

Sonic Patriarchy: Improvising Gender in Southern Thai Folk Song

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Abstract

“Pleng Bok” is one traditional performance of social communication in southern Thailand. Pleng Bok has a wide range of content, including praise songs, news distribution, celebrations in traditional ceremonies, and allusions to women in different circumstances. However, the primary performers who sing and improvise, known as “mae pleng” (literally “mother of song”), are predominantly male singers. This research article analyzes the construction of images and meanings of “femininity” through the perspective and presentation of male singers (male gaze), selecting 10 songs as case studies from the 1950s to the present. To represent social dynamics, the study combines musicological analysis, content analysis, and song categorization techniques. The findings reveal that “mae pleng” (male singers) construct representations of women in three significant categories: 1) The Ideal Mother/Donor, who usually makes an appearance during merit-making rituals and traditional festivals and uses soft, respectful vocal tones; 2) The Object of Desire, emphasizing descriptions of physical form and beauty through compact rhythms and flirtatious melodic patterns; and 3) The Modern Deviant, presented through satirical and mocking melodies to control the social behavior of modern women. The conclusions of this study indicate that Pleng Bok is not just a form of entertainment but also a cultural tool that men use to prescribe and define women’s roles through the art of improvisation. This clearly reflects the dynamics and power relations within the context of southern Thai folk culture.

Keywords: Pleng Bok, male gaze, construction of femininity, southern Thai folk music, improvisation

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Introduction

Phleng bok is a form of folk performance from Southern Thailand, particularly prominent in the provinces of Nakhon Si Thammarat, Phatthalung, Surat Thani, Chumphon, Trang, and Songkhla. With a historical lineage spanning over 150–200 years, *phleng bok* has functioned as a medium for communicating important news and information within communities. As such, it is not merely a form of entertainment but also serves as a communal “mouthpiece.”

At an annual festival in a community in Nakhon Si Thammarat, as night falls into quiet stillness, the rhythmic sound of the *taphon* drum begins. The *mae phleng*, dressed in a brightly colored sarong, sits cross-legged before the chorus. His voice emerges—hovering between natural speech and poetic verse—as he sings about young women from nearby villages, describing their physical appearance, praising their virtues, and satirizing behaviors deemed socially inappropriate. Laughter echoes across the temple grounds, while the *mae phleng*—a male performer—simultaneously redefines the meaning of “womanhood” for society. This scene is not an anomaly but a recurring cultural pattern within *phleng bok* performance over decades.

This phenomenon raises a compelling musicological question: although the title *mae phleng* linguistically denotes femininity, the role is predominantly occupied by men. Thus, the performer is not only singing but also “performing gender” through improvisational authority. What is defined, celebrated, or condemned through song is invariably filtered through a patriarchal lens. This article therefore argues that *phleng bok* should not be understood merely as entertainment but as a form of “**sonic patriarchy**”—a cultural mechanism that reproduces and reinforces male dominance through the aesthetics of music and language.

Phleng bok is a distinctive form of Southern Thai folk performance, centered particularly in Nakhon Si Thammarat and surrounding areas. Its defining characteristics include regionally specific melodic structures, unique poetic forms, the use of the Southern Thai dialect, improvisational verse, and dynamic interaction with the audience.

The performance structure consists of two primary components:

1. The *mae phleng* (lead singer), responsible for improvising both lyrics and melody.
2. The *luk khu* (chorus), which provides rhythmic support and vocal responses.

Despite the feminine connotation of the term *mae phleng*, the role is predominantly performed by men. This contradiction forms the foundation of this study, as it implies that male performers are the primary agents defining how women should appear, behave, and function within society.

The content of *phleng bok* spans a wide range, from praising patrons in ritual contexts and reporting community news to describing female beauty and engaging in courtship. What distinguishes *phleng bok* from many other folk traditions is its improvisational immediacy, allowing performers to adapt content fluidly to specific contexts. However, this flexibility operates within relatively fixed ideological frameworks—particularly in representations of women.

Existing studies on *phleng bok* have largely focused on historical documentation and narrow musicological analysis. Scholars such as Chuan Phetkaew have pioneered the collection of historical data and archival lyrics, providing essential insights into the evolution of performance forms and poetic structures. Meanwhile, Phattradee Puchadaphirom has expanded

the scope to include socio-cultural analysis, highlighting the adaptability of *phleng bok* within modern society and emphasizing the intellectual and linguistic complexity required for performance.

However, these studies have not systematically addressed gender dynamics—particularly questions concerning who holds the authority to define gender and how such definitions are constructed through musical mechanisms. This gap reflects a broader tendency within Thai musicology to remain detached from theoretical developments that have significantly reshaped international musicological discourse.

Globally, scholars such as Susan McClary have introduced feminist approaches to music analysis, demonstrating that seemingly neutral musical elements—such as harmony, rhythm, and melody—can function as carriers of gender ideology. Ellen Koskoff has further extended this framework cross-culturally, illustrating that women’s roles in music are inseparable from broader social power structures.

Although some studies have examined women’s roles in Thai classical music (e.g., *piphat* ensembles), the application of such theoretical frameworks to Southern Thai folk music remains largely unexplored. This gap is particularly significant in the case of *phleng bok*, where improvisation makes the process of reproducing gendered power relations more visible than in fixed musical forms.

This article proposes the concept of “**sonic patriarchy**” to describe the process through which patriarchal power is maintained and transmitted through musical aesthetics, vocal expression, and language in folk performance.

This framework builds upon McClary’s work but extends it to the context of improvisational folk music. Unlike Western classical traditions, where ideology is embedded in pre-composed scores, gender ideology in *phleng bok* is produced and reproduced in real time through improvisation. This introduces both flexibility and fluidity, which conventional frameworks cannot fully account for.

The second dimension draws upon Judith Butler’s concept of **gender performativity**, which posits that gender is not innate but constituted through repeated performance according to social norms. In *phleng bok*, each act of describing women’s appearance, praising normative behavior, or satirizing deviance constitutes a public performance of gender. Audience responses—laughter, applause, or vocal affirmation—serve as acts of **ratification**, reinforcing these norms within collective memory.

The third dimension incorporates Laura Mulvey’s concept of the **male gaze**. While originally formulated in film theory, it is applicable here: in *phleng bok*, the male gaze operates not through visual media but through language, melody, and vocal delivery that frame women from a male evaluative perspective.

Together, these three frameworks enable a multidimensional analysis of *phleng bok* as a system encompassing musical, linguistic, and power-related dimensions.

This study analyzes ten *phleng bok* performances selected to represent the period from 1957 to the present. Selection criteria include:

1. Verifiable sources,
2. Diversity of performance contexts,
3. Clarity in the representation of women.

The methodology combines **musicological analysis** (melody, rhythm, vocal timbre) with **content analysis** (language use and representational strategies).

The findings identify three primary categories of female representation:

1. **The Ideal Woman (The Ideal Mother/Donor)**
Typically appearing in ritual contexts, characterized by gentle vocal delivery and praise.
2. **The Object of Desire**
Emphasizing physical description, often accompanied by rhythmic vitality and flirtatious performance style.
3. **The Deviant Woman (The Modern Deviant)**
Portrayed through satirical melodies to regulate behavior deemed socially inappropriate.

All three categories are constructed through male improvisation and reinforced through audience response, making gendered authority appear natural and unquestioned.

The article is structured into three main sections:

- Section 1: Historical context and gender dynamics in performance
- Section 2: Case study analysis based on the three representational types
- Section 3: Theoretical implications, examining whether improvisation functions simultaneously as a mechanism of control and a space for negotiation

The conclusion proposes directions for future gender-focused Thai musicological research.

Objectives of the Study

1. To analyze the musicological forms and mechanisms employed by the *mae phleng* in constructing representations of “womanhood” in Southern Thai *phleng bok*, including melody, rhythm, vocal timbre, and linguistic choices, from 1957 to the present.
2. To classify and interpret the types of female representation in *phleng bok*, examining the relationship between musical characteristics and embedded gender ideologies through the frameworks of the male gaze and gender performativity.
3. To interpret improvisation as a mechanism of **sonic patriarchy**, reproducing gendered power relations in Southern Thai folk culture, and to evaluate the extent to which the live performance space allows for negotiation or resistance to gender norms.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach, primarily utilizing documentary research to fulfill the research objectives regarding the analysis of musical mechanisms and the construction of female representations. The research process is outlined as follows:

1. **Data Collection:** The researcher collected data exclusively from recorded documents and audio-visual materials, employing a non-reactive research method without conducting field interviews. The data collection process is categorized into the following components:

- **Case Study Selection:** The researcher purposively sampled (Purposive Sampling) 10 *Pleng Bok* songs composed from 1957 (B.E. 2500) to the present. The selection criteria specifically targeted songs that contain significant lyrical content pertaining to “women.”
 - **Primary Documentary Sources:** These include audio-visual materials such as cassette tapes, vinyl records, and digital archives of *Pleng Bok* performances recorded from the past to the present. These materials serve as the basis for musical transcription and the examination of sonic elements.
 - **Secondary Documentary Sources:** These encompass transcribed lyrics, documents from the National Archives of Thailand and the Fine Arts Department, as well as academic articles, research papers, and theses related to Southern Thai folk music and gender theories.
2. **Data Analysis:** The researcher synthesized and analyzed the collected lyrical and audio data across three dimensions to address the research objectives:
- **Musicological Analysis:** Analyzing the musical forms and mechanisms employed by the lead singer (Mae Pleng) to construct the representation of “womanhood.” This involves examining the melody, rhythm, vocal timbre, and word choice.
 - **Critical Content Analysis:** Categorizing and explaining the types of female representations present in *Pleng Bok* by examining the relationship between musical characteristics (e.g., melody, rhythm, and singing style) and the underlying gender ideologies. This analysis is conducted through the theoretical frameworks of the Male Gaze and Gender Performativity.
 - **Theoretical Interpretation:** Interpreting the implication of improvisation as a mechanism of “Sonic Patriarchy” that reproduces gender power relations within Southern Thai folk culture. Furthermore, the study discusses the extent to which this performance space allows for the negotiation or challenging of gender norms.

Result

Folk performance constitutes one of the most direct reflections of value systems, social structures, and ways of life within a community. In the context of southern Thai society, *phleng bok* (Southern Thai folk song) has long functioned as a significant cultural heritage for over 150–200 years. The performance space of *phleng bok* does not exist solely to fulfill aesthetic or entertainment purposes during festivals such as Songkran or merit-making ceremonies; rather, it operates as a communal “mouthpiece” for disseminating news and transmitting local knowledge. This is achieved through vocal performance in the Southern Thai dialect, combined with a distinctive poetic structure and the highly sophisticated skill of improvisation, which requires exceptional wit and verbal agility from the lead performer—commonly referred to as the *mae phleng*.

However, within a social context that ostensibly respects the intellectual capabilities of *phleng bok* performers, a notable contradiction emerges in terms of gender dynamics. Although women play crucial roles in preserving and transmitting traditions at both familial and community levels in Thai society, upon entering the “performance space,” the microphone and the authority to vocalize are predominantly monopolized by male performers.

This phenomenon becomes even more compelling when one considers that, although men are the performers, a substantial portion of improvised content revolves around representations of

“women” in various forms. Women thus occupy the position of the “spoken subject” or the “object of the gaze,” deprived of the agency to articulate, contest, or define themselves within this performative domain. This study therefore seeks to examine the relationship between musicological mechanisms and the construction of female representation through the theoretical frameworks of the *male gaze* and *gender performativity*. In doing so, it aims to illuminate what may be termed “sonic patriarchy,” subtly embedded within the aesthetics of Southern Thai folk music.

Musicological Mechanisms in the Construction of Womanhood

Music is not merely a vessel for lyrics; it is itself a medium that structures and communicates social meaning. The first objective of this study is to investigate how the *mae phleng*—typically male—utilizes musicological forms and mechanisms to construct representations of womanhood.

Melody, Rhythm, and Vocal Timbre

The communication of attitudes toward women in *phleng bok* does not rely solely on semantic meaning but is also shaped by sonic mechanisms.

In cases of admiration or courtship: Performers tend to employ smooth, flowing melodic lines, gentle vocal timbre, and elongated phrasing within relaxed rhythmic structures. These musical features construct an atmosphere of pleasure and aesthetic appreciation, reinforcing idealized images of femininity.

In cases of admonition or satire: Musical elements shift toward faster tempos, more compact rhythmic articulation, and often a parlendo style of delivery. Harsh or staccato vocal attacks are used, and in some instances, exaggerated high-pitched vocalizations mimic and ridicule female behavior. These musical devices function as emotional markers, signaling to the audience whether the woman being represented is to be admired or ridiculed.

Call-and-Response Structure as Social Consensus

One of the defining characteristics of *phleng bok* is the presence of the chorus (*luk khu*), whose role is crucial in legitimizing the discourse of the lead singer. Consider the following example:

(Lead singer) “Loving one's wife may cost one's rank and status;
Loving cattle may cost one's fields and yield.”
(Chorus) “**Ae he ma hey** ... Loving cattle may cost one's fields and yield ...”

From a critical musicological perspective, the phrase “Ae he ma hey” functions not merely as a rhythmic filler but as a form of **social validation**. When the lead singer—positioned as an intellectual authority—delivers a statement that diminishes women’s value, the chorus’s repetition transforms an individual opinion into a collective truth. This process of sonic repetition aligns closely with the concept of gender performativity: repeated vocal enactment reinforces patriarchal ideology as a normalized and unquestioned social norm.

Typologies of Female Representation in *Phleng Bok*

By analyzing lyrical content through the framework of the male gaze, which posits that women are viewed through patriarchal desire and ideology, three primary categories of female representation emerge:

The Ideal Woman and the Object of Desire

A prominent representation constructs women simultaneously as economic laborers and objects of visual and sexual desire, as illustrated in the verse “Daughter of Pak Phanang”:

“O daughter of Pak Phanang,
With rounded hips and firm breasts, making shrimp paste sheet ...”

Here, the male gaze operates explicitly through the fragmentation of the female body (“rounded hips and firm breasts”), reducing women to sexualized components. Simultaneously, the lyrics praise industrious domestic labor (“making shrimp paste sheets”), reinforcing an ideal woman who satisfies both erotic desire and economic productivity within the household.

The Deviant Woman and Social Control Through Mockery

Women who deviate from normative expectations are subjected to ridicule and satire:

“Lazy daughter ... must be woken by her mother ... struck with an axe handle ...”
“Daughter of Wern Tok... sagging breasts dangling ...”

In these examples, bodily ridicule serves to construct deviance as socially undesirable. Furthermore, references to physical violence are embedded within comedic framing, masking social punishment under the guise of entertainment. Such portrayals normalize disciplinary mechanisms while inviting collective laughter at women who fail to conform.

Woman as an Obstacle to Male Advancement

Perhaps the most ideologically powerful representation positions women as impediments to male success:

“Loving one's wife may cost one's rank and status ...”

This discourse reinforces a dichotomy between the public sphere (associated with male achievement and authority) and the private sphere (associated with women and domesticity).

The juxtaposition of “wife” with “cattle” further dehumanizes women, equating them with property or economic assets to be managed for optimal productivity.

Improvisation as Sonic Patriarchy and a Space of Negotiation

Real-Time Construction of Identity

Improvisation enables the *mae phleng* to draw upon immediate social contexts and construct lyrical content in real time. This capacity grants male performers the authority to observe

women within the performance setting and instantaneously assign identities to them. Women are thus placed in a condition of sonic subjugation, unable to respond within the same poetic and performative framework. This dynamic constitutes what this study terms “**sonic patriarchy**”—a system of gendered power that operates through aesthetic and musical processes to reproduce and naturalize male dominance.

Social Dynamics and Negotiation Space

Despite its patriarchal structure, the *phleng bok* performance space is not entirely devoid of female agency. Women often occupy roles as patrons, sponsors, or financial supporters (*mae yok*). This economic dimension introduces a counterforce that shapes improvisational content.

When confronted with women of higher social or economic status, performers often shift from satire or objectification toward praise, portraying women as virtuous benefactors. This demonstrates that gender representation within *phleng bok* is not static but dynamic, subject to negotiation within specific socio-economic contexts.

Thus, even without direct vocal participation, women exert influence over the boundaries and direction of male improvisation, transforming the performance space into a site where gender power and economic power are continuously negotiated through sonic aesthetics.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that *phleng bok*, while celebrated as a traditional folk performance, functions as a microcosm of social power relations. Through melody, rhythm, vocal timbre, and call-and-response structures, performers construct multiple representations of women: the idealized woman, the deviant subject of ridicule, and the obstructive figure to male advancement.

Improvisation—traditionally regarded as a marker of artistic brilliance—emerges as a powerful mechanism of **sonic patriarchy**, reinforcing and perpetuating gender hierarchies. At the same time, the socio-economic roles of women as patrons reveal fractures within this system, opening spaces for negotiation and reconfiguration of gendered meanings.

Ultimately, this study not only reinterprets Southern Thai folk music through a critical lens but also calls attention to the subtle operations of power embedded within familiar sonic practices, thereby contributing to broader efforts toward more equitable and inclusive cultural spaces.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

During the preparation of this work, the author used Claude to assist with drafting and translating portions of the manuscript content, as well as to improve the language and readability of the text. After using this tool, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the content of the published article.

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