

THE WAR OF THE SEXES

During the first People's Poetry Festival we focused on poetry contests from around the globe, gathering decimeros from Puerto Rico, Columbia and Mexico and presenting them alongside slams, freestyle rap, and a Heavyweight Poetry Bout. This year we carry that theme forward by exploring a variety of other poetry contests and informal word duels, a number of them between men and women. We feature extemporized poetic debate from the Philippines, and we explore poetic courtship banter from the Hmong culture and Cambodia, juxtaposing these with a reading by Galway Kinnell and Marie Howe of love poems from the western literary tradition. We also look at the improvised sung poetry duels from Trinidad's calypso tradition.



Décima performers at the 1999 Gathering

Ayai Chlong Chlaey: **The Comical Improved Repartee** **Poetry of Cambodia**

During a break in a religious festival, a crowd gathers around a makeshift stage next to a Buddhist temple in a Cambodian village. A man and a woman mount the stage, followed by four musicians. The musicians begin to play. The man turns to the woman and starts to recite or sing, accompanying himself with stylized hand gestures. As he completes a stanza, some crowd members begin to laugh. The woman turns to the man and recites a stanza. The crowd laughs louder and shouts encouragement. The two reciters trade verses and occasionally address the audience, while their lines are punctuated by flourishes of instrumental music. Soon the crowd is roaring with laughter, the reciters' movements become more farcical, and the woman pretends to kick the man's behind.

This is *ayai chlong chlaey* (call-and-response), a venerable folk theater of improvised stand-up comedy in verse, practiced in Cambodia in venues as varied as the square of the remotest village and the screen of national TV. The typical one-man/one-woman *ayai chlong chlaey* is a mock courtship. But *ayai* can also be performed by two men, one of them in drag, or by a larger group acting out parts of a well-known folktale but with improvised variations.

Certain elements are common to all *ayai*. Lines of rhymed verse are always improvised on the spot and traded back and forth between the participants. The verses are repartee, a kind of duel by teasing. Most of the humor is based on sly sexual innuendo, often in the form of puns. Audience reactions become part of the performance. The hand gestures are borrowed from Khmer social dance movement. Although instrumentation may vary, four instruments are standard accompaniment to an *ayai* performance: the *take* (a zither), the *khim* (a hammered dulcimer), the *tro* (a fiddle), and the *skor* (a lap drum).

Although *ayai* is a form of professional stage entertainment, its repartee style finds its way into everyday life, as when it is heard in courting couples' mutual teasing. It is a form that depends on free expression. Attempts by past governments to control or politicize its content have never succeeded. Today *ayai chlong chlaey* can be heard outside of Cambodia in the Khmer immigrant communities such as those in Long Beach, California, and Lowell, Massachusetts.



Pan Xiong

***Kwv Txhiaj* (pronounced Ku Chia): The Hmong Sung Poetry of Courtship**

Through poetry, songs and stories, Hmong people keep an unwritten record of important events, such as the large-scale migration of their people from China two hundred years ago, and their dispersal from Laos, Vietnam and Thailand to other parts of the world, including Philadelphia and Minneapolis, in the 1970s. These oral traditions enable the Hmong people to say things that cannot be said in other ways and help to maintain their culture and traditions despite their own diaspora.

The *kwv txhiaj* tradition of sung poetry is part of the Hmong New Year's celebration, when boys and girls are allowed to socialize through the ritualized exchange of improvised verses. It is both a contest to determine the better singer and a way for the participants to get to know one another; as one singer put it, "If you like me, don't like me from the outside, know me from the inside." If two people can't sing well together, they will turn away to find other potential partners. If a singer wants to discourage her partner, she can sing a *kwv txhiaj chib*, an insulting verse (though a woman may turn away a suitor in song, only to find herself kidnapped later by his family).

Each verse of *kwv txhiaj* contains a pair of linked ideas in two couplets. The lines can vary in length, but the last word or near-to-last word of each line in a couplet must rhyme. The first couplet is an image often drawn from nature. The second refers to the singer or to the couple. In one example, the first couplet paints a picture of mountains, one overlapping the next, far into the distance. The next couplet depicts a scene of mountains encircling and embracing each other. These images convey the feeling of the distance that exists between the boy and the girl and the barrier that must be crossed for them to see each other. But the way the mountains come together with ridges and passes symbolizes the way they can meet at the New Year's celebration.

In addition to the improvised songs, both adults and teenagers sing a number of traditional *kwv txhiaj* songs that frame the ritual event. These verses go back hundreds of years and often comment not only on the arrival of a new year but on the courtship rituals of the New Year celebration. Hmong singer Chia Kue, for instance, sings, "Now we are all arriving. We will pour the wine into the cup. We the young Hmong will sing the songs and urge our partners to sing with us."

The Hmong boys answer to the girls, "We wish that we could tie the sun with apron strings (like we would tie your heart to ours). Let the sun stay with us until we finish singing all the songs."

The girls answer the Hmong boys, "We will not be able to finish all the songs. The shadows cast by the sun move higher and higher up the hillside. Let us arrange a time to meet next New Year. I hurt inside. It is impossible to save this feeling, this memory until next year."