

TONAL CHANGE IN THE TAI LANGUAGES OF NORTHEAST INDIA¹

Stephen Morey

Research Centre for Linguistic Typology
La Trobe University

Currently four languages of the Southwestern Branch of the Tai family are actively spoken in Assam, Northeast India. These are Aiton, Khamti, Khamyang and Phake. There are in addition several other communities who identify themselves as Tai, such as the Ahom and Turung, but who no longer speak the Tai language. Using the methodology established by Gedney (1972), the tonal systems of each of these languages have been studied and will be exemplified in this presentation. Based on this linguistic evidence a historical reconstruction of tone change will be proposed. This will then be compared with the findings of some other scholars, particularly the tones of Khamti as reported by William Robinson (1849), who, unlike most other scholars of his time, was able to distinguish and record the tones of the language. A reconstruction of the tonal system of Robinson's Khamti will be presented. Reconstructions for the tonal systems of the Tai varieties in Northeast India in several stages from Proto-Tai up until the present day will be proposed.

Keywords: Tai languages, Northeast India, Tones, Language Change, Tone Change, Southwestern Tai

¹ This paper was written whilst I was holding a Postdoctoral Fellowship from La Trobe University, based at the Research Centre for Linguistic Typology. It was presented at the SEALS 14 conference in 2004, and I am very grateful to all the participants there for their advice: especially Jerold Edmondson and Paul Sidwell. I also acknowledge the comments of David Bradley, John Hajek to an earlier version of part of this paper, and to Anthony Diller and Alexandra Aikhenvald for comprehensive comments on the earlier drafts of this paper. I acknowledge the helpful comments of Randy LaPolla and of the two anonymous reviewers. I am most grateful of all to the various Aiton, Khamti, Khamyang and Phake informants whose patience over many years made the study of their language possible, in particular Bidya Thoumoung (Aiton), Rajat Namsoom (Khamti), Deben Chowlik (Khamyang) and Ee Nyan Khet (Phake). Abbreviations used in this paper:

DEF	Definite	IMP	Imperative	NEG	Negative
POST	Postposition	PRT	Particle		

1. INTRODUCTION

The most salient differences between languages in the Tai family are often found in their tonal systems, in terms of the number, distribution and realisation of those tones. This paper will present a comprehensive study of the tonal systems of the Tai languages still spoken in Assam State, Northeast India, and propose a history of the tonal systems for those languages which are in the Shan sub-group, within the Southwestern branch of the Tai family.

1.1 *The Tai peoples of Northeast India*

Tai speaking peoples have entered the northeast of India in several waves over the past eight centuries. According to both oral traditions and historical documents, the first group of Tais to arrive were the Ahoms, led by a prince of Mau Lung, Sukapha, who crossed the mountains from Burma into Assam in 1228 and set up a kingdom. The ethnonym of this group is the same as the name Assam, pronounced [aħom] in Assamese, and is thought to be cognate with both Siam and Shan (see Edmondson and Solnit 1997:340). Assam is now the name of a state of the Republic of India, the majority of whose population are Hindu and speak an Indo-European language, Assamese. The Ahoms remain a distinct ethnic group in Assam, but they have largely assimilated with the majority Hindu population and no longer speak Tai language as a mother tongue.

Mau Lung, or Mūng Mau (məŋ² māu² loŋ⁶ in Phake), had been founded in the sixth century by Tais who moved from Southern Yunnan into the Shweli valley, Burma, with the capital at Si Lan in what is now northern Shan State. In 1204 the capital was moved to Mūng Mau (Edmondson and Solnit 1997:340).

In the last 300 years, 6 other groups of Tais have settled in India. These are the Khamti, Phake, Aiton, Khamyang, Tairong or Turung and Nora (Diller 1992:5). Each of these groups was literate, using their own scripts derived from either the Burmese or Mon

scripts. Some of the historical chronicles of these communities have been translated (Aimya Khang Gohain MS for Phake, Morey 1999 for Aiton). It appears that these groups migrated northwest from Mau Lung at around the same time as Sukapha, and established small polities (Muangs) in the valleys of northern Burma and in the region of the India-Burma border.

The Phake Chronicles, based on documents that are several hundred years old, tell the history of a Tai polity called Phake (məŋ² phā⁴ ke⁵) situated in the Hukong valley. These chronicles list a series of Phake kings (cau³ phā⁴), who appear to have ruled over this polity for several centuries (Aimya Khang MS:11). The Phake traditions state that the Phakes left the Hukong area in 1775 and moved to Assam. The Phake Chronicles also mention the Talung (=Turung?) and Khamyang as at least place names (Aimya Khang MS:12), and also mention Khamti as an ethnic group.

A recently discovered Ahom manuscript², also several hundred years old, mentions Aiton, Khamyang and Khamti as the names of small polities in contact with the Ahom kings at the time of Sukapha. The Khamyang Chronicle (Panjok 1981) tells of the Khamyangs coming into Assam at the time of Sukapha, and then retiring into the mountains and setting up a polity at Nong Yang Lake, from which they derive their name. Nong Yang Lake is in the mountains on the border of India and Burma. No ancient Turung history has yet been found, but a modern chronicle written in the mid 20th century tells of the Turung settling by the Tarung River, a tributary in the Upper Chindwin valley, Kachin State, Burma.

Khamti was a larger polity than the others. Chamberlain (1975:59), on the authority of Luce (1958), states that Khamti was first mentioned in Pagan inscriptions in 1192, before Sukapha entered Assam. Leach (1964:34) lists the Khamti states that were

² I was fortunate to be shown a copy of this manuscript by Nabin Shyam Phalung in Guwahati in 2004. The copy had been collected by Sri B.K. Gohain. Its provenance and current location are unknown.

found in Upper Burma, and mentions that they were dependent on the Kingdom of Mogaung, a Tai polity called Muang Kong (muŋ² kəŋ²) in Aiton and known as Nora in Ahom sources (Leach 1964:241). The impetus for at least some Khamti migration into India was the downfall of the Mogaung princes in the 18th century (Leach 1964:34). There are Khamti Chronicles, but no translations of these into English are available.

Most of the Khamtis now live in either Arunachal Pradesh or in Burma, and I have not been able to visit either of those locations. Within Assam itself, most of the Khamtis live in Borkhamti village, Narayanpur, in Lakhimpur district on the north bank of the Brahmaputra. The ancestors of the present villagers were transported there by the British after a war between the British and the Khamtis in the 1820s.

The Aitons have oral traditions that appear to be based on manuscripts which tell of the Aitons living in the Hukong valley at the time of Sukapha (13th century) and then migrating to a place called Kolang, where they set up an Aiton polity. The oral traditions also report that the Aitons were in contact with the Ahom kings at the time of the Ahom King Suhummung (1497-1539), also known as Dehingia Raja. This is confirmed by the Ahom chronicles, which tell of Suhummung fighting wars with the Aitons³ (Baruah 1930:54).

By the late 18th century, all of these groups had entered Assam and settled in villages along tributaries of the Brahmaputra River. This period coincided with the troubles that led to the end of the Ahom Kingdom, the temporary occupation by Burma and the eventual conquest of Assam by the British in 1826. Since this time, contact with non-Tai speaking groups and isolation from the Tai speaking homelands has put pressure on the maintenance of the Tai language, and the Khamyang community has largely shifted to

³ In the translation of this passage, Barua misleadingly uses the term Itania Nagas. In the original text, however, they are simply referred to as Aiton ~~any~~.