

THE PHONOLOGY OF THE DUNG DIALECT OF MOKEN¹

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1. INTRODUCTION

Moken is a Malayo-Polynesian language spoken by Sea Gypsies living in the western coastal waters of Burma and Thailand. The people refer to themselves as Moken or Mawken. They are called Selung or Salon by the Malays and Burmese. For further discussion of names see Lewis (1960:1) and Hogan (1972:206-207).

The dialects of Moken spoken off the west coast of Thailand have been studied by Sorat (1981) and Sudarat (1984). They have identified two major dialects in Thai waters which they refer to as the Moken and Moklen dialects. They also agree that Urak Lawoi' is not to be considered a dialect of Moken, but is a separate language more distantly related.

Sorat (1981) makes a lexicostatistical comparison of word lists taken from some eleven locations. He concludes that two languages are involved, Moken in the north and Urak Lawoi' in the south, with Moken comprising two dialects: Moken dialect (Victoria Point, Ranong and Rawai) and Moklen dialect (Bangsak, Thai Muang and Tha Chatchai).

Sudarat (1984) makes a comparative study of Moken, Moklen, and Urak Lawoi', all as spoken in Rawai Village, Phuket. She concludes (p.180) that Moklen and Moken reconstruct as Proto Moken-Moklen and that Urak Lawoi' is more distantly related.

The Moken dialect situation in the Burmese islands has not yet been the subject of systematic investigation, though dialect names and locations have been suggested by a number of scholars. Walter Grainge White (1922) recognised four dialects of Moken: the Dung dialect spoken in the Mergui area; the Jaet dialect spoken in the area of Lampi Island² and Bokpyin; the L'be dialect spoken around Victoria Point and Saint Matthew Island; and the Lawta dialect spoken around Lanta Island³ and Phuket in Thailand. (The Lawta dialect he refers to would appear to be not a dialect of Moken but is rather the Urak Lawoi' language.)

Hogan (1983:1-2) refers to five dialects: the L'be dialect which he says is spoken in an area extending from Tavoy Island southward to the islands off Bokpyin; the Dung dialect which is spoken in the islands off the town of Mergui; the Jade dialect which is spoken in the southern islands as far as Victoria Point and on into Thai waters further south; the Moklen dialect which is spoken on the islands at the mouth of the Takuapa River and south along the

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² Lampi Island, also known as Sullivan Island, is called L'be Island in Moken.

³ Lawta is the Moken name for Lanta Island south of Phuket, which is the traditional point of origin of the Urak Lawoi' people of that area.

coast as far as the northern end of Phuket Island; and the Phuket dialect, spoken in Rawai Village in Phuket Island and on Peepee Island in Krabi Province.

Older Moken people living on Tavoy Island have told me that their ancestors came from the south, from the Jaet area, looking for a better place to make their livelihood. And the similarities between Tavoy and Jaet vowel glides would seem to confirm their account. Tavoy intonation, however, is different from Jaet intonation. Further clues to points of origin may be obtained from a comparison of dialect names with Moken placenames. It is quite possible that these name relationships antedate White's report by a considerable time span. The Moken names for the dialects spoken in Burmese waters are Dung, Jaet, and L'be. Dung is also the Moken name for two islands, Elphinstone and Ross.⁴ These islands still constitute the centre of the Dung dialect area, and in this case it seems fairly clear that the dialect name has a geographic origin. If we assume that Jaet and L'be originally also had geographic reference in Moken, we have not far to look. Sa-ii Island is referred to in Moken as Jaet, and Lampi Island is referred to as L'be.

The earliest Moken primer using Pwo Karen script (A primer of the Selong language, 1846) contains a note by the Reverend D.L. Brayton written at Mergui in October 1844 drawing attention to the variety of pronunciations heard.

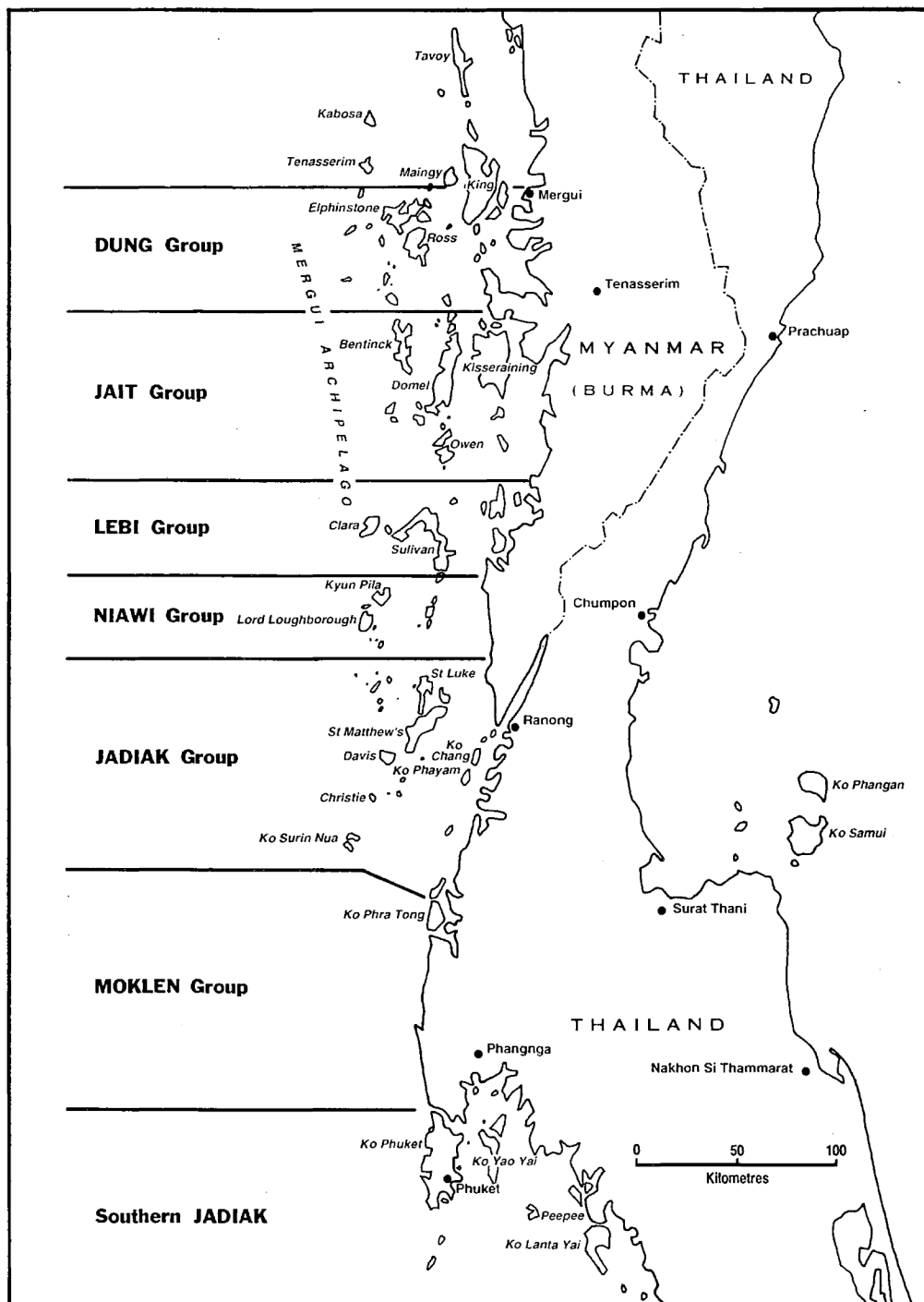
More recently the French anthropologist Ivanoff has spent some time with the Moken people living on Surin and Phra Thong Islands near Takuapa, where he has had contact also with Moken people who have come down from Burma. He has published a map showing five subgroups of the Moken people: Dung, Jait, Lebi, Niawi and Chadiak (Hogan's 'Jade' group). He does not claim that these subgroups represent different dialects, but rather that they show groupings based on the island areas which are their normal habitat (Ivanoff 1985:173-176).

Hogan has now checked these subgroups with Moken informants in Rawai village on Phuket Island. They all say that they come from the Jadiak group which is based on Saint Matthew's Island off Victoria Point. Therefore Hogan no longer calls this the Jade dialect, but the Jadiak (rather than Chadiak). His previous listing of a Phuket dialect seems unnecessary as the older people there all speak Jadiak while the younger people speak a version adulterated by a mixture of Urak Lawoi' and Thai. The informants say that Niawi differs only slightly from Jadiak, and Lebi is slightly different again. They know little about the two northern dialects of Dung and Jait.

On the basis of this information it is considered that we can now give a tentative listing of six dialects of Moken, including Dung, Jait, Lebi, Niawi, Jadiak and Moklen (spoken only in Thailand). The map is based on Ivanoff's map, modified to show more details of the groups in Thailand.

It is hoped that further research can establish more precisely whether Lebi, Niawi and Jadiak need to be differentiated as three separate dialects. Similarly the precise relationship between Dung and Jait needs more careful study. A preliminary check of Dung and Jait via a 300-word list shows more than 90 per cent cognates and the phonological shifts appear to be regular, involving mainly the front and back vowels.

⁴ In earlier Moken usage, Dung was the name used specifically to refer to Elphinstone Island, and Ross Island was referred to as Moung. In current Burmese administration usage Elphinstone Island is called Done Paleh Awe and Ross Island is called Done Kama Chaung.



MAP: MOKEN DIALECTS

When I first started my research on Moken in 1967, it was with two speakers of the Jait dialect from Mali Island (Tavoy Island). My first visit to the language area was in 1973 and since 1974 I have spent part of every year on Elphinstone Island, where the Dung dialect is spoken (and if the line of reasoning suggested above is valid, where it has been spoken ever since the dialect acquired its present name). A tentative census report⁵ in 1972 placed the Moken population in Burmese waters at more than 4,000 people, of which some 500 are speakers of the Dung dialect dealt with in this paper.

Examples in this paper are given in phonetic script. There is a current Burmese-based Orthography. (A paper discussing this orthography is in preparation.) There have been at least two earlier orthographies for the Moken language, both based on the Dung dialect: one Pwo Karen-based and the other Roman-based (Lewis 1960:4ff.); neither one is in current use. According to Lewis (p.4), the Reverend E.A. Stevens was the one who devised the Karen-based script, which W.G. White (1911:19) describes as consisting of Pwo Karen characters with certain additional signs. Lewis reproduces Stevens' remarks on the script.

The remainder of this paper consists of three sections on word and syllable structure, vowels, and consonants respectively, and of a brief sample text.

2. WORD AND SYLLABLE STRUCTURE

A very brief account of the phonology of the Dung dialect of Moken appeared in an unpublished paper (Hogan 1983) in which a Thai orthography is proposed for Thai dialects of Moken. Other than this, little has been written on Dung Moken phonology.

Dung phonological word structure consists minimally of a major syllable, preceded optionally by either a minor syllable or by a pre-syllable, as has been noted also for the Phuket dialect of Moken (Hogan 1983:12 following Veena 1980). This typically Mon-Khmer word structure is presumably the result of old Mon influence.

Major syllables in the Dung dialect can be either open or closed, and they receive primary word stress. They manifest a larger set of contrasting vowels than either of the other two syllable types, since only in major syllables do vowels contrast for length or tenseness. In fact, contrasts of vowel length are to be found only in closed major syllables, since the vowels of open major syllables both lax and tense are all long.

Minor syllables do not have final consonants. Their vowels are phonetically intermediate in length between the short and long vowels of major syllables, and they receive secondary stress. Minor syllables manifest a system of six contrasting vowel qualities. Neither vowel length nor the tense-lax distinctions are contrastive within minor syllables. The vowel in minor syllables is phonetically slightly longer than the short vowels of major syllables, indicated by a single dot in the examples.

Pre-syllables are unstressed, lack final consonants and manifest only a single vowel, a short, phonetically unstable schwa which is essentially just an open transition between the initial consonant and the first consonant of the next syllable. In faster speech this schwa may be completely dropped.

⁵ The census report was a personal communication from U Than Tun, who accompanied Major Aye, the officer in charge of census taking in the area from Tavoy Island to Victoria Point in 1972.