

## **Singing Histories, Singing Buddhism: Pa'O Vocal Performance in Contemporary Myanmar**

### ***Abstract***

The Pa'O, an ethnic minority group occupying large areas of eastern Myanmar and numbering approximately one million individuals, maintain both male and female vocal performance traditions of regional histories specific to the Pa'O experience as well as Pa'O interpretations of the Buddhist canon. Predominantly accompanied by *khaya* (adapted Anglo concertina) first adopted from British soldiers and Salvation Army officers in the second decade of the twentieth century, Pa'O vocal traditions play an active role in the persistence of Pa'O culture within the larger context and pressures of the Myanmar nation. Through an ongoing partnership with the cultural branch of the Pa'O National Organization, my research project explores textual content within Pa'O song traditions that echo dominant (Burmese/Mon/Shan) religious and historical narratives, and more importantly, document where those texts diverge, presenting a unique Pa'O perspective. I ask how the Pa'O negotiate these differences across contexts, from national to local media and public events, and beyond, including within more intimate spaces such as the archive, monasteries, and private homes. I further investigate the actual dynamics of artistic practice around gender in performance, where initial appearances indicate fluidity and equality. Finally, I explore how composition, instrumentation, and performance practice together establish a musical environment in which these differences may be expressed and fully realized among Pa'O musicians, vocalists, and audiences, from regional to national and beyond.