Putting it All Together:
Components of a Secular Song in Iu Mien

Herbert C. Purnell
Biola University

Introduction

Thirty years ago, Charles Frake wrote a fascinating short article entitled "How to ask for a drink in Subanun" (Frake 1964). In describing a small but highly significant aspect of this Philippine culture, Frake took Ward Goodenough's proposal that an ethnography "properly specify what it is that a stranger to a society would have to know in order to perform any role in any scene staged by the society" (Frake 1964: 127) and linked it to Dell Hymes' notion of an ethnography of speaking: "specifying what the appropriate alternatives are in a given situation and what the consequences are of selecting one alternative over another" (127). Frake focused on specifying the linguistic and cultural skills which an outsider would need to master in order to function properly in the social context of drinking.

This paper focuses on one aspect of the Iu Mien (Mien, Yao) culture of Thailand and Laos.[1] It is a basic descriptive study, presenting an overview of the various components which a Mien singer must incorporate in some form or other in the performance of a secular song. Since I have dealt with many of these components in several previous articles (Purnell 1989, 1990, 1991, 1992), I will not go into any of them in much detail.[2] Rather, I will try here to pull the components together in summary form and thereby show something of the cultural knowledge Mien singers possess about their secular songs. This present paper thus attempts to provide some of the foundation needed to undertake an ethnography of communication through songs in Iu Mien.

Components of a Secular Song

One preliminary point at the outset. As one might suppose, the Mien concept of "song" differs from the Western concept. For example, the English word "song" covers a wide variety of lyrics set to music from lieder to lullaby, from hymns to rap, from "Happy Birthday" to the "Hallelujah Chorus," and almost everything in between. The Mien word most often glossed as "song" covers a much narrower semantic domain.[3] There is no cover term in Mien which is as broad as the English term. Instead, Mien distinguishes between specific categories of words-plus-tune. Some of these terms will be introduced and described below.

The seven components of Mien secular songs which will be touched on in this paper are:

A. Overall context
B. Language variety
C. Categories, participants, and topics
D. Metrical structure
E. Performance style
F. Musical scale and the relationship between pitch and tone
G. Padding syllables

The components described here are not ordered, though the presentation tries to follow a more general to a more specific line. Although they are treated separately for the sake of expository convenience, the components are interrelated, and choices made in one area will constrain or influence the availability of choices in another.

A. Overall Context for Singing

There are two major Mien contexts within which songs and other types of lyrics-cum-melody are used. These could be called the secular and the sacred, or perhaps better, the

literary and the ritual. Compositions within both these contexts have particular forms and functions and are accorded status to one degree or another. By contrast, the lullaby has words and a tune, but it is not considered to be a song. It is in a category all by itself, *laau5* , and has no status because of the language variety it uses, its truncated metrical structure, its limited content, and its all-too-common social function. This paper will focus only on secular songs.

B. Language Variety

Closely connected with the component of cultural context is the choice of language variety. The Iu Mien language system is complex and consists of three core language varieties or repertoires: (1) the vernacular language (*Mien2 waa6*), (2) the literary language (*nzung1-waa6*), and (3) the ritual language (*zie6-waa6*). The vernacular language is the basic or original language of this ethnic group and is historically part of the Miao-Yao, now sometimes called Hmong-Mien, language family. The other two languages and their accompanying forms, were borrowed from two different types of Chinese. The literary language was apparently borrowed from a type of Mandarin together with literary forms similar to Tang dynasty "Old Style" and "Regulated Style" poetry. The ritual language was borrowed from a type of Cantonese (Downer, personal communication) along with the Daoist manuals and ceremonies needed to perform the rituals.

In addition to this tripartite core language system, the Mien readily recognize a variety of languages at their periphery, such as the trade languages they use. The most important of these peripheral languages is southwestern Mandarin, which the Mien call "Chinese" (*Kaeq3 waa6*). By comparison, the literary and ritual languages, while obviously of Chinese origin, are not considered to be Chinese by Mien. These two language were borrowed sufficiently long ago that they have now been completely integrated into

Mien culture as "literary Mien" and "ritual Mien," respectively. A small sample of words comparing the three core languages is given in Table 1.

Table 1: Comparison of Mien Core Language Varieties.[4]

English	Vernacular	Literary	Ritual
flower	*biang2*	*kuaa1*	*huaa1*
house	*biau3*	*oq3, win2*	*gaa1*
four	*biei1*	*fei5*	*si5*
three	*buo1*	*faam1*	*saam1*
hand	*buo4*	*siou3*	*saau5*
come	*daai2*	*daai2*	*loi2*
rise	*faau5*	*zaang6*	*siang5*
forest	*gem2*	*sen1*	*saan1*
large	*hlo1*	*daai6*	*taai6*
year	*hnyang5*	*nin1*	*nien1*
body	*sin1*	*sien1*	*saan1*
water	*wuom1*	*sui3*	*suei3*
ten	*ziep6*	*ziep6*	*sap6*

Ritual songs use primarily the ritual language, but there are important types of ceremonies in which the literary language plays a major role. Some ritual songs even use Chinese.

Two language varieties are used in secular songs: the literary language (LL) and Chinese (KW). Of these, the literary language is by far the most common. KW is used for poetry (*fei1*; Mandarin: *shi1*), epics (*gou3*; Mand: *xu4shi4shi1*), an ethics instruction book (*zu5 cong2 sou1*; Mand: *lun2li3shu1*) dealing with filial piety and respect in family relationships, titles of song sections, and prose introductions and conclusions to various types of songs.

The literary language is the typical language variety for literary works, primarily a wide variety of songs, but also including didactic material, proverbs and sayings, narratives, epics, and personal letters. It is also used for prose portions of books and titles of song sections.

LL and KW may also occur together in the same piece of literature. At times the writer may want to use KW for