

## THE PASTIME OF RHYME-MAKING AND SINGING IN RURAL SIAM

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This paper touches the fringe of the subject of Siamese poetry. The poetry of a country is always difficult to treat adequately in a foreign language, and although it is not my intention tonight to go deeply into Siamese poesy, yet I confess that I should feel easier if I could dismiss from my mind the lingering doubt that the majority of my audience have a previous acquaintance with it.

At the outset, I should like you to accept the assumption, by way of a premise, that the Siamese are a poetically-minded people. You will probably admit that much without hesitation. But I will go further, and state that there is a natural aptitude for poetry which is general not only among the intellectual classes, but among the unlettered peasants themselves. We have an abundance of poetic literature which merits the attention of foreign scholars and students of our language: but, although many books have been written by foreign authors on this country, Siamese poetry is a subject which has been left practically untouched. We have a large number of foreigners living in this country who speak Siamese fluently, many of them read and write it and do both very well, but only a few have attempted to read Siamese poetry and acquire a taste for it. Fewer still know anything of the different kinds of Siamese poetry, and can recognise *ฉันท* (*chand*) from *โคลง* (*glon*), *โคลง* (*glon*) from *กลอน* (*klōn*), *กลอน* *klōn* from *ร่าย* (*rāy*) and *ร่าย* (*rāy*) from mere prose<sup>(1)</sup>. The same remark applies to a large number of our own people, and to not a few of the modern educated Siamese.

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(1) The transliteration is that of the editor.

This last fact, I maintain, is not inconsistent with the assertion that the Siamese are a poetically-minded people. If proof were needed of this point, it would be found in the existence of numerous illiterate rhymesters among our rural population, and in the crowds which gather around them with obvious enjoyment as they sing their extemporised songs well into the small hours of the morning.

The expression "illiterate rhymester" sounds like a contradiction of terms, and it may be asked how far it is possible for a man or woman who cannot read or write to compose rhymes of such merit as to indicate a poetical sense.

Here, perhaps, I should make the point that my paper to-night deals with the art of the extempore-rhymester rather than with that of the poet, specifying extemporized rhyme as the natural product of an elementary though poetical mind.

But before I come to the real extempore rhyming by our rural illiterate rhymesters, I would like to argue in their defence that poetry is not altogether impossible without literacy.

Inability to read and write is a drawback, no doubt, but have we not had great poets in European history who could neither read nor write? Here, I am on the brink of an error of equivocation, but Homer was a poet without the sense of sight, and Milton produced "Paradise Lost" some years after he had become totally blind. As Milton after his affliction dictated his poems to his daughter, so our illiterate rhymester sings his rhymes out to his audience. To us who enjoy the advantage of eye-sight, it seems that a poet who cannot read on account of his blindness must suffer a disadvantage similar to the difficulties of a rhymester who cannot read on account of his illiteracy. Each has to compose his lines without seeing them recorded on paper, and is obliged to depend mainly, if not solely, on his memory. Yet we read of an ancient bard of classical time who deliberately destroyed his own eye-sight so as to be able to bring greater mental concentration to bear on his work. It is surely pardonable to argue from all this that ability to read and write is not an essential part of a poet's equipment, though scholarship, or its absence, affects the quality of his work. A blind poet is probably better able to concentrate his thought on the work in hand than the rhymester who is

blessed with eye-sight but suffers from illiteracy. He (the blind poet) is able to compose his lines at leisure, and, as his words are taken down by a scribe, he is able to refresh his memory as he goes on. Our rural rhymester, on the other hand, has no friend to record his words: ordinarily, there is not a single person in the neighbourhood capable of doing it, even if he is given time. As a matter of fact, the village poet sings out his rhymes at such a speed that no scribe short of a stenographer could do it. I have myself tried and failed. Be it said at once in this connection that the rhymes are not worth taking down continuously: they would not all pass muster on paper. The rhymes are spuri out as fast as the rhymester can sing them: hesitation on the part of the singer is often jeered at by his opponents. Now and again a couple of lines tumble out which create a roar of laughter and stick in the memory of the audience, whereby a man's or woman's reputation is enhanced. Otherwise the importance rests on ready wit, a good thrust at an opponent, a smart repartee, a pretty compliment, or a persuasive argument. Good scholarship counts, of course, but the lack of it will pass muster when the rhymes are merely sung.

Having arrived at this point, one may venture the assertion that an illiterate who can compose rhymes is a poet by nature. Education — even mere literacy — would of course enhance the quality of this work. Its absence may curb, but does not wholly suppress, the poetic instinct in him. Poets are said to be born, not made, and the saying seems to apply forcibly here. So far as Siamese poetry is concerned, one might go further, and observe that a great poet is not necessarily a good scholar. We have a famous poet, popularly known as *สุนทรภู่* (*Sundara Bhū*) who flourished during the second and third reigns of the present dynasty, and is the author of many voluminous works. He was undoubtedly a very fine poet, and in one class of poetry, of which he made himself the master, there has been no one to equal him either before or since. This point is conceded by the most fastidious student of Siamese poetry today. Some European scholars differentiate between what they term poetic energy and poetic art. In some literatures energy is the dominant quality; in others, art. With individual writers it

is the same. Thus in classical literature, Pindar is usually taken as a type of the poets of energy; Virgil of the poets of art. In English poetry, Elizabeth Browning and Keats are held to typify the poets of energy and art respectively. Some poets, notably Shakespeare and Milton, appear to have exhibited equal properties of energy and art in their works. Our man ฐนพณิ possessed a first class genius, fertile powers of mind, and an elegant diction. In spite of all this, one is inclined to class him more as a poet of energy than a poet of art. Like Pindar of old, and in the words of the charming Corinna, he did not "sow with the hand"; his poetic energy impelled him "to sow with the whole sack." Tradition has it that he had two or more scribes to take down his dictation of two or more stories at the same time. An examination of his writings, however, does not reveal profound scholarship, and in him we have an example of a fine poet whose work is not that of a great scholar.

The same remark applies to the author of the great work ฐนจันฐนพณ (Khun Jān Khun Phēn), whosoever he or they may have been. The book is one ~~of~~ which I recommend to those who wish to take up the study of Siamese poetic literature. It depicts real life of the day in which it was written, and has nothing to do with myths and mythological heroes such as are told in tales of Indian origin, or in those imitating Indian stories. It is a real Siamese tale.

To go back further ฐปราชญ์ (S'rī Prājña), who lived in the time of ฐนพณิ (Brah. Nārāyana), the author of many poems which have always been considered high-class work, does not rank as a scholar of high grade in the estimation of many students of the present day. The poems of his father, the great ฐมหาฐราชญ์ (Brah. Mahārājagrū), may be classed higher than those of the son.

The fact is that many of us present-day Siamese students of poetry have become more than a little iconoclastic. With an audacity which undoubtedly shocks our elders, we discuss the flaws and blemishes which we discover in the works of our ancient authors. Such weaknesses in the poetry of our old bards evidently passed unnoticed by readers of past generations; at any rate, they have left no record of their opinions which mete out giving anything but unstinted praise.

Modern students and minor poets (and I speak as one of them) have no desire to dethrone our old famous writers, many of whom deserve their places of honour in the literature of the Country. We respect them: we admire their fine qualities. Finding faults in them, even if the faults are real enough, does them no harm. They are too big to be seriously damaged. But we have become fastidious, and feel aggrieved when we find a flaw in a good poetical passage which would, without it, be a brilliant piece of work. Imagine yourself lost in the enjoyment of an exquisite poem, sailing serenely through the air, so to speak: and then receiving a sudden jar which flings you back to earth,—you probably know the feeling. One may also liken it to the discovery of a bitter pill concealed in a delicious morsel of food. We have in fact become impatient with the easy-going method employed by most of our old writers, who, though perfectly capable of turning out fine pieces of work, yet leave unpolished portions which often spoil the whole effect.

It should be stated here, in justice to our ancient poets, that they were not obliged by the rules of poetry of their day to be as careful as we are today. Judged by present day standards, their works are more or less crude. There was nothing out of the way in the ideas of their times, for instance, in rhyming ไอ (ai) with อวย (āy), or in rhyming กั้น (kǎn) with กัน (kān); that would be woefully wrong today. In a modern โคลงสุภาพ (*glon subhāb*), an เอก (ek) word (i.e. a word with <sup>mai</sup> เอก on it) can only be replaced by a “dead word” (คำตายอันไม่ได้ *gām tāy phān mai tai*) that is, a word in which modulation in tones is not possible. This rule was evidently non-existent, or if existent, was generally ignored say in the time of พระนารายณ์ (*Brah Nārāyana*), when an เอก (ek) word could be left and anything except a โท (do) word substituted for it without offending the ears of contemporary readers. Woe betide a โคลงสุภาพ (*glon subhāb*) writer who did that today.

Of the ฉันท์ (*chand*) poetry, which closely follows its Indian origin, and which I believe to be poetry in the full sense of the English word, I have seen no old poem in which regard is paid to the

metre. Rhyming which until recently was absent in the same class of work in Sanskrit and Pāli, was introduced into Siamese *ฉันท* (*chand*) in the old days. There is nothing one can find to indicate the actual period when this took place, but our existing *ฉันท* (*chand*) poems are all rhymed, even the oldest, which date back to the period of Ayudhya. It is possible that rhyming was intended to take the place of rhythm, on the ground that Siamese is not a language which lends itself easily to the metre. That is a fact, and today we only manage to write rhymed *ฉันท* (*chand*) rhythmically by employing more Sanskrit and Pāli words than we really care to do.

The first piece of work in *ฉันท* (*chand*) poetry in which the rules of the metre are observed, in addition to the rhyming, was written as late as the time of พระนิพนธ์ (Brāh Nani Klao) by the Prince-Monk who was the Supreme Patriarch of his day. To him one may attribute the birth of *ฉันท* (*chand*) poetry in the form in which it is written today.

I have said previously that the works of our old writers judged by modern standards, are more crude than those produced by later and present-day authors. That is without doubt due to a change in the accepted principles of poetry, or in the ideas of beauty in it. Whereas a modern กลอน (*klōn*) writer will hardly write down a single line without regard to what is termed the "inner assonance" สัมผัสใน (*sāmphāt nai*) or alliteration, our forefathers evidently saw beauty in something else, of which we are profoundly ignorant today. On this point, Byron may be usefully quoted. He says: "So far are principles of poetry from being invariable that they never were, nor ever will be, settled. These principles mean nothing more than the predilection of a particular age, and every age has its own, and a different, from its predecessor." That is Byron, and very strongly put, but there is much in it.

I have deviated from my path at some length. My purpose is to show that scholarship is not an essential attribute of the rhyme composer, and that the phrase "illiterate rhymester" is not such a paradox as it sounds.

I will now describe the form of amusement known as เล่นเพลง

(*len blei*), or merely เพลง (*blei*) in Siamese. The เพลง (*blei*) in all its varieties is a form of กลอน (*klōn*) which I will describe in the last part of this paper. It is indulged in by our rural rhymesters at the time of harvest, in the high-water season, and at other periods of the year, when the people are not too busily occupied with the cultivation of the land. Not only is it an amusement among the people themselves, but it is also a form of entertainment provided at festivities and occasions of a similar nature, when professionals are often employed.

The expression เล่นเพลง (*len blei*) consists of two words, viz. เล่น (*len*) 'to play', and เพลง (*blei*) 'rhymes'. เพลง (*blei*) means 'tune' also. I do not know how precisely to translate the two words in combination. Both "Rhyme Play," and "Playing at Rhyme," seem misleading and inadequate. "Rhyme Game" is no better. The title of this paper, that is, "the Pastime of Rhyme-making and Singing" conveys the whole idea, but the rendering is unwieldy. It would be useful to have a correct and pithy translation of the phrase, which perhaps some of you will suggest. Meanwhile I propose to employ the Siamese words เพลง (*blei*) and เล่นเพลง (*len blei*) and to evade the responsibility of a translation here.

I have described our rural rhymesters as illiterate. Generally speaking, that is correct. It is true that most of the men I have spoken to can read, though they do not profess to be able to write. The most literate man I have met was a smart young fellow whom I sent for to explain the pastime to me. He reads fairly well, but can only write indifferently. His literacy, however, is an attainment from which, so far as rhyme-making is concerned, he derives no advantage whatever.

Once I typed out half a page of rhymes of my own composition imitating their style, and meeting a man who could read, I asked him to sing them to me. He could read them all right, but I think he could turn out his own rhymes faster than it took him to read mine. Finally he sang them quite satisfactorily, and when I asked his opinion of me as a rhyme-composer, he gave it. It may interest you to hear the criticism of a man from the paddy field

on rhymes made by one on a higher intellectual plane. He said in effect that the words I employed were mostly too difficult, and my style of love-making too lofty for a country girl, who would be absolutely non-plussed, and unable to make an adequate reply. It was an excellent criticism. I tried another man a few days later, and he said substantially the same thing: which convinces me that one cannot go love-making in rhyme among people in a lower station of life. You sing your beautiful song to a girl, expressing lofty and exquisite sentiments. The poor thing is utterly bewildered, and you miss your mark every time.

It may be asked—and the question would be a very pertinent one—how far is extemporising possible in composing the rural rhymes of the country side? In this connection I would state that I have listened to, and been in conversation with many of the people; and being something of a rhymester myself, I feel able to judge whether the rhymes are really extempore, or whether they are old lines learnt by heart. I recognise that, for the most part, the rhymes are genuinely extemporised on the spur of the moment to suit the occasion, and in response to unexpected raillery from the other side. Good and clever passages are no doubt remembered and repeated, but that is seldom possible. The rhymes are usually sung by at least two parties (male and female) in opposition: there is much controversy in the substance of the rhymes, each side trying to defeat its opponents; amorous advances are made and <sup>repeated</sup> registered, grave mock charges stated and defended; there is much sneering and leg-pulling, often plenty of vulgarity on the part of the men, and positive rudeness on the part of the women. It is impossible to anticipate the method or direction of attack, and discomfiture is only avoided by ready wit and ability to make rhymes in quick reply. It will thus be realised how futile it would be to depend upon old lines remembered by heart.

I will now describe the different forms of *lwan* (*bleh*) which I have witnessed, principally at *Labapuri*. The field of study is a large one, and I must confine myself to the varieties which I have seen. Each variety differs from the others, not in the form of the rhymes, but in the tunes and in the manner in which it is sung.



Musical instruments are often employed; but they are just as often absent, in which case the time is marked by clapping the hands or stamping with the feet.

The เพลงเกี่ยวข้าว (*bleñ kiao khao*) or Harvest Rhyme is a pastime which, as its name implies, is indulged in at the time of harvest. There is an old custom in this country (a system approximating to Co-operation with a big C in present-day economies), dating back probably to quite ancient times, whereby neighbours and friends gather to assist a cultivator in harvesting his crop. A farmer appoints a day, and sends word round to his neighbours, relatives and friends. They come and spend the day with him as his workers and his guests, the host providing them with food and drink, betel-nut and tobacco. Opportunity is often taken of the gathering of people on such occasions to indulge in the pastime of เพลง (*bleñ*). After a spell of work, the host suggests to his guests to take a rest. If there is a rhymester among the men, he seizes an opportunity to sing "a call." The Siamese expression is เก้า่น (*krön*), an unusual word, which means 'to give voice', 'to call'. A bird is said to เก้า่น (*krön*) when it calls for its mate, and the significance of the word here is presumably the same. The man's call is answered by a woman, who is said to เก้า่นตอบ (*krön tōp*) that is to say, to sing in response. The challenge having thus been accepted, the people form themselves into ring, and the fun begins. There is a Siamese saying นักเลงอดเพลงไม่ได้ (*nak leñ at bleñ mai tai*) which means that a rhymester cannot refrain from rhyme-making. It is a singularly accurate saying. A good rhymester cannot come across a เพลง (*bleñ*) without itching to join in. Hence, if there are rhymesters among the people who have gathered for the harvest, the pastime starts spontaneously. A host may, with a view to providing his guests with entertainment, specially invite expert rhymesters for the occasion, and pay for it in two 'labours' or even three. Payment in two 'labours' means that the payer will work two days for each one the other works for him. The expert is an honoured guest, and does practically no work until the rest hour, say at 3 o'clock in the afternoon, when the diversion begins. It is he, of course, who sings the calling song. Needless to say, but little work is done after that

It is conceivable that เเล่นเพลง (*len blen*) was a less formal affair in the old days than it is now, and that men and women sang their rhymes as they worked. Larger numbers of people used to attend on the appointed day; strangers met as fellow guests and workers, and love making often ceased to be a make-believe, but developed into a genuine affair. It is not frequently so today in the case at least of the เพลินไร่ (*blen rōa*), which I shall describe presently. In the old days the harvesting of the crop was not such a serious proposition as it is today. Rice was grown mainly for consumption and not on a commercial scale. There was therefore plenty of labour; men and women were able to work leisurely, and play as they worked.

The times have changed. Reaping is an occupation which must be undertaken seriously nowadays. Larger areas of cultivation, a decrease in the number of friendly helpers, the introduction of hired labour, combine to make it necessary to pay undivided attention to the prosaic work in hand, and to drive all poetry and romance out of it.

But the Harvest Rhyme has survived all changes, and is still an institution. Instead, however, of starting spontaneously, it often has to be engineered by the host, who, as I have said, invites experts for the occasion.

In the singing, or the "playing" of the Harvest Rhyme, men and women, say half a dozen of each sex, stand round in a ring. Each has a sheaf of rice-ears in the left hand and a sickle in the right. Stamping with the feet marks the time. The sheaf and the sickle are swung about in imitation of the act of reaping. Care is taken in swinging the sickle that it does no damage to one's neighbours—a necessary precaution in view of the formidable character of the instrument. The circle moves round and round as the rhymes are sung. The singer usually shifts in the inside of the ring, and steps about in front of the person whom he, or she, is addressing at the moment, making gestures appropriate to the words. Apart from the leaders, perhaps one or two persons on each side can produce new rhymes, the rest merely forming a chorus,—potential rhymesters who may develop into important persons in the rhyme-ring in time

to come. The words of the chorus are usually a nonsense verse; they are seldom changed, and have nothing whatever to do with the new rhymes which are being sung.

The men and women having taken their places in the ring (each side forming a half-circle), the leader of the men, termed the *นายพล* (*nāy blēn*), begins with an invocation. He sings a song in praise of the old masters, 'Gru' This and 'Gru' That, rural men just like himself, now dead and gone, but famous as rhymesters in their day. The 'Gru's' are invoked to give assistance to the singer, who though poor in experience, desires to entertain the audience to the best of his ability. The song is an old one; or, if composed for the occasion, the composition has been made at leisure, and remembered by heart.

As soon as the man stops, the leader of the women starts. She sings a different song, but goes over much the same ground, the only difference being that the names of the 'gru's' eulogized are those of women. The spirits of dead feminine experts are invoked to assist the singer in making the men humble and discomfited, in fact to make her victory over them absolutely crushing. This again is an old song, perhaps with variations to suit a special occasion. If a distinguished person is present, some sort of benediction is often added. Once when I was on a tour of inspection of Co-operative Societies, a lengthy song on the benefits of Co-operation was sung, including a blessing on the movement. It was very interesting, though the singer's grasp of the principles of Co-operation ~~were~~ <sup>was</sup> as you may imagine, not absolutely firm.

When the leader of the women has finished her first song, the leader of the men begins again. Now starts a wordy passage-of-arms, though you may not recognize it immediately. The man says, that he comes to the meeting expecting pleasure and enjoyment, but his delight far exceeds his anticipation on beholding the bevy of celestial beauties confronting him. Was man ever so fortunate? Approaching for a closer look, he is shocked to find that the leader is not such a young damsel as she appeared at first glance. Is that a grey hair peeping out above the left ear? No. It is not a single

grey hair, but a whole head of it. Why? She must have half-a-dozen grandchildren. And so on.

The leader of the women on the occasion is, in truth, an elderly woman. She is at the head of the feminine party by virtue of her seniority and experience in the pastime. She and the man know one another quite well, and casting aside all pretence of ignorance of his identity, she addresses him by name, asking how a man with such features comes to be outside the prison walls. She does not know his means of livelihood, but whatever it is, she advises him to abandon it, and conduct a straight, blameless life.

As soon as she gives him a chance to break in, the man starts again. He is always ready to interrupt his opponent's flow of derision and attack. He now repudiates her suggestion of his unworthiness, stating that he has all the negative virtues: he does not smoke opium, does not drink intoxicants, and does not gamble. It is unkind of the lady to suggest what she knows is not true. He may then move on to the next woman, or may introduce the second man as a worthy fellow: whereupon the latter steps in, and, unless interrupted by a member of the feminine party, makes love to one of the women. She resists his advances, making fun of him, attacking his looks, his character, his presumption, and anything else that may occur to her mind capable of being put instantly into rhyme. And so it goes on. All this time there is much movement of the arms and body, especially when the people get excited; and thirst-quenchers are in <sup>constant</sup> demand.

I once had the *เพลงเก็บข้าว* (*bleñ kiao khao*) performed before me, in which the best rhymesters of the neighbourhood took part. There was much excitement and laughter, but after about an hour, I was asked if they might "play" something else less exhausting, a request to which I readily assented. They then switched on to *เพลงรำ* (*bleñ rapām*) which I will next describe.

I do not know an English word which will translate *รำ* (*rām*) and *รำ* (*rapām*) precisely. The Siamese expression includes both dancing and gesture. In the *เพลงรำ* (*bleñ rapām*) the singer steps about to mark the time, and there is plenty of movement of the

face, hands and arms. The person addressed will often รำ (*rām*) also. As a matter of fact, dancing and gesture appear to be the rule in every kind of เพลอ (*bleñ*), the sole exception being the เพลอเรือ (*bleñ rōa*) where space in the boat does not permit much movement. It is curious, therefore, that the phrase ระบำ (*rapām*) should be applied to one variety of เพลอ (*bleñ*) only.

You may have guessed that the เพลอระบำ (*bleñ rapām*) has other names in other localities: in fact it often has more than one <sup>appellation</sup> application in the same district. Thus in ลพบุรี (*Labapuri*) it is also known as เพลอบ้านไร่ (*bleñ Pān Rai*), referring to village in เมืองสิงห์ (*Muan Singh*) where this form of เพลอ (*bleñ*) is said to have originated. เพลอบ้านไร่ (*bleñ Pān Rai*) is probably its original name, but the diversion is usually referred to today as เพลอระบำ (*bleñ rapām*). The singing as a rule starts with an introduction in the form of question and answer: “ระบำไหน เอ๋ย ระบำ ชาว บ้าน ไร่ (*rapām hnai ōy rapām jāw Pān Rai*)” that is “which ระบำ (*rapām*) is it? ระบำ (*rapām*) of the people of บ้านไร่ (*Pān Rai*).

In this เพลอระบำ (*bleñ rapām*) the men and women also stand round in a ring. The invocation song is <sup>not</sup> sung, and the sheaves and the sickles are of course discarded. The movements are comparatively slight, and therefore less exhausting. Love-making, teasing and sneering, attack and counter-attack, go on in the same way. The words of the chorus are changed, as is the tune in which the rhymes are sung. After a time a variety may be provided by the acting of a story, the men and women assuming characters in the tale, and making rhymes to fit their respective parts.

I once watched a เพลอระบำ (*bleñ rapām*) which started most interestingly, and developed in an unexpected manner. The leader of the feminine party was the belle of her village, a clever young woman of a remarkable beauty. The leader of the men was a young fellow who was smart not only in appearance, but also in making the rhymes which he sang. They were strangers to one another, and from the beginning, we in the audience looked for

interesting developments. The young fellow made love quite prettily. The girl offered the usual resistance, but very soon gave in. The man's conquest was remarkably speedy; the girl's surrender unusually prompt. She suggested an elopement in preference to the formal method of obtaining the consent of her parents, who, she stated, would surely object. Whereupon the man sang that he stood under the lady's window, ready for her to step on to his shoulder. The girl sang that she stepped on his shoulder, slipped and sat violently down on the top of his head. Ultimately she reached the ground, so she sang, and the man conducted her away.

As soon she had stopped the man started again, and in imagination as well as in rhyme, led the way through a beautiful forest across the railway, pointing out to the lady the magnificent scenery, which he described most extravagantly. He picked delicious fruits and flowers for her; for her sake he braved the wrath of the bees to obtain their honey. It seems also that all descriptions of ferocious monsters obstructed their path, but he overcame them all in the approved manner of a hero.

Meanwhile I noticed a group of men in close conference outside the ring. Some of them had detached themselves from the rhymesters; others had joined them from the audience. I suspected them of hatching a plot, and sure enough they did. Directly there was a pause in the description of the forest, the leader of the new group, who had unobtrusively taken up his position inside the ring, broke out with his song. He stated that he was a robber chief, the terror of the forest, with a powerful following of cut-throats and other villainous characters. From his point of vantage, he espied a man and woman walking in the lonely forest, and sent out a scout to question them.

The leader stopped, and the second man of the new group immediately began. He said he was a scout. He went out to meet the two travellers on the lonely road, and discovered a man and a lovely woman. He stood obstructing their path.

Now, the first man, that is to say, the lover, had no previous idea of the turn of events. It was thrust upon him, and he was obliged to accept it. There followed a conversation in rhyme in

which questions were asked and answers given. There was much bragging and bombastic talk, each man threatening the other with all manners of sudden deaths. Finally the scout reported to the robber chief, who came forward to confront the lovers, and stated his intention to kill the man and carry off the woman.

A fight was inevitable, and the lover turned to his lady-love to assure her of his ability to cope with the opium-sodden robbers. But, in order to be able to fight unencumbered, he asked her to run back and conceal herself in the cave behind that imaginary rock.

The lady sang that she hesitated to run away, and soliloquised aloud, what a pity it would be to kill the robber chief, who was such a handsome man. Whereupon we in the audience, as well as those in the rhyme-ring, realised that the young woman had now given such a turn to the play that a story by สุนทรภู่ (*Sundara Bhū*) called จันทโครบ (*Chandagorap*) was now definitely adopted. The man who acted the part of the robber chief might have had the idea of the story in mind when he joined in, but until the woman had shown her hesitation, ~~by~~ manifesting a preference for the robber chief, the story might have been anything, made up as it proceeded. In view, however, of the turn now given, it was necessary for the robber to kill the hero, who was accordingly slain.

I have stated that the beauty of the village accepted the lover's suit more readily than usual, and it was she who suggested an elopement. I was now able to understand her reason, which I will make clear to you.

The man who acted the part of the lover was a complete stranger to the village. A few days previously, he had turned up from nowhere, and given but vague information concerning himself. No one knew anything of his antecedents, and he was rightly regarded as an adventurer. On that night he was introduced to the rhyme party by a casual acquaintance, and being a นักเลงเพลงไม่ได้ (*nāk len at bleñ mai tai*), he asked to be allowed to take part in the amusement. He was finally admitted with much reluctance, especially on the part of the women. He proved to be a good rhymester, and speedily forced his way to the leading part.

The leader of the women, on the other hand, was the beauty of the village, and belonged to a family of local distinction—she was in fact a daughter of the *ကုမ္မင်* (*kūmnān*). The man who acted the part of the robber was a friend of the family. It was the young woman's dislike of the intruder that decided her to adopt the story in which the lover had to be slain. Even a hero cannot sing, when he is dead, and the young stranger was obliged to sit out. He was thus cleverly dismissed from the rhyme-ring for the rest of the evening. According to the actual story, the lover was revived by a god, and came back to a life of vigour befitting a hero. But before that could happen, it was too late to continue the *ပေဃ* (*bleñ*), and the stranger had no chance of looking in again.

An official of my Department, who has for several years been stationed in a district where this particular form of *ပေဃ* (*bleñ*) is much in vogue, informs me that he has seldom seen other than young women take part in a *ပေဃဃိပါ* (*bleñ rapām*). It is essentially a pastime for young people. A woman with family encumbrances finds it difficult to devote so much time to it. Again, a jealous husband must be a positive nuisance—an unpleasant bar to the enjoyment of the pastime.

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The third variety of *ပေဃ* (*bleñ*) which I witnessed at *လပ်ပုရီ* (*Labapurī*) is called *ပေဃဃိဝါ* (*bleñ rōa*), *ဃိဝါ* (*rōa*) meaning "boat." The pastime takes place on the water, the season being the month when the rivers are in flood, and most of the land<sup>is</sup> several feet under water. In this season the *ကိရိမ္မ* (*kathin*) and *မိပါ* (*phā pā*) take place, that is to say, robes or cloths to be made into robes, are presented to the monks after the rains. Processions of boats are formed to take the robes to the monasteries, and on many such occasions, people stay out in their boats all night. During this season also, famous images of the Buddha and other images are taken about in procession, the idea being that the visits of the images afford the people of the different villages an opportunity to worship them in their own midst. The images often stay out over night, sometimes for two or three nights.



On such occasions hundreds of boats are brought together, each one filled to its utmost capacity. Where a number of boats thus gather, the เพลงเรือ (*bleñ rōa*) is indulged in; not by one group only, but by many groups.

I was present two years ago on such an occasion at the confluence of two rivers above ลำพูน (*Labapuri*), where the water is practically still. It is an ideal spot for such a gathering. I arrived in the afternoon at a spacious open building on a bank overlooking the three broad branches of the confluence, a cool spot commanding a fine view of the surrounding inundated country. Towards evening a procession of boats passed us, bearing a famous image returning home to a monastery a mile away. There was a large number of boats of all sizes; some took part in the long procession, others loafed about on the still water, others again were tied up along the banks. Many crafts moved about with food for sale—veritable restaurants, where many people could have their dinner and supper. As evening approached, more and more boats arrived; boats containing two or three persons,—mere sightseers who were to form part of the audience later on; boats occupied by a dozen men well-provided with cigarettes, drinks and other requirements; craft in which sat ten or twelve young women and girls often with a man to handle the steering oar, and an elderly women to act as chaperon. Each เพลง (*bleñ*) boat was out to spend the night on the river, and so had to be well-provided. It is a large boat capable of holding the whole เพลง (*bleñ*) party, together with any neighbours who care to come along and assist with the paddle (not exceeding the capacity of the boat). One or two big oiled-paper umbrellas are carried กันน้ำค้าง (*kān nām gān*), i.e. to keep off the dew. A hitch-cock lamp is a necessity; it not only provides light, but also lends dignity to the boat. It is not to be expected that a girl who has been singing and exerting herself all night will care to be exposed to the morning sun with a grimy face; and so a woman's boat carries a good-sized box in which are to be found powders, scents, unguents and a hundred and one articles of feminine garniture and paraphernalia suitable for rural Beauty Queens. A smaller box with betel-nut sufficient for everybody

occupies the centre of the boat with the hitchcock lamp. The chaperones and the girls sit round them, leaving to others the locomotion of the boat.

As the darkness falls, and after dinner has been taken, the men's boats move gently along the broad, still water. The men sing a "calling" song as the boats move. When a women's boat is seen tied up to the bank having the appearance of containing a *เพลง* (*bleñ*) party, a men's boat sidles up to it and comes to rest. Its leader sings a song addressed to the beautiful young lady: he says *the* young lady but takes care not to indicate which of the half-dozen he means; in fact he does not know which is their leader. He expresses pleasure at the opportunity to address her, and hopes that she will condescend to reply. It is just a short song to feel the ground, and he stops after a few movements. If the women accept the invitation, their leader starts immediately; otherwise the men move away to try elsewhere. Silence on the part of the women may mean that theirs is not a *เพลง* (*bleñ*) boat, or that it is composed of women who do not care for strangers, or for that particular set of men. A feminine party is sometimes led by a young woman who has not had much experience, and, being afraid of defeat, avoids a contest with strangers. I have however, seen a girl of not more than 17 years of age who was "coming out" for the first time, take up the challenge of a set of utter strangers, without flinching. That girl will be a celebrity in the years to come, but she had a poor time of it that night.

My launch was tied up where the water was broadest and most still. It is the place where hundreds of boats are accustomed to gather. On that particular evening, however, they kept away from their usual rendezvous, and spread out along the river, being shy of a party of visitors in a big launch. I suspect also that some members of our party, knowing that the *เพลงเรือ* (*bleñ rōa*) is an all-night affair on that particular evening, hinted to the people to keep away from the launch, so as to allow us an opportunity to sleep. But that was not our intention, for we too were out for the night, and we soon had the boats gathered in hundreds at their accustomed rendezvous. Where a women's *เพลง* (*bleñ*) boat was tied

up, a men's *bleñ* boat soon attached itself. Each pair had a crowd of boats round them. The crowds were large, and it was not everybody who could hear well enough to follow the songs. Some boats moved about from group to group trying to get into good position; others were content to be where they were, and just clung on. It was amusing to watch boats on the edge of a crowd whose occupants could not possibly follow the songs, and some of them merely went to sleep. Everybody was out to spend the longest part of the night; all were in good humour, and even those who heard nothing remained stoically on.

As the night advanced, and the crowd of boats thinned down, there was a tendency for the remaining boats to move closer together, and we soon had several pairs of *bleñ* boats in front of our 'Sala' at short distances apart. The singing and the musical instruments of the neighbouring groups interfered with one another, and none but the nearest members of the audience could possibly follow the songs. Yet nobody seemed to mind. At half past 2 o'clock, when I retired to the furthest corner of the 'Sala' to get some rest, the crowd of boats was smaller, but there were some hundreds still. At dawn I woke from a slumber to find the boats moving away. The girl of 17 was one of the last to leave, and I heard her powerful voice halfway across the river in the silence of the hour, still singing as her boat was heading for home.

If you understand the people, can follow their songs, are able to appreciate their jokes and the good points of their rhymes, and in a non-critical frame of mind ready to overlook their literary shortcomings, such a night as I have described is full of interest and enjoyment. It is well worth the loss of sleep which you must suffer, and the consequent fatigue the next day.

Well, on an occasion such as I have indicated, when a multitude of boats gather from all directions far and near, when everybody is out to sing or to listen to the singing, the *bleñ rōa* starts as I have described. A men's boat moves about "calling". It goes up to a likely women's boat, and the leader sings a short song of compliment and invitation to reply. The leader of

the woman (if hers is a *ໄພນີ* *blen* boat) responds with another short song. Then the men settle down and start in earnest. The leader pays further compliments, and if they are strangers, asks where she lives. She may or may not gratify his curiosity; or she may describe her house as one which stands on the bank of the river, with a roof basking in the sun, and ladders leading to the earth. That of course is a description which fits every house. She may go further, and furnish the additional information that there is a tamarind tree in front. As, however, there are hundreds of tamarind trees in front of houses on the river, the information still conveys nothing. The man soon starts love-making, and the woman resists his advances. As a rule she recedes and gradually appears to give in, offering numerous objections in the mean-time. One objection I have heard in this: how can a girl fall in love with a man when her people miss a buffalo after each visit he pays them? Another: is it possible for a self-respecting girl to marry an uncultured man who has not even been in the monkhood? A third: is a girl to throw herself into the meshes of a man whose love-making indicates a practised hand? Much word-fencing takes place, scoffing, derision, mock and real charges, are indulged in, but I have never heard real vulgarity in the *ໄພນີຣ໌ວາ* (*blen rōa*).

In the midst of all this argument and rhyme-warfare, it is not unusual for a new boat to make its way through the crowd, and take up a good position unobtrusively. It is a *ໄພນີ* (*blen*) boat on the war path, with its armaments concealed. The men in the new boat sit listening quietly,—the musical instruments in the bottom of the boat,—till a good opportunity offers. There is a pause when one side has stopped, waiting for the other to begin. The intruder seizes the chance, and, to the surprise of everybody, breaks in with a song. He sings that years ago he and this beautiful woman were married. The marriage ceremony is described at some length in order to show that the wedlock is a proper and formal one. They have a child, and live a happy life. Then came the Great War. He volunteered for service in France. His offer was accepted; and he describes the painful scene of his parting from the family. For the sake of his wife and child, he managed to keep a tight hold of his life

through-out his service at the front, and has now returned home, as he imagines, to his beloved family. What does he find? His home is a veritable wilderness, everything in his house upside down. It looks as if the jungle has moved not only into his grounds, but also indoors. Amidst all this neglect and confusion, he found the child thin and wan, begrimed with dirt. What has happened, he asks the child, and where is mother? Between sobs, the child informs him that after father had gone, a strange man came to the house to see mother. He came often and more often, and finally moved in to live in father's place. He and mother ill-treated the child, and gave him bananas instead of durians. After a time they went away taking everything, leaving the child alone in the house.

The man goes on to say that he has spared no pain in his search for his wife, and now he comes upon her with a lover. What has she to say?

It takes three quarters of an hour to bring out all this. The man begins in a voice loud enough to attract the crowd's attention, and then drones away till he becomes monotonous. The part is a difficult one, and none but a confident man will take it up.

As regards the other man, who has up to now been wooing a maiden, the part of a lover of another man's wife is thrust upon him unexpectedly. He accepts the situation; and, knowing that the new man's song is a long one, he and his friends lay themselves down as best they can within the confines of their boat, and calmly go to sleep. He shows by his attitude that the new turn of events bores him, but, like a sportsman, he is prepared to take the rough with the smooth, and will wake up to assume his new part when his turn comes.

As to the woman, who in real life is still unmarried, she has been playing the part of a pretty maiden till the entry of the second man, and now the role of a wife who has eloped with a lover is thrust upon her. She accepts it unflinchingly, and as soon as the new man has come to the end of his lengthy song, she takes up her new part. She admits all his rigmarole, and asserts that she has never really loved him, having accepted him in marriage merely to follow the wishes of her parents. She has now found her true

love, and begs him to refrain from molesting her in her present happiness. Surely he will have no difficulty in finding another wife.

At this point, one anticipates that the husband will fly into a rage; he must surely scold and beat the woman, and perhaps kill the other man. But no, he does nothing of the kind. Such action would bring the climax on too soon. They are out for the night, and there is no need to hasten anything. So he merely says that despite her faithlessness, his love for her is as deep as ever, and he implores her to abandon the lover and return home to husband and child.

The woman, when she starts again, continues to beseech him to set her free, advising him to have nothing to do with an unfaithful wife.

Meanwhile the lover is apparently peacefully asleep amid the noise of the singing and the musical instruments. At the psychological moment he wakes up to take part in the discussion. He tries to persuade the wife to go right away with him.

In this way it goes on till late hours and I have never heard the ending of such a story. Perhaps it is terminated by the dawn of the day.

The description I have just given is that of a *จินนา (jin nān)* "contending for the lady". None but an experienced rhymester would venture into a rhyme-group as the deserted husband, and none but a clever and confident woman would accept the role of the delinquent wife.

The progress of the *เพลงเรือ (bleñ rōa)* may develop in a manner contrary to the preceding one. A pair of boats may be joined by a third occupied by a feminine party, whose leader asserts that she has come upon her husband making love to another woman. It is called *ตีหมากขุม (tī hmāk khum)* and I have to confess for the moment that I do not know what the expression means. The man finds himself an unhappy fellow who stands between two sharp tongues.

The fourth variety of *เพลง (bleñ)* I have met with is called *เพลงมาลัย (bleñ mālai)* "garland rhymes", alias *เพลงโนน (bleñ none)*.

The last is a meaningless word. In the neighbourhood of เฝ้ายบุรี (*Bejrapurī*), where I came across it, I did not meet the best rhymesters of the district; those who performed in my presence were far more crude than their kith and kin to the North of the Capital. They differed from the others in the poorer quality of their rhymes, in the tune to which they sang them, and in the fact that their chorus repeated every word sung by the leader, clapping their hands all the time. The leaders รำ (*rām*) when they feel like it, and love-making goes on in much the same way.

The fifth variety is one which is better known to the people of Bangkok. One, of its names is เพลงเหนือ (*bleñ hnua*), i.e. Northern Rhymes and the Circle of พิษณุโลก (*Bisnulok*) is said to be its original home. At a village one station below พิษณุโลก (*Bisnulok*), I found a set of professional men and women who are said to be in constant demand outside the cultivation season. They make good rhymes, which are too good to be extemporaneous, and are highly entertaining if ladies are not present in the audience.

At ลาพบุรี (*Labapurī*), too, there is a party of the same class of professional rhymesters. They also are out of their element when coarseness is not permitted. There, it is known by the name เพลงน้อย (*bleñ chōy*) or เพลงวน (*bleñ van*), วน (*van*) meaning "ring."

In this variety, the performance begins with songs of invocation and benediction. It then goes on to love-making, in which vulgarity is given full play. You can warn them against indecency, but, then they become monotonous: or you may discover that their idea of the absence of vulgarity is not the same as yours. It is therefore, better to listen to them with all their spice, or not at all.

In my young days, this form of เพลง (*bleñ*) became very popular in Bangkok. A man with a broken leg was at the head of a party of professional men and women. He was known by the apt name of อ้ายเป่ (*āy Pe*) and from him the เพลง (*bleñ*) received one of its appellations. เพลงอ้ายเป่ (*bleñ āy Pe*) rivalled even the ลคร (*Lagor*) and ยี่เก (*Yike*) as a popular form of entertainment, at functions such as the tonsure, house warming, and other ceremonies.

In this *blen* (blen) stories are enacted, and the men and women, being professionals, are acquainted with many tales provided by Siamese literature. After the death of *Śānti* (ay Pe) his followers dispersed and gradually disappeared, and I have heard no more of that or any other variety of *blen* (blen) in Bangkok.

I now come to the last part of my paper. What is Rural Rhyme, and how is it constructed? What are the principles governing the system? The task of explaining anything connected with Siamese poetry is, in the first place, a trackless one. So far as I know, Siamese poetry has never been taken up by scholars as a subject of study, and there is no previous writing to guide one who wishes to give a brief sketch of just one branch of it. The vocabulary of English prosody is a large one, but, in trying to give a description of a section of Siamese poetry, one finds that only a few words out of that vocabulary fit in with the meaning which he wishes to convey. The fact is that, with one exception, there is no affinity between Siamese poetry and English poetry. The exception is the *chānd* (chānd) which is Sanskrit or Pāli in origin, and therefore cognate with the English metrical system. The very word "poetry" itself is one which we can only use in a wide sense. Our rhymes have little, if anything, to do with rhythm, and are therefore not poetry in the strict sense of the English term. Rhyming is the chief essential feature of our poetry: with us, in fact, nothing is poetry unless it rhymes. Divide your words into a given number of syllables, usually six or eight, put in rhyming where Siamese prosody prescribes it, and if your words make sense, you have produced Siamese *klōn* (klōn). Add extra assonance and alliteration, and you probably improve it. In English poetry, "the jingling sound" to use Milton's words, "is no necessary adjunct." In Siamese poetry it is the very essence. Siamese poetry, in fact, is made up of "jingling sound" judiciously placed: provided, let me repeat, that there is sense in the whole composition. Importance must be attached to the intelligent placing of the "jingling sounds," so that they do not lose their vibrant effect.

Siamese poetry is of several kinds. The *chānd* (chānd) is an



importation from India; the โคลง (*glōn*) some people think, is from the same source, but others consider that it comes from China. The กลอน (*klōn*) is believed to be indigenous, as is probably the ฎาย (*rāy*). Each has its own sub-divisions which are too numerous to mention here.

The rhymes sung by our rural rhymesters are a variety of กลอน (*klōn*). A good line, in my opinion, is one containing 14 syllables, divided into two halves of 8 and 6 syllables, with an assonance which binds them together. I have called the whole 14 syllables a line because they are sung almost in one breath. Let us have a specimen thus:

หน้าเจ้า นวล จันทร์ เมื่อ วัน เดือน เพ็ญ ทาเหมือนไม่เห็น ทาไหน.

(*hnā chao nuan chāndr mēa vān tēan beñ hā hmān mai*  
*hen hā hnai*)

Let us also have a free translation:

“Your face, shining with a brilliance  
of the full moon, has no peer on earth.”

Now, the girl to whom the line is addressed has come to the rhyme-party by boat, and must have contributed her <sup>fair</sup> share of the locomotion of the vessel. You know it is hard work paddling against the stream, and the girl has not had a chance to powder her nose for the last two hours. Her face therefore must be positively shiny, but that is not the brilliance of the full moon.

The words เพ็ญ (*beñ*) and เห็น (*hen*) form an assonance which binds the two half-lines together. It is compulsory. On the other hand หน้าเจ้า (*hnā chao*) and นวลจันทร์ (*nuan chāndr*) make an interlaced alliteration which is not necessary, but improves the line by its vibrancy. So does what we call the inner assonance created by the words จันทร์ (*chāndr*) and วัน (*vān*). The repeated appearance of the letter ห (*h*) in the second half-line also serves to enhance its effect.

But the outstanding syllable of the line is the last word ไหน (*hnai*) with which the ends of all subsequent lines must rhyme. Thus we might continue:

มา พบ ภักตร์ นาฬิ พว จะ ม้วย

เพราะ แสทน จะ บ้วย หัวใจ

เนตร คม ตั้ เคียว มา เกี้ยว มา เชือด

จน ทำ ให้เลือด หลั่ง ไหล

กำสรวี ก็ ลด สลด เพราะ รัก

หัวใจ จะ หัก ให้ได้

*(mā bap bhaktr nāñ bī bān chā muay*

*broh sēn chā pray hvā chai*

*netr gam tññ giav mā kiāv ma jōat*

*chan dām hai lout hlññ hlai*

*kāmññ ka lat salat broh rāk*

*hvā ak chā hāk hai tai)*

of which a free translation is as follows:

"Beholding your face, I am prostrate with love,  
sick at heart."

"Your eyes, sharp as sickle, cut me and make me  
bleed in profusion."

"My strength reduced, I am sad with unrequited  
love, and my heart is on the point of collapse."

It is often impossible to put a line into English, even in free translation, and convey all the meaning. Two years ago I heard one sung by a girl which clung to my memory at once. A man had said that he came to the girl's front gate and shouted a request for admission. The girl sang that the human voice outside the gate was greeted by a canine voice inside.

ได้ยินเสียงคนมาป่นเสียงหมา ไม่รู้จะจำเสียงไหน

*(tai yin siāñ gan mā pan siāñ hmā mai rū chā chā siāñ hñai)*

It is beyond me to put the line into English and convey the full meaning, the subtle humour, the insult flung with deadly aim. A translation might run something like this: "I hear the voice of a man mingled with the voice of barking dogs, and I do not know *which* to respond to." It is not a good translation. The humour is nearly all lost.

It is not to be understood that a line, as sung by our rural rhymesters, always contains the above number of syllables, nor is it usually as good as those I have given. In the singing, a syllable missed out is substituted by a drawl which serves to bridge the gap, while a syllable too many is hurried over so that it is not noticeable. The binder is always present, but the inner assonance

and alliteration are not frequently heard. It is not to be expected that a line composed almost without thought should contain so much refinement.

And so we may go on, always ending in ใ (ai). If, on the other hand, you begin your song with a line ending in ใ̃ (ī), you have to continue rhyming with it till the end, otherwise you are said to be defeated. Should a woman start, for instance, with the ใ̃ (ā) rhyme, the man must follow her lead, and she also must adhere to it. It does not matter if the end word is often repeated, provided that the repetition is not unduly frequent. A rhymester may have to confess that he or she cannot go with the same rhyme and ask to be allowed to change it: in which case it is understood that the other side, having accepted the change, must follow suit. The ใ (ai) rhyme, the ใ̃ (ā) rhyme, and the ใ̃ (ī) rhyme, (termed กลอนใ klōn lai, กลอนลา klōn lā, กลอนลั klōn lī) are the ones most frequently used. The order I have given is also the order of their frequency.

I hope I have given some idea of the กลอน (klōn) sung by our rural rhymesters. It is not the กลอน (klōn) you find in books. The written กลอน (klōn) is not so simple, but a description of that would be far beyond the compass of this paper.

