

The MOHLAM

A mohlam is 3 people -- a man and a woman exchanging narrations in a sing-song manner while accompanied by another man playing the Khene; a bamboo flute.

The mohlam narrations have no comparable counterparts in Western culture although the closest some have compared them to are the calypso songs of the West Indies. The songs are not uniquely Lao because their origins some 180 years ago sprang from across the Mekong river, on the Thailand side. However, fervent Lao nationalists are quick to point out that at that time these Thai regions (which they call Paisan) were Lao land whose frontiers stretched as far as Korat, about 300 Km from the present Lao border.

Historically they are correct, for long before the Mekong served as a 1,000-mile border between Thailand and Laos, the latter empire included parts of Burma, Vietnam, Cambodia and Northeast Thailand, Today the Thais of Northeast Thailand are linguistically and culturally more related to the Lao of the Mekong valley than with their richer, Bangkok-oriented brothers--proof that they were once part of the great Lao Lane Xang empire.

Today, most if not all of Lao's 20 active mohlam singers come from northeast Thailand. They can switch from the Lao to the Thai language and vice-versa with stunning fluency, and are perhaps among the best known faces to the villagers of the kingdom. For mohlam still remains the most popular listening entertainment among the Lao, and will draw more spectators than any other spectacle in any boun (village temple fundraising festival) or in any village gathering.

Khamphai Loumphout, 39, reputedly the most famous mohlam singer in the country, explains why: "First, we consider the mohlam as something that is our very own, a genuine feature of our culture and tradition, an art born many years ago in our land, nurtured and patronized proudly by our people. Movies, the radio and combo bands are imports not truly Lao.

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"Secondly, the mohlam is the most direct and effective way of communicating a message. It is face to face. We are a warm presence to our listeners and they to us; we can instantly gauge their reactions; they can tell us what they want to hear.

Because of these reasons, communications people in Laos believe that the mohlam is one highly valuable tool for education and information at the village level. The Royal Lao Army's Psychological Warfare section and Lao National Radio use mohlam singers faithfully; USIS employs 4 teams (2 men and one woman to each team) who range up and down the country.

And what do they sing about. Unless given specific subject matter to sing about by their employers, mohlam singers Chalermphol Pholse, 30, and Nguen Vannarom, 48, both of USIS, dwell on what they consider the villagers want most to hear: Lao history (especially of the province where they are performing), pointers on how to be a good citizen, and how to maintain a happy family. On the other hand Khamphai and his partner sing of love and courtship in glowing poetic terms which make them a favorite.

An important feature insuring mohlam popularity is its ability to instruct and delight at the same time, to ramble on about Lao history without boring, to illuminate a Buddhist doctrine with wit, to explain love's purity with sly bedroom jokes. A mohlam audience seldom listens in silence; it explodes now and then with high hoots of laughter and pleasure.

But the mohlam singers take their work and art seriously. They know, and their employers realize, their incomparable value as minds in a country where information facilities are inadequate and where propaganda is a national program. Their training as mohlam singers is equal to their important roles. From 8 to 10 years are devoted to perfecting their art, first as monks in their Buddhist temples, then perhaps under a recognized lay master. No school in Laos or Thailand teaches the art, although Khon Kaen, in Thailand, is recognized as the seat of mohlam learning. To keep his tongue as fluent and witty as it should be, the mohlam singer must necessarily be a knowledgeable man, intimately familiar with Lao history, culture, religion, legends and contemporary events. The mohlam singer is in the final analysis, a storyteller with a most engaging style of telling his story which can hold young and old entranced for hours and hours.

Their largest audiences assemble during Savannakhit's That Inghang boun in February and during Vientiane's That Luang festival in November, grandest and biggest boun of the kind. The latter festival has all the carnival sounds and sights to dazzle the fairgoer, but the largest crowds flock in front of the mohlam platform, outdrawing the color, the cast of thousands and the full orchestral sounds of nearby free movies.