

# THE SAEK LANGUAGE OF NAKHON PHANOM PROVINCE<sup>1</sup>

by

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The Saek language is spoken at the village of At Samat in Amphoe Muang, in the province of Nakhon Phanom. This village is located 5 kilometers north of the city of Nakhon Phanom, on the banks of the Mekhong River, on the road going to Uthen.

This village of At Samat is a pleasant, prosperous place. There is a large school and a fairly large monastery. Actually administratively Ban At Samat counts as two villages, with one headman for the north and another for the south.

The Saek people at Ban At Samat are fairly well off economically. They have fine fruit orchards, and do fishing in the Mekhong River on a large scale.

Most of the Saek people speak not only Saek but also the local variety of Lao and also standard Bangkok Thai. Many of them come into the city of Nakhon Phanom frequently, on bicycle or on the bus, to do marketing and shopping. Some are employed as government officials in Nakhon Phanom, and some are teachers, in their own village or elsewhere. Nowadays a good many are working at the American military base outside the town of Nakhon Phanom. There are a few Saek people living in Bangkok.

Their standard of living is not inferior to that of the Lao of other villages in that province. In fact their houses tend to be larger and sturdier than those of country people elsewhere in Thailand. They are devout Buddhists, and so far as I have been able to observe are all loyal and patriotic Thai citizens. Their culture, in fact, is almost entirely identical with that of other Lao and Thai people<sup>2</sup> of the Northeast. It is only in language that they differ.

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1) This is the text of a talk delivered in Siamese at the Siam Society on 26 June, 1969.

The Saek people of Ban At Samat report that there are a few other Saek villages scattered here and there in various places in Nakhon Phanom province. They say that the Saek language spoken in these other villages differs somewhat from their own speech, both in pronunciation and in the vocabulary. I have myself so far studied only the variety of Saek spoken at Ban At Samat.

French scholars have noted that Saek is spoken at a number of villages on the Lao side of the Mekhong River, inland from the town of Tha Khok (which is directly opposite the town of Nakhon Phanom), and the wordlists that they have recorded and published show that the Saek language spoken on the Lao side of the river is very similar to the Saek language at Ban Samat, with some differences in pronunciation and a few differences in vocabulary.

Nobody has estimated how many Saek speakers there are altogether. My guess would be that they number in the thousands, but probably not in the tens of thousands.

I do not know about the Lao side of the river, but in Nakhon Phanom province it seems likely that in one or two generations this language may disappear, because the children nowadays even when at home in the village understand the Saek spoken by their parents and grandparents, but usually answer in Lao when spoken to. Young people speak Saek a good deal, and have some lively Saek slang, but they speak Lao and standard Thai so much that they are beginning to forget Saek words. Often when one asks young people what this or that is called, they reply that they will have to ask the old people. I have sometimes asked the old people if they are not afraid the Saek language will die out in another thirty or forty or fifty years, and they reply that they are sure it will, because the children do not like to speak Saek, but there is nothing they can do about it.

Nobody knows for sure when the Saek people came to settle in Nakhon Phanom province. They have a legend that they came from Vietnam, perhaps a hundred and fifty or two hundred years ago. The legend tells that they lived in two towns in Vietnam but one time when they were very hungry they killed and ate a white elephant belonging to the Vietnamese king. They were fined a large amount

of money, which they were unable to pay, but a Vietnamese official named 'oŋ muu<sup>5</sup> took pity on them and lent them the money to pay the fine, so that they came to regard him as their patron. But then they ran away, and came to settle in Nakhon Phanom, without repaying the debt to 'oŋ muu<sup>5</sup>. Later the spirit of this Vietnamese man 'oŋ muu<sup>5</sup> followed them to Ban At Samat, and the Saek people to this day have a shrine where they do reverence to the spirit 'oŋ muu<sup>5</sup> in an annual ceremony.

One wonders if they were brought down from Sip Song Chu Thai at the same time as the Phu Thai who now live in various other places in the Northeast.

In any case, if historians were to go to work and study the stories that they have, and try to identify the persons and places named in these stories, it ought to be possible to find out a good deal about their history. I have confined myself to studying their language.

Now I wish to speak about what has been done previously on the Saek language by earlier scholars.

On the Thai side of the river, the only scholar who ever went and heard this language spoken and published anything on it was the Danish scholar Seidenfaden, about 35 years ago. He did not note down any words, but he declared that Saek was a language of the Mon-Khmer family. This is an error, as we shall see later. (Saek is a member of the Tai family of languages.) This erroneous statement of Seidenfaden has been copied by other scholars ever since, with the result that all books that mention Saek by Thai, American, British, and German scholars state that Saek is a Mon-Khmer language. How Seidenfaden came to make this mistake is not known. The Saek people themselves understand that their language belongs to the Tai group. There are no words in Saek that resemble Mon-Khmer words except the modern loanwords from Thai and Lao which happen to be of ultimate Khmer origin. Probably Seidenfaden heard the initial clusters bl, pr, pl, ml, etc., and on this evidence alone concluded that Saek was a Mon-Khmer language. He may also have been misled by the fact that in the same province there is another

minority group, the So, whose language is indeed a Mon-Khmer language.

The French scholars have done better. Altogether three French scholars, from 1904 onward, have recorded and published wordlists of 100 or 200 Saek words. They did not analyze tones, and made many other mistakes both in the pronunciation and in the meanings of the words they recorded, but at least they attempted to record actual data.

During the last ten or fifteen years the French scholar Haudricourt has been interested in Saek. Studying the three earlier wordlists published by French scholars, he arrived at the opinion that Saek is a Tai language, but not only that; he believes that it is a Tai language belonging to the group of Tai languages spoken far to the north, in southern China. Haudricourt himself recorded a short Saek wordlist at Tha Khek about ten years ago, but did not have time to work out the sound system or the tones. He has published five or six articles in which he mentions this opinion that Saek belongs to the northern group of Tai languages.

Now I wish to explain briefly how I came to study the Saek language. In 1964-65 I spent a year studying various languages of the Tai family, working mainly with refugees living in Taiwan, in Hong-kong, in South Vietnam, in Vientiane, and in northern Thailand. Various friends, especially Professor F.K. Li, urged me that year to try to find and study the Saek language, but I felt that I had no time. Finally, when my time was nearly up, in March 1965, my wife and I went to Nakhon Phanom and went to ask the officials in the Education Office there if they knew where Saek was spoken. They took us to Ban At Samat and found teachers for me, and we spent two full days in the pavilion on the school grounds recording about three thousand words. At that time I was able to analyze the tone system, but came away feeling uncertain about many other things that I had recorded in this brief period of two days. About a month later I was returning from a trip to Vientiane and stopped again at Nakhon Phanom. This time I worked for three full days, and was able to correct my mistakes and get enough material to feel satisfied.

On another fieldtrip, in July of 1966, I went again to Ban At Samat for about a week. This time I asked for texts, songs and stories. I recorded on tape, and transcribed in notebooks, a total of 15 texts, some very short and some very long.

This year (1968-69) I have been working again on Tai languages in Thailand and Laos, and have made three trips to Nakhon Phanom, making a dictionary. This is now finished, and I hope now to return to America and work up this collection of texts and the dictionary of the Saek language and publish them.

The Saek material that I have recorded has aroused even more interest in this Saek language than existed before, among scholars in Europe and America, and among my students in comparative Tai linguistics in the United States.

Most people who have studied this Saek material feel that Saek is somehow the Hittite among Tai languages; that is, it is a very remote member of the family, somehow more distantly related than other languages of the family, and therefore likely to be especially helpful in the task of reconstructing the parent language of the Tai family, spoken in prehistoric times.

It is because Saek has aroused so much interest abroad that I am especially glad to have this opportunity to say something about it here in Thailand.

In the time remaining, I wish to dwell on three points :

1. The structure of the Saek language.
2. Evidence that Haudricourt is right in claiming that Saek belongs to the Northern group of Tai languages.
3. A few examples of characteristics of the Saek language that make it especially interesting to students of comparative Tai linguistics.

First, as to the structure of Saek.

In syntax Saek is not at all different from Lao and Thai.

In sound structure, we will consider tones, vowels, and consonants (both initial and final).

As regards tones, Saek has six tones :

1.	↗	rising	:	<i>kwa</i> <sup>1</sup>	leg
				<i>pra</i> <sup>1</sup>	eye
2.	↔	low level	:	<i>phra</i> <sup>2</sup>	hair of the head
				<i>mu</i> <sup>2</sup>	pig
3.	↘	low falling	:	<i>thra</i> <sup>3</sup>	head
				<i>ha</i> <sup>3</sup>	five
4.	↗↘	high rising-falling	:	<i>ra</i> <sup>4</sup>	house
				<i>thaŋ</i> <sup>4</sup>	to arrive
5.	↘	high falling	:	<i>thua</i> <sup>5</sup>	bean
				<i>ʃeɛŋ</i> <sup>5</sup>	foot
6.	↔↘	mid level, with slight fall:	:	<i>ʃa</i> <sup>6</sup>	rice
				<i>yu</i> <sup>6</sup>	to be in a place
				<i>na</i> <sup>6</sup>	water

Tones 3 and 6 have glottal constriction, with final glottal stop before pause, like *siaŋ thoo* and *siaŋ trii* in Thai.

On checked syllables (kham taay), that is, those ending in *-p*, *-t*, *-k*, and glottal stop *-ʔ*, on short syllables Saek has very commonly two tones, high and mid, which we may identify with tones 4 and 6 :

<i>pit</i> <sup>4</sup>	duck
<i>rək</i> <sup>4</sup>	six
<i>mlek</i> <sup>6</sup>	seed grain ( <i>málét</i> )
<i>sip</i> <sup>6</sup>	ten

And in long syllables there are commonly two tones, similar to tones 5 and 6 :

<i>lɔk</i> <sup>5</sup>	'outside'	
<i>ʃeɛp</i> <sup>5</sup>	'narrow'	( <i>khêep</i> , <i>kháp</i> , <i>khêep</i> )
<i>kaat</i> <sup>6</sup>	'broken, torn'	
<i>peet</i> <sup>6</sup>	'eight'	

Other tones on checked syllables recur only rarely, e.g. on short syllables there are a few words with low or second tone, e.g.

**phat**<sup>2</sup> a very common word which is difficult to translate, something like 'lɛn kl̩p̩ thəm yān̩ n̩i yān̩ nán' e.g. **phat**<sup>2</sup> **pay**<sup>1</sup>, **kl̩p̩ pay**, **phat**<sup>2</sup> **tham**<sup>2</sup>, **kl̩p̩ thām**<sup>2</sup>, but does not mean really turned or returned. Similar to colloquial English idiom 'then he turned around and did so and so'.

And on long checked syllables there is rarely a high tone, similar to the 4th tone, e.g. 'iit<sup>4</sup> 'ɔɔy<sup>5</sup> = nitn̩ɔy.

And quite a few words with low or second tone :

**muak**<sup>2</sup> 'hat'.

As regards vowels, Saek has a system very similar to Thai. There are nine vowels :

		<b>ii</b>	<b>iɪ</b>	<b>uu</b>		
<b>ñii</b> <sup>6</sup>	to point		<b>sii</b>	to buy	<b>vuu</b> <sup>1</sup>	to float
		<b>ee</b>	<b>əə</b>	<b>oo</b>		
<b>mee</b> <sup>5</sup>	mother		<b>tləə</b> <sup>3</sup>	near	<b>roo</b> <sup>4</sup>	we
		<b>ɛɛ</b>	<b>aa</b>	<b>ɔɔ</b>		
<b>bɛɛ</b> <sup>3</sup>	goat		<b>raa</b> <sup>2</sup>	to seek	<b>səə</b> <sup>5</sup>	name

All nine occur both short and long, as in Thai.

And there are the three diphthongs **ia ia ua**

as in Thai, e.g. **via**<sup>6</sup> 'to poison', **sia**<sup>6</sup> 'mattress' **lua**<sup>2</sup> 'left over'.

The vowel system is thus the same as that of Thai, but in some ways it is more complete, richer (**bəɔrɪbuun**, **phitsādaan**) than Thai. For example there is a clear distinction between short and long **ee** and **əə** before the nasals **m**, **n**, **ŋ**, e.g. 'ɛŋ : 'ɛɛŋ, 'ɔm : 'ɔɔm which is not very clear in Thai. Also, there is a clear distinction between short **iw** and long **iɪw** (besides also **iaw**), and a clear distinction between short **uy** and long **uuy** (besides also **uay**).

The system of initial consonants is like that of Thai but differs from Thai in these points :

there is no **kr kl khr khl**

but there is **kw** and **khw**,

e.g. **kwaay<sup>1</sup>** to sell  
**khwaa<sup>4</sup>** right hand.

there is a voiced velar fricative **ɣ**

e.g. **ɣaw<sup>6</sup>** rice  
**ɣay<sup>6</sup>** khii  
**ɣeen<sup>5</sup>** foot

(This sound makes it impossible to write Saek in the Thai alphabet)

There is a **c** but no **ch**:

**cht<sup>1</sup>** heart (cay)

There are clusters **tr tl thr thl**

**traaw<sup>1</sup>** star  
**tlua<sup>1</sup>** salt  
**threek<sup>6</sup>** Saek  
**thlœt<sup>5</sup>** to slip and fall **phlâat**

There is a cluster **bl**:

**blian<sup>1</sup>** moon, month  
**blii<sup>1</sup>** gall bladder

There are clusters **pr pl**

**praa<sup>1</sup>** eye  
cockspur (đtay kây)  
**plaa<sup>1</sup>** fish

and **phr phl**  
**phrak<sup>4</sup>** vegetable  
**phleek<sup>5</sup>** thăŋ môt



and **ml**

	<b>mlɔɔ<sup>5</sup></b>	meat	
	<b>mlek<sup>6</sup></b>	málét	
e.g.	<b>mlek<sup>6</sup></b>	ɰaw <sup>6</sup>	= mét khâaw

There is a palatal nasal **ñ** :

	<b>ñaaŋ<sup>5</sup></b>	to walk
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There is a clear distinction between

**r** and **l** :

	<b>rak<sup>4</sup></b>	to break	<b>hāk</b>
	<b>lak<sup>4</sup></b>	stake	<b>lāk</b>
	<b>raaw<sup>2</sup></b>	sword	
	<b>laaw<sup>2</sup></b>	to fear	

There is a **v** rather than **w** :

	<b>vaan<sup>2</sup></b>	sweet
	<b>vaa<sup>6</sup></b>	shoulder
	<b>vii<sup>4</sup></b>	fire

There is no **f**; loanwords from Lao and Thai having **f** are borrowed as **ph** :

	<b>phiit<sup>6</sup></b>	= fiit
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There are some clusters of consonant plus **w** that do not occur in Thai, e.g. **ɲw ñw sw lw**. Otherwise, except for the points mentioned, the initial consonants of Saek are the same as in Thai.

Final consonants are as in Thai :

<b>m n ŋ</b>
<b>p t k ʔ</b>

Final **w** occurs in the following combinations with vowels :

<b>iw</b> :	<b>hit</b> <sup>6</sup>	<b>thiw</b> <sup>2</sup>	to whistle
<b>iiw</b> :	<b>ɲiiw</b> <sup>3</sup>	<b>kapok</b>	
<b>iaw</b> :	<b>yiaw</b> <sup>3</sup>	<b>yún sây</b>	<b>kháaw</b>
<b>uaw</b> :	<b>ruaw</b> <sup>2</sup>	<b>to laugh</b>	

(This sequence **uaw** not known to occur in any other language of the Thai family)

<b>ew</b> :	<b>reew</b> <sup>6</sup>	<b>a snare</b>
<b>ɛw</b> :	<b>ʔɛw</b> <sup>1</sup>	<b>waist</b>
<b>aw</b> :	<b>raw</b> <sup>2</sup>	<b>they</b>
<b>haaw</b> :	<b>haaw</b> <sup>2</sup>	<b>white</b>

Final **y** occurs in the following combinations with vowels :

<b>iy</b> :	<b>miay</b>	<b>bear</b>
<b>uy</b> :	<b>mlek</b> <sup>6</sup> <b>tuy</b> <sup>5</sup>	<b>hailstone</b>
<b>uuy</b> :	<b>phuuy</b> <sup>4</sup>	<b>fat</b>
<b>uay</b> :	<b>suay</b> <sup>6</sup>	<b>tribute money</b>
<b>əy</b> :	<b>rəy</b> <sup>1</sup>	<b>to disappear</b>
<b>ooy</b> :	<b>khooy</b> <sup>5</sup>	<b>to ride</b>
<b>ay</b> :	<b>pay</b> <sup>1</sup>	<b>to go</b>
	<b>may</b> <sup>6</sup>	<b>wood</b>
<b>aay</b> :	<b>praay</b> <sup>1</sup>	<b>to die</b>
	<b>vaay</b> <sup>4</sup>	<b>water buffalo</b>
<b>ɔy</b> :	<b>rɔy</b> <sup>1</sup>	<b>mountain</b>
	<b>hɔy</b> <sup>2</sup>	<b>comb</b>
	<b>hɔy</b> <sup>6</sup>	<b>I</b>

The final consonant that has aroused the most interest among scholars is final **l**. No other language of the Tai family has this. Saek has final **-l** in some words which in other Tai languages have final **-n**, e.g.

<b>thual</b> <sup>5</sup>	forest
<b>riil</b> <sup>2</sup>	stone
<b>phal</b> <sup>4</sup>	to be
<b>vil</b> <sup>2</sup>	firewood
<b>bil</b> <sup>1</sup>	to fly

but in many other words Saek has final **-n** as in other Tai languages, e.g.:

<b>vin</b> <sup>1</sup>	rain
<b>bin</b> <sup>1</sup>	sky
<b>hun</b> <sup>4</sup>	person
<b>nuun</b> <sup>4</sup>	to sleep

I will return to speak of this final **-l** again a little later.

In some features of pronunciation, there is a difference between older people (50 or more) and younger people. The younger people do not make the distinction between such pairs as **tr** and **tl**, or **pr** and **pl**, so that

	<b>praa</b> <sup>1</sup>	'eye' or 'cockspur'
and	<b>plaa</b> <sup>1</sup>	'fish' are pronounced the same.

And people under 50 do not have the distinction between final **-l** and **-n** that we just spoke of: they pronounce all these words with final **-n**.

Because of this, in the dictionary that I have been making I have had to mark many forms YG for younger generation, and others OG for older generation.

There is another change made by even younger people, people in their twenties and young children: in words having an initial cluster of consonant plus **w** followed by long **aa**, such as **kwaa**<sup>1</sup> 'leg' or **kwaay**<sup>1</sup> 'to sell', young people often use the diphthong **ua**, e.g. **kua**<sup>1</sup> and **kuay**<sup>1</sup>. This, of course, is under Lao influence.

Next we come to the question of M. Haudricourt's opinion that Saek is a member of the Northern branch of the Tai family of languages.

Professor F.K. Li has classified the languages of the Tai family as belonging to three branches, the Northern branch in southern China (Kweichow, western Kwangsi, and eastern Yunnan), the Central branch (Nung and Tho in northeastern North Vietnam, together with some closely related dialects across the border in southern Kwangsi in China), and the southwestern branch, which includes most of the better known Tai languages, that is, White, Black and Red Tai in northwestern North Vietnam, the various dialects of Lao and Thai in Laos and Thailand, Lue in Sipsongpanna, Shan in Burma, and the extinct language Ahom in Assam.

The so-called Northern branch has been called *thay yᵒy* in this country. It differs considerably from all other Thai languages, in the sound system and in vocabulary. In citing Northern Tai forms here I will use Yay, a language of this group spoken in the area of Lao Kay in the extreme north of North Vietnam, near the Chinese border. This is a Northern Tai language on which I have worked with refugees in Vientiane.

Haudricourt, using the brief wordlists published earlier by French scholars and also the material which he noted himself at Tha Khek, came to the conclusion that Saek is a member of the Northern branch of Tai, because Saek has a number of very common words which are the same as or very similar to words in the Northern Tai branch, but different from those in the Central and Southwestern branches. It turns out that the more one studies Saek, the more such lexical resemblances one finds. Following is a short list of words that are similar in Yay and Saek.

The Yay tones are as follows: 1. mid level. 2. low level. 3. low rising. 4. high rising-falling. 5. falling. 6. high rising. No Yay tones show glottal constriction.

Saek	Yay		
maan <sup>4</sup>	faan <sup>4</sup>	spirit, corpse	phii
ʔən <sup>1</sup>	ʔwan <sup>1</sup>	thorn	naām
khin <sup>4</sup>	kín <sup>4</sup>	on, above	bon, nǎa
kuuk <sup>6</sup>	kuk <sup>3</sup>	tiger	sǎa
maa <sup>4</sup>	fa <sup>4</sup>	iron	lèk
tliik <sup>6</sup>	cik <sup>3</sup>	lazy	khii-khráan
biin <sup>3</sup>	bín <sup>3</sup>	grass mat	sǎa
bin <sup>1</sup>	bun <sup>1</sup>	sky	fáa
bik <sup>4</sup>	bik <sup>3</sup>	girl, woman	pháu-yǎn
phaa <sup>4</sup>	paa <sup>4</sup>	wife	mia
naan <sup>4</sup>	raan <sup>4</sup>	young shoot	nǎo máay
viat <sup>5</sup>	fiat <sup>5</sup>	wing	piik
ñian <sup>5</sup>	ñian <sup>5</sup>	finger, toe	níw

Haudricourt did not have information on the tones of Saek. Now that we understand the Saek tone system, it turns out that there is a great deal more evidence for his theory that Saek is a member of the Northern group of Tai languages.

Many words in Tai languages of the Northern branch have what seems to be the wrong tone, from the point of view of Siamese and other more familiar Thai languages.

For instance, the word for 'to come' in Yay is *maa*<sup>1</sup> just like the word for 'dog,' rather than *maa*<sup>4</sup> like the word *naa*<sup>4</sup> 'ricefield.' In Saek also, 'to come' and 'dog' are the same, *maa*<sup>2</sup>, not with the tone of *naa* 'ricefield.'

This means that the word for 'to come' in Siamese and other Tai languages of the Southwestern and Central branches has to be reconstructed as having had a voiceless initial at an earlier time, whereas the word for 'to come' must have had a voiceless initial at earlier times in languages of the Northern branch.

Many words in languages of the northern branch show the opposite phenomenon, that is, they have tones that must indicate an earlier voiced initial whereas other Thai languages, including Siamese, show tones that must reflect an earlier voiceless initial. Some Yay and Saek examples are as follows.

To serve as a basis for comparison, we should cite first some Saek words having the tones that reflect real original voiced initial consonants, about which there is no doubt and no discrepancy among various Tai languages :

	<b>mii<sup>4</sup></b>	to have	
	<b>phəw<sup>5</sup></b>	father	
	<b>nam<sup>6</sup></b>	water	
	<b>mək<sup>6</sup></b>	ant	
	<b>lək<sup>5</sup></b>	outside	
Saek	Yay		
<b>khooy<sup>4</sup></b>	<b>kiay<sup>4</sup></b>	son-in-law	<b>lūk-khǎy</b>
<b>khwa<sup>4</sup></b>	<b>kwa<sup>4</sup></b>	right hand	<b>khwǎa</b>
<b>thaj<sup>4</sup></b>	<b>taŋ<sup>4</sup></b>	to arrive	<b>thǎj</b>
<b>thiil<sup>4</sup></b>	<b>tin<sup>4</sup></b>	wasp	<b>teen</b>
<b>ʧam<sup>4</sup></b>	<b>ham<sup>4</sup></b>	bitter	<b>khǎm</b>
<b>phal<sup>4</sup></b>	<b>pan<sup>4</sup></b>	to be, become	<b>pen</b>
<b>khooy<sup>5</sup></b>	<b>kiay<sup>5</sup></b>	to ride	<b>khii</b>
<b>thii<sup>5</sup></b>	<b>ti<sup>5</sup></b>	closely spaced	<b>thii</b>
<b>thual<sup>5</sup></b>	<b>tian<sup>5</sup></b>	forest	<b>pāa</b>
<b>thua<sup>5</sup></b>	<b>tua<sup>5</sup></b>	bean	<b>thūa</b>
<b>thooy<sup>6</sup></b>	<b>tiay<sup>6</sup></b>	bowl	<b>thūay</b>
<b>phuu<sup>6</sup></b>	<b>pu<sup>6</sup></b>	person	<b>phūu</b>
<b>ʧay<sup>6</sup></b>	<b>hay<sup>6</sup></b>	excrement	<b>khii</b>
<b>ʧaw<sup>6</sup></b>	<b>haw<sup>6</sup></b>	rice	<b>khāaw</b>
<b>sip<sup>6</sup></b>	<b>sip<sup>1</sup></b>	ten	<b>sip</b>
<b>suk<sup>6</sup></b>	<b>suk<sup>1</sup></b>	cooked, ripe	<b>sūk</b>
<b>ʧap<sup>6</sup></b>	<b>hap<sup>1</sup></b>	to bite	<b>khǎp, kăt</b>
<b>khut<sup>6</sup></b>	<b>hut<sup>1</sup></b>	to dig	<b>khăt</b>

There is also evidence in the vowels to support Haudricourt's opinion that Saek belongs to the northern branch of the Tai family. We do not yet understand the vowel system of the parent language of the Tai family, called Proto-Tai, and the main reason that we have been unable to make any headway in this matter is that in many words, perhaps a quarter or a third of the vocabulary, languages of the Northern family show a very different vowel from other Tai languages. In such cases of divergence, Saek has a vowel the same as or very similar to that found in the Northern forms, as shown in the following Saek and Yay examples :

Saek	Yay		
ñua <sup>3</sup>	ñia <sup>3</sup>	grass	yáa
nua <sup>3</sup>	nia <sup>3</sup>	crossbow	náa-máay
via <sup>3</sup>	via <sup>3</sup>	cloud	méek, fáa
rəəy <sup>1</sup>	rɪay <sup>1</sup>	to disappear	hǎay
ruak <sup>5</sup>	ruak <sup>5</sup>	to vomit	ráak
ʔay <sup>6</sup>	hay <sup>6</sup>	excrement	khii
yɔɔ <sup>5</sup>	θɔ <sup>5</sup>	straight	troŋ, sfi
dua <sup>1</sup>	dia <sup>1</sup>	navel	sàdii
tlua <sup>1</sup>	kua <sup>1</sup>	salt	klía
saak <sup>5</sup>	saak <sup>5</sup>	rope	chfak
raan <sup>4</sup>	raan <sup>4</sup>	house	rian
thaŋ <sup>4</sup>	taŋ <sup>4</sup>	to arrive	thínŋ
ɲua <sup>4</sup>	ɲia <sup>4</sup>	snake	ɲuu
paw <sup>1</sup>	paw <sup>1</sup>	crab	puu
rɔɔ <sup>6</sup>	ro <sup>6</sup>	to know	rúu
lik <sup>6</sup>	lik <sup>1</sup>	child	lúuk
saan <sup>2</sup>	θaan	high	sũuŋ
rii <sup>3</sup>	vi <sup>3</sup>	mountain stream	húay
nuuk <sup>3</sup>	nuk <sup>3</sup>	deaf	nùak

Saek	Yay		
riŋ <sup>1</sup>	diŋ <sup>1</sup>	red	dæŋ
priaŋ <sup>1</sup>	tiaŋ <sup>1</sup>	melon, cucumber	teen
vii <sup>4</sup>	fi <sup>4</sup>	fire	fay
rii <sup>5</sup>	ri <sup>5</sup>	dry field	rây
kuu <sup>3</sup>	ku <sup>3</sup>	nine	kâaw
pluu <sup>6</sup>	pyu <sup>2</sup>	empty	plâaw
kəw <sup>3</sup>	ho <sup>2</sup>	knee	khâw
rii <sup>4</sup>	ri <sup>4</sup>	track, footprint	rəw
ñum <sup>6</sup>	ñum <sup>6</sup>	to dye	yəw
nuan <sup>6</sup>	nuan <sup>6</sup>	younger sibling	nəw
pruk <sup>4</sup>	tuk <sup>4</sup>	bamboo strip	təw
suak <sup>3</sup>	suak <sup>5</sup>	elbow	səw

There is further evidence that Haudricourt is right in classifying Saek as a Northern Tai language. For instance, Saek agrees with Northern Tai in some words where the form is in some ways so similar to but in other ways so different from the form in other Tai languages that we do not know whether we are dealing with the same words or not :

Saek	Yay		
pul <sup>1</sup>	pun <sup>1</sup>	body hair	khǒn
phiaŋ <sup>4</sup>	piaŋ <sup>4</sup>	city, country	miaŋ
phia <sup>5</sup>	pia <sup>5</sup>	shirt	sâa

We must conclude that Haudricourt's theory, based on a handful of words, was more correct than he knew.

Finally, I wish to cite some of the features of the Saek language which make it especially interesting to scholars. The fact that Saek is a member of the Northern branch but has strayed to its present location far to the south, is already an interesting fact which suggests fascinating questions as to when it separated from the other Northern languages, and by what route it came south.

But there are other exciting things in this language.



For example, Professor F.K. Li in 1954 reconstructed various consonant clusters for Proto-Tai, to account for various small sets of words having aberrant correspondences in initial consonant in various branches of the Tai family. Now we discover that Saek has clusters very similar to those which Li reconstructed for Proto-Tai:

Proto-Tai \*phl-or \*phr - as reconstructed by Li :

Saek	phrak <sup>4</sup>	vegetable	phāk
	phram <sup>2</sup>	hair of the head	phóm
	phraa <sup>2</sup>	cliff, rock	phǎa
	phraak <sup>6</sup>	forehead	phāak
	phrɔ̃m <sup>2</sup>	thin	phǔ̃m
	phraw <sup>2</sup>	to burn	phǎw

Proto-Tai \*pr - as reconstructed by Li :

Saek	praak <sup>6</sup>	to expose to the sun	tāk
	preek <sup>6</sup>	to break	tēk
	priaŋ <sup>1</sup>	melon, cucumber	teŋ
	pruk <sup>4</sup>	bamboo strip	tōk

Proto-Tai \*ʔbr or \*ʔbl as reconstructed by Li :

Saek	blii <sup>1</sup>	gall bladder	dii
	blian <sup>1</sup>	moon, month	dian
	blɔ̃k <sup>6</sup>	flower	dōk

Linguists do not allow us to call one modern spoken language older than another, because any modern spoken language must have a history no longer or shorter in time than that of other languages of the same family, counting from the period of unity, before separation, to the present. But we must admit that some features of this Saek language, such as the consonant clusters just cited, are more conservative or archaic than those of other Tai languages.

Some of these apparently archaic features of Saek present new problems to the student of comparative Tai linguistics interested in reconstructing Proto-Tai. For example, it will probably take several scholars many years to figure out the historical explanation of the great variety of initials which Saek has corresponding to Siamese initial **d-**, besides **blian**<sup>1</sup> for **dian** and the other **bl-** words cited above :

Siamese	Saek	
<b>dii</b>	<b>dii</b> <sup>1</sup>	good
<b>dom</b>	<b>dam</b> <sup>1</sup>	to smell
<b>dian</b>	<b>tlual</b> <sup>1</sup>	earthworm
<b>daaw</b>	<b>traaw</b> <sup>1</sup>	star
<b>dam</b>	<b>tram</b> <sup>1</sup>	to transplant
<b>dɔɔŋ</b>	<b>trɔɔŋ</b>	relatives by marriage
<b>dfay</b>	<b>praa</b> <sup>1</sup>	cockspur
<b>deen</b>	<b>rii</b> <sup>1</sup>	red
<b>dēt</b>	<b>riit</b> <sup>6</sup>	sunshine
<b>dip</b>	<b>rip</b> <sup>4</sup>	raw, unripe
<b>tāday</b>	<b>ray</b> <sup>1</sup>	stairs, ladder
<b>kādūuk</b>	<b>rɔɔk</b> <sup>6</sup>	bone
<b>dɔɔy</b>	<b>rɔɔy</b> <sup>1</sup>	mountain
<b>dūk</b>	<b>rɔk</b> <sup>4</sup>	catfish

Saek is full of such puzzling features. Another curious one is that Saek initial **y** corresponds sometimes to Siamese **y**, but sometimes to Siamese **ch**, and sometimes to Siamese **s** :

Siamese	Saek	
<b>ylap</b>	<b>yiap</b> <sup>6</sup>	to step on
<b>yāaw</b>	<b>yiaw</b> <sup>3</sup>	granary
<b>yūu</b>	<b>yuu</b> <sup>6</sup>	to be in a place

yâaŋ	yuaŋ <sup>3</sup>	to roast
yâa	yaa <sup>5</sup>	paternal grandmother
chúu	yuu <sup>6</sup>	lover
chaay	yaay <sup>4</sup>	eaves
saay	yooy <sup>4</sup>	sand
sák	yak <sup>6</sup>	to wash clothes
say	yay <sup>4</sup>	fishtrap
sîi	yɔɔ <sup>5</sup>	straight
són	yɔɔl <sup>5</sup>	to hide

Another curiosity is that Saek has initial *kw-* in the two words *kwaa*<sup>1</sup> 'leg' and *kwaa*<sup>1</sup> 'to sell,' whereas no other Tai language is known to have a *-w-* in these two words. It turns out that in Sui, a minority language spoken in Kweichow province in China, which is believed to be remotely related to Thai, these two words have initial *p* rather than some kind of velar sound.

The final *-l*, mentioned earlier, in such words as *thual*<sup>5</sup> 'forest' or *riil*<sup>2</sup> 'stone', has caused great interest among students of southeast Asian languages. No other language of the Tai family has such a feature. The question is whether this is an innovation in Saek, or an old feature which all other Tai languages have lost.

If it is an innovation, why is it that only certain words have the final *-l*, while others have final *-n*? One occasionally hears a final *-l* pronunciation instead of *-n* in various Tai languages, even in modern standard Bangkok Thai, but only as a kind of free variant of final *-n*, whereas in Saek it is a regular, fixed feature of certain words, distinguishing such pairs as

<i>bil</i> <sup>1</sup>	to fly	:	<i>bin</i> <sup>1</sup>	sky
<i>vil</i> <sup>1</sup>	firewood	:	<i>vin</i> <sup>1</sup>	rain

Some have wondered if this final *-l* is the result of contact with Mon-Khmer languages, but Saek shows no other evidence of such contact.

On the other hand, if the final *-l* is an old, original feature of the parent language which only Saek has preserved, this raises various problems and possibilities. One serious problem is that the group of Mak-Sui-Kam languages in Kweichow, to which scholars believe the Tai family to be next most closely related, has no such final *-l*, but only final *-n*, so that this means that the period would have to be extended even farther back during which Saek alone is supposed to have preserved this feature while all the other related languages lost it. As to possibilities, scholars who like to believe that the Tai languages are ultimately related to Malayo-Polynesian, are pleased with the discovery of this final *-l* in Saek, because it means that at least one language of the Tai family is in this respect more similar to Malayo-Polynesian languages than we thought before.

This whole subject of the special archaic features found in Saek which differ from those found in other languages of the Tai family are what give Saek such special interest and importance. Some of these features, when we get down to studying them in detail, will undoubtedly help to clarify problems in the reconstruction of Proto-Tai, the reconstructed prehistoric language which is assumed to have been the parent language of the entire group, before the break-up into daughter branches and languages.

But as we have seen, there are other features in Saek which add to our problems, that is, they create new problems which were not known to exist.

I have recently had a new idea about the position of Saek with regard to its historical relationship to the other languages of the Tai family. If this new idea of mine is right, then Haudricourt's theory that Saek is a member of the Northern branch of Tai, which I have been supporting earlier in this talk, will turn out not to be right.

This new idea of mine is suggested by the fact that the small group of Mak-Sui-Kam languages in Kweichow, which are believed by scholars to be the next most closely related linguistic group to Tai, seem to agree with Northern Tai rather than with Central and South-western Tai in those features of tone, vowel, and vocabulary in which Northern Tai differs from the others.

This suggests that when we speak of northern Tai as having made various special changes which differentiate it from the other Tai languages, we are putting it backwards. If Northern Tai agrees with the Mak-Sui-Kam group, then the special features of Northern Tai must be old, and it would then be the Central and Southwestern branches of Tai that have made special changes.

If it turns out that this new idea of mine, which I have not yet had time to investigate thoroughly, is right, then we would have to call the period of unity just before the Southwestern and Central branches separated off Proto-Tai, and it may then be possible to show that Saek separated off at some time before this period which we designate Proto-Tai.

In any case, whether we finally are able to prove that Saek is a genuine member of the Northern branch, or a separate language that broke away even earlier than the time of Proto-Tai, as I have just suggested, the Saek language provides material for study which is sure to take many years of careful study by scholars to work out. I can scarcely hope that all the problems which my Saek studies have brought to light will be solved by myself or others within my lifetime.

I should like to urge Siamese students of linguistics to study Saek. It is our great good fortune that this unusual language is available, so to speak, in our own back yard.

Do not think that I have done it all. Even for Ban At Samat, I hardly dare to hope that my dictionary is complete. And there are a great many more texts (legends of Saek history, folktales, etc.) to be collected there. And there remain the other Saek dialects spoken in other villages in Nakhon Phanom province.

