

CHAPTER 5

NORTHERN THAI CULTURAL THEMES

5.1 Introduction

Language and culture are intimately and inextricably linked to one another. Language both reflects and is affected by its cultural context. To be relevant, any given message must have some connection to the cultural context and systems of meaning of the hearer. As Stubbs (1983:8) states:

On the one hand, ... there is no use of language which is not embedded in the culture; on the other hand, there are no large scale relationships between language and society which are not realized, at least partly, through verbal interaction. In Goodenough's (1964) famous formulation: '...a society's culture consists of whatever one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members, and to do so in any role that they accept for themselves.' Culture is 'what everyone knows' and part of this knowledge is conversational competence. The general vision is of culture as comprising interlocking systems of meaning.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine some of the cultural information contained in Mae Laa's discourses. This information will be examined in connection with the overall structure of her stories.

A useful tool for cultural analysis is the idea of themes. According to Opler (1945:199) a theme is "a postulate or proposition, declared or applied, and usually controlling behavior or stimulus activity, which is tacitly approved or openly promoted in a society."

Many of the cultural themes in Mae Laa's stories are indicated or highlighted through various linguistic devices, including seeming alteration of the normal course of the story line and the use of certain particles. Perhaps more interesting from a

sociolinguistic point of view are the times when cultural information is not highlighted; it is at these points where the author is drawing upon her presuppositions as to what the audience already knows about Northern Thai culture. As Stubbs (1983:30) states,

Discourse analysis must be concerned with ways in which information is selected, formulated and conveyed between speakers; or alternatively assumed to be known and shared knowledge, taken for granted, and not selected at all. It is therefore concerned, not just with whether statements are true or false, but with states of information, and differential access to information. Part of a speaker's task is to understand his hearers, what they know already, and what they expect and want to hear. Such points immediately make clear the importance of concepts such as information focus, and given and new information.

This interplay of explicitly revealed themes and implicit, or assumed shared themes is crucial to communication between the narrator and the audience.

Konrad Kingshill (1991:11) poses seven cultural themes that pervade the Northern Thai world view. These themes, listed below, work together to shape the world view and social life of village dwellers in Northern Thailand.

1. Utility
2. Profit
3. Fun
4. Individuality
5. Communal Responsibility
6. "Do good, receive good--Do evil, receive evil"
7. Playing it safe

All seven of these themes are manifested in Mae Laa's stories--in fact, a description of a single event may often reveal all seven themes! Therefore, these cultural themes

serve as a framework to investigate the interweaving of culture and discourse structure.¹⁸

5.2 Cultural Themes

5.2.1 Utility and Profit

According to Kingshill (1991:7), “Regardless of tradition, the villagers seem to govern their actions by what is expedient for them at any given moment.” Many observations of Mae Laa’s lifestyle prove that she and her friends are entrepreneurs-- they will readily adopt a new method or procedure, if it gives promise of producing valuable results. Even if someone is opposed to taking part in or giving approval of a task, he may tend to change his mind if he discovers that profit may be a possibility.

Therefore, if a task will bring profit, it will be done, but if the villager sees no immediate return on his investment of time, labor, or money, he or she may decide to abandon the task. Naturally, this tendency will vary from person to person and cannot be assumed to be the primary motivation for every action, nevertheless, it is a prominent cultural theme. Mae Laa expresses these themes in many parts of her stories, especially in the topics of brideprice and marketing goods.

5.2.1.1 Practicality of Engagement

The first example of the profit/utility theme is in the peak of “My Life,” when Mae Laa’s father gives Ai Muak his consent to marry Laa. Her father is not explicitly portrayed as being happy about the love they share or what a good son-in-law Ai

¹⁸Some themes (such as utility and profit) have been grouped together for investigation and discussion because they overlap in Mae Laa’s stories.

Muak will be. Though he may be quite happy with Mae Laa's choice in a husband, he does not explicitly state this because it is not appropriate to express one's feelings about such personal issues. However, at the time of his consent, he does explicitly state, "You can have (marry) her. There is no one to work the fields." The marriage of his youngest will provide him with another worker and as a result, a lightened load and higher profit.

(1) "My Life" Lines 169-172 ¹⁹

'So he came and asked my father first. My father said, "OK, you can have her." "You can have my child," (he said it) like this, right? "There is no one to work the rice fields," (he said it) like this.'

Mae Laa's father's answer also reflects the responsibilities and obligations to family which are especially prominent in the case of the youngest. It is expected that the youngest daughter will live with her parents, even after marriage, so that she can care for them in their old age. For this reason, the youngest child receives more inheritance than the rest. So Mae Laa's father's answer to Ai Muak reflects this implicit cultural norm--if Ai Muak wishes to marry Mae Laa, that automatically means that he will move in with her parents and work for them.

The second example from "Paa Daa and Lung Too" is also related to the process of engagement. Though Daa's parents were opposed to her marrying Too because he was a Christian, in the end he was able to convince them with a promise of a high brideprice--three hundred baht. This high brideprice was an indication of Too's love for Daa and his ability to care for her responsibly in the future. Their initially intense feelings of opposition based on religious differences faded in comparison to the utility

¹⁹ For the purpose of this topic of cultural themes, examples are given using the free translation only unless there is something significant in the Northern Thai form that needs to be revealed.

and profit connected with Lung Too's promise. The profit/utility themes were not only fulfilled by the brideprice of 300 baht but also by the assurance of Daa's secure future.

(2) "Paa Daa and Lung Too" Lines 22-23, 29-41

'She was waiting for her parents, because they did not want to allow her to be with "Uncle" Too, you know. They wouldn't allow it because he was a Christian, like that...."Uncle" Too went and asked, "Phat, Phat, go ask and see what they say." "Uncle" Too said, "If I can get permission to marry her, I will not forget your graciousness (I will pay you back). I will help you with anything I can," he said it like that, you know. *"Uncle" Too was a rich man, right? (nǎ?)*

And then "Uncle" Phat went and asked "Aunt" Daa's father, "Grandfather (term of respect), how much do you want for the brideprice?" The brideprice, the gold and money, the brideprice--how much would he want, like that, you know. In those days three hundred baht had a lot of value. And so he (her father) said, "If he is really sure, then tell him to bring me three hundred baht," like that. "Then I will allow them to get married," (he said) like that, you know. *In the end "Uncle" Too had a lot of money. He had a lot of money, right? (nǎ?)* He then said, "Okay, three hundred." And they then got married.'

The profit motive is portrayed structurally in the story with the use of repetition, and the particle *nǎ?* (see 3.3.1.2). Mae Laa repeats three times that "Uncle" Too was a rich man (in italics), following each statement with the particle *nǎ?*, which portrays a desire for agreement from the audience. These structural features emphasize the fact that even though he was a Christian, Daa's parents agreed to the marriage because Too was a rich man. Mae Laa's desire for audience agreement stresses the fact that according to Mae Laa, profit and utility are acceptable motivations for changing one's mind.

Example 3 is also related to brideprice, but has a different twist. The themes of utility and profit mix with the Thai value of 'saving face', resulting in Mae Cum's marriage

to a man she initially did not love. When he began to pursue her seriously, she teased him, saying the only way she would marry him was if he brought her parents a brideprice of two thousand baht. She thought surely he would never be able to come up with this huge sum of money, thus her refusal would be final. However, he returned with the money and the cultural norms deemed that she had to marry him. Though the implicit theme of ‘saving face’ was important to this decision, I would venture to say that the incredible amount of profit to the parents was also a factor.

(3) “Mae Cum” Lines 8-19

And then there was the brideprice that was given to Grandfather Too (our father)--*two thousand baht*, even back then, you know (*nǎa*)! It was *two thousand* because Mae Cum really did not really want to marry him, like that (*ʔii nǎæ*). She didn’t love him very much. She had played around with him saying, “If you have *two thousand*, then come and take me (*tǎʔ*)!” *In the end, he really did come.* (laughter) *In the end, he really did have it,* obviously (*kǎa*)! She felt remorseful because at first she thought that he didn’t have the money--that is what she said. *But in the end he did have it!* (laughter) So they got married, obviously. Later on she grew to love him, that’s what she said.

(4) “Mae Cum” Lines 52-55

She’d answer, “If he has *two thousand*, he can come and take me” (*nǐʔ*) (she said) like that. *In the end, she exclaimed, “He really has it!!” He had the two thousand baht.* (laughter) It was necessary for her to marry him, obviously (*kǎa*).

As can be observed above, Mae Laa uses abundant repetition to structurally mark this section of the story as not only humorous, but packed with cultural meaning. The phrases (in italics) depicting the amount of money and the fact that Mae Cum’s suitor really had it are stated again and again, stressing the cultural reasons why Mae Cum was obliged to marry her suitor. Not only was she forced to *hǎksǎa nǎa* (‘save face’) but the amount of the brideprice could prove to be quite beneficial to the whole family! And perhaps more than that, his loyalty to his word guaranteed a good future

for Mae Cum. Not only was he trustworthy, but he was prepared financially to provide for Mae Cum and their future family.

Repetition is used at phrase level and paragraph level as Mae Laa tells the story in Lines 8-19, then flashes back to it again in Lines 52-55. This episode is repeated in order to emphasize the novelty of it as well as the cultural themes that undergirded the turn of events.

Mae Laa also employs a variety of particles to highlight this funny episode and its cultural implications. Mae Laa uses the particle *kāa* (see 3.3.2.3.2) to indicate the obviousness of Mae Cum's obligation to marry her suitor. The use of this particle portrays her assumptions that the audience would understand the strength of the obligation to marry.

5.2.1.2 Market Forces

Because Mae Laa's main occupation through the years has been as food merchant, most every story mentions what she sold, where she sold it, and how much profit she made. She states explicitly that when selling was profitable, she would sell even more, and when it produced low profit, she would try something else, such as changing locations or selling a different food. The following examples show how the cultural motive of profit has affected her habits, resulting in her status as a good seller.

Example 5 shows Mae Laa's willingness to abandon a selling venture once it proved to be less than profitable. She made a lot of profit during the Thai New Year festivities because many people came home from the cities and brought other city friends with them. After everyone partied until they were out of money, they went back to normal life. Everyone was out of money and could not afford to eat out for

the next few months. For this reason, Mae Laa's profit decreased and she decided to stay around the house and sell desserts in the morning market instead.

(5) "When Tom Was Young" Lines 67-69

'There weren't many people (customers) anymore, after New Year was over, so I came to stay around the house. I would mop the house, gather the firewood, and straighten up around the house. And so then I would sell goods in the morning market.'

Example 6 shows the profit motivation clearly as Mae Laa starts a new selling venture after her divorce. She invested in equipment and ingredients to sell papaya salad at the intersection, and on her first day, she made fifty baht. She states that because her first day was such a success, she decided to keep on selling indefinitely. If it had not been such a profitable day, she may have opted to try something else--either a different location, different foods, or a completely different type of work.

(6) "When Tom Was Young" Lines 30-41

'I went and started selling on the first of January; I started to sell things then, you know. I sold things at the intersection. And so then on the first day I sold I got fifty baht! It sold really well, you know. I sold papaya salad (*tǎmsōm*) for one or two baht a plate. And I sold noodles with sauce (*nōmsēn*) for one or two baht a bowl. Sweet desserts (*k^hǒŋwǎan*) were one baht a bowl. I got fifty baht! Wow! I sold so well!! I felt happy hearted, right? The next day I thought I would sell again, for sure, you know.

Mae Laa uses a variety of linguistic devices--exclamations, particles, and descriptive phrases--to emphasize this positive, profitable event in her history as a food merchant. The exclamations *?úu* and *t^hoo* (see 4.6.2) show Mae Laa's excitement and surprise at the exorbitant profit she made her first day of selling. *?úu* is extra high in intonation as well (see 4.2.1), which expresses Mae Laa's intensely positive feeling about the high profit.

t^höo follows the word *müan* which is part of the phrase *k^hǎaj müan*, which literally means “to sell fun.” This very common phrase could be said to correlate with the cultural theme of “fun” (see 5.2.4) in that making a profit would be a definite prerequisite to having a fun day as a merchant.

The particles *nǎa* and *nó?* (see 3.3.1.1 and 3.3.1.2) are used as audience involvement devices, stressing to the hearers the importance of Mae Laa’s first day of selling. These particles emphasize her description of this momentous day--a new beginning as a single mother after a painful divorce. The determiner *níi* points out the specific amount--fifty baht--of her high profit. This high profit, comparable to a profit of about 300 baht these days, was a sign that from that day forward, she would be able to make it on her own.

Example 7 shows Mae Laa’s industriousness and desire for profit as she sets different prices for different customers. If the customer was an outsider (thus unaware of prices), and/or appeared to be wealthy, then Mae Laa would charge them five baht per bowl of noodles, compared to the standard price of two baht.

(7) “When Tom Was Young” Lines 124-126

‘We charged three, four, and, at the most, five baht per bowl, isn’t that right (*nó?*)? The five baht price was for those people from places far away--the really rich people, you know (*nǎa*). They would come buy it for five baht a bowl.’

The rationale for this behavior is that if a customer is able to pay and willing as well, then why not make a profit from their ignorance? The outsider feels that five baht is a good price (compared to city prices), thus is satisfied with the interaction, so both parties are pleased. Her attitude about this profitable interaction is stressed by the

use of the particles *nǎa* and *nǎ?* (see 3.3.1.1 and 3.3.1.2), both seeking agreement from the audience.

5.2.2 Communal responsibility

Being responsible to one's community is a high value in Northern Thai daily life. Kingshill (1991:10) describes the theme of communal responsibility as "arising out of the utility and profit motives." A person's self-interest is not abandoned when fulfilling his or her communal duties--instead he or she profits in the long run by helping someone else in their time of immediate need. Everyone knows that if they help in a time of need, they will be helped in their time of need as well. As Kingshill (1991:10) elaborates,

When a villager prepares for a house-blessing ceremony, a wedding, or a funeral, others will stream to his house for days before the event to help with preparing food, decorations, and gifts for the monks. When a man is sick, others come to his house every night, to help with whatever is needed while he is incapacitated.

This cultural theme is one of the most dominant in Mae Laa's stories, yet I would venture to specify responsibilities to the family as the most important part of the community in terms of loyalty. Mae Laa's stories describe her loyalties and obligations primarily to family, and then to wider society. Mae Laa's roles as the youngest child are implicit as her relationship with other family members is described in terms of her "place" in the family. On a broader level, Mae Laa's stories reveal her place in the wider social hierarchy, as she interacts with those on a "higher rung of the status ladder."

5.2.2.1 Duties as a young child

Mae Laa's childhood consisted of well-defined activities and responsibilities, as expressed in the story "My Life." As the youngest of nine children (four of whom died of smallpox), her main duty as a child was to take care of the house while her parents and older siblings worked in the rice fields. Potter (1977:39) describes the expected role of the youngest daughter as observed in Chiang Mai village:

She is a hard worker when she wants to be. Because she is the youngest, everyone else is entitled to give her directions and orders, and if she wants to be good and polite, she must do as they tell her.

Mae Laa's daily chores included sweeping, mopping, dipping water out of the stream, filling the water jars, feeding the animals, and pounding the rice.

(8) "My Life" Lines 44-52, 60-67, 83-85

'So my older siblings would all go to the rice fields together, you know (*nǎa*). They left me at home to mind the house. They told me, "Whatever happens, you stay at home and clean the house." When they left, I would sweep the house, mop the house, and dip the water out. In those days we would carry the water in buckets hanging from a pole (*nǎa*) balanced on our shoulders, you know (*nǎa*). After I dipped enough water to fill the water jars, then I could go play (*?i nǎæ*)...I could go play with my friends. That is what they said, you know (*nǎa*). I could go play with my friends.

...When it was about three o'clock, I would return home. They had taught me, "About three o'clock, come back home, you hear?" I would come to feed the chickens, and they told me to pound the chilis to make the paste ahead of time and then wait for them. And they would come home and make the food, you know. I really didn't know how to cook the food, so they had me pound the chili paste and get the food all ready for them to cook (*nǎæ*). I would wait for them like that (*nǎæ*).

... Then when we woke up in the mornings you know (*nǎa*), I would pound the rice, you know (*nǎa*). I would pound the rice to eat. It was milled rice, you know (*nǎa*).'

When she was finished with her chores, she was free to play with her friends around the village. Therefore, her duties were much lighter than those of her elder siblings, who worked the fields all day.

The most prominent structural marking of this important cultural information is the repeated use of the particle *nǎa*. This particle, as described in 3.3.1.1, functions to involve the audience by eliciting their agreement. Because Mae Laa is describing her responsibilities to the family, which are very important culturally, she uses *nǎa* to emphasize to the audience that these accounts of her daily life are not just memories, but are important parts of her role in the Northern Thai theme of communal responsibility. Her use of *nǎa* also stresses the fact that she was a good youngest daughter.

5.2.2.2 Duties as an adult

Family pressures were unique for Mae Laa in that her life as a child was pretty easy (compared to her siblings), yet her long term obligations were much more binding. As the youngest child, Mae Laa was expected to remain with her parents until they died, taking care of their every need. This expectation was initially fulfilled when she married, as she and Ai Muak lived with her parents for five years.

The strength of this cultural norm is evidenced in Example 9--Mae Laa's reaction to Ai Muak's desire to move out of her parents' house. Mae Laa tells of her parents' grieving as well as her own at the possibility of this betrayal of familial responsibility.

(9) "My Life" Lines 209-219

'After four years, Tom's father said that he wanted to be independent. He "wanted to descend," (*ʔi nǎeʔ*) like that. In Kammuang this one, (that I speak), they call it "to descend." He wanted us to "descend" and build another house of

our own. It's called "to descend," like that, right? (*ʔii nɔ̃ʔ*) And so then I said, "If you want to 'descend' you need to go ask my parents first." My parents didn't have anyone else to care for them, right? (*ʔii nɔ̃ʔ*) So then he asked them. My parents cried, you know (*nǎa*). They didn't want to allow us to come here (to a new house), you know (*nǎa*). To tell you the truth, I cried as much as they did. I didn't want to move out either, you know (*nǎa*).'

After her parents gave permission for them to move out, Mae Laa found another relative to replace her at her parents' house. She felt responsible to find someone to take her place as the caregiver for her parents.

(10) "My Life" Lines 220-224

'So then Basom, a younger relative who came to build this for us, obviously (*kǎa*). He went to replace us there. He was in his teenage years, this one. He was an adolescent boy, you know (*nǎa*). We told Basom to go live there, like that, right (*ʔia nɔ̃ʔ*)?'

After five years of living independently, Mae Laa and Ai Muak divorced. In personal conversations, Mae Laa often links her break with responsibility as the reason for her "bad luck" with Ai Muak. She laments that if she had fulfilled her duties well, maybe they would still be happily married. After the divorce, Mae Laa and her daughter immediately moved back in with her parents. As a result, her parents gave her the inheritance and implored her to stay with them until they died.

(11) "My Life" Lines 255-261

'In 2522 I returned to go live with them again. When I went to live there they then gave me an inheritance of the house and fields--those fields I told you I could sell for more than one million baht, those ones, you know (*nǎa*). They gave me this inheritance. They gave it to me. So that I would care for them "until they die, until they became dust" completely. "Until the end," (they said it) like that (*ʔii nǎæ*). This is what they said, you know (*nǎa*).'

Indeed, Mae Laa took care of both parents until the end. Her father died soon after she moved back into their house, but her mother lived even longer than Mae Laa's

second husband! Even when Mae Laa remarried a government official from Chiang Rai city, she remained at her parents' house. Her new husband lived in her parents' house until after her father's death, after which he built a new house for Mae Laa, her mother, and himself.

All three examples of Mae Laa's role as an adult within the family are marked once again by the particle *nǎa*. As stated in the previous section, this particle stresses to the audience the importance of fulfilling the cultural themes of community and family responsibility, as well as highlighting the fact that Mae Laa was a good youngest daughter.

5.2.2.3 Hierarchy, Social Prestige, and Reciprocity

As mentioned briefly in Section 2.2.2.4, Mae Cum, Mae Laa's elder sister, plays a major role in Mae Laa's life. Mae Laa has a tremendous amount of respect for her elder sister. This is manifest not only in many of her stories, but also in her daily life. In the two years I have known Mae Laa, I have observed that she always defers to Mae Cum in decision making--from major issues such as whether to sell land to minor decisions such as what food to fix for dinner. This is exemplified in the story "When Tom Was Young" in which Mae Cum encourages Mae Laa to continue selling.

(12) "When Tom Was Young" Lines 42-48

'And so then the next day Mae Cum came to visit and she said "Wow!" She came to visit me at the intersection and said, "You are selling so well!" I said, "Mae Cum, yesterday I got fifty baht!" like that, right? And so then Mae Cum said, "Oh, you should sell a lot!" So then she said that, you know. "You shouldn't go visit anyone or go anywhere," she said. "Just sell things here all the time!" she said like that, right? And so I sold things ever since the first day that I went to Chiang Rai to invest in equipment.

This admiration of the elder, wealthier, and socially prestigious sibling is also shown in Mae Laa's mention of Mae Cum's presence at certain events. It is interesting that none of the other siblings are mentioned at all--even the eldest brother Ai and the eldest sister Khan. The following example tells of the merit-making ceremony she and Lang San had before they moved into their new house.

(13) "My Life" Lines 292-298

'In March we 'went up' (had the merit-making ceremony). We had one hundred invitations printed. We invited all relatives and friends. We had one hundred invitations printed. And so the relatives on Lung San's side from Sankong; they also came, you know. Mae Cum's household also came. We ate together and had a party as we ate together yesterday, you know.'

Mae Laa specifies that Lang San's relatives came and that Mae Cum's household came as well. Both Lang San and Mae Cum were high up on the social ladder, and the fact that they and their relatives came to the ceremony gave great honor to Mae Laa. Indeed, as Klausner (1983:225-226) states so well:

There is an acute sense of hierarchy that pervades all Thai personal relationships. There are well defined patterns of behavior required for both parties in the symbiotic relationships patron-client, teacher-pupil, elder-younger, boss-worker, and master-servant...The superior is expected to give moral support. The subordinate looks to his superior for praise and attention. Often the mere presence of a person of high status and prestige will give *kamlang jai* or 'strength of heart' to one on the lower rungs of the social status and power ladder.

In the story "Mae Cum," a reversal of expected kinship roles occurs as Mae Cum asks for Mae Laa's help in a time of crisis. As the youngest child, Mae Laa was always looked after by the older siblings. Though she had certain household duties, she would normally never be the one to turn to in times of crisis. The fact that Mae Cum asked her (instead of the other two sisters or older brother) to take over may have been a surprise to Mae Laa and certainly was a privilege.

This event was also an opportunity for Mae Laa to prove herself as a responsible adult. Mae Laa makes this explicit as she mentions Mae Cum's probable worries as to whether Mae Laa could really take care of her children for one month with only sixty baht to work with.

(14) "Mae Cum" Lines 141-146

'Mae Cum was in Chiang Mai [with her hospitalized husband]. She was worried, thinking, "The sixty baht that I gave to Laa...sixty baht to care for two more children," (she was thinking) like this, right? "For the children to go to school every day--I don't know if that money is enough or not?" (Mae Cum was thinking) And so I was pretty clever. I took that money and invested it in selling goods, of course.'

Mae Laa defends herself, informing the audience of her capability by frankly implying that if she weren't so smart the whole crisis could have been much worse. Mae Laa's individuality is shown by her decision to invest the sixty baht and by her hard work to make profit for the children to use at school. She was a "self-starter," taking the initiative to support her kin by selling food for profit. Her underlying motivations were a sense of communal responsibility to her elder as well as the assurance that her good deeds would be rewarded in the future.

Thus, the theme "Do good-receive good; do evil-receive evil", which is discussed in greater detail in the next section, intermingles with family responsibility to strengthen Mae Laa's motivations. Though Mae Laa does not explicitly tell the audience about the "compensation" for this outpouring of help for Mae Cum, the implication of her helping was that Mae Cum later took care of Mae Laa's daughter when she attended a junior high school near Mae Cum's house. Because the school was too far from Mae Laa's house, Mae Cum offered to care for Tom during the school week and then take

Tom home on the weekends. This unending reciprocity between family and friends is a hallmark of Thai and Northern Thai culture.

5.2.3 Cause and Effect

Three themes posed by Kingshill-- individuality, “do good, receive good--do evil, receive evil”, and playing it safe-- can all be grouped together as norms which are based on the idea of cause and effect. These three themes are examined together as they emerge in Mae Laa’s stories, specifically manifested in examples of the common practice of merit making.

Individuality is emphasized strongly in many facets of Buddhist teachings, and is the basic presupposition behind acts of merit-making. As Kingshill (1991:10) states:

Individuality is reinforced by the Buddhist emphasis on self-reliance. Every action by an individual causes a reaction in his future life, every cause has its effect; hence, the future is determined solely by our present, individual conduct.

This assumption unfolds and takes the form of many different actions which are performed in order to “receive good” and to play it safe. A person will do good and play it safe because he believes that he is ultimately responsible for his eternal fate.

The theme “do good-receive good; do evil-receive evil” is based on a very common axiom. This phrase is used in everyday conversation to summarize or comment on the various results of people’s actions. It is most commonly used to justify why something bad happened to someone. For example, Mae Laa once told me the story of why she was not allowed to attend school. She said that the headmaster was a cruel man who did not really care about the students’ learning. Her first day of school, he saw that her eye was not normal, called her a cripple, and told her to go

home and not come back. She never went back to school and thus never had the opportunity to learn to read and write.

When I asked what happened to the headmaster, she answered that he died suddenly of a brain tumor a few years later. She followed her answer with this axiom: “do good-receive good; do evil-receive evil.” She firmly believed that his tragic death was a result of his cruelty to her and others. Her reasoning exemplifies what Kingshill (1991:10) calls the idea of “group control” in the following statement:

More than anything else, behavior is based on this axiom. This provides a certain amount of reassurance for persons to know that if they do something evil, they can always extricate themselves by doing a greater amount of good. At the same time, it provides an effective means of group control by promising inevitable punishment in a person’s own life, whether present or future.

The idea of “playing it safe” represents a combination of the Buddhist emphasis on taking the “middle way” and the pragmatic theme of utility in a way that encourages people to “keep all their bases covered.” It is always better to make a little merit doing whatever than not to make merit. When people come to the door raising funds for a new temple or some sort of social organization (such as the local woman’s foundation), at least a small donation will be given. To refuse would be tempting fate. At the same time, the pragmatic aspect of “playing it safe” produces an outlook that is open to various routes of gaining merit (including non-Buddhist routes), while essentially remaining non-committal (non-extreme). Again, one’s destiny is in one’s own hands (individuality). I often heard Mae Laa and other villagers referring to potentially dangerous situations, telling how their “goodness” protected them from harm--the ultimate safety is in making merit, as an individual and in reference to fulfilling family obligations.

All three of these themes have been observed in examples already given for previously mentioned themes, for example, Mae Laa's individual initiative in helping care for her sister's family (communal theme), the reward of which was Mae Cum's helping Mae Laa's daughter later on.

As for playing it safe, I have observed other members of Mae Laa's family try many different methods in seeking an end to illness. Mae Caj, another sister, had been ill for several months. She took medicine from the hospital in Chiang Rai, tried some local herbal medicine that a friend suggested, made merit at the temple, and placated the spirits of the household for protection. When she did not show any signs of improvement, Mae Cum suggested hiring a special witch doctor who was famous for "cutting off" the spirits of the deceased who played havoc on those still living. The family agreed that Mae Caj had not improved because the spirit of her deceased husband was coming to take her with him. So the witch doctor came to Huaj San, performed the ceremony, and Mae Caj recovered. Her recovery thus depended on what she herself did (placating spirits), good deeds (merit making), and the pragmatics of trying several different medicines.

As mentioned previously, making merit is perceived as the most sure way to play it safe as well as to benefit from doing good. It is individualistic as well--as it is a personal decision, whose primary benefit lies with the decision maker.

The most prominent description of merit-making in Mae Laa's stories is in Examples 15-17 about the death of her parents and her second husband. She mentions all three deaths, that she made merit for them, and then concludes in Example 18 by saying that she has finished making merit for them all and everything is in order now. Her merit making not only hoped to result in a good reincarnation for her parents, but gave

her the security of knowing that she had fulfilled her role as the youngest and would be rewarded accordingly.

- (15) “My Life” Lines 267-269 Death of father

sét mót. mǎæ kò? t^hambun pòj hǎa pǎn.
 finish completely mother conn. make merit celebration visit 3rd person
tǎw dǎj pǎn síp pǐi
 until past part. to be ten year

‘(He) was completely finished. I then made merit, did the celebration for him. (I made merit, etc.) for the full ten years.’...

- (16) “My Life” Lines 302-303 Death of Lang San

tǎaj pǎn pǎn maléŋ pɔt
 die 3rdpers to be cancer lung

‘(Lang San) died. He had lung cancer.’

- (17) “My Life” Lines 312-314 Death of mother

mǎæ ʔúj tǎaj pǐi sǎam cét
 mother grandparent die year three seven
kamníi kò? sǎa sóp nǎŋ mǎæ ʔúj lǎæw móot kò?
 and then conn.cremate corpse etc. mother grandparent finish completely conn.

k^hõp sǎam duan pǎaj síp wan k^hõp lôj wan nǎ?
 until three month more.than ten day until hundred day [pt: ‘isn’t that right?]

mǎæ k^hǎw kò? t^hambun ləj lüat pòj hǎa mǎæ
 mother(I) 3pers. conn.make.merit and.so to.pass.on.by celebration mother

ʔúj tuaj ʔii nǎ?
 grandparent also like this [pt: sign.]

‘Grandmother died in the year 2537. And so then Grandmother was finished being cremated, then we completed the three months plus ten days, and one hundred days. I then made merit and also had celebrations for Mae Uuj (Grandmother), like that.’

(18) “My Life” Lines 315-316--- Conclusion

lā? bádiaw nii liaplǝj paj móot

then this time this in order go completely

t^hambun t^hamtaan nǎj hũu pǝn lææw móot lā?

make.merit give alms etc. give 3rdpers. finish completely already

nǎa

[pt: ‘you know’]

‘And now everything is completely in order. I have finished making merit, giving alms, etc. for them already, you know.’

Examples 15-18 demonstrate the repeated use of the culturally related phrases *t^hambun pǝj hǎa*, *t^hambun læj lüat pǝj hǎa*, and *t^hambun t^hamtaan*. These phrases are repeated and used to conclude all three deaths, providing cohesion to the story and reinforcing the strong cultural value of making merit. Mae Laa also uses the particles *nǎa* and *nǎ?* to reinforce the information she is sharing with the audience.

Possibly related to merit making would be Mae Laa’s openness to appealing to deity of other faiths. This is illustrated quite clearly in Mae Laa’s plea to the audience to pray to God for her. She is not a Christian and would probably not pray to God herself, but implores the audience to do this for her. This is a clear example of ‘playing it safe’ by seeking blessings through any possible channel. The things that she requests are typical of Buddhist blessing formulas--to live comfortably and to have good health:

(19) “My Life” Lines 320-324

‘And well, how do we know how long our lives will last, right? I ask that you children help by praying for me, right? Please pray for God to bless me, so that I will live happily and comfortably, OK? Ask God to keep me from sickness, fever, pain, etc., OK? (laughter) Please pray that God will allow me to live comfortably.’

5.2.4 Fun

Tourist brochures on Thailand often make light of the fact that the Thai use the same word for ‘work’ as they do for ‘party’-- *ɲaan*. Northern Thai people will try to make even the most mundane activities fun. Whether this means racing to plant rice and throwing mud at the slowest planter, joking with friends at a market even if you are not making much profit, or gossiping and joking while preparing food for a funeral, *müan*²⁰ ‘fun’ is always something to be strived for.

müan also provides a break from the pressures of daily life. As Klausner (1983:240) notes for Central Thai society:

In a society where individualism constantly has to sublimate itself to the demands of social place, *sanuk* ‘fun’ provides a respite, a release from the socially enforced constraints and demands imposed by the acceptance of one’s place in the social hierarchy. One is continually according respect, deference, diffidence toward those of higher status, seniority, and rank. *Sanuk* provides welcome relief from the tensions, pressures, and frustrations attendant on this never-ending accommodation to power and hierarchy.

The story “Games We Played” describes in detail the different games Mae Laa played with her friends during the day. These fun times consisted of playing market, swimming in the stream, playing “beauty shop,” and other outdoor games. It is interesting to take note of the links between games that Mae Laa played as a child and her occupations today. She is a regular market seller and does hair permanents on the side. In both work settings, Mae Laa thoroughly enjoys visiting and joking around with her fellow merchants and customers. This link between fun and work is stated by Mae Laa, as she makes the connections between “practising through playing” as a

²⁰ *sanuk* in Central Thai

child and her choice of occupations today, both in the area of marketing and hair dressing.

(20) “Games We Played” Line 2

‘We would play market with our friends, therefore we are able to sell things at the market up until this time, obviously.’

(21) “Games We Played” Lines 58-63

‘And Mae Cum, she had studied to be a beautician before I did, you know. So if she and all the others went to the fields, I would steal her equipment and give my friends permanents. This is the reason that I caught on so fast when I went to study, you know. It only took me one or two months to learn, right? I was able to learn very fast. I learned so fast because I had already practiced beforehand, like that, right?’

One interesting, humorous glimpse into Mae Laa’s opinions about friendship is in her comparison of two friends, Nuansii and Juang. Nuansii is exalted as a “fun friend” because she is flexible--willing to go anywhere and eat anything. As for Juang, Mae Laa says that she is not much fun because she is negative about everything. She doesn’t like to eat noodles and doesn’t like to go anywhere because she gets carsick.

(22) “When Tom Was Young” Lines 165-186

‘She was a really close friend, that Nuansii, you know (*nǎa*). She was so good, and so honest! We were such good friends! We wrapped the sweets together you know (*nǎa*). We would go to the city or anywhere together. In those days we would meet together and go to the Huaj San intersection way over yonder, you know (*nǎa*). When we were finished we would get in a taxi truck and go together, you know (*nǎa*). If I said, “I want to get some really pretty clothes, or a pretty skirt,” we’d go together to the city over yonder to shop. Uhm, that one, you know (*nǎa*) --she was a true friend. If I said, “Do you want to go eat noodles?” she would go with me. She’d say, “Sure, I’ll go.” If I invited her to eat anything at all, she would eat it!

Juang, her older sister, that one, she doesn’t like to eat anything, you know (*nǎa*). That one, you know (*nǎa*). If you go with her it is not really fun. If I said, “Juang, do you want to go eat some noodles?” she would say, “Naw, I

don't like those, I don't like to eat noodles, I don't like them." She didn't even like to eat noodles with sauce (*k^hanǒm sēn*)! She doesn't like to eat anything, you know (*nǎa*). She also gets car sick. If she rides in a car she gets dizzy headed too! She doesn't like to eat anything at all, but Nuansii, this one, she will eat anything! Everywhere we went, we went together.'

This theme of 'fun' also is woven with the utility and profit themes-- if an activity is not convenient or does not promise any rewards, then it is not considered to be fun. If an event is convenient, profitable, and fun as well, then the participant will be fully satisfied. For example, Mae Laa's selling desserts at village festivals enfolds all three of these themes. She is quite adept at making sweets, thus the process is convenient for her. She makes a big profit because of her expertise at investing in inexpensive ingredients. Finally, when she sells with friends she has fun! Example 23 shows the interweaving of these various themes in one activity.

(23) "When Tom Was Young" Lines 92-131

'And if there were any type of parties or festivals, like that, you know (*nǎa*), the two of us would...the one whose name is Nuansii and whose house is inside the village, that one. The younger sister of Kong, you know (*nǎa*). We would go to sell together. We would carry our things in baskets over our shoulders. We would make the food at separate places, you know (*nǎa*). She would make food at her house and I would make it at my house here. Suppose there was a celebration in Muangluk village. (I would say) "Do you want to sell food together at the celebration? (She would say) "Uh huh, sure I'll go with you." We would get together and make noodles with sauce. Sometimes we would even make the noodles together, you know (*nǎa*). And we would divide up; sweet stringy desserts and layered desserts--whoever made one would carry that one and sell it. In time we would all be sold out--about three or four in the afternoon, all would be sold out. Sometimes we would go until four or five o'clock, you know (*nǎa*). We would do that, right (*nǎ?*)? If there were any celebrations or other occasions, we would go to all of them! We would carry our baskets on our shoulders and go to Pasang. The place that we sold the most, you know (*nǎa*)...I had the best day of selling goods at a monk's funeral. It was the monk of Pongpae village, you know (*nǎa*). There were so many people there! There were just tons of people there, and I carried my baskets there with

lots of goods in them, and the next day I prepared even more goods than before, like that, right (*nǎ?*)? I prepared to many things! Oh! That day I got over three hundred baht! We talked about this...We met each other and were so excited, right (*nǎ?*)? We talked. “Today we were so lucky.” “We got lots of money,” like this, you know (*nǎa*). We talked together, you know (*nǎa*). We charged three, four, and at the most five baht per bowl, isn’t that right? The five baht price was for those people from places far away--the really rich people, you know (*nǎa*). They would come buy it for five baht a bowl. They were not even to the time where they cremated the monk’s body, and I had already sold all of my goods! Oh! On our way home, we had fun talking together, right (*nǎ?*)? We wanted to make more money, of course. And so if there were any celebrations of any kind, we would go together like before, right (*nǎ?*)?

In both examples 22 and 23, the high value placed on fun is marked by several rhetorical devices. The abundant use of the particles *nǎa* and *nǎ?* stress Mae Laa’s desire for the audience to agree with her opinions about what types of friends and activities are fun. Evaluatory statements such as “good” vs. “bad” and “fun” vs. “not fun” also emphasize Mae Laa’s strong opinions about her friends and the profitable events that they attended together. Reported speech and exclamations, which are expressed with high pitch as Mae Laa quotes and characters and expresses her feelings, are rhetorical devices which Mae Laa uses to add vividness and entertainment value to the strong cultural theme of fun as expressed in this story.

5.3 Conclusion

Mae Laa’s stories provide many interesting insights into Northern Thai culture. The culture itself serves as a persistent backdrop to the texts; in order to understand the texts, one must understand something of the culture. On occasion, various cultural elements are highlighted through rhetorical devices, including the use of particles, reported speech and exclamations. All these cultural and linguistic elements combine to help give Mae Laa her village-wide reputation as a great story teller.