A Diachronic View of Burmese Kinship Terminologies[1]

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During the last two decades the study of kinship systems has received a good deal of attention. Most of the discussions, like those an structure and sentiment, descent and alliance, unilineal and cognatic, were concerned with functional or structural interpretations and concepts, based on cross-cultural comparisons. Relatively little importance, however, has been attached to the historical aspect of the systems under consideration. The traditional agnosticism with regard to unreported history confessed by functionalists as well as the primarily ahistorical character of the models used by the structuralists may account for this tendency. Nevertheless, there have been valuable contributions to diachronic studies, to mention but Spoehr's (1947) researches on the changes in the Muskogean systems; and G. Dole (1957) has even been successful in the formulation of a general rule, viz. that the first categories to change their connotation within a given kin term System are those of Ego's generation.

In spite of these achievements the study of the development of the different components in the context of a changing social system is still deemed mere guesswork unless we have reliable reports for consecutive historical periods on which to base our conclusions. This critical position severely limits the source material at hand for diachronic studies. Under certain conditions, however, comparative studies on closely related systems may help to enlarge our possibilities. A relatively well documented example, which will be seen to cover both aspects, can be compiled from the various sources we possess on the Burmese kinship terminologies.

The first scholar to take Burmese material into account for a comparative study on kinship was L. Morgan (1871). His list, however, suffers from the handicap of a predetermined scheme and is, moreover, marred by several misprints. A far better source had been published several years before Morgan's book. Still, it requires a certain knowledge of Burmese written characters to use it. This reliable and comprehensive source is the Burmese-English dictionary of Rev. A. Judson, first published in 1852, revised and enlarged several times, and reprinted in a centenary edition. In recent years, another two lists of Burmese kin terms were published by Ch. Brant and Mi Mi Khaing (1951) and by R. Burling (1965). These two sets of data – those of the last century and those of recent date – will constitute our source material necessary for a downright historical

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[1] This paper is reprinted here, because otherwise the reader may have difficulties to consult the original publication (in the Proceedings of the VIIIth International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences, Tokyo and Kyoto 1968), while the data and conclusions contained in it will be mentioned several times in my paper on "Male Bias."

investigation. For the purpose of further comparisons 1 shall use another set of data, viz. the kinship terminologies reported from the Arakan frontier side.

At the request of W. Rivers, kinship terms from various ethnic groups of Burma were collected for the Census 1911. The quality of these lists, however, is sometimes rather deplorable, and it is only with care that we may use this source for the Khyongsa, i. e., the river people of Arakanese stock in Arakan. Quite a number of these Khyongsa today live in East Pakistan, where they have been studied in recent years. A list of kinship terms collected by A. Sawada in 1964 is worth even less than that of the Census of 1911, and another list, collected by C. Levi-Strauss and published in 1952, suffers not only from the author's unacquaintedness with the language but contains some errors too. Really reliable data were published but last year (1967) by L. Bernot in his book on the Arakanese peasants in East Pakistan, who call themselves Marma. "Marma," like "Burma," apparently goes back to the old Burmese ethnonym "Mranma," yet it comes closer to the old Mon (Talaing) form of this name, viz. Mirma. The Marma themselves are proud of a certain Talaing ancestry. We shall have to reconsider the question of a Talaing influence later on.

Linguistically, the kin terms used by the Arakanese or Marma differ from those reported from Burma proper mainly in their pronunciation, the Arakanese pronunciation being more archaic. The written form, on the other hand, is practically the same, and in order to facilitate comparisons I have, therefore, preferred to transliterate rather than to transcribe the Burmese as well as the Arakanese terms. Different terms are used by male and female speakers according to their sex mainly in order to designate their siblings-in-law. For the present purpose I shall merely deal with the terms used by a male speaker, since they are better documented. However, as far as I can see, with the female set of terms the results would be exactly the same. Furthermore, I have restricted the analysis to three generations, i. e., to Ego's own, the first ascending, and the first descending generation. For the second ascending and descending generations, principally the same categories are used in all systems under consideration.

There are basically but two terms for all relatives of the second ascending and but one term for the second descending generation. We therefore shall have to consider mainly the terms relating to parents, uncles and aunts, and parents-in-law, to siblings, cousins, siblings-in-law, and parents of children-in-law, and finally to children, nephews and nieces, and children-in-law.

Let us begin by a comparison of the Marma system reported by Bernot and the Burmese system reported by Judson (fig. 1 and 2). The basic terms for father, mother, their parallel siblings and their spouses are the same. Regarding Marma *a'do* for "mother," Bernot has already noted that it may be the same term as *do* used in modem Burmese for "aunt." *Do* or *a'do* are not to be found in Judson's dictionary, but he gives *kri:-to* and *thwe:-to,* the second syllable to be pronounced *-do,* as colloquial forms of address for *mi'-kri:* and *mi'-thwe:* (elder

and younger "mother") respectively.[2] The distinguishing adjective *thwe:,* used for the youngest uncle or aunt in Judson's Burmese, is also mentioned by Bernot. With the Manna, *thwe:* is generally used in the designation of the second eldest of one's parents' siblings; in especially polite or endearing address, however, one, may also use *bha'-thwe:,* for instance, for father's younger brother or mother's younger sister's husband. Marma *a'khang,* "mother's elder brother," has its counterpart in Burmese *sa'khang,* formerly designating a master or a lord. Of similar reverential character and used in address only are Marma *sa'kong:* and *sa'kong:ma'.*

In Ego's and the children's generation Judson and Bernot give practically the same terms, the only difference being Marma *a'may* instead of Burmese *a'ma'* "elder sister"; in *khray-ma'* and *khrwe:ma'* Marma has preserved the more archaic *-r-.* There is, however, a major semantic difference in the categories of Ego's generation: the Marma, but not the Burmese, call their cross-cousins by the same terms as their siblings-in-law. For Burmese, the question is a little more complicated than will appear from my diagram: Judson's Burmese-English does not mention the cousins, and it is only by reference to the English-Burmese part that we learn that sibling terms may be used for the cousins as well, for referential purposes, however, descriptive terms are used, for instance: *bha'-kri:-sa:* = "father's elder brother's son," *u:ri:-sa'mi:* = "mother's brother's daughter," etc.

The systems of the Marma and the old Burmese are obviously rather close to each other, but while the Marma use a consistent bifurcate-merging Iroquois terminology, the Burmese system combines a bifurcate-merging arrangement in the first ascending and descending generation with cousin terms of the Hawaiian (or, if you prefer, Eskimo) type. This type of cousin terminology apparently would go better with lineal categories, and it is a lineal terminology that has actually been reported by both Brant and Burling. In face of the evidence of these reports, it must be emphasised that there can be absolutely no doubt about the bifurcate-merging character of the relevant categories in Judson's dictionary: his definitions are unambiguously clear. The only explanation which will account for these facts is a change in the system. To a certain degree this change can be documented by the list published by Morgan.

Comparing Judson's terms with those given by Burling (fig. 2 and 3), we perceive that the terms in Ego's generation are practically the same. *(Min:ma'* for "wife" was already known to Judson, and *ma'ya:,* also given by Morgan, is still listed by Burling as an alternative term). In the first descending generation, however, the lineal arrangement in the modem system is obvious. Already in

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[2] /:/ and /'/ are used to mark the tone of the syllable, /:/ indicating the falling tone, /'/ the creaky tone. For the latter the usual indication is (as in Burmese writing) a dot below the vowel. But what was available to the printer in 1970, is no longer available to the computerised editing in 2001. /o/ is to be pronounced as open /o/, /ö/ (here used for the Burmese sign normally transcribed as "ui") is to be pronounced as closed /o/.

Morgan's list, *tu* and *tu-ma'* are used for all nephews and nieces and their respective spouses. In the first ascending generation, Morgan's terms for parents' parallel siblings are still the same as those given by Judson. With regard to cross-siblings, however, *a'ri:* is replaced by *kri:-to* and *thwe:-to; bha'-kri:* is used instead of *u:ri.,* while *u:-mang:* appears besides *bha'-thwe:* for mother's younger brother and mother's younger sister's husband. Moreover, "father" is *a'bha[1]* or *a'phe,* and "mother" is *a'mi'* or *a'me.*

Today, *a'bha'* and *a'mi'* are still used in literary language, but in ordinary style the terms for parents are now clearly differentiated from those for uncles and aunts. The terms for parents' elder parallel siblings have been extended to all of their elder siblings and their spouses. For the younger siblings and their spouses the term for "mother's brother" was applied to the male relatives, while for the female relatives the term *a'ri:* has been completely dropped in Rangoon and *do* has taken its place. For several terms Burling lists a number of alternative forms, and there exists a full scale of suffixed adjectives to mark the relative age from the eldest to the youngest of uncles and aunts. Among them *u:-kri:* and *do-kri:* are used, according to Burling, as alternatives of *bha'-kri:* and *kri:to* (fig. 3 and 4). Brant and Mi Khaing, on the other hand, list *u:-kri:* and *do-kri:* as terms for the second eldest uncle and aunt respectively. This minor discrepancies may be taken to indicate that the process of lineal re-arrangement has not yet reached complete consolidation.

More importance can be attached to another feature: According to Burling, wife's sister's husband is called like brother, and wife's brother's wife is called like sister. According to Brant and Mi Khaing, however, wife's sister's husband is called like wife's brother, and wife's brother's wife is called like wife's sister, thereby breaking up the quasi dual arrangement of two intermarrying groupings by which spouses' siblings' spouses are equated with siblings. I hesitate, however, to perceive the same tendency behind the appearance of separate terms for sister's husband and wife's brother in Brant's list. In all of the other systems under consideration sister's husband is called *yok-pha* by a male speaker, while *khai:o,* designating also a husband's brother, is the corresponding term for a female speaker. Brant's *khai:o* - sister's husband without indication of the speaker's sex may therefore be incorrect. Burling's system, on the other hand, indicates an inroad on the dual grouping as well, but in opposite direction. Here the sibling terms do cover not only spouses' siblings' spouses but also siblings' spouses' siblings. Burling himself remarks that this usage may appear somewhat odd, since these kinsmen to be called by sibling terms include a number of possible spouses. Still, it seems common Burmese usage, documented also by Judson, to address one's spouse by a sibling term or its derivative.

Unfortunately, neither Judson nor Brant mention siblings' spouses' siblings. Apart from Burling, Morgan is the only source on the systems of Burma proper to mention them. His data, however, are somewhat ambiguous: wife's brother's wife is given as *yok-pha' ma'ya:,* a descriptive term meaning "brother-in-law's

wife." Husband's sister's husband is given as *khai:o,* being the term for sister's husband, woman speaking. Still, husband's brother's wife and wife's sister's husband are *a'ma'-to* and *a'kö-to* respectively, i. e., they are called by reverential terms. And it is this use of sibling terms which is confirmed by Burling. After all, there seems to prevail a certain uncertainty or vagueness with regard to secondary in-laws, and since Judson mentions neither siblings' spouses' siblings nor spouses' siblings' spouses, we may ask whether the dual grouping, expressed in the equation of spouses' siblings with siblings' spouses, was actually realised beyond these relations in the old Burmese system.

Also Bernot, in his discussion of the Marma terms does not indicate any extension of the dual grouping beyond the primary in-laws. A more far-reaching and consistent dual grouping, however, implying the equation of siblings' spouses siblings with in-laws (or cross-cousins) and spouses' siblings' spouses with siblings, is evident from Bernot's case studies on forbidden or disapproved marriages. This conclusion is corroborated by Webb's Khyongsa material, according to which sibling terms are used for spouses' siblings' spouses (fig. 5 and 1). Webb's data seem to indicate other interesting features as well; it must be remembered, however, that they are rather incomplete. The list does not distinguish, for instance, between elder and younger uncles and aunts. The terms given probably apply to the younger uncles and aunts and their spouses only. The two terms for parents' elder parallel siblings, shown in the diagram, have been added by me, basing myself on the evidence of the terminology used in the Chittagong Hill Tracts where the terms *a'bay* and *a'way* are known as well. With the Marma, the term *a'bay* is used also in addressing unrelated men a little older than the speaker. Similarly, for much older men *wa'-kri:* is used. *Wa'-kri:* is nothing but a variant, also noted by Judson, of *u:-kri:,* "mother's brother." Marma *wa'-kri:,* however, does not seem to convey much respect, and this may explain why *a'khang,* "master," is used in its stead to address mother's brother. The rather complete equation of cross uncles and aunts with parents-in-law in Webb's list seems remarkable, its evidence, however, should not be overrated. Cross-cousin marriage being a rather common feature with the Khyongsa, the equation may be based on the personal relations of the informant. At any rate the terms of reference for children-in-law and cross nephews and nieces are clearly distinct. Most probably Bernot's and Webb's data reflect the same system.

When we now try to compare this system (fig. 1 and 5) with the Burmese systems (fig. 2 to 4), the major differences obviously exist between the Arakanese system and the contemporaneous system of Rangoon, while Judson's old Burmese system holds a medium position. In order to derive the modern from the old Burmese system, the former bifurcate-merging terminology had to be replaced by a lineal terminology more conform to the distribution of terms in Ego's generation. The modern arrangement in the parental generation reflects the dichotomy of siblings and cousins which appears in Judson's data: primary terms for siblings, descriptive terms for cousins. The contemporaneous reports, on the

other hand, indicate Hawaiian cousin terms without restriction. According to Burling, these terms extend also to siblings' spouses' siblings, Brant and Mi Khaing, however, reveal an opposite tendency, viz. to set off own kin against the group of affinals. I am unable to decide whether the fact that neither Burling nor Brant give any terms for children-in-law's parents has any significance in this context.

Let us return to the Marma-Khyongsa system. In order similarly to derive it from Judson's system we should have to assume that, contrary to what happened in Burma, the Marma adjusted their cousin terms to the terminological structure of the first ascending and descending generation. Thus, while the Burmese system could be seen to confirm Dole's rule, the Marma system would contradict it. Any such problem, however, will disappear if we assume that it was not Judson's system which preceded the Marma system, but, contrarily, that it is the Marma system which, although being reported but recently, represents the older stage.

In favour of this assumption we may also adduce that the use of sibling terms for spouses' siblings' spouses, still reported by Burling and quite consistent with the Marma system and its equation of cross-cousins and siblings-in-law, has no basis in an Eskimo or Hawaiian system which should rather tend to develop the dichotomy of consanguinal kin and affinal relatives reported by Brant. Furthermore a special term mentioned by Judson for a cousin of opposite sex, *sa'mi:-myok-sa:* (literally perhaps "intermarrying daughter and son") may be reinterpreted in view of our assumption as referring to cross-cousins of opposite sex being marriage partners. On a more general level, the assumption of an original Iroquois type of Burmese cousin terminology would bring it closer to the systems of other Tibeto-Burmese societies. Although Obayashi (1955) has suggested that the linguistically closest relations of the Burmese, the Maru, Atsi, and Lashi, had Hawaiian cousin terms as well, I should maintain that Webb's data in the Census for 1911, on which Obayashi had to rely, can better be interpreted in favour of an Iroquois (or even Omaha) system.

There is, however, another way by which the development of the Hawaiian type of Burmese cousin terms might be explained. In the Tibeto-Burmese tribal societies Omaha systems appear rather frequently, and it has even been suggested (e. g. by Benedict 1941) that the Omaha type was the original Sino-Tibetan form of cousin terms. A breakdown of an Omaha terminology usually results in Hawaiian cousin terms. This process is evident from some systems in the Kuki-Chin area. Still, the assumption of a similar process for the Burmese system has the disadvantage that it neither explains the Iroquois system of the Marma nor the dichotomy between siblings and cousins noted by Judson and unknown in the Hawaiian terminologies which resulted from a breakdown of Omaha terms.

The same dichotomy, however, i. e., the use of primary terms for siblings and of descriptive terms for all cousins, can be found in the kin terms of the Mon (cf. Webb 1911, in view of Shorto 1962). In that particular respect the Mon system is nearer to that of the Burman than the lineal Eskimo type of the Karen or the

lineal Hawaiian (or sometimes Eskimo) type of the Shan and Thai. I mentioned that the Marma claim a certain Mon (= Talaing) ancestry. It will be impossible, however, to attribute the special structure of the Marma kin categories to Mon influence: there is a clear opposition of the Mon-Burmese type on the one hand and that of the Marma on the other. Still, before we can insist on the role of the Mon system in the shaping of the Burmese system as reported by Judson, we shall have to take into account also Burmese influence on the non-Burmese kin term systems of Burma. It will not be necessary to enter into details, as it is but the question of lineal or bifurcate merging arrangement which is of concern. And it is in this respect that Benedict (1943) and Obayashi (1955) unanimously, by their comparative analysis of different Thai and Austroasian systems, were led to the conclusion that the Hawaiian lineal type represents the old tradition of these societies. Whatever the reason for the process may have been, we may content ourselves to state that there actually was an agent who may have stimulated the change in the old Burmese system.

The rearrangements in the first ascending and descending generation categories of the Burmese system are documented by our sources of the last hundred years; with regard to the shift in Ego's generation, however, we have no indication. From Than Tun's study on the social life in Burma during the Pagan period it would appear that practically the same terms as those reported by Judson were in use already at that time; on the crucial question of cousin terms, however, our source is silent. Nor do we have any clear indication about the time when the Marma entered Arakan and broke away from their Burmese relatives. Except for the categories of the first ascending and descending generations the change from a bifurcate merging Iroquois type to a lineal Hawaiian type must, therefore, remain but a working hypothesis as long as our knowledge of modern Burmese kin term systems will remain restricted to the recent Rangoon system. It may, however, become better documented if it would be possible to collect and to analyse comparative data from various Burmese countrysides.

In the figures the major terms are in capitals, minor terms (possible variants) are in small letters. In case two lines have been used, elder relatives are in the first line, younger ones in the second line - except in cases where no elder/ younger distinction is to be expected: here the second line contains an alternate form. Arrows in a connecting line indicate that the relationship is to be read one way only. It will be seen that the terms remain more or less the same in the different figures. What changes are the alignments, that is, the subsumption of uncles/aunts, cousins and nephews/nieces under the terms in question.
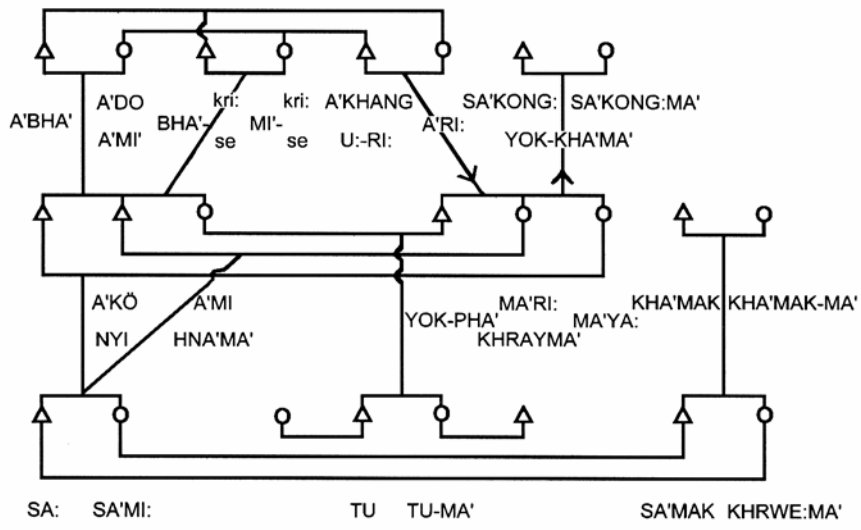
Fig. 1   Bernot

A'BHA'   A'DO   kri: kri: A'KHANG   SA'KONG: SA'KONG:MA'
      A'MI'   BHA'-   MI'-   U:-RI: A'RI: YOK-KHA'MA'
             se   se

      A'KÖ   A'MI   MA'RI: KHA'MAK   KHA'MAK-MA'
      NYI   HNA'MA'   YOK-PHA'   MA'YA:
                       KHRAYMA'

SA: SA'MI: TU   TU-MA'   SA'MAK   KHRWE:MA'

Fig. 2   Judson

A'BHA'   A'MI'   BHA'-   kri: kri: RI: A'RI: YOK-KHA'MA'
             thwe: MI'-   U:-
                 thwe: MANG:

     ACKÖ   ACMA'   MA'RI: KHA'MAK   KHA'MI'
     NYI   HNA'MA'   YOK-PHA'   MA'YA:
                     KHAYMA'

SA: SA'MI: TU-MA'   TU   TU-MA'   TU   SA'MAK   KHYWE:MA'

Fig. 3   Burling

A'BHA'   A'MI'   BHA'-KRI: KRI:-TO   YOK-KHA'MA'
            u:-kri-   do-kri:
            U:-LE: DO-LE:

     A'KÖ   A'MA'   MA'RI: ma'ya:
     nong   ma'ma'   YOK-PHA'   MIN:MA'
     NYI   NYI-MA'   KHAYMA'
     nyi-nyi   hna'ma'

SA: SA'MI: TU-MA'   TU   TU-MA'   TU   SA'MAK   KHYWE:MA'

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Fig. 4   Brant

BHA'-KRI: KRI:-KRI:
U:-KRI: DO-KRI:
U:-LE: DO-LE: YOK-KHA'MA'

A'PHE   A'ME

A'KÖ   A'MA'   KHAI:-Ö   MA'RI: MIN:MA'
                         YOK-PHA'
NYI   HNA'MA'   KHAYMA'   NYI-MA'-LE:

SA: SA'MI: TU   TU-MA'   SA'MAK   KHYWE:MA'

Fig. 5   Webb

bha'-kri: a'kri:ma'   SA'KONG:
                      A'KHANG A'RI:
A'BHA'   A'MI'   A'BAY   AY'WAY   A'RI:
                                A'KHANG

A'KÖ   A'MAY   MA'RI:
                 YOK-PHA'   MA'YA: KHA'MAK
NYI   NYI-MA'   KHRAYMA'

SA: SA'MI: TU   TU-MA'   SA'MAK   KHRWE:MA'
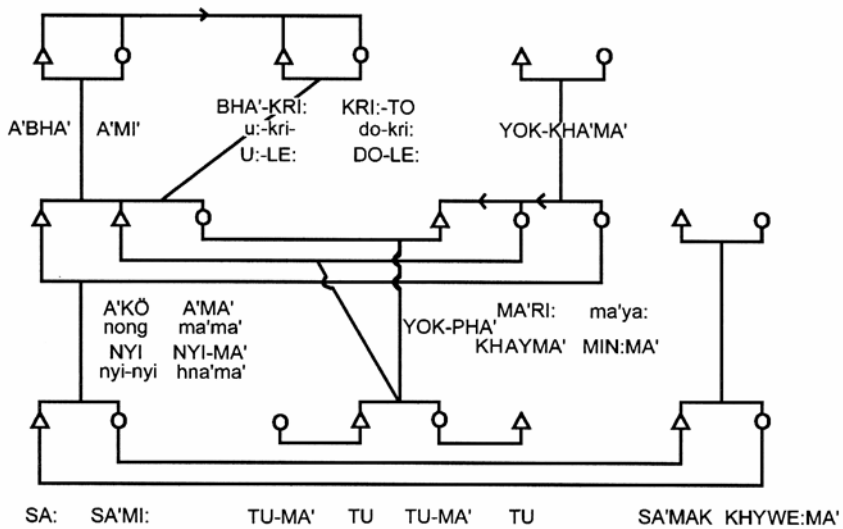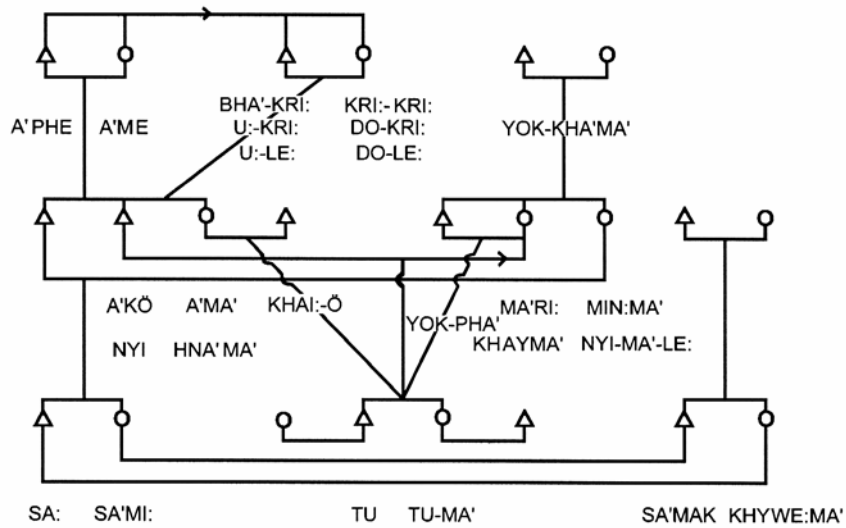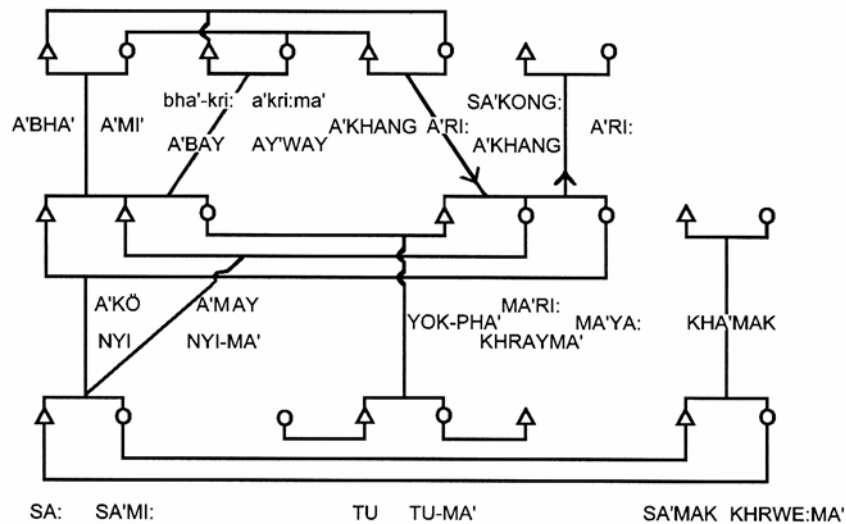

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