SOME NOTES ON MARAA

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1. SOURCES

Most of what today is known about Maraa (generally written Mara, to be pronounced Maràa), a language of the Chin group of Sino-Tibetan, we owe to Reginald Arthur Lorrain. His Grammar and Dictionary of the Lakher or Mara Language was published posthumously in 1951 by the Government of Assam. Due to Lorrain’s “Lakher Pioneer Mission”, the Maraa became a literate people. Today, at least on the Indian side of the international border by which the British preferred to divide them up between India and Burma, they are managing their own affairs within the possibilities of an Autonomous District of Mizoram State.

The fact that the Maraa and their language did not share the fate of the various Southern Chin languages which are still known by name only is, however, not to be accredited to the work of Lorrain. The Maraa were a people of renown ever since the English came to know them. The first officer of the British Empire who, in 1865-66, tried to contact them, was Colonel Lewin. He had come to know of them as the “Shendu” (the Arakanese rendering of “Sam-tu” ‘hair knot’, a term also applied to other tribes of this area whose men wore their hair in a knot on the top of their head). Lewin was responsible for the administration of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, while the Shendu repeatedly raided villages in this area. Before, Lewin had fearlessly ventured to contact wild Lushai to arrange a kind of peace treaty, but the Shendu proved less approachable. The brave men Lewin had selected as his guides and porters deserted him once he had entered the territory of these famous warriors, and in the end he was happy to find his way back alive.

The first English officer to be accepted as a guest (in Sai-káo) was Captain Shakespear in 1892. The approach was now from the Lushai side of the country, and as a result Maraa became known by their Lushai name as Lakher. In the following years some Maraa (of the Tlówài group) accepted British government, but it was not until 1924 that all Maraa, last among all the Chin peoples, could be forced to accept it at least outwardly, that is, to give up raiding. No wonder then that Sai-káo (under Government control since 1911) became the center of colonial activity and the mission.
In 1908 F.W. Savidge from the mission station in Lungleh published the first *Grammar and Dictionary of the Lakher Language*. In 1932 N.E. Parry distinguished himself — and the Maraa — by publishing the best (and last) monograph in the series on the tribes of the Naga-Chin group. It is from the appendix to his work that we know that there are five major dialects. The data he presented remain, however, scanty. In his rendering of Maraa terms he used the transcription devised by Savidge, based on the Tlóusâi dialect. Lorrain selected Sai-kâo as his place of residence, and thus, though he used a somewhat different spelling, the language he recorded was again Tlóusâi. Though spoken only by a minority of Maraa speakers, Tlóusâi for these historical reasons had the privilege of being raised to "standard" Maraa which, nowadays, children have to learn in school. Judging from Parry's data, another dialect might have proved less difficult to "transcribe" in Roman letters.

Unlike a century ago, the Maraa of today would welcome visitors from Western countries, but the government of India forbids entry into this frontier region. And no lengthy stay in Mizoram would have provided me with all the data which leading learned people of the Mara Autonomous District were kind enough to send me by post during the last nine years. Though our work is far from being completed, the data now available to me allow some rather sure statements about the development of Maraa.

These statements may not be very useful by themselves. But Maraa is not the only language of Sino-Tibetan which has lost all its finals, and the reconstruction of the phonological history of these other languages may be even more complicated than for Maraa, since in the latter case two of the neighboring and historically related languages are well documented. Without the testimony of these languages it would have been rather impossible to reconstruct former stages of Maraa, with all of the changes it has undergone, some of which would appear highly implausible on the mere basis of phonetics.

2. PHONEMES AND TONES

For the missionaries the language was a major concern, as they were, first of all, interested in translating the Bible into Maraa. But like the people themselves, their language proved to be difficult to administer with English concepts. Maraa is the most progressive of all Chin languages insofar as it has lost all of its final consonants. Lushai, written without tone marks, may still make sense when the words appear in context. Maraa however, when written *without tone marks, has many words written alike but pronounced differently*, which may result in passages hard to understand, even when reading in context. You just have to guess what this kind of "shorthand" writing is meant to say. However, both Savidge and Lorrain failed to recognize the importance of tones.
Lorrain mentions them in his *Grammar and Dictionary*, but the tones he gives in the few lines devoted to this (p. 59) are mostly wrong.

Thus, with the spread of literacy the Maraa themselves decided to mark at least one tone. The decision they took, i.e. to add a final -h to the syllables pronounced in a low tone, may be phonetically correct, but it makes things even more difficult for someone who is not a native speaker. To explain this statement, it may be sufficient to state that Maraa has aspirated nasals and laterals (written \(hn\)-, \(hm\)-, \(hr\)-, \(hl\)-). At the same time people write syllables which form one notion together in one word. Thus, in cases where the second syllable starts with a nasal or a lateral, only native speakers know whether the (by now medial) -h- belongs to the first syllable as a final tone mark, or to the second syllable as a sign of initial aspiration.

Fortunately, Lorrain’s use of a final -h as a sign for a glottal stop (as in Lushaï) has been abolished. In fact, Maraa does not have final glottal stops as a distinguishing feature. You may use them, but they are a sign of “rough” (that is impolite, for instance angry) language. With very few exceptions, Lorrain used the -h after /a/ only, and in most cases the syllables marked in this way show the midtone. Lorrain realized that Maraa had both long and short /a/ and introduced /atl/ for the long vowel. The phonetic difference is quite apparent (the short vowel has the sound similar to the English indefinite article and could also be written [\(\alpha\)]), but Lorrain nevertheless failed to note most of the long /a/, and instead introduced the shortening -h for some of the short /a/. The result is a complete mess because his /a/ with neither circumflex nor -h remain undefined regarding their length. The spelling reform introduced by the Maraa corrects this. The trouble is that the heritage of the past cannot be abolished so easily. People even stick to it when it comes to their ethnonym. Officially it is still written “Mara” — and not “Marâh” as the new spelling would require. Moreover, the simple typewriters available are not provided with circumflexes, and thus even official letters continue to be written in the old spelling.

Lorrain introduced yet another vowel with circumflex, /ô/, which, this time, is not the long variant of /o/. Savidge (and following him Parry) used /ong/ and /ang/ instead. According to Lorrain’s description, his /o/ (the former /ang/) is to be pronounced “like oun in the English word young, only the ng is a nasal half sound…”, while the /ô/ (the former /ong/) is explained as “a combination of sounds, like ar in the English word ark combined with a short aw sound concluding with a nasal half sound ng…”. Hence one might think that /ô/ is a nasalized version of what Lorrain writes /ao/, formerly written /o/ by Savidge. Contrary to all these statements, today at least there are no nasalized vowels or diphthongs in Maraa. Completely misleading is the statement about /ô/: it could
very well be rendered by [ou]. Less easy to describe is the value of Lorrain’s /o/. It sounds somewhat like the throaty /arl/ in English snarl, but with no lateral trill, and with the help of the international phonetic alphabet it might be written [əɔ], not too different from Lorrain’s /ao/ = [ʌɔ]. The [ə] in the first case is rather indistinct, and Lushai speakers tend to replace both əɔ and ʌɔ with their diphthong written /au/. Still there can be no doubt about the phonetically higher second part of the diphthong. Lorrain’s dictionary contains a few /ai/ instead of his /o/, and this is the value of this sound given by Parry for the “Zeuhngang” dialect (“Zyhnno” in Lorrain’s spelling), while for “Sabeu” (Capi) he gives “ei”. Thus, on an all Maraa basis, Lorrain’s use of /o/ is definitely not the best solution for this sound.

For some unknown reason neither Savidge or Lorrain recognized that they used /i/ for two different sounds. The reformed spelling differentiates them as /i/ and /ie/. The latter is peculiar insofar as it is the only diphthong in Maraa with the stress on the second vowel; a Frenchman would have written it /ié/. There is another vowel in Maraa said by Lorrain to have a French quality (“like the eu in the French word feu”). It was probably for this reason that Savidge used /eu/, with the result that he could not differentiate it from the diphthong containing the same vowel plus a bilabial offglide. Lorrain used /y/ and /yu/ instead, but there are still quite a few cases in his dictionary where he writes /y/ instead of /yu/ and vice versa. The French /eu/ value is, according to Lorrain, “like ur in the English words cur, murmur, but this sound must be spoken more in the throat.” I heard it just the other way round, i.e. as a rather high central vowel, like French closed /eu/, but with the lips in the position of /ɛ/, that is, unrounded. It is indeed rather near to closed /ɛ/, while in combination with the offglide it might also be written [ɔu]. There is also an [ɔi] conventionally written /ei/. This /ei/ may indeed represent two different sounds as well, i.e. [ɛi] and [ɔi].

It is easy to criticize Savidge and Lorrain for their spelling system, but the five vowels of the Latin alphabet are just not sufficient for the seven plain vowels of Maraa, the less so as the nine diphthongs of Maraa are not reducible to them but use yet another series of vowel sounds that defy systematization. Using the present system we have

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\begin{align*}
\text{a, å, i, u, e, aw, y} \\
\text{ai, ao, ia, ie, ua, ei, yu, o, ô.}^2
\end{align*}
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1 I have also heard, however, a plain vowel allophone, [uu]. If it should win out, there would exist a rather parallel development of former u and o + nasal, i.e. û > u, ô > o (see below).

2 Leaving /ie/ aside and using /au/, /eu/, /oi/, /ou/ instead of Lorrain’s /ao/, /yu/, /o/, /ô/, one may arrive at the following scheme (which, however, does not represent the actual pronunciation): ia, ua, ai, au, ei, eu, oi, ou.