

The language of Akha ritual texts

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In this paper I would like to discuss the problems I am having in analyzing Akha ritual texts from a grammatical point of view, and in judging their antiquity and thereby their value for historical grammar and phonology.¹

The text I have started to work with in detail is the *Akha Death Ritual Text* (tshó-hà sjhí xaq ə nēq thó thó ə) as recited by the phí-ma [priest] àbó-go of the dzò clan, Maeby village, Chiangrai province, Thailand. Apart from the *Death Rituals*, there are also other phí-ma texts, e.g. in connection with recitations for sickness, calling a lost soul back, or securing good health. Besides these phí-ma texts, there are also texts belonging to the offices of dzò 'village leader,' and njí-phà 'shaman,' and of course a rich variety of songs sung by everybody according to the occasion. I won't talk about this vast corpus of Akha orally transmitted literature (to which we should also add the stories told in the vernacular language), but only say that it is an extremely valuable repository of material for the study of Akha culture in all its aspects, and for the information it gives about the history of a minority people and the region they inhabit, that is, the area where China, Burma, Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam meet.

In the version I first recorded, the *Death Ritual Text* is 219 type-written pages long, totalling about 6000 lines, each line with 8-12 syllables. I later got several more pages to add to it, and hope in the future to be able to record texts from other phí-ma for comparison.²

The text is recited by the phí-ma, sometimes more than one, assisted by phí-zà, 'apprentices,' at the occasion of the funeral of an adult, whose family has given a buffalo as a companion for the dead on the road back to the ancestors. The recitation takes place during three nights (or more with a longer version), and the phí-ma recites the whole text, apart

¹ This article is a revised version of a paper originally presented at the 20th International Conference on Sino-Tibetan Languages and Linguistics, Vancouver, 1987.

² In August 1991, I obtained a *Death Ritual Text* recorded among the Hani in China, just published in Hani and Chinese, which seems to be very similar to the one I recorded in Thailand. I will shortly make a detailed comparison between the two versions.

from the last parts which are only said at the very end, every night. It takes about eight hours, without pause, and is a feat of memory and concentration. It has to be done correctly and is the sole responsibility of the *phí-ma*. After the three nights he is exhausted with almost no voice left for the last hours.

He is well trained for this. As a young man — no woman can hold this office — he started to attend teaching sessions, where a *phí-ma* would gather those young men who were interested in learning the ritual texts at his home on several nights every year. Using a special teaching rhythm (*nèq khè khè ə*), the *phí-ma* recites, with his apprentices following suit a few syllables behind. It goes on the whole night, and if the young man has the ability to memorize and the interest and desire to do so, he attends many nights a year, over a period of many years. The *phí-ma* I have been working with studied for twenty years and was in his forties before he could manage a complete Death Ritual by himself. The young man who wants to become a *phí-ma* takes up formal apprenticeship, in addition to his daily life as a farmer, and also starts to assist the *phí-ma* at the rituals he performs during the year, joining in the recitations, and becoming exposed to countless repetitions of the text. Once he has finally learned the texts and the rituals, and has been called by a village to be their *phí-ma*, he also has to spend time on refreshing his memory of the texts, which is partly achieved by teaching them. In case there aren't many Death Rituals during a year — a problem that is rapidly increasing lately because of the rapid cultural changes occurring in Akha villages for many economic and political reasons — he may fear that he will forget his texts. He then spends many evenings by the fireside repeating the texts to himself. Like everybody else in the village, he is also a farmer, and has to go to the fields every day. He gets a bigger share of the meat at ritual occasions but is otherwise not especially remunerated for his work. He is usually highly esteemed as a knowledgeable man in the village, and — if he has a good reputation as a *phí-ma* — is often called to other villages which lack a resident *phí-ma* to perform rituals and recite.

There is thus a tradition for transmitting the texts, a system that can still be observed today. As far as I know, however, there is no tradition for systematically explaining the texts. They are learned by sheer repetition and presumably eventually understood through the vernacular language. This doesn't mean that the Akha don't discuss their traditions and laws, which indeed they often do, also with reference to the transmitted texts. Many passages are also used in songs, which are learnt from childhood, also by repeating and listening to the older children and adults singing. The *phí-ma* was exhausted by my method of constantly asking about the

meaning of every syllable, which he had never done himself, but happily enough he soon became very interested and was, and still is, very patient with me.

The *Death Ritual* text describes in detail Akha life from birth to death, and the road the deceased is supposed to take back to the ancestors. On the whole the text is pretty understandable. Most passages can be explained, but some have ended up being incomprehensible to the *phí-ma* himself; perhaps someday they will be explained by another *phí-ma* or be understood through comparisons with other texts. Some passages are very doubtful, since I have not been able to figure out the meaning of each individual syllable, and the *phí-ma* can only give me a vague explanation or just a guess. But enough of it is certainly in good enough shape to be used for a grammatical analysis.

I have collected the text in several contexts: by recording it at an actual funeral; at teaching sessions; and by asking the *phí-ma* to recite it slowly into a tape-recorder. After that, the *phí-ma* has repeated every line into the tape recorder while I wrote it down phonetically. Then began the work of explaining the text, which we did entirely by using the Akha language as a medium, our only language in common. I have been working with this text, along with other ritual texts I have collected, for several years, translating and retranslating them as my knowledge of Akha has increased, saving up my questions for the next time in Thailand, when I would interrogate him again, sometimes to his despair, his answers sometimes to my despair, going through the whole text with him again, asking him to translate most lines into the daily vernacular language. This I did for two purposes: partly to recheck my understanding of the text and to write down his explanations as a running commentary — Chinese classical style! — and partly to get material for comparing the ritual language with the present-day vernacular language. Sometimes I think he is happy when I leave. He thinks it is so easy for me, being able to write it all down while he has to remember it all by heart, but I fear that my time of apprenticeship will probably be as long or longer than his was.

And he hasn't seen my computer printouts! For years I have been manually filing my material in the vernacular language, and I couldn't face filing anything any more. So finally I made the decision to get computerized and have started writing my ritual texts with the help of a program which is able to make concordances for any syllable I wish to have. I stopped after the first 2500 lines and started to analyze that much before I continue with the rest (another 20,000 lines), and I keep on getting more texts. It looks as if I won't lack work for years to come.

The problems of dealing with this text are indeed many. It is especially difficult to judge the relationship between the language of the ritual texts and the present-day vernacular language, or to say anything at all about the age of the text.

There is so far no external information about the origin of the text. In the text itself there is a list of several transmitters, with their clan names, up to the deceased teacher of the living, reciting *phí-ma*. There is also mentioned the first reciter, called 'ancestor reciter' (*àphò t'hó-ma*). But there is nothing said about what was transmitted, or how it was created or compiled. There are no stories about it either, just that it is 'words of the ancestors, words of old.' So we have only the end product of a presumably long line of transmission.

Analyzing the grammar of the text is of course valuable in itself — irrespective of the lack of knowledge about its date and method of compilation — as a help in understanding and translating it and comparing it with other ritual texts. The problem is mainly to judge whether the rhythm of the text has forced the language into a special structure, manipulating it or extending its possibilities, which might mean that it doesn't truly reflect a spoken language and thus can't be used to show the differences between earlier and later stages of Akha. It is also difficult to see whether we must conceive of an orally transmitted text, though the technique of transmission is one of strict repetition, as being a text with a frozen language, or whether it may have changed over the years, keeping pace with the ongoing changes in the vernacular language. One hint in this direction is the phonological structure of the ritual text. It seems to me to be exactly the same as the present-day language, with the same mergers taking place, e.g. *ts > tj*, *sj > s*, *z > j*. On the lexical level there are a number of words which are obsolete in the language today. Unfortunately — perhaps inevitably — many of them occur in lines whose meanings are obscure, making it impossible to decide exactly which syllable may mean what, thus diminishing their value for historical comparison.

Now let's look into some details of the emerging structure of the text. In its recitation style, it is rhythmically built up in two-syllable pairs, with the second syllable of each pair more stressed than the first. Each line consists of an uneven number of syllables, arranged 2 + 2 + 2, etc. (usually between 8 and 12 in each line but sometimes more or fewer), plus one final syllable. A line is defined as a stretch of syllables followed by a pause. At the actual funeral recitation, lines were often recited together with fewer pauses, while at teaching sessions each line is followed by a string of final particles, usually one to five in a row. These final particles seem to be

variable between recitation styles, occasions, and desired speed, while the bulk of the line is consistent. I have checked with the *phī-ma* several times on this issue.

It is then of obvious interest to see if there are any differences as to which words can occur in which position in rhythmic pairs. The pattern seems so far to be as follows:

<i>1st syllable</i>	<i>2nd syllable</i>
Noun	Noun
Verb	Verb
Adjective	Adjective
Numeral	Numeral
Final particle	Final particle
Prefix	Suffix
Negation	—
—	Classifier
—	Noun particle
—	Verb particle
—	Filler
—	Adverb marker

The definitions of these word classes are the same as I have earlier used for the vernacular language. There is nothing really surprising about the positions listed above, since in the vernacular language noun particles are also placed after the noun, the negative marker always precedes the verb or series of verbs it negates, and verb particles follow the verb. The problems occur in the ritual language in connection with the requirements of the rhythm pairs. A pair consisting of, e.g. two monosyllabic nouns cannot be followed by a noun particle directly starting a new pair; a monosyllabic noun functioning, e.g. as an object can't be followed by a negative + verb, etc. This is solved through an interplay of the absence or presence of prefixes, suffixes, noun particles, verb particles, classifiers, 'filler syllables,' and final particles, to shape each pair and each line into the required pattern. All of these morphemes have the same grammatical function in the present-day vernacular language, with the exception of the 'filler syllables,' which seem to be a ritual text specialty.

A rhythm pair can consist of, e.g. N + N, N + V (i.e. S + V or O + V), Neg + V, V + V, Num + Clf, N + NP (noun particle), V + VP (verb particle), N + Adj, Adv + Adv marker, N + suffix, N + FP (=final particle), V + FP, N + filler, Prefix + N, etc.

Below I will give some examples of the various devices used, and discuss their function in comparison to the structure of the vernacular language.

The 'filler syllable' ɿɔ — tone depending on context — is pretty frequent in the text and occurs after nouns, including pronouns and monosyllabic time and place words, when there is a need to make up a pair:³

1. nɔ ɿɔ / mà sɿhì / de ɣa / ànm / mà ɳé /
 you not know court youngster not be
 You are not an unknowledgeable youngster going courting
2. zá ɿɔ / xhàŋ áŋ / djoq dji / à ə / má
 then coffin NP clean finish FP FP
 Then we have finished cleaning the coffin
3. dɰ ɿɔ / gá áŋ / thà tshò /
 log road NP don't fall across
 Log, don't fall across the road
4. hù ɿɔ / mà gaq / àzá / mà djaq /
 first not cold place not be
 hù gaq / àzá / zá bà / lm le / i le / xòq ə / lé
 first cold place then warm come clab. return VP FP
 At first we are nothing but cold; our coldness now will later turn
 into warmth again

In (1) the negation must be in a first position (the slanting stroke / is a demarcation line between rhythm pairs). Thus the monosyllable nɔ 'you' can't occur alone before it, since that would push mà into a second position. In (2) the NP áŋ, which marks the object or place, as here, must be in a 2nd position, which means that zá 'then' must be expanded e.g. with the filler ɿɔ. The same is true for (3), where both áŋ and thà have fixed positions, second and first respectively, leaving dɰ 'log' alone, and thus it gets the filler ɿɔ tagged on. In (4) the time word hú 'first' is required to have a filler in the first line, as mà must start a new pair. Compare the second line, which is not negated, so that hú + gaq can make up a pair, with no filler inserted.

³ There is also a Lahu emphatic particle ɿɔ that frequently occurs as a filler in religious poetry, especially in the sonorous sequence ɣɔ-ɿɔ-lê-qô?-qo. [Ed.]

For comparison I give some examples of negated verbs with preceding nouns without fillers:

5. *lò xε / mà mỳ /*
 village not good
 The village is not good
6. *khỳ ṭjhe / mà mỳ /*
 dog feces not good
 The dog feces are not good
- 7 *thì m̄ / mà bja / sjhì xhố /*
 one heaven not dawn while
 While dawn has not yet come

In (5) there is a disyllabic noun; in (6) two monosyllabic nouns in an unmarked genitive relationship (also usually unmarked in the modern vernacular, and thus a kind of disyllabic noun); and in (7) a numeral + classifier, all of which make up pairs by themselves, so that no filler is needed.

If the monosyllabic noun functions as object, place, or origin, the appropriate noun particle is often used:

8. *dzò djó / phu áŋ / já xhà / thè ə / mà ɲé /*
 leader live village NP verdict hurry NP not be
 It is not (a case of) being busy with verdicts in the village where
 the leader lives

Here, *phu* 'village' is followed by the NP *áŋ* marking place, and the following noun, *já xhà* is disyllabic.

9. *m̄ b̄àŋ / m̄ nε / mà tshé /*
 heaven wrong heaven NP not judge
 Wronging heaven (but) not judged by heaven

The NP *nε* marks instrument/origin.

The noun particle *áŋ* is frequent, always in the second position, and marks (as already mentioned) object or place, e.g.:

10. *xhàŋ áŋ / lé ə / nò tɪq / àyà / tètqé /*
 coffin NP go VP you only Clf only

mà ŋé / a
 not be FP

You are not the only one who goes into the coffin

11. *ý tjàq / gá áŋ / thà jɔ /*
 water bad road NP don't flow
 Bad water, don't flow on the road

12. *zà mi / jɔ djà / shm áŋ / mà í /*
 girl beautiful other NP not go
 The beautiful girl doesn't go (to marry) somebody else

13. *tjìq djɔ / dàŋ áŋ / shm i / mà the /*
 smith live place NP iron even not hurry
 At the place where the blacksmith lives there is not even hurry
 with iron

Sometimes *áŋ* is absent when there is no place for it, as in:

- 14a. *oq bà / nèq daq / lá ə / mà mɔ /*
 door spirit climb come VP not see
 I didn't see the spirit coming up to the door

In the vernacular language the line would be:

- 14b. *oq bà áŋ nèq daq lá ə mà mɔ a.*

There is no preference in the vernacular language as to the number of syllables that can precede any noun particle, verb particle, negation, etc.

In the next example, *dù* 'place' seems to be inserted to make room for *áŋ*:

- 15a. *mì nm / ný gò / dù áŋ / djɔ tjhí /*
 girl chair place NP stay firm

thà kha /
 don't down

Girl, don't sit down firmly on the chair

In the vernacular:

- 15b. zà-mi-àbú ný-gò áŋ thà ný zìq deè
 girl chair NP don't sit firm FP

In the ritual text, áŋ can't follow the disyllabic ný-gò directly. Compare also two similar structures:

16. lo dzoq / khm áŋ / zàq bò / mà hi /
 stone firm fence NP pig root not let

lá ə / má
 come VP FP

Don't let the pigs come to root around by the stone fence

17. mí tjiq / tjhù dù / lo ma / zàq khm
 evening hot spring stone big row of stones

tseq la / tjhódjá / mà mjà / àzà / bjm lá /
 deer horn long not many elab. conceive start

miá / lé
 FP FP

In the evening, by the rows of big stones at the hot spring the deer with a few slender antlers is ready to conceive

In (17) there is no immediate place for áŋ after khm, but the line is perfectly clear without it.

The same principles seem to be valid for the noun particle nɛ, marking instrument or origin.

18. phu bàn / phu nɛ / mà tshé /
 village wrong village NP not judge
 Wronging the village (but) not judged by the village

- 19a. da nɛ / àdjè / djèq lá / xaq khá / ɣe ɔ /
 father NP strip weave come basket take VP
 Taking a basket woven by father from àdjè strips

In the vernacular it comes out as:

- 19b. *ɲà da nɛ ɛ ádjè ɛ áné nɛ djèq*
 my father NP NP NP strip NP weave
 ɛ xaq-khá phi ɔ
 NP basket carry VP

Another *nɛ* (extended to *nɛ ɛ*) is added after *ádjè ɛ áné*, which there is no place for in the ritual text. Note also the VP *ɛ* marking the relative clause (more about this later).

In the next example, the text has no *nɛ* at all after a noun of instrument:

- 20a. *zỳ né / pjàq ɛ / phò khỳ / ɣɛ ɔ /*
 tree cut VP yoke take VP
 Taking a yoke cut from the *zỳ né* tree

In the vernacular we have:

- 20b. *zỳ né nɛ pjàq ɛ phò-khỳ phi ɔ nɛ*

where *nɛ* is inserted. The reason for its absence in (20a) seems to be twofold: there is no room for it in a rhythmic pair, and its absence causes no lack of clarity.

The interplay shown above between presence versus absence of the noun particles in relationship to rhythm requirements and obligatory positions, as well as clarity of expression, is the same for the verb particles, the prefix *a-*, suffixes, etc. Below I give some examples of these phenomena — sometimes several in each line — and comment upon them as I go along.

The following examples show prefix *a-* in contrast with lack of prefix:

21. *ja sjhə / lá ɛ / djé bjù / mà mɔ /*
 chicken drag come VP eagle not see
 I didn't see the eagle which came to drag the chicken away
22. *ɲjò sjhə / lá ɛ / àlà / mà mɔ /*
 buffalo drag come VP tiger not see
 I didn't see the tiger which came to drag the buffalo away
23. *zàq sjhə / lá ɛ / jé màq / mà mɔ /*
 pig drag come VP wolf SUFF. not see
 I didn't see the wolf which came to drag the pig away

The rhythm requires a pair before the negation *mà*, and the VP *ə* must be in the second position after the verb. In (21) 'eagle' is disyllabic, in (22) 'tiger'⁴ gets the prefix *à-* and 'wolf' in (23) (vernacular *xhà-jé*) gets the suffix *màq* < *ma*, 'big, female'.⁵

Two more examples of the behavior of prefix *a-*:

24. *mì za / ya zá / ló xhe / dà zò /*
 girl play place dancing grass
 place
àde / mia /
 level area FP
 The girls' playing ground, the level dancing place with grass

25. *dà zó / de áŋ / djó ma / mì zà / mà ya /*
 grass level NP girl girl not play
 area
záŋ xhó / mján ə / mia / tho
 be a long time VP FP FP
 On the level grass area, a girl who hasn't gone dancing for a long time

In (24) *à-* makes a pair with *de*, but in (25) *de* is marked as a place with the NP *áŋ* thus there is no reason for a prefix.

26. *tshé la / àtshá / ym doq / lò bàŋ /*
 hot month sunshine hot season bamboo tube

pèq á /
 burst FP
 Sunshine in the hot months, the bamboo tube burst in the hot season
27. *doq goq / tshá shm / njì mè / dzà áŋ /*
 outskirt sunshine shadow two edge edge NP
 At the outskirts (of the house) where sunshine and shadow meet

⁴ The dissyllabic vernacular form with the common Tibeto-Burman animal prefix, *xhà-lə* doesn't seem to occur in ritual language.

⁵ This morpheme could actually also be interpreted as *màq* 'group', which seems to be relevant for wolves.

In (26) *tshá* gets a prefix to make a pair, but not in (27) where it is combined with *shm̃*.

28. *zỳq t̃jhu / h̃m mỳ / tshé ñjiq / àlɔq /*
 sister-in-law clf good twelve clf
 (My) sister-in-law's good clothes, twelve sets

29. *sjhə djí / mà mỳ / th̃i lɔq / mà dm /*
 I not good one clf not wear
 I won't wear a set that isn't good

In (28) the classifier *lɔq* can't stand by itself after the disyllabic numeral 'twelve', and gets the prefix, while in (29) it makes a pair with *th̃i* 'one' between two negated-verb pairs.

The verb particle *-ə* marks a relative clause, among other functions, and is present in the following examples:

30. *àt̃jhɔ / lɔ bì / làq t̃jhɔ / dm ɛ / àt̃jha /*
 they people long trousers wear VP kind
 The *lɔ-bì* people is a kind that wears long trousers

31. *shm̃ γà / bɔ ɛ / àma / ó*
 three clf give birth VP mother interj.
 Oh, a mother who has given birth to three children

32. *zỳ né / pjàq ə / phò khỳ / γɛ ɔ /*
 tree cut VP yoke take VP
 Taking a yoke cut from the *zỳ-né* tree

Note also the prefix *à-* in *àt̃jha* and *àma*. Compare then:

33. *lò dəq / ànm̃ / phò dəq / zà gù /*
 boat cut youngster raft cut youngster
 The youngsters who make a boat, the youngsters who make a raft

where there is no VP *-ə* after the verb *dəq*. Were it to be inserted, something else had to be changed, e.g. a filler added after *lò*. Compare what may happen if the verb head has a versatile verb following it:

34. lə hə / tʃiŋ ə / xhà bố / dzò mò /
 boat paddle able VP people elder

djù ó /
 group interj.

Oh, you group of elders, xhà-bố people, who can paddle a boat

where the VP - ə finds its place again, after the versatile verb tʃiŋ 'be able'.

I could give many more examples of the structures illustrated so far, and of others not yet discussed, involving especially verbs in series, numerals, classifiers, and final particles, but I will stop here for now. I will continue working along these lines and hope that the picture will become clearer when all my material has been treated.

The possibility in the ritual language of playing around with certain features, especially grammatical markers, depending on the requirements of the rhythm, has an analogue in the vernacular language, where some particles (mainly noun particles) are not compulsory but are merely added when clarity so demands. The rhythmic pattern of the text is very simple and open-ended, making it pretty easy to make up lines in this style. It seems to me so far to be difficult to make any clear statements about historical grammar in Akha, or to decide anything about the age of the text based on linguistic criteria. These questions have to remain open until more comparative studies can be done on the transmission of oral literature in this language area.