

# PHONOLOGICAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN AHOM AND TAI NUA AS EVIDENCE ORIGIN OF THE AHOM PEOPLE

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## 1. Introduction

According to Li (1960) and many other historical linguists, Ahom belongs in the Southwestern branch of the Tai language family. Gait (1994) suggests that Ahom is the language of a group of the Shan peoples who, since 1778 A.D., have migrated into the easternmost part of India bordering on Burma to establish their own kingdom, the Ahom Kingdom. The area is presently known as the Assam State in India. This Shan group originally called themselves “Tai” but later on adopted the name outsiders used to call their group and since have called their group “Ahom.”

Since the establishment of the Ahom Kingdom, the status of the Ahom language has changed dramatically. In the earlier times, Ahom was used in all circumstances within the Ahom society. Then, the language was gradually replaced by the Assamese language until 200 years ago when Assamese completely took over Ahom as the daily language of communication. Despite all that, Ahom survived and its status rose to become the sacred language existing to be seen in religious texts and rituals, and in a number of words used to call local plants as well as kitchen utensils. The fact that Ahom has its own writing system allowing a lot of historical records, literature, religious texts, etc., contribute to the survival of the Ahom language (Chatthip 1991).

The most important handwritten manuscript which is known as *Ahom Buranji* or “the history of Ahom” claims that the Ahom people migrated from the Maw Luang Kingdom, their original

homeland.<sup>1</sup> As is stated by Elais (1876), based on the Shan history, the first center of the Maw Luang Kingdom was situated on the plain of the Maw River, presently the area stretching from the North of the Shan State in Myanmar to the Southwest of Yunnan County in China. Both the history of Ahom and the history of Shan lead the Ahom people to believe that the Ahom language somehow originates in the Maw Luang Kingdom. Such hypothesis is even more convincing now that more research has been done specifically on the characteristics of the Ahom and Tai Nua's scripts as well as their writing systems (Ranoo 1987 ).<sup>2</sup>

According to Harris (1975), the Shan language in the Plain of the Maw River, both in Myanmar and China, is called *the Tai Nua language*. Tai Nua consists of at least three important dialects namely *Tai Loe* with its origin in the city of Chefang, China, *Tai Maw* in the town of Nam Kham, Myanmar, and *Tai Noe* in the Van Poong Tong village of Sipsongbanna, Yunnan. The relationship between the Ahom language and the three dialects of the Tai Nua language is of great importance in three ways. First, if, in fact , the Ahom people migrated from the Maw Luang Kingdom, the four languages should have a fairly close relationship.<sup>3</sup> Second, if the Ahom language is closest to a certain dialect, the area where the dialect is spoken may prove as evidence for the center of the Maw Luang Kingdom in the past.<sup>4</sup> Third, the study of the four languages which leads to an attempt to reconstruct Proto-Tai Nua will contribute greatly to the historical linguistic study of the Tai language family, especially the aspect concerning the status of Ahom; that is, whether Ahom is a language (just like it is widely understood) or merely a dialect of a language. Not only does this paper directly study the history of languages, but it will also help clarify some of the historical linguistic issues.

## 2. Methods of the Study

As previously stated, this paper is an attempt to study the relationship between four languages, namely Ahom, Tai Noe, Tai Maw and Tai Loe, by means of a comparative method. Thus, I will start from collecting data of the four languages based on Swadesh 200 basic word list to look for sound correspondence sets among those languages.<sup>5</sup> After cognates between the four languages are determined,

I will use the method of lexicostatistics to determine how close Ahom is to each of the three dialects of Tai Nua. Then, I will reconstruct the consonants and vowels of the Proto-language which I term “*Proto-Tai Nua*”

The data of the Ahom language are obtained from *Ahom Lexicon*, edited by B. Barua and N.N. Deodhai Phukan (1964). All the words in the book were recorded in 1932 by a group of graduates who could still remember how each word was pronounced. Since all words were written down in Romanized forms, I take the liberty of transforming them into phonetic forms using IPA.

The data of Tai Noe, Tai Maw, and Tai Loe are taken from the article “A Comparative Word List of Three Tai Nua Dialect” written by Jimmy G. Harris in 1975.

### **3. Background Information**

#### **3.1 Ahom**

There are approximately 30,000 real Ahom people descending from Ahom families of the Ahom Kingdom. At present, they can be found in Guwahati and in some areas of Sibsagar in the Assam State of India. However, due to political reasons and a serious attempt to revive the Ahom culture as well as some forms of the Ahom language, many other Assamese speaking people claim themselves to also be the Ahom’s descendants. Now that *Ahom* or *Tai-Ahom* nowadays refer to those who are minority people in Assam and speak other dialects of the Tai language family including Phake, Aiton and Khamti, the number of the Ahom seem to increase considerably. According to Diller (1998), the Ahom people number at approximately 8 million.

#### **3.2 Tai Nua**

As mentioned in the introduction, Tai Nua refers to one dialect of the Shan language. As far as the Shan language in Myanmar is concerned, not much study has been carried out and, as a result, no real classification of the language has been done linguistically. The only classification of the Shan language of the Shan State in Myanmar that has been studied by Cushing (1914) is purely geographical. Its classification is as follows:

(1) Southern Shan or Standard Shan whose center is in Taunggyi. Southern Shan is used in print and in communication. Generally, Southern Shan or Standard Shan is chosen to be the representative of the Shan language in linguistic studies.

(2) Northern Shan whose center is in Lashio and which includes Tai Nua.

(3) Eastern Shan whose center is in Kengtung is linguistically known as *khün*.

The speakers of Tai Nua are sometimes referred to as “Chinese Shan.” They can be found not only in the North of the Shan State in Myanmar but also in China. Sompong (1997) suggests that there are approximately 300,000 Tai Nua in China, but the exact number of the Tai Nua speakers in Myanmar is unknown.

The three dialects of Tai Nua studied in this paper are found in the areas scattered on the plain of the Maw River and nearby. They are as follows:

(1) The first dialect is spoken in the North of Myanmar in the areas from the city of Nam Kham to Mu-Se down to Hsenvi. The speakers of this dialect call their group and their language *Tai Maw* (TM). They accept that they are a group of the Tai Nua.

(2) The second dialect is spoken in the Southwest of China in Chefang, Muang Maw and Muang Wan Ting. The speakers of this dialect call their language *Tai Loe* (TL).

(3) The third dialect is spoken in the Van Poong Tong village of the Sipsongbanna region of Yunnan. The speakers of this dialect call their language *Tai Noe* (TN).<sup>6</sup>

#### **4. Problems of the Classification of the Tai Languages**

In Myanmar, Shan dialects are found spoken not only in the Shan State but also in the Kachin State, bordering on North of the Shan State. The speakers of those Shan dialects call their languages Khamti, etc., which happen to be the same languages found spoken in some areas of the Assam State in India. Oral literature as well as handwritten manuscripts suggest that the Phake and the Khamti speakers in Assam migrated from the Kachin State in Myanmar, the area connecting to the North of the Shan State.