

Forbidden Songs of the *Pgaz K’Nyau*

Suwichan Phattanaphraiwan (“Chi”) / Bodhivijjalaya College (Srinakharinwirot University), Tak, Thailand

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Abstract

The “forbidden” songs of the *Pkaz K’Nyau* (Karen), part of a larger oral tradition (called *tha*), are on the decline due to lowland Thai modernization campaigns, internalized Baptist missionary attitudes, and the taboo nature of the music itself. Traditionally only heard at funerals and deeply intertwined with the spiritual world, these 7-syllable, 2-stanza poetic couplets housing vast repositories of oral tradition and knowledge have become increasingly feared, banned, and nearly forgotten among Karen populations in Thailand. With the disappearance of the music comes a loss of cosmology, ecological sustainability, and cultural knowledge and identity. *Forbidden Songs* is an autoethnographic work by Chi Suwichan Phattanaphraiwan, himself an artist and composer working to revive the music’s place in Karen society, that offers an inside glimpse into the many ways in which Karen tradition is regulated, barred, enforced, reworked, interpreted, and denounced. This informative account, rich in ethnographic data, speaks to the multivalent responses to internal and external factors driving modernization in an indigenous and stateless community in northern Thailand.

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Suwichan Phattanaphraiwan (“Chi”) is assistant professor of geo-cultural management at Bodhivijjalaya College, Srinakharinwirot University in Mae Sod, Tak. He received his PhD from Srinakharinwirot University. He has published two books, *Rao Khue Tehnaku* (2011) and *Phleng Tawng Haam Khong Pga k’Nyau* (2014); is actively involved in the Karen Network for Culture and the Environment; serves as vice president of the Foundation for Culture and Environment, Southeast Asian chapter (FCESA at www.fcesa.org); and is co-founder of the Karen Community Ecomuseum in Tak province.

Benjamin Fairfield is lecturer in the music department at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa. His PhD dissertation, “The Participatory We-self: Ethnicity and Music in Northern Thailand,” examined Karen (*Pgaz K’Nyau*), Lahu, Akha, and Lanna-Thai participatory music traditions. As an East West Center degree fellow and Foreign Language and Areas Studies (FLAS) recipient, he translated “Chi” Suwichan Phattanaphraiwan’s first academic work, an auto-ethnographic story of the Karen harp, *I am Tehnaku* (Sangsilp, 2015). Fairfield also served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Omkoi district, Chiang Mai province, Thailand from 2007 to 2009.

Translator’s Introduction

Scholars have spilled much ink in defining and delimiting “the” Karen, a stateless Southeast Asian indigenous population straddling the Thai-Burma border and tied together by shared cultural practices, folkloric history, appropriation of exogenous religious practices and written scripts, shared experience of lowland oppressive kingdoms, and more. Among such scholars, Peter Hinton famously asked whether “the Karen” even existed (1983: 162); missionaries credited Christianity (and Christian literacy, in particular) in Burma for Karen ethnogenesis (Marshall 1922: 279-280) and nationalism (Hovemyr 1989); Charles Keyes pointed to lowland administrative powers as significantly involved vis-à-vis the negotiation of ethnic difference and navigation of state policy (2003: 210); and Andrew Walker (2001) observed a late 20th century NGO-inspired coalescence of Karen identity around an eco-friendly yet curiously exclusionary ethnic label. “The” Karen people are not a monolithic group (and neither are they without intra-ethnic sub-groups, i.e., Pwo, Sgaw, and others)—I also should note that, as my short list above shows, a majority of studies of “the” Karen are based on Karen populations in Thailand, who have had a considerably different contemporary relationship to lowland and foreign powers when compared to their ethnic compatriots across the border in Burma.

Nearly all of these different forces, and the versions and visions of “the” Karen emerging from exchange with them, make appearances and feed into the musical narrative as told by Chi in this book, which is primarily focused on the “forbidden” quality of Karen funeral music in Thailand. Chi begins with traditional animist belief and practice, traces the demise of traditional music as villages converted to Baptist Christianity, and elaborates on the impact of lowland-driven modernization and market orientation on sacred forests. Chi, himself an accomplished performer, scholar, activist, and spokesperson, plays an active role in reframing, reclaiming, and reintroducing traditional music of the Karen. His book speaks to, for, and about the Karen, highlighting the challenges facing the Karen as they continue to navigate the waters of national assimilation, religious conversion, and cultural perpetuation.

My role as translator of this work is to make Chi’s message more widely accessible. All footnotes herein, with the exception of half of footnote #17, are my own insertions and are attempts to clarify assumed cultural knowledge. In the interest of transparency, of course I will concede that I admire and respect Chi for his music, his character, his thoughtfulness, and his humble approach to the work he does. On the work of translating itself, I should point out that this is, in essence, a mediated translation: Chi is writing about a stateless and traditionally non-literate people (Karen) with the script of an imposed nation-state (Thai)—i.e., Karen genesis, Thai script, and English translation. Some of the translations are thus Karen modes and values expressed in Thai conventions, and my English rendering (and Romanization of the Thai script,

which is itself at times used to transcribe the snippets of Karen text found within) is potentially twice removed from the original.

It is the case that “the Karen” now theoretically have written languages. Burmese-based scripts were created for both Sgaw (in 1853) and Pwo Karen (1878) by protestant missionaries Francis Mason and Jonathan Wade and a less widely distributed catholic Romanized script is also in use. As the religious labels demonstrate, though, a/the written language is not universally available to “the Karen” but is instead limited to educated Christians, split by denomination as well as by ethnic sub-group. While Chi’s first book, *I am Tehnaku* (2011), was written in both the Catholic script and Thai, *Forbidden Songs* is only published in Thai script. The choice of language here reflects the broadest possible national audience even as it limits its cross-border ethnic accessibility: any Karen person (Pwo or Sgaw) who has grown up in Thailand since the 1980s and attended compulsory national education should be able to read this book (to publish in one of the Karen scripts limits its readability among Karen populations). The ethnic population continues to be transected by borders of nationality and literacy.

I will also note here, as Chi does in his public talks, that “Karen” is what they are called (in English) and not what they call themselves—Thais call them *Karieng*; northern Thais (*khon mueang*) call them *Yang*. For Chi’s situation, this refusal to call them by name extended to the Karen village as well as the Karen self: Thai authorities would come to rename both (Chi’s village became *Ban Mai Phattana* and Chi had to officially register himself as *Suwichan Phattanaphraiwan*. “Chi” is now not part of his legal name, even though his family and community know him by that name). The Sgaw Karen call themselves (and here I’m using the Catholic script spelling, as requested by Chi) *Pgaz K’Nyau* (the final “z” is silent and denotes a low tone), which means “human.” This is the spelling and term used throughout this translation.

Finally, I must acknowledge with utmost gratitude those who have supported me in this endeavor, beginning with Professor Yuphaphann Hoonchamlong of the University of Hawai‘i. Her patience and meticulous attention to detail and nuance helped me shape this translation, and none of this would have been possible without her guidance (if there are any errors or inconsistencies, the fault is mine). Funding for this directed study came from the John Young Scholarship in the Arts, and I hope the spirit of this project honors Mr. Young’s memory and legacy. Access to Chi and this book were also made possible as a side project while studying advanced Thai at Payap University with summer funding from the Foreign Language and Area Studies (FLAS) grant. For all of this and to many others, I am exceedingly grateful and humbled. I hope this translation will highlight the work Chi and other *Pgaz K’Nyau* artists are engaging in as well as the value of Karen cultural expression and wisdom.

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Notes on Romanization

As noted above, this is a mediated translation: it is a Thai language publication, and the quotations of Karen text are transcribed using the Thai alphabet. For transcription of this Thai-ified Karen, I slightly modified the system used by Deborah Wong’s work on Thai music,¹ which closely mirrors the Royal Thai General System as shown below. Since *Forbidden Songs* used Thai to transcribe Karen, my Romanization of Karen text refers to this Thai script rendering and not to any system for Romanizing Karen directly to English. Readers familiar with Roland Mischung’s spelling of the Karen seven-syllable couplets containing oral tradition, *hta* (see the Delang 2003 volume cited above), will notice that I spell it *tha* owing to the conventions below and Chi’s Thai spelling. This is not ideal, but such is the reality in Thailand and other Southeast Asian systems, layered as they are with exogenous multiplicity. Even the spelling of the Karen name for themselves has nearly a dozen variants when Romanized (on that note, I should mention that I am treating it here—as well as the harp here transcribed as *tehnaku*—as a proper noun and retaining Chi’s preferred spelling even though it doesn’t fit my preferred Romanization shown in the chart below).

Consonant	Initial	final	Noun	Romanization
ก	k	k	້ะ, -ก	a
ขคฆ	kh	k	็ำ	am
ง	ng	ng	็ี, ็ี	i
จ	j	t	็ี, ็ี	ue
ชฉฌ	ch	t	ุ้, ุ้	u
ญ	y	n	เะ, เ	e
ด(ต)ท	d	t	แะ, แ	ae
ตฎ	t	t	โะ, โ	o
ทถฐฑ	th	t	เาะ, อ	aw
นณ	n	n	เอ, ็ี	oe
บ	b	p	็ียะ, ็ีย	ia
ป	p	p	็ีอะ, ็ีอ	uea

ผพท	ph	p	ัว	ua
ฝฟ	f	p	ไ ใ ัย ไ-ย	ai

Consonant	Initial	final	Noun	Romanization
ม	m	m	เ-า -า	ao
ย	y	i	ุย	ui
ร	r	n	-อย	oi
ลพ	l	n	เ-ย	oei
ว	w	u	ัว	iu
สศษช ทร	s	t	เัว	eo
หศ	h	--	แ-ว	aeo
อ	--	--	เัว	iao
-รร	--	-an		
-รร-	--	-a-		
-ร	--	-awn		
ฤ	rue-	--		

Forbidden Songs of the *Pgaz K’Nyau*

[Thai] Editor’s Introduction

Most of us are familiar with the name Chi (Suwichan Phattanaphraiwan), the *Pgaz K’Nyau* artist with his *tehnaku*, the *Pgaz K’Nyau* musical instrument, who sings his gentle songs. Those who work closely with him know of his work as a social, cultural, and civil rights activist for the *Pgaz K’Nyau* people. Much of that work could not be accomplished without Chi’s contributions.

The life of Chi Suwichan may seem dedicated to fighting for the ecological, cultural, and artistic expressions of the *Pgaz K’Nyau* people. But it’s more than this, actually. Given the chance, he will face any opponent on behalf of any oppressed people.

He is perhaps not very different from other social activists who emphasize peaceful means—music, poetry, art, and culture. These are the weapons of the heart and mind. I am of the same generation as Chi, and as a teenager I remember seeing his name appear in a music magazine as the composer of underground albums. Here I was, in secondary school, having accomplished nothing substantial, while Chi was featured bringing *Pgaz K’Nyau* music to the outside world.

When our paths had a chance to cross, I reminisced with him on this, while Chi told me about his publications and also of some unpublished manuscripts ready for publication.

One of these was his work, “Forbidden Songs of the *Pgaz K’Nyau*.” I was immediately interested, especially when he told me he wanted me to edit the work, and I willingly gave my word, even though I knew comparatively little about this subject.

But due to my desire to read it, I agreed, not wanting to miss out on this opportunity. When I read and edited this work, I could tell that this book was a reaffirmation that, besides being a musician and social activist, Chi Suwichan is also a cultural activist and talented author: he eloquently recounts the story of the forbidden songs of the *Pgaz K’Nyau* as a work of knowledge, a record of history, which serves as a lesson for the next generation and a means by which others can have a greater understanding of the beauty and peaceful nature of the *Pgaz K’Nyau* people and culture.

In my capacity as editor, I am proud to play a role in bringing this work to fruition. I sincerely hope that this work will have some use for those who are interested in the social and cultural ways of the *Pgaz K’Nyau*. I would like to thank the Academic Outreach Services of Srinakharinwirot University for their budgetary support of this first printing for educational benefit. Thank you to Bodhivijjalaya College, the Pridi Phanomyong Institute, the Dinsaw Si Group, and friends of Chi Suwichan who helped publicize the production of this book.

If any mistakes occurred in the editing of this book, I fully welcome criticism, censure and suggestions from all readers.

Sithitham Rohitasuk

End of the Rainy Season at the place of tears²
May 20th Publishing House
Editor

From the Author

Professor Sujit Wongthes, a historian, once told me, “The victors of wars, or the powerful, will record their history in books, while the losers, or the powerless, usually record their histories in songs, tales, and legends, as well as through the naming of people and places.”

When I revisited our remaining *Pgaz K’Nyau*³ songs, stories, and legends, I began to realize their links to the history of my people; these stories have been awaiting further reflection and discussion. Analysis of our oral tradition can tell us more about our past and can shed some light on the history of our people. We should do this ourselves rather than just believing what others have told us, what others have written, or what others have interpreted.

In the funeral songs of the *Pgaz K’Nyau* arose many once-hidden aspects of interesting, noteworthy, and educational stories that tell of our history as a powerless group. But the process of modernization, development, and state assimilation policies that many *Pgaz K’Nyau* would encounter from the past until now caused, intentionally or not, the funeral songs to become forbidden, or devoid of meaning, or without foundation or use in society. These events affect the histories of the powerless. Little by little, collapse is happening within *Pgaz K’Nyau* society as culture is affected by new belief systems, new political structures, new economic situations, and a new society.

The stories in this book first appeared in an article of mine published on www.prachatai.com,⁴ showing the trajectory of *Pgaz K’Nyau* funeral songs. I wrote the article just from my own experience as a case study. This was the presentation of information from another point of view, one that was missing from mainstream history—the past, present, and future of the marginalized ethnic groups within Thai culture. Here we can see these cultural and social phenomena at work when we encounter the tides of change resulting from inside-out and outside-in contact.

The reason for publishing a book on these forbidden songs is to provide an informative case study or research topic for university students and for the public who are interested in ethnic issues so that they may analyze and debate the socio-cultural issues and find inventive solutions for community development at the practical and policy level, a means that balances cultural identity and modern development within the context of a multi-cultural Thai society.

The author would like to thank Professor Sithitham Rohittasuk for picking up this work and getting it out into the world. Thanks to Amnat Yensabai, dean of Bodhivijjalaya College of Srinakharinwirot University, for the encouragement and for always recognizing the importance of work on ethnic groups.

Thank you to the Academic Outreach Service project of Srinakharinwirot University and to Bodhivijjalaya College's project inspired by the royal initiative for bestowing the funds for printing.

I thank God that I still have life and breath and am allowed to see, experience, exchange, learn, write, and spread our people's stories in various opportunities and venues.

Suwichan Phattanaphraiwan
Wrist-tying season, *Lakhu kijue*, 2014

Chapter 1: Origin of Funeral Songs

One evening after returning from work in the rice fields, and while sitting to eat rice together in the house by the mud stove and enjoying each other's company:

"Uncle, quick quick! *Phue Wa Kho* is having trouble breathing." The boy came to give the news about *Phue Wa Kho*, the man's father. The man left the family dinner and ran to find his father immediately.

Phue Wa Kho was the term employed by all younger people in the village for calling any senior elder whose hair was white all the way through. "*Phue*" means male elder, "*Wa Kho*" means "white hair." If it were a woman, she would be called "*Phi Wa Kho*," with "*Phi*" translating as "female elder." People of this status are loved by all younger generations both in the family and in the community because they are seen as an important and valued resource. If there are problems that arise in the community that the younger generation cannot solve, they will usually seek advice from the elders who are more experienced.

Their main importance for the *Pgaz K'Nyau* people is the belief that the blessings from the elders are words with great power and effect for the next generations. These experienced elders can give parting advice and blessings to the younger generations and their advice should be heeded since their remaining time is limited. They could depart at any time. Everyone in the village thus must take good care of them.

After he arrived at his father's house, he grasped his father's hands. *Phue Wa Kho* breathed his last. All the siblings looked to him, the eldest brother, as he lowered his head to gather his thoughts in accepting the truth, the reality of life that none can live forever.

"Father's work has ended." It was a short statement, but it was enough to cause the younger siblings, their children, and the cousins all to shed tears and wail loudly, their cries rumbling the walls of the house. The neighbors and villagers got goosebumps when they heard the sound of crying grow louder. But each knew the meaning of the sound well. It was something that everyone, every family, has to face one day or another. Today we may watch them cry. The next day they would see us cry. Today we would comfort them. Another day they would comfort us. Today we cry for those who have left us. Tomorrow they will cry for us, who have departed this

world. These are life's truths: all mankind must sing at the place of mourning called *haw kho khloe*.

"The rest is now up to us. Everyone must focus on the funeral, the final thing we can do for our father. Whoever can do something, please do." He reiterated this to his younger siblings, children, and relatives.

As for the neighbors in the community, when they heard the sound of wailing growing louder, all came down, one by one, to the source of the sound. Some came to grieve. Some came to comfort. Some began to prepare to send the spirit off to *plue*, which is the afterlife according to *Pgaz K'Nyau* belief.

Everyone came, except for newborns under the age of 1 and pregnant women, who are forbidden from entering the house of the deceased (the source of the mourning songs) due to beliefs as well as past actual experiences where entering resulted in adverse effects on these groups. They are barred from entering for their own safety.

Death and departure from this world will evoke grief and mourning for those who are still living, but after the mourning songs' sounds float down past the nearest headwaters, they function as an announcement of both the news of departure and the oncoming grand festival.

The young people in this village and other mountain tops, watersheds, and villages begin to get excited when they get the news. It is as if a gravitational force pulls the young people away from their work, their duties, and causes them to go back home to prepare themselves.

Night falls. The young people from nearby villages start pouring into the village of the deceased. The atmosphere fills with the greetings of people who have come from other areas, making the space in the home of the deceased cramped and crowded with people, especially young people who await the start of the antiphonal funeral songs.

Chapter 2: The First Stage of the Funeral Songs

"The *mo cho* has arrived!" one young man declares with an excited tone of voice. When the late middle-aged man walked in, everyone's eyes turned to the *mo cho*, the leader of the antiphonal singing called "*tha*." He must obtain knowledge and prove himself over many years in order to earn this title. His duties and responsibilities include being the leader of *tha* singing in various rituals that occur in the village (e.g., weddings, funerals). Some communities do not have a village *mo cho*. When there is a ceremony, they have to borrow or invite one from a nearby village. It is said that a complete and ideal village must have at least 30 households, a traditional community leader (called *hi kho*), and a *mo cho*.

The later it gets, the colder it becomes. Inside the house of the deceased, two boys begin to pick up candles with their left hands and light them. The boys get up and walk counter-clockwise, circling the corpse three times. They then place one of their candles at the head of the corpse and the other at its feet. Then they look up to invite the *mo cho* and the elders to join the circumambulation.

The candle light ignites the singing of *tha*. The *mo cho* provides the lyrics and melody from behind. The first couplet of *tha* they sing is called *le pluea mae*, or “to cast light on the corpse’s face.” This *tha* couplet calls us to reflect on the deceased and turn our thoughts to the days he spent with us. The sun has bid farewell from the sky, but morning will come again. The moon, though dark now, will reappear.

When the moon departs, the sun will replace it. But those who die, who depart from us, will not return. So, we must think of the good they have done as an example to us. If they have done misdeeds, we should not imitate them. In casting light on the corpse’s face, we see and remember them clearly again. As the *tha* reminds us:

Ji me mue si mue o di; ji me la si la o di.
Mue lae loe la a koe bli; la law loe mue a koe bli.

The sun dies and will return; the moon dies and will revive.
The sun overlaps with the moon; the sun sets and the moon rises.

This is followed by another *tha* couplet, “*Nae Mue Ne La*,” or, “point the way for the deceased.” Since *Pgaz K’Nyau* believe that the world of the dead and the world of the living are opposites, north for the living is south for the dead. The top of the tree is the root for the dead. Therefore, we must speak and point the way for the dead so that they don’t forget, so that they can return to the world of the dead correctly and not lose their way. That way they won’t return and bother or harass the living. They must know that when they die, they cannot take a single thing from the world of mankind with them to the world of the dead. As the *tha* says:

Noe thi tha kae loe thi khi; se khaw thi kae se jaw khi.
Mue law nue noe cho soe kui; moe law nue hae thaw kho khi.

Our headwaters are your basins; our treetops are your roots.
Your sun rises in the west; your sun sets in the east.

From there they move to the next *tha* couplet, *khose khamaw*, with couplets featuring the angels of death and the lord of the underworld—the ones who take the life of the deceased from family and community to the underworld. This *tha* will let the deceased know the truth that no one wishes for his departure. Life’s destiny is determined. When the time comes, we must accept the departure. No one can refuse or escape it. It is the reality. As the *tha* says:

Kho se do loe kha maw pu; mue che che a chui u yu.
Kho se do a sa chae ae; hae chae si pwa le a mae.

Here are *Kho se do* and *Khama*,⁵ the dog howls in the morning.
Here is *Kho se do*, the heartless one; he comes to take man away from his people.

In this *tha*, *khose khamaw*, the boys are still leading as the *mo cho* brings up the rear. More and more boys and girls begin to follow them. Towards the end of the ritual, the children begin to

leave one by one, off to sleep. Now the young men and women begin to sing more actively with one another.

Chapter 3: Songs to Send the Corpse

They begin singing the *tha pluelaw*, the couplet about going to the afterlife. Normally, before people die, they have a premonition or a sign appears to someone close to them. This means their time has come. The time for death comes for all. Therefore, before we die, we should do as much good as possible to benefit our homeland. When we have a premonition, we take leave of all our suffering and worry in this world. This is exemplified in the *tha* that begins as follows:

*Mi maw khloe ha ne a de; mi moe khaw ha ne a de.
Toe me khloe ha ne a de; ta toe jue doe ni doe che.*

Dream of the Bodhi branches falling from the tree;
dream of the Banyan tree shedding its branches.
Truly, the Bodhi and Banyan still stand;
the cloth of the deceased has been hung in the house.⁶

From there we move on to the *tha choekeplue*, or “sending off the spirit of the deceased.” This *tha* is a means of showing the deceased that the things they have done while living will affect their life in the next world, which is called *plue*. Life after death may be good or it may not, depending on the deeds performed while in the land of the living. If you do good deeds while alive, your life in *plue* should be comfortable. If you performed evil or bad deeds, you will go on to receive the effects in *plue* just the same. In addition to telling the deceased this, the *tha* also warns the living that there is certainly a world after this life. As the *tha* says:

*Choe ke plue tue thi cha pu; thi mo tro je law chue thu.
Choe ke plue tue hi do jo; na hu plue chaw aw o jo.*

Send the spirit of the dead to the headwaters;
send it to the silver waterway and golden washing rock.
Send the spirit of the deceased to the edge of the village;
the rooster’s crow is heard faintly.

The next *tha* is *chawlaw*, which is the couplet that calls listeners to bring an offering to the deceased, since after we die we cannot take anything with us to the next life. The riches we have accumulated while living will be worthless in *plue*. Secondly, it tells the deceased that they don’t need to worry and don’t need to cling to things of this world, for in *plue* there is adequate supply of everything already. Also, items in the offering will go with them. As the *tha* says:

*Chaw law ne plue a sa sui; khu ya o koe nae kho the.
Cha law e plue a sa haw; khu ya o kxae e kxae jaw.*

Send a tangerine to *plue*; soon you will find sweet honey.
Offer a pomelo to *plue*; soon you will have sweet *min* honey.⁷

After offering the items to the deceased, the living must be called for a return to their senses.⁸ The spirit of the living must not follow the spirit of the deceased; the spirits of the living must sever relations with the spirit of the deceased. This is the reason that infants, the sick, or pregnant women are not allowed to attend the funeral, as these people are in a state of mind where their spirits are fragile. If they attend the funeral, the spirit of the deceased might more easily entice their fragile spirits to accompany them to *plue*. The *tha* begins as such:

Plue me law n aloe a phaw; naw khe noe phaw o paw paw.
Plue me law n aloe a khwa; naw kho naw khwa o a a.

Should *plue* lure you with a flower;
remember the many golden flowers on this earth.
Should *plue* trick you with a young man;
remember that in this world there are many young men.

When the senses of the living begin to return, the *tha* changes topics in order to adjust to the new context. The living can see that the dead have accomplished their missions on this earth already. We see in front of us just a body with no spirit. The important thing for the living to remember is to uphold life in our world here and now, which the *Pgaz K'Nyau* call *haw kho khloe*, and translates as “the place of tears.” This means that the departed now has a better life, but the living left behind must struggle on, be brave, and confront more tears still. This *tha* couplet is called *chaw toe lae*, or “back to the material world,” and says:

Klo po a khaw me koe chaw; ta si a khaw naw doe jaw.
Klo po a khaw koe chaw pha; ta si a khaw na doe ya.

Ma o plue a khaw wi li; naw doe jaw a khaw o di.
Ma o plue a khaw wi ma; a khaw o di na doe ya.

On the side of the frog drum is the symbol of an elephant;
Man's death symbolizes eternal truth.
The elephant accompanies the frog drum;
Death is our companion.

The work of the deceased is done;
but the young still have work to do.
The story of the dead is behind us;
ahead is the story of you and me.

Chapter 4: Song for Climbing the Tree

When we hear the *tha chaw toe lae*, all the young people come in droves to the singing circle to begin the ceremony of youth. The *tha* can thus be seen as a song that invites the young people to come sing in competition, with a *mo cho* of the women and a *mo cho* of the men leading each team. The stage is set for the much-anticipated responsive display of *tha* singing. The *tha* event starts with the couplet *tha dawthaw*, which means “the *tha* begins.” Most will be *tha* about love, harmony, and cooperation, giving participants a sense of awareness that they are all of one community, one ethnic group, one society, and one world. An excerpt from the *tha* states:

Koe yae mo pho ma khu khu; po thaw soe ko se phloe thu.
Koe yae mo pho ma pra pra; bo thaw soe ko se phloe wa.

Mother and children, come together; help to raise the golden pillar.
Mother and children, come together; help to raise the silver pillar.

While singing the *tha dawthaw* continuously, the young men and women try to find an opportunity to transition to *tha naw doe jaw*, or the courting song, while the older performers try to stay with *daw thaw*, since it is not yet the appropriate time to change to the courting song. When the elders bring it back to *daw thaw*, the younger singers will try to get back to *naw doe jaw*. The elders then will come back to the original, staying there until they see it fitting to move on. When it is appropriate to change, it will be the time for *naw doe jaw* (the courtship song).

Tha naw doe jaw is the beginning of courting songs between male and female, where poetic language is used to communicate. Sometimes they banter back and forth and tease each other, which makes for a most enjoyable atmosphere for the young male and female singers. They say that once the youngsters reach this stage, they can carry on non-stop past the rooster’s morning crow. Nevertheless, when dawn arrives, the antiphonal singing session must end so that all can go rest up and restore their strength for the second night, which will have different *tha* performances than the first night. The second night will have more *tha* inserted.

Early in the evening of the second night of the funeral, the house of the deceased is full of people. Some are smoking, some are eating, some drinking for courage, some are drinking tea. Not long after, you can hear the sound of *tha thaw se sa*, or the “tree climbing song” which is sung as a means of telling all that it is time to have life on earth. Living life on earth is like climbing a tree. Once you reach the top of the tree, it is time to go back home. This tells the living that life is like climbing a tree—some are fast, some are slow. If you go quickly, you’ll be done sooner. If you climb slowly, you’ll prolong the end. But no one can avoid it.

Thaw se sa jae ue jae oe; naw tho oe oe naw chaw oe.
Mue cha naw lae ja phae lae; kwa noe tho ko noe chaw sae.

Climb the tree, steadily; not like a bird, not like a chicken.
Where are you during the day? Chicken and pigs make their sounds.

After *tha thaw se sa*, next up is *tha le ploe mae*, or “reflecting the face of the departed,” followed by *tha nae mue ne la*, or “point the way for the departed.” But after “point the way,” they will sing *paepo pae suay*, or “roast the rice millet,” to make food for the departed, provisions for his journey to the next life. This is a symbol that tells us we were born empty-handed and we will leave the earth with nothing. The most important thing here is to live sustainably. Growing rice is as good as having a tree of silver. Millet is as good as a tree of gold. We don’t need to focus on amassing valuables that we can’t bring with us in the end. The only thing we can take is that which we can eat.

The *Pgaz K’Nyau* also believe that when you roast the rice or millet for the deceased as an offering, it ensures they have food to eat in *plue*. If we don’t roast it for them, they will have no food there. Preserving the belief and ceremony is preserving rice and millet seeds so they continue on. Many *Pgaz K’Nyau* communities that no longer have these traditions also don’t have these types of rice and millet. They have gone extinct together. *Tha pae po pae suay* usually starts as follows:

Pae po baw baw pae po baw; pae suay baw baw pae suay baw.
Jaw lae ho jue je yak haw; jue je jaw lae lo ya khaw.
Chu ya o loe thu a phaw; chu ya o loe je a phaw.

Roast the rice until it splits; roast the millet till it turns yellow.
I am born empty-handed; when I am born, I have nothing.
In the future, I will have a barn of gold; hereafter, I will have a granary of silver.

Chapter 5: Trees Falling and Wind Blowing

After *tha pae po pae suay*, next comes *tha khose khamaw*, with the young boys leading the *tha* with a circular procession as they did on day one. After this, the *tha pluelaw* follows *kho se khawmaw*, continuing with *tha choekeplue*, *chawlaw*, *kwaekae*, and *chawtoelae*.

After this, *tha dawthaw* begins again while a crowd of young people return. After *tha dawthaw*, they perform *dawhae*, *dawne*, *lawba*, and *lawklaw*, which are all part of *tha naw doe jaw* (the song of youth). From *tha dawthaw* onward, these are considered the *tha* which can be sung for any general occasion and place. There is no rule prohibiting it.

But as for *tha leplueamae*, *naemue nela*, *khosekhamaw*, *pluelaw*, *choekeplue*, *chawlaw*, and *chawtoelae*, these are considered songs for prayer and are for use in funerals only. They must be sung only in the appropriate occasion and time—only at funerals. One cannot sing them outside of this context, as that would be inauspicious.

Outside of the funeral occasion, these *tha* would be forbidden. You could not speak them or sing them anywhere: neither in a house, nor in the fields, nor in the forest.

One time, in a *Pgaz K’Nyau* village called Ban Thung Luang in Tambon (sub-district) Maewin, Amphoe (district) Mae Wang, Chiang Mai province, a community forest conservation group

collaborated with the *Makham Pawm* Theater Group, sponsoring activities in connection with rehearsals for a play young *Pgaz K'Nyau* community members were going to perform for the third “*Mahakam sieng pao chon khon tonnam khrang thi sam*” (3rd headwater tribal festival). They introduced a folktale called *Naw Mue E*, which is the story of a beautiful young girl who was captured by a large snake and taken to live with him in his cave as his wife.⁹ In one scene of the play, there was a funeral for *Naw Mue E*. In order to make it realistic, they had to insert a funeral-procession song into the play. I was called to go help teach them the processional song and introduced the *tha plue* to them. Before I taught it, I tried to find the *hikho*, the spiritual leader of the community.

“*Phati* (uncle), can I teach the *tha plue* in the community?” I asked the *hikho*. He hesitated a bit before answering.

“I think that...probably...it’s okay. But I’d ask you to teach it at the community *sala* (pavilion). You probably won’t have a problem there, eh?” he answered.

I am not certain whether he was just trying to be considerate of my feelings or whether he really thought it wouldn’t be a problem. But when I got the green light from him, I immediately went to teach the *Pgaz K'Nyau* youth troupe. The sound of the *tha plue* coming from the community pavilion raised a few eyebrows, since it was a bit strange, but when they saw that it was only a play, they raised no complaint.

Two days had passed like this. I woke on the third morning and went about my usual business, ate breakfast, and was ready to leave for the communal pavilion to continue teaching the *tha plue* as we had planned. As I was descending the staircase to go to the pavilion with the kids who were waiting below, an elder approached me.

“*Phodo* (nephew), you don’t need to go teach at the pavilion today. Come to my house this evening instead.” His expression was both excited and sad.

“How can you say this? It’s not good to sing this *tha* inside someone’s home,” an older woman, whose house I was staying at, remarked.

“Oh, it’s okay. *Phi* (grandma) Lawkaw just passed away this morning.” After he had spoken this, everyone understood. Some were alarmed, some were saddened, some felt surprised.

That evening, the youth and I had the chance to see a real performance of *tha plue*, unexpectedly so. But, unfortunately, the funeral for Lawkaw was just one night. After that, the *hikho* and the villagers would not permit us to practice singing *plue* in the village anymore. But they did try to find an alternative solution: we could still practice, but it had to be far away from the village, so far that a rooster’s crow could not be heard.

On the following day, we consulted and packed provisions. From there, we entered the small foot path leading out of the village. After about 30 minutes we arrived at a rice field that had a small shack that seemed especially built for us to rehearse. We used this location as a practice space for singing *tha plue* so that our singing would not cause anyone else in the village to die.

We spoke with the *hikho* and the elders of the village about the occurrence. Actually, we were afraid that the villagers would blame us for singing *plue* in the village, but luckily the villagers understood our intentions. We had asked the *hikho* and the villagers before we started singing it there. We didn't do it without prior proper authorization.

“No problem. *Koe li hae ne se ka taw a kha*. The tree just happened to fall right as the wind was blowing. It was just a coincidence. If this had happened in the past, you would have had to ask for forgiveness from the family of the deceased, but in this case, we don't think like this.” The *hikho* told this to the theater troupe and to me, relieving us of our worries, but it is still an important life lesson to remember.

Chapter 6: Forbidden Songs in an Era of Religious Change

Meanwhile, within *Pgaz K'Nyau* communities that had converted to Christianity, the *tha* was fading away, being abandoned, and was seen as a relic of the past and as less and less useful to contemporary generations. The *mo cho*, leader of funeral music, had no role as the *Pgaz K'Nyau* began to adopt western, church-style song leadership led by a conductor.

Tha was devalued as hymns arrived. *Pgaz K'Nyau* musical instruments were disregarded once western instruments (guitar, drum set, accordion, mouth organ, and others) came onto the scene.

“DO SO SO MI DO MI SO. Ready...Sing. *Sawi*” This was the typical lead sentence uttered by the conductor of the choir. By priming the choir with “DO SO SO MI DO MI SO” he would establish the key. The words “ready, sing,” were spoken in English; the singers would sing after hearing them.

But this conductor, aside from using the words “ready, sing,” also included “*sawi*,” which again means “sing,” so from this I was never certain if they were just copying the foreign word or whether they understood them as one and the same. If you took out the words “ready, sing,” and just used *sawi* alone, that should've been enough...or did they want to use both languages together? I'm still confused about this matter.

As time passed, *tha* and *Pgaz K'Nyau* traditional music was being marginalized within *Pgaz K'Nyau* Christian communities. I reiterate: *Christian Pgzaz K'Nyau* communities.

“But you are Christian,” others tease me.

“That's right! I am Christian. That is why I know what happened to *tha* and *Pgaz K'Nyau* traditional music in these Christian *Pgaz K'Nyau* communities,” I answer them.

In the year that they held the Muejekee¹⁰ Christian Assembly of *Pgaz K'Nyau* Churches, every member church from the Muejekee Conference (around the vicinity of Mae Chaem watershed) came to join the festivities, which included 14 congregations from 20 communities. As is

tradition, on the first night of the meeting, the host church must have a song to welcome the visiting participants from the other churches.

There was one *Pgaz K'Nyau* teacher, a well-known song master of Muejekee, who was entrusted with said duties. He immediately felt excited and highly honored, and commenced with the preparations. All the top musicians skilled in *Pgaz K'Nyau* traditional music were invited to play, including Buna on the *saw* [bowed lute], Phahae on the *khwae* [free-reed buffalo horn], Ta-Aw on the *Pgaz K'Nyau* drum, Thunu on the leaf, Kawphaw on the gong, Loepho, expert on the *kraw* [bamboo slit drum] and in singing harmonies, and many others. The song master played the *tehnaku* [harp], leading the group by singing melody.

When the night came, everyone was anticipating this composition, the welcoming song, of the Muejekee group, for it had been publicized as an important aspect of the opening ceremony.

“Next on the program is the host’s welcoming song.” The loud sound of applause followed the announcement as the band climbed the stairs and up to the stage, carrying their traditional instruments with them. The audience was not expecting this at all, because the activities of Christian conferences involve mainly western instruments (e.g., guitar, drums, bass, and accordion).

The most unexpectant was the elderly senior pastor who stared, scowling, a marked contrast from the smiling, attentive, laughing audience members who were enjoying the group’s playing style, lyrical quality, and poetic content.

After the song ended, applause proved that the song’s pleasing effect had impressed the audience. The senior pastor rose in the midst of the applause that had yet to abate, walking up on stage as the performers began their descent.

“THESE INSTRUMENTS! They are instruments of a bygone era! They are instruments of a people who did not yet know or believe in God! They are instruments used to worship the spirits, *Mara*, Satan! They are instruments for calling the spirits and souls of the sick and deceased. Therefore, they are not appropriate here and should not be brought into the church, the sacred temple of God. We should play music that is free of blemish, untainted, pure. Please see that this is the last time these instruments are played in a church. This destroys the honor of the church and God. Remember this!” He finished speaking. The festive atmosphere ended abruptly. Silence engulfed the space. He turned and exited the stage. Everyone in the band looked at one another, bewildered and astonished. Not knowing what to say, they just collected their things and walked off the stage, brokenhearted.

“I’m so sorry you all had to endure such public reprimand,” the song master said to his bandmates, his fellow *Pgaz K'Nyau*, in a dejected tone of voice. After that, this once-famed teacher was never seen again playing ethnic music in church. However, at ceremonies and other cultural events that happened beyond the fences of the church, he did not abandon *Pgaz K'Nyau* musical instruments.

After this, *Pgaz K'Nyau* traditional music became a thing forbidden. There was to be no opportunity for it to enter *Pgaz K'Nyau* churches in Muejekee ever again. *Tha* was forgotten, and those who sang it forgot that they were once *mo cho*, masters of *tha* in their communities.

Chapter 7: *Naw Cha Tru*. Bringing the *Tehnaku* into the Church Again

More than ten years passed in the village of the heartbroken music master since that church incident.

The master felt very happy when his son came and asked to learn traditional *Pgaz K'Nyau* music from him, since children of his son's generation had all gravitated toward the same fashionable music. This was the thing he had waited and hoped for futilely: that there would be young people, whether his own flesh and blood or someone else among the *Pgaz K'Nyau*, who would come to him to learn and eventually perpetuate their traditional music. Today, he began to see his dreams take shape and near realization. The songs of *Pgaz K'Nyau* culture would not be completely abandoned in this generation after all. But he was alarmed when his son told him that he wanted to learn *tehnaku* so that he could play it on Christmas night in the community church.

“Are you sure, son? You want to play it *in church*?” he asked his son, while thinking of the situation where they condemned him in the middle of the Christian assembly meeting in Muejekee ten years ago. He still felt somewhat worried, and he was afraid it was all about to happen again and that his son might not be able to endure such pressure. If there were the same words of reproach after playing it in the church, the thing he worried about even more was that his son might cast off the music of his people.

“Absolutely. I want to play it. I am just a kid. They can't scold me!” He affirmed his choice.

Since the day was fast approaching, they had only three days to prepare. But three days was sufficient to give the son enough chances for his father to knock him on the head many times, as his playing and singing did not meet his father's standards.

When Christmas evening arrived, the community held a simple Christmas celebration, as is typical in the mountains, but they don't do away with the fun of it all. Many songs are sung and staged plays about the Nativity tell the story of the birth of Jesus year after year. The children participate, one and all, in the acting and singing on Christmas night.

Before long, it was time for the son's presentation. He climbed up to the stage uneasily, shyly, and trembling, since he was not yet used to performing and not especially confident on this instrument. But he felt that when the moment arrived, he must play, at least finish it with due diligence.

His father dared not go watch his son play the *tehnaku* in the church. He just gave him some suggestions for playing on stage, dealing with stage fright, not losing confidence, and staying relaxed. But his mother went in and stayed close to encourage her son.

He got up on stage, dragging a chair up with him. His appearance and the look of the instrument drew laughter from the audience. Even though it was their own people's instrument, it had now become estranged, long out of sight and out of mind. Yet here was this little boy carrying an instrument that hardly anyone played anymore—who knew if he could even play it himself? It became a joke to all in attendance.

When he set himself down on the chair, he began to pluck the strings with a bit too much confidence, so that he was stiff and the music did not flow naturally. He began to sing with a slight tremor in his voice.

The lyrics of the song relay a *Pgaz K'Nyau* story about a girl, *Naw Cha Tru*, who disappeared into the big city. Everything in *Pgaz K'Nyau* society changed. The daily pounding of rice was not heard; even the chicken stopped crowing. The wholeness of the earth's resources—earth, water, forest—was also gone. But there was still hope. *Naw Cha Tru* could be called home by the sound of the *tehnaku*. We can use *Pgaz K'Nyau* culture to get *Naw Cha Tru* to awaken from her subconscious state and bring life to our community again.

This is the content of the song that his father intently passed on to the boy in order to have him communicate it to the people in the *Pgaz K'Nyau* Christmas celebration.

When the boy had finished singing, he rushed off the stage so he wouldn't hear anything. He walked quickly past the audience members, but he could still catch some of their whisperings.

“Like father, like son, eh? Before, his father played the *tehnaku* in church and was criticized by Pastor *Se Ra Do* once. Now his child has done it again. It's a good thing that that *Se Ra Do* is not here today. The boy played the whole thing straight through, though. His father must have taught him well.” He walked past as if not interested, and walked all the way home to put away the *tehnaku*.

As soon as he arrived at home, he quietly put the instrument back in the same corner. The father noticed his behavior.

“How did it go?” the father asked.

“I got five baht,” he answered indirectly.

“Who gave it to you?” the father asked next.

“Mom,” he answered, as he pulled out a coin for his father to see.

“She's something! Crazy about her kids,” he said while laughing.

But the father was relieved. He felt as if their music and culture were returning to the Christian *Pgaz K'Nyau* community. A newfound hope in his heart for musicians playing traditional *Pgaz K'Nyau* music began to wash over him. There may be a chance yet for its sound to be heard in the church again.

In the song, the *tehnaku* helps to call *Naw Cha Tru* back home. It tells us we must bring her back. On this day, we fulfilled the duty outlined in the song. We brought the *tehnaku* back into the church—and the community—once again.

Chapter 8: *Punu DawkJimu*. When Forbidden Songs Go Out into the World

In the year 1997, another wave of protest emerged in forest communities in response to the government of P.M. Chuan Leekpai's [1992-95, 1997-2001] policy to evict people from the forests. This meant changes to the fates of those who lived in the forest. Their original communities, their homes, their ways of life, and their senses of place would become things of the past.

Representatives of the *Pgaz K'Nyau* forest dwellers traveled to demonstrate once again in front of the Government House and they were joined by the "Assembly of the Poor" coming from various regions.¹¹ This group, together with the assembled *Pgaz K'Nyau*, became a new, enlarged "assembly" in front of the Government House.

"The younger ones have gone to demand rights many times now, but they were unsuccessful. This time I will go myself. If our demands are not met, I will absolutely not return." Punu DawkJimu, an older leader in the *Pgaz K'Nyau* community from Mae Hawy Village, Mae Wang Amphoe, Chiang Mai, said this before he left. The goal of this protest was the same as in the past: not to stop until they were successful.

"*Ta i oe na lae la la*" (Oh, our destiny is indeed sadness)." Before leaving the house, he sang this sad *tha* incessantly. His wife had to complain in order to make him to stop.

That morning, the government's minister of agriculture and industry, Mr. Chuchip Hansawat, agreed to negotiate with the community groups. He thus went to hear the negotiations.

"In any case, those living in the watershed forest must leave and be relocated, period. These are national forest preservation areas. We cannot make any exceptions for anyone. This is the law," the minister of agriculture insisted.

Punu then left the meeting room with a changed expression. It was as if his spirit and soul had left him, but he tried to gather his senses.

"Tell me! What am I to do? How can I make the minister understand and return our right to live in the forest? Should I go stab him to death? Tell me now. I don't want to waste my time with them," he said to Phati Johnni Odochao, one of the *Pgaz K'Nyau* leaders of the gathering, who responded.

"*Khwa* (comrade), patience. We have a way. We must fight with peaceful methods, not with violence. Violence is not the way to get what we want," Johnni told him, causing Punu to feel

immensely let down, both with Johnni's response and with his mission of coming down to demonstrate.

"Peaceful means? Peaceful means? And when will it end?" he grumbled while pacing back and forth, as if he had lost his mind. He set his sights on the Prempracha canal by the Government House as the place to end it all.

"Someone jumped into the water to drown himself." A shout came from an *Isaan* woman¹² returning from bathing. Everyone went to go look, including all the *Pgaz K'Nyau* people there.

"*Phati Punu!*" a young *Pgaz K'Nyau* person exclaimed while running and jumping in to assist the many other able-bodied men entering the water, and they succeeded in rescuing him. Everyone was shocked, never imagining that *Phati Punu* would resort to such a decision.

"I said it before: if our rights are not restored, I will not return home." He said nothing else, just this. Everyone agreed that he should be accompanied back home. Otherwise, he might do something even more unimaginable than this.

"When you send him home, have three people go along to take care of him and take turns looking after him. It's not enough to just have one caretaker." The protest leaders created the following plan and sent *Phati Punu* home:

One person would sleep while another watched over him. They were to alternate their shifts like this until the morning of March 5th. When the train brought them back to Lanna [the northern region of Thailand], the land of horse carriages [Lampang province], the guardians began to feel relieved because *Phati Punu* was sleeping soundly and before long they would be at the final train stop. At the same time, exhaustion came over all three watchmen and deep sleep overtook them.

While they all slept, Punu slightly opened his eyes and peered left and right. He got up quietly and carefully and climbed up to the train window. Before his guardians could catch hold of his body, he jumped and hit the train tracks below. He did as he said he would before leaving:

If the demands are not met, I absolutely won't return home.

And truly he did not return. The *tha*, "La la," that he sang when leaving home, truly became his farewell song. His words and actions became the catalyst for the poor forest dwellers' fight, resulting in the cabinet reconsidering the eviction policy. This only happened after 99 days of protest in front of the Government House.

To mark the one year anniversary of his death, the *Pgaz K'Nyau* Network for Culture and Environment wanted to organize an event to commemorate *Phati Punu*, who was regarded as one of the heroes in the fight for forest dweller rights. The *Pgaz K'Nyau* Network for Culture and Environment produced a music CD, featuring *Phati Awd Withun*, a *Pgaz K'Nyau* singer-songwriter.

“Help me write a song about Punu, please. I can’t finish in time,” *Phati Awd* told me. I felt highly honored to help write the song for Punu, as this was the first song I wrote for someone who had died. And it would have to speak to the situation in which he died. It immediately brought to my mind the laments in *Pgaz K’Nyau* funeral songs.

The origin of funeral procession songs, or what the *Pgaz K’Nyau* call *tha yo ta*, are based on a legend saying that in the past the *Pgaz K’Nyau* had a great civilization in the land of *wekimae* (decorated with ivory). It is said that the *Pgaz K’Nyau* kingdom of the past had many elephants, with tusks in all corners of the land. Also, the shape of the city-state resembled a curved buffalo horn. A river, *kimae*, separated the *Pgaz K’Nyau* land from the *Kowa* (Lawa people).

The reason the *Pgaz K’Nyau* call the Lawa “Kowa” is that the Lawa lived on the “Kokola” (Mekong) riverside (between the Ping and Mekong Rivers). The *Pgaz K’Nyau* lived between the “Khekola” (Salween) and Ping rivers. “Ko” refers to the Mekong while “Wa” just means “side.” Thus, “Ko-wa” translates as the Mekong (“ko”) side (“wa”) of Chiang Mai. The *Pgaz K’Nyau* say that the kingdom of “Kimae” was located in what is now Chiang Mai, with the Ping River dividing *Pgaz K’Nyau* and Lawa lands.

But there came a day when another ethnic group invaded, plundering and murdering in both *Pgaz K’Nyau* and Lawa lands. The *Pgaz K’Nyau* had to disperse, fleeing in all directions. Some fled into the mountains; some went to Mae Sarieng and crossed the Salween to live with a larger group of *Pgaz K’Nyau* on the western side of the Salween, in what is now the Karen State in Burma.

In fleeing from that invasion, many died. So, in the funeral some laments curse the ethnic group who invaded, robbed, murdered, and broke up the land of the *Pgaz K’Nyau*. A term refers to those who drove the *Pgaz K’Nyau* out and caused their deaths: they are called the “Yo” people. The *tha Yota* originated in the laments about the Yo people.

Nowadays, *Pgaz K’Nyau* people refer to people in the Lanna area as “Yo.” And these “Yo” northerners call the *Pgaz K’Nyau* the “Yang.” People in the central region are called “Yo toe ra,” which might originally come from the name of the kingdom of Ayuthaya.



Map: "Topography of Northern Thailand"¹³

This author once consulted with poet and National Artist Nawarat Phongphaibun about this story. He told me that the Yo mentioned [in the laments] must be either the "Yonok" of Lanna or the Yo of "Yodia" (Ayodhya).¹⁴ But what is certain here is that the "Yo" people were definitely the ones who drove the *Pgaz K'Nyau* out of their land.

The circumstances behind the policy to evict people from the forests might not be the same as the plunderous land grab of the past, where the *Pgaz K'Nyau* and Lawa lost their land, but they are similar, and the results are not all that different.

"They are taking it again, these Yo. That's how it was in the past, and today is no different. They see other's dwellings, their abundance, and they want it for themselves. When they get it, they destroy it all—the soil, the water, the forests, the air. What will happen next?" one elder in the *Pgaz K'Nyau* community complained furiously.

"We must insert the *tha Yota* into the song for *Phati Punu*, for the Yo have once again caused the death of a *Pgaz K'Nyau* man." I thought this and set my heart to it as I wrote the song.

There was a Pgzaz K'Nyau elder of Khometha village,

A man without fame: Phati Punu DawkJimu.

*He lived with his wife and children in the forested, mountainous area;
Amidst the trees, people, animals, and the forest co-existed.*

*He rotated his fields, planted rice, had a hut and a house and a community,
Had land to make a living and had a stable way of life.*

*He made a living for his family, as have many generations prior,
Had knowledge of forest preservation, knew how to use medicinal herbs.*

*He was so generous, multi-talented,
He could weave baskets and traps for mice, he would share what he caught.*

*But there came a day when his worst nightmares came to pass, government orders
reached the hills,
Demanding the people leave the forests and move to a new location that had been
prepared for them.*

*So Phati Punu had to leave his birthplace, his home in the forest,
His community would become a thing of the past, their ways would become mere legends.*

(The spoken section next includes the original words of *Phati Punu* before he committed suicide.)

Our home, our forests. We lived and cared for them since the days of our ancestors. Why must they come and persecute us like this? Why keep living? The government cares not for us. Going back home is the same as death, a roundabout detour to destruction. It is better to die now than to fight it.

*At the new location, our children cannot live,
They cannot farm, cannot grow rice. Everything must be purchased with money.*

*We have no knowledge of city life. We know not what they are up to.
My descendants, grandchildren, and great grandchildren will be their slaves.*

*The more I think, the sadder and more worried I become. What will our life become next?
The month of thiphae has come again, and we have no time to prepare the fields.*

*We have to leave for Bangkok to demand our right to return to our forest.
When he heard of the government resolution, Punu's heart nearly crumbled.*

*On the 5th of March, he was sent back to Kimae (Chiang Mai),
Expired were his soul and spirit, and he met his death outside the train window.*

Punu, Punu, DawkJimu, Punu, Punu, DawkJimu,

Yo e Yo aw Yo e Yo aw, Yo e Yo aw yo e Yo aw.

*Little bird, your mother waits at the nest. If you fly back home
Do not follow the path to Dulawra (hell), come back to the path to Dutoewaw (heaven).*

*There we have frog wraps and fish salad, there is pomelo and oranges for you,
Yo e Yo aw Yo e Yo aw, Yo e Yo aw Yo e Yo aw.*

Song: “Punu Dawkjimu”

Album: *Koenyaw koe rao* by Awd Withun Jaemrattanasuwan [shining gold]

Lyrics, Melody, Vocals: Chi Suwichan

At first, I was set on having *Phati Awd* be the sole singer, since it was his album. But *Phati Awd* told me that he did not have the time to rehearse and had me do it alone, which caused me to think that I must have written a bad song that he did not want to sing. So, I decided to sing it by myself, even though it was featured on his album.

After production of *Phati Awd*’s album had finished, the song was publicized over the airwaves on *Pgaz K’Nyau* radio stations.

With the intention of honoring a hero in the forest dwellers’ fight, the *Pgaz K’Nyau* Network for Culture and Environment chose the song “Punu Dawkjimu” for their publicity campaign.¹⁵

The first place we sent it was the national radio station. In the programming allotted to tribal languages, especially *Pgaz K’Nyau*, there is Ma Na, or Bi Na, who is a news anchor on various programs that go out to *Pgaz K’Nyau* people in the mountainous regions.

After the song got some airplay, *Pgaz K’Nyau* people from various places called in to express their opinions to Bi Na:

“Most people say that they like this song a lot. But some ask that the song be stopped when it comes to the section with the *tha Yo*, because it makes their hair stand on end, especially if they are sitting or lying down in their homes. It makes them think instantly of funerals. They say it makes them feel uneasy.” Bi Na called to tell me this.

In addition to the radio listeners calling in to tell Bi Na these things when the song first came out, when I was traveling to play music in *Pgaz K’Nyau* communities that still practiced traditional religious customs, people there told me similar things with the same attitude. I did not expect that it would have such an effect on hearts and minds.

At the one year anniversary of the death of *Phati Punu*, we all came together for an organized memorial at his birthplace in Maewang village, Maewin Subdistrict, Mae Wang District, Chiang Mai. I had an opportunity to participate and prepared the song “Punu Dawkjimu.” Also, there were many *Pgaz K’Nyau* musicians present, including *Phati Awd* and Jui Se-A, as each had come to entertain the *Pgaz K’Nyau* participants.

When it was time for me to get on stage, worry engulfed me immediately. I started to get worried about the song, “Punu Dawkjimu,” wondering whether the people would accept the section with the *tha Yo*, since it was specifically for funerals. But before I could get onto the stage, the emcee announced:

“Meet the composer of the song, ‘Punu Dawkjimu.’” This brought my confidence back. However bad it might be, I had to sing the song this evening as I had intended to do.

Initially, I dared not sing the song, and sang two other songs first. Then I introduced “Punu.” As I started the introduction, people recognized it as “Punu Dawkjimu,” as shown by their applause. I started singing and was approaching the *tha Yo* section, with the repeats of the name “Punu Punu Dawk Jimu.” The audience members who knew the song began to sing along with me, “Punu punu Dawk Jimu.” When I arrived at the *tha Yo* section, I thought I would just leave it out, figuring that the listeners would not accept it. But before I could stop, the participants started singing: “Yo e Yo aw....” Those who could joined in on the *tha Yo* part, which caused every one of my hairs to stand on end. I happily listened to them singing the *tha Yo* and accompanied them on my guitar vigorously, breaking two strings!

“Brothers and Sisters, I need to stop. I broke two strings,” I told them. After that, Phruet, another *Pgaz K’Nyau* eco-activist got up on stage.

“I think that this is what *Phati* Punu would have liked to say to all of us. This song was written for him. You can observe from the two broken guitar strings. He’d want us all to be steadfast in our ways. Take care of the resources in your community. We will always have them.”

I was most taken aback by being able to sing this song, even though this celebration was not a funeral.

“This is probably because it was a memorial for someone who had actually died,” I thought to myself.

But, stranger than this, there are times when I play music in *Pgaz K’Nyau* communities that are Christian, and even there I get requests for the song. When I approach the section with the *tha Yo*, there is no demand that I stop. Instead, I am free to sing it, and they join in, even in a celebratory event. Do they not know these are taboo? These are forbidden songs...do they just not recognize them anymore?

Chapter 9: *Soe Le*. The Curse of the Forbidden Songs

Even though the rice harvest season had arrived, the rain was still sprinkling. The rice farmers could only pray for it to stop while they threshed the rice, as the moisture would make the price of rice fall.

I was preparing to return home to the harvest. The places where I used to run around as a child beckoned, calling me from the city to return to the ripened fields—which I could do since my

father happened to be in Chiang Mai attending to some business. We could ride in my father's vehicle this time.

"Do you have any cassettes? I'd like to listen to them in the car," my father asked me before we left Chiang Mai. I went back into my room to search for a tape suitable for my father. There were some *Pgaz K'Nyau* tapes, some western ones, some Thai. My eyes met a purple case. The album was called "Songs from the Basement" by Suwichanon Ratanaphimon (a.k.a. "Non"). The front cover included a picture of Phawwa, his daughter. I chose this album in part because my father had known Non for a while but had still not heard the music on this album.

After I had chosen this cassette tape, I told my father we could leave, volunteering myself as the "DJ" for the trip while my father served as chauffeur. I started the tape on side A: "Rain in September," "*Bu Lon*," "Chipped Moon," "Little House in a Big Forest," "Singing Songs in the Basement." We came to side B: "Bamboo Dance," followed by "*Da Ra Ang*," and then we came to songs it seemed I had never heard Non sing before.

But the lyrics of this song felt familiar:

*I shout to all the leaves: do not open the way;
Keep the long darkness, do not let the sun shine in.
May the rivers stop flowing.
Don't go, please don't go.*

*When you were a young and beautiful girl in the mountain forests,
Your beauty would catch the gaze of the flowers;
The multi-colored, hand-woven cloth wrapped your body,
You wove it yourself.*

*Many days and nights passed; fever of the forest¹⁶ overtook you.
You ranted and raved in delirium while taking the medicinal root.
A cold and windy night took you away;
The house filled with tears.*

*Soe le, Soe le, Yo Ue,
Soe le, Soe le, Yo Ue.*

Song: "Soe Le"

Album: *Phleng Tai Thun Ban*

Artist: Suwichanon Ratanaphimol

[<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ee05u9uOJNo>]

"Little Non [Suwichanon] turned *tha plue* into a song," my father told me while driving. *Tha plue*, a *tha* about a person who died... Did Non know this? And how come I never heard him perform this song anywhere live before? These questions stirred in my heart, even as other songs played in the car after this one.

“We play music seasonally.” This was what Non told me before, referring to playing our music at the start of a semester, from the cold to hot season. The rainy season is community planting time. This is a time when celebrations decrease, as everyone is busy working.

This is probably why it took us so long to set up a time to talk. November is when musicians typically start to go out on tour. When Non was available, I usually wasn’t, and vice versa, many times over. Finally, we were both available at the same time as we had no engagements elsewhere.

“I heard the story of *Soele* first from Lee-sa.” Non introduced the song’s origins to me.

Soele is the story of a *Pgaz K’Nyau* girl who died before getting married. When an unmarried *Pgaz K’Nyau* girl dies, her dress will be hung at the gates of the village. Just before dusk, the last rays of sunlight will illuminate the hanging dress as it glistens. It brings tears to one’s eyes.

“After I heard this story, it stuck with me, so I wanted to compose a song about *Soele*. But as I kept trying to write it, I couldn’t finish it. It remained as such.”

With the song still unfinished, Non tried to find out more about the story from those near him who would have more knowledge of *Soele*. When he met *Phati Thongdee*, he wasn’t going to miss his chance to ask.

“Uncle Thongdee, I have this unfinished song about *Soele*. Is there a *tha* about her?” The research about the song had begun again.

“Sure there are, but you can’t talk about them now! We are in the car, and they can’t be discussed or sung here,” *Phati Thongdee* told him.

“They are forbidden. You can’t sing them inside,” he repeated. But with persistence, Non gradually persuaded *Phati Thongdee*, who finally relented.

“You really want to know, Non? Okay, well, keep driving safely.” *Phati Thongdee* started doing as Non wished.

Phati Thongdee sang *tha plue* for him up until the line about the Yo. That evening, during an event, Non asked for a translation of the song. After the event ended, the song “*Soe Le*” had been finished.

“I imagine that the girl must have had hardships in her life. She had to accompany her parents to help to plant rice. By the time she was grown, she had worked hard. I imagine that her death was caused by malaria.”

Non started rehearsing the after it was completed. While practicing, he would not dare sing the *tha* section with the words “Yo e Yo aw” because he was looking at the face of his sleeping daughter. Instead, he’d switch the words to “La la.” At that moment, he’d consider the words of *Phati Thongdee*.

You must absolutely not sing these words, or even speak them, while indoors.

“I recorded the song ‘*Soe Le*’ in a *Pgaz K’Nyau* village called Ban Phrabat Huay Ton. Before recording this sung section of ‘Yo e Yo aw,’ I would think of Thongdee’s warning again, but when the time to record came, the mood of the song led me to sing ‘Yo’ [instead of ‘La’], causing utter silence amongst the listeners. The only thing to be heard was the sound of sniffing.” This was the setting of the recording.

The album *Phleng Tai Thun Ban* came out in October of 2001. Inexplicably, Non’s daughter Phawwa passed away two months later, in December.

“Thongdee, does this have anything to do with the song ‘*Soe Le*?’” Non asked *Phati* Thongdee after he lost his daughter. Thongdee patted him gently on the back instead of responding.

“Lee-sa told me I shouldn’t sing this song anymore, but I liked the melody a lot. It reminds me of John Denver songs—easy going, melancholic.¹⁷ I once performed it at *Ramkhamhaeng* [University]. I played for students and I was nearly unable to finish it. That was the only time I tried performing it at an event.” No one heard Non sing it after that.

Non told me that the song became something he was scared to sing. It was like a wave sweeping over the world, over the earth, even over the sky. If one uttered this *tha*, would it cause a ripple through the entire universe?

Even though he wanted to perform it again, he could not conquer his fear.

“I’d still be reluctant even to make a new copy of the album. I feel so afraid, but it should end this way. I studied philosophies that spoke of freedom, refusing cultural admonitions, and living with truth and reason. But when all of this happened it was like being knocked off my feet. Normally, I don’t believe in this type of thing, but this is an exception.”

“Are you still afraid to sing it?” I asked the composer.

“I don’t know. What might happen if I redo the song? I’d probably die before my time. I’ll leave it as it is. It is finished.” Non spoke with an observable mixture of fear and sadness, so I did not continue the interview, since we were talking in the month of December of 2008. Non and his family’s feelings had not faded.

The angel had spread her wings and flown from this earth to return whence she came.

Chapter 10: Singing Forbidden Songs in Funerals

The news spread of the death of the 96-year-old leader who established the Christian church in Muejekee, not only in Muejekee but also in Chiang Rai, Kanchanaburi (his hometown), and to other places in which he had preached his Christian message, including Chiang Mai, Mae Hawng Sawn, and Tak. News of his departure was missed by none.

The funeral was organized well, according to Christian customs. Wherever the news reached, people came. Locals and people from outside the area turned out in equal number. It was the same as organizing any large community festival. All the relatives scattered far and wide for work now returned for the three-day funeral.

After the third night of the funeral, time had come for the burial. After breakfast, there would be another prayer service prior to the corpse being taken to the gravesite.

“*Phodokhwa* (nephew), when I deliver the sermon, I want you to perform a *Pgaz K’Nyau* funeral song, because I would like to speak on the topic of the afterlife.” The Secretary General of the Karen Baptist Convention (KBC), the son of the deceased who had to perform the rites on the final morning in the village of his father, invited me.

“Would that be okay? Would that be acceptable to them (the Christian *Pgaz K’Nyau*)?” I asked him hesitantly.

“It’s no problem, because I want to compare *Pgaz K’Nyau* beliefs to those of the Christian Bible to show their similarities and differences,” he assured me. I felt that his was a good attitude and I willingly agreed, but in order to make the song more complete, I solicited help from *Phue Saunge*, who was an old, respected *tha* specialist and formerly a *mo cho*.

When I entered his house, *Phue Saunge* had been recovering from a week-long fever. He slept under a blanket at the rim of the *phakhwathi* (*Pgaz K’Nyau* earthen hearth). I hesitated, not knowing if it would be appropriate to invite him or not. But as soon as he saw me, he greeted me, talking of nothing but songs, *tha*, and legends that stayed with him his whole life. After talking for a while, I told him my objective in coming to find him. I had prepared myself, thinking that if he agreed to come with me, that would be great; but if it wasn’t convenient for him, that was also okay, since I was worried about his health.

“*Phue*, you aren’t up to it, right? You are just getting over a fever.” His son-in-law didn’t agree with the plan, since he worried about his health.

“I can, I can. But let me eat first.” *Phue* got up willingly, revealing a smile of blackened teeth under his red lips, the result of betel leaf chewing. It was as if he had a thirst for something he had not had the chance to do in a while.

Phue tried to focus on eating as much as he could, and his son-in-law was surprised that he could eat this amount. Earlier, he would not eat much and complained of the food’s blandness. He had been refusing so adamantly that the son-in-law had to repeatedly force him to eat.

“But I can’t really walk. You’ll have to come pick me up on your motorcycle, okay?” *Phue* told me, ignoring his son-in-law’s objections. I agreed and came to pick him up, taking him to the funeral, which had many people in attendance by now. *Phue* told me he could not sit up there for long, so I went to find a chair for him to sit and wait down below.¹⁸

“When the time for the performance is near I will call upon you, *Phue*,” I told him. He nodded instead of voicing his consent. I walked up the stairs and waited for the signal to call him up.

The service followed Christian convention. As it neared the time for the sermon, the emcee announced the following:

“Before we hear the sermon, we will have a song performed by a youth and an elder so that we may mourn for the deceased together. Please welcome them.” Everyone turned and looked at me, and I turned to *Phue Saunge* in order to signal him. *Phue* gathered up his walking stick carefully, climbed up the stairs, and sat next to me.

“Okay, ready?” I asked him, certain that he was.

“Just a moment. I would like to say a few things first.” He started explaining about the song we would sing so that the audience would understand the content more clearly. Since they are *tha* lyrics, some *Pgaz K’Nyau*, especially younger generations, might have some difficulty in understanding them.

“We are about to sing a *tha* for you called *Phue*. We sing this so that the living know that the deceased has gone on and so that the deceased will know he has left his body and needs to move on. On a day where no one has died, you must not say these words, and definitely must not sing them. Not indoors, under the house, or anywhere else. But when someone has died, you must sing them.” *Phue* said this, picked up the microphone, and looked at me. I started playing the *tehnaku*.

Yo e yo aw e e e; yo aw yo e aw aw aw.
Tho ko ra noe mo la le; plue oe noe me ke.
Du law ra ne ke toe ke; ke loe du toe waw.

Yo e yo aw e e e; yo aw yo e aw aw aw.
Noe thi khi kae poe thi tha; noe thi tha kae poe thi khi.
Noe mue thaw kae poe mue nue; noe mue nue kae noe maw thaw.

Yo e yo aw e e e; yo aw yo e aw aw aw.
Noe se ki poe se jaw khi; no se jaw kae poe se ki.
Noe mue law ne poe toe lae; noe wae law tow me poe wae.

Yo e yo aw e e e; yo aw yo e aw aw aw.
Noe mue cha kae poe mue na; noe mue na kae poe mue cha.
Noe klae mue kae poe pa pu; noe klae po kae loe pwa pu.

Yo e yo aw e e e; yo aw yo e aw aw aw.
Noe mae thi toe law kha pwa. poe mae thi toe law kha na.
Noe law o poe o toe se; poe law o noe o toe se.
Yo e yo w e e e, yo aw yo e aw aw aw

Translation:

Yo e yo aw e e e; yo aw yo e aw aw aw.

Kora bird¹⁹, your mother inquires of you, please return home.

Do not follow the path to *Dulawra* (hell); follow the way to *Dutoewaw* (heaven).

Yo e yo aw e e e; yo aw yo e aw aw aw.

Your headwaters are our basin; our basin is your headwaters.

Your east is our west; your west is our east.

Yo e yo aw e e e; yo aw yo e aw aw aw.

Your roots are our treetops; your treetops are our roots.

Your land we do not enter; your fields are not ours.

Yo e yo aw e e e; yo aw yo e aw aw aw.

Your night is our day; your day is our night.

Your footpath is our ravine; your road is thick forest to us.

Yo e yo aw e e e; yo aw yo e aw aw aw.

What you see is not what we see; we see the opposite

Your dwelling cannot be our dwelling; ours cannot be yours.

Yo e yo aw e e e; yo aw yo e aw aw aw.

Phue Saunge was steady and would not stop. The emcee looked at me, signaling me to cease. I tried to pass the message along to *Phue*, but I couldn't tell whether he was unable to hear or whether he was not paying attention. He kept singing until I finally had to stop playing *tehnaku* and singing along. He stopped, looking confusedly at me, as one who had his bowl taken from him before he was finished eating.

I pulled at his hand softly, explaining so that he would understand.

“They only want a sample of the song, *Phue*.”

“Mmm mmm, just a little bit is okay. Take me home. I want to sleep.” So I did.

“When you come home, don't forget to come visit me at my home. I have many folktales I want to tell you about.” *Phue* told me before climbing on to the back of a young man's motorcycle that would take him home.

Chapter 11: Forbidden Forests

After the Christian service ended, the visitors came down the stairs one by one and stood around on the ground in front of house of the deceased. Two pickup trucks belonging to the son of the deceased pulled up, parting the crowd and parking in front of the house in the midst of those gathered.

“This cross is too heavy for us to carry,” one able-bodied man said as he loaded the 2.5-meter long, 6-inch thick cement cross onto the back of the truck. A long time ago, Jesus carried a cross up a mountain and was nailed to it. On the way, he got tired and could not carry on. A man had to help him carry it. And here is a case where no one man could carry it. I thought to myself that a cement cross must be heavier than the wooden one Christ had to carry.

The casket was brought out to the front grounds and gently laid in the truck bed. The lid was opened so that the gathered could take one last look at his face before the nails sealed the coffin and closed off the soulless corpse from the sight of everyone forever.

The funeral procession started from the front of the house with the truck carrying the casket. Following the truck were processioners dressed in their traditional ethnic costume colors: red, black, and white. Some carried items of the deceased. Some brought wreaths (a modern addition to the traditional mourning items). Some also brought shovels. The truck moved slowly, the crowd walked slowly, and soon they arrived at the gravesite.

The gravesite, the forbidden forest, which at this time had been cleared, had tall, old pine trees standing sparse and orderly, as if to protect this place. The young saplings were gone. The seedlings had been cut and dared not reemerge to take in carbon dioxide and give off oxygen. The trees, which were once indigenous to the area and interspersed with the overcrowding pines, were now increasingly devalued and removed.

Spirits. The sound of spirits begging filled both of my ears. But I was not certain, so I asked the person next to me whether they heard it.

“Don’t talk about it. It makes my hair stand on end,” he responded. I was not certain whether he heard the same thing as me.

“Do you see any corpses that have not been buried?” I asked the same man.

“Where? I don’t see anything.” The man glanced side to side, looking 360 degrees around him.

“There! So many of them. They have died and no one has buried them.” I pointed my hand at the trees that had been cut unnecessarily. The man just turned to me, made a face, and looked at me as if I were crazy.

I had not only heard the sound of the spirits but also saw a number of trees decaying. The place that was once the safest for the trees was at the site of these graves, because it was the place on which the trees had the right to stand dignified, taking on the sun and wind without worry. At one time, the trees had depended on these resources for sustenance. Sometimes the trees protected the spirits of the dead. Sometimes the spirits of the dead protected them. They relied upon each other.

But this time was different. Each could not care for the other as before. When the grave had been dug out and the water, sand, and cement mixture had been poured to make a slab to support the casket, any chance for the roots to spring up was sealed forever.

“This village cemetery should look well-maintained, not scary like before. We want it to appear open, spacious, the way the Chinese or Western cemeteries are. In the future, it could be a restful area. We want all who pass by to see the cross and know that this is a Christian cemetery. If the gravesite was buried in the dense forest as before, you wouldn’t even be able to see the cross.” An elder in the community presented his vision proudly.

Before lowering the casket into the hole, there was one more Christian observance, led by Pastor Simon, the director of a seminary in the Mae La refugee camp.

“Let all know that we are not speaking with or to the deceased. Rather, we are speaking of one still living, who has merely sacrificed body and flesh: *Phue Sa-ra* (the deceased) still has eternal life. Today he has gone ahead of us to the place God has prepared for him. It is a place with no suffering. We shall concentrate on following God’s commands, which Jesus taught to us through his example of his life. One day we will meet him again in the place to which he has gone ahead of us.” After this, Simon prayed, but his words made me think of the words of *tha plue*, the funeral song that points the way for the deceased to their next destination. It caused me to see the similarities between the belief systems, but this hasn’t really been investigated seriously.

The casket was lowered into the grave. The son, who was a preacher and inherited the title of pastor, picked up a handful of dirt and raised it for all the participants to see.

“Our life comes from the dust, and God breathes life into it. This is our life. Taking care of our body is not as important as taking care of life. Life goes on, even without a body. For when the body is made from dust and set to work, it fades back into dust. But life does not come from dust; it comes from the breath of God. If we take care of our life while on this earth, and follow the commands of God, our lives will return to the hands of God. As to our way of life on earth, if we do not behave according to the good teachings, we should worry that our lives will be destroyed and will ultimately face the same fate as our bodies. Let the dust be left to the dust.” He tossed the dirt onto the grave, stepped back, and his relatives also picked up handfuls of dirt, tossing them onto the casket. Finally, the other participants did the same.

Bits of wood were also tossed on, as were leaves and seeds. All wanted to go into the ground to perform their natural duties. They felt honored to be part of the ceremony. At last, the dirt had reached the rim of the grave.

“Okay, that’s enough.” Another of the sons asked us to stop adding dirt. After this, the team of cement workers started up their work, leveling the cement slab above the grave site.

“Don’t do that! We live in here! Don’t pour that over our heads!” I heard the complaint of the germinating seeds of various species of tree, but no one else paid attention. Everyone watched the cement capping off the dwelling of the seeds, not thinking of the tens or hundreds of lives they were sealing into that tomb.

New trees grow from the buds of fallen branches. When a tree dies, it leaves its seeds behind, and they sprout anew. When old men die, they leave descendants behind. But for these seeds here, this will not be the case.

“Why must you cover the plot with cement?” I could not bear it and let this question slip out, knowing it wouldn’t help anything and might irritate those pouring the slab.

“It’s easier to take care of and will last longer. It won’t wash away. And, it’s prettier,” they answered.

Easiness. Convenience. Introduced with the capitalist system when we required more land. Even the gravesite—which should be the place for the deceased—was not excepted.

I shared my opinions with my friends, with elders, with many, about the incident, especially the issue of the transformed gravesite. Some agreed that it should be handled according to *Pgaz K’Nyau* traditional custom, but they didn’t feel that the pouring of cement on the gravesite was that destructive of an activity.

“The world has changed. Everything else will change.” This is the sentence that sums up the modernist way of thinking, a.k.a. “ready-made-ism,” a.k.a. “convenient-ism.”

I walked out of the forest without turning back to look, according to *Pgaz K’Nyau* belief, which forbids looking back should one invite the departed soul to follow them out of the forest.

That evening, everyone came together to give their final mourning for this pioneer of the Muejekee church, but I still felt sorrowful over the other tragedy: the one that happened to the vegetation in the forest. And I also felt sorry about the death of another large traditional *Pgaz K’Nyau* gravesite.

I knew this wouldn’t be the end of it. Many *Pgaz K’Nyau* gravesites had disappeared already, and the *Pgaz K’Nyau* gravesites still existing awaited their sentences in the courts of modernism: they were next in line for the gallows!

Chapter 12: The World Has Changed

After the funeral, a feeling of reluctance to leave home returned, but coming home this time. I observed many changes—especially in the observance of funeral customs in the community, and also in the state of the gravesite area where the local vegetation had been cleared away and replaced with mostly foreign things.

In my heart, I could not hold back these emerging worries about my hometown. The river where I used to swim, the forest where we foraged, the rice fields where we once ran and played—how long could they survive the onrush of development and the evils of capitalism that intruded from the outside world? My biggest worry was in regard to the hearts of the *Pgaz K’Nyau* community

members of Muejekee: how much longer would they be able to remain steadfast in their *Pgaz K'Nyau* ways? And how would they grapple with these things that came to seduce them?

In the previous six or seven decades, original ethnic groups such as the *Pgaz K'Nyau* were stigmatized, looked down upon, dishonored, insulted, seen as undeveloped, inferior, wild, savage, and uncivilized. It had been like this for three or four generations. This caused many of these ethnic groups to now see no pride, no honor, no prestige in being one of their kind.

Presently, there are many *Pgaz K'Nyau* that see it like this: we *Pgaz K'Nyau* people need to elevate the state of their lives ourselves by modeling our ways on those who live in the city. They want advancement of language, to speak Thai as clearly as city folk for whom Thai is a mother tongue. And if they can speak an international language (English), they won't be looked down upon. Their own language gets tucked away.

They also want to modernize their dress to make it up-to-date and trendy, like that of city-dwellers, so that it won't be considered old-fashioned or outdated and cause others to look down upon those who wear such dress. As to the intricate designs of our woven clothes and our jewelry, they are folded up and tucked away.

They desire economic development in the community as well, so that they can accommodate the changes and exchanges that make daily life more convenient. They must have money to send their kids to school, to buy radios, TVs, refrigerators, CD players, motorcycles, and trucks. These things that make life convenient are the indicators of social progress that are acceptable to urbanites. Therefore, they must have these, and they need money to build nice looking bathrooms so that when the urban visitors come out here, they won't adjudge these mountain tribes dirty or unhealthy.

The means for obtaining money is altering the system of production in the community—from self-sustenance to market orientation, from sustainability and conservation to possession for sale, from biodiversity to massive mono-cropping. The traditional *Pgaz K'Nyau* system of production, which gave importance and respect to nature, has been tucked away.

They want good city planning. There should be ordered streets. The city must have a modernized landscape with imported decorative trees and plants. There must be green grass from Japan here, grass from Malaysia there. They want a variety of multi-colored flowers from far-off places to spruce up this place with some color, since foreign products are valued by city-dwellers. Meanwhile, our grass—*chumaepwi* (gold beard grass) and *nawkoesecha* (pigeon grass)—and our multi-colored flowers from the forest are tucked away.

Our agriculturally zoned lands are required to be converted to fruit orchards. If they were to leave the large original trees standing, they wouldn't be able to make a living. Many people in the community, therefore, quickly cut down all of the big trees so that they could plant fruit-bearing trees in their place, which are more convenient and in accordance with the criterion set forth by government land-use standards. As for the sacredness of the forest, it is put away, and the spirits in these forests and mountains will just have to understand.

And the children had to be educated in the Thai government system in order to raise their educational backgrounds to match those of their urban counterparts. They want the kids to have a chance to enter the workforce with increased knowledge and skills. They had to understand the outside world. They shouldn't be taken advantage of for lack of knowledge. They can become high ranking officers. Meanwhile, *Pgaz K'Nyau* knowledge and wisdom is tucked away.

They also had to update their belief system and change to an international religion that city people would respect and that the government could certify. This was done for the safety of the community. When the belief system was changed, it had an effect on tradition. Culture was something received from the outside more and more. The New Year changed to a new month, a new day. *Songkran* and *Loy Krathong* (Thai holidays) were now celebrated in the village, though villagers still didn't quite know the actual meaning of these holidays. Songs, *tha*, teachings, chants, and prayers all changed. Tools changed. Language changed. Customs, values, cultural and ancestral prohibitions were all forgotten.

Eventually, the more people strayed from their roots and the more relations with the outside increased, the more they forgot their culture and customs. The people of Muejekee at this time were living in a state of jubilant absorption as they moved drunkenly wherever the currents took them. If they finally get tired of this, will there be a place to rest? If they fail, will there be a place to take refuge? Though they are currently on this high, you can observe that nature is starting to wilt. Many streams are severely sick, the soil is starting to degrade, the forest has been worn out. The belief systems are in a critical state.

But, there are still things of which I'm proud: I could reintroduce *tha plue* back into a funeral, which is part of our foundation as a people, even if it was just a small part of the one ceremony.

Chapter 13: The Aftermath of Singing the *Tha* at the Funeral

I have been through many communities in Muejekee, all of which bear the evidence and traces—the excrement—of a capitalist system strewn throughout these hundreds-of-years-old communities. It is likely that natural resources, people, and culture are now being consumed by this system as a delicious food to an increasing degree.

When I have the chance to return to the area, as soon as I arrive at the first *Pgaz K'Nyau* village in the Muejekee area, I immediately feel like a bird returning to the nest, that I have filled a void when I am in the city. As I pass each village, I watch each passing car; I watch each person I meet to see if it is a friend of ours or not. Is it an uncle or an aunt? Was that a relative? A close neighbor? Someone I know? Whenever it is, we always immediately greet one another, and even if the interaction is just a few short sentences, it is enough to instill this feeling.

On the other hand, when it is time to leave and go back to the city, I sigh each time I pass through the last village of the Muejekee area. That one will be the first village on my return journey. My mood changes each time I pass that final village, as if I were walking onto a battlefield to rejoin the fight.

I sigh again, but this time because I feel secretly proud and very happy with the return of *tha plue* to the Christian *Pgaz K’Nyau* community, as its return was special—*tha* returned to the funeral of the Christian founder of Muejekee. This is quite a good omen.

“Once it has returned, it will come again,” I thought in my heart excitedly.

In the morning, many friends and family members who were unable to attend called me, asking about the atmosphere at the funeral of Muejekee’s religious founder. Thus, I became the reporter, discussing the incident as needed, never forgetting to include that the *tha plue* was performed for those in attendance. After my report, just about everyone would ask the same question:

“No one objected to you singing the *tha plue* at the funeral of the Christian founder of Muejekee?”

“No one. His descendants gave me the opportunity to sing and the community is starting to understand.” I always answered like this.

That evening I was reporting the events again to another person. “Wait a minute, I have someone on the other line. Let me answer it and then I’ll come back and tell you about it.” When they agreed, I clicked over to the incoming call, not knowing who it was.

“Do you know that when you sang the *tha plue* at my father’s funeral, my family was devastated?” I was confused and taken aback before gathering my thoughts to listen on.

“I arranged everything without missing a detail, except for your *tha* singing, which caused the funeral of my father, the religious founder, to be ruined, to be negatively criticized. I am his son and a religious leader, and I must be an example. I am not supposed to be one who allows this kind of improper act. This kind of thing is damaging to religious belief. If I knew you were going to sing the *tha plue* I would have forbidden you outright. Everything is ruined.” His voice was shaking, sobbing. I knew that he was crying as if a major disaster occurred in his life and I knew what caused it.

I was at a loss for words. I just told him, “You are a good example, you have done well. Everyone commended you, especially during the *tha plue*. They understand.” I tried to explain.

He was quiet, and did not answer. He did not hang up just yet.

“I know they did not like it. It was not appropriate...” he complained slowly.

“I am sorry that I did something inappropriate in the service.” The words of apology caused him to lower his tone and stop blaming me, and he finally hung up before I could tell him that it was his own older brother who invited me to sing *tha plue*. But that was probably good, because if I had told him that, it might have caused problems within his family. Everyone means well.

Two days later, I received news from home that *Phue Saunge* had been reprimanded for having a hand in the singing of *tha plue* in the funeral. I felt sorry for the elder who had been a songster

since his birth. He had never been reproached like this before. He is the most popular *tha* master, but at this funeral he met utter reprimand. He is the one who should be receiving my sincerest words of apology.

Seven years later, as I sat in front of my computer screen catching up on my social media feed, I saw a message from a friend, a grandson of *Phue Saunge*.

“May he rest in peace.” I didn’t need to speculate about what happened. I would let close friends at home pick up their phones to send their condolences to the family. Really, I would have liked to return to send him off one last time, but I was on a business trip abroad.

Some people asked for me at the funeral.

“He should come back for this since, when *Phue* was alive, he would regularly come to visit,” one person said.

“No, it’s good that he is not here. We don’t need him singing the funeral song again,” another said.

“He once invited *Phue* to sing at the funeral for *Phue Sarado*,” another added.

On the one hand, I felt bad. On the other, I was glad not to know what happened. I wasn’t discouraged. But I had my questions.

Before, my father’s generation could not play the *tehnaku* in the church, but now my generation can.

Funeral songs are not allowed in my generation. Will they be in the next generation? I see no opportunity for them now, owing not only to actions of the religious leaders who forbid them, but also to the behavior of congregations who show no indication that they will accept them.

And the next question: from here, where is the place for *Pgaz K’Nyau* funeral songs? The viewpoints, the mainstream belief systems, cannot change. This we understand. How can they also allow a space for the maintenance of *Pgaz K’Nyau* funeral songs? Or do we have to give them up altogether, so that they go extinct in the tides of change of the modern era before we can research, analyze them, make their value understood, find their meanings, or explore their benefits deeply?

What tools and procedures will we choose in deciding what to discard and what to retain? Who should determine these? By what criteria? With what methods: reasoning, principles, and understanding, or with emotions, feelings, and perception?

I wonder whether the concept of “cultural dialogue” of Paulo Freire in the book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*²⁰ can be used as a tool for self-reconsideration, for full communal participation of *Pgaz K’Nyau* communities in determining their future for the purpose of breaking free from cultural oppression.

Chapter 14: Forbidden Songs in the Final Days of an Author from the Field

Every time I walk past the village of Maehaetai of Panghinfon sub-district, Mae Jaem district, Chiang Mai, there is never a time that I bypass the little grocery stand by the side of the road manned by an old man with betel-reddened lips. The shop had the rudimentary necessities for mountain life: dried goods, snacks, and basic medicine.

But this tiny little store, though small, has more than this. It has stories to make you laugh, to make you smile, to make you ponder, and it has plenty of *tha*.

“Don’t forget, now. Once you’ve got the album completed, send me a copy. If you don’t send it, you will be struck by lightning!” This was the departing sentence the old man spoke as I prepared to leave. It was a short sentence, but I was bound to it by the conditions of our agreement, which I didn’t really have to follow as long as I didn’t mind being struck by lightning! If that didn’t scare me, I must be crazy. If I was struck by lightning, I’d be dead.

It was January of 2009. Members of the community forest conservation group and I took my latest CD *Tehna and Friends* to the old man in the shop on the top of the mountain. I had brought him my album *Mountain Forest Birds* many years ago for many reasons, including a fear of being struck by lightning. This time (2009) I could not speak with the elder very much. His conversation with us consisted of nodding or shaking his head. He made no sound, did not open his mouth or eyes; he just nodded and we understood his condition.

The next time I was in town and stopped at that store it was different. I did not take a CD to give him. I didn’t go to hear his stories. I went as a pilgrimage to pay my final respects to him before he would become one again with the earth.

It was true. *Phue Phawlepa* had passed away after prolonged bouts with various diseases. As he had been gradually declining and was in his last stages, his supporters already had a chance to come to terms with his dying. Finally, the fight for life ended as expected, though *Phue Phawlepa* fought bravely, winning the hearts of his supporters, especially his friends who were thinkers, authors, seekers, and readers.

While *Phue Phawlepa* had finally completed his mission on this earth, *Haw Kho Khloe* (the Place of Tears), many of his comrades were occupied by their own duties for mankind. Some were absorbed in work, some encumbered by school, some bound up in teaching, some stuck with kids, some with their wives, some too buried in debt, and others bogged down by many other obligations. Thus, very few actually made it down to pay their respects to *Phue Phawlepa* and celebrate his liberation from the “Place of Tears.” But the simple and quiet atmosphere at the *Pgaz K’Nyau* ritual was heartwarming.

As for me, I was busy with my work. It caused me to arrive one night later than Professor Lee-sa Chuchuenjitsakul and Non (Suwichanon Ratanaphimol). While travelling, I reflected upon the many feelings I felt towards *Phue Phawlepa*. The thing I was most anticipating was that, since this was the funeral of an important master of *Pgaz K’Nyau tha*, there must be a *mo cho* singing, so we would definitely get to hear the *tha phue*, the *Pgaz K’Nyau* funeral song.

“There must be a *mo cho* coming to participate. Tonight, I will get to hear the *tha plue* in its entirety. If there is, it is our chance to learn it from the *tha* master.” Just the thought of this made me excited, my hair standing on end. I wanted it to arrive soon.

The old shop at this moment had transformed into a gathering place for relatives from the village and beyond. The body of *Phue Phawlepa* was still in the same place it had been the last time I had come to visit, when he was gravely ill.

Last time he was sleeping on a mat and breathing, but now he lay tightly and serenely in the coffin. His old headscarf was wrapped around the coffin.

I went over and touched the hand of an old woman, *Phue Phawlepa*’s wife.

“You are here, how many have come with you?” *Phawlemo* greeted me quietly, and I understood the feeling of the situation.

“Go pay your respects to *Phue* so he knows that you have arrived.” *Phawlemo* sent me to *Phue Phawlepa*. I felt odd at the side of the coffin where candles had been placed as a sign of respect. On another side of the coffin there were many incense sticks placed by mourners, even though *Phue Phawlepa* was Christian and a missionary. According to Christian custom, using incense to pay respect to the deceased was not customary, but there were many here, so I was confident, seeing this as an open space for culture. This evening, the singing of the *tha plue* would surely not meet opposition.

When I paid my respects to *Phue Phawlepa*, his relatives invited me to eat and gather my strength. Wealth is an illusion. Food is real. I followed the hosts happily.

When I got up and followed the host to go eat, I glanced over at an elder, thinking that he looked familiar, even though this was the first time I had seen him. He also looked at me as if he knew me well.

“*Phodo* (nephew), will there be *tha* singing tonight?” he asked me, as if he knew my heart’s desire, but his face did not seem confident.

“Oh! There must be!” I responded, certain that he must be a *mo cho*.

While eating dinner in the reception area, I overheard the conversation of people inside, but whether they meant for me to hear or not I cannot say.

“I told you! No one will be allowed to sing *tha, tha plue*, or anything!” came the sound of a man in the house.

“I think so, too. He was about to sing. If our older sister hadn’t fainted, he would have sung it,” a woman responded.

“Just now he was going to sing and she fainted again. I complained to him two or three times and now it stopped,” another woman said.

I tried to sit and eat as if nothing was happening, but my feelings were confused. The intentions and hopes with which I had come were utterly destroyed. They can light incense to show respect but not sing the *tha plue*?²¹ What is going on? One thing I knew was that at this funeral, *tha plue* was strictly forbidden. Such a pity that a funeral for a *tha* master would have no *tha*, and specifically not *tha plue*, which was especially for the deceased.

I felt that the taste of this dinner changed over the course of the meal. If I had insisted we have *tha* and ended up creating more conflict, it would not have been worth it. There would be other chances to build understanding, other opportunities to open a space for traditional cultural practice.

The house attached to the store belonged to the youngest daughter of *Phue Phawlepa*, and right above its entrance was written, “Music to my father, Phawlepa.” Darkness had enveloped the mountain top, but silence could not overcome the things happening in the village. At about 8:30 pm, Professor Lee-sa and his wife appeared along with Non under the sign at the entrance to the daughter’s house. The “Music to my father, Phawlepa” would begin.

It started with the song,

Phawlepa, elder of Mae Hae,
writing about life, writing about the land with his blood and flesh;
Phawlepa, elder of Mae Hae,
writing about life, writing about the land with his soul.

This was followed by the next piece, “We are *Pgaz K’Nyau*.”

The song “We are *Pgaz K’Nyau*,” I conceived from a book called “*Pgaz K’Nyau*: I am a Person,” written by Phawlepa. “Phawlepa was a pioneering *Pgaz K’Nyau* man in the country of Thailand who travelled to tell the story of the *Pgaz K’Nyau*. When he first travelled into cities to tell our story, he sometimes got lost, sometimes walking straight into the glass windows of large buildings. But he told stories with his life,” Professor Lee-sa explained after the song.

“I am a man from another village. The first time I met Phawlepa, I asked to be counted as his relative, because I saw him as a walking encyclopedia travelling from Mae Hae Khi, going out to the whole country. Children of the newer generations learn of what he has done. Outsiders know him—authors, philosophers, readers, and students from bachelors to doctoral levels know of the wisdom of the *Pgaz K’Nyau*,” Non explained after the song “Forest Animals” had ended.

The area in front of the house is a road in the village now temporarily closed off to create space for the audience. Children of the new generation packed in and listened to “Music to Phawlepa.” Elders, men and women, sat and looked up at the stage as if witnessing a miracle. Lee-sa and Non played on.

Song after song was played, was sung, was explained, was passed on. Each grew out of ideals not very different from Phawlepa's own. After more than half an hour had passed Lee-sa and Non offered the stage to me and I was confused, not knowing what song I was supposed to play. The thing I had prepared while coming here I could not play and could not even speak about. It was a touchy issue for this occasion once again.

I whispered with Non and Lee-sa, asking them to stay with me on stage, for I still hadn't thought of anything. For my first song, I asked them to sing "Phawlepa" with me again. This was the first time I had a chance to play with these two pioneering musicians, these two tellers of the *Pgaz K'Nyau* story. I felt so good that I forgot about the issue of forbidden songs.

The road in front of the house had many young people sitting and listening. It was a good opportunity to exchange ideas for improving highland culture. So what if we couldn't sing *tha plue*? At least we have a place to communicate with the upcoming generation of our people.

"Announcement: children who are attending the camp should go to bed now because tomorrow you'll have to get up early for the activities. You should go to bed now," the camp organizer announced. I knew then why so many kids were here: an ethics camp was being run in the community.

Lee-sa excused himself from the stage because tomorrow he would be involved in the activities of the youth camp, but Non still stood next to me on stage until the audience, too, started to leave. The stage was emptied for the night.

I came back to the place arranged for me to sleep, but tiredness had not yet met us. The hearth still had coals, offering enough warmth and light for a bit of conversation amidst the silence under the light of the stars.

"I think holding this camp for the kids during a real funeral provides a good opportunity for kids in this community. The kids should know about funerals too, because these are the ways of our people. The children can soak up this experience of community. No one should prevent them from doing so." A friend who joined the conversation was expressing his view.

"Right, I want the kids to know what kind of person *Phati* (Phawlepa) was. What he did for us. What he said to us. And what others, meaning outsiders, think of the work of Phawlepa. I want the kids to be proud of being *Pgaz K'Nyau* and inspired to work for the community's future. It was too bad they were so quickly sent to bed," another in the conversation added.

On the final evening in Phawlepa's store—which had now become a welcoming center—Phawlepa's youngest daughter and her husband sang a song addressing him.

"Thank you, father, for your work, for raising us. You constantly imparted your knowledge to us. We can't not thank you. To not speak of you brings unhappiness. We pray that God in heaven welcomes you now." It was a *Pgaz K'Nyau* song written by the daughter.

After this, Non and I had to perform.

“Non, I want to sing the song ‘Phawlepa’ many times tonight so that it gets stuck in everyone’s heads. It should resound throughout the mountains on Phawlepa’s last night,” I told him.

“Good. Let’s do it. How about three times through?” Non asked me.

“No, we should do it at least nine times,” I responded.

“What? You really want them to remember it, eh? Ha ha. How interesting.” Non responded while plucking the guitar strings. The sound of the song “Phawlepa” began for the first time that final night. Non and I traded songs back and forth, and sometimes we sang one of Lee-sa’s songs, since he was busy at the youth gathering and could not join in on the final night of the funeral.

The song for Phawlepa began the second time through and then we played three or four other songs, then played “Phawlepa” a third time, a fourth...until the ninth pass. After this we got off the stage.

In the morning, the funeral procession brought the corpse of Phawlepa to the spiritual space, the place for the departed spirits, the place where they return the body to nature. As the coffin was aimed toward the grave, the “Phawlepa” poetry was recited amongst the crowd.

“Since I was very young, I walked with my friends. My mother wove my shirt and I was happy. I put it on and walked ahead of others. At that time, I felt my face full with a smile and excitement. I did not know whether convenience and comfort would bring happiness or suffering to the people of the mountain.” A man in a black shirt incanted the poem of Phawlepa. The people gathered to pay their respects got quiet as they listened to the poem as if they had never heard it before.

When the poem ended, the *tehnaku* song began.

*The dove sings at the porch of the house;
If the wind doesn’t blow, the leaves do not move.
It once appeared, it once happened. The elders thus tell us.
Little bird, your mother is waiting at the nest; if you fly back home,
Don’t go on the path to Dulawra (hell), come back on the path to Dutoewaw (heaven).
We have frog wraps and fish salad, there is pomelo and orange for you.*

I intentionally inserted lyrics from *tha plue* in the song, but I changed the melody and I didn’t sing the line with “Yo” in it. Strange! No one seemed to care about the lyrical content. All were quiet, watching my fingers pluck the *tehnaku* and listening peacefully to a melody they had never heard, and no one felt that it was the same as *tha plue*, the funeral song. It had escaped from its forbidden status. Even if they tried to forbid it now, it could not be stopped. It had been sung.

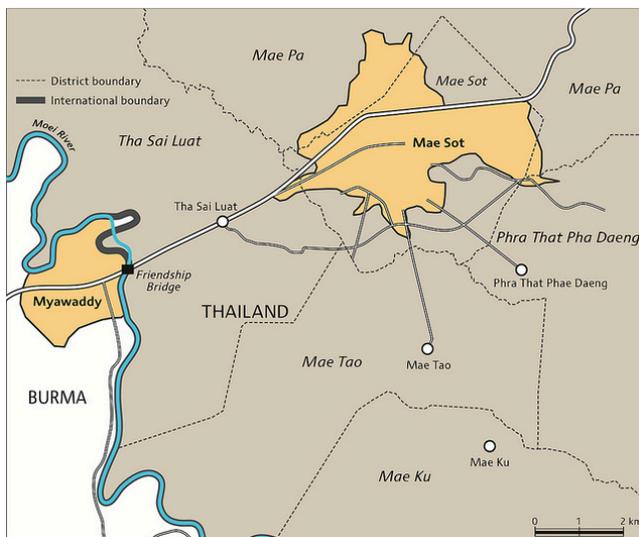
“You did it after all, nephew.” The same elder that we met before eating that night came up to greet me after the song in the graveyard. The smile on his face showed his clear satisfaction. I smiled rather than replying, knowing that if the conversation continued, the forbidden song I just

sang would be exposed. That would not be good. He had to know what I was thinking. He smiled in response and patted me softly on the back.

When the Christian service had ended, the coffin of Phawlepa was lowered into the ground. Immediately, the grave opened its arms to receive the body devoid of spirit, as dust to dust, returning to the soil. The sound of all the trees in the forest cried out, “*Ta te do haw kho*” (the earth has been filled).

Chapter 15: Forbidden songs in War

War along the border of Thailand and Burma, marked by the Moei River, had broken out again. The Burmese government denied having any part in it, declaring it an internal dispute among *Pgaz K’Nyau* factions, between the Karen National Union (KNU) and the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA).²² The result of this fighting was that *Pgaz K’Nyau* communities caught in the midst of the battle had to flee. Many villagers weaved through gunfire and landmines. While fleeing to safety, they escaped death with speed and silence, stifling even the sounds of crying.



Normally, the *Pgaz K’Nyau* people love music, but when fleeing from death in this kind of situation, they suppress songs and music in favor of preserving their lives. As *Pgaz K’Nyau* in Burma have been working to liberate their nation for over 61 years now, scores of songs have also been lost on the battlefield.

I had the chance to speak with a *Pgaz K’Nyau* friend who fled from the fighting along the Burmese side of the border about songs in these *Pgaz K’Nyau* communities caught in the middle of the fighting.

“There are some forbidden songs that the military dictatorship of Burma doesn’t want us to sing,” he told me.

“Really? Why is this?” I was curious.

“They were revolutionary songs that would call the *Pgaz K’Nyau* to action, to uplift them in the war of liberation from the Burmese military dictatorship, to encourage them to fight for their nation, their land, and to cast off the shackles of unjust Burmese rule,” he explained.

“So they weren’t allowed to sing them at all?” I asked.

“Before, we could. If we were in our own area, we could sing them outright. We would shout them and they could echo over four or five mountain passes. But we could not sing them in any area where there were Burmese soldiers. And now, in our areas, we can’t sing them, since Burmese soldiers are all around. Maybe in our villages we can sing them, but you have to check yourself first to see if anyone is around. Or you can just sing quietly [laughs].”

The Burmese military dictatorship sees these revolutionary songs as a tool to call the ethnic groups to action and to join the fight for independence. Many performers of these types of songs have thus been imprisoned or killed. Or they are fleeing from accusations of singing revolutionary songs to help instill ethnic resistance.

The most famous and most wanted revolutionary *Pgaz K’Nyau* singer-songwriter for three or four decades can be none other than Cha Ke Do Thi. He once had to escape from Yangon to Thai soil. For this reason, he later decided to take up arms on the frontline as part of the organized resistance. Now he has fled to his third country—America. But his songs still have enough power, so much so that the Burmese government is still afraid of them and doesn’t want them sung or heard in *Pgaz K’Nyau* communities.

In a village deep in the forest in the northern part of the Karen state of Burma, in a rice paddy beginning to turn yellow, the fragrant scent of seeds attracts flocks of birds swooping in for a taste. The farmers have to shoo them away. If they did not, there wouldn’t be a single grain of rice left. Like birds attracted to the emerging fragrance of rice, the Burmese troops return to the fields almost every year. Sometimes, if they come a little late, the villagers can harvest their rice.

Some years they’d come early, seize the fields, and set up a temporary military base. Eventually, they started staying longer, confiscating the land.

Once there was a naïve boy who did not yet know north from south, west from east. He didn’t know of the moon cycles or the passage of time. He only knew about playing in the water and catching fish along the banks of the river just outside the village. Nearly every morning and evening people in the community heard him singing songs as he came and went.

One evening, his songs noisily drifted down to the end of the village as usual. He carried his bamboo fish trap and he intended to set it five river bends downstream, since it was well known that this was an area teeming with fish. The first four bends closest to the village had seen traps for a long time and the schools of fish had figured out an escape route to evade the familiar sight. But the fifth curve was a little further from the village. The boy was ready to try his luck there.

He walked down to the end of the village while singing the song “Don’t Let the Tears Fall” by Cha Ke Do Thi.

*Mother, don’t let your tears flow,
I am now 16 years old.
Every nation has a draft to make men into soldiers;
Your son has a responsibility to join the revolution.
Father gave his life and you raised me as an orphan.
Food, clothing, and shelter we lacked; Mother endured poverty.
Now the time has come for your eldest son to do this duty;
Mother, do not let your heart melt into sadness.*

*Oh Mother, the land of the Pgaz K’Nyau
Must be paid for with blood, body, and life.
Mother, Oh beloved Mother
To die in battle is better than a life of slavery.
Do not be discouraged by this fate, please carry on;
It won’t be long before we get our land, Kaw-su-le,²³ back.*

*My younger siblings, do not let your tears flow,
Father’s parting words asked that I take his place fighting for our liberation.
The oppression and persecution are not worth remembering;
We must preserve our ideology in order to be liberated.
Advise the children, care for your Mother,
Plant the fields, pound the rice, gather the firewood, draw the water, cook the rice.
To scrape together a living is better than to become slaves;
Don’t think of taking advantage of others for your own benefit.*

Song: “Malaw Noemaethi toeke”

Album: *O Phlae Loe Kaw Su Le*

Artist: Cha Ke Do Thi

Little by little, the sound of the song faded as it moved through the community. Finally, it was quiet. That evening, there was no sound heard returning with the young boy who had gone out to lay fish traps. His parents could not sleep all night, but they did not dare go out in the night looking for him, as it was well known that this was the season of Burmese military presence. When soldiers meet villagers, they capture and interrogate them for information about the KNU. If the villagers don’t talk, they will be harmed or conscripted as porters, or even put to work as human shields to explode landmines or absorb bullets.

In the wee hours of the morning, the father got up and saw nothing in the place where the fish trap was normally kept. There was no fishy odor, no song being hummed. News of the boy’s situation began to spread from one person to another. People in the community all had their different assumptions. Some thought he was sleeping by the traps to keep an eye on them. Some thought he must have met a friend from a nearby village and gone home with them. No one dared presume something bad that they didn’t want to have happened. Eventually, the sun had

risen into the sky, and the leaders of the village agreed to follow the trail down to the fifth river bend where the boy had intended to set the trap.

When the search party had passed the fourth river bend from the village, they saw one of his shoes by the path. They all started to feel terrible. In less than ten steps, they saw a trap not yet set up, but the trap was in a ruined state as if it had been snatched up. Everyone now came to terms with reality. They kept walking, approaching the fifth river bend from the village. They saw the boy's shirt hung over a branch. Now everyone was certain that there was no other possible explanation.

“Those Burmese soldiers. Aside from being known for burning our villages, murdering, and raping our women, they also have no qualms against sexually assaulting a young boy? Most of the time the victims of sexual assault, whether male or female, don't survive, because they put up a fight, and they all meet the same end,” explained a man.

“Three days later, the *Pgaz K'Nyau* military intelligence network received news from Burmese Military intelligence that there was a murder of a young *Pgaz K'Nyau* boy, killed for singing a revolutionary song by Cha Ke Do Thi, which is a song forbidden by the Burmese military dictatorship. After that, no in in the village would sing the music of Cha Ke Do Thi ever again. After the revolutionary songs were no longer sung, it was as if the revolution itself lost power,” the same man told me.

Do these songs have such power? Though I have my doubts, we must leave it there for now. Time will tell, and we will wait and see—and believe. We must give it time and let it run its course, but we must not deprive ourselves of our beliefs. The *Pgaz K'Nyau* in Burma have endured, awaiting change in their land. Belief must be paired with action. 61 years of freedom fighting is a testament that unilateral action by a single group might not be enough to change the situation for the better. It is necessary to have assistance from allies who are dedicated to neutrality and fairness. The *Pgaz K'Nyau* in Burma are keeping an interested eye on the meetings among ASEAN countries, including the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting with ASEAN Dialogue Partners and the ASEAN meeting on Political-Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific region, which will take place from July 17-23, 2009, in Phuket. Will this bring any measure of change to a region cursed with war and suffering for more than 60 years? Or will it be just another typical act of the power play of ASEAN?²⁴

Chapter 16: Forbidden Songs (The End)

The atmosphere at the third Indigenous People's Conference in Thailand was down-to-earth and intimate, fittingly following the theme and topic, “Managing Community Resources in High Elevation Areas Under Community Deed.” Elders from ethnic groups across the north were present.

One part of the meeting included a seminar entitled “Reducing Emission from Deforestation and Forest Degradation” about the impact of the carbon-credit-selling policy. Ethnic groups living

traditional lifestyles in high elevation areas were seen as a new problem and were themselves forced to find new ways of dealing with things happening in their lands.

At the back of the room, a *Pgaz K'Nyau* elder sat and listened while grinding his teeth, indicating that he was deep in thought about ways of solving the problem for his descendants.

“*Phodokhwa* (grandson), come here.” He gestured for me to come near.

“I want to say this. In my time, we fought for this for 10 or 20 years and we achieved something. If the next generation does not carry our environmental work forward, it was all for nothing. The horse can travel far with his strong hooves, and people must move their communities onward through their descendants. This is what the elders taught us. At this meeting, you must see through what they are up to in the discussion. If you don't, there will be nothing left of our community.

“I don't know how much longer I have. Will I have any energy left? The old generation must be replaced by the next. Don't be the broken link in this continuing fight. We must protect the forest, defend the community, care for our ethnic group, and steward the culture. There have been many that have fought, but they are no longer with us—Phawlepa and many others.” *Phati* Johnni Odochao, *Pgaz K'Nyau* philosopher and chair of the organizing committee of the Indigenous People's Conference, spoke of the late Phawlepa. When he asked about Phawlepa's funeral, I told him about the issue with the forbidden songs.

“*Phati*, what do you think about the young *Pgaz K'Nyau* people not knowing the *tha plue* or other *Pgaz K'Nyau* songs for the deceased?” I wanted to know his viewpoint, as he is an individual who had gained recognition from within and without the *Pgaz K'Nyau* community as a scholar of local knowledge.²⁵

“We are headed for disaster if the *Pgaz K'Nyau* people do not know *tha plue* or other songs for the deceased. It might cause us to lose a sense of ourselves, or our origins, or the true meaning of life, or the causes of suffering, or the origin of death. We would have a life on earth that just floats by, not truly rooted in our own humanity.” *Phati* shared his opinion about *Pgaz K'Nyau* funeral songs in this way.

“Funeral songs were forbidden for two reasons. The first was love and concern. People didn't want their loved ones to be negatively affected should they participate in any way.

“The second was fear and a lack of understanding. There were many things to fear: they feared others getting hurt and thus forbade them for the sake of others; they feared being hurt themselves, too, and thus forbade them for their own sake. As to the lack of understanding, this is the bigger problem spiraling out of control. When the thing forbidden is a thing the forbidders do not truly understand, it could close the door on an opportunity to discover valuable and important knowledge. Important is the intention behind the act of prohibition: is it for your own good or for others'?” Christian Pastor Chatri Daenphongphi, who oversees a church in Ban Nong Jet Nuay, lectured about these two: fear and ignorance.

While our people's traditional music was passed down from generation to generation, these attitudes transforming certain songs to forbidden status are passed down in the same way. Now, many *Pgaz K'Nyau* communities dare not sing these forbidden songs. Following traditional cultural practice is considered destructive.

The era of *political* colonialism has ended: countries once under colonial rule announced their independence and ability to self-govern, military dictatorships were removed from many countries, and martial law has been lifted. But the *tha plue*, the *Pgaz K'Nyau* funeral songs, are still forbidden amongst Christian *Pgaz K'Nyau* communities today.

And so I return to the song "Punu." Sometimes I still don't understand how, in a real funeral, I was not allowed to sing funeral songs paying respect to the deceased. Yet in a non-funeral setting, I was not prevented from doing so. How are these funeral songs actually understood? The things that are forbidden—do the forbidders really understand them well? How do these songs hurt our society?

When songs composed from my people's wisdom are forbidden to be sung, how can they continue?

"The community that has songs, but has no one to sing them; that has musical instruments but no one to play them; that has a language but no one speaks it; that has a community but no one residing there; that has a culture but none to pass it on—how can we call this a community?" I think of the words of one elder:

Who is the one who determines destiny and takes away people's lives?

Who is the one who determines destiny and takes people away from their homeland?

Who is the one who determines destiny and takes us away from the trees to which we are tied?²⁶

Who is the one who determines destiny and takes our lives away from our roots?

Who is the one who determines destiny and takes the deceased away from the songs that point the way after death?

Who is the one who determines destiny and takes the songs for the deceased away from pointing the path for the living?

Who is the one who determines destiny and points the dead back to the way of the living?

Who is the one who determines destiny and points the living towards the way of the dead?

Who is the one who determines destiny and points the living away from the way of the dead?

Who is the one who determines destiny and points the dead back to death?

Who is the one who determines destiny?

The songs born of the place of tears.

About the Author: Suwichan Phattanaphraiwan (Chi)

Born to a *Pgaz K’Nyau* family in Muejekee, or Khun Nam Jaem (Thai name), on June 28, 1980, my *Pgaz K’Nyau* name is “Chi,” meaning “small one,” since I was the youngest of four children. My father is Sadae, or Phana. My mother is Senephaw, who carried me in her womb for 10 months. I began learning music with my father, and learned writing with a Sunday school teacher at church.

Education

Before school, I lived with my mother and grandmother in the village, and did not go to kindergarten. I started grade 1 at Ban Jaemluang school in Jaemluang sub-district, Kanlayaniwatana district, Chiang Mai province. I repeated 1st grade and studied through 9th grade at Sahamitwittaya School in Ban Jan sub-district of the same district. Through a quota system, I was able to study to be an electrical power engineer at Chiang Mai Technical College, though in my village at that time we did not even have electricity and did not know what an electrical outlet or switch was, but a professor told me I should go so the next generation would not miss out on modern development. This was the reason that I was the first person in my class to short out the grid. But I was able to endure through graduation and get my vocational diploma, making me realize that, with anything not meant for us, if we push through anyway, it won’t be good and we won’t be happy. I therefore ended that path and turned to community development at Ratchaphat University, Chiang Mai, obtaining my Bachelor’s degree. After this, I carried out research about my indigenous people’s cultural ways while playing music on tour in the mountains, cities, and other countries in order to educate the public about the sustainable and symbiotic forestry methods of the *Pgaz K’Nyau* people. I decided to continue my studies in the department of non-formal education at Chiang Mai University, graduating with an MA and writing a thesis on *Pgaz K’Nyau* ethnic identity maintenance amidst the changes in natural resources, economy, and social relations. In 2011, I had the opportunity to travel to study in an Intercultural Education program at the Pestalozzi Children Foundation of Switzerland for almost a year.

Discography

2003. *Mountain Forest Birds*
2006. *Seeds of the Mountains*
2009. *Tehna and Friends*
2014. *Ta-ti Ta-taw*

Books

Breath on the Hillside: A collaboration with five other authors
I am Tehnaku: A collection of stories of the *Pgaz K’Nyau* harp and playing methods

Traveling for Tehnaku Performance

I have traveled to tell the *Pgaz K’Nyau* story through songs and with the *tehnaku*, the traditional *Pgaz K’Nyau* musical instrument, in Thailand and beyond, including Japan, Burma, Singapore, *Pgaz K’Nyau* state, Vietnam, Indonesia, India, America, Sweden, Italy, and Switzerland.

Work

Nowadays, I am a professor in the Geo-Cultural Management Program at Bodhivijjalaya College of Sinakhorintwirot University in Tak province, and am also volunteer activist for the Karen Network for Culture and Environment. I work in art, culture, quality of life enhancement, community activities, and research with the title of Vice President of the Foundation for Culture and Environment, Southeast Asian chapter (FCESA at www.fcesa.org).

Notes

¹ See Deborah Wong, *Sounding the Center: History and Aesthetics in Thai Buddhist Performance*, (University of Chicago Press: 2001). My modifications include: “j” instead of “c” or “ch” for a, “aw” rather than “au” or “o” for a; and, following the Royal Thai General System, I do not distinguish between long and short vowels nor do I account for tones with the use of diacritical markings. Those interested in the Thai script can consult the original publication.

² (Translator’s note): See chapter three for elaboration on this idea, which is a reference to the world of the living.

³ Though many in the English-speaking world may be more familiar with the term “Karen” (or Sgaw, as distinguished from the Pwo, Karen), I use the self-referential term at the request of the author. *Pgaz K’Nyau* literally means “people” and it is what “the Karen” call themselves.

⁴ A non-profit and independent news organization in Thailand that typically covers more controversial events and discussions, self-described as “an independent, non-profit, daily web newspaper established in June 2004 to provide reliable and relevant news and information to the Thai public during an era of serious curbs on the freedom and independence of Thai news media” (<http://prachatai.com/english/aboutus>).

⁵ *Pgaz K’Nyau* names referring to the god of the underworld and the angel of death.

⁶ A ritual practice to emphasize that we can take nothing with us when we die. The most beautiful garments of the deceased must stay behind.

⁷ The English translation here does not capture fully the investment/return relationship. The tangerine is more common than the pomelo, and the two types of honey are equally tiered (regular honey bees versus “Min” bees, which are rarer).

⁸ The original text uses the Thai notion of the spirit leaving the body and needing to be called back in times of distress, surprise, or sadness. Karen traditional belief also has a similar notion of the spirit leaving the body during sleep or when jolted. See Harry Marshall, *The Karen People of Burma: A Study of Anthropology and Ethnology*. (Ohio: University of Columbus, 1980), 218-222.

⁹ Marshall points out that the story of the white python abducting and eventually killing *Naw Mue E* is the primary lore accounting for the festive and happy atmosphere of funerals. The snake purportedly got so much pleasure out of killing humans and developed a taste for it that humans responded by trying to trick the snake, turning funerals into celebratory occasions to show the snake that he no longer had power over their lives. The python fell for the ruse and got so mad that he discharged all his venom and lost his power to kill (1922: 193-94).

¹⁰ This area, when described in Christian publications, is typically Romanized as “Musikee,” also as “Musechi” in Loo Shwe, *The Karen People of Thailand and Christianity* (Yangon: Karen Baptist Church, 2006). I use this spelling at Chi’s request.

¹¹ For more on this NGO’s history and the concessions won by their 99-day protest, see Chris Baker, “Thailand’s Assembly of the Poor: Background, Drama, Reaction,” *South East Asia Research* 8, no. 1 (March 2000): 5-29.

¹² *Isaan* is the general term for the northeastern region (on the border between Thailand and Laos).

¹³ License & attribution: Hdam (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Topography_of_northern_Thailand.png) Topography of northern Thailand, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/legalcode>.

¹⁴ *Yodia* is the Burmese term for the historic Thai Kingdom of Ayutthaya (1351-1767).

¹⁵ There are a few versions of this on YouTube, including https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XIAMcaftk_k. In line with some of the issues Chi observes with the inclusion of a forbidden song, keen observers of the other versions will notice that the final chorus of the *tha Yota* is completely cut out of the video. Its place outside of a funeral setting is considered by some to be inappropriate for broadcasting.

¹⁶ malaria

¹⁷ (Thai editor’s note): John Denver (1943-1997), a famous American Singer-songwriter, excelled in composing. He toured widely and was known worldwide. Some of his best-known songs among Thais include “Take me Home Country Road,” “Leaving on a Jet Plane,” “Sunshine on my Shoulder,” and “Annie’s Song.” (Translator’s note):

These are regularly performed in Chiang Mai's restaurants. For example, see Jane Ferguson, "Another Country is the Past: Western Cowboys, Lanna Nostalgia, and Bluegrass Aesthetics as Performed by Professional Musicians in Northern Thailand," *American Ethnologist* 37, no. 2 (May 2010): 227-240.

¹⁸ *Pgaz K'Nyau* homes were traditionally raised up on stilts off the ground. Thus, one had to ascend a staircase/ladder to get up to the home, which would have no chairs inside.

¹⁹ White-breasted Waterhen (*Amaurornis phoenicurus*)

²⁰ Friere's work (1968) emphasized an approach to education that engaged students in the process of liberation from structures of oppression through understanding and eventually transforming them. Knowledge was meant to generate action, to be informed by real issues faced in the immediate community and a de-colonial worldview. Students are thus not dehumanized bank accounts to be filled with abstract, disconnected knowledge, but are rather educationally active in the process of conscientization, evaluation, and critical engagement with oppressive systems. Chi is currently developing curriculum in the Geo-Cultural Management Program at Bodhivijjalaya College to link up local communities and explore integrated knowledge production through a Karen Ecomuseum project.

²¹ Here, there was a space for both Christian and Thai Buddhist funeral customs. It would seem that this would have been an open and multi-cultural space, yet the only cultural customs prohibited were those of *Pgaz K'Nyau* tradition (*tha*).

²² The KNLA (Karen National Liberation Army), whose leadership has been predominantly Christian, has been fighting for an independent Karen state, Kawthoolei (land of the flowers, with varied spellings, including Kawsule) in Burma since the 1949. The Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) broke away in 1994 and negotiated their own ceasefire agreement with the Burmese military in exchange for financial and military assistance but have since reunited to a degree. See Ardeh Maung Thawngmung,, *The Karen Revolution in Burma: Diverse Voices, Uncertain Ends* (Washington, D.C.: East West Center, 2008). Map image shows Moei River and international boundary near Mae Sot (site of Chi's university)

(https://farm5.staticflickr.com/4094/4830494217_4e7cceb3d2_b.jpg).

²³ Sometimes spelled Kawthoolei, denoting the Karen State in Burma. An independent Karen state has been the aim of an ongoing battle for independence since the late 1940s.

²⁴ Reports on the outcomes of these meetings echoed this sense of skepticism. Thai appraisals as "positive" outcomes furthering a "constructive engagement" policy with Burma were criticized for allowing Burmese leaders to continue destructive policies (see Wai Moe, "Senior Thai Official Says Junta Reaction 'Positive,'" *The Irrawaddy*, July 21, 2009, accessed April 20, 2016). A ceasefire was ceremoniously signed between the Karen National Union and Myanmar government officials in January of 2012, but it has not necessarily eased tensions, facilitated the repatriation of displaced refugees, or been honored, by many accounts and recent events (e.g., "Karen Call on Myanmar to Honour Ceasefire Agreement," *The Nation*, April 25, 2018 or Ben Dunant, "Myanmar's Karen Cease-Fire in Jeopardy," *Voice of America*, March 16, 2018).

²⁵ For example, see John McKinnon's take on Odochao's work in "Community Culture: Strengthening Persistence to Empower Resistance" in *Living at the Edge of Thai Society: The Karen in the Highlands of Northern Thailand*, ed. Claudio O. Delang (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003); alternatively, Odochao is interviewed about education and culture in J. Odochao, D. Nakashima, and C. Vaddhanaphuti, "An Education Rooted in Two Worlds: The Karen of Northern Thailand," *International Social Science Journal* 58, no. 187 (March 2006): 117-120.

²⁶ When a *Pgaz K'Nyau* child is born, the placenta will be placed inside of a bamboo joint which is then tied to a tree. This tree is paired with the child for life and cannot be cut down.