Tai Dam Poetics and Proto-Tai Tone Categories

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Recent works on the structures of Thai and Lao poetry by Compton (1977), Bozman (1978), Gedney (1978), Cooke (1980), Hudak (1981), and Bickner (1981), among others, have greatly contributed to an understanding of the history of Thai and Lao verse forms. In particular, the re-analysis of Siamese verse forms by reconstructing proto-Tai tone categories from modern tones, as set forth in the seminal work by Gedney, has resulted in significant findings and implications for comparative-historical Tai linguistics and literature.¹

At the same time, the comparative-historical approach, of which the cited works are an endorsement, naturally leads to a comparison of verse forms across dialect boundaries beyond Central Thai (Siamese) and Lao. The handful of studies on verse forms in other Tai dialects shows a rich variety of structures, contents, and functions that further relate one dialect area to another in the Tai language family. F. K. Li has given us the “Native Songs of Wuming” (1956) and “The Songs of T’ien-Pao” (1970). Nguyên Văn Huyễn (1941) has produced Receuil des chants de mariage Thô de Langson et Cao-bang. Wijeyewardené (1968), Egerod (1971), and Purnell (1967) have looked at Northern Thai (Chiang Mai) versification. Hartmann (1984) has studied some aspects of verse forms in Tai-Lue of Sipsongpanna. Compton (1977) has analyzed Lao mohlam in depth. In this paper we add to these dialect studies and apply some of the findings from the works cited for Central Thai in analyzing a specimen of Tai Dam (Black Tai) poetry.

¹ This paper is a revision of a presentation given at the International Conference on Sino-Tibetan Languages and Linguistics, University of Washington (Seattle), October 1983. The phonological description of the oral performance of the Tai Dam Origin Myth was based on the speech of a middle-aged male informant from muaŋ4 muaŋ5, in or near Mai Son, Vietnam. Later work on translating the text was done with the assistance of another Tai Dam male in his 60s. The latter was Baccam Don, former Chief of muaŋ4 moy3, the main district of muaŋ4 laa4, (Son La in Vietnamese). Muaŋ4 moy3 is northwest of Son La and just off the road up to Lai Chau, the center of the White Tai dialect area.
This particular Tai Dam text comes from a version of the Tai Dam Origin Myth (Hartmann 1981). The original was both a written and sung version of the myth provided to me by a former Tai Dam shaman from the Black Tai region of northern Vietnam. The written version had no tone symbols owing to the fact that, unlike Central Thai (Siamese), diacritics for indicating tones are not part of the traditional orthography. Written evidence of tonal rhymes were not to be found in the original text, nor could they be detected in the chanted version. Both versions were originally collected by the author in 1976. Since then, Gedney (1978: 19) has provided a technique for discovering possible underlying tonal rhyme based on proto-Tai categories, especially in older, more obscure texts, such as the one at hand:

The procedure would be to mark the earlier tones, A, B, C, or D, on all words in a poetic text, and then to compare stanzas to see whether there are certain points where a particular earlier tone always occurs, and therefore was presumably required.

In order to fully appreciate the phenomenon of tonal changes in Tai Dam as they have affected verse forms in that dialect, we provide the following chart.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Earlier/Proto-Tai Tones</th>
<th>*A</th>
<th>*B</th>
<th>*C</th>
<th>*D (checked syllables)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>*Initials: *Voiceless</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To recapitulate the history of the changes from the four proto-Tai tone categories to their bifurcation into six modern Tai Dam tones, the original tones underwent a simple splitting along the lines of proto-voiceless and proto-voiced initial consonants. An identical two-way split affected neighboring White Tai (Tai Don) and Tai Lue. Haudricourt (1961) has shown how the two-way splitting of tones has affected a number of languages in the area.

The six modern Tai Dam tones have been described as follows:
1. lower mid-level
2. high-rising
3. low/low rising, glottalized
4. high-level

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5. high mid-level
6. mid-falling, glottalized

In the system we have adopted for numbering modern Tai Dam tones, 1 and 4 = *A; 2 and 5 = *B; 3 and 6 = *C. The D category (tones 2 and 5) turns out to be similar to the B (2 and 5). By reconstructing the proto-Tai tone categories for each syllable in the poetic line, marked by a pause in the chanted form, we should be able to confirm or deny the existence of an older underlying rhyme pattern in our Tai Dam text and say something of its antiquity.

According to the argument presented by Gedney (1978), verse forms that originally had tonal rhymes utilizing the earlier tones A, B, C, and D would predate the tonal splits in a particular Tai dialect. The Siamese forms known as the ráay and the khlooŋ are the oldest Central Thai poetic structures, and both employ the earlier A, B, C tone categories in versification. Historically, they and other verse forms that can be shown to utilize a similar scheme for placement of A, B, and C tones in rhyming patterns lie on the other side of the great divide known as the “tonal split.” For Central Thai (Siamese), the three-tone systems prevailed up until about sometime between the 14th and 16th centuries A.D. Mosel (1959: 6-7) claims that the oldest khlooŋ date from the 14th century while ráay predates the Sukhothai period, the 13th century. He states that Lilit Phra Law is traditionally believed to have been composed during the reign of King Boromatrailokanart, who ruled Ayuthaya during the 15th century, but that there is reason to accept a later date, somewhere between the end of the 16th and the beginning of the 17th century. Bickner (1981: 26) assumes that Lilit Phra Law was composed during the latter half of the 17th century (the reign of King Narai), the same period that, according to Gedney (1978: 18), saw the completion of sound changes away from the earlier three-tone system. Gedney also states in the same article that in earlier texts “khlooŋ sii is much more frequent than either khlooŋ sɔŋ or khlooŋ sāam.” A count of the stanzaic structure of Lilit Phra Law shows that khlooŋ sii is indeed the predominant form, which would be evidence for the early Ayuthaya period dating favored by Wibha (1982: 3) and Thai scholars in general.2

Cooke (1980: 424) relates, “The Khloong Five Water-Curse Pronunciation” is the earliest khlooŋ and dates from the reign of Ramathibodi (1350-1369 A.D.). Cooke says further, “The term khloong ha, ‘khloong five’, in the title reflects the fact that many of the lines of the poem (about half the total) consist of five syllables....The poem alternates between rai, /râayl/, a simple verse form often used for narrative, and

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2 The entire text of Phra Law contains approximately 40,000 words of 110 stanzas of ráay, 294 of khlooŋ sii, 10 of khlooŋ sāam, and 246 of khlooŋ sɔŋ. (See Hartmann, Henry, and Kongananda 1989).
another verse form which bears a somewhat distant resemblance to other and later khloeng." Cooke finds it difficult to classify the "Water-Curse" ["Water Oath"] as khloeng because of its "rather different form." He finally puts it aside as "this primitive khloong."

Of the two forms, then, the rāay is assumed to be older and simpler than the khloeng. Because both share the common feature of an ideal or underlying five-syllable line in Thai (Siamese) canonical form and the feature of rhyming syllables according to their membership in the earlier A, B, and C tone categories, it makes sense to view the rāay and the khloeng as intimately related. The historical picture might well be viewed as one where the "primitive" rāay of an earlier oral tradition became the polished khloeng of a more self-conscious written tradition.

Mosel (1959) refers to four types of rāay, among which is rāay yaaw, "the easiest and most free of all Thai classical verse," where the only requirement is that "the last word of each line need rhyme with any word in the next line." (Mosel appears to be referring to syllable, not tonal, rhyme here.) In general terms, Mosel refers to rāay as "poetic prose," where "rhyme patterns are so simple that from the Thai point of view rai barely qualifies as poetry."

Gedney (1978: 11) states, "With khloeng is frequently associated a kind of rhymed prose, or verse without divisions into stanzas, called rāay. Rāay usually consists of a series of five-syllable lines that are indefinite in number, each linked to the next by rhyme. A passage of rāay is supposed always to end in a stanza of khloeng sɔɔŋ. Rhymes in both khloeng and rāay are in older texts required to show (like all Siamese rhymes) agreement in vowel and consonant, but also in tone (A, B, C, or D)." The segment used by Gedney to illustrate the rāay has the syllable + tone rhyme pattern summarized below.

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---A
-A-A
---AD
-D-D
D---D
D---D
--D-A
--ADC
--B-C BC--
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