

# *Don Mula* (Original Dance) and the “Sacred Sound” of Buddhism:

*Performing Collective Identity Among the  
Pwo Karen in Thung Yai, Thailand*

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## **Abstract**

The *Don Mula* (Original Dance) represents an important part of the collective consciousness and identity of the Pwo Karen people in the Laiwo sub-district, Thung Yai Naresuan Wildlife Sanctuary in Western Thailand. Due to modernization and changes that have occurred in Karen society at the turn of the millennium, many functions of the dance have been transformed. While the dance continues to be performed to pay respect to the Rice Goddess, it is employed to educate the younger generation about Buddhist knowledge and Karen beliefs as expressions of "Karen-ness." Through in-depth interviews and a study of the musical lyrics and dance, this article shows that the Karen identity in the *Don Mula* dance has shifted from the sacred texts and sound of Buddhism in the songs for the older generation to a performance and the dance movements for the younger generation.

**Keywords:** *Don Mula Dance, Pwo Karen Identity, Cultural Transmission, Sacred Sound of Buddhism, Collective Consciousness, Thailand*

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## Introduction

The Pwo Karen, who refer to themselves as *Plow* (meaning ‘people’), is a Tibeto-Burman group of the Sino-Tibetan language family living as a minority ethnic group in Western Thailand. The Pwo Karen inhabit the forested areas along the Thai-Myanmar border where they are distributed in a number of Thai provinces including Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Lamphun, Tak, Uthaitani, Rathchaburi and Kanchanaburi (Suriya Ratanakul, & Somsong Burutpat, 1995:4). This article focuses on the *Don*<sup>1</sup> dance (also known as *Thoeliton*<sup>2</sup> in the Karen language), a distinctive traditional dance of the Pwo Karen of Laiwo sub-district in Thung Yai Naresuan Wildlife Sanctuary (TYNWS) in Kanchanaburi Province, Western Thailand. The *Don* dance and lyrics have been absorbed into the religious beliefs and have become part of the traditional ceremonies and expressions of the Pwo Karen. Further, the Buddhist stories that are found in the lyrics of the songs that accompany the *Don Mula* dance portray the Karen worldview. In this way, the *Don* dance plays an important function, as a vehicle for identity construction of the Karen (Smith, 2018).

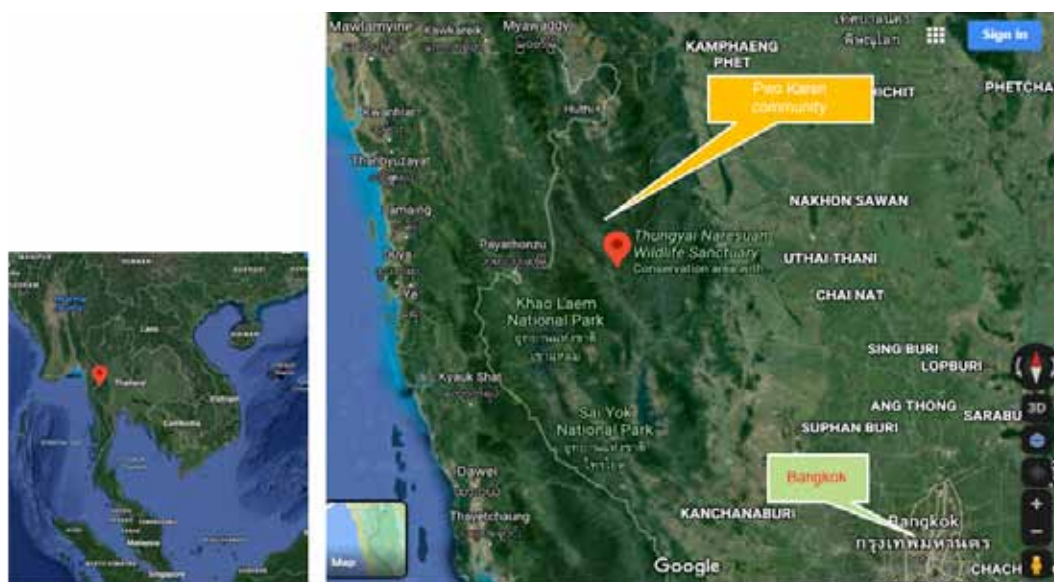


Figure 1. A map of the Pwo Karen community in Thung Yai Naresuan Wildlife Sanctuary. Source: <https://www.google.com/maps/place/Thungyai+Naresuan+Wildlife+Sanctuary/@15.408807,98.8154627,92125m/data=!3m1!1e3!4m5!3m4!1s0x30e6c3fa7e9a780b:0x76febcad4c39a70c!8m2!3d15.3333647!4d98.9164846>.

This article explores the meaning, history, characteristics and transmission of the Pwo Karen *Don Mula* dance. The *Don Mula* dance provides spaces where the Pwo Karen can perform their identity as well as educate the younger members about Buddhism and other religious beliefs. Regarding the three primary concerns are the following: What were the origins of the *Don Mula* dance and how was the dance connected to Buddhist and other religious beliefs in the past? What is the current state of the *Don Mula* dance? How does the *Don Mula* dance engender a conscious sense of Karen identity for the new generation?

This paper applies Benedict Anderson’s concept of “religious community” (2006: 21), to frame and understand how the process of building a “collective identity” occurs through the *Don Mula* dance. This involves exploring the Karen commu-

nity's processes of transmitting the *Don Mula* dance in relation to the construction of identity and a Buddhist community within the Thung Yai Naresuan Wildlife Sanctuary.

### **The *Don Mula* Dance Embraces Animist and Buddhist Beliefs**

The term *Don* is an onomatopoeic term that the Karen use to imitate the sounds made by beating the instruments such as the *Waleko* (a percussion instrument made of wood) that accompanies the dancer and controls their movements. *Mula* is derived from the Pali language word *Mun-La* meaning "root" or "original." Together, *Don Mula* refers to the original dance of the community. The *Don Mula* dance reflects the blending of two religious belief systems: animism and Buddhism. In the case of animism, the dance has been and still is performed to show respect to the Rice Goddess (*Pi Bue Yo* in Karen language) during the annual Rice Threshing (*Poe Bue*) ceremony held in December.

It is believed that Buddhist stories were incorporated into the *Don Mula* song around the middle of the 19th century after Buddhism was introduced to the Pwo Karen community in Thung Yai by the Mon people who were close with the Pwo Karen (Stren, 1968). Although, the Karen of Thung Yai practiced animism then, they did not deny or resist the introduction of Buddhism and have adapted old and the new religious practices into a well harmonized local syncretic form of religion. After Buddhism was accepted by the Karen, song lyrics which included Buddhist stories were added to the performance as a main narrative source. This remains the current practice in the community.

A legend that has been recounted among the Karen in Thung Yai highlights the combination of these two belief systems. The legend is about a debate between Lord Buddha and the Rice Goddess who both claim to be important to humans. They each believe that humans (in this case, the Karen) cannot live without them. As the legend goes, when Lord Buddha ignored humans and did not give them teachings, the people became immoral and unhappy even though they had food. However, humans cannot survive without rice. When the Rice Goddess ignored humans, even for a moment, she was called back to protect the rice and help the people succeed in their rice farming. Both the Rice Goddess and Lord Buddha are equally important to the Pwo Karen people because rice is necessary for the body and Buddhism is important for the mind (Chumwaratayi & Sangcharatan, 2004). Although this folktale may not relate to the *Don Mula* directly, the appearance of the *Don Mula* dance for expressing respect to the Rice Goddess in the Rice Threshing ceremony and the appearance of Buddhist teachings in the song of the *Don Mula* dance, illustrate how the Karen have adapted to both animism and Buddhism.

The Karen remember that the *Don Mula* dance was such an important part of their daily lives that it was performed at Buddhist temples for important life-cycle occasions. For instance, in 1923, the dance was staged at Phra Si Suwannakhiri, the

Governor of the city of Sangklaburi Muang’s funeral ceremony at Wat Si Suwan (Buddhist temple), Wang Ga village, Shangklaburi. At that time, many Karen performed *Don Mula* dance for remembrance of *Phra Si Suwannakhiri* who was an important leader of the Karen at the Thailand-Myanmar borderland (Setaphan, personal communication, January 22, 2022).

### Present-Day Pwo Karen Don Mula Dance and Music

Typically, but not always, a performance consists of sixteen dancers; they arrange themselves in four rows with four dancers in each row. The movement of the body emphasizes the hand movements in various poses as well as rhythmic feet stomping. Before the performance commences, the troupe leader must pay respect to the spirit of the village (*Phu Phadu*) for protection against any mishaps. The dancers then pray to the sacred entities of higher faith in a ritual known as *Kala Chai To Song* (take the remembrance to sacred entities such as the *Devas*, *Brahma*, *Buddha*, *Dhamma*, and *Sanga*). In this ritual, all the dancers kneel in front of the musical band (*Cha-Pu Chap U*) and move their hands and bodies. After paying respect to the sacred entities three times, they begin the next section of the dance.

Musical accompaniment has historically been provided by the *Waleko* (a percussion instrument made of wood) and *Chaco* (a small drum). The dancers also sang while they moved. In present times, more musical instruments including *Patala* (iron xylophone), *Khanui* (oboe), and *Mong Wai* (frame gong), have been included in the dance, making up the band called *Cha-Phu Cha-U* (Bhrammaputra, 2009) (see Figure 2). There is no fixed number of musical instruments accompanying the dance; this depends on the availability of musicians in the villages. It is not uncommon to find only one melodic instrument accompanying the dance because of the lack of musicians. The melodic instruments such as the *Patala*, *Khanui*, and *Mong Wai* improvise and imitate the melody sung by the vocalists. When there is no singing, the band plays variations on the main melodic themes but remains within the orbit of the basic vocal melody.



Figure 2. Left, *Che-pu Che-au* Band accompanied *Don Mula* dance. Right, *Don Mula* dance of Kongmongta village (Kanchanapradit, 2015).



Figure 3. Melody of *Don Mula* dance (the first section of the dance).

As shown above, the melody of the *Don Mula* dance includes lines performed by the *Patala*, *Voice*, *Chaco* and *Waleko*. The introduction begins with the *Patala* (line 1), *Chaco* (line 3) and *Waleko* (line 4) on the strong beat. The voice enters with the word “Hey Hey.” This vocalization indicates to the musicians the beginning and the ending of each of the lyric sections and the length of the song. While the lyrics are sung, the *Patala* plays along with the singer with improvised melodies that imitate the sung melody. As we shall see in the analysis below, this vocal melody has been an important marker of Karen identity for the older generation.

### Buddhist and other Religious Elements in *Don Mula*

The *Don Mula* dance is regarded as a distinctive local traditional cultural practice and a symbol of Pwo Karen Thung Yai identity because of the presence of stories about Buddhism and Buddhist doctrine as well as of the Karen legends in the songs. As the *Don Mula* exponent Setaphan (personal communication, January 22, 2022) says, “there have been many Karen *Don* dance songs that contained Buddha’s stories, which were combined with stories about Karen ancestors since the early twentieth century.”

How is the *Don Mula* dance connected to Buddhism and other religious beliefs? Phu Jo Pong, a wisdom leader of the Karen in Kongmongta village (a village in Thung Yai) states that around 1944, he learned the *Don Mula* dance from a *Chera Don* (*Don* dance teacher) in the Karen village near the Si Suwan temple (Currently, this temple is submerged in an area called *Sam Prasop* of Sangklanburi). It is said that the Karen philosopher Phu Yong Do was a creator and teacher of the dance in that village. The song that accompanied the dance at that time comprised lyrics strongly related to the teaching of Buddhism in an ancient language (Phu Jo Pong,

personal communication, April 2009). This teaching continues to be transmitted orally and forms an important part of cultural memory among the Karen in Sangkhlaburi. Phu Jo Pong continues to remark that:

Originally, the song of the dance took about 20-30 minutes to complete and narrated the Lord Buddha’s life history, the doctrine of Buddhism, and the prophecy of the Lord Buddha. Because of the relationship between the song and the dance movements, students must learn and remember how to sing the song before they learn the dance.

The original song was composed using the Karen traditional poetry form called *thakhu li mung* (*thakhu* means song; *li* means 4; *mung* means lines). Each stanza consists of 4 lines with 6-7 words in each line. The song combines words in Pali and the ancient Pwo Karen language. The Karen people believe that the legendary Karen-Mon monk by the name of Phu De Ko translated the scriptures of the *Tripitaka* from Pali into Karen-Mon language before 1750 AD. This translation is an important source of philosophical knowledge to the villagers. The *Don Mula* song is believed to be linked to Phu De Ko’s translation because of the use of both Pali and the old Mon-Karen language, which the new generation cannot understand. The original song of the *Don Mula* dance uses a type of sacred language called *Lai Talaya*, the Pwo Karen script that has been lost and forgotten. Today, the elder Karen can remember and have preserved only ten stanzas of the original song. Figure 4 shows the first part of the *Don Mula* lyrics from the *Thakhu Li Mung* prosody. This is followed by eight stanzas of English translations intended to convey the meaning of the song (Figure 5).

Pwo Karen poetic form ( <i>Thakhu Li Mung</i> )	1 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 } 2 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 } 3 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 } 4 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 }
Pwo Karen script	သာမိဋ်အိဋ်အဂုဏ်ခဝ်သင် ဒေဝတာအိဋ်ပိဋ်ပုဗ္ဗင် စူးလ်ခိဋ်တိဋ်ထင်းထင်း သာဓု သာဓု မိဇါဂုဏ်လင်
Pronunciation	<i>Sa Meng Eng Kho Chai To <b>Song</b></i> <i>Te Wia Ta Eng Ploe Poe <b>Mong</b></i> <i>Chu Loe Chi Moe Poe Toei <b>Tong</b></i> <i>Sathu Sathu Moe Ba Woe <b>Long</b></i>
Translation	Deva being above, Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha May Deva and Brahma protect us The ten fingers raised to the head To say Satu! Satu! and prostate on the ground
The content summary	Pray to Devas and be respectful of Buddha, Dharma, and Sanga as well as Brahma who is a protector

Figure 4. The first stanza of the *Don Mula* song lyrics.

<i>Form</i>	<i>Content Meaning</i>
<b>First part:</b> <i>Karu Chai To Song</i>	1. Deva being above, Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha Deva being above and protective Brahma The ten fingers raised to the head To say <i>Satu! Satu!</i> and prostrate on the ground
<b>Second part:</b> <i>Narrative story</i>	2. I am about to tell the past The telling is about religion Having passed over two thousand and five hundred years It was foretold that the sinful people would win & rule over the virtuous  3. The world is covered with delusion and greed The world is full of the smoke of delusion  4. Hearing dogs' groaning They are chasing for treasures  5. In a fog of greed, they never have enough In a fog of greed, they never stop competing in the mundane world  6. Believing in material riches, And ignore the Dhamma of the Buddha.  7. When the time's up When death comes You cannot beg for your life with nice words You cannot take your treasures with you
<b>Third part:</b> <i>Reminding</i>	8. Buddhism calls <i>Vīdhi</i> (disease) and <i>Jarā</i> (aging) We must realize the reality of the body

Figure 5. English Translations of the *Don Mula* dance song of Kongmongta village troupe.

The structural analysis of the lyrical content of this *Don Mula* text provides a three-way division of the form. The first part, *Karu Chai To Song*, deals with the remembrance of and pays respect to the sacred entities of higher faith such as the Devas, Brahma, Buddha, Dhamma, and Sanga that must be performed before the dance commences. Following this, the narrative story refers to the order of the prophecies in the semi-Buddhist period when Buddhism began to decline due to defilements of greed, and delusions that took over people's minds because of lack the principle of morality. The third part is the message reminding everyone that birth and death are inevitable and everyone must face their mortality. When we die, nobody can take anything of value with us. It is only the precepts that are in our hearts that will always be with us. This section reminds everyone to purify their hearts and live by the Five Precepts according to the Buddha's teaching.

The texts from Phu De Ko's scriptures not only contained Buddhist stories, but also information about Karen wisdom, including information about Karen legends, ancestor teachings, rituals, Karen harp and the *Don Mula* dance. Historically, Karen wisdom was written on palm leaf in the form of old Mon-Karen script called *Lai*

*Talaya*. The original palm-leaf scriptures were damaged and lost but some were transcribed onto paper and kept as individual property by individuals with personal interests. For example, the palm-leaf scripture named *Salapot Nimit Samo Leo Roe* (Palm-leaf of One Thousand Visions) describes the Wrist Tying ceremony in which the human spirit was called when people became sick or were injured in an accident. Another unnamed palm-leaf scripture mentioned two types of Karen harps: the Pwo Karen harp, which is called *Na Deng* and the Sgaw Karen harp which is called *Tena*. This set of palm leaf scripture describes the song lyrics of the *Don Mula* Dance.

Nevertheless, the written script of the *Don Mula* song lyrics is no longer used today and transmission is carried out orally. The change has shifted the focus and authority of knowledge transmission from the Karen written language, which used to be the sacred text connected to Buddhist teachings, to human produced sounds such as chants and prayers in the Buddhist ceremonies. The inclusion of Buddhist stories in the song of the dance preserves the Buddhist knowledge. However, it is not the same form of chanting as found in Buddhist rituals, but rather a song lyric that is performed at various traditional events in the Karen community, which is central to both life and religious knowledge. For instance, during a funeral ceremony, old women of the village perform the *Don Mula* dance at the house of the deceased at night. The dance helps to transfer Buddhist knowledge to those who attend the funeral. The lyrics draw attention to the inevitable reality of death that everyone must confront and the truth of life that everyone will have to meet. In addition, the dance is meant to commemorate and honor deceased ancestral members of the community.

The *Don Mula* dance involves making vocal sounds that are “sacred” to the Karen people because they provide a path for accessing the truth of life. The sounds are “emanations of reality not randomly fabricated representations of it” (Anderson, 2006:14). The older generation villagers appreciate watching the *Don Mula* dance because the song provides the highest knowledge and is in essence “the truth.” This is consistent with Anderson’s conception that “ontological reality is apprehensible only through a single, privileged system of re-presentation: the truth language” (Anderson, 2006:14). In this case, for the Karen this truth language is in the song lyrics of the *Don Mula* dance of the Karen Thung Yai. We have tried to show that the performance of the Karen *Don Mula* dance is not just a performance for entertainment, but a ritual that emits “sacred sounds” that can take the Pwo Karen to meet the truth of life.

This is a process of making the “collective consciousness”, an insider’s perspective obtained through the “sacred sounds” within the *Don Mula* dance. It is a process through which the Karen identify themselves and self-consciously celebrate how they establish their “religious community” (Anderson, 2006:21). This shapes social relations, constructs a shared consciousness, and forms a sense of togetherness with a unified community.



### Women Elders Educate the Younger Generation about Karen Beliefs via *Don Mula*

To illuminate the current state of the *Don Mula*, I draw attention to the dance as an important educational tool for providing religious instruction to the younger Pwo Karen. In response to modernization and changes in Karen society, older female community members who are experts in *Don Mula* dance have assumed a new role in educating the younger generation about Karen and Buddhist beliefs using the *Don Mula* dance performance. Through the dance, young members of the community are being enculturated into Karen beliefs at various social occasions such as weddings, funerals as well as new Rice, Threshing, annual Buddhist and other ceremonies.

In the past, the *Don Mula* was a principal form of knowledge for the Karen people and was seen as important cultural information that must be learned. The dance was also an important center space for the community where people gather and communicate with other members of the village. The centrality of the dance to traditional life drew both young men and women to learn it. But this situation has gradually changed over the past three decades as the Karen people's values have shifted. Today, dance is considered a feminine activity and playing music a male activity. The majority of the current generation also do not study traditional Karen dances. These "cultural change processes" (Ilgı Toprak and Orhan Hacıhasanoğlu, 2022:19) influence the transformation of an insider's perspective. Kongnandee, a Karen leader of Sanepong village who runs summer dance workshops for the younger generation Karen, emphasizes that: "Nowadays, all dancers are women who have married and adult men no longer perform the dance but play the music" (personal communication, May 29, 2021). As a result, the *Don Mula* dance is often referred to as *Don Misa* or *Don Plow Misa* which means the dance of the old women.

The transformation of the *Don Mula* dance to involve only women performers has consequently increased the importance of women in the transmission of the dance. This situation encouraged the building of a new form of "collective consciousness" within the Karen people in the community in which women's duties were recast. As it is the older women who perform the *Don Mula* dance, it is appropriate for these women to take up the important role of educating the children. This is not surprising as women play leadership roles within the family and community in Karen society. They conduct the rite to worship the spirit of ancestors in their houses. According to Buergin's study, kinship among the Karen in Thung Yai "is based on matrilineal descent, by which children are born into their mother's group. Upon marriage, the husband becomes a member of his wife's group" (Buergin, 2002:9), which Hinton (1969:35) calls "the matrilineal guardian spirit." For this reason, the eldest woman of the family has been promoted to conduct the ritual as the leader of the family. From this lens, the *Don Mula* dance is a significant responsibility of the senior women Karen descendants of the community, (as it is they) who have the strength to transmit the culture of the Karen. For the Karen woman, the practice and preservation of the *Don* dance is a way of expressing continued observance of their ancestors' teachings and the traditional practices of worship to the "ancestor spirit" (Kunstadter, 1969a:31).



Figure 6. Top, Che-pu Che-au Band accompanying the *Don* dance. Bottom, *Don Mula* dance in the New Rice Ceremony of Kongmongta village (Kanchanapradit, 2016).

### Practicing and Learning *Don Mula* Dance Among the New Karen Generation

I now turn to the case of two young girls in the community who have experienced practicing and learning *Don Mula* dance in the village to deal with questions around how the dance creates and promotes a conscious sense of Karen identity for the new generation. Ji Po and Prio began participating in *Don Mula* dance and became members of the village dance troupe out of their interest and willingness to learn. This interest was encouraged and supported by their families. They enjoy the activities with their friends; participation allows them to gradually learn about interacting with other people and helps them absorb the surrounding soundscapes. This personal experience connects them emotionally, viscerally and bodily to village culture.

Ji Po, Phonchawee Setaphan, is a twenty-one-year-old girl from *Kongmongta* village. She is currently studying Public Health at Boromarajonani College of Nursing in the Thai town of Suphanburi under a scholarship from a government agency in Kanchanaburi. She began learning her first *Don Mula* dance at age eleven with her sister who was five, and about other children of the same age. They all learned the dance with Chera Thongkhai. Ji Po said that she had an interest in and wanted to learn the *Don Mula* dance during a summer break. So, she and her sister joined the village dance troupe that runs workshops for young participants in April every year. This project for teaching *Don* dance to youths in the village was funded by the Laiwo sub-district Administrative Organization. Participating children practice singing, dancing, and playing the *Waleko*, the principal instrument for playing the

beat accompanying the dance. She said that “everybody was happy and had fun because practice time was a chance to do new things with friends and on some days, we got to eat delicious food or snacks that Chera prepared for those who came to study.”



Figure 7. *Don Mula* dance Transmission Project, Kongmongta village (Kanchanapradit, 2011).

Ji Po recalled her first experience,

New children must first learn the rhythm of the *Waleko* instrument for understanding the beat. Everyone must practice singing the *Don* dance song for one or two rounds and then start learning the dance. When we start the class, Chera (teacher) will review the early dance practices first. When I can remember the steps, I will be allowed to continue learning the new movements until the end of the song.

The second young participant is Prialo, Phannika Sangkhakiadtikhun. She is twenty-two years old and was studying in the Department of Primary Education, Early Childhood Education, Faculty of Education at the Rajabhat University in Kanchanaburi. She is the daughter of Chera Kongjeng who is a music teacher of the *Cha-Phu Cha-U* band in *Kongmongta* village. She began studying music with her father, Chera Kongjeng when she was in elementary school. The instrument she chose was *Mong Wai* (Frame Gong). Additionally, she learned the traditional dance from her mother, Maausu, who is recognized by the village for her ability to perform the *Don* dance. Children in the village are taught the *Don Mula* routine by her mother.

Prialo said that when she was learning the dance for the first time with her mother, she had to learn the beats and rhythms of the song by practicing the *Waleko* (percussion instrument). It was only after she understood the beats and rhythms that her mother demonstrated the poses of the dance to her. She then followed

her mother’s movements. Prialo has been able to inherit the dance and music knowledge because of the opportunities to study seriously within her own family as both parents are capable performers. She remarked that “I started to feel that the music and dance of the Karen were important to me because the younger generation seemed to know less. I’m glad to learn and have pride in my parents.”

The two case studies illustrate the personal experiences of the younger generation of Karen who have the opportunity to learn *Don Mula* dance in Kongmongta village. Their memories of the *Don* dance involve learning new things as children, doing activities with friends, showing their talents, and being admired by others. But when asked about the lyrics to the song that they studied, both gave the same answer “I cannot remember all the lyrics, I know they are about Buddha’s teachings.” While they remember some parts of the lyrics and some sections of the song, they cannot understand the meaning as the words are hard to understand and the language is not used in everyday conversation. They cannot comprehend the long sections, such as those in the song of *Don Mula* dance which are associated with Buddhism. Despite this, they are happy that they have an opportunity to perform dances with others.

The two examples indicate that the inclusion of Buddhist knowledge in the *Don Mula* song may not be as important to today’s young people as it was to the older generation. Despite this potential loss of religious meaning, the experience of the *Don Mula* dance practice still functions to connect the community members to a greater consciousness of their “Karen-ness.” Even though the Buddhist messages in the lyrics were not interpreted doctrinally, the experience of learning the *Don* dance instilled in them a common sense of Karen identity. Ji Po told me, “Pwo Karen, it’s me, if you say the word Karen, I will think of *Plow (Pwo)*, it’s me” (Ji Po, personal communication, January 1, 2021) and *Plow (Pwo)* is us” (Prialo, personal communication, January 3, 2021). The consciousness of “Karen-ness” constructed through their personal experiences learning *Don Mula* dance as children is a powerful form of identity formation and affirmation; this has endowed the younger generation with a sense of their cultural (collective) and personal (individual) identities of which they are proud.

Like many Karen children, the two girls may leave the village to live in an urban society, where they will learn to apply new life skills and knowledge studied in Thai educational institutions; they may never return to the lifestyle of their parents, but they are proud of the *Don* dance and their “Karen-ness.” These cases reflect the worldview of the new generation of Karen within a recalibrated Karen society with different ideas and expression of their “Karen-ness.” In the past, Karen people accepted that knowledge of Buddhism and other traditional beliefs was important as it provided them with the truth of life and directly helped them to live happily. This understanding of the role of Buddhism and other Karen beliefs may be under threat because of modern secular ideals, forms of knowledge and ways of living that stand to displace them. Nevertheless, the Karen continue to create new ways of expressing their identities. As Bussakorn Binson (2022:216) writes, “the adaptation of the indigenous cultures takes place so that the cultures can survive the changes.”

### New Perceptions, Identity Formation and Transmission of the *Don Mula* Dance

Changes in the diverse life experiences of the different generations of Karen influence how the latter interpret and access the *Don Mula* dance. Those who have studied and practiced *Don* dance have different perspectives and relate to the dance differently compared to those who have not. Learning and practicing *Don* dance and singing is a means of accessing knowledge that requires physical learning which links learning in the body with the mind. Body learning involves the immediate subjective experience and perception of how the body's various parts move in specialised and unique ways.

In the Karen practitioner's view, learning to dance involves learning physical movements. Learners from outside the community might not be able to replicate the movements completely or express them as a Karen would "naturally." This is because the dance imbues an intuitive inner feeling of being Karen. An outsider who learns the dance and imitates the gestures cannot produce the movements like a Karen performer. On numerous occasions, the authors observed students from Bangkok who had come to the village to learn dance from the Karen culture bearers in the community. Although they were competent dancers who could dance well, their bodily movements were consistent with the characteristics of the Thai dance forms that they were familiar with and expressed what was seen as "Thai-ness." The distinct dance genres involve different styles of movements and a dance observer (with knowledge of the different practices associated with the different traditions) would be able to see which tradition the dancers come from.

As in the use of verbal language, dances of different cultures have important but subtle differences in physical expression and their respective nuances cannot be faithfully imitated in a short study period. The character of dance movements is a combination of the dancer's unique personalities and the cultural background. Although all members of the Karen community might not have the same opportunity to learn the *Don Mula* dance, those who do participate in a practice that is critical to both the construction and absorption of a collective Karen consciousness ("Karen-ness"). Dance is critical to Karen identity because children who perform *Don Mula* dance in the community learn to move their bodies in a style that they perceive to be both more natural and beautiful than other styles, but which is strongly connected to their ethnic identity.

At the same time, the markers of Karen identity in the *Don Mula* dance have shifted from the singing (referred to as the "sacred sound" of Buddhism) in the past to the dance performance today. The disparity between bodily and written knowledge is further widened in the *Don Mula* dance context, because not only does the language of body movements have no corresponding counterpart with the world of written language, but the new generation does not use the Karen written language and has no experience in its study. The locus of symbolic meaning has shifted from the sound of the vocalist singing the lyrics to the highly specialized and culturally rich body movements of the dancers. Neither the new generation Karen performers nor their audiences understand the language in the vocal songs of the *Don Mula* dance. So younger audience members focus on the dance movements of the performance.

A consequence of the social transformation processes thought to be modern is the steady decline of the “unselfconscious coherence” of the religious community of the Karen Thung Yai, which, according to Anderson (2006:16, 18) is “a gradual demotion of the sacred language itself.” Although Anderson’s “sacred language” is embedded in the written language used in text publications, the authors show that dance and music performances also have the power to emanate the “sacred sound” that has a profound influence on human feeling.

### Conclusion

The *Don Mula* dance is a core cultural practice and marks the identity of the Pwo Karen in Thung Yai. It plays a defining social role when performed in Buddhist, rice harvest and funeral ceremonies. A distinctive element in the *Don Mula* dance is its presentation of the Pwo Karen’s Buddhist and other religious beliefs within the narrative of the vocal music. This is a source of important philosophical knowledge to the villagers. The origins of the *Don Mula* dance which are related to Buddhism are tied to the sacred language of *Lai Talaya*, the Pwo Karen script that was invented to record and transmit the Buddhist knowledge on palm leaves during the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries.

The knowledge recorded on the palm leaf script is expanded to record other aspects of Karen wisdom and religious beliefs. The *Don Mula* lyrics were composed in a traditional Karen form of poetry and recorded in the ancient language comprising Mon-Karen and Pali words. The meaning of some of the words of the written lyrics are accessible to the old Karen, but many of the younger Karen do not understand this language or read its written form and thus cannot access this part of their cultural heritage. Structural changes to the transmission and reception of animist and Buddhist beliefs make the *Don Mula* dance an important cultural prism through which to observe changes in social meaning and ideology.

The dance was formerly performed to pay respect to the spirit of the Rice Goddess (*Pi Bue Yo*). When song lyrics were added, they contained Buddhist teachings, thus expanding the scope of meaning and function of the *Don Mula* dance to incorporate a pedagogical dimension that was crucial to the reception of Buddhism among the Pwo Karen community in Thung Yai. The teachings within the song texts have been embraced by the community who consider Buddhist knowledge to be “the truth” of life. This elevates the social practice of the *Don Mula* dance to a cultural performance made up of “sacred sounds.”

Although Karen society has changed in the past century, the *Don Mula* dance continues to represent the “collective consciousness” and “un-selfconscious coherence” of Karen identity. But changes to the structure of Karen society have altered the cultural meanings that have accrued over time. The new generation Karen sees the traditional practice of the *Don Mula* dance differently from their elders in terms of its social function and cultural meaning. The source of “un-selfconscious coherence” of “Karen-ness” has been relocated and transformed. Whereas previously it centred on belief in the Buddhist ideology, which was expressed in a lan-

guage not widely understood, "Karen-ness" is now embodied in the movements of the *Don* dance. The "sacred sounds" of the *Don Mula* performance still play an important role in affirming the Buddhist ideals and identity of the Karen community of Thung Yai, but these sounds are perceived and interpreted differently by the younger Karen. The younger community members who have experienced the *Don Mula* dance, may not realize "Karen-ness" through the song lyrics as their parents did, but they construct their "Karen-ness" through the unique physical movements required to perform the *Don* dance properly.

The *Don Mula* dance opens multiple spaces of identity formation that span many generations of Karen. While its Buddhist origins are recast as transient among the younger generation, these meanings are nonetheless deeply ingrained in their "collective consciousness" as they access its meanings through body movements.

### Endnotes

- 1 The word *Don* is a local abbreviation of *Thoeliton* which is a Pwo Karen term for traditional dance.
- 2 The word *Thoeliton* can be divided into two words; *Thoe li* means dance. It may have its roots in the Mon language term *Leh* which means dance (Mon-Thai Dictionary, 2005, p. 225). *Ton* is an onomatopoeic term derived from the sound made when the *Waleko* is played.

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## Interviews

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- Phu Jo Pong (leader of the Karen wisdom of Kongmongtha village), in discussion with the author, April 10, 2009.



Sangkhakiadtikhun, Phannika (member of the Don dance and music troupe of Kongmongta village), in discussion with the author, January 1, 2021.

Setaphan, Apichart (musician, leader of the Karen wisdom of Kongmongta village), in discussion with the author, January 22, 2022.

Setaphan, Phonchawee (member of the Don dance of Kongmongta village), in discussion with the author, January 1, 2021.