

The Map that Christmas Carols Made: A Case of Musical Appropriation and Application in a Karen Village¹

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Abstract

Described by Charles Keyes as the greatest success case of Christian conversion in Southeast Asia, the Karen people's experience with Protestant Christianity offers a unique case study on missionary work, indigenous appropriation, and the role of music in marking out the 'we-self' community from the 'other.' This article highlights Karen agency in history, religion, and music in directing a future-oriented, indigenized Christian faith and pairing ethnic destiny with Christian networking to preserve an indigenous people on specific, localized terms. Myths foretelling of the "white brother" with a "golden book," traditional *tha* poetry, and Western church music were and are reshaped by white Baptist missionaries and Karen theologians alike in a two-way negotiation. While scholars in the past wrote off Karen Christian musical expression as abandonment of tradition, I argue that both the

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act of appropriation and the results of domesticating Western religious music challenge essentialist conceptions of “foreign” and “authentic” in Karen culture. This article will examine general religious historical contexts before launching into an analysis of one specific Karen community in Thailand that enacts these ideas in musical practice, appropriating Christmas carols as a mediating technology and setting ethnic boundaries through aural mapping. In order to examine these trends, I condense historic and contemporary ethnographic narratives, apply Thongchai Winichakul’s theories on mapping as a mediating technology, and draw upon musical and ethnographic data from my own field research in Chiang Mai province.

Introduction

It was a full moon in December of 2008. The frigid mountain air was descending into the teak forests surrounding our house, condensing into thick fog that would make slick all surfaces when the village awoke the next morning. It was nearing midnight, and most of the neighborhood pigs, chickens, and Buddhists had drifted off to sleep. We were huddled under all the blankets in our possession. Rumors had passed through that an elderly Karen couple in Omkoi had died a few nights ago, unable to survive the night’s freezing temperatures. This year was unseasonably cold.

The crisp silence outside was suddenly interrupted by what sounded like a parade of marchers. A mob of footsteps was shuffling up the hill and into our front yard. Just as suddenly, they stopped. I wondered, *who would possibly be out right now at this time and in these temperatures?* I peered out the window to see rows of students in knit caps and scarves, puffs of breath rising from the cloths covering their mouths. At the end of the row, one had a guitar strapped to his body and was blowing into his hands to warm them. He sang an interval of a

perfect fourth (SOL-DO) and began strumming. I was still groggy, sleepy, and confused, but I instantly recognized the tune: Happy Birthday. *Why would they be singing Happy Birthday in the middle of the night in Karen?* Then I realized they were not singing in Karen. It was English: “*Merry Christmas to you.*” After finishing the song and a prayer, they left as quickly as they came, eager – just as I was, I assumed – to get back to their own warm beds.

In the small village of Thi Wa Klo in Chiang Mai province, local Karen church members make annual treks through their village, marking out religious insiders and outsiders through the performance of Christmas carols. By presenting these activities from an agentic perspective of Karen musical practice and as a forging of Karen ethnic identity, rather than as a degradation of tradition or Westernization, this article shows how Thongchai Winichakul’s ideas can apply to music as a map-making technology that plays an active role in shaping and perpetuating community, place, and ethnic identity.

Localized Karen Christian songs, such as the regularly-performed Christmas carol, “Merry Christmas to You” (sung to the tune of “Happy Birthday”), demand ethnomusicological investigation and analysis. This Karen adaptation of this song and other carols performed in Thi Wa Klo village implies both an adoption and a domestication of Christianity. This article seeks to analyze the question: “What is this music *doing* there?” In doing so, I address not just the Karen Christmas carols’ presence, but also their application.

Historic Setting

Described by Charles Keyes as the greatest success case of Christian conversion in Southeast Asia,³ the Karen people’s experience with Protestant Christianity offers a unique case study on missionary work, indigenous appropriation, and ethnogenesis. “The Karen” are a consolidated conglomeration of people groups numbering between 4-6 million in Burma and around 400,000 in Thailand,⁴ historically classified into “Pwo,” “Sgaw,” and “Red” (or “Karenni”) sub-groups

³ Keyes, *The Golden Peninsula*, 51.

⁴ Renard, “Karieng: History of Karen T’ai Relations”, 8.

according to language, dress, elevation, and even arbitrary mislabeling.⁵ For the purposes of this article, I use the gloss term “*the Karen*,” acknowledging its political baggage, implications, and acknowledged advantages.⁶ The Karen received increased attention in the West with the influx of American Baptist missionaries in 19th century Burma, which warrants a brief summary.

In 1813, a missionary from the American Baptist Foreign Mission Society, Dr. Adoniram Judson, began proselytizing in Burma and eventually purchased Ko Tha Byu, a Karen man convicted of murder. Judson instructed Ko Tha Byu in a Burmese-based Sgaw Karen script developed by Western missionaries and introduced him to the printed Karen Bible (published in 1853). The printed hymnal soon followed. Central to the missionary effort was the often-cited Karen literacy legend speaking of a “Golden book” containing the knowledge of an omnipotent, pre-animistic god, “Ywa”.⁷ While variations of the myth exist, the legend tells of three brothers (Karen, Burmese, and white) who were given books of Ywa’s knowledge. The Karen’s book was accidentally burned to ashes while swiddening, and from then on, oral tradition tells of lost literacy, marginalized status, and lost knowledge of God. However, some accounts also foretold that one day the white brother would return with God’s book, restoring their literacy and, in some more millennial readings, their political power.⁸ Both the Western and new indigenous evangelists adjusted, appropriated, and employed such syncretic narratives in order to spread Christianity among the Karen of Burma and, eventually, Thailand.

Christian conversion had a significant impact on Karen ethnic and national movements.⁹ Virtually all Western scholarly renditions of the encounter point to the organizational power of Christian literacy as

⁵ Renard, “Karieng: History of Karen T’ai Relations”, 10; Lehman, “Who are the Karen, and, if so, Why?”, 241.

⁶ Keyes, “Afterword”, 210.

⁷ Marshall, *The Karen in Burma*, 213; Renard, “Karieng: History of Karen-T’ai Relations”, 2; Hayami, *Between Hills and Plains*, 279.

⁸ Marshall, *The Karen in Burma*, 279-280; Hovemyr, *In Search of the Karen King*, 67; Hayami, *Between Hills and Plains*, 17.

⁹ Hovemyr, *In Search of the Karen King*, 88-89.

central to creating, binding, and determining an *ethnic* future of “the Karen people.” Missionaries Jonathan Wade and Francis Mason completed *Sgaw* (1853) and *Pwo* (1878) versions of the Bible, and the *Morning Star*, a monthly religious periodical, began circulating in 1842.¹⁰ Ethnographer Anders Hovemyr portrays teams of indigenous evangelists armed with literacy, the “white brother,” and centralized printing presses as “probably the most important factor in the development of Karen nationalism.”¹¹ Confirming Benedict Anderson’s ideas on print media,¹² the formation of ethnic consciousness and national aspirations were an outgrowth of literacy, education, and access to colonial powers through English, encouraging indigenous literature and a broader social organization through vernacular script, church organizations, and institutionalized education¹³ that superseded what had been formerly been the largest social unit of organization – the isolated village.¹⁴

The pairing of ethnic consciousness and Christian networking has resulted in several agentic attempts to indigenize and localize Christian themes for ethnic purposes, and Christian Karen creative expression allows for analysis of this process. One of the clearest examples of the attempted indigenization of Christianity among the Karen is a manuscript by Reverend Loo Shwe in 1962 that details his mission activities among the Karen in Thailand. Shwe’s life’s work involved collecting Karen legends and customs in order to pair them with Biblical ideas, arguing for an inevitability of Karen conversion to Christianity, accompanied by social uplift. Shwe saw Christianity as a natural trajectory in the fulfillment of Karen legend and ethnic history.

Describing Karen traditional poetry (“*tha*”) as the Karen’s “veritable un-written Bible”¹⁵ that are “so like the Old Testament,”¹⁶

¹⁰ Marshall, *The Karen in Burma*, 296-301; Hovemyr, *In Search of the Karen King*, 13, 97-98.

¹¹ Hovemyr, *In Search of the Karen King*, 88.

¹² Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 2006.

¹³ Hovemyr, *In Search of the Karen King* 89, 168; Hayami, *Between Hills and Plains*, 43.

¹⁴ Marshall, *The Karen in Burma*, 168.

¹⁵ Shwe, *The Karen People of Thailand and Christianity*, 5.

Shwe tries to reconcile and reclaim Karen poetic traditions along biblical themes, positioning Christianity as a non-exogenous belief system and predicting a religious revival of ethnic proportions. In his words:

Though the Karens [sic] had been scattered all over the four corners of the compass, from time immemorial, they will meet together through the spreading of the gospel of Christ...These verses are not invented by the westernized and educated Karen Christians. Many of them are not even aware of the existence of such a wealth of their own native traditions.¹⁷

While his prophetic and interpretive work ended in the 1960s, Karen seminary students in the 1990s were still linking Karen traditions to Biblical narratives. In a paper on Karen creation stories, Esther Danpongpee remarks: “we feel a deep urge to preserve the beliefs of our people... my Christian beliefs are one with the original beliefs of the Karen. We can agree in almost everything.”¹⁸ In her view, understanding Karen religion required knowledge of oral tradition narratives, and congruencies between these and stories from the book of Genesis could be shown to prove that the Christian God could be understood indigenously as the original deity of the Karen supreme deity, “Ywa”,¹⁹ which, as Shwe and other Karen theologians frequently remark, bears similarity to the Hebrew “Yah-weh” term for God.²⁰

Some Notes on Karen Music and Christian Conversion

Christianity, as described above, met with considerable success because of a constructed and manipulated similarity with Karen folklore and the actions of both missionaries and the Karen to adapt each tradition to the other. This trend of appropriation can be seen in their

¹⁶ Shwe, *The Karen People of Thailand and Christianity*, 21.

¹⁷ Shwe, *The Karen People of Thailand and Christianity*, 10-11.

¹⁸ Danpongpee, “Karen Stories of Creation”, 12.

¹⁹ Danpongpee, “Karen Stories of Creation”, 18.

²⁰ Shwe, *The Karen People of Thailand and Christianity*, 6.

musical practices as well. However, even as ethnographer-missionary Harry Marshall welcomed their agency in adapting Karen legends to the Christian narrative, he expressed much more concern over what he described as a somewhat negative affect he saw conversion having on their musical practices. Marshall laments that the Karen had “abandoned” their traditional music in favor of Christian hymns.²¹ He states:

With the introduction of Christianity came the music of the western hymnbook, and to this the Karen have taken with their whole hearts. They love to sing and do not grow weary of it, however late the hour. Occidental music has taken such a hold on those who have become Christians that they have almost entirely given up on their native music. A few hymns are sometimes sung to adaptations of their old tunes, but they prefer to the western melodies, and few of the young people know any other.²²

Later, he remarks: “It is to be regretted that, with the acceptance of Christianity, the Karen have almost entirely dropped their own music for that of the west.”²³

Subsequent scholars would take similar stances. An 18-page document by Ronald Renard, claiming to be the single largest contribution to the topic of Karen music at publication,²⁴ was marked by preservationist attitudes and worries about the disappearance of traditional music and instruments. Renard stated: “More is known of Karens in Thailand for their expertise with the guitar, piano, and violin than is of their traditional Karen music.”²⁵ He sides with Marshall, bemoaning the decline of the 6-stringed *tenaku* harp previously played

²¹ Marshall, *The Karen in Burma*, 161-9.

²² Marshall, *The Karen in Burma*, 29.

²³ Marshall, *The Karen in Burma*, 161.

²⁴ Renard, *Some notes on the Karen and their Music*, 17.

²⁵ Renard, *Some notes on the Karen and their Music*, 2.

by “almost all Karen young men,”²⁶ and further claims that Karen music has been in a “decline” since Marshall’s ethnographic report.²⁷

These assessments of Karen musical “abandonment” and “decline,” I argue, would be better examined in terms of agency and appropriation, especially given the high degree of indigenization of the faith tradition credited with (or blamed for) Karen music’s demise. Theodore Stern’s study of the *tenaku* argues that Karen musical behavior, especially among the youth, is not exceptional to other groups in Southeast Asia in that they have always borrowed from neighboring peoples, making a distinctly “traditional” style difficult to pinpoint.²⁸ Judith Becker’s study of Karen wedding and funeral songs reveals the same attitudes and practices when it comes to absorbing outsiders’ music. She says that they “love the music of other peoples and will go out of their way to hear ‘foreign’ songs. The missionaries use recorded hymns to draw the villagers into their compound.”²⁹ She saw it as highly probable that, in the future, the Karen would incorporate outside music into their own repertoire.³⁰ Yet even with scholars hinting at new musical developments and trends of domestication with the emergence of the Karen into the modern world, most still focus their attention on “traditional” Karen expression – typically the iconic *tenaku* harp³¹ and the poetic and stylized Karen *tha* poetry.³² What has been missing is an ethnographic exploration of Karen Christian music and its theory and practice in these communities. History provides a sense of the music’s arrival, and ethnographies constantly point to its ubiquity, but its execution on the ground-level warrants more attention than has been given to it.

²⁶ Renard, *Some notes on the Karen and their Music*, 11.

²⁷ Renard, *Some notes on the Karen and their Music*, 15.

²⁸ Stern, “I Pluck my Harp”, 209.

²⁹ Becker, “Music of the Pwo Karen”, 138.

³⁰ Becker, “Music of the Pwo Karen”, 141.

³¹ Stern, “I Pluck my Harp”; Suwichan, *I am Tenaku*.

³² Mischung, “When it is Better to Sing than to Speak”, 138; Fink, “Living for Funerals”, 93.

Christmas Music

Singing is a favorite past time among the younger Christians. Besides hymns and carols, the songs of several young Karen folk singers with Christian backgrounds had become popular among the Karen in the hills. Western musical scales and harmonies have been introduced to the Karen through church music and has become one of the most important elements of Christian Karen culture.³³

Christian music is mentioned as a popular activity in nearly every ethnographic account of the Karen, including those by Yoko Hayami, Anders Hovemyr, Shigeru Ijima, Roland Mischung and Loo Shwe.³⁴ While “traditional” Karen music has received and continues to merit attention in ethnographies and musical scholarship,³⁵ serious ethnomusicological analysis of Karen Christian music has been minimal. Assumed to be a copy of Western music or a degradation of traditional Karen sound, scholars have mostly overlooked it.³⁶

The complete indigenization of the bronze frog drum (an instrument made by the Shan people) gives precedence to the acknowledged tendency of the Karen people to transform foreign musical idioms into locally-recognized Karen icons of expression.³⁷ Karen Christian music must similarly be approached in terms of agency because creative and ethnic expressions like these hold important

³³ Hayami, *Between Hills and Plains*, 266.

³⁴ Hayami, *Between Hills and Plains*, 266; Hovemyr, *In Search of the Karen King*, 168; Ijima, “Ethnic Identity and Sociocultural Change Among the Sgaw Karen”, 107; Mischung, “When it is Better to Sing than Speak”, 130; Shwe, *The Karen People of Thailand*, 12.

³⁵ Becker, “Music of the Pwo Karen”; Fink, “Living for Funerals”; Mischung, “When it is Better to Sing than to Speak”; Schwoerer-Kohl, “Wedding Songs of the Karen”; Stern, “I Pluck my Harp”; Renard, *Some Notes on the Karen and their Music*.

³⁶ Gavin Douglas’ *Music in Mainland Southeast Asia* in the Oxford textbook series, *Experiencing Music, Expressing Culture*, does briefly include some information on Karen Christmas caroling, but no full-scale musical ethnography on Karen Christian music has been published. See Douglas, *Music in Mainland Southeast Asia*, 83-84.

³⁷ Cooler, *Karen Bronze Drums of Burma*.

implications for constructed and imagined communities.³⁸ The remainder of this article focuses on the indigenization and application of Karen Christian music.

Christmas Caroling

Thongchai Winichakul, in his historical analysis of the creation of Thai nationhood, foregrounds the map as an essential technology of nationalism.³⁹ Broadening Benedict Anderson's ideas on print capitalism, he looks for other technologies that allow humans to reconfigure and reconceptualize space, redefine the "we-self" through boundary-making,⁴⁰ and reaffirm the constructed-ness and non-naturalness of identities.⁴¹ He asks: "What are the other kinds of mediators...and how do they operate in mediating and creating the imagined communities?"⁴² This article argues that Christian music (specifically, Christmas caroling) is effectively used as one of these other "technologies" that allows for mediation between the institutional church and the village community. In doing so, they create and reinforce physically-experienced (if not "physical") maps that solidify borders between Christian and non-Christian Karen community members, "demarcating the sphere of 'us' against 'them'" in the process.⁴³

Setting

Thi Wa Klo village is a Karen community of approximately 1,000 residents in Chiang Mai province near Thailand's northwestern border with Burma. Christian missionaries first arrived in Thi Wa Klo in 1980, and, 30 years later, the town is just about evenly split between Christian Karen and animist-Buddhist Karen. A large Baptist church and

³⁸ Turino, *Nationalists, Cosmopolitans, and Popular Music*; Anderson, *Imagined Communities*; Stokes, *Ethnicity, Identity, and Music*.

³⁹ Thongchai, *Siam Mapped*, 52.

⁴⁰ Thongchai, *Siam Mapped*, 164.

⁴¹ Thongchai, *Siam Mapped*, 15-16.

⁴² Thongchai, *Siam Mapped*, 15.

⁴³ Thongchai, *Siam Mapped*, 16.

dormitory houses about 400 students from the surrounding mountains and regularly sponsors life-skills activities (religious instruction, Karen literacy, cultural education, sports, and social events) for the residents. On December 30, 2011, my wife and I were invited, as participant-observers, to the annual Christmas caroling activities in Thi Wa Klo. Led by one adult church staff member and accompanied by an 18 year-old student worship leader on acoustic guitar, about 30 dormitory students (age 6-18) caroled their way through the village from 6:00 pm until midnight, eventually returning to the church (see map).

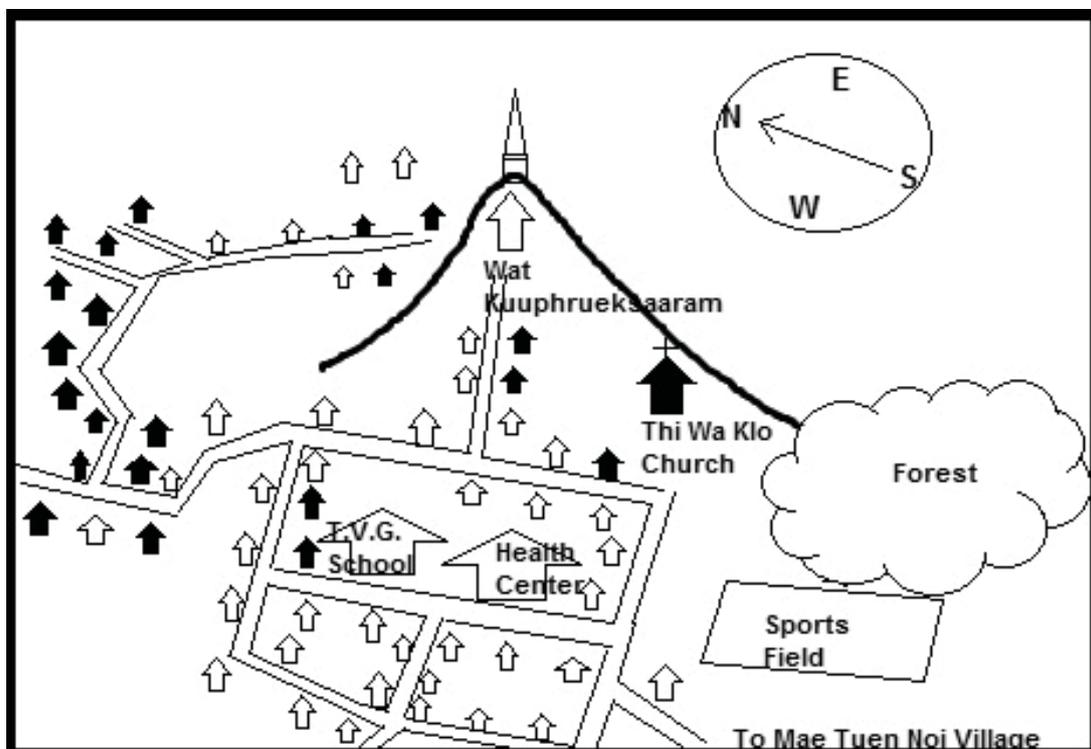


Figure 1: Approximation of caroling route through *Thi Wa Klo* village. Christian homes (where music was performed) shaded black. (Author's rendition). Note: Map not to scale.

Musical Performance and Data

The leader took the group to every Christian home in the village. Some households had prepared baskets of homemade, cone-shaped sticky rice treats wrapped in banana leaves to be distributed after the musical performance. The students gathered in front of each house and would sing and clap through a structured medley of three songs. My

musical analysis will show that each song represents various tactics of domestication, arguing that these pieces are more than just “bad” imitations of Western musical ideas, and embody both Karen musical idioms and syncretic blends of traditional and Western ideas. That is to say, they deserve analysis beyond scholarly write-offs as “declining” or “abandoned” tradition.

The first song of the medley is “While Shepherds Watched their Flock by Night,” a four-line, 16-bar Baptist hymn. In this song, the lyrics show a direct translation from the Western Christmas story from the Bible:

*Now the shepherds were sitting with their sheep, when angels descended upon them in a magnificent light. They told them, “Do not be afraid. We bring good news to you on this Christmas day.”*⁴⁴

An analysis of the tune, however, shows Karen adaptation in the form of pentatonicization. Traditionally, Karen scales were primarily anhemitonic pentatonic,⁴⁵ and while their hymnal shows an opening melody that includes the leading tone (SOL DO DO *TI* LA SOL), the carolers domesticate it, performing a pentatonic melody (SOL DO DO *DO* LA SOL).⁴⁶ This substitution of pentatonic scale degrees (DO and

⁴⁴ Karen translations provided by primary informants Seksorn “tu-chaē” Deesaw and Gae-dee Waewjantra.

⁴⁵ I.e., Five notes, no semitones (half-steps). See Suwichan, *I am Tenaku*, 64; Stern, “I Pluck my Harp”, 188; Marshall, *The Karen in Burma*, 161.

⁴⁶ Marshall made many comments on what he saw as a certain “inadequacy” when it came to Karen singing Western tunes. He remarked that “they appear to know nothing of the different keys” and that “they do not keep accurate time.” For scale degrees, he portrayed them as more or less uncommitted to matching pitch, saying they “introduce quavers on the long notes and sliding down or slurring from one tone to the next.” Marshall, *The Karen People of Burma*, 161. All of these are typical traditional Karen sounds, and imply a domestication of Western music, rather than an inadequate replication of it. In other words, they were applying traditional techniques (more commonly seen in *tha* recitation) to new foreign material.

SOL) for heptatonic notes (TI and FA, respectively) happened in this and many other pieces.⁴⁷

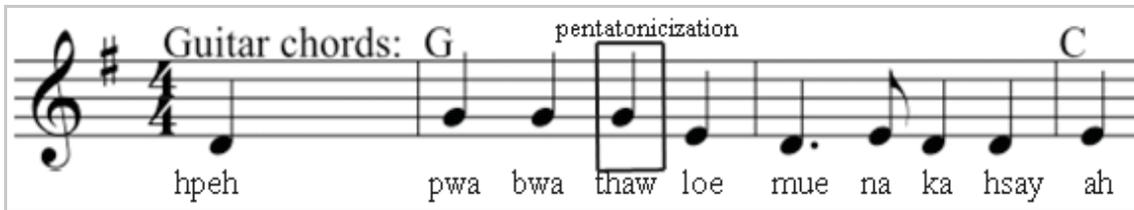


Figure 2: The author’s transcription of the Karen hymn, “While Shepherds Watched their Flocks by Night,” highlighting the pentatonicized melody (as compared to the hymnal version as written).



Figure 3: “While Shepherds Watched their Flocks by Night” (Sgaw Karen Hymn and Tune Book 62).

This opening hymn typically transitioned without a pause into the second song, usually a version of “Merry Christmas/Happy New Year to You,” sung to the tune of *Happy Birthday*. This was usually sung in Karen (“*Khri o phlae loe noe gaw*” [Merry Christmas], “*Ni thaw saw loe noe gaw*” [Happy New Year]) but occasionally in English. This piece represents a higher level of domestication. Where the shepherds song directly translated a Western metaphor (Thi Wa Klo Karen do not raise sheep), but did domesticate the melody, here there is a complete lyrical rewrite, coupled with a resignified meaning. A Western melody associated with birthday celebrations, here becomes a Karen expression of Christmas and New Year cheer and well-wishing. This is not a

⁴⁷ These instances of “pentatonicization” happen in numerous hymns and other popular Christmas tunes. For more examples and in-depth musical analysis, see Fairfield, “Merry Christmas Huay Nam Khao”, 83-110.

discarding of tradition for a Western expression; rather, this exemplifies Karen adaptation of the foreign for new, localized purposes.

The musical score is written in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time. It consists of four staves of music with lyrics underneath. The lyrics are in Karen script. The chords are indicated above the notes: C, D, G, D, G, D, C, D, G, D, G, D, G, G, G, G.

bue tae jgoe aw ni Khri o phlae loe noe gaw khri o phlae loe noe
gaw khri o phlae loe noe gaw — khri o phlae loe noe gaw ni thaw
saw loe noe gaw ni thaw saw loe noe gaw ni thaw saw loe noe
gaw — ni thaw saw loe noe gaw (blessing) ("Amen!") doe blue do ma law
[*this Christmas we ask for happiness and strength*]

Figure 4: Author's transcription of "Merry Christmas/Happy New Year to You" (Karen)

The musical score is written in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time. It consists of two staves of music with lyrics underneath. The lyrics are in English. The chords are indicated above the notes: D, F#, G, C, C, G, D, G, C, G, G.

yu me ri Khri sa mas thu yu Me ri Khri sa mas me ri
Khri sa mas Me ri Khri sa mas thu yu (Blessing) (AMEN!) doe blue do ma law
[*Thai: This year we ask for God to send peace, well-being, and good health...*]

Figure 5: Author's transcription of "Merry Christmas to you" (English)

After a prayer for peace and prosperity in the New Year, performers and hosts shout "AMEN" in unison, and the final song begins. Most performances concluded with a song of thanks, "*Ta blue do ma law, da pue we oe*" ("Thank you very much, from all of us"), set to the tune of "Blessed be the Name of the Lord," a Wesleyan hymn.

Refain

Bless-ed be the Name, bless-ed be the Name, Bless-ed be the Name of the Lord!

Bless-ed be the Name, bless-ed be the Name, Bless-ed be the Name of the Lord!

PUBLIC DOMAIN

Figure 6: “Blessed Be the Name of the Lord”⁴⁸

This song provides arguably the most extreme case of appropriation and adaption. Firstly, it is rhythmically performed with an equal (rather than dotted, baroque-style, as-written) subdivision more typical of a *tehnaku* (Karen arched harp) performance.

C G D G C G G

Khri sa mas Me ri Khri sa mas thu yu (Blessing) (AMEN!) Ta blue do ma law
 [Thai: This year we ask for God to send peace, well-being, and good health...]

G G G G

ta blue do ma law ta blue do ma law da pue we oe ta blue do ma law

C G G D G

ta blue do ma law ta blue do ma law da pue we oe Ha - le - lu - ya

C G D G C G

ha - le - lu - ya ta blue do ma law da pue we oe Ha - le lu - ya Ha - le - lu - ya

G D G D G

ta blue do ma law da pue we oe Leader: Maw boe si soe ko
 All: Ta blue (x3)!

Figure 7: Author’s transcription of “Ta blue do ma law.”

⁴⁸ “Blessed Be the Name of the Lord.”

Secondly, and more importantly, a lyrical analysis highlights a few important cultural ideas. Shigeru Ijima describes the kinship term, “*da pue we*,” in an earlier function, as important to the animist practice of spirit feeding, describing a group of family members united by the same matrilineal family spirit.⁴⁹ In this usage, *da pue we* referenced the family collective that gathered for healing ceremonies, calling the sick person’s soul back to their body. This *da pue we* kin group would assemble to sacrifice livestock and read divinations from a pig’s gall bladder or chicken bones.⁵⁰ Here, however, the term is employed more generically – translated as “us”, or, as Thongchai’s term captures it, a “we-self” – and refers to the bounded Karen Christian faith community as a kin-based collective.

Additionally, the performances ended with a participatory call and response, involving not just the performing musicians, but also the residents of the home. The leader would call out, “Let us all say together.” All present would respond by shouting “*Ta blue*” three times. “*Ta blue*” has a double meaning here. First, it translates literally as “thank you” in Karen. More exclusively, though, it possesses an alternate meaning specifically limited to the Christian Karen community, where it serves as a greeting, accompanied by a handshake. Non-Christian Karen do not use the term in this fashion. Taken together, these musical uses of Karen terms provide a means of demarcating particular community members within the village as part of Thongchai’s “we-self.”

Performances lasted about two minutes at each house, and it took over five hours to mark out the town’s Christian territory – for community members who were not Christian, no music was performed at that house. The usage of borrowed melodies (including “Happy Birthday” and “Jingle Bells”) again evidenced the continued adaptability and appropriation of the foreign for their own localized ethnic purposes, reaffirming the findings of Philip Bohlman, who argued that it is not the music itself, or its style or history, that is of primary importance, but rather the ways that it gathers and brings

⁴⁹ Ijima, “Ethnic Identity and Social Cultural Change among the Sgaw Karen”, 108.

⁵⁰ Marshall, *The Karen in Burma*, 234-237.

people together, organizing and demarcating one group from another.⁵¹ Christmas caroling here plays a significant role in mapping the Christian Karen community, and has implications for what I am calling a “musical map.”

What is a Map?

Renate and Geoffrey Caine propose that “we must remember where we are in order to interact with the world safely and effectively,”⁵² arguing that maps orient the self in space and positions one relationally to their social surroundings. Maps also caricaturize and simplify more complicated realities. Thongchai shows this in his description of a map as one of many technologies that “mediates between human thinking and space,”⁵³ communicating through signs. A physical map orients the reader to a geographical space through an abstracted, reified representation of a place. Caine and Cain agree with Thongchai in arguing that the specifically relational rationale for maps surpasses mere geography and infers interpersonal identity.⁵⁴ Far from being a neutral or natural artifact: “A map...could well be the creator of the supposed reality.”⁵⁵ More than passively reflecting, a map actively structures the scope of the group, emotionally and physically,⁵⁶ into “others” and the “we-self.”⁵⁷ Martin Stokes hints at music’s ability to delimit and define space, noting that music and dance, like geographical maps: “do not simply ‘reflect’. Rather, they provide the means by which the hierarchies of place are negotiated and transformed...Music provides the space by which people recognize identities and places, and the boundaries which separate them.”⁵⁸

By these measures, I argue that Christian carolers and Christmas caroling actively reconfigure the space and layout of Thi Wa Klo village, communally defining the boundaries between the “we-self” and

⁵¹ Bohlman, *Where Two Streams Flow*, 232.

⁵² Caine, *Making Connections*, 41.

⁵³ Thongchai, *Siam Mapped*, 52.

⁵⁴ Caine, *Making Connections*, 44.

⁵⁵ Thongchai, *Siam Mapped*, 56.

⁵⁶ Thongchai, *Siam Mapped*, 130.

⁵⁷ Thongchai, *Siam Mapped*, 164.

⁵⁸ Stokes, *Ethnicity, Identity, and Music*, 4-5.

the “other” via musical performance. As carolers pass by non-Christian homes in silence, the lack of revelry confirms the relational “other” in the minds of the carolers and the non-Christian community members. When they arrive at a Christian home, festivities reinforce the in-group and confirm Christian presence. Yoko Hayami’s assessment of Karen animist ritual participation could just as appropriately apply to the scene of Christian caroling, where she says: “Through the performance, each participating villager reformulates his/her relationship with the rest of the community. In the process, the community itself is constituted.”⁵⁹ Thongchai draws attention to those excluded, as well.

The “reduction, selection...distortion...or exaggeration”⁶⁰ required in mapmaking is in this case the binary reduction of a complex community into “Christian” and “not Christian” houses afforded by musical performance (or the lack thereof), with ethnic undertones and implications, which will become evident shortly. While it does not exactly forge a printed map, this musical event still mediates between human actors and the imagined Karen Christian local community by orienting participants and non-participants alike as to their place within the projected social structure. This marks a significant departure from the origins of Western Christmas caroling, a 19th century Anglo-Saxon development where carolers traversed door to door requesting, demanding, or begging for money or food from every house they encountered.⁶¹ This musical “pretext for collecting money”⁶² might more closely resemble the daily rounds of Thi Wa Klo’s Buddhist monks than the Christian Karen caroling activities. In the case at hand, the local Karen Christian community employs caroling for its own transformative purposes. They do not sing in order to obtain goods, and they intentionally do not sing at every home, as would have been the case for Western Caroling methods and purposes at the time of their introduction. Caroling in this religiously diverse village serves to divide the village into insider and outsider categories and maintains a didactic function, showing church dormitory students who is to be included within their communal sphere.

⁵⁹ Hayami, *Between Hills and Plains*, 152.

⁶⁰ Thongchai, *Siam Mapped*, 53.

⁶¹ Sandys, *Christmas Carols, Ancient and Modern*, lv, lxvi, xcix, cvi.

⁶² Sandys, *Christmas Carols, Ancient and Modern*, cxix.

Institutionalized Music

Religious in-groups and out-groups, tied up in ethnic identity through the earlier Christian appropriation of traditional oral narrative, have implications for community cohesion and purists seeking to define ethnic ‘authenticity’,⁶³ itself an admittedly shifting human construct.⁶⁴ The purpose of this article is not to deconstruct the validity of Karen Christian identity as they confront Karen traditionalists, but rather to view the application and outcomes of Christian musical expression and institutions for the insular community. Providing a musical equivalent to Thongchai’s ideas, Philip Bohlman argues first that musical institutions function as mediators between the ethnic group and the ethnic individual⁶⁵ and secondly that: “One of the most important processes allowing ethnicity to persist through several generations is the maintenance of boundaries demarcating the community and its values.”⁶⁶ The institutional power of the church and dormitory in Thi Wa Klo ensures that the annual tradition of caroling (and its active boundary-making) will continue. It is in this context that pastor Amphon (Ta-u) of Thi Wa Klo church imagines an ethnic Karen future shaped by just this kind of Christian experience:

...for those Karen who aren’t Christian, in 50 years I believe they won’t be able to read, write, or speak Karen, and won’t wear Karen clothing. I believe their identity and culture will start to become extinct. The young generation now.... doesn’t want others to know that they are Karen. But, for the Christians, at the church, they teach language, literacy, they have to wear Karen clothes weekly at church services. These kids will preserve their Karenness longer. It will probably improve, even...Christian Karen are having gatherings... using only the Karen language... Non-Christians don’t have these... there’s even a world-wide Karen awareness, with an annual meeting

⁶³ Tapp, “The Impact of Missionary Christianity upon Marginalized Ethnic Minorities”, 82-86; Platz, “Buddhism and Christianity in Competition”, 481.

⁶⁴ Amporn, “Lukthung”, 26.

⁶⁵ Bohlman, *The Land where two Streams Flow*, 103.

⁶⁶ Bohlman, *The Land where two Streams Flow*, 110.

...Each country has an organization. This is only for Christian Karen, though. As I said, most non-Christian Karen don't really have this...⁶⁷

While such predictions on “preserving their identity longer” may or may not come true in the future, the fact that he can pin his hopes for an ethnic destiny to the institutionalization afforded by Karen Christianity is noteworthy. For Amphon (Ta-u), it is an indigenized faith practiced by a wider Karen community that offers a place for Karen-ness to be defined and developed, and mediating technologies such as Christmas caroling specifically provide annual occasions for the performance of this brand of Karen Christian identity creation and confirmation. While his view certainly glosses over past attempts by church leaders (predominantly in Baptist communities) to do away with traditional instruments and cultural expressions,⁶⁸ he – like Loo Shwe before him – hitches his hopes of ethnic continuity and destiny to the institutional frame of the Christian church, and sees mediating technologies, musical mapping in this case, as constituting and ensuring the borders of his brand of a global, imagined, and Karen community. Ingrained into these borders is a sense of domesticated Christianity, constructed identity, ensured destiny, and an arguably “Karen” musical tradition.

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⁶⁷ Amphon Ta-U, personal interview.

⁶⁸ Suwichan, *I am Tenaku*, v-vi; Platz, “Buddhism and Christianity in Competition”, 483.

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