A WAI KRHU FOR ACAN GEDNEY

Carol J. Compton

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, ʔ.ColumnName Gledney. And it is indeed in full awareness that I and others have combined the Thai term, ʔColumnName, 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 ʔColumnName 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 khúu—way meaning ‘to pay respect’ and khúu being the Lao word for ‘teacher’.

This way khúu 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 Nunaa, the daughter of a Vientiane man and a Roi Et woman. Mohlam Nunaa had been performing ลำ, 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 mohlam, I was to pay her a fee. Second, I was to learn
by heart the vây khûu poetry which she had prepared for me. I was, as one might expect, easily able to handle the fee. Learning to lâm the vây khûu 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 vây khûu 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 mohl'am 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 vây khûu section itself is entirely in kõn ḃaen, 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 ʔèek and may thôo are required to fall on certain specific syllables in each line. There is both internal and external rhyme. A presentation in kõn ḃaen 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 mohl'am calls the attention of the audience seated around her to the fact that the performance is about to begin: ʔbolənšo. 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.
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.
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30c Along with the merit of the ancient gods,
Of all the Four Guardians of the World,

31d Of the Earth, of the Naga King,
Of the little Goddess of Lightning,

32c And of Siva. The listeners will be overflowing;
Indra himself will come to watch me.

33d I want to debate in song
Today; to compete in poetry.

34a In addition,
Let me be able to sing every verse;
Guide me wisely so that I don’t forget any.

35b And may the merit of my teacher,
Allow her to whisper to me,
To keep hold of me and to guide me along the road.

36c Don’t let fate strike me;
May all of my teachers strive to guide and help me.

37d Don’t let me have anything
Blocking my way.

38a That’s all I’ll say;
That’s enough for you to listen to.

39b Another, second part
Will be presented next.

40c I will take you, man, on a walk;
We will walk in the jungle, in the forest.

41d We will be able to leave the old women,
To bid them farewell; then we will go for a walk.

42 That’s adequate;
I’ll stop.

That’s all!

Transcription

1 ṭōlanāo

2 ṭōt dēn ṭōt sāa tūm ṭāw khōuy lāy lāy
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Amharic Text</th>
<th>Pwooroo Text</th>
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<td>3</td>
<td>màa thàwáay k désn lám</td>
<td>cotj màa lap ?àw phòon khàa nàwy wày</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>?ólánjë</td>
<td>núan ?àwy</td>
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<tr>
<td>5c</td>
<td>?àw dëh meèn sàathu? dëh khàa càk wàntháa nöm</td>
<td>thànthëm bünkhnùn nàh</td>
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<tr>
<td>6d</td>
<td>khàa hày màa lam sìj</td>
<td>pày lìtj lám lam lèé</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7a</td>
<td>meèn si? còot lëk këe</td>
<td>pëc man thàmmabhôt</td>
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<td>8b</td>
<td>hày wày pàan khàp lot</td>
<td>saa kày khòn ñòeq</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9c</td>
<td>khàa hày màa mòtj sìj</td>
<td>lìtj nám phùu khàa ñòey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10d</td>
<td>bàat si? k àw si? ñòey khàa hày màa h'âm kûm</td>
<td>khùm khàatj yaa haatj níi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11a</td>
<td>na? bát nìí càd dày</td>
<td>pày lám khèetj phèetjlit</td>
</tr>
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<td>12b</td>
<td>yaa sàa míí thàatj phèt</td>
<td>hày lìan wày pàan lëj</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13c</td>
<td>meèn si? fìatj lë+ sëj</td>
<td>khòo khùu pèn ñay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14d</td>
<td>meèn si? sëj si? lay hày pèn kòn khòtj nëtj</td>
<td>bòo khàa khòtj ìatj dày</td>
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<tr>
<td>15a</td>
<td>sàathu? dëh khùn phà? phut cotj dày</td>
<td>sëj lay khàw tit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16b</td>
<td>khùn phà? thàm khàa hày màa khòo ykhit</td>
<td>bòo si? lám wán níi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17c</td>
<td>cáj wàa khùn phà? sòtj khàa hày màa nám sìj</td>
<td>hày lám dìi khè+ muu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18d</td>
<td>khùn ?ì bi'dàa khûn khûu khòo hày màa h'âm kûm</td>
<td>khùm khàatj yaa sàa láy</td>
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<tr>
<td>19a</td>
<td>khùn ?ì phòo meè pòk kàw</td>
<td>khàa khòo niaw wëon khòo</td>
</tr>
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<td>20b</td>
<td>kàp thàtj khùn ?òtj phà?</td>
<td>ñòot ñàan tày këew</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21c</td>
<td>khùn phut thàtj phòom</td>
<td>thàm móo dùtnj ñòot</td>
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</tbody>
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22d  khùn phaʔ sọtjhaʔ cǎw  hay màa khàw suay pòŋ
23a  khọʔ hày màa suay pòŋ  sìʔ sọŋ thàan dəŋ
24b  yaa míi thàatj lọtj  pày dàŋ thàm khùn kɛɛw
25c  khọʔ hày màa nêem hàa  khày pàn nàa sìʔ sọy
26d  yaa sàa hày hàa nàɔy  dày míi khọŋ sọŋ dàŋ
27b  kàp khùn fày khùn lòm  hày làŋ màa nám nûu
28c  khọʔ hày màa sùu khàm  nám thàatj sìʔ hëet
29d  hày màa pòk këet kàw  ṭi nàaŋ wày suu nɛɛw
30c  kàp thàatj khùn thèeŋ thàw  càtùlłaat thàatj sìi
31d  thòolaní nàak nàm  nàaŋ nàɔy mëe[khàlaa
32c  kàp ṭiisũn khòn lòn  phaʔ nàa ṭi in màa lam
33d  khàa yàak lám còot kɛɛ  wán nìi khëetj kàn
34a  ṭàn nùŋ  sìʔ pòŋ yaa míi lọtj
khọʔ hày dày thuk sọŋ  coong dëŋ nám sèn
35b  kàp khùn ṭiäcap nàatj  hày nàam pòŋ sìʔ sọy
coŋ hày màa sùu sap  dày míi khọŋ sọŋ dàŋ
36c  yaa míi wéen màa tòŋ  phòo suu kàn fàŋ
37d  yaa sàa hày hàa nàɔy  tòo lòŋ pày nàa
38a  wàw thoŋ nàm  pày dëŋ dòŋ dàŋ paa
39b  ṭìik tìit jìŋ jìŋ  sìʔ láa lëɛw dùŋ dëŋ
40c  sìʔ dày phàa sàay dàŋ  lâm wàa sìʔ lòtj
41d  sìʔ dày phàak mɛɛ pàa  thàw nàn lëɛw
42  sòm phòo khùan

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1. ไว้เลย
2. ถ้าตีเสียก็ค่ะ
3. มาๆถ้าทุกแม่
4. ไปเลย
5. โอเค เมาเม่สุขใส่

บัลลังทิ้งทิ้ง

6. อยู่ในน้ำแล้วฝัน
7. แก่เมียใจนี่ละ
8. ในใจงงจุ้น
9. ดึงน้ำมาหยุด
10. บอกเธอว่าวิ่ง

นั่นไม่เป็น
11. แห้งแล้ว
12. ปลาดุกอยู่ยัง
13. แก่เมียใจนี่ละ
14. แก่เมียใจนี่ละ

ปกปิดว่ารวยขึ้น

บัลลังทิ้งทิ้ง
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15 ที่มาที่
คุณเพอร์
ยังไม่ได้

16 คุณพระ
ยังไม่ได้

17 คุณอาน
ยังไม่ได้

18 คุณอาน
ยังไม่ได้

19 คุณอาน
ยังไม่ได้

20 กับท่าน
คุณอาน

21 คุณอาน

22 คุณอาน

23 คุณอาน

24 คุณอาน

25 คุณอาน

26 คุณอาน

27 กับท่าน

28 กับท่าน

29 กับท่าน

30 กับท่าน
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30  េយ ស្រុកសេស ព្រហ្មការ ។
31  មេ និ សម្លាប់ តុង ។
32  បាន ឈ្មោះសេក់ដុំ ។
33  ដំបូង តាម រួម កាល ។
34  ឱស្សម្ដី
  ក្រែក កូន តាម មេ ឈុះ
35  តែង មាន ការ។ ។
  គឺបាន មាន គួរ ។
36  គ្រូ ឈ្មោះ មស្សែ
37  កែស្នើ នៅ កូន ស្រើ
38  ស្នាក់ អំពូល
39  ចុង តាម
40  ទឹក ឈ្មោះ
41  និ រួម បាន ។
42  ស្នាក់ ដុំ គេ
A Wai Khru for Acan Gedney

Discussion

In approaching this piece one could simply look at the text itself, analyze its contents, note the order of appearance of the various deities or people called upon for support by the mohlam, and investigate the ways words are used to describe the deities. One also might consider the implications of this material in a larger context or tradition. I have chosen to discuss aspects of the educational context or tradition of which wāy khūu is a part, and the apparent role of such a wāy khūu text in it.

One might look at what this text can tell us about the Lao cultural expectations of how you learn, what it means to learn, what you teach and how you teach it, and what it means to be a teacher. The role of experience, of example, and of explanation in this cultural learning situation might be explored as well. But we can only touch on a small part of this here.

When a young Lao man or woman seeks out an experienced mohlam as a teacher, the result is an adult-education situation, more specifically an apprenticeship. It involves an agreement between the teacher and the student; one might call it a "learning contract." I will briefly discuss here certain aspects of the learning process of which the wāy khūu is a part, as seen from the foreign student-learner’s point of view.

A student with Western notions of a formal learning situation usually expects to receive a direct answer to a question asked of a teacher. Thus it was particularly frustrating, when I asked a question of my own teachers or of other mohlam, to be told again and again:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{cāw sī? khàw cày ʔèŋ} & \quad \text{You'll come to an understanding yourself.} \\
\text{màn sī? khèn ʔèŋ} & \quad \text{It will rise up within you.} \\
\text{cāk nɔ̄y hūu ʔèŋ} & \quad \text{Soon you'll come to understand by yourself.}
\end{align*}
\]

Mohlam Nunaa and the two former monks with whom I studied poetry were trying to tell me that I would have to work it through alone. They wanted me to come to an understanding of these forms on my own, whereas I wanted them to answer my endless questions. Clearly our perceptions of the teaching/learning situation were
different.

The significance of the وحدة ฤๅว text as the first element to be learned by a student of ลำ is greater than I understood at the time. Now I know, having learned by working it out on my own, that this very text contained the answers to many of my questions. In fact, the learning process dictated by my Lao teachers reminds me of the method Acan Gedney used with students in his Comparative Tai class. He provided us with data which we were to sort, sift, and organize. When we came to class, he would ask questions of us, and we would try to answer, drawing upon our experience of working through the data.

Why do I say that learning the text itself answered many of my questions? Because the act of learning takes one through the steps in the process of singing that have become traditional for this form. One learns not just words with which to greet one’s audience, but also that “I should always greet my audience and bring them along with me psychologically.” One learns words to beseech and invoke the deities, but one also learns that they must be invoked, for by so doing you actually feel a kind of psychological power, the power coming to you through the words themselves.

The fact that there are certain patterns of words, or stock phrases, which can be depended upon, which are “handy,” is also revealed by the text, for these repeated patterns exist even in a text as short as this وحدة ฤๅว piece. (For example, see ฤๅว ฤๅว ฤๅว ฤๅว in lines 9c, 10d, 16b, 17c, 18d, 23a, and 28c.) One discovers that learning is not just memorization of a text; one must also think about what one is doing, what it means, and how to put one’s heart into it. Somewhere here is to be found the ฤๅว; the special “magic” attributed to the ฤๅว is to be found in the words themselves.

Implications

I would like to suggest that we have tended to overlook the total psychological and spiritual environment in which learning takes place, and the impact of this kind of environment on the quality of learning itself. The interaction between the student and the teacher is an important factor, and the degree to which one is “told the truth,” rather than “discovering the truth” may have a profound effect on the quality of the learning that takes place.
The apprenticeship learning situation between an accomplished mohlam and the new student is similar in some ways to what has been called the “learning contract.” What exists in the mohlam apprenticeship is a particularly heavy emphasis on the student’s responsibility to do the learning, to make decisions, to participate fully in the learning process. What is expected from the student is (1) a full commitment to the specific learning task; (2) a full commitment to the traditional art which he or she is about to learn; and (3) a high motivation to succeed, such that there is khrè ncāy, in other words, so much enthusiasm and commitment to the task that the learning is accomplished at a very deep level: it ‘enters one’s heart’. This, I feel now, is the basis of the ʔëh, of which I was told by so many Lao when I began to investigate lâm. Mohlam, I was told, have ʔëh, a “special kind of magic,” which allows them to sing.

In a book on Buddhism in Thailand, Sujib Punyanubhab discusses supernatural powers. He says,

When a mind is respectively trained and pacified, thereby divested of outer disturbances, more power—of a finer nature—will be accumulated thereon and thus more force can be deliberately released through the coarse, physical vehicle. Hence the seemingly incredible phenomena that astound many people and that we mistakenly call supernatural power. Once its possibility is accepted and its nature understood, there is no more of the baffling mystery and the incomprehensible. For it is just the natural method of practice and can be learned by anybody who would take the pains to follow out its course.²

Memorization of a text is not important. Real value lies in development of the power of concentration which focuses the mind on the task at hand and gives it additional power for later creative efforts. In other words, the presentation is no less important than the spirit in which it is done.

There is much to be learned from this tradition of paying respect to our teachers, and it is far more than the respect itself; it is the understanding, the knowledge that comes to us from the meaning of the process, and the strength that comes as we draw on the wisdom of the ages, rather than turning our backs on the past, for to turn so

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is to lose much accumulated merit.

Farewell

As those of you familiar with Laos and the Lao people already know, it is customary there, when one departs, to be given words of farewell by those one leaves behind. Consequently, I would like to end this paper from the conference in honor of Acan Gedney with a brief farewell to him.

Translation

Farewell, Acan

1 May you live well; may you have strength. 
   May you have neither injuries nor illnesses.

2 May you have a long, long life. 
   Throughout your life, from this day forward,

3 May you and your wife 
   Have no losses.

4 May you receive only good things 
   In this world.

5 May you have happiness and contentment 
   In your soul and in your heart.

6 Do not forget your old students 
   When you go off travelling.

7 We invite you to come and visit us, 
   To stay in our homes and villages.

8 Come any day you can; 
   We will all be pleased,

9 For you are a fine person 
   To whom we pay tribute today.

10 Now, 
   I ask to bid you farewell, 
   Supremely knowledgeable and precious teacher.
A Wai Khru for Acan Gedney

11 That's all!
12 Olanoh.

Transcription

lāa koon ?āacāan

1 khō hāy yuu dīi mīi hēēt bōo mīi cēp bōo mīi khāy
2 khō hāy mīi ?āānu? ŋī+n tālōt sīiwit tōo pāy
3 khō hāy ?āacān kāp mīa bōo mīi nāŋ sīa
4 hāy hap tēe sin dīi nāy lōōk thōolānī
5 khō hāy khūam sūk sābāy yuu nāy cēt yuu nāy cāy
6 yaa li+i mīuksīt kaw māa thiaw thua thāw
7 sēen máa yīam máa yāam phak hōn nōōn bāan
8 máa mē+ dāy kō dāy phūak hāw kō dīi cāy
9 phō ?āacān pēn khōn dīi thii hāw wāy nāy mē+ nīi
10 bāt nīi nāŋ khō lāa koon lēēw ?āacān hōōt nāan dīi kēēw
11 thāw nān lēēw
12 ?ōolanōō
Notes

