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Abhidha Journal of Art, Archaeology and Cultural Heritage
www.abhidhajournal.com
Vol. 4, No. 4, 2024. pp. 1-24.

Telling stories and recalling ethnohistories: Transmission of oral tradition in an upland multilingual mosaic

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Abstract

In the multiethnic and multilingual uplands of mainland Southeast Asia, storytelling is an important part of ethnic reproduction and ethnohistorical production. Despite the area's extreme ethnolinguistic diversity, there is a remarkable amount of material shared across the oral traditions. Moving beyond a concern with directionality of cultural transmission to reconstruct an "original" source that reifies hierarchies of cultural and language, in this paper, we examine oral performances of upland Laos as located in a linguistic ecology, where the telling and retelling of stories is both motivated and enabled by aesthetic and affective agency, and creates an areal orature. The multilingualism of the area requires us to explicitly recognise the role of interethnic relations, as they are practised, imagined and reimagined, as a matter of poetic interaction, in addition to – and perhaps more important than – the political, cultural and economic dynamics that are more easily discussed.

Keywords: Ethnopoetics, Multilingualism, Oral Traditions, Ethnohistory, Upland Laos

Received: 03-03-2025/ Revised: 05-06-2025/Accepted:13/07/25

1. Creating a local society through oral performance

In the uplands of northern Laos, we find many commonalities in the culture of storytelling across ethnic groups. This includes themes, characters, messages of morality, historical events, imagined worlds, deities, taboos and ethnonyms. Amidst the commonality, we also find a richness of divergence. One is fascinated by, on one hand, the familiarity and other the other hand, the seemingly endless creative ability of the storyteller to improvise, interpret and adapt. This fascination is also expressed by people who participate in storytelling, on both the teller's and hearer's sides. Storytellers often comment on the source of their material, offering ideas and insights on what motivates the telling. More often than not, there is highly sophisticated wordplay and culturally nuanced humour, told in different languages as called for by the setting. The high awareness of these multilingual storytellers reflects the depth to which the roots of storytelling reach in the life of the region.

Many ritual practices and language are shared across the region's ethnic groups, together with agricultural traditions that are located in shared forest cosmologies. The tension between shared semiotic frames and diversity in the articulation of local cultural salience is omnipresent when doing fieldwork in places like northern Laos. We are challenged to ensure that our understanding of a story or a character is fully based in the language, culture and history of the teller. At the same time, we are pulled through other liminal spaces between the teller and others. Comparative mythology's interest in identifying the roots of specific folklore traditions and the universality of human experience is drowned out by the polyphonic telling of stories in the dense and complex human landscapes of Laos. In the face of this dynamism, we are inspired by the notion of a linguistic area, for which Southeast Asia is often raised as a prime example (Enfield 2005). In a linguistic area, diverse languages spoken in proximity to each other begin take on structural features as a result of contact between speakers. These forces can be both subtle and striking – sounds can change, tones can emerge, words can be replaced, and grammar can be rearranged. The result is a geographically defined space where unrelated languages sound more similar than they "should" if considered from the position of phylogenetic diversity. This linguistic concept helps us observe the tension between synchronic similarity and difference through a diachronic framework that assumes contact happening through actual speakers of languages, individuals who are part of communities, imagined they may be, in larger networks of interaction.

The region is also composed of linguistic ecologies, a notion that proposes a framework of organic interactions among populations in a landscape of connected systems. In this paper, we explore how an extremely diverse area that exhibits common themes and characteristics in its oral traditions might be constructed and reconstructed through interethnic and multilingual interactions, where each member in the ecology is affected by others. This is important in the uplands of Laos because the most common framework for understanding interethnic relations is based on a simplistic opposition between Tai (civilised and sedentary, speaking Tai-Lao languages[1]) and Kha (isolated and mobile, speaking Austroasiatic and other languages). This is partially a local articulation of the Zomian divide that separates the upland and lowlands with a boundary that, although porous, proposes clear definitions on either side. Scholars based in ethnographic projects have challenged both the simplicity of Zomia within the reality of the ethnographic record (Jonsson 2010), the rigidity of the Tai-Kha framework (Tappe and Badenoch 2021) and the possibility of symbiotic relationships based on language and ritual (Chamberlain 2012). In these ecologies, convergence produces unexpected similarity, yet linguistic culture and the telling of stories are most often focused on reproducing narrative distinction (O'Neill 2012).

The following sections present perspectives from several upland people to explore how the sharing of stories creates ethnohistories based on the types of interethnic relationships that can be observed in the field. Crucial to the creation of this shared cultural space is the role of multilingual storytellers. In the sections that follow, we follow the threads of several shared stories, considering how they contribute to shared imaginations of similarity and difference. Our analysis covers both social aspects of storytelling as well as the linguistic praxis. We conclude that the poetic relationships that obtain between diverse peoples bring to light important insights on the region that are missed when the focus is on the structural imbalances of economic systems and political organisation. What we find is that the "source" of a story is less important to the telling than what it says about regional ethnohistory as a dynamic process of cultural contact. Looking at the poetics of storytelling in a multiethnic mosaic takes us away from concern with the directionality of borrowing (cultural influence) and into the performance of linguistic repertoires that achieve the aesthetic effect needed transmit salient elements of stories.

[1] Tai refers to a group of languages, including Lao, the national language, and other upland languages such as Lue, Nyuan, Tai Dam, Tai Daeng, and others of the Southwestern branch of Tai.

Multilingual storytellers in the Lao uplands

The mountains that span the uplands of northern Laos, Thailand and Vietnam have generated a wealth of knowledge about folklore in ethnically diverse zones of cultural interaction. The collection of Khmu – an Austroasiatic language – oral literature collected by Kristina Lindell, drawing largely on the expertise of Ka□m Ra□w (also known by his Thai name Damrong Tayanin) and others, provides a look into Khmu folklore of a breadth and depth that is unmatched in Southeast Asia. On top of this, we have a collection of analytical papers by Frank Proschan, an anthropologist of folklore and ethnographer of oral arts, who has been following Khmu folklore and poetics across the region and into the Khmu diaspora for three decades.

One volume of the Lindell collection, entitled "Master-Teller's Tales," (Lindell et al. 1989) is a compilation of Khmu stories told by Duang Saeng (Du□aŋ Sɛ□ɛŋ). In this book, the reader finds a wide range of stories that provide deep insights into Khmu culture, as well as intersections with stories told by other ethnic groups. While it is easy to get lost in the rich detail of Khmu life lived in villages and imagined in the stories, the preface of the book offers a critical hint for understanding the positionality of Khmu folklore in these upland areas. Duang Saeng, the "master-teller" of the Khmu stories featured, is Samtao, not Khmu. He was born and raised in a Samtao village – Samtao are another Austroasiatic group that speak a language related but not mutually intelligible with Khmu – in an area that is predominantly Khmu. Like most Samtao men of his time, his Khmu was fluent, and probably native. The Samtao are known as a multilingual people who "became" Khmu or Tai depending upon where they were. Vernacular ethnology of the area reports that the Samtao could not only speak the language, but also tell stories and sing traditional songs (Badenoch and Tomita 2013). Lindell's recording of Duang Saeng's stories confirms the cultural pliability of the Samtao in compelling detail. Telling stories in a Khmu area with close relations to several centres of Tai power, Duang Saeng and people like him create a shared body of folklore that exists in and across languages, amidst multiple cultural traditions. Someone like Duang Saeng would have heard stories in his own language, Khmu, several varieties of Tai, as well as another Austroasiatic language called Rmeet, at times in Khmu or Tai translation. He would also have heard stories told in Tai by people of Tibeto-Burman or Hmong-Mien background. Duang Saeng is both a Khmu storyteller and a multicultural folklorist, and the creative

power of narrative must have been great, because multilingual storytellers often give different renderings in different languages (O'Neill 2013).

As interesting as it appears to the outside observer, the story of Duang Saeng does not present any particularly important challenges for an ontology of Khmu folklore. Proschan's (2001) analysis of Khmu ethnogenesis stories highlights the idea of a primal multiculturalism, as well as a fluid framework that allows storytellers to actively incorporate changing social relations to explain similarity and difference. Storytellers incorporate ethnonyms, discourses of ethnicity and language ideology. The birth order of all the peoples who emerged from the gourd in the Khmu story offers a social hierarchy that is based on racial tropes as well as cultural observations, or more accurately, cultural experiences. For the Khmu themselves, Proschan cites multiple Khmu storytellers who assert a Khmu identity –"*ʔiʔ məh kmhmuʔ mooy kuŋ, mooy gaaŋ* 'we are people/Kmhmu of one village, of one house'" (p1026). However, Khmu society is also differentiated by *tmooy* groups that are defined by the group's relations to different Tai people, ways of speaking, geography and other cultural facts in their social landscape (Proschan 1997). Upon establishing shared Khmu identity, the first thing most people do is inquire about *tmooy* identifications. These illustrate the possibility of definable ethnic identities as well as the social fact of interethnic ties.

Proschan's work also responds to Jakobson's call for linguistic contributions to the study of folklore, bringing to light the complexity of Khmu poetics in the practice of play language (1993) and parallel verse (2022). Proschan locates these linguistic practices in an areal context, contending that performative aesthetics, not only in the abstract but also in linguistic and pragmatic detail, are shared by many groups. We suggest that these aspects of language facilitate the sharing of stories and beliefs among speakers of different languages, contributing to the subtle creation of a cultural area. Chamberlain has argued, based on his work on a Lao epic poem that is told widely across the region, that the sharing of myths between Austroasiatic and Tai is not uncommon and has been reinforced by a ritual interdependence (Chamberlain 1989-1990, 16).

As Hymes argues through his work on ethnopoetics, recognition of the centrality of aesthetics is a matter of both cultural and political voice (Blommaert 2006, reviewing three of Hymes' most influential works). The importance of linguistic aesthetic as a source of voice was illustrated by the performance of the Cheuang myth at a Boun Greh (Khmu *bun grəh*) festival that we attended in a multiethnic village where the Khmu are the majority ethnic group. With people from several ethnic groups, as well as government officials in attendance at the official opening of the two-day celebration, a

Khmu elder began to tell the origin of Khmu rituals through a Cheuang story. The epic poem Thao Huang Thao Cheuang is one of the most famous Lao literary works, but it is widely accepted that the main character Cheuang (ɕiəŋ) is Kha, not Tai, and the battles that are recounted in the story are between Kha and Tai people (Chamberlain 1989-1990). But as Proschan demonstrated, for the Khmu, there are many Cheuang characters and stories at various points in time and space. As such, Cheuang is at the heart of the question of shared oral traditions in the region. At this Boun Greh telling, the storyteller began his story in Lao, but before he could finish the first lines, one could hear calls from the audience for him to tell the story in Khmu. After some awkward laughing, the storyteller switched into Khmu. After a few lines of performative transition through a more "official" register of Khmu that is influenced by formal Lao oratory (Badenoch 2018), he comfortably delivered the story. The content of the story was about how the Khmu came to receive their rituals through Cheuang's reconciliation with the soul of his younger brother, who had died because of Cheuang's misguided request for him to bring him the moon. As an official village event, there was pressure to tell the story in Lao and contribute to the creation of a "modern" ethnic tradition within the framework of the Lao state (Petite 2013). The Khmu in attendance intervened in favour of a Khmu telling, which made the story more salient to the Khmu cultural meaning of the festival. It also served the purpose of decontextualising what would be seen by a Lao audience as an unfamiliar take on Cheuang. In Native American communities, storytelling has assumed political meaning that works to assert cultural and linguistic distinction in an area where cultural convergence, together with the oppressive influences of the national language, has created a tentative situation of polyglossia (O'Neill 2013). In what follows, we see how ritual interdependence and the poetic performance of folklore cross many social boundaries, many without reference to a politically dominant or culturally superior Tai Other. The analysis reinforces the need for ethnopoetic approaches to folklore in linguistically diverse areas such as northern Laos.

2. Porcupine quills and the moral implications of reciprocity

When Badenoch began his work with the Bit – an Austroasiatic language spoken by approximately 2,600 people in Laos, Vietnam and China – the first story he heard was how the Bit language was born as the result of a conflict over the sharing of meat. The short story is about the obligations of reciprocity among kin, but recognises the tentative balance between understanding and trust. This leads to the Bit learning a new language from

the forest, as they are banished from the household. Later, we would find that a similar story exists in the oral traditions of other ethnic groups, referencing different positions in the social hierarchy but indexing the same questions of morality in daily interaction. The implications are illustrated in terms of ethnicity and governance in a landscape of social hierarchy where mobility is the most fundamental option for survival. In this section, we explore the story of the porcupine quill from the telling of the Bit and the Tai Daeng, one of the Tai-speaking groups that has provided the broad structures of governance across the Lao-Vietnam border area.

Linguistic divergence and Bit ethnogenesis

The Bit myth of ethnogenesis is a linguistic event stemming from a conflict over the sharing of meat. At the time of the split, the Bit were the younger brother of the Khmu. Together they spoke Khmu in the house. One day, the elder brother shot an elephant in the forest and brought back a leg of meat to share with the younger brother. They ate well together. The next day, the younger brother went to the forest and shot a porcupine. He brought back a leg to share with his elder brother, who saw the quill of the porcupine and said, "With hair like this, the animal you shot must be huge! I shared an elephant leg with you, but you only share a small portion like this? You have deceived me! You are banished from the family!" The elder brother chased the younger brother out into the forest, saying, "From now on, you shall not speak our language. Go learn a new language from the sounds in the forest!" The younger brother ran into the forest, crying. Soon, he learned to speak a new language, imitating the sounds of the birds chirping, the rush of the water over the falls, and the popping of bamboo during forest fires. The new language was Bit. The Bit spoke their new language, which their elder brother, the Khmu, could not understand. But the Bit still remembered the old language, Khmu.

This story of mimetic survival is culturally salient in the context of the large lexicon of expressives that are used enthusiastically in most areas of the Bit's daily language use. Expressives – a class of words in Bit that make use of special sound-meaning associations, enabling the speaker to depict complex perceptual networks of qualia and iconically perform spatial and temporal facts of an event – are an integral part of Khmu linguistic culture as well. The story also explains the asymmetric bilingualism that exists between Khmu and Bit, which, to the Bit, is an important element in the survival of the small group. There is a commonly heard language ideology that identifies multilingualism, and more specifically asymmetric bilingualisms, as a key to maintaining cultural integrity in the face of

stronger, more numerous groups. The story may also be a vernacular view on the linguistic divergence that happened in the Khmuic branch of Austroasiatic, where the split off of Bit from the main Khmuic language was early (Hiroz and Badenoch 2024).

The specifics of the story are a critical element of the Bit ethnohistory that has been passed on, aligning with other synchronic perspectives on the entanglements of language and culture in the area where the Bit live. However, the story can be heard among other ethnic groups in the area as well. For example, the Sida tells a similar story about the linguistic similarity-difference between the Pana and Paza, all closely related Tibeto-Burman languages with small speaker communities. However, these languages are linguistically much closer than Bit and Khmu, and mutual intelligibility is possible with a short period of exposure. Also, the Sida telling is a third-person narrative, rather than a first-person narrative, which suggests that it was borrowed as a form of social commentary. It is interesting to note that we have not heard this story in the old territory from which the Sida and Pana migrated, which suggests that there was recent contact between these Austroasiatic and Tibeto-Burman groups in an area where Khmu has been spoken as a lingua franca together with Tai languages.

Tai Daeng is leaving the muang

There seems to be something about this story that speaks to the condition of people living in an area of high diversity of small ethnic groups. However, there is a version of the story that explains the situation of a large, socio-politically dominant group as well. A recent compilation of Tai Daeng oral tradition (Sinonthong 2007) identifies an "Era of the Porcupine Quill." According to the story, in the 15th century, there was a small kingdom that was being oppressed by a larger kingdom. Anyone who shot an animal in the forest must bring its fur, anyone who caught a fish must bring its scales to inform the rulers and surrender a choice cut of the meat. Failure to do this would result in a heavy fine. Eventually, there was a villager who shot a porcupine and took a quill to report to the ruler. Seeing such a huge "hair", the ruler supposed that the body of the animal must be as large as an elephant. The hunter tried to explain that the porcupine is a small animal, with a head the size of a dog and a leg the size of a bamboo rat. He promised to retrieve the body to show the ruler, but after five days, the villagers were not able to find it. Fearing that the ruler would tax them heavily for failing to make the necessary tribute payment of porcupine meat, the villagers decided that they would flee. Now there is a saying among the Tai Daeng,

"We lost our houses at the time of the Cheuang Wars, we lost our village at the time of the Porcupine Quill War."

This story explains why the Tai Daeng left their homelands in Vietnam and migrated into the Lao territories. The Tai Daeng assert historical agency in leaving lands of oppression to find a place to live more freely. It was in the Tai lands of upland Vietnam that Georges Condominas (1990) observed the social hierarchy that put Tai on top of the others, including the Kha, a general category of non-Tai people who lived under the rule of the Tai. It is likely that the *caw phaŋaa* 'feudal ruler' of this story refers to the local presence of Vietnamese governance, who rule through local lords. This published version is in Tai Daeng, written in a non-standardised Lao orthography, and shows the influence of contemporary political analysis of the Lao nation state that describes the struggle of these Tai people against class oppression.

Morality and vulnerability

Both the Tai Daeng and the Bit story are accounts of an injustice stemming from a misunderstanding. The Bit story is a linguistic explanation of an ethnogenesis process, while the Tai Daeng version more explicitly addresses regional political imbalances. Given the large size of the Tai Daeng population, it is possible that the conflict was within competing clans or local chiefs. What is more interesting for us here is the fact that the Bit were also resident in this area of upland Vietnam until the mid-1800s. But rather than searching for a common historical event, it is more productive to consider how the common motif spread in the course of local inter-ethnic communication. The Bit lived under a Tai system of governance in Vietnam, most likely of the Tai Daeng or Tai Khao. Speaking Tai languages has been a part of Bit's multilingual life since these times, as evidenced by the deep time depth indicated by Tai borrowings in their language. In fact, the other central element of contemporary Bit multilingualism, Khmu, may be a newer and less politicised influence in their lives. The existence of this shared story is the result of Tai-Bit-Khmu multilingualism that has recently come into contact with speakers of Tibeto-Burman languages.

Interethnic relations within the Tai political hierarchy entail matters of ecology, economy and culture, as we see in these two stories. Of importance here is the specificity of the porcupine quill and the confusion surrounding its identity. We note that there is a humorous, or at least ironic, element to the stories – it is highly unlikely that someone would not be able to identify a porcupine quill with the animal, which is well known in these

parts. In fact, there are two species of porcupine with distinct etyma in Tai and Austroasiatic languages. Moreover, it is entertaining to consider the possibility that there would be an animal in the forest larger than an elephant that was unknown to a group of high economic and political (or kin) standing.

The honesty of the migrating group – in the Bit case, the commitment to reciprocity and in the Tai Daeng case, the effort to follow the rules set from above –is seen as a morally positive, but politically futile fact within the social landscape. Applying this basic motif to two fundamentally different social situations signals the existence of shared frames of cultural reference that can be understood as an ecology of folklore, rather than a genealogy of descent. The salience of the cultural logics involved in the story works across scales of political organisation and ethnic hierarchy. The fact that the Tai Daeng, a strong group in this area, are subject to the same oppression from another group enables the Bit to imagine their relationship with the Khmu in a similar semiotic framework. The question of whether this is a Tai story then becomes less important than the fact that the story has been reproduced in different settings, that is to say, that the existence of regionally shared stories indexes the dense networks of interaction that accompany widespread multilingualism.

3. "They didn't know how to die": Ritual in the imagination of difference

Among various Tibeto-Burman people in northern Laos, there is a commonly heard story about a group of people in the past who "didn't know how to die." This trope is used to explain how a change in ritual practice is involved in social differentiation. But what does it mean for a storyteller to say that "they didn't know how to die"? The phrase has a common semantic-syntactic structure across local languages, using the auxiliary verb of learned or habitual potential – in Tai languages Lao *saaŋ* and Lue *caaŋ*, corresponding to Tibeto-Burman Pana *khfy* and Luma *ki̱*. This can be interpreted in two ways: first, that they physically could not die, their bodies living extremely long lives; or second, that they tended to live long lives as a group. Either way, this inability to die is a problem that is remedied by a change in ritual practices, involving the intervention of a bear or bear-like animal in a new death rite. This cultural change is used to explain the existence of sub-groups among closely related people, which is related to differences in language, divergent migration patterns and ethnonyms. In the three stories below, the social differentiation occurs at three levels: formation of an ethnolinguistic group, divergence of sub-groups of an

ethnolinguistic group, and power relations among clan groups within an ethnolinguistic group.

A binturong's funeral and the Pana clans

The Pana arrived in the area just before the turn of the 19th century, and have created a village environment in which Pana, Khmu and Lue have been spoken together at the household level for several generations. This story explains the differentiation of ritual groups within a clan after the introduction of a funeral for a binturong to allow the dominant clan to die "normally" like the others.

> The Lao Li[2] went to cut a tree. The Lao Phong stood there watching, clapping their hands. The Lao Chau had the most people, and their descendants increased. They went to catch the falling tree, and they were able catch it. They had so many people that they weren't afraid of anyone. They had a lot of money, and they had many people to speak for them. All they had to say was, "You are not Lao Chau!" The Lao Phong continued clapping, congratulating the Lao Chau, and drinking rice whiskey. There were Big Chau and Small Chau, and the Big Chau could not die. Children were born, and they grew up healthy. The old people got older and older, but didn't die. The Lao Chau did not attend the funerals of the other clans. If a Lao Li person died, we didn't go join the rites. If a Lao Phong person died, we didn't go. But the Lao Chau wanted to do rituals [so that they could die]. One hunter went to the forest, and he captured a binturong, and brought it back to the village. They didn't eat it, but they did death rites for it. They all cried. They killed a buffalo and a cow. From then on, we Lao Chau, could die like the other clans. That is why each clan has two sub-clans. They each have to do the death rites for the other.

As explained in this story, there are three main clans within the Pana social system: Chau, Li and Phong. Within each, there is a major and a minor group, the latter being a ritual sub-group that has incorporated people from other ethnic groups, primarily upland Chinese. The significance of the tree cutting is not elaborated in this telling, but it is clear that the tree is a ficus. Cutting a ficus tree is a common motif in the region, as the

[2] "Lao" is from the Chinese 老 lǎo which is prefixed to clan names in many Tibeto-Burman languages. It is not related to the Tai ethnic group Lao.

ficus has spiritual power for both Buddhists and animists, regardless of ethnicity. Because powerful spirits are believed to reside in ficus trees, cutting the tree usually requires a ritual intervention and signifies a disturbance to the social order, often involving the death of someone crushed by the falling tree. Here, the Chau clan people were able to catch the falling tree, indicating sacred potency that led to their inability to die.

The Pana hunter that captured the binturong made sure that it was not eaten, but rather was given funeral rites. The binturong is known as giving off a pleasant smell, and is actually a type of civet, even though it is classified linguistically as a type of bear in both Lao (*mii hɔɔm* 'bear-fragrant') and Pana (*y□my* 'bear-fragrant). The Pana practice organised wailing at their funerals, and the storytellers make specific note that the Chau cried for the binturong. They also sacrificed a buffalo, which is a practice normally associated with Austroasiatic groups but indicates great wealth and ritual power. The Pana are a very small group who have survived through close contact with surrounding groups, frequent intermarriage and pervasive multilingualism (Badenoch forthcoming). It seems possible that the binturong represents the ritual input of another ethnic group. It is somewhat ironic that the ritual innovation removes the sacred power keeping them from dying, but at the same time indicates a correction to an abnormal social situation and perhaps accounts for changing political realities within the group.

Pala, Eusi and Luma: Forgetting as ritual death and ethnic rebirth

In areas of high ethnolinguistic diversity, particularly among Tibeto-Burman peoples, ethnonyms, languages, rituals and oral histories tell of complex intersections and divergences. In 2024, an elder was explaining to us his understanding of the languages and ethnonyms of local groups of Tibeto-Burman people, including his own Luma. He commented on how there are different names for different groups, but the linguistic differences do not often match. In this area, the women tend to wear traditional clothing, and folk ethnology often tries to link hat shape or skirt length to different ethnic identities. Linguists have considered these local classifications with phonological and lexical differences (Lew 2023), but the storyteller told us the story of a ritual innovation in response to the inability of one group to die.

> The Luma and the Pala are really the same people, and speak the same language. There are some small differences, but it is a question of villages. But in the old days, the Pala couldn't die. The

> people lived and lived, they got old, but they didn't die. They brought a bear to try to help with funerals, but then many people died. It was because they didn't have the rituals. That is why they are really called Eushi [ɤ55ɕi55] – you know, ɕi55 means "to die". So many of them died after they brought the bear for the ritual. But we, Luma, were fine, because we had the rituals. We taught them the rituals. They were also called Pala, but that was not their real name. Everyone knows them as Pala because someone working in tourism made it popular, but they are Eushi. And we are Luma. They couldn't die, but we had the rituals.

In our follow-up discussion, he hinted that "cannot die" meant that they did not have rituals that allowed them to send off the spirits peacefully. Because he identifies Luma and Pala as "the same people," we can read his story as an assertion of a ritual integrity that was lost by the Eushi and then restored by the Luma after a health or demographic crisis resulting from this ritual forgetting.

A failed ritual and the birth of the Phusang

Lue elders near the Lao-China border also tell the story of a group that could not die. There was a group of "Akha" people that lived near the areas of Phu Hua Sang, Phu Phabat and Phu San in Nyot Ou district. The Lue called them Tai Phusang. Some of them lived near Siang Siaw village. In those days, there was a footprint of the Buddha that had appeared on one mountain, and the Phusang went to live there, making offerings at this holy site. Because of this, these Phusang lived very long lives; in fact, it was said that they didn't know the word 'to die'. But some people wanted to die, because living such long lives was difficult in many ways. The Phusang saw some nearby Lue people holding a funeral procession, taking the deceased from the village to their cemetery area, where they were buried. So the Phusang went hunting and brought back a bear, and gave the bear a funeral in imitation of the Lue. After that, however, the Phusang started dying in large numbers, as if it were an epidemic. With all these people dying, they were constantly digging graves and burying people in rows. The Lue of Siang Siaw started calling that area "The Cemetery of 10 Thousand Graves." Then the Phusang decided to dig up the footprint that they had worshipped and bury it, out of fear for what had happened after the bear's funeral. They left the area, moving south to Bun Nuea and Bun Tai. It was after this that they divided up and each group came to be called by a different name (Lao Academy of Social Sciences 2021).

In this way, discontinuity in ritual life is identified as the source of ethnic difference. In Native Northwestern California, there is an area inhabited by three ethnolinguistic groups who have been in close cultural contact for centuries. Local variations on a shared story of how the original inhabitants, who "did not know death," experience the first death as a result of a past moral transgression. For each of the groups, the story has been reproduced as a way of maintaining ethnocultural distinction, even as they engage in an areal practice of performativity. In northern Laos, the "learning to die" story is used as a way of describing differentiation. In the telling of these, we see how the first death is the birth of an "other," rather than the reification of a self. In an area where mobility and dynamic patterns of interaction have been the norm, these stories are a semiotic window on ethnogenesis, and as they are told across ethnic groups contribute to a sense of shared historical experience. In the Sida telling of the porcupine quill story, we see another intersection with an areal motif commenting on the linguistic differentiation and the ambiguity of Self/Other in the broader ethnic landscape.

4. Poetic affect in the maintenance of areal culture

After a session eliciting words in the Khami variety of Phong, an Austroasiatic language spoken by a few elders in a village on the outskirts of Vientiane, Badenoch's informants began to talk about the importance of oral traditions in maintaining cultural integrity. The Phong Khami language is not being transmitted to the younger generations since they came down from the mountainous areas as refugees in the 1970s. Living with Lao in a village where the Phong are now a small minority, the elders occasionally speak Phong with each other when they get together, and with a foreign linguist – first Proschan in the 1990s and Badenoch in the 2010s – but they have resigned themselves to being the last generation of speakers. Recognising they have some difficulty recalling words, one elderly man explains that this is because their parents weren't able to tell them the old stories. The ancestors knew who they were before they "became Phong", but they didn't tell the story. That is why they cannot recall all the words. If they had told the stories, they would "be able to speak all the old words."

Another speaker followed by summarising that "there is no one to speak it," further explaining that, for example, there is the story of Khun Lu and Khun Lang. This is a very well-known story in the Lao world and has been identified as an example of classical Lao literature. Switching from Lao to Phong, he began to tell the story, which starts with the introduction of the main character, Khun Lang. He sets the stage by explaining that

Khun Lang is *Phram Riah*, an 'old person'. Another participant comments, "He was *sonphaw riah*" – the old ethnic group, using the modern Lao political term for the 50 official ethnic groups. There is an important ambiguity here, because *phram* is both the general term for person as well as a word that can be used to refer to ethnic groups. As will be discussed further below, in most versions of this story, Khun Lang is clearly identified as Kha, or even more specifically as Khmu. The Phong tell of their past as being a younger brother of the Khmu, similar to the Bit, but the Phong left him behind because he failed to become civilised, which indexed by the lack of certain cultural practices associated with Tai culture (Tappe and Badenoch 2021). Khun Lang is described as a rich person with influence, although there is no overt mention of his ethnicity. When told by other groups, Khun Lang is not usually mentioned in the title of the story, which is known widely as Khun Lu Nang Ua, for the hero and heroine of the story. In what might be the last telling of the story in Phong Khami, the storyteller identifies directly with Khun Lang, asserting his wealth and influence, and more importantly perhaps his indigeneity in the area as the "old" person.

The Phong Khami version recorded was very short, but ends as expected with Khun Lu, the hero and competitor of Khun Lang, and Nang Ua, the woman over whom the two struggled, dying by suicide in a Romeo and Juliet-type conclusion. The Phong version is resolved with Khun Lu and Nang Ua becoming the colours of the rainbow – he, the dark colours because of the blood of Nang Ua that dripped onto him from the tree where she hung herself, and she, the light colours as she hung in the sun from the top of the tree. Here is the type of variation that is fascinating – the Lao version has them becoming stars that can only meet once a year, or the sun and the moon, and the Bit version introduced below tells of their fate to be buried near each other but separated by a barrier through which they can only clasp each other's hands in death. The Phong elders struggled to recall the word *khar?uc* 'rainbow', but then moved to elaborate on each of the seven Phong language colours in the rainbow and their relation to the characters. Each of the elders has likely told the story to his children and grandchildren in Lao, but for this telling, the Phong terms needed to be produced, perhaps asserting association with the Khun Lang framing they provided.

Thematic adaptations of the type introduced above are critical elements in the creation of a shared regional semiotic landscape of praxis. The flexibility through which these stories are manipulated to convey new meaning in different socio-ecological settings is indexical of the intimate contact that happens across cultural borders. It also shows how the stories themselves are given agency through the telling of the stories. But the transcultural life of a story is also a story of multilingualism and

translanguaging, as hinted by the Phong elders who told the Khun Lu Khun Lang story. For these stories to move and morph, storytellers maintain poetic affect in the telling. Even as stories are translated as they are trans-related across an ethnic landscape, attention to linguistic detail demonstrates the importance of shared aesthetics in creating areal orality. In this section, we explore the poetics of storytelling to expand some of the implied messages of the Phong elders above.

Tai and Kha in the story of Khun Lu and Nang Ua

As introduced above, the story of Khun Lu and Nang Ua is a central part of the Lao-Tai tradition of oral literature, but it is heard in many different languages across the uplands as well. As would be expected, there are differences in the telling, reflecting local histories, social relations, ecological niches, moral frameworks and changing world views. In the Lao-Tai telling, one of the main characters – Khun Lang – is identified as being "Kha", a member of one of the Austroasiatic groups that have lived in proximity to the Tai for centuries. In the version recorded by Phaivanh (202x), the character is the leader of the Kha, marked by the Tai noble title *khun* and suggests a degree of cultural assimilation within Tai society. He woos a Lao-Tai woman away from marriage with the local Lao-Tai leader. A piece of historical context for this story is that the Kha groups, characterised as wild, forest people, have been integrated into the foundation myths of many Tai polities, as the Tai recognised the need to draw on the local power of autochthonous groups in negotiating the spiritual landscape. The Khun Lu and Nang Ua story can be understood in this socio-historical context, with Khun Lang representing the Kha Other that has been partially assimilated.

The story of Khun Lu and Nang Ua is told by the Bit, with some significant modifications to the story. But here we focus on *how* the story is told using three languages – Bit, Lue and Khmu – to maintain an effective perspective on the ethnic diversity of the uplands where the story is told. The main narration is done in Bit, and the tellers of the versions recorded by Badenoch all maintain that this is a Bit story. To the question of possible Tai origins, they explain that it is "shared" with the Tai and other groups. This is a cultural iteration of an important linguistic ideology that separates newly "borrowed" Lao-Tai words – literally *buəs kee* "others' language" – and older borrowings known as *buəs ruəm*, or "common language". The latter are pronounced with Bit phonological characteristics, while the former are pronounced as they are in Lao (Badenoch 2019). The importance of Lue poetic singing regionally is mentioned directly in some Khmu stories,

where the social skills of a character are underpinned by the narrator commenting on his ability to sing in the Lue tradition (Lindell et al. 1989). The use of Lue, together with Khmu, in the telling of this "Bit" story is necessary for the completeness of the message and the experience of the telling. This is in contrast to the Phong telling above, which needed to use basic cultural words in Phong to achieve the intended effect.

The Bit have changed the name of the Kha character from Khun Lang to Khun Nyiw (*koŋiəw*), but his ethnic identity is made explicit by the use of Khmu for his dialogue. The multilingualism surrounding his character is key to the social dynamics of the story. The narrator begins the story in Bit, setting up the love interest between Khun Lu and Nang Ua. When Khun Lu goes on a long trading trip, Khun Nyiw tries to gain the affections of Nang Ua. Like many Bit stories that are believed to have Lao origins, the dialogue between characters is sung in a style of poetic Tai. Most of this dialogue would be identified as Lue, the common Tai language of northeastern Laos, by the Bit people. There are exchanges between Nang Ua, her parents, and Khun Nyiw in Lue, with the narrator continuing to narrate the story in Bit. But at key points when Khun Nyiw is strategising to capture Nang Ua, he speaks to his entourage in Khmu. The narrator moves between Bit, Lue and Khmu over the course of the story, with no commentary on the code switch or explanation about the relationships.

Through the trilingual performance, the narrator appeals to the sociocultural history of the region, evoking a Bit perspective on how these power relations might have felt. Because Khmu is a prestige language and lingua franca in the region, the use of the language keeps the narrative located in an "other" world for the Bit. But this Other is a familiar and intimate one, as Bit has maintained this bilingualism with Khmu for generations. The emergence of an asymmetric bilingualism goes back to the Bit ethnogenesis myth discussed above. Thus, the narrator draws on several strains of cultural legitimacy and political power in her use of Khmu. The maintenance of the Lue dialogue is a second layer of intimate otherness drawing directly from the Bit position on the edge of the Tai polities that extend across the mountains. Here we prefer the notion of translanguage (Li 2018), as the speaker opts not translate the Lue and Khmu texts, demonstrating the importance of the language itself – sounds, syntax and social insinuation – and its relations to other forms of interaction in completing the message.

Three languages index three layers of cultural life that define their ethnohistory and link them in a complex network of political and poetic similarity. The narrator never makes an overt statement of where the Bit are located within the story: On the Tai side, or on the Khmu side? More

likely, one of many in the shared aesthetic of a multilingual mountain landscape. The narrative performance also indexes Bit ideologies of multilingualism, where code mixing is used as a tool to enhance the range of poetics available to the speaker. In the lexicon of elaborate expressions, there are many examples of Bit nouns paired with Tai or Khmu words to elevate the cultural affect of speech in a marked register (Badenoch 2019).

Expressive language as a narrative anchor

In the Khun Lu Nang Ua story, the narrator indexes the Bit view on ethnic relations, mapping the social landscape by assigning different languages to different speakers. Multilingual performance allows the speaker to expand the affective space of the story and draw on other poetics within their linguistic repertoires. Speakers of Bit make frequent and creative use of expressives, which have their own grammar of sound-meaning mapping and marking of temporal dynamics that set them apart from other words like nouns or verbs. Expressives are used to increase the affective stance of the narrative in Bit. Dialogue produced in Lue is essential for establishing the cultural context for the story, but the narrator of one telling included a few expressive words amidst the Lue text in an example of expressive code mixing. In normal conversation, expressives are indexical of the Bit affective register and would not be chosen as a poetic tool to enhance a Tai text. In the story, expressives are used to depict the inviting sense of food ready to be eaten. In the following passage, discursively marked as Lue, the parents of Nang Ua encourage her to come out of her room and eat with Khun Nyiw, whom she has been avoiding because she is dedicated to Khun Lu.

naaŋ	*ʔəəy*	*naaŋ*	*luk*	*sɔɔy*	*kin*	*saap*	*luk*	*sɔɔy*	*naa*	*kin*	*kɛɛŋ*
girl	hey	girl	get. up	help	eat	meat	get. up	help	EMPH	eat	soup

Oh, young girl, get up and help me eat all this food and soup.

kɛɛŋ	*pet*	*suk*	***rayray***	*kɛɛŋ*	*kay*	*suk*	***rawraw***
soup	duck	cooked	EXP: hot. and. boiling	soup	chicken	cooked	hot. and. steaming

The duck soup is cooked and boiling; the chicken soup is cooked and steaming hot.

aw	*tuəy*	*nɔɔy*	*tak*	*kɛɛŋ*	*pet*	*kɛɛŋ*	*kay*
take	bowl	small	scoop	soup	duck	soup	chicken

Scoop the duck soup and chicken soup into the small bowls,

aw	*tuəy*	*ɲai*	*dee*	*tak*	*kɛɛŋ*	*muu*	*kɛɛŋ*	*maa*
take	bowl	big	INT	scoop	soup	pig	soup	dog

Scoop the pork soup and the dog soup into the big bowls.

Discussing this usage with another Bit speaker, he suggested that these words are most certainly a Bit intervention in the story, but would not be the first choice of expression for daily discussion of hot food ready to be eaten. Here, we observe a marked example of a different level of code switching within the multilingual narrative performance.

Expressive language may be part of the "translation" process as a story moves from one culture to another. Let us take, for example, the humorous story of a tree that becomes a man in order to marry a woman, but proves unable to understand his role as a human. A Khmu version of the story is recorded by Lindell's team, and Badenoch has recorded versions of the story in Bit and Phong, in this case, the Laan variety. Although the three languages are all related, they are mutually unintelligible. The Phong have not lived close to the Khmu or Bit for several generations. Rather than a concern with the possible source or original themes – the story is composed of a string of episodes that demonstrate how a tree lacks common sense and must be saved by his wife – we are interested in the translingual poetics that remain in the Bit and Phong versions. Both languages have rich expressive lexicons, and the narration of the story uses expressives to depict a very specific detail in one episode.

In the Bit story, after the tree Cah Cial (*cah ciəl*) married the woman, she instructed him in upland farming. This includes building a field hut to use while they are clearing their fields. The instruction employs an expressive word depicting the feel of the desired field hut, illustrating it for him with reference to a crab's shell.

tɛʔ	*doʔ*	*tapdap*	*səʔ*	*miən*	*trpuəʔ*	*kjaar*	*laʔ*	*seʔ*
do	small	EXP: compact. enclosure	like. that	like	shell	crab	say	like. that

"Make it small and compact with an enclosure for us like a crab's shell," she said.

The hut is a lean-to, with one side open, which the wife likens to a crab shell propped up on one side. The imagery is specific and vivid. The Bit expressive *tapdap* is indexical of how the small hut should be open on one side but provide a safe space under the roof.

In the Phong version, the wife gives Yong Blik (*yɔɔŋ blɨk*) similar instructions for the construction of their field hut.

ʔəə	*plɛɛŋ*	*cɔpŋɔɔp*	*kʰɨɨ*	*dɔh*	*raap*	*mən*	*naa*
um	to. make	EXP: open on. the. side	like	shell	crab	that	EMPH

Well, make it open on the side, like a crab's shell.

The storyteller uses an expressive – *cɔpŋɔɔp* –to depict the feel of the desired hut, again describing it as a crab-shell propped up on one side. The common crab-shell theme is interesting, but remarkably, both narrators foreground the affect with an expressive trope.

The linguistic similarities between the Bit and Phong depictions of this part of the story are striking. Both storytellers present the imagined field hut with an expression, which is then complemented with a similar construction using different Tai words for 'similar' (Bit *miən*, Phong *khɨɨ*) and then completed with a direct reference to the crab shell. Interestingly, the words for 'crab' in Khmu (*ktaam*), Bit (*kyaar*) and Phong (*raap*) are all etymologically distinct, while the Phong and Bit expressive use different bases. Discursively, however, both deliver the image in a narrative micro-arc from expressive to prosaic, or depictive to referential. We can rule out direct contact between Bit and Phong, based on the facts of their residence and movements. Similarly, we cannot imagine a compelling setting in which these versions would be translated versions of an original that had similar structures, although we could easily imagine grammatically, pragmatically and performatively that a Khmu version might be structured similarly. The more salient point is that this type of poetics is important enough to reproduce itself across languages in different areas over a considerable time-depth. The Bit story is told by Ay Lan, who speaks Bit, Khmu, Lue and Lao fluently, while the Phong version was narrated by Bounta, a speaker of Lao, Phuan (another Tai language) and Phong.

This analysis complements the notion of a linguistic area in which languages converge structurally through sustained multilingualism and cultural contact. The linguistic features that remain in the translation of stories contribute to cultural convergence. It should be mentioned that the Cah Cial and Yong Blik stories are composed of episodes of humorous social incompetence on the part of the tree-turned-human hero. In other parts of the story, his wife instructs him to burn their upland field (as part of their upland swidden agricultural practices) at the top if the wind blows from above and at the bottom if the wind blows from below. Taking these instructions to heart, both Cah Cial and Yong Blik set fire to their own head and pubic hair according to the wind patterns. The shared value of humour

as a way to shed light on social norms is an important motivation for the reproduction of not only themes, but also narrative devices, across a multiethnic semiotic landscape.[3].

5. Interethnic poetics in the creation of a cultural area

In an area where there is both vast ethnolinguistic diversity and significant elements of shared culture, the question of relationships between ethnic groups is critical. Northern Laos is a microcosm of the wider linguistic ecologies of upland mainland Southeast Asia, where one constantly encounters shared themes and characters in the oral traditions of different ethnic groups. In this area, the fundamental frameworks for understanding interethnic relations tend to stress essentialized hierarchy and simple paths of cultural transmission from the lowlands to the highlands, from the Tai to the Kha, even though we know from the historical record that autochthonous groups played a central role in the founding of most Tai political centres across the area.

How are we to interpret a Sida (Tibeto-Burman) elder's telling of a Bit (Austroasiatic) story of ethnogenesis that is also told by the Tai Daeng (Tai) but in a completely different political context? In the upland areas, our Bit and Sida storytellers engage in a variety of translanguaging practices when they hear, adapt and retell a story. The process is less about the translation of a text than the interpretation of a set of relationships that are located in a cultural landscape of which they participate as well. How performative culture is reproduced across ethnic and linguistic groups is the product of ideological strategies that the storyteller uses to claim power that is associated with different language worlds in society. If we consider the types of narratives discussed above, it is clear that making is concerned with cultural memory. This is true not in the abstract, but in the affective sense as well – the stories that are passed down are those that are memorable for the hearer (Nanson 2023).

Rather than a comparative approach to oral traditions that is concerned with cataloguing themes and motifs, an areal approach that recognises oral traditions as the culturally embedded patterning of style will allow us to recognise diverse emic strategies to produce meaning. Dell

[3] Unfortunately, the Khmu versions published by Lindell's team do not include the original Khmu for all texts. Notations provide interesting information on linguistic and cultural interpretation, and motifs are indexed for reference, but we cannot read the text as aesthetically organised praxis.

Hymes oriented his ethnopoetics towards the notion of voice, summarised succinctly by Jan Blommaert as the ability to "express things on one's own terms, to communicate in ways that satisfy personal, social and cultural needs" (2006: 237). Rather than searching for the unicorn Ur-text that may not exist (O'Neill), we can hear stories for the aesthetic experiences they are and try to understand how expressive and poetic structures order the exchange of ideas, values, and histories across the semiotic landscape of diverse people.

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