

The Origin And The Tribal Affinities Of The PA-O

Rangoon University 1959-60, English Session P.6-8.

There is rather general agreement among students of the tribes of the Shan States and Burma that the Taungthu are to be classified with the second of the three major tribal divisions of the Karen, the Pwo. This classification has been made almost exclusively upon evidence of language affinities, and may have to be changed or modified at some later date when more information is in hand. On the evidence of language, however, there is little doubt that the Pa-o language is a dialect of the Pwo Karen. Most of the evidence gathered by the early writers on the subject was of a rather superficial nature, based upon a limited knowledge of the language and a small vocabulary. Recently, my wife and I have done some research in the Karen languages with Professors R.A.D. Forrest and Gordon Luce, of the School of Oriental Research of London University. The method being used is that of comparing 12 or 14 dialects of the Karen language family, determining the roots, and observing how modification has taken place. Although this work is still unfinished, it seems to indicate that at one time these people spoke one language, and perhaps lived together as one people.

Though the study of scholars shows that Pa-o languages is rather closely allied to the Pwo Karen, it is my observation that the Karen dialect most closely resembling Pa-o is Padaung, a tongue identified with the Bwe group. The Padaung are a small tribe living in contiguous territory to the south-west of the Shan States, in western Karenni. This resemblance might be attributed to contacts between the two groups, yet although the Taungthu have lived in contact with the Red Karens, or *Karenni*, and have moved across their country and dealt with them for hundreds of years, the dialects are exceedingly different. Sir George Scott believes the Karenni to be nearer in language and customs to the original stock than the Pwo and Sgau Karens.¹ Contiguity and close proximity, especially among strictly endogamous tribes, highly suspicious of strangers and strange objects and customs, does not necessarily effect similarly.

Marshall, who spent 40 years living among the Karen, identified the Pa-o in these statements.

The Pwo group, comprises, besides the Pwo Karen, the Taungthu tribe, who call themselves the Pao. The Pwo are found along the seacoast from Araken to Mergui and are said to be found nowhere more than fifty miles inland. However, I think that some of the Pwo villages in the Henzada district may be a little farther inland than that. The Taungthu are found in a section of country running northward from Thaton into the Shan States beyond Taunggyi.²

The process by which the Taungthu split away from their Karen brothers, adopted Buddhism as their religion, and finally settled in the southern Shan States is more obscure than the facts concerning their relationship to the other Karens. Early writers state that their main concentration is at Thaton, in Amherst district,³ with scattered villages to the north. Either these writers did not know of the numbers scattered through the Karenni and Shan States, or the Taungthu have been migrating northward in large numbers. For by comparison the numbers around Thaton are rather insignificant compared with the vast population in the Shan States say that they came from Thaton. Those who live around Thaton say that they came from Hsa Htung (the Shan form of Thaton), a *myosahship* just

¹ Scott, and Hardiman, *op. cit.*, Pt. I, Vol.I, p.524.

² Marshall, H.I. *The Karen People of Burma: a study in anthropology and ethnology*, Columbus, The University 1922, pp. 1-3.

³ Ferrars, M. and B Ferrars, *Burma*, London, Sampson Low, Marston, 1900 p. 155.

north of Karenni. Perhaps there were two migrations, the first when the Shan or Burmese drove them southward and took their land, and the other when they were driven back northward by Burmese persecution. The legend locally told concerning this latter event is as follows:

In the year 419 BE.(957 A.D) Manuha, the Taungthu King of Thaton, invited a Buddhist monk to visit his country for the purpose of spreading the Buddhist religion. The monk came and brought with him three sets of the Buddhist scriptures, the Pitikat. The neighbouring King of Pagan heard of this and wrote to the Taungthu king Manuha asking for one set of the scriptures. He sent the letter by an Amat, but the King of Thaton sent an insolent reply to the effect that the subjects of the King of Pagan were so exceedingly ignorant and wild that a copy would be wasted on them, for they would not be able to understand it. Nawrahta replied by raising a great army which proceeded by land and by water against Thaton, and the King of Pagan himself commanded the boat party. Thaton was attacked and taked; king Manuha and his wife and family were made prisoners, and the copies of the scriptures were carried on wight white elephants to Pagan.⁴

This action is described in Burmese History; the date is in the 11th century. The Taungthu King and all the nobility were made pagoda slaves to the Shwezigon and other pagodas in Pagan, and all the more prosperous people of Thaton were taken into slavery. Those Pa-o who were left migrated to found a new states, giving it the same name. This states became the modern Taungthu city and state of Hsa Htung. This legend, which undoubtedly has much groudng in fact, is told with minor variations, among most of the Pa-o of the Shan States. Other significant testimony to the truth of the story is the religion of the Taungthu. Though most of the Karens are spirit-worshippers, the Pa-o are staunch Buddhists, perhaps more devout than the Burmese or Shans.

The Taungthu have maintained themselves distinct from the Muns (Talaing), the masters of Pegu, for five hundred years or more. The men dress like Shans. The womens wear a black *thindaing* and *longyi* much like the Chin, but with red trimming instead of embroidery, and with red silk tassels to the gaungbaung. The Taungthus are expert craftsmen in all the arts of the peninsula. They are strict Buddhists and build magnificent *Kyaungs* in the prevailing wood style; these exhibit a noticeable peculiarity in their stone fences.⁵

The Pa-o differ in another way from the other Karen people, in that they have had a written language for many years. In two or three of the oldest *hpongyi-Kyaungs* (Monastery) in and near Hsa Htung town, I have seen hand-written menuscritps in the Pa-o, quite evidently of fairly ancient times. Two factors led me to believe they were hundreds of years old; and was the yellow and delapidated condition of the parchment upon which they were written; the other was the fact that the language of the writing was an archaic from which was alomost unintelligible to monks, and completely so to the laymen. The abbot Seyadaw (literally, holy teacher) told us that some of these writings had been brought with them when they moved from Thaton to Hsa Htung. Not being on expert on such matters, it was not possible for me to determine whether this was true or not, but it is probable that there is truth in the stories and legends.

Another interesting explanation of the meaning of the word Taungthu, which is given by some of the Pa-o, is that the Burmese, who, emigrating from the north, found the Pa-o at Thaton, to the south of them called them southern people, i.e., Taungthu. *Taung* in Burmese may mean "hill" or "south", and some of the Pa-o insist that the original meaning of the term was the second . They claim

⁴ Scott, and Hardiman, *op. cit.*, Pt. I, Vol.I, p.555.

⁵ Ferrars, and Ferrars, *op. cit.* P.155

Thaton as their ancient capital, and say that the name is derived from tha-too, the Pa-o word for laterite, of which mineral the hills in that district chiefly consist.⁶

In conclusion, on the basis of partial evidence only, we may make the following tentative statements regarding the origins and tribal affinities of the Pa-o, and the migrations by which they came to the Southern Shan States. First, they are probably one of the tribes which may be classified as belonging to the Karen speaking peoples, and more specifically to the family of dialects known as Pwo Karen. Secondly, the Pa-o, together with their Karen brethren, emigrated from the high plains of central Asia, the western part of the ancient China, to lands to the south, and by stages reached the area where they are now living. Thirdly, the Pa-o were pushed further south to the Thaton district by the pressure of the Shans and Burmans, where they came into contact with the Mons, and attained to some of the accomplishments of more civilized peoples, i.e., a kingdom, a written language, and the Buddhist ethic. Fourthly, in the tenth or eleventh century, A.D. Thaton was destroyed, and most of the Pa-o migrated to the southern Shan States, where the large concentration of them is now found.



⁶ Fychte, A., Burma, Past and Present, London, C. Kegan Paul and Co., 1878.(2 vols) Vol.I p. 341. (Extracted by R.U, Pa-OH STUDENTS ASSOCIATION FROM THE THESIS OF THE PA-O PEOPLE OF THE SHAN STATE written by william Dunn Hackett)