

Reach Back Reach Deep Reach Out:

A Case History of the Songs of Memory Project in the Community

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Abstract

The Songs of Memory project documents the traditional music and ceremonies of the highland peoples of Southeast Asia, with the aim of preserving this rapidly vanishing musical legacy, and educating and inspiring others with the beauty, integrity, and wisdom of the peoples who create it.

The field research and materials, gathered over many years, have been integrated, creating a variety of media: a series of educational films; photo exhibitions; presentations; the Songs of Memory book and compact disc; and a multi-media museum exhibition, which presents comprehensive collections of musical instruments, clothing, films, and photographs of the six major groups living in the Golden Triangle – the Hmong, Mien, Lahu, Akha, Lisu, and Karen.

To enhance the Songs of Memory exhibition, held at the Chiang Mai Arts and Cultural Center in 2010, a symposium, featuring conferences, demonstrations, curator walks, and concerts, was organized to further engage students, researchers, and the general public.

Keywords: *Tribal Music, Ceremonies, Preservation, Cultural Understanding, Multi-media Exhibition*

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*The question is not what you look at, but what you see”
Henry David Thoreau*

*One blacksmith alone cannot forge ten irons
One speaker himself cannot recite ten lines at the same time
Ten blacksmiths forging one iron
Ten Pima reciting together at one time
Working to keep the people’s culture never to be lost
Even if the Dragon dies, the footprint will never disappear
– An Akha Saying*

Introduction

The Songs of Memory project originally grew from a desire to preserve, through film, the ancestral music of the traditional highland peoples of Southeast Asia. By capturing age-old ceremonies that trace the arc of life, from birth to death, a documentary film would demonstrate the primal importance of vocal and instrumental music, as it shapes and supports those communities that continue to practice oral tradition, live close to the earth, and believe in animism.

As music plays such a vital role in marking the daily, seasonal, life, and generational cycles of a society, it is impossible to isolate it from other aspects of people’s lives. With this in mind, I resolved to expand my original undertaking, in order to place the soundscapes of these communities into a larger context. So what began in 2005 as a one-hour film transformed into the creation of distinct, independent media that, when woven together, form an interdisciplinary whole. In this way, it is hoped that the Songs of Memory archival project provides a deeper, truer, more meaningful experience than any single medium could offer.

Origins of the Songs of Memory Archival Project

During my many travels trekking to remote mountain enclaves in Myanmar, Laos, China, and Thailand, I invariably found myself the only visitor in the villages. This compelled me to document all that I witnessed, in as many forms as possible. So it came to pass that, after four non-stop years, I had amassed a wealth of film footage, images, recordings, journals, musical instruments, and textiles.

The years following this fieldwork were spent assimilating and integrating these materials. It was rewarding to watch a complementary range of media emerge – photo exhibitions; a series of educational films; illustrated presentations; and the Songs of Memory book and compact disc.

With time, the project culminated in the Songs of Memory museum exhibition, a multi-media display which presents comprehensive collections of musical instruments, clothing and jewelry, films, and photographs of the six major tribal groups living in the Golden Triangle – the Hmong, Mien, Lahu, Akha, Lisu, and Karen. Visitors to the exhibit are able to gaze upon sacred Hmong percussion instruments, while an educational film demonstrates their timbre and use, as a shaman, performing a healing ceremony in trance, travels to the spirit world. Guests can

contemplate the intricate, multicolored patterns that a young Karen woman has lovingly woven into her “singing shawl,” in order to catch the eye of a suitor; this is just one of the marvels found in the exhibit’s extensive textile collection. Large structural components – an Akha spirit gate with sacred totems and a soaring courtship swing – bring village life to the city. Numerous maps, text panels, descriptive labels, and photos further highlight each culture’s customs and identity.

It is hoped that those who attend the Songs of Memory exhibition, and the accompanying presentations, demonstrations, and concerts, not only feel the music and ceremonies come alive, but also tap into the integrity and sophistication of the peoples who live them. Truly, the Golden Triangle is one of the most culturally – and sonically – dynamic places on the planet.



Figure 1. Surrounded by traditional Mien musical instruments, visitors watch a Mien wedding ceremony.

Purpose and Significance

A critical role of the humanities is to illuminate and interpret the function that aesthetic experience plays in human development and, ultimately, in defining civilization. Among the arts, music is unquestionably the most powerful because of the unique nature of the aural experience. Here is an intangible, abstract medium that unfolds over time, and is able to transform human consciousness in multi-sensory ways. Music affects us physically, as vibrational frequencies alter our very cells, organs, and bones; intellectually, as musical patterns entrain perception, memory, and thought; and emotionally, as music’s expressive qualities nourish our inner world of awareness, imagination, and spirituality. Music expressly fulfills a critical function in all cultures by virtue of its ability to influence our bodies, minds, and hearts.

When the aural experience also serves as a means to transmit everything a people knows about its world to future generations, music's significance grows exponentially. For indigenous, pre-literate societies, the oral arts have functioned throughout the millennia as the primary channel for sustaining history, myths, customs, laws, knowledge, and beliefs, thereby linking the first ancestor with all who follow.

However, with the encroachment of advanced technology and global homogeny, how long these age-old traditions continue, or, indeed, are remembered, is questionable. The Songs of Memory archives has as its principal aim to help record and preserve the musical legacy of the highland peoples of Southeast Asia, before it disappears.

Secondly, informing and engaging viewers through a variety of portals – visual, auditory, and tactile – is meant to bear witness to the sheer creativity and skill, the majesty and triumph of the traditional peoples of Southeast Asia. The multiplicity of the world's cultures is what makes our human species so extraordinary. Lose any of these and we lose a part of our humanity.

Finally, this documentary project hopes to give voice to smaller cultures, which may be left marginalized in favor of mainstream standards. It must be acknowledged that these communities have developed knowledge and ingenuity, based on a life in nature and honed over centuries, which can contribute to the greater good of our world. An appreciation of our reliance on others, who share our planet, encourages in us a sense of responsibility to human dignity that transcends borders and prejudices.

Audience

By creating a comparative collection of artifacts and media, showcasing music, rituals, and traditions that are little known and minimally documented, if at all, it is hoped that the Songs of Memory archives can make a valuable contribution to scholarship. Specifically, the work is intended to be relevant to ethnomusicologists, anthropologists, and Southeast Asian scholars. Additionally, educators in such diverse fields as sociology, religion, folk arts and folklore, cultural geography, and ethnic studies may use the exhibition, book, recordings, and educational films to inform students, from grade school to the university level, about the diversity of humankind.

For descendants of the ethnic groups portrayed, whether they continue to live in their ancestral villages or have relocated, possibly to another country as immigrants or refugees, the materials will serve as a touchstone to their identity, a reminder of the physical, communal, and spiritual source of their forebears.

The project has been specifically designed around integrated disciplines, to enlighten a wide audience with varied interests. Visitors can enter into the world of these six ethnic groups aurally through the filmed rituals or visually through the instruments, clothing, and photographs. Taken together, the overall vitality and exoticism of the highland peoples and their customs will captivate world travelers and virtual explorers alike.



Figure 2. Karen S'gaw Women watch a documentary film on the Karen Harvest Ritual.

A Case in Point

After a successful launch at the renowned Jim Thompson Art Centre in Bangkok, in 2009, the Songs of Memory exhibition traveled a year later to the Chiang Mai Arts and Cultural Center, located in the heart of the Old City. Chiang Mai is the largest and a culturally significant city in northern Thailand, the gateway to the foothills of the Himalayas. These highlands have become home to a variety of ethnic groups, who, over millennia, have migrated in a southerly trajectory from their source in Siberia, Mongolia, and the Tibetan Plateau, through China. Hence, there could be no more fitting venue than the CMACC to host these collections of the Hmong, Mien, Lahu, Akha, Lisu, and Karen, the six major ethnic groups found in the region.

In an international museum setting, a collection of ancestral artifacts from faraway cultures is viewed, in all likelihood, with a universal eye, which contemplates the uniqueness of their traditions with an open mind. When, however, these are displayed in situ where the people themselves reside, history and a possible stigma enter into the equation. As smaller, so-called 'minority' populations, these indigenous peoples have come to their 'home country,' in some cases before the majority or, indeed, before national boundaries were created, for a variety of reasons – migrating for better land and opportunities, joining family members, or fleeing persecution from repressive situations in bordering countries. This may give rise to a sense of otherness or alienation, which is often compounded by a number of factors – living in isolated, seasonally inaccessible mountainous areas; having less access to educational, work, and medical opportunities; and, in many cases, being 'un-settled' in refugee camps, without identity papers.

The intent of the Songs of Memory exhibition, then, goes beyond preserving culture and captivating the imagination of visitors. Of equal importance is revealing the extraordinary sophistication, integrity, wisdom, and abilities that the Hmong, Mien, Lahu, Akha, Lisu, and Karen embody. Their culture is deep and rich, and they possess a wealth of knowledge that must not be overlooked. A major purpose in showcasing tribal culture is to build a connection for mutual understanding among all peoples.

With this in mind, the vision for the Songs of Memory exhibit at the CMACC was to establish a dynamic outreach program to engage, educate, and instill an appreciation for the highland groups in this region – as fellow neighbors, classmates, and citizens – and to serve as a platform for sharing knowledge and exchanging ideas. The Songs of Memory project remains grateful to the CMACC for hosting these events, and honored to have collaborated with the Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development (RCSD) at the Faculty of Social Science of Chiang Mai University, which helped sponsor and support the activities.

During its run from 12 February – 29 April 2010, the Songs of Memory exhibition was accompanied by the “Tribal Wisdom School: Sharing and Preserving Traditional Knowledge,” a symposium of the culture, history, and beliefs of the indigenous peoples, featuring conferences, demonstrations, curator walks, and concerts.



Figure 3. Meeju, an Akha Pawmee member of IMPECT, discusses the art of Akha garments in the seminar “From the Hands of the Hills: The Richness of Traditional Craftsmanship.”

The CMACC was humming for two and a half months, from the opening launch party in its lovely courtyard, where 160 guests were serenaded by Karen, Akha,

and Hmong musicians, to the final food fair, “Specialties from the Mountains,” held in the grand Three Kings Monument Square. Five conferences, free and open to students, researchers, and the general public, were presented by learned tribal members, academics from Chiang Mai and Payap Universities, leaders of cultural, social, and non-governmental organizations, and experts in a variety of fields. These seminars included: “Traditional Tribal Music;” “From the Hands of the Hills: The Richness of Traditional Craftsmanship;” “Living History of the Traditional Peoples;” and “May the Chain be Unbroken: What is the Future of Traditional Culture?” Hundreds of people, of all ages and many nationalities, were touched by the ideas shared by such respected presenters.



Figure 4. High school students attend the seminar “Living History of the Traditional Peoples.”

One weekend was devoted to artisan demonstrations, set in six traditional tribal huts constructed on the museum grounds, where tribal craftsmen and -women from each group demonstrated the masterful artistry of their forebears: Lisu weaving and needlecraft, Hmong batik printing, Akha embroidery and instrument-making, Mien embroidery and basket-weaving, and Karen and Lahu back-strap weaving.

As curator and exhibition designer, it was my pleasure to offer frequent curator walks for museum guests, including a special showing of my film, “Threads of Memory,” for the Chiang Mai Textile Society. Fourteen additional tours were given to school children, university students, and teachers from the following institutions: Chiang Daow, Ban Mae Angkang, and Prawe Wittayokom Schools, Rajapat Chiang Mai University, and Sacred Heart College. Perhaps most moving of all was a tour for a class of at-risk tribal girls, who had left their families to attend the New

Life Center Foundation boarding school. They expressed how the exhibit “helped them learn about their own culture.”



Figure 5 & 6. Artisan Demonstrations: left, a Mien woman displays fine embroidery skills and right, a Lisu woman demonstrates the art of weaving.



Figure 7. A curator walk given by the author for visitors to the Songs of Memory exhibition.

Without doubt, one of the highlights of the symposium was a public concert extravaganza, held on stage in the Three Kings Monument Square. Eighty skilled musicians, representing all six groups, sang, played instruments, and danced for hours into the night, sharing their extraordinary melodies and rhythms, and clothing and customs. Held during Chiang Mai's Sunday Market, a large, appreciative audience listened, entranced.



Figure 8. Akha Ulo musicians perform at the outdoor Songs of Memory concert at the Three King Monument Square in Chiang Mai.

The Songs of Memory collections, presented in context with the Tribal Wisdom School symposium and events, created a bridge, allowing visitors an opportunity to know and appreciate the ancestral cultures of the Golden Triangle area in Southeast Asia. But a bridge has two entryways, and it is believed that this experience also gave the traditional peoples themselves a means to be heard and understood and valued.

During one event, television, radio, and print journalists surrounded Aju Jupoh, an Akha colleague and musician, as he spoke about Akha culture during a live national broadcast. As he told me personally afterwards, "If I had come alone to this venue in Bangkok, I would not have been allowed to enter. I am so grateful to have had the chance to speak about my people."

On the Road

The Songs of Memory exhibition has had the great good fortune to continue its journey, traveling, in 2012, for a four-month run at its first international show at the University of Hawaii's East-West Center, well-known as an institution for mul-

ticultural dialogue. With an outreach blueprint in place, I brought with me a Karen and an Akha musician, to offer a variety of concerts, presentations, and curator walks to Hawaiian school children, university students and faculty, senior citizens, and the public.



Figure 9. Chi, a Karen S'gaw musician, performs his harp for an audience at the East-West Center in Honolulu, Hawaii.

It is hoped that, wherever the Songs of Memory collections and activities may be presented, they strike a chord in others, demonstrating the extraordinary ways our fellow man lives and creates, in all the varied splendor of humanity.

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