

# Lao Phaen 11/4/2015

PATIWAT SARAIYAEM

*Translated by Peera Songkunnatham*



Center for Southeast  
Asian Studies  
**University of Wisconsin-  
Madison**

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## Translator's Introduction

Peera Songkunnatham

"Lao Phaen" is a song originally from nineteenth-century Siam retelling the hardship and humiliation of Lao captives, in particular the commoners conscripted by Chao Anouvong, the vassal king of Vientiane, to join his ill-fated rebellion against the king of Bangkok in the 1820s.

An unintended effect of the mass displacement of Lao peoples to Siam after the rebellion was the rise in popularity of Lao music with *khaen*, the iconic bamboo mouth organ. In the following reign, King Mongkut was so concerned about the future of Thai music that in 1865 he banned Lao *khaen* music, threatened its patrons and players with heavy fines, and associated its performance with poor rice harvest.<sup>1</sup> One theory holds that the word "phaen" in the song's title was a euphemism of "khaen."<sup>2</sup>

With *khaen* prohibited, folk musicians turned to other instruments like *pi* and *sor* to produce analogous rhythms and sounds. Lao Phaen emerged as a hybrid song with beautiful melodies and hard-to-swallow lyrics. The song has become a classic piece in traditional Thai music, with several versions and perversions along the way.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Read the official ban in Thai at ["253 Prakat ham mi hai len aew lao."](#)

<sup>2</sup> Patiwat proposes another reading: *phaen*, which means spread or extended or flowing, might have been understood by performers and listeners as a genuine descriptor of *molam* songs, with fluid lyrics and music that can be extended indefinitely accompanied by a dance performance with outstretched fingers.

<sup>3</sup> The theme of forced separation, for example, was depoliticized into a love song by one of King Mongkut's sons. See the 2014 Thai article ["Lao Phaen song: political history in music,"](#) by Chaomanat Prapakdee, *Journal of Language and Culture*, 33(1), for an era-by-era review.

In 2015, Patiwat Saraiyaem rewrote Lao Phaen through his experience and observation of life in prison, closely tracing the arc of the established narrative. There are enough parallels to suggest that, nearly two centuries later, the body remains the primary site of punishment. Only whips and back scars have given way to schedules and scabies. Still, the body remembers injustice best.

By the time it was written, Patiwat had spent eight months in prison. A few months after the military seized power in 2014, he was arrested on a *lèse-majesté* charge at the university where he was studying the art of molam. Mor lam, “expert singer,” is a title given to Lao-speaking folk performers that doubles as the name of their musical and storytelling tradition from Northeast Thailand, also known as Isan.

Staying true to the transculturated quality of the song, Patiwat follows Thai orthography in words that Thai and Lao hold in common, and also uses distinctly Lao words and turns of phrase here and there. The language that results has many names, depending on one’s identification or disidentification or non-identification with Thainess: Thai-Isan, Isan, Isan Lao, Lao on the Right Bank of the Mekong.<sup>4</sup>

Patiwat’s Lao Phaen was first performed on camera in 2016, shortly after his release.<sup>5</sup> What the viewers did not know was that the last line of the song had been tweaked at the request of the interviewer for safety concerns. Instead of “suffering so much so that I’m about to die” as it was sung on video, in Patiwat’s notebook the symptoms build up to a diagnosis: “suffering because of sakdina thai.” Sakdina is the name

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<sup>4</sup> Read about disidentification with Thainess in the essay [“Ten Years of Being Thai”](#) by the translator.

<sup>5</sup> Watch the solo performance [“Patiwat aew lao”](#) published on way magazine’s Facebook page, 21 August 2016. Reposted on YouTube as [“Lao phaen \(New Version\) by Patiwat Saraiyaem”](#), 19 March 2021.

of an obsolete system of Siamese social rank akin to feudalism. Since 2020, anti-dictatorship protesters in Thailand have increasingly used the term alongside or in place of military dictatorship in order to highlight the ruling elite's atavistic turn to royal absolutist tendencies, if not the persistence of unchecked oligarchic and royal power itself.<sup>6</sup>

Uncensored for the first time, Patiwat's lyrics are presented in English translation below. The final line is significant not only for the breaking of taboo, but also for its contrast to the established version. Rather than placing the ultimate blame on the person of King Anouvong, Patiwat instead identifies a *system* that is *Thai* as the cause of collective suffering.<sup>7</sup> More than merely new, this rewriting can be read as an attempt to set the record straight.<sup>8</sup>

Out of his circumstances as a contemporary captive in Bangkok, Patiwat Saraiyaem attests by way of his work to the contemporaneity of premodern molam which, despite prohibition and forced adaptation, still manages to retain its untamed spirit.

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<sup>6</sup> Read the analysis "[Down with Feudalism, Long Live the People! The People against Royalism in Thailand](#)" by Thiti Jamkajornkeiat on Spectre Journal, 3 December 2020, and [a critical response](#) by Giles Ji Ungpakorn, 16 December 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Read Jit Phumisak (1930-1966)'s [commentary on the song](#), reprinted on Thang E-Shann's website. Jit criticized the false consciousness of the commoner Lao captives, presumably the original songwriters, who failed to see the Thai sakdina as the ultimate cause of their misery.

<sup>8</sup> The strategy of rewriting is much different from outright rejection. A divergent interpretation of Lao Phaen appeared in a 2001 conference of Laotian historians, where an academic remarked that "the Thai wrote the song to mock the Lao whom they forcibly removed and enslaved." (From [Virakam Phrachao 'Anuvong](#), as cited in "Lao Phaen song: political history in music," page 23.) The translator suspects that this rejection may have something to do with the song's hybrid linguistic and musical quality, rendering it suspect in the eyes of Lao nationalists.



**Lao Phaen    11/4/2015**

Patiwat Saraiyaem

Our songs—Lao songs    entreat and entertain  
Our bamboo pipes    delight and deliver pain  
Tear after tear I shed    in tune with the crooning khaen  
In Gods' Metropolis<sup>9</sup>    I am but a captive man

Brother,  
How I have fallen on hard times  
Tears stream down my face  
I have to say goodbye  
They took me to this place  
No way to fight or flee  
I was chained up  
And then both tugged and dragged  
Big and little siblings torn  
From the arms of mom and dad  
Totally uprooted  
For a brutal punishment  
They keep us down during the day  
They keep us up during the night  
At twilight, I lie there spent  
Like I'm about to die  
Or already a ghost...  
Within these prison walls  
Clothes are threadbare  
With none to spare  
It's a world of woe and want  
Tried to force my eyes shut, but they leak  
So eaten up my body's gaunt  
Wiping away each teardrop

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<sup>9</sup> A possible translation of the official name of Bangkok: Krung Thep Maha Nakhon.

Like a bird ripped from his nest  
 Without khaen sounds to lull to rest  
 Without pladaek to dip, plachom to scoop<sup>10</sup>  
 In a cage and barred from flight  
 It's hardship with hardship on top  
 Their coarse red rice and greenish soup  
 Never fills my mouth  
 And there's no appetite  
 My scalp is lice-infested  
 My arms and legs  
 Scabies never leave unmolested  
 Pus spills, fever spikes, head spins  
 Tears turn to blood  
 Bile rises in my gut  
 No sympathy for us as humans  
 Sentence to prison  
 Sending affliction  
 Because they're gullible  
 Rotten from the inside  
 With tonsil stones  
 An elephant died  
 The stench has made it known  
 No lily pad can hide  
 A crime so overgrown<sup>11</sup>  
 They weighed us down and locked us up  
 Hoping to quell us  
 What an affliction that befell us  
 Because of the Thai Sakdina...  
 My brother.

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<sup>10</sup> *Pladaek* is fermented fish, essential for many a dish. *Plachom* is salted little fish mixed with toasted rice and topped with herbal garnishes.

<sup>11</sup> From the Thai adage *chang tai thang tua, ao bai bua ma pit*, meaning somebody who has done major wrong—one might say “royally messed up”—cannot by a cover-up prevent others from getting wind of the wrongdoing.

## ***About the Author and Translator***

**Patiwat Saraiyaem** is a folk singer-songwriter known in Thailand as “Molam Bank.” Born and raised in a Phutai community in Sakon Nakhon, Patiwat moved to Khon Kaen to study the traditional and transboundary art of molam, where he received the stage name “Molam Bak Nuat Ngoen Lan Patiphan Luecha.” He graduated from the Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Khon Kaen University. Patiwat spent over two years in prison (2014-2016) due to a lèse majesté conviction for acting in a play satirizing the Thai monarchy. In 2020, he was again charged and detained with lèse majesté, on top of sedition, for speaking about the plight of political prisoners at a pro-democracy rally. He is currently released on bail and regularly commutes to Bangkok for court appointments. You can support Patiwat via personal bank account: Siam Commercial Bank, No. 4086581769.

**Peera Songkunnatham** is a non-binary writer-translator from Sisaket City who lives in Indianapolis. Funded by the King’s Scholarship from the Thai people’s tax, they graduated from Swarthmore College with a major in anthropology and minors in Spanish and interpretation theory. Email: peera.peesuke@gmail.com.