

# Lexical Tone, Pitch and Poetic Structure: Elements of Melody Creation in *Khap-lam* Vocal Music Genres of Laos \*

*Adam Chapman*

---

Ethnomusicologists have described the traditional *khap-lam*<sup>1</sup> vocal music genres of Laos as being a song type in which the melody is closely related to the lexical tones of the Lao language.<sup>2</sup> However, this explanation understates the complexity of the relationships between a number of factors which contribute to the creation of melody. This article aims to provide a more detailed explanation of how lexical tones interact with other elements to create melody in *khap-lam* genres.

## **Background: Lao *Khap-lam* Vocal Music**

The *khap-lam* vocal genres discussed in this article belong to the ethnic group known as the lowland Lao, or Lao Lum. Other vocal genres which belong to various Mon-Khmer and Sino-Tibetan ethnic groups are also found in Laos, however, these are not part of the Lao *khap-lam* tradition and they are not considered here. Lao *khap-lam* vocal music genres are generally divided into two regional groups: northern genres which are prefixed with the word *khap*; and southern genres prefixed with the word *lam*. Apart from these, these two groups can

---

\* Fieldwork for this research was made possible by funding from the Monash Asia Institute. The fieldwork was conducted at various times between November 1998 and December 1999 in Vientiane and Pakse, Lao PDR. Earlier versions of this article were presented at the annual conference of the Victorian Chapter of the Musicological Society of Australia (MSA) in November 2000, and at the MSA's national conference "Musicology 2001" at Melbourne University, April 2001.

<sup>1</sup> Transcriptions in this paper follow the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) except for the following: palatal alveolar nasal /ɲ/; mid-front unrounded vowel /ɛ̃/; low-front unrounded vowel /ɛ̣/; high-back unrounded vowel /ɯ̃/; low-back unrounded vowel /ɔ̣/. Long vowel sounds are indicated by repeating the vowel. For ease of reading I have omitted the glottal stop from the transcriptions. Place names and other nouns are spelled according to accepted conventions rather than phonemically. Two terms, *mohlam* /mòlám/ and *khaen* /khèèn/, are also not spelled phonetically but according to conventions established elsewhere. A number of different spellings for *khaen* and *mohlam* exist, the result of different systems of romanisation for French and English pronunciation. I have used *khaen* throughout this text because this spelling achieves a more accurate pronunciation from English speakers than the French spelling *khene* or *khène*. I prefer *mohlam* over the currently popular 'molam' because the latter spelling fails to account for the contrast between vowels /o/ and /ɔ̣/.

<sup>2</sup> Terry E. Miller, *Traditional Music of the Lao: Mawlum Singing and Kaen Playing in Northeast Thailand* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1985) 142; Therese Mahoney, *The Red Star and the White Parasol* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI, 1995) 254.

generally be distinguished on the basis of a metrical (southern) or non-metrical (northern) musical accompaniment.<sup>3</sup> However, the singing in both northern and southern genres varies from genre to genre, with some metrical and others non-metrical.

The various genres within the two regional groupings are nearly all named after the geographic location or ethnic group of their origin. For example, *lam khon savan* comes from the southern town of Savannakhet, and *lam phuu thaj* is named after the *phuu thaj* ethnic group from whom the genre is said to have originated. The compound term *khap-lam* is used throughout Laos as a mass noun denoting all or any of the vocal music genres found in northern or southern Laos.<sup>4</sup> Used individually, the terms *lam* (ລຳ) and *khap* (ຂັບ) function as noun and verb denoting both a type of vocal music and the method of singing (that is, one *lams lam siphandon*). In Lao, the *khap-lam* method of singing is differentiated from the singing of songs with a fixed melody by the use of different terminology. In the latter, the singer is considered to *hòng* (ຮ້ອງ) 'to sing' a *phêng* (ເພິ່ງ) 'song with a fixed melody.'

A typical *khap-lam* performance takes place in the context of a *bun* (ບຸນ), the Lao term for a Buddhist merit-making event held at a private home or communal space such as the village temple.<sup>5</sup> Beginning some time between eight or nine o'clock in the evening, a traditional performance continues throughout the night, ending only once dawn has broken. Usually two singers, one male and one female, both known as *mohlam* (ມໍລຳ),<sup>6</sup> sing repartee verses accompanied by the *khaen* (ແຄນ), the Lao free-reed mouth organ. A number of genres also permit other instruments such as the *kachappi* (ກະຈັບປີ້), a three-stringed lute, *soh* (ຊໍ, an upright bowed fiddle) and *khuj* (ຂຸ້ງ, a small fipple flute) to be used as either part of a small ensemble, or on their own. The *mohlam* sing alternating rounds lasting anywhere from five to thirty minutes each, in which various themes are employed.<sup>7</sup> Imagined courtship is the underlying theme for much of the performance, into which the *mohlam* incorporate other themes and topics.<sup>8</sup> For example, episodes from Lao traditional literature are often introduced into the love banter between the male and female, in which the *mohlam* may compare themselves, or the other *mohlam*, to a particular character in a Lao tale.

## The Corpus

The relationships between lexical tone and melody examined in this article are those occurring in three *khap-lam* genres: *lam siphandon* (ລຳສີພັນດອນ) and *lam som* (ລຳໂສມ) from the far south of Laos, and *khap ngeum* (ຂັບເງິມ) from the region just north of the Lao capital Vientiane. The

<sup>3</sup> See Terry E. Miller, 'Laos,' *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music* vol. 4, 'Southeast Asia,' ed. T. E. Miller and Sean Williams (New York: Garland, 1998) 351–52. Note that I do not consider the metrical northern genre of *khap thum* (and several associated melodies) to belong to the Lao *khap-lam* tradition because its relatively fixed vocal melody and close relationship to the Lao classical/court tradition distinguish it from regional *khap-lam* genres, which are a product of Lao village culture.

<sup>4</sup> The earliest reference I have found for this compound appears in Théodore Guignard, *Dictionnaire Laotien-Française* (Hong Kong: Imprimerie de Nazareth, 1912) 291, 395, in which *khap-lam* is defined as the verb *chanter* (to sing). Its nominal use is not mentioned.

<sup>5</sup> In Lao the word *bun* also means 'merit.' It is desirable to accumulate merit during one's lifetime.

<sup>6</sup> In northern genres the singers may also be called *mohkhap* (ມໍຂັບ), but for clarity only *mohlam* will be here.

<sup>7</sup> Lao *mohlam* use the term 'rounds' (ñok) to denote each turn they take at singing. This is the same term used to denote a round in boxing, and most likely refers to the adversarial nature of the singing.

<sup>8</sup> See Carol Compton, *Courting Poetry in Laos: A Textual and Linguistic Analysis*, Special Report No. 18 (Northern Illinois University, 1979).

corpus for each of these genres consists of two rounds of about six minutes each, one sung by a male *mohlam*, the other by a female *mohlam*. A total of four *mohlam* performed the material: Acaan<sup>9</sup> Duang Phaeng (female) and Som Sii (male) performed *lam siphandon* and *lam som*, while Paeng Thong (female) and Acaan Sing (male) performed *khap ngeum*. All four singers are professional performers, considered by their peers and audiences to be fully competent in their art.<sup>10</sup>

The musical and textual transcriptions for this analysis were taken from two sets of recordings. The performances of the southern genres, *lam siphandon* and *lam som*, were recorded by the author in Pakse during 1999, and the *khap ngeum* performances were recorded in Vientiane by Lao National Radio, sometime during 1997. Transcriptions were made using the computer program *Transcribe!*, which enables wave (.wav) files to be slowed down, with or without a corresponding change in pitch.<sup>11</sup> In the transcription process, I listened to the recordings at both normal and reduced speeds. This was particularly necessary for *lam siphandon*, in which the text is delivered rapidly making it difficult to hear every syllable clearly. The transcriptions were made for two reasons. Firstly, to obtain a textual transcription from which the tonal patterns could be deduced; and secondly to provide a melodic outline of each performance with which the tonal patterns could be compared.

### Factors Affecting Melody in Khap-lam Genres

In a recent publication, Miller identifies several elements which a *mohlam* combines when singing the melody in a *khap-lam* genre: scale, genre-specific melodic shapes, and overall correspondence of individual lexical tones and melodic contour. These three are tempered by a fourth element, that of individual style. According to Miller, the key characteristic of *khap-lam* singing is a ‘flexible melodic line which maintains its genre-specific identity while avoiding regularity and predictability,’ distinguishing it from other types of singing in which the melody is fixed throughout the entire song.<sup>12</sup> Although Miller’s description is accurate, no explanation of how these factors combine to produce the melodic patterns is provided. Furthermore, Miller does not make explicit the degree to which *kòon aan* (ກ່ອນອ່ານ) verse structure (in which the majority of *khap-lam* texts are composed) acts as a platform upon which the genre-specific melodic shapes and overall melodic contours of each round are laid. The following analysis explores some of these facets of *khap-lam* melody creation.<sup>13</sup>

### Scale in Khap-lam Vocal Music Genres

Miller considers the Lao tuning system to be one consisting of seven tones in an octave (that is, all the pitches available on the *khaen*), noting that *khap-lam* music is not built upon seven tone scales but upon the two pentatonic scales, shown in Example 1.<sup>14</sup> Most *khap-lam* genres are sung to the accompaniment of the *khaen* which plays one of five possible modes derived

<sup>9</sup> Acaan (ອາຈານ), a word of Sanskrit origin, meaning ‘teacher’. In Laos, it is a common title for learned monks and lay people such as university teachers and others who pass on their knowledge to others.

<sup>10</sup> This fact was attested to by audience members at performances I attended. Furthermore, all four performers have taught students the art of *lam*. Two of them have attained the status of *acaan*.

<sup>11</sup> This shareware program is available from [www.demon.seventhstring.co.uk](http://www.demon.seventhstring.co.uk).

<sup>12</sup> Terry E. Miller, ‘Laos.’ *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, Second Edition. Editor Stanley Sadie (New York: Grove Dictionaries, 2000) 259

<sup>13</sup> There are sung texts which are not composed in *kòon aan* form, however, these are not considered in this article.

<sup>14</sup> Miller, *Traditional Music of the Lao* 23–24.

from these two scales.<sup>15</sup> The different modes are employed in conjunction with careful selection of individual *khaen* in order to match the vocal range of each *mohlam*. Although *khaen* players must know the different modes, *mohlam* need only sing the scale, adjusting absolute pitch to suit the pitches of the *khaen* mode accompanying them.

Example 1: Scales in Lao Genres (after Miller)



Note that the above scales do not take actual pitch into account, but follow a system which was developed to avoid the use of sharps and flats. Every *khaen* has a series of pitches with the same internal relationships which can be represented using the Western A-minor scale.<sup>16</sup> This provides a standardised method of transcribing the pitches of individual *khaen* whether or not the actual pitches produced are the same, facilitating comparisons between different performances of similar genres.

### Word-Tone Contours in Vientiane and Champassak Lao

Lao is a tonal language exhibiting features typical of other mainland Southeast Asian languages. In the tonal languages of Asia most lexical items tend to be monosyllabic (Vietnamese and Sinitic languages) or 'sesquisyllabic' (Khmer, Burmese, Lao, Thai).<sup>17</sup> Sesquisyllabic forms in Lao usually consist of a short syllable prefix such as /ka-, kha-, pa-, pha-, ta-, tha-/ attached to a long syllable. For example, *kacaaj* 'to distribute,' *kaduuk* 'bone,' *pakan* 'to guarantee,' and so on. Polysyllabic forms do exist in the language, but these are loan words from Pali, Sanskrit, French, and English. Tables 1 and 2, set out the word-tone contours of the two Lao dialects in which the genres analysed here are sung. Each tone contour is assigned a number from 1 to 6. Note that the tone numbers 1 to 4 used here for Vientiane Lao correspond to the same number-contour relationships used in the labelling system for Mandarin Chinese.<sup>18</sup>

The first line of each table contains a phonetic transcription of a Lao word with the tone contour number, indicated by the numeral attached to the phonetic transcription (e.g. phaa3). These words were selected because they form a minimal set, that is, they are distinguished from each other on the basis of a single phoneme, their lexical tone. The only exception to this is /paa/ 'fish', which also has a different initial consonant, unaspirated bilabial stop /p-/ rather than the aspirated /ph-/. The next two lines of the table contain the word written in Lao script and an English gloss. Below these is a schematic and a numerical representation of each tone contour. The vertical line serves as a scale to the left of which the tone contour is mapped; this contour map is then represented numerically below (with 1 as the lowest relative pitch, and 5 the highest). The first numeral represents the tone's relative starting point; the second its end point. For example, the tone in the second column of Table 1 is depicted numerically as 35; this means that the tone begins around the middle of the middle of a person's normal speaking range (3), and then ascends to the upper reaches of their range (5). This is shown

<sup>15</sup> Miller, *Traditional Music of the Lao* ch. 6.

<sup>16</sup> Miller, *Traditional Music of the Lao* 192. Pitch names appearing in the text are underlined.

<sup>17</sup> James Matisoff, *The Grammar of Lahu* (Berkeley, Cal.: University of California, 1973).

<sup>18</sup> Peter Ladefoged, *A Course in Phonetics* (San Diego, Cal.: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982) 230.

on the accompanying graph. The final two lines in the table contain a verbal description of each tone contour and its corresponding tone number (preceded with ‘T’ for tone). These descriptions and the associated numbers (T1, T2, etc.) are used to describe tones throughout the text.

Table 1: Vientiane Lao Tones \*

phaa1 ຜງ ‘to split’  33 mid-level (T1)	phaa2 ຟງ ‘to lead’  35 high-rising (T2)	phaa3 ຜງ ‘cliff’  213 mid-rising (T3)	phaa4 ຟງ ‘machete’  51 high falling (T4)	phaa5 ຜງ ‘cloth’  21 low-falling (T5)	paa3 ຟງ ‘fish’  213 mid-rising † (T3)
---	--	--	---	--	--

\* N.J.E. Enfield, ‘Combinatoric Properties of Natural Semantic Metalanguage Expressions in Lao,’ *Meaning and Universal Grammar*, ed. Cliff Goddard and Anna Wierzbicka (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2002).

† This is the tone normally marked as ‘low-level’ in most English-Lao dictionaries and language learning materials; see Alan Kerr, *Lao-English Dictionary* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 1992) and Russell Marcus, *English-Lao Lao-English Dictionary* (Tokyo: Tuttle and Co., 1970).

Table 2: Champassak Lao Tones \*

phaa1 ຜງ ‘to split’  33 mid-level (T1)	phaa2 ຟງ ‘to lead’  51 high-falling (T2)	phaa3 ຜງ ‘cliff’  213 mid-rising (T3)	phaa4 ຟງ ‘machete’  41 mid-falling (T4)	phaa5 ຜງ ‘cloth’  21 low-falling (T5)	paa6 ຟງ ‘fish’  22(1) low-level (T6)
---	---	--	--	--	---

\* Carol Compton, *Courting Poetry in Laos: A Textual and Linguistic Analysis*, Special Report No. 18 (Northern Illinois University, 1979), 185

The tables above show the Vientiane dialect with five contrasting phonemic tones and the Champassak dialect with six. A comparison of the two tables shows that some contours are the same in both dialects while others are different. Vientiane Lao does not have a sixth tone; the parameters which produce the low-level contour, T6, in Champassak Lao produce a mid-rising contour, T3, in Vientiane Lao. The most significant difference between the two dialects is the realisation of T2, which has a high-rising contour in Vientiane Lao, but a high-falling contour in Champassak Lao. A less significant difference occurs on T4, which has a falling contour in both dialects, however, in Vientiane Lao the fall begins from a higher relative pitch

than in Champassak Lao. Although these particular tone contours vary, the phonological features that produce them are exactly the same. Thus, the phonological features which produce a high-rising tone contour in the Vientiane dialect, produce a high-falling contour in the Champassak dialect. However, they are both described as a single tone type, T2, because the same parameters produce the tone. For example, the word ພາງ / phaa / 'to lead' is unstopped, and has an initial low-class consonant followed by a long vowel with no tone marker.<sup>19</sup> In the Vientiane dialect this word takes a high-rising tone, but in the Champassak dialect it has a high-falling tone. It is essential that the tonal differences between the Champassak and Vientiane dialects are taken into account, because they are important for the analysis of lexical tones sung to melismas, presented later in this article. However, for the following discussion of poetic structure, reference to the tone contour numbers only (T1–T6) will suffice.

### *Kòòn Aan* Poetic Structure

Lao vocal genres are largely, although not exclusively, composed in *kòòn aan* poetic form.<sup>20</sup> *Kòòn aan* is the primary verse form in which traditional Lao literature is composed. Until recently, scholars did not question the rules of *kòòn aan* verse structure as they were first explained by the Lao scholar Maha Sila Viravong in the 1930s.<sup>21</sup> The model of Sila's rules is set out in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Sila's Model for *Kòòn aan* Poetic Structure

1	○	○		○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
2	○	○		○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
3	○	○		○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
4	○	○		○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

In *kòòn aan* poetry, a single stanza, *baat* (ບາດ), is made up of four lines, called *vak* (ວັກ). A unit of two lines, the structure most common to *khap-lam* texts, is called a *fuang* (ເຜິ້ງ). Each of the four lines has a core of seven syllables or 'words', *kham* (ຄໍ້າ), represented in Figure 1 by the ○ symbols located within the dotted vertical lines. Additional, optional, syllables can be added to the start and end of each line. These are called *kham buphabot* (ຄໍ້າບຸພະບົດ) if they precede the core syllables, and *kham sòj* (ຄໍ້າສອຍ) if they follow them. In Figure 1, these are represented by the circles on the outside of the dotted vertical lines. Certain, predetermined, syllables within each line must take a tone indicated in the figure by the *maj êêk* (ເມເອກ) ○

<sup>19</sup> Lao consonants are divided into three classes, mid, low and high. The initial consonant of a word in conjunction with tone marking diacritics, vowel length and whether or not it ends with a stop consonant determines the word's tone-contour.

<sup>20</sup> The verses at the beginning and end of each round are often composed in a simpler verse structure called *kaap* (ກາບ). In *lam siphandon* there is often a section called *kòòn fòon* 'dancing verse' which features this poetic structure as well, although *mohlam* refer to the poetry as *kòòn fuang*.

<sup>21</sup> Koret has shown how Sila's research imposed an inappropriate Thai scholarship upon the poetic structures found in Lao literature. Contemporary Lao literary research largely accepts Sila's rules without question, despite the fact that only one work in the entire Lao literary canon, that of *sang sin xai* (ສິງສິນຂາຍ), adheres to Sila's rules throughout its entire length. See Peter Koret, 'Books of Search: the Invention of Traditional Lao Literature As a Subject of Study,' *Laos: Culture and Society*, ed. Grant Evans (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1999).

and *maj thoo* (ໂມ່ໂທ) ໐ tone markers.<sup>22</sup> For the remaining, unmarked syllables—including the *kham buphabot* and *kham sòj* syllables—tones are not predetermined. Each of these predetermined tone-syllables may be viewed as ‘tone-slots’, into which words bearing the required tones are placed. Henceforth, the terms *êêk* tone-slot and *thoo* tone-slot will be used when referring to these predetermined syllables.

In addition to words marked with the *maj êêk* tone marker (which always produces the mid-level tone T1), any *êêk* tone-slot also permits words ending with the stop consonants ນ, ດ and ບ (that is, stopped or ‘dead’ syllables) realised as /k, t, p/ in final position. This means that any *êêk* tone-slot may be occupied by more than one tone, because the tone varies according to the class of the initial consonant and the vowel length of the syllable. For example, a word that begins with a high- or mid-class consonant such as ຕ /t/ and ends with the stopped consonant ດ /d/, will produce a high tone, T2, if the vowel is short—ຕັດ /tat2/<sup>23</sup> ‘to cut’—but a low-falling tone, T5, if the vowel is long—ຕັດດ /taat5/ ‘waterfall’. If a low-class consonant is in the initial position of a word ending with a stop, then T4 is produced if the vowel is long—ຄາດ /khaat4/ ‘to expect’—and T1 if the vowel is short—ຄັດ /khat1/ ‘to select’. Thus, any *êêk* tone-slot may accommodate one of four possible tones: T1, T2, T4, and T5. In contrast, any *thoo* tone-slot only permits those words marked with *maj thoo*, which produces either T4 with a mid- or low-class initial consonant—ຄາງ /khaang4/ ‘to be stuck’—or T5 with a high-class consonant—ຂາງ /khaang5/ ‘side, direction’. The possible tone contours for each tone slot are summarised in Table 3.

Table 3: Possible Tones for *êêk* and *thoo* Tone-Slots

<i>êêk</i> tone-slot			<i>thoo</i> tone-slot	
<i>maj êêk</i> tone marker	Stopped, long vowel	Stopped, short vowel	<i>maj thoo</i> tone marker	
mid-level (T1)	low-falling (T5) OR mid-/high-falling (T4)	mid-rising (T3) OR mid-level (T1)	low-fall (T5)	mid-/high-falling (T4)

Sila’s rules, as detailed above, act more like guidelines rather than strict rules to be followed to the letter. Koret has shown that traditional Lao literature seldom strictly adheres to these rules; verses are only occasionally composed using all four lines in sequential order, and the predetermined tone-slots sometimes have an ‘incorrect’ tone placed in them.<sup>24</sup> These and other

<sup>22</sup> Phoumi Vongvichit, *Vajnyakòòn Lao* (Sam Neua and Vientiane: Naew Lao Sang Xat, 1991) 204; Sila Viravong, *Lao Grammar, Part Four: Versification* (Vientiane: Literature Committee, 1961) 7; Thao N. Abhay, ‘Versification,’ *Kingdom of Laos: The Land of a Million Elephants and the White Parasol*, ed. Rene de Berval (Saigon: France-Asia Press, 1959) 345–58 at 353; Thongkham Onmanison, *Mòdladok Lam Siiphandòòn-Lam Soom* (Vientiane: Ministry of Information and Culture, 1998) 456.

<sup>23</sup> Note that in Lao orthography final stop consonants are written as voiced ດ, ບ /d, b/ but realised as unvoiced as if spelled ຕ, ປ /t, p/.

<sup>24</sup> Koret, ‘Books of Search’ 242

exceptions are likewise apparent in the *khap-lam* rounds analysed here, as the following analysis shows.

To illustrate how the above tonal patterns are realised in a *khap-lam* text, four *kòòn aan* lines from *lam som* sung by Som Sii are given in Example 2. The fixed tone-slots discussed above are shown in bold, and the *kòòn aan* line numbers written above each line to permit easy comparison with the model in Figure 1. Notice that the lines of *kòòn aan* in the example are arranged with lines 3 and 4 preceding lines 1 and 2 (that is, a 3–4, 1–2 pattern). The example also exemplifies the use of *kham buphabot* and *kham sòòj* syllables (written in italics), and the use of more than seven core syllables in a line. Most of the words occurring in the tone-slots are marked with *maj êék* and *maj thoo*; the one exception is the first tone-slot in the Line 1, which is a stopped syllable with a short vowel, *khít* (ຮິດ) ‘to think.’

#### Example 2: Text Excerpt from *Lam Som* Showing Tone-Slots

##### Line 3

ນາງ ເອີຍ ກັບ ຄືນ ມາ ຫາ ຫ້ອງ ເຮືອນ ຊານ ບ້ານ ຊ່ອງ  
*naang2 eej6 kap2 khù:n2 maa2 haa3 hòòng5 hùan2 saan2 baan4 sòòng1*  
 [Oh my dear, come back to your room, your home]

##### Line 4

ນາງ ເອີຍ ເຈ້ ຂີ ຮ້ອງ ຮ້າ ໄຫ້ ຫາ ອ້າຍ ຍ່ ບໍ  
*naang2 eej6 caw4 si1 hòong4 ham1 haj5 haa3 aaj4 juu1 bòò6*  
 [Oh my dear, do you ever cry and think of me?]

##### Line 1

ສ່ວນ ວ່າ ອ້າຍ ຮິດ ພໍ້ ມີ້ ນີ້ງ ສາມ ເວລາ ບວນ ຫ້າ ນາງ ເອີຍ  
*suan1 vaal aaj4 khít1 phòò4 mù:4 nùng1 saam3 vee2laa2 nuan2 naa5 naang2 eej6*  
 [As for me, I think of you three times a day, my soft-faced lady]

##### Line 2

ຫລັບ ຈະ ຕາ ລົງ ໃບ ໝອນ ຮ້າ ຄະນີງ ນໍ ບ້ອງ  
*lap2 ca1 taa6 long2 naj2 mò:n3 ham1 kha1ning3 nam2 nòòng4*  
 [I close my eyes, rest my head on the pillow and think of you]

#### Outline of Musical and Textual Structures

The genres of *lam siphandon* and *lam som* originated in the far south of Laos in the area known as Siphandon,<sup>25</sup> where the Mekong river splits into a broad wetland area forming thousands of islands of various sizes. Most performers of this genre live in the provincial centre of Pakse, although they were all born in rural districts of Champassak province. The *lam siphandon* rounds analysed here were sung to relatively fast tempos of around 108 quarter-note beats per minute, whereas *lam som* is much slower at around 80 quarter-note beats per minute. These two genres use different scales; *lam siphandon* uses the scale {g, a, c, d, e}, and *lam som* is

<sup>25</sup> This area was formerly called Sithandone, a name by which many people still refer to both the region and the vocal genre.

based upon the scale {a, c, d, e, g}, but adds b to give a hexatonic scale. In the corpus examined here, both *mohlam* had vocal ranges greater than an octave but less than two octaves. Duang Phaeng’s range spans 14 semitones for *lam siphandon* and 17 for *lam som*, while Som Sii’s ranges for these genres spanned 16 and 15 semitones respectively.

Each *lam siphandon* round opens with a brief introductory verse in free rhythm which descends to the finalis g, or the secondary finalis c. Before entering the main body of the text, which is mostly metrical (Duang Phaeng’s performance is more metrical than Som Sii’s), the *mohlam* sings a bridging section, a series of pitches sung to euphonic vowel sounds. This pitch series is always the same for both male and female *mohlam* and is one of the musical features which identifies this genre. The main body of the text is normally sung with the verse lines arranged in pairs (lines 3 and 4; lines 1 and 2). Each pair is sung together as a melodic unit consisting of three or four discreet musical phrases, with the main, or finalis cadences falling at the end of line 2. The finalis g is avoided at most of these main cadences with both *mohlam* utilising the secondary cadence at c instead. Extended sections of verse arranged in pairs of lines 3 and 4 are also found, as is the occasional verse consisting only of a single poetic line. A melodic unit often opens with an ascending minor third, occasionally extended to a fourth, sung on *kham buphabot* pre-syllables. This brief phrase is a genre-specific feature of *lam siphandon* found in all performances, and is unrelated to the word-tone of the syllables to which it is sung (note that in Example 3, the ascending opening motif is sung to a low-falling tone).

Example 3: Common Opening Motif (a fourth interval) in *Lam Siphandon* (Duang Phaeng) \*



\* Note that the transcriptions do not carry time signatures because performers do not think in terms of Western time signatures. Southern genres are in duple time, so dashed barlines are used to indicate the divisions between measures.

Textually, *lam som* has strong structural similarities to *lam siphandon* with both introductory and closing verses using similar stereotypical phrases. The singing throughout *lam som* is in free rhythm, although the *khaen* accompaniment maintains a steady duple rhythm throughout the round. Texts are composed in a similar fashion to *lam siphandon*, with the melodic unit consisting of two lines and the main finalis cadences always falling at the end of every line 2. The finalis cadence, distinguished by a b–a motif which both voice and *khaen* emphasise, is the main melodic identifier of the genre, providing *lam som* with an instantly recognisable sound (see Example 4).

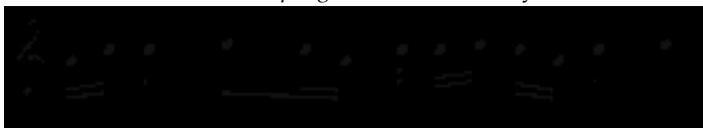
Example 4: Cadence at the End of *Kòon Aan* Line 2 in *Lam Som* (Som Sii)



The *khap ngeum* genre takes its name from the Nam Ngeum (ນ້ຳນ້ອມ), a river which flows down from Xieng Khouang province into the Vientiane plain. The performers live in villages close to, or alongside, the Nam Ngeum, and they regularly travel into the capital Vientiane to perform at privately-sponsored *bun*. They also perform, however, in the province's larger towns, such as Phon Hong and Ban Koen, and in the villages along the Nam Ngeum.

As a northern genre, *khap ngeum* is stylistically different from the two southern genres. Sung in free rhythm to a non-metrical accompaniment, the basic melodic unit is a single poetic line often extended by the addition of several *kham sòj* syllables. The text is delivered in a slow and deliberate manner using the scale {a, c, d, e, g}. Each round is divided into distinct sections, the end of which is signalled by the *mohlam* with a melismatic descent to the finalis. Listeners often add a descending whooping motif as the *mohlam* reaches the finalis. *Khap ngeum* singers exploit the slow delivery of text by employing a greater amount of melismatic embellishment than is found in southern genres, despite their vocal range being narrower, spanning just twelve semitones (see Example 5).

Example 5: Melismatic Character of *Khap Ngeum* Vocal Delivery



### Tone-Slot Behaviour

Although Lao *mohlam* do not adhere slavishly to *kòòn aan*, its structure nevertheless provides a predicability of form, making the fixed tone-slots a logical place to start an examination of the interaction between lexical tone and melodic pitch. Theoretically, the *êêk* tone-slot is able to accommodate up to four tones (T1, T2, T4 and T5), however, in practice singers do not make full use of all four tones. For *lam siphandon*, Compton reports that both male and female singers prefer to place mid-level tone T1, in the *êêk* tone-slot and mid-falling tone T4, in the *thoo* tone-slot.<sup>26</sup> My own analysis of the tone-slots in *lam siphandon* verse concurs with Compton's findings. However, the similarities continue with performers' tone preferences in *lam som* and *khap ngeum*.

The figures in Table 4, indicate the frequency with which certain tone contours occur in the two tone-slots in all three genres. Note that the *êêk* tone-slot is predominantly occupied by mid-level tone, T1, with the low-falling tone, T5, as second choice. Occurrences of T2 and T4, the other two possible tones in this tone-slot were very rare among all the performers, although they were used to a greater extent in the *khap ngeum* performances. The *thoo* tone-slot was occupied by both possible tones, however, all four performers made much more use of T4 (high- / mid-falling tone) than they did of T5 (low-falling tone) in this slot. This was especially apparent in the *lam siphandon* rounds. The low incidences of T5 in both tone-slots and the avoidance of T4 in the *êêk* tone-slot suggests that a compositional tactic has evolved in order to maintain strong distinctions between the two tone-slots. The high number of occurrences of high- / mid-falling tone T4, in the *thoo* tone-slot is due to its role in facilitating the performer's

<sup>26</sup> Compton, *Courting Poetry in Laos* 188.

descent to the frequent finalis cadential points which fall on the final syllable of line 2 (*thoo* tone-slot). Also notable is that the low-falling tone, T5, never occupies the *thoo* tone-slot in line 2 at a main cadence in any of the genres. In all genres, the majority of T1 words occurring in the *êêk* tone-slot are marked with tone marker *maj êêk* rather than being unmarked stopped syllables (see Examples 4 and 6).

Example 6: T4 on the Final Syllable of Line 2 in Lam Siphandon (Duang Phaeng)

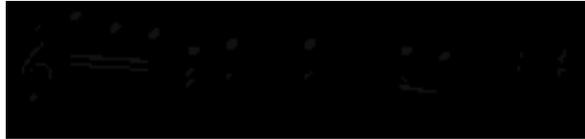


Table 4: Most Common Tones found in Tone-Slots Across All Three Genres

		<i>êêk</i> tone-slot		<i>thoo</i> tone-slot	
		T1	T5	T4	T5
Lam Siphandon	<i>Duang Phaeng</i>	71%	23%	88%	12%
	<i>Som Sii</i>	79%	20%	89%	11%
Lam Som	<i>Duang Phaeng</i>	79%	19%	72%	29%
	<i>Som Sii</i>	84%	10%	79%	21%
Khap Ngeum	<i>Paeng Thong</i>	60%	18%	83%	17%
	<i>Acaan Sing</i>	69%	17%	60%	40%

In the figures for *lam siphandon* and *lam som*, Som Sii and Duang Phaeng show a remarkable consistency in the frequency of the particular tones they use; their matching of tone contour with tone-slot is retained across the two genres. The figures in Table 4 reveal that, regardless of genre and performer, singers not only place the same tones into the tone-slots of *kòdn aan* structure, but that they do so with consistent degrees of variation between the options available to them. A significant discrepancy occurs in Acaan Sing’s *thoo* tone-slot figures for the *khap ngeum* genre, in which he makes greater use of T5 than any other performer; most likely an indication of his personal style. The overall consistency across performers and genres suggests an intuitive use of tone by all the *mohlam*, their compositional ability being the result of ‘consistent lifelong exposure’ to oral performance, rather than having learned the technique according to a set of rules such as those proposed by Sila.<sup>27</sup>

Consistency of tone placement at particular points in the text does not cease with the fixed tone-slots of *kòdn aan* structure, but continues with other syllables which also play an important role in the composition of *khap-lam* texts. Compton notes that musical beats fall upon the first, third, fifth and seventh core syllables of *kòdn aan* structure, as shown in Figure 2. The accenting of these syllables was also noted by Miller in his observations for *lam thaang san*, a metrical

<sup>27</sup> Koret, ‘Books of Search’ 243.

genre from northeast Thailand.<sup>28</sup> According to Compton, the most important tones, in *lam siphandon* at least, are those falling on musical beats 2 and 4; that is, the last syllables of the first and second hemistiches of each poetic line (third and seventh core syllables).<sup>29</sup> Compton's analysis suggests that singing is always metrical, with these tones regularly falling upon the beat whereas the *lam siphandon* texts analysed here are not entirely metrical. However, in the *lam siphandon* rounds analysed, both *mohlam* accent these syllables to a greater degree than the three fixed tone-slot syllables which do not fall on the final syllable of each hemistich (see Figure 2). The non-accented tone-slots are the ones most frequently ignored; that is, they are the ones on which the *mohlam* is least likely to place the 'correct' tone. It is worth noting that some descriptions of *kòòn aan* structure only include the fixed tone-slots that fall on these accented syllables.<sup>30</sup>

Figure 2: Accented Syllables in *Khap-lam* Texts

1	○ ○	○ <sub>̇</sub> ○ <sub>̇</sub>	○ <sub>̇</sub> ○ <sub>̇</sub>	○ <sub>̇</sub> ○ <sub>̇</sub>	○ ○	○ ○	○ ○	○ ○
2	○ ○	○ ○	○ ○	○ ○	○ ○	○ ○	○ ○	○ ○
3	○ ○	○ ○	○ ○	○ ○	○ ○	○ ○	○ ○	○ ○
4	○ ○	○ ○	○ ○	○ ○	○ ○	○ ○	○ ○	○ ○

Linguistic phenomena also support Compton's suggestion that some tones are more important than others. Enfield notes that in conversational Lao word-tones are frequently overridden by stress patterns within an utterance.<sup>31</sup> In such instances the tone of the unstressed word is neutralised, giving T0. For example, the utterance '(I) didn't go' is realised as *bòd0 daj0 paj3* and not *bòd1 daj4 paj3*. Although we should not necessarily expect that the more 'marked'<sup>32</sup> sung *khap-lam* texts will behave in exactly the same way, this phenomenon shows that full articulation of word-tone in Lao is not absolutely necessary for comprehension. In *kòòn aan* structure, stress or accent is determined by the location of the syllables rather than by their semantic role; the latter being the factor that determines stress in conversational Lao.

Tone neutralisation offers a solution to the potential problem of the interaction between adjacent tones. Adjacent tones have been considered as having equal importance in the generation of melody, so when adjacent tones do not correspond, many analyses run into difficulties. For example, Miller attempted to explain the conflicts that sometimes occur between word-tone and a genre's melodic shape saying that this 'can be avoided by the singer's addition of slides to or from main notes'.<sup>33</sup> This is a common strategy, however, it is by no means utilised

<sup>28</sup> Miller, *Traditional Music of the Lao* 103

<sup>29</sup> Compton, *Courting Poetry of Laos* 189

<sup>30</sup> Abhay, 'Versification' 353; Miller, *Traditional Music of the Lao* 102; Kavin Kiangkhamsony, *Khap Ngùum: Silapa Vannakhadii Phùun Mùang Laaw* (Vientiane: Department of Literature and Mass Culture, 1997) 42

<sup>31</sup> personal communication, 24 April 2001. It should also be noted here that Enfield and I have discussed the issue of tone sandhi in Lao. Although no detailed analysis of this has been undertaken for Lao, there appears to be no reasonable evidence for the existence of tone sandhi in Lao (that is, where the contour of one tone alters that of its neighbour); tone neutralisation occurs instead.

<sup>32</sup> 'Marked' speech forms are those which fulfil particular functions such as royal vocabulary, religious sermons, and so on. Casual conversational speech is considered to be the 'unmarked' form.

<sup>33</sup> Miller, 'Laos' 259.

at every point where adjacent tones do not correspond. However, if tones on unaccented syllables are neutralised or considered less important, then the relationship between adjacent tones becomes less of a concern because accented syllables do not usually appear together.

Example 7: Melodic and Textual Transcription Illustrating Coordinated and Non-Coordinated Tone-Melody in *Lam Siphandon* (Duang Phaeng)



<p><b>Line 1</b></p> <p>ຫຼື ກ່າ ອ້າຍ ມີ ຜູ້ ຕ້ອງ ອ້າຍ ແລ້ວ ແຕ່ ຈິດ ໃຈ</p> <p>lùu3 thaa6 aaj4 mii2 phuu5 <b>tòng4</b> aaj4 lèew4 <b>tèè1</b> cit2 caj6</p> <p>[or if you need someone, it's up to your heart]</p>
<p><b>Line 2</b></p> <p>ຄັນ ບໍ່ ມີ ຄົນ ໃດ ຮວມ ໃບ ບອນ ຊ້ອນ</p> <p>khan2 bə̀1 mii2 khon2 də̀3 <b>huam1</b> nə̀2 nò̀n2 <b>sò̀n4</b></p> <p>[if you have no-one to share your bed]</p>

Example 7 shows the coordinated and non-coordinated tone-melody relationships in *lam siphandon*, as performed by Duang Phaeng. Note that the two syllables with mid-falling, T4, which begin the second hemistich of the first line (*kò̀n aan* line 1), /aaj4 lèew4/ are not coordinated because the melody ascends, going against the falling tone contour. Glides are not used to link to these two pitches, rather the melody ascends in clearly defined steps. The two tones which follow, mid-level T1, and high-falling T2, can be considered as coordinated because the melodic movement follows the tone contour. In the example, each occurrence of high-falling, T2, seeks a relatively high point from which to begin, although consecutive occurrences of T2, on /mii2 khon2/ do not begin on the same pitch. However, these are still coordinated because the following syllable, a mid-rising T3, begins at a pitch lower than the preceding occurrence of T2. Since the matching of tones in *khap-lam* is not absolute (that is, tones always occur at the same pitch), there is no reason to expect that consecutive occurrences of the same tone contour will commence from the same pitch every time they occur. The same pattern also occurs in the following hemistich with /nə̀2 nò̀n2/. Note also that the melismatic tones, mid-rising T3 /də̀3/, and mid-falling T4 /sò̀n4/, are coordinated. The accented syllables in this example, /tòng4, tèè1, caj6, mii2, də̀3, nə̀2, sò̀n4/ are all coordinated, with the syllables at the end of each hemistich sung to an interval corresponding with the tone contour.

We must also account for the fact that Lao is highly pragmatic; listeners use context and background information to deduce meaning when a subject or topic is elipsed, or when lexical tones are not fully realised on each syllable.<sup>34</sup> Lao audiences, being well versed in the poetic forms presented in *khap-lam* texts, are capable of discerning meanings, even if some lexical-tone contours are altered by genre specific melodic patterns. Given the *khap-lam* tradition's origins in public

<sup>34</sup> For a discussion of the pragmatic nature of Lao, see Enfield, 'Combinatoric Properties.'

readings of traditional stories from the Lao literary canon, it is reasonable to expect that along with the poetic structure it has retained other elements of spoken Lao, one of which may be the neutralisation of tones. Therefore, the potential problem of a word's meaning being altered by non-conformity of melodic phrase and lexical tone may not be as crucial as Miller suggests.

An examination of the *lam som* and *khap ngeum* texts revealed that the same syllables are also emphasised in these genres in spite of the non-metrical singing found in these genres. This indicates that accent is inherent in the texts with or without metrical musical accompaniment. Returning to the *kònn aan* model in Figure 2, it is clear that the majority of these important tones at hemistich ends coincide with the predetermined tone-slots shown in Figure 1. The only hemistich final syllables without a predetermined tone-slot are those at the ends of lines 1 and 4, and at the end of the first hemistich of line 2 (see Figure 2). The remainder are all *thoo* tone-slots except for two *êêk* tone-slots; one in line 1, the other at the end of line 3. Compton's observations indicated that hemistich final syllables without a tone-slot also took certain tones more frequently than others.

In her study of *lam siphandon*, Compton reported that the male *mohlam*, Sunii, preferred the tones T3 in line 1, T3/T5 in line 2 and T2/T3 in line 4, while Duang Phaeng, the female *mohlam*, used T3/T2 in line 1, T2/T3/T5 in line 2 and T3/T2 in line 4.<sup>35</sup> Similar results for Duang Phaeng can be seen in the corpus analysed here, with the exception of the tones used at the end of the first hemistich in line 2. Likewise, significant similarities exist between Sunii's choice of tones, and the choices made by Som Sii in this corpus. A count of tones occurring in these hemistich final positions produced the results presented in Table 5.

Table 5: Common Tones at Hemistich Ends (non-tone-slot syllables)

		Line 1	Line 2	Line 4
Lam Siphandon	<i>Duang Phaeng</i>	T2/T3	T2/T6	T2/T3
	<i>Som Sii</i>	T6/T3	T3	T3
Lam Som	<i>Duang Phaeng</i>	T3	T2/T1	T2
	<i>Som Sii</i>	T3	T2/T3	T2
Khap Ngeum	<i>Paeng Thong</i>	T3/T4	T2	T2/T4
	<i>Acaan Sing</i>	T3	T2	T3/T2

The choice of tone contour in each of the syllables is remarkably consistent across all three genres. Note also that the tones which most commonly occur in the predetermined *êêk* and *thoo* tone-slots (T1, T4, T5) are avoided almost entirely in these positions. The consistency of tone contour/ tone-slot correspondence in these selected performances supports claims made by *mohlam* and Lao scholars that there is no difference in the structure of sung verses from one genre to the next.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Compton, *Courting Poetry in Laos* 188–189.

<sup>36</sup> Kavin, *Khaph Ngùum* 2–3.

The next stage of the analysis was to examine the correspondence between the lexical tones appearing in the *êêk* and *thoo* tone-slots and the pitches to which they are sung. Tables 6 to 8 list the results for the most common tone contour/musical pitch combinations found in fixed tone-slots of text composed in *kòðn aan* form in each of the three genres. The figures are listed in hierarchical order, with percentages denoting the frequency of occurrence of specific pitches within the tone-slot specified. Pitches which occur infrequently in each tone-slot are listed at the bottom of each box without a percentage. Each pitch represents the most discernible pitch with which each word-tone occurs throughout the text, normally the initial pitch of the tone contour. These are what Mendenall described as being ‘syllabic’ tone/pitch forms as opposed to ‘melismatic’ forms, in which syllables are sung to easily discernible intervals; the latter are discussed in the following section.<sup>37</sup>

Table 6: Tone-Slot/Pitch Correspondence in *Lam Siphandon*

	<i>êêk</i> tone-slot				<i>thoo</i> tone-slot			
	T1		T5		T4		T5	
<i>Duang Phaeng</i>	g'	30%	e	11%	e	28%	e	6%
	e	27%	g'	2%	d	24%	d	6%
	d	11%	d	4%	a'	15%	c	3%
	a'		c		g'	10%		
<i>Som Sii</i>	e	41%	c	13%	e	39%	c	4%
	d	22%	e	4%	d	30%	d	3%
	g'	9%	d	2%	c	14%	e	
	c				g'	5%	g'	

The results for *lam siphandon* in Table 6 show that both *mohlam* are consistent in their coordination of tone-pitch combinations for T4 in the *thoo* tone-slot, in which they heavily favour pitches e and d. Duang Phaeng exploits the upper range using pitches g' and a' to a greater degree than Som Sii. The consistency of correspondences in the *thoo* tone-slot is largely due to the cadential points that occur on the final syllable *thoo* tone-slot in line 2 (as in Example 7). In the *êêk* tone-slot, T1 occurs more frequently on higher pitches than does T5, although they both occur on the same pitches (for example, e and d) as well.

T4 and T5 also share the same pitches in the *thoo* tone-slot. Such pitch sharing between tone contours shows that this (as can be seen in Tables 7 and 8) and other *khap-lam* genres exhibit what Yung calls ‘relative matching’ of lexical tone and musical pitch.<sup>38</sup> This means that the tone contour/pitch correspondences of the adjacent syllable affects the following syllable as opposed to ‘absolute matching’, in which each tone occurs on the same pitch throughout the round.

<sup>37</sup> S. T. Mendenhall, ‘Interaction of Linguistic and Musical Tone in Thai Song,’ *Selected Reports in Ethnomusicology* 2.2 (1975): 17–23.

<sup>38</sup> Bell Yung, ‘Creative Processes in Cantonese Opera 1: The Role of Linguistic Tones,’ *Ethnomusicology* 27.1 (1983): 29–47.

Table 7: Tone-Slot/Pitch Correspondence in *Lam Som*

	<i>êk</i> tone-slot				<i>thoo</i> tone-slot			
	T1		T5		T4		T5	
<i>Duang Phaeng</i>	d	45%	e	8%	a'	24%	d	9%
	a'	19%	g	6%	b	17%	c	9%
	g				g	17%	e	
<i>Som Sii</i>	d	36%	c	4%	g	22%	c	8%
	a'	24%	b		a'	19%	d	6%
	g	13%			b	19%	b'	
					e		g	
					b'			

Tone-slot behaviour in *lam som* largely mirrors that of *lam siphandon*. However, the figures for *lam som* show greater differentiation between those tones commencing at higher relative pitches in speech (T1 and T4) with those of a lower relative pitch (T5). The higher relative tone contours occur at higher musical pitches than do the lower relative tone contours, as Table 7 shows clearly. The greater differentiation of lexical tone and musical pitch is most likely due to the slower tempo at which the text is delivered, giving the *mohlam* more time to fully articulate the differences between tones, possibly resulting in less tone neutralisation throughout the text.

Example 8 illustrates the use of pitch  $\underline{d}$  in the T1 slot at the end of *kòon aan* line 3 in *lam som*. This example also provides further illustration of coordinated tones within a line. Note that consecutive occurrences of T2 seek the highest pitch in the line, and are followed by a coordinated melisma on T4. The short syllable with T2 /ka2/, appears not to be coordinated, however, since this is a linking particle it is unlikely that it would realise its tone in this construction in normal speech. It is tones such as these which are less likely to be coordinated with the melody.

Example 8: Typical Tone-Pitch Matching for T1 ( $\underline{d}$ ) and T4 ( $\underline{a'}$ ) in *Lam Som* (Som Sii)



**Line 3**  
 ມື່ນ ຈັ່ ໃ ເ ສົ ສີ ອາ ອາ ບໍ່ ຫຼາ ປີ ກະ ຕາມ ອໍ່  
*mèn1 cang1 daj3 som3 sii3 khòng2 khòj2 nòng4 laaj3 pii6 ka2 taam3 jaa1*  
 [nonetheless, I shall wait for you, many years it doesn't matter]

In Table 8 below, the tone-slot/pitch correspondences reflect the narrower vocal range used in *khap neum*. Only three pitches occur regularly with the three different tone contours in the tone-slots. The greater amount of pitch sharing between different tone contours in *khap neum* suggests that the genre's melodic shape is conventionalised to a greater degree than

are the melodic shapes of the southern genres. Note that in *khap ngeum*, the highest and lowest pitches of the scale (a, g, a') occur only rarely in these slots because the *mohlam* nearly always employ *kham sòj* syllables, rather than *thoo* tone-slots, to carry the melismas at section-end cadences and other ornamentations.

Example 9: *Kòdn aan* Line 3 in *Khap Ngeum* Showing Narrow Vocal Range (Acaan Sing)



ໂອ່ ບ ອີກ ອັບ ບຶ່ງ ກໍລະນີ ດີ ຮ້າຍ ທັນ ການ ເພີ່ນ ໄດ້ ຊ່ອຍ
oo nòò2 iik5 an3 nùng1 kòò3 la1 nui2 dii3 <b>haaj4</b> than2 kaan3 pheen1 daj4 <b>sòòj1</b>
[And another thing, in good or bad cases, any time he'll help you]

Table 8: Tone-Slot/Pitch Correspondence in *Khap Ngeum*

	<i>êk</i> tone-slot				<i>thoo</i> tone-slot			
	T1		T5		T4		T5	
<i>Paeng Thong</i>	c	24%	c	20%	d	47%	c	12%
	d	11%	d	6%	e	27%	d	5%
	e	9%			c			
	a				a			
	g'							
<i>Acaan Sing</i>	c	30%	c	13%	e	41%	c	16%
	d	17%			d	14%	d	7%
	e	13%			c		a	
	a							

Both *mohlam* opt for the same degrees of the scale for each tone with some minor variations between them (for example, T4). Distinctions between the two main tone choices in each slot are greatest for the *thoo* tone-slot where higher pitches are reserved for T4, the tone with the higher relative pitch, providing contrast with the lower tone T5. However, the *êk* tone-slot correspondences do not show as much contrast, although T1 does occur on higher pitches at times.

Table 9 details the most common word-tone and pitch correspondences occurring on all syllables in the *khap-lam* texts analysed. For this analysis, only the initial pitch of every syllable was recorded, which means that the finalis pitches for each genre are not prominent because they normally occur as the final note of a descending interval. By counting every possible tone/pitch correspondence, both accented and unaccented syllables can be assessed for patterns of overall correspondence. The figures show that lexical tone and pitch correspondences are less systematic outside of the predetermined tone-slots. This may well be due to the inclusion of unaccented syllables in the figures which, if their tone is neutralised, are less likely to

correspond with their adjacent tone contour (see Example 8). The most useful conclusion to be drawn from these tables is that in both southern genres, T2 occurs on the highest sung pitches of both male and female rounds in the two genres. This indicates a definite preference for the tone with a high relative pitch to seek out high pitches within the melody. In *khap ngeum*, where T4 is the tone with the highest relative pitch, we find that it too occurs most frequently with a high pitch  $\underline{e}$ , although this is not the highest pitch sung in the round.

Table 9: Overall Pitch-Tone matching

		T1	T2	T3	T4	T5	T6
<i>Lam Siphandon</i>	<i>Duang Phaeng</i>	g' e	c' g' a'	e g'	e g'	e	e c
	<i>Som Sii</i>	e d	g' a'	e d	e d	c d	e d
<i>Lam Som</i>	<i>Duang Phaeng</i>	d a'	e a' d'	g a' e	g d a'	d g e	g d a'
	<i>Som Sii</i>	d a'	e a' g	a' e g	g a' e	c g	a' g e
<i>Khap Ngeum</i>	<i>Paeng Thong</i>	c e d	c e d	c a e	e d c	c e	
	<i>Acaan Sing</i>	e c d	c d e	c d e	e c d	c e	

Throughout the corpus, the majority of syllables are 'syllabic', sung either to a single pitch or to an interval in which only one pitch—the initial or final pitch—is distinct. However, there are occurrences of contour tones sung to an interval in which both the initial and final pitches are clear. In these instances, the issue of whether or not the direction of the interval matches that of the tone contour is of interest. More melismatic contours occur on accented syllables throughout the text, further supporting the probability of tone neutralisation (see Example 7). Overall, it was found that tone contour direction produces a corresponding direction in the melodic line when sung melodically. A great deal of consistency in the selection of certain tones that are sung to intervals was also noted across genres. It was also found that the two level tones, T1 and T6, were only occasionally sung to an interval but that this interval could be either ascending or descending, with little indication as to which factors determined the direction of movement. Adjacent tone contours did not appear to have any direct or consistent effect upon these intervals. Table 10 shows the most commonly occurring intervals and the direction of those intervals.

In *lam siphandon*, both *mohlam* show the same trends in the direction of the movement which predominantly matches the direction of the tone contour. The direction of movement is unstable with the two level tones, mid-level tone T1, and low-level tone T6. High-falling T2, low-rising T3 and mid-falling T4 tone contours all consistently match the direction of the interval to which they are sung. However, the low-falling T5 tone contour is consistently sung to an ascending interval by both *Duang Phaeng* and *Som Sii*. In interpreting these results, the differences of tonal system between the Champassak dialect and the Vientiane dialect are of utmost importance; the falling contour of T2 in Champassak Lao is reflected in the descending interval to which this tone is sung. A glance at Table 10 shows that the high-rising contour of T2 in Vientiane Lao is likewise realised as ascending intervals in *khap ngeum*.

Table 14: Common Tone Contour-Intervals

		T1	T2	T3	T4	T5	T6
<i>Lam Siphandon</i>	<i>Duang Phaeng</i>	a-c'↑ g-f↓	d'-c'↓ g-f↓	a-c'↑ a-d'↑	g-f↓ c'-a↓	a-c'↑ f-g↑	a-c'↑ d-c↓
	<i>Som Sii</i>	a-c'↑ a-g↓	d'-g↓ a-f↓	a-c'↑ g-a↑	g-d↓ a-f↓	f-g↑	g-a↑ a-d↓
<i>Lam Som</i>	<i>Duang Phaeng</i>	d-e↑ g-e↓	e-d↓ a'-g↓	g-a'↑	b-a↓ g-e↓	a'-b'↑	g-a' ↑ d-e↑ b'-a↓
	<i>Som Sii</i>	g-b'↑ a'-b'↑	e-d↓	g-a'↑ d-e↑	b-a↓	g-b'↑	d-e↑ e-d↓
<i>Khap Ngeum</i>	<i>Paeng Thong</i>	c-a↓ d-a↓	c-d↑ d-e↑	a-d↑ c-a↓	d-a↓ e-d↓	c-a↓	
	<i>Acaan Sing</i>	c-e↑ d-e↑	d-e↑ c-d↑	c-d↑ c-a↓	e-d↓ d-c↓	c-a↓ d-c↓	

The size of interval exhibits more variation than does its direction. In keeping with the overall interval patterns throughout the verses both *mohlam* use small intervals, mostly minor thirds and seconds, although there is a single occurrence of a descending fifth by Som Sii. Duang Phaeng is the more consistent of the two, using minor thirds and seconds in both directions, whereas Som Sii's patterns appear to be more random. Both *mohlam* sing the ascending interval on tone contour T3, using the same degrees of the scale, a-c'. This also occurs in relation to the most common interval for T1, but this is less significant as T1 is a level tone.

The matching of tone contour and interval size is much more precise in *khap ngeum*, in which both *mohlam* employ the same intervals based upon the same degree of the scale they are singing (see Table 10). Seconds, minor thirds, and fourths are the predominant intervals with minor thirds only used on descending intervals. As in the southern genres, the tones with rising and falling contours, T2, T3 and T4 consistently occur with an interval in the corresponding direction. Examples 11-12 below, show the realisations of T2 and T4 in *khap ngeum* and *lam siphandon*. For mid-rising T3 on a melismatic syllable, see Example 7.

Example 10: Coordinated Melismas to High-Rising T2, and High-Falling T4, Tone Contours in *Khap Ngeum* (Paeng Thong)



Example 11: Coordinated Melismas to High-Falling T2, and Mid-Falling T4, Tone Contours in *Lam Siphandon* (Duang Phaeng)



However, both *mohlam* occasionally use a descending interval with low-rising tone T3. Low-falling tone T5 is always sung to a descending interval, usually reaching the finalis. However, the high-level tone T1, is sung to descending intervals by Paeng Thong, whereas Acaan Sing uses ascending intervals but the total number of occurrences was very low. The high degree of tone/pitch correspondences in *khap ngeum* suggests that the melody in this genre may be conventionalised, or fixed, to a greater degree than the southern genres.

### Conclusion

Previous studies of tone/pitch correspondences have observed that one hundred percent correspondence is extremely rare, even in song types where the melody is fixed and tone/pitch correspondence is high.<sup>39</sup> The above analysis shows that Lao *khap-lam* vocal music exhibits definite correspondences of lexical tone and melody, but that these are only partially systematic. During my field research in Laos, I asked many *mohlam* to explain how they determined melody when they sang. Their responses, all similar, are best summed up by the words of Acaan Som, a well-known performer of *khap ngeum*, who simply stated that melody 'goes according to the language' (*man paj taam phaasaa*).<sup>40</sup> This paper has examined some of the structures of the sung texts and then related them to musical elements of the three genres examined. The analysis has shown that *mohlam* manipulate the conventionalised structure of *kòdn aan* poetry with its predetermined tone-slots in each poetic line. In addition, *mohlam* show distinct preferences towards particular tone contours on all accented syllables within *kòdn aan* structure; evidence of further conventionalisation. This conventionalised tone structure provides a series of signposts for the *mohlam* as they sing, a conclusion borne out by the consistent correspondences of tone and pitch in these syllables.

The fundamental question of exactly how *mohlam* generate melody remains unanswered. This article has shown that the fixed tone-slots in *kòdn aan* poetry will be a useful point from which to commence future examinations. Future researchers will need to compare the lexical tone-melody relationships of *kòdn aan* with those occurring in verses based upon other structures, such as the *kòdn fuang* verses which typify the dancing sections of *lam siphandon* performance. Also requiring further consideration is the coordination of melody between adjacent tones, taking into account the neutralisation of some tones. This may well mean individual syllables in a melodic phrase have differing degrees of melodic importance depending upon whether their tone is fully realised or not. This final problem can only be solved by accurate analysis of acoustic measurements of the sung text, perhaps with a spoken version of the same text as a control.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Herbert C. Purnell, 'Lexical Tone and Musical Pitch in an Iu Mien Yao Wedding Song,' *Selected Reports in Ethnomusicology* 9 (1992): 61–80.

George List, 'Speech Melody and Song Melody in Central Thailand,' *Ethnomusicology* 5.1 (1961): 16–32; Yung, 'Creative Processes in Cantonese Opera.'

<sup>40</sup> Acaan Som, interview at Ban Pak Kanyung, Vientiane Province, Lao PDR, 13 August 1999.

<sup>41</sup> See Phil Rose, 'Sybor Klog—A Musical and Linguistic Description of Tibetan Spelling Chant' (unpublished ms, Australian National University, 1998).