a cultural symbol that can be bought and sold though not actually a part of any real farmer’s life. Its new musical status has been gained on the basis of the following factors.

First, a government supported academic institution merits high respect in Thai society. The *natasin* school is a government institution[^628^] which represents bureaucracy, honor, dignity, and respect in the minds of Thais. The image of an academic in Thai society stands for scholarship, knowledge, intellectuality, and virtue.[^629^] When Isan folk music was brought into the schools, its musical status automatically improved. Chawiwan Damnoen once said that one of the reasons she gave up her successful professional *mawlam* singing career and accepted lower income in a teaching job she was offered at Natasin Roi-et was because she wanted to “lift up the value and status of Isan music.”[^630^]

[^628^]: It is similar to a state college or university in the United States.
[^629^]: Although today in reality, Thai academia is quite opposite. Within at least the last decade, Thai education has become more like a “business” in an age of fake degrees and lazy professors.
[^630^]: Chawiwan Damnoen was well known as a *mawlam* singer. She was born in 1945 into a *mawlam* family in Ubon Ratchathani Province and represents the seventh generation in her family as a *mawlam* performer. She learned *mawlam* singing from her father and an older sister when she was a child; and after she finished her mandatory general schooling, she began to accompany her father on performance tours. Later, she and her sister left their father’s ensemble to form their own. In 1979, Chawiwan Damnoen accepted a teaching position at Natasin Roi-et, Roi-et Province.
Second, the music has been growing in popularity. The characteristics of Isan music match well with modern musical tastes. Under the influence of commercial pop music, Thais are accustomed to the Western diatonic scale and tempered tuning system; and the Isan traditional scales and tuning system are similar enough to the diatonic system that people do not find them too “different” from Western music. That helps the audience accept Isan music more easily compared to Thai classical music with its significantly different tuning system.631

Most Isan musical selections are short, simple, and happy sounding. That also makes it easier for modern people to accept them. The ponglang dance sets are mostly fast and usually performed by young girls in visually striking “traditional costumes.” Most newly invented dance sets are choreographed to allude to fictitiously romanticized Isan traditional lifestyle activities such as hunting and gathering food, imitating old rituals and customs; and they modify old sets of folk dances. Besides entertainment, the performance basically reconstructs an “old Isan image” by calling on nostalgic themes which represent Isan identity and Thai culture as a whole. It has been popular among school children as a part of their musical identity to express this musical tradition. Both common Thai people and tourists like the ponglang performance because of its simplicity, cheerful music, and joyful kind of entertainment. It is easy to understand the music since it does not require a knowledge of Isan language as does mawlam. Current ponglang music performance practice is also an example of the “exoticizing” and “fetishizing” of the image of the Isan people, making them into simple, happy farmers. In particular, they can then be seen as harmless idiots who entertain and do not threaten Central Thais.

631 The Thai classical tuning system has seven equi-distant steps in the span identified as a Western octave.
Third, the hierarchy and value of the music are determined by those who play it. *Ponglang* music no longer belongs to the “folk,” the real Isan farmers and their families. Instead, it has become a music of intellectuals: “civilized,” educated, and professional people who represent academia. Those people have degrees in music and dance and, in the future may find employment in the Thai bureaucracy, mainly as music teachers at provincial schools. Although the early, local Isan musicians such as Wong Ponglang Kalasin were not truly performing farmers as in the tradition of *wong phin-khaen*, the status of the ensemble was not as it is today. What is a more subtle change is that the performances are now aimed toward middle class, educated people and foreign visitors.

Finally, the place of performance, the occasion, and the class identity of the audience are all determinants of musical “value.” *Ponglang* music performance is intended for the middle class. When I joined a *natasin* Isan ensemble in the late 1980s, our school preferred performance commissions for an “appropriate” occasion and at an “appropriate” place. We performed mostly in hotel halls and at government workplaces, at provincial fairs and festivals, for business meeting dinners, welcoming ceremonies for high ranking government officials, and for tourists, instead of at a village intersection, temple yard, a school children’s football field for village festivals, celebrations, and ceremonies as in the traditional performance context. Apparently, our music was for middle class audiences rather than for common farmers, who were considered “low class.” As the music is now assigned a new function representing Isan culture, its hierarchical level and “value” have improved. When the music is viewed in such a significant role, it also raises the value of Isan culture as a whole. On the downside, however, this music as it is now presented provides an overemphasis on only one aspect
of Isan culture. To project an image in which Isan farmers are always simply happy-go-lucky is ultimately somewhat unethical and unfair to the grounded reality of their lives.

**Spreading Isan Image and Expressions of Musical Identity**

Pan-Isan Traditional Music

*Ponglang* music has become a kind of pan-Isan traditional music. It is actually “neotraditional music” that has been objectified as an Isan cultural affect outside both the traditional and popular musical realms. Sometimes it is considered an “official music” in terms of its functional context in that it is often associated with schools, government support, and the business sector so that it can be useful as cultural representation rather than as mere entertainment as is commercial pop music.

The musical context associated with its performance appears in music schools, the *natasin*, among school children, and in college students’ musical activities. The more organized these performance activities become, the more Isan culture and identity are objectified.632 The term “objectified” indicates a distancing and detached “use” of the people and their culture. *Ponglang* ensembles from both Natasin Roi-et and Kalasin have come to be known throughout the country via their performances. The names of these schools also are famous through the media, which provided the first step in establishing the new image for Isan music in the late 1980s.

632I was a member of the Natasin Roi-et *Ponglang* Troupe from 1986 to 1989. Each year the school accepted hundreds of performance commissions around the country and abroad. Our *natasin* school ensemble traveled to perform with no exception during every summer and winter break.
School Children

School children’s ensembles play a major role in spreading the Isan musical image. By 1988, ponglang music had already expanded from the natasin music schools to Rong-rian Prathom-suksa (โรงเรียนประถมศึกษา), elementary schools, and Rong-rian Matthayom-suksa (โรงเรียนมัธยมศึกษา), secondary schools, beginning in the Isan region. When the music was taken up as an object of cultural promotion and preservation, most school children in Isan began to receive budgeted funds for its study. The government provided money to the schools for their instrument purchases and the hiring of appropriate teachers for the formation of school ensembles. For example, in 1985, I was hired as a part time teacher to direct a school ponglang ensemble in one of the schools near my district of Roi-et City, Roi-et Province. Within a few years, school children’s ponglang ensembles had become common throughout the region.

Figure 52. Elementary school children’s ponglang contest in Khon Kaen, 2007.
Ponglang music classes also fulfill requirements in the Thai music education curriculum. In the late 1980s for the first time in the history of Thai music education, Isan children could learn their own musical culture in school. In the past, most school ensembles in Isan formerly took the form of a Western-style musical band similar to a kind of pop or rock band, a marching band, or a Thai classical ensemble. Such an opportunity, unfortunately, was available only in large, well funded provincial schools in Isan’s urban centers. As a consequence, few rural children had an opportunity to study instrumental music in school. That was because Western instruments were too expensive for most rural schools, and teachers were few. Although Thai classical instruments cost less than Western ones, Thai classical music teachers usually were not available. In my elementary school days in the late 1970s, our teachers did not teach us much about music. However, at the end of the semester, each student had to sing a popular song, usually luk thung Isan, in front of the class as part of the examination in music to fulfill a curriculum requirement. When ponglang music programs developed, the instruments were affordable. Ponglang teachers became available from among those who graduated from the natasin schools.

Around 1990, school children’s ponglang ensembles became common in the Bangkok metropolitan area. Isan teachers who graduated from the Isan natasin schools taught those children. Bangkok was and still is the main center of ponglang musical activity outside the Isan region; and, during the late 1980s and early 1990s, most Isan music graduates from both Natasin Roi-et and Natasin Kalasin went to Bangkok to study for an additional two years to earn a bachelor’s degree in music and/or dance, since only there was such a degree available. The only place to offer a bachelor’s degree in Thai
classical music and dance which directly admitted students from natasin all over the country was the Department of Dance and Music at Rajamangala Institute of Technology, Phra Nakhon Chumphon Khet Udomsak (Sathaban Teknoloyi Ratchamongkon Withayakat Chomphon Khet Udomsak, สถาบันเทคโนโลยีราชมงคล วิทยาเขตชุมพรเขตอุดมศึกษา), “[the] Ratchamongkon Institute of Technology [at] the regional campus at Udomsak.”633 Those students gathered together their own ad hoc and usually nameless ponglang performance troupe in order to earn extra money.634, 635 They performed around Bangkok in restaurants, hotels, tourist locations, and in private households. Isan music and dance thus began to gain popularity in Bangkok. The audiences enjoyed the happy, easy sound of the music. It fit better with modern tastes than did the more formal classical music which could seem slow, complicated, and sounded “out of tune” to people accustomed to the diatonic scales and melodic lines of most popular music.

Because of the popularity of ponglang, not only native Isan students began to participate in the ensembles but also students from different parts of Thailand including natives of Bangkok itself. Those musicians had perhaps earlier studied ponglang music in a public school, college, or school music club and had become interested in it through friends who were Isan natives. They played and now play not only in ponglang bands but also in the folk music and dance from other regions of Thailand as well as in Thai classical and pop music for practical reasons. The wider such a group’s repertoire is, the

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633 In 2005, this institute became Rajamangala University of Technology, Phra Nakhon.Mahawitthayalai Teknoloyi Rachamongkon Phranakhon (มหาวิทยาลัยเทคโนโลยีราชมงคลพระนคร).
634 I also joined them during my four years of college in Bangkok from 1989 to 1993.
635 In 1998, the Music and Dance Department was transferred to Bunditpatanasilpa Institute, Sathaban Phatanasin (สถาบันบัณฑิตพัฒนศิลป์) as it expanded directly from the old campus of each natasin school. This allows students of the natasin from all regional campuses to continue pursuing bachelor’s degrees at home at the same campuses, without having to go to Bangkok as in the 1980s and 1990s.
more opportunities they find to be hired for various events, many of which may feature a mix of music and dance of the various regions. These musicians learn many kinds of music in their natasin educations, including folk music of their own regions as well as Thai classical music. Sometimes they exchange musical knowledge with players from different regions. Many working musicians who live in Bangkok teach, but few can support themselves exclusively by means of performance. They play music from the Northern, Southern, and Central regions of Thailand and include classical and pop as well as their own music from home; however, Thai classical music and dance are normally used to represent Thai musical arts as a whole for foreign listeners.

After finishing their degrees, some Isan musicians did, and still do establish careers in Bangkok. Those who have become teachers in schools for children have played an important role in promoting Isan ponglang music in the capital city. Some began by including ponglang music as extra-curricular activities in their schools. In applying for music teacher positions, those candidates who could direct ponglang ensembles were considered first; and so, within a few years, school children’s ponglang ensembles became common in Bangkok. Students who join the school ensemble may be native Isan born, Isan born in Bangkok, or natives of Bangkok with no Isan background. Starting a school ponglang ensemble in Bangkok is even easier when the principal of the school is a native of Isan.

In some schools where the music teacher has no knowledge of Isan music, the administration may hire a part-time teacher for a ponglang ensemble. In 1991, when I was a junior at Chulalongkorn University, I obtained a position as a part-time teacher to form a ponglang ensemble in the Chulalongkorn Elementary Demonstration School. In
the course of that teaching experience, I saw no sign of an insulting attitude toward Isan music and culture among my native Bangkok students. Instead, they were happy to dress in Isan costumes and pretend to be Isan people while performing Isan music on stage. That was clear proof that Isan music had attained a positive image and not necessarily through native Isan efforts alone.

**College Students**

The first collegiate Isan local music ensemble appeared at Srinakharinwirot University of Mahasarakham in 1976. Students who just loved music started the group as a student music club there. They brought some Isan instruments in so that they could play together as an extracurricular activity. Surasak Phimsen (สุระศักดิ์ พิมพ์เสน), 1960-2008, a Professor of Music at Mahasarakham University, mentioned that he was one of the early members of the Isan local ensemble, *wong dontri phuen-mueang*. He stated that, in those days, their ensemble was one of the first to appear in an academic venue. 636 The first melodic instruments in the ensemble were the *khaen* and the *saw Isan*, two string-bowed lutes. The repertoire was partly traditional tunes but mostly melodies that the students borrowed from popular songs. Apparently the term *ponglang* was not yet associated with that ensemble. There was no specific genre attached; people simply identified it by the name of the group, *Wong Khaen* (วงดนตรี), the ensemble of *khaen*, although the students had other instruments too. 637 For a few years in the mid 1980s, the ensemble was known as Wong Dawkfa Srinakarin (วงดอกฟ้าศรีนครินทร์), “Srinakarin Noble Women’s Ensemble,” partly derived from the school name, Srinakharinwirot. The

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636 Surasak Phimsan, a music professor, Mahasarakham University. Interview by author, summer 2007.
637 This is the actual name of the ensemble, not a musical genre. The term, however, can be confused with a musical genre, the *khaen wong*, a musical ensemble made up of many *khaen*, originally created in Central Thailand, which played mostly Thai classical pieces.
name of the ensemble did not then refer to Isan as it did later in the mid 1980s when it became \textit{wong dontri phuen-mueang Isan}, “Isan folk/local musical ensemble.” The fact that the term “Isan” often became part of the title shows how open the expression of an Isan identity had become. From its creation in the late 1970s, the ensemble expressed a strong popular music influence. By the 1980s, however, both the newly founded college ensembles and continuation of such ensembles resulted from the conscious intention to preserve traditional music against the trend towards Westernization.

Today the ensemble still remains as a club called Chomrom Natasin Phuen-ban lae Dontri Phuen-mueang (ชุรูมรนภักสิลปพื้นบ้านและดนตรีพื้นเมือง), the Club of [Isan] Folk Dance and Music, at Mahasarakham University. The name of this student club is also the name of the ensemble to which often they add Wong Khaen in parentheses to indicate the original name of the ensemble on a banner on their drum stand when they perform. Like any other Isan neotraditional ensemble today, this student group features \textit{ponglang} music and dance. They offer many performances during the year, on or off campus, in or out of the country.

In the same town, Mahasarakham Teachers College (now Mahasarakham Rajabhat University) founded the second Isan student local ensemble in 1979. Because of the sometimes destructive impact of Westernization by the late 1970s, national and local Thai government functionaries, merchants, and middle class people in the cities of Isan became concerned about the preservation and promotion of Isan culture. In 1979, they founded Sun Sinlapa Watthanatham (ศูนย์ศิลปวัฒนธรรม), the [Isan] Cultural Center, in Mahasarakham. In the same year, they also organized a cultural festival called Maradok Isan (มรดกอีสาน), “Isan Heritage,” which was held many times in the late
1970s. The strength of this cultural effort inspired Phawnchai Srisarakham (พรชัย ศรีสาระคำ), a professor who loved Isan music and culture, to found the ensemble Wong Kaen Isan (วงแคนอีสาน). According to Surasak Phimsen, “kean” in Isan dialect means “center” or “core,” and in this context “heart.” Kean Isan means “the heart of Isan.” The new term kean conveyed a deeper meaning in its reference to both musical identity and the solidarity of the people within their musical culture. The term “Isan” here suggests the expression of Isan identity through the music.

Phawnchai Srisarakham was the outstanding leader of this student music group for two decades. In the late 1970s, as in the Wong Khaen at Srinakharinwirot University, Mahasarakham, this kind of academic ensemble had no ponglang instrument in the group. The term Wong Dontri Phuenban Isan Phrayuk (วงดนตรีพื้นบ้านอีสานพระยุก), Isan Applied Folk Music Ensemble, was the common appellation.638 In the mid to late 1980s, players brought the instrument, the ponglang, as well as its musical elements into the ensemble; and ponglang eventually became the common identifier for this musical genre.

It has now been four decades since all of these ensembles began. Many groups of student performers have retired from the troupes as they have graduated; the college has increased in size and status from a teachers college to a university;639 but the present band still maintains its original name, Wong Kaen Isan. During the mid to late 1980s, besides

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638 As mentioned earlier, the term used to identify this modern Isan local ensemble, prior to the mid 1980s and before the term ponglang became widely used, was wong dontri phuen-mueang Isan and also wong dontri phuenban Isan. Phuen-mueang means “local town or city” while phuen-ban means “local village,” which makes it just slightly different in terms of literal meaning but no different in practical effect. The term phrayuk can be added as in wong dontri phuen-ban Isan phrayuk; but that still conveys the same meaning.

639 From 1962 to 1991, the campus was called Witthayalai Khru Mahasaramkham (วิทยาลัยครุศาสตร์รามคำแหง), Mahasarakham Teachers College, and from 1992 to 2003 it was Witthayalai Rajabhat Mahasarakham (วิทยาลัยราชภัฏมหาสารคาม). “Rajabhat Mahasarakham College.” Finally in 2004, its status changed from that of a college to a university and is now called Maha Witthayalai Rajabhat Mahasarakham University.
the *natasin* ensembles, there were only a few college ensembles; and that helped to make Wong Kean Isan the best known college ensemble of that time. They presented at least forty performances a year both in Thailand and in foreign countries in the 1980s.

In 1981, the third Isan local college ensemble was founded at Witthayalai Khru Ubon (วิทยาลัยครูอุบุรี), Ubon Teachers College, Ubon Province, about two hundred kilometers southeast of Mahasarakham City. The ensemble, called Wong Ponglang Witthayalai Khru Ubon (วงโป่งลำวิทยาลัยครูอุบุรี), Ubon Teachers College Ponglang Ensemble, became well known in the late 1980s. The ensemble was founded in Phak Wicha Natasin Lae Dontri (ภาควิชานาฏศิลป์และดนตรี), the Department of Music and Dance. Most of the participating musicians and dancers were students of that department. Thinnakon Attaphaibun (ทินกรณ์ อัตตาภัยบุญ), a music faculty member at the
teachers college, was leader of the student ensemble at that time. Unlike the Wong Khaen and Wong Kean Isan in Mahasarakham, the Ubon Teachers College Ensemble was founded at a time when ponglang music was already well established. This ensemble began with all the ponglang instruments as a standard ensemble, including all the main melodic instruments: ponglang, phin, khaen, and wot. Thus, it is more comfortable to classify the Ubon Teachers College Isan Ensemble as wong ponglang rather than wong dontri phuen-mueang or wong dontri phuen-mueang phrayuk. In the late 1980s, what made the Ubon Teacher College Ponglang Ensemble distinguishable from the others was that they hung their ponglang in an inverted position so that the high register was on top. In performance, Thinnakorn, the group leader and one of the wot players in the band, held the instrument with his right hand while he shook a hanging gourd rattle with the other. This particular style of performance made his ensemble look unique. Each year, they gave many performances as did the other academic ensembles including the natasin school groups and Wong Kean Isan of Mahasarakham Teachers College.

The ponglang ensemble continued to grow in popularity in other colleges both inside and outside the Isan region. It is still common as a musical activity for student music clubs. By the mid 1980s, the Isan music ensemble had spread to many colleges in Bangkok. Such a band is known either by a formal name, wong dontri phuen-mueang Isan, Isan folk/local music ensemble, or by a more informal name, wong ponglang (วงปองกลาง), the “ponglang ensemble.” The ponglang ensemble Chomrom Sinlapa Wattanatham Isan Chula (ชมรมศิลปวัฒนธรรมอีสานจุฬา), Isan Chula Club, began at
Chulalongkorn University in 1983. It was similar to other bands at various colleges around Bangkok. From 1989 to 1992, the ensemble had many opportunities to perform on and off campus, at government institutions, and in the private business sector. Every academic year, as part of the encouragement of extra curricular activities, the university provided funds for musical activities and other student performance projects. Today college ponglang groups continue to grow, and ever more colleges and universities have this type of Isan neotraditional music ensemble. They appear in performance throughout the country and even abroad, and they advertise their performance activities through their music club websites which anyone can access.

The Isan musical image then went through major changes during the period from 1989 to 1992. The old negative image of “folky,” “rustic,” and “primitive” music shifted direction. Isan college students at Chulalongkorn University no longer feel shy, embarrassed, or cheapened in carrying their Isan instruments around campus. In the past, anyone who carried an Isan instrument in public in Bangkok was considered “Lao,” “low class,” “rustic,” “beggarly,” and “stupid.” Now the students seem not to worry whether their friends from other regions will look down on them or even think about the fact that they are from Isan. They are quite proud of their culture and express that pride through the instruments they carry around campus. Such a phenomenon is the direct opposite from what happened to former generations of Isan people in Bangkok when the situation was so painful that they hid their Isan identity if they could.

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640 This music club is also called, in short, Chomrom Isan Chula (ช้อมรอมอีสาน จุฬา). I personally participated in one of these Isan music activities through the Isan Student Club at Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, from 1989 to 1992.
These college students were instrumental in enhancing the value of Isan music. The new socio-political and cultural environment enabled Isan college students to promote their musical culture. First, the government promoted Thai culture, and Isan musical culture is a legitimate part of Thai culture. The playing of Isan music supported the government policy of cultural preservation and advancement. Second, in the Isan Student Club of Chulalongkorn University, Isan instruments are no longer played only by Isan “folk” but by educated intellectuals from all regions. These young amateur musicians are students at one of the most highly respected institutions in the nation. Only the best students in the nation can be admitted to that school. Some who join the Isan music activities study in the “top” academic programs in the university such as engineering, medicine, and computer science. They are utterly confident in the activities in which they participate. Openly seen as Isan students, activities such as playing Isan
music, speaking Isan language, and purchasing Isan food from Isan street vendors in Bangkok have become common to the daily life style of these students. Among the student musicians, Isan music is no longer viewed as an affect of poor, stupid, and/or uneducated people.

College music activity provides an opportunity for expression and expansion of the Isan image and identity. In Bangkok, the *Ngan Phalang* (นางพลากลาง), “Isan dinner party,” is one of the Isan student activities that celebrates Isan identity. The Isan student clubs in most colleges organize such a party yearly. Besides organizing their own parties at their schools, the members of Isan student clubs are also invited to join similar events organized at other schools at various times during the academic year. The main objective of the Isan dinner party is to build friendship and brother/sisterhood among Isan students in Bangkok as well as to promote Isan arts and culture. Of course, Isan food is served at the party. Most importantly, *ponglang* music and dance provide the main entertainment for guests, who are not all native to Isan but are also from other regions. Usually if the hosts do not have their own ensemble, they invite one from another campus to perform. This kind of activity serves as an opportunity for Isan students to express, promote, and expand Isan cultural identity among Isan students themselves and to entertain other students in the Bangkok metropolitan area.

Thai Cultural Promotion

**Cultural Officials**

The National Office of the Cultural Commission, *Samnak-ngan Khana Kam-makan Wattha-natham Haeng-chat* (สำนักงานคณะกรรมการวัฒนธรรมแห่งชาติ), was one of the earliest government institutions committed to national cultural policy. This office
was established in 1979 and, in the more than two decades since, it has supported many cultural projects. The main objective of the commission is to promote and preserve Thai culture as a whole. All the arts: visual, performing, literary, and recreational are included. In music, Isan neotraditional ponglang music is not the only regional music promoted; musical genres representing Thai culture of all regions are important. Cultural projects have been developed by the commission itself or devised in cooperation with other institutions involved in cultural work such as the Fine Arts Department and the Department of Religion.\textsuperscript{641} The methods for achieving the nation’s cultural objectives include education, research, reconstruction, development, and dissemination services.

For the first two decades of its existence, the National Office of the Cultural Commission was under the Ministry of Education. Education, thus, has played a seminal role in cultural preservation. For example, the natasin school system which first formally promoted Isan ponglang music was a part of the Fine Arts Department under the Ministry of Education. Now all these functions have been transferred to the new Ministry of Culture.

Recently, because the Thai governments decided to concentrate considerable attention on cultural policy, they reestablished the Ministry of Culture in 2002. The Ministry of Culture was first founded in 1952 during the second Phibun government. After the end of that regime, however, for political reasons, the next Thai administration abolished it in 1958. The current Ministry of Culture includes the National Office of the Cultural Commission, the Fine Arts Department, and the Department of Religion.

At the local level, the government has created provincial cultural centers, called watta-natham jangwat (วัฒนธรรมจังหวัด), in most provinces. These cultural centers

\textsuperscript{641}Kram Satsana (กรมศาสนา).
have a responsibility for preserving and promoting local culture. Throughout the year, many cultural activities are organized and/or hosted by provincial officers who cooperate with local institutions including schools, Buddhist temples, community groups, and the private business sector. Most cultural activities are timed to coordinate with the traditional Buddhist and agricultural calendars. Each province has selected one event to promote as its own highlighted provincial festival. In Isan, for example, Roi-et Province promotes *Bun Phawet* (บุญพะเว), the Phrawet-Sandawn Festival (The Festival of Prince Wetsandawn, the penultimate life of the Buddha); Ubon Ratchathani Province promotes the *Ngan hae-thien khao phansa* (งานแห่เทียนเข้าพรรษา), the Candle Festival; and Yasothon Province promotes *Bun Pawngfai* (บุญปองไฟ), the Rocket Festival. These provincial festivals not only preserve local culture but also serve as a kind of cultural commodity to draw tourists from both inside and outside the nation. *Ponglang* music is often one of the primary music projects at these provincial cultural centers. Throughout the year, *ponglang* student ensembles often appear as a part of activities organized by the centers. *Ponglang* music may serve as stage show entertainment, in school-ensemble competitions, and/or as processional music. The activities can appear either as part of a provincial festival or on other occasions.\(^{642}\)

In the last few years, the development of an overriding cultural icon has become important in some provinces. In Kalasin Province, the *ponglang*, since it originated there, was selected as an instrumental symbol of the province. Bureaucrats built a huge

\(^{642}\) *Ponglang* competition is a common musical activity among the lower schools and even at the college level as part of the cultural preservation and promotion agenda supported by government policy. There are many competitions during the year organized by various organizations and institutions at different times and places. An ensemble that wins such a competition gains fame for its school. The competitions are arranged in many levels from local to high national competitions.
ponglang monument in the city of Kalasin. In Roi-et Province, where the wot developed, that instrument was chosen as the provincial instrumental icon, and a monument to the wot was built in the city of Roi-et. In Khon Kaen, the khaen became the provincial instrumental symbol. Khon Kaen officials created a slogan: “Khon Kaen mueang mawkhaen (ขอนแก่นเมืองมหาแค้น), “Khon Kaen is a city of khaen players,” and has been promoting that for years.643 In the near future, people in Ubon Ratchathani Province may officially name the phin as their provincial symbol since that region is the home of a well known phin player, Thongsai Thapthanon. In addition, these provinces have also built huge statues representing their provincial identity, cultural heritage, and chosen cultural “commodity.” The statues draw the attention of visitors. In short, this is all evidence of a kind of musical activity that has proved the new value and positive image of Isan instruments. Isan music is now a major part of the expression of Isan culture.

Every citizen is now expected to participate in “the expression of the Isan image.” The preservation and promotion of Thai culture generally is now led by government institutions like the Fine Arts Department, the Office of the Cultural Commission, the Provincial Cultural Centers, and schools and colleges. In addition, the government has strongly promoted the idea that cultural work is the responsibility of all Thai people. Companies, shops, restaurants, and other commercial enterprises are expected to provide funds for the promotion and preservation of Thai culture. In Isan, even some politicians have become involved in Isan music. Occasionally, a political party sets up a special cultural activity in the region such as a ponglang music competition and/or a khaen solo competition.

643 This is more politics than cultural fact since most great khaen players live in Ubon Ratchathani and Roi-et, especially as the latter has the best khaen makers in the nation.
Figure 55. *Ponglang* Monument in City of Kalasin.

Figure 56. The *Wot* monument in Roi-et City.
Some Isan politicians even play Isan instruments, especially the *khaen*, in public.\(^{\text{644}}\) Their musical activities may benefit them in their political careers in gaining positive reputations. In addition, their involvement proves that Isan music is no longer considered “low class,” “beggarish,” “poor,” or “stupid” as in the past.

The royal family plays an important role in cultural work. The members of the family often join in national and regional cultural activities. They have honored folk artists each year with awards, hosted the opening ceremonies for many kinds of cultural events, and participated in musical performances in local arts events. The royal family’s cultural activities are often shown in the Thai media. On some occasions, the royals give speeches in which they state how important culture is and encourage Thai people to participate in cultural tasks. On one occasion, Princess Sirinthon gave a speech at the presentation ceremony for the National Artist Awards and said:

> The production of [our] National Artists is a great national heritage. It is a symbol of our high civilization in the Thai nation that we, Thai people, should be proud of. As time passes by, these cultural productions have been lost for many reasons. We should hurry in researching and collecting all the works, listing all Thai arts for future study, and saving them as our national treasure.\(^{\text{645}}\)

Princess Sirinthon has personally participated in Thai arts. She plays Thai classical, folk, and Western instruments and participates in many kinds of musical activities. In 1990, it was a great honor for Isan people in Kalasin Province when the princess opened an annual provincial cultural fair, *Ngan Mahakam Ponglang Phrae-wa Jangwat Kalasin* (งานมหากรรมปลานง พระยา จังหวัดกาฬสินธุ์), the Great Festival of *Ponglang* [and] Textiles of Kalasin Province. At the ceremony, the Princess participated

\(^{644}\) Adisawn Phiangket (อัษฎ์วงศ์ เพียงเกต), b. 1952, a native Isan parliamentarian, studied *khaen* with Sombat Simla, a well known blind *khaen* master in Mahasarakham Province.

as a ponglong player in performance with the Ponglang Ensemble of Natasin Kalasin School. This is tangible proof that the image of Isan instruments is no longer just for Isan folk but can be appropriated by any level of Thai society.

**Folk Artist Honor Awards**

One of the cultural tasks of the National Office of the Cultural Commission is to create awards that honor Thai artists. To aid in preserving Thai culture, the government has created three cultural award levels for each year which are given to outstanding artists in different fields including architecture, literature, and visual and performing arts. The number of artists selected for these awards is not fixed. There are more artists selected in some years than in others.

The first award, the *phumi phon ngan diden thang wattha-natham* (ผู้มีผลงานดีเด่นทางวัฒนธรรม), was established in 1980. The title means “One Who Has Great Work in [Thai] Cultural Productions.” Folk artists in different disciplines from all four regions of Thailand have received the award. From 1980 to 1997, there are 45 Isan artists who have received this award; and some have received awards in the performing arts.

For example, in 1992, Chawiwan Phanthu (ชวีวรรณ ฟันธุ) received an award in *mawlam* performance and Sunthawn Chairatthanasot (สุนทร ไชยวรัตนโชติ) received the award as a lam text writer. In 1994, Bunpheng Faiphiuchai (บุญเพ็ง ฝายผู้ชัย) also earned an award in *mawlam* performance.

Second, in 1985, the second honors award called *silapin phuen-ban diden* (ศิลปินพื้นบ้านดีเด่น), “the Great Folk Artists,” was created. That year, sixteen folk artists in

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646 Her stage name is Chawiwan Damnoen (ชวีวรรณ ดำเนน).
647 His pen and stage name is Sunthawn Chairungrueang (สุนทร ไชยวรัตนรุ่ง).
various disciplines from around the country were selected to receive the award. For these two awards the government does not provide lifetime financial support but only shows appreciation for the artists. Besides handing the artist a plaque, the government occasionally provides them some financial support as in covering health care. In 1985, Phim Rattanakhunsat (พิมพ์ รัตนกุลสาส์), b. 1913, a well known Isan poet, was the first Isan artist to receive this award. The intent of such awards is to promote folk artists as well as to encourage younger citizens to appreciate all kinds of Thai arts. While the former award continues to be granted today, the latter was offered only once, in that year.

Last, in the same year, 1985, the National Office of the Cultural Commission also created the greatest of the honor award positions, the *Sinlapin haeng-chat* (ศิลปินแห่งชาติ), “National Artist.” It is not only the highest award, but the selected artist receives lifelong financial support. This award is the most important in that a recipient becomes a “national living treasure.” An attached slogan says “They are the people who link the past to the present. They have preserved and transferred Thai cultural knowledge from the ancestors, the past, to today’s people; and they will bring their art to future generations.” In addition, the government recently named February 24 as “National Artists Day.”

Isan national artists present the image of the culture of Isan to the nation and to the world. In the field of performing arts, the first two Isan National Artists were named in 1986. In *mawlam*, Isan traditional vocal music, Thawngmak Janthalue (ทองมาก จันทะลือ), b. 1924, from Ubon Ratchathani Province, was the first *mawlam* singer named an Isan National Artist. In instrumental music, a *ponglang* performer, maker, teacher, and

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Theoretically, in instrumental music, a *khaen* player should have been chosen as the first National Artist since the *khaen* is the primary traditional instrument in Isan culture. However, a position such as the National Artist was created sometimes to serve a political purpose rather than a cultural objective. The *ponglang*, as a new instrument that has played an important role in Isan neotraditional music because it appears in the *ponglang* ensemble, satisfies modern Isan social norms. The *ponglang* ensemble appears to represent a “purer” Isan culture, although *khaen* music may also convey the old culture of the Lao people. It has been almost three decades since the National Artist Award was created. Unbelievably, no *khaen* artist has yet been recognized as a National Artist. Since the position was created in 1985 for the performing arts, there have been a total of 112 artists selected. Among these, only six Isan artists have been decorated as national artists. Five are *mawlam* singers, but only one is an instrumental musician, Plueang Chairatsami, the *ponglang* master. More importantly however, they all have come to represent Isan within the greater Thai culture.

The year of 1999 was remarkable as to the revival in Thai traditional knowledge. The Thai government strongly reinforced its policy of cultural preservation and promotion that year by coming out with new legislation that stated local culture should be promoted specifically as an aspect of the educational system. It was the first time the government allowed local authorities independence in managing their own educational curricula. In other words, they tried somewhat to decrease the exercise of centralized Bangkok power as they claimed that the central authority in Bangkok does not

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649 See chapter 6.
completely know and understand the needs of local people. In the past, under the dominance of that central authority, there was a serious loss of local traditional and cultural knowledge. Now, as uncountable numbers of local intellectuals pass away, we are fast losing our traditional knowledge. This legislation effectively mandates the availability of local knowledge for students through the formal education system.

Local artists and non-degree intellectuals in Thai folk traditions have a right to and responsibility for the education of their youngsters. The national government has finally created a situation that enables knowledgeable local people to become teachers. In the past a teacher had to be someone who graduated in the modern educational system, as organized and controlled by the Thai national government based in Bangkok.

The new teaching position is called khru phum-panya Thai (ครูภูมิปัญญาไทย), the teacher of Thai wisdom, also known as khru phum-panya thawng-thin (ครูภูมิปัญญาท้องถิ่น), the folk wisdom teacher. This position allows common people who are knowledgeable in all kinds of traditional disciplines to be teachers without the requirement of modern education degrees. Today, many non-degree people who are knowledgeable in different fields have been named Thai wisdom teachers throughout the country. By 2008, there was a total of 341 Thai wisdom teachers throughout the country, among whom more than 80 were selected from the Isan region.650

The Isan-Thai wisdom teachers bring the old traditional music into schools. In the case of Isan music, the “pure” traditional music can be transmitted by the wisdom teacher without the considerations of commercial development and modification, unlike

ponglang music which has already been modernized in order to gain new value and status and to function in an urbanized, commodified society. Thus, today, “authentic” traditional music is available to Thai children as a part of their heritage. Many well-known mawlam singers and phin, wot, and khaen players have been designated folk wisdom teachers. Even a blind musician, who might formerly have been regarded as a “musical beggar,” can be admired as an honored teacher and invited to teach children in schools. For instance, Sombat Simla (สมบัติ สิมหล้า), b. 1963, a blind khaen player from Mahasarakham Province, is now recognized as a great musician and khaen teacher. He is invited to teach in schools and at the college level, and he appears often in the Thai media as a great khaen performer. The Thai folk wisdom teachers are not only elevating Thai cultural values and increasing the status of folk artists but also creating jobs for “common” non-degree people. In addition, the Isan wisdom teachers are giving young Isan students opportunities to build positive images for themselves vis-a-vis the rest of Thailand.

Isan Folk Music Programs

Isan folk music is at last being offered as a professional academic program. The positive attitude of government functionaries toward the promotion of local culture has influenced Thai music education, particularly in regard to Isan music. Although ponglang music has been a part of Isan musical academic programs in the Isan branches of the natasin schools since the 1980s, the music was not at first available as a major program of study. At that time, the natasin schools offered only Thai classical music, the music and dance of the old Siamese court, as a major field of study. Isan music, on the other hand, was then available at most as a minor program at the natasin schools. During
the late 1980s and early 1990s, Isan music first appeared only as an extra curricular activity for student music clubs in the colleges. However, since the late 1990s, Isan music has been considered of high enough value to be offered as a music major program both in the natasin schools and in some colleges and universities in Isan and Central Thailand. In 1997, the Music Department of Mahasarakham University,\footnote{This college music department, similar to others, earlier offered Western music and Thai classical music majors. Prior to bringing Isan music into the degree program, this university and some others, mostly in Isan and Bangkok, offered support to Isan music as an extra curricular activity for (Isan) student music clubs.} Mahasarakham Province, was the first to offer a major in ponglang music to undergraduate students. That department created a folk music program officially referred to as Saka wicha dariyang-kasin phuen-ban (สากาวิชาศิลปะดนตรีเพื่อนบ้าน), the [Isan] folk music program, or simply dontri phuen-ban (ดนตรีเพื่อนบ้าน), folk music.\footnote{In 2008, this Isan music program and the entire music department moved from the Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts to the College of Music.} Although the program does not mention a specific regional music (it could be any kind of folk music from any or all regions of Thailand), Isan ponglang ensemble is the primary offering.\footnote{Although ponglang music is the main focus in the program, mawlam (no specific genre) is also offered as a major. Isan (ponglang) dance is not included as a major program; but students practice it, especially when they have performance opportunities for their ponglang music ensembles.} Typically, students select one of the melodic instruments in the ponglang ensemble, khaen, phin, ponglang, or wot, as their major instrument of study.

At the Isan natasin schools, the first academic centers to bring ponglang into their curriculum as an elective course and then a minor program, the faculty began to elevate Isan music to a major program in 2000, although at first it was limited to the high school and a two year college program. In 2007, Khon Kaen University, one of the largest institutions of higher learning in Isan, added Isan music as a major in its music department. Finally, in the same year, The College of Music, Mahidol University,
Bangkok, offered the first Isan music major outside the Isan region. Recently many other colleges and universities in the Isan region have begun to follow this pattern, especially among the campuses of Rajabhat University. At these locations, the instructors for Isan music are usually Isan national artists, Isan folk wisdom teachers, or some other well known Isan traditional musicians.

These Isan music programs have become quite successful. Every year they admit a fair number of students. Most students who decide to major in Isan music are those who previously joined ponglang ensembles in their elementary or high schools. The college level courses are encouraging to students who would like to study Isan music at a

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654 See chapter 5.
655 Among the four Thai regional musical cultures of the North, South, Central, and Northeast (Isan) regions, only Isan music has been elevated to music major status in the colleges and universities of Thailand.
higher level. This phenomenon is certainly different from the 1980s when, in Thai college-level music departments, students who studied Western music were considered “high so” (high society) and most were sons or daughters of rich people from the cities. Then, most music students who came from common backgrounds studied Thai classical music. Most of them were from musicians’ families and from Central Thailand. The Thai classical music students felt inferior to those who studied Western music. Western music was deemed more significant than even Thai classical music. As the third major created, (Isan) folk music should have been classified as last in that hierarchy since it is “just” a folk music. However, the hierarchy among these three genres is no longer clear and has sometimes shifted in the opposite direction. Most folk music students at Mahasarakham University seem proud of being (Isan) folk music majors. This pride is expressed not only through the music they have chosen to study but also in the ways they behave socially including their imitation of what they think the folk of Isan would have done in the old days. For example, they use some old Isan words in their verbal communication, sometimes dress in old style Isan clothing or even chew betel nuts. As their field of study is more local, unique, and it represents the Isan tradition, these students have chances to travel and perform and thus promote their musical culture abroad. These opportunities are almost nonexistent among students in other music

656 Western music is “imported.” The instruments and music lessons are more expensive than those for Thai music. In addition, traditionally in Thai classical music, a student did not pay for music lessons but lived with the teacher as a family member. Musical transmission was a process of long apprenticeship; and that created a close relationship between student and teacher. Beginning in the 1990s, the Western commercialized system of teaching/learning music was adopted for Thai classical music in Bangkok among music businesses that imitated the Western model.

657 As in many cultures in Southeast Asia, chewing betel nut is an old Thai tradition. However, to “civilize the nation” the Phibun government banned it in the 1940s. In Isan, the region farthest away from Bangkok, this cultural mandate was not so effective. In the 1980s, it was still common to see elderly Isan people chew betel nut. Today, of course, chewing the nut is considered old fashioned; and it is only very rarely seen anywhere in the country.
majors. In the summer of 2008, when some of the folk music majors came to perform at the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., they told a joke in which they said:

If one wants to travel abroad (to perform), one should study folk music because only Isan musicians can be selected to perform abroad. If one wants to travel to perform a shorter distance as to Bangkok or cities in other provinces, one should study Thai classical music because there is a Thai classical music festival among college students called Dontri Thai Udom Suksa (ดนตรีไทยอุดมศักษา), College Thai [Classical] Music, which is organized and held in a different location every year. Finally, if one does not want to go far from home at all, one should study Western music, because local people usually like to hire a Western style band to play for their parties around town.

After graduation, these students become school music teachers, and most schools in Isan want to establish ponglang ensembles. In the past few years, many colleges have needed “professors” to fill positions in the new programs in Isan music. It appears that many of these college level jobs are filled by young graduating students. For example, the Mahasarakham University music program has hired its own students after graduation to teach in the place from which they have just graduated. Some of these graduate students also find jobs at local cultural centers and popular music studios.

658 Traveling outside the country, especially to Europe or America, is almost impossible for ordinary Thais due to economic limitations. Any middle class Thai citizen such as a teacher, policeman, accountant, or mailman would have to save for many years just to be able to purchase a plane ticket to America or Europe.


660 If one needs Thai classical music, one invites musicians in Bangkok or somewhere in Central Thailand, home of Thai classical music. However, I myself toured Germany and the Netherlands with the Natasin Roi-et Ponglang Ensemble in summer, 1988.
Commercialization and Isan Music in Mass Media

Isan Traditional Music

The traditional genres of lam klawn, repartee singing, and lam mu, theatrical singing, have moved into modern contexts that involve media systems and commodification. When the early forms of media such as the phonograph and LP records were introduced into the nation, especially Bangkok, most people in the countryside still listened to their own live traditional music. Rural people were still deeply attached to their own root of entertainments when other kinds of popular music, such as phleng Thai sakon, appeared.

Lam Klawn

Phaibun Paeng-noen (ไพ multiline แพงเงิน), b. 1935, the author of The Text of Mawlam Singing: the Intelligence of the Isan People, states that lam klawn recordings initially appeared under the “Rabbit” trademark in 1940. A pair of especially well known singers on that label were the female partner, Jawmsri Banlusin (จอมศรี บระคคศิลป์), b. unknown, and male partner, Khun Thawawnphong (คุณ руд้วนพงษ์), b. 1902. In the 1940s besides the Rabbit Division of the Taw Ngekchuan Company, there were other enterprises that produced lam klawn recordings including the “Philippe” and Tra Singto (ตราสิงโต), “Lion,” labels that belonged to the Thepnakhon Company (เทพนคร). A wind-up phonograph was known as a hip siang (หิปเสียง), literally “luggage sound,” which appeared in the countryside after the Second World War and was often kept in the

662 However, she must be younger than her male partner, the singer Khun Thawawnphong, born in 1902, since she regarded him as her big brother.
village temple as communal property. It also appeared privately in the homes of rich families. Phaibun Paeng-ngoén states that he first saw and heard a phonograph playing lam klawn in towns in the central region around 1951.\(^{663}\) He said that, at that time, communities played the phonograph as communal entertainment for many occasions such as funerals, weddings, and at celebrations and other festivals as well. The machine made the production of music convenient and less expensive for people than hiring some kind of live ensemble or troupe for their events. With the phonograph, they could have a variety of music from the machine rather than listen to only one specific genre in live performance.

In Isan, Chawiwan said she first saw a phonograph when she was a child in about 1950. The owner carried it from one village to another and played mawlam music on it for a listening fee. The villagers were amazed at how a little suitcase could sing a song. By the 1960s, lam klawn was already common in the media; and, besides the phonograph, the radio had also become common. That made even more music available to people.

In the 1960s, besides the Suntharaphirom troupe, which lived and performed in Bangkok, other well known Isan singers included Bunpheng Faiphiuchai (บุญเพ็ง ไฟผือชัย), 1932-2008, a famous female singer who made her first record in 1955, Ken Dalao (คเณ ตาเหลา), b. 1930, a male singer who had his first record release in 1959, and later, Chawiwan Damnoen (จวิวรวรรณ ดาเนิน), b. 1945, who became famous with her first record in 1963. There were many other lam klawn singers in the media, but these three were the most outstanding from the 1960s to the mid 1970s.

\(^{663}\)Ibid., 11.
On a recording, *lam klawn* took the form of *klawn* poetry pieces which lasted about three to four minutes each. A 45 rpm record could hold only one *klawn*. This form of presentation certainly is not the same as a live performance on stage with live interaction between the performers and audience, including a section of repartee singing between the male and female singers. The themes of the singing, however, can be similar to a stage performance in terms of the depiction of many issues from traditional cultural settings. For example, some of the presentations in the old style might relate to Buddhist teachings, cultural norms, courtship, and local customs. From the late 1960s onward, the poetic lyrics can be more associated with recent issues of daily life such as gossip, criticism of social changes, sentimentally nostalgic situations, politics, folk tales, and jokes. One of the nostalgic themes that produced highly successful albums for Chawiwan Damnoen was that of *Chiwit chao-na* (*ชีวิตชาวนา*), “the Life of a [Wet Rice Isan] Farmer.” In the album, each poem gave a description of the beautiful life of the Isan farmer in the old days, of which some scenes were already anachronistic because of the impact of modernization and social change. The album was very famous and has become one of the classic collectibles for anyone who loves *lam klawn* music today.

At that time, although most consumers of this music were native Isan people, the mass media made it possible for outsiders also to hear the music. The mass media provided some of the earliest venues through which Isan music began to take a broader space in Thai consciousness and made the music more than something regionally limited, isolated, and significant only to the natives of Isan. Isan traditional music such as the *lam klawn* was, in addition, already being brought into the commercial system, although it was on a small scale and had, as yet, little to do with improving the Isan image.
**Lam Mu**

*Lam mu*, a theatrical singing style, was another genre of Isan traditional music also brought into the media system. It had been popular among the majority of Isan listeners in their home region since the late 1960s, well before modern music such as *luk krung* and *luk thung* came to replace most of it in the mid 1980s. *Lam mu* first began to appear on recordings after the Second World War and it became quite popular in the Isan region by 1968.⁶⁶⁴ One of the earliest and most popular troupes was the Khana Rangsiman (คำแระสิมันต์), 1963-1969, from Ubon Ratchathani Province. Chawiwan Dumnoen (ชวีวรรณ ดายนีน), b. 1945, and Thawngkham Phengdi (ทองคำ เพงดี), 1927-1996, who were also famous in the *lam klawn* genre, were the lead singers of the troupe. Their recordings were first broadcast from the Radio Station of Ubon Ratchathani Province, and they sang several Isan traditional stories. The *Sithon Manora* (ศิริน มโนราห์), “Mr. Sithon and Miss Manora,” and *Nang Taeng-awn* (นางแดงอ่อน), “Miss Taeng-awn,” were two of the famous stories from among their recordings.

The Ubon Phatthana Troupe (อุบลพัฒนา), 1968-1978, performed in Ubon style; and the lead singers were from Ubon Ratchathani Province. Ironically, the troupe established itself in Khon Kaen, as that city was a better location for operating their performance business. The troupe became popular after they won first prize in a competition organized by the Khon Kaen TV Station in 1971. After winning the competition, they began recording their performances, which made them available for radio broadcast. The major story that they performed was the *Nang Nok Krayang Khao* (นางนกกระยางขาว), “The Female White Heron,” a traditional tale associated with

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⁶⁶⁴ According to Surin Phaksiri, recordings produced earlier seemed more available in Wiang Chan, Laos.
Buddhist teaching. In addition in the 1970s, the theatrical style of mawlam phloen also appeared on recordings although it was not as popular as mawlam mu. One of the famous troupes was Khana Thawngmi Malai (คณาแทองมี มาลัย) whose first recording of theatrical music covered a traditional story entitled Khun Chang Khun Phaen (ขุนช้าง ขุนแฝน), “Mr. Chang [and] Mr. Phaen,” in the 1970s.

Figure 58. Cassette tape cover featuring two lead theatrical singers, Chawiwan Dumnoen and Thawngkham Phengdi of the Rangsiman Troupe who performed the story of Sithon Manora. They were very popular in Isan from the late 1960s through the 1970s.
Both repartee *mawlam* and theatrical *mawlam* are traditional Isan genres which appeared early in the media and consequently became musical commodities. The music is considered the first Isan “popular” music as it was the first brought into the realm of popular music production in commercialized form while serving mainly Isan audiences in the home region during the 1960s and 70s before it gradually lost ground at the beginning of the 1980s. By 1992, formerly popular troupes such as the Ubon Phatthana could no longer survive exclusively through their performances. Modern popular genres such as *luk thung*, “country music,” *luk thung Isan*, “Isan country style,” *luk thung mawlam*, “Isan pop-folk music,” and *mawlam sing*, “traditional-popular hybrid repartee,” were taking over in Isan. The more modern music genres were supported by new Isan audiences of the following generation; and they remain the genres of Isan music currently popular today.

Surin Phaksiri and the Promotion of Isan Popular Music

It has been approximately three decades since the current popular genres started to dominate the Thai music industry. The traditional genres have gradually declined in popularity, basically due to changes in musical taste among the younger Isan generations. Young Isan people who have grown up in the modern environment prefer pop music. They are mostly working class people who live and work in Bangkok. At the beginning, music businessmen actually hesitated to sponsor *luk thung Isan*, Isan country music. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Isan commercialized music such as *mawlam klawn* and

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666 See chapter 4.
*luk thung Isan* appeared in Bangkok and flourished among Isan migrant workers. However, radio music programmers and producers as well as recording companies did not yet want to invest in the music. Commercial sponsors certainly did not want their products to be associated with an Isan radio music program. They were afraid that people who were not from Isan would not listen to the music. They also thought that Isan people who listened to the music would not able to afford their merchandise.\(^\text{667}\) Isan popular music might not have become mainstream Thai “country” today except that Isan radio announcers and songwriters in Bangkok “stirred up” the music and brought it into the Thai commercial music milieu.

**Surin Phaksiri** (สุรินทร์ ภาคศิริ), a pioneer native Isan DJ/radio announcer and a remarkable Isan-style songwriter, is especially important in this history.\(^\text{668}\) He was born in Amnatcharoen District, Ubon Ratchathani Province in 1942. After he graduated from high school in 1960, he went to Bangkok with the dream of achieving a career as a songwriter and singer. Unfortunately, during the 1960s a songwriter could hardly make a living. In 1965, while he continued to write songs, he also applied for another job as an officer at *Krom Ratchathan* (กรมราชทัณฑ์), the Bangkok Corrections Department. Most of the songs he wrote at that time were Lao style country songs.

Surin began participating in the field of Isan popular music in 1970. As a DJ/radio announcer who spoke the Isan language on his radio program, he is considered the earliest leader of the Isan working class to promote Isan music and identity in the capital city. In the realm of Thai country music, he is well known as an Isan style songwriter of more than 800 songs, among which some have been notable popular hits


\(^{668}\) Isan style music refers to both *lukthung Isan* and *lukthung mawlam.*
during the last three decades. By 1972, he was already acknowledged one of the best songwriters in Bangkok, for which he received the *Phan-siang Thawng-kham Phra-rat-chathan* (ผ่านเสียงทองคำพระราชา), “The Golden Sound Recording Award from the King,” for the song, *Ngan Nak-rong* (นางนักร้อง), “Singer’s Work,” which he wrote for Phawnphrai Phetdamnoen (พระไพร เผดยคำเนิน), b. 1948, a male singer from Ratchaburi Province.

Receiving the award made Surin famous among songwriters and singers. Due to his fame that year, one of his friends, who worked on a radio music program in Bangkok, introduced him to the managers of the radio station, Sathani Witthayu Taw Shaw Daw (สถานีวิทยุ ตชด). The Radio Station of the Frontier Police Officers, where the friend himself had a radio music program. Surin started organizing his own radio music program as a part time job on the weekends; and he began sharing radio broadcast time with the friend who had introduced him to the job.669

Surin and his friend were offered twenty hours total time for their radio broadcast every Sunday. They divided the hours into three sections for different kinds of music including the luk krung and luk thung styles670 and a singing contest. Surin began by taking as his share of the time the singing contest program. With his reputation as a famous songwriter, Surin had the commercial clout to promote a winner of the contest into potential success as a professional singer; and that encouraged a large number of amateurs who loved singing to enter the contests. As a result, his radio music career started out immediately as a success. Within the year, besides the singing contest, he also organized many kinds of radio music programs on several different radio stations beyond his full time job at the Corrections Department. In his music career, Surin not only wrote songs and organized the radio music programs but also managed a luk thung troupe called Wong Dontri Thit-so Lam Phloen (วงศ์ดนตรีทิต-สโล่ปลื้ม), 1977-1984, for eight years. The term Thit-so was derived partly from his radio name, Thitso Sutsanaen (ทิศ桫 สุด

669 Waeng Plangwan (วง หลังวรรณ), Lukthung Isan: Isan History and Legend of Popular Songs, ลูกทุ่งอีสาน: ประวัติศาสตร์และที่มาของเพลงลูกทุ่ง (Bangkok: สำนักเรียนปัญญา, 2545/2002), 336.
670 See chapter 4.
Moh, which conveyed some degree of Isan naming culture. His troupe performed mainly in Bangkok and in nearby provincial towns.

**Mawlam, Early Isan Musical Identity**

As a radio music programmer who exerted “control” over the media through his broadcasts, Surin started to promote Isan music in Bangkok. He began with traditional *mawlam*. The Isan popular country style called Lao style songs already existed within *luk thung*, which was created during the period of modernization in Bangkok and which could represent any of the four regions; but the Lao style songs then employed Central Thai singers, rather than native Isan, who tried to represent Lao culture through the songs. Some Lao characteristics such as Lao words and musical instruments had already appeared in the country style available to Central Thai people. However, an outsider could easily understand the poetic lyrics since most were written in Central Thai. The “Lao elements” were added as a kind of “flavor” to make it sound “country.” Those who listened to the Lao style songs were not necessarily Isan people, and the music did not necessarily represent Isan identity.

In the early 1970s, Isan people still considered themselves “Lao” and were still deeply attached to their local traditional culture. Modernization had not yet reached most of the Isan region. Traditional rather than modern music was, in that era, more effective in the representation of the culture and people of Northeast Thailand. *Lam klawn*, poetic singing as musical entertainment, represented the cultural identity of the people from the Northeast in Bangkok. The *mawlam* genre also represented Isan. A person who listened

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671 Isan music in this context refers to the traditional genre, *mawlam*. Although a similar musical style of today called Isan country “*luk thung Isan*” had already appeared, it was not yet considered Isan music at that time. It was a part of country music in general and not necessarily used to represent Isan culture.

672 The term “Lao” here refers to people today both in the nation of Laos and in Northeast Thailand.
to the music at that time tended to be native Isan since an outsider might not understand or easily appreciate the music. In 1972, Surin began to broadcast mawlam, which at that time was considered Lao music, on his Bangkok radio program. To put it simply, he spoke “Lao” and played “Lao” music for “Lao” people in Bangkok under his Lao radio name, Thitso Sutsanaen.673

The lack of mawlam recordings was a problem in running the radio program in 1972. Although some mawlam music had been recorded earlier, only limited numbers of recordings were as yet available and they were mostly held by private collectors. Not many old recordings were available at music stores in Bangkok in the early 1970s. Surin stated that he had only two mawlam records when he first started the “Lao music” program. One was by Ken Dalao and the other by Bunpheng Faiphiuchai. As mentioned earlier, these two singers were already well known in Isan in the 1960s. Each record holds ten klawn (songs/poetry). Surin said that he had to play the same klawn over and over again on the program. One of the solutions he found was to purchase some old mawlam recordings in Wiang Chan (Vientiane), the capital city of Laos, available because some old mawlam recordings sung by Isan singers were popular in Wiang Chan in the 1970s.674

Because of the lack of recorded music, Surin decided to produce mawlam records himself for his radio program. He encouraged the Krung Thai Recording Enterprise (ท่าท้านวัฒนธรรม), which at that time produced popular music (luk krung and luk thung), to produce mawlam. The recording company hesitated to do so. They were afraid they

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673 The first part of his radio name, “Thit,” refers to a Lao man who is ordained as a Buddhist monk. The last name, Sutsanaen, is a borrowed term from traditional khaen repertoire; sutsanaen means “infinity.”
674 Waeng Plangwan (แวง พลังวรรณ), Lukthung Isan: Isan History and Legend of Popular Songs, ลูกทุ่งอีสานตำนานเพลงลูกทุ่ง (Bangkok: สานักเรียนบัญญัติ, 2545/2002), 337.
would not be able to sell them. Surin convinced the company executives to move ahead saying that the only reason the music might not sell would be lack of promotion. Surin suggested that, if the recording company promoted the music through his radio program, he could guarantee that Northerners would buy it. This Lao music radio personality was confident because he knew there was already a large audience who listened to mawlam on his program.675

In 1972, Surin started producing mawlam records. He invited well known lam klawn singers such as Ken Dalao and Bunpheng Faiphiuchai to sing on his first record. As he expected, the records sold well, particularly through promotion on his radio program. However, the majority of purchasers were not Isan working class people in Bangkok, who at that time could afford neither the records nor the record players, but Lao people who lived in the provinces around Bangkok such as Nakhon Pathom, Nakhon Nayok, Phrachinburi, Chanthaburi and Lopburi. Those Lao had much earlier been forced to settle in Central Thailand because of the Siam-Wiang Chan Wars in the early nineteenth century.676

Beginning in 1972, Surin began to write and produce a modern style of mawlam, known today as luk thung mawlam. Some of his successful pieces were in the traditional style of mawlam phloen (ลำเพลื่น) which was derived from a theatrical style. At that time, however, he wrote them as independent songs for music films and for recordings. As mentioned in Chapter 4, Surin wrote the first work for Angkhanang Khunnachai, b. 1955, a 17 year old female traditional mawlam singer from Ubon Ratchathani Province. One of his early songs was entitled “Isan Lam Phloen” (อีสานลำเพลื่น), “The Isan Style

675 Ibid., 338
676 See chapter 3.
of *Lam Phloen* [Singing].” His music was exceptionally successful in 1972. Surin’s *lam phloen* was the earliest style of Isan folk-pop music to appear in a commercialized context and supported by an Isan audience in the 1970s. It became one of the models for today’s modern styles of *luk thung mawlam* music. Surin basically introduced the style which still flourishes among Isan songwriters and singers today.

**Persuading Radio Isan Music Sponsorships**

To bring “*mawlam*” into the commercialized radio music milieu, Surin needed sponsors to support his program. In the beginning, he contributed five out of twenty hours total radio time on Sunday afternoons from 12:00 to 5:00 p.m., all supported by two sponsors, the Krung Thai Recording Enterprise (ทำงฝันเสียงกรุงไทย) selling records and the Krung Thawng Watch Enterprise (ทำงนาฬิกากรุงทอง) selling watches. Surin proposed to his sponsors that he should use three hours, from 12:00 to 3:00 p.m., to cover only *mawlam* music and the rest of the time for the singing contest.

Trying to convince the sponsors was not simple; and, at first the sponsors did not at all support his plan to present *mawlam* on the radio. The recording enterprise argued that they did not have *mawlam* music records either for broadcast or for sale, and they asserted that nobody in Bangkok would listen to such music. They said that even Isan people in Bangkok would not listen to it because they would be afraid that others would then know they were “Lao.” The owner of the enterprise quoted his personal experience to Surin saying that even his servant never spoke Lao because she did not want others to know she was from the Northeast region.”

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The watch merchandisers were afraid that nobody who listened to the *mawlam* music program would buy their watches. They said that the music was too “low class” and so were the people who listened to it. Their watches were high priced and none of those [poor] audiences would buy them; Isan workers would not be able to afford them. With his strong desire to bring Isan music onto the radio to serve Isan people, Surin tried to convince the sponsors to trust in his ability to make the program a success. He told them that, if the audience liked the program, they would buy the merchandise. Finally, through his strong insistence as well as his celebrity as a songwriter, the two sponsors gave Surin a chance to run his *mawlam* program. Certainly as Surin had insisted, the merchandise sold successfully.

Surin also once asked another enterprise that sold face powder to sponsor his radio *mawlam* music and thereby promote their products to his radio fans. The manufacturers suggested that their new face powder, with a quite famous brand name and high price, was not appropriate to Surin’s audience as, at that time, Isan people normally used an inexpensive body power which cost perhaps only five or ten baht per pack. The new product, however, cost about thirty to thirty five baht, at least triple the price. In terms of marketing, Northeasterners could not be a focus group for their product (they thought); so the company refused to support the program. They also said they did not want to sell the product to “Lao people,” arguing that this particular group of consumers were poor, “low class,” people who “wore sandals” and would not have the money to buy their “high” and expensive product.

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678 Isan people used this powder as a face powder as well.
679 Wearing sandals refers to laboring class or low-income people as opposed to high-class or high-income citizens who wear leather shoes.
Surin finally approached another company that sold a similar product, which was also expensive, but without such a famous and “high class” brand name. On the radio program he urged his fans to buy the product and frankly asked them to buy it so that that he could keep *mawlam* music on the air for them. It sold quite successfully, which induced the former sponsors with the “high class” product, who had earlier refused Surin, to change their minds and offer him their sponsorship.

**Musical Media and Building of the New Isan Image**

From the 1970s onward, the primary media that were gradually presenting the new Isan image to Thai society included radio, film, and the Isan music itself as a mainstream music in the Thai music industry. Among these three components, radio was the fundamental and most effective at the beginning, during the 1970s, since radio waves accounted for the most “time” and “space.” Most people listened to their music through a radio more than through any other kind of media during that time. For example, factory workers, in the most popular career among Isan migrants in Bangkok, were allowed to listen to their favorite radio programs during their working hours. This did not include other laboring people such as maids, servants, or taxi drivers who could listen to the radio almost anytime they wanted to. In the 1970s, besides the radio, “Isan film,” any Thai produced movie that involved Isan culture in any way, especially country music, was also effective in contributing to the new image of Isan. When compared to radio which people could access simply at any time, the number of films was much smaller. Within a given year, there might be only one movie produced. However, one movie could make a big difference in terms of promoting a new Isan image. Last, beginning in the mid-1980s, Isan music itself has been one of the main factors in advancing the image of Isan
to what it has become today, as Isan pop music is now one of the most popular commercially driven musics in Thailand.

Radio “Lao” Music Programs and Isan Cultural Expression

“Lao” Music Broadcasts and the Positive Image

The Lao music radio program was the first step through which advertisers discovered there was a new economic power arising that might even translate into some form of cultural power in Bangkok. That music demonstrated that the Isan people were a significant sector of the city’s population and economy. Although Isan migrants listened to “their” music in private places and at home, however humble that might be, the media carried “the announcement” farther, to native Bangkok people living everywhere in the city where radio waves could reach. The presence of Isan music on the radio at least impressed upon Bangkok society that now there were significant numbers of Isan people living in the area, while, in fact, Bangkok people had long easily identified native Isan from their dress, behavior, and other cultural attributes.

The media made it possible for the Isan workers psychically to “gather” together as a specific mass audience to express their cultural identity simultaneously in different locations while listening to the radio. Such expression of identity through the radio system could be accomplished by individuals who listened to the programs at home on weekends or as groups who listened together at their work places. The radio let Isan people present their culture to Thai society without having directly to face the outsiders in public. It is impossible to imagine how many people, either as individuals or groups from different areas in the city, listened to the radio program at the same time. This kind

680 Many factories in Bangkok allow their employers to listen to their favorite radio programs while working.
of social activity can be viewed as giving a sense of cohesion to the people who, in turn, internalized a sense of their own power. Listening to the radio program allowed many Isan people to assert their strength together simultaneously. Over time, the sense of affirmation in this experience gradually encouraged a sense of spiritual power that made them more effective, strong, and confident within their cultural identity and ethnicity.

Besides common Isan working class people, Isan Buddhist monks and laymen living in monasteries in Bangkok formed another group of fans for the Lao speaking radio disk jockey and his programs. Many Isan monks came to Bangkok through the traditional temple system of Thai education. Although modern education was introduced into the country in the late 1800s, the traditional education system in the Buddhist sangha remains strong in Isan to this day. One reason that this system continues to be strong is that it costs less than a modern education. It has been a blessing for those Isan people who continue to have the lowest income levels in the nation. In the 1970s or earlier, Buddhist study in the Isan region could earn a student only limited credit; but, if the monk wished to pursue higher education such as a bachelor’s degree, he had to go to Bangkok. After graduation, while some monks might leave the sangha and find jobs as lay people, others decided to stay in the Buddhist orders. The latter often live at temples in Bangkok, and some of them attained and still do attain high offices in the hierarchy of the Thai sangha.

A young layman, called luksit wat (ลูกศิษย์วัด) or a “temple child” student, that is, a “temple boy who serves a monk,” usually lives at the temple with the monks. In Bangkok, there are members of the Isan luksit wat who come to the city to study in modern schools. These boys, although they usually can afford the tuition, cannot afford
to live in a private apartment or dormitory. While studying in schools or colleges, living at the temple as *luksit wat* provides safety for many young Isan boys who mostly come from poor families. They need not pay for food and rent. Most monks accept as many *luksit wat* as they can afford, and an Isan monk often accepts an Isan boy to be his *luksit wat*. The *luksit wat* usually lives at the temple until he finishes his education and leaves the temple. After graduation, some Isan *luksit wat* obtain good jobs and may even become high ranking officials in Bangkok. Some of them have become leaders who can use their position to enhance Isan identity in Bangkok.

As a part of the audience for the Lao speaking radio program in Bangkok, some Isan Buddhist monks also have played a leading role in the promotion of Isan identity. In 1972 a crowd of college students demonstrated their anti-American sentiments against the United States Air Force and Army who had established bases in Thailand during the Vietnam War. The students were anti-war and wanted the U.S. forces to move out of the country. That incident affected a group of Isan workers called “the Thai guards” who worked as security guards for the U.S. Army bases in Isan. The Thai guards were afraid they would lose their jobs if the U.S. Army left. They went to Bangkok to ask the government to give them some employment if they lost their jobs. Since Isan was the area of the nation most sensitive to communist influence and those workers were the “guards” and were in Bangkok at that time, the government was afraid they might create some security problems for the nation. Government officials were worried that the

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681 During the 1970s and 1980s, tuition in Thai colleges and universities was affordable as the government managed Thai education from tax revenues. Today many colleges try to be “independent.” They try to run their educational programs with less or completely without government support; and one of their ways to find funds is through increasing student tuition; thus, higher education has become quite expensive.  
682 Theoretically Buddhist monks are not supposed to listen to any kind of entertainment; however, they can listen to news or anything that is considered not entertainment but knowledge. In any case, not every monk is completely serious in the practice of his religion.
guards might link up with working class activists in Bangkok through the Lao music programs because by that time there were already five Lao-speaking Isan radio announcers in Bangkok. To try to prevent any collusion, the government officials decided not to allow those DJs to speak Lao on their radio programs. That incident made both Northeasterner [Lao-Isan] radio fans and Isan radio announcers really unhappy as they were forced to switch from speaking their own Lao dialect to speaking Central Thai. The coercion made them feel awkward, abused, and uncomfortable in presenting their programs. From one of the temples in Bangkok, it was two Isan Buddhist monks who stepped into the situation to negotiate with the authorities. Finally, the government allowed the radio announcers to continue speaking in Lao during the radio programs on condition that they actively supported the government’s political agenda.\textsuperscript{683} The incident showed Buddhist monks from Isan in one of their typical traditional roles helping people to reach a peaceful compromise. In that particular instance, the monks were also supporting the Isan people in their wish to express their Lao-Isan-ness through the “Lao” music programs.

\textbf{“Home” of Isan Migrants}

The radio program was the place where Isan migrants could express their sister/brotherhood in solidarity with one another. For instance, a fan could write a letter to the DJ to request a song, and the DJ would read the letter on air. In the letter, the writer could say that he/she would like to dedicate a song to his/her loved one who might be listening to the program at that moment. The letter could be related to courtship, in which one might request a song that had some special private meaning to the loved one.

\textsuperscript{683} Waeng Plangwan (
In other words, the radio announcer basically worked as if he/she were a postman delivering a message from one person to another through the radio waves. The radio announcer was a surrogate sender of the message since he was the one who read the letters; and, thus, he became beloved of both parties.

The announcers transmitted general news as well. For example, for long holiday weekends, most Isan workers living in Bangkok preferred to go home to Isan. One could send a letter through the announcer on the program to ask friends in different locations if they wanted to go back home together. The friends could reply through the radio program as well. The reply might take some time; but that was no big matter since most workers listened to the radio programs while on the job. Sometimes the announcer would give his fans some advice about work, how to deal with the bosses, and information about Bangkok people in general and how to deal with them.

Among a few other DJs in Bangkok, Surin Phaksiri was one of the “leaders” of the Isan migrants. He became beloved among his fans not only because of his role as a radio announcer but also as a helper, a trusted friend, and a social and spiritual leader among Isan working class people. In his radio music program, he would announce news about jobs that were available in the city from time to time. This was quite useful for the migrants since most came to Bangkok to look for jobs. People who already had jobs could listen for news of new and better jobs offered in town at that moment. Most radio fans were thankful toward and deeply admiring of the Isan radio announcer because finding a job was the driving need that took them to the city.

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684 In the 1970s, a telephone was not as convenient or affordable as it is today when everybody has a cell phone.
Surin stated that Isan radio announcers were a kind of spiritual center among Isan working class folk in Bangkok. He said that when people were far from home, they became homesick and lonely. Sometimes new workers from Isan arriving in Bangkok had serious culture shock in the unfamiliar and harsh urban environment. For many workers, going to Bangkok was the first time they had ever been far from home. The radio announcers were the people on whom these Isan workers could rely. Hearing their own dialect and music on the radio made them feel closer to home. Surin asserted that once he received a letter from a fan who expressed his homesickness and thanks to the radio announcer. In the letter, the fan wrote:

…When [I] turn on the radio, [I] hear Lao language [broadcasting]. I drop my tears. Although [I] don’t have a chance to go visit you at the [radio] station, listening to the program cheers me up. I feel safe in the fact that now I have a friend from home living close to me who I can rely on when having some troubles…\(^{685}\)

The radio music program was a place where Isan people could start expressing their identities. The Isan announcers opened a door and encouraged them to show others who they were. A transistor radio was the medium that provided Isan migrants a supportive space in Thai society. The radio station was an actual place where Isan people could “get together.” On the weekends, some Isan workers used to assemble together at the radio station. They came to visit their beloved radio announcers and to express their mutual cultural identity by speaking their own home dialect, eating their home foods, and listening to their own music. Surin carried out all the activities mentioned above and convinced his radio fans that it was okay to follow his model and express their Lao or

\(^{685}\)Waeng Plangwan (ว่าง พลางวาน), Lukthung Isan: Isan History and Legend of Popular Songs. อุทรกิจสถาหานศิลปศาสต์ (Bangkok: สานักเรียนปัญญา, 2545/2002), 338.
Isan identity. Isan workers, thus, began to gain enough confidence to express their Lao- or Isan-ness in the big city of Bangkok.

The Pride of Being Lao

Although Northeast Thailand has been called “Isan” since the late 1800s, the term was not really commonly used until the last three decades of the twentieth century. The term “Lao” was apparently used to refer to Isan people in the 1960s to 1970s. Miller recalls that both these terms were used in Bangkok in 1972. Isan people usually regarded themselves as Lao while the word, Isan, was a kind of scholarly term.\(^{686}\) The label “a Lao speaking radio announcer” who offered “Lao” music through the media was unusual in Bangkok in the early 1970s, since “Lao” was a pejorative word and Lao culture carried and still carries a negative cultural projection among Bangkok people. Speaking and playing “Lao” music on the radio in Bangkok apparently required a great deal of bravery.

As he provided the first commercial Lao radio music program, Surin became the first role model for the open expression of Isan identity in Bangkok since, in the early 1970s, Isan people in Bangkok preferred not even to speak their Isan dialect to each other in public. The negative cultural image among Bangkok people intimidated them and impelled them to hide their ethnic identity. They were aware that others would recognize and look down on them through the extremely negative word “Lao,” which meant second class (or even lower), inferior, and insignificant to Bangkok society. Terry Miller recalls specific stereotypes of Isan people among the Bangkok natives in 1972 when he want to Thailand to conduct field work for his dissertation. He was told that the “Lao” people (the term Isan was not commonly used then) were lazy, stupid, and their food smelled

\(^{686}\)Terry E. Miller, personal communication.
bad. Bangkok people told him to live in the city, keep his family safe there, and just go up to the Northeast to do some research. They said that Northeast region was not a good place to live. However, Miller found out that almost no Central Thai people had ever been to the Northeast. Those people were almost insulted to be asked if they had gone to Isan because they never would.687 At that time, Isan natives had a strong fear of being labeled “Lao.”688 By speaking Lao on his radio music program, Surin became a hero to the working class Northeasterners and led them to the first free expression of their Lao identity in Bangkok. He encouraged his radio fans to speak Lao on his broadcasts. When the fans wrote him letters requesting songs, he read those letters in Lao dialect on air. On the program, sometimes a fan would simply call him on the phone and begin speaking to him in Bangkok dialect with strong Lao accent and clumsy sentences. “Please just speak Lao” was Surin’s common reaction, and that showed how he supported his fans in speaking their native dialect on air.

In order to encourage his fans to be confident in their Lao ethnicity, he convinced them that Lao people were not stupid or ignorant as the Thais (native Bangkok people) thought but [Lao] were hard workers, friendly, sincere, and smart. To support this idea, Surin mentioned to his listeners the big names of Northeasterners who were famous and appeared prominently in the Thai media at that time. Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat (สกุลเดช ธนรัชต์), 1908-1963, Prime Minister of Thailand from 1959-1963, Sombat Methani (สมบัติ เมทะนี), b. 1937, a popular male movie star from Ubon Ratchathani, and Suthep Wongkamhaeng (สุเทพ วงศ์กมหัง), b. 1934, a famous luk krung singer from

687 Ibid.
688 Even in the early 1990s when Isan culture seemed to be accepted, I was still not confident when I needed to tell my college friends in Bangkok where I was from. I cannot imagine, back in the 1970s, how Isan people felt about their identity in Bangkok.
Nakhon Ratchasima were some of those whom he often mentioned. 689 On the broadcast, Surin showed his fans that there were many Lao Northeastern people from Isan who were accomplished, well known, and important to the nation. Thus, Northeastern people should not look down on themselves but should be proud of their cultural heritage instead. 690

**Establishing Isan Identity**

Surin also convinced his audience to view themselves as “Isan,” from the Isan region, rather than “Lao.” He insisted that people who were from Northeast Thailand were not Lao but Thai or Thai-Isan. On his radio program he often said to his fans: “…If you do not believe me, look at your identifications. It says that we are of Thai nationality, Thai ethnicity, and believe in Buddhism. We are not Lao but we are Thai Isan, speaking phuen-mueang Isan (Isan local dialect), and living in the Isan region.” 691

Surin tried to differentiate among people from the two banks of the Khong River. He argued that he wanted to make Isan people feel comfortable and confident that the negative term “Lao” no longer applied to them. Lao referred only to Laotian people in the nation of Laos. He asserted that in this way, also, he could enable the rest of the Thai people to better understand Isan people. His strategy at least made Isan people more confident about themselves and continued to reinforce their newly created identity although this argument contains some weak points. First, the difference between Lao and Isan is that Laos is a foreign country and was a colony, extremely poor, and backward.

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689 Today, in 2010, Sombat Methani is 73 years old. He has been publically labeled a Phra-ek talawt-kan (พระเอกตลาดกลาง), “a permanent main role actor,” and Suthep Wongkamhaeng was awarded National Artist status in 1990.
Calling the people of the Northeast “Isan” also defined a relationship to Central Thailand. It is “Northeast” of something, and that is Bangkok, the center of power and culture. Isan people did not want to be Lao because Lao were foreigners. Isan people were Thai in a relationship with Bangkok. In the term they just acknowledge that Isan are Thai; however, Isan people acknowledge that Bangkok people are the center. Last, in the broader sense, however, this usage differentiates Isan from Lao and adds to the ongoing animosity between Thailand and Laos. Saying Isan people are sort of like the Lao but not Lao is irrational. In some ways, on the other hand, it is true that all the Lao people of Thailand are strongly influenced by Central Thai culture and those in Laos are little influenced by it. Isan people would have difficulty in arguing against those Laotians who might say Isan people are “corrupted Lao.”

In the beginning, this strategy seemed effective in terms of politics. Isan natives used this identity mostly as a shield to protect themselves when they needed it. Isan people considered themselves to be Isan only when they needed to be Isan and especially when they needed to differentiate themselves from other Thai people. At home among themselves, however, they were still Lao. In the early 1980s, Isan people in the villages who are now in their late 70s sometimes considered themselves Lao. They still called themselves “Lao” and called people of the Central region “Thai,” especially Bangkok people. In the 1970s and 1980s when they went to Bangkok, Isan people often said “Bai Thai” (ไปไทย) “going [to] Thai,” for “going to Bangkok,” while today the new generation simply says “Bai Krung Thep” (ไปกรุงเทพ) “going to Bangkok.”

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692 Terry E. Miller, personal communication.
Today, Isan identity has already become well established among the younger generations. Most modern Isan people consider themselves to be Isan and are no longer conscious of their cultural roots in the traditions of Laos. They seem to have completely separated the people in Laos from those in Northeast Thailand, and somehow they feel superior to people who live in the nation of Laos. Miller asserts that even in 1973, there was evidence of a sense of superiority among the Isan over the Laotians in viewing things in Laos as dirty and backward. Those people were (supposedly) lazy and stupid. Apparently some Isan thought of the Lao of Laos in the way that Central Thai thought of the population of Isan. Today most people in Thailand, whether Isan or not, still think that Laos and Lao culture is low and backward. This phenomenon shows the power of mass media, politics, and economy to break the people of one culture into two groups and estrange them from each other.

Isan Music Films Empower Isan

In about 1977, Isan people in Bangkok began to find opportunities to get together in public to enjoy their cultural identity through watching Isan music films in addition to listening to radio broadcasts of their music at home and in the workplace. By the late 1970s Isan country music, luk thung Isan, had become popular, and Isan traditional music, luk thung mawlam, morphed into a true folk-pop genre. Luk thung Isan continued to play an important role in the building of a positive Isan image among working class people in Bangkok, and film was the next medium to emphasize Isan music in the form of Isan musical movies. Unlike the radio, through which Isan people could express themselves in pseudo-private spaces, the nature of the new medium and “going to see a

693See chapter 4.
movie” opened an opportunity for them to appear in public and present themselves as Isan.694

Movie music in Thailand was first influenced by Your Cheating Heart, an American country music film, shown in Bangkok in 1964;695 but Thais did not act on the idea of producing this kind of film until the 1970s. In 1970, Monrak Luk Thung (มนตรีก สุกทุง), “The Magic Love of a Country Song,” became the earliest film of this type in which many luk thung songs were included. The story took place in Central Thailand, and most of the songs in the picture featured Central style country songs rather than those of Isan. This early Thai music film is not at all considered connected to Isan or the new image of Isan except that it led to an Isan oriented movie a few years later.

Beginning in the early 1970s, some Isan movies, with stories set in Isan and depicting Isan culture, began to appear. Isan music, in both traditional and pop genres, was included in the new films. Some of the well known early movies were (1972) Khaen Lam Khong, (แก่นลำโขง), “The Khaen’s Sound along the Khong River;” (1972) Bua Lam Phu (บัวลำพู), “The Subdistrict of Bua Lam Phu;” and (1975) Phaendin Mae (แฝงเดินแม่), “The Land of Our Mother.” The Isan music in those movies served merely as background sound tracks. Bua Lam Phu, however, had some actual musical scenes in the movie or at least carried a story related to the music.

In 1977, Monrak Maenam Mun (มนตรีกแม่น้ำมุ่น), “The Magic Love of Mun River,” was the first Isan music film to become widely popular. It was a love story about young Isan in Ubon Ratchathani Province where the Mun River flows before merging with the Maekhong near the border with Laos.

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694 In the 1970s, home video was not common.  
695 See chapter 4.
In the film there were a few full music scenes with some *luk thung Isan*, and Isan pop singers also appeared in it. The music functioned as a musical showcase, not merely as a sound track; and the film was heavily promoted by the Chomrom Khosok Isan (ชุมชนโชมรุ่มโคราชอีสาน; ชุมชนโคราชอีสาน), “Isan Radio Announcer’s Association of Bangkok.” Surin Phaksiri, the
favorite Isan radio announcer in Bangkok, held the position of President of the Association for many years; and he was also involved in the production of the movie as songwriter and song selector.\textsuperscript{696}

**Isan Spoken Movies**

The Isan Radio Announcer’s Association of Bangkok had been founded at a gathering of all the Isan radio announcers in the city. By the late 1970s, there were already ten of them. Surin, as a “senior,” gathered the others together and founded the association whose objective was to cheer, encourage, help, and be a companion to those Isan migrants in Bangkok who were far from home and homesick, lonely, and perhaps in need of help. While each Isan DJ provided music for entertainment and cultural expression, the association was intended mainly to unify Isan people and promote Isan culture in Bangkok. Promoting the culture helped to strengthen the spirit of Isan and made the people feel more confident while they lived in the dominant Central Thai environment.

Language is a primary aspect of cultural identity. It functions profoundly within a person’s inner self in communication with someone who shares the same cultural background. Language plays a major part in determining a person’s ethnic identity. Isan dialect, then, was one of the primary foci in Isan cultural promotion. As mentioned earlier, prior to the late 1970s, Isan culture was regarded as Lao. The Radio Isan Announcer’s Association reinforced the use and promotion of the new term, “Isan” to replace “Lao” in referring to the people and culture of Northeast Thailand. For example, \textit{pha\textsubscript{a}s\textsubscript{a} Isan} (ภาษาอีสาน), “Isan language;” \textit{khon Isan} (คนอีสาน), “Isan people;” and \textit{phak}\textsuperscript{696}Most songs that appeared in the movies were not directly composed for the films themselves but instead were previously released and already popular in the pop music industry.
*Isan* (ภาคอีสาน), “Isan region” became the preferred terms. This new identity made people feel more secure since “Lao” was such a negative term among native Bangkok people. “Isan” has since become the norm in the media to designate the people of Northeast Thailand.

The film, *Monrak Maenam Mun*, “the Magic Love of Mun River,” expressed Isan identity through use of the Isan dialect in the movie. Similar to other Thai movies, it was originally produced in the Bangkok dialect, the official language of Thailand; and most of the actors and actress were regular Central Thai movie stars, although the film presented Isan culture and music. The Isan Radio Announcer’s Association of Bangkok was the primary voice of promotion for the movie. They announced it on their radio programs and told their fans to support it as “Isan movie music.” In addition, to make the fans
happier, the movie was later overdubbed in Isan through the voices of their favorite Isan radio announcers. The whole movie then “spoke” in Isan to suit the taste and cultural identity of the Isan audience. *Monrak Maenam Mun* is the first known Thai film in Isan dialect, achieved through this overdubbing of the dialogue. It demonstrated that the Isan people in Bangkok had the power to bring their culture to the media and present it openly to Thai society. Isan culture was previously so “taboo” that it was not displayed in public. That movie, however, proved that the old negative view of Isan culture was shifting to a more positive one.

**Isan Dialect in Public**

According to Waeng Plangwan (แวง พลังวรรณ) the film *Monrak Maenam Mun* premiered at Phet Rama Theater (เพชรรามา), Phetburi Road, Bangkok, on August 20, 1977, as well as subsequently showing in all the other regions of the country. Bangkok, however, was the major target for making a profit. In the early 1970s, there were about one million Isan people in Bangkok, and, if all of them went to the movie, the producer could earn ten million baht. That means the movie ticket cost about ten baht in 1977. In the advertisements for the film and at the premier, the producer added a live mawlam performance for the audience before showing the movie in the theater. The audience members also had an opportunity to meet their favorite Isan radio announcers.

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697 Although Central Thai dialect serves as the official language of Thailand, there are many other dialects. All Thai movies had previously been presented in the Bangkok accent except, perhaps, in some few scenes where the countryside was depicted. Then some other Central Thai dialect that is not Bangkok would be applied. Not until recently were dialects from other regions, North, South, or Isan, heard in Thai film in addition to Central Thai.


699 Today one U.S. dollar equals thirty-one to thirty-five baht. In 1977, one dollar was about twenty-five baht.

700 The event, however, is recorded in a Thai newspaper, the *Thai Rat* (ไทยรัฐ) of August 12, 1997, instead of August 20.
who later on would dub the whole movie into Isan language. The lead actors and actresses were present to welcome and offer *pan khoa* (พันข้าวจิ), a bun of roasted sticky rice, a traditional Isan snack, to the audience members. Incidentally, even the term *pan khoa* was “low class” enough that in the ad the term *hot dog Isan* was written next to it to make it sound “significant.” 701 On the small post card which advertised the film, the message said, “go see the movie, *Monrak Maenam Mun* and feel we are going back home for a celebration.” 702 That verifies that the Isan spirit was still strongly connected to the hometown in 1977. 703

The movie became very successful, and hundreds of thousands of people went to see it. It even caused a serious traffic jam. Extra security guards were called to duty for the safety of the crowds. Surin mentioned that the movie earned more than three million baht, a great success. Within a few years, many other film companies began to produce similar Isan style movies, most also quite successful.

That whole phenomenon showed the power of Isan people’s getting together to express their identity through their musical culture and their own language in film.

Through the media, the Isan radio announcers actually spoke for Isan working people to the whole of Thai society. They acted as if they were Isan politicians in helping Isan people to see themselves from a new perspective. In fact, those radio announcers were among the first to promote real cultural diversity in Thailand.

The film acted as a mirror in which Isan people could see themselves in ways different from the negative view Bangkok people had earlier created for them. It is

703 Due to more advanced technology in communications and transportation, however, the meaning of “hometown” and “homesick” may be slightly different among today’s Isan migrants.
important to note that in the 1970s and even today most Isan pop music genres that have gone mainstream in the Thai music industry were first supported by Isan people in a manner similar to the way Isan films were in the 1970s. Non-Isan Thais, especially native Bangkok people, had their own kinds of musical entertainment. The change to a positive image of Isan culture was first facilitated by native Isan people themselves.\footnote{Unlike the United States where many forms of African-American music have been popular with both black and white people for at least a full century, in Thailand except for ponglang music, the other Isan genres remain supported primarily by native Isan. However, today, another proof that Isan culture has been accepted by non-Isan Thais lies in foods and textiles. By the end of the 1980s, considerable numbers of five-star Isan restaurants in addition to Isan street vendors began to appear all over Bangkok where, of course, the food is enjoyed not only by native Isan people but also by Bangkok natives and others.}

After watching that first movie, Isan people in Bangkok began speaking their dialect to each other in public. It then began to be heard on buses, in market places, and shopping centers, where it never had been before. When Isan people became confident enough about themselves, that attitude influenced others to accept them as worthy equals.

Commercially Driven Music

Listening to Our Own Music

From 1980 to 1990 Isan music became a commercially driven product. While regular Thai country style, \textit{luk thung}, has faded in popularity, the Isan style, \textit{luk thung Isan}, has continued to grow, especially the popularity of the latest genre, \textit{luk thung mawlam} or “folk-pop,” rooted in its ethnic musical identity. It shows the power of the people who consume it to represent their musical culture. That power is also manifested to the rest of the nation through the media, the music industry, and popular culture generally. Besides promotion by the Isan radio announcers mentioned above, a few other factors have driven Isan music up through the other commercial musics in Thailand today. They are the large numbers of the Isan population, capitalism, and modern life.
styles in addition to the strong foundations of the Isan musical tradition. The popularity of Isan music in Thailand was witnessed by John Clewley, an English-born and long-time Bangkok resident who devoted the majority of his chapter entitled “Thailand: songs for living,” in the second edition of *World Music: the Rough Guide* (2000), to Isan music.\(^{705}\)

First, the Isan population is fully one-third of the total Thai population. If Isan people do something together as a group, they have a strong possibility of success. As Khamkoeng Thawngchan (คำแก่ง ทองจันทร์), b. 1946, a native Isan songwriter, points out, “If they [Bangkok people] don’t buy our music, their wives/husbands who are Isan will buy it. If they don’t buy our music, their bosses/employees will buy it.”\(^{706}\) Second, capitalism and the modern, urbanized way of life have opened an opportunity for Isan people actively to support their music. Working in Bangkok, Isan people have strengthened their economic positions, and the modern urbanized life style encourages them to be materialistic. This is quite different from the traditional agricultural life style based on economic efficiencies in which people do not need to spend cash to live their lives. Last, Isan has a strong and unique musical tradition because the region was formerly somewhat isolated from the dominant power of Bangkok. After Westernization and modernization arrived in Bangkok in the late 1800s, people in the Isan region continued to practice their traditional way of life. Even up to the 1970s, compared to people in big cities like Bangkok who were already influenced by Westernization and modernization, Isan people still remained deep within their own traditional culture. They had not much chance to experience and did not understand Western musical culture,

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unlike people in Bangkok. Isan people, thus, still preferred to listen to their own traditional and popular music, the latter of which is less influenced by Western music than that of other Thai populations.

**Thai Music Industry and Isan Songwriters**

When Isan music became widely popular, it brought attention from outsiders, especially music business people. When other styles of music began to decline in sales, those people began to turn to Isan music. They began to work with a music that they formerly looked down on as “music of the poor” and “low class.” Khamkoeng stated that, in the beginning music business people started to work with Isan music not because of any esthetic appreciation but because they saw the potential for profit. As he said, “They came to us basically because our music has a good sell.” “They can make money from us.” “We are useful for them.”

Their estimate was correct, and Isan music has become really prominent in the Bangkok music industry. Although those businessmen involved themselves with Isan music for crass purposes, their promotional activities enhanced the general cultural value of the music.

The Isan popular songwriter and producer, Khamkoeng Thawngchan, continues to see some of the benefits of the popularity of Isan music. He said that in the past, when *luk krung* “urban style” and *luk thung* “(regular) Thai country style” were popular, an Isan songwriter had to follow the Central Thai style of writing and singing the songs. When the production of Isan pop became successful, non-native Isan writers or producers also initially gained more benefit than the Isan artists who were involved. Now, because Isan music has become so universally popular in the nation, those Central Thai artists

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707 Ibid.
have to follow the Isan style of writing and singing the songs. They come to ask Isan artists to help them. Many singers, both native and non-native Isan, who used to sing other styles have begun to sing Isan style music. These singers apparently have native Isan songwriters and producers to advise them in their careers. This whole process began an involvement with Isan artists as songwriters, singers, musicians, and producers of Isan country music. As a result, it has created more jobs for Isan artists. Isan songwriters, such as Sala Khunnawut (สัลล่า กุญหาวิน), b. 1962, have achieved high reputations and real celebrity status in Thai (Isan) country music today. Some Isan instruments such as the wot, the rounded panpipe, have become highlight instruments for accompaniment of luk thung Isan.

In the last fifteen years, many non-native Isan singers and Isan-born singers who used to sing other styles have switched to sing mostly Isan style. When even a non-native Isan singer sings luk thung Isan, his or her music is likely to be successful. Isan audience members feel great pride when they see and hear outsiders sing their music. As a songwriter and music producer, Khamkoeng Thawngchan often advises his non-native Isan singers that, “You don’t need to act or sing exactly like a native Isan; you just need to do something to prove that you can do it. Then your songs will have good sales; Isan people will buy your music.”

**The Isan Country Music Troupe**

Since the 1970s, besides the mainstream Isan country music that became first popular with the support of the Isan working class in Bangkok as mentioned above,
Wong Dontri Lukthung Isan Phet Phin Thawng grounded in the home style, has projected an Isan image through their famous performances in the Isan region, Bangkok, and many other areas of the country for more than three decades. In the 1970s only a few luk thung Isan troupes, usually identified by the name of the most famous or lead singers of the troupe with the prefix wong dontri, meaning a musical band, appeared mostly in the Isan region and few in Bangkok. Among the best known is: Wong Dontri Saksayam Phetchomphu (วงศ์ดนตรีศักสมัย เพชรชมพู), 1972-1982; Saksayam Phetchomphu was the most famous singer of that troupe. It was the first complete or “pure” luk thung (Isan) troupe in the country.\(^{710}\) Wong Dontri Dao Bandawn (วงศ์ดนตรีดาว บ้านตนเอง), 1973-1982, and Wong Dontri Thepphawn Phetubon (วงศ์ดนตรีเทพพร เพชรบุญ), 1974-1981, were quite successful, and most Isan people now in their mid 40s remember them. Sonthi Sommat (สนธิ สมมาตร), b. 1952, the leader of Wong Dontri Sonthi Sommat (วงศ์ดนตรีสนธิ สมมาตร), 1978-1979, was most famous in the late 1970s through recordings of his that carried on for many years. He founded his own troupe although it did not last long. Those troupes usually disbanded when the lead singer lost “the popularity of the new” and no longer intensely appealed to audiences as time passed by. Wong Dontri Thitso Lam Phloen (วงศ์ดนตรีทิตโสฬาพลเอิน), 1977-1985, was founded, unlike the others, in Bangkok. The name of the troupe, Thitso Lam Phloen, in this case was not the name of the most famous singer in the troupe but of a songwriter and radio producer mentioned above. Among these groups, the Wong Dontri Phet Phin Thawng\(^{711}\) had the longest popularity with Isan audiences, from 1970 to 2005. Unlike other troupes, Khana Phet

\(^{709}\) See chapter 4.
\(^{710}\) Prior to the early 1970s, luk thung shows in Isan existed only as a part of the performance of mawlam mu and mawlam phloen, an Isan traditional theatrical genre.
\(^{711}\) Apparently this troupe’s name is not based on the name of the most famous singer in the troupe either. See “Phet Phin Thawng, chapter 4.”
Phin Thawng did not just offer the audience typical country style songs but also comedic plays which were the real highlight of their performances. The troupe served Isan audiences both in terms of musical entertainment and in reinforcing Isan cultural values, especially the Isan dialect. They were the first Isan country troupe to present their performances completely in Isan dialect, “an Isan speaking *luk thung* troupe.”

The Phet Phin Thawng was unique from other troupes and showed the audience they were a real Isan country music troupe, not just in the fact that most of the numbers were Isan but in that they sang and spoke Isan dialect to the audience through their entire performance on stage. In a general sense, all sorts of Isan traditional genres and other entertainments have been presented in Isan dialect, which is normal. Traditional music should be presented in the traditional language. However, a *luk thung* troupe such Phet Phin Thawng was not just “traditional” but a “country” music troupe, as they preferred to present themselves, offering various styles of popular music including *luk thung, luk thung Isan, luk thung mawlam*, or even traditional *mawlam*, and some traditional instrumental music as well. It had been common throughout the country in the 1970s and 1980s for a *luk thung* troupe (or band) to perform in [Central] Thai language, which was considered “high,” “significant,” and “up-to-date,” as *luk thung* music was and is supposed to be. Unlike the others, the Phet Phin Thawng did the opposite. They selected Isan dialect as their main performance language, the first country music troupe to do so.

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712 As mentioned earlier, *luk thung* music is a country style that originated in Bangkok. The singing style and music presentations were done in Central Thai dialect. Later, *luk thung Isan*, an Isan style, was based on a style of song that includes some Isan words. The performance and the manner in which the music was presented in a stage show, concert, or singing contest was in Central Thai dialect.
That troupe was able to present more Isan dialect than others through their Sa-daeng talok (สะเด่งตลก), “a comedic play.” More than half of their total performance was devoted to their comedic play, usually about an hour or up to ninety minutes. It was certainly the highlight of their performance and it brought them great fame. During the 1980s, the audience most looked forward to seeing their comedic performances rather than anything else, such as country songs or other kinds of pop music. The performance presented conventional Isan mawlam, talk show elements, and sub-sections of comedian’s skits as well as short episodes of old folk tales and various views of Isan farmer life style in both its traditional and more modern aspects, all in Isan dialect. Their

Figure 62. Cassette tape cover of Phet Phin Thawng Troupe featuring popular comedic album, Mawlam Phitsadan (ม่วลามพิสดาร) “Strange Mawlam (Performance),” released in the late 1980s.
comic plays alluded to deep levels of Isan culture not easily understood or appreciated by people who were not native to the Isan region.

In contrast, their presentation of country songs symbolized the troupe’s up-to-dateness. It suggested the modernity of the Isan region itself by implying that farmers could have what people in the city had. This unconsciously cheered Isan people and encouraged them to be more confident in their culture and identity. They felt “civilized” and equal to “others” due to the promotion of their musical modernity rather than just traditional music that city people might sneer at. By talking and announcing their performance programs to the audience in their own dialect and performing *luk thung* songs, they presented Isan culture in a modern light.

For about three decades, from the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s, the troupe travelled all around the country including Bangkok where large numbers of Isan (or Lao) people were gathered.713 These musicians’ marketable products have come out in several media formats such as vinyl records, cassette tapes, video tapes, CDs, VCDs, and on Youtube. The media systems have carried the performances to an ever broader audience, farther and farther away, even among some Isan diasporas and Lao refugees in the United States who have been given opportunities to see them through home entertainment systems. The troupe’s fame, during the time they were still active, cheered all Isan people and enhanced their sense of solidarity. It reminded them of the customs and traditions which had been heavily impacted by modernization and the Central Thai cultural hegemony. The Phet Phin Thawng Troupe played an important role in encouraging Isan people to stand up for their cultural heritage during their three decades

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713 Referring to Lao refugees from the Siamese and Wiang Chan Wars in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries who were forced into resettlement, mostly in Central Thailand.
of performances. That musical art in its strong communal role was extremely important in easing the stress levels of the migrants as they went rapidly through their own version of future shock.

Today, although the troupe is no longer active, what they achieved in the past has counted significantly toward the redefinition of the Isan image. Some artists have been lauded as distinguished contributors to the cultural promotion and preservation of Isan. Naphadon Duangphawn (นพดล ดวงพร), b. 1941, the founder/leader, was decorated as phumi phon ngan diden thang wat-tana-tham (ผูมีผลงานดีเด่นทางวัฒนธรรม), “One Who Has Great Work in [Thai] Cultural Productions,” in 1989. Thawngsai Thaphathan (ทองใส่ ทับถ่าน), b. 1947, the troupe’s phin player, who was significant musically in providing Isan sound for the troupe, has received many awards such as Sinlaphin Diden (ศิลปินดีเด่น), “Distinguished Artist” of Ubon Ratchathani Province in 2000, Khru Phumpanya Thai (ครูภูมิปัญญาไทย), “Teacher of Thai Wisdom,” in 2002, and an Honorary M.A. Degree in Music from Ubon Ratchathani Rajabhat University in 2005.

**Bring the Music Home**

Although Isan popular genres were first born in Bangkok, promoted by native Isan radio DJs in the city, and supported mostly by Isan migrant workers, those fans eventually brought the music home to Isan. By the mid 1970s, luk thung music had already taken its place, mostly among young Isan back home while, of course, the elderly still preferred and supported traditional genres. By the early 1980s, the more modern music such as luk thung Isan and luk thung mawlam had become the mainstream in the Isan region.
Most Isan migrants are able to come home to visit only a few times a year, most often for important occasions such as the (modern) New Year, Songkran (traditional New Year), or Buddhist holidays such as the Buddhist Lent. During these festivals, which usually take place over a long holiday weekend and last five or six days, they can enjoy a break from their full time jobs, visit with family, eat home-cooked food, and participate in festivities. Because most village festivals feature large scale musical entertainment in addition to the obligatory festival procession, the migrants look forward to seeing performances similar to those they enjoy in the city on those occasions when they return to their home villages. Because they work in the central economic zone that is Bangkok, many of these people, who range in age between their late teens and early fifties, have earned enough money that they are now the richest people of their home village. This allows them to contribute to the village’s economy even though their primary residences are in Bangkok. They most commonly do so in three ways: assisting their parents and other relatives who remain in the village; making merit by supporting their local temple or a temple in some other area, often through lavish building projects; and contributing to the entertainment for village festivals. Their status also allows them to exert an influence over which acts are hired for festivals in their home villages. In most cases, they prefer to see music that matches their urban tastes, and they prefer troupes who perform popular music with an Isan flavor. That was the primary reason that finally Isan pop style came home to the region among these Isan migrants.

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714 Before the mid 1980s at home, those Isan workers could enjoy the urbanized styles of their musical choice both luk thung Isan and luk thung mawlam as a part of theatrical performances in the mawlam mu and mawlam phloen genres. Since the mid 1980s, these people can enjoy the music in the form of lam sing performances, which basically cover all kinds of popular songs in the process of performance. In most cases, these workers are not able to hire a troupe of well known luk thung or luk thung mawlam singers due to the high cost. Mawlam sing troupes, however, cost less to hire and can include some songs in the same styles although they just do most covered songs.
Due to the ever increasing influence of these migrants in their home villages, the older, prominent individuals who formerly selected and hired the entertainment for village festivals have had, since the 1980s, less control over which groups are invited to perform. Because most of these urbanized younger people have little interest in traditional mawlam, they generally prefer to recommend hiring troupes who perform in current popular styles or a mixture of popular and traditional rather than purely traditional styles such as mawlam klawn and mawlam mu. This has been one of the key factors in the decline of Isan traditional genres, for instance, mawlam klawn, the last surviving genre of unadulterated traditional musical performance. However, rather than leading to the disappearance of mawlam entirely, it has led to the creation of new genres such as mawlam sing and luk thung mawlam. These new kinds of mawlam fulfill the demands of young audiences through their eclectic combinations of musical styles. Unlike the old traditional styles, these new traditional genres fit better with Isan modern culture and still represent Isan musical culture and identity.

From the late 1970s onward Isan popular music has been a symbol of modernity which, through its consumption, implies that Isan people have become modern. This modernity thrives not only in Bangkok among Isan workers but also in the Isan region. It indicates that the region itself has become modern “just like” Bangkok and that helps common Isan people now, no longer to be ashamed of some “backwardness” of their home region. Bringing this modern music home is another way to change the image of the region. What people in Bangkok listen to in the city, Isan people in Isan also similarly listen to; how can anyone now claim that Isan people are somehow “uncivilized,” “unfashionable,” or of “low taste.” If Isan people in Isan also play similar
kinds of modern (Western) instruments to those of people in Bangkok, how can anyone say the Isan region and its culture are “rustic,” “out of date,” or “undeveloped.”

**Conclusion**

All Isan musical genres have contributed to the redefinition of Isan’s new positive image. Since the 1970s, although media has been the main tool for projecting Isan music to Thai society at large, without political and educational accommodation and the profit motive of commercial entities, the process would not have been possible. The development of *wong dontri phuen-mueang (Isan)*, which flourished in the 1970s, was accomplished through the support of the Thai government in providing entertainment for rural people as a venue for anticommunist efforts. Beyond festivals and celebrations in the communities, musical activities were organized in some other contexts including occasional performances for the Thai royal family, and Isan local ensemble contests, as well as for the official anticommunist programs. By the early 1980s, the Isan ensemble was already well established in Thailand’s academic environment, through the *natasin* schools. By the late 1980s, this educational system enabled the spread of the music throughout the region and to some other parts of the country. The music became more standardized and was promoted among all levels of the Thai educational system, particularly among school children and college students where the name *ponglang* music/ensemble overrode the old term *wong dontri phuen-mueang Isan* among the mass of people. Recently *ponglang* music has been offered as a music major both in the *natasin* schools and in colleges, mostly in Isan where it became the first Thai folk music major in the country.
The National Office of the Cultural Commission is another government organization that also promotes *ponglang* music in many of its cultural projects. *Ponglang* music has been projected as “Isan traditional music” representing Isan culture and identity. Isan popular music, including *luk thung Isan* and *luk thung mawlam*, was first promoted by Isan DJs through their radio music programs in Bangkok. Beginning in the 1970s in the capital city, Isan audiences, who were mostly working class people, began to support the music from their hometown through the radio music programs and films. By the mid 1980s, Isan popular music became one of the mainstream commercially driven musics in the Thai music industry. Most Isan popular music such as *luk thung Isan* and *luk thung mawlam* carries considerable Isan cultural elements which enabled it to become another way of projecting Isan culture and identity. All these achievements have promoted the positive image of Isan musical culture as a whole.

In order to make their music acceptable to Thai society, Isan people embedded in their music necessary indicators of Westernization and modernization, the overall Thai model for advanced civilization in the twentieth century. While their music has been the primary driver in the redefinition of the Northeasterners’ image, the Isan people themselves have in the process been a deeply affected population. Through the Thai media and under the impact of Westernization and modernization, while the music projected their cultural identity to others, that music has also simultaneously positively reinforced their own self image. Isan people learned how to navigate the Central Thai environment and, concurrently, wipe out the old negative images as they constructed for themselves a new more positive position in Thai culture.
CHAPTER VIII
CONCLUSIONS: PRIDE IN BEING FROM ISAN

Most of Isan, Thailand’s Northeast, is culturally and ethnically Lao. Unlike the four neighboring countries of Myanmar, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Cambodia, all of which differ from Thailand in terms of ethnicity, language, and culture, the Lao and Siamese are linguistically and ethnically derived from the same root, that of Tai speaking people. They have long shared certain aspects of culture. Historically, within what is now Thailand, the Lao people, a minority, have suffered from a negative image problem held by the Siamese who have dominated the kingdom’s politics and economics. In the 1930s when the absolute monarchy of Siam became the constitutional monarchy of Thailand, a new constitution required Thai identity for all who lived in the nation; however, people in the remote areas on the periphery remained deeply attached to their old ethnicities and identities. Prior to the 1970s, most people in Northeast Thailand still saw themselves as Lao; and Bangkok people definitely considered them an inferior class. Beginning in the 1970s, Northeasterners adopted and developed a new sense of “Isan-ness” although they continued to be disrespected by citizens of the Central region during most of the next two decades.

Prior to the late nineteenth century, Northeast Thailand was also identified as the Khorat Plateau. For many centuries the region had gradually absorbed Lao settlers from the other side of the Khong River who maintained political and cultural connections with the three interrelated kingdoms of the Lao: Luang Phrabang founded in 1271, Wiang Chan founded in 1560, and Champasak founded in 1713. By the late eighteenth century,
the successive Siamese kingdoms of Ayuthaya, Thonburi, and Bangkok gained political hegemony over the three Lao kingdoms. During that period, the Siamese forced large numbers of Lao to resettle not only on the Khorat Plateau but also in what is now Central Thailand. During the two Siamese-Lao wars, in 1778 and 1825, many members of the Lao royal family were sequestered in Bangkok. During those times, the Siamese, as rulers, viewed the Lao as slaves, servants, and generally inferior people. “Lao” functioned in all respects as a pejorative term in Bangkok and Central Thailand.

In the late 1890s, under pressure from nearby Western colonizers, especially the French, the Siamese determined to separate their Lao-speaking territories and people from those the French already controlled, that is, most of today’s modern nation of Laos. To that end, the Siamese bestowed Siamese citizenship on the Lao people who lived on the Khorat Plateau and designated the northeast territories and towns as the “Region of Isan” instead of the “Head Cities of the Lao.” This policy had nothing to do with culture. The people of the Northeast were still regarded as and still called “Lao” by the Siamese.

In the 1930s, the new “Thaï” government replaced the monarchy with a constitutional, democratic monarchy. This enormous change demonstrated the desire to form a modern nation as opposed to the old, absolutist kingdom. The country became Thailand, as it remains today. By edict, all the people of the nation were supposed to immediately become officially Thai, regardless of their original ethnicities and identities. However, it took somewhat longer to change peoples’ minds and attitudes, especially in remote areas; and most common people continued to regard themselves according to their traditional identities. Northeasterners remained Lao, and Bangkok people looked down on them as
if they were all living in the traditional context of the old Siam for many decades following.

After the Second World War, the Bangkok economy grew rapidly. The city was flooded with large numbers of Northeast migrants and those of other regions as well who poured in looking for work. In Northeast Thailand in the dry season, only the elders and children were left at home while everyone else headed for Bangkok seeking employment. In the city, most factory workers, laborers, gardeners, servants, and taxi drivers were and continue to be Northeasterners. The resultant unequal economic, social, and cultural interactions between natives of Bangkok and Northeasterners reinforced use of the term “Lao” as an insult against people from the Isan region. By the second half of the twentieth century, although “Lao” still conveyed the negative meanings of the past, its usage was based on then current socio-cultural conditions.

After World War II, the negative connotations of the term “Lao” contrasted with ideas of Westernization and modernization. Unlike the early 1800s when “Lao” implied slave, servant, and prisoner of war, by the 1950s, Lao just meant “low class,” as Northeasterners came from the formerly “Lao” countryside. They were seen as “stupid” because they were just farmers and “never” achieved high education; they were “out of date” because they dressed unfashionably and were low in technological “savvy” in contrast to Bangkok people. Even today, Westernization and modernization still reinforce Thai class identity. One who assumes a Western image and becomes involved in modern technology is regarded as of higher class. This group has primarily been personified by wealthy Sino-Thais who own commercial enterprises in Central Thailand. People of other groups tend to be more deeply immersed in their traditional cultures and
tend to display fewer affects of Westernization and modernization. Those who are from rural areas and are farm based country people are automatically thought of as lower class. In terms of the economy, certainly, country people are poor. They provide the labor and service industry working class in the city. In this setting, the rich, of course, hold the power and take their positions as bosses. While one who is rich is usually admired and praised, or at least envied by the poor, the poor typically are yelled at, insulted, and ridiculed by the rich. This custom is common not only between the “high” and “low” classes in work places but also in public encounters between common native Bangkok citizens, many of whom regard themselves as superior, and people from the countryside who may be thought of as inferior. It is exceedingly common for urban folk to look down abusively on rural folk in Thailand. On the other hand, country people seemed to accept the givens of this class system without question, although the abuse has sometimes been hard to bear.

Westernization and modernization have influenced many aspects of Thai culture. In relation to language usage, those of “higher class” tend to add some Western, and especially English, words to their speaking patterns as they think this makes them look “sophisticated” in contrast to those who merely speak Thai or have some kind of marked accent by which the “ sophisticates” can consider them “low class.” Someone who plays a Western musical instrument supposedly looks “high-so” [high society] while one who plays a local instrument may be considered “low class,” “unsophisticated,” and “out of date.” Recently, a young man could hardly find a girlfriend in town if he played a Thai instrument. One who keeps up with modern fashion is “up to date,” while one who wears
older style clothes is not attractive or interesting. Any Western food, even fast-food hamburgers or pizza, is also “high class,” especially among the elites in Bangkok.

From the end of the Second World War, the Thai middle class expanded markedly in numbers throughout the country, and those people had opportunities to absorb Western styles. A few had opportunities to study abroad, especially in England or the United States. In other words, they grew in the shade of Westernization and modernization. The impact of Western culture became an important issue in Thai society. Middle class people were the ones who brought in Western culture while people in the countryside were still attached to the older Thai ways of life. Some of the new middle class certainly were also children of farmers from the countryside who, one way or another, caught better opportunities than did others to navigate their lives closer to the mainstream of modern, internationalized culture. Unfortunately, in some cases, adapting to modern society resulted in shameful and unethical mores. From the late 1970s to the mid 1980s, there were many novels and radio and TV dramas that depicted a son or daughter of a farmer family who happened to be living in a “high-so” Bangkok setting. While with Bangkok friends, the farmer’s son or daughter always tried to hide his or her farmer roots, not wanting to be looked down on or insulted. In some sense, such a character wanted to be a city person as did many countryside people who dreamed of living the urban lifestyle. The main plot line proceeded until one day the old farmer couple unexpectedly came to visit their child in Bangkok. Trying to prevent

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715 In fact, the true elites began seriously to absorb Westernization and modernization as early as the late nineteenth century; but they were and are a minority and have had less noticeable effect nationwide.

716 An awareness of the invasive aspects of Western cultural influence entered the minds of Thai people by the late 1970s and the Thai government then began to initiate projects for cultural protection. In addition, the national government designated 1994 “the Year of Thai Cultural Preservation.”

717 In those days, communication was not convenient; and visiting friends and family without advance notice is also an acceptable, long held Thai custom.
embarrassment among city friends about the fact that his or her parents were poor dirt farmers, the child rejected the old farm couple and said that he/she was not their child. Tears flowed down the old farm couple’s faces. They, of course, missed their child terribly and had made a long inconvenient trip from their countryside home to see him/her in the city. However, when they arrived, they were repudiated by their own child. Heartbroken and weeping helplessly, they took the fruits, vegetables, and bag of rice that they brought from their farm for their child back home. Although this example is just fiction, it reflects a real aspect of social change within the impact of Westernization and modernization. Prior to 1990, many Thai people were so captivated by modernization that they thought nothing of ignoring and sacrificing their own culture.

In Isan, Westernization and modernization effectively began in the 1960s. During the Cold War and the Vietnam War with mostly American aid, the Thai government constructed roads, electrical grids, modern water systems, radio, TV, and other facilities, first in the cities of the Isan region. Cities were prime locations for the development of a middle class. Modern life styles first appeared in the provincial cities among people in bureaucratic positions, commercial businesses, and other modern careers. Most high schools and colleges are located in the provincial towns or cities. The prospective middle class of Isan, some of whom were sons or daughters of the (majority) village farmers, came together at these educational institutions. Some lived in school dormitories. Some rented rooms or lived with relatives, while others whose homes were not too far from the

718 The idea of countryside people as “low class,” “poor,” “uncivilized” and “stupid,” appeared only only in Bangkok but also in cities and towns in more remote regions of the nation. During my studies in Natasin Roi-et in Roi-et City in the mid 1980s when my parents came to visit me occasionally, they would dress up as if they were urbanites just because they did not want me to be embarrassed among my “urban” student friends.
719 For example, our village, about thirty kilometers from its provincial city of Mahasarakham, did not have electricity until the early 1980s.
city commuted to school. For many students from small villages, living in a city while studying was a new life style which called for personal adjustment. When villagers and farmers travel, it was/is a custom to bring lunch with them, at least a haw khao (haew khaw), a “rice-wrap.” If they need to buy food on the way, they buy only kab khao (kae khaw), “(to eat) with rice,” any typical side dish. This custom is seen as part of the farmer identity. In the “Western” and “modern” environment of the cities, if one pursued such a practice, he would certainly feel “low class.” At school, sons and daughters of farmers felt “poor,” “shy,” or “unsophisticated” if they brought haw khao with them for lunch, although their parents suggested that they do so because it saved on food expenses.

During the 1980s, some male students brought haw khao to school and concealed it in their school book bags. Living in modern style, one would not properly bring a rice wrap but instead just purchase a whole meal at the school dining hall.

By the late 1970s, young people who had grown up in towns and cities formed the first cohort of “baby boomers” in the Isan urban middle class. As in other areas of Thailand, young Isan natives began to play guitars and sing pop songs. Some formed bands to play in current popular music styles. Enthusiasm for Westernization and modernization caused traditional music to decline in popularity. Even within the Isan region itself, based on the new attitudes, traditional music was seen increasingly as “low class,” “farmer music,” and “out of date.” To be “sophisticated” one did not play a traditional instrument but a Western one, and, of course, everybody wanted to be

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720 A Thai meal always has rice as the primary food, but it is not common to eat only rice alone.
721 Students did not need to buy rice at school but just some side dishes to go with it.
722 In the mid 1980s when I studied at Natassin Roi-et, a Thai music and dance school that offered mostly Thai classical and Thai folk music, the students, while they studied Thai instruments in class, played Western instruments in pop bands after school as part of their social life or sang pop songs with guitars to serenade young girls.
“sophisticated” and “up to date.”723 The Isan middle class did not do much to support traditional Isan musical culture and musical identity at that time. They turned towards Central Thai culture which was, in turn, reflective of Westernization and modernization. Westernization and modernization, thus, defined Thai social class structure not only in Bangkok but also in Isan. Within the region, city people were considered the highest stratum of society. Similar to Bangkok, most Isan urbanites were Sino-Thai who owned businesses, shops, restaurants, and various other kinds of enterprises that drove the Isan economy. While the rest of the Isan population, primarily farmers, were poor, those urbanites were the wealthy people in the region.724 Unlike Bangkok, since Isan Sino-Thais lived in the same cultural setting as others, there were fewer cultural distinctions between rich and poor. However, based on Westernization and modernization, city people had an easier life than did village farmers. As a result, the majority, Isan farmers, felt inferior and envious of the rich. To show their own modernity or what they thought looked best among city people, the villagers/farmers would wear newer clothes to town rather than what they normally wore in their daily life at home. Rather than those who lived far away in Bangkok, Isan townspeople were a closer role model of urban lifestyle to Isan village people who wished for a life style similar to that of provincial city people.

Education was a pathway into such an urban life style. With higher education, one could enter a modern professional career. By the 1970s, rural Isan people began to urge their children to attain higher education so they would not end up as farmers like

723 Even in the mid 1980s while studying ponglang music at the natasin, I felt cheap, awkward, and unconfident if I carried my khaen on the street in town or while I occasionally traveled on the bus between home and school.
724 See chapter 3.
their parents. However, only a small percentage of Isan farmers could support their children’s entry into higher education. Some could not afford it economically while in many other families the children were not interested in formal study. The majority of young Isan who did not make their way into professional careers ended up going to Bangkok for jobs. That mass migration created large scale cultural interaction between Isan country people and Bangkok city people who set the “boss” versus “employee” and “high class” versus “low class” relationships.

In the case of Northeast Thailand, besides social class, ethnicity is another cultural affect that historically has provided a target for city dwellers publicly to ridicule country folk. Even prior to the 1980s, more and more cultural interaction between different ethnic groups took place in the capital city as economic migrants flowed into the work force there. Native Bangkok Thais who considered themselves upper class and superior, continually used “Lao” as a pejorative term to identify Northeasterners. Although at that time, Northeasterners accepted the fact that they were ethnically Lao, because of the negativity embedded in the term and to protect themselves from mistreatment, they would do whatever they could to hide their identity. One of the common ways to hide was not to speak in public or allow outsiders to hear them speak their native dialect. Language is often the best clue to a person’s cultural identity, and speaking Lao certainly provided a target for insult. When Bangkok Thais heard someone speaking Lao, they would immediately start making fun of him or her in some publicly perceptible way. Such incidents were still quite common in the 1970s, but they dramatically decreased in

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725 Even in the late 1980s, some of my student college friends in Bangkok still occasionally used this term in this way to me.
frequency by the late 1980s.\textsuperscript{726} Northeasterners made a major effort not to speak their dialect in front of outsiders while they struggled quickly to learn to speak Central Thai. Prior to the late 1970s, no matter how hard they tried, their Lao accents were often so thick that insult was unavoidable. Some could speak the dominant dialect quite well, but other countryside characteristics such as dress style and personal mannerisms might still betray their identity. Among musicians, playing Lao traditional instruments such as \textit{khaen} and \textit{phin} was another way that people could know their identity; and that could invite others to look down on them. If a Northeast musician needed to travel to Bangkok, he would feel uncomfortable carrying his instrument(s) in public. As they suffered continual abuse, many Northeasterners lost self confidence and strenuously tried to hide their identities.

The adoption of a new identity as “Isan” rather than Lao was one the primary ways for Northeasterners to build a kind of shield for self protection. In the early 1950s, the term “Isan” first appeared among members of parliament from the Isan (Northeast) region, among whom many were accused of being leftists and separatists.\textsuperscript{727} Some were even assassinated during political agitations related to communism. In terms of music, beginning with the popular genre, \textit{phleng talat} “market song,”\textsuperscript{728} the first song style that

\textsuperscript{726} In my college years (1989-1992), I had such experiences myself. When I spoke Isan to my native Isan student friends, some non-Isan would yell at me, “Don’t speak a foreign language.” They pretended that the language of someone who lived in the region of Northeast Thailand was a “foreign language,” although that could hardly be true. Sometimes they said, “Please speak \textit{Phasa Klawng} (ภาษากลาง),” Phasa Klawng, “Central Language,” in reference to the Bangkok accent, the official Thai language. When they heard our conversation in our native dialect, some of my Bangkok student friends would say to us, “What kind of language is that?” “Is it Chinese?” Of course, they knew what we were saying, but they pretended not to, and they did not want to use the term “Lao” to us because it was too strong. Certainly, they had no way to understand how awkward it can be if you speak Bangkok dialect to someone from your home region.

\textsuperscript{727}…who wished to secede as an Isan state independent from the nation of Thailand.

\textsuperscript{728} \textit{Phleng talat} (เพลงตลาด) also includes \textit{phleng ramwong} (เพลงวัง), “Circle Dance Song,” in the 1940s and \textit{phleng Thai sakon} (เพลงไทยสามก์), “Thai Universe Song,” the earliest style of Thai pop music which first appeared in the 1930s. See chapter 4.
used the term “Isan,” entitled “Klap Isan” (ก랩อีสาน), “Return to Isan,” appeared as early as the mid 1950s. Unfortunately, because the song was released only a few years after major political conflict and although there was nothing in it to suggest any sort of political involvement, the government banned it. This suggests that the term was still quite sensitive in Thai politics in the 1950s. The Thai government was afraid of causing any kind of national insecurity. In the 1960s, phleng luk thung (เพลงลูกทุ่ง) or luk thung, (ลูกทุ่ง) “(Thai) country song,” was coined as a more formal term to replace the older phleng talat. Songwriters continued composing luk thung songs in the Isan style which used the term “Isan” as a part of the title as in “Baw Luem Isan” (บัวลิ่มอีสาน), “Never Forget Isan,” “Isan Baw Laeng” (อีสานบัวแดง), “Isan’s not in Drought,” and “Isan Phao Raw” (อีสานผาโร), “Isan Is Waiting.” The songwriters were either native Isan or descendants of Lao born in Central Thailand. The term “Isan” was “borrowed” by Lao descendants for musical titles specifically to express their Lao identity in the 1960s as well, since the term “Lao” was not a popular one.

The early 1970s saw the first occasions when ordinary Northeasterners began adopting and promoting the new “Isan” identity, although the term itself had existed since the late 1890s. That was a reflection of their wish to defend themselves from being mistreated in Bangkok. In practice, they did not do much other than just change the identification itself from “Lao” to “Isan.” Still, for many years, most Northeasterners unconsciously regarded themselves as “Lao,” and they used the new identity only in certain places and at certain times, especially in public in front of people not native to

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729 Waeng Phlangwan (วัง พลังวรรณ), Luk thung Isan: Isan History and the Legend of Popular Songs, ลูกทุ่งอีสาน:ประวัติศาสตร์ด้านเพลงลูกทุ่ง. (Bangkok: สานักการมีพิษ, 2545/2002), 228.
730 This song was written and sung by Pawng Prida (ปอง ปริดา), b. 1932, a famous native Isan singer from Khon Kean City who was popular in the late 1950s and early 60s. See chapter 4.
It was a strategy to force others not to use the term “Lao” pejoratively but instead “Isan” in referring to them. In some cases, the new identity made some Northeast workers in Bangkok actually believe that they were not “Lao” and helped them stop caring about what others said about their being Lao. “Isan” gradually replaced “Lao” in labeling Northeasterners and their culture as in “Isan music,” “Isan food,” and “Isan people,” although it took time for outsiders to get used to the new label.

The term “Isan” more and more frequently appeared as part of Northeast style song titles, and it became more prominent in suggesting that the content of the songs was/is directly connected to Isan culture. As it projected the new identity, Isan style music became increasingly popular. In acknowledgment of a relationship to the general luk thung style of music, the term luk thung Isan was coined in 1973 to differentiate between the general Isan styles. Native Isan DJs in Bangkok, who “controlled” the media, were most important in popularizing Isan music in their campaign to promote a positive Isan identity. They broadcast the music on radio music programs, which naturally were supported by the Isan working class. In the beginning, mawlam klawn, a traditional genre already available, was immediately and intentionally brought in for broadcast. In 1972, Surin Phaksiri, a prominent native Isan songwriter, wrote a song entitled “Isan Lam Phloen” (อีสานลำเพลิน), “the Lam Phloen [melody/style] of Isan,” based on a traditional style of lam phloen or mawlam phloen. He gave it a modern sound

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731 In the 1970s and 1980s, it was acceptable among Northeasterners to use the term “Lao” in reference to themselves because that was who they were. The term conveyed negative meaning only when outsiders used it insultingly to refer to Northeasterners.
732 The overall sound of luk thung Isan is not immediately distinguishable from regular country style. Although most of the time hearing a traditional Isan instrument accompany a country song may be a means to identify the Isan country style, the most prominent way to verify luk thung Isan is through the lyrics which carry some Isan idioms and cultural content. A country song that encloses an Isan cultural component such as theme or story involved with the Isan region and culture is considered luk thung Isan. If a country song contains some Isan words, it is also reasonable to classify it as luk thung Isan. See chapter 4.
through a Western instrumental accompaniment. People in Isan as well as Isan radio fans in Bangkok welcomed the song. In 1973 because of the overwhelmingly positive acceptance of Isan Lam Phloen, Dao Bandawn (คำ บ้านตannabin), a famous Isan country singer, created a song written in the same style entitled “Lam Phloen Jaroenjai” (ล้ำเพลินเจริญใจ), “the Joyful Mind of (the Melody of) Lam Phloen,” which was also very successful, mainly among Isan listeners.\footnote{See chapter 4.} This traditional song style with modern accompaniment became extremely popular in the mid 1980s when two more traditional styles, lam doen (ลำเดือน) and lam toei (ลำเดียว), were adopted. They became the mainstream music for Isan audiences, and the term luk thung mawlam (ลูกทงมوابล้ำ), “Isan folk-pop,” was invented to classify this particular genre in the mid 1980s. Luk thung mawlam has continued to be popular for more than two decades. Among Isan popular styles, the folk-pop genre contains the most perceptible Isan musical influences; and it strongly represents Isan culture and identity.

Modern mass media have been the most important means for carrying Isan music to audiences in all the different formats that have come and gone in the last fifty years. The LP record was common from the early years until the 1970s when the cassette tape succeeded it. The CD became popular in Thailand during the 1990s, but MP3 and computer audio wave files are the current preferred formats. In the motion picture media, the VHS video cassette tape was widely used in urban Isan households from the mid 1980s to the late 1990s before the VCD and DVD came into vogue. The latter has become today’s platform.\footnote{In music, the VCD is common as a form of music video (MTV) and in karaoke style presentations.} These media devices are used both in private and public
places for radio broadcasts, TV programs, films, and Internet communications.\textsuperscript{735} Recently, even the ring tone of a personal cell phone may carry a luk thung song. In addition, live performance is also significant. Isan musicians and their troupes provide this mode of presentation which has contributed in a major way to the dissemination of Isan music. During the 1970s and 80s, most luk thung and luk thung mawlam troupes presented their work in live performances. A well known Isan country troupe, Kana Phet Phin Thawng (คณาเพชรพินทอง), the “Diamond-Gold Phin Troupe,” contributed greatly during a long popular career because of the numerous elements of traditional music embedded in their productions. Today, although audiences are accustomed to purchasing music for home entertainment, they still enjoy occasionally attending live performances.

\textit{Mawlam sing}, a commercialized, neotraditional-popular hybrid form of mawlam, or modern repartee genre, first appeared in the mid 1980s but came to its peak of popularity in the 1990s. It developed out of mawlam klawn with the addition of modern instruments in accompaniment. This eclectic form has also added elements from many kinds of popular genres, basically “covers” and mostly from luk thung Isan, luk thung mawlam, and other kinds of popular Thai commercial music. Similar to some other pop music, mawlam sing first developed to serve young Isan urbanized workers when they went to visit their hometowns, and they were highly influential in the development of mawlam sing. More than half a performance of mawlam sing features cover versions of whatever the current popular genre may be, and mawlam sing is best classified as “party music” presented mostly in live performances. Live performance is an important Isan tradition featured in festivals and celebrations at several different times of the year, and mawlam sing represents a kind of traditional performance in the modern era. Although

\textsuperscript{735}The quality of the VCD is quite low, and is therefore not common to be broadcast in public media.
most *mawlam sing* is “party music” at home, it occasionally appears in live concerts on the weekends in Bangkok which are also broadcast for Isan workers. The music is then, of course, simultaneously available to non-Isan audiences. *Mawlam sing*, as a result, represents Isan music and culture; and it occupies time in the Thai media along with other modern Isan genres.

*Wong klawng yao*, long drum ensemble, is a processional music which has long existed in the traditional culture of Isan. It appears in many kinds of festivals and celebrations throughout the year. Within the ritual procession, the music also functions as entertainment. Unlike many other current Isan genres, the traditional term “*wong klawng yao*” continues to be used although the music has actually been transformed into a modern style. The traditional style consists of a set of long drums rhythmically interlocked and played reciprocally with one or more round bass drums and embellished with pairs of different sized cymbals. The ensemble focuses on rhythmic drumming patterns. The modern style, however, began gradually to develop in the late 1970s, and by about one decade later it was well established. It has adopted a melodic line, in addition to the traditional drum patterns, which has become the main focus while the rhythm patterns now function as accompaniment. The first two instruments to provide the melody line were electric keyboard and electric *phin*. By the 1990s, many other Western instruments such as electric guitar and electric bass guitar had joined the band. In performance, the instruments are connected to a sound system of amplifier and speakers set up in a push-cart.

The long drum ensemble is another example of how Isan people adapt modern devices to their traditional music. Although most of the melody section employs Western
instruments, they primarily play Isan traditional melodies or Thai popular tunes without the vocal line. The Western instruments represent Westernization and modernization while the Isan melodies represent traditional culture. In regard to other cultural affects, today most Isan people dress in Western clothes, which represent modernization, while they speak their own language, eat their own home style food, and behave like who they are, all of which personify Isan culture and identity. To include Western instruments in wong klawng yao is another way to be “modern,” an important aspect of life style that can help others accept rather look down on Isan consumers of this music. Overall, the ensemble still maintains mostly Isan musical elements which show Isan love of and pride in their culture and identity in the midst of the pressures of modern life.

In contrast to Isan popular genres, ponglang music represents “Isan traditional music,” although it is better described as a neotraditional form. The genre developed from a local ensemble commonly called wong dontri phuen-mueang (Isan), (ผู้ดนตรีพื้นเมืองอีสาน) “Folk/local Music Ensemble (of Isan),” which began by imitating pop music in the 1960s. The newly created ensemble was generally a formal one which performed on stage rather than a group of musicians who played for their own enjoyment and for friends and relatives at home in the traditional way. That was the first traditional Isan ensemble to become a serious ensemble which performed on stage for an audience the way a luk thung band does. Wong dontri phuen-mueang was not prominent in most areas of Isan until the late 1960s and 70s.736 As a part of the development of its popularity, local Thai government representatives provided partial support for the ensembles as musical entertainment in a program of anticommunist propaganda during

736 The first ensemble appeared as early as 1959 in Kalasin Province.
the Cold War. In the 1980s, the ensemble moved into its next phase of development when it entered the formal Thai academic setting called (Withayalai) Natasin (นาฏศิลป์).

Since the government supported the school system and promoted the ensemble, it can be viewed as “(Isan) official music;” and, in the fact that it represents Isan musical culture as a whole, it can also be labeled “pan-Isan music.” In the late 1980s when that kind of ensemble became well known in public throughout Isan, the current term, wong ponglang (วงศ์ปล่าง) “ponglang ensemble” replaced the old term, wong dontri phuen-mueang, among common people.

*Ponglang* music has proved most important in representing Isan culture and in redefining the Isan image. Especially important within academic settings, ponglang music is now offered to students as part of the standard Thai music education curriculum. This formal acceptance of the folk music of “low” Isan-rice famers is significant in that the music was considered to have enough value to be offered in the general school system, a part of “high” bureaucratic society. The music involves both school children and college students in as simple a situation as a student music club to a more complex full music program in a Thai college music department. Educated middle class people have become the main stratum of the population to support such music performances in the context of business meetings, cultural fairs, and at tourist attractions. As a result, the Isan middle class and, more importantly, even non-Isan Thais now support ponglang music. It is not unusual to see a ponglang ensemble presentation in Bangkok performed by non-Isan musicians, a phenomenon which demonstrates the current high degree of acceptance for Isan musical culture in Thai society.
The prevalence of *ponglang* music presentations has developed not only from Thai academia’s enhanced image of the music, now popular among school children and college students both within and without the Isan region, but also because the musical elements themselves fit the tastes of modern audiences. In comparison to Thai classical music, which is also available in the Thai academic environment, *ponglang* music sounds more “fun” to the common listener. The simple pentatonic sounds, uncomplicated rhythm patterns, short tunes, and fast tempo make *ponglang* music easy for modern people, most of whom do not have much musical knowledge, to accept. For a cultural presentation either in or outside Thailand, Thai people now often select Isan (*ponglang*) music and/or *ponglang* dance to represent the musical culture of Thailand as a whole.\(^{737}\)

The *ponglang* ensemble competition is another musical activity important for school children, college students, and common people. Competitions are arranged by various organizations for many purposes both in and outside Isan. Bangkok has become a major site for *ponglang* competitions. Some winning ensembles receive their awards from a member of the Thai royal family. This is considered the highest of honors among Thai people and has verified the standing of Isan musical culture in Thailand.

Invitations to perform in foreign venues provide additional proof of respect for Isan *ponglang* music. Because of problems in the Thai economy, travel abroad, especially to Europe or America, is almost impossible for Isan people who come from common families.\(^{738}\) Joining a *ponglang* musical troupe in school or college often enables the sons and daughters of ordinary Isan farmers to perform abroad. The first

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\(^{737}\)In the United States, Thai (foreign) student associations often choose Isan (*ponglang*) dance for presentation to an audience for an event such as Thai Night. This type of dance, in fact, is simple to learn in a short time while mastery of Thai classical dance requires long, intensive training.

\(^{738}\)Travel abroad also means an opportunity to ride on an airplane which most common people never have a chance to do since Thailand is a small country; and it is not necessary to travel domestically by plane.
performance trip abroad occurred in the summer of 1988. The school *ponglang* troupe of Natasin Roi-et received an invitation to perform in Germany at the festival for the celebration of Bonn’s 2000 years of history. Today similar invitations are common. Even a regular school children’s *ponglang* troupe can receive such an opportunity.

The confidence that Isan people have gained from the acceptance of *ponglang* music has made them seek out more of their genuine traditional music. As mentioned above, although most people consider *ponglang* music to be a traditional music and it has been presented that way, the music is not really traditional. In the Isan (folk) music program at Mahasarakham University, some authentically traditional genres such as *mawlam klawn* have now been brought into the curriculum. Focus has been moving toward traditional *khaen* repertoire in addition to study of neotraditional *ponglang* tunes. People considered these traditional music styles to be “low class” music in the 1980s, 70s, and earlier. Seeking for the truly authentic tradition implies pride in the people’s cultural heritage.

In this dissertation I have devoted my focus to those musical styles which have been primary factors in changing the former negative image of the people of Northeast Thailand to a positive one and how it has been accomplished. By taking advantage of the modern, commercial music industry and earlier political reinforcement in the 1970s and 80s, the Isan people were able to utilize their music in a major way to redefine the cultural image of the Isan region. Primarily native Isan audiences, who purchased the music in various media forms and who attended live concert performances, supported and promoted the popularity of *luk thung Isan, luk thung mawlam, mawlam sing,* and *wong klawng yao.* In addition, *ponglang* music became the most important musical symbol of
“Isan traditional music,” when it was promoted by Thai government officials as musical entertainment in the anticommunism drive of the 1970s and in the policy of cultural preservation to counter the impact of Western culture beginning in the 1980s. Because of specific characteristics of the music which fit the tastes of modern audiences, the music has been welcomed both by native Isan and non-Isan Thai people. The subsequent prominence of all Isan music in Thailand has become extremely powerful. Waeng Phlangwan estimates that among Thai popular genres, the prevalence of Isan style music products alone has already reached about ninety percent.\textsuperscript{739} Thai popular music would certainly be less rich without the enlivening influences from the Northeast. This large quantity of music has been projected through many forms of Thai media. Its huge impact cannot be denied, and doubters must inevitably accept it. Within two to three decades beginning from the early 1970s, Isan music gradually brought a new positive image of Isan clearly into view by the 1990s. Today Isan popular culture is a major aspect of overall Thai culture, and many other cultural affects of Isan beside music are generally enjoyed by the majority of Thai people. Isan food has become popular among non-Isan Thai people and is available in many different classes of Thai restaurants in Bangkok. Isan dialect now occasionally appears on Thai TV. Remnants of the old negative view of the people of Northeast Thailand and their culture are negligible in modern Thailand.

Certainly, although it has been a primary influence in establishing a positive image of Isan, music is not the only factor. Isan people themselves have significantly contributed to recreating the new image of the region. There are numerous Isan of the middle class who are professionals and have demonstrated success. These people have

\textsuperscript{739} Waeng Phlangwan (แวน ฟล่างวานวัน), \textit{Luk thung Isan: Isan History and the Legend of Popular Songs}, ลูกทุ่งอีสาน: ประวัติศาสตร์ตำนานเพลงลูกทุ่ง (Bangkok: สำนักเรียนบุญญา, 2545/2002), 262.
brought fame and a good reputation to their region. In sport, Somrak Khamsing (สมรักษา คำสิงห์), b. 1973, a boxer born in Khon Kaen, is the first Thai athlete ever to win an Olympic gold medal (in the Twenty-sixth Olympic Games, Atlanta, 1996). Paradorn Srichaphan (ภาราร ศรีชาพันธ์), b. 1973, a tennis player also from Khon Kaen Province, is considered an “Asian Hero,” as he was labeled in Time Magazine (2003). He is the first high ranked Asian tennis player to reach a career high of Number Nine in the world. Khamphun Bunthawi (คำพูน บุญหวี่), 1928-2003, born in Ubon Province, was the first Thai writer to win the S.E.A. Writers Award in 1979. Many other famous natives of Isan who are movie and TV actors and actresses all represent Isan and have brought pride and their positive reputations home to the Isan region.

The Isan middle and working classes have also learned to protect themselves from mistreatment. Reducing criticism and insult has brought a more positive image to Isan. During the 1970s and 80s, although the new “Isan” identity provided a starting point for changing the image, the culture gap between rural and urban people was still high, and that exposed “weak” targets which enabled city people to look down on rural folk. Among the Isan middle class, such as school teachers, college professors, police officers, military personnel, various bureaucratic careerists, and even college students, education enabled them to learn how to protect themselves from torment. While living and working in Bangkok, most, in fact, began marrying natives of Bangkok. Their careers and other social settings enable them to be involved with and surrounded by middle and upper class

740 Southeast Asian Writers Award.
native Bangkok people. Enhanced social roles and status provide a closing of cultural and social gaps which then leaves less likelihood of insult.\textsuperscript{741}

The Bangkok working class, of which the majority is from Isan, has most keenly felt the need to learn to avoid making themselves targets of ridicule. Through the 1970s and 80s, they proved to be quick studies in learning and adjusting themselves toward establishing a positive image for all of Isan by behaving so as to avoid belittlement. One of the most significant defenses was through language. By the 1980s, speaking in the Bangkok accent was no longer a problem among migrant Isan working class people; most of them could speak the official language fluently with no Lao accent. In the early 1980s by just listening to someone speaking Central Thai, no one could know, without that person’s saying so, whether he or she was from Isan. Learning Thai was easier by the 1980s through the school system\textsuperscript{742} and most importantly through Thai radio and TV.\textsuperscript{743}

Rural people watched TV day in and day out: soap operas, dramas, news, and sports. Isan children can now speak Central Thai even before they are old enough to attend first grade just by watching TV as they grow up.\textsuperscript{744} Indeed, some of today’s Isan children never do master Isan language. Without the dialect difference, speakers create almost no target for potential mockers to use against people from Isan. If no one is speaking in a backward manner, how can anyone be seen as inferior?

Meanwhile it is not only language usage that Isan children have learned from Thai TV but also other elements of modern life style such as fashion, mannerisms, music,

\textsuperscript{741}Enhanced social roles and status here also mean “to be like Central Thai” particularly when they are surrounded within that kind of social environment. Miller points out, for example, when one of his Isan friend’s son married a Central Thai lady, the wife insisted he change his Lao name, Khamphaeng (คำพระ) to a Central Thai name, Piyawat (ปิยะวัฒ) which he did. (Terry Miller, personal communication).

\textsuperscript{742}The Thai government required all school systems throughout the nation to use Central Thai language, including all government offices around the country. See chapter 5.

\textsuperscript{743}Local Thai radio stations are allowed to run their programs in local dialects.

\textsuperscript{744}This was quite different from the 1970s when TV in Isan was only available (mostly) in the main cities.
food, and occupations. By the late 1980s, when the first generation of these children became teenagers, they were more than ready to live in Bangkok without culture shock or even homesickness. With modern conveniences in communication and transportation, these days the nation seems smaller. The region of Isan does not seem so isolated from Bangkok as it did before the 1980’s. By the 1990s, Isan had become a relatively modernized region where people have most of the same things they can have in major cities like Bangkok, including telephones, internet service, and universally provided electricity. The cellular phone, for example, is extremely common for most people.

Since 2006 even in a remote village, at least one member of every family has cell phone service. Most outlying communities have become somewhat urbanized. Many people have cars and trucks, and that in itself demonstrates marked economic improvement. Life in the countryside now is not so different from life in the city. As Khamkoeng Thawngchan, a successful Isan style songwriter, points out, “They [Bangkok people] had cars; we also have cars.” “They aren’t different from us.” Indeed, the larger Isan cities now boast the same hyper-stores and chain restaurants as Bangkok, if not a mall comparable to those of Bangkok. Prior to the 1990s, Isan song lyrics often depicted a love story in which a country boy would complain to his lover who left him by saying, “You left me because he, the city (Bangkok) boy, has cars and money while I am just a country boy who has nothing but a (water) buffalo.” In the 1990s, however, a similar kind of love song depicted the situation differently. The country boy would question his lover saying, “I have everything he, the city boy, does; so why did you leave me?”

This shows the gap between city and rural life has culturally and economically decreased,

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745 Khamkoeng Thawngchan, a mawlam singer, songwriter, and producer, interview by author, summer 2003.
746 Ibid.
and that helps rural people feel more confident about themselves and more pride in their own cultural identity.

In terms of social interaction, when the Isan working class can live and behave as if they are native to Bangkok, they leave almost nothing for city people to make fun of. As projected through the music, even while living in Bangkok they do not want to give up their identities. They still want to be themselves. Living in a city like Bangkok, they just know when they should behave in Isan style and when they should not. They learn to present who they are in the deepest sense only when it is reasonably safe to do so. Behaving like natives of Bangkok is still sometimes necessary as a means of self protection. Isan working class people can attain modernity while conserving their own musical culture and local traditions.

Within the approximately two decades during which Northeasterners have spontaneously accomplished the redefinition of their image, we can analyze the process as having three components: learning to protect themselves from being mistreated, increasing their self confidence, and promoting their revamped identity. All three parts of the process have taken place simultaneously, and each part has involved and been supported by other social elements including cultural adjustment, economics, politics, Westernization, modernization, and musical culture. To be accepted, Isan people have been adapting to the national (Central Thai) culture, improving their economic situations, and embracing the modern, urban life style. Meanwhile, to assert positively who they are to the rest of the Thai population, Isan natives continue to express themselves through their music and, thus, display their cultural identity. The popularity of Isan music has

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747 It is important to note that there are no issues of race in the situation in Thailand, which causes it to differ from the situation of African Americans as their skin color(s) add other levels of complication to problems of acceptance and respect.
proved the acceptability of Isan culture and has convinced Isan people of the deep value of their own cultural heritage. The acceptance of Isan music, music from the people of the countryside, can perhaps bring cultural diversity as a desirable objective to the eyes of modern Thais and convince them truly to celebrate it in the near future. Isan people in the following generations hopefully will also be proud of their cultural identity, not only as the Isan of Northeast Thailand but also as Lao people from the old Lao cultural heritage.
GLOSSARY

Acha yasi (อาชญาสี) or Ayasi (อาญาสี), “authority of four,” ancient Isan system of administration

Aeng Khorat (แองโกรราช), "Khorat Valley"

Aew Lao (แอนลาว), “traveling to see Lao [music]”

Ai (ไอ), informal Central Thai prefix, male person

Ai (อัย), “older brother,” used as first person pronoun “I” in Lao language

Ai Lao (อ้ายลาว), ancient Tai kingdom

Ai-sio (ไอเสียง), term invented by Bangkok natives to mean “stupid” “coward,” or “cowardly”

Ajan Amphawn Sa-ngajit (อาอาจยอัมพลึง สาจิต), well known mawlam master from Ubon Ratchathani

Ajan Thawng-lue Saenthawisuk (อาอาจย์ทองลือ แสนทวิสุข), another well known mawlam master from Ubon Ratchathani

An (อำนาจ), “to read”


Angkan Thorasap Hang Prathet Thai (องค์การโทรศัพท์แห่งประเทศไทย), “Telephone Organization of Thailand” founded 1954

Angkhanang Khunnachai (องค์กั้นังค์ คุณchai), b. 1955, well known early Isan folk-pop singer

Ao pai sai khaen (เอาไปใส่คน), suggestion of the creation of Isan traditional ensemble of phin-khaen

Awk khaek (อวกเข็ก), “Indian style” [probably Malay] opening section originally used as introduction for all likay performances

Bai Krung Thep (ไปกรุงเทพ), “going to Bangkok”
**Bai sri** (บาทศรี) or **bai sri su khwan** (บาทศรีสุขวร), ritual to call back possessed human spirit

**Bai Thai** (ไปไทย), “going [to] Thai,” for “going to Bangkok” expression popularly used prior to mid 1980s

**Bak iteng** (บากิต่ง), **bak lente** (บักลันเต) and **bak lilae** (บักลีแลว), informal term for "Isan musical push cart"

**Ban** (บ้าน), Isan village as in **mu ban** (หมู่บ้าน), Central Thai dialect

**Ban Chiang** (บ้านช่าง), archaeological site of 3600 B.C. Bronze Age village

**Ban Kaengsamrong** (บ้านแก่งสะโรง), Kaengsamrong Village

**Ban Klang Muen** (บ้านกลางเมื่น), Klang Muen Village

**Ban Kutnamsai** (บ้านคุณนาใส่), Kutnamsai Village

**Ban Na Khu** (บ้านนาคุ), Na Khu Village

**Ban Nanok-khian** (บ้านนาคมเขียน), Nanok-khain Village

**Ban Nawng Mek** (บ้านหนองเม็ก), Nawng Mek Village

**Bang fai** (บังไฟ), homemade bamboo tube rocket filled with black powder

**Banyen Rakkaen** (บันเย็น รักแก่น), b. 1952, **Isan luk thung mawlam** singer from Ubon Ratchathani

**Baw** (บัว), “no” or “none” in Isan dialect

**Baw Luem Isan** (บัวเล่มอีสาน), song title, “Never Forget Isan”

**Benjamin** (เบนจามิน), 1921-1994, native Isan singer and songwriter earned title, "King of Ramwong [music]"

**Bru** (บุรุ), Isan ethnic group

**Bua Lamphu** (บัวลำพู), “Subdistrict of Bua Lam Phu;” Isan film, 1975

**Bun** (บุน), prefix for numerous annual festivals and rituals in Buddhist and agricultural calendars
Bun Bang Fai (บุญบังไฟ), Rocket Festival

Bun Phawet (บุญผาเวท), Phrawet-Sandawn Festival, "Festival of Prince Wetsandawn," penultimate life of Lord Buddha organized in early March

Bunpheng Faiphiuchai (บุญฟึง ไฟภู่ชัย), 1932-2008, famous female singer first recorded in 1955

Bunsawong Denduang (บุษฎา ดำเนินดวง), b., 1945, senior living mawlam klawn singer

Bun-Uea Sunthonsanan (บุญเอียว สุนทรสานัน), 1910-1981, Director of the Sunthonsanan Band

Buri Phromlakkano (บุรี เพรมลักษณ์), Governor of Kalasin Province who supported Wong Ponglang Kalasin in 1968

Carabao (คาราบาว), famous Thai "song for life" music ensemble formed in 1976

Caravan (คาราวาน), famous Thai "song for life" music ensemble formed in 1975

Cathay (เค้าเอี้ยย), "Khathe Company, early Thai recording company

Chai Chomphu (ชาเย ชมพู), well known radio DJ at Roi-et Radio Station, Roi-et City

Chai Mueangsing (ชาเย เมืองสิงห์), b. 1939, Central Thai popular singer, 1960s-70s


Chao Thai (ชาวไทย), literally “Thai people”

Chap (จ่าย), flat cymbals

Chap lek (จ่ายเล็ก), small flat cymbals

Chap yai (จ่ายใหญ่), large cymbals

Chat (ชาติ), Indic term meaning “nation,” “race,” or “country”

Chat Thai (ชาติไทย), “Thai nationality”

Chawalit Manirat (ชาวลิต มณีรัตน์), Director of Witthayalai Natasin Roi-et 1980-1988
Chawiwan Damnoen (ชวีวรรณ ด่านเนิน), b. 1945, well known mawlam singer famous from her first record in 1963

Chawiwan Phanthu (ชวีวรรณ พันธุ), real name of Chawiwan Damnoen (ชวีวรรณ ด่านเนิน)

Chen Rotharat (ธนรรพราช), 1883-1968, previous rank of Chen Duriyang (เจนดูรี่วงศ์) he attained the position of Siamese Music Director, August 1, 1917

Chen Duriyang (เจนดูรี่วงศ์) literally “skilled in music,” Director of the Siamese Royal Western String Ensemble

Chetthathirat (เชษฐทวิรุฬห), r. 1548-1571, well known king of the Lao kingdom

Ching (ชิง), small high-pitched cymbals


Chok Sawng Chan (โชคงชัย) “Double Fortune,” early Thai film made by all Thai crew, produced by Wasuwat family’s Bangkok Film Company

Chomrom Khosok Isan (ชมรมโคสออกอีสาน), “Isan Radio Announcer’s Association of Bangkok”

Chomrom Natasin Phuen-ban lae Dontri Phuen-mueang (ชมรมนาฏศิลป์พื้นบ้านและดนตรีพื้นเมือง), Club of [Isan] Folk Dance and Music, at Mahasarakham University

Chomrom Sinlapa Wattanatham Isan Chula (ชมรมศิลป์วัฒนธรรมอีสานจุฬา), "Isan Chula Club" at Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok

Chomrom Thaeksi (ชมรมเท็กซี่), “The Taxi Drivers’ Club.” "pop hit" album by Thawngmi Malai, early 1980s

Chon Chat Thai (ชนะชาติไทย), “people of Thai nationality”

Chonla Phrathan Jangwat Ubon (ชอละราษฎร์จังหวัดอุดรภูมิ), "Ubon Rachathani Province Irrigation Service"

Dao Bandawn (ดาว บ้านดอน), b. 1947, famous Isan country singer from Yasothon Province

Dao Isan (ดาวอีสาน), village ramwong troupe founded in Mahasarakham Province, late 1960s
Devaraja (เทวราชา), “divine ruler”

Dong Phayayen (ดงพญาเย็น), montain on border between Central and Northeast Thailand

Dontri phuen-ban (ดนตรีพื้นบ้าน), "local or folk music"

Dontri phuen-mueang Isan (ดนตรีพื้นเมืองอีสาน), "Isan folk/local music"

Dontri sakon (ดนตรีสากล), “universal music”

Dontri tawantok (ดนตรีตะวันตก), “Western music”

Dontri Thai (ดนตรีไทย), "Thai music"

Dontri Thai Udom Suksa (ดนตรีไทยอุดมศิึกษา), "College Thai [Classical] Music" festival held in different location every year

Fa (ฝ่า), sky

Farang (ฝรั่ง), a Westerner

Farang Ram Thao (ฝรั่งรำท่า), “The Westerner Dances with his Feet”

Fawn phuen-mueang Isan (ฝันพื้นเมืองอีสาน), “Isan folk dance”

Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat (สุริยันต์ ธนะรัชต์), 1908-1963, Prime Minister of Thailand 1959-1963

Grap (กรับ), clappers

Hai (ไห้), bulbous shaped earthenware jar

Hai sawng (ไห้ทอง), Isan earthenware jar without handles commonly used to store rice wine, tobacco, or sliced, salted bamboo shoots

Hang (หาง), “tail”


Hang Nalika Krung Thawng (ห้างนาลิกากรุงทอง), "watch marketing enterprise" in Bangkok
Hang Phansiang Krung Thai (หางแผ่นเสียงกรุงไทย), "Krung Thai Recording Enterprise"

Haw khao (ห้าข้าว), lunch pack “rice-wrap”

Het na (เหตีนา), literally “working [in the rice] field” in Lao dialect

Hip siang (ฮิปเสียง), wind-up phonograph, literally “luggage sound”

Hmong (ม้อง), ethnic minority in Thailand and Laos

Hong (ฮง), "swan"

Hua mueang (หัวเมือง), “main city” or “primary city”

Hua Mueang Lao (หัวเมืองลาว), “Lao main cities”

Huai Mano (หวายมาโน), reservoir in Na Khu District, Kalasin Province

Huana klawng yao (หัวนายกลางยาง), “klawng yao leader” who may both perform and supervise rehearsals

Huana nak fawn (หัวนาถกฟวน), "dance leader"

Isan Baw Laeng (อีสานบัวแดง), “Isan Is not in Drought,” early Isan country song with "Isan" in its title

Isan Lam Phloen (อีสานลำพลีน), “The Lam Phloen [melody/style] of Isan,” song based on traditional style of lam phloen

Isan Phao Raw (อีสานเผ่ารอ), “Isan Is Waiting,” early Isan country song with "Isan" in its title

Jammong Rangsikun (จัมมอง รางสิกุน), Director of Channel 4 television, 1940s

Jamrat Suwakhon (จำรัส สุวานธร), most famous male Thai movie star, 1930s-1940s

Jangwa beguine (จังหวะเบเกียน), "beguine rhythm"

Jangwa klawng yao (จังหวะกลางยาง) or jangwa klawng (จังหวะกลาง), "longdrum rhythmic pattern"

Jangwa ramwong (จังหวะรำวง), “circle dance rhythm”

Jangwa rumba (จังหวะรัมบ้า), "rumba rhythm"
**Jangwa sam cha** (จังหวะสามช้า) *jangwa cha-cha-cha* (จังหวะ ขา ขา ขา), "cha-cha rhythm"

**Jangwa thon** (จังหวะโทน), “thon rhythmic pattern”

**Jangwat** (จังหวัด), modern Thai province administration system

**Janja Fajan Faengmawk** (จันทร์จาฟ้าจันทร์แห่งมะกอก), “Oh, My Moon in the Foggy Sky,” early Thai popular song title

**Janjaokha** (จันทร์เจ้าขา), “Oh, My Moon,” early Thai popular song title

**Janloi** (จันทร์ลอย), “Flowing Moon,” early Thai popular song title

**Jansawat** (จันทร์สวัสดี), “Charming Moon,” early Thai popular song title

**Jao** (เจ้า), traditional prefix before governor’s name to signify rank and position

**Jao khon nai khon** (เจ้าคน นายคน), “lord of men and boss of men”

**Jao mueang** (เจ้าเมือง), "governor"

**Jao phaw pu ban** (เจ้าพ่อป้าบ้าน), “village paternal grandfather spirit” or “village spirit”

**Jaonai** (เจ้านาย), "lord" or "head of city"

**Japey** (จับเปย), two-stringed long-necked lute sometimes called jariang-japey

**Jarernchai Chonpairot** (เจริญชัย ชั่นไพโรจน์), U.S. trained ethnomusicologist from Mahasarakham Province

**Jariang** (เจริญ), Khmer vocal genre

**Jawmsi Banlusin** (เจอมศี บรรลือศีลป์), early female *mawlam* singer on a commercial recording in 1940

**Jek pon Lao** (เจกปนลาว), "Chinese mixed with Lao"

**Juangjan Jankhana** (จวงจันทร์ จันทร์คน), known by stage name “Phranbun” (พราบุญ), most prominent *lakhon rawng* composer

**Ka** (กา), a crow

**Ka ponglang** (ขาปองกลาง), “ponglang leg” or ponglang stand
Kab khao (กับข้าว), side dish eaten with rice

Kabot (กบฏ), "rebellions"

Kam (กรรม), "karma"

Kamon Sukoson (กมลสุกอสส), well known Bangkok record company, 1960s-70s

Kamron Sompunnanon (กมร สมปุณณะนท), first "luk thung singer"


Kantruem (กันตรีม), Khmer vocal genre in Northeast Thailand

Kap soeng (กาพย์เชิง), Lao/Isan poetry sung at Rocket Festival

Karatchakan (ข้าราชการ), bureaucrats

Kaw Sawat(ti)ghan (กอ สรัสสีพานชัย), well known Isan native, Minister of Education 1975 to 1980

Kawng chia (กองเชียร์), “cheering section” at traditional ramwong performance

Kawng Senarak (กองเสนารักษ์), branch of Royal Thai Armed Forces

Khaen (แคน), bamboo, free reed mouth organ

Khaen faifa (แคนไฟฟ้า), “electric khaen”

Khaen kao (แคนแก่), eighteen pipe long khaen

Khaen Lam Khong (แคนล่วงขึ้น), “The Khaen’s Sound along the Khong River,” an Isan film, 1972

Khaen paet (แคนแพ็ต), sixteen pipe khaen

Khaen wong (แคนวง), ensemble of many khaen

Kham Mueang (คำเมือง), regional language of Northern Thailand

Khamkoeng Thawngchan (คำเก่ง ทองจำรัส), b. 1946, native Isan folk-pop songwriter

Khamphun Bunthawi (คำพูหน บุญทวี), 1928-2003, first native Isan Thai writer to win S.E.A.Writers Award, 1979
Khampun Phungsuk (คำปูน ฟังสุข), famous mawlam klawn singer from Ubon Ratchathani Province

Khan Kanjanaphirom (ข้ากงานนี่ภิรมย์), Plueang Chairatsami’s primary ponglang teacher

Khana (คณา), “troupes” or “groups,” the instruments of the ensemble, implies by way of synecdoche ensemble itself

Khana Asawin-Simawk (คณาอัศวินสิ่มมาก), "Asawin-Simawk Troupe," mawlam mu troupe, late 1940s

Khana Jum Thawng Siangsanae (คณาจุมทอง เสียงสานเหย), "Jum Thawng Siangsanae Troupe," mawlam sing troupe based in Khon Kaen

Khana klawng yao (คณาคลองยาง), "long drum troupe"

Khana nang ram (คณานางรำ), "dance troupe"

Khana Phaw Rungsin (คณา ภ.รุ้งศิลป์), "Phaw Rungsin Troupe," first lam phloen troupe founded in 1950

Khana Phet Phin Thawng (คณาเพชรพินทอง), "the Phet Phin Thawng Troupe," Isan speaking Lao luk thung troupe from Ubon Ratchathani Province

Khana Phetsayam (คณาเพชรสาย), Isan theatrical singing troupe from Phetsayam

Khana Prathombanthoengsin (คณาประทุมบันทะศิลป์), "Prathombanthoengsin Troupe," well-known mawlam mu troupe in Khon Kaen Province

Khana Rabiapwathasin (คณาเรอปัววาทศิลป์) "Rabiapwathasin Troupe," well-known mawlam mu troupe in Khon Kaen

Khana ram fawn (คณาราฟื่น), "dance troupe"

Khana Ramwong Samyan (คณารามวงศ์สามยาน), "Samyan Ramwong Troupe"

Khana Rangsiman (คณาเรงสิมันต์), "Rangsiman Troupe," most famous mawlam mu and music troupe in Isan 1963-late 1960s

Khana Ratanasin Inta Thaiyarat (คณาเรตนิสาเรต้าไทยราชภู), "Ratanasin Inta Thaiyarat Troupe," mawlam mu troupe founded in Ban Laonadi (บ้านน้าดี) Village, 14 kilometers from Khon Kaen City, 1952
Khana Ratri Ratri (คำราวดี ศรีวิไล) "Ratri Sriwilai Troupe," well known lam sing troupe based in Khon Kaen

Khana Saksayam Phetchomphu (คำสาศัยภูมิ เพชรบูรณ์), “country music troupe from Saksayam Phetchomphu”

Khana Sao Noi Phet Ban Phaeng (คำสาสนวัยพระบวรมหา), a current mawlam phloen troupe from Mahasarakham

Khana Suntharaphirom (คำสุนทราภิรมย์), a mawlam klawn troupe in Bangkok in the 1960s

Khana Thawngmi Malai (คำสก่งมี มาลัย), mawlam phloen troupe whose first successful recording covered a traditional story entitled Khun Chang Khun Phaen (ขุนช่าง ขุนแโนน), “Mr. Chang [and] Mr. Phaen,” in the 1970s

Khao jao (ข้าวเจ้า), “noble rice,” staple food among Central Thai people

Khao niao (ข้าวเหนียว) “sticky rice,” staple food among Isan people

Khao Phansa (เจ้าพรรษา), Buddhist Lent

Khaotit naklawng (ข้าวติดหน้ากลอง), “rice [for] attaching drum head”

Khap-rawng phuen-mueang (ข้าพร่องพื้นเมือง), "Isan folk singing"

Khawlaw (ข่าวโล้), bamboo slit drum traditionally used by village headmen to send signals to villagers

Khawng wong (ข่าววง), gong circle

Khen Dalao (คุณ ดาヲำ), b. 1930, famous male lam klawn singer first record release in 1959

Khisut (ขี้สุด), wax secreted by species of stingless bee called maeng khisut (แมงขี้สุด) to produce airtight seal on some Isan instruments

Khitasin (คิดศิลป์), classical vocal music

Khlui (ขี้ลี่), vertical flute

Khmen (เขมร), "Khmer"

Khmen Nuea (เขมรเหนือ), Cambodians resident in Thailand
Khon (โขน), male only masked dance drama genre

Khon Isan (คนอีสาน), “Isan person”

“Khon Kaen mueang mawkhaen” (ชลบุรีเมืองมวกเหล็ก), “Khon Kaen is a city of khaen players”

Khon Lao (คนลาว), “Lao person” or “Lao people”

Khon Thai (คนไทย), "Thai people" vs. Khon Lao (คนลาว) “Lao (including Isan) people”

Khru (ครู), teacher, from guru (India)

Khru Bunyang Ketkhong (ครูบุญยังเกตคอน), 1924-1997, famous Bangkok likay performer who introduced this tradition to Khorat City

Khru Hem Wechakan (ครูهم เวชกัน), wrote Sao Chao Rai (สาวชาร์ไอ), song for a radio drama

Khru phum-panya Thai (ครูภูมิปัญญาไทย), teacher of Thai wisdom

Khru phum-panya thawng-thin (ครูภูมิปัญญาทองเติน), folk wisdom teacher

Khruea Fa (ขรีอุ่นฟ้า) “Miss Khruea Fa,” well-known lakhon rawng performers

Khrueang dontri sakon (เครื่องดนตรีสากล), “universal musical instruments” or Western Instruments

Khrueang sai (เครื่องสาย), stringed instruments

Khuea yanang (เค้อยานัง), climbing plant

Khuean Julaphawn (เชี่ยวจุลภัณฑ์), Chulabhorn Dam, Chaiyaphum Province

Khuean Sirinthawn (เชี่ยวศิรินทร์), Sirindhorn Dam across Lam Dom Noi River, Ubon Ratchathani Province

Khuean Ubonrat (เชี่ยวอุบลรัตน์), "Ubonrat Dam," built across Nam Phong River, Khon Kaen Province, 1964

Khun (ขน), lower rank in traditional ranking system in both Siamese and Lao kingdoms

Khun Thawawmpfung (คู่น ทหารพงษ์), b. 1902 early male mawlam klawn singer appeared on Thai records in early 1940s
Khun Wijitmattra (ชูวิจิตร มาตรา), artist, columnist, songwriter, screenwriter, and film director, 1940s


Khunying La-iat (คุณหญิง ละอิ่ม), Prime Minister Phibun Songkhram’s wife

Khwam Rak Nai Maenam Chao Phraya (คว้ารักในแม่น้ำเจ้าพระยา), “Love on the Chao Phraya River”

Khwan (ขวัญ), set of spiritual essences of a human being

Khwan Khawng Riam (ขวัญของเรียม), “Khwan Belongs to Riam”

Kin khao (กินข้าว), “to have a meal,” “to eat”

King Samsaenthai (สมเสนาทาย), r. 1374-1416, son of Fa Ngum and great ruler of Lan Chang Kingdom

King Wichon (วิชวล), 1501-1520, well known Lao king

Klap Isan (กลับอีสาน) “Return to Isan,” Isan pop song written in 1950s

Klawn (กลอน), "poem," "poetry," or "stanza"

Klawn lam (กลอนลำ), “lam poetry” or "poem [divided into] stanzas”

Klawng (กลอง), “drum”

Klawng hai (กลองไห), “jar drum”

Klawng hang (กลองหาง), “tail drum”

Klawng teng (กลองเตี้ย), round, low pitched drum

Klawng tum (กลองตูม), round, low pitched drum, alternate term for klawng teng (กลองเตี้ย)

Klawng yao (กลองยาว), “long drum”
Kluai Mai (กลัวไม่), “orchids”

Krachappi (กระทบปี), three-stringed plucked lute

Krap (กระบ), wooden craper

Kraprong sumkai (กระทาgresqlร่งสุมไก), Western style skirt

Krasuang (กระทรง), ministry

Kratoei (กระทเทย), male homosexual

Krom Khosanakan (กรมขยานการ), "Department of Public Relations"

Krom Mahorasop (กรมพระสพ), "Department of Royal Entertainment"

Krom Prachasamphan (กรมประชาสัมพันธ์), "Public Relations Department"

Krom Ratchathan (กรมราชทัณฑ์), "(Thai) Corrections Department"

Krung (กรุง), prefix indicating “capital city” followed by city name

Krung Thai Recording Enterprise (กรุงเทพฯayanทางบก), well-known record store in Bankok, 1970s

Kula (กุล่า), ethnic minority member from Isan, Northern Thailand

Kuy (กูย or กูย), also Souei, (สู่ย) or Kuay, (กูย), another Isan ethnic minority

Kwai lek (ควายเหล็ก) “metal water buffalo,” small tractor commonly found today on Thai farms instead of water buffalo

Lae (ลาด), "hightened speech" in Isan traditional vocal genres

Laem Thawng (แกลมทอง), "Golden Peninsula”

Lakhon (ละคร), mostly female genre of classical dance drama

Lakhon Khana Sriophat (ละครอณาศรีโอฬา), "Sriophat Troupe," well-known "Thai singing drama," 1940s

Lakhon rawng (ละครอง), “singing drama,” hybrid theatrical genre combining elements of traditional Thai lakhon theater with Western opera, invented in 1908

Lam (ล้า), verb meaning “to sing”
Lam doen (ลาเดิน), style of lam doen, doen (เดิน) literally “walking;”
most lam doen texts describe sights one might see while walking in the forest

Lam khawnsawan (หมอลำคำสอนวาระ), vocal style, Swannaket, Laos


Lam phloen (ลำเพลิน), Isan traditional genres from Yasothon Province,
phloen (เพลิน) “happy,” “fun,” or “joyful”

Lam Phloen Jaroenjai (ลำเพลินเจริญใจ) “Joyful Mind of (the Melody of) Lam Phloen,” popular folk-pop song, 1970s

Lam Phutai (ลำพูไท), vocal genre of Phutai ethnic group, Northeast Thailand

Lam Salawan (หมอลำｻﾗﾜﾝ), vocal genre from Salawan, Laos

Lam Siphandawn (หมอลำสิป_handawn), vocal genre from Champasak, Laos

Lam thang san (ลำทางสัน), main section in lamklawn, metrical sound in
pentatonic major scale

Lam thang yao (ลำทางยำ), section in lamklawn, non-metrical in pentatonic minor scale

Lam that (ลำทัด), Central Thai folk vocal genre

Lam toei (ลำทัดย), lam style first appeared early in twentieth century. Toei suggests
“courtship” or “flirting,” especially while dancing or “courtship singing”

Lao Kao (ลาวกะ), “old Lao” suggesting "ethnic people," "area" or "territory"

Lao khaen (ลาวกacen), Lao music found in Bangkok and adjacent area

Lao khao (เหล้าขาว), distilled rice liquor

Lao Phuan (ลาวพวน), major Lao ethnic group

Lao Phung Dam (ลาวกุ้งดำ), “black belly Lao”

Lao Phung Khao (ลาวกุ้งขาว), “white belly Lao,” Lao people who did not
tattoo their bellies

Lao Song (ลาวซอง), another Lao ethnic group in Central Thailand
*Lao takhao* (ลาวาต้าขาว) “white-eyed Lao,” negative central Thai expression suggesting Lao are “stupid” and “cowardly”

*Lao Wiang* (ลาวเรียง), Lao ethnic group in Isan who suggest an origin in Wiang Chan instead of Champasak

*Lawa* (ละวะ or ละว้า), Mon-Khmer speaking indigenous ethnic minority in Laos

*Lieutenant Junior Grade Manit Senawinin* (เรือโทมาณีด เสนารีนิน), *Rueatho* Manit Senawinin, officer in the Royal Thai Navy and songwriter, 1930s

*Likay* (ลิเก), Central Thai folk opera

*Likay Lao* (ลิเกลาว), Lao imitation of Central Thai folk opera

*Likay samai boran* (ลิเกสัมัยโบราน), “ancient likay”

*Likay Thai* (ลิเกไทย), among Isan, likay performed by Central Thai people in original style

*Lilat* (ลิลาศ), Thai term for ballroom dance

*Lok Phra Sri Ariya* (โลกพระศรีอารีย์), “The World of Phra Sri An” (โลกพระศรีอารีย์), *(An is an abbreviation for “Ariya”)*

*Long khuang* (ลงช่วง), Isan traditional chore and courtship ritual taking place on full moon nights throughout dry season


*Luang Phatthanaphong Phakdi, Thim Sukyang* (หลวงพัฒนพงษ์ พัชริ [ทิม สุขยางค์]), Siamese court official and writer, late 1800s

*Luang Wijit Wathakan* (หลวงวีจิตวัฒนาน), 1898-1962, well known composer of patriotic songs

*Ludu Fon* (ลูดูฝน), rainy season

*Ludu Nao* (ลูดูหนาว), cold season

*Ludu Rawn* (ลูดูร้อน), hot or dry season

*Lueat Chao Na* (เลือดชาวนา), “Blood of the Farmers”

*Lueat Suphan* (เลือดสุพรรณ) “Blood of Suphan,” Thai patriotic song, 1940s
Lueat Thahan Thai (เลือดทหารไทย) “Blood of the Thai Soldiers,”
Thai patriotic song, 1940s

Luk krung (ลูกกรุง), "child of city," city style of Thai popular music

Luk ponglang (ลูกปองกลาง), ponglang bar or "log"

Luk thung (ลูกทุ่ง), "child of field" country style of Thai popular music

Luk thung Isan (ลูกทุ่งอีสาน), Isan country style music

Luk Thung Isan Patha Luk Thung Phak Klang (ลูกทุ่งอีสานปายลูกทุ่งภาคกลาง),
“Luk Thung Isan vs. Luk Thung Phak Klang,” Phak Klang means “Central Region”


Luk Thung Isan Yam Chao (ลูกทุ่งอีสานยาะเช้า), “Isan Country Music in the Morning,”
radio "Lao music" program in Bangkok

Luk thung mawlam (ลูกทุ่งมะลม้า), “Isan folk-pop music”

Luk thung pak klang (ลูกทุ่งภาคกลาง), “Central Thai country style”

Luk thung thamada (ลูกทุ่งธรรมดา), "regular luk thung genre," Central Thai country style


Luksit wat (ลูกศิษย์วัด), “temple child” who lives with monks at Thai Buddhist temple

Mae Nam Khong (แม่น้ำโขง), "Khong River" in Thai

Maenam Chi (แม่น้ำชี), "Chi River"

Maenam Mun (แม่น้ำมุ่ง), "Mun River"

Maha Nikai (มหานิกาย), "Grand Denomination," primary Buddhist sect in Thailand

Maha withayalai (มหาวิทยาลัย), "great college," (maha means “great”), university

Mahori khamen (มหาหริ่งเม้น), Khmer mahori ensemble
Mahori Koktachai (มาหอรีโคกต้าชัย), well-known Khmer mahori ensemble in southern Isan

Mai bukmi (ไม้บักฟี้), jackfruit

Mai du (ไม้ดู่), Lao, and mai pradu (ไม้พระดู่), Thai, wood to make khaen windchest

Mai ku khaen (ไม้กุแคน), khaen tube

Mai mak hat (ไม้맡บาท), wood for making ponglang

Mai mak lueam (ไม้ maksล่ม), wood for ponglang

Mai phai hia (ไม้ไผ่เอีย) or mai hia (ไม้เอีย), bamboo for making khaen, Isan dialect

Mak kaloeng (มากกะเล่ง), local name of ponglang common in Kham Muang District, Kalasin Province

Mak khik (มากขิ้ก), small version of pong hung on water buffalos' and cows' necks

Mak king kawm (มากกิ้งก้อม), local name for ponglang in Ban Non Yang Subdistrict, Nong Sung District, Mukdahan Province and in Khao Wong District, Kalasin Province

Mak toe toen (มากเต่อเต่น), local name of ponglang common in Kham Muang District, Kalasin Province

Mak toet toeng (มากเต่อเต่ง), local name of ponglang in Nawng Phawk District, Moei Wadi District, and Roi-et District, Roi-et Province

Maradok Isan (มรดกอีสาน) “Isan Heritage,” Isan cultural fair held many times in late 1970s

Matthayom-suksa (มัธยมศึกษาตอนต้น), secondary school system in Thailand

Maw (มอาจ), “skilled person” Isan/Lao language

Maw khwan (มอาจารย์), phram (พระหม่ำ), or maw phram (มอาจารย์), ritualist

Maw muay (มอาจารย์), boxer in old Isan dialect

Maw ya (มยาวา), folk doctor who uses herbal medicine and ritual texts

Mawlam (มอาจารย์), vocalist in Isan traditional vocal music

Mawlam jot (มอาจารย์เจที่ย์), one skillful in asking questions
**Mawlam jotkae** (หมอละเจตเกะ), “question mawlam” or “question-and-answer singing”

**Mawlam kawn** (ลำกลอน), pronunciation of *mawlam klawn* in Lao dialect

**Mawlam khawnsawan** (หมอละคะสวนสาร์), Lao traditional vocal music from Sawannaket, Laos

**Mawlam khu** (หมอละคุ), “couple singing” (*khu* [คู่], “couple”)

**Mawlam klawn** (หมอละกลอน), repartee sininging between two singers, normally one male and one female, with *khaen* accompaniment

**Mawlam Krung Thep** (หมอละกรุงเทพ), "Bangkok mawlam singer," mawlam performer(s) in Bangkok, 1960s

**Mawlam mu** (หมอละหมู่) "theatrical singing," *mu* (หมู่) means “group” or “troupe”

**Mawlam mu maeng tap tao** (หมอละหมู่ แมงตับเต้า), old form known as theatrical singing, about 1928 in Isan

**Mawlam phatthana** (หมอละพัฒนา), “development,” mawlam klawn singer(s) who added political agendas to performances in Cold War era

**Mawlam phaya yoi** (หมอละหย่าใหญ่), repartee style, Mukdahan Province

**Mawlam phi fa** (หมอละพี่ฝ้า), mawlam performed to heal sicknesses

**Mawlam phloen** (หมอละเพียน), theatrical genre of mawlam similar in performance to mawlam mu

**Mawlam phuen** (หมอละพื้น), narrative tradition usually performed by solo male vocalist to *khaen* accompaniment

**Mawlam rueang** (หมอละเร้อง), "story mawlam,” another term for mawlam mu

**Mawlam rueang taw klawn** (ลำเร้องตอลล่อน), *Taw klawn* (ตอลล่อน) “continuous verses,” in which each singer utilizes only pre-composed text without any improvisation in that theatrical genre

**Mawlam sing** (หมอละซิ่ง), a commercialized musical style combined mawlam with popular song

**Mawlam toei hua non tan** (หมอละเตียหัวโนนตาล), another style of lam toei
Mawm Ratchawong Kratai (ฌุมรมราชวงศ์ กรวดย), one of twenty-seven Siamese emissaries sent to court of Queen Victoria, United Kingdom, 1857

Mawmchao Waitayakawn Wawrawan (ฌุมมาเจ้าไวทยะกร วรวรรณ), 1891-1976, coined the term _lilat_ for Thai ballroom dance

Mawt Lueat Thahan Thai (มาร์ซเล็อดเทาะไท), “Blood of the Thai Soldiers March,” Patriotic Thai song, 1940s


Mon (มนุษย), ethnic group common in Thailand


Monthon (มณฑล), "circle," "area," or "territory," new Siamese administrative system of late 1800s

Monthon Fai Nua (มณฑลฝ่ายเหนือ), “Northern Circle”

Monthon Isan (มณฑลอีสาน), "Isan Circle"

Monthon Lao Chiang (มณฑลลาวเชียง), “Diagonal Lao Monthon”

Monthon Lao Kao (มณฑลลาวโก้), “the Circle of the Lao Kao,” southern part of modern day Laos and lower part of Khorat Plateau

Monthon Lao Klawng (มณฑลลาวกวาง), “Middle Lao Monthon,” area of modern-day Nakhon Rachasima Province along with adjacent provinces

Monthon Lao Phuan (มณฑลลาวพวน), “Monthon of the Lao Phuan [ethnic group],” of northern most part of Laos from Wiang Jan northward and upper part of Khorat Plateau

Monthon Nakhon Ratchasima (มณฑลนครราชสีมา), the area that has Nakhon Ratchasima as the main city
Monthon Payap (มณฑลพายัพ), "Payap Circle" specific area partly in today's Northern Thailand

Monthon Tawanawk Chiangnua (มณฑลตะวันออกเฉียงเหนือ), “Northeast Circle”

Monthon Tawantok Chiangnua (มณฑลตะวันตกเฉียงเหนือ), “Northwest Circle”

Monthon Udon (มณฑลอุดون), "Udon Circle," part of today's northern Isan

Montri Tramote (มณตรี ตรอมท, 1908-1995), well known Thai classical composer, mid 1900s

Mot rawp (หมอตะวัน), "ending the round," end of each dance in ramwong performance

Muang Na (ม่วงนา), village in Kalasin District, Kalasin Province where ponglang developed

Mueang (เมือง), "city(s)"

Mueang Fa Mueang Sawan (เมืองแท้, เมืองสวัสดิ์), literally “city of sky, city of heaven”

Mueang Nakhon Ratchasima (เมืองนครราชสีมา), capital city of Nakhon Rachasima, Nakhon Rachasima Province

Naihoai (นายฮ้อ), “men cattle traders”

Nak (นาค), "serpent"

Nakhon (นคร), "big city"

Namta Lao Wiang (น้ำตาลาวเรียง) “Tears of the Lao of Wiang Chan,” early Lao-style country song

Nang ek [นางเอก], female lead role in Thai theatrical performance

Nang hai (นางhai) “jar woman,” reference to hai "player" in ponglang ensemble

Nang Nok Krayang Khao (นางนกกระยางขาว), “The Female White Heron,” traditional tale associated with Buddhist teaching

Nang Phat (นางพัด) and Nang Ua (นางอัว), mawlam klawn performers who performed with a male singer named Mawlam Khen Banphrakue (มวลลำแก่น บ้านพระคือ) in the early 1900s

Nang pramothai (นงนพรหมทัย or นงนปราโมทย), shadow-puppet form in Isan
Nang ram (นางรำ), “young female dancers”

Nang Sao Suwan (นางสาว สวัสดี) “Miss Suwanna of Siam,” Siamese film premiered in Bangkok to much fanfare, 1923

Nang Taeng-awn (นางต่างอ่อน) “Miss Taeng-awn,” two famous stories from Rangsiman Troupe

Nang talung (หนังตะลุง), shadow puppet

Nang Yipun (นางยิปุน), “Japanese films,” first screened in Bangkok, 1902

Nangsue bailan (หนังลือใบลาน), “palm leaf book”

Nangsue lam (อ่านหนังสือลำ), “reading a poetic book”

Nangsue phuk (หนังสือผูก), “tied book”

Nangsue tham (หนังสือธรรม), “dhamma books”

Naphadon Duangphawn (นภพล ดวงพรรณ), b. 1941, founder/leader of the Phet Phin Thawng Troupe

Nat Thawawnbut (นารถ ดาวบุตร), early famous Thai songwriter in Bangkok

Natasin Chiangmai (นิทริตานนาฏศิลป์เชียงใหม่), regional campus of College of Dramatic Arts founded 1971, Chiangmai Province, Northern Thailand

Natasin Kalasin (นิทริตานนาฏศิลป์กำแพงเพชร), regional campus of College of Dramatic Arts founded 1982, Kalasin Province, Northeast Thailand

Natasin Nakhon Srithammarat (นิทริตานนาฏศิลป์นครศรีธรรมราช), regional campus of College of Dramatic Arts founded 1976, Nakhon Srithamarat Province, Southern Thailand

Natasin Roi-et (นิทริตานนาฏศิลป์รอยเอ็ด), regional campus College of Dramatic Arts founde 1979, Roi-et Province, Northeast Thailand

Natawut Suttisongkhram (นิธีวัฒน์ สุทธิสงค์), Thai historian specializing in Thai royal family

Nen (ภูเช), Buddhist novice

Ngan hae-thien khao phansa (นางแห่งเทียนเข้าพรรษา), Candle Festival in Buddhist calendar
Ngan Mahakam Ponglang Phra-wa Jangwat Kalasin (งานมหากรรมปองกลาง พระว่าจังหวัดกาฬสินธุ์), "The Great Festival of Ponglang [and] Textiles of Kalasin Province"


Ngan Phalang (งานพาล่าง), “Isan dinner party”

Nithan (นิทาน), “folk tales”

Nithan phuen-mueang (นิทานพื้นเมือง), "local Lao folk tales"

Norasing (นอรัสิง), music pavilion in what is today Dusit District, central Bangkok

Num Yasothon (หนุ่มยะธอร์), “A Young Man from Yasothon,” first song of Dao Bandawn

Nyahkur also called Chao Bon (ชาวบอน in Thai), ethnic minority in Khorat Province

O Sao Chao Rai (โอศาล้าชายไร่), “Oh, the Farmer’s Daughter,” radio drama, 1940s

Ongkan Faifa Suan Phumiphak (องค์การไฟฟ้าส่วนภูมิภาค), "Provincial Electricity Authority" established 1960

P. J. 7 Saladaeng (ศาลาแดง), early Thai Radio Station in Bangkok

Pa (เป่า) and thon (โทน), strokes of thon, single-headed goblet membranophone

Padaek (ปาแดง), fermented freshwater fish also called para (ปลา nouve) in central Thai

Pan Kanjanaphirom (ปาน ภานุพิภรมย์), ponglang developer who added three more logs to make a nine log-khawlaw

Pan khaoji (ปันขาวจี), bun of roasted sticky rice, traditional Isan snack

Paradorn Srichaphan (กราดอร ศริชาพันธ์), b. 1973, tennis player from Isan considered an "Asian Hero"

Pawng Prida (ปอง ปฎิดา), b. 1932, early Isan popular singer

Pha Wetsandawn (พระวิเศษสันต์), Jataka story in Buddhist tradition

Phaibun Paeng-ngoern (ไพบูรณ์ แพงเงิน), b. 1935, author of The Text of Mawlam Singing: the Intelligence of the Isan People

Phaibun Siangthawng (ไพบูรณ์ เสียงทอง), mawlam cing troupe based in Mahasarakham

Phak Isan (ภาคอีสาน), “Isan region”

Phak Wicha Natasin Lae Dontri (ภาควิชานุศิลป์และดนตรี), Department of Music and Dance

Phakoma (ผ้าขอมา), traditional clothes most Isan men use for multiple purposes

Phan Silalak (พัน ศิวลักษณ์), mawlam phleon founder from Ban Dongkhaen Yai (บ้านดงแก่นใหญ่), Yasathon Province

Phanomdongrak (พานมองกรัก), a mountain

Phan-siang Thawng-kham Phra-rat-chathan (ผันเสียงทองคำพระราชาทัน), “The Golden Sound Recording Award from the King”

Phanyya (พายยา), traditional poetry young Isan people recited in courtship rituals

Phaphayon Sri Krung (ภพพยอนศรีกรุง) "Sri Krung Film Studio," early Thai film company in Bangkok

Phasa dai (ภาษาใต้), Soutern Thai dialect

Phasa Isan (ภาษาอีสาน), “Isan language;” Northeast region

Phasa klang (ภาษากลาง, Central Thai language

Phasa nuea (ภาษาเหนือ, Northern Thai language

Phasa phuean-meueang (ภาษาพื้นเมือง), “local language” or “folk language”

Phasa Thai Tai (ภาษาไทยใต้), "Southern Thai language"

Phasa thawngthin (ภาษาทองถิ่น), “Regional or local language”

Phasa thin (ภาษาถิ่น), short form of "local or folk language"

Phatthana (พัฒนา), "development"
Phawnchai Srisarakham (พรชัย ศรีสาระคาม), professor from Mahasarekham City who loved Isan music and culture

Phawnphrai Phetdamnoen (พรไพร เผดชาริน), b. 1948, male pop singer from Ratchaburi Province

Phawnsak Sawngsaeng (พรภัสสก์ สว่างแสง), b. 1960, early Isan folk-pop singer

Phet Phin Thawng Troupe (เพชรพินตะอง), Isan country troupe who presented performances in Isan dialect

Phet Rama Theater (เพชรรามา), movie theater in Phetburi Road, Bangkok, where first Isan film music, "Monruk Maenam Mun" was shown, August 20, 1977

Phi Fa (ฝีฟ้า), Isan grand spirit believed to have power to control rain

Phi pao (ฝีป้า), spirit that likes to eat raw food

Phi pawp (ฝีป้อ), violent spirit that eats liver, stomach, and intestines of people by possession

Phi Phaya Thaen (ฝีพยาแทน), another name of phi fa

Phi phrai (ฝีไพร) or phi pa (ฝีปา), spirits that live in forests

Phi tahaek (ฝีต้าเอ็ก) or phi na (ฝีนา), spirits that live in rice fields

Phi Thaen (ฝีแทน), another name of Phi Phaya Thaen

Phiaoluk thung (ฟีอะลูกทุง), “Pure luk thung,” Central Thai country style music

Phim Rattanakhunsat (ภิรมย์ รัตนคุณแสง), b. 1913, first Isan artist to receive award of “The Great Folk Artists,” 1985


Phin (ฝิน), Isan three-stringed plucked lute

Phin bet (ฝินเบ็ต), “bass phin,” Isan electric bass

Phin faifa (ฝินไฟฟ้า), “electric phin”

Phin hai (ฝินไห่), “jar phin”
Phleng (เพลง), “song” but also more broadly “music”

Phleng Janjaokha (เพลงจันทร์เจ้า), “Oh, My Moon,” title of early Thai popular song

Phleng Khorat (เพลงโคราช), local narrative singing from Nakhon Ratchasima Province

Phleng luk krung (เพลงลูกกรุง), "songs of the city child"

Phleng luk thung (เพลงลูกทุ่ง) or luk thung (ลูกทุ่ง), “country song”

Phleng luk thung Isan (เพลงลูกทุ่งอีสาน), “Isan country music”

Phleng luk thung mawlam (เพลงลูกทุ่งมะลัย), folk-pop version of traditional mawlam music developed in mid-1980s

Phleng luk thung phak klang (เพลงลูกทุ่งภาคกลาง), “Central Thai luk thung”

Phleng nua tem (เพลงเนื้อเดิม), syllabic style song

Phleng pheun ban (เพลงพื้นบ้าน), "folk/local song"

Phleng phudi (เพลงผู้ดี), “elite song”

Phleng phuea chiwit (เพลงเพื่อชีวิต), “songs for life”

Phleng phut (เพลงพูต), “spoken song”

Phleng pop (เพลงป็อบ), "Thai popular song"

Phleng ramwong (เพลงรำวง), “circle dance song”

Phleng Ramwong Matrathan (เพลงรำวงมารดาธาร), “Standardized Ramwong Songs”

Phleng ramwong phuen-mueang (เพลงรำวงพื้นเมือง), “folk circle dance songs”

Phleng sakon (เพลงสาคน), "universal song"

Phleng string (เพลงสตรี), Thai popular style derived from American style Rock, 1970s

Phleng talat (เพลงตลาด), “market song”

Phleng Thai (เพลงไทย), any instrumental or song style indigenous to Thailand

Phleng Thai nuea tem (เพลงไทยเนื้อเต็ม), modern Thai song sung (more) syllabically as opposed to (more) melismatically in Thai classical tradition
**Phleng Thai sakon** (เพลงไทยสากล), "universal Thai song"

**Phloen** (เพลิน), “joyful,” “joyous,” or “enjoyable”

**Phra Chen Duriyang** (พระเจนดีเรียง), Director of Siamese Royal String Orchestra (1883-1968)

**Phra ek** (พระเอก), “male lead role”

**Phra Kaew** (พระแก้ว), Emerald Buddha

**Phra Pinklao** (พระพิมพ์หล้า), younger brother of King Mongkut (1808-1865)

**Phra Sri Ariya** (พระศรีอิระ), also Phra Sri Ariya Metrai (พระศรีอารีย์มาตรี), ideal world of plenty and peacefulness

**Phra That Phanom** (พระธาตุพนม), stupa in Nakhon Phanom Province, Isan

**Phrajao** (พระเจ้า), prefix before king’s name to indicate status, e.g., **Phrajao Suriyawongsa** (พระเจ้าสุริyawongsa), “King Suriyawongsa”

**Phrajao Nakhon** (พระเจ้านคร), "king who conquers a city"

**Phrathet Siam** (ประเทศไทย), "the country of Siam"

**Phrathet Thai** (ประเทศไทย), Thailand in Thai

**Phromdaen** (เพลิน, พรหมเดน), b. 1939, country singer well-known in "spoken song"

**Phu dai** (พูได้), Isan dialect, interrogative “who?”

**Phuan** (พวก), another Lao ethnic group

**Phuen** (พื้น), “floor,” “foundation,” “tradition,” “traditional”

**Phuen-mueang Isan** (วงศ์เมืองอีสาน), “local Isan music ensemble”


**Phumibun** (พุ่มบุญ) "men of merit," uprising against Siamese in many areas throughout Isan (1901-1902)
Phutai (ภูไท), ethnic group in Isan

Phuyai ban (ภูไยบ้าน), village headman

Pi (ปี), small, slender bamboo free reed pipe

Pi luk khaen (ปิลูกแคน), “khaen child wind instrument”

Pi Phutai (ปี่ภูไท), Phutai bamboo free reed instrument

Pinai (ปีโน), quadruple reed oboe

Piphat (ปีพหาท), Thai classical ensemble of gong circle, xylophone, and vertical flute or oboe

Piphat khamen (ปีพหาท์เขมร), "Cambodian piphat ensemble"

Piphat mai nuam (ปีพหาทัยนาม), Piphat ensemble played with soft mallets

Piphat nueng wong (ปีพหาที่หนึ่ง), “one piphat ensemble;”

Plueang Chairatsami (เปล้อง ชาวรัตน์), 1932-2007, well-known modern ponglang developer

Pong (โป่ง), large slit drum common in Isan Buddhist temples

Ponglang (โป่งกลาง), neotraditional Isan vertical log xylophone

Prachum Intaratun (ประชม อินทร์ตุ้น), park official in Yang-talat District, Kalasin Province


Praka-sani-yabat Wicha-chip Chansung (ประกาศนียบัตรวชีพชันสูง), "vocational certificate, higher-level" abbreviated (ปราช), Paw Waw Saw

Prakawp Chaiyaphiphat (ประภาพ ไชยาพิทักษ์), Thai television producer, 1960s

Prakuat Wong Dontri Phuen-mueang Isan (ประกาศวงศ์ดอนตรีพื้นเมืองอีสาน), “Isan Folk Music Ensemble Contest”

Pu Som Fao Sap (ปู่สมfaqาหวพ), “Grandfather Spirit Guarding the Treasures”

Rachabut (ราชบุตร), “son of the head city”
**Rachawong** (ราชวงศ์), “relative of the head city”

**Rak Mueang Thai** (รักเมืองไทย), “Love Thailand,” patriotic song written by Luang Wijit Wathakan (หลวงวิจิตรวิศวรกัน)

**Ram** (รำ), "dance"

**Ram Toei** (รำเตย), *phleng ramwong* song recorded 1945

**Ramana** (รำมนา), small frame drum

**Ramten** (รำเต้น) “dance-jumping,” refers to ballroom dance in an impolite way

**Ramthon** (รำโทน), dance accompanied by *thon* rhythmic patterns

**Ramwong** (รำวง) “circle dance,” *ram* (รำ) “dance” and *wong* (วง) “circle”

**Ranat** (ราнат), Thai classical xylophone or Western xylophone bars

**Ranat ek** (ราнатเอก), Thai lead xylophone

**Rangsi Tasanaphayak** (รังสี ทสนาพยัคฆ์), 1926-2003, well-known Thai movie producer

**Ratcha Phleng Phut** (ราชาพลวงพุธ), “King of Spoken Song”

**Ratri Sriwilai** (รัตรี ศรีวิไล), b. 1952, mawlam singer who created *mawlam cing*

**Rawng-nuea-tem** (ร้องเนื้อเต็ม), song "sung syllabically"

**Rawp** (รอบ), "round"

**Roi-et Phetsayam** (ร้อยเอ็ด เพชรสาย), well known native Isan *luk thung* singer

**Roitri Prawm** (ร้อยตรี พร้อม), "Second Lieutenant Prawm," Siamese soldier who falls in love with young lady from Chiang Mai in "Thai singing drama" by Sao Khruea Fa

**Rongram Kosa** (รองระมโคษา), "Kosa Hotel" in Khon Kaen City built to serve American GIs during Vietnam War

**Rongrian fuekhat khru** (รองเรียนฝึกหัดครู), "teacher training school," first founded in provinces of Nakhon Ratchasima and Ubon Ratchathani, Northeast Thailand

**Rongrian Fuekhat Khru Hansung** (รองเรียนฝึกหัดครูฮันสุง), "teaching training school, higher level"
Rong-rian Prathom-suksa (โรงเรียนประถมศึกษา), elementary school

Rosita (โรสิ塔), Thai lakhon rawng, Bangkok "singing drama" troupe, 1940s

Ru nap (รูนำ), musical instrument "finger hole"

Ru pao (รูป้า), musical instrument “blow hole”

Ru phae (รูเพาะ), "turning hole," cut into opposite sides of each pipe at fixed distances on khaen tube

Rueang (เรื้อง), “story” pronounced lueang (เลียง) or hueang (เอียง) in Lao

Sa-daeng talok (แสดงตลก), "comedic play”

Saek (แสน), Isan ethnic minority

Sai achip (สายอาชีพ), “career path” in Thai vocational school system

Sak yant (ลีกยันต์), tattooed men

Saka wicha duriyang-kasin phuen-ban (สำอาวิชาศิริยางคศิลป์พื้นบ้าน), "[Isan] folk music program"

Sakon (สากล), “universal” or “international”

Sakon Nakhon (แกลงสงขลา), "Sakon Nahon Valley," Isan

Saksayam Phetchomphu (สักซ้ายสาม เพชรชมภู), b. 1952, first famous lukthung Isan singer, 1970s

Sala Chaloe Krong (ศาลเจ้าลีกรุง), early Thai movie theater on Charoen Krong Road (ถนนเจริญกรุง) built in 1931

Sala Khunnawut (ศาล คุมนาวต์), b. 1962, native Isan songwriter who has achieved high reputation and real celebrity status in Thai (Isan) country music today

Sama Khom Chao Isan Krong Thep (สามาขอมชาวอีสานกรุงเทพ), "Isan Association of Bangkok"

Samai Awnwong (สามัย อังวิวงค์), 1931-1996, well-known Lao-style country singer who first included khaen, Lao traditional instrument in his music
Samakhom Mawlam (สม أخي หม่อมละม้า), “Mawlam Association,” mawlam agency localted in towns or cities most parts of Isan

Samnak ngan mawlam (สานักงานหม่อมละม้า), "mawlam performance agencies"

Samnak-ngan Khana Kam-makan Wattha-natham Haeng-chat (สานักงานคณะกรรมการวัฒนธรรมแห่งชาติ), "Office of Cultural Commission"

San (สาน), “short” in reference to lam thangsun in Lao musical scale or mode

Sang Sin Chai (สัง ศิน ชัย), great Lao epic

Sangha (สังฆะ), Buddhist community of monks

Sangwat (สังวาส), style of mawlam with strident vocal timbre and formal and conservative language use

Sankhamphaeng (สันกำแพง), an Isan mountain

Sanong Klangprasri (สแง่ง คลังพระศรี), scholar who studied mawlam cing

Sao Chan Kangkop (สาวชันกรังค์โภ), “Miss Chan’s Broken Heart,” Isan folk-pop top hit released in 1986

Sao Fangkhong (สาวฟังโขง), “Maekhong Riverbank Girl,” well known Isan style song recorded in 1957

Saraphan (สารภายนุ่ม) or sut saraphan (สูตรสารภายนุ่ม), style of "Buddhist chanting" or "hightened speech"

Sathaban Rachaphat (สธาบันราชภัฏ) "Institutions to Rajabhat," previously known as Witthayalai Khru, "Teacher College." became Maha Witthayalai Rachaphat (มหาวิทยาลัยราชภัฏ) "Institutes of Rajabhat Universities" in 2004

Sathaban Teknoloyi Ratchamongkon Witthayakat Chomphon Khet Udomsak (สถาบันเทคโนโลยีราชมงคล วิทยาเขตชุมพรเขตมศักดิ์), “[the] Ratchamongkon Institute of Technology [at] the regional campus at Udomsak

Sathani Thoratat Thai Thiwi Chawng 4 [Si] Bangkumphrom (สทานี โทรทัศน์ ไทยทีวีช่อง 4 บางขุนพรหม), "Bangkumphrom Thai TV Channel 4"

Sathani Thorathat Chong Si Khon Kaen (สทานีโทรทัศน์ ช่อง 4 จังหวัดขอนแก่น), "Channel 4, Khon Kaen TV Station"
Sathani Thorathatsi Kawng Thapbok Chawng 7 (สะทโคนโทรทัสสะศักดิ์บุตร ช่อง 7), “Royal Army Television Station, Channel 7”

Sathani Withayu Krajai Siang Wangjat Roi-et (สะทโคนวิทยาครบรามไพศาล วงศ์เจต), "Roi-et Radio Station," Roi-et City

Sathani Withayu Krung Thep Thi Phaya Thai (สะทโคนวิทยากรุงเทพฯ ที่พระยาไท), “Bangkok Radio Station at Phya Thai,” located in the Waikun Thepayasathan Hall of the Phya Thai Hotel in Bangkok in 1932

Sathani Witthayu Taw Shaw Daw (สะทโคนวิทยุ ตาว ช้าว ดว), "Radio Station of Frontier Police Officers"

Sathit Thawngjan (สาทิต ธาวงจรัฐ), b. 1960, first luk thung mawlam singer famous for singing in mawlam doen style

Satho (สะโท), "fermented rice wine"

Saw (สะว), a two stringed bowed lute

Saw bang (สะว้บัง), two-stringed bowed bamboo lute

Saw bip (สะวีบ or สะวีบ), two-stringed bowed lute with metal can as resonator

Saw Isan (สะวีอีสาน, two-stringed bowed lute to used for Isan traditional music

Saw u (สะวุ), two-stringed bowed lute in Thai classical instrument that has coconut chell as its resonator

Sawatdi (สั้วอติ), Thai term for "greeting"

Sawng thaeo (สองแคว), “two rows (of seats),” a Japanese made “pickup truck”

Sayan Sanya (สะยาณ สะณา), b. 1952, most Thai popular luk thung singer in the early 1970s and 1980s

Setha Sirichaya (เสทตสะ ศรียะยา), b., 1944, is the lead singer in early Thai Rock Music in the 1970s

Siang di [เสียงดี] or dang di [ตังดี]), "good sounding," the real beauty of Isan longdrum ensemble

Sing (สะง), the term derives from the English word “racing" referring to mawlam sing genre
**Sinlapin Diden** (ศิลปินดีเด่น), “Distinguished Artist”

**Sinlapin haeng-chat** (ศิลปินแห่งชาติ), “National Artist”

**Sio** (เสีย), “friend” or “friendship” in Lao culture

**Siplaw** (สิบล้อ), “ten wheeler,” Japanese large truck common in Thailand

**Sithon Manora** (ศิริน โมนารา), “Mr. Sithon and Miss Manora,” one of the well-known Thai/Lao epic

**Siwilai** (ศิวลัย), Thai-ification of “civilized” which expressed the desire to “progress” on the model of the West

**So** (ใส), Isan ethnic minority

**Soeng Tham Na** (เชียงท่านา), ponglang dance movements representing process of nurturing rice production from first planting of rice seed to harvest

**Sombat Methani** (สมบัติ เมธานี), b. 1937, popular Thai male movie star from Ubon Ratchathani

**Sombat Simla** (สมบัติ สิมหล้า), b. 1963, blind khaen player from Mahasarakham Province


**Somrak Khamsing** (สมรักษ์ คำสิงห์), b. 1973, boxer born in Khon Kaen, first Thai athlete to win Olympic gold medal, Twenty-sixth Olympic Games, Atlanta, 1996

**Songsak Prathumsin** (ทรงศักดิ์ ประทุมสิน), b. 1955, phin, wot, and ponglang maker and teacher, Roi-et Province

**Songserm** (ส่องเสริม), surname of District Chief Thanawm Songserm (ทานหอม สงสือ), b. 1944, District Chief of Nongphawk, Roi-et Province, late 1970s

**Sonthi Sommat** (สันทิ สมมาตรา), b. 1952, well known Isan country music singer, late 1970s and early 1980s
Srisakara Vallibhotama (ศรีสกิริ วลีโภดม), well known Thai archaeologist

Su khwan (สุขวัฒน์), Hindu-derived ritual performed to restore or enhance a person’s spiritual, physical, or mental health

Sun Sinlapa Watthanatham (สุนันทวดวัฒนธรรม), "Cultural Center"

Suntharaphirom (สนทราวิภาโรม), Bangkok mawlam klawn agency organized in early 1960s by Khru Suntharaphirom (ครูสนทราวิภาโรม)

Sunthawn Chairatthanasot (สุนทร์ ไชยรัตนโชติ), well known Isan mawlam klawn singer and lam text writer in the 1960s-70s

Suphannahong (สุพรรณหงส์), "golden swan"

Suphine Patsungnoen (สุฟิน พาสุงเนิน), b. 1927, mawlam mu performer known professionally by comedic stage name, Kao Noi Kluai Nao (แก่น้อย กล้าวเน่า), literally “Nine Rotten Bananas”

Suraphon Sombatjaroen (สุรพล สมบัติเจริญ), 1930-1968, Central Thai country singer who earned the title “King of Luk Thung”

Surasak Phimsen (สุรศักดิ์ ฟิมพ์เส้น), 1960-2008, Professor of Music at Mahasarakham University

Surin Phaksiri (สุรินทร์ ภาคศิริ), pioneer native Isan DJ/radio announcer in Bangkok and Isan-style songwriter

Suriyavongs (สุริยะวงศ์), r. 1637-1694, famous Lao king

Sut [สุตร], “sutra,” type of Lao chanting text

Suthep Wongkamhaeng (สุเทพ วงศ์กมภัย), b. 1934, famous luk krung singer from Nakhon Ratchasima

Tai Dam (ไท达), ethnic minority in Isan and Laos

Tai Khorat (ไทโครา), "Khorat Tai," people of Nakhon Ratchasrima Province (Korat)

Tai-Lao (ไท-ลาว), Lao ethnic group in Thailand

Tao khaen (เต้าแคน), khaen windchest

Taphon and glawng that (กลองหัด), two kinds of drums among Thai classical instruments

Tawan Yaw Saeng (ตะวันยาบแสง), “Shining Sun,” early Thai film song

Tem Wiphakphojanakit (เทemu วิภักพิจานิกาติ), well known author who wrote History of Isan

Tenram (เต้นรำ), “jumping dance,” Thai ballroom dance

Thai Doeng (ไทยเด่ง), Isan local dialect of Naknon Ratchasima Province

Thai-Nyaw (ไทยเหนือ), Isan ethnic minority

Thammayut Nikai (ธรรมยุตีนิกาย), Buddhist sect in Thailand created by King Mongkut

Thamnong (ทานอง), "melody"

Thamnong lam (ทานองล้า) "lam melody," style of lam singing rather than its actual melodic contour

Thamnong lam doen (ทานองล้าเดืน), "melodic style of lam doen"

Thamnong lam khawnsawan (ทานองล้าขัวสนวารส), "melodic style of lam khawnsawan"

Thamnong lam phloen (ทานองล้าพลีน), “melody of lam phloen.”

Thamnong lam Phuthai (ทานองล้าพุทธไห), "melodic style of lam Phuthai"

Thamnong lam tang wai (ทานองล้าตังหวาย), "melodic style of lam tang wai"

Thamnong lam thang san (ทานองล้าทางสัน), “singing in the scale of san”

Thamnong lam thang yao (ทานองล้าทางยา), "singing in the scale of yao"

Thamnong lam toei (ทานองล้าเดีย), "melodic style of lam toei"

Thanat Khoman (ทนถ คูมานันท์), 1914-2009, consultant of Thai Prime Minister, Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat (สฤษฎิ  ธนระรัตนชัย), 1908-1963

Thang (ทาง), “way” or “path” in musical sense meaning “scale” or “mode”
Thanon Mitraphap (ถนนมิตรภาพ), Mitraphap Highway or “Friendship Highway”

Thansamai (ทันสมัย), “up to date”

Thao Phromakhod (ท้าวพรหมโคตร), person from Wiang Chan (Vientiane, Laos) believed to have brought ponglang to Isan

Thawin Thitabutta (ทรงวิน ซื่อตะบุตา), schoolteacher from Yang Sri-surat District, Mahasarakham Province who wrote the song, Tam Nawng Klab Sarakham (ตามน้องกลับสาร самом)

Thawngjaroen Dalao (ทองเจริญ ดาหลา), b. 1942, a well-known male mawlam klawn singer

Thawngkham Phengdi (ทองคำ เพ็งตี), 1927-1996, well-known female mawlam klawn singer

Thawngue Saenthawisuk (ทองถือ แสนทรีสุข), leader of famous mawlam mu troupe, Khana Ubon Phatthana

Thawngmak Janthalue (ทองมาก จันทะลือ), b. 1924, first mawlam singer to earn the title "National Artist"

Thawngmi Malai (ทองมี มาลัย), b. 1944, famous mawlam phloen singer from Yasothon Province, 1970s

Thawngsai Thapthanon (ทองใส ทับถาน), b 1947, well known phin player from Ubon Ratchathani Province

The Impossibles (ดี อิมพอสซิเบิล), early Thai rock group, 1970s

The Mawlam Noi (มวลลามloit), “mawlam singer Noi,” ensemble active in uprising against Siamese rule in Mahasarakham Province, 1936

The Nai Sila (นายศิล่า) “Mr. Sila,” ensemble active in uprising against Siamese rule in Ubon Ratchathani Province, 1949

The Nawngmakkao (หนὼงมักกะแ瓜), ensemble active in uprising against Siamese rule in village of Nawngmakkao, Puan Phu Subdistrict (ตำบลปัวพุ), Phu Kradueng District (อำเภอกระดึง), Loei Province northern Isan, 1924

Thek (เทค), Thai term for discotheque

Thepnakhon Company (เทพนัก), record company, produced mawlam klawn music, 1940s
Thepphabut Satirawtchomphu (เทพภูตร สติราวท์ชมภู), prominent Isan music businessman, active late 1960s and 1970s

Thepphawn Phetubon (เทพพร เผดิมบุณ), b. 1947, well known lukthung Isan singer, 1970s

Thesaphiban (เทศาภิบาล), Siamese administrative system created by King Chulalongkorn, late 1800s

Thet (เทสนี่), preaching by Buddhist monks either spoken or chanted

Thet lae (เทสนีแหล่) also lae (แหล่), short form, style of melodic preaching

Thet nihan (เทสนีไหนัน), singing of Lao traditional tales and epics, usually by Buddhist monks

Thewada (เทวะฯ), male angel

Thida hai (ธิด่าhai), “jar daughter,” female hai player in ponglang ensemble

Thinnakon Attaphaibun (ทินนคร อัตพลพิบูลย์), music faculty member at Ubon Teachers College and leader of Wong Ponglang Witthayalai Khru Ubon

Thitso Sutsanaen (ทิตสโร สัตสนะแน่น), radio DJ pseudonym of Surin Phaksiri

Thon (โทน), single headed, goblet shaped hand drum

Thongsak Prathumsin (ทรงสัก ประทุมสงิน), b. 1955, wot developer from Roi-et Province

Ti rab sung Khorat (ที่ราบสูงโคราช), "Khorat Plateau"

Tiangna (ติยางนา), tiny, simple, open walled rice field hut of four posts and thatched roof

Tra Singto (ตราสิงโต) “Lion Tradmark,” Thai record label

Tuk-tuk (รถตุกติก), small three wheel taxi common in Bangkok

Tumthawng Chokchana (ตุ้มทอง โชคชนะ), Isan native ramwong songwriter from Ubon Ratchathani Province

Upatcha (อุปัชชา), (roughly) "teacher" in Buddhist monk society

Waeng Plangwan (วัง พลังวรรณ), first author who wrote a book on luk thung Isan
Waiphot Phetsuphan (วายพล เพชรซุปกรณ์), b. 1942, Lao-style luk thung singer from Central Thailand

Waltz Plueamjit (วอลเตอร์ ปลิวมจิต), Thai-sounding melody in Western waltz rhythm called (ปลิวมจิต) meaning "happy mind"

Wannakhadi Lao (วรรณคดีลาว), Lao epics

Waranut Ari (วรนุช อารีย์), early Thai pop female singer, singing partner of Benjamin

Wasuwat (วสวัสดี) family, first importer of popular films, early 1920s

Wat Supattanaram Varawihan (วัดสุทัศนารามварีห์), Maha Nikai Buddhist Temple in Ubon Ratchathani City

Watta-natham jangwat (วัฒนานิธิจังหวัด), "provincial cultural organization"

Weti Muay Ratchadamnoen (เวทีมวยราชดำเนิน), "Ratchadamnoen Boxing Stadium" in Bangkok

Wilat Osathanon (วิไล โอสถานนท์), first Director of Krom Khosanakan (กรม ประชากร), "Department of Public Relations"

Withayalai (วิทยาลัย), "college"

Withayalai achi-wa seuksa (วิทยาลัยอาชีวศึกษา), female vocational school typically teaching sewing, embroidery, cooking, secretarial work, and hairdressing

Withayalai kaset (วิทยาลัยเกษตร), "agricultural colleges," offer degrees in farming technology, animal husbandry, and related fields

Withayalai Khru (วิทยาลัยครู), "Teacher’s Colleges"

Withayalai Natasin Kalasin (วิทยาลัยนาฏศิลป์กาฬสินธุ์) or Natasin Kalasin (นาฏศิลป์ กาฬสินธุ์), "Kalasin College of Dramatic Arts"

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Withayalai teknik (วิทยาลัยเทคนิค), "technical colleges," male vocational schools providing instruction in traditional fields such as construction, electricity, carpentry, welding, and mechanical work

Withayalai Khru Ubon (วิทยาลัยครูบุรฉัตร), "Ubon Teachers College"
Witthayalai Natasin (วิทยาลัยนาฏศิลป์), “Colleges of Dramatic Arts”

Wong (วัง), (musical) “ensemble”

Wong [dontri] mawlam sing (วัง [ดนตรี] หมอละซี้), band for accompanying mawlam sing

Wong Dawkfa Srinakarin (วงดอวกฟ้าศรีนารินทร) “Srinakarin Noble Women’s Ensemble,” student neotraditional ensemble at Mahasarakham Teacher College

Wong dontri (วงดนตรี), “musical ensemble”

Wong Dontri Dao Bandawn (วงดนตรีด้าว บ้านตอน), "Dao Banddawn Country Troupe"

Wong Dontri Jaruknok (วงดนตรีจารุกนก), "Jaruknok Band," well known pop band, 1940s

Wong Dontri Krom Khosanakan (วงดนตรีกรมโภชนาการ), “The Department of Public Relations Band”

Wong dontri luk thung Isan (วงดนตรีลูกท่งอีสาน), “Luk Thung Isan Band”

Wong Dontri Lukthung [Isan] Phet Phin Thawng (วงดนตรีลูกท่งอีสานเพชรพินทอง), "Lukthung [Isan] Band Phet Phin Thawng"

Wong Dontri Phuenban Isan Phrayuk (วงดนตรีพื้นบ้านอีสานประยุกต์), "Isan Applied Folk Music Ensemble"

Wong dontri phuen-mueang (วงดนตรีพื้นเมือง), “local music ensemble”

Wong dontri phuen-mueang Isan (วงดนตรีพื้นเมืองอีสาน), “Folk/Local Music Ensemble”

Wong dontri Phutai (วงดนตรีพุทไธ), "Phutai Musical Band"

Wong dontri sakon (วงดนตรีสากนก), “Universal Music Ensemble,”

Wong Dontri Saksayam Phetchomphu (วงดนตรีสักสิ่งเบญจภูพ), "Saksayam Phetchomphu Band"

Wong Dontri Samai Silapin (วงดนตรีสมัยศิลปิน), "Band of Samai Performing Artists"

Wong Dontri Sonthi Sommat (วงดนตรี สนธิ สมมาตร), "Sonthi Sommat Band"

Wong dontri Thai (วงดนตรีไทย), “Thai music ensemble”
Wong Dontri Thepphawn Phetubon (วงศ์ดอนตรีทิพยวณ พชรภูบ), "Thepphawn Phetubon Band"

Wong Dontri Thitso Lam Phloen (วงศ์ดอนตรีทิตสลามพลีน), "Thitso Lam Phloen Band"

Wong Duriyayothin (วงศ์ดุริยโยธิน), "Duriyayothin Band"

Wong Kaen Isan (วงศ์แก่นอีสาน), "Kaen Isan Band"

Wong Khaen (วงศ์แคน), "Wong Khaen Band," early Isan student neotraditional ensemble at Mahasarakham Teachers College

Wong khaen prayuk (แดนประยุกต์), “modernized/applied khaen ensemble”

Wong Khrueang Sai Farang Luang (วงศ์ครุยังสายฟ้าร้างหลวง), "Royal Western String Ensemble" founded in 1911

Wong klawng yao (วงศ์กล่องยาว), "longdrum ensemble"

Wong mahori Isan (วงศ์มหาอีสาน), "Mohori Isan Ensemble"

Wong Phin Prayuk (วงศ์พินประยุกต์), “Modernized (or Applied) Phin Band,”

Wong phin-khaen (วงศ์พินแคน), “phin-khaen ensemble”

Wong ponglang (วงศ์ปองกลาง), “ponglang ensemble”

Wong Ponglang Kalasin (วงศ์ปองกลางกำแพงแก้ว), “Kalasin Ponglang Troupe”

Wong Ponglang Somphamit (วงศ์ปองกลางสมพัฒน์), “Somphamit Ponglang Troupe”

Wong Ponglang Witthayalai Khru Ubon (วงศ์ปองกลางวิทยาลัยครูบุนนท์), "Ubon Teachers College Ponglang Ensemble"

Wong ranat khawng wong (วงศ์ระนาดข้าวทอง), "piphat ensemble of Central Thai classical music"

Wong string kawmbo (วงศ์สตริงคัมโบ), “String Combo Band,” a Thai rock band

Wong Suntharaphawn (วงศ์สุนทรสราพ), "Suntharaphon Band," early Thai jazz band founded in 1939

Wong Trae Farang Luang (วงศ์แตร์ฟ้าร้างหลวง), "(Siamese) Royal Brass Band" founded in 1850
Wong Wot Siangthawng (วงวอดเสียงทอง) “Golden Sounding Wot Troupe,”
local neotraditional ensemble from Roi-et Province

Wot (โวต), round panpipe

Yak hu (อยากหู), "want to know" in Isan dialect

Yak Pen Nakrawng (อยากเป็นนักรอง), “Wanna Be a Singer,” song sung by Pawng Prida (ป้อง ปริท้า), b. 1932

Yamlaeng (ยำแล่ง), "dust" in Isan dialect

Yu sai (อยู่ใส่), interrogative “where?” as in “where are you from?” or “where do you live?” in Isan dialect
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