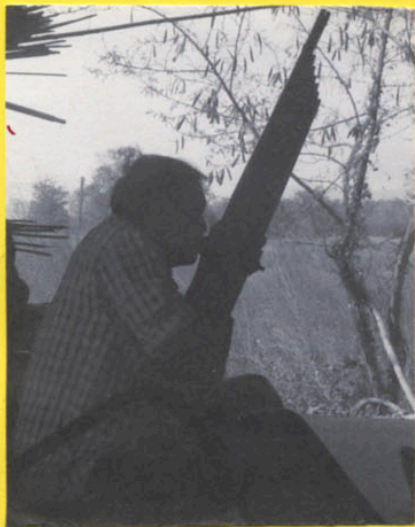


EXPLORATORY MUSIC SERVICE VOL. I
THE KHAEN AND OTHER SOUNDS
FROM ISAAN (EMSI)

The recordings on this cassette were made in Chaiphum province, Isaan, Thailand during January 2009. Side A was recorded in Banokhatong village and is performed by Mr. Yiboon, a rice farmer who has been playing the khaen for 40 years. Side B was recorded in Nanongtong village and features performances from two players. The first is Mr. Sootjai followed by Mr. Sood, a renowned khaen maker and master player. The recordings are of solo khaen.



Mr. Sootjai

History and Use

The area known as Isaan is one of 4 regions within Thailand, all with their distinct dialect and culture. Isaan is located in the Northeastern corner of the country. The largest industry is wet rice agriculture with rice fields in abundance throughout the region. The Lao speaking people are the dominant ethnic group and identify themselves as Khon Isaan.

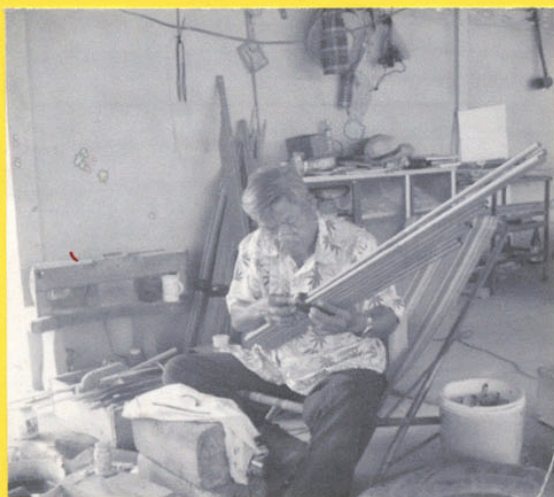
Northeastern musical culture is primarily represented by one instrument; the free reed khaen. The origin of the khaen is unclear with the earliest known image of a khaen located on the front wall of Wat Mai in Luang Prabang, Laos. The image dates from 1820 and depicts a traditional Siamese ensemble with a khaen player. In 1855, Sir John

Dowring, the 4th governor of Hong Kong, visited Thailand and commented upon the Second Kings use of the khaen in his journals. The Laotian origin of the khaen is told in the following story:

"It's said that long ago, there was a Lao widow who liked to imitate the birds song. One day, she followed the well known hunters of her village to a hunting expedition into the deep forest which took many weeks. She knew almost all the birds in her district by name and their singing. Among them, there was a species of sparrow called 'Nok Karavek' which had its own very distinctive song. To record this special sound, the widow made a wind instrument using the mouth to blow air into. She first used a rice plant stalk, then changed to using a small set of bamboo pipes joined together. As expert in sound imitations, she finally succeeded with this bamboo instrument which she could blow into and imitate the rare and unique song of the Nok Karavek. To make it known to other people, the widow offered the instrument to the governor of her district. It still had not been given a name. The governor asked her to play and was pleased by the extraordinary melodies which came from the instrument. It is very different from other instruments presented to him. And the governor said in Lao "Ghang khaen dair", meaning literally "this is much better". At the end of the audience the governor told the proud and ingenious widow to call the new instrument of music khaen or "Better".

The khaen's primary function is to accompany singers in various Mawlum troupes (including lum pun, lum plun, lum moo) with the khaen baet (8 pipes on either side) being most commonly used. Formally there is no forum for solo playing of the khaen since a traditional courting ritual has ceased. Previously, boys would

travel from village to village playing the khaen where young women would recognise the playing of their love interest. Upon arrival the playing would stop and a literary joust "panyah" of intricate metaphors would take place. Although a formal solo performance does not exist, during my time in Isaan, I witnessed a number of villagers playing the khaen alone for pleasure, and in small groups in the evening.



Mr. Sood

Making

The khaen is generally made by individual makers from start to finish, many of whom are also rice farmers. There are 4 basic materials - bamboo pipes, hardwood windchest, metal reeds and kisoot (a sticky substance used to seal the windchest). A special bamboo called 'mah hia' is used as it grows to a suitable length and diameter. Makers most often purchase this from tradesmen, but the maker I visited, Mr. Sood, had suitable bamboo growing on his rice farm so is self sufficient in his production of khaens. The bamboo is straightened by being heated and pressed against a master stick 'mai mu ling' and the nodes are removed. Pipes are cut to the appropriate length by eye and three slots are cut in each pipe; two pitch holes toward the top and bottom of the pipe and one towards the centre

which will hold the reed. The metal reeds are produced by cutting the tongues out of a strip of silver (often made from old coins) and these are filed until the correct pitch is reached. The pitch holes are cut by eye and tuned by ear by comparing to a master 'mother' pitch. The positioning of these holes is learnt by rote and experience. Mr. Sood simply cut the pipes to length, selected the appropriate pipe and rudimentarily cut the pitch holes with no measuring device. The reeds are then placed into the reed holes and further filed to reach the exact pitch relative to the mother pitch, in this case a basic harmonica. The pipes are then placed in the dao (windchest), divided by a fine piece of bamboo and sealed with kisoot to ensure they are airtight. At this stage all pipes will sound simultaneously as they are acoustic chambers. To fix this, the next stage is to burn the finger holes into the pipes, which is achieved with a burning hot poker. This results in the sound only being made when the hole is covered. Finally the maker ties the vine around the top and bottom of the pipes to hold them firmly in place.

Playing

The khaen is held in a prayer like position with the palm of each hand around the dao and is often held with the khaen leaning to one side. The khaen is played by breathing in and out with the dao pressed firmly against the lips. The holes are fingered by the thumbs for the first 2 pipes and with all remaining pipes played by the fingers. To mask the breathing in and out players use various tonguing techniques to give the impression of a continuous sound. There are 5 modes which are recognised by most players. These are sootsanean, bo sai, soi, yai and noi. Players repertoires include the 5 modes and any number of set pieces, many of which are standards.

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**Cassette edition of I4 and free download from thedoozer.com

**Recorded on Sony TC-D5-M cassette field recorder.