A WAI KHRU FOR ACAN GEDNEY

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This conference and this paper are in keeping with a strong tradition in Thailand, and indeed in Asia generally, for we have come together to pay respect to our teacher, ณacademic Gedney. And it is indeed in full awareness that I and others have combined the Thai term, ณacademic, with his Western last name, "Gedney." In the West, using the title plus the last name is a way of showing respect. In Thailand, the title plus the first name is the respectful form of address. In our ณacademic we have some of both East and West—thus this title, Acan Gedney.

It is fitting, too, that this first section of the conference is on literature, for it was in the Department of Indic and Far Eastern Languages and Literature at Yale University that Acan Gedney first began his own studies. Indeed, from the literature of the Tai peoples we can learn so much.

One of the important traditions in Thai society—and in Lao society as well—is the practice of paying respect to one’s teacher. Whether one is learning to make a musical instrument, to box, to dance, or to sing, one first learns to pay respect to one’s teacher through prescribed words and actions.

In keeping with this ancient tradition of the Tai peoples, I have chosen as my way of paying respect to our teacher to present and discuss a Lao way khûu—way meaning ‘to pay respect’ and khûu being the Lao word for ‘teacher’.

This way khûu piece was actually written for me to perform by another teacher who entered my life some years after I had begun studying with Acan Gedney. That teacher was Mohlam Nuna, the daughter of a Vientiane man and a Roi Et woman. Mohlam Nuna had been performing /âm/, or Lao sung poetry, for over twenty years when I began to study with her in Vientiane in March of 1973.

Two things were required of me as a new student. First, like many an apprentice mohlâm, I was to pay her a fee. Second, I was to learn
by heart the 왜 헤우 poetry which she had prepared for me. I was, as one might expect, easily able to handle the fee. Learning to 라ム the 왜 헤우 poem, however, was far more difficult; some of the reasons for this will be discussed below.

In this paper I will provide a brief description of the basic structure of this particular 왜 헤우 piece. Second, I will present the translation and transcription of the piece. Finally, I will briefly discuss certain aspects of the learning process for an apprentice mohlam and suggest some of their implications.

Then I will bid you, and more specifically Acan Gedney, farewell.

Two aspects of the structure of this piece are important: its poetic structure and the organization of its content. The 왜 헤우 section itself is entirely in 쿨 나NonNull, or ‘long poetry’, a form I have discussed in detail elsewhere.¹ Basically, it is a verse of four lines (a, b, c, and d), each line usually having from seven to thirteen syllables; may  הערב and may 동요 are required to fall on certain specific syllables in each line. There is both internal and external rhyme. A presentation in 쿨 나NonNull form begins with the last two lines (lines c and d) of a verse. The presentation continues using both full (a, b, c, d) and half (c, d) verses. This is exactly what we find in this particular poem.

The organization of the poem’s content is as follows. First, the mohlam calls the attention of the audience seated around her to the fact that the performance is about to begin: 9다란다. Then she asks for their patience and protection. Having claimed the attention of her human and present audience, she then addresses those other beings—both spiritual and physical—who have helped her in the past. She calls upon them once again to provide guidance and support for this newest of her performances. Six full verses and four partial verses are devoted to this.

Finally, in her last verse she announces that she is finished with the invocation and plans to sing a second section which will take us “for a walk in the forest.” She concludes this section firmly with a line saying, “That’s all!” This final verse and line mark the end of the introduction to the performance and provide a transition to the second section of her song.
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Translation

Mohlam Nunaa

1  Olanoh
2  Be patient, be very patient with me,
   And protective of me.
3  I’ve come to offer you my sung poetry,
   And I hope you will receive a blessing to keep from these poems.
4  Olanoh, gentle one.
5c  Let’s begin! Amen!
   I will bow my head in respect to you, gods,
   And cherish greatly your kindesses.
6d  I ask you to come to watch me,
   To observe me and to watch over me.
7a  Whether I ask questions or answer
   About interpretations of the Buddhist teachings,
8b  Let the words come as quickly as a speeding chariot,
   And my reputation be widespread and praised by all.
9c  Please come and watch me,
   And look at me as I win them over.
10d  When I am about to sing courting songs, or songs to convince others,
   Please come and support me devotedly;
   Stay beside me; don’t flee afar.
11a  Now I will be able to
   Go to sing at my very best.
12b  Don’t let me go the wrong way;
   Let me advance as swiftly as a wheel.
13c  Whether the questions are twisted or tricky,
   Let my teacher be great.
14d  If I am questioned and interrogated,
   Let my answers be accurate and clear;
   Don’t let me be caught on any subject.
Amen!
May the merit of Lord Buddha enable me
To deceive and pursue the other singer successfully.

May the merit and morality
Come to watch for me and think for me,
Here where I sing today.

Therefore, may the merit of a Buddhist monk
Guide me
So that I can sing as well as my friends.

May the merit of my father and the merit of my teacher
Come and support me devotedly;
Stay beside me; don’t abandon me.

May the merit of my parents protect me,
I beseech you,

Along with all of the merit of a Buddhist monk,
And the supreme knowledge of the three treasures of Buddhism,

Together with all of the merit of Lord Buddha,
And the merit of this supreme religious system.

May the merit of a master monk
Enter me and help me as I strive to sing.

Please come to help me and protect me,
To guide me along the way.

Don’t let me lose the way;
Let me proceed like the precious virtue of the Buddhist Law.

Let this merit come to watch over me;
Open my reason; give me your guidance.

Don’t let me have anything
Blocking my way.

And the merit of Fire, the merit of Wind,
May they be behind me, pushing me onward.

Let this merit elevate my words
And conduct me along the path of reason.

May this merit protect my head;
I pay my respects to every god.