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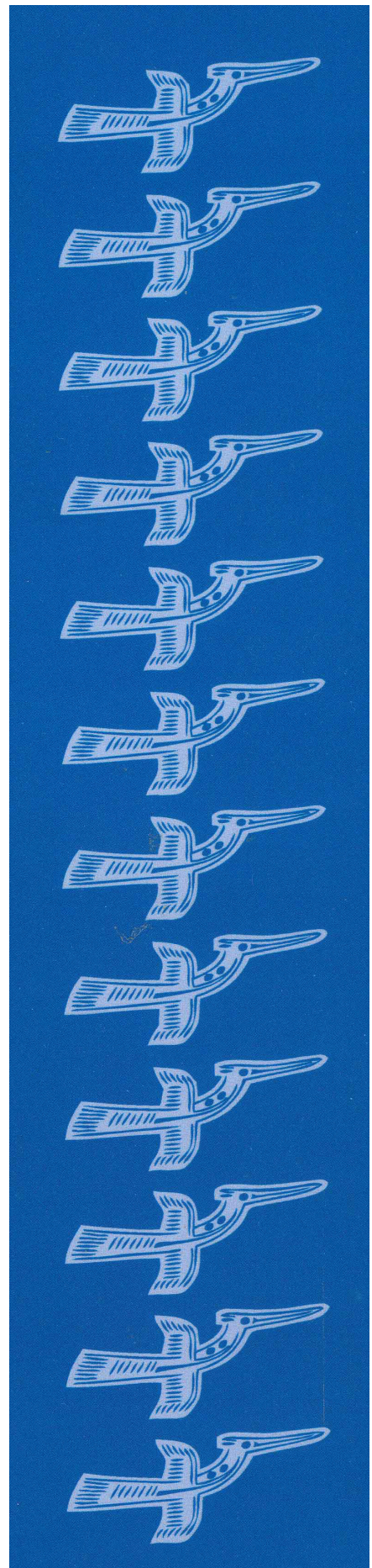
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# The Ta'oi Language and People

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## Abstract

This paper provides a review on the linguistic and cultural background of the Ta'oi people in Laos and Vietnam from the available literature. Starting with an overview of the geographic location, historical and cultural context and linguistic nature, the paper pays special attention to the confusing amount of ethnonyms and glossonyms<sup>1</sup> referring to these people and their language.

**Keywords:** Ta'oi culture, glossonyms

**ISO 639-3 language codes:** tth, tto

## 1. Introduction

Katuic languages, belonging to the Mon-Khmer branch of the Austroasiatic language family (cf. Sidwell 2009), are found in Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam. Today, the Katuic population is estimated at over one million people, with the Katuic groups typically being divided into 15-20 distinct language varieties (Sidwell 2005a). Research on Katuic languages includes comparative analyses (Gregerson 1976, Diffloth 1989), historical reconstructions (Thomas 1976, Peiros 1996, Theraphan 2002, Sidwell 2005a,b), and phonologies, e.g. on Pacoh (R. Watson 1964), Katu (Wallace 1969) and Bru Tri (Phillips et al. 1976). Grammar sketches are available as well, e.g. J. Miller (1964) on Bru Tri, Costello (1969) on Katu, S. Watson (1976) and Alves (2006) on Pacoh, and Solntseva (1996) on Ta'oi. Discourse analyses have been performed by Burusphat (1993) on Kui, R. Watson (2000) on Pacoh, and Migliazza (2003) on So. Despite this, there is still much to be learned about the Katuic. In fact, it is still unclear what ethnic and language groupings exist, how much the languages continue to be spoken, and the social and linguistic interactions that take place between the different varieties.

Several sources speak of the minority peoples of Laos or Vietnam in broad terms, grouping the Ta'oi<sup>2</sup> together with other similar minority groups into “Lao Theung” or “Kha” groups. The most thorough source that deals specifically with the Ta'oi is Robert L. Mole's book *The Montagnards of South Vietnam: A Study of Nine Tribes* (1970). Schliesinger (2003), Chazée (2002), Đăng et al. (2000), and Laos's Department of Ethnic Affairs' *The Ethnic Groups in Lao P.D.R.* (2008) each give brief anthropological sketches of all of the people groups of Laos or Vietnam, including the Ta'oi<sup>3</sup>. Linguistic publications on Ta'oi have been limited in scope (Watson 1969, van der Haak 1993, Solntseva 1996). Some word lists have been taken (Nguyễn Văn Lợi et al. 1986, Theraphan 2001, Ferlus ND, Miller 1988), and the Mon-Khmer Languages Project website ([sealang.net/monkhmer/](http://sealang.net/monkhmer/)) provides wordlists from six different sources comprising a total of 1194 entries. There is also a Vietnamese-Ta'oi-Pacoh dictionary (Nguyễn et al. 1986). As with many Katuic varieties, it is unclear what Ta'oi varieties exist, the extent that they are spoken, and the sociolinguistic relationship between each variety and with closely related languages. Due to infrastructural and administrative limitations, direct access to Ta'oi language communities is difficult. Here a literature review of the geographic, linguistic and anthropological research on the Ta'oi people in Laos and Vietnam will be given. Special attention will then be paid to the vast number of ethno- and glottonyms, followed by recommendations for further research.

## 2. Geography

The country of Laos is composed of sixteen provinces and one municipality. These provinces are further broken up into 139 districts. The lowest of the administrative divisions in

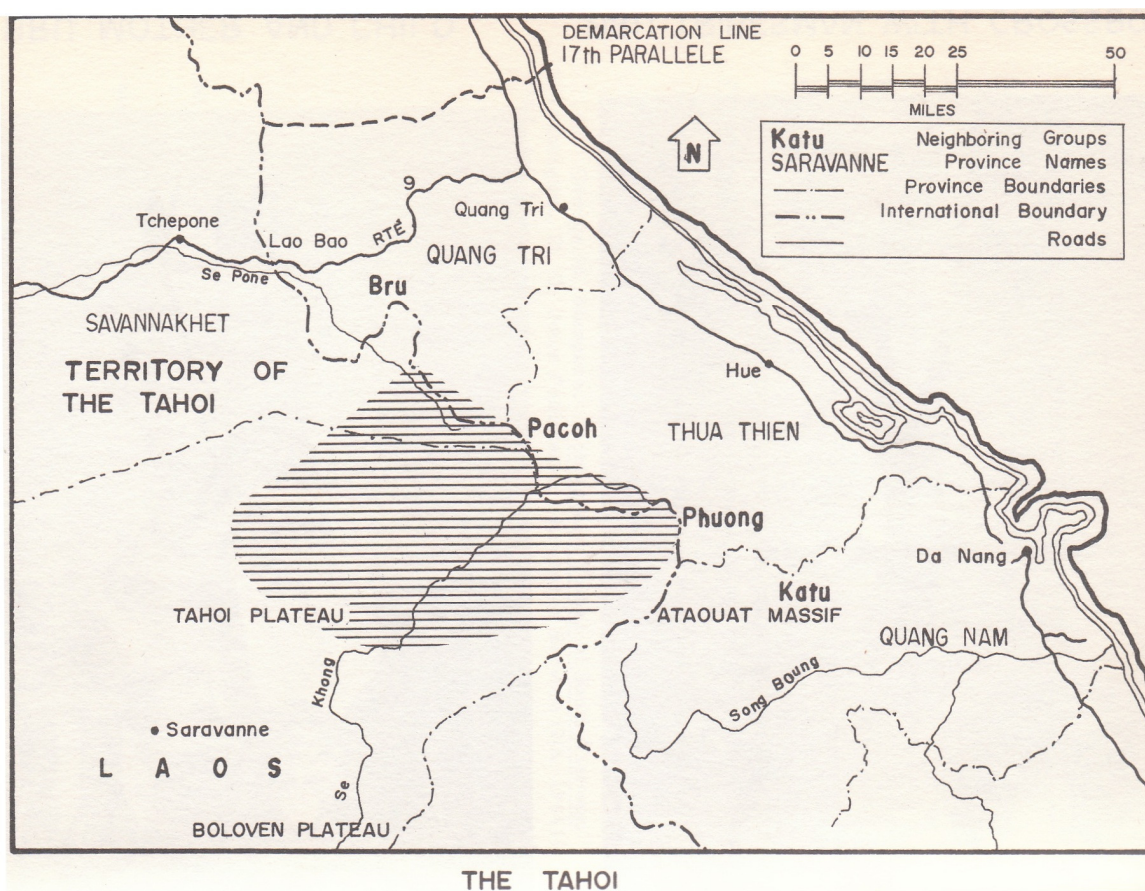
<sup>1</sup> This paper uses the term ‘ethnonym’ to refer to the name of an ethnic group, ‘autonym’ to refer to what speakers call their ethnic group, and ‘glossonym’ or ‘glottonym’ to refer the name of a language.

<sup>2</sup> There are many versions of spelling this language, which are discussed in section 6.1 of this paper. This paper adopts the spelling “Ta'oi” except where quoting directly from another source.

<sup>3</sup> Some of these sources mention other texts that may have primary research but were out of print, in a language other than English, or both.

Laos is the village. The total number of villages in Laos is estimated at being between 10,000 and 11,000 (Messerli et al. 2008). There is one informal administrative division called a *khet* (“zone”), which is found between the village and district levels. A *khet* is typically comprised of several villages. There are reported Ta’oi groups located in the Lao districts of Sepone and Nong in Savannakhet Province, Ta Oi, Toumlaan, Salavan, and Lao Ngam in Salavan Province, Bachiang Cehaleunsook, Paksong, and Phathoomphone in Champasak Province, Thateng and Kaleum in Sekong Province, and Sanamxay in Attapeu Province (Steering Committee for Census of Population and Housing 2006).

Vietnam has 58 provinces and 5 municipalities. Provinces are further divided into 548 rural districts and 47 urban districts. These are divided into a further 1448 precincts and 9050 communes (General Statistics Office of Vietnam 2011). In Vietnam, there are reported to be Ta’oi groups living in A Luói district in Thừa Thiên-Huế province and Hương Hóa district in Quảng Trị province (Đặng et al.2000). The map below (from Mole, 1970) shows the traditional homelands of the Ta’oi people.



**Map 1:** Taken from *The Montagnards of South Vietnam* by Robert L. Mole, 1970.

Most Katuic groups in Laos are found from Khammuan province south, and Ta’oi is no exception. The southern provinces of Laos for the most part are mountainous along the eastern borders which they share with Vietnam. The land slopes gradually west to the Mekong River, which forms much of the border with Thailand. Plains used for paddy rice cultivation are located in Savannakhet and Champasak. The plains in Savannakhet are watered by the Xe Banghiang River, a major tributary of the Mekong. The Mekong River winds south along the border between Laos and Thailand before cutting eastward through Laos just before Pakse and making its way across Southwest Laos into Cambodia.

Research on provincial accessibility (Messerli et al. 2008) shows that as many as 50% of the locations in Southern Laos are more than 5 hours travel from provincial capitals. Many of these areas have Ta’oi-speaking populations. As Chazée (2002:85) states, “The majority of the Taoy remains isolated from the market and development opportunities.”

Traditionally, the Ta'oi in Vietnam are found within 20 miles of the border with Laos in the rugged mountainous area of the Annamite Mountain Chain. The Annamite Mountains in this area are drained on the Vietnamese side by “numerous small streams that become part of the Song Da Giang” (Mole 1970:76) as it travels toward the Pacific. On the Lao side, the mountains give way to the Ta'oi Plateau, and are drained by the Se Pone and the Se Khong which both make their way down to the Mekong River.

### 3 Sociolinguistic Background and Endangerment

The countries of Laos and Vietnam are both rich in linguistic and ethnic diversity. Laos is known to have languages from the Mon-Khmer, Tai-Kadai, Sino-Tibetan, and Hmong-Mien families, while Vietnam has these as well as Austronesian languages (Lewis 2009). Language contact resulted in broad cross-directional linguistic exchanges (Choo 2009) which is prevalent not only between languages of the same family, but can be seen as strongly linking the minority and national languages. For example, in Laos and Thailand, Huffman (1976) reports vocabulary borrowing up to 20% from Thai and Lao, and he also has Vietnamese at about a 20% cognate level with several Katuic languages. The linguistic borrowings along with the continued rise of the national languages in Laos and Vietnam cause concern about the future of minority speech varieties, including those from the Katuic branch. Despite the Mon-Khmer languages being the most numerous in Laos, Enfield (2006) states that, “One cause for urgency in linguistic research in Laos is language endangerments... almost all are endangered...” (473).

This endangerment can be traced to a myriad of factors, including a desire to better oneself economically by learning the national language and the resettlement of people into villages with multiple ethnicities present. The effects of language learning still need to be studied in depth within the context of Laos and Vietnam. The possibility exists for both bilingualism and the loss of minority language in the subsequent generations with language contact scenarios such as the ones springing up across Southeast Asia. Choo (2009:10) asserts that, “It will not be clear whether frequent contact with the lowland Lao correlates directly with decreased mother tongue vitality until a proper study is done.”

From personal observations and communication with Ta'oi speakers, it appears that the Ta'oi language is maintaining vitality in villages where almost all of the people are Ta'oi, but is losing vitality in mixed villages where there are several minority languages as well as native Lao speakers present. In this context, the younger generation is often growing up speaking Lao as their mother tongue, as only some are able to understand or speak the language of their parents.

### 4 Society and Culture

The Ta'oi tend to organize maximally at the village level, around the family as a cohesive unit. In the past, the extended family would all live in the same long-house, but now there is a trend toward the nuclear family having their own house in the same village or nearby. Schliesinger (2003b:90) states that, “The difference between rich and poor people in Ta Oi society is not great. The Ta Oi have a well-developed spirit of mutual assistance within the community.”

The Ta'oi are a patrilineal and patrilocal society, and a new bride will take the lineage of her husband upon marriage. Young people are free to choose whom they want to marry. However, there is a bride price that must be paid for the marriage to take place. If the groom's family is poor, “the dowry may be reduced by consent of the bride's family but it must always include at least one buffalo and some food” (Mole 1970:83). At least in the past, there was polygamy among the Ta'oi with men able to take multiple wives if they could afford the bride price. It is not uncommon for Ta'oi to marry outside of their people group, especially in more recent times. According to Schliesinger (2003b), the Ta'oi are marrying among neighboring groups with greater frequency in order to obtain better farming techniques. Each Ta'oi family has a certain totemic plant or animal that is associated with their lineage. Chazée (2002:56) says that, “Meat or vegetables from the name of one's lineage line are not eaten and the same house is not shared between two persons of different lineages.” This is played out in a marriage relationship by the new bride taking on the lineage of her husband's family and thus the totemic symbol.

In the past, men were considered superior to women, but this has changed (Đặng et al. 2000). However, the roles of men and women are quite distinct, with women taking care of most of the activities concerning food including planting and harvesting and meal preparation. The men will hunt and fish, clear jungle, and build buildings as necessary (Mole 1970). These days, the women often give birth in their own houses, but before, they would have to go out into the forest alone to deliver the baby and give initial care unassisted before returning to the village (Schliesinger 2003b).

#### **4.1 Ceremonies, myths and beliefs**

The Ta'oi are traditionally an animistic culture who make sacrifices to appease the spirits, or *?yaan?*, of the village. The two main *?yaan?* that the Ta'oi are concerned with are the spirit of the rice paddy and the spirit of the sky. These are thought by the people to be the two most powerful spirits that control the fate of the tribe. Spirit houses are set up in the center of the village for both of these spirits, with a sacrificial post connected or nearby where sacrifices are made. Sacrifices range from alcohol, rice, or chickens up to a buffalo. Sacrifices are made to appease spirits, gain their favor, or to secure their cooperation. Mole (1970:87) states that, "The Tau-oi believe that the spirits work through, and control, the various natural forces so that harm or prosperity may be given to an individual or the village as the spirits please." There are also many taboos that are in place so that the spirits will not be offended. If the taboo is broken, a sacrifice must be made to appease that spirit that is thought to have been offended. These sacrifices are made by the village shaman who will also perform any ceremony necessary for the sacrifice.

While sacrifices to appease the spirits can take place at any time, there are two ceremonies that occur on an annual basis. The first takes place in February and is to honor the spirit of the village. The second occurs in October and informs the spirits that they are going to clear new land for rice paddies.

The Ta'oi are thought to practice black magic or sorcery through the use of incantations and spells. This makes them feared by the other people groups in Laos. There are many among the lowland Lao that are afraid to take up posts among the Ta'oi because of this fear, though smelling nice is thought to protect against the spells. Thus, shampoo, toothpaste, deodorant, and talcum powder are all thought to be important when living in Ta'oi areas.

The majority of Katuic ethnographic studies (Chazée 2002, Schliesinger 2003b, Mole 1970) state that the Katuic peoples are animist who believe in the powers of the spirit world. However, Buddhism is gradually influencing the beliefs of the Katuic people, while some communities are turning to Christianity.

#### **4.2 Houses and villages**

Ta'oi villages are for the most part found between 300 and 1000 meters above sea level. The Ta'oi will often share their villages with other minority peoples. In their traditional homeland, it is often with the Katu that they share. More recently, many Ta'oi villages have moved down to lower elevations, and they are now found in mixed villages with Katu, Kui, Katang, Alak, Loven, and Lao (Schliesinger 2003b).

Traditionally, Ta'oi villages were either in a circular shape used for defense or had long-houses, "radiating like the spokes of a wheel" (Mole 1970:80). In either case, the center of the village was a communal house that was used for meetings and for guests and a spirit house for the village spirit. Attached to the spirit house would be a pole where sacrifices would be made. In modern times, defense is no longer a consideration and the houses are more often built along a road with smaller houses used more for individual families.

According to Mole (1970), the traditional long-houses could be as big as 600 feet in length. These long-houses would have extended families all living together in the same long-house with a corridor running the length of the house with rooms coming off of one or both sides. The size of the long-house would be determined by the size of the extended family, village space permitting.

### 4.3 Costume, Crafts, and the Arts

The Ta'oi would traditionally weave cloth of red or blue to use for their various needs. Their traditional costume had, “embroidered patterns similar to those of Kriang and Kahtoo” (Lao for National Construction 2008:118), but is becoming less common. In recent times, the women typically wear the Lao *sinh* with a blouse, while the men wear trousers. Schliesinger (2003b) found that Ta'oi still wear traditional pearl necklaces. The Ta'oi traditionally would file their teeth, tattoo their bodies to ward off evil spirits (Mansfield 2000), and stretch their earlobes, but these practices are now less common.

The Ta'oi also practice the crafts of woodworking, carving, and basket making (Schliesinger 2003b), and are noted for their wooden masks and statues (Chazée 2002). Mole notes that the Ta'oi favor a lizard motif and that it can be found in the design of almost all of their houses. He states, “Sometimes the lizard motif is intricately carved on the ends of the main roof beam as a work of art. In this regard the Tau-oi seem to have a talent of woodworking and skillful carving that surpass that of most other tribes” (Mole 1970:80).

The Ta'oi also have music, dance, and poetry that are unique to their culture. They play instruments such as the bronze gong, *khaen*<sup>4</sup>, and drum at different occasions. According to one source, they have a particular type of song that, “They sing to express their joys and sorrows and, to declare their love” (Đặng et al. 2000:87). These songs are accompanied with musical instruments such as the *khaen*. They also have poems, folktales, and proverbs that tell about their past, their culture, and their livelihood (Lao Front for National Construction 2008).

### 4.4 Agriculture and economy

The traditional method of farming uses the shifting or slash-and-burn techniques. In recent years, the government of Laos has been promoting resettlement projects throughout Laos in order to help stop slash-and-burn agriculture as well as the cultivation of opium (Evrard and Goudineau 2004). Some of the resettled communities who have resettled in rice friendly areas have incorporated paddy cultivation into their agricultural practices. Glutinous rice is the most popular crop among the Katuic groups, planted mostly for their own dietary needs and supplemented through hunting and gathering. Other crops include cassava, sweet potatoes, corn, and other vegetables. The Ta'oi have also started growing cash crops such as coffee, tea, soy beans, castor beans, tobacco, sesame, red chillies, fruit, and opium (Mansfield 2000). In addition to crops, the Ta'oi supplement their diet by foraging, hunting, fishing, and raising domesticated animals such as chickens, pigs, and buffalo. In the past, they were even known to hunt and domesticate elephants.

The Ta'oi formerly relied solely on natural conditions for their crops. The crops were watered by rainfall alone, and they would use no other fertilizer besides the ashes from the burning of the remnants of the last harvest. According to Mole (1970), this was because they believed that the spirits of the paddy and the rice would not like it if other fertilizers were used. In more recent times the Ta'oi have moved into some mixed villages, where they are rapidly taking on new farming techniques from other groups. Chazée (2002:85) states that, “The majority of the Taoy remains isolated from the market and development opportunities, but start to mix with other minorities with more productive farming systems. The integration seems rapid, and there is acculturation.”

## 5. History and Migration

The Mon-Khmer people are thought to be the original inhabitants of Southeast Asia. Originally, the Mon-Khmer people, such as the Ta'oi, inhabited more of the lowland regions of Southeast Asia, but were pressed further up into the hills with the expansion of the Lao/Tai groups from what are now the southern provinces of China starting in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries AD. As the Lao peoples moved further and further south into the region, the Mon-Khmer people were forced higher and higher away from the more arable land. This culminated with the 1431 AD capture of the Khmer capital by the Siamese, causing the Khmer peoples to retreat into the more remote hills (Mole 1970).

<sup>4</sup> The *khaen* is a traditional reed pipe instrument that is used in many parts of Southeast Asia.

The Ta'oi were a warlike people who would often raid the Lao villages, which would cause the Lao to respond in kind. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Ta'oi and some of the other tribes took to slaving: "While killing anyone who resisted, the Tau-oi kidnapped women and children of neighboring tribes and supplied Montagnard slaves for the markets at Bassac, Attopeu, Phnom Penh, Bangkok and other trade centers." (Mole 1970:78). The Vietnamese paid tribute to the Ta'oi in order that they might pass through their territory safely. In 1897 the French entered into negotiations with the Ta'oi, ending the slave trade and the violence associated with it.

During the time of colonial rule, the French enacted a policy of what was called a *corvée* labor system. The men 19-60 years old of the Lao Theung groups were required to pay 1 piastre a year as well as serve 10 days a year laboring for the French (Evans 2002). Parts of the road from Salavan to Ta'oi still have some of the paving stones laid down by these workers to this day (Osborne 2012).

At the turn of the century an indigenous rebel movement directed against the French was growing on the Boloven Plateau. This 'holy man movement' is expounded upon in works such as "The Holy Man in the History of Thailand and Laos" (Wilson 1997). Under the leadership of first Ong Keo and later Ong Kommadam, attempts were made to force out the French. This movement attracted Ta'oi support.

During the Vietnam War, the country of Laos was used as a staging ground and not so secret battleground by both the Pathet Lao and their North Vietnamese allies and the United States. For the most part, the United States limited its involvement to supplying those fighting the communist forces and bombing throughout the country, concentrating on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, which ran south along the border mountains where many of the Katuic people lived. These bombings along with the fighting that took place throughout the country caused many people, including Ta'oi, to leave their homes. Stuart-Fox (1997:144) finds that, "At one time or another as many as three-quarters of a million people, a quarter of the entire population, had been driven from their homes to become refugees in their own country."

During the late 1950's and early 1960's as the anti-royalist forces moved into the mountainous regions of the Annamite cordillera, Ta'oi villages from what is now Ta'oi District were moved away from the advancing forces and re-settled along the roads closer to Pakse. As early as 1967, the administrative center of Salavan, which was the closest to the Ta'oi, was under the control of the Pathet Lao. The de-population of the area was a military strategy designed to deny local food supply or support to an advancing army (Osborne 2012).

Since the end of the war, there have been two factors that have affected the movements of minority peoples. The first is the migrations that have taken place as people look to build better lives for themselves in a different area. Schliesinger (2003b:88) states that, "Since the end of the Vietnam War there is a trend for most Katuic-speaking people who lived near the mountainous, malaria infested, remote and inaccessible Laos-Vietnam border region, to migrate westwards onto the plains as far as the outskirts of Pakse close to the Mekong River."

Many of the villages that have sprung up from this migration are mixed villages, or villages that contain multiple ethnicities. The Ta'oi have tended to form villages with the Katu, Kriang (Ngeq), Katang, and others. This has had the effect of a greater reliance on the Lao language as these groups will use Lao among those outside of their own language community.

The second factor which has affected the movements of minority groups are the resettlement projects that the government of Laos has taken on. Besides creation of infrastructure such as dams, the reasons that are given for these resettlement projects are opium eradication, security concerns, access and service delivery, cultural integration and nation building, and swidden agriculture reduction" (Baird and Shoemaker 2007:870). Because opium has to be grown at higher elevations, the resettlement of villages to the lowlands allows for the eradication of opium production. Resettlement because of security concerns was more valid in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, when rebel groups were more active. In moving these villages out of the highlands, the government hopes to be able to better provide services such as education and health services to villages that are easier to access via the road system. The government is also trying to eliminate traditional slash-

and-burn farming techniques by moving villages to areas where rice paddy farming is a viable option.

The final reason for resettlement is the one that deals most directly with topics covered in this paper, that is, cultural integration and nation building. In resettling minority groups, such as the Ta'oi, into areas that are traditionally ethnic Lao areas, the minority groups are being encouraged to integrate into the wider Lao society and language. As mentioned before, this is true not only in villages where there is an ethnic Lao population, but also where mixed villages are created from several different ethnicities. This creates the need for a lingua franca, which in this case is Lao.

## 6. Linguistic Background of Ta'oi

The Katuic languages were first listed as a Mon-Khmer branch of its own by Thomas and Headley (1970). This list contains 17 suspected Katuic varieties, and was lexically based as much of the subsequent research has been. As research has increased, different researchers have postulated divisions that have built from the work of Ferlus (1974). For example, the Ethnologue (Lewis 2009) lists 19 Katuic languages according to its classifications, and two of Thomas and Headley's Katuic languages have since been recognized as Bahnaric (Sidwell 2005a). Ferlus (1974) and Therapan (2000) whose classifications are based on lexical considerations distinguish only West and East Katuic, but do not conform in the assignment of individual languages. Miller & Miller (1996) whose divisions are based on a lexicalstatistical analysis of 50 wordlists differentiate North, West, and Central Katuic. Sidwell's (2005a) historical phonological comparison postulates the four Katuic branches West-Katuic, Ta'oi, Katu, and Paco. Table 1 below shows different Katuic groupings and related varieties in each, according to the aforementioned sources.

**Table 1:** Katuic groupings according to various sources (taken from Choo 2009).

Source	Proposed Katuic grouping
Ferlus 1974	West Katuic: Kui, Souei, Bru, So East Katuic: Katu, Kantu, Phüöng, Ta-Oi, Kriang etc.
Miller & Miller 1996	North Katuic: So, Bru, Tri, Makong, Siliq, Katang West Katuic: Sui/Suoi/Suai, Nheu, Kui, Kuay Pacoh: Pacoh Central Katuic: Ong, Ir, Ta-oih (implied from body of paper) Ngeq: Ngeq Katu (Laos): Katu (Laos) Katu (Vietnam): Katu (Vietnam)
Theraphan 2002	West Katuic: Kui, Souei East Katuic (North): Bru, So, Pacoh East Katuic (Central): Ta'O'i, Chatong, Kriang East Katuic (South): Dakkang, Triw, Kantu, Katu
Sidwell 2005(a)	West Katuic: Kui, Souei, Bru, Sô, etc. Ta'O'i: Ta'O'i, Katang, Talan/Onh/Ir/Inh, Kriang/Ngeq, Chatong Katu: Kantu, Katu, Phuong, Triw, Dakkang Pacoh: Pacoh

Based on these groupings, Ta'oi falls either into the East Katuic (Ferlus), Central Katuic (Miller), East Katuic [Central] (Theraphan), or into a Ta'O'i-Kriang grouping (Sidwell). An in-depth discussion of Ta'oi linguistic classification would exceed the framework of this paper. What remains clear is that further research on the Ta'oi language is needed. One of the biggest areas for further studies is the relationship between Ta'oi dialects, as well as establishing the relationship between Ta'oi, Ong, Ir, Chatong, Katang-Ta'oi, Pacoh, and Cantua.



### 6.1 Ethnonyms and Glossonyms

The most recent census in Laos took place in 2005 (Messerli et al. 2008), and it lists the population of Laos at 5.6 million people, although since this number is likely to have grown closer to between 6 and 7 million (World Factbook 2012). The 2005 census (National Statistics Centre 2007) states that ethnic Lao compose 55% of the population. The remaining 45% are made up of the ethnic minorities, among which the government of Laos officially recognizes 49 ethnic groups with 160 sub-groupings. These have been ethnolinguistically classified into four families: Lao-Tai (Tai-Kadai), Mon-Khmer (Austroasiatic), Hmong-Mien, and Sino-Tibetan. Officially recognized Katuic languages in Laos are the following varieties: Katang, Makong (including Bru), Tri, Ta'oi, Katu, Kriang, Souay (also known as Kuy), and Pacoh.

One older method of classifying ethnic minorities in Laos that is still sometimes used is based on the geographic altitude at which they typically live, started by P.S. Ngin in the early 1960s, but not widely used until after 1975 (Schliesinger 2003a). It divides the ethnic groups of Laos into three groups: the *Lao Loum* 'Lao below' who traditionally live in the lowlands up to approximately 400m above sea level, the *Lao Theung* 'Lao above' who traditionally lived at the middle altitudes of approximately 800-1400m, and the *Lao Soung* 'Lao high' traditionally lived in the higher mountainous regions, those above 1400m from sea level. For the most part, the groups are broken up ethnolinguistically, with the Lao-Tai groups in the *Lao Loum*, the Austroasiatic (including Katuic) groups in the *Lao Theung*, and the *Lao Soung* being composed of the Hmong-Mien and Tibeto-Burman populations (Chazée 2002). This method is losing relevance as more and more of the people move out of their traditional homelands and into those traditionally occupied by other groups.

According to Chazée (2002), ethnonyms for ethnic groups in Laos are a challenge. Some of the ethnic groups do not have an autonym. This has been found to be especially true with regards to Austroasiatic groups (e.g. Katuic). Even if they do have an autonym, they are often called by a different name by others. One example of this is the Makong. The *Ethnologue* (Lewis 2009) lists Makong as an alternate name for So. However, the government of Laos puts Makong as a primary ethnonym with sub-groups: Trui, Phoua, Maroih, and Trong; but not So. Studies done by the Nam Theun Project researchers (Ovenden 2007) frequently list the Brou (Bru) as representative of Makong. However, Bru is listed as a distinct variety from So in the *Ethnologue*; and Bru is not even found in the official list of ethnic groups recognized by the government of Laos<sup>5</sup>.

The Ta'oi people are similar to the Makong in having a large number of ethnonyms. In addition to the ethnonyms, there are also the glossonyms (names of the language). For the most part, the ethnonyms and glossonyms are synonymous. However, there are a few exceptions where names of dialects are different from any known ethnonyms. Both ethnonyms and glossonyms from various sources are included in Table 1 below. The *Ethnologue* (Lewis 2009) has two listings for the Ta'oi, Upper and Lower Ta'oih. The reason for the Upper and Lower Ta'oi distinction is unknown. For Upper Ta'oih, it lists Kantua, Ta Hoi, Ta-Oi, Ta-Oy, and Tau Oi as alternate names, and it lists Pasoom, Kamuan', Palee'n, Leem, and Ha'aang (Sa'ang) as dialects. For Lower Ta'oih it lists the alternate name of Tong and the dialects as being Tong and Hantong'. Mole (1970) lists Tau-oi as having synonyms of Ta Hoi, Tahoi, Ka-Ta-Oi, Ta-oih, and Toi-Oi. The most extensive lists come from Schliesinger who has gathered a number of sources and lists the language as Ta Oi with Taoy, Ta Oy, Ta Oih, Ta Hoi, Ta Uat, Taoey, Tau Oi, Tau-oi, Tauat, Atuat (probably after the Atouat Mountain in Laos), and Ta Liat as alternate names and Ong, Ir (or Yir), Tong, and Hantong as subgroups (Schliesinger 2003a). Also in this book he quotes Nguyen Duy Thieu who also lists Bru, Paco, Oong, In, Canay, Cado, Zir, Toong, Kha Paco, T'rau, and Lao Thong as other names of Ta'oi. In his notes, Thieu states that, "Oong means mountain, Canay means mouse, Cado means wild banana and Toong is a village name" (Schliesinger 2003a:90). In Vietnam, the name Ta'oi is also used for the Paco (Pacoh, Pako), Can Tua, and Ba Hi people (Đặng et al. 2000). Sidwell (2005a) has the name as Ta'O'i with alternate spellings of Taoih, Ta-Oy, and Ta Hoi, and lists Ong/Ir/Talan

5 See also Enfield (2006: 486), who shares a similar problem of ambiguity in identifying ethnonyms. Perhaps coincidentally, the example he gives is also Brou-Makong-So.

as different names for one dialect and Chatong as another dialect. Names of Ta'oi found in the literature are listed in Table 2 below which shows the different names used by the various sources.

**Table 2:** Ta'oi ethnonyms and glossonyms from published literature

Source	Primary Name Used	Additional Ethnonyms Listed	Additional Glossonyms listed
Ethnologue (2009)	Ta'oih	Upper: Kantua, Ta Hoi, Ta-oi, Ta-Oy, Tau Oi Lower: Tong	Upper Dialects: Pasoom, Kamuan', Palee'n, Leem, Ha'aang (Sa'ang) Lower Dialects: Tong, Hantong'
Mole (1970)	Tau-Oi	Ta Hoi, Tahoi, Ka-Ta-Oi, Ta-oih, Toi-Oi	
Schliesinger <sup>2</sup> (2003a and 2003b)	Ta Oi	Ta-Oi, Ta-oi, Ta Oy, Ta oy, Taoy, Taoey, Ta Oih, Ta-oih, Ta Hoi, Thoi, Ta Uat, Tauat, Tai-Oi, Tai Oih, Tau Oi, Tau-Oi, Tau-oi, Kha Ta Hoi, Kha Tahoi, Atuat, Bru, Cado, Canay, In, Kantua, Kha Paco, Lao Thong, Oong, Paco, Ta Liat, Zir, Toong, T'rau, Ting Subgroups: Hantong, Ir (or Yir), Ong, Tong	
Chazée 2002	Taoy	Ta-oih, Ta-oy, Ta Hoi	
Đặng et al. (2000)	Ta-ôi	Tôi-ôi, Ta-ôi, Ta-hoi, Tà-uât (Atuât) Subgroups: Pa-cô, Can-tua, Ba-hi	
Solntseva (1996)	Taoih	Ta-ôi, Ta-uôi, Ta-uôt, Pa-koh, Ba-hi, Pa-hi	Ta-ôi, Ta-uôi, Ta-uôt
van der Haak (1993)	Ta'uaih		Ta'oih, Katang-Ta'oih
Sidwell (2005a)	Ta'Oï	Taoih, Ta-Oy, Ta Hoi	Dialects: Ong/Ir/Talan, Chatong

While there are some differences between the ethnonyms and glossonyms, the names used for both the people and their language can be grouped into basic categories: Ta'oi (plus variations), names that are thought to be related languages, and names that are suspect that come from a single original source. The first category is "Ta'oi" plus variations. This would include what are thought to be the two main dialects of Ta'oïq and Ta'uas or Ta'uaih (van der Haak 1993). There is a third group that van der Haak calls Katang-Ta'oïh that may be a dialect of Ta'oi, Katang, or it may be another language entirely. Up until this point there has not been sufficient research to determine the relationships between Ta'oi, Katang, and Katang-Ta'oi.

In the second grouping of names that are thought to be from related languages, we have Bru, Ong variations (Tong, Hantong), Ir variations (Yir, In, Zir), and different spellings of Pacoh. Pacoh at least is a different language (Alves 2006) and Bru is sometimes used as a term for a larger section of the Katuic population. In Vietnam, the Pacoh are included under the umbrella of Ta'oi, as are Can-tua and Ba-hi (Đặng et al. 2000). According to Richard Watson, Pahi (Ba-hi), Kado (Cado), and Pacoh were dialects of the same language, although Kado, at least, has grown apart to the extent that it is no longer mutually intelligible with Pacoh, except for those people who have a lot of contact. Cantua is a Pacoh name for Ta'oi, though it is unknown whether it is actually a dialect within Ta'oi (personal communications). There seems to be at least an ethnographic difference between the Ta'oi and the Ir and Ong, and they seem to consider themselves different

<sup>6</sup> Schliesinger draws from many sources. He has tables that include ethnonyms from each source as well as a table that conglomerates most of the others in the back of the first volume of his *Ethnic Groups of Laos*. All quoted sources have been added to this table.

groups. Whether their languages are separate languages or just dialects of a single language remains to be determined. One final glossonym of note is Chatong, which Sidwell (2005a) reports as being a member of the Ta'oi subgroup, which also contains Kriang (Ngeq) and Ta'oi. Other names that are listed were found only from a single source and are suspected to be names of villages or other geographical areas rather than actual ethnonyms or glossonyms. From the above sources, the following divisions in Table 3 are therefore suggested.

**Table 3:** Dialects of Ta'oi

Primary Dialects:	Dialects in Need of Data:	Related but Separate Languages or Dialects
Ta'oiq	Katang-Ta'oi	Bru
Ta'uas	Ong	Pacoh
	Ir	Pahi
	Cantua	Cado
	Chatong	

## 7. Outlook

The Mon-Khmer language Ta'oi in the Katuic sub-group is spoken in Laos and Vietnam. It has many names, and further research is needed to determine the relationships especially between Ta'oi, Katang, and Katang-Ta'oi. As an endangered language, Ta'oi would benefit greatly from phonological and grammatical descriptions, an orthography, and literature development, which may help prevent extinction. In addition, an updated anthropological study with historical data is recommended as much has changed in recent years for many minority groups in Laos and Vietnam, including the Ta'oi.

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