

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.0 Introduction

This thesis is the phonological description of Syriem. This chapter introduces the origin of Syriem and the people, the location, and the Syriem language and its classification.

### 1.1 The origin of Syriem and the people

Lieut. R. Steward (1856) in his article on “Notes on Northern Cachar” offers some comments about the settlement of Kukis in Cachar [present days Barak valley]. Steward conjectures the original country of the Kukis to be in the south of Cachar and the hill ranges lying between that province and Chittagong. Thus, in the words of Steward (1856)

A war, however, sprang up between the whole of the clans, and another large tribe called Looshais [Lusheis], who inhabited the same country though removed further south; this tribe having the advantage of propinquity to a coast-trade had supplied themselves plentifully with fire-arms and consequently the Kookies, who had hereto-fore considered themselves more powerful, were defeated, and in 1848-49 four large clans of them called the thadon [Thadou], Shingshón [Singson], Chúnghsen [Changsen] and Lumgúm [Lhangum], together with other pity though

distinct families, poured themselves in Cachar, flying before their enemies the Looshais, who had driven them from their native hills into the plains.

Although, a direct link between the clans who were driven out of the Lushei hills into Cachar and the present population of the Syriem cannot be established with full authority, it may be mentioned here that, the presence of Changsen, Chongloi (Thadou) and Khochung in addition to Vaiphei and Aimol families amongst the Syriem population could be a clue to assume that they (Syriem) are those groups of new Kukis who once settled in the Lushei hills.

A detailed account of their past history and the timing of their settlement into Cachar are too far remote for anyone in the community to remember. But, few elders could tell us interesting stories of how they once settled in and around what is today called Silchar Medical College in the heart of Silchar (Trade Centre of Cachar district) and how they were pushed gradually northward bordering Mizoram. But when asked why they were pushed northward, the only consistent answer they gave was their settlements were gradually annexed unabatedly by the Bengalis and their arable lands gradually shrunk until they have no option but to migrate northwards where they can find some arable land for their cultivation. Most elderly persons in the community still have a fresh memory of how they came to inhabit their present settlements. Most elders espouse that Balisor (a.k.a) Kuki Punji) is the oldest settlement of the Syriems. The first man who lived in Balisor was a person was an Aimol who is popularly known as *Khupa Raja*. It is said that, *Khupa Raja* assisted the Britishers by showing them the way when they could not further proceed to Mizoram. In exchange of the service, the Britishers

gave him a large acre of land which is known as KukiPunji. Today, the residents of the village could proudly say that they are the only people amongst the whole of Syriems to have had *paata* (land certificate) from the British. With KukiPunji as the epicentre, the rest of the other villages were later inhibited as their population increased in the course of time.

The speakers at present are spread in five villages of Barak valley<sup>1</sup> (Southern Assam), namely, Balisor (KukiPunji), Noksa (Nengpur), Bagbahar, SyriemKho and Nagathol. The exact number of people who speak Syriem is not available. According to a rough estimate provided by some elders during our field visits, the total population may be between 600-700 speakers. Their immediate neighbours, particularly the Bengalis seldom call them as Syrems, but instead refer to them as Kukis. It may be noted here that the term *Kuki* was used particularly by the Britishers to cover all the Kuki–Chin groups who have so much in common in terms of the language and culture. Historical sources which deals on the Kukis of Cachar are scanty and they do not tell us anything about the Syriems.

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<sup>1</sup>Barak valley is the historical term for Cachar out of which is carved out three administrative districts-Cachar, Karimganj and Hilakandi. The local variety of Bengali (Sylheti) is spoken by almost 90% of the total population.



Figure 1. Map of India showing the state of Assam

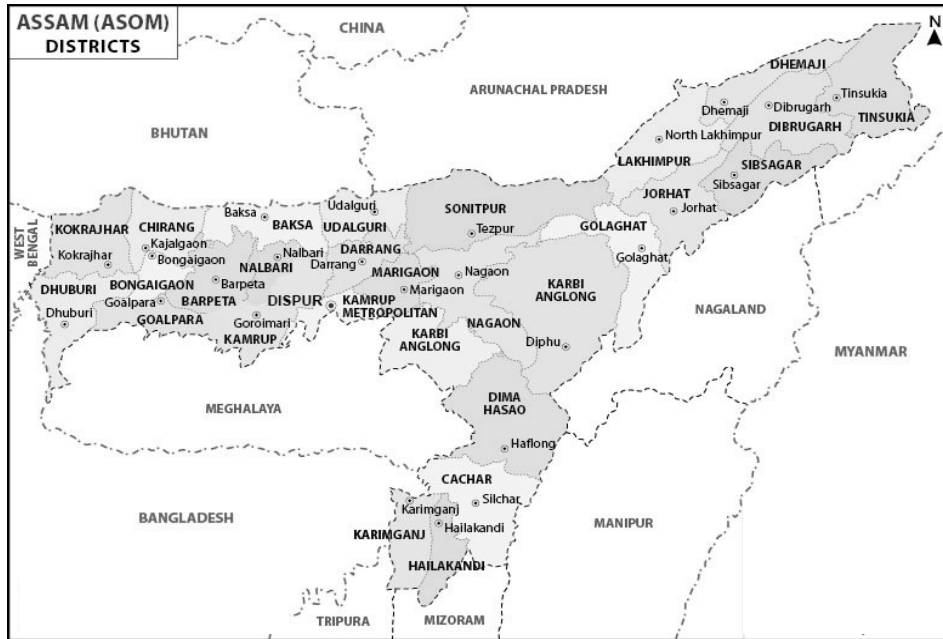


Figure 2. District Map of Assam

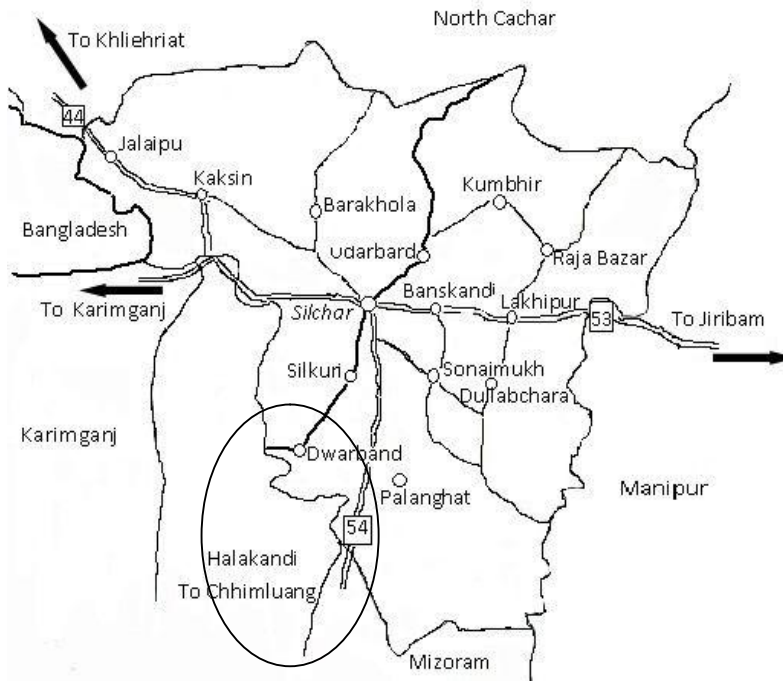


Figure 2. Map of Southern Assam showing the location of Syriem villages

## 1.2 Social Composition

Unlike, many other linguistic groups in Northeast India, where language name is also the name of the tribe to which people affiliate themselves to, this is not so in the case of the Syriems. The reason why this is not so is that Syriem speakers belong to different clans/tribes all belonging to the Kuki-Chin group. These include Aimol, Changsen, Chongloi (Thadou), Khochung<sup>2</sup>, Kholhang, Vaiphei, Rangkhoh and Tollai, etc. Many of these tribe's name still exist in other regions of Northeast India as a language with native speakers though, many of them are spoken by dwindling number of speakers. Though the people who speak Syriem traced their origin from other Kuki-Chin groups, most people have completely stopped using them as their mother tongues while others remember only few words and sentences. The Aimols Syriem speaking population are not conversant with their counterpart Aimols of Manipur. During January 2010, we had the privilege of an Aimol linguist from Manipur who had accompanied us to visit Kuki Punji where we met few Aimol households. With the pretext that they can communicate in Aimol, the Aimol linguist talked to them in Aimol, but none of them could understand the words and sentences uttered by our friend, though they could make out what he intended to say. In contrast to the Syriem speaking Aimols, on many occasions, we have visited few households who happened to claim themselves as Thadou. The first reaction they have when they met the second author who himself was a native speaker of Thadou, they immediately

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<sup>2</sup>Khochung and Kholhang are the geographical names used by the traditional Kuki-Chin people to refer to the Thadous and Hmars who happened to settle in the north and south in the traditional homeland of the Kuki-Chin people. Throughout the settlements of the Kuki-Chin people save in this case, these two terms have been replaced in favour of Thadou and Hmar.

tried to communicate to us with their vague knowledge of Thadou to show their affiliation. Somehow, they can understand each other since lexical items of all the Kuki-Chin languages are closely related. The communication is facilitated because both sides know Hmar language which is the well spread in and around Barak valley.

### **1.3 Linguistic classifications of Kuki-Chin**

Linguists have classified the Tibeto-Burman language family variously, at higher levels as well as at lower levels. Shafer (1974) divides Tibeto-Burman into four main groups: Bodic, Baric, Burmic and Karenic. According to his classification the Kukish Section is included in the Burmic Division. Benedict (1972: 5) lists ‘seven primary divisions or nuclei of Tibeto-Burman’. These are: Tibetan-Kanauri (Bodish-Himalayish), Bahing-Vayu (Kiranti), Abor-Miri-Dafla (Mirish), Kachin (Luish), Burmese-Lolo (Burmish), Bodo-Garo (Barish) and Kuki-Naga (Kukish). According to his classification Chin languages fall into the last sub group. The classification that Matisoff has developed for the STEDT project differs from Benedict’s classification in several respects (see Matisoff 2003: 5-6). Relevant for the classification of Chin is the fact that Matisoff has ‘provisionally’ lumped together Benedict’s Kuki-Naga group with Bodo-Garo (Barish) and Abor-Miri-Dafla (Mirish) into one super group which he named *Kamarupan*. Matisoff points out that *Kamarupan* is a purely geographical name, from the old Sanskrit name for Assam. Matisoff’s invention of *Kamarupanas* a subgroup of Sino-Tibetan has led

to controversies with other Sino-Tibetanists, especially with Robbins Burling (1999).

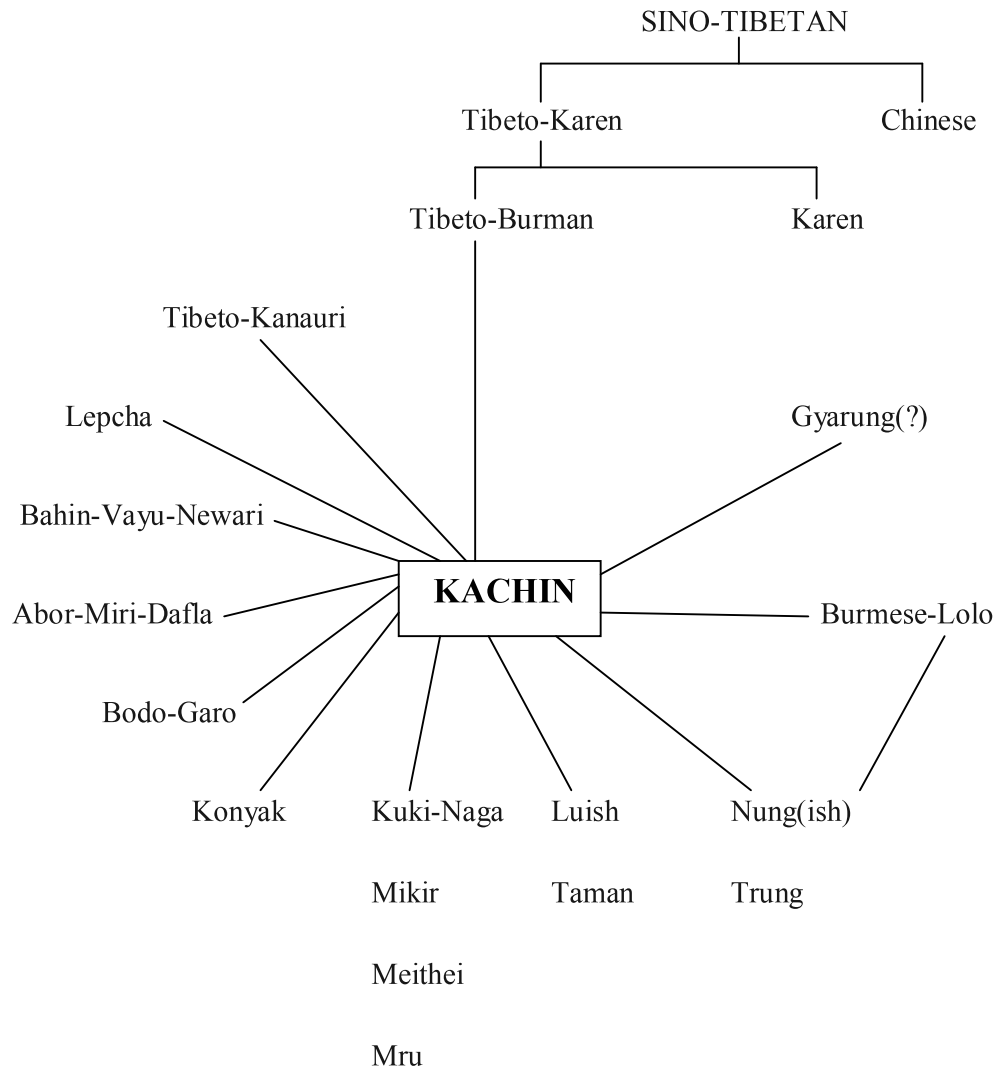


Figure 4. Schematic chart of Sino-Tibetan Languages (Benedict 1972)



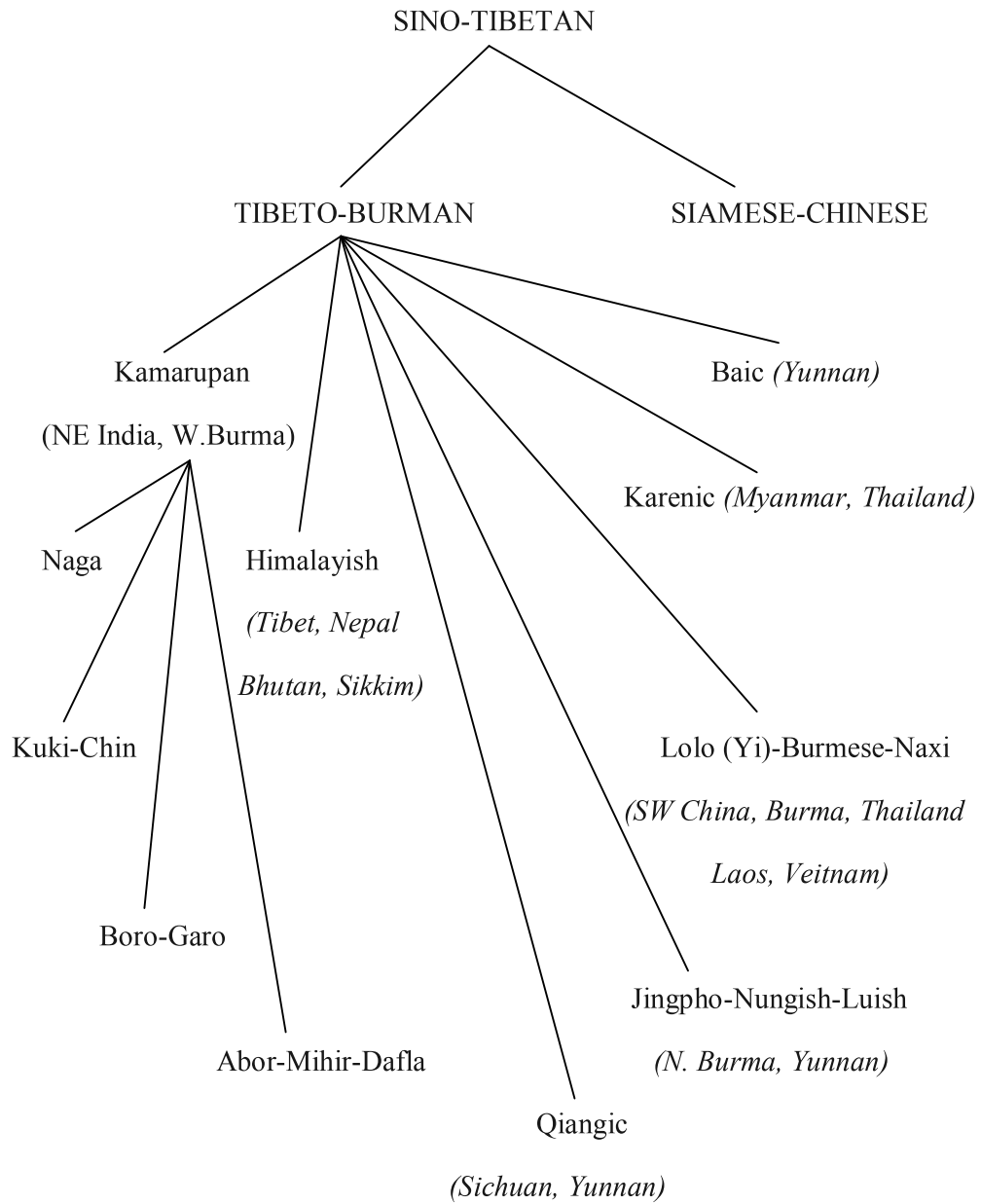


Figure 4. Matisoff's Provisional STEDT Family Tree

Bradley (1997) gives an overall summary as follows: North-eastern India, Western, South-eastern and North-eastern. He classifies 'Kuki-Chin-Naga' as part

of the 'North-eastern India' group and divides Chin into Northern Chin, Central Chin and Southern Chin and Other Chin Groups. According to Bradley's classification **Northern Chin** comprises: Thado, Chiru, Gangte, Pawi, Simte, Siyin, Paite, Vuite, Sokte, Kamhau and some others. Under **Central Chin** he lists: Mizo (Lushai), Bawm, Paangkhoa, Zahao (Laizo), Tashon, Ngawn, Zanniat, Zophei, Lawtu, Lailen, Senthang, Tawr 'and many other groups'. Under **Southern Chin** he lists: Zolamnai, Welaung, Matu (Ngala), M'kang, Ng'men, Nitu (Daai), Ngizung, Utpu (Chinpon), Chinbok (Sagaingbaung) and Asho. Under **Other Chin Groups** he lists: Khami/Khumi and Mara (Lakher). Figure 5 shows Bradley's Kuki-Chin-Naga classification and Figure 6 illustrates Grierson's (1904) classification of Chin languages.

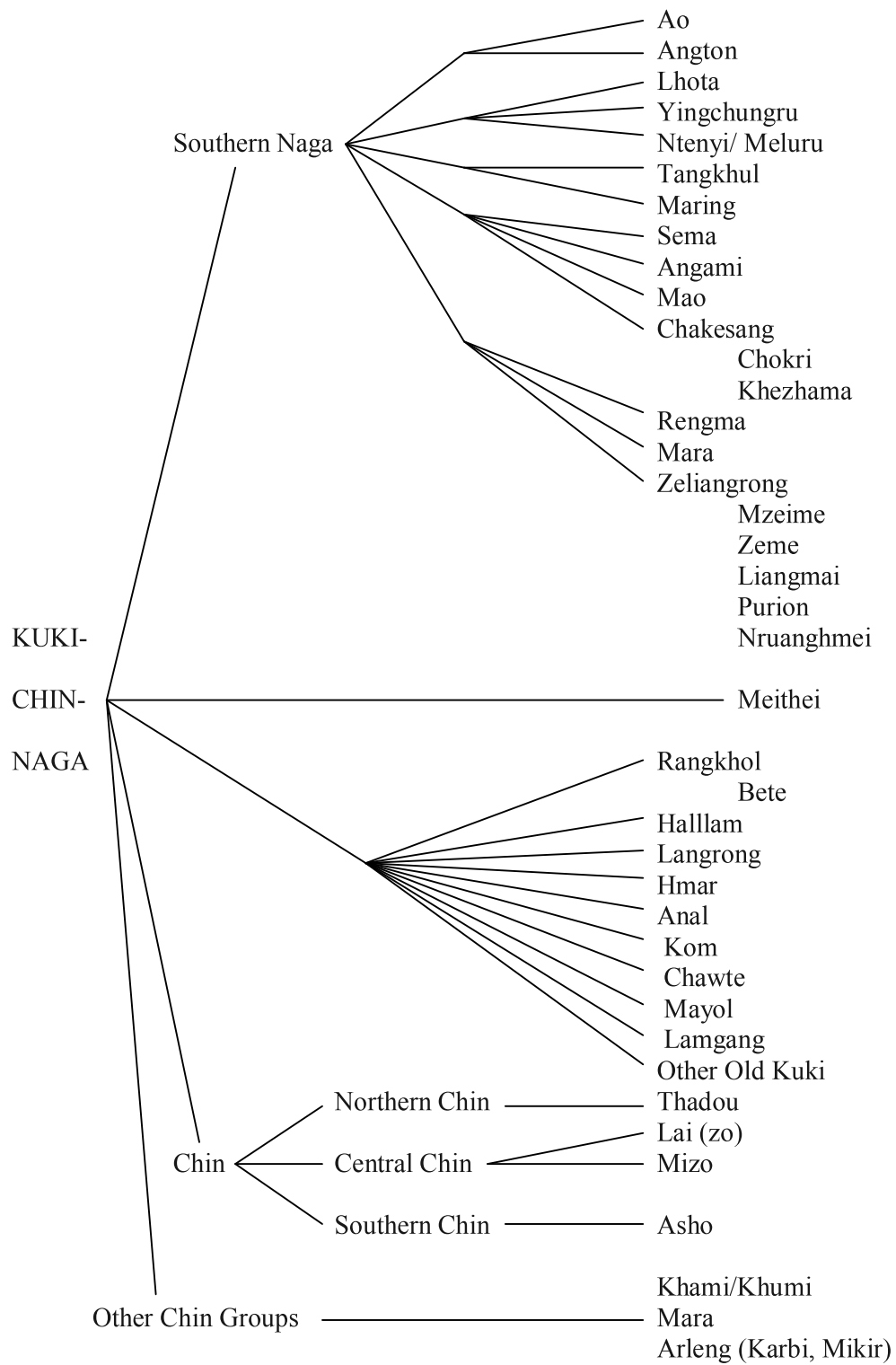


Figure 5:Bradley's Kuki-Chin-Naga classification

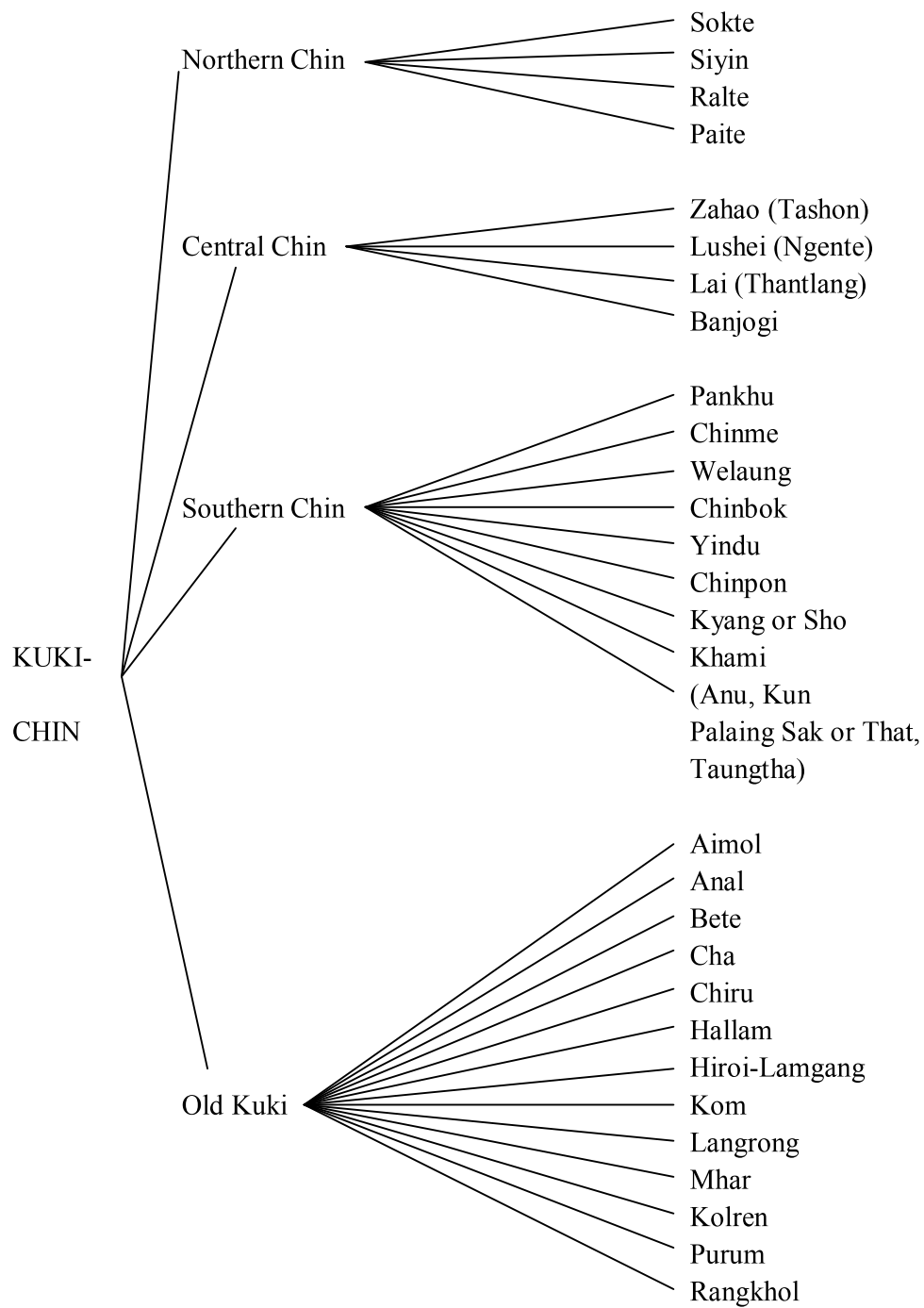


Figure 6: Grierson's classification of Chin languages

### **1.3.1 Is it a language or a dialect?**

#### **A. Aimol views**

During the course of our field work some Syriem speaking population of Aimol origin who are not so happy to be identified to be Syriem politely asked what we think of Syriem. Then we also politely reply what they think of it. The answer we got was that, they believe that Syriem is language which evolved out as a result of living together of different tribes and clans belonging to the Kuki-Chin group. Their contention was that the first family to inhabit the village of KukiPunji was an Aimol family. The Aimol family not feeling happy to be alone invited other Kuki-Chin group and distributed lands to them as well. As a result of living together and inter tribes marriages languages converges and a new variety of speech form called Syriem was born.

#### **B. Hmar views**

The Hmars believed that Syriem is a dialect of Hmar on the pretext that Syriem happened to be one of the clan's names in the genealogy of Hmar. The Hmar missionary movement is very strong among them. They used Bible and Hymn books printed in Hmar in all their Churches. In addition even preaching and singing is done in Hmar.

### **1.3.2 Proposed classification of the language**

After looking at all Chin language classifications, it is concluded that Syriem[Sâ:jriem] or its alternate name Fyriem [Fâ:jriem] is a Tibeto-Burman language of the Kuki-Chin sub group which currently lacks an ISO code although the further classification and subgrouping is incomplete. A specific research for language classification has not been done yet.

### **1.4 Goal of the study**

The purpose is to propose a phonological description which will be a source of information on the language since there is no literature available. Hopefully, it will benefit the community as well as the linguistic researchers who may like to take up the language for further study.

### **1.5 Method of Data collection**

The data used in this thesis consists of two parts: One is library based data for theoretical studies and the other one is words gathered from different speakers belonging to different age groups, sex and region.

Wordlists recorded through digital recorders were transcribed and converted into charts of vowels and consonants. Some stories were also recorded and analyzed for further sound patterns. Syllable structure, segmental distribution and tone were analyzed.