

Kammu vocal genres and performance¹

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The vocal tradition of the ethnic minority Kammu in northern Laos contains songs of many different kinds. This article deals with the kind of song called *tr̥nəəm*. It can be characterised as orally transmitted poems, which are varied upon and combined together in performance. The material in this article comes from the repertoire of Kam Raw, who was born about 1938 in the village *Rmcùal* in the area called *Yùan* north of the river Nam Tha in northern Laos. His mother tongue is a dialect of the Kammu language.

Kam spent his childhood in his home village where life at that time followed rather traditional patterns². There he learnt the way of life which included the orally transmitted traditions. Apart from the *tr̥nəəm* his vocal repertoire also includes children songs, lullabies, ceremonial songs and shaman songs.

A major theme of the *tr̥nəəm* is that of expressing an urge for social belonging. Three sub-groups of themes dominate Kam Raw's repertoire: social belonging, longing and journeying. The major source of reference for the poetical imagery is nature. Nature – particularly plants and animals – is referred to in a number of different ways: nature words are often rhyme-words, the images are mainly built on association and parallelism. The nature symbolism places the songs in a physical context involving animals, birds, trees, flowers, etc. that are part of the ecological environment but also in a spiritual context as many of these metaphors are used in ceremonies and rituals.

The words of the *tr̥nəəm* normally fall into two stanzas each of which contains four lines. Generally the first stanza is metaphorical and difficult to understand whereas the second stanza contains a more concrete meaning. The first stanza may be seen as a poetic parallel to the second. The two stanzas are tied together by parallelism and rhymes. The first line of the second stanza often serves as a title for the song (distinctive sentence).

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²See Tayanin 1994, Tayanin and Lindell 1991 and also Lindell et al 1982 concerning farming, village life and calendar, Lindell et al 1984:xvi–xxiv, Lundström fc. concerning Kam Raw's home village.

The many aspects of the associative qualities in the nature images make the interpretation rather open and closely related to contextual factors. In other words one and the same *trnàəm* is likely to be given different meanings in different situations. This means that even a rather limited repertoire may cover a wide range of meanings.

Vocal genres

It is not easy to say to which degree the *trnàəm* exist as separate entities or exist only when performed. The concept can be said to have three meanings: (1) in a general sense approximately meaning "song", (2) in an abstract sense meaning distinctive sentence in combination with corresponding rhymes and (3) in a specific sense meaning a re-created form in performance.

The *trnàəm* may be performed according to a number of 'singing styles' or vocal expressions. Each such style is a vocal genre. These can be regarded as techniques for performing *trnàəm* that differ in a number of respects: musical motifs, rhythmic distribution of words, relationship between word-tone and musical pitch and the practice of vowel reduplication. Also the mastering of the poetical capacities of *trnàəm* is essential to these techniques.

Táəm

The most elaborate vocal genre. In a traditional setting the singing is often done in direct communication between two or more singers – particularly so in the party situation – but one would also *táəm* while alone, particularly while in the fields or in the forest.

Sung to a basic melody in free rhythm which starts high and falls to a "recitation pitch" about one octave lower. A degree of coordination between word-tones and pitch. Words and music are closely intertwined through simultaneous variation and there is much room for individual expression.

Hrlüi

(approximately 'flatter' or 'flattering talk') had its proper place anytime when *trnàəm* were sung inside the village when there was not a feast going on or when male and female youths sang to each other. Also frequently used in the fields. Particularly those *trnàəm* that were used by young people are closely related to *hrlüi*.

A form of fast recitation which apart from short initial and final formulae has a total correlation between word-tones and pitch, i.e. in the main part only two pitches are employed (since the Yüan dialect of the Kammu language has two word-tones: high and low). Minor variation of the words.

Hrwà

(approximately cf. 'long for, think of') belonged to situations outside of the village like in the fields or while fishing. It was especially used by adolescents, particularly by females.

The words are sung to a melody consisting of a short motif of narrow range.

Húuwə̀

Mainly sung in the fields and particularly by young girls.

More or less identical to *hrwə̀* but differs in that it has a refrain sung to the syllables “*húu wə̀*” before and after the stanzas.

Yàam

(‘weeping’) was mainly performed by women. Inside the village it was used for soothing songs and dirges the poetical form of which differs from that of the *trnə̀əm*. Outside of the village *yàam* was used for *trnə̀əm* when women were by themselves while washing in a river, while fishing or catching frogs. Also young girls and boys used it sometimes. In these cases *yàam* was used mainly for joke or youth *trnə̀əm*.

Performed to a melody built on a short arch-shaped motif with a minor flavour.

“Yúun tuiŋ”

is not a Kammu concept for a vocal genre but a term used by myself for a vocal genre which is very similar to the melody of a ceremonial song and dance called ‘Water tube dance’ (*Yúun tuiŋ*) which was used at house-building feasts. In the forest or field areas this vocal genre was used for *trnə̀əm*.

The melody is longer than the above-mentioned ones, iso-rhythmic and with a range of more than one octave. It also differs in being predominantly pentatonic.

Táəm area melodies

In Kam Raw’s home village in the Yúan area there was one basic *táəm* melody type with many individual variants. Neighbouring villages had their own *táəm* formulae still within the same basic frame. Generally, the melodies of other dialect areas differed more. Kam Raw knows a handful of such local formulae or *táəm area melodies*. General characteristics of *táəm* performances are:

- there is no distinct beat but there is an underlying slow pulse,
- an iambic pattern of performing,
- methods of variation by which a varying number of syllables in a line are combined with the melody (prolongation, contraction and others),
- use of embellishment words for means of symmetry and correction of number of syllables in a line,
- systematic reduplication of vowels (*nàaŋ* ‘dear’ becomes *nàaŋ-a* etc.),
- correspondences between language and music with regard to metre and word-tones,
- correspondences between poetic and musical variation.

The *táəm* area melodies in Kam Raw’s repertoire are:

Táam Yùan

begins high and loud with an initial expressive “Həəy” and develops to low and weak so that the over-all shape of the melodic movement resembles a shouted phrase. There is a low-pitched “Eee” ‘oh’ at the beginning of 2nd or later stanzas or after major pauses within stanzas. End of stanzas are often sung *accelerando*. A final expressive “Kàay sáh” ‘return, I say’ ‘then I say’ meaning ‘that’s all’, ‘so’ or ‘this is what I say’ is sung at a low pitch and finished off with a downward slur. It occurs at the end of stanzas but also sometimes at the end of lines within stanzas.

Táam Kwèen

with an introductory “Həəy” starts with a higher grace note and leads much faster down to the recitation pitch. There is no particular ending formula. The dynamic contrasts are not as big as in *táam Yùan* and there is no marked *accelerando* at the end of stanzas. There is no special initial formula to the second stanza; either the recitation continues or one starts over with the introductory “Həəy” which therefore is heard more often in *táam Kwèen*. Particularly in the even-numbered lines syllables are squeezed into a shorter space by speed-doubling (contraction). Characteristically almost every word has a vowel reduplication. The singing is mainly at a low pitch which is almost only interrupted when there are high word-tones or syllables with particularly heavy stress.

Táam Cwàa

has an initial “Həəy” reached by a higher grace note and followed by an “əəy” which rather quickly falls nearly one octave to a recitation pitch. The final word of the first line is long and here the pitch again rises to the high pitch level. Most words have vowel reduplication. Like in *táam Kwèen* speed-doubling occurs particularly in the beginning of even-numbered lines.

Táam Cwàa –2

Another melody from the the Cwàa area (the village *Pcrèe* and its surroundings). The melody used in feasting situations in those villages resembles *Yùun tiij* (cf. Vocal genres above). It is different in character from the other *táam* melodies.

Táam Ûu

is quite different from the area melodies described so far. The initial “Həəy” is sung at a much lower pitch than in the previous formulae, starts with a downward glissando, ends with a gliding “blue” note and is followed by a pause. The “Həəy” is repeated approximately after every two lines and has the character of a refrain rather than an initial formula of a phrase. The words of the first line are sung rather rapidly to a rising melody which is repeated for the second line. The general impression is that of a syllable-counting performance as opposed to the iambic organisation of the other area melodies. Vowel reduplication occurs regularly on the penultimate word of a line and only occasionally elsewhere. There are no particular introductions for the first line of the 2nd stanza and there are no final formulae.

Táam is mainly a solo genre. If more people than the singer are present they will join in a common tone between stanzas or poetical lines. This is called *knnàay* ‘cheering’. If the singing is accompanied it is mainly by the

flute which then plays a slow parallel melody, or by the mouth-organ which mainly plays a bourdon.

The mono-melodic system

As can be seen from the above descriptions Kam Raw's repertoire of *trnəəm* can be musically realized in different ways depending on the choice of vocal genre. The performance involves a number of techniques by which the *trnəəm* can be transformed from a more or less abstract form into a poetical expression in performance, thus having been re-created according to the principles of one of the vocal genres.

One common denominator between all the vocal genres is that each one is built on *one* basic melody or tune which is varied according to the words of the *trnəəm* in question. Each vocal genre has its particular use with regard to time, place and the singer's sex. I have used the term *mono-melodic* for this phenomenon. Similarly each *təəm* area melody is only one basic melody with its connection to the place where a certain accent of the Kammu language is spoken.

The trnəəm is thus placed within one mono-melodic system of vocal genres and one mono-melodic system of area melodies. This points towards a music which is organized in a rather specific way relative to social, spatial and situational factors.

A descriptive model

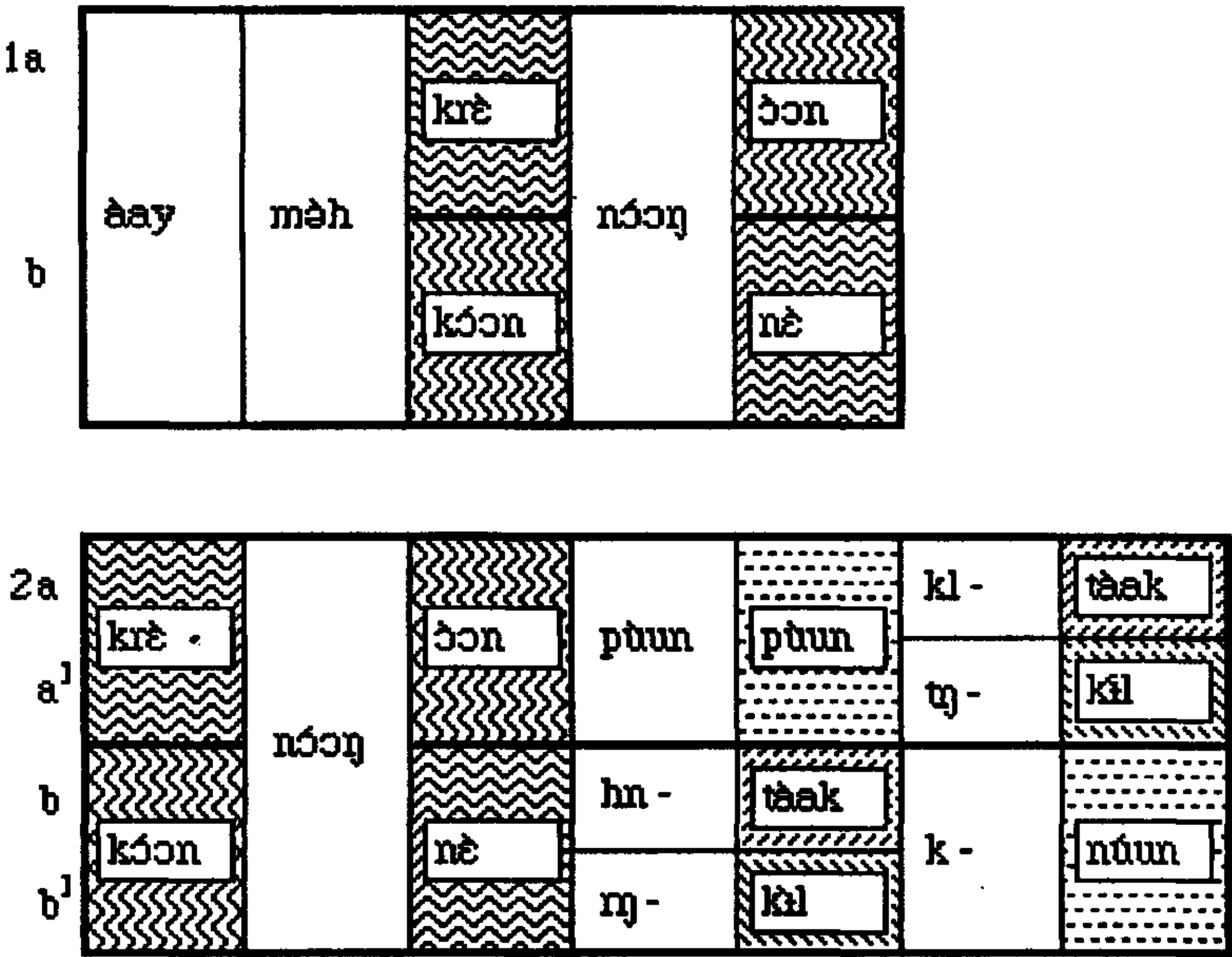
In performance of *trnəəm* words or whole lines can be varied from one performance to the other. Lines may be added and two or more *trnəəm* may be interwoven. It is therefore not possible to say which one of a number of versions is the basic one. In fact there might not be an "original" version for the *trnəəm* seem to exist only when sung. For a description of a repertoire it is nevertheless essential that the words of a *trnəəm* can be defined in *one* form, flexible enough to permit description of the different versions in which the particular *trnəəm* appear. A number of characteristics should be covered by such a description:

- division into stanzas, lines and syllables,
- parallelism,
- flexible order of lines,
- rhyme patterns,
- combinations of *trnəəm*,
- combinations with embellishment words, words of address and so forth.

In order to meet these ends a model has been devised. It is built on the constants of the *trnəəm*, namely lines which are identified by their syntactic form and rhyme patterns and are repeated often throughout the *trnəəm*. Lines that don't fit together in these respects will be considered as belonging to different *trnəəm*. In this manner it is possible to reduce a performance to one or more basic formulae. The sentences or phrases ("lines") are called "1" and "2" respectively. The letters "a" and "b" stand for first and second stanza. The indexes denote variants within a stanza. The vertical

divisions denote the syllables. The squares that contain rhyme-words are shadowed in different patterns so that the cross-rhymes can be easily spotted. This model can be seen as an abstract analytical representation of the *trnàəm*.

The model was devised through analysis of *trnàəm* performances in the vocal genre *hrl̥i*, which contains the *trnàəm* in their most compact form with only minor variations of words. The concepts syllables, lines and stanzas were thus derived from the actual performance. From a linguistic point of view it would in many cases be possible to condense the *trnàəm* further, particularly since the Kammu language is elliptic in the sense that personal pronouns and corresponding grammatical functions often can be left out. Since this does not seem to be supported by performing practice no such further reduction has been made. It turns out that the majority of the *trnàəm* in their reduced form has lines of 5 or 7 syllables. With this model, it is possible to describe a performance with respect to the order of lines, for example the standard manner: 1a–2a–1a–2a' / 1b–2b–1b–2b'.



This is the kind of song sung by a visitor to a host. Here follows word-by-word translation with the rhyme-words marked out and an interpretation.

àay	m̥əh	kr̥	n̥ɔŋ	ɔŋ		
I	am	table	still	soft		
		χ ^l		γ ^l		
kr̥	n̥ɔŋ	ɔŋ	p̥uun	p̥uun	kl -	t̥ak
table	still	soft	exp:	stamp	[tree]	
				p ^l		q ^l

àay I	məh am	krè table χ^1	nóŋ still	ðon soft γ^1		
krè table	nóŋ still	ðon soft	pùn <i>exp:</i>	pùn stamp P^1	tŋ - tree	kíl stump R^1
àay I	məh am	kón child γ^2	nóŋ still	nè small χ^2		
kón child	nóŋ still	nè small	rŋ - below	kíl R^2	k - knee	núun p^2
àay I	məh am	kón child γ^2	nóŋ still	nè small χ^2		
kón child	nóŋ still	nè small	hn - about	tàak Q^2	k - knee	núun p^2

Rhyme-words:

krè table	= χ^1	↔	nè small	= χ^2
ðon soft	= γ^1	↔	kón child	= γ^2
pùn pùn <i>exp:</i> stamp	= P^1	↔	knúun knee	= p^2
kltàak [tree]	= Q^1	↔	hntàak about	= Q^2
tŋkíl tree stump	= R^1	↔	rŋkíl below	= R^2

Interpretation:

I am a food-tray still soft,
a food-tray still soft, a stepped-on tree-trunk.
I am a food-tray still soft,
a food-tray still soft, a stepped-on tree-stump.

I am a child still small,
a child still small, less than knee-high.
I am a child still small,
a child still small, just about knee-high.

Performance

In performance the words of the *trnàəm* are matched to the template of the proper vocal genre or *táəm* area melody. Such a template consists of a melodic outline and a rhythmic principle. In most cases the melody has introductory and final formulae which also contain certain words (exclamations, vocalises). Particularly in the *táəm* area melodies other words are also used, like words of address or exclamation.

This is common in vocally performed poetry of Southeast Asia (and perhaps elsewhere as well). If the poetry is approached as a written poetry such words would appear to be rather meaningless sentence fillers and conventional additions to poems. From the perspective of performance they stand out as essential to the form. If it is accepted that *trnàəm* only exist when performed it follows that *trnàəm* does not exist in the *trnàəm* genre without these words.

In the case of *trnàəm* this set of words is a major factor in the characteristics of each vocal genre and of each *táəm* area melody. They are indispensable parts of the performance templates and more or less inseparable from melody and metre.

In the case of *táəm Yùan*, which is Kam Raw's most frequently used area melody, the most important words of the template frame are shown in the following graph. Apart from the words in the figure the interjection *sáh* 'I say' is regularly used in the beginning of lines. A *trnàəm* might be performed as follows:

Həəy	sáh	àay	məh	krè	nóŋ	ðon				1a
			krè	nóŋ	ðon	pùn	pùn	kl -	tàak	2a
	sáh	àay	məh	krè	nóŋ	ðon				1a
			krè	nóŋ	ðon	pùn	pùn	tŋ -	kíl kàay sáh	2a'

Listeners (if any): *naay*

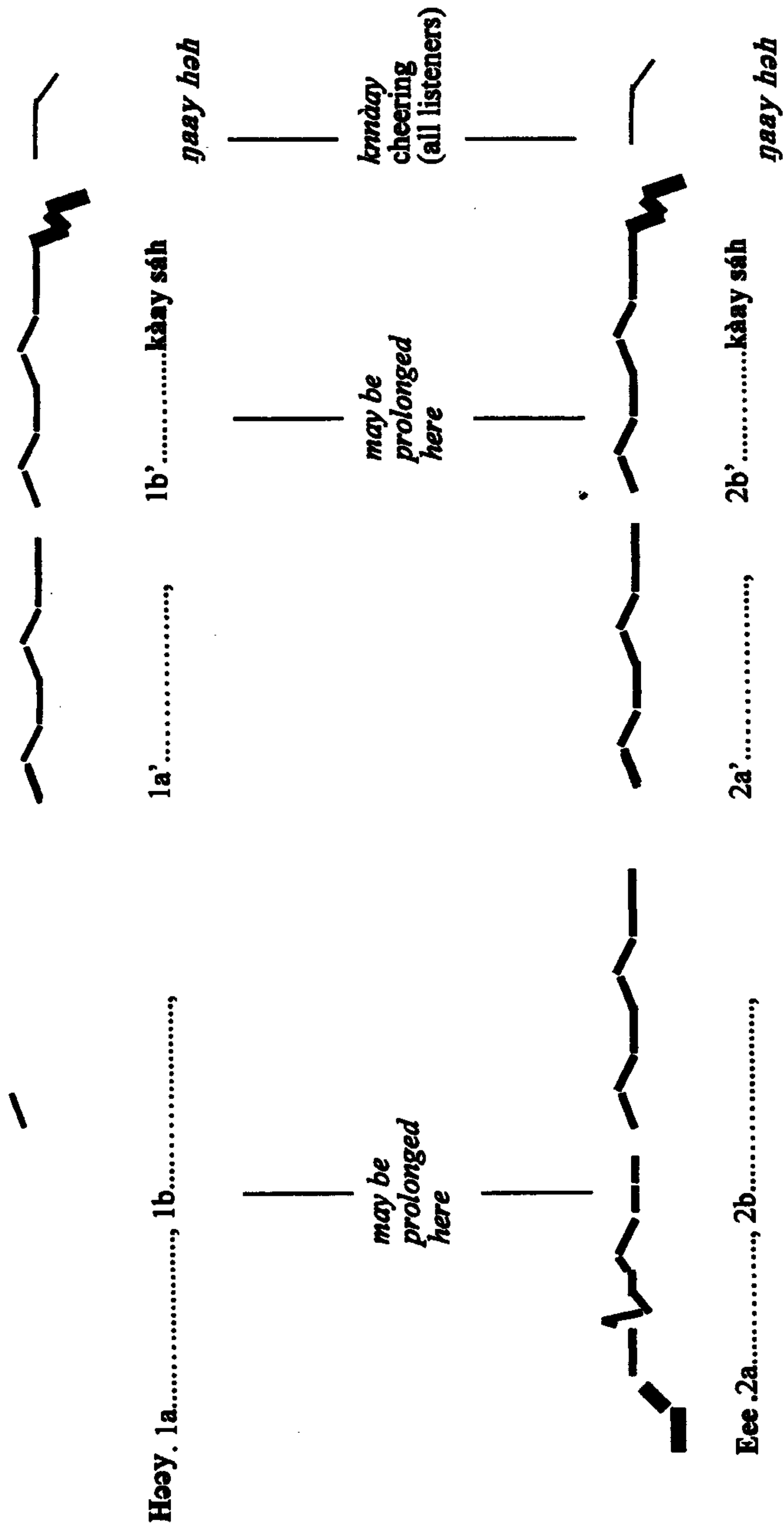
Eee	sáh	àay	məh	kón	nóŋ	nè				1b
			kón	nóŋ	nè	rŋ -	kíl	k -	núun	2b
	sáh	àay	məh	kón	nóŋ	nè				1b
			kón	nóŋ	nè	hn -	tàak	k -	núun kàay sáh	2b'

Listeners (if any): *naay*

Interwoven *trnàəm*

In *tàəm* performance the *trnàəm* are often combined with each other in a number of ways. One is the suite which is made by simply linking *trnàəm* of related contents to each other. Another technique is interwoven *trnàəm* in which whole *trnàəm* or parts of *trnàəm* are interwoven with each other.

Figure 1. Basic frame and distribution of musical phrases in the *təəm* Yüan template.



Lundström, H. 2002, "Kammu vocal genres and performance", in *The Mon-Khmer Studies Journal*, vol. 32, pp. 131-143. (purl.org/sealang/lundström2002kammu.pdf)

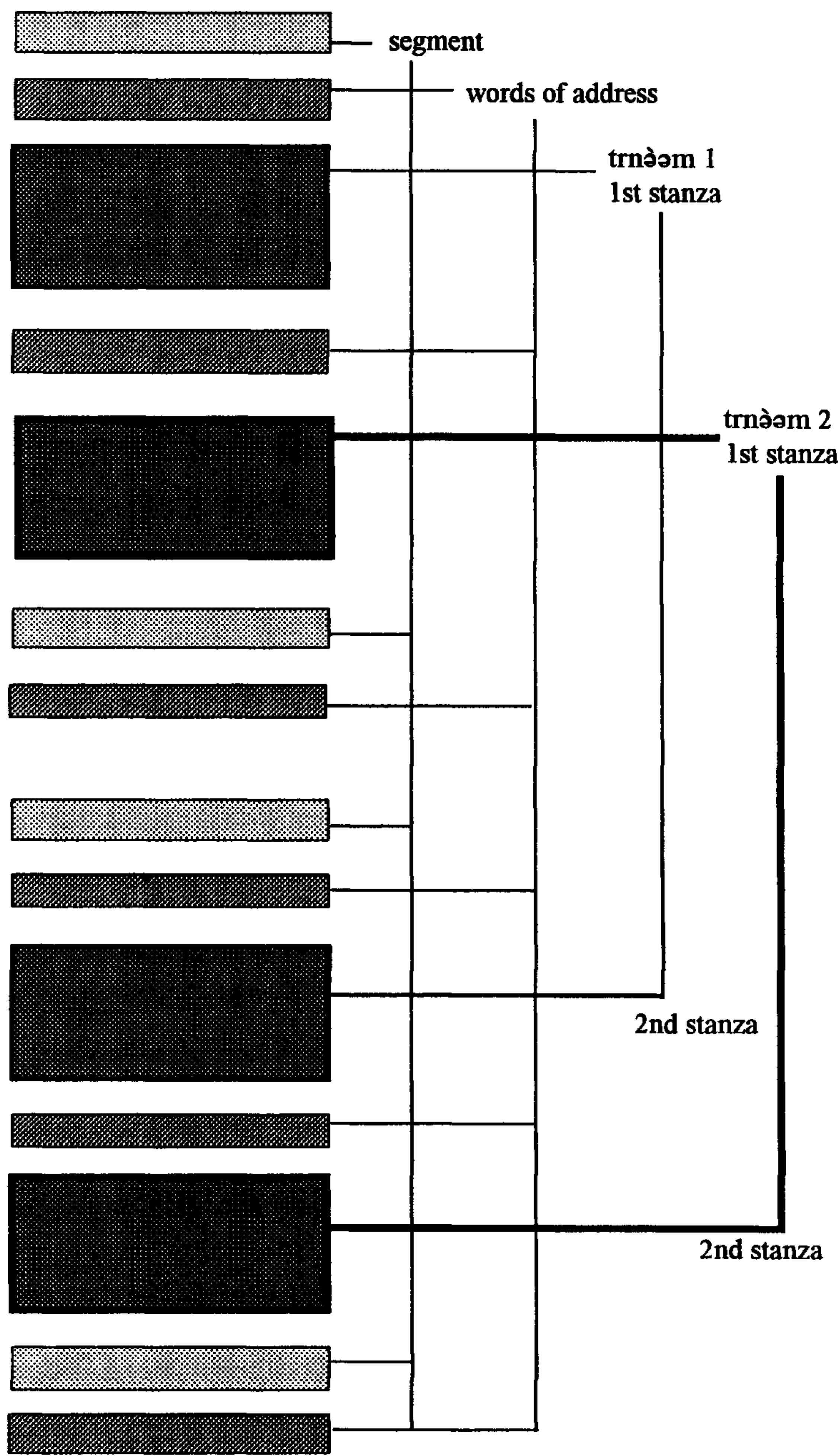


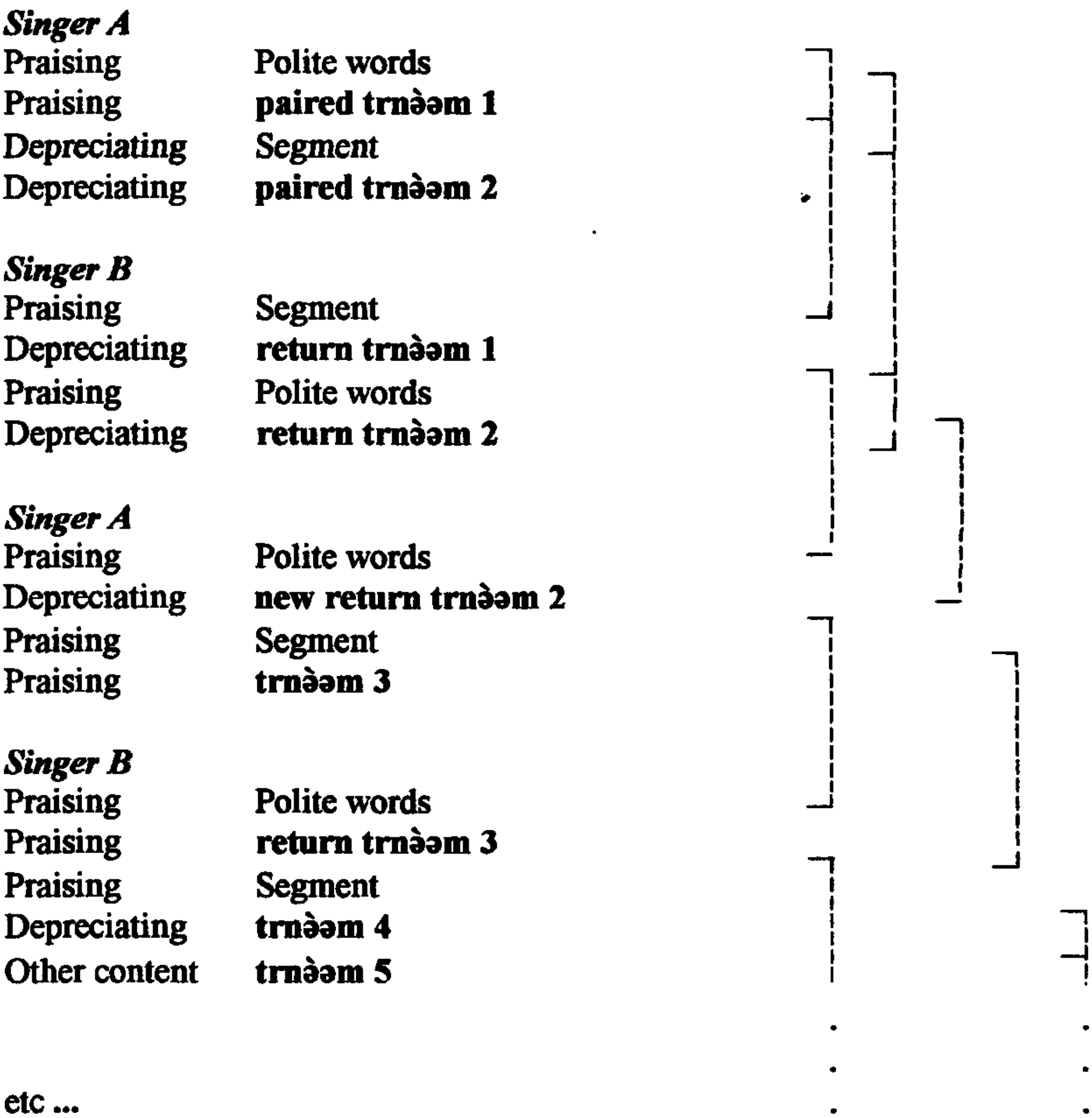
Figure 2.

Lundstr  m, H. 2002, "Kammu vocal genres and performance", in *The Mon-Khmer Studies Journal*, vol. 32, pp. 131-143. (purl.org/sealang/lundstr  m2002kammu.pdf)

Paired trnàəm in alternating singing

Alternating singing can occur between two or more individuals. In a group people will take turns in singing. A number of the wine *trnàəm* are directly related to their functions in alternating singing. Many *trnàəm* go together in pairs, *paired trnàəm*, so that the person who answers somebody's singing can use them in his/her reply. In some cases the two *trnàəm* are each others inversions, employing the same words with only pronouns and negations differing.

The structure of such an exchange has the following structure:



The guiding rule of singing with others is to *krsén* ‘praise’ or *cóol* ‘exaggerate, beautify’ the one(s) the song is directed to and to *plóoc* ‘look down upon, despise, depreciate’ oneself and one’s own belongings. A dialogue may start with the first singer praising the other and depreciating himself/herself by use of a suitable *paired trnàəm* and the appropriate polite words. The other party then answers with the corresponding *trnàəm*,

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depreciating himself/herself and praising the other party, and then goes into another paired *trnəəm* which will inspire the other party to develop the exchange further. On and on new *trnəəm* are added and they are not necessarily paired ones. There are also certain *trnəəm* for inviting a person to sing, for persuading, teasing, advising, excusing one's own poor singing and for ending a dialogue. Cheering occurs between stanzas in order to encourage and spur the singer on. An element of competition is inherent in this singing situation.

In a *təəm* dialogue the *trnəəm* are not developed as a continuous conversation but rather constitute a chain of telegrammatic messages which are linked to each other in a manner that leads forward in steps. A *trnəəm* may include rather much symbolism on many levels. They are so much open to interpretation that they may be used in several different situations, the interpretations thus being closely related to the context.

Conclusion

The Kammu tradition in northern Laos thus has a rich and complex vocal repertoire which in performance demands mastering of a number of performance techniques as well as social conventions for singing. There are reasons to believe that this is not limited to the Kammu. One may see parallels in the Chinese singsong tradition (Chao 1956) and an example of mono-melodic organisation is reported from south China by Schimmelpenninck (1997). A parallel to the mono-melodic system related to singing situations in areas in and around a village, i.e. the vocal genres, may perhaps be read into the report from Rengao in Vietnam by Gregerson (1980). Music cultures have, however, seldom been approached from this perspective.

Possibly there is a difference between western and eastern Kammu traditions in northern Laos with the river Uu as a border. The melody types are markedly different and there are also differences in tonal aspects of the language. The repertoire under study here is of the western kind. It is the repertoire of one singer only, but in my material there are several examples of Kammu singers who use more than one vocal genre and who use more than one area melody, so the phenomenon is not limited to Kam Raw. Like Kammu culture in general the vocal traditions are, however, presently subject to change and it is uncertain whether or not villages exist where these practices are still in use (cf. Lundström 1994).

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