Whispering Bamboo: the Untold Story of the *Mor Lam* Music of Laos

The nation of Laos is one of very few remaining Marxist-Leninist socialist states in the world following the disintegration of the USSR. The Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) is the sole ruling power of Laos, and as such it holds total control over not only the country's political and economic affairs, but also its social and cultural output [7]. The country has about 24 regularly circulating newspapers and 44 radio stations, all of which are affiliated with and heavily censored by the Ministry of Information and Culture, an arm of the LPRP. Indeed, Freedom House's 2022 report [11] on Laos gave the country a rating of 0/4 with respect to the existence of "free and independent media." Heavy restrictions have been placed on social media usage as well. A 2008 law requires all social media users to register with their real names, and even requires all *websites* using the .la domain name to verify any content posted with state media. Though these measures were purportedly put in place to combat "fake news," a 2014 revision allowed for imprisonment of not only journalists criticizing the state, but also for *all internet users*, whose real names and internet search histories are actively monitored by the government.. Actual reports of these imprisonments are, for obvious reasons, scarce and difficult to verify; Reporters Without Borders [10] termed Laos an "information 'black hole' from which little reliable information emerges." However, there are a few confirmed (and quite disturbing) reports of these imprisonments and so-called "forced disappearances" of human rights activists in Laos [9].

However, these restrictions do not apply only to journalists and political activists: in 2021, popular Lao musician Ther Una, who maintains one of the largest social media followings among all Lao public figures, disappeared from his social media pages for several weeks without explanation. Ther Una is most well known for founding and operating Una Studio, a multimedia organization that runs the most followed YouTube channel in Laos. Una Studio posts live music performances, comedy sketches, and documentary-style reports on social and cultural issues. Though Ther Una returned after a few weeks, explaining that he was merely busy working on a film, a local police officer from Savannakhet, the province where Ther Una lives, gave an anonymous tip to Radio Free Asia that Ther Una was arrested and was being questioned and detained at the provincial police headquarters, reportedly for reasons related to Una Studio's

recent criticisms of corruption in the Lao government. The informant could not be reached for further inquiry – the true nature of this occurrence and many others like it may never be known.

In any case, stories like these raise several questions about the production and dissemination of music in Laos today. When even the most beloved of Lao musicians are subject to such ruthless censorship by the state, is the production of truly independent music possible and, if so, is there a market for such music? There is also the question of "traditional" Lao music and its preservation – while Lao folk music is in most cases approved by the LPRP, the advent of state-sponsored mass agriculture in Laos has eliminated many rural and indigenous and rural agricultural communities that traditionally served as the setting of Lao folk music [14]. This, in concert with the physical devastation and political overhaul in the wake of the Laotian Civil War (1969-1975) and the Vietnam War, leave traditional Lao music in a very precarious position. Without the infrastructure to support its production, the living germ of Lao folk music lacks a permanent cultural, let alone physical, home. Worse, without the audience and interest among Lao people to support its preservation or revival, there is serious concern as to whether traditional forms of Lao folk music will simply go extinct in the coming years. The dominant forms of pop music in Laos today are from foreign sources – primarily Thailand, France, and the United States, and listenership in urban centers for traditional *mor lam* and *khaen* music is diminishing rapidly. It is worth noting that, in the years of Pathet Lao rule following the dissolution of the Lao monarchy in 1975 and ushering in the rule of the LPRP and eventual authorship of the Lao constitution 1991, the only music permitted in Laos was patriotic music and traditional *mor lam* folk music [2]. However, Laos participated in the hyperglobalization following the disintegration of the USSR in 1989, and foreign music cemented itself as the dominant form of popular music in Laos [7]. Hence Lao folk music has neither producers nor advocates to guarantee its continued existence and relevance in Lao culture. Though some of this folk music is being preserved in (state-run) museums and institutions, it remains to be seen whether this art form will continue to have significance in the personal identities of Lao persons, or whether it will exist as a mere vestige of nearly a millennium of cultural prosperity that is becoming further and further removed from the reality that the Lao people face today.

The history and structure of Lao folk music is not well documented. The national instrument of Laos is the *khaen*, a handheld bamboo mouth organ that is omnipresent in traditional *mor lam* music. Though the exact origin of the *khaen* is unclear, there are reports of the instrument being used at least as far back as the 17th century in Thai royal courts, though it is believed that variations of this instrument were in use in rural communities for some time before this [7]. The word *lam* refers to a particular mode of singing, described by Mosel [6] as one in which "the words are primary, the melody being adjusted to fit the sound and grouping of the words (as in setting a poem to music). The rhythmic intervals are necessarily irregular in that they must accommodate to the word groups and their meaning." The word *lam* has a very particular milieu, specific to folk music. It is *not* the one used to describe, for example, singing in Western or Thai pop music. The word *rawng* is more suited to these modes of singing, and its usage is close to the English word "sing" – it can be used to describe modes of singing as diverse as opera singing or the karaoke singing that is very popular in the capital city of Vientiane. Mosel describes this sense of singing as one in which there is a "set melody to which the words must adjust themselves regardless of their tones." This distinction is meaningful because Lao, like most Southeast Asian languages, is a *tonal language*, in which the meaning of words depends not only on the consonant and vowel sounds, but also on the *tones* or pitches involved. *Lam* is an umbrella term that encompasses many singing traditions in Laos and the (culturally Lao) region of Isan in northeastern Thailand, but in general it is appropriate to describe any type of musical recitation in which the tonal aspects of the lyrics take priority over other melodic or other musical elements of the work. Hence it is reasonable to claim that *lam* music, in some form, is itself as old as the Lao people [5].

On its own, the word *mor* is most commonly used to refer to a medical doctor, but when used in conjunction with a modifier like *lam* it refers more generally to a person highly skilled in a particular field. Hence the meaning of *mor lam*, the term used to refer to Lao folk music in general, is roughly *skilled singer* or *skilled poet*, and indeed the term is used to refer not only to the type of music, but also to the performers themselves. The focus placed on the tonal aspect of the language places comparably great emphasis on the meaning of the lyrics themselves, and as such, *mor lam* music is the preferred medium for recording and performing poetry. That is, the

lyrics to *mor lam* music are written independently of the other musical conditions of the performance. That is, the instrumental component of *mor lam* music is almost always heavily improvised, whereas the vocal component conforms closely to a written or orally transmitted text. Today, there is a small body of work aimed at describing the music theoretic features of Lao music, but there is little evidence to suggest that this systematization had any historical import and is not a recent development targeted to audiences accustomed to Western musical theory. As noted by Miller [5],

> Lao musical theory is neither written nor systematic. Players and singers distinguish scales and rhythms in nontechnical language which, when not understood, must be explained in descriptive terms. Today singers and players distinguish metrical and nonmetrical rhythms with the words *sun* and *yao*, the former meaning "short", the latter "long". In certain singing forms the two rhythms are distinguished as *fum tang sun* (metrical) and *lum tang yao* (nonmetrical), tang meaning "route" or "way". These terms, however, are of recent origin and would not be encountered, for example, in old literature. The terms may have come into use as recently as 1945 when northeastern vocal music reappeared in Bangkok, and the singers used these terms for the benefit of the central Thai.

This lack of systematization poses a serious problem for the preservation of Lao folk music. *Mor lam* music today is most frequently found in rural agricultural villages, as opposed to the prevalence of pop music (the precise nature of which will be discussed later on) in urban centers. Though the urban population of Laos is only around 40%, the cultural influence of the major population centers of Vientiane, Pakse, and Luang Prabang is not to be underestimated – only around a third of the rural population of Laos has access to the internet, according to 2022 figures from the World Bank [13]. Even this relatively low number is a very recent development. Only ten years ago, only 11% of the *total population* of Laos had internet access, with no reliable information about the distribution between urban and rural populations. Hence, without museums or academic institutions dedicated to preserving *mor lam* music, there is little hope in the current state of any sort of digital record of this musical tradition. To exacerbate the situation even further, the rural population of Laos is dramatically decreasing as the indigenous communities of semi-autonomous subsistence farming communities that comprised much of the urban population of Laos are being incorporated into state-sponsored agricultural programs designed to increase efficiency, but that have ultimately proved to reduce the self-determination of Lao farmers [14]. According to [7], “[w]ithin the large field of Lao music, ‘traditional’ rural

music occupies a diminishing position and in the future will survive only in specialist media and museums as subsistence farmers and their social environment disappear."

This discussion is not intended to herald the "extinction" of traditional Lao music, though such claims are not unheard of. Indeed, Lao news sources have been warning of this phenomenon for decades, though in most cases these are quite transparently fear mongering efforts attempting to quell the popularity of foreign music in Laos, following the nation's rapid globalization in the last 30 years [7]. Of course, as indicated by the fact that well over half of the Lao population is rural, there is still an active "village" culture of folk music performance, though the role of *mor lam* music in these rural communities is slightly different than the role of pop and rock music in urban centers. For one, the folk music tradition in village communities is in some ways *the opposite* of commercializable. More precisely, there is a clear demarcation in village communities between labor (known as *viak*) activities and leisure activities. Notably, owing in part to the absence of economic wage-labor in village communities, *viak* encompasses both those tasks one usually associates with labor (plowing fields, harvesting crops, etc…) *and* tasks that are necessary for subsistence and might be considered unpleasant (cooking food, cleaning, weaving, etc…). The production of *mor lam* music stands very firmly on the other side of this separation of labor and leisure. It is a well-defined action, classified as a social activity that *does not accompany viak.* Instead, the creation of *mor lam* music is almost always done with instruments (almost always including the *khaen*), and is a social activity, insofar as it is performed for other villagers as a leisure activity [7]. In other words, *mor lam* music can not be created in isolation, and furthermore the question is raised of whether recordings of *mor lam* music intended for a private listening setting adequately capture the social and improvisational aspects upon which the creation of *mor lam* music is contingent. As I will discuss in what follows, the recorded music industry in Laos is flourishing, including a renewed national interest in *mor lam* music. When this is taken together with nationalistic efforts from the LPRP to emphasize the importance of Lao traditional music, there should therefore be little concern for the preservation of *mor lam* music in itself (in the form of recordings or digital archives), but rather on the broader phenomenon of the disappearance of the social environment of traditional Lao folk music.

A representative case study is Muang Champasak, a small agricultural village in the ancient region of Champasak, which has been inhabited by indigenous peoples for at least a millennium. The key event that kickstarted the tourism industry in Laos occurred in 1994, when the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge between mainland Thailand and the Lao capital of Vientiane was opened. In conjunction with the nationalization of Lao agriculture that began in the 1980s, Muang Champasak became a small tourist center, acting as a stopping point for visitors to the nearby Vat Phou temple complex. A recent survey [1] from Mahasarakham University in Thailand reveals that the *mor khab* (a regional style of *mor lam* music) being performed today in Muang Champasak is almost always either part of state-sponsored programs to preserve Lao musical traditions *or* privately organized "cultural events" to support the tourism industry. This study goes on to note that the "state sector emphasizes the important [sic] of developing both state artists and private artists parallel to the tourism development [sic]," in contrast to the role of *mor lam* music during the monarchic period before 1975, when it was viewed as "entertainment for general [Lao] people." This indicates that the conditions of performance of *mor lam* music today are more appropriately categorized as *viak* than as social or leisure activities serving the inhabitants of rural communities. Compensating for the younger generations of Lao people demanding Western music, tourists visiting Laos create a market for "traditional" Lao music, although the very commoditization of *mor lam* means that none of the musical styles tourists experience can appropriately be identified with the pre-socialist *mor lam* musical tradition.

As far as the listening activity in urban centers is concerned, there has been in recent years a revived interest among Lao people in commercial recordings of *mor lam* music. Furthermore, among the Lao-produced pop music that is popular in Laos (though it should be remembered that pop music from Thailand, Korea, and the United States are by far the most prevalent), there is a sub-genre somewhat confusingly *also* known colloquially as *mor lam* music that draws influences from traditional *mor lam* music. I will refer to this wave of recent *mor lam* music as "modern *mor lam*." This modern *mor lam* music is quite diverse, but, like traditional *mor lam* music, it is characterized by its prioritization of the tonal components of the Lao language over melodic aspects of the music. However, this modern *mor lam* may incorporate elements from hip-hop, rock, or electronic music and is often composed, rather than

improvisational. This has led to a period of so-called musical *glocalization* [3], in which Lao musicians incorporate Western instrumentation, rhythms, and harmonies into their music while using the Lao language for their lyrics and maintaining the emphasis on vocal tonality.

It is rather suggestive that this new musical movement is referred to as *mor lam*, as if *the* defining feature of the genre is this vocal tonality, rather than instrumentation, dynamics, melody, or any other of the conventional elements of western music. This faithfulness to the Lao language might indicate the importance of the *social aspects* of Lao music, precisely the condition we determined to be necessary for production of true traditional *mor lam* music. This is a bold claim, considering the prevalence of lyrical music in say, American pop music. However, the key distinction furnishing evidence for this idea is that the vocal tonality of the Lao language is the *sole* artifact of traditional *mor lam* music that is apparent in its contemporary homonymous analog; there is *special privilege* given to this component of *mor lam* music in particular. Of course, this is speculation based more or less solely on what could amount to nothing more than a linguistic coincidence, but it provides at least a peek into the relatively undocumented development of ethnically Lao music. Because of the opacity of Lao media discussed earlier, there is almost no Lao scholarship on the modernization of this musical tradition; in fact, the state is invested in obscuring any links between traditional Lao folk music and modern Lao pop music. Rehbein [7] provides the following analysis of this phenomenon

> The strategy used by the party to outflank competition is to convert the field of music (and all other cultural fields) into a national field – over which it can then claim complete legal authority and control…Many singers and composers in the Lao music industry have turned to selling their music in Thailand after their songs were found to be inappropriate for [Laos]...The party's 'taste' will cater only for a specific group of consumers who are mostly older, associated with the party, socio-economically under threat and not 'globalized' in their outlook – in other words, conservatives

The conclusion is that this globalization, or introduction of foreign influences into Lao music production, is frowned upon by the LPRP, though of course overwhelming demand for pop music precludes it from being banned or censored more heavily. Even the examples I found of state-controlled media outlets reporting on *mor lam* pop music were quite nationalistic in content. A recent snippet from the Vientiane Times [15] announcing the release of pop artist Willy's new single reads like a tourism advertisement for the city of Vientiane:

> Talathep Vilayvanh aka Willy launched his latest music video "Yakkabpaivannan" on Monday after the audio version has proved a hit with fans in recent months…Shot on location in the capital, the video features many landmarks such as Vientiane Night Street, Lao Derm Restaurant, Landmark Mekong Riverside Hotel and other sites to set the scene of the storyline.

An even more obvious example is indicated by Chapman [3], who references one of the top Lao pop songs of 2007 being a song encouraging people to vote, accompanied by a "music video" that is little more than state-produced PSA shown during Lao election season.

This is not to say that there is no independent music production in Laos. Though all media produced in Laos is monitored by the government as far as its possible political or activist content, censorship on artistic grounds is far more lenient. I witnessed firsthand the booming home-recording industry in Vientiane – there are countless market stalls packed with CDs of varying production quality featuring local rock and pop artists of the "glocal" character described above, namely western musical tropes set against Lao vocalization and tonality. The style of rock music popular in the United States in the 1980s and 1990s is quite prominent in the Vientiane rock music scene. One concert featuring such a *mor lam* group that I attended in Vientiane began with a *mor lam* cover of 4 Non Blondes' 1993 hit "What's Up," followed by several original compositions that were quite similar in spirit and style to the opener. To reemphasize the above in this context, it is quite suggestive that this performance, so musically distinct from traditional Lao village music, is still referred to by the same umbrella term *mor lam*. Understanding the nature, scope, and social implications of the common thread uniting these musical traditions is my ultimate goal, but to do so on the basis of existing scholarship is next to impossible. After graduating this year, I plan to apply for a Fulbright fellowship in Laos to fund research in precisely this area – of studying the history and structure of traditional *mor lam* music with the aims of not only distilling any extant traces of Lao folk music in today's *mor lam* music, but also of understanding the anthropological, social, and activist aspects of Lao folk music that may be intentionally obscured by state-sponsored scholarship which aims to paint an artificial and nationalistic picture of the Lao cultural tradition surrounding an idealized Lao rural proletariat. There is a massive gap in scholarship regarding the development of modern Lao music, as well

as the history and musical theory of traditional Lao music, let alone reconciling these musical styles. This is the tension that I aim to help resolve, or at least to begin inquiry into.

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