

THE LANGUAGE OF COURTSHIP IN CHIENGMAI¹

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If you have a daughter the dogs bark at your house,

If you have a son the dogs bark at the house of your friend.

One of the sad aspects of progress and technological innovation is the loss of folk customs which were intimately connected with the old technology. I believe it would be very difficult today to see such a scene as depicted in the accompanying re-production.² The spinning wheel and the rice-pounder appear to have been an integral part of courtship in Northern Thailand—today they are fast disappearing. In the Chiangmai district of Mae Taeng, or at least in the parts of it which I know, the spinning wheels and rice pounders³ lie unused and discarded, the first made superfluous by the advent of imported printed coltons and synthetic fibres, the second by the small diesel driven rice mill. Of course there are other factors responsible for the death of traditional northern courtship as well,—but spinning

- 1) Field work in North Thailand was financed by the Australian National University, where the author currently holds a research fellowship in the Department of Anthropology and Sociology.
- 2) The reproduction is from a painting by Vichit Viangthong (วิชิต เวียงทอง) and is reproduced by permission of the Editor of *Nitayasan Chiangmai* (นิตยสาร เชียงใหม่). The reproduction was done by the Visual Aids Unit of the Australian National University.
- 3) There is no rice pounder in the picture, — but it is well-known that rice-pounding was a favourite occasion for courtship. See สงวน โชติสุขรัตน์ (Sanguan Chotesukharat) ประเพณีและวัฒนธรรมของเมืองเหนือ (*Customs and Culture of the North*) Bangkok 1962 p. 79.

and weaving, and the pounding of rice appear to have provided the conditions under which young girls could remain outside while their parents were in bed - at the same time maintaining propriety: for as long as the long as the sounds of the spinning wheel, the weaving loom and the rice pounder continued the parents could be sure their daughter was behaving as a young lady should.

There are other changes and other causes. The hair styles, the clothes, and even the houses are different. The blouses of the girls are cut differently, and their hair, most likely short and permed - and I have yet to see in real life the boy's hair style so clearly shown in the picture. The guitar (*syng*)⁴ is still played and enjoyed, but rarely now in courting. The only uncovered verandah, of the style so prominent in the picture, that I have seen is the one attached to the house that now stands in the compound of the Siam Society. The greatest loss however is in the language, the poetry of courtship. The compliments, the self-deprecation still occur, but the idea that courtship entailed the learning of a linguistic art is fast going, if not

- 4) The system used for the transliteration of Thai words is essentially the Mary Haas system 1956. The Northern Thai sounds not found in Central Thai are represented as follows: The nasal which replaces the Central Thai sound 'j' in initial position in many words is written 'ŋ', and is pronounced like 'gn' in *coconut*: The high falling tone is represented by a bar over the vowel, thus: 'ā̄a'. What for convenience may be called a mid tone on a dead syllable is written without a tonal marker.

The Northern Thai written in Central Thai script follows more or less the system proposed by มานะ รตนประสิทธิ์ (Mate Ratanaprasit, Nai) มานะรัตนประสิทธิ์ ไทโยน-ไทย-อังกฤษ (Thai Yuan-Thai-English Dictionary) Bangkok 1965. In this system 'j' is always written 'ญ' and 'ŋ' always 'ง'. The high falling tone is distinguished from the mid falling tone by being underlined, thus 'ā̄ā'. The mid tone on dead syllables is similarly distinguished, thus 'āā'. For translation and other purposes, the following were consulted: Purnell, H.C., *A Short Northern Thai-English Dictionary* Chiangmai 1963; Hope, E.R. & Purnell, H.C., *A Colorful Colloquial Chiangmai* 1962 (2nd edition undated); Mate *op. cit.*; and McFarland, G.B., *Thai-English Dictionary* Stanford 1944. In the main body of the article tonal markers and the glottal stop are ignored, and '๑๑' is written 'au', and '๑๑' is written 'ae'. I apologize to readers for any mistakes in transliteration.

lost already. Khun Thaworn Khatiphibul, from whom the fragment recorded here was collected, speaks with nostalgia of the time before the war, when, as a young man he paid to learn the art, performing the ritual of *tang khan* (ตั่งขัน) as any pupil does for any teacher, as any client does for any expert. All that he remembers now is this fragment.

Courting was, and is, not restricted by season, but summer months when the nights are warm and the roads and fields dry, and particularly on full moon nights, when not only is there light to see by, but many old folks are safely out of the way spending the night in the *wat*, youths still wander far afield looking for a quick conquest, a wife, or at least a pleasant evening's entertainment. There are rules and conventions which dictate the progress of the courtship, though rather surprisingly it seems little control was exercised over the girl's choice of suitors. In the few cases I know where parents have objected to a match, the objection has occurred much too late to be of any use. When the suitor has been invited up, with or without enthusiasm (see text), the girl is expected to continue with her work, and the young man to talk or sing, but not to touch. Any physical contact is 'an offence against the spirits' (*phid phii* ผิดผี) and must be compensated for. If no propitiation is made to the domestic spirits (*sia phii* เสียผี) sickness will befall some member of the family. Usually, but not always, *sia phii* leads to marriage. People say that in the old days if the boy picked up a handkerchief the girl happened to drop, or if they sat on the same plank the spirits were offended. The text suggests that this prohibition was not always taken very seriously.

The prohibition on touching is part of the general prohibition of any intimacy in public, even between husband and wife, but apparently unlike Central Thailand, the objection to public intimacy and physical contact without the placation of spirits is not merely a matter of propriety. There is very real apprehension of the supernatural dangers of contact between men and women. One of the standard diagnoses of diviners in case of illness, is that somebody has 'offended the spirits', and this does not necessarily mean adultery.

One story which I believe to be authentic, is of a young girl selling illegal lottery tickets, who tried to escape a police raid by screaming that the police were offending the spirits by grabbing her. The policeman's answer was that he was not interested in catching spirits, only sellers of the illegal lottery.

Courting language appears to be of two kinds. The first, of which the text is an example, is in the style of formalized conversation, the second is a style of poetry or song used in other contexts as well. Both sorts are popularly spoken of as *ham uu saaw*⁵; Sanguan calls the first type *kham khrya* (คำขวัญ). This is presumably a transference of the Northern Thai form into Central Thai, and should, I believe, be written *ham khya* (คำขวัญ). The other type is known as *khaaw* (คำขวัญ) and is today also used in advertising and for political and other types of comment. One of the weekly newspapers in Chiangmai, *Siang Chiangmai*, has a regular column in the *khaaw* or *khaaw sau* style. This is the only column in the newspaper which uses Northern Thai, perhaps the only column in any Chiangmai newspaper. *Khaaw sau* is to be distinguished from *sau* proper, which today at least, seems much more popular. The two forms have different rhythms. *Sau* may be used to celebrate almost any occasion - in fact no celebration is really complete without the presence of a *sau* troupe. The subject matter presented in this form covers the full range from the religious to the obscene, though troupes specializing in the obscene do not appear to operate any more within the city or in the more accessible areas. The two types of *sau*, and to some extent the *kam khya*, involve the learning of themes, techniques and rhythms; improvisations are then made to fit the particular circumstance.

This fragmentary text is the only example of *ham khya* of which I know, except the even briefer fragment in Sanguan.⁶ Because of this it would be foolish to attempt any detailed analysis but it may be worth while setting out the few hints this one text provides. The fourteen statements fall into five sections which may be interpreted as representing different stages of the conversation. 1, 2a and 2b the arrival

5) Sanguan *op. cit.* p. 80.

6) *Loc. cit.*

and invitation to the suitor—with 2a and 2b as alternative responses. 3 and 4 represent an opening gambit in the conversation. 5, 6 and 7 do not follow from 3 and 4. It would appear that this type of sequence could follow from one of many types of exchange—most probably from a statement of the girl expressing her virtue or her constancy. 8, 9 and 10 take up a theme common in ordinary conversation—the polygamous propensities of the male. I would interpret it as being the closest to a direct proposition as the form will allow, and that the outcome of this type of sequence will show whether the girl is willing to take the suitor as a lover or not. 11, 12 and 13 are a conclusion to the conversation, and have the cleverest bit of word play of the entire fragment. This will be taken up in a moment.

The first section indicates on the one hand that the form provides a number of different choices for differing circumstances, and on the other, the use of insult. Clearly implied insult, I would suspect, is a female prerogative. It is also likely that the response 2b is by far the commoner, and would not in itself deter a prospective suitor. 2a could only be used if the girl and her suitor had already reached an understanding with each other—if they called each other *tua pau-tua mae* (ตัวบ่ฮอ-ตัวแม่). 3 and 4 fall into a pattern of compliment by the boy and self-deprecation by the girl. This is also seen in the fragment given by Sanguan⁷ and also in a hypothetical modern conversation given by the same author.⁸ I would venture the hypothesis that pattern of compliment and self-deprecation is always from male to female. The set 5-7 is the most difficult to say anything about. In the first place there is some puzzle as to why the formal pronouns *khaa-caw* are used rather than the more usual *aaj-naung*. One answer may be that this set represents a stage in the courtship where the two are not yet familiar with each other, but where the girl is trying to indicate the possibility of a more serious relationship by insisting on her constancy or some other virtue. The metaphor in 6 is clear enough, but why *dauk kae* (ตลกแค) should imply teasing or lack of seriousness is not clear. It could be that this exists

7) *Loc. cit.*

8) Sanguan, ผู้ดำเืมือง (*Speak Northern Thai*) Bangkok 1965.

merely to rhyme with *laulac* (လူလပ်). *Kac* is *khac* in Central Thai which McFarland identifies as *Sesbania Grandiflora*.⁹ Perhaps this set falls into a pattern of self-justification and denial, a pattern which is reversed in 12 and 13, and found in a slightly different form in 8, 9 and 10. *Dauj* in 8 is *taun khamauj* in Central Thai.¹⁰ Mate identifies it merely as an infantile disease, whereas McFarland says 'a common chronic ailment of Siamese children characterized by thin arms and legs, but enlarged abdomen (usually due to intestinal worms).'¹¹ The term probably covers a number of quite distinct diseases, but I would have thought that kwashiorkor would be one of them. It is therefore interesting that in Northern Thailand at least it is thought of as being caused by eating fish or meat without rice. In 9 *aem thaw* is an inversion (*kham klab* ကံလပ်) a form of word play common in both Northern and Central Thai. The phrase stands for *aw thaem* (အသံတေ) meaning 'to take more' or 'to increase'. The metaphor in 10 does not present any problems. The interesting feature of the final set is the pair of inversions, *kham klab*. In 12 the girl is supposedly saying 'The cock is crowing on the roof (of the shed)', and the boy replies 'No, the cock is crowing in the fields (*rai* ရေ)'. But *khan huan* when reversed becomes *khaan han*, (ကံလပ်) which means 'tired of seeing you'. *Khan haj* when reversed becomes *kha₂ han* meaning 'wish to see you'. So that in fact the girl is saying 'I am fed up of looking at you', and the boy replies 'But I wish to look at you'.

A comment on terms of address used between courting couples. The usual form is for the pair to call each other 'elder brother' and 'younger sister', i.e. *aaj* and *naung*. It should however be mentioned that though *aaj* is also the term used by a woman for her elder brother, a man will not address his younger sister as *naung* but as *ii* + name, e.g. *iidaeng, iipan*. However, when a girl accepts a suitor as a husband, as a lover or as a potential lover the terms *tua pau-tua mae* are used.¹² I suspect that this latter usage is becoming rarer. The term

9) McFarland *op. cit.*, gives two other botanical names as well, but *Sesbania Grandiflora* appears to be the one intended in the text.

10) Mate *op. cit.* p. 105.

11) McFarland *op. cit.* p. 362.

12) Sangan 1962 *op. cit.* p. 81.

pīi (Central Thai *pīi*) is usually used only for the elder sister, but in 9 *tua pīi* is used synonymously with *aa-j*.

What is interesting about this fragment is not so much its colourful language, but the possibility that the form worked as a kind of code using varying conventions, some of which I have called 'patterns' in the fore-going, to communicate the intentions of the wooer and the wooed. It is possible that this code was highly formalized, and that the girl, particularly, could indicate her intentions by her responses, with propriety, within the conventional compliment, insult and banter. The boy's task would be partly to present the stimulus so that the girl could indicate her intentions through the response, but also partly to elicit the desired response through his own skill. Admittedly the evidence is at the moment quite insufficient, but the structure of *kam khya* is, I think, worth investigating whatever the conclusions arrived at. For this reason I shall be extremely grateful for many more examples from anyone who has them. Besides this, it is worthwhile trying to preserve one of the more colourful features of what Hope and Purnell have called 'a colourful colloquial'.¹³

13) Hope and Purnell *op. cit.*

Text¹⁴

1.

ชาย ขอบ น้ํา หนอย เตะ

Man: khǎw nǎj nǎj tɛʔ
 may sit a little please
 May I sit down for a little while?

2a.

หญิง: น้ํา เตะๆ น้ํา เมอะอิ กั้น โผ กั้น จ้าง มัน
 ห้าง ไ้

Woman: nǎj tɛʔ (repeat) nǎj mǎʔ iŋ kǎn phaj hǎn cǎj man
 laaj daj
 sit! sit close together who sees can it right can
 Come on sit down. Sit close by me, it does not matter
 if anyone sees us.

2b.

หญิง: น้ํา เตะๆ บ่าใจ^{๑๕} ต โผ ต หัว ขนโต ต
 อยู่ ทมา ไ้

Woman: nǎj tɛʔ (repeat) bǎacǎj tɪ phǎj tɪ hǔa khyndaj tɪ
 jɪu mǎa kǔɔŋ
 sit! not place anyone place head stairs place stays dog
 spotted
 Sit down. The place at the head of the stairs only belongs
 to the spotted dog.

14) The text was collected from Khun Thaworn Khatiphibul of Mae Taeng, Chiangmai. I owe Khun Thaworn a deep debt of gratitude not only for his help, but also for the unfailing friendship he showed my family and myself.

15) This is often written 'บ้', but Khun Thaworn prefers 'บ่า'. In normal speech one hears 'ba' or 'bǎ'.

3.

ช : บ้าน นี บ้าน ชุ่ม บ้าน เย็น บ้าน เหน บ้าน กัดกิน ไก่
 Man : bāan nī bāan cūm bāan jen bāan hěn bāan hěn bàakin kàj
 house this house fresh house cool house civet not eat chicken
 This house is fresh and cool, and the civet does not steal
 chickens = The house is quiet and peaceful.

4.

ญ : บ้านไฟ บ้าน นี บ้าน ฮ้อน บ้าน ไหม้ บ้าน ใกล้ตะวัน
 Woman : bàacāj bāan nī bāan hāon bāan māj bāan káj tǎawan
 No! house this house hot house burns house near sun
 No! This is a house of fire and heat = No! This is a house
 full of trouble.

5.

ช : จู ก้า
 Man : cú' káa
 Lies!

6.

ญ : บ้านจู้ ปาก ข้า ว่า เต้ แล้ว ก่อ แล้ว ตั้ง ใจ บ้านม่วง
 สุก ตั้ง หน่วย ตั้ง ขวน
 Woman : bà' cú pàak khāa wāa téε léew kòw léew tyŋ cǎj bàamūan
 suk tyŋ nùaj tyŋ khwān
 not lies mouth my says true already already to heart mango
 ripe both seed and stem
 It's not a lie. My mouth speaks only what is in my heart.
 Like the mango that is ripe from stem to seed.

16) In the original text Khun Thaworn wrote 'ใกล้'.

7.

ช : ปาก ว่า แต่ น้ำใจ หลอแหล เจ้า สี ดอก แก ว่า แต่
แก้ม เทลัน

Man: p̄ak wāa t̄ee n̄amc̄aj l̄s̄ l̄ē caw s̄i d̄ōk k̄ee wāa t̄ee
keem l̄ēn

mouth says true spirit fickle you colour flower (?) says true
mix play

You may speak truly, but your spirit is fickle. You are like the
colour of the khae flower, you speak the truth mixed with
jest.

8.

ญ : มี แล้ว จะ เอา หญิง หลาย กิน ป้า บ้าตาย บ้ากั้ว
เป่น ค้อย กำ

Woman: mii l̄ew ēa' aw ʔāŋ l̄āj kin p̄āa b̄iadaŋ baakūa
p̄ēn d̄w̄j k̄āa

have already will take why many eat fish alone not afraid
become (sick)?

If you have a wife already, why do you want some more?
Aren't you afraid that you will become sick by eating fish
without rice?

9.

ช : อ้าย มี แล้ว ใค่ แอม เดา (เอาแอม) ตัว บี้ ใค่ เอา
กั้ว น่อง บ้าสู

Man: 'āaj mii l̄ew khāj 'eem th̄aw ('aw th̄eem) t̄ūa p̄i khāj 'aw
kūa n̄ōŋ b̄āsū

E. Brother has already wish take more E. Brother wish take
afraid Y. sister not willing

I have a wife already, but I wish to have more. I want a
wife, but am afraid you will not be willing.

10.

ญ : ถ้า อาย มี แล้ว แอม แอม สอง ช้ เชื้อ นานอง
ข้าง ล้ม

Woman: thaa 'aaj mii léew 'eem thǎem sǎwŋ khii hya námnoŋ
cāaŋ lóm

if E.B. has already increase two paddles boat flood
can capsize

If you add a wife to the one you have the boat may capsize
in the flood while trying to use two paddles.

11.

ญ : เด็ก¹⁷ มา ม่อยม้อย น้ำนอย ป้ายแป้ ไก่ ขัน แจแฉ
ปอดดา ไก่ แจ้ง ไก่ ปอ ขัน ฮ่าน (ค่านหัน)
แล้ว น้อ

Woman: dak maa mǔwǎj mǔwǎj nám'wǎwǎj pǎaj pǎe kàj khǎn cǎe'le
pǔwdaa khǎj cǎeŋ kàj pǔw khǎn hǎan (khǎan hǎn)
léew nǔw

dark comes everywhere dew gutter cock crows cock-a-doodle-
doo almost wish sunrise cock ready crow roof (don't wish
see) already isn't it so?

It is dark everywhere, there is dew in the gutter, and the
cock crows cock-a-doodle-doo. It is almost dawn and the
cock is ready to crow on the roof (or I am tired of seeing
your face).

17) In the original text Khun Thaworn wrote 'คัก',

12.

ข : บ่่าจ้ ใถ่ มั้น ขัน ไซ่ (ใถ่มั้น)

Man : báacāj kāj man khān hāj (khāj hān)

No! cock it crows fields (wish see)

No, the cock is crowing in the fields (or I wish to see you).