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The Syntax of Khasi Questions

George Bedell, Ph. D.

Khasi is a Mon-Khmer language spoken primarily in eastern Meghalaya State, India and adjoining areas in Assam and Bangladesh. The speaking population in India is 865,000, according to *Ethnologue* (Lewis 2009). The examples in this discussion are taken from *Ka Khubor jong ka Jingieit* (The Message of Love: the New Testament in Khasi, 2000) and cited in the orthography used there, unless otherwise noted. The numbers following examples indicate chapter and verse in Ka Gospel U Mathaios (The Gospel according to Matthew). Although the edition cited is recent, the translation was done from the Authorized (King James) English version, sometime in the nineteenth century. Thus the Khasi investigated here differs from Khasi as either spoken or written at the present time. It is difficult for some modern Khasis to fully understand, but it remains in common use. An earlier version of this paper was presented to the First International Conference hosted by the Department of Linguistics, North Eastern Hill University, Shillong, March 2009.

Polar (yes-no) questions. Khasi polar questions are distinguished from statements only by intonation.

- (1) *Me long uta uban sa wan, ne ngin ia ap ia*
 2SM be 3SM=that 3SM=C=FUT prox come or 1PL=FUT COLL=wait OBJ
 uwei pat? (11: 3)
 3SM=one again
 'are you the one who is coming, or do we wait for someone else?'

Sentence (1) is a disjunction of two such questions corresponding to statements (2) and (3).

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- (2) *Me long uta uban sa wan.*
'you are the one who is coming'
- (3) *Ngin ia ap ia uwei pat.*
'we wait for someone else'

Sentence (4) is a parallel case in which the disjunction is such a question and its negation.

- (4) *Ka bit ne em ban ai khajna ha u Kaisar? (22:17)*
3SF proper or not C=FUT give taxes to 3SM Caesar
'is it proper or not to give taxes to Caesar?'

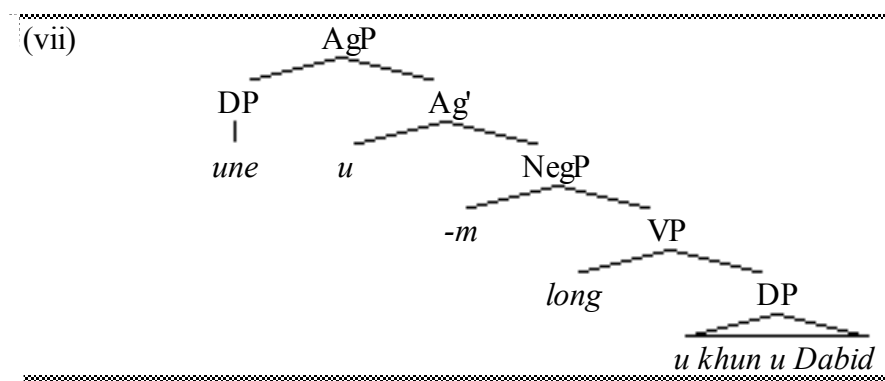
Here the components correspond to statements (5) and (6).

- (5) *Ka bit ban ai khajna ha u Kaisar.*
'it is proper to give taxes to Caesar'
- (6) *Kam bit ban ai khajna ha u Kaisar.*
'it is not proper to give taxes to Caesar'

Most polar questions have no explicit disjunction, as in (7) corresponding to statement (8).

- (7) *Une um long u khun u Dabid? (12:23)*
3SM=this 3SM=NEG be 3SM son 3SM David
'is this not the son of David?'
- (8) *Une um long u khun u Dabid.*
'this is not the son of David'

Structures 1. Part of sentence (1) is identical in morphosyntactic structure to (2), and another part to (3). Part of sentence (4) is identical in structure to (5) and sentence (7) is identical in structure to (8). Structure (vii) represents both (7) and (8).



Notice, however, that in addition to intonation and its pragmatic effects, the interpretation of *-m* 'not' differs between (7) and (8). Just as in English, in a statement like (8) it is negation, but in a question like (7) it rather expresses the presumption that the answer will be affirmative.

Constituent (wh) questions. Constituent questions differ from polar questions in containing an interrogative phrase. In sentences (9), (11) and (12) the interrogative phrase is *aiu* 'what?', and in (10) it is *nong aiu* 'what profit?'

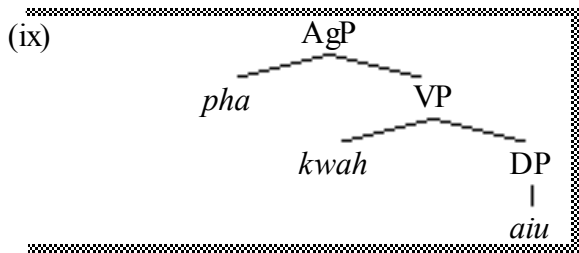
- (9) *Pha kwah aiu?* (20:21)
2SF want what
'what do you want?'
- (10) *phi ioh nong aiu?* (5:46)
2PL get profit what
'what profit do you get?'
- (11) *Phi mon [ba ngan leh aiu ia phi]? (20:32)*
2PL want C 1S=FUT do what OBJ youPL
'what do you want [me to do for you]?'
- (12) *ba ka kti kadiang jong me kan tip [aiu ba ka
C 3SF hand left of youSF 3SF=FUT know what C 3SF
leh ka kti kamon jong me]; (6: 3)*
do 3SF hand right of youSF
'so that your left hand will know [what your right hand is doing]'

Notice that in (9) to (11), *aiu* is located in the position where the answer would appear in the corresponding statement. In (12), it is located at the beginning of the question. Notice also that in complex sentences like (11) or (12), an interrogative phrase within a subordinate clause may make the entire sentence a constituent question as in (11), or may make its own clause an embedded constituent question as in (12). In the latter case the sentence as a whole need not be a question. Another Khasi interrogative phrase is *balei* 'why' in (13) and (14).

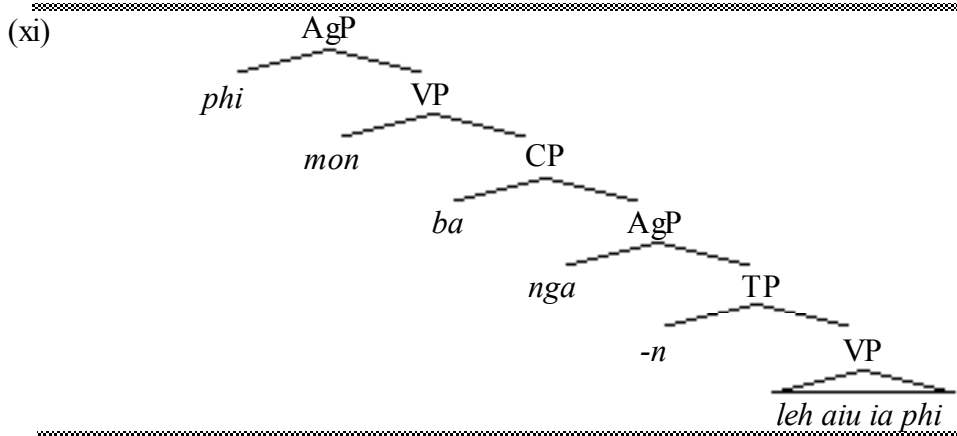
- (13) *Balei phi pynkhuslai ia ka kynthei?* (26:10)
why 2PL CAUS=troubled OBJ 3SF woman
'why are you troubling the woman?'
- (14) *Balei ba ngi ngim lah ban beh noh ia u?* (17:19)
why C we 1PL=NEG can C=FUT expel away OBJ 3SM
'why can we not drive it out?'

As in (13) and (14), *balei* usually appears at the beginning of the question.

Structures 2. Questions (9) and (11) will have structures as in (ix) and (xi). For the analysis of *pha* and *phi* as agreement markers, parallel to *u* in (vii), see Bedell (2011a).



In (ix), *aiu* 'what?' is the direct object of *kwah* 'want' and occupies the position an ordinary object would occupy.



In (xi) *aiu* is the direct object of *leh* 'do', again occupying the ordinary object position. Here *leh* is within an embedded clause and not the main verb of the question; rather that verb is *mon* 'want' whose object is the clause *ba ngan leh aiu ia phi* 'that I will do for you'. See Bedell (2011c) for discussion of Khasi embedded clauses.

Interrogative agreement 1. In addition to *aiu* and *balei*, there are two interrogative stems in Khasi from which a number of other interrogatives may be formed.

- (15) *Uei une?*
 3SM=Q 3SM=this
 'who is this?' (21:10)

- (16) *Ngam tip [ia kaei ba pha ong].*
 1S=NEG know OBJ 3SM=Q C 2SF say
 'I do not know what you are saying' (26:70)

Sentences (15) and (16) contain the interrogative stem *-ei*, which combines with an agreement prefix to give *uei* 'who?' or *kaei* 'what?'.

- (17) *bad kino kiba long ki hynmen hynbew jong nga?*
 and 3PL=Q 3PL=C be 3PL older-sibling younger-sibling of me
 'and who are my brothers and sisters?' (12:48)

- (18) *U la ong ha u, [Ia kino]?*
 3SM PAST say to 3SM OBJ 3PL=Q

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'he said to him, "which ones?"' (19:18)

Sentences (17) and (18) contain the interrogative stem *-no*, which combines to give *kino* 'who?' or *kino* 'which?'.

The agreement prefixes in Khasi are *u-* (masculine singular), *ka-* (feminine singular) and *ki-* (plural). These combine with interrogative stems to form the following paradigms.

(a)

	Masc	Fem
Sing	<i>uei</i>	<i>kaei</i>
Pl	<i>kiei</i>	

(b)

	Masc	Fem
Sing	<i>uno</i>	<i>kano</i>
Pl	<i>kino</i>	

There are no clear differences in morphosyntax or meaning between *-ei* and *-no*. Rabel (1961, p. 69) says, '*-ei* and *-no* seem to be in free variation. *-ei* is used more often with personal pronouns and prepositions, while *-no* is used more frequently with the remaining words and bases.'

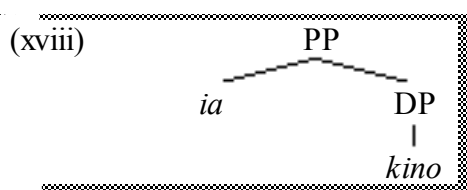
Like *aiu*, these interrogatives may serve as modifiers within a noun phrase. But the order is different: while *aiu* follows its head as in *nong aiu* 'what profit' in (10), agreeing interrogatives precede it as in (19) and (20).

- (19) *uei u briew uba na phi, lada u khun jong u un pan ia u*
 3SM=Q 3SM person 3SM=C from youPL if 3SM child of him 3SM=FUT ask OBJ 3SM
kpu, uban ai da u maw ha u?
 bread 3SM=C=FUT give would 3SM stone to him
 'which man among you, if his son asks for bread, would give him a stone?' (7: 9)

- (20) *naba phim tip [ha kano ma ka sngi ba u wan u Trai jong phi].*
 for youPL=NEG know on 3SF=Q EMPH 3SF day C 3SM come 3SM lord of youPL
 'for you do not know [on what day your lord is coming]' (24:42)

In *uei u briew* 'which man?' or *ha kano ma ka sngi* 'on what day?' the interrogative agrees in person and number with the head noun as manifested in the gender/number particle *u* or *ka*. This structure is very similar to that of deictic modifiers with respect to their head nouns, and the interrogative precedes the gender/number particle. See Bedell (2011b) for a discussion of Khasi deictic modifiers and pronouns. Parallel to *uei u briew* are *une u briew* 'this man' and *uta u briew* 'that man'.

Structures 3. Sentences (18) and (19) contain the structures shown in (xviii) and (xix).



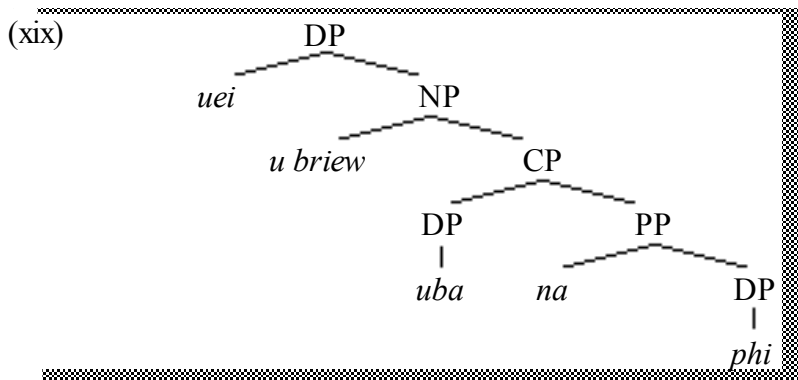
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Structure (xviii) is a direct quotation consisting of a prepositional interrogative phrase.



In (xix), the interrogative *uei* 'which?' modifies the head noun *u briew* 'man'. It agrees with that head noun and also with the relative clause modifier *uba na phi* 'among you'. See Bedell (2011c) for a discussion of Khasi relative clauses, including those like *uba na phi* which contain no overt verb.

Interrogative agreement 2. Like deictic pronouns, interrogatives often occur without a following overt head noun, as interrogative pronouns. Sentences (15) and (17) already presented provide clear examples.

- (21) *Uno te na phi, haba u da khuslai ruh, uba lah ban*
 3SM=Q and from youPL when 3SM would be-troubled even 3SM=C can C=FUT
pyntam shi pruh ia la rnyieng?
 CAUS=added one cubit OBJ own stature
 'which one of you, even if he takes trouble, can add one cubit to his height?' (6:27)

- (22) *na kino ba ki syiem ka pyrthei ki ju shim khrong lane khajna?*
 from 3PL=Q C 3PL king 3SF world 3PL usually take duty or tax
 'from whom do the kings of the world take duties or taxes?' (17:25)

- (23) *kum kaei ngan pynsyriem ia kane ka pateng bynriew?*
 like 3SF=Q 1S=FUT CAUS=similar OBJ 3SF=this 3SF generation
 'to what will I liken this generation?' (11:16)

In (21) the interrogative *uno* 'which one?' is modified by the prepositional phrase *na phi* 'of you', and in (22) the interrogative *kino* 'who' appears within a prepositional phrase as the object of *na* 'from'. In (23) the interrogative *kaei* is the object of the preposition *kum* 'like'. Additional examples of the prepositional phrase structure are *ia kaei* 'what?' in (16) and *ha kano ma ka sngi* in (20).

The interrogative stems *-ei* and *-no* do not invariably agree. Particularly when serving as the object of a preposition, they often fail to have any agreement prefix.

- (24) *Ko lok, me wan iaei?*
 VOC friend youSM come OBJ=Q
 'friend, what have you come for?' (26:50)

- (25) *da ei yn pynbha pat ia ka?*
 by Q FUT CAUS=good again OBJ 3SF
 'how will it be made good again?' (5:13)

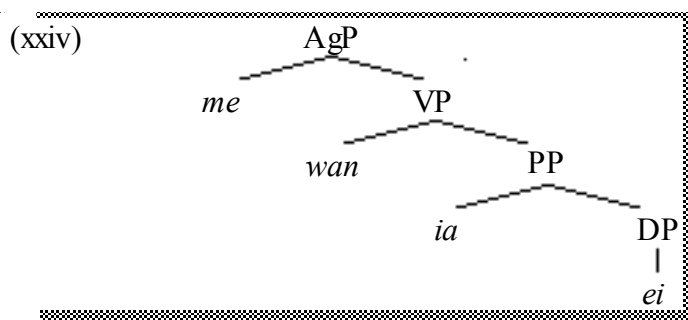
In (24), *-ei* is the object of the object marker *ia*, and in (25) it is the object of the preposition *da* 'by'.

- (26) *Phi mon [ba ngan pyllait iano ha phi]?*
 2PL want C 1S=FUT release OBJ=Q to youPL
 'which one do you want [me to release to you]?' (27:17)

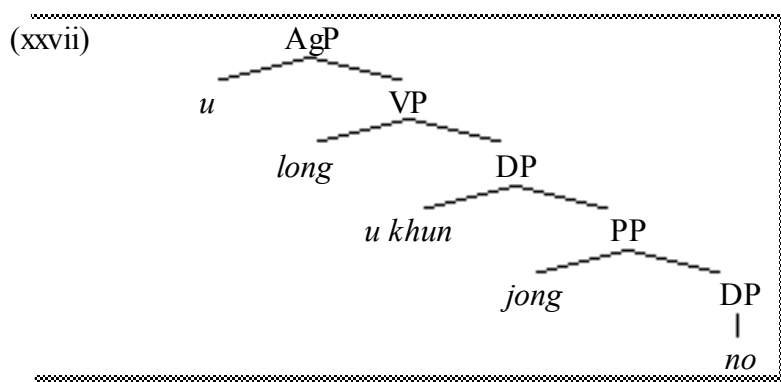
- (27) *u long u khun jongno?*
 3SM be 3SM child of=Q
 'whose son is he?' (22:42)

In (26), *-no* is the object of *ia* and in (27) it is the object of the preposition *jong* 'of'. When these interrogative stems lack agreement, they are usually written together with a preposition as a single word.

Structures 4. Sentences (24) and (27) will have structures as in (xxiv) and (xxvii).



Compare (xxiv) with (ix) above and (xxviii) below.



In (xxiv) and (xxvii) the prepositional phrases are given a syntactic analysis as such. But it would also be possible to analyze them morphologically, parallel to English words such as *therefore* or *forever*.

Initial interrogatives 1. As noted at the outset, the interrogative phrase in a Khasi question may occupy the position where an answer would be. But many such phrases appear at the beginning of the clause which expresses the question. (28) is a main clause example and (29) is a parallel embedded example.

- (28) *Kaei ba ngin bam?*
 3SF=Q C 1PL=FUT eat
 'what will we eat?' (6:32)
- (29) *wat khuslai ia la ka jingim, [kaei ba phin bam],*
 NEG trouble OBJ REFL 3SF ACT=live 3SF=Q C 2PL=FUT eat
 'do not trouble about your life, [what you will eat]' (6:25)

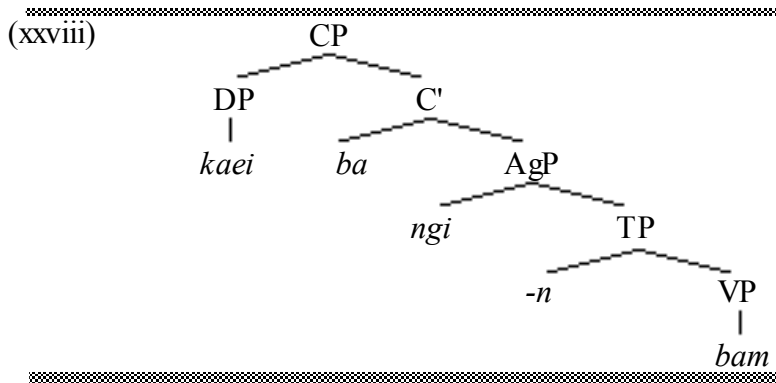
In both (28) and (29), the interrogative *kaei* 'what' is the object of the verb *bam* 'eat'. But it appears at the beginning of its clause rather than following the verb, it is not accompanied by the object marker *ia*, and it is separated from the rest of the clause by the 'complementizer' *ba*. *Ia* differs from other prepositions in lacking independent meaning and being optional in many cases. Compare (29) with (16). Similar examples already presented are (12) and (14).

Interrogative prepositional phrases may also appear in initial position followed by *ba*.

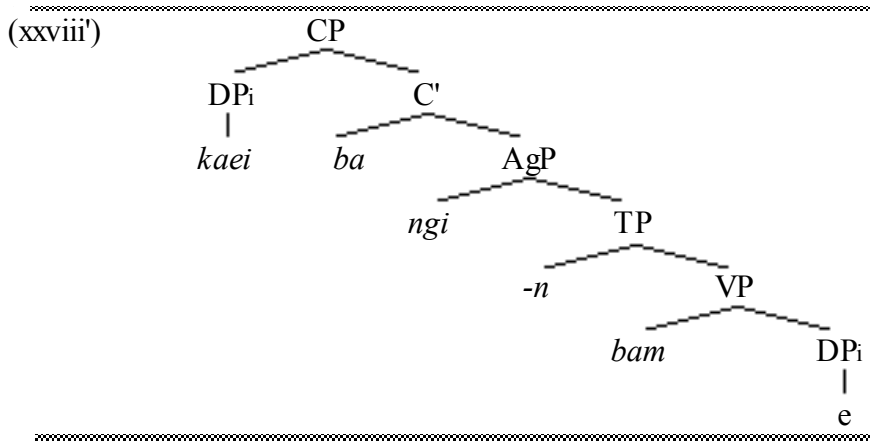
- (30) *dano ba ki khun jong phi ki beh noh ia ki?*
 by=Q C 3PL child of youPL 3PL expel away OBJ 3PL
 'by whom do your children drive them out?' (12:27)
- (31) *Da ka bor aiu ba me leh ia kine kiei kiei ruh?*
 by 3SF power what C 2SM do OBJ 3PL=this 3PL=Q 3PL=Q also
 'by what power do you do these things?' (21:23)
- (32) *Phim ju la pule ... [kumno ba u leit hapoh ka templ],*
 2PL=NEG usually PAST read like=Q C 3SM go into 3SF temple
 'have you not read ... [how he went into the temple]' (12: 4)

In (30) the interrogative prepositional phrase is *dano* 'by whom?', and in (31) it is *da ka bor aiu* 'by what power?' In (32) it is *kumno* 'how?' in an embedded question. Additional examples already presented are (16) and (22). Sometimes *ba* does not appear overtly in questions with initial interrogatives. Examples already presented are (13), (23) and (25).

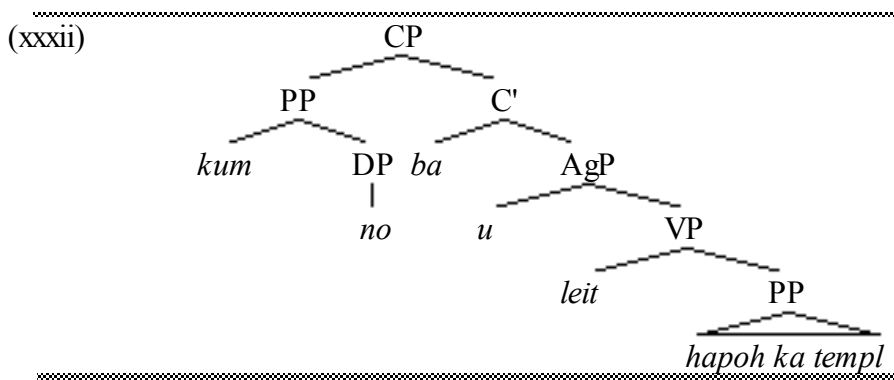
Structures 5. The structure of (28) and the embedded question in (29) will be as in (xxviii).



In (28) and (29), *kaei* 'what?' is understood to be the object of the verb *bam* 'eat'. This relation may be represented syntactically by the alternative structure (xxviii').



The structure in (xxviii') closely resembles that often given for English questions like *what will we eat?* The differences are (i) in English but not in Khasi, there is 'inversion' of the subject and finite verb (that is *will we* rather than *we will*) and (ii) in Khasi but not in English, the complementizer may remain (that is *kaei ba*). Notice that English lacks inversion in embedded questions such as (29). The structure of the embedded question in (32) will be as in (xxxii).



An empty prepositional phrase might be used as in (xxviii') to represent the syntactic 'origin' of *kumno* 'how?'.

Initial interrogatives 2. The complementizer *ba* which accompanies an initial interrogative phrase may have a prefix which shows agreement with the interrogative modifier as well as the head noun (if present).

(33) *Kano kaba long ka kmie jong nga?*
 3SF=Q 3SF=C be 3SF mother of me
 'who is my mother?' (12:48)

(34) *Uno na kine arngut uba la leh ia ka mon u kpa?*
 3SM=Q from 3PL=this two=CL 3SM=C PAST do OBJ 3SF will 3SM father
 'which of the two did the will of the father?' (21:31)

In (33), *kiba* agrees with *kino* 'who?', and in (34), *uba* agrees with *uno* 'which?' Parallel examples already presented are (17), (19) and (21).

There are similar examples which admit or suggest a different analysis.

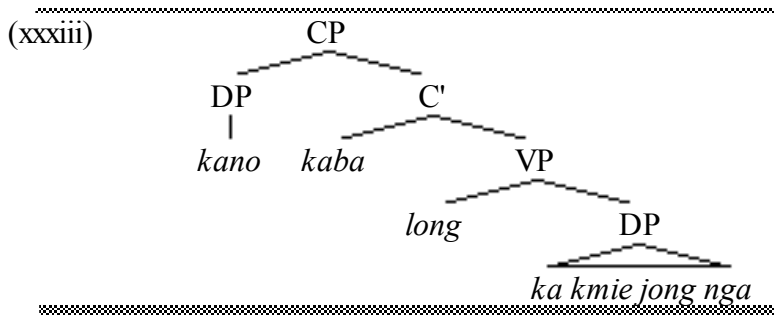
(35) *to wad [uei ha kata uba bit nam]:*
 IMP ask 3SM=Q in 3SF=that 3SM=C seem well-thought-of
 'ask [who in it seems well thought of]' (10:11)

In (35) it is possible that *uei* is not an interrogative but rather an indefinite pronoun. That is, its meaning here is not 'who?' but 'someone'. If that is the case, then *uba bit nam* is not the main clause of an embedded question meaning 'seems well thought of', but rather a relative clause modifier of *uei* meaning 'who seems well thought of'. And the gloss of (35) as a whole would be 'look for someone in it who seems well thought of'. Strictly speaking, indefinite pronouns in Khasi should be reduplicated: *uei uei* rather than *uei*. Khasi *wad* means 'look for' rather than 'ask'. The corresponding English in the King James version is 'enquire who in it is worthy'. The Good News Bible has: 'look for someone who is willing to welcome you'. This verse is ambiguous in the original Greek where the verb corresponding to *wad* can mean either 'ask' or 'look for', and interrogative and indefinite pronouns are similar. *Ka Baibyl* (2005) has: *to wad ia u briew uba phi lah ban shaniah* 'look for a man you can trust'. In (36), something like this must be the correct analysis.

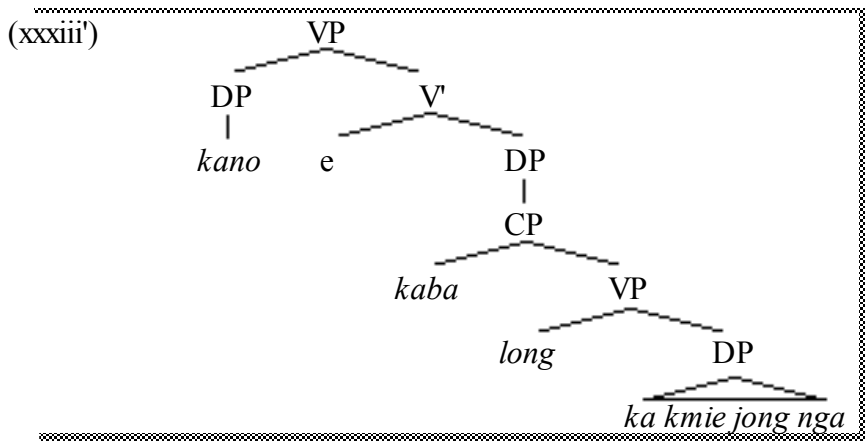
(36) *Hangno uba la dang kha shen U Syiem ki Jiw?*
 LOC=Q 3SM=C PAST just give-birth now 3SM king 3PL Jew
 'where is the one born king of the Jews?' (2: 1)

In (36) though the interrogative *hangno* 'where?' does not show agreement, it could not agree with *uba*, which refers to a (masculine singular) person. The phrase *uba la dang kha shen u syiem ki Jiw* is a relative clause without overt head noun, and *uba* is a relative pronoun which would agree with that head noun if it were present. See (1) above and Bedell (2011c) for additional examples of headless relatives.

Structures 6. The structure of (33) under the original analysis will be as in (xxxiii).



In the analysis shown in (xxxiii), *kaba* agrees with *kano*; both also agree with *ka kmie*, but this is a separate phenomenon imposed by the copula *long*. The structure of (33) under the alternative analysis will be as in (xxxiii').



In the analysis shown in (xxxiii'), *kaba* agrees with its absent head noun (and in fact provides the only information about the gender and number of that noun). *Kano* in turn agrees with the noun phrase (DP) whose head is absent as imposed by the absent copula. In this case, the gloss must be changed to: 'who is the one who is my mother?' That such verbless questions must be allowed for is clear from examples like (15).

Abbreviations

1S	first person singular
1PL	first person plural
2SM	second person masculine singular
2SF	second person feminine singular
2PL	second person plural
3D	third person diminutive
3SM	third person masculine singular
3SF	third person feminine singular
3PL	third person plural
ACT	action nominalizer
AGT	agent nominalizer
C	complementizer
CAUS	causativizer
CLASS	classifier

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COLL	collective
DIM	diminutive
EMPH	emphatic
FUT	future tense
IMP	imperative
LOC	locative
NEG	negative
OBJ	object marker
Q	interrogative
PAST	past tense
PROX	proximate
REFL	reflexive
SUBJ	subjunctive
VOC	vocative
youSM	you (singular masculine)
youSF	you (singular feminine)
youPL	you (plural)

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