Chapter I:

the workings of Thai popular music

Preface:

Storytelling is one of the oldest and most widespread forms of entertainment. Oral traditions in Thailand have been kept alive for hundreds of years and some of them even make it multiple times to the silver screen and to the heart of our culture like the story of Nang Nak, one of Thailand's most infamous legends. Other stories that "air out the dirty laundry" of a society/culture sometimes have a harder time finding its way to the public, but nonetheless it is still there like Nonzee Nimibutr's controversial film, Jan Dara, depicting Thai society's unspoken attitudes toward love and sex.

At the same time stories entertain, it teaches and familiarizes the reader/listener to their surroundings, which according to Kingkeo Attagara, helps individuals become oriented to their environment. She states that "telling of stories may help a person give vent to suppressed feelings, become familiar with certain beliefs and practices, and learn social problems and their ethical solutions." Knowing all that information helps an individual function more effectively within the society, (Attagara 1967).

Values, morals and sensibilities are constantly changing in any given society due to new ones factoring in from various points of an evolving global culture as indicated by Paiwarin Khao-Ngam's poem, Bangkok Mood in as early as 1986:

Such amalgam of temperaments!
More defined meanings, more stories,
More values, more points of evidence,
More novel ideas, more controversies

Ideologies of a society's customary way of living can be gauged through society's standard of acceptance. The various forms of storytelling found in popular culture can therefore act as a sound indicator of society's level of tolerance as it's constantly tested in music, literature, films, and all other forms of public expression. Popular culture is derived in essence from everyday life manifested in forms of expression, which can, as Lockard states, "serve as a potent force for both persuasion and value building as well as for the perception of consciousness," (Lockard 1998: 5).

Artists and musicians consistently challenge the boundaries of social acceptance with popular culture as their forum which sometimes help result in cultural reform and change because "it [popular culture] expresses social cosmology, worldviews, class and gender relations, conceptions of good and evil and other sociocultural phenomena," (Lockard 1998: 5). Changing ideologies and value systems in a society can thus be traced and analyzed by examining its various forms of popular culture, which illustrates the stories indicative of the relevant meanings and values of a given society.

Music, just like cinema and other forms of entertainment, are narratives that progress and evolve alongside a culture and society. Creators of what we hear, see, and read everyday illustrate views and opinions influenced by the surrounding environment which makes the creators/their creations become visible products responding to their culture and society. Music is thus analogous to cultural documents on the grounds that it can be used to reflect the different values and ideas of a certain society. Like books and

movies, music is recorded and become permanent fixtures in a culture which makes every album or single, no matter how obscure, contextually relevant to times and society.

For those who hold an importance to music, life becomes music and music becomes the meaning of their lives or a big portion of it anyway as "there is a difference between people who listen to music and people who need music," says Stirling, bassist of the local Bangkok rock band, Eastbound Downers. This "difference" is more than apparent to the makings and evolution of popular culture as we know it.

Introduction

In a culture that puts much emphasis on eating and drinking, it's only natural that a musical culture develop right alongside the good times and hearty meals. What better way to prolong the pleasures of eating and drinking than passing the time appreciating music? Weather it be karaoke, listening to sappy pop songs from Boyd Kosiyapong, watching live bands, singing along to cover bands, drunken sing alongs with that one guitar minstrel existent in every circle of friends- there's always some sort of musical appreciation happening at various levels and styles during times of sanook and fun.

Aside from the opera lovers and followers of classical music, the problem with musical appreciation in times of sanook and fun is just that- the emphasis is on the "sanook and fun," not the music. The music is a supplement to the "sanook" as "the superficiality of fun filled days and nights assures that emotional entanglement will be avoided. The less involvement, the less disappointment," (Klausner 2000: 291). But at the same time "sanook" can serve as an escape to the physical realities as it is an escape

from "a society where individualism constantly has to sublimate itself to the demands of social place."

Klausner writes, "sanook provides a respite, a release from the socially enforced constraints and demands imposed by the acceptance of one's place in the social hierarchy. One is continually according respect, deference, diffidence towards those of higher status, seniority, rank. Sanook (fun and games) provides welcome relief from the tensions, pressures, and frustrations attendant on this never ending accommodation to power and hierarchy," (Klausner 2000: 290).

So whatever melodies that can rev up a group sing along or evoke communal emotion is deemed "a good song." How else do you explain hearing "Can I Survive," and "I love you baby" covered by just about every cover band in every live music establishment in Bangkok?

Nonetheless, Bangkok still generates musicians of notable standards. There are plenty of guitarists that are able to transcribe just about any song within minutes of hearing it. But when asked to play something they wrote themselves, one is more than likely to just shy away and play another one of your favorite sing along songs instead.

I once knew a guitarist who transcribed "I Wanna Hold Your Hand," a Beatles song he never heard of in about five minutes, note perfect and everyone was happy because the requested song was played with every last person present singing along swinging their whiskey and sodas. I praised the guitarist for his transcribing abilities and asked him if he wrote any of his own music and his reply was, "no way, that's too hard." He hears it, he can play it, how hard could it be? Or maybe he meant that playing a song he wrote wouldn't be "sanook" because no one would've been able to sing along...

Which brings us to question, what is the role of pop music in Thailand, a vehicle of sanook, or the conventional development of personal expression as fine art? How does pop work in modern Bangkok? Who does it relate to? Where does Thai pop music derive from? All in all, what is modern Thai pop music?

To some pop music is the same group of songs heard over and over again over a period of a few months before a new set of songs sink in on the radio, at clubs, bars, shopping malls, TV commercials, etc, but I want to go beyond that to see where these songs originate from, the logic behind their structure and weather or not it can say something in particular about popular culture in Thailand as a whole.

In the chapters that follow I will try to trace, follow and hopefully bring to light the value of modern Thai music by first describing the climate and overall context that modern pop music is created and wallows in. As this thesis will mainly focus on present day influences and creators of popular and unpopular music in Bangkok, there'll be a brief outline as to how modern Thai music got to where it is now before going through interviews with the musicians and non musicians (participants) of today's Bangkok music scene. From the information provided in the interviews, I will attempt to analyze how such a marginalized group can be so influential to the development of popular music culture and also maybe even see why and how music sounds the way it does and what it all means.

Popular music emerges in Thailand

From the beginning, music in Thailand has been distinctively something of its own. Ever since early on, Thai classical music did not use the same tempered scale that's

been prevalent in the West since the 18th century. The standard Western scale features an eight-note octave, but is arranged in seven full intervals (whole steps) with no "semi-tones." The Thai scale on the other hand comprises of a seven note octave with each whole step coming short about one quarter of a semi-tone. Which means each note of the Thai scale will never match that of a Western scale, thus producing sounds that are unfamiliar to Western ears. As written by Charles Hubert Hastings Parry in "Evolution of the Art of Music,"

"The Thai scale system is...extraordinary. The scale consists of seven notes which should by right be exactly equidistant from one another; that is, each step is a little less than a semitone and three-quarters. So that they have neither a perfect fourth nor a true fifth in their system, and both their thirds and sixths are between major and minor; and not a single note between a starting note and its octave agrees with any of the notes of the European scale..." in other words there was once a time when music was something distinct and unique in different parts of the world.

Music, theatre and dance have been part of Siam's illustrious past straight on through to the reign of King Rama IV when the royal court flourished with cultural, artistic, dramatic and literary activities.

In the beginning, fine arts were contained within the walls of the Royal Palace, away from commoners and village people living outside the palace, but later on as history will have it, the arts changed in form and style with the evolving society as it spread to accommodate the varying mindsets of people living outside the palace walls.

During the Reign of King Rama III the Khon and Lakon troupes of the royal court were banished as the King considered these leisurely activities "wasteful luxuries which a

country in difficult times could not afford and which created temptations to indulge in worldly pleasures," (Rutnin 1996: 61).

The ban resulted in troupes secretly performing outside the court continuing the tradition and also expanding on it by for the first time incorporating women into the performance, and inventions of new lakons that were not traditionally performed in the court. So the various forms of lakons and the classical music that accompanied it began to make its way out to the general public within a context of an underground, secret community for fear of the king's displeasure. (Rutnin 1996: 62) Villagers and ordinary people began to make music more relevant to their immediate being and existence.

Thus, the early beginnings of Thai popular culture, which was in fact originally created and performed by royal consorts to becoming somewhat of a subcultural entity with secret performances before it was finally introduced and embodied by the general populace.

When King Rama IV came to the throne, he lifted the restriction to "officially permit private lakon troupes to give public performances out side the royal palace," (Rutnin 1996: 76) without any repercussions.

King Mongkut's goal was to create a grandiose atmosphere surrounding the Siamese monarchy to change Westerners' condescending perception of Asian monarchs. "The king [Mongkut] started to revive many royal customs and the pageantry of the Ayudhaya period..." (Rutnin 1996: 74), in lieu of the growing contacts with the West. What started to happen at the time of King Mongkut's reign was a revival of royal Siamese traditions, this time open and accessible to all.

King Rama IV foresaw the impact "highly cultivated arts" could have on a nation's political and social development. Siam's rich cultural heritage was looked at as a source of original values and identity amidst the colonializing powers closing in all around them. This identity and original values were used to "convince any Western aggressor of the rich heritage of the Siamese people, the stability and glory of Siamese monarchy and its political and social superiority of Siam..." (Rutnin 1996: 77).

This prevision was carried on through the next reign of King Rama V, so along with scientific anomalies of the West, a new way of dress, implementation of eating utensils- came new developments of music and the arts to accommodate the changing times and culture. King Rama V's attempt for Siam to have the best of two worlds, the old and the new, the farang and the Thai gave Siam the precedence "to retain links with its glorious past with all the living royal traditions and ceremonies to prove it and at the same time to keep in step with modern advancement in the international world," (Rutnin 1996: 96). Thus, the process of synthesizing Western culture with Thai civilization commences and the wheels of modernization begin to turn.

Ever since 1862, Thai musicians have been taking what is distinctly Thai and "transcribing" it into music that can be rendered into Western notation. Music from modern Thailand is altering its course from the traditional scale to something more modern due to developing musical backgrounds, technology, and tastes derived in part from contacts with the West. This notion of "the old and new, farang and Thai," continues to change society today, and mobilizing along with it is the face of popular culture.

Popular music in twentieth century Thailand

Although the beginning of modern popular music in Thailand is attributed to the coming of Suntharaporn in the 1950s, there was no semiotic lineage linking this claim to the immediate locale. Suntharaporn's popularity came during the rule Field Marshal Plaek Pibulsongkram (1939-44 and 1948-57). It is important to note Pibulsongkram's ardent and forceful attempt to modernize Thailand through the implementing of Western customs and ideals into the core of the culture.

Under the rule of Pibulsongkram, anything traditionally Thai was considered subordinate and an obstruction towards the path to modernization. Thais were encouraged to adapt Western behavior from husbands kissing their wives before leaving to work, ballroom dancing and wearing hats out in public, to encouraging Thai versions of Big Band music- hence Suntharaporn's music came into play, (Ratanaruang 2000). Thai music was no longer based on mythical stories of karma and kings reincarnated, but lounge songs bound to the worldly intimacies of flirtatious love, romance and fluff.

"Suntharaporn's music was famous for the luk krung singing style focused on pleasant sounding vocals and lyrics that can make you cry," said one informant.

Luk krung is a derivative term of luk thung, referring to city songs as opposed to songs from the countryside. Both types are focused on the vocal tones and storytelling lyrics, but instead of coarse language and local dialects about life and hardships, luk krung utilized refined language and lyrics about love as its focal point. The songs were usually performed with big choruses, back up singers and the man and woman duet vocal roles. By the time luk thung music reached the confines of Bangkok, it diffused into a diluted version losing its relevance to the lives and people it came from.

Talking about the advent of popular music, it is important to note the significance

of luk thung music emerging from transistor radios as popular, mass mediated folk songs

with considerable elements of social criticism relevant to people living in the rural areas

of Thailand since the early '60s.

Lockard quotes Ubonrat Siriyuvasak describing luk thung's functionality in

popular culture was that of "articulating class resentment…by deliberately utilizing lower

class language, consciously opposing the elite's romantic view of the world (represented

by luk krung) with a more earthy sexuality and criticizing or parodying official attitudes

and policies as well as the socioeconomic class system.," (Lockard 1998: 189). Luk thung

created the art of satire in popular music as their wit and criticisms of society had to be

"cautiously synthesized" or face possible state retribution. This form of satire was later to

be picked up and developed on by upcoming musicians of Thai popular culture.

The popularity of Suntharaporn in Bangkok was enormous. He embodied in

musical form Phibulsongkram's sentiments of Western modernization. "These songs

were for easy listening," says the informant using Thai words like leun (slippery), yen

(cool), and sabai (comfortable) to describe the music. These words connote complacency,

which is what Phibulsongkram wanted the public to feel about the changing society-

apparent with the government's daily broadcasts and campaigns blaring out slogans like,

"Believe in the Leader and our nation will be saved." Although embraced and revered by

much of the population, there were the few who outwardly opposed these sentiments.

Luang Praditpairoh (1881-1944) composed a melancholic masterpiece called Sam

Kum Nueng (song of remembrance) as reaction against this cultural oppression,

(Ratanaruang 2000). Usage of classical Thai music represented the yearning to move

back to one's natural identity. This Thai classical masterpiece embodied the segment of society that was uncomfortable with the imposing forces and the path society was moving towards. The music created was a direct reaction to Phibulsongkram's cultural reform campaign which attributes to the fact that society's respondents have the ability to explain and react to the world through composition and style- concrete expressive forms that are to be received by anyone who will listen.

A coup d'etat in 1957 overthrew Phibulsongkram into exile and new paths of development began to open up in Thailand. Ideas of cultural imperialism begin to spread its seed during the late '60s and '70s. The National Student Center of Thailand (NSCT) at Chulalongkorn University was founded in 1972 with their first task being organizational work to boycott Japanese goods. The Thai Communist Party starts the rally for "national independence" as a reaction to the presence of US troops on Thai soil during the Vietnam War and the close cooperation between the Thai military governments and the USA.

Leading up to the October 14, 1973 uprisings, we begin to see what some might call "cultural imperialism" morph into a manifestation of localization as per Caravan and the 'pua chiwit' movement of the '70s proved with their music.

Sources for music outside of Thailand became more attainable, and becoming more relevant to the people exposed to it. The surge of American GIs and civilians involved with the wars in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia spawned juke boxes and night clubs regularly playing songs from the West including antiwar and protest songs of which became quite an influence with the 'pua chiwit' movement.

'pua chiwit' songs were being written and composed from the lives of people living this transition of military rule, an emerging bourgeoisie and the declining state of

the national economy. Surachai Janthimathon and Wirasak Sunthonsi, the founders of the prominent 'pua chiwit' band Caravan, were students and activists who utilized their music as a unifier for people within the cause. After the '73 student uprisings Caravan went on tour playing their songs in the rural Northeast on a campaign to help prepare villagers for the forthcoming democratic elections. In a way the songs helped bridge the gap between peasants and workers of the Northeast and the student activists who sympathized with their struggle in Bangkok. The social and political protest expressed by the 'pua chiwit' groups was thus able to assemble, strengthen and embody the student movement.

Although their music was in part a "model of" American folk song patterns, Pamela A. Myers-Moro writes that their songs also, "...provided a model for behavior, thought and emotion," (Myers-Moro: 108) as it spoke to local audiences and harbored ideologies that made up the revolting sector of this particular society.

The 'pua chiwit' movement gained popularity as they grabbed the attention from a deprived audience waiting to hear concrete expressions of their thoughts. The 'pua chiwit' sentiments "drew upon appropriate symbols, upon appropriate sounds and structural features...created through human experiences and human interaction," (Myers-Moro: 108).

The sentiments of cultural imperialism felt by the far left and the military dictatorship of the far right gave birth to the subcultural sounds of protest songs that fused traditional expressive forms with outside influences of the West to create a new form of expression representing those in the middle of it all- the people.

The use of American folk song patterns from the likes of Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, Arlo Guithrie and Pete Seeger, in corporation with the writings of culture hero Jitr Phoumisak and Thai expressive traditions, were the basis for this modern musical development. What Caravan and the 'pua chiwit' musicians did was create an identity by taking Western musical influences, mesh them to what was already there, the Thai expressive traditions, and added lyrics through which to communicate their concrete opinions and ideas of the time.

So how does this modern form of musical storytelling contribute to the development of a society? It becomes part of a continuing process counter-acting the structure of power in a society, giving an identity reference for the overlooked and underprivileged. This reference of identity materializes in the form of music, thus begetting a musical subculture comprising of students, workers, villagers and sympathizers to the causes and ideologies of the movement.

For Cohen, "latent function" of subculture is to "...express and resolve, albeit magically the contradictions which remain hidden or unresolved in the parent culture" (Cohen 1972); the contradiction in the case of the 'pua chiwit' movement being military rule, unequal distribution of wealth and human rights.

Similar to the secret lakon troupes during the days of King Rama III, and Luang Praditpairoh during the Phibulsongkram days, 'pua chiwit' embodied and gave form to the rebellious ethos of society, each creating "subcultural 'instances' representing a 'solution' to a specific group of circumstances to particular problems and contradictions of the time, (Hebdige 1979: 81). The only difference with the 'pua chiwit' movement is

that it was immediate with larger political/social issues and localized Western influences into a forum propagating the expressions and communication for unheard, local civilians.

Once these outside influences of American protest songs have been adapted and integrated into the Thai repertoire of music and tradition, it is only inevitable a sound distinctly of Thai sensibility re-emerges to the surface and re-establishes the relativity of Thainess (and all the localized thoughts relevant to living in Thailand at that specific moment in time) from within the newly adopted western musical structure. This process of adopting and localizing begat a new form, a new style, and a new subcultural narrative within Thai popular music history.

The movement eventually became popular making their work much more visible to the country and created a new point of lineage to a Thai form of public expression for upcoming modern musicians.

Creating the localized self

To exemplify the importance of Thailand "localizing itself" from within the influences of the West, we should take a look at a regional incident that parallels the relationship between Thailand and the West in terms of the spread of popular culture. An incident which generated much controversy and violence between Thailand and Cambodia in early 2003 parallels Thailand as the "domineering" culture infiltrating the cultural boundaries of Cambodia.

Thailand, once considered the next little Tiger of Asia, becomes influential as a pop cultural role model for neighboring regions to receive and localize. On January 18, 2003, Rasmei Angkor, a small Cambodian newspaper, published a front-page article that

sent shock waves through the region. Picking up on a rumor that 24-year-old Thai soap opera star Suvanant Kongying (nicknamed Phkay Proek) claimed Cambodia's 900-year-old temple of Angkor Wat, as rightfully Thailand's. The paper reported: "Phkay Proek said that if any Cambodian official or director invited her to perform in Cambodia, she would do so only if they first agreed to give Angkor Wat to Thailand....Phkay Proek said that she hated Cambodians like dogs."

According to the World Press Review, while recognizing that Kongying's statement might have been misinterpreted, the article continued: "If this Thai actress said that she hates Cambodians like dogs, we would like to tell her that Cambodians throughout the country hate Thais like leeches that suck other nations' blood....If it is true, Kongying must lower her head to the ground and salute by placing palm to palm in order to apologize to Cambodians, who are a gentle and polite race and have never encroached on other countries' land. It is insulting enough for Cambodians to hear Thais wickedly saying to their children, 'You must not be born a Khmer in your next life' and so on."

Kongying reportedly, denied ever making such comments, but a Cambodian population long convinced that their richer and more powerful Thai neighbors looked down on them was not open to any such explanations.

On January 29, a group of Cambodians demonstrating outside the Thai Embassy in Phnom Penh broke through the embassy fence, entered the building, destroyed documents inside, and set fire to the structure and to nearby cars. According to Udom Katte Khmer (Jan. 30), the Thai ambassador was forced to flee.

Thaksin Shinawatra told Hun Sen that Thai commandos would be sent in if the situation were not brought under control within 90 minutes. Though Cambodian police ultimately arrived on the scene, making arrests and firing shots in the air to disperse the crowd, this official response came too late. Before the night was over, the angry Cambodian crowd had destroyed several Thai-owned businesses, including Cambodia Shinawatra, the telecommunications company of the Thai prime minister, and the well-known Royal Phnom Penh Hotel.

According to the World Press Review, many in the Thai media have tried to determine the underlying reasons for the violence. The World Press Review reported that Khao Sod (Feb. 5) speculated: "The root cause was due to the long-held dislike of Thailand's role in Cambodia's history. In the past, U.S. planes took off from Thai air bases and bombed Cambodia to smithereens. That's why the Cambodian people have never remembered that Thailand helped to build their roads and rehabilitate their war-torn economy in the past two decades."

Kom Chad Leuk speculated (Feb. 5) that "the deep resentment of young Cambodians, who were born after the genocidal regime of the Khmer Rouge in 1978, was the main cause. They have not received any benefit from peace dividends in the past 10 years. While they are proud of their country's newfound stability, they are very bitter with the lack of governance and corruption problems in their country. Any news especially that related to neighboring countries can trigger outrage. The burning of the Thai Embassy was the outcome of this madness."

One Cambodian paper pointed to Thailand's arrogance as a cause of the crisis. "According to Cambodian history, Cambodians, who are an older race in Southeast Asia,

had a prosperous culture and civilization. But near-neighbor Thailand seems not to understand this," said Kampuchea Thmey (Feb. 16).

Thailand's Mathichon Daily on February 4 laid the blame on both countries: "The biggest mistake of the Thai-Cambodian misunderstanding is the fanning of nationalism on both sides," it charged. The paper then offered a suggestion: "Thailand should learn from this incident and urge both the government and private sectors to find ways to ameliorate the feelings of Cambodians."

To understand the reasons why this seemingly petty quarrel between two nations ended in a violent uproar, a look into the process of construction national identity should be explored. Quoted in Catherine Hesse-Swain's paper on popular Thai television, leftist social thinker Thirayut Bunmi believes that "the massive influence of global culture stimulates Thais to assert their local culture and identity" to their neighbors. Thongchai Winicahkul's notion of "negative identification" in his book Siam Mapped illustrates the motives behind usage of the mass media to perpetuate certain views. The theoretical context of negative identification helps us see the way Thai media imagines otherness within its own nation. "Negative identification" constructs not only a physical space called a nation, but also perpetuates new cultural assumptions about what constitutes "Thainess" through negative assertions of the "other."

With their recent history of cultural genocide during the Pol Pot regime (1975-1979), Cambodia is put in an unfavorable position to create the capacity to harness an outlet of popular culture which can serve as identity references. Some 90 percent of classical dancers died or were killed in the late 1970s under the Communist Khmer Rouge regime which tried to wipe out the country's traditional culture, (Sam-Ang 1994).

Popular culture in Cambodia comes mainly from Thailand expanding its reach within the region, which may be the root cause leading to this violent outbreak. The Cambodians absorbed too much of the Thai media without having the means to harbor their own sense of individualism, which can sometimes foster feelings of hostility. Without individualism, its inevitable locals will keep a distance from what's outside until they can take it and mold it into something of their own.

"Khon Issan or Issan/Laos identity evolved in response to the Thai State's program of national identity construction," (Hesse-Swain 2002). Popular culture and mass media becomes important here as it can be used to construct or carve an identity. As the state border line was never consistent in this region, the identity of these people heavily relied on the popular culture around it.

Like we have seen with Cambodia, each neighboring country has its own history and background which either perpetuates domineering pop media/culture or condones it in their own special way. With Laos, tension is minimal as we see the region blending, apparent from the "mor lum" form of music.

Traditional Laos identity forms (for example literature) was subsumed then re-invented for popular consumption, thus begetting the popular musical form of "mor lam." The question becomes, "Is mor lum Thai, Issan, or Laos?" It is not confined to any political or ethnic border as it is something of its own, a creation of itself by the people living it. It is not strictly Thai as one can feasibly cross over the border to Laos territory and still sing/listen to mor lam. Likewise, even though it has traces of "Issan" music, it isn't entirely Issan because it also comes from Laos literature. What binds the people of this region in harmony is mor lum, no matter where the political borders may lie because

to most people in this region, political borders are far removed from their everyday understanding of life.

The binding in the northeastern/ Laos region is contrasting to the situation in Cambodia, a country just getting out of a cultural crisis without a face of their own yet. The process of adapting and creating from the domineering Thai popular culture into Cambodia has not yet developed and can be the cause of much tension behind last year's violent outbreak.

As Thai soap operas, lakons, CD's, movies continue to infiltrate television sets and airwaves of Cambodia without the process of adaptation and creation, without localizing their foreign influences, the tension will continue to grow. And if Thailand oversteps their allotted space, which can be triggered by an incident like a rumor from a famous actress, the tension explodes.

There's a sense of individuality when something new and that can be called one's own is created. Without that sense of individuality, feelings of aversion toward the other seemingly "domineering" power imposing its popular culture, has potential to manifest itself in unruly ways.

The presence of a local culture within society can help absorb or buffer tensions from exploding as the local society will have its own viable sensibility, untouchable to the forces of imperialism. It is only then a sense of unity and unique culture is established and outside influences will be tolerated, even welcomed as they will no longer pose as a cultural threat to the local society.

As the 'pua chiwit' movement was able to adapt outside influences of the West along with the unheard voices of the people, a balance was created and restored back into

local society/community. Their political and predominantly working class songs created a counter culture of musicians and activists who spoke out and expressed desires of the people who weren't getting what they wanted. The beneficial pattern of adapting foreign influences to the "localized self" is evident in the 'pua chiwit' movement that emerged from Thailand's revolutionary upheaval of the 1970s. And the pattern continues with the state of today's ever developing society.

By the end of 1976, Caravan and several other 'pua chiwit' bands of that era sought refuge up in the Northeastern mountains of Thailand. Caravan's success spawned a slew of other "songs for life" bands right on through to the '80s. This was the beginning of the end for the "Songs for Life" movement, but it didn't leave without an impact. A music subculture expressing the "fundamental tension between those in power and those condemned to subordinate positions and second class lives," (Hebdige 1979: 132) was shaped. For the first time a hybrid of Western and Thai modern musical influences merged out of a quest in part for social representation and in part for original musical expression. The idea of style as a coded response to changes affecting the entire community was created in Thailand through the medium of musical expression.

The 'pua chiwit' movement thus took the form of a musical subculture as their "social and political protest served as a marker of group identity among progressive students and symbolically represented the ethos of the student movement," (Myers-Moro: 93). The 'pua chiwit' movement's success in mobilizing unheard voices of Thailand and introducing new structures of music was a breakthrough in the continuing evolution of Thailand's modern music history.

Now that the significant role of popular culture and the presence of a subculture's ability to create a sense of unity/community/identity can be seen, how do subcultural forms of musical storytelling emerge and contribute to the development of today's society?

Hegemony makes its move

Following the 'pua chiwit' movement, a new development in Thai popular culture occurs. By the early '80s, the 'pua chiwit' movement that was once subversive and progressive became commodified into mass popular culture. According to Myers-Moro, dozens of 'pua chiwit' style recordings were released of which "many of these were little more than luuk krung with politically relevant lyrics," (Myers-Moro: 102).

This instance shows us the relevant pattern of popular culture development. How and why can a people's revolution, created almost a decade before all of a sudden become a nation-wide craze with just about every teenage cassette buyer owning a copy of Carabao's 1983 hit album, Made in Thailand?

Everything ideological possesses a semiotic value of which can be interpreted, manipulated, and used in different ways by different people. Once an ideology or style gets manipulated for consumption by mass media and the powers of "popular culture" that be, those original ideologies do not completely evaporate as there will always be traces of the subcultural origin found within. It's up to the audience what they will or want to recognize as every sign is subject to the criteria of ideological evaluation.

"The diffusion of youth styles from subcultures to the fashion market is not simply a 'cultural process', but a real network or infrastructure of new kinds of

commercial and economic institutions…situates the dialectic of commercial 'manipulation,'" (Hebdige 1979: 95).

It is this "infrastructure of new kinds of commercial and economic institutions" that keep subcultures on the move to counteract mass/popular culture's absorption of its own voices from within. At the same time this absorption and engulfment occurs, we can see the impact of pop cultural development through the way new narratives, new styles, and new subcultures emerge in lieu to the reaction of the "infrastructure" that surrounds it.

Hebdige explains that subcultures are reincorporated into the boundaries of social acceptance, by being portrayed and interpreted in the media TV, newspapers etc., until they are brought back to the consciousness of society, (Hebdige 1979: 94). As the new styles and ideologies of subcultures get portrayed and circulated amongst the masses in shopping malls, boutiques, music videos, what was once subversive and taboo becomes society's high/mainstream fashion and gets "returned to the place where common sense of the masses would have them fit." It is in this grey area where the lines of transformation from alternative to mainstream occur and it is also this point where new subcultures will emerge.

Lockard explains that, "In this process the media serve to ceaselessly classify the world within discourses of the dominant ideologies, but in so doing reproduce the contradictions embedded within these contending ideologies and their relationship to social classes allowing countertendencies to be manifested also," (Lockard 1998: 13). When mass media reproduces ideas from a subculture, there will always be "contradictions" because "discourses of the dominant ideologies," which are irrelevant to

the original subculture, are used to define and make sense of the subculture to the masses. Misinterpretation and misusage of the subculture style will then cause "countertendencies to be manifested," usually in the form of a new subcultural style/narrative.

The new narratives that emerge from the underbelly of society become part of society's popular culture through the process of what Italian Marxists Antonio Gramsci's terms as hegemony. The term hegemony is used to describe the way ruling elites of a society use their "infrastructure" to expand society's dominant ideology to include the realms that were once undermining their boundaries of acceptance. In a way this process is how the ruling elites "cope" or subvert ideologies not aligned with theirs. There's no direct imposition of ruling ideas through force but "winning and shaping consent so that the power of the dominant classes appears both legitimate and natural" (Hall 1977). Hegemony can only be maintained so long as the dominant classes 'succeed in framing all competing definitions within their range' (Hall 1977), so that subordinate groups are if not controlled; then at least contained within an ideological space which does not seem at all 'ideological'" which appears instead to be permanent and 'natural' to lie outside history, to be beyond particular interests," (Hebdige 1979: 16).
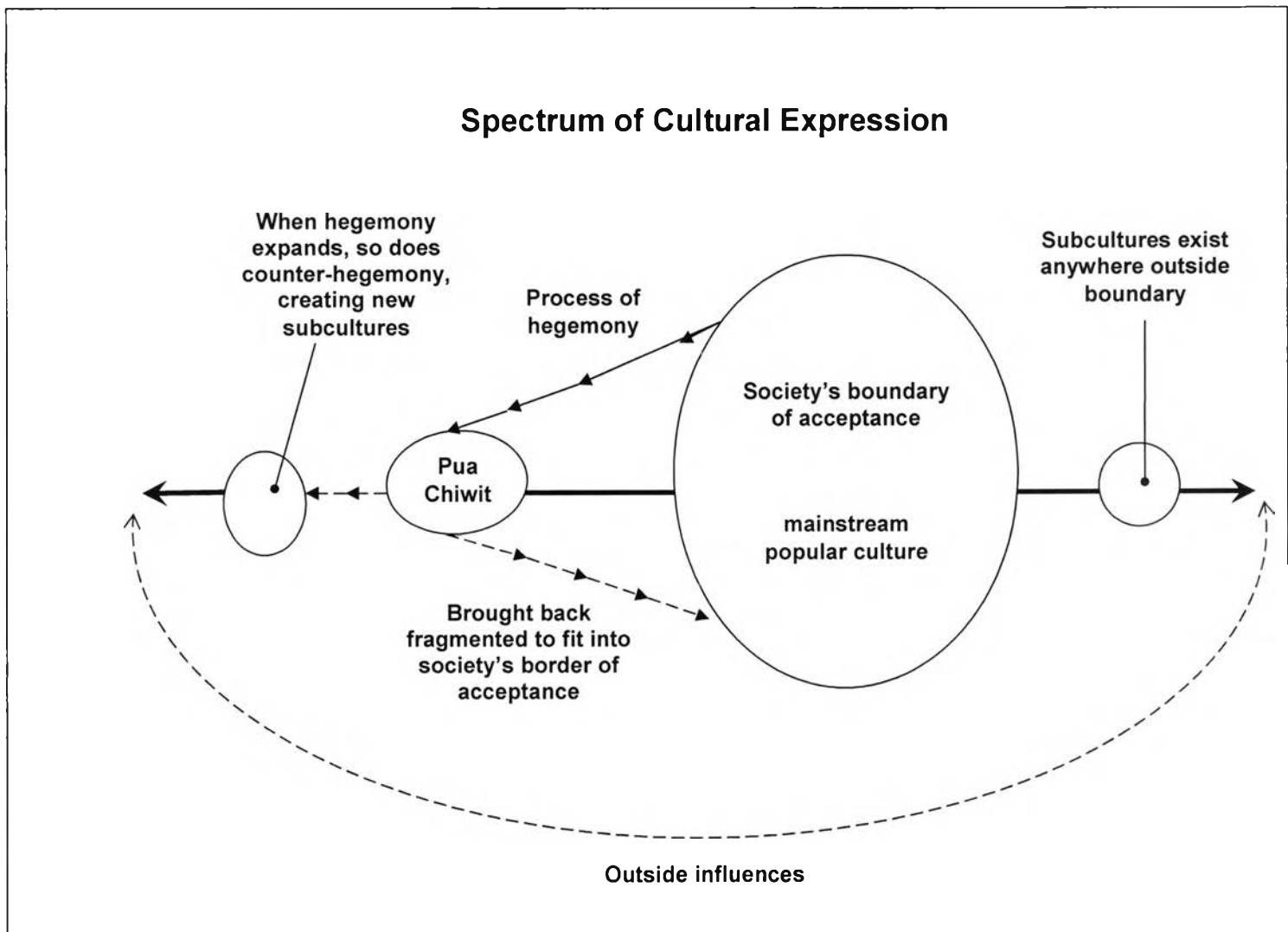
So as the process of hegemony will have it, each new subcultural narrative that establishes new trends, generates new looks and sounds will eventually feed back into the appropriate industries, (Hebdige 1979: 95).

Hence hegemony is also a continuing development involving many changes, "it does not passively exist as a form of dominance that cannot be dislodged and must be

continually renewed, recreated, defended and modified because it will also be continually

resisted, limited, altered and challenged (counter hegemony)," (Lockard 1998: 14).

The diagram below will help us visualize this process a bit more vividly.

Diagram Fig. 1

Spectrum of Cultural Expression

When hegemony expands, so does counter-hegemony, creating new subcultures

Process of hegemony

Subcultures exist anywhere outside boundary

Pua Chiwit

Society's boundary of acceptance

mainstream popular culture

Brought back fragmented to fit into society's border of acceptance

Outside influences

The circle in the middle represents society's boundary of acceptance, and within it is the mass popular culture we are bombarded with everyday. The line cutting across it represents the spectrum of cultural expression on which popular culture is derived from. The semi-circle above represents outside influences (most notably the West, but not necessarily limited to) that globalization brings closer to us everyday. Whatever lies outside the middle circle within this spectrum of cultural expression are where the subcultures, alternative ideologies and the unpopular factions of society lay. To take the 'pua chiwit' movement as an example, we can see the lines of society's boundary of acceptance expand to include the 'pua chiwit' circle into its realm during this process of hegemony. The dotted lines back to the middle circle represent the part of the process of hegemony to which 'pua chiwit' is brought back to the masses fragmented, accommodated and manipulated. What we see happening as the dotted lines circle back to the masses is that at the same time society's boundary of acceptance expands, the lines of cultural expression expands outward as well, away from the reach of society's hegemonic boundaries, continuing its path towards narratives of new ideology.

This expansion of cultural expression portrays a society advancing not only with the international modern world, but also at a level pertinent to its individually unique space and set of circumstances. Popular culture is thus always in a state of flux, never at one place at one time, but always in a state of dialectical cultural struggle. As Lockard quotes Hall, "It [popular culture] goes on continuously, in the complex lines of resistance and acceptance, refusal and capitulation, which makes the field of culture a sort of constant battlefield. A battlefield where no once for all victories are obtained but where there are always strategic positions to be won or lost." Or in Lockard's words, "Neither

"pure autonomy" nor "total encapsulation" of the audience is the sole reality," (Lockard 1998: 13). The battles being fought on this spectrum of cultural expression preserves at the same time it defines a culture. The transformation from what was once unpopular and underground to what is widely accepted is the lineage that keeps popular expression in perpetual motion and expansion.

End of an era- 'pua chiwit' becomes irrelevant

Most of the 'pua chiwit' movement have become irrelevant to the times, as Att Carabao once singing songs about buying Thai is now sporting Mercedes Benz's and Levi jeans. The desire for new narratives that are more relevant become apparent to a new generation of people.

The advent of Carabao Daeng a new energy drink from Carabao's lead singer Att Carabao, takes the 'pua chiwit' image (of which Carabao was once an integral part of) and more or less sells it back in the form of an energy drink. The Beer Chang campaigns have also bought into Att's 'pua chiwit' sentiments of "Thainess" to help sell their products as well. Chang's target market aims at the local/rural people of Thailand and does so by reiterating the fact that drinking Chang is drinking "Thainess" with images of farmers and the working class appealing to those who want to identify with the 'pua chiwit' bandwagon.

The ideologies of the 'pua chiwit' movement's been degraded and packaged into forms of commodity, cheapening the messages and narratives behind what started the whole thing. But there are those who see between the lines and are expressing, either directly or indirectly, the pitfalls and pleasures of their lives in modern Bangkok.

New narratives occur in response to or in place of popular culture's lineage of origin that society's people choose to identify with or incorporate into. All this recalls the days when 'pua chiwit' was an underground form of music, operating outside the borders of social acceptance with its proponents articulating subjects not on the everyday palate and playing with their hearts on their sleeves. Because of the attitude, their music was genuine, before the genre was turned into a business with most of its ideals spent. Even so, there are still underground bands today who admire the 'pua chiwit' pioneers that brought everyday life to the forefront of modern Thai music.

Carrying on a tradition born in Thailand's years of turmoil and transition, Bangkok's alternative music scene dares to think and feel in an environment where its styles of music aren't understood or appreciated. A thriving scene that comes in different shapes and isn't hostile to change, its thinking will always be one step ahead of the regurgitated fare that passes for modern rock in Thailand today, (Silliphant and Apanich 2002).

The farther you get away from the defined borders of the dominant ideology, the closer you get to the ideas and heart of a perpetuating culture. And with a whole counter culture community utilizing their lives to change the face of Thailand's music, the most one can do is listen.

Popular culture and modernization

Social change is part of the modernization process that's been transpiring since, most notably during the reign of King Rama IV, and continues with persistence to this day. Tradition and the "modernized technological world of business" clash within the

boundaries of social acceptance resulting in changes to those very boundaries that harbor social acceptance. As Nathalang writes, "In the midst of social change, we often found two streams of social phenomena going along side by side, one is the 'stream of tradition' and the other is the 'stream of modernity,'" (Nathalang 2000).

It is when these two "streams" are directly put up against one another that puts the debate on weather the modernization process in Thailand is in Erik Cohen's words, "an eclectic strategy for adopting elements of modern Western civilization without impairing the basic texture of "traditional" Siamese society," or "a model of modernization as a process by which Western civilization is gradually substituted for tradition" (E.Cohen 1991: 48). One end sees Thailand as master manipulators of influences while the other one sees the outside influence as a growing force in its early stages of domination.

Erik Cohen argues that although these foreign influences had to be translated into the local cultural prior to adoption, "it did not develop in a Western direction; rather, it interacted with adopted Western ideas...to develop on lines peculiar to it and largely constrained by its own basic premises" (E.Cohen 1991:63). In other words, where the local culture adapts a foreign ideology and channels it in such a way that stretches the constituent elements of the traditional socioculture making it adoptable to change. Cohen uses the terms "reinterpretation" and "realignment" to describe the modernization process of the 'traditional' socioculture, which can be used comparably to the process of cultural expression explained in the diagram earlier.

The border of social acceptance or mainstream popular culture is in essence identical to the border of the Thai nation's center of polity, or the border of what is to be

considered Thai. The process of expansion these borders go through have a similar pattern of which is noteworthy for examination.

Hegemony pulls the subculture or underground into the reaches of the mainstream by "diffusing" it into "high fashion". As the subculture is brought back to the mainstream, it simultaneously drops those sounds and images that once constituted their subcultural ideologies and moves to other forms of expression to create new forms of subculture to stay "underground" or outside the borders of the mainstream.

Similarly the border of what constitutes Thainess or the center polity of what is Thai expands to include ideas outside of the border through interpretations of the advances pushed by modernization. Here, the interpreting was usually wrought out by those at the top of the social hierarchy- solely by the King during the early absolute monarchy and by the King and a few royal princes during the later absolute monarchy.
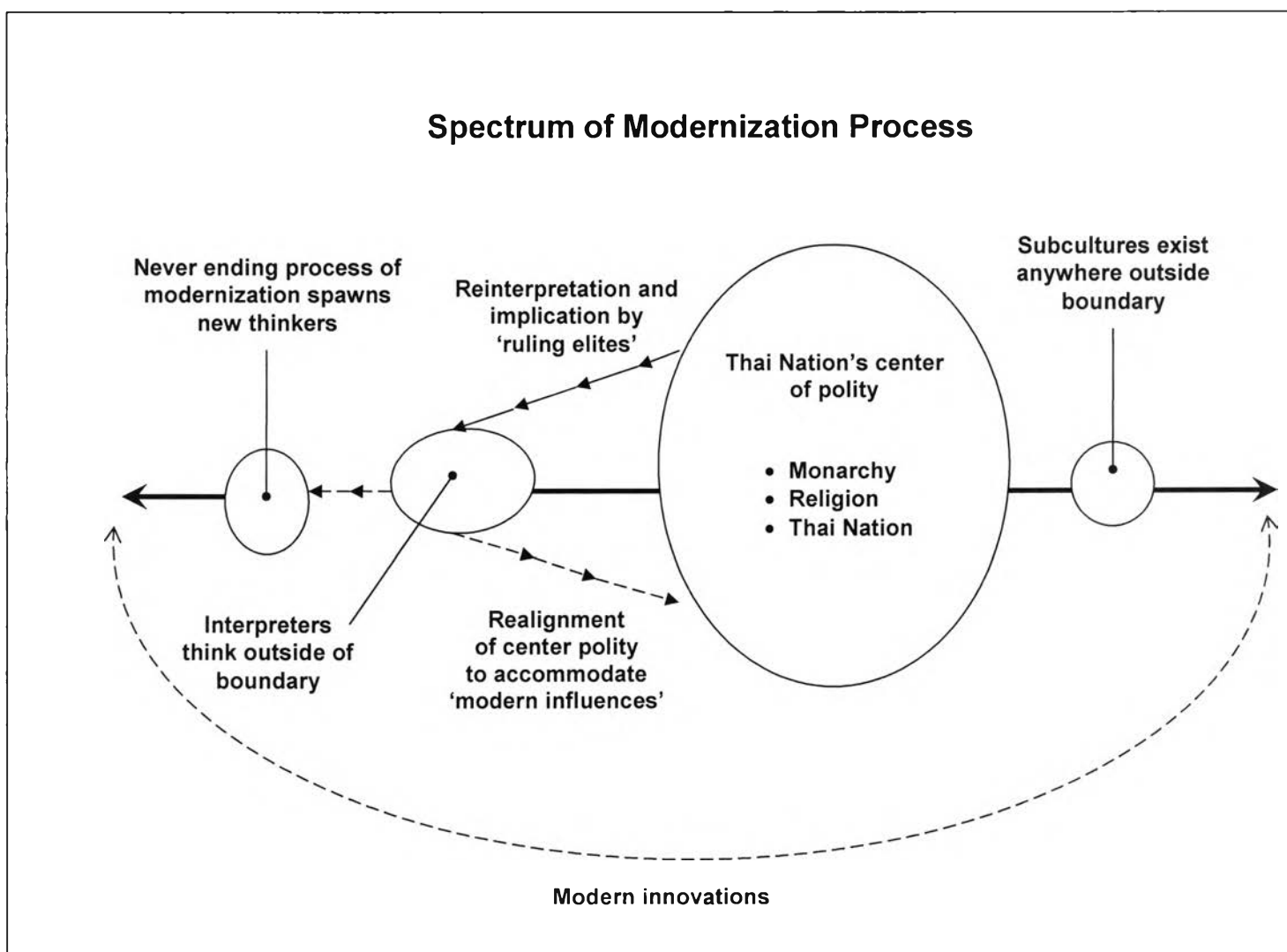
As Cohen states, "the Siamese kings were thus in a unique position to introduce innovations into Siam: they were traditionally the only legitimate source of innovation and change in Siamese society..." (E. Cohen 1991: 54). The monarchy and upper elites who were "better aware than any other group in society of the potential which these innovations harbored for the preservation of Siamese independence, as well as of the dangers to Thai socioculture inherent in these very innovations," (E.Cohen 1991: 55) is tantamount to the subcultures bringing in new ideas to the realm of mainstream popular culture.

As those at the top of the social hierarchy "reinterpret" these ideas and innovations of modernization, the boundary of Thailand's center of polity expands to incorporate what is "modern" relevant to their own tendencies. Also as the state of

popular culture is in perpetual flux, so is the state of modernization as there will always

be those thinking outside the boundaries of Thailand's center of polity. In this day and

age of global flow, it is not only the king or ruling elites who have access and the ability

to think outside the boundaries, it is now accessible for all to do so.

Comparing the process of modernization to the diagram of cultural expression

discussed earlier, we clearly see the parallelism.

Diagram Fig. 2

Spectrum of Modernization Process

Never ending process of modernization spawns new thinkers

Reinterpretation and implication by 'ruling elites'

Subcultures exist anywhere outside boundary

Thai Nation's center of polity

- Monarchy
- Religion
- Thai Nation

Interpreters think outside of boundary

Realignment of center polity to accommodate 'modern influences'

Modern innovations

The model of popular culture can thus be compared, even analogous, to the modernization process, as they both move in the same pattern. With this in mind, we can draw parallels to subcultures as being innovative and influential as the kings of past who were "better aware than any other group in society" of the inherent potential of working outside the borders of society to keep it advanced with development.

Cohen defined subculture as "…a compromise solution between two contradictory needs: the need to create and express autonomy and difference from parents…and the need to maintain the parental identifications" (Cohen, 1972).The "parental identifications" are important to maintain as its partly a direct lineage to traditional values and identity while the need to differentiate from these "parental identifications" are equally important in order to shift and change the borders of society in correlation with the modern world in order to strengthen those traditional values and identity.

In this analysis, the different styles of today's subcultures in Bangkok can be interpreted as attempts to mediate between experience and tradition, the familiar and the novel. (Hebdige 1979: 77). And for Cohen the "latent function" of subculture is to "…express and resolve, albeit magically, the contradictions which remain hidden or unresolved in the parent culture" (Cohen 1972).

It is this "contradiction" within the parent culture that finds its way to the public through expressive means. "Inevitably, there is psychological stress and tension as the new rules of the game require one to act in ways contrary to traditional behavior patterns," (Klausner 2000: 9). The realization of this pain is both the unifying force keeping traditional values from dissipating and the generating force that gives strength to

a new rejuvenated, post-modern Thai sensibility, however "as new patterns of behavior are desired and required for advancement, the emotional strain and stress attendant on the change cannot be discounted," (Klausner 2000: 259). It is perhaps within this "emotional strain and stress attendant" that we see people needing to give "release" to. And music subcultures are one such an outlet.

The "emotional strain" caused by social relations is in effect continually being transformed into culture through expressive forms. Thus, as material products of societal relations, any new advents of (un)popular culture or modernization for that matter can never be completely 'raw' or unprecedented in origin. As Hebdige puts it, "It [social relations] is always mediated: inflected by the historical context in which it is encountered; posited upon a specific ideological field which gives it a particular life and particular meanings," (Hebdige 1979: 80). Implying even the local Bangkok music scene carries its own "particular life and meaning" which can be analyzed for insight on the development of Thai society, which also has its own particular life and meaning.

Examining the social changes and surrounding circumstances these "particular lives and meanings" are being articulated from will give us a better understanding into the dialectical response of today's subculture. The next chapter illustrates the social context of modern Bangkok in the areas of religion and media development. With this context in place an understanding of the conditions for today's musicians can be drawn.