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NEO-AHOM AND THE PARABLE OF THE PRODIGAL SON

Ahom is the western most of the Tai languages. Early in the thirteenth century the Tai-Ahoms migrated from a region in what is now called upper Burma, across the Patkai to the Brahmaputra Valley. Gradually they conquered the lowlands of Assam, and in order to deal with their greatly increased kingdom they adopted the Indo-European Assamese language as the lingua franca. The Ahom language, with its monosyllabic character and unique script, eventually ceased to be a vernacular. Already at the beginning of the nineteenth century its use was limited to a small priestly class, who derived a measure of status from being able to read ancient documents and chant them aloud.

Those who have attempted to read and translate Ahom manuscripts or who have examined features of Ahom in comparative Tai studies, have relied upon existing published grammars and dictionaries. The present article is intended to appraise past work on Ahom grammar. It will be shown that the standard works are based wholly on the analysis of groups of sentences that were deliberately contrived by people unqualified to produce them. This critical analysis, it is hoped, may assist future scholars in avoiding the pitfalls that have hitherto prevented many from having much success in attempts at translating Ahom, may help foster an awareness of the fact that authentic Ahom manuscripts are relatively easily understood by people familiar with other Tai languages, and may generally stimulate interest in the wealth of useful knowledge stored in unpublished Ahom manuscripts still awaiting examination.

The first translation
In 1835 Captain F. Jenkins presented an Ahom manuscript to the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, extracts of which were published in lithograph two years later to illustrate an article by the Reverend N. Brown (1837), in which, probably for the first time, Ahom was identified as belonging to

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1 The two main dictionaries have been reviewed in some detail, and a large number of errors exposed, recently. See B. J. Terwiel, forthcoming.
the Tai language family. When these extracts were first published, the editors of the *JASB* expressed the hope that Brown would soon be able to produce a translation. It was, however, Jenkins (who had meanwhile acquired the rank of major), the original supplier of the manuscripts, who took up this challenge. He engaged the help of Juggoram Khargaria Phokan, who, judging by his name, was of Ahom descent. Phokan was at first unable to translate the manuscript and was obliged to send it to the town of Jorhat, where it must have been read by members of the Deodhai priestly class. Within a year of publishing the extracts, the *JASB* was able to provide its readers with a translation (Jenkins 1837).

Jenkins’s informants correctly identified the nature of the text, which deals with the primordial state of affairs and the creation of the world. They also correctly identified a substantial part of the vocabulary. Nevertheless, they did not come up with a satisfactory translation. There appear to be three reasons for this. Firstly, when confronted with words whose meaning was unclear, the Ahom priests appear to have augmented their incomplete knowledge by some spirited guesswork. Secondly, when providing conjectural solutions, they seem to have been guided to some extent by cosmological ideas found in some Hindu and Christian works. Thirdly, the translators apparently had no inkling of the basic grammatical rules in Tai languages.

In order to illustrate these three points, the 1837 translation of the first two lines of the 1837 text will be examined in some detail. The Ahom may be transcribed as follows:²

1: PIN NANG YIM MU’W RAN KO’ TEU PHA PAI MI DIN.
2: PAI MI LU’P DIN MU’NG SU’A TEU.

The 1837 translators, in their ‘verbal analysis’, surmised that *pin* — *nang* stood for ‘to be — like that’. *Yim* — *mu’w* was ‘formerly’, or ‘first beginning’. *Ran* — *ko’* was read as *rano* and regarded as being derived from *eraka*, ‘deserted or confused, chaos’. *Teu* — *pha* was taken to mean ‘to bottom — heaven’, and *pai* — *mi* — *din* to stand for ‘is not — earth’. *Pai* — *mi* was interpreted as ‘is not’, *lu’p* — *din* as ‘an island — land or globe’, and *mu’ng* — *su’a* — *teu* as ‘country — to wish — below or under’.

The translation of the first two lines, based upon this ‘verbal analysis’, was:

1. FORMERLY THERE WAS NEITHER HEAVEN NOR EARTH BUT A MASS OF CONFUSION.
2. THERE WAS NEITHER ISLAND NOR LAND IN THE GLOBE.

The verbal analysis demonstrates that the 1837 translators, quite wisely,

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² This transcription of the Ahom is based upon a somewhat simplified version of the system proposed in Terwiel 1983.
usually took two or three consecutive words together to help assign their meanings, a necessary process with Tai languages written in a script that does not indicate tonal differences: each syllable can have many meanings and words can only be understood in context with others.

While many of the above-listed words have been quite satisfactorily identified, there remain some problematic ones. Thus the words ran ko' appear to have confounded the translators of 1837. Probably under the influence of the conventions of writing of the Assamese script, they misread them as a single word, rano 'ko'. Then, assuming this to be an Assamese loanword, they came up with a form of the conjugation of the verb era, 'to be abandoned, to be disused' (see Barua 1965:153), and then widened the meaning to 'chaos'. The very idea that in the Ahom cosmogony there was originally chaos may have seemed a happy coincidence to both those familiar with Hindu religious ideas and Christians, since this idea conforms to Hindu thought as well as to the opening passage of the Judeo-Christian Book of Genesis. If the text is read as it was written, in two separate words, ran and ko', there is no need to assume the introduction of a loanword, and a quite different meaning may be assigned. The word ko' often cannot be readily translated into English: here it appears to indicate the end of a temporal clause and the commencement of the main part of the sentence. As for the word ran, there are no cognates corresponding to Ahom ran in other Tai languages that mean 'chaos'. In this context ran could be the ancient Tai word for 'step, degree, layer' (Haudricourt 1948:225), and at the end of this temporal clause, it seems to function as a word indicating both direction and emphasis.

Another problem may be identified in the translation of teu pha. The first teu here is rendered as a verb 'to bottom'. Having first chosen this strange verb, when putting it into an English sentence the translators proceeded to change this into 'neither' — by what process of reasoning remains unclear. To someone familiar with Tai languages both these steps in the translation appear unwarranted. The words teu pha simply seem to mean 'under the sky'. It is strange that the translators did not think of this much more obvious translation, since in the second line they themselves render teu as 'below or under'.

As for the Tai word lu'p, it is not altogether clear how the translators came to assign the meaning 'an island' to it. In Shan lu'p means 'land, country' (Cushing 1914:600) but not 'island'. As far as can be established, no Tai languages have a single word that covers both the meaning 'land'

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3 Note, for example, that Jenkins himself was struck by the similarity of ideas between the Hindu creation as described in the Laws of Manu and that related in the Ahom extract.

4 In central Thai the meaning 'platform' was extended to encompass the idea of 'platform for selling goods', and now means 'shop'.

5 For evidence of a similar use of ran see the entry 'han' in Shan (Cushing 1914:634), especially the expression han tau, 'until, up to'.

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and ‘island’. The most likely explanation for the inclusion of ‘island’ is that the Assamese-speaking intermediaries transmitted *lu'p* into an Assamese word that, when rendered into English, would acquire the additional meaning of ‘island’. There is, indeed, such a word in Assamese, namely *dwip*, which has the meaning of both ‘a continent’ and ‘island’ (Barua 1965:525). At any rate, given the choice between ‘island’ and ‘land’, the combination with *din mu'ng* in the sentence would suggest the latter, rather than the former, as the appropriate meaning.

As for the three words *mu'ng su'a teu*, ‘country — to wish — below’, the translation ‘to wish’ is apparently derived from misreading *su'a* as *su*. In the construction of the actual translation it was not even attempted to include the conjectural meaning of these three words. Considering the fact that Ahom scribes often confuse the endings ‘-ia’, ‘-u'a’, and ‘u'e’, several more meaningful renderings suggest themselves, such as ‘sia teu’, in which *sia* is a word giving emphasis, and *teu* means ‘below’, or ‘su'a teu’, ‘spread out below’ (cf. Cushing 1914:249).

The section on ‘verbal analysis’ may be thus critically appraised, and someone familiar with various Tai languages may be able to suggest better readings for many items. However, a comparison of the ‘verbal analysis’ section with the way the translators have put together these components into sentences reveals a total ignorance of Tai word construction. The translators did not notice that in the first line of the Ahom extract there was no ‘neither ... nor’ construction; also, they failed to see that the word *pha*, placed before the negation *pai mi*, cannot be semantically directly linked to *din*, which comes after; and they did not know how to fit the words *mu'ng su'a teu* into the sentence. Anyone familiar with a Tai language will be able to read the expression *teu pha pai mi din* as ‘under the sky there was no earth; but in 1837 this was erroneously rendered as ‘there was neither heaven nor earth’.

The problems of dubious vocabulary and the failure to recognize typical Tai grammatical constructions that have been identified for the first two lines apply throughout the 1837 effort: in every line there occur words whose meaning appears to be conjectural, and every sentence has been approached without the Tai grammar in mind. This confirms that the Ahom language had already become extinct in the early nineteenth century (as was already noted by Francis Buchanan; Hamilton 1963:7).

Interestingly enough, there is no sign of any direct Shan influence in this first Ahom-English translation: many expressions that would have been obvious to Shan speakers in Assam appear not to have been understood by the Ahom Deodhai priests. The possibility of some ‘recent’ Shan influence in the writing of Ahom texts must not be dismissed out of hand. Various groups of ‘Shans’ appear to have entered Assam during the eight-

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6 Indeed, it would seem likely that the word *lu'p* was originally derived from the Sanskrit *dwipa*. 

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teenth century, and their presence can hardly have escaped the Ahom priests' notice. Especially in the light of the fact that the Deödhais had lost certain essential aspects of the Ahom language, these priests may have felt it to be necessary to occasionally consult people who still spoke a living Tai language in order to assign meaning to some of their documents. While this possibility must always be kept in mind, there were several circumstances that prevented an open exchange of information, however. In the first place the Shans were refugees from Southeast Asia, who did not move in the same circles as the Deödhais. The Shans were Buddhists, while the Deödhais were all Hindus. Then, the Shan and Ahom scripts, though somehow related, differ to such an extent that people skilled in the one cannot readily read the other. Moreover, Deodhai priests derive a large measure of prestige simply from possessing and having the ability to chant Ahom texts: by the nineteenth century the semi-intelligibility of these texts may be considered as forming part of their mystique. If Deödhais did consult Shans, they were very discreet about it. Up to the present day Ahom documents have preserved a style and vocabulary quite distinct from Shan; there is, for example, in Ahom astrological literature no trace of Buddhism or of Burmese loanwords that are so common in comparable Shan texts.

If the 1837 translation may be taken as a representative indication of the state of Deodhai priestly knowledge of their ancient language, then it may be concluded that they knew how to transmit a vocal version of words written in Ahom script; that they knew, or were able to find out, the meaning of a number of single words, sufficient to identify the general nature of a text, but were unsure as to a word-for-word translation; and that they had lost all knowledge of Ahom grammar.

Further 19th-century publications on Ahom
During the nineteenth century there were several further attempts to record and translate the extinct Ahom language. The same Reverend Brown whose article triggered off the 1837 translation supplied B.H. Hodgson with a series of word lists of different languages, including Ahom, Khamti, Lao and Siamese (Thai), which was published in 1850 (Hodgson 1850). The Ahom list has 165 items, many of which are straightforward Tai-Ahom words, but, like the 1837 translation, this list again reveals that some basic principles of Tai languages were no longer understood. There are many examples of mistakes indicating that Brown's informants had only a very limited vocabulary. In the entry for 'hand' Brown's list gives

7 Brown noted in 1837 that the tones of their original language were already entirely lost by that time (see Brown 1837:18).
8 In view of the fact that Thailand was, until World War II, officially known as Siam, and in order to avoid confusion between the words Thai (referring to Thailand) and Tai (referring to the Tai language family, including Thai), the adjective 'Siamese' is used here in preference to 'Thai'.
kha, the Ahom for ‘thigh’, or ‘leg’. For ‘mosquito’ the 1850 list gives an Ahom word meaning ‘bee’. The entry ‘night’ has the Ahom word for ‘black’; for ‘oil’ it gives man nga, which specifically refers only to sesame oil; for ‘skin’ the list contains the word for ‘rind’; and the word for ‘cat’, which ought to have been meu, is misspelt men. For ‘raw’ is given the word lip, where it ought to have been dip. For ‘sweet’ the Ahom word for ‘sugar cane’ appears. Ahom texts contain the proper words for ‘hand’, ‘night’, ‘skin’, ‘oil’, and ‘raw’, and Brown’s informants seem to have had a very limited vocabulary indeed.

Examples indicating misconceptions about word order and grammatical constructions also abound. Thus for ‘arrow’ only the classifier lem is given, rather than the proper word pu’n. For ‘bird’ the Ahom column gives nuktu, apparently both the word for bird, nik, and tu, the classifier for animals, though this classifier is not given for ‘dog’, ‘goat’ or ‘horse’. Apparently Brown and his informants did not understand the use of classifiers. The Ahom word for ‘goat’ is given as penga, while other Tai languages have pe. Here Brown seems to have overlooked the meaning of nga, ‘ivory’, and failed to realize that the Ahom word probably indicates a specific type of pe, rather than the whole genus ‘goat’. The third personal pronoun in Ahom is man, but Brown renders it (as well as the form ‘his’) as heu. For the possessive form ‘mine’ he presents the Ahom word for ‘to take’. For ‘in’ we find the Ahom for ‘to enter’; for ‘on’ the word meaning ‘above’; for ‘now’ the word ‘where’; and for ‘here’ the Ahom expression meaning ‘to live’.

Some expressions in the list defy attempts to trace their possible origin. Thus for ‘yes’ we find khewo; ‘no’ is given as bukhewo; and ‘which’ is rendered as panku; none of these have, as far as this author is aware, been encountered in Ahom documents. Brown’s word list was reprinted several times (Dalton 1872:69; Hodgson 1880:13-17) and most of it, mistakes and all, eventually found its way into the twentieth-century Ahom vocabularies and word lists.

A more ambitious and independently derived list of Ahom words was published by Sir George Campbell (1874:168-181). Apparently Campbell did not have any knowledge of Brown’s list, because his transcription often differs, and many of Brown’s mistakes are not repeated by him. He introduced a wealth of new ones, however, particularly in relation to grammatical constructions. This word list represents an interesting new departure in Ahom research, in that it attempts to give an Ahom rendering of a great

\[9\] The form lip conforms to Shan-Phakey rules of pronunciation. This is the only exception to the general rule, mentioned above, of there being no trace of Shan influence in the early nineteenth-century reports on the Ahom language. In Barua’s Parable of the Prodigal Son, discussed below, the Ahom word for ‘unripe’ is spelled dip.

\[10\] Thirty-two items from the list, mistakes and all, found their way into a short table comparing Tai languages. See Gurdon 1895:163.
many English grammatical constructions. If anybody needs to be convinced that Campbell's informants had a very limited Ahom vocabulary, not the slightest inkling of Tai grammar, and a strong imagination, a detailed examination of the list will prove most rewarding. A few examples will suffice to illustrate this.

There are many inconsistencies in the transliteration: 'child' is sometimes rendered as _lok_, and on other occasions as _luk_. Only those familiar with Tai languages will be able to deduce that the word _mi_ ought to be pronounced with the vowel of English 'she'; _ki_, however, is Campbell's rendering for _kai_ ('chicken'), while _fie_ stands for _fai_ or _phai_ ('fire'). _Tang_ ('belly') and _sang_ ('two') should be pronounced _to'ng_ and _so'ng_ respectively, but _kham_ ('gold') and _nam_ ('water') have an 'a' sound as in the German 'mann'. Some words must be wrong. The entry for 'cultivator' (_recna_) corresponds to the expression 'to plough a field', while for 'shepherd' is given _palic_, which must be a misspelling for _po'ling_ ('father who tends').

In simple constructions involving a noun and one or two adjectives the Ahom list offers a remarkable variation in word order. 'A he-goat' is rendered as 'male-goat-one', but in the definition of the Ahom for 'a male deer' we read: 'classifier for animals-deer-male-one'; in the entry for 'a daughter' the numeral is placed first: 'one-female-child', but 'a bad girl' becomes 'child-female-one-bad'; 'of a good man' becomes 'one-good-man-of' and 'of good men' is rendered as 'good-man-several-of'. These are only six of many examples illustrating that Campbell's informants knew some Ahom words (albeit not sufficient to distinguish between 'daughter' and 'girl'), but had no idea of how to use them according to the principles of Tai grammar.

Perusing the whole list of words and phrases, it becomes clear that Campbell's informants made use of their ingenuity as well as Assamese grammatical rules to equate the English examples with some Ahom utterances. While this is already obvious from the simple constructions listed above, the Ahom informants proved to have a fertile imagination indeed when it came to translating verbal conjugations. In Tai languages verbs are not conjugated as in English or Assamese: the relevant shades of meaning are given by constructing sentences with the aid of secondary verbs, adverb auxiliaries and particles. It is extremely difficult, if not impossible, for a Tai speaker to produce offhand an out-of-context equivalent for 'I was', then a different translation for 'I have been', followed by something else again for 'I had been'. In the column for the Aiton language, a still living Tai form of speech, in Campbell's word list the Aiton informants simply left such verbal constructions untranslated.

As if to underline the fact that Ahom was no longer a spoken language, the persons supplying Campbell with Ahom equivalents, in contrast to the Aiton speakers, came up with expressions for virtually every one of his conjugations. Campbell devoted much space to the verb 'to beat'. His Ahom informants matched this with a series of constructions around a verb
dhek (apparently from dhu’k, which is either a loanword, for Ahom does not have words that commence with ‘dh’, or a misspelling for thuk, or thu’k). Table 1 offers an example of how Tai-Ahom was ‘conjugated’.

Table 1: The verb ‘to beat’ in Campbell’s Ahom, some entries

| English  | Ahom          |
|----------|---------------|
| Beat     | Dheksi        |
| To beat  | Dhekpasi      |
| Beating  | Dheksi        |
| Having beaten | Dhekpasi lung |
| I beat   | Kau-e dhek    |
| I am beating | Dau-e dheksi dheksi |
| I was beaten | Kau-e dheksi lung |
| I had beaten | Kau-e dheksile |
| I may beat | Kau-e dheksilo |
| I shall beat | Kau-e dhek-boi’ |
| I should beat | Kau-e dhek falai |
| I am beaten | Kau-ke dheki   |
| I was beaten | Kau-ke dheksi-lung |
| I shall be beaten | Kau-ke dheksipasi |

Table 1 illustrates well how informants who knew some Ahom coped with the problem posed by the English column, which those who spoke Aiton could not solve: unburdened by any knowledge of Ahom grammar, Campbell’s informants simply created one for this occasion. Each sentence posed a challenge which was met by inventing a new rule. The solutions, such as the endings ‘-eksi’, ‘-ile’, ‘-iloi’, and ‘-alai’, appear to have been inspired by Assamese rules of grammar, but bear no relation to the grammatical rules of any Tai language, nor can they be found in any authentic Ahom manuscript.

Campbell’s list ends with a set of twenty-two complex phrases, such as: ‘The son of my uncle is married to her sister’, and ‘Whose boy comes behind you?’ The Ahom ‘translations’ of these sentences provide yet further evidence of the fact that the translation process took place without any regard for consistency of word order. The Ahom often is no more than an attempt to match the English with some Ahom words, which then appear to have been ordered according to principles of Assamese. Two examples should suffice to illustrate this. The phrase ‘He is grazing cattle on the top of the hill’ is rendered with the Ahom for ‘He-mountain-one-head-cow-eat-grass; and ‘In the house is the saddle of the white horse’ becomes ‘Horse-white-saddle-house-in-is’.
The Analysis of Ahom 1902-1904

The preparation of Grierson's monumental Linguistic Survey of India was based upon an analysis of three specimens for every known dialect and sub-dialect spoken in the area covered in the survey. As first specimen was chosen a translation of the Parable of the Prodigal Son. In order to minimize the risk of the translation being unidiomatic, the second specimen had to be a piece of folklore or some other passage of narrative prose or verse in the vernacular. The third specimen decided upon was the standard list of words drawn up by Campbell (Grierson 1977a:17-18). During the late 1890s, therefore, the Parable of the Prodigal Son was sent out to be translated into hundreds of different speech varieties, and at the same time a multitude of other specimens were collected. In the case of Ahom, Grierson in 1899 obtained a translation of the Parable from G.C. Barua, an Assamese speaker who in the mid-1890s had been appointed to learn Ahom from a committee of five Deodhai priests and to translate Ahom documents. The second specimen, a summary statement apparently relating to a court case, was also obtained from G.C. Barua in the same year. Grierson added to this as a third specimen the sample cosmogony of 1837. These specimens, forming the chief source upon which Grierson based his influential analysis of Ahom grammar, deserve to be noted in some detail.

Specimen 1: The Parable of the Prodigal Son

Given the circumstance that the Ahom language had been long extinct, G.C. Barua and his committee of Deodhais produced an impressive document, written in the Ahom script, together with a transliteration in Roman characters and a word-for-word English translation. In all, the Ahom version of the Parable covered 54 lines. A perusal of the text reveals in the first place that Barua had access to the Hodgson and Campbell lists. From Hodgson he took tinali in the (dubious) meaning of ‘now’, and the even stranger word tet, ‘there’. In Hodgson’s list is a puzzling entry kleu, for ‘to drink’; misreading the final letter, Barua took this as klen and created an altogether novel ‘couplet’ kin-klen, for ‘to eat and drink’. Hodgson’s iu, for ‘this’ (apparently an attempt to represent the sound ‘yu’), was taken by Barua as two separate words, ‘i-u’, while Hodgson’s suspect word for ‘which’, panku, was also used in the composition of the Parable. When Barua had to translate the word ‘swineherd’, he took the Campbell word palic (po’lik) for ‘shepherd’, assigned fictitious meanings to the two syllables (pa becoming ‘to graze’, and lik11 ‘to tend’), and thus was able to create the new term mu lik (‘pig-tend’).

Barua not only made imaginative use of the Hodgson and Campbell lists. The vocabulary is surprisingly rich for an extinct language, containing words for ‘to float’ (phu), ‘to ask a favour’ (yo’n su), ‘meet’ (cho’m),

11 Possibly this is a misspelling for ling, an Ahom word meaning ‘to rear, to raise, to look after’.
Obviously Barua had better sources at his disposal than his predecessors. Apparently he gained access to a small Ahom-Assamese dictionary, of which he prepared a copy for Grierson, which reached the latter just too late to be included in his ‘Notes on Ahom’ (Grierson 1902), or in his description of Ahom in the Linguistic Survey of India (Grierson 1977b:81-140). Grierson incorporated this new source in his next major publication on Ahom (1904), and it is clear from a careful study of this augmented vocabulary that Barua’s unidentified dictionary was the Bar Kakot Homung Puthi document, better known as the Bar Amra.\(^{12}\) This document, reputedly compiled in 1795, comprises 40 leaves of Sanchi bark, containing eight to nine lines of writing per page. The Bar Amra alphabetically lists Ahom words, in Ahom script, followed by their Assamese meaning, in Assamese script.

Barua’s use of the Bar Amra explains Specimen I’s wide vocabulary to a certain extent. The Bar Amra contains Ahom words corresponding to those chosen by Barua for ‘to float’, ‘meet’, ‘sorrow’, ‘kiss’, ‘feast’, and ‘to return’. However, this Dictionary does not furnish the words used by Barua for ‘to ask a favour’, ‘a shoe’, ‘to embrace’, ‘worthy’, ‘property’, or ‘numerous’. Neither does the Bar Amra contain expressions, such as an-nan (‘that’). There must have been at least one more source for Barua to have been able to provide a word-for-word Ahom version of the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

We may exclude the possibility that a native Tai speaker had a hand in the process of joining words together to form new terms, or in the building of sentences. Nobody who spoke Tai and who wanted to find a word for ‘harlot’ would have come up with the clumsy construction kun-mi-bo’ng-do’i-kan, (‘person-female-copulate-together’). And when the same word ‘harlot’ occurred a second time, they would not have shortened these five words to bo’ng-saw, meaning ‘to copulate-girl’. Neither would a Tai speaker who wanted to translate ‘all my property’ agree to using kaw-tanglai-kho’ng ling (‘I-all-of-them-property’). Similarly, the rendering of ‘my father’s female house-servant’ with kaw-po’-man-ru’n-kha-lik-kha-nyüng (‘I-father-house-servant-female-servant’) represents a stringing together of Ahom words without the slightest regard to the basic rules for indicating the possessive case, the use of classifiers or common Tai word order. Upon close examination, all sentences in Specimen 1 appear to prove that Barua and his informants had no guide to grammar other than that inherent in Assamese and English.
Neo-ahom and the Parable of the Prodigal Son

An indication as to Barua’s possible sources is provided by the fact that there are four words apparently spelled in Ahom with the strong vowel sign. From an Ahom manuscript it is clear that the word khan, meaning ‘quickly’, is spelled without a vowel sign, quite in accordance with its spelling in other Tai languages (Cushing 1888:206; Needham 1894:177). However, in the Ahom text as well as in the transcription, Barua has kho’n. Then there is the expression tak ṭak o’k, which appears to be a misspelling for tak ṭak yak (‘shall be famished, shall be hungry’ — a common expression in Tai languages). Similarly, po’ng, meaning ‘clear’, would conform to other Tai conventions if it had been spelled pang. When it is considered that Barua’s mother-tongue was Assamese, and that in Assamese the unmarked vowel (usually transcribed in English with the symbol for ‘a’) is pronounced ‘o’, it would seem that some of Barua’s sources were written in Roman characters. The fourth misspelling is the word for ‘pig’, mu, often encountered in Ahom manuscripts. In the Parable, Barua twice spelled it mu’w (using, instead of the simple stroke for ‘u’, a symbol meaning ‘u’, followed by the letter ‘w’ and the sign indicating an end of the closed syllable). This most unusual and cumbersome spelling for a common Ahom word could be the result of Barua’s working with a word list that spelled mu in such a manner as to make him assume that it was pronounced ‘mü’.

After a careful search in word lists and dictionaries that were available in 1899, it was possible to identify a source that Barua used to augment his vocabulary. It was J.F. Needham’s Outline. Needham’s work explains the Tai-Khamti use of the expression an-nan; it contains an extensive Tai vocabulary with words such as khan and yo’n; and it spells the word for ‘pig’ mü, complete with a circumflex that can easily be misread as an umlaut. Further corroborating evidence for Barua’s having borrowed from Khamti is his ‘Ahom’ word for ‘shoe’ khu’p. As far as can be established, Ahoms went barefoot. Even in documents describing a coronation, when the official attire of the incumbent is described in full detail, there are no shoes mentioned; on the contrary, the future king is described as having to put rings on his toes, an activity precluding the wearing of shoes. Barua, compelled to produce a translation of a text for which he did not have sufficient vocabulary from Ahom sources, apparently looked up ‘shoe’ in Needham, and found on p. 183 the expression khep tin. He then ‘Ahomized’ it by taking the first syllable only and spelling it with an ‘u’ vowel. The translation of the word for ‘property’ with kho’ng ling would

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13 As in the sentence Su’a tak nam pu’n khan-khan, from a folk story, ‘When the tiger dipped water, it was spilled quickly’.  
14 Several instances of the confusion between these two vowels in Barua’s Dictionary have been documented in Terwiel, forthcoming.  
15 This is the case in an unpublished Ahom manuscript. The relevant sentence is: Nungtang tin sip niw ro’p cho’p so’ng tamma, ‘Wear on all ten toes golden and brilliant rings’.  

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indicate that Barua also borrowed from Shan, where this appears to be an idiomatic expression for ‘production goods’ (Cushing 1914:135).

In creating the Ahom version of the Parable of the Prodigal Son, Barua not only failed to notice the unreliable character of previously published word lists, but also seems to have deliberately facilitated his translation from English to Ahom by borrowing from Khamti and Shan.

Specimen 2: The court case
The second specimen that served Grierson as material for the analysis of the Ahom language was also supplied by the same G.C. Barua in 1899, and covered a mere eighteen lines of text. Like the Parable of the Prodigal Son, the whole text was clearly created by Barua and his committee. In this respect the second specimen does not fulfil the criteria for the preparation of the Linguistic Survey: it is not a vernacular text that can serve as counter balance to the unidiomatic character of the Parable translation. The fact that Barua manufactured an imaginary court case in Ahom, rather than translating an extract from one of the hundreds of original Ahom texts readily available to him, may be interpreted as an indirect admission of the pitiful state of Ahom studies. Apparently it had not progressed to the point where an extract from an original text in the vernacular could be translated word-for-word.

Just as for the first Specimen, in the case of the fictitious court case Barua delved into the Bar Amra for inspiration. When he needed to find an equivalent for ‘to seize’, he borrowed the word kho‘t, meaning ‘to tie’ (as in ‘to tie a knot’); further, the Bar Amra provided him with a word for ‘shyness’ (ai). For various pronouns he relied partly on Hodgson; hence the misread word i-u for ‘this’, tet for ‘there’, and pan-ku for ‘which’. Other expressions, such as an-nan for ‘that’, khan for ‘price’, and o’n for ‘first’, he seems to have borrowed from Khamti. When he gives the word ma for ‘not’, this appears to have been inspired by a shallow reading of Needham’s section on negative interrogatives (Needham 1894:61-62). Additional proof that Barua took words from other Tai languages to augment his Ahom vocabulary is provided by the appearance of the word hing for ‘force’. While in Shan this word does commence with an ‘h’, in Ahom, if it existed there, the regular correspondence pattern would suggest a spelling ring (pronounced reng; the Bar Amra does not list ring (or hing) with the meaning ‘force’).

Specimen 2 is much shorter than the Parable of the Prodigal Son. The Ahom covers a mere eighteen lines. Yet Barua seems to have spent less time on it to make it ‘convincing’. The word for ‘mango’ in Specimen 2 is given as mak mo’-mo’ng. Here it would appear that Barua, not knowing what ‘mango’ was in Ahom (the Bar Amra does not list it), borrowed mo’-mo’ng from another variety of Tai. Unaware of the meaning of the first syllable, mo’, which is already an abbreviation for mak, ‘fruit’, he added another, superfluous, prefix mak. The resultant form is tautological to any
Tai speaker. The English expression 'on the said day' should not have been translated literally to 'say-day', or *wa wan; and 'to go' should not have been written with an aspirated 'p'. For 'police' Barua did not attempt to find an Ahom word, but made up the fictitious loanword *pulis, and for 'court' he gave the Assamese *kachari.

In this specimen also the words are put together in a 'cobbling' fashion, and the sentences constructed unlike any in authentic Ahom manuscripts. Barua writes Ahom in the manner of someone creating sentences in an alien tongue with only a dictionary at hand. Thus for 'to hide his sister's shame' Barua wrote *man no'ng saw ai lap, or 'he-sister-shy-to hide', in which the words are strung together in a way never found in 'real' Ahom, or in any other Tai variety, except possibly in the Khamti as described by Needham.

Specimen 3
The third specimen consisted of the same 'Ahom Cosmology' that had been published and translated in 1837. It would seem, therefore, that there were at least twenty-two lines from an authentic Ahom document forming part of the material considered in the subsequent grammatical analysis of the Ahom language. Unfortunately, as was seen in the first part of this article, the 'Cosmology' had been only partly understood. Grierson seemed aware of this and produced a somewhat amended translation. An examination of the details soon reveals, however, that he lacked the means of identifying mistakes and improving much on the 1837 effort.

Since the first two lines have already been examined in some detail, it suffices to note what Grierson made of these relatively simple sentences. The first line Grierson rendered as: 'Thus it was in the beginning time, chaos below (and) in heaven. Earth was not.' It is clear that Grierson here accepted the basic verbal analysis of 1837, but approached the text with a different grammatical construction in mind. He noted that 'sky' had to be separate from 'there was no earth'. Just like the translators of 1837, however, he failed to see that *teu pha simply meant 'under the sky', and felt impelled to insert '(and) in'. As for the expression *ran ko', for some undisclosed reason Grierson changed the Ahom spelling to *ro'n-ko.\(^{16}\) For the word *ko', he assumed that this was simply an optional suffix used to give definitive force to a noun (Grierson 1977b:91). Apparently Grierson failed to note that the 1837 translation, 'deserted, chaos', had resulted from a faulty reading of the words *ran ko' as *rano'k and an erroneous assump-

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\(^{16}\) In line 13 of Specimen 3, coming across the word *ro'm, Grierson simply assumed that this was yet another variant spelling of the word for 'confused, chaos'.

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tion about an Assamese derivation. In the second line Grierson accepted the rather doubtful translation of *lu*’p as ‘island’, but quite rightly questioned the 1837 translation of *su’a ieu* as ‘to wish-below’ — words that obviously do not make sense in the context. Grierson changed this to ‘or below’, but indicated that the choice of ‘or’ was only a guess (Grierson 1977b:138).

A close examination of Grierson’s 1902 translation reveals that the few improvements on the 1837 attempt are related to a slightly larger vocabulary, primarily stemming from his tentative comparisons of Ahom with other Tai languages, notably Khamti, Shan and Siamese. However, in most of the lines he was unable to unravel the sentence construction. Grierson quite frankly admits his inability to handle the translation when he writes that the extract possessed many points of difficulty, some of which he had failed to elucidate in a manner satisfactory to himself (Grierson 1977b:118).

The reason why Grierson found the ‘Cosmogony’ extract quite abnormal lies in the fact that he took Barua’s Specimen 1 and 2, as well as Campbell’s word list, as authoritative. His trust in Barua’s ability to produce Ahom translations was complete. He refers to Barua as ‘the only person alive who is familiar with both Ahom and English’ and assures us that:

> ‘... the accuracy of the specimens is guaranteed by the inexhaustible kindness of Mr. E.A. Gait, I.C.S., who has gone through it with Babu Golab Chundra Barua, and has not only checked the meaning of every syllable of this monosyllabic language, but has also supplied me with a valuable series of notes elucidating the many difficult points’ (Grierson 1977b:81).

The present-day reader who is aware of the fact that Ahom was extinct already at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and who has been alerted to the fact that the first two Specimens differ dramatically from all authentic Ahom documents in style, vocabulary and word order, cannot accept these guarantees of accuracy. Prior to his appointment to assist Gait, not more than five years before he produced the Specimens, G.C. Barua had no knowledge of Ahom, nor was he familiar with any of the other Tai languages. There is good reason to question his Deodhai com-

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17 The confusion surrounding *ran*, *ro’n* and *ro’m* does not end here. In the 1920 Ahom Dictionary (Barua 1920:223), the entry *ran* is given the meanings ‘chaos’ and ‘confused’, but a yet different word *ram* is given the meanings ‘to be deserted’ and ‘deserted’. This reveals how G. C. Barua often proceeded in his compilation of the Dictionary. Obviously he took Grierson’s 1904 Vocabulary, transcribed it into Assamese (where the ‘o’ sound is inherent as an unmarked vowel), and then reconstructed the Ahom spelling from the Assamese. The mistake was not recognized and therefore repeated in B. Barua and N. N. Deodhai Phukan (1964:115-116).
committee's ability to teach Ahom. As for Gait's checking of every syllable in the first two Specimens, it ought to be noted that in 1905 Gait himself wrote (1967:xiii) that he had no knowledge of the Ahom language and that for translations of Ahom documents he had had to rely entirely upon G.C. Barua.

A fourth 'Specimen': Campbell's list
Apart from the three Specimens, Grierson also used Hodgson and Campbell. When Grierson mentions an Ahom word whose translation was based solely upon Hodgson's list, he indicates this but he remains strangely silent on the manner in which he made use of Campbell's list. A comparison of Campbell's work with an extract from an anonymous 'vocabulary', published in 'Notes on Ahom' (Grierson 1902), reveals that he had Campbell's word list completely revised. The differences between the two versions are conspicuous, as the examples in Table 2 reveal.

Table 2: Campbell's 1874 list and Grierson's version, some examples*

| English sentence                  | Campbell's list               | Grierson's list               |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| What is your name?               | Mou le su kham sang           | maw chu'ka sang u?           |
| How old is this horse?           | Ma tu pi le                   | I-u ma ki thau u?            |
| How far is it from here to Kashmir? | Ti nai mu'ng ban Kasmiri       | Ti nai luk-tam Kashmir ki sai u? |
|                                  | theu reu                      |                               |
| I have walked a long way today   | Kau-e menai phaimu'ng phai ban | mu'w-nai kaw phrai sai-ni yaw-ko'i |
| Give this rupee to him           | Pheu-man to'k lu'ng heu si    | Heu man i-u tra               |
| Draw water from the well         | Khrum pen nam au              | Tet nam si luk na-khrum       |
| Walk before me                   | Kaw le na khanpai khanma      | Pai an kau mai                |

* In order to facilitate comparison, the various spellings have been standardized.

The seven examples in Table 2 demonstrate the extent of the revision of Campbell's Ahom list. The Ahom of 1874 and the revised Ahom cited by Grierson in 1902 constitute two totally different languages. After the examination of Specimens 1 and 2, it is quite clear who did the revision. Barua's misreading of yu to make i-u is a clear indicator that once more it was Barua who supplied Grierson with his own version of Campbell's list. In the process, he provides further evidence of his ability to create the semblance of a living language.
Every line provides examples of his inventiveness. ‘Draw water from the well’, for example, would have posed a problem even to those who, some centuries ago, could still speak the Ahom language. After all, it is unlikely that Ahoms ever had to dig deep narrow shafts for their water supplies, let alone construct mechanisms to lower and raise containers in such shafts. In 1874, Campbell’s informant dealt with this problem by choosing for ‘well’ the Ahom word khrum, meaning ‘artificial lake’, and for ‘to draw’ the verb pen with an extended meaning ‘to get’, thus coming up with ‘lake-get-water-take’. With his improved sources, Barua managed to come up with a wholly different sentence. For ‘draw’ he chose the verb tet, found in the Bar Amra, meaning ‘to pull’. To make the word ‘well’, Barua invented a new compound from nam, the word for ‘water’, and khrum, ‘artificial lake’. Both the sentences of 1874 and those recreated by Barua are nothing more than nineteenth-century creations. They stem from the minds of people who had mastered a number of Ahom words and, unrestricted by any knowledge of Tai grammar, proceeded to concoct a wholly artificial language. The Ahom language being long extinct, few people being able to even read the script, and among those Barua being the only one who could also read English with ease, there was little chance of someone pointing out that such creations bore no resemblance to authentic Ahom documents.

‘Specimen 4’ is thus of exactly the same type as Specimens 1 and 2: it is ‘translated’ Ahom; no part of it is likely to represent anything that once was actually uttered when Ahom was still a living language. Yet, in his grammatical analysis, Grierson quotes freely from ‘Specimen 4’ to back up statements resting upon evidence taken from the Parable and the Court Case.

In ‘Notes on Ahom’, Grierson published in tabular form all of the twenty-two sentences that formed the concluding part of Campbell’s list. He informs the reader that these sentences ‘are taken from a longer list not here published’. Each sentence is preceded by a number, the first being 220, ending with 241. In the vocabulary of ‘Notes on Ahom’ he refers to earlier items on that list, so that it is possible to find out how the earlier parts of Campbell’s list were revised. Item 58 on that list, the word for ‘cultivator’, for example, which in 1874 was wrongly given as recna, has changed (Grierson 1902:51) to an even less convincing kun-na-kin.

When publishing his chapter presenting the analysis of the Ahom language in the Linguistic Survey, two years after ‘Notes on Ahom’ had appeared, Grierson omitted all references to this word list, and did not reproduce the series of sentences numbered 220 to 241. However, the examples taken from them to illustrate particular grammatical rules remain, as does as their listing in the appended vocabulary. Only those taking the trouble to read ‘Notes on Ahom’ will become aware of the existence of the anonymous ‘Specimen 4’. It remains a puzzling fact that, although in the Linguistic Survey publication he relies just as heavily upon the
revised list, and he reproduces virtually all of 'Notes on Ahom', Grierson excised only the information that would reveal the existence of this list. Possibly Grierson was motivated by a wish not to seem to be too dependent upon the work of one single informant.

**Ahom grammar reexamined**

In the light of this background to the sources, Grierson's rules of Ahom grammar may be reappraised. Virtually all statements regarding Ahom that are in conflict with what one may expect from a Tai language rest upon Barua's English-Ahom translation. Thus *i-u* is elevated to the status of a demonstrative pronoun, and *klen* is listed, once with an alternative spelling *klun*, as the verb 'to drink'. In this way Barua's misreadings of older lists became enshrined in academic language. Looking through his Specimens, Grierson discovered two different 'rules' governing the way a genitive is formed in Ahom: sometimes the genitive marker preceded and sometimes it followed the noun. He gave ten examples of the former and sixteen of the latter case. All of these examples can be traced back to Barua's hand. When Grierson wrote about the Ahom demonstrative pronoun *an-nan*, 'that', his sole evidence rested upon Barua's translations from English to Ahom. For verbal constructions he based himself exclusively upon a careful analysis of the Parable of the Prodigal Son, together with the revised Campbell list. The same can be said for his remarks on adverbs, prepositions and postpositions. Grierson's statement that in Ahom word order the rule is Subject-Object-Verb is based wholly upon sentences created upon his own request by G.C. Barua. Evidence to the contrary found in the 1837 text (the only first-hand source for Ahom among Grierson's sources) is dismissed as being 'quite abnormal'.

After having taken note of Grierson's chief sources one may safely conclude that, for those wishing to learn about Ahom, the 'cosmology' is likely to be much closer to the norm than the Parable of the Prodigal Son, the Court Case and Campbell's revised list taken together. In the light of the evidence presented above it may safely be said that Grierson, who himself wrote that Ahom had long been an extinct language, was very imprudent, if not altogether unscholarly, to base his analysis solely upon material contrived upon his own request.

**Twentieth-century Ahom grammars**

Once Barua's Ahom had been analysed, and abstract rules had been formulated and published in both a leading periodical and the authoritative Linguistic Survey, nothing more needed to be done, other than to apply the scientifically established rules, and translate Ahom texts. The close cooperation between Grierson and Barua continued. In 1903 or 1904, Grierson

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18 'The order of the words is quite abnormal, -the subject frequently coming at the end of the sentence' (Grierson 1977b:118).
obtained from G.C. Barua a translation of a real Ahom text, a much more detailed Cosmogony comprising 64 lines of Ahom, together with a word-for-word 'translation'. Barua also provided him with the vocabulary from the Bar Amra. Grierson hastened to edit the translation and send it to press. It should come as no surprise, since the state of knowledge of the Ahom language was so imperfect, to learn that this 'translation' contained an amazing number of examples of misreadings and mistakes. It suffices to take a look at the first two lines which, incidentally, are identical to the ones of the 1837 Cosmogony and have already featured twice in this article. In 1904 these were rendered once more, complete with novel interpretations and some new errors.

In the first line ran was no longer interpreted as 'chaos', but translated with 'layer'. Grierson took ran-ko-teu to be an Ahom expression, meaning 'layer-under', or 'the foundation', as a metaphor for 'the earth'. Barua and Grierson failed to notice that the word din missed a final 'n', and read literally pai mi di, 'is not good'. All this was put together to form the sentence: 'Thus it was in the beginning-time — the foundation below (i.e., the earth) and heaven did not exist'.

In line 2 lu'p was still taken to mean 'island', and su'a had now acquired the new meaning 'level'. This led to the novel translation 'No island or level country existed below'. Quite clearly there is no progression in the three attempts to translate these sentences. The 1837 attempt was an identification of as many words as possible, followed by the creation of an English sentence by 'free association' of those words, without any regard to Tai sentence construction. In 1902 and 1904 the same process was applied. The 'grammatical rules' that had been published in 'Notes on Ahom' had apparently made no difference, or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that these rules were inapplicable to pre-1899 Ahom.

It was not until 1911 that the first sign of progress may be noted. In that year, through the efforts of W.W. Cochrane, the 1904 'cosmogony' appeared once more in translation. Cochrane, who was familiar with the Shan language, did not have access to the 1904 issue of the JRAS when he wrote that he had seen that cosmogony and had been far from satisfied with the translation, it being too free and abounding with paraphrases. He remembered that Grierson had relied upon 'a Hindu, who had been deputed by the Government to learn the Ahom dialect'. Cochrane (1911:1133) 'expressed the opinion that no accurate or satisfactory translation of a difficult MS can be obtained in this way.

Cochrane obviously did not remember that Grierson's 'Hindu' had been mentioned by name (G. C. Barua), for, having written his critical remarks, he goes on to say that he had received a much better translation from that very same Barua. Cochrane praises Barua for having a good knowledge of modern Shan, as demonstrated by Barua's translations of more recent Shan compositions. Cochrane's article reveals, therefore, that Barua had...
commenced a serious study of the Shan language. This development accounts for the much-improved translation. While Barua’s Shan studies may well have assisted him in his later attempts to translate Ahom texts, his knowledge had come too late to influence the published Ahom grammar.

In 1920 G.C. Barua published his *Ahom-Assamese-English Dictionary* and, following the Preface of that work, he took the opportunity to write a ‘Short account of the Ahoms and their language’. This could have been a splendid opportunity to rectify past mistakes, but sadly enough this text is nothing but a summary of the first 25 pages of ‘Notes on Ahom’, complete with examples from his own version of Campbell’s list, the Parable, and the Court Case.

Only one further publication appeared that was wholly devoted to Ahom grammar. This was the *Ahom Primer*, first published in 1936. It represented a whole new departure, and, refreshingly, provided a critical reordering of some sentences, in which the influence of at least some authentic Ahom texts is apparent. However, since the main text of the *Ahom Primer* is in the Assamese language and script, it has not had any noticeable influence upon scholars outside Assam.

All English-language publications related to Ahom grammar thus rest exclusively upon material that was first transmitted from English into Ahom, at a time when Ahom had long been extinct. When mentioning the characteristics of the Ahom language, authoritative linguistic textbooks such as Greenberg’s *Universals of Human Language* still rely wholly upon Grierson (Greenberg 1978:84-85).

There are thousands of pages of documents written in the Ahom language that remain unstudied. Only a small proportion of the State Chronicles and Copper Plate Inscriptions have been tentatively translated, leaving many texts on subjects such as state rituals, divination, and astrology unstudied. The only exception, ‘Ahom Cosmogony’, on which at least five articles were written, serves to prove the point that Grierson’s analyses of Ahom grammar, instead of assisting translation, prevented, rather than facilitated, access to this interesting extinct language. As the authentic Ahom may well have existed in relative isolation from other Tai languages since the early thirteenth century, its study may be of great value.

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19 The first sentence, the translation of which has been mentioned three times before, was rendered as: ‘Thus it was in the beginning: under the sky (or heaven) there was no place’. This is a quite acceptable rendering of the first line. The second line, however, does not appear to have been included in the 1911 translation.

20 The second edition was published in 1968 by the Government of Assam for the Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies in Assam.

21 I thank Dr. A.V.N. Diller of the Australian National University for bringing this fact to my notice.

22 The fifth of these articles, not mentioning any Ahom words and therefore not cited earlier in this article, is that by Gait, 1896.
to comparative linguists and ethnohistorians. They cannot effectively undertake this study until they have successfully separated out the 'neo-Ahom' created in 1899 from the Ahom in authentic documents. The fairly recent interest in Tai-Ahom studies, particularly in Thailand, makes this distinction between neo-Ahom and authentic Ahom a matter of urgency.

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