

NOTES ON NORTHERN KATANG KINSHIP AND SOCIETY

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Abstract

The patrilineal clan system is still very strong in Katang society in southern Laos. This affects how a person relates to and addresses both his father's and mother's kin groups. It also is important in choosing a marriage partner. This paper provides a listing of the common kinship terms in Katang. Ritual and authority are also an important part of village life, and affect property ownership and work relationships. This article discusses some of these features of Katang society and those who provide leadership at both clan and village level.

Key words: kinship, ritual, authority

ISO 639-3: ncq

The Northern Katang language community consists of approximately 65,000 people living in the Salavan and Savannakhet provinces of southern Laos. Its language classification is Austro-Asiatic, Mon-Khmer, Eastern Mon-Khmer, Katuic, West Katuic, Bru. (Ethnologue 2017)

The information in this study is based on interviews with Katang young men from the villages of Keng Sai and La Kai in Muong Phin District of Savannakhet Province. Katang people form the majority group of this district, and the dialect spoken in Muong Phin is one of the major dialects of Northern Katang. The young men were part of a language development project in which the author served as a facilitator, and the interviews were conducted in the Katang language.

Katang society is patrilineal and patrilocal. Inheritance is through the male lineage and land distribution is also from father to sons. Upon marriage the wife follows the husband and usually lives in the same house as the husband's parents. Later, with agreement, a separate residence may be established, but it is generally within the same village as the husband's family.

Patrilineal kin groups or clans /mɔː/ are a very important feature of Katang society. Reckoned through the father's kin group, these become like a primary identity for a Katang male. Anyone related through his male ancestors becomes a man's kindred /sɛːm ʔaːj/. They will share the same surname with him. He cannot marry anyone who carries the same surname, no matter how distant their relationship is.

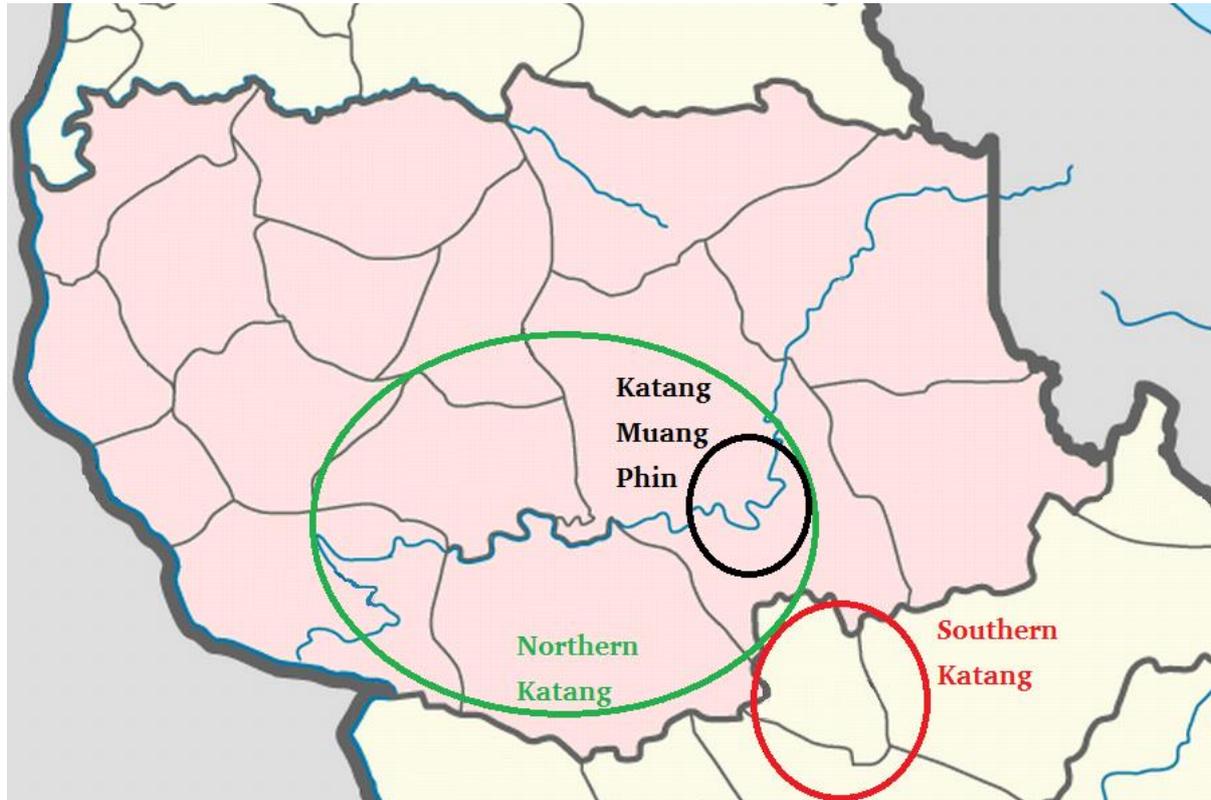
Every Katang person knows the name of his clan or kin group. One village may have families from several clans, but each clan in the village must be represented by a ritual specialist /ʔacuaɰ rɪːt/ who lives in that village. If only a few families of a clan reside in a particular village, they may ask to join another clan for the purpose of sharing a ritual specialist.

For example, in BL's village there are seven different clans represented. The families from from the /krɛːh/ and /paʔok/ clan have asked to join his clan /tʰrɛːŋ/, and his father's older brother is the ritual specialist for that group. Additionally in his village, the /klɔŋ/ clan has joined the /ŋaːl/ clan and the /padɔŋ/ clan has joined the /tʰraŋ/ clan, so there are three ritual specialists who serve the seven clans.

Another important clan relationship is formed when someone from another clan takes a wife from ego's clan. This makes anyone from that clan to be related to him as /kʰɜːj/. He cannot marry anyone from a clan that is related to him in this way.

Those related to him through his mother's side are his /kujaː/. It is permitted for him to marry someone who is related to him as his kuja.

Figure 1: Location of Katang speakers in Savannakhet province and surrounding areas (adapted from Doãn Hiệu 2010)



Kinship terms

Seven generations are indicated in Table 2 for a male ego. The generations are noted for previous (+) or following (-) generations from ego. (F) indicates Father; (M) is Mother; (S) is Son; (D) is Daughter; (Z) is Sister; (B) is Brother. Elder is (e); younger is (y). Collaterality is indicated by numbers 0-3.

Elder and younger siblings and cousins are differentiated by age as shown in Table 1. Additionally a male can refer to both elder and younger sisters by the term /ʔamiəʔ/. And a female can refer to both elder and younger brothers by the term /ʔama:ŋ/.

Table 1: Katang terms between elder and younger siblings

	Male Ego	Female Ego
Elder brother	ʔa:j	ʔa:j ʔaʔɛ:m } ʔama:ŋ
Younger brother	ʔaʔɛ:m	
Elder sister	ʔɜ:j ʔaʔɛ:m } ʔamiəʔ	ʔɜ:j
Younger sister		ʔaʔɛ:m

Affinal kin terms are given in Appendix 1. As a helpful rule, the wife of any male who is addressed as /ʔa:j/ is called /ʔɜ:j/. The wife of any male addressed as /ʔaʔɛ:m/ is /kuman/. The husband of any woman addressed as /ʔɜ:j/ is /ʔaʔɔŋ/. And the husband of any woman addressed as /ʔaʔɛ:m/ is /ʔalaj ɲɔʔ/.

The spouse of ego's son is referred to as /kuman/ (the address term is /ʔalaj/); the spouse of ego's daughter is referred to as /kʰɜ:j/ (the address term is /ʔalaj/). Similarly the spouse of anyone referred to as /ramɔ:n/ is /kuman/ for a female and /kʰɜ:j/ for a male.

Table 2: Kinship Terminology for Katang Muong Phin

Generation	Collaterality			
	0	1	2	3
+3				FFF ?ace:h
+3				FFM ?aje:
+3				FMF ?ace:h ja:?
+3				FMM ?aje: ja:?
+3				MFF ?ace:h no:
+3				MFM ?aje: no:
+3				MMF ?ace:h ja:?
+3				MMM ?aje: ja:?
+2			FF° ?acuaǰ	
+2			FM ?aja?	
+2			MF ?acuaǰ no:	
+2			MM ?aja? no:	
+1		F mpp:	FBe ncaǰ	
+1		M mpe:?	FBy ?ani:	
+1			FZe ncaǰ	
+1			FZy ?awa:	
+1			MBe ncaǰ no:	
+1			MBy ?ani: no:	
+1			MZe ncaǰ no:	
+1			MZy ?awa: no:	
0	ego	Be ?a:j	FBSe ?a:j	
0		By ?a?ε:m	FBSy ?a?ε:m	
0			FBDy ?a?ε:m	
0		Ze ?ε:j	FZSe ?a:j	
0		Zy ?a?ε:m	FZSy ?a?ε:m	
0			FZDe ?ε:j	
0			FZDy ?a?ε:m	
0			MBSy ?a:j no:	
0			MBSy ?a?ε:m no:	
0			MBDe ?ε:j no:	
0			MBDy ?a?ε:m no:	
0			MZSe ?a:j no:	
0			MZSy ?a?ε:m no:	
0			MZDe ?ε:j no:	
0			MZDy ?a?ε:m no:	
-1	S kɔ:n	BS ramp:n		
-1	D kɔ:n	BD ramp:n		
-1		ZS ramp:n		
-1		ZD ramp:n		
-2	SS ?acaw	BSS ?acaw		
-2	SD ?acaw	BSD ?acaw		
-2	DS ?acaw	BDS ?acaw		
-2	DD ?acaw	BDD ?acaw		
-2		ZSS ?acaw		
-2		ZSD ?acaw		
-2		ZDS ?acaw		
-2		ZDD ?acaw		
-3	SSS ?ace:			
-3	SSD ?ace:			
-3	SDS ?ace:			
-3	SDD ?ace:			
-3	DSS ?ace:			
-3	DSD ?ace:			
-3	DDS ?ace:			
-3	DDD ?ace:			

Marriage and Divorce

Katang marriage is not proposed without involvement of the potential partners who may have occasion to meet at funerals or weddings of other people, or of visits to neighboring villages. But the negotiations for the marriage are very much a family affair. The ritual head /^haw ke:/ from the potential groom's village acts as a negotiator with the ritual head from the bride's village. If they are from the same village, the ritual head of the village negotiates with representatives of each family. They agree on how much bride wealth /wa:n/ the groom's family must give. This includes a sword, pots and pans, buffalo, cattle, pigs and chickens, old French silver, and money. If they are able to get enough French silver, they do not need to use modern currency, since negotiations are made involving old silver currency. There is no standard price, and the asking price is determined by the bride's family depending on what they think the groom's family is able to give. If his family is wealthy and has a lot of land, or if the son wants their daughter very badly, the price might be higher. A daughter who is considered hard-working, well behaved, and polite might bring a good price. On the other hand, if either of the parties is an orphan, the price is apt to be lower, and the marriage not considered as desirable. In cases where the couple wants to be married and one or both of the families seem to be unwilling to negotiate, it is not unknown for the couple to simply begin to live together and force the families to negotiate. There still must be a ceremony.

A typical marriage settlement might be 3 /ra:ŋ/ or 12 /klɔ:ŋ/ of old silver which is approximately equal to 7,700 baht or around US\$650; 5 or 6 medium-sized pots /ʔadɛh ce:ŋ/; one large pot /ʔadɛh klɔ:ʔ/; one large brass tray /kuto:ʔ/ plus pigs, chickens, rice, and rice wine to be used in the first feast at the groom's house. The bride's family then takes back all the gifts that have been prepared. From the bride price, the groom's family is expected to give gifts to members of his own clan /sɛ:m ʔa:j/ and to the clan of the groom's mother /nɔ:/.

The marriage ceremony has two parts. The first is called /ca: parsuəj/. At this time the friends of the groom go to the bride's home to bring her to her new home. A big party at the groom's house marks this time when she is brought to her husband's house /sɔh suar/. At a later time determined by the bride's family with the negotiator /^haw ke:/ from the groom's side, a second ceremony is held which is called /taʔ pro:j/. Required for this ceremony are mattresses /sanɔ:n/, mats /raca:ʔ/, and pillows /rano:l/ which are given to the groom's family, as well as rice steamed in banana leaves (/tampɛʔ/ and /ʔacuəj/), a pig to be eaten in the evening when the guests arrive and a buffalo to be eaten the next morning. Other rice and rice wine are also provided. Honey is given to relatives who help with the feast.

This celebration is held at the home of the bride's parents. It could be held up to as much as a year later depending on the amount of time taken to assemble all that is needed for this feast. It signals that all debts of the groom's family have been paid, and it lifts the taboo against the girl going back home to visit her parents or her parents coming to visit her and going into her house. Animists are required to hold this ceremony to lift the taboo, lest some disaster /traw/ strike the family. Christians do not hold this second ceremony. They are said to no longer fear the taboos of the old system and feel no need for the second ceremony.

Traditionally, few Katang men married outside their ethnic group. More recently some Lao men have taken wives from the Katang group. In this case the wife follows the husband and lives with his family. Lao men are also required to pay the /wa:n/. And in the few cases where Katang men have taken Lao women, a payment is also required to the bride's family. In the case of divorce, the wife goes back to her father's household and clan. Generally children follow the mother. Fault for a marriage dissolution (and possible repayment of the bride price) is determined by an elder (t^haw ke:) from each side.

Polygyny is allowed but not encouraged. If a man takes a second wife against the wishes of his first wife, he is obligated to pay a fine to her. Still some men take a second wife if they do not get along well with the first one, find themselves enamoured of another woman, or are unable to have children with the first wife.

Work and Property

Property is privately owned. If a man dies, his wife has control of the property. If the wife has no children, she might return to her father's clan, but any land or property belonging to her husband would revert to his clan. If she has children, she will generally remain in her husband's clan. Quite often, upon the death of her husband, a woman will divide her husband's inheritance /mɔ:n/ giving each son a share /sarnɛ:ʔ/ and go to live with one of her sons. The son who takes responsibility for his mother /cɛ:m/ would receive the largest share. She might stay with whatever son she feels most comfortable with, but it would be unusual for

her to divide her time staying with different sons, since this would imply criticism of the home she first chose.

In the experience of those interviewed, every family in a Katang village is involved in rice planting – either in paddies /na:/ or fields /t^hraj/ or both. If the land owned by the father is not enough to provide for the families of the sons, they may supplement this by taking land that is not claimed by someone else. Currently there is still land available in much of the Muong Phin area. Only wet rice land can be owned. Dry rice is planted for only two years, so is not considered owned after that time. At the present time wet rice is more frequently planted than dry rice.

Work in the fields is done by both men and women. Plowing and harrowing is generally done by men. Sowing seed and transplanting may be done by either men or women, as is also harvesting.

Other crops grown for cash are bananas, rubber and manioc as well as livestock (cows, chickens, and pigs). Things taken from the forest such as dried mushrooms, dried bamboo shoots, deer, and wild pig are also sold for cash. Trees may be cut down and sold to the Vietnamese or Lao by one family, by two or three families, or by the whole village.

Work contracted with others, such as plowing, threshing, or transportation is paid for by the one requesting the service. In one instance a boat owned by 17 families is held on separate days by each of the families who have a stake in it. Anyone else wanting to use the boat pays for the service.

Men are the primary basket weavers, and women are the primary weavers of cloth. Children may begin at approximately six or seven years of age to help with cooking, getting firewood, and drawing water. At around twelve years of age they may be left to care for younger siblings while the parents are at work in the fields.

Authority and Leadership

There are three primary leaders in a Katang village – the Village Chief /p^hu: ba:n/, the Elder /t^haw ke:/, and the Ritual Specialist /ʔariəŋ ri:t/. The Village Chief is theoretically chosen by the people of the village (both men and women), who assemble for this purpose, for a period of three years. However, the slate of candidates is chosen by district officials, and it is not clear whether the choice of the villagers is actually represented in the final decision. He is responsible to carry out instructions from government officials, to take charge of any common work projects, and to regulate buying and selling in the village. Penalties for breaking of civil laws are imposed by him or reported to government authorities at the district level.

The Elder is generally a person who is recognized for his experience and his knowledge of the rules /k^hanv:t/ of the village and who has strong backing from an influential family. Theoretically he also is chosen by the people in assembly, but it is rare for this position to change in the lifetime of the Elder, and even when he is no longer able to continue, the position will generally be given to one of his sons or other relatives. A village has only one Elder; he takes complaints from any one in the village and makes decisions based on the rules he has learned from his ancestors or makes up himself. These might apply to such cases as animals from one family getting into the fields of another family. He negotiates marriage settlements, family problems, thefts, destruction of property and problems with people from other villages. In the latter case he negotiates with an Elder from the other village.

His authority is one of persuasion and threat of repercussion from the spirit world. Where there is a disagreement between two parties, he generally asks them to submit to a trial by ordeal /ŋp:j^ʔ dɜ:ʔ/. Literally this phrase means to “drink water” and the water is understood to represent a curse /rawɛ:n/. Christians refuse to participate in the trial by ordeal, saying that they no longer are willing to submit to or participate in the curses carried out by the spirit world. This causes major friction between Christian believers and the village Elder. His only recourse is to continue to pressure them to submit or to leave the village. In some cases an Elder has been successful in expelling whole groups of believers. In other cases they have stood on their rights as Lao citizens and refused to leave unless ordered to by civil authorities. This, however, makes them vulnerable to abuse from others in the village, since they cannot ask for retribution from the Elder.

For example, in a recent case a family of believers borrowed a boat from a believer in another village because the village boat owner refused to give them service. The village boat owner retaliated by putting salt into the engine of the borrowed boat. Though they knew who had done this, their refusal to submit to trial by ordeal meant that they were responsible for fixing the engine and could expect no action by village authorities.

The Ritual Specialist has authority in matters of spirit rites for the families in the clan or clans he serves. He is called in when someone from the clan is ill with what is determined to be caused by an offended spirit or when someone from another clan accuses someone from his clan of causing an illness. He is responsible to determine what sacrifices are required and can demand /lap tu:/ from those in his clan(s) whatever they need to provide. Sometimes these demands are very heavy, requiring pigs and buffalo.

Generally a shaman /mɔ:/ is called in to perform an incantation to determine what spirit is offended and what the spirit wants in order to be appeased /ʔapuəl/. If the spirit can be appeased by the shaman, the shaman performs a further ritual incantation /jaw/. This incantation may last anywhere from six to twelve hours with breaks. The one who has called on him is expected to pay a fee /salə:j/ of whatever he demands. This could be clothing, money, or animals. One shaman demanded roofing /plaj/ for his services. A shaman must learn from another shaman, and not all are qualified to appease all the spirits. In treating a specific illness, a shaman may put his hands on the offending member and speak an incantation over it /plɔŋ/.

If the offense is more severe, the Ritual Specialist is the one who performs the sacrifice required /cam/. If it is determined that a spirit has been offended by something someone in his clan has done (e.g. a pregnant woman or newly married woman has gone into a field house) the Ritual Specialist must perform the sacrifice to appease the offended spirit. The Ritual Specialist learns the chant performed over a sacrifice from his father.

Authority in the home is generally held by the eldest male member of the family. If a father or grandfather is present, he would be considered to be the head of the household. In the case where the father is dead and a widow has gone to live with her son, that son is considered the head of the household, even including younger unmarried siblings. The mother would continue to have authority over household affairs, including authority over her daughter-in-law.

The church among the Katang is still relatively new, and recognized leaders are few. Where there is a dedicated meeting place, there is generally an Elder chosen by the local church. He is likely to be the one who has believed for a longer time or who knows how to read. He may have assistants from different areas of the village or different sections of the society. He leads the services, makes decisions about who to invite for special occasions, and when these will be held. He is not the one who holds the money given for offerings. Another man is responsible to do this. The money given for offerings is used for expenses in the church, travel, special equipment, and special celebrations such as Christmas or Thanksgiving. No money from the offerings is given to the Elder in charge as salary. He is expected to support himself. In places where there is no dedicated meeting place, the services may be held in a home of one of the believers or in different homes.

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Appendix 1: Kinship Terminology for Affinal Kin in Katang Muong Phin¹

generation	collaterality					
	0		1		2	
	consanguine	affine	consanguine	affine	consanguine	affine
+1					FBe ncaj	ncaj
+1					FBy ?anji	?awia
+1					FZe ncaj	ncaj
+1					FZy ?awia	?awia
+1					MBe ncaj nɔ:	ncaj nɔ:
+1					MBy ?anji nɔ:	?awia nɔ:
+1					MZe ncaj nɔ:	ncaj nɔ:
+1					MZy ?awia nɔ:	?anji nɔ:
0	ego	lakuəj	Be ?a:j	?ɜ:j	FBSe ?a:j	?ɜ:j
0			By ?a?ɛ:m	kuman	FBSy ?a?ɛ:m	kuman
0			Ze ?ɜ:j	?a?ɔŋ	FBDy ?ɜ:j	?a?ɔŋ
0			Zy ?a?ɛ:m	?alaj nɔ?	FBDy ?a?ɛ:m	?alaj nɔ?
0					FZSe ?a:j	?ɜ:j
0					FZSy ?a?ɛ:m	kuman
0					FZDe ?ɜ:j	?a?ɔŋ
0					FZDy ?a?ɛ:m	?alaj nɔ?
0					MBSy ?a:j nɔ:	?ɜ:j nɔ:
0					MBSy ?a?ɛ:m nɔ:	kuman
0					MBDe ?ɜ:j nɔ:	?a?ɔŋ
0					MBDy ?a?ɛ:m nɔ:	?alaj nɔ?
0					MZSe ?a:j nɔ:	?ɜ:j nɔ:
0					MZSy ?a?ɛ:m nɔ:	kuman
0					MZDe ?ɜ:j nɔ:	?a?ɔŋ
0					MZDy ?a?ɛ:m nɔ:	?alaj nɔ?
-1	S kɔ:n	kuman	BS ramɔ:n	kuman		
-1	D kɔ:n	k ^h ɜ:j	BD ramɔ:n	k ^h ɜ:j		
-1			ZS ramɔ:n	kuman		
-1			ZD ramɔ:n	k ^h ɜ:j		
-2	SS ?acaw	kuman	BSS ?acaw	kuman		
-2	SD ?acaw	?alaj caw	BSD ?acaw	?alaj caw		
-2	DS ?acaw	kuman	BDS ?acaw	kuman		
-2	DD ?acaw	?alaj caw	BDD ?acaw	?alaj caw		
-2			ZSS ?acaw	kuman		
-2			ZSD ?acaw	?alaj caw		
-2			ZDS ?acaw	kuman		
-2			ZDD ?acaw	?alaj caw		

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¹ The numbers for generation and collaterality refer to ego's consanguinal kin.