

ON THE POSITION OF LADAKHI AND BALTI IN THE TIBETAN LANGUAGE FAMILY¹

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It is often said that Ladakhi and Balti come closest to the original Tibetan language, and that phalskat—the spoken Ladakhi language—is no more than a deviation from it. The “original” language is understood to be the religious book language (chosskat). *Thonmi Sambhoṭa* is said to have invented the Tibetan script under the rule of *Sronbrtsan Sgampo*, mainly for the codification of the sacred texts of Buddhism.

The historical evidence does not tell us anything about the script being introduced at a particular time, by a particular person, or for a pre-eminent religious purpose. In particular there is no mention of *Thonmi* in the early documents (Róna-Tas 1985:245). The first mention of the script is the entry for the year 655 AD in the Old Tibetan annals of Tunhuang where it is stated that “the chief minister *Stonbrtsan* wrote down the letters of the royal order”.

The annals themselves start with the year 650 and a summary of the preceding decade. They end with the year 746. They mention various political events, but remain silent about religious affairs. The main purpose of such annals was to provide references for dating official documents and contracts (Uray 1975:170 English summary, Takeuchi 1995:25, note 5). Written documents played an essential role in the highly developed administration of the Tibetan empire. Such an effective system could not have been introduced overnight: at least a rudimentary form of writing must have been in use in Tibet for secular purposes before the advent of the empire.

¹ For the full version of this paper, see my chapter with the same title in *Ladakhi Histories. Local and Regional Perspectives* (Edited by John Bray. Leiden: Brill, 2005).

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The not-very-objective Tunhuang chronicle states that Tibet had no script in earlier times. Under Emperor *Sronbrtsan Sgampo* the penal and the public law was codified along with the sciences, the systems of measurement and assignment of fields and pastures, and other cultural accomplishments. Nothing is said about the introduction of the script. If it really happened under *Sronbrtsan Sgampo*, it must have been mainly for administrative purposes.

The *skad gsar bcad* “New Language Decree” at the beginning of the 9th century is generally held to be an orthographic reform. But it was merely a standardization of the religious terminology and the methods of translation. The spelling of other words was of no importance (Simonsson 1957:227, 247-259). Nevertheless, changes in orthography took place during the following centuries, when the Amdo Tibetan dominance in the official language ceased, which shows itself in the spelling and grammar of Old Tibetan documents.

Together with the speakers of some modern Amdo varieties, Baltis and Ladakhis pronounce most of the prefixed consonants that have become “mute” in other Tibetan varieties. Archaeological evidence shows that up to the 9th century the now desert areas in the north of Tibet up to Turkestan, and between Turkestan and Baltistan, were populated by farmers in permanent settlements, before a climate change led to the drying up of the region. Through this belt of settlements cultural and linguistic features could be shared (Denwood 2005).

Apart from the phonological level, Balti and Ladakhi have been highly innovative, particularly on the syntactic level. With respect to its complex verb constructions, Balti differs in some points from Ladakhi. Denwood (2005) argues that the differing verb forms of Balti correspond to Amdo verb forms and that this could be indicative of continuing linguistic contact between the two regions through trade or migration. I have not been able to observe such correspondences. The Balti forms in question are either isolated or shared with the Lhasa and Kham dialects as well.

Given these facts, the Balti and Ladakhi *phalskat*, instead of being derived from *chosskat*, has its origin in an earlier stage of the Tibetan language from which Amdo Tibetan as well as Old Tibetan developed. *Chosskat* turns out to be a younger cousin rather than a parent of Balti and Ladakhi.

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APPENDIX: SUMMARY OF RÓNA-TAS (1985:183-303) ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE TIBETAN SCRIPT

Thonmi Sambhoṭa is said to have created the *Dbucan* and *Dbumed* scripts on the model of the (Nepalese) *Lañdza* and *Wartula* scripts, which, however, appeared only in the 11th century (Ngawangthondup Narkyid 1982: 26). But the *Dbucan* script was instead derived from the late Gupta or *Brāhmī* script, which flourished in Kashmir and Khotan between the 4th and the 8th centuries. This was recognized by the Amdowa scholar Gendun Chopel (1938). *Buston* (Ed. 1988:182) mentions that the Tibetan letters were created after a Kashmiri model (*gzugs Khacheḥi yigedaṅ bstunnas*).² The West Tibetan school has *Thonmi* sent to Kashmir (Francke 1912:267).

Gendun Chopel also states that the *Dbucan* and *Dbumed* scripts were not designed at the same time. Rather *Dbumed* evolved naturally from the old style of writing. Even the *Dbucan* alphabet cannot have been developed all at once. Since Francke, several European scholars commented upon the development of the script. A synthesis of their views is found in the most recent study on this topic by the Hungarian scholar András Róna-Tas. Since this study is written in German and therefore inaccessible to the wider public in Ladakh, I would like to summarise the arguments. Square brackets and notes will be used for some additional explanations from my part.

The Tibetan alphabet has some letters that are derived by various means: (a) use of a diacritic [i.e. differentiating] hook (*tsa*, *tsha*, *dza*), (b) combination of letters (*wa*: *ba* with superscribed *la* or, as in Old Tibetan, *ḥa*), (c) reduction of letters (*ža*: deletion of the left stroke of the old form of the *ša*, where the hook is not attached directly to the

² Others take the *Nāgarī* alphabet as the model. It is, however, unclear what they understand by this very vague term, which may include even the present day *Devanāgarī*. According to Ngawangthondup Narkyid (1982:34, note 14), it would refer to an earlier Kashmiri script [=Śāradā?]. But the term is also applied to an eastern late Gupta script, the ancestor of the Bengali script and of the Nepalese *Rañjana* =*Lañdza* (cf. J. Ph. Vogel, quoted in Francke 1912:270f). In the 12th century *Maṇi bkaḥḥbum*, Fol. E269, the term “*Nāgara*” is used in connection with *Bhadrula* (=Wartula) and thus means *Lañdza*.

main body of the sign but via a bow), and (d) inversion (*za*). The derived letters are all inserted after the *ma*, violating the strict phonetic ordering, which is typical of Indian alphabets. Thus they must have been introduced at a later stage. [According to a phonetic ordering, the dental affricates (*tša, tšha, dža*) should be placed either after the dental stops (*ta, tha, da, na*) or before the sibilants (*ša, sa*).] *ž**a* and *z**a* should be paired as voiced counterparts with *š**a* and *s**a*. The *wa* should be placed between the *la* and the sibilants. In fact, this position was held by the *ba* in early alphabets from Tunhuang. The missing letters for Sanskrit words are derived at a later time from the Tibetan alphabet itself through inversion (retroflexes) and combinations with the *ḥa* (long vowels) or the *ha* (voiced aspirated consonants), which shows that there was no need for writing Sanskrit formulas when the Tibetan alphabet was first designed.

The row of the inserted consonants is finished off with the *ḥa*, which has quite different functions in Tibetan. As a basis for vowels, it seems to be the voiced counterpart of either *ha* or *a*. Written before a consonant it indicates its prenasalisation. In transcriptions of Chinese names, it is added to “protect” a voiced consonant.³ But written as a syllable final, its use is merely conventional without any phonetic value. Only from a rather late date on, the *ḥa* is also used as subscript for long vowels.

In some dialects the *ḥa* corresponds to a guttural fricative [*ɣa*] or laryngeal fricative [*ɦa*].⁴ This, as well as Situ’s description of the *ḥa* as situated in the throat, confirm Francke’s (1912:270) claim that it is pronounced as “gh” [*ɣ*] in many dialects. Francke had concluded that the Tibetan *ḥa* must have been derived from an Indian (or Khotanese) letter *ga*.

It is not very likely that the whole alphabet was derived from the Khotanese script. But certain traits of the Tibetan alphabet as well as

³ This “protective” effect can also be observed in the modern dialects: while a written Tibetan voiced consonant not combined with any pre- or superscript typically corresponds to an unvoiced pronunciation, a voiced consonant combined with *ḥa* often remained voiced, hence Ladakhi /*te/ de* ‘that’ and /*di/ ḥdi* ‘this’. The effect can be observed with all pre- and superscribed letters, but only the letter *ḥa* was used conventionally in foreign names to guarantee a voiced reading.

⁴ The voiced form of the *ha*, cf. Upper Ladakhi [*fioma*] for [*oma*] *ḥoma* ‘milk’.

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some orthographic conventions can only be explained by a certain influence from Khotan.

The Tibetan letters can be classified in two categories: letters that were imported from a foreign script, and letters that were derived internally. It is not logically or historically necessary for all the letters of the first group to be imported at the same time and from the same source. Likewise, the rules of orthography do not necessarily have the same source(s) as the letters. If one compares the Tibetan alphabet with the Indic alphabets of the 6th to 10th centuries, the following consonants can be linked with the Nepalese *Brāhmī* as well as with the so-called Proto-*Śāradā* or Gilgit/Bamiyan II script: *kha, ṅa, ca, cha, ja, ṅa, ta, tha, na, pa, pha, ma, ya, ra, la, va/ba, śa, sa, ha, a*; but *ka, ga*, and *da* cannot be linked to either alphabet.

It is quite interesting that the voiced consonants *ga* and *da* were not imported from one of these models, but seem to have been derived internally. This could only be motivated by the fact that the letters had a different phonetic value in the source language. One possibility would have been the fricativisation of *ga* to [ɣa] and *da* to [ða], which is typical for Khotanese, but not for the Indian languages of that time, while the neutralisation of *ba* and *va* is common to the Indian Prakrits.

The Indian alphabets have independent letters for word-initial vowels at the beginning of the alphabet. As an innovation, the Khotanese and the Tibetan alphabets systematically dropped the independent vowels except *a*, which became the base for initial vowels. Likewise, the Khotanese alphabet lost most of the distinctions between short and long vowels; the long *ū* began to vanish in the 8th century.

The classical letter *ḥa* shows an irritating similarity with the Khotanese *ga* and its Old Tibetan variant (with an additional hook on the top) resembles the Khotanese *gā* (with long vowel).

The Khotanese letter *ga* eventually became mute. Thus it could be written conventionally without any phonetic value. Additionally, it was used instead of the combination *-ṅg-* (presented by an *anusvāra* plus *ga*) as in *aga* for *aṅga* 'limb'. Orthographic prenasalisation on the other hand was used to 'protect' a voiced plosive pronunciation, e.g. *hamda* for *hauda* 'seven'. The similarity between these orthographic conventions and the above-mentioned conventional use of the *ḥa* in Tibetan is apparent and it seems very probable that not only the

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form of the letter was imported, but also some of its conventional functions.⁵

The possible development of the Tibetan script might therefore be sketched as follows:

1. Some people started to write short Tibetan texts with the *Brāhmī* script without any adaptation to Tibetan phonetics. Some signs thus were used for two or three phonemes [i.e. distinctive pronunciations].
2. For practical reasons people started to use diacritic [i.e. discriminating] signs, but rather unsystematically.
3. After some time there was a need to write more extended texts. The script became more important, and thus the users of the script began experiments in order to adapt the script to the Tibetan language.
4. As the script became an important device in the state, it was necessary to establish writing schools and orthographic rules.
5. With the beginning of the translation of Buddhist texts, orthographic as well as grammatical rules were formulated after the model of the Indian grammatical tradition. Mnemonic texts (such as the *Sumcupa*) were introduced in order to facilitate learning.
6. The mnemonic texts were written down, transmitted, and possibly changed through transmission.
7. At the beginning of the 9th century, the orthographic and grammatical rules were codified. Grammatical commentaries and attempts to redefine the rules may have started soon afterwards.

⁵ Yet there remain some questions. Why would the Old Tibetan *ḥa* take the form of the Khotanese letter *gā*? Francke (1912:270) holds that the *ga* and the *ḥa* “may have looked much the same” and that the additional hook served to distinguish them. There are many examples of the Gupta letter *ga* in a shape that could well have served as a model for the Tibetan *ga* (Gudrun Melzer, personal communication). Cf. also the specimen presented in Ngawangthondup Narkyid (1982: 31f). This would make a derivation of Tibetan *ḥa* from Khotanese *ga/gā* rather unlikely. But the hook from the *gā* with the long vowel might have been borrowed in order to derive a letter **ḡa* from the letter *ga* and might then have been use as a general derivative device for the letters *tsa*, *tsha*, *dza*. Róna-Tas himself does not consider the question of the origin of the Tibetan script as settled.

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