

The Phonology of Lawa

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1. Background information

In this paper the term 'Lawa' is referred to as the language of a tribal group whose population is estimated to be about 9,841¹ and is concentrated in two Northern provinces, Chiangmai and Maehongsorn.² Specifically the Lawa villages are found between Baw Luang, Hot district, Chiangmai province in the East and Maesariang district, Maehongsorn province in the West.³ These Lawa or, as they call themselves, [laviə], belong to different linguistic groups from the so-called 'Lawa' of Kanchanaburi province, from the 'Lue' (Mal, Thin) of Nan province, and from the 'Lawa' (Chaobon, Nahkur)⁴ of Petchabun, Nakorn Rajseema and Chaiyaphum provinces. Historically, the Lawa are the descendants of the powerful Lawa whose kingdom was recorded in the early Northern Thai chronicles. The history of these Lawa has been a subject of discussion by many historians and anthropologists. For example, according to two Thai scholars, Sisawat and Khanthathatbamroong, the Lawa were once the lords of the land in the upper part of the Golden Peninsula before the southward migration of

the Thai race from China.⁵ Gordon Young mentioned a story told to him by a great Wa chieftain who claimed that his people had journeyed thousands of years ago northward along the Mae Ping river and settled for a long time in what is now Chiangmai valley*.⁶ Princess Viphavadee Rangsit believed that the Lawa once had attained a state of civilization whereby human society consisted of classes. The belief was based on her discovery in 1969 when she visited the Lawa village of Umphai in Chiangmai province where it was found that the Lawa community actually consists of four classes, i.e., (1) The saman (royal blood), (2) the lam (mandarin), (3) the koyit (sorcerer and shaman) and (4) the ordinary lavia.⁷ Besides, from her observation of the crocodile motives carved on the pillars of an ancient ceremonial pavillion in that village together with the saman's use of fish as their herald, she advanced the theory about the sea origin or the northward migration of the Lawa*.⁸

Linguistically speaking, the Lawa language belongs to the Palaungic branch of the Mon-Khmer family in the Austroasiatic Phylum.⁹ The Lawa language described in this paper is the one spoken in Ban Pa Pae village [yuəŋ pɛ], Maesariang district Maehongsorn province. The Institute of Language and Culture for Rural Development, Mahidol University has been working on this language since 1974 with the purpose of compiling a Lawa-Thai and Thai-Lawa dictionary¹⁰ which will be published very soon.

Ban Pa Pae village,¹¹ situated in Ban Pa Pae, Tambon Mae Sariang, Mae Sariang district, Maehongsorn Province, consists of 284 Lawa living in 54 households. The majority of the population are animistic Buddhists and accept the saman as their leaders. Christian missionaries came to the village 20 years ago and converted a small number of the Lawa. Perhaps the greatest contribution by those missionaries to the Lawa was the introduction of the Roman and Thai alphabets as the means of writing Lawa.¹² As a result, the Lawa have been using these alphabets in their daily correspondences including the writing of the *læsom* [?]/₁₄ poetry.¹³ Even if the widespread written language introduced by these missionaries was based on the pronunciation of people from another village, Ban La-up, the Ban Pa Pae people have no difficulty in using it as an effective means of correspondence because they know the systematic sound correspondence between the pronunciation of Ban La-up and their own. The phonological description in this paper is based on the pronunciation of the authors' principle informant, Khun Bunphob Bo[?]bi, age 33.

2. Lawa Phonology

2.1 The Intonation Group

2.1.1 The Statement Contour

2.1.2 The Question Contour

2.2 The Stress Group

2.3 The Syllable

2.3.1 Structure

2.3.1.1 Open Syllable

2.3.1.2 Closed Syllable

2.3.2 Function

2.3.2.1 Nuclear Syllable

2.3.2.2 Peripheral Syllable

2.3.2.2.1 Weakly Stressed Syllable

2.3.2.2.2 Unstressed Syllable

2.4 The Phoneme

2.4.1 The Vowels

2.4.1.1 Vowels in Open Syllables

2.4.1.2 Vowels in Closed Syllables

2.4.2 The Consonants

2.4.2.1 Single Initial Consonants

2.4.2.2 Consonant Clusters

2.4.2.3 Final Consonants

2.4.3 Phoneme Charts

2.4.3.1 The Vowel Charts