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Studio music production as kinship practice: Technology and the making of Lisu religiosity in contemporary Myanmar

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The twentieth-century social change among the Lisu, a transnational ethnic group spreading across the mountainous regions of southwest China and Southeast Asia, is characterized by their large-scale conversion from animism to Protestantism, which has become essential in the making of Lisu ethnic identity today despite of the marginalized status of Christianity in their main populated areas. From the 2000s onwards the indigenous religious practices in Nujiang Lisu Nationality Prefecture in the northwest of Yunnan province were tremendously impacted by the import of Lisu Christian pop music recordings and online materials produced outside the region. When these ethnic-language gospel audiovisual products were circulated throughout Nujiang, the local government accelerated ethnic cultural production to compete with the Christian soundscape in the village. Combining part of my doctoral research on the role of new media practices in construction of cross-border religious networkings with the ethnographic data collected from my recent fieldwork in Myanmar's Kachin state (Myitkyina) and Yangon—the centers of Lisu music and media production—this paper examines how over the last three decades the Christian revival and sustaining of the Lisu have been affected by their self-organized engagements with “old” and “new” media technologies. In particular, I study how the Burmese Lisu musicians use new sound technologies to establish and inhabit what I call a “studio kinship” for making Lisu pop music in the studios and beyond, based on which an audiovisual world of Lisu Christianity and a specifically indigenous domain have emerged.

More recently, affordable home recording and mastering technologies have afforded Burmese Lisu musicians from rural areas who lack substantial financial support to work at home with the most rudimentary recording equipment in compensating for professional facilities. Historically shaped by American missionaries' transnational media (radio) evangelism and further de-

veloped through the interactions with both Burmese and *tain-yin-tha* (ethnic minority) pop musicians in a thriving Burmese pop music industry, the low-budget production of Lisu-language music recordings has been virtually unknown to the non-native audiences. What have been recorded in those so-called “home studios” for circulation within Lisu transnational communities are short original pop songs of three types according to the lyrics: love songs, gospel songs, and ethnic songs. The majority of them are performed by solo singers and accompanied by heavy electronic sounds that are generated either on synthesizers or by the instrumentation of an electronic guitar, a bass, a drum kit, and a keyboard. Despite all the obstacles they’ve encountered, this small group of marginalized ethnic minority musicians have been motivated to continuously write and perform Christian and ethnic pop songs in their own language with great enthusiasm.

Unlike Burmese pop music industry where virtually all recordings are made in professional studios in Yangon (MacLachlan 2011: 3), Lisu pop music production is carried out in the transnational, multi-sited spaces. Lisu musicians who wish to make a professional career in music have to move to Yangon or Myitkyina away from their village communities. A small portion of recording sessions are completed in the Lisu-run radio ministry based in the city of Chiang Mai. Generally speaking, the production is realized through what I call in this paper “studio kinship” rather than isolated activities separated from kinship networks and community life. My analysis of “studio kinship” underlying Lisu music production takes inspiration from Steven Feld’s concept of “acoustemology” (1992/2015) —particularly aligning with its logic connection to relational ontology—to suggest a relational understanding of the studio space as being defined by and connected with a host of human (singers, musicians, engineers, producers, vendors, etc.) and non-human actors (mobile technologies, studios and spaces beyond, etc.). In the ensuing discussions, I use case studies to analyze the mechanism of Lisu studio production through affective kinship practices to ensure the mobility of people and musical objects that are often constrained technically, economically, temporally, and spatially. The current study shows that the Lisu model of “distributed music production” (Eliot Bates, 2016) necessitates a re-evaluation what the (home) studio actually is beyond what is commonly perceived. I argue that in addition to its technological affordances the home studio is better understood as a resilient space of what transcend its physical limits for a cumulative and interactive process of socio-religious participation, and thereby an analytic of “studio kinship” is useful to do justice to the mechanics of studio production as an assemblage of spaced-out nodes in which notions of ontological determinism and human agency are largely downplayed.