

# JAH-HUT, AN AUSTROASIATIC LANGUAGE OF MALAYSIA

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## FOREWORD

The present account of Jah Hut is based on several field trips I made to Malaysia in 1966, 1968, 1969, 1971 and 1973.

Each time, my work on Jah Hut was only a diversion from my main occupation: the study of Semai, Jah Hut's fairly distant, but closest relative, which will be the subject of a larger description. The total amount of direct contact I had with Jah Hut speakers is about one month, with long intervals between sessions for sorting out, comparing and thinking about the data. Most of my observations, but not all, were made by direct questioning, either in Malay or in my own hesitating Jah Hut. As my questions were not always meaningful to the Jah Hut, the answers were not always consistent. In such cases, I had to modify the question, or to rely on my experience with Semai, Temiar, Cheq Wong and Semelai to guess what the answer was likely to mean. Since my questions were also intended for comparison with Semai, I may have unwittingly introduced a pro-Semai bias in my description; for this, I alone am responsible since the Jah Hut do not know Semai. But as the two languages are related, I felt such a bias could be more

revealing than any other, if bias there must be. In such short time as I spent, I did not record much text, nor observe or participate in many spontaneous Jah Hut conversations, although these approaches would have been much more fruitful and reliable than direct questioning.

Published literature on related languages was helpful, up to a point; of the fifteen or so Aslian languages of Malaya, only Temiar, Semai, Kentaq Bong and Jahai have brief grammatical sketches; the present description of Jah Hut grammar, in spite of its many gaps and defects, is more comprehensive. As for the few other languages of the Mon-Khmer family for which we have full grammars: Khmer, Khasi, Palaung, Nicobarese, Chrau, Sre, they are too distantly related to Jah Hut to serve as guides. So nearly every single statement made here represents a step in the unknown, and a possible error.

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## INTRODUCTION

To the world outside, both in Malaysia and beyond, the Jah Hut people are practically unknown. Their language has never been written nor described, and the total amount of vocabulary printed in word lists probably does not exceed two hundred items. Yet, a study of the language will help us to understand certain problems and to raise new, more interesting questions. For instance, what does the presence of a Mon-Khmer language so far south in the Malay Peninsula mean for the linguistic history of South East Asia; or, does Jah Hut present, in the typology of ergative constructions, a kind of system which was so far unrecognized. These questions, and others, were in the back of my mind while I was studying Jah Hut, and have limited my queries.

## 1. PREVIOUS LITERATURE

The name Jah Hut does not appear at all in Skeat and Blagden's monumental work (W.W. Skeat, C.O. Blagden - 1906), but, by studying the Comparative Vocabulary (vol. 2, part IV) it is possible to ascertain that some groups which they included in their 'Eastern Sakai

cluster' must have spoken Jah Hut. However, within this 'cluster', one also finds groups who did not speak Jah Hut but Semaq Beri, a rather distant relative of Jah Hut. Semaq Beri is a South Aslian (and hence also Mon-Khmer) language, closely related to Mah Meri and Semelai (Benjamin, 1973a), whereas Jah Hut is a Central Aslian (or Senoic) language, whose closest relatives are Semai and Temiar. Judging from the Vocabulary, Jah Hut proper seems to correspond to what Skeat and Blagden called the 'Inner Subgroup of Eastern Sakai'. Vocabulary entries preceded by the labels: Sak. Gual, Krau Ket., Krau Tem., and Kerbau are clearly Jah Hut, while certain words entered as being Krau Em., U. Cher., and U. Tem., seem to have a Jah Hut origin.

R.J. Wilkinson (1926) rejected Blagden's inclusion of Jah Hut (which he calls 'Krau Sakai') in a special division of 'Eastern Sakai'. He collected fifty to sixty 200-word vocabularies of Aslian languages and had access to a 'very full vocabulary of the Krau dialect' collected by A.J. Sturrock, a District Officer in Temerloh (unpublished, unseen). Yet, he would not decide on the position of Jah Hut, and preferred to mention it in a chapter entitled 'Mixed and doubtful tribes' saying that it showed features of both 'Central Sakai' (i.e. Semai) and 'Jakun' (i.e. Semelai), without discussing any specific example.

Peter Williams-Hunt (1952) placed Jah Hut squarely within the Senoi branch together with Semai and Temiar; he referred to it either as 'South Eastern Senoi' or properly, as 'Jah Hut'. Unfortunately he also included Mah Meri in the Senoi branch, and used the term Jakun interchangeably with Semelai.

Robert Dentan (1964) had first-hand information on the Jah Hut language and noted the shortcomings of Williams-Hunt's classification but did not propose one of his own.

Finally, Geoffrey Benjamin (1973a) presented a full-fledged classification of Aslian languages with probable separation dates based on lexicostatistical techniques. Although we have reservations about glottochronology and the dates proposed, we agree with his language subgrouping, having reached ourselves very similar results by different methods. His subclassification of Senoic is essentially the one presented here, and the position of Jah Hut within Senoic which he proposes is confirmed by our study.

## 2. AFFILIATION

Jah Hut is an Austroasiatic language, and belongs specifically to the Mon-Khmer branch, but due to numerous internal changes, and to a good number of Malay borrowings, this fact is not immediately evident. Perhaps the most important change which has obscured the affiliation

of Jah Hut has been the loss of contrast between long and short vowels, a contrast which has been preserved in other Senoic languages (Semai, Temiar), and is found in most of the Mon-Khmer family. The only remnants of this contrast which survive in Jah Hut today are the diphthongs /ye, we, wo, wo, wa, we/ which correspond to Senoic long vowels; if these diphthongs are analyzed as clusters of consonant plus vowel, Jah Hut only has one vowel quantity, like North Aslian and Malay, but other analyses are possible (see 6.2.1.3.). As for the Lexicon, there is a tendency to use many Malay borrowings, especially when speaking to non-Jah Huts, but Benjamin's lexicostatistics (Benjamin, 1973a) show that the basic lexicon of Jah Hut remains Senoic, and therefore Mon-Khmer.

In spite of this obscured situation, there remains enough evidence of a structural nature to demonstrate the Mon-Khmer membership of Jah Hut in a fairly rigorous fashion. It is not our purpose to do that here, but one bit of evidence is worth mentioning, however briefly: the existence in Jah Hut of final palatal obstruents (/c/ and /ɲ/). These two finals are found in every single branch of Mon-Khmer and in Munda languages; they are to be reconstructed for Proto-Austroasiatic. Austronesian languages never have them, except when they were borrowed from Mon-Khmer, as in the Chamic languages of Viet Nam. They occur after any Jah Hut vowel, in words that have regular sound correspondences with Mon-Khmer cognates in Aslian, Nicobar, and all over continental South East Asia. Only a few examples will be given here:<sup>1</sup>

- excrement* (SB: B161, D114): Jah Hut /ʔɛc/  
 Khmer: ʔac, Proto-North-Bahnaric (238): \*ʔc, Chrau: /ǎc/  
 Pear: ich, Khasi: /ʔɛc/, Nancowry Nicobar: /ʔǎc/.
- to harvest, to pluck* (Pin. K40): Jah Hut: /kɛc/  
 Khmer: /kac/, Proto-South-Bahnaric (353): \*kac, Pear: khach,  
 Khasi: /kʰɛc/, Nancowry Nicobar: /kɛ́c/.
- meat, flesh* (SB: F170): Jah Hut: /sɛc/  
 Khmer: /sac/, Proto-North-Bahnaric (247): \*sěc, Proto-East-Katuic (340): \*sâJ, Old Mon: sac, /sɔc/ (*fruit*).
- ghost* (SB: G18): Jah Hut: /kmɔc/  
 Khmer: /kʰmaoc/ (*corpse, ghost*), Proto-South-Bahnaric (p.29):  
 \*koʔmôc (*grave*), Pear: khmuch (*corpse*), Pacoh: /kumuuyʔ/.
- to weave, to plait* (Pin. 301): Jah Hut: /tɔɲ/  
 Khmer: bɔnda:ɲ/ (spell.: paɲa:ɲ), Proto-North-Bahnaric (94):  
 \*tañ, Proto-South-Bahnaric (335): \*tañ, Proto-East-Katuic (640):  
 \*taañ, Khasi: /tʰa:ɲ/, Pear: thanh, Nancowry Nicobar: /tǎɲ/.  
 The Aslian words given in SB:P126 actually mean *to braid* and