

Chapter II

The Historical, Geographical and Linguistic Settings of the Kui, the Bruu and the So

2.1 The Historical, Geographical and Linguistic Settings of the Kui

2.1.1 The Historical Setting of the Kui

"Kui" is the term by which the Kui people refer to themselves and their language, in addition to having the meaning 'human being'.* Another designation, "Suai" (spelled variously as Soai, Souei, etc.), is used by the Thai and the Lao to refer to the Kui people. It is widely believed that this term originated during the early Bangkok period when the Kui were required to /sòŋ sùaj/, or pay annual tribute or taxes, e.g. in the form of forest products, to the Thai (and Lao) rulers. As a result of this practice the Kui came to be called "Suai" /sùaj/, 'those who pay tribute', by the Thai and the Lao.

According to published sources and oral tradition, the original homeland of the Kui of northeastern Thailand was in various areas of the southern Lao provinces of Attapeu, Champasak and Saravane. The oral tradition of the Kui in Surin Province indicates that Kui

* Variant dialectal pronunciations of "Kui" /kuuj/ include "Kuay" /kuəj/, "Kuoy" /kooj/, etc.; the spelling "Kui" is used herein as it represents the pronunciation in the dialect used in this study.

people began migrating westward to Surin during the reign of the Thai monarch King Narai (1656-1688) of Ayudhaya from Muang Saen Pae (Saen Pang, located in the extreme northeastern corner of present-day Cambodia) and Attapeu. It is said these movements resulted from dissatisfaction with local rulers and it is quite possible that migration was not only politically motivated but also related to the livelihood of the Kui as elephant hunters and trainers in that they moved into the northeastern Thailand area in search of new hunting grounds, for example.

Migration continued until the late Ayudhaya period when large-scale movements of different groups of Kui into Surin began, continuing up to the Dhonburi period of Thai history. Tradition further indicates that there were four main groups, each having its own chief and settling in different villages in the Surin area.*

It is traditionally believed that the city of Surin was originally settled and inhabited by Kui people but they were subsequently assimilated by the Khmers who migrated into the area. The fact that the originally Kui villages of Ban Charapat and Mueang Thi and for the most part, the city of Surin itself are now Khmer-speaking may serve to substantiate this belief.

2.1.2 The Geographical Setting of the Kui

Almost all of the present-day Kui-speaking population in northeastern Thailand is found between the Mun River and the Dong Rek ^{Rak} Mountain, which form the Thai-Cambodian border. The largest concentrations are to be found scattered throughout the provinces of Surin and Si Sa Ket. There are other groups of villages in the districts of eastern and southern Ubon Ratchathani Province, through

* For more details and information on sources see Prasert Sriwises (1978:ii-iv).

which, it is traditionally believed, the various Kui migrations from southern Laos passed.

Smaller pockets of Kui settlements are to be found scattered throughout most of Buri Ram Province, and in one district each of Nakhon Ratchasima (Korat) and Maha Sarakham provinces. Most of the Kui villages in Buri Ram (and Nakhon Ratchasima) are called /so? tamaj/, 'new villages', by the Kui in Surin and Si Sa Ket as most of them seem to represent relatively recent westward migrations from Surin and Si Sa Ket into those provinces. Some of the Kui villages in Buri Ram, however, plus those in Maha Sarakham and those that may exist (or may have existed) in Roi Et Province and other areas, may represent only a remnant of formerly Kui populations. (See Seidenfaden 1952 and 1958:115-6)*

Johnston (1976:259) gives an apt description of what may be considered the areas with the heaviest concentrations of Kui-speaking villages:

The Kuy people...live in a broad dogleg-shaped area stretching from the northeastern tip of Buri Ram Province, east in a slightly southerly direction across Surin Province, and barely across the border into Si Sa Ket Province, then due south to the Cambodian border and into Cambodia. In Si Sa Ket Province there are also large pockets in Khu Khan District, as well as smaller pockets scattered throughout the entire province. (See Smalley (1964:26) for pertinent map.)

In addition, in 1954 Johnston estimated the Kui population in Thailand at 150,000 and says there are no accurate estimates of the Kui population in Cambodia or Laos available. However, Seidenfaden (1952) presents an exhaustive examination of three older studies of the Kui-speaking areas in north central Cambodia. Ferlus (1972:35

* The two preceding paragraphs are taken from Prasert Sriwises (1978:iv) with minor changes.

and 1974b:141) gives information on the locations and estimated population of Souei-speaking peoples in southern Laos (10,000), as does Lebar, et al. (1964:159), taken from two other sources.

My own surveys, although incomplete, show from 350 to 400 Kui-speaking villages scattered in various concentrations in the following provinces of northeastern Thailand (listed in descending order of estimated number of villages):*

1. Surin : all districts
2. Si Sa Ket : all districts
3. Buri Ram : all districts
4. Ubon Ratchathani : Nam Yun, Det Udom, Na Chaluai, Warin Chamrap and Khong Chiam districts
5. Maha Sarakham : Phayakkhaphum Phisai district
6. Nakhon Ratchasima : Huai Thalaeng district

The dialect focused on in this study is spoken at Ban Sang Kae, Tambon Ban Tael, Sikhoraphum District, Surin Province and is referred to below as Kui Ban Tael.

2.1.3 The Linguistic Setting of the Kui

The historical and geographical settings of the Kui clearly indicate that they have been in continuous contact with at least three other languages: first with Khmer and Lao and later with Thai.

The ethnolinguistic survey made by Smalley (1964) and the striking contrast of his findings with those of Seidenfaden (1952), based on a survey made in 1917-18, provide evidence that the borders of the Kui-speaking areas had narrowed considerably over a fifty year

* For sources of this data see Prasert Sriwises (1978:iv).

period, as the Lao, encroaching from the north, absorbed them. He also observes that the solid core Kui-speaking area in the three-province area of Surin, Buri Ram and Si Sa Ket is much smaller than the Khmer solid area and notes the wide distribution of Khmer-speaking peoples in this three-province area. His data also shows how much the non-solid Khmer area is shared with the Kui and where Kui and Khmer villages are intermingled.

This evidence, along with the Thai government's policy of assimilation of minority groups and the official, and thus prestige, status of Standard Thai in the educational system and government agencies, also indicate an even increasing contact of Kui speakers with the Khmer, Lao and Thai languages, thus increasing the possibilities of influence of these languages on Kui.

My own Kui dialect studies could provide evidence of some influence on Kui by Khmer, Lao and Thai, e.g. certain vowel and consonant shifts, the loss of /r/ - /l/ contrasts, the reduction of disyllabic words to monosyllabic ones, but for the most part they simply suggest some dialect and sub-dialect groupings and their geographical distribution based on selected features and a limited corpus of data.*

There appear to be no other published dialect studies of the Kui in northeastern Thailand. However, Johnston (1976:259) says:

In Thailand there are two principal dialects of Kuy - Kuy Kuy and Kuy Mla [probably /mlaa/] - with innumerable sub-dialects showing marked differences in pronunciation and occasional differences in vocabulary. The two principal dialects are pretty well mutually intelligible.

She also presents a very detailed phonetic and phonolo-

* See Prasert Sriwises (1978:xviii-xxiii).

gical description of the Kui dialect spoken in Ban Samrong Thap (presumably a Kuy Kuy dialect), situated east of Ban Tael near the Surin-Si Sa Ket provincial border, which differs from Kui Ban Tael only in a few minor details.

Another noteworthy phonological study of a Kui dialect is that of Taveeporn Suwannaraj (1980); the speakers of the dialect are called Nyeu and they are located in central Si Sa Ket province. The study is noteworthy in part because the drastic changes that have taken place in this dialect are prime examples of the effects of the influence of Lao (and Thai). The Souei language of Laos, which Ferlus (1971:379) says is very close to Kui of northern Cambodia, contains a high percentage of original Lao words that are ancient loans.

Finally is the notable ^{tu} study of the Kuay language spoken in Suphanburi (western Thailand) by Pailin Yantreesingh (1980). Though far removed geographically from the Kui-speaking area of the Northeast, this comparative study shows Kuay Suphanburi to be closely related to Kui Ban Tael. However, certain phonological and lexical features suggest the speakers of this language originated in Cambodia.

The Kui dialect of Ban Tael contains evidence of influence by Khmer, Lao and Thai, and although it does seem to be a somewhat prestigious dialect it is only one representative of the various Kui dialects.

2.2 The Historical, Geographical and Linguistic Settings of the Bruu

2.2.1 The Historical Setting of the Bruu

"Bruu" is what the Bruu people call themselves, their tribe and their language. They also have the word /kuay/ meaning 'person, human being'. By the Lao and the Thai they are called "Kha", a term which probably has its origins in the Lao word meaning 'slave';

thus the appellation is felt by the Bruu to be derogatory.

Of the recent history of the Bruu of Ban Woen Buek it is told that they migrated to the Thai side of the Mekong River from Laos (actually simply crossed the river) some 80-odd years ago, due to French taxation pressures.* Some years previous to that they had lived on Kang Huean Mountain, at Ban Nong Mek, somewhere to the north-east(?) of present-day Ban Woen Buek near the Se Done River, which has its headwaters near Sarawane city, much further to the northeast. Available information reveals that the Ban Nong Mek settlement included a mixture of many clans: Araw, Sua-j, Karaj, etc., so that the later settlement at Ban Woen Buek comprised members of at least these three clans.

The oral history of Bruu migration presented in Theraphan L. Thongkum and See Puengpa (1980:i) is that of only one of these clans, the Araw, who are said to have originated somewhere up "north" in Laos. I have not been able to identify but maybe 1 or 2 place names mentioned in this migration history, but for the time being I think the word "north" should not be interpreted as the compass direction but rather as meaning 'upriver' or 'up higher' (in the mountains).

Presently, we know nothing of the history and origins of the other clans who were living in the Ban Nong Mek area and some of whose members later settled at Ban Woen Buek. However, it is interesting to note that the clan names Araw and Karaj probably mean 'calladium (tuber)' and 'rattan' respectively.

* Some of the information to follow is found in Theraphan L. Thongkum and See Puengpa (1980:i).

2.2.2 The Geographical Setting of the Bruu

We know very little about the Bruu settlement areas in Laos along the east bank of the Mekong River and along the Se Done River upstream towards Sarawane, except for several village names.

Ban Woen Buek itself is located a short distance downstream from the district town of Khong Chiam (Ban Dan), Ubon Ratchathani Province, on the west bank of the Mekong. The only other Bruu settlement on the west bank is at Ban Tha Long some distance upstream. Otherwise, there are two other villages located between Khong Chiam and Ban Tha Long whose inhabitants are said to be Suai who now speak only Lao. There is some information that some of the Ban Tha Long villagers have family connections in the Ban Na Kok-Na Sadong area of Mueang Wapi-Kham Thong near the Se Done, so we can assume there are also Bruu settlements in that area.

2.2.3 The Linguistic Setting of the Bruu

From what little we know about the historical and geographical settings of the larger Bruu population in Laos and about the two Bruu villages in Thailand, it is certain that they have been in continuous contact with the Lao, and more recently, the Thai languages.

However, we know very little about the various other Mon-Khmer-speaking groups that the Bruu may have come in contact with - through trade, co-settlement, inter-marriage, etc., simply because there is little information on these groups settled along the Se Done River. Further east there are such groups as the Ong and Loven, and large Souei settlements in the Boloven Plateau area. In the Sarawane area are found not only Souei but also Katang, Ngeq, etc. Only a comparison of phonological features and vocabulary could reveal any

evidence of contact, or relationships.

Suffice it to say that there is evidence from the oral histories that Ban Woen Buek Bruu may be a "mixed" dialect. Moreover, there is evidence in the language for this contention, e.g. in elaborate expressions in which one element of the expression is the commonly used word whereas the other element is said to be "old" word, or is actually the commonly used word in other Katuic languages.

2.3 The Historical, Geographical and Linguistic Settings of the So

2.3.1 The Historical Setting of the So

In comparison to the term "Suai", "So" refers to a linguistic group, if not an ethnic group, that seems relatively easy to define. There are indications that this may be a Lao term, which in fact the So pronounce /throo/. With the Bruu and the Kui they share the word /kuəj/ meaning 'human being'. There is information, however, that some so-called "So" in Laos actually call themselves "Bruu". This profusion and confusion of ethnic terms causes headaches for linguists and ethnologists alike.

Information on the history of the So, and groups speaking related languages, comes from oral traditions on the Thai and Lao sides of the Mekong River and also from, mostly Thai, historical documents. As with the Bruu of Ban Woen Buek there is one oral tradition that has the So originating in northern Laos but arguments could be made to explain this "twist" of history.

On the whole, both oral traditions and chronicles, which relate many forced migrations beginning in the early 19th century, most frequently mention Mueang Mahasay and Mueang Wang as the original locations of the So. These and numerous other towns, or townships, mentioned are located in the Lao provinces of Thakek, Sawannakhet and

Kham Muon. As a result of these forced migrations the So settled in the northeastern Thai Provinces of Nakhon Phanom and Sakon Nakhon, and the major settlement appears to have been Mueang Kusuman, or present-day Kusuman District of Sakon Nakhon Province. There are other So settlements in this general area which have slightly different histories or for which little or no information is available. Many of the migrations are closely linked to the simultaneous movements of various Tai groups such as the Yo (Nyo), Kaleung and Phu Thai, with all of whom the So continue to have close contact.

2.3.2 The Geographical Setting of the So

The general area in which So-speaking peoples live include parts of the Thai provinces of Sakon Nakhon, Nakhon Phanom and Kalasin, and large areas of the middle Lao provinces of Kham Muon and Sawannakhet.

In Thailand the largest concentrations of So speakers are to be found in the border area between Sakon Nakhon and Nakhon Phanom Provinces, namely Kusuman District in the eastern part of Sakon Nakhon and Tha Uthen District in the northern part of Nakhon Phanom.

A small number of villages are also found in the districts of Phanna Nikhom, Muang and Song Dao in central and western Sakon Nakhon, and the districts of Si Songkhram, Ban Phaeng, Muang and Pla Pak in central and northern Nakhon Phanom.

In addition, there are also a relatively large number of So and so-called Kha-speaking villages in Dong Luang District of Nakhon Phanom and the bordering districts of Mukdahan Province, and maybe some in the Khao Wong, Kuchinarai and Somdet districts of (northeastern) Kalasin Province. A few So villages are also found

in So Phisai District of Nong Khai Province.

Based on my own surveys and several other sources, I estimate the total number of So villages at about 90.

The So dialect considered in this study is spoken in Ban Photi Phaisan, Tambon Photi Phaisan, Kusuman District, Sakon Nakhon Province. Ban Photi Phaisan is located a few kilometers north of the town of Kusuman.

2.3.3 The Linguistic Setting of the So

Not only have the So been in contact with the dominant Lao for many centuries but they have also had close contact with other minority groups, in particular the Phu Thai. Most So villages seem to remain "unmixed" but there are, for example, several villages that some people say are Yo and others say are So. The great diversity of Tai dialects found in the Sakon Nakhon-Nakhon Phanom gives So speakers contact with many different speech communities. More recently, the So have had contact with Central Thai, through the educational system, government officials, etc.

My own studies do not reveal any great influence of Thai or Lao on So, except among young speakers. Interestingly, there is quite a lot of evidence of So borrowing from Phu Thai rather than Lao (certain peculiar phonological features of Phu Thai evident in the loanwords support this contention), which indicates that these two groups have had closer relations with each other than they have had with Lao groups.

There do not appear to be any published studies of So dialects. My own work has revealed that there are at least 2 and maybe 4 "sub-groups" of So. I qualify this because there are 2 clearly identifiable dialects whose speakers do not identify themselves

as So but as Trii and TruuJ, the latter representing one of the groups called "Kha" by the local people. There may also be sub-groups identifiable as Trong and Makong.

Unsurprisingly, these dialect group names appear in published studies and surveys made by French scholars in the Thakek, Mahasay, Nhommarath and other areas of middle Laos, e.g. So Tri, So Tiali/Tiari, So Slouy, So Trong, So Makon, Mang-Khong, etc. So far I have been unable to do much comparative work in this area though data on 2 TruuJ dialects and 1 Trii dialect have been collected. They have some very distinctive differences from So Photi Phaisan, the dialect considered in this thesis. So Photi Phaison itself is almost identical to the dialect of Ban Kusuman, which appears to be the prestigious So dialect, as it is the main town in the area of heaviest So concentrations.