

Lawa Ləsəm ʔLɛ Poetry Revisited*

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0. Introduction

In 1979 the author reported to scholars of Austroasiatic linguistic studies the existence of the Ləsəm ʔLɛ poetry of the Lawa people and its function in the Lawa tradition.¹ It was stated that Ləsəm ʔLɛ poetry is used in association with the coming of age of Lawa adolescents. The tradition was established that at the age of puberty, the Lawa boys and girls must learn to recite the Ləsəm ʔLɛ poetry and must be able to recite it in funeral ceremonies. The ability to recite the Ləsəm ʔLɛ poetry was viewed as a sign that the boys and girls had become young adults, ready for courtship and marriage and for taking up social responsibilities. Traditionally, there was not much ado about the learning of Ləsəm ʔLɛ poetry for boys. Boys picked up the poetry wherever there were people reciting it. Sometimes boys learned this poetry while going to the rice fields up in the hills, walking in a line of three people with the one who knew Ləsəm ʔLɛ walking in the middle and reciting it to the others while they were on their way up or down the hills. Thus, the boys who walked in front and behind could learn the Ləsəm ʔLɛ during the trip. For girls the learning of Ləsəm ʔLɛ poetry was more formally done than that of the boys. It was part of their coming of age. For a girl to come of age she had to be 13 years old. The community then wished that she participate in the social duty of reciting Ləsəm ʔLɛ poetry at funerals. Thus the girl was given instruction in Ləsəm ʔLɛ by the older girls in the village. This was the state of things that was reported twenty years ago.

However, things are moving quickly in Thailand and even the Lawa villages up in the hills are not spared this social and economic change. Lawa boys and girls nowadays come down from the hills to work in factories in the plains. Some even come to Bangkok to work as gardeners or housemaids. As there are not many boys and girls left in the Lawa villages at present Ləsəm ʔLɛ poetry is not now recited during courtship and social ceremonies as it used to be. At present during funeral ceremonies, married men must take turns to recite both the poetry for the part of the

* Acknowledgement is made to Dr. Christopher Court for polishing of my English and for painstaking, editing and checking. The usual disclaimer also applies here. The author alone is responsible for the linguistic content and interpretation of Lawa Poetry.

** Paper presented to the Australian Linguistic Society, July 6-7, 1996. The Australia National University, Canberra, Australia.

¹ A paper entitled "The Lawa Ləsəm ʔLɛ Poetry" was presented to the Symposium on Austro-Asiatic Languages, Helsingor, Denmark, October 24-26, 1979 and later published in the *JSS* 73:183-204, 1985.

boys and that of the girls. This was unheard of twenty years ago. And as there are fewer and fewer Lawa who know the *Ləʂəm ʔLə* poetry, the author was concerned that this beautiful Lawa tradition might die out in a few decades. This is the reason why a project for the preservation of the oral traditions of the minority peoples was established at Mahidol University. What is going to be reported hereafter in this paper is a part of the findings in a study conducted as part of this project. The paper will be divided along these lines:

1. Introducing the Lawa people
2. A brief phonological description of the Ban Pa Pae dialect of the Lawa language
3. Different types of *Ləʂəm ʔLə* poetry
4. Translation of a selected text
5. Remarks on Lawa poetry

1. Introducing the Lawa people

In this paper the term 'Lawa' refers to the language of a tribal group whose population is estimated at about 9,318² and is concentrated in two northern provinces of Thailand, namely Chiangmai and Maehongsorn. Specifically the Lawa villages are found between Baw Luang, in the Hot district of Chiangmai province in the east, and the Maesariang district of Maehongsorn province in the west. The Lawa tend to group together in small villages not exceeding 500 persons in each village. Linguistically, Lawa belongs to the Palaungic branch of the Austroasiatic family. However, as their villages are alongside those of the Karen (linguistically belonging to the Sino-Tibetan language family), the Lawa and the Karen tend to share some customs, such as the singing of songs at funeral ceremonies, and sometimes the Karen and the Lawa intermarry. In a mixed-marriage family the factor that determines which language is to be used is the locality of the house. A Lawa living in a Karen village speaks Karen, and a Karen living in a Lawa village speaks Lawa. The Lawa of Chiangmai and Maehongsorn provinces call themselves [lavia], and they are not to be confused with the so-called 'Lawa' of Kanchanaburi province who call themselves [ʔugɔŋ] and whose language belongs to the Tibeto-Burman linguistic family.³ Nor are they to be confused with the Lua (Mal or Thin) of Nan Province.⁴ In older literature the [ɲahkur] of Petchabun and Chaiyaphum Provinces are also called 'Lawa', which is a wrong designation in the author's opinion. The people who speak Austroasiatic languages in Petchabun and Chaiyaphum Provinces should be called [ɲahkur], which is the word they call

² According to the *Tribal Population of Thailand* published by the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare in 1994 (p.44-45).

³ Dr. David Bradley of La Trobe University has been working on the [ʔugɔŋ] for almost twenty years. Also two M.A. theses on this language were presented at Mahidol University, namely:

1. Pusit Rujjanavet. 1986. "The Phonology of Ugong in Uthaitхани Province." M.A. thesis, Mahidol University.

2. Mayuree Puapunsuddee. 1993. "Verbs in Ugong." M.A. thesis, Mahidol University

⁴ The author has been working also with Lua for twenty years and is compiling a Lua-Thai dictionary, expected to be completed in 1998.

themselves.⁵ And we should reserve the word ‘Lawa’ exclusively for the Austroasiatic-speaking people in Chiangmai and Maehongsorn who call themselves [lavia].

Historically the Lawa are the descendants of the once powerful ‘Lawa’ whose kingdom was recorded in the early Northern Thai chronicles. Stone inscriptions carved during the Sukhodaya period (700 years ago) mention the name of the Lawa people. Nowadays the Lawa villagers in Ban Pa Pae (where the author interviewed her informants) have very little knowledge of their history. But they still remember that once they had a king whose name was Wilangka, and that this king was cheated by a Mon queen whose name was Chammadevi. Gordon Young (1974:53-54) stated that the present-day Lawa in Chiangmai and Maehongsorn were the descendants of the Wa people who migrated from Burma. However, the present-day Lawa cannot remember this migration and cannot pinpoint the place in Burma from which they migrated. As the Lawa have never kept chronicles, it would be difficult to authenticate any hypothesis concerning their history, however attractive this hypothesis might be. One interesting hypothesis advanced by the famous French ethnologist, Georges Condominas,⁶ was that Chammadevi⁷ must have had Lawa blood herself and was only brought up in the Mon court. That was why Wilangka, the Lawa king, dared ask her to be his queen, as he was asking for his right to marry her according to the preferred marriage custom practiced by people who are cousins. As it is difficult to prove or disprove such a story, it remains for us, the readers, to decide whether we want to believe it or not, while we wait for more evidence. One sure thing about the Lawa, whether we want to believe in the story of Wilangka and Chammadevi or not, is that we must admit that the Lawa must have had an advanced form of civilization during years past in which human society was divided into classes. Princess Viphavadee Rangsit⁸ recorded in her diary when she visited the Lawa village of Umphai in Chiangmai province in 1969 that it was found that the Lawa community actually consisted of four social classes i.e., (1) the *samarj* (those of royal blood) (2) the *laam* (mandarins) (3) the *koʻyit* (sorcerers and shamans) and (4) the ordinary *lavia*.⁹ In her studies of the Lawa in Ban Pa Pae, Maesariang Province, the present author found that of those four classes there remain only three in Ban Pa Pae at the present time i.e. (1) the *samarj* (of royal blood, descended from the long-gone Lawa kings, (2) the *laam*

⁵ A *nahkur*-English dictionary was published in 1984 by Theraphan L. Thongkham under the name *Nyah Kur (Chao Bon)-Thai-English Dictionary*, Chulalongkorn University Printing House, 522 pages

⁶ By personal communication with the present author. Condominas himself wrote about the Lawa in Georges Condominas, “Notes sur l’histoire lawa. A propos d’un lieu dit Lua (Lawa) en pays karen (Amphoe Chom Thong, Changwat Chiangmai)” in *Commemorative volume for the Museum*, Bangkok, 1974:146-164

⁷ Chammadevi was traditionally described as a Mon queen in some Thai historical texts.

⁸ Princess Viphavadee Rangsit was the sister-in-law of Prince Samidh Rangsit who studied the ethnography of the Lawa in the 1940’s, see “Beitrag zur Kenntnis der Lawasprachen von Nord-Siam (mit Vokabularien”, *Anthropos* 37-40:688-710 (1942-1945). Prince Samidh Rangsit studied the Lawa in Umpai and Bo Luang villages in Hot district, Chiangmai Province.

⁹ A vivid description of a two-day trek to these Lawa villages was given in Princess Viphavadee Rangsit’s article entitled “*mīa nuay phrarajchathan khīn khao*” (when the Royal Aid Unit comes to the hills) published in her collected papers “*riaj lai rot*” (Different tastes), Bangkok, Prae Pittaya Press, 1971, pp. 336-37.

who are elected by the *samaŋ* to perform traditional ceremonies such as the funeral, and (3) the ordinary *lavīa*. As we have noted, the fact that there are different classes in Lawa society can be interpreted as meaning that once the Lawa had a high form of culture—a civilization now vanished with the passage of time. But there no longer exists in Lawa villages any material things that bear witness to a high civilization of the Lawa. The *Ləsom ʔLe* poetry is the only thing that remains of the once powerful Lawa people.

2. A brief phonological description of the Ban Pa Pae dialect of the Lawa language¹⁰

Ban Pa Pae village,¹¹ situated in the 3rd village, Tambon Ban Pa Pae, Mae Sariang district, Mae Hongson Province, consists of 415 Lawa persons and 74 households, according to the สถิติประชากรเขตโครงการหลวงแม่สะเรียง ศูนย์พัฒนาและสงเคราะห์ชาวเขา จังหวัด แม่ฮ่องสอน พ.ศ. 2537 (Population statistics in the Royal Project of Mae Sariang, the Center for Development and Aid to the Hill Tribes, Mae Hongson Province A.D. 1994).¹² The majority of the population are animistic Buddhists and accept the *samaŋ* as their leaders. Christian missionaries came to the village 40 years ago and converted a few of the Lawa. Perhaps the great contribution of these missionaries to the Lawa was the introduction of the Roman and Thai alphabets as the means of writing Lawa. As a result the Lawa have been using these alphabets in their daily correspondence, including the writing of *Ləsom ʔLe*. Even if the widespread written language introduced by these missionaries was based on the pronunciation of another village, Ban La-up, the Ban Pa Pae people have no difficulty in using it as an effective means of correspondence, because all of them know the systematic sound correspondences between the Ban La-up pronunciation and their own pronunciation.¹³

¹⁰A full phonological description of Ban Pa Pae dialect was given in “The Phonology of Lawa” by Suriya Ratanakul and Lakhana Dao Ratanahongse in *Papers in Southeast Asian Languages and Linguistics in Honor of André-Georges Haudricourt*, Suriya Ratanakul, David D. Thomas and Suwilai Premsrirat (editors), Bangkok, Mahidol University, 1985, pp. 264-306.

¹¹ Peter Kunstadter, gave a description of Lawa life in Ban Pa Pae village in his article ‘Living With Thailand’s Gentle Lua’ in the *National Geographic Magazine*, July, 1966, page 123-146. At present, the Institute of Language and Culture, Mahidol University, is preparing a book (in Thai, with illustrations) describing Lawa culture, that is to be published by the end of 1996.

¹² The figure that I gave in my 1985 article is 284 Lawa person and 54 households.

¹³ The phonological description of Ban La-up dialect was given in Donald Schlatter’s “Lavīa (Lawa, Lua?)” which appeared as chapter eleven in William A. Smalley (editor) *Phonemes and Orthography : Language Planning in Ten Minority Languages of Thailand*, Pacific Linguistics Series C No.43, Department of Linguistics, The Australian National University, 1976, pp. 273-280. The grammar of the La-up dialect was written as an M.A. thesis, under the supervision of the present author, submitted to Mahidol University by Chiranun Komolkitisakul. “Some General Characteristics of Lawa Grammar (La-Up Dialect)” (in English), mimeograph, 1985, 231 pages.

The Phonemes

There are two major classes of phonemes according to their function in the syllable; consonants and vowels.

The Vowels

Lawa vowels function as syllable nuclei, and consist of:

/i e ε i w ə a u o ɔ
 iə iə uə əi əi əo əɔ ai ai ao ui oi ɔi ɔe aiε/

Two subclasses of vowels are set up according to their function in the syllables: vowels in open syllables and vowels in closed syllables.

Vowels in open syllables

They function in open syllable type.

C(C)V(V) (V). In presyllable type CV, only /i, ə, u/ occur. In other open syllable types, almost all the vowels occur, except /ɔi/.

sɪcai	‘in a hurry’	ləmoʔ	‘dream’
tutai	‘soft (cloth)’	t ^h i	‘clear’
ɣuə	‘a fly’	həi	‘this’

Vowels in closed syllables

They function in closed syllable types C(C)V(V) (V)C and consist of all vowels.

t ^h iʔ	‘one’	p ^h ɛɲ	‘white’
mah	‘to be’	caop	‘to wear’
taip	‘frequently’	ɲiəʔ	‘house’

The Vowel Charts

Lawa has 10 simple vowels and 15 complex vowels. The complex vowels consist of 14 diphthongs and one triphthong.

Simple Vowel Phonemes

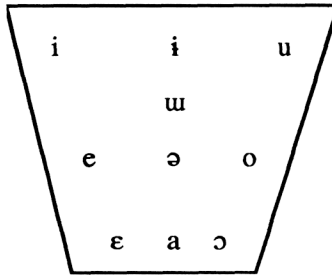


Figure 1. Simple Vowel Phonemes

Complex Vowel Phonemes

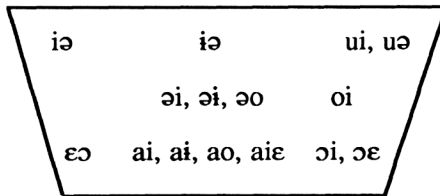


Figure 2. Complex Vowel Phonemes

Consonants

Lawa consonants function as syllable-periphery. There are 37 consonant phonemes:

/p p^h b m^b t t^h n^d c c^h ɲ^c j ʔj
 k k^h ŋ^g ʔm hm ʔm n hn ʔn ɲ hɲ ʔɲ
 ŋ hŋ ʔŋ f v s ʔɣ h l hl ʔl/

Consonant Chart

Lawa's 37 consonant phonemes are shown in the following chart:

Points of articulation			bilabial	labio-dental	alveolar	palatal	velar	glottal
Manners of articulation								
Stops	Oral	voiceless unasp.	p		t	c	k	ʔ
		voiceless asp.	p ^h		t ^h	c ^h	k ^h	
		voiced	b			j		
		prenasalized	m ^b		ⁿ d	^ɲ c	^ŋ g	
		preglottalized				ʔ _j		
	Nasal	voiced	m		n	^ɲ	ŋ	
		voiceless	hm		hn	h ^ɲ	hŋ	
		preglottalized	ʔ _m		ʔ _n	ʔ _ɲ	ʔ _ŋ	
Fricatives	Slit	voiceless		f				h
		voiced		v			ʔ _ɣ	
		preglottalized					ʔ _ɣ	
	Groove	voiceless			s			
Laterals		voiced			l			
		voiceless			hl			
		preglottalized			ʔ _l			

Figure 3. Consonant Chart

Examples

p-	paŋ	'bottle'
t-	təm	'egg'
c-	caŋ	'deer'
k-	kaʔ	'fish'
ʔ-	ʔaiʔ	'I'
p ^h -	p ^h eŋ	'white'
t ^h -	t ^h u	'mountain'
c ^h -	c ^h uəŋ	'foot'
k ^h -	k ^h iət	'to bite'
b-	bak	'small frog'
j-	jiəm	'to weep'
m ^b -	m ^b ok	'to ride'
ⁿ d-	ⁿ doŋ	'pot (cooking utensil)'
^ɲ c-	^ɲ caim	'(finger) ring'
^ŋ g-	^ŋ gok	'ugly'
ʔ _j -	ʔ _j iə	'medicine'
m-	maic	'good, beautiful'
n-	nok	'to make an offering to the spirits'
^ɲ -	^ɲ iəʔ	'house'

ŋ-	ŋoŋ	'knee'
hm-	hməŋ	'to hear'
hn-	hnam	'blood'
hŋ-	hŋoic	'the narrow part of a piece of cloth'
hŋ-	hŋəʔ	'paddy, unhusked rice'
ʔm-	ʔmoʔ	'rope'
ʔn-	ʔnoŋ	'only one'
ʔŋ	mah ʔŋok	'Never mind!'
ʔŋ-	ʔŋai	'eye'
f-	fiəʔ	'monkey'
h-	hɛ	'bee'
v-	vec	'sword'
ʔ-	ʔaih	'turtle'
ʔY-	ʔYəŋ	'pillar, post'
s-	saŋ	'elephant'
hl-	hlaʔ	'leaf'
l-	ləic	'pig'
ʔl-	ʔloŋ	'boat'

These consonants can be divided into three subclasses in terms of their distribution: single initial consonants, consonant clusters and final consonants.

Single Initial Consonants

All 37 consonants function in syllable-initial position.

Consonant Clusters

These function in syllable-initial position, and consist of

/pl p^hl m^bl kl k^hl ŋgl
 pj p^hj m^bj kj k^hj ŋgj/

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

Examples:

l -	pl	pləŋ	'grass used for thatching'
	kl	kloŋ	'river, stream'
	phl	phlɔk	'elephant's tusk'
	khl	khliək	'to lick'
	m ^b l	m ^b le	'bracelet'
	ŋgl	ŋgloʔ	'swamp'
j -	pj	pjaŋ	'roof'
	kj	kjak	'buffalo'
	phj	phjuʔ	'blanket'
	khj	khjai	'gold'

^m bj	^m bjɔŋ	'horse'
^ŋ qj	^ŋ qjɔŋ	'to carry (two or more people)'

Final Consonants

These function in syllable-final position, and consist of /p t c k ʔ h m n ɲ ŋ/ Lawa has both open syllables and closed syllables. Open syllables occur only after long vowels. Closed syllables can have the following 10 consonants as final consonants.

Examples:

-p	ʔaop	'cooked rice'
-t	ʔait	'to be'
-c	lœic	'pig'
-k	ʔak	'crossbow'
-ʔ	khoʔ	'tree'
-h	maih	'nose'
-m	ʔəom	'salty'
-n	kuən	'child'
-ɲ	^m bijɲ	'mud'
-ŋ	klɔŋ	'river, stream'

The Syllables

Most Lawa words are monosyllabic. However, as in most Austroasiatic languages, sesquisyllabic words are quite common. Sesquisyllabic words have a pre-syllable and a main syllable. The pre-syllable receives no stress. Its first vowel position can be filled by only two vowels (/a/ and /ə/). /ə/ is more frequent than /a/. It is a neutralization of all points of vowel articulation. However, when reduplication (such as in an onomatopoeic form) is present, any short vowel may occur. The second syllable, the main syllable, receives stress. It may be filled by all vowel phonemes.

3. Different Types of Ləsəm ʔLɛ

Up until twenty years ago the *Ləsəm ʔLɛ* poetry of the Lawa was used by Lawa adolescents in their social visits and courtship, and by the young unmarried Lawa in funeral ceremonies. In traditional Lawa society, until around 20 years ago, when a boy acquired the skill of reciting *Ləsəm ʔLɛ* poetry, it was his social duty to pay night visits to a “visitable” girl. The word “visitable” meant that the girl was more than 13 years old and also had the skill of reciting *Ləsəm ʔLɛ* poetry. In my 1985 article it was stated that “coming of age and courtship among the Lawa are not a sexual orgy as most tourists seem to believe. There is no ‘special’ rendezvous for the young Lawa. The boy has to visit the girl in her own one-room house where all the family members sleep together. Only a fireplace is between the girl’s sleeping quarters and her parents. The visitor and the girl are each conscious of the

social aspect of the visit. Both consider the visit as a *duty*. For the boy it is his duty to pay a visit to every ‘visitable’ girl at least once. Similarly, for the girl it is her duty to welcome the guest. Hence they treat each other with good manners and each talks to the other in *Lə̀səm ʔLɛ*. What was just described was the situation of twenty years ago. Since to-day there are not many young people left in the Lawa villages because they come down to sell their labor in big cities, and the few young ones that are left in the villages are not enthusiastic to learn the *Lə̀səm ʔLɛ*. The result is that nowadays there is no longer any recitation of *Lə̀səm ʔLɛ* during night visits. All the different types of *Lə̀səm ʔLɛ* that the young ones used to recite on different themes on different occasions are lumped together these days to be recited only at funeral ceremonies. So it is rather comical—or tragic (depending on your point of view)—to hear *Lə̀səm ʔLɛ* on the theme of “desire” recited at a funeral by old men while another group of old men in turn recites the part that used to be that of the girl’s response to this declaration of desire. When the present generation of Lawa old men (people more than forty are considered old in Lawa society) passes away, there might not be any *Lə̀səm ʔLɛ* poetry left anymore.

The following are seven types of *Lə̀səm ʔLɛ* as traditionally classified by the Lawa themselves. The name given for each type is that used by the Lawa themselves.

1. *lə̀səm luəŋ ʔit*. *luəŋ* ‘In the direction of, side’; *ʔit* means ‘tradition’. *lə̀səm luəŋ ʔit* is traditional poetry recited only during a funeral ceremony. Its text is traditionally fixed and cannot be changed nor improvised.

2. *lə̀səm kam khuih*. *kam* is the Kam Muəŋ loan word meaning ‘word, language’. *khuih* ‘to desire’. The main theme of this *lə̀səm* is an expression of the reciter’s desire, e.g., love, the wish for happiness and prosperity of the girl, the desire to have the capacity of giving beautiful presents. *lə̀səm kam khuih* consists of 10 different texts. This number is given by the principal informant, but the present writer cannot find the complete text of the 10 *lə̀səm kam khuih*.

3. *lə̀səm ʰdojn ʔəjn kheʔ*. *ʰdojn* means ‘to climb, to walk along the narrow path of the rough mountain trail’; *ʔəjn* means ‘to come back, to return’; *kheʔ* means ‘back, at the back of’. The theme of this *lə̀səm* is a description of the difficulty of the reciter’s journey and his desire to return to his beloved. The *lə̀səm ʰdojn ʔəjn kheʔ* is usually recited by the boy in his first night visit to the girl and also when he has to depart from her and make a rather long journey from the village (e.g. to Chiangmai). *lə̀səm ʰdojn ʔəjn kheʔ* consists of 10 texts. As previously mentioned for *lə̀səm kam khuih*, no one remembers the complete ten texts.

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

5. *lāsom γəok həo*. *γəok* means ‘to bring someone along’; *həo* means ‘to go’. This *lāsom* is the reciter’s invitation to his beloved to go with him to other places. In the invitation the girl is assured that she will have a pleasant journey. The invitation is only a formality, because no Lawa girl will go out with her suitor unless they are married. *lāsom γəok həo* may, therefore, be regarded as an expression of the reciter’s wish for his beloved to share a delightful experience (i.e. making a journey) with him. *lāsom γəok həo* consists of six texts. As previously, the present writer was not able to collect all six texts. Only the ones which are popular are remembered by the informants.

6. *lāsom puə ləŋaʔ*. *puə* means ‘to ask for something’; *ləŋaʔ* means ‘to play’. The theme of this *lāsom* is the reciter’s asking permission to talk with, to play with, to be in the presence of the other. This *lāsom* is usually recited by both a boy and a girl, who are not familiar with each other. The reciter may also use this *lāsom* to ask the other to teach him (or her) *Lāsom ʔLə* by adding that he (she) has only little knowledge about it. *lāsom puə ləŋaʔ* has 4 texts. The present writer could collect only two texts.

7. *lāsom ꞑoi*. This type of *lāsom ʔLə* does not have handed down texts. So it leaves room for innovation for the Lawa would-be poet to compose his own poetry to express his feelings. For example Khun Bii,¹⁴ the author’s principal informant, in his sympathy for his people, once composed a *lāsom ꞑoi* expressing his feelings about the misery and poverty of the people in his village. Unfortunately, the young Lawa are less and less interested in their traditional poetry, and consequently there might not be any *lāsom ꞑoi* newly composed anymore in a few years from now.

4. Transcription of a selected text

liak miəŋ phui

<i>text</i>							
ⁿ dah	miəŋ	mojn	khjec	juh	taʔ	ne	(1)
ⁿ dah	miəŋ	mojn	^m bje	chəm	taʔ	net	(2)
niəm	γəok	meʔ	həo	^m bəo	lələjn		(3)
γəok	təo	kjəih	thoʔ	ⁿ giʔ	səʔaŋ		(4)
γəok	təo	kjəih	thoʔ	hnaŋ	lə ^m buət		(5)
γəok	təo	meʔ	pən	səʔ	huət	ka	(6)
γəok	təo	meʔ	pən	səla	fu	mojn	(7)
γəok	təo	meʔ	choŋ	chuəŋ	^m boŋ	san	(8)
γəok	təo	meʔ	ŋan	ʃan	ləjum		(9)
γəok	təo	meʔ	lək	je	sam	sum	(10)
γəok	təo	meʔ	ŋoi	phjum	niəʔ	cao	(11)

¹⁴ In my 1985 article and in my other previous Lawa works, I gave the name of my principle informant as Bunphob, which was his Thai name. At present he prefers to use his Lawa name i.e. Bii. Please note that Khun Bunphob and Khun Bii are the same person. And these days he prefers to use his new surname “Kachomsaksee”, which replaces his old surname of “Bo^ʔbii”.

ɣəok	təo	hnuət	ɲuə	niŋ	ʔmoʔ	cok	(12)
ɣəok	təo	mək	ŋok	niŋ	vec	ləm	(13)
paŋ	phui	paŋ	kləm	sənat	kiaŋ	kiaŋ	(14)
paŋ	phui	paŋ	kliəŋ	vec	^m be	^m be	(15)
hluk	hliək	ʔɣəh	teʔ	liək	ha	mək	(16)
fat	niŋ	vec	lup	phliə	cup	^ŋ gə	(17)
ɲiəm	ɣəok	meʔ	həo	^m bəo	lələiŋ		(18)
ɣəok	meʔ	həo	^m bin	teʔ	sətək		(19)
ɣəok	meʔ	həo	cok	^m bjok	sem	viəŋ	(20)
həo	hɔic	miəŋ	phui	thui	som	miəŋ	(21)
thui	som	miəŋ	ɣaʔ	phjaʔ	inthəŋ		(22)
hɔic	təŋ	ɲali	siʔ	tinɔn			(23)
siʔ	tinɔn	kaɔ	kuən	caɔ	luəŋ		(24)
həo	hɔic	mjəŋ	liʔ	si	kəŋ	kop	(25)
^ŋ goh	khiəh	ləʔoh	teʔ	mələŋ			(26)
həo	hɔic	miəŋ	^m blan	siʔ	kwan	sup	(27)
siʔ	ɣəok	kwan	sup	lup	hlaʔ	chuəŋ	(28)
caop	kwan	miəŋ	hɔ	tɔ	ⁿ ɔʔ	^ŋ glai	(29)
kuən	ⁿ doʔ	tiəʔ	tiəʔ	ŋiəʔ	niŋ	la	(30)
ⁿ doi	pha	ləŋci	mai	si	ʔɔn		(31)
ⁿ doi	pha	ləmɔn	ʔɔn	tutai			(32)
kəh	ʔɔn	tutai	ɣai	kəŋ	kat		(33)
lə ⁿ ʔəŋ	caɔ	lat	kaiŋ	kat	muə		(34)
ɲiəm	ɣəok	meʔ	həo	^m bəo	lələiŋ		(35)
həo	hɔic	lak	caop	ʔnəok	ləkho		(36)
həo	hɔic	lak	ko	viət	teʔ	təŋ	(37)
həo	hɔic	lak	^m bləŋ	ʔɣəŋ	dinci		(38)
həo	hɔic	lak	ko	viət	viʔhan		(39)
ko	viət	viʔhan	san	miəŋ	kək		(40)
ɲiəm	ɣəok	meʔ	həo	^m bəo	lələiŋ		(41)
ɣəok	təo	meʔ	ʔait	ɲiəʔ	ləphim		(42)
ʔait	ɲiəʔ	ləphim	^ŋ gim	huə	fai		(43)
ɣəok	meʔ	həo	ŋoi	^ŋ gim	pjaŋ	viət	(44)
ŋoi	^ŋ gim	pjaŋ	viət	nai	sənam		(45)

ləic

Translation and explanation This text belongs to *ləsom ɣəok həo*

title

- liək

‘enter’

- miəŋ

‘town (T.)’¹⁵

- phui

‘people’

The title means ‘when we enter the town of (other) people’.

¹⁵ (T.) means loan from Thai

- (1) - ⁿdah 'if'
 - miən 'like, as....as (T.)'
 - mojn 'word'
 - khjəc 'as was already mentioned's
 - juh ta? ne 'archaic expression, whose meaning is unknown to the author's informants'

The whole meaning of this first verse is *if it is like the word that was already agreed*. They might have talked about their trip to the town.

- (2) - ^mbje 'as it was already mentioned'
 - chəm 'sweet, appealing, charming' (sex appeal is probably not included in the meaning)
 - ta? [?]net 'like 'ta? ne', this is an archaic word whose meaning is unknown to the authors' informants'

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

- (3) - niəm 'when'
 - ɣəok 'to bring someone along'
 - me? 'you'
 - həo 'to go'
 - ^mbəo 'to spin cotton to make a thread'
 - lələjn 'instrument for cotton spinning'

This third verse means *if you come with me, (your trip will be like) cotton-spinning*. Cotton spinning is considered delightful work by most Lawa girls.¹⁶

- (4) - təo 'not'
 - kjəih 'maiden'
 - tho? 'little, not the eldest'
 - ⁿgi? 'to push the walking-stick against the ground'
 - sə?aŋ 'bone'

In this verse *the boy promises not to bring the girl (whom he regards as his younger sister) into any trouble (like that of having to use her own bone as a walking-stick)*.

- (5) - hnaŋ 'necklace made from beads'
 - lə ^mbuət 'teardrops'

¹⁶ Please note that these first three verses are used as an overture in many *Ləsom* [?]Lə texts. In the author's 1985 report on *bot som khənom niŋ kat* which is another text of *Ləsom ɣəok həo*, these three verses are also used at the beginning of the text (Suriya Ratanakul 1985:199-200).

A direct translation of this verse would be (I) *will not let you (my younger sister) wear a necklace made from teardrops*. Please note the beauty of this Lawa poetic expression. The teardrops are compared to the beads for stringing a necklace.

- (6) - pən ‘to be (a copula verb) (T.)’
 - sɔʔ ‘dog’
 - huət ‘to chase after, to hunt’
 - ka ‘a kind of civet’

A direct translation of this verse would be (I) *will not let you be like a dog chasing a civet*. Dogs are hunting companions of the Lawa. The boy promises not to let the girl fend for herself, a subtle way to indicate that he will be the breadwinner himself.

- (7) - səla ‘craftsman (K.M.)’¹⁷
 - fu ‘to fight (poetic word)’
 - moɪŋ ‘word (is already translated in (1) in this verse the ‘word’ has an expanded meaning of ‘case in court’).

In the seventh verse *the boy promises that he will not take the girl to be a lawyer (literally craftsman who fights cases in court)*, which is one of the most unpleasant professions in the old way of thinking of many Southeast Asian cultures (such as that at the Thai, the Chinese and the Lawa).

- (8) - chɔŋ ‘to stand’
 - chuəŋ ‘foot’
 - m̩boŋ ‘stairs’
 - san ‘a law-court (T.)’

The meaning of the eighth verse is a continuation of the seventh verse. *The boy promises that he will not let the girl stand at the foot of the staircase in a law-court*. To go to the law-court is considered as unpleasant as eating a dog’s excrement in Thai and Chinese proverbs.

- (9) - ŋan ‘to raise (lift up) one’s head’
 - ləjum ‘Lawa name for the district of Mae Sariang in Mae Hongson province’

Again in the ninth verse the scene at a law-court continues. This time *the boy promises not to let the girl lift up her head to look at the law-court in Mae Sariang*, which is described as a tall, threatening building. Here we see the cleverness of the Lawa poet who does not have to say straightforwardly that the law-court is high and threatening. The fitting use of the verb /ŋan/ whose meaning suggests that a human being must look very insignificant when compared to the law-court building because one has to lift up one’s head when looking at it.

¹⁷ (K.M.) means loan from Kam Mɪəŋ which is the northern dialect of the Thai language. Another name for this dialect is Lanna Thai.

- (10) - lək 'to touch'
 - ʔjɛ 'prisoner's chain (rare word)'
 - sam 'three (T.)'
 - sum 'this syllable has no meaning (it is put here to rhyme with the final word of the preceding verse.)'

In the tenth verse *the boy promises the girl that he will not let her be a prisoner who has to have a prisoner's chain attached to her in three places (namely, around the neck, at the hands and at the feet).*

- (11) - ɲoi 'to stay quiet in a subdued manner'
 - phjum 'big house of the royalty'
 - ɲiəʔ 'house'
 - caɔ 'big and powerful man, royalty (T.)'

In the eleventh verse *the boy promises not to let the girl sit subdued at the big house of a powerful man/royalty.* Like most minority and rural people, the Lawa hate to get into contact with powerful men.

- (12) - hnuət 'to be bound/tied'
 - ɲuə 'waist'
 - ɲiŋ 'at'
 - ʔmoʔ 'a rope'
 - cək 'a noose'

In the twelfth verse *the boy promises not to let the girl be bound by a rope at the waist.* This was the way prisoners of war were herded from one place to another, as in the old days when the Burmese did this to the Thai at the fall of the Thai capital of Ayuddhaya in 1767 A.D.

- (13) - mək 'to hew down trees at the beginning of the planting season, to chop'
 - ɲək 'neck'
 - vec 'a sword'
 - ləm 'sharp'

In the thirteenth verse *the boy promises not let the girl have her head cut off by a sharp sword.* This verse concludes the listing of all the things that he would not let happen to the girl. The fourteenth to the seventeenth verses must be read together in order to facilitate the understanding.

- (14) - paŋ 'even if'
 - phui 'people'
 - kləm 'to carry on the shoulder'
 - sənat 'a gun'

- kjaŋ kjaŋ ‘an expressive term¹⁸ describing the threatening sound of a soldier carrying a gun’

The fourteenth verse means that *(you do not have to fear) even if (you see) people carrying guns making a threatening sounds.*

- (15) - kliəŋ ‘to sharpen’
- ^mbe ^mbe ‘another expressive term¹⁸ describing the threatening sound of someone sharpening a sword’

The fifteenth verse means that *(you do not have to fear) even if (you are in the presence of those who) are sharpening their swords with a threatening sound.*

- (16) - hluk hliək ‘another expressive term¹⁸ describing the quick movement from one side to another side like that of fish turning itself in mud during the rain, or the quick movement of a sword-dancer’
- ʔyɔɛh ‘fingers’
- teʔ ‘hand’
- liək ‘to enter’
- ha ‘until’

The sixteenth verse means that *(you do not have to fear the sword-dancer) who moves his fingers from side to side before he chops down.*

- (17) - fat ‘to strike, to hit (T.)’
- lup ‘a kind of sword’
- phliə ‘young men’
- cup ‘ones of the same generation (K.M.)’
- ʔgɔ ‘ones of the same generation’

The seventeenth verse means that *the sword-dancers—there must be more than one dancer in this kind of sword-dance—strike with their swords at the other dancers who belong to the same generation (the same age-group).* This implies that the striking down of swords is only play-acting. One does not have to be afraid. The key word signifying that this is only play-acting is the word ʔgɔ. This word appears again and again in other texts where it is used to imply the solidarity among the people of the same age-group. So this sword-playing must not be a serious matter.

¹⁸ By ‘expressive’ I mean a class of word which shows that there exists an iconicity in languages (especially in Southeast Asia), whereby a clear relationship exists between the *meaning* of a word and the *sound* of that word. The term ‘phonaesthetic words’ was used by Henderson (1965). But I prefer the term ‘expressive’ which was first used by Diffloth (1972, 1976). Ratreé Wayland wrote a very good paper on “Lao expressives” *MKS* 26:217-231, 1996.

(18) is a repetition of the third verse. This frequently appearing line is an indication that the reciter of *Lə̀səm ʔLɛ* wishes to change the subject. From verses (1)-(17) we are told what the boy promises not to bring the girl to endure. From now on he will describe what she can expect if she goes with him.

- (19) -^mbin ‘to stand on, to tread/step on’
 -teʔ ‘earth’
 -sətok ‘somewhere’

The nineteenth verse means (when I) *bring you to step on the earth somewhere* (other than in our village then.....). The meaning is not complete in only this one line, we must wait for the continuation in the twentieth verse. These two verses i.e. (19) and (20), occur frequently in several texts in different types of *Lə̀səm ʔLɛ* and they indicate that the reciter is entering onto another subject (other than that just recited).

- (20) - cok ‘to walk (poetic word)’
 -^mbjok ‘an indeterminate piece of land between the different houses in a village. Please notice that we have to use a long phrase in English to express the equivalent in meaning of this monosyllabic Lawa word. This word is frequently used both in *Lə̀səm ʔLɛ* and in ordinary conversation because it is in the ^m*bjok* that things usually happen in a Lawa village.’
 - səm ‘this word is the name that the Lawa give to the Lanna Thai people’
 - viəŋ ‘town (T.)’

The twentieth verse means (when I) *bring you to walk in a ^mbjok in a Lanna Thai town* (then.....the sense is continued in the twenty-first verse.

- (21) - həc ‘to arrive at’
 - thui ‘to buy’
 - som ‘to eat’

The literal (word-for-word) translation of the twenty-first verse is that ‘(when we) *arrive at the town of other people, then we shall buy (that town) and eat that town.*’¹⁹ Of course this is an exaggerated way of speaking. This hyperbole is used to indicate that the boy will bring his girl into prosperity, such as that of the position of the king/prince (chief of a town).

- (22) - ɣaʔ ‘big’
 - phjaʔ ‘high mandarin/prince (T.)’
 - in thəŋ ‘proper name of a prince (T.)’

¹⁹ ‘to eat the town’ is a word-for-word translation; from an archaic Thai expression กินเมือง (eat-town) meaning ‘to rule the town, to be a prince/king’.

The twenty-second verse means that *we shall be as* (powerful and famous as) *phja* in *thəŋ*, which was the name of an unidentified powerful prince who lived a long time ago.

- (23) - təŋ ‘field, open country, prairie (T.)’
 - ɲa li ‘proper noun, name of a field which my informants do
 not know the whereabouts’
 - siʔ ‘to buy (T.)’
 - ti nəŋ ‘a mattress (T.)’

The twenty-third verse means that (when we) *arrive at the ɲa li field (we shall) buy a mattress*. To be able to buy a mattress is a sign of prosperity in the Lawa culture of olden days (like wearing a Rolex watch in Western culture). Normally a Lawa woman had to make a mattress by herself. So, this twenty-third verse continues the sense (carried on from the twenty-first verse) that the boy promises the girl a luxurious existence if she goes with him.

- (24) - kaə ‘old (T.)’
 - kuəŋ ‘child’
 - caə luəŋ ‘the prince of the big town (such as Chiangmai) in the
 old days’

In this twenty-fourth verse the boy continues to boast that the mattress, which he will buy for his girl is (not an ordinary mattress but that of) an old mattress of the children of the prince of Chiangmai.

- (25) - liʔ ‘proper name of a town (my informants do not know
 where)’
 - kəŋ kop ‘a bronze drum which dates back to the Dongson²⁰ culture
 thousands of years ago, which is considered a rare priceless
 object’

In the twenty-fifth verse the boy promises the girl to buy her the rare and priceless objects such as the Dongsonian bronze drum.

- (26) - ɲgoh ‘to beat (a drum, a gong)’
 - khiəh ‘to give (used as a causative verb)’
 - ləʔoh ‘that which gives very loud sound’
 - teʔ ‘the Earth, the soil’
 - mələŋ ‘the sky’

In the twenty-sixth verse the boy relates the bronze drum he will buy by saying that it will give a loud sound that can be heard from the Earth to the sky.

- (27) - m^hblan ‘this word is the name that the Lawa give to the Burmese
 (Myanmar) people’
 - siʔ ‘to buy (T.)’

²⁰ Information about the Dongson culture can, of course, be found in archaeological books and articles about Southeast Asia prehistory.

- kwan 'socks'
- sup 'to put on'

In the twenty-seventh verse the boy says that when they arrive at the Burmese town, they will buy socks to put on. To have socks is considered a luxury. Ordinarily a Lawa girl has to make-do with gaiters.

- (28)
- lup 'to cover'
 - hlaʔ 'a tree-leaf (meaning sole of foot)'
 - chuan 'foot'

The sense continues from the twenty-seventh verse. The socks will cover the soles (which is better than the gaiters that only cover the legs).

- (29)
- caɔp 'to put on'
 - miəŋ 'town (T.)'
 - hɔ 'this word is the name that the Thai call the Yunnanese Chinese (T.)'
 - tɔ 'to run'
 - ⁿɟɔʔ 'not (rare word)'
 - ⁿglai 'to fall down, to trip and fall'

The twenty-ninth verse praises the socks that the boy will buy in Yunnan, saying that this kind of sock will enable the wearer to be able to run without stumbling down.

- (30)
- kuən ⁿdoʔ 'children'
 - tiaʔ 'little, small'
 - ŋiəʔ 'this word is the name that the Lawa call the Shan'
 - la 'a proper name of the sub-district of Mae La Noi in Chiangmai province'

In the thirtieth verse the boy changes the subject. He describes what the girl will see when she goes along with him to Mae La Noi. She will see the Shan children (The Shan are a Tai people speaking a language of the South-western branch of the Tai language family).

- (31)
- ⁿdoi 'to wear trousers in a loose manner (such as one wore Chinese silk pyjamas in Thailand about a hundred years ago)'
 - pha 'cloth'
 - læŋ ci 'sarong, a lower part garment such as that of the Burmese and the Malay men (B.)'²¹
 - mai 'silk (T.)'
 - si 'color (T.)'
 - ʔɔn 'soft, pale, lighter color or complexion (T.)'

²¹ (B.) means loan from Burmese.

In the thirty-first verse the sense is carried on from the previous verse. The Shan children wear silk sarongs of pale colors.

- (32) - ləmɔn 'a kind of cloth'
 - ʔɔn 'soft (T.)'
 - tutai 'expressive²² describing the feeling of touching something soft, such as silk, or new banana leaves that are left to dry in the sun'

The thirty-second verse continues the sense introduced in the thirtieth verse : the Shan child wears a kind of cloth which is soft and pleasant to the touch.

- (33) - kəh 'to be able to (do something)'
 - ʔai 'to walk in a leisurely manner'
 - kɔŋ 'road'
 - kat 'market (K.M.)'

In the thirty-third verse the subject changes from the Shan children to that of the boy and girl who *will now be able to wear such soft cloth* (because he can afford soft cloth, in comparison to the hard/stiff cotton cloth, that Lawa girls weave in the village), and they will *walk in a leisurely way on the road to the market*.

- (34) - ləⁿgɔŋ 'height (of people and animals)'
 - lat 'proper name of an unidentified Lanna Thai prince. This person must have been famous in the times because his name occurs again and again in different *Ləsom ʔLə* texts.'
 - kain 'head, at the head of'
 - muə 'market in which one trades in the evening (not a morning market) (K.M.)'

In the thirty-fourth verse the boy tells the girl that (if she go with him) she will see Prince Lat at the head of the evening market.

(35) This verse is a repetition of the third and eighteenth verses, will be repeated again the forty-first verse. The accelerated repetition of this key verse is the indication that the boy is going to close his part of the recitation of *Ləsom ʔLə* and that it is now the turn of the girl to reply.

- (36) - lak 'place'
 - caop 'to join two pieces of wood together in house-building by driving one piece as a wedge into the other so that there is no need to use a nail. In the Lawa traditional way of building houses, nails were not used at all. There are still a few of such houses left in Ban Pa Pae nowadays.'
 - ʔnəok 'tie beam (architectural vocabulary)'
 - ləkho 'timber along the length of the roof which serves as the main frame of the roof'

²² See footnote 18 on expressives.

The thirty-sixth verse means that (then they will) *arrive at the place* (where people have a hardwood²³ house) *with tie beam and timber main-frame roof.*

- (37) - ko ‘to build (T.)’
 - viət ‘the Buddhist temples, from Thai word [wat] (T.)’
 - teʔ ‘earth, soil’
 - ɬəŋ ‘to bake (such as of clay)’

The thirty-seventh verse continues the picture painted in the preceding verse and means that (then they will) *arrive at a Buddhist temple built from baked soil* (i.e. brick).

- (38) - m̥bləoŋ ‘to raise/erect a pole (of a house)’
 - ʔɣəŋ ‘pole of a house (tent, temples etc.)’
 - dinci ‘brick (K.M.)’

The thirty-eighth verse continues the aforementioned picture and means that (then they will) *arrive at a place (the temple where one) erects brick poles.*

- (39) - viʔhan ‘the second main hall in a Buddhist temple. (Loan from Thai วิหาร [wiʔhǎ:n] ‘the first main hall being the ไบสัศ [ʔuʔbo:sot] (T.)’

Again the twenty-ninth verse continues the scene in a Buddhist temple.

- (40) - kək ‘shortened form of Bangkok, the capital of Thailand (T.)’

In the fortieth verse, the boy continues to describe the places that he will bring the girl to see. In this verse the picture shown is as ambitious as the journey to Bangkok, almost 800 kilometres south of Mae Hongson province. The boy promises to bring the girl to see the temples and the court in Bangkok. Of course, everybody knows that this invitation is only a formality. No Lawa lad of bygone days (when the *Ləso:m* ʔLə were composed) could afford to bring his girl down to Bangkok.

(41) This verse is a repetition of the third, the eighteenth and the thirty-fifth verses. The reciter is going to foreclose his recitation and will paint only one more picture by assuring the girl that he will not bring her to an unpleasant place as indicated in the forty-second verse.

- (42) - ʔait ‘to stay, to be in’
 - ləpʰim ‘garden’

The forty-second verse contains the boy’s promise *not to bring* (the girl) *to stay in a house where there are gardens* (around). This might be a surprising promise for us, the readers who have the mentality of people who live in a crowded ‘concrete-jungle’. A house in a garden should be a pleasant place to stay for us. But

²³ This paints a picture of prosperity because in the poor Lawa villages, there are no such houses. Ordinary Lawa houses are not of hardwood built by the [caop] technique.

the Lawa of old days (when the *Lə̀səm ʔLɛ* were written) lived in dense malaria-infested jungle; to live in a place with densely tall trees was considered unpleasant. They preferred to be in open area (after the chopping down of big trees), as the final word in the final verse suggests. See *infra*.

- (43) - ʔgim ‘under the house, equivalent to Thai word ใต้ตุ้ [tâi-thũn]’
 - huə ‘head (T.)’
 - fai ‘weir, a dam built to back up the flow of water (T.)’

In the forty-third verse the boy suggests that he lives under the house at the head of the dam, a place considered pleasant from the Lawa point of view (because there is plenty of water and fish).

- (44) - pjaŋ roof

In the forty-fourth verse the boy suggests that he will *bring the girl to stay quietly under the roof of a temple*. This is considered a more pleasant condition than being in a house among gardens.

- (45) - nai in (preposition) (T.)
 - sənam large open ground, lawn. Loan from Thai สนาม [saŋnǎm]

In the final verse the boy closes his invitation by promising to bring the girl *to stay quietly in a temple which has large open grounds*. After reciting this forty-fifth verse, the reciter closes his part by uttering the word *loic* which means ‘the end’. From now on it is the turn of the girl to reply. Limited space and time do not permit us to go on in this paper with the girl’s part. It is the author’s sincere hope that this paper will whet the appetite of the readers in the appreciation of the oral literature of minority people. For my part, I am going to publish a whole book on the *Lawa Lə̀səm ʔLɛ* poetry in a few years time from now, if time and health permit.

5. Remarks on Lawa Poetry

The analysis of Lawa poetic meter will not be attempted here, since it requires examples from a large number of texts to be able to pinpoint the Lawa techniques and devices in composing poetry. It suffices to mention here that the author has found a full battery of what are known to be the devices of poetry in the western world. These can be grouped as follows:

I. Phonetic factors

1. Rhyme (both internal and between verses)
2. Alliteration

These two devices are apparent from the text, so I do not have to pinpoint which kind occurs on which verse.

II. Lexical/Semantic factors

1. Use of rare/archaic words
2. Use of terms that are more intense in meaning than ordinary terms

3. Imagery
4. Metaphor
5. Figures of speech
6. Hyperbole

III. Factors that are more frequently found in Southeast Asia than in western literature.

1. The technique of 'sense encapsulation', such as the use of one particular word which contains/suggests a lot of meaning as in Verse 4 regarding the word ^ŋgi?, Verse 20 regarding the word ^mbjok.

2. The use of expressives (as in verses 14, 15, 16, 32)

IV. Discourse Level Factors

1. The use of cue opening verse (the first three verses)
2. Repetition of key verse as in verse 3, 18, 35, 41
3. Repetition of key phrases (i.e. ʔəok təo meʔ, həo həic, etc.) at the beginning of verses
4. Acceleration of repetition

The above mentioned characteristics are only a brief sketch of what I am going to explain in more detail in a book entitled **Lawa Oral Poetry** to be published in a few years time.

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Received: May 1996

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