

Ahom and Tangsa: Case studies of language maintenance and loss in North East India

Stephen Morey

La Trobe University

North East India is probably the most linguistically diverse area on the Indian subcontinent, with long established communities speaking languages of four different families – Austroasiatic, Indo-European, Tai-Kadai and Tibeto-Burman.

Comparing Tai Ahom, language of the rulers of a kingdom that consisted of what is now Assam, with the very diverse Tangsa varieties spoken on the India-Myanmar border, we will discuss factors of language decline and language maintenance.

Tai Ahom has not been spoken as a mother tongue for 200 years, but survives in the large body of manuscripts, and in the language used in religious rituals. While both of these features have been necessary foundations of the ongoing revival of the language, neither was able to maintain the language in its spoken form.

At least 35 different Tangsa sub-tribes are found in India, with more in Myanmar. Each has a distinct linguistic variety, many of which are mutually intelligible while others are not. Despite having no writing until very recently, each variety is still healthy. Since many Tangsas are now Christians, Bible translations are underway, and many Tangsa of all religions are interested in orthography and literacy development. This may lead to standardisation, which would represent a significant loss of diversity.

1. INTRODUCTION. This paper will contrast the situation of two languages/ language groups that are geographically in close proximity, but with very different histories. One, Tai Ahom, once the language of a powerful kingdom,

is no longer spoken as a mother tongue, whereas the other, Tangsa, with a much smaller population, preserves significant linguistic diversity. Most of the Tai Ahom population are monolingual speakers of Assamese,¹ an Indic language and the language of wider communication for most of the North East. In Tangsa communities, Assamese is now the lingua franca for at least some of those whose native varieties are not mutually intelligible. These case studies will demonstrate the complexity of these situations of language endangerment and loss in detail.

Although North East India has only around 3% of India's population, its linguistic and cultural diversity makes it one of the world's linguistic hotspots. Languages of five major language families (Austroasiatic, Dravidian, Indo-European, Tibeto-Burman and Tai Kadai) are spoken there.² The North East also has significant populations of each of the major religions of India (Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Buddhist, Sikh, Jewish (Manasseh), Jain, Animist), a situation that is also fluid because of the shifting of animist communities to Christianity, Buddhism, and forms of Hinduism.

Much of the present existing linguistic diversity is due to migration that has occurred over a long period. The Dravidian and Tai-Kadai languages have arrived in relatively recent times – 19th century for Dravidian speakers belonging to communities transported to Assam to work in tea plantations and between 13th and 18th centuries for various Tai-Kadai communities (see Section 2). Austroasiatic and Tibeto-Burman speaking communities, on the other hand, include those who have been present for a very long time, as well as much more recent arrivals. Van Driem (2012: 187) suggests that “Austroasiatic and Tibeto-Burman presence in northeastern India ... must date back to some hoary period of ethnolinguistic prehistory”, but Tibeto-Burman speakers are still arriving, such as the Hakhun group within Tangsa/Nocte³ who have moved into Assam state since 2000.

The number of languages spoken in the North East is not known. Any such calculation depends, of course, on one's definition of “a language”. One

¹ Also known as Asamiya.

² The only village where languages of all five families have been used is Balipathar, Karbi Anglong District, Assam, where there are communities of active speakers of Austroasiatic, Indo-European, Sino-Tibetan and Tai Kadai languages, as well as some whose historic language was Dravidian, believed to be moribund now.

³ Some members of this community prefer the spelling Nokte, the pronunciation of which is approximately /nɔk te/.

way of estimating the linguistic diversity is to use the information contained in the SIL *Ethnologue* (Lewis 2009), which now carries the imprimatur of the International Organisation for Standardisation. By our count, out of a total 452 languages listed in *The Ethnologue* for India, 99 are wholly or mostly in the North East, about 22% of the Indian total, in a region representing about 3% of India's population. This is not necessarily a good guide; for example, many of the Tangsa lects are mutually unintelligible, and listing them as a single language significantly understates the linguistic diversity.

The languages examined in this paper were chosen because we have done significant research on them, but also because of the differences between them, Tai Ahom was once spoken as the official language of the Ahom Kingdom that ruled much of Assam from 1228 to 1824; yet, despite its status (and army) it is no longer spoken as a mother tongue. Tangsa, on the other hand, is an incredibly diverse group of lects – a diversity that persists despite migration into the multilingual plains of North East India where Assamese is the lingua franca, and continues into the present era of standardisation and language loss. This is summarised in Table 1:

Language	ISO 639-3 code	Family	Status	Internal variation	Size of ethnic population	Writing
Ahom	aho	Tai-Kadai	no native speakers	unknown ^{a)}	c. 1,000,000	Yes
Tangsa	nst	Tibeto-Burman	actively spoken by all	70 distinct varieties	c. 100,000	No ^{b)}

^{a)} Our knowledge of Ahom is largely based on manuscripts and we cannot make any conclusions about internal diversity on the basis of those. Our assumption is that Ahom, during the period when it was the court language, was much less diverse than Tangsa is today.

^{b)} Traditionally at least. The more recent development of Roman-based orthographies and some native scripts is discussed in section 3.

TABLE 1: The situation of Ahom and Tangsa compared

The location of those who identify as Tai Ahom is primarily in Sibsagar, Jorhat and Dibrugarh districts of Assam, shown in green on Figure 1. These three districts are multicultural and multilingual but Ahom is probably the

largest group at least in Sibsagar district. The Tangsa live in the Changlang district of Arunachal Pradesh as well as the neighbouring Tinsukia district of Assam, the latter shown by the blue circle in Figure 1. Tangsa are the majority in the Kharsang, Jayrampur and Changlang areas within Changlang District of Arunachal Pradesh.

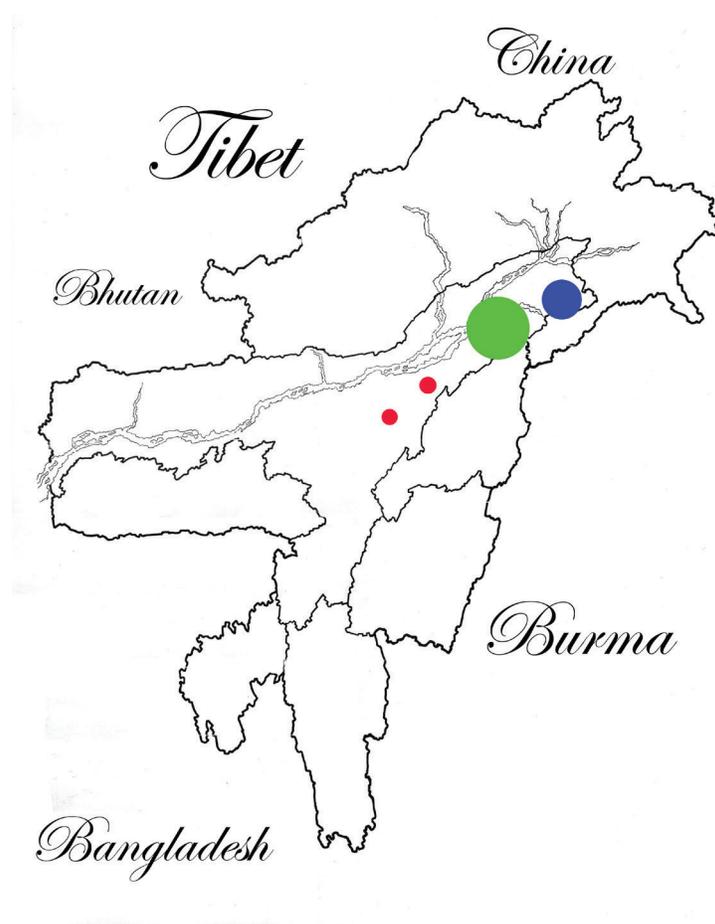


FIGURE 1: Map of Assam showing the Ahom area (green) and Tangsa area (blue)

2. TAI AHOM. According to traditional accounts, a group of Tai, led by a prince named Sukapha,⁴ arrived in Assam in 1228 from the kingdom of Mau Lung which is now divided between Shan and Kachin States in Myanmar (Burma) and the Dehong Dai autonomous region in Yunnan Province, South West China. Sukapha founded a kingdom which ruled in the Brahmaputra valley for 600 years.⁵ In addition to speaking a Tai language, the Tai Ahoms had their own religion the rituals of which were performed by priestly clans (see 2.3. below). Their kingdom gradually expanded and dominated most of the valley in the 16th to 18th centuries. However, despite this political domination, during this period the Tai-speaking Ahoms culturally and linguistically assimilated with local communities most of whom were Assamese speaking Hindus. It seems that by early in the 19th century, everyday usage of Ahom language had ceased and that Ahom people all spoke Assamese as their mother tongue.⁶

Tai Ahom is therefore usually regarded as a dead language, but it survives in three ways: (1) in vast collections of manuscripts, (2) as a ritual language in Ahom religious ceremonies, and (3) as a language undergoing revival.

One complication in discussing the situation of Tai Ahom is that there are five other groups of Tai people in North East India: Aiton, Khamti, Khamyang, Phake and Turung (see Grierson 1904: 58f, Diller 1992, Morey 2005: 13f). This picture of 6 Tai languages including Ahom in North East

⁴ Written as 𑜀𑜢𑜤𑜰𑜫 in the Ahom script, which is transcribed as <siuw ka pha>. Because the Ahom script does not mark tone and perhaps underspecified the vowel contrasts, we cannot be sure of the pronunciation of this name in the original Ahom. Evidence suggests that Tai Aiton is the closest modern variety to Ahom (Morey 2005: 178), and the Aiton consultant Nabin Shyam Phalung gave the meaning of this King's name is "tiger-equal to-sky", which is pronounced *sw¹ kaa² phaa³* in Aiton, where tone 1 is level, tone 2 high falling and tone 3 low falling (see Morey 2005: 134f for an explanation of Aiton phonology).

⁵ The history of the Ahom kingdom is discussed in detail in Gait (1905). The most widely available translation of the Ahom Chronicles (Buranji) is G.C. Barua (1930), though Ranoo (1996) is the more reliable translation.

⁶ A manuscript belonging to Tulsi Phukan, photographs of which will be archived in the British Library Endangered Archives Programme under the name EAP373_TulsiPhukan_KhunLungKhunLai, was copied in the reign of the Ahom King Kamaleshwar Singha (1795-1811). The copying is of a quality that suggests the copyist was a speaker of a Tai language. Thus we assume that in the early decades of the 19th century there were still a few speakers of Ahom remaining.

India is based on Grierson (where Aiton is called Aitonia, Khamyang is called Nora, Phake is called Phakial and Turung is called Tairong). Even though the linguistic diversity within Tangsa (see section 3 below) is much greater than between these six Tai varieties, due to the influence of Grierson, each of these groups is regarded as having its own language, and each has its own ISO⁷ language code, while Tangsa has a single code and is regarded as one.

Today only Aiton, Khamti and Phake are being learned by children, while Khamyang is only spoken by a small number of elderly people.⁸ Each of these is more or less mutually intelligible. Turung people, on the other hand, speak a variety of an unrelated Tibeto-Burman language, Singpho (described in detail in Morey 2010).

The word Ahom is not a Tai word. In Assamese, the word for Assam is pronounced [aɦɔm], a word for which a number of etymologies have been suggested, discussions of which go back to at least the time of Grierson (1904: 61, footnote 2). The two most likely explanations given by Grierson are that *Assam* is either from Sanskrit *A-sama* ‘peerless’ or (perhaps more likely) that the second syllable is “simply Shām or Shān”, a word etymologically related to *Siam* and used today, in the form Shyam, as the surname for most Aiton, Khamyang and Turung people. The word Ahom is not used in the Tai Ahom texts from the 18th century and before. In the *Bar Amra*, the Ahom-Assamese lexicon written in Ahom script dating from 1795 (see 2.2. and 2.4.), the term Ahom is given as the Assamese translation for *Tai*. It seems therefore that the Tai-speaking ancestors of the present day Tai-Ahom called themselves simply Tai, overtime acquiring the name Tai-Ahom, the term that is used today (often abbreviated simply to Ahom) to distinguish a community and a language that are both distinct from the other Tai varieties of North East India.

2.1. DECLINE OF THE TAI AHOM LANGUAGE. So what are the reasons for the decline of the Tai Ahom language as a spoken variety and the loss of some aspects of Ahom culture? The Ahom kingdom’s establishment, traditionally

⁷ International Organisation for Standardization. The codes are listed in the *Ethnologue* (Lewis 2009).

⁸ Nonetheless, moves to revitalise the Khamyang language are underway, and there is now a Facebook group for those wishing to revitalise it.

dated at 1228, was done by a group migrating from the south east, large numbers of whom were male army members, who would have taken local non-Tai speaking wives. The Ahom kingdom remained a relatively small polity until it expanded during the 16th and 17th centuries, commencing with the conquests of King Suhummung (1497-1539). Terwiel (1996: 276) suggests that this expansion, by bringing the Ahoms into contact with “highly developed cultures in the general orbit of the civilizations of the Indian subcontinent” led to a “rapid assimilation of the Ahom tradition to the more general Assamese one”. Thus Tai Ahoms came to follow various aspects of the Hindu religion, and “the Ahom language and Ahom script were relegated to the religious sphere”, from which its survival as a spoken language was no longer possible.

The Ahom script has certainly helped to maintain the Ahom language in all of the ways in which it survives today, as we shall discuss in 2.2., but the presence of the script was not enough to save the spoken language from decline. The same is true of the presence of a powerful army, one that had defeated the great Mughals in the 17th century. Perhaps, in this case, the army was a factor in language loss because, at the height of the Ahom kingdom, probably a large majority of the armed forces were non-Tai speaking and the language of army (and consequently of government) would have needed to shift to the more widespread Indic language, Assamese.

As far as the loss of the spoken language, and indeed of the wider cultural shift, is concerned, we suggest the following factors:

- Increasing and eventually overwhelmingly non-Tai population of the Ahom kingdom (particularly after 1500);
- Intermarriage of the Tai speakers with non-Tai from the beginning of the Ahom Kingdom;
- Contact with the cultures of India;
- Conversion to Hinduism, particularly under the influence of the Hindu Sage Srimanta Shankaradeva (16th century);⁹
- The costly nature of the traditional Ahom rituals.

That Ahom was in danger of being lost was clearly known by those who wished to preserve it. The creation of the Ahom lexicons known as the *Bar*

⁹ Reputed to have lived from 1449 to 1568; his period of greatest activity corresponded with the power of Ahom king Suhummung.

Amra and *Loti Amra* in the late 18th century, texts that exist in multiple copies, was one sign of the attempt to preserve the language.

Despite the cultural loss, the Ahom have not disappeared as a community. Even in the mid 19th century, large numbers of people identified as Ahom – the population being estimated at 148,000 in 1872 and at around 1,000,000 in 1989, with around 33% of the population in the districts of Upper Assam (Jorhat, Sibsagar, Dibrugarh) being identified as Ahom (Terwiel 1996: 277). We will now consider what survives of their linguistic heritage.

2.2. MANUSCRIPTS. The Ahom manuscripts which have survived to the present day encompass at least the following types of texts:

- a. History (called *Buranji* in Assamese)¹⁰
- b. Creation stories
- c. Spirit Calling Texts
 - i. Khon Ming Lung Phai
 - ii. Khon Ming Kang Phai
 - iii. Khon Ming Phai Noi
- d. Mantras and Prayers
- e. Predictions and Augury
 - i. Phe Lung Phe Ban
 - ii. Du Kai Seng (chicken bone augury)
 - iii. Ban Seng
- f. Calendar (Lakni)
- g. Stories
 - i. Traditional Tai stories
 - ii. Stories of Buddhist origin
- h. Lexicons (Bar Amra, Loti Amra)
- i. Writing Practice

One of the surprising features is the significant number of

¹⁰ The word *Buranji* used to describe Ahom histories has been extended to refer to all Assamese histories. The word can be pluralised in the English used in Assam as *Buranjis*. One suggested etymology is that it should be read *বুৰাণ চি* (*bau ran chi*), literally ‘never to be shown’ (Aimya Khang Gohain 1991: 54). In the Phake language this would be *mau’ han’ ci’* ‘NEG-see-show’. Another etymology would base the first element on Sanskrit *purāṇa-* ‘ancient’.

manuscripts containing stories that are unambiguously of Buddhist origin. Examples of this include the *Nemi Mang Phura*, as well as the much longer story that precedes it in the manuscript owned by Gileswar Bailung Phukan at Patsako.¹¹ The extent of Buddhist influence within the Ahom kingdom is a matter of controversy but, as we shall see in section 2.3. below, Buddhist features are also found in some of the Ahom prayers (*mantras*) that are still in use.

Most of the manuscripts have not been translated in modern times. Yet the interest in finding out their meaning really never stopped, from the time the language ceased to be spoken as a mother tongue right up to the present day. Terwiel (1988) describes the process of translating an old Ahom manuscript first published in Brown (1837) and published again in Grierson (1904: 118-9). This is one of the creation manuscripts, and contains some material that has been translated by us as *Pvn Ko Mvng* (Creation of the World),¹² but the translation in Brown and Grierson is clearly flawed. The next major step was G. C. Barua (1930) who translated the Ahom Buranji, a huge manuscript of history from mythological times up to the end of the Ahom Kingdom. This translation is largely accurate, but the problem with it is that the reader (even the careful reader skilled in Tai language) is not usually able to identify translation errors. A much more scholarly work is Ranoo (1996), a translation into standard Thai, but this work is not well known in North East India because few people there can speak or read Standard Thai. Terwiel and Ranoo (1992) has been for a generation the most accessible and most reliable translation of an Ahom text, rendered in both English and Thai (transliterated into English, with cognates in Thai and a translation into both English and Thai). This deals with ritual texts.

The Lexicons, *Bar Amra* and *Loti Amra* have been translated to a large extent and formed the basis of two 20th-century Ahom dictionaries (G. C. Barua 1920 and B. Barua and Phukan 1964), as well as of the on-line

¹¹ To be archived at the British Library, Endangered Archives Programme (<http://eap.bl.uk/>), as EAP373_GileshwarBailung_NemiMang.

¹² The text of *Pvn Ko Mvng* can be searched and a .doc version of the translation and glossing can be downloaded from the *Tai and Tibeto Burman Languages of Assam* website (<http://sealang.net/ahom>). The photos of the *Pvn Ko Mvng* manuscript and .pdf of the translation and glossing is available at the DoBeS archive (go to <http://www.mpi.nl/DoBeS> and then follow a link to projects, then Tangsa, Tai and Singpho in North East India, which will open the IMDI browser, and then search Tai Ahom).

dictionary (<http://sealang.net/ahom>), developed as part of our project.

More recently, our project has been transcribing and translating a number of texts, concentrating on spirit calling texts (*Ming Mvng Lung Phai*), mantras or prayers (see 2.3. below), creation stories (*Pvn Ko Mvng*) and Buddhist stories (*Nemi Mang*), four genres not previously much translated.

Reading the Ahom manuscripts is complex for a number of reasons. Most Ahom words are a single syllable consisting of initial consonant, vowel and optional final consonant. While the Ahom script marks all the consonants, because it does not mark tone and underspecifies for vowel contrasts, the same written word can have a large number of meanings. Consider (1), which gives the 17 meanings for *kong* that we have so far identified in Ahom manuscripts:

- (1) ꠘꠞ (*kong*) *n.* 1. hill; 2. echo; 3. gun; 4. over-sunned paddy; 5. drum; 6. courtyard; 7. jaw; 8. Indian aconite; *n.,v.* 9. heap; *v.* 10. control; 11. prune; 12. prepare for husking; 13. hide; 14. spin; 15. anticipate; *adj.* 16. wide; 17. curved.

While most syllables do not have as many as seventeen separate meanings, there are very few syllables that have only a single meaning. The work of translation thus involves considering a significant number of different possible meanings, and a substantial knowledge of vocabulary. Older manuscripts in much of the Tai-/Shan-speaking world were written in this way, prior to the introduction of tone marks in the various Shan varieties in the mid 20th century (see Egerod 1957 and Sai Kam Moeng 2004 for further details of Shan script and script reform). We have been fortunate in having the expert knowledge of Chaichuen Khamdaengyodtai, who has studied Tai literature for many years, combined with the remaining traditional knowledge of some of the Ahom priests, to produce our translations.

2.3. RELIGIOUS RITUAL. The status of the traditional Ahom religion is a matter of some debate among scholars. Terwiel, who studied the Ahom very closely in the 1980s, wrote in 1996 that “the anthropologist ... is able to demonstrate that the Ahom cannot read their ancient manuscripts. He can

further show that the rituals there described have nothing in common with the constructs of after the 1960s. To him the claims of historical continuity are simply untrue” (1996: 290). Terwiel has described these religious rituals as “pseudo-old Ahom ritual” (1996: 286).

Our position is different from Terwiel’s in several senses. The statement “the Ahom cannot read their ancient manuscripts” turns on the meaning of “read”. A large number of Ahoms can read the letters and approximately pronounce the sounds that were intended but without understanding the meaning. Many of the Ahom priests, who are the custodians of their manuscripts, know the content of the manuscripts, at least in a general sense, being able to say which is a history, which is a creation story and which a text containing predictions, and indeed can give an overall summary of the meaning of the text. They also know the meanings of a large number of Tai words, due to the copying and study of the *Amras* (Ahom-Assamese lexicons), a process that appears to have gone on continuously since the end of the 18th century.

On the other hand it is true that none of the Ahom priests that we have met are able to give the kind of word-by-word gloss that a scholar like Chaichuen can give. Nevertheless, in our view, the knowledge that the priests do have represents a partial survival of traditional knowledge.

The following are some of the features of what the historical Ahom religion would have been like:

- Belief in the importance and ubiquitous nature of spirits (*khwan~khon*)¹³ – both good and bad;
- The practice of calling back those spirits if they are felt to have been lost;¹⁴
- Placating the spirits by costly rituals, animal sacrifice and the offerings of costly items.

One ritual that we have studied in detail was the *No Khowa* (‘new rice’)

¹³ The spelling of this word in Ahom could be read as either *khwan* (as it is pronounced in Thailand) or *khon* (as it is pronounced by other Tai speaking groups now in North East India. We cannot be sure of the pronunciation in Ahom times.

¹⁴ A ceremony called *Rik Khwan Miung* (calling the spirit of the country) was performed on 2nd July 2012. It is likely that the text that we have translated, *Ming Mvng Lung Phai*, was used at this ceremony.

ceremony performed in the village of Koronga, near to Parijat in Sibsagar District, Assam, on 17th November 2008. The Ahom priests were led by Chau Tileshwar Mohan. The male family members sat in the traditional mud kitchen, a place of considerable reverence in those Ahom villages where such traditions are maintained. The prayers, described as *khvk phi dam* (consisting of three words: ‘placate/worship’, ‘spirit’ and ‘ancestor spirit’) were repeated several times.

The prayers were made to four deities, whose altars were arranged in front of the priests from their left to their right. The four deities were described as *Lang Ku Ri*, *La Reng*, *Leng Don* and *Ja Seng Pha*. We have transcribed and translated the prayers uttered in part of that ritual, and found that they are very similar to a prayer found in an old manuscript, dating from at least the 18th century, owned by Chau Dhiren Baruah of Simaluguri.¹⁵ The manuscript prayer also mentions the first three ‘deities’ in the same order, *Lang Ku Ri*; *La Ring* and *Chau Pha Phit Khan Kham*, literally the ‘Lord of Lightning with the golden axe’, which refers to Lengdon. The fact that these are mentioned in the same order, and that the name given to *Lengdon* is a descriptive name rather than the actual name, leads us to suggest that some part of the meaning of the prayer has come down to modern times.

On the other hand, we have not found *Ja Sing Pha* mentioned in Dhiren’s manuscript, perhaps adding weight to the suggestion by Terwiel (1996: 282) calling into question the Ja Sing Pha ritual he witnessed, saying that it “reminded one more of a Hindu *puja*” and that some of the terms used by the priests in explaining the ritual were not grammatically Tai.

Table 2 compares part of the text of the No Khowa prayer with Dhiren Baruah’s manuscript:

¹⁵ This will be archived at the British Library, Endangered Archives Programme, with the name EAP373_DhirenBaruah_Mantra. The manuscript is in very poor condition.

The meaning conveyed in the last two lines is also reflected in a portion of the *Pvn Ko Mvng* ('creation of the world') manuscript, as shown in (2):

(2)	𑜀𑜢𑜤𑜰𑜫	𑜃𑜫	𑜀𑜢𑜤𑜰𑜫	𑜃𑜫𑜀𑜢𑜤𑜰𑜫	𑜃𑜫	𑜀𑜢𑜤𑜰𑜫	𑜃𑜫𑜀𑜢𑜤𑜰𑜫
	sing	kam	pha	ko	mi	tang	chau
	pn	pn	pn	link	have	with	resp
	𑜀𑜢𑜤𑜰𑜫	𑜀𑜢𑜤𑜰𑜫	𑜃𑜫	𑜃𑜫𑜀𑜢𑜤𑜰𑜫	𑜀𑜢𑜤𑜰𑜫		
	pha	tik	pin	khun			
	stone	break	be	prince			

'And *Sing Kam Pha* had a respected stone which he broke up and made into princes.' *Pvn Ko Mvng* (Creation of the World), 10v5¹⁷

Table 2 and example (2) show that the Tai language used in the *No Khowa* prayer is the same as that of the old Ahom manuscripts, and is not "pseudo-Ahom language", a term used by Terwiel (1996) to describe some examples of the Ahom language revival. According to the Ahom priests we have spoken with, these prayers have a long history and were handed down from generation to generation. The fact that the language used is genuine Tai language does not of itself prove that the *No Khowa* prayer (and associated rituals) was indeed handed down through the generations, rather than being copied from a manuscript like that of Dhiren Baruah. This debate about the authenticity of revived/reviving cultural practices, like those of the Ahom, is one that is likely to continue into the future.

We mentioned above that Buddhist influences are found in some Ahom prayers. Consider (3), a section of a prayer called *Jon Ming* 'beg tutelary spirit' which precedes one of the most commonly performed Ahom prayers, *Ai Seng Lau*.¹⁸

orthography which digraphs such as <ph> and <ng> rather than <p^h> and <ŋ>. We believe that the proto Tai distinction of high and mid-high vowels (/i~/e/, /u~/o/ and /w~/ɤ/) had been lost by the late Ahom period, leaving six distinct vowels, /i/, /u/, /w/, /ɛ/, /ɔ/ and /a/ (Morey 2005: 178). In the practical orthography used in this paper, /ɛ/ and /ɔ/ are notated as <e> and <o> and /w/ as <v>.

¹⁷ Photographs of this manuscript will be archived at the Endangered Archives Programme under the name EAP373_TileshwarMohan_PvnKoMvng.

¹⁸ We have recorded this prayer performed to honour the Ahom manuscripts prior to them being photographed by our research team.

(3)	𑜇𑜡	𑜇𑜢	𑜇𑜡	𑜇𑜢	𑜇𑜢𑜤𑜂𑜫	𑜇𑜢	𑜇𑜢𑜤𑜂𑜫		
	chau	phra	chau	tra	phura	tara	along		
	resp	(God)	resp	(law)	creator	creator	(Bodhisattva)		
	𑜇𑜢𑜤𑜂𑜫	𑜇𑜢	𑜇𑜢𑜤𑜂𑜫	𑜇𑜢	𑜇𑜢	𑜇𑜡	𑜇𑜢	𑜇𑜢	𑜇𑜢
	sik kya	ra	ni pan	boi	mu	chau	kau	vi	"
	(Sikkya)	create	(Nirvana)	pray	2sg	resp	1sg	voc	

‘The God and Creator, the Lord Lengdon who is in Nirvana, we pray to you, O my lord!’

The words whose glosses are shown in brackets, *phra*, *tra*, *along*, *sikkya*, and *nipan* are all Buddhist concepts, that appear to have been ‘imported’ into the Ahom prayers. Chaichuen Khamdaengyodtai suggested that each of them could also be analysed as Tai terms, for example *phura* being in Shan 𑜇𑜢𑜤𑜂𑜫 **phu;laa** ‘person-create’ and *tra* as 𑜇𑜢𑜤𑜂𑜫 **tolaa** ‘body-creator’. Thus this line may represent a Buddhist influence but the substratum may be genuinely Tai.

2.4. AHOM LANGUAGE REVIVAL. In this paper we will not deal in detail with the Ahom linguistic revival, which dates at least from the early 20th century. Even before modern technology made printing easier, two major Ahom dictionaries, G.C. Barua (1920) and B.K. Barua and Phukan (1964), were produced, and a ground breaking *Ahom Primer* (G.K. Barua 1936) was written to assist people to learn the language. Since the creation of the first Ahom Truetype font¹⁹ there has been a huge increase in the publication of word lists, primers and texts in Ahom.²⁰

Despite this considerable enthusiasm for language revival, there is not much actual usage of a revived Ahom language, and most of the small number of Tai Ahom people who can speak Tai have learned one of the spoken Tai languages (Phake or Aiton, see Morey 2005), rather than being fluent speakers of revival Ahom. In other words we do not find the kind of

¹⁹ Downloadable from our Tai and Tibeto-Burman languages of Assam website (<http://sealang.net/assam>).

²⁰ There are far too many of these to list here, but some examples include primers like Kar (2005) and editions of manuscripts, with transcriptions and translations, like Mohan (2010).

fluent second language learners that we do find in the Cornish revival in Cornwall,²¹ much less the native speakers found in the revival of Hebrew.²²

The identifiable stages of the Ahom language revival are listed below:

- 1795 – The production of the Ahom-Assamese dictionaries *Bar Amra* and *Loti Amra*, during the last stages of the Ahom language's decline;
- 1837 – First publication of an Ahom text by Brown (1837) 'Plate 4 Specimens of the Ahom, or Assam Character', the first translation of which was presented in Jenkins (1837);²³
- 1904 – Publication of translations of texts into Ahom made by G.C. Barua, in Grierson (1904);
- 1920 – *Ahom-Assamese-English dictionary*, prepared by G.C. Barua;
- 1936 – *Ahom Primer*, prepared by G.K. Barua, containing information provided by the Aiton speaker, Mohendra Phalung;
- 1968 – Memorandum listing the arguments in favour of the recognition of a distinct Tai Ahom identity (see Terwiel 1996: 279);
- 1981 – Formation of *Ban Ok Pup Lik Miong Tai* (Eastern Tai Literary Organisation);
- 1980s – Introduction of the teaching of Tai Ahom language as a subject in some primary schools.

Terwiel (1996: 283) pointed out that, in regard to the Ahom language, the 1968 Memorandum claimed that "the priestly classes use it as mother tongue", a claim one still hears sometimes, though we have never met any priest who can speak Ahom in a fluent way. The revived language has been described by Terwiel as a "pseudo-Ahom language". He cited as an example

²¹ The author of this paper is a supporter of the Cornish language revival, is descended from Cornish speakers and has learned one of the varieties of revived Cornish sufficiently to pass the Gorsedh examination (Grade 4) (<http://www.kesva.org/examinations>).

²² Hebrew shares in common with Ahom that it was preserved in the religious sphere for hundreds of years before the spoken language was revived. The key difference is that these religious texts were well known to large numbers of Jewish people throughout the period when Hebrew was not spoken, and the meanings of the texts were widely studied and discussed.

²³ This text and its translation was discussed in detail by Terwiel (1989: 125-126). To make the translation, Jenkins had the help of Juggoram Khargaria Phokan, who at first could not do the work and sent it to Jorhat where it was read by members of the Ahom priestly caste.

the name of the Eastern Tai Literary Organisation, *Ban Ok Pup Lik Miong Tai* which word by word means ‘sun come.out book read country Tai’ a structure which would be ungrammatical in Tai language, where the head noun would be expected first in the phrase.²⁴

As far as we know, no assessment of the success or otherwise of the program of teaching Ahom in schools has ever been undertaken.

3. TANGSA. Tangsa is the name given in India to a community of at least several tens of thousands living on both sides of the India-Myanmar border. With the name Tangsa, they are a scheduled tribe under the Indian Constitution (listed under ‘other Naga tribes’). The name Tangsa was not used prior to Indian independence, and was coined in the 1950s by Indian Government Officials. Bipin Borgohain, former Political Officer, Tirap Frontier Division, wrote: “the once subjugated but now liberated and resurgent lovable Tangsa (Tang = Mountain, sa = person), a word which was specially coined by the undersigned and accepted by the tribe and the Government for official use ...” (Foreword written by Bipin Borgohain in Barua 1991: viii).

As best we can tell, the term Tangsa was created to refer to small communities living in what is now the Changlang district of Arunachal Pradesh and neighbouring areas of Assam that were not otherwise categorised as belonging to one of the bigger languages like Singpho (ISO 639-3:sgp), and whose languages were clearly related. If such a group was within what is now Tirap district, it got classified as Nocte (ISO 639-3:njb).²⁵ The International Organisation for Standardisation have coded Tangsa as ISO 639-3:nst, under the name ‘Naga Tase’. This name was chosen because the ISO codes are based on the SIL Ethnologue (Lewis 2009), and the word *Tase* is the Chamchang Tangsa pronunciation of the word Tangsa, and the Chamchang were the first sub-tribe of Tangsa to commence a Bible

²⁴ Similar things have happened with the Cornish language revival. The Cornish festival in Australia, *Kernewek Lowender*, which word by word means ‘Cornish happiness’ would be rendered *Lowender Kernewek* in ‘authentic’ Cornish, in which, like Tai languages, modifiers follow nouns.

²⁵ Groups that are found in both places, like the Ponthai (Phong) thus get called either Tangsa or Nocte, depending on which district they live in. Similarly, the Hakhun in Ledo (near to Changlang district) are grouped under Tangsa, but the Hakhun in Tirap district are regarded as Nocte.

Translation (see 3.3. below).

In Myanmar, the term Tangshang came into use in April 2003, “inaugurated by the concurrently named Tangshang Central Culture and Literature Committee with a mass meeting in the township center of Nanyun. The name Tangshang is derived from *Tang Nyuwang* and *Shang Nyuwang*, two siblings in the oral history.” (Nathan Statezni pers.comm.) Despite the similarity of the terms *Tangsa* and *Tangshang*, they do not appear to be cognate, and they do not refer to exactly the same groups; some groups that would be called Nocte in India are subsumed under Tangshang in Myanmar.

The data collected by Thomas (2009) in India and Statezni and Ahkhi (2011) in Myanmar/Burma, together with our research, show that there are about 70 sub-tribes²⁶ of Tangsa/Tangshang, each speaking a distinct variety, some mutually intelligible and some not.

Prior to the 1950s, in India, these groups now gathered together as Tangsa seem to have been referred to only by their own group name, or sub-tribe name. A 1927 British map (Tandy 1927) names some of these as Moklum Naga, Mossang Naga, Jugli Naga, Tikhak Naga and so on.²⁷ Around 35 of these groups are found in India.²⁸

Each sub-tribe has its own autonym, which is usually different from the ‘general name’ used by everyone else to refer to them. For example, the people described as Moklum actually call themselves Muklom, those who are described as Ponthai call themselves Phong, and those whose general name is Kimsing have the name Chamchang as their autonym. In addition, each group has its own name for every other group.

We will not discuss the linguistic diversity of Tangsa in detail here, but it is certainly the case that, while some of the language varieties included in it are mutually intelligible, others are certainly not. We will exemplify this in Table 3, which gives a series of words in four varieties of Tangsa, Champang (general name Thamphang) and Cholim (general name

²⁶ The term sub-tribe is used by the Tangsa people to refer to each of these. As a whole, Tangsa are a Scheduled Tribe in terms of the Indian Constitution.

²⁷ After several years of work among the Tangsa, we can attest that, while most Tangsa people are happy to be categorised as ‘Naga’, many are not, particularly some of those who are not Christian. In particular, many Tikhak people now prefer not to be given the name ‘Naga’, although that was used in connection with them in the 1927 map.

²⁸ The most up to date full list of Tangsa/Tangshang groups is available on the Wikipedia Tangsa site (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tangsa_people).

Tonglum), Chamchang (general name Kimsing) and Mueshaungx (general name Mossang):

Gloss	Champang	Cholim	Chamchang	Mueshaungx
snake	punu	pu ³	pau ³ (paüf)	puu ³
bee	nəʔnu	ɲɣ ²	ɲiʔ (nyiq)	ɲaʔ
monkey	jukku	βo ²	jokβi ¹ (yokwix)	wir ² sul ³
pig	wəkku	βak ¹	βaʔ (waʔ)	wauk
mouse, rat	juʔpo	ʒu ²	ʒuk (juk)	juuʔ p ^h uuʔ
buffalo	lumo	ɲe ³	ɲi ³ (ngif)	ɲa ³
elephant	bokla	tɕ ^h a ¹	tɕɣ ¹ (chiix)	tɕo ¹ , boklo ²
tiger	səpbe	tɕ ^h ɲɣ ²	tɕiʔ (chiq)	tɕaʔ
bear	səpba	tɕap ² ba ²	tɕapbi ² (chapbi)	tɕəpbɔ ²
ant	sjamu	xip ¹ xa ²	sai ¹ sɣ ² (saixsii)	si ¹ sɔ ²
deer	kahu	k ^h i ¹ go ²	tɕ ^h i ² ɲi ² (chhingi)	
frog	lutja	luk ¹ ha ²	makp ^h aŋ ² (makphang)	lukbur ²

TABLE 3: Some words for animals in several varieties of Tangsa

Both the Cholim and Chamchang lists are marked for tonal categories. In Cholim tone 1 is high level and glottalised; tone 2 is low falling and tone 3 (less frequent) is high falling, whereas in Chamchang tone 1 is low falling, tone 2 is mid level and tone 3 is high falling. Chamchang words are presented phonemically as well as with the orthography devised by Rev. Yanger Thungwa. The Champang words have not been marked for tonal categories because we have not yet been able to establish the categories for tones in Champang. We can see that whereas more than half of the Cholim words in the table are monosyllabic, all of the Champang words are disyllabic. Some of the words that are monosyllabic in Cholim are disyllabic in Mueshaungx, such as *juuʔ p^huuʔ* ‘rat’. The second syllable is not obligatory in Mueshaungx, whereas apparently it is in Champang.²⁹

²⁹ In Chamchang, on the other hand, *juk* means ‘mouse’ and *jukphuk* means a ‘wild rat, forest mouse’.

Thus, one feature that distinguishes Champang from other Tangsa varieties is that almost all Champang nouns are disyllabic. Several of the Champang words are cognate with those in the other three varieties, with an additional syllable that is perhaps reconstructable to *ku, literally ‘mother’ in several related varieties and used as a classifier for animals in several others.

Within Tangsa, we can identify one subgroup having certain linguistic and cultural features in common. The Pangwa, who include the Cholim, Chamchang and Mueshaungx but not Champang, make up about half of the Tangsa sub-tribes, and sing a song called Wihu song or Sahwi song (see Barkataki-Ruscheweyh and Morey 2013, Morey and Schoepf forthcoming). We have studied the language of this song style in some detail, and found that it probably preserves an earlier form of the language, perhaps a Proto-Pangwa-Tangsa; in other words if comparative reconstruction were undertaken of the Pangwa varieties, the reconstruction would probably be very similar to the song language.

Consider Table 4, where four words that have the coda *-a* in song language are compared with Proto-Tibeto-Burman (based on Matisoff 2003) and Singpho (based on our own data) on the one hand, and with three spoken varieties on the other. As we can see, the song language preserves the proto vowel, where the three spoken varieties have undergone vowel shift, to *-e* in Cholim, *-i* in Chamchang and *-ai* in Mungray.

Proto TB	Singpho	(Mungray) Song language	Cholim spoken	Chamchang spoken	Mungray spoken	Gloss
-a	-a	-a	-e	-i (-e)	-ai	
*m-ka	chinghka	kalue	kelyo	kilü	kailung	‘door’
*na	na	na	nekyoe	ni	nai	‘ear’
*ka	-	ka	ke	ki	kai	‘go’
*tsa~*za	kāsa	sa	se	se	sai	‘child’

TABLE 4: Wihu song language compared with spoken Tangsa varieties

The importance of song language is that it has functioned as a kind of ‘common language’ even when the spoken varieties have diverged, as we can see from Table 4. Older speakers report that, in former times, everyone could understand the song language, even when the spoken language of other

people was difficult to understand. Older speakers are, by and large, more able to understand a range of different varieties than the younger speakers, and we have observed that younger speakers from different Pangwa sub-tribes generally communicate with each other in Assamese rather than their own Tangsa varieties.

Another interesting feature of the Pangwa varieties is that they were paired: from many different consultants we have heard that two varieties originally spoken in nearly neighbouring villages were very similar and fully mutually intelligible. This similarity does not mean, however, that these two varieties were identical. Longri for example, preserves *-a where Cholim has undergone a shift from *-a to -e. This does not mean that Longri is closer to other varieties that have preserved *-a. Longri and Cholim do share an almost identical TAM marking system (Morey 2013) which differs significantly from other Pangwa varieties.

As well as being linguistically diverse, the Tangsa are now very diverse in religious practice. A small number of people maintain the traditional animist practices, including animal sacrifice, but most Tangsa have converted to various larger religions, Christianity (Baptist, Presbyterian, Catholic and other denominations), Theravada Buddhism and Rang Fraa, a kind of codification of the traditional practices undertaken with the support of Hindu organisations.

3.1. LINGUISTIC ECOLOGY. Most of the approximately 70 sub-tribes have relatively small populations; possibly around 1000 for most of the sub-tribes but more for the larger groups, which in India include the Mossang (Mueshaungx), Tikhak, Longchang, Muklom and Joglei. We present here a brief overview of the linguistic ecology of Tangsa, in the following dot points:

- The linguistic ecology of the Tangsa in the period before migration into India seems to have been one linguistic variety per village (Statezni 2012). We know, for example, that the original Cholim village was near to the original Longri village, and that is why these two sub-tribes are paired,³⁰

³⁰ The top right-hand corner of the United States Army Map Service map entitled Sibsagar NG46-8 shows the ancestral villages, in most cases one for each of the sub-tribes.

- The original villages were often at some distance from each other and surrounded by forest: communities were thus inward-looking and self-reliant; Non-Tangsa people lived some distance away, and were most of the time out of contact;
- There was (and remains) a clan system that crosses linguistic/sub-tribe boundaries;
- Marriage could (and can) be with someone of the same sub-tribe but not the same clan;
- While the lects of the sub-tribes were different, people generally understood the varieties of those with whom they were in contact, as well as those that were linguistically similar;
- There was often linguistic mixing after marriage, with parents speaking different varieties; it was the father-tongue rather than the mother-tongue that was usually passed on;
- In earlier times, some sub-tribes quarrelled and fought with other sub-tribes;
- There are stories of a traditional writing system that was eaten by animals, but up until very recently there was no Tangsa writing.

The linguistic ecology of the Tangsa has been altered in recent years by migration. As best we can tell, the traditional pattern of migration was that, when necessary, due to the demands of the shifting cultivation practices, or the ravages of conflict, some of the people from the 'home village' would shift to a new location. For generations, the direction of migration has been from the mountains of northern Sagaing district of Myanmar into the mountains of Arunachal Pradesh (India), and sometimes further down onto the plains, in Tinsukia district of Assam and the Kharsang area of Changlang district, Arunachal Pradesh.³¹

The first to arrive in India, some hundreds of years back, were the non-Pangwa Tikhak group, consisting of three large sub-tribes (Tikhak, Longchang, Yongkuk) and several smaller ones, including Kato. These

For example there is Tulim (Tonglum) village and nearby Lungri at the coordinates 363 and 111 (approx 96°50' East and 27°45' North). This map was produced in 1954, based on earlier maps including the British Government of India's *Survey of India* maps.

³¹ Almost all the villages in Kharsang are Tangsa, with Muklom and Mossang probably being the largest sub-tribes there. A large proportion of the population, however, is Chakma, Buddhist refugees from Bangladesh.

groups form a linguistic subgroup within Tangsa. Many of these people settled in the mountains of Changlang District and even on the plains of Assam, and their language is not intelligible by most other Tangsas (see Simai 2008, Hastie in preparation). There are no Tikhak group speakers in Myanmar.

A second group of non-Pangwa sub-tribes, including the Muklom and Hawoi, also arrived some hundreds of years ago.

The more recent migration by the Pangwa groups continues to the present day. Some of these groups, like the Joglei and Mossang (Mueshaungx), have been in India for a long time, are well established and plentiful; others, like the Chamchang and Cholim, have arrived much more recently.

Further non-Pangwa groups, like the Hakhun and Champang (whose languages are mutually unintelligible), have arrived in very recent times: the Hakhun village at Ledo has been largely settled since 1996, when we commenced our language work in Assam.

As already mentioned, many of the younger Tangsa people from different sub-tribes now communicate with each other in Assamese, as it is no longer easy for them to understand the range of Tangsa varieties.

3.2. LANGUAGE LOSS AMONG THE TANGSA. As far as we know, only two Tangsa varieties in India have become extinct.³² Hashak and Kato (though there is said to be still one family speaking Kato in Changlang town). Hashak is marked on the 1927 British map as Hashak Tangsa. Hashak village, which today is populated by Singpho-speaking Yongkuk people, was settled probably in the 19th century by a group who sought the permission of the local Singpho landowners to settle there.³³ We know nothing about the linguistic variety spoken by the Hashak, and perhaps it was not distinct from the present day Yongkuk population.

That said, there is clearly language loss going on. In the villages of Kharang Kong and Hewe Ninggam in Assam state, settled around 100 years ago mostly by Mossang (Mueshuangx) and Lochhang speakers, Singpho, a

³² Several more on the Myanmar side of the border have been identified (Bynn Kham Lann pers. comm.)

³³ The story of the Hashak settlement was told by a Singpho leader, the late Kiyang Laq (1916-2011), of Kumchai Kong village. It was in his grandfather's time that the Hashak came to Assam.

distantly related non-Tangsa but Tibeto-Burman language is now the mother tongue for most people. This represents a survival of an earlier situation where Singpho was the lingua franca of this part of Assam. In fact, the very first Tangsa person we encountered was a Singpho speaker who did not know his own ancestral Tangsa variety. These villages are situated on the plains in areas of great linguistic diversity, consisting of other tribal groups, speaking Tibeto-Burman and Tai languages, as well as communities of Nepalis, tea tribes (originally speakers of Austroasiatic languages), Biharis, Assamese-speaking Tai Ahoms and others. Now that Assamese has largely replaced Singpho as the lingua franca in this area, we might perhaps expect this group of people to gradually shift to Assamese.

This situation is quite different from where the majority of Tangsa live in Changlang district, where most villages are Tangsa, albeit linguistically diverse. It seems that geographical separation from these Tangsa-majority areas and the pressures of living in the more densely populated multilingual plains areas are leading to language loss.

On the other hand, almost all of the groups that have been longest in India (Tikhak, Longchang, Yongkuk, Muklom, Hawoi) and others still maintain their languages strongly, although there is some influence by outside linguistic factors, such as the use of more Singpho words in Tikhak – perhaps because Tikhak and Singpho are mostly followers of Theravada Buddhism, unlike most other Tangsa.

3.3. PROSPECTS FOR THE FUTURE. One of the most common requests we have received in the Tangsa area is to assist with the creation of a single ‘common language’. This is a desire stronger among some of the Christian Tangsa, motivated by a desire to have a single Bible translation and single hymn book to be used by all. In a certain sense, this follows the same idea as the Wihu song language – a unifying linguistic feature among the diverse spoken varieties. Reaching that unity, however, is proving challenging and elusive.

There are now three Bible translations underway among the Tangsa:

- Chamchang (Tangsa Baptist Churches Association, TBCA)
- Joglei (Presbyterian Church)
- Mossang (Hewa Naga Revival Church)

Chamchang had been accepted by many people as the ‘common language’ at least for Bible translation, but this has been challenged by both the Presbyterian Church and the Hewa Naga Revival Church. These challenges are largely based on linguistic considerations. The Presbyterian Church has been more successful converting Joglei and Ngaimong people, whose varieties are quite similar, but rather more distinct from Chamchang, so it is easy to see that Joglei would be a suitable language for use in that church.

The Mossang (Mueshaungx in their own orthography) are probably the largest sub-tribe in India and they broke away from the TBCA on the language issue, because they did not agree to use Chamchang as their language and have got their own Bible translation and literacy program underway.

There certainly is pressure from several directions for the Tangsa to develop a common language. It is hard to imagine an education system ever being possible in each of the 70 different varieties, especially when some of them are very similar to each other; yet in every village that we have ever visited, Tangsa people are very proud of their own sub-tribe and its own traditions and linguistic usage, so we think that the chances of a single variety becoming the ‘common language’ are slim.

However, there are some interesting signs. Consider the situation of Singpho, which is a spoken language related but not identical to the much larger Jinghpaw language, the official language of Kachin state in Myanmar. At least some of the younger Singphos in India now prefer to use written Jinghpaw rather than a form of their own spoken variety, because Jinghpaw has a large literature, larger population and some political sway. It is certainly possible to see that if, for example, the Chamchang variety reached the same position in Tangsa society as the written Jinghpaw has, people would gradually merge to it.

On the other hand, many Tangsa people, even members of the Tangsa Baptist Churches Association, have said that, while they will accept a single variety in church, they won’t change to using it in everyday speech. For example, the Hakhun, who are mostly Baptists and members of the TBCA, have recently produced their own books in a divergent orthography, exemplified in Figure 2:³⁴

³⁴ This was developed by Mr. Sujong Hakhun and Mr. Khithong Hakhun. While

Ti^ˆva[˘] nøe[˘] miq ni- yu^ˆbe[˘] rung^ˆla[˘] tung^ˆ t^ˆna[˘], ta^ˆni^ˆ va[˘]ni^ˆ rwe^ˆyer^ˆ a^ˆroq, Mun-ri[˘]t^ˆna[˘]. I-røe[˘] :ka[˘]møe[˘] ti^ˆka[˘] vaq, k^ˆmøe[˘] ma^ˆma^ˆ nøe- tung^ˆlat na[˘]møe[˘] i-ruq, t^ˆni^ˆ va[˘]ni^ˆ mik, nøe- ve^ˆ k^ˆmøe[˘] ha^ˆni^ˆ mik, nøe- pat t^ˆna[˘]. I-røe[˘] :ka^ˆmøe[˘] ya[˘]ka[˘] yu^ˆbe^ˆ ni- miq lap :ki^ˆmun^ˆ miq na[˘]. Nøe- mik nøe- a^ˆlam[˘] lam[˘] møe[˘] lap :ki^ˆkeq a^ˆna[˘] a^ˆbøe^ˆ na[˘]. Ha:kun[˘] k^ˆmøe i-ruk :pan[˘] keq.

FIGURE 2: Hakhun story written in Hakhun orthography

One more complication is that, some years ago, the Government decided that a Tangsa radio program should be broadcast on the Government radio. The variety chosen was Longchang, one of the Tikhak group of languages, mutually unintelligible with Chamchang.

We will conclude our discussion of Tangsa by mentioning one of the scripts that has been developed for use in all Tangsa varieties. Mr Lakhum Mossang of Namphai village has devised 73 characters which are exemplified in Table 5 (the font used here was developed by Paul Hastie).

ɔ	ᵛ	Low falling
z	ᵛ	High Rising
ʌ	ɔʔ	Glottal final
ʒ	ᵛ	High falling

TABLE 5: Lakhum Mossang’s orthography

One important features of Lakhum Mossang’s script that distinguishes it from all the Roman-based orthographies is that the vowel symbols also notate tone, as we see with each of the four examples in Table 5. In other words, it is impossible to write a word in this script which is not marked by tone.

differing significantly from other Tangsa orthographies, this is very similar to orthographies created by Baptist missionaries for other Tibeto-Burman languages, esp. Lahu and Akha, where the tonemarks come one space after the vowel.

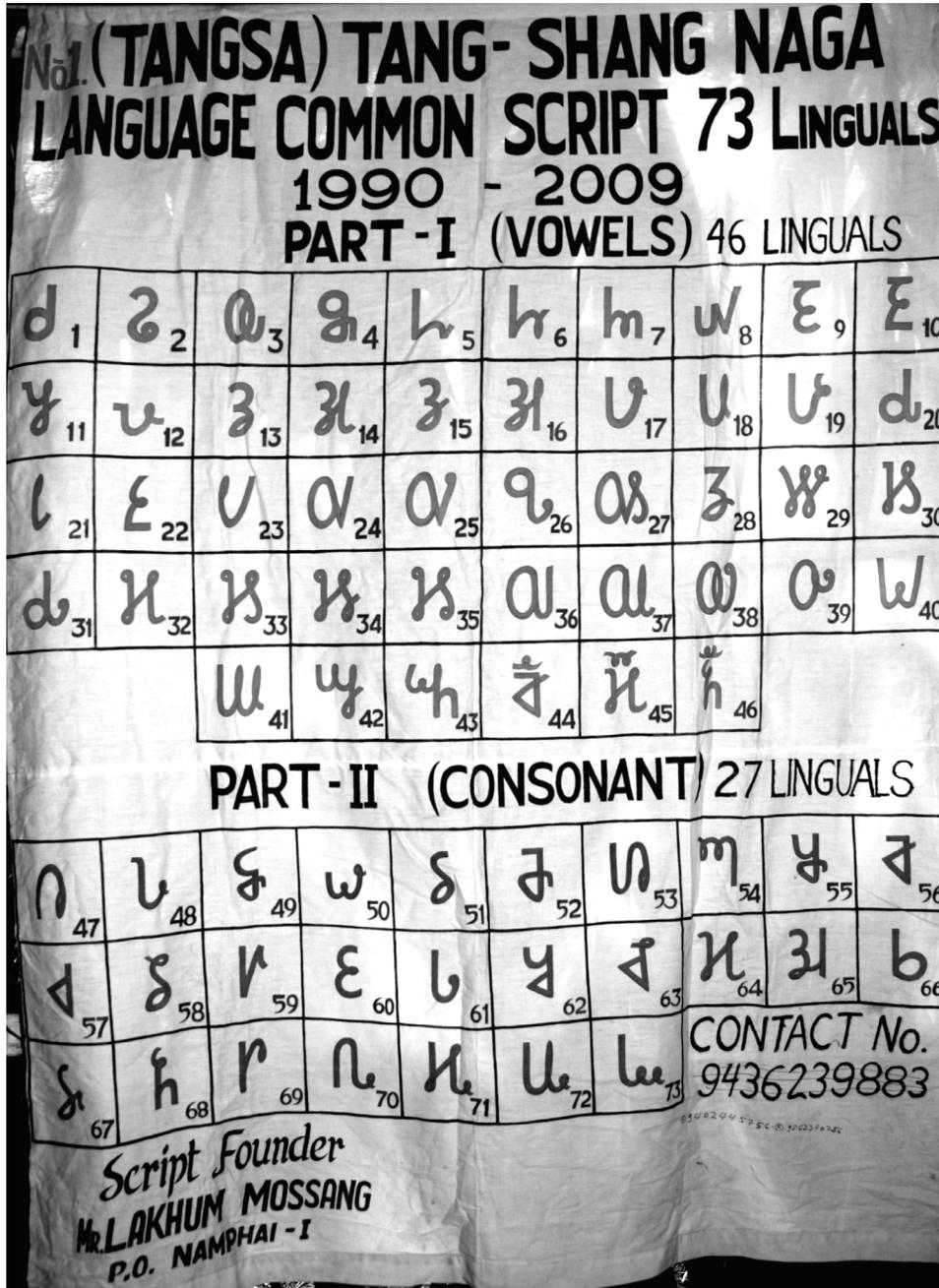


FIGURE 3: (Tangsa) Tang-Shang Naga Language Common Script, developed by Lakhum Mossang

There is controversy among the Tangsa as to whether this script should be adopted, but, to give the reader an idea of the work done by Lakhum Mossang, a full list of the characters in his script is given in Figure 3 above.

4. CONCLUSIONS. Speculation about why some languages survive and others do not is perhaps merely that, speculation. The two case studies that we have looked at in this paper do present a very substantial divergence. In the case of Tai Ahom, where the language was the court language of a kingdom, with written texts, an army, and a whole government and priestly caste, the language was nevertheless largely lost as a spoken language even before the Ahom kingdom itself was extinguished in the 1820s. A writing system, the political strength of the government and the prestige of having a dynasty dating back perhaps 600 years did not save the language from becoming moribund and ceasing to be used. What writing did do for Tai Ahom was to preserve a large array of texts on which a language and cultural revival can be based, and which can support the continuation of religious rituals.

We should mention that Tai Ahom is not the only language that has ceased to be spoken on the plains of Assam in recent centuries. Moran, a Boro-Garo language within Tibeto-Burman, was still spoken in Upper Assam into the 19th century but is now extinct; the Moran community is nevertheless still strong in Tinsukia district of Assam. On the other hand, there are languages that are spoken on the plains of Assam that have not become extinct in the same period, of which Boro is the most populous. Living on the plains and being in regular contact with Assamese speakers is thus not the only reason for language shift.

Tangsa, with a much smaller population, no political power, no writing until relatively recently and considerable linguistic diversity, nevertheless still shows language vitality in almost all of the varieties that we have investigated. In part, this situation can be explained in terms of hills versus plains. In the hills, where villages are more separated, where land is less suitable for intensive cultivation and where modern technology is less present, the linguistic diversity within Tangsa remains stronger. In these areas, most of the villages are Tangsa, and regular contact with non-Tangsa people is much less than in the plains areas.

We have seen that language loss is occurring in at least some of those

Tangsa communities that have moved to the plains of Assam – where most of the population are not Tangsa. These plains have long been very multicultural but they are now dominated by Assamese language, and Assamese³⁵ is the most common language of wider communication among Tangsa today. Writing is also now being introduced and its presence may or may not assist in the preservation of the existing diversity. Should one of the Bible orthographies become dominant, this might accelerate the loss of much of the existing diversity, perhaps with the benefit of strengthening the written variety. For some Tangsa people, such a single variety would represent greater unity and greater strength to withstand the inevitable cultural pressures to use languages of wider communication such as English, Hindi and Assamese. For others, it would represent the loss of a wonderful diversity.

It is hoped that these detailed case studies will assist in understanding the factors involved in language loss.

5. ACCESSING OUR DATA. Our raw data can be found in several locations. Firstly, most of our Tangsa and Ahom recordings and photographs are archived at the DoBeS archive, maintained by the Max Planck Institute in Nijmegen. The address for the MPI is corpus1.mpi.nl/ds/imdi_browser/. After opening that, click on *DoBeS archive* and then on *Tangsa, Tai, Singpho in North East India* to access our data.

Linguistic transcriptions of the Tangsa and Ahom materials are also being made available, in searchable format, via SEALANG at <http://sealang.net/assam>. Word documents with transcriptions are also available for download there. The searchable Ahom Dictionary is found at <http://sealang.net/ahom>.

Photographs of the Ahom manuscripts are being archived at the British Library Endangered Archives Programme (<http://eap.bl.uk/>).

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³⁵ The Assamese used by Tangsa people varies from quite close to standard, to pidginised forms that are sometimes grouped together under the designation of Nagamese. It would indeed be worthwhile to make a deeper, cross-generational study of the Assamese in use by Tangsa people, but this has been well beyond the scope of any of our researches to this point.

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