



**Jan-Olof Svantesson, Kàm Ràw (Damrong Tayanin),
Kristina Lindell, and Håkan Lundström, *Dictionary of
Kammu Yuàn Language and Culture***

Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2014. 462 pages. 10 maps and 300 illustrations. Hardback, £50. ISBN 978-87-7694-116-1.

DICTIONARIES that focus on a language and culture in a balanced way can be considered rare. However, any language dictionary must reveal deep cultural knowledge. The advantage of this dictionary by Svantesson, Kàm Ràw, Lindell, and Lundström is the purposeful approach to culture as the background and outcome of language. Its unique feature is that the main body of knowledge derives nearly entirely from one single individual and the sum of his understanding of various aspects of life gained within a limited time frame of thirty-four years. Kàm Ràw, born in 1938 in northern Laos and emigrated in 1972, is undoubtedly a versatile and reliable representative of his culture, and his qualifications are manifold. Nevertheless, the special circumstances of the dictionary should be kept in mind while studying the diverse entries. Also, the perspective of explanations is strictly bound to the main informants' and the coauthors' active knowledge, which is only in a few cases extended through external literature, mainly research articles and reports written by specialized foreign scholars (xxix–xxxiv). For example, on dialects and usage (xiii), a set of abbreviations is introduced to ease classifications. Here, the abbreviation “Dial” refers to “Dialectical, that is, non-Yuàn (or Yuàn but different from Kàm Ràw’s variant).” This means that due to the entire concept, Kàm Ràw’s contribution is taken as the focus variant of which further derivations or variants exist. This might be not entirely correct in the social and cultural practice of a people living dispersed in a wider area even at the time when Kàm Ràw was one of its actual representatives between 1938 and 1972. However, the consistency in how this concept is realized makes up for this and helps the reader to put oneself into the role of this one observer and the time in which he observed life, learned to practice it, and processed the resulting knowledge. The dictionary seems to be, therefore, a detailed cultural description of the Kammu Yuàn in Southern Luang Namtha province of Laos through the lens of one very attentive and educated individual whose interest in researching his own culture was successfully nurtured by special circumstances in his later ex-regional life and the relationship with his research colleagues.

The dictionary consists of a few very useful features, such as compact information on kinship, village structure, and life, and agricultural calendars in a section following the introduction “About the Dictionary.” The material for these sections derives from previous individual studies that the four authors contributed to this joint undertaking; one of the earliest contributions is already over thirty years old (see LINDELL at al. 1982). Further, some concise paragraphs help to understand

basic principles of the Kammu language, its phonology and orthography, syntax, morphology, and word classes, as well as Tai loanwords. The tables for Lao and Lü transliteration supplemented by IPA symbols are important because they enable speakers of Lao or Lü to relate better to the occasionally difficult way of writing in this somewhat language-laboratory style. The practical use of this writing style was first explained in LUNDSTRÖM and TAYANIN (2006).

The main body of the dictionary is well designed and considers all necessary types of information needed for word types, loanwords, reduplicatives, pair words, dialects, and classifiers for nouns. The dictionary entries also include references, especially marked examples, and in some cases encyclopedic information and illustrations. These illustrations are worth noting since more than three hundred of them are drawings made by Kàm Ràw, with a few by his sons. Most of the drawings show working tools (I counted 104), followed by various animals. Drawings of traps, musical instruments, and house constructions share an equal amount of visual representation (34 to 38 drawings). This is interesting in that it shows a similar degree of attention paid to them as well as the estimated intelligibility of the various items. Regarding plants, standard writings on descriptions and agricultural context have been used, and thus only very few plants—usually the classical field of encyclopedic drawings—are depicted. However, the visual Kammu Yuàn world appearing through the dictionary's illustrations is again a view seen through a one-man window. It contributes to the dictionary's layout as a dense personal report enriched through some thematic studies.

The main body of the dictionary is generally characterized by a mixed mode of lexical and encyclopedic entries that appear in a rather synchronic way, thus reflecting the relatively short time frame in which data were collected. Taking the word list as an indicator of weighing lexical and/or encyclopedic relevance, the entries reveal a congruency to the long-term research project conducted by the four authors at the Department of Linguistics and Phonetics, Lund University, Sweden, concerning the Kammu people in northern Southeast Asia. Though narrowed down to the Kammu Yuàn and the given time frame of lexical collections, a quite clear distribution of focus terms regarding language, culture, and experience becomes apparent. Culture in itself is again divided into extensive entries on folklore, especially orally transmitted literature; music—less intense but still remarkably distinct—especially on musical instruments and their production and use; excerpts on musical genres that have already been widely discussed in a previous publication (LUNDSTRÖM 2010); and finally religion, including religious activities such as portrayals of spirits and spirit-related ceremonies. The accounts given in these entries are indeed highly interesting because of the subjective input made by the informant. They do not appear as being universally applicable to all Kammu and to all times.

The dictionary, therefore, is mainly referential since normative and diachronic entries cannot be the main purpose. Some entries dealing with folklore and religious culture give a good account of what referential means. For example, the word *tá* means, among others, “belonging to a totem group”—the encyclopedic explanation (339) describes how totem groups relate to each other and also men-

tions that members of a totem group do not eat the name-giving animal of their own totem group. This taboo had diverse functions in organizing the agricultural production of a village that must have been of mutual benefit in the past, and this was known to Kàm Ràw. Today, however, these taboos may not work anymore since large groups of workers take meals together and depend on the canteen's menu of the day, for example when building greenhouses or transport infrastructure. Also, children, who attend schools outside their village, cannot keep to rules of their totem group anymore. Another example is the *kítɔɔŋ* (114), which might have been a useful set of rhythmically beaten bamboo tubes that were once used to guide important visitors into the village. Today, a mobile phone is used in most cases to ensure the completion of preparatory works prior to arrival. Other signaling instruments are often replaced by simple police whistles since the mellow sound of a buffalo horn can easily be overheard along a modern roadside.

It is up to the user to add experiences to the entries or to take the dictionary as an essential report of the language-culture-experience state of the Kammu Yuàn between the 1940s–1970s. The final and important question is, to what extent were prospective users considered in the long process of putting this dictionary together? As mentioned in the introduction, this dictionary was preceded by another Kammu-Lao dictionary produced in 1994 (SVANTESSON et al. 1994). This dictionary is widely used among Kammu and Lao people working in the north of Laos. The words, as Svantesson says, were written in a dialect-neutral script based on the Lao alphabet (viii). Due to this fact, users of the dictionary were given the freedom to “dialectize” the entries or to derive word variants without being burdened with complementary explanations.

The dictionary at hand does seemingly not allow for this type of lexical appropriation or encyclopedic extension since the view of a real individual is the basis of knowledge provided. The strengths and the uniqueness of the dictionary are at the same time its weak points. When distributing this dictionary in a similar way as the preceding dictionary, there is a potential for inflicting interpretative or other-directed views on the past, as if undertaking a journey into a described history that could have been different for the real communities concerned.

Nevertheless, interesting and detailed information is given in the key areas of the dictionary. The rich appendix, which includes maps, geographical names, a comprehensive index of songs, prayers and sayings, measures, plants, animals, village life, and concluding with an English index, is undoubtedly worth studying. The dictionary might be of special interest to those who are involved in various types of fieldwork, onsite data collection, and academic approaches to cultural description. Last but not least, the dictionary is the product of a scholarly team that pursued their long-term goal without compromising the outcome, and thus it will be very welcomed by readers.

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