I am Tenaku: The Reification and Textuality of “Chi” Suwichan’s Karen Harp

By Benjamin Fairfield

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Abstract: While scholars of nationalism point to a standardized print media as an indispensable tool for creating communities and binding groups, the process of “ethnogenesis” involves a reification of cultural icons through said print media, enabling groups to reflexively analyze and project cultural themes and activist messages. This paper examines Karen musician and activist “Chi” Suwichan Phatthanaphraiwan’s bilingual book about the Karen tenaku harp as an indigenous account that shows the process of newly recontextualizing a traditional musical artifact as a modern, politically-positioned, and reified icon of indigenous identity. I argue that Chi presents to the world an agentically advantageous conflation of instrument and ethnicity to construct and position an image of the Karen people and culture as grounded in indigenous tradition yet also modern, adaptable, and deserving of equal treatment in Thai and international society.

While scholars of nationalism point to a standardized print media as an indispensable tool for creating communities and binding groups (Anderson 2006; Duara 1993; Gellner 1983; Gladney 1999), Thomas Hylland Eriksen argues that the process of “ethnogenesis” involves reification of cultural icons in print media, which enables groups to reflexively analyze their culture, turning it into a concrete tool for directing, foregrounding, and politicizing ethnicity (2002:128).[1] This paper examines Karen musician “Chi” Suwichan Phatthanaphraiwan’s bilingual (Thai and Karen) book about the Karen *tenaku* harp, entitled *Rao Khue Tenaku* (“I am Tenaku”), as a primary source that shows the process of recontextualizing the tenaku as a modern, reified icon of Karen indigenous identity. I argue that, through harnessing the power of music as an ethnic marker and text as a means of engagement, Chi presents to the world a vision of his ethnic instrument and its usefulness in constructing an image of a cosmopolitan Karen, grounded in indigenous tradition and identity yet showcasing his people’s modernity, adaptability, and entitlement to equal treatment in Thai and international societies.

Introducing the Author, the Book, and the Harp

In the summer of 2011, while studying Thai at Chiang Mai University, I had the opportunity to interview “Chi” Suwichan Phatthanaphraiwan, a prominent Karen musician and community activist. In cooperation with the Center for Ethnic Studies and Development and the faculty of Social Science at Chiang Mai University, he had just released a book about the tenaku, the six-stringed, curved-neck Karen harp (1,000 copies printed). *Rao Khue Tenaku* is the first book on the Karen harp by a Karen scholar. Indeed, aside from a few scholarly articles that mention the tenaku (Becker 1964; Renard, Prachadetsuwat, and Moe 1991; Stern 1971), the harp has not received much attention in ethnomusicological literature.



Figure 1. “Chi” Suwichan Phattanaphraiwan in 2012. Photo by the author.

According to John Blacking, “We should consider artistic cognition, and musical practice in particular, as having primary roles in the imagination of social realities” (1995:234). This paper seeks to explain the process and significance of “Chi” Suwichan’s work in light of his stated ethnic activism, whereby a reification of the indisputably Karen tenaku as a cultural icon shows Chi positioning not only his and his people’s music but the physical tenaku itself as representative of his imagining of his people.

Imagined (Ethnic) Communities and Invented (Ethnic) Traditions

Ethnic identity in contemporary scholarship is understood as a constructed rather than a natural inheritance (Gladney 1999:49). Both ethnic and national identity are constructed and maintained by producing meanings with which the affected populations can identify (Hall 1996:613). Typically promoted and solidified by the invention of so-called historical and self-validating “traditions” that infer continuity with a shared ancestry, ethnic communities ground themselves by interpreting and formalizing a shared reference to a constitutive, authentic, and binding past (Hobsbawm 1992:4; Eriksen 2002:35).

Indispensable in the process of ethnogenesis, identity is constructed through establishing history (Eriksen 71-72). Benedict Anderson’s landmark *Imagined Communities* reaffirms that identity is something that must be “narrated” (2006:204-5), and he especially emphasizes the importance of print capitalism and national media (43), where widely circulated newspapers and novels in vernacular languages allow for the conceptualization of shared time with imagined, distant, and similar others (25).

The Karen are an indigenous group with at least 4-6 million people in Burma and 400,000 in Thailand (Renard 1980:8) who are typically divided into two subgroups (*Pwo* and *Sgaw*). For them and many other highland dwellers in Southeast Asia in the 1800s, consolidation of a printed vernacular often took shape through the printing of Protestant Bibles and hymnals, resulting in unified local organizations that contributed to group identity formation (Reid 2010:157). Soon after, other ethno-religious novels, journals, and newspapers became widely circulated, expanding the concept of the community from local villages to *imagined* and *imaginable* contemporaries across the hills (160).

This trajectory is the typically told story of Karen nationalism in Burma (Marshall 1980:304; Hovemyr 1989:88). In these accounts, missionaries Francis Mason and Jonathon Wade created Karen scripts in 1832, completing versions of the Bible and some dictionaries by 1853 (Marshall 300). Additionally, a monthly periodical called *The Morning Star* was established in 1842 (Hovemyr 13), linking remote Karen communities with a centralized, printed, religious publication in the newly acquired vernacular script. A similar model of evangelism coupled with social uplift began in Thailand in the 1950s, resulting again in an ethnic identity and interconnectedness among villages through schools, churches, and seminaries (Hayami 2004:48-61).

Charles Keyes suggests that the organizational power of literacy itself, apart from religion and its connections to the Western powers, became an agentic positioning tool for claiming the validity of minority cultures and traditions (1996:290). While Karen literacy helped to catalyze a Karen ethnic awareness, literacy in Thai allows “Chi” Suwichan to use music-text to tell the dominant Thai society his people’s story of adaptability. With this historically constituted, text-driven ethnic consciousness in mind, I turn to “Chi” Suwichan’s book, *Rao Khue Tenaku*.

Rao Khue Tenaku: Background and Synopsis

Chi’s book shows how a Karen scholar uses literature to reify an ethnic artifact and position the Karen harp as emblematic of Karen culture in order to engage in a dialogue about ethnic authenticity and adaptability. Chi’s bilingual book is written in Thai and a Romanized Karen script developed by Catholic missionaries.[2] While this Karen script is scarcely read outside of Christian Karen circles, the Thai version of the book makes the story accessible to the dominant surrounding Thai society. Chi’s book seeks to educate his own people about the tenaku and Karen “traditional music” which is fading from popularity among the younger Karen generation, but he also uses the lore of the harp to tell the story of the Karen to the Thais. The book speaks for his people as much as it speaks to them.[3]



Figure 2. Front Cover of Rao Khue Tenaku.

In the first section of the book, Chi offers a folk history of the tenaku (2011:17-48). The protagonist of the story is an orphan who lives by himself in the forest—a typical heroic character in Karen folklore (Hayami 2004:25; Hovemyr 1989:5-6; Marshall 1980:269). The annual wrist-tying ritual is fast approaching, and the governor has a problem: his youngest daughter refuses to participate this year, preferring to sleep instead. As the event cannot be successful unless all female family members participate (Hayami 2004:123), the governor decrees that any young man who can wake her will be given half of his kingdom and the daughter in marriage. None of the men in the town are able to wake the girl. The young, clever orphan accidently creates a curved-neck harp while carving up a fence post and eventually is able to wake the girl by playing a song deriding her for sleeping and being unable to hear the music. The governor cannot go back on his promise but tries to find a way to trick the orphan out of his winnings. In the end, hard work and honesty prevail, and the orphan tries to reconcile rival factions by appealing to ethnic unity and kinship.

The book transitions from this mythic narrative, told by the father character, to the present-day music and culture lessons, given by the father to the son as they sit around the fire. In this second part of the book, Chi provides background and development of the physical instrument itself (49-104), which embodies deeper ethnic trends of the Karen people. He discusses the etymology of the name, its different and acceptable tunings, materials used in construction, taboos associated with gathering and using materials, cultural ideals in Karen music, his own developments in adding new scales, and the learning process and environment. There are also two traditional songs rendered melodically in solfège.[4] Both sections of the book contain persistent political themes and cultural messages that Chi wishes to present to his audience, who he presumes to be Thai, indigenous Karen, and interested outsiders.

The Power of Text

In pointing to the etymological linkage between “text” and “textile,” Osamu Yamaguti argues that the act of converting a musical object to concrete “text” is an action that requires human intervention, or weaving multiple objects into a resolute whole (2001:178). Eriksen frames this in terms of reification, saying that abstract cultural notions can be manipulated by humans only after being transformed to objects (2002:71). By developing such icons, ethnogenesis is made possible whereby culture, myths, histories, and continuity can be pointed to (128) and used as evidence to prove a people’s existence and legitimacy. Especially in the form of literate text, Eriksen notes, “the form of cultural reflexivity engendered by literacy may be a decisive variable in the ethnic revitalization of indigenous peoples” (128).

Chi’s book is an attempt at such a revitalization. In the preface to his book, he recounts his personal history with the harp, where his father faced criticism by the leaders of the village’s new Christian church for bringing the “pagan” instrument into their worship center (2011:v; personal interview). From then, Chi neglected the tenaku, not really playing it again until he found it was useful as a symbol of Karen identity in protesting against the Thai government’s forced migration of his peoples, now “illegal encroachers” (Laungaramsri 2003:21), from newly declared royal forestry lands (which had been their home for generations). Chi used the harp and its history to perform his counter-narrative in response to Thai assumptions. Where the Thai authorities had lumped the Karen into an all-encompassing “hill tribe” label that inappropriately implicated them as uncivilized opium growers and forest destroyers (Laungaramsri 21; Buergin 2003:54-60), Chi wanted to present his people as possessing a deep-rooted and ethnically-informed environmental consciousness, and set about researching and reviving traditional music to showcase the Karen people as adaptable friends of the forest who lived in symbiosis with nature (vi-vii).

Instruments and Agents, Instruments *as* Agents

I am Tenaku tells not just about what the instrument is, but who the Karen are, according to Suwichan. Much like Thomas Turino’s “semantic snowball effect” (2000:176), where music traditionally associated with ancestors and the past is put to use for modern nationalism, effectively linking indexical meanings of old ways to new ideas in performance contexts at rallies, Chi similarly attempts a pairing of modern musical development to “authentic” ancestry in his book. In seeking to ground his concepts in ethnic “authenticity,” most chapters in the book open by quoting a time-honored “*Tha*” poem. These seven-syllable couplets were considered to be “the authentic speech of the remote ‘ancestors of the olden days’” (Mischung 2003:130; also see Hayami 2004:144). In addition to the oral narrative outlining the origins of the tenaku, Suwichan employs these ethnically authoritative *tha* to show the tenaku’s rootedness in Karen society, with poems such as:

Tena[5] *a pli loe jaw chue,*
de toe mue de sue de sue
(*Tena* strings come from *jaw chue* [plant].
Carefully play, softly tune the strings)

Tena loe jaw wae phaw hue,
toe ba jaw jue sae toe mue
(The *tena* that I hold:
It does not sound beautiful if I am not the one playing it)

Tena pga gaw aw loe choe,
de ba ge a law loe ploe
(The *tena* is carved from the Indian coral tree.
Play, then reflect on the olden days) (2011:95, 96)

After establishing continuity through ancestral poems, he details the harp’s transformations, evidencing a continual contact and negotiation with external factors of modernity. We learn that the resonant skin of the tenaku used to be made from animal hide—deer, snake, buffalo, and others (51)—but now come mainly from galvanized metal containers. This increasingly commonly found metal, usually in the form of candy containers or gas cans, proved to be more weather resistant, not softening or hardening in hot or cold weather as animal skins did (53). While this “all-weather” panel, seemingly borrowing communist and Western concepts of “domination” or “mastery” over nature, might be problematized as incompatible with previously mentioned Karen ideology regarding symbiotic coexistence with nature, Chi presents it non-contradictorily as yet another clever appropriation of the foreign, the norm in Karen society (see Becker 1964:138, 141).

The strings of the tenaku have progressed from a baseline of six to ten or more. In scripted conversations between the boy and his father, Chi is, in effect, giving public permission and precedence for continued development of the instrument. While the tuning of the strings are presented with two “traditional” scales—pentatonic major (*do re mi sol la*) and minor (*la do re mi sol*)—the father hypothesizes more possibilities, leaving the option open for new scales to be explored and introduced, a process that would neither contradict nor conflict with his teachings (2011:85).

As to the strings’ physical makeup, in the past they were said to be made of natural materials as well— vines, rattan, banana roots, and sometimes animal tendons (53)—all of which had problems with breakage. With increased exposure to the outside world, the Karen ancestors adopted new innovations, appropriating fishing line and eventually settling on untwisting bicycle brake cables to use as strings. This process of turning the colonizers’ products into creative protestation of the hegemonic forces is reminiscent of George Lipsitz’s assertion that the methods of hip-hop have been an appropriate means of counteracting state oppression in post-colonial situations, where African slaves adopted the Biblical narratives to tell their own story of diaspora or Trinidadian communities turned capitalism’s oil barrels into steel drums for ethnic expression (36). Chi does not quite frame it in such direct terms, but the idea of appropriation of the oppressors’ tools as an effective, agentic response to hegemonic forces definitely applies.

In fact, it seems that Chi is aware of possible skepticism of this presentation of the modified, modernizing tenaku as retaining a Karen authenticity, and he inserts a dialogue between the boy and his father to once again bolster his argument that adaptability is part of Karen identity and agency in a chapter titled “Taking Father’s Knowledge to the Next Level,” where the child leaves the village and returns with a tenaku tuned to a diatonic scale including the 3rd and 7th western major scale degrees of *fa* and *ti* (*do re mi fa sol la ti*) (85). Chi takes the opportunity to narrate a timely cultural lesson on innovation, where the father tells the boy about their Karen ethnic identity and adaptability:

> The Father told him, “The first thing: we are born with some natural limitations. For example, our place of birth, our family, our community, and our culture. . . . We are this way by nature. This is our way of life. . . .
>
> The second thing: we must seek out knowledge from other people, other sources. This is your lesson, your

> course, your foundation for . . . maintaining our people’s way of life. . . .
>
> The third thing: we must raise the level of knowledge that we have and take it to the next level by innovating . . . .
>
> Music is the same. You must learn from other people and other sources, and certain things you must learn by yourself in order to innovate. . . . In this line of thinking, *in tune with the elders*, we can have advancement . . . increasing the strings to seven, eight, nine, or more . . . changing the scale from pentatonic to a complete seven-note scale. (88-89, my emphasis)

When I asked about whether his ideas about the tenaku might be construed as straying from an “original,” Suwichan again pointed to the idea of continuity and change:

> Culture keeps up with society. If it doesn’t evolve, it dies. There probably would be some [of my fellow Karen] who reject this. But eight strings comes from a root: six strings. Six strings is *mother* [English]. Eight strings is the child. All come from the same root. (personal interview)

Thus, Chi frames his argument and defends his position on terms of ethnic continuity, driving the discourse away from dichotomous essentialisms and notions that engaging modernity on its own terms is allowing it to destroy tradition. Chi presents the tenaku as not just emblematic of Karen customs and ideas but as a precedence for empowering them to negotiate with the immediate Thai authorities and the world at large. His book thus reaffirms Martin Stokes’s idea that music is capable of “constructing trajectories” (1994:4): the textual representation of the tenaku is not just about reconstructing the past or reflecting the present. Rather, Suwichan positions it decidedly as directing a Karen musical and cultural future. In doing so, he enters the Karen into the mix of political engagement of ethnic minority groups creatively adapting to modernity by redefining ethnic identity through musical measures.

Through writing this book, (Chi) Suwichan has successfully positioned himself as the authority on the harp, both within Thailand and internationally. Politically, he has worked as a community activist in engaging with Thai forestry officials, where he justifies his participation, saying, “I participated in the protests by using art, music, and songs to instill understanding among the public in the ways of my people,” none of which would have been possible without the ethnic instrument (*vi*). In my analysis, I would add that it would not have been possible without the reification of the harp, its elevation to ethnic iconic status through recasting it as a textual actor in print media, and its political foregrounding as validating Karen agency and appropriation of modernity for ethnic activist purposes.

Conclusion

Rather than merely performing Karen music, Chi sees a need to present an authoritative, fixed, textual account of what the Karen have always done, musically and culturally. This process of turning cultural activity into a reified, discursive object is a very real transformation from orality to literate and literal “text.” The message of the clever Karen’s cultural adaptability becomes validated, “museumized,” and invigorated within the physical makeup of the tenaku.

In his subversive analysis of highland minorities in mainland Southeast Asia, James Scott frames non-literacy as a means of evading the state and all of its tendencies to fix and classify its subjects into submission. He sees textual accounts as holding that same standardizing, fixing power, viewing written records much the same as monolithic and rigid monuments or museums (2009:227-228). Though Scott views this omnipresent textual monument in a negative (state-favoring) sense, I argue that Chi’s use of literacy is rather a positive, agentic engagement with modernity, more in line with Lipsitz’s ideas of pragmatic appropriation of colonial tools (1994:32). In fact, his strategy of engagement quite closely matches the suggestions of sympathetic anthropologist John McKinnon, who argued for exactly this kind of negotiation by means of Karen cultural practices and artifacts, saying,

> If Karen are to persist as Karen this may well depend on them being able to change the forms and images of their beliefs…find expression in the language and symbols of the past to speak to the present. This provides the moral stuff on which resistance can be built. It is not false memory. It is not a reconstructed, entirely and conveniently reinvented history but a harvested legacy that makes resistance possible. (81-82)

It is especially through an ethnic, reified instrument that Chi empowers himself to speak up for his people, taking charge and self-designating a name for a group that throughout its history has been ethnically defined by missionaries and administrators (Hayami 23). In taking control of the newly emerging Karen narrative, Chi’s book about music counteracts the dominant message of mainline Thai media and state. His book is a platform to tell his side of the story. In writing *Rao Khue Tenaku*, Chi presents what Scott would call a “standard” version of his instrument and his people that comes from the inside. He is employing agency, creativity, and appropriation of the language and tools of modernity to place Karen lore and music into the arena of published, literate, authoritative works. It is his way of responding to the various forces of modernity that he believes caused his people to abandon their music and traditions of the past (personal interview). He is able to respond to the powers with their means on his own ethnic terms, in cooperation with his instrument, to which, through reification, he has given its own ethnic voice.

Notes

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[2] Protestant Karen use a Burmese-based script developed by missionaries Jonathan Wade and Francis Mason (Marshall 296). This script is much more widely known and used than its Romanized Catholic counterpart.

[3] In *Huay Nam Khao*, the village where I spent two years as a Peace Corps volunteer from 2007-9, written Thai script is relatively well-known by most people under 50 years old (those who have gone through the government’s mandatory education system). Villagers over 50 were more likely to be non-literate, signing government forms with a thumbprint. The Christian church, positioning itself as preserver of the Karen language, still teaches the old Burmese-based script, and Christian children use it weekly in Bible readings, but it is nowadays less necessary to learn, since Thai has become more effective for communication as well as more useful with increasing contact between the two groups (Keyes 1979: 18).

[4] The book also includes a VCD with audio-visual instruction. On this video, Chi explains the tunings and the song lyrics in both Thai and Karen.

[5] The tenaku is also sometimes referred to by a shortened name, “*Tena”* (see Suwichan 42).

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