THE SAEK LANGUAGE OF
NAKHON PHANOM PROVINCE

The Saek language is spoken at the village of At Samat in Amphoe Muang, in the province of Nakhon Phanom. This village is located five kilometers north of the city of Nakhon Phanom, on the banks of the Mekhong River, on the road to Uthen.

This village of At Samat is a pleasant, prosperous place. There is a large school and a fairly large monastery. Actually, administratively Ban At Samat counts as two villages, with one headman for the north and another for the south.

The Saek people at Ban At Samat are fairly well off economically. They have fine fruit orchards, and do fishing in the Mekhong River on a large scale.

Most of the Saek people speak not only Saek but also the local variety of Lao and also standard Bangkok Thai. Many of them come into the city of Nakhon Phanom frequently, on bicycle or on the bus, to do marketing and shopping. Some are employed as government officials in Nakhon Phanom, and some are

teachers, in their own village or elsewhere. Nowadays a good many are working at the American military base outside the town of Nakhon Phanom. There are a few Saek people living in Bangkok.

Their standard of living is not inferior to that of the Lao of other villages in that province. In fact their houses tend to be larger and sturdier than those of country people elsewhere in Thailand. They are devout Buddhists, and so far as I have been able to observe are all loyal and patriotic Thai citizens. Their culture, in fact, is almost entirely identical with that of other Lao and Thai people of the Northeast. It is only in language that they differ.

The Saek people of Ban At Samat report that there are a few other Saek villages scattered here and there in various places in Nakhon Phanom province. They say that the Saek language spoken in these other villages differs somewhat from their own speech, both in pronunciation and in the vocabulary. I have myself so far studied only the variety of Saek spoken at Ban At Samat.

French scholars have noted that Saek is spoken at a number of other villages on the Lao side of the Mekhong River, inland from the town of Tha Khek (which is directly opposite the town of Nakhon Phanom), and the wordlists that they have recorded and published show that the Saek language spoken on the Lao side of the river is very similar to the Saek language at Ban At Samat, with some differences in pronunciation and a few differences in vocabulary.

Nobody has estimated how many Saek speakers there are altogether. My guess would be that they
number in the thousands, but probably not in the tens of thousands.

I do not know about the Lao side of the river, but in Nakhon Phanom province it seems likely that in one or two generations this language may disappear, because the children nowadays even when at home in the village understand the Saek spoken by their parents and grandparents, but usually answer in Lao when spoken to. Young people speak Saek a good deal, and have some lively Saek slang, but they speak Lao and standard Thai so much that they are beginning to forget Saek words. Often, when one asks young people what this or that is called, they reply that they will have to ask the old people. I have sometimes asked the old people if they are not afraid the Saek language will die out in another thirty or forty or fifty years, and they reply that they are sure it will, because the children do not like to speak Saek, but there is nothing they can do about it.

Nobody knows for sure when the Saek people came to settle in Nakhon Phanom province. They have a legend that they came from Vietnam, perhaps a hundred and fifty or two hundred years ago. The legend tells that they lived in two towns in Vietnam but one time when they were very hungry they killed and ate a white elephant belonging to the Vietnamese king. They were fined a large amount of money, which they were unable to pay, but a Vietnamese official named ?og⁴ muu⁵ took pity on them and lent them the money to pay the fine, so that they came to regard him as their patron. But then they ran away, and came to settle in Nakhon Phanom, without repaying the debt to
Later the spirit of this Vietnamese man
followed them to Ban At Samat, and the Saek
people to this day have a shrine where they do rever-
ence to the spirit in an annual ceremony.

One wonders if they were brought down from the
Sip Song Chu Thai at the same time as the Phu Thai
who now live in various other places in the North-
east.

In any case, if the historians were to go to
work and study the stories that they have, and try to
identify the persons and places named in these sto-
rries, it ought to be possible to find out a good deal
about their history. I have confined myself to
studying their language.

Now I wish to speak about what has been done
previously on the Saek language by earlier scholars.

On the Thai side of the river, the only scholar
who ever went and heard this language spoken and
published anything on it was the Danish scholar
Seidenfaden, about thirty-five years ago. He did not
note down any words, but he declared that Saek was a
language of the Mon-Khmer family. This is an error,
as we shall see later. (Saek is a member of the Tai
family of languages.) This erroneous statement of
Seidenfaden has been copied by other scholars ever
since, with the result that all books that mention
Saek by Thai, American, British, and German scholars
state that Saek is a Mon-Khmer language. How
Seidenfaden came to make this mistake is not known.
The Saek people themselves understand that their
language belongs to the Tai group. There are no
words in Saek that resemble Mon-Khmer words except