THE COMMUNICATION OF VERBAL CONTENT ON THE HMONG RAJ:
AN ETHNOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS OF PERFORMANCE PRACTICE

A Thesis

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By

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ABSTRACT

First generation members of the diasporic Hmong-American community continue the practice of communicating verbal content on a variety of instruments, including raj, a family of aerophones. Based on field research with White Hmong (Hmoob Dawb) residents of Wisconsin and Minnesota, this thesis provides an in-depth ethnographic account of raj performance in America. Through interview, participant observation, musical transcription, and computer analysis of recordings, the relationship between words and musical sound is investigated and contextualized in performance. Building on the work of Eric Mareschal and Amy Catlin, multiple levels of communication in raj performances are investigated, moving beyond previous descriptions based on the "speech surrogate" model.

Although an instrument for courtship in Laos and Thailand, raj performances in America are most likely to occur at Hmong New Year celebrations or at private family gatherings. Utilizing consistent relationships between lexical tone and musical pitch, performers extemporaneously
manipulate conventional and formulaic phrases into personal expressions within a limited range of topics. Skilled listeners interpret verbal content in familiar melodic contours and rhythmic patterns. Associations between the sound of words (lexical tone) and sets of pitches, different across various raj and between scales played on a single raj, serve to clarify ambiguous content. Still, performances and interpretations of performances are rarely word-forward. Rather, performers develop motor patterns for favorite expressions that are understood on multiple levels as performances unfold.

Ornamentation, breath control, and precise fingering add beauty to performances and communicate the skill and cultural knowledge (lxawj) of the performer. Thus performances are more than instances of "speech surrogacy" as defined by Theodore Stern. In this way, the raj remains relevant for new generations of Hmong-Americans who, due to lack of experience or familiarity with the Hmong language, cannot understand the underlying words. Furthermore, this deeper understanding of raj performances can inform future research on the relationship between language and music in Hmong culture as well as provide a starting point for the investigation of connections between lexical tone and musical pitch in cognition.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of tables</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of figures</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapters:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preface</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Introduction</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1 Playing word by word</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 History and context</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3 Hmong musical practices</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3.1 Vocal genres</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3.2 Instrumental genres</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Theory and methodology</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 The ethnographic context</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 Previous studies of Hmong music</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3 Speech surrogacy</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4 Beyond semiotics</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5 Methods in the field</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Fieldwork</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1 Details of fieldwork: people and places</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2 Talking about music</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

vii
3.3 My lesson from Ger: a reflexive critique of methodology in the field.................................................................................. 61
3.4 Tshuab raj in the American context: a Hmong New Year celebration.................................................................................. 70

4. Analysis................................................................................................................. 84
4.1 "Hmong people, are you lonely?" ....................................................................... 84
4.2 Lexical-tone and musical sound in tshuab raj...................................................... 91
4.3 The limitations of mapping................................................................................ 96
4.4 Ornamentation....................................................................................................... 101
4.5 Pitch contour and moving tones ........................................................................ 109
4.6 Rhythm and prosody........................................................................................... 112
4.7 The structure of performance.............................................................................. 114
4.8 Comparisons between raj nplain and raj hliav ncauj......................................... 118
4.9 Formulaic expressions.......................................................................................... 126
4.10 Orphans and lovers............................................................................................ 133

5. Conclusion.............................................................................................................. 139
5.1 A reconsideration of Mareschal’s lexical-tone to pitch mapping....................... 139
5.2 Conclusions.......................................................................................................... 145
  5.2.1 The raj in context ......................................................................................... 145
  5.2.2 The musical performance ............................................................................. 147
  5.2.3 The verbal content ....................................................................................... 148
5.3 New directions for research .............................................................................. 151
5.4 Afterword ............................................................................................................ 153

Glossary.................................................................................................................... 154
Appendix.................................................................................................................. 159

Bibliography............................................................................................................ 164
LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>The relationship between lexical-tone and musical pitch described by Eric Mareschal. This table is derived from Amy Catlin's description of Mareschal's findings.</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>Relationships between lexical-tone and musical pitch in <em>suab raj nplaim</em> as performed by Ger Xiong.</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>A table of pitch levels and two-note motives related to lexical-word tone as demonstrated in a prototypical <em>kwo txhiaj</em> performance by Choua Lee. The repetition of strophes with new pairs of rhyming words is counted.</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>Mareschal's lexical-tone to pitch-level map compared to proposed modifications. Numbers in parentheses represent alternate pitch levels conditioned by preceding lexical-tone.</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>Ger Xiong’s qeej. Eau Claire, Wisconsin, 2001</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>Xiong performs a spin as he plays the qeej. Still from Speaking Musically, 2001</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>Vang Tong Thor plays the raj nplain using a section from a plastic bottle as a resonator. Madison, Wisconsin, 2005</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>Close-up view of a raj lev les made by Lee Por Yang. Madison, Wisconsin, 2005</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>Lee Por Yang plays the raj lev les by covering the free-reed with his mouth. Madison, Wisconsin, 2005</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>A still from the video, Speaking Musically, showing a performance by Ger Xiong on the raj hliav ncauj. Eau Claire, Wisconsin, 2001</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>A performance on the raj pum liv by Tong Pao Moua. Madison, Wisconsin, 2005</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>Close-up of a ncas belonging to Vang Tsha. Madison, Wisconsin, 2005...26</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>Vang Tsha performs into a microphone with a ncas. Madison, Wisconsin, 2005</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.1 The dance group Dej Ntshiab Pajtawg Tshiab. Hmong New Year 2000, Eau Claire, Wisconsin.................................................................78

3.2 Ger Xiong performs on the raj hliav ncauj at the Hmong New Year, 2000. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.................................................................81

4.1 Ger Xiong plays the word ‘Hmoob’ on the raj nplaim by lifting his fingers, leaving all five holes open. Eau Claire, Wisconsin, 2005........................................86

4.2 A graph of the fundamental frequency of Ger’s performance of ‘Hmoob.’........................................................................................................86

4.3 Ger Xiong plays the word ‘puas’ on the raj nplaim by covering the first two holes. Eau Claire, Wisconsin, 2005..................................................87

4.4 A graph of the fundamental frequency of Ger’s performance of ‘puas’ on the raj nplaim................................................................................87

4.5 Ger plays the word ‘kho’ on the raj nplaim by covering only the first hole. Eau Claire, Wisconsin, 2005.................................................................88

4.6 A graph of the fundamental frequency of Ger’s performance of ‘kho’ on the raj nplaim................................................................................88

4.7 A graph of the fundamental frequency (Hz) over intensity (dB) of Ger’s raj nplaim performance of ‘Hmoob puas kho.’........................................89

4.8 A spectrogram of phrase played by Ger Xiong on the raj nplaim. A graph of fundamental frequency with associated pitch rank is provided for reference.................................................................99

4.9 A histogram of fundamental frequency based on the first ten phrases of suab raj nplaim performance by Ger Xiong........................................101

4.10 Inconsistent ornamentation across two performances of the same verbal content........................................................................................105
4.11 A graph of fundamental frequency based on the second half of a *nqes* performed by SaiPao. The words are presented as spoken by SaiPao at the end of the *nqes* and the pitch rank of the frequencies is provided for reference...

4.12 Spectrogram of "*Yuaw kho kho peb siab*" spoken by Kang Vang...

4.13 Graph of the fundamental frequency of an opening melodic formula in a performance by Sai Pao Lee. This is the first half of the *nqes* completed in Figure 4.11. Pitch rank is included to clarify the position of these sounds in *suab raj nplaim*...

4.14 A graph of fundamental frequency based on a performance of the *Nkauj Hmoob* pattern as performed by SaiPao Lee on the *raj nplaim*...

4.15 Representation of Ger's sung performance in Western notation near actual pitch...

4.16 A graph of the fundamental frequency of Ger Xiong's sung performance demonstrating the dynamic nature of the pitch...

4.17 Representation of Ger Xiong's performance on the *raj hliav ncauj* in Western notation near actual pitch...

4.18 Representation of fundamental frequency in Sai Pao Lee's *raj nplaim* performance rendered in Western notation near actual pitch...

4.19 Pitch map of performances on the *raj nplaim* and *raj hliav ncauj* demonstrating shared intervalllic content and octave displacement of high-falling tone (-j) words...

4.20 A transcription of melodic contours based on common poetic expressions utilized in *suab raj nplaim*...

4.21 A graph of fundamental frequency from a performance in *suab raj nplaim* by SaiPao Lee...
PREFACE

This thesis makes use of the Romanized Popular Alphabet (RPA) orthography for words in the White Hmong (Hmoob Dawb) language. Developed between 1951 and 1953 in Southeast Asia by William Smalley, G. Lindwood Barney, and Yves Bertrais, RPA can also be used to write Green Mong (Moob Lees), the other dialect of Western Hmongic spoken by Hmong in the West. Syllables in both dialects follow the pattern of consonant-vowel with simultaneous tone. Since, with the exception of a few Chinese loan words, syllables end in vowels, RPA utilizes final consonant letters as tone markers. Thus, raj is spoken with a high-falling tone, indicated by the final -j. Note that the letter 'r' in RPA is actually an unaspirated, post-alveolar stop with no equivalent in English. The sound of 'dr' at the beginning of the word 'drink' approximates the sound for English speakers.

The sound analyses in chapter 4 were created using Praat version 4.3.01. Fundamental frequency data was gathered from recordings using Praat with the following settings:
Pitch method: Autocorrelation

Pitch very accurate: yes

Pitch max. number of candidates: 15

Pitch silence threshold: 0.03 of global peak

Pitch voicing threshold: 0.45 (periodic power / total power)

Pitch octave cost: 0.01 per octave

Pitch octave jump cost: 0.35 per octave

Pitch voiced/unvoiced cost: 0.14 Hertz

At times, obvious octave errors were hand-edited for graphing. The contours produced by graphing fundamental frequency are intended to supplement transcriptions in Western notation.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Playing word by word

"Hmong music is not like normal music," Ger Xiong stated. "We play word by word into the flute." That Hmong musicians could communicate verbal content through musical performances was not a surprise to me. The phenomenon had been documented and described by Eric Mareschal, Amy Catlin, and a number of other researchers. Still, I found Ger's statement to be arresting: for the first time, I seemed close to an explanation of this process that, to me, seemed so mysterious.

"How do you know what is being said?" I asked with anticipation, certain I was on the cusp of a breakthrough in understanding.

"It's difficult to explain," he responded. That was fine with me. I was patient and was willing to learn.

He continued, "Mostly, if you are Hmong and know the Hmong language, then you understand."
At the time, I was disappointed. I had learned much from Ger and his responsiveness to my questions suggested he wanted to share more of what he knew—both for the understanding of non-Hmong people like me and of those Hmong people who did not understand the practice. This, the first of my interviews with Ger took place in the summer of 2000 on the studio floor of the Public Access Cable Channel in Eau Claire, Wisconsin. I was a senior in college and collecting footage for an educational video about traditional Hmong music. The video, and a related Hmong-language version, were intended to be a resource for teachers interested in Hmong culture. Playing the flute, tshuab raj [tshuab, to blow; raj, a tube usually made from bamboo], figured as only one of the many musical practices demonstrated in the video, including: hais kwv txhiąj (singing extemporized poetry) and playing instruments, like qeej (a bamboo, free-reed mouth organ) and nplooj (any type of leaf blown between the lips).\(^1\)

Compared with other forms of music making, in particular, hais kwv txhiąj, tshuab raj was and still is not as wide-spread in the Hmong-American community. It lacks the iconic status and ritual significance of the qeej, the free-reed mouth organ most associated with the funeral ritual. And unlike Hmong popular music, a blend of Asian and American musical styles performed in the Hmong language

\(^1\) These instruments and other Hmong musical practices are explained more completely in section 1.3.
that appeals to all ages, tshuab raj is practiced and appreciated by older first-generation immigrants almost exclusively. Yet like other instrumental genres brought to the United States by Hmong people, including ncas (a brass, free-reed jaw harp) and xim xaus (a two-stringed, violin-like instrument), it uses words as a basis for performance and communicates those words to knowledgeable listeners.

The question I brought to the field—"How do they do it?"—was well intentioned but inadequate. What is it that is being done? By whom? For whom? For what purpose? Finally, what does it mean? The answer, of course, is complex, multi-faceted, and never complete. Yet, it is worth asking, not just for the satisfaction of curiosity. If the new generation of Hmong-Americans is not learning how to play or understand the flute, then there are issues of preservation and documentation to consider. Also, how does this affect ever-changing concepts of Hmong cultural identity? The study of musical languages can also improve our understanding of the relationship between speech and music, and can even help to break down these somewhat artificial categories into a more complex idea of communication through the performance of sound

The meanings of sounds and actions may be diverse, but at the heart of this study are players who perform words on the raj and listeners who understand them. As mentioned earlier, Amy Catlin was one of the first
ethnomusicologists to describe this practice and to document the words of a performance, as understood by the player and other listeners.² Based on previous work by Eric Mareschal, Catlin wanted to understand how singers of kwv txhiaj selected pitches for performance. In her analysis, this was accomplished through the mapping of word tones onto the pitches of a scale, just as Mareschal had described. In tshuab raj, she believed listeners understood the verbal content of performances, in part, by recognizing familiar melodic phrases based on consistent lexical-tone to pitch relationships and the rhythmic character of the melody. My research builds on this model and attempts to describe in greater detail the musical elements that contribute to the communication of words, including pitch, rhythm, ornamentation, and timbre. At the same time, I refine previous comparisons of tshuab raj and hais kwv txhiaj describing not only interrelationships, but also significant differences that highlight the independence and complexity of tshuab raj. Based on my experience with tshuab raj and kwv txhiaj, I offer a new interpretation of Mareschal's original mapping that highlights the interaction of both phonology and melody. These unique elements offer opportunities for future research in linguistics and cognitive

ethnomusicology, and contribute to a deeper understanding of the relationship between Hmong music and language in general.

Performances of words on the *raj* can be analyzed in terms of word-tone to pitch relationships. Based on analysis of interviews and recorded performances, I present a new mapping of these relationships. Performers, however, do not understand their actions in this sense. The tone of a word is inseparable from the sound of a word, and it is actually the sounds of words that players and listeners correlate with the sounds of the flute. Pitch is only one aspect of this sound, and while it is an important organizing principle for the relationship between words and musical sounds, it is not alone. Rhythm and timbre also contribute to the production and perception of words in musical sound, although to a lesser degree than pitch. For performers and listeners, individual musical sounds only become meaningful in the context of other musical sounds within the context of a verbal communication. Thus, analyzing the relationship between individual words and musical sounds cannot account for all of what participants experience. Formulaic, oral expressions and spatio-motor aspects of performance, like fingering and breathing patterns, both limit and inspire creativity while making verbal content intelligible. Approaching performances from these perspectives
allows for insight into the practice of performance, but also the processes that realize a performance: cognitive, social, and otherwise.

While my research draws from linguistics, semiotics, music cognition, as well as anthropology and ethnomusicology, my goal is, as Jeff Todd Titon has summarized so well, “understanding (rather than explaining) the lived experience of people making music (ourselves included)…” In other words, I am not so much interested in generating a complete, systematic description of how Hmong musicians perform words on the flute. Rather, I want to understand this phenomenon in terms of how performers and listeners use it to negotiate meaning of many types. I worked with performers and other knowledgeable people to create an “intersubjective product” of multiple meanings. The voices of the people with whom I studied are not just analyzed and interpreted, they also respond to and critique the array of theories with which I come to the field.

1.2 History and context

Yet these conclusions must be contextualized more broadly. The Hmong people I worked with are part of a diverse, international community that crosses

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geographic, political, linguistic, and ethnic boundaries. Any conclusions I have reached must be considered within these complexities and must be clearly situated. Of the two major Hmong cultural groups in the United States, the White Hmong (Hmoob Dawb) and the Green Mong (Moob Lees), I have focused my research on the White Hmong only. While the dialects of Green and White Hmong are mutually intelligible, there is sufficient linguistic and cultural difference between the two groups to complicate generalization. In the limited scope of this project, I also restricted the geographical boundaries of my research. My consultants all reside in the belt of Hmong communities that cross Minnesota and Wisconsin, specifically: St. Paul, Minnesota; and Eau Claire and Madison, Wisconsin.

These American communities have been formed through secondary-migration patterns, primarily based around kinship ties and job opportunities, and do not correlate to the geographic distribution of the Hmong in Laos. That

is to say, Hmong neighbors in the United States did not necessarily grow up in
the same village or province in Laos, even if they are connected by clan name. At
the same time, my informants did come from areas of Laos traditionally
associated with the Hmong, in particular, the mountains around the Plain of Jars
and the city of Nong Het on the western border with Vietnam. Like other
Hmong people who lived in Laos during the 1960s and ’70s, most were forced to
move frequently from village to village or refugee camp to refugee camp in order
to escape war, famine, or discrimination. Movements of families or entire
villages could also be brought about by the need for better or more land for
cultivation or the desire to be near family, sometimes for political advantage.

While I interviewed people of a wide variety of ages and origins, my
primary informants were first-generation immigrants who had come to the
United States via refugee camps in Thailand after 1975. They grew up amid the
turbulence of the Lao Civil War and the American Secret War in Laos and
continue to negotiate local, national, and global identities in the context of a
complex postcolonial history. Direct ties between the United States and the
Hmong of Laos can be traced to December of 1960 when the CIA approached
Hmong military leader Vang Pao to assist in the struggle against communist
North Vietnamese forces active in Laos. From the perspective of the United States, the American-backed Royal Lao Government, overthrown months earlier in a coup, was unable to defend against the communist-nationalist Pathet Lao, which was also fighting for control of the country. Without intervention, Laos would become another fallen domino in the spread of communism.

The Hmong were already embroiled in the struggle for control of Laos, even before the final pull-out of French colonial forces following the 1954 Geneva accords. As a politically marginalized minority ethnic group, the Hmong chose sides carefully. Based on political and familial affiliation, some Hmong joined Lo Faydang Bliayao and his Hmong Resistance League, which supported the nationalist-communist Pathet Lao that sought to depose the Royal Lao Government. Others tried to remain neutral, living in isolated communities at high elevations. Even more fought along side the French and the Royal Lao Government against the Viet Minh-backed Pathet Lao. The Eisenhower administration, hoping to sway the balance of power, stepped in to subsidize pro-Western candidates and the Royal Lao Army (RLA), of which Hmong forces were a part.

7 Tim Pfaff, Hmong in America: Journey from a Secret War (Eau Claire, Wisconsin: Chippewa Valley Museum Press, 1995), 32.
After the 1973 cease-fire agreement establishing a coalition government, the American military withdrew major support of the RLA and Vang Pao's forces. Sporadic conflicts lasted until the Pathet Lao takeover in 1975 and the formation of the Lao People's Democratic Republic. The new government singled out the Hmong people who had fought against them for retribution leading many to flee across the Mekong River into Thailand. Political unrest and famine caused further movements of Hmong and other Lao, Cambodian, and Vietnamese refugees into Thailand, reaching a high point of around 200,000 total incoming refugees in 1979. Other Hmong people, many of whom were former soldiers of Vang Pao, remained in Laos and began a small-scale armed resistance against the communist government.

The total number of Hmong refugees to leave Laos is difficult to determine. Based on resettlement data, the Hmong anthropologist, Gary Yia Lee, places the number near 200,000. In 1975, the United States began admitting Hmong refugees often relying on church organizations to sponsor individual

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families. Soon, settled Hmong families were able to sponsor relatives still living in Thai refugee camps. By 1994, around 119,000 Hmong refugees had been resettled in the United States.\textsuperscript{11} Since that time, Thailand has closed its remaining refugee camps. The final one, Wat Tham Krabok, an unofficial camp based at a Buddhist temple, was closed in 2003. Since then, the majority of the 15,000 Hmong refugees eligible for resettlement in the U.S. have already arrived.\textsuperscript{12} According to the 2000 U.S. census, there are 186,310 Hmong currently residing in the United States. The Hmong population of Minnesota and Wisconsin is currently 75,951 persons total.\textsuperscript{13}

Besides emigrating to the U.S., large numbers of Hmong refugees resettled in France and Australia where around 15,000 and 2,000 Hmong people currently live, respectively.\textsuperscript{14} Small communities can also be found in Canada, French Guyana, Argentina, and Germany. From this diaspora, a transnational Hmong identity has begun to emerge. Many Hmong scholars and writers have

\textsuperscript{11} Jac D. Bulk, "American Hmong on the Move." 7-11.
\textsuperscript{14} Kaoly Yang, "Naître et grandir: les processus de socialisation de l’enfant en milieu hmong," (Ph.D. diss., Université d’Aix-Marseille, 1999), quoted in Jaques Lemoine "What is the actual number of the (H)mong in the world?" \textit{Hmong Studies Journal} 6 (2005), 5-6.
encouraged the diasporic community to acknowledge and embrace its diversity. In the keynote address for the 2nd International Symposium on Hmong People in August of 1995, Dr. Gary Yia Lee argued that Hmong people “need to recognise that despite all the differences in languages, life styles, religion, customs and economic status, we are but one people.” Others have rallied around the idea that “Hmong means free,” based on speculated etymology. While it is a potentially inspiring phrase, some critics, including historian Mai Na M. Lee, have argued that it essentializes Hmong identity and echoes colonial characterizations of Hmong people as fiercely independent and warlike. She goes on to say that the phrase “conveniently serves as a means of romanticizing the Hmong and sensationalizing their struggle.”

A transnational Hmong identity is enabled by the internet and other modes of global communication, including the production and distribution of Hmong oriented media, like videos, books, and music. As Louisa Schein notes, “Hmong who watch videos of the coethnics in other parts of the world come to think of themselves as ever more unified across distances not only of space but also of dialect, costume style, form of livelihood, and other diacritics of cultural

identity.”\textsuperscript{16} This includes not only Laos, the locus of homeland-lost for Hmong in the West where over 310,000 Hmong people continue to reside.\textsuperscript{17} The large groups of Hmong people in Thailand, Vietnam, and to a lesser degree Myanmar participate in the discourse.

Still, the majority of ethnic Hmong people live in China where they constitute a large part of the Miao, an official classification of ethnic minorities dating back to 1949.\textsuperscript{18} Based on census data and projected growth rates, Jacques Lemoine suggests there are around 2.8 million speakers of the various Hmong dialects currently living in China, proposing a figure of around 4.5 million for a global population.\textsuperscript{19} The early history of the Hmong in China is complicated by the indeterminate use of ‘Miao’ in Chinese documents. Ruey Yih-Fu has found a reference to the “San-miao” tribe in the \textit{Shu jing} that is repeated in other early histories of China.\textsuperscript{20} The story, however, is told in the context of the legendary Emperor Shun, who is thought to have reigned from 2255 to 2206 B.C. Later

\textsuperscript{18} Nicholas Tapp, \textit{The Hmong of China: Context, Agency, and the Imaginary}, Sinica Leidensia, vol. 51 (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2001), 109. Also included in this group are the Hmu, Gho Xiong, Ge/Gelao and A Hmo. Note that spellings of these terms vary widely.
\textsuperscript{19} Jacques Lemoine, “What is the Actual Number of the (H)Mong in the World?” 7.
sources, if historically accurate, fail to differentiate the Miao tribes, using the term in conjunction with "Man" in the sense of "barbarian." Such problems render the connection between the ancient Miao and the modern Hmong highly speculative despite the numerous written sources of information.

The Hmong of China, along with other Miao groups, fought wars of resistance against the cultural and economic reforms of the Qing Dynasty during the 18th century. After a series of large-scale internal migrations, Hmong immigrants first began arriving in northern Vietnam from Guizhou province sometime around 1800 and reached western Laos around 1820. There they grew rice and corn in patterns of shifting cultivation in the uninhabited highlands. Opium was grown as a cash crop, one that was capitalized upon by the French colonial government that took control of Laos in 1893. By 1899, the French established a monopoly on the opium trade making the Indochinese colonial project profitable. Hmong suppliers became even more important to the government when the Japanese occupied Indochina during World War II. Cut off from raw opium exporters, like Iran, India, Afghanistan, and Turkey, the government turned to Hmong growers who drastically increased production,

23 Ibid., 47.
24 Piaff, Hmong in America, 25-27.
encouraged by the option to pay their taxes in opium. Such deals helped to set
the stage for postcolonial history to follow, dividing Hmong loyalties along
political and familial lines.

1.3 Hmong musical practices

Hmong immigrants, in the context of the United States, continue a
number of musical practices that they learned in Laos or Thailand. This includes
vocal and instrumental genres that together can be thought of as traditional, in
the sense that they were carried through the diaspora. While the practices may
have changed in terms of function, they can be used by members of the
community to reaffirm or critique a sense of Hmong identity. Some of these
practices were introduced at the beginning of the chapter and they will be
discussed throughout this thesis. For readers not familiar with Hmong musical
practices, the following descriptions are offered.

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1.3.1 Vocal genres

There are a wide variety of traditional Hmong vocal genres for both secular and ritual uses. With the exception of Hmong popular music, sung with a band, these genres are performed solo. In kwv txhiaj, skilled singers compose words and melodies extemporaneously, following poetic and musical conventions. Both Amy Catlin and Catherine Falk translate kwv as ‘archaic’ and txhiaj as ‘riddle,’ although it is most commonly described as “sung poetry.”

Each verse is typically made up of two similar sections (ob fab, two sides). The first fab of the verse consists of two rhymed lines between a number of unrhymed lines. The pair of rhyming words agree in vowel, but not necessarily in tone, and may occur at any point of the line. The fab is then repeated, but with a new pair of rhymed words replacing the last pair. Depending upon the context of performance, the new pair of words can be synonyms, antonyms, or words with similar meaning to the earlier rhymed words. A typical performance of kwv txhiaj is made up of several verses, each of which begin with a repeated musical/poetic motive that serves to identify the style (Hmoob Dawb, Moob Lees, etc.), genre, and pitch range of the kwv txhiaj. Kwv txhiaj can be sung at any time.


27 Catlin, “Speech Surrogate Systems,” 172
but they are most important during New Year Festivals during which young men and women sing back and forth in courtship games.\textsuperscript{28}

In America, the use of \textit{kuv txhiaj} in courtship has diminished and performances have moved onto the main stage at New Year festivals. Interaction between young men and women is more likely to occur on the dance floor to the sounds of Hmong popular music. Slow beats and pentatonic melodies predominate in this fusion of Western and Asian popular music styles. Other important vocal genres include wedding negotiation songs (\textit{zaj tshoob}), funeral songs (\textit{xiv xaiy}), and soul-calling songs used in healing ceremonies (\textit{hu plig}). Unlike \textit{kuv txhiaj}, these songs rely on ritual oral-texts that are memorized and realized in performance according to musical conventions.

1.3.2 Instrumental genres

As in vocal music, Hmong musical instruments are performed solo. Performances are based almost always on words – improvised or memorized. For the Hmong community, the \textit{qeej}, a free-reed mouth organ consisting of six bamboo pipes set in a wind chest, is the most iconic of the traditional instruments. [Figure 1.1] In the funeral ritual, the words played on the \textit{qeej} guide the spirit of the deceased back to the ancestral homeland. Performers

\textsuperscript{28} A transcription of a \textit{kuv txhiaj} by Choua Lee appears in Appendix 1.
spend years learning the words of the ritual and how to play the words on the instrument. Qeej masters perform intricate footwork, spins, and even somersaults while playing to confuse evil spirits and to hold the attention of the deceased person's soul. The qeej can also be used to play traditional or newly composed material for other occasions. Qeej competitions are regular features of New Year Festivals. Performers try to outlast opponents as they execute acrobatic dance movements while continuing to play ostinato patterns on the instrument. [Figure 1.2]

![Figure 1.1 Ger Xiong's qeej. Eau Claire, Wisconsin, 2001.](image-url)
Raj literally translates to ‘tube,’ but in a musical context it refers to a wide variety of aerophones. The free-reed pipe, *raj nplaim*, is one of the most widely played *raj* and is the focus of my research. *Raj nplaim* are made in a variety of sizes and can have five to seven holes. The characteristic feature of this *raj* is the thin, brass free-reed into which the performer blows. [Figure 1.3] It can be played by using the lips to create a seal around the reed or by inserting the top of the instrument into the mouth, although this is only practical on smaller
instruments. Another free-reed pipe, *raj lev les*, can be made from a small piece of bamboo or other grass. [Figures 1.4 and 1.5] These instruments tend to be disposable and are not common in the United States.

Figure 1.3 Vang Tong Thor plays the *raj nplait* using a section from a plastic bottle as a resonator. Madison, Wisconsin, 2005.
Figure 1.4 Close-up view of a *raj lev les* made by Lee Por Yang. The dark, perpendicular lines on the right side of the *raj* mark the edges of the free-reed. Madison, Wisconsin, 2005.

Figure 1.5 Lee Por Yang plays the *raj lev les* by covering the free-reed with his mouth. Madison, Wisconsin, 2005.
Several related types of fipple flutes, such as *raj hliav ncauij*, *raj pum liv*, *raj ntsha*, and *raj nploog*, are also traditional to Hmong music. The application of these names to a variety of instruments can be inconsistent between performers and flutes of different sizes, with between three to seven holes, have been reported. Ger Xiong performed on a recorder-like instrument he called *raj hliav ncauij*. [Figure 1.6] Tong Pao Moua of Madison, Wisconsin, played a similar instrument called *raj pum liv*. As visible in the picture below, however, there was no lip on the pipe and the sound hole was on the reserve side of the instrument. [Figure 1.7] In reference to the sound of fipple flutes on recordings, consultants used *raj hliav ncauij*, *raj pum liv*, and *raj ntsia* interchangeably. For the time being, it remains uncertain if these terms are related to morphology.
Figure 1.6 A still from the video, *Speaking Musically*, showing a performance by Ger Xiong on the *raj hliau ncau*. Eau Claire, Wisconsin, 2001.

Figure 1.7 A performance on the *raj pum liu* by Tong Pao Moua. Madison, Wisconsin, 2005.
The Hmong jaw harp, *ncas*, allows vowel sounds and some consonants to be preserved in the musical transmission of words. [Figures 1.8 and 1.9] A quiet instrument, the *ncas* is most associated with courtship practices in which boys and girls play expressions of love back and forth. If the object of desire was in a distant field or lived on a nearby mountain, leaves (*nplooj*) could be used as makeshift free-reeds to blow high-pitched melodies. Soldiers also made use of *nplooj* while fighting in the jungles of Laos, performing bird calls and other sounds to communicate coded messages.

![Figure 1.8 Close-up of a *ncas* belonging to Vang Tsha. Madison, Wisconsin, 2005.](image)
While not as common as raj and ncas, some Hmong musicians are able to communicate verbal content with melodies on the xim xaus, a two-stringed spike fiddle adopted from Lao culture. [Figure 1.10] The term xim xaus itself is based on Lao words, and Hmong musicians have several native terms to refer to the instrument, including: thaj chij, nkauj paj nruag, and nkauj puas ncas. I have only heard this instrument in performance once, and it was used to play melodies similar to those heard on the raj nplaim and raj hliav ncauj. According to other sources, the instrument was used for courtship in Laos and Thailand.
Figure 1.10 A performance on a handmade *xim xaus* by Vang Tsha. Madison, Wisconsin, 2005.
CHAPTER 2

THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

2.1 The ethnographic context

Musical performances are complex metacommunicative events, in the sense of communicating on multiple levels simultaneously (e.g. visual, demonstrative, and verbal indexes of visual signs), what Charles Briggs has called "semiotic richness". Aural, visual, verbal, and other signals and operate within social situations that, though always changing and being transformed by the interaction, provide a framework of expectations about the communication that can be fulfilled and subverted. Levels of communication, or "channels" as Briggs describes them, cannot be separated out neatly. They are integral and interactive. Performances on the Hmong raj incorporate sound, words, movement, place, and much more in communicating a wealth of potential meanings.

This diversity of meaning requires selectivity in what is interpreted. First, how do performers relate words to the sound of the flute? The words encoded in the flute sounds of raj performances are, for the most part, meant to be understood. How are these sounds performed so as to be comprehensible? At the same time, tshuab raj is part of an oral tradition where performances are not analyzed sound for sound. Listeners from diverse backgrounds approach performances with varying levels of competence and may not be aware of direct musical sound-to-speech sound relationships. The word-for-word meaning may be unimportant in certain contexts. As Anthony Seeger argues, following a line of ethnomusicological thought leading back to Alan Merriam, "Musical performances are not only sounds but the contexts of which those sounds are a part. Musical performances are embedded in other events, to which they lend salience and emotional force, and from which they also receive them." Raj performances communicate (or metacommunicate) more than just verbal content. Creativity, skill, feelings, tradition, cultural symbolism, as well as social and individual identity are also 'spoken' on the raj. In the sense of "discourse about communication," raj performances reiterate values of respect and skill that inform personal and cultural identities.

Through the reflexive analysis of key encounters, I am able to describe not only the understanding of *tshuab raj* I gained, but also critique my metacommunicative strategies in the field, including the various roles I played during field research. It is possible to demonstrate not only what is learned from fieldwork, but also how this knowledge is constructed intersubjectively. As James Clifford has written, in this type of ethnography the "proper referent of any account is not a represented 'world,' now it is specific instances of discourse."\(^{31}\) Elsewhere, he argues that "[e]thnographic truths are thus inherently partial — committed and incomplete."\(^{32}\) This resonates with Titon's emphasis on 'understanding' rather than 'explaining,' and implicates the participants, rather than an object of study, as the mediators of meaning. The partial truth of ethnography becomes a strength by giving voice to the polyvocality of meaning.

2.2 Previous studies of Hmong music

Amy Catlin was the first ethnomusicologist to study Hmong music in the context of the United States. In the early 1980s, she documented traditional and emerging Hmong art forms and connected them with the musical practices of the

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\(^{32}\) Ibid., 7.
Hmong living in Southeast Asia where she also conducted research. Catlin’s writings covered a wide range of musical practices, but an interest in relationships between speech and music runs throughout her work. In “Speech Surrogate Systems of the Hmong,” one of her first articles, she compares the transformation of lexical-tones into melody, as practiced in singing kuv txhiaj, to “distortions of the original phonological features of Hmong speech,” in other musical practices.\(^{33}\) This includes a sung version of lus rov ‘turned words,’ secret ways of encrypting speech. Catlin refers to the ncas as “non-voiced speech modification” since it can transmit all vowel sounds, as well as many consonants. Further from speech, she describes musical instruments like the raj, nplooj, and “nkauj pau5 ncas” (more commonly referred to as xim xaus) that “mirror the melodies produced in performances of sung poetry.”\(^{34}\) Lastly, the performance of ritual text on the qeej is most distant from speech and requires special knowledge to understand the semantic content.

Catlin was not the first to describe the relationship between language and music in Hmong culture. Eric Mareschal’s 1976 book, *La Musique des Hmong*, was an important precedent for Catlin and continues to inform the interpretation of

\(^{34}\) Ibid., 187.
traditional Hmong music.\textsuperscript{35} Based on extensive research in Laos and Thailand, Mareschal first recognized the consistent relationship between lexical-tone and musical pitch in \textit{khu txhiaj}, as transmitted by Amy Catlin. [Table 2.1]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RPA symbol</th>
<th>Lexical tone</th>
<th>Pitch (4-pitch system)</th>
<th>Pitch (5-pitch system)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-b</td>
<td>high-level</td>
<td>1 (highest)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-j</td>
<td>high-falling</td>
<td>4 (lowest)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-v</td>
<td>mid-rising</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-ø</td>
<td>mid-level</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-s</td>
<td>low-level</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-g</td>
<td>mid-falling breathy</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-m</td>
<td>low-falling glottal stop</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5 (lowest)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textbf{Table 2.1} The relationship between lexical-tone and musical pitch described by Eric Mareschal. This table is derived from Amy Catlin’s description of Mareschal’s findings.

\textsuperscript{35} The book, now out of print, was unavailable to me but is transmitted in the work of other ethnomusicologists, including Catherine Falk and Amy Catlin.
Mareschal found 17 different pitch sets in use between 33 both White and Green Hmong singers. Of these structures, only two were performed by more than three singers, represented by: C-Eb-F-G and C-F-G-A in Western letter names. The latter of these is the outline of suab raj nplaim, the scale I found to be most common in raj nplaim performances.

Jean Mottin, an anthropologist, also took interest in the performance of kwv txhiaj. His book, 55 Chants d’Amour Hmong Blanc, records the words performed by both male and female singers in Laos and Thailand. Mottin has much to say about the poetic language used in kwv txhiaj, but comments on musical aspects only in passing, echoing Mareschal.

"The melodies of songs do not vary one to the other as in European music, but each genre has its melody fixed once and for all. Thus, one can show originality only in the text... The melody is very simple and is not comprised of more than five notes, those being imposed by the tone of the words. It should however be noticed that the melody requires such or such tone; thus, the tones are not always what they would be in the spoken language...”

Themes and repeated phrases are traced by Mottin between the texts and offer insight into the compositional process of performance. Some of the “clichés” he

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36 Mareschal refers to the Green Hmong as Blue Hmong. These two colors have been used at different times in reference to Moob Lees.
37 Ibid., 176.
recorded also occurred in *raj* performances I recorded, demonstrating the connection across time between Hmong instrumental music and vocal music.

### 2.3 Speech-surrogacy

The Hmong *raj* was not studied in depth until Amy Catlin described *tshuab raj* as a “speech surrogate,” based on the work of Theodore Stern. Stern considered the performance of words on musical instruments to be a “signaling system” or a “speech surrogate”—systems of signs ripe for semiotic interpretation. By 1957, when he put forth his classification of speech surrogates, several such practices had been well documented. Stern was interested in analyzing “common principles shared by such communication systems.” For this he relied on Charles Pierce’s tripartite division of the sign and the work of linguists based upon this model. According to Pierce, signs can be of three types: icon, which represents by similarity with the sign; index, which represents by relationship to the sign; and symbol, which represents by

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association with the sign. For Stern, most speech surrogates utilize
"abridgement," an iconic system, in which "each transmitted sign exhibits
significant resemblance to a corresponding sound of the base message," in
particular, at the level of the phoneme (or syllable.) This is opposed to
"encoding," a symbolic representation in which sign has no physical similarity to
the sound. In raj performance, segmental features of phonology, like consonants
and vowels, cannot be reproduced on the raj. The suprasegmental, lexical-tone
is transmitted by musical pitch but not always in ways that are obvious to
listeners competent in the Hmong language.

Stern's concept of iconicity in instrumental abridgement has much in
common with Ger and other performers' understanding of relating the suab
('sound') of the word and the suab ('sound') of the raj. The connection between
word and musical sound is, in part, one of resemblance, although the nature of
the resemblance is not transparent. Stern allows for multiple systems of
resemblance to operate simultaneously (e.g. at the level of the phoneme,
morpheme, and phrase). At the level of the morpheme, Stern refers to "direct
transmission" in which the "lexical unit is represented directly by encoding or

41 Charles Sanders Peirce, The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce, vol. 5, Pragmatism and
Pragmaticism, eds. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge: Harvard University Press,
42 The qeej and nplaoj are also incapable of transmitting consonants and vowels. The ncas, which
utilizes the oral cavity as a resonator, can transmit several vowel sounds.
abridging component phonemes.”

43 As discussed below, melodic contours sung in kwv txhiaj and performed on the raj preserve “tone sandhi” (i.e. conditioned tone change, tonemic substitution). It is not only the sound of individual words that are communicated on the raj, but the sound of words in the context of speech.

Still, what is the nature of the resemblance? According to Stern’s speech surrogate model we should expect to find resemblances between phonology and musical production. Amy Catlin, inspired by Eric Mareschal’s recognition of consistent relationships between melody and lexical-tone in Hmong music, suggests that “linguistic tones of words are somewhat systematically restructured in the transition from speech to song. Similarly, other distortions of the original phonological features of Hmong speech are effected in the transition from speech or song to vocal or instrumental representations of either.”

45 In part, the pitch aspect of the lexical-tone is preserved, albeit it in an altered form. Other phonological features of lexical-tone, such as the contour of moving tones,

44 Martha Ratliff, Meaningful Tone: A Study of Tonal Morphology in Compounds, Form Classes, and Expressive Phrases in White Hmong (DeKalb, Illinois: Northern Illinois University Center for Southeast Asian Studies, 1992), 25. Martha Ratliff describes “tone sandhi” as referring to “phonetic changes occurring in words that are caused by certain phonetic characteristics of contiguous words.” White Hmong tone sandhi cannot be predicted on phonetic environment alone. Ratliff continues, “Grammatical category and the particular lexical items involved also play a role.”

breathiness and glottal stop, are lost in vocal and instrumental productions.  

She notes that this loss of contour causes "disparate treatment ... for the high falling and low rising tones, which are sung on low- and high-level pitches, respectively: the final point of these two moving tones."

Analysis of words performed on the raf raises important issues in the application of semiotic theory to Hmong music, and perhaps music in general. If indeed there is a "resemblance" between the sign (musical pitch) and the signifier (lexical-tone), we must understand it from the point-of-view of insiders, those who make use of the sign-system for communication. The pitch-aspect of lexical-tone is an intuitive point of departure for analyzing such relationships. Catlin has repeatedly demonstrated consistent patterns between the two and my research bears out many of her conclusions. Still, relating the pitch aspect of lexical-tone to the pitch aspect of melody has been based on models of Hmong lexical-tone developed by non-Hmong linguists, a problem Catlin fully realizes, citing the example of the Pahawh Hmong alphabet recounted in the book, Mother of Writing. Shong Lue Yang, a Hmong farmer raised in Vietnam (just across the border from Nong Het), developed the alphabet in the early 1960s believing it to

46 Amy Catlin, "Puzzling the Text: Thought-Songs, Secret Languages, and Archaic Tones in Hmong Music," The World of Music: Journal of the Department of Ethnomusicology, Otto-Friedrich University of Bamberg 39, no. 2 (1997), 71. As demonstrated below, some aspects of contour may be preserved, especially in instrumental performances of words with a high-falling tone (-j).
be sent from God to lift up the Hmong and Khmu peoples from poverty and political oppression.47 His model of Hmong tones, passed down by his followers, presents pitch values different from those observed by linguists.48 As noted by the authors of *Mother of Writing*, many Hmong people claim that Shong Lue's model represents how they hear tones. The authors conclude, "[p]erhaps some other feature than pitch is the salient one to them, at least on some of the tones, and the ordering of the tones is completely or partially dependent on it." Martha Ratliff, a linguist studying the Hmong language, has also worked to refine the description of Hmong lexical-tones using comparisons across different speakers.49

In conversations I had with musicians, the pitch aspect of lexical-tone was never discussed in isolation, even among those who had learned the RPA orthography.50 As mentioned earlier, the closest word for 'lexical-tone' in

48 Ibid., 63.
50 Until the 1950s, and the development of the RPA orthography, Hmong was almost exclusively an oral language. Phonological awareness is usually associated with alphabetic writing, and since *tsahuab raj* and other musical practices are still firmly rooted in oral transmission, it is not surprising that the concept of lexical-tone would not be important in discourse on music. Based on studies of Hmong secret languages, which utilize tonal substitution, Martha Ratliff has argued that Hmong speakers do have phonological awareness, even if they are unable to articulate it. Martha Ratliff, "Hmong Secret Languages: Themes and Variations" in *Language Variation: Papers on Variation and Change in the Sinosphere and in the Indosphere in Honour of James A. Matisoff*, eds. David Bradley and others (Canberra: Pacific Linguistics, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, The Australian National University, 2003), 30-31.
Hmong language is *suab*, which refers to the overall 'sound of the word.'

Smalley et al. note that "[t]here are no names for the individual spoken tones in Hmong except for the d-tone, which is referred to as *suab yuas* ... This term is also used more generally for the category of tone itself. Hmong people also speak of tones descriptively as the voice going up and down." While I did not encounter the term "*suab yuas*" or "up and down" descriptions of tones in my experience, these examples demonstrate the used of *suab* in discussing tone and an awareness of the different sounds of words among Hmong speakers. During my time studying the Hmong language using the RPA orthography, my teachers referred to tones and the letters that represent them by invoking a word with that particular lexical-tone, not by describing phonological features. For instance, the high tone was called *cim suab*, literally, 'the symbol that represents the sound of the word *suab*.' Similarly, the low, level tone was called *cim mus*, literally, 'the symbol that represent the sound of the word *mus* (to go).

I raise these issues to highlight the problems associated with trying to make the performance of words on the *raj* fit into a preconceived system. It is impossible to know how each person understands the performance and interpretation of words on the *raj*, yet it is a practice shared by a wide variety of people and one that has been passed down through generations. There must be

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51 Smalley, *Mother of Writing*, 56.
some system of understanding that is shared intersubjectively. Models of instrumental abridgment (utilizing phonological resemblance) or encoding (utilizing symbolic representation) suggest points of departure for research and cross-cultural comparison. Still, while lexical-tone to musical pitch mapping in Hmong music superficially follows intuitive patterns of high and low relationships, the very nature of these resemblances must be thoroughly analyzed. As Catlin and others bring to attention, lexical-tone in Hmong language can not be easily reduced to essential qualities, and as indicated above, more than phonological qualities of lexical-tone may be preserved in Hmong musical performances. At the same time, performances are generated and interpreted based on formulaic expressions that, while potentially based on abridgment, can be understood, if not parsed, without reference to underlying lexical-tone.

2.4 Beyond semiotics

The semiotic model provides a starting point for studying the communication of verbal content, but it does not address issues of creativity, the context of performance, or the nature of the performed expression. Inspired by the work of linguist J.R. Firth, J.H.K. Nketia has suggested studying the
intersection of music and language in terms of phraseology, which "deals with lexis as well as features of the phrase and groups of phrases and not the analysis and description of phonology, grammar, and syntax except where particular stylistic features are displayed or distributed through the way in which these linguistic levels are handled in particular textual contexts." While Nketia is most interested in vocally performed songs, his concept of phraseology forms a complement to Stern's model. He continues, "Applied to song making, phraseology relates to the stylistic features of the units of structure within which differentials of tone, duration, and stress are correlated, as well as the interrelations of such units. In other words, it is concerned not only with the principles governing the formation of structures but even more so with the qualitative features of particular concern to the song maker that emerge in the creative process when such principles are applied."

For Nketia, language and music are more than parallel, they are integral. Phraseological analysis not only describes the integration of speech and music in performance, but also contextualizes it in phrases, performances, and the creativity of the song maker. The musical performance of words on an instrument is more than just a representation of language: it is a creative act.

Word choices are made to qualitatively affect the musical sound, and choices of musical performance are made to affect the meaning of the words. This makes clear the weakness of the term 'speech-surrogate'; raj performances do much more than stand in for speech. Nketia's phraseology is also significant for its emphasis on relating disparate aspects of performance. Prosody, syntax, and timbre are just as important in performance as phonological resemblance. The understanding of verbal content in tshuab raj requires attention to multiple levels of communication, and Nketia makes these levels clear while drawing attention the creative power of the performer.

Performance is action, and the musicians I worked with emphasized the physical processes of music making. John Baily has said, "a musical instrument is a type of transducer, converting patterns of body movement into patterns of sound. There is a precise isomorphism between music structure and movement structure: every nuance in the micro-structure of the sound pattern reflects a subtle adjustment of the motor pattern."53 This was clear in my earliest conversations with Ger in which he explained playing the words on the raj by demonstrating where he placed his fingers on the holes to make each sound. The physicality of performance is another way in which words are performed and

understood on the raj. Furthermore, the morphology of instrument and the control of breath and fingering places limits on what can and cannot be performed. This includes both spatial relationships and patterns of movement which combine in a “spatio-motor mode” “to instigate and to control musical performance.” Baily, like his mentor John Blacking, is interested in more than just the motor patterns that applied to performance, but also culturally grounded “concepts about music and movement” that “emerge at the level of action.”

Movement and space must be accounted in the description and analysis of performance.

2.5 Methods in the field

These theories form the basis for the methodology of my fieldwork. Consultants were engaged in a variety of interactions. Interviews about personal experience and knowledge of musical practices were efficient for gathering a wide variety of data. Authors have pointed to the limits of interviewing as a methodology, including Charles Briggs, as described above. Udo Will has noted that “an abundance of research data indicates that there is a multitude of mental concepts for which there are no corresponding verbal categories and often these

54 Ibid. 151.
concepts are the most significant ones with respect to coping with the
environment." The dependence of interview on verbal categories is especially
problematic in the study of oral cultures in which a theory of music is
unarticulated. Variability in Hmong musical vocabulary does not evidence
inconsistent concepts of music making, but rather critiques the method of
learning about such practices through interview.

Discrepancies between ways of talking about Hmong music were
overcome through participation and observation. In "learning by doing," the
similarity of musical production between performers became apparent.
Moreover, teaching through demonstration was the frame of discourse most
familiar to the consultants. This put them at ease and allowed the expression of
their expertise and creativity. By taking on the role of the student, I was able to
break through barriers of language and the expectations of interview. Although
I had some capability for communicating in the Hmong language, problems of
mutual understanding where diminished when consultants had control of the
interaction, often teaching by example rather than explanation. As demonstrated

56 Udo Will, "Et quand ils n'en disent rien?" (And what if they say nothing?) in Cahiers de
musiques traditionnelles, vol. 11 (Genève: Georg éditeur, Ateliers d'ethnomusicologie, 1998),
http://music.osu.edu/Ethnomus/EMW/Will/What%20if%20they%20say.pdf (accessed
January 15, 2005).
in the following chapters, applying careful analysis to this data reveals commonalities not found in verbal communication.

Consultants were also asked to participate in experimentation and analysis of recorded performances. They listened to recordings of themselves and other performers to transcribe verbal content and to comment on other salient features of the performance. Consultants also collaborated in producing transcriptions with me and were able to critique the transcriptions I had completed. This method was inspired by the earlier work of Amy Catlin who involved multiple people in the process of transcription of a performance on the *raj nplaim*. The resulting polyvocal interpretation is closer to the way performances are made and understood in non-experimental contexts than an authoritative transcription that fits expectations of analysis. In this way, fieldwork and analysis are inextricably linked to create an intersubjective understanding of a complex musical practice.

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CHAPTER 3

FIELDWORK

3.1 Details of fieldwork: people and places

My experience producing an educational video about Hmong music provided a foundation for my subsequent field research. An Ethnomusicology Field Research Grant from the Ohio State University made possible four weeks of research divided between Minneapolis/St. Paul, Minnesota and Eau Claire, Wisconsin. This consisted of four total trips of between 26 July and 21 November, 2004. In Eau Claire, I attended the 2004 Hmong New Year celebration and reconnected with the contributors to the Speaking Musically video project, including Ger Xiong, Joe Bee Xiong, and Houa Moua.

Ger, skilled in many of the musical practices brought to the United States by Hmong immigrants from Laos and Thailand, had been recommended to me by Joe Bee Xiong, one of the leaders of the Eau Claire Hmong community and himself a capable musician on Hmong, Lao, and Chinese instruments. Joe Bee was born in 1961 and, like Ger and Houa, was raised in rural Xiengkhouang.
Province, Laos. His father was a soldier and in 1973, Joe Bee took his father's place in the army. After a harrowing escape across the Mekong River into Thailand, Joe Bee immigrated to Eau Claire in 1979. Throughout the 1980s, Joe Bee, due to his extensive cultural knowledge, facility in the English language, and high social position had become a primary representative of Hmong culture in Eau Claire. Joe Bee went on to graduate from college and earn a Masters degree and later became one of the first Hmong elected officials in Wisconsin, serving two terms on the Eau Claire City Council (1996-2000). By the late 1990s, when I first contacted him about my interest in producing an educational video about Hmong music, Joe Bee was running three businesses, heading the Hmong Mutual Assistance Association of Eau Claire, and raising a large family. He knew he did not have the time necessary to contribute to the project beyond a few brief interviews, so he recommended his cousin, Ger. Ger, who arrived in the United States from Thailand in 1982, had facility in the English language and had begun to perform the cultural outreach programs that Joe Bee had established.

Houa Moua, the daughter of a shaman, was born in 1955 and came to Eau Claire in 1976. Houa and her husband, Yong Kay Moua, were among the first Hmong immigrants to arrive in the city. With the help of Barbara Rolland, Houa
wrote a memoir of her experience growing up in Laos during the war, including her family’s escape after the communist takeover. As a bilingual aide for the Eau Claire County Health Department, she presented talks about Hmong culture and religion. Houa was also one of the most esteemed singers of kwv txhiaj in the region until throat problems forced her to quit public performance in the mid-1990s. Although she did not have a playable instrument available, Houa had taught herself to play raj as a child in Laos and had even made her own instruments. She and her husband continue to serve as cultural representatives for the Eau Claire Hmong community.

In Eau Claire, I also visited Charles Vue, Houa’s younger brother and Southeast Asian coordinator for the Office of Multicultural Affairs at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. Charles cannot play or understand ishuab raj but he provided valuable insight about contemporary Hmong music in the United States as well as perspective on appreciating Hmong instrumental music without knowing the verbal content. Pang Cher Vue, director of Hmong programs for the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire Continuing Education/Extension, also contributed valuable knowledge about Hmong history and musical practices. He too has an interest in and appreciation for ishuab raj although he cannot understand most of the words that are performed.
In the Twin Cities, I visited the resource center at the Hmong Cultural Center, which houses an extensive collection of Hmong studies materials. I had the opportunity to interview the director of the resource center, Mark Pfeifer, and Tongeu Leepalao, a cultural consultant and author of many Hmong language books about traditional culture. Tongeu, born in 1930, was the oldest consultant I worked with. He was also the most widely traveled, having lived in Laos until 1976 when he moved to Thailand. From there, he spent time in France and French Guyana before moving to St. Paul in 1989. At the Hmong Cultural Center, I also spent time with Meng Vang, a young qeej expert and ESL teacher.

Next door to the Resource Center was the Center for Hmong Arts and Creativity, or CHAT. Operated by Hmong young adults, the center offers classes on a variety of art forms and puts on arts festivals and theatre performances. At CHAT, I met Cathy Mouacheupao, Kang Vang, and Tou Saiko Lee, three of the main organizers for the center. They offered a second generation perspective on traditional Hmong arts, many of which they are just learning about, as well. Kang, a writer and filmmaker, was born in Laos but has spent most of his life in the United States and, like many of his peers, has taken a renewed interest in his cultural heritage as he enters adulthood. Tou Saiko, a prolific poet and hip-hop
MC, was particularly interested in making connections between verbal arts and the traditional verbal arts of his parents and grandparents.

It was through Kang, that I met his father, SaiPao Lee, a former officer under General Vang Pao. Originally from the area around Nong Het, Laos, SaiPao was a knowledgeable performer on the raj nplaim as well as a patient teacher. Over three days, SaiPao gave multiple performances and provided commentary and instruction, translated by Kang. This was a unique time during my research that demonstrated the transformative power of fieldwork. Not only did I come to new a understanding and appreciation of tshuab raj, but so did Kang, reinforcing the strong relationship with his father. Kang is deeply interested in Hmong culture and keen observer of intergenerational relations in the Hmong-American community, as demonstrated in his recent movie, Puag Thaum Ub. Still, he knew little about his father's skill on the raj nplaim and how words were communicated through music. Kang became more than a translator for his father, actively participating in the research process both to aid my understanding and his own. SaiPao enjoyed the opportunity to share his unique expertise with his son and me. In this way, all three of us were enriched by the experience.
Funded by a Committee on Institutional Cooperation Foreign Language Enhancement Program scholarship and a summer Foreign Language and Area Studies Program fellowship, I attended an intensive, eight-week course on Hmong language from 15 June to 5 August, 2005. As part of the Southeast Asian Studies Summer Institute, hosted at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, I had the opportunity to improve my White Hmong language skills and conduct field research in the Madison area. This included meeting recent Hmong immigrants from Thailand at the United Refugee Services of Wisconsin center, interviewing elderly Hmong immigrants at Kaj Siab House, and attending qeej lessons.

Through Yang Yang, a clinical specialist at Kaj Siab House, I was introduced to Va Chang who allowed me to record his performances on the ncas and xim xaus. Yang Yang also introduced me to Lee Por Yang, an expert raj player who taught others how to tshuab raj while at the Ban Vinai refugee camp. Lee Por met with me to demonstrate his large collection of raj and answer my many questions. Through a relative of his, I acquired a raj nplaim of my own and Lee Por spent time teaching me how to play.

My two Hmong language instructors at SEASSI, Leepao Yang and Choua Lee, were also helpful in my field research. Leepao instructed me in Hmong spirituality, ritual, and herbal medicine, also giving me access to his personal qeej
and ncas. Choua Lee taught me to sing a kuv txhiaj she had written and contributed to the analysis and transcription of my recordings of raj performances. Besides being an expert performer of kuv txhiaj, Choua has appeared on an album of popular music with her husband, Thaj Ying, who writes and performs original Hmong language songs. Choua grew up in a musical family, and while she does not play raj herself, she was very capable in understanding the words of diverse performances. Choua had previously made transcriptions of the words from tshuab raj as an educational aid for her students.

Part of the reflexive analysis of fieldwork must be a realization of the limits of choice in selecting the field of research. The decision to focus my research on White Hmong music was predicated on my previous experience in developing an educational video with White Hmong contributors. I turned to these contacts to begin specialized research on tshuab raj. The geographical area of the field, including Eau Claire, Madison, and the Twin Cities of Minnesota, is home to one of the largest Hmong populations in the United States. It is also the part of the country where I grew up. Not only was I familiar with the communities in which I studied, but family and friends provided housing and transportation, facilitating my research. In these ways, the boundaries of the field were constructed by chance and by choice.
3.2 Talking about music

There is no single, all-encompassing word like ‘music’ in the Hmong language. When I asked Joe Bee Xiong to translate the title of my educational video project (Speaking Musically: An Introduction to Traditional Hmong Music) for a related Hmong-language version, he came up with: Qhia txog suab hmoob qeej, raj, ncas, thiab kwotxhiaj, literally ‘Learning About Hmong Sound Qeej, Raj, Ncas, and Kvw Txhiaj.’ Each type of performance had to be mentioned by name. The word suab, translated in this instance as ‘sound,’ has several other related meanings and appears in many expressions with diverse definitions. Under his first definition of suab, Heimbach lists: “voice, sound of the voice, tone, noise, sound.” Clearly, suab is a highly adaptable word used in a variety of contexts encompassing phenomena that might be described as related to both speech and music.

For instance, the tones of the Hmong language, not having individual terms, are referred to as cov suab, ‘the sounds.’ In conversations with Hmong musicians, I found suab used in reference to both individual pitches and pitch ranges played on the raj. Each raj can be played in various suab in the sense of set

58 Tongeu Leepalao frequently used the Lao word phee in reference to music in general. Other consultants were familiar with the term, but felt that using Hmong words was better than using a Lao word.
60 Ibid.
of pitches played using characteristic melodic contours, based on genre-specific verbal content. *Suab* is also used in reference to both the speaking and singing voice, as in *kvw txhiaj*.\(^61\) This is also related to the word *hais*, which is most often used in reference to speaking. Singers *hais kvw txhiaj*, literally ‘speak *kvw txhiaj*,’ and *raj* performers *tshuab hais lus*, ‘blow speak words,’ on the *raj*. Similarly, *hu* can mean to call out or to sing as in *hu nkauj*, ‘to sing a song,’ usually in the sense of a popular song.

This is not to imply that Hmong musicians and listeners categorize “music” or “song” as a part of speech. Using speech-related vocabulary to describe musical phenomena, like vocalizations with regular meter and discrete pitches or instrumental performances of words, simply suggests a relationship that can be investigated further. In the same way, the lack of a category to encompass these diverse practices does not deny their interrelatedness. By observing what Hmong musicians say and do, it becomes clear that while speech and music maintain unique functions and performance contexts, the performance of speech and the sound of speech are fundamental in the organization of musical sound, as demonstrated in *tshuab raj*.

Despite their geographic and historical displacement, Houa, Ger, and SaiPao described a similar process of learning *tshuab raj*. Each became interested

\(^61\) The various definitions of *suab* are discussed in more detail at the end of section 4.1.
in learning how to understand the sound of the *raj* and how to make that sound for themselves around the time of puberty, when they became more aware of the opposite sex. *Tshuab raj* was one of several courtship practices, like *kwo txhiaj* and *tshuab ncas*, that could transform the emotionally charged speech of love into a culturally acceptable form. It also served as protection against the hurt feelings of rejection. As Joe Bee Xiong remarked about the *raj*, if the girl or boy didn’t like you, the blame could be transferred to the instrument.

While both boys and girls could *tshuab raj*, it seems that boys were more likely to take up the practice. Houa remembers having been a “naughty girl” who did what she wanted, including making her own *raj lev les* and teaching herself to play. There are reports of boys and girls playing *raj* back and forth to each other, exchanging the instrument with each other. This practice seems to be associated even more with the *ncas* which was easier to play and understand. A boy would come to the house of a girl in the night and the two would pass the *ncas* back and forth through the holes in the bedroom wall. The quiet tone of the instrument allowed for long, romantic conversations without waking the rest of her family.

The ability to *tshuab raj* was a sign of *txawj,* ‘skill,’ an indicator of intelligence and resourcefulness that were favored qualities in a potential spouse.

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At the same time, it communicated to the public the performer's interest in a girl or boy. Unlike the ncas, which was used for private communication, the raij could be heard throughout a village. All three consultants remembered hearing the sound of the raij while growing up, especially at twilight and dawn. According to them, parents tended not to interfere in such courtship practices and everyone enjoyed hearing the raij.

Catherine Falk paraphrases Eric Mareschal's description of raij performance in the public sphere: "Mareschal comments that this type of speech-music uses verbal clichés and stereotyped tunes to which the words are well known, but the lovers take care to hide pre-arranged words in the midst of words which everyone will understand (1976:159.)" The use of secret words was not confirmed in my research, but the use of idiosyncratic secret languages (lus roo) in Hmong culture is well documented and use of secret words in speech-surrogates for courtship has been described by David Bradley.52

Learning tshuab raij was an informal process: a mixture of listening, imitation, and occasional help from an older sibling or cousin. Houa's first response when I asked her who taught her to tshuab raij was, "I don't know who taught me. I think I just see people do it and do it [myself]." The first step was

to learn how to make sounds on the *raj* and included practical skills, such as: how to hold the instrument, how to blow properly, and where to place the fingers. Once sounds could be reliably produced, the learner had to figure how to relate the sound of words with the sounds of the *raj*. When the player understands the relationships between the sound of words and the sound of the *raj*, the possibilities of expression are potentially limitless. In Ger's words, "You know which hole you [are] supposed to put your finger on to make a different sound so that people know which word you are talking about, after that you can say anything you want to say into the flute."

This is more hypothetical than actual. The *raj* is performed to be understood, and subject matter is limited to conventional topics and familiar formulaic expressions. As Sai Pao said, "You can say maybe 80% of the words through the flute," suggesting that complex subjects like politics and law would not communicate well on the *raj*. Ger defined three general themes for *tshuab raj*: *raj nkauj nraug*, courtship; *raj tsito teb tsaws*, the sorrow of moving to a new country; and *raj ntsuag*, the sorrow of being abandoned (e.g. an orphan or widow.) While not articulated by other performers, these three themes are common to the performances I documented and frequently overlap in the course of a single performance. Despite drawing from a limited resource of topics and sayings,
different flute players sound different because they use slightly different words, even if speaking about similar ideas. In this way, the sound of the words organizes the pitch content of the raj performance.

There are two equally important elements in a successful raj performance: the player must have enough skill to make beautiful sounds with the instrument and, at the same time, to express the words clearly. As Houa Moua put it, "You want to play good sounds; ... you want to make people understand." This makes a performance "zoo mlaog," in Houa's words, "good in the ear," or literally, 'good to listen to.' "If it sounds beautiful - sounds good, but people couldn't understand, it doesn't mean much." The clear articulation of words is at the core of what makes a raj performance zoo, 'good.' Both Sai Pao and Ger also commented on the clarity of word articulation in the recorded performances I played for them. Like Houa, they used it as a basis for judging the skill of the performer and the quality of the performance.

Learning to play the raj word-by-word was only one of several ways to learn to tshuab raj described. Much learning took place by listening to others play

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Footnote: Houa's remark that music without words, or at least words that can be understood, "doesn't mean much" can be interpreted in many ways. It could mean, quite literally, that there is little or no verbal content and no words can be understood. Based on her other statements, and her questions about verbal content in non-Hmong music, however, it seems she is implying something about the value of the musical expression. While I cannot completely describe the system in which this evaluation takes place, to Houa, music communicates words. Music without words, then, is in a way less 'musical' and perhaps less valuable, meaningful, or in her words, zoo, 'good.'
and then imitating the sounds on your own raj. A younger person could ask what was just said in a raj performance and sometimes a vocal rendition, with words, might be provided. Sai Pao, Ger, and Houa, however, agreed that singing what was played on a raj was done infrequently and almost always for the sake of teaching a younger person. To sing what could be played on the raj demonstrated a lack of knowledge and skill, or txawj. In fact, it was sometimes difficult to elicit a sung version of what a musician had played during my own fieldwork – playing the notes slowly and speaking the words was the preferred method.

As first noted by Mareschal, and echoed by Catlin and others, tshuab raj is based on the melodic conventions of kwv txhiaj. But it cannot be said that performers are simply playing the melody of a familiar kwv txhiaj. As it will be demonstrated in the next chapter, most performance types make use of the formulaic expressions and associated melodic contours of kwv txhiaj. Still, knowing how to sing kwv txhiaj does not result in the comprehension of tshuab raj. Instrumental idioms and techniques distance raj performance from vocal genres. The reluctance of some consultants to sing what they had played on the flute is a
further distinction between what is performed on a raį and what is sung in a kwv txhiaį. ⁶⁴

Ger Xiong performed in a highly virtuosic style on the raį hliav ncauį in what he called suab Niam Ntawv. Not to be confused with Shong Lue Yang, the creator of the Pahawh alphabet and so-called ‘Mother of Writing,’ this Niam Ntawv was one of the first Hmong immigrants from China, according to Ger. The words he played told the story of the difficult journey and resulting life of poverty from the point of view of Niam Ntawv. High, sustained pitches interspersed with quickly-played groups of notes characterized the melody. Ger said that he had to memorize the words to these stories to reproduce them, in contrast to the typical extemporaneous style of composition on the raį. While I did not have the opportunity to study this particular suab in greater detail, it does suggest that genres specific to the raį do exist.

3.3 My lesson from Ger: a reflexive critique of methodology in the field

Ger Xiong had a strong desire to teach others, Hmong and non-Hmong alike, about the music he had grown up with. In fact, my desire to learn, his

⁶⁴ Amy Catlin has closely analyzed the performance of sung poetry in courtship rituals finding a number of reasons for singing, rather than speaking, in such circumstances. Similar to ỉshuab raį, kwv txhiaį communicate passionate feelings in restrained performances making the message ambivalent and emotionally distant.
desire to teach, and our mutual desire to communicate our understanding to others created an immediate bond between us when we first met in the summer of 2000. Needing to generate footage with Ger for the educational video, I relied on interviews with predetermined questions. This was sufficient to produce answers that could be utilized in an educational video, but our discussion about playing words on the raj revealed the limitations of this type of communication. I lacked Hmong music vocabulary and Ger was not familiar with the musical vocabulary I had acquired in my education. Our goals were the same, but I was trying to communicate in the wrong channel: a structured interview.

The language barrier was more than one of Hmong vs. English. Ger had said that if you understand the Hmong language then you can understand the raj, suggesting that learning how to play and understand the raj was more than memorizing a few familiar melodies. When I met again with Ger in November of 2004 to learn about tshuab raj specifically, I suggested that I wanted him to “teach me to play the raj,” to “give me a lesson.” Again, these are culturally bounded categories that do not apply to the way in which Ger had gained his knowledge, but it was a first step toward getting beyond the typical interview. This allowed Ger to shape the discourse in ways that made sense to him: instruction through story and demonstration.
First, Ger explained that he had learned how to play from his parents and older brother. The raj was used mainly by teenage boys and girls to communicate messages of love and longing. Ger himself had become interested in the instrument around age 11 as he was becoming interested in the opposite sex. He felt that he had learned mainly by hearing other people play on a daily basis and having some informal instruction. I couldn’t resist intruding, hoping to guide the discussion to details of the learning process. He was very vague in his answers and it became clear that the questions I asked had little to do with his experience. This communicative impasse was actually quite revealing. His inability to verbally communicate the learning process echoes the informal way he had learned the instrument. Unlike the qeej, a bamboo free-reed mouth organ used in Hmong funeral rituals, which is taught to a student by a master over years of apprenticeship, there is no structured, verbalized method to teach the raj. Asking Ger to relate his learning experience verbally was incongruent with the way he learned and practiced ishuab raj.

When I finally asked Ger to teach me how to make the sounds on the raj, he came alive and began an impromptu lesson. First, I had to learn to connect the sound of words with the sound of the raj. Ger taught this to me by speaking a word, for example, hmoob, and then blowing the raj nplaim while covering
different holes (*qhov*). Each time he played a different sound (*suab*) he would say, “No, it’s not *hmoob!*” Finally, he played a low reference sound and, with all of his fingers raised above the five holes (*qhov*) of the *rāj*, sounded the highest pitch on the instrument. “*Hmoob!*” As he had said earlier, while I was struggling to understand this idea, “This hole, it sounds better. ... The other hole, they sound different.” The sound (*suab*) of the *rāj* had to match the sound (*suab*) of the word.65

Ignoring, for the moment, the nature of the relationship between sounds on the *rāj* and the sound of words, much can be learned from this exchange. First, Ger had no names to use in reference to the holes of the flute except the generic word *qhov*, ‘hole.’ He had no words for relationship between the pitches performed on the *rāj* except *suab soob* and *suab nqes*, literally, ‘high sound’ and ‘low sound.’ He had no words to describe the motions his fingers had on the instrument or the way he controlled his breath. These words might exist, might be known to other performers, but Ger had achieved mastery of the instrument without a vocabulary to frame the performance. For him, other “channels” of communication, to use Charles Briggs’ term, were more significant.66 In

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65 This exchange is analyzed in more detail in section 4.1.
66 Briggs, *Learning How to Ask*, 44.
particular, Ger immediately turned to the visible performance of sound through demonstration.

Previous studies of Hmong music, especially those based on the semiotic theory of Theodore Stern, have related musical sound to lexical tone. These have sought to describe the resemblance between two. It is clear, however, from Ger Xiong’s performance that, at least in terms of the raj, lexical-tone cannot be separated from a word. The sound of the word is performed on the raj, not the sound of the lexical tone. Phonological awareness has been linked to the development of alphabetic writing systems. It was not until the 1950’s that Hmong was written alphabetically. While Ger is certainly aware of lexical tone and the Roman Popular Alphabet for writing the Hmong language, his description of performing the sound of words on the raj suggests a foundation in oral tradition.

While the relationship between the sounds of speech and the raj are clearly important, Ger’s lesson also highlights the physicality of producing those sounds. The only way for him to demonstrate the various sounds was to utilize different fingerings, an act to which he drew attention. He thought of the sound of words both aurally and physically. In terms of performance, John Baily has

called this the "spatio-motor mode."\textsuperscript{68} A performer is not simply translating words into the *raj*. As Ger demonstrates, it is also a performance of motor patterns.\textsuperscript{69} This creates an alternate visual channel for communication: a listener can interpret what a performer is saying not only through sound, but also motion. 

After our lesson, I had many more questions for Ger about how performances were structured and other technical issues. Again, we struggled in communicating. My limited knowledge of Hmong was the primary cause of confusion. Still, it was clear that many of my questions were ill suited to learning about how Ger *tskuab raj*. I was particularly eager to learn the correct terms for different aspects of performance. At times, Ger would respond that he did not know of any word for what I wanted to know. At other times, he came up with his own words to fit my questions. Without realizing it, I was pressuring him to think about his musical practices in ways that had never occurred to him. In one sense, this could be seen as distorting the experience that Ger was trying to communicate to me. Yet, it is also a necessary part of the intersubjective creation of meaning.

\textsuperscript{68} Baily, "Music performance," 151.
\textsuperscript{69} In funeral rituals, *geej* players perform memorized instructions for the soul of the deceased to guide them back to the ancestral homeland. One way this is learned is by memorizing the fingerings that create the sounds of different words and then applying them to the memorized words.
Briggs notes that the “interview provides a rigid frame for interaction,” and that respondents are likely to “break frame” when it is not a part of their metacommunicative repertoire.\(^7\) For instance, I asked Ger to teach me about the intricate fingerings he used to create different sounds on the \textit{raj}. I was hoping for a detailed explanation of typical hand movements that created sliding pitches and quickly articulated ornamental pitches. Instead, Ger said that this was all \textit{txawj}, ‘skill’: a combination of inborn talent and practice that not everyone possessed. He could tell if people had \textit{txawj} when listening to recordings of other performers.

For Ger, \textit{txawj} had much to do with the meaning of the performance. True, he could understand the verbal content, but he admired good technique and respected others for their ability. Thus, when he played, he was not only communicating words, he was communicating his own \textit{txawj} to the community. The investment required to achieve \textit{txawj} demonstrates a respect for and interest in something unique about Hmong musical practices, or in Ger’s words, “not like other music.” In another part of the lesson, Ger talked about playing the \textit{raj} when he was a teenager for a girl he liked. He would play sayings to her like, “What do your parents feed you to make you so beautiful?” and “I’m so lonely for you I could become sick and die.” Whether the exact words were understood

\(^{7}\) Briggs, \textit{Learning How to Ask}, 49.
or not, the message was clear: Ger had txawj, a sign of intelligence and
compentence that marked a good potential spouse. It also showed respect for the
girl, Ger would not say such brazen things without the emotional distance
provided by the instrument.

The next day I went to the Hmong New Year Festival held in a
gymnasium at the local university. Ger took the makeshift stage and played his
raj into a microphone. The sound was distant and muffled in the oversized room.
The sound engineer made little effort to make the nuanced performance more
audible. As Ger played, the crowd seated in stackable chairs on the gym floor
thinned out as people went to look for friends or shop in the market set up on the
jogging track. Most of the remaining audience was made up of older Hmong
people, many of whom may have understood what Ger was playing into the raj.
At the same time, this was clearly not a young boy trying to impress a girl with
his musical ability. Ger looked sharp in a vest covered with silver coins over a
crisp, white dress shirt. If this performance was about sound, it was a failure. As
a demonstration of txawj, of respect for tradition, of the uniqueness of Hmong
culture, and of power of the Hmong-American community to persevere, it was a
great success.
More than words, this performance spoke to the real and imagined past, present, and future of the Hmong community. Whatever was in Ger’s mind as he played the *raj* at the New Year Festival, the performance spoke beyond the particulars of the words. Ger had decided to participate in this performance of something called ‘Hmong culture’ that had been agreed upon by the organizers of the event. In this way, it symbolizes ‘something Hmong,’ however that is understood by the diverse group of people gathered at the festival. To be given time and prominence suggests that it has value to wide audience. While it certainly has personal meaning for Ger, it also has what Clifford Geertz called “public meaning.”71 The performance becomes a cultural symbol.

At the same time, I want to be careful in asserting meanings that hold for all members of the group. Past research on Hmong music has tended to blur the lines between cultural practices in Laos, Thailand, and the United States wanting to present a unified cultural identity. In fact, the global Hmong community has always been diverse. As anthropologist Gary Yia Lee has noted, “We are not one single homogenous group located in one single geographical area, but a multi-ethnic and multilingual community living with many people in many

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countries.”72 This is congruent with contemporary notions of the “fluidity, multiplicity, and intricate contradictions that characterize all forms of cultural identity.”73 If tshuab raj is a cultural symbol, that symbol must always be contextualized in performance and competing interpretations.

Through failure, experimentation, frustration, and reflection an understanding of ‘partial truth’ is reached. Meaning might be multiple, but it is still important. For Ger, continuing to perform Hmong music was crucial to his identity and to be understood by others was a great validation. His experience is unique and what we learned together incomplete, but what we shared clearly matters to more than just the two of us. While we reached a greater understanding of each other, our relationship has changed who we are as people and will likely grow as we continue to learn from each other. As Jeff Titon says, fieldwork is “personally transformative,” and not just for the ethnomusicologist.

3.4 Tshuab raj in the American context: a Hmong New Year celebration

In the performance of Hmong-American culture, the raj and related instruments remain important identifiers of a unique cultural identity. With

good reason, however, *kvw txhiaj* (improvised, sung poetry) and the *qeej* (a free-reed, bamboo mouth organ) receive the most attention. Both are popular and central to diverse constructions of Hmong cultural identity. The *qeej* is necessary for funeral rituals in which the spirit of the deceased is guided back to the ancestral homeland. *Kvw txhiaj* remain a crucial performance of cultural identity, bridging the divide between the Southeast Asian community and the diasporic community. Their symbolic force is evident at the numerous Hmong New Year festivals across the United States, in which the *qeej* and *kvw txhiaj* figure prominently, along with Hmong popular music, dance, and martial arts.

Hmong New Year celebrations fill arenas, convention centers, and gymnasiums in cities like Fresno, Minneapolis, and Milwaukee, as well as smaller cities like Eau Claire, Wisconsin where I attended my first New Year in 2000. For the two-day event, the large gymnasium of the McPhee Physical Education Center, on the campus of the University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire, was transformed into a virtual town. Under the orange glow of the overhead lights, vendors of imported videos and audio recordings set up shop next to stalls selling fried chicken and sticky rice. The basketball courts on the lower level had been turned into a makeshift auditorium where music and dance

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24 See for instance Louisa Schein’s research on “homeland” video consumption, which includes recorded *kvw txhiaj*, by the diasporic community that, in part, creates a sense of transnational “solidarity.” Schein, “Homeland Beauty,” 438.
dominated the performance schedule. In fact, besides the requisite opening speeches and closing remarks, the main stage and the floor surrounding it were entirely devoted to music and dance. The one exception was a showcase of Hmong martial arts that involved several groups of young boys demonstrating various combat skills to the accompaniment of electronic dance music.

I was there to collect footage for Speaking Musically and the organizers issued me a detailed program listing the scheduled events in five to ten minute increments. While deviations from this script were numerous (for instance, an unscheduled performance on the Lao khaen by Joe Bee Xiong), when combined with my own recollections, it can be used to describe the American performance context of tshuab raj. The Hmong New Year Festival is one of the few places where the hmuob raj can still be heard in public. Hmong adults who continue to play the instrument, especially the elderly, are much more likely to perform at home for family and friends or for their own enjoyment.

At the New Year celebration, tshuab raj is only one type of musical performance among many. The terminology employed by the unknown author(s) of the program for the year 2000 celebration in Eau Claire is helpful in categorizing the various types of performances. Vocal performances were divided into three categories with English names: “folksongs” (i.e. kwv txhiaj),
"songs" (i.e. Hmong popular music, sometimes referred to as nkauj), and

"American songs" (i.e. English-language, American pop music.) Of the thirty-five vocal performances listed for the two-day celebration, twenty-five were kwv txhiaj and ten were popular songs. Kwv txhiaj were not only greater in number, they were scheduled at significant times in the program. For instance, immediately following the opening ceremonies, even before the opening remarks by the chair of the New Year committee, two "New Year folk songs" (kwv txhiaj tsiab) were performed by prominent married women in the Eau Claire Hmong community. Kwv txhiaj were also scheduled to close the Saturday program and to open and close the Sunday program. In contrast, the first popular song was not sung until well into Saturday afternoon following more kwv txhiaj, a performance on the rāj by Gei Xiong, traditional Hmong dance, and the Hmong martial arts demonstration.

In a sense, the kwv txhiaj formed a frame of tradition around the diverse performances of the celebration, especially for the older generation – the adults who came of age in Laos and Thailand. The Hmong teenagers, for the most part born in the United States, who performed Hmong and American popular songs, were well aware of this framework. They mindfully selected slow songs on themes of love that would be acceptable to the elders who both organized the
show and made up the bulk of the seated audience. For example, the leader of
the all-boy singing group from LaCrosse, Wisconsin, *Obsession*, mentioned to me
that he was happy to limit song choices for the opportunity to perform for so
many people. The subdued performances did not quell the excitement of the
children and teenagers who gathered around the stage whenever one of their
peers took the stage. Fourteen-year-old Maihoua Xiong elicited cheers of delight
from the young girls in the crowd with her performance of a popular Céline Dion
song.

While teenagers performed contemporary music, *kwo txhiaj* were sung
primarily by married, adult women. This is in sharp contrast to descriptions of
New Year festivals in Laos where *kwo txhiaj* were most often sung between
young men and women as they tossed a ball back and forth in the traditional
courtship practice of *pov pob*. In fact, according to some consultants, it used to be
that women generally stopped singing in public once married. Of the ten
performers listed in my program, eight were women and two were men, both of
whom were married adults. Of the women, only two were unmarried women in
their mid-twenties. It is unknown if these two performers learned to sing in the

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75 Widowed women can sing in public to attract a new spouse. For the text and translation of one
such *kwo txhiaj ntsuag,* 'orphan/widow song,' see:
Amy Catlin, "Homo Cantens: Why Hmong Sing during Interactive Courtship Rituals," *Selected
Reports in Ethnomusicology* 9 (1992), 52-56.

74
United States or elsewhere. Talking to other women of a similar age at the celebration, some discussed their interest in learning to sing *kuv txhiaj*. These women had just graduated from college and were thinking about starting a family. The thought of connecting to the traditional practices of their culture was appealing as a foundation for their adult identity. Also, many expressed feelings of guilt for not maintaining such a highly esteemed practice. Finished with school, they hoped to have more time for learning about Hmong culture. For them, *kuv txhiaj* was not about finding a mate, but rather being engaged with their community.

The appeal of *kuv txhiaj* as a cultural marker was also evident during my time at the SEASSI Hmong language program. Learning to sing a *kuv txhiaj* was part of the curriculum for the second- and third-year students, all of whom were college-aged and raised as Hmong-Americans. While some were learning the Hmong language to use in their careers, many wanted to improve their language skills to better communicate with older relatives. Singing *kuv txhiaj* connected them to the traditions of their families and to a shared Hmong identity.

It is not that *kuv txhiaj* have lost their courtship function in the United States. Audio recordings and videos of singers, both American and Southeast Asian, still circulate to attract potential spouses, but they also serve other
purposes. Hmong adults, especially those raised in Laos and Thailand, enjoy listening to *kvw txhiaj*, recorded and live, for numerous reasons: an appreciation of a singer with a clear, high voice; an intellectual delight in the play of words; a stimulation of fond memories for the homeland; as well as a sense of comfort in familiar sounds. At the 2000 New Year celebration, it was mainly the adults who remained in their seats to hear the performances of *kvw txhiaj* while the youth drifted away to shop for CDs and videos.

When asked about *kvw txhiaj*, many teenagers explained that they found the words difficult to understand. Performers make use of archaic, poetic language. Understanding lexical word-tone in a sung context is even more problematic for non-native speakers of Hmong. These same teenagers, however, consume and understand Hmong language popular music where the problem of word-tone should be even more pronounced since the melodies are unrelated to the tone of the words. Singers of *kvw txhiaj* base their melodies, at least in part, on lexical word-tone.

Beyond melodic contour, however, many factors of intelligibility need to be considered. Popular songs use simple, everyday language that even novice

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76 Amy Catlin has studied the musical differences between *kvw txhiaj* and Hmong popular music and found that the former exhibits a strong relationship between word-tone and pitch height while the latter has a random distribution. Amy Catlin, "Harmonizing the Generations in Hmong Musical Performance," *Selected Reports in Ethnomusicology* 6 (1985), 90-96.
speakers of Hmong are likely to know. Furthermore, while the language of kuv txhiaj is highly formulaic, the expressions are unfamiliar to young Hmong-Americans who hear these songs and poetic language infrequently. The lyrical conventions of Hmong popular music, closely related to those of the Western popular music that dominates their musical soundscape, are well-known to them and more easily understood in the popular music context. One girl compared kuv txhiaj in the Hmong context to opera in the Western context: opera represents a highly esteemed practice with a long tradition (the appreciation of which must be cultivated) and the lyrics can be difficult to understand even for native speakers. The high register of language and the distortion of words through a stylized form of singing require a knowledgeable and engaged listener to get the message.

Thirty-eight of the eighty-two designated performances on the program were dance routines, listed as either “Hmong traditional dance” or simply “dance.” While dozens of boys were involved in the half-hour long martial arts demonstration on Saturday afternoon, the thirteen groups of two to eight girls dominated the schedule both days of the celebration. The “traditional” groups were made up of young girls in traditional Hmong apparel or conservative, matching outfits who danced to the slow, Asian-style popular music especially
favored by the older generation. These groups had names like *Hmoob Zoo Nkauj* (‘Good/Pretty Hmong Girls’) and *Dej Ntshiab Pajtawg Tshiab* (‘The Clear Water New Flower Blossoms’). The girls danced in symmetrical grids and circles, sometimes making gestures to emphasize the lyrics of the song. [Figure 3.1]

![Image](image_url)

**Figure 3.3** The dance group *Dej Ntshiab Pajtawg Tshiab*. Hmong New Year 2000, Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

As Nancy Xiong, at the time a senior high school and the choreographer for *Hmoob Zoo Nkauj*, explained: the style of dance was not traditional in the sense that has it roots in the Hmong culture reaching back hundreds of years. Based on the amalgamation of hand movements and patterns of group motion, it seemed to be largely derived, relatively recently, from Lao, Chinese, and Thai

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77 The name *Dej Ntshiab Pajtawg Tshiab* is also a play on the English translation of the French *eau claire* (‘clear water’), which is the name of the town. The name of the group could also be understood as “The Eau Claire New Flower Blossoms.”
sources. It is only performed to Hmong popular music of the slow, Asian style that seems to have come into vogue in the middle of the 20th-century. Regardless of origin, however, the costume, decorum, and music of the performance are understood as traditional. This is further emphasized in Hmong language names of the groups that play on typical images of Hmong femininity.

Those groups listed under the title "dance" were more likely to have English language names, like New Millennium Girl or Clear Vision. These groups tended to incorporate the dance language of hip-hop into more traditional movements. The group Ntxhais Angel ("Angel Girls"), using both Hmong and English words in their name, exemplified this combination of dance styles utilizing both Lao-style hand movements and athletic, hip-hop style jumps and kicks. The costumes of these groups were tighter, more flashy, and revealed more skin. Some groups avoided the conventions of Hmong traditional dance altogether and performed spirited hip-hop routines to uptempo, Western dance music.

Along with the martial arts demonstration, which involved a large number of performers, the dance groups drew the largest crowds. As the dancers were announced, Hmong teenagers and children collected along the space in front of the stage to have a good view of the performance. Proud
parents and relatives, with camcorders ready, would join the older adults already seated in the stackable chairs laid out on the gym floor. After an anticipatory hush, the extensive PA system would set the gymnasium reverberating with the slow and steady beat of a popular Hmong song or the hammer-like thump of techno music while the girls performed. For a few minutes, the incessant din of multiple CDs and videos played at top volume by vendors along the upper jogging track would be lost in the visceral impact of the musical sound.

While the events presented on the main stage of the Hmong New Year 2000 in Eau Claire can be described as musical, they are also closely related to speech. Even purely instrumental performances are verbal expressions. This includes *tshuab nplooj*, *raj*, *ncas*, and *qeej*, but also dances to instrumental renditions of popular songs in which the choreography evokes the imagined words. Perhaps the only "wordless" type of music at the New Year celebration is the simple ostinato played by a *txiv qeej* while he performs a particularly acrobatic *tawg qeej*. Even then, simple words or syllables can be employed to remember the structure of the musical sound. When not standing on his head or otherwise somersaulting, a *txiv qeej* draws on a repertoire of "worded" songs appropriate to the festival.
As mentioned above, the only raj performance took place early on the first day the New Year Festival. Ger performed on the raj hliav ncauj in very similar circumstances to his performance described in section 3.3. The crowd thinned out as Ger played the raj into a microphone. [Figure 3.2]

![Figure 3.2 Ger Xiaoq performs on the raj hliav ncauj at the Hmong New Year, 2000. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.](image)

The performance highlighted his mastery of the instrument as he blew long, sustained pitches with a tightly controlled vibrato. These sounds alone stood out in the din of the cavernous gymnasium. His fluid runs of quickly-played notes were lost in reverberation. Those who did listen were attentive and appreciative
when he finished. It is likely that some characteristic melodic contours were
clear enough to be understood by the audience in terms of verbal content. Due
to his prominent place on the stage and the limitations of the sound system, his
\textit{txawj} was communicated much more clearly.

Joe Bee Xiong said that when telephones first became available in parts of
rural Laos, people immediately began playing \textit{raj} to each other over the phone
lines. Other consultants reported playing \textit{raj} on the phone to family and friends
in Laos and Thailand. With no village or girlfriend to play for, \textit{raj} performance
has become a private event. It is brought out at family gatherings or played for
personal enjoyment. A few self-produced recordings are available for people,
like Houa Moua, who enjoy listening to the music in the background of daily life.
\textit{Raj} performances in public are done as demonstrations of traditional Hmong
culture or as part of New Year Festival programs.

Choua Lee claimed that she knew of some people who had learned to play
\textit{raj} since coming to the United States, but it seems unlikely that the tradition will
continue far beyond the second generation. The \textit{qeej} continues to be learned by
young boys at community centers across the country and its role in the funeral
ritual remains intact. Learning and performing \textit{kuv tshiaj} is also a popular way
for young Hmong people to express a unique identity, although the songs are
usually memorized rather than improvised. To play raj requires deep knowledge of the Hmong language and exposure to conventional verbal and musical phrases, two things uncommon in Hmong-American life where attentions are divided among work, school, and family obligations. If tshuab raj does find a place in the future of Hmong culture, it will be adapted to meet the new needs of the community. Like kwo txhiaj, songs will probably be memorized rather than improvised and styles will be homogenized, a process that may be underway already. The biggest change will be an audience that understands performances as something other than words. Still, there is much potential in the future of Hmong music and renewed interest in tradition among the second generation could lead anywhere.
CHAPTER 4

ANALYSIS

4.1 "Hmong people, are you lonely?"

Ger Xiong heard a relationship between the sound of Hmong words and
the sound of the raj. But what is the nature of this relationship? Ger began to
teach me the connection between words and musical sound with the placement
of his fingers on the holes of the raj. Different fingerings made different sounds
on the raj, making different words possible. Using the phrase "Hmoob puas khoi;," (Hmong [people], are you lonely?) he demonstrated these relationships in suab
raj nplaim, the basic set of pitches and melodic formulas used on the instrument.

His raj nplaim featured six holes (qhow), but since suab raj nplaim only
requires the five holes, he had used a piece of transparent tape to cover the hole
nearest the reed into which he blew. The sound for the word 'Hmoob' was
produced by lifting his fingers, leaving all five holes open.78 This sound was

78 The white tape on the raj nplaim above Ger's fingers is actually a moveable cover that can be
placed over the reed when the raj is not in use. A variety of materials of for this purpose,
including plastic. The hole covered with transparent tape is not visible in Fig. 1, but can be seen

84
preceded by a low reference sound made by covering all of the holes on the flute. [Figures 4.1 and 4.2] He continued the lesson, finding the right sound on the flute to match the sound of the word puas, an interrogative particle. This was made by covering the first two holes of the raj. Again, performing this word in isolation, he prefaced it with a low reference note. [Figures 4.3 and 4.4] Finally, he performed kho by covering only the first hole of the raj after a quick reference note. [Figures 4.5 and 4.6]

above his right hand in Fig. 2. I have encountered raj nplaim with as few as five holes and as many as seven. The intervals used in suab raj nplaim are always arranged so as to be played on the bottom five holes of the raj, i.e. those holes furthest from the reed.

While I designate these holes to be the ‘first two,’ Ger knew of no names or words for the holes beyond the general term qhov. This was true of the other players, as well. This in mind, I will refer to the holes, beginning from the one closest to the reed, as first, second, third, fourth, and fifth.
Figure 4.1 Ger Xiong plays the word 'Hmoob' on the raj nplaim by lifting his fingers, leaving all five holes open. Eau Claire, Wisconsin, 2005.

Figure 4.2 A graph of the fundamental frequency of Ger's performance of 'Hmoob.'
Figure 4.3 Ger Xiong plays the word 'puas' on the raj nplaim by covering the first two holes. Eau Claire, Wisconsin, 2005.

Figure 4.4 A graph of the fundamental frequency of Ger's performance of 'puas' on the raj nplaim.
Figure 4.5 Ger plays the word ‘kho’ on the raj nplaim by covering only the first hole. Eau Claire, Wisconsin, 2005.

Figure 4.6 A graph of the fundamental frequency of Ger’s performance of ‘kho’ on the raj nplaim.
After playing the sound of each word on the *raj*, Ger played the words as a phrase. [Figure 4.7]

**Figure 4.7** A graph of the fundamental frequency (Hz) over intensity (dB) of Ger's *raj* *nplain* performance of 'Hmoob puas kho.'

The graphing of intensity is useful in indicating both the tongued articulation of pitches (*e.g.* near 1.5sec) and the relative loudness of each sound. Also note, the noisy timbre at points of articulation causes anomalies in the pitch contour. Due to the isolated performance of such a short phrase, Ger begins the phrase with a low reference note as in the previous examples. The sounds of the *raj*, now joined together in a meaningful unit, become dynamic. The high note, 'Hmoob,'
is drawn out and slowly drops to the next lowest pitch as Ger gently lowers his index finger over the first hole. For a moment, he lifts his finger, for a brief return to the higher pitch before articulating the next sound, 'puas.' Unlike, 'Hmoob,' both 'puas' and 'kho' are static in terms of pitch contour. Still, 'kho' is played with extra force, creating an accent.

From this very brief example, several methods of making the sound of the raj meaningful can be observed. 'Hmoob,' the subject and most important word of the phrase, is stressed by holding it out longer than the other notes and ornamenting it with a downward pitch contour and a final ornamental note. 'Kho,' the important descriptive word, is stressed by greater loudness. Ger, and others, also explained that the rhythm was important in clarifying the important words of a phrase. A relatively steady pulse undergirds most raj performances, although a consistent meter cannot be discerned. The prosody of the spoken phrase 'Hmoob puas kho' is evident in this performance, however. An unstressed anacrusis leads to the stressed 'Hmoob' followed by the unstressed 'puas' and finally the stressed 'kho.' Pitch, pitch contour, ornamental pitches, rhythm, and relative loudness are all utilized to make the meaning of the phrase clear.

The relationship between the sound of the word, what musicians call suab, and the sound of the raj, also referred to as suab, allows for consistent
performance and understanding of verbal content. Suab has a wide variety of meanings and in musical contexts can refer to a single pitch or an entire pitch range. Other elements like rhythm and timbre can also be included in suab. It is, however, the relationship between lexical-tone and pitch as performed on the raj that is most crucial in communicating words in raj performances. This can be seen in the care taken by Ger to match the sound of words to the correct pitch on the raj. Also, as seen in the previous chapter, these relationships, although not explicitly stated, were fundamental to the learning process of the performers with whom I worked.

4.2 Lexical-tone and musical sound in tshuab raj

Based on conversations with performers and analysis of performances, it is clear that a consistent relationship between lexical word-tone and pitch is fundamental in tshuab raj. While performers may or may not conceive of tone separately from words, performances tend to transmit words and their associated word-tones on predictable pitch levels. In Ger’s example from the beginning of the chapter, the word ‘Hmoob,’ high-tone (-h), is performed on the highest pitch of suab raj nplaim. Words with a mid-rising tone (-v) also tend to be played on this pitch. ‘Puas,’ low-tone (-s), is performed on a low pitch and ‘kho,’

80 Timbre and rhythm are discussed in sections 4.3 and 4.6 respectively.
middle-tone (no marker), is performed on a pitch in-between. Based on other performances, words with a mid-falling tone, characterized by a breathy quality (-g), tend to be performed on the middle pitch and words with low-tone ending in a glottal stop (-m), tend to be played on the lower of the three pitches.81

Of the seven basic tones, this leaves the high-falling tone (-f). In suab raj nplain, words with this tone are performed in two ways. Most frequently, it is played with two pitches: a shorter pitch produced by covering all but the fifth hole of the raj nplain and a longer pitch produced by covering all five holes. This creates the contour of a downward step, perhaps related to the falling contour of the word-tone itself (although the interval is small in comparison to the pitch range of words with a high-falling tone.) When played quickly, however, sometimes only one of the pitches is played. Based on performances by Ger and SaiPao, it became clear that these diverse renditions did not change the lexical meaning of the underlying verbal content. The same words could be performed using these different realizations. Thus, it is difficult to discern if these two sounds are thought of as distinct by performers.

81 This is slightly different from Mareschal’s mapping of lexical-tone and musical pitch. These differences are discussed below and in section 5.1. See also section 2.2 and Table 2.1 for a description of Amy Catlin’s use of Mareschal’s findings.
To clarify the situation, the following graph represents the word-tone to fundamental frequency relationships in suab raj nplain, as well as the most common fingering patterns.\(^2\) [Table 4.1]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word-tone</th>
<th>RPA Symbol</th>
<th>High-to-low pitch rank (^a)</th>
<th>Approx. Fundamental Frequency (Hz) (^b)</th>
<th>Fingering position: covered holes (^c)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High-level</td>
<td>-h</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>467</td>
<td>(all holes open)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid-rising</td>
<td>-v</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>467</td>
<td>(all holes open)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid-level</td>
<td>-n</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>416</td>
<td>1 (1,2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid-falling</td>
<td>-g</td>
<td>2 (3)</td>
<td>416 (373)</td>
<td>1 (1,2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>breathy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low-level</td>
<td>-s</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>373</td>
<td>1,2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low w/ glottal</td>
<td>-m</td>
<td>3 or 4/5</td>
<td>373 or 304/278</td>
<td>1,2 or 1,2,3,4/1,2,3,4,5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>stop</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High-falling</td>
<td>-f</td>
<td>4/5</td>
<td>304/278</td>
<td>1,2,3,4/1,2,3,4,5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\) Pitch rank based on fundamental frequency, not perceived pitch quality.

\(^b\) Fundamental frequency (Hz) based on Ger Xiong's raj nplain. These frequencies are only approximate. During performance, pitches are rarely static and often move within a small range. Also, there is no standard for raj nplain construction and individual instruments vary in pitch range and fundamental frequency. These numbers are provided as a general guide.

\(^c\) Hole 1 = the hole nearest to the blown-end of the raj. These are not the only fingering positions used while performing suab raj nplain. For instance, hole 2 can be covered to create a pitch near 460 Hz, as when all holes are left open. Playing the pitch this way gives the performer more control over shaping the sound, as demonstrated in the next example.

**Table 4.1** Relationships between lexical-tone and musical pitch in suab raj nplain as performed by Ger Xiong.

\(^2\) Finger patterns are included here to emphasize the importance of the musicians physical interaction with the instrument. Relationships between word sound and musical sound are grounded in the movement of the body, as described by Ger Xiong above.
In the examples collected, words with \(-b\) and \(-v\) tones were consistently associated with pitch 1. Words with the \(-o\), \(-s\) or \(-j\) tones were just as consistent, being associated with pitch 2, 3, or pitches 4 and 5, respectively. A few examples of the pitch 2-to-3 contour performed on \(-\emptyset\) tone words occurred in performances by SaiPao and Ger. Still, pitch 3 seemed to function as a connection between pitch 2 and the 4/5 pitch level rather than contrastive cue.\(^{83}\) A small number of inconsistencies between lexical-tone and pitch occurred on "filler words," i.e. words without significant lexical meaning inserted in the melodic contour to add beauty or demonstrate \(ixawij\) (the skill of the player.)

The remaining tones (\(-g\) and \(-m\)) were mapped less consistently, but each showed a tendency toward one pitch level. For instance, the \(-g\) tone mapped to pitch 2 in most cases. Exceptions were few, but so were the times that the \(-g\) tone was recorded in reports by performers and listeners. This is not surprising considering that the \(-g\) tone is the least common of the seven primary tones. When \(-g\) tone words did not map to pitch 2, they were correlated with pitch 3 or a two-note, falling motif: pitches 2-3.\(^{84}\)

While the \(-m\) tone was reported several times, it was almost always on the word \(niam\) 'mother.' Moreover, \(niam\) only appeared in the context of the

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\(^{83}\) See section 5.1 for a similar use of the pitch 2-to-3 contour in \(kwu txhiaj\) performance.

\(^{84}\) The remapping of \(-g\) tone words to pitch 3 may be triggered by proximity to \(-\emptyset\) tone words performed on pitch 2. See section 5.1 for examples drawn from a \(kwu txhiaj\) sung by Choua Lee.
formulaic expression "leej niam leej txi," 'mother and father/parents.' In these cases, it was always played on pitch 3. Based on my kwv txhiaj lessons with Choua Lee, I learned that -m tone words tend to be sung on the lowest pitch level (4) out of four, and are sung on pitch level 3 only after -j tone words, which are always sung on pitch level 4. Thus, the consistent mapping of -m tone words to pitch 3 in suab raj nplaim is likely a result of the frequency of the leej niam leej txi formula, the relative infrequency of the -m tone, and the limited scope of my data. The few times -m tone words occurred outside of the "leej niam" condition, listeners connected -m tone words to pitches 4 and 5. One informant used "niam" as a nonsense filler word to explain the pitches 4 and 5 that she could not otherwise understand. More than anything, these issues demonstrate of inherent difficulty of analyzing tshuab raj performances word for word.

To be sure, the table above does not present rules of performance, but rather tendencies derived from the analysis of recorded performances and interviews with performers. For example, during my interview with Tongeu Leepalao, I showed him the words that Kang Vang had written down from his father's verbal rendition of some raj nplaim performances. Without hesitation, Tongeu began to read the words aloud, half-singing as he spoke. The contour of his intonation followed the melodic contour played by SaiPao on the raj nplaim.
While he did not have his *raj nplaity* handy, and the one I had purchased proved to be unplayable, Tongeu sang some examples of phrases he would play on the *raj*. Not only did his sung performance match the structure of instrumental performances, discussed later in the chapter, but the way he related word sound (*i.e.* lexical tone) and pitch matched the derived mapping listed above.

### 4.3 The limitations of mapping

The table relating word-tone and musical pitch is a useful reference during analysis, but it cannot convey key features of musical understanding. It codifies a complex and intuitive system of mental relationships based on oral tradition in a form incompatible with the knowledge of performers. As already mentioned, performers don't refer to connections between lexical-tone and fundamental frequency. Rather, musical discussions are framed in the context of “the sound of words” and “the sound of the *raj*.” The structure of the table translates dynamic musical sounds into to static pitch and cannot integrate relationships between ornamentation, rhythm, timbre and the sound of words—key components in performing and understanding words in *tshuab raj*.

The pitch rank, while useful for organizing the recorded fundamental frequencies, does not necessarily correlate to descriptions of pitch by performers.
For instance, -j tone words are performed are pitches 4 and 5 in the mapping, but is this thought of as one sound or two distinct sound events? Recall that sometimes pitches 4 and 5 were played in succession, other times in isolation. In all renditions, they were described as suab, but that could mean anything from 'sound' to 'single pitch' to 'pitch range.' If anything, the upper pitch seems to be auxiliary to the lower pitch and is often used like a passing-tone leading to the held out lower pitch. The lower pitch is never performed leading back to the upper pitch.

Understanding them as one sound or two, they can be measured as the lowest pitch levels, in terms of fundamental frequency, in suab raj nplaim. At the same time, they are not necessarily thought of as 'low' sounds by the performers themselves. None of my teachers knew of specific vocabulary in reference to the placement of pitches in a given range and had different words to describe the sound of these two notes. The general terms suab siab, 'high sound,' and suab qes, 'low sound,' were used by Ger to describe the possible range of pitches, but he and others described the two notes played for words with the high-falling tone, -j, as suab siab (high sound) despite their relatively low fundamental frequency.85

Siab, while meaning 'high in terms of position,' also can mean 'tail,' the antonym

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85 Some consultants thought that the term suab soob was more appropriate for musical sounds with a relatively high fundamental frequency since soob is used in reference to small things that would produce a high-pitched sound, for instance, a child or a woman.
being qes, 'low' or 'short.' The antonym for soob is laus, which can mean both 'low in terms of position' but also 'old' or 'big in size.' Houa Moua, in fact, preferred to describe pitches 4 and 5 in the pitch rank as laus.

Computer analyses of performances indicate that the fundamental frequency of these sounds is indeed lower than that of the other pitches. Fundamental frequency alone does not determine the perception of pitch, however, and these two sounds have a characteristically noisy timbre in which the first overtone is especially prominent. The following narrow-band spectrogram of a phrase played by Ger Xiong on the raj nplaim demonstrates the strong overtones of pitch levels 4 and 5. [Figure 4.8]
Figure 4.8 Spectrogram of a phrase played by Cer Xiong on the *raj nplaim*. A graph of fundamental frequency with associated pitch rank is provided for reference.

While Ger and I did not transcribe the words of this performance, it demonstrates the variety of spectral characteristics between pitches on the *raj nplaim*. In comparison with the other pitches, pitches 4 and 5 have weak fundamental frequencies. This is evident during the sustained pitch 5 beginning near the middle of the graph. The fundamental frequency becomes a faint trace while the strength of the first harmonic, near 500 Hz, is represented by the dark, black line. For pitches both 4 and 5, the first harmonic is more prominent, emphasizing the frequency an octave above the fundamental. It could be this
quality of the sound that Hmong listeners describe as *suab siab* or *suab soob*. Furthermore, note the strong upper overtones of pitch 5 indicating its characteristic "buzzy" sound.

The strong first overtone of pitches 4 and 5, while emphasizing the pitch an octave above the fundamental frequency, does not imply that performers fail to recognize the fundamental frequency. In sung renditions of phrases played on the *raj nplaim*, performers utilized the fundamental frequency for pitches 4 and 5, not the octave above. The term *suab soob* seems to have more to do with the tone color than the perception of pitch itself. Characterizing this relatively low frequency sound as 'high' does have interesting implications for comparisons between different types of *raj*, as will be described later. In *suab raj nplaim*, pitches 4 and 5 stand out in sharp contrast to the other pitches, both in terms of fundamental frequency and timbre. Thus these two pitches not only signal –j tone words, but also mark important points of structure in performances as in the examples by SaiPao transcribed in Figures 4.10 and 4.18. In both cases, the pitch 4-to-5 motive is utilized to mark the end of introductory melodic material and the beginning of the important verbal content.
4.4 Ornamentation

The dynamic quality of pitches in the context of a phrase can be seen a histogram of a *raj nplain* performance. [Figure 4.9]

![Histogram of the first 10 phrases of a performance in suab raj nplain](image)

**Figure 4.9** A histogram of fundamental frequency based on the first ten phrases of *suab raj nplain* performance by Ger Xiong. Pitch rank is from 1 (high) to 5 (low) as above. The count measures a window length of 10 ms.

This example is taken from a performance by Ger Xiong recorded in the summer of 2000 as part of the *Speaking Musically* video project. It is the same *raj nplain* that he used in the above examples. In the course of the three-minute performance, Ger played a total of thirteen phrases (*njes*), the first ten being in
suab raj nplain. The ability to perform a variety of suab in the course of one performance is a mark of skill and is a common feature of longer performances. The histogram graphically represents a count of the number of times different fundamental frequencies were detected with a window length of 10 ms.

In this performance, pitches 2, 3, and 5 are relatively stable, deviating only a little from a primary frequency area. Pitch ranges 1 and 4, however, cover a wide range of frequencies. In both instances, Ger is bending the pitches by slowly covering or uncovering the holes of the raj with his fingers. Pitch 1 is particularly dynamic. There are two frequency peaks in the range. Rather than playing pitch 1 with all of the holes uncovered, Ger sometimes used the middle finger of his right hand to cover the second hole of the raj. This produces a frequency near to that of the open-hole fingerling, but has the advantage of giving the performer more control over the shape of the sound. By slowly lifting his finger on the second hole, Ger produces an upward pitch slide. These techniques do not change the word that is performed or understood, but rather can emphasize certain words, add beauty of the performance, or demonstrate the performer's skill, txawj.

Note that this type of pitch bend, which is used to ornament a single pitch area, differs from raising or lowering the fingers to create continuous pitch
contours between two distinct pitch areas, as seen in Figure 4.7 above. This technique is most evident on the histogram between pitch areas 4 and 5, although it is visible to a lesser degree between pitch areas 1 and 2, as well.

Depending upon the context, two pitches connected with a continuous glide can be used to express one or two words. For instance, this technique is used to ornament the word Hmoob in Figure 4.7. The ornament stresses the importance of the word as the subject of the phrase. In other instances, the glide can be used to connect smoothly two pitches carrying different words, requiring further information, such as melodic context, to clarify the meaning.

Again, Hmong vocabulary for discussing these techniques of ornamentation can be inconsistent between consultants. When asked what to call the frequent, quickly-played ornamental pitches, doog suab was suggested, or doog raj. Doog most commonly means ‘to bruise,’ but Jay Xiong records an alternate meaning in his Hmong Dictionary of “to move or lift a finger off and on fluently at the finger holes of the musical instrument such as a flute; to change tone or music note smoothly.” This definition could also include the pitch bends created by slowly raising or lowering the fingers over the hole of the raj.

Ger Xiong said that these notes also could be called hloov suab, literally ‘changing

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86 As noted earlier, pitch areas 4 and 5, played in conjunction or alone, are used to express single words exclusively.

87 Jay Xiong, Lus Hmoob Txaib (Hmong Dictionary), Version 1.02.03e (2003).
sound. Doog suab and hloov suab are also used in reference to the practice of changing the word-tone of words as they are performed in music, both vocal and instrumental, although this phenomenon is yet to be studied in depth.

Like pitch bends, quickly-played ornamental pitches, created by briefly switching to an auxiliary note near the first articulation as in a mordent, appear not to change lexical meaning. For instance, during my time with SaiPao, I recorded him playing the phrase “Yuav kho kho nej lub siab tsis kho?” on different occasions, two days apart. Both performances took place in didactic settings while SaiPao was teaching me how to hear the words of a raf performance, but I did not specifically ask to hear this phrase again. Rhythm and pitch content for each performance by Sai Pao was nearly identical but the application of quickly-played ornamental pitches was inconsistent. [Figure 4.10]

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88 Note the similarity in verbal content and melodic contour of this example and the example transcribed in Figure 4.18 below. Both are representative of formulaic expressions that are well known to the musical community. Such expressions are described in more detail below.
He carefully explained the words he was playing, speaking the same phrase each time. While the ornamentation changed between performances, it had no affect on underlying verbal content being communicated. Other instances, comparing conventional phrases across performers and performances, support that verbal content is not changed by quickly-played ornamental pitches.

Such ornaments can potentially emphasize important syntactical points. After the opening melodic formula, the only ornament played consistently between the two performances is on the first iteration of "kho." "Lawv los lawv" ("Everybody, everybody") functions like a call to attention for the message to come and is followed by short motive setting off this introductory material from...
the main utterance.\textsuperscript{89} This message, "Yuav kho kho nej lub siab tsis kho" translates roughly to "Are you lonely or not lonely?" \textit{Kho siab}, an emotional state akin to loneliness, is the focus of this statement.\textsuperscript{90} The consistent ornamentation of \textit{kho} by SaiPao draws attention to this pitch, perhaps alerting the listener to the first important word after the introductory melodic material.

It remains unclear how listeners cognitively process performances. Since meaning can be disambiguated only by context, short-term memory has some role. Could it be that ornaments help listeners to group pitches into meaningful units? \textit{Kho siab} is a common theme of \textit{tshuab raj} and listeners are attuned to its melodic contour.\textsuperscript{91} If at any point a listener recognizes the \textit{kho siab} contour

\textsuperscript{89} \textit{La}\textit{wv} is actually the third-person plural personal pronoun. SaiPao translated it as "everyone" based on the context. This usage is discussed in greater detail below. In fact, the same melodic motive (1-3-1) is common across performers, although many transcribe it as "Hmoob os Hmoob" (Hmong people, Hmong people!).

\textsuperscript{90} The repetition of \textit{kho} in \textit{kho kho siab} serves an intensifier. \textit{Lub} is the classifier associated with \textit{siab}, literally 'liver,' the seat of emotions in traditional Hmong understanding. \textit{Nej} is the plural form of the second-person. The use of \textit{yuav}, a word with multiple meanings, is somewhat unclear. A more typical way to ask this question would be to use \textit{puas}, a marker of yes/no questions, as in: \textit{Puas kho kho nej siab}? Indeed, in other performances of similar phrases, \textit{puas} was reported instead of \textit{yuav}. Even when \textit{puas} was reported, however, the performer sometimes played the highest note of the pitch range, typically reserved for words with \textit{\textastripedtext{b}} and \textit{\textastripedtext{v}} tones. (See Fig. 4.18 for an example of \textit{puas} performed in its expected context.) Kang Vang, my translator for the sessions with his father, SaiPao, explained that in this context, \textit{yuav} could be used to indicate that the performer is asking a question. Sometimes, the main idea of a \textit{nqes} is preceded by an introductory sound, the lexical content of which is ambiguous. If the listener does not understand the utterance to be a question, "\textit{tis kha}" (or not lonely), at the end of the phrase, marks it as a question.

\textsuperscript{91} Many native speakers of Hmong who claim not to understand \textit{tshuab raj} can pick out certain common expressions, \textit{kho siab} among them. After time spent studying performances by several musicians, I would also characterize my listening ability in this way. Rarely can I identify the
(pitches 2-to-1, in suab raj nplaim), in the context of a phrase, the only question is: who is it that is lonely? In the recordings I collected, the only first- and second-person personal pronouns were utilized in conjunction with kho siab. This is not surprising since performances usually take the form of a personal communication between the performer and an audience of one or more. The first-person personal pronouns kuv (I, me) and peb (we) are both be played on pitch 1, while the second-person personal pronouns koj (you) and nej (you, plural) are both be played on pitches 4-to-5. In expressions with kho siab, the personal pronoun appears in-between the two words, as in kho kuv siab (I am lonely), or the intensified version kho kho kuv siab (I am very lonely). The pitch range, either 1 or 4-to-5, clarifies the subject and the number can then be disambiguated by the context. In this instance, 4-to-5 in the kho siab contour indicates the second-person, and the plural (nej) is marked by the opening motive evoking the attention of everyone, "lauv los lauv."'
This explanation, however nicely it fits the data, cannot be validated without further research. For example, SaiPao performed nqes containing “kho siab” without any quickly-played ornamental pitches whatsoever. In other instances, especially when slowly playing short phrases to teach me how to hear the words, he exaggerated the ornamentation. Without a verbalized a theory of melodic-ornament application the practice of performance must supply the evidence, and more diverse examples are necessary to draw more firm conclusions.

When consultants did talk about quickly-played ornamental pitches, as well as pitch bends caused by slowly raising and lowering fingers on the raj, consultants described them in terms of skill (txawj). In other words, the ability to utilize these instrumental techniques enhanced the listening experience and demonstrated the artistry of the performer. Some described it as making the sound more beautiful, smooth, or flowing. Others spoke about performers having skilled or “soft” fingers. During a raj nplaim lesson with Lee Por Yang, he continually reminded me to use an ornamental pitch on the beginning of an opening melodic formula saying that it “sounds better.” To like other forms of articulation, including tonguing and breath control, ornamental pitches can be

94 The introductory melodic formula taught to me by Lee Por was nearly identical to the one performed by both SaiPao and Ger. See Figure 4.13 for a transcription of this opening gesture.
used to emphasize or stress important pitches or structural points in the phrase to help the listener understand what is being played. This is, however, at the discretion of the performer and may not necessarily conform to conventional patterns.

4.5 Pitch contour and moving tones

There are more lexical-tones than pitch levels in suab raju nplaim, requiring that more than one lexical-tone will map onto a musical pitch. As described above, the level tones—high (-b), middle (-ø), and low (-s)—map onto pitches 1, 2, and 3 in the system explained above. Leaving aside the high-falling tone (-f), which is performed using pitches 4 and 5, the three moving tones can be mapped to the same pitches as the level tones—mid-rising (-v), mid-falling breathy (-g), and low-falling with a glottal stop (-m)—map onto pitches 1, 2, and 3, respectively.\textsuperscript{95} Just as lexical tones can be dynamic in terms of pitch, skilled performers carefully shape each note performed on the raju, bending the pitch as they slowly raise and lower their fingers on the instrument. Could it be that these subtle pitch bends are used to contrast level and moving lexical-tones performed on the same pitch level?

\textsuperscript{95} As discussed in section 4.2, -m tone words typically map to pitches 4 and 5 in suab raju nplaim but can occur on pitch 3 when preceded by a -j tone word performed on pitches 4 and 5.
This appealing hypothesis is not borne out by the data. Just as in the application of quickly-played ornamental pitches, pitch bends are applied inconsistently. The same words can be performed using static or dynamic pitches, as can words with level or moving tones. Take for instance this excerpt from a nqes performed by SaiPao Lee in suab raj nplaim. The phrase, "kuv twb tsis muaj niam tsis muaj txi nyob qhov twg" is taken from longer statement: "Es kuv twb hais koj hais tias kuv twb tsis muaj niam tsis muaj txi nyob qhov twg," literally, ‘So I already told you, I say that: I already do not have a mother, do not have a father anywhere.’ [Figure 4.11]

**Figure 4.11** A graph of fundamental frequency based on the second half of a nqes performed by SaiPao. The words are presented as spoken by SaiPao at the end of the nqes and the pitch rank of the frequencies is provided for reference.
Pitch 1 is performed for words with both the high-level (-b) and mid-rising (-v) tones, specifically: *kuv, twb, nyob,* and *qhou*. Pitch 2 is heard for words with both the mid-level (-ø) and the mid-falling breathy (-g) tones: *txi* and *twg*. Note that a rising pitch bend is utilized for each instance of pitch 1 regardless of associated lexical-tone. Similarly, pitch 2 is consistently performed without contour.

Rather than represent the shape of moving lexical-tones, pitch bends are used to make the musical sound beautiful and demonstrate the *txawj* of the player. In several performances by SaiPao, the pitch levels were performed with consistent alterations. Pitch 1, if not static, tends to be performed with an upward bend as does pitch 3. Pitches 4 and 5, which form a downward contour when played successively, are almost always performed with a downward pitch bend. Only pitch 2 was consistently level. Ger Xiong also utilized these tendencies in *tshuab raj nplain*, although his pitch 3 was more often static than rising. Houa Moua, listening to recordings of SaiPao and Ger was impressed with their technique and complimented their "soft fingers."
4.6 Rhythm and prosody

Figure 4.10 above, while primarily concerned with the distribution of melodic ornaments, also demonstrates how rhythm can contribute to the communication of words. "Lub" is a classifier word for "siab" (liver) and is usually left out in kho siab constructions. Here it is performed, but given a reduced rhythmic value, deemphasizing its importance. "Tsis," in case meaning 'or not,' is also relatively shorter in duration than the surrounding words, something akin to prosody of speech.

In other respects, however, the rhythm of the performance violates conventions of speech. When words are repeated for intensification, as in "kho kho," the first word is usually shortened as in the following diagram of a phrase spoken by Kang Vang. [Figure 4.12]
While these are not the same words played by SaiPao above, they do represent a prosody typical of the *kho siab* formula.\(^9\) Rhythmically faithful realization of speech patterns is not a primary concern in instrumental performances. Indeed, most traditional Hmong musical performances utilize a fairly steady pulse. As demonstrated above, the prosody of speech does seem to influence some rhythmic decisions, but more detailed analysis of rhythmic schemes across genres will be required to clarify the relationship.

While it can help clarify the words of a base utterance, skillful use of rhythm is also a feature of *txawj*. SaiPao played some examples demonstrating

\(^9\) In this instance, *peb* 'we’ replaces *nej* ‘you (plural)’ in the sense of “We (Hmong people) are lonely/depressed/homesick.”
the weaknesses of incompetent performers. During the first phrase, his fingers 
fumbled over the instrument producing a jumble of inarticulate sounds. His 
second phrase was inadequate in a more subtle way. The notes were right—his 
fingers moving gracefully across the instrument—but he played them in an 
artificially stiff rhythm, each note lasting as long as the last one. A tongued 
articulation of each sound highlighted the humorously rigid pulse. This parody 
of a rhythmically insensitive performance highlighted the skillful manipulation 
of durations and accents in SaiPao’s other performances further demonstrating 
his txawj.

4.7 The structure of performance

As described in the previous chapter, tshuab raj can be performed in a 
variety of settings. In response to my very specific questions, performers most 
often responded by playing a short phrase or a few words. When asked to 
perform as they pleased, both Ger Xiong and Sai Pao Lee gave longer 
performances made up of several phrases. This is more consistent with 
recordings of tshuab raj that are available commercially. Each phrase (nqes) 
performed on the raj is a complete idea made up of one or more sentences. One 
phrase is referred to as ib nqes raj ‘one phrase on the raj.’ An entire performance
of several phrases is called zaj raj, zaj being a classifier for musical performances (e.g. zaj tshoob ‘wedding songs’), or ib zaj raj ‘one raj performance.’ Frequently, performers switch play in various suab (scale-types with associated melodic formulas) over the course of a zaj, demonstrating their mental agility and skill (txawj).

The structure of ib zaj raj is highly adaptable. Usually, a zaj begins with an introductory nqes comprised of melodic formulas or stereotyped expressions that generate predictable melodic contours. Performers rarely begin by haiis lus ‘speaking words,’ even in the context of nqes later in the performance. Establishing a context of pitch range and style is necessary for listeners to understand the message.\(^9\) Prefacing the performance of words provides a frame of reference, but it is also a time for the player to test the instrument, ensuring the sometimes finicky brass reed is working properly. These opening melodic gestures range from simple to highly complex and vary from flute-to-flute and performer-to-performer. Occasionally, these patterns can be reused later in the zaj, to fill out a nqes or conclude a performance.

Raj uplaim performances usually begin with a double iteration of the pitches 4-to-5 as seen in this example taken from a performance by Sai Pao Lee.

\(^9\) Recall that when Ger was playing one word at a time on the flute, during my lesson, he first played a reference note.
Sai Pao used the nonsense words *tws le tws le* to refer to the sound of this melodic gesture. Other consultants had their own words to refer to these sounds so commonly heard at the beginning of *raj nplaim* performances, including *pwm las*, which is listed in Jay Xiong’s *Hmong Dictionary* as: “a starting sound, music note, of the Hmong musical instruments called ‘raj nplaim.’”98 This melodic fragment usually leads into a longer gesture. Both Sai Pao and Ger used variations of the following formula in different performances of *suab raj nplaim.*99 [Figure 4.13]

![Graph of the fundamental frequency of an opening melodic formula in a performance by Sai Pao Lee. This is the first half of the nges completed in Figure 4.11. Pitch rank is included to clarify the position of these sounds in *suab raj nplaim.*](image)

98 Xiong, *Lus Hmoob Txhais.*
99 Sai Pao had a larger *raj nplaim* than the one used by Ger Xiong. Thus, the pitch rank based on fundamental frequency of 4 and 5 has a lower frequency than pitch 4 and 5 played on Ger’s *raj nplaim.*
According to Sai Pao, this is “just music,” meaning that there are no
communicated words to understand. Other suab, even if performed within the
context of ib zaj raj, one complete performance on a raj, also have characteristic
opening melodic formulas, although they will not be described here.

Other opening formulas are associated with verbal content. One of the
most common is a pattern based on the words nkauj hmoob ‘Hmong girl,’ a
person to whom many zaj raj are directed. This pattern is found in performances
on both the raj nplaim and raj hliav ncauj, although they are realized quite
differently. Most often it is played at the beginning of a performance, or at least,
at the beginning of a nqes raj. In a sung realization of a zaj raj, Tongeu Leepalao
used it both to begin and to end nqes raj. Sai Pao played the nkauj hmoob pattern
in suab raj nplaim to demonstrate how the melody relates to the words, ‘nkauj
hmoob os, nkauj hmoob os, nkauj hmoob.’ [Figure 4.14]
The meaning of *os* in this context is unclear. Heimbach lists 'os' as an emphatic final particle, and its use here seems consistent with that definition: 'Hmong girl, oh! Hmong girl.'

4.8 Comparisons between *raj nplaim* and *raj hliav ncauj*

I realized after the fact that I had heard the *nkauj hmoob* pattern performed on the *raj hliav ncauj* by Ger Xiong. This had been recorded while collecting material for *Speaking Musically*. I asked him to sing something and then play it on the *raj hliav ncauj*. He began by singing, "*Nkauj hmoob os nkauj hmoob, puas kho koj siab*, "Hmong girl, oh Hmong girl, do you feel lonely?" [Figure 4.15]
Figure 4.15  Representation of Cer’s sung performance in Western notation near actual pitch. Quarter-tone flat signs used to indicate an interval near 170 cents. See next graph for more detail. Rhythm is only approximate.  $j = \text{near 195}$

Here I have presented the sung phrase in Western notation for the sake of comparison with different versions. Even in a sung performance of what is played on the raj, individual pitches are dynamic: rising and falling over short periods of time. This can be seen in a graph of the fundamental frequency of this same sung performance below. Please note that this graph has been edited to remove pitch contour anomalies generated by the noisy timbre of consonants.

[Figure 4.16]
Both of these examples also demonstrate the regular pulse that forms the basic rhythm of most raj performances. Accents (dynamic or otherwise) tend to follow speech patterns, and performances are not governed by strict meter. Sections of a performance may highlight a regular grouping of beats, but not for long periods of time.

When Ger performed this phrase on the raj hliav ncauj, the end-blown fipple flute, he made some small, but significant changes.  

Although this performance appears to be a whole-step higher, it is actually very close in pitch to the sung version, albeit an octave higher. The version played on the raj hliav ncauj is based on a note almost 50 cents below D4 in an A=440hZ equal-tempered tuning, and the vocal version was based on a note several cents above C3.
Figure 4.17 Representation of Ger Xiong's performance on the raj hliav ncauj in Western notation near actual pitch. Bars between note stems represent extended, downward pitch bends. Words from the sung version are included under the appropriate notes in section B. Rhythm is only approximate: $\frac{1}{4} = \text{near} 220$.

The auxiliary upper pitch, only hinted at in the vocal performance, is made clear in the instrumental performance. 101 Each time, it is played in conjunction with the second highest pitch and twice is given a reduced rhythmic value, a further suggestion of its auxiliary nature. The section marked ‘A’ is the opening ‘Nkauj hmoob’ formula, this time with an added iteration in comparison with the vocal performance. In fact, this is more like SaiPao Lee’s performance of the same pattern on the raj nplaim transcribed below. An extra pitch is added at the end of the formula before section ‘B,’ the hais lub, ‘speaking words section. This section is similar to the vocal performance, but the final sound, siab, is played with an

101 I have used a quarter-tone flat sign here to indicate that the distance between these two pitches is not a full major-second that the notation would otherwise seem to indicate. The distance between these two frequencies (approximately 941 Hz – 862 Hz = 151 cents) is half-way between a minor-second and a major-second. This relationship is also found on Ger Xiong’s raj nplaim and Sai Pao Lee’s raj nplaim.
extended, downward pitch bend adding both semantic weight to the word and style to the performance. Finally, a concluding melodic formula is added at letter 'C."

While recording *tsuab raj vplaim* with Sai Pao Lee, in September of 2004, I asked him to play some simple phrases that could be easily understood. Without realizing it at the time, he played a nearly identical phrase to the one performed by Ger Xiong more than four years earlier. His spoken version was slightly more elaborate: "*Nkauj hmoob os nkauj hmoob puas kho koj siab tsis kho yuav?*" 'Hmong girl, oh Hmong girl, are you lonely or not lonely?'[^102] [Figure 4.18]

[^102]: *Yuav* does not have a specific meaning in this context. It is often added when performing words on the flute and in this case allows for a long, held-out note in the *raj* performance that is intended to evoke empathy from the listener. See footnote 13.
Figure 4.18 Representation of fundamental frequency in Sai Pao Lee's *raj nplaim* performance rendered in Western notation near actual pitch. Words are included from the spoken version under the appropriate notes. Rhythm is only approximate. $\downarrow = \text{near 180.}$

Just as in Ger's rendition of a similar phrase on the *raj hliav ncauj*, the *nqes* has three basic sections. 'A' is an introductory melodic formula (beginning with the familiar 'test' sound) followed a contour based on the words 'Nkauj hmoob os nkauj hmoob.' There is an additional sound (pitches 4 to 5) at the end of the formula before section 'B' where *hais lub*, 'speaking words,' begins.\footnote{Inserted 4-to-5 pitches are frequently played to separate introductory material from the main statement. See also Fig. 4.10.} At 'C,' a brief concluding formula ends the *nqes*.

Sai Pao Lee's performance adheres to the conventional relationships between lexical word-tone and pitch for *suab raj nplaim* except for the word 'yuav,' which is played a pitch lower than expected, preceded by two ornamental
pitches. Sai Pao explained that *yuav* was used only as a "filler" to extend the instrumental performance of the phrase. This adds beauty and style to the performance and the held-out pitch evokes the loneliness suggested by the words. Additional words also supply extra syllables to give the *njes* more melodic variety. Other performers transcribed similar, held-out pitches as "*yuam,*" supporting the notion that the lexical content of such added words is at least flexible, if not irrelevant. It could be that the syllables are onomatopoeic.

Comparing the 'B' sections from Sai Pao's *suab raj nplaim* performance and section Ger’s *suab raj hliav ncauj* performance reveals some striking similarities. Adjusting for a difference of register (Sai Pao’s *raj nplaim* is pitched lower than Ger’s *raj hliav ncauj*), the rhythm and melodic contour of the section associated with the words ‘*puas kho koj siab,*’ ‘are you lonely?’ are nearly identical, with one key difference: the musical realization of the word with a high-falling tone, "*koj.*" The intervallic content and rhythm of "*koj*" are consistent between the two performances but realized in different octaves. [Figure 4.19]
Even this octave displacement may appear more significant than it is. Recall that Sai Pao and Cer both considered the pitches performed for words with the high-falling tone \((-f)\), in *suab raj nplaim*, to be *suab soob*, 'high sounds,' or in this context perhaps 'sounds with a high quality.' These sounds have a prominent first harmonic, emphasizing the frequency an octave above the fundamental.\(^{104}\) Thus, although realized in different octaves across *raj nplaim* and *raj hliav ncauj*, the musical realizations of words with a high-falling tone share the *suab soob* characterization.

\(^{104}\) See Fig. 4.8.
4.9 Formulaic expressions

Many aspects of performance contribute to the disambiguation of verbal content in tshuab raj. Consistent relationships between lexical-tone and musical sound, rhythm, ornamentation, and timbre can be utilized by skilled performers to communicate words with an audience. These features alone, however, cannot deliver the message. As was discussed in Chapter 3, performances are always circumscribed by conventional topics for discourse, further limited by formulaic phrases drawn from an oral tradition of sung poetry. Examples of similar, if not almost identical, verbal content across performers have already been given, but it remains to be seen how these “stock phrases” are creatively developed into individual expressions.

In tshuab raj, a single musical sound, an isolated pitch, cannot be meaningful in any respect. Even playing words one at a time on the raj nplaim, Ger Xiong was diligent in prefacing each sound with a reference pitch. Once the range of the pitch is contextualized, lexical meaning cannot be understood until it is placed in meaningful relationship with another pitch. Indeed, the minimum meaningful melodic unit in tshuab raj consists of two pitches, as in kho siab (pitch 2 to 1 in suab raj nplaim). It would be impossible to discern these words from two
pitches alone, but a two-note motive, as part of a longer expression, can be expanded upon to create a rich array of possible expressions.

For instance, often kho is repeated suggesting a very intense emotion: kho kho siab. Next, a subject can be added: Kho kho koj/nej/kuv/peb siab, 'You/You all/I/we are lonely.' It can also be turned into a question with the addition of the interrogative particle: Puas kho kho koj siab? 'Are you lonely?' Many Hmong expressions feature parallel construction, as in: Puas kho kho koj siab tsis kho? 'Are you lonely or not lonely?' This redundancy, besides being a common feature of verbal arts in oral cultures, can help to clarify phrases that pass by quickly. As the length of the phrase increases, the potential for confusing one melodic contour for another decreases.105 The kho siab contour (pitch 2 to 1) is cited by many listeners, even those who have difficulty understand much of tshuab raj, as one of the few things they can recognize within the context of a longer phrase. Several times, after a lengthy zaj raj, I asked people, "What did you hear him say when he tshuab raj?" Many times, the answer was, "He says he's lonely."

There are other, more consistent characteristic melodic contours based on conventional expressions that raj players utilize. These are drawn from the stock

phrases of the *kuv txhiaj* repertoire. For instance, conventional poetic expressions for family members or love interests occur frequently, as transcribed below. [Figure 4.20]

![Figure 4.20](image)

**Figure 4.20** A transcription of melodic contours based on common poetic expressions utilized in *suab raj nplaim*. Fitches and rhythms are only approximate.

Line A presents common expressions for family members: *leej niam leej txi*

'mother/father,' *leej kuv leej tig* 'siblings/relatives,' and *leej vi leej ncaus*

'sisters/female cousins.' It is interesting that each of these coordinate compounds preserves tone sandhi, triggered by the -j tone of *leej* in the case of: *txiv* 'father,' *tij* 'cousin/brother,' and *viv* (meaningful only as part of the compound *viv ncaus* 'sisters.') The tone sandhi is realized in the musical performance, affecting the
pitch level on which the words are sung, and further demonstrates the close relationship between the sound of words and musical pitch in tshuab raj. Line B transcribes references to girls frequently used in performances about courtship. The nkauj hmoob formula, described in section 4.7, is extended in the second example to sweetly denote the clan name of a girl, Yaj. Tus hluas nkauj, ‘young/unmarried girl,’ is common subject of both kwv txhiaj and tshuab raj.

The expressions in Figure 4.9 are frequently employed in poetry, but rarely used in everyday life. For example, parents would be referred to as niam txiv ‘mom dad’ or niam thiab txiv ‘mom and dad.’ Similarly, these ordinary expressions would not be used in poetic contexts. More than establishing the register for communication, expressions like those above create characteristic melodic contours that skilled listeners recognize immediately. These can then be employed formulaically to create long nqes on the raj. An orphan does not simply lack parents, but also more distant relatives: Kuv tsis muaj leej niam tsis leej txiv tsis muaj kwv tsis tig. The details of such formulaic phrases can be easily altered so that each performer has their own way of communicating the same ideas. SaiPao Lee expanded upon the orphan theme to create a long and elaborate nqes played in a single breath: Kuv twb hais koj hais tias tub leej txiv yuav tsis muaj kwv tsis muaj tig es tsis muaj vi muaj ncaus nyob qhov twg. Puas koj paub
tsis paub? 'I already told you that this boy doesn't have brothers or sisters anywhere. Do you know what I say?' By adding and removing words from the middle of the phrase, he creates a unique contour for the highly predictable expression. This is embedded within the framework of an ongoing dialogue with introductory and concluding material evoking empathy from the listener and clarifying the context for discourse. It also allows for more notes and a longer phrase, highlighting his skill as a performer.

The gestures in Figure 4.9 stand out in the overall melodic contour of a nges due to the use of the of the 4th pitch level (pitches 4 and 5) which has a unique timbre and consistent downward, falling shape. Repeated pitches, either successively as in "tus hluas nkauj" or interrupted as in "leej niam leej txi," also the listeners attention. As evidenced in the transcriptions above, repeated notes in succession are uncommon in tshuab raj, as they are in singing kwo txhiaj. The variety of lexical-tones in Hmong reduces the chances that words with the same lexical-tone will occur one after the other. Tone sandhi contributes to this as well: the -j tone can cause a following -j tone to change to the -g tone, and the -b tone can cause a -v tone to change to the -ø tone. This affects the musical realization, causing the words to be performed on different pitch levels. We have also seen that in both kwo txhiaj and tshuab raj, the use of two words with lexical-tones that
map to the same pitch level can result in predictable modifications. For instance, 
-\textit{m} tone words following -\textit{j} tone words are performed on pitch 3 in \textit{suab raj} 
\textit{nplaim}, rather than pitch level 4. It is also possible that musicians make word 
choices that favor non-repeated pitches, but this remains to be investigated. 

Other three- to four-note melodic gestures, with associated verbal content, 
can be added to phrases to evoke empathy from the listener and heighten the 
emotional quality of the expression. For instance, the pitch sequence 1-3-1, 
played in \textit{suab raj nplaim} with characteristic rising and falling pitch bends, can be 
used at the beginning or end of phrases to get the listener’s attention. [Figure 4.21]
Figure 4.21 A graph of fundamental frequency from a performance in suab raj nplaib by SaiPao Lee. The pitch sequence 1-3-1 is seen with the characteristic rising and falling pitch contours performed for the words "Hmoob os Hmoob" or "Lawv os Lawv." This particular example comes from the beginning of the phrase, but it is repeated with the same pitch contours as a concluding melodic gesture.

Despite the use of identical pitch content and articulated pitch bends, the gesture takes on different meanings based on its position in the phrase. At the start of a nqes, performers and listeners transcribe it as "Hmoob os Hmoob" or "Lawv los/es lawv," meaning "all Hmong people" or "everybody," in the sense of "listen up, I'm about to say something to you." At the end of the phrase, the same people transcribe the words as "paub iis paub," 'to know or not know.' Depending on the subject of the question, it means something akin to, "Do you know, or not know, what I'm talking about?" Such phrases address listeners, inviting them to
become involved in the dialogue. By personalizing the message, performers have a better chance of moving the emotions of the audience—a goal of performance.

4.10 Orphans and lovers

According to many informants, personal and regional differences in style can inhibit the interpretation of ishuab raj. Amy Catlin came across this idea as well: "... the methods of melodically portraying songs are not universal, being subject to regional and individual variation; therefore, even "experts" may not comprehend a performance by a musician who comes from a different region, or whose style is idiosyncratic."¹⁰⁶ Still, conventional expressions, varied and reorganized in formulaic processes between performers and performances, allow for a coherent but diverse repertoire of messages for communication on the raj. This is evident not only in the examples I collected, but also in performances recorded by other researchers.

For instance, So Thao and Megan McNamer transcribed performance by Toua Thao on an unspecified "flute" beginning with the phrase: "Pøj Hmoob nes

*poj Hmoob! Koj puas muaj siab?* "Hmong girl, Hmong girl, do you love me?"

The words are slightly different from the "*nkauj Hmoob*" formula transcribed above, but the lexical-tones would potentially produce a similar melodic contour. The remainder of the performance consists of short phrases with a pair of rhyming words. Like a miniature *kwo txhiaj*, the stanza is repeated with a new pair of related rhyming words. It is the plea of a young man for his girlfriend to meet him in the evening along the forest path, a typical expression of courtship songs.

My *kwo txhiaj* teacher, and Hmong language instructor, Choua Lee grew up in a musical family. Her father, now a farmer in Arkansas, continues to play the *raj* almost every day. Although Choua never learned to play the *raj* herself, she still enjoys listening to *tshuab raj*. As a teacher, she has produced transcriptions of various performances to help explain the practice to Hmong-American students, many of whom find *tshuab raj* mysterious or incomprehensible. One *raj nplaim* transcription she shared with me was striking in its similarity to the words performed by SaiPao and Ger. Choua characterized the genre as "*Raj tsis muaj kwo tij,*" the song of an orphan. In her transcription,

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she organized the *nqes* into three larger groups, each of which ended with "*os yuam,***" meaningless syllables on which long, held-out notes are performed.

Within this performance, by a musician unknown to me, phrases familiar to me occurred several times. Some, such as "*kho kuv siab na luaj no,***" appeared exactly as performed by SaiPao and Ger. The *tsis muaj* formula, with *leej niam leej txilee j kuv leej tig* combinations, was used in each of the three major sections. A poetic expression used by SaiPao and Ger for a far away country, *rab teb rooj ntug deb deb,* was also used repeatedly. Other expressions that Ger had mentioned to me were transcribed by Choua: *tsav ntuj nrig ‘bright, sunny day,’ niam kab niam noog quaj quaj ‘the insects and birds cry out,’ txiv leej tub yuav mus noj tus yeeb tus tshuaj tuag ‘this boy (who is so lonely) will go eat poison and die.’* Indeed, the entire performance was made up of familiar formulaic expressions, repeated and varied into a complex musical performance.

Based on a *raj nplaim* performance by Yao Yang, a *Moob Lees* musician, Amy Catlin produced a musical transcription and elicited three interpretations.108 Her musical transcription presents the same intervallic material I found in performances in *suab raj nplaim,* the only difference being her marking of pitch 4 with a flat sign, where I mark it with a quarter-flat sign. The first transcription of the verbal content, written by her research assistant, Khu Khang, did not

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correlate well with the musical performance; the lexical-tones did not match the pitches and the number of syllables and pitches did not align. Still, he found it to be a satisfactory rendition. His text transmits many of the conventional formulas described above including: rab teh rooj ntug deb, yuav kho siab ua luaj no, leej kw [sic] leej tig, nej paub las [sic] tsis paub os Hmoob om, and variations of these. Catlin then had the performer listen to the recording and “write down what he had been thinking.” The resulting version was dissimilar to Khang’s text in detail, but it transmitted some of the key formulaic expressions at similar points in the text.

The final transcription was made by a bilingual Moob Lees in conjunction with the performer. They listened to the recording repeatedly and with great effort produced a version that corresponded with the performance in regards to lexical-tone and melody, based on Eric Mareschal’s mapping, and matched the number of syllables. As Catlin remarks: “For several hours they labored with the tape, in the end producing text ... whey [sic] they agreed was correct.” This final transcription also has less spelling errors and is better organized into complete thoughts. Although heavily reworked, it preserves the same formulaic expressions of the first two transcriptions and adds two more that were described Ger, SaiPao, and transcribed by Choua from another performance:
niam kab niam noog quaj 'the insects and birds sing,' and cuag li yuav tuag 'it is like dying.'

The raj nplaim performance recorded and transcribed by Catlin expresses the sorrow of abandonment embodied by ntsuag, a word that encompasses orphans, widows, and other people who live lives of loneliness. In the context of tshuab raj, the loss of family is made worse by the loss of homeland, tsiv teb chaws. Ger Xiong summarized these main ideas in a spoken description of a raj nplaim performance.

I came to this country, and my mom, my dad, my family, my relatives, older brother—
they still did not come to this country.
So when I came to this country,
I saw the birds or any kinds of mountains,
I feel lonely, I miss my family.
I miss my mom, my dad very much,
and if I know that I came to this country—
my family, my mom, my dad,
they did not come to this country—
I am better eat something, die, back in my own country instead of come to this country.
You come to this country, your mom, your dad, your relatives, they already come with you.
So you are not lonely, you don't miss anybody, so you feel more happy than I do.

Ger spoke these words before he performed, explaining what he intended to play.

His English-language rendition of a potential raj nplaim performance maintains the formulaic repetition that characterizes tshuab raj as realized by performers from different generations, families, and geographic origins. The themes Ger
articulated, along with associated themes of young love that make use of the language of abandonment and loss, constitute the foundation of communication on the raj.

Catlin’s account of the field experiment resonates with my experience, as well. Performers were reluctant to analyze their performances sound for sound, especially longer performances. They preferred to explain the words they played orally, either before or after the performance. After longer performances, these accounts often omitted large sections of verbal content or turned the repetitive, flowery language performed on the raj into simpler phrases, more conducive for speaking. This is not unique in the study of speech surrogates. J.H. Kwabana Nketa, after studying numerous speech surrogates in Africa, came to the realization that “those who transmit surrogate languages are under no obligation to interpret what they transmit by word of mouth. In some societies, some of them do not find it easy to do so when confronted with a request to translate.”\textsuperscript{109} This could be because “they are not sure of the texts or if there is something that they want to hide.” In other cases, people might “invent” a word to fill in an incomplete line. He too meet performers and listeners who “gave different interpretations for the same sequences of drum beats.”

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

5.1 A reconsideration of Mareschal's lexical-tone to pitch mapping

Mareschal's innovative analysis of lexical-tone and pitch in *kuv txhiaj*

performance remains a powerful influence in current Hmong music research. The impact of his work can be seen in a recent study of the *qeej* by Catherine Falk.\(^{110}\) Falk transcribed a sung version of a funeral text played on the *qeej* as well as the *qeej* performance of the text. In the sung version, she finds little consistency between lexical-tone and pitch level. Seng Thao, the singer, utilizes a four-note pitch range, transcribed in Western notation as C-D-E-G. An auxiliary pitch, a fourth below C, is added to a few syllables. Falk finds that words with the high-falling tone, \(-j\), and words with the mid-rising tone, \(-v\), are mapped most frequently to the lowest and highest pitch, C and G, respectively. Contrary to expectations, the high-level tone, \(-b\), is most frequently sung on the second

\(^{110}\) Catherine Falk, "‘If You have Good Knowledge, Close it Well Tight': Concealed and Framed Meaning in the Funeral Music of Hmong Qeej," *British Journal of Ethnomusicology* 12, no. 2 (2003), 1-33.
highest pitch, E. The remaining three lexical-tones are distributed across the three lowest pitches. Falk draws no conclusions from this, except to reiterate the "nonintuitive" correspondence between lexical-tones and pitches, as described by Amy Catlin.

The above example demonstrates the difficulty in applying Mareschal's analysis to different performance types. Based on my experience, I have found Mareschal's original observations to be applicable, with some modifications, to both suab raj nplaim and kuv txhiaj. Using four basic pitches, Choua Lee taught me to sing a kuv txhiaj she had written.\textsuperscript{111} In my voice range, the pitches were near i-a-b-bb-c1. Choua did not articulate any rules of lexical-tone to pitch association; rather, she taught me the melody through demonstration. First, she would sing a line and then have me repeat it. In this way, I eventually performed the kuv txhiaj to Choua's satisfaction. There were clearly right and wrong pitches, and Choua was adamant that I sing the right pitch for the right word. It is uncertain if Choua would have performed the song the same way. If anything, what I learned was more like a prototype of kuv txhiaj performance that more rigidly fixed the lexical-tone to pitch relationships based on Choua's experience of extemporaneous performance. The table below presents the pitch levels and two-note motives with the associated lexical-tones. [Table 5.1]

\textsuperscript{111} A complete transcription in Western notation appears in Appendix 1.
Table 5.1 A table of pitch levels and two-note motives related to lexical-word tone as demonstrated in a prototypical *kuv txhiaj* performance by Choua Lee. The repetition of strophes with new pairs of rhyming words is counted.

Words with the \(-b\), \(-v\), \(-s\), and \(-j\) tones were only sung one pitch level. The remaining tones were distributed across two pitch-levels and at times were sung on more than one pitch.

Even the more widely distributed lexical- tones, \(-o\), \(-g\), and \(-m\), each had a stronger relationship with one pitch level. Words with \(-o\) and \(-g\) tones were most frequently sung on pitch level 2. Perhaps to minimize the repetition of pitches, words with the \(-g\) tone were sung on pitch level 3 following words with the \(-o\) tone.\(^{112}\) The pitch 2 to pitch 3 motive was only utilized in instances where

\(^{112}\) At one point in the second verse (*txawmr*) Choua taught me to sing the word *noog* on pitch three. The reason for this is unclear. It could be motivated by musical taste or some unknown principal. The inability of pitch mappings to apply in all circumstances is an important reminder of their limitations.
the following word was a high-falling tone, -j, sung on pitch level 4. Pitch 3
serves as a bridge between pitch 2 and pitch 4 in this instance. This is not a rule
governing movements from pitch 2 to pitch 4, however. Rather, it seems to be
related to the lexical-tone of the subsequent word. Words with -o and -g tones,
sung on pitch 2, move directly to level 4 for words with the -m tone. This leaves
only words with the -m tone. The distribution seems to suggest a fairly equal
mapping between pitches 3 and 4. As in the case of the -g tone, the pitch level is
influenced by the preceding word. Words with the -m tone were sung on pitch 3
only after words with the -j tone, always sung on pitch 4. To be clear, the
performance of -g and -m tone words on pitch 3 occurs only in special conditions
triggered by the lexical-tone of the preceding word.

Just as phonological conditions can cause tone sandhi, musical conditions
can cause predictable changes in lexical-tone to pitch mapping. Although the
pitch range of this kwv txhiaj did not correspond to that of suab raj nplaim, the
distribution of lexical-tones to pitch levels was identical. Recall that leej, as part
of the phrase “leej niam leej txi,” triggers a tone change in the word ixiv ‘father,’
resulting in a performance of the word on pitch level 2. Leej does not change the
lexical tone of niam ‘mother,’ but it is sung on pitch level 3 rather than pitch level
4, where it is expected. Based on congruencies between raj nplaim performances
and this *kvu txhinj*, the following modification to Mareschal’s mapping of a 4-pitch system is proposed. [Table 5.2]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lexical-tone</th>
<th>Mareschal</th>
<th>Proposed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-b</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-d</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-ø</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-g</td>
<td>3 (2)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-s</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-m</td>
<td>3 (4)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-j</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.2 Mareschal’s lexical-tone to pitch-level map compared to proposed modifications. Numbers in parentheses represent alternate pitch levels conditioned by preceding lexical-tone.

The proposed pitch mapping distributes the lexical-tones evenly across the pitch range. It is only the infrequent tones, -g and -m, that are associated with more than one pitch level, and even then, the secondary pitch level is triggered by predictable phonological/musical conditions.

This analysis may seem contrary to the spirit of understanding rather than explaining musical experience, discussed in the first chapter. Clearly such
mappings are only applicable in limited circumstances. Falk finds no such system in the sung performance of funeral texts, or at least a system that is not yet understood. As noted in Chapter 4, the same words performed on different raj may utilize different relationships between lexical-tone and pitch. In kwv txhiaj performances with five pitch-levels, both Mareschal and Catlin find that –m tone words are sung on the lowest level, even lower than words with the –j tone. Most importantly, performers themselves do not appear to think in these terms. Without careful recognizing these limits, utilizing maps of tendencies in the musical performance of words has the potential to obscure creative processes of production and culturally specific structures of musical organization.

Close mapping, taking into account the phonological and musical conditions as I have attempted here, could one day contribute to a better understanding of the relationship between words and music in Hmong traditions. This analysis has already demonstrated that lexical-tone/pitch levels affect subsequent pitch levels without triggering tone sandhi. Also, the lexical-tone/pitch level of a word can affect the preceding melodic contour, as in the pitch-2 to pitch-3 motive utilized before –j tone words performed on pitch level 4. How this relates to Hmong concepts of resemblance between lexical-tone and
musical remains to be seen, but such mappings provide testable circumstances for future research.

5.2 Conclusions

In the preceding chapters, I have attempted to deeply contextualize tshuab raj both in the memories of consultants and in the current practice of performance. Careful analysis has been made of social interactions, recorded performances, and pre-existing literature to arrive at a multi-faceted, intersubjective understanding of Hmong music-making. To draw together this diverse body of knowledge, I offer the following conclusions, highlighting what has been learned about the context of performance, the musical product, and the communicated verbal content.

5.2.1 The raj in context

1. Today, raj continue to be performed by first-generation Hmong immigrants in the United States. These people were born and raised in Thailand and Laos and grew up in a traditional Hmong musical culture. A few people are reported to have learned the raj since arriving in America. However, second-generation Hmong-Americans are much more likely to learn kuv txhiaj and qeej.
2. In Laos and Thailand, performers learned to play the *raj* around the time of puberty as a way to communicate with the opposite sex. The instrumental performance of words provided a safe channel for the verbal expression of intense emotions. Performers also played for personal enjoyment and the entertainment of others.

3. Some types of *raj* could be produced by non-specialists. Only the *raj niplaim* required a metal-worker to make the brass reed. The process of learning to play and understand words on the *raj* was informal. Relatives or friends might demonstrate a few phrases, but much learning took place through the observation of performances.

4. In the United States, the *raj* is no longer used for courtship. Performances take place at family gatherings, community festivals, and educational demonstrations of Hmong culture. These performance opportunities are infrequent and people who can play the *raj* are more likely to perform for their own enjoyment. A limited number of recordings are available for those who like to listen to the music.
5.2.2 The musical performance

1. For performers and skilled listeners, musical pitch carries lexical meaning. Musical pitch obtains this meaning through a relationship of resemblance between the musical sound \((s\text{u\text{a}\text{b}})\) and the sound of the word \((s\text{u\text{a}\text{b}})\). The exact nature of this resemblance remains unclear, but aspects of tonemic pitch contour are preserved in several mappings.

2. Rhythm, pitch bends, melodic ornaments, articulation, and other types of stress are utilized to clarify verbal content and to enhance the beauty of performance.

   a. In some instances, rhythmic patterns based on the prosody of speech help indicate lexical relationships. More often, a basic pulse is favored, obscuring the prosody of the base utterance. This pulse is treated freely in performance and the ability to creatively manipulate the pulse is seen as a sign of skill.

   b. Ornaments, both quickly-played neighboring pitches or pitch bends, can be used to emphasize important points in the phrase. The application of ornamentation is inconsistent, however, even across performances of the same verbal content. Ornaments do not change the verbal content of a musical sound.
They do, however, add beauty to performances, and the ability to utilize
ornaments is seen as part of a performer’s skill.

3. There are multiple pitch ranges (*suab*), with associated melodic gestures,
performed on each *raj*. Performers often switch between *suab* over the course of
a performance. The *raj* nplain, in particular, is versatile in its ability to
accommodate the performance conventions of other *raj*. *Suab* do not necessarily
utilize the same relationships between lexical-tone and pitch level.

4. Skilled performers build up a repertoire of phrases and expressions for
performance. In part, these are manifested in practiced motor performances. At
the time of performance, word-for-word productions of musical content are not
necessary. This is demonstrated in reports of verbal content made at the end of
performances. In speaking after the fact, performers often omit or reorganize
verbal content that was performed musically.

**5.2.3 The verbal content**

1. The verbal content performed in *tshuab* *raj* comes from a limited range of
themes with associated conventional phrases and expressions. Themes of love,
abandonment, and loss of country can overlap within the course of a single
performance. These phrases and expressions are drawn from the conventions of
kuv txhiaj and other verbal arts. Raj performances do not usually repeat the
melodic contour of a known kuv txhiaj. Rather, instrumental idioms are
creatively combined with well-known phrases and expressions to produce
unique performances.

2. Three- or four-word expressions, and their associated melodic contours, are
fundamental to construction of longer phrases and the communication of words
in performance. The formulaic adaptation of these words by individual
performers creates unique musical performances. Listeners latch onto familiar
melodic gestures to create points of reference in a phrase. The words, or at least
a sense of the words, is disambiguated by contextualizing these contours within
the phrase or longer performance. Close analysis of verbal content in raj
performances is not a typical process in the understanding of verbal content for
both performers and listeners.

3. Tshuab raj tends not to reproduce preexisting vocal music. Performers are able
to speak and sing the words of their performances, but this is only done for the
sake of explaining the verbal content. When spoken or sung, performers frequently alter the base utterance, eliminating extensive repetition of formulaic expressions and idiomatic elements of instrumental performance. For instance, vocalized performances of *tshuab raj* typically do not preserve ornamentation or nonsense syllables added for melodic elaboration.

4. Unlike *kwo txhiaj*, performances on the *raj* do not have to follow a rhyme scheme. Furthermore, each *naes* (a single phrase marked by a breath) contains one or more complete thoughts. This is in contrast to breath points in *kwo txhiaj* which tend to be taken in the middle of a line. *Tshuab raj* also appears to utilize lexical-tone to pitch mappings more consistently than performances of *kwo txhiaj*.

5. Performances on the *raj* are meaningful in ways beyond the communication of verbal content. Performers demonstrate skill (*txawj*) and cultural expertise in *tshuab raj* and craft performances to move the emotions of the audience. Listeners appreciate the beautiful sound of the *raj* as manipulated by the skillful hands of a performer. Like *kwo txhiaj* and *geej*, *tshuab raj* is valued by members of the Hmong community as a unique cultural practice. In public demonstrations
of Hmong traditions, the raj is utilized as a symbol of a transnational community united through a common history.

5.3 New directions for research

That Hmong musicians make connections between lexical-tones and musical sounds has been common knowledge for almost thirty years. Still, the nature of this connection remains uncertain. The semiotic model, based on Theodore Stern's concept of speech-surrogate systems, has been useful in predicting and analyzing such relationships, but it provides little insight into how skilled performers and listeners understand the resemblance between music and words. Experimental methods from cognitive science may provide valuable insight into relationships between language and music processing. Such studies have will help to understand not only what is unique about the cognitive characteristics of Hmong culture, but what is shared between all people.

It is possible that the resemblance between lexical-tone and pitch is no longer apparent in Hmong spoken language. Amy Catlin has suggested that "[T]he absence of music contour in representing rising or falling tones may indicate earlier tonal characteristics of Hmong speech."\(^{113}\) She continues, "the musical levels may represent archaic linguistic tones that have since been

\(^{113}\) Catlin, "Puzzling the Text," 79.
superseded by two contoured tones - the high-falling tone, which is sung a low-level note, and the low-rising tone, sung on a high-level note. At one stage, these contoured linguistic tones may have been low- and high-level tones which later acquired glides to the original level for contrastive purposes. In fact, research on Proto-Hmong-Mien, the ancestor of Hmong-Mien/Miao-Yao languages, suggests that process of tonogenesis did occur, resulting in four basic tones that underwent a high-low split in most dialects. It may be that the study of Hmong music can contribute to the understanding of tonogenesis or vice versa.

There still remains much to be learned about tshuab raj. This study focused almost exclusively on the raj nplaim, only one of at least four types of raj. Even on the raj nplaim, analysis was restricted to only one scale and associated melodic conventions - suab raj nplaim. A brief analysis of a raj hliav ncauj performance made apparent the startling diversity in the performance of words on different instruments. No consideration was given to performance styles on the xim xaus or nplooj, as well. These instruments and the relationships between the musical practices of Hmong people in Southeast Asia and around the globe are in many respects poorly understood. Further study must also be devoted to the profound effects of the developing transnational Hmong culture on musical practices and the use of music to negotiate multiple identities.

114 Ratliff, Meaningful Tone, 21-22.
5.4 Afterword

When I first began research Hmong music in the summer of 2000, many consultants expressed concern that musical traditions like singing *kwv txhiaj* and playing the *qeej* would be lost within a generation or two. The situation seems even more critical for the *raj*, which has yet to become popular in the Hmong-American context. Five years later, there are increasing numbers of young Hmong people learning to play *qeej* at cultural centers across the country. Programs, like SEASSI, offer an opportunity to learn the Hmong language and *kwv txhiaj*. Such practices tend to be reinvented in new circumstances, adapting to meet needs of the community. For example, spoken word artist Tou SaiKo Lee has found a connection between his improvised poetry and his grandmother's *kwv txhiaj*. Tou understands little of his grandmother’s songs and she understands even less of the English language Tou speaks. Still, they perform together—playing with words, each in their own way.
The following glossary contains vocabulary I learned from consultants during my field research as well as relevant words and definitions from existing sources. It must be noted that the vocabulary listed below may not be meaningful for all Hmong speakers. Hmong music is based on oral traditions and much musical learning takes place informally. Often, consultants were unaware of a single term for a particular phenomenon. At other times, different consultants used different words for the same phenomenon. Thus, differences in spelling and definition are preserved. I have tried to eliminate neologisms created by consultants to satisfy my curiosity during interviews.

Confusion remains, on my part, over terminology for the many different types of bamboo flutes. Some consultants utilized multiple terms for the same instrument while others used only one term for a particular organology. As noted in Chapter 1, raj hliav ncauj, raj pum liv, and raj ntsia were all used to refer to flutes and the sound of flutes on recordings. Of these, raj ntsia was used most generally to refer to the sound of the bamboo flute. Lee Por Yang, however,
reserved this term to refer to an end-blown flute, possibly of Indian origin, that he had bought at a flea market. The recorder-like instrument played by Ger Xiong in Figure 1.6, called raj hliav ncauj by him, was called raj ntsia by others. Note that the raj pum liv played by Tong Pao Moua in Figure 1.7 lacks the lip of Ger's raj hliav ncauj and is blown through a notch on the back side near the top of the covered end.

Classifiers are included in parenthesis following the most nouns. Terms and definitions drawn from existing sources are identified according to the following key:

Catlin, 1997

H(page number)

JX

SH
| dhiam geej | to dance acrobatically while playing the geej |
| doog raj | a quickly played ornamental notes near the point of first articulation in tshuab raj |
| doog suab | to change the tone of a word in its musical realization (also, hloov suab) |
| fab | one strophe of a kww txhiaj |
| haaj seev suab | to sustain a note or tone in speech or song |
| hloov suab | to change the tone of a word in its musical realization (also, doog suab) |
| kww txhiaj | sung poetry, often extemporized |
| hu plig | to sing soul-calling songs |
| laug suab ntev | a long tone, sustained note |
| lus rov | any of a number of methods to disguise speech, such as inserting nonsense syllables or exchanging initial consonants |
| lus taum | narrative and moralizing songs |
| ncas | a brass jaw harp (guimbarde) primarily used for courtship |
| nkauj (raj) | a song - in particular, a modern popular song |
| nkauj (tus) | a girl - as in nkauj hmoob (Hmong girl) |
| nkauj paj nruag/ncas | synonyms for xim xaus |
| noj peb caug | synonym for "New Year Celebration" |
| nplooj (daim) | a leaf - often used as a free-reed for musical performance |
| nqes | one half of a Hmong poetic couplet |
| nqes raj (ib) | one complete thought played as a phrase on the raj |
| paj lug | proverbs; "flowery words" or poetic, often archaic sayings used in verbal arts |
| phee | Lao word referring to music in general |
| pliv lus | metaphoric expressions |
| geej (rab) | a free-reed mouth organ made of six bamboo tubes |
| qhow | a hole - in particular, the finger holes of a musical instrument |
| raj (lub) | a tube, usually made of bamboo; may be used as a container or musical instrument |
| raj hliav ncauj | an end-blown fipple flute |
| raj laus | a large version of the raj nplaim - reported to be as long as 6 ft. |
| raj lev les | a small free-reed pipe made from a stalk of grass or bamboo |
| raj nkauj nraug | a song on the topic of love played on the raj usually directed toward a particular girl or boy |
| raj nplaim | a free-reed pipe |

H(300)

Catlin, 1987

H(170)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>raj nploog</td>
<td>a small end-blown fipple flute - usually 3 holes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>raj nstia</td>
<td>an end-blown fipple flute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>raj ntsuag</td>
<td>a song on the topic of being an orphan played on the raj - usually about the misfortune of not having a mother or father and how much they are missed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>raj ntxhiam</td>
<td>alternate spelling for raj nstia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>raj pun liv</td>
<td>an the end-blown fipple flute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>raj soob</td>
<td>a small raj npaim - usually between 1-3ft. long, can be played by inserting the end of the pipe into mouth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>raj tsiv teb chaws</td>
<td>a song on the topic of moving from one place to another played on the raj - usually about the loneliness of leaving behind the homeland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>seev suab raj</td>
<td>holding out a note on the raj for the sake of emotional expression (also, seev raj)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>suab (lub)</td>
<td>1. voice, sound of the voice, tone, noise, sound. H(300)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. word-tone - as in: the lexical tone of a word H(300)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. musical sound, pitch, note H(300)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. a scale and associated melodic gestures on the raj</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>suab laus</td>
<td>1. low in tone or pitch, low voice H(300)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. low musical sound, low note H(300)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>suab nkauj see</td>
<td>a suab of the raj npaim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>suab raj nruag</td>
<td>melody (noun), music (noun) SH</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>suab raj niam ntawv</td>
<td>a suab of the raj hliav ncauj</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>suab raj nkauj see</td>
<td>a suab played on several raj</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>suab raj npaim</td>
<td>the primary suab of the raj npaim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>suab raj nploog</td>
<td>a suab of the raj npaim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>suab soob</td>
<td>1. high in tone or pitch, high voice H(300)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. high musical sound, high note JX</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tawg qeej</td>
<td>to dance and play the qeej</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>thaj chij</td>
<td>synonym for xim xaus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tshooj</td>
<td>Cif. for a poetic couplet or verse in songs for the dead. One 'tshooj' consists of two 'nqes.' For ordinary songs the equivalent word is 'txwm.' H(369)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tshov</td>
<td>to blow or to play a musical instrument having reeds or fingerholes (contr. 'tshuab')</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tshuab</td>
<td>to blow; used also in the sense of 'to play a wind instrument'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tshuab ncas</td>
<td>to play the ncas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tshuab raj</td>
<td>to play the raj (literally, to blow a bamboo tube)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>txwm</strong></td>
<td>1. A [Hmong] poetic couplet (consisting of two 'nqes') 2. Rhyme or correct poetic structure (as in: <em>Tsis muaj txwm tsis zoo mloog</em>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>xim xaus</strong></td>
<td>two-stringed violin-like instrument borrowed from Lao culture (<em>xim xaus</em> is a Lao term)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>xiv xaîv</strong></td>
<td>funeral songs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>zaj</strong></td>
<td>Clf. for sayings, speeches, poems, hymns chapters, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>zaj qeej (ib)</strong></td>
<td>a complete performance on the qeej, usually a song from the funeral ritual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>zaj raj (ib)</strong></td>
<td>a complete performance on the raj, usually made up of several phrases</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>zaj tshoob</strong></td>
<td>marriage negotiation songs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>zoo mloog</strong></td>
<td>pleasing to the ears; used in reference to good musical performances especially</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX

A KWV TXHIAJ BY CHOUA MOUA
During the summer of 2005, I took part in Hmong language classes at the University of Wisconsin-Madison as part of the Southeast Asian Summer Studies Institute. One of my teachers, Choua Lee, had grown up in a musically talented family and was an expert singer of extemporaneous, sung poetry called kuv txhiaj. Choua had written out the words to some of the kuv txhiaj she sang and taught many of the Hmong students how to sing using the words as a reference. Due to my interest in Hmong music, Choua also instructed me in how to realize the words musically. What follows is a musical transcription in Western notation capturing the melodic framework that Choua taught to me.

Note that this transcription is not based on an actual performance. Rather, I have transcribed the approximate pitches Choua taught me to sing with her written out words. Certain rhythmic conventions have also been approximated in the transcription. My few lessons with Choua focused on singing the proper pitch with the proper word, and rhythm was not discussed in great detail. In actual performance, singers often utilize a fairly steady pulse as is indicated in the transcription. Thus, this transcription is most useful for comparing the distribution of lexical tones to musical pitches.

The form of the kuv txhiaj is based on a repetition of each strophe with a new pair of rhyming words. The three strophes in this kuv txhiaj have been
transcribed once with the rhyming words, and their substitutions, indicated in bold typeface. In cases where the new word is sung to a different pitch, the lower of the two pitches corresponds to the new word. Breathing is at the liberty of the performer and breath marks are not included. Typically, singers try to make phrases as long as possible while minimizing the appearance of effort. Breaths may occur at any point but many singers will purposefully break in the middle of a sentence.
After C, B is repeated with new rhyming words.
After C, B is repeated with new rhyming words.
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