A grammar of the Kachin language

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OF THE

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BY

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PREFACE.

This attempt to explain the laws of the Kachin language does not pretend to be exhaustive in all its details. Neither do we wish to be dogmatical upon any of the numerous points, where further investigation no doubt will throw new light. All the help at present available has been utilized, but owing to the great uncertainty that everywhere confronts us, any one attempting a work like this must to a great extent rely solely upon his own judgment.

The system of writing employed is that adopted by the Government of India, to which has been added a few explanatory notes. No alphabet adapted to the needs of an alien tongue will ever do full justice to the same, until it has grown into and become one with the language itself.

In spelling and pronunciation we have mostly relied upon the opinions of such Kachins as have been able for some time to use the system employed. Some of the Kachin sounds are extremely difficult for a European ear to get correctly. Where a number of educated Kachins agree upon a given point, their judgment can as a rule be relied upon and followed.

The Southern Kachin, or Chinghpaw, as spoken in the Bhamo district has been taken as our basis. Still we have everywhere attempted to call attention to the differences, both in pronunciation and idiomatic usages, found in different localities. All we hope is that this work may prove a guide to further study of this difficult but interesting dialect.

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KACHIN GRAMMAR.

INTRODUCTION.

1. The Kachin, or more properly the Jinghpaw, or Chinghpaw, language, comprises one of the branches of the great Mongolian family. In its nature and genius it is strictly monosyllabic, but many indications are at hand to show that it has entered upon its agglutinative stage. Its Grammar agrees in the main with the rest of the dialects belonging to the same stock, and its vocabulary presents a strong relationship with Burmese, Shan and Chinese. Other dialects kindred to Kachin are also spoken in Upper Burma, of which the most important are Māru and Atsi, the one known as Lāshi being but a modification of the latter. The origin of these dialects would be an interesting subject in itself, but must as yet be regarded as undetermined.

2. The vocabulary in Kachin is not as meagre as has often been asserted. It must contain about 12,000 words, which is sufficient to express more than ordinary thought, and to describe almost any phenomenon in everyday life. Its grammar is remarkably full and even exact, and not without serious difficulties to a western mind. To think and speak as a Kachin is no easy matter, and the main trouble in understanding even ordinary Kachin must be sought in the fact that the full force of their numerous particles and other grammatical peculiarities have not been sufficiently mastered.

3. The Kachins, never having been a literary people, being broken up into a great number of
tribes, clans and families, cannot be expected to agree with each other in all particulars regarding pronunciation or vocabulary. More or less important differences may be noticed in almost every village, or at least among every family and tribe. To treat of all these differences and peculiarities would be an endless and useless task. It will be necessary, however, to point out the general variations, characterizing and distinguishing the representative branches of the whole Kachin race.

4. For the sake of convenience, we will divide the whole Kachin race in upper Burma into three great divisions, which we will call, the Southern Chinghpaws, the Cowries, and the Northern Chinghpaws, without attempting any definite demarcation for either, and in a general outline notice the chief differences in their otherwise common language.

(1) S. Chinghpaw. Cowrie.

(a) Difference of vocabulary:
Dai, to be sharp ; Jung.
Hkali, fever ; Ara.
Mädi, to be moist ; Ke.
Läsi, to be lean ; Mäkhru.
Upreng, a quail ; Gälük.
Anhtê, we ; I or i hteng.
Nanhtê, you ; Ni or ni hteng.
A, sign of the genitive ; Ya or yê.
Ai, a general connective ; De.

(b) Use of different performatives:
Bungli, work ; Mangli.
Gintawng, the morning star; Kantawng.
Shingtai, a worm ; Dungtai.
Nhtu, a sword ; Ninghtu.
Nbung, wind ; Mäbung.

Rem. The use of ning in Cowrie where the S. Ching. has n, is very common. The n should be considered an abbreviation of ning. Thus the Cowrie
would say ninghtoi, where the S. Ching. use nhtoi.

(c) Different use of aspirates and lakials:

- Hkyen, to cut jungle; Shen.
- Hka, a river; Kha.
- Mähkawn, a maiden; Mäkhawn.
- Hpun, wood; Pfun.
- Hpan, to create; Pfan.
- Pyaw, to feel happy; Praw.

Rem. The use of the aspirates, just illustrated, which runs all through the Cowrie dialect, must be considered one of its chief characteristics.

(d) Different use of final letters and syllables:

- Ma, a child; Mang.
- Māsha, a person; Māshang.
- Kābawng, to burst; Kābum.
- Mājaw, because; Mājoi.
- Na, from; Nai.
- Mālut, tobacco; Mālawt.

(e) Use of Chinese words introduced into Cowrie:

- Hking, a saddle; Shian.
- Jārit, food for a journey; Shizau.

(2) The differences between the S. and N. Chinghpaws are to a certain extent the same as those between the S. Chinghpaws and the Cowries. The Kachins north of Myitkyina, on both sides of the Irrawaddy, all have a tendency to use the final ng where the S. Chinghpaws would end in a vowel. The use of the pronouns also more often agree with the Cowrie, than with the S. Chinghpaw. Besides these, the following peculiarities may be noticed:

**S. Chinghpaw.**

(a) Use of different words:

- Tam, to seek; Bram.
- Shāman, to bless; Kāhtan.
- Noihkrat, rubber; Gānoi.
- Shat mai, curry; Si.
Hpa, what?  Hkai.
Gāde, how many?  Gālaw.

Rem. This list might be somewhat enlarged, but it should not be thought that these and similar words are unknown in different localities. No S. Chinghpaw would have any difficulty in understanding one from the North, even though his own idiomatic usage may be different.

(b) Different pronunciations of the same word; Chyē, to know; Chyoi or Chyeng.
(c) Different usage of the same word:
Ngawn, to rejoice, considered indecent by many of the N. Chinghpaws.
Num, a woman, considered disrespectful in some localities N. and also in certain cases by the S. Chinghpaws.

5. Words introduced from kindred dialects will naturally vary in different localities. Thus the word for taxes is generally kanse or hkansi in and around Bhamo. In the Moguang district hpunda was often heard, and kantawk seems to be confined to Myitkyina and surroundings. The words used to designate Government officials, for example, may be: du ni; agyi ni; atsu ya ni; hkur ni or jaru ni, all except the first being borrowed from the Burmese or Shan.

6. The same word, even in the same locality, may have different pronunciations. Thus käkup, a hat, may also be pronounced lakup; pungkum, a chair, lakum; nlung, a kind of root from which a yellow dye is extracted, shalung; shinglung or yanlung. The general tendency is to interchange l and m, j and sh. Thus lāhkam or māhkam, a trap; jāhpawt or shāhpawt, a morning. Such peculiarities as, māl̥ māngli or bungli, work; māla, minla or numla, a spirit, deserve attention, but do not appear to be very numerous.
7. In view of the great diversity and differences in pronunciation, it will not be insisted upon that the way an individual word is spelled in this work must correspond to its pronunciation by each and all of the Kachin tribes. The same must be said in regard to idiomatic usages. A very common idiom in one district may be very little used in another. Besides, the Kachins themselves distinguish between the "children's language" (ma ga); the language in everyday use (maioi ga); and the "language of the elders" (sæ-lang ga), and each may be said to have some distinct feature of its own. At present our only attempt is to present the general broad outlines of the language.

8. Some attention must here be paid to the religious, or the nat, language of the Kachins. The definite meaning of all the terms used in connection with the nat worship is not known to the average Kachin. All have a general idea as to their import, but only the "elders" (sæ-lang ni), the Nat-priests, (dumsa ni), the professional storytellers (jai wa ni), and the nat prophets (myihtoi ni), are able to give the full meaning of the words and phrases they employ. It is a great mistake to think that the long and tiresome rhapsodies, to which a visitor to a Kachin village may have an opportunity to listen, are all a meaningless jargon. Every word and sentence has some meaning. No doubt a large part of this vocabulary echoes reminiscences from an earlier date, and is antiquated so far as its daily use is concerned, but a still larger part is still in use, especially among "the elders" in conversation among themselves, or in general consultations. No one can have a comprehensive knowledge of Kachin without a fair understanding of this important and interesting part of the language.

9. The figurative and consequently, what we for want of a better term, may call the poetical
structure of the nat language is very marked. In connection with this the following points may be noticed:

(a) Employment of unusual terms. Thus, water, ntsin, is here called dingru; liquor, jāru, is called hpang; an egg, udi, is called ḫaklum.

(b) Figurative names for common objects. Thus, water, ntsin, may be called san hpungsan, li hpungnan or lam gālu; jāru, liquor, may be called lānu sālat; udi, eggs, bam bam; wa, a hog, māhkaw ḫkingyi.

Rem. Often different names are employed by the dumsa, jai wa and myihtoi. Thus māhkaw ḫkingyi, a hog, would by many be called myihtoi ga, “prophetical language”, while a phrase such as ĵi nma hpri nhpra, “before the beginning” would be called jai wa ga, “the story letter’s language.”

(c) The parallelismus membrorum, or the attempt to unfold the same thought in two successive parallel members of the same division:

Shālung māhtan yin nga ga;
Shāla māhtan hpyin sa wa ga;
Akawng ginngai ya du ga;
Mārawn gindai ya pru ga;
“Let us pass the Shālung tree;
Let us go by the Shāla tree;
We will arrive at the low hill;
Let us go forth to the high hill.”
Hkauka ningshan mānau n rat,
Si myan ari hta gau n hkrat.
“Dancing on the sword’s edge he is not hurt,
Walking on a cotton thread; he does not fall.”

(d) In connection with the parallelismus membrorum, which is the most characteristic of the religious language, may also be noticed the use of couplets.