

6 *A brief look at thirteen Mon-Khmer languages of Xekong province, southern Laos*

THERAPHAN L-THONGKUM

1 Introduction

Thirteen Mon-Khmer languages are spoken in Xekong province in southern Laos, viz., Alak (also called Harak, Harlak), Chatong, Dak Kang, Kaseng, Katu, Laven, Lavi, Nge', Suai, Ta Oi', Tariang, Tariw, and Yaeh (L-Thongkum 1997a).¹ Based on linguistic criteria, the Suai ethnic group as known by the local authorities and the inhabitants of Xekong are in fact two separate groups, that is the Suai of Tha Taeng speak a Katuic language, while the Suai of Yok Thong, Chunla, and Ka Pue villages speak a West Bahnaric language (L-Thongkum 1997b). Therefore, it would be more correct to say that fourteen Mon-Khmer languages are spoken by the population of Xekong. Because the Katuic Suai (Kui, Kuay) spoken in Thailand and Lao PDR has been studied by many linguists and language specialists and reliable data are available, I have not included it in my study. I discovered the fact that the Suai at Yok Thong village had called themselves Juk /ju:k/ during my fifth field trip in April 1998, when I worked extensively with my Suai informant from Yok Thong village. I also learned that the village name 'Yok Thong' did not mean 'raising flags' as I had been told by some local authorities but instead 'the lowland or paddy-field Juk'. This implies that in the past this West Bahnaric-speaking group had moved from the highlands somewhere to lowland areas to cultivate wet-rice, perhaps not for their own sake but for their Khmer landlords when the Khmer Kingdom had been in power and had conquered the whole area of

¹ The research project on 'Languages and Cultures of the Ethnic Groups in Xekong province, Lao PDR: A Foundation for Research and Development Planning', funded by the Thailand Research Fund (TRF), was officially launched in January 1997 after a brief field survey conducted in December 1995. Without the kindness of Her Royal Highness Princess Mahachakri Sirindhorn, this project could not have been possible. The output and outcome of this project will be regarded as our tribute to Her Royal Highness. I would like to express my gratitude to the Embassy of Lao PDR in Bangkok, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ministry of Information and Culture of Lao PDR for their kind co-operation. Last but not least, I feel thankful to the local authorities of Xekong province for their help and assistance in making many arrangements.

southern Laos. This assumption of Khmer sovereignty is based on the fact that many old Khmer loans can be detected in Suai (Juk), whereas there are fewer such loans in the other Mon-Khmer languages of Xekong on which I have been working. All the data cited as examples in this paper come from my fieldnotes. I have made seven field trips (each of two to three weeks) since December 1995. A tentative classification of the thirteen Mon-Khmer languages is presented in this paper. The language data given as examples are in broad phonetic transcription.

2 Sociolinguistic setting

The number of people inhabiting Xekong is about 64,000. Although the population of Xekong is small, the sociolinguistic setting of the province is very complex. Lao is the official language of the province and the lingua franca of the Tha Taeng district, whereas Alak, Tariang and Nge' are those of Lamam, Dak Chueng, and Kaluem districts, respectively. Each inhabitant of this province can speak or understand at least two or three languages. The 'Lao Lum' or lowland Lao or even half Lao Lum is considered to be the most prestigious group; ethnic groups ranked next in prestige are the Alak and Tariang. As the result of language contact, linguistic borrowings cannot be avoided, especially in Lamam where the municipality of Xekong province is located, and in Tha Taeng which is the most recently established district where almost all of the ethnic groups belonging to Xekong can be found. In short, Xekong may be regarded as a paradise for sociolinguistic studies. See maps in the Appendix.

3 Language classification

Broadly speaking, the thirteen languages of Xekong can be divided into two major groups based on lexical and phonological developments; namely, Group A: Ta Oi', Katu, Nge' (Kriang), Chatong, Tariw, Dak Kang; and Group B: Suai (Juk), Laven (Jru'), Lavi (Savoeng), Tariang, Kaseng, Yaeh, Alak.

Comparison of several cognate lexical items in Tables 1 and 2 confirms the dichotomy of the two groups of languages. Both lexical and phonological evidence supports the idea that the six languages of Group A belong to one branch of Mon-Khmer, while the seven languages of Group B belong to another branch of the family.

4 Katuic languages

Based on the lexical examples given in the following two tables, there is no doubt in my mind that Ta Oi', Katu, Nge' (Kriang), Chatong, Tariw, and Dak Kang belong to one branch of the Mon-Khmer language family, and Suai (Juk), Laven (Jru'), Lavi (Savoeng), Tariang, Kaseng, Yaeh, and Alak belong to another branch. The next step is to try to place the languages of Groups A and B within the right branches. After searching through the literature of comparative Mon-Khmer to find appropriate criteria for identifying the Mon-Khmer branches, I believe the criteria of lexical and phonological innovations as proposed by

Diffloth (1996a,b) have proved to be applicable to and useful in my work.² My hypothesis has been confirmed: the Group A languages are Katuic, whereas the Group B languages are Bahnaric. Diffloth (1996a:11) has suggested that 'lexically, all Katuic languages have innovated in replacing the Proto Mon-Khmer numerals 'six', 'seven', 'eight', and 'nine' by a new lexical set'. The reconstructed forms of these numerals in Proto Katuic are: **təbat* 'six', **təbool* 'seven', **təgɔl* 'eight', and **təgɛs* 'nine'. Somewhat different forms have also been reconstructed by Peiros (1996): **tapat* 'six', **dəbuul* 'seven', and **dagiejh* 'nine'. Based on the Brou, Pacoh, and Katu languages of Vietnam, D.M. Thomas (1976) reconstructed the forms of these numerals as **pout* 'six', **tupol* 'seven', **tikool* 'eight', and **tikeas* 'nine'. Her reconstruction implies that the Proto Katuic voiced plosives **b*, **d*, **j*, **g* have devoiced to become voiceless in Proto East Katuic.

In the West Katuic languages, such as Kui, Kuay, Bru, So, and so on, the breathy voiced vowels (or second register vowels) suggest the intermediate stage of the devoicing process; see the numerals in Kui (the Suai language of Surin, Thailand): /thph̄aət/ 'six', /thph̄ool/ 'seven', /thkh̄uəl/ 'eight', /thkh̄əh/ 'nine'; and in Bru (of Khongchiam district, Ubonratchathani, Thailand): /tap̄ət/ 'six', /tap̄uul/ 'seven', /tak̄uəl/ 'eight', /takēeh/ 'nine', and so on. Based on the lexical and phonological developments illustrated in Tables 1 and 2, the six languages in Group A should be classified as East Katuic. There is no geographical contradiction.

Among the six East Katuic languages of Xekong, three are 'newly discovered languages', since Tariw, Dak Kang, and Chatong have never been mentioned previously in any publications on Mon-Khmer linguistics. One interesting feature worth pointing out is that the Proto East Katuic (PEK) preglottalised plosives or implosives **ɓ* and **ɗ* became plain voiced plosives *b* and *d* in Tariw and Dak Kang; and in Chatong which is a register language both voiced plosives and implosives **b*, **d*, **j*, **g*, **ɓ*, **ɗ* have merged to become voiceless plosives *p*, *t*, *c*, *k* and are followed by the breathy voiced or second register vowels. See examples in Table 3.

Besides the numerals 'six', 'seven', 'eight', and 'nine' (see Table 1), the more reliable Proto Katuic lexical innovations form a particular set of lexemes according to Diffloth (1996a). These lexemes and his Proto Katuic reconstructions are as follows: 'wife' **kəndɛal*, 'unmarried woman' **kumoor*, 'to smile' **kəcaŋ*, 'year' **kəməv*, 'cobra' **duur*, 'mushroom' **triəə*, and 'to keep' **dɔk*. I do agree with his conclusion that 'any Mon-Khmer language which has cognates in all or most of these words, as well as the numerals 'six', 'seven', 'eight', and 'nine' can be presumed to belong to the Katuic branch'.

² From 1996–98, Gérard Diffloth, who now lives permanently in Thailand, has visited me at the Thai Studies Institute, Chulalongkorn University, many times. Whenever we met, I showed him some parts of my Mon-Khmer data collected during my field trips in Xekong province, especially the lists of cognates as illustrated in Table 1 and Table 2, or discussed what I had found. This is one of the reasons why almost all of his proposals presented in the manuscript of his book 'An Introduction to Mon-Khmer Languages' from which he kindly gave me three chapters concerning the criteria for identifying languages belonging to the Katuic and Bahnaric branches were very useful to my Xekong project. In February 1998 Gérard Diffloth spent a few days working with my Tariw, Dak Kang and Suai (Juk) informants during his field trips in southern Laos.

Table 1: Classification of Xekong M-K languages into two groups based on lexical evidence

	'six'	'seven'	'eight'	'nine'	'to smile'	'tongue'	'navel'	'snake'	'head'	'skin'
Group A										
Ta Oi'	<i>ta'pat</i>	<i>ta'pool</i>	<i>ta'kool</i>	<i>ta'kiəjh</i>	<i>ka'caŋ</i>	<i>n'taaʔ</i>	<i>pon</i>	<i>ka'seŋ</i>	<i>plɿɿ</i>	<i>ŋ'kar</i>
Katu	<i>tɛ'pat</i>	<i>tɛ'pɔol</i>	<i>ta'kool</i>	<i>tɛ'kees</i>	<i>ka'caŋ</i>	<i>n'taak</i>	<i>pon</i>	<i>ka'seŋ</i>	<i>plaaw</i>	<i>ŋ'kar</i>
Nge'(Kriang)	<i>ta'piiət</i>	<i>tɛ'puul</i>	<i>ta'kool</i>	<i>tɛ'kieh</i>	<i>ka'caŋ</i>	<i>n'taak</i>	<i>pun</i>	<i>ka'seŋ</i>	<i>plɿɿ</i>	<i>ŋ'kar</i>
Chatong	<i>ta'pat</i>	<i>ta'pool</i>	<i>ta'kool</i>	<i>ta'kiejh</i>	<i>ka'caŋ</i>	<i>n'taak</i>	<i>pun</i>	<i>ka'seŋ</i>	<i>plɿɿ</i>	<i>ŋ'kar</i>
Tariw	<i>tɕa'pat</i>	<i>ta'pool</i>	<i>ta'kool</i>	<i>ta'kiəh</i>	<i>ka'caŋ</i>	<i>ʔan'taak</i>	<i>pun</i>	<i>ka'seŋ</i>	<i>plɿɿ</i>	<i>ŋ'kar</i>
Dak Kang	<i>tɕa'pat</i>	<i>ta'pool</i>	<i>ta'kool</i>	<i>ta'kiəʔ</i>	<i>ka'caŋ</i>	<i>taak</i>	<i>pun</i>	<i>ka'seŋ</i>	<i>plɿɿ</i>	<i>ŋ'kar</i>
Group B										
Suai (Juk)	<i>traw</i>	<i>thoh</i>	<i>thaam</i>	<i>ciin</i>	<i>ca'ʔaal</i>	<i>la'piat</i>	<i>klok</i>	<i>bih</i>	<i>tuuh</i>	<i>sruat</i>
Laven (Jru')	<i>traw</i>	<i>pɔh</i>	<i>thɿɿm</i>	<i>ciin</i>	<i>sa'ʔaal</i>	<i>piat</i>	<i>klok</i>	<i>bih</i>	<i>tuəjh</i>	<i>sruat</i>
Lavi	<i>traw</i>	<i>pɿh</i>	<i>thaam</i>	<i>ciin</i>	<i>sa'ʔau</i>	<i>ha'piet</i>	<i>klɔk</i>	<i>pih</i>	<i>tuəjh</i>	<i>srɔt</i>
Tariang	<i>ta'raw</i>	<i>ti'pɿh</i>	<i>taŋ'haam</i>	<i>ka'ceen</i>	<i>jaal</i>	<i>ha'piat</i>	<i>klɔk</i>	<i>bis</i>	<i>tuus</i>	<i>ruat</i>
Kaseng	<i>ta'raw</i>	<i>pa'pɿh</i>	<i>ta'haam</i>	<i>ka'ceen</i>	<i>ca'ʔaal</i>	<i>piat</i>	<i>klok</i>	<i>biç</i>	<i>tuuç</i>	<i>ʔa'ruat</i>
Yaeh	<i>cə'raw</i>	<i>puɿh</i>	<i>thaam</i>	<i>ciin</i>	<i>ʔaal</i>	<i>piat</i>	<i>kɔk</i>	<i>bih</i>	<i>tuuh</i>	<i>sruat</i>
Alak	<i>ta'raw</i>	<i>ti'pɔh</i>	<i>thaam</i>	<i>ta'ciin</i>	<i>ca'ʔau</i>	<i>ha'peet</i>	<i>klɔk</i>	<i>bih</i>	<i>(gaw)</i>	<i>(ʔa'kar)</i>

Table 2: Classification of Xekong M-K languages into two groups A based on phonological evidence

	'bone'	'pain'	'I'	'thigh'	'moon'	'liver'	'earth'	'fire'
Group A								
Ta Oi'	<i>ŋ'haaŋ</i>	<i>?aj</i>	<i>kuuu</i>	<i>paɾ'law</i>	<i>ka'saj</i>	<i>lɔɔm</i>	<i>ka'tɛɛ?</i>	<i>?uujh</i>
Katu	<i>ŋ'haaŋ</i>	<i>ka'?aj</i>	<i>?a'kɣɣ</i>	<i>pɛ'law</i>	<i>ka'saj</i>	<i>lɔɔm</i>	<i>ka'tiiək</i>	<i>?uus</i>
Nge' (Kriang)	<i>ŋ'haaŋ</i>	<i>?aj</i>	<i>kaw</i>	<i>pə'lɣw</i>	<i>ka'sɛɛ</i>	<i>lɔɔm</i>	<i>ka'tiiək</i>	<i>?uujh</i>
Chatong	<i>ŋ'haaŋ</i>	<i>?aj</i>	<i>kaw</i>	<i>pa'law</i>	<i>ka'sɛɛ</i>	<i>lɔɔm</i>	<i>ka'tiiək</i>	<i>?oojh</i>
Tariw	<i>?i'haaŋ</i>	<i>ka'?aj</i>	<i>kuuu</i>	<i>bi'lɔw</i>	<i>ka'sɛɛ</i>	<i>lɔɔm</i>	<i>ka'tiiək</i>	<i>?uujh</i>
Dak Kang	<i>?i'haaŋ</i>	<i>ka'?aj</i>	<i>kuuu</i>	<i>pa'law</i>	<i>ka'sɛɛ</i>	<i>lɔɔm</i>	<i>ka'tiiək</i>	<i>?uuʔ</i>
Group B								
Suai (Juk)	<i>ka'tiin</i>	<i>ji?</i>	<i>?aw</i>	<i>bluu</i>	<i>khaj</i>	<i>klɔɔm</i>	<i>pa'tɛh</i>	<i>(?uuh)</i>
Laven (Jru')	<i>ka'tuuwəŋ</i>	<i>ji?</i>	<i>?aj</i>	<i>blɔw</i>	<i>khɛj</i>	<i>klɔɔm</i>	<i>pa'tɛh</i>	<i>?uuj</i>
Lavi (Savoeng)	<i>ka'cuuwəŋ</i>	<i>chi?</i>	<i>?ɣɣ</i>	<i>pluu</i>	<i>(kɔɔt)</i>	<i>klɣɣm</i>	<i>pa'tiɛh</i>	<i>?uuj</i>
Tariang	<i>tiiŋ</i>	<i>?ii?</i>	<i>?au</i>	<i>blaw</i>	<i>ka'hee</i>	<i>kuuəɔm</i>	<i>ca'neh</i>	<i>?uuj</i>
Kaseng	<i>?a'tiiŋ</i>	<i>?ii?</i>	<i>?au</i>	<i>m'blaw</i>	<i>?a'haj</i>	<i>klɔɔm</i>	<i>?a'mɛh</i>	<i>?uuj</i>
Yaeh	<i>kriiŋ</i>	<i>?ii?</i>	<i>?au</i>	<i>blaw</i>	<i>khe</i>	<i>kɔɔm</i>	<i>?a'neh</i>	<i>?uuj</i>
Alak	<i>ka'tiin</i>	<i>?a'ji?</i>	<i>?au</i>	<i>bluu</i>	<i>ka'haj</i>	<i>klɔɔm</i>	<i>ta'neh</i>	<i>?uuj</i>

Table 3: Voiced plosives and implosives in Tariw, Dak Kang, Chatong

	PEK	Tariw	Dak Kang	Chatong
'to sleep'	*b-	<i>bek</i>	<i>bec</i>	<i>p̄ic</i>
'to burn'	*b-	<i>buh</i>	<i>buh</i>	<i>p̄oh</i>
'two'	*ɓ-	<i>baar</i>	<i>baar</i>	<i>p̄aar</i>
'bamboo shoot'	*ɓ-	<i>ka'baŋ</i>	<i>ka'baŋ</i>	<i>p̄aŋ</i>
'house'	*d-	<i>duŋ</i>	<i>duŋ</i>	<i>t̄aŋ</i>
'long (of time)'	*d-	<i>duuŋ</i>	<i>duuŋ</i>	<i>t̄uʊŋ</i>
'water'	*ɗ-	<i>daak</i>	<i>daak</i>	<i>t̄iak</i>
'wife'	*ɗ-	<i>ka'diiəl</i>	<i>ka'diiəl</i>	<i>ka't̄iiəl</i>
'to peck'	*ɟ-	<i>ɟoh</i>	<i>ɟoh</i>	<i>c̄oh</i>
'to dip up'	*ɟ-	<i>ɟet</i>	<i>ɟet</i>	<i>c̄it</i>
'dry'	*g-	<i>goh</i>	<i>?a'goh</i>	<i>ŋk̄oh</i>
'mountain'	*g-	<i>gɔɔr</i>	<i>gɔɔr</i>	<i>k̄ɔɔr</i>

To confirm the above assertion, let us examine carefully the following set of words in Tariw, Dak Kang, and Chatong listed in Table 4 below.

Table 4: Test words for identifying Katuic languages

	Proto Katuic	Tariw	Dak Kang	Chatong
'wife'	* <i>kəndeal</i>	<i>ka'diiəl</i>	<i>ka'diəl</i>	<i>ka't̄iiəl</i>
'unmarried woman'	* <i>kumoor</i>	<i>ka'moor</i>	<i>kɔɔn moor</i>	<i>kam'moor</i>
'to smile'	* <i>kəcaŋ</i>	<i>ka'caŋ</i>	<i>ka'caŋ</i>	<i>ka'caŋ</i>
'year'	* <i>kəmɔɔ</i>	<i>kam'mɔɔ</i>	<i>ka'mɔɔ</i>	<i>kam'mɔɔ</i>
'cobra'	* <i>duur</i>	<i>tuur</i>	<i>tuur</i>	<i>tuur</i>
'mushroom'	* <i>triəə</i>	<i>truuu</i>	<i>truuu</i>	<i>trii</i>
'to keep'	* <i>dɔɔk</i>	<i>(lut)</i>	<i>dɔɔk</i>	<i>t̄ɔɔk</i>

We can clearly see that the sets of forms from these languages are cognates.

Regarding phonological innovation, medial /-h-/ in forms for 'centipede' in Tariw, Dak Kang, and Chatong also supports the idea that these are Katuic languages, since /-ʔ-/ from Proto-MK *-ʔ- is expected in many other Mon-Khmer branches but becomes /-h-/ in Katuic languages; cf. 'centipede': **kalheep* (PEK), *ka'hip* (Tariw, Dak Kang), and *ka'hēep* (Chatong). This is another criterion set up by Diffloth (1996:2).

Not only has the register distinction, that is clear voice versus breathy voice, developed in Chatong, but so also have the post-glottalised consonants *mʔ*, *-nʔ*, *-ŋʔ*, *-wʔ*, *-lʔ*, *-rʔ*, *-jʔ* in the same way as in Ta Oi', although fewer words have post-glottalisation in Chatong. We may note the following examples:

Chatong: *beek tranʔ* 'flint rock', *?aʔaʔ* 'more, again', *puuʔ* 'dull (of the pointed end)', *trɔʔ* *prɔʔ* 'excessively', *kanʔrɔʔ* 'to tiptoe', *kanʔɔɔmʔ* 'to close (wings)', *mʔphɔʔ* 'light (of weight)', *ka'colʔ* 'to leap', *luʔkluuʔ* 'getting dim (of candle light)', *?a'duʔ* 'float on the water', *tarʔrɔʔmʔ* 'to belch', *ha'rɔɔbrɔʔ* 'kind of paddy', *kam'briʔ* 'to blink', *c̄eewʔ* 'to tickle', *ka'vɔʔjʔ* 'to snatch', *puʔjʔ* *puʔjʔ* 'high spirited'.

Ta Oi': *m'paan?* 'maggot', *ha'pan?* 'to pretend', *la'laaj?* 'flash (of lightning)', *priin?* 'banana', *ηiiən?* 'to dive', *huan?* 'to steam', *lxj?* 'no, not', *man?* 'eyes', *maaj?* 'face', *suaj?* 'elongated', *la'ηəwən?* 'soft', *ka'vaan?* 'to scratch with claws', *juaj?* 'gibbon', *kəwəm?* 'to snatch', *ka'siam?* 'wither', *leem?* 'bird, animal', *lɛɛm?* 'older sister-in-law', *raaj?* 'grasshopper', *ka'taam?* 'to slap, to clap', *puuul?* 'dull (of the pointed end)'.

On the basis of the examples given above, we may notice that the PEK finals **-p*, **-t*, and **-c* in some words have become post-glottalised *-m?*, *-n?*, *-j?* in Ta Oi'; cf. *kəwəm?* 'to snatch', *ka'taam?* 'to slap', *priin?* 'banana', *man?* 'eyes', *raaj?* 'grasshopper', *suaj?* 'elongated'. I have not heard any pre-glottalised final nasals in the speech of my Chatong and Ta Oi' informants. In fact, a high-rising-falling pitch always accompanies the post-glottalisation in Ta Oi' and Chatong. I suspect that both pre- and post-glottalisation are perhaps part of the process of 'a non-tonal language becoming tonal'. Moreover, I think that Chatong and Ta Oi', which are spoken by hundreds of people, belong to the Yir-Ong-Ta Oih or Katang-Ta Oih group of the East Katuic sub-branch.

5 Bahnaric languages

Lexical innovations in numerals 'five', 'six', 'seven', 'eight', and 'nine' and phonological innovations in forms for 'tongue', 'bone', and 'fire' support the idea that Suai (Juk), Laven (Jru'), Lavi (Savoeng), Tariang, Kaseng, Yaeh, and Alak spoken in Xekong province are Bahnaric languages (see Table 5). No contradiction exists between my findings and the above criteria for identifying Bahnaric languages proposed by Diffloth. The only problems are that forms for 'five' in Suai, Laven, and Lavi and the form for 'fire' in Suai are Katuic borrowings; compare the following forms:

'five' **sâang* (PEK) > *sauŋ* (Brou), *səŋ* (Pacoh), *sâang* (Katu) (Thomas 1976:79), *ɤɤŋ* (Ta Oi', Katu, Nge', Chatong, Tariw), *pa'sɤɤŋ* (Dak Kang), *ɤɤŋ* (Suai, Lavi) *ɤəwŋ* (Laven).

'fire' **ʔ(uu)s* (P-MK, Diffloth 1998), **ʔ-s* (PEK, Thomas 1976), *ʔuus* (Katu), *ʔuujh* (Ta Oi', Nge' Chatong, Tariw), *ʔoojh* (Chatong), *ʔuuʔ* (Dak Kang), *ʔuuh* (Suai or Juk).

Diffloth points out that final **-j* in 'fire' is a phonological innovation in Proto Bahnaric, that is Proto MK **-s* became **-j*, whereas the other Mon-Khmer branches still retain the Proto voiceless fricative. The Bahnaric languages of Xekong, except Suai (Juk), do retain the Proto Bahnaric **-j* (see Table 5). The Proto Bahnaric etymon **ləmpɨət* 'tongue' has been derived from the verb **liət* 'to lick', not the noun **ləntaak* 'tongue' in Proto MK (Diffloth). Forms for 'tongue' in Bahnaric languages are as follows:

**ləmpɨət* 'tongue' > Suai *la'piiət*, Laven *piiət*, Lavi *ha'pieet*, Tariang *ha'piat*, Kaseng, Yaeh *piat*, Alak *ha'peet*.

In most of the other Mon-Khmer branches, forms for 'bone' have a medial *-ʔ-*, but in the Bahnaric languages they have medial *-t-*; for example, Suai, Alak *ka'tiiŋ*, Laven *ka'tuuwəŋ*, Kaseng *ʔa'tiiəŋ*, and so forth.

Based on the data collected solely by myself, I believe that the Bahnaric languages spoken in Xekong province comprise three subgroups as illustrated below. First, Suai, Laven, and Lavi form one subgroup; the second subgroup includes Tariang Kaseng, and Yaeh spoken in

Dak Chueng district; Alak is a third subgroup by itself. Both lexical and phonological developments support this classification.

Table 5: The three subgroups of Bahnaric languages spoken in Xekong

	'house'	'long'	'shoulder'	'star'	'egg'	'neck'
Suai (Juk)	<i>srΛΛm</i>	<i>goh</i>	<i>paal</i>	<i>pa'toor</i>	<i>klɛɛ</i>	<i>lɔŋ</i>
Laven	<i>nΛΛm</i>	<i>goh</i>	<i>paal</i>	<i>pa'tuər</i>	<i>klɛɛ</i>	<i>lɔŋ</i>
Lavi	<i>sa'nΛΛm</i>	<i>goh</i>	<i>paa</i>	<i>pa'tɔər</i>	<i>klɛɛ</i>	<i>ha'lɔŋ</i>
Tariang	<i>suu</i>	<i>ruus</i>	<i>ca'laaŋ</i>	<i>φɛn</i>	<i>ka'leh</i>	<i>ndɔŋ</i>
Kaseng	<i>suu</i>	<i>?a'ruuɕ</i>	<i>laaŋ</i>	<i>ta'mɛŋ</i>	<i>leh</i>	<i>ndɔŋ</i>
Yaeh	<i>suu</i>	<i>ruuh</i>	<i>ku'laaŋ</i>	<i>?a'maŋ</i>	<i>keh</i>	<i>dɔŋ</i>
Alak	<i>jii</i>	<i>ja'rooŋ</i>	<i>ca'maa</i>	<i>bluuŋ</i>	<i>ka'tap</i>	<i>ŋɔk</i>

After searching through the available literature, such as Thomas and Headley (1970), Thomas (1979), Thomas and Srichampa (1995), and having discussions with Diffloth and Ferlus, I am certain that the first subgroup is West Bahnaric. My findings agree very well with the classification proposed by other Mon-Khmer specialists, no matter what methods or criteria they have used, that is Laven, Lavi, and Suai (Juk) must be West Bahnaric languages.³ For more details see L-Thongkum (1997a,b).

As for the second and third subgroups, the data from my fieldnotes contradict the classifications proposed by some Mon-Khmer specialists, that is that Alak belongs to Central Bahnaric, which is a very loose subgroup comprising Bahnar, Tampuan, and Alak (Thomas 1979); however, Diffloth places Alak, Tariang, and Kaseng within a new branch which is named 'Northwest Bahnaric'. If the Yaeh language of Xekong and the Jeh language of Vietnam are in fact the same language or dialects of the same language, then Yaeh should be a North Bahnaric language. Diffloth claims that 'bone' which has undergone very specific changes in different sub-branches of Bahnaric can be used as a test word for subgrouping within Bahnaric; for example, medial *-s-* is found only in the North Bahnaric sub-branch. To support his idea, he has cited forms for 'bone' from many languages of the North Bahnaric sub-branch; for example, Kacho' *kəɕ^hɛŋ*, Hre *kəseŋ*, Sedang *kəseŋ*, Jeh (*kə*) *siaŋ*, Halang *kəsiaŋ*, Cua *khiak*. Smith (1972) has reconstructed Proto North-Bahnaric **katseŋ* for 'bone'. Xekong Yaeh *kriiəŋ* 'bone' does not seem to fit any of the above North Bahnaric characteristics. On the basis of this criterion, I do not think that Yaeh belongs to the North-Bahnaric sub-branch. If Yaeh and Jeh turn out to be dialects of the same language, the only

³ Relying almost totally on vocabulary compiled from a variety of sources, Thomas and Srichampa (1995) tried to identify the affinities of the Mon-Khmer languages spoken in southern Laos. Their comparison of the distinctive vocabulary or distinctive forms of words yielded the following result: almost all of the languages belong to the West-Bahnaric sub-branch which comprises five subgroups, i.e. Northwestern, West Central, Southern, Central and Northeastern. Loven (Laven) is placed within the Northwestern subgroup, whereas Kraseng (Kaseng) and Trieng (Tariang) are placed within the Northeastern subgroup. As for Alak, it is a non-West Bahnaric language (Thomas & Srichampa 1995:306–307). On the basis of 'a unique Bahnaric phonological development in the word "bone"' (Diffloth 1996b:17), the languages within Bahnaric are sub-classified as West Bahnaric, Northwest Bahnaric, North Bahnaric, Central Bahnaric, and South Bahnaric sub-branches. In Diffloth's opinion, Alak, Tariang and Kaseng belong to the same sub-branch, i.e. Northwest Bahnaric. The classifications proposed by Thomas and Diffloth still need to be confirmed when more solid data are available.

possible explanation of the close relationship between Tariang and Yaeh is ‘language contact’, due to the fact that the Tariang and the Yaeh of Dak Chueng district have lived in the same area for a very long time. Moreover, it is more prestigious to be a Tariang since many members of this ethnic group have become the VIPS of Xekong province, and this can also encourage the borrowing of a lot of Tariang loanwords into Yaeh.

At this point, let us presume that Yaeh, Tariang, and Kaseng belong to the same sub-branch, namely Northwest Bahnaric. However, I do not think that Alak should be placed within this sub-branch as proposed by Diffloth; different types of lexical and phonological developments in Alak make me reject his classification of Alak. At the same time, I also do not support the idea that Alak is a member of the Central Bahnaric sub-branch as proposed by Thomas; this is due to the distribution of the Alak-speaking group which is in the northwest of the Bahnaric area and far away from the Tampuan and Bahnar areas, unless it is a displaced ethnic group as the result of wars or migrations in the past. Table 6 below lists some cognate items in Tariang, Kaseng, and Yaeh, and the non-cognate forms in Alak.

Table 6: Lexical evidence for separating Alak from Tariang, Kaseng, and Yaeh

	‘new’	‘head’	‘sky’	‘tooth’	‘tail’
Tariang	<i>naaw</i>	<i>tuus</i>	<i>pliij</i>	<i>pɯuɯŋ</i>	<i>suuəj</i>
Kaseng	<i>naaw</i>	<i>tuuɕ</i>	<i>pliij</i>	<i>pɯuɯŋ</i>	<i>sɔɔj</i>
Yaeh	<i>naaw</i>	<i>tuuh</i>	<i>pliij</i>	<i>pɯuɯŋ</i>	<i>sɔɔj</i>
Alak	<i>ta'maj</i>	<i>gauu</i>	<i>brah</i>	<i>ca'neŋ</i>	<i>teenj</i>

	‘hundred’	‘intestines’	‘skin’	‘to drink’	‘to steam’
Tariang	<i>riiəŋ</i>	<i>klaak</i>	<i>ruat</i>	<i>seet</i>	<i>coŋ</i>
Kaseng	<i>?a'riiəŋ</i>	<i>klaak</i>	<i>ruat</i>	<i>seet</i>	<i>coŋ</i>
Yaeh	<i>ka'riiəŋ</i>	<i>kaak</i>	<i>sruat</i>	<i>seet</i>	<i>coŋ</i>
Alak	<i>klam</i>	<i>pa'tuu</i>	<i>?a'kar</i>	<i>jɔɔk</i>	<i>sruu</i>

The phonological developments in the Alak cognates differ from those in the Tariang, Kaseng, and Yaeh cognates: diphthongs *uuə*, *ua*, *iiə*, *ia*, *au* (*aw*) in Tariang, Kaseng, and Yaeh correspond to Alak monophthongs *uu*, *oo*, *ii*, *e/ee*, *uu*; and Alak diphthongs *ai* (*aj*) and *ua* correspond to monophthongs *εε* and *oo* in Tariang, Kaseng, and Yaeh, respectively. See examples in Table 7.

Table 7: Vowel correspondences in Tariang, Kaseng, Yaeh and Alak

	‘road’	‘four’	‘bone’	‘banana’	‘rain’	‘tongue’
Tariang	<i>truuəŋ</i>	<i>puan</i>	<i>tiəŋ</i>	<i>priiət</i>	<i>miiə</i>	<i>piat</i>
Kaseng	<i>truuəŋ</i>	<i>puan</i>	<i>?a'tiəŋ</i>	<i>priiət</i>	<i>miiə</i>	<i>piat</i>
Yaeh	<i>truuəŋ</i>	<i>puan</i>	<i>kriiəŋ</i>	<i>priiət</i>	<i>miiə</i>	<i>piat</i>
Alak	<i>n'tuuŋ</i>	<i>poon</i>	<i>ka'tiiŋ</i>	<i>priit</i>	<i>mii</i>	<i>ha'peet</i>

	'root'	'nail'	'thigh'	'bathe'	'husked rice'	'three'
Tariang	<i>ʔa'rias</i>	<i>ka'rias</i>	<i>blaw</i>	<i>hoom</i>	<i>ba'hεε</i>	<i>pεε</i>
Kaseng	<i>rias</i>	<i>ʔa'riah</i>	<i>blaw</i>	<i>hoom</i>	<i>ʔa'hεε</i>	<i>pεε</i>
Yaeh	<i>ʔa'riaç</i>	<i>kriah</i>	<i>blaw</i>	<i>hoom</i>	<i>phεε</i>	<i>pεε</i>
Alak	<i>reh</i>	<i>ki'neh</i>	<i>bluu</i>	<i>huam</i>	<i>pa'haj</i>	<i>paj</i>

Even though the Tariang and Alak peoples are officially classified as 'Lao Thoeng' and live in nearby districts, several aspects of their cultures are different. Geographically, southern Laos, which comprises the four provinces of Champasak, Saravan, Xekong and Attapue, can be divided into three major areas: 'Thong Phiang (low land)', 'Phu Phiang (plateau)', and 'Phu Doi (mountain)'. Before liberation, the three most prestigious groups of 'Lao Thoeng', that is the Laven (Jru'), Alak, and Tariang, separately inhabited the three major areas mentioned above. At present, the majority of the Alak villages are still scattered in Lamam district which is a valley surrounded by high mountains; as a result, the Alak house style suits very well the warm climate of 'Thong Phiang' area. Dak Chueng district which is located in high mountains or 'Phu Doi' near the Lao-Vietnamese border is the center of the Tariang. The cold climate has caused the differences between the house styles of the Tariang and Alak and also their ways of living. The Laven who are quite rich in comparison with the other 'Lao Thoeng' ethnic groups live comfortably in the Boloven Plateau area which enjoys a temperate climate and they plant coffee trees. Although insignificant to language classification, these supporting reasons lead me to believe that languages spoken by the Alak and Tariang should not be placed within the same sub-branch. If Suai (Juk), Laven (Jru'), and Lavi (Savoeng) belong to the West-Bahnaric sub-branch, and Tariang, Kaseng and Yaeh belong to the Northwest sub-branch, then the place of Alak is still a problem which should be solved soon.

I heard an informal source state that the Kaseng and Tariang were in fact the same Mon-Khmer ethnic group. Most Kaseng people live in San Xai district of Attapue province which shares a common border with the Dak Chueng district of Xekong province in the south. I doubt the claim they are the same group of people is true. Among Mon-Khmer languages spoken in Xekong, Tariang and Kaseng are the most closely related; however, they are not the same language in my opinion. A comparison of basic vocabulary items (based on Matisoff's 200-wordlist) in these languages as in Table 8 below seems to support this view.

Table 8: Basic vocabulary differences between Tariang and Kaseng

	'mouth'	'finger'	'palm'	'fish'	'otter'	'flower'
Tariang	<i>nuuŋ</i>	<i>caaç</i>	<i>ta'paan</i>	<i>kaa</i>	<i>ba'hee</i>	<i>ʔa'piər</i>
Kaseng	<i>buəl</i>	<i>ʔool</i>	<i>klɔəm</i>	<i>ʔa'dum</i>	<i>biər</i>	<i>ʔa'raan</i>
	'brook'	'branch'	'shade'	'shadow'	'crossbow'	'to sleep'
Tariang	<i>nɔɔŋ</i>	<i>baak</i>	<i>ŋuut</i>	<i>mook</i>	<i>sroʔ</i>	<i>leek</i>
Kaseng	<i>huuŋ</i>	<i>n'daaj</i>	<i>kuuwp</i>	<i>ʔa'raʔ</i>	<i>ʔa'nan</i>	<i>ŋiər</i>
	'close (eyes)'	'to weep'	'to run'	'red'	'to eat'	'to kick'
Tariang	<i>ka'soot</i>	<i>rɯ'vɯh</i>	<i>n'duuəç</i>	<i>bruuh</i>	<i>caa</i>	<i>ŋ'jraat</i>
Kaseng	<i>kluw</i>	<i>kliiəw</i>	<i>ʔa'har</i>	<i>broon</i>	<i>cɔŋ</i>	<i>daç</i>

As for cognate words, we detect the two different patterns of phonological changes:

1. Proto Northwest-Bahnaric *CV(C)¹ CV(C) is retained in Tariang but has become CV(C) in Kaseng, and vice versa. See examples in Table 9.
2. Proto Northwest-Bahnaric *ai and *ua are retained in Tariang but have become ee and oo in Kaseng, and vice versa. See examples in Table 9.

Table 9: Different patterns of phonological changes in Tariang and Kaseng

	‘egg’	‘nail’	‘knee’	‘foot’	‘person’	‘bitter’	‘to tie’
Tariang	<i>ka'leh</i>	<i>ka'rias</i>	<i>ta'kool</i>	<i>ca'kooŋ</i>	<i>ma'ŋaaj</i>	<i>ŋ'ŋaŋ</i>	<i>m'blaŋ</i>
Kaseng	<i>leh</i>	<i>riah</i>	<i>kool</i>	<i>kooŋ</i>	<i>ŋaaj</i>	<i>ŋaŋ</i>	<i>blaŋ</i>
	‘bone’	‘rice’	‘ten’	‘to stand’	‘long’	‘sweat’	‘itchy’
Tariang	<i>tiiəŋ</i>	<i>saaj</i>	<i>jit</i>	<i>juuəŋ</i>	<i>ruus</i>	<i>hil</i>	<i>kiiət</i>
Kaseng	<i>ʔa'tiiəŋ</i>	<i>n'saaj</i>	<i>ka'jit</i>	<i>ʔa'juuəŋ</i>	<i>ʔa'ruuʉ</i>	<i>ʔa'hul</i>	<i>ʔa'kiiət</i>
	‘horn’	‘tail’	‘child’	‘you’	‘fruit’	‘moon’	‘otter’
Tariang	<i>ʔa'kuaj</i>	<i>suaj</i>	<i>ʔa'kuan</i>	<i>maj</i>	<i>plee</i>	<i>ka'hee</i>	<i>ba'hee</i>
Kaseng	<i>ʔa'kooj</i>	<i>soj</i>	<i>ʔa'koon</i>	<i>mee</i>	<i>plaj</i>	<i>ʔa'haj</i>	<i>biar</i>

6 Conclusion

On the basis of both lexical and phonological developments, we can identify and group within the two Mon-Khmer branches the thirteen Mon-Khmer languages spoken in Xekong province of southern Laos as follows: the Katuic branch includes the languages of Ta Oi', Katu, Nge'/Kriang, Chatong, Tariw, and Dak Kang; and the Bahnaric branch includes the languages of Suai/Juk, Laven/Jru', Lavi/Savoeng, Tariang, Kaseng, Yaeh, and Alak. The six Katuic languages belong to the East Katuic sub-branch; and the seven Bahnaric languages belong to three sub-branches: (1) West Bahnaric with Juk, Jru', and Savoeng; (2) Northeast Bahnaric with Tariang, Kaseng, and Yaeh; and (3) Northwest Bahnaric with Alak (?). The classification of Alak is still problematic: whether Alak is Central Bahnaric (Thomas), Northwest Bahnaric (Diffloth), or something else is still to be decided.

Once I have finished collecting data for the Xekong project, I might be able to give a better solution. While I have not yet worked extensively on Tariang, Kaseng, Yaeh, and Alak, the present stage of my studies leads me to modify previous classifications proposed by other Mon-Khmer specialists into the following subgroupings:

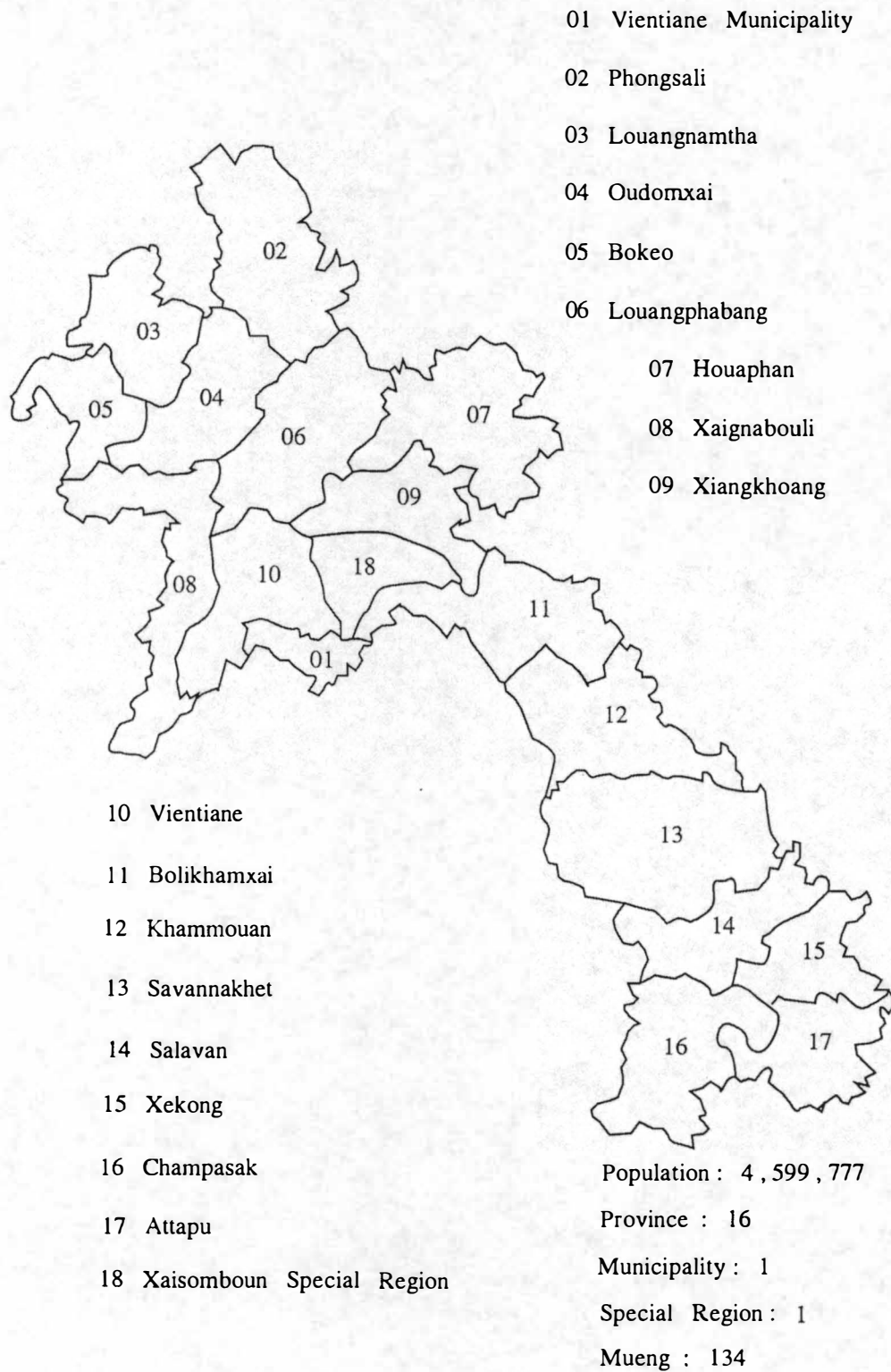
Katuic	<i>West:</i>	Kui, Kuay, Bru, So, etc.
	<i>Central:</i>	Nge', Ta Oi', Chatong, Tariw, Dak Kang, etc.
	<i>East:</i>	Katu, Pacoh, Phuong, etc.
Bahnaric	<i>North:</i>	Northeast: Tariang, Kaseng, Yaeh, etc. Northwest: Alak, etc.
	<i>West:</i>	Laven, Lavi, Juk, Brao, Su', Nyah Hueny, etc.
	<i>East:</i>	Takau, Cua, Sedang, Hre, etc.
	<i>Central:</i>	Tampuan, Bahnar, etc.
	<i>South:</i>	Mnong, Stieng, Sre, Chrau, etc.

My commitment to the Thailand Research Fund (TRF) is to produce a book in Thai and a few papers in English as products of this project. When well-organised sets of data are available and more solid evidence is produced, then the members of our small Mon-Khmer community will be quite well-equipped to search for the truth. At present we can only hypothesise. I would like to stress that my present opinion is based on my preliminary research and is subject to future change.

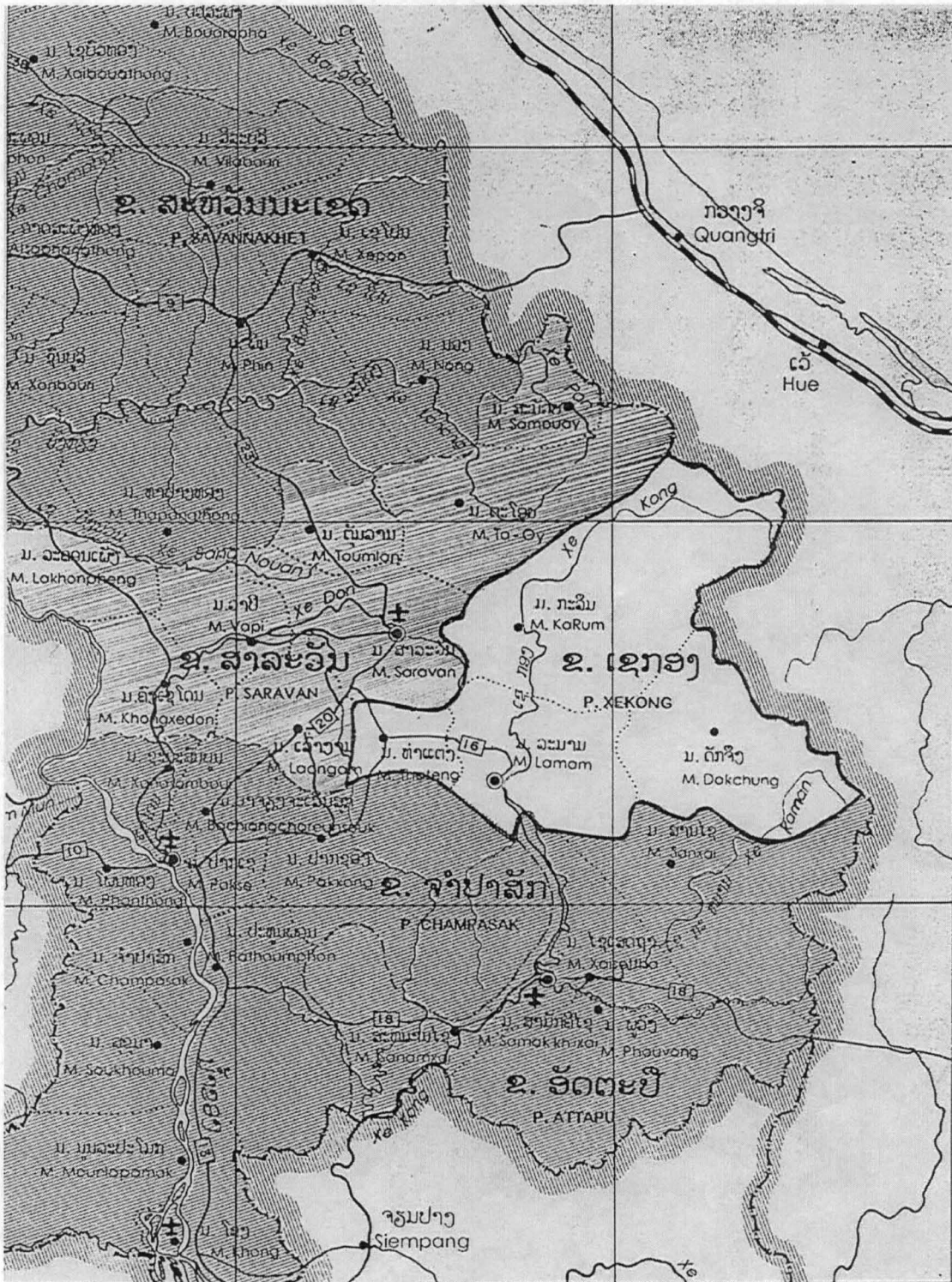
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Appendix



Map 1: Lao PDR



Map 2: Xekong province (from Administrative Map of Lao PDR, National Geographic Department, 1996)

III

Discourse analysis

