REMARKS ON THE VOWEL SYSTEM OF OLD BURMESE

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Benedict's view of early Burmese phonology was crucial for the vocalism of his entire ST system and is still widely accepted among Tibeto-Burmanists and Sino-Tibetanists. His oBrm\(^1\) (Old Burmese) finals (-y \(\rightarrow\) -j) are as follows:\(^2\)

\[
\begin{array}{cccccc}
\text{-i} & \text{-u} & \text{-ip} & \text{-up} & \text{-it} & \text{-ut} \\
\text{-ow} & \text{-aj} & \text{-a} & \text{-aw} & \text{-ap} & \text{-at} \\
\text{-ak} & \text{-ac} & \text{-uik} & \text{-ok}
\end{array}
\]

The efforts to reconstruct oBrm seen in Benedict/Matisoff 1972 make quite limited use of the Atsi (Zaiwa) and Maru (Longwo, Langsu) material available then, which is a pity since those are the languages mentioned in the *Conspectus* which are most closely related to Burmese. Ideas for the reconstruction of oBrm are also seen in Pulleyblank 1963 and Gong 1980, but these grand-scale discussions of Sino-Tibetan follow the comparative method even less, making use only of Chinese, Tibetan, and Burmese.

Evidence from a variety of sources, some not available when the STC was written, indicates a vocalic system which is more naturally balanced and easier to use as a comparative tool:

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1 *Abbreviations*: Brm: Burmese, Bsh: Burmish, i: inscriptional, JP: Jingpo, o: old, m: middle, n: new, s: spoken, Tib: Tibetan, w: written, YB: Yipo-Burmic, :: = "is (allegedly) cognate to"

- x- in the Zaiwa Group denotes tense vocalisation.
- *, -h : tone marks
- -q = final glottal stop.
- # = any high central vowel (as a phoneme)
- 'C- = homorganic prenasalisation of the stop C.
- i- = dz-, e- = di-.

2 From *STC* p. 59. Omitted is a set of nasals which closely follows the behavior of the stops.
1) **Written Burmese (wBrm)** Ⴕ “ui” = *ə.

Hla Pe 1961 is a good source for the phonology of Indic loan-words in Burmese. This rime concerns mainly pages 90-92. Simple monosyllables with Ⴕ include {buil} ‘strength’ < Pali bala, {guin} ‘group’ < P. gana, {puid} ‘stanza’ < P. pada, {luin} ‘cave’ < P. lena. In most of these cases we have a short -a- in Pali which either already had the pronunciation [ə] commonly found in parts of India when borrowed into Mon or Burmese, or in the case of Mon the sound [ə] may have arisen from short -a- in the same way that it developed from other short vowels in Mon (cf. Table 1, below). The correspondence is Indic short a [ə] :: wBrm -ui-.  

2) wBrm -uik -uin, sBrm [aiq / aié] < *-ek / *-en < *-ək / *-ən.

"Note especially the words ending in -uik, and -uini. Such finals are rarer in Old Burmese than in Modern. They do not fit into the old Burma Group pattern. Not all the -uik and -uin words in Burmese are Shan in origin, but most of them are." (Luce 1985:I.100). With Luce's authoritative assessment in mind, let us consider some evidence pertaining to the earlier values of the rimes now heard as -aiq and -ai in Rangoon Burmese:

a) Miller 1954 is a study of 64 Burmese words transcribed into Chinese some time in the sixteenth century and probably based on older materials. Unfortunately it contains no words in the {-uik/-uin} rimes, but we do have an early Qing dynasty transcription of -uin in the word ta-luηn (> t'laŋ) used by the Burmans to refer to the Mon people: 得傣 tek-len (Pelliot 1904). The Chinese (Mandarin) pronunciation [tsʰ-lοŋ] (Pulleyblank 1991) was similar to today's, so this either indicates that the wBrm -uin rime was still being pronounced as [-ən], or, if my proposed change *-ək/-ən > *-ek/-en (and then to modern -aiq/-ai) had already taken place, then Chinese [ləŋ] could have been the closest attempt to render Burmese len [-en/?-en?]. The Chinese could easily have picked an -un rime character such as 隆 to render “luηn”, but they did not; we can assume that the rime to be represented was indeed closer to [-əŋ].

b) Burmese dialect reflexes for {-uik/-uin} are mostly -aiq/-aiN, with perhaps -aq/-aN in the far north, so front-vowel rimes such as *-ek/-en for several centuries ago are a good possibilities. The path of changes which Benedict would require from *-uk/-un to -aiq/-aiN has never been explained by anyone that I know of.

c) A latter-day association of wBrm {-uin} with the pronunciation -en is further evident from the observation in Bernot 1957-1958:278 that the
Chittagong (Marma) Burmese have a word šen ‘long’ which is spelled {hjañ} in standard wBrm, but these Burmese-speakers have modified the wBrm spelling to {sjuñ} (Bernot: syuin). At the time they adopted this modified spelling, they apparently took their model from a Burmese dialect (Rangoon?) where -uiv was pronounced as [en]. Rangoon Burmese še ‘long’ was likely also *šen earlier, but was processed by what was probably an earlier spelling standard, giving it the {hjañ} spelling. A similar example of such western dialect spelling is found in Okell 1997 p. 5, where cuiñ is given as a 400-year-old Arakan spelling for wBrm {cañ}. The latter can be reconstructed with an *-en rime as in ‘long’ above. Again we can assume that for the Arakanese of that time, the letters še were a way to spell -en.

d) There seems to be a connection between wBrm {hluiñ} hlaiñ < *hleñ (< *hlaiñ?) ‘wave’ and Jingpo k’aq-leñ ‘wave’ (k’aq = ‘water’).

e) Bradley 1985, quoting Loeffler 1960, refers to traces of “earlier Arakanese pronunciations” preserved in Khumi, a Kuki-Chin language. Arakanese, a far western dialect of Burmese, has -aiN as a reflex of both wBrm {-añ} (in cases where the wBrm reflects a real nasal ending) and wBrm {-añ} (normally written -uiv, cf. above). In both cases the Khumi borrowings show -en (“eng”). My explanation for this is that wBrm {-añ} represented *-en which then raised further to *-iñ in Central Burmese; some time later, by the time of the loans into Khumi, original *-añ had fronted to -en (thus merging with original *en in Arakanese but not in Central Burmese), and this product of *-añ > *en is preserved in Khumi, but then diphthongised to -aiN in both Central Burmese and Arakanese.

Given these several connections of wBrm -uiv with front vowels, it would be prudent to reconsider Benedict’s evidence (STC #356-363) in support of his claim that -uiv came from *-u:ñ (and -uik < *-u:k). Indeed he calls the “ui” “simply a positional variant (allophone) of the phoneme u before -k, -ñ and -w” although, as he explains, this does not apply to “short medial u”. I don’t find all this very persuasive: the few wBrm words he cites mostly have some problem, e.g.:

1) t’uik-t’uik: a rare word not even listed in large dictionaries;
2) muik: ‘foolish, reckless’, not ‘dark’;
3) ‘cave, hole’ should be wBrm pok < *buk, not puik;
4) cuik can be more closely compared with Mru cak;
5) *tuin* should be more closely related to Leqi *t'æn*, Jino *tu* (= high-central vowel), and Bisu *din* (Bradley 1979:187-92) says that Bisu *-in* is the normal reflex of pYipoish *-in/-en*, not of *-un/-on*;

6) ‘dark’ should be wBrm *hmon*, not *hmuin* (‘lost in thought’);

7) ‘river’ should be wBrm *k'jow* (< *k'ruñ*, cf. cNusu *k'roñ*), and not related to *k'jow* ‘pothole’. According to Benedict’s theories this Burmese word for ‘river’ originally had a short -u-, but his argument here requires a long -u-.

Due to these all these misinterpretations and outright mistakes, Benedict’s examples do not not fulfill the requirements of his arguments and thus are not at all persuasive that wBrm “uin” originates from *-u:n*.

Even if *k'jow* could be connected with Old Mon *kruñ* ‘river’, the next section will show how such a -u- was already turning to -a- in Mon, so wBrm -ui- would still be representing a. This does seem the case in wBrm *k'tin* ‘firm, durable’, connected to Mon *k'æn* (earlier written *k'on*), Shan *k'æn* and Thai *k'en*. Benedict's theory was that *-uk/-un* > /ɔ̌/ /ɔ̌/ were special pre-velar allophones which should be understood as having a “probably mid-unrounded” vocalism (STC p.60), i.e. [-æk]/[-æn], but this is directly contradictory to the more substantial evidence from Mon which suggests it was short -u-, not long -u:-, which changed into -a- (Diffloth 1984:276). Of course the way that long vs. short u developed in Mon also agrees with a similar process well-known in the history of southern English (e.g. *luk* > *lak* ‘luck’ but *luk* > *luk* ‘look’).

**History of the -ui- graphic complex:**

The graphic complexes /ɔ̌/ and /ɔ̌/ are not found in the Indic traditions whence the Mons acquired their script. These innovations are rare in the oldest stage (inscripational) of Mon writing (cf. Shorto 1971: xii) but became increasingly common in later centuries. Until recent decades, efforts to reconstruct the phonological history of Mon were rather unsatisfactory (e.g. Blagden 1910 [Journal Asiatique], Shorto 1971) due to the chaotic spelling of Old Mon and the lack of a broad base of modern dialectal variation. This was greatly alleviated by the discovery of an isolated Mon dialect, Nyah Kur, still spoken in N.E. Thailand. Using this evidence, as well as the testimony of some Indic loan-words with relatively well established phonological histories, it has become possible to trace the history of Mon with much more assurance. Consult Table 1, based mainly on data from Ferlus 1983 and Diffloth 1984.