THE TONE AND SYLLABLE STRUCTURE OF TURUNG[1]

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1. Introduction – the Turung

The Turung, also called Tai Turung or Tairong, are a group of around 1200 people living in seven villages in Assam, India. Four of these villages are in Jorhat district, two in Golaghat district, and one in the Karbi Anglong autonomous district, all of which are on the south side of the Brahmaputra River.

Today the Turungs speak a language that they call Turung or Singpho or sometimes simply *ii³ buu² gaʔ³* 'our language'. This language is part of the Jingpho[2] group within Tibeto-Burman, but its lexicon contains a significant Tai admixture, and Turung differs in terms of both phonology and syntax from Jingpho as has been described by Hanson (1896), Matisoff (1974a) and Dai (1992). Some dialects of Singpho spoken in India (one form of which was described by Needham 1889) are not intelligible to Turung speakers, and there appears to be a dialect continuum between Turung and the various Singpho varieties.

The Turungs believe that they were once a Tai speaking people, and that there name was originally *taiA4 loŋA1*, a Tai term meaning 'great Tai'. British sources dating back to the early 19th century always describe the Turung as a Tai speaking group. For example, Grierson (1904) described them as one section of the Shans (i.e. Tais) "who at various times entered Assam has retained this name, and its members are now known as the Tairongs, Turūngs or Shām (*i.e.* Shān) Turūngs."

Grierson added that at the time that he was writing, there were very speakers of Turung/Tairong, putting the number at 150. The information he gives about the language shows that it was Tai, albeit slightly aberrant (see Morey 2005:44). The reason for the small number people speaking Turung/Tairong as a Tai language was that this group had been taken prisoner by the Kachins (or Singphos) and that "during their servitude to the Kachins they entirely forgot their own language, and now only speak that of their conquerors, Singpho." (Grierson 1904:167).

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A.AG	anti-agentive	C	consonant	DEF	definite
GV	generalised verb	N	nasal	POSS	possessive
PRT	particle	T	tone	V	vowel

[2] Also spelled Jinghpaw and Jinghpo (e.g. in Dai and Diehl 2003). The spelling adopted here, also used by Matisoff (2003), parallels the spelling Singpho used in India. In Burma, the language is also called Kachin, a Burmese word referring to various Tibeto-Burman speaking groups in Kachin state, of whom the Jingpho are the most numerous (see Leach 1964 for a fuller discussion).

Table 1: *Aiton and Turung villages*

Description of village	Examples	Symbol on map
Aiton speaking villages (Turung women are married into the village, but their children generally do not learn Turung)	Duburoni (Ban Nam Thum), Bargaon (Ban Lung)	♦
Aiton speaking villages with minority Turung speaking households	Tengani, Ahomani	★
Previously Turung speaking village that has switched to Aiton speaking	Barhula	✴
Village with both Aiton speaking and Turung speaking areas of roughly equal size	Balipathar	☐
Turung speaking village where the language shows a high level of Tai mixing	Rengmai	✖
Turung speaking village (Aiton women are married into the village, but their children do not learn Aiton)	Basapathar	♥
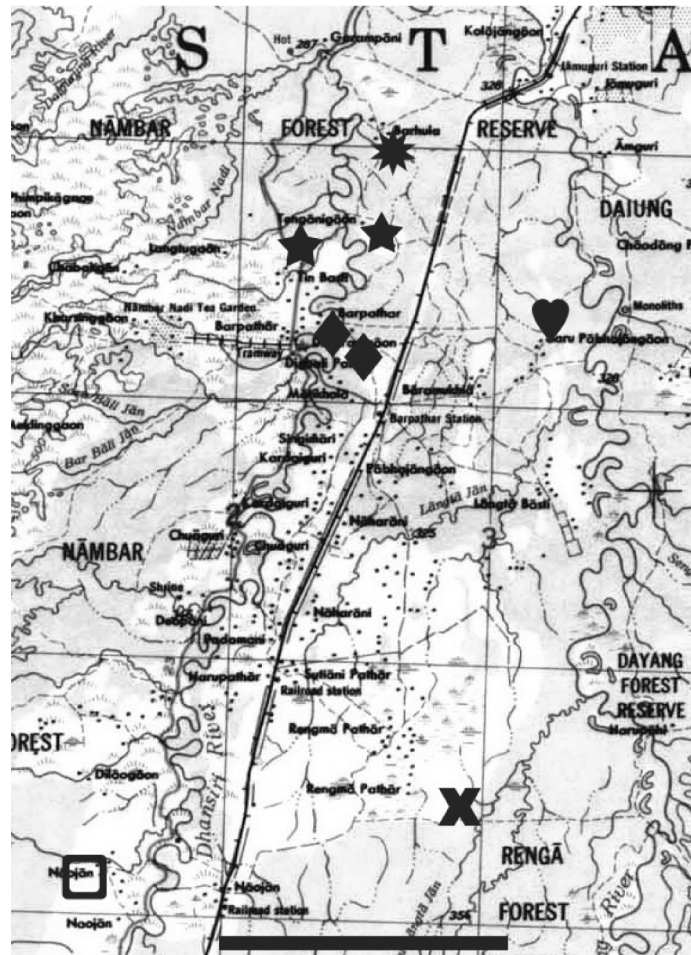
Map of the middle Dhonsiri River, south of the junction of the Doiyang and the Dhonsiri; scale bar – about 10km

The Turungs themselves do not accept that they were enslaved by Kachins or Singphos, but their own histories do state that they lived in close proximity to the Singphos in Upper Assam, and hence acquired Singpho language. Modern Singpho scholars from Upper Assam, on the other hand, regard the Turung as one of the clans (*khong*) of the Singpho who got their name because they lived in the neighbourhood of the Tarung River, which is in Kachin State and the Sagaing Division of northern Burma.

Many older Turungs maintain that their parents and grandparents spoke Tai, and that the Turung community was once Tai speaking, whereas the present-day Turungs are a mixed community. The Turung caste or family names, which represent the male line in Turung villages, include both Singpho forms like *lə gung¹* and Tai forms like *man³ nuu³*, from *maan³ nɯ¹*, which in Tai Aiton means 'village-up'.

Since making an agreement with the Tai speaking Aitons in the early 19th century, the Turungs have intermarried with Aitons. In all Turung villages, some Turungs have married Aiton wives, and many Turung women have moved to Aiton speaking villages and married Aitons. This has led to a complex contact situation between Aiton and Turung. In the Dhonsiri valley, straddling the borders of Karbi Anglong and Golaghat districts, there are 5 Aiton villages and 3 Turung villages as shown on the map below. Table 1 sets out the linguistic situation in each of the villages:

All Turungs speak Assamese, the language of wider communication in Assam. Some also speak English, and some can speak Hindi. At least partial passive knowledge of these two national languages of India is widespread. In addition, some Turungs have competence in the languages of other tribal groups with whom they are in contact.

2. The segmental phonemes of Turung

The consonant inventory of Turung is presented in Table 2:

Table 2: *Consonant Phonemes in Turung*

	Bilabial	Dental / Alveolar	Palatal / affricate	Velar	Glottal
Voiceless unaspirated stops	p	t	c [tɕ]	k	ʔ
Voiceless aspirated stops	ph	th		kh	
Voiced	b	d	j [dʑ]	g	
Nasals	m	n	ny	ng	
Voiceless fricative		s			h
Semi vowel	w		y		
Rhotic Approximant		r			
Lateral Approximant		l			

This inventory differs significantly from the syllable onset inventory given for Jingpho (Dai and Diehl 2003:402) in several ways. Some of the differences reflect differences of analysis or presentation: Dai and Diehl include initial stop-glide sequences in their table, which we treat as clusters, and they use IPA symbols where we use digraphs. Some of the differences, however, are significant. Turung has an /h/

phoneme, which is found only marginally in Jingpho[3]. This phoneme is found with words borrowed from Assamese or Tai, but does occur with some native words such as *hong²* 'sunlight', apparently a reflex of proto Tibeto-Burman **hwaŋ* 'shine, bright, yellow' (reconstruction in Matisoff 2003:430).

Only one other fricative, /s/, is found in Turung (although [f] or [ɸ] are variants of /ph/ especially in younger person's speech). Jingpho in Burma makes a distinction between the initial of 'to eat' <Sha> and 'to go' <Sa> (Hanson 1906), but both these words have the same initial in Turung, although with different tones. Matisoff (1974b) gives the Jingpho words for 'die' and 'ten' as *sī* and *šī* respectively, whereas in Turung both words are identically pronounced *sii³*.

Permitted final consonants in Turung are listed in Table 3:

Table 3: *Final Consonant Phonemes in Turung*

	Bilabial	Dental / Alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
Voiceless unaspirated stops	p	t		k	ʔ
Nasals	m	n		ng	

Final -k is uncommon with proto Tibeto-Burman final **-k* having regularly become *-ʔ* in Turung, as it has in Jingpho (see Matisoff 2003:319). Most words with final *-k* are Tai or other borrowings, but at least one very common Turung function word, *bok³* 'all', also has final *-k*.

Phonetically both /l/ and /r/ are sometimes found syllable finally in Turung. This comes about as follows: the word *dai³ lə khan³* 'therefore' is a compound formed from three words: *dai³ naa³ khan³* 'that-POSS-cause'. In fast pronunciation, the schwa in the sesquisyllabic structure reduces, and the word can be realised as [dail khan].

The Turung vowels are presented in Table 4:

Table 4: *Vowels in Turung*

i		u
e	ə	o
	a	

Vowel length is not contrastive in Jingpho, but it is in Turung, at least marginally. For example, *peen³* 'to fly' clearly has a long vowel (0.30"), contrasting with *naa¹ pen³* 'earlobe' that has a short vowel (0.19"). Words with nasal codas and long [e] or long [a] in Turung are cognate with words that are realised in Jingpho with initial stop-glide clusters (e.g. *pyen* 'to fly'). The reflex of this glide is expressed as length in Turung. The length of the vowel in *peen³* is the same as the length of the vowel when a word has no consonantal coda, so that words like *phee³* 'anti-agentive' are also written in this paper with long vowels.

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[3] Hanson (1906) lists four words with initial /h/ that are interjections, borrowings or alternative pronunciations of function words. In the *Jingpho Miwa Ga Ginsi Chyum*, there are seven words with initial /h/, mostly proper names or interjections.