

A NOTE ON AP NAM AP THA (อาบน้ำอาบท่ำ)

by

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Commenting on jingling sounds and meaningless repetitions in Siamese expressions, Prince Chand² cites, as an example, the well-known idiom อาบน้ำอาบท่ำ. However, I think there is reason to doubt that the choice of just this example was a lucky one.

Prince Chand does not elaborate on his example, but it seems evident to what he is referring: the incongruity between the first and the second parts of the expression, the obvious meaning of which is: "To wash (oneself) with (or: in the) water, to wash (oneself) in (or: at) the harbour". Such a meaning is indeed not very satisfying, although evidently there is some connection, because a harbour has much to do with water. Still, the expression makes some sense if one does not think "harbour" in terms of Hamburg or Khlông Tôi—why should villagers not have their bath at a place where their boats are moored?

The meaning of น้ำ is "liquid" in a broad sense; but mostly the word is used in the restricted sense "water".

If one looks up ท่ำ in some of the major dictionaries, one comes across the following entries:

Pallegoix³

1. Bank of a river
2. Road for going down to the river
3. ลงท่ำ to go towards the river, towards the water
4. ท่ำหรือ landing place for boats
5. น้ำท่ำ water of a stream, of a river, of a great river
6. ดินท่ำ road towards the river

Plang⁴

1. Landing place
2. น้ำจืด fresh water
3. ดินท่ำ landing place

1) Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University

2) M.C. Chand Chirayu Rajani, A.B. Griswold and Prasert na Nagara, "Epigraphic and Historical Studies No. 9 and No. 10", JSS (61.2) 1973 p. 167-182. The expression is referred to on p. 171.

3) D.J.B. Pallegoix, *Dictionarum linguae Thai*, Paris 1854.

4) ปลัง พลอยพรหม, *พจนานุกรมไทย-อังกฤษ*, พระนคร (แพรวพทยา) พ.ศ. 2502.

McFarland⁵

1. A place for boats or ships to approach the land
2. ท่าช้าง a fording or bathing place for elephants
3. ท่าม้า a landing platform provided with steps
4. คันท้า the lower steps of a pier or ladder leading down from a landing place to the water in front of Siamese houses; a bathing place with steps leading down.

Krom Tamra⁶

1. ฟังน้ำสำหรับขมลง หรือจอดเรือ

Phrā Phithaya⁷

1. ฟังน้ำสำหรับขมลง หรือจอดเรือ
2. น้ำคดองหรือในแม่น้ำ เรียกน้ำท่า
3. ท่าข้าม ริมน้ำซึ่งใช้เป็นที่ข้ามฟาก
4. ท่าม้า ริมน้ำซึ่งใช้เป็นที่ขมลง

Rachabandit⁸

1. ฟังน้ำสำหรับขมลงหรือจอดเรือ
2. ท่าสำหรับขมลงริมน้ำ เป็นท่าช้าง ท่าเกวียน ท่าข้าม
3. น้ำจืดที่ตกขึ้นมา เรียกว่า น้ำท่า

Similar meanings are found in White Thai, North Vietnam⁹:

1. Fontaine
2. Endroit où on puise de l'eau et où on se baigne
The meaning of ท่า is thus obviously fourfold:
1. (River) landing, also used for bathing; here ท่า seems to include the mooring place of the boats in the water as well as the land along the edge of the river
2. A shallow part in the river bed (ford), used either for crossing the river or for bathing
3. Water

5) George Bradley McFarland, *Thai-English Dictionary*, Stanford 1953.

6) กรมตำรวจธรรมการ, *บทานุกรม*, พระนคร พ.ศ. 2470.

7) พจนานุกรมไทย ฉบับของบริรักษ์ "แพร่พิทยา" พระนคร พ.ศ. 2507.

8) พจนานุกรม ฉบับราชบัณฑิตยสถาน พระนคร พ.ศ. 2513.

9) Georges Minot, *Dictionnaire Tay Blanc-Français*, in : BEFEO (40) 1940,

It is difficult to decide, which of the four meanings of ^{น้ำ}ท่า is the one referred to in ^{น้ำ}อาบน้ำ^{น้ำ}ท่า, because all of them make sense:

“To wash (oneself) in the water, at the landing”

“To wash (oneself) on the water, at the ford”

“To wash (oneself) in the water, in the water”

“To wash (oneself) in the water, in the river”.

All four meanings are in keeping with the usual construction of Siamese idioms which often make use of repetitions or duplications.

But if one considers two similar expressions, viz. ตก^{น้ำ}ตก^{ท่า} and กิน^{น้ำ}กิน^{ท่า}, which are commonly understood to mean “to fall into the water” and “to drink water”, then it appears that ^{น้ำ}ท่า either is a synonym to ^{น้ำ} or has a more specific meaning than ^{น้ำ}, i.e. น้ำ^{จืด} “fresh (not salty) water”, because one does not drink salt water, neither from the ocean nor from a well. ^{น้ำ}อาบน้ำ^{น้ำ}ท่า therefore seems to have the meaning of “to wash (oneself) in (fresh) water”, or “to have a (fresh water) bath”.

It is perhaps possible to go one step further in the interpretation of the expression. In some of the Northern Thai dialects, such as Yuan or Droi¹⁰, ^{น้ำ}ท่า has the meaning of “river” and some of the above mentioned quotations indicate the same meaning. In classical Yuan, ^{น้ำ}ท่า also has sometimes the meaning “river”. If it is true that these dialects and quotations represent a more ancient state of language, then the expression ^{น้ำ}อาบน้ำ^{น้ำ}ท่า must originally have meant “to wash (oneself) in the water, in (of) the river”, or perhaps “to wash (oneself) in the river, in the river”, i.e. “to take a bath in the river”.— If one takes into account that the countryfolks, having no bathroom, still take their bath in the river—at a shallow place, from where they also carry the water of the river to their houses for consumption, usually not far from their boats that mostly lie half on the sand and half in the water—then these latter interpretations seem even more likely, and the other meanings of ^{น้ำ}ท่า may be secondary derivations.

^{น้ำ}อาบน้ำ^{น้ำ}ท่า thus contains either a repetition (^{น้ำ} = ^{น้ำ}) or first a word with a more general meaning (^{น้ำ}) and then a word with a more specific meaning (^{น้ำ}ท่า). Whatever the precise original meaning, at its time and place, the expression does not seem to have been a meaningless repetition.

10) Jos. Esquirol et Gust. Williatte, *Essai de dictionnaire Droi Français*, Hongkong 1908.