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Migration patterns, legends and historical records

Quentin Devers

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Diversité des langues 2



Nicolas Tournadre and Hiroyuki Suzuki

*The Tibetic Languages:
An introduction to the family
of languages
derived from Old Tibetan*

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on their religion. In some marginal cases, one also encounters hybrid names made of both Tibetan and Persian or Arabic roots.

The main studies on the languages of NW section are: Read (1934), Sprigg (2002) and Bielmeyer (1985; 2000) on Balti; Bailey T. G. ([1915] 1975), Rangan (1979), and Zemp (2013a; 2013b; 2016; 2018) on Purik; Francke ([1901] 1979), Koshal (1979; 1982), Zeisler (2004; 2007; 2011; 2012; 2014; 2018) and Norman (2001 reed. in 2005; 2019) on various dialects of Ladakh; Hoshi and Tondup Tsering (1978) on Zanhar. Bakula Rangdol Nima (2005) has written a ‘Ladakhi grammar’ (in Ladakhs language). The CTDI also includes data from the NW section. Sharma (2004, Tribal languages of Ladakh, Part 3) on Brokskat and other languages of the area.

9.10.1. Migration patterns, legends and historical records

Ladakh is located at the strategic crossroad of nearly unavoidable routes leading to the Tibetan high plateau, which was once the production center of a variety of precious commodities such as gold, pashmina, musk, salt and iron. These resources were circulated along routes passing through Ladakh in direction of major trading centers, such as Khotan and Yarkand, located on the so-called southern Silk Road, the regions along the northwestern corridor of the Pamir and Hindukush ranges such as Gilgit, the Swat valley, Gandhāra and the Wakhan corridor and regions of the northern subcontinent such as Kashmir, Jammu, Kishuwar, Mandy, Lahul and Kinnaur (Rizvi 1999; Devers 2017). Unsurprisingly, various populations have coexisted and succeeded one another in Ladakh. Among the groups that we are able to trace, in addition to the Tibetans, there have been Dardic settlers, predominantly Brogpa, and also Shina. There have also been Turkic groups (Horpa), coming primarily from the Pamir corridor and from the Tarim basin. In some parts of the Dras and Suru valleys, there have additionally been Kashmiri and other Dardic populations. Finally, there used to be so-called ‘Mon’ communities, locally said to have come from Himachal Pradesh. As can be expected from such situation, numerous toponyms in Ladakh are not of Tibetan origin – examples are villages like Hemis, regions like Purik, and most probably Ladakh itself. As a testimony of this critical commercial location and diverse populations, Ladakh is the area of the Tibetan plateau with the greatest variety of

scripts observed in rock inscriptions. In addition to the use of Tibetan script, we find historical inscriptions written in Kharoṣṭī, Brāhmī, Chinese, Sogdian, Tokharian, Arabic and Śāradā scripts.⁷⁸ It is also the area with the highest density of archaeological remains, being for fortifications, rock art, temple ruins, pre-Buddhist funerary sites, etc.

In the past, we can observe material differentiation between the eastern and western Indus valley: remains from the eastern parts, sometime associated by oral tradition to past Mon populations, display significant shared traits with the the Tibetan Plateau; remains from the western parts, commonly associated by oral tradition to Brogpa, Horpa and Balti populations, display stronger links with the Pamir corridor. A transitional area of mixed influences lies in the central belt that extends from the Indus-Zangskar confluence to the confluence with the Gya brook. Parallel territorial variations can be outlined in Zangskar, Nubra and Purik, whereas in the westernmost fringes of the latter, Kashmiri and Shina influences are further noticeable (Devers 2018).

As can be expected in a country of considerable trading and mining wealth, these territories, as delineated by considerable material remains, evolved over the centuries, often considerably. Whereas ancient fortifications or toponyms relating to the Brogpa can be found in all parts of northern Purig as well as in the Indus valley from Baltistan to the confluence with the Gya brook, Brogpa populations are now strictly confined to the lowest reaches of the Indus river, downstream of Hanu. More strikingly, the Mons have entirely vanished from the country.

Prior to the tenth century, the history of the territory corresponding to present-day Ladakh is largely unknown. We know that to the east, on the Tibetan high plateau, was Zhangzhung and to the west, along the Pamir corridor, was Balur (alt. Bolor). The exact borders of these two ancient kingdoms are unknown. In the light of the geographical distribution of the material remains that have been found, we may

78. For examples of Kharoṣṭī and Brāhmī inscriptions see: Francke 1907. For examples of inscriptions in Sogdian, Tokharian, Arabic and Śāradā, see: Vohra 1994, 1995, 1999; Sims-Williams 1993; Francke 1907; Jina 1997: 53–55.

postulate that a frontier between them lay in central Ladakh. In other words, the Ladakh as we know it now may have been divided between two larger kingdoms. A domain covering both eastern and western Ladakh seems to have emerged only in the tenth and eleventh centuries under the name Maryul, when the West Tibetan kingdom of Ngari Skorsum progressively brought these territories under its control (Devers et al. 2016; Devers forthcoming b). An alternative name for Maryul was Mangyul, the two names being apparently interchangeable.⁷⁹ Ladakh, on the other hand, appears to have then been only the name of a subdivision of Maryul around Alchi, from where the Namgyal dynasty originated.⁸⁰ When this dynasty took control of Maryul in the mid-sixteenth century, the name Ladakh seems to have progressively been applied to the country as a whole.

9.10.2. Linguistic groups of the NW section

In 2011, Zeisler proposed a classification of the NW languages into two major groups: གཤམ་སྐད་ *GSHAM.SKAD* sham-kä locally pronounced /Shamskat/ i.e. the ‘language of Lower Ladakh’ and གཡེན་སྐད་ *GYEN.SKAD* Gyen-kä, locally pronounced /Kenhat/ i.e. ‘language of Upper Ladakh’. Unlike most other dialects groups of the Tibetic area, the Highlanders speak ‘innovative dialects’ while Lowlanders speak ‘archaic dialects’. Zeisler (2011) proposed the following description:

“According to phonetic features alone, the various dialects spoken in Ladakh are presently classified [by Bielmeier 2004 and others] roughly in two main groups:

- *Western Archaic Tibetan*: the non-tonal ‘conservative’ dialects of the north-eastern and central areas: Baltistan, Purik, Lower Ladakh, Nubra, and Leh, showing initial and final consonant clusters.
- *Western Innovative Tibetan*: the ‘innovative’ dialects of the south-eastern areas: Upper Indus, Changthang, and Zaskar, where the clusters have been reduced and tonal features can be found.”

79. For instance, in the seals of documents emitted by Nyima Namgyal found in Purig during surveys with Nils Martin, the Namgyals present themselves as the “rajas of Mangyul” (*RNAM.RGYAL MANG.YUL RAJA*).

80. Howard was probably the first scholar to understand that Maryul and Ladakh were not synonymous: Howard 2005: 136–137. See also: Denwood 2008: 13; Devers forthcoming a.