

'Ladakhi' identities and language attitude

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1. The fiction of 'Ladakh'

Ladakh is part of Jammu & Kashmir. It is divided into the two Ladakh Autonomous Hill Councils (formerly *tehsils*) Kargil and Leh. Kargil HC consists of the predominantly Muslim area Purik – with the main town Kargil – and the predominantly Buddhist area Zaskar. Leh HC, predominantly Buddhist consists of Sham or Lower Ladakh, Nubra, Zhung or Central Ladakh – with the main town Leh –, Upper Ladakh (with Gya) and the western part of the Changthang. Reliable census data does not yet exist, but the 'Ladakhi' speaking population may number around 200,000.

As a term for a political entity, "Ladakh" is a colonial fiction. The original (?) name of the region around Leh, *Lata*, was etymologised and transformed into *Ladvags* (ལ་དབང་), which in turn was pronounced in Purik as *Ladax*, from where the Urdu and Hindi spellings لداخ and लद्दाख and the English form Ladakh were derived and transferred to the whole region.

The official self-perception that we are all *Ladakspa*, speaking *Ladakse skat* may gain ground among the younger generations, but it is not at all self-understood in the more peripheral regions and among elder people. One old man referred to a 'polyglott' lama as speaking not only *Ladakse skat* (that is, the dialect of Leh!), but also *Shamskat* (the dialect of Lower Ladakh), *Nubre skat* (the dialect of Nubra), etc., while even young Zaskaris referred to *Ladakse skat* (the dialect of Leh!) as to a foreign language, their own language being *Zāhare sau*.

2. The fiction of 'Tibetanness'

From mid 8th c. – mid 9th c., the region of present-day 'Ladakh' (not yet so called) was part of the great Tibetan Empire. Before the conquest it most probably belonged to the somewhat nebulous political entity of Zhangzhung, which stretched from the Pamirian borderlands into Central Tibetan and which was populated in the west with people speaking Iranian and/ or 'Dardic' languages.

After the breakdown of the Tibetan Empire in 848, and a 'dark' period of about 100 years, an alleged offspring of the Imperial line re-conquered parts of the area and established the allegedly unbroken dynasty of (Upper) Ladakh rulers – there is evidence that the line was broken several times, and some of the rulers were clearly Mongol invaders.

Since the 11th c., great monasteries gained more and more influence, leading to the gradual Tibetanisation of the area, while Ladakh was under the loose suzerainty of Tibet until the mid 19th c.

The cultural hegemony of the large monasteries led to a more or less superficial identification with Tibet, particularly among the elites, which still conditions the self-perceptions of the dominant Buddhist scholars.

The local language, which relates to the classical language of the religious books as Hindi to Sanskrit or French to Latin, is perceived as an ignoble deviation (if not rubbish), which 'has no grammar'¹ and should not be written, except according to the orthography and grammatical rules of Classical Tibetan...

People who are well versed in reading Classical Tibetan² might loose the feeling for the difference between the languages, and claim that they are actually the same (T.Ts., B.m., ca. 80ys in 2004).³ The scholarly attitude is shared by people who went to the TCV (Tibetan Children Villages) schools of the exile Tibetan community, cf. S. from Pang below.

The issue is highly controversial (cf. also the citations from Konchok Panday 2007 below), and many people whom I asked in 2004 when I prepared another paper on the language issue (see Zeisler 2006), would hide behind the statements of the Buddhist clerics. Any linguistic argument is blocked by the scholars as being based on Western concepts not applicable to the Ladakhi reality.

However, the few people who dare to differ readily agree that the orthographic rules of the classical language are unfit for writing Ladakhi. And, whenever Tibetan lamas give teachings in Ladakh, they need translators.

On the other hand, the fiction that the Tibetan script was invented only for the holy Buddhist scriptures, upheld by Buddhist scholars as a matter of fact, has led a major part of the Muslim clergy to condemn the script as Buddhist script.

There is nevertheless a growing pride in the 'Tibetan' heritage and a growing interest to write the own language in the best-suited Tibetan script among the younger generation and intelligentsia in Purik; e.g. Muhammad Sadiq Hardassi compared language and culture to the Taj-Mahal, claiming it thus to be a national monument!' (*mushairah*, 31 July Kargil).

I took the opportunity of a seminar in Kargil 2015 to conduct informal interviews on the question of one's identity and one's attitude towards the local language and the possibilities of writing it. Later, I also talked informally with other persons at other places. None of these interviews was recorded, but I noted down the key statements, sometimes during the talk, sometimes immediately afterwards, sometimes later the day from memory. I shall also refer to earlier observations and the interviews from 2004. Given the problematic nature of the dispute, I will not disclose the names. The abbreviations are B. for Buddhist,

¹ Of course, they think of a prescriptive written grammar book. Like many people in India, they also confound language and script. A language is a language only, if it has a script of its own. And since there is one Tibetan script, there can only be one Tibetan language, or so.

² All of the conservative lay or clerical scholars I spoke to in 2004 admitted that they do not have much or enough knowledge of the traditional grammar, and while their reading ability might be quite sufficient, many feel insecure about the correct spelling when writing. One person even made a fundamental mistake during his explanations.

³ In 2004, one scholar, unintentionally, demonstrated the exact opposite to me by reading out a text in the classical format, explaining every second or third word by using its Ladakhi equivalent.

f. for female, M. for Muslim, m. for male. The lack of female voices is, to a certain extent, accidental, but the political side of the debate is exclusively a male affair.

Given the above-sketched politicised frame, one would have expected that language and the question of how to write it would generally dominate the self-ascriptions of identity.

However, most people I asked, what they associate with being a Ladakhi, or more specifically, being a person of a particular region, did not mention the language at all or even rejected the idea that language and/ or religion would play an important role, when bystanders mentioned these two features.

The place where one was born and where one grew up, family, friends, even the landscape were often said to be most important factor for one's self perception. Another recurrent feature, not very surprising and also encountered before,⁴ is the layered levels or (roughly) concentric rings of identities or senses of belonging: one is first of all a person of a specific village or region. Secondly, one belongs to a particular religion or community. But outside of Ladakh, in mainland India, one perceives oneself as Ladakhi brothers and sisters – in contrast to Kashmiris or other Indians,⁴ and then perhaps abroad also a person of Indian nationality. As one will see, the statements of Buddhists and Muslims do not differ much.

There are thus (as elsewhere) complementary perceptions of identity: an outwardly, 'official' notion of Otherness – with respect to the rest of India –, drawing upon the Imperial Tibetan heritage, a highly politicised, sometimes quite aggressive notion of Buddhist vs. Muslim, with a strong tendency to prescribe what and how to write – in both cases: not the mother tongue! –, and the private, rather intimate perception of oneself within a small community, which may combine with pride in the inherited but vanishing culture.

3. Voices I: Identity

Taxi driver from Turtuk (M.m., ca. 30ys). Turtuk was part of Baltistan (now in Pakistan), but together with a few hamlets it was conquered by the Indian army in 1971. The Balti language differs considerably from all other Ladakhi varieties.

We are Baltis, not Ladakhis. We had belonged to Pakistan. Ladakh begins in Nubra [ca. 30km upstream].

A.H. from Turtuk (M.m., ca. 55ys). He had gone to a middle school 30km further down river, and was just back for winter holidays, when Turtuk was cap-

⁴ Namgyal, a Buddhist policeman from Nubra, told me a few years ago that when he served in Srinagar, he and his Muslim colleague from Kargil were sticking together like brothers, despite the conflicts between the two communities. – This is to a certain extent certainly also a reaction to being discriminated as 'Chinky' etc. by their 'Aryan' colleagues and compatriots.

tured by the Indians in 1971. (One elder brother, however, got stuck in Pakistan.) After that, he had no chances to get a higher education and stayed mainly in Turtuk:

I identify myself, first of all, with my *rgyut* (lineage) and then with the area. This is my world. I didn't learn much. I once believed if one goes far, one reaches the end of the world, *rjikteni thama*, and then one would fall down. – Loughs.

S. from Pangl, Kishtwar Dstt. (B.m., ca. 30y), free lance consultant. He had been to the Tibetan TCV school, and thus takes a pro-Tibetan stance:

First of all, I am a Pangl, because I was born there and my family lives there. Culturally I am a Tibetan. Tibetan is my mother tongue. But abroad I am rather a Ladakhi.

H.A. from Kargil (M.m., ca. 25ys)

To be a Purikpa or Kagili means: the family, the region, not so much the language – though I do not 'feel at home' with English or Urdu. When I hear somebody speak Purigi abroad, I immediately want to know who this person is, where he comes from. This does not happen when a person speaks Urdu.

On a second level, I am also a Ladakhi: if there is a crisis like the Leh flood [of 2010], I feel sorrow and want to help. But in the case of the Kashmir flood [2014] or the Nepal earthquake [2015], the first feeling is that this does not concern me.

A.A. from Kargil (M.m., ca. 25ys), studied law and wants to become a lawyer. He runs several small NGOs in Kargil, one for winter tuitions, one for communal harmony:

To be a Purikpa? This is first of all the language. I don't know the Tibetan script, but I write Purigi in Urdu (Persian) script. I think it would be good to learn Purigi [= writing Purigi in Tibetan script].

F.H. from Kargil (M.m., ca. 30ys), researcher into the culture and history of Purik.

My identity is Ladakhi. This means the Ladakhi culture, incl. dresses etc. "We are all the same."

– *As he wasn't quite in a traditional dress, BZ jokes: and the same as all Indians ...* –

No, I give you an example: I have a Panjabi good friend. And this Ladakhi Muslim friend is a friend, but not a good friend. But who will help me if I have a crisis? Not the Panjabi good friend, but the Ladakhi. It is this feeling of sameness, a sense of belonging.

– BZ: *and what does it mean to be a Kargili, perhaps the religion? –*

No, not the religion! There are so many different people living here: Brokpa [Dards], Balti, Purikpa... [Quite apparently he identifies with this diversity.] Being a Purikpa? This is first of all related to the Purik region.

Tea-stall owner (M.m., ca. 45ys), Kargil. He was quite proud of his eldest daughter who had learned the Tibetan script when studying in Choglamsar near Leh. She seemed to have been quite enthusiastic in learning the script, but as her father stated, now she has forgotten everything:

The best of all languages is the international language (English); Purigi is nice but ... [= not so useful].

F. from Kargil (M.m., ca. 30ys), teacher:

Identity as a Purikpa means: we are very hard working people (since life is so difficult) in contrast to the Lepas (people of Leh), who are only after money; we are more social and honest.

No, language is not important at all. But there is need to preserve our culture.

J.Y. from Gya-Sasoma (Upper Ladakh, B.f., ca. 30ys), educated, between two jobs, working as my informant:

My identity is: I am a person from Gya, because I have been born there and my family is there. The landscape etc. are not important.

The language and the dialect are also not important. I like to talk in the dialect of my friends from the Changthang (the eastern area), but whenever I come back from mainland India I am glad to be back home in the Ladakhi language.

Younger people use too many English or Urdu words and have forgotten many Ladakhi words.

T.m., (B.m., ca. 35ys), journalist:

Being a Ladakhi means one is not an Indian, not a Kashmiri. The difference lies in the mindset. That is, one knows what others think or expect.

In contrast to Kashmiris or Indians, Ladakhis are perhaps more simple, less materialistic. ... [Referring to F.'s statement:] It might be true that the Kargilis are still more simple than the Lepas, but once tourism really takes root there, they will become like us.

With Ladakhi, I mean the whole culture – points at his western style jacket – what we call a traditional dress is often imported: the *subma* (the

women's dress) was a Moghul dress [the Moghuls were the Central Asian rulers of pre-colonial India], the *tibi* (hat) comes from Kashmir, etc. ...

Language is at the core. But I am not afraid that English medium in school leads to language shift. The children might talk English which each other while still learning the language, but they will talk Ladakhi among themselves after becoming fluent in English.

4. Voices II: Writing the local language?

The Tibetan script was introduced in the mid 7th c. While the orthography, once codified, got fossilised and changed only minimally, the spoken languages continued their phonetic dissimilation and grammatical simplification.

Ladakhi dialects show various stages of this development. The dialects of Purik are closest to the original pronunciation, a fact of great pride, but their grammar has changed as radically as that of other dialects. Next come the dialects of Lower Ladakh, and then Leh, where the difference between certain initial clusters (such as *lt*, *rt*, *st*) was lost. In the dialects further up, the clusters are lost (that is, only the second consonant remains).

Human language cannot exist without grammar, whether it is written in the shape of a book or not therefore to say that the Ladakhi language has no grammar is not true.

Language written with grammar that doesn't match the grammar of speech may be misunderstood by the readers, whereas any language which matches the written grammar with the spoken language will be clearly understood.

Some people mistake grammar for religion and treat it as a precious holy object. Grammar is just a vessel for any kind of knowledge. ...

Some people try to write Ladakhi language with Tibetan grammar. The style becomes like a gentleman in lady's dress. ...

Khanpo Konchok Phanday (2007: 198–202)

S. from Pangi (reproduces the standard position of the Buddhist clericals):

The Ladakhi language should not be written – because there is already a universally valid grammar,⁵ which did not change since its establishment [1200 ys ago]. So why should one create a new (!) language?⁶ Or if not the language of the religious books, why not write modern Tibetan, as this is spoken by far more people than Ladakhi.

⁵ Like many Tibetan and Ladakhi scholars, he means the 'orthography' of Classical Tibetan.

⁶ This is a common idea. In 2004, N.Ts.Sh. objected that "you cannot just create a new language. If you do so, you would need a new dictionary and a lot of text books, so who would do all the work?"

H.A. from Kargil:

I don't know how to write Purigi in Urdu (Persian) script, I never tried. When I write, I write in Urdu (=the language). I learned a little bit of the Tibetan script, but after one month, the group got dissolved. I would be interested to learn more.

H.A., A.A., F.H. from Kargil:

There is some difficulty. Not everybody wants the Tibetan script, most Kargilis don't want it.

F.H. from Kargil:

But it also belongs to us!

H.A.:

We have the old pronunciation, we are the real Tibetans! We should ask where *Bodhi* (Tibetan) is taught and then ask the officials whether it cannot be introduced in all schools.

N., a writer from Kargil (M.m., ca. 27ys), holds a degree in English. He read some poems in Urdu on the *mushairah* in Kargil on July 31,⁷ but says that he also writes Purigi in Urdu script.

But this is difficult. It would be better to use *Budyik* (the Tibetan script). There is absolutely no problem, the concept of 'Buddhist script' is a misrepresentation. Actually, only the Tibetan script can render our ideas and feelings correctly (!).

We have a new youth organisation, which wants to take care of our own culture. We mostly meet in winter time and we also learn the Tibetan script from a monk.

People also start to use Tibetan names again, such as Rincan, which means 'precious', or Skarma, which means 'star', eg. my nephew is called Rincan Ali. These names do not have any religious meaning.

When the area was converted to Islam, many things were discarded as being Buddhist, and then the next generation believed that this is true. Yes, I feel some regret about it.

⁷ Actually, as this was an official occasion (the new building of the Cultural Academy being inaugurated), all poets (exclusively men) presented only verses in Urdu. The only exception was Muhammad Sadiq Hardassi, who presented one verse in Balti (with the statement about the Taj Mahal), and the rest in Urdu.

F. from Kargil:

But of course, it would be good to write Ladakhi or Purigi, and the best way would be to use *Budyik* (the Tibetan script). That *Budyik* means 'Buddhist script' is a misconception.

Conversation on the road with a contractor (M.m., ca. 50ys), Kargil:

Writing Purigi is difficult. I am a Muslim so I didn't learn the Tibetan script.

A Purik historian (M.m., ca. 50ys), Kargil, small talk after the *mushairah*:

Writing Purigi in Urdu (Persian) script is very difficult, because of the phonetics. The Tibetan script might be useful, because when using Urdu script, people write inconsistently.

M.I. (M.m., ca. 40ys), a Muslim Tibetan, originally from Srinagar, running a private school in Kargil, the only one that offers classes for alphabetisation in Tibetan script:

We have *Budyik* classes since 2010, because of the need to write the Purik language.

The children have great difficulties, because their parents cannot help them with the homework.

We also do not know how to teach them best. We use teaching materials from Leh, But we think, an 'easy writing' should be used [that is, with a spelling close to the actual pronunciation].

J.Y. from Gya:

It is a pity that *Budik* (the Tibetan script) is not taught at school. And if it is taught, then only for *Chosskat* (the religious language), and the teachers are often Tibetans. But much too little is taught, and hardly anything is published in *Budik*.

Children forget the Ladakhi language, I have heard children ask *fiftinla tci zertcan?* 'How does one say for fifteen?'

I have worked in a school where children are told better not to speak Ladakhi, and this is even a school that was praised by the Dalai Lama for preserving the Tibetan culture. I wonder how this is possible.⁸

As a student in SECMOL,⁹ J.Y. had acquired a positive attitude towards writing the Ladakhi language. She was witness of a rather hot discussion with S. from

⁸ The school was actually set up by a *rinboche* or re-incarnated priest.

⁹ SECMOL (Students Educational and Cultural Movement of Ladakh) is an NGO that has

Pangi, where she accompanied all my counter arguments with nods of agreement. She uses the Tibetan script for her own purposes in an orthography that corresponds to her pronunciation.¹⁰

My way of writing is private. I don't think I could show anything to anybody; they would only laugh. In order to write letters, one should know the standard orthography, but I don't know it.

No, I don't mean the classical orthography, but some standard for Ladakhi. If I had a choice, I would prefer a spelling that reflects the pronunciation of the Leh dialect, rather than the orthography suggested by SECMOL.¹¹

Choskat (the classical language) is too difficult to understand. I wonder why the *Kangjur* and *Tangjur* (large collections of Buddhist scriptures) are not translated into Ladakhi. The rimboche's translations [see below], by contrast, are well intelligible.

It is really important to teach Ladakhi rather than Tibetan, and it would also be good if not all instructions in school were only in English.

Bakula Rangdol Nima rimboche from Achinathang (B.m., ca. 45ys). He is a reincarnation and the abbot of the Lamayuru and Skyurbucan monasteries. He has written a small grammatical treatise with suggestions for writing Ladakhi (Bakula Rangdol Nima 2005) and started translating Classical Tibetan texts into Ladakhi (2010, 2014). Tibetans in Ladakh find difficulties in reading his translations, but Ladakhis willing to read the local language like J.Y. find it an easy reading (although he has not always found the best solutions). When I visited him in 2015, he was just busy translating the biography of Milaraspa, Tibet's most famous yogi, famous particularly for his songs.

I want to make important texts available to the uneducated public, who do not have access to the English translations. I have already finished 150 of 900 pages of the Milaraspa text. But there are some difficult words in the songs, which I can't find in the dictionaries. Ladakhi and Tibetan are quite different, but perhaps not as much as Sanskrit and Hindi.

– BZ: But some people claim that Ladakhi and Tibetan are actually the same... –

been instrumental in raising the quality of government schools. Among many other things they had propagated writing Ladakhi and had published some children's booklets and a few pages in a magazine in Tibetan script and were badly attacked and threatened for this.

¹⁰ Her dialect lacks initial clusters, hence she writes *ta* instead of *rta* etc.

¹¹ They tried to accommodate the pronunciation of Lower Ladakh, which is in certain ways closer to the original pronunciation reflected by the script, e.g., *rta* 'horse' is pronounced *rhta* in Lower Ladakh, *sta* in Leh, and *ta* in Y.'s dialect. While SECMOL opted for the spelling *rta*, Y. would prefer a standard spelling *sta*.

Then why is it necessary to always translate the Dalai Lama's speeches?

– BZ jokingly: Perhaps because of the pronunciation? –

Even if the Dalai Lama would use a Ladakhi pronunciation, the speech would still not be understandable.

Ng.T.Sh. from Sabu (B.m., ca. 55ys), historian and writer. He had been working for the Cultural Academy of Jammu and Kashmir, Leh branch. I met him by chance on the road, and he invited me to a cup of tea, starting the language issue on his own. As I could have expected from earlier discussions, he didn't really appreciate the rimboche's work:

One should write Ladakhi according to the grammar [=orthography of Classical Tibetan]. Otherwise the language will deteriorate.

He did not specify which language he meant, but I heard several scholars claim that – believe it or not – the classical language would get destroyed, if people would write their modern mother tongue in a modified orthography.¹² One can infer what kind of fancy arguments are ventilated by certain scholars from Konchok Panday's polemics:

Some people say. "If you read and write Ladakhi language, you will never learn the meaning of Kangyur and Tangyur [the large collections of Buddhist scriptures]." This is like saying a person can never learn a new word in his life after his first language at the age of seven. ...

Some people object, "If you want to compose a Ladakhi grammar, which language will it be based on? Central Ladakh, Zangskar, Nubra or Changthang? You cannot choose one form."

And yet these same people say, "You should use grammar [=orthography] that can be understood by all the people from Skardo in the west to Amdo in the east." Is it not a strange thought?

Some people say that those who want to destroy Ladakhi Culture, destroy the language first.

If we go round the world for many years looking for a person who wants to destroy Ladakhi Culture, we will not find a single one all over the world. ...

In reality the destroyers of our culture are perhaps those who hate our own language and even try to stop us from writing our own language.

Some people say, "Ladakhi language is an inferior or common language and it should not be written."

Language cannot be divided into inferior and superior – we do not have separate languages for Kings and common people. ...

¹² For example, at the 11th Seminar of the International Association for Ladakh Studies, Choglamsar 2003 SECMOL and its supporters were openly accused of intentionally spoiling the grammar of *Choskat*.

We must know to whom we are writing or speaking: Tibetan to Tibetans, English to English speakers and Ladakhi to Ladakhis. Otherwise our meaning will not get across.

I am a Ladakhi and my mother tongue is Ladakhi and I am proud of it. Speaking and writing one's mother tongue is not bad. I write Ladakhi language for Ladakhis, Tibetan for Tibetans and English for English speakers. I respect all languages. The grammars, the structure of the sentences, the vocabulary, all are used for the purpose of conveying the concept to the reader. If the reader cannot understand clearly, what is the point?

Khanpo Konchok Phanday (2007: 203–206)

5. Concluding remarks

By chance, I did not yet meet any Muslim authority ousting the Tibetan ‘Buddhist’ script. To the contrary, Molwi Muhammad Omar Gutu Nadvi, who was the Imam of the Leh Masjid around 2006, a keen enthusiast of Ladakhi culture, loves the ‘Ladakhi’ script to the extent that he has pioneered on translating a section of the Quran.

Quite by contrast, I have had enough discussions with Buddhist elites who think that only the Classical Tibetan language is the real language, and only this should be written in the Tibetan script. Some of them even hold that the Tibetan script should not be used for lay purposes, such as school books or magazines!

Indirectly admitting that learning *Choskat* is more difficult than learning the common language, some of them think that ‘if the people do not understand the language of the religious books, it is their own fault, as they simply have not made the necessary efforts’ (Chigmet Namgyal, IALS XI, Choglamsar 2003).

Some of them would not mind if the spoken language disappeared completely, but they would also not object writing the Ladakhi dialects in Roman letters or the Persian script.¹³ But unfortunately both scripts are only marginally used and there is no standard way of representing the vowels and those consonants that are not found in the particular script.

Furthermore, the medium of instruction is English, which is never properly taught. There is even pressure on the teachers not to give explanations in Ladakhi. Only a few schools offer optional Tibetan classes, but again, there is no proper approach to teaching it as a foreign language.

There is also a common perception among the people that Ladakhi is not so important or not important at all when one wants to participate in the Indian or Global economy. I have often been asked by Ladakhis why I do not study Hindi, but this unimportant little language, which is hardly spoken by anybody.

Apart from the different identification layers and perspectives, there is also a striking contrast between the rather theoretical claims of one’s cultural identity and every day practice where almost nothing remains. One could write a long lament about the ‘cultural decay’. But this ‘decay’ or alienation from one’s ori-

¹³ I remember one of the scholars in 2004 saying: “Then you can do what you want.”

gins may perhaps be one of the reasons why the language issue is so acute: there is hardly anything else left by which one could still identify with Imperial Tibet, except script and religion. No wonder then that for some people the script has become religion!

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