

REACH BACK, REACH DEEP, REACH OUT — A CASE HISTORY OF THE SONGS OF MEMORY PROJECT IN THE COMMUNITY

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*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.*
- 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 soundscape 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 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; presentations highlighted by extensive photographs and recordings; 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 that presents comprehensive collections of musical instruments, films, photographs, and clothing (for a family: father, mother, son, and daughter) of the six major ethnic groups living in the mountains of the Golden Triangle—the Hmong, Mien, Lahu, Akha, Lisu, and Karen. Visitors to the exhibit are able to gaze upon ritual Hmong percussion instruments, while an ethnographic film demonstrates their timbre and use, as a shaman travels to the spirit world while performing in trance a healing ceremony. Guests can study the intricate, multicolored patterns that a young Karen woman has mindfully woven into her “singing shawl,” which she wears to catch the eye, and the ear, of a suitor as she sings archaic love songs. This cloth 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 practice them. With over 130 groups and subgroups in the region, the Golden Triangle is truly one of the most culturally—and sonically—dynamic places on the planet.



FIGURE 1: Visitors watch a Mien wedding ceremony, surrounded by Mien musical instruments (*Songs of Memory* Exhibition; Chiang Mai Arts and Cultural Center; Chiang Mai, Thailand, 2010).



FIGURE 2: Traditional Garments of a Pwo Karen family. (*Songs of Memory* Exhibition; Chiang Mai Arts and Cultural Center; Chiang Mai, Thailand, 2010).

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. As an invisible, intangible, abstract medium that unfolds in a temporal continuum, melody and rhythm can transform human consciousness in multi-sensory ways. Music affects us physically, as vibrational frequencies alter our very cells, organs, and skeletal system; intellectually, as musical patterns entrain perception, memory, and thought; and emotionally, as music's expressive qualities

nourish our inner world of feelings, imagination, spirituality, and healing. Music expressly fulfills a critical function in all cultures by virtue of its ability to influence the body, mind, and heart.

When the aural experience also serves as a means to transmit everything a people knows about their 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 transforms or disappears.

Secondly, informing and engaging viewers through a variety of portals—visual, auditory, and tactile—is meant to bear witness to the ingenuity and skill, the sheer majesty and individuality 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 archival 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 innovation, 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 all a sense of responsibility to human dignity that transcends borders and prejudices.

Audience

By creating a comparative collection of artifacts and media, showcasing music, ceremonies, 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 that honors their identity, a reminder of the physical, communal, and spiritual source of their forebears.



FIGURE 3: S'gaw Karen Women watch a documentary on the Karen Harvest Ritual (*Songs of Memory* Exhibition; Chiang Mai Arts and Cultural Center; Chiang Mai, Thailand, 2010).

The project has been specifically designed around integrated disciplines, to inspire 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, textiles, artifacts, and photographs. It is hoped that, taken together, the overall vitality and singularity of the highland peoples with their unique musical heritage and culture will captivate world travelers and virtual explorers alike.

A CASE IN POINT

After a successful launch at the renowned Jim Thompson Art Centre in Bangkok, Thailand, in 2009, the *Songs of Memory: Traditional Music of the Golden Triangle* 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 most 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, migrated in a southerly trajectory along the great rivers of Asia from their source in northern China and the Tibetan Plateau. Hence, there could be no more fitting venue than the CMACC to host 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 their traditional 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 Chiang Mai Arts and Cultural Center 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 on the culture, history, and beliefs of the indigenous peoples, which featured conferences, demonstrations, curator walks, and concerts.

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 village 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 numerous nationalities, were touched by the ideas shared by such respected presenters.



FIGURE 4: Meeju, a Pawmee Akha member of IMPECT, discusses the art of Akha textiles “From the Hands of the Hills: The Richness of Traditional Craftsmanship” Seminar Tribal Wisdom School Symposium. (Chiang Mai Arts and Cultural Center; Chiang Mai, Thailand, 2010).



FIGURE 5: Highschool students attend the seminar “Living History of the Traditional Peoples” Tribal Wisdom School Symposium. (Chiang Mai Arts and Cultural Center; Chiang Mai, Thailand, 2010).

One weekend was devoted to artisan demonstrations, set in six traditional huts constructed on the museum grounds, where village 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.



FIGURE 6: A Hmong woman displays her batik skills / S’gaw Karen women teach a guest the art of weaving. Artisan Demonstrations Tribal Wisdom School Symposium. (Chiang Mai Arts and Cultural Center; Chiang Mai, Thailand, 2010).

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, Rajabhat Chiang Mai University, and Sacred Heart College. Perhaps most moving of all was a tour for a class of at-risk ethnic 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 7: Curator Walk given to visitors by Victoria Vorreiter (Songs of Memory Exhibition. Chiang Mai Arts and Cultural Center; Chiang Mai, Thailand, 2010).

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 ancestral music, and clothing and customs. Held during Chiang Mai’s Sunday Market, a large, appreciative audience listened, entranced.



FIGURES 8a and b: *Songs of Memory* public concert. An ensemble of Mien musicians and a Hmong qeej player. Three Kings Monument Square. (Chiang Mai Arts and Cultural Center; Chiang Mai, Thailand, 2010).

The *Songs of Memory* collections, presented in context with the Tribal Wisdom School symposium and events, created a bridge, allowing visitors an opportunity to learn and appreciate the age-old 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 musician, as he spoke about Akha culture during a live national broadcast. As he told me personally afterwards, “I would never have dared to come to the Jim Thompson Museum in Bangkok, for fear that 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

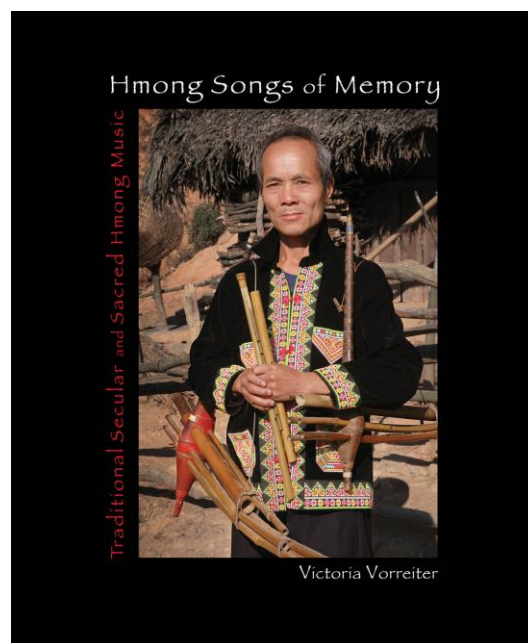
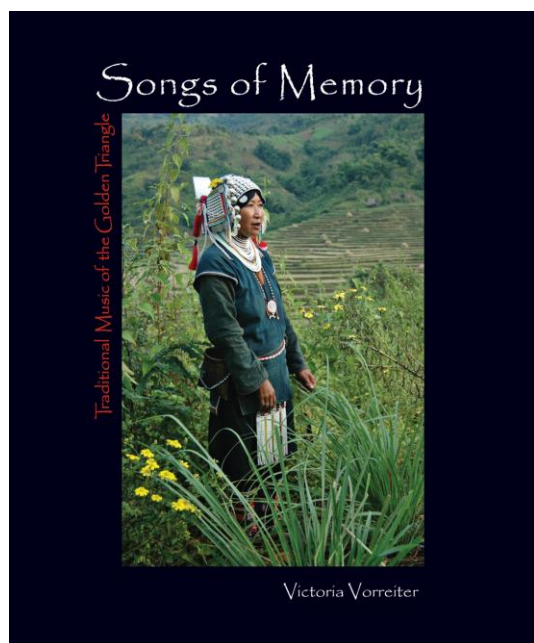
The *Songs of Memory* exhibition has had the good fortune to continue its journey, traveling, in 2012, for a four-month residency at its first international show at the University of Hawaii’s East-West Center, well-known as an institution for multicultural dialogue. With an outreach blueprint in place, I brought with me Karen and Akha musicians to offer a mix of concerts, presentations, and curator walks to Hawaiian school children, university students and faculty, senior citizens, and the public.



FIGURE 9: Chi, a S’gaw Karen musician, performs his harp, *te na ku*, for an audience (*Songs of Memory* Exhibition East-West Center – University of Hawaii, Honolulu, Hawaii, 2011).

In the intervening years, the *Songs of Memory* project has expanded in its research, documentation, and reach, giving rise to new media, displays, and engagement with community, all based on the soundscape and sacred and secular ceremonies of the peoples of the Golden Triangle. Nearly fifteen additional exhibitions have been featured at galleries and international conferences affiliated with IIAS, ICAS, Leiden University, Mandalay University, Chulalonghorn University, and Chiang Mai University. Multi-media presentations have been offered in Hong Kong, Thailand, and Laos. Numerous articles have appeared in cultural and academic journals. After six years in the making, the new *Hmong Songs of Memory: Traditional Secular and Sacred Hmong Music* project has emerged with an in-depth book, ethnographic film, presentation, and multi-media exhibition.

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



FIGURES 10a and b: *Songs of Memory* Book and CD and *Hmong Songs of Memory* Book and DVD.¹

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