

The Lawa Ləsəm ɬɛ Poetry*

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Background information

In this paper the term 'Lawa' is referred to as the language of a tribal group whose population is estimated to be about 9,841¹ and is concentrated in two Northern provinces, Chiangmai and Maehongsorn.² Specifically the Lawa villages are found between Baw Luang, Hot district, Chiangmai province in the East and Maesariang district, Maehongsorn province in the West³. These Lawa or, as they call themselves, [lavə], belong to different linguistic groups from the so-called 'Lawa' of Kanchanaburi province, from the 'Luə' (Mal, Thin) of Nan province, and from the 'Lawa' (Chaobon, Nahkur)⁴ of Petchabun, Nakorn Rajseema and Chaiyaphum provinces. Historically, the Lawa are the descendants of the powerful Lawa whose kingdom was recorded in the early Northern Thai chronicles. The history of these Lawa has been a subject of discussion by many historians and anthropologists. For example, according to two Thai scholars, Sisawat and Khanthathatbamroong, the Lawa were once the lords of the land in the upper part of the Golden Peninsula before the southward

* An earlier version of this paper was presented to the Symposium on Austro-Asiatic Languages, Helsingor, Denmark, October 24-26, 1979

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1. The number was given by the Tribal Research Center in its reports, *Tribal Population Summary in Thailand*, 1979.
2. The Lawa population in Chiangmai is 7,139, consisting of 1,239 households in 19 villages. In Maehongsorn, the number is decreased to 2,570, consisting of 499 households in 13 villages. There is also a Lawa village in Chiengrai where there are only 132 Lawa and 29 households; cf. the above mentioned *Tribal Population Summary in Thailand*.
3. A vivid description of a two-day trek to these Lawa villages was given by the late Princess Viphavadee Rangsit in her article "nīe nuyə phra? rajchathan khīn khao" (when the Royal Aid comes to the hills) in her collected papers "riəj lai rōi" (Different tastes), Bangkok, Prae Pittaya Press, 1971.
4. A description of the Chaobon language was done by Miss Payao Meemanas in her *A Description of Chaobon (nahkur) : an Austroasiatic Language in Thailand*, an unpublished M.A. thesis, Southeast Asian Language Center, Mahidol University, 1979, 314 pages (in English).

migration of the Thai race from China⁵. Gordon Young mentioned a story told to him by a great Wa chieftain who claimed that his people had journeyed thousands of years ago northward along the Mae Ping river and settled for a long time in what is now Chiangmai valley⁶. Princess Viphavadee Rangsit believed that the Lawa once had attained a state of civilization whereby human society consisted of classes. The belief was based on her discovery in 1969 when she visited the Lawa village of Umphai in Chiangmai province where it was found that the Lawa community actually consists of four classes, i.e., (1) The samaṅ (royal blood), (2) the lam (mandarin), (3) the koyit (sorcerer and shaman) and (4) the ordinary lavi⁷. Besides, from her observation of the crocodile motives carved on the pillars of an ancient ceremonial pavillion in that village together with the samaṅ's use of fish as their herald, she advanced the theory about the sea origin or the northward migration of the Lawa⁸.

Linguistically speaking, the Lawa language belongs to the Palaungic branch of the Mon-Khmer family in the Austroasiatic Phylum⁹. The Lawa language described in this paper is the one spoken in Ban Pa Pae village [yueṅ pé], Maesariang district, Maehongsorn province. The author has been working on this language since 1974 with the purpose of compiling a Lawa — Thai and Thai — Lawa dictionary¹⁰. Even if more than 4,000 words together with phrases and sentences illustrating their usage have already been collected, the author always finds it difficult to finish the planned dictionary. New interesting words come up every time the author interviews her informants. Attracted by the richness of its vocabulary and by the poetic expression of this language, the author shifted her interest from the planned

5. Sisawat, Bunchūai 'sām sip chat nai Chiengrai' (Thirty Nationalities in Chiengrai), Outhai Press, Bangkok, 1952 (in Thai).

Khanthathatbamroong, Manas 'kan sonkhro? chao khao nai phak nākhon tamruet phuthon chai den' (An assistant to the hilltribes in the North by the Royal Patrol Police), an unpublished M.A thesis, Thammasart University, 1965 (in Thai).

6. Young, Oliver Gordon (*The Hill Tribes of Northern Thailand*, 1961, fifth edition published by the Siam Society, Bangkok, 1974, 96 pages, page 53.

7. Kauffmann, H. E gave a slightly different account of the Lawa system of classes in his article 'Some Social and Religious Institutions of the Lawa' part I'. *Journal of the Siam Society* 60, 1, 1972.

8. Viphavadee Rangsit, "mānuay phra rajchathan khin khao", page 336-337.

9. Thomas, David D., and Headley, Robert K., 'More on Mon-Khmer Subgrouping', *Lingua* 25, 4 page 398-418.

10. Ratanakul, Suriya, 'ruəpruəm kham phasa Lawa' (A collection of Lawa vocabulary), paper presented to the Symposium on Humanities Disciplines, organized by the National Research Council of Thailand, March 24-26, 1977, 40 pages.

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linguistic investigation to the study of the culture and literature of the Lawa. This paper is a report of part of her findings of such study.

In this paper an attempt will be made to give (a) a brief phonological description of the Ban Papae dialect; (b) a short account of the coming of age of Lawa adolescents together with courtship and marriage, all of which are entwined with ləsəm ɿɛ; (c) an analysis of different types of ləsəm ɿɛ; and (d) a translation of some selected texts of ləsəm ɿɛ.

A brief phonological description of the Ban Pa Pae dialect¹¹

Ban Pa Pae village¹², situated in Tambon Ban Pa Pae, Mae Sariang district, Mae Hongson Province, consists of 284 Lawa living in 54 households. The majority of the population are animistic Buddhists and accept the samaŋ as their leaders. Christian missionaries came to the village 20 years ago and converted a small number of the Lawa. Perhaps the greatest contribution by those missionaries to the Lawa was the introduction of the Roman and Thai alphabets as the means of writing Lawa¹³. As a result, the Lawa have been using these alphabets in their daily correspondences including the writing of ləsəm ɿɛ. Even if the widespread written language introduced by these missionaries was based on the pronunciation of people from another village, Ban La-up, the Ban Pa Pae people have no difficulty in using it as an effective means of correspondence because all of them know the systematic sound correspondence between the pronunciation of Ban La-up and their own.

In the phonological description that follows, IPA symbols are used with some exceptions: y = IPA j; ñ = IPA ɲ; m̥ etc preglottalized.

Ban Pa Pae Lawa has 37 initial consonants as shown in the following chart.

11. The phonological description is based on the pronunciation of the author's principle informant, Khun Bunphob Bo? bī, ages 31.
12. Kunstadter, Peter gave a description of Lawa circle of life in Ban Pa Pae village in his article 'Living With Thailand's Gentle Lua' in the *National Geographic Magazine*, July, 1966, page 123-146.
13. Schlatter, Donald gave a detailed description of the analysis and development of orthography for writing the Lawa language, in *Phonemes and Orthography : Language Planning in Ten Minority Languages of Thailand*, William A. Smalley (editor), Pacific Linguistics Series C - No. 43, Australian National University, 1976, chapter 11, page 273-281.

| | | | bilabial | labio-dental | alveola | palatal | velar | glottal |
|----------|------------|------------------|----------------|--------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|---------|
| stops | oral | voiceless unasp. | p | | t | c | k | ʔ |
| | | voiceless asp. | p ^h | | t ^h | c ^h | k ^h | |
| | | voiced | b | | | y | | |
| | | prenasal. | m _b | | n _d | ñ _c | n _g | |
| | | preglottalized | | | | y | | |
| | nasal | voiced | m | | n | ñ | ŋ | |
| | | voiceless | hm | | hn | hñ | hŋ | |
| | | preglottalized | m̥ | | n̥ | ñ̥ | ŋ̥ | |
| | fricatives | slit | voiceless | | f | | | h |
| voiced | | | | v | | ɣ | | |
| groove | | voiceless | | | s | ʃ | | |
| laterals | | voiceless | | | hl | | | |
| | | voiced | | | l | | | |
| | | preglottalized | | | l̥ | | | |

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examples :

| | | |
|------------------|--------------------|-------------------------------------|
| p- | paŋ | bottle |
| t- | tɔm | egg |
| c- | caŋ | deer |
| k- | kaʔ | fish |
| ʔ- | ʔaĩʔ | I |
| p ^h - | p ^h eñ | white |
| t ^h - | t ^h u | mountain |
| c ^h - | c ^h uəŋ | foot |
| k ^h - | k ^h iət | to bite |
| b- | bak | small frog |
| y- | yĩəm | to weep |
| m ^b - | m ^b ok | to ride |
| n ^d - | n ^d oŋ | pot (cooking utensil) |
| n ^c - | n ^c aim | (finger) ring |
| n ^g - | n ^g ok | ugly |
| y- | yĩə | medicine |
| m- | maic | good, beautiful |
| n- | nok | to make an offering to the spirits |
| ñ- | ñiəʔ | house |
| ŋ- | ŋoŋ | knee |
| hm- | hmɔn | to hear |
| hn- | hnam | blood |
| hñ- | hñoic | the narrow part of a piece of cloth |
| hŋ- | hŋɔʔ | paddy, unhusked rice |
| ṃ- | ṃoʔ | rope |
| ŋ- | ŋoŋ | only one |
| ñ- | mah ñok | “Never mind!” |
| ŋ- | ŋai | eye |
| f- | fĩəʔ | monkey |
| h- | hɛ | bee |
| v- | vec | sword |
| ʔ- | ʔaĩh | turtle |
| ʔ | ʔɔŋ | post, pillar |
| s- | saŋ | elephant |
| hl- | hlaʔ | leaf |

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| | | |
|----|------|------|
| l- | lɔic | pig |
| l- | lɔŋ | boat |

In Lawa /l/ and /y/ can function as the second consonant.

example

| | | |
|-----------------|-------------------|-------------------------------|
| l — pl | plɔŋ | grass used for thatching |
| kl | kloŋ | river, stream |
| phl | phlɔk | elephant's task |
| khl | khlɔk | to lick |
| ^m bl | ^m ble | bracelet |
| ⁿ gl | ⁿ gloʔ | swamp |
| y — py | pyaŋ | roof |
| ky | kyak | buffalo |
| y — phy | phyuʔ | blanket |
| khy | khyai | gold |
| ^m by | ^m byɔŋ | horse |
| ⁿ gy | ⁿ gyoŋ | to carry (two or more people) |

Final consonants: Lawa has both open syllables and closed syllable. Open syllables occurs only after long vowels. Closed syllable can have the following 10 consonants as final consonants:

example

| | | |
|----|------------------|---------------|
| -p | ʔaop | cooked rice |
| -t | ʔaɪt | to be |
| -c | lɔic | pig |
| -k | ʔak | crossbow |
| -ʔ | khoʔ | tree |
| -h | maih | nose |
| -m | ʔəom | salty |
| -n | kuən | child |
| -ñ | ^m biñ | mud |
| -ŋ | kloŋ | river, stream |

Vowels:

| | | | |
|------|-------|--------------|------|
| | front | central-back | back |
| high | i | i | u |

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| | | | |
|----------|----|---|---|
| mid-high | | w | |
| mid | e | ə | o |
| low | ɛ̃ | a | ɔ |

Lawa has a nine — vowel types. It is the author's hypothesis that the mid-high /w/ may have been recently introduced. It is found only in 9 words, all of which are undoubtedly Thai (or Kam Muəŋ) loan words.

| | | | |
|------------------|------|----------------------------------|---------------|
| examples: | khwŋ | to stretch | Thai khin̄ |
| | twk | to get stuck (to, in) | Thai tit̄ |
| | kwt | to obstruct, to be in the way of | Thai kiit̄ |
| | vwn | to feel lonely and nostalgic | Thai waŋ weeŋ |
| | swk | enemy | Thai sik̄ |
| | | etc. | |

Diphthongs :

| | | |
|----|----|----|
| iə | ĩə | ui |
| ɛi | əi | uə |
| ɛɔ | əĩ | oi |
| | əo | ɔi |
| | ai | ɔɛ |
| | aĩ | |
| | ao | |

Syllables

Most Lawa words are monosyllabic. Disyllabic words have a preliminary syllable and a main syllable. Preliminary syllable receives no stress. This first vowel position is filled by only two vowels (a and ə). ə is more frequent than a. It is a neutralization of all points of vowel articulation. However, when reduplication (such as in an onomatopoea) is present, any short vowel may occur. The second syllable, the main syllable, receives stress. It may be filled by all vowel phonemes.

Coming of Age in Ban Pa Pae

Unlike the Meo, the Yao, the Lisu or the Akha, the Lawa do not enjoy festivities. They are more repressive and subtle in their emotional expressions. In our relationship with them, their mannerism, slight facial expression and other bodily

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signs must always be taken into account.¹⁴ Therefore one should not be surprised that the coming of age ceremony of the Lawa adolescents is much simpler than that of other tribes. Tradition was established with the belief that after the age of puberty, these Lawa boys and girls would become young adults, ready for courtship and marriage and for taking up social responsibilities (e.g. making and receiving social visits and reciting *l̥səm ɿɛ* at funerals). In this tradition the coming of age of the girls is more defined than that of the boys. For a girl to come of age she must be 13 years old and in accordance with the need of the community where she lives. If, on that specific period there exists in the community a large number of unmarried debutantes, to use the Western terminology, whom the community could ask to recite the *l̥səm ɿɛ* in funeral ceremonies, her coming of age can be postponed for 6 months or a year if she so desires. On the contrary, if on that time there are few maidens, the girl's coming of age can be hastened to the age of 12. Such decision is made partially by the girl herself and by the elder maidens of the community. If the girl's older sister has just been married and if the number of the older maidens in the community is much limited, the girl will recite or ask to be taught *l̥səm ɿɛ*. This indicates her readiness to assume social duties. If her intention is in accordance with the wishes of the older maidens in the community, a piece of meat will be sent to the girl's house, indicating the latter's willingness to accept her in their circle. With this sign, the girl is ready to welcome night visits from young boys and to assume social duties by participating in funeral ceremonies. A knowledge of *l̥səm ɿɛ* is required for these two occasions.

As for the boys, when they are 12 or 13 years old, they need no encouragement nor social approval of their behavior on the matter of their coming of age. Usually, boys go where people are gathering, be it at a house-warming or funeral. They hear and learn the *l̥səm ɿɛ* recited by their older brothers in the community. When a boy acquires the *l̥səm ɿɛ* skill, he starts paying night visits to the "visitable" girls.¹⁵

Coming of age and courtship among the Lawa are *not* sexual orgies as

14. For example, if when the author's linguistic informant wanted to work with her, he would be dressed in his best suit walking leisurely with his friendly cleaned-shaven face. But if he did not want to be bothered his dress was shabby and he sat serenely in the garden.
15. There is no definite age specifying when he should pay these visits. If he is precocious, he can start paying visits at the age of 14-15 years. If he is shy, he can postpone this social duty a little longer. However, these visits are a *must* for all Lawa boys. If any boy has never paid such a visit he becomes "odd" in the eyes of people in the community. This is because the visit is essentially social and not necessarily a courtship. Of course the visit might turn into courtship later.

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many tourists seem to believe. There is no “special” rendez-vous for the young Lawa. The boy has to visit the girl in her own one-room house where all family members sleep together. Only a fireplace is between the girl’s sleeping quarter and her parents’. Both the visitor and the girl are each conscious of the social aspect of the visit. Both consider the visit as a *duty*. For the boy it is his duty to pay a visit to every “visitable” girl at least once. Similarly for the girl it is her duty to welcome the guest. Hence they treat each other with good manners and each talks to the other in ləsəm ɿ. Only a serious illness can be used as an excuse for the girl’s unwillingness to talk in ləsəm ɿ with her guest. If the boy feels attached to her, he will increase his visits and use the ləsəm ɿ as a means of courtship. In addition, as a sign of his love a small gift such as a box of matches or a beautiful sea shell filled with tobacco will be given to the girl. Unless the girl likes him his gift will not be accepted. The giving, refusal or acceptance of the gift all are done by means of the ləsəm ɿ. When both of them are sure of their feelings for each other, the suitor will give the girl of his choice a “big gift”. The gift is a beautiful object such as a comb or jewelry plus cash of at least 20 baht. The acceptance of this gift indicates her willingness to be his bride. A marriage ceremony will take place later. After marriage the ləsəm ɿ will no longer be used by the couple. Marriage is considered by the Lawa as the zenith of adulthood and the door to old age.

An analysis of different types of ləsəm ɿ

ləsəm ɿ is Lawa poetry used by the Lawa adolescents in their social visits and courtships and by the young unmarried Lawa in a funeral ceremony. The theme of ləsəm ɿ therefore varies in accordance with the occasion of its use. At a funeral ceremony the ləsəm ɿ is usually recited by groups of boys and girls taking turns with each other. The ləsəm ɿ for the funeral ceremony can be recited only on that particular occasion. A fine is imposed by the saməŋ on those who break this tradition. Married people will recite the ləsəm ɿ only when they are asked to instruct the ləsəm ɿ to the young Lawa at a funeral ceremony. In this case it is the boy that needs such instruction more than the girl. This is because usually the girl takes her social duties more seriously than the boy. She learns about all ləsəm ɿ of different themes from the older maidens of the village before her willingness to come of age.

We may classify ləsəm ɿ into six kinds each with a single different theme. Our classification does not include what is known as ləsəm ɿŋɔi which not only has various traditional themes but also leaves room for innovative themes. The 6 ləsəm ɿ are as follow:

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1. **ləsəm leŋa ʔit luəŋ** “in the direction of, side”; ʔit means “tradition”. **ləsəm luəŋ ʔit** is a traditional poetry recited only during a funeral ceremony. Its text is traditionally fixed and cannot be changed nor improvised.

2. **ləsəm kam khuih kam** is the Kam Muəŋ loan word meaning “word, language”. **khuih** means “to desire”. The main theme of this **ləsəm** is an expression of the reciters’s desire, e.g., love, the wish for happiness and prosperity for the girl, the desire to be able to give beautiful presents. **ləsəm kam khuih** consists of 10 different texts.

3. **ləsəm ⁿdoiñ ʔein kheʔ ⁿdoiñ** means “to climb, to walk along the narrow path of the rough mountain trail”; ʔein means “to come back, to return”; **kheʔ** means “back, at the back of”. The theme of this **ləsəm** is a description of the difficulty of the reciter’s journey and his desire to return to his beloved. The **ləsəm ⁿdoiñ ʔein kheʔ** is usually recited by the boy in his first night visit to the girl and also when he has to depart from her by making a rather long journey from the village (e.g. to Chiangmai). **ləsəm ⁿdoiñ ʔein kheʔ** consists of 10 texts.

4. **ləsəm həo ka həo** means “to go”; **ka** is a loan word from Kam Muəŋ, Chiangmai dialect, meaning “to do business”. This **ləsəm** has as its main theme a description of how the reciter did business in another place. In the Lawa tradition, to do business means also to “sell one’s labour”. In the present day Lawa village there is not enough fertile land for the whole population. Therefore Lawa men tend to go “selling” their labour outside the village twice a year, usually in September after rice planting, and in February or March after the harvest. There are 7 texts of **ləsəm həo ka**.

5. **ləsəm ʔəok həo ʔəok** means “to bring someone along”; **həo** means “to go”. This **ləsəm** is the reciter’s invitation of his beloved to go with him to other places. In his invitation the girl is assured of having a pleasant journey. The invitation is only formal, because no Lawa girls will go out with their suitors unless they are married. **ləsəm ʔəok həo** may therefore be regarded as an expression of the reciter’s wish for his beloved to share a delightful experience (i.e. making a journey) with him. **ləsəm ʔəok həo** consists of 6 texts.

6. **ləsəm puə leŋaʔ puə** means “to ask for something”; **leŋaʔ** means “to play”. The theme of this **ləsəm** is the reciter’s asking permission to talk with, to play with, to be in the presence of the other. This **ləsəm** is usually recited by both the boy and the girl who are not familiar to each other. The reciter may also use this **ləsəm** to ask the other to teach him (or her) **ləsəm lə** adding that he (she) has

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only a little knowledge about it. ləsəm puə leŋaʔ has 4 texts.

All these 6 ləsəm ɬe have a definite number of texts composed by anonymous Lawa poets handed down from generation to generation in the form of oral literature and are kept alive by the young Lawa. The texts of these 6 ləsəm ɬe cannot be revised nor can they be changed. Only by learning these texts by heart can the Lawa adolescents perform their social functions properly.

As stated before there is another ləsəm ɬe (i.e. ləsəm ńɔi) which leaves room for innovative themes to be composed by contemporary Lawa poets, ləsəm ńɔi means “miscellaneous ləsəm”. There is no definite text for ləsəm ńɔi, and the reciter can put in any theme appropriate to his feelings on a particular occasion. For example Khun Bunphob, the author’s principal informant, once in sympathy for his people, composed a ləsəm ńɔi expressing his feelings for the misery and poverty of his people in the village.

The fact that there exists in Lawa culture different kinds of subtle ləsəm ɬe is probably an indication of the high culture of this tribal group whose Kingdom once dominated the Golden Peninsula. At present anyone who visits the Lawa village in Ban Pa Pae will see poverty and misery, the same conditions witnessed in other hill tribes in Thailand. But poor as they are these people carry their long lasting traditions within their hearts. These living traditions are expressed in the subtle ləsəm ɬe.

A translations of some selected texts

- | | |
|---|------|
| ńiēm ʔeʔ ləpəo məi meʔ ʔaʔ | (1) |
| ⁿ dah ʔeʔ yum haic nīŋ yoʔ kloŋ | (2) |
| ca:k meʔ nīŋ thu ləʔ aom ⁿ du hleʔ | (3) |
| ⁿ dah ʔeʔ yum ⁿ goŋ nīŋ yoʔ phyeʔ | (4) |
| meʔ bīk nīŋ ŋiək chík ləheŋ | (5) |
| pat nəh laŋlaŋ ləʔ aom səʔ aom sə ⁿ gyoŋ | (6) |
| pat nəh loŋloŋ ləʔ aom kloŋ ʔaʔ | (7) |
| məiń nəh nīŋ ʔeʔ ləha ʔəʔ ⁿ daip | (8) |
| ⁿ daip nəh nīŋ ʔeʔ ləhaiəv nəŋsī | (9) |
| tit nəh səmoiń khyoiń səmoʔ | (10) |
| səkək kuən ⁿ doʔ khyoiń ⁿ goʔ phui | (11) |
| khīəh mah lə ^m biń ^m byiń ləih loŋ | (12) |
| khīəh mah sə ⁿ gyoŋ ^m byiəŋ ləih pə | (13) |

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- khī'əh ?e? m^hbyiñ lə'əh məi kyai'ŋ klo? (14)
 khī'əh ?e? m^hbyiñ phyo? məi səmaŋ (15)
 khī'əh phyo? haŋhaŋ səmaŋ ʔo ?ε (16)
 khī'əh phyo? hεhε tək kekho? (17)

etc.

translation and explanation This text belongs to lə'səm puə ləŋa'.

- (1) - ñī'əm when
 - ?e? I (poetic term. As an ordinary word for the first person singular pronoun is ?ai'?).
 - ləpəo to splash water (poetic expression; in everyday language the phrase pəo lə'əom is used instead).
 - məi with, together
 - me? you
 - ʔa? big

A rough translation of the first verse would be *when I am playing water-splashing with you*. Such is the boy's subtle way of comparing the recitation of lə'səm lə to water — splashing game.

- (2) - ⁿdah if
 - yum to die
 - haic to dry up
 - yo? to be without
 - nī'ŋ at
 - kloŋ a stream, a river

A rough translation of this second verse would be *if I die within a dried up stream*. The literal meaning of this verse is : reciting a lə'səm lə to you is like playing water — splashing in a stream if there is no more water the stream would dry up and thus cease to be a stream. Similarly if all of my knowledge is spent in reciting lə'səm lə to you, please _____.

- (3) - cak to bring water into one's field
 - thu mountain
 - lə'əom water
 - ⁿdu a waterway
 - hle? rain

This discourse continues from the second verse. “Please bring rainwater from the

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mountain through the waterway”.

- | | |
|------------|---|
| (4) - ʔgoŋ | to die of malnutrition (in humanbeings) or to die of the lack of water and fertilizer (in plants) |
| - phyeʔ | cultivated land |

A direct translation of this fourth verse would be *If I am dried up and die without a place for cultivation*. Here it should be noted that the boy is comparing himself to a tree which must die if there is no earth to sustain its roots.

- | | |
|-----------|--|
| (5) - bīk | to explore a land, to be a pioneer |
| - ŋjək | a narrow trail where two ranges of mountain meet |
| - chīk | a rice field |
| - ləhɛŋ | is an adjective whose use is restricted only to qualifying the word “chīk”. ləhɛŋ means (a ricefield) where only rain water is used as means of cultivation. |

The fifth verse is the boy’s begging the girl to open up the narrow trail between the pressing mountains and make it a place for cultivation.

- | | |
|-----------|--|
| (6) - pat | to flow (used with water only) |
| - nɛh | always, never cease |
| - laŋlaŋ | continuously, on and on |
| - səʔaom | archaic word whose meaning is unknown to the author’s informants. |
| - səʔgyoŋ | the name of a river of which the location is unknown to the author’s informants. |

The direct meaning of this sixth verse is *water flows continuously in səʔgyoŋ river*. Literally the boy is imploring the girl to be generous and help him unceasingly like the flow of water in səʔgyoŋ river.

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| (7) - loŋloŋ | an onomatopae imitating the sound of the running water. |
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The direct meaning of this seventh verse is *water flows continuously in a large river*.

In summary the literal meaning of the sixth and seventh verses is the boy’s request for the continuation of the exchange of ləsm lɛ.

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| (8) - məiŋ | to count |
| - ləha | joint, node (of bamboo) |

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| - ʔɔʔ | bamboo |
| - ⁿ daip | to be close in succession, to be of high frequency |

The direct meaning of this eighth verse is *to count continuously the frequent joints of bamboo at me*. Literally this also is the request to continue the exchange of *ləsəm lɛ*.

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| (9) - ləhaip | archaic word whose meaning is unknown to the author's informants. |
| - naŋsī | a Thai loan word meaning "book". |

The meaning of the ninth verse is not clear. Generally speaking it is the request for the continuation of the recitation of *ləsəm lɛ*. What is worth mentioning in this ninth verse is the word "naŋsī". If we interpret the word naŋsī as referring to knowledge, this verse can be considered as the boy's humble request for the girl to teach him the knowledge which she has. If the word "naŋsī" is referred to "a written text" or to "an orthography", it can be speculated that *ləsəm lɛ* had once been recorded in written language before the introduction of orthography by the Christian missionaries in the 1950's. This hypothesis is entertained because the author believes that this *ləsəm* was composed more than 30 years ago since there are many archaic words in this verse, the meaning of which is unknown even to older informants (50–60 years old).

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|-----------------------|------------------------------|
| (10) - tit | to attach (a Thai loan word) |
| - səmoĩñ | star |
| - k ^h yoiñ | every |
| - səmoʔ | rock |

A direct translation of this tenth verse is "*Please continue to attach a star to every piece of rock*". This is the boy's subtle way of complimenting the girl. His words are compared to a worthless objects such as a rock and her words to celestial objects i.e. the stars. He asks the girl to shed the stardust of her words on his earthly clumsy words so that he would become more enchanting.

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| (11) - səkək | to teach |
| - kuən ⁿ doʔ | a child |
| - ⁿ gəʔ | each person |
| - phui | man, human-being |

A direct translation of this eleventh verse would be "*Please teach every child*". In this verse the boy is comparing himself to a child waiting for instruction from a teacher. Please note from this eleventh verse that on this occasion there must be

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more than one boy. Therefore originally this verse was probably composed with the purpose of being recited in public such as during the funeral ceremony where a group of boys take turns in reciting the ləsəm l̩ɛ with a group of girls. This belief is based on the fact that in Lawa tradition many suitors cannot woo a girl at the same time, each in his own way, trying to capture her attention. People look down on anyone who does this. Therefore the only occasion where several boys can recite a ləsəm l̩ɛ together is public ceremony such as the warming up of a new house and particularly the funeral.

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| (12) - khī̄əh | let it be that |
| - mah | to be |
| - lə ^m bin̄ | the Lawa name for the Mae Ping river in the north of Thailand. |
| - ^m byiñ | as (good, fast, beautiful, etc.) as, like |
| - ləih | to go down |
| - l̩ɔŋ | a boat |

A direct translation of this twelfth verse is *Let (you) be like the Mae Ping river where a boat can go down.*

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|---------------------------|--|
| (13) - ^m byiəŋ | as (long, short, big, small etc.) as, like |
| - pɛ | a raft (a Thai loan word) |

A direct translation of this thirteenth verse would be *Let (you) be like the sə^ŋgyoŋ river where a raft can go down.* Literally the twelfth and thirteenth verses convey the boy's request for the girl's generosity.

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| (14) - l̩ɔəh | loud |
| - kyaīŋ kloʔ | a kind of drum made of alloy metal much treasured by the Lawa. |

A direct translation of this fourteenth verse is *Let (me) be as loud as the kyaīŋ kloʔ drum.* A literal translation would be an expression of the boy's wish or his solicitation of help from some spirits to make him famous.

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| (15) - phyoʔ | famous |
| - səmaŋ | the highest class in the Lawa society generally believed to be of royal blood. Nowadays a səmaŋ lives in poverty as other Lawa, but he still enjoys some privileges given to him by his high birth such as he has the privilege of being the first to choose land for cultivation. However |

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as the keeper of Lawa traditions he has many obligations. He must also observe a special code of manner such as never to utter any abusive language. There are female *səmaŋ* and male *səmaŋ*. A *səmaŋ*'s daughter is entitled to receive a higher "bride price" and better gifts than ordinary brides.

In this fifteenth verse the boy expresses his wish to be as famous as a *səmaŋ*.

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|---------------|--|
| (16) - haŋhaŋ | This word has no meaning. It is put here to fill the required number of words in a verse (5-7 words with a majority of 6 words), and also to rhyme with the word <i>səmaŋ</i> in the preceding verse. |
| - ʔo | a cock's crow. The use of this word is restricted only to the cause where it crows because it sees a spirit. |
| - ʔε | chicken, cock, hen |
| - səmaŋ ʔo ʔε | Is the name of a Lawa princess (<i>səmaŋ</i>) in the past. She was so beautiful and her hair was so long that when she wanted to comb it she had to stand on a rock so that her hair would not touch the ground. Later this princess decided to marry a spirit. Since then, whenever she comb her hair, cocks crow in the same manner as when they see a spirit. |

In the sixteenth verse the boy expresses his wish to be as famous as that princess whose name is still known among the Lawa today.

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|-------------|---|
| (17) - həhε | This word has no meaning. It is put here so that this verses have the required number of words. It also rhymes with the last word of the sixteenth verse. |
| - tək | like, as |
| - kəkhoʔ | chief of the foresters |

The seventeenth verse expresses the boy's wish to be as famous as the chief of the foresters.

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bot som khənom n̄iŋ kat — ləsm̄ɿc ɣəok həo

- ⁿdah miən moiŋ khyɛc yuh taʔ ne (1)
ⁿdah miən moiŋ ^mbye chəm taʔ n̄ɛt (2)
 niəm ɣəok meʔ həo ^mbəo lələiŋ (3)
 ɣəok təo kyəih thoʔ yoʔ ləyīə (4)
 ɣəok təo həo pɔic n̄iŋ yoʔ taiŋ (5)
 ɣəok təoʔʔəin plain̄ lələiŋ həiŋ pui (6)
 ɣəok təo som ⁿgiəʔ khet viʔ kloŋ (7)
 ɣəok təo som n̄oŋ pɔn phoŋ naʔ (8)
 niem ɣəok meʔ həo ^mbəo lələiŋ (9)
 paŋ kɛ ləkoʔ chan ɣiək ɣəok (10)
 paŋ kɛ ⁿdoŋ teʔ chan ɣiək kləm (11)
 niem ɣəok meʔ həo ^mbəo lələiŋ (12)
 həo ^mbit məi meʔ pɔn ləkhīəʔ (13)
 həo thiəʔ məi meʔ pɔn lələn (14)
 həo noʔ məi meʔ nam hoi na (15)
 həo pɔn məi pa hoi nɔɛ (16)
 həo som ləka th̄im ləⁿnuic (17)
 həo ʔɛh ləka hoic ləphaom (18)
 həo som ləka th̄im khyoiŋ khoʔ (19)
 həo pɔn ləka koʔ khyoiŋ kloŋ (20)
 həo som phi yīə ^mbīə lələŋ (21)
 həo som phi tan phyaʔ setuʔ (22)
 toh yoʔ viətŋiəʔ som phi tan (23)
 toh yoʔ viət ^mblam kin tan sɛm (24)

etc.

Translation and explanation

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|------------------------|--|
| (1) - ⁿ dah | if |
| - miən | like, as.....as (Thai loan word). |
| - moiŋ | word |
| - khyɛc | as it was already mentioned |
| - yuh taʔ ne | archaic expression, unknown to the author's informants |

The whole meaning of this first verse is *if it is like the word that was already agreed*.

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They might have talked about their trip to the town.

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|------------------------|--|
| (2) - ^m bye | as it was already mentioned. |
| - chəm | sweet, appealing, charming. Sex appeal is probably not included in the meaning. |
| - taʔnet | like 'taʔne', this is an archaic word whose meaning is unknown to the author's informants. |

The meaning of this second verse is *if it is like the word that was nicely agreed*.

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|--------------------|--------------------------------|
| (3) - ñĩəm | when |
| - ʔəok | to bring |
| - meʔ | you |
| - həo | to go |
| - ^m bəo | to spin cotton |
| - lələĩñ | instrument for cotton spinning |

This third verse means *if you come with me*, (your trip will be like) *cotton-spinning*. Cotton spinning is considered a delightful work to most Lawa girls.

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| (4) - təo | not |
| - kyəih | maiden |
| - thoʔ | little, not the eldest |
| - yoʔ | to see |
| - ləyĩə | painful experiences such as lack of food or hardship during a journey etc. |

In this verse the boy promises not to bring the girl (whom he regards as his younger sister) to trouble.

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|------------|---------------------------------------|
| (5) - pɔic | to take off (one's dress, shoes etc.) |
| - nĩŋ | at |
| - yoʔ | lack, without |
| - taiñ | cloth weaving |

A direct translation of this verse would be *will not let you be without clothes, because there is no cloth weaving*. Literally the boy promises not to let the girl be in trouble without any clothes on.

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|------------|---------------------------------------|
| (6) - ʔəĩñ | to return, to come back |
| - plaiñ | starving, lack of rice, lack of water |
| - lələĩŋ | among |
| - həĩn | a large number of |

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- phui people

Literally this verse means that the boy will not take the girl to starvation among a large number of people who have enough to eat.

- (7) - som to eat rice
 - ɳgīəʔ to eat only rice without even salt
 - khet archaic word whose meaning is unknown to the author's informants
 - vīʔ a kind of vegetable
 - kloŋ a stream, a river

In this verse the boy promises that he will not take the girl to eat rice with that kind of vegetable only.

- (8) - ɳoŋ only, alone
 - pən to eat rice with other kind of food
 - phoŋ bamboo shoot
 - naʔ sour

The boy promises not to take the girl to eat rice with sour bamboo shoots.

- (9) - repetition of the third verse
 (10) - paŋ although
 - kəe to have
 - ləkəʔ husked rice
 - chan to intend
 - yæk elder brother

The boy indicates his willingness to take some rice grain with him.

- (11) - ɳdoŋ cooking pot
 - teʔ earth
 - kləm to carry

The boy says "I have an earthen cooking pot which I will carry with me to cook rice for you during our journey so that you will not starve."

- (12) repetition of the third verse
 (13) - ɳbit to take a wood to bar water, to use earth as a barrier to water in a river until the water dries up. This is done in order to catch fish.
 - ləkhiəʔ the dried up place in a stream where there is a barrier for fish catching.

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The boy says "I will go to make a barrier in a river with you and eat the fish from that barrier with you." He does not talk directly about fish. To mention the two words whose meanings are related to fishcatching is enough. Besides, *ləkhīəʔ* rhymes nicely with the following word *thīəʔ*.

- (14) *thīəʔ* to cast a fishing net
 - *ləlan* a kind of big fish which is delicious to eat.

The boy says "I will go casting nets with you and eat this delicious fish with you."

- (15) - *ñoʔ* to drink
 - *nam* water (Thai word *náam*)
 - *hoi* head (Thai word *hǔə*)
 - *na* rice field (Thai word)

"I will go and drink water with you at the head (starting point) of the rice field."

- (16) - *pa* fish (Thai word)
 - *hoi* stream (Thai word *hǔəy*)
 - *nəe* small (Thai word *nóy*)

"I will go and eat fish from the small stream with you."

- (17) - *ləka* in front of, in place ahead
 - *thīm* ripe
 - *ləñuic* fully, really (used only to qualify ripe fruit and fat pigs)

In this verse the boy persuades the girl to go with him where ripe fruits are waiting for them.

- (18) - *ʔəh* to take
 - *hoic* to feel satisfied
 - *ləphaom* heart

He continues his persuasion. The girl is encouraged to go and seek satisfaction in the future with him.

- (19) - *khyoiñ* every

"Every tree that we will meet on our way ahead will have ripe fruit. Let us go and eat them."

- (20) - *koʔ* water animals such as fish, shrimps, crabs and turtles

"In every stream that lies ahead, there are plenty of water animals, let us go and eat them."

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- (21) - phiyǎ̃ easily available things
 - ^mbǎ̃ thin membrane inside a piece of bamboo.
 When the Lawa roast glutinous rice in a bamboo section, this thin membrane will envelop the glutinous rice, making the glutinous rice delicious, according to the Lawa.
 - ləlaŋ glutinous rice roasted in a section of bamboo shoot

“Let us go and eat easily available and delicious thing such as bamboorice.”

- (22) - phitan what is offered to monks
 - phyaʔ novice
 - sətuʔ monk

“Let us go and eat food that was offered to novices and monks”. In Buddhist festivities, food will be offered to monks and novices more than they can take. This is because people want the rest to be shared to other people who come to participate in the ceremony. The boy in this ləsəm lɛ invites the girl to go with him to a buddhist monastery during a ceremony and partake in such food.

- (23) - toh to meet. In everyday usage this word is lətoh.
 The presyllable is reduced here in accordance with the rhythm of the ləsəm lɛ.
 - viət a buddhist monastery
 - ŋiəʔ the Shan

“Let us go to see the Shan monasteries and partake of the food offered there.”

- (24) - ^mblam the Burmese
 - səm the Northern Thai

“Let us go to see the Burmese monasteries and partake of the food offered by the Northern Thai.”

The full text of this ləsəm comprised of 64 verses. The above text and translation are only examples.

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