

"KOX KWAI KAUV KOX KWAI":¹ ECOPOETIC
SYMBOLISATION IN PGAZ K'NYAU ORAL
POETRY

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ABSTRACT

This article* presents the transcription, translation, and annotation of an original performance of *hta*, a traditional form of oral poetry in Sgaw, the language of the Pgaz K'Nyau (Karen) people of northern Thailand. This performance was recorded during ethnopoetic fieldwork carried out in two villages in the province of Chiang Rai.² The *hta* is then analysed to understand the operations of ecopoetic symbolisation that bring particular nonhumans into the domain of human language. This analysis reveals that a metaphorical mode of symbolisation is extensively used throughout the *hta* to overcome human/nonhuman allotopies by means of implicit or explicit semic transformations. This seems to indicate that a naturalistic mode of identification underlies the whole poem, a conclusion that calls into question the essentialising and mythifying portrayal of the Pgaz K'Nyau as pre-modern and animistic indigenous stewards.

KEYWORDS: oral tradition • ethnopoetics • semiotics • ecocriticism • literary devices

The Pgaz K'Nyau (Sgaw Karen) are a group of people who inhabit the borderlands of Myanmar and Thailand in Southeast Asia and speak a particular Karenic language, which is part of the Tibeto-Burman family of languages (Schliesinger 2000: 203–208). Linguistically and culturally, they are closely related to the Plong (Pwo Karen), although the two languages are mutually unintelligible. There are other Karenic-speaking peoples in the region, such as the Pa'O or the Kayah, but the dialectical diversity between and within all these groups is broad. In fact, the number of Karenic languages is still largely unknown (Manson 2011: 1).

In spite of their differences, the Pgaz K'Nyau and the Plong are generally subsumed under the same ethnic exonym of Karen (Hinton 1983: 155–158; Renard 2003: 1–15), which seems to derive from a derogatory term used by Tai and Burmese speakers to refer to forest dwellers (Marshall 1922: 6–8). While most of the Karen live in Myanmar, where their population is estimated to be between four and six million, there are also over 400,000 Karen (Sgaw and Pwo) living in Thailand, where they constitute one of the largest ethnic minorities (Delang 2003: x). In the context of political conflicts derived from modern state-building processes in the region (Winichakul 1994; Ribó 2017: 39–45), the origin of this population is somewhat disputed. It seems, however, that Karenic peoples, or their ancestors, have been inhabiting remote mountainous areas in the north and west of what is today Thailand since at least 300 years ago (Ganjanapan 1998: 75), but perhaps as far back as the 13th century (Keyes 1979: 31).

Traditionally, the Pgaz K'Nyau and the Plong in the north of Thailand tended to live in the mid-range highlands, at between 500 and 1,000 meters altitude, somewhere between the lowland Tai dwellers and various other non-Tai groups living at even higher altitudes, such as the Hmong, Yao, Akha, Lahu, or Lisu (Anderson 1993: 19–35). In that range, they practiced rotational swidden agriculture with short cultivation and

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long fallow periods, establishing relatively permanent residences in mainly homogeneous rural communities (Kunstadter et al. 1978: 12–42). In recent decades, however, increasing competition for land in the highlands, due to demographic, economic, and environmental changes (Tan-Kim-Yong et al. 1988), as well as political factors (Laungaramsri 2001), have forced many Pgaz K’Nyau to move to lower altitudes, settling in mixed communities and adopting forms of permanent cultivation and cultural practices more closely resembling those of northern Tai groups (Puginier 2003: 185).

The term Pgaz K’Nyau is an endonym usually translated as ‘people’ or ‘human beings’ (Marshall 1922: 6–8; Laungaramsri 2003: 23), although it would be more accurate to view it as a pronominal reference (in Sgaw, *pgaz* is the first person plural accusative pronoun ‘us’) or a subjective marker referring to the social condition of personhood in the context of what Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1998: 469) calls the “cosmological deixis” of animist ontologies. While highly syncretic and poorly documented (Marshall 1922: 210–295; Keyes 1979; Mischung 1984), the indigenous religious beliefs of the Pgaz K’Nyau seem to fit into the overall patterns of animism, understood as a “relational epistemology” (Bird-David 1999: S77; see also Harvey 2013: 1–12) in which personhood or subjectivity is not limited to human beings, but extends to many other nonhuman inhabitants with which humans interact in their shared habitat (Ribó forthcoming). Nevertheless, the religious practices of modern-day Pgaz K’Nyau have been largely modified by the widespread adoption, in one way or another, of Buddhism and Christianity (Rajah 2008: 1–23). A survey conducted by the Tribal Research Center of Chiang Mai in 1977 showed that 42.9% of Pgaz K’Nyau identified themselves as ‘animist’, 38.4% as Buddhist, 18.3% as Christian, and 0.4% as having other religious identities (Kunstadter 1983: 15–45). Even if the conflation of animism with “spirit and ancestor worship” is somewhat problematic (Rajah 2008: 5), this survey seems to indicate that traditional beliefs have persisted to some degree amongst the Pgaz K’Nyau, at least until fairly recently.

In the context of increasing conflict over resources and land use in the past few decades (Ribó and Calzolari 2020: 81–86), and despite the profound socio-economic transformations that they have undergone, the traditional farming practices and animist beliefs of the Pgaz K’Nyau have served to sustain a discourse that presents them as caring and dedicated environmental stewards, in contrast to other highland ethnic groups, whose ways of life are often portrayed as environmentally damaging (Forsyth and Walker 2008: 60). This ‘Karen consensus’ (Walker 2001) has been promoted by both international activists and Thai scholars (Tan-Kim-Yong et al. 1988; Ganjanapan 2000; Laungaramsri 2001). It has also gained ground in the academic and popular texts produced by the Pgaz K’Nyau themselves (Trakansuphakon 2006; 2008; Phattanaphraiwan 2018), as a cultural marker of identity and social cohesion. In this latter literature, Pgaz K’Nyau oral poems or songs – *hta* – are often highlighted as a source of ancient wisdom and traditional ecological knowledge that would come to demonstrate the essential character of the Pgaz K’Nyau as a people living in harmony with their natural environment.

In Pgaz K’Nyau language, the noun *hta* is equivalent to the English ‘song’, while the expression *maz hta* (also, *ufluz maz hta* or *uf hta*) can be translated as ‘to sing’. Originally, both of these terms had the same broad semantic range as they do in English, being applied to all forms of parallelistic prosodic verbal performance, from highly

ritualised compositions, usually performed during funerals and other ceremonies, to informal and playful songs and poems performed in all kinds of social situations, such as flirting, working, arguing, or drinking. Due to the growing popularity of modern Thai and Western songs amongst the new generations of Pgaz K'Nyau, however, the term *hta* is increasingly used to refer specifically to the traditional forms of oral poesis, which for the most part only the elderly can still remember and perform. Moreover, in Christian communities, the traditional *hta* have been actively replaced by religious hymns and other imported songs, deemed more orthodox and modern by those who despise the old practice of *maz hta* for being too tied up with animistic beliefs (Fairfield 2012; 2017; Phattanaphraiwan 2018). While Buddhists have been less militant against the traditional *hta*, this practice is slowly dying out in most Pgaz K'Nyau communities, despite some efforts to modernise it, for instance by the performer Suwichan ('Chi') Phattanaphraiwan (Fairfield 2013).

While the earliest ethnographers who studied Karen culture, often Christian missionaries, already noted the importance of *hta* and even included fragmentary translations of verses in their publications, there has been little systematic attention devoted to this practice in Western ethnography (Mischung 2003: 133). Similarly, there are only a handful of studies devoted to *hta* in the fields of ethnomusicology or folkloristics (Schwoerer-Kohl 2002; Fairfield 2012; 2017), and the published corpus of texts, whether transcribed into one of the alphabets of the original language or translated into Thai, Burmese, or English, is rather scarce and difficult to access (San Lone 1913; Htoo and Hudspith 1980; Maiyot 1995).

Based on some of these publications (Maniratanavongsiri 1997; Fink 2003; Mischung 2003; Fairfield 2012), as well as on our own fieldwork, it is possible to sketch a non-exhaustive classification of the most common genres of traditional *hta*, which include new year songs, funeral songs, marriage songs, temple or religious songs, love or flirting songs, songs for working in the fields and gardens, and songs of the elders. In any case, these genres should not be viewed as a taxonomy of ideal-types, but rather as "socially operating frameworks, or metasemiotic entities" that are "learned, become recognisable and carry meaningful associations" (Koski et al. 2016: 25; see also Fowler 1982) for the Pgaz K'Nyau. Some of these songs are handed down from one generation to the next as the embodiment of ancestral wisdom and might be subject to certain taboos, like the verses performed during funeral ceremonies to guide the soul of the deceased on its journey to the world of the dead (Phattanaphraiwan 2018). However, many other songs are composed and performed for social occasions, such as weddings or other gatherings, by anyone who is skilled enough to engage in the various forms of individual, antiphonal, or choral performance enjoyed by the Pgaz K'Nyau. Often, *hta* are performed with musical instruments, especially with the *tenaku*, a traditional Pgaz K'Nyau string harp, although they can also be sung without musical accompaniment.

In general, *hta* follow a syllabic meter, with each verse being usually composed of seven syllables (but there seems to be many exceptions to this, as shown by the *hta* presented here). There are other prosodic regularities, such as a high degree of parallelism, with frequent reduplication of verses, many redundant formulations, and extensive use of alliteration and end-rhyme (Mischung 2003: 137–139). More than strictly enforced rules, however, these regularities seem to be the result of the oral style of composition and performance, which may indicate, as most students of oral traditions would expect,

that Pgaz K'Nyau singers use formulaic techniques similar to the ones described by Milman Parry and Albert Lord for the South Slavic epic poetry (see Lord 1960; also Foley 1988). In any case, the particular use of these techniques in the oral traditions of the Pgaz K'Nyau, as well as the formal characteristics of the *hta*, have not yet been studied in any systematic way.

This article does not attempt to fill such a gap, nor does it provide a comprehensive understanding of this poetic practice. Rather, the limited aim of our research has been to record, transcribe, and translate a sample of performed *hta*, in order to analyse the operations of "ecopoetic symbolisation" (Ribó forthcoming) that bring particular non-humans into the domain of human languaging, and more specifically into the domain of singing. This research can shed some light on the ongoing debate about the 'Karen consensus' by testing whether the harmonious relationship that the Pgaz K'Nyau are said to sustain with their environment is modeled into the living oral tradition, as shown by the semiotic analysis of three segments of an original poetic performance by Kaew Kangyang, a 90-year-old Pgaz K'Nyau woman living in Ban Nong Dan, in the district of Doi Luang (Chiang Rai, Thailand). By publishing this performance, both in Sgaw and in English, we also aim to fulfil the ethnopoetic ambition of making oral poems of relatively unknown cultures "directly accessible through transcriptions and translations that display their qualities as works of art" (Tedlock 1992: 81).

METHODOLOGY

Theoretical Framework

The empirical study of what is variously known as 'folklore' (Dundes 1965), 'verbal art' (Bascom 1955), 'oral poetry' (Finnegan 1977), or 'oral tradition' (Foley 1986), has been steadily moving from the philological endeavour of Romantic folkloristics, bent on collecting 'texts' and their variants, towards an ethnographically-based effort to observe, record, analyse, and value oral poesis as a skilled practice widespread in all human groups. The influence of Parry and Lord's studies of South Slavic heroic poetry (Lord 1960), with their implications for the understanding of many traditional forms of poetry, including Homeric epic, as the product of an oral-formulaic technique of composition, has led to a "performance-centered view" (Finnegan 1992: 40) of human poesis.

While this performative turn constitutes a paradigmatic change that has produced many strands within folkloristics, one of the most influential has been the ethnography of speaking, pioneered by Dell Hymes (1971; also Bauman and Sherzer 1975). This line of research led to the development of ethnopoetics as a collective effort to publish transcriptions and translations of oral narratives and poems that would capture the multimodality and formal richness of the original performances, while highlighting their aesthetic value and their relevance for ethnic self-awareness and mutual recognition across cultures (Hymes 1981; Tedlock 1983).

The research presented here, at least in regard to the design of the ethnographic fieldwork, the recording of the performance, and the processing and presentation of the selected texts, is largely inspired by the ethnopoetic project. In terms of analysis, however, the aims of our research point beyond the study of performance for its own

sake. Our objective is not so much to approach the performance as a social practice or as a cultural product, but rather to study it as a form of entextualisation, which can be in turn decontextualised, notably through transcription, translation, and formal-linguistic analysis, before recontextualising it as “a means of investigating larger social and cultural problems” (Bauman and Briggs 1990: 76; also Honko 2000).

More specifically, what we aim to study through the analysis of a particular performance drawn from a precarious but still living oral tradition is the role of the skilled practice of oral poesis in sustaining processes of semiotic alignment between humans and nonhumans within a particular habitat (Ribó 2019a; 2019b; forthcoming). This project, while founded on a slightly different conceptual framework and stemming from fieldwork of considerably less scope and ambition, has much in common with Steven Feld’s (1982: 16) classical attempt to interpret the relationship of the Kaluli with the birds of Papua New Guinea’s forests through a semiotic, affective, and ethnological analysis of their “melodic-sung-weeping”.

The conceptual framework for our analysis is the poetics of cohabitation, an ecosemiotic theory of oral poesis articulated by Ignasi Ribó (forthcoming) in the context of the same research project that brought us to record, transcribe, and translate the performance presented in this article. Within this specific framework, we want to study the modes of ‘ecopoetic symbolisation’ revealed by the rhetorical operations deployed in the analysed *hta*. As Ribó (forthcoming) points out,

oral poesis plays an important role in the symbolisation of nonhumans, through various semiotic operations that bring animals, plants, mountains, rivers, but also spirits and gods, into the human domain of languaging in ways that may facilitate alignment within the habitat, not just between humans, but also between human and nonhuman inhabitants.

The poetics of cohabitation hypothesises that there is a link between the mode of identification prevalent in a particular society, as described by Philippe Descola (2013: 112–125) in his “four ontologies” model, and the mode of symbolisation prevalent in that group’s oral poesis (see Table 1).

Table 1. Schematic model derived from Descola (2013: 122), showing the correspondence between his four modes of identification and the modes of ecopoetic symbolisation defined by Ribó (forthcoming).

Similar interiorities Dissimilar physicalities	ANIMISM ↓ Literality	TOTEMISM ↓ Metonymy	Similar interiorities Similar physicalities
Dissimilar interiorities Similar physicalities	NATURALISM ↓ Metaphor	ANALOGISM ↓ Analogy	Dissimilar interiorities Dissimilar physicalities

According to Descola (2013: 112), identification is a mechanism of ontological discrimination “by means of which I can establish differences and resemblances between myself and other existing entities by inferring analogies and contrasts between the appearance, behavior, and properties that I ascribe to myself and those that I ascribe to them.” In particular, he distinguishes four general modes of identification, based on the ascription or denial to nonhumans of an “interiority” and a “physicality” similar to the ones that humans ascribe to themselves (ibid.: 115–116). Moreover, these four ontologies (animism, totemism, naturalism, analogism) “serve as a point of reference for contrasting forms of cosmologies, models of social links, and theories of identity and alterity” (ibid.: 121) that characterise different collectives of human and nonhuman inhabitants.

The ecosemiotic analysis presented in the Discussion section of this article, by applying the hypothetical relationship between identification and symbolisation postulated in the poetics of cohabitation, aims to deduce the dominant mode of identification from the operations of ecopoetic symbolisation found in the selected *hta*. While this analysis is only valid for the particular sample drawn from the oral tradition and cannot be directly extrapolated to the whole ‘culture’, its results should be helpful in assessing the claims that the Pgaz K’Nyau have a special relationship with their environment (‘Karen consensus’).

Moreover, our analysis might serve as a case study for the application of this specific ecosemiotic model to the interpretation of oral-poetic practices. Ecosemiotics, as a “branch of semiotics [that] emerged in the mid 1990s to scrutinize semiotic or sign-mediated aspects of ecology” (Maran 2020: 1; also Kull 1998; Nöth 1998; 2001; Maran and Kull 2014), has been struggling to develop viable theoretical models to articulate the relations between human and nonhuman sign systems. The poetics of cohabitation has been proposed as one of these models. By applying it to the study of a particular case of oral poesis we hope to test its capacity to make sense of at least some of those relations.

Fieldwork

During several weeks at the end of 2019 and beginning of 2020, we conducted ethnographic fieldwork in two villages of Chiang Rai province in Thailand. Our aim was to record and gather information about the practice of *maz hta*, as well as to learn about the cultural, social, demographic, and ecological conditions of the Pgaz K’Nyau communities that constitute the majority of the population in these villages. At the outset, this work posed significant practical difficulties, given the age of our potential informants, the marginal status of traditional *hta* in modern society, and the various language barriers.

The villages of Pa Sang Gnam and Ban Nong Dan are situated one next to each other in the district of Doi Luang. Both of them were initially established and populated by Pgaz K’Nyau and Plong families who immigrated from Lamphun province in the 1950s and 1960s. Many of the current inhabitants of the villages descend from these early settlers. At the end of 2019, based on the information provided by the heads of the villages (FM 2019: Pa Sang Gnam a; Ban Nong Dan), the population of Pa Sang Gnam was 486

people (154 households), while Ban Nong Dan had 557 inhabitants (165 households). Most inhabitants are Buddhist, but they still retain many beliefs and rituals originated in traditional Karen animistic religious practices. While the majority seem to identify as Pgaz K'Nyau and speak a variety of Sgaw Karen, there is also a considerable number of Pwo Karen speakers living in both villages. Judging from our interviews, it seems to be fairly common, especially for the older generation, to speak and understand both Pwo and Sgaw, although not with the same level of fluency. Both villages are situated at low altitude, on a wide agricultural plain. Farming is the main occupation of most villagers, whose livelihood depends on the seasonal planting of rice, corn, cassava, red beans, soybeans, as well as on raising various kinds of livestock, such as black swine, chicken, and cows. While many families have orchards and vegetable gardens for self-consumption, the villages do not seem to rely on subsistence farming, but are quite integrated into the modern commercial networks and markets for agricultural products in the region.

In total, we interviewed 15 informants from both villages, some of them on repeated occasions. Initially, interviews were semi-structured with ample use of open-ended questions, but increasingly led to more unstructured conversations, especially as we developed a closer relationship with some of the informants. The interviewees, both male and female, were selected based on their knowledge of traditional culture, and particularly of *hta*. For this reason, all our interviewees were above 50 years old, with some of them being well over 80 years old.

During these interviews, we were able to identify three elderly women (Kaew Kangyang, Jib Kangyang, and Kam Pento) who had extensive knowledge of *hta* and could skillfully perform them for us. Two of these women, however, were only able to sing complete *hta* in Pwo, while having a much more fragmentary repertory in Sgaw. Given that no member of our research team had sufficient competency in the Pwo language, we decided to rely exclusively on the *hta* performed by Kaew Kangyang, who showed extraordinary memory and skill at singing a wide variety of songs despite her age.

Performer

Kaew Kangyang (see Photo 1) was born in Huai Rai village, in the Li district of Lamphun province (Thailand), in 1930. After she married, she moved to Ban Nong Dan, in Chiang Rai, where she has lived ever since and has raised her family. She practices Buddhism and identifies as a Pgaz K'Nyau. Her native language is Sgaw Karen, but she is also fluent in Pwo

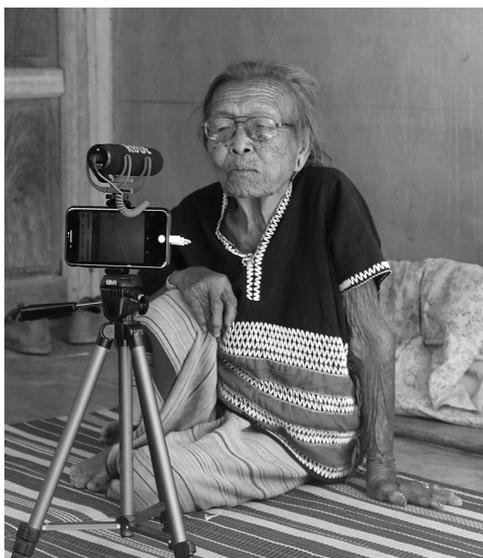


Photo 1. Kaew Kangyang performing hta during one of the recording sessions at her house in Ban Nong Dan. Photograph by Sitthichok Samachitloed.

and can understand central Thai and the northern Tai language (*kam mueang*) with some difficulty. While not being literate, she is recognised in the community for her talent in singing *hta*. She claims to have learnt this skill from a relative of hers who was a soldier back in Lamphun and used to visit her and teach her the art of *maz hta*. Since then, she has often sung *hta* during social and religious ceremonies, especially in weddings, but also while working in the fields or during her free time, as she is very fond of singing. As she told us, “I like to sing *hta* when I miss my partner or when I hear the birds singing” (FM 2019: Ban Nong Dan). While she claims that the *hta* she sings have been handed down to her from the ancestors, the fact that she is able to sing indefinitely long compositions that vary at each performance, while using recurring formulae and parallelistic diction, seems to indicate that she relies on an oral-formulaic technique of composition and performance, with at least some degree of improvisation.

Performance

With Kaew’s informed consent, we recorded several of her oral performances during interviews at her house in Ban Nong Dan. She lives in a relatively isolated farmhouse surrounded by fields and nearby houses. While the village is generally quiet and there is not much traffic, there were a few interruptions and distractions during the recording sessions, especially when neighbours or other family members approached the house driving cars or motorbikes. While we were there, Kaew often began to sing without any prompt on our part, reciting different kinds of song, especially Sgaw *hta* for marriage celebrations, Pwo *hta* for working in the fields, and other songs in Sgaw and *kam mueang* that would be sung during different religious ceremonies. After some interviews, we decided to focus on marriage *hta*, as these seemed to be the ones with which Kaew was more familiar. During a single session on February 22, 2020, we asked her to perform for us a ‘complete’ marriage *hta*. The poem that we have transcribed and analysed here was performed during this particular session as an uninterrupted sequence, separated by short pauses that allowed Kaew to catch her breath and drink some water. These intervals, and the fact that each part has a different leading verse, have allowed us to break the performance into three separate segments. It should be noted, however, that these segments are actually part of a longer composition, which Kaew claimed could be extended indefinitely and was only interrupted because she was already feeling quite exhausted.

This particular performance took place in what Kenneth Goldstein (1964: 80–89) defined as an “artificial” setting or context. For the most part, Kaew’s marriage *hta* would have been performed during weddings, as part of both ritualised ceremonies and informal social gatherings, where groups of guests, both men and women, would respond to each other with antiphonal and choral verses (Schwoerer-Kohl 2002; Mischung 2003). In our case, however, the performance was a simulation or an activity out of context, prompted for the purpose of recording, transcription, translation, and analysis (Ellen 1984: 72–73; Finnegan 1992: 73–75).

Kaew was the sole performer of this composition, singing the verses with her bare voice without the aid of any musical instrument. While performing, she was sitting down on a mat on the floor and did not accompany her song with any observable ges-

ture or multimodal feature. The audience, which remained passively attentive and did not participate in the performance, included the group of five researchers, sometimes joined by Kaew's husband, her daughter, and one or two visiting neighbours.

The performance was recorded using a mobile voice recording application and a directional microphone to enhance the quality of sound. The digital files with the recordings of the three segments of the *hta* analysed below are available as a public data set (Ribó 2020).

Transcription

As it has not undergone extensive processes of standardisation, Sgaw Karen is mainly an oral language with broad dialectical diversity (Rattanaporn 2012: 7–11; West 2017). There are, nonetheless, three alphabets that have been used to transcribe the language into written texts. The most ancient one, probably developed by the Pgaz K'Nyau themselves, is the so-called 'chicken-scratch alphabet', which is used by some groups in Myanmar but has never taken hold in Thailand (Seguinotte 2007: 1). The most common alphabet is the 'white alphabet', which was derived in modern times from the Mon-Burmese script (Gilmore 1898). Finally, there is the Romanised alphabet, which was initially developed by Protestant missionaries in Myanmar and later systematised by Joseph Seguinotte, a Catholic missionary working in Thailand in the 1950s (Seguinotte 2007).

The *hta* analysed in this article has been transcribed using the Romanised alphabet, as described by Seguinotte 2007.³ In order to ensure the accuracy of the written text, the poem was transcribed directly from the recorded performance into the Romanised alphabet by the only member of the research team (Sitthichok Samchitloed) who is a Sgaw native speaker, working in close consultation with the performer. The transcription was then reviewed and completed by the whole team, with the assistance of Ginu Chalermliemthong.

Translation

The researchers worked collectively to translate the *hta* into English, making every effort to produce a translation that was as faithful as possible to the original meaning while preserving the poem's aesthetic and formal qualities without adding extraneous literary ornament (Hymes 1981: 35–64; also Honko 1998: 586–589). However, as Sgaw and English have very different grammatical and lexical structures, in some cases we were forced to interpret the poem in ways that might differ from a native audience's reception.

Besides lexical questions, the main problem that we faced was the fact that Sgaw, like other Southeast Asian languages, is generally more ambiguous than Western languages in the use of pronominal reference (Cooke 1965). While zero pronouns (dropping of the personal pronoun, especially in the subject position) are unusual in Sgaw, it is fairly common for a speaker to use nouns instead of pronouns, even when talking about oneself (nominal self-reference). In these cases, the person to which the noun

refers is often not clearly determined by the utterance. For example, the sentence “the woman laughs” could mean “she laughs”, but also “I laugh”, or even “you laugh”. In everyday speech, the ambiguity is easily solved by referring to the context of dialogical interaction. But in poetic discourse, which already shows a considerable degree of polysemy, there is often no simple way to resolve this kind of ambiguity. Based on our interviews with the performer and with other experts in the Sgaw language, we have interpreted all three segments as having the same subject of enunciation, a male speaker (*cau*) who is addressing a woman (*nauj*).

Another common problem, although not as severe, derives from the fact, again shared with other Southeast Asian languages, that Sgaw verbs are not inflected. As David Chandler Gilmore (1898: 30) pointed out, “the accidents of voice, mood, tense, person and number, are expressed by particles connected with the verb, or are left to be inferred from the subject.” When translating the poem, therefore, we often had to infer the tense and other aspects of the verbs.

Other specific issues encountered during the translation are addressed in the notes that follow each segment of the poem.

Presentation

In order to present to the public the selected *hta* in a textual form that is as faithful as possible to the oral performance, we have followed to a large extent the tiered strategy proposed by John Miles Foley (2005).

In the results section, we present the Sgaw transcription and the English translation of each segment of the poem, facing each other in coordinated and numbered columns of poetic lines, so as to facilitate the reader’s textual appreciation and interpretation. Although many of the verses are repeated, we have avoided any editing that would reduce redundancy, in order to preserve the effect of the original performance.

After each segment, we provide some notes to clarify the most relevant aspects of the transcription and translation, such as the use of performative and rhetorical devices, prosody, grammatical construction, lexical choice, and cultural background. These notes do not attempt to be exhaustive, but simply to provide the reader with the necessary information to make sense of the texts and be able to follow the Discussion section. As this article focuses exclusively on rhetorical operations of symbolisation, we have not undertaken a musical or prosodic analysis of the performance. However, we invite readers to take the time to listen to the audio files in order to gain a better understanding and appreciation of the poem’s idiosyncratic musicality.

RESULTS

We have divided the transcription and translation of Kaew’s performance into three separate segments, based on the variation of the leading verse in each part. It is important to notice, however, that all three segments share the same theme. While their meaning is quite ambiguous and open to different readings, we interpret them as telling the story of a young couple of lovers, the male speaker and his girlfriend, escaping into the

forest to avoid an arranged marriage. In this sense, they can be viewed as segments or chapters of a single poem, which seems to reflect narrative motifs from Pgaz K'Nyau lore. In any case, given the focus of our investigation, we have not attempted to analyse the narrative content of the poem, much less to conduct a comparative or genealogical study of these motifs.

Apart from being thematically coherent, the three segments also have a similar structure. All of them begin with a leading verse, which is then reiterated in alternate lines throughout the poem. In contrast, the verses following the lead vary at each turn and show a narrative or lyrical progression. In the first segment, however, there is a variation in this pattern, as the initial lines begin with a slightly different verse. In the leading verse of the third segment, there is also a small variation in the order of the words, although in this case the change does not affect the meaning. These variations could be attributed to the performer's hesitation in this particular performance, but they might also stem from the flexible and intentional use of oral-formulaic techniques.

Based on Kaew's account, which fits to a certain degree with existing ethnographic descriptions (Hayami 1992; Schwoerer-Kohl 2002; Mischung 2003), this parallelistic structure seems to reflect the antiphonal or choral dynamics of performance in a 'natural' setting (Goldstein 1964: 52). In the context of a social gathering during a marriage celebration, a lead singer, who might have been on many occasions Kaew herself, would begin by singing a well-known verse. This verse would then be picked up by a chorus of other guests (distributed in separate groups, on the side of the groom or the bride), while the lead singer goes on performing her own composition at every turn. In other cases, the verses would have been sung by a lead performer from each group (male and female, perhaps), in a call-and-response interaction. In the poem that Kaew performed for us, this structure was artificially simulated, with Kaew taking on all the roles, both as sole lead singer (initial verse and following verses in alternating lines) and chorus (antiphonal verses in repeated lines).

<i>Sav kwaj taj lauz lav aiz</i>	1	To see wonderful things
<i>N'hai m'taz laif av lo</i>		How do you come over here?
<i>Of sav kwaj taj lauz lav aiz</i>		Oh, to see wonderful things
<i>Av lo y'hai geij hki geij hkaf lo</i>		Over here, I come over the white rattan
<i>Nauj miz muf y'kox muj naz</i>	5	I call your sweet-sounding name every night
<i>N'hai m'taz laif av hki</i>		How do you come this far?
<i>Nauj miz muf y'kox muj naz</i>		I call your sweet-sounding name every night
<i>Av hki y'hai geij hki geij hkaf hki</i>		This far, I come across the white rattan
<i>Nauj miz muf y'kox muj naz</i>		I call your sweet-sounding name every night
<i>Y'hai qauz kwif hai qauz hsaix</i>	10	I come to the marsh, I come to the pond
<i>Nauj miz muf y'kox muj naz</i>		I call your sweet-sounding name every night
<i>Qauz hsaix y't'htif pooz hpwaj t'hwai</i>		In the pond, I do not see the family man fishing
<i>Nauj miz muf y'kox muj naz</i>		I call your sweet-sounding name every night
<i>Y'hai qauz hsaix hai qauz kwif</i>		I come to the pond, I come to the marsh
<i>Nauj miz muf y'kox muj naz</i>	15	I call your sweet-sounding name every night

<i>Qauz kwif y't'htif pooz hpwaj dauz ciz</i>		In the marsh, I do not see the family man setting a trap
<i>Nauj miz muf y'kox muj naz</i>		I call your sweet-sounding name every night
<i>N'hai m'taz laif av lo</i>		How do you come over here?
<i>Nauj miz muf y'kox muj naz</i>		I call your sweet-sounding name every night
<i>Av lo y'hai geij hki geij hkaf lo</i>	20	Over here, I come over the white rattan
<i>Nauj miz muf y'kox muj naz</i>		I call your sweet-sounding name every night
<i>N'hai m'taz laif av hki</i>		How do you come this far?
<i>Nauj miz muf y'kox muj naz</i>		I call your sweet-sounding name every night
<i>Av hki y'hai geij pax dof av hki</i>		This far, I come across the big white rattan
<i>Nauj miz muf y'kox muj naz</i>	25	I call your sweet-sounding name every night
<i>Y'hai qauz kwif hai qauz hsaix</i>		I come to the marsh, I come to the pond
<i>Nauj miz muf y'kox muj naz</i>		I call your sweet-sounding name every night
<i>Qauz hsaix y't'htif pooz hpwaj t'hkwaiz</i>		In the pond, I do not see the family man fishing
<i>Nauj miz muf y'kox muj naz</i>		I call your sweet-sounding name every night
<i>Y'hai qauz hsaix hai qauz kwif</i>	30	I come to the pond, I come to the marsh
<i>Nauj miz muf y'kox muj naz</i>		I call your sweet-sounding name every night
<i>Qauz kwif y't'htif pooz hpwaj dauz ciz</i>		In the marsh, I do not see the family man setting a trap
<i>Nauj miz muf y'kox muj naz</i>		I call your sweet-sounding name every night
<i>Y'hai m'hsa k'ne pooz</i>		I come during the day inside the forest
<i>Nauj miz muf y'kox muj naz</i>	35	I call your sweet-sounding name every night
<i>K'ne pooz y't'htif sav bleif blauf yooz</i>		Inside the forest, I do not see the swallow flying
<i>Nauj miz muf y'kox muj naz</i>		I call your sweet-sounding name every night
<i>Y'hai m'hsa k'ne kla</i>		I come during the day in the middle of the forest
<i>Nauj miz muf y'kox muj naz</i>		I call your sweet-sounding name every night
<i>K'ne kla y't'htif sav bleif blauf hav</i>	40	In the middle of the forest, I do not see the swallow walking
<i>Nauj miz muf y'kox muj naz</i>		I call your sweet-sounding name every night
<i>Y'hai m'hsa le htof kauv</i>		I come during the day while the bird is calling
<i>Nauj miz muf y'kox muj naz</i>		I call your sweet-sounding name every night
<i>Kauv meif oo kaiz av laf hpav htau</i>		As the bird calls, the flames burn through the high leaves
<i>Nauj miz muf y'kox muj naz</i>	45	I call your sweet-sounding name every night
<i>Y'hai m'hsa taj av dei</i>		I come during the day to a hill pass
<i>Nauj miz muf y'kox muj naz</i>		I call your sweet-sounding name every night
<i>Av dei meif oo kaiz av laf hpav dei</i>		In the hill pass, the flames burn through the leaves on the branches
<i>Nauj miz muf y'kox muj naz</i>		I call your sweet-sounding name every night
<i>Y'hai m'hsa moj kauv htwai</i>	50	I come during the day while mother calls me back
<i>Nauj miz muf y'kox muj naz</i>		I call your sweet-sounding name every night

<i>Kauv htwai moj me y'kwai cau s'nai</i>		Calling me back, mother tells me to invite the old man
<i>Nauj miz muf y'kok muj naz</i>		I call your sweet-sounding name every night
<i>Y'hai m'hsa moj kauv co</i>		I come during the day while mother calls from afar
<i>Nauj miz muf y'kok muj naz</i>	55	I call your sweet-sounding name every night
<i>Kauv co moj me y'kwai nof looj bo</i>		Calling from afar, mother tells me to invite the young girl
<i>Nauj miz muf y'kok muj naz</i>		I call your sweet-sounding name every night
<i>Nauj miz muf y'kok muj naz</i>		I call your sweet-sounding name every night
<i>Hki gaz of le taj sauf lei</i>		We are together in a lonely place
<i>Nauj miz muf y'kok muj naz</i>	60	I call your sweet-sounding name every night
<i>Sauf lei meif oo auf laiv taj av dei</i>		In the lonely place, the fire blazes through the hill pass
<i>Nauj miz muf y'kok muj naz</i>		I call your sweet-sounding name every night
<i>Hki gaz of le taj lei sau</i>		We are together in a desolate place
<i>Nauj miz muf y'kok muj naz</i>		I call your sweet-sounding name every night
<i>Lei sau hki gaz of le taj av htav</i>	65	In the desolate place, we are high above
<i>Nauj miz muf y'kok muj naz</i>		I call your sweet-sounding name every night
<i>Hki gaz of le dai hpo pooz</i>		We are together inside a little hut
<i>Nauj miz muf y'kok muj naz</i>		I call your sweet-sounding name every night
<i>Hpo pooz kwaj dauv bu hpo k'liz oo</i>		Inside the little hut, we watch the wind blowing over the rice fields
<i>Nauj miz muf y'kok muj naz</i>	70	I call your sweet-sounding name every night
<i>Hki gaz of le dai hpo paz</i>		We are together near a little hut
<i>Nauj miz muf y'kok muj naz</i>		I call your sweet-sounding name every night
<i>Hpo paz kwaj dauv bu hpo k'liz dwa</i>		Near the little hut, we watch the breeze blowing over the rice fields
<i>Nauj miz muf y'kok muj naz</i>		I call your sweet-sounding name every night
<i>Of guz nauj le hti hpo hki</i>	75	I stay with you by a little fountain
<i>Nauj miz muf y'kok muj naz</i>		I call your sweet-sounding name every night
<i>Hpo hki of guz nauj t'plaj sav mi</i>		By the little fountain, I stay close to you, I am happy not letting you go

(FM 2020: *hta a*)

- 1 As the verb *kwaj* ('to see' or 'to look') does not have a subject, we have translated this sentence with an infinitive construction. *Taj lauz lav* is something extraordinary, marvelous, or wonderful. According to our informants, the word *aiz* does not have any meaning, but is used to complete the verse and create an assonance with the beginning of the following line (*n'hai*). The same leading verse is repeated in line 3 with the addition of the expletive *of* at the beginning of the line. From line 5 onwards, however, a different leading verse is used.

- 2 This is a question that ends with the preposition *av lo* ('on' or 'over') and rhymes with line 4, which ends with the same preposition. Line 6 asks the same question but ends with the preposition *av hki* ('the edge of' or 'the end of'), which rhymes with line 8. In the translation, we have not retained the rhymes, but have tried to replicate the effect by using similar prepositions in both questions and answers.
- 4 *Geij* is the generic term for 'rattan' (*Calamoideae*), a family of flexible and polyvalent climbing plants that grow in the forest and have many uses for the Pgaz K'Nyau, as food, construction, and handicraft material. *Geij hkaf* (also in line 8) is a variety of rattan (literally, 'white rattan'). The image conveyed by lines 4 and 8 is that the speaker walks through the rattan in the forest. Line 4 begins with the same prepositional phrase that is used at the end of line 2. This chiasmatic structure is repeated throughout the poem, with certain lines picking up and incorporating the ending of previous ones. This seems to be a fairly common rhetorical device in *hta* and is used in all three sections of the poem presented here.
- 5 In the performance, this leading verse was only recited in full in line 5. In subsequent lines, the performer dropped the pronoun *y'* ('I'), although it continues to be implied. In our transcription, we have preserved the pronoun throughout the poem, as the meaning would significantly change without it. The verse refers to *nauj* ('woman') as the object of the speaker's calling. The verb *kox* means 'to call' and is a synonym of *kauv*, used in other lines of the poem. For consistency with the rest of the poem, we have translated this nominal reference as a second person pronoun. The adjective *muf*, qualifying the name of the woman, means 'sweet-sounding' or 'melodious'.
- 10 The synonyms *hsaix* and *kwif* are used alternatively in the chiasmatic structures of lines 10, 14, 26, and 30. They both refer to a pond or marsh. The expression *qaaz hsaix* can also mean 'to set a trap'.
- 12 *Pooz hpwaj* is a married man with children. The verb *t'hkwaiz* means to fish using a fishing rod. This verse is parallel to line 16, where the action is *dauz ciz*, which means to fish setting a trap. The same structure is repeated in lines 28 and 32.
- 34 *K'ne* is a common word for 'forest'.
- 36 *Sav bleif blauf* is a swallow (*Hirundinidae*). *Yooz* is a verb that means 'to fly'. In line 40, the same bird is mentioned, but this time the action is *hav* ('to walk').
- 42 The generic word *htof* ('bird') is the subject of the action *kauv* ('to call' or 'to sing'). Because in Sgaw there is no number inflection, it is not clear if this refers to a single bird or to various birds calling. The rest of the poem seems to indicate that the line refers to a single bird, perhaps the same one that sings "*kox kwai kauv kox kwai*" in the leading verse of the following segment.
- 44 This line begins with the verb that ends line 42. Because of the absence of a subject in the original, it might refer to the calling of the speaker or to the calling of the bird (or birds) in the previous lines. In our translation, we interpret it in the latter sense. *Meif oo* means 'fire', while *kaiz* is the verb 'to burn'. The generic term for 'leaf' (singular or plural) is *laf*. In Sgaw, flames are called *meif oo av laf*, which implies a comparison between the leaves of a tree and the flames of a fire, creating an untranslatable rhetorical figure.
- 46 *Taj av dei* can be translated as 'hill pass', as it usually means the low part of a ridge between two elevated points in the mountains. But the expression could also mean a branching or crossing path. The word *dei* ('branch') is used on verse 48, as part of the modified *hpav dei*, which refers to the leaves (*laf*) on the tree.

- 50 *Moj* is the generic term for ‘mother’. The verb *kauv* (‘to call’) is the same one used in the previous lines to refer to the birds singing and to the man calling the name of his lover. *Kauv htwai* means ‘to call back’. In line 54, the same structure is repeated but with *kauv co* (‘to call from far away’, although *co* could also mean ‘from the top of a mountain’).
- 52 According to our informants, the words *cau s’nai* refer to an old unmarried man or bachelor. Similarly, the words *nof looj bo* (line 56) refer to a single young girl. These two verses seem to evoke an arranged marriage between an old man and a young girl, not an uncommon practice in traditional Pgaz K’Nyou society. Thus, it is possible to interpret that the young girl who is supposed to marry the old man is the same woman whom the speaker loves. The whole poem might then be read as the narrative of a young man pursuing his lover, after she has escaped into the jungle in order to avoid an imposed marriage.
- 57 In lines 57 and 58, Kaew repeated the leading verse. This seems to be intended, as the same repetition takes place in all three sections of the poem, approximately in the middle of each segment. The repetition could mark a transition in the story.
- 59 *Hki gaz*, which literally means ‘two people’, is a quantifier that acts as a first or third-person plural subject. In this context, we have translated it as referring to the speaker and his lover. In order to better reflect the meaning of the expression, we have added the adverb ‘together’. *Taj sauf lei* is a place with few or no people. In the original, an antimetabole is created through the inversion of *sauf lei* into *lei sauf* in line 62. We have translated this variation using different synonyms (‘lonely’ and ‘desolate’).
- 61 *Laiv* means ‘to burn’. When combined with the verb *auf* (‘to eat’), the effect of the flames is emphasised.
- 67 This line has a similar structure to lines 71 and 75. They all use the adjective *hpo* (‘little’ or ‘small’) to qualify a noun, followed by a preposition. In lines 69, 73 and 77, the same construction is repeated at the start of the verse but without the noun. In our translation of these clauses, we have followed the most literal reading, interpreting them as having the same meaning as the antecedent, but with an elision of the noun. However, in Sgaw, *hpo* can also mean ‘baby’ or ‘child’ when used as a noun. Thus, these verses might also be alluding to the baby of the couple. This less obvious interpretation could help to explain why the two lovers have been forced to escape into the forest.
- 69 *Bu hpo* is a ‘paddy’ or ‘rice field’. *K’liz* is a term for ‘wind’, while the verb *oo* means ‘to blow’. In line 73, there is again a similar expression, but this time the verb used is *dwa* which implies a lighter breeze.
- 77 This is a very condensed verse in the original. *T’plaj* can be translated as ‘I will not let you go’ and *sav mi* (equivalent to *sav mux*) means ‘happy’ or ‘satisfied’.

<i>Liv m’taz kauv nej laif kox kwai kauv kox kwai</i>	1	What is that that sings “ <i>kox kwai kauv kox kwai</i> ”?
<i>Hki gaz of le hti hpo klo</i>		We are together by a little stream
<i>Liv m’taz kauv nej laif kox kwai kauv kox kwai</i>		What is that that sings “ <i>kox kwai kauv kox kwai</i> ”?
<i>Hpo klo of guz nauj t’plaj saf mo</i>		By the little stream, I stay close to you, I am happy not letting you go
<i>Liv m’taz kauv nej laif kox kwai kauv kox kwai</i>	5	What is that that sings “ <i>kox kwai kauv kox kwai</i> ”?

<i>Of guz nauj le hpau pgaix hki</i>		I stay with you up the river of flowers
<i>Liv m'taz kauv neij laif kox kwai kauv kox kwai</i>		What is that that sings "kox kwai kauv kox kwai"?
<i>Pgaix hki bo tro oz hti div nyax div</i>		Upriver, we build a water pipe with banana tree stems
<i>Liv m'taz kauv neij laif kox kwai kauv kox kwai</i>		What is that that sings "kox kwai kauv kox kwai"?
<i>Of guz nauj le hpau pgaix klo</i>	10	I stay with you down the river of flowers
<i>Liv m'taz kauv neij laif kox kwai kauv kox kwai</i>		What is that that sings "kox kwai kauv kox kwai"?
<i>Pgaix klo bo tro oz hti div nyax do</i>		Downriver, we build a water pipe with banana leaf stems
<i>Liv m'taz kauv neij laif kox kwai kauv kox kwai</i>		What is that that sings "kox kwai kauv kox kwai"?
<i>Nauj htof lwij hpo av hkauf du</i>		You are a little dove with short legs
<i>Liv m'taz kauv neij laif kox kwai kauv kox kwai</i>	15	What is that that sings "kox kwai kauv kox kwai"?
<i>Hkauf du cau j lauz seif dei hkof t'hoov</i>		When short legs perch, the twig does not move
<i>Liv m'taz kauv neij laif kox kwai kauv kox kwai</i>		What is that that sings "kox kwai kauv kox kwai"?
<i>Nauj htof lwij hpo av hkauf bau</i>		You are a little dove with yellow feet
<i>Liv m'taz kauv neij laif kox kwai kauv kox kwai</i>		What is that that sings "kox kwai kauv kox kwai"?
<i>Hkauf bau cau j lauz seif dei hkof t'lauz</i>	20	When yellow feet perch, the twig does not bend
<i>Liv m'taz kauv neij laif kox kwai kauv kox kwai</i>		What is that that sings "kox kwai kauv kox kwai"?
<i>K'hsau hai div av pax tu</i>		The elephant comes with its harness
<i>Liv m'taz kauv neij laif kox kwai kauv kox kwai</i>		What is that that sings "kox kwai kauv kox kwai"?
<i>Pax tu cau waij hai div av k'du</i>		For a harness, I come with my shadow
<i>Liv m'taz kauv neij laif kox kwai kauv kox kwai</i>	25	What is that that sings "kox kwai kauv kox kwai"?
<i>K'hsau hai div av pliz htav</i>		The elephant comes with its chain
<i>Liv m'taz kauv neij laif kox kwai kauv kox kwai</i>		What is that that sings "kox kwai kauv kox kwai"?
<i>Pliz htav cau waij hai div av k'laz</i>		For a chain, I come with my spirit
<i>Liv m'taz kauv neij laif kox kwai kauv kox kwai</i>		What is that that sings "kox kwai kauv kox kwai"?
<i>Liv m'taz kauv neij laif kox kwai kauv kox kwai</i>	30	What is that that sings "kox kwai kauv kox kwai"?
<i>Yuj htraj bo tro k'pix pooz</i>		The mouse is trapped inside a bamboo pipe in the mud
<i>Liv m'taz kauv neij laif kox kwai kauv kox kwai</i>		What is that that sings "kox kwai kauv kox kwai"?
<i>K'pix pooz bo htof kif hpo av maix yooz</i>		Inside the muddy bamboo, the eyes of the little parrot fly

<i>Liv m'taz kauv nej laif kox kwai kauv kox kwai</i>		What is that that sings "kox kwai kauv kox kwai"?
<i>Yuj htraj bo tro k'pix kla</i>	35	The mouse is trapped in a bamboo pipe in the mud
<i>Liv m'taz kauv nej laif kox kwai kauv kox kwai</i>		What is that that sings "kox kwai kauv kox kwai"?
<i>K'pix kla bo htof kif hpo av maix ywaz</i>		In the muddy bamboo, the eyes of the little parrot cry
<i>Liv m'taz kauv nej laif kox kwai kauv kox kwai</i>		What is that that sings "kox kwai kauv kox kwai"?
<i>Seif hpu hkof plau muj htauf bi</i>		A vine grows around a log
<i>Liv m'taz kauv nej laif kox kwai kauv kox kwai</i>	40	What is that that sings "kox kwai kauv kox kwai"?
<i>Htauf bi n'bi y'bi hpauv n'hki</i>		Around a log, you grow, I grow after you
<i>Liv m'taz kauv nej laif kox kwai kauv kox kwai</i>		What is that that sings "kox kwai kauv kox kwai"?
<i>Seif hpu hkof plau muj htauf cwa</i>		A vine crawls over a log
<i>Liv m'taz kauv nej laif kox kwai kauv kox kwai</i>		What is that that sings "kox kwai kauv kox kwai"?
<i>Htauf cwa n'cwa y'cwa qux div naz</i>	45	Over a log, you crawl, I crawl with you
<i>Liv m'taz kauv nej laif kox kwai kauv kox kwai</i>		What is that that sings "kox kwai kauv kox kwai"?
<i>N'k'riv div laif coz kwi</i>		How do you spin in the spinning wheel?
<i>Liv m'taz kauv nej laif kox kwai kauv kox kwai</i>		What is that that sings "kox kwai kauv kox kwai"?
<i>Coz kwi n'riv y'riv hpof n'hki</i>		In the spinning wheel, you spin, I spin after you
<i>Liv m'taz kauv nej laif kox kwai kauv kox kwai</i>	50	What is that that sings "kox kwai kauv kox kwai"?
<i>N'k'riv div laif coz kwau</i>		How do you spin with the spindle?
<i>Liv m'taz kauv nej laif kox kwai kauv kox kwai</i>		What is that that sings "kox kwai kauv kox kwai"?
<i>Coz kwau n'riv y'riv le n'saux</i>		With the spindle, you spin, I spin with you
<i>Liv m'taz kauv nej laif kox kwai kauv kox kwai</i>		What is that that sings "kox kwai kauv kox kwai"?
<i>Nauj mej taz hpav cif le lei</i>	55	You are a goral running on the cliff
<i>Liv m'taz kauv nej laif kox kwai kauv kox kwai</i>		What is that that sings "kox kwai kauv kox kwai"?
<i>Le lei y'cif keiz av lauj t'sei</i>		On the cliff, I cannot follow you running around
<i>Liv m'taz kauv nej laif kox kwai kauv kox kwai</i>		What is that that sings "kox kwai kauv kox kwai"?
<i>Nauj mej taz hpav cif lei htau</i>		You are a goral running on the high cliff

(FM 2020: hta b)

- 1 The leading verse of this segment is constructed as a question with the interrogative pronoun *m'taz* ('what') and the demonstrative pronoun *nej laif* ('that'). This could also be translated as 'who is it that...' with the addition of the often omitted or silenced *gaz* (a plural affix used only for people) after the interrogative pronoun. Here we find again the verb 'to call' (*kauv* or *kox*), used repeatedly in the previous segment. In the dictionary of Seguinotte (2007), only the spelling *kauv* is given, but Kaew's performance made a clear phonetic distinction between *kauv* and *kox*, which also reflects everyday usage in Sgaw. According to our informants, *kox kwai kauv kox kwai* is an onomatopoeia or phonological icon that attempts to reproduce the characteristic call of the Common Green-Magpie (*Cissa chinensis*), a bird with long tail, bright green plumage, chestnut-tipped wings, a black mask, and coral-red bill (see Photo 2). This bird, which the Pgaz K'Nyau call *kox kwai*, used to be more common in the past, but even then it was difficult to spot, as it tends to hide in the canopy of the forest. As suggested by our informants, we have not translated the word *liv* at the beginning of the sentence, which might simply be used to reinforce the question. However, another possible interpretation of this verse would be that *liv* ('child') constitutes a vocative, used by the speaker to address the question to his newborn child. Because this usage is not common in Sgaw and was not recognised by our informants, we have not reflected this possibility in the translation.
- 2 The expression *hti hpo klo* refers to a small river or stream, literally 'a small channel of water'. In Sgaw culture, riverbanks are common places for lovers to meet.
- 6 The term *hpau pgaix* refers to a flower with small white petals that grows near water streams. The plant, which is edible and fragrant, might be a water dropwort (*Oenanthe javanica*) or Chinese celery (*Apium graveolens*). According to our informants, the Pgaz K'Nyau often refer to a whole stream with the name of these flowers. In our translation, therefore, we have used the paraphrasis 'river of flowers'. The prepositions *hki* (lines 6 and 8) and *klo* (lines 10 and 12) are commonly used in this context to refer to the upper (upstream) and lower (downstream) course of the river.
- 8 The words *nyax div* in this verse refer to the stem of the banana tree or the hard leaves that make up the trunk. Similarly, *nyax do* in line 12 refers to the hard stems of the banana leaves themselves. *Bo tro* is a pipe cut out of bamboo traditionally used by the Pgaz K'Nyau to carry water from streams.
- 14 The expression *htof lwij* means 'dove' or 'pigeon' (*Columbidae*). 'Little dove' (*htof lwij hpo*) is an affectionate way to refer to a woman. Here, as well as in line 18, the possessive construction (*av hkauf du*) is rendered in translation with a prepositional clause.
- 16 This line lacks an explicit subject, but it seems to refer to the fact that the 'twig' (*seif dei*) does not 'move' (*hooov*) or 'bend' (*lauz*, in line 20) when the dove perches on it, as the bird is too light.
- 22 The word *k'hsau* means 'elephant' (*Elephas maximus*), an important animal for the Pgaz K'Nyau, who used to train and employ elephants for various tasks. The elephants were fitted with a chest 'harness' (*pax tu*) when forced to drag logs in the forest. In the past, this harness was made from wood, but nowadays it is more common to use a nylon rope. Another implement, still used to handle and keep captive elephants, is the *pliz htav* ('chain') mentioned in verse 26.

- 24 The word *cau waij* literally means ‘elder brother’ and can be used as a third person or first-person nominal reference. For consistency with the rest of the poem, we have translated it as referring to the male speaker.
- 28 The term *k'laz* can be roughly translated as ‘spirit’. This is an important concept in Pgaz K’Nyau traditional ontology and psychology. According to Harry Ignatius Marshall (1922), the Pgaz K’Nyau make a distinction between *tha* (the moral consciousness or soul) and the *k'laz*, which is a life principle with which all living beings, and even inanimate beings, are endowed to different degrees. As he explains, the *k'laz* is
- the force that keeps one alive and well. As it is being constantly solicited by demons and more or less by the *k'laz* of dead relatives to leave the body, it needs the protection of charms, offerings, and medicines. As the *k'laz* comes from a previous existence to inhabit the body at the time of birth and departs into a new existence at death, so also it leaves the body for brief periods and at frequent intervals, as during sleep. If it remains away longer than usual, its absence causes the sickness and even the death of the body. (Ibid.: 218)
- 31 *Yuj* is a generic term for a ‘mouse’. This might be an indirect reference to the woman, as it is common in Sgaw (as well as in Thai and other Southeast Asian languages) to use the word mouse to refer affectionately to young girls. The verb *htraj* means ‘to be in the way, as an obstruction’.
- 33 *Htof kif* is a generic name for ‘parrot’ (*Psittaciformes*). The noun *maix* means ‘eyes’ and is linked to the parrot with the possessive particle (*av*). The verb *yooz* (‘to fly’) is here an action of the parrot’s eyes, forming a synecdoche that seems to refer to the parrot’s desire, rather than its effective action to fly away. A similar construction, but with the verb *ywaz* (‘to cry’) is found in verse 37. The word *bo* seems to refer to the ‘bamboo’ mentioned in line 31. In order to keep the same meaning in the translation, we have turned the word *k'pix* (‘mud’) into an adjective.
- 39 The combination of *seif* (‘tree’) and *hpu* (‘old’) means ‘log’ (the trunk of a fallen tree), while the combination of *plau* (‘outside’) and *muj* (‘sun’) is the generic term for a vine, that is, any plant with climbing stems, lianas, or runners.
- 41 In verses 41, 45, 49, and 53, the construction *N'* (‘you’) + verb + *Y'* (‘I’) + verb, means ‘you do this, I do the same’. It is an idiomatic way of expressing a replicated or coordinated action between the speaker and the addressee. We have kept the same construction in the translation, even though it is not idiomatic in English.
- 47 In lines 47 and 51, the verb *k'riv* (‘to spin’) refers to two different parts of a spinning wheel: *coz kwi* (the wheel itself) and *coz kwau* (a movable part, equivalent to the spindle or crank, that is used to spin the wheel and thread the fabric).
- 55 *Taz hpav* is a ‘goral’ (*Naemorhedus*), an ungulate that can climb swiftly up the cliffs.
- 57 The verb *cifkeiz* can mean ‘to run back’ or ‘to run from one place to another’. The whole expression refers to the impossibility (*t'sei*) of following or pleasing someone.



Photo 2. Common Green-Magpie (*Cissa chinensis*), the bird that the Pgaz K'Nyau call *kox kwai*. Image by Quyên LeKhac (<https://pixabay.com/photos/common-green-magpie-4989814>).

<i>Y'goz mauf az meij mux</i>	1	We can be friends if you are happy
<i>Lei htau y'cifkeiz av lauj t'nyau</i>		On the high cliff, I can hardly follow you running around
<i>Az meij mux wai y'goz mauf</i>		If you are happy, we can be friends
<i>Nauj meij deif bu of le lei</i>		You are a field frog on a rocky cliff
<i>Az meij mux wai y'goz mauf</i>	5	If you are happy, we can be friends
<i>Le lei nauj uf t'sei af t'sei</i>		On the rocky cliff, you cannot speak, you cannot talk
<i>Az meij mux wai y'goz mauf</i>		If you are happy, we can be friends
<i>Nauj meij deif bu of lei htau</i>		You are a field frog on a high cliff
<i>Az meij mux wai y'goz mauf</i>		If you are happy, we can be friends
<i>Lei htau nauj uf t'nyau af t'nyau</i>	10	On the high cliff, you struggle to speak, you struggle to talk
<i>Az meij mux wai y'goz mauf</i>		If you are happy, we can be friends
<i>Nauj meij htwif hpo mauz lo sau</i>		You are a puppy learning to bark for the first time

<i>Az meij mux wai y'goz mauf</i>		If you are happy, we can be friends
<i>Lo sau mauz t'sei mauz waj mauz wauz</i>		For the first time, you cannot bark, you just bark back and forth
<i>Az meij mux wai y'goz mauf</i>	15	If you are happy, we can be friends
<i>Nauj meij htuwif hpo mauz lo hkliu</i>		You are a puppy learning to bark at a turtle
<i>Az meij mux wai y'goz mauf</i>		If you are happy, we can be friends
<i>Lo hkliu mauz t'sei mauz wej wauz diu</i>		At a turtle, you cannot bark, you are still barking around
<i>Az meij mux wai y'goz mauf</i>		If you are happy, we can be friends
<i>Cau lauz baf hple pluj av pooz</i>	20	I fall among mad wasps
<i>Az meij mux wai y'goz mauf</i>		If you are happy, we can be friends
<i>Av pooz k'eif yaz maz hki maz hku</i>		Being among them, the wasps sting me frantically
<i>Az meij mux wai y'goz mauf</i>		If you are happy, we can be friends
<i>Cau lauz baf hple pluj av kla</i>	25	I fall amidst mad wasps
<i>Az meij mux wai y'goz mauf</i>		If you are happy, we can be friends
<i>Av kla k'eif yaz maz hku p'sav</i>		Being amidst them, the wasps sting me with frenzy
<i>Az meij mux wai y'goz mauf</i>		If you are happy, we can be friends
<i>Y'lauz baf hse av gij pooz</i>		I fall inside the roots of a <i>hse</i> tree
<i>Az meij mux wai y'goz mauf</i>		If you are happy, we can be friends
<i>Gij pooz taj t'of htuv htauf y'cu</i>	30	Inside the roots, nobody pulls my hand out
<i>Az meij mux wai y'goz mauf</i>		If you are happy, we can be friends
<i>Y'lauz baf hse av gij kla</i>		I fall between the roots of a <i>hse</i> tree
<i>Az meij mux wai y'goz mauf</i>		If you are happy, we can be friends
<i>Gij kla taj t'of htuv htauf nej yaz</i>	35	Between the roots, nobody pulls me out
<i>Az meij mux wai y'goz mauf</i>		If you are happy, we can be friends
<i>Y'lauz baf hti av wau lei</i>		I fall inside a whirlpool
<i>Az meij mux wai y'goz mauf</i>		If you are happy, we can be friends
<i>Wau lei taj t'of htuv htauf y'hsei</i>		As I whirl, nobody pulls me out by my shirt
<i>Az meij mux wai y'goz mauf</i>		If you are happy, we can be friends
<i>Y'lauz baf hti av lei wau</i>	40	I fall inside a whirlpool

<i>Az meij mux wai y'goz mauf</i>		If you are happy, we can be friends
<i>Lei wau taj t'of htuv htauf htuv lauz</i>		As I whirl, nobody pulls me up and out
<i>Az meij mux wai y'goz mauf</i>		If you are happy, we can be friends
<i>Seif dof k'nai hsov le ple</i>		The bee lives in a big tree for a long time
<i>Az meij mux wai y'goz mauf</i>	45	If you are happy, we can be friends
<i>Le ple k'nai cif hpav t'muf lez</i>		For a long time, the bee does not want to leave
<i>Az meij mux wai y'goz mauf</i>		If you are happy, we can be friends
<i>Seif dof k'nai hsov le nya</i>		The bee lives in a big tree since early on
<i>Az meij mux wai y'goz mauf</i>		If you are happy, we can be friends
<i>Le nya k'nai cif hpav t'muf mav</i>	50	Since early on, the bee never wants to leave
<i>Az meij mux wai y'goz mauf</i>		If you are happy, we can be friends
<i>P'toj seif nwi nif dof bi</i>		Seven years after carving a tree, the bark grows again
<i>Az meij mux wai y'goz mauf</i>		If you are happy, we can be friends
<i>Dof bi k'luj hav suv t'nej div</i>		As the bark grows, the word is steady
<i>Az meij mux wai y'goz mauf</i>	55	If you are happy, we can be friends
<i>P'toj seif nwi nif dof be</i>		Seven years after carving a tree, the bark grows anew
<i>Az meij mux wai y'goz mauf</i>		If you are happy, we can be friends
<i>Dof be k'luj hav suv t'nej lez</i>		As the bark grows, the word does not falter
<i>Az meij mux wai y'goz mauf</i>		If you are happy, we can be friends
<i>Az meij mux wai y'goz mauf</i>	60	If you are happy, we can be friends
<i>K'liz meij hai seif laf lau</i>		When the wind rises, the leaves fall
<i>Az meij mux wai y'goz mauf</i>		If you are happy, we can be friends
<i>Laf lau htof kauv htauf y'nauf baf hpau</i>		As the leaves fall, a bird suddenly sings and I think of the flower
<i>Az meij mux wai y'goz mauf</i>		If you are happy, we can be friends
<i>K'liz meij hai seif laf waf</i>	65	When the wind rises, the leaves sway

<i>Az meij mux wai y'goz mauf</i>		If you are happy, we can be friends
<i>Laf waf htof kauw htauf y'nauf baf naz</i>		As the leaves sway, a bird suddenly sings and I think of you
<i>Az meij mux wai y'goz mauf</i>		If you are happy, we can be friends
<i>Nauj of yiz hti waj yau yei</i>		You are far away, on the other side of the river
<i>Az meij mux wai y'goz mauf</i>	70	If you are happy, we can be friends
<i>Yau yei sav hki hplef maz hpgaj t'geiz Az meij mux wai y'goz mauf</i>		On the other side, do not break two hearts apart If you are happy, we can be friends
<i>Nauj of yiz hti waj yei yau</i>		You are far away, on the other bank of the river
<i>Az meij mux wai y'goz mauf</i>		If you are happy, we can be friends
<i>Yei yau sav hki hplef maz hpgaj geiz nauz</i>	75	On the other bank, do not ever break two hearts apart

(FM 2020: *hta c*)

- 1 The leading verse of this segment is *Az meij mux wai y'goz mauf*, but in the first line Kaew inverted the order of the conditional sentence and dropped the connecting word *wai* ('therefore'). This might be attributed to a certain hesitation or faulty memory at the moment of transitioning from one segment to the next. Or it might be an intentional rhetorical device. In any case, these variations do not change the meaning of the sentence, although they do affect the rhyme.
- 2 This line is similar to line 57 in the previous segment. Apart from the repetition of the last words of line 59 from that segment (*lei htau*), this verse ends with *t'nyau*, which means 'not easy' but is rendered as an adverb ('hardly') in our translation.
- 4 *Deifbu* is a field frog (*Fejervarya limnocharis*), also known as Asian Grass Frog or Rice Field Frog. It is a common sight in the fields, especially during the rice harvesting season, when it comes out of hibernation to lay its eggs. It is often hunted and consumed for food by the Pgaz K'Nyau.
- 12 *Htwif* is the generic term for dog. Combined with *hpo* ('little'), it means a 'puppy' or 'young dog'.
- 16 *Hkliv* is a generic noun for 'turtle' (*Testudines*). The expression seems to reflect the playfulness and inexperience of a puppy using the newly acquired skill of barking to engage with a turtle, even though the turtle cannot respond.
- 20 *Cau* ('man') can be used as a first-, second- or third-person pronoun depending on context. In line with the rest of the poem, we have translated it as a first-person self-reference. This interpretation is also coherent with the use of accusative first-person pronouns in the following verses, confirming that the speaker is supposed to be a male. *Hple* is the generic noun for common wasps (*Vespidae*). Because of their aggressive behaviour, the Pgaz K'Nyau refer to the wasps that come out of their nests around October as 'mad wasps' (*hple plu*).

- 28 *Hse* or *hse ko* (*Erythrina subumbrans*) is a large deciduous tree with a spreading crown. It is usually found in forests, near water streams, and the Pgaz K'Nyau appreciate it for its shade and floral display. Since there is no English translation, we have preserved its original name.
- 36 In Sgaw, *hti av wau lei* (or its chiasmatic variant on line 40, *hti av lei wau*) is a 'whirlpool'. The expression is composed of the words *hti* ('water'), *av* (possessive), and *wau lei* ('around'), forming a paraphrasis that could be literally translated as 'what turns water around'.
- 44 *Seif* ('tree') and *k'nai* ('bee') are generic terms. Because verbs in Sgaw are not inflected, the tense of this line (and the following ones) is undetermined. Based on the use of temporal markers like "for a long time" (44), "since early on" (48), "never" (50), the most natural translation of these verses would be in past tense. However, the bee's determination to live in the tree could symbolise the speaker's determination to love the woman. In the overall context of the poem, therefore, a translation in (atemporal) present tense seems to be less marked and leaves open the possibility of different interpretations.
- 52 *P'toj* is the action of making cuts on the trunk of a tree, for example to carve steps to climb it. The mention of "seven years" (*nwi nij*) might be explained because this is an auspicious number in Pgaz K'Nyau culture. According to our informants, odd numbers (especially seven) are often mentioned in Karen folklore; for example, a king might have seven children. The term *dof bi* refers to the regrowth of bark over the cut after some time. The same structure is repeated in line 58, but there the term is *dof be*, which has a similar meaning. In our translation, we have alternated 'again' and 'anew', in order to reflect this variation in the original.
- 54 *K'luj* can mean 'voice' or 'word'. In this context, it might be interpreted to refer to the word given by the man to his lover, a love pledge which is not moved by the troubles encountered by the couple, in the same way that the tree overcomes the cuts endured.
- 61 The expression *seif laf lau* ('the leaves fall') usually refers to the falling leaves of the deciduous *Dipterocarpus tuberculatus*. The leaves of this common rainforest tree are used by the Pgaz K'Nyau for thatching roofs.
- 67 *Htof* is a generic term for 'bird'.
- 69 This verse parallels verse 73, with an antimetabole in the alternation of *yau yei* and *yei yau*. In order to maintain a similar structure in the translation, we have used 'side' and 'bank' as alternatives.

DISCUSSION

A superficial reading of the poem already reveals the importance of so-called natural images or representations. The setting of this *hta* in the forests and mountains that constitute the traditional habitat of the Pgaz K'Nyau brings forth a wide variety of nonhuman inhabitants, such as the white rattan, the *hse* trees, vines, mice, parrots, bees, wasps, doves, gorals, frogs, elephants, or magpies, as well as nonliving agents like wind, fire, water, or the spinning wheel. It might be true, therefore, that the abundance of eco-poetic imagery in these poems reflects the intimate relationship of the Pgaz K'Nyau with their natural environment, a key argument used to support the 'Karen consensus' (Walker 2001) as a discursive formation.

It is not enough, however, to simply remark on the importance of natural imagery in the poem. In order to better understand the underlying relationship between humans and nonhumans, we need to look more thoroughly at the rhetorical operations that bring nonhuman co-inhabitants into the domain of human languaging. In this section, we develop such an analysis using an ecosemiotic theoretical framework (Ribó forthcoming) that hypothesises a parallelism between the ontological mode of identification and the mode of symbolisation of nonhumans in oral poesis (see Table 1). The main aim of this analysis is to discern the dominant rhetorical strategy, or the master trope, used to symbolise nonhumans, by looking in detail at the rhetorical operations that bring forth nonhuman actants into the semantic microuniverse (Greimas 1983) of the poetic text.

The first step in the analysis is to describe with some precision the “actantial structures” (Greimas 1987: 107) deployed in those poetic utterances that involve human and nonhuman actors. Because we are not undertaking here a narratological analysis, there is no need to develop exhaustive functional descriptions (as in Propp 1968). It will be sufficient to decompose these utterances into simple syntactical functions that reveal the relation between the actants, using the notation that structuralist semantics borrowed from logic. In the analysis of these actantial structures, we will put human and nonhuman actors on the same plane, in application of the material-semiotic principle of symmetry, which constitutes one of the key methodological tenets of Actor-Network Theory (Callon 1984: 1–4; Latour 2005: 74–78; Michael 2016: 7–9).

From this analysis (shown on Table 2), we can identify six different actantial structures that are deployed throughout the poem. The simplest of these functions, understood in the sense of formal relations (Greimas 1987: 107), are F_1 and F_2 , where a subject (human in F_1 , nonhuman in F_2) enters into a relation with a nonhuman object, which can either be a place (verbs of movement or state) or an instrument (verbs of action). In F_3 , the syntagmatic chain is slightly more complex, insofar as it involves a human subject that relates (through verbs of perception) to a nonhuman object, which then becomes the subject of a different action over another object. In this case, as in the remaining functions, we find both human and nonhuman actors in the same utterance, even if they are articulated at different hierarchical levels. The structure of F_4 is similar to the previous one, but in this case it is the human subject that is turned into a nonhuman subject through a copulative transaction. A significantly different structure is found in F_5 , where two separate actions, one by a nonhuman subject, the other one by a human subject, are articulated in a complex parallelistic figure. Finally, F_6 constitutes a hybrid structure, where a variable number of F_1 and F_2 functions, involving both human and nonhuman actors, are added to a syntagmatic chain of simple narrative actions, linked by implied causality, and in at least one case by reciprocal interaction (c20/22 and c24/26).

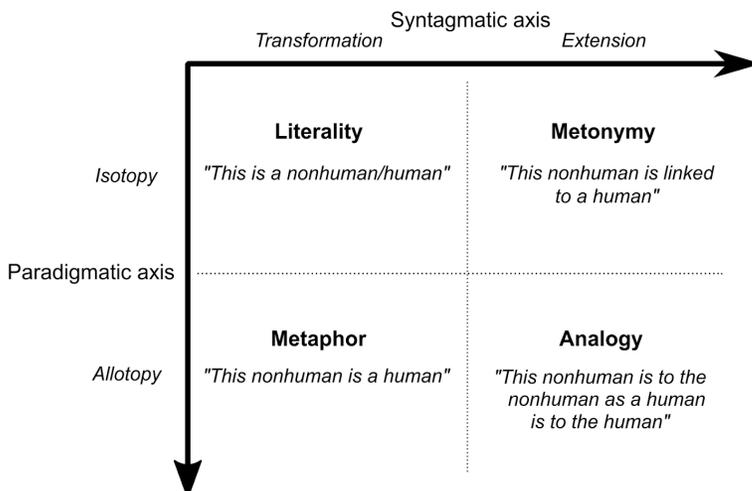
Table 2. Relation of actantial structures or functions found in the three segments of the poem (a, b and c). Verses have been simplified where necessary to reflect synthetically the semantic content. Only actors (both human and nonhuman) acting as subjects are included in the last columns. Unless they double into subjects, objects (both human and nonhuman) have not been accounted for.

Function	Lines	Examples (simplified)	Human actors	Nonhuman actors
$F_1 (S_H \rightarrow O)$	a4, a8, a20, a24	I come over the white rattan	man	–
	a10, a14, a26, a30, a34, a38, a46	I come to the marsh (pond, forest, hill, etc.)	man	–
	a59, a63, a67, a71, a75, b2, b6, b10	We are together by a little stream (river, fountain, hut, etc.)	man, woman	–
	b6, b10	I stay with you up (down) the river of flowers	man, woman	–
	b8, b12	We build a water pipe with banana stems	man, woman	–
	c28, c32	I fall inside the roots of a hse tree	man	–
	c36, c40	I fall inside a whirlpool	man	–
$F_2 (S_{NH} \rightarrow O)$	b31, b35	The mouse is trapped inside a bamboo pipe in the mud	–	mouse
	b33, b37	The eyes of the little parrot fly (cry) inside the muddy bamboo	–	parrot
	c44, c46, c48, c50	The bee lives in a tree	–	bee
$F_3 (S_H \rightarrow O / S_{NH} \rightarrow O)$	a36, a40	I do not see the swallow flying inside the forest	man	swallow
	a42	I hear the bird calling (singing a song)	man	bird
	a44, a48, a61	(I see) the flames burning through the leaves	man	flames (fire)
	a69, a73	We watch the breeze blowing over the rice fields	man, woman	breeze (wind)
	b1ss	(I hear) something (a bird) calling "kox kwai kauv kox kwai"	man	bird (green magpie?)
$F_4 (S_H / S_{NH} \rightarrow O)$	b14/16	You are a dove with short legs (which do not move the twig)	woman	dove
	b55, b59	You are a goral running up a cliff	woman	goral
	c4, c8	You are a field frog on a cliff	woman	frog
	c12, c14, c16, c18	You are a puppy learning to bark (at a turtle)	woman	dog

$F_5 (S_{NH} \rightarrow O \parallel S_H \rightarrow O)$	b22/24, b26/28	The elephant comes with its harness (chain); I come with my shadow (spirit)	man	elephant
	c52/54, c56/58	The tree keeps its bark; I keep my promise	man	tree
	b39/41, b43/45	A vine grows on a log; I (you) grow on you (me)	man, woman	vine
	b47/49, b51/53	A spinning wheel spins; I (you) spin with you (me)	man, woman	spinning wheel
$F_6 (S_{H/NH} \rightarrow O \parallel S_{H/NH} \rightarrow O [\parallel S_{H/NH} \rightarrow O \dots])$	c20/22, c24/26	I fall among mad wasps; mad wasps sting me	man	wasps
	c61, c65	The wind rises, the leaves sway	–	wind, leaves
	c63, c67	The leaves fall, a bird sings, I think of the flower (you)	man	leaves, bird

Once the actantial structures have been described, the next step is to analyse the rhetorical operations that relate the human and nonhuman actors in each case. This is crucial to evaluate the dominant mechanism of ecopoetic symbolisation, based on the semiotic matrix defined by Ribó (forthcoming). In this model (see Table 3), the four modes of symbolisation (literality, metaphor, metonymy, analogy) are plotted on the two axes of structuralist semiotics (Saussure 1983). On the paradigmatic axis, a distinction is made between *isotopy*, defined as the recurrence or reiteration of semes, and *allotopy*, which is the rupture of isotopy (Greimas 1983; Groupe Mu 1990). In turn, the syntagmatic axis distinguishes between *transformation*, produced by internal operations within a semic category, and *extension*, which is the addition or subtraction of contiguous semic categories (Greimas and Courtés 1982; Greimas 1987). We are only interested here in the articulation of human and nonhuman actants on the semantic plane, leaving aside any other rhetorical operations that might be taking place in the poetic utterance.

Table 3. Diagram from Ribó forthcoming, showing the four modes of ecopoetic symbolisation arranged in the paradigmatic and syntagmatic axes.



For the purpose of this analysis, we can quickly dispatch the functions of type F_1 , where any differences between human and nonhuman semes are already determined by the syntactic composition that links human subjects (actors) and nonhuman objects (places, instruments). In effect, none of these sememes involve a transformation or extension of the semic categories shared by human and nonhuman actors. At this level, therefore, the topological question (isotopy vs. allotopy) is not even posed.

We cannot say the same about the figures of type F_2 , where nonhuman subjects appear to act in ways that can be the object of various semantic analyses depending on the underlying mode of identification. For example, in line c44 the nonhuman subject “bee” (*k'nai*) is said to “live” (*hsov*) in a big tree. As this action can be indistinctly applied to humans and nonhumans, we have a case of polyisotopy (Groupe Mu 1990). It is not clear from the text whether the bee is actually a bee (first isotopy), or stands in the place of the man (second isotopy), or perhaps in the place of the woman (third isotopy). All three readings, one literal, the other metaphorical, are possible and cannot be discerned from the analysis of the sememe. Similarly, line b31 presents another nonhuman subject, in this case a “mouse” (*yu*) trapped inside a bamboo pipe in the mud. Again, this line could be read literally, as presenting a mouse trapped inside a bamboo pipe, which might be a fairly common experience for the Pgaz K'Nyau. But it is also possible to read this verse metaphorically, as a reference to the woman being trapped in a difficult situation, perhaps the arranged marriage. In the following lines, the mouse becomes a “little parrot” (*htof kif hpo*) crying and attempting in vain to fly, unable to escape from the bamboo pipe where it is trapped. This rapid metamorphosis could be read as the isotopic reiteration of a fundamental identity between all forms of life, to which animistic perspectivism would attribute a common interiority in spite of their different exteriorities. However, we should notice that both “mouse” and “parrot” are not unusual ways in the cultures of northern Thailand, including amongst the Pgaz K'Nyau, to affectionately refer to a girl or young woman. In this particular context, therefore, those utterances are more likely to constitute metaphorical devices used to overcome the allotopy of the sememes.

This interpretation is further reinforced by the analysis of the F_4 functions, all of which involve the transformation, through an explicit copula (*meij*), of the woman (*nauj*) into a “little dove” (*htof lwij hpo*), a “goral” (*taz hpav*), a “field frog” (*deif bu*), and a “puppy” (*htwif hpo*). All of these utterances could perhaps be analysed as literal figures, involving an identity or lack of distinction between the human and nonhuman subjects. For this interpretation to work, the sememes would have to be isotopic (or perhaps, polyisotopic, as in line c44 above), bringing forth nonhuman inhabitants into the poetic utterance, not as substitutes for human beings, but as beings endowed with the same degree of personhood that humans have. We should note, however, that the Sgaw text explicitly uses the word *nauj* as the subject of all these statements. While this noun can be used and translated as a pronoun (I, you or she), contemporary Pgaz K'Nyau people would only apply it to human females, ruling out the possibility that these functions are literal, at least in the context of this particular poem. Once again, the metaphorical reading seems to be intended in this case, even if the images themselves might reflect archaic forms of “ontological perspectivism” (Viveiros de Castro 1998: 476) preserved in the tradition.

In the functions of type F_3 , on the other hand, there is an explicit relation between a human speaker who perceives (or fails to perceive) a nonhuman actor undertaking a certain action. The enigmatic leading verse of the second segment may be included in the functions of this type, insofar as it can be paraphrased as “I hear something [or someone] singing ‘*kox kwai kauv kox kwai*’”. In the poem, this is articulated with a combination of interrogative and demonstrative pronouns (*m'taz... nej laif*) that leaves open the human/nonhuman nature of the actor in question. Similarly, the verb *kauv* (equivalent to *kox*) is used throughout the poem to refer to both the human action of calling someone (for example, in the leading verse of the first segment) and to the singing of birds (for example, in verses a42 and c63). It is also an implicit metapoetic reference to the human song itself, and in particular to the *hta* that is being performed. This verse is therefore polyisotopic, as several interpretations (is it the woman calling back from the forest? the male speaker singing? a bird singing?) are possible. While this lack of definition is an integral aspect of the poem’s aesthetics (and might explain why the verse is phrased as a question), the narrative progression of the song seems to lean towards a metaphorical interpretation, as we move from the speaker calling the sweet-sounding name of his lover while he searches for her in the mountains to the description of the couple’s life in the forest, where a bird singing immediately evokes the girl’s image (c63 and c67).

Similarly, the functions of type F_6 , which combine utterances of the types F_1 and F_2 , seem to confirm the predominance of metaphorical tropes in the symbolisation of nonhumans in the poem. There are, however, some simple images, like the ones on lines c61 and c65 (“the wind rises”, “the leaves sway”, “the leaves fall”), which invite literal readings. Rather than being forms of dead metaphor, these images might reflect the underlying isotopy between the nonhuman subjects and those particular actions. In contrast, lines c63 and c67 show a clear example of metaphorical transformation. In this case, the metaphor is created by the alternation of the nonhuman object (*hpau*, ‘flower’) and the human personal pronoun (*naz*, ‘you’), which refers to the woman.

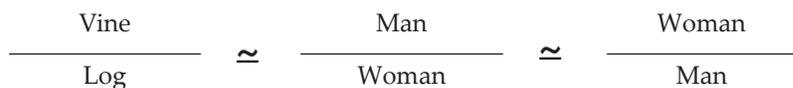
Interestingly, the functions of type F_5 seem to operate with quite a different rhetorical strategy than the previous ones. These are more complex sememes involving at least four terms. Take, for example, the pair of verses in lines b22/24 (“The elephant comes with its harness / I come with my shadow”). The trope here is clearly an analogy, which can be schematised as:

$$\frac{\text{Elephant}}{\text{Harness}} \quad \approx \quad \frac{\text{Man}}{\text{Shadow}}$$

In this case, we can be certain that the analogical operation is working to establish a relation of the type “this nonhuman is to the nonhuman as the human is to the human” (see Table). In the original Sgaw, the subject of the second verse is the noun *cau*, which means ‘man’ (but can also be used as a personal pronoun). This limits the possibility that the second verse might involve some form of semic transformation of the nonhuman subject (elephant). Instead, what we find here is an extension of the semic category which overcomes the allotopy elephant/man by way of analogy. It is important to note that the same construction is repeated in lines b26/28, but this time the analogy relates the elephant’s “chain” and the human “spirit” (*k'laz*). While traditional Pgaz K'Nyau

animism would tend to see all living beings as endowed with *k'laz*, conceived as a life force or principle (Marshall 1922: 218–222), the use of the term in this analogy implies that only humans have *k'laz*. Based on our interviews with Kaew and other informants, this restrictive use of *k'laz* seems to reflect the transformation of ancient animistic concepts under the influence of anthropocentric spiritual beliefs, and in particular of Buddhism (FM 2019: Pa Sang Gnam b; Pa Sang Gnam c; 2020: Kaew).

The remaining examples of F_5 are similarly constructed with analogical operations. In some cases, however, there is an additional extension of the semic category through the subtle use of an idiomatic Sgaw grammatical structure ($n' + \text{verb} + y' + \text{verb}$) that adds dynamism to the analogy and highlights the reciprocal entanglement of the man and the woman. Thus, in the pair of verses b39/41:



CONCLUSIONS

From the analysis of the rhetorical operations involved in the symbolisation of nonhumans in the sampled *hta*, we can conclude that the dominant master trope is the *metaphor*, which is extensively used throughout the poem to overcome the allotopy between human and nonhuman actors by means of implicit or explicit semic transformations. At the same time, we have been able to identify a number of cases of polyisotopy, which might allow for some degree of literality in the interpretation of at least some of the figures. Finally, we have also described some interesting cases of analogical extension, although there are too few of them to consider analogy to be the dominant mode of eco-poetic symbolisation in this particular poem.

Based on these results, it is tempting to conclude that the underlying mode of identification of this *hta* stems from a *naturalistic* ontology. In Descola's (2013: 173) schema, naturalism is "defined by the continuity of the physicality of the entities of the world and the discontinuity of their respective interiorities". In the last few centuries, naturalism has become the dominant ontology in most societies, by postulating the dualism of culture and nature that underlies modern scientific and technological development. While it is important to remember that our analysis is based on a hypothetical relationship between modes of symbolisation and modes of identification, and cannot in any case be extrapolated to the whole Pgaz K'Nyau culture, we might briefly wonder how our conclusion fits into the widespread depiction of the Pgaz K'Nyau as the embodiment of "a fragile ideal of mutually beneficial interaction between culture and nature" (Walker 2001: 145).

In doing so, we should avoid assuming that there is a necessary link between a naturalistic ontology and the kind of environmental destruction and appropriation that characterise certain systems of production. Societies that share a naturalistic mode of identification show very different patterns of consumption and management of natural resources, resulting in various environmental impacts and degrees of sustainability. Accepting that contemporary Pgaz K'Nyau culture shares this same dualistic ontology

does not put into question that some cultural practices, values, and beliefs of the Pgaz K’Nyau might effectively contribute to sustain their habitat. It does put into question, however, the mythifying portrayal of the Pgaz K’Nyau as primordial indigenous people living in harmony with the land. This depiction, sustained by external and internal discourses, does not reflect the social and economic complexity of contemporary Pgaz K’Nyau villages like Ban Nong Dan or Pa Sang Gnam, and could even be detrimental to their sustainability (Walker 2001: 160–162). As our research has shown, an essentialising construct of this sort might not even reflect the ontological outlook underlying the living oral tradition of *hta*, an indication that Pgaz K’Nyau modernity is not the result of externally-imposed cultural change, as the ‘Karen consensus’ often implies, but rather of endogenous social processes not unlike those experienced by many other contemporary cultures.

In sum, our study of Pgaz K’Nyau oral poetry, while limited to a single performance, might help to illustrate that cultures are not monolithic, but evolving and dynamic collectives that assemble both human and nonhuman inhabitants, even as they push them out into the separate realms of human culture and nonhuman nature within their discursive formations (Latour 1993). This apparent contradiction, quite modern in itself, was brought out during our conversations with Kaew Kangyang. When we asked her if *hta* ever spoke of animals, plants, or other nonhumans, she replied in the negative (FM 2020: Kaew). Even after she had just finished singing of swallows, frogs, elephants, *hse* trees, and birds that sing “*kauv kwai kox kauv kwai*”, she was adamant that *hta* only speak of people.

NOTES

1 Onomatopoeic imitation of the Common Green-Magpie’s song drawn from one of the leading verses of the Sgaw poem analysed in this essay.

2 The authors would like to express their gratitude to Kaew Kangyang for sharing her knowledge and artistic skill in performing *hta* for us. We would also like to thank all the Pgaz K’Nyau and Plong informants, such as Tip Kangyang, Kam Pento, Janmalai Wanros, and others, who contributed to our understanding of *hta*, as well as the chiefs of Pa Sang Gnam and Ban Nong Dan for facilitating our fieldwork. We also wish to thank Ginu Chalermliemthong, a teacher of Sgaw Karen and pastor of the Ban Ruammit Church, for his help in interpreting the linguistic nuances of the poem. Finally, we would like to express our gratitude to the anonymous reviewers of this paper for their insightful comments and suggestions.

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3 In this system of transcription, there are 24 consonants (k, hk, g, q, ng, c, hs, ny, t, ht, d, n, p, hp, b, m, y, r, l, w, s, h, ah, eh), ten vowels (a, e, o, i, u, ai, ei, au, oo, ’), and five ‘tone marker’ letters that come at the end of the word and are used to represent the six tones of the Pgaz K’Nyau language (-, v, j, x, f, z). Words are generally formed with an initial consonant, followed by a vowel and a silent tone marker, which is absent in the case of the normal middle tone.

SOURCES

- FM = Fieldwork materials of the authors. Materials are kept in the authors' possession.
- FM 2019: Pa Sang Gnam a. Interviews with various informants in the village of Pa Sang Gnam on November 23, 2019.
- FM 2019: Pa Sang Gnam b. Interviews with various informants in the village of Pa Sang Gnam on November 30, 2019.
- FM 2019: Pa Sang Gnam c. Interviews with various informants in the village of Pa Sang Gnam on December 1, 2019.
- FM 2019: Ban Nong Dan. Interviews with various informants in the village of Ban Nong Dan on December 7, 2019.
- FM 2020: *hta* a. *Hta* "To see wonderful things" performed by Kaew Kangyang on February 22, 2020. Duration of performance: 9:42. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17632/z5x729frwr.1#file-2437ee34-50e4-4ecf-a295-e6cacc76b464>.
- FM 2020: *hta* b. *Hta* "What is that that sings *kox kwai kauw kox kwai*?" performed by Kaew Kangyang on February 22, 2020. Duration of performance: 10:39. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17632/z5x729frwr.1#file-f2199f96-693f-4a79-8805-55cef629a86d>.
- FM 2020: *hta* c. *Hta* "If you are happy, we can be friends" performed by Kaew Kangyang on February 22, 2020. Duration of performance: 10:44. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17632/z5x729frwr.1#file-8728cd4a-1d5d-45e2-8c6e-d489031174eb>.
- FM 2020: Kaew. Interview with Kaew Kangyang in the village of Ban Nong Dan on February 16, 2020.

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