

Star, Moon, Spirits, and the Affricates of Angami Naga:
 A Reply to James A. Matisoff*

by

Alfons K. Weidert
 Department of Linguistics, Heidelberg

0. In a recent paper entitled "Stars, Moon, and Spirits: Bright Beings of the night in Sino-Tibetan" (1980), James A. Matisoff discusses the phonological status of the Angami Naga labiodental affricates and their ultimate importance in the wider context of Tibeto-Burman (TB) and Sino-Tibetan (ST) comparative reconstruction. Any paper, however modest its scope, dealing with the largest subgroup of TB, the approximately 60-80 Kuki-Naga (KN) languages, must be highly welcome because barely half a dozen serious scholarly works have appeared so far that significantly enhance our knowledge of KN. With the exception of languages like Tiddim Chin, Lushai, Tangkhul Naga and a few Southern Kuki languages, the whole field has been slumbering for the past 50 years or so.

In recent years local Indian agencies have attempted to improve the state of literacy among speakers of the smaller and lesser known languages of the border areas; hence, Tibeto-Burman philologists are getting a chance to scrutinize a tremendous wealth of descriptive data that might have a bearing on their TB and ST studies. However, with regard to the potential usefulness of recent Indian data on Angami, a language spoken by 43,569 people (Census of India, 1971) in Nagaland Province, now under the political administration of the Indian government, Matisoff's account as we shall see in this paper is too optimistic. To those acquainted with the KN languages Matisoff's arguments are not just unconvincing but unacceptable. In particular, it is not difficult to disprove Matisoff's claim that a medial bilabial element *-w- was the factor responsible for the development of labiovelar affricates in Angami.¹

1.0 First, we shall refute six general conclusions drawn in Matisoff's essay. After this, each of the etyma analyzed by Matisoff ('bee', 'dog', 'monkey', 'bitter', 'nine', 'twenty') will be considered in turn. Then, together with the treatment of all words having labiodental affricates comparable in terms of a strict comparative approach, we shall give our own interpretation of the history of labiodental affricates in Angami. Finally, we shall discuss the representations of words for 'star', 'moon', and 'spirit' in various TB languages and conclude that the proposed connection between Angami /²the³ma/ 'star' and Ancient Chinese *ngiwāt 𐑦𐑦𐑦 'moon' rests on extremely shaky phonological grounds.

*Editor's note: Matisoff will be given an opportunity to have the last word in our next issue.

Six points, cited in the order of their occurrence in Matisoff's paper, must be refuted because they contradict what is known about the Naga languages.

1.1 It is incorrect to say that the bi- and tri-lingual dictionaries of 18 KN languages published in the early 1970's by the Nagaland Language Society (Nagaland Bhasha Parishad) are (Matisoff 1980:3) "particularly excellent and copious sources of information". Matisoff's paper itself demonstrates that it is extremely dangerous to use these dictionaries if one is not personally acquainted with the languages in question. The defects of these dictionaries are not only the lack of tonal marks, as Matisoff himself complains, but also the wealth of printing errors², the numerous incorrect English translations, the very inadequate and un-systematic attempts to render complicated and not so complicated sounds into the Roman alphabet—a task for which even the IPA is badly equipped—and the entirely useless Devanagari transliterations of not the actual pronunciation but of the Roman letters. To illustrate the unreliability of these dictionaries, we first selected at random one language from within the Naga subgroup³ of which Angami is a member, Chakhesang (=Chokrī = Tšakrima = Chakrü), and then we chose some words from the NBP dictionary (Hindi Chakhesang English Dictionary (Chokri dialect), Kohima 1972) to contrast with our own phonemic forms:

<u>NBP</u>	<u>Phonemic</u>	<u>English</u>
Rüzhü	² _{re³_zw}	'to play'
Thegu	² _{the⁴_{vw}}	'crab'
Tekhüshe	² _{te²_{fr⁵_{se}}}	'banana'
Zhe	² _{ze}	'dao'
Ugi	² _{u²_{yi}}	'skin'
Mezüh	² _{me³_zr ²_{u²_{me²_zr}}}	'to urinate' 'urine'
Khrü	² _{tr} hw	'to wash (as dishes)'
Ve	⁵ _{ve}	'to be good'
Zü	² _t zw	'language'
Thishie	³ _{thi⁵_{se}}	'chillies'

In general, our impression of these dictionaries is that they are no better than the dictionaries, vocabularies and word lists published 50 and 100 years ago by the British (cf. Shafer 1957).

1.2 It is incorrect to say that Burling 1960 (1980:4) transcribes "the 5 tones [of Angami] accurately".⁴ A large number of tonal mistakes by the printer must be attributed ultimately to the choice of a notational system where diacritics are used; in addition, Burling himself was not able to differentiate level tones /3/ and /4/, the most difficult tones to hear in the Kohima dialect of Angami.⁵

1.3 It is incorrect to say that because of the non-existence of syllable-final consonants Angami somehow compensated by developing (p. 5) "a full-blown tonal system of the 'Central Loloish' type, with 5 contrasts". The strongest counterexamples are Zemei, Liangmei, and Khiamngan, which all have systems of final consonants and a large array of tones.

Zemei, with a 5-toneme pitch tone system, has the following rimes:

-p	-lp	-ap	-op	-lep
-t	-it	-et	-at	
-k		-ak	-ok	-iak -uak
-m	-im	-am	-um	
-n		-an		
-ŋ	-iŋ	-aŋ	-uŋ	-iaŋ -uaŋ
-i	-ei	-ai	-ui	-uai
-u	-iu	-au		-iau

The tones on CVP-syllables are restricted to three pitch heights; the pitches correspond exactly in frequency to pitch levels /1/, /3/, and /4/ of the smooth syllable types, e.g., /lkelkap/ '1. to crush, of heavy materials like stone iron plate, etc.; 2. to lose money in gambling or betting'; /lke³kap/ 'to shoot'; /lke⁴kap/ 'to measure with stretched-out arms'.

Liangmei⁶, with a 6-toneme contour tone system, has the following rimes:

-p	-ep	-ap	-op	-iap	-uap
-t	-it	-et	-at	-ut	-iat -uat
-k	-ik	-ek	-ak	-ok	-uk -iak -uak
-m	-im	-em	-am	-um	-iam -uam
-n	-in	-en	-an	-un	-ian -uan
-ŋ	-iŋ	-eŋ	-aŋ	-oŋ	-uŋ -ian -uan
-i	-ei	-ai	-ui		-uai
-u	-iu	-au	-ou	-iau	

In this language the tones on CVP-syllables are restricted to five level and/or contour tones, which acoustically parallel the tones of the smooth syllables: /-/ (higher mid level), /./ (higher mid falling contour), /./ (low to high sharp rising), /-/ (very high level), and /-/ (low falling-rising, with a wave-like contour), e.g.,

/-guat/	'to shave'	/-riak-/	'ten (in decades)'
/,khat/	'one'	/,sep/	'nest'
/,muat/	'to blow (by mouth)'	/-n,phiak/	'broom'
/-n-gek/	'a crow'	/-ka-cek/	'gold'
/-a.luak/	'brain'	/-pa.pək/	'half'

Khamngnan, an Eastern Baric language⁷ that the author recently discovered in North-Western Burma, with a 6-toneme system interpretable as either a contour or a pitch tone system, has the following rimes:

-p	-Ip	-ep	-op	-up	-Iup
-t		-et	-ot	-Ut	
-k		-ek	-ok	-Uk	-Iok
-?	-I?	-e?	-o?	-U?	-Io?
-m	-Im	-em	-om	-Um	-Iom
-n	-In	-en	-on	-Un	-Ion
-ŋ	-Iŋ	-eŋ	-oŋ	-Uŋ	-Ioŋ
-l		-el	-ol	-Ul	
-U			-oU	-qU	
-w	-Iw		-oIw		
-l?		-el?	-ol?	-qI?	
-U?			-oU?	-qU?	
-w?	-Iw?				

The tonemes occurring with smooth syllable types are /1/ low, /2/ mid, /3/ high, /12/ low to mid rising, /21/ mid to low falling, and /23/ mid to high rising. The tones on CVP- and CV?-syllables are limited to the level tone /1/ and the contour tones /12/ and /23/, which are identical in frequency to the same tones on smooth syllables, e.g.,

/1 _o k/	'necklace'	/12 _{br} 1 _t ʔeIʔ/	'eight'
/12 _o 12 _{kop} /	'to fold'	/12 _o 12 _{tsU} ʔ/	'to get up'