

The Representation of Ethnicity as a Resource:
An Understanding of *Lukthung Molam* and Traditional *Molam* Music
in Northeastern Thailand in an Era of Globalization¹⁾

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In recent years, Thailand has embraced capitalism, and an enhanced consumerist society has emerged. Rapidly spreading commercialization may influence and contribute to conserving Thailand's traditional local music through, for instance, the commodification of local music into CDs or VCDs, the development of electronic media, and the emergence of the Internet in northeastern Thailand. These modern conveniences provide opportunities to expand the consumption space of local music with the linguistic challenge and limitations of being sung in a dialect. Local music is a flow of culture in the context of selling and buying in a consumer society, and it can traverse the length and breadth of villages, a nation, and transnational spaces. However, the literature on traditional local music in Thailand has paid little attention to what gave rise to the existing local music of northeastern Thailand, and this literature has tried to describe it as a static form enjoyed only in the country. This paper, therefore, will shed light on how the representation of ethnicity as a resource is utilized in the process of local music's entry into music industry subsidiaries. Local music, which is rooted in local melodies, can also be an important factor in the survival of both individual musicians and singers, as it symbolizes ethnicity in the modern, commercial music industry, although sometimes musicians and singers utilize it as a strategic tact associated with cultural preservation in accordance with governance policy. Therefore, this paper aims to examine how local musicians and singers utilize their own ethnicity representations as a strategic resource when traditional local music is commercialized. This paper will present a case study of a part of the music activity of *Lukthung Molam* and *Molam* music in northeastern Thailand.

The first section will discuss the migrant worker phenomenon in Bangkok that began in the 1970s, the Lao immigrants' social and cultural encounters with the Thai, and the ways they differentiated themselves from the Thai as "others" in the ethnoscape, as is evident when analyzing the lyrics of *Molam* music. The second section will evaluate how the ethnicity of the Lao was represented and how it played a role in song lyrics in the latter half of the 1970s to the 1980s—the peak period of the worker migrations from northeastern Thailand to Bangkok. The paper will further explore the way of respond attitude that convert the negative perspectives to positive energy by creating laughter and healing. The third section will demonstrate that the interaction of *Molam* music with politics strengthened Isan identity as part of the nation but caused the ethnicity to become more abstract. In conclusion, the representation of the Lao and the melodies of *Molam* show the ways in which culture and ethnicity can be resources in the development of electronic media and in the emergence of the Internet in the mediascape. By demonstrating how local music in modern Thai society uses melodies as resources to represent identity, this paper will contribute to forming a new viewpoint on the traditional *Molam* music of northeastern Thailand.

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1. Introduction

The present paper analyzes the production and lyrics of *Molam* music in order to examine the representation of the Lao ethnicity in northeastern Thailand within the context of the Lao's interethnic relationships.²⁾ This paper also seeks to demonstrate how representations of ethnicity are utilized as a resource in the consumption and commodification of northeastern Thailand's *Lukthung Molam* and traditional *Molam* music in the commercial music industry. Evidentiary support is gained from an analysis of the lyrics of *Lukthung Molam* and traditional *Molam* music produced from the 1970s through the first decade of the 21st century.³⁾

The study of the music of northeastern Thailand began with Charoenchai's (1983) and Miller's (1985) research on *Molam* music. Native researchers' work followed and many studies emerged, mostly influenced by Miller's work (Chanthon 1988). The researchers found that *Molam* singers served as a means to spread propaganda for a variety of entities: for the resistance movement in the 1901-02 rebellion against the central government, initiated by supernatural beings called *Phu Mi Bun* in northeastern Thailand in the era of Rama 5, and for villages, the government, and other agents such as folk media during the modernization process, rise of democracy, and nation-state building campaigns in Thailand (Charuwan 1993, 1994:103). This research demonstrates the social functions of the music: to promote political slogans among government workers and the public, to provide entertainment, and to disseminate knowledge to villagers (Khuanchai 1996; Busaban 1994; Charuwan 1993, 1994, 1997). Additionally, in this research field, anthologies of *Molam* songs accompanied by social analyses published during the 1990s and early 2000s elevated local *Molam* music to the status of a national art (Phonthip 1996). A revolutionary approach to local *Molam* music developed alongside industrialization and economic growth in northeastern Thailand (Chanthon 1988; Suriya 2001). This body of literature has contributed to the understanding of the role that representative local music from northeastern Thailand has played in the politics of nation-state building.

Most of the research produced since Miller's ethnomusicology has assumed that the performance of local music occurs only within the frame of a village or at the state level in Thailand. However, the phenomenon of globalization has invaded the society of northeastern Thailand and challenged the stylistic tradition of ethnographic music writing. Consequently, it has become inappropriate to confine the performance of local music to the specific geographic locale of a village or a nation. This evolution has influenced recent literature, which emphasizes the transnational nature of global culture (Appadurai 1996). Baba's 2010 study of Thailand demonstrates that external factors, such as the One Tambon One Product (OTOP)⁴⁾ policy, the growth of an aging society, and the development of mass media have influenced local performances exhibited at the Guardian Spiritual Festival and that "local" performances can no longer be regarded as specific to one location. Local music is no longer of singular value, a mere form of entertainment at the traditional venues of local festivals, Buddhist ceremonies, weddings, and funerals; instead, local *Molam* music has become accessible to a much wider audience throughout the nation-state of Thailand and, thus, plays a relatively new role in interethnic relations.

This new scope of access was made possible by the arrival of telecommunications technology and new media in northeastern Thailand in the second half of the decade beginning in 2000. In addition, the music industry's commodification of local music in CD and VCD recordings in recent decades has changed audiences' consumer behaviors. Previously, a special occasion was required to listen to local *Lukthung Molam* and *Molam* music, such as live performances in villages and at Buddhist temples during festivals. Migrant workers from northeastern Thailand in Bangkok would go out for a drink after work and listen to a concert in a pub or club. Taxi drivers listened to *Lukthung Molam* music on the radio while waiting for passengers. However, revolutionary changes in the mediums and technological processes of music recording and duplication have broadened access to this music; it can now

be listened to anywhere—on CDs and VCDs, karaoke versions, and music videos. For example, the music is often broadcast on buses carrying migrants and visitors returning from Bangkok to the northeastern region and at bus terminals in prefectural capitals; the music seems intentionally picked to suit the passengers' tastes, such as songs containing words from a commonly understood dialect and a familiar melody. Migrant laborers in the cities turn to the local music channel on the radio and listen to it as background music when working. Even during festivals held at Buddhist temple, CD and VCD recordings of local music are broadcast loudly. These new audio mediums have promoted the spread of local music, reduced the limitations of time and space, and formed new music communities beyond the villages. The commodification of local music has contributed to its deterritorialization from the frames of village, city, and state. In addition, the emergence of the Internet and online video-sharing services, particularly YouTube, has changed how local music is consumed. Therefore, borrowing from Appadurai's concept of the global culture flow, the production and consumption of culture has enabled *Molam* music and performances to freely cross five separate dimensions: ethnoscapescapes, mediascapescapes, financerscapescapes, technoscapescapes, and ideoscapescapes (Appadurai 1990:296, 1996:33). In other words, the global cultural flow has permitted *Molam* music to spread beyond the local village and has thus contributed to the deterritorialization of local music.

Furthermore, anthropologists' recent growing concern with becoming process of resources (Uchibori 2007, Yamashita 2007a, 2007b) has led to the understanding that resources are generated from humans' desire and ability to utilize a particular resource. Yamashita asserts that cultural resources become everyday practices as individuals strive to make a living or survive in their respective natural, social, and cultural environments (Yamashita 2007a:57). The becoming process of resources has also occurred with the local music of northeastern Thailand. As a common expression of the Lao ethnicity, local music's representation of ethnicity attracts and expands its audience and is perceived as an active social resource. The expansion of the music market has taken place within interethnic relationships in which the costumes, languages, and melodies associated with the music are perceived as exotic or Oriental to audience members, especially Lao immigrants or refugees outside their country of origin who have joined cyber or virtual communities that have formed in recent decades. These websites reveal the transnational communities formed by the Lao diaspora—the intellectuals, students, refugees, and immigrants who retain a strong attachment to their homeland. Therefore, in this paper, *Molam* music is described as a cultural flow across national borders, which is shared through virtual communities. These virtual communities have variable binding forces depending on each individual's affection for them (Delanty 2006:234-235), and they connect the Lao transnational communities in the United States, Canada, and France. These communities help their members to better understand music in closed, national, and transnational spaces. This paper aims to clarify the process by which representations of ethnicity become utilized as resources in the consumption of local music within the larger music industry in an era of globalization and new media.

2. *Molam* Music of the Lao in Thailand

(1) The Lao in Northeastern Thailand

As briefly mentioned in the discussion of modern consumption of local music, the local music market is supported by representation on the national level and by the substantial population of ethnic Lao in Thailand, which is assumed to contain many *Molam music* listeners. The Lao account for one-third of Thailand's population, numbering more than 20 million, while the population of Lao PDR is less than 6.5 million. The Lao in northeastern Thailand inhabit the upper area of the *Khorat* plateau, while the Lao on the left side of the Mekong River live in Lao PDR. In this paper, "Lao" refers to the people living in northeastern Thailand, who have recently been called "Lao-Thai" on some

occasions. The Lao living on the left side of the Mekong River are referred to as the “Lao in Lao PDR.” Apart from ethnicity, as demonstrated by Charles F. Keyes (1967), the Isan identity was promoted through the regionalization of the northeast as part of Thailand in the 1960s and through national economic developments since then. Hayashi argues that the Isan regional identity signifies geographical identification—as people who inhabit northeastern Thailand—and linguistic identification with the Lao (Hayashi 2000:61). Self-identifications also shift depending on how individuals are situated within interethnic relationships (Hayashi 2000:61, 1998). The Lao have a self-identifying term of their own but have been identified with other terms by outside groups. The Thai people residing the rest of the country, the Lao in Lao PDR, and government entities and the media, all propagated the replacement of “Lao” with the regional term “Isan” throughout Thailand during the process of modernization.

For example, in the ethnographic description of the Lao in the 1980s, the Lao in northeastern Thailand strongly retained identification of themselves as “Lao” (*khon Lao*), but in the 1990s their identification shifted fully to “Isan” (Hayashi 2000:40-41). Lao functioned as the lingua franca for their communication with speakers of Mon-Khmer languages, such as Khmer, Phuthai, So, etc, which are classified in the Tai-Kadai language family of the northeastern region (Hayashi 2000:61). According to a Lao informant, the Lao did not mind calling themselves Lao, sometimes even jokingly using the term with one another, yet were bothered by being called Lao by the Thai people, including policymakers and intellectuals. This situation requires a brief look at the history of the descriptive resources of the Lao, *Molam* music, and the traditional mouth-organ instrument *Khaen* within the context of the Lao’s ethnic relationship to the Thai. In 1865, Rama 4 viewed the Thai people’s enthusiasm for traditional Lao performances, such as *Khaen*, and singing Lao songs called *Eo Lao* as undesirable and ordered those in the capital of Bangkok to play neither *Molam* nor *Khaen* music. Rama 4 viewed Thais playing Lao music as disgraceful, because the Lao were slaves to the Siam (Phaibun 1991:2-4, Chalomsak 2008:39-42, Takaoka 2004:105-106). The history of Lao music thus illuminates the history of the Lao and Isan ethnic representations and how, for the central Thai, the Lao representation still encodes negative stereotypes and prejudices held by Thai policymakers and intellectual elites in particular.

(2) *Lukthung Molam* and *Molam* Music in Thai Society

Nowadays, while the Thai music industry has welcomed new genres such as Thai-pop, hip-hop, and jazz, Thai music is still generally classified into four categories: Thai popular music (*Phleng Thai Sakon*), music for life (*Phleng Phuea Chiwit*), Thai country music (*Phleng Lukthung* or *Phleng Lukthung Molam*), and *Molam*, a traditional Lao form of music from northeastern Thailand and Lao PDR.⁵⁾ The term *Mo-lam* is based on two words: *Mo* meaning “expert,” and *Lam*, meaning “singing with Lao intonation.” This definition vastly differs from the Thai word *rong* which denotes “to sing” when used as a verb and “a song that the *Molam* singer performs singing local melodies” when used as a noun (Tanese 1990:191-192). *Molam* performances last all night during social and religious ceremonial occasions, especially the *Molam Klon*, which is discussed more extensively later in the paper, featuring male and female singers publicly battling in rhetorical discourse. *Lukthung*, or Thai country music, is the most widely known musical style in Thailand and was developed in the first half of the twentieth century. As indicated by the name, which is short for *Phleng Lukthung* and means “a song of a child of the field,” this style of music addresses social issues that concern the Thai people. Traditionally, *Lukthung* music is sung in the Thai language. However, since the 1980s, singers from northeastern Thailand have inserted the melodies of *Molam* music and Lao language lyrics into *Lukthung* music.⁶⁾ Suriya’s (2001) study identifies Phornsak Songsaeng as the musical pioneer who first incorporated the *Molam* melody “Lam Toei” into a *Lukthung* song entitled “Sao Chan Kan Kop” (Chan’s Chilling Out to Wait for Someone Else). This song gave rise to a new genre called *Lukthung Molam*, whose melodies are derived from traditional *Molam* music but are barely recognizable to Thai audiences. Only *Molam* music experts can detect the mixture of the melodies of

traditional *Molam* and the more commercialized *Lukthung* music. The Lao's representative music, including *Lukthung Molam* and *Molam*, raises a discussion about singing in Lao dialects. *Lukthung Molam* music is typically sung in a mixture of the Thai and Lao languages, while *Molam* music is usually performed *Lam* in the Lao language. In addition, *Molam* songs are generally performed only by Lao singers and lyrics are the Lao language, so only a limited population is able to comprehend the words that are sung. Therefore, *Molam* music is considered an audio-perceptible cultural icon that represents the Lao who reside in Thailand and Lao PDR. The audience is accordingly estimated to consist primarily of the Lao people, but in recent years, *Molam* music has succeeded in expanding its sphere beyond the two countries and gaining new audience, such as the Lao diaspora and foreign fans of *Molam*.

3. Encountering the Other in the Migrant Worker Phenomenon and Locating the Self between the Thai as Others and the Lao as Self in the 1970s and 1980s

In the 1960s, the Cold War spread throughout the countries of Southeast Asia, and Thailand became involved in the political battle between capitalist and socialist countries. The Thai government was concerned about the growing number of communist collectives and their breeding ground among resistance forces in northeastern Thailand. Communist insurgent groups established themselves in the forested uplands beginning in the mid-1960s (Pasuk1997:61), though such groups had also emerged before the government started to mobilize *Molam* singers as part of anti-communist and pro-American policies in collaboration with the United States in 1955 (Sutthisomphong Sathanak 1993:12-13). Within the Cold War division of East and West, Sarit Thanarat's military government, under the preferred term of "development" (*phatthana*), established the National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB) and launched the NESDB economic development plan in 1963 to implement social development programs intended to stem the growth of communists in the forests of northeastern Thailand. These development projects caused many migrant workers to relocate from northeastern Thailand to Bangkok and other provincial cities. The influx of migrants from northeastern Thailand to Bangkok doubled from 66,813 (22.36%) in 1965-70 to 119,661 (35.11%) in 1975-80; the majority of migrant workers in Bangkok came from northeastern Thailand during those periods (Obonai 1991:32-33). As the population of migrant workers gradually increased in cities, *Lukthung Molam* music became a dominant genre in the Thai music industry. Migrant workers brought this music with them from northeastern Thailand to their adopted cities, and the previously discussed rise in popularity of *Lukthung* and *Lukthung Molam* during the 1980s was largely due to this migration. The popularity of this music among migrant workers was reinforced by the content of the songs, which often dealt with the social problems encountered by migrant workers from northeastern Thailand.⁷⁾

The *Lukthung Molam* song "Siang Bua Long Krung" (The Sound of the Lotus Flower Goes Down to the Capital), sung by Sak Siam Phetchomphu, was first broadcast in Thailand in either 1973 or 1974, the dates differing among various informants. It depicts migrants' new lifestyle:

The train whistle makes repeated sounds of bububu, pipipi, spreading out. I gave a big smile and left my girl alone with a good-bye. I've got to be in a rush to buy a train ticket to go down south to **Thai** to work for a time (ลงไปไทยทำงานอีกห้วง)... Will just work for wages and earn money and let my girl long for me, my girl. Until I come back one day next spring with a new sky and nice rain showers. I will be back to hold the grand wedding. I will also get some alcohol and give it away with grilled chicken.

These lyrics describe a Lao man who has migrated to Bangkok, and left behind the woman he loves in order to earn

money to pay for a big wedding. His departure to work in Bangkok is expressed as going “down south to Thai,” which highlights the juxtaposition of the Lao with the Other; in this song, “Thai” connotes the world unknown to the Lao. The above song lyrics function as a historical record of how the Lao population perceived the Thai as the Other and differentiated themselves from them during this time period.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the migration of workers from northeastern Thailand to Bangkok and other cities peaked (Obonai 1991:31-33). Through economic, social, and geographic isolation, northeastern Thailand had long placed the Lao people in complete psychological and cultural isolation, causing conflicts because of their differences in lifestyle and language. However, with the migration of many Lao workers, the Lao people became less isolated and, through this experience, encountered the Thai as the Other. At the same time, the Thai government assigned the regional identity of Isan to the Lao and encouraged its spread throughout northeastern Thailand. This movement marked the beginning of the Lao people’s cultural integration into Thailand.

Many songs reflect the social changes of the era as the government assigned the Isan identity to the people of northeastern Thailand. These songs were produced to express Lao, later Isan, messages. In the 1970s, Theppaphorn Phetubon⁸⁾ became the first singer and writer of *Lukthung Molam* music in Thailand’s music industry to use the term “Isan” while exclusively using Lao-language lyrics. Songs such as “Isan Ban Hao” (Our Motherland Isan) and “Khong Saep Isan” (Isan’s Delicious Food), both written in 1977, celebrate the food, scenery, natural fragrances, and animal sounds that punctuate the landscape of Isan. These songs promote representation of the Lao people’s daily lives, helping to share their experiences with other Lao throughout Thailand and to integrate them into the consciousness as the Thai people, who led extremely different lives. In an interview, one informant, a 50-year-old lecturer at a national university who is from northeastern Thailand, stated that these songs showed that “the Lao migrant worker relocation caused them to reflect on how they perceived central Bangkok as an unknown world in which everything differed from their way of life in northeastern Thailand. In Bangkok, without any cash, the Lao could not obtain anything to eat, a place to stay, or clothing, which differed from life in the village, where they only had to do what was necessary to obtain food to survive. In Bangkok, they became fascinated with obtaining cash, earning money, and being able to purchase the daily necessities for a ‘more convenient life’ (*chivit saduak kwa kao*).” As with the previous song, the informant regarded Bangkokians and life in Bangkok as Other.

The song “Isan Ban Hao” has been covered and reinterpreted not only by domestic *Molam* singers but also by a Western duo who released their version on a *Lukthung Molam* music album in 2000. The song’s melody was also reproduced as the theme music for TV drama series entitled “Mun Rak Mae Nam Mun” (Love Potion in the Mun River) in 2011. Additionally, as of April 15, 2013, “Isan Ban Hao,” which was uploaded to YouTube in May 2011, had 994,096 hits and 218 comments by users from many countries, including Thailand, Lao PDR, the United States, the Netherlands, Australia, Denmark, Russia, Germany, and Japan.⁹⁾ Users, particularly Westerners, who live outside Thailand and enjoy Thai country music have commented on the beauty of the melody and stated that the song has inspired a desire to travel to Thailand. The comments on the webpage also compliment the beauty of the Thai women in the video, who represent an exotic Orientalism that appeals to Westerners. Moreover, United States residents of Lao and Thai heritage have also posted comments to which Thailand residents have responded in mixed English and Thai. Several themes emerge from these comments: memories of the homeland Isan, which are elicited by the song’s melody; pride for *Molam* music, which is part of their cultural heritage; controversies in Lao and Thai history; and sometimes, queries about the meaning of Lao lexical items, which vary among the diverse regional dialects of northeastern Thailand. YouTube thus provides opportunities for interaction among the Lao and Thai residing in Thailand and the multitude of those who belong to transnational communities, such as the spouses of foreign partners, immigrants, expatriates, migrant workers, and international students. In addition, villagers have gained opportunities

to record the live performances of *Lukthung Molam* and traditional *Molam* music at the Buddhist festivals and ceremonial occasions on CDs and VCDs. The lyrics of “Isan Ban Hao” are as follows:

Wrapped in the fragrance of the Kanyaeng,¹⁰⁾
 The sky flames red and the sun goes down,
 The frog croaks throughout the rice field,
 The sky cries.
 Bull frog and blacklegged dart frog,
 As if *Molam* was waxing poetic,
 A black cloud wreath appears,
 The rain showers down on the land of Isan.
 The bunch of weeds gets wet,
 And shines green.
 After the agricultural work is done,
 All the cows graze in the grass, and weeds grow luxuriously by the field.
 A ray of light starts to flash
 In the fresh of the morning, just get out of the house into full flight.
 Our motherland Isan—
 Our occupation has continued since many ages ago,
 Puff out our chests toward the sky and rain,
 Rice cultivation never ends...never, and ever joyful...

In the cities such as Bangkok where the Lao moved in order to obtain work as laborers (*raeng ngan*), the Thai tended to mock or despise them for not leading a typical urban lifestyle and especially for their language and eating habits. According to Lao informants and even TV programs produced by the Thai media, the Lao in northeastern Thailand are often described as fools and oddities because they are from a low socioeconomic class and a poor region known for its low educational achievements. In light of this complex injustice, what led to the introduction of the term “Isan” in the lyrics of *Lukthung Molam* music?

The lyrics of “Isan Ban Hao” depict the eating habits, dialects, languages, and scenery of daily life in Isan as essential elements of Lao culture. The herbal plants and small animals such as frogs to which the lyrics refer are indispensable components of the Lao people’s diet. In this sense, *Molam* music is a cultural medium that captures the Lao ethnic group’s language and customs. In particular, the scenery, the smell of rain, the various plants and herbs, eating habits, and the language can be considered cultural mediums. In other words, the song expresses the primordial ties, described by Geertz (1963), that connect, for example, the Lao in Thailand with the Lao in Lao PDR on the Mekong River, who also consume herbal plants and small animals, and help both groups express their thoughts and emotions about being Lao. The use of the term “Isan” spreads a representative image of many aspects of Lao identity. At the same time, the conjunction of the term “Isan” with the assertion, through song, of the Lao way of life might also convey an ironic resistance to the new Isan identity assigned to them by the government. The music industry’s growing use of the appellation “Isan,” inextricably associated with the Isan identity promoted by the government, gradually reduced its historically negative perception, except when the Lao themselves effectively used it to provoke laughter. In addition, Theppaphorn used “Isan” in the title of songs he produced during the same period, and the term became thoroughly entrenched in *Lukthung Molam* music. These usages suggest that in the 1970s, the ethnic Lao

constructively and strategically used the term as an iconic resource to promote the positive relationship between the Isan Self and the Thai Other. In this matter at least, “Isan” became a new, fashionable and usable term in the music industry, while the term “Lao” receded into the background, as is discussed in Section 5. The history of this iconic term teaches that ethnicity is an abstract concept that consists of more than the obvious traits of language, religion, and customs and refers to common conceptual knowledge.

4. The Differentiation between Self and Other

As described in the previous section, the productive utilization of Lao ethnicity and Isan identity in the lyrics of the local traditional music caused, for the Lao in northeastern Thailand, the differentiation between themselves and the Lao in Lao PDR, as they accepted the Isan identity assigned them by the Thai government. As migrants, during their interaction with others, how did the Lao use their musical activities to represent themselves and to differentiate the Self from the Other?

The song “Isan Krap Thin” (Isan’s Homecoming), which was also written by Theppaphorn Phetubon, consists of two parts: a solo sung by the performer and a skit performed by comedians.¹¹⁾ The song describes the story of migrant workers returning home to help with the farm work, reflecting the collective experience of the Lao migrants into Bangkok. In the lyrics, Phetubon addresses a challenge often encountered by Lao immigrant workers: having to speak the Other’s language (i.e., Thai) and the accompanying linguistic problems. Phetubon approaches this serious issue through comedy. As demonstrated by Japanese street performer *Daidogeinin*, humor has the potential to heal people’s minds, especially when combined with such elements as a nostalgic melody and well-chosen language, and atmosphere (Hatta and Baba 2003:60-61). Konishi’s and Shimura’s studies of *Rai*, a traditional performing group in central India, and *Namsadang*, a traveling entertainment group of male Korean performers, show that these performers tended to criticize authorities with laughter and sarcasm (Konishi 1990, Shimura 1990). The songs performed by local *Molam* singers also provided a healing¹²⁾, therapeutic effect for migrant workers experiencing harsh conditions. For example, consider the lyrics of “Isan Krap Thin”:

(Solo)

Get on a train from Bangkok,
Homecoming to our countryside Isan.
We are all in the same boat.
When we get home, the farming work waits for us.
Some are from Ubon Ratchathani Province.
Others are from Roi Et Province.
Another is from Sisaket, Udonthani, Khon Kaen,
That sister comes from Nong Khai Province.
We ask where each comes from on the train. Could you save up your money? We’ve gone home to help farm.

(Skit)

PHETUBON: Hey sister, you’ve come to Krungthep for many days (*don don wan*). Then could you save your money?

นี่ คุณผู้หญิงครับ อ่า...มาอยู่กรุงเทพฯ คนๆ วันเฮ็ดเก็บเงินได้บ้างไหมครับ

NOK NOI : Oh no. Aren’t you ashamed you made a mistake? It’s not *don wan* [lai wan]. It’s *lai wan* [many

days]. Please try to use proper language.

เหมม... อ่าเขาหน้อยสิคะ หลายวัยไม่ใช่คนวันล่ะ พุดให้มันถูกหน้อยสิคะ

PHETUBON: Hahaha, you are right... Should have said *lai wan*, shouldn't I?

เอ้อๆ หลายวันครับนะ

NOK NOI: About my saving? Right now... I have only 1,000 bath. I will buy many pieces of *soi sen* [gold necklaces].

เรื่องเงินทองหรือคะ ตอนนี่ก็... เก็บได้แค่พันแล้วหรือคะ ว่าจะไปถึงบ้าน จะซื้อสร้อยเส้นเยอะๆ ใด้ล่ะ...

PHETUBON: Fufufu, many, many pieces of *soi sen* [soi kho]... Doesn't sound bad. Hahaha

ฮ่าๆ สร้อยเส้นเยอะๆ... เห้อๆๆ

(Solo)

Our conversationalists kept asking where they came from and whether it's far away.

Uncle Champa stays in Ubon.

If the direction is toward Amphon, we know your hometown is in Roi Et.

We told stories until we got to the last station.

Then we got off the train,

And each goes to their hometown...

(Skit)

THOT: Well, where are you livin'?

อ้อ นี้คุณ บ้านคุณที่ไหนหรือครับ

SHITHIPHON: My hometown is in *Khiang Nai* [Khueang Nai¹³] City.

บ้านผมอยู่อำเภอเขียง(เขื่องใน) ในนะครับ

THOT: Oh, again ... you didn't speak properly. Just pronounce Khueang as "Khueang." There's no place named *Khiang Nai* City, you know.

โว้ย พุดก็ไม่ถูก เขียงก็เขื่องอะครับ ไม่ใช่อำเภอเขียง

SHITHIPHON: Hahaha. How about you? Where are you going, then?

เอ้อๆๆ แล้วคุณหนือครับ คุณจะไปที่ไหนหรือครับ

PHETUBON: Me? To *Khongchueam* City [Khongchiam].¹⁴

ผมหรือครับ ผมจะไปอำเภอโขงเจียม (โขงเจียม)

SHITHIPHON: Hahaha. *Khongchueam*?

ฮ่าๆๆๆ โขงเจียม

NOK NOI: Aw, you are alone. Where are you going? Where is your hometown?

เอ๊ะ คุณยืนอยู่คนเดียว จะไปไหนจ๊ะ แล้วบ้านคุณอยู่ที่ไหนล่ะ

PHETUBON: My home is not near your place. It's in the *phak klang* [central].¹⁵ It's in Roi Et Province. I am a *phian* [friend]¹⁶ of Brother Lia.¹⁷ Hehe...

บ้านผม..อ่า... ไม่ได้อยู่ใกล้หมู่บ้านหรือครับ บ้านผมอยู่จังหวัดร้อยเอ็ด ผมเป็นพี่ขง(เพื่อน) กะไอ้เหลี่ยนะครับ ฮ่าๆๆ

NOK NOI: Well, the way you behave is the same as the way the Lao do.¹⁸

โว้ย ที่แท้ก็คนลาวก็กันละน้อ

PHETUBON: Okay, *Siao* [mate].¹⁹ Let's go on.

ไปเถอะเด้อ เสี่ยวเด้อ

The significance of these lyrics lies in the way in which the Lao ethnicity emerges through the selected language. Such representations of the emerging linguistic Lao identity are noted in the footnotes. The song narrates Lao migrant workers' attempts and failures to speak proper, standard Thai, while constantly lapsing into their native Lao dialect. Here, unintentional linguistic errors in the lyrics are represented in italics, with the correct Thai usage noted in brackets. When even minor mistakes such as these occur intermittently, the speaker may become a target of mockery and use humor to dispel embarrassment, hesitancy, and frustration. However, as the lyrics show, when migrant workers try to speak proper Thai, they unconsciously revert to their Lao dialect and eventually respond with self-deprecating humor about their true Lao identity, which has historically been viewed with negative prejudices in Thai society.

In the song's second skit, the train passengers traveling to northeastern Thailand from Bangkok ask about their hometowns and eventually realize that they are all returning home to the same area. When Phetubon behaves in a way consistent with the Lao people's typical interactions with strangers (see footnotes 17, 18, and 19), the other passengers on the train realize their commonality and admit that they are all Lao pretending to speak Thai. Concluding the song with "*siao*" clearly reveals that the passengers can relate to each other in their Lao identity: they accept who they are as Lao and position themselves as the targets of self-mockery, which induces laughter. How then can a broader audience share the common meaning of this laughter? Perhaps their behavior is a sort of response that seeks to transform the negative perceptions held by the Thai into positive ones by provoking laughter through subtle verbal expressions of one's mistakes and failures. What is represented about the Lao in this song is the transformation from a negative mood to a positive zest for living, reflecting the Lao experience of integrating into the nation-state of Thailand while retaining their identities. This transformation process is also demonstrated by thinking in or speaking Lao despite the remaining negative views held by the central Thai. This song can be regarded as art that addresses negative perceptions and shares the consolation of a common experience of discrimination. From the music industry's perspective, a representation of Lao ethnicity infused with comic relief is healing and attractive to an audience with similar experiences.

5. Differentiation: Repositioning Themselves from the Lao as the Other to the Isan in the 2000s

Thus far, this paper has demonstrated how the Lao ethnicity has been utilized in music as a response to the particular interethnic relationship between the Lao and the Thai. The music entertainment industry's effective utilization of representations of the Lao ethnicity to promote positive relations among the Lao, Isan, and Thai facilitated an increasing identification of the Lao in northeastern Thailand as Thai nationals, at least since the 1990s. The Lao used music during this period to ensure their own (cultural) survival, strategically infusing their music into politics. In other words, the Lao people adopted this strategy to promote their own political agenda.

Since the mid-1980s, the Thai private sector has invested in Lao PDR through direct trade, and both countries' governments have actively and steadily developed economic collaboration. In particular, the First Mekong International Bridge Construction Project began in 1989, with the financial support of the Australian government, and the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge opened in 1994, demonstrating the governments' willingness to cooperate economically and culturally. Among the Thai royal family's diplomatic activities in northeastern Thailand and Lao PDR, endeavors by the two women in the Thai Royal family should produce measurable results: Queen Sirikit has recently focused on encouraging weaving and broadening the recognition of Matmi, an ikat-patterned fabric, to stimulate the promotion and branding of handicrafts from the Lao silk textiles industry in Lao PDR through UNESCO's international promotion projects (Vallard 2011:234-245).²⁰⁾ The completion of the friendship bridge in

1994 marked the start of friendly diplomacy between Thailand and Lao PDR, as evidenced in writing and publications covering the event, which was an initiative of Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn's Personal Affairs Division (Somdetphratheprattanarachasuda 1994a). Princess Sirindhorn made a diplomatic visit to Lao PDR in 1994 and subsequently published descriptions of her travels (Somdetphrathep-rattanarachasuda 1994b, 1995, 1996, 1997). Her educational and cultural support activities have increased the friendship and mutual understanding between Thailand and Lao PDR, which have historically had what some have described as a "close but far away" relationship. Princess Sirindhorn's diplomatic activities have been regarded as the start of a growing Thai awareness of the Lao on the left side of the Mekong River. In 2004-2006, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) launched and has since intensified the operations of an economic cooperative system in the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) economic area. The cooperative economic relationship between the two countries has also been strengthened systematically through the construction of cross-border infrastructure and a new hydroelectric plant, which is also supported by Vietnam (ADB 2004, 2009).

As Thai media representations of the Lao have gradually changed and increased understanding and awareness over the past several decades,²¹⁾ the Lao-Thai have altered their representations of themselves in the music industry. *Molam* singers, who share *Molam* music with the Lao on the left side of Lao PDR, have reflected economic and diplomatic events in their poetic writing. *Molam* music has emphasized the neighborliness of the Lao while still distinguishing them as the Other, living in a politically and administratively different country. *Molam* master Ratri wrote the following lyrics for the song "Mittraphap Thai Lao" (Friendship between Thai and Lao) in Khon Kaen in the late 1990s.

(Intro)

The interception between the Mekong doesn't matter.
 Our hearts were united by strong bonds.
 The Mekong was just a line as the border,
 But there is no border in our minds.
 The thing is that our brotherhood was fastened firmly.
 The blood received from the God of Phaya Thaen²²⁾ flowed through our bodies.
 A golden gourd has been bound up for many ages.

(The following part is from *Lam* song)

Hold a discourse on friendship,
 The border area between the two countries of Thailand and Laos—
 Though we are apart, we are bound by concern.
 Even though our national policies are different, it's never a country
 Our ancestors have loved from past to present.
 So we could finally combine the lineage of the Thai-Lao.
 Recent generation is precious.
 They understand that each life and custom,
 Communicate by the same language.
 Whatever you're looking for all over the world, there's no country like Thailand and Laos.
 Our brotherhood has abundant laughing voices, and we are bound by strong love.
 Rise up together.

Whether rich or poor, whether high class or low, one could be ambitious.
No one can realize a goal like us. Where is the country?
No one can love each other, like brothers and sisters, like us—
Love each other from the heart, on the earth.

Meandering,
The Mekong River is wide and long—
The pure love that used to be shared was torn apart in our hearts.
Pure and straight hearts never meander like the song of the Mekong.
Heart with no foulness, the Lam song of the Mekong—it is our heart and soul.

The problem is not that the Mekong River is also the border.
With even a little interference, we take ourselves closer and visit each other.
As if our common ancestors, through the long ages, used to do good deeds (making merit) together and gather again.
Commandments, practice virtue, customs that have been transmitted since olden times,
Twelve disciples (of the Lao) have been seen living in harmony by merit making together.
Since many ages ago, we have been getting along and happy together.
The Thai and the Lao...And today, we've gathered here.

This song was broadcast throughout Thailand and Laos by the first mass-media radio station operated by the national radio broadcast station. Ratri explained the song's popularity: "This song was a wish for further developments and flourishing of friendly relations between Thailand and Laos. Though we both live in different countries, we could have the same aim to achieve understanding with each other." Despite having similar languages, Buddhist religious practices, and customs, Ratri situates the Lao on the left side of the Mekong as being with the "neighborhood of Lao," and within the diplomatic and political context, she differentiates between the Lao who reside on either side of the Mekong. These lyrics link the wish for friendship between Thailand and Lao PDR to the countries' political history and have contributed to developing the Lao's consciousness as a part of the nation-state of Thailand.

According to an interview with Ratri's music production company, the following lyrics were written between the late 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s, and two *Molam* masters whom Ratri taught to sing *Lam* performed the lyrics to her "*Lam Thang Yao*" melody. *Molam* music produced after 2000 has presented more consistent representations of the Lao. The traditional *Molam* performance described here is a *Molam Klon* singing battle between men and women. This performance style is similar to the original style of African-American hip-hop music in the United States in that two elements dominate the lyrics—fixed written texts and improvisational linguistic dialogue—as the participants compete in a vigorous linguistic battle. In this public singing battle, the singers address the divergent or contradictory self-representations of the Lao in northeastern Thailand, comparing what they are like in the present with what they were like in the past and referencing political matters with skillful rhetoric. *Molam Klon* performances take place in public places and link rhetoric to politics. The lyrics of "Lam Prachan Klon" are as follows:

For a long time (*tangtae ki tae kon*), I have looked admiringly at you. I, the *Molam Klon* expert, am going to the temple where the Kathin will present the ceremonial robes. What a mature age now. I have seen the evolution from the *Molam Klon* style to the *Molam Sing* style. Because of this, I, the *Molam Klon* master,

will sing for our grandfathers and grandmothers, fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters, siblings, and our descendants. ...

A long time ago (*samai boran*), our country was not as developed as today. Recently? Answer, Teacher Sombat? Men of old times (*khon samai taeki*) did not wear trousers like the Europeans wear in the present; instead, they put on a tight loincloth. Women of old times (*samai boran*) did not wear the skirts to which we are accustomed nowadays. Instead, they put on red and white skirts. Colorful dyed sashes hung on their shoulders at an angle. The hairstyle was a dumpling knot on the top of the head... They didn't have any shampoo... Of course, we had no combs made of plastic sold in the market as in the present!

Yo, elder sis, where have you come from? How many people are you hanging out with? Just go if it's time for the wedding. Where do you live, sis? Are you a married person? Or still a bachelorette? When a man courted a woman, he composed a poetic letter and sent it to her, in the old times (*samai boran*). The woman who received it responded to his sentiments in a letter with the poetry of love.

And nowadays (*samai sumueni*), it is the age that has already matured! Reform and revolution have occurred repeatedly. Neither modern children nor grandchildren hear what their parents are saying at all. Their clothes are not the same as those in the old times (*samai boran*), and they pamper themselves. Recently (*samai sumueni*), they have started to wear new clothing such as camisoles. I prefer telling more recent stories, not merely recalling the past that we have gone through. In recent years, a new social system has developed, and the new movement consolidated. For instance, the One Village One Product Movement should be watched by everyone... Next let me talk of Vientiane ...

At first, these singers seem to identify themselves as propaganda transmitters who aspire to preserve the Lao culture and to situate themselves between the past (*tangtae ki tae kon ตั้งแต่ก็แต่ก่อน* or *samai boran สมัยโบราณ*) and present (*samai sumueni สมัยชุนี*). They describe the *samai boran* ways through discussion of old farming tools, women's roles, their costume and appearance, the use of Lao textiles, washing hair with milky rice water, hairstyles, and courting rituals. The singers also refer to the *samai sumueni* governing system (*rabop mai*) and the modern, technologically advanced Thai society (*charoen, thansamai*). However, from the middle of the singing battle to its finale, the rhetoric presents contradictory images of the Lao. Although the singers reminisce about the traditional ways of life, they detach themselves from it and try to situate themselves in Thai society by remarking on political issues and legitimatizing their current situation. Thus, the *Molam* performance creates a space in which the singers can live in the present. It demonstrates the negative prejudices based on nostalgia and the complicated regional situation the Lao people face within the nation-state of Thailand.

In addition, by using music to access the political realm, the Lao in northeastern Thailand have positioned themselves as part of Thailand, not simply in the neighborhood of the Lao who are in Lao PDR. The changing political climate in Thailand since 2005 has apparently strengthened the Lao's tendency to identify themselves with the nation-state. Political protest has increased since 2005, and both yellow-and red-shirt groups have used *Lukthung* music as a replacement for the satirical *Phleng Phuea Chiwit* music of the 1970s pro-democracy movement.²³⁾ Mitchell (2011) examines the use of such satirical songs during Thailand's most recent political struggle, taking place from 2005 to the present, and describes how *Lukthung* music created its own roles.²⁴⁾ Red-shirt protesters of the United Front of Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD) have utilized a wide range of memories, while their yellow-shirt opponents

of the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), have drawn on a much narrower selection of hegemonic cultural memories. The *Lukthung Molam* songs by the red-shirts, which are mostly Lao from northeastern Thailand, are crucial to understanding *Lukthung Molam* music sung in the Isan dialect. Predominantly using lyrics accompanying traditional *Molam* melodies performed live during protests, the protesters from northeastern Thailand self identify neither as Lao nor as Thai (*khon thai* or *chao thai*) and mention Thailand (*mueang thai*) in the context of the political movement. The red-shirt news media outlets broadcast UDD supporters' songs through TV and YouTube, the latter being used as a powerful new tool to spread political messages to supporters and to muster sympathy for former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. As of July 2012, the lyrics of *Molam Klon* songs had 168,636 hits and 100 comments posted by people from Thailand, Lao PDR, the United States, Canada, Japan, and Mongolia, among other countries.

Oh... people, we all have in us both the good and the bad, right? Girl, up to now, it's a pity that Thaksin had to leave our brothers and sisters. Thai people have come home now... The one who seizes the virtue and made a lot of (meritorious deeds) in the land of Thailand is the minister Thaksin of our Thai brothers and sisters. Everyone admires all of his achievements throughout all regions, which are the prestigious and celebrated gifts for any farmer who is engaged in agriculture. They are also a gift for the fans...

...snip...

The 30 baht health insurance policy combats any disease in the hospital... That's the obvious accomplishment. Anyone's country would mention this remarkable accomplishment and win the first prize ... Well, our minister, on the side of the people of the earth, accomplishes flourishing achievements... We, including our uncles and aunts, open our mouths. The Thai community ... FML²⁵) came to give money to the whole country and help all the people. The Thai prime minister is the only one who could do these things. Turning lottery money into a foundation for youth to continue their education. Performing meritorious deeds at the temple... Eliminating drugs... Even though Thaksin leaves our country, he will be back as a representative, just as before....

The support songs of the red-shirt group, including "Lam Klon Thaksin Thuk Klan Klaeng" (The Petitionary Song of Bullied Thaksin) sung by Sinchainoi Phumra, also use the words *khon thai* (the Thai) and *mueang thai* (Thailand). Since the 2006 protest, this song had gained 140,383 YouTube hits as of February 2013 and was broadcast on the local TV program "*Isan Prachachon*" (The Isan Nation). In 2010, "Wao Phun Rattaban" (The Critic of the Government), served as the red-shirt group's protest song and was sung in front of *Rat Phaw*, the Big-C, department store. Sung to a *Molam* melody, this song lambasts the incumbent party and refers repeatedly to *khon thai* and *mueang thai*. Indeed, earlier literature on traditional *Molam* music has documented how singers themselves tended to perform important roles in disseminating the political messages of government propaganda (Bunsai 1990; Sutthisomphong Sathanak 1993; Khuanchai 1996; Wichaya 2005). However, the literature has overlooked changes in singers' usage of language based on how they position themselves in relation to others. The traditional *Molam* songs used in recent protests have shown that nothing of the Lao ethnicity remains in the political movement because the Lao have insisted on becoming a part of the nation-state of Thailand.

6. The Representation of Ethnicity and its Possibility as the Resource of Melody

As mentioned in the introduction, *Molam* singers are generally invited to perform at wakes, weddings, Buddhist ceremonies, and ancestral worship ceremonies. Their live performances have been limited by the time and space allotted to consuming music. However, in the 2000s, new media technologies, especially audio mediums such as CDs and VCDs produced in cooperation with recording studios and record companies, changed the activities of *Molam* singers in northeastern Thailand. The *Molam* singers themselves have succeeded in expanding their range of musical activities and gained consumers through their CDs and VCDs. Meanwhile, the audience that once sought occasions for live *Molam* performances have turned to consuming the music on CD and DVDs except for those who value the uniqueness of live performances. Technological advances in audio mediums have given audiences and performers of *Molam* music the possibility of repeatability and removed the limits of time and space from music, as *Molam* music can be consumed through audio recordings and Internet videos. The Internet's expansion of the various means of consumption has made public representations of the Lao the target of purchases or consumption by audiences in more places. Here, we first examine the process by which melodies of these songs attract audiences to *Molam* music. Secondly, we explore the possibilities that the music industry's strategic production and selling of representations of ethnicity open among cyber communities in a globalized era.

Melodies are considered as resources first in *Lukthung Molam* music. Tai Orathai, a popular, talented, mid-career *Lukthung Molam* singer in Thailand, released her sixth album, "*Molam Dok Ya*" (*A Flower of Weed-like Molam*), in 2008. Ten of the 12 songs on this album are traditional *Molam* songs in the Lao language. The other two *Lukthung* songs feature *Molam Lam Salawan* melodies, which originated among the Mon-Khmer group in Lao PDR, in contrast to *Lam Phuthai* melodies, which originated in northeastern Thailand (Sakon Nakhon, Kalasin) as well as in Lao PDR. The album also includes a melody native to the Siang Khwang (Xiang Khouang) Province in Lao PDR. These melodies are deeply connected to the lives of the ethnic groups of different regions of Lao PDR. However, some friction has arisen between Thailand and Lao PDR over the use of traditional *Molam* melodies with roots in both countries as a resource. According to an interview with a *Molam* music industry informant in Lao PDR, the release of Orathai's album encouraged the decision to lightly promote the local music album for Thai *Lukthung Molam*, and controversy over Salawan²⁶⁾ arose among Lao intellectuals and the general public during my field research in Lao PDR in 2009. In 2008, Ratsami Phonmingdon, a popular, competent, mid-career Lao *Molam* singer, released a *Molam* music album in Lao PDR that was a creative forerunner of the inclusion of many *Molam* melodies in one album. All the songs on the album contain *Molam* melodies: "*Lam Tang Wai*," "*Lam Phuthai*," "*Lam Mahasai*," "*Lam Khonsawan*," "*Lam Shiphandon*," "*Khap Thung Luang Prabang*," and "*Khap Siang Khwang*." In the modern Lao and Thai music industries, the commercialization of local music styles such as *Molam* in Lao PDR has progressed year by year, applying modernized tunes, tempos, ornate costumes, and dancing to *Molam* music. At the same time, the industry has gradually made more traditional melodies into effective resources that have attracted more consumers.

In addition to the usage of local melodies as resources, the question arises as to how the representation of an ethnicity becomes a resource in music albums and what impact this role has on the Internet. On the cover of the 2008 album *Molam Dok Ya* (*A Flower of Weed-like Molam*), Tai Orathai wears a blue shirt tied with a red loincloth, referencing the female dress of the ethnic Phuthai minority near northeastern Thailand. Her costume evokes imagery that appeals to nostalgia and captures people's interest, as evidenced by online comments. As of November 23, 212, the song "*Salawan... Ya Luem Sanya*" (*Salawan... Don't Forget Our Promise*), posted on YouTube in 2008, had been viewed 301,910 times,²⁷⁾ which is the highest number of views among all the songs on this album. The reasons for its popularity are complex, because *Lam Salawan* was broadcast at a Buddhist festival in northeastern Thailand and

employs rhythmical melodies often used as background music for circle dancing. The *Lam Salawan* in the album title refers to a province of Lao PDR that has never been part of Thailand, but the Thai music company used the name and the original melody from Lao PDR to make a profit. The context of this album reveals that the Thai production of *Molam* music using ethnic melodies from Lao PDR has expanded the online presence of *Molam* music. In addition, as informants from northeastern Thailand recalled their 20s through their 40s, they regarded Salawan as a kind of lotus land—their birthplace where boys and girls dance together in circles. Such narratives and images of Salawan circulating among the Lao people demonstrate that they consume the music as a form of nostalgia for the beautiful land of Isan, from which their ancestors came and to which they cannot return.

These nostalgic images of Salawan, as well as those of ethnic costumes and dance are shared not only by the Lao but also by those living outside their country of origin. People from many different backgrounds and all over the world, including the Lao-Thai diaspora and foreign fans of *Molam* music, are able to come together and have posted many comments on the “Salawan...Ya Luem Sanya” video page on YouTube. In other words, the act of listening to *Molam* music could result in strengthening the loose connections of the communities, who possess a myriad of different characteristics. These *Molam* music fans who have emerged in the virtual community are either Laotian or Thai; additionally, the foreign fans of *Molam* music from the United States, Canada, France, Germany, Japan, and Denmark have also joined in commenting about their impressions of and opinions on Lao music. As of July 2012, 76 comments had been posted for this video.²⁸⁾ Thai commentators have expressed admiration for the song and Orathai’s singing ability, while those overseas, evidently Lao or Thai expatriates or migrants, expressed longing to return to their hometowns in Isan and admiration for the *Lukthung Molam* music that made them feel nostalgic. The acts of commenting on and discussing common musical interests online, even with strangers, can evoke a feeling of fellowship. Audience members who understand the language of the lyrics are able to enjoy a sense of camaraderie in comprehending the lyrics and melodies together; others might not understand the language but share the common image of the ethnic culture, which generates nostalgia through the image of the lotus land and as such might foster peer identities online.

The two points which this paper has demonstrated are worth emphasizing. First, the utilization of melodies as a resource and the representation of ethnicity have created conditions in which, despite inexact understanding of the lyrics’ national and linguistic content, a transnational, cyber community has formed, including members from outside the country of origin and its diaspora in the United States, Canada, France, and other countries.²⁹⁾ Second, these audiences, including non-Lao speakers such as the foreign fans of *Molam*, eagerly express and exchange their opinions, and discuss issues of concern through online comments. This interaction may engender a sort of fellowship which depends on highly individual affection as a binding force, which the cyber community provides. Specifically, the representation of ethnicity by the music industry has facilitated the deterritorialization of the *Molam* music from the geographical framework of the nation-state of Thailand, and it has seemingly brought together linguistically and nationally diverse people from many backgrounds in new virtual communities and enabled them to communicate freely.

7. Conclusion

This paper has argued that the representation of the Lao ethnicity from northeastern Thailand and other political identifiers such as Isan’s changes within different social contexts, have been utilized as resources by the music industry. This insight has enabled interpretation of several aspects and possibilities of representations of ethnicity.

The Lao’s awakening to their identity was precipitated by migrant workers’ experience of encountering the Thai

as the Other in Bangkok. Acceptance of the new administrative and regional Isan identity allowed the Lao to choose their own designation as either “Lao” or “Isan.” In *Lukthung Molam* music the songs (as presented here) demonstrate singers’ tendency to strategically utilize the term “Isan” as a fashionable symbol to build and promote their role and presence in the Thai music industry, rather than expressing resistance to the new Isan identity assigned by the government. The songs refer to cultural elements, including language, scenery, and eating habits, all of which identify the Lao. In the 1970s and 1980s, *Lukthung Molam* music was created within the social context of the Lao migrants’ encounters with the Thai people in cities such as Bangkok. Therefore, some of these songs show the cognitive process of the Lao’s realization that they were different from the Thai people, who spoke another language and had other customs. During this time, the Lao were often obliged to speak Thai or risk being mocked by the Thai if they spoke their own dialect of Lao. Migrants’ experiences encouraged the use of Thai, not their mother tongue, which situated them in an oppressive environment.

However, as shown in *Molam* music, song offered a mystical power to allow the Thai to eliminate their negative perception through laughter. The Lao were flexible and tough enough to survive the Thai’s prejudices. Yet through the historically negative perspective of the Thai intellectuals and elite, the Lao people took advantage of their identity and origins and strategically used the representation of ethnicity as resource to propagate a positive view of themselves. Gradual changes, however, occurred during the 1990s. The relationship of Thailand and Lao PDR strengthened through economic, cultural, and educational partnerships, especially the promotion of Lao culture by the Thai royal prince and princess. The more the countries’ economic and political partnerships intensified, the more the lyrics of *Molam* singers in Thailand reflected their feelings about belonging to the nation-state of Thailand. For example, the lyrics of traditional *Molam* songs maintained identification with Lao customs, food, and religious practices, but the Lao in northeastern Thailand considered themselves a part of Thailand and completely differentiated themselves from the Lao in Lao PDR. Simultaneously, *Molam* singers positively incorporated the new, fashionable Isan identity into *Lukthung Molam* music and used it to gain recognition in the Thai music industry. The lyrics analyzed in this paper show that *Molam* singers promote government policies and have encouraged friendship between Thailand and the Lao PDR. The Lao in northeastern Thailand seemingly faced an internal struggle over their relationship with the Lao on the left side of the Mekong River, but rather than viewing their choices negatively, the *Molam* singers in modern Thai society legitimized and viewed positively their new way of living. Although *Molam* singers have been utilized in the political arena—particularly in protest campaigns and political confrontations between the red and yellow shirt groups—questioning whether they identify as Lao, Isan, or Thai has become unproductive and meaningless. Given *Lukthung Molam* and *Molam* music’s connection to politics, representations of ethnicity and the new roles of world music as resources warrant further consideration.

The traditional *Molam* songs discussed here were broadcast on TV, radio, and even online, creating the image of the Isan and the Lao through a cultural flow shared and consumed by online audiences whose size exceeded expectations. Video-sharing websites such as YouTube and Vimeo have provided a new venue for the consumption of *Molam* music. *Molam* music sung in Lao has the potential to act as a lingua franca, attracting both speakers and non-speakers of Lao who live outside these two countries. Tunes used in *Molam* music in Thailand and shared by Lao PDR have helped expand access to performances in both countries.³⁰ The tunes of local *Molam* music have been engraved on audience members’ hearts regardless of whether they could understand the lyrics. Listeners appraise and discuss the songs freely online, giving feedback on the songs. Their comments reveal that the ethnic costumes, melodies, and recorded scenery and locales in northeastern Thailand in promotional *Molam* music videos capture audiences’ hearts. Some Lao immigrants and expatriates in foreign countries including the United States, Canada, and Japan experience nostalgia and miss their hometowns. Foreign fans of *Molam* music express a strong desire to travel to Thailand. The

interaction among these two groups from different backgrounds would not be realized without the emergence of cyber communities on the web. In other words, the representation of ethnicity and the melodies rooted in northeastern Thailand and Lao PDR, which once assumed the local provenance and ethnic descent of its audience, possess the potential to link locals, expatriates, and fans with no solid connections through cyber communities. In understanding local performing arts, the capability of new technologies of production and consumption must be considered when describing the art world in today's era of globalization.

Notes

- 1) This paper is based on a paper entitled "Representing Lao as the Others in Thailand-Modern Thai Cinema and Entertainment of *Lukthung Molam* Music" (Hirata 2012), which the author presented at the third annual Conference for the Consortium for Asian and African Studies, "Making a Difference: Representing / Constructing the Other in Asian/African Media, Cinema and Languages," held Feb. 16-18, 2012, at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. With the understanding and great help of the committee of OFIAS, TUFSS, I could have such a wonderful occasion to give my presentation and exchange the ideas with foreign scholars from many background in SOAS, London. I would like to thank my teachers, friends and family for their support and encouragement throughout this endeavor.
- 2) For transcription of Thai and Lao languages and dialects, this paper used as adjusted version of the Royal Thai General System of Transcription (RTGS). In this regard, the spellings of names and titles that are widely available in Roman transcription throughout Thailand have been adjusted.
- 3) All the data were collected and recorded during the author's anthropological field research in northeastern Thailand in July 2004, August 2006, July-August 2008, October 2009, September-October 2010, and April 2009 in Lao PDR. The lyrics of more than 200 songs were transcribed from audio recordings.
- 4) OTOP stands for "One *Tambon* (sub-district) One Product," a local entrepreneurship stimulus program that supports the unique, locally made and marketed products of each Thai *tambon*. The "One Village One Product" movement of Oita Prefecture in Japan is assumed to be the model for this idea. The goal is to brand and market at least one main product rooted in each *tambon* in Thailand.
- 5) *Molam* music is known as *Lam* in central and southern Laos and as *Khaph* in northern Laos. Compton (1979) details the variations of *Khaph* and *Lam* music in Lao PDR.
- 6) In the 1980s, Phonsak Songsaen, a famous *Lukthung Molam* male singer from northeastern Thailand, released a *Lukthung* song entitled "Sao Chan Kang Kop" ("Chan's Chilling Out to Wait for Someone Else"). The song consisted of a mixture of *Lukthung* and the *Molam* melody "Lam Toei." This unique experiment was a big hit in the music industry and provided an opportunity for the traditional *Molam* music of northeastern Thailand to gain wider recognition throughout Thailand. Famous Thai *Molam* singer Siriphorn Amphaiphorn composed her song "Bo Rak Si Dam" ("Black Love Ribbon") in the same pattern, switching between *Lukthung* and a portion of the *Molam* melody "Lam Toei" (Suriya 2001).
- 7) An analysis of Lockard's survey of 730 *Lukthung* songs produced in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s determined that 34% expressed individual messages (seeking love); 8% concerned tradition, customs, and beliefs (including religion, folklore, and supernatural phenomena); 37% were about the disappointment and depression caused by heartbreak or other negative emotions; and the remaining 10% discussed unrequited love due to poverty, conscription, and prostitution (Lockard 1998:169). These topics in *Lukthung* music depict the individual or collective experience of the Lao and migrant workers from northeastern Thailand.
- 8) Theppaphorn Phetubon was born in 1947 in the Khuang Nai district in Ubon Ratchathani Province. He received a vocational education at a machine shop after his graduation from the school of SEATO. He is a well-known representative *Luk Thung* singer and has released between 200 and 300 songs with the support of charismatic songwriter Phonsak Jansukha (Waeng 2002:446-447).
- 9) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ya3as22XpO0> (Accessed April 15, 2013).
- 10) *Limnophila Geoffrayi Bonati*.
- 11) The exact year the song was released cannot be determined, but it can be assumed to have been in the 1970s or 1980s during the known period of collaboration between Nok Noi Uraiphorn and Phetubon.

- 12) As Hanh explained healing is not only the remedy or cure of sickness but also rehabilitation and palliation—the mitigation of suffering in the sick—a term that can be traced back to the Germanic word for healing, which came from the terms for “whole, uninjured, of good omen” (Hanh 1995:7). Hence, healing does not include the success of the cure for achieving mental stability. Yet, in recent years, as South, Southeast, and East Asian societies present many different facets of the encounter between “local,” “indigenous,” or “traditional” healing and modernity, the studies on healing and therapeutic practices using sound and music and their effect on the body and mind have started to receive much attention in medical, ethnomusicological anthropology and religious studies (Roseman 1991, Connor 2001, Hackett 2012). Healing as used in this section of this paper focuses on the role of *Molam* music.
- 13) A district in the western Ubon Ratchathani Province which borders three provinces, Yasothon, Amnatcharoen, and Sisaket, to the north.
- 14) Phetubon tried to say the name of his hometown in Thai, which is pronounced the same as in Lao, making himself appear ridiculous.
- 15) “The central area” is commonly thought of as the central region of Thailand, including Bangkok and the surrounding areas. Khonchuan City in Ubon Ratchathani Province, in northeast Thailand, is promoted as a sightseeing spot because it is adjacent to Lao PDR. However, the Khonchuan in this song, the singer’s hometown, does not refer to that city, but is rather the name of a sub-district (*tambon*). His answer to Nok Noi’s question makes it clear that he exaggerated by calling it a district (*amphoe*), which is a larger administrative division unit than a *tambon*. He did so to distract his companions.
- 16) “Friend” is *mu* in Lao and *phuean* in Thai. In this song, Phetubon tries to say *phuean* but unintentionally pronounces it as *phian*.
- 17) Both the Lao and Thai call older adults, even non-relatives, *phi* (elder brother or sister) to indicate respect. They also call a younger person *nong* (younger brother or sister) to communicate fondness or intimacy. In this skit, Phetubon refers to a brother (Phi Lia) who is not his real brother, but whom he deeply respects and to whom he is emotionally attached. This word is one Lao greeting and indicates that the person whom they are addressing belongs to a group and, thus, is not alone.
- 18) The Lao word *siao* indicates mutually friendly relationships. People call each other this name when they have overcome difficulties and obstacles, regardless of how long they have known each other.
- 19) The small mistakes in the skit cause laughter, which implies that all the passengers shared the experience of the difficulties and linguistic obstacles in speaking standard Thai. The conclusion implies the beginning of a new friendship by using a Lao term, *siao*, that describes intimate friends.
- 20) After several visits, she published travelogues describing the magnificent beauty of the landscape, the rich resources of Lao PDR, short histories of each province, traditional Lao PDR culture, local wisdom, and the condition of the local economy (Somdetphratheprattanarachasuda 1995).
- 21) To strengthen the friendship between Thailand and the Lao PDR and to promote tourism, a film called *Sabaidi Luang Prabang* was released in 2008. This romantic drama was directed by Sakchai Dinan, who was born and grew up in northeastern Thailand, and starred Laotian-Australian actor Ananda Everingham, who was born in Thailand. The plot is simple: A visiting Thai photographer named Son falls in love with his beautiful Lao tour guide, Noi. The film contrasts two cities: the busy life of Bangkok and the slow, relaxed pace of Laos. This film represents the Lao in a way novel for modern Thai cinema. Not only did historical documents and Thai political rhetoric contained negative remarks that caused controversy between the countries, but for many decades, works produced by the Thai entertainment industry also made the Lao the object of mockery and insults from Thai policymakers and intellectuals. However, this film did not contain this typical, negative Thai portrayal of the Lao. Instead, it represents the Lao rather positively, as warm-hearted, kind, and relaxed people, while in contrast, the Bangkokians are depicted as having forgotten their humanity. It is no exaggeration to say that this image of the Lao was revolutionary in Thai media. The reasons for this change are considered in another paper.
- 22) The *Lao Chronicle* states that, during the Lang Sang (Lang Xang) era, the gods and humans could cross freely between the land and sky. Phaya Thaen, the Lord Thaen acted as the awe-inspiring guardian of the natural world who could punish human beings. Humans did not perform the required dedications and offerings to the Lord Thaen after a successful harvest, so he caused flooding in the world of humans. Eventually, this disaster led to the present-day Lao custom of making offerings from food, including all

- meats and fish. For a more detailed story of Phaya Thaen, see Charuwan 1994:46 and Bunmi 2009.
- 23) In Thailand, *Phleng Phuea Chiwit* music, influenced by elements of Western rock and folk music, began to spread and gained recognition as a genre during the revolutions by Thai students in 1973 and 1976. The songs of Caravan, the earliest band in this genre, mostly protest the hardships suffered by the working class. For a more detailed description, see Lockard 1996, 1998.
 - 24) In Thai history of 1970s, *Phleng Phuea Chiwit* music has been influenced by the elements of western rock and folk music, began to spread and gained the recognition as genre through the revolution by Thai students in 1973 and 1976 by the earliest band named Caravan. Their early songs contain principally strong protest theme pertaining to the voice of the hardship of working-class people. See Lockard 1996, 1998.
 - 25) FML is the term of SML with the Lao pronunciation. SML is abbreviation for Small, Medium, and Large (SML), one of Thaksin's populist programs in 2005. This program gave out money to villages, which were categorized into small, medium, and large size. Different sizes of villages received different amount of money. This money was to be utilized for the development (i.e. infrastructure purposes) in each village (Patana 2010:30).
 - 26) Salawan (or Salavan) is a province in the southernmost area of Laos. Historically and geographically, it is the most-damaged battleground of any war from the early nineteenth century to the Cold War. During the post-independence Lao-Siamese War of 1827-28, Lao officers were dispatched to the Salawan province and forced the Lao Thueng inhabitants of the upland to gather forest products as tribute to Bangkok (Stuart-Fox 2008). Consequently, Salawan culture is influenced by Lao Lum (the Lao who habitat in the lowland), and the dance, named *Ram Wong* for its style, which accompanies *Molam* music has spread throughout the entire province and can be seen in northeastern Thailand as well. The word "Salawan" has three meanings: the name of the region, the form of dance associated with *Molam* music, and for the Lao in northeastern Thailand, a foreign sky that evokes nostalgia.
 - 27) After I accessed this song on July 2, 2012, it was deleted by the poster, but followers and audiences have uploaded this song repeatedly.
 - 28) Although this song was deleted from YouTube in November 2009, a karaoke version was uploaded in November 2011 and already has 200,769 views and 181 comments. Accessed February 18, 2013. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zMr0z57DlyU>.
 - 29) The issue on the Lao diaspora is beyond the scope of this paper due to space constrains.
 - 30) The differentiation of the tune is not discussed in this paper due to space limitations.

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