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Sounding Civilization: Race and Sovereignty in the Imperial Music of Siam

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By

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Abstract

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My dissertation accounts for the sonic history of an absolute monarchy—the kingdom of Siam under Chulalongkorn—in the decades around 1900. In the wake of its defeat in the Franco-Siamese War of 1893, Siam was in crisis over the racial and civilizational standing of its regional empire against encroaching European colonization across Southeast Asia. This study examines the way the monarchy employed listening, criticism, and emulation of European musical practices to assert sovereignty and to negotiate colonial strategies of racialization. The musical reforms cultivated at court portrayed the Siamese elite as cosmopolitan equals to courtiers of the great monarchies of the world. At the same time, the changes in musical thought and practice at court magnified the ethnic difference between Bangkok as a royal center (the locus of the cosmic glory of the king) and Siam's own rural peripheries (the realm of "lesser" ethnicities vulnerable to French and British takeover). I also examine the strategies by which the monarchy fashioned itself as interimperial listeners – listening from the situated space between empires as judges of both Siamese and European music practices – and as colonial intellectuals eager to adopt and harness, rather than resist, European music theoretical discourses of racial hierarchy.

Each of the four chapters focuses on a different mode of musical reform enacted as efforts of racialized self-invention that balanced between satisfying traditional Siamese cosmology and European colonial approval. These reforms in musical practice and thought, routed through the underlying rhetoric of race and civilization, illustrate from the Siamese perspective the commensurability of sonic spectacle as an index of civilizational and racial excellence in situations of colonial contest. While the music history addressed here centers Siam's actions in response to European colonialism, I stress that these practices were not enacted as subaltern efforts of anticolonial resistance, but as a waning monarchy's bid to wrest the markers of sovereign power in a newfound global-colonial order.

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Introduction

When King Chulalongkorn of Siam was received at the Brunswick Palace in 1907, he was met with a lengthy and lavish series of entertainments.[1] There was a tour of the town's sugar factory, a parade of the royal stables, a stroll through the estate gardens, a ballet at the state theater, and a choir concert of over six hundred musicians: an impressive array typical for the entertainment of visiting dignitaries, though with personal touches clearly meant for a distinguished visitor from the non-Western world. The ballet, to Chulalongkorn's pleasure, incorporated choreography involving the Siamese flag depicting a white elephant in royal regalia. The visit's culmination was a much-touted display of song, as Chulalongkorn recounted:

> According to the program there was to be a voice recital after the feast. The doors to the room where the concert was to take place were tightly guarded. When we finished the feast and entered the hall, there was only a gramophone. I heard a few songs and then left.[2]

Two weeks later, on his way to Hamburg, Chulalongkorn made a detour to Berlin to shop at the brand-new *Kaufhaus des Westens*. After "circling the mall three times" he decided to purchase his own "little squealy thing" – his name for the gramophone. The purchase was not a novelty to furnish his Bangkok palace, but to accompany him during the rest of his tour. The machine served to pass the time in "barren Hamburg," where the king listened to his favorite recordings of Siamese opera, his homesickness assuaged by the voice of his eminent court singers such as Mom Somcheen. "I listened to these three discs every day until I've committed them to memory. Ever since I arrived [in Hamburg] I've only listened to these Thai songs, never European songs."[3] The discs featuring Mom Somcheen did not come from very far away. They were pressed in Hanover by the Gramophone Company with a double logo: the familiar trademark "recording angel" on one side, two Siamese angels on another (see Figures 0.1 and 0.2).

In accounts reporting his travels among the courts and governments of Europe to his courtiers in Siam, Chulalongkorn often portrayed himself in such contrasting ways. One moment he was fully delighting in the lavish experiences shown to him of the European palace, in another mildly offended, bored, or amused at the naivete of his European host. His host's expectation that the gramophone-recital would please the king had fallen short. Chulalongkorn, with polite brevity, reminded his readers that their king

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[1] The king was a guest of Duke Johann Albrecht zu Mecklenburg, whose hospitality Siam was able to return in February 1910, just months before Chulalongkorn's death. A letter from Chulalongkorn to Narathip Praphanphong discusses the duke's "adult patience" toward Siamese opera: "it would not be a miracle if he wished to see two nights of performances." Letter dated August 15, 1909, in Chulalongkorn, *Samnao phraratchahatthalekha Phrabat Somdet Phra Chunlachomklao Chaoyuhua mi phraratchathan Krommaphra Narathippraphanphong* (Bangkok: Rongphim Sophon Phiphatthanakon, 1931), 28-29.

[2] Letter dated August 10, 1907 in Chulalongkorn, *Klai Ban* (Bangkok: Khuru Sapha, 1954), 217. While these letters were couched as intimate correspondence between royalty, they were also widely shared among a public audience. See Maurizio Peleggi, *Lords of Things: the Fashioning of the Siamese Monarchy's Modern Image* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002), 36.

[3] Letter dated September 2, 1907 in Chulalongkorn, *Klai Ban,* 301-302.

had long been accustomed to the acousmatic marvel of recorded sound. Indeed the duality of both European and Siamese angels on the record faces suggest as much. Not only was such technology present in Siam, but Siamese songs were already reproduced on the gramophone.

Figures 0.1 and 0.2: Two record faces, both featuring the singer Mom Somcheen.

The performative balancing acts of the Siamese elite—juggling between their delight at Western forms of cultural splendor, the reflexive anxiety at desiring to incorporate such forms, and the need to display Siamese authenticity—are the concern of this dissertation. By the turn of the twentieth century, the entire region of Southeast Asia, save for Siam, had fallen to European colonial rule. Elevating the civilizational standing of the Siamese monarchy was important at this time as race thinking was a major tool of imperial control. Britain and France utilized the discourses of civilizational excellence, racial purity, and the right to rule as justification for colonial expansion across Southeast Asia. These strategies introduced into Southeast Asian imperial dynamics the idea that a nation needed to justify its sovereignty through displays of racial-civilizational unity. At the close of the Franco-Siamese War in 1893, Siam had lost many of its territories to French and British control, a geopolitical seizure backed by unequal treaties and international law. Siam was surrounded on all sides, with French Indochina to the East, British Burma to the West, and British Malaya to the South. Charting a careful path through the European perception of Siamese monarchy on a racial-civilizational hierarchy, in this case, was pertinent to Siam's colonial survival at this time.[4]

However, the colonial history of nineteenth-century Siam is not simply one of victimhood, but of direct competition between Siam and European powers. Itself a prior colonizing force in Southeast Asia, Siam competed directly with European interests in

[4] On the Siamese localization of European practices, see Rachel V. Harrison and Peter A. Jackson, eds., *The Ambiguous Allure of the West: Traces of the Colonial in Thailand* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press; Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010).

attempts to retain and expand its regional empire.[5] Thai historian Thongchai Winichakul has demonstrated how the Siamese court coined the rhetoric of *siwilai* (civilization) as a philological conduit to assimilate Euro-imperial rhetoric and to stake out a position for Siam in colonial modernity.[6] The history of European imperialism across Southeast Asia, then, is contiguous with the history of Siam's decline as a regional empire.

Race and Ethnicity as Colonial Contest

As French and British imperial powers engulfed Southeast Asia, Prince Devawongse, Siam's Minister of Foreign Affairs and half-brother to Chulalongkorn, described a new register of colonial threat that undermined the traditional balance of powers in the region:

> For the past hundred years the Kingdom of Siam found rivals in our vicinity only in the Burmese and the Yuan. The tradition of governance for these kingdoms is one and the same as ours. It is impossible to indicate the precise boundaries of our lands, for we do not maintain boundaries as is done in Europe. … When we conquer a rival city, we do not seek to restore and govern it, but rightfully herd its inhabitants to our capital as slaves. There did not exist the judgment, as known today, that such enslavement was wrong. The extent of what we might call "international relations" among us was the old saying "whoever held power, wields it" and "whoever governed, governs." … Today, we find that our kingdom borders the two great forces of Europe in the most burdensome of positions, for we are the cushion of their clash.[7]

The shift in the methods of "international relations" that Devawongse identified would be exacerbated in the ensuing years. After Siam's 1893 defeat in the Franco-Siamese War, with Bangkok blockaded by French gunboats, Chulalongkorn signed a treaty yielding the Laotian and Cambodian populations within his kingdom to the French protectorate. The legal criteria that determined who was Laotian or Cambodian, however, were not dependent on geography, citizenship, or voluntary identity. They were based on colonial ethnology carried out by French officials who prescribed and redescribed the boundaries of ethnic belonging in Southeast Asia.[8]

The decades around 1900 saw a litany of ethnological publications claiming that the Siamese of Bangkok were a hybrid variation of the Lao, who, by right of racial purity, ought to be liberated from their impure Siamese overlords. In 1885 François Garnier categorized the Lao and Siamese as tribes of equal status within a broader Lao race. By 1895 Auguste Pavie similarly proposed a racial formulation that placed Lao and Siamese

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[5] See Tamara Loos, *Subject Siam: Family, Law, and Colonial Modernity in Thailand* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 2006), and Maurizio Peleggi, *Lords of Things: Fashioning the Siamese Monarchy's Modern Image* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002).

[6] Thongchai Winichakul, "The Quest for Siwilai: A Geographical Discourse of Civilizational Thinking in Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth-Century Siam," *Journal of Asian Studies* 59/3 (2000): 528-549.

[7] My translation from *Wikrittakan Sayam Ro So 112: kan sia dindaen fang sai Maenam Khong*, ed. Chiraphon Sathapanawatthana (Bangkok: Srinakarinwirot Prasanmit University, 1980), 422–23.

[8] See David Streckfuss, "The Mixed Colonial Legacy in Siam: Origins of Thai Racialist Thought, 1890-1910" in *Autonomous Histories, Particular Truths,* ed. Laurie Sears (Madison: University of Wisconsin, Madison, Center for Southeast Asian Studies, 1993), 123-53.

as equal branches of the Thai race, with the caveat that the Siamese was created by Thai intermixtures with Chinese stock. Pierre Nicolas theorized in 1900 that the Thai were "mountain Lao," an offshoot of the true Lao race, while in the same year Francois Tournier described the Thai as a tainted hybrid, arguing that only Lao were a "pure race with Aryan elements."[9] The methods used by these imperial officers and ethnologists ranged from conjecture to phrenology to climatic measurement. The British consul to Bangkok advised the Siamese court that "under this French method, it would be found that the whole of Thailand would come *de jure* under French rule without any annexation necessary … even the king himself could be proven to be Cambodian."[10] Siam was bound to lose further territories to French control under the 1893 treaty, if it, too, did not embrace this new racialized paradigm of colonial contest.

As Devawongse explained, according to the traditional hierarchy of the kingdoms in Southeast Asia, the conquered were conquered, and slaves were slaves. Concepts such as race, ethnicity, nation, or the human and its right to self-governance were not stable, given categories in anticolonial struggle, but were localized to Siam in the project of consolidating political power. Before the threat of French control over Siam's Lao-dominated northern territories, the question of whether the king of Siam could be proven by scientific means to be Laotian or Cambodian would have been both absurd and trivial. But, bound by unequal treaties and international law, the Bangkok court found that the control of knowledge about ethnicity and racial essence was a foreign standard of imperial conquest that it urgently needed to master. Bangkok needed to demonstrate to audiences across the colonial spectrum that the core of Siam was developmentally distinct from its peripheries. The means of escaping the trap of colonial legality was to prove that the Siamese monarchy was not racially impure, and that its members were more than mere regional overlords, but rather cosmopolitan equals to the sovereign powers of the European world order.

*

This dissertation accounts for the sonic history of an absolute monarchy: the kingdom of Siam under Chulalongkorn in the decades around 1900. This was a moment when the monarchy was in crisis over the racial and civilizational standing of its regional empire against encroaching European colonization in Southeast Asia. The study examines the way in which the monarchy employed listening, (mis)hearing, criticism, and emulation of European music as discursive sites for self-fashioning sovereignty and negotiating colonial strategies of racialization. These reforms in court music worked to portray the Siamese elite as cosmopolitan equals to the great monarchies of the world. At the same time, they magnified the ethnic difference between Bangkok as a royal center (where resided the cosmic glory of the king) and the kingdom's rural peripheries, which were vulnerable to French and British takeover. I also examine the strategies by which the monarchy fashioned itself as interimperial listeners – listening from the situated space between empires as judges of both Siamese and European music practices – and as colonial intellectuals eager to adopt and harness, rather than resist, European music theoretical discourses of racial hierarchy. While this history centers Siam's actions in

[9] See Streckfuss, "The Mixed Colonial Legacy in Siam," 126–29.
[10] Quoted in Streckfuss, "The Mixed Colonial Legacy in Siam," 137.

resisting European colonialism, I stress that these practices were not enacted as subaltern efforts of anticolonial resistance, but as a waning monarchy's bid to ex-appropriate the markers of sovereign power in a newfound global-colonial order. These reforms in musical practice and thought, routed through the underlying rhetoric of race and civilization, illustrate from the Siamese perspective the commensurability of sonic spectacle as an index of civilizational and racial excellence in situations of colonial contest.

Histories of Thailand

It has long been a point of pride for historians of Thailand that the country was the only Southeast Asian nation to resist European colonization.[11] Such narratives emphasize Thailand's status as an uncolonized or non-colonial state, arguing that Chulalongkorn's modernizing reforms in government, law, and policy (his *siwilai* or "civilizing" project) were necessary, heroic measures that saved the kingdom through minimizing the preconditions for colonization. English-language scholarship in recent decades, however, has complicated the much-vaunted claim to sovereign status, naming the state instead as cryptocolonial, semicolonial, and ideological-colonial, to cite only three of many concepts applied to trouble inherited historiographical frameworks.[12] Leading the call is Thongchai Winichakul, whose studies subvert the nationalist narrative, arguing that the *siwilai* project was an attempt by Siamese elites to attain and confirm the relative superiority of Siam as the traditional sovereign power in Southeast Asia.[13] The advent of Siamese modernity, then, was not so much a heroic effort of anticolonial resistance, but a bid to gain strategic entry into a new global order in which Western Europe was at once imperial threat and locus of desire.

There is, in short, a wealth of scholarship – in the realms of policy, economics, and law – that shows how Siam's indigenous cosmology was refashioned as modern rationality.[14] And yet, such accounts have not made room for the intimacies of cultural production that I address in my dissertation – music performance, operatic depictions,

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[11] For early examples of such nationalist self-inscription, see Damrong Rajanubhab, *Thai Rop Phama* [Thai Wars with the Burmese] (Bangkok: Khlangwitthaya, 1951) originally published 1917, detailing the many wars between Siam and Burma from the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries. See also, in English, Prince Damrong's "The Founding of Ayuthia [sic]," *Journal of the Siam Society* 1/0 (1904): 7-10. For scholarship on this topic see Thongchai Winichakul, "Siam's Colonial Conditions and the Birth of Thai History" in Volker Grabowsky ed., *Southeast Asian Historiography: unravelling the Myths* (Bangkok: River Books, 2011), 20-43; and Patrick Jory, "Thai Historical Writing" in Axel Schneider and Daniel Woolf eds., *The Oxford History of Historical Writing* Vol. 5, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 539-558.

[12] In 1978, Benedict Anderson already challenged the "alleged uniqueness" narrative of Thai Studies as "celebrated, rather than studied," "Studies of the Thai state: the state of Thai studies," in Eliezer B. Ayal ed., *The state of Thai studies, (*Athens : Ohio University Center for International Studies, Southeast Asia Program, 1978). The most salient model for my purposes is analysis of Siam as a cryptocolony, a state which aggressively fashions its policy, government, law, and cultural practices to suit foreign models. Such states retain their nominal independence from colonial threat, but at the cost of humiliating effective economic dependence upon European systems of modern governance. See Michael Herzfeld, "The Absent Presence: Discourses of Crypto-Colonialism," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 101, No. 4 (Fall 2002).

[13] See Thongchai Winichakul, "The Quest for Siwilai," *Journal of Asian Studies* 59, No. 3 (August 2000), 528-549; and *Siam Mapped* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994).

[14] For excellent examples see Maurizio Peleggi, *Lords of Things*, Tamara Loos, *Subject Siam*, and Patrick Jory, *A History of Manners and Civility in Thailand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

music theorization, and the discourse of song – as the sites in which the threat of European colonial domination was registered, resisted, and (re)constituted.

In order to account for cultural production in the advent of Siamese modernity, my dissertation troubles existing models in studies of music and colonialism by recognizing the colonial ambivalence of the Siamese perspective. Addressing the issue of colonial difference, Olivia Bloechl has been influential in demonstrating musicology's persistence in foregrounding the historical agency of European individuals.[15] Not only has European subjectivity often been preconceived as monolithic; the musicological means developed to address the Other have been stuck in limited, redemptive methods. Recent studies focused on colonial subjectivity have often operated according to the paradigm of redeeming subaltern vocality from devaluation as noise or animality by the colonizer's discourse, or rescuing it from appropriation and exoticist transformation in the imperial imagination. This stance has too often prompted musicologists to conceive of their work as beginning and ending with laying bare the imperialist underpinnings of exoticism/Orientalism, or else providing a radical contra-ontology to the imperial framework in which indigenous vocality/musicality is revealed to be autonomous and coherent all along.[16]

As an alternative to current models, I offer a music history of colonial encounter that is rife with mutual incomprehension, mishearing, and strategic posturing. Taking up the call to uninstall a bounded idea of "Europe" as the subject and object of musicological knowledge, this dissertation is not about an Eastern nation responding to Western imperialism through nationalist mimicry. Rather, it is about an empire-building effort which competed with concurrent European and non-European imperial powers – through commensurable sonic spectacle – within and outside its realm. The dissertation is a call, then, to rethink the history of nineteenth-century colonialisms, not just as subaltern response to imperial action, but as a series of competitions between empire-building centers. While the center/margin binary has been a well-worn historiographic concept contested by postcolonial studies, prominently in Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe,* I argue for its usefulness in conceptualizing Bangkok's own spatialized understanding of its civilizational status. Accordingly, I use "Europe" and "the West" in this dissertation to refer to the Siamese elite's situated understanding of such spaces as always existing between the imagined and real. On the other hand, I use "Euro-American" to refer to the academic sphere of present-day scholarship in which my writing is situated. If the case studies I present here convey contradictory purviews of "Europe", it is to illustrate all the more the situatedness of a Siamese viewpoint from which Europe was less a knowable imperial monolith, and more a collection of ideas that wavered between a desired occidental exotic and an oppressive colonial force.

Deemphasizing the overriding determinism of Western European music in colonial histories, I also propose a counternarrative to scholarship that portrays Western

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[15] Olivia Bloechl, *Native American Song at the Frontiers of Early Modern Music* (Cambridge University Press, 2008).

[16] On these topics see for example Taylor, *Beyond Exoticism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Locke, *Musical Exoticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Sheppard, *Revealing Masks* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Karantonis and Robinson ed., *Opera Indigène* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011); Wisenthal ed., *A Vision of the Orient* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006); Irving, *Colonial Counterpoint* (Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 2010); and Baker, *Imposing Harmony* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

tonality as an imperial force.[17] While David Irving has crucially demonstrated a model of colonial music history in which non-European musical practices became "contrapuntalized – that is, certain Western melodic and harmonic structures were absorbed into them – so they could be accepted within colonial frameworks" as a means of evading eradication against European imperial domination, I offer a history of colonial change vis-à-vis non-European music practices in which European harmony and equal temperament are not overdetermined as part and parcel of the ideological toolkit for imperial domination.[18]

As the chapters in this dissertation show, Siamese musics were not "contrapuntalized" in the face of European imperialism. Instead, musicians selectively incorporated or vehemently rejected European sonic elements in a balancing act between cosmopolitan legibility and racialized Siamese authenticity. Siamese music transformed in response to the idea of European vertical harmony, but the outcome was not to adopt or incorporate such vertical arrangement. This insistence on the ability to select and choose reflects Siam's institutional power, both cosmological and material. My aim is not to purge tonality of its colonial implications, but rather to think through the strategic decisions made in a musical tradition that overhauled its outward presentation in reaction to colonial threat, and yet refused to change the premises of its musical organization and practice. This refusal reveals the limits of musical localization in the cryptocolonial framework, especially in the face of comparative musicologists who analyzed such practices to determine developmental distance from European excellence (see Chapter 3).

To the extent that musicologists have engaged with the history of Siam, the focus has fallen on the seventeenth-century emissary exchanges between the courts of King Narai and Louis XIV.[19] While this scholarship has effectively paid homage to the Siamese contribution made to the music of Lully or Delalande, my work departs from the framework of "cultural exchange" to assume a different relationship to the Western art canon. Although my narratives of Siamese musical diplomacy may begin in or pass through Paris or Genova, they do not route back to Europe as far-East exotica.[20] The point is not to close the loop of influence and prove the extent of Siamese contributions to a sovereign Western art canon. Instead, it is to show how colonial modern concepts about racialization are routed through Siamese interactions with European musical practice back into Siamese ideas about the ability to know reality through art, and to show what varieties of essential knowledge can be extracted through acts of listening and describing music.

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[17] See the chapter "Colonialism, modernity, and music: notes on the rise of tonality and opera" in Timothy Taylor, *Beyond Exoticism,* and Kofi Agawu, "Tonality as a Colonizing Force in Africa," in eds. Ronald Radano and Tejumola Olaniyan, *Audible Empire: Music, Global Politics, Critique* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 334-356.

[18] See Irving, *Colonial Counterpoint,* 2-3.

[19] See for example, David Irving, "Lully in Siam: music and diplomacy in French–Siamese cultural exchanges, 1680–1690," *Early Music*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (2012), 393–420, and Jittapim Yamprai, "Michel-Richard de Lalande and the Airs of Siam," *Early Music,* Vol. 41, No. 3 (2013), 421-437. For an application of sound studies to this period, see Downing Thomas, "The Sounds of Siam: Sonic Environments of Seventeenth-Century Franco-Siamese Diplomacy," *French Historical Studies* 45/2 (2022), 195-218.

[20] On the politics of intra-Asia cultural flows that do not culminate back to Europe, see Iwabuchi, Muecke, and Thomas eds., *Rogue Flows* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004).

Recognition and Colonial Approval: Toward a Global Music History

In *Our Neighbors, Ourselves,* Homi Bhabha theorizes the stakes of the politics of recognition through a primal scene of colonial encounter, a vignette from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), in which the protagonist Charles Marlow stops to notice the pained visage of an ailing Congolese man with a piece of white fabric tied around his neck.[21] Offering the man a biscuit, Marlow focuses his attention on the scrap of cloth; the white man becomes absorbed in pondering its meanings: "Where did he get it? Was it a badge—an ornament—a charm—a propitiatory act? Was there any idea at all connected with it? It looked startling round his black neck, this bit of white thread from beyond the seas."[22] This the moment of recognition when the colonial Other becomes human, when interiority is recognized—in this case—through the commonality of sartorial practice. The sight of the native man's face initially moves Marlow to an act of charity. But it is the latter's reflection on the fact of the white fabric that activates the process of recognition, raising the possibility that this man might be a subject who possesses a belief system unknown to Marlow.

Bhabha focuses on this moment as an unsettling experience, disturbing the recognizer's sense of self: "In reaching out to the specific thought of the other and grappling with what is not entirely intelligible within it … there lies the possibility of identifying with the unconscious of the other, and extending oneself in the direction of the neighbor's alterity and unknowability."[23] Recognition, then, makes legible the gap of difference, but does not fully traverse it. The native man's interiority is not granted *a priori* as a human right, but ushered in through a moment of Marlow's pondering the man's "startling" sartorial preference. The white thread around the neck serves as the mediating structure that enables the moment of recognition: its presence points toward an as-yet-unknown system of meaning, but does not, in itself, index or disclose the content of those meanings.

Marlow's discomfort at being unable to grasp the native man's belief system offers an opportunity to reflect on the relationship of music studies to the colonial archive. Bhabha's analysis places both the agency of recognition and the onus to identify with the colonial Other entirely upon the party in power. The subjectivity of the recognizer is the locus of colonial discomfort, leaving that of the recognized "unconscious" absent in a vignette of silent abject alterity. Marlow does all the thinking and feeling; the native man lies dying.

This dissertation moves away from Bhabha's framework of emphasizing the subjectivity of the recognizer, to pay attention to the ways in which the colonial Other becomes a strategic agent for manufacturing his own recognition. In Bhabha's example, Marlow is the agent who recognizes the native man's interiority through the white fabric that indexes an underlying belief system. In the following chapters, I trace various scenes in which members of the Siamese elite transform or reshape Siamese music as an offering to Europe's imperial ear, an offering of colonial approval that strategically measures up to the moment of encounter. The framework of music, here, whether it be an operatic

[21] Homi Bhabha, *Our Neighbors, Ourselves: Contemporary Reflections on Survival* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011).
[22] As quoted in Bhabha, *Our Neighbors, Ourselves,* 8.
[23] Bhabha, *Our Neighbors, Ourselves,* 9.

event, a discourse of music theory, or sheet music to a national song, serves as the recognizable symbol—Bhabha's fabric around the neck—through which Siamese civilizational excellence can be represented, all in terms of a knowledge system legible to European cognition.

I have been drawn to reflect on the work of invented signifiers and systems that demand recognition, rather than the affective qualities of the fleeting moment of encounter itself. This shift relocates the locus of colonial discomfort away from the experience of European officers in foreign lands (Marlow's unsettled sense of self as he recognizes the native man's unknowable interiority) to the work that subjects of colonialism themselves undertook upon their entrance to the global-colonial register. Histories of music and colonialism, operating often in a prefabricated paradigm of postcolonial struggle, frequently fail to account for these agents who acted strategically to restructure their musical and sonic selves in a bid toward global power. My approach centers the discomfort of colonial targets (as reactive thinkers rather than unknowable subalterns) in preparing a sense of self that is "worthy" of recognition.

Much recent Euro-American scholarship on music and colonialism has been written from the perspective of the European-language archive.[24] Such histories center the experience of European imperial officers in foreign lands, often accompanied by laments for the dearth of documents preserved in non-Western archives.[25] The accessibility of the European-language imperial archive to musicologists means that the colonial Other does not always answer back in the same terms. Only very rarely do we discover a colonial archive that answers back, as it does in the case of Siam. However, this archive does not present autonomous or coherent underlying ontologies to counteract Europe's colonial fantasy. Siam's response to European imperialism constitutes a recursion of assimilated imperial forms rather than its rejection.

The ambivalence as to Siam's relation with colonial resistance serves as an opportunity to reflect on ontological questions concerning the ideas of "globe" and "music" that are routinely posed as core problems for conceptualizing the emerging field of global music history.[26] The impossibility of the vantage point of the globe has been a vexed issue: nobody lives at the level of the globe. It exists as a knowable space only through visualizing and virtualizing technologies like the tabletop globe and the internet.[27] I suggest that one method to approach this problem of contingency is through the experience of historical actors who find themselves having to adapt to being thrust upon the register of the globe.

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[24] Olivia Bloechl diagnosed this issue more than a decade ago in *Native American Song at the Frontiers of Early Modern Music*, 23.

[25] See Jen-yen Chen's response to Thomas Irvine's claim that there are no archival sources that describe the eighteenth-century soundscape of Canton from Chinese perspectives; Chen, "Listening to China: Sound and the Sino-Western Encounter, 1770-1839 by Thomas Irvine (review)," *Music and Letters* 102 (2021): 158-160.

[26] See Daniel Chua, "Global Musicology," *New Sound* 50/2 (2017): 12-16 and his "Global Musicology: A Keynote without a Key," *Acta Musicologica* 94/1 (2022): 109-126; see also Sanela Nikolic, "Five Claims for Global Musicology," *Acta Musicologica* 93/2 (2021): 219-35.

[27] See Gayatri Spivak, "Planetarity," in her *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005) and Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021).

Many global music historians have been fascinated by the fleeting moment of encounter and the affects provoked in that encounter, but such accounts tend to privilege the experience of European officers in foreign lands and ignore the actions and the subjectivity of the local population, who acted strategically to restructure their own musical identities in a bid for "global" power.[28] Why not turn our attention to the signifiers and systems invented by the subjects of colonialism at the moment of their inscription into the global-colonial register? To do so centers the discomfort of colonial targets (as reactive thinkers rather than unknowable subalterns) in preparing a sense of self that is "worthy" of recognition. Instead of celebrating the irreducible value of difference, such work attends to the ways in which colonial Others became the strategic agents of their own recognition.

To put it another way, global music history could become a home for histories that recognize the discomfort of how certain non-European music practices navigate their entry into a highly provincial global sphere, a history of actors weighing and balancing the guises of their own music according to a politics of colonial approval. This would mean investigating seriously the conditions by which non-European musical practices were codified into legible forms of knowledge. It would mean examining how the particular histories of a musical practice were included – how they gained entry into a global discourse of knowledge production. The case studies of Siamese music history presented in the chapters that follow do not constitute a "resistant" indigenous knowledge, one offered as a supplement or corrective to present-day music studies. Instead, I narrate a history of self-unsettled reflections on what it meant to willingly incorporate oneself into European imperial forms of knowledge production. Our writing of new global-colonial histories of musical encounter will have to grapple with these uneasy scenes of imperial intimacy, where the colonial target comes to covet the tools of the colonizer as a strategic means of self-conception.

Dissertation Overview

Chapter 1, "Voice, Race, and Imperial Ethnology," concerns the Bangkok court's operatic depiction and racialized embodiment of the kingdom's northern periphery as a tool of ethnological control.[29] The chapter examines Prince Praphanphong's *Sao Krue Fah* (1909), proudly billed as a faithful adaptation of Giacomo Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*. Adapting the racial dynamics of *Butterfly* into Siamese terms, Praphanphong portrays a tragic love story between a Bangkok lieutenant who abandons his ethnic northern wife for a more racially appropriate marriage. True to its exoticist conception, the melodies for the opera were composed through an extractive-ethnographic process in which Praphanphong observed a northern-ethnic servant who was made to sing. The extracted melodic-ethnic essence thus revoiced in the bodies of Bangkok opera performers. In the space of palace theaters, court opera served as a new means of producing knowledge about racialized subjects through dramatized ethnology. Rather

[28] East Asian studies has long questioned the portability of postcolonial theory borne from the model of resistance to the British Raj. See for example Tani Barlow ed., *Formations of Colonial Modernity in East Asia* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).

[29] A version of this chapter appears in print as an article, "Voice, Race, and Imperial Ethnology in Colonial Siam: *Madama Butterfly* at the Court of Chulalongkorn," *Opera Quarterly* 36/3-4 (2021).

than attempt to redeem the subjectivities of northern-ethnic characters, I understand the selves of these ethnicized subjects – double-Others twice assigned to "the waiting room of modernity" – as perennially receding from the colonizer's depiction. There are no authentic human figures waiting to emerge from behind the various layers of exoticist objectification. My point is not to rescue the racialized subaltern from imperial exoticism, but to map the dynamics of such depictions as they became situated according to differing regional and global colonial scales.

Chapter 2, "New Figures in the Menagerie of Colonial Listening," explores the relationship between vocality and animality as the lenses through which imperial actors – both European and Siamese – negotiated their understanding of sovereign personhood. The nineteenth-century colonial archive is littered with European descriptions condemning indigenous vocality as an animalistic howl. My inquiry inverts the zoological dynamics typical of the colonial encounter to highlight the myriad ways the Siamese elite conceived of European sonic personhood through the figure of animality. Building on the Siamese theory of *kotchalak,* or the evaluation of white elephants as a supplement to the monarch's sovereignty, I present an alternative history, one where the figure of animality becomes a positive measure of personhood—one which does not originate from within a Western evolutionist epistemology. Following snippets of travel narratives from Siamese princes touring Europe, as well as the experiences of European men in service to the Bangkok court, I argue that the Siamese elite made sense of their colonial-liminal predicament through differing registers of animalistic comparison, and through careful consideration of listening-posturing in the opera house and the concert hall, figured here as sites of colonial self-fashioning.

In Chapter 3, the dissertation turns to Siam's anxiety over the theoretical foundation of its court music: "Comparative Musicology and Colonial Survival."[30] European comparative musicologists published the first theoretical studies on Siamese music upon observing Bangkok court musicians on tour to Europe to perform at the World's Fairs of 1885 and 1900. I trace the court's response to these studies through the Siam's first journal publications on music, to examine the Bangkok elite's anxiety for the European perception of Siamese tuning as a measure of racial and civilizational standing. These Siamese studies developed a music-theoretical discourse for the approval of Europe's imperial ear, an issue that continues to preoccupy Thai music studies today. The comparativist concern with pitch organization as an index of cultural evolution and as carrier of racialized knowledge was not the one-sided concern of European intellectuals: it was internalized by Siamese intellectuals and engaged with as a matter of colonial survival. The chapter illustrates, then, the court's realization that Siamese music contained more racially coded theoretical secrets than were perceptible or conceivable to its performers.

The anxiety over Siamese musical worth is examined to different ends in Chapter 4, "Songs for the New Nation." This chapter challenges the naturalized idea that a country has a representative song in the form of its anthem through examining Siam's confrontations with this very concept. Siam's constant alterations to its national anthem, I argue, reflect Siam's fast-changing political understanding for the conception of song as a

[30] An early version of a section from this chapter is published as "On Offering Oneself to Music History: Positionalities and Perspectives from Colonial Siam" in the forum "Centering Discomfort in Global Music History," *Journal of Musicology* 40/3 (2023).

basis for constituting nationhood. For much of the nineteenth-century, Siam used the British anthem "God Save the King" in its own ceremonies in a bid to portray Siamese sovereignty as equal to that of Britain's. This practice became a matter of embarrassment, however, upon Chulalongkorn's first visits to British colonies in the 1870s amidst mounting tensions of European colonization in Southeast Asia. This diplomatic faux pas of unwittingly announcing Siam as a British colony sparked decades of intellectual discourse at court about the merits, place, and worth of certain songs as suitable for representing the kingdom at a time of massive political upheaval.

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In his essay "Global Minoritarian Culture," Homi Bhabha imagines the possibility that W.E.B. DuBois, residing in Paris in September 1907, could have happened upon a secret anticolonial meeting hosted by the exiled Indian revolutionary Bhikaji Cama.[31] A skilled colonial mimic, Cama is "at once undoubtedly modern and irreducibly Indian," adept at deploying the minoritarian strategy of taking advantage of disadvantage. Her gathering is a space for mobilizing an "alternative contramodernity" that claims the modern as its own in continuous disavowal through mimicry. Inspired by this inventive exercise, I would like to imagine, in DuBois's place, a different figure who also resided in Paris in September 1907. Were Chulalongkorn to chance upon this group of African and South Asian anticolonial radicals, how would he have reacted to this cosmopolitan crowd, whose horizon of freedom from imperialism stopped at no national border? Would he, alone in retaining his sovereignty and royal title, have fit poorly among the contingent of radical anticolonialists – in much the same way as the history of Thailand within postcolonial discourse?

[31] Homi Bhabha, "Global Minoritarian Culture" in Wai Chee Dimock and Lawrence Buell eds., *Shades of the Planet: American Literature as World Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 184-195.

1. Voice, Race, and Imperial Ethnology: *Madama Butterfly* at the Court of Chulalongkorn

Upon his May 14, 1897 arrival in Venice, King Chulalongkorn became the first monarch of Siam ever to set foot in Europe. The king visited courts and governments across the continent, collecting allies, negotiating trade and treaties, and parading the Siamese court through the halls of European palaces in an attempt to prove their status as global royalty. Between military demonstrations, banquets, and museum trips, Chulalongkorn was usually received at the local state-sponsored opera house for an evening performance. The spectacular scale and emotional affordances of European opera left the monarch in awe, and he repeatedly bemoaned the expressive shortfall of his own operatic tradition to the courtiers back home. European singing could convey cries, insanity, and rage, the king observed. Siamese singing, in comparison, was emotionally limited. "Our singing cannot convey such rage," Chulalongkorn observed, "only cries."[1]

Yet despite his assessment of the emotional intensity of European vocality, the king dismissed the possibility of training Siamese court performers in European operatic singing. As he wrote to one of his half-brothers, the court impresario prince Narathip Praphanphong:

> On the topic of opera, I think it would be impossible for our singers to train in the European manner and still retain the Siamese ensemble. The Europeans can sing over dozens of violins because they howl loudly like dogs. Against this volume, our singing sounds like mumbling, and would be entirely drowned out by the instruments. An Italian claiming to be a professor of singing has written to me, asking to apprentice two Thai students capable of speaking Italian, German, French, or English.[2] He claims that within five years these students could return and start their own schools of singing. I am not sure what to make of this. In Bangkok, only a handful of individuals have the taste to appreciate the European sound. If our students go to Italy for training, when they return, I am afraid that they would not be able to do much except howl like dogs.[3]

This snide comment made in privacy between two members of the Siamese elite demonstrates the problem of opera's aesthetic commensurability in colonial contest. From Lisbon to Moscow, the king and his entourage witnessed firsthand the privileged status of European opera as the locus of imperial pride. Yet, in its grand project to be

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[1] "This dulcet singing is difficult to achieve in our language and music, because it is sung from the chest, while our singing is from the lips. The melody can be shaped to sing as if crying, to sing as if insane, or to convey a fit of rage. Our singing cannot convey such rage, only cries." Letter dated May 14, 1907 in Chulalongkorn, *Klai Ban* (Bangkok: Khuru Sapha, 1954), 193.

[2] The "Italian professor" in question is Florentine voice teacher Isidore Braggiotti, who himself had visited Bangkok in 1898. "My great ambition is to be able to send back to Siam a beautiful, cultivated voice that would by its purity, sweetness, power, and beauty stimulate the great and wonderful art of singing… which is – so far – unknown in that magnificent country." Letter dated December 23, 1908 in Mor.Ror.5 Tor./31 (34/163), National Archives of Thailand.

[3] Letter dated April 25, 1909. Chulalongkorn, *Samnao phraratchahatthalekha Phrabat Somdet Phra Chunlachomklao Chaoyuhua mi phraratchathan Krommaphra Narathippraphanphong* (Bangkok: Rongphim Sophon Phiphatthanakon, 1931), 19–21.

accepted among the great monarchies of the world, Siam refused to incorporate European singing into its court practices. Note the king's singular rejection of the voice: Chulalongkorn's concern in this letter was not a refusal of the European operatic form, but a dilemma about the singing voice as a polarizing aesthetic phenomenon. On the one hand, Italianate singing indexed an animalistic howl; on the other, Siamese singing proffered the ineloquence and incomprehension of the mumble. From the situated perspective of interimperial listening—a listening from the space between empires—Chulalongkorn did not characterize European vocality as inherently dog-like, but rather suggested that it sounded that way to Siamese listeners. Siamese singing was not in essence an inaudible mumble, but was rendered so against the sheer volume of European opera. Such overlapping interpretations of the singing voice—its variable animality and audibility across the colonial spectrum—complicate voice and opera as unstable categories that demonstrate the gradients of subjectivity and civilizational spectacle across competing courts and kingdoms.

In a sense, Chulalongkorn's dilemma echoes the problem posed by Ana María Ochoa Gautier: "if in the new nation all were to be deemed citizens and therefore had to be politically defined as persons, what counted as a proper human voice?"[4] This dilemma plagued European colonial officials in nineteenth-century Colombia, who branded indigenous vocality as an animalistic howl—the "not yet" of pitch in the waiting room of modernity. Their accusation of the howl at once co-constitutes and denies the figure of the human, judged in distinction from the organized structures of pitch and song. In Chulalongkorn's case, however, Ochoa's perspectivist model (informed by the thinking of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro) feels insufficient for its reliance on the presumed ontological stability of the indigenous perspective, and for situating its redemptive ethics in the methodology of the present-day scholar. Here, the colonial Other himself questions the coherence of his own vocality. For Chulalongkorn, this binary politics of voice—the pitch and the howl—is unsatisfactory as an interimperial listening between European and Siamese operatic vocality: the howl's Other is not the civilized order of pitch, but the comparative inaudibility of the mumble. Neither tradition of singing succeeds in traversing the aesthetic boundary of civilizational excellence.

Such questions of legibility became crucial indices of civilization at a time when Siam faced a new kind of colonial threat from France. In the 1890s, French colonial strategy in Southeast Asia shifted from the brute force of warfare to invented discourses about civilizational hierarchy, racial purity, and the right to sovereignty.[5] Relying on imperial ethnology as legal justification, France acquired administrative control over several of Siam's territories and neighbors, backed by unjustly conceived international law. By 1900, Siam had lost much of its regional influence across Southeast Asia to French and British control: the kingdom was bounded by European imperial powers in all directions, with French Indochina to the East, British Burma to the West, and British Malaya to the South.[6] The stakes of Siamese cultural production in this context were

[4] Ana Maria Ochoa Gautier, *Aurality: Listening and Knowledge in Nineteenth-Century Colombia* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 28. See also the chapter "On Howls and Pitches."

[5] See David Streckfuss, "The Mixed Colonial Legacy in Siam: Origins of Thai Racialist Thought, 1890–1910," in Sears, Smail, eds., *Autonomous Histories, Particular Truths* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, Madison, Center for Southeast Asian Studies, 1993), 123–53.

[6] I use the more open-ended term "regional influence" here to indicate that the complexity of naming land as territory, colony, vassal city, tributary state, etc. within Southeast Asian Studies. Indeed, the idea of the

high. Its importance went beyond internal politics or entertainment, becoming a matter of colonial survival—a matter by which Siam displayed its civilizational excellence and proved its humanity and right to sovereignty.[7]

The history of nineteenth-century Siam, however, is not simply one of victimhood or of resistance against European colonial threat, but also of imperial competition between the Siamese court and European powers.[8] Itself previously a colonizing force in Southeast Asia, Siam competed directly with European interest in attempts to retain and expand its regional empire. I describe this predicament as a double colonial front: the ambivalence of behaving at once as colonizer and colonial target. Finding itself under ethnological scrutiny, the Siamese court reveled in such colonial ambivalence when it produced exoticist operas addressing the ethnic peripheries of its own kingdom.

Parallel to this newfound concern for ethnological knowledge production, the court underwent an aesthetic upheaval in its methods and presentation of Siamese opera at the turn of the century. Significantly, the tradition of plots centered on national mythology and glorified historical figures morphed into a new genre that depicted contemporary stories about everyday commoners. The new plots often featured stock depictions of ethnic minorities from the furthest reaches of the kingdom—territories most vulnerable to French and British takeover. I argue that this shift was no coincidence, but rather represented a novel attempt to control the meanings of race and ethnicity in the face of looming European imperial threats. Emblematic of this aesthetic reform is the impresario Narathip Praphanphong's own *Sao Krue Fah* (1909), a romantic tragedy that tells the story of a Bangkok lieutenant and his ethnic northern wife. Proudly billed as a faithful adaption of Giacomo Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* (a favorite of Chulalongkorn's across his Eurotours), *Sao Krue Fah* took Bangkok by storm as the exemplar of the new reformed opera.

This chapter examines how an absolute monarchy—in crisis over its own position within a global racial hierarchy—turned to opera as a means to produce ethnographic knowledge, and how the monarchy's newfound concern for control over ethnological knowledge production interacted with the urgent aesthetic reform of Siamese opera. I turn to Siamese opera and its European counterpart, rather than other cultural forms,

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bounded nation-state with defined cartographic borders is part and parcel of the European colonial toolkit introduced to the region in this period. See Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994), Martin Stuart-Fox, "Conflicting Conceptions of the State: Siam, France and Vietnam in the Late Nineteenth Century," *Journal of the Siam Society* 82/2 (1994): 135–44, and David K. Wyatt, *Thailand: A Short History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

[7] For a history of these dynamics in the realms of governance and policy, see Rachel V. Harrison and Peter A. Jackson, ed., *The Ambiguous Allure of the West: Traces of the Colonial in Thailand* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press; Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010).

[8] I use "colonial" to apply to Siam in full knowledge that the prevailing nationalist historiography often boast of Siam's status as never having been colonized. I use "colonial" in this sense not to assert that the government of Siam was ever controlled by a French administration, but to describe the ontological and cosmological flux of the colonial condition. Useful here is Michael Herzfeld's description of Siam as a *cryptocolony*, a state which aggressively fashions its policy, government, law, and cultural practices to suit foreign models. Such states retain their nominal independence from colonial threat, but at the cost of humiliating effective economic dependence upon European systems of modern governance. See Michael Herzfeld, "The Absent Presence: Discourses of Crypto-Colonialism," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 101/4 (2002): 899–926.

because the dramatic and spectacular elements of opera were especially well suited as colonial tools for staging and producing knowledge about the surrounding world. The Siamese court localized opera as an ethnological tool that afforded the ability to dramatize fantasies of the Other into knowledge of the real through the phantasmagoric space of operatic performance.[9] These practices strategically magnified the ethnic difference between the royal center, Bangkok (site of the cosmic glory of the king), and its rural peripheries (the realm of "lesser" ethnicities enlivened in the elite imaginary through operatic depiction). What follows is a history, then, of the moment when the Bangkok elite began to learn that the surety of identity and subjecthood were not so much innate and immutable qualities, but prescribed from afar through various means of legitimized knowledge production, whether scientific or theatrical.

Chulalongkorn in Europe, or The King of Siam Tours the Civilized World

Chulalongkorn's decision to travel to Europe was not taken lightly. In Siamese cosmology, all that is good and prosperous in the kingdom radiated from the heavenly body of the king.[10] This belief had led monarchs to remain largely bound to the capital, a practice that also provided a convenient excuse for the relative poverty of the kingdom's rural peripheries. The belief began to wane in the reign of Chulalongkorn, however, as the king wished to experience the ways of the world.[11] He traveled first to vassal cities of Siam and other Southeast Asian kingdoms under European colonial rule, including tours of Singapore and Java in 1870. After years of such regional visits, Chulalongkorn undertook his first grand tour of Europe in 1897, then again in 1907.[12] Each of these journeys sent the body of the monarch further and further away from his seat of cosmic glory in Bangkok. They conveyed an implicit signal that the king needed to travel abroad to experience civilizational excellence somewhere other than Bangkok, and that there existed sources of power greater than the court and the grace of the monarch himself.

For centuries, Siam had looked to India, particularly Brahmin culture, as a fount of cosmological power and as a distant neighbor to be respected and feared.[13] But after seeing India and China fall to European militarism, Siam was ready to shift the focus of

[9] Following Peleggi (*Lords of Things,* 11–13), I use the term "localization" to describe the combined adoption and adaptation of European cultural practices in Siam. Peleggi, in turn, drew on O. W. Walters, who coined the term to describe the earlier spread of Indic influence across Southeast Asia. Peleggi prefers "localization" to the terms "Europeanization" or "Indianization," because it foregrounds indigenous agency in incorporating such practices for their own use.

[10] See Winichakul, *Siam Mapped*; Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer: A Study of Buddhism and Polity in Thailand against a Historical Background* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976); and Patrick Jory, *Thailand's Theory of Monarchy: The Vessantara Jataka and the Idea of the Perfect Man* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016).

[11] A Belgian lawyer under Siam's employ observed: "the old kings of Siam never left their palace, except in extraordinary circumstances. Things are not the same anymore: King Chulalongkorn often goes out and nothing is more normal than seeing his landau, preceded by two grooms on horses. There is a summer palace in Bang-pa-in, where they go frequently. He also visits the new park in Samsen every day. He has been to Java three times and has made an eight month visit to Europe." Émile Jottrand, *In Siam: The Diary of a Legal Adviser of King Chulalongkorn's Government* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 1996), 312.

[12] The 1897 tour included visits to Italy, Switzerland, Austro-Hungary, Russia, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, the United Kingdom, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Spain, and Portugal. The 1907 tour visited Italy, Switzerland, Germany, France, the United Kingdom, Belgium, Denmark, and Norway.

[13] See Patrick Jory, *Thailand's Theory of Monarchy.*

its admiration and competition. The Siamese elite experienced this realignment of the global order firsthand in its sojourns through Europe. For example, Prince Prisdang Chumsai (who will become a central figure in Chapter 3) was surprised to receive preferential treatment at Windsor Castle over dignitaries from India, who had waited months for an audience with Queen Victoria, and were made to wait longer on account of the Siamese prince's unscheduled arrival. Siam was able to skip the line because sovereign kingdoms were held to deserve priority over vassal colonies. These interimperial encounters offered a glimpse of the new playing field—of Siam's entrance upon a new global order in which, with India's influence having waned, Europe would be the new arbiter of taste and status.[14]

The success of Chulalongkorn's diplomatic visits varied greatly by destination. At times, the entourage was received with indifference or as an Oriental curiosity. On other occasions they were treated with familial affection, as during their visit to Nicholas II of Russia, during which the Tsar's mother repeatedly "threatened" to adopt Chulalongkorn so that the two monarchs could be brothers.[15] The details of these visits were monitored expectantly by courtiers who remained in Bangkok, through the king's near-daily epistolary reports. Chulalongkorn was not hesitant to boast, for instance, about his singular triumph at the Palazzo del Quirinale in Rome:

> Confidants to the King of Italy had told me that their master was surprised at how well I presented myself, as if I had been a long-time visitor to Europe and its palaces. They reported that they did not see me shocked, surprised, or awed by anything wonderfully European that would have shocked, surprised, or awed any other man; that I appeared to be at home at every corner of Europe, as the kings of Europe themselves are at home; and that I was ever admirable and composed, a far cry from my entourage, who behaved as roaming children, and were startled in amusement by every little thing of beauty, or of the mildest delight. These sentiments were widely shared about me.[16]

Visits to local opera houses were a consistent feature of Chulalongkorn's European tours. Whether he communicated it in person or not, the many letters he sent back to Bangkok reveal the king's astonishment at the difference between the aesthetic

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[14] Manich Jumsai, *Prince Prisdang's Files on His Diplomatic Activities in Europe, 1880–1886* (Bangkok: Chalermnit, 1977), here 34–38. For more on the dynamics described here, see Thongchai Winichakul, "The Quest for Siwilai," *Journal of Asian Studies* 59/3 (August 2000): 528–49.

[15] *Premier Voyage en Europe du roi Chulalongkorn*, ed. Pornsad Watanangura, Naruemit Sodsuk, and Khanittha Boonpan (Bangkok: Center for European Studies, Chulalongkorn University, 2003), 223. The reader who does not know Thai may be interested in this particular volume of Chulalongkorn's letters from 1897, as it is reproduced in both the original Thai and French translation.

[16] Letter dated June 29, 1897; in *Premier Voyage en Europe*, 161. An earlier letter from June 7 contains more of Chulalongkorn's colorful observations from his stay at the Palazzo: "This custom of kissing among Italian royalty is no trivial matter. It is undertaken with incredible force. To initiate, a person of lower social rank has to angle his cheek toward a person of greater status. The Duke of Genoa angled his cheek to me first, then plowed his face across my mouth and nose. We slurped each other in this manner five, six, seven times. With the King of Italy, he exclaimed 'eeh eeh' for me to angle my cheek first, to which he reciprocated, indicating that we were equals. The Prince of Naples offered his cheek to me as did the Duke of Genoa, but he did not dare to kiss me in the same way."

affordances of Siamese and European opera.[17] Compared to the stylized timelessness of traditional Siamese opera, the realist effects of European opera, with its sympathetic portraits of contemporary domestic struggle, came as a shock and delight to the king.

As a guest of the Duke of Genoa during the 1907 tour, Chulalongkorn attended a performance of Verdi's *La traviata* at the Teatro Vittorio Emanuele, where he was much impressed by the extent to which performers were able to infuse their roles with verisimilitude:

> While it is true that these characters exaggerate their gestures beyond what ordinary people going through those emotions would do, such exaggerations convey to us the truth of these emotions. That is, anger is shown through a frown and wrinkled brow, heartbreak is conveyed in a withered slouch, gladness through beaming smiles. Such effects, facilitated by dress and makeup, really transform a face.

Chulalongkorn's comments about the range of expressions in European acting no doubt betrayed an anxiety about the relative stillness of Siamese acting and its ability to convey "the truth" of emotions. The letter goes on to recount in vivid detail the way the singer portraying Violetta transformed herself into a consumptive:

> This character with an abscess in her belly [sic] gradually painted her eyes green, adding black to her cheeks. From one scene to another, her face shriveled up with sickness. Not a single performer appears onstage with an unpainted face, but these are not the piggish faces of Chinese opera, with their inhuman expressions—here, the faces are painted to convey the truth of human countenance. … When she fell down to die, I saw her die as if in truth. It touched my heart to feel the coordination of her cry, the music of the orchestra, and that falling motion.[18]

Chulalongkorn expresses here an earnest fascination for the realist effect produced by the coming together of the elements of European opera; at the same time, he manages to insert a mocking comment about the "piggishness" of Chinese opera.[19]

Months later, the king attended a performance of Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* at the Opéra Comique, where the king again enthused about the way the production absorbed the spectator into a vivid and complete world. This letter focused on the end of the second act, and the way the curtain delineated the space of the stage from that of the real:

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[17] My evidence here relies largely on the king's voice due to the state of archival sources. Many of Chulalongkorn's writings are collected in published volumes by government institutions, as are these letters from Europe. Other correspondence to specific individuals is often published in funerary memorabilia as evidence honoring the deceased's proximity to the monarch. This leaves us with a one-sided archive, where letters written by the king are public and available, while letters sent to him are not. For example, only Chulalongkorn's side of the correspondence with Narathip Praphanphong has been preserved. This is a reflection of the importance of the king's voice above all others in an absolute monarchy.

[18] Chulalongkorn, *Klai Ban*, letter dated May 14, 1907.

[19] More blatant anti-Chinese sentiment would take hold in Siam during the reign of Chulalongkorn's son, Vajiravudh, when the new king penned an essay declaring the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia as Jews of the Orient. See Vajiravudh, *Jews of the Orient* (Bangkok: Siam Observer Press, 1917).

> She stared out [into the harbor] until her child had fallen asleep, until her handmaid had fallen asleep, but Butterfly herself never stopped staring, even as the curtain came down to great applause. Customarily, the singer must step forward for a bow—but she did not leave character, she kept her gaze stretched outward, to convey that she had no other care in this life but to wait for her husband's return. The curtain rose and fell three more times, but she paid no mind.[20]

The king noticed not only the veristic effects onstage, but also how the architecture and technology of the theater amplified and facilitated the effects of realism. In this suspended moment of performance, the soprano Marguerite Carré ceased to be herself and remained as Cio-Cio San in that phantasmagoric space, despite the uproar of applause. For Chulalongkorn, European opera was not only a spectacle of civilizational excellence; it was also a means of theatrical absorption into a dramatized space that passes as the real. Meanwhile, back at the Bangkok court, impresarios and theater-makers reading these firsthand reports about their king's fascination with European realist opera busied themselves to implement changes.

The Veristic Turn in Siamese Opera

From the perspective of historical scholarship, I describe Siamese court music drama of this period as "opera," even though in its language the genre is a form of *lakhon*, meaning simply "drama." I use the term strategically to show Siamese opera's historical implication and indebtedness to global operatic phenomena at the turn of the twentieth century, and to insist on a commensurability of music dramatic spectacle in a broader global-colonial music history. From the Siamese perspective, after all, European opera was merely a form of *lakhon*, that is, *lakhon opera*. In this sense, I am not branding Siamese practices as an Oriental offshoot of the European tradition. Rather, I am using "opera" as a neutralized metonym to mean state-sponsored, dramatized plays with unamplified singing, musical accompaniment, and a work concept—the theatrical spectacle that courts and governments produce with cultural and political ramifications.

After the monarchy's experience with European opera during its tours abroad, the reform introduced to Siamese court opera in the decades around 1900 was swift and drastic, altering the genre as both form and event. These reforms encompassed the subject matter that was deemed appropriate for operas, the way dramatic characters were envoiced musically, and a redesign in its theatrical spaces, including the positioning of the audience in relation to the performance.

Many of the changes bear a striking resemblance to earlier reforms of European opera. The changes in subject matter, especially, paralleled the move from mythological and court-based plots to more historical and realistic subjects that had occurred in both the French and Italian operatic practices a century earlier. The question of how such aesthetic changes occurred across a continent and over the span of decades is complex, but the European reforms are often understood, broadly, as related to the social and aesthetic changes initiated by the French Revolution and the Napoleonic campaigns. Siam's shift, in contrast, seemingly occurred with drastic speed. A clear impetus was to

[20] *Klai Ban*, letter dated September 25, 1907.

imitate veristic opera, a form of civilizational spectacle that the court understood to hold strategic cultural currency under ethnological imperialism. Although the reform was initiated in emulation of European opera, the aesthetic and political workings by which Siamese opera magnified and guaranteed monarchial power were vastly different from those addressed in the literature on opera at European courts. Rather than legitimizing the monarchy by modeling sovereign relations and benevolence onstage, the new Siamese opera demonstrated the elite authority to depict subaltern subjects in exoticist representation.[21]

The full reach of the shift in Siamese theatrical aesthetics lies beyond the scope of this dissertation and has not been fully or directly addressed in Thai music scholarship.[22] The nature of Siamese operatic practice as an oral tradition of apprenticeship means that the written archive is scant, and its colonial implications often sit uncomfortably alongside the oral and embodied knowledges claimed by living performers of the tradition. Setting aside this archival reality, the question of whether Siamese court music ought to have a linear developmental history, parallel to the Western canon, is itself fraught with the very ethics of "measuring up to the West," one of the concerns that run throughout this dissertation. I describe generalizations of operatic reform in this section with many of these reservations in mind.

The plot content of traditional Siamese opera repeatedly presented excerpts from a handful of legendary and mythological epics that formed the bedrock of the kingdom's cosmology and imagined past.[23] Some of these major texts included Inao, Unarut, and the Indian epic Ramayana. Such presentations of foundational mythology legitimized the present sovereign by linking him to the greatness of sacred antiquity. This is especially true of the Ramayana, since Bangkok's monarchs are considered earthly avatars of the Hindu god Rama, with Chulalongkorn himself incarnating Rama V. A key element of the reform was an abrupt abandonment of such foundational narratives, in preference for newly composed libretti that dramatized the everyday lives of contemporary individuals, often ethnic commoners from the furthest reaches of the kingdom. Prince Damrong, another of the king's half-brothers, noted that after 1910 one could no longer find regular performances of *Inao*, *Unarut*, or the *Ramayana*.[24]

Not only did everyday people become the subjects of Siamese opera for the first time; they also began literally to speak for themselves from the space of the stage. In traditional court opera, characters appeared as silent actor-dancers. Protagonists did not sing, and the dramatic action was instead conveyed by a chorus of offstage narrators. The new practice, however, discarded the pantomimic mode, and presented characters who

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[21] See, for example, the forms of sovereignty dramatized and sustained in eighteenth-century courts through the *tragédie en musique* and *opera seria* in Olivia Bloechl, *Opera and the Political Imaginary in Old Régime France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017) and Martha Feldman, *Opera and Sovereignty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007). For precedent scholarship on opera and colonial spectacle, see Katherine Bergeron, "Verdi's Egyptian Spectacle: On the Colonial Subject of *Aida*," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 14/1–2 (2002): 149–59.

[22] In English, an overview of Siamese court opera across the centuries has been examined by theater historian Mattani Rutnin. In this section, I rely on Rutnin's account, contextualized with information about Chulalongkorn's visits to Europe. See Mattani Rutnin, *Dance, Drama, and Theatre in Thailand* (Tokyo, Japan: Centre for East Asian Cultural Studies for Unesco, the Toyo Bunko, 1993).

[23] See Rutnin, *Dance, Drama, and Theatre in Thailand* and ed. Rutnin, *The Siamese Theatre: A Collection of Reprints from the Journal of the Siam Society* (Bangkok: Sompong Press, 1975).

[24] Damrong Rajanubab, *Tamnan lakhon Inao* (Bangkok: Khlang Witthaya, 1965), 216.

sang of their own experiences in real time. This shift from the facelessness of offstage, collective singing to the expressiveness of the individual voice was especially significant at a point in Siam's colonial history when human subjectivity—the sense of selfhood through ethnicity and belonging—was a perilously contested category. In view of the history of colonial racialization, in which human sovereignty was not an innate right, but rather a variable standard to be performed, ascribed, and denied, this invention of the ability to sing the self in Siamese opera cannot be taken lightly.

The move toward new plot types and a new mode of address also demanded a new mode of attention from operatic audiences. Writing about the new operas penned by the impresario Narathip Praphanphong, the king observed:[25]

> Narathip's operas were at first unpopular since the plots were not immediately understandable by the audience. They had to concentrate on listening and watching intently. They could not look around, as any lapse in attention meant incomprehension of the storyline. The audience is too used to chatting amongst themselves during performance: once in a while, a lively character would catch their eye, or some bit of beautiful music would tickle their ears, and that was enough for them. They only wanted opportunities for chitchat; that's why they didn't like the new operas at first.[26]

Chulalongkorn noted in his commentary on Cio-Cio San's vigil that the space of the theater itself was a crucial dimension of European realist opera, and Siamese operatic reform likewise instigated significant changes to theater architecture and to the social practices of theatergoing in Bangkok. Siamese opera was traditionally performed outdoors on makeshift, temporary stages, with little to no set design, viewable from multiple sides. Performances were free of charge, under the patronage of an important individual, who commissioned them to commemorate an auspicious or religious occasion. The discovery of wild white elephants early in Chulalongkorn's reign, for instance, merited performances of excerpts from *Inao*.[27] Around 1900, the Bangkok elite began constructing permanent theaters for indoor performance, which afforded a front-angle proscenium view, and allowed for elaborate set design. Operatic performance also became a commercial venture, with performances of repertoire rotating on a weekly basis, and tickets required for admission.[28] While the commercialization of Siamese opera did not bring the repertoire into vast circulation, the reform did allow paying

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[25] While my focus here is on Narathip Praphanphong, he was hardly the sole impresario responsible for reforms during this period. Of importance is also Prince Narisara Nuwattiwong, another half-brother of Chulalongkorn, and his *lakhon duk dumban*. Narisara will feature as a key figure in Chapter 4, albeit outside the realm of opera.

[26] Letter dated April 24, 1909; in Chulalongkorn, *Samnao phrarātchahatthalēkhā Phrabāt Somdet Phra Čhunlačhǭmklao Čhaoyūhūa mī phrarātchathān Krommaphra Narāthippraphanphong* (Bangkok: Rōngphim Sōphon Phiphatthanākǭn, 1931).

[27] Rutnin, *Dance, Drama, and Theatre in Thailand*, 97.

[28] "Requiring payment to enter an indoor theater, to view the performance for a prescribed, limited amount of time as opposed to in the audience's choice of time frame, over consecutive evenings in an outdoor setting, where they are free to come and go as they please, without requiring continuous concentration … all of these are truly Western influences upon Siamese theater." See Khukrit Pramot, Montri Tramot, and Mattana Rutnin, *Laksana Thai, Vol 3: Sinlapa Kansadaeng* (Bangkok: Thanakhan Krungthep, 2008), here 85.

commoners access to performances that would otherwise have been the exclusive privilege of the royal elite.

The king himself participated in the implementation of the new theatrical environment, instructing Narathip on the correct application and concealment of the mechanisms for the set design of an unnamed work:

> I approve of your plan for changes. I agree that the front of the sliding platform has no need for doors. Make the bottom portion solid, with an opening cut into it. Elevate the scaffold behind the platform to match the height of the opening—it is a good position to sing from: the sound will be more beautiful carried atop the instruments. Depending on the outcome, there may be no need to hide the platform behind props such as trees, except in the forest scene, where trees are necessary. We will need large trees for the right effect. Much will depend on what is possible to transport. Make sure we arrange this far in advance, so the trees can be made available.[29]

This attention to detail—on the part of the king no less—in the specifics of producing convincing realist effect shows just how significant it was for the court to perfect the presentation of this new theatrical space, one fitted to dramatize the veristic reality of the kingdom's subjects. These ventures also proved a financial success. By July 1909 the king reported:

> The whole of the palace, from the lowest servant to the highest lord, have gone crazy for Narathip's operas. Not long ago, each of his performances drew fewer than 500 viewers, but these days not a single seat remains empty … recently, a single performance at his theater earned upwards of 10,000 Baht. Narathip exclaimed "It is by the glory of the king!" The most popular offering of all is no doubt *Sao Krue Fah*. Narathip received many requests for repeat performances this coming week.[30]

The totality of these aesthetic reforms in the performance and presentation of Siamese opera amount to a shift in the political utility of operatic performance as envisioned by the court.[31] The court's traditional practice staged mythology as a means to legitimize the sovereign genealogy of the king, a practice that utilized the space of performance as a window linking the present day to mythic antiquity. This dramatized mythology was a manipulation of time against the fixed space of the court as a royal center. The turn to realism, however, enabled the court to imagine and codify ethnic stock-types by which to depict commoners from the outer reaches of the kingdom on the stages of Bangkok—the manipulation of sovereign space against fixed time. In the

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[29] Letter dated January 19, 1909 in Chulalongkorn, *Samnao phrarātchahatthalēkhā*, 45–46.
[30] Letter dated July 2, 1909 in Chulalongkorn, *Samnao phrarātchahatthalēkhā*, 29.
[31] The reassignment of Siamese spatial categories to emulate European ones is a familiar argument in Thai Studies. Thongchai Winichakul has shown how the localization of European cartography reshaped the court's understanding of a kingdom as a geopolitical nation, while Leslie Castro-Woodhouse has shown how the court reimagined the domestic space of the palace dwellings with European suburban sensibility. Winichakul, *Siam Mapped*, and Castro-Woodhouse, *Woman between Two Kingdoms* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 2021).

imaginary of the Siamese monarchy, this operatic practice was accorded a new power to produce knowledge about the periphery at a time when sovereign control of such spaces was tenuous. Put another way, the new Siamese opera no longer staged models of sovereign relations for public subjects as a means of verifying legitimate rule. Rather, it codified an imagined reality of peripheral subaltern subjects, dramatized from afar and envoiced through the bodies of Bangkok performers. This new operatic form was a one-sided tool of imperial governance through which the distance between realism and reality could be collapsed.

Sao Krue Fah and the Status of Polygamy in Siam

Praphanphong's *Sao Krue Fah* took Bangkok by storm in 1909. The operatic sensation proudly billed itself as an adaption of *Madama Butterfly*, and it served as the exemplar of reformed Siamese opera. While Praphanphong himself had never seen *Butterfly*—or likely, any Italian opera at all—the royal impresario was acquainted with Puccini's plot through a detailed synopsis written by Chulalongkorn.[32] No doubt, he was also able to glean detailed source information from the king and other members of court who had attended not only the performance of Puccini's opera in Paris, but numerous other operatic performances throughout Europe.

Sao Krue Fah preserves most of *Madama Butterfly*'s plot elements with a change in locale: the setting was adapted to depict the cultural tension between Bangkok and Chiang Mai, a tribute-city at the border with French-controlled Laos, the northern edge of Siamese influence. Localizing the story for Siamese purposes, Praphanphong reframes the racial tension between America and Japan into a tragedy of ethnic transgression involving Lieutenant Prohm, a soldier from Bangkok, and Krue Fah, a peasant girl from Chiang Mai. Crucial to these ethnological dynamics, Praphanphong presented Krue Fah not as Siamese, but as Laotian, endowing her and other characters with approximated details of Laotian customs and dialect. Krue Fah's ethnic guise, long hair and a patterned tube skirt called *phaa sin*, is repeatedly foregrounded in the libretto as praise for her Laotian beauty.[33]

In adapting the plot of *Butterfly* to depict tensions between Bangkok and Chiang Mai, Praphanphong localized many of the points of cultural difference in Puccini's original to Bangkok's advantage, and with rather didactic straightforwardness. In Puccini's opera, the Buddhist Bonze rushes into Cio-Cio San's wedding, cursing her for abandoning her ancestors and converting to Christianity. In *Sao Krue Fah*, a Chiang Mai monk similarly disrupts the wedding in Act I, citing it as an inauspicious day for marriage and chastising the bride's family for not having consulted him in the matter. But while the Bonze won out in Puccini's opera, Praphanphong's monk quickly retracts his intrusion upon learning that the groom is a lieutenant from Bangkok. The adaptation

[32] Set in Nagasaki on the southern tip of Japan, *Madama Butterfly* depicts a tragic love between a Japanese geisha, Cio-Cio San, and the American navy lieutenant Pinkerton. Married according to Japanese custom before Pinkerton's departure to the United States, Cio-Cio San naively awaits her husband's return, only to discover three years later that he has taken a lawful American wife. Out of shame and disgrace, Cio-Cio San redeems her honor by committing suicide.

[33] The Romanized spelling varies, but I use *phaa sin* after Katherine A. Bowie. For a cultural history of fabrics in northern Siam, see her "Assessing the Early Observers: Cloth and the Fabric of Society in 19th-Century Northern Thai Kingdoms," *American Ethnologist* 20/1 (1993): 138–58.

teaches a moral lesson: the rural superstition of an ethnic-regional monk recognizes itself as powerless in relation to the urban sensibility of a Bangkok officer.

Another crucial difference concerns the legitimacy of indigenous polygamy in Siam. In *Butterfly*, Cio-Cio San's rudimentary understanding of American marital law validated her persistent devotion to Pinkerton, even if her understanding was wrong. This was made clear in Chulalongkorn's synopsis of the opera:

> Madame Butterfly recognized that her husband had found a new wife, but each side held a different importance in the meaning of that status. Butterfly understood herself as the lawful wife in her terms, but Pinkerton insisted that the union did not hold up in his terms.[34]

Praphanphong gave Krue Fah no legal recourse, however, in the final scene of his adaptation. While contemplating suicide, Krue Fah is instead faced with a choice: to redeem her shame through the honor of the blade or to reunite with Lieutenant Prohm as his Laotian "minor wife," yielding to the legitimacy of the Bangkok "primary wife" he has secured. Like Cio-Cio San, Krue Fah chooses death. As she lies dying, a chorus of offstage narrators intone the words inscribed upon the blade that took her life, the very same words that appeared on Cio-Cio San's blade: "better to die with honor than to live without."

The status of polygamy in Siamese law was a vexed issue at court in the first decade of 1900, and the reference to polygamy in *Sao Krue Fah* likely carried great pedagogical significance for the opera's audiences; indeed, the plot may be read as royal commentary on the topic. Indigenous polygamy had been a means of consolidating and centralizing power in Siam for centuries; these kinship transactions worked to strengthen imperial ties between regional lords and the centralized power of Bangkok. It also served to supply the ranks of governance with the monarch's half-brothers and close relatives. However, polygamy was also diagnosed as a symptom of civilizational backwardness by European officials; the stereotype of the decadent Siamese harem persists today through the exaggerated writings of Anna Leonowens, Chulalongkorn's governess, popularized in Rodgers and Hammerstein's musical adaptation.[35] The British physician Malcolm Arthur Smith, employed at Chulalongkorn's court, described his observation of royal polygamy with reserved approval:

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[34] Chulalongkorn, *Klai Ban*, letter dated September 25, 1907.

[35] The English-language *Bangkok Times*, for instance, printed the teasing article "Three Wives for Every Man" on January 11, 1906: "Man was intended to be a polygamist. At one time in his history there is no doubt that he was, but civilization has restricted him to one wife, whereas he was intended to have three." The Belgian lawyer Émile Jottrand privately observed in 1900: "Everyone knows that the customs of the Orient authorize the practice of polygamy. Nevertheless, this polygamy is not what many people imagine it to be, that is, a primitive institution, incompatible with all civilization and with all conceptions of the family as we understand it. … [The Siamese] always has a main wife who is the real wife and who, as the only one, has some authority. The others are but auxiliary wives, who in no way disrupt the harmony of the household but, on the contrary, make it more complete because it is often the principal wife, who for reasons which are explained by the tropical climate, recruits some sort of harem for her lord and master. One must not forget that in the tropics, the native woman is almost old at twenty-five years of age and that with forty her reign is finished. … The Siamese of an elevated rank has five or six wives. It is thus not so strange that the King, because he is King, has some forty. An absolute monarch must exaggerate everything." Jottrand, *In Siam*, 309.

> There is no evidence to show that they [the monarch's consorts] longed for freedom or were unhappy in their surroundings.... They played cards, they gambled on the daily lottery, they flew their little kites when the kite-flying season came in March and April. They had their theatrical shows, their shadow plays, the marionettes and the slow and stately performances of the palace dancers. It was a butterfly existence, but did they want much more. They were housed, fed, clothed, and entertained. For a light-hearted, easy-going, pleasure-loving people, with an infinite capacity for enjoyment, it was an almost ideal existence.[36]

It stood to reason that in order to appear civilized under European ethnological scrutiny, Siam might seek to outlaw its practice of polygamy; yet no such law or any public commentary on the matter was enacted during Chulalongkorn's reign.[37]

As part of its efforts to resist the colonial traps of European international law, Siam established its first centralized judiciary system during the first decade of the twentieth century, with the support of European legal advisors employed by the court.[38] As historian Tamara Loos has shown, law was a primary language of "universal modernity" by which Siam was judged in European eyes. Rather than the fluid and overlapping meanings of operatic spectacle, Siamese law needed to be conceived within Europe's inscribed terms and logics. This was a real translingual concern for the court, so much so that Siam's legal system was written first in English in order to record it in an immutably legible form, and only afterward translated into Siamese for practical use. Legal reform brought about several modernizing changes: the abolition of slavery, the establishment of family law granting of marital rights to wives, and the elimination of the term "Lao" as an ethnic category for official use.[39] No doubt influenced by the 1893 treaty that ceded all Laotians under Siam as French subjects, this ban certainly did not stop Praphanphong from writing Laotian identity into the Chiang Mai of his opera.

It is tempting here to read the minor wife's choice offered to Krue Fah as the court's veiled commentary on polygamy, conveyed through dramatic representation rather than an overt proclamation or ban. The moral of the story was that middle-class Bangkok officers should not toy with the hearts of country girls, whose pride would lead them to choose honor in death rather than the demeaning status of ethnic minor wife. As a parable on the family unit, *Sao Krue Fah* enabled the court to make a pedagogical

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[36] Malcolm Arthur Smith, *A Physician at the Court of Siam* (Kuala Lumpur; New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 143. Smith, like Jottrand, believed in the climatic determination of Siamese libido: "Sexual indulgence by the Siamese, as by many other tropical races, is carried to a degree that to most Europeans must seem incredible. Between the ages of 18 and 40 it is the overmastering passion of their lives, with the result that many of them, by the time they have reached the middle forties, if not already impotent, are well on the road to being so. King Chulalongkorn did not have any children after he was 42," 142.

[37] Tamara Loos, *Subject Siam: Family, Law, and Colonial Modernity in Thailand* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

[38] On the experience of such lawyers, see Jottrand, *In Siam*, and Walter E. J. Tips, *Gustave Rolin-Jaequemyns and the Belgian Advisers in Siam (1892–1902)* (Bangkok: Auteur, 1992). See also *Thai Legal History*, Andrew Harding and Munin Pongsapan eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

[39] See Soren Ivarsson, *Creating Laos: The Making of a Laos Space between Indochina and Siam, 1860–1945* (Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2008), and John Draper et al., "The Thai Lao—Thailand's Largest Unrecognized Transboundary National Ethnicity," *Nations and Nationalism* 25/4 (2019): 1131–1152.

commentary without confronting issues of class: Bangkok royalty could warn low-ranking subordinates against polygamic transgressions without exposing themselves as hypocritical for holding a number of consorts. In this sense, *Sao Krue Fah* served the court's purposes as at once a sign of pseudo-European cultural exceptionalism, moral pedagogy for Bangkok commoners, and a political instrument to control the ethnic meanings of Lao and Chiang Mai identity within the Bangkok imaginary.

Dararasami in Bangkok: The Princess of Chiang Mai as the Lao Princess

The city of Chiang Mai had been a vassal city to Siamese lords of Bangkok throughout the nineteenth century, but the idea of Chiang Mai had always wavered in the experience of the Bangkok court. Although loyal to Siam, Chiang Mai is separated from Bangkok by mountainous terrain, and its customs, in the eyes of the Siamese elite, resembled those of their more exotic neighbors to the north, the Lao, more than they did the civilized culture of Bangkok. Before the establishment of continuous train service later in the twentieth century, it was cheaper to board a ship from Bangkok to Europe than to traverse the perilous mountains between Bangkok and Chiang Mai.[40] The notion of a country with defined boundaries, overseen by centralized administrative control, did not take hold in the region until the late 1800s, in territory disputes between European imperial powers. Such conflicts ushered into Southeast Asia the power of colonial cartography, with its ability to align cultural essence with national borders, against indigenous conceptions of boundaries of influence through lord/vassal relations.[41] As the Bangkok elite enjoyed depictions of Chiang Mai women in *Sao Krue Fah*, the opera's title character invited direct connection to the Princess Dararasami, consort to Chulalongkorn and the very emblem of Chiang Mai womanhood at the Bangkok palace.

In 1881 British diplomats from Burma undertook the mountainous journey to approach the royal court of Chiang Mai with the kind of news that makes and breaks kingdoms. Queen Victoria requested the Princess Dararasami of Chiang Mai, eight years of age, be given into her care as a ward of the British court. The political implications of such a move are transparent. Having firmly established colonial rule in British Burma, imperial Britain had her sights set on newfound neighbors to the east, recognizing that, although Chiang Mai was loyal to Siam, Bangkok wielded little actual administrative control so far north of its border.[42] Adopting the Chiang Mai heiress would be the first step in cementing British control of the region, inching farther toward French Indochina in the east.

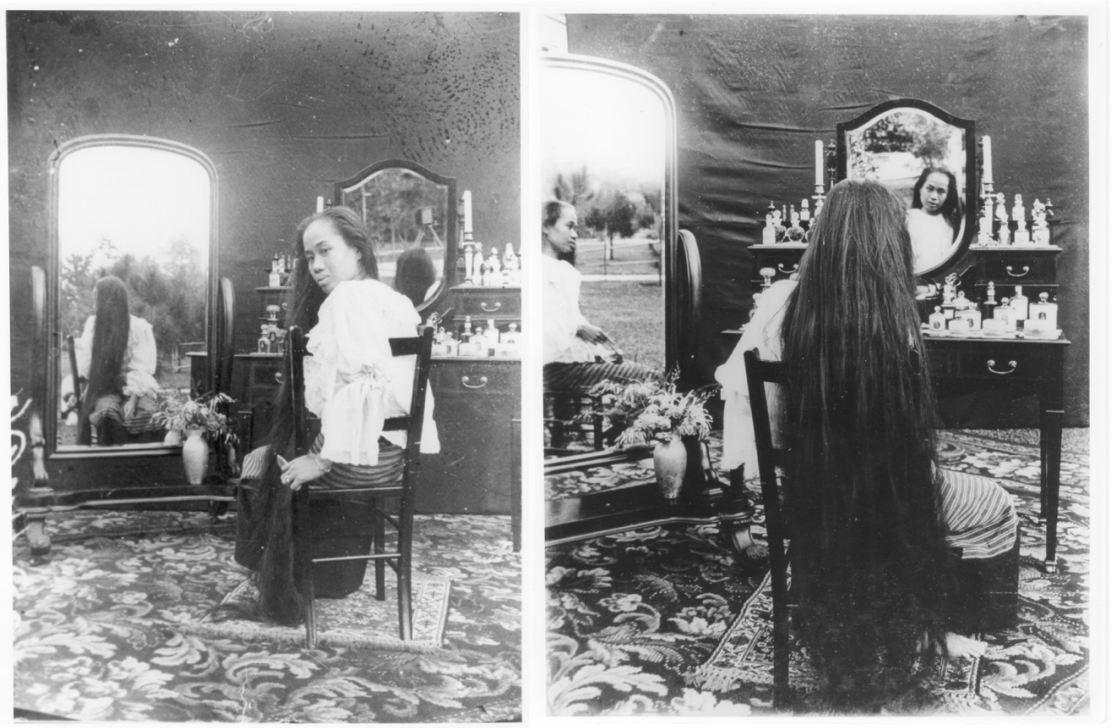
Rumors of this kind traveled swiftly from the vassal cities back to the court in Bangkok, and before Dararasami could be shipped off to England, Chulalongkorn was

[40] "Travel in the north of Siam depends greatly upon the season of the year, the amount of water in the rivers, etc. There are various places of interest but the difficulties in reaching them are such as to practically preclude their being visited by the ordinary traveller [*sic*] or tourist unless business draws him thither When it is explained that a trip to Chiengmai [*sic*] takes as long as a journey to Europe, and costs even more, it will readily be seen that something more than a mere desire to view the jungle country is necessary to attract the average sightseer." J. Antonio, *The 1904 Traveller's Guide to Bangkok and Siam* (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 1997), here 60.

[41] Winichakul, *Siam Mapped*.

[42] See Tej Bunnag, *The Provincial Administration of Siam, 1892–1915: The Ministry of the Interior under Prince Damrong Rajanubhab* (Kuala Lumpur; New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

quick to act. Prince Bijitprijakara, another of the king's half-brothers, was sent to Chiang Mai in the following year, carrying diamond jewelry intended as a token proposing a marriage between Chulalongkorn and Dararasami. It was an offer that Chiang Mai could not refuse.[43] Dararasami and her entourage journeyed to Bangkok to be presented as Chulalongkorn's royal consort, while Bijitprijakara remained behind as the Siamese commissioner in charge of Chiang Mai.



Figures 1.1 and 1.2: Staged photographs of Dararasami, ca. 1905.

This political maneuver, in which the ownership of foreign kingdoms was transacted over the body of a child, set the tone for the way Dararasami was received in the royal palace in Bangkok.[44] In contrast to many of Chulalongkorn's consorts, Dararasami was not "gifted" to the king but rather solicited with jewelry. What she stood for was symbolically invaluable, the ownership of Chiang Mai itself, yet her actual person was near powerless and subjected to ridicule, since she was perceived as an ethnic Other among the Siamese. Her northern *phaa sin* skirt and long hair visually marked her as different from Bangkok women, who wore *chongkrabaen* wraparound trousers and kept their hair cropped short; her strange appearance earned Dararasami the moniker "Lao Princess."[45] This exoticizing approach is highlighted in a series of photographs that

[43] Or perhaps it was an offer that Chiang Mai officials had orchestrated all along. As Castro-Woodhouse has shown in *Woman between Two Kingdoms*, no documents survive on the British side of such a solicitation from Queen Victoria; the archival evidence is entirely Siamese. I rely on Castro-Woodhouse's study for many of the historical details in this section.

[44] See Castro-Woodhouse, *Woman between Two Kingdoms*, 127–34.

[45] See Čhirachāt Santayot, *Phrarātchachāyā Čhao Dārāratsamī: prawattisāt chabap "rū sāng" thang thī "čhing" læ "sāng khn mai"* (Bangkok: Matichon, 2008), here 127.

circulated inside the palace, candidly staged photos of the princess at a makeshift boudoir (see Figures 1.1 and 1.2).[46] Notice the horizontal pattern of her *phaa sin* skirt and the display of her long, textured hair—the same visual markers featured in *Sao Krue Fah*.[47]

This insistence on the adornment of exotic objects upon Dararasami's body as a racializing trope reappears prominently in Praphanphong's opera, in Sao Krue Fah's dressing scene, where she bathes and adorns herself in anticipation of Lieutenant Phrom's return. During this scene, the offstage chorus lists the dozens of richly described scents and accessories—including the *phaa sin* skirt—with which the heroine adorns herself. Both the real and fictional Lao woman, then, accrue a racialized Asiatic femininity not through the difference of skin, but through the stylized encrustment of cosmetic objects.[48] Since Lao and Siamese femininity were not distinguished at the level of epidermal schema, both Dararasami and Krue Fah appear as ethnic Others through the insistence of exotic accessories. The listing of feminine accessories as an Asiatic-racializing trope also appears in Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*, when Cio-Cio San describes and reveals to Pinkerton the contents of her kimono sleeves: "Fazzoletti. La pipa. Una cintura. Un piccolo fermaglio. Uno specchio. Un ventaglio. … Un vaso di tintura." (Handkerchiefs. Pipe. A sash. A little clasp. A mirror. A fan. … A jar of rouge.)

Beyond Dararasami's surface appearance as Laotian, the women of the Bangkok palace also ridiculed the Chiang Mai princess's status as displaced nobility, as one lady-in-waiting of the court wrote:

> In the palace, [Dararasami] had no rank or authority, no importance at all; so she came by the name used for her by all the consorts: Chao Noi (little noble). Chao Noi didn't know anything; Chao Noi sat there, smiling happily to herself at nothing. Of all the consorts there, no one knew anything about her besides the words 'Chao Noi'."[49]

This description of Dararasami in her first years at court reveals not only the derision of her ethnic status by Bangkok elite, but also the fear inspired by their inability to conceptualize her Laotian quality, emphasizing only emptiness. The lady-in-waiting's description of Dararasami knowing nothing reproduces the writer's knowing nothing about Dararasami. If the Bangkok court was to maintain sovereignty over its inferior vassal, Chiang Mai, the court needed to demonstrate command of knowledge over its internal Other. This issue of ethnological precision became more pressing after the treaty of 1893, which dictated that individuals in Siam who were identifiably Laotian officially belonged under French rule. Chiang Mai's geographic proximity to Laos, and its

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[46] On these photographs and the photographer, Erb Bunnag, see Castro-Woodhouse, *Woman between Two Kingdoms*, 69–106.

[47] This long hair was a contentious marker of ethnic difference in Bangkok and a point of pride for northern women. Fong Kaew, a lady-in-waiting of Dararasami, lost a prestigious engagement to a Bangkok nobleman for refusing his demand that she trim her hair; see Castro-Woodhouse, *Woman between Two Kingdoms*, 66.

[48] On this theory of Asiatic femininity constituted through objecthood, see Anne Anlin Cheng, *Ornamentalism: A Feminist Theory for the Yellow Woman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019). I use the specific term "encrustment" here after Cheng, particularly as a counterpart to "enfleshment" as a racializing framework.

[49] Quoted in Castro-Woodhouse, *Woman between Two Kingdoms*, 41.

submission to Bangkok through the body of Dararasami, complicate another level of colonial ambivalence.[50] At this junction of the double colonial front, Siam was at once an imperial threat and colonial target, both potential victim and rival to French expansionism. To reject Chiang Mai as Laotian would be to show French officials in Bangkok that the region was within their control. To conceptualize Chiang Mai as Siamese, on the other hand, would be to concede that Siam was ethnically close to Laos, rendering the Bangkok elite themselves vulnerable to French leverage. It is through the ambivalence of operatic depiction, then, that the court imagined a strategic solution that balanced between these dilemmas.

Revoicing Ethnic Melody in the Music of *Sao Krue Fah*

The methodological problems of incorporating non-Western music practices into Euro-American musicological study has long troubled the discipline.[51] How can one aim to ethically represent, in the pages of scholarship, a musical practice without notation, without a tradition of journalistic or theoretical criticism, and which grappled to present its civilization as legible to European colonial officials? In the last decades of the nineteenth century, the Bangkok elite adopted various strategies for making their music legible to European audiences. As an oral tradition passed on through systems of apprenticeship, the Siamese opera of this period produced no performance materials beyond the printed libretto. The music of these operas, including *Sao Krue Fah*, survives through artists who have passed on the roles in conservatory and state-sponsored settings in the decades after the abolition of absolute monarchy and court patronage.

The question of who can claim aesthetic access to this music—exoticist music with tangible implications in colonial conquest, no less—weighs heavily on my mind.[52] It feels as if anything I write about this music as part of a Euro-American musicological

[50] For a history of state attempts to grapple with the term "Lao" both as an ethnic label and a spatial category, see Taylor Easum, "Imagining the 'Laos Mission': On the Usage of 'Lao' in Northern Siam and Beyond," *Journal of Lao Studies,* Special Issue 1 (2015): 6-23, here 8. "[Siamese elites believed that] Lao were upcountry, lowland-dwelling speakers of closely related Tai languages, but lacked the access to civilization and global modernity that favored Siam. No longer simply outside the reach of Siamese control, by the late nineteenth century they became outside the reach of modernity. In this process, a distinction between a spatial and an ethno-cultural construction of 'Lao' must be made. In Bangkok's eyes the external kingdoms of Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai and Lan Xang became 'within' by becoming spatially part of the Siamese kingdom and territory—the space ceased to be Lao and became, instead, Siamese. Ethno-culturally, however, the people remained different and apart from the Siamese people and culture—hence, they remained 'others.'" *Sao Krue Fah,* as a state-sponsored tool of ethnological knowledge production, maps perfectly into the dynamics Easum describes here.

[51] For an account of this issue through French anthropology around 1900, see Jann Pasler, "Sonic Anthropology in 1900: The Challenge of Transcribing Non-Western Music and Language," *Twentieth-Century Music* 11/1 (2014): 7–36. I'd also like to point to the work of Naila Ceribašić, who teasingly coined the term "biethnomusicologicality" to demonstrate the need for mutual legibility between Euro-American and indigenous spheres of scholarship that study the same music. See her "Musings on Ethnomusicology, Interdisciplinarity, Intradisciplinarity, and Decoloniality," *Etnološka tribina* 49/42 (2019): 3–39.

[52] I witnessed and participated in discussions of this problem during the 2019 meeting of the International Council for Traditional Music World Conference at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, especially in conversation with Anant Narkkong. I yield the issue to individuals whose daily life lives and breathes traditional Siamese music.

study risks being, in some sense, a reach or an invented claim, not dissimilar to the historical efforts to reform and repackage Siamese music to be attractive for European observers. Accordingly, I refrain from reproducing any visual analog for the music discussed in this section, not only due to the fraught ethics of transcribing such a repertoire into Western notation, but also from the sense that the present state of analytical tools uneasily fit as explanations for how Siamese operatic music "works" as racialized sound.[53]

Much of the music in *Sao Krue Fah* was composed in a Laotian musical accent, typified in a series of percussive and motivic patterns that indexed specific ethnicities upon thematic recognition. The history and theory of these "accent" patterns remain to be written in Thai music studies.[54] Patterns that signify the Laotian ethnicity feature prominently throughout *Sao Krue Fah* and underscore the entirety of Krue Fah's suicide scene. In addition to these percussive topoi, *Sao Krue Fah* references the exoticism of Chiang Mai through its vocal melodies, many of which were adapted from the improvisation of a Lao servant/informant in Praphanphong's service. Praphanphong and his wife created a quasi-laboratory setting in which Laotian essence could be extracted from their servant in melodic form. Their son described the process, reminiscing on a scene from his childhood:

> In composing a part for his opera, my father would write out the lyrics while my mother played an accompaniment on the *chakhe* [Siamese zither]. To obtain the tune for these words, a Lao servant improvised on the *kaen* [Laotian mouth organ]. In this manner they derived [the Laotian tunes] "Lao duen dong," "Lao chom dong," "Lao kam hom," and "Lao suai ruai."[55]

The production of knowledge about the Lao characters in *Sao Krue Fah* thus depended on a belief in the legitimizing force of extraction from a Lao himself—an ethnic essence inscribed into the opera, reproduced through Siamese voices. Siamese ideas about singing the self are bound up with the act of endowing and envoicing a colonized subject with an essential interiority that can be extracted through melody, and then revoiced in the body of the colonizer. In its attempt to counter French ethnological imperialism, Siam did not produce ethnography as such, but rather produced an opera that demonstrated its cultural control over and essential knowledge of the Lao.

The final scene of *Sao Krue Fah*, the scene of the heroine's suicide, employs one such tune composed through melodic extraction. As Krue Fah realizes that her husband has returned from Bangkok with a legitimate Siamese wife, she reflects on the humiliation that has resulted from her transgression of daring to love a Bangkok man. The scene's music is presented as strophic verses, alternating between Krue Fah and the offstage narrators, underscored by the Laotian percussive pattern. In contemporary

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[53] On transcription and empire, see Glenda Goodman, "Sounds Heard, Meaning Deferred: Music Transcription as Imperial Technology," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 52/1 (2018): 39–45.

[54] To my knowledge, no major study exists in Thai or English on the history of these exoticizing accents as musical topoi. On the Lao accent of one popular song, see Benjamin Pongtep Cefkin, "'Lao Duang Duen' Lost in Translation: A New Perspective on the Southeast Asian Classical Arts," *American Music Research Center Journal* 27 (2018): 25–40.

[55] Ploenphit Kamran and Niansiri Talaluk, *Phraprawat lae phonngan khong Prachao Boromwongthoe Krom Phra Narathip Praphanphong* (Bangkok: Munnithi Narathip Praphanphong, 1979), 44.

recordings of the scene, Krue Fah sings this passage amid interruptions of cries, tears, and sighs. A present-day interpreter of Krue Fah, Rudeechanok Kotchasenee, described in an interview the importance of perfecting the tearful cries required of this scene, and the difficulty of mastering this balance of singing and crying while she was taught the role.[56] Throughout the scene, Krue Fah's voice, disrupted by sighs and tears, stands in stark contrast to the offstage narrators who perform the same melodic lines with smooth and unaffected melismatic precision.[57]

This contrast in vocal affect in the finale to *Sao Krue Fah* harkens back to the binary politics of the singing voice that had troubled Chulalongkorn—the problem of European singing sounding like a dog's howl, while Siamese singing sounded like a mumble. The scene takes advantage of the king's worry about the limited expressive range of Siamese court opera that he commented on in the letters sent home during his European travels: that Siamese singing could only cry. This difference between Laotian Krue Fah's unravelling voice and the melismatic eloquence of the offstage narrators (the invisible, omniscient voice of the court) plays into a politics of recognition based on the judgment and valuation of "the proper human voice."[58] Faced with the task of self-fashioning a proof for their human sovereignty, the Bangkok court relinquished the opportunity to project its own image through musical drama, to offer up its own essential voice for colonial approval. The court instead fashioned an invisible self-constituted by its capacity to produce exoticist opera, a form of cultural production that could inscribe Bangkok's vision of its ethnic peripheries into dramatized reality.

Taken as a whole – Chulalongkorn's operatic reform—while inspired by European opera and in reaction to European colonial threat—was conceived at the same time as an internal matter, with European officials as only one of several addresses. The spectacle of court operatic patronage, the "event form" of operagoing, was enough to signal civilizational standing, while the message about ethnicity encoded in *Sao Krue Fah*'s music—details like the Laotian percussive pattern—was legible only to the Bangkok elite. This, too, was a strategic move: Siam wanted the northern territory of Chiang Mai to be just Lao enough to demonstrate its difference from Bangkok, but not Lao enough to suggest that the territory rightfully belonged to France. Europe must see all of Siam as ethnically united, and thus deserving unified nationhood; but within Siam, Bangkok must consolidate sovereignty and retain racial superiority. This ambivalent strategy is laid out in Chulalongkorn's advice to the Siamese Commissioner to Chiang Mai:

> You must remember that if you are speaking with a European on the one hand and a Lao on the other, you must maintain that the European is 'them' and the Lao is Thai. If, however, you are speaking with a Lao on the one hand and a Thai on the other, you must maintain that the Lao is 'them' and the Thai is 'us'.[59]

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[56] www.youtube.com/watch?v=3t49oLffjkA; accessed December 2, 2020.
[57] For an analytical overview of Siamese court singing, and a survey of the scant literature in English on the subject, see Dusadee Swangviboonpong, *Thai Classical Singing: Its History, Musical Characteristics, and Transmission* (Aldershot, UK and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003). On this melismatic *uan* style of singing, see John Latartara, "The Timbre of Thai Classical Singing," *Asian Music* 43/2 (2012): 88–144.
[58] Ochoa Gautier, *Aurality*, 28.
[59] Quoted in Streckfuss, "The Mixed Colonial Legacy in Siam," 134.

From Chiang Mai to Bangkok, and from Bangkok to Europe, cultural production at this double colonial front needed to afford overlapping comprehensions along the varied spectrum of colonizer and colonized. As Frantz Fanon wrote in "On National Culture," "you will never make the colonizer blush for shame by spreading your little-known cultural treasures under his eyes."[60] The Siamese court anticipated Fanon in presenting its music drama in lavish theaters and in the event-form of European opera, legitimizing national culture within containers of recognizable form.[61] Far better to build treasure chests that gesture at the culture inside.

Turning Away from the Paradigm of the Colonial Mimic

While, as I discuss in Chapter 2, some European dignitaries treated to performances of Siamese opera likely yawned their way through the evening, the people of Chiang Mai themselves could not afford the same polite indifference. In 1909, when Dararasami returned to her homeland for the first time to visit her father's deathbed, the princess made preparations to have excerpts from *Sao Krue Fah* performed at the Chiang Mai palace.[62] Here, Bangkok's invented Other returned back around to learn about itself through the colonizer's song. This practice would begin a century of internalized Orientalism within Chiang Mai's understanding of its own womanhood, as Krue Fah's exotic fashion, innocent demeanor, and marital devotion were absorbed into picturesque tropes of ethnic femininity that reproduce Bangkok's fantasy of the northern territories. As the Thai critic and historian Nidhi Eosriwong writes, these tropes continue to be explored and contested in northern cultural politics today:

> This constant game of ethnic dress-up in pretend costume and pretend hairdo is more characteristic of an imagined, fantasy version of Chiang Mai than of Chiang Mai as it really is, or ever was. When the women of Chiang Mai conduct themselves in the image of Bangkok's fantasy, as it was staged in *Sao Krue Fah*, oh my, the fantasy is realized.[63]

At the same time that Chiang Mai was seeing its first performances of *Sao Krue Fah*, the opera reached new heights of popularity in Bangkok, as Chulalongkorn recounted in the letter to Dararasami quoted earlier:

> (The most popular offering of all is no doubt *Sao Krue Fah*) The reasons for its popularity are many: first, because it is a European drama, second because I have so fondly told of *Madama Butterfly* in *Klai Ban* [the letters from Europe], but most important of all, when *Krue Fah* was last performed at the palace, the way the singer cut her throat at the end was so real, I was compelled to tip her a hundred baht.[64]

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[60] Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 223.
[61] The spectacle of theatrical architecture at the court of Chulalongkorn is addressed in Chapter 2.
[62] Recounted in Saengdao na Chiang Mai, *Phraprawat Phraratchaya Chao Dararasami* (Chiang Mai: Rongpim Klang Wieng, 1974), 185. My thanks to Songkran Somchandra for pointing me to this evidence.
[63] Nidhi Eosriwong, *Phakhaoma, phasin, kangkengnai lae la: waduai prapheni, khwamplianplaeng, lae ru'ang sapphasara* (Bangkok: Matichon, 1995), 110.
[64] Letter dated July 2, 1909; in Chulalongkorn, *Samnao phrarātchahatthalēkhā*.

In accounting for the opera's popularity, the king entirely bypassed mention of the resemblances between the fictional Krue Fah and his consort Dararasami, the letter's addressee. Preferring to overlook the complexity of his own position in this fictive/real nexus of colonial domination, he instead focused on the opera's connections to European models as the basis for its success, repeating the same appeal to the violence of realism that had captivated him in the opera houses of Europe.

At this point some readers may wonder why I have shied away from describing this history of emulation and appropriation of European operatic practices through the lens of colonial mimicry, drawing on Homi Bhabha's influential theory.[65] As a subversive paradigm that undermines imperial authority, colonial mimicry is useful in granting redemptive agency to colonial subjects. In repeated performance of obedience to imperial forms that are "almost the same but not quite," the colonial mimic produces a farce that subverts the authority of that form through its slippage, "almost the same but not white."[66] The comic extreme of mimicry is evident in Bhabha's own example: the native who accepts a copy of the Bible with gratitude, only to use its pages as napkins—the imperial authority of the Bible reduced to its mundane utility as paper. The Siamese court's localization of the European operatic form in *Sao Krue Fah*, however, can hardly be understood as subversive or as undermining the dominance of ethnological imperialism as a colonial strategy. Siamese operatic depiction of its internal Others was a harnessing of European exoticist representation as an imperial form—a recursion of oppressive tools, rather than their denial.

To illustrate this gap between the successful colonial mimic and the workings of *Sao Krue Fah*, I conclude with a vignette of quintessential colonial mimicry connected with the 1840 visit of British traveler Frederick Arthur Neale to the palace of Mongkut of Siam, Chulalongkorn's father. As a guest of the court, Neale was treated—among many other splendors—to two contrasting items of entertainment: a performance by Siamese musicians of an instrumental excerpt from Bellini's *Norma*, "with variations, in a style to be by no means sneered at," and a drug-fueled boxing match between European men in service to the palace.[67] The racialized tropes of the colonial encounter are reversed in these contrasting vignettes: the exotic Other traverses the bel canto line, while white bodies thrash and pummel for the pleasure of ethnic royalty. Performing European music, the Siamese court presents a self that is hollow repetition, lacking any representation of the self. Colonial mimicry conceals no essential identity behind the action. Mimicry, in Bhabha's reading of Lacan, is camouflage—not a harmonization of difference, but merely resemblance. In Neale's account, Bellini in Siam is not Wild Bellini, mediated through exoticist values; it is simply Bellini "with variations." In these presentations, the

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[65] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 2004), 121–31.

[66] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 122 and 128.

[67] Neale cites the music as "De con Fe," which I assume is a typographical error, referring to the duet "Deh! con te li prendi" from act 2 of Bellini's *Norma*. Neale, *Narrative of a Residence at the Capital of the Kingdom of Siam* (London: Office of the National Illustrated Library, 1852), 87–101. Many of Neale's accounts border on the fantastical, and the veracity of some of his more sensational anecdotes is dubious. There are no archival records on the Siamese side to suggest that such a performance of European music was offered at court as early as the 1840s. The employ of European bandmasters was later common during Chulalongkorn's reign. Prince Rangsit Prayurasakdi (b. 1885) wrote that in his childhood at court he regularly heard military band arrangements of music from *Carmen, Faust, La traviata*, and *Rigoletto*; see his *Pai Muangnok Khrang Raek Ro. So. 118* (Bangkok: Mom Ratchawong Priyananthana Rangsit, 2005).

Bangkok palace successfully demonstrated Siamese civilizational excellence, but devoid of anything essentially Siamese.

Italian opera appeared again at the court's Christmas party, where Neale was so overcome by the lavish festivities, he was compelled to invoke a scene of celebration by Donizetti:

> It was, indeed, a sumptuous repast! Most sumptuous. We had good wines, aye, the best of old crusty wines, to wash down the good things and assist digestion … so I sang to myself like the famed Edgardo [sic] in the Borgia—"Non curiamo lincerto domani, Si quest oggi ci dato go'dare [sic]."[68]

Such anecdotes from European travelers like Neale, among many others across the colonial nineteenth century, illustrate the complex position opera occupies in the interimperial imaginary: Asiatic opera itself is a slow, noisy bore, but the Oriental court feels operatic.[69]

In contrast to the offerings that Neale experienced at Mongkut's palace, it is difficult to call *Sao Krue Fah* anything close to an anticolonial move, and we have come far from Bhabha's colonial mimic. Rather than subvert the colonial gaze upon its own disavowal, the opera reinscribes coloniality on a smaller axis that lies within Siamese control. This reform in Siamese opera was not an act of colonial mimicry intended to camouflage the Bangkok court within the "mottled background" of colonial relations, but rather a complete removal of the Siamese royal center from the colonial fabric. In *Sao Krue Fah*, the self is not flattened into a mask of repetition, but deferred through the representation of the ethnic Other. Rather than fashioning itself as capable of European art practices, Chulalongkorn's court placed itself in the authorial position as unaffected producer of ethnographic knowledge. Balanced between the position of imperial force and colonial target, perhaps the surest kind of colonial subjectivity is not to offer one's vocal expression up for recognition—a game that will always be rigged from the start—but to render oneself invisible from taxonomical description, in the position of the sovereign observer.

[68] Neale, *Narrative of a Residence*, 96. Neale mistakes the character who sings these lines; it is Maffio Orsini.

[69] Neale's experience echoes that of Emily Eden, another English traveler to Asia a decade earlier, who similarly drew on operatic references to capture the splendor of a stately feast in Calcutta. See Benjamin Walton, "*L'Italiana* in Calcutta," in *Operatic Geographies: The Place of Opera and the Opera House*, ed. Suzanne Aspden (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 119–32.

2. New Figures in the Menagerie of Colonial Listening: White Elephants and the Operatic Frame

Since representatives of the East India Company began trading with the kings of Ayutthaya in 1612, British officials have regularly visited the courts of Siam. Siamese delegates, however, first laid eyes on a British monarch as late as 1857.[1] The diplomat Mom Rachothai, received at Windsor Castle in Queen Victoria's presence, described her appearance in the most laudatory way known to him, comparing the queen to a most majestic form of animal life:

> One cannot but be struck with the aspect of the august Queen of England, or fail to observe that she must be of pure descent from a race of goodly and warlike kings and rulers of the earth, in that her eyes, complexion, and above all her bearing, are those of a beautiful and majestic white elephant.[2]

In colonial encounter, the description of a human through comparison with an animal often takes the form of "racist animalization."[3] The nineteenth-century colonial archive is littered with European observers detailing the animalistic appearance and demeanor of indigenous peoples they encountered – behaving like an ape, howling like a dog – a confirmation of evolutionist racial hierarchy that justified the superiority of one's status in foreign lands.[4]

Take for example the Italian lawyer Salvatore Besso's description of a Siamese woman recently wedded to his Italian colleague:

> Amid immense rice-fields irrigated by canals lives the Italian Mazza, who has married a Siamese woman and who has a cloud of children, that, rather impossibly, are somewhat white [quasi bianchi]. His wife, dressed in simple and rough *panum,* displays her breasts in an indecent manner. Perhaps with age and as a result of her frequent maternity, she has lost that grace which one finds in her younger compatriots. Mazza calls her Madame Mazza; and it requires an effort to not laugh at that ape [scimmia] which in a few days will become the legal spouse of an Italian. After twelve children, Mazza has decided![5]

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[1] The 1857 Siamese delegation to Britain was led by Phraya Montri Suriyawong, a reciprocal mission after Sir John Bowring, Governor of Singapore's visit to King Mongkut in 1855. Mom Rachothai (also known as Mom Rajawongse Kratai Issarangkul), fluent in English, served as the lead interpreter. Prince Prisdang was received by Victoria in 1882, as briefly described in Chapter 1. The Siamese court musicians touring to London in 1885 played for the Queen, as described in Chapter 3. King Chulalongkorn dined with the British monarch at Osborne House during his first European tour, in 1897.

[2] As recounted in Anna Leonowens, *English Governess at the Siamese Court: Being Recollections of Six Years in the Royal Palace at Bangkok* (Boston: Fields, Osgood, and Co., 1870), 145.

[3] See Julie Sze, "Race, Animality, and Animal Studies," *American Quarterly* 72/2 (2020): 497-505.

[4] See, for example, the discussion of animalistic voices in Ana Maria Ochoa Gautier's *Aurality: Listening and Knowledge in Nineteenth-Century Colombia,* as covered in Chapter 1.

[5] Salvatore Besso, *Siam e Cina; L'Incoronazione del re del Siam e i giorni della rivoluzione cinese* (Rome: Tipografia editrice nazionale, 1913), 81. Entry dated December 16, 1911. Besso was not a legal advisor to the royal court, but among the foreign lawyers and judges employed to try cases involving Europeans in Siam which benefited from extraterritorial legal protection. Besso was brought to Bangkok to work on a case of trade fraud involving an Italian company.

Besso's salacious description of the "animalistic" Siamese woman activates a constellation of well-worn tropes of the condemnation of colonial subjecthood: the male gaze upon the exoticized female body (whose indecency, in this case, does not please him), the demotion of a racialized Other to monkey, the disgust of racial miscegenation and its abundant proliferation (and also, through animalistic description, the threat of inter-species reproduction), and the legal protection and humanization imminently afforded this Siamese woman and her "somewhat white" children through international law.[6]

While the figure of the animal has been crucial in recent humanistic inquiry into the history of modern personhood, they have featured heavily in Euro-American colonial histories of the construction of animalistic Others, the denial of racialized personhood through the concurrent demeaning of the animal as similar categories.[7] These are histories of the human category, alterity, and difference told from the viewpoint of Western thought in which to be animal is distinctly and most surely nonhuman.[8]

The descriptions of the Siamese – royalty and commoner alike – as an animalistic Other abound in the writings of European visitors to Siam, but the reverse case, that of Mom Rachothai's description of Victoria as a white elephant, is not a rejection of the queen's personhood, but an animalistic lens that elevates her to supra-human status.[9] Against the recurring figure of the native as animal, then, this chapter presents an alternative view on the figure of animality as a positive measure of personhood, one which does not originate from within a Western evolutionist epistemology.[10]

This animalistic image of Victoria as an elephant sparks a juxtaposed constellation of questions separate from the "racist animalization" framework: what would it mean to take seriously Mom Rachothai's praise of the monarch as a basis for sovereign personhood? To see Victoria's pink eye sockets, pale nails, and white skin in

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[6] This intersection is richly explored in relation to scientific knowledge production in Donna Haraway, *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science* (New York: Routledge, 1989).
[7] This issue has been richly explored in scholarship on the Black Atlantic. See for example, Che Gossett, "Blackness, Animality, and the Unsovereign," *Verso Books Blog,* September 28, 2015, www.versobooks.com/blogs/2228-che-gossett-blackness-animality-and-the-unsovereign; and Benedict Boisseron, *Afro-Dog: Blackness and the Animal Question* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).
[8] On the long Atlantic history of constructing racial difference through describing people of color as animalistic, see Claire Jean Kim, *Dangerous Crossings: Race, Species, and Nature in a Multicultural Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), particularly the chapter "Animals, Nature, and the Races of Man," 24-60. For an early treatment of the colonial formation of the categories of animal and human, see Tim Ingold, ed., *What is an Animal?* (London: Routledge, 1988).
[9] Another example: a British diplomat to Siam delegitimizes the authority of a Siamese prince, Wongsa Dhirajsnid, through describing him as a toad without full command of language. "An English visitor to the Siamese court," *The Times,* January 3, 1859: "The presence of that monster of obesity, the prince Wongsa, a mass of fat having but slight resemblance to a man, a horrible toad-like being… He laughs all over, and what a laugh, rolling about and heaving his huge body… giving utterance to such strange sounds that the first idea of the uninitiated is to send for a doctor… Rising up and calling attention by a grunt, he utters a toast in broken syllables "Her-Ma-ye-tih Queen Wik-to-erier!" and then gives a second grunt of satisfaction."
[10] Postcolonial scholarship has often shied away from analyzing the treatment of animals in relation to the treatment of humans under colonialism for risk of devaluing the experience of one group as an allegorical tool of comparison of another. See Philip Armstrong, "The Postcolonial Animal," *Society and Animals* 10/4 (2002): 413-419.

the way that a Siamese courtier might examine the merits of a white elephant? To see the height of human greatness through the image of the animal?

Accordingly, I deal with the figure of the animal today in the approach of animality studies, that is, the study of the animal and the human as co-constitutive figures in the histories of race, class, gender, and other forms of Othered and colonial personhood.[11] What follows is not about animal rights or the agency of nonhumans, but rather an inquiry into the idea of animal as a category of difference—both of inhumanity, in the Eurological sense, and supra-humanity in Siamese terms.

This chapter examines the Siamese conception of the white elephant as a symbol of sovereignty and as a supplement to royal personhood. The following section will explain the Siamese theory of *kotchalak,* or the theory of the assessment of elephants as heavenly bodies that confirm the divinely ordained sovereignty of monarch, and how this cosmology extends to other forms of bodies under the king's possession, such as royal patronage over the women of court opera. This Siamese cosmology is contrasted, however, with the real experience of European visitors to Bangkok who routinely expressed disappointment and distaste for the palace stable of elephants and the experience of court opera singers alike. The chapter ends by exploring how elephant-thinking manifested itself in Siamese royalty's experiences of European opera, and—building upon Chapter 1—the consequent decisions about operatic aesthetics in the court of Chulalongkorn through this animalistic lens. In sum, the chapter demonstrates how the identification of elephants abroad in the markers of European royal power was crucial to Siam's reshaping its traditional conceptions of sovereignty in light of encroaching European colonial domination across Southeast Asia.

As outlined in Chapter 1, the nineteenth-century history of European colonization of Southeast Asia is one and the same as the history of Siam's decline as a regional empire. The Siamese actors here, reconciling their traditional understanding of elephant assessment with newfound experiences of European cultural production, did so in a bid to wrest their share of sovereign power in a newfound global-colonial world order. Siamese royalty acted not for the purpose of anticolonial resistance, but with a desire to requisition the tools of European sovereignty in the wake of the collapse of traditional powers in Southeast Asia. Siam's response did not work toward an anticolonial future, but rather recast the successes of European coloniality onto local axes of expression. This is facilitated by Siam's capacity to afford the institutional power and sheer capital to respond to European imperialism on its own terms. In this cosmological flux, traditional conceptions of sovereignty did not disappear completely, but were rather reconceptualized in a crucial balancing between Siamese authenticity and cosmopolitan legibility. This reconceptualization, I will show, takes advantage of close associations between court elephants and court opera as kingly possessions that symbolize the successful reign of a Siamese monarch.

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[11] "The animal and the different are twins, for both operate as a broad swathe within which categories of simians, Asians, women, and other Others seem "different" in inexplicably similar ways"; Rachel Mundy, "Why Listen to Animals?" *Musicology Now,* October 17, 2018, www.musicologynow.org/why-listen-to-animals. See also Mundy, *Animal Musicalities: Birds, Beasts, and Evolutionary Listening* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2018) and Michael Lundblad, "From Animal to Animality Studies," *PMLA* 124/2 (2009): 496-502.

Kotchalak, or the Theory on the Assessment of Elephants

What does it mean to assess an elephant for its potential to accompany and amplify the power of the sovereign? The Siamese court interpreted the variable coloration of elephants through the theory of *kotchalak,* passed down as oral knowledge and illustrated treatises, which the kingdoms of Southeast Asia had localized from Brahminism.[12] A prized and magnificent form of life, the white elephant was a crucial counterpart to the successful reign of a Southeast Asian monarch. Such an animal lived a venerated life of sedentary captivity at court, as a heavenly body whose proximity to the heavenly body of the king reinforced one another's significance. As one Italian employee of the Siamese court relayed to another:

> A legend says that from time to time in the history of the world, a monarch appears who is able to conquer and govern every nation. He can be recognized by certain signs and by the possession of certain objects: of which the white elephant is the most sacred. Without the white elephant he could not become the dominator of the world.[13]

The legend in question can be traced back to the fourteenth-century cosmological treatise *Traiphum Phra Ruang* [The Three Worlds According to King Ruang], an early Siamese text describing the importance of the possession of white elephants (among other objects) for a monarch.[14] In this realm of knowledge, elephants were central to the origin myth in which the Hindu god Vishnu conjured a lotus flower, which became the earth. From each grain of the flower's pollen was birthed the first 173 elephants, each with different features, coloration, and accordant rank and holiness.[15] The theory of elephant assessment, then, was a comparative practice for interpreting and assessing a certain real-life elephant's features in accordance with those of originary elephants from the creation of the world.[16] They tie together two important aspects of elephant cosmology: the mythical and the real. Real elephants become a conduit to the originary divine, and the confirmation of a king's right to rule.[17] Certain European visitors to Siam were privy to

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[12] See Rita Ringis, *Elephants of Thailand in Myth, Art, and Reality* (Kuala Lumpur; New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

[13] Gerolamo Emilio Gerini to Alberto Nazzari, upon their meeting at the Siamese pavilion of the 1911 World's Fair in Turin, as recounted in Adriana Lo Faro, *La marcia del'elefante bianco: 1911 da Torino a Bangkok* (Turin: Ananke, 2006), 52. Lo Faro is Nazzari's granddaughter, and this book is a narrative retelling of the author's understanding of Nazzari's experience as Italian bandmaster at the Siamese court.

[14] King Lithai of Sukhothai (c.1374), trans. Frank Reynolds and Mani B. Reynolds, *Three Worlds According to King Ruang, a Thai Buddhist Cosmology* (Berkeley, California: Asian Humanities Press, 1982). The possession of white elephants by monarchs of Southeast Asia can arguably be traced back as early as the twelfth century, assuming that the historical evidence in question is not a nineteenth-century falsification. See William Warren, *The Elephant in Thai Life and Legend*, (Bangkok: Monsoon Editions, 1998), 112.

[15] The multitalented military instructor, philologist, and historian Gerolamo Emilio Gerini, employed at Chulalongkorn's court as Director of Military Education, also describes this origin myth in relation to a coming-of-age ritual of Siamese boys in the 1893 publication, *Chulakantamangala: the Tonsure Ceremony as performed in Siam* (Bangkok: Siam Society, 1976), 11-28. This was among the many publications on Siamese tradition written by European intellectuals employed by the court around 1900.

[16] See Henry Ginsburg, *Thai Manuscript Painting* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1989), 33-43.

[17] Outside of royal function, the animal as an everyday conduit to the mythical, the ghostly, and the superstitious remains commonplace in Thailand today. For a reflection on animism, animality, and

this, as was the German anthropologist Adolf Bastian, who had the opportunity to study an illustrated *kotchalak* manuscript during his 1863 ethnographic tour:

> [A Siamese minister] kindly allowed me to borrow a book depicting and describing all the different species of elephant, so that one could derive an animal's pedigree from the characteristics listed and thus assess to what degree it was thoroughbred…. The Elephant Manual begins: I will speak about old things, from that pre-history when Isuen and Phrommana, consecrating Narai's holy fire, called to life with strong and mighty powers the apparition of the elephants of four dynasties: the dynasty of Isuen, the dynasty of Phrohm, the dynasty of Vitsanu, and the dynasty of Akkhani.[18]

The features of an auspicious elephant are not hereditary, and so new white elephants must be discovered from among the wild herds of Southeast Asia. When tamed and brought to the court in Bangkok, a new white elephant undergoes a rigorous observation period in which royal assessors would scrutinize every inch of its body – studying the color of the eye sockets, lashes, the toes, the hairs on the ears and the tail, and their fullness – to judge its demeanor, its appearance and favorable coloration. Assessors also listen for the qualities of its trumpeting, breathing, and snoring to discern the auspiciousness of its sound. *Kotchalak* treatises describe some favorable features of an elephant's vocality with a large range of sonic referents, such as sounding like a heron, a trumpet, a conch, or thunder. The mythic elephants in the dynasty of Vishnu [Vitsanu, in Bastian's text] for example, have the voice of the tiger during the day and the voice of the rooster during the night.[19] The ability to interpret these mythic descriptions upon the observed qualities of real elephants are part of the mastery of a *kotchalak* assessor.

While stylized depictions of white elephants may show the animal in mythical form and fully white, in reality these elephants' "whiteness" shows up as patches of brown or pink rather than uniform whiteness, to the disappointment of many a European visitor.

Rather than describing the animals themselves in detail, foreign visitors to the court's elephant stables before the nineteenth-century often focused on describing the fuss and expense taken in the care of these animals. As early as the mid-sixteenth century, the Portuguese explorer Fernao Mendes Pinto described the elaborate procession involving a white elephant:

> He [the elephant] was shaded from the sun by twenty-four servants carrying white parasols. His guard numbered three thousand men. It was like a procession on a day of festival. Before and behind went about thirty lords on elephants. He had a chain of beaten gold on his back and thick silver chains girding him like belts.

Thainess from a contemporary anthropological view, see "The Strange Story of A Strange Beast," in Benedict Anderson, *Exploration and Irony in Studies of Siam Over Forty Years* (2014), 131-146.

[18] The four dynasties listed are each descended from four Hindu deities; Adolf Bastian, *A Journey in Siam (1863),* (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 2005), 73-74.

[19] Chroen Waiwatchanakun, *Tamnan khot chasat chabap mu ban chang: ekkasan prakop Kanprachum Sammana wan Chang Thai Changwat Surin khrang thi 1,* (Surin, Thailand: Chamnong Chaloem Chat, 1999), 64.

> Round his neck were more silver chains. They told me that on feast days he wore gold chains, but silver chains when he was going to his bath.[20]

A century later, French diplomat Nicolas Gervaise commented on the luxurious treatment of the court's elephants, from the staff required to attend them to the expense of their feeding vessels:

> The duties of the keepers, who look after the elephants night and day, are quite unbelievable; they have to stay with them to look after their needs and to chase away any flies that might disturb them…. The white elephant is distinguished from the rest [of the elephants] by the golden vessels from which it feeds, by the consideration which the whole court pays to it, and by the honor it has of being lodged next to the king's apartment.[21]

Simon de La Loubère, while witnessing the embarkment of the gift elephants Siam had sent to the court of Louis XIV, dismissed the Siamese veneration of elephant-qua-human as a misrecognition of basic animal behavior:

> They embarked three young elephants which the king of Siam sent to the three princes the Grandsons of France. The Siamese which brought them on Board our Ships to embark them, took leave of them, as they would have done of three of their Companions, and whisper'd them in their Ears, saying "Go, depart cheerfully, you will be Slaves indeed, but you will be so to three the greatest Princes of the World, whose Service is as moderate as it is glorious. They afterwards hoisted them into the Ships, and because they [the elephants] bow'd down themselves to go under the Decks, they [the Siamese] cry'd out with admiration, as if all Animals did not as much to pass under low places.[22]

The ritual significance of such elephant interactions were lost upon these early European travelers to Siam, and recorded in the archive as observations of wasteful excess or superstition. The efficacy of such ritual was opaque and illegible across interimperial lines.

Nineteenth-century accounts, on the other hand, shift to the disappointment of seeing a white elephant whose actual colors did not live up to the name. As Sir John Bowring, Governor of Singapore, wrote of his tour of the court's elephants:

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[20] As translated in William Warren, *The Elephant in Thai Life and Legend,* (Bangkok: Monsoon Editions, 1998), 114. Pinto widely is a known as an unreliable historical source. For more on his accounts of Siam, see Michael Smithies, "The Siam of Mendes Pinto's Travels," *Journal of the Siam Society* 95/1-2 (1991): 59-73.

[21] Nicolas Gervaise, trans. John Villers, *The natural and political history of the Kingdom of Siam* (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 1989), 32.

[22] Simon de la Loubère, *A New Historical Relation of the Kingdom of Siam* (London: T. Horne, 1693), 46. For the history of the seventeenth-century gift economy of elephant exchange between the courts of Europe and Southeast Asia, see Pichayapat Naisupap, "The Emblematic Elephant: Elephants, the Dutch East India Company, and Eurasian Diplomacy in the Seventeenth Century," Master's Thesis, Leiden University (2020).

> The animal's color is really a light mahogany, with the eye that of an albino, but it appeared in perfect health and occupied the center of a large apartment, one part of which, in an elevated position, was a golden chair for the king…. We visited many other elephants which were more or less white.[23]

The Norwegian explorer Carl Alfred Bock, writing almost three decades later, made similar comments:

> Were I to describe him [the elephant] as white I should lay myself open to the charge of colorblindness; but he was quite an albino, the whole body being of a pale reddish-brown color, with a few real white hairs on the back. The iris of the eye, the color of which is held to be a good test of an albino, was a pale Naples yellow. He looked peaceful ... [and] his quiet bearing was in great contrast with the excitement all around, as if he felt the importance of his position.[24]

In contrast, our rather fantastical source (as seen in Chapter 1) Frederic Arthur Neale was blown away by the sight of a truly white elephant:

> I have never before seen so large an elephant; his skin was as smooth and spotless and white as the driven snow, with the exception of a large scarlet rim round the eyes. The brute was too dignified and accustomed to homage to pay the slightest attention to the intrusion of such unpresuming visitors as ourselves, but went on calmly helping himself to leaves and branches from the mighty piles that were heaped up before him.[25]

The aforementioned anthropologist Bastian, who was loaned a *kotchalak* manuscript, expresses brief disappointment upon seeing the animal in real life:

> The white elephant that I saw in the palace when I arrived was not an entirely authentic one, as a few defining characteristics were lacking, and he was called only Chang Pralat (Wonderful Elephant) [a category beneath that of White].[26]

Returning to the manuscript, Bastian goes on to describe the pages of mythical elephants illustrated in the treatise of a wide array of colors and forms:

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[23] John Bowring, *The Kingdom and People of Siam, with a Narrative of the Mission to that Country in 1855, Vol. 2* (London: J.W. Parker, 1857), 312.

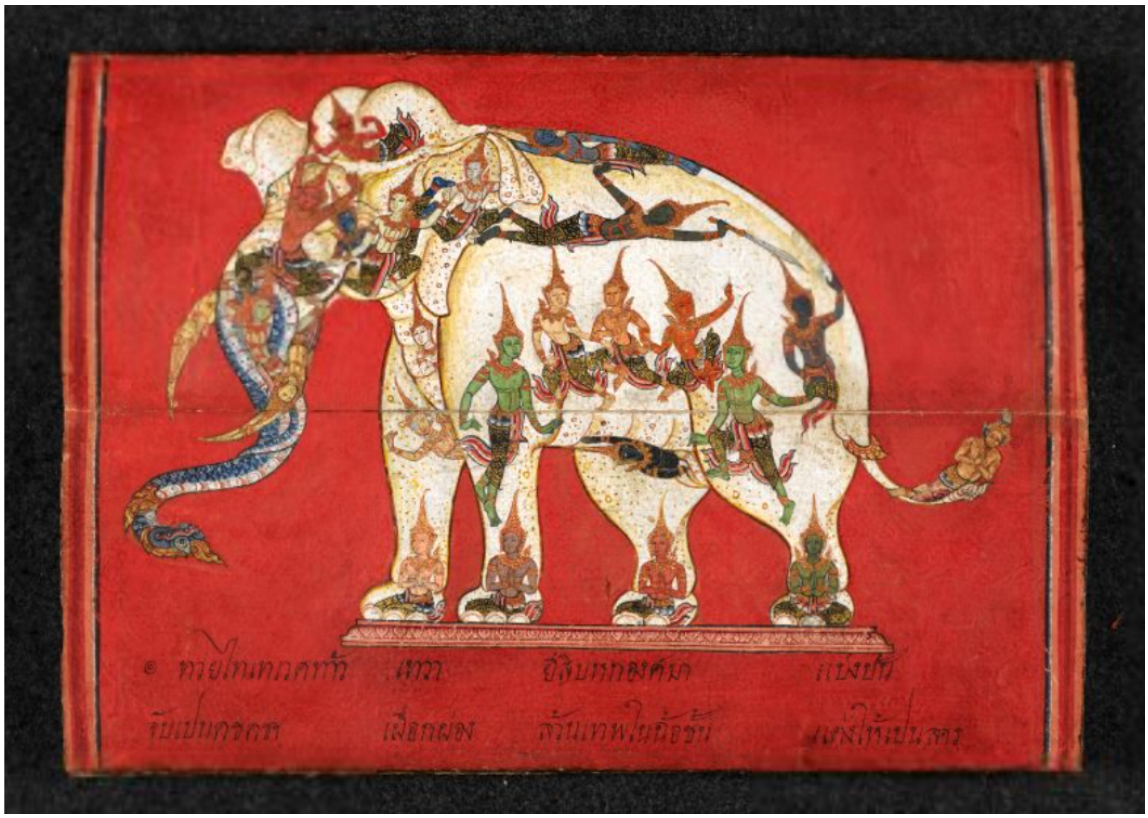
[24]Carl Alfred Bock, *Temples and Elephants: The Narrative of a Journey of Exploration through Upper Siam and Lao* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle & Rivington, 1884), 33. Bock also added a cautionary anecdote reminding visitors that parody and sacrilege upon the symbol of the white elephant was not to be taken lightly. As Bock describes, an English travelling circus under the management of a certain Mr. Wilson visited Bangkok in 1881 widely advertising a white elephant of "snow-white complexion." This clearly painted elephant performed humiliating and belittling tasks, each movement leaving a mark of his "whiteness" on everything he touched, to the disdain and disbelief of the Siamese audience. Both Mr. Wilson and the elephant were killed during their journey out of Bangkok to Singapore.

[25] Frederic Arthur Neale, *Narrative of a Residence at the Capital of the Kingdom of Siam* (London: Office of the National Illustrated Library, 1852), 99.

[26] Adolf Bastian, *A Journey in Siam,* 72.

> A white-colored elephant consisting of 26 *thephada* [angels].… the 33-headed elephant *Eravan.* … the three-headed elephant *Khirimekh* … five elephants, in golden, silver, yellow, blue, green, and gray color … a large number of other illustrations of elephants in the usual black color, explaining the various species and emphasizing the special virtues of each … the final page contains an elephant formed from the contortion of girls.[27]

Bastian's description accords well with the elephant treatise (c.1830-1850) currently held at the British Library, allowing us to view the same images he described.[28]



[27] "Die letzte Seite enthielt einen aus den Korperwindungen von Mädchen gebildeten Elephanten," Bastian, *A Journey in Siam,* 75.

[28] *Elephant Treatise* (Tamra Chang), British Library, (c. 1830-1850), manuscript number OR13652, www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Or_13652. An older elephant treatise from 1824, held at the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore, Maryland, accession number W.893, also depicts a composite white elephant made up of 26 angels, although it does not contain one made of court women. The Walter manuscript is examined in detail in Hiram Woodward, "The Characteristics of Elephants: A Thai Manuscript and Its Context," in ed. Justin Thomas McDaniel and Lynn Ransom, *From Mulberry Leaves to Silk Scrolls: New Approaches to the Study of Asian Manuscript Traditions* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 15-41.

Figs 2.1 – 2.6: illustrations from *Elephant Treatise,* (British Library, OR13652)

The illustrations shown in Figures 2.1 to 2.6 range the gamut of elephant-like forms of life. The subjects depicted descend from mythical depictions—multi-headed elephants and angels in the shape of elephants—into subjects that occupy the everyday—regular black elephants with novel markings (there are eight more pages of these), and women, posed in contortions to form the shape of an elephant. Indeed, the two elephants made up of the bodies of other beings open and end the manuscript's depictions. This motif is known in art history as the composite animal, originating in Indian and Persian practice and localized to Siam.[29] The specific ways that the composite elephant motif makes meaning in Siamese art have not been theorized, but their juxtaposition within this manuscript suggests one answer: the heavenly bodies of angels come together to form a singular body of a mythic white elephant, and so too can Siamese court women come together to form, so to speak, an earthly, auspicious elephant for the sovereign grace of their king. The illustrations' status as the only composites depicted in the manuscript otherwise filled with singular-bodied elephants suggests a symbolic closeness between the two: the monarch's patronage of court women resembles the spectacle of possession of a white elephant.

This parallel was explored in an article penned by King Mongkut himself in the court's *Wachirayanwiset* journal, entitled "On White Elephants and Women Performers." Detailing the historical rivalry and exchange of both white elephants and female performers in the courts of past reigns and dynasties, Mongkut wrestles with the fact that the criteria for "ranking" women are more subjective than those for assessing elephants, but alludes to court opera as a situation in which status is more clearly delineated:

> White elephants and women performers are similar things to a king … [but] the assessment and ranking of women performers is always up for debate. One can attempt to judge a woman performer in the manner one assesses a white elephant, but there can never be consensus over the merits of one woman over another the same way one can come to an agreement on the merits of an elephant, since the criteria for assessment are apparent. Each man naturally clings to his own biases regarding women performers. The issue is more clearcut in court opera under the king's patronage, since the woman in the lead role of the king's troupe is by status superior above all.[30]

In a sense, Mongkut's article puts into words the relationship between woman and elephant captured by the composite elephant illustrated in the *kotchalak* manuscript. The patronage provided to the women of the court opera bolsters the monarch's sovereignty in the same way as his possession of a white elephant does. Both elephant and opera functioned as legible systems for legitimizing the monarch's rule, albeit an internal legibility whose logics were lost upon many a European observer.

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[29] On the South Asian origin of the composite animal motif as early as the fifteenth century, see Robert J. Del Bonta, "Reinventing Nature: Mughal Composite Animal Painting" in Som Prakash Verma, ed., *Flora and Fauna in Mughal Art* (Bombay: Marg Publications on behalf of the National Centre for the Performing Arts, 1999), 69-82. South Asian composite elephant paintings seem to always depict a rider – a human figure or a Hindu deity such as Krishna or Kama - while the Siamese ones are riderless.

[30] "*Wa duai chang puek lae nang ngam* [On white elephants and women performers]," *Wachirayanwiset* 2/17 (1886): 134-136, here 135.

Hearing Operatic Animality in Siam and Abroad

While the women of Siamese court opera were geometrically assembled into the image of a white elephant in order to uphold Siamese sovereignty, European visitors were not privy to this grand metaphorical knowledge. To the influx of European visitors to the court, performances of Siamese opera conveyed little of the sovereign spectacle that the art form enjoyed across Southeast Asia prior to European rule. Carl Alfred Bock, for example, described Siamese opera as "very uninteresting" and indistinguishable from Javanese theater, dismissing the tedious drama an opportunity to see some pretty figures.[31] In addition to emphasizing boredom and the slow pace of the music and dramatic action, many European accounts of court opera performances interpreted the timbre of the Siamese voice through the figure of the cat—piercing, unmusical, and unrefined.

In the guise of praising the musicality of Lao musicians she had heard, the English writer Florence Caddy also demeaned their singers with howling cats, simultaneously casting the Lao as a subset of the Siamese race:

> The Laosians [sic] are really the most musical of the Siamese race. The band played a love-song of their Lao land … the voice – though they were very proud of their singers – was too much of a cat-howl to be musical, but the music itself is wild, melodious, and very pleasing.[32]

As overlapping categories of human division, race, ethnicity, and animality, cohere in such European observations of foreign music and song.

The Italian lawyer quoted at the outset of this chapter, Salvatore Besso, similarly seized on images of noisy animals in his account of a court opera performance he attended in the presence of King Vajiravudh and the foreign dignitaries Princess Alice of Teck and Grand Duchess Maria Paulowna:

> And the performance? You will ask me. Beautiful for a while, very beautiful, but finally most monotonous … [with a character that] emitted piercing little shrieks [piccolo gridi acuti]. I shall never be able to describe the music which accompanied these bleating dancers [danze-belati]: to call it braying or barking [ragli o abbaiamenti] is to say little.[33]

By 1921, the stereotypes of exotic Siam had been distilled so completely in the European imagination that novelist Gilbert Frankau could combine them into a few lines in the opening vignette of his *The Seeds of Enchantment.* The novel opens with a traveler's memory of the Siamese theater that features the wailing timbre of cat-like singing, the polygamous plot that drives dramatic intrigue, and the spectacle of the white elephant:

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[31] Bock, *Temples and Elephants*, 47.
[32] Florence Caddy, *To Siam and Malaya in the Duke of Sutherland's Yacht* (London, Hurst and Blackett: 1889), 210.
[33] Salvatore Besso, *Siam e Cina,* 79. Letter dated December 6, 1911.

> A strange playhouse, and a strange play… I can still hear, vaguely, the wailing, cat-like music of the chorus; I can still remember the polygamous plot…. I can still see … an enormous elephant—the white elephant of Siam, panoplied to victory in resounding brass.[34]

Even the distaste for Siamese singing itself could be expressed in animalistic terms, as when London's *Musical News* suggested in an article on the musical inclinations of various animals that cats are sensitive to high sounds, arousing in them "feelings akin to those in which we ourselves listen to efforts of Siamese performers."[35] The imagery shifts, here, to put the cat in the position of listener, proximate to that of the listening human pained by Siamese singing.

It is striking that animalistic imagery was no less common in Siamese descriptions of European operatic singing. As described in Chapter 1, members of Siamese royalty, in addition to King Chulalongkorn himself, likewise lived and travelled across Europe in the late nineteenth century and were firsthand witness to many operatic offerings. It was at the opera that the Siamese conception of animalistic personhood clashed against the Western evolutionist counterpart.

In 1881, the Siamese princes Prisdang and Sowathisophorn attended a performance of Rossini's *Guillaume Tell* at the Paris Opéra. Their misadventure was reported as far as the *New York Times*, which writes:

> The most curious exhibitions of the past week [in Paris]—I do not say performances, for the individuals in question were as quiet as though they were specimens of taxidermy—have been those of the Siamese contingent who came in by the train from Marseilles … the coffee-colored exotics.[36]

The princes were so awestruck by the singing of Henri Sellier in Rossini's *Guillaume Tell* that they barged backstage to bestow upon the tenor "The Most Exalted Order of the White Elephant," an award newly coined by Chulalongkorn's government to mark European individuals in favor of the court. In this gesture we glimpse the Siamese conception of animality as a supplement to the figure of the sovereign. The name of the award carried cosmological significance, the honor in Siamese literally means "to be honored as if a white elephant." Marking a European as an elephant meant claiming the occidental Other into the fold of a knowable hierarchy within the Siamese ordering of animality. The conferring of such an award suggested that sources of sovereign power were not found just in the forests of Siam, but also the cities of Europe. The emblem of the white elephant remained as a crucial cosmological sign for a successful reign in Chulalongkorn's time, its manifest materiality shifting from the literal body of an elephant with pink complexion onto the bodies of white men.

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[34] Gilbert Frankau, *The Seeds of Enchantment, Being Some Attempt to Narrate the Curious Discoveries of Doctor Cyprian Beamish, M. D., Glasgow; Commandant René de Gys, Annamite Army, and the Honourable Richard Assheton Smith, in the Golden Land of Indo-China* (New York and Toronto: Doubleday, Page, and Company, 1921), v-vi.

[35] "Animals' Love for Music," *Musical News: A Weekly Journal of Music,* November 16, 1904, 467.

[36] "Stage Affairs in Paris," *New York Times,* September 25, 1881.

While Prisdang and Sowathisophorn expected this honor would be received with gratitude and humility by Sellier, the princes' attempted display of royal power backfired. Their conduct backstage was so boisterous and uncivil that the Opéra's administration ejected the princes from the premises, demanding "the monkeys be taken to the *Jardin des plantes*."

At play in this theater of colonial relations are overlapping lenses that transform the contested figure of the human through opposite emblems of animality. The princes found Sellier's novel expression of the singing voice so magnificent that they deigned to honor it with the pride of Siam's forests. In the process, their misfired theater-etiquette became associated with the monkey, their conduct deemed more suitable for a zoological exhibit than for the theater. In this colonial encounter, an evolutionist racial hierarchy superseded the Siamese cosmological ordering of life, facilitated by the operatic experience. This "taming" of the French voice through the emblem of the white elephant resulted in embarrassment for the Siamese princes. Rather than a figure of sovereignty bestowing a token of patronage to the European arts, the princes were reduced to a vignette from the lower rungs of the humanity-animality ladder: as if creatures exhibited at the zoo.

Substitute elephants at Chulalongkorn's court

In Chapter 1, I discussed at some length a letter in which Chulalongkorn explained to Narathip Praphanphong his reasons for refusing to train Siamese students in Italian singing. The King refused the services of the voice teacher Isidore Braggiotti, fearing that Siamese singers upon their return from Italy "would not be able to do much except howl like dogs."[37] Chulalongkorn articulated this view even after he had made trips to Europe during which he had been greatly impressed by European operatic singing, and had also certainly come to understand that the Siamese singing at his court failed to make much of an impression on foreign visitors beyond comparisons with wailing cats. The problem of aesthetic legibility was not lost on the king, who had encountered issues of translation and incomprehension in theaters across Europe. Yet rather than hybridize the musical aspects of his court opera with European features, Chulalongkorn fervently resisted the incorporation of either Italian vocal technique or musical style.

The question of which European practices ought to be emulated and which refused weighed upon the king. The letter quoted at the opening of Chapter 1 continues, revealing the logic of interimperial balancing between singing and architecture:

> (If our students go to Italy for training, when they return, I am afraid that they would not be able to do much except howl like dogs.) The true question is whether the individual students are able to integrate their learning back into Thainess. The goal is not to imitate Italian opera outright while performing it in Thai—that would have the same effect as Sala Luk Khun Hall [a drab administrative building that approximated a European style]. The right individual

[37] Letter dated April 25, 1909. Chulalongkorn, *Samnao phraratchahatthalekha Phrabat Somdet Phra Chunlachomklao Chaoyuhua mi phraratchathan Krommaphra Narathippraphanphong* (Bangkok: Rongphim Sophon Phiphatthanakon, 1931), 19–21.

would be able to create the Benchamabophit Temple and improve upon our way of singing.[38]

Chulalongkorn's analogy between operatic singing style and palace architecture reveals beliefs about the separation between the form and content of the opera house, and about the singing voice, as techniques for amplifying monarchical power. For the king, listening to court opera and looking at court architecture are similar, as they both uphold and symbolize the cosmological power of the sovereign.

Both of the buildings mentioned in Chulalongkorn's letter formed part of the palace complex, and both had been commissioned by Chulalongkorn from Italian architects who fashioned a number of Bangkok's royal structures in the decades around 1900. The design for the Benchamabophit Temple (Figure 2.7) was made by Prince Narisara Nuwattiwong, another half-brother of the king (who will feature again in Chapters 3 and 4), with assistance from the architect Annibale Rigotti. Its design incorporates the traditional roof of the Siamese temple, supported by the symmetrical façade of columns carved from Carrara marble. The presence of European architectural elements was a common feature across the capitals of nineteenth-century Southeast Asia. But in Siam, the terms of this incorporation were entirely under the court's control, rather than being the emblem of civilization and progress imposed on foreign lands by a colonial administration. The symmetrical façade of Carrara marble, for instance, literally upholds the Siamese roof of the Benchamabophit Temple.

The Sala Luk Khun (Figure 2.8), designed by an unnamed architect and revised by Michele Galletti, stands in stark contrast with its generic European plainness, incorporating no Siamese elements in the design.[39] For Chulalongkorn, the commonplace appearance of Sala Luk Khun, while legible to European visitors, failed to display Siamese authenticity. It contained no elements to signify Thainess – the same pitfall that the king feared Italianate singing would be for his court singers.

The greatest architectural endeavor of Chulalongkorn's time was the Ananta Samakhom Hall, carved again from Carrara marble with copper domes in the design of architect Mario Tamagno, with interior work by Carlo Rigoli and Galileo Chini (Figure 2.9).[40] The hall's ornate red carpet, marble walls, and gold accents – components imported at great cost from abroad – point directly to the great opera houses of Europe (Figure 2.10).[41] In reforming his court practices for the purposes of European legibility, Chulalongkorn understood the architectural conventions of European opera as a portable aesthetic frame suitable for Siamese excellence. Not wanting to transport the sound of the dog into the Siamese body, the king found it best to refuse the voice of the dog and instead emulate the dog house.

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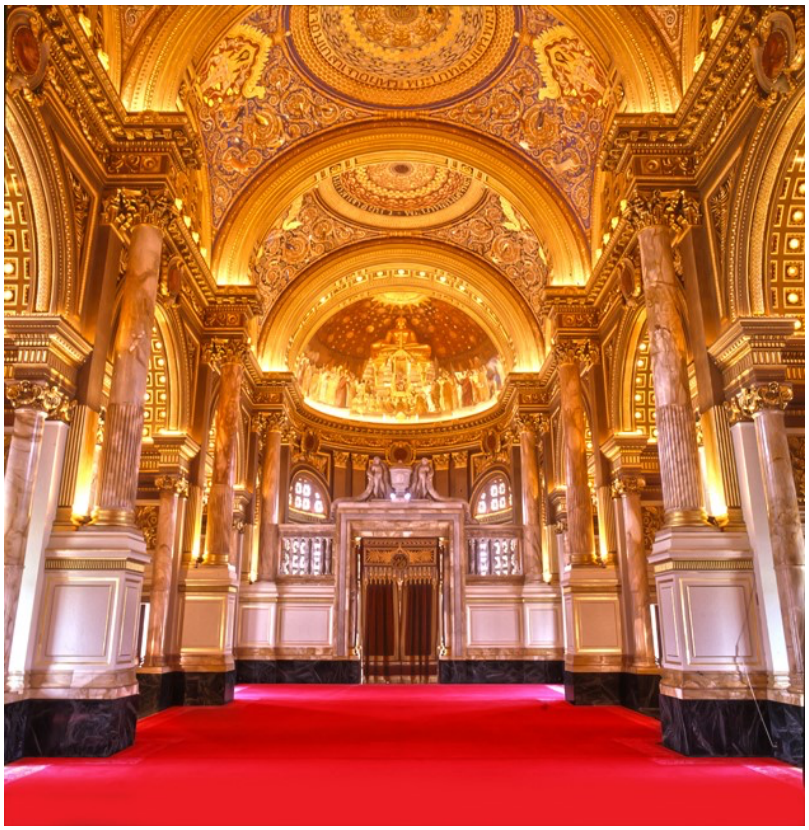
[38] Letter dated April 25, 1909; in Chulalongkorn, *Samnao phrarātchahatthalēkhā,* 19-21.
[39] Galletti's revisions are detailed in Sor.Tor.0701.7.3.1.1/10, National Archives of Thailand.
[40] Tamagno also fashioned Bangkok's Hua Lamphong Station, the Italian Neo-Renaissance landmark featured in the film *Tár* signaling the titular conductor's arrival in postcolonial Southeast Asia.
[41] For a history and comprehensive illustrations of the hall, see *Centenary of Ananta Samagom* [*sic*] *Throne Hall and the opening ceremony of "the seventh arts of the kingdom" and "Borommangalanusarani Pavilion," Friday 10th, June 2016* (Bangkok: Queen Sirikit Institute Chitralada Villa). On the history and significance of the red and gold interior in opera house architecture, see Laura Vasilyeva, *Opera and the Built Environment* (forthcoming).

Figure 2.7: Benchamabophit Temple

Figure 2.8: Sala Luk Khun Hall



Figures 2.9 and 2.10: Anantasamakhom Hall, exterior and interior

Chulalongkorn may have rejected the Italian operatic sound, but he invested great sums in bringing the accoutrements of Italian architecture to the Siamese court, as well as in obtaining the services of other foreign professionals.[42] In 1893, the court hired 36 Italian architects, engineers, and artists into the Ministry of Public Works, with the engineer Carlo Allegri as their director in chief.[43] By the end of Chulalongkorn's reign, the number of Italians at court alone numbered around one hundred, many of whom had been recruited from among the graduates and faculty at the Accademia Albertina di Belle Arti in Turin.[44] Many of the Italians who contributed to the Anantasamakhom's design and construction, for example, like the architect Annibale Rigotti and painter Galileo Chini, held short contracts and worked a few years at court before continuing their careers back in Italy. Chini, having decorated a real palace of the orient, went on to fashion the fantasy of an oriental palace as set designer for the world premiere of Puccini's *Turandot* at La Scala in 1926.[45] Others, like the engineer Carlo Allegri and architect Mario Tamagno, spent their careers serving the Siamese court before taking an early retirement back in Italy with their pensions paid by the Siamese crown.[46] Yet others built new lives and families in Siam, marrying Thai wives and taking up new names and citizenship.[47]

For their service to Siamese absolutism, some of these men were awarded the Honor of the White Elephant – that is, they were honored as if a white elephant of the court.[48] Italians thus became enfolded into the Siamese conception of animality as a supplement to the grace of the sovereign. By the end of the nineteenth-century, neither the real bodies of white elephants nor their metaphorical double in Siamese women

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[42] Michele Fusco, who will feature in Chapter 4, served Chulalongkorn's court to train the military band, never to touch court opera. Alberto Nazzari was similarly hired as bandmaster in 1911, in Vajiravudh's reign. For a devoted study on the architectural reforms at Chulalongkorn's court, see Pirasri Povatong, "Building Siwilai: Transformation of Architecture and Architectural Practice in Siam during the Reign of Rama V, 1868-1910," PhD diss. (University of Michigan, 2011).

[43] See Francesca B. Filippi, *Da Torino a Bangkok: Architetti e Ingegneri nel Regno del Siam* (Venice: Marsilio, 2008) and Neungreudee Lohapon, "The encounter between Italy and Siam at the dawn of the twentieth century: Italian artists and architects in the modernizing Kingdom of Siam," *Modern Italy* 24/4 (2019): 469-484.

[44] Some of the artists and architects recruited from the Accademia Albertina included Ercole Manfredi, Cesare Ferro Milone, Annibale Rigotti, and Mario Tamagno. Other important Italian professionals in Siam at the time were Carlo Allegri, Salvatore Besso, Corrado Feroci, and Gerolamo Gerini; in addition to art and architecture, they served the court in matters of defense, law, and cultural and history writing.

[45] For more on Chini's work on Puccini, see Alessandra Belluomini Pucci, ed. *Giacomo Puccini e Galileo Chini: tra musica e scena dipinta* (Viareggio: Torre di Legno, 2006).

[46] Upon his retirement from Siamese service in 1926, Mario Tamagno retired to Italy with an annual pension of 8,000 Baht until his death in 1941. See Ror.6 Bor.5/61, National Archives of Thailand.

[47] Ercole Manfredi took the name Ekkarit Manfendi and later taught at Chulalongkorn University. Corrardo Feroci, with the assistance of Wichit Wathakan, changed his name to Silpa Bhirasri and founded Silpakorn University, the University of Fine Arts of Thailand.

[48] The Siamese crown also awarded "The Most Illustrious Order of the Royal House of Chakri" to European individuals, as Chulalongkorn widely did during the 1897 European tour. The honor in Thai carries the same comparison clause as in the Elephant award, thus literally "To be honored as if a member of the royal house of Chakri." This suggests a selection process in which certain foreigners of repute ought to be honored as if a white elephant, others as if a member of Siamese royalty. Queen Victoria received both honors. See Joachim Schliesinger, *Elephants in Thailand,* Vol. 3 (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 2012), 119-120. For records of some of these awards, see Ror.5 Bor.9/43 and Mor. Ror.5 Tor./25, National Archives of Thailand.

performers could serve as interimperial symbols of sovereign power. Chulalongkorn's court integrated the Siamese animalistic cosmology onto these architects and artists, as Italian men became substitute elephants whose service to the king reinforced his sovereign significance and the right to rule.

This is, however, not a kind of listening, at least not a listening practice. Substitute elephants make no sound – with the exception of their amateur production of *Cavalleria rusticana,* produced as a benefit performance in 1918, the reign of King Vajiravudh.[49] Unlike the other animalistic comparisons examined here – the wailing cat and the howling dog – the elephant does not trumpet. Rather, the drove of European artists and advisors, and the architectural splendor they instituted, created a space that guarded against the audibility of animality at court. Chulalongkorn seems to have realized that vocal timbres (whether Siamese or European, whether heard as cat or dog) could never be fully translated, or transcend the formidable sonic barriers of cultural formation. He chose instead to devote his resources to transforming the civilizational spaces that house those voices—spaces that could guarantee their recognition within the signifying systems of the colonial modern—while making very few changes to the sonic material of music and song at court. The refusal to integrate Italian operatic vocality into court music reveals the limits of Siamese Occidentalism: in an interimperial space, nationalist cultural production must toe the line between local authenticity and cosmopolitan legibility.

Italo-Siamese comparisons are a way of thinking about forms of life as living accessories of sovereignty: collapsing the difference between white elephants, Siamese women, and white men. But the basis of comparison is of course unequal. Italian employees enjoyed the legal personhood afforded by international law and the protection of their embassy, while elephants and court women were literal possessions of the crown.

Why specifically, did Siam choose to employ Italian men? Perhaps it was the practicality of having established connections with Carlo Allegri and the Albertine Academy, after which their network of workers followed. Perhaps it was because Italy maintained no colonial activity in Southeast Asia, and played no part between the British and French clash for regional dominance. Or perhaps, the prominence of Italian artists at court suggests a global-colonial history that balances Italy's status as Europe's near-Other with the cosmopolitan legibility of Italianate aesthetics that appealed to a marginal newcomer to the global stage like Siam.

The frame of the white elephant as an emblem of Siam's self-presentation was by no means immutable. By 1916, King Vajiravudh was well aware of the overt centrality, even excess, of white elephants in the iconography of the kingdom abroad. In his decision to change the flag of the country from the drawing of a white elephant to the red, white, and blue stripes still in use today, the king bemoaned: "to most [foreign] people, Siam is a country full of White Elephants and nothing much besides."[50] But in a time of colonial upheaval, the cosmology, iconography, ritual, and spaces that conceptualize royal power can be very real concerns to its practitioners, even if they are fast-changing. If, in 1886,

[49] Santuzza was sung by A. Gollo, wife of the engineer Emilio Giovanni Gollo, opposite the Turridu of Michele Galletti, introduced above. Ercole Manfredi sang in the chorus.
[50] As quoted in Walter F. Vella, *Chaiyo!: King Vajiravudh and the Development of Thai Nationalism* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2019), 191. Originally printed in the English-language *Siam Observer* daily newspaper, April 1916.

the court journal could print an article stating “white elephants and women performers are similar things to a king,” perhaps by 1910 the same could be said of elephants and Italian men.

Figure 2.11: a composite elephant of my own making, in which the portraits of Italian professionals at Chulalongkorn’s court: Carlo Allegri, Galileo Chini, Gerolamo Gerini, Ercole Manfredi, Annibale Rigotti, and Mario Tamagno, come together, over-imposed on the court women, to form the shape of an elephant.

3. Comparative Musicology and Colonial Survival: Siam's Anxiety for Music-Theoretical Excellence

In 2003, Sugree Charoensook, dean of the conservatory at Mahidol University, published the ambitious study *Sieng lae rabob sieng dontri thai* [*Pitch and System of Thai Music*].[1] Charoensook's decade-long project measured the pitch frequencies of hundreds of Thai instruments from 30 ensembles and 35 instrument makers across the country, in a renewed effort to record the various regional and local tuning preferences, which, the book reminds us, were rapidly dying out as the consequence of modernity, globalization, and youth disinterest. Preservation, however, was not the only aim of the study. Charoensook also called for a governing body – the Thai government's Department of Fine Arts – to institute a standardized national tuning system for Thai music. Such a decree would serve a practical role in implementing Thai music instruction in public education--for example, allowing instruments to be mass-produced in the thousands, compared to the bygone practice of local apprenticeships with master musicians.[2]

While both Thai and foreign scholars have long declared that Thai music is tuned to the theoretical ideal of a seven-tone, equidistant scale, such mathematical perfection is not observed in practice. Charoensook's book is one among many that wavers between the conceptual realm of mathematical organization and the diverse tuning preferences in use by Thai ensembles across the country. Decades' worth of attempts to map the Thai scale onto absolute pitch frequencies have concluded that contemporary tuning practices are a deviation from—and corruption of—the glorious equidistance of times past.[3]

Some studies appeal to a royal lineage to lend authority to the tuning systems they describe. One 1999 study, for example, cites a series of pitches and relationships obtained from a well-guarded metallophone kept at court during the reign of King Vajiravudh (1910-1925) as the absolute standard and historical evidence of equidistance.[4] Present-day access to the instrument, which is regarded as sacred, is forbidden to outsiders, and

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1 Sugree Charoensook, *Sieng lae rabob sieng dontri thai* [*Pitch and System of Thai Music*[sic]] (Nakhon Pathom, Thailand: Mahidol University, 2003). The word *sieng* in Thai carries the translingual, conceptual burden of signifying "sound" and the narrower smaller parameter "pitch." Charoensook was the first Thai scholar to obtain a doctoral degree in music abroad, a DMA in saxophone performance at the University of Northern Colorado in 1985. He stated in a 2014 interview: "I wanted to stay in America, but America had no use for me. You could throw a rock anywhere in the USA and hit someone with a doctorate in music. That's why I decided to come back home, where my knowledge and skills could be appreciated"; https://bk.asia-city.com/city-living/news/sugree-charoensuk-mahidol-university-college-music.

2 Charoensook (15-16) cites the reliance of artisan instrument makers on natural materials – wood, bamboo, hides, coconut shells, etc. – as a hindrance to progress in instrument-making, since the shape, density, and acoustic properties of the natural materials cannot be fully controlled.

3 In his *Theory and Practice of Thai Music* (1987) [English title as original], for example, Uthid Naksawat values equidistance as a theoretical ideal, but concedes that the idea does not hold up in practice: "The Thai musical scale is somewhat similar to the diatonic scale of Western music, but not identical. It consists of seven different full-tone steps arranged equidistantly within its octave… one could change the key-tone in playing any Thai song without affecting the arrangement of the scale steps at all. However, in performing Thai music, such a key-note is always fixed in order to have a proper tonality and to fit with the type of wind and bowed instruments playing in the band." Naksawat, *Theory and Practice of Thai Music* (Bangkok: Patanasilpa Institute, 1987), A-B. This Thai-language book, like many of its kind, begins with a ten-page summary in English.

4 Anonymous, *Sound Frequency of the Notes Used in the Thai Musical Scale Music* (Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok: Thailand, 1999) [English title as original].

only pictures of the instrument are available for study.[5] The book's reliance on royal power to authorize its claims is bolstered by its anonymity: the researchers remain nameless, with "royal patronage" listed as the only author.

Whether they draw on nationwide ethnographic surveys or close measurements of jealously guarded sacred instruments, these studies of tuning tend to approach their music-theoretical projects as part of the ethno-national apparatus of centralized state governance. Writing in 2003, Charoensook sounds both resolute and tortured as he argues the benefits of standardization and the corresponding erasure of regional difference:

> The standardization of a tonal system to equal temperament necessitates the loss of the regional diversity of inherited sounds.… Nevertheless, since Thai music and Thai instruments are the central [กลาง] tradition of the Siamese people [sic], it is necessary to mandate a standardized tuning system to serve as the original source of the central [กลาง] sound…. In this manner, regional traditions all sacrifice their cultural sounds on equal terms, for the sake of centralization, and for a new Thai standard of musical sound that is unified and fair [กลาง]. Thus, standardization is an elevation of national culture. While it is true that there is diversity across national culture, diversity must be expressed through a centralized system [กลาง] that is understandable by all.[6]

This passage takes advantage of the double meaning of the word กลาง [*klang*] to connote "central" (as in centralized, in the middle) and "fair." That is, to be *klang* is at once to be both fair and to be from Bangkok. Elevating a tuning standard as the heritage of "the Siamese people" also gestures to the royal power of a bygone Siam. The explanatory power of pitch standardization lies in the justification it can provide for urban Bangkok's political control over and erasure of difference in its ethnic peripheries. After the overthrow of absolute monarchy in 1932, the ensuing totalitarian military regime changed the name of the country from Siam to Thailand in 1939. This renaming symbolized a crucial transference in the ownership of the nation: the body of the nation was no longer the royal body of the Siamese – an elevated race of royals who ruled from its central seat of power in Bangkok – but that of all Thais, an invented racial category that included all peoples of the nation. Charoensook's appeal to the heritage of Siamese tuning as a standard for Thainess, then, imagines the cohesion of the nation through royalist ethnonationalism. All Thais can be made equal through the centralized fairness (*klang*) of the Siamese heritage.

The idea that knowledge about a people's musical organization reveals essential knowledge about their race is familiar musicological territory. In the introductory volume to his *General History of Music* (1869), François-Joseph Fétis posited a continuum of musical progress and attainment, figuring Asian music as a perpetual adolescent incapable of maturing:

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[5] On the difficulties of access to royal instruments, see Supeena Insee Adler, "Music for the Few: Nationalism and Thai Royal Authority," PhD diss. (University of California, Riverside, 2014).

[6] Charoensook, *Sieng lae rabob sieng dontri thai*, 18-19; translation my own.

> The true history of music begins only with the general history of the privileged [white] race, one which never has known the state of savagery, and who, upon making their first appearance in the world, showed themselves relatively advanced, cultivated, and of such great superiority over all other races that no comparison between them can be made…. Contrary to the other races, one of which [the black race] remains in servitude and stays in a permanent state of social infancy, and the other [yellow race] which has attained a certain degree of civilization but one that it can never surpass, the white race has developed over time all the consequences of its moral organization.[7]

This rhetoric of racial determinism permeates the writings of nineteenth-century European theorists who purported to survey and compare the musics of the world. Armchair comparativists like Fétis were convinced that, as Thomas Christensen has put it, "each civilization, people, and race had a tonality that was uniquely suited to their character and needs … [and that] only the European white race, with its advanced system of diatonic scales … possessed a tonality that allows for true musical art."[8]

This line of thinking equates the musical progress of different races, especially their systematic organization of pitch, with the capacity for morality, logic, and reason. As Jann Pasler has shown, many of these theorists subscribed to Charles Darwin's belief that music provided access, "albeit in a vague and indeterminate way … to the emotions resonant of a distant age."[9] Different musics thus constituted living archives of the developmental past of humankind, a racially essential knowledge of "vague indeterminisms" awaiting the explication of the comparative theorist.[10] The fixity of pitch as a quantifiable parameter divorced from performance was taken for granted in such comparative analysis. Thus, the study of tuning joins other scientistic measures like phrenology and climatic determinism in the European ethno-imperial toolkit—albeit one predicated on essential notions of inner psychology, open to tactics of discursive and performative persuasion distinct from skull shape and the weather.[11]

As discussed in Chapter 1, navigating the implications of European perception of Siamese music was crucial to Siam's colonial survival at this time. Thai historian Thongchai Winichakul has demonstrated how the Siamese court coined the rhetoric of *siwilai* (civilization) as a philological cipher to assimilate this imperialist rhetoric and to stake out a position for Siam in colonial modernity.[12] This new ordering of the world

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[7] As translated in Thomas Christensen, *Stories of Tonality in the Age of Francois-Joseph Fétis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 202-203.

[8] Thomas Christensen, "Fétis's Racial Frame of Tonality," *History of Music Theory,* accessed October 13, 2022, https://historyofmusictheory.wordpress.com/2020/09/29/fetiss-racial-frame-of-tonality-part-i/

[9] Jann Pasler, "Theorizing Race in Nineteenth-Century France: Music as Emblem of Identity," *Musical Quarterly* 89/4 (2006): 459-504.

[10] As Walter Mignolo argues, "at the end of the nineteenth-century, savages and cannibals in space were converted into primitives and exotic Orientals in time… the question was no longer whether primitives and Orientals were human, but how far removed from the present and civilized stage of humanity they were." Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 283.

[11] For an early representative example of nineteenth-century ethnography of peoples across Siam, see Adolf Bastian, *Reisen in Siam im Jahre 1863* (Jena: Costenoble, 1867).

[12] Thongchai Winichakul, "The Quest for "Siwilai": A Geographical Discourse of Civilizational Thinking in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth-Century Siam," *Journal of Asian Studies* 59/3 (2000), 528-549.

was, in Winichakul's terms, a "temporal consciousness in which history, progress, and nostalgia were conceivable" – a civilizational time that displaced Siamese indigenous notions of Hindu-Buddhist temporal-cosmic stasis. Within this possibility of developmental time, the quantifiable consistency of a musical system served as a measure of civilizational advancement.

This chapter examines the long history in Siamese intellectual thought on tuning as a goad to the dream of a unified nationhood and racial standing. As the political landscape shifted, from the tentative origins of nationhood through absolute monarchy to state fascism, the conviction that Siamese tuning systems were an index of racial-cultural excellence has remained a constant. I begin with a focus on the theorist, mathematician, and philologist Alexander Ellis, in a quintessential moment of colonial encounter: his visit to the Siamese Embassy in London in 1885, where Ellis became the first to declare that Siamese music utilized seven-tone equidistant tuning. Understanding Ellis's project in his own terms, however, is not my ultimate concern. The fantasy of the European intellectual's control of knowledge over the colonial world, whether it involved actual ethnography or mere guesswork, has been extensively scrutinized in music studies.[13] Departing from Ellis, I examine the aftereffects of such colonial listening for Siam and the reception and lineage of European theorizing about Siamese music as it was received and understood by its subjects of research.

Accordingly, my goal is not to comb through the decades of Ellis's scholarly output to untangle what he really thought, nor to expose the inconsistencies in his thought and methods. Nor do I aim to uncover what Siamese music and its tuning practices really were. My focus is on the anxiety that European perceptions of Siamese tuning created for Siamese intellectuals in the late nineteenth century, an anxiety that persists in Thai musical thought. This approach resists the binary logic of subaltern resistance to imperial suppression, to instead explore an archive of Siamese musical thought that grappled with the real consequences of European theorizing, hollow or tenuous as we can retrospectively prove them to be. I am concerned, therefore, with the afterlife of such failed projects, and the cultural work they did and continue to do even when their comparative methods are revealed to be incomplete and unethical.

The first half of the chapter examines the history of the Siamese encounter with the idea of music theory as a racializing scheme during the reign of King Chulalongkorn, leading up to an influential recording and treatise on Thai music by Carl Stumpf. The second half traces the consequences of this expropriated framework through the ensuing century of Thai music scholarship. I close with reflections on how a coeval global music history must take seriously the ways colonial Others reinvent themselves for imperial scrutiny. Such reinvention of one's own being-in-music-and-sound as a matter of colonial

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On the colonial-modern in Asian history see Tani Barlow, ed., *Formations of Colonial Modernity in East Asia* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).

[13]Anna Maria Busse Berger, *The Search for Medieval Music in East Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020); Thomas Irvine, *Listening to China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020); D.R.M. Irving, *Colonial Counterpoint* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); and Ana Maria Ochoa Gautier, *Aurality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014). See also James Davies, "Instruments of Empire" in Davies and Lockhart, eds., *Sound Knowledge* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017) and Benjamin Steege, "Between Race and Culture: Hearing Japanese Music in Berlin," *History of Humanities* 2/2 (2017): 361-74.

survival, I argue, foregrounds the enormous effort that non-Europeans underwent to make themselves legible in European modes of knowledge production.

The World's Fair of 1885 and the Birth of Siamese Equal Temperament

In 1885 a group of Siamese musicians travelled to Europe to perform in London at the International Inventions Exhibition. Spaces of inter-imperial contact like world's fairs were paradigmatic sites where Siam could represent itself to the world, navigating an aesthetic presentation that balanced national authenticity with cosmopolitan legibility.[14] The Exhibition, touted as the first "devoted to the illustration of the history of Music from the earliest times down to the present day," featured exhibits and performances that made audible the linear development of music history.[15] The Royal Albert Hall hosted a museum of "obsolete instruments," as well as performances of European music—from Dufay and Ockeghem to Bach and Handel—alongside an ensemble of Siamese musicians straight from the court of King Chulalongkorn.

The nineteen musicians, led by Prince Naret Wararit, gave a repeated schedule of performances at the Royal Albert Hall, and took great pride in being chosen to champion the music of the Siamese court on the international stage. The aesthetic incommensurability of their music to colonial ears, however, came as a shock to the performers. One of the musicians on the tour, Nai Kram, kept detailed journal entries of his months in London in which he bemoaned the reception the ensemble met with at the Royal Albert Hall performances. While he enjoyed performing on the evenings when the price of admissions was 2 1/2 shillings, Nai Kram recounted his discomfort at facing the audience on evenings when discounted tickets were offered to the public:

> On the days that the poor were admitted, we had to maintain immaculate composure and presentation. The European poor are of rough and foul character. Whenever one of us made the tiniest mistake in our stride or demeanor, we were met with an immediate uproar of jeers. There was no authority present to chastise them for such behavior.

In between such taunts, Nai Kram was further disheartened to notice that his music was received with silent indifference:

> I felt an unease in my heart every time we performed. Our audience listened without listening; they went through the motions of listening without any intuition or understanding. There was no point to our concerts – we were playing Siamese music to a herd of buffalos.[16]

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[14] The Siamese visit to the 1885 Exhibition has remained largely unstudied. For a description of the Siamese troupe touring in 1900, see Harry Liebersohn, *Music and the New Global Culture: From the Great Exhibitions to the Jazz Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019). For a significant musicological study of the preceding Paris World's Fair, see Annegret Fauser, *Musical Encounters at the 1889 Paris World's Fair* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2005).

[15] Anonymous, "Music at the Inventions Exhibition, 1885," *The Art Journal* (May 1885), 153.

[16] Nai Kram, *Khonthai nai rātchasamnak Phranāng Čhao Wiktṓrīa* (Bangkok: Khana Hem, 1935),51-52; translation my own. The Thai idiom exists today "to fiddle for buffalos," which is similar to Nai Kram's expression here.

Instead of the admiring British listeners Nai Kram had imagined, he faced instead a sea of blank faces who responded to his artistry with the cluelessness of field animals.

Nai Kram's experience differed greatly when the Siamese musicians were invited to give a private performance for Queen Victoria. For a Siamese court musician like Nai Kram, class was a natural and unquestioned correlate of taste. He recited a litany of unending exaltation, for instance, after the queen praised their performance for being "beautiful beyond the music of many, many other nations."[17] Here Nai Kram adopts the same rhetoric as many a European commenter (including Fétis) when he uses animalistic metaphors to portray the British poor as a lower tier of the human category while elevating the heavenly figure of their monarch.

The Siamese ensemble's July 1885 arrival in London had long been anticipated by the English theorist and mathematician Alexander Ellis. In March of that year, Ellis had published his monograph "On the Musical Scales of Various Nations," including a brief, inconclusive section on Siamese tuning. Ellis's only source of information about Siamese tuning before the ensemble's arrival was a Siamese *ranat* (wooden xylophone) housed at the South Kensington Museum. Taking pitch measurements from the specimen, Ellis deduced that the Siamese octave was divided into seven tones, but was unable to specify the intervals between tones. Some of the *ranat*'s bars were made of different wood materials, and not only was the arrangement of intervals within an octave "unintelligible" to him, but the two octaves measured offered entirely contrasting readings:

> This scale is quite enigmatical. The second octave, of which only the beginning was measured, quite disagrees with the first.… Let us hope that the Siamese musicians who are to come to the Inventions Exhibition of this year will give a better notion of Siamese music than this *Ranat* affords.[18]

While this specific instrument may indeed have been in disrepair, its tuning wax stripped or degraded, it was also probable that the *ranat* in question was never constructed for functional performance. King Chulalongkorn had often sent Siamese instruments abroad as tokens of diplomacy, but many of these instruments were decorative rather than functional gifts, as are some of the instruments included in the 1876 collection gifted to the United States (currently held at the Smithsonian Institution; see Figure 3.1). Prior to Ellis's study, the court did not expect that the recipients of these instruments would actually have attempted to play them.[19]

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[17] Unlike Mom Rachothai's praise of Queen Victoria as resembling a regal elephant, as discussed in Chapter 2, Nai Kram unfortunately did not describe the queen in animalistic terms.

[18] Alexander Ellis, "On The Musical Scales of Various Nations," *Journal of the Society of the Arts* 33/1688 (1885): 485-527, here 507.

[19] Of the 1876 collection many of the instruments were not made to be played: the *pi nai*, or Siamese oboe, came with no reed, and the *so sam sai*, or Siamese fiddle, had no counterweight. See Paul Michael Taylor and William Bradford Smith, "Instruments of Diplomacy: Nineteenth-Century Musical Instruments in the Smithsonian Collection of Thai Royal Gifts," *Journal of the Siam Society* 105 (2017): 245-272.

Figure 3.1: Siamese instruments gifted to the United States in 1876, some of which are nonfunctional

Equipped with a battery of tuning forks, Ellis visited the Siamese Embassy that October to take pitch measurements of the Siamese scale from two percussion instruments: the *ranat ek* (xylophone) and *ranat lek* (metallophone).[20] While it was easy enough for Ellis to deduce that the Siamese instruments divided the octave into seven tones, the intervals between each tone varied drastically between the two *ranat*. For example, Ellis listed the interval between scale degrees ^2 and ^3 (II and III in Ellis' chart; see Figure 3.2) as 219 cents for the *ranat lek*, but only 165 cents for the *ranat ek*. Similarly, he observed that the interval between IV and V was larger on the *ranat ek*, at 200 cents, compared to the *ranat lek* at 150 cents. The measurements Ellis took from these instruments, unfortunately for him, did not point towards any coherent theory for Siamese tuning.

Observed—	SIAMESE SCALES.														
Ranat Lek—															
Vib.	285		316		358		386		421		458		511		562
Cents.....	I	177	II	219	III	127	IV	150	V	149	VI	148	VII	167	I
Ranat Ek—															
Vib.	285		317		349		383		429		471		522		577
Cents.....	I	185	II	165	III	160	IV	200	V	159	VI	178	VII	174	I
Theoretical—															
Vib.	285		315		347		383		423		467		516		570
Cents.....	I	171	II	171	III	171	IV	171	V	171	VI	171	VII	171	I

Figure 3.2: Ellis's measurements of the Siamese scale from "Appendix to Mr. Alexander J. Ellis's Paper on 'The Musical Scales of Various Nations.'"

[20] He published the results of this visit as an appendix to his earlier work. Ellis, "Appendix to Mr. Alexander J. Ellis's Paper on 'The Musical Scales of Various Nations.'" *Journal of the Society for Arts* 33/1719 (1885): 1102-1112.

Ellis's examination of the Siamese instruments was presided over by Prince Prisdang Chumsai, Siamese ambassador *extraordinaire* and the first Siamese man to obtain a university degree (from King's College, London, 1876).[21] Upon inspecting Ellis's unsatisfactory readings, Prisdang intervened to propose instead that the Siamese scale consisted of seven equal tones, tuned to 171 cents per interval (171.43 being seven equal divisions of the 1200 cents in an octave).[22] In a moment of strategic self-invention, Prisdang replaced the jumbled intervals of Ellis's measurements and coined a system that extolled the organizational perfection of equidistance for Siamese music. This encounter introduced the idea of mathematical consistency into Siamese musical thought, a pivot through which Prisdang deployed his authority to transform the strangeness of stark difference into legible diversity.

Having been told of the Siamese theoretical equidistant tuning by his strategic informant, Ellis sought to confirm the newfound theory he had extracted. For this purpose, he devised an instrument that he called a "dichord" in seven-tone equal temperament, which he played for the assessment of the Siamese musicians. Acting preemptively to confirm Ellis's assumptions, his listening subjects professed a preference for the scale based on purely theoretical measurements to the one based on the tuning of their own instruments:

> In order to test the correctness of this information, I made a fingerboard for my dichord, on which I could play such a scale, and I played it before the musicians at the Siamese Legation. They unanimously pronounced the scale good. I then played the scale I had heard from the *ranat*, and they said it was out of tune. This experiment may be considered decisive.[23]

In his fantasy of absolute control over pitch production, Ellis had conjured an ideal scale, one that sounded the ethnic essence of "Siamese tuning" with an accuracy never before produced by a Siamese instrument, a perfection against which the *ranat*, tuned with rudimentary applications of lead and wax, came to be heard as out of tune. Note, of course, the likelihood that the musicians' approval of the scale was informed by what their prince had just conveyed to Ellis. Ellis built an instrument based on a theory that had been suggested by Prisdang for rhetorical purposes, and then the musicians talked themselves into preferring the scale played by that invented instrument. The multiple and conflicting agendas at play in this encounter drown out the sounds and make it impossible to actually hear Siamese music—leaving only strategically reciprocal reflection on pitch and tone as isolated constituents.

Mapping these findings onto an imaginary timeline of developmental progress, Ellis concluded that Siamese equidistant tuning did not allow its music to convey vertical harmony:

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[21] On the life of Prisdang see Tamara Loos, *Bones Around My Neck: The Life and Exile of a Prince Provocateur* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2016).

[22] See Ellis, "Appendix," 1105. See also Ellis's notes in Helmholtz, *On the Sensations of Tone as a Physiological Basis for the Theory of Music* (New York: Dover, 1954), 556. We do not know Prisdang's intentions in conveying this information; his encounter with Ellis is recorded neither in Prisdang's correspondence nor in the journal of Nai Kram, one of the musicians present.

[23] Alexander Ellis, "Appendix to Mr. Alexander J. Ellis's Paper on 'The Musical Scales of Various Nations,' read 25th March, 1885," *Journal of the Society for Arts* 33/1719 (1885): 1105.

> It is this absence of harmony and presence of simultaneous performance, having its own peculiar but decidedly non-harmonic character, that gives a European, so accustomed to harmony that he is apt to forget it is a comparatively recent discovery, an opportunity of appreciating what must have been the effect of music in early times.[24]

Ellis's study thus relegated Siamese music to a civilizational phase equivalent to that of Europe's antiquity, a heterophonic past when instruments purportedly played together without any understanding of counterpoint. Despite the Siamese effort to convey a music-theoretical system that was legible to Ellis, they could not escape such relegation to developmental time. In the sphere of written publication – the space of knowledge production that follows encounter – the rules of the game were stacked against the Siamese musicians as objects of study.

In hindsight it is easy to imagine that either Prisdang himself or the Siamese musicians could have indicated to Ellis the flaws in his methods. They could have pointed, for instance, to Ellis's presumption that Siamese tuning was a homogeneous practice, or to the absurdity of the notion that nineteen court musicians present in London could represent the whole of their race (let alone that the idea that Siamese psychology itself was audible between the intervals of any purported tonal system). As an oral tradition passed down in systems of apprenticeship within insular schools of music, Siamese court music supported competing schools and master lineages, many of which subscribed to unique tuning practices as markers of style and differentiation. The concept of a theoretical ideal scale, conceivable outside of performance and toward which performance would strive, was a racializing construct introduced into Siamese musical discourse by Ellis's study. Moreover, Ellis assumed that all Siamese music followed the same tuning system as fixed-pitch percussion instruments. As John Garzoli has shown, vocalists, wind, and string instruments tune to various systems depending upon repertoire and ensemble composition, especially in the absence of fixed-pitch percussion.[25]

Despite the many errors and oversights in Ellis's study, its claims were not questioned until recently. Anticolonial resistance – the rejection of European ways of knowing as intrusive upon Siamese music – is only actualized in scholarly hindsight.[26] A better way to narrate the history of Siamese music-theoretical practice is to show how Siamese actors themselves came to terms with European musical logics, incorporating and reconciling them with Siamese thought. After Prisdang, Siamese intellectuals wrote the first manuals of music theory and instruction to localize and incorporate European concepts into Siamese terms. Their efforts to codify a Siamese musical discourse that appeared prestigious in European terms, as writers, intellectuals, and practitioners,

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[24] Ellis, "Appendix to Mr. Alexander J. Ellis's Paper," 1103.

[25] See John Garzoli, "The Myth of Equidistance in Thai Tuning," *Analytical Approaches to World Music* 4, no. 2 (2015): 1–29; and Nattapol Wisuttipat, "Relative Nature of Thai Traditional Music through its Tuning System," *International Journal of Creative and Arts Studies* 2, no. 1 (2015): 86–97.

[26] I am wary of scholarly attempts to recover nineteenth-century musical practices by analyzing contemporary Thai music. Such an approach would assume that Siamese ways of knowing their own music existed as presentable systems of knowledge prior to encounter and remain intact across years of European evaluation. In the oral tradition of apprenticeship that dominates in traditional Siamese music, "theory" is a learned practice for performance and not an extraneous object of knowledge.

worked to establish their reputation and agency as the subjects of colonial recognition themselves.

Just a decade after the publication of Ellis's study, the Siamese court had already internalized the European concern for comparativist theory. One high-profile instance of this colonialized self-interpretation appeared in the journal *Wachirayanwiset*, a monthly publication by and for members of the court's elite intellectual circle.[27] Established in 1886, this was Siam's first scholarly publication, predating the *Journal of the Siam Society* by almost twenty years. In between contributions about government and imperial politics we find several articles about various aspects of music and its place at court, the most prominent being an anonymous article from September 1894 titled "Dontri" [Music].[28] The article begins with a philological treatment of the Siamese word for music, "dontri," tracing the word to its Sanskrit origin to describe a plucked string, and thus ostensibly demonstrating the ancient Indo-European lineage of Siamese music. The essay goes on to list and describe instruments of Indian, Burmese, Khmer, Siamese, and European origin, commenting on the refinement or crudeness of each, before concluding:

> Of the musics of various races described here, if I were to compare the merits of each to honor one above all, I must commend the European race for their peerless intelligence. Their music is capable of producing twelve distinct pitches, greater than that of any other race, while Thai music is the foulest of them all, capable of only producing seven.[29]

Fixated on the division of the octave as a measure of racial worth, this Siamese theorist had internalized the comparativist concern so expounded by European theorists. The comparativist concern with pitch organization as an index of cultural standing and as a carrier of racialized knowledge was not the one-sided concern of European intellectuals: it was localized by Siamese elites as a matter of reflexive self-evaluation.

Fashioning Siamese Identity at the Paris World's Fair of 1900

The powerful reverberations of the 1885 visit of the Siamese musicians to London, and of Ellis's theoretical study, likely exerted an influence on the bureaucrats in Bangkok who fifteen years later grappled with an invitation for Siamese musicians to perform at the 1900 *Exposition Universelle* in Paris.[30] It would be a historian's dream to find a reference in the bureaucrats' discussions to the treatment of Siamese tuning that has appeared in *Wachirayanwiset*. The minutes of the committee's meetings survive, and while they communicate ample anxiety about the relationship between race and music, and the

[27] The article "On White Elephants and Women Performers" discussed in Chapter 2 appeared in an early issue of this same journal.
[28] Anonymous, "Dontri" [Music] *Wachirayanwiset* 6/37 (September 1894): 433-436. There are five articles on the topic of music in *Wachirayanwiset* in the 1890s. Two are credited to Prince Jayanta Mongkol (Prince Mahisara Rajaharudaya); the rest are anonymous.
[29] "Dontri" [Music], 434.
[30] Assembled in 1899, the planning committee for the 1900 World's Fair consisted of Siamese princes, several of whom are familiar figures in this dissertation: Narathip Praphanphong, author of *Sao Krue Fah,* served as the committee secretary, while Narisara Nuwattiwong appears in the next chapter as a key figure mediating old practices to the new.

legibility of Siamese culture abroad, they contain no such direct reference to the valuation of the world's musics according to their tuning systems.[31]

The committee began by celebrating its success in renegotiating the location of the Siamese pavilion. Originally planned for a site on the northern banks of the Seine, in an exhibit zone reserved for colonies, the committee had persuaded the fair's organizers to place the pavilion instead at the foot of the Eiffel Tower, alongside the sovereign nations of the world. Such management of imperial optics was critical to Siam's colonial survival, as the court was keen to demonstrate its continued independence despite its defeat in the Franco-Siamese War of 1893.

Phraya Suriyanuwat, the Siamese ambassador to France, had contracted an unnamed European architect to draw up a design for the Siamese pavilion, planned as a "modest replica" of the Amarin Winitchai Throne Hall in the Bangkok palace. The meeting minutes record the committee's estimate that the pavilion would cost 45,000 francs to construct, an amount that exceeded the entire budget allocated for Siam's participation at the World's Fair. Assessing the architect's sketches, the members of the committee unanimously agreed that "the details of the Thai ornate style imagined by this European architect are pitiful." The committee then considered alternative plans of action, debating whether to go forward with this crude approximation or to allocate more funding to enable a redesign. Although moving forward with the existing sketches was the more economical option, one committee member protested:

> There is great risk that the result will be downright unappealing. Any visitor with knowledge of Thai design would exclaim that this pavilion is not in the Thai style, which in reality is far superior to this crudeness. Visitors without such prior knowledge, moreover, would assume that real Thainess is this lacking.

He proposed that the committee appoint a Siamese architect who would travel to Paris to collaborate on and authenticate the design of the pavilion. This plan was favorably received by many committee members, and they debated to no avail over the ideal individual who would be put to the task, until Prince Narisara Nuwattiwong, Siam's Minister of War and former Minister of the Treasury, interjected:

> Fewer than 1 in 10,000 visitors to the pavilion would lay eyes on the design and recognize that it is not truly Thai. No European could tell the difference in the beauty between real Thainess and this approximated one. Even if we supply plans for a more elegant and accurate design, no European workman would be able to realize them. The result will remain exactly like the one drawn up here – a waste of time and effort for all parties involved.

From the position of an inter-imperial observer, Narisara weighed the truth of cultural authenticity against the limits of aesthetic commensurability. There was no need to correct the pavilion's design; the vision of Thai design projected by the European imagination would suffice. Having heard Narisara's sobering argument, the committee relented and decided to move forward with the proposed sketches. Visitors to the World's

[31] Minutes of the meeting of the planning committee, document dated February 1, 1899, Mor.Ror.5/27, National Archives of Thailand.

Fair were left to gaze upon this crude approximation of the Amarin Winitchai Hall, ignorant of the splendor of "real" Thainess of its referent (compare Figures 3.3 and 3.4).

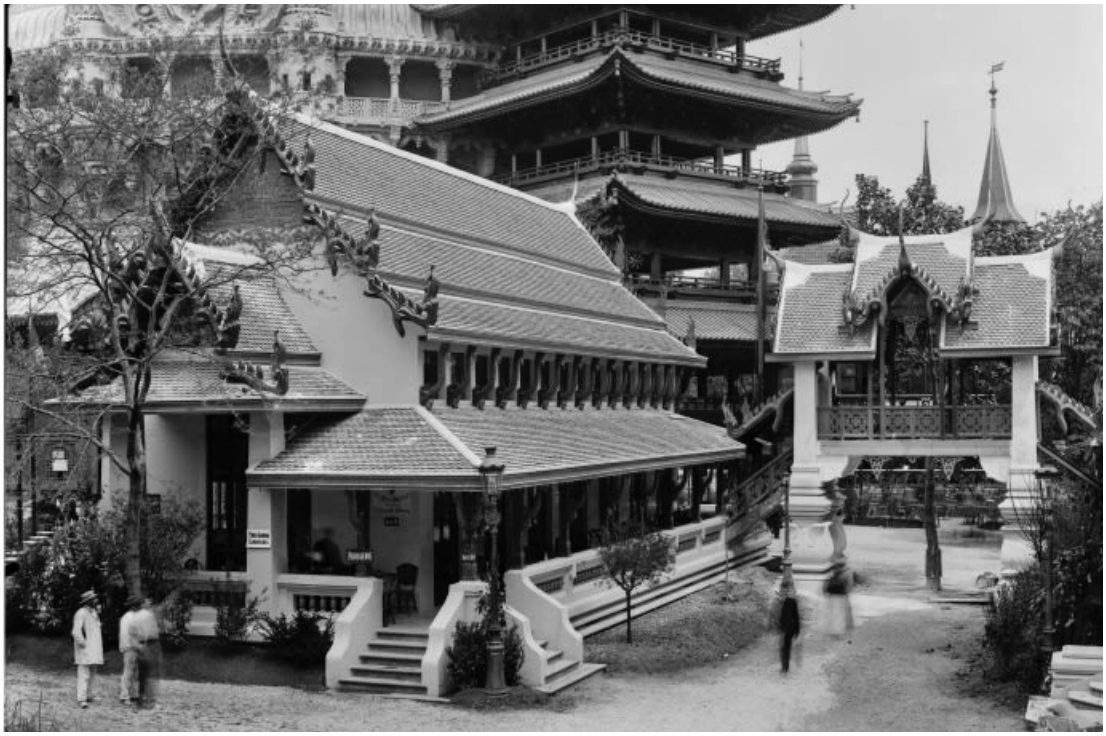

Figure 3.3: Siamese pavilion at the 1900 World's Fair

Figure 3.4: Amarin Winitchai Throne Hall

Having settled the debate on the perceived authenticity of the Siamese pavilion, the committee turned to discussing its plan for the musical offering that would be curated within this architectural frame. Suriyanuwat suggested the inclusion of a women's *mahori* ensemble – a secular court music consisting of *ranat*, gongs, and strings – whose beauty he argued would draw curious visitors to the pavilion. Narathip Praphanphong, the impresario of court opera who appeared in Chapter 1, dissented sharply, arguing that it would be impossible to convince self-respecting female musicians to commit to the journey, and that those who did would only have signed on out of misinformation or naiveté. Such a performance would be "a disgrace to both Siamese womanhood and nation," Praphanphong insisted. Meanwhile, Narisara interjected to explain that a men's ensemble was impossible, because the musicians in question could not be relieved from their duties at court in Bangkok.

Overall, the committee was not convinced that sending Siamese musicians – whether male or female – to Paris would guarantee favorable public opinion at the World's Fair. Having arrived at this impasse, the committee came to a confounding recommendation, one that if implemented would have shattered the European perception of the World's Fair as an exhibition of "authentic" exotic specimens:

> We do not approve of sending *mahori* women to the World's Fair, nor do we believe that sending a men's ensemble would be financially viable.… If musical display is deemed necessary, European performers may be employed to appear as if Siamese. We will supply them with sheet music.… Better to send sheet music than musicians.

The seemingly casual proposal that white musicians could masquerade as Siamese at the Paris World's Fair disrupts any baseline assumptions about the relationship between music, cultural authenticity, and the racialized body in performance. The committee's suggestion testifies to the instability of identity in the colonial liminal. While the committee's impetus may be simply to solve a logistical problem of organizing performance, their decision offers a glimpse into a fantasy of counter-imperial control, a spectacle of Siamese patronage over European musicians, of harnessing whiteness as an unmarked category that could acquire specificity through the accrual of Siamese markers.

Whatever the court's initial intentions for the World's Fair pavilion, this fantasy of white Siamese music never came to be, and the potential for the interchangeability of the performing body and notation as carriers of racial essence was left unrealized. News of the organizing committee's decision swiftly made its way through the ranks of Siamese nobility, attracting the attention of the penniless entrepreneur Chao Muen Waiworanat. Seeing a financial opportunity to salvage his ailing theater company, he petitioned King Chulalongkorn to allow his private troupe to travel to Europe and perform at the World's Fair.[32] The court hesitantly agreed, imposing one condition:

[32] The pleadings of this low-ranking noble are extensively covered by *The Bangkok Times* in several issues across February 1899. On the career of Waiworanat and the choice of his troupe for the Paris exposition, see Phakamas Jirajarupat, "Lakhon Phanthang: Thai Traditional Theatre in the Modern World," PhD diss. (Royal Holloway College, University of London, 2014), 85-91.

Waiworanat would only be permitted to present Siamese music abroad upon renouncing his noble title.

This requirement reveals the court's conception of Siamese nobility as an authenticator of music performance. For the Siamese pavilion, architecture approximating Siamese design would suffice, as Narisara suggested, but music performance possessed more racial specificity that could be not waved away. Any failures of the European tour must reflect on Waiworanat's person alone as a commercial agent, not as music under the patronage of Siamese nobility. While any European ensemble in Siamese dress would do to present Siamese music at the World's Fair, to send a Siamese nobleman for the same task was deemed too great a risk. Thus, Waiworanat renounced his royal title and accompanied his troupe to Europe under his commoner's name Boosra Mahin.

Oblivious to this business of renounced nobility, the European press billed Boosra Mahin's performances with generic names like "Royal Siamese Theater Troupe."[33] But the troupe was never discussed in the Parisian press, because they never made it to France and in the end the Paris Exposition went on without Siamese music.[34] The troupe instead found themselves engaged in months-long commercial contracts in less museum-like and more carnivalesque settings, first at an amusement park in Vienna with the gaudy name *Venedig in Wien* (Venice in Vienna) and later at the Berlin Zoo. We do not know whether these excursions were undertaken willingly, motivated by financial incentives, or out of necessity. Misled and unpaid, the performers endured miserable conditions at these engagements, and many were driven to sell their instruments to afford a return trip to Siam. The *Bangkok Times* reported:

> We have heard from a man whose wife embarked upon the journey to Europe with Chao Muen Waiworanat. He had received a letter from his wife in Berlin expressing the unbearable conditions of their accommodations. She had never suffered hardship the likes inflicted under this company's employ.[35]

It was at the Berlin Zoo performances that the comparative musicologist Carl Stumpf made his first recordings for the Berlin Phonogram Archive, thus creating the first wax cylinders of Siamese music. These cylinders became the basis for Stumpf's influential essay "Tonsystem und Musik der Siamesen" (1901), which hypothesized that Siamese equidistant tuning was derived from Buddhist numerology, further entrenching the indexical relationship between tuning and race.[36] Aware of Ellis's study from fifteen years earlier, Stumpf was also fascinated by the Siamese tuning system. Recognizing the

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[33] See Nic Leonhardt, "'From the Land of the White Elephant through the Gay Cities of Europe and America': Re-routing the World Tour of the Boosra Mahin Siamese Theatre Troupe (1900)," *Theatre Research International* 40/2 (July 2015): 140 – 155.

[34] Boosra Mahin's troupe achieved a small foothold in the history of European dance through the influence of their performances on choreographer Michel Fokine. Fokine attended one of their performances in St. Petersburg in 1900, and his memory of the style shaped the choreography and costuming for the "Danse Siamoise" in his ballet *Les Orientales* (1910), which was danced by Nijinsky at both the Mariinsky Theater in St Petersburg and in Paris.

[35] *The Bangkok Times*, December 17, 1900.

[36] Stumpf, "Tonsystem und Musik der Siamesen" *Beiträge zur Akustik und Musikwissenschaft* 3 (1901), 69-138.

non-harmonic nature of Siamese music, he suggested that seven-tone equidistance sprung out of superstitious Buddhist numerology rather than from any inherent material properties of musical sound. Like Ellis, Stumpf relegated Siamese musical organization to the temporal frame of Europe's past.[37] He concluded that Siamese heterophony, devoid of vertical harmonic consideration, was evidence of its direct descent from ancient Greek music, which had made its way to East Asia but had then ceased to develop due to the slowness of the Orient.[38] Stumpf's comments fit neatly into Fétis's racial-temporal schema. Asiatic court music (Siamese, Japanese, and Javanese, for Stumpf) shared the same civilizational point of origin as European art music, but had been frozen in developmental time due to racial limitations.

The Persistence of Equidistant Tuning in Thai Musical Thought

As suggested in the introduction to this chapter, the latent anxiety about Siamese music theory as racial worth and national pride was carried through the late nineteenth-century into present-day scholarship.[39] The reign of Chulalongkorn's son, King Vajiravudh (1910-1925) saw an intense period of nationalist literary production and strong disapproval of the reforms to Siamese opera described in Chapter 1, thus briefly moving the discourse of national culture away from music.[40] After the fall of absolute monarchy in 1932, however, the military government's Department of Fine Arts (under the direction of Wichit Wathakan) produced voluminous writings on Thai music as part of the regime's ethnonationalist campaign.

The 1940s saw further publications—in Thai and English—that worked to authenticate the history of Thai music within European terms. Publications like Phra Apaipolrop's *Dontriwithiya* (1912), Wichit Wathakan's *The Evolution of Thai Music* (1942), and the Department of Fine Arts' *Thai Classical Music* (1961) coined and catalyzed narratives on the developmental history of Siamese instruments (including the parsing of those that could be considered "pure" national instruments and others designated as "borrowed"), the ancient beginnings of Siamese song, and the localization of pitch, melody, and rhythm as discrete conceptual parameters to describe Siamese

[37] Frederic Arthur Neale, the 1840s visitor to the Siamese court familiar from previous chapters, made similar comments about Siamese music sounding like the Western well before Ellis and Stumpf: "Their [Siamese] instruments are extremely primitive, such as one might imagine were in vogue in the days of the psalmist David... I consider the Siamese music execrable; nor indeed, is there any nation in the East that can be said to possess even the first rudiments of music." *Narrative of a Residence in Siam,* 237.

[38] Stumpf, "Tonsystem und Musik der Siamesen," see 96, 97, and 128, for example. Stumpf cites Plato on 131.

[39] While Siamese intellectual writing on music around 1900 did not engage with the ideas in Ellis and Stumpf's studies directly, they are cited elsewhere in familiar terms. In the introduction to the 1904 inaugural issue to *Journal of the Siam Society,* the Society's president, Oskar Frankfurter, called for more scholarship on Siamese music of the quality of that produced by Stumpf, Hipkins, and Ellis. See Oskar Frankfurter, "Aims of the Society," *Journal of the Siam Society* 1 (1904): 1-6, here 5. As a court intellectual and founding president of the Siam Society, Frankfurter was inducted into Chulalongkorn's Order of the White Elephant (see Chapter 2). His White Elephant honor, along with those awarded to German citizens, were rescinded upon Siam's entry into World War I in 1917. See Sor.Tor.0701.28/1(1), National Archives of Thailand.

[40] Vajiravudh intensely disapproved of the operatic practices adopted during his father's reign; see Vajiravudh, "Notes on the Siamese Theatre" originally published in 1911 and reprinted in *Journal of the Siam Society* 55/1 (1966): 3-30.

music.[41] Taken as a whole, this work illustrates a concerted attempt to construct a "music history." To this day, scholar-practitioners of Siamese court music continue to grapple with the lineage and prestige of Euro-American ethnomusicological scholarship, work that insists on fixing seven-tone equidistance in "the tradition," against contemporary practices that purportedly deviate from that "heritage."[42]

The nationalist narrative of the 1940s was given its most enthusiastic and most coherent articulation in the work of Wichit Wathakan, a key figure in the formation of a nationalist "Thai culture," indeed the politician responsible for spearheading the campaign to rename to nation from Siam to Thailand.[43] In a sense, Wichit followed in the diplomatic path charted by Prisdang, working at the Siamese embassies of Britain and France in the decade leading up to the overthrow of absolute monarchy. After the governmental reform, he served as Director General of the Department of Fine Arts from 1934 to 1942.[44] Among many Thai-language novels, plays, and pamphlets promoting themes of national-racial unity, Wichit published *The Evolution of Thai Music,* a short booklet in English that described the development of Thai instrumental and vocal music from ancient times to the present day.[45]

Wichit's long history of Thai instruments begins, exactly as expected, with scenes of primitive discovery. The first wind instrument was "simply the leaf of some plant," while the first percussion instruments were logs struck "to give warning of danger and call meetings of the tribe."[46] Over the centuries, these gave rise to more complexity and refinement, leading up to the Thai instruments of modernity. After cataloging dozens of instruments without specific demarcations of time period (stating merely "in primitive times," or "our ancestors") Wichit declares that this evolution culminated and arrested around the year 1600. He holds Thai instruments to have continued, perfect and unchanged, since before the diplomatic exchanges between the courts of King Narai and Louis XIV of France:

> All the instruments mentioned above are by no means modern. They came into use more than four centuries ago. They have never been modified nor modernized since, and they are still good for use at the present time, especially the instruments of percussion which are our national instruments. This is the reason why the Thais are proud of their achievements in the sphere of arts, and the art of music is one of the objects of national pride in Thailand.

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[41] Phra Apaipolrop, *Dontriwithiya* (Bangkok: Rongpim Sophon Pipantanakarn, 1912); Wichit Wathakan, *The Evolution of Thai Music* (Bangkok: Department of Fine Arts, 1942); and Krom Sinlapakon [Department of Fine Arts], *Thai Classical Music* (Bangkok: Department of Fine Arts, 1961). For an analysis of Apipolrop's work, see Francis Nuntasukon, "Symbols and Meaning in Phra Apipolrop's 'Musicology'" in *Proceedings of the 8th National and International Smarts Conference* (Nakhon Pathom, Thailand: Rajabhat Nakhon Pathom University, 2018).

[42] One influential example is David Morton's *The Traditional Music of Thailand* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).

[43] The romanization of Wichit's name varies across sources and publications. Many of his own publications in English give the name Vichitr Vadakarn, and may appear so in library catalogs.

[44] Wichit left his position at the Department of Fine Arts to lead the Ministry of Foreign Affairs upon Thailand's participation in World War II. He was tried as a war criminal by both the United States and Thailand, but escaped the death sentence on both fronts.

[45] Wichit Wathakan, *The Evolution of Thai Music* (Bangkok: Department of Fine Arts, 1942).

[46] Wichit, 1 and 8.

Harping on this narrative of national pride, Wichit insists equally on the timelessness and broad applicability of Thai tuning:

> One startling fact is that these instruments can play not only Thai and other oriental melodies, but they can play some western melodies as well, and only an expect can detect the few defects. These instruments can play the National Anthems of principal nations such as Great Britain, France, United States of America, Japan, Germany, and Italy, with surprising exactitude.[47]

These proud comments cast aside all reality of Thai tuning to boast of cosmopolitan versatility. Wichit's *Evolution of Thai Music,* somewhat ironically, locates the entire timeline of musical evolution in an imagined, premodern antiquity. According to Wichit, by the time Siam entered into cultural contact with Europe, it already possessed an evolved musical tradition whose properties equaled that of the West.

A logical next step in cultural domain of the new government's campaign to transfer royal power to the state was the transcription of Siamese music into European notation. This project was undertaken by Phra Chenduriyang. Born to a German father and educated in European music, Phra Chenduriyang (born Peter Feit) established himself as a musician, composer, and conductor of the royal court and was later appointed as a government official in the military regime. This work was much disrupted upon Thailand's participation in World War II, and the first complete collection of Phra Chenduriyang's transcriptions were published only in 1950, as *Hom rong yen,* or *Evening Prelude* (see Figure 3.5).[48]

In the preface to this collection, Phra Chenduriyang included a diagram comparing the Siamese and European scales (see Figure 3.6), with a description that imagines the quasi-European "chromatic scale" that would result from further subdividing the seven tones of the traditional Siamese scale:

> The intervals between each of the seven notes of the Thai scale are equally distributed. Were the Thai scale to insert a new pitch in between each existing note, in the manner internationally known as the chromatic scale, and which possesses 12 pitches, Thai music would produce as many as 14 pitches.

The fixation on the number of pitches in an octave as an index of racial-national worth that had preoccupied the scholar writing in *Wachirayanwiset* in 1894 was alive and well in Phra Chenduriyang's hypothetical Thai chromatic scale.

[47] Wichit, 13.
[48] *Phleng chut hom rong yen (Evening Prelude),* (Bangkok: Sadhukarn), 1975.

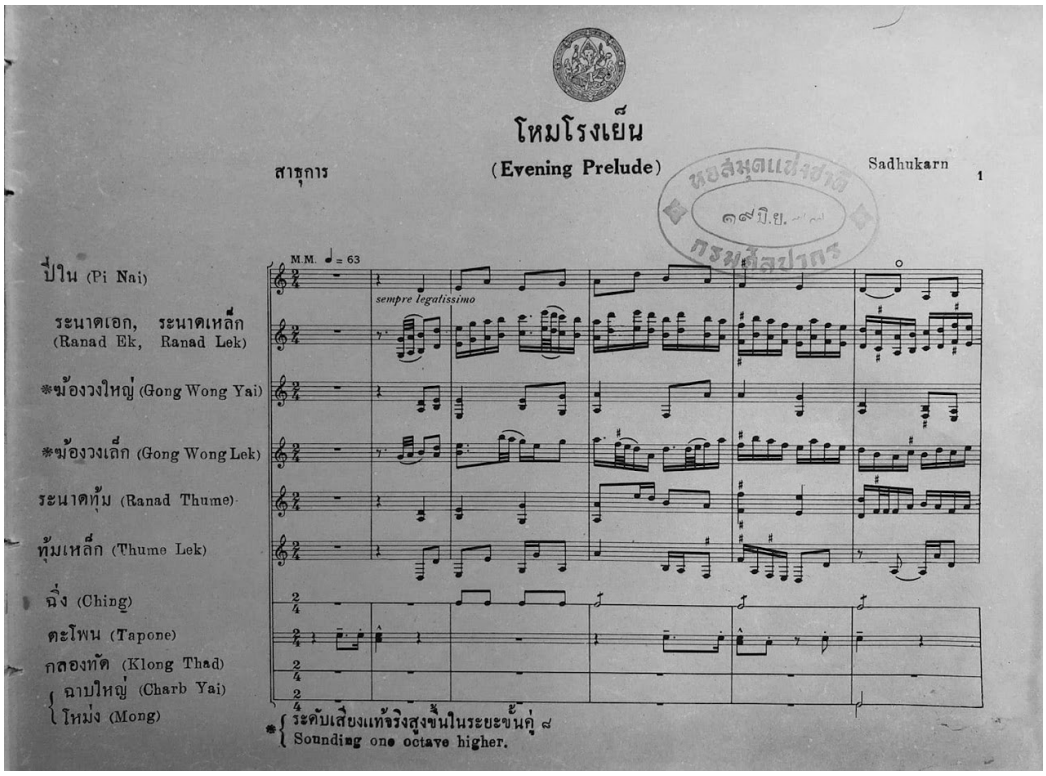

Figure 3.5: Phra Chenduriyang, transcription of *Evening Prelude* (1950)

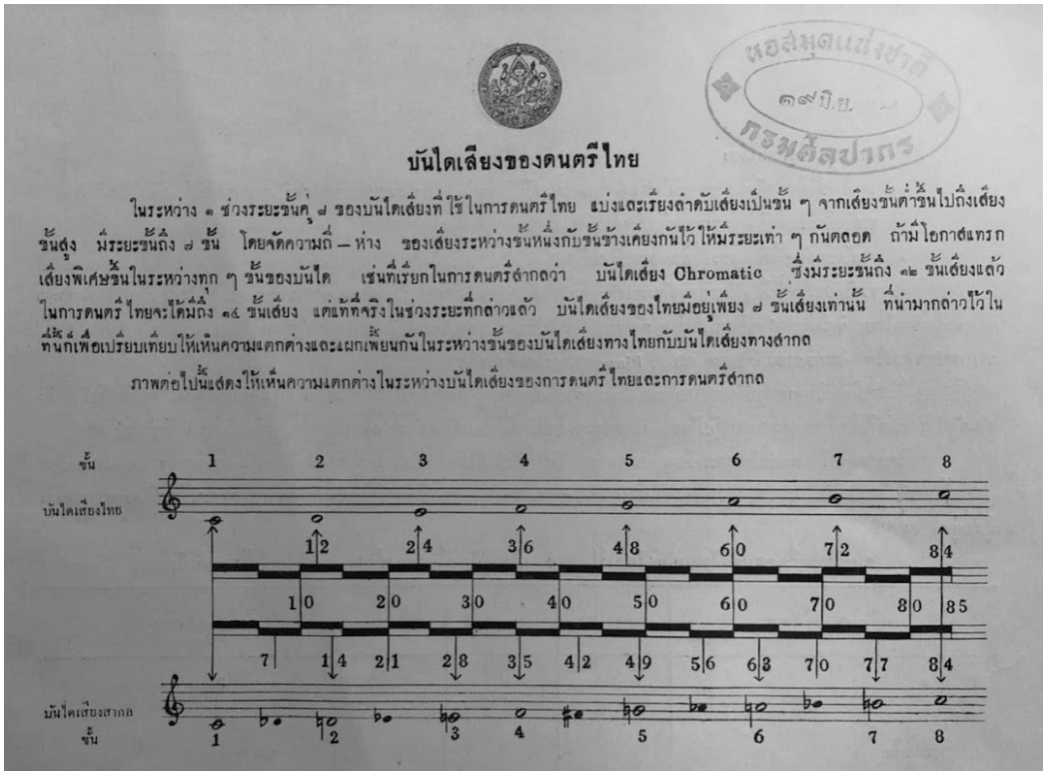

Figure 3.6: Phra Chenduriyang, "The Siamese musical scale," preface to *Evening Prelude*

Unlike Wichit's *Evolution*, Phra Chenduriyang's study involved the elaboration of real tuning theory. He was pleased to point out that the interval of the Thai fourth in seven-tone equal temperament was almost identical to the European fourth. Taking 84 divisions of the octave as a common denominator between 7 and 12, Phra Chenduriyang's diagram shows the Thai fourth at 36 divisions and the European at 35. The fifth is similarly close, at 48 divisions for the Thai and 49 for the European. The European third and seventh, however, are significantly flat on the Thai scale, leading commentators through the centuries from Simon de la Loubère to Ellis to comment on the amusing quality of European tunes played on Siamese instruments.[49]

The national Department of Fine Arts also produced many radio broadcasts on the topic of music reform for the new nation. In a broadcast titled "On the Improvement of Music and Drama,", Chalerm Sawettanan calls for a reimagined modern *ranat* with double the pitches similar to the scale imagined by Phra Chenduriyang. Chalerm's new *ranat,* with bars for whole and half steps, transforms the instrument into a veritable Thai piano:

> The traditional instruments of Thailand thus must be improved to sound the same pitches of the international standard. The materials and methods of instrument construction will remain the same, but tuned to the international system. The *ranat*, for example, will have two rows of bars, the first row tuned to whole steps and the second row above tuned to half steps. In this manner, Thai ensembles will be able to play with European instruments, even perform European music without fault, since there is the standard of pitch as the basis. Traditional tunes must also be arranged in the correct rules of harmony. This internationally-recognized standard of music has established clear rules that govern the consonance of sounds. This is the way of improving traditional Thai music: once harmonized, our national instruments will be able to perform both Thai and European music. We will not lose our old instruments or our old songs. It is necessary to be able to perform everything, only then will our project of national improvement be complete.[50]

The constant refrain of European condemnation across four centuries—that Thai music understood no properties of harmonic organization—became a point of fixation for the Department of Fine Art's efforts at imagining a new national Thai culture, one with hybrid, bimusical instruments capable of mastering both the music of old Siam and that of the European standard. Note the binary thinking here between Siamese music on the one hand, and European music as pertaining to every other music. For the Department, "everything" performable was already subsumed under the European harmonic system.

I have taken the liberty here to speculate from the position of Siamese and Thai officials – an imaginative exercise necessary when dealing with an archive that sits uneasily with the familiar methods of music studies. Such speculations may not be

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[49] Simon de la Loubère, *Du Royaume de Siam* (Amsterdam: Abraham Wolfgang, 1691).

[50] Chalerm Sawettanan (royal name Chamuen Manitrnaret), "On the Improvement of Music and Drama," Sor.Tor.0701.29/23(43), National Archives of Thailand. A different portion of Chalerm's piece quoted here is examined at length in Chapter 4.

verifiable, since so much of the evidence was recorded only as oral history or on discarded bits of old paper, but they are crucial to the effort towards a global-colonial history of music. Such acts of imagining and questioning grant a new interiority to the historical personalities who previously appeared only as passive or absent figures of global music history. My goal is not to speak for them, or to envoice them into authentic subjecthood, but rather to demonstrate their agency to withhold or selectively perform a guise of racialized selfhood in the space of imperial ambivalence and uncertainty. What it meant to be Thai/Siamese was codified into legible knowledge forms upon being interrogated by European imperial scrutiny. Such cultural identity is not a prefigured, monolithic, or innate essence made knowable through scientistic fantasies of listening, but rather fashioned in the flux of colonial contest, bound up in strategic considerations as a matter of survival. This survival, I must stress, is not a history of the disenfranchised, but rather names the survival of an elite ruling class in their project to retain imperial power. Siam's internalization of tuning as a racializing concern deployed a form of strategic essentialism without subaltern resistance – as recourse to assimilated imperial forms. These strategies of knowledge production about oneself are offered up in a politics of recognition which is ultimately one and the same as a politics of colonial approval. The lineage of Siamese theorizing described here is a lineage of music theory of the Other conceived strategically to fit the standards of its white racial frame, the scrutiny of Europe's imperial ear.[51]

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As a coda, I return briefly again to the experience of Nai Kram, the Siamese musician who performed at the London World's Fair of 1885. While Nai Kram's journal entries made no mention of a meeting with Alexander Ellis, they do contain an account of the musician's experience with a different visitor to the Siamese Embassy:

> This morning, we were informed that an Englishman has begged to hear a performance of Siamese music, and we were instructed to report to the ambassador's residence that evening. We arrived as promised, complete with our instruments, and performed for the Englishman in the presence of [other luminous Siamese dignitaries]. After our piece was over, the Englishman praised and thanked us, then proceeded to say, "I will now play the piano for you to hear." He performed his own music on the piano, which was beautiful. While he performed alone, I heard unearthly sounds coming from his lightning-fast fingers – the sound of five performers. We gave him some sheet music we had prepared [โน้ตที่ไทยทำไว้] and he was able to perform it instantaneously. He performed this piece alongside us Siamese musicians, each in our own ways, each continuing to praise the other's playing, until we said our farewells shortly before midnight.[52]

The reference to Siamese music in European notation is remarkable here. There is no other record of the sheet music to which Nai Kram refers, or to any concerted efforts of transcription that predate the work of Phra Chenduriyang and the Thai Music Manuscript

[51] I am referring here to Philip Ewell's influential use of the term in "Music Theory and the White Racial Frame," *Music Theory Online* 26/2 (2020).
[52] Nai Kram, *Khonthai nai rātchasamnak Phranāng Čhao Wiktṓrīa,* 121-124.

Committee well into the 1930s.[53] It is also unclear whether Nai Kram meant a transcription of Siamese music, or a piece of European music familiar to the Siamese ensemble.

So much then, for lofty intellectual angst over the musical commensurability in this drastic experience of cross-cultural musicmaking. Playing alongside this anonymous Englishman, a reprieve for Nai Kram from the hecklings at the Royal Albert Hall, it mattered little how differently the *ranat* or the piano were tuned. Such theoretical concern had no explanatory power amid the excitement of performance; only to revel in the earnest exchange of fast fingers. This vignette, indeed, suggests a flipside to the project of inducing racialized knowledge in encounter via tuning forks and tonal analysis, a fantasy of inter-imperial intimacy between two musicians where no empires were won or lost.

[53] See Panya Roongruang, "Thai Classical Music and its Movement from Oral to Written Transmission, 1930-1942," PhD diss. (Kent State University, 1999).

4. Songs for the New Nation:
Royal and National Anthems from Siam to Thailand

As late as 1930, Siam maintained a courtly administrative structure in which close family relatives of the king filled the ranks of governance.[1] As this government was beginning to feel the effects of the Great Depression on the country's tumbling economy, a group of aging princely bureaucrats worried over a peculiar request from across the world. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs received a letter from a certain Rolland Gingras, who was working on a book "on the origin of national songs of different countries" [sur l'origine des chants nationaux des différents pays].[2] His request of the Siamese government involved a seemingly straightforward list of facts about their national song:

> Could you provide me with information on the title, the author, and the origin of the national song of Siam? My study would be even more complete if you could supply a copy of the music and lyrics, with, if possible, a translation of the text into English or French.

The request landed in the hands of Prince Devawongse Varodaya, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, who expressed confusion: he was unsure what Gingras meant by "chants nationaux." Devawongse was certain it should include the national anthem Sansern Phra Barami ["Glory to His Majesty"], but was unsure what other songs would fit the criteria.[3] As Devawongse wrote, pondering the request:

> The sheet music to a song that could be considered "chant national" [sic] in the meaning of this European we do not have (or do we?).… In any case, we must reply in a formal and regal manner. We cannot answer that we do not have national songs. We'll send "Glory to His Majesty," or some old song for which we have prepared prints, perhaps the excerpt from *Inao*.[4]

As an oral tradition without a preexisting system of written notation, "sending Siamese music abroad" meant dealing with transcription into Western staff notation, a skill that few at the court could provide.[5] Unable to resolve this case alone, Devawongse

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[1] For an overview of the political history addressed in this chapter, see Christopher John Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit, *A History of Thailand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), the chapter "Nationalisms, 1910s to 1940s," 105-139.

[2] Letter dated May 23, 1930, Sor.Tor.0701.40/2(130), National Archives of Thailand. Documents at the National Archive are labelled in Thai script, I give the call number in Latin script here for ease of reproduction. The Thai script, on-site call number for this document would be ศ.ธ.๐๗๐๑.๔๐/๒(๑๓๐).

[3] I use "Glory to His Majesty" in this chapter to refer to the royal anthem "Plaeng Sansoern Phra Barami." In full, direct translation the title would be "Song to Glorify His Majesty," the functional purpose is included in the title. The *Bangkok Post* translates it as "The Song that Praises the Glory of the King," see "A song that unites Thais in their grief," October 22, 2017.

[4] Letter dated August 11, 1930, Sor.Tor.0701.40/2(129), National Archives of Thailand. *Inao* was one of the mythic, "stock" operas popular at court that died out after 1910, replaced by the new "veristic" style described in Chapter 1.

[5] See the discussion of the Phra Chenduriyang's transcription efforts in Chapter 3. For a thorough history see Panya Roongruang, "Thai Classical Music and its Movement from Oral to Written Transmission, 1930-1942," PhD diss. (Kent State University, 1999).

forwarded Gingras's request to his uncles and cousins, the princes in charge of other government departments. Chaophraya Thammasakmontri – among the princes in correspondence – concurred, clarifying the stakes at hand without contributing a solution:

> A reply would not be in vain if it means the inclusion of Siam in the publication. If this book is to contain information about the entire world, but did not have an entry on Siam, readers would assume that Siam was too primitive to be included.[6]

The Siamese bureaucrats here encountered a Western form of knowledge production – the collection of songs – a form they respected and wished to participate in, but whose nuances and particularities they could not fully grasp. It did not register that Rolland Gingras, in reality, was a small-time organist and music teacher in Quebec City, and not some grand, direct agent of European imperialism. The princes' response betrays anxieties about the threat of being labelled a primitive people, and an imagined concern about the global reach and relevance of Western knowledge and communication, even well after the colonial nineteenth-century. Such a monolithic fantasy of Western knowledge production and the affordances of its cultural practices continued to plague the imaginations of Siamese elites.

Responding to Devawongse's call for advice, Prince Narisara Nuwattiwong, who in his long career had served as Minister of the Treasury, Minister of Defense, and Minister of the Palace to three kings, chimed in on a crucial factor in Gingras's request: the need to supply a set of lyrics and translation. Narisara wrote:

> Such requests give me much annoyance and inconvenience. The music to "Glory to His Majesty" is not the problem; the Ministry of Defense can provide a copy [since they already have them prepared for military bands]. It is the lyrics that burden me and cause hesitation. Each set of lyrics is composed for such and such situation, and there are so many! To choose one set of words is an illegal act.[7]

As the monarch's anthem, "Glory to His Majesty" supported various lyrical settings – numerous versions with different words set to the same tune. Narisara himself was in charge, for instance, of writing separate sets of lyrics to this royal anthem, one for use by a boy's school, another for a girl's school, and one for co-ed schools. Other princes had written specific lyrics for the army, the navy, and for their own private dance and operatic troupes.[8] In this sense, each organization could personalize the lyrics to be sung from the perspective of its constituents, and to narrate their specific relation to the glory of the monarch. To codify one set of lyrics to the song would be "an illegal act" because it would mean limiting a powerful melody to a single positionality.

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[6] Letter dated August 22, 1930, Sor.Tor.0701.40/2(109), National Archives of Thailand. In the archival original, an unknown hand had written "inferiority complex" in English next to this sentence.
[7] Letter dated August 29, 1930. Sor.Tor.0701.40/2(127), National Archives of Thailand.
[8] Poonpisamai Diskul recalled that in an 1888 event at court had a specific set of lyrics to the royal anthem written just for the evening. See Sugree Charoensook (also spelled Sukri Charoensuk), *Kaosipkao pi phleng Sansonen Phrabarami* (Bangkok: Ruenkaew Karnpim, 1987), 46.

Today the various historical versions have faded from use. "Glory to His Majesty" is a standardized anthem, fixed according to one version of Narisara's lyrics written in 1913:

> We, servants of His great Majesty
> Prostrate our heart and head
> In homage to our ruler,
> Whose merits are boundless:
> Our glorious sovereign
> The monarch of Siam.
> Your peaceful rule shelters us
> Your greatness harbors our happiness.
> May it be that
> Whatever your wish be realized in every way
> According to the hopes of your great heart,
> As this is our loyal wish, hurrah!

Narisara's text suggests homage and prostration at the highest level for one's respect of the monarch. Compared to many national anthems, the absence of any description or celebration of the country's landscape, population, or history is striking. Note especially the metaphors that cast the monarch as shelter and harbor for the citizenry, and the concluding gesture towards the force of the wishes and hopes of the ruler. When Gingras's request arrived in 1930, however, the anthem's lyrics had not yet been standardized. The mere fact of the need for standardization—in service of its presentation to a Western forms of knowledge production—became another occasion for anxious indecision among the princes.

If Siamese bureaucrats were unfamiliar with the printed song collection as a form of reproduction, they were very familiar with another form: the vinyl record. In the first decade of 1900, many European record labels pressed copies of "Glory to His Majesty."[9] Several were recorded using Siamese instruments by private ensembles at court, while others were arranged for Western instruments and performed by military bands.[10] These recordings featured multiple different sets of lyrics fitted for use in variously intended contexts. Not only were these sold commercially, but the Siamese government also commissioned them by the hundreds to distribute across the country as part of the campaign to centralize and standardize state power. In the 1930s, Bangkok newspapers

[9] For a brief history of the record industry in Siam during the first decade of 1900, see James Leonard Mitchell, *Music and Recording in King Chulalongkorn's Bangkok* (Bangkok: Silkworm Books, 2022). See also the heavy criticism in John Garzoli's review of the book in *Journal of the Siam Society* 110/1 (2002): 183-187.

[10] Many of these records are preserved by Pluethipol Prachumphol at the Thai National Flag Museum. They can be heard on the museum's YouTube channel. The Pathé recording from 1907 features the singers Mae Poon and Mae Paen with the Third Infantry Regiment Military Band, https://youtu.be/estZ9YYF9vw. Another Pathé recording from 1910 features the singers Mom Charoen and Mae Thet, accompanied by Prince Narisara's own Siamese ensemble, https://youtu.be/lOAo3imWLfk. The 1909 Gramophone Company recording features the singer Nai Jon, https://youtu.be/2RmyS3KRNao. The Odeon recording is purely instrumental and features the Royal Chamberlains Brass Band [traewong mahad lek]. A Rabbit Brand recording, under the parent company Deutsche Crystalate, feature unnamed musicians in both sung and instrumental versions, https://youtu.be/swzadIdrx8g.

would print slanderous reports of rural communities who performed the anthem in "corrupt" ways – with deviant, unsanctioned lyrics, or for the purposes of inappropriate occasions.[11] Much government paperwork, preserved in the National Archives, also records negotiations about whether the theaters, cinemas, and other businesses that were required to obtain these records would pay for their copies.[12]

The Siamese princes' anxiety over supplying a copy of "Glory to His Majesty" for Gingras's song collection, therefore, was not technologically determined. It was not that Western technologies of sound reproduction required sonic permanence, prompting Siamese hesitation. Nor was it the case that the princes were bewildered—and here I am imagining a reverse teleology of sound reproduction—because of an anxiety about the novelty of sheet music in a listening culture familiar with the record player. Should they have wished, the princes might soon have commissioned dozens of versions of "Glory to His Majesty" to be arranged and printed as sheet music, just as they had done so in disc form. Their problem was the purpose of the request: narrowing down the anthem's multiple manifestations to one singular and authentic "national song" for the consumption of an imagined, monolithic imperial West. The process of standardizing "Glory to His Majesty" for release into the alien sphere of global consumption meant running up against such Siamese conceptions of the origin of song.

In direct response to Narisara's letter of concern, Prince Bidyalongkorn, the president of the palace's Royal Society, expanded on his elder cousin's frustration. Bidyalongkorn took the opportunity to sketch an aesthetic theory of Siamese song in miniature:

> The request seems to treat the words to a song to be of supreme importance. I surmise that Europeans write the words to a song first then compose the music to fit the words. But our methods are opposite. Music comes first, and new words can always be made and remade. Any poetry can fit into any song. It is my opinion that any verse from [the fourteenth-century epic] *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* could be the words to any Siamese song.[13]

Bidyalongkorn here questions the conventional tethering of melody to words, setting the textual interchangeability of Siamese song against the fixity of European song. Then, taking up the administrative matter at hand, the prince proposes to send Gingras the one obvious candidate for a national song and to consult more widely about what other songs might qualify for inclusion in the Canadian organist's project. The letter continues:

> I agree that we should send "Glory to His Majesty." That much is settled. Our matter is to determine whether to send additional songs. I myself am hardly learned in music and am also uncertain what kind of songs are considered to be

[11] See *Kao Siam* clippings in Mor.Tor.5.13/81, National Archives of Thailand.
[12] See letter between Wichit Wathakan and other government officials, Sor.Tor.0701.40/2(21-23). The government mandated that live theaters and cinemas have copies of the anthem to play before every show. This posed a huge logistical hurdle, as the government needed to commission them upfront and found difficulty recuperating the cost.
[13] Sor.Tor.0701.40/2(128), National Archives of Thailand.

> national songs. If Your Highness is also uncertain, may I suggest we consult Prince Paribatr? He seems to be quite informed in matters European.

In his reply, Narisara endorsed Bidyalongkorn's characterization of the relationship between music and words in Siamese song, and took the argument several steps further. Narisara also agreed with the suggestion of consulting yet another prince, one who had a reputation for being versed in European thought and custom:

> You have it right. In Thai music, melody reigns supreme. Whatever words are at hand can be fitted into preexisting music. Any gaps without enough words are punctuated with additional "ah/uh" as necessary. Newly composed melodies command no respect. They are liquid [laew], they have no substance, they are without body. One must use an ancient song, which can be decorated and beautified as fit for use. This is our impasse: we can send them printed words, but melodies are old things. It may be wise to consult Prince Paribatr.[14]

In Narisara's comment we glimpse a certain value system governing the elite composition of Siamese music. Newly composed melodies command no respect, apparently, because they are "liquid," and without substance or body.[15] Narisara recognizes this as a central "impasse" for the task of making Siamese song legible abroad: the impossibility of conveying in print, outside of Siam, why the tune to "Glory to His Majesty" carried actual royal power. The anxiety about what one's music can mean when sent out in the world prompts Bidyalongkorn and Narisara to theorize, to arrive at explanations of Siamese musical aesthetics that they would never have articulated without this query from a foreigner. Put another way, the act of selecting music to represent yourself forces you to articulate for yourself how your music works.

This chapter analyzes the history of Thailand's grappling with selecting songs suitable for a new nation. This inquiry requires exploring changing sonic conceptions of Siamese/Thai nationhood and the discourse that induced the country to change its national anthem numerous times, as the court embraced and debated the European idea that a sovereign nation ought to be accompanied by a representative anthem. While Chapter 3 concerned the process through which the Siamese court came to terms with European-derived understanding of the vertical arrangement of music — the division of the octave as a measure of racial worth — this chapter turns to music's horizontal dimension: questions of melody, and the musical, aesthetic, and political discourses prompted by the attempt to identify and define forms of song that could be considered worthy of the nation.

The sections that follow detail the nineteenth-century origin of Siamese royal anthem practices, before turning back to the 1930s to describe the overthrow of absolute monarchy in 1932, and the country's transition from royalist Siam to ethnonationalist

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[14] Sor.Tor.0701.40/2(128), National Archives of Thailand.

[15] The metaphor here involving liquidity and solidity suffers in translation. "Laew" in Thai means liquid, but also connotates failure, as in, unable distill into anything tangible or substantial. When Narisara describes new melodies as liquid, then, he may be conveying simply that new compositions are doomed to fail. Liquidity's opposite, "nuea," I translate here as body, but a more transliteral approach could also be flesh or meat.

Thailand under military rule. Crucial to this shift are the policies and publications of the newly established Department of Fine Arts under Wichit Wathakan, including the commissioning and mandating of a new national anthem (composed 1932, formally adopted 1939).

The chapter demonstrates, in sum, that state decisions made in relation to "national song" became the means by which Thailand's governing body manufactured its ideas about race and nation. This is true both of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century royal-absolutist decrees and later ethnonationalist ones. I argue that shifting relationships between race and nation in the transition from absolute monarchy to military nation-state can be traced and elucidated through the examination of shifting discourses about national song. This negotiation of sonic conceptions of the nation, whether in Siam or Thailand, was consistently articulated in reflexive dialogue with European ideas of nationhood-through-song.[16] The production of a legible national identity for the purposes of "global consumption" was provoked by external requests and thus always framed in a conversation with that audience, imagined or otherwise.

The nineteenth-century origins of a national song

Narisara's concern about what it would mean to pin the lyrics of "Glory to His Majesty" to a single authorized version was not the only reason for the princes' hesitation to fulfill Gingras's request. The song's compositional history was difficult to account for, in view of the need to make a definitive account fit for encyclopedic entry. This obscured origin was a further anxiety informing Narisara's insistence that melodies were good only when they were old. If age was such a valued criterion of judgment, how might the princes articulate where "Glory to His Majesty" actually came from?

To probe the origins of this anthem, we must go back to the 1850s, to the reign of King Mongkut. In Mongkut's time, before the adoption of "Glory to His Majesty," ceremonial events involving the Siamese monarch were accompanied by—of all things—the tune of the British anthem "God Save the King."[17] This practice was implemented in Siam through the first Europeans who served as military leaders in the Siamese army, among them the British lieutenant Thomas George Knox, a certain Captain Impey of whom little is known, and the Italian bandmaster Michele Fusco.[18]

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[16] The imbrication of national song and the constructed nature of nationhood hardly needs to be elaborated. See, for example, Martin Daughtry's call for scholars to "regard an anthem not as the static reflection of a monolithic ideology but rather as a polysemous text through which national identity is constantly being negotiated"; J. Martin Daughtry, "Russia's New Anthem and the Negotiation of National Identity," *Ethnomusicology* 47/1 (2003): 42-67, here 42.

[17] See Prince Damrong's account, Damrongrachanuphap [Prince Damrong] and Naritsaranuwattiwong [Prince Narisara], ed. Phunphit Amatayakun [also spelled Poonpit Amatayakul] *Phleng dontri lae nattasin chak san somdet* (Nakhon Pathom: Mahidol University, 2009), 336.

[18] To flesh out the life of British subjects employed at Mongkut's court: Knox's daughter Caroline married Louis Leonowens, son of Anna Leonowens of *The King and I* fame. Prince Damrong recalls that both Knox and Impey came to Siam after their service in British India, *Phleng dontri lae nattasin,* 349. Little is also known about Michele Fusco, who arrived in Siam by way of the Americas, and was one of the earliest Italian artists who "went native" at the Siamese court (see Chapter 2 on the lives of Italian employees at the court of Chulalongkorn). Prince Narisara recalls how he once arranged an informal holiday to an island, and was unsure whether it would proper etiquette if Fusco were to come along, as the conditions were far from appropriate for the reception of a European. The prince's doubts were dispelled upon seeing Fusco

Why would a regional empire experiencing the encroachment of European imperialism willingly announce its head of state with a British tune? One obvious explanation would be that the British anthem was familiar, came with built-in associations of dignity and power, and had an appropriate walking pace, singable stepwise motion, and memorable patterns of repetition – qualities suitable for any monarch's procession. But to understand this choice as the blunder of a provincial monarch, unattuned to the global order of customs regarding national anthems, is to presume the universality of the idea that a sovereign nation naturally has a representative song, in a distinctive style that can be heard as racially specific. Mongkut's adoption of the British tune was not an unwitting announcement of Siam as a Commonwealth subject, but instead reveals a specific understanding of the sonic markers of monarchical power. In other words, it was a strategic appropriation rather than simple blunder. Mongkut was fond of addressing Queen Victoria with phrases that cast the two as kin: "by race of royalty Our very affectionate Sister."[19] Casting royal blood and divine birthright as akin to a familial bond and racial identity, he positioned himself as a monarch of the world, not differentiated by physiological race, but made an honorary member of global royalty by the sheer right to rule. In nineteenth-century Siam – before the idea of a "Thai people" had ever been hinted at – the anthem "God Save the King" was not heard as representing any specific nation at all, whether Siam or Britain, nor any specific sovereign. It was heard instead as celebrating a universal race of monarchs that included Mongkut and Queen Victoria and all others born to royalty, in distinction from those races that were born to be governed.

This conception of royal song echoes Narisara's ideas about the core values of "old melodies" and the question of interchangeable lyrics. "God Save the King" appears to be immeasurably old and powerful as a melody. It is a prolific contrafact that has enjoyed widespread adoption as part and parcel of British imperial reach, appearing as hymns and anthems across the world. This widespread adaptation is testament both to the song's perceived power and to the British empire's inability to control and centralize its proliferations. In Siam, as per expectation, the tune could take on any number of lyrical states – two known examples survive: one set is in Siamese by Phraya Sisunthonwohan, another in English by the Baptist missionary Samuel John Smith, written for the occasion of Chulalongkorn's coronation in 1869.[20]

This use of the British anthem continued into the reign of Mongkut's successor, King Chulalongkorn. But just two years into the reign of the king, the song became an occasion for embarrassment. Stopping in Singapore en route to India in 1871, Chulalongkorn's entourage was ashamed to find that the ceremonial music that announced the Siamese king was identical to the music that announced British rule over Singapore. Because Siam's kings hardly ever left the capital – not to mention travelling abroad – such diplomatic faux pas over the specificity of anthems was unanticipated. In haste, Chulalongkorn commissioned a European bandmaster in Singapore (probably

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dressed down in "sunbathing cloth" and eating bare-handed while seated on the ground; *Phleng dontri lae nattasin,* 346.

[19] See Maurizio Peleggi, *Lords of Things: The Fashioning of the Siamese Monarchy's Modern Image* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002), here 14.

[20] Samuel John Smith, for the coronation of King Chulalongkorn, *The Siam Repository: Containing A Summary of Asiatic Intelligence* (Bangkok: S. J. Smith's Office), January 1869.

named Hewetson) to provide a new anthem. Hewetson procured a set of already-composed pieces for the king to choose from, and one of those became "Glory to His Majesty."[21] Chulalongkorn's first trip to "European territory," then, marked an early encounter with the question of how songs worked differently at the level of the globe, where racial and semantic specificity clung to a recognizable melody in ways that Siamese elites could not have expected.

Or so goes one version of the story. Not every bureaucrat at court believed that the unidentifiable bandmaster Hewetson (also referred to across various sources as Hewutsen, Heutsen, Husen, Yusen, Hoodson, Hudson, etc.) was the composer of the tune for "Glory to His Majesty."[22] Many competing origin stories for the tune co-exist, and the story of Chulalongkorn's Singaporean blunder was merely one among several. Some princes believed it was the German music teacher in service to the court, Jacob Feit, who composed the tune—although his son, Phra Chenduriyang (born Peter Feit, featured in Chapter 3), believed that his father only made the brass band arrangement. The troupe of Siamese musicians under Boosra Mahin who toured Europe in 1900 told the comparative musicologist Carl Stumpf that it was Phra Bandilphairoh who had composed the tune as an adaptation of an older one called "Glory to Narai" [Sansoern Phra Narai], Narai being the Siamese king contemporary to Louis XIV.[23] Prince Damrong Rajanubhab insisted that the "Glory to Narai" was an unrelated song composed for the Siamese military by Michele Fusco.[24] Some believed it was the Russian composer Pyotr Schurovsky who composed the tune, a favor that King Chulalongkorn rewarded with an ornate cigarette box made of silver in 1888. Others still believed the tune was a divine offering, and had been communicated in a dream either to King Rama II himself or to one of his consorts at the close of the eighteenth century. This narrative was especially attractive not just because it located the song's origin deep in the dynasty's past, but also because it relegated all the Europeans mentioned – Hewetsen, Schurovsky, Feit, and Fusco – to the status of mere arrangers.

The confusion was caused partly by the near impossibility of pinning down the differences between original compositions, arrangements, and contrafacts in a musical tradition without written notation and one that relied so heavily on a canon of existing melodies. This is compounded by the fact that the term "nua phleng" (literally body/flesh of a song) was used by Prince Narisara, a major source for this chapter, to mean

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[21] This story is not preserved in any source from Chulalongkorn's time. It has been repeated as a distant memory or as oral history passed down by members of court. Prince Damrong recounts the story in a letter dated September 8, 1941, *Phleng dontri lae nattasin,* 337-338. Phra Chenduriyang repeats his understanding of the story in his autobiography, *Chiwaprawat khong khaphachao* (Bangkok: Sikentarian, 1969), 112-113. Wichit Wathakan relayed this same story to the Ministry of International Relations to inform their indecision in sending details about the Thai national anthem as requested by the Brazilian Embassy in a letter dated November 27, 1934, Sor.Tor.0701.40/2(95-96), National Archives of Thailand.

[22] Phra Chenduriyang believed Prince Damrong's rendering of the name Heutsen/Yusen is actually Hoodson or Hudson, *Chiwaprawat khong khaphachao,* 113.

[23] See Stumpf's account in "Tonsystemen und Musik der Siamesen," *Beiträge zur Akustik und Musikwissenschaft* 3 (1901), 69-138.

[24] A song under the same name is printed in an early German source as "Phra Narai: altes Siamesisches Volkslied," in Ernst von Hesse-Wartegg, *Siam das Reich des Weissen Elefanten,* (Leipzig: Verlagsbuchhandlung von J.J. Weber, 1899), 120-121. Sugree Charoensook believes this is Michele Fusco's arrangement of Simon de la Loubère's "Siamese song" as printed in Loubère, *Du Royaume de Siam,* (Paris, 1691). See Charoensook, *Kaosipkao pi phleng Sansonen Phrabarami*, 35-41.

"melody"—an understanding that aligns with his belief in the primacy of melody in constituting Siamese song. In today's contemporary Thai, however, "nua phleng" strictly means "lyrics."

As the Siamese princes deliberated over Gingras's letter in 1930, then, they did so hesitating over a seemingly basic a request as the biographical information related to a song. To provide such information required pinning the idea of song to a Eurological framework that would stigmatize these conflicting narratives as unacceptable inconsistencies. Such inconsistencies co-existed as lively, almost mythic rivalry within the Siamese sphere, but were incompatible with the demands of any standardized history.

It is in this context that the views of Prince Paribatr Sukhumband, the authority to whom the other the princes seemed to defer, become relevant.[25] When asked to clarify what Siamese "national songs" might be amenable to Gingras' request, Paribatr replied:

> "Chant nationaux" are simple songs that a population likes to sing and knows by heart, where the lyrics do not necessarily pertain to national pride, but should be heartfelt and free of rudeness. Such are the criteria for what Europeans mean by national song. I hope this humble information can aid in Your Highness in selecting the right songs for Your reply.[26]

Rather than point toward "Glory to His Majesty," or the lineage of other songs that magnify the greatness of the sovereign, as the other princes had done, Paribatr interpreted "chant nationaux" with some idea of Johann Gottfried Herder's *Volkslied* in mind. For him a national song was a song of the masses that, in its heartfelt earnestness, rises up as an imagined collective resounding of the nation. Philip Bohlman has suggested that invented labels such as *Volkslied* act as

> a currency of value translation that allows trade in limitless desire, locating national music in a cosmopolitan world of mass consumption. [The term *Volkslied*] is an empty signifier that abhors a vacuum, calling a music into being that will serve the nation through cultural translation.[27]

When the Siamese princes confronted Gingras's request in 1930, they entered into an encounter with another such invented label, that of "national music," which created and filled a vacuum of its own. When someone goes around asking various people from various corners of the world for national songs, they will discover national songs.

All this goes to show that the categories of colonial inquiry in encounter—whether of race, nation, or song—are not given categories, but something one discovers and transforms in the act of translation. The Siamese princes' collective contemplation involved a reflexive calculation that packaged their own music into the kind of recognizable cultural form. This process, crucially, forced the princes to theorize for themselves the relationship between words and melody. The whole process of cross-

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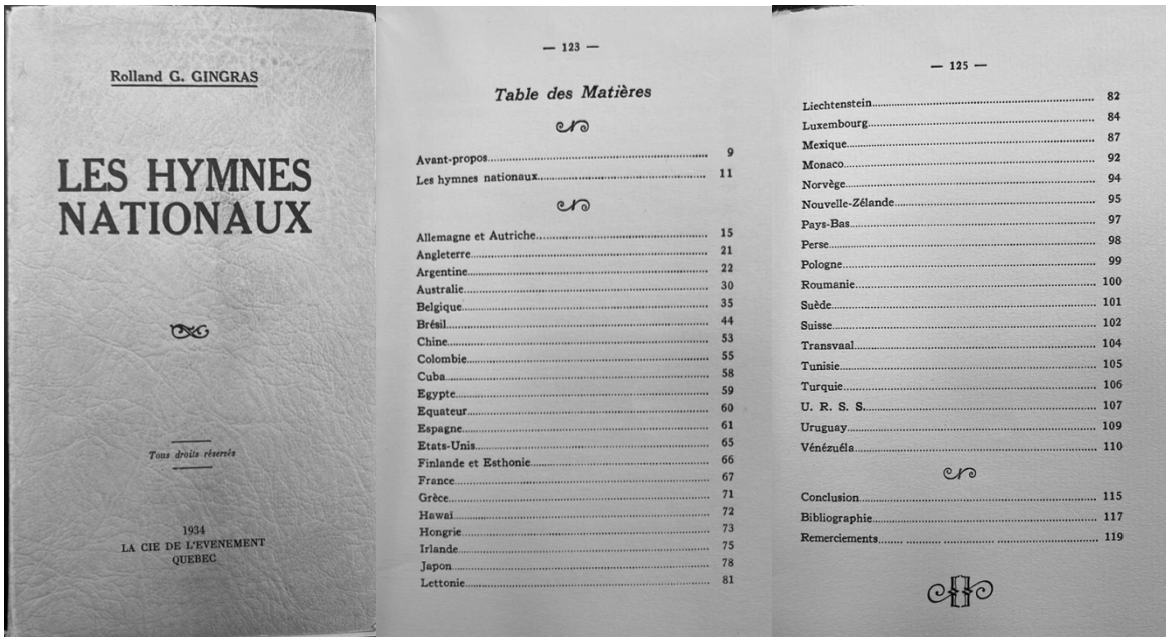
[25] Also spelled Paribatra Sukhumbandhu. He received his education at the Prussian War College in Berlin.
[26] Letter dated September 20, 1930, Sor.Tor.0701.40/2(121-122), National Archives of Thailand.
[27] Philip Bohlman, "Music Before the Nation, Music after Nationalism," *Musicology Australia* 31/1 (2009): 79-100, here 87. See also Philip Bohlman and Johann Gottfried Herder, *Song Loves the Masses: Herder on Music and Nationalism,* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017).

cultural packaging forced the collective to articulate how they thought Siamese songs worked.

The exchange of letters collected in a folder at the National Archives of Thailand ends here. There is no evidence of how the other princes reacted to Paribatr's clarification of "chant nationaux;" nor do we know what songs were sent over to Quebec in the end. At the time, Siam did not possess a corpus of "songs from the voice of the masses." For the princes, a "national song" was not the inscribed voice of the masses in song; instead, all they could think of was the king's royal anthem, a song useful to the dissemination of praise to the monarch. We can, however, study one result of this process of worrying: the book Gingras published in 1934, entitled *Les Hymnes nationaux.*[28]



Rolland G. GINGRAS

LES HYMNES NATIONAUX

Tous droits réservés

1934
LA CIE DE L'EVENEMENT
QUEBEC

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Figure 4.1: Title page and table of contents to Gingras's *Les Hymnes nationaux*

A glimpse at Figure 4.1 shows how the collection moves alphabetically from Romania to Sweden and Switzerland, with no chapter on Siam. The energy the princes devoted to answering Gingras's query seems disproportionate in relation to the book's circulation. Their discussions, nonetheless, reveal much about the process of engaging with foreign epistemologies. Modern scholars today might interpret Gingras's national song collection as the work of a smalltime armchair scholar; but, to contemporaneous Siamese royalty, the imagined consequences of being asked "what is national song" for oneself and for the world meant so much more.

[28] Rolland G. Gingras, *Les Hymnes nationaux* (Quebec: La Compagnie de l'Évènement, 1934). My thanks to Alexander Hardan for retrieving what seems to be the only copy of the book available at a U.S. library, at Brown University.

The 1932 Revolution and New Conceptions of Race and Nation

Recall that Gingras's request arrived in 1930, sparking the anxious exchange of letters among the Siamese princes. The request was a minor backdrop to a crisis of government facing the court at the time: Siam was suffering a massive economic downturn as a result of the Great Depression.[29] This crisis would, in turn, set off a chain of political events that once more required national self-definition in song.

Clinging to the recommendation of his British advisers at court, King Prajadiphok refused to detether the Siamese baht from the gold standard. This decision brought a halt to Siam's agricultural exports, and caused the government great embarrassment in September 1931 when the British pound itself exited the gold standard. Prajadiphok assessed the situation in a pivotal speech to the court that would demolish all faith in his ability to rule:

> The financial war is a very hard one indeed. Even experts contradict one another until they become hoarse. Each offers a different suggestion. I myself do not profess to know much about the matter and all I can do is listen to the opinions of others and choose the best. I have never experienced such a hardship; therefore if I have made a mistake I really deserve to be excused by the officials and people of Siam.[30]

Meanwhile, a group of Europe-educated Siamese commoners began plotting, dreaming of a liberal state in which individuals could strive and develop to their full potential. This promise of class mobility was an alluring alternative to a system in which birth definitively determined status and to an absolutist ideology of love and individual sacrifice for the benefit of the king. In 1932, a group of 100 revolutionaries rallied under the banner of the People's Party, supported by an offshoot of the royal army, and demanded that King Prajadiphok grant Siam a constitutional government. In a matter of hours, the People's Party seized the palace and took control of government, dismissing the royal cabinet of princes, and overthrowing 800 years of absolute monarchy in a swift and bloodless coup. The report on the revolution issued by the British Foreign Office dryly observed that "the average self-respecting revolutionary in any South American republic would certainly laugh at these anemic efforts."[31]

Prajadiphok survived this takeover and participated in the staged handover of constitutional power to the People's Party. The People's Party's hopes of establishing a constitutional democracy in Siam were short-lived. Only 10% of the population voted in the first national election, and the new government did not last the year, immediately deposed by a military coup that installed a dictatorship in Siam for the next two decades. Conceding to the strength of the regime, King Prajadiphok abdicated the throne in 1935 and lived the remainder of his years in England. The Council of Ministers elected his

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[29] I rely on Baker and Phongpaichit's *A History of Thailand* for much of the history described here.
[30] As quoted in Benjamin A. Batson, *The End of Absolute Monarchy in Siam* (Singapore, New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 187.
[31] As cited in Scot Barmé, *Luang Wichit Wathakan and the Creation of a Thai Identity* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1993), 105.

nephew, Ananda Mahidol, as the next king – a nine-year-old child-king who remained in far-off Switzerland.

The military regime's bid for absolute control focused on severing the monarchy from the idea of the nation. As part of the cultural project to secure lasting power, it was essential to shift concepts of the nation and its populace away from the Siamese definition, understood in view of an elevated race of royalty that ruled from the seat of Bangkok. For this purpose the regime devised the idea of the "Thai" race – a newly invented racial category that comprised all peoples of the nation.[32] At the head of implementing these efforts was the regime's Department of Fine Arts, established in 1933 and headed by the French-educated commoner Wichit Wathakan.[33]

Wichit drew his definition of the Thai race from the work of two nineteenth-century thinkers, the French philologist Albert Terrien de Lacouperie, and the Presbyterian missionary William Clifton Dodd.[34] Both theorized that Thais were a people that migrated from Southern China, eventually establishing the present kingdoms of Southeast Asia between the seventh and tenth centuries. In this configuration, Siam was assumed to share a common heritage with neighboring countries like Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia that had fallen to colonial rule. As the only kingdom to have retained sovereignty from European imperialism, Siam had the moral right to assist these neighbors in their efforts to exit French colonial rule, in failed attempts to repatriate these "former territories" into a new "great Thai empire." The country formally changed its name from Siam to Thailand in 1939, with Wichit's department publishing manifesto essays elaborating on this new national status:

> We are of the Thai race, but the name Siam does not correspond to our race.… In making Thai people truly Thai, we must remember there are many new Thais. Now that we have Thailand, we can join the true Thai with the new Thai to work together in friendship for the unity of the nation.[35]

Wichit's new histories of the Thai race were published, in Thai, under the ambitious title *Prawattisat Sakhon* [Universal History], which detailed the universal history of mankind in twelve volumes (with Thailand covering two).[36] Wichit published a similar account of the origin narrative of the Thai race in English under the softened title *Thailand's Case.* His major point of contention was steering a new meaning of the name "Thai" away from centuries-held understanding to mean a people freed from foreign domination:

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[32] Barmé, *Luang Wichit Wathakan and the Creation of a Thai Identity.*
[33] Also spelled Vichitr Vadakar.
[34] See Wichit Wathakan, *Thailand's Case* (Bangkok: Thai Commercial Press, 1941), 121-137. Wichit conveniently skips over, of course, much of the nineteenth-century French ethnology (described in Chapter 1) that contradicted his cherry-picked narrative.
[35] As quoted in Baker and Phongpaichit, *A History of Thailand,* 132.
[36] Wichit Wathakan, *Prawattisat sakon* (Bangkok: Wiriyanuphap, 1929-1931). For an analysis of Wichit's attempts in writing Thai history into global relevance, see Patrick Jory, "Thai Historical Writing," in Axel Schneider and Daniel Woolf, eds., *The Oxford History of Historical Writing, Vol. 5* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 539-558.

> "Thai" is commonly understood to mean "freed from slavery." This meaning is derived from an understanding that ancient Thais were slaves to the Chinese, and once freed from their influence called themselves Thai…. This explanation is factually incorrect. Thais were never enslaved, and the belief that Thais descended from the Chinese is also false. As I have detailed in the history of China (Vol. II, page 184) Thais were a race distinct from Chinese that simply resided in a region that in the present day belongs to China... Thus, the name Thai existed before Thais came to know the Chinese, and were never enslaved.[37]

This narrative self-invention is again cast in reflexive dialogue with European models. Wichit deplores, for instance, the commonly made analogy that the race names "French" and "Thai" both referred to people freed from domination, calling the comparison "delirious." "French" after all refers to Gaul's independence from Rome, while, as Wichit had just established, the "Thai" were never ruled by China.[38]

Ethnonationalism of this sort, of course, inevitably brings with it xenophobia and exclusion. Despite being from a Chinese immigrant family, Wichit espoused hateful anti-Chinese sentiment and contributed to the longstanding trope of describing Chinese immigrants as Jews of Siam.[39] There are also ethnic minorities in Thailand, some of whom claim indigeneity, that were not recognized as Thai, and to this day do not hold citizenship.[40]

Necessarily, this shift in the conceptualization of nationhood from the divine right of the sovereign to the shared collective of the Thai people had to be fortified at the level of national song.[41] In this new folkish climate, "Glory to His Majesty" would hardly work as a national anthem; its message of uplifting the Siamese monarch failed to invoke the new idea of the Thai race. The regime bade Phra Chenduriyang (the son of Jacob Feit, one of the putative composers of "Glory to His Majesty") to compose a new national anthem that would reflect the new conception of race and nation. The new anthem (literally named "National Anthem") fit squarely in the generic trope of the European style military march. Phra Chen was instructed to find inspiration in the Marseillaise.[42] The lyrics were updated twice (see Figure 4.2), but they all thematized the idea of the collective flesh and blood of the Thai race unified under the nation.

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[37] Wichit Wathakan, *Prawattisat sakon Vol. VI,* 38-39.
[38] Wichit Wathakan, *Prawattisat sakon Vol. VI,* 40.
[39] For a nuanced analysis of the history of Chinese xenophobia in Thailand, see Wasana Wongsurawat, "Beyond Jews of the Orient: A New Interpretation of the Problematic Relationship between the Thai State and its Ethnic Chinese Community," *positions: asia critique* 24/2 (May 2016): 555-582.
[40] On state-excluded ethnic minorities in Thailand and their participation in the global movement of indigenous rights, see Micah F. Morton and Ian G. Baird, "From Hill Tribes to Indigenous Peoples: The Localisation of a Global Movement in Thailand," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 50/1 (February 2019): 7-31. This is part of a special issue on indigeneity and Southeast Asia. See also Prasit Leepreecha's "Becoming Indigenous Peoples in Thailand" in the same issue, 32-50.
[41] Commenting directly on the Department of Fine Arts' role in implementing nationalist policy, Wichit writes: "Nationalism has many similarities with royalism in prior times. The difference is that royalism prioritizes the resolve of the monarch as absolute, while nationalism values the resolve of the nation, which is appointed by the population. Nationalism is thus our new national culture." Sor.Tor.0701.29/1(85), National Archives of Thailand.
[42] See Phra Chenduriyang, *Chiwaprawat khong khaphachao*, 71.

1932-34
Siamland is renowned as the land of gold
The Thais have conquered this beautiful land
Thai people have served it since ancient times
United, we have defended it
In some eras, our foes have attacked us.
Thais always sacrifice our lives for the nation
With blood, we fought for our sovereignty
And hitherto we have kept Siam alive.
The Siamese soil is the body of the Thai race
The land's water is the blood of our ancestors
Independence is like a pagoda we honor
We will rise and stand as one

1934-39
Let us all sacrifice our lives
To maintain the rights to freedom the land of Siam
That the ancestors tried to fight until their death
Eliminate the enemies of Thailand to perish
We are all of the Thai blood and race
We don't allow anyone to oppress us
Protect rights and freedom
When disaster helped each other until the day of death

1939 – present
Thailand unites the flesh, blood, and the race of the Thais
The land of Thailand belongs to the Thais
Long has been our independence
Because we have been united forever
Thais are peace-loving, but are not cowards in war
Our sovereignty will never be threatened
We will sacrifice every drop of our blood for our nation
We are ready to die for freedom, security and prosperity!

Figure 4.2: Changing lyrics to Phra Chenduriyang's "National Anthem"

The regime's control over the meanings of song extended beyond the national anthem to the traditional corpus of Siamese songs in the efforts to fashion the markers of Siamese royalism into a Thai national culture. Because everybody was Thai now, the Department of Fine Arts imposed a mandate removing racial identifiers from all songs – "pertaining to the Committee on National Culture's decree to refer to all Thai people as Thai without regard to perceived or preferred race and ethnicity."[43] The document

[43] *Department of Fine Arts Decree on the Removal of Racial Names from Songs*, 1939, Sor.Tor.0701.29/1(338-340), National Archives of Thailand, here 338.

renames a long list of Siamese songs with a race and ethnicity in its title – such as Lao, Khmer, Mon, Ngiew. Since these ethnic categories worked against the idea of totalized Thainess, they had to be purged to indicate that (almost) everybody was Thai now. The song called "Lao walks the fields" for example, was recast as "Walk the fields."

The Department of Fine Arts' attempts toward totalitarian control over music as national culture did not, however, insist on the superiority of Thai music to that of the West. Rather, it produced much comparative discourse that grappled with justifying the worth of Thai music's emotional efficacy. The Department presented numerous radio broadcasts and printed pamphlets instructing the population on such correct engagement with national culture. I will focus here on two essays that directly engage with anxiety around the meaning of Thai song.

First is a radio broadcast by Chalerm Sawettanant, a transcript of which is preserved in the National Archives, on the effectiveness of European music when compared to Thai:

> The listener must recall the differences in Thai and European music, in that music from the West embeds its feelings in a natural way into melody. The expression of Western melody is thus the highest art of the universal level. Thai music, on the other hand, as an art of the East, relies on the addition of human words and gestures to imbue feelings into sound. Thai tunes rely on its lyrics to convey its intended content. The art of the West, on the other hand, concentrates on melody. Images like flowing water or rushing wind can be depicted in melody, as sounds that themselves resemble drawings.[44]

The primacy of melody in relation to the words, so valued in Prince Narisara's description of Siamese song, is flipped on its head when compared to the efficacy of European music in this broadcast. Note however, the essay's shifting definitions of musical meaning: as abstract as the "feelings" that can be imbued by Thai music on one hand, and the mimetic concreteness of images that "resemble drawings" in Western music on the other. Rather than point to the pedagogical prestige of a music that requires sophistication to appreciate, Chalerm envied instead the perceived transparency and immediacy of European music. His terms and conclusions are consonant with the Department's aim of embracing a totalized racial-national Thai identity rather than celebrating the class-based superiority of elite court music.

Evidence suggests that Chalerm's essay angered at least one member of the Department of Fine Arts, who wrote an anonymous response titled "The Emotions of Thai Song." Taking issue especially with the claim that the expressiveness of Thai music resided in words alone, the author complained:

> Some have recently commented that Thai Music all sounds the same, that Thai Music cannot depict the feelings and emotions into song as does European music. When European music wishes to convey sweetness, sadness, or anger, the effect is so apparent that it is conveyed even to listeners without musical learning. But the accusation that Thai song relies entirely on its lyrics to convey sweetness,

[44] Chalerm Sawettanant, "Rao prubproong arai bang sumrub dontri lae lakorn" [On the Improvement of Music and Drama], Sor.Tor.0701.39/23(43-47), National Archives of Thailand, here 45.

> sadness, or anger, is false. The learned listener will know that these effects become apparent when performed by master musicians, but are lost to amateur performers, whose poor technique causes confusion in the emotions of songs.

This writer leapt to the defense of Siamese music, casting it as transparent and interpretable even without the assistance of lyrics. The problem was that Chalerm had failed to appreciate the best performances of true master musicians. The writer goes on to construct his own comparison between Siamese music and that of the West, this time appealing to the division of the octave as a measure of expressivity. The author's intensity echoes the sentiments conveyed in Chapter 3, where the standard European scale system was deemed to hold greater expressive potential, merely because it possessed a greater number of pitches across the octave:

> We do concede, however, that Thai Music is not as developed as European Music. Thai Music's feelings are not conveyed as transparently. This is due to the limitations of our instruments. Thai instruments do not have half-steps. European music has the advantage of being able to produce more pitches, and they make good use of this. European songs convey sadness or anger primarily through the half-step, which allows for clarity. We can only hope that in the future our music can improve to the point that its emotions can be conveyed as clearly as in music from the West. In the meantime, in order to train listeners to better understand the emotions of Thai melody, please refer to the categorizations of emotions in Thai song as follows:[45]

The writer then provides a list of Siamese songs categorized by intended emotional effect: anger, sadness, arousing, calming, gladness, flirtation, excitement. The line of argument here betrays the Department's anxiety about the inherent cultural worth of Thai song and its efficacy in comparison to European music: the West is more expressive because they have half-steps, but this does not mean Thai music is inexpressive; it merely needs more institutional clarification as to what exactly those emotions expressed are.

The shift in the ideology of governance in the 1930s from absolute monarchy to an ethnonationalist regime was thus played out at the level of fine-grained negotiations in the policies of the Department of Fine Arts. The royal court's repertoire of "exoticist" songs, once a repertoire of ethnological knowledge and control (see Chapter 1), was now a thing of the past; in the new regime, song rid itself of ethnic labels in accordance with the new totalized, generic Thainess. The specific musical techniques that conveyed such ethnicities, however, remained untouched. It was as if once the signifying label was removed, the corpus of songs itself—like the bodies of the populations in the new nation—will be neutralized of ethnicized specificity, signifying only Thainess.

[45] Anonymous and undated, "The Emotions of Thai Song," Sor.Tor.0701.1/176(1-5), National Archives of Thailand, here 1.

Foreign requests for song after nationalism

In the context of the political turmoil and national upheaval described above, the issue of foreign requests for songs may seem trivial; but such requests did not stop coming, and the Department of Fine Arts, as the office responsible for music, fielded numerous inquiries. The documents from six such requests are preserved in the National Archives:

- 1933 from J. Van Wynsburghe, Revue Théâtrale, Belgium
- 1933 from H. Bonnet, Institut International de Coopération Intellectuelle, France
- 1934 from Brazilian Embassy[46]
- 1935 from Elery S. James, Poets' Guild, Christodora House, New York City
- 1938 from Barnard. A. Young, Intercollegiate Music League, Boston
- 1939 from American Embassy

There must have been plenty more, however, since Wichit sent 50 copies of "Glory to His Majesty" and the National Anthem to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, so that each time they were asked for it, they did not need to file a new request to Wichit's office.

Consider one of these cases: in 1933 J. Van Wynsburghe of Belgium wrote to ask for materials to furnish his compilation of music and theatrical arts of the world's nations.[47] He requested a raft of information: a piano score, lyrics with translation, name of composer and lyricist, history of composition, whether the music or words came first, date of official use, list of national artists, national poets, national pieces of music, national plays, important national theaters. The Department of Fine Arts could not satisfy the request so early in its operations, but such lists of national figures in the arts were surely on Wichit's mind as necessary building blocks for a nationalist regime.

The impetus to withhold a reply once again colored Wichit's response to Barnard Young of the Boston Intercollegiate Music League's request for information on the Thai anthem. Explaining the situation to his colleagues at the Ministry, Wichit wrote:

> I have considered Mr. Young's request…. Our reply may not bring so much fame or glory to the nation. The composition history of "Glory to His Majesty" is not one we can be very proud of, and we would stand to lose face in explaining all this.… In any case, this letter of request is typical of American manners, and bereft of the proper etiquette for addressing His Majesty's government. It does not merit a reply.[48]

As key architect of the new conception of the Thai race, and with a child king away in Switzerland, why did Wichit think of "Glory to His Majesty" when considering how to respond to Young, rather than sending the new Thai National Anthem? Was he embarrassed by the European quality of Phra Chenduriyang's composition, that it was not Thai enough? Or did he cling to some traditionalist belief in the power of royal song? One answer is suggested in a letter Wichit penned discussing the American Embassy's inquiry:

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[46] Sor.Tor.0701.40/2(101), National Archives of Thailand.
[47] See the series of letters in Sor.Tor. 0701.40/2(110-117), National Archives of Thailand.
[48] Letter dated 23 November 1934 in S.T. 0701.40/2(95-96)

> Per the American Embassy's request to know more about "Glory to His Majesty" and the National Anthem, particularly their differences and how to differentiate them in English, the matter pertains to the Council of Ministers' recent decision to combine the two songs into one. We are currently at work on this project. The resulting song will be what is called "National Anthem" in English. I convey this information for your benefit, but the Council's decision is not yet public knowledge. Therefore it is not appropriate to answer the American Embassy at this time. How to avoid answering I leave to your decision.[49]

This letter remains isolated in the National Archives, and I was not able to find other paperwork related to this combined song project. We can only speculate about what this hybridized song might look like—a song that combines the old with the new, the Siamese race of royalty with that of the unified Thai. Whatever powerful remnant in the old melody of "Glory to His Majesty" that it was fantasized to fuse with, the new national anthem—the combined song—never came to be.

Abandoning the experiment to combine the royal and the national into one song, the regime turned its attention instead to cutting "Glory to His Majesty" down to size. Observing that a full performance of the royal song lasts about two minutes, and the National Anthem only one, the regime published a booklet titled "The Department of Fine Arts' Policy on the Appropriate Use of Honorable Songs" in 1940. Its justification for the truncation of the royal song announced:

> Cuts have been implemented to reduce "Glory to His Majesty" to comparable length with the National Anthem, and in consideration alongside the anthems of other nations. It can be observed that prominent nations all use short anthems, while small, insignificant nations compensate through long songs. Among those learned in national anthems is the saying "the smaller the nation the longer the song, the greater the nation the shorter the song." This is the general opinion among the learned. No matter the truth of this saying, we cannot allow the Thai nation to be viewed as inferior through the length of our song. This is true of all holy things: while holiness demands absolute respect, an excess of holy things devalues their worth. Therefore, we will cut the Royal Anthem down to a length equal to the National Anthem.[50]

This musical judgment, the longer the song the smaller the nation, may seem as strange as the one examined in the previous section: the more pitches in a scale the more expressive the music. This confounding conceit has a source: the assumption is the product of correspondence between Prince Narisara and Wichit Wathakan. While several princes who resisted the military regime were exiled, Narisara spent his final years in Thailand in amiable relations with the new government. He was preoccupied by the recognizability of the British and French anthems, observing that "Britain only has to

[49] Letter dated 27 July 1939 in S.T. 0701.40/2(6)
[50] *Kam cheejaeng kong krom silpakorn rueng karn chai plaeng kiettiyot* (Bangkok: Rongpim Phra Chan, 1940), 2.

play the beginning and France only has to play the end."[51] The power of those songs seemed to lie in the easy identification of their thematic material.

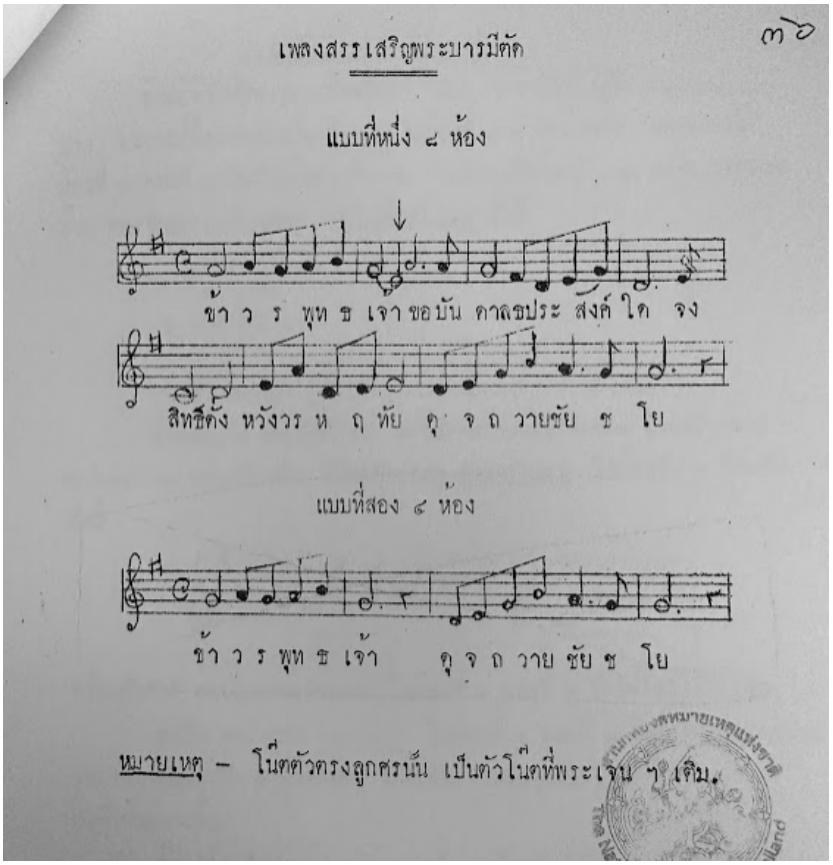

Figure 4.3: Truncated versions of "Glory to His Majesty" in 4-bar and 8-bar versions, Sor.Tor. 0701.40/2(65), National Archives of Thailand

Narisara and Phra Chenduriyang's shortened versions of the royal anthem were disseminated in both four-bar and eight-bar versions (see Figure 4.3), codified into national policy as standardized versions with singular sets of lyrics, and with legal protection against their parody and deviation. The 1940 policy also dictated the division in the appropriate use of the anthems:

> The occasions to use the Royal Anthem ["Glory to His Majesty"] and the National Anthem are as follows: in wishing to salute the monarch, whether the presence of his person or the idea of the monarch, it is appropriate to perform the Royal Anthem. In wishing to salute the nation, or the people of the nation, it is appropriate to perform the National Anthem.[52]

[51] See Narisara's memo in Sor.Tor.0701.40/2(84-87), National Archives of Thailand.
[52] *Kam cheejaeng kong krom silpakorn rueng karn chai plaeng kiettiyot,* 3.

This guidance clearly delineates the division between the monarch and the nation through the separation of song in official and ritual performance. The "idea of the monarch" can be celebrated through its appropriate practices, but such glorification does not cross over into the "idea of the nation" as a newly defined collective of Thainess imagined by the regime.

The melody to "Glory to His Majesty" had enough substance that even though the tune indexed all the royal grace of old Siam, the new regime still fantasized about harnessing its power even as it rejected the basis of that power in absolute rule.[53] While the regime mobilized the idea of collective populous identity, it still did not care about the masses – for Wichit, new bureaucrats were paternal elites in charge of relieving the sufferings of a backward and passive peasantry.[54] The masses were a population of bystanders to a politics carried out in urban government. New laws and policy, once codified under the constitution and executed correctly, would grant justice without mass involvement. The top-down, center-periphery, urban-rural model here replicates exactly the structure of power derived from the structure of absolute monarchical rule.

A Paradigm Shift in Colonial Extraction

We have now seen that whether in the absolutist or ethnonationalist model, song was a means through which Thailand's governing body manufactured its idea of race. This could be the harnessing of a foreign anthem to serve the race of monarchy, the mass dissemination of imposed songs through records, or the codification of song through law.

In all of these models, the idea of the nation is not empowered through collective song, the folk essence of the masses, neither entirely through a negotiation of melody understood as an ancient power that could be maneuvered to the will of the state. Rather, a juggling of these opposing factors forms the conceptual basis for national unity in a moment of transition, with the scrutiny of the global stage always in the background.

Like the anxieties related to tuning explored in Chapter 3, the anxiety around national song persists. In 1986, one of Thailand's premiere newspapers, *Matichon*, ran a column with the headline: "Discovered: Beethoven Origin of Royal Anthem".[55] The article details how the scholars Sugree Charoensook and Wasit Jarunyanont had "discovered" that the opening melody of "Glory to His Majesty" was identical to the beginning of Beethoven's Sonatina No. 5 and the second movement of Haydn's Symphony No. 100. *Matichon* writes:

> When comparing the three pieces of music…. it can be concluded that the main melody of all three pieces of music is identical to the "Glory to His Majesty" in use today in every respect… Even if the composer of the latter song did not copy

[53] As late as the 1960s, the Department of Fine Arts sent "Glory to His Majesty" rather than "National Anthem" to be included in an anthology of the world's national anthems. The collection lists "Huvitzen" as composer and Narisara as lyricist. See Cartledge, T.M., Henry Coleman, and Martin Shaw, eds., *National Anthems of the World* (Poole, England: Blandford Press, 1975), 403-404.
[54] See Baker and Phongpaichit, *A History of Thailand,* 126-129.
[55] "Pob: Beethoven ton kumnerd phleng sansoern" [Discovered: Beethoven Origin of Royal Anthem]. *Matichon,* December 5, 1986.

> [Beethoven and Haydn] exactly line by line, the evidence points to substantial direct influence.

Such obsession over specific originality and lineage overlooks the arbitrary happenstance of similarity in a rather simple melodic elaboration of the tonic (see Figure 4.4). The newspaper article, a century later, repeats the same ambivalence wavering between European threat and desire, as outlined in the introduction of this dissertation and across numerous examples in between. The dangerous allure is forever twofold: that "Glory to His Majesty" might have descended from Beethoven makes it less authentically Thai and at once enfolded into a conceivable lineage of European musical excellence. After all, this is consistent with the Siamese ontology of song-ish value as described so far. As Narisara remarked, new songs are liquid, lacking substance or body. Why not add Beethoven and Haydn to the varied lineage of this mythology?

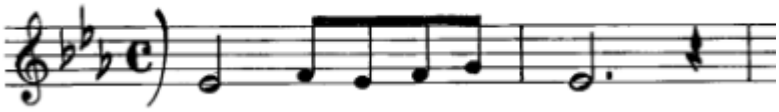

Figure 4.4: Opening two bars of "Glory to His Majesty"

This foray into the 1930s is instructive because it tells us something new about the ways in which European systems approached the extractive process of Orientalist knowledge production. From the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries, Europeans came to Siam in droves to observe: they conducted studies in ethnography and phrenology, they measured the stars and the land, collected samples of flora and fauna, they described ritual and festival, transcribed and analyzed music and song. As explored in the previous chapters of this dissertation, these were acts of extractive scrutiny that Siamese subjects under observation learned to understand as such. Such actors, I argue, became strategic agents in withholding and fashioning their own cultural practices in efforts to subvert or assimilate into such extractive scrutiny. This they did as a means of colonial survival.

The situation of the requests for songs, surveyed above, is different. During the 1930s various representatives of European knowledge production systems rushed to ask Siam how it wanted to present its national culture. This process proved much easier for the researchers than for those condemned to provide the answer – the work is outsourced, even authenticated, through the request for Europe's Others to tell their own stories. It is in fact quite comfortable for you to sit at home and send letters across the globe asking for national cultures, seemingly unaware of the labor needed to ensure its fabrication. The receiver has to come up with a neatly ordered list ready for consumption, a document of culture wrested into a form that they imagine the requester would find pleasing. Here, I am addressing an ethics of knowledge production that, knowingly or unwittingly, transforms the subject's understanding of their own culture in the process of writing about oneself. It always already forecloses the idea "pure" colonial extraction or the recovery of a "pure" prior other.

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This dissertation has plumbed an archive of non-European sentiment, an archive that is replete with ambivalence about the efficacy of Siamese music. In negotiating these affects, we have seen bureaucrats, artists, and intellectuals alike forced to grapple with competing and overlapping epistemologies of music and song. One reward of engaging with this archive is that it offers an escape from, and alternatives to, postcolonial paradigms of mimicry and to the overwhelming binary that often governs the idea of colonial struggle. Postcolonial paradigms like Bhabha's colonial mimic depend on colonial subjects knowing how the tools of imperialism work and then subverting them. Such paradigms are theorized out of settler colonialism or subaltern resistance to colonial administration, and are useful for narrating resistance in such forms of subjugation. The power dynamics present here are completely different, with Thailand as a regional empire with its own imperial desires. Even after "winning" the colonial nineteenth-century and being the only one in Southeast Asia not to be colonized, Siam still did not have a complete grasp of the workings of European modern forms of global relations, whether it be trade economics or the song collection. There was still, always, a yearning toward European musical practices, undergirded by an understanding of their efficacy as imperial forms.

Of course, stories such as this about the alignment of racial and national unity through song are fictions. When you go looking at ethnonationalist archives, you will find outrageous fantasies dreamed up by regimes to constitute their power. This is not a history of Siamese song through the experiences of the ordinary musician around in the decades around 1900, if such a thing ever existed or could be recovered. But I still believe that it is important to probe the mechanisms that created those ethnonationalist fictions. Despite the instability of such fantasies, this regime has lasted. Thailand has been under military rule for the majority of my lifetime, governed by a regime that continues its grasp of power over the country to the present day.