Fading Musical Memory: 150 Years of Lao Phuan Singing in Lopburi, Thailand

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Abstract—As a consequence of numerous wars and forced migrations, the Phuan kingdom, which once flourished on the Plain of Jars in Laos, was obliterated during the 19th century. Much of the population was force-marched down to the Mekong Valley and into northeastern and central Thailand. One of the last contingents settled in central Thailand's Lopburi province, in the district of Ban Mi. After nearly 150 years of exile there, only two living traditional singers of *khap phuan*, both around 90 years of age, could be found and were recorded in 2012 and 2013. Since our initial documentation of them and their *khaen* mouth organ accompanist, all have passed away, leaving no one to carry on the tradition. This article examines these musical fragments and compares them to the living music found in the old Phuan area. Due to the stark differences between Ban Mi singing and modern *khap phuan*, we aimed to identify what was preserved in Thailand and what this reveals about Phuan history and migration.

Keywords: Forced Migration; *Khap Phuan* Tradition; Lopburi Province; Music of Laos; Musical Memory; Phuan Kingdom

Prologue

In January 2012, retired Thai music teacher and co-author Taywin Promnikon, of Lopburi province in central Thailand, suggested that he and I visit the district of Ban Mi (บ้านหมี่) and specifically the village of Ban Sai (บ้านทราย) on the western side of the province to meet two elderly Thai Phuan (พวน; Lao: ພວນ) singers and their mouth-organ accompanist. These musicians were said to be the community's last living practitioners of Phuan traditional singing. The Phuan are descendants of an historical Lao sub-kingdom located on the Xiang Khuang

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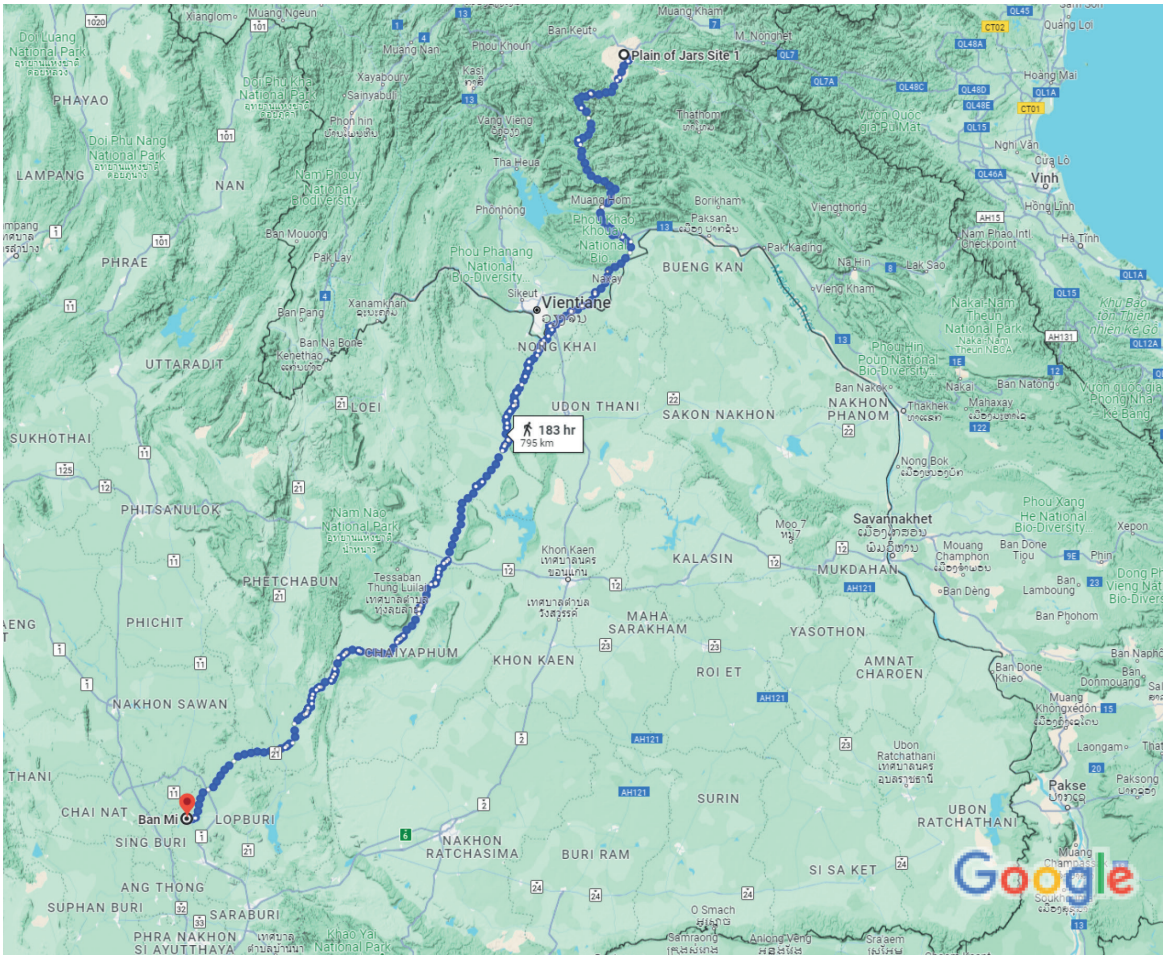
(ຊຽງຂວາງ; Th.: Chiang Khwang, เชียงขวาง/เชียงขวง) Plateau in the area of the prehistoric Plain of Jars northwest of Vientiane, Laos. Their repartee singing genre, called *khap phuan* (ขับพวน), is unique in central Thailand but related to many local singing genres of other Lao-descended cultures widespread in and characteristic of northeast Thailand. It is, however, unrelated to either the unaccompanied repartee songs known as *phleng phuean ban* (เพลงเพื่อนบ้าน) of central Thai villages or the elaborate instrumental and vocal music, "Thai classical music", of the Thai/Siamese court and aristocracy. Intrigued, we wondered how Phuan living in central Thailand would have preserved a style of singing from a remote area of Laos, hundreds of kilometers to the northeast across the Mekong River.

Ban Mi district consists of 22 sub-districts, the latter further divided into 157 villages. The musicians we visited lived in Ban Sai (บ้านทราย) sub-district, about 30 km north of Lopburi city. Our first meeting took place in the local museum (พิพิธภัณฑ์ไทยพวนบ้านทราย) where Phuan artifacts have been preserved, including examples of its famous *mat mi* (มัดหมี่; ꪣꪗꪙꪱ) style of weaving cotton and silk. Virtually all the inhabitants of this district are descendants of Phuan who came from Laos in the later 19th century **[Map 1]**.

At this event, organized expressly for us, the singers were supported by an audience of fellow residents and introduced by their most prominent leader and proponent, Mrs Thongmak Charoenrat (ทองมาก เจริญรัตน์). As an introduction, the singers and audience all began by singing several central Thai songs called *ram thon* (รำโทน), dance songs accompanied by a small single-headed drum called thon that had been adopted over time. *Ram thon* was the basis for what became Thailand's best-known contribution to social dancing, *ram wong* (รำวง) or "circle dance", thought to have been introduced during the administration of Prime Minister Plaek Phibun Songkhram (in office: 1938–1944 and 1948–1957) by his wife, Lady La-iat (ละเอียด พิบูลสงคราม; 1903–1984).

Following the performance of the *ram thon* songs, the two *khap phuan* singers, Mrs Sa-nguan Pradapmuk (สงวน ประดับมุข), then 93 years old, and Mrs Mueang Tonchan (เมือง ต้นจันทร์), 89 years old, sang, accompanied on the *khaen* (แคน) free-reed mouth organ by Mr Pho Anthachai (โพธิ์ อัญฑะชัย), 77 years old. Though of advanced age and frail, each was able to sing with clear pronunciation and stable pitch **[Figure 1]**.

We returned the next year, 2013, and recorded both singers again, this time at the home of Mrs Thongmak. By our third and last visit early in 2020, only Mrs Mueang remained alive, but since then she too has passed, leaving none of the original three alive. No one who attended the first meeting was aware of any other living traditional singers, in Ban Mi district or in other nearby Phuan communities. No one had apprenticed to these singers to preserve and pass on their musical knowledge. No one was aware of any residents who had ever gone to visit the Phuan area of Laos or of any visitors from there. According to these witnesses, the Phuan of Ban Mi have been cut off from their original homeland since settling here in about 1876. Thus, these two singers were



Map 1: Excerpt of map showing the likely overland journey of approximately 800km (8 days walking) from the Plain of Jars in Xiang Khuang to Ban Mi district in Lopburi © Google Maps

amongst the last practitioners of a music genre that had survived for nearly 150 years: their passing marks the near extinction of *khap phuan* in the Lopburi region and likely in Thailand generally (see, however, ***Addendum***).

In 1991 and 2013 we travelled to Laos around Phonsawan, the largest city on the Xiang Khuang Plateau, and made field recordings of and conducted interviews with *khap phuan* singers. These recordings can be compared to the *khap phuan* singers recorded in Ban Mi. But, surprisingly, even inexperienced ears would immediately recognize that *khap phuan* from Ban Mi in no way resembles *khap phuan* as sung today in the former Phuan kingdom in Laos. This obviously raises many questions which we will address below. The most comprehensive study of the Phuan, by Snit Smuckarn and Kennon Breazeale (1988), provides a highly detailed history of the Phuan but does not discuss Phuan singing. The following discussion attempts to sort out the complex historical relationships between the Phuan in Thailand and those in Laos and address possible explanations for this musical discrepancy. Understanding this

Figure 1: Mrs Sa-nguan Pradapmuk (left) and Mrs Mueang Tonchan (right) with *khaen* accompanist Mr Pho Anthachai in the center, January 2012 © Terry Miller

may shed further light on the journey of the Lao Phuan to central Thailand.

Musical Context

Numerous local singing genres—prefixed with either *khap* (ຂับ) in the north or *lam* (ລຳ) in the south—exist throughout Laos. Some denote a place. For example, *lam khon sawan* (ລຳຄອນ ສະຫວັນ; ลำคอนสวรรค์) references the area of Sawannakhet along the Mekong River and *khap sam nuea* (ຂับຊຳເໜືອ; ขับซำเหนือ) references the capital of Houa Phan province near the Vietnamese border. Others denote an ethnic group, such as *lam phu thai* (ລຳຜູ້ໄທ; ลำผู้ไท) or the genre under study, *khap phuan*. Both terms denote repartee singing in which male and female singers alternate, accompanied by one or more instruments. The *khaen* (ແຄ�Ō) is normal for lowland Lao genres, although some performances add other instruments. *Khap thum luang phabang* (ຂັບທຸ້ມ ຫຼວງພະບາງ; ขับทุ้มหลวงพระบาง), a genre of the old court city, uses a small "classical" ensemble.[3]

[3] Some observers also apply *khap* to upland Tai and non-Lao/Tai singing, such as *khap tai dam* (ຂັບໄຕ໌ດຳ; ขับไต๋ดำ). However, though linguistically related to Lao and other branches of the Tai family, these latter genres only vaguely resemble those of the lowland Lao or Phuan. Singing of the Khmu and Hmong, who are linguistically Austro-Asiatic, is fundamentally distinct from all Lao genres.

Today's *khap phuan* in Xiang Khuang is sung as repartee, that is, the alternation of male and female singers, each accompanied by a male playing the *khaen*, with fourteen or sixteen pipes. The *khaen* is the most typical instrument of the Lao culture, found in most areas of Laos and throughout northeast Thailand. Singers perform memorized poetry typically in *klon* (กลอน; Lao: *kon*, ກອນ) form, where a verse has four lines, each with eight syllables. Some poetry is constructed to allow for a modest degree of improvisation to fit circumstances. However, while audience members may believe that *mo khap* (ໝໍຂັບ or หมอขับ; lit. "singers of *khap*") improvise their poetry on the spot; this is erroneous. Few singers have that capability. The male sings first, then the female, continuing to alternate in this manner throughout the performance. The majority of the poetry relates to courtship and male-female relations. The female may respond by speaking the poetic response, called *wao phanya* (ເວົ້າຜຍາ or เว้าผะหยา; lit. "speaking wisdom"), which may or may not have a singsong or heightened speech quality reflecting the lexical tones of the Phuan language poetry.

Today's *khap phuan* as heard in the area of the original kingdom is in duple meter that, if written into Western staff notation, would be in two-beat "measures". The singer emphasizes the lowest pitch of five, which could be expressed as A B C D E. Typically, the rhythm is "slow, quick-quick" (or quarter note, eighth, eighth). The *khaen* accompaniment for *khap phuan* is semi-improvised in a pentatonic mode expressible as A C D E G; in northeast Thailand this mode is known as *lai yai* (ลายใหญ่ or ລາຍໃຫຍ). The first beat of each measure is a multi-note sonority ("chord" in Western thinking) followed by a monophonic, melismatic melodic phrase in free rhythm.

By contrast, the *khap phuan* of the two women we recorded separately in Ban Mi, Lopburi, had no male counterparts, and thus the repartee aspect had been lost. They performed in non-metrical speech rhythm. The singers followed a pentatonic scale encompassing pitches A C D E G, declaiming the poetry in separate phrases. Normally both male and female singers perform similarly, but without male singers, this is uncertain. Additionally, their *khaen* player was minimally skilled, but, as he was the only living *khaen* player known among the Phuan in central Thailand, it is unclear if he came from a long tradition or merely learned enough to accompany the two remaining female singers. If the answer is the latter, then perhaps someone else had played *khaen* earlier. With all three musicians now deceased as of June 2020 and no known successors, the tradition has nearly become extinct (see, however, ***Addendum***).

Possible Explanations

That the *khap phuan* known today in Xiang Khuang is clearly different from the *khap phuan* documented at Ban Mi raises numerous questions regarding why this is so. At least four explanatory theories are possible:

1. The Ban Mi singers preserve an earlier form of *khap phuan* which underwent change in Laos, making it a "survival phenomenon".

2. The Phuan in Ban Mi did not actually originate in Xiang Khuang and,

consequently, what is called *khap phuan* in Ban Mi is a different genre.

3. The Phuan in Ban Mi became mixed with non-Phuan Lao during the forced migration from their homeland and absorbed a non-Phuan style.

4. What is known as *khap phuan* in Xiang Khuang today is a genre borrowed from another ethnic group after the Phuan kingdom declined and the culture failed.

Testing each of these theories requires an examination of Phuan history and of the many forced migrations from their homeland to Siam (modern-day Thailand). Snit and Breazeale detail how the Phuan kingdom's location on a relatively fertile plateau in central Laos made them the flashpoint for numerous conflicts in the 18th and 19th centuries involving two Lao kingdoms—Luang Phrabang and Vientiane—along with Siam, Vietnam, and Chinese bandits called the Haw or Ho. During that period lesser Southeast Asian kingdoms customarily paid tribute to more powerful entities, entering into a relationship of suzerainty. Because of the Phuan kingdom's location, however, it often had to pay tribute to multiple powers to remain viable. While the Lao kingdoms also submitted to Siamese suzerainty in the 1770s after King Taksin's restoration of the Siamese kingdom in Thonburi, these relationships were rarely stable, with many attempts on the part of the Lao remaining in Laos to play one power against another. The Lao, however, failed at this and, as a result, a Siam army under the future Siamese King Rama I invaded Vientiane and other parts of Laos again in the late 1770s and carried off the royal family and other groups to Thonburi.

After Siam, from its new capital at Bangkok established in 1782 by the successor Chakri dynasty, allowed Lao Prince Anuwong (เจ้าอนุวงศ์ or ᦅᦸᧉᦷᦂᦲᦅᦳᦺᦑᦟᧃ; r. 1805–1828) to return to Vientiane, and after ascending the throne, he launched an ill-fated rebellion against Bangkok in 1827 which led to a second invasion of Laos and the near destruction of Vientiane. The Phuan were caught in the middle when Anuwong fled to their old capital, now Mueang Khun (เมืองคุณ or ᦙᦲᧃᦃᦳᧃ), seeking protection from the Vietnamese/Annamese Nguyen court in Hue, who were then involved with the Phuan. The Siamese captured Anuwong and took him back to Bangkok where he died in November 1828. The unfortunate Phuan ruler, Prince Noi (เจ้าฟ้าน้อย or ᦅᦸᧉᦷ ᦓᦲᧃᦟᦲᧃ), was taken to Annam and executed in 1830. During the 1830s and 1840s the Siamese, operating from Nakhon Phanom on the right bank of the Mekong, continued to raid Laos and resettled most of the Lao population from the left bank of the Mekong into what is now northeast Thailand (commonly called Isan). But many of the resettled Lao remained loyal to Vientiane, sometimes trying to return. As punishment, the Siamese forced the escapees to move deeper into Siam to live in the provinces surrounding Bangkok.

Beginning in 1834 the Siamese also came into conflict with Annam over territory in what is now Cambodia. Because the Phuan had also sought protection from the Vietnamese at various times, the Siamese punished the

Phuan by forcing large groups to migrate to and down the Mekong River's right bank. The Siamese continued to raid Lao villages from 1837 to 1847 and forcibly moved much of the remaining population to the right bank. Snit and Breazeale write, "Entire Lao villages were forced to move across to the right bank, so that they could never serve as sources of food, supplies or transport labour to any Vietnamese invasion force" (1988: 18). Indeed, the stated goal of the Siamese during this period was to depopulate the Phuan kingdom.

> Beginning in 1834, new Phuan villages spread gradually across this area [northeast Thailand below Nong Khai down to the Chi River] along and near the Mekong itself and simultaneously in some ethnically Thai towns as well. In April 1834 orders were sent from Bangkok to the Thai commander at Nongkhai, instructing him to continue the depopulation of the Phuan State and to scour the plateau region of its people. 'It would be well if someone can go up to prevail upon and take the Phuan families, so that the Phuan State will have no population at all remaining' (Snit & Breazeale 1988: 23).

During the following decades, though, many resettled Lao snuck back to their home villages in Laos. Under pressure from the Siamese, Lao officials forced many of these returnees back to various left bank locations pending resettlement in Siam. Snit and Breazeale do not specify whether any Phuan who had returned to their homeland were again forced out, possibly to areas along the Nguem River north of Vientiane.

During the middle years of the 19th century the Siamese refrained from further forced migrations from the Phuan area, but by 1875 the Chinese Haw had not only occupied various Phuan villages but were raiding Lao villages along both sides of the Mekong. Many Phuan fled further inland in Isan, away from the river. To counter this rapid expansion of Haw power, the Siamese counter-attacked and after killing their leader, drove the Haw back to the Xiang Khuang Plateau, the Phuan homeland. But the Siamese also rounded up the fleeing Lao and Phuan, sending them to Bangkok as prisoners. Eventually the Siamese and Lao armies reached Xiang Khuang, captured most remaining people and looted anything not already taken by the Haw, sending the captives towards the Mekong.

Though 1876 proved to be the final year of forced migrations, it was also among the cruelest. As Xiang Khuang was depopulated, both Lao and Phuan were forcibly moved into several areas of northeast Thailand. Among them was a group of 5,700 who were force-marched far enough into the region that they could board barges to float down the Chao Phraya River, disembarking into resettlement camps north of Bangkok. Having left their homeland with virtually no provisions, medicine, or possessions, they suffered on this forced march to the point that around 3,000 died *en route*. For the first time, foreign residents in Bangkok became aware of this incident, investigated, even interviewing captives.

Eventually the prisoners were resettled over a broad area in the provinces ringing Bangkok in the central plain, including one group sent to Phromburi, a district town of Singburi province along the Chao Phraya River at today's Wat Amphawan (วัดอัมพวัน), one of central Thailand's most revered temples. Some of the Phromburi group moved east into Lopburi province and founded numerous villages in today's Ban Mi district, the community of the two singers of *khap phuan* that we documented.

The early life of the Phuan in the Lopburi–Singburi area was arduous at best. Snit and Breazeale write:

> Non-Thai villagers who were brought down to the central plain for resettlement did not have freemen status. They were kept entirely separate under the designation of "captive labourers" (*chaloei suk* [เชลยศึก]) [...]. Undistinguishable physically from the Thai, the Phuan were integrated into the peasantry—but only as labour units. From time to time, when town registers were revised, all able-bodied men were tattooed with registration numbers, with men from the captive labour villages receiving special tattoos to identify their status. Their labour was a principal source of wealth for the royal family and other senior officials. Phuan and Lao men, for example, performed the heavy construction work for royal villas and monasteries in the provinces, including stone cutting and sculpting for which no skilled Thai artisans could be mustered.
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> Royal paddy fields were tilled by Mon, Vientiane Lao, Phuan, Cham, Malay, Khmer and other ethnic groups seized during the wars in their homelands [...]. Phuan, Lao, Cham, Khmer, and even Vietnamese peasant units were the backbone of traditional infantry and naval forces around Bangkok up to the end of the nineteenth century [...]. Captive labourers were immobile units within society. Their status was essentially a closed caste, inherited from generation to generation [...]. Mobility through marriage was virtually out of the question for Phuan men, because of social pressures on Thai women not to marry beneath their own status (Snit & Breazeale 1988: 124–126).

Although Phuan remaining in Laos were no longer forcibly moved to Siam after 1876, the situation on the Xiang Khuang Plateau remained grim for the survivors. Some researchers estimate that the Phuan population had been reduced to just one quarter of its earlier size (Schliesinger 2001: 66). The Haw continued their widespread raids and domination of Xiang Khuang, pushing the Phuan into near exile in the southeast corner of their kingdom. In the 1880s the French began exploring Laos towards their planned colonization, sending Dr Paul Neis in 1883 to explore a possible trade route between the Mekong and northern Vietnam. While making the arduous trek up what he called the Nam Chau (Chau River), today thought to be the Nam Xong or Song River (ນ້ຳຊອງ; น้ำซอง), he encountered

the Phuan royal family fleeing the Haw, then the Haw themselves, forcing him to turn back and abort his mission (Neis 1997[1884]).

The Siamese, fearing encroachment by the French on territory they had once conquered, arrested the last Phuan monarch, King Khamti (ພະເຈົ້າຂັນຕີ; r. 1876–1880) and exiled him to Bangkok. A Siamese commissioner then oversaw the area, notwithstanding the continuing problems with the Haw, until 1893. In that year the French established their protectorate over Laos through a treaty forced on Siam following the Pak Nam Incident, when French warships approached Bangkok in the estuary of the Chao Phraya River. The few surviving members of the Phuan royal family were released, but most had already died, including King Khamti. In 1899, the Phuan kingdom lost any remaining autonomy, when the area was converted to the Lao province of Xiang Khuang.

Snit and Breazeale noted early in their study just how reduced the Phuan population had become by this time.

> The earliest census records (dating from 1889) estimated a total population of 24,920 for the Phuan State, of which 49 per cent were Phuan, 30 per cent Hmong, 14.3 per cent other hilltribes and 6.7 per cent were immigrants from Lao towns [...]. This distribution represented, however, a situation at the end of two generations of devastating warfare, which had probably reduced the Phuan population of the plateau by more than three-quarters (Snit & Breazeale 1988: 3).

If these figures are at all accurate, then at the end of the 19th century only about 12,000 Phuan remained in Laos. Great numbers of Phuan had been killed or forcibly moved to other areas, especially Siam, during the 19th century, leaving only a rump population to preserve and restore whatever culture made the Phuan unique. Were there enough skilled *khap* singers among them to preserve the genre known today in Xiang Khuang? Add to this that Xiang Khuang was the most heavily bombed place on Earth during the "Secret War" carried on by the United States, with unexploded ordnance continuing to kill people even today 50 years after the end of the Vietnam War. Untold numbers of people, no doubt including Phuan, were killed during this period. With the Phuan kingdom now fully absorbed into the Lao nation, there is little about modern life there to separate them from Lao culture generally except their individual and often miserable history.

The historical area of the Phuan kingdom, now Xiang Khuang province as configured in present day Lao PDR, has a mixed population totaling, according to a 2015 census, 244,684 people comprised of five ethnic groups: Tai Dam (Black Tai), Tai Daeng (Red Tai), Hmong, Khmu, and Phuan. Thus, today's Phuan are but a minority of the area's population. Because the former capital, the town of Xiang Khuang, now called Mueang Khun, was bombed into rubble during the Vietnam War, the present provincial government long ago moved to a new and more modern city, Phonsawan. The lead author of this article visited the province twice with the goal of documenting *khap phuan*

Figure 2: Traditional *khap phuan* with male and female singers accompanied by *khaen* free-reed mouth organ, Phonsawan, Laos, 2013 © Terry Miller

among other genres, first in 1991 when conditions were still extremely challenging and research strictly controlled by the government, and again in 2013 when researchers were free to find their own resources. On each visit the author was able to record notable traditional singers of *khap phuan* **[Figure 2].** The form of singing recorded on these trips has been the basis for comparison with the singing recorded in Ban Mi; as noted earlier, each style was distinct and unlike the other.

Drawing Conclusions about the Lopburi Singers

Phuan singing in Laos is distinctive among the repartee genres found throughout the country. *Khap phuan* in Lopburi is different not only from other khap heard anywhere, but even, and

especially, different from, *khap phuan* heard in Laos. Why this is so? This requires understanding how the Phuan in Ban Mi district might be related to their ancestors still living in Xiang Khuang.

The first clue appears after we answer the following question: if *khap phuan* in Lopburi is unlike *khap phuan* in Laos, is it similar to any other genre in Laos? Understanding that similarities do not prove a relationship; the lead author had noted early on in his research that the singing in Ban Mi strongly resembled another genre called *khap nguem* (ຂັບງึม) found along the Nguem River north of Vientiane around the city of Thulakom (ທุ่ะค็ม), previously field recorded twice in 1973 and 2006. Unlike Lao *khap phuan* today, the *khaen* in *khap nguem* begins in free rhythm while the first singer, normally the male, also sings in free rhythm using the same scale as heard in Ban Mi. The *khaen* more or less follows the singer's contour and fills in gaps between sung phrases. The female can respond with singing or by speaking (*wao phanya*), which was also true in the modern *khap phuan* recorded in Phonsawan. But it was still too premature to say that *khap phuan* in Ban Mi is in fact *khap nguem*.

Since first encountering *khap nguem* in 1973, we had also wondered why it was so different from the *lam* genres found from Vientiane to the south in Laos, though vaguely similar to *lam thang yao* (ລำทางยาอ) heard in nearby northeast Thailand. Having the prefix *khap* raised another question: could it have originated somewhere further north among other genres with the same prefix? If it were true that the Ban Mi style was equivalent to *khap nguem*, might that suggest that at one time the Phuan had more than one style? While it is true that most singers in southern Laos and northeast Thailand can perform more than one lam style, this has not been true among khap singers in northern Laos. Additionally, the northern khap styles are more geographically isolated than the *lam* genres of the south, many of the latter existing side by side geographically. Then it is logical to ask, could the people and the singers of *khap nguem* in Thulakom be related to the Phuan of Ban Mi? Although Paul Neis encountered Phuan fleeing the Haw along the Song River, which flows down from the Xiang Khuang Plateau, the Nguem River also flows from the same plateau and could have been another exit route. If the people of Thulakom are descendants of the Phuan, does that mean that *khap nguem* is also Phuan? And if this is so, is it also possible that the Phuan refugees who settled along the Nguem River might have had too few practitioners—or even none—of the original form to keep it alive and adopted a local genre whose origin is unknown? Thus, addressing questions 3 and 4 raised earlier, there is the possibility that *khap nguem* was originally a non-Phuan genre adopted by them while exiled in that area.

In January 2020, while visiting Vientiane, the lead author had an opportunity to meet a professional *khap nguem* singer living within the city using the professional name Mo lam Phetwilai Sainam-nguem (ເพ็ดอิไล สายน้ำงึม or เพชรวิไล สายน้ำงึม).[4] During the interview

[4] This professional name identifies him as a singer of *khap nguem*.

we asked him to watch a video of the Ban Mi singers. He immediately, and without hesitation, said "this is *khap nguem*". In response to further questions, he said that he and the people living along the lower Nguem River north of Vientiane originally came from Xiang Khuang and were Phuan. He said that his grandparents still referred to themselves as Phuan, but after living there, the Phuan intermarried with the local population, mixing their language as well, and adopted (apparently) a local singing style now known as *khap nguem*. He said both genres had come from formal courtship; that is why the female may respond in heightened speech called *wao phanya*. He mentioned that in *khap nguem*, the *khaen* begins before the singer enters. Whereas in most Lao cultural areas courtship was performed in homes, among the Nguem River Phuan it took place along the riverbank or on a boat floating on the river.

We have not been able to document Phetwilai's assertions independently, but they are plausible because the Nguem River originates in northern Xiang Khuang and flows from there southwest towards Thulakom and then down to the Mekong east of Vientiane.[5] When the Phuan were forcibly moved from their homeland, one of the possible routes could have followed the Nguem River Valley, though Snit and Breazeale note that "It was a hard journey, on foot most of the way. Peaked mountains and chaotic forest along the trails gave way eventually to rounded hills [...] and finally the two central plains" (1988: 2–3).

Certainly, the people living in Thulakom also included lowland Lao. This is likely because the Siamese had been depopulating the Vientiane plain and entire left bank of the Mekong over many years, leaving the area bereft of population by the mid-19th century. But the issue is complicated because while some Phuan might have stayed in Thulakom, some Lao captives who had been moved to the right bank in what is now northeast Thailand escaped back home to Laos. Some of these escapees remained there while others were rounded up a second time and forcibly moved back to Thailand. Thus, because of the complicated mixing of people in this area, it would be risky to assert that *khap nguem* was the original *khap phuan*, also preserved at Ban Mi. This would require also arguing that today's *khap phuan* in Laos developed after 1876, possibly derived from another style found in that area but unknown today. It is also possible that at the time of the forced migration there had been two separate types of *khap phuan*, perhaps one associated with Chiang Khwang and the other with Chiang Kham, but because the two styles are radically different, this proposition seems unlikely. As noted earlier, other ethnic groups now share the plateau, but none of their singing genres is similar to *khap phuan* as heard today in Laos. Another relatively nearby genre, *khap sam nuea* from Houa Phan province, in no way resembles *khap phuan*. As known today, *khap phuan* in Laos is distinct from other

[5] The flow of the river is now interrupted, however, because of the construction of a major dam built to produce hydro-electric power.

genres nearby and throughout Laos. This bolsters the assertion that what we hear today on the Xiang Khuang Plateau is indeed the original *khap phuan*, but that of the Phuan of Ban Mi instead reflects singing that developed along the Nguem River, possibly an adoption of a genre from a different Lao ethnicity.

Having considered numerous possibilities, we offer the following explanation for why *khap phuan* in Lopburi, Thailand, differs from *khap phuan* in Xiang Khuang, Laos. The ancestors of the Thai Phuan in Lopburi evidently came to Siam from along the Nguem River in Vientiane province in 1876. Earlier those same people or their forebears either fled Xiang Khuang for refuge nearer Vientiane or were forcibly moved there during one of the depopulations of the Plain of Jars. These refugees lived in these locations long enough to intermarry with local Lao and adapt to a different form of *khap* singing, either because there were no skilled practitioners of Xiang Khuang style, or they found *khap nguem* more appealing or accessible. That community, possibly one that included non-Phuan, was later forcibly marched and barged to Lopburi in the mid-1870s but was able to maintain the *khap nguem* style. However, because they were Phuan by memory and custom, they called it *khap phuan*. They managed to pass it from one generation to the next until it came to reside in only two elderly singers. Since no one from the younger generations found it of interest, it dead-ended in 2020 with the death of the last living singer. Unless there are as-yet undiscovered singers of the tradition among Phuan communities in other provinces, *khap phuan* in Thailand is extinct. The probability of finding additional singers is low, however, because Ban Mi was the largest and most intact Phuan community and no one in Ban Mi was aware of any other singers. Additional efforts were made to find any surviving singers elsewhere in 2023 but to no avail (see ***Addendum***, however).

What should the Ban Mi community of Lopburi think of this finding? Their entire identity as Thai Phuan, distinct from surrounding central Thai and non-Phuan Lao descendants, depends on their having come from Xiang Khuang, Laos. Culturally, they are primarily known for their *mat mi* textiles, not their now-extinct singing style. Both the Phuan Cultural Center at Lopburi's Ratchaphat University and the Ban Sai Museum emphasize textiles over other cultural aspects. Indeed, their ancestors did come from Xiang Khuang originally, though the process was likely far more complex than they realize. And the Phuan communities of Ban Mi district, although having been borne of tragedy and brutality, now stand proud of their heritage while benefitting from the prosperity of modern central Thailand. It is doubtful that anyone would be concerned that all these years they have been calling their local singing *khap phuan* when it is only comparable to contemporary *khap nguem*. The Phuan kingdom of earlier times is little more than a vague memory even for the Phuan still living there today. Clearly, the Phuan of both areas now prefer living in their own time over that of an imagined and lost past.

Addendum

On 17 February 2024, as this article was going to press, the authors learned of two hitherto unknown singers of *khap nguem* living near Lopburi city and apparently not known to the singers in Ban Mi district. Retired Thai army colonel Somyot Phonyiam (สมยศ พลเยี่ยม), a native of Roi Et province and descended from Lao wiang (forcibly removed from the Vientiane area in Laos), mentioned playing *khaen* to accompany them at Phuan festivals. The singers are Mr Kesom Lasakun (เกษม ลาสกุล), age 77, and Mrs Makrut Thong (มะกรูด ทอง), age 88, both from the village of Ban Namchan, Khao Sam Yot sub-district, City district, Lopburi province (บ้านน้ำจั้น ตำบล เขาสามยอด อำเภอเมือง ลพบุรี จังหวัดลพบุรี). They told us their ancestors had escaped from the rest of the Phuan captives into the forests and mountains around present-day Lopburi and now inhabit around six villages. Because both male and female can sing, they preserve the original repartee format. Otherwise, their singing is the same as that heard in Ban Mi. The authors have initiated a project to document their poetry and singing as well as encourage younger individuals to learn and pass on their musical and poetic knowledge.

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