

Speaking like a Ghost: Registers of Intimacy and Incompatibility in the Forests of Northern Laos

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ABSTRACT—The Ksingmul people of the northern Laos-Vietnam border area have been known within local Tai social systems as Puak, a derogatory term that evokes images of forest-eating termites. Occupying the lowest rung in the Tai social hierarchy, what is known of the Ksingmul has been dominated by the idea of Tai-ization — a process of cultural loss and assimilation. But overt markers of physical culture and economic status mask the persistence of traditional beliefs, moral entanglements and alternative historical perspectives that can be accessed only through the Ksingmul language. In this article, I analyze a story called “Person and Nya Wai Become Friends”, which tells of a competition of trickery between a human and a wild spirit. In the telling of this story, the narrator marks the words of the spirit with a prefix that marks the “abnormal speech” of a non-human. He uses the marking to index the moral stance of the person and the wild spirit, as they first become friends, and the human subsequently betrays the special bond of friendship. The wild spirit Nya Wai “speaks like a human” when he is trying to gain mercy from Person when he is caught stealing from Person’s bird traps, while Person starts to “speak like a ghost” as he hatches his plot to get revenge on Nya Wai by tricking him into castrating himself. This is one of the linguistic devices used by the narrator to perform human-spirit relations in the telling of the story. Such performances are firmly located within the multiethnic landscape of the uplands, where power structures are negotiated, constructed and subverted through language use.

Introduction

The Ksingmul people of northeastern Laos attribute the diversity of languages found in the world to an unfortunate event of food poisoning that made people crazy (*tuh wiit*) and run around wildly. In one telling of the story, in the old days everyone lived together in one place, living their lives as one family in the forest and speaking the same language. Sharing the language, everyone understood the difference between *?aa-baa* and *?ap-mih*. These oppositional pairs are the first and second person pronouns, the former used as part of a special relationship of intimacy, the latter for general use. It was also understood by everyone if one said *caa pah* ‘to eat’ or *bii hree* ‘to farm the mountains’ because they were ‘people of the same house.’ The story continues: one day, a man was wandering in the forest and came across mushroom. He didn’t know if it was poisonous

or safe to eat, but he took it back and made soup out of that mushroom anyway. In those days they didn't know how to spice the food, but the soup was eaten and everyone got violently sick. Vomiting all over the forest, the people were scattered in all directions, sleeping and then sitting by themselves until the poisoning passed. When they felt better, people started coming back to their home, only to find that the common language they had spoken was gone. They didn't understand each other anymore, since they had gone crazy and started speaking in their own way. Because of that mushroom, now everyone had their own language (*khwaam nɔh khwaam ?in* 'language-who-language-he') and they could not live together. That is why there are different ethnic groups, languages and countries all over the world.

This account of the diversity of languages and peoples of the uplands of Southeast Asian Zomia is just one of many that explain why people speak differently. The more common myth shared across the region has to do with differentiated people emerging from a gourd (Proschan 2001). This is part of a shared oral tradition that reflects historical relationships between ethnic groups. However, the Ksingmul story of the poisonous mushroom (*ptih kambool* 'mushroom-to.be.poisoned'), as told here by Somsi (58-year-old man) during my first fieldwork on the Ksingmul language in 2012, establishes a different framework for analyzing the linguistic ideologies of this upland, multilingual people living on both sides of the Laos-Vietnam border. The notion of language differentiation because of people "going crazy" shines a light on the social bonds that are reflected in sharing a language, as well as the perception of speaking differently as reflecting different values, histories and identifications. It is also a story that needs to be considered within the multilingual setting of the uplands of the Lao-Vietnam border area, where linguistic and cultural contact have long contributed to the local social fabric.

Working off of this basic narrative of abnormal speech types (Sapir 1958), in this article I analyze a lengthier story about the relationship between a person and an evil spirit called Nya Wai (Ksingmul: *naa wáay*), in which the speech of the spirit is marked with a special prefix *bar-*. I argue that this rhetorical device indexes the moral difference between people and spirits. Interestingly, a parallel theme in this story is the nature of the special relationship that is reflected by the use of the *?aa-baa* pronoun set introduced above. These two performative practices highlight the linguistic marking of tensions between intimacy and incompatibility in the negotiation of social relations within an animate world that includes non-humans. It is also likely that the opposition of the person (*ksiiŋ*) and spirit (*skil*) and the enregisterment (Agha 2015) of intimacy is part of the complex representations of the historical relationship between autochthonous speakers of Austroasiatic languages and the more recently arrived Tai people. I contend that this story is part of a larger areal narrative of the morality of exchange relations, indicated by the social pragmatics of interlocutor reference (Fleming and Sidnell 2020).

Expressivity in abnormal speech, social stereotypes and moral propositions

Abnormal types of speech have been observed in Native American languages and the discussion has shed important light on the ways in which grammar reflects ideologies

about social differentiation and distance. As suggested by Sapir, reference to physical and other characteristics that are deemed strange within a culture can be marked through the use of morphological and phonetic devices in Nootka. Generally speaking, the types of “person-implication” that can be encoded here may include sex and social status, but for Nootka the range of differentiation indexed is much broader. The nuances are specific: children, body size and type, as well as “defective” speech. In this last category, there is nasal speech, lisp and others, and the forms used to represent these types of speech are described as “mocking-forms”. The speech of foreigners is also a reference that can be augmented through markers of abnormal language, as well as mythological and cultural heroes (Frachtenberg 1920). However, the manipulation of consonant and vowel sounds that are used to achieve this effect are not arbitrary, but related to the Nootka speaker’s semiotic maps of the indexicality and iconicity for specific segments and sequences.

Most relevant to the Ksingmul abnormal speech marking under consideration here are the forms of speech used by myth-characters in Native American linguistic culture. In many cases, this entails representing the speech of different animals through these tools of “sound play”. Langdon (1978) proposed that “animal talk” represents speech of animals as imagined by humans, as well as speech in which animals are addressed by humans. As a register of speech, animal talk is a mode of linguistic performance that is open to interactions that can be experienced dialogically. When a speaker of Takelma “talks like a bear”, they are using grammatical means of marking the speech in a way that both enhances the experience of Bear’s characteristics, while at the same time indicating the appropriateness of that usage to a specific actor or situation within a narrative (Hymes 2004). Sapir had proposed that the marker of Bear’s speech *L-* was characteristic, but intrinsically meaningless morpheme that could be called a “grizzly bear prefix”. The sounds used to mark different animals were thus meaningless in and of themselves, but indexical of the nature, character or behavior that is stereotypical of that animal. Hymes’ reanalysis of the texts revealed that the use of this and other prefixes was a much more nuanced part of Takelma narrative poetics. It turns out that just as the personality of a person is not defined by one single characteristic; in practice animal speech can take a number of prefixes to foreground certain traits, and their stereotypicality may be linked to a different animal.

An important element of this sound play is the sound itself. In the Takelma case, prefix *L-* is not part of the prosaic Takelma phonological inventory. Although this sound does exist as a phoneme in neighboring languages, for the Takelma speaker this prefix is uneuphonious (Sapir, referenced in Hymes 2004). In other words, the effect of abnormal speech is achieved through use of abnormal sounds. These uneuphonious sounds are part of the aesthetic grammar (Williams 2014) of the language that use them. It is noteworthy that Hymes terms these “expressive prefixes”, drawing a link to the affective intention of the speaker, evoking shared norms of social value and judgement (Hymes 2004). Recent research on expressives (also known as ideophones and mimetics) has demonstrated how ideal social types are evoked (Choksi 2019) and moral propositions (Badenoch et al. 2020) are given voice as part of a performative ideology that places high value on marked sound-meaning mappings.

In mainland Southeast Asia, folk classification of people groups by speech practices is found. For example, the Khmu, a different Austroasiatic speaking people of northern Laos, identify subgroups through the word *tmooy* [tmɔɔy] ‘guest’ and a range of qualifying terms that are salient in their perceptions of intimacy, proximity and difference (Evrard 2007). For example, the negative marker is used as a shibboleth: adding the various words for ‘not’ in the regional varieties, we find Khmu people referred to as *tmooy pe*’, *tmooy khat*, *tmooy ?am*, *tmooy ?al*. Thus with the term *tmooy*, the Khmu recognize people with whom they can communicate in the same language, despite variations in various aspects of speech, subordinate to the larger classification of *kmhmu?* ‘person’ (Proschan 1997). There are other ways of differentiating internally with *tmooy*, and the boundaries of *tmooy* are not rigidly fixed. Some groups that are not native speakers of Khmu, but live close to the Khmu and speak Khmu as a second language are also sometimes considered to be *tmooy*.

The Ksingmul “ghost prefix” *bar-* marks the abnormal speech of a wild spirit, and the literature on Native American languages provides a fertile theoretical backdrop upon which this phenomenon can be analyzed. As will be discussed in more detail, the Ksingmul language uses prefixes and infixes in a wide range of grammatical functions. This special *bar-* prefix, which is composed of a sequence of sounds that is not grammatically irregular in Ksingmul but is nonetheless rare in the language, gives a feeling of mimetic strangeness to the speech, emblematic of both a crazed mode of talking and the immoral behavior associated with it. Mimesis depends upon the recognition and manipulation of alterity; as such it is a moment of knowing rather than a process of loss (Taussig 1993). While at first this prefix seems to delineate clearly the worlds of humans and evil spirits, the narrative shows that human speech and behavior is subject to the same marking when the lines of social appropriateness are crossed. I argue that this register of linguistic performance can shed light not only on the Ksingmul imaginations of human/non-human relations, but can be extended further to provide insights on social history more broadly.

Recognizing that this is but one story from the Ksingmul oral tradition, the analysis presented here is meant to suggest ways to open up alternative avenues for considering upland society and the many types of relationships we find there. As with all oral literature, the telling and the meaning of stories are deeply rooted in the social history and cultural traditions of the people who tell them. In order to “read” the telling of “Person and Nya Wai Become Friends” we need to explore the place of the Ksingmul within the ethnic and political landscape of northeastern Laos.

Ksingmul in the political landscape of upland forests

The Ksingmul people have long been known locally as “Puak”, a term that is considered to be derogatory because it means “termite” in Lao and the local Tai languages. The Ksingmul are an Austroasiatic forest people who have combined hunting and gathering with upland agriculture for as long as they can remember. They currently number approximately 10,000 people in Laos (Houaphan province) and 21,000 in Vietnam (Son La and Lai Chau provinces), where they are known as Xinh

Mun. The autonym they use on both sides of the border is *ksiiŋ muul*, and the common explanation is that this means hill (*muul*) people (*ksiiŋ*). When discussing the origin of this name, however, some Ksingmul elders have commented that this received wisdom, while feasible in terms of the meaning, is in fact not linguistically correct. In Ksingmul the word for ‘hill’ *múul* is pronounced with a marked high tone, while the word used in the ethnonym is a low, unmarked tone. This was not, however, presented as a problem, because they do live in the mountains and in any case, regardless of the etymology, it is preferred to *puak*. In official usage, the Lao-ified form Singmoon, is used. Nonetheless, locally one may still hear the term *puak* used, both outside and within the community.

In the Ksingmul narrative of their social history, they refer to two axes to explain the internal diversity of their population. The first can be considered to be a geographic distinction, the Nget (*ksiiŋ muul yéet*) and the Ya (*ksiiŋ muul yáa*). The Nget people previously lived at the headwaters of the Nget river (*lɔɔŋ yéet*), which is a tributary of the Ma (*lɔɔŋ harmaa*) and form the majority of the Ksingmul in Laos. It was explained that in previous times all Ksingmul were Ya, but the group that fled to the area of the Ma river then became known as Nget. Elders also refer to the Ya people as *kyaa*, which is probably the original name that was reworked into the *ksiiŋ muul yáa* term that is now used, a form that may reflect the current official style of subclassifying groups with a general noun and modifier. The fieldwork that informs this article was carried out among Nget villages in the Harma (*harmaa*) area. In accounts of their migration from Vietnam, elders mention *luəŋ kéew* ‘the Vietnam side’ and *luəŋ harmaa* ‘the Lao side’ as the basic geographical orientation of the group. Interestingly, the word *laaw* does not come into their historical narrative until we reach the period of revolutionary struggle in the 1940 and 1950s. Differences in speech are described as being minor pronunciation points and some lexical variation, but they are mutually intelligible.

Another distinction made is between *ksiiŋ muul kɔh* and *ksiiŋ muul laay*. This axis groups people into those communities living in the older forest (*kɔh*) and those living in areas that are dominated by regenerated fallow forest (*laay*). The implications of this landscape-based criteria is one of *ksiiŋ muul laay* proximity to lowland society, where the *ksiiŋ muul kɔh* live in more remote areas. Comparing the speech of these two groups, *ksiiŋ muul laay* is undergoing phonological changes that may be the result of more intense contact with Tai languages. Ksingmul is a typical Austroasiatic sesquisyllabic language, where the main syllable is preceded by a minor syllable.¹

Another phonological change is final /r/ > /l/, as seen in ‘rib’, above. When such phonological changes occur in tandem, it can intensify the impression of differentiation; for example, ‘ear’ is *hantoor* in *kɔh*, but *khtool* in *laay*. It should be noted that similar changes are underway in *kɔh* as well, but they are still in a transitional stage. In the Ya variety recorded in the Soviet “linguistic expedition” in Vietnam in the 1970s, this final /r/ > /l/ change had already been completed (Материалы советско-вьетнамской лингвистической экспедиции 1979 года 1990). The implication of these changes is that the structure of Ksingmul words is being simplified to resemble that of Lao and

¹ In the *laay*-type speech, minor syllables are reduced; for example, taking common terms for body parts, we find reductions such as *kaldah* ‘palm of the hand’ > *kdah*, *hanhriəŋ* ‘tooth’ > *hliəŋ*, and *canniaŋ* ‘rib’ > *cniəl*.

Vietnamese. However, when discussing the distinction with village elders, they stress that the distinction between *kɔh* and *laay* is a fluid one, because small groups of people change their residence. The terms should not be taken as having any ethnic connotation or fixed sociopolitical nuance. Rather, the use of these terms shows a Ksingmul notion of type of forest and implications for contact with others, backed up by the reality of linguistic change of which people are aware.

The general greater distance from the lowlands does not mean, however, that the *ksiiy muul kɔh* are isolated from contact with Tai-speaking people. Indeed, the culture and language of the *ksiiy muul kɔh* have been heavily influenced by Tai. Evans (1999) has proposed a process of Tai-ization of the Ksingmul through contact with the Tai Dam, where material culture is virtually indistinguishable from that of their Tai Dam neighbors. His conclusion is that the Ksingmul are on a course of inevitable cultural merger with the Tai Dam, although the persistence of the Ksingmul language may be the only form of resistance to the more sophisticated Tai culture. Central to Evans' argument is a Tai Dam discourse of Ksingmul laziness, something that he describes from the Tai Dam point of view but does not elaborate from the Ksingmul perspective. The primarily economic framework utilized by Evans hid the more complex sociohistorical and cultural dynamics that underpin Ksingmul representations of their position within the complex ethnic mosaics of the mountains. As this article asserts, passing over language as simply one factor that might slow the pace of assimilation, the language itself offers myriad insights into the Ksingmul view on their relationship with the Tai.

The Ksingmul believe that they were the original lords of Muang Muak Muang Mooy in Vietnam, “living together” with the Thai Ay, who had their own political territory in Muang Ay. Their name for the area they controlled is Muang Phu Puak, and they are clear that the Tai with whom they are historically most familiar are the Thai Ay, not the more numerous and well-known Tai Dam, Tai Daeng or Tai Vat.² Eventually, there was conflict and the Thai Ay drove the Ksingmul out. The group now living in Laos fled to the top of the Nget stream and then crossed the border into what would become Lao territory. Their claim to control of a *muang* offers another view on the question of the social dynamics of this “Tai” form of sociopolitical organization.

The Ksingmul were part of the political structures of the Tai *muang* of the Sip Song Chu Thai (Condominas 1990). As we currently understand it, the social hierarchy of the Tai system consisted of a basic distinction between Tai and non-Tai, where the latter were Austroasiatic-speaking peoples who were incorporated at the bottom of society. The *saa* category of non-Tai (*sa*’ in Condominas’ notation, *saa* is cognate with the Lao *kha* and often translated simplistically as “slave,” although the power relationships were something more accurately described as “vassal” or “bonded subject”) included both culturally Austroasiatic groups, as well as those who had assimilated to Tai culture. There was also a sector of Tai people, known as *kuong ñòk*, who had fallen into a bonded relationship to those higher up in the hierarchy. The Austroasiatic groups such

² It is not always easy to identify which Tai language is the source of borrowings. This is an important question to ask, but for the purposes of this article, I use Tai to refer to those Southwestern Tai languages spoken in the area, unless it is possible and necessary to differentiate. For the Ksingmul, the primary language of contact is Thay Ay. For more on the importance of this issue, see Tappe and Badenoch 2021.

as the Ksingmul, occupying the lowest rung of the hierarchy, were known as *pua' pai* /puə? paay/. This category is a socioeconomic one, located within a larger notion of ethnicity as an opposition between Tai and non-Tai. *Pua' pai* people were excluded from collective decision-making of the *muang*, provided manpower to the Tai rulers, and had their ethnogenesis in the gourd myth. The term is cognate with the proto-Tai word **buak*, which is a pluralizing particle (contemporary Lao *phuak*, “group”), which may have had pejorative connotations in history. It seems that this word has a history of becoming an ethnonym in the area of Chinese adjacent to the Vietnam border (Chamberlain 2016). Thus the name *puak* /puək ~ puə?/ has a complicated history of being a general social category, as well as a racial grouping and specific ethnic reference.

The Ksingmul continued to live within the sociopolitical framework of the Tai *muang*, where they adopted (and adapted) the patronymics of Tai lineages: *caw lɔɔ*, *caw wii*, *caw ?mɔɔŋ* and *caw yaa*. These patronymics in fact mix Tai *siij* ‘lineages’ (*lɔɔ* and *wii*), Austroasiatic taboo groups (?*mɔɔŋ* is a type of civet, so this group avoids eating that animal) and something that seems to be the remnant of an older ethnonym (*yaa* from *kyaa*, where *k-* may be a prefix indicating ‘group of people’). A full-blown analysis of the Ksingmul system is beyond the scope of this article, but it should be stressed that this is an example of a non-Tai group (*saa*) from the bottom of the hierarchy (*puak*) adopting the patronymics of the Tai group at the top. At times the Ksingmul performed the role of legitimizing Tai occupation of the land by conducting buffalo sacrifice as mediators between the Tai and the local spirits (Petit 2020), and it is possible that the Tai patronymics were given in exchange for this type of service (Sprenger 2010).

When the pressure to pay head tax and corvee labor to the French became too onerous in the late 1800s, one group of Ksingmul dispersed across the upper Nget valley area and hid themselves in the forest. The leaders had made a decision to not live in villages, as a matter of survival. They describe this as *blat karhraj* ‘scatter into the forest’, and the type of forest that could hide them from the French was the *kɔh* forest introduced above. This was crucial for the reorientation of the discourse about Ksingmul in the upland landscape. It is at this time that the Ksingmul say they temporarily “became” *saa tɔɔŋ liəŋ*, “Slaves of the Yellow Leaves”. This term is well known in Southeast Asian ethnography as Phi Tong Luang (*phii tɔɔŋ liəŋ*, “Spirits of the Yellow Leaves”), an exonym of the Mlabri of the Thai-Laos border area, one of the last hunter-gatherer groups in this part of the mainland Southeast Asian mountains. However, *khaa/saa tɔɔŋ liəŋ* is in fact the more common term, found as a reference to the hunter-gatherer groups of the Central Laos-Vietnam border. The term appears in a 1930s census cited by Grossin listing Kha Tong Luang hunter-gatherers in the Nam Gnouang-Khamkeut area. The transformation of *khaa/saa* > *phii* may be a development that happened within the Mlabri-Tai encounter (also possibly including the Khmu (Proschan 2001)) on the Thailand-Laos border (Jim Chamberlain pers. comm.). Returning to the Ksingmul myth, the distinction between *saa* and *phii* is important because it is the Nya Wai that is the *phii* (*skil*), not the person (*ksiing*) living in the forest.

According to the Ksingmul explanations, at this time small groups of people moved their simple forest lean-tos whenever the tubers were exhausted. Thus the only evidence they left of their presence was the banana leaves from the lean-tos that had turned

yellow. Village elders describe this period of their history as *kuyh tuup ʔlaa* ‘living in banana leaf huts,’ endorsing the notion of Yellow Leaves. According to the narrative, they abandoned agriculture for hunting and gathering, led mostly by the availability of tubers, only cooking at night to avoid giving their location away. It is interesting to note that the term for the ‘house’ of the *tɔɔŋ liəŋ* lifestyle is not a single lexeme, and includes the Tai borrowing *tuup* ‘thatched hut’. The “normal” word for house in Ksingmul is *jiəŋ*, with cognates in several other languages in the area that mean house (in a village). This linguistic evidence—the lack of a specific word for temporary forest huts as opposed to more permanent houses—supports the idea that the *tɔɔŋ liəŋ* lifestyle was something that they adopted from a more sedentary livelihood. This is also when the old *puak* term was re-interpreted to mean ‘termite’, as they now lived like *puak doŋ* (Tai: ‘forest termites’), hidden from view and consuming the trees from the inside, little by little.



Figure 1. Monument to the 25 Heroes, signifying the importance of the Ksingmul area to the early days of the Revolution, and the transformation of Ksingmul from Puak to Lao May.

The Ksingmul thus speak of their social mobility up and down as a function of their own agency within the larger political hierarchy. The Lao Communist revolution would provide an interesting twist in this narrative of local politico-ethnic structures in the multiethnic landscapes of this area. (Tappe forthcoming). In the early days of the Communist/nationalist insurgency against the French, which was based in Houaphan province, the revolutionary leader Kaysone Phomvihane fled to the area inhabited by the Ksingmul in the mountains of Xiengkho district, adjacent to the Vietnam border (Figure 1). According to the local memory, the Ksingmul people then hid him in the forest to avoid capture by the French between 1954-1960. The area was later given the revolutionary name Khet Lao Hung (“Zone of Law Dawn”); the Ksingmul had

made Kaysone a *puak doy* in order to save the revolutionary movement, for which the Ksingmul were made Lao May “new Lao” (Lao *laaw may*, or *laaw mæ̃* in Ksingmul³ and the local Tai language), moving them up in the hierarchy of ethnopolitics in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic. Because of this episode, when speaking in “official register” (Badenoch 2017), the Ksingmul are still sometimes referred to as Lao Mai. While they appreciate the sentiment, they are quick to note that they are actually part of the original people (*khon phrécem* ‘old people’) in the local Tai world.

From this position within the changing Tai/Lao political systems, it is not surprising that bilingualism has been a central part of their cultural life. From the view of the periphery, multilingualism is a key element of the *muang* (Badenoch and Tomita 2013) as a social ontology (Baumann 2020). Although we speak of the Ksingmul within the local Tai political structures, which we know best from the Tai Dam perspective, the Ksingmul have typically spoken Thai Ay, which is different from Tai Dam and Tai Vat. There are many borrowings from Tai languages in Ksingmul. This influence is present in the lexicon of daily life, as well as ritual practice, which has been deeply influenced through their interactions. The Ksingmul of the Harma area have, however, not spoken Khmu, and consider themselves to be socially distant from that group of Austroasiatic people who are typically more numerous in the uplands of this area. That said, the Ksingmul do know the Khmu, calling them *kláw*, a curious and historically important ethnonym that is shared in different forms by various people of the region (Chamberlain 2019).

Despite influence from surrounding Tai languages the Ksingmul language maintains its social integrity as the first and primary language of life in Ksingmul villages. This suggests that their relationship with the Tai should be characterized as one of multifaceted cultural exchange and social intimacy. As Evans suggests, intermarriage between Ksingmul and Tai is not common, but Tai people almost never learn to speak Ksingmul. Another factor providing insight on the social world of the Ksingmul is their relationship with the Hmong in the Harma area. When the Ksingmul first arrived in the area, there were already Hmong present, living in small villages. The local leaders, those who interfaced with the surrounding Tai *muang* held the titles *ciəŋ* and *ʔnaa*, but were mostly Hmong and paid taxes to the French in opium. Both groups planted upland rice and maize, but the Hmong produced opium and the Ksingmul gathered forest products to trade. The Ksingmul tell that they have never worked for the Hmong, as has been reported in other places, and explain further that the Hmong were quick to learn Ksingmul language. When government policies of sedentarization were implemented, Ksingmul groups started to form villages, which brought them together administratively with the Hmong. As the Hmong population grew, mixed Hmong-Ksingmul villages appeared, and Hmong is now spoken together with Ksingmul and Lao (or Tai Dam) in daily life. In the nine villages located in the upper areas of the valley, four are *kɔɔl ksiij muul néc-néc* (“only Ksingmul villages”) and five are mixed Hmong-Ksingmul.

³ This word is a useful historical diagnostic. The Ksingmul form with the /əə/ vowel does not reflect the Tai Dam word, which has /ai/. In discussions about local history, Ksingmul of the *harmaa* area stress the importance of this fact.

Because this area is directly adjacent to the Vietnam border, the Vietnamese language is commonly used as well, together with the Vietnamese currency.

This short look at local historical narratives shines light on the dynamism with which the Ksingmul have interacted with their neighbors within the socioecological context of upland forests. The multiple meanings of the forest that are encoded in Ksingmul memory and imagination reflect notions about their position within the local political structures that have been in flux, featuring periods of more and less strong social agency (Figure 2). The overarching political structures, together with the local landscape of daily life, form a framework of morality through which they imagine their history as a part of larger regional cosmology.



Figure 2. In the Ksingmul village at the top of the Harma watershed. Across the valley to the left are more Ksingmul villages, Hmong villages and then the Vietnamese border.

Bilingualism, relics of cultural contact and degrees of otherness

The Ksingmul, occupying the lowest status within the Tai *muang*, have used Tai languages as a point of contact within the local multiethnic landscape. Influence of Tai languages on Ksingmul are significant, historically and presently, yet the Ksingmul language is itself the most resilient and salient emblem of Ksingmul cultural identity. As a matter of course, the Ksingmul have adopted terminology from Tai languages as they made technological, socioeconomic, political and ritual accommodations to local cultural dynamism in their larger world. One indication of a major social shift within the social structure of Ksingmul is a reorientation to a more rigid patriarchal social system, under the influence of the Tai Dam (Figure 3), in which lineage names (*siij*) were adapted, together with a large number of kinship terms. As already mentioned, the

social relationship that is core to this narrative *síiw* is a borrowing from Tai. Other areal linguistic adaptations (Vittrant and Watkins 2019) found in Ksingmul include replacing native numerals above three, borrowing of discourse markers and simplification of canonical syllable structure. For example, the borrowing of Tai discourse markers is evident in the current text; forms found in the text of this story, such as *lee*, *laa*, *laa meen*, *thiiwaa*, *hay la?* and *hay kwaa* are borrowed from Tai, as well as mixed Ksingmul-Tai constructions such as *miə neew kəh* ‘after that’ (Tai *miə* ‘when’, Tai *neew* ‘way’ and Ksingmul *kəh* ‘that’). Elaborate expressions are often semantically redundant, as they pair up equivalent Ksingmul and Tai forms to enhance the poetic effect; for example, describing a flood *hójt nóə hójt kdij* ‘water-big-water-big’, where *nóə* is a Tai borrowing, and now the more commonly used word, and *kdij* is a native word that is still used but in more marked expressive, performative situations. Such multilingual devices are used frequently in this type of narrative to establish a certain rhetorical feel, locating the narrative firmly in the shared poetic ecosystem of oral culture.

A layer of old Tai influence in the Ksingmul lexicon points to a long history of contact with languages of the political elite. Two characteristics stand out here. First, many Tai borrowings in Ksingmul preserve an old /r/ sound that remains today only in Thai (Siamese). The fossilization of old Tai forms in Khmu was discussed by Downer (1992), and Ksingmul provides further evidence of contact between speakers of Tai and Austroasiatic languages before some of the key sound changes swept through Tai. Ksingmul preserves old Tai /r/ in words such as *hráp* ‘to receive’ Lao *hap* Thai *rap*, *hrúə* ‘fence’ Lao *huə* Thai *ruə* and *hrójt* ‘to arrive’ Lao *hójt* Thai *rójt*. Modern Lao words with initial h- are borrowed as /h/, yet these old Tai /r/ forms have not shifted to converge with the modern languages that Ksingmul speakers hear on a daily basis. The preservation of this old pronunciation remains as a marker of an older relationship, an older voice of the Other in the Ksingmul language.⁴ In Khmu, which also preserves this sound, the /r/ is sometimes considered by local people to be a symbol of Khmu as “ancient” in the Lao cultural area (Badenoch 2018).

Another interesting feature that remains to be explained in terms of the history of the language is the existence of a two-way tone contrast on many word pairs in Ksingmul – a mid- to low-pitch tone that is more prominent, and a high-rising-pitch tone that is more marked. Contrasting pairs include: *hrep* ‘intestine’ and *hrép* ‘bamboo grub’, *tal* ‘downstream’ and *tál* ‘to touch, to disturb’, *kaw* ‘raw’ and *káw* ‘unpounded rice’ and *ruu* ‘to burn’ and *riúu* ‘to hurry’. Some borrowed Tai words have a high rising pitch, providing lexical contrast with a native word⁵ – for example, *kii* ‘moon’ and *kíi* ‘loom’ (T), *bɔɔ* ‘cow’, *bɔɔ* ‘well (water)’ (T) and *kaa* ‘fish’ and *káa* ‘to dare to do’ (T). Many other common Tai borrowings⁶ have a high rising tone in Ksingmul, such as *nɔɔk*

⁴ A few other residuals from old Tai, preserving a medial /l/ include *bliən* ‘moon’ (Lao *diən*), *mlít* ‘seed’ (Lao *met*), *mléey* ‘insect’ (Lao *meen*) and *mlɔɔ* ‘to divine’ (Lao *mɔɔ*).

⁵ Interestingly, there is a pitch contrast between *pua* ‘to heal, to treat’ and *púə* ‘king’, the latter being a borrowing from Tai Dam and the former a common Tai word. This is puzzling because both have the same tone in Tai languages.

⁶ The letter-number combination provided indicates the tone class of the word in the system shared by Tai languages. The phonetic realization of each tone class varies by language. They are included to demonstrate



Figure 3. Ksengmul women wear a turban (loop khat ?luu) that shows influence from the Tai Dam.

‘outside’ (ນູ້ອົກ DL4), *náaŋ* ‘daughter-in-law’ (ນາງ A4), *bét* ‘fishing hook’ (ບັດ DS3), *míi* ‘jackfruit’ (ມື້ C4), *síəŋ* ‘things, belongings’ (ຂໍ້ຮື່ງ B4) and *sóɔ* ‘to ask for, to beg’ (ຂໍ້ອັກ A1). The pitch cannot be explained by the tone of the source word in Lao or Tai Dam.

In other words, it seems feasible that because old features of Tai borrowings survive in Ksingmul, speakers may be aware of another layer of difference with the contemporary Tai languages that surround them; while Ksingmul speakers will not be aware of the historical phonology of borrowed words, they will be aware of these sounds as being markers of identity within their multilingual society. In other words, the persistence of these historically conservative forms in the face of ongoing and increasingly intensive contact with modern Tai languages serves to not only bolster the Ksingmul imagination of their own internal history, but at the same time points to a time of cultural intimacy in the local history of interethnic relations. While the linguistic details are beyond the scope of this article, the assertion here is that Tai linguistic influence can be seen as both likeness and differentiation, and therefore must be considered in full detail when arguments about Tai-ization are being formulated. In the historical interaction between the Brou (kha) and Phou Tay (tai) of Central Thai (Chamberlain 2012), the structural embedding of Tai language in the ritual language of the Brou of Vietnam (Vargyas 1994), an areas where Phou Tay is not spoken regularly, is seen not as a hegemonic imposition, but rather an appropriation of sacred power within a complementary, symbiotic relationship. The Ksingmul-Tai relationship is deeply rooted within the more rigid social Tai political hierarchy but suggests that the substance of cultural interactions may have been more fluid than is normally suggested by structural analysis that looks from the Tai perspective. Indeed, the old and regional layers of Tai borrowing in the Ksingmul lexicon – which most certainly were a part of ritual exchange as well as political imbalance – signal a different history from the narratives of the contemporary Lao nation state, as well, where Ksingmul are classified into a group of fifty officially recognized ethnolinguistic groups that have been given equal status in the political discourse of a multiethnic Laos, regardless of local and regional histories. These local identifications span a temporal and spatial landscape in which their own iterations of cultural similarity still retain specific markers of difference. In contrast to this mode of cultural expression, the *bar-* prefix starkly contrasts a gap in that cultural intimacy and point to an incompatibility produced through certain modes of cultural interaction.

“Person and Nya Wai become friends”: Performing self and other in Ksingmul oral literature

The story analyzed in this article is part of a Ksingmul genre of oral literature called *nʔiic*, myths that usually have a moral message illustrated through relationships – concerning appropriate ways of acting, modes of exchange, explanations of power imbalances and implications of how relationships influence structures of social agency

that the high pitch in the Ksingmul form does not map to patterns within the original Tai system of tones. This problem needs to be investigated more deeply.

– between humans and others in their forest landscapes. “Others” can include people *ksiiy*, animals *hrəay*, spirits *skil* and celestial beings such as gods *théen* and Naga/ngeuak *bruəŋ*. Another type of traditional story is the *myuəŋ*, which tell tales of supposedly real people and places *mia yuəŋ* “in times before”. The term *nʔiic* is a reduced form of *nee* ‘time’ and *ʔiic* ‘before’, which makes it lexically equivalent to *mʔyuəŋ*. However, the moral weight of the *nʔiic* came to differentiate the genre, as it is generally held that there is no direct knowledge of the people and events in these myths. In terms of performance, the two are indistinguishable, but the content holds a different position in the local tradition of knowledge transmission. In any case, the distinction between the two should not be overstated, but the possibility of two differing modes of oral performance is interesting in the context of the story presented here.

The proposition of a moral order of the forest is used here to provide a framework for analyzing the linguistic ideologies that are intertwined in the marking of intimacy and abnormal speech developed below. First, I will provide a synopsis of the story that is included in its full transcribed, parsed and translated form in the appendix. This story was narrated to me as one of three stories by Somsi – teacher, village elder, craftsman and ritual performer who has been my primary instructor in the Ksingmul language in the village – told to me during my early study of the language. He and two other villagers traveled from Xiengkho district in Houaphan province to Vientiane to work with me and Khamsone Thongmixay, at that time professor and Head of the Department of Vietnamese Language at the National University of Laos. Khamsone is also a native speaker of Ksingmul who studied in Vietnam and Japan, specializing in analysis of Lao literature, as well as Vietnamese-Lao translation and lexicography. Later, I spent time with them in their village and traveling throughout the upper Baw catchment recording *nʔiic* and *myuəŋ* and surveying language use practices. During this fieldwork, a small team of researchers from the National University of Laos gathered data and had discussions about oral literature among the Ksingmul with storytellers in three villages. Technical work on this oral text – transcription, translation and interpretation – was done together with Khamsone.

In this story, a man traps wild chicken in the forest, but notices that someone, or something, is stealing them from the traps. When he hides to see the identity of the thief, he sees that it is a *naa wáay*, a dangerous and evil spirit that eats people. He goes home and plans to kill the Nya Wai, but the next day when Person confronts him, Nya Wai begs for mercy. Nya Wai promises to change his ways, and offers to “make friends” with the person, thereby entering into a special relationship of social equality. Person agrees to this, as a way to distract the Nya Wai and kill him in revenge. He invites Nya Wai to his house, and hatches his plan to pretend that he has cut off his testicles to offer them to his “friend” Nya Wai. This will require Nya Wai to reciprocate. Person cuts off the testicles of a pig and asks his wife to help offer them to Nya Wai in a way that looks like he has cut off his own testicles. Nya Wai comes to his house, and Person pretends to cut off his testicles and serves them to Nya Wai, who eats them greedily. Nya Wai responds to Person’s pain with encouragement to endure the pain for the sake of their relationship. After eating, Nya Wai gets up to leave and invites the person to his house in three days, but warns him that he will not have any delicious food to offer him. Person

tells his friend not to worry, but then suggests as he leaves that Nya Wai can serve his own testicles if necessary. Arriving home, Nya Wai is excited, but worried about putting on a proper reception for his friend. Nya Wai's wife reminds him that his friend cut off his own testicles, and so he should do the same. Nya Wai is pleased with this plan. When Person arrives, Nya Wai apologizes for not having good food and proceeds to cut off his testicles. When he complains about the pain, Person encourages him, reminding Nya Wai of his own "sacrifice". After the testicles are cut off, Person offers to treat Nya Wai's wounds to relieve the pain, but actually applies a mixture of pepper and chili, increasing the suffering of Nya Wai. Soon, Nya Wai dies his painful and humiliating death, and Person hurries off to his home.

In the following sections, I discuss the intertwined metapragmatic discourses of intimacy and incompatibility that is entangled through the use of a marked set of pronouns and a prefix indicating abnormal speech. The intersection of these two registers of speech is indicative of a social history in which similarity and differentiation coexist in a multilingual moral landscape.⁷

Intimacy in the Ksingmul pronoun system

In the Ksingmul personal pronoun system, information about intimacy is encoded in the selection of terms available to a speaker in the first and second person singular. Previously I described the non-intimate form as "respectful", but it seems more appropriate to focus on the markedness of the intimate *?aa-baa* forms, which leaves the *?ap-mih* forms as the 'socially unmarked' set. Dual pronouns can be derived through the use of *biər* 'two' and the intimate form.

	singular		plural	
	unmarked	intimate	unmarked	intimate
1	?ap	?aa	?ee [inclusive] yii [exclusive]	dáa
2	mih	baa	bee	
3	?in		nee	

Ksingmul social interactions are structured in terms of age, with basic reference for interactions being the kinship system and the terms used to address those above and below Self in the hierarchy of relationships.

The oppositional pronominal pairings *?ap-mih* 'I-you' in the non-intimate and *?aa-*

⁷ See "Tales of the Clever Man - Plàan Thóoy" in Lindell et al. (1998) for a tale of trickery, testicles and a tiger in the Khmu tradition. Many thanks to Rosalie Stolz for bringing this to my attention and suggesting that this may be part of a larger cultural motif in the region.

baa, in the intimate, play an important role in indexing the relationship and expected behaviors of the characters. In the story presented here, Person and Nya Wai strike an agreement to *biī siīw* ‘become friends’; the conclusion of this agreement is shown in the shift from *?ayn-mih* to *?aa-baa*. The primary social significance of this relationship is that it is normally restricted to people who are of the same age. The closer the birthdates to each other, the stronger the perception of the bond. This relationship is part of a regional phenomenon, known in Tai culture as *siaw* (the source of the Ksingmul word *siīw*), in which two people can interact with each other outside of the extended hierarchical structure of kinship. This is critical to the reading of the story, because a kinship relationship would have entailed a clear, unbalanced relationship. People commonly refer to each other with the kinship terms that reflect the age relations of the interlocutors. Thus Ksingmul speakers of the same age will use *?aa-baa* instead of *?ayn-mih* once they have established that they are eligible. In order to use the intimate form, they must also be of the same sex. Another situation in which *?aa-baa* can be used is between parents of an engaged or married couple. In the negotiation of bride-price and other wedding arrangements, the fathers of the couple asking to be engaged used *?aa-baa* forms in order to appeal to their emotional support and social commitment to supporting the new family as parents. The implications of the use of the *?aa-baa* pairing in Ksingmul is more apparent when considered within the context of the Person-Nya Wai relationship here.

In the story, it is Nya Wai that proposes that the two *biī siīw* ‘become friends’ in response to the tense start that their relationship has taken. Nya Wai proposes assuming the special *siīw* relationship as a part of a solution to the fact that he has been caught stealing from Person’s traps in the forest. In his anger, Person pledges to kill Nya Wai for disturbing his trapping, but the narrator’s choice of words points to the moral dilemma that lies at the center of this story. Begging for his life, he quickly promises to change his ways, but Person is not convinced so asks for a larger commitment. Nya Wai knew that Person was ready to kill him, but if he could get Person to agree to become his *siīw*, they would be bound by the special non-kin relationship of sharing and equality. Person agrees to this, but only because it will help his plan to kill Nya Wai. After they decide to *biī siīw* ‘to.do-friend’, Person’s plan to “kill” Nya Wai *daa p-siān* ‘intend.to -to.kill’, becomes a plan to find a way to “make Nya Wai die” using some special secret means.

In the first, *p-siān* makes use of *p-* causative prefix with *siān* ‘to die’ to form the unmarked word “to kill”, while in the second he is searching for a way to *mah naa wāay ?ii siān* ‘to make this Nya Wai die’ (using the more indirect *mah siān* ‘to cause to die’) through some *tuum sraw* ‘deep road,’ or secret way. Having armed himself for a tough fight with a newly sharpened sword (and skewers), now that he is bound by the *siīw* relationship, he cannot kill Nya Wai outright and must think of another way to exact revenge. The two types of causative here reflect this moral dilemma, as Khamson explained the *p-* form is more direct and intentional, while the *mah* form is trying make the planned death more ambiguous.

In this way the switch from *?ayn-mih* to *?aa-baa* becomes a constraint on Person’s desire for revenge. Even as he curses Nya Wai upon finding out that it was he who had been stealing the chicken, Person uses the unmarked second person *mih* in the

bilingual construction *sii mee mih ?ii* ‘You bastard!’, the very loose translation of a partial calque from the Lao, literally “fuck-mother-you-this”. Hence, the opposition is not of politeness or respect, but rather of a special marked intimacy. Moreover, when speaking with his wife, Person uses the unmarked *?ayn-mih* pair, reinforcing the notion of a special intimacy inscribed narrowly in the social relationship.

The word *siiw* can also mean ‘to make a pledge to a spirit’ as part of a request. The ritual of making this pledge is *bii mansiiw*. The use of the nominalizing prefix *man-* indicates that this is not simply a matter of making friends, but rather a binding pact that is confirmed through the ritual exchange. Normally, a person would request the assistance or mercy of a *skil* through this ritual, but in this case it is the *skil* that is begging for his life with the proposal that they *bii siiw*. The narrator uses the words in the expected way, in that that one party is proposing that they become special friends, yet the fact that a *skil* is doing the requesting is another foreshadowing of the way the linguistic performance will illustrate this abnormality. Bridging the divide from the human to *skil* world is thus a serious matter that requires ritualized formalization.

Abnormal speech types and morality in the non-human world

From the outset, Person is concerned about the identity of the troublesome being that appears in the forest walking in a strange way, who has been stealing from his traps:

?in	la?	sojsay	ksiij	boo	liiwa	neew	moh
3SG	then	to.doubt	person	Q	or	way	which
...he wondered “was it a person, or what was it?”							

In this way, the fundamental conflict of the story is set up in terms of an opposition between *ksiij* ‘person’ and *skil*, which is equivalent to the Lao term *phii* and can be translated variously as ‘spirit, ghost, demon’. In this story, the antagonist is *skil jaa wáay*, a local spirit known also to the local Tai people. In their first encounter, the *skil* is introduced as approaching Person in an abnormal way, walking unstably with a walking stick, depicted with the expressive of movement *caaj-cu? caaj-ci?*. Use of expressives – marked words that depict vivid sensory perception (Dingemanse 2014) – appeal to the metapragmatic use of grammar to perform aesthetics, while also denoting certain idealized social types (Choksi 2019) and associated moral stereotypes (Badenoch et al 2019). The shape of expressive words in Ksingmul can be iconic of a “type” of motion, appearance or quality, enhanced through parallelism in reduplication; in this case the form is ABAC. The walking is depicted as awkward through the long vowel/nasal contrast (A and C) with the short vowel/glottal stop (B and C), evoking jerking, jolting stride mixed with a smoother, longer stride. In the morphology of Ksingmul expressives, alternation of the vowel across B and C is also iconic of spatial dispersal, that is an action occurring in more than one place or occupying a larger space than “normal”.⁸ In

⁸ See Badenoch (2021) on the indexical and iconic implications of vowel manipulation in Bit, a related Austroasiatic language spoken in northern Laos.

their next encounter, Nya Wai's walking is depicted with the expressive *jaan-juuŋ jaan-juuŋ*; the movement of this type of walking is less of a jerking motion, and more of a back-and-forth swaying motion, with a heavier stride evoked through the use of voiced /j/. With Nya Wai's entrance, Somsi stood up to enhance the description and depiction with embodiment of the walking, in a multimodal expressive performance that is typical of these words. Here, we decode the expressive depiction as indexical of Nya Wai's abnormality, as part of the larger abnormality-immorality trope performed through the narrator's repertoire of poetic devices.

Despite the difference and incompatibility of the *ksiiŋ-skil* opposition (Figure 4) that has been evoked here by using expressives of motion, Person and Nya Wai establish their *siiw* relationship and shift to the marked intimate *?aa-baa* pronouns. From Nya Wai's point of view, he has avoided being killed by Person, while Person has created a relationship in which Nya Wai will be off his guard. The next rhetorical development is when Nya Wai, behaving according to the human code of the *siiw* relationship, sees that Person has apparently endured the great pain of cutting off his own testicles and sees the blood on the knife. Seeing the testicles on the plate,

Figure 4. Ritual offering to the household spirits (*skil jiəŋ*) in a Ksingmul house, maintaining reciprocal relations between *skil* and *ksiiŋ* within the domestic sphere.

Nya Wai is consumed with the desire to eat human flesh, and begins to revert to his *skil* identity. When Person taunts him to deny that he has really gone through this ordeal for his *siiw* because he had no food to offer him, Nya Wai responds

ʔoo	<i>bar-maat</i>	<i>bar-dee,</i>	baa	kɔ?	<i>bar-coo</i>	ʔɔɔ
Oh	ABN-really	ABN-REFL	2SG	NEG	ABN-to.hurt	way

“Oh, it is really true! Doesn’t it hurt?”

Nya Wai's reversion to *skil* is marked by the *bar-* prefix. This morphological marking indicates an abnormal speech type that is indexical of the non-human personality of Nya Wai, which until that point had been suppressed by the *siiw*-pronouns. From this point on, Nya Wai is speaking like a *skil* because he is acting like a *skil*. The *bar-* prefix can be used on any class of Ksingmul word. In the first occurrence of its use, it is applied to the adverb *maat* ‘really, truly’, the reflexive particle *dee* and the verb *coo* ‘to hurt’.



Nya Wai's use of *bar-* is related to his emotional state; when he is excited and more *skil*-like, he uses it with high frequency. The first occurrence of *bar-* is after Person shows Nya Wai the blood to assure him that he had cut off his testicles. Person begins to use *bar-* from that point as well, in response to Nya Wai's language use. As Person's scheme progresses, Nya Wai reverts to his true identity, which Person mimics through the adaptation of *bar-*.

After eating Person's (pig) testicles, Nya Wai returns home to tell his wife about the great sacrifice Person made for him, and has a discussion with his wife about what to do when Person comes for a visit and they do not have any food to offer him.

[Nya Wai]

bar-mee tanmee ?aaa *bar-daa* bii neew moh
old woman wife oh ABN-IRR to.do way which

“Wife, what am I going to do?

siiw ?oɔm yaam *bar-kɔ?* kuyh hmoh *bar-caa* dee naa
friend to.come to.vist ABN-NEG to.have what ABN-to.eat EMPH

My friend is coming to visit but we don't have anything to eat.”

[Wife of Nya Wai]

bar-siiw ?in *bar-keet* *bar-klaa* ?in ?oo
ABN-friend 3SG ABN-to.cut ABN-testicle 3SG EMPH

“Your friend cut off his own balls,

mih *bar-keet* *bar-klaa* mih kəh kwáa
2SG ABN-to.cut ABN-testicles 2SG that EMPH

so you should cut off your balls, too!”

[Nya Wai]

bar-neew *bar-kəh* *bar-maat*
ABN-way ABN-that ABN-really

“That's what I'll do!”

Nya Wai is in his own environment at home now, and the speech of his wife is also marked as *skil* with *bar-*. However, they use *pap-mih* in their conversation. He is upset because he doesn't know how to make the reciprocal offering required for his *siiw*, while his wife argues that the solution is simple – he must return the favor and endure the pain. The above shows the syntactical versatility of *bar-*, attaching to the negative particle *kɔ?*, as well as the key verbs and nouns in the exchange. At the end of the story, *bar-* is even prefixed to the onomatopoetic expressions of pain as Nya Wai dies; *bar-?* ‘whimpering from pain’, *bar-?ooy* *bar-?oooooooy* ‘moaning and groaning in agony’.

That the phenomenon of speaking like a *skil* is indexical of a specific frame of speech-behavior-morality mapping is made clear when Person's speech gets marked with *bar-*, as he responds to Nya Wai's return to *skil*-like behavior. When Person sees

that Nya Wai is falling for his trick with the pig's testicles, he responds to Nya Wai's question about whether or not the cutting hurt, Person responds:

bar-coo maat, ?aa ?ot hay nee
 ABN-to.hurt really 1SG to.endure EMPH EMPH
“Yes, it really hurts, but I will endure the pain!”

He prefixes *bar-* to *coo* 'to hurt', indicating that he has started to feel his plan of causing Nya Wai's death will come to fruition. Given the horrible death that he has planned for Nya Wai, the narrator marks Person's words with the abnormal speech of *skil* that is indexical of immoral ways of behaving – not only is he planning a cruel and painful revenge, he is betraying the *siiw* pact that they have been performing through the *?aa-baa* pronoun usage. After Nya Wai is tricked into cutting his testicles off and is suffering – *bar-coo bar-hréy naa* 'it hurts so badly' – Person ratchets up the cruelty by telling him that he will help treat the wound:

?oooy ?aa daa *bar-p-suək* baa *bar-siiw*
 Ohhh 1SG IRR ABN-CAUS-medicine 2SG ABN-friend
“Oooh, I'll treat your wound, my friend!”

and

?aa daa p-suək *bar-baa* ?ii
 1SG IRR CAUS-medicine ABN-2SG this
“I'm going to treat you now.”

Person uses *bar-* with *p-suək* 'to treat', *siiw* 'friend' and *baa* 'you'. In contrast to Nya Wai's usage, which tends to focus on the unbearable act of cutting off one's testicles and then eating them, *bar-* used by Person here foregrounds the moral transgression he is making through use of words that would otherwise be indexical of the morality involved in their *siiw* relationship. In other words, the abnormality is performed on what should be the non-marked part of the interaction, thereby intensifying the frame of speech-behavior that is enregistered in the use of the *bar-* prefix.

The story ends with Person fleeing the scene, running home even as the sound of Nya Wai's final moments reach his ears. The final moaning of Nya Wai,

thriiŋ *bar-?əəy*
 to.moan.in.pain ABN-EXP:moaning
the sound of Nya Wai's last moans

leaves the listener with a final instance of *skil* abnormal speech. Nya Wai dies alone, depicted with the expressive *khok-yok*, which evokes the sight of someone curled up and unmoving, as well as a feeling of loneliness. Person escapes *suŋ-duy*, running quickly and nimbly. We get no further speech from Person, and having achieved his mission,

as cruel and inhuman as it was, he returns to an unmarked style of speech. The use of expressives is generally considered to be a marked style representing a specific ideology of verbal aesthetics within a frame of political relations (Bermudez 2020; Choksi 2019). As the story ends, the narrator reverts to the use of expressives as a more “normal” mode that evokes the shared conventions of depictive sound-meaning mapping that enhance the vividness of the oral imagery.

Native speakers explain that the frequent occurrence of *bar-* creates an uneuphonic effect for the listener. While minor syllables with /r/ in the coda position are not at all rare, the combination with /b/ is. The use of *bar-* also increases the frequency of sesquisyllabic words in an utterance, creating a heavy feel to the speech. Given that Ksingmul is presently undergoing a process of simplifying word syllable structure, the intentional addition of a heavy minor syllable with two voiced consonants and a short, but fully articulated /a/ makes the speech abnormal on several accounts. Somsi’s performance of this register is also characterized by low voice pitch, accompanied by frequent use of breathy voice triggered phonetically by the voicing of the *bar-* segmental sequence, but iconic of a non-human style of speech.

Register as social history

Speaking “crazy” after being poisoned by a mushroom is also one of the many explanations that the Khmu have for why different groups of people speak different languages, and it was recorded from the Son La Khmu, locating the myth in the same area where the Ksingmul live. A common trope in these myths explaining linguistic complexity is that before the different languages were created, the people didn’t know how to speak (Proschan 2001). In the Khmu version of the mushroom, which explicitly includes the Ksingmul (*jeʔ puak*), it was not until they ate the mushroom that they started speaking at all, while the Ksingmul version has them living together harmoniously as one household and speaking the same language.⁹ Marking Other’s speech morphologically fits into this motif of abnormal speech in the liminal space between cultural worlds where difference and similarity are produced as a matter of daily interactions.

The register phenomenon does not help us understand one other set of oppositional relationships that must surely be relevant to this story. There is a triad of “life” in this story, as mentioned above, consisting of *ksiiŋ-skil-hraay* (person-spirit-animal). The *hraay* category is represented here by the pig and the chicken, both of which have wild and domesticated versions. The chicken appears in the wild form, while the pig is the domesticated type. In this iteration of the wild-domesticated trope, the person controls both the wild (*kharhray* ‘forest’) and the domestic (*jiəŋ* ‘house’) animal, suggesting a transition across the Ksingmul *kɔh* (‘old forest’) - *laay* (‘fallow field’) divide (Figure 5). Nya Wai is ultimately killed through the use of the domesticated pig, after he is unsuccessful in appropriating the wild chicken. Nya Wai speech should thus be

⁹ A poisonous mushroom trope is not a common explanation of ethnogenesis in Tai oral culture, but at the beginning of the Tai Dam account of the creation of the Earth, we hear ...*kɔɔ pen din pen jaa, kɔɔ pen faa thɔɔ duay het...* ‘there was the earth and the grass, there was the sky, like a mushroom’ (Chamberlain 1992: 35).



Figure 5. Villagers propitiate *skil* at the forest-fallow edge, where animals and spirits are encountered in an ambiguous domestic-wild space.

considered the wild register, even if his crimes do not place him within the anticipated “wild” world.

The narrator provided no framing commentary for this story, but the use of Nya Wai’s register in the narrative provides a window on the frameworks of behavioral and linguistic norms in the history of Ksingmul-Other relations. The metapragmatic activities distinguish criterial behaviors as different (Agha 2015), and in this case abnormal. The *ksiiy-skil* confrontation is puzzling, because the moral performances are the opposite of what might be expected. The person outsmarts the evil spirit, but the method through which he exacts his merciless revenge seems excessively harsh. Who do the *ksiiy* and *skil* represent in this story? In the narration, the first mention of the person is in the term *ksiiy muul*, which creates the expectation of a Ksingmul confrontation with a spirit within the Ksingmul forest cosmology. But after that initial reference, the person is simply *ksiiy* or *?in too kyii* literally ‘he-body-person’, a general life-form reference made in opposition to the evil spirit *?in too naa wáay* ‘he-body-Nya Wai’. If the *ksiiy* is indeed Ksingmul, then the story is one of repelling the encroachment of Others on their forests. Feasibly this would put the Nya Wai in the role of the Tai, and the betrayal of the special friendship a rejection of the Tai social order, in this case represented by the *síw* relationship. Nya Wai is portrayed as feeble (poetic marking of manner of walking with the expressive), slow witted (tricked by Person, gullibly taking the wife’s advice to copy Person) and defeated (death by self-castration).

It should be remembered that the Tai political system in which the Ksingmul have been living is not Buddhist, so this cannot be construed as a struggle between *phut* and *phii*, or Buddhism and animism. The theft of the *ksiiy* chicken may be an indirect reference to extraction of taxes by the rulers of the Tai *muang*, who take the form of

evil spirits in a flipping of the dominant discourse of social hierarchy. Moreover, the *naa wáay* is a common spirit in the regional cultural landscape. Local Tai groups also have stories about Nya Wai, and it is possible that this character was borrowed from the Tai.¹⁰ It is interesting to note that the Tai Vat of the adjacent district of Muang Aet have a story in which the Tai killed an evil spirit when they migrated to the area, and in order to remain in the area they have to make offerings to the wife of the spirit who fled to the upper forest areas (Petit 2019). The wives in the current story are peripheral to the main plot, but play an important role nonetheless. If it weren't for the wife of Nya Wai, Person's plan may not have succeeded. In Petit's discussion of the Tai Vat story of killing the *phii*, the identity of the *phii* is not elaborated but it is mentioned that the *phii* ate people at night.¹¹ This fits with the common understanding of the "personality" of the *naa wáay*. Another important theme of this story is the *siiw-siaw* relationship, which contrasts with the many permutations of the more common hierarchical brother relationship that is associated with major events such as village founding, migration and ethnogenesis.

The special intimacy involved in this relationship suggests that the violent conflict arose out of a more complicated history of relations that were not entirely antagonistic. However, the phenomenon of "wild spirits" in the mountains of mainland Southeast Asia reminds us that some spirits cannot be placated, and when the household is threatened, violence – premeditated and cruel – is an acceptable measure for protecting the family (Jonsson 2014). The proposition of a *siiw* relationship with a "wild spirit" is by definition impossible, a fact understood by Person, who plays along in order to deceive Nya Wai. Person knew that a normal offering to the spirits would not be effective, thus the offering of the pig (testicles) was only part of a larger scheme. Wild spirits can represent historical events experienced by the group, such as conflict induced migration (Jonsson 2005), so any interpretation of the story – as a human-spirit conflict, a wild-domestic conflict, or a Kha-Tai conflict – seems feasible. In the Chiang Mai valley, Kraisri (1967, 1965) documents how the Chiang Mai king was made the guardian of the upland Lawa, their chiefs and the Tai. In this case, the relationship was formalized in a document and included a resort to violence in the event that the Lawa were poorly treated – "If he [the chief] causes disaster to the Lawa, let him be destroyed as easily as a clump of banana trees; let him be annihilated like clumps of grass (Kraisri 1965: 236). The regional reconfiguration of exchange can be seen in the Ksingmul tale, in which equal (*siiw*) and unequal (*ksiij-skil*) relationships are malleable and subject to local agency. The assertion here is that the linguistic forms discussed are situated in – for the region more generally, indexical of – a morality of exchange, in which the *?aa-baa* relationship is extended and accepted, and then betrayed as the *bar-* register is initiated and adopted.

¹⁰ Other shared evil or dangerous spirits have different names in Ksingmul, even if they draw on the common characteristics: for example, the *koyklóoc* is another Ksingmul spirit that is known in Tai languages as *phii kɔɔŋkɔɔy*.

¹¹ In the Tai Daeng tradition, the Nya Wai has long, red hair that is wrapped around the head so that the face cannot be seen. If one walks alone in the deep forest, there is a danger of being taken by a Nya Wai. The Nya Wai eats people, but only after the sun has gone down.

Conclusion

The register described here as “speaking like a ghost” provides a window on the performative of abnormal types of speech, complementing the previous literature from linguistic anthropologists of North America. In contrast to abnormal speech that mimics other peoples’ physical or psychological traits, or animals that interact with humans, the Ksingmul *bar-* prefix in this story foregrounded the stereotypical immorality of the evil spirit. However, the indexing of unacceptable behavior can jump the human/non-human divide to highlight the unexpected, abnormal behavior of the person. This register is thus formulated as a model of (mis)conduct (Agha 2015) within a Ksingmul semiotic ideology that draws on the sound-meaning mappings of a typologically rare morpheme. The immoral abnormality of the *bar-* speech is directly contrasted with the *sīw* relationship and the marked pronouns of intimacy.

The enregisterment of ghost-speak was part of a specific sociohistorical and multilingualistic milieu (Agha 2015). Even though we are not sure of the ethnohistorical references, because the Nya Wai is a shared character in the region the interethnic entanglements of history are at the core of the metapragmatic framing of Self and Other. The agency available to speakers in reworking the moral code that is indexed by the semiotic register of speaking like a ghost draws on the linguistic resources that map sound to meaning in Ksingmul. The behavior-type that is supposed to lie at the core of this linguistic practice is itself turned around, making the evil spirit the victim and the human the transgressor. The basic “personality” of Nya Wai seems to be common between Ksingmul and Tai oral literature, but this story and its peculiar twist is unknown to the surrounding Tai groups. Connection to the Tai Vat story of the killing of the *phii* is likely, but it has been appropriated and reconfigured to meet Ksingmul social history. We know the importance of this role reversal because of the modeled behavior type performed through the employment of Nya Wai’s register by Person. We may consider this an excellent example of the way in which language serves as a crucial frame of mimesis through which relationships are negotiated in the inter-ethnic systems of upland Laos (Tappe 2018, Jonsson 2010), the mimetic signification performed by an iconic depiction of moral incompatibility within a larger framework of cultural intimacy at one of the many frontiers of the Tai-Kha encounter.

As an enregistered emblem of abnormal, un-human speech, *bar-* is not as deeply institutionalized in the performative culture of the Ksingmul as Nootka and other Native American languages. Other Ksingmul stories in which an evil or dangerous spirit appears do not necessarily use this register, suggesting that the negotiation of identities and ideologies proposed here is contested, and ongoing. Interestingly, however, there is evidence of a semiotic ideology of marking abnormal speech with a Cr-¹² prefix from other Austroasiatic languages spoken in the area. Here too, the link between expected speech types and stereotyped behavior plays out in terms of a moral order in flux. For example, in the Bit language spoken in several villages stretching across northern Laos, a *kr-* prefix is found attached to text in which unnatural phenomena are being narrated.

¹² /Cr-/ means a sequence including a consonant and r at the beginning of the word.

In a story about a girl who was abandoned by her parents, when her pregnancy resulting from an interdicted relationship produces not children but dogs, the narrator of the story says *kr-koo kr-keen kr-kuəŋ*

kr-koo	kr-keen	kr-kuəŋ
ABN-3SG.f	ABN-cursed	ABN-inauspicious

She was cursed (for bringing forth this inauspicious event).

In the Bit lexicon, a substantial number of adjectives with negative qualities have a *kr-* minor syllable. When I asked my main Bit informant about this text, he said that it was not grammar, but gave the feeling that his talking was not regular. I have heard this type of construction in other similar narrative situations, and understand this to be an expressive device, related to a larger system of expressivity that is a core part of Bit linguistic ideology (Badenoch 2021). Similarly, the Phong Laan language, also Austroasiatic and spoken in Houaphan in relative proximity to Ksingmul, has a *bar-* minor syllable on some words that describe undesirable traits: for example, *barwaa* ‘crazy’ and *barbic* ‘feeling of nausea with over-production of saliva before vomiting’. It is worth noting that in Houaphan province, the Khmu pick up on some of the distinguishing linguistic characteristics of the Phong people, using the general category of *jeʔ* ‘stranger’: *jeʔ trʔap* ‘those who say *ʔap*’ (*ʔap* is their word for “I”) and *jeʔ trʔiʔ* ‘those who are not all together’ (Tappe and Badenoch 2021). Here a *tr-* prefix seems to be marking some perceived strangeness. The iconic mapping of /Cr/ in *kr-*, *br-* and *tr-* suggests evidence of grammatical marking in the local Austroasiatic languages – where these sounds prefixed to “normal” words just do not sound “right” – that is reminiscent of the Native American data that brought the abnormal speech phenomenon to our attention (Frachtenberg 1920).

For Person in this story, the use of *bar-* is an act of mimesis through which he protects himself from Nya Wai; the marked performance of similarity being a strategy for overcoming the threat from a powerful other (Taussig 1993). Adjusting one’s speech to another’s is a frequently seen type of iconism, but here we experience the use of an inverse icon as “aspirations to persona and personhood” (Agha 2007: 175) play out in a historical context of cultural contestation across the forest-field, or upland-lowland divide. The forest, as the main setting for Ksingmul life, is a moral space, where the interactions between human, animals and other non-human beings are performed in oral literature. These “social” relations are given shape through linguistic practices that draw on stereotypes, but are applied flexibly in recognition of the fluidity of identity and multidirectionality of communication. Speech practices that utilize expressive devices to encode similarity and difference can provide insights on how notions of Self and Other are constructed amidst social boundaries in flux (Rudge 2021). Pronoun use is situated within a metapragmatic contextualization in which human-spirit is delineated dynamically through the abnormal space marker. Linguistic performances like these, especially when they involve social relations, give cues to local notions of appropriateness and expression of social values (Suwilai 2002). The multilingual setting of upland Laos is a space of poetic exchange (Badenoch 2020, Badenoch 2019), where

syntax, lexicon as well as morphology are manipulated to highlight the socially salient details of daily life. Considering the social agency and cultural dynamism that is imbued in these *puak* linguistic practices, the rigid hierarchy of the upland Tai *muang* looks more like a dialogic heterarchy (Crumley 1995). The narrative recasts the ethnic lines from *puak* to *ksiiŋ*, asserting their place in the social landscape; the “forest termite” has turned the tables and dispatched the immoral other. Yet, tropes of intimacy and incompatibility are not mutually exclusive in this space, reflecting the reality of not only human/non-human, but also Ksingmul/Other and Tai/non-Tai exchanges over time.

Abbreviations used in the glossed text

ABN	abnormal speech marker
CAUS	causative
DEF	definite prefix
EMPH	emphasis
EXPR	expressive
IRR	irrealis
LOC	location prefix
NEG	negator
PERF	perfective
Q	question
RECP	reciprocal
REDUP	reduplicated form
1DU	first person dual
1PL	first person plural
1SG	first person singular
2SG	second person singular
3SG	third person singular

ksiij kap skil naa wáay bii síiw lay pharnuu
 Person and Nya Wai become friends

liəŋ ?ii daa cíən ksiij kap skil naa wáay
 story this IRR to.tell person and spirit Nya Way

In this story I will tell how Person and the Nya Wai spirit,

bii síiw lay pharnuu
 to.do friend RECP each.other
became friends.

téewaa kóon daa bii síiw nii
 but before IRR to.do friend this

But before they were friends, now,

tuh sajmoh na? khree bii síiw
 to.be what then to.be.able to.do friend
how was it that they became friends?

laa meen n̄eew kəh
 so.then way that

So, it was like that.

?in too ksiij muul juu dak deh cōok ?éer karhraŋ
 3PS body Ksingmul to.go to.set.trap bird.trap to.put.in chicken forest
That Ksingmul guy went to set a trap for wild chicken.

?in juu təŋ téelaa mii
 3PS to.go to.look.at each day

He went to check the trap every day,

kii diə kuyh nəh ?əəm yuəŋ ?in, suər təŋ yuəŋ ?in
 only to.see to.have who to.come before 3PS to.steal to.look.at before 3PS
but he just saw that someone had come to check the trap before him.

miə tuh n̄eew kəh ?in la? sonsay ksiij bōo liiwaan n̄eew moh
 when to.be way that 3SG then to.doubt person Q or way what
Then he wondered, was it a person, or what was it?

mii kəh ?in juu téé saw
 when that 3SG to.go from early.morning

So, he went early in the morning.

juu tham lee mee
to.go to.wait.in.ambush PERF EMPH

He went to hide and watch.

juu kuyh khéem bóon kəh, tham khree
to.go to.be.at edge place that to.wait.in.ambush to.be.able

He went and hid at the edge of the place where he set the trap.

təj la? meen diə skil jaa wáay kəh ?əom hay la?
to.look.at then to.be to.see spirit Nya Wai that to.come just.like.that

When he looked, he saw that Nya Way was coming, just as he had suspected

bii tharcii caaŋ-cu?
to.do walking.cane EXPR: unstable walking EXPR: REDUP to.come
coming closer, walking around unstably with a cane.

?əom téelaa thii kə? diə kuyh ?éer ?leh
to.come each time NEG to.see to.have chicken to.be.caught

Each time he came, if he saw that there was no wild chicken caught in the trap

?in lee klaay juu
3PS then to.pass.by to.go
he would pass by and keep going.

kanməh ?éer ?leh ?in loo yak
which.one chicken to.be.caught 3SG then to.take

Whichever one had caught a wild chicken, he would take it.

miə yak nəew kəh leeəw ?in juə leeəw
when to.take way that PERF 3SG to.know PERF

When Nya Wai took the chicken, the Person knew that

skil jaa wáay ?ii suər təj
ghost Nya Way this to.steal to.look.at

this Nya Wai had been sneaking around checking the traps.

miə suər təj nəew kəh ?in kiəm leeəw day withii
when to.steal to.look.at way that 3SG to.prepare PERF EMPH method

When he spied Nya Wai doing this, he began to prepare a good way to deal with him.

?in kiəm daa p-siən jaa wáay
3SG to.prepare IRR CAUS-to.kill Nya Way

He got himself ready to kill Nya Wai.

toon saw mii hrim ?in ka? kiem
 period.of.day morning day tomorrow 3SG to.prepare to.prepare

In the morning of the next day, he made his preparations.

yak sarkaap cōok thoŋ lee khráy khartaaw
 to.take barbecue.skewer to.put.into bag then knife sword

He took skewers and put them into a bag, together with a sword.

?in handéc láp lee
 3SG to.sharpen sharp.edge PERF

After sharpening the blade,

téew ba-kandeh ?ii hay la?
 to.fasten.onto.waist LOC-lower.back this just.like.that
he tied it onto his waist.

miə téew ?oo kəh mii kəh
 when to.fasten.onto.waist way that day that

Having tied it onto his waist like that,

?in ?oo tée sáw dal bōn phréem kəh
 3SG to.come from morning to.hide.and.wait place old that
he left early in the morning to go hide and wait in the same place as before.

jaa wáay jaan-juuŋ jaan-juuŋ ?oo hay la?
 Nya Wai EXPR: walking unsteadily EXPR: REDUP to.come just.like.that
Nya Wai came walking unsteadily up to him

miə nəew kəh ?in la? kiem lee day
 when way that 3SG just to.prepare PERF EMPH

He was all ready,

khráy laak ḥoh daa tíc jaa wáay
 knife to.pull to.go.out IRR to.slash Nya Wai
and pulled his sword out to slash Nya Wai.

sii məe mihi ?ii nee
 fuck mother you this EMPH

“You bastard!

toŋ deh ?ap suu mii naa
 to.look.at trap 1SG every day right?

It was you that was checking my traps every day, wasn’t it?!”

jaa wáay wóo
 Nya Wai to.say
Nya Wai said,

?oooo sóo dεε, sóo dεε
 oh to.beg EMPH to.beg EMPH
“Oh please, I beg of you! I beg of you!

pee bii neew kəh
 NEG to.do way that
Don’t do that!”

[Person says]
 khan sóo laa bii neew məh
 if to.beg then to.do way which
“So what then, if you are begging like that?”

[Nya Wai says]
 niŋ məen daa piən təo ?ii juu
 one to.be IRR to.change to.continue this to.go
“First, I will change! From now on.

thiiwaa kə? dik bii leew suər təŋ ?ii naa
 to.mean.that NEG (not).anymore to.do PERF to.steal to.look this right
I mean that I will not do that anymore, sneaking around checking on your traps.”

[Person says]
 khan neew kəh laa bii neew məh
 if way that then to.do way which
“And then, what?”

[Nya Wai says]
 ?ii ?ee bii siiw
 yeah 2PL to.do friend
“We will be friends!”

jaa wáay kap ksiij bii siiw laa jróon kan?i?
 Nya Way and person to.do friend then because.of this.one
This was how Nya Wai and Person became friends.

?in too ksiij daa p-siən jaa wáay la? bəo
 3SG body person IRR CAUS-to.kill Nya Wai then right
Person was going to kill Nya Wai, you see.

leew naa wáay sóo kó? mah p-siən
 PERF Nya Wai to.beg NEG to.give CAUS-to.kill

And Nya Wai begged Person not to kill him.

miə kó? mah p-siən lee sóo bii siiw lay
 when NEG to.give CAUS-to.kill then to.beg to.do friend RECP

When it seemed that he wouldn't be killed, Nya Wai asked to be friends.

[The Person says]

daa bii siiw loo bii
 IRR to.do friend then to.do

“If we are to become friends, then so be it.

miì hrim baa juu yaam ?aa nəə siiw
 day tomorrow 2SG to.go to.vist 1PL.INC EMPH friend

Tomorrow, come visit me, Friend.”

too kṣiij kəh naa wóo nəew kəh cōok too naa wáay kəh
 body person that then to.say way that to.put.in body Nya Wai that
Person said this to the Nya Wai.

[Nya Wai says]

?ii ?aa daa juu téé sáw
 yeah 1PL IRR to.go from morning

“Yeah, I will go early in the morning.”

miə nəew kəh ?in too kṣiij haa withii
 when way that 3SG body person to.search.for method

And then Person started to search for a way,

daa bii nəew məh
 IRR to.do way which

some way he could

mah naa wáay ?ii siən duəy tuum sraw kó? mah siə lap
 to.give Nya Wai this to.die to.follow road deep NEG to.give to.lose secret
make this Nya Wai die, using some special, secret means.

?in too kṣiij kəh loo daw jiəŋ, daw ba-jiəŋ
 3SG body person that then to.return house to.return LOC-house

Person then went into his house. He went into the house

maay løyh ?in tíə
 to.hurry to.tell 3SG wife

and hurried to tell his wife,

mee kharhraa juu pat yak cijn ba-khɔɔk ?ɔɔm heen ?ajn
 mother old to.go to.grab to.take pig LOC-pen to.come to.give 1SG
“Old Lady, go get a pig from the pen and bring it to me.

?ajn daa keet yak klaa cijn kəh ?uən
 1SG IRR to.cut to.take testicle pig that to.set.aside

I am going to cut off the balls of that pig.

mii hrim siiw jnaa wáay daa ?ɔɔm day
 day tomorrow friend Nya Wai IRR to.come EMPH

Tomorrow my friend Nya Wai is coming, you know.

?ɔɔm mii hrim ?ajn daa yak klaa cijn kəh
 to.come day tomorrow 1SG IRR to.take testicle pig that

Tomorrow when he comes, I am going to take out the pig’s balls

ŋɔh suu ?in caa
 to.go.out for 3SG to.eat

lee daa wɔɔ ?ajn keet klaa ?ajn ?ii
 and IRR to.say 1SG to.cut testicle 1SG this

Then I’ll say that I cut off my own balls.”

khwaam cijn kɔ? ?iik, ?in keet klaa cijn ?əə
 word true NEG to.(not).be.so 3SG to.cut testicle pig EMPH

But that’s not what really happened, it was the pig’s testicles he cut off.

too jnaa wáay lék juu leeW day
 body Nya Wai then to.go PERF EMPH

Then Nya Wai was on his way.

?in lee kiəm leeW day
 3SG then to.prepare PERF EMPH

He got ready.

keet klaa cijn cɔɔk ba-dɔɔy lee tih
 to.cut testicle pig to.put.in LOC-plate to.put.out

He cut off the pig’s balls, put them on a plate.

tih ba-kəh leew dōy lee kəh
 to.lay.out LOC-that PERF plate that

He placed them there, on that plate.

klaa cijn kəh ?in tih ba-kəh
 testicle pig that 3SG to.place LOC-that

He placed the pig's balls there

leew ?in tih ba-sneen ?o ?ii luəj dūut ?ii
 PERF 3SG to.place LOC-bed way this side back this
and then he placed it all on the bed like this, behind him.

yək baat ?in kdiən ?o ?ii nīi
 now.listen when 3SG to.sit way this EMPH

So now he was sitting like this,

?in thardij dōy lee luəj dūut ?ii naa klaa cijn
 3SG to.hide.behind plate side back this EMPH testicle pig
and he hid the plate with the pig's balls behind him.

khráy kəh ?in mah ?in tíə súk ba-mok ?oo ?uən leew
 knife that 3SG to.give 3SG wife to.hide LOC-inside over.there to.place PERF
He gave the knife to his wife to hide away inside over there.

klaa cijn tih ba-dúut kəh
 testicle pig to.place LOC-back that

The pig's balls were behind him there.

naa wáay ?ōm leew day
 Nya Wai to.come PERF EMPH

Nya Wai arrived.

diə ?in too kṣiij kdiən ba-sneen ?o ?ii hantək naa wáay
 to.see 3SG body person to.sit LOC-bed way this to.wait.for Nya Wai
He saw Person sitting there on the bed like that waiting for the Nya Wai.

?ə han ?ee, baa kə? tuh məh ?o
 hey to.be.energetic here 2SG NEG to.be which Q

“Hello there, how are you doing?”

?i? ?aa kdiə kə? tuh məh siiw
 no 2PL NEG NEG to.be which friend

“I’m doing fine, friend!”

n̄ēw k̄eh sam too tuh too l̄ō la?

way that like body to.be body good good PERF

“Well, that’s good then.”

hantak hantam l̄ēw kdīen

to.greet to.greet PERF to.sit

After their greetings, he sat down.

jnaa wáay kap k̄siīj kdīen lom pharnuu

Nya Wai and person to.sit to.talk each.other

Nya Wai and Person sat together and talked.

mīo lom pharnuu n̄ēw k̄eh l̄ēw

when to.talk each.other way that PERF

After they talked together like that

?in too k̄siīj l̄ē wó̄o ?ee bar-?ee dáa

3SG body person then to.say hey ABN-1DU 1DU

Person said “Hey, the two of us...”

wó̄o suu ?in tí̄o

to.say to 3SG wife

He said to his wife,

?ee daa yak hm̄oh suu sí̄iw caa nah

1PL IRR to.take what for friend to.eat EMPH

“What do we have to offer to my friend to eat?

sí̄iw ?ōom yaam nah

friend to.come to.visit EMPH

My friend has come for a visit.”

?in tí̄o la? wó̄o

3SG wife then to.say

Then his wife said,

?eee khóon khrīej hm̄oh nah

oh to.worry to.worry what EMPH

“Hey, what are you worried about?

l̄ēe k̄ēt yak k̄laa mīh k̄eh dee naa

just to.cut to.take testicle 2SG there self EMPH

Just cut off your own balls.”

[Person says]

?eee kɔ? bœl bii naa
oh NEG to.want to.do EMPH

“Oh, I don’t want to do that!

klaa ?ap coo lœœ bœœ
testicles 1SG to.hurt EMPH

That would be too painful for my balls!

?œœ campen hay nii, neew kœh lœœ neew
yeah necessary EMPH EMPH way that then way

Yeah, but if that’s the way it is then so be it.”

naa wáay kdiœn ba-kœh
Nya Wai to.sit LOC-that

Nya Wai was sitting there.

mee kharhraa mih yak khráy ba-suœm ?œœm heen ?ap hih
mother old 2SG to.take knife LOC-bedroom to.come to.give 1SG EMPH

“Old Woman, bring me the knife from the bedroom.

?ap daa keet klaa ?ap nii kɔ? kuyh hmœh suu sœiw caa
1SG IRR to.cut testicle 1SG here NEG to.have what to friend to.eat
I will cut my own balls off because I don’t have anything to offer you to eat.”

?in tœœ yak khráy lœœw day, ?uœn ba-suœm téœ ?œœk
3SG wife to.take knife PERF EMPH to.place LOC-bedroom from just.now

His wife got the knife from the bedroom, where she had hidden it just before.

yak ?œœm luœr mah ?in ?lii
to.take to.come to.hand.to to.give 3SG husband

She brought it over and handed it to her husband.

?in ?lii hrap yak khráy kœh ?œœm
3SG husband to.receive to.take knife that to.come

Her husband took the knife from her,

?ooo sœiw bii neew mœh
Oh frid to.do way which

“Oh, what are we going to do, my friend?

?aa kɔ? kuyh neew mœh suu baa caa dee naa
1PL NEG to.have way which to 2SG to.eat REFL EMPH

I don’t have anything to offer you to eat!

khanay ?ii ?aa daa keet klaa ?aa ?ii suu baa caa nœ
now this 1PL IRR to.cut testicle 1PL this to 2SG to.eat EMPH

So, I now I will cut off my balls for you to eat, okay?

baa daa caa ?ee ?œ
2SG IRR to.eat here Q

You will eat them, right?"

[Nya Wai answers]

caa maat
to.eat true

"Of course, I will!"

tœp ?œ kœh
to.answer way that

He answered like that.

caa maat
to.eat true

"Of course, I will!"

?in naa wáay tœp ?œ kœh
3SG Nyway to.answer way that

Nya Wai answered like that.

?in lœ yak khráy kœh ?œm ba-sneen ba-dúut
3SG then to.take knife that to.come LOC-bed LOC-back

Then he took the knife from the bed behind him,

?in bii ?œ hraj soon
3SG to.do way to.grab pants

and pretended like he was grabbing his pants.

keet keet met ?œen
to.cut to.cut one a.little

He made a few little cuts.

?e? ?e? cää siiw daa bii neew mœh naa
EXP: sharp pain oh friend IRR to.do way which EMPH

"Ow, ow! Oh, what should I do, friend?

?aa ?al coo dee naa
1SG to.feel to.hurt REFL EMPH

It hurts!"

[Nya Wai says]

coo mak mεε, yiən mεε baa naa
to.hurt to.ignore EMPH to.endure EMPH 2SG EMPH

“Don’t pay attention to the pain, just endure it!”

kə? kuyh hməh caa plək ?aa laa bəə
NEG to.have what to.eat lunch 2PL EMPH INTERR

We don’t have anything to eat for lunch, right?”

naa wáay wóó neew kəh
Nya Wai to.say way that

Nya Wai said that,

na? hrúu ?in bəel caa laa bəə
just then to.hurry 3SG to.want to.eat EMPH Q

as if he was eager to eat [his balls].

yak khráy kəh ?əəm ſaat-ſaat ?e?-?e?-?e?
to.take knife that to.come EXP: slicing sound EXP: expression of pain

He took out the knife and starting cutting. “Ow! Ow!”

coo hréj day síiw
to.hurt very.much EMPH friend

“Oh, it hurts terribly, my friend!”

bii ?əə ?əəm tih luəŋ dúut
to.do way to.come to.place side back

He pretended to put them behind him.

kha məh klaa cij ſok hay dəək
when which testicle pig just.now EMPH EMPH

But actually, it was the pig’s balls from a moment ago.

?əə kəh leew ?in la? kdiən ?əə ?ii
way that PERF 3SG then to.sit way this

And then he sat like this.

[Says to his wife]

hih khráy nah
here! knife EMPH

“Here, take the knife!”

?in tíə yak khráy kəh juu ?uən
 3SG wife to.take knife that to.go to.put.away

His wife took the knife to put it away.

khráy kəh kha?eet maat ?in ?əcm cuup-cuup klaa cijn
 knife that red really 3SG to.come to.dip-REDUPL testicle pig

The knife was all red because he had wiped it on the pig's testicles

luəŋ dúut ?ii laa bəo
 side back this EMPH EMPH

behind him here.

yak ɻəh ?əcm mah síiw jnaa wáay diə
 to.take to.go.out to.come to.give friend Nya Wai to.see

He brought it out for his friend Nya Wai to see.

nih síiw kanneeŋ ?ii nee síiw
 here friend to.look this here friend

“Look at this here, friend!

?aa kəet klaa miəm cap khráy ?ii
 1SG to.cut testicle blood to.stick.to knife this

There is blood on the knife from cutting off my testicles

?aa kɔ? siə nah
 1SG NEG to.believe EMPH

if you don't believe it.”

[Nya Wai responds]

?oo bar-maat bardee, baa kɔ? bar-coo ?ɔo
 Oh ABN-really ABN-REFL 2SG NEG ABN-to.hurt that
“Oh, it is really true! Doesn't it hurt?”

[Person says]

bar-coo maat, ?aa ?ot hay nee
 ABN-to.hurt really 1SG to.endur EMPH EMPH

“Yes, it really hurts, but I will endure the pain!”

[Nya Wai says]

?oo neew kəh
 Oh way that
“That's the way!”

laak yak dəoy kan-klaa cijn ?in keet ?uən tée ?ɔk ?oo
 to.pull to.take plate DEF-testicle pig 3SG to.cut to.set.aside from just.now that
He pulled over the plate with the pig's testicles that he had just cut before

?ɔəm luər ?in tíə
 to.come to.hand.to 3SG wife
and handed it to his wife.

həə klaa ?aa yak juu téen pharjín
 there testicle 1SG to.take to.go to.make to.cook
“Here, take my testicles and cook them up

suu síiw ?ii caa jii
 for friend 1PL to.eat EMPH
For my friend to eat.”

?in tíə yak dōoy, yak juu téen skaap
 3SG wife to.take bowl to.take to.go to.make skewer
His wife took the bowl and went to cook them on skewers.

téen plək téen phiən khak nəə
 to.make lunch to.make dining.table definite certain
She prepared the lunch and set the table nicely.

[Wife says]
 yəə yəəj síiw naa wáay kəh ?ɔəm caa
 hey to.lead friend Nya Wai that to.enter to.eat
“Now invite your friend Nya Wai to start eating.”

[Person says]
 caa síiw, kə? kuyh hməh yəəj caa
 to.eat friend NEG to. have what to.lead to.eat
“Eat, my friend! There is nothing good to offer you,

?aa keet klaa ?aa mah mee síiw baa
 1PL to.cut testicle 1PL to.give mother friend 2SG
so I cut off my balls and got my wife

kəh téen yəəj caa
 that to.make to.lead to.eat
to cook them for you to eat.

bar-caa bar-maat
 ABN-to.eat ABN-really
Go ahead, eat up!"

?in wóo nœw kəh, ?in naa wáay khip ?œm caa
 3SG to.say way that 3SG Nya Wai to.grab to.come to.eat

When he said that the Nya Wai came quickly to the table to eat.

?uk ksah ?uk ?œy
 to.drink alcohol to.drink what
"Drink up! Have some alcohol.

suu ksah siiw khœŋ siiw nee
 for alcohol friend to.consider friend EMPH
Friends drink together!"

miə kəh leew ?in too siiw kəh,
 time that PERF 3SG body friend that

Then he and his friend

naa wáay kap ?in hlœŋ caa
 Nya Wai with 3SG to.do.together to.eat
Nya Wai ate together.

caa maat khœŋ ?œk klaa ?in, klaa cœj hay lœ bœ
 to.eat really to.consider NEG testicle 3SG testicle pig EMPH EMPH
They really ate, since it wasn't really his testicles. It was the pig testicles, right!

khan kœt klaa ?in maat, ?in hœn caa, ?in too ksij
 if to.cut testicles 3SG really 3SG not.inclined to.eat 3SG body person
If he really cut his testicles, Person wouldn't have been able to eat them.

caa ?œim leew kəh œj
 to.eat to.be.sated PERF that to.go.out
When they had eaten their fill, they went outside.

?in naa wáay ciim kheew peew khaaj tharbéc hanhriœj cet pœh
 3SG Nya Wai to.poke teeth to.clean jaw to.poke teeth to.stab wood
The Nya Wai was picking at his teeth with a toothpick.

naa wáay sáj
 Nya Wai to.say.farewell
Nya Wai bid him farewell.

?əə daa daw ləew
yeah IRR to.return PERF
“Yeah, I’m going to go home now.”

daa daw ləew nəə síiw nəə
IRR to.return PERF EMPH friend EMPH
I’m going home now, my friend!”

naa wáay wóɔ
Nya Wai to.say
Nya Wai said,

bar-mii bar-hmoh naa, baa daa juu yaam bar-?aa nah
ABN-day ABN-what EMPH 2SG IRR to.go to.visit ABD-1SG EMPH
“When are you going to come visit me?”

[Person says]

bar-mii phoo biər ?ih ?aa daa juu
ABN-day future.day two EMPH 1SG IRR to.go
“I will go the day after tomorrow.”

[Nya Wai says]

baa bar-juu bar-maat day
1SG ABN-to.go ABN-really EMPH
“You really have to come!”

wóɔ nəew kəh ?in too kṣiiŋ kəh phləh mii kəh
to.say way that 3SG body person that to.arrive when that
Just at that time, after Nya Wai had said that, Person said,

?aa bar-juu kɔ? kuyh hmoh caa, baa bar-keet klaa baa day
1SG ABN-to.go NEG to.have what to.eat 2SG ABN-to.cut testicle 2SG EMPH
“When I go visit, if you don’t have anything to eat, you just cut off your balls, okay?”

bar-?əh bar-?əh
ABN-uhm ABN-yeah
“Yeah, okay!”

wóɔ ?ɔɔ kəh ləew
to.say way that PERF
That’s what they said.

lit daw, paa wáay kəh ?in phleh jiəŋ lee nōo
 enthusiastically to.go Nya Wai that 3SG to.arrive house EMPH
Nya Wai went on his way and arrived at home.

?in síiw kəh lit juu yaam mii phoo biər
 3SG friend that enthusiastically to.go to.visit day future two
His friend set out to go visit him two days later.

jaa wáay kəh lee ?oɔm cáa wóo suu ?in tíə
 Nya Wai that then to.come so to.say to 3SG wife
Then Nya Wai came home and said to his wife,

bar-mee tanmee ?aaa bar-daa bii n̄eew mōh
 ABN-old woman wife oh ABN-IRR to.do way which
“Wife, what am I going to do?

síiw ?oɔm yaam bar-kɔ? kuyh hmōh bar-caa dee naa
 friend to.come to.vist ABN-NEG to.have what ABN-to.eat EMPH
My friend is coming to visit but we don't have anything to eat.”

[Wife of Nya Wai says]
 bar-síiw ?in bar-keet bar-klaa ?in ?oo
 ABN-friend 3SG ABN-to.cut ABN-testicle 3SG EMPH
“Your friend cut off his own balls,

mih bar-keet bar-klaa mihi kəh kwáa
 2SG ABN-to.cut ABN-testicles 2SG that EMPH
so you should cut off your balls, too!”

[Nya Wai says]
 bar-n̄eew bar-kəh bar-maat
 ABN-way ABN-that ABN-really
“That's what I'll do!”

?oɔ ?in síiw phalleh laa nōo hantak hantam kdiən
 well 3SG friend to.arrive EMPH to.greet to.call.out to.sit
Well, his friend arrived, and they sat down after they greeted each other.

jaa wáay kəh
 Nya Wai that
Nya Wai [said]

?ííh bar-yak bar-khráy kəh ?oɔm nih
 yeah ABN-to.take ABN-knife that to.come here
“Bring me that knife!”

?ap bar-keet bar-klaa ?ii suu siiw caa
 1SG ABN-to.cut ABN-testicles 1PL for friend to.eat
I’m going to cut off my balls for my friend to eat

kɔ? kuyh hmoh bar-suu bar-caa
 NEG to.have what ABN-together ABN-to.eat
because we don’t have anything to eat.”

tíə jaa wáay kəh khip yak khráy ?oɔm maat nəə
 wife Nya Wai that to.grab to.take knife to.come really EMPH
Nya Wai’s wife grabbed the knife and brought it

mah ?in ?lii
 to.give 3PM husband
to her husband.

?in ?lii keet klaa ?in maat nəə
 3SG husband to.cut testicles 3SG really EMPH
Her husband really cut off his balls.

?in siiw klaa cij haa ?in naa
 3SG friend testicle pig just 3SG EMPH
But the friend, it was just pig’s balls.

bar-neem klaa jaa wáay
 to.pinch testicles Nya Wai
“Grab your balls, Nya Wai!”

jaat-jaat-jaat ?e?-?e?-?e?
 EXPR: slicing EXPR: calling out in pain
[Calling out in pain as he cut his testicles]

baa pee bar?e? məə barsiiw
 2SG NEG ABN-EXP: calling out in pain COMD ABN-friend
“Don’t cry out, friend!”

?in kṣiij wóo nəəw kəh
 3SG person to.say way that
said Person.

cáa ?aa bar-coo naa
well 1SG ABN-to.hurt EMPH

“Oh, but it hurts!”

kɔ? bar-liək naa, ?aa daa bar-p-suək hay naa
NEG ABN-to.fear EMPH 1SG IRR ABN-CAUS-medicine EMPH EMPH

“There is nothing to be afraid of, I will treat your wound.”

?in ceew ?iət téé ba-jiəŋ
3SG to.pound.paste chili since LOC-house

He had made some chili paste when he was still at home

ceew ?iət ?ɔɔm cɔɔk kheen cɔɔk dəə,
to.pound.paste chili to.come to.put.in pepper to.put.in which

He made the chili paste with pepper and some other things

cɔɔk thonj ?ɔɔm
to.put.in bag to.come

and brought it in his bag.

baa bar-hrúu bar-keet ləew,
2SG ABN-to.hurry ABN-to.cut PERF

“Hurry up and cut them!

pee bar-?e-? bar-?i? məə
NEG ABN-EXP:calling.out EXP:REDP EMPH

Don’t whimper and cry about it!

?aa kɔ? kuyh bar-hməh bar-caa ?aa bar-suu caa nee
2SG NEG to.have ABN-what ABN-to.eat 2SB ABN-together to.eat EMPH

We don’t have anything to eat together!”

ʃaat-ʃaat bar-?e?
EXP: cutting ABN-EXP:crying.out
[Nya Wai crying out in pain as he cuts]

ʃaat-ʃaat bar-?e?
EXP: cutting ABN-EXP:crying.out
[Nya Wai crying out in pain as he cuts]

ʃaat-ʃaat bar-?e?
EXP: cutting ABN-EXP:crying.out
[Nya Wai crying out in pain as he cuts]

bar-coo bar-hréj naa
 ABN-to.hurt ABN-intense EMP
“It hurts so badly!”

baa bar-hrúu khrëe jih lëew
 2SG ABN-to.hurry to.get to.take.off PERF
“Hurry up! You can take off your pants,

?aa daa bar-p-suëk hay ?aa
 1SG IRR ABN-CAUS-medicine EMPH
I will treat your wound for you!”

kjaaaat yak këen ñoh maat nœ tih ba-këh
 EXP: cutting to.take core to.go.out really EMP to.place LOC-that
With a final slice he took out his testicles and placed them there.

?oooy ?aa daa bar-p-suëk baa bar-siïw
 Ohhh 1SG IRR ABN-CAUS-medicine 2SG ABN-friend
“Oooh, I’ll treat your wound, my friend!”

duëh bój khëen ?iøt ?oõm téé ?ii duëh
 to.open container pepper chili to.come from here to.open
He opened the container with the chili and pepper paste that he had brought.

?aa daa p-suëk bar-baa ?ii
 1SG IRR CAUS-medicine ABN-2SG this
“I’m going to treat you now.”

yak ?iøt cõok sam coo hréj naa
 to.take chili to.put.in even.more to.hurt intense EMPH
He applied the chili paste, which made it hurt even worse!

bar-?oooy bar-?oooooy
 ABN-EXP: moaning ABN-EXP:moaning
[Nya Wai voice moaning in pain]

?in too ksiij suj-tuj lit daw
 3SG body person EXP:running enthusiastically to.return
Person got up quickly and ran home.

?in tiø jaa wáay këh keët klaa ?in lëew
 3SG to.trick Nya Wai that to.cut testicles 3SG PERF
He tricked Nya Wai to cut his own testicles off.

?in daw ba-jiəŋ ?ik
 3SG to.return LOC-house first

He just left and went back home.

yəək jaa wáay ?in coo hréŋ nəə
 well Nyhaway 3SG to.hurt intense EMPH

Well, now Nya Wai was in serious pain.

?əəy bar-?əəy
 EXP:moaning EBN-EXP:moaning
 [Nya Wai voice moaning in pain]

too kṣiiŋ daw sun-tuŋ daw, kii ɻal jaa wáay kəh
 body person to.return EXP:running to.return just to.hear Nya Wai that
Person just went home, not paying attention to

thriiŋ bar?-əəy
 to.moan.in.pain ABN-EXP:moaning
the sound of Nya Wai's last moans.

?in siən hay naa, too keet klaa too
 3SG to.die EMPH body to.cut testicles body

He died. The one who cut off his own balls.

?in kṣiiŋ daw waap
 3SG person to.return EXP:quickly.disappearing
Person went home and wasn't seen again,

jaa wáay kəh siən khok-ŋok
 Nya Wai that to.die EXP: curled.up
leaving the Nya Wai to die curled up alone.

phləh ba-?ii ləə ták kancíən n?íic ?ii naa
 to.arrive LOC-this then to.be.gone story.telling story this EMPH
That is all, this is the end of this story.

sut
 to.end
The end.

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