Mon-Khmer Studies

VOLUME 43.1

Papers from the 5th International Conference on Austroasiatic Linguistics (Canberra, September 4-5, 2013)

The journal of Austroasiatic languages and cultures

1964—2014 50 years of MKS

Khmuic classification and homeland

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Abstract
The paper discusses the author's comparative investigation of Khmuic in progress. Original proposals are made concerning the classification of Khmuic languages and their original homeland and migrations that established present distributions. The arguments are made with reference to the author's working version of his phonological and lexical reconstruction. The evolution of the consonant system is found to be uninformative in regard to the classification, so special attention is given to an apparent chain shift in the reflexes of Austroasiatic *aː, broadly schematized as *aː > *ɛː > *iə > *iː that supports strongly nested family tree. However, there are also counter-examples that fail to show these developments, such that we are forced to posit various parallel correspondences. To explain these facts, it is suggested that there were several phases of Khmuic expansion historically, each radiating from a homeland in the north-west of Laos, and resulting in dialect mixing that has confused the correspondence patterns.
The pKhmuic phonology as it is reconstructed to date is quite straightforward; lacking tones, registers or an implosive contrast in the stop series. Complex initial clusters are regarded as archaic, although relatively few are yet reconstructed on the basis of lexical comparisons. The vowel correspondences are somewhat complex, but this is consistent with an apparently rich history of dialect borrowing, so absolute regularity is not expected. On the whole pKhmuic resembles the Khmu Cuang dialect phonologically.
Keywords: Khmuic, classification, reconstruction, homeland
ISO 639-3 codes: kig, khf, tyh, prb, mlf, prt, pry, mra, kjm, pnz, puo

1. Introduction

Comparative studies on Khmuic are relatively meagre; there are no published reconstructions of pKhmuic, and published classifications are contradictory and lacking justification. This is actually a typical situation in Austroasiatic (AA) linguistics where a branch is represented by one dominant and readily accessible language (e.g.: Khasi is well known but Khasian is neglected, Khmer is well studied but Khmer dialects get less attention etc.), and quite understandable in the circumstances. It is rather striking that if one erases the imprint the Lao language, the linguistic map of Northern Laos is dominated by a single language, Khmu (also spelled Kammu, Kmhmu', Khmu'), whose speaker population comprises approximately a tenth of the population of the Lao PDR, and is the second largest ethnic group after the Lao Loum. An additional handful of languages make up the remainder of Khmuic branch of Austroasiatic, some of which also spill over the borders into Thailand, China and Vietnam.

Khmu has been known to scholars since the 19th century (e.g. lexicon of Khmu features in the materials of the Garnier expedition; Garnier 1873), and Khmu comparisons played a crucial role in Haudricourt's famous (1953, 1954) reconstruction of Vietnamese tonogenesis, so the historical importance of the branch has been appreciated. However, with much scholarly attention focussed on Khmu (e.g.: Smalley 1963, Delcros & Subra 1966, Lindell et al. 1981, Svantesson 1983, Preisig et al. 1994, Premsrirat 1993, 2002) at the expense of the lesser Khmuic tongues, a fuller understanding of the branch has taken time to emerge. The situation began to improve especially from the 1970s e.g.: Filbeck (1971, 1978, 2009) T'inic, Pogibenko & Bùi Khánh-Thê (1990) on Ksingmul, Rischel (1989a,b, 1995, 2007) and Rischel & Egerod (1987) and Egerod & Rischel (1987) on Mlabri, Bùi Khánh Thế (2000) on Phong/Kaniang, Ferlus (1970) and Đặng Nghiêm Vạn (1983) on Thai Hat/Ỡdu, Maspéro (1955) on Theng.

Given the relatively small size of the branch, the availability of some reliable and lengthy lexicon, and the fact that the major contact languages (Lao, Vietnamese, Thai, Tai etc.) are well known, one would predict that a comparative reconstruction - at least of phonology and lexicon - should be a practical proposition. This is made all the more reasonable by the extent of low-level comparative work that has already been published; it focuses specifically on:

- Mlabri and T'inic sub-groups, found in the more accessible Nan Province of Northern Thailand and the adjacent Sayabouly Province of Laos (Filbeck 1978, Rischel 1989b, 2007); and
- tonogenesis and registrogenesis within Khmu dialects (Lindell et al. 1979, Premsrirat 2001, 2004).

The above studies follow Haudricourt (1965), who compared Thinic, Mlabri and Khmu data, demonstrating the conservatism of Khmu and Mlabri consonants and the innovative restructuring of initial stops in the Thinic dialects. Consequently, while these works clarify a tremendous amount of Khmuic historical phonology, until now scholars have apparently not tried to synthesize this body of work and model the phonology of pKhmuic and the phonological divergences that mark the diversification of the branch. The principle explanation for this lies in the tendency for scholars to specialise in a specific language or group of related dialects; additionally the contemporary emphasis on language documentation imposes extensive burdens on field linguistics making it even less attractive to engage in comparative studies.

The problems of assembling and organising materials to support a reconstruction are real and multiple. First of all, there is actually no agreement on which languages are necessarily counted within the branch. Khang/Khao and Khabit/Phsing are treated by Diffloth (ms.) as Khmuic but this writer considers them to be Palaungic with Khmuic strata (see discussion below). Rischel, in several publications (including 1995, 2007) wonders whether Mlabri is an independent branch of Austroasiatic that was relexified with Khmuic loans, although this view seems to have no significant support. Secondly, the lexical sources that do exist vary extensively in their lexical coverage, and even when they do overlap, lexical replacement within languages has been so great that it can be very difficult to identify cognates. And finally, it is also clear that there has been substantial inter-dialectal borrowing within Khmuic, much of it from Khmu into the smaller languages, and as Rischel has variously identified, from T'inic into Mlabri. These problems are significant, but not insurmountable, and in this paper I offer a first framework of a pKhmuic reconstruction, and strategy for dealing with the problems of borrowings between closely related members of the group.

2. Classification

2.1 Defining Khmuic

The first problem is to determine the membership of the Khmuic branch. Proschan (1996) provides the following list:

Table 1: Khmuic languages listed by Proschan (1996)

Language	Alternate names	Language	Alternate names
Kmhmu	(many[1])	Mlabri	Phi Tong Luang
Phong	Tay Phong	Theen	Kha Sam Liam
Thin	Mal, Pray	Iduh	Tay Hat
Ksing Mul	Puok, Pou Hok	Khang	Mang Uˀ
Bit	Khabit		

Effectively the same list is provided by Chazée (1999), Diffloth (2003), Anderson (2006) and elsewhere. All sources agree on the following basic groups, plus a couple of doubtful languages:

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[1] Note Filbeck's spelling "Kmhmu" for the name of the language. Proschan (1997:97) lists 35 (!!) different romanized spellings attested in the literature.

- Khmu, Kmhmu', Kammu etc. (many dialects)
- Mlabri, Yumbri (Phi Tong Luang)
- Thinic: Thin, Mal, Pray, Phay, Lua', Lawa
- Khsingmul (Puok, Puoc, Pou Hoc)
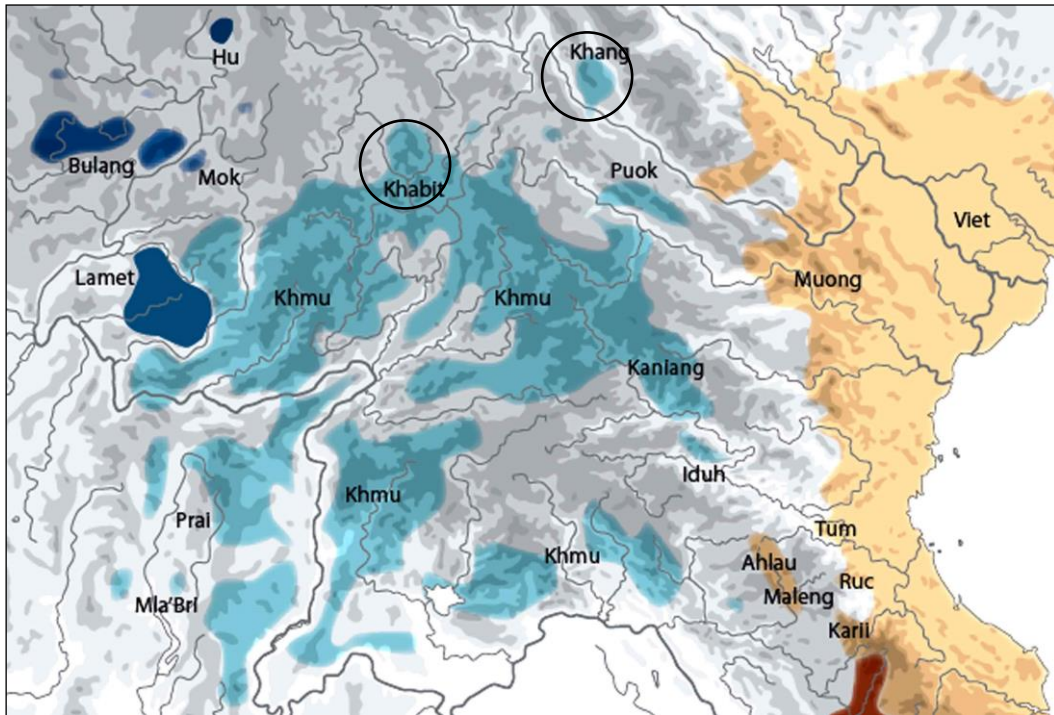- Pramic: Phong (Pong, Kanieng), Ởdu (Idu, Thai Hat)

Figure 1: Fragment of Language map (Diffloth 2001): Khmuic language light blue, Palaungic dark blue, Vietic yellow. Misclassified languages Khabit and Khang circled.

The doubtful languages are Khabit and Khang (Khao, Mang U̓), listed by Parkin (1991) as Khmuic. The most recent lexicostatistical study (Peiros 2004, see Figure 3) recognises both of these as Khmuic, although places them in a sub-group branching above the rest of the group. Diffloth (1982) suggested a Palaungic affiliation for Khabit, and this is confirmed below, with data from Kingsada & Kosaka (1999). More controversial is Khang (ISO 639-3 **kjm**, **xao**, not to be confused with Mang **zng**, spoken either side of the Vietnam-China boarder), for which Mikami (2003) is the source used here. The problem arises in the first place because both of these languages are effectively adjacent to other Khmuic speakers (see map at Figure 2) and not in contact with Palaungic, and therefore on geographical grounds we would be surprised if they were anything other than Khmuic. Throughout AA a tendency is that multiple branches don't overlap so much, with the most marked exceptions involving Pearic and Vietic (due to the expansion and dominance of Khmer and Vietnamese as national languages).

Comparative analysis demonstrates that Khabit and Khang show significant Palaungic lexical innovations, plus a shared phonological development (raising of $*a{:}$ to $u/u\partial$[2]) that strongly hints at subgrouping

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[2]   Interpretation of the sources is somewhat problematic, but it would appear that u and $u\partial$ are effectively indicating the same phoneme, a high unrounded non-front vowel.

Table 2: Lexical comparisons supporting Palaungic classification of Khabit, Khang (plus other forms bracketed)

	Khmuic					Palaungic				Khasian
	Khmu Cuang	Mlabri	Mal	Phong	Khsing-Mul	Khabit	Khang	Palaung	Lamet	Khasi
'eye'	*mat*	*mat*	*mat*	*mat*	*mat*	*pᵊŋaːj*	*ŋaj²*	*ŋaj*	*ŋaːj*	*mat*
'fire'	--	*Ɂuːlh*	*Ɂoːh*	*Ɂoːs*	*(hǝlŋoŋ)*	*tɕᵊŋal*	*ŋal²*	*ŋǝr*	*ŋal*	*(diŋ)*
'sated'	*biɁ*	*biɁ*	*piɁ*	*kbɛːj*	*(Ɂkiŋ)*	*suːk*	*siɁ²*	*huɁ*	*saːk*	*(hun)*
'blood'	*maːm*	*mɛːm*	*miam*	*miːm*	*miǝm*	*sᵊnuǎm*	*num²*	*snam*	*naːm*	*snaːm*
'laugh'	*kʰras*	--	*khieh*	*krih*	*khliǝ*	*kᵊɲaʲh*	*ɲaj¹*	--	*kǝnaːs*	*rkʰie*
'moon'	*(moŋ)*	*kiɁ*	*(thuaɁ)*	*kiː*	*(bluǝn)*	*(tɕᵊriǎŋ)*	*(khiaŋ¹)*	*(kiǝr)*	*kheɁ*	*(bnaj)*
'water'	*(Ɂom, Ɂɔːk)*	*(ɟrʌːk)*	*(Ɂɔːk)*	*(paɁaŋ)*	*(hɔːt)*	*Ɂoːm*	*Ɂɔm²*	*Ɂom*	*Ɂoːm*	*Ɂum*

The Khmuic branch is readily defined by a very specific phonological innovation, the loss of pAA medial **h*, which is evident in the reflexes of 'blood' in the table 2 (and other etyma including 'sated' and 'moon' in Table 2). Unfortunately, Khabit and Khang reflexes of the specific etyma expected to show pAA medial **h* are lacking in the sources available to this writer, however they do show specific Palaungic lexical innovations. Of particular note, Khabit and Khang reflect pPalaungic **ŋal* 'fire', **Ɂŋaːj* 'eye' and **saːk* 'sated'. Additionally Khabit and Khang reflect etyma for 'blood' and 'water' that are otherwise restricted to Palaungic and Khasian, except that *Ɂom* 'water' is borrowed into Khmu (indicated by its narrow distribution in Khmuic and the short vowel). Also Khabit and Khang show the distinctive Palaungic form for 'laugh' with medial palatal nasal. The presence of Palaungic and Khasi-Palaung innovations in two languages which are not in contact with Palaungic, and are under strong influence form other groups, is best explained as indicating that these are actually Palaungic languages displaced by migration.

2.2 Internal classification

Studies and reference literature on Khmuic classification have been sparse and ambiguous; a typical pattern, such as listed at Table 1. A rare exception is Chazée (1999), providing the following tree diagram, citing Diffloth & Proschan as the sources, although no bibliographic reference is given.
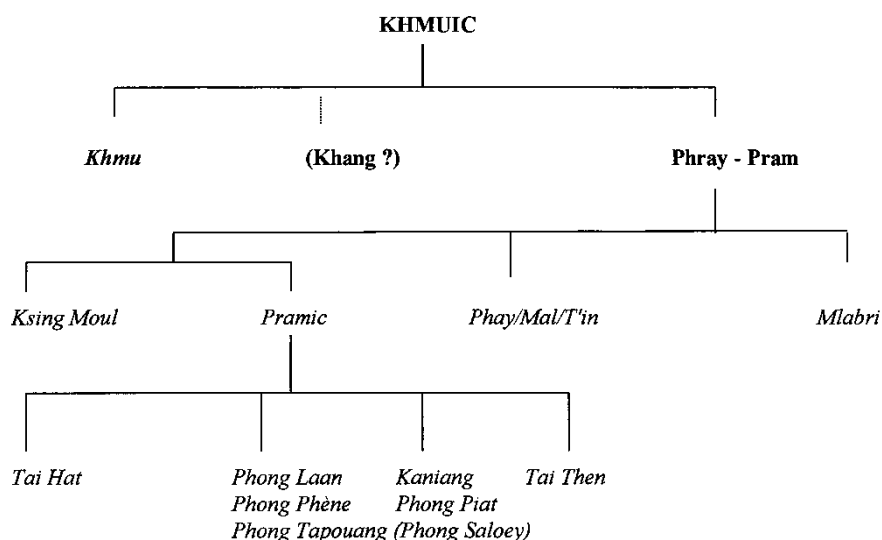
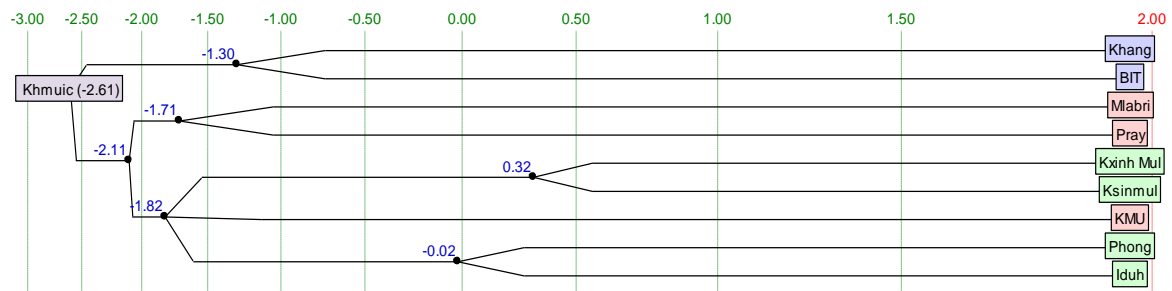**Figure 2:** *Khmuic languages tree from Chazée (1999)*

Figure 3: Khmuic languages tree from Peiros (2004)

There is also the lexicostatistical tree offered by Peiros (2004) reproduced at Figure 3. My view is that we ought to disregard this analysis as it is not grounded in historical phonology, and it is distorted by a failure to properly identify borrowings that accounts for his placement of Khmu between Pramic (Phong/Ỏdu) and Ksingmul. More interesting is Chazée's (1999) tree, which does strong correspond to the analysis based on phonology - specifically vowel changes - offered here.

In the first place we would expect classification to be based upon innovations identified by a comparative reconstruction. The present author has been compiling a Khmuic comparative lexicon and developing a reconstruction of pKhmuic phonology and lexicon, and the first version of this was released online in 2013 at sealang.net/monkhmer. It must be acknowledged up front that this reconstruction is limited by the factors discussed above, which mean that most etymologies are incomplete, but it is far from an elaborate untestable hypothesis. This is because the bulk of the 750+ etymologies so far compiled are firmly grounded in deeper AA etymologies documented in published references (primarily Shorto 2006). The main consonantal correspondences[3] underlying the reconstruction are set out at Table 3.

Table 3: Khmuic consonant correspondences underling the reconstruction of Sidwell (2013)

Initials pKhmuic	K-Cuang	Mlabri	Mal	Khsing-Mul	Phong
*p	p	p	ph	p	p
*t	t	t	th	t	t
*c	s	ch	s	c	s
*c₁	c	ch	s	c	s
*k	k	k	kh	k	k
*ʔ	ʔ	ʔ	ʔ	ʔ	ʔ
*b	b	b~ɓ	p~mp	b	b
*d	d	d	t~nt	d	d
*ɟ	ɟ	ɟ	c~ɲc	c	j, s (/_C)
*g	g	g	k~ŋk	g, k (/_R)	g, k (/_R)
*m	m	m	m	m	m
*n	n	n	n	n	n
*ɲ	ɲ	ɲ	ɲ	ɲ	j
*ŋ	ŋ	ŋ	ŋ	ŋ	ŋ
*w	w	w	w	w	w
*r	r	r	j	g, l (/p_), r (/C_)	r
*l	l	l	l	l	l
*j	j	j	j	z	j
*s	h	th~ch	s	s	s
*h	h	h	h, Ø (/_C)	h	h, Ø (/_C)

Finals					
*p	p	p	p	p	p
*t	t	t	t	t	t
*c	c	c	c	c	c
*k	k	k	k	k	k
*ʔ	ʔ	ʔ	Ø	Ø	Ø
*m	m	m	m	m	m
*n	n	n	n	n	n
*ɲ	ɲ	ɲ	ɲ	ɲ	ɲ
*ŋ	ŋ	ŋ	ŋ	ŋ	ŋ
*w	w	w	w	w	w
*r	r	r	ɰ~w	l	r
*l	l	l	l	l	l
*j	j	j	j	j	j
*s	s, h (/i,e_)	lh	h, jh	h	s
*h	h	h	h	h	h
*Ø	Ø	Ø	Ø	Ø	Ø

The proposal offered here is that the developments of pKhmuic *aː, *a are indicative of the internal classification of Khmuic. Changes in the consonants found within Khmuic are of the kind that involve devoicing and or aspiration, in other words delay in voice onset timing, and such are typical of both areally conditioned change and spontaneous drift. Within Khmuic, devoicing of stops is attested even between dialects of the same language (e.g. southern Khmu dialects show devoicing and registrogenesis while northern dialects do not: see Premsrirat 2001, 2004). However, there is a particular pattern of correspondences among reflexes of the long and short low central vowel which is taken as significant because these vowels are otherwise quite stable, and no conditioning factors are evident. In summary, there are apparently four distinct correspondences reflecting what are assumed to be only two pAA vowels. These are illustrated in the examples at Table 4.

Table 4: Lexical comparisons illustrating pKhmuic *aː, *aː₁, *a, *a₁ developments

	'blood'	'stone'	'bone'	'weave'	'tongue'	' tiger'
pKhmuic	*maː₁m	*glaː₁ŋ	*ɟʔaː₁ŋ	*taːɲ	*hntaːk	*rwaːj
Khmu Chuang	maːm	glaːŋ	cʔaːŋ	taːɲ	hntaːk	rwaːj
Mlabri	mɛːm	-	ɲiʔɛːŋ	-	-	rwaːj
Mal, Pray	miəm	lhiaŋ	ʔiəŋ	thaːɲ	ntaːk	waːj
Khsing-Mul	miəm	ʔəliəŋ	-	taːɲ	həltaːk	həwaːj
Ơdu	mim	gliŋ	jon ʔiɲ	htaː	roj
Pong	miːm	kliːŋ	sʔiːŋ	taːɲ	taːʔ	rawaːj

	'wing'	'thick'	'year'	'medicine'	'arrow'	'bitter'
pKhmuic	*pna₁r	*-ba₁l	*-na₁m	*crna₁m	*kam	*caŋ
Khmu Chuang	pnɨr	hmbɨl	nɨm	srnɨm	kam	caŋ
Mlabri	hnʌr	-	hnʌm	-	-	-
Mal, Pray	panəɰ	mpal	-	nam	kham	saŋ
Khsing-Mul	phəlnal	-	-	-	kam	cuŋ
Ơdu	knɔːr	bɨl	-	cnɔm	-	caŋ
Pong	ʔannaːr	-	-	-	kam	saŋ

The situation is that there appears to be two distinct correspondences each for *aː and *a, for which the notation *aː, *aː₁, *a, *a₁ is adopted. pKhmuic *aː and *a have reflexes that are essentially unchanged across the branch, while *aː₁, *a₁ have phonologically marked reflexes: beyond Khmu reflexes of *aː₁ show fronted and raised vowels, while for *a₁ it is the Khmu reflexes that are marked, being raised and central, and in Mlabri a little raised, but otherwise little changed in the rest of the branch. The asymmetries in these changes strongly suggest that this is not a vestige of an earlier register system. Elsewhere among the vowel correspondences there is no indication of these kinds of split correspondences; admittedly some of the correspondences are

difficult to interpret, but this is due to lack of regularity (probably due to dialect borrowing) whereas the correspondences at stake here are quite regular. The interpretation of *a:, *a:₁, *a, *a₁ offered here is as follows:

- *a:₁ is a regular reflex of pAA *a:; the conditioning is obscure, but all involve voiced initials and all but three so far identified have final nasals. I propose that the unchanged forms with similar environments are loans, presumably from Khmu into the other Khmuic languages, although some could also have come in from other AA contact.
- *a₁ is less frequent, being only about 1/10 the frequency of *a, so it is quite marked. Also, there are sporadic examples of high vowel reflexes in other languages (e.g. Ơdu *bil* 'thick') which look suspiciously like loans from Khmu. However, there is no clear indication of conditioning; both voiced and voiceless initials are found, and stop and continuant finals, nor is there any evident semantic link. So it looks like a poorly understood change that originated within Khmu, and may have diffused out in some loans.

Consequently the *a:₁ correspondence seems to be relevant for Khmuic internal branching. If, on general phonetic grounds, we assume that there was a raising of pAA *a: in the sequence **a:> *ɛ: > *iə > *i:**, the branching/subgrouping indicated in the following figures (both the Venn diagram and family tree modified from Chazée (1999) are indicated:
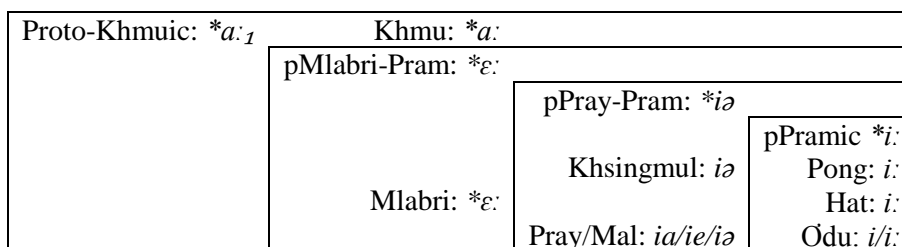
Proto-Khmuic: *a:₁	Khmu: *a:		
	pMlabri-Pram: *ɛ:		
		pPray-Pram: *iə	
			pPramic *i:
		Khsingmul: iə	Pong: i:
	Mlabri: *ɛ:		Hat: i:
		Pray/Mal: ia/ie/iə	Ơdu: i/i:

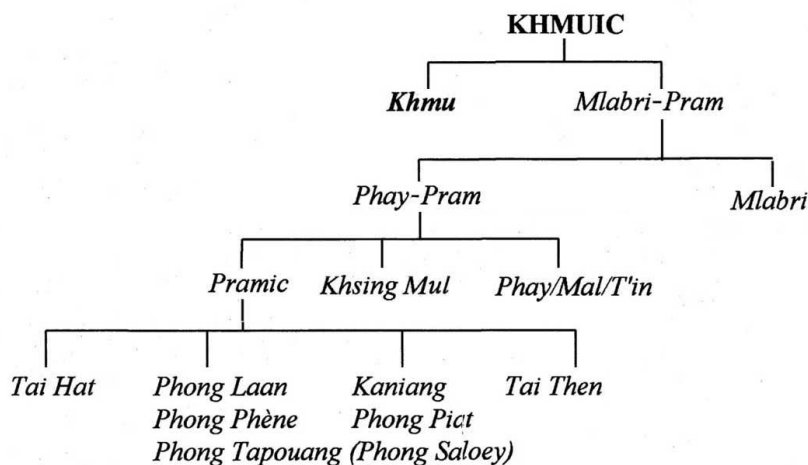**Figure 4:** Venn diagram representation of *a:₁ developments

Figure 5: Khmuic tree based on *a:₁ developments

3. Homeland and migration

The proposed classification we have thusly arrived at is strongly nested, with a primary split between Khmu and a Mlabri-Pram sub-branch that diversified into the rest of the branch. However, the geographical interpretation is problematic, as we do not have an obvious centre of diversity, which would suggest a homeland location on the basis of the assumptions of dialect geography. Mlabri-Pram languages are spread over a wide area, from Northern Thailand to North Vietnam, and even the Phray-Pram sub-group below this has a similar distribution, only the very low level Pramic dialect chain has a narrower distribution in the eastern part of the Khmuic range. Khmu

also has a similarly wide range, although it is evident that the phonologically conservative dialects, and the greatest diversity of Khmu dialects overall, is quite localised to the northwest of Luang Phrabang, over more or less the area of present day Oudomxay Province (interestingly in proximity to the Palaungic languages Lamet and Khabit). These facts suggest that the Khmu language diversified and spread out of Oudomxay historically.

The next split in the tree is between Mlabri and Phray-Pram; both Mlabri and part of the Phray-Pram group (specifically the Thinic languages) are localised southwest of Luang Phrabang, while all of the non-Khmu languages in the eastern range fall within the Phray-Pram group (specifically Pramic and Khsing-Mul). This suggests a very specific migration path: the first split saw a group move directly south out of Oudomxay, over the Mekong, and into Sayabouly, where Mlabri and Thinic speakers still live today. A subsequent movement east into the region of Houaphan Privince and adjacent Vietnam, and later diversification in the area, give us the Khsing-Mul and Pramic dialects.

The above scenario, however, remains incomplete. Khmu dialects are spoken as far west and even further south than Mlabri-Phray languages, and those Khmu dialects are relatively homogenous (see Lindall et al. 1981, Premsrirat 2002), indicating a fairly recent dispersal (although surely before Lao established social dominance, so some time in the first half of the 2nd Millennium is likely). This clearly suggests another phase of Khmuic expansion that saw Khmu speakers spread out over and among the various Mlabri-Pram communities after the latter had become differentiated to some extent and established in their present ranges, and offers an explanation of the problematic split correspondences $*a_:$, $*a_{:1}$.

For whatever reasons, the Khmu are substantially more numerous and enjoy more prestige and status than their fellow Khmuic speakers. The linguistics and geographical facts suggest that there was a period of Khmu dominance of Northern Laos, with Khmu influence over a diversity of smaller Khmuic communities, before this gave way eventually to Lao and Vietnamese hegemony (although may still exist to some extent). Such a phase of Khmu dominance could have seen substantial relexification with Khmu words that do not show the sound changes (such as the raising of $*a_:$) that mark the non-Khmu sub-groups.
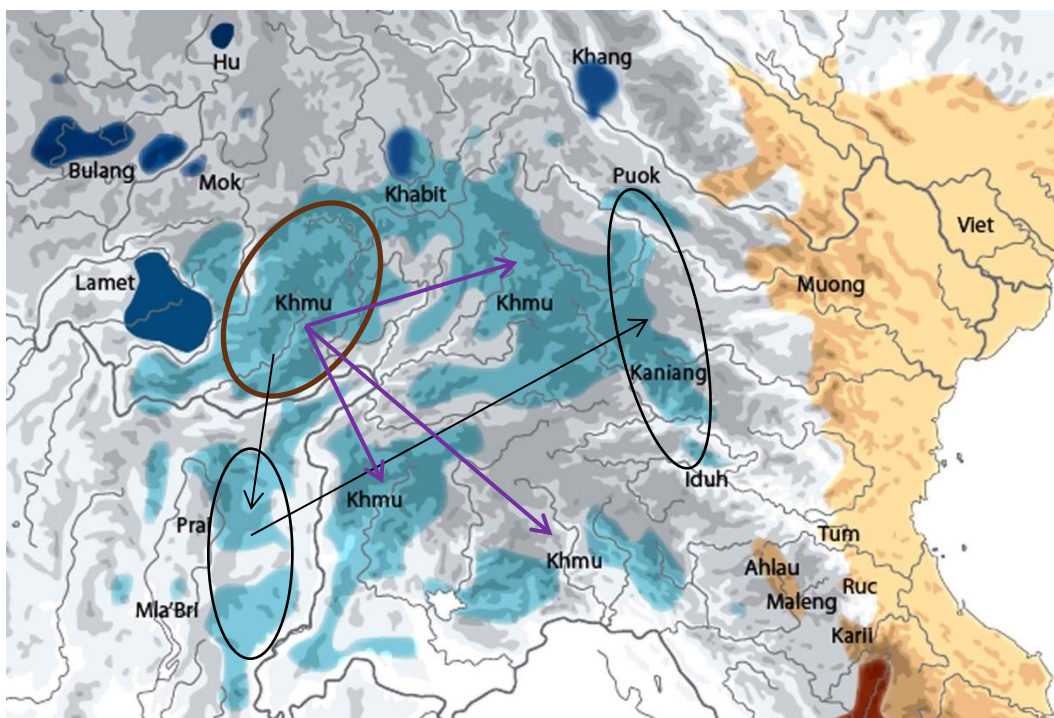

Figure 6: Map indicating proposed Khmuic homeland (brown oblong) and migration routes: black arrows indicate initial movement of Mlabri-Pram and subsequent Phray-Pram migrations; purple arrows suggest later Khmu radiation(s).

4. Conclusion

This short paper has presented evidence for Khmuic subgrouping and homeland localisation based on the author's emerging comparative reconstruction. The data discussed here are quite limited, but strongly suggestive of the conclusion that Khmuic originated in the area of Oudomxay, and that several phases of out-migration originated from this area, the later associated with Khmu dominance over diverse smaller communities. Moving forward, the challenge is to further build the comparative lexicon and the identification of regular correspondences and indication of borrowing. The work is extremely problematic, but the discussion present here, including the tabled correspondences, provides a framework for progress in Khmuic reconstruction which offers both linguistic and historico-cultural explanation.

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