

Linguistic characteristics of oral literature in Thadou Kuki

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[Kuki People - Folklores](#)

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July 2, 2007: *Linguistic Characteristics of Oral Literature in Thadou Kuki: A Tibeto-Burman Pre-Literature Language*

1. Thadou Speech: Oral literatures of preliterate Tibeto-Burman communities have not been extensively studied for their literary form, content and linguistic features. The Kuki-Chin languages of the Tibeto-Burman family are no exception to this condition.

Thadou, a Kuki-Chin language, is spoken mainly in Manipur Hills, although a sizeable population speaking Thadou and closely related speech varieties is found in adjoining states of Assam, Nagaland, Mizoram, parts of Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh, and across the Indo-Myanmar border.

The earliest article on Thadou was published in 1800s by Stewart, who was a lieutenant in the British India Army.

Other important works include T. C. Hodson's *Thado Grammar* (1906), *Notes on Thado Kukis* by William Shaw (1929), J. Shakespeare's *Lushai Kuki Clans* (1912), *Thadou Phonetic Reader* by Thirumalai (1971), and Shree Kishan's *Thadou, a Grammatical Sketch* (1980). Some significant research contributions in recent years have been made by the native speakers themselves. *The Structure of the Thadou Society* by T. S. Gangte, for instance, is a good compendium of much needed information to understand the social structure of the peoples speaking the Thadou language.

Shaw's presentation on the ethnographic description of Thadous and related peoples have been questioned by the people speaking the same language (Thadou) but not belonging to the Thadou tribe proper. Certain unfortunate remarks by Shaw in his book led to physical skirmishes. The 1917 Thadou Rebellion or the Kuki Rebellion against the Britishers is a special and significant event in the history of the Indian freedom movement. In any reckoning the groups of people speaking Thadou, Thadou Kuki, or simply Kuki is an important segment within Manipur.

The name of the language THADOU itself is a bone of contention, one section insisting upon the name, Thadou, and another insisting upon the appellation Kuki. Fortunately, there appears to be a general trend to accept THADOU KUKI as the name for the language. I argued for the adoption of this term in 1960s in some of my unpublished articles circulated among the then leaders of the people groups as a compromise. Thadou is written in Roman for about eighty years but it is still plagued by a number of problems relating to spelling standardization, lexical choice, etc. Some folk poems and folktales have been published in stray Thaadou magazines. Neither a comprehensive collection of oral literature in writing nor an analysis of the same is available.

2. Oral Literature in Thadou Kuki: Oral literature in Thaadou may be broadly classified into two groups, namely, ritual and non-ritual. Oral literature employed for ritual purposes is restricted to recitation for ritualistic purposes by only a limited number of people-native priests or shamans, and is known only to them. As most Thadous and people belonging to related tribes have accepted Christianity as their faith, the number of native priests or shamans has come down drastically in the last few decades.

Ritual oral Thadou literature is fast becoming extinct. Even thirty years ago, it was not comprehended by others and required interpretation by the priests. It was recited and not narrated. It was sung without one being able to identify the words and the syllables, with a fixed rhythm. But for the interpretations given, one would be tempted to treat this variety only as a secret code and not as a part of oral literature.

3. Non-Ritual Oral Literature: Non-ritual oral literature in Thaadou, on the other hand, consists of two subcategories. To the first category belong those folk poems and folk tales in a language not fully comprehended and which require interpretation. The pieces of this subcategory are known to many people, people of older generation, but even for them complete comprehension of these is not possible. Vocabulary items not in use and not interpretable even on the basis of context abound in such pieces.

Of this category, poetry forms the majority. In the second category, we have both poetry and folktales, comprehended and enjoyed by all. The second category of the non-ritualistic oral literature is thus open ended. In terms of comprehensibility, there appears to be a continuation between the ritual and the first category of the non-ritual oral literature. The ritual oral literature does not lend itself for parsing, phonological analysis or any type of linguistic analysis on the basis of linguistic structures.

The first sub-category within the non-ritual oral literature is comprehended largely and can be analyzed into various levels by language with some difficulty. However, there are also elements for which no meaning or explicit function could be found. The second sub-category of non-ritualistic oral literature is accessible to all and lends itself to linguistic analysis. This category may further be divided into narrative poetry and narrative prose. Fieldwork experience reveals that in comparison, narrative prose pieces are more in number.

4. To Explain the Differences: Thus there are delivery differences between the non-ritual and ritual categories of oral literature. These differences must be ascribed to the communicative intent of the pieces concerned. The pieces of

ritualistic oral literature, as already pointed out, do not lend themselves to a linguistic structural analysis. It is difficult to decide whether there is any level or unit at all on which these pieces are built. If there are any units or levels, these may have to be found in the context of recitation, the emotional status, and the priests' perception of the condition of the listeners, and not in the "utterances" themselves.

5. Narration in Prose and Poetry: Tales in Serial Form: As in the other cultures, a clear and distinct pattern is seen in the recitation/singing of poetry pieces in comparison to the narration in prose. Narration in prose closely follows the general patterns found in day-to-day conversation, with certain structural devices marking the art form status of the pieces narrated (discussed below). The non-ritual narrative poetry and narrative prose may be further classified into various types, in particular into serials and non-serials. There appears to be continuity in stories narrated.

A large number of stories carry the same characters. The continuity is marked also by the manner in which the character is first introduced and the appellations added to the character. Even where no explicit story content or character connection is established, an impression may be created that the story being narrated is a continuing story, through abrupt introduction, or through some reference to another story, which upon inquiry will be found not at all linked to this story by any character, content or plot, etc. The function of assuming continuity in stories narrated where there is actually no clear connection is still a problem to be solved.

While many narrative pieces are of a serialized variety, there are others which clearly belong to the non-serial type. Both the varieties share common linguistic features (discussed below). The non-serialized variety also contains stories from other linguistic groups such as Meithei and Nagas. Thus one is tempted to suggest the feature inclusion/non inclusion in the serials as a variable for finding whether the story in question is truly a Thadou or pre-literate Kuki-Chin story or a story adopted from non-preliterate Kuki-Chin communities in the same region.

6. Discourse Features: We shall now look into the discourse features: linguistic, formal and context. We shall focus our attention on the structural features, both linguistic and content that mark the beginning, further progression, end, and continuity (leading on to another episode).

1. While many narratives do not have masayla:ijin "Long ago" as the beginning of the narration, the first sentence must have xat "one" in phrases such as nuva? xat "one girl," leypaaxat "one King" (there was a girl, there was a king, etc.).
2. Of the various types of sentences in Thadou, the narration prefers the -ahi ending type. This is a copula-like structure for statement, used in preference to the declarative type. The declarative type is easily converted into a copula-like structure with the addition of link morphs -in to -ahi, thus making a large chunk of the narration into a single sentence. The sentence ending in -ahi becomes ahin to indicate that the sentence is not complete yet, or it is a complex/compound type.
3. Other sentence-linking morphs (conjunctive markers) are also employed to make a narration appear thoroughly connected as if the narration consists of only a few sentences. This feature is noticed also in day-to-day conversations, but is resorted to under certain narrative conditions more often.
4. The choice of the title for the narration may be based on one of the characters, or on the moral of the story, or on one of the events. In some narratives, the character or the event, supposedly using which a title to the narrative is given, may not even be found in that particular narration. The title may have no direct or continued bearing on what is being narrated. Even the moral may not be seen in the narration. And yet the title is retained because such narrations are part of the serial and the character, event or moral is likely to be elaborated somewhere in the serialized structure. These processes are yet to be studied in depth.
5. That a folktale is part of a series, or it may be an end in itself, is revealed through two devices-one device is that the tale starts with some reference, the relevance of which is not readily traceable in the current tale; another device is purely linguistic. With anaphoric references, the narration commences. Abrupt ending of the story or an indication of some movement (of the characters from one place to another or from one activity to another) at the end may also indicate that the story is from a series.
6. Except in a few cases wherein mysterious elements are involved, the sequential organization of sentences and the events narrated correspond to one another. For bringing in magical effect or, perhaps due to taboo, (in cases such as transformation from one form of body to another), events are not narrated; resultant change is obliquely referred to through some descriptive phrase and the story further proceeds. This descriptive phrase is generally a metaphor.
7. Except for the narrative pieces falling under the category of 6, narration is generally straight forward-straight forward in the sense that the sequential organization of sentences matches the sequential organization of events in the external word.
8. While the sequential organization of sentences matches the sequential unfolding of events in the external word, the Thadou folktales occasionally present foregrounding as their chief characteristic. This foregrounding is generally carried out through descriptive phrases.
9. Most of the folktales are short, running to not more than fifty printed lines. This does not, however, mean that the sequences narrated are few. There is a quick succession of events, many a time forcing the characters to assume

different forms, to visit different worlds and to experience a serious obstacle. The shortness of the tale is related to the linguistic facility in the structure, which enables linking to or fusing together of many sentences into one. There is also a general tendency towards brevity based on the practice to bring together compact descriptive phrases. This may also be related to monosyllabic word structure with no elaborated grammatical differences at the formal level.

10. The relationship between foregrounding in one episode and the content in another episode, is one of the major devices that is exploited to establish the continuity of the folktales narrated.

11. In the narrative poetry, love and death relating to fulfillment of love appear to be the dominant theme. Little white and yellow orchid flowers come to be compared with the slenderness of the girl, for whose beauty and hand, the young man yearns. While in the narrative prose also love episodes are abundant, the prose pieces-the folk tales-abound in a variety of characters, both earthly and supernatural. The stepmother, the widow, the widower, the tiger-man, the passage from the earth to moon, the tall ever-growing creeper touching the skies and leading to the other world, the life under the ground (under the earth) and efforts to go over ground, the metamorphosis of characters into other forms and incarnations, the rectitude, cunning and clever animals, the cunning and cleverness of individuals and a whole series of Benglam stories-all present a very complex world of Thadous.

7. Themes: Except for lexical cohesion, the themes do not apparently lead to differences in style of language and presentation. This investigator is not a native speaker of Thadou and hence his assumption in this regard requires further proof. Sentence length, types of sentences, folktale length, remain more or less the same in different themes. The conquest of audience, however, could be different. The recorded folktales available with the investigator were recorded without reference to any one particular audience. Perhaps a real audience would have brought out the differences in style.

8. Relationship Between Thadou Folklore and Folklore of Other Kuki-Chin Languages: We shall now look into the relationship between Thadou folklore and the folklore of other Kuki-Chin communities, and see how internal sub-grouping of Kuki-Chin languages is corroborated also by folklore. Manipuri/Meithei and Lushai/Mizo are populous languages of the Kuki-Chin group. Manipuri/Meithei has a written history of its own for many centuries, whereas the other languages of the Kuki-Chin family have a comparatively recent introduction to writing.

The settled conditions of the Meithei society and the mobile jhum-cultivating population of the other Kuki-Chin languages present development in different directions. While Lushai/Mizo, Thadou, Hmar, Paite, etc., the languages of the Kuki-Chin group, share among themselves many folktales, characters, and themes and these are also sung or received or narrated in the same rhythmic manner, Manipuri/Methei, the largest community settled in the Manipur valley with a history dating back to at least one thousand years or more, presents a distinct appearance. There is not much of an impact of Methei folklore on the core of the folklore of other Kuki Chin languages.

This diversion is reflected also on the phonological and grammatical structures of the Methei/Manipuri vis-a-vis Kuki-Chin preliterate languages. The internal sub-grouping of Kuki Chin that Methei/Manipuri on the one hand and pre-literate languages on the other hand may be corroborated at the folklore level also. Secondly, a cursory comparative study of the phonologies of Kuki-Chin languages reveals some interesting phonological variables which can help us to group these languages more or less decidedly into several subgroups. One such variable is the plus or minus trill phonological segment.

The minus trill feature neatly brings Thadou, Paite, Vaiphei, Gangte, Teddim Chin, Zoute and Simte under a single subgroup. This classification based on a purely linguistic variable is supported one hundred per cent by the folklore materials. Thus, Thadou Kuki has a large number of folktales of non-religious type revolving around a single, humorous and unique personality called Benglam. He is clownish, generally foolish and at times extra ordinarily brilliant. Even the mention of his name to a Thadou will provoke him into laughter. This humorous character is called Penglam in Paite, Teddim Chin and Simte; he is called Benglam in Vaiphei, Gangte and Zoute.

There is no necessity for us to be misled by the identity of the usage of the name only. If we go still further collecting Benglam stories in all these languages are more or less identical. The non-Benglam and plus trill feature subgroup of languages such as Hmar and Lushai do not mention the name of Benglam at all and the seemingly identical stories (of Benglam type) in these languages vary very much in their content. Thus this additional support from the folklore materials confirms the linguistic classification in a general way.

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[< Prev](#)

[Next >](#)