

## VOWELS IN TAI-KHAMTI

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### ABSTRACT

The Tai ethnic group of North-east India is one of the largest ethnic groups of the region. It is an established fact that the Khamti entered into Assam through the Patkai pass from the Upper Burma towards the last part of the 18th century. The Khamti were the original inhabitants of the Khamti-lang or Khamti-mung or the great Khamti land in the valley of the river Irrawaddy in Burma in 1751 (Rahman, 2005). They are mainly concentrated in Namsai, Arunachal Pradesh but a little part of the group spread in Assam also. Khamti word is the combination of two words, 'Kham' and 'Ti'. Literally, Kham means gold and Ti means region or place. According to Grierson, the Khamti language belongs to the Tai speech family of the Siamese-Chinese family, coming under Indo-Chinese super family. The first Tai-Khamti kingdom was in Sadiya, Assam. In Assam, they spread in Narayanpur of Lakhimpur district and Tinsukia district. Narayanpur has the largest number of Tai-Khamtis in Assam. Data for this research has been collected from Bor-Khamti gaon situated in Narayanpur. The Tai-Khamti language has a few speakers which led a threat for the preservation of the language. Therefore, in this prospect 'Vowels in Tai-Khamti' has been chosen to study the vowel analysis of the language. The sounds which are produced without any obstruction or stricture in the vocal tract are known as vowel. The Khamti language has 16 vowels. Among these seven have long forms. In this paper, the phonetic transcription, classification of the vowels according to their height, length and nature and initial, medial and final positions of the vowels has been chosen for study. Moreover, the paper will also focus into the diphthongs used in the language.

### Keywords-

Vowel, Tai-Khamti, Vowel positions, Vowel classification, Diphthongs.

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### Introduction

The Khamti Shan people, who number about 8,000 in Myanmar (Simons et al. 2009), consider their heartland to be the Putao region in northern Myanmar's Kachin state. Another 5,000 to 10,000 speakers of Khamti can be found in Northeast India (Morey 2008:208). The Khamtis, as one of the oldest immigrants of Assam (1750-1850 A.D.). Tai-languages broadly fall into two groups- Southern and Northern. Thai (Siamese), Lao, Lu, Khun come under Southern group while Northern group includes Dai, Shan, Ahom, Khamti basically speaks Northern Shan language variety with which it has close affinity except differing in a little pronunciation. Tai- Khamti language is tonal and monosyllabic. That is, each syllable or word has several speaking tones ranging from 1 tone upto 14 tones, each tone making entirely different meaning as the tone varies according to its meaning. One needs mastery to read and speak the language perfectly.

Captain Wilcox narrated that there were feuds between two groups of Khamtis and as a result, one section of them has moved to Assam, the then Tai Ahom kingdom. The Tai Ahom kingdom permitted the Khamtis to move into Assam and to

settle on bank of the river Tengapani in 1751. The Ahom king understood that the Khamti were the kith and kin (Pinongkum Tai) and hence allowed to settle within their kingdom. The members of the other Tai branches whose original languages are since dead, such as Tai-Ahom, Tai-Kham-Yang, Man-Tai community of Arunachal and Assam (India) and learning the language in an effort to revive their lost language.

The Khamti manifest predominately Mongoloid traits in their appearance. They are fairer in complexion. They are tall, muscular and well built. The epicanthic eye-fold is distinct and easily observable. The nose is small rather than flat. The hair is long, straight, lank and rarely of any other color than black.

The Khamti entered into Assam through the Patkai Pass from the Upper Burma towards the last part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The process of emigration, however continued in batches till 1850 and in 1891, the total Khamti population reached 3,040 in Assam province (Grierson, p.63). There are various views about their migration into India, either recorded in some of the Buranjis or are fresh in the memories of some of the Khamti elders through the perpetuating oral traditions. They were the original inhabitants of the Khamti-

lang or Khamti-mung or the great Khamti land in the valley of the river Irrawaddy in Burma. Boruah (2001:41) after listing 30 Khamti villages in Arunachal Pradesh, went on to list some in Assam. ‘In Assam seven Khamti villages are found in Lakhimpur District and these are – Bor-Khamti, Sribhuyan, Gosainbari, Borpathar, Deotula, Tipling and Tunijan. More than one thousand souls are found in these seven villages’.

**LITERATURE REVIEW:**

Tai Khamti literature (Liklai) is very rich. There are hundreds of thousands of volumes in manuscript from which are carefully preserved in Buddhist monasteries and homes. These manuscripts are read in great reverence in melodious intonation, and taught to the inmates in monasteries. These literary works deal with various branches of temporal knowledge, such as Buddhist teachings, Jataka tales, Fables, Novels, History, Astrology, Customary Jurisprudence, Guide to good living, worldly knowledge and wisdom, Human Conduct, Indian epics of Ramayana, Mahabharata, Chronicles, Chinese traveler Huen Chwang’s accounts of his India-travel on 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D, system of medicine, mythology, many other secular subjects of human interests with intrinsic value. The literary works also include dramatic performing arts with theme usually drawn from jataka tales (Buddha’s birth stories) and epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata. These volumes are written in scholarly poetical style having flowing rhyme rich in assonance and alliteration. Sang Vaku, Pu-shon-lan, Loka Niti, Loka Pingya, Hitopadesa, Hodham (Chau Khunhong’s India travel accounts), Chau Lamang (Indian epic Ramayan), Sasana-tongpan. Besides, Tai-Khamtis have numerous oral folk tales. The existing studies on Khamti include comparative vocabulary/ wordlists and grammatical sketches (Robinson 1849, Hodgson

1850, Needham 1894, Grierson 1903, Harris 1976, Weidert 1977), primers (cf. Manpoong 1993) and other works on people and society (Gogoi 1971, Konwar 2002, Tun 2004, etc).

**DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS**

**3.1 CLASSIFICATION OF VOWELS:**

Tai- Khamti alphabet, which is in pristine form, closely resembles Northern Shan alphabet of Burma with some of the letters taking somewhat divergent shapes. Tai Khamti language has 35 alphabets including 17 consonants and 18 vowels. This ancient script has, however, been in meticulous use for last 500 years. All literary works up to this are in this ancient script. This Tai-Khamti script had since been reformed in 1988 by committee of Tai scholars assisted by philological experts with a view to standardize the script by removing the inherent deficiencies in the script. The reformed script has 39 alphabets of which 26 are consonants and 13 are vowels. It has 9 tones and 8 tone-symbols. They are- /a/, /i/, /i:/, /u/, /u:/, /e/, /e/, /o/, /o/, /ai/, /aw/, /u/, /x/. It appears that these reforms have not been accepted by all Khamti people. The objections to the revised script include aesthetic objections that the symbols are not sufficiently beautiful, and practical objections that use of the new script would necessarily involve a loss of knowledge of the traditional scripts (Morey, p. 197).

The nine vowel contrast in Khamti according to my documentation /i, e, ε, a, o, u, x, u/ and the rest /i:, a:, u:/ are provided by the length contrast between /i/ and /i:/, /a/ and /a:/, /u/ and /u:/. These vowels can be categorized in terms of the vowel height, length and nature of lip. The /ai/ and /aw/ found in the revised Khamti script are considered diphthongs and are included on the diphthong’s list.

**Table 1:** The Khamti vowel phonemes

Lip	Unrounded				Rounded	
	Front		Central		Back	
	Short	Long	Short	Long	Short	Long
Close	i	i:			u, u	u:
Close-mid	e				x, o	
Mid						
Open-mid	ε				o	
Open	a	a:				

The above table shows that Khamti has nine phonetically distinctive short vowel phonemes and three phonologically distinctive long vowel phonemes. The rest of the two vowels /ai/ and /au/ (according to revised Khamti script) are considered diphthongs and are included on the diphthong list.

**Front-to-back dimension:**

Front: /i, e, ε, a/

Back: /ɔ, o, ɾ, u, u/

**Height of vowel:**

Close: /i, u, u/

Close-mid: /e, ɾ, o/

Open-mid: /ε, ɔ/

Open: /a/

**Lip of vowel:**

Rounded: /ɔ, o, ɾ, u, u/

Unrounded: /i, e, ε, a/

**Length of vowel:**

Short vowel: /i, e, ε, a, ɔ, o, ɾ, u, u/

Long vowel: /i:, a:, u:/

**Table: 2 Occurrence in words:**

Sl.no	Vowel	Initial	Gloss	Medial	Gloss	Final	Gloss
1.	i	inu	love	kin	eat	ti	place
2.	e	en	owl	len	play	me	to fix
3.	ε	εm	near	hεŋ	dry	pε	win
4.	a	aŋi	paternal aunt	kapʻ	bite	má	mad
5.	ɔ	ɔn	narrow	tʰɔn	forest	sɔ	let's
6.	o	ói	sing	kʰon	feather	ŋo`	cow
7.	u	ú	stay	nukʻ	bone	c`u	blouse
8.	u	uu	yes	muuŋ	country	nuu	above
9.	ɾ	ɾŋ	negative	mɾn	at that time	nɾ	meat
10.	i:	i:	2 <sup>nd</sup> daughter	ni:	good	pi:	elder sibling
11.	a:	a:u-pin	someone	ma:la	come	má:	dog
12.	u:	u:la	live	pu:thaw	grandfather	kεnhu:	ear

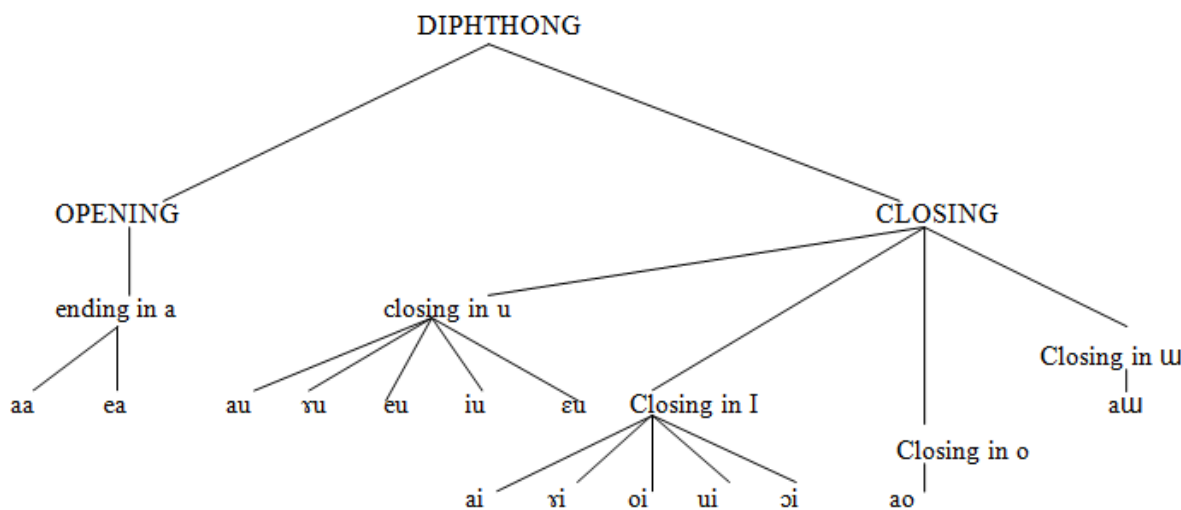
/ɾu/, /ai/, /ɾi/, /oi/, /eu/, /ui/, /ɔi/, /iu/, /εu/, /aa/, /au/, /ao/ and /ea/.

**3.2 CLASSIFICATION OF DIPHTHONGS:**

Diphthongs are speech sounds which consist of a movement or glide from one vowel to another. It should be borne in mind that such a glide, if it has to be termed a diphthong, must occur within a single syllable. The total number of diphthongs found in Tai-Khamti is fourteen. They are- /au/,

The tree diagram of the diphthongs is provided below. The easiest way to remember them is in terms of two groups divided as in this diagram:

**DIPHTHONG**



**Table: 3 Diphthongs occurrence in words**

Sl no.	Diphthongs	Occurrence in word final position	Gloss
1.	au	ʃau	Father
2.	ɻu	tɻu	Ashes
3.	ai	dai	Get
4.	ɻi	kɻi	Far
5.	oi	moi	Ice
6.	eu	meu	hand
7.	ui	hui	Seed
8.	ɔi	nɔi	Mountain
9.	ao	sao`	Twenty
10.	iu	hiu	To wither
11.	aa	waa	Say
12.	ɛu	p <sup>h</sup> ɛu	Excessive
13.	au	hau	Give
14.	ea	mea	aunt

Based on the data, the above table no.3 is prepared. From the cited above, it is clear that the diphthongs in Tai-Khamti occurs only in the final position of the words.

### CONCLUSION

The Khamti language is an endangered or threatened language. All speakers of Khamti are bilingual. Systematic research is required for its proper development and preservation. Because of globalization and affect of dominant language, the new generations shows a negative attitude towards their language, literature and culture. Due to lack of sincerity, documentation and systematic study or research, we are definitely going to lose its root. The loss of one language is a great loss not only to the community but to all.

Through the above discussion and analysis, we found some findings as follows:

- Nine vowels are found in Khamti language including three long vowels. They are /a/, /i/, /i:/, /u/, /u:/, /ɛ/, /e/, /o/, /ɔ/ and /i:/, /a:/ and /u:/. They occur in the initial, medial and final position of words.
- There is no central vowel found in the language.
- There are fourteen types of diphthongs found in the language. These glides are found only in the final position.

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### APPENDIX:

Native Speakers:

- [1] Chao Tewom Namchoom (70), Bor-Khamti gaon, Narayanpur, Lakhimpur.
- [2] Arya Dhanna (80) Bor- Khamti gaon
- [3] Chao Khatiya Manchekhun (60) Bor- Khamti gaon
- [4] Nang Halita Manpung (40) Bor-Khamti gaon
- [5] Chao Manseng Namsum (50) Bor-khamti gaon