

ORIENTATION ORIGINS: THE SOURCE OF JRU' CARDINALS

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0 Introduction

In the course of fieldwork on the Jru' (Laven)¹ Mon-Khmer language of southern Lao P.D.R., we encountered a puzzle when we first elicited terms for the cardinal directions. While we found that Jru' people consistently use the same set of 4 terms, some older informants, and the oldest written sources, gave conflicting sets of directions for these terms.

Investigating this puzzle we developed the hypothesis that the cardinals derived from a set of directionals that originally reflected traditional Jru' village design, which is no longer practiced. It turns out that this idea does offer a good basis to etymologise the Jru' cardinals, although we are still unsure of the explanation for the confusion in some of the data.

1 The data/issues

Early in our Jru' fieldwork we recorded the Cardinal Directions from 2 young informants: in 1998 from a man named Eh, and in 1999 from a woman named Toi. They are cousins, both aged in their mid twenties, and raised in Paksong district (Eh in Ban Thongset, and Toi in Ban Phu Khao Thong). Both learnt Jru' as a second language from their Aunts/Uncles (their parents only spoke Lao to them). They presented the set of cardinals as diagrammed in figure 1. Interestingly Eh freely alternated between initial *p*- and *k*- for 'west' and 'east' (and once pronounced 'west' as *kliŋ*, which was perhaps an error). We compared these data with the written sources we held, laid out here in Table 1.

Two things are evident, 1) that the oldest source, Prachakij-karacak, which actually records data from the 1890s, records the variants with initial *p*- that we found in the contemporary speech of Eh, and 2) there is apparently some confusion concerning which directions are indicated by each term.

The first point appears to be rather marginal, as such alternations in prefixal consonants are not uncommon in Bahnaric languages, and so far we have assumed that the forms with initial *k*- are basic. However, as this alternation indicates that we are dealing

¹ Jru' /ʃruʔ/ (also known in the literature as Jruq, Loven, Lawen, Boloven) is a West Bahnaric language spoken in southern Lao PDR, predominantly on the Boloven Plateau. (Lao national census gives a figure of 40,000 Jru' 'Lawen' people, although many Jru' in larger towns under the age of twenty do not speak the language competently or only as a second language).

with prefixed forms, it suggests that we can segment and potentially etymologise the morphemes.

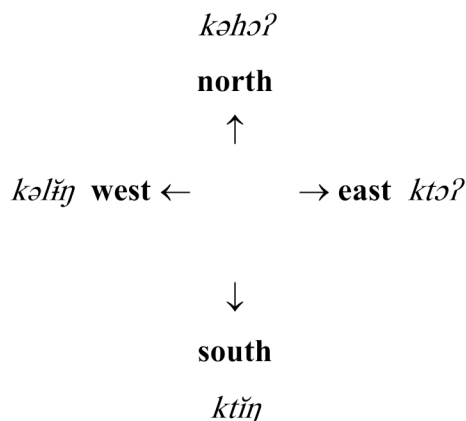


Figure 1: *Set of Jru' cardinals*

Table 1: *Jru' directionals from various sources*

	North	South	East	West
Eh & Toi	<i>kəhɔʔ</i>	<i>ktɿŋ</i>	<i>ktɔʔ</i>	<i>kəlɿŋ</i>
Prachakij-karacak (1995 [1919]):	<i>plɿŋ</i>	<i>pɾtɔʔ</i>		
Bondet de la Bernadie (1945): (with our phonemisation):	<i>k'ho</i> /kəhɔʔ/	<i>k'tin</i> /ktin/	<i>k'to</i> /ktɔʔ/	<i>k'lu'ng</i> /klɿŋ/
Huffman (1971):	<i>khɔʔ</i>			<i>klɿŋ</i>
Ferlus (1969-70):	<i>ktɔʔ</i>	<i>klɛŋ</i>		

[We had also recorded *ktɿŋ* ‘north’ from Eh’s father in 1998.]

In the process of writing her grammar of Jru', Jacq set out to investigate the etymology and explain the confusion in the use of these four words. In the first place simple comparison with cardinals recorded for other West Bahnaric languages was not useful, as they generally show a pattern of using compounds meaning ‘unstream’ and ‘downstream’ for North and South, reflecting the flow of the dominant rivers on the plains, and compounds on the model of ‘sunrise’ and ‘sunset’ for East and West. Some have a term for South that appears to derive from prepositions meaning ‘here’ or ‘middle’, but none of these corresponded to Jru' terms under investigation here.

On the basis of form Jacq identified that *ktɔʔ* and *kəhɔʔ* may be analysed as derivatives from prepositions: *tɔʔ* ‘to’, and *hɔʔ* ‘in’ with prefixes attached (note that Prachakij-karacak recorded *prhɔʔ* ‘in’, rather than *hɔʔ* which is consistently recorded in all later sources).

The analysis of *klɿŋ* and *ktɿŋ* took a little more digging. In 1998 Jacq recorded Eh's father using *ɿŋ* to mean 'behind, back', while younger speakers such as Eh and Toi use *pɿt* for this meaning. We may assume that *ɿŋ* is a preposition that has fallen out of use, but survives in the *klɿŋ* formation. At first we were not able to identify a source for *ktɿŋ* within the Jru' lexicon, so we searched further afield within West Bahnaric. Likely cognates were found among wordlists we collected in our 1998 and 1999 fieldtrips: Sapuar *tiŋ* 'following, next (year)'; Oi *tiŋ* 'over, in sky'; and we found two forms in Michel Ferlus' Nhaheun fieldnotes: *pak tiŋ* 'north, upstream', *ŋwɔɔ tiŋ* 'next year' (Ferlus 1998) allowing us to reconstruct Proto West Bahnaric **tiŋ* 'following, next' (Jacq & Sidwell 2000)². In retrospect it also appears that the Jru' form recorded by Prachakij-karacak *prtɿn* 'out' also may reflect this root (assuming that the final *-n* is an attempt to represent a velar nasal).

So on purely formal grounds we appear to have sources for these cardinal terms, but semantic problems remain, as it is not immediately clear how the known meanings of these prepositions come to reflect the compass points. Our suggestion is that originally the four terms were indeed directions but instead of referring to the poles/sun position, they described points of reference within the village layout. Investigation into old anthropological sources and ethnographic surveys made in the late 1800s to the early part of the 20th century revealed that the Jru' did seem to have a rather strict traditional village design, where houses were built in straight lines, e.g.:

After a marvelous walk in the forest, I arrive at a second Boloven village, called Ban Dong Kheuong consisting of some fifteen houses, abandoned like the others, placed on a single line and built on an identical model. (Harmand 1997:92)

Harmand describes the Jru' (Boloven) houses, noting that "they have a verandah on each end. A platform lengthens the floor on the side of the principle entrance" (p.89) unfortunately Harmand does not note alignment with geography or sun positions. The clearest evidence of this is found in Fraisse's (1951) detailed ethnographic study of the indigenous and Lao populations living throughout the Boloven Plateau. In reference to the three Jru' villages north of Paksong in the Nong Lê complex (at that time already established for 40 years), Fraisse (p.60) notes that "L'entrée des maisons est toujours dirigée vers l'Est: c'est un «ordre des Génies»." In comparison, in a Jru' village called Ban Nhik (now called 'Kilometer 30 Village') to the west of Paksong, Fraisse (p.64) remarks that "L'orientation des portes des maisons se fait vers le Nord ou le Sud."

Prachakij-karachak (1995:85) reported that at the time of his investigation in the 1890s the Boriwen (Jru') had a similar house design to the Yaheun (Nhaheun). Wall (1975) described the Se Nam Noi village layout and cardinal direction of the village. The Se Nam Noi river is crucial to the Nhaheun village layout:

Géographiquement le village de Se-Nam-Noi, ou Daak Mih comme l'appellent les Nya Hön, est situé à 60 km à vol d'oiseau de la frontière vietnamienne, au bord de la rivière principale du plateau, rivière dont il porte le nom. Celle-ci a une grande importance dans la "géographie nya hön". (Wall 1975:44)

² Compare also Proto South Bahnaric **tiŋ* 'follow, chase' (Sidwell 1999), and Old Khmer *tiŋ* 'follow, chase' (Pou 1992)

Wall (1975:45) explains “L’architecture de Daak Mih et de tous les villages traditionnels nya hön veut que les maisons soient bâties parallèlement à la rivière, sur une pente, la porte principale orientée vers ‘la grande avenue’”. She provides a diagram showing the grand avenue running perpendicular to the river—the directions north/south/east/west are not significant (the houses aligned lengthways about 45° to the Northwest).³

We believe that in traditional Jru’ villages houses were aligned in rows parallel to the river banks. Like the Nhaheun, each village formed a compound that had a specific entrance/exit. The four ‘cardinals’ were perhaps reference points/directions of movement within the village, such that: *kəhɔʔ ‘in’ the village, *ktĩŋ ‘out’ of the village, *ktɔʔ ‘in front’ of the house and *klĩŋ ‘behind’ the house, as illustrated in Figure 2:

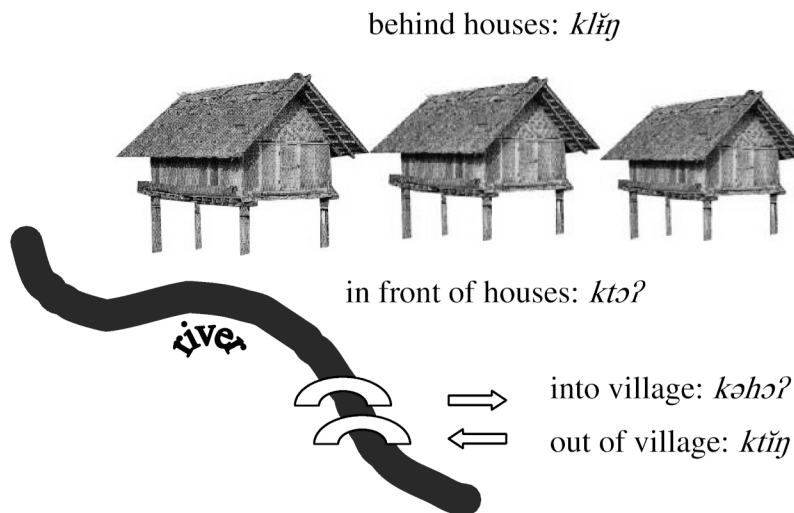


Figure 2: *Traditional village layout & directions*

Another attraction of this theory was that it seemed at first to offer an explanation for the confusion found in the sources concerning the specific uses of the cardinals. We hypothesised that every village was potentially aligned differently due to the meanderings of the different rivers. Under Lao and French colonialisation, the Jru’ people may have applied their indigenous terms to those of the European cardinal points. As a result, some villages may have applied different directions to each of the cardinal points, so that the Jru’ informants (coming from different locations) revealed conflicting uses of these forms to investigators.

To investigate this theory Sidwell interviewed a number of older people from different villages in 2002. Informants were obtained from several locations along the road from Paksong to Ban Panuan: Ban Thôn Wa (on the west bank of the Houai Vang Ngao), Ban Sepian (on the south bank of the Sepian River, near it’s source) and Ban Panuan

3 In contrast, Martin (1997:115) states that montagnard Khmer used to align their houses with the sun, but since 1970 have been instructed by the Authorities to align housefronts with rivers. If we follow Wall’s description and hypothesise that the Jru’ village was aligned with rivers, then this contradicts Fraisses’ findings (unless of course he was examining the village from a European perspective and not where the river was).

(located by a large pond that feeds the Sepian River) and, from several villages north of Paksong: Ban Thôngset, Ban Katuot and Ban Sekhôt (all aligned along the road running north) and from Paksong itself. All but one informant gave forms and directions perfectly consistent with those we recorded from Eh and Toi 4 years before. One 57 year old man from Ban Thông Wa gave directions which were consistent with those recorded by Prachakij-karacak, although his fellow villages disagreed with him, and gave the 'standard' directions. In subsequent discussions Sidwell was assured by villages that this fact had no special significance, it was simply that older people sometimes get confused!

Conclusion

Our conclusions at this stage are mixed: earlier investigators may have incorrectly recorded the meanings of the cardinals they elicited, or they may well have accurately recorded usages that are/were different from what we have recorded in 7 contemporary villages, for reasons that are not clear. The latter remains an intriguing problem, keeping in mind that such different usage of the cardinals would have caused miscommunication between speakers. On the other hand, we are reasonably satisfied that we have etymologised the forms. It is a reasonable, although unproven, hypothesis that they originate within the scheme of traditional Jru' village layout.

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