

LAM KHON SAVAN:
A TRADITIONAL FORM AND A CONTEMPORARY THEME

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Lam, a traditional Lao folk art form of sung, extemporaneous poetry, is part of the social fabric of most Lao villages. At funerals and at festivals one can hear the familiar melodies of the bamboo pipes of the khene and the flowing poetry of the mohlam singers. In recent years this familiar art form has also been heard at political gatherings and over the airways, sounding the praises of one or another of the many political factions in Laos. Interspersed among descriptions of conditions in the country at the time of the particular performance which is the subject of this paper are references to Buddhist stories and teachings, as well as expressions of the feelings of the singers for the plight of their countrymen.

In earlier days one could not travel far in Laos without coming upon villagers gathered for various social events at which the songs of the mohlam blended adaptively to each occasion. Today, too, traditional themes and current issues and events may be interwoven in a performance of lam. The social context is taken into consideration wherever mohlam singers perform, and new variations of old stories and themes seem to be spun effortlessly from their lips.

Traditionally, a facility with oral poetry was developed by many Lao, though only a few would eventually become mohlam singers. At one time, Lao children were exposed to poetry from their early days, and many childhood pastimes included rhyming games. During the courting years, a young man's ability to take part in dialogue in sung poetry was highly regarded, as was the ease with which a young woman could respond with lines of kham phaṅaa, a short, pithy poetic answer.

Today, the ability to lam well is still admired, and each region of Laos has its own style of lam. Of these many styles, the Khon Savan style of the Savannakhet is presented here in a performance which took place some years ago. The material was obtained during a recent stay in Laos under a Fulbright-Hays Dissertation Research Grant. Thanks are due to Phomma Cantharaacak who worked with me on the translation. However, responsibility for the final form is mine. A transcription¹ of the verses of kṣṓn poetry is provided along with this translation. Hopefully, this material will arouse the interest of others in the liquid language of the Lao mohlam.

MOHLAM WOMAN

- 1 *Oh, how the thunder rumbles,
Oh, gentle one.*
- 2 *Why doesn't it rumble near
The ladder where you live?*
- 3 *Why doesn't it rumble near
The camp where you sleep?*
- 4 *Beloved, it's been ten years since I've seen your face.
Twenty Buddhist Lents have gone by since we've managed
To see each other once a year.*
- 5 *Sweetheart, we've been unhappy since we fled from Phu Lang.
I've been afraid I would not see you
Ever since the Vietnamese surrounded the mountain.*
- 6 *Now, I'm going to tell a story,
A chronicle, telling it slowly.*
- 7 *Dear, when we reach the age
Of destruction and violence,
Then the god will come.*
- 8 *Dear, the following story
Has been told since ancient times.*

¹This dialect of Southern Lao has six tones: low rising tone indicated by ˇ; low mid-level tone indicated by ¯; mid-level tone indicated by the absence of any symbol; low level tone indicated by ˘; mid falling tone indicated by ˆ; high level tone indicated by ˙. The transcription used is basically that of William J. Gedney.

- *9 *To wit, instability and thoughts
Are always changing.*¹
- 10 *Beloved, listen to the tumultuous sounds everywhere
Which are like the old story which has been told.*
- 11 *There is a story that will occur
In the future. Please wait and see.*
- *12 *But, oh what Buddha foretold,
We have already seen some.*
- 13 *Upon hearing it, we feel sad
Because the story has come true.*
- 14 *Beloved, Buddha predicted that
God Si An² would appear on earth.*
- 15 *He is an extraordinary god
Buddha said,*
- *16 *Who, if the people of earth
Lead each other into sin,*
- 17 *Honoured women, when the religion reaches the half-way
Point, people will group together and die
Chaotically, miserably and the ground will become hot.*
- 18 *Dear, in every town in the South
We will see fires burning.*
- 19 *There will be trouble in the world
When the religion is at its mid-point.*³
- 20 *Honoured aunts, groups of people who have sinned will raid
the towns and destroy them completely.*
- 21 *Only the ones who have merit will remain.
Afterwards,*

¹Lines which were particularly troublesome or which were unclear or ambiguous are marked with an asterisk.

²In Buddhism, "the last great prophet, who will appear 5000 years after Buddha, and who will successfully propagate a religion of complete peace and equality". (Kerr 1972: 853.) Also, "the next Bodhisattva who will save mankind". (So Sehaputra 1965:799.)

³The year B.E. 2500 would have been the mid-point if the year 5000 mentioned in footnote 2 is considered. The current year is B.E. 2518 (A.D. 1975).

- 22 *Honoured aunts, the ones who have little merit
Won't see the excellent god.*
- 23 *This world will be extremely difficult.
Aunts and uncles will insult each other and quarrel.*
- 24 *Honoured aunts, there will be difficulty everywhere.
The leaders of the towns will be disruptive.*
- 25 *Honoured aunts, when we look at the chronicle correctly,
We can understand it.*
- 26 *Honoured women, the capital cities
Will also be divided and harassed.*
- 27 *This world will become disturbed.
And towns and villages will be in confusion.*
- 28 *Honoured women, there will be a lot of robbers
Who steal and seize things.*
- 29 *They will violate the ways and teachings
Which the Lord Buddha pointed out to us.*
- 30 *Beloved, there will be wars in the world,
And thousands of thieves.*
- 31 *They will organise themselves to be criminals
And plan to do bad deeds.*
- 32 *Now, our world is chaotic and
Troubled. It's not as it was.*
- 33 *When people don't believe each other,
They will always fight and live by themselves.*
- *34 *Honoured aunts, they (should) seek the Buddha's
Wisdom as much as possible.¹*
- 35 *They don't warn each other.
They don't obey anybody for
They are the brave soldiers.*

¹When it is apparent that the singer started a line which did not come out quite right, and then began the line again, changing it somewhat or altogether, we have enclosed the "false start" in parentheses and translated only the final form of the verse.