

On Jingpho 'one' and 'two'

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The first two numerals in Jingpho (Jg.), *lən̄ai* 'one' and *ləkhôn̄* 'two' are Tibeto-Burman isolates. The *l-*, apparently from PTB **lak* 'arm/hand', ties in with WT *l̄n̄a* 'five' but the forms themselves have long puzzled the writer. It now appears that they represent derivatives of early terms for the little and ring fingers, as employed in counting, especially when the thumb is used, beginning with the little finger ('one'), followed by the ring finger ('two'):

lən̄ai 'one' < 'little [finger]'; cf. *n̄ai* 'baby; give birth'; *c̄n̄ai* 'baby'; *s̄n̄ai* 'give birth'; WB *n̄ai* 'small, little'; also ArCh 侏 *n̄ieg/n̄iei* (GSR 873f) 'young and weak'; 𐑦 id. (873o) 'fawn', etymologically the same word; 𐑦 *sn̄j̄eg/n̄z̄j̄e* (873a) 'child, son' (with prefixed **s-*), all from PST **n̄a(:)y*, with regular *-j̄eg* < **ay*, *-ieg* < **-ay* (Benedict 1970: App.I).¹

ləkhôn̄ 'two' < 'ring [finger]', from **kwan̄*, with regular *-o-* < **-wa-*, as in Sumgong 'casting net' < PTB **kwan* (STC #158); *khon* 'wear (as bracelets)' < PTB **kwa-n* (STC #160); cf. WB *kwàn̄* 'bend into a ring', '*a-kwàn̄* 'a circle, ring, loop'; also P-Kham **gwan̄* 'circular; in a circle', all from PTB **gwan̄* ~ **kwan̄*.

Speculatively, with an eye upon archaic pre-PST levels, the */n̄ay/* perhaps arose as an **-i* diminutive ('little digit'), as contrasted with */n̄a/*, the 'big digit' = 'thumb', the last of five digits to be counted and thus the source of */l-n̄a/* 'five'. Additionally, the */n̄a/* can be viewed as a derivative (the opposable thumb that is branch-like when extended) of an areal */n̄a/* 'fork, notch, branch', as represented in PAT **tsan̄a* 'id.' > P-Tai *(*h*)*n̄a* < *(*s-*)*n̄a* (regular */s/* < **ts*) 'fork, notch, branch', (SW Tai: Lue 'space between fingers'); Outlier Kadai **hn̄a* < **s-n̄a* < **ts[a]n̄a* ('forkedly-riden animal) = horse', the source of the early Tai-Chinese calendrical 'horse': P-Tai **san̄a* (cf. above for phonology), ArCh 𐑦 *s-n̄o/n̄o* < **s-n̄a*. (cf. Fr. à *califourchon*).

Finally, and even more speculatively, this archaic */n̄a/* may be etymologically the same element as PST **n̄a* 'I/me', the *moi* standing apart

¹ Cf. also the meagerly represented roots for 'one': **ka* and **a* (Matisoff, 1995) with the similarly impoverished (with different distributions) roots for 'child': **ka* and **a* (see Benedict 1941).

like an opposable thumb from all the other personal pronouns, making for a Sino-Tibetan version of a literary Thai original: *The Ring and I*.²

REFERENCES

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² With all due respect, I find these etymologies to be vastly less convincing than my own speculations on this subject (Matisoff 1994), where I interpreted ləŋāi as deriving from the 1st person pronoun (Jg. ṅāi) [alluded to in Benedict's last paragraph] and (less confidently) ləkhōŋ as deriving from a 2nd person address form. Chief among my objections to Benedict's alternative is the fact that there is no evidence whatsoever that the Jingpho (or any other TB group) have ever associated the fourth finger with rings! [Ed.]