The language of Akha ritual texts

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In this paper I would like to discuss the problems I am having in analyzing Akha ritual texts from a grammatical point of view, and in judging their antiquity and thereby their value for historical grammar and phonology.¹

The text I have started to work with in detail is the Akha Death Ritual Text (tshō-hā sjhí xaq ø nèq thó thó ø) as recited by the phí-ma [priest] åbō-gō of the dzō clan, Maebay village, Chiangrai province, Thailand. Apart from the Death Rituals, there are also other phí-ma texts, e.g. in connection with recitations for sickness, calling a lost soul back, or securing good health. Besides these phí-ma texts, there are also texts belonging to the offices of dzō ‘village leader,’ and njí-phà ‘shaman,’ and of course a rich variety of songs sung by everybody according to the occasion. I won't talk about this vast corpus of Akha orally transmitted literature (to which we should also add the stories told in the vernacular language), but only say that it is an extremely valuable repository of material for the study of Akha culture in all its aspects, and for the information it gives about the history of a minority people and the region they inhabit, that is, the area where China, Burma, Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam meet.

In the version I first recorded, the Death Ritual Text is 219 typewritten pages long, totalling about 6000 lines, each line with 8-12 syllables. I later got several more pages to add to it, and hope in the future to be able to record texts from other phí-ma for comparison.²

The text is recited by the phí-ma, sometimes more than one, assisted by phí-zà, 'apprentices,' at the occasion of the funeral of an adult, whose family has given a buffalo as a companion for the dead on the road back to the ancestors. The recitation takes place during three nights (or more with a longer version), and the phí-ma recites the whole text, apart

¹ This article is a revised version of a paper originally presented at the 20th International Conference on Sino-Tibetan Languages and Linguistics, Vancouver, 1987.
² In August 1991, I obtained a Death Ritual Text recorded among the Hani in China, just published in Hani and Chinese, which seems to be very similar to the one I recorded in Thailand. I will shortly make a detailed comparison between the two versions.
from the last parts which are only said at the very end, every night. It takes about eight hours, without pause, and is a feat of memory and concentration. It has to be done correctly and is the sole responsibility of the phí-ma. After the three nights he is exhausted with almost no voice left for the last hours.

He is well trained for this. As a young man — no woman can hold this office — he started to attend teaching sessions, where a phí-ma would gather those young men who were interested in learning the ritual texts at his home on several nights every year. Using a special teaching rhythm (nèq khọ khọ ø), the phí-ma recites, with his apprentices following suit a few syllables behind. It goes on the whole night, and if the young man has the ability to memorize and the interest and desire to do so, he attends many nights a year, over a period of many years. The phí-ma I have been working with studied for twenty years and was in his forties before he could manage a complete Death Ritual by himself. The young man who wants to become a phí-ma takes up formal apprenticeship, in addition to his daily life as a farmer, and also starts to assist the phí-ma at the rituals he performs during the year, joining in the recitations, and becoming exposed to countless repetitions of the text. Once he has finally learned the texts and the rituals, and has been called by a village to be their phí-ma, he also has to spend time on refreshing his memory of the texts, which is partly achieved by teaching them. In case there aren’t many Death Rituals during a year — a problem that is rapidly increasing lately because of the rapid cultural changes occurring in Akha villages for many economic and political reasons — he may fear that he will forget his texts. He then spends many evenings by the fireside repeating the texts to himself. Like everybody else in the village, he is also a farmer, and has to go to the fields every day. He gets a bigger share of the meat at ritual occasions but is otherwise not especially remunerated for his work. He is usually highly esteemed as a knowledgeable man in the village, and — if he has a good reputation as a phí-ma — is often called to other villages which lack a resident phí-ma to perform rituals and recite.

There is thus a tradition for transmitting the texts, a system that can still be observed today. As far as I know, however, there is no tradition for systematically explaining the texts. They are learned by sheer repetition and presumably eventually understood through the vernacular language. This doesn’t mean that the Akha don’t discuss their traditions and laws, which indeed they often do, also with reference to the transmitted texts. Many passages are also used in songs, which are learnt from childhood, also by repeating and listening to the older children and adults singing. The phí-ma was exhausted by my method of constantly asking about the
meaning of every syllable, which he had never done himself, but happily enough he soon became very interested and was, and still is, very patient with me.

The Death Ritual text describes in detail Akha life from birth to death, and the road the deceased is supposed to take back to the ancestors. On the whole the text is pretty understandable. Most passages can be explained, but some have ended up being incomprehensible to the phí-ma himself; perhaps someday they will be explained by another phí-ma or be understood through comparisons with other texts. Some passages are very doubtful, since I have not been able to figure out the meaning of each individual syllable, and the phí-ma can only give me a vague explanation or just a guess. But enough of it is certainly in good enough shape to be used for a grammatical analysis.

I have collected the text in several contexts: by recording it at an actual funeral; at teaching sessions; and by asking the phí-ma to recite it slowly into a tape-recorder. After that, the phí-ma has repeated every line into the tape recorder while I wrote it down phonetically. Then began the work of explaining the text, which we did entirely by using the Akha language as a medium, our only language in common. I have been working with this text, along with other ritual texts I have collected, for several years, translating and retranslating them as my knowledge of Akha has increased, saving up my questions for the next time in Thailand, when I would interrogate him again, sometimes to his despair, his answers sometimes to my despair, going through the whole text with him again, asking him to translate most lines into the daily vernacular language. This I did for two purposes: partly to recheck my understanding of the text and to write down his explanations as a running commentary — Chinese classical style! — and partly to get material for comparing the ritual language with the present-day vernacular language. Sometimes I think he is happy when I leave. He thinks it is so easy for me, being able to write it all down while he has to remember it all by heart, but I fear that my time of apprenticeship will probably be as long or longer than his was.

And he hasn’t seen my computer printouts! For years I have been manually filing my material in the vernacular language, and I couldn’t face filing anything any more. So finally I made the decision to get computerized and have started writing my ritual texts with the help of a program which is able to make concordances for any syllable I wish to have. I stopped after the first 2500 lines and started to analyze that much before I continue with the rest (another 20,000 lines), and I keep on getting more texts. It looks as if I won’t lack work for years to come.
The problems of dealing with this text are indeed many. It is especially difficult to judge the relationship between the language of the ritual texts and the present-day vernacular language, or to say anything at all about the age of the text.

There is so far no external information about the origin of the text. In the text itself there is a list of several transmitters, with their clan names, up to the deceased teacher of the living, reciting phí-ma. There is also mentioned the first reciter, called 'ancestor reciter' (àphò tḥó-ma). But there is nothing said about what was transmitted, or how it was created or compiled. There are no stories about it either, just that it is 'words of the ancestors, words of old.' So we have only the end product of a presumably long line of transmission.

Analyzing the grammar of the text is of course valuable in itself — irrespective of the lack of knowledge about its date and method of compilation — as a help in understanding and translating it and comparing it with other ritual texts. The problem is mainly to judge whether the rhythm of the text has forced the language into a special structure, manipulating it or extending its possibilities, which might mean that it doesn't truly reflect a spoken language and thus can't be used to show the differences between earlier and later stages of Akha. It is also difficult to see whether we must conceive of an orally transmitted text, though the technique of transmission is one of strict repetition, as being a text with a frozen language, or whether it may have changed over the years, keeping pace with the ongoing changes in the vernacular language. One hint in this direction is the phonological structure of the ritual text. It seems to me to be exactly the same as the present-day language, with the same mergers taking place. e.g. t's > t j, s j > s, z > j. On the lexical level there are a number of words which are obsolete in the language today. Unfortunately — perhaps inevitably — many of them occur in lines whose meanings are obscure, making it impossible to decide exactly which syllable may mean what, thus diminishing their value for historical comparison.

Now let's look into some details of the emerging structure of the text. In its recitation style, it is rhythmically built up in two-syllable pairs, with the second syllable of each pair more stressed than the first. Each line consists of an uneven number of syllables, arranged 2 + 2 + 2, etc. (usually between 8 and 12 in each line but sometimes more or fewer), plus one final syllable. A line is defined as a stretch of syllables followed by a pause. At the actual funeral recitation, lines were often recited together with fewer pauses, while at teaching sessions each line is followed by a string of final particles, usually one to five in a row. These final particles seem to be