Lao Poetics: Internal Rhyme
in the Text of a Lam Sithandone Performance

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Poetry is a cultural group's way of playing with sounds and presenting feelings and ideas in language that is attractive to the listener's ears or the reader's eyes. As Burnshaw has indicated, we need to consider "the poem as a work of sonal art" (1960: xi).

This sonal quality is particularly important to consider in analyzing the work of oral poets such as the Lao *mohlam*.[1] In a written discussion of the "poetics" of such an oral form, much is lost because the written examples can only partly convey the beauty of the sung poetry. And in translating such a piece, even more is lost, for the poetic style of one linguistic group is often far removed from that of another.

> The words are the poem. Ideas can often be carried across, but poems are not made of ideas....they are made of words....An English translation is always a different thing; it is always an *English* poem. (Burnshaw 1960: xii)

What Professor Gedney (1989b: 489) has noted in speaking about Thai poetry appears to be true for Lao poetry as well:

> Poetic artistry in Siamese verse finds expression mainly in the skillful manipulation of language within the constraints imposed by the various verse patterns. So much of the value of Siamese poetry lies in the form, as opposed to the semantic content, that translations into Western languages are notoriously disappointing.

For these reasons, in planning this discussion of the poetics of a performance of *Lam Sithandone*, I have chosen to include both a phonemic transcription of the Lao verses, arranged essentially as they might be if written out in Lao, and an English translation, which is presented in verse form, but which contains no rhyme and only a little alliteration. Essentially, the

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[1] A *mohlam* is an expert performer of *lam*, a form of essentially sung, somewhat extemporaneous Lao poetry.

phonemic transcription of the Lao provides the reader with some idea of the poem itself, the *sounds* of the poem if you will, while the English translation lets the reader in on the *ideas* that the poets expressed.

Lam Sithandone is a form of Lao oral poetry traditionally performed by the *mohlam* of South Laos.[2] The verse form usually associated with this style of lam is *kɔ̌ɔn ñɔ̂ɔn*. Though other verse forms, such as *kɔ̌ɔn tǎt*, for instance, may be used briefly during a performance of *Lam Sithandone*, it is the *kɔ̌ɔn ñɔ̂ɔn* form that predominates. It is this poetic verse form that makes up the bulk of the lines of Lao poetry presented in the appendix to this paper.

The performance discussed in this paper was recorded in 1972 at a Lao radio station and was re-recorded, transcribed, and initially translated in 1973.[3] The two performers, Mohlam Sikhun (male) and Mohlam Thongbang (female), were renowned professional singers at that time.

I have described in detail elsewhere (Compton 1979: 136-146) the rhyme requirements for this form of poetry as discussed by Maha Sila Viravong (1970). For the benefit of readers unfamiliar with this form, I have bolded the words that fit into the external rhyme pattern for one verse of this form (see appendix). However, in the paper we will focus on the extensive use of internal rhyme in this performance.

Internal Rhyme

The two major forms of internal rhyme in Lao poetry are vowel rhyme (*sǎmphǎt sǎlaʔ*) and the (initial) consonant rhyme (*sǎmphǎt phañánsanaʔ*). Vowel rhyme (assonance) includes paired-word rhyme (*sǎmphǎt thíam khuu*) and yoked-word rhyme (*sǎmphǎt thíam ʔèek*). Examples of paired-word rhyme found in our material include *nɔ̌ɔy ŋɔ́ɔy* (S69)[4] and *ʔûan súan* (T80). Examples of yoked-vowel rhyme are *kôm hɔ́ɔm phóm* (S91) and *nîi pham sʼi* (T13) and *dây míi bǎy* (T44). It should be noted that in Lao, words of the same basic consonant and vowel patterns (CVV, CVC, or CVVC) are still considered to rhyme if they have different tones. Thus a yoked-vowel rhyme such as the following can occur: *kǎy nîi kây*.

Consonant rhyme includes continuous consonant rhyme (*sǎmphǎt lían ʔǎksɔ̌ɔn*) and separated consonant rhyme (*sǎmphǎt khàn ʔǎksɔ̌ɔn*).

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2 Under the Royal Lao government, Sithandone was the name of a Southern province that had Pak Se as its capital. One style of *lam* from that area is referred to as Sithandone or Siphandone; in this paper I use the term Sithandone throughout.

3 The data was collected in Laos under a Fulbright-Hays Dissertation Research Grant during 1972-1973.

4 The letter S plus a number indicates a line from Sikhun's performance; T plus a number indicates a line from Thongbang's performance. See appendix.

Consonant rhyme is what we usually refer to as alliteration in English poetry, and such alliteration or consonant rhyme strikes the eye almost immediately when one looks at the phonemic transcription in the appendix, most particularly in the verses performed by Mohlam Thongbang. Examples of continuous consonant rhyme are *khŭam khám* (S10) and *khéen khɔ̆ɔ* (T42). Examples of separated consonant rhyme include *kɔ̆ɔn wây kɔɔn* (S106) and *ŋắw ŋŭam bɔɔ ŋə̂əy ŋaay* (T28).

Professor Gedney (1989b: 537) has observed that "the internal rhymes *linking phrases in a line of klɔɔn poetry have a close connection with the* realities of actual speech," and that "much of the flow of Siamese speech consists of two- and three-syllable phrases." An additional support for this view is that the "rules" presented for internal rhyme for Lao give us a two-word phrase minimum for both vowel rhymes (that is, paired-vowel rhymes) and consonant rhymes (that is, continuous consonant rhymes) and a three-word phrase for each of these when the rhyming words are separated by just one word (yoked-vowel rhymes and separated consonant rhymes). *The result is that common, everyday phrases, which also happen to rhyme, fit nicely into the poetry, ready-made as it were. Such common phrases found in* rhyme in my data include paired-vowel: *hak mak* (S78), *cɔɔ lɔɔ* (S80), *dây pǎy* (T42); yoked-vowel: *nân sǎmkhán* (S11); continuous consonant: *náaŋ nɔ̂ɔŋ* (S20), *wâw waa* (S87; T50,52), *pūu pǎa* (S90), *khit khit* (T62); and separated consonant: *hày náaŋ hûu* (T17), *mɛɛn bɔɔ mĭi* (T32).

Further evidence for Gedney's position that the internal rhymes have "a close connection with the realities of actual speech" is the extensive list provided by Roffe (1975) of four-syllable "elaborate expressions" found in everyday Lao speech, expressions that exhibit patterns of alliteration, assonance, and reduplication. Examples of similar sets found in this performance include the following, some of which appeared in the first hemistich of a line, others in the second hemistich:

First hemistich:

S51 *(mak) hɔ̂ɔt hĭan hɔ̂ɔt lâw...*
S59 *(tâŋ) tɛɛ puu tɛɛ puu...*
S60 *(mak) con hɔ̂ɔŋ con hày...*
S82 *(mak) hɔ̂ɔt tūum hɔ̂ɔt tâaŋ...*

Second hemistich:

S32 *dǐn dâaw faay láaw*
S82 *phàa phɛɛn phée phǎaŋ*
S84 *khŭam pàak máa mâak*
S91 *lóŋ kôm hɔ̂ɔm phóm*

All of the example expressions from the first hemistich are productive, that is they can be used as needed by substituting appropriate words in the second and fourth positions of the four-syllable phrase, as we see in comparing lines 51 and 82. These flexible four-word expressions are thus useful to the *mohlam,* who can manipulate them creatively to fit the variety of topics and performance situations they face.

The four types of internal rhyme discussed earlier can be found in abundance in the verses of both of these *mohlam.* For instance, Mohlam Sikhun uses vowel rhyme in thirty of his lines in which the final word of

the second hemistich of a line rhymes with the first or second word (or once in a while the third word) of the first hemistich of the next line. Two words in a row with the same initial consonant are common in everyday Lao speech and in Lao prose and poetry. We can find seven such pairs in the first four lines of Mohlam Thongbang's poetry alone.

Alliteration

Continuous consonant rhyme or alliteration of three or more words in a row, however, is so pervasive in the $k\check{\jmath}\mathfrak{I}n$ $\tilde{n}\hat{\mathfrak{I}}\mathfrak{I}n$ form that it deserves particular attention. For example, in this small sample of just eighty-one lines, Mohlam Thongbang has produced forty-one lines that have three, four, five, or even six words in a row using the same initial consonant. Twenty-seven of those lines have three words in a row, but of those, seven lines also have separated consonant rhyme on this same consonant as well. For example, line 8 has the pattern *t- n- t- t- t-*; line 11 has the pattern *ph- ph- ph- m- ph-*; and line 13 has *ph- ph- ph- n- ph-*. In addition, two of the lines have double sets of three-word alliteration; that is, line 30 has *w- w- w- p- d- d- d-* and line 56 has *t- t- t- l- s- w- w- w-*.

Nine lines of Thongbang's poetry contain alliterative phrases of four words; one of those, line 15, contains two sets of four words: *m- t- t- t- t- ?- ph- ph- ph- ph-*. Line 73 contains separated consonant rhyme as well: *s- th- s- s- s-....s- l- l- h- l- m-*.

Three lines favor five-word phrases: line 40 has *?- kh- kh- kh- kh- ....kh- n- l- l- d-*; line 53 has *p- l- l- l- l- l- l-*; and line 62 has *ph- ph- ph- ph- ph- th-*.

The full lines containing six-word phrases are reproduced below. The alliterative initial consonants have been bolded for emphasis.

T46 *phən waa bāaŋ sâat sìa*   *súm sɔ̀ɔk sóm sǎwǒəy*
T64 *bɔ̀ɔk hày sǎŋkhǎan nɔ̀ɔm n̂ii*   *nɛ̂ɛp nɛ́ɛm nám niaw*

Mohlam Sikhun's poetry shows abundant use of alliteration as well. In his 108 lines, we find thirty-three lines with three or more alliterative words in a row. Twenty-six of those lines have three words in a row; five lines have four words in a row and two lines have five words in a row. The examples of the full lines in which the five-word alliteration sets appear are provided below. Note that in the lines below words beginning with both high-class and low-class initials (*khɔ̌ɔ* and *khɔ́ɔ* respectively in line 8 and *sɔ̌ɔ* and *sɔ́ɔ* in line 24) from the writing system are used, but it is their sonal effect that we are concerned with here.

S8d   *khǎy khaaw khúam khɔ̂ɔp khɔ̌ɔ*   *sǎɔn phii nɔ̂ɔŋ coŋ fǎŋ*
S24d *thaw tháŋ sòok sàw*   *sɛ̌ɛn sâm sɛ̀ɛp mɔ̌ɔŋ*