

The East-West Center Arts Program
presents

Songs of Memory

Music & Ceremony
of Highland
Southeast Asia

Notes by Victoria Vorreiter

In the foothills of the Himalayas where Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand once knew no boundaries, lies a region of Southeast Asia evocatively known as the Golden Triangle. The rugged, often impenetrable mountains, rivers, and forests have formed natural barriers that create a dramatic terrain with little arable land. Home to some of the world's oldest civilizations, this expanse has proved through the millennia to be a cultural and historical crossroads of ancient migrations from the highlands of China and Tibet, trade routes connecting India and Mongolia, and passages along the great rivers of Asia.

Yet for all the movement and interchange, this region harbors a staggering number and variety of peoples living in remote hill villages, which have effectively safeguarded their individuality. Numbering over one hundred and thirty groups and subgroups, each tribe represents an extraordinary world, unique in its language, customs, arts, religion, dress, and features.

Guest Curator: **Victoria Vorreiter**

Installation by **Lynne Najita & Michael Schuster, Ph.D.**

Photographs and films by **Victoria Vorreiter**

Guest cultural experts/musicians: **Aju Jupoh (Akha) & Chi Suwichan (Karen)**



Prominent among this multiplicity are the Hmong, Mien, Lahu, Akha, Lisu, and Karen, six distinct peoples who originally migrated through China, converging in the mountain ranges that sweep the region. Preferring high altitudes, these groups traditionally live as hunters and subsistence dry-field farmers, practicing swidden agriculture on steep mountain slopes. Despite the necessity for frequent migrations in search of harvestable terrain, they have flourished, maintaining their independence and identity to a high degree. Music and ceremony are among the major cultural characteristics that make up indigenous identity.

This exhibition features a wide array of musical instruments, traditional dress, and jewelry, augmented by fascinating photographs and video clips of rituals and performances.

Oral Tradition

Attuned so perceptively to their sonic environment, these traditional peoples listen to the songs, ceremonies, and stories of their forebears with deep attention and great reverence. These living cultures embody centuries of accumulated arts, history, and tenets of faith, providing a lasting link between past and present. An all-night healing ceremony or a three-day wedding has great significance beyond treatment or union. These highly organized, intricately ordered, meticulously observed rites fulfill a sacred purpose that is engrained in people's consciousness and essential to their worldview.

The keepers of oral tradition—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 indigenous ways of life.



HMONG NJUA BOYS PERFORM THE GHENG

Hmong

Hmong songs and legends recount a motherland of "icy terrain and harsh winters," suggesting Hmong origins in the arctic wilds of Tibet, Siberia, and Mongolia. Descending the Yellow River into Central Asia before 2000 BC, they gradually migrated into southern China, residing along the Yangtze River for several millennia. By the 1700's, the Hmong continued to spread throughout Southeast Asia, when in successive waves they established settlements in Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand.

For the Hmong, music is an extension of speech, as expressed through sung poetry and prayer—inherently melodic because of the tonal nature of the Hmong language. Mouth harps, flutes, strings, and reeds are able to imitate the musical qualities of language, giving instruments magical, sacred importance. Along with these, a rich assortment of percussion instruments has emerged. Penetrating rattles, gongs, drums, and divination paraphernalia used by shamans in trance are able to echo in the supernatural world. In Hmong culture, musical experience is inseparable from life itself.



A MIEN WEDDING IS ACCOMPANIED BY DZAT PLAYER

Mien

The Mien keep their history and culture alive through a magnificent oral tradition. Songs reveal age-old passages from their source in Mongolia throughout Central Asia. The Mien settled in the mountainous regions along the southern expanse of the Yangtze River over two thousand years ago, where they prospered for centuries. The 14th and 15th centuries witnessed gradual migrations stretching into southern China, which remains the homeland of the majority. Many Mien, however, continued an itinerant life, fanning out further into Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand.

Journeys through China have left their mark on Mien culture, which intermingles Taoist practices with animist rites. Nowhere is this unique mélange better reflected than in Mien music, a study in contrasts—sacred recitation of written liturgical texts juxtaposed to secular outdoor singing; traditional percussion instruments of metal, horn, wood, and hide played to accompany a rare double reed instrument; a musical tradition without stringed instruments or gourd pipes in an area teeming with them. Music becomes a soundprint that reveals the distinctive experience of the Mien people.

Lahu

The Lahu have evolved a formidable tradition of sacred and secular music that reflects their beliefs and experiences through centuries of peregrinations. In search of fertile lands and peaceful living conditions, they migrated ever southward into China from their source near the Tibetan Plateau. As groups and sub-groups developed and dispersed, they roamed further into the mountain ranges of Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam. The Lahu language can be heard in a variety of dialects, some of which are mutually unintelligible. Despite such diversity, the Lahu find commonality in shared tenets, which permeate their songs, stories, and ceremonies.

In Lahu culture, music encircles both the mystical and the earthly experience. The musical tones of reed pipes, gongs, and chants are so powerful as to reach gods and spirits. The melodies of flutes, bowed lutes, and songs have a profound effect on the hearts and minds of men, women, and children. Throughout the centuries, the Lahu have played music as a way to heal, seduce, unite, lament, appease, rejoice, and renew the time-honored beliefs of their forebears.

Akha

The Akha cherish a vibrant oral tradition and revere the ancestors who faithfully memorized and passed down tales of their culture and history. From an age-old body of epic songs, poems, and myths comes a two-thousand-year account of Akha migrations from their source in Mongolia to China, where they flourished, expanding into over thirty different subgroups. Beginning in the mid-19th century, the Akha continued their passage, spreading throughout the mountain ranges of Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand.

With a stirring vocal repertoire, a wealth of instrumental timbres equally represented by winds, strings, and percussion, and the verses of *Akhazang*, the sacred oral texts of shamans, music has served as songlines that stretch back millennia, renewing myth, culture, and history. Every facet of life is recounted in music, from the harvest to the hunt,



AKHA LOIMI WOMAN PLAYS A LEAF

from the phases of the moon to the cycles of the seasons, from the first lullaby to the last lament, reminding every Akha of his or her connection to the revered ancestors and to one another.

Lisu

The Lisu originally dwelled in the mountains of eastern Tibet, near the headspring of some of Asia's great rivers. It is not surprising then that the belief that water has mystical powers pervades Lisu folklore. Songs and stories also speak of the people's resilience. These themes reflect a history of thousands of years of challenging journeys along the Salween, Mekong, and Irrawaddy Rivers. Presently, the Lisu inhabit a vast vertical tract reaching from Tibet and India, south through western China, Myanmar, and Thailand. Having established settlements in such diverse locations has led to the emergence of distinct subgroups. Still, an overriding sense of common ideology and Lisu identity run deep, due in great part to a shared musical heritage.

The Lisu have cultivated a stunning musical repertory, a living archive that has carried their entire worldview through time on the melodies of songs, strings, and winds. Their flutes, reeds, mouth harps, and lutes, their sacred incantations and celebratory songs of life passages link the Lisu to their past, all the while giving meaning to their present.

Karen

With no written texts to mark their history, and a language that defies connection to other linguistic roots, speculation about the provenance of the Karen people abounds. Based on oral legends of a great exodus from the "river of running sand," the Karen people trace their lineage to the Gobi Desert in Mongolia. Gradual passages followed into Tibet and southward through Yunnan, China, until the Karen finally descended the Irrawaddy, Sittang, and Salween Rivers, finding residence for centuries in the highlands of Myanmar and, more recently, in northwest Thailand.

The Karen have developed a robust musical legacy throughout the millennia thanks to a wide array of musical sounds and styles that is unparalleled in all of Southeast Asia. The bronze rain drum (also known as bronze frog drum), *te na ku* harps, *kwa* free-reed horns, the multiplicity of plucked and bowed lutes, songs based on scales that hark back to other lands and times, even a shawl that sings—the performing traditions of the Karen remain distinctive, rich, and vibrant.



KAREN S'GAW MUSICIAN



The **East-West Center** promotes better relations and understanding among the people and nations of the United States, Asia, and the Pacific through cooperative study, research, and dialogue. Established by the U.S. Congress in 1960, the Center serves as a resource for information and analysis on critical issues of common concern, bringing people together to exchange views, build expertise, and develop policy options. The Center is an independent, public, non-profit organization with funding from the U.S. government, and additional support provided by private agencies, individuals, foundations, corporations, and governments in the region.

The **East-West Center Arts Program** for three decades has enriched the community through concerts, lectures, symposia, and exhibitions focusing on traditional arts of the region, and by arranging cultural and educational tours by artists who are skilled in bridging cultures. <http://arts.EastWestCenter.org>

EWC Arts Team: Karen Knudsen, director, External Affairs; William Feltz, arts program manager; Michael Schuster, Ph.D., curator; Eric Chang, arts outreach coordinator, Yining Lin, arts assistant. **Mahalo** also to Lynne Najita, Eugene Alexander, Prof. Jonathan Padwe, Benjamin Fairfield, Patricia Cheesman, Derek Ferrar, Shayne Hasegawa, Tina Tom, Loraine Ikeda, Roxanne Tunoa, Deanna O'Brien, Floren Elman-Singh, Lucy Kamealoha, Ella Lum, Linda Kawasaki, Reynold Balintec, EWC Facilities Management, Perry Lam, SG Lam Customs Broker, International Travel Service, and Kennedy & Preiss Graphic Design.



LAHU SHI COUPLE COURTS THROUGH MUSIC

Victoria Vorreiter is a musician, researcher, filmmaker, and photographer, based in Chiang Mai, Thailand. She holds a B.A. and M.A. in Music and an M.A. in Liberal Studies. As a specialist of the Suzuki Method of music instruction, she has taught in music schools and at conferences in Europe, Asia, and the U.S. (most recently as a faculty member of the DePaul University School of Music, in Chicago). Victoria has researched a number of world musical traditions, including that of Morocco.

Songs of Memory is the result of many years of fieldwork and documentation among the indigenous peoples and cultures in remote villages of Thailand, Laos, Myanmar, and China.

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EWC Arts programs are made possible by the Hawai'i Pacific Rim Society, Friends of Hawai'i Charities, and generous contributors to the EWC Foundation, including members of the EWC Arts 'Ohana.



MIEN PRIEST PLAYS THE CHORNG TO INVITE THE DIETIES

Special Events

All in the EWC Gallery, admission free.

Sunday, May 13, 2:00-3:30 p.m.

Exhibition Gala Opening including reception, musical demonstrations by Akha musician and culture expert, Aju Jupoh and Karen musician and culture expert Chi Suwichan. Also includes walk-throughs by the curator.

Sunday, May 20, 2:00-3:00 p.m.

"Life in a Highland Village: Continuity and Change in Northeast Cambodia." An illustrated talk by Jonathan Padwe, assistant professor, UH-Mānoa Dept. of Anthropology.

Sunday, June 3, 2:00-3:00 p.m.

"Oral Traditions Set in Type: 'Chi' Suwichan's Musical Autobiography of the Karen Harp." Ethnomusicology Ph.D. student Benjamin Fairfield will present an illustrated talk with musical elements.

Sunday, June 17, 2:00-3:00 p.m.

"Songs of Memory: A Musician's Perspective." Guest curator Victoria Vorreiter, will give a talk illustrated by recordings, images, and film, about the power of traditional music found in indigenous highland communities of Thailand, Laos, Myanmar, and China.

Sunday, July 22, 2:00-3:00 p.m.

"Land Use Practices of Highland Peoples of Southeast Asia: Past and Future," an illustrated talk by Jefferson Fox, East-West Center senior fellow, whose research focuses on the impact of land use in South and Southeast Asia.

Sunday, September 9, 2:00-3:00 p.m.

"A Karen Christmas: Singing an Indigenous Identity with Hymns, Carols, and Rock Music."

Ethnomusicology Ph.D. student Benjamin Fairfield will present an illustrated talk with musical elements.

East-West Center Gallery Honolulu, Hawai'i

John A. Burns Hall, 1601 East-West Road
(corner Dole St. & East-West Rd.)

Gallery hours: Weekdays: 8:00 a.m. -5:00 p.m.

Sundays: Noon-4:00 p.m.

Closed Saturdays, holidays, May 27, and Sept. 2

For further information: 944-7177

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<http://arts.EastWestCenter.org>

School & group tours available

Gallery visitors interested in joining the EWC Arts 'Ohana can obtain the appropriate flyer in the gallery, by telephoning the EWC Foundation at 944-7105, or online: <http://arts.EastWestCenter.org>