

Tai Languages in Assam: Daughters or Ghosts?

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Professor William J. Gedney's work is a continuing source of guidance and inspiration to those studying comparative Tai linguistics, a field he did much to establish.¹ Although what follows is a brief programmatic note, far below the stature typical of Professor Gedney's contributions to the field, it is nonetheless offered to him in appreciation. There is also a propagandistic purpose: it is hoped that readers may become interested in Tai varieties mentioned below in time to obtain additional linguistic material before it becomes unavailable as living daughter languages die out and pass to "ghost" status.

It is well-known among comparative Tai linguists that the territory that is now the Indian State of Assam for some time has encompassed the extreme northwestern members of the Tai family. These have included the better-known Ahom and Khamti, but other Tai varieties are known (see Grierson 1903): Phake [p^ha:-ke:], Aiton, Turung, Khamyang, and Nora (the latter two are perhaps by now one) or their equivalents in different transcription systems.² In traditional accounts and oral histories, there are links

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² *Phake* is also transcribed as *Phakey*, *Fakey*; the Assamese form is *Phakial*; similarly, Aiton-Aitonia. *Khamyang* also occurs as *Khamjang*. *Nora-Nara* is mentioned below; the alternation perhaps relates to the Assamese orthographic "inherent vowel," regularly romanized as -a- but phonetically realized as a low back rounded vowel. Grierson (1903: 64) traces *Turung* to *Tai Long*, "great Tais," which he states also occurs as *Tai Rong*.

between Assamese Tai varieties and “Northern Shan” areas associated with Tai-Mao and Tai-Nuca (Gedney 1976).

Below, we briefly survey these varieties and suggest that three are still viable, distinct “daughter” languages (Khamti, Phake, and Aiton) and that the rest are dying, dead, or—as in the case of Ahom—linger on in a post-mortal “ghostly” state. To establish contact with the Ahom “ghost” is now problematic. Although it is still conjured up by its few surviving priest-officiants, the Ahom *deodhai*, for them it is to remain recondite and beyond analysis; perhaps it can still be approached through surviving “daughter” languages—but not without a certain hermeneutic trepidation. That is, if only the “daughter” can lead us to the “ghost,” then perhaps the spectre of “daughter-ghost” progeny will haunt us. As luck would have it, the Tai-Aiton people tell a ghost story that might well serve as a cautionary allegorical tale representing such trepidation. The story is given in the appendix (“Ghosts of the Jungle,” henceforth GJ; it also illustrates more mundane linguistic issues mentioned below).³

Background

The historical background of the Tai varieties in Assam can be approached in two ways: along the lines of a “traditional” view or by raising the possibility of more “radical” viewpoints. The former rests on one particular assessment of local historical materials and sets Ahom off from the other Tai varieties of Assam quite sharply, while the latter raises other historical possibilities. However, before we turn to these views, a note on the terms Ahom, Khamti, and Shan is in order.

Ahom, as an ethnic term, has two associated but still somewhat distinct senses.⁴ Ahom could refer to (1) the former Tai-speaking population who came to rule in the upper Brahmaputra valley, but by the 19th century had become assimilated with their subjects, Assamese-speaking Indo-Aryans; or (2) a modern Assamese-speaking subgroup presuming them-

³ Needless to say, the Aiton people are not responsible for this allegorical reading! The story was told by a 60-year-old Aiton speaker of Bar Pather Bargaon, whose brother assisted in producing the transcription. Apart from editing out a few hesitations and “false-starts” the original oral syntax is retained. Citation-form tones are shown in the system introduced as Aiton₁ in table 2 below; “tone 1” is represented as unmarked. A hyphen indicates either a preclitic or postclitic form, or else (quite arbitrarily) a compound with a single English gloss (for example, “daughter” accounts for *luk-saaw*³). It will be obvious that Lik-Tai spelling is not a normalized system.

⁴ A third use of Ahom has been noticed for some Central-Thai-speaking circles where the term apparently is supposed to include Khamtis and other modern Tai-speaking (Buddhist) populations of Assam. Neither modern Ahoms nor Khamtis in Assam would use Ahom in this inclusive sense.

selves to be descendants of the former; these modern Ahoms will be mentioned in a later section.

Khamti and Shan raise familiar problems of Tai subgrouping and what to call specific local varieties or larger dialect groupings (note also the term Lao). Grierson (1903) uses Shan to refer to the entire language family as it was then known to him (that is, to what most of us would now call Tai), but Shan is used by others to refer to specific varieties associated with Burma or perhaps with a Burmese-like writing system.⁵ If, say, a high degree of shared lexicon and loose inter-intelligibility (and shared orthography) were taken as criterial, then Khamti would perhaps be a mere “dialect” of Shan and the lesser-known Assamese-Tai varieties, Phake and Aiton would not really be too distinct from Khamti. Note also that all three varieties largely share a common writing system—Lik-Tai (see section on phonology and the appendix).

Yet on important linguistic grounds mentioned below, it is certainly useful to distinguish Aiton and Phake from Khamti, and all of these current Tai varieties of Assam from the (Southern) “Shan Proper” of Cushing (1914), Egerod (1957), and others; although one might well wish to recognize a “Greater Shan” subgroup structure.⁶ In any case, all Assamese Tais refer to themselves as Tai or, if need be, as Tai-Khamti, Tai-Aiton, and so forth, but apparently never as Shan; nor would Aitons refer to themselves as Khamtis. In fact, even Khamti, as a self-reference term, may be somewhat problematic (Wilaiwan Khanittanan, MS).

The traditional account of the history of Tai speakers in Assam is derived mainly from oral tradition and from indigenous written histories called *buranji*; some of these were written in Ahom, especially those covering earlier periods, and others in Assamese. Sir Edward Gait’s 1905 *History of Assam* makes much use of these sources for the period prior to the mid-1820s, when the British terminated Burmese influence in the area, annexed it and brought formal Ahom rule to an end. Gait’s observations (and similar summary comments of Grierson 1903, based on the same sources) have

5 Young (1985) discusses Northern Shan subgrouping; see also Gedney (1976), Harris (1976). For the history of Shan subgrouping, compare also the introduction to Cushing (1914).

6 If speakers’ own impressions of mutual intelligibility should have any influence on subgrouping, it is worth noting the results of a survey of conversational interactions between Phake and Aiton speakers (who find each other’s speech totally unproblematic) and those of other Tai varieties. Phake and Aiton speakers found Lashio Shan distinct but “quite easy” to understand (and vice versa); Chiangmai Lanna-Tai was said to be generally comprehensible but “more difficult” [however, see also Aroonrat Wichienkeo (1985)], as was a rural northern Lao dialect, while Standard Central Thai was “very difficult” to unintelligible, frustrating to the point that practical conversation frequently had to switch to English (undoubtedly due mainly to non-Tai vocabulary in Standard Central Thai); see also Terwiel (1980: 28). (Conversations were held in Australia in 1986.)

been slightly recast by subsequent writers (Acharyya 1966, Basu 1970, and others).

In this traditional account, Sukapha, a Tai-Mao chief, and a band of some ten thousand followers crossed the Patkai Hills and entered the Brahmaputra valley in 1228 A.D. Sukapha (that is, 'tiger—proceed—sky') and his descendants established themselves in the Sadiya area, using what was perhaps a traditional Tai form of polity. Gait presumes (although without material evidence) that these Tais brought the Ahom script with them into India, thus predating the traditional establishment of Sukhothai writing by the best part of a century. They became dominant over local tribes, although it was not until the mid-16th century that indigenous peoples like the Chutiyas and Kacharis were reduced to vassalage—at best a precarious position. From that time, invading Moghuls also had to be reckoned with, and for the next century strife was waged between Ahoms and Moghuls almost continuously. By this time, perhaps to survive, the Ahoms were intermarrying with local non-Tai-speaking people, adopting Hindu names, customs and often Brahmanical religious practices.⁷ However, there appears to have remained a more conservative alternative, to some extent in competition with Brahmanical rites: a body of traditional Tai-Ahom rituals preserved by the *deodhai*, traditional Ahom priest-officiants. More and more, the Tai-Ahom language became limited to the special practices of this group.⁸

In the traditional account, it was not until about 1750, or nearly in the period which Gait called "the decay and fall" of the Ahom kingdom (1780-1826) that the later (Buddhist) Tai groups began crossing into Assam from Burma.⁹ This coincided both with the ascendancy of British influence in the area and with a wider pattern of incursions from Burma into the Brahmaputra valley. In 1779, a Nora chief (apparently Tai-speaking) is said to have led a rebellion near Sadiya, and by 1790 Khamtis from the upper Irrawaddy (an area known as "Bor-Khamti") had arrived in the area. They gained control of Sadiya in 1794. In battles of 1800, the Ahoms attempted to oust them, together with Noras and Phakes, who also had appeared by

7 As there was a shift from Ahom to Assamese as the practical language of administration, Gait (1905) observes that the former contributed very few loan-words to the latter, save for a few toponyms and technical terms [see also B. Barua (1966); Kakati (1941)].

8 Gait (1905: 99). For example, in the 1780s the *deodhai* held that current misfortunes of the Ahom kingdom had been caused by the following of Brahman astrological predictions rather than traditional Tai chicken-bone divination and numerological calculations for auspicious and inauspicious days based on the Tai *lak-ni* calendrical system.

9 Grierson (1903: 64) may have been of the opinion that the Ahoms had once been Buddhists also, as he states that after they had become Hinduized they were "no longer Buddhists"—a comment repeated by later writers. *Buranji* evidence for this appears to be lacking.