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0) Introduction

Among the fourteen or so extant branches of the Mon-Khmer family, only three or four have developed preserved enough differentiation today to yield proto-branch reconstructions of great antiquity. They are: The Bahnaric, the Aslian, the Palaungic and probably the Viet-Muong branches. It is mostly from these reconstructions that we will be able some day to cast a glance at Proto-Mon-Khmer and beyond. The Katuic, Khmuic and Nicobarese branches, while extremely useful, do not appear to be as diversified as the first four. Monic and Khmeric, in spite of their written records and resulting prestige, ironically rank even lower in this respect.

Reconstructions of proto-Bahnaric, proto-Aslian and proto-Viet-Muong are already well on the way, but that of Proto-Palaungic now needs to be pursued beyond the advances made by Schmidt (1904), Shafer (1952), Shorto (1963) and Benedict (1975). The main problem in this branch has been the poverty of the data available; even when good collections were made, they often remain unpublished for lack of funding or other reasons.

In the last few years however, more data has become available on the Waic branch of Palaungic: Mitani has published descriptions and vocabularies of several Lawa dialects (Mitani, 1966, 1972), and is currently working on reconstruction in this area; tape recordings have been made of Wa, and for the first time, of Samtau, and I have collected some material on Lawa dialects not studied by Mitani. This new material complements what is already available in scholarly publications, in Bible translations and in political pamphlets,

so that it is now possible to attempt a phonological reconstruction of the whole Waic branch of Palaungic.

By Waic¹, I refer to all the languages included by Ferlus under the label "04-WA" (Ferlus, 1974), plus the newly discovered Samtau. The historical unity and distinctiveness of the group within Palaungic is supported by lexical and phonological evidence which I provide below. The diversity and probable time-depth within the Waic sub-branch are sufficient to make reconstructions interesting, but not great enough to render the task hopeless with the limited data available at present.

A) The Waic languages

1) Location

The eastern drainage of the Salween, between the 18th and the 24th parallels (the latitudes of Bhamo and Lampang respectively) is where most of the Waic languages are to be found today. In the South, several groups have remained in (or moved into?) the Chao Phraya basin: the Khalo (Fratz, 1970), the Kien Ka "Lawa" (Wenk, 1965), and some dialects of Lawa proper. In the East also, Samtau, K'ala² (Harding, 1927) and the Waic languages of China extend into the western drainage of the Mekong. But the narrow, 600 Km-long corridor mentioned above appears to be of historical significance to the Waic languages, as Schmidt suggested seventy five years ago.

The exact location of all the groups is not always clear from the published evidence, but the southern and eastern parts of