



Hmong Tsai musician plays the gheng at the New Year Festival, Phongsali, Laos, 2005



Akha Ulo Women sing funeral rites, Chiang Rai, Thailand, 2009



Traditional clothing of the Lahu Shi, Myanmar/Burma
Songs of Memory exhibition at Chiang Mai Arts and Cultural Center, 2009

Songs of Memory Traditional Music of the Golden Triangle

‘If a village has no music, how can it be called a village?’
Akha saying

THE EAST-WEST Center Gallery in Honolulu, with the mission of increasing understanding between the US and Asia, is hosting the *Songs of Memory* exhibition in Honolulu, Hawaii, for three months in the summer of 2012. This archival project is the work of American researcher and independent filmmaker Victoria Vorreiter. Trained as a classical violinist, and experienced as an orchestral performer and teacher in posts around the world, she reflects on the fact that every culture throughout history has developed its own unique music and methods to pass it on orally through generations. A visit to Morocco, where Vorreiter witnessed the primal role music plays in the lives of traditional peoples who maintain a vibrant age-old oral tradition, proved to be a pivotal event, compelling her to shift from performing classical music to documenting world music.



Traditional Karen Pwo musical instruments and garments, photos of the Songs of Memory exhibition at Chiang Mai Arts and Cultural Center, 2009

After filming her first documentary, *The Music of Morocco* and the *Cycles of Life*, which trace the arc of life passages from birth to death through the richness of Moroccan tribal music, she cast her eye for her next destination and decided upon Southeast Asia and the Golden Triangle, at the crossroads where Laos, Thailand, and Myanmar/Burma converge. Here live a rich multiplicity of traditional peoples, who still maintain, to a high degree, their traditional ways of life. Migrating ever southwards over millennia from Mongolia, China, and the Tibetan Plateau, more than 130 cultural groups and sub-groups have fanned out throughout the region, establishing their villages high in the mountains and living as hunters and subsistent farmers.

Prominent among this number are the Hmong, Mien, Lahu, Akha, Lisu and Karen, six distinct groups who have preserved their individuality and cultural identity throughout time. Each group is unique in history, language, customs, arts, religion, dress, and physical features. No less impressive is the diversity of their musical traditions. Living in nature

and rooted in animism, these mountain peoples have developed a vast repertoire of songs, sacred chants, and instrumental music that is ever-present and vital to their lives.

The keepers of the bardic traditions – the master musicians, shamans, headmen, matriarchs and patriarchs – use their rich trove of songs, legends and rites to connect people with something greater than themselves. Music, when supported by ritual and formality, anchors members of a community to their life-source. It reunites them with their ancestors and aligns them with their deities. Ceremonies and songs remind them of their origins and preserve collective memory. Music promotes a sense of communal harmony by instilling identity and belonging. Songs are the chronicles and oracles of tribal ways of life.

Moving to Chiang Mai in 2005, Vorreiter spent four years trekking to remote mountain villages in Laos, Myanmar/Burma, China, and Thailand to document the ancestral songs and ceremonies of the traditional peoples. Travelling with only a guide to translate, she amassed an extensive body of work including film, photos, recordings, journals, musical instruments, and traditional dress. In recent years she has been weaving these materials together, which are now coming out in several dynamic forms: the Songs of Memory travelling exhibition, as well as photographic exhibitions. A series of films of complete ceremonies in a condensed format is also planned.

In May, the East-West Center Gallery in Honolulu will be transformed into a tribal village, complete with the sights and sounds of the traditional peoples of the Golden Triangle. The cultures of the Hmong, Mien, Lahu, Akha, Lisu and Karen (the six major tribes of the highlands of Southeast Asia) will be featured through artefacts, photographs, and film.

Visitors to the gallery will be able to view collections of musical instruments, which beyond their functional role in ceremonial life also

appear as striking sculptural objects. Made from natural elements of the earth – wood, bamboo, gourd, vine, wax, metal, horn, ivory, bone, leather and leaf – the amazing diversity of instruments from the highlands makes for a wide spectrum of tonal colours. Found in a variety of sizes, each instrument projects a special timbre that is perfectly suited to its use.

The bellowing timbre of the *ya ju*, made of water buffalo horn, penetrates through the forest to warn an Akha hunting party of an approaching tiger. The metallic clang of cymbals and gongs reverberate off mountain walls to summon nature spirits to Lahu festivals. The lilting melody of the stringed *tsubeu* sets the beat and energizes the step of Lisu dancers. The Hmong ceremonial rattles, *jen neng*, provide a menacing metallic jangle to exorcise demons. The soft overtones of the tiny Lisu mouth harp, the *maga*, can only be heard when a courting couple plays cheek to cheek. In times past, the thunderous resonance of the *klo*, the Karen bronze rain drum, startled distant enemies. These instruments are among many others in the exhibition, highlighted with photographs showing musicians performing them.



Lahu Shi Couple court through song and the *tae lae* flute, Keng Tung, Myanmar/Burma, 2005

Mien Priest calls the deities to the P’an Hung Festival, Phayao, Thailand, 2007



Documentary films for each of the six tribal groups reveal a repertoire of ancient incantations, chants, songs, percussive and tonal calls, and instrumental music that has evolved over generations to ‘bring to life’ ceremonial events. There are virtually no rituals where music or rhythmically intoned prayers are not present,

propelling the participants through the hours and days it takes to satisfactorily appease the spirits. A Hmong shaman, concealed behind a black veil, makes gestures of a galloping horse as she rides to the supernatural realm, singing out the evil spirit responsible for a baby’s malady. During a three-day Mien wedding, sacred music and ceremonies are performed nonstop to celebrate the union of two families and clans, honour the ancestors, propitiate the spirits, and instill the couple with ancestral wisdom. The Akha welcome the Women’s New Year at the end of harvest with festive celebration and sacred rites. Known for its spectacular Swing Festival, this is also the occasion for Akha boys and girls, dressed in their most spectacular attire, to court one another through call-and-response songs.

Mannequins from each group, dressed in their particular costumes, complement the musical instruments, films and photographs. The festival clothing and jewellery are manifestations of their ancestral legacies. In the Golden Triangle much can be perceived from traditional garments, from headdress

to leggings, from beaded shoulder sash to engraved silver carplugs, as they serve many purposes, both functional and decorative. A young Hmong girl’s cap is adorned with the root of a medicinal plant and a small bag with a talisman to ward off illness and harm. A Mien woman is dripping in silver necklaces, bracelets and overlapping pendants that hang down her front and back, an indication of her wealth and beauty. As a sign of his status, a Lisu man attaches to his belt a ceremonial knife with an elephant ivory hilt, a silver mount, and a silver sheath embellished with coiled metalwork.

The East-West Center Gallery has planned a variety of special events to accompany the exhibition, including performances and demonstrations by tribal musicians, lectures, films, and curator-led walks.

From 13 May to 26 August, *Songs of Memory: Traditional Music of the Golden Triangle* is at the East-West Center Gallery, John A. Burns Hall, EWC, 1601 East-West Road, Honolulu, Hawaii 96848. For more information visit <http://arts.eastwestcenter.org> and www.TribalMusicAsia.com