

平成20年度第2回AA研フォーラム
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Concerning the homeland of Austroasiatic

G. Diffloth (Ecole Française d' Extrême. -Orient / ILCAA)

At present, the Austroasiatic family of languages is spread over two subcontinents: India and mainland Southeast Asia. It is a relic family, in the sense that the other language families of this area are thought to have arrived later, and to have partly replaced and dispersed what used to be a geographically compact AA family.

Because of this, the question of an AA homeland is a difficult one; it goes back several millennia into prehistory, and evokes linguistic situations which are different from those we see on the map today. Perhaps due to this difficulty, there has never been a full-fledged discussion of this matter in print. But there is at least one hypothesis which has been suggested long ago, and is now being revived: AA would have originated in the Yangtze basin, expanded West and South, and eventually disappeared from its original homeland. This scenario would provide support to a current view that language expansions in Asia are associated with the discovery of rice cultivation. The problem with this idea, as far as the AA family is concerned, is that very little, in fact hardly any evidence has been produced in its support.

In this lecture, we look for some evidence regarding the homeland of Austroasiatic.

First, we try to relate the historical family-tree of AA to the distribution of the languages on the map: a small region containing the deeper historical divisions of the family would suggest a probable homeland. Unfortunately, this approach does not lead to any clear hypothesis. Starting from the present time and going back into the past, we can propose some intermediate homelands at relatively shallow historical depths; for example, the Aslian languages of Malaysia seem to have originated on the West coast of the Malay peninsula, the Bahnaric languages probably dispersed from the area near Stung Treng in Western Cambodia, and the Katuic languages probably occupied both banks of the middle course of the Mekong River. But when we try to go back further in time, we reach an impasse.

On the Mon-Khmer side, the Eastern, Southern and Northern divisions of the family would suggest a homeland in the area between Khorat and Nongkhai in what is now Thailand, but on the Munda side we have no reason to assume anything other than East

India as a place of dispersal. There is no convergence here, and no suggestion either that the Yangtze river of central China should be involved.

Another approach would consist in trying to relate climactic and environmental regions of the world with the vocabulary which is reconstructed for Proto-AA. We show that there are a number of such words, for both fauna and flora, which refer to species living in tropical and humid climates. For example the tree-monitor lizard (*Varanus bengalensis*), an animal which requires warm temperatures, was known by a name which goes back to Proto-AA. The great hornbill (*Buceros bicornis*) a bird which is dependent on the huge Dipterocarps of tropical primary forests, was also known by its name in Proto-AA times. The same can be said of the banyan tree (*Ficus bengalensis*), a tropical species which plays an important role in the cultures of India and Southeast Asia, but does not grow in China. Looking at this evidence, it would be difficult to reconcile the existence of such vocabulary with a migration of languages from the Yangtze basin through the cold and arid mountain ranges of Yunnan.

In conclusion, the idea that AA languages originated in the Yangtze basin receives no support here. We may have to look much further South, possibly on the shores of the Bay of Bengal, to build a scenario which is compatible with the evidence we have.