

The Kam in Ancient Times

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1. THE GEOGRAPHIC AND CULTURAL SETTING

Kam is the largest language of the Kam-Sui linguistic branch, a lesser-known sister branch to the Tai Branch, of which Thai is the largest member. Beyond Kam, the Kam-Sui languages include Sui, Mulam, Maonan, Then, Mak, Ai-Cham, and Grass Hmong; essentially all the Kam-Sui peoples live in China. These languages might seem a trifle removed from the locus of research done by Acham Vichin Panupong—whom we honor with this volume. Nevertheless, some archeological studies have recently suggested the original homeland of the Thai might have been in Guangxi Province in a location close to where the Kam may once have lived (Vallibhotama, 1993). We feel therefore that this modest contribution about some of the distant cousins of the Thai might be of the interest to Acham Vichin and other Taiists in searching for linguistic and cultural roots.

The Kam call themselves *kəm*⁵⁵ and they are called Dòng 侗 [tɔŋ⁵⁵] by the Han (Chinese) people. The Kam until recently possessed no written tradition of their own. Moreover, mention of the Kam in Han records has been relatively infrequent. Therefore, the most enlightening sources of information about times past are to be sought mostly in the Kam language, religion, myths, stories, oral history, and ethnology. This essay probes these materials to study the origins of the Kam.

The Kam are distributed over Guizhou, Hunan, Guangxi, and Hubei Provinces (total population of 2,514,014 according to the 1990 census). They are said to be the descendants of an ancient group of people Chinese historians called *Geling* 猺伶, as reported in AD 1171 by the *Songshi*: *Xinan Xi-dong Zhuman* [History of the Song: The assorted barbarians of the SW Stream-Mountain Area]. The *Xidong* area was depicted as mountainous turf (*dong*) with interspersed rice paddies and many small streams (*xi*); thus the name *xi* and *dong*. The original *Xidong* territory is today a part of Guizhou Province including some neighboring land from Hunan and Guangxi. The largest number of Kam are located in Guizhou Province, about 1.4 million. The most concentrated site of their population in Guizhou is found in SE Guizhou Miao-Kam Autonomous Prefecture in the following places: Liping, Congjiang, Rongjiang, Tianzhu, Jingping, Jianhe, Sansui, Zhenyuan, and Tongren Counties. In Hunan Province their population amounts to 770,000 where they live at Tongdao, Xinghuang, and Zhijiang, as well as in Jinzhou Miao-Kam Autonomous County. In Guangxi-Zhuang Autonomous Region their population numbers 400,000 and they inhabit the areas in Sanjiang, Longsheng, Rongshui, and Luocheng Counties. Some centuries ago a group of Kam immigrated to Hubei. The Kam there are found at Enshi and Xuan'en Counties, a total of only about 40,000 people.

Until two years ago it was not known to many outside Vietnam that some Kam left China and settled south of the border. A few settlers apparently accompanied the Yao from the Guizhou-Guangxi border areas into northern Vietnam. This outward movement happened at the end of the 18th or the beginning of the 19th centuries.

Vietnamese sources use the Han-Viet name **Tống** or **Đồng** in referring to them, cf. **Hoàng Văn Ma** and **Vũ Bá Hùng** (1992, p.143) and Fan Honggui, Meng Weiren, Xu Quanyin, and Gu Shaosong (1986). Professor **Hoàng Văn Ma** of the Linguistics Institute of the Institute of Social Sciences of Vietnam has told us that today the Kam live with their Yao relatives in Tuyên Quang Province near **Sơn Dương** in a village where he studied their language ten years ago and a small number of older people speak it yet today. From examples of their speech gathered in October 1995 (*vi*² 'buffalo'; *mən*¹ 'sky'; *pja*¹ 'rock, stone'; *məm*⁴ 'tiger') and from the fact that these Kam accompanied the Yao to Vietnam and now intermarry with them, we now know that they originally came from Congjiang/Liping Counties, Guizhou or from Sanjiang County in Guangxi Province, where the Pa-hng are concentrated.

In Guizhou the Kam inhabit two settlement areas that are separated by other nationalities called the *northern settlement area* and the *southern settlement area*. The southern area is more preservative of traditional life style. There are also some differences of language and customs, but these are not so great as to prevent a strong sense of common ethnic identity and ready communication. In the southern areas it is quite usual for Kam women to wear their daily dress of indigo blue/black dyed cotton.

The Kam belong to the Kam-Tai or Kadai Branch of languages (Li, 1965). They have had contact over the centuries with the Han, the Miao, the Zhuang, the Yao, the Sui, the Mulam, the Maonan, and the Gelao. Some of this interaction, while of ancient origin, was interrupted when the groups settled in different geographic areas; some of it has been continuous since Tang times (8th c.). This situation has beclouded the original patterns of linguistic affiliation, while false connections among groups have been suggested from repeated and multilevel linguistic and cultural borrowings. Chinese scholars, who have been skeptical about the link between Tai, Kam-Sui, and Gelao, may be beginning to give serious consideration to such a connection, for example Liang (1990) and Long Yaohong (1992).

The Kam people are engaged principally in farming and in wood cutting. Both these activities have achieved a very high level of development. The Kam are particularly known for their cultivation of glutinous rice and for wood construction. The role of glutinous rice in their culture and history is of cardinal importance, as it provides them not only their principle dietary staple, it also serves as a symbol of the Kam themselves. Glutinous rice is called *qou*³¹ *kəm*⁵⁵ 'Kam rice' or *qou*³¹ *lai*⁵⁵ 'good rice' in their language and is to be contrasted with non-glutinous rice, which is called *qou*³¹ *ka*³¹ 'Han (Chinese) rice.' However, the harvest of glutinous rice is not sufficiently abundant to satisfy all their needs and therefore both kinds of rice must be cultivated today.

The Kam areas are one of China's eight forested territories, and many kinds of wood products figure into their lives. Of paramount importance is the Chinese fir, which grows rather rapidly and is quite tall and straight, producing superior timber for house construction. Over the centuries the Kam have employed wood to erect two of their most distinctive cultural features, the drum tower and the wind-rain bridge. These, like their houses, are erected on stilts with the occupied parts found on the second story and higher. This practice is an inheritance from the ancient Yue *ganlan* house type.¹ It

¹In regard to dwellings, the successors to the Yue, the Liao (Lao) 獠 namely, said they remembered that the Yue first lived in caves. But caves were unsuitable dwellings during floods and

is the practice of the Kam that Chinese fir trees are planted on the occasion of the birth of a girl so that the trees and the child reach maturity simultaneously at 18 years, when the wood will be needed as a dowry.

The Kam village consists typically of 20-30 households surrounded by a stockade or natural ramparts. The largest villages may have as many as 500-600 households. The town of Rongjiang in Guizhou's SE Miao-Kam Autonomous Prefecture has several thousand households and is the largest settlement. In each of these villages in the southern area there is at least one drum tower; some may have more. The drum tower is one of the two unique features of a Kam village. It is the center of community life, a gathering point, and a determiner of marriageable partners, since everyone in a village may have the same last name; being tied to different drum towers is a convenient way of keeping clans separated. The drum tower is erected by the efforts of the entire village. In the Kam language it is called *peŋ*³²³. It is also a place for rest and recreation, for the singing of Kam and clan history, for telling stories, for teaching the young, and for doing trade.

The wind-rain bridge is the other distinctive cultural aspect of the village. The Kam settle on small rivers or streams and bridges are therefore a necessity. Needing access to both sides of the water, they began constructing bridges, but today the cultural and artistic significance of such bridges rivals any practical value, as they use them for meeting places and to house the river spirits. The famous bridge at Chengyang in Guangxi just south of the Guizhou border is over 100 meters long and has been declared a national cultural treasure by the Chinese government.

Among the other characteristics of the Kam are their songs and the bronze drum. The Kam are known for their singing, especially their choral singing in harmony. *These songs, when performed by women, are typically sung while clasp[ing] hands in a line or circle and swinging them to and fro or, when performed by men, by standing front-to-back in a circle and placing the right hand on the shoulder of the man in front; one then marches in a circle while singing.* In the Song Dynasty there are reports of these practices among the Geling 犵伶 and Gelam 犵覽 in a work by Lu You 陸游 entitled *Laoxue'an biji* 老學庵筆記 [Records of the Laoxue'an]. Songs are used in courting, working, and recounting history.

The Kam are also among the bronze drum cultures of East Asia, as are the Thai, Lao, Vietnamese, Zhuang, Bouyei, Sui, Miao, Yao, and others (Beauclair, 1986b). The great geographic expanse, the dating of the finds, as well as the artistic inscriptions on excavated drums attest the importance and antiquity of these impressive artifacts. The drums are used today for entertainment, but there are indications that they once figured into rites and ceremonies. The usual Kam word for bronze drum today has

were often infested with snakes and vermin. So in time, the Yue changed to living in trees. Trees were better as refuges from water and bugs, but the sites of large trees could not be chosen by the owner, and villages or groups of houses were not practical. Nevertheless, a Yue inventor incorporated the character of trees in his design of a dwelling on piles one story tall. One house in the Hemudi culture (4th-5th millennium BC) was reconstructed as having piles, cf. Chang (1986, p. 209). We are today familiar with this kind of house so characteristic of the Tai and Kam-Sui people. The word for this house design is also from the Yue, namely *Ganlan*. Note that 欄 *lan* resembles fairly closely *-lan*. In other languages there are similar forms: Kam *yuan*, Zhuang *ruan/luan*, etc. The *Ganlan* house style is found today among the Thai, Zhuang, Kam, and Sui as well as among other related groups.

been borrowed from the Han language, *toŋ¹¹ku³³*, but in Guangxi Rongshui Pingdong we recorded the word *jan¹¹*, which must represent a very archaic level of the Kam lexicon and which ties the Kam to an ancient practice.

2. THE AUTONYM

Although the general name used by the Kam to refer to themselves is *kəm⁵⁵*, one also finds *kən¹*, or *kjəm⁵⁵*. When they wish to specify the Kam people, they add *la:k³¹* or *jin¹¹*. Thus, they call themselves *la:k³¹kəm⁵⁵* or *jin¹¹kəm⁵⁵* or even *la:k³¹jin¹¹kəm⁵⁵*. *La:k³¹*, which is cognate with Thai *lûuk*, means 'offspring, descendants.' Using the term "offspring" to denote the entirety of an ethnic group, both the quick and the dead, is a common practice among other Kam-Tai groups. For example, the Lachi of Yunnan Province in China and in Vietnam call themselves *li³⁵po³³*, in which *li³⁵* is also cognate with Kam *la:k* and Thai *lûuk*; thus, the Lachi are the "children of the Po," who were another ancient people of the area.

To the outside the Kam call themselves *Kam*, but within Kam territory and society there are many branches and clans where different ways of speaking of themselves are heard. The most important of these are *kəm⁵⁵lau³¹* 'Old Kam', *kəm⁵⁵tan³¹* 'Tan Kam,' and *kəm⁵⁵tau³¹* 'Jao Kam.' The attributive modifier dividing the various subbranches is always an item in tone 4 (31) or tone 10 (31) in dead syllables, *lau³¹/tau³¹/fan³¹*.² The fourth tone is also the tone of direct descendant kinship names *pu³¹* 'father,' *nai³¹* 'mother,' *tai³¹* 'older sibling,' *noŋ³¹* 'younger sibling,' *pai³¹* 'older sister,' *la:k³¹* 'child,' *sa³¹* 'grandmother.' The tonal system of Kam is highly developed with nine tone contrasts in live syllables and six in dead syllables; nine categories according to the Thai model and fifteen tones according to the Chinese way of reckoning. The Kam are, from the tonal complexity of their language, extraordinarily sensitive to the slightest difference of pitch. Thus, it cannot be accidental that the various subdivisions of the Kam and kinship names are all words of tone four, *kəm⁵⁵lau³¹*, *kəm⁵⁵tan³¹*, and *kəm⁵⁵tao³¹*.

What is then the meaning of Kam? It can be either a noun or a verb. As a noun, it refers to the Kam nationality or it can signify: *tu¹kəm¹* 'indigo'; *tau¹kəm¹* 'a kind of ivy'; *naŋ²kəm¹* 'a kind of bamboo shoot'; *pən¹kəm¹* 'a kind of bamboo.' When used as a verb, it represents 'to fence, to block something' as: *kəm¹tam¹* 'to cover a fish pond (using branches)'; *kəm¹pa¹* to use branches to form a fish blind'; *kəm¹khwən¹* 'block at the village entrance'; *kəm¹ca:⁶* 'to fence in a village'; *kəm¹ja:n¹* 'to make a fence for a vegetable garden'; *kəm¹ta:m²* 'to make a fence.'

From these meanings we may not readily see the connection between the autonym and the sense of 'to block, to fence.' But if one knows Kam customs and practices,

²Tone category 4 in the system of William J. Gedney (1972) is the tone found in the box C4 or in the system of Li Fang Kuei (1977) C2; tone 10 corresponds to Gedney's DL4 and Li's DL2.