MERRY CHRISTMAS PUAY NAM KHАО:
DOMESTICATING FOREIGN CHRISTMAS MUSIC
IN A SGAW KAREN VILLAGE IN NORTHERN THAILAND

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ABSTRACT

Many scholars who have examined the Karen people, a highland minority along the border of Burma and Thailand, have given special attention to the place of Christianity within their history. Sometimes problematized, sometimes celebrated, the Karen negotiation with Christianity and other foreign powers remains a contested ground that deserves further investigation and analyses. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in Chiang Mai province, northern Thailand, this is an ethnomusicological study of Karen Christian music and its role in articulating Karen notions of tradition, identity, and worldviews. Similar to all forms of expressive culture, music is a medium that constitutes social reality and notions of self and community. This thesis draws insights from Thai historian’s Thongchai Winichakul’s theories of mediating technologies to examine the music and context in which Karen actors create and perform Christian music in Huay Nam Khao village during the annual Christmas celebration. By privileging Karen agency, I argue that this Karen community actively and creatively adopts and domesticates western musical and religious idioms for the purposes of solidifying, preserving, and reshaping the spatial and social imaginings of the immediate local village and an indigenous and Christian Karen ethnic destiny.
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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Introduction

This thesis examines the musical practice in a Sgaw Christian Karen village in northern Thailand. Focusing on how Christian music has been adopted and transformed by local musicians, I argue that the Karen have indigenized and re-signified Christian church music for the purposes of redefining an ethnic past and redirecting an indigenous future. The Karen in Thailand, divided into Sgaw, Pwo, and “red” or Karenni sub-groups, make up the largest of the highland ethnic minorities and historically lived along the border between modern-day Thailand and Burma (Lepoir 75). Ethnographer and missionary Harry Marshall, author of the seminal ethnography on the Karen in Burma (1922), claimed that any account of the Karen that does not cite their history with Christianity could be considered “incomplete” (296), as experience with Christianity heavily shaped Karen nationalistic and ethnic imaginations. Of course, Christianity had ties to colonial, western powers, and these are also examined (see chapter two), but most successive ethnographers have, since Marshall’s work, focused due attention to the importance of religion in affecting Karen conceptions of identity (Hayami 2004; Hovemyr 1989; Ijima 1979; Keyes 1995; Platz 2003; Shwe 2006). While “traditional” Karen music has also received some attention in these ethnographies and musical scholarship (Becker 1964; Fink 2003; Mischung 2003; Schwoerer-Kohl 2003; Stern 1971; Renard 1991), no researcher has examined Karen Christian music in any detail.

Considering Marshall’s demand for attention to the history of Christianity among Karen communities and the adherence to that call for recognition by successive scholars, the lack of examination of Karen Christian musical practice is striking. It seems that essentialist notions regarding “tradition” and “authenticity” have prevented any serious exploration of the
“modernized” or “Christianized” musical practices of today’s Karen villages. Indeed, scholars have overlooked Karen motives in their descriptions of the Karen as “dropping,” “trading,” or “abandoning” their own music traditions for systems introduced by the western church (Marshall 161; Renard 1991: 15, Hayami 2004: 266; Fink 108). This wholesale write-off of Karen Christian music ignores Karen agency in musical practice, privileging inappropriate concepts of “traditional” music at the expense of gaining insight into ethnic and social understanding of Christian Karen society. By assuming Karen church music to be a carbon-copy of Protestant church music and, thus, somehow unworthy of academic study, scholars have ignored a significant portion of contemporary Karen existence and overlooked a documented agentic trend of the Karen appropriating the music of outsiders (Becker 138).

This study, therefore, focuses on understanding the practice of Christian music and Karen agency: what is Christian music doing in Huay Nam Khao, and how has it been localized, internalized, and made into a tool for bounding the ethnic and religious community? How do the Karen employ Christian music, and in what circumstances? Is the performance of church music, as scholars imply, a straightforward case of abandonment of traditional music? How has it developed and in what ways is it important to the spatial and ethnic imaginings of the Karen populations employing it?

To answer these questions, I combine two years of participant experience as a Peace Corps volunteer and resident of Huay Nam Khao village (2007-9) and participant-observatory ethnomusicological field work (2011) with consultation of scholarly works. The following chapters stress Karen agency and adaptability, arguing that domestication of the foreign has long been the rule rather than the exception in Karen society. As such, Christian music presents no
problems in the arena of ethnic authenticity for those who have chosen to use it as a means of “constructing trajectories” (Stokes 4) in transforming their social spheres.

Chapter Outline

My primary role in this research is analytical. While the field demands attention to the Christian experience and has put me in regular contact with devout and committed Karen Christians, I do not seek to position my framing of the issue in terms of advocacy or activism. The primary inquiry of this study, how the community of Huay Nam Khao, a Karen village in Thailand, has come to indigenize Christian music for ethnic purposes, requires a close examination of each area. Each chapter is devoted to a particular arena of Karen Christian music, namely: Huay Nam Khao village, the Karen Christian experience, Christian music, and music as mediator. This opening chapter gives a synopsis of scholarly literature consulted and an introduction to Huay Nam Khao village, a history of Christian experience there, a synopsis of key informants in my fieldwork, and a justification for using this particular Christmas festival and caroling event as a representative sample of Karen musical and religious experience.

Chapter two begins the discussion on Karen inclinations to appropriating foreign concepts. I argue that the ethnic label itself has served as a tool of negotiation with the outside world, creatively shaped by “Karen” players for their own political purposes. These ideas lean on theoretical propositions of Charles Keyes (1979) and Thomas Hylland Eriksen (2010), who argue that ethnicity is a constructed, adaptable identity. Contemporary Karen scholar-activists, such as Jonni Odochao (2006) and “Chi” Suwichan Phattanaphrawan (2010), prove this in their political maneuvering within Christianity, non-governmental organizations, and relations with state and international media.
Chapter three continues this examination, examining Karen agency in their experience with Christianity, both in historic terms (nationalism) and in modern theological movements that index “tradition” to argue for the ethnic integrity of Christian conversion and destiny. I analyze the agentic revisionist writings of Karen theologian Loo Shwe (1962), who, in my reading, seeks to reposition Christian spirituality within an indigenous framework. In line with Karen actions in ethnic and political realms, religion also became a means of reconstructing Karen history and positioning a Karen destiny. Contemporary Karen theologians and field interviews confirm that appropriation continues as the norm.

By using transcription to analyze and argue for congruency between “traditional” musical practice and contemporary Christian worship, Chapter four applies this established agency to Christian music in a discussion of songs presented at the 2011 Christmas festival. I categorize songs into distinctive styles, laying out thematic elements of “traditional” Karen music and successive incorporations of western church music, concluding that musical experience aligns with previous descriptions of Karen agency and appropriation.

Chapter five turns from description of Karen music to its application, showing how Christian music effectively creates the Christian community through mapping technologies employed in the annual practice of Christmas caroling. To analyze this unique activity, I apply a model based on Thongchai Winichakul’s (1994) theories on mapping as a technology of mediation. Here, music becomes an “othering” tool for drawing borders between the Christian and non-Christian Karen village community.

Chapter six offers conclusions, implications, and suggestions for further research. In this chapter I reemphasize the fascinating irony of the case: that a globalizing, western religion—typically receiving historic and academic criticism for its role in the demise of indigenous
cultural practices—now provides one rallying point for the preservation and perpetuation of Karen culture.

**Literature Review**

Scholars have approached the Christian conversion of indigenous communities with varied approaches and opinions. While the Reverend Harry Marshall, missionary and author of the seminal ethnography of the Karen in Burma, communicated the Karen Christian conversion as an overall benefit that instilled political organization (305), paved the way for modernity through education and social organization (309), and engendered a sense of Karen nationalism (298), he frames the musical changes in terms of loss, saying they “dropped their own music for that of the west” (161). Other scholars often quote his account in examining the history of the Karen conversion to Christianity, which he paints as highly syncretic due to Karen legends and stories that foretell of a “white brother” with a long-lost book of God’s knowledge (279-280).

Anders Hovemyr (1989) traces the path of Karen conversion from Burma to northern Thailand as part of an indigenous-led, transnational outreach program. By his account, the Karen in Burma, politically and religiously united by a newly acquired script developed by American missionaries, set out to bring the both the gospel, nationalist politics, and, in some cases millennialism, to their brothers and sisters in Thailand (88-89, 99). Though he concludes that the mission, under religious auspices, failed due to the alternative motivations of the Karen searching instead for a political base of the rumored millions of fellow Karen in Thailand (123), he does continually note the appropriation and ethnicization of the Christian message for the Karen. The indigenous Christian outreach resulted in an ethnic and religious group dynamic that organized the Karen on a level superseding the village as the largest unit (168).
Yoko Hayami (2004) casts Karen contact with administrators and missionaries in agentic terms, arguing against outdated narratives that paint the Karen as helpless until outsiders moved them from irrational, unreflexive selves to literate, intellectualized faith traditions (6). For her, acceptance of Christianity and Buddhism, the religions of the hegemonic outsiders, was a calculated negotiation on the part of the Karen taken for political, economic, adaptive, and pragmatic reasons (11, 61). She discusses, like Hovemyr, the ethnicization of religion (more prominent in Christian conversion than Buddhist conversion), and sees Christian music as a powerful constructive tool, saying, “Western musical scales and harmonies have been introduced to the Karen through church music and has become one of the most important elements of Christian Karen culture” (266). She does not, however, elaborate on how this is accomplished.

A recently released ethnography, published in 2006, was written in 1962 by Loo Shwe, a Karen Christian who worked for the Thai forestry department and travelled extensively through northern Thailand from 1917-1942. His writings give excellent insight into how educated, Christian Karen thought of their people and their religion in the early years of proselytization. Where Hayami, Marshall, and Hovemyr all point to traditional myths and folklore that paint the Karen as perpetually oppressed, illiterate, powerless, and abandoned orphans living on the fringes of powerful kingdoms, Shwe portrays the Karen as a people with a glorious, powerful past, claiming that they founded a large northern kingdom predating Lanna (4). Shwe continues his empowered narrative, interpreting traditional Karen “tha” poetry as prophecy parallel to the Bible’s Old Testament. He selectively foregrounds ancestral teachings that bear similarity to modern Christianity and condemns traditional practices he deems barbaric. The result is a reshaped, fully ethnic tradition where indigenous knowledge helps in seamlessly fusing Karen
ethnicity to Christianity (48, 58), an idea currently being furthered by contemporary Karen theologians (Danpongpee 2002).

Roland Renard’s PhD dissertation (1980) outlines the history of the Karen in Thailand from “the beginnings,” an admittedly limited endeavor due to the oral and folkloric emphasis of Karen knowledge of their own history in Thailand. He paints a picture of varied contact and relations between the Karen in Thailand, the Burmese, and Thai rulers, distinguishing the experience of the more settled, Buddhism-favoring Pwo Karen from the more isolated Sgaw Karen in the highlands (the category which Huay Nam Khao falls under). He also recounts the narrative of similarities between missionary stories and Karen folklore, crediting the exchange as the originator of Karen national and ethnic consciousness (40). Ultimately, Renard’s account focuses on the political history of the Karen, showing that the Karen used to have fairly normal relations with the royalty of Siam and Lanna, and it wasn’t until the centralization and modernization of Thailand as a nation that Bangkok’s control of national territories relegated the Karen to their 1980 status of “benign neglect” (219). With decreasing contact between the groups, the Karen faded from the public, until modern issues of communism, forestry management, and opium became matters of national security. Renard’s synopsis of Karen experience provides political, ethnic, and religious materials, but music rarely enters the picture.

Shwe (12), Hovemyr (6), Hayami (2004:266), and Marshall (29) all agree in both the power of music in verifying and shaping Karen identity and the power of religion in altering forms of ethnic consciousness (Renard credits cultural expressions in general, but never singles out music). Shwe’s pairing of ancestral sayings to Christian sacred texts and practices seems to suggest that Christian music could equally be reframed as indigenous. To this point, Amy Stillman’s (1993) analysis of hymns in Polynesia proves useful. Stillman takes issue with former
scholars examining Polynesian music traditions who equated the presence of western idioms with loss of tradition. For her, foreign-born musical idioms cease to be foreign when they begin to be passed on and claimed as ethnic property of the people. She calls for an investigation that will show how “an originally exogenous repertory and performance practice has come to be accepted, by islanders themselves, as indigenous” (98). Don Niles (2000) reports similar transformations of foreign Christian music to local, familiar genres in Motu communities in Papua New Guinea (155). For him, the ultimate proof of its acceptance and indigenization was that the community themselves took to writing their own original compositions in the acquired style (150). This degree of replication indicates that a musical tradition has been internalized and becomes part of local repertoire, shedding its “exotic” label (Trimillos 1992).

Mervin McLean (1986) provides a more essentialized understanding of music in terms of insider “loss” and outside “replacement” in his article addressing musical change in Oceania (33). In his telling, singing and dancing faded away because Protestant missionaries demanded it. These sentiments are echoed by articles as recent as Dana Rappoport’s (2004) lamenting over musical loss in Toraja at the hands of restrictive missionaries. Rapport talks of an “intrusion of the church” (397) that eradicated and reshaped indigenous music practice, only reluctantly admitting that “music, despite all its transformations, carries on and contributes to collective cohesion” (398). My study of the Karen proposes to provide an objective take on church music, offering descriptions of musical style and application within a community of Christian converts in northern Thailand.

Studies of highland minorities in Thailand suggest radical changes to communities that accept Christianity, though music remains relatively unexamined in the analyses. Cornelia Kammerer’s investigation of the Akha (1990) notes Christianity’s exclusive and prohibitive
qualities, suggesting that a change in religion can be viewed locally as a rejection of Akha ethnicity (281). Nicholas Tapp’s study of the Hmong (1989), on the other hand, shows how literacy myths among the Hmong allowed for Christian texts to be seen as indigenous (77). For his case study, conversion to a restrictive religion was motivated by political and economic reasons, but had the effect of imposing conflict into the group’s social makeup (94). Roland Platz (2003) brings the conversation back to the Karen, noting that conversion to Christianity was a way for Karen to become modern citizens without resorting to the prescribed Thai method of conversion to Buddhism (476). Protestant Christian Karen have more rules and bans on traditional religious practices (especially in regard to alcohol consumption), but they also experience more solidarity in their ethnicized Christian faith (483). All of the above studies noted that Catholic communities experienced far less drastic changes to “traditional” practices (the Karen community of Huay Nam Khao practiced Protestant Christianity). Also, the above studies had next to nothing to say about musical practices, even though, as the ethnographers (Hayami, Marshall, Hovemyr, Shwe) have all agreed, music is fundamental to these religious identities.

Anthony Seeger (1987), in his famous account of the Suyá people, states that “Without collective rituals there might not have been villages at all…collective life was essentially ceremonial life” (130). He argues that for the Suyá, music was essential for establishing group identity (137); but even so, “traditional” music was not a fixed entity and could be changed as needed, such as in adopting new dances that fit lowland assumptions of “Indianness” when government officials were considering declassifying certain ethnic groups from the politically expedient “Indian” category (137). At the heart of musical practice was local agency and politicization of ethnicity. It is curious in the Karen case that, for all the attention given to
Christianity among the Karen and all the ethnographic mentions of the importance of music in Karen society, Christian music among the Karen remains unexamined.

There are some studies of Karen music, but none of them specifically deal with Christian music, except in reference to how it has fostered the abandonment of “traditional” music (Marshall 29, 161-167). Theodore Stern’s study (1971) of the tehna (Karen harp) maps out some basic commonalities among “traditional” Karen music (pentatonic scales, uneven phrase lengths, commonly occurring cadence patterns), but his main argument throughout the article is that Karen musical behavior, especially among the youth, is not exceptional to other groups in Southeast Asia in that they have always borrowed from neighboring peoples, making a distinctly “traditional” style difficult to pinpoint (209). Judith Becker’s study (1964) of Karen wedding and funeral songs reveals similarities in song structure, but, more importantly, she observes the same attitudes and practices when it comes to absorbing outsiders’ music. She says that they “love the music of other peoples and will go out of their way to hear ‘foreign’ songs. The missionaries use recorded hymns to draw the villagers into their compound” (138). She saw it as probable that in the future the Karen would incorporate outside music into their own repertoire (141).

An 18-page publication by Ronald Renard (1991) claims to be the single largest contribution to the topic of Karen music (Renard, Prachadetsuwat, and Moe 17), and is marked by preservationist attitudes. His views and exposure to Karen music may perhaps be shaped, not by fieldwork as in Stern and Becker’s case, but by his position at the religiously affiliated Payap University, the only university in Chiang Mai with a classical music program, which had many Karen in attendance. He remarks, “More is known of Karens in Thailand for their expertise with the guitar, piano, and violin than is of their traditional Karen music” (2). He sides with Marshall, bemoaning the decline of the tehna harp that used to be played by “almost all Karen young men”
(11), and further claims that Karen music has been in a “decline” since Marshall’s ethnographic report (15).

“Chi” Suwichan Phattanaphraiwan, a Karen musician and activist who I interviewed while studying Thai at Chiang Mai University in the summer of 2011, recently produced the first indigenous account, in Thai and Karen, about the tehna and its place in Karen culture in his book, *Rao Khue Tehnak* (2010), meaning “I am the tehnak”. This book presents his retelling of the history and pedagogy of the tehna—its origins, how it is learned, and its development. His perspective on the instrument and music of his people lines up with Stern and Becker’s assessments in portraying a living tradition with progressive developments, firmly rooted in tradition yet not at all stagnant. The book also includes a VCD with basic lessons on playing technique, tunings, and a few songs. Overall it provides invaluable emic perspectives on Karen storytelling, life, and music, and it helps to make the case for an expanded scope of ethnic identity based on appropriation of the foreign to update the traditional. Also of interest is how Suwichan’s book positions the Karen in Thailand as forest preservers and guardians of the land (*vi*), a clear rebuttal to discourse arising from Thai nationalism. In this sense, the topic of indigenous music brings the conversation back to the politics of ethnicity and nationalism.

In his ground-breaking theory of nationalism and its roots in standardized language and the importance of media in allowing for an enlarged, imagined community, Benedict Anderson (2006) concludes that identity is a performative process: it must be “narrated” (204). His analysis easily pairs with Hobsbawm’s (1992) assertion that traditions are largely invented and promoted in order to establish social cohesion, legitimize institutions, and socialize a community of people.

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1 In Stern’s study, the harp is called “Na den” (190), which is the Pwo Karen term (Suwichan 42). Most scholarly articles use the Sgaw Karen term, “tehna” (sometimes Romanized as Thana, T’na, and other variations). In this study, I use tehna, or tehnak, as requested by Suwichan.

2 For purposes of this paper, I translated the book into English. Any page numbers cited are from the original Thai text.
Even as many area studies scholars pick at the concepts as being too Euro-centric and broadly applied, the basic notions—a continuity with the past, the rewriting and reemphasizing of traditions and historic narratives, and the importance of centralized education and media—continue to validate Anderson and Hobsbawm’s fundamental claims (Uehara 81; Chaterjee 7-9; Jiang 147; Duara 50, 54; Reid 26-28). Applying this idea to the Karen in Burma, Hovemyr surmises that the script introduced by Baptist missionaries in the 1800s (and its network-enabling periodicals, literature, and religious publications) contributed significantly to an expanded ethnic consciousness among the Karen of Burma (88).

An important concept in Anderson’s book is the idea that national identity is highly emotional, inspiring citizens to lay their lives down for it. Music scholars take this point to showcase the power of music, a highly emotional artist form of expression, in creating communities. Simon Frith (1996) describes music, with its social and participatory nature (124), as “that aesthetic process through which we discover ourselves by forging our relations to others” (118). Thomas Turino (2004) applies Pierce’s semiotic triangle to music, claiming that the indexical ambiguity of music allows for music to convey multiple meanings simultaneously—a song associated with holidays can be played enough at national rallies to the point that it invokes both, and synchronizes familial emotion to national allegiance (2004:11-13; 2000:174-177). Both scholars agree that communities participate in more than just music; the music narrates and reinforces their notions of ethnic identity.

“Ethnicity” and “authenticity” as precise or constant terms are as suspect to scholars like Stuart Hall (1996a) and Thomas Eriksen as “traditions” were to Hobsbawm. Radano and Bohlman, in their article on music and race, pose the question, “If any world music can occupy any space…then what is the meaning of authenticity?” (33). Stuart Hall contends that ethnicity
(and nationalism, which tends to draw upon notions of ethnicity for its legitimacy) is formed by narratives as told by authorities and media and reimagined myths, histories, or a pure folk invoking timelessness and continuity with a past (613-615). Thomas Eriksen echoes these sentiments and describes the process of expanding the scope of ethnicity as a way for marginalized indigenous societies to agentically engage with the modern world. He describes a process of “ethnogenesis,” claiming that “the form of cultural reflexivity engendered by literacy may be a decisive variable in the ethnic revitalization of indigenous peoples” (128). Useful in my examination of Karen appropriation, the act of reifying cultural ideas (myths, ancestors, music) allows for a people to project and point to concrete, ethnicized objects as boundary markers, fostering, widening, and delineating the ethnic community. Chapter three will use these ideas to examine how Karen actors fused indigenous folk narratives with Christian stories and organization to give institutional and indigenous clout to a reified Christian identity. For Eriksen, this is a benefit of literacy for traditionally oral indigenous societies.

James Scott takes a different angle, seeing illiteracy, non-agrarian, and non-state existence as preferred, ideal tactics of evading state rule in his study of Southeast Asian highland dweller communities (8). By seeing these fringes, which he calls “shatter zones,” as collections of multi-racial deserters rather than homogenous tribal groups unified by cultural-linguistic systems, he echoes Anthony Reid’s (2010) ideas of Southeast Asian pre-colonial self-assessments that utterly lacked a conception of “race,” as defined by colonizers (Reid 33). Indeed, one of the first problems encountered by many nationalist projects was in how to codify the diverse upland dwellers in the national census (Mullaney 327), who tended to identify themselves by locale and religion before race or language categories. This lines up with Hovemyr’s study of the Karen in Thailand, whom he claims found ethnic solidarity not in
lineage but from a shared experience of oppression, folklore that cast them as powerless orphans, and a general self-conception as “the other” (5).

Bohlman’s (Jewish immigrants performing Wagner as ethnic music) and Turino’s (Zimbabwean use of Christian hymn tunes to rally anti-western nationalism) cases provide applicable support for viewing “ethnic” music as a constructed, imagined, and fluid concept. Bohlman calls it “transforming western art music…so that if functioned as ethnic music” (9) for ethnic reasons, and Turino says the incorporation of western elements into local music is not a case of westernization but of “indigenization” (2000: 46). Turino speaks of a cosmopolitan movement that combines the “indigenous old” with the modern “new” (180). In doing so, the “western” music of the “colonizer” can be reframed and attached to indigenous practice with neither controversy nor contradiction. While no such studies examine these musical issues for the Karen in Thailand, there are examinations other aspects of Karen experience. This study specifically addresses Karen Christian music as an example of indigenization. In doing so, I borrow from scholarly examinations of Karen appropriation in Thailand.

Two essay collections specifically explore Karen ethnic experiences in Thailand, shaped by political and religious encounters. In Ethnic Adaption and Identity, edited by Charles Keyes (1979), Keyes contends that ethnic identity is more than just flexible, it is “communicated and constantly revalidated” by myths, religious rituals and beliefs, folklore, and art (4). For him, cultural expressions create ethnicities. They are adaptable, and not mutually exclusive. This opens the possibility for a non-contradictory Karen self-identity that can encompass, domesticate, and make use of any religion for any ethnic purpose. In his view, no single ‘Karen’ religion is an exclusive marker of identity (12), yet the Karen experience approximated the
experience of the Karen in Burma, where Christian script coevolved with Karen ethnic communities and identity.

Shigeru Ijima’s essay in the collection, while not contradicting Keyes, does argue that religion plays an important role in preserving Karen ethnic identity (107). While his research focuses on “traditional” animist Karen practice, the argument could easily be stripped of claims of an “authentic faith” and applied to the Christian Karen situation, showing how religion in general informs ethnic and communal ties. In addition to attending to familial spirits (Bgha), he calls attention to the fact that Karen dress and language are mandatory at animist events as evidence of their ethnic fashioning (109-110). While Christianity abandons the concept of a family bgha, ethnic dress and language are also central to the Christian Karen experience, and it might not stand to reason that ethnic identity dissolves with traditional religion and livelihood. Even Ijima claims at the end that they still remain distinctively Karen even though they’ve abandoned traditional land ownership and longhouses (115). This thesis explores the possibility that religion can also be an interchangeable ethnic marker.

F.K. Lehman’s contribution to the Keyes’ collection builds on the notion that ethnicity is fluid and adaptable, claiming that ethnicity itself is an adaption to the ever-changing conditions in the social and political world, or a “conceptual means by which peoples adapt to their social (and natural) environment” (216). For him, historic conditions do not themselves create ethnic groups but most importantly provide the context of ethnogenesis (216). In other words, it is not a cultural definition that decides who the Karen are. There is no real, common, unique heritage. Rather, historic and social realities are tools that the Karen can use in shaping their own ethnic experience. Lehman argues for agentic ethnicity over a determinist one.
While the Keyes’ collection articles help establish the case against biological or natural ethnicity, a second set, edited by Claudio O. Delang, emerged in 2003, this time focused on Karen issues as a minority in Thailand. With activist tendencies and implications of the Karen as benign victims of the state, articles in this collection examine the more public and confrontational issues facing the Karen in Thailand. Renard returns as a contributor, introducing the Karen by framing their current situation through their folklore as oppressed orphans, misunderstood by the larger powers (2003: 6). His work, along with others in the collection, emphasizes a current trend of activism and ethnic revival seen in environmental movements, non-governmental organization (NGO) appropriation of Karen traditions, and ethnic identity politics (2003:13).

Pinkaew Laungaramsri’s article draws attention to environmental conflict and ethnic labeling, describing how state intrusions catalyzed Karen ethnic identities, previously absent or unimportant to the Karen self (23). Pinkaew details the history of names that “the Karen” have been called, and their implications. From an unknown “forest people” with no contact with lowlanders, the Karen became part of an overarching “hill tribe” discourse, implicating them as “forest destroyers” in the national spotlight demanded by the dichotomizing politics of the cold war (30). Assimilation as a Thai policy thus failed, and Pinkaew observes a recent turn to seeing the Karen as eco-friendly forest preservers, an ethnic identity employed perhaps more by conservationists and NGOs than the average Karen. Overall, her article shows identity as a political tool.

John McKinnon analyzes Karen activism in partnership with NGOs to come to similar conclusions about ethnic identity as a tool of engagement. However, more than observing the practice, he actively promotes it, calling on the Karen to “find expression in the language and
symbols of the past to speak to the present” (81) for the purposes of ethnic self-preservation. In this sense, his ideas synch rather coincidently with those of Karen ethnographer Loo Shwe, who used this same kind argument to attach Christianity to Karen identity some 40 years earlier (45). In doing so, McKinnon and Shwe both point to the possibility of cooperation between ethnicity and modern realities. Either can be appropriated for the benefit of the other.

Perhaps this is why Charles Keyes concludes this collection of essays by saying “the Karen are an invention of the modern world, a product of Christian missionization, colonial and post-colonial ethnographic research, and policies regarding ethnic minorities…” (2003: 210). By extension of his reasoning, a Karen is a Karen when they need to be, or when contemporary realities require them to be. In today’s world, the Karen can draw upon and shape their ethnic history to argue for just about anything—political rights, land use, religious practice, or social development programs.

One Karen scholar who makes use of the contemporary situation is Jonni Odochao, a Karen activist in Chiang Mai. In an interview published in International Science Journal, he traces his path of political engagement and cultural revival, drawing upon Karen proverbs to make ethnic arguments against the entrapments of modernity. He advocates engagement rather than retreat to the hills, using anything and anyone available to get his message of Karen identity and conservation out to the world (119). By befriending foreign NGO workers, journalists, and priests, and through connection with Thai academics and media networks, he seeks alliances that will serve his cause of ethnic identity and justice for the marginalized (120). His ideas showcase a Karen adaptability and openness, an ability to transform not only internal cultural traditions but also outside resources into social and political tools. As such, they are valuable in framing Christian Karen musical practice.
The topic of Karen domestication of foreign items and ideas comes up rather inadvertently in scholarly writings that discuss the one Karen musical instrument that has received a fair amount of attention. Richard M. Cooler’s exhaustive archaeological analysis, *The Karen Bronze Drums of Burma*, traces the development of the famed Karen bronze frog drums and their history in Southeast Asia. His analysis pairs Karen folklore, myths, and poetry to drum designs, detailing how the Karen modified the drum to fit their ethnic, ritual, and cultural needs (19). The drum today stands somewhat as deeply emotional icon of Karen cohesion, and is used on nationalist flags ([www.karen.org](http://www.karen.org)) and by development NGOs ([http://www.drumcoffee.com](http://www.drumcoffee.com)) to symbolize ethnic unity. In Cooler’s study, a well-documented yet unproblematised concept recurs throughout: the Karen bronze drum, whether in origin myths (28-30) or academic accounts (54), is acknowledged to have initially been made by the Shan people and was adopted by the Karen for their own ceremonial purposes over one thousand years prior (54). Thus, “foreign” artifacts successively became central to Karen ritual practice and ethnic identity, and are universally conceived of as “Karen” now. This accepted domestication of the exogenous offers analytical precedence for the situation of “foreign” Christian music in Huay Nam Khao.

To that end, the ideas of Martin Stokes (1994) fit appropriately. He offers many considerations in analyzing “ethnic” music, drawing attention to the problematic notions of authenticity, ethnicity, and nationalism. Outside styles and genres are frequently picked up and transformed by local contingencies for their own purposes (16), and, far from being victims of an encroaching modern world, indigenous communities can domesticate the outside world through music. He notes, “The incorporation and ‘domestication’ of musical difference is an essential process of musical ethnicity” (17). Or, again, as Turino puts it, incorporation of foreign materials is not a sign of “westernization” but of “indigenization” (2000: 46).
These ideas on identity concur with many of Thongchai Winichakul’s (1994) observations on the mapping of Siam. Tongchai lays out the process of turning the physical space of Siam (later, Thailand) into an abstracted object for the purposes of nationhood and identity. By applying Anderson’s literature-as-mediation model to the physical mapping of his country, Thongchai offers new perspectives on objects and objectification, how humans were trained to reimagine their communities in spatial and ideological conceptions, and how borders between ‘us’ and ‘the other’ become fixed in minds and on paper (164). Maps mediated between physical landscape and the emotional imaginings of the nation (52), and Thongchai calls for his framing to be applied to other mediative technologies (15). To that end, this thesis applies Thongchai’s ideas as a framework for examining the Christmas caroling activities in Huay Nam Khao, viewing Karen Christmas caroling as an active campaign of border-making, with local and global ethnic ramifications.

**Introducing the Field: Huay Nam Khao village**

Huay Nam Khao is a small Sgaw Karen\(^3\) village of 1,000 people in the southern tip of Omkoi District, near the border between Chiang Mai and Tak Province (kilometer drive). Today, the concrete road stretches into Mae Tuen Noi village, just across the river from Huay Nam Khao, and seasonal dirt roads offer tentative access to villages further south, eventually reaching Tak province.

Most of residents of Huay Nam Khao are rice farmers (paddy) whose families have lived there as long as they can remember, harvesting one crop annually. Soil preparation begins in

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\(^3\) The Karen have been mainly divided into Sgaw and Pwo subgroups (and sometimes “Red” Karen), each speaking a mutually unintelligible Karennic dialect. As portrayed in Ronald Renard’s thesis, the Pwo had more contact with Thais throughout history, more typically lived in the lowlands, and tended to adopt Thai ways, including Buddhism, more readily. The Sgaw, on the other hand, tended to stay at higher elevations and avoid contact with lowland groups. They also had a higher rate of conversion to Christianity (Keyes 1979: 21; Renard 1980: 14). Additionally, Sgaw and Pwo are Thai words for them. They refer to themselves as Pgakoenyaw and Pflong, respectively, meaning “human” or “people.”
May, and crops are harvested in October. With a few exceptions, the vast majority of professional positions (government officials, teachers, forestry officers, royal project management) are held by educated Thais who have been stationed there temporarily (usually two years). A third presence in the area is the Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) and local church, Soon Phattana Khristajak Huay Nam Khao, which, due to Huay Nam Khao’s location at the end of the paved road, serves as a sort of final “filling station” for faith-based development workers before heading out into the mountains to establish schools, community health centers, and agricultural development projects.
Up until the 1990s, there were no paved roads connecting the village to Omkoi district (an 80

Background and History

I first came to know Huay Nam Khao through the Peace Corps. I was stationed there with my wife, Lisa Chuang, from 2007-2009. I served at the local mayor’s office on community outreach and development projects. Lisa worked with English teachers at Huay Nam Khao School, a Kindergarten (anuban) through 9th grade special governmental educational institution (khayai ogat) that housed over 400 Karen students, ages 5-17, from the surrounding hill villages.
who had no access to education in their communities. An additional 300 students, who claimed Christianity as their faith, lived in the dormitory at the church. Our status as foreign development workers and relatively long-term residents allowed for and necessitated intentional relationship building with the local population. My position of building networks between community organizations and resources and Lisa’s personal contact with students eventually provided closer contacts with the dormitory students, the church, and the Christian Karen population.

Huay Nam Khao village, set on a southwest-facing hill with a Buddhist temple at the top, is just about evenly split between Christian Karen and Buddhist Karen practitioners, both demographically and in an observable physical sense. Most of the non-Christian homes can generally be found on the lower and southern side, while the majority of the Christian families reside on the upper north side. While wealth plays a significant factor, traditional Karen-style homes (wooden pillars, split and rolled bamboo floors, walls with roofs made of thatched teak leaves on bamboo frames, and an indoor hearth for cooking) have largely been replaced by permanent fixtures: cement foundations, separate kitchens, wooden walls that connect flush against the roof with no gap, and factory-made corrugated roofing. Out of our neighbors who still lived in the more traditional accommodations, most practiced Buddhism (or a blend of animist Karen and Buddhist traditions).

Now the head pastor of Huay Nam Khao church, Amphon (Karen name: Ta-u) Deenoi was just a teenager when Baptist missionaries first arrived in Huay Nam Khao around 1985. A team of helpers, under the guidance of a Karen missionary named Le-thu, arrived with the message of Protestant Christianity and claimed a power greater than the spirits of Karen animism or syncretic Buddhist-animist beliefs. Ta-u remembers a feeling of general resistance among the
population, who saw it as a foreign religion. The Karen community initially was not interested in the message of the Christian missionaries (personal interview).

The turning point for Baptist Christianity in Huay Nam Khao came when one family in the village had run out of options. They had an extremely sick family member, and had nearly exhausted their livestock in performing Karen spirit feeding rituals to try and heal the member or discern what the problem was. With nowhere else to turn, they called upon the Christian missionary team to come examine the family member. In Amphon (Ta-u)’s telling, the missionaries advised them to “Believe in God,

... and they did. And then they started to feel better. So they began to have faith in God. After this, this caused people in the village to not like them very much. But then other families started to wonder: is this real? They believed in God, and they feel better? They started to think believing in God was easier. Don’t have to feed all the spirits. It’s easier, not so heavy. So it caused others to come to believe, too.

Maybe ten families converted. (Personal interview)

The rationale for accepting Christianity as “easier” is an often repeated benefit and draw of Christianity among Karen Christians I have spoken with. By their own conception, even among acquaintances who were born into Christian homes and never personally experienced Karen animist ceremonies, Christianity was a faith that was more “convenient” to practice, not requiring raising special ceremonial animals or conducting elaborate ceremonies. Cornelia Kammerer (1990) describes a similar case for the Akha minority, who chose to convert because the traditional faith was “extensive and expensive” (283). From a worldview where every incident inferred auspicious or serious omens, Protestant Christianity advertised a higher power that “freed” the community from both the economic squandering of livestock and the emotional
burden of spirits (Amphon [Ta-u], personal interview; Gaedee, personal interview; Platz 478; Tapp 87-88; Hayami 1996: 343).

After the initial “miracle” and conversion of a few families in Huay Nam Khao, the institutional church was established in 1985, built largely by volunteer labor and cooperation among the new Christian community. The small gathering for worship eventually evolved into a center for housing students, connecting them to a larger Christian Karen church network and teaching them about health, education, social development, and Karen culture. Pastor Ta-u describes his experience:

At first, we only had a church. In 1992 or 1991 there was a refugee camp in Pe Klo. Have you ever been? I came back from that, and saw that the church was very small. I therefore went out, walking through the villages with an announcement. I saw that there were many Karens out in these mountain villages that didn’t have schools, the kids weren’t studying. So I was concerned about the kids. I prayed. Asked God what I should do for my fellow Karens’ education and development. God told me to open a dormitory. I asked God, “How am I supposed to open a dormitory?” I didn’t have any budget. No funds. But God told me to do it. So I did. It was a very small one. HA! Little roof, bamboo structure. I asked for God to send a group to come help me. And things started to happen. At first, it was very difficult, since we had no money. And I was the caretaker of these kids, doing everything. Oh, so tired! But God helped to organize everything. (Personal interview)

Today the church prides itself on its programs and regularly receives international funding and visitors. Staff members help with homework and provide meals, Saturdays are
devoted to supplemental studies (computer, English, music, health, physical education, and Karen culture and literacy classes). The church also regularly services incoming and outgoing development NGOs, such as the Integrated Tribal Development Project (ITDP), which brings in international volunteer groups on short-term missionary and community development work.

![Image](image-url)

**Figure 2:** Huay Nam Khao dormitory for Karen students. Photo taken by author, 2011.

**Research Questions and Issue to be Addressed**

As my initial introduction to Karen music came through the church while working as a community development volunteer, I was struck by the obvious and public presence of western church music, and did not even know of the existence of any traditional Karen instruments until I saw a *tehnaku* (Karen curve-necked six-string harp) played at an opening ceremony for the new school building about one year into our stay in Huay Nam Khao. Earlier and contemporary
scholarly articles state or imply situations of musical and cultural “loss,” “replacement,” and “abandonment” (Marshall 161; Renard, Prachadetsuwat, and Moe 1991: 11) of traditional songs and instruments at the hands of unbending Protestant legalism (with a few alluding to modernity as a factor) which demanded the abandonment of all traditional rituals (Hayami 2004: 226). Yet these same authors attest to the popularity and importance of music in the life of the Christian Karen communities they study (Hayami 2004: 266; Shwe 12). The major focus of this study seeks to chart and reconcile this issue of Christian music and Karen agency: what is local, “Karen” Christian music doing in Huay Nam Khao, both in an active and existential sense? How are the Karen using Christian music, and to what ends? Is it actually a case of abandonment, replacement, or loss, or something more complicated? How has it developed and in what ways is it important to the life, communal context, and spatial and ethnic imaginings of the Karen populations employing it? As Christopher Waterman comments, music is important in conceptualizing the community. More than merely reflecting the situation, “Music is a context for human perception and action” (214). This thesis seeks to understand the context that Christian music creates for the Karen players involved in Huay Nam Khao’s social and cultural situation and the rationalization for doing so. I argue that the Christian Karen community actively and creatively adopts and domesticates foreign idioms for the purposes of solidifying, preserving, and reshaping the trajectory of their ethnic destiny. To accomplish this, Karen groups appropriate ethnic labels, reshape religious narratives, and apply music as a means of mediating between individuals and an evolving ethnic community.

**Methodology and Informants**
In order to analyze the on-the-ground experience of the Karen community, I have focused on the experiences of four representative community players whom I came to know closely during our two years as residents. Utilizing open-ended questions and dialogic interviews, I explored topics ranging from religious change, economic histories, musical training, personal histories, political opinions, and other issues that came up in our loosely structured conversations. Interviews centered around four key interviewees who I selected due to their backgrounds, multi-lingual capacities\(^4\), and their familiarity with myself and Lisa. Each possesses their own unique perspectives on Karen-ness, religion, and music, and vary in terms of age, gender, and experience. I sat down with each of them for formal, recorded interviews, but I also draw from ethnographic data collected outside the context of these intentional conversations. Next, I will provide a short background of each of my informants.

1. **Amphon (Ta-U) Deenoi.** Pastor of Huay Nam Khao church, Ta-u, 48, has a deep, personal connection to both the history and the destiny of the Huay Nam Khao Karen Christian community. He helped to found many of the programs, projects, and buildings that now make up the church. This institutional experience has put him into contact with the larger institutions such as the Church of Christ in Thailand (CCT) and the Karen Baptist Association and has afforded him international connections to the Karen diaspora in America, Sweden, Canada, Burma, and Australia. These international connections make for a leader who is very much grounded in local matters yet understands the importance of broader alliances and connections. While he does not speak English, he is very comfortable interacting with foreign guests (including Japan, Australia, and the US) and generally possesses a higher intercultural competence than his non-Christian

\(^4\) Interviews were conducted in Thai, not Sgaw Karen.
community members who tend to be significantly more cautious and closed off when it comes to interacting with foreign newcomers and visitors.

2. **Seksorn (Tu-chae) Deesaw.** As my community development work involved, at one point, working with a local rock band, I met Tu-chae while he was still a Buddhist who had learned to play screaming lead guitar solos from the internet. A self-taught guitarist, I had always been impressed at his motivation and drive. We parted ways in 2009—I returned to America as he was leaving his hometown to study music at a university in Chiang Mai. When I returned in 2011, I learned that he had quit the music degree, converted to Christianity, and had moved to Bangkok to live in an international Christian dormitory run by *Youth With a Mission* (YWAM) while working on a degree in international relations in hopes of landing an NGO job working with Karen refugees from Burma. I sought an interview with him because of his musical expertise and his unique social situation: most of my acquaintances had been born into the faith of their families. Tu-chae was one of the few who had chosen to convert on his own, and I wanted to explore the ethnic and familial issues associated with conversion. We did discuss that, but I was more intrigued with his ability to reflexively analyze his own culture at a level I certainly would not have been capable of as a 19 year-old. Additionally, I continued to correspond with him online after returning to the US, and was able to have him confirm and supplement translations of Karen songs from the Christmas events.

3. **Mayuree (Pe-nyo) Khaoyub/ Chawiniakon.** Mayuree, 46, is a well-respected, strong-willed female leader of the community. I first met her while she was the vice mayor at the government office where I worked (the first woman and the first Karen person to hold the position). She is also the leader of the women’s group for Huay Nam Khao and the
president of the Omkoi district weaving group, overseeing marketing, design, and product development for a cooperative that spans several sub-districts. Her family has a rather long and established history in the area, and a firm grounding in Buddhism. I relied on her to provide insight into non-Christian Karen perspectives on faith and traditional music, as well as culture, writing, romance, weaving, inter-faith relations, and any other topics that came up. She also served as a sort of host-mother for us during fieldwork in 2011. Of her three daughters, the youngest, Gibe, was an excellent cultural mentor and a very good friend to us during our time in Huay Nam Khao, and her name comes up both in our interview and in various points throughout this study.

4. **Gaede Wawjantra.** Gaede, 19, is a former student of Lisa’s at Huay Nam Khao school, an accomplished musician (drummer of the church band that won a Karen battle of the bands competition in Chiang Mai in 2009), and a dormitory student who was primarily raised at and by the church since age nine. As such, he has deep-rooted ideas about and allegiances to this particular brand of Karen Christianity, and was able to provide quick and concise translations of any Christian Karen song or text (I had him help me summarize songs recorded at the Christmas celebration). In my interview with him, I attempted to elicit the perspective of the younger generation raised with and steeped in Karen Christian ideals on education, social development, faith, non-Christian Karen music, and community service (in contrast to those of Pastor Ta-u’s generation, who consciously and actively adopted and worked to spread them). His brother, Lapo, was a staff member at the church and an accomplished musician. He also offered online correspondence in translating Karen songs into Thai for me.
The major community event that took place during my fieldwork was the annual Christmas festival. Lisa and I had previously attended two of these events as Peace Corps volunteers and community members in 2008, and I was eager to revisit, this time conducting ethnomusicological research and observation. These festivals typically include staged presentations of Karen music, ranging in genres from church worship, traditional (pre-church) Karen songs, early-church Baptist hymns, to original pop and rock-inspired compositions. We were invited to attend such a service on Christmas Eve in Pisalong, an exclusively Christian Karen village about a one-hour motorcycle ride away from Huay Nam Khao (community members came from three surrounding villages to participate in the activities).

![Figure 3: Stage decorations at 2008 Christmas festival. Photo taken by author.](image)

Additionally, I engaged, as a participant-observer, in the annual Christmas caroling activities held on the night before the festival began. Dormitory residents went out in caroling...
groups, visiting every Christian home in the village and singing Karen Christmas music, inviting us to attend, observe, and participate in all aspects of each event.

These annual Christmas events take place all throughout northern Thailand (Amphon, personal interview) and serve to assemble multiple Karen village groups within the context of musical performance. Widely practiced and a key justification for gathering broad-reaching Christian networks, they offer excellent insights into the importance of music in creating and shaping Karen self-conceptions of community, identity, and appropriation of exogenous materials in building and defining ethnic authenticity (in a popular sense) and adaptability. As Martin stokes surmises, music is powerful in its usefulness in encapsulating not just history, but destiny:

…music can be used as a means of transcending the limitations of our own place in the world, of constructing trajectories rather than boundaries across space…Music does not then simply provide a marker in a prestructured social space, but the means by which this space can be transformed. (4)

In order to analyze and discuss Karen musical practice as text, I transcribed a representative sample of songs from both the Christmas festival and the caroling activities. Pairing these with an analysis of historic context and agency in social situations, this study seeks to contextualize and make meaning of the transformation of Karen music as well as Karen appropriation of music in transforming the community of Huay Nam Khao. Before I can approach the topic of Karen domestication of music, though, the issue of ethnicity must be addressed. The next chapter focuses on the ethnic label itself, examining who “the Karen” people were and are and the role of agency in defining and utilizing Karen ethnicity.
CHAPTER 2  APPROPRIATING THE ETHNIC LABEL

Introduction

Whether catalyzed by a print language created by western missionaries in Burma (Hovemyr; Marshall) or formed amidst counter-state responses to lowland nation-states (Keyes 1979; Renard 1980), the idea of “the Karen” as an ethnic identity is a product of modernity, uniting a linguistically diverse, scattered, and eclectic group of highland dwellers along the border between Thailand and Burma (Keyes 2003). This chapter examines the historic contexts in which these ideas of multiple distinctive “Karen” identities arose. I agree with theorists Benedict Anderson and Thomas Eriksen that ethnicity is adaptively constructed and argue that, for the people who have been called or have claimed “Karen” as an ethnic marker, ethnicity has proven a useful tool in constructing counter-state narratives which themselves reshape the ethnic reality and trajectory of “the Karen.” In doing so, I expand F.K. Lehman’s question of the Karen ethnicity in terms of “who” and “why” to encompass an agentic usefulness of a “so what now” examination of ethnic activism for political positioning. I will explore several instances of Karen ethnic negotiation to show that, rather than being a conclusive or deterministic ethnic label, the term “Karen” continues to hold political dexterity in navigating self-determination in modernity. In this sense, the idea of “the Karen” is applied both from outside powers as an etic label and reclaimed by Karen actors as a meaningful, emic identity by which they make sense of contemporary realities.

Ethnicity on Paper

“A Basic feature of modernity is the way in which individuals have become increasingly free—indeed, condemned—to choose their sense of identity self-
consciously, rather than inherit it unquestioningly as a preordained given”
(Manuel 202-3).

In 2008, our friend Gibe came over to our house in Huay Nam Khao with her sister, Waew. Waew had been away from the village for five years, living in Bangkok while studying at a university. She needed to have her resume translated to English in order to apply for a government job, so we were enlisted to help. At the end of the standard section on biographic information (name, age, religion, height, weight, nationality, and marital status) was the category of ethnicity. Since her sister, father, mother, and extended family all spoke Karen, lived in a Karen village, dressed in Karen clothing, and functioned occupationally and socially according to Karen customs, I started to type “Karen.” She immediately corrected me, telling me to write “Thai” instead. I was confused, as I had never thought of their family as Thai in any sense, and asked for clarification. She told me that at some point in their family tree, a Thai person had married into the family, which allowed her to claim that ethnicity on the resume. I offered a hyphenated “Karen-Thai” option, and that, too, was turned down. I realized that ethnicity, in this context, could be claimed as anything as long as it was plausible in the eyes of others, and furthermore was impossible to validate with any classificatory measures. If Waew could speak Thai, behave like a Thai, and function as ethnically Thai, who could argue with her otherwise?

Thomas Hylland Eriksen attests, following trends of other scholars since the 70s (Keyes 1979: 3; Lehman 215; Gladney 49; Brubaker 166), that ethnicity is relative and situational (30) and that social relations only become “ethnic” when one of the two interacting parties questions the claims of classification (12). His mentioning of Michael Moerman’s “emic category of ascription,” whereby the Lue people of Southeast Asia had the option of incorporating themselves into an ethnic category based purely on self-avowal rather than any actual genetic or
linguistic linkage (11), is seconded by Charles Keyes and other scholars who focus on Southeast Asian ethnic identities.

On the subject of ethnic identity in Southeast Asia, pertaining especially to highland minorities, Keyes argues that “Origin and background…are communicated, and constantly revalidated, in cultural expressions such as myth, religious belief, ritual, folk history, folklore, and art” (1979: 4). Within these confines of ethnic identity, there is no mention of genetic inheritance (and even language in some cases also proves to be optional), and Keyes notes a further complication in that groups in this region can draw upon and claim simultaneous ethnic identities without contradiction (1979: 6).

These ideas on ethnic flexibility and fluidity helped to set the stage for the more well-known theories of “invented traditions” (Hobsbawm 4) and “imagined communities” (Anderson 6), both of which work to further the idea and expand the political capacity of ethnicity and nationalism as modern concepts made possible through specific, centralized state programs such as media, education, and language (Anderson 25, 38, 42). Anderson especially focuses on the role of print capitalism, seeing literature as the first mass-produced modern commodity that effectively reorganized the populace’s sense of self, history, and camaraderie (38). By his argument, the newspaper and novel provided humans a way to imagine that there were hundreds of thousands of other people just like them whom they had never met and would never meet but nevertheless shared a connection, history, and destiny. Standardized information could instantly be read by everyone simultaneously, bringing the community together in conceptualized time and space previously unimaginable. Anderson concludes that identity itself is not something to be “remembered” but that it must be “narrated” (204). His ideas prove insightful in the arena of
ethnic formation, but he tends to apply them to the national, macro level. Stateless minorities have had similar but not identical experiences with print languages.

Anthony Reid (2010), applying Anderson’s ideas to minorities in Southeast Asia, finds much of the argument applicable. Before World War II, he notes, colonizers had many troubles in classifying people for official censuses. Census takers lamented over self-definitions of their subjects, who felt more oriented by religion or region rather than by obscure notions of race or ethnicity (33). Ethnic and national allegiances were thereafter created by standardizing languages through the introduction of printed alphabets (28) and state religious incorporation (30). Stateless highland dwellers—such as the Karen—on the other hand, “faced a crisis of identity when for the first time at the beginning of the twentieth century they were brought, by force or persuasion, within the fixed boundaries of a modern (colonial) state, with strong ideas of sovereign rights over them” (46). Similar to Reid’s description of the Batak, who, for many centuries and until Protestant missionaries Romanized their unwritten language into a printed script, “perceived no collective identity” (145), it was through contact with modern administrators (with notions of sovereign boundaries) and missionaries (with standardized print media) that “the Karen,” a diverse group of upland dwellers whose largest social unit of organization had been the village (Marshall 127), formed into a solitary ethnic group (Hayami 2004: 43). This negotiable label would eventually become a tool of negotiation. In the following sections, I will explore the applications of Anderson’s framing to the experience of the Karen in Burma and Thailand.

**Ethnicity and funerals**

In the summer of 2011, I participated in the Advanced Study of Thai (AST) program at Chiang Mai University, and had a few opportunities to return to visit Huay Nam Khao. Staying with Gibe’s family again, I learned that the 109 year-old matriarch of the family, Gibe’s great-
grandmother, had passed away since our time living there. She had overseen her family’s transition to Buddhism from the traditionalist animism forty years prior (see Shigeru Ijima’s description of the chakasi ceremony, 112). However, before her death, she had asked her daughter to make sure they had a “real Karen” funeral rather than observing the Buddhist rites. Gibe was showing me pictures and video of her last breath when Gaedee, an old student of ours and committed Christian who lived at the local Baptist dormitory, came over. Gaedee took one look at the pictures of relatives circling the corpse in pairs and visibly backed away, shaking his head.

Addressing both Gibe and me, he said, “Our people don’t have this kind of ceremony anymore.”

Gibe looked at him and said, “Our people? We’re all Karen, Gaedee. It doesn’t matter if you are Christian or Buddhist. We’re both Karen.”

Both of them held entrenched ideas about what it was to be ethnically “Karen.” While Gaedee cited religious convictions, Gibe emphasized an overarching origin and descent. They both bought into the conceptual ethnic label, but understood its scope along differing delineations. Overall, this exchange demonstrates not just the fluidity of “ethnicity” as a concept but the flexibility of “Karen” as a means of understanding their history and future.

I returned to the topic of ethnic identity in an interview with Gaedee and his friend, Ela, during my fieldwork, and they both portrayed an open, reflexive conception of the term. Ela claimed that “Ethnicity depends on the individual,” and Gaedee followed this up with, “For me, everything can enter” (personal interview). While they sought to distance themselves from a Karen animist past, the future and the larger world were wide open for appropriation. Having a “Karen” label still mattered to them, but the content seemed both expendable and exclusive.
“The Karen”

Charles Keyes only reluctantly uses the word “Karen,” preferring to refer to them as “Karennic-speaking peoples” (2003: 214). He claims that the notion of “the” Karen ethnicity is, like all other ethnicities, a modern invention, saying, “There is no common cultural denominator to all those labeled ‘Karen’…The Karen are an invention of the modern world, a product of Christian missionization, colonial and post-colonial ethnographic research, and policies regarding ethnic minorities” (2003: 210). Harry Marshall, a Christian missionary and the author of the seminal ethnography of the Karen in Burma, claims that “No account of the Karen can…be regarded as complete which does not contain some mention of the widespread influence of the Christian religion among them” (Marshall 296).

Though my research focuses on the Karen in Thailand, the earliest accounts and encounters with the people labeled “Karen” begin in Burma, and the history there serves as important context for the story of the Karen (as well as the aims and interests of researchers) elsewhere. As Lehman (1979) argues about Karen ethnicity in context,

Historical questions and historical evidence are of genuine importance for characterizing ethnicity—not, perhaps by way of defining a common history of some set of people but rather by way of defining the context of ethnogenesis itself, the context of the virtual invention of an ethnic category. (216)

“The” “Karen” are a mix of people groups, numbering between 4-6 million in Burma and around 400,000 in Thailand (Reynard 1980: 8), who lived in the highlands between Burma and Thailand, and have historically been classified into “Pwo,” “Sgaw,” and “Red” (or “Karenni”) sub-groups according to language, dress, elevation, and other arbitrary customs or even etymological mislabeling (1980: 10; Lehman 241). It is to these isolated and scattered small
villages that Baptist missionaries first took the message of Christianity (accompanied by literacy, social development, and institutional organization) in Burma in the 19th century. And it is this organizational capacity that many authors point to as the tool for developing nationalism (Anderson; Hovemyr; Hayami; Marshall). In other words, missionaries and print media would foster a group awareness, which would in turn lead to an ethnic movement. A pan-village “Karen” identity would become justification for political actions.

The Karen in Burma: Origin Myths and Missionaries

With no written language or historical records to fall back on, some historians, indigenous and outsiders, tried to reconstruct a Karen continuity from traditional folklore. Problematic for western historians like Ronald Renard who prefers objective facts in his reconstruction of the history of the Karen in Thailand (1980: 30), these Karen poems, called “Tha” in scholarly literature (Mischung 130; Shwe 5; Suwichan 17, Schwoerer-Kohl 300) and “saw” in Huay Nam Khao, recount origin myths and other folkloric knowledge. One commonly told story is that the Karen initially migrated southward after crossing a “river of running sand” likely referring to the Salween River, with some scholars suggesting southward migration from as far north as the Gobi desert (Shwe 5; Renard 1980: 33). Their leader was the first Karen ancestor, Htau Me Ba, who had saved the settlement from a wild boar and fashioned a comb from the boar’s tusk, which granted him eternal youth (Renard 1980:31; also Shwe 28). In many versions of the story, he was too quick and his followers, represented as the current Karen people, lost him and were thereafter seen pitifully trying to boil some sort of bi-valve shellfish in its shell, not knowing how to eat it (Renard 2003: 5).

A result of this and other such stories was a mythology and accepted fatalistic character of the Karen as abandoned orphans, doomed to oppression at the hands of morally inferior yet
politically and militarily dominant others, including Burmese and Thai overlords (Hovemyr 5-6).

A friend of mine working with Karen malaria patients in Mae Sot (Tak province, south of Chiang Mai) encountered clients who believed they were destined for such medical misfortunes precisely because of their status as an oppressed, marginalized ethnic group. In that case, Karen ethnicity became a fatalistic coping mechanism in dealing with misfortune.

In addition to the *Htau Me Ba* origin story, missionaries in Burma claimed to unknowingly stumble upon another orphan story that greatly assisted them in their proselytizing. In this telling, the supreme deity, “*Y’wa*” (also Romanized as *Yua*), created books of knowledge for each of the sons (sometimes three and up to seven). *Yua* gave the white brother a golden book, the Chinese (or Burmese or Thai) received a book of silver. The oldest brother, the Karen, received a book made of paper. The brothers dispersed, and the irresponsible Karen brother left his book on a hillside while burning his fields to clear agricultural land. The book of *Yua’s* knowledge was burned up in the flames, and the chickens and pigs ate the ashes (this was also the explanation for the Karen’s animistic ritual of chicken bone and pig gall bladder divinations). While the Chinese and white brothers successively went on to establish great civilizations, the Karen were left illiterate and ignorant. At the end of the story, though, it was told that the white brother would one day return with the golden book of *Yua’s* knowledge (in some versions, this would result in the reinstatement of a mighty Karen king or other united, utopian, or millennial visions).

This story, contextualized within the marginalized status of the Karen in Burma at the time, made for a convenient, syncretic point of entry for the white Baptist missionaries, who came with their own book of God’s wisdom and radical social development and educational programs, instituting formal education, implementing western hygiene and health standards, and
reconfiguring animal husbandry and living situations in villages (Marshall 211-16, 279-80). The “lost book” account was also repeated to me by Somsak Khlonggrajonkeeree, one of the Baptist church officials in Huay Nam Khao, whose use of it legitimized their understanding of a Karen identity grounded in both Christian faith and a self-conceived ethnic “authenticity.” In Anderson’s theory, the literacy and literature detailed next would be the beginning of an awareness and expansion of the ethnic group.

In 1813, an American named Adoniram Judson, the first Baptist missionary in Burma, arrived. On May 16, 1828, he claimed his first Karen convert, a convicted murderer named Ko Tha Byu whom he purchased, redeeming him from a fate of slavery. His conversion was accomplished by teaching Ko Tha Byu how to read a Burmese-based Karen script that the missionaries had been working on. By 1853, Dr. Jonathan Wade had finished a Sgaw dialect version of the Bible. Francis Mason completed a Pwo version in 1878, the Morning Star vernacular-language monthly religious periodical began in 1842, and a Baptist college was established in 1875 in Rangoon (Marshall 296-301, Hovemyr 13, 97-98). This team of indigenous evangelists armed with literacy, the “white brother,” and centralized printing presses “was probably the most important factor in the development of Karen nationalism” (Hovemyr 88). By 1881, the Karen in Burma, dominated by the Christian Sgaw Karen, had formed the Karen National Association (Renard 1980: 41). Confirming Anderson’s ideas on print media, the formation of ethnic consciousness and national aspirations were an outgrowth of literacy, education, and access to colonial powers through English, encouraging indigenous literature and a broader social organization through script, church organizations, and institutionalized education (Hovemyr 89, 168).

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5 See next chapter.
Yoko Hayami critiques this colonial, heroic, hegemonic narrative, where “The Karen in Burma were oppressed by the Burmese and developed an ethnic consciousness through their relationship with the Christian missionaries, rising from the status of degraded hill people to a well-educated and civilized people with ethnic pride” (2004: 30). While I agree that the Karen should be given due credit for their appropriation and application of the message and do not doubt their ability to do so (see Hovemyr 123), Hayami argues that the Karen took as much initiative in shaping the exchange to fit their own nationalistic desires. In doing so, she seems to view the Karen actors in somewhat of a pre-nationalist mode of thought, already conscious of an “ethnic” organizational capacity, whereas scholars like Anderson, Reid, and early Karen ethnographers would argue that the print language itself and successive publications were the most crucial in catalyzing this ethnic nationalism.

While the missionaries set forth to spread the gospel through a centralized print media, the scattered and isolated forest dwelling people who shared common folkloric themes of oppression, illiteracy, and a return of the golden book soon became aware of each other and came to believe in a shared origin as well as a common fate. As Hovemyr puts it, “These traditions both expressed distinct Karen claims and then, having been recorded, contributed to the on-going formulation of an explicit Karen self-understanding” (96). Keyes comments on the effects of Christian education, noting that “schools were the crucible for an emergent sense of Karen-ness that transcended local communities” (2003: 212). In organizing and uniting vast and dispersed Karen populations through faith-based social collectives, the process of ethnogenesis had begun.

Even as a modern ethnicity was created by modern nationalistic concepts, Hovemyr argues that ethnicity became the means for conceiving of a Karen ethnic nationalism. The white
missionaries used “Karen-ness” for expanding their base of faithful believers and community
development, and the newly converted indigenous missionaries employed ethnicity in trying to
convince the Burmese Baptist organization to support them in advancing their message across
the border into Thailand. It was this drive to expand both the ethnic and religious base that
initially brought this appropriated Karen ethnicity from Burma into Thailand. The Karen in
Thailand, as I will show, experienced a slightly different story of ethnogenesis, expanding ethnic
networks, and contact with outsiders.

“Chi” Suwichan Phattanaphraiwan, Musician and Ethnic Activist

Figure 4: “Chi” (http://www.oknation.net/blog/thammanamai/2009/02/01/entry-1)

On July 31, 2011, I interviewed “Chi” Suwichan Phattanaphraiwan, prominent Karen
musician and president of the Foundation for Indigenous Knowledge. He is most well-known for
his recent publication, *Rao Khue Tehnaku* [I am Tehnaku] (2010), a semi-autobiographical
folktale in Thai and the Catholic Romanized Karen script (not the same as Wade and Mason’s
Burmese-based scripts) about the Karen harp, called *tehnaku*. His account draws attention to Karen agency in music as paired to ethnic agency and appropriation, which will be examined more in chapter three.

“Chi” Suwichan is quick to point out that religious institutional affiliation alone is not the only thing that shaped Karen conceptions of ethnic awareness. He points to cold war politics (eastern communism versus western democracy), the mishandling of the Karen by the Royal Forestry Department, and modernity’s communication systems and advertising as equally responsible in influencing Karen ideas about themselves and their place in Thai society. His ideas of Karen consciousness match up fairly well with scholars who have studied the Karen on the Thai side of the border, viewing Karen ethnicity as a product of the modern state needs of national and border security, teak logging and (now) forestry conservation, education, and citizenship (Buergin 43; Laungaramsri; Renard 1980: 18; McKinnon 65; Odochao 118).

In Suwichan’s view, the matter is much more complicated than a simple issue of religion and ethnic identity, but one of increasing contact with outsiders:

What I’m saying is not just to Christianity, not just to westerners. People who tell us to change our life: Chinese, India [Buddhist], Hindu…these also have an effect… Other things enter: consumerism. I like this car, I see promotional commercials every day, and I want that car. More communication these days. See how the young people dress, how they cut their hair…So it’s a tool… communication is changing us… We are Karen more than religion. More than nationality. Some people are crazy for their nation. Some people are religious [English] too much. Some say they live in Burma, so they are Burmese. Some say

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6 I completed an English translation of this book for use in another class, keeping the original page numbers for purposes of citation.
to be true Karen is to be animist. You should be Karen first. Where you live might affect your religion, sure, but you’re still Karen. Some families have problems when family members convert to other religions.

Every day now, we use religion as a tool of politics. A way to separate “them from us.” It comes from idea [English] of cold war politics. This is a responsibility of missionaries and foreigners: the dividing and compartmentalizing of ethnicity. Buddhist missionaries are also responsible.

(Personal Interview)

“Chi” Suwichan’s conceptions of Karen ethnicity (“You should be Karen first”) confirm Stuart Hall’s notion that identity becomes strongest when challenged or in crisis (597). Approaching ethnicity from the standpoint of an activist working against domination from the state, his idea of ethnicity is one of alliances for the sake of strengthening resistance. As I will show in the next sections on Karen identity in Thailand, activists like “Chi” Suwichan required a united yet distinct Karen population to combat colonial discourses that seek to either ignore them as insignificant or inappropriately group them together with other minority groups in Thailand that do not share their values or agricultural practices.

**The Karen in Siam through 1923: Ethnogenesis and the State**

The experience with missionary print media and political organization in Burma is only one part (admittedly the larger portion, since the Karen population in Burma is 4-6 million in comparison to the 400,000 in Thailand) of the story of Karen ethnogenesis. With the closing of Burma to western anthropologists after World War II, scholars have taken up studies of the Karen in Thailand with new lenses, focusing less on Christianity and more on political, economic, and social relations between Siam, the northern Lanna kingdom, the Karen, the
modern Thai nation, and foreign powers. These studies frame the ethnic exchange more in line with Dru Gladney, who argues that “the formation of ethnic identity in the modern nation-state is a process of dialogical interaction between self-perceived notions of identity and sociopolitical contexts, often defined by the state” (159). Indeed, James Scott claims that the Karen and highland minorities like them can only be accounted for in relation to the state, saying “hill peoples cannot be understood in isolation, say, as tribes, but only relationally and positionally vis-à-vis valley kingdoms” (32).

There was an effort on the part of the Karen in Burma to bring their newly acquired religion, literacy, and political organization into the Sangkhlaburi province of western Siam in the middle of the 19th century. Anders Hovemyr’s study argues that the Karen in Burma believed there was a significant population, perhaps even a Karen kingdom, to the east of Burma, and some presented themselves as Baptist missionaries, hiding ulterior motives of seeking to unite what they believed to be the millions of Karen in Thailand (123). Due to distrust on the part of their western missionary counterparts, illness, natural disasters, and lack of funding, the Karen evangelists had very limited success in converting the Karen of Thailand in these late 19th century missions. Therefore, there was no resulting faith-based ethnic nationalist movement of the Karen in Thailand that matched the experience in Burma at that time, but Christianization still emphasized distinctive ethnic expression through religious, educational, and social development programs and institutions (Hovemyr 166).

Another reason for their lack of success in converting the Karen in Thailand was that the primarily Pwo Karen in western Siam along the border at Three Pagodas Pass had largely assimilated into lowland plains culture (Mon and Thai), integrating to the point where the ethnically-framed message of the golden book and relief from oppression did not hold much
persuasive power (Hovemyr 167; Renard 1980: 96). This suggests that, precisely because they had integrated into lowland society and did not share the same “oppressed orphan” mindset, ethnicity did not hold the same kind of rallying power for the *Pwo* Karen of that region. In other words, the lack of perceived injustice among the *Pwo* Karen of western Siam resulted in a reduced need for a strong Karen ethnic identification.

Ronald Renard provides a deeper background on the Karen in western Siam in his account (1980: 71-109). The first mention of the Karen in Siam’s records is of a settlement in Sangkhlaburi in the late 1700s, which eventually achieved the status of a province, recognized by King Rama III in 1829. A Karen, Phuwapho (titled “Phra Suwan”), was appointed by Bangkok as provincial governor. Karen in Sangkhlaburi were thus well respected by the monarchs, who enlisted their help in patrolling the borders and regularly accepted their tributes of herbal medicines and prized Karen woven cloth. The *Pwo* Karen of Sangkhlaburi were also known to entertain King Chulalongkorn by “convert[ing] the dances from only an event at festivals to a performance for visiting dignitaries. Such flexibility and willingness to please the Thais exemplified the *Pwo*’s desire to ingratiate themselves with the Thais” (100). The result of these actions and dialogic exchanges with lowland Thai communities resulted in social and ethnic assimilation: *Pwo* Karen in Sangkhlaburi were speaking Thai, no longer living in traditional longhouses (opting for permanent single family dwellings), engaging in wetland rice cultivation instead of swiddening, and practicing Buddhism rather than animism. In the 1880s, Karen ethnicity in the settlements of Sangkhlaburi seemed to be veering towards a complete merging with lowland Thai identity (109).

However, the *Sgaw* Karen, who lived further north (Tak and Chiang Mai province) and tended to remain at higher elevations, had a very different experience from the *Pwo*. Hovemyr
surmises that the Burmese model of an ethnically-based religious organization could have been successfully replicated in the north, and there were limited attempts by Karen evangelists to reach the more isolated Sgaw Karen there, but they only got as far north as Lampang, establishing a floundering Christian Karen community that soon lost its financial support from the Burmese convention (170).

As to relations between the Karen and northern Thai (khon muang), initial reports relate a similar and disengaged ‘us-them’ dichotomy, where the Karen were seen as wild jungle people (khon pa) to be left to the highlands as compared to the civilized, lowland Buddhists. There were mutually beneficial interactions, though. The Karen were regularly employed as teak loggers, a popular wood used by northern royalty to pay tribute to Bangkok. As Chiang Mai rulers sought to increase the population after the second Anglo-Burmese war ended in 1852, the Karen were invited into the mix as forest wardens and spies by King Kawilorot. During this peaceful time (through the 1880s), the Sgaw and Pwo Karen enjoyed good relations with the northern royalty and participated in lowland agriculture and religion (1980: 119-171). But modern reform and international issues would soon impact social relations and social identity of these northern settlements as well as the Pwo areas of western Siam.

King Chulalongkorn, or Rama V (1853-1910), sought to modernize Thailand as a preventive strategy in keeping western powers from colonizing it as they had done to the surrounding countries. Analyzed in light of Benedict Anderson’s theory, this was a nationalization of Thailand: borders were drawn, censuses were taken, elections were held, education was standardized, railroads connected previously unlinked regions, slaves became tax-paying citizens, and semi-autonomous regions (like the northern kingdom) were subsumed into a centralized system controlled by Bangkok (Renard 1980: 181-183). These events significantly
transformed relations between the individual and the state, and nation-state borders would solidify distinctions between the Karen of Burma and the Karen experience in Thailand.

For the *Pwo* Karen in Sangkhlaburi in western Thailand, their help was needed in the nationalist project of maintaining the border, and they were enlisted in rebuilding the boundary marker at Three Pagodas Pass. For the Karen around Chiang Mai, the creation of the Royal Forestry Department turned wild forests (previously viewed, not in terms of ownership but of regionality, as Karen territory) into official Thai government property, enlisted for national service as a government-controlled commodity. This setup effectively bypassed the northern royalty, with whom the Karen had good relations, leaving the Karen of the north with no ally (195). Further alienation occurred as centrally-appointed administrators, lacking local knowledge and operating from a “Thai/non-Thai” dichotomous classificatory system, lumped all minorities into one ethnic category in an act of political convenience, effectively equating the historically-embedded Karen with the newly arriving and drastically different (in terms of culture and agricultural practice) Hmong, Lisu, and Yao minorities (213). Alienated from society by the encroaching Bangkok-driven management, the (mostly *Sgaw*) Karen in the north tended to retreat away from lowland society and return to the hills, with their re-emphasized ethnic distinctions between their identity and that of the Thais.

Overall, the reforms and modernization beginning with Chulalongkorn’s reign in 1868 had the unforeseen result of ethnic formation and specialization, inherent in the discourse of patriotism and citizenship. When his successor, King Vajiravudh (1881-1925), took over in 1910 there was, for the first time, a clear, legal distinction made between Thai and non-Thai citizens (Renard 1980: 218). Where Chinese and Muslim citizens were encouraged to assimilate and adopt Thai ways, there was an overall policy of “benign neglect” directed at the Karen and other
less-visible minorities (219). As modern imports and Chinese medicines entered the scene, Karen products—hand-made textiles and herbal remedies—became less prized among Thai royalty. As the borders became firmly fixed and less contentious to both the British in Burma and the Thais, the Karen were no longer important for safeguarding the western frontier. Finally, the consolidation of power removed northern allies from the scene for the Karen around Chiang Mai.

Renard concludes that, as a result, “They lost their political status, their strategic importance, and their economic base. In 1923 [when the last Karen governor of Sangkhlaburi retired, followed by a subsequent Karen retreat from the forefront of Thai society], the Karens were citizens, but most of them felt abandoned again” (222). In this sense, Karen ethnicity became a means of justification of actions: for the Thais it was an excuse to ignore a group of legal, non-assimilating citizens within their borders, and for the Karen it became a means of understanding marginality and a reason to retreat from the state and into the ungoverned hills. But as national administrative methods modernized and became more far-reaching, conflicts would soon arise, framed again in terms of ethnicity.

**The Karen in Thailand since 1923: Ethnic Conflict and the State**

In “Chi” Suwichan’s introduction to his book on the *tehnaku* harp, he reminisces about his musical ethnic activism and its potential to spread his message of his people as environmentally benign, in contrast to the state’s assumptions:

I left it [the Karen harp, or *tehnaku*] there [sitting in a corner of the house] for a long time, until the state introduced a migration policy where people had to leave their forests. My fellow tribesmen, who mostly lived in forested areas since before they were declared as government property, were born in those forests. The forest was everything for our lives. We benefited from the forest, and therefore
preserved it. We preserved the forest, and therefore used its advantages. Use and preserve: that was balance, durability. But the government didn’t see it that way. People in the city didn’t believe it. It was therefore the duty of headwater tribes and forest dwellers to cooperate with people who felt confident in them, who understood that people and forests could live symbiotically together, to stand up and tell our story to those who didn’t understand or believe, to be able to acknowledge that our stories are true, to understand our various methods and tools taken up in the struggle in order to halt the forced eviction of the original forest people from their communities. I wanted to participate in the protests by using art, music, and lyrics to instill understanding among the public in the ways of my indigenous people. This made me think of the tehnaku again…(Suwichan vi)\(^7\)

Pointing again to Hall’s notion that identity most strongly comes to the fore in times of conflict (597), the story of the Karen ethnic awareness in Thailand most notably emerges through their experience within modern Thailand’s administration over them. “Chi” Suwichan and other Karen activists not only feel (and construct) an increased sense of ethnic distinctiveness informed by treatment of their people as other than Thai by authorities but also draw upon ethnic materials in formatting and justifying their own responses.

Pinkaew Laungaramsri (2003) argues that ethnic labels conjured up by the Thai authorities have created a discourse that has justified various inappropriate actions by the authorities. She argues that the Sgaw Karen in the north themselves recognized no common, pan-Karen identity (23) until the modern Thai nationalists adopted racial categorizations. During the period of what Renard dubbed “benign neglect” above, the Karen, and all other upland

\(^7\) This is my English translation, as the book was written in Thai and Karen.
minorities, were labeled “khon pa” (forest people), implying that they were nomadic, dirty, without religion, illiterate, barbaric, and uncivilized—consequently casting dominant Thai society as the norm (28). They were still, for the most part, left to themselves. With the looming threat of communism, however, the ethnic “othering” label officially changed in the 1950s to “chao khao” (mountain people, or “hill tribe”), which articulated Thai government desires to control, civilize, and nationalize both the people and the natural resources of the untamed hills. Assimilation became the official policy, waged in the form of Buddhism and state education and framed along ethnic outcomes. As the underlying subtext, Pinkaew asserts, “Complex ethnic relations have been transformed into a monolithic view of resource competition between uplanders and lowlanders…In this context, the Karen have entered into a more complex political ambience of ethnic labeling” (35). Charles Keyes further argues that neither the state nor the Karen people themselves really thought of themselves as an ethnic group until the 1960s (2003: 214). Far from accepting the overarching “chao khao” label assigned to them by the Thais (one that merges a diverse range of upland minorities into a single category), the Karen began to argue their uniqueness, even within the Thai classification.

Reiner Buergin (2003) observes that this non-Thai “Hill Tribe” label, blindly applied to all northern minorities regardless of realities, has helped make an inappropriate yet convenient case for displacement of the more environmentally benign Karen (as compared to the more environmentally aggressive practices of the Hmong and Lahu groups). After the 1989 ban on logging due to the destruction of most of Thailand’s teak forests, the Royal Forestry Department has shifted to a focus of preservation. While Hmong populations were the primary culprits in clearing forests to grow opium, the overarching “Hill Tribe” label indicted the Karen as equally guilty of destroying government forests and in need of “resettlement” (58). In an unfortunate
twist, the Karen legends of being “oppressed orphans” at the hands of mighty lowland rulers continued to be validated by these land use conflicts of the 80s and 90s. More than this, though, they continue to be used as tools for political engagement by both sides, with origin myths and ethnic stereotypes justifying ethnic activism on one side and government evictions on the other.

One outcome of these types of discriminatory events has been a stronger sense and positioning of Karen ethnic identity—one that, for “Chi” Suwichan, even subsumes the distinction between Pwo and Sgaw (Suwichan 47). Uradyn Bulag, in an analysis of Mongolian nationalism, points to “semiotic affirmative action” and the power of “ressentiment,” whereby “the affirmation of the ethnic self was to be brought through evocation of a sense of victimhood” (119). But ressentiment can do more than just create a commiserating in-group; it can further provide materials to base an ethnic case for countering hegemony. Rather than bringing the Karen into Thai society through religious and educational assimilation, these community forestry movements have offered a way for Karen people to rally around an ethnic consciousness and reposition themselves as distinctive, civilly engaged, and equal to Thais. John McKinnon argues that activists like Jonni Odochao are able to appropriate the methods and means of modernity afforded to them via education to, through media appearances and interviews, portraying the Karen as indigenous conservationists claiming long trajectories of ancestral wisdom applied to a “return to roots” community forestry management, setting the Karen on footing equal to any ethnic group. In an interview with UNESCO representatives (evidence that the movement has garnered some international attention), Jonni explains his actions and motives as this:

The idea is to tell the public that we have been misunderstood, to let them understand how we understood our forests, what our culture is, who we are. The Karen are trying to construct their own identity, or rather, they have their identity
and need to reconstruct it for the outside. The Karens are guardians of the forests.

(Odochao, Nakashima, and Vaddhanaphuti 120)

For activists like Jonni and “Chi” Suwichan, “the esoteric capital of ethnicity is his principal qualification” (McKinnon 77). An additional advantage comes in the indisputable nature of self-proclaimed “ethnic authenticity” that cannot resolutely be proven or disproven. In this way, ethnic activism, moldable to idiosyncratic preferences, proves to be an extremely versatile political tool.

In other words, a “consciously cultivated and performed” (McKinnon 81) ethnicity and culture becomes a means of counteracting the state narratives of Thai society. This process of turning the methods and materials of colonizers (education and literacy in Thai, appearances on state media, reframing and reclaiming ethnic labels) back on them in creative and ethnically-grounded formats is reminiscent of George Lipsitz’s (1994) assertion that the subversive methods of hip-hop have been employed globally by minorities in counteracting state oppression in post-colonial situations, where African slaves adopted the Biblical narratives to tell their own story of diaspora, consumers of music become producers through sampling and appropriating snippets of commodities to create new works, or Trinidadian communities hammered the oil barrels of capitalistic colonialism into steel drums for ethnic expression (36). The people who have been labeled by the state as “the Karen” are appropriating the label and the classificatory exclusivity (non-Thai-ness) to bolster their own sense of distinctive identity and indigenous claims to land and livelihood.

Karen Christianity in Thailand?

Contemporary scholars of the Karen in Thailand each give due mention to Christianity as shaping Karen identity where appropriate (Hayami 2004: 48), but there seems to be somewhat of
a trend to downplay the already-explored Burmese-Karen Christianity-to-nationalism route, instead focusing on aspects of Thai-Karen identity as a marginal survival of a Karen ethnicity relatively undiluted by the Burmese Baptist experience (Renard 2003:14). The Lampang community reached by the initial attempt from Burmese Karen (pre-1950) stressed “Christian identity as a bearer of ethnic identity” (Hovemyr 170), and a significant influx of American Baptist missionaries entering the northern hills in the 1950s, filling the social development vacuum left by the neglect of Thai authorities, copied the methods of their Burmese mission one hundred years prior, emphasizing the “institutional dimensions” (Hayami 2004: 257) of the Christian church.

Karen Christian movements in Thailand have also stressed literacy, pan-village organization through churches, medical centers, and social development programs, so much so that the all-important “print media” of Karen script was less constitutive of a Christian ethnicity than the new progressive lifestyle and restructured village, bolstered by tribal development projects and incorporation into national religious unions (273). Emphasizing ethnic pride and identity, “Christianity provides a means for retaining difference while at the same time facilitating incorporation into the socioeconomic and cultural life of modern Thailand” (291). Lehman agrees that involvement in the church has international ramifications (298). For Pastor Amphon (Ta-u) of Huay Nam Khao church, the Christian church is not only a link to larger international ethnic unions but also sees operates as the primary force of preserving and developing Karen ethnicity:

…for those Karen who aren’t Christian, in 50 years I believe they won’t be able to read, write, or speak Karen, and won’t wear Karen clothing. I believe their identity and culture will start to become extinct. The young generation now is
going out to study in Chiang Mai and other provinces, and they aren’t interested in Karen-ness very much…. Some people are shy when others find out that they are Karen. They don’t want others to know that they are Karen. But, for the Christians, at the church, they teach language, literacy, they have to wear Karen clothes weekly at church services. These kids will preserve their Karen-ness longer. It will probably get better, even. Because, today, the clothing is changing. There is also a computer program that allows them to type Karen. So I believe the Christian Karen will preserve their culture better. Also, another thing: some are returning to using local music, too. And, another thing, Christian Karen are having gatherings, with the Karen Baptist Convention, large meetings. These are huge gatherings, using only the Karen language. They have competitions, like cultural contests, with different musical instruments, exhibitions, staged songs. The organization is expanding… Non-Christians don’t have these. More thoroughly, there’s even a world-wide Karen awareness, with an annual meeting. Sometimes they meet in Chiang Mai. There’s Thai Karen—only Christian Karen—from Thailand, Burma, Canada, Sweden, USA. It’s a huge group. Organized internationally. Each country has an organization. This is only for Christian Karen, though. As I said, most non-Christian Karen don’t really have this kind of thing. (Personal interview)

If it is true, as Keyes argues, that the Karen are able to “draw on their traditions in situating themselves within the modern political economy of Thailand” (2003: 216) at the demands of environmental activism, the Karen can be shown to approach Christianity or Buddhism with the same savvy and flexibility in regard to their ethnicity. My earlier example of
the funeral discussion between Gibe and Gaedee confirms that ethnicity can become a validating tool for religious identity. Ethnicity can serve as a means to claim a wide variety of causes, and a Karen man like Gaedee can argue that he is Christian because he is Karen in the same way that Jonni Odochao and Suwichan Phattanaphraiwan can argue that they are environmental or community activists because they are Karen.

**Ethnicity is as Ethnicity Does**

As Keyes, observes, “ethnic identities serve as adaptive strategies for people faced with certain types of social experiences” (1979: 6). Yoko Hayami emphasizes that “the Karen reflexively adopt practices introduced by different forces to redefine their own communities and social orders while negotiating a continuously changing relationship with the lowlands” (2004: 246). Most of the studies cited here open with the problematically “non-ethnic” origins of the Karen, pointing to diverse languages, non-unified villages, and people who, in the 19th century, possessed no ethnic solidarity. Rather, Karen ethnicity seems to be a thing that happened to a group of people (or, in agentic terms, was claimed by them) based on social and political events. While myths, lore, ancestry, and other means of establishing continuity can be claimed, performed, and creatively reapplied by the Karen themselves, their power does not lie in their verifiability.

“Ethnicity” thus is not so much a thing to be negotiated by the Karen or their colonial, administrative, or religious overseers. Rather, ethnicity—whether articulated in terms of religious millennialism, education and community uplift, or counter-state conservationism—is a convenient and persuasive thing with which the modern Karen negotiate when confronted by the outside world. In confronting the Royal Forestry Department and stating their environmentalism, they articulate a glorious tradition of balanced, symbiotic coexistence with nature stretching back
to time immemorial (McKinnon 81). In encountering Christianity and successively spreading the Christian message to their own people, they reframe the message as indigenous and ethnic by fitting ancient *tha* poetry and myths to Christian themes (Shwe 63; Danpongpee; Amphon [Ta-u], personal interview). Ethnicity allows “the Karen” to bring their own motives and narratives to the negotiating table. In doing so, they perpetuate the ethnic label. As McKinnon surmises regarding their future,

> If the Karen are to persist as Karen this may well depend upon them bring able to change the forms and images of their beliefs...find expression in the language and symbols of the past to speak to the present...it is not false memory. It is not a reconstructed, entirely and conveniently reinvented history but a harvested legacy that makes resistance possible. (81-2)

When scholars examine the diversity and flexibility of the term “Karen,” it is always beneficial to keep in mind the actors behind the positioning. The question of “Who are the Karen?” might better be framed as “Whose ‘Karen’ are we talking about?” As my opening story with Waew and the resume shows, not everyone wants to claim the label for the same thing, and the label itself might imply different things for different Karen actors. Andrew Walker (2001) points out flaws in the environmental movement’s idea of “the Karen consensus,” where an unnecessary commitment to the assumed history of Karen as swiddeners limits agricultural development, since paddy production has historic precedence and might fit their ecological message better. The result is an “overly narrow and distinct sense of Karen identity” (161). Basically, not only is the construction of Karen identity selective and limited; it also has the potential to limit those who take it up actively. For a Karen person who grounds their ethnic essence in traditional animism (or swidden agriculture, or folkloric tales of oppression and
abandonment), the adoption of Buddhism or Christianity (or paddy production, or political or economic fortunes) would thus require a reframing of what it is to be Karen. And it is precisely that this label can be reconstituted in so many creative ways that bears witness to its power as an effective, even if invented or constructed, method of modern negotiation.

The following chapter will, therefore, take up this process of Karen ethnic domestication of Christianity, exploring more deeply the ways in which ethnic viewpoints can be reshaped to meet the demands of authenticity. The surface-level irony that a globalized world religion can be used to forge a distinct ethnic identity helps to reconfirm the versatility, adaptability, and agentic savvy of the Karen.
CHAPTER 3  INDIGENIZING CHRISTIANITY

Introduction

Setting the context for Karen appropriation of Christian music requires an examination of their history with Christianity. Missionary ethnographer Harry Marshall (1922) provides an early, colonial perspective while later ethnographies by Anders Hovemyr (1989) and Yoko Hayami especially (2004) emphasize Karen agency throughout the process of conversion in attempting to establish an emic, Karen-centric religious narrative (2004:30). Amidst the background of Karen religious history, this chapter examines transitions from traditionalist “spirit feeding” practices to Christian belief in light of writings by Thra (teacher) Loo Shwe, a Karen evangelist who traveled throughout Karen villages in Thailand before the arrival of western Baptist missionaries. The experiences of Huay Nam Khao residents are also taken into account. Loo Shwe, NGO-sponsored teachers, and local pastors in Huay Nam Khao focus varying efforts on intermingling Karen ancestral poetic teachings with the Judeo-Christian tradition in attempting to prove, justify, and legitimate Karen identity within the Christian tradition, reinforcing the Karen ability and tendency of localizing, domesticating, and adapting the foreign to Karen ethnic and indigenous demands.

Origin Myths

As discussed in the previous chapter, “Karen” is what the other calls them (Hayami 2004: 23). The idea of “the Karen” as a distinct or unified people group was initially a construct of outsiders from Burmese, Siamese, Northern Thai, and Shan records since at least the 18th century (Renard 1980: 54) and western colonizers and missionaries in the 19th (Keyes 1995: 211). Anders Hovemyr maintains that Karen identity was not just a matter of shared culture or
language but of common experiences with “persecution, exploitation, and marginalization, which the Karen have suffered at the hands of their more powerful neighbors in the course of centuries…it was probably this oppression that formed the firm sense of identity” (5). Hayami and Renard agree, pointing to a vast collection of Karen folklore in which the poor orphan, which is always equated with the Karen self (Hayami 2004: 27), was once powerful but has since been abandoned and oppressed (26; Hovemyr 63-69; Renard 1980: 7).

Writing multi-cultural awareness and comparison into their folklore, the Karen portray themselves in their stories as the eldest brother (Hinton 2000), while the white brother is typically the youngest. In one story, the father had two sons, Karen and white, who were both cooking by a river. The white brother finished first and left with the father, abandoning the Karen brother, who was now left with no intercessor (Hayami 1996: 338). In scholarly accounts of these myths, the Karen view themselves as abandoned, usually by their own negligence, and left helpless and illiterate, awaiting the return of a brother, father, or supreme deity with whom they once communed. Similar “lost literacy” myth recurs in many Southeast Asian highlander traditions (Tapp 77; Kammerer 282; Scott 2009), and the Karen have adapted it for ethnic, religious, and political purposes (Stern 1968: 305; Keyes 1996: 290).

A second origin story described by Marshall, coexisting with the primordial Karen ancestor Htau Me Ba (see previous chapter), recounts the Karen relationship with the supreme deity Yua. In this story, Yua created the first pair, making an orchard with seven types of fruit trees. Yua forbade them to eat of one of the trees, saying it would cause death. The serpent goddess, Muekawli (originally Yua’s servant but was since cast out), approached the couple and tried to convince them to eat the forbidden fruit, saying they would not die but would become gods. While the man refused to listen, the woman was enticed to eat the fruit. Not wanting to be
separated, the husband reluctantly ate as well. Yua found out about the act and banished them from his presence. They were therefore, by their own actions, exiled from Yua’s presence and guidance and left with Muekawli, who taught them how to read omens and divinations in the gallbladders of pigs and the bones of chickens (Marshall 213-216). From this emerged a self-ascribed status as “Pho Khe-Tse Kho,” or “destitute orphans” (Shwe 22). The similarities between this story and the Biblical account of the Garden of Eden inspired many early missionaries, including Francis Mason, to explore the possibility of a connection to the Jews, perhaps in China (Renard 1980: 34; Hayami 2004: 28). Some even suggested that the Karen were “one of the lost tribes of Israelites” (Shwe 6). These ideas were later abandoned.

Karen Animism

Figure 5: Karen Spirit-feeding animist ritual in forest outside of Huay Nam Khao (Before rice planting season). Photo taken by author, 2008.
While the “Yua Tradition” (Marshall 210; Hayami 28; Hovemyr 76) existed in myths and folklore, the Karen were not worshipping Yua in any ritualized ceremony at the time of first contact with western missionaries. All early accounts of the Karen portray them as practitioners of highly localized animist rituals (Hovemyr 77), consisting of ceremonies with just the family or sometimes the whole village. Harry Ignatius Marshall described a complex and consuming religious existence where “Every tree, river, lake, and indeed, almost every natural object is supposed by the Karen to be inhabited by its ‘K’sa’ or divinity…When a man selects the location for his field, he must perform certain ceremonies to win their good will” (225). Huay Nam Khao residents like Gaedee and Ela, who were too young to even remember experiencing these rituals, still conceive of them as stressful, consuming time, energy, and resources:

GADEEE: I think the Christians are more freestyle [English]. Their life…they don’t have to do wrist-tying. If something bad happens, they don’t have to follow those religious precepts…. They don’t have to follow those old rituals.

ELA: They don’t have to be afraid of spirits.

GADEEE: But, for me, I think Christians have an easier life. They don’t have to do this kind of thing.

BEN: Really? More comfortable?

GADEEE: Mm! Very comfortable! It’s very comfortable being a Christian, Ben….We don’t have to stress out over spirits. (Personal interview)

Karen animistic spirit beliefs hold many similar concepts of souls, spirits and health issues, a disconnected supreme deity, family and community bonds built through religious feasting, divination by reading animal intestines, and even origin myths with indigenous practices of other peoples in Southeast Asia (Leach 55), including Balantak (Busenitz 3-5, 13,
A main theme running through scholarly works on animist societies returns to the ability of animism to explain happenings that otherwise would seem arbitrary and capricious (Jensen 209) and also playing a major role in preserving familial and communal solidarity (Geertz 14, 28).

Animist Karen beliefs attributed health and well-being to a person’s “K’la” (life principal), which was prone to wandering about at night (leaving from the top of the head), and whose absence resulted in disease and eventually death (Marshall 218; Shwe 24). Children were especially prone to losing their K’la, which is why cotton strings were tied around their wrists at birth (Marshall 169; Young 75) and also why they were forbidden to attend funerals or even witness a processional with a corpse, fearing their weaker K’la would follow the departing K’la of the deceased (Shwe 38). Healing rituals, then, centered on calling the K’la back to the sick person’s body. The family spirit, or Bgha, could be called upon for assistance. Since the Bgha was a composite of each of the family members’ K’la (248), every family member (matrilineal) had to be present in order to have an effective ritual. Hayami identifies a social function in this religious setup as well, serving as a “way to keep families from dispersing geographically, maintaining social networks and “matrilocal residence” (2004: 123). She also observes the stress put on Karen families when female converted in the earlier years, jeopardizing the required full participation of all women in rituals (250). However, Pastor Amphon (Ta-u) of Huay Nam Khao church maintains that Karen allegiance to the family results in discussion and unanimous decisions, claiming an ideal and collective approach to religious conversion:

Karen families don’t really operate like that. Before they make the change, they discuss it as a family. After discussion, if they are to change, they do it as a family. Or if not changing, none of them change. That’s the way we do
it…Sometimes a child sees that God is a good idea, and changes individually, without asking his family. That does happen, and it can cause issues. But this isn’t what normally happens. Mostly it’s a family affair. (Personal interview)

Mayuree Khaoyub, the former vice-mayor of Monjong sub-district (Huay Nam Khao being one of nine villages under its authority), remembers the old Karen rituals not only as family affairs, but as reinforcing and requiring ethnic displays. Clothing and food had to be “real Karen” in order for the rituals to be successful. As she puts it,

Back in the day, in rituals, you could only wear Karen clothes. If you didn’t wear them, you couldn’t feed the spirits properly. That was the belief of those days. If getting married, you had to wear the clothes. (Personal interview)

Just as the home rituals constituted and enforced familial and physical boundaries by limiting participation to matrilineal family members responsible for the family’s bgha spirit (Hayami 2004: 105), community-wide rituals and religious observances also worked to make individual matters into village issues. Marshall’s observation that “the great fear of blighted crops, and of other evils not less feared because unknown, tends to keep the Karen a chaste people” (258) refers to traditional values where sexual misconduct, more than any other action, incited the anger of the spirits among the Karen, affecting the whole community. Monogamy, chastity, and fidelity were reinforced by spirit beliefs (Fink 106), and couples caught in the act (or deemed guilty through chicken-bone divinations) could be banished from the community (Shwe 13). Religious practice and adherence to morals were not communal, not personal matters.

Through engaging in animist ritual, “each participating village reformulates his/her relationship with the rest of the community. In the process, the community itself is constituted”
One favorite participatory activity for Mayuree was singing the seven-syllable sung poetic couplets, called *tha* in most studies (in Huay Nam Khao, it is referred to as “*saw*”), which are considered to be the authentic, unchanging teachings of the ancestors (Schwoerer-Kohl 301). For Mayuree, they proved very versatile:

… you could sing in any general situation. At a funeral, sure. Entering a mountain or forest, yeah. And if you don’t know what to do, you can work and sing at the same time…when we cheer for someone, playing sports, that’s one. *Saw* for someone who died, *saw* for happiness. There are many types… They talk about love, fighting, many things. Fighting. We also have songs about that. Love, young girls. Men and women sing in pairs. Sometimes, when you are angry, and there are no appropriate words to speak, they’ll sing them in a song. Oh, and there’s also the kind where one person sings one half, then the other responds. There, my father is good at those. He doesn’t speak much, but if he drinks whiskey, he’ll sing and dance. *Ha!* He sings well. When they get married, they sing. Newlyweds will sing auspicious songs. To ask for happiness for the bride and groom. To ask for the couple to have plenty of food. While tying strings around their wrists. This is a Karen ritual…Especially during spirit feeding time. House spirits. They sing in groups. Sing songs, drink whiskey, ask girls for cigarettes. When girls pass by, they call out to her: “Can I have a cigarette?” She’ll give him a cigarette. We have those…but not so much here. You’d have to go waaaay out into the mountains for that. Back in the day, I was a young girl, you know? They’d see me and say they wanted a smoke, one that I rolled myself. That’s how they called us. They’d sing
a song, ask for a cigarette. I’d give cigarettes to elders. That was another ritual.

Real Karen. (Personal interview)

In Roland Mischung’s study, “the knowledge of [tha] formed one of the most prominent markers of a person’s identity as pgak ’nyau (‘Karen’)” (130). Margaret Schwoerer-Kohl, in her examination of the use of tha at weddings, notes “the tha are of great importance in their cultural and religious life, as well as social identity” (301). Funerals especially featured singing of tha (Fink 95), which facilitated courtship, as boys and girls would pair up, singing tha while circling the corpse all night long (Fink 97). Certainly in my interview with Mayuree, no other topic sparked as much conversation and nostalgic reflection. When Loo Shwe traveled throughout northern Thailand (from 1917 until World War II), he spoke of challenges to his authentic Karen identity and his knowledge of poetry as the only acceptable defense:

If you go to a non-Christian village, they invariably address you in that way and start opening a “broad side” at you with old Karen traditional verse. Once in such a village as I entered it a couple of young Karens started speaking to me in poetry. I refused to be beaten by such uncouth (unpolished) country bumpkins at their own game. Relying on the knowledge gained by me in my study of old Karen traditions and songs, I returned them in the same strain and the duel continued thus for some length of time. When at last I found the leader’s face gradually lit up and a very broad grin appeared from ear to ear. We struck up a quick friendship and as it happened to be that he was some-what of the “poet laureate” of the locality, I was fortunate enough to gain a considerable amount of old Karen poetry as a result. (57)
It can thus be observed that many rituals and practices associated with Karen animist belief have served to establish, solidify, and confirm a sense of Karen ethnic identity. The traditional singing of *tha* as noted above by Shwe and others (Mischung; Fink) also featured prominently in the construction of identity, and music will receive due consideration in chapters three and four. Yet as noted previously, the poetic *tha* of the ancestors include not only animistic folklore but also retained implications of a former, abandoned, or otherwise present-yet-unutilized tradition involving a supreme deity and implying a former, glorious, favored, and powerful position of the Karen. It was this tradition that early missionaries were to tap into, albeit unknowingly at first.

**Christianity, Ko Tha Byu, and the Return of the White Brother**

After Adoniram Judson arrived in Burma 1813 and eventually purchased convicted murderer Ko Tha Byu, Judson taught him to read the Burmese-based Karen script developed by missionary Jonathan Wade and introduced him to Francis Mason’s translation of the Karen Bible. Prior to this, the Karen in Burma had myths of a lost written language, but they also had a legend about a return of their literacy with connections to *Yua* and to the white brother (Hayami 2004: 28; Hovemyr 66). As the first Karen convert, Ko Tha Byu would soon share a Karen legend with the Baptist missionaries that they would use to argue that their mission work was a divinely inspired, predestined fulfillment of a Karen path to Christianity (Marshall 297).

To reiterate the legend here, *Yua* had seven sons. The Karen son was the oldest brother, and the white brother was the youngest. *Yua* went on a journey, inviting his sons. All were too busy except the white brother. *Yua* made three books of knowledge, one of silver and gold for the Karen, one of palm leaves for the Burman, and one of parchment for the white brother. The
white brother would be charged with bringing the books back to his other brothers, but he gave the parchment book to the Karen, keeping the golden book for himself. The Karen were careless with the book, leaving it by the field one day while they were burning the hillside to clear the land for planting rice. The book was consumed by the fire, and chickens and pigs ate its charred remains. They therefore were left without the knowledge of Yua, lost the ability to read and write, and had to consult the intestines of the animals that ate the book of knowledge, that being their only link to the lost tradition, as Muekawli (the serpent goddess) had taught them. Finally, it was said that one day the white brother would return with the golden book, restoring their lost literacy and power (Marshall 279-280; Hovemyr 67; Hayami 2004: 17).

In some cases, this last detail resulted in some millennialist cults (Christian and Buddhist) forming around leaders claiming magical texts and divine connections (Hovemyr 85; Stern 1968: 312), but the early missionaries (western and Karen) in Burma quickly took it upon themselves to position themselves as bearers of the golden book in fulfillment of Karen legend, pointing to the parallels between the creation story of the Karen with that of the Judeo-Christian Adam and Eve story of Genesis and the similarity between the Karen Yua and the Hebraic “Yahweh” (Hovemyr 78-79). Hayami also stressed Karen agency in this process, saying the legend was “mutually constructed” by proselytizing missionaries and Karen people seeking to explain their ethnic history (2004: 33). By her telling, “the Karen also very conveniently adopted the missionaries as the white brothers who might fulfill their legends, bringing civilization, the Bible (i.e. the golden book), writing, education, and power” (2004: 41).

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8 Anders Hovemyr correctly points out that most writings on the Karen in Burma before the 1950s were done almost exclusively by Christian missionaries, who cast all of their history within Christian experience (65). As such, they might best be read as Karen Christian appropriation and adaptation of Christianity rather than “authentic” ancestral wisdom passed on “from time immemorial,” as Shwe claims (5). This paper focuses on the reasons for these claims rather than seeking to question their validity or origin.
For a local and contemporary example of this agentic reinterpretation, I consulted pastor Amphon (Ta-u). While he credits a miraculous healing as the real catalyst for conversion of the first Christians in Huay Nam Khao, he did recall how certain Karen legends were used to convey Biblical themes:

_Naw Mue E_ and _Khu Naw Le_. I’m not very good at telling it. I’ve seen it in a book. There are still people who tell it… at the beginning, there was a woman named _Naw Mue E_. There was the husband, named _Khu Naw Le_. One day, _Khu Naw Le_ went out to work, looking for wage labor in order to start a family, so his wife, _Naw Mue E_, could stay at home. He told her not to let the pigs out. This is a very shortened version of the story. Can’t be too long, Ha! So, _Naw Mue E_ didn’t obey. There was a big snake that came to eat the pigs. She had let them out. At that time, _Naw Mue E_ went to help the pigs, and the snake pulled her away. And no one could help her. After that, when no one could help, the snake said that he wanted the blood of _Khu Naw Le_; if he had that, he’d let _Naw Mue E_ go. So, in the end, this is very short, _Khu Naw Le_ went and cut his throat, taking his blood to the snake. And the snake let _Naw Mue E_ go free. So this is like in the Holy Bible with the story of Adam and Eve where God told Eve not to eat the fruit. But they ate it. After eating, they fell into sin. Fell into the hands of Satan. And after that, they couldn’t be helped by anyone. In the end, Jesus had to come to help. Only Christ, and it had to be his blood and body only. This is a legend that is like the Bible story. (Personal interview)

In Marshall’s version of the history, these kinds of stories, revised in Christian terms, took root and quickly spread, through proselytization, literacy, and the institutional networking
capacity of the church. Francis Mason completed a *Sgaw* version of the Bible in 1853, J.G. Binney formed the Karen Theological Seminary in 1845, and the Baptist College was established in Rangoon in 1875. In 1856 they had reported 11,000 converts. At the time of Marshall’s writing (60 years later), the number of converts had reached 55,000 (Marshall 300). Schools, printing presses, literacy, periodicals, and upward social mobility through contact with colonial powers accompanied pan-village social organization and religious conversion (301-305).

Marshall recounts the events as a process of national ethnic consciousness building, where upon seeing the Bible smuggled into villages against Burmese wishes, “they believed they were no longer to be members of a despised nation” (298).

Hayami credits western missionaries with their work as administrators and missionaries, but admonishes those who would ignore the role of the Karen in the process, saying,

> Although the missionary activities consolidated, delineated, and delimited the extent of these bonds, we must not emphasize the influence of western discourses to the extent that we deny Karen-initiated movements across communities prior to and concomitant with the arrival of Christian and British influences. (2004: 30)

Indeed, Hovemyr noted a marked move toward self-reliance on the part of the Karen (100), some of whom he argued found evangelistic motivation solely in the rumor that somewhere to the west existed a vast Karen Kingdom, the ultimate aim of the new emerging ethnic consciousness made possible through Christian administrative organizations (123). Whatever the motivation, though, “The evangelical work leading to widespread Karen religious conversion was conducted with strong Karen initiatives” (Hayami 2004: 40). The result of their
efforts led Charles Keyes to label the Karen conversion to Protestant Christianity as one of the greatest success stories of South East Asian Christian proselytization (1995: 51).

“Christianity is a radically different set of practices that promises a new order, a new life” (Hayami 2004: 256). Karen villages that convert to Christianity undergo vast changes to architecture, aesthetics, and hygiene (2004: 259), along with strict prohibition on animist activities and alcohol (Marshall 303). Hayami describes a Baptist development program called “Village Uplift,” where “Wells were dug, animal corrals built, streets laid, picket fences erected, and toilets were dug…the new aesthetics and hygiene appear to have gone hand-in-hand with the aspiration for material goods. Wooden houses with zinc roofing became more common” (259). Other research on Thailand’s highland minorities find similar “Rice Christian” (Kammerer 286) experiences with Protestant conversion and a successive (real or perceived) commercial gain among the Akha (Kammerer 286) and Hmong (Tapp 88), as well as the Karen (Platz 486). For Pastor Amphon (Ta-u), the material changes and prohibitions were primarily pragmatic:

BEN: Do you think, that when the Karen Changed religions, they forbade them to drink whiskey… no smoking…were they forbidden from playing music like this? [On traditional instruments]

AMPHON: No. Ha! They had a reason for forbidding whiskey and smoking. When the Karen would drink, they would lose control of their senses when drunk. Some would be drunk to the point of having bad health. Some would drink and cause their families to break up. Some would get into fights. The Christians saw that these things were not good. Things that cause us to destroy God’s temple, because our bodies are temples of God. So they forbade these things. But some still drink a lot. This was especially for whiskey. As to smoking…opium, you
know? Opium causes a lot of problems. They smoke it, then steal, become impoverished. So the Christian Karen forbade that, too. If they smoke it, nothing will get better. But about musical instruments, there’s not really a problem. That’s up to the individual—whether they like it or not.

BEN: …Do you think culture nowadays is different between Christian and non-Christian Karen? Or are all still Karen just the same?

AMPHON: We’re all Karen. It’s not that different. We’re mostly the same. It mostly depends on the individual’s taste…It’s not that Christians think they are better. No, they are equal.

Figure 6: Traditional Karen house in Huay Nam Khao. Photo taken by author, 2011.
Pastor Amphon (Ta-u) thus sees the successive prosperity (health and wealth) as matters of good sense (i.e., not taking drugs meant better health and familial relations, and not sacrificing all of one’s animals to spirits meant they could be put to a more economic use). With religious conversion came changed commodities, rituals, diets, medicinal practice, opportunities, and prohibitions (Hayami 2004: 268), leading some to question its effect on ethnic self-identity (Platz 481). Where Mischung (130) and Shwe (57) in a sense attach Karen identity to knowledge of the customary tha poetry and its connection to the ancestors and legends, Mischung wonders how identity will be constructed with increasing loss of this traditional knowledge (149). In relaying his experience in 2010, Tu-chae, a Karen musician (and recent convert to Christianity) from Huay Nam Khao described a relatively seamless conversion experience and theorized about Karen identity as such:

TU-CHAE: …some Karen these days are not open to new things in society, or don’t like outside ideas or think broadly. But this new generation doesn’t really have that problem. Older people might have this kind of problem.

BEN: So what did your mom think when you changed religion?

TU-CHAE: My mom didn’t scold me or anything. She just said it was up to me, and she wanted me to have happiness with what we are. As to personal life, as long as I’m happy, it’s okay with her. There probably are many families that preserve their values and want to preserve ancient ideas, forbidding this kind of thing.

BEN: …how do they think about it? Do they think changing religion has an effect on being Karen? In their opinion?
TU-CHAE: In their opinion, Karen people have beliefs that originate in spirit feeding, taking care of the forest, so when they change religion, those rituals of worshippng the spirits, worshiping the forest, when they don’t have those it maybe causes them to feel they had some wealth in that...if they knew that God has a stronger power, it might cause them to feel their beliefs and society are ancient, of the past. So changing to a different religion changes their way of life for some: they don’t have to do those old rituals anymore, and maybe brings in some new things to culture, too. Before, the Karen wouldn’t shake hands to greet each other and say “doe blue” [“Thank you” in Karen, also, a Christian greeting], but this handshaking action came with western culture, so it’s a mixture of original culture and the west. It doesn’t conflict much.

BEN: Do you think that if you mix in other cultures, you are still 100% Karen?
TU-CHAE: Yes. Yes. Our thoughts and stories are Karen, and the culture that comes from nature. Cultures all over the world always have change, because culture is a thing that goes with time, to each generation. So many generations will have differences. They have to adjust. But on being Karen, we have to develop ourselves to keep up with society as much as possible. The Karen are still Karen, the same. (Personal interview)

Hayami stresses that “It is indisputable that the Karen Baptist church consciously endorses ethnic pride and identity” (2004: 286) and also that “Karen ethnic pride and Christian morality are constituted as intertwined, providing a basis for a widened sense of the Christian Karen community” (2004: 289). While shrugging off saw singing and animism, pastor Amphon (Ta-u) even theorizes that, bolstered by Christian institutionalization, the aspects and artifacts he deems
constitutive of Karen culture will *only* be perpetuated by the Christian community as the non-Christians assimilate completely into the Thai system:

AMPHON: A family that changes religion…some things are lost. From rituals and original culture. Some things are lost. For example: wrist-tying. This is a belief dealing with spirits. Most of these are gone. What else? Singing *saw* when people die. They walk around the corpse singing *saw*. To this, most Christian Karen don’t have these anymore, because this was a belief from the original that they wanted to change. But, about language, I see that the Christians, most of them, have actually helped to develop and preserve it. Spoken, written language. And clothing, too. Christian Karen have developed and furthered this. But non-Christian Karen, some of them developed things, but in the area of language, it’s not really preserved. And sometimes, with Karen clothing, they also don’t quite preserve it.

BEN: And why do you think the Christian Karen want to preserve the language and clothing like this? Why is it important?

AMPHON: I believe that, in about 10 years, if the Karen who don’t follow Christianity—or maybe in 50 years—the non-Christian Karen will not be able to speak or write Karen. It will be gone. Because they don’t preserve it. They don’t see it as important. But, the Christian Karen will continue to develop it—writing, clothing—because they believe that Karen culture is something that God gave them. So we have to take care of it. (Personal interview)

In Huay Nam Khao, non-Christian Karen certainly do not use the writing system, even though there was an attempt to teach it in school when Mayuree was a student (personal
interview), but weaving is still a strong tradition that continues to be passed on. Part of what makes the Christian community so confident of their ability to survive, though, is the incorporation of these cultural elements into the institutional life of the dormitory students at the church. Kids there formally learn to weave, to read and write Karen, and to play guitar and sing worship songs and hymns in classroom settings. Non-Christian communities do not typically learn weaving unless they want to and their parents have the knowledge to teach, they do not learn to read and write the script at all, and even among the older generations, the popularity of saw singing is dwindling because very few remember them anymore and the kids do not see the music as fun or fashionable (Mayuree; Gaedee, personal interview). Hovemyr claimed that, for communities he studied in Thailand, evangelists fostered the idea that “to be Karen is to be a Christian” and that there was “a conscious move to stress Christian identity as a bearer of ethnic identity” (170). The Christians I talked to do not see the absence of tha (saw) as a major loss, and they do not view Christianity as a western, non-Karen intrusion. This is partly due to appropriative actions as described next.

**Indigenized Christianity and Karen Identity**

While outside authors describe Christianity in terms of reinforcing Karen identity, the account of Reverend Loo Shwe, the Karen evangelist who traveled throughout northern Thailand from 1917 until World War II, can be read as a clear framing of local agency and the Karen attempt to fully indigenize the Christian message. Shwe’s life’s work involved collecting Karen legends and customs in order to pair them with Biblical ideas, arguing for an inevitability of Karen conversion to Christianity, accompanied by social uplift. For Shwe, Christianity was the natural trajectory in the fulfillment of Karen legend and ethnic history.
Along with the typical story of God’s golden book and its return by the white brother (4), Shwe pairs other legends with Christian teachings as the Karen’s “veritable un-written Bible” (5) that are “so like the Old Testament” (21). He compares the singing of *tha* to Jewish cantillation and Karen prophecy to Hebraic prophetic traditions, saying

> It is very astounding that some pieces of Karen poetry have a general theme embodied in the book of Genesis, some are like Psalms of the Old Testament praising ‘YW AH’ (Karen), JEHOVAH (Hebrew) and His great works. It will be seen that God is pronounced in the same way of both the Karens and the Hebrews (Jews). Some poems resemble the books of the Prophets such as Isaiah and others, which foretell the thing in the distance [sic] future. (6)

After equating Karen prophecy to the Old Testament Hebrew prophets, Shwe seeks to establish legitimacy by offering proof of how Karen predictions have been true so far, claiming that Karen poetry accurately foretold the coming of the white man, railroads, rice mills, radios, and airplanes (6). This textual reframing undertaken by the Christian Shwe arguably indexes the traditional animist Karen practice of chicken bone divination before taking on wilderness expeditions, rituals, or unknown new endeavors (Marshall 279-285). In introducing his people to a new way of life, he justifies the power of both Karen poetry and Christian prophecy in foretelling future events. For example, he cites a Karen poem which, he claims, predicted the invention of the radio:

> Blow the trumpet hung on the rock;

> The air will make a rod to talk. (7)
By Shwe’s account, the trumpet is a loudspeaker hung high up on a tower (such as the tower for morning announcements from the mayor’s office in Huay Nam Khao), and the rod is the antennae (7). Shwe also points to Karen poetry that claims that the earth is round and spins on an axis (9), contains tales of Armageddon (8), and foretells of an ultimate, nationalist gathering where all Karen peoples will be brought together at last in peace under the unifying force of Christianity, or the “ten dog’s [sic] heads” (9-10). He interprets,

For the un-initiated, the ten dog’s [sic] heads means the sounding of the GOSPEL (ten commandments). The real meaning of this verse is though the Karens had been scattered all over the four corners of the compass, from time immemorial, they will meet together through the spreading of the Gospel of Christ. (10)

Shwe claims that Karen traditions, as passed down from the elders and ancestors, are nothing short of “firsthand evidence of this singularly interesting Biblical tradition of the whole Karen Race” (22). He thus positions animist practitioners as “groping in the very dark” (23) or lost from the true Karen way. But he does not completely discount all ritual by equating it with animism. Indeed, he tries to reconcile and reclaim Karen traditions along biblical themes, a process somewhat similar to the prediction of Geertz in Java, who claimed, “For modèren [modern] people…there is need to reform the beliefs of the past to make them consonant with what they take to be the demands of the present” (112). Shwe, in determining a contemporary Christian demand, compares the family “Bwa” ceremony (performed to restore health for a sick family member) to the Jewish Passover feast (28, 39).
Shwe seems motivated primarily by the idea of uplifting his people, seeing Christianity as the vehicle for self-sufficiency, progress and unification (57) of the dispersed sects of Karen, assumed to span from Burma to Vietnam. By his assessment,

It is undeniable to say that such an extraordinary progress is in the main, due to the enervating (vigorous) spirit of Christianity which their forefathers embraced…It is this very spiritual force that I wish to let it permeate (allow, permit) and uplift our brethren in Thailand who are still groping in the dark. (48)

In his travels, he not only preached but encouraged agricultural development, education, hygiene, and architectural restructuring (51-52, 58). The status of his people monopolized his final remarks. He desperately wanted to restore glory to the oppressed and disillusioned orphans, and saw a unified ethnic-religious front as the means to that end. In his conclusion, he attempts to link Karen identity to Christianity by placing Htau Me Pa (alternatively Romanized as “htaw me pah” by Shwe)—the mythic progenitor of the Karen race who lived eternally through the use of a magical boar-tusk comb and would one day return for to unite his lost children (28)—within the Christian trinity. Shwe foresaw the day when the Karen and God would “reunite…under the blessing of HTAW ME PAH who is nobody but, to the writer, God’s Holy Spirit” (63).

Shwe’s work in equating Christianity with Karen folklore served to position Christianity as not an exogenous belief system but as one validated and confirmed to the Christian Karen as indigenous. He called for continued research in 1962, and some 35 years later, a group of Karen seminary students still continued in this vein. In her paper on Karen creation stories, Esther Danpongpee remarks, “we feel a deep urge to preserve the beliefs of our people. In addition to all of this, I personally have come to realize that my Christian beliefs are one with the original
beliefs of the Karen. We can agree in almost everything, and our differences are very few” (12). In her view, to understand Karen religion, one must know the *tha*, and those poems contain everything needed to prove that the Karen God is the same as the God of Christianity (18). By pointing out similarities and differences between the Karen creation story with *Yua* and the Biblical creation story, Dangpongee claims,

> The traditional creation stories of the Karen are relevant to Karen churches. They form a bridge between Karen thinking and identity and biblical Christianity. These similarities seem so striking, in fact, that some wonder if they don't show that they were really taken from the Bible and then claimed as “traditional” stories of the Karen. But, there are important differences between Karen stories and Genesis that show that these old creation stories are not just taken from the Christian Bible. (26-27)

Thus the establishment of Karen identity in Christian terms depends on the ability of the Karen to indigenize the faith through pairing it with their own traditions. Dangpongee concludes that her Christian faith and ethnic identity mutually reinforce each other, stating, “One reason we feel God’s closeness and love so clearly may be our Karen heritage and our Karen *tha*” (28). Where Marshall and early foreign missionaries stressed the uplift of the Karen through the adoption of Christianity, Dangpongee spins it back to these predecessors, advocating for the enrichment of Christian identity through the incorporation of Karen ideas, noting, “If we would make more use of our Karen heritage, our religious experience and understanding could be enriched” (29).

This work of molding Karen folklore and Christian teachings continues in Huay Nam Khao and other villages throughout Omkoi district today, as can be seen by one NGO project
called “Beans of Mission” or “Metal Drum Coffee” ([http://www.drumcoffee.com/blog/](http://www.drumcoffee.com/blog/)). With a stated vision of environmental protection and uplift of poor Karen villagers without access to education, the majority of the content of the website and activities undertaken by Beans of Mission are clearly focused on Christian-based service projects. On the blog section in a travel journal format, one entry describes activities at Huay Nam Khao church\(^9\) in 2008 that clearly reinforce Shwe’s ideas on evangelism:

Friends from Korea led by Dr. Bea and Karen Church leader from Myanma [sic], led by Dr. KhinThan Htay visited villages to encourage and teaching Bible, on Jaunary [sic] 13-18, 2008… Rev. Htoo Meh preched [sic] at Tee Wah Klo\(^10\)… Rev. Htoo Mae taught about the Karen ancient poems connected to the Bible… Rev. Htoo Mae exchanged Karen Ancient poems with elders who know their culture… Rev. Htoo Mae taught Karen poems that go together with the Bible, exchanging their knowledge. ([http://www.drumcoffee.com/blog/?page_id=2505](http://www.drumcoffee.com/blog/?page_id=2505))

**Conclusion**

Christianity, therefore, met with (and continues to meet with) considerable success due to a constructed and manipulated similarity with Karen folklore and the actions of both missionaries and the Karen to adapt each tradition to the other. The Christian Karen have, through institutionalization and indigenization, taken it upon themselves to promote an ethnic identity and social mobility through faith as a unifying vehicle. As Amphon (Ta-u) repeated, he believes that Karen culture will begin to go extinct for his non-Christian neighbors (personal

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\(^9\) Pastor Amphon (Ta-u) shows up on several of the site’s pages, as Huay Nam Khao church offers a main point of departure to more rural Christian Karen villages.

\(^10\) "Tee Wah Klo" (Also Romanized as Thi Wa Klo) is the Karen name for Huay Nam Khao.
interview). Ethnic solidarity and institutional involvement in Huay Nam Khao reinforce each other. As Phillip Hammond notes, “the stronger are a person’s ethnic ties, the more they remain loyal to the religious organization associated with their ethnic groups” (7-8). Some Karen theologians today have turned the tables on the traditional conversion narrative in a sense. Whereas 19th century missionaries sought to uplift the ethnic, political, and social status of oppressed minorities through imparting Christian ideals and infrastructure, 21st century Karen evangelists are attempting to strengthen the Christian experience of the Karen by pointing to an authentic, indigenous identity.

Chapters two and three have both focused on the adaptability of the Karen in reshaping both the ethnic label and religious narratives to fit within and fulfill the needs of current events. The next chapter will examine Karen adaptive agency in light of their musical experience, which still draws heavily on a historic interaction with Baptist Christianity. As Loo Shwe asserts,

The Karen have an inborn love of music…A Karen loves to hear others as well as himself sing. As soon as a Karen is converted to Christianity (especially young people), the first and foremost thing he or she would do is learn to sing hymns and other secular songs. There are only a few Christian villages in Thailand, but you will easily, without previous information from anybody know that they are Karen villages. If you approach a Christian Karen village in the daytime, you will often hear from afar, someone singing songs of praise or hymn. In the evening, at lamp-lighting time, you will hear young people singing in their homes not only in solo
but in group and not only in a soprano part, but in all the other parts of musical sound. (Shwe 12)

The next chapter will focus on Karen Christian musical appropriation of foreign forms in Huay Nam Khao by analyzing Christmas songs in light of scholarly works on Karen musical styles.
CHAPTER 4  CHRISTMAS MUSIC IN PISALONG VILLAGE

Introduction

The previous two chapters examined Karen agency in approaching ethnicity and religion, showing their adaptive resourcefulness in resituating themselves within new circumstances. This chapter continues this direction in analyzing their confrontation with and appropriation of western church music. In describing and analyzing a representative selection of songs from this Christmas festival, I argue that the presence of “foreign” musical forms does not represent a loss or degradation of Karen musical practice but rather an indigenization of said idioms. As Hayami observed regarding conversion, Karen Christians do not simply reproduce received Christian doctrines but translate, contextualize, and localize it (2004: 285) within a conscious endorsement of ethnic pride and identity (286). This chapter will show how Christian music is similarly adapted and equally responsible in constituting ethnic pride among the Karen in Huay Nam Khao and the surrounding area.

Setting

On December 24th, 2011, Lisa and I were invited to attend a Karen Christmas festival being held in Pisalong village, a one-hour motorcycle ride southwest from Huay Nam Khao. Getting to this village required off-road driving on a narrow and dusty mountain path tracing the Mae Tuen river, winding through a substantial teak forest. As forests are considered the domain of spirits (Young 1969) in Karen animism and syncretic animist-Buddhist belief, the fear of encountering spirits in navigating this forest (on the part of non-Christian Karen and Thais)
results in Pisalong’s Christian residents enjoying a relatively isolated existence, with very few non-Christian residents being willing to visit or settle down there.  

The town is a small group of homes that cluster around a single dirt road. No power lines connect the village to any central grid, but most houses have electricity for a few hours a day with 2’ x 4’ solar panels provided by NGOs. Other evidence of contact with faith-based NGOs include people wearing “Good Life Club” t-shirts, 12 signs on houses advertising “Metal Drum Coffee,” 13 and cold-weather jackets provided by the Huay Nam Khao dormitory.

11 In fact, in the past, it had an enforced rule that no non-Christians were allowed to live there. This rule has since been repealed, but, even so, most of the residents in the town with the exception of a few homes practice Christianity exclusively.

12 The Good Life Club is a program supported by “Christians Concerned for Burma,” a Christian NGO that focuses on the spiritual and physical health needs of (Karen) children in villages attacked by the Burma army (http://www.prayforburma.org/IDX/Get_Involved/GLC/glc_what.php).

13 Metal Drum Coffee is a product of “Beans of Mission,” a local Christian organization based in Omkoi district dedicated to assisting Karen villages by developing eco-friendly agriculture projects and faith-based education and infrastructure (http://www.drumcoffee.com/blog/).
We parked our motorcycle at pastor Amphon (Ta-u)’s brother’s house, a large wooden structure with a satellite dish, and everyone walked over to the field next to the small church. A stage had been constructed and students were busy decorating it with palm fronds, streamers, paper flowers, balloons, fluorescent lights covered with colored plastic sleeves, and a large red cloth backdrop. On the stage sat an electric guitar, acoustic guitar, one electric bass, a few small amplifiers, and a microphone stand. Behind the stage, a gas-powered generator provided electricity for the public address (PA) system.

A team of church women squatted around large black plastic wash basins, cutting up banana tree trunks, pumpkins, and taro for curry. A few men had butchered a pig and were cooking it over a large wok placed over a hole in the dirt that had been filled with charcoal. When all the food had been prepared, village residents started to arrive in traditional dress. Married women wore black and red woven double V-neck shirts with wraps, young girls came in one-piece white tunics, and men had red woven shirts with jeans or slacks (Pastor Amphon and
other church administrators wore long-sleeved white dress shirts under their Karen shirts). Two long tables stretched across the field and everyone stood around them together, dipping rice into shared bowls of curry.

Service set list

After consuming dinner, approximately 200 church members from three villages (Huay Nam Khao, Huay Din Maw, and Pisa lung) gathered for the worship service, sitting on a large blue tarp (typically used for drying newly harvested rice). A student music team led congregational worship on stage (Thai and Karen worship songs), followed by prayer (Karen), reading from the Bible (Karen), and a sermon by Pastor Amphon (Karen). As soon as the regular service ended (Songs 1-5 in the subsequent chart), the stage transformed into an informal open mic forum where solo and group performers presented a song or two to the audience. This stage itself represents a change from “traditional” musical practice as described by Judith Becker (1964), who remarked that “there are no situations where music is the sole entertainment” (137). A quick synopsis of each song is listed in the chart below. For classificatory purposes, I have designated four separate song categories (traditional, hymn, Karen worship, and Thai worship), which I will define and expound upon later.

In the following sections, I lay out my analytical parameters for describing and categorizing performances. Prose descriptions in ethnographies, scholarly accounts, and data collected from personal interviews and my own transcriptions transforms the audio data into text for investigation. In doing so, I argue that contemporary Karen Christian musical practice shares a congruency with many aspects of “traditional” Karen styles, and acknowledges Edmund Leach’s (1964) suggestion that ethnographers merely observe a snapshot, a point-in-time observation of a culture in constant flux (7). All transcriptions in this chapter are my own.
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<th>Language</th>
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<td>Congregation, led by Amphon (Ta-u)</td>
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<td>18</td>
<td>I want Thais to know Jesus</td>
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<td>Worship (Karen)</td>
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<td>Thank you, mom and dad</td>
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<td>Karen</td>
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<td>C</td>
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<td>23</td>
<td>I’m glad Jesus was born</td>
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<td>Karen</td>
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<td>Worship (Karen)</td>
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<td>Reprise of song #19</td>
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<td>Hopeless without Jesus</td>
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<td>Acoustic &amp; electric guitar</td>
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<td>Worship (Thai)</td>
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<td>28</td>
<td>Wise men, shepherds, angels, Bethlehem, etc…</td>
<td>Male youth</td>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>Acoustic guitar</td>
<td>Em</td>
<td>Worship (Karen)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>God bless all Karen people</td>
<td>Male/female youth</td>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>Acoustic guitar, bass</td>
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<td>Worship (Karen)</td>
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<td>30</td>
<td>Jesus born in Bethlehem</td>
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<td>Acoustic guitar</td>
<td>C</td>
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<td>31</td>
<td>I miss my girlfriend, and I pray for her every day</td>
<td>Male youth</td>
<td>Karen</td>
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<td>Male youth</td>
<td>Thai</td>
<td>Acoustic guitar</td>
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<td>Worship (Thai)</td>
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<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>“Merry Christmas to you” “Happy Birthday to you”</td>
<td>Male adults</td>
<td>Karen/English</td>
<td>Acoustic guitar</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>Worship (Karen)</td>
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<td>34</td>
<td>God gives good gifts</td>
<td>Male youth</td>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>Acoustic guitar, Bass</td>
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<td>Worship (Karen)</td>
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<td>35</td>
<td>Forgiveness &amp; redemption</td>
<td>Male adult</td>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>Acoustic guitar</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>Hymn</td>
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<td>36</td>
<td>God is always with us</td>
<td>Male youth</td>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>Acoustic guitar, Bass</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>Worship (Karen)</td>
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<tr>
<td>37</td>
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<td>Male youth</td>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>Acoustic guitar, Bass</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>Worship (Karen)</td>
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<td>38</td>
<td>“Joy to the world”</td>
<td>Congregation</td>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>Unaccompanied</td>
<td>A</td>
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<td>39</td>
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<td>Congregation</td>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>Unaccompanied</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Hymn</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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*a Translations provided by Gaede Weiwantra

*b Key is listed by visual (chords played) rather than audio data, as the guitar tuning was ½ step lower than standard guitar tuning (E A D G B E).

c Gaede found it hilarious that this song was performed. As he put it, “He sings this song at every event. It’s allowed because he does mention prayer, so it sort of has Christian content” (personal interview).
Graphically representing performance genres, performer data, and instruments used, the following data shows that youth-oriented, guitar-led, worship music dominated Christmas performances. Adults, traditional pieces, and unaccompanied pieces enjoyed minimal stage presence:

Table 1: Set list at *Pisalong* Christmas festival.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Performances, broken down by song type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Worship (Karen), 20 songs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worship (Thai), 9 songs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hymn, 5 songs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional, 3 songs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 9: Graphic representation of Christmas performances, grouped by style categories. Of the 37 performances on stage, almost 80% of the songs could be classified as being performed in “worship” style (to be explained later in this chapter), while older genres (Hymn and traditional) accounted for 21%.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age range and gender of performers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mixed youth, 14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male youth, 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adults, 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congretation, 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female youth, 2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 10: Graphic representation of performers, in terms of age and gender. The performance space was largely dominated by the youth in attendance. Unsurprisingly, younger performers tended to perform more contemporary styles.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instrumentation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Guitar (acoustic and electric), 22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guitar and Bass, 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unaccompanied, 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tehnaku, 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ukulele, 1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 11: Graphic representation of instruments used in performance. Guitar accompanied 87% of the songs, while the Karen *Tehnaku* harp made only one appearance (not including my performance).

---

14 For these graphs, statistical data excludes the two performances by Lisa and me.
Category One: “Traditional” Musical Style (*Tha and Tehnaku*)

Including anthropological ethnographies, only a few scholars have examined Karen music in much detail, and essentialist ideas regarding a supposed ‘authenticity’ commonly reoccur. Margaret Schwoerer-Kohl (2003) offers a preliminary study on *tha* poems sung at weddings, emphasizing their importance in linking contemporary Karen peoples with the ancestors (300) and also acknowledging that “thus far, no detailed investigations of the songs have been done” (301). While her study is brief and introductory, she does offer a sense of slurred melodic contours favoring a leap of a perfect fourth (302).

Roland Mischung takes wedding *tha* analysis in a more functional direction in his study (2003), more explicitly linking them to ethnic authenticity, saying, “until the 1980s *tha* were regarded as constituting the core of Karen cultural heritage...real Karen were those who had knowledge of *tha* and knew when and how to use them properly” (134). Mischung goes on to describe their structure—seven syllables, repetitive, rhyming finals, and antiphonal performance at weddings—yet does not provide transcriptions. His analysis addresses their use as an identity marker and a means of managing social situations—both ideas reinforced in my interview with Mayuree—but this chapter focuses rather on examining the ways in which they are sung as embodying Karen singing style.

In my interview with Mayuree, I asked her to demonstrate how *tha* is and was performed, and on what occasions. She offered the following vocalization and description:

![Figure 12: Tha [saw] performed by Mayuree (Pe-nyo) (personal interview)](image-url)
MAYUREE: It means, a young girl is in love. Si doe khue si khue o khue means a Bodhi tree and the forest live together. If you die, you die together. Like that. Si doe khloe si khue o khue...Si khue o khue means ‘live together, die together.’

Love… you’d sing this when climbing the mountain, for fun. You could think whatever, then sing it. You could also sing it to help send off the spirit of a deceased person, too. When you sing this saw\textsuperscript{15} at a funeral, you’d pair up, saw-ing. People would watch and say, ‘Oh, this girl can sing well!’

BEN: and who taught these songs?

MAYUREE: My parents. They learned from their parents. Before, my grandma, who was over 100 years old, she had like seven or eight children. The youngest would sleep next to her, and she’d sing every day, so it was easy to remember them… Nowadays, I can’t really remember them. Well, I can’t sing them, but some I still remember. Can’t sing, though. Ha! When you sing them, you have to pair up. If I pair up with someone, maybe I can be able to sing them.

Even while she claims to be a poor singer and deferred to women of older generations who could perform much better than she could, Mayuree’s singing style evidences one of the most typical aspects of Karen vocal performance: that of the sliding, slurring note that reaches pitches by approach rather than a “clean” landing on an exact pitch. Recognizing the difficulties in graphically capturing this vocal feature within the confines of western “prescriptive” notation tools (Seeger 1958), in my transcription I render these vocal patterns with both a slur and a straight connecting line (figure 13).

\textsuperscript{15} As noted elsewhere in this thesis, Karen in Huay Nam Khao referred to these as saw rather than tha.
This singing style is also observed by Theodore Stern (1971: 208) and Roland Renard (1991), who describes a slurring and poorly enunciated singing style due to the chewing of the betel nut while singing at ceremonies (12). Marshall describes the Karen as “hold[ing] one or another tone as suits their fancy, introducing quavers on the long notes and sliding down or slurring from one tone to the next” (161). None of them renders these stylistic elements through transcription, though. Thus, I have also included below (figure 14) my transcription of a tha sung by an elderly woman while harvesting rice in neighboring Mae Tuen Noi village in the summer of 2011, giving visual representation to Schwoerer-Kohl’s perfect 4\textsuperscript{th} and Marshall’s noted “quavers” and “slurs.”

Figure 14: Rice harvest tha (recorded July 2011 in Mae Tuen Noi village). This song, as is typical in this genre (Stern 1971: 189), employs a more ancient, archaic language and, as such, was untranslatable even to Tu-chae’s elders (personal correspondence).
*Tha* poems have both gone out of fashion for younger Karen generations and, for the Christian community of Huay Nam Khao, experienced decline due to their past association with Karen animist rituals which were typically abandoned following the conversion to Protestant faiths (Hayami 2004: 226; Amphon, personal interview). As such, performance of *tha* was definitely not included in the Christmas celebration. However, I include them in this section for the purpose of providing an understanding of “traditional” Karen singing style. The predominant vocal trait employed in *tha* singing—the slurring approach to notes—as I will show later, has been retained even as musical styles adapt and change.

One traditional aspect of Karen music that *has* been (just barely) retained and was showcased in the Christmas festival is the *tehnaku*, the six-stringed Karen harp which can still be found among Karen villages, even if only marginally so. As I had been told in 2008 at a Karen Christmas celebration in Yang Piang (within Omkoi district) by a Swiss missionary couple that their church members in Omkoi were afraid to play the old instruments due to religious convictions, I was surprised to hear that its scarcity in Huay Nam Khao was attributed not to religious restrictiveness but more to issues of modernity and aesthetics. As Amphon (Ta-u) emphasized,

AMPHON: Very few play them [the *tehnaku*].

BEN: Why do you think that is? Why aren’t they popular?

AMPHON: ...They just aren’t modern/ up to date/ fashionable. Ha! There’s a very small group that’s interested in them.

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16 Renard says it is “almost impossible to find a Karen skilled in playing this instrument” (1991: 11), while Christina Fink describes it as dwindling in the 1990s (93). However, Karen activist-musician “Chi” Suwichan Phattanaphraiwian’s recent publication of *I am Tehnaku* can be read as an attempt at reviving its popularity and reestablishing it as an icon of Karen indigeneity.
BEN: If someone wanted to play the *tehna* in church, would that be a problem?

AMPHON: No, not a problem. There are people who can teach it. You’d have to find a *tehna* first, though.

BEN: So, it’s not that people see it as music of the old religion?

AMPHON: No, no. Not like that. It depends on the melody they use. Not that the instrument is of Buddhism or Christianity…

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“Chi” Suwichan’s book on the *tehnaku* recounts his father’s history with the harp, suggesting that the Christian community has not always held such a tolerant stance on the traditional instruments. He describes a situation where the church elders criticized him for playing the harp in church in the early days (2010: v). He does agree that it is not as problematic in the new era of multiculturalism, however (personal interview), and actively foregrounds it in performances for bolstering his claims to authenticity in ethnic and environmental activism.
The development of the tehnaku itself provides a compelling example of Karen agency, as described in “Chi” Suwichan’s recent publication, *Rao Khue Tehnaku* (2010). His book outlines a history of appropriation with the instrument itself, evolving from nature-sourced products to domesticated foreign objects. The plucked strings now come from reclaimed and untwisted bicycle brake cables rather than vines and tendons (54), resonators are made from metal gas cans and candy containers rather than animal skins (53), and tunings taken from western hemitonic scales coexist with traditional Karen anhemitonic pentatonic scale (89). Thus, as a model of material domestication, the tehnaku shows that indigenization was a process that pre-dated the acceptance of Christianity. The continued appropriation of both the sounds (hemitonic scales and strophic song forms) and the instruments (primarily the guitar) of Christian music prove a continuation of the trend.

Even as “Chi” Suwichan attempts to revive the status of the harp, the tehnaku made only one appearance at the 2011 Christmas festival, a reflection of its fading popularity among the younger generation, who all chose guitar as their performance instrument. Even the musician that played it, an older man seen as a local comedian of sorts, performed his three other songs of the night on the guitar. While the attention given to what I am describing as “traditional music” here may seem disproportional, given the comparatively much larger amount of time devoted to performing contemporary worship songs, I find it is valuable in laying a framework for certain Karen musical styles, as well as musical and religious ethnographic data. This sole tehnaku song (see figure 16) showcases the previously-described Karen slurring singing style, a tonality established by the recurring E-A perfect 4th, and an adherence to the anhemitonic pentatonic scale described by Marshall (161), Stern (208), and “Chi” Suwichan (85). Additionally, in line with Stern’s observations that traditional lyrical content typically included unintelligible Mon,
Pali, and highly embellished language, translating the lyrics proved problematic for my informants, who claimed the language to be archaic and difficult to decipher.

Figure 16: Tehnaku song performed at 2011 Christmas celebration (See appendix for my full transcription). Both Gae-dee and Tu-chae summarized the lyrics as referring to Muekawi, a serpent goddess who lived in the “Garden of Eden” with “Adam and Eve” (An adaptation of the creation story from the Bible’s book of Genesis).

The final example, a medley of two songs performed on the guitar but sung in traditional fashion—employing an anhemitonic pentatonic scale and slurring notes—retraces themes of the previous chapters on Karen adaptability when it comes to ethnicity and religion while confirming my previous observations on the slurred singing style. Additionally, this song (as compared to the rigid structure of hymns in the next section) does not follow a strict, strophic A-B form with a distinct verse and chorus.

18 The guitar, unamplified, can barely be heard in the recording.
19 Rhythm, frequently mentioned in ethnographic and musical studies on the Karen, will be addressed in the next sections.
The lyrics of this song, more than any other, shows Karen adaptation to foreign ideas—religion, in this instance. For analytical purposes, I quote Tu-chae’s translation in full:

In the past, the elders told us our land was very hot.

If we went looking for firewood in the forest,

And threw it down strongly,

When midnight came, we were afraid,

Because the gods of the old era were strong.

When we’d go up to cut down trees in the forest, we’d be afraid;

But when the white man came, why is it that in our village

The elders told us that it caused our land to cool down?

The tree was no good, and the white man cut it down.

Therefore, we don’t have to be afraid of the old spirits anymore.

This song blends several elements. First, the situation is cast in terms of “hot” and “cool,” ideas indexing traditional animist conceptions about fertility, “coolness” being seen as “the precondition of fertility and well-being” (Hayami 2004: 224). By appropriating animist concepts

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20 In our personal correspondence, Tu-chae translated songs from Karen to Thai, which I then translated to English.
and reapplying them to the arrival of the white man and his religion (and the subsequent freedom from forest spirits) within the context of traditional music, the old spirit order, described by anthropologist Shigeru Ijima as key to preserving a “Karen” sense of self and family (107), is overthrown without a perceived decline of ethnic identity (Amphon, personal interview). As such, the second half of the song goes on to usurp the newly arrived foreigners’ language and faith set to an anhemitonic pentatonic scale centered on G as the tonic, complete with mock-English lyrics (to which the audience responded in uproarious laughter):

![Mock-English lyrics: “Thank you Jesus.”](image)

Figure 18: “Thank you Jesus” performed at 2011 Christmas celebration (See appendix for full transcription).

These methods of appropriation of the foreign, in addition to the retention of typical musical forms, indicate a vibrant and grounded music tradition. While it is true that the “time-honored” tha is not sung here and the tehnaku makes but a single appearance on stage, Marshall’s assessment that the Karen “have almost entirely given up on their native music” (29) and Renard’s claim that “Karen music can be said to have been in a decline for the last 70 years” (1991: 15) demonstrates essentialist notions that privilege an inappropriate partiality to a constructed concept of “authenticity” and does not give fair credit to Karen agency in their appropriation of foreign forms. In Leach’s view, these ideas favor “equilibrium” and do not give
equal voice to agency or change (7). Judith Becker (1964) provides a more open assessment, noting that the Karen “love the music of other peoples and will go out of their way to hear ‘foreign’ songs” (138). Echoing the tendency of seeking out and taking advantage of the knowledge of others described in “Chi” Suwichan’s book (88-89), Tu-chae further emphasizes:

TU-CHAE: The nature, the characteristic of the Karen is one that easily picks up new things, adjusts well. They are open to new things. They study and get things from others… This is development. If we don’t develop, just keep the old, we won’t keep up with the times… I think that the mixture is a means of adjusting. An adjustment of life that’s necessary for survival. I think every culture, every religion, everything in life has this kind of adjustment to survive.

BEN: That’s probably true… But some people nowadays maybe think, “This music is ‘pure’ or not influenced by the west.” But if we analyze it really, we’d maybe see that it is normal to mix things. Mankind has done this since…

TU-CHAE: Yes.

BEN: Many years.

TU-CHAE: Thousands of years.

To summarize, the most prominent features I draw attention to in examining “traditional” Karen music are the use of the anhemitonic pentatonic scale, a slurring singing style, ambiguity (or ambidexterity) of lyrics in tha singing, and a non-adherence to the rigidity of western forms and meter typically employed in hymns (to be discussed in the next section). Also, good-natured appropriation of foreign ideas is celebrated. Thus, the parody “Thank you Jesus” helps to pave the way for understanding a direction in Karen music marked by internalizing a repertoire of Baptist hymns. The next section will show, through style analysis, how hymns represent not a
westernization of Karen music but a continuing “indigenization,” to borrow Thomas Turino’s framing (2000: 46).

**Category Two: Four-Stanza Baptist Hymns**

Most scholars who have examined Christian Karen communities have noted a deeply held love of singing. Hayami calls the singing of hymns, carols, and original compositions a “favorite pastime among the younger Christians” (2004: 266). Loo Shwe claims his people have “an inborn love of music” and that learning to sing hymns is one of the first activities of new converts (12). Marshall claimed that the Karen took up the western hymnbook “with their whole hearts” (29). Learning to sing and read notes from a hymnal was a significant part of Amphon (Ta-u)’s theological training (personal interview). Christina Fink (2003) mentions that courtship singing at funerals (tha), an extremely popular activity among Karen youth, had been forbidden in Christian communities, who turned with equal enthusiasm to these all-night Christmas and New Year singing experiences (108).

Echoing those ideas, the Christmas music at Pisalong village predominantly featured youth performers (figure 10), who had been anticipating the event with much enthusiasm (Amphon, personal interview). Yet there were a few instances on stage where older performers presented hymns, which immediately differ from traditional pieces. First, Christian hymns employed the hemitonic seven-note scale of the west, including the half-step scale degrees fa and ti (C and F♯ in figure 19 below). Secondly, the four-stanza structure of hymns can be clearly seen in the following song as A₁⁻₁⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻⁻ контакт

21 Traditional singing did not have such “rigid” (in a western, strophic hymn sense) musical forms, although they were structured by the demands of seven-note phrases as they were based on tha conventions. Stern describes “uneven length of musical phrases” (188) which Marshall saw as inaccurate time-keeping (161), and Schwoerer-Kohl notes that Karen poetic demands trumped strophic musical regularity (303).
hymn as “a very old song.” Most of the adults around me visibly mouthed the words, and a few joined in singing at various points. (Figure 19)

Figure 19: Hymn performed at Christmas Festival. See appendix for full transcription.

Lyrically, this is one of the few songs to not feature a Christmas theme. Lapo described it as a prayer of repentance:

I have so much sin: these desires/passions/lusts, I ask forgiveness for

Now I enter in to meet God,

Asking God to forgive me.

Life on the surface of the sea, one must fear everything.

I was about to sink, but asked for God’s help,

About my sin, tears flowed,

I asked God to wipe my tears,
And in humility, I begged God to send help,
And to return again to be my center.

This hymn style shows domestication of a foreign form. While it incorporates symmetric 6-measure stanzas, strophic text, and western harmonization, two features correlate with the “traditional” style outlined in the previous section. The first is the vocal slur, which can be heard in nearly every measure of this performance. The second feature, rhythmic style, is what Marshall alluded to in his comment that “They do not keep accurate time in their singing” (161, emphasis mine). This hymn employs a mixed meter (3/4 + 3/4 + 4/4), which shows a recurrent pattern when analyzed as a whole but would certainly feel awkward to a westerner like Marshall accustomed to symmetry of the meter when singing hymns (“Merry Christmas/Happy Birthday to You”, discussed later on, will show similar metric organization). This hymn performance shows that the “uneven” Karen rhythmic practice (Stern 188) was not fully subsumed under the influx of the rigid, symmetrical meter of western hymnody.

The second hymn example, “Joy to the World,” again shows this mixing of western hymns with Karen musical style (Figure 20). Accompanied by guitar and performed by a group of men, this upbeat hymn evidences the similar slurring singing technique, a gradual transformation from the hemitonic western scale to the anhemitonic pentatonic scale, and what seemed to this western singer to be a rhythmic elision on the final phrase. The reason for this change is not quite clear. One possibility is that this is case of making the closing line symmetrical to the opening phrase, as was sometimes done with antiphonal performances of tha couplets at weddings (Mischung 131), but regardless of the reason, it shows that hymns have been domesticated and that the style of performance is not a carbon copy of the west.
Figure 20: Karen version of “Joy to the World,” performed at 2011 Christmas celebration.

Therefore, Karen hymns provide evidence of adaptation, and Marshall’s statement that “the Karen have almost entirely dropped their own music for that of the west” (161) is not a fair assessment, not only in his stated preference for essentialized “tradition” but even in his musical analysis. Even though certain instruments and song types are not found at Christian ceremonies and western melodies and A-A-B-A song forms can be pointed to, these performances still embody many aspects of Karen musical style. The next section, “Karen worship music,” offers further proof of this in that it contained newly composed songs in a newly developing style. As most of the community converted to Christianity 30 years ago, the teenager performing on stage grew up with Christian church music as their primary (ethnic) musical referent. That they now compose and perform music in this style proves a high degree of internalization and a sense of ownership over musical practice, re-forming and reframing “the exotic” into something locally relevant (Trimillos 1992: 17).

Before I move on to the “Karen Worship” category, I present one liminal song featuring strophic, melodically variant verses, straightforward melodies and rhythms, and chordal
simplicity. This song applies the jubilant feel of “Joy to the World” to a conglomeration of English and Karen lyrics set to a well-known western melody, and seems more in line with the “Thank you Jesus” discussed in the first category. The “Karen” Christmas song, “Merry Christmas/Happy Birthday to You,” proved to be a good-humored performance and one of the key songs used in the annual caroling events (discussed in the next chapter). Figure 21 below shows the same themes discussed previously: slurring singing style and a mixed meter (3/4 + 4/4). Additionally, this song, along with many of the youth worship songs in the next section, was universally known. This provides clear evidence of domestication, as no western tradition sets these lyrical and melodic sets together in one fused performance. Christmas music is thus made into their own product.

Figure 21: “Merry Christmas/Happy Birthday to You,” performed by male singers accompanied by guitar. See appendix for full transcription.
Category Three: Karen Contemporary Christian Worship

Karen worship songs, by far the most popular type of music performed on the stage, represent a continuing blend of musical continuity and development. The song below shows some of the same singing styles, but differs considerably in chords used as well as rhythmic complexity. Compared to hymns, where emphasized notes tend to fall on strong beats, contemporary worship songs heavily feature syncopated rhythms and stressed upbeats. A second distinguishing feature is the use of more chords. While hymns tend to keep to a basic I—IV—V structure, Karen worship songs regularly substitute relative minor chords and add scale degrees (2nds, 7ths) for more complex sounds:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{I} & \quad \text{V} & \quad \text{vi} & \quad \text{IV} & \quad \text{V} & \quad \text{I} \\
\text{Spoken: Doe lo ko wa kha ja e nav} & \quad \text{pa goe sa} & \quad \text{mae} \\
\text{a gu we} & \quad \text{pwe we do} & \quad \text{so ga ma} & \quad \text{pwe we do} & \quad \text{ta la kue baw} \\
\text{lo} & \quad \text{a we saw} & \quad \text{jgi} & \quad \text{pa goe sa} & \quad \text{lo} & \quad \text{e po pwa} & \quad \text{hi}
\end{align*}
\]

Figure 22: A local band from Pisalong performed Christmas 13, a worship song written by Lapo Waewjantra. Lyrics talk about God’s power. See appendix for full transcription.

One particular chord pattern occurred frequently enough to deserve inclusion as part of a distinct “Karen worship” style. Not found in any of the hymns or traditional songs, this particular chord progression appeared in 75% (15 of the 20) Karen worship songs in this set list (and 4 out of 8 Thai worship songs). I call it the “Karen worship pre-cadence,” and have marked it in both examples, above (Figure 22) and below (Figure 23), with a box. The basic progression is ii—V—iii—vi (circle of fifths), and usually occurred at the end of B sections as an extension of a IV—V—I sequence (see Table 2).
Table 2: Chord structure analysis of Karen worship songs. Emphasizes prominence of "Karen worship pre-bridge" (underlined in chart).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure 22</th>
<th>Song into</th>
<th>A section chord structure</th>
<th>B section chord structure</th>
<th>C section ending/coda</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1-ii-V-V</td>
<td>1-iv-V-V</td>
<td>1-iv-V-V</td>
<td>1-iv-V-V</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>1-ii-V-V</td>
<td>1-iv-V-V</td>
<td>1-iv-V-V</td>
<td>1-iv-V-V</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>1-ii-V-V</td>
<td>1-iv-V-V</td>
<td>1-iv-V-V</td>
<td>1-iv-V-V</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>1-ii-V-V</td>
<td>1-iv-V-V</td>
<td>1-iv-V-V</td>
<td>1-iv-V-V</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>1-ii-V-V</td>
<td>1-iv-V-V</td>
<td>1-iv-V-V</td>
<td>1-iv-V-V</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>1-ii-V-V</td>
<td>1-iv-V-V</td>
<td>1-iv-V-V</td>
<td>1-iv-V-V</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>1-ii-V-V</td>
<td>1-iv-V-V</td>
<td>1-iv-V-V</td>
<td>1-iv-V-V</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>1-ii-V-V</td>
<td>1-iv-V-V</td>
<td>1-iv-V-V</td>
<td>1-iv-V-V</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>1-ii-V-V</td>
<td>1-iv-V-V</td>
<td>1-iv-V-V</td>
<td>1-iv-V-V</td>
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In some instances, ii or V/V replaces IV (see the underlined song in the next section) and V/V replaces iii (as in plagal final).
Figure 23: Christmas 7, performed by worship team of mixed male/female singers. Also features “Karen worship pre-cadence.” See appendix for full transcription. Lyrics discuss the birth of Jesus Christ.

Finally, “Christmas 13” (Figure 22) deserves extra discussion in that it was an original song composed by Gaedee’s brother, Lapo, who did not attend this festival. When I first had Gaedee listen to the song, he knew it instantly, and surmised that the performers must have come to know this song through one of the many church bands who had since made recordings of it (Gaedee’s band included). The presence of locally composed songs in the festival has at least two implications. First, it gives evidence of the interconnectedness of villages afforded to communities through the institutional church network. That is to say, churches provide both the venue for artistic production as well as the audience. Non-Christian Karen artists do not enjoy the same instant access to a broad network of ready-made fans. Secondly, the presence of locally-composed songs supports my argument that this style of music has been internalized and indigenized, representing a self-replicating musical culture, or perhaps even a thriving “invented tradition” (Hobsbawm 1992). Karen Christian worship music thus serves as a valid outlet for creativity and ethnic self-expression.
As they have become more integrated into the Thai nation through local governance as well as the institutionalized *Church of Christ in Thailand* (Amphon, personal interview), it is not surprising that the Thai language, in the context of Christian music performance, has also gained prominence. The next section examines Thai worship songs at the festival.

**Category Four: Thai Contemporary Christian Worship**

![Musical notation]

Figure 24: Thai worship song performed at 2011 Christmas celebration. Lyrics discuss the advent of Jesus Christ and God’s mercy as “the most important news for our hearts” (See appendix for full transcription).

Stylistically speaking, the Thai worship songs performed on stage matched the Karen worship pieces fairly closely, with the same vocal styles and lyrical content. Beyond that, though, they provide evidence of a continued branching out and appropriation of external ideas. Most notable in the first song is the use of an ukulele, an instrument that has only in the last few
years gained momentum as a popular fad on the Thai music scene
(http://www.thailandukulelefestival.com/home/festival).

As Stern (1971) notes in his study on Karen musical acculturation, the Karen “have a long history of emulation of adjacent civilizations…Imported styles are all a part of youth culture, which is highly receptive to new things” (209). The next song (figure 25), which several audience members described as “rap,” shows that this practice continues. Significant here is the insistence on the English term “rap” by my informants rather than any Karen or Thai term for similar traditions of rhythmic spoken word. Ward Keeler (2009) suggests, in examining Burmese rap compared to indigenous antiphonal thañ ja’, that, although similar, actions and attitudes of young Burmese performers indicate that “rap” in their case infers adoption of global musical forms rather than revival of a “dead” local genre (3, 5), and they see themselves as taking on “an internationally-validated style” (13). As my informants insisted on calling it “rap,” I view the situation here similarly as musical appropriation of the foreign.

Stern described an “intricately woven” Karen musical background with “no single dominant sophisticated tradition” (208). The consolidated commonalities of Karen music of the past stemmed from appropriation, and I argue that current musical trends are not a departure from that aspect of musical practice. Rather, in the age of information and through international contacts from church networks, the pool of resources has expanded to include foreign languages (Thai, English) and styles (“rap”):
Figure 25: Thai “rap” about the guiding star of Bethlehem. For full transcription, see appendix.

Rhythmically, the lyrics avoid speaking on the first beat, and have a syncopated feel.

Lyrically, this song recounts the same Christmas themes as the majority of the rest of the evening’s songs. Gaedee even remarked, at one point in our session on translation, “All these songs are the same, Ben!” The full translation of this “rap” is as follows:

Once upon a time, a time that many have forgotten,

On a night with a beautiful sky, shining bright with stars,

There was a strange and large star, a huge circular star

That appeared in the heavens, shining brighter than any other star.

Would anyone know what this strange star

Would mean? Do you still remember?

Well, that strange star means the Christ.

It means the redeemer, the powerful baby named Jesus

Has come to save the evil, sinful people like me,
To conquer death, the fires of hell,

To manifest superior love, above all explanations. In that night.

How could I forget that?

So I want to thank God with all my head and heart,

And I want to tell Him that I love Him with all my heart,

Therefore I make melodies and sing a new song,

With all my soul, as an offering to God.

Upbeat, syncopated songs like this “rap” and other worship songs again provide proof of continuing appropriation. Karen musical practice is not static but continually progressing, and scholars should not ignore Karen agency in this process. Roland Renard (1991) provided the following assessment: “Karen music can be said to have been in a decline for the last 70 years…this does not mean that the Karens have lost their ability in music…this change indicates new values becoming popular among the Karen” (15). While scholars may be tempted dichotomize “traditional” (2) or “tribal” (17) music from Karen music played on the “guitar, piano, and violin” (2), doing so essentializes a notion of authenticity and downplays the agentic, local voice. From Tu-chae’s perspective, this is not a new activity and thus does not necessarily imply a new, discontinuous set of values becoming popular (personal interview). For the Karen community of Huay Nam Khao, the Christmas music learned from childhood, composed on guitars, and presented on stage both retains undeniably “Karen” musical styles and embodies a tradition of domesticating the foreign and exotic. With this description of Karen Christmas music presented as evidence of continued domestication of the foreign, the next chapter will focus on its successive implications: how Karen actors foreground this music as a tool and bound the community through its performance.
CHAPTER 5  CHRISTMAS CAROLING AS MEDIATION: THE MUSICAL MAPPING OF
HUAY NAM KHAO VILLAGE

Introduction

In Thongchai Winichakul’s (1994) history of the creation of Thai nationhood, he
foregrounds the map as an important technology of nationalism. By broadening Benedict
Anderson’s concept of language and literature as a mediator between humans and the external
world, he looks for other technologies that allow humans to reconfigure and reconceptualize
space, redefine the “we-self” through boundary-making (164), and reaffirm the constructed-ness
and non-naturalness of identities (15-16). He also leaves the door open for further explorations,
asking, “What are the other kinds of mediators…and how do they operate in mediating and
creating the imagined communities?” (15). This chapter seeks to adapt Thongchai’s ideas on
mapping to the local Christian Karen community of Huay Nam Khao by analyzing the annual
Christmas caroling routes and activities, arguing that Christian music (specifically, Christmas
caroling) is effectively used as one of these other “technologies” that allows for mediation
between the institutional church and the village community. In doing so, they create and
reinforce physically-experienced (if not “physical”) maps that solidify borders between Christian
and non-Christian community members and “demarcating the sphere of ‘us’ against ‘them’”
(16). In brief, Christian music directly defines the social sphere and divides the conceptual
community in Huay Nam Khao village.

Setting

On December 30, 2011, we were invited by Mr. Somsak Khlonggrajonkeeree, staff
member at the church, to participate in the annual Christmas caroling activities at Huay Nam
Khao church. This event happens every year on the night before the Christmas festivities begin at
the church, serving both as an advertisement of sorts and as a way for the new dormitory students to get a sense of bearings in their local Christian community.

The students gathered at 6:00pm and split into three groups of 30-40. One group stayed in Huay Nam Khao while the other two went caroling in two nearby villages. Led by one adult staff member (who knew which homes belonged to church members and which did not) and accompanied by an 18 year-old student worship leader on acoustic guitar, about 30 students (age 6-18) crossed to the other side of the hill to begin caroling at the far end of town and gradually work their way back, finally returning to the church.

Figure 26: Sketch of caroling route through Huay Nam Khao village. Christian homes (where music performed) shaded black. (Note: as caroling took place at night and this sketch was reconstructed later, the map is just an approximation, intended to give a sense of musical mapping activity rather than give a precise account of the Christian population.)
Musical Performance and Data

The church staff member led the group to every Christian house in the neighborhood. Some households had prepared baskets of homemade, cone-shaped sticky rice treats wrapped in banana leaves to be distributed after the musical performance. The students gathered in front of the house, and the lead singer provided the first few notes of the song before counting off. All students would sing and clap through a structured medley of three songs that did not vary in form or key (though several of the songs themselves were fairly interchangeable):

1. *Opening church song* (usually the following four-lined Christmas hymn or sometimes an upbeat worship song. This particular hymn was also sung at the opening of the Christmas festival in Pisalong village and again in Huay Nam Khao church as part of the worship service on Christmas morning. Its frequent occurrence in caroling made it somewhat of a trademark song for the Christmas season). The lyrics focus on feeling of hope generated by the advent of Jesus Christ, translating\(^{23}\) as: “*Now the shepherds were sitting with their sheep, when angles descended upon them in a magnificent light. They told them, “Do not be afraid. We bring good news to you on this Christmas day.”*” (See Figure 27)

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\(^{23}\) Initial and general translations of the Christmas carols in this chapter were provided on site by Ela, who accompanied us. I later double-checked and confirmed the meanings with Tu-chue via online communications. In some cases, he had pre-consulted with Lapo Waewjantra, Gaedee’s older brother, in determining appropriate lyrical translations.
2. This opening hymn typically transitioned without a pause into the second song, usually a version of a song called “Merry Christmas/Happy New Year to You,” sung to the tune of Happy Birthday. This was usually sung in Karen (“Khri o phlae loe noe gaw” [Merry Christmas], “Ni thaw saw loe noe gaw” [Happy New Year] figure 28) but sometimes in English (rendered phonetically in my transcription as “Me-ri Khri-sa-mas thu yu,” as in figure 29).
3. At the conclusion of “Merry Christmas to you,” the leader would offer a general prayer for blessing, asking God to keep the family strong and in good health, for well-being, prosperity, and peace. This prayer was sometimes offered in Karen and other times in Thai.

Figure 29: “Merry Christmas to you.” (English)

Figure 30: Song of thanksgiving and unity.

Spoken: Ma ba si sa ko,
all: Doe Blue! (x3)
4. After the prayer, performers and hosts would shout “AMEN” in unison, and the final song would begin. A majority of the performances concluded with this song of thanksgiving called “Doe blue do ma law” (“Thank you very much”) that emphasized unity and group cohesion (Figure 30). While Ela and Lapo both translated the lyrics, “da pue we oe,” as, “We join together, helping one another,” Shigeru Ijima describes its function in animist practice as referring to a group of family members united by the same matrilineal family spirit (108). Here, its use has been appropriated for use in forming the Christian Karen community.

5. Finally, the performances ended with a call and response chant. The leader would yell out, “Maw boe si soe go,” meaning “Let us all say together.” All present would respond by shouting “doe blue” three times. “Doe blue” has a double meaning here. First, it functions literally as “thank you” in Karen, reinforcing the message of the final song (Doe blue do ma law). Secondly, and more exclusively, it possesses an alternate meaning limited to the Christian community, where it serves as a religious greeting, typically accompanied by a handshake (Tu-chae, personal interview).

These caroling performances lasted about two minutes at each house. Starting at 6pm, the students took over five hours to traverse the entire town, stopping at every Christian home to sing, clap, and pray. The usage of borrowed melodies (including “Happy Birthday” and “Jingle Bells”) again evidenced the continued adaptability and appropriation of the foreign for their own localized ethnic purposes (see previous chapters), reaffirming the findings of Philip Bohlman, who argued that it is not the music itself, or its style or history, that is of primary importance but rather the ways that it gathers and brings people together, organizing and demarcating one group from another (1989: 232). This chapter, therefore, focuses on the activities of Christmas caroling,
its role in mapping the Christian community, and the implications of what I am calling the “musical map.”

Figure 31: Carolers offering a blessing to the homeowner. Photo taken by author, 2011.

What is a Map?

Tongchai (1994) describes a map as one of many technologies that “mediates between human thinking and space” (52), communicating through signs. A physical map orients the reader to a geographical space through an abstracted, reified representation of a place. Far from being a neutral or natural artifact, “A map may not just function as a medium; it could well be the creator of the supposed reality” (56). And more than passively reflecting, the map is seen as actively structuring the scope of the group, emotionally and physically (130). As such, the
boundary and the “other” created by maps are just as significant as the bounded “we-self” (164). In the area of performance, Martin Stokes similarly argues that music and dance do not simply ‘reflect’. Rather, they provide the means by which the hierarchies of place are negotiated and transformed…Music does not then simply provide a marker in a prestructured social space, but the means by which this space can be transformed…music is socially meaningful not entirely but largely because it provides the means by which people recognize identities and places, and the boundaries which separate them. (4-5)

By parading through the village once per year, singing a wide range of Christian Karen songs and offering spiritual blessings and greetings exclusive to their faith community, the Christian carolers are actively reconfiguring the space and layout of Huay Nam Khao. The boundaries between the “We-self” and the “other” are clearly laid out in musical terms: as carolers pass by non-Christian homes in silence, the lack of revelry constructs boundaries and the relational ‘other’ is reconfirmed in the minds of the carolers and the non-Christian community members via the non-participation of both parties. That non-Christian households can overhear the joyful exchanges between their Christian neighbors and the carolers reconfirms the religious divide. When the group does come to a Christian home, they rejoice, sing, dance, pray, and eat, reinforcing the in-group, the Christian activities familiar to their shared traditions, and the knowledge that at this particular home lives a fellow “brother or sister in Christ.” Yoko Hayami’s assessment of Karen animist ritual could just as appropriately apply to the scene of Christian caroling, where, “Through the performance, each participating villager reformulates his/her relationship with the rest of the community. In the process, the community itself is constituted” (2004: 152). One minor amendment to her insight would give equal attention to, or
perhaps emphasize, the non-participation at non-Christian homes and the constitutive implications therein.

The “reduction, selection…distortion…or exaggeration” (Thongchai 53) required in mapmaking is here the binary division of a complex community into “Christian” and “not Christian” houses afforded by musical performance (or the lack thereof). In Christmas caroling, the singers and hosts reformulate their bond with each other within the greater scope of the entire Christian community. While not a physical map, this musical event still mediates between human actors and the imagined Karen Christian local community by orienting participants and non-participants alike as to their place within the projected social structure. The musical experience of Christmas caroling offers participants the opportunity for future engagements, mutual recognition, and reinforcement of the “We-self.” Each of the dormitory students now knows who their fellow believers are and where they live, and each household reaffirms their relationship to the institutional church.

But just as the strolling singers create an experiential (and, in that sense, “physical”) map of the Christian community, the emotional experience generated by musical mapping helps to create and solidify communal and participant identity as well (Turino 2000: 175). Thongchai’s final word of the power of maps shows how they are not just constituted, but constituting: “They can be nonhuman subjects which are able to turn humans into the agency or even the object of their mediators” (173). In this case, the grand tradition that the Christmas caroling has become now demands these annual treks. Singers are not just creating community; the Christian community established by musical mapping creates the need for annual reconfirmation. The Christian caroling in the Karen community of Huay Nam Khao has thus become an institutionalized event that offers individual actors a sense of place and concurrently demands
from them the performance of this musical mapping ritual. This institutionalized construction of both the Karen Christian community and the Karen Christian individual is mutual, and realized primarily within the mediative realm of musical mapping.

**Institutionalized Music**

Philip Bohlman speaks to the power of institutions in his study of German-Jewish communities in Israel (1989), arguing that the institutionalization of a music tradition allows for both continuity and a fair amount of acceptable change (104). Much like Thongchai’s ideas on maps, Bohlman argues first that musical institutions function as mediators between the ethnic group and the ethnic individual (103) and secondly that “One of the most important processes allowing ethnicity to persist through several generations is the maintenance of boundaries demarcating the community and its values” (110). The institutional church and dormitory in Huay Nam Khao ensures that the musical tradition of caroling (and its active boundary-making) will continue with each new annual influx of dormitory residents by throwing its institutional clout behind the process. In this context, I again emphasize Pastor Amphon’s rationalization of his ethnic conservationist predictions:

…for those Karen who aren’t Christian, in 50 years I believe they won’t be able to read, write, or speak Karen, and won’t wear Karen clothing. I believe their identity and culture will start to become extinct. The young generation now is going out to study in Chiang Mai and other provinces, and they aren’t interested in Karen-ness very much… Some people are shy when others find out that they are Karen. They don’t want others to know that they are Karen. But, for the Christians, at the church, they teach language, literacy, they have to wear Karen clothes weekly at church services. These kids will preserve their Karenness
longer. It will probably get better, even…most non-Christian Karen don’t really have this kind of thing. (Personal interview)

For Amphon (Ta-u), it is the Christian community in general that offers a place for Karen-ness to be defined and developed, and the annual Christmas caroling activities specifically provide a calendrical occasion for performing this brand of Karen Christian identity and for creating this community through active musical mapping. He hitches his hopes of ethnic continuity to the institutional frame of the Christian church, and sees mediating technologies, musical mapping in this case, as constituting and ensuring the borders of his imagined community. Ingrained into these borders is a sense of constructed destiny, fixed permanence, and Karen musical tradition.
CHAPTER 6  CONCLUSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND SUGGESTIONS

The Wedding Guest

In 2008, Lisa and I attended a wedding in Huay Nam Khao hosted by Mayuree’s family. One of her sisters was getting married to a man from Samoeng district (about a six-hour drive from Huay Nam Khao), and his family had come to the village for the ceremony. We entered the home to offer our blessings and gifts to the couple and were invited to sit with a group of men drinking lao khao (distilled whiskey made from sticky rice). A white French man with a receding hairline and long gray ponytail accompanied one of the members of the groom’s party, a Karen man who spoke fluent English. Both of them looked surprised to see me.

“Are you a missionary?” The Karen man asked.

“No.” I replied.

“Then I will ask you to drink with me.”

He spoke loudly, demanding to know who I was and why I was in the village. I told him about the Peace Corps and my role in community development. I explained how Lisa was a teacher at Huay Nam Khao School. He shook his head at both of us.

“You are only here for money. I know foreign workers like you. Open your f***ing mind!” His French friend nodded in agreement.

I tried explaining about the Peace Corps model of sustainable development and that I was working in partnership with interested community members rather than imposing a top-down development program, but he was not interested.

“You want to know the real Karen experience? I’ll take you out to our villages where they are so poor they don’t even have f***ing pencils! Can you imagine that?” His white friend nodded again.
I tried to tell him that, actually, I could imagine that, and had recently been working collaboratively with several of these kinds of villages through the local mayor’s office, and had worked in various capacities on community improvement projects in villages outside of Huay Nam Khao. He interrupted me as I tried to explain.

“Come out there with us. To our villages. You’ll see real Karen life there. Not like this Beverly Hills village. Open your f***ing mind!”

I tried to explain that we could not leave, as we were committed to this community, but he was not interested. These back-and-forth exchanges went nowhere, with every answer to mine a rant on “real” Karen poverty and oppression and our life of luxury and tremendous personal gain as foreign workers. He repeatedly swore at us, repeating his catch phrase while his friend nodded, sometimes nervously and apologetically, in imperative agreement with every opinion.

His actions, beyond the swearing, struck me as exceedingly abrasive, as I had not encountered this mixture of vocalized resentment and ethnic consciousness in our time living in the village. While it is likely that his outspokenness was an exception to the typically reserved and shy Karen trait (Young 77; Marshall 24), probably as a result of his familiarity with foreigners, his assertion that “real” Karen villages were those most deeply affected by poverty actually aligns with many contemporary scholarly observations (Walker 2001), and brings me to the implications of my research.

Implication #1: Orphans, Oppression, and Ethnic Identity

In Don’t Fence Me In, a documentary film (2004) centering on Mary Oh, a major in the Karen National Liberation Army overseeing security in refugee camps along the Thai-Burma border, the crew interviewed a caretaker at an orphanage for Karen children whose parents had been killed in the conflict. Asked about her situation, she remarked, “Since our grandparents’
era, our people were suffering. Our mothers gave birth to us, and our troubles continued.”

Written accounts of this attitude of ethnicity encapsulated in oppression and misfortune go back to Marshall’s seminal ethnography, where he recounts Karen myths that cast them as abused, oppressed, and tricked out of a past glory (26). Even as Marshall shows partiality, praising the work of western and indigenous missionaries in bringing religious and political deliverance and progress (305-6), he implies a loss of ethnicity with the influx of wealth, saying that there were wealthy Karens who had moved to big cities and consequently “lost their racial identity” (307). It seems even Marshall attached ethnic authenticity to the conception of the Karen, at some level, as rural and poor.

Anders Hovemyr contends that as village life and language varied so vastly among different groups calling themselves “Karen,” the only thing that really did unite them as an ethnic group was their sense of “persecution, exploitation, and marginalization, which the Karen have suffered at the hand of their more powerful neighbors…It was probably this oppression that formed the firm sense of identity” (5). This “orphanhood” status was reaffirmed at every famine, bad turn of politics, and even by the untrustworthiness on the part of American missionaries who, in the 1880s, tried to prevent enthusiastic Karen evangelists in Burma from doing missionary work in Thailand without the white missionaries’ supervision (141-150). Myths of oppression always resurfaced, reapplied for ethnic solidarity in times of misfortune.

Hayami confirms that in all Karen stories, the poor, forgotten orphan is always analogous to the Karen people (27). While she acknowledges a difference between the Karen in Burma and those in Thailand, who were not as oppressed, not as isolated, and not colonized (47), she does assert, along with others (Keyes 2003: 215; Renard 2003: 6; Pinkaew 31) that negative experience with the Thai state has resulted in them being stigmatized and feeling like “second-
class citizens” (238). Whether stemming from Renard’s “benign neglect” (1980: 219) and non-
assimilation or from inappropriate treatment from Thai government officials (Buergin 55; McKinnon 65), Karen activists like “Chi” Suwichan (2010) and Jonni Odochao (2006) cite
mistreatment as an ethnic catalyst, drawing inspiration from this well-documented and constantly reaffirmed Karen experience as “orphans” mistreated by the dominant society.

These accounts of the Karen confirm Uradyn Bulag’s (2010) notion of “ressentiment,”
whereby “the affirmation of the ethnic self was to be brought through evocation of a sense of victimhood” (119). It is not a novel concept that an ethnic group easily rallies together against a common enemy or a commonly-felt oppression. However, the Christian Karen community of Huay Nam Khao evidenced a strong sense of togetherness and a dedicated sense of Karen ethnic identity without any apparent enemy. Their sense of ethnicity, similar to John Lie’s (2008) study of the Zainichi population in Japan, focused as much or perhaps more on ethnic destiny rather than history of victimhood (144). They still have the Karen orphan stories, but the Christian community of Huay Nam Khao has hitched their contemporary self-conceptions and visions of an ethnic future to the institutional capacities of the Christian church, as presented through music. This implies that the rhetoric of formative oppression, central and obligatory for decades in Karen ethnographies, is not absolutely necessary to the continuation of a strong Karen identity (though it had significant importance for initial construction). It also implies that there is nothing unique or privileged about Christianity: “the Karen” could presumably fasten their identity to any form of “sacred communion,” to borrow Anthony Smith’s (2003) term, binding ethnic communities through any form of ritual and symbolic practice (18). As such, this study proposes a further area of exploration of the Karen: what other contemporary movements are there today among the Karen in Thailand that seek to establish a new chapter and a future trajectory of Karen
identity? How is the emic and etic discourse starting to shift, moving beyond the era of “benign neglect” (Renard 1980: 219) bad relations with forestry officials (Pinkaew), forced relocations (Beurgin; Suwichan), welfare recipients displaced from culture and land by government and NGO handouts (McKinnon), and ambiguous minority status within the Thai nation? I am confident that “Chi” Suwichan’s activities as a Karen musician, environmental activist, respected scholar, and spokesman for indigenous knowledge would prove a fruitful line of investigation. His actions, particularly the publication of his book on the Karen harp (2010), deserve scholarly attention, but this is beyond the scope of this thesis. His book seems to be an attempt to elevate the Karen tehnakut harp as iconic and representative of Karen adaptability, similar to what has been happening globally with the well-known Karen bronze frog drum.

**Implication #2: Icons of Adaptability**

Figure 32: Metal Drum Coffee logo on house in Pisalong featuring the Karen frog drum.
For at least 500 years\(^{24}\) locally, and, for scholars, since Marshall’s time, the Karen have been known for their highly prized bronze frog drums (Marshall 115). Central for calling community gatherings and highly prized as sacred objects and status symbols in the past (Marshall 118), Richard Cooler (1995) describes them as the one thing that united a varied, non-homogenous group of highland dwellers who had nothing else in common (3). The traditional use of the bronze frog drum declined by the early 1900s, gaining new life as an icon on the Karen national flag, designed by Mann Ba Khin and adopted in 1935 (Winraw Saw Htel Nay 2). This flag, and the drum itself, has since become an icon of “unity in traditional Karen culture” (3), employed by activists (like “Chi” Suwichan) and NGOs for rallying the dispersed Karen (http://www.karen.org/; http://www.friendsofthekaren.org/; http://www.drumpublications.org/). To take one example, Beans of Mission/ Metal Drum Coffee, a faith-based NGO, employs the drum icon in their vision statement as a means of calling and gathering the dispersed to join in uplifting a marginalized community:

Metal drum has been to many of the locations in the mountains where the Karens live. We have seen the need of the people. That they are living without many things most people elsewhere have. Especially, school children in the hostels. They lack of the basic material necessities that children else where [sic] are enjoying.\(^{25}\) These children are the citizens of tomorrow and they will become the strength of the country if given the opportunity. But many do not attend school and achieve and education due to the poverty and isolation of their birth place.

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\(^{24}\) The drums originated in northern Vietnam before the 6\(^{th}\) century, BC, and eventually came into possession by the Karen in the 16\(^{th}\) century or perhaps much earlier (Cooler 1).

\(^{25}\) Notice the parallels in this message to those of the wedding guest mentioned earlier in this chapter.
The solution to these problems will not be solved by one or two people. These are the kinds of things that many people working together can impact in a very positive way. Metal Drum has volunteered to become a voice to make known to the world about their needs. Metal drums in older days were used as an instrument to announce to the village people about important [sic] ceremonies such as weddings, new years, or even wars. Metal Drum wishes to become the medium to let the world know about the situation of some of these children.

(www.drumcoffee.com/blog/?page_id=60)

Clearly, the drum maintains a high degree of importance to the Karen for varied ethnic and political purposes. The key issue for my argument rests in the fact that the drum was and is widely acknowledged to have been an instrument created by another people group (the Shan) and only later adopted by the Karen (Cooler 54, Marshall 124). This “foreign” instrument has since become unquestionably iconic in Karen life and culture and now serves as the primary ethnic symbol of unity on a national flag. That it originated elsewhere remains unproblematic, and there are no questions as to its “authenticity” or its status as “traditional.”

Christian music, however, has yet to achieve any such accolades, even though, as this thesis shows, it accomplishes some of the same ethnic and community constructions. Beyond the scope of this thesis is the use of Christian, rock ‘n’ roll, pop, rap, hardcore, and other styles of guitar-driven music at Karen New Year gatherings among Karen refugee populations and 2nd generations in places such as Bakersfield, California (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fP8N9SPH8O4&feature=related), Buffalo, New York (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0eVFBStz1IA&feature=related), Omaha, Nebraska.
Can Christian music (or its pop music offshoots) achieve iconic status in resettled Karen communities? Examinations of any of these diaspora Karen New Year events (all of which employ similar musical performances to those in Pisalong) would provide an excellent venue for examining the capacity of the Karen in applying previously-mentioned agentic adaptability to their situation of resettlement as refugees, a Karen issue that has received “relatively scant” coverage in scholarship as of yet (Couch, Adonis, and MacLaren 6). Further studies on the American continent could address whether Christian church involvement facilitates further adaptation and integration, whether the Karen maintain creative control over their application of Christian faith, issues surrounding the question of a return to the homeland, ethnic conceptions among stateless nationalism, or any other number of outcomes yet unaddressed. Music would absolutely hold a central place in such a study, as the Karen community abroad increasingly looks to performance for cultural preservation. As one of the speakers in the Omaha New Year festival put it:

We have our own language, culture, and tradition…Dance is very important for us in order to preserve our culture. We believe that if we lose our language, our cultures and traditions, we will lose our whole nation.

As Pastor Amphon (Ta-u) noted about Huay Nam Khao’s experience with retaining and improving ethnic markers and culture, some things about the past were purposefully discarded (tha) while others (dress, language, alphabet) were deemed essential. A deeper investigation of these YouTube postings reveals similar themes to the Christmas festival I observed in Thailand:
few traditional instruments and most performances dominated by youth groups singing hip-hop, rap, and rock songs. Yet all of them emphasize Karen identity. Dance (historically a *Pwo* Karen activity) and Karen costume emphasize a selective notion of continuity with tradition while other aspects will likely indicate continued adaptation of new situations and tools available to them. One approach of investigating these festivals among the Karen diaspora could include the ways in which the community and homeland is imagined and reimagined through music in the American (or Australian, or Swedish, or Canadian,) resettlement context, perhaps in employing Anderson’s or Thongchai’s frameworks on technological mediations, as described in chapter six.

Finally, it is evident that many of these events are housed within the walls of American churches, which offers a rather striking parallel to the situation in Thailand from 60 years ago. Renard’s “benign neglect” of the Karen on the part of Thai authorities in the 1950s became a window of opportunity for American missionaries to step in, offering social services, education, and development. American churches now are finding similar voids left by overburdened refugee resettlement government agencies who do not have the resources to handle the influx of Karen refugees beyond basic and initial placements, and unexpected masses of Karen congregations are filing in and filling the pews of churches in the US, citing long-established connections to Baptist Christianity (Dunford 4, 6). Perhaps Marshall’s initial assessment that any account of the Karen must include a discussion on their experience with Christian history (296) will retain its validity among resettled communities. These ideas require further research and are beyond the scope of this study, which limits itself to a small community in Thailand that, while sharing a similar musical expression, does not share the same political refugee experience.
Conclusion

The Karen community of Huay Nam Khao provides evidence that ethnicity and music both are tools to be manipulated through agency. Local actors reshape conceptions of their own music and proudly borrow from outside their sphere, fitting themes together to make arguments of authenticity. It is then taken it off-stage and into the physical community, applied as indigenized sound to the construction of social space. Music as a mediating technology offers a radical means of imagining the past, present, and future of the local village as well as the ethnicity itself, locally and internationally.

Ultimately, the case of the Christian Karen in Thailand provides an example of a grand irony. Many studies have described Christianity as instrumental in the radical reorganization of indigenous village structures and social relations (Kammerer 1990; Kammerer 1996), as inspiring militancy and economic restructuring (Tapp 1989), as repressing and restricting traditional musical practices (McLean 1986; Rappoport 2004), or as “depriving villagers of their traditional means of dealing with…misfortune” (Hayami 1996: 343), among other descriptions ranging from negative activism to objective description. Scholars on the sympathetic side of Christianity—Marshall and Shwe, for example—paint biased accounts that require apologetic contextualizing to explain. This thesis does not take sides but rather sheds light on the way Christian Karen have cleverly reframed the discussion, positioning themselves at the helm. Christianity, demonized by some as destroyer of indigenous practice, is here occupied and used by my informants as a means of preserving and perpetuating indigeneity, which they describe as “a gift from God” (Amphon, personal interview). Their history suggests that they may employ other means in the future, but, for now, the Christian Karen of Thailand are establishing and expanding their imagined communities through Christmas music.
APPENDIX A: MUSICAL TRANSCRIPTIONS

Author’s note: Songs recorded in Pisalong, Huay Nam Khao, and Mae Tuen Noi villages in Chiang Mai, Thailand between December 2011-January 2012. For explanation of “slurring” vocal style (represented visually with a slur and a straight connecting line), please see page 91.

Caroling 1
Summary of lyrics: Christmas hymn (Bethlehem story), thank you from all of us, Merry Christmas to you. Singers clap on every beat.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Guitar chords: G} & \quad \text{C} \quad \text{D} \quad \text{G} \\
\text{doc} & \quad \text{khwa gwa daw loc mue na ga che} \quad \text{aw daw khwa a saw mu} \\
\text{kho da eo ga khwa a saw goe pwe da pha do go si pi doe ge aw} \\
\text{gaw kho a sague da sa a ge oe hae goe sue yu aw go wae tae} \\
\text{bue tae jgoe aw ni Khri o phlæ loc noe gaw Khri o phlæ loc noe} \\
\text{gaw khri o phlæ loc noe gaw} \quad \text{Khri o phlæ loc noe gaw} \\
\text{saw loc noe gaw} \quad \text{ni tho saw loc noe gaw} \quad \text{ni tho saw loc noe} \\
\text{gaw} \quad \text{ni tho saw loc noe gaw} \quad \text{ni tho saw loc noe} \\
\text{gaw ni tho saw loc noe gaw (blessing) ("Amen!") doe blue do ma law} \\
\text{doe blue do ma law doe blue do ma law da pue we oe doe blue do ma law}
\end{align*}
\]
Translation of Caroling hymn, by Lapo Waewjantra (whose lyrics have some variation from this and other performances):

[Phae bwa gwa so loe mue na kha che naw daw gwa a so] translates as ‘Now the shepherds were sitting with their sheep’

[Mu kho goe lu law phla a sa goe prue goe braw do do] means, ‘Angels descended and appeared with a magnificent bright light’

[Si plue toe heng haw kho pho hoe sa khue goe saw aw ee] means, “Do not be afraid, humans. We bring good news.”]

[The words at the end are maw boe si soe go, which translates as “Let us say together.” Then everyone will say in unison, “ta blue ta blue ta blue” which translates as “thank you.”] (Personal correspondence, my translation)
Caroling 4
Summary of lyrics: unavailable (1st song), Merry Christmas to you, thank you from all of us.
Singers clap on every beat.

\[
\text{Ela: "If you are tired, you can tell me..." [inaudible] sa kaw}
\]

\[
\text{Khir o phlae loe noe go —Ela: Khir o phae loe noe go...means "Merry Christmas" sa mas thu}
\]
Tu-Chae’s translation of Christmas carol #4, 2/23/12:

[Look at the sky tonight, It’s a very beautiful night, full of sparkling light. Do not grieve. Happiness and joy have come to you. Happiness on Christmas for you. Happiness on this new year for you.]

[The prayer: Since it is Christmas and the start of a New Year, we ask for happiness and strength always.]

[2nd song: Thank you very much, brothers and sisters. Hallelujah. Thank you very much. We join together to help each other. Thank you.] (Personal correspondence, my translation)
**APPENDIX A.3**

**Christmas 07**

*Summary of lyrics:* "Today is a good day, because Jesus was born."

*Instrumentation:* Electric guitar, 1 male and 1 female singer.

*Note:* Transcription 1/2 step higher than performance pitch.

Karen worship “pre-cadence” (IV - V - V/V - vi)
Spoken: Doe blue now
APPENDIX A.4
Christmas 10: "Joy to the World"

Summary of lyrics: "Joy to the world, the Lord has come," a Christian Christmas hymn
Instruments: men's group with acoustic guitar
Note: transcription written 1/2 step higher than performance
\( \frac{d}{=} = 120 \)

1. Daw ju sa ko ye-su e wae tu
   lo hoe go so pa pwoe loe_ a klae pwoe ko_ ga dae soe
   gue pwa go a ga soe gue pwa go a ga soe gue saw gue pwa go a
   ga

2. D*... ... ... no pwa soe wi ko ga khri
   aw go naw u nya sa wi_ soe khue cha da sa wi soe khue cha da da sa
   sa_ wi_ sa wi soe khue cha da

3. yoe doe ko taw
   toe loe loe daw due se nya ki pwa oe toe goe ue_ goe nyaw phi do da
   he a da lo_ la da he a da lo la da he_ da he a da lo

Spoken: Doe blue. Doe blue. Phra jao wai phawn
["Thank you; God bless you"]
Tu-chae’s translation of tehnaku song (via online communication, 2/12/12):

TU-CHAE: Difficult to understanding. [ยังไม่เห็นฟัง เขาเข้าใจไม่เห็น
[I had my mom listen. She couldn’t understand the whole thing]

BEN: it's about a snake? ใช่ครับ...ใช่ครับ [“Muekawlee”...right?]

TU-CHAE: มีความหมายเหมือน ขี้涎 แต่เป็นเหยื่อ มุก ที่หลอกดูด กับ อดีตภัยภัย [It has the same meaning as Satan and is comparable to the snake that tricked Eve and Adam into eating the apple]
A snake lived on a shrub, beneath a shrub. God in heaven had not yet come down

toe paw khi is a characteristic like a bush that has ferocious animals that humans fear living in it

My elder translated it, but I don’t understand too well. It’s ancient language, hard to understand. But I can’t translate the whole thing. Sorry, Ben
Christmas 12 (Karen Way of Life/ "Thank you Jesus")

Lyrical summary: 1) Karen used to be afraid of forest spirits, but the white Christians cut them down.
2) Parody of Christmas carol in mock-English attempt at singing "Thank you Jesus"

Instruments: Acoustic guitar (mostly inaudible) and male singer

Note: pitch shown is 1/2 step higher than performance

---

[Music notation]

---

Spoken: da gwe nyoe khao ba phri pa pha ra naw. Doe se blu mo ba e wa. *wi *da chaw * di khu cha...

[Fellow audience members gesture toward me, smiling]

Ben: "Huh?"

[second half of song continues on next page]
Tu-Chae’s translation of Christmas 12:

In the past, the elders told us, “Our land was very hot
If we went looking for firewood in the forest, and threw it down strongly,
When midnight came, we were afraid, because the gods of the old era were strong
When we’d go up to cut down trees in the forest, we’d be afraid
But when the white man came, why is it that in our village
The elders told us that it caused our land to cool down?
We didn’t know what to do, we didn’t dare to cut the trees anymore
[The tree was no good, and the white man cut it down; therefore, we don’t have to be afraid of the old spirits anymore] (Personal correspondence, my translation)
Christmas 13

(Composed by Lapo Waewjantra)

Summary of lyrics: God is forever, the all-powerful creator and protector. We love him and will sing to him.

Instruments: Amplified acoustic guitar and male singer

Transcribed 1/2 step higher than performance

\[ \text{\(\text{\textit{Voice}}\)} \]

\[ \text{\(\text{\textit{Spoken: Doe lo ko wa kha ja e nav}}\ \text{\(\text{\textit{pa goe sa}}\ \text{\(\text{\textit{mae}}\}}\)} \]

\[ \text{\(\text{\textit{a gu we}}\ \text{\(\text{\textit{loei pwe we do}}\ \text{\(\text{\textit{so ga ma loei pwe we do}}\ \text{\(\text{\textit{ta la kue baw}}\)}} \]

\[ \text{\(\text{\textit{loei a we saw ji}}\ \text{\(\text{\textit{pae goe sa}}\ \text{\(\text{\textit{loe e po pwa hi}}\)}} \]

\[ \text{\(\text{\textit{hka pa choe goe hue gue ya}}\ \text{\(\text{\textit{we da pwa thaw baw loei poe thoe o mu bu go hga}}\)}} \]

\[ \text{\(\text{\textit{a ta c loei ba pwa wo we a ma hgi thaw de thaw a da e thoe loei}}\)}} \]

\[ \text{\(\text{\textit{yoe goe si pwoe troe nac}}\ \text{\(\text{\textit{yuegoe si pwoe troe nac}}\ \text{\(\text{\textit{yoe}}\)}} \]

\[ \text{\(\text{\textit{pa goe sa yae loei ae ba we ya haw kha daw pe}}\ \text{\(\text{\textit{mu khaw da}}\ \text{\(\text{\textit{* * e oe}}\)}} \]

\[ \text{\(\text{\textit{me pwe loei do goe thoe}}\ \text{\(\text{\textit{pa goe sa}}\ \text{\(\text{\textit{loe e po pwa te}}\)}} \]

\[ \text{\(\text{\textit{law thoe po}}\ \text{\(\text{\textit{li pho te pha te law toe khri loei ta}}\ \text{\(\text{\textit{pha di}}\)}} \]

\[ \text{\(\text{\textit{saw tro ka}}\ \text{\(\text{\textit{thi ba}}\ \text{\(\text{\textit{ta e}}\ \text{\(\text{\textit{a da ae loei ba pwa o we a ma}}\)}} \]

\[ * \text{ Karen worship “pre-cadence” (ii – V – iii – vi)} \]
Spoken: *Doe blue naw!*
APPENDIX A.8

Christmas 19 (Thai Worship Song)

Summary of lyrics: God loves us, and sent the Messiah down to Bethlehem to be with us and to save us. This is the greatest news of all.

Instruments: Ukulele and mixed male/female singers

Note: Notation 1/2 step higher than performance

Karen worship “pre-cadence” (IV – V – iii – vi)
Translation of ukulele worship song “เปี่ยมรัก He's Heart Filled with Love”:

เปี่ยมรักจนเต็มล้น ผู้คนในใจ
[Overflowing with love for mankind]

ด้วยความห่วงใยจึงได้เสด็จมา
[So worried about us that he came down]

บรรทมในรางหญ้า ทรงนามว่าเยซู
[Sleeping in a manger, his name was Jesus]

ทุกคนควรรู้ ว่าทรงเป็นผู้ใด
[Everyone must know that he came as one of us]

** นี่คือข่าวส าคัญที่สุดในหัวใจ
[This the most important news for our hearts]

เพราะผู้ไถ่ได้มาอยู่กับเรา
(The redeemer came to live with us)

เปลี่ยนความเศร้ามืดมน ด้วยแรงสว่าง

[He changed our sadness through his power and light]

แห่งความรักพระคุณ และเมตตา ...

[With love, kindness, and mercy]

ที่เมืองเบธเลห์ม ที่เคยเงียบเหงา

[In the city of Bethlehem, which was quiet]

ผู้คนปวดร้าว ไม่มีที่พึ่งพิง

[Where broken-hearted people had no protection/support]

ตะวันเริ่มทอแสง ประกายแห่งความหวัง

[The light began to shine, sparkling with hope]

ผู้คนสุขสันต์ ผู้นั้นเสด็จมา

[People were happy that he had come]

(Transcription from Romyen Church website: http://www.romyenchurch.org/WorshipSongs/?%E0%B9%80%E0%B8%9B%E0%B8%B5%E0%B9%88%E0%B8%A2%E0%B8%A1%E0%B8%81%E0%B8%95%E0%B9%87%E0%B8%A1%E0%B8%A5%E0%B9%89%E0%B8%99.279, my translation)
Guiding Star (rap) (Christmas 24)

Instrumentation: Guitar and male singer
Summary of lyrics: Star announcing Jesus' birth
Note: Transcription 1/2 step higher than performance

Hey hey hey

gan khrang nueng nan ma laew nan jon lai khon luem pai laew

nai khuen thi fa phruet phrao jaem jaew duay saeng duang da-ra

mi dao pra-lat duang yai duang to ma hue ma

pra-got khuen bon thawng fa sawng saeng joet ja gwa duang dai

mi khrai ja ru mai naw wa dao pra-lad du-ang nan

man mai-thueng a-rai gan thue yang jot-jam dai mai

gaw dao pra-lad du-ang nan mai-thueng ong phra khris ngai

mai-thueng ong phra phu thai phra kuman krieng krai nam Yes-su

sadet lu ma bang good phuca khon hop chuay yang chan
Translation of “Guiding Star” rap, (transcribed by Ajaan Panya Lekwilai):

Hey, hey, hey กาลครั้งหนึ่งนานมาแล้ว นานจนหลายคนลืมไปแล้ว
[Once upon a time, a time that many have forgotten]

ในคืนที่ฟ้าเพริศแพร้ว แจ่มแจ๋วด้วยแสงดวงดารา
[On a night with a beautiful sky, shining bright with stars]

มีดาวประหลาดดวงใหญ่ ดวงกลมโต มหัศจรรย์
[There was a strange and large star, a huge circular star]

ปรากฏขึ้นบนท้องฟ้า ส่องแสงเจิดจ้ากว่าดวงดาวอื่น
[That appeared in the heavens, shining brighter than any other star]

Spoken: Doe blue
Would anyone know what this strange star

มันหมายถึงอะไรกัน เรื่องอิงจากได้ไหม

Would mean? Do you still remember?

ก็ดาวประหลาดดวงนั้นหมายถึงองค์พระคริสต์

Well, that strange star means the Christ

หมายถึงองค์พระผู้ไถ่ พระกุมารเกรียงไกรนามเยซู

It means the redeemer, the powerful baby named Jesus

ถึงถึงทุกมั่งคั่น เพื่อคนบาปชั่วอย่างฉัน

Has come to save the evil, sinful people like me

ช่วยให้พ้นจากความตาย ให้เราย้อนกลับ

To conquer death, the fires of hell

สั่งแสดงความรักอันใหญ่เกินอธิบายในคืนนั้น

To manifest superior love, above all explanations. In that night

แล้วเราจะให้ฉันลืมได้ไง

How could I forget that?

จึงอยากขอบคุณพระองค์ด้วยสุดหัวใจนี้

So I want to thank God with all my head and heart

และอยากจะบอกว่ารัก ว่ารักหมดใจที่ฉันมี

And I want to tell Him that I love Him with all my heart

เลยบรรเลงเป็นบทเพลง ผ่านเพลงบทใหม่บทนี้

Therefore I make melodies and sing a new song

หมดทั้งจิตใจที่ฉันมีมอบแด่พระองค์

With all my soul, as an offering to God.] (Personal correspondence, my translation)
APPENDIX A.10

Christmas 33 (Happy Birthday/ Merry Christmas to You)

Instrumentation: Acoustic guitar and male singers
Summary of lyrics: Merry Christmas & Happy Birthday
Note: Transcription is 1/2 step higher than performance

[Music notation]

[Merry Christmas:]
Christmas 35 (Hymn)

Instruments: Guitar and male singer

Summary of lyrics: God's forgiveness and redemption

Note: Transcription 1/2 step higher than performance

![Musical Notation]

Voice

153
Lapo Waewjantra’s translation of Christmas 35 (old hymn):

I have so much sin, these desires/passions/lust I ask forgiveness for

Now I enter in to meet God

Asking God to forgive me

Life on the surface of the sea, one must fear everything

I was about to sink, but asked for God’s help

About my sin, tears flowed

I asked God to wipe my tears

And in humility, I begged God to send help

And to return again to be my center] (Personal correspondence, my translation)
Rice Harvest “Saw” (Tha)

Summary of lyrics: widow missing her husband
Note: transcribed at 1/2 step higher than recording

\[ \text{\textbf{Female singer}} \]

\[ \text{\textbf{Translation by Mayuree:}} \]

It means, a young girl is in love. \textit{Si doe khue si khue o khue} means a Bodhi tree and the forest live together. If you die, you die together. Like that. \textit{Si doe khloe si khue o khue}...\textit{Si khue o khue} means ‘live together, die together.’ Love. (Personal interview)
APPENDIX B  GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Anhemitonic Pentatonic: A musical scale consisting of five notes with no semitones (i.e, do, re, mi, so, la)

Anuban: (Thai) pre-school.

Bgha: (Karen) family spirit (composite of all the female family members’ K’la)

Chao khao: (Thai) “mountain people,” more commonly translated as “hill tribe.”

Chakasi: (Thai) official ceremony described by Shigeru Ijima (1979), whereby Buddhist monks destroy the Karen hearth and “convert” the family to Buddhism.

Da pue we: (Karen) “All of us,” or, in animist ritual, the assembling of the family.

Doe blue, ta blue: (Karen) literally “thank you,” but also used as a Christian greeting among the Karen (accompanied by a handshake).

Htau me pa, htaw me pah: name of mythical Karen ancestor who crossed “the river of running sand.”

K’la: (Karen) animistic term describing a person’s “life principal” (sometimes translated as “spirit” or “soul”).

Khayai ogat: (Thai) special type of government school in Thailand offering dormitory services.

Khon muang: (Thai) people of the northern Thai kingdom of Lanna.

Khon pa: (Thai) people of the forest.

Khri o phlae loe noe gaw: (Karen) “Merry Christmas to you.”

Khu Naw Le: (Karen) male character in Karen legend.

Lao khao: (Thai) Distilled whiskey made from sticky rice (Karen term: si)

Maw boe si soe go: (Karen) “Now let us all say together.”

Muekawli: Karen serpent goddess, adapted as “Satan” in Karen Christian teaching.

29 Terms listed are Sgaw Karen unless otherwise noted.
Naw Mue E: (Karen) female character in Karen legend.

Ni thaw saw loe noe gaw: (Karen) “Happy New Year to you.”

Pgakoenyaw, pgak’nyau: Sgaw Karen self-referential term, literally meaning “human.”

Phlong: Pwo Karen self-referential term, literally meaning “human.”

Pho khe-tse kho: (Karen) destitute orphan.

Phra: (Thai) title of high respect, usually for monks or deities.

Pwo: Sub-set of Karennic-speaking people. In Thailand, tended to live at lower elevations further south (such as Kanchaburi province) and practiced Buddhism at higher rates.

Sgaw: Sub-set of Karennic-speaking people. Tended to live at higher elevations in Thailand and further north. Formed the majority of Christian Karen practitioners.

Soon Phattana Khristajak: (Thai) Christian development center (smallest organizational Christian church unit within Thai church hierarchy).

Tehnaku, tehna: (Karen) six-stringed, curve-necked Karen harp. (Pwo Karen: “Na den”)

Tha, saw: (Karen) rhyming, seven-syllable poetic couplets sung predominantly at Karen weddings and funerals, said to contain the teachings of the ancestors.

Thañja’: Burmese antiphonal, rhythmic chant: 7-syllable call with 8-syllable rejoinder.

Thi Wa Klo, Tee Wah Klo: Karen name for Huay Nam Khao village. Literally, “white water river.”

Thra: (Karen) teacher.

Yua, Y’wa: Karen term for a supreme deity.

November 15, 2011

TO:        Benjamin Fairfield  
           Principal Investigator  
           Department of Music - Ethnomusicology

FROM:  Nancy R. King  
       Director

Re: CHS #19618- “Karen Christian Music Performance and Practice in Huay Nam Khao, Thailand”

This letter is your record of CHS approval of this study as exempt.

On November 15, 2011, the University of Hawai‘i (UH) Committee on Human Studies (CHS) approved this study as exempt from federal regulations pertaining to the protection of human research participants. The authority for the exemption applicable to your study is documented in the Code of Federal Regulations at 45 CFR 46 (2).

Exempt studies are subject to the ethical principles articulated in The Belmont Report, found at http://www.hawaii.edu/irb/html/manual/appendices/A/belmont.html.

Exempt studies do not require regular continuing review by the Committee on Human Studies. However, if you propose to modify your study, you must receive approval from CHS prior to implementing any changes. You can submit your proposed changes via email at uhirb@hawaii.edu. (The subject line should read: Exempt Study Modification.) CHS may review the exempt status at that time and request an application for approval as non-exempt research.

In order to protect the confidentiality of research participants, we encourage you to destroy private information which can be linked to the identities of individuals as soon as it is reasonable to do so. Signed consent forms, as applicable to your study, should be maintained for at least the duration of your project.

This approval does not expire. However, please notify CHS when your study is complete. Upon notification, we will close our files pertaining to your study.

If you have any questions relating to the protection of human research participants, please contact CHS at 956-5007 or uhirb@hawaii.edu. We wish you success in carrying out your research project.
REFERENCES


