

THE TAI LANGUAGE AS SPOKEN BY THE TAI-PHAKAES

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1.1 Tai-Phakae, the people: The Tai-Phakae, according to their chronicles, migrated from Müng-Mau (Keng'-cheñ). In 1215 A.D. King Sükhanpha sent one Prince Caò-Tai-Cheo, who established Müng-Kwang, the Phakae principality. It was also known as Phakae-ce-hing and Müng-Ho-Kong, as it was situated at the head of the Nam-Kong river. Kwang-Taü was its capital. In 1933 Mung-Mau was occupied by the Chinese. The Phakae principality came under the Mung-Kong kings. Later Mung-Kong was in turn occupied by the Burmese in the middle of the 17th century. Due to oppressions the Tai-Phakae left Hukong in 1775 and came to Assam. They joined the Tai-Khamtis in occupying Saiya by defeating the Ahom Governor Sadiyakhoa Gohain. The Ahom reinforcements defeated them in 1798-99 and brought them to Jorhat, the Ahom capital. The Burmese during the First Burmese invasion of Assam in 1817 asked them to return to Hukong. They returned as far as the Namchik river when the British occupied Assam in 1826. They came down and permanently settled in Assam mostly on the bank of the Buridihing (Namhuk) river in the undivided Dibrugarh district scattered in ten villages, namely-Namphakae, Tipamphakae, Borphakae, Munglang, Ningkam, Phaneng, Manmo, Nonglai, Long and Lungkung. Their biggest village Namphakae has about 550 individuals. Their total population is nearly 3000.

1.2 The etymology of the term Phakae : It is consisted of two words; Pha (king) and kae (old) ; another meaning is pha (rock) and kae (old) ; their chronicles indicate as "ancestors of very old dynasty" or ruling class of the Tai people who lived near a rocky cave near Kwang-Taü. (Tâm-nañ phă-luŋŋ ñã:k peñ tha:m / phă hu yaô cam phuŋ wo' lăi ðk ma' kin ñă/ = nearby there was a rocky cave from where at dawn the cows came out for grazing. -Phakae Chronicle.)

1.3 Like all other Tai people the Phakaes dwell on stilt house built facing either north or south. They are Theravadi Buddhists. But they have one non-Buddhistic observance twice a year in May and November in observing a taboo day (wan-kam) while propitiating Phi-Su-Mung (state-deity) in a simple ceremony and is said to have continued since their coming from Mung-Mau. Earlier their education and cultural life, as it is now, was the Buddhist Vihara. Tai monks and laymen from Mung-Kong and Hu-Kong used to come and live among them. During the 19th and early 20th century such communication was maintained. One monk U panna Mahathera composed the Tai Mahabharata in 4 volumes and one version of Ramayana (Lama-Mang) in 1860. The other version of Lama-Mang was composed by Pu-Chamoi, a Phakae scholar, in 1840. The other monk U Gandama Mahathera built up a collection of about 2000 Tai manuscripts before his death in 1934. This collection is now increased upto 3600 Tai manuscripts with about 250 headings.

1.4 Tai-Phakae dress is colourful and very distinctive. The womenfolk weave clothes for their family use. They are proud of their family descent and till recently they rarely married outside their own community. So their strength was deteriorating. However, with modern education and socio-economic pressure, cultural changes have set in in their social customs and behaviours. The learning of Tai-Phakae language is found less in favour among the youths due to socio-economic reasons and lack of Government patronage.

2.1 Relations with other Tai groups : The Ahoms under King Sukapha came from Mung-Mau in 1215, passed through Phakae-ce-ring and conquered Assam in 1229. They ruled Assam till 1825. The Ahom kings had frequent exchange of embassies with the Mung-Kong kings and vice-versa. Both the embassies had to pass through the Phakae principality who were always concerned in their political relations. The Ahoms adopted Assamese as Court language for communications with others. Tai was retained only among the higher and priestly classes for communicating with the Tai Mung-Kong kings and for writing their chronicles. Devoid of royal patronage after the British occupation, the Ahoms have totally forgotten their Tai language.

2.2 Like the Tai-Phakaes other smaller Tai groups came to Assam at the end of the 18th century. The Tai-Khamtis came from their principality Khamtlong. The Tai-Aitons, the Tai-Khamjangs and the Tai-Turungs came from

Hu-Kong. Now the Khamjangs speak Assamese like the Ahoms and the Turungs speak Singpho (Kachin) dialect. So of the six groups of Tai people in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, only the three smaller groups, viz. the Khamtis, the Phakaes and the Aitons speak Tai. Any dissimilarity of speeches found among these three groups is mere of accent. In writing there is very little difference. Of the total of about 20 million population of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, the Tai groups constitute only about an eighth and of it only about .5 per cent (i.e. about .08 per cent of the total population) speak Tai.

3.1 Phonological aspect of Tai as spoken by the Tai-Phakaes:

The alphabets: The Tai-Phakaes has followed and accepted the Mung-Kong northern Shan scripts, which is round in forms, as do the Tai-Khamtis and other smaller Tai groups of Assam. The northern Shan alphabet including the Khamtis has 17 letters. The Ahoms use their older angular form scripts and the alphabet has 19 letters while the southern Shan has 18 letters. The comparative alphabets are shown below:

CONSONANT:

N.Shan :	၀	၁	၂	၃	၄	၅	၆	၇	၈	-	၉
Ahom :	ṁ	ṅ	ṅ	ṁ	ṁ	ṁ	ṁ	ṁ	ṁ	ṁ	ṁ
S.Shan :	၁	၂	၃	၄	၅	၆	၇	၈	-	၉	
English:	k	'kh	ŋ	c	ch	ñ	t	th	d	n	
N.Shan :	၀	၁	၂	၃	၄	၅	၆	၇/၈	၉		
Ahom :	ṁ	ṁ	ṁ	ṁ	ṁ	ṁ	ṁ	ṁ	ṁ		
S.Shan :	၀	၁	၂	၃	၄	၅	၆	၇	၈		
English:	p	ph	m	y/j	r	l	w/b	h	a		

3.1.1 The Ahoms have later by the end of the 16th and beginning of the 17th century adopted five dipthong letters for writing Hindu names: e.g.

ဂ/ခ	ဂ	ဂ	ဂ	ဂ
g	gh	jh	dh	bh

The last three letters are mere addition of *w* to *ch th ph*.

3.2 VOWELS: List of vowel phonemes in Tai-Phakae:

	Front		Central		Back	
	Short	Long	Short	Long	Short	Long
High	i	i:			u	u:
Mid-high	e	e:	u	ü:	o	o:
Mid-low	<u>E</u> /ai	E:			ə/au	ə:
Low			a	a:		
Diphthongs						
Mid-low				aü:		

3.2.1 Vowels occur in all positions: initially, medially and finally. e.g.

- /i/i:/ high unrounded front :
 /i:/ second daughter; /tiŋ/ leg ; / ki:/ loom.
- /e/e:/ mid-high unrounded front:
 /ĕ:/ longing ; /pet/ duck ; / ke:/ less.
- /E/E:/ mid-low unrounded front :
 /E:/ elephant grass; / pEt/ eight; /kE/ old, aged.
- /a/a:/ central open :
 /à:/ open ; /ka:t/ market ; /kà:/ dance
- /ü/ü:/ mid-high unrounded central :
 /ü:/ yes ; /tük/ mud ; /tüu:/ to increase.
- /ə/ə:/ mid-low rounded back:
 /ə:/ yes ; /kək/ cup ; /tə:/ to fight.
- /o/o:/ mid-high rounded back :
 /ok/ fifth daughter ; /koŋ/ man ; /kó:/ fear.
- /u/u:/ high rounded back :
 /u:/ to stay ; /khut/ to dig ; /ku:/ bedstead.

/aü/ mid-low unrounded central. occurs initially and finally.

/aü/ correlated pain ; /caü/ mind.

/ai/, au/ The peculiarity among the Tai-Phakae speakers is that due to stress and pitch accent, the pronunciation of E and when followed by k and n tends to make the close vowel more open as ai and au. e.g.
 /pEK/ > /paik/ = mistake ; /pEŋ/ > /paiŋ/ = sweets.
 /kək/ > /kauk/ = a cup ; /kəŋ/ > /kauŋ/ = drum.
 /ək/ > /auk/ = to come out ; /əŋ/ > /auŋ/ = success.

3.2.2 There are also vowel diphthongs which appear as vowels in contact with deliberate speech. Such diphthongs are / ai oi ui ao eo io /. E.g. kai = fowl ; kôî = end ; kûi = banana ; kao = old ; keo = to hook ; kio = mid-thin.

3.2.3 Semi-vowels and Liquids: / w / y / r / l / The letters W and Y when placed before a word are sounded like consonant, and at the end of a word like vowel. E.g. /wa:o/ = open place ; /ya:ó/ = long ; /a:y/ = shame, vapour.

The liquids r and l often assume the value of vowels even when clustered and no difference in pronunciation is maintained in Tai-Phakae. The Burmese influence has turned many r pronunciation into y in a cluster. e.g.

tain kâk kâk = tañ klêk klêk. (to speak incessantly).

yăm piŋ piŋ = yăm pliŋ pliŋ > yom pyiŋ pyiŋ (v very thin). chra = chla > chya. (teacher).

apat' = aprat' > apyat' > apyet'. (sin).

3.3 Consonant : List of phonemes in Tai-Phakae:

Class	bi-labial	alveolar	palatal	velar	glottal
Contact.					
- Vl. unasp.	p	t		k	
Vl. asp.	ph	th		kh	
Fricative:					
Vl. unasp.			c		
Vl. asp.			ch		
Voiced					h

6. High rising tone khǎ to search

4.1.1 There are also close and open tone of the diphthong vowels and when two consonants are placed one after the other in a word syllable. e.g.

<u>Close tone</u> (short vowel)	<u>open tone</u> (vowel length)
1. kao long used, old	ka:o to remember prayer
2. kaó I	ka:ó spider
3. kaò nine	ka:ò calf of leg; bun of hair
4. taô to prop or support	ta:ô a title of rank
5. taó ash	ta:ó to return; to fall
6. khǎo they	kha:ǎo white
1. kak to stammer	ka:k spoon, small wicker basket
1. kat to bite, to gnaw	ka:t market
2. paŋ to crumble	pa:ŋ to invite
1. tap liver	ta:p slap
6. nam many	na:m thorn

5.1 Morphology and Syntax :

The word order in the sentence is subject + verb + object. The adjective comes after the noun it qualifies. The adverb comes either at the beginning or at the end of the sentence. Possession is conveyed by simply placing the possessive pronoun after the noun. e.g.

Tai-Phakae: mǎinaí ka:ŋnǎü ŋónaiŋ haó nê kin khaò khǎ
 English : today morning cow red our the eat paddy their
 ǎi-u ǎi kaŋ nê yǎo.
 continue at mid (paddy) field the completed.

Free translation: Today morning our red cow was eating
 their paddy in the mid (paddy) field.

The first reaction in the above sentence is :

Who did?	: ŋo_nE	the cow
What colour is the cow?	: naiŋ	red
Whose cow?	: hao	our
What is it doing?	: kin	eat
What is it eating?	: khaó	paddy
Whose paddy?	: khaó	their

Where is it eating? : ti kan na: at the mid
field

When is it eating? : munai kaŋnau today
morning

So we get the sequence: ŋo naiŋ hao kin khao khao ti ka
na: munai kannau.

5.2 Article : a and the comes as a post-position. e.g.
ŋo naiŋ nE = the red cow ; ŋo naiŋ lüŋ = a red cow.

5.3 Verb and tenses: The main root of the verb does not change in number, tense and mood. Only tense marker is added to the verb either at pre-position or postposition. In past tense yao, yaoka koi are added as post position. In Continuous tense si-u for the present and si-u yao for the past are added. In Future tense tak pre-position tense marker is added; tak is shortened to ta. e.g. tak-kin = ta-kin : shall eat. (Shan : tE-kin).

5.3.1 Negative words are used according to sense and placed as pre-position. e.g.

mao-ka (indicative) not going.

ya-ka (imperative) do not go.

pai-ka (indicative of time) do not go; i.e. not
yet time.

mao pai-ka (do do) has not yet gone.

mao hən-ka (in the sense of never) never to go.

am-ka (indicative and imperative) not going or
not to go

Sometimes in colloquial speaking one hears partial incorporating words in Tai-Phakae :

kai-yeüŋka. (=kao-ye mao-ka). I am not going.

mañ wā makiñ wot. (=mañ wā mañ mao kiñ wā u). He said he
is not eating.

het-yê ta-peñ chaŋ ? (=het ka cam tapeñ chaŋ ?)

If done what will happen ?

5.4 Pronouns are mainly Personal and Demonstrative. e.g.

	<u>Singular</u>	<u>Plural</u>
First Person :	kaó I	haó we
Second Person :	maü' you	sũ you
Third Person :	mañ he/she	khăo they

In addressing superior and honourable persons cao is ever added after the addressee word and kha on the part of the speaker. e.g.

kaó-khà / haó-khà	-	I humble self/we humbleselves.
maú-caò / sũ-caò	-	your honour
mañ-caò / khǎo-caò	-	his honour / their honour
chra-caò	-	the honourble teacher. (char = acharyya)
chra-mon-caò	-	the honourable acharyya bhik-khu. (the bhikkhu is ever a teacher. So acharyya)
caò-peñ-caò	-	to very high officials.
phâ-peñ-caò	-	to king, His Royal Majesty.

In old writing of Phakae chronicles ᱠᱷᱟ (Phra) and ᱠᱷᱤ (Phwa) both are seen, as in Ahoms. But it is now pronounced as Pha.

5.4.1 Case-markers of Pronoun : Certain help-words are added as pre-position to Pronoun, both in singular and plural numbers to indicate the Cases. These help-words fix the relationship of syntactical connections. The case-markers are-

Case	Case-markers	Remarks
Nominative	-	No Case marker
Accusative	hañj , cǎ:	<u>han kao.</u> given me (for keeping) <u>ca: kao.</u> given me (for personal)
Instrumental	aó , lui	<u>ao mit ten.</u> to pierce with a knife <u>ma lui man.</u> come in company of a friend.
Dative	cǎ:	<u>hauka ca: man.</u> given to him.
Ablative	lukchĕ lukti lukchEti luktaim	<u>lukchE man/lukti man/</u> <u>lukchEti man nai ma.</u> got from him. <u>luktam chEmun ma-ma.</u> came from Rangpur.
Possessive	-	none. Only Pronoun word sits after the

English	Phakae	Khamti	N.Shan	Aiton	Ahom	Thai	Remarks
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
man	koń	koń	koń	koń	koń	khon	k > kh
to trade	kâ	kâ	kâ	kâ	kâ	khá	
true	tÊ	tÊ	tÊ	tÊ	tÊ	thÊ	t > th
Tai (race)	taí	taí	taí	taí	taí	thái	
village	mañ	mañ	mañ	bañ	bañ	bañ	m > b
flower	mɔk	mɔk	mɔk	bɔk	blɔk	dɔk	m>b>d
sun	wań	wań	wań	bań	bań	bań	W > b
moon	nün	nün	lün	dün	dün	dün	n>l>d
to open eyes	münta	münta	münta	münta	münta	lümta	m > l
we	haó	haó	haó	haó	raó	raó	h > r
grandmother	yá	yá	yá	yá	já	yá	y > j
city wall	keng	keng	keng	keng	keng	chieng	k > ch
to seek	khă	khă	khă	khă	khă	hă	kh > h
to give	häu	häu	häu	häu	häu	hài	au>ai
big	yaü	yaü	yaü	yaü	yaü	yai	
heart	caü	caü	caü	caü	cau	cai	au>au>ai

6.2 Semantic changes :

Under new environment many Tai words acquired new meaning in cognate languages or other neighbouring languages. e.g.

chanăi (= rare, dear of sentimental value) becomes chenai in Ahom, later in Assamese, to mean "a lover" = a very dear one of sentimental value. Change in contraction of meaning.

bao-ran-ĉi (written as bu-ran-ji) means "never to be shown". The Tai Royal Chronicles were never to be shown to any unauthorised person. This very word came to mean ironically in Assamese "history". It is a transference of meaning, just like in Sanskrit "taskar" = doer of that i.e. something unthinkable comes to mean "thief".

So also some change in meaning between or among cognate branches.

müwan in Phakae on the day in Thai yesterday

hěn	"	to look up	"	to see
yu:n	"	without move- ment	"	stand
len	"	to run	"	to play
kap	"	to bite		
kat	"	to gnaw	"	to bite etc.

6.3 Absorption of foreign words:

The Tai-Phakae people had lived in Hukong among the Singphos (Kachins) for over 550 years from 1215 to 1775 A.D., for over 200 years from mid 17th to the end of 19th century under the Burmese rule or at least had influence of Burmese language. Again for over 200 years from 1775 to date in Assam among variety of people, mainly Assamese. Naturally they have absorbed quite a lot of foreign words and many have become bi-lingual as required for their day to day living. Being Buddhists many Pali words are included in their religious conversation. Some examples are

<u>word</u>		<u>meaning</u>	<u>remarks</u>
ncaü (Singpho+Tai)		not correct	n = no(Singpho)
chəp (")		beautiful	or corruption of <u>am caü</u>
Ü (Burmese)		father	Tai words <u>pə</u> and <u>cao</u> are also used.
kyəŋ	"	temple	Tai <u>wat</u> also used.
mahanat	"	pineapple	Tai <u>mak-keŋ-həm</u>
mantaka	"	guava	Tai <u>manokham</u>
pencachi (pali-Pancasila)		five precepts	Tai <u>chin-ha</u>
chetca (" sacha)		truth	
ape (" apaya)		lower worlds	
ñana (" ~nana)		knowledge	
kamit (Assamese-Kamij)		shirt	
kitab (" kitab)		book	
ut (" ita)		brick	Tai <u>nin-ci</u>
iskut (English)		school	
kəlet (")		college	
lətio (")		radio	
chilik (")		cigarette	etc. etc.

6.3.1 The Ahoms and the Phakaes had their writing of chronicles in a very similar manner. e.g.

soldier; kurti = coat ; Burmese (Myanmar) words: chenat = gun ; English word: kaptuch = cartridge.

Northern Shan from Waisali M.ngyang. 1817 A.D. : in poem

တေလေ ဗွင် ငါ် လေ ငါ် ဤ ဘျီအိတ် တွက်လေ ။ ပဲဘူ ဘျီဝဲ ဘွတ် ဝှုလေအိတ်တူ ဘဲ ဗွဲ
မိုဝဲ ငါ် တွက် ငါ် ဘဲအိတ်တူ ဘဲ ဘဲ အိတ် ငါ် ဤ ဤ ဘျီအိတ် တွက် လတ် ဗျင် ခါ် ဝှု
မိုဝဲ ပျီ ဗျီအိတ် လေ ဗဲအိတ်/ဘျီအိတ် ဗျင် ငါ် ။

(tɔche chǎŋ chǎm lé ŋá hà nün tam twak-lə . pa
häu hū hɔt wachanta nài khào mo ye phñn yam,
nanta. naŋ-nài miŋ-ma ana nuk-thwak lat pəC, l
tɔŋ caò pəi khunè lémak chǎm won puŋ' pan.)

Free translation : Even if two three four five months are required, do not allow rainy season overtake you and soak you. In this way the mighty king sent his calculated orders to the three generals with soldiers on their forward march.)

Note: Burmese (Myanmar) words: lé = four ; ŋá = five ; twakle = calculated ; wachanta = Pali word for rainy season; mo = rain ; ye = water; miŋ-ma = king's orders ; ana = mighty ; lemak = soldier; won = general, minister.

Tai-Phakae from Waisali Thaomung. 1840 A.D. in poem :

မင်တုအ် ဘျီအိတ်တတ် ပျီ ဗျီအိတ် ဘျီအိတ် ဤ ဤ ဘျီအိတ် ဗျီအိတ် ။ တာဘဲအိတ်
ဘျီအိတ် ဘျီအိတ် ဗျီအိတ် ဗျီအိတ် ဗျီအိတ် ဗျီအိတ် ။ တာဘဲအိတ် ဘျီအိတ် ဗျီအိတ် ဗျီအိတ်
ဗျီအိတ် ဗျီအိတ် ဗျီအိတ် ဗျီအိတ် ။

(maŋ koŋ hekwa tak pɔi cú khǎo luŋtá kha-ɔ
mayu pə hǔkɔŋ camai. kànphɔŋ hekwa nàiyu ley
yǎo mao khǎu pai thǎŋ pum nɔi. Tan-nài hǔcau
siŋphɔ lɔphǎ aki minǎm waŋ lai hɔi' kuchèn).

Free translation : Some thought that they would go back to Hukong to their earlier in-laws. But some thought that after having stayed at the plains for so long, they would not like to go back to the hills. In this way the Singphos due to their greed and pride were confused greatly in every way.)

Note : Assamese word; jamai = son-in-law ; leyang = Singpho for plains, valley; pum = hill (Singpho); aki = pride (Myanmar).

7.0 CONCLUSION :

The Tai-Phakae people though a very small group have a very rich cultural heritage and heirlooms. They have their (1).historical chronicles, (2).religious books and manuscripts, (3).two great epics Lama-mang (Ramayana) in two versions, and Thammapaktram (Mahabharata) in four volumes, (4).Thammasat (Code of justice) (5).folk-tales, (6).Khe-khyangs (ballads), (7) astrological calculations, (8). herbal medicine etc.

The one time mighty Ahoms have lost their language. So also the Khamjangs and the Turungs. They still have a chance for revival or at least regain to some extent their lost language through the Phakaes, and also the Khamtis and the Aitons. The Phakaes are also now in the threshold of being lost, unless the Ahoms and the Government come to help. The Tai-Phakaes have a saying:

mă pái hăi. = Dog roams in a jhumfield. i.e.an
useless trip.

A riddle : ta:í chắm pí manăo hăkhao tang tuŋ - khuŋ.
= Died three years ago, but not rotten. Its knees
are still erect as they were. (dead spider).

And a proverb:

măi phăk kŏ́ peń tăk : = trees separated from grove
become pieces.
măk phăk phă peń phŭn : = cloud separated from sky
becomes rain drops.
koń phăk mŭŋ peń pŭń : = men separated from country
become alien.

Sometimes it occurs in their mind whether all their contributions will be "useless trip" ; or though appears to be dead, but still not "rotten" ; or have they become alien or are they soon going to be alien from their own people like the "rain-drops"? They have to wait and see.

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