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Ṭawngkasuok: Traditional Sayings of the Hmar People

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Abstract

This research article analyzes 15 selected ṭawngkasuok, traditional sayings of the Hmar people, aiming to explore their relevance and societal context. Deep-rooted in Hmar culture, these sayings are repositories of their traditional wisdom and guidance. This study seeks to contextualize ṭawngkasuok from diverse cultural contexts by comparing them to analogous proverbs and sayings from various cultures, such as English, Chinese, Spanish, Arab, and African proverbs. Doing so sheds light on these conventional expressions' universal themes and traditional wisdom. Each ṭawngkasuok offers a window into the values and beliefs of the Hmar people. From the emphasis on hard work and perseverance to the importance of respect and resilience, these sayings reflect a society steeped in tradition yet adaptable to change. Furthermore, the study delves into the poetic resonance and linguistic nuances of ṭawngkasuok, highlighting their aesthetic appeal and cultural significance. In conclusion, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of ṭawngkasuok(s) as cultural artifacts, offering valuable insights into the rich fabric of Hmar tradition and society.

Keywords*: Hmar, Tawngkasuok, Sayings, Proverbs.*

Introduction

Ṭawngkasuok, translated as 'language spoken out of the mouth' and anglicized as *trong-ka-sook*, (is or) are old sayings (or adages) used by the Hmar people. To deconstruct the term "ṭawngkasuok" from the Hmar dialect, *'ṭawng'* means language (or dialect), *'ka'* means mouth, and *'suok'* means 'out of.' Its initial letter 'Ṭ,' a Latin character and an adopted consonant of the Hmar dialect or the larger Mizo group, gives it a 'tr' sound as in 'tree.' So, *ṭawngkasuok* should not be mispronounced as *tong-ka-sook*. On the other hand, Lallungawi (2022) writes that 'Ṭ' is pronounced with the tongue against the bars of the roof of the mouth and that colonial writers such as James Herbert Lorrain ('Pu Buanga') made a differentiation between 'Ṭ' and 'Tr' when introducing the consonants to the Hmar people. Baruah and Bapui (1996) writes that the Hmar language remained unwritten until the 1930s when an alphabet of

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25 Roman characters was adopted. He further writes that the Hmar language, or *ṭawng*, "uses diacritic marks such as a dot below the letter [t] to indicate its retroflex pronunciation".

Ṭawngkasuok may also be labeled a proverb (or sayings), which stood the tests of time (at least for the Hmar people). Chintya Winda et al. (2019) wrote that proverbs are "figures of speech… [that] seem to have stood the test of ages for their usefulness in modern society". Proverbs or old sayings, in a way, are embedded in conversations to help people understand more or to give advice to them, which were and still are relevant to that date. For instance, Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* employs numerous old sayings of the Umuofian society or, in the larger context, the Nigerian culture. Achebe (1958) remarks, "Proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten". Similarly, Hmar people use *ṭawngkasuok* in a conversation, according to the circumstances (or to be), to act as a maxim for (generally younger) people. Arewa and Dundes (1964) write that proverbs from the cultural past whose voices speak truth in traditional terms. Honeck (1997) mentions that there is no overarching theory of traditional sayings [proverbs] but instead a variety of views where he presents seven such theories (or views). He says old sayings [proverbs] may be categorized into personal, formal, religious, literary, practical, cultural, and cognitive views. The Hmar *ṭawngkasuok*(s) come from different views as well. For example, the *ṭawngkasuok* "*Ei thaw dawl le dawl ei fâk a, ei thaw rak le marak ei fâk*" comes from a practical view that advises people to work harder. It means people who work lazily eat yam leaves (considered mediocre or substandard food in the Hmar culture), while people who work heartily eat *marak* (considered a delicacy within the Hmars). In its vernacular transcription, the first *dawl* (meaning a lethargic work input) and the second *dawl* (meaning yam or taro leaves) rhymes, also the *thaw-rak* (meaning an industrious work input) and the *marak* (firm rice) rhymes, giving its poetic significance as well.

This research article aims to compile a list of 15 chosen *ṭawngkasuok* for analysis to explore their relevance and societal context. This aim will be achieved by referencing analogous old sayings or proverbs from various cultures, providing insight into their significance within the broader cultural landscape.

Abbreviations used:

- Anglicization is written as "angl."
- Deconstruction is written as "decon."

Analyzing Hmar Ṭawngkasuok

A châ̂ngin hmar thing a pâ̂r a, a châ̂ngin sim thing a pâ̂r

(angl.: *a CHANG-in hum-ar thing a PAR a, a CHANG-in sim thing a PAR*)

(decon.: *chang* - sometimes; *hmar* - north; *thing* - tree; *sim* - south; *par* - bloom)

This *ṭawngkasuok* is translated as "sometimes the north-tree flowers, at other times, the south-tree." It refers to a maxim that a person (or thing) will become successful in his/her endeavor if not today, sometime soon, his/her turn will come. Old Hmar folks use this saying to motivate their younglings to persevere and patiently wait for their time to bloom. (Ngurte et al., 2019). It may be said that this saying is of a cultural view that everyone, regardless of

background, will someday get their chance to shine. The mention of the north and south trees is metaphoric and suggests that irrespective of the different directions the trees are facing, its time for bloom will come at some point. Also, using 'a changin…thing a par' on both phrases makes it euphonic. The nature of the saying is (relatively) similar to that of the English proverb "Every dog has his day" (Speake 2008).

Ṭawng inbuo le tui inbuo rût thei an nawh
(angl.: *trong in-bu le tui in-bu RUT thay an noh*)
(decon.: *ṭawng* - speech, language; *inbuo* - spilled; *tui* - water)
This *ṭawngkasuok* is translated as "Words once spoken are like spilled water, irretrievable once released." It refers to a maxim that one should be careful with what to say, as words, once spoken, are irretrievable. The clubbing of 'words spilled' (tawng inbuo) and 'water spilled' (tui inbuo) rhyme its end and meanings, although they have different usage and context, making it euphonic. Old Hmar folks use this saying to warn younglings to be aware of their words to avoid making unconsiderable consequences (Ngurte et al., 2019). An African proverb, "Words are like bullets; if they escape, you can't catch them again," emits certain similarities. Also, a Chinese expression, "Yī yán jì chū, sì mǎ nán zhuī" which means "Once a word is spoken, it flies away and cannot be caught," has a resemblance with this *ṭawngkasuok*.

Lal ngai lo lal a kha
(angl.: *lal ng-ai lou lal a KHA*)
(decon.: *lal* - king, chief; *kha* - bitter)
This *ṭawngkasuok* is translated as "A king who was never a king before is noxious." It suggests that someone who has never held power tends to misuse it when suddenly given authority. Alternatively, in a more general sense, it can also mean that a person who has never been (say) rich before becomes extravagant (or spoiled) once he becomes rich. For example, in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, where Macbeth, who had never been a king before, drove him to ruthlessness once he got that position:

> Then comes my fit again: I had else been perfect;
> Whole as the marble, founded as the rock,
> As broad and general as the casing air:
> But now I am cabin'd, cribb'd, confined, bound in
> To saucy doubts and fears. (Shakespeare, 2018, 3.4.21b-26)

From this extract, Macbeth, although he was 'fit' and 'founded as a rock' before, became cribbed with 'doubts and fears' after becoming the King of Scotland. Old Hmar folks use this maxim to denote people who become cruel and corrupted after being positioned to (considerably) high power (Ngurte et al., 2019).

Pân lovah tho a fu ngai nawh
(angl.: PAN lo-va thou a fu ng-ai noh)
(decon.: *pân* - infected skin; *tho* - housefly; *fu* - sit, perch)

This *ṭawngkasuok* is translated as "a fly sits nowhere but on an infected skin." It is a metaphor to denote that when something, be it rumors, is said about a particular thing, place, or person, there is a probability that said 'something' is (at least) true in part or whole (Ngurte et al., 2019). The saying, "Where there is smoke, there is fire," portrays a similar idea. Its meaning is "If unpleasant things are said about someone or something, there is probably a good reason for it" (Cambridge Dictionary).

Khûpin lû a khêl thei nawh
(angl.: *KHUP-in lu a KHEL thei noh*)
(decon.: *khûp* - knee; *lu* - head; *khêl* - surpass)
This *ṭawngkasuok* is translated as "a knee cannot rise to/surpass the stature/level of a head." While it's true in the literal sense that a knee won't ascend to the level of a head, the concept of ṭawngkasuok symbolizes the significance of seniority. It reflects that the youth cannot attain the stature of their elders, whether in life experience or various fields (Ngurte et al., 2019). The African proverb, "The youth can walk faster, but the elder knows the road," portrays a similar idea.

Keipuiin a zie a thup thei nawh
(angl.: *kei-pui-in a zi a thup thay noh*)
(decon.: *keipui* - lioness; *zie* - character; *thup* - hide)
This *ṭawngkasuok* is translated as "A lioness cannot conceal her true character." It resembles the idioms "a tiger never changes his stripes" or "a leopard never changes his spots." It is meant to say that a person has a (in-born) personality or trait that doesn't just go away. He or she may try to become different, but this old trait returns with time. At this time, the old Hmar folks used to say *keipuiin a zie a thup thei nawh* to denote that a person never truly changes his original color(s) (Ngurte et al., 2019).

Taimak chu ieng dangin a mâk naw a, kawng chauvin a mâk
(angl.: *tai-MAK chu ING DUHNG-in a MAK noh a, KONG cho-vin a MAK*)
(decon.: *taimak* - hardworking; *mâk* - takes negative toll; *kawng* - waist)
This *ṭawngkasuok* is translated as "Hard work is good in all aspects, except the toll it takes on one's waist." Old Hmar folks use this *ṭawngkasuok* to praise and motivate them to work harder, as a hardworking person is highly respected within the Hmar community. Also, a hard worker eats 'better,' which is beneficial in almost all aspects; the ache it causes the physical body is the only limitation it provides (Ngurte et al., 2019). This *ṭawngkasuok* aligns with the many proverbs from different cultures, inspiring us to become more hardworking. Such as "The early bird catches the worm," "The diligent bee will never have time for sorrow," "Through hardships to the stars," and so on.

Chem zawr le dar zawr an intuok
(angl.: *chem zor le DAR zor an in-TUK*)
(decon.: *chem* - machete, knife; *dar* - gong; *zawr* - sell, seller; *intuok* - meet)
This *ṭawngkasuok*, "the machete seller and the gong seller cross paths," gives the notion of two individuals with contrasting needs encountering each other. The machete seller seeks to

trade his blade for a gong, while the gong seller desires the opposite exchange. In old Hmar culture, when a hastily married couple met, the old folks would say, “Chem zawr le dar zawr an intuok” - likening it to the meeting of the machete and gong sellers, symbolizing the convergence of two people with desires (Ngurte et al., 2019). It resembles the English idiom, "One man's trash is another man's treasure." However, this *ṭawngkasuok* does not treat either *chem* (machete) or *dar* (gong) as inferior or superior to each other but the point being, (many) people have contrasting needs that require an opposite exchange.

Ei thaw dawl le dawl ei fâk a, ei thaw rak le marak ei fâk
(angl.: *ei tho dol le dol ei FAK a, ei tho rak le ma-rak ei FAK*).
(decon.: *thaw* - do; *dawl* - sluggish, taro leaves; *marak* - firm rice; *fâk* - eat)
This *ṭawngkasuok* is translated as “If one works lazily, he eats taro leaves; if he works hard, he eats *marak*.” It imparts advice on the importance of diligence. It suggests that those who approach their work sluggishly will have to settle for lesser rewards, symbolized by taro leaves—a modest food in Hmar culture. On the other hand, those who exert themselves wholeheartedly will enjoy the fruits of their labor, represented by *marak*, cherished firm rice also known as *buchangrum* among the Hmars (Ngurte et al., 2019). This saying not only offers practical advice but also carries poetic resonance through the rhyming of two “dawl” in the two phrases and “thaw-rak” with “marak” in its vernacular rendition. It is similar to the Chinese proverb that says, “Yī fēn gēng yún, yī fēn shōu huò” (One part sown, one part reaped; One gets out what one puts in; The reward one reaps is proportional to the effort one puts in).

An inah mazû a ṭap el
(angl.: *an in-a ma-zu a truhp el*)
(decon.: *inah* - at home, house; *mazu* - mouse; *ṭap* - cry, weep)
This *ṭawngkasuok* is translated as "A mouse cannot help but cry in the [man's] house." It is used to metaphorically denote a person's extreme poverty, to the extent that a mouse (mice) can't even find something to eat and hence cry. It is a derogatory *ṭawngkasuok* used to demean someone of lower wealth (Ngurte et al., 2019). The English saying “a poor as a church’s mouse” resonates somewhat with this - the fact that a mouse is being used in both cases and is used to denote extreme poverty.

Keite in lai suktho naw ro
(angl.: *kei-te in-lai suk-thou no rou*)
(decon.: *keite* - from the wild cat family, leopard; *in* - sleep; *suktho* - awake)
This ṭawngkasuok translates to “Do not wake a sleeping wildcat” (although “leopard” can also be substituted for “wildcat”). It serves as a warning against tempting imminent danger. For instance, if someone persistently challenges another to a duel or a fight, especially when the latter has not provoked it and stands a high chance of winning based on their physique or experience, the elders in the Hmar community would caution with *keite in lai suktho naw ro*, advising against instigating the fight as the other person is still “unawakened” (Ngurte et al., 2019). There are resembling proverbs in different cultures, such as “Let sleeping dogs lie”

and “Don’t stir up a hornet’s nest.” Dictionary.com writes that “stir up a hornet’s nest” means to “Make trouble” or “cause a commotion.”

Suhlu kûngah thei dang a ra ngai nawh
(angl.: *suh-lu KUNG-a thay dang a ra ng-ai noh*)
(decon.: *suhlu* - gooseberry; *kung* - tree; *thei* - fruit)
This *ṭawngkasuok* is translated as “No other fruit grows on the gooseberry tree.” It denotes the character resemblance between a parent and a child. For instance, when a father is a known thief, and his child is caught for theft, old Hmar folks would say, “Do other fruits grow on the gooseberry tree?” Also, it mainly impacts a negative statement (Ngurte et al., 2019).

Ṭawngbau ṭha’n siel a man
(angl.: *trong-bau THRAN SIL a man*)
(decon.: *ṭawng* - speech, language; *ṭha* - good, *siel* - mithun, gayal)
This *ṭawngkasuok* is translated as “Sweet words win a prized gayal.” It is a metaphor signifying that sweet words or respectful language win hearts. It is important not to interpret it literally as implying that a good speech will procure a gayal (*siel* in the Hmar language) (Ngurte et al., 2019). There is an Islamic expression that resembles this *ṭawngkasuok*; “Al-kalimah al-tayyibah sadaqah” which means “a kind word is a form of a charity” (Khan).

Sakei huoiin pasalṭha a kei suok
(angl.: *sa-kei HUI-in pa-sal-thra a kei SUK*)
(decon.: *sakei* - tiger; *huoi* - wild, fierce; *pasalṭha* - courageous, honorable man)
This *ṭawngkasuok* translated as "A wild tiger draws out fierce men," suggests that true courage and valor are often revealed in times of adversity. Without conflict, it is not easy to discern the genuinely courageous. However, individuals of remarkable bravery step forward when faced with danger, like a tiger roaming a village. Thus, Old Hmar folks used to say challenges bring forth the bravest among us (Ngurte et al., 2019).

Phuba le Saihlum an nge ngai nawh
(angl.: *phu-ba le SAI-HLUM an ng-eh ng-ai noh*)
(decon.: *phuba* - revenge; *saihlum* - clay marble; *nge* - rot, decay)
This *ṭawngkasuok* is translated as “revenge and clay marble never rot.” Its essence lies in the analogy of a clay marble's resilience, suggesting that vengeance, like the clay marble, can always be pursued, regardless of time. Old Hmar folks had their adage, “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth,” saying that the inevitable consequence awaits those who sow mischief. Within this context, *ṭawngkasuok* finds its relevance, affirming that the pursuit of revenge knows no expiration (Ngurte et al., 2019). Some famous sayings somewhat resemble this *ṭawngkasuok*. Such as “Revenge is dish best served cold” and “Venganza nunca duerme (Revenge never sleeps).”

Concluding Remarks

It can be observed that within their traditional context, the Hmar people possess a distinctive manner of conveying their traditional wisdom. They are a society deeply ingrained with these sayings, whether they remain accurate or relevant in today's modern era. Among the chosen 15 traditional sayings, it becomes evident that they belong to a culture steeped in a strong work ethic. Many of these sayings emphasize the virtues of hard work and the elders' encouragement for the younger generation to strive diligently. This indicates a collective inclination towards industriousness, evident in their agricultural lifestyle and the necessity to fend off wild animals or seek retribution. Moreover, various professions, such as machete or gong sellers, are depicted, underscoring the diversity of their society. The emphasis on polite speech reflects their values of respect and courtesy, as seen in expressions like “Khupin lu a khêl thei nawh.” Additionally, they possess a resilient mindset, finding motivation to persevere through setbacks, believing that success will eventually come to fruition, akin to the blossoming of the "Hmar thing" after the "Sim thing." Furthermore, they are mindful of words' power, understanding that they cannot be taken back once spoken, likening it to spilled water. While other cultures worldwide, such as the Chinese, Spaniards, and Arabs, share similar maxims, the expression of these sentiments remains uniquely distinct among the Hmar people.

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