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Notes on the Southern Chin Languages

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to make available a number of wordlists representing some of the languages and dialects of Southern Chin.[1] They belong to what Shafer (1966) has called the Southern Kukish subgroup of Tibeto-Burman. Utilizing the Swadesh 100 wordlist (adapted for Southeast Asia) I attempt on the strength of lexical similarities to show relationships among these languages and dialects. I also give lists of regular phonetic correspondences for consonants and vowels. Tone and/or register was not marked consistently in most of the lists, so I have not attempted to discuss it.[2]

The lists were collected from speakers from the townships of Matupi, Mindat, Kanpetlet and Paletwa[3] and are representative of the languages and dialects spoken in the main settlements in these townships. The lists do not represent all the Southern Chin dialects and languages spoken in these townships, though they do represent the main languages in Matupi, Kanpetlet and Mindat; data for Paletwa township are somewhat lacking. In all of these four townships there are also found numbers of speakers of Central Chin and even Northern Chin languages, but no data from these languages will be given here.

Some useful information was gleaned from Luce 1959, Lehman 1963: 81-88, Mindat Bu Naing 1968 and Burma Socialist Party 1976 concerning the ethnic groups of this area. My findings partly agree with and partly differ from their descriptions.

Occasional comments in Aung San 1980, Aung Tin 1981 and Khyang Ling 1981 helped to sort out Southern Chin from Central and Northern Chin groups in this area.

The survey list consisted of about 280 items, including the whole Swadesh 100 word list.[4] For the lexicostatistical calculations only the Swadesh 100 words were used, but for the phonetic comparisons the full lists were consulted.

2. The languages and dialects

1. Matu

Population about 10,000. They live mainly in the township of Matupi.

Subgroups:
The Matu in Matupi and in the surrounding area call themselves Nga La. Thlan Tan is another name for the same group. The Matu west of Matupi call themselves Va Lang. Their dialect is slightly different from the Nga La group. The Matu living in Paletwa township are also called Va Lang or Warang. In northern Matupi and the surrounding area the Matu call themselves Tlam Tlaih. Their dialect differs quite a lot from Nga La and Va Lang but is more closely related to the speech of another group called Nga Leng (or Nga Laeng). These subgroup names were first used as names of villages but eventually came to refer to whole dialect areas.

II. Ngmüün

Population about 15,000. They live mainly in the township of Mindat, but also in the townships of Matupi and Kanpetlet.

Subgroups:
The Nglung Tu live in the area of Mindat. Some of them are also called Ngmeen (from which the general name Ngmüün seems to have been derived). My informants relate the name Ngmeen to the ngmeen deer. Some living along the Mo river call themselves Ha Ta, some Kyuun Ta. The Ni Tu live in the area of Mindat and along the Yaw river. Ma Ngthang, originally the name of a person, later the name of a village, is now used for a whole area of about a dozen villages along the Nghngi river. This same group of people is also called Nghngi Long or Nghngi Yung. The Mbak Lo live near Mindat, some of them are also called Kyung So, some Mlung So. In some villages along the Khyah river the Ngmüün call themselves Khyah Long and along the Hlet river Hlet Long. There are dialectal differences between all of these groups.

III. Daai

Population about 30,000. They live in all four townships of the Southern Chin Hills, Matupi, Mindat, Kanpetlet and Paletwa. The Burmese used to call the Daai Yin Tu, and this is the name found most frequently in the literature.

Subgroups:
The Yang live in Kanpetlet township along the Pilong river, the Ngjang and Nglung also live in Kanpetlet township, along the Nghmo river. The Nghmoye live on the east side of the Nghmo river, and this is the direct meaning of their name, 'other side side of the Nghmo'. It is said that they were the first ones to call themselves Daai but the other Daai groups don't accept them as Daai. I have not been able to find any reliable meaning for the name Daai. The Ng'yah live in the northeast corner of Kanpetlet township. Their dialect is very similar to Nghmoye. The Mkuui and Thaai live in Mindat township. Ngxang is the name for some Daai in the township of Paletwa. The Daai in Paletwa township living along the Lemyo river are sometimes called Lemyo Chin, but Lemyo Chin is also a general name used for other Chin groups living along the Lemyo. Most of these names for subgroups were first names of one village, but as the villages in the course of time started to split and divide into several villages these names are used now for whole groups

of villages. There are dialectal differences between all of these subgroups.

IV. Mkaang

Population about 1,200. They live in three villages in Mindat township: Kkyuk (Thluk), You Phoong and Hla Tui. Their language, as will be seen, is very closely related to NgmÜÜn and Daai, but there are some cultural differences.[5]

V. Chinpon

Population in the Southern Chin Hills is about 4,000. They live mainly in Kanpetlet township along the Chindwin river. There are also Chinpon settlements in Paletwa township. They also live at the foot of the Chin Hills and in the plains like the Asho Chin. The languages of of the Chinpon and Asho Chin are closely related and somewhat mutually intelligible. The name 'Chinpon' is explained by themselves as being derived from the Burmese word põ 'to hide'. They used to be the 'hiding Chins'. It is believed that because they are only a small group they had to hide themselves in order not to be suppressed and robbed by bigger and stronger Chin groups. According to their main settlements they are also called Chindwin Chin. Still another name for the same group is Üt Pü.

VI. Song Lai

Population not yet known. They live along the lower Lemyo River and their language is intermediate between Daai and Chinpon. It seems there are actually two groups, the Song and the Lai, living in mixed settlements and speaking slightly different dialects.

VII. The Letu Chin also live along the Lemyo river. Nothing is yet known about their population or their dialectal relationship with other Chin groups.

VIII. Vet and Heet Tui. Both of these groups live along the banks of the Than river, the Heet Tui more to the north than the Vet, towards Matupi. Population and dialectal relationships are also still unknown.

IX. Khomi

Population about 35,000. They live in Paletwa township. There are several variations of their name, as Khumi, Khami, Khami and Khimi, all referring to the same group of people. They themselves explain their name as being derived from Khu or Kho 'soil, earth' and mi 'man'.

Subgroups:
The Nise, Tahaensae and Nangbwe live on the west side of the Varu river, the Nise towards the south, the Tahaensae in the middle and the Nangbwe toward the north, at the foot of Katah Hill. The Anglai live along the

Sami river. The dialects of these four subgroups are fairly closely related to each other. The Kajauk , also called Kaja, live on both sides of the Mi river and on the east side of the Kaladan river. Their dialect is not so closely related to the four above-mentioned groups.

X. Wakung

Population about 8,000. They are also called Awa Khama (by the Khomi) or Mru (by themselves or by the Arakanese). They refer to themselves also as Khami. They live along the Mi river in Paletwa township but also in the Arakanese state and in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh. (Some people say that the Mru and Wakung are two different groups).

Subgroups:
Khetana (location unknown) and Likhaeng, who live at the upper part of the Mi river.

Luce (1959:2.28) mentions that Shafer postulates an ancient non-Chin Tibeto-Burman layer in Mru, and below that a pre-Tibeto-Burman layer.

XI. Pomnau

Population about 900. They live in three villages along the Othalin and Shinlet rivers. (Both are tributaries of the Kaladan river.)

XII. Anu

Population about 1,000. They live north of Paletwa along the Daletme and Phayong river, both are tributaries of the Kaladan river.

XIII. Khaungtso

Population about 600-700. They live along the Palet and Mi rivers.

The Pomnau, Anu and Khaungtso languages seem to be related to each other and to some degree mutually intelligible.

XIV. Launghu

Population about 400 in Paletwa township. They live along the lower reaches of the Mi river, but many more of them live in the Arakanese state and in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh. It is said that the Launghu people emigrated from the area of Matupi but their language seems different from Matu.

There are two general terms used for and by the people of the Southern Chin Hills, Khumi and Cho. The name Khumi (Khomi, Khami, Khami, Khimi) is the name of a specific language group (see IX above) but is also used generally of the western groups in the Southern Chin Hills (groups IX - XIII). This name means 'man of the soil' in these