

Molam: the folk music of eastern Thailand

Molam music (หมอลำ) is a traditional folk music style from the Isan province of Thailand and from neighboring Laos. This style of music originated among farmers and working class people, and incorporates traditional wind, string and percussion instruments. Molam lyrics tell the singers' personal stories about village life, unrequited love, and sometimes they touch on social issues such as workers' rights and social injustice.

The instrumentation for molam usually includes a bamboo reed mouth organ (kaen - แคน), a stringed folk instrument (phin - พิณ), a bowed instrument (sor - ซอ), a hand drum and a circular panpipe. In urban areas and at large music festivals, the traditional instruments are supported by and sometimes replaced by synthesizers, electric bass and a Western drum set. Smaller-scale performances are common at Buddhist festivals, temple fairs and ceremonies such as funerals and weddings. These performances often include improvised material and passages of teasing dialogue between the singer and members of the audience.

Molam musicians often receive money and flowers from audience members while they are performing. Great singers may receive many flower garlands, and the performers acknowledge each donation with a *wai*. The audience members dance throughout the night, sometimes in large gatherings in public spaces. As always at Thai festivities, food and drink are usually shared among those in attendance



Above: *khaen*, bamboo wind instrument & singer
Below: electric *phin*

