

## Alexander Csoma de Kőrös' contribution to Tibetan studies

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Those who did not know him better, might have taken Kőrösi Csoma Sándor (ཀོ་རོ་སེ་ཙོ་མ་ཤུག་རྩོ་རྩ་), better known as Alexander Csoma de Kőrös (1784–1842), for an eccentric adventurer. He travelled from Europe via Turkey, Alexandria in Egypt, Iraq, and Iran to Bukhara, and from there via Afghanistan to Leh, where he arrived in June 1822, always in search for the – as he and his compatriots believed – Central Asian ancestors of the Hungarians and, more particularly, of the Székelys (the ethnic group of Transylvania).

However, he was also, or perhaps rather primarily, a great scholar and linguist. When he had finished his Oriental studies in Göttingen, Germany, in 1818, he was already literate in thirteen or fourteen languages, among them the major European languages, Hebrew, Arabic and Turkish. He was also able to converse in Persian. In Ladakh, he studied the Classical Tibetan book language or *chos-skad*. Some years later, in Calcutta, he added Sanskrit, Marathi and Bengali to this impressive list.

When he met Moorcroft, Superintendent of the East-India Company, the latter realised that Csoma's gifts could be used to get a more thorough knowledge of Tibetan. At that time, the only lexical resource was the Tibetan-Latin dictionary *Alphabetum Tibetanum* of 1762, published by the Catholic friar Antonio Agostino Giorgi (1711–1797). As the introduction to one of Csoma's articles illustrates (H.H. Wilson 1832, *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, 1: 269ff.), European scholars had no clue how to translate Classical Tibetan, and Giorgi's rudimentary knowledge was of little help.

Moorcroft supplied Csoma with a copy of this dictionary, and Csoma started learning colloquial Ladakhi through the Persian medium. In June 1823, Csoma set out to Zangla in Zaskar to study *chos-skad* and the Buddhist Literature under the erudite lama Sangs-rgyas Phun-tshogs. They worked together 16 months in Zangla and another three years in Kanam in Kinnaur. Sangs-rgyas Phun-tshogs had spent six years on a study tour through almost all parts of Tibet and was thus fully acquainted with the Central Tibetan colloquial language.

Csoma was thus confronted with at least two, if not three, different Tibetan languages: colloquial Ladakhi, Classical Tibetan or *chos-skad*, and most probably also colloquial Central Tibetan. Despite their shared heritage, mainly a shared vocabulary and some basic grammatical principles, all three languages have developed different grammatical patterns that cannot be projected from one language to the other.

Csoma, the linguist, however, did not take advantage of this situation and concentrated solely on the study of the classical language. His merit as a pioneer in this subject was briefly challenged, when in 1826 Christian Gotthelf Schroeter's Tibetan-English dictionary *A Dictionary of the Bhotanta, or Boutan Language* – based on the work of the Capuchin monk della Penna – appeared. As it turned out, however, this dictionary had quite a few flaws and was, as Jäschke (in the introduction of his dictionary, p. v) put it, only useful “for those who are already

competent, for themselves, to weigh and decide upon the statements and interpretations it advances”, and it soon fell into oblivion.

Csoma’s dictionary, *Essay towards a dictionary, Tibetan and English, prepared with the assistance of Bandé Sangs-rgyas Phun-tshogs, a learned Lama of Zangskar*, Baptist Mission Press, Calcutta 1834 – it features the lama as the main contributor on the preceding Tibetan title page: *Bod-skad-kyi ming-gi mdzod, Zangskar-gyi slob-dpon rje Sangs-rgyas Phun-tshogs-kyis kun-las btus-pa-dang / slob-gnyer-pa Koroshi Co-ma Sha’an-dor-gyis bsgyurd-cing gtan-la phab-pa /* (Tibetan dictionary, compiled by the Zanskari instructor Sangs-rgyas Phun-tshogs and translated and ordered by the student Kőrösi Csoma Sándor) – was, therefore, the first dictionary that proved to be both consistent and correct. Later lexicographical work, be it that by Isaak Jacob Schmidt (1841: *Tibetisch-Deutsches Wörterbuch*) or Heinrich August Jäschke (1881: *Tibetan-English Dictionary*) benefited from the forerunner, whether this was acknowledged, as in the case of Jäschke, or not. It may be noted that Csoma’s dictionary only partially follows the Tibetan alphabetical ordering: all initial consonants are treated equally, whether they be the main root letters or prefixes (in which case the words should have been placed under the root letter).

In the same year, Csoma also published a comparatively detailed grammar: *A grammar of the Tibetan language in English*, Baptist Mission Press, Calcutta 1834. As common for this period, Csoma describes Tibetan within the now outdated terminology of Latin grammar. While this did not much justice to the Tibetan language, it was of great help for the European students (who were all brought up with the Latin grammar) to familiarise themselves with Tibetan, and it may still be used for self-study, if the student is aware that the description contains some errors. These errors are possibly based on the linguistic influences Sangs-rgyas Phun-tshogs underwent during his travels in Tibet and in part perhaps also to the Hungarian bias of Csoma’s ears.

In the section on pronunciation, for instance, we find the unexpected information that the combination of *k*, *kh*, and *g* with the subscribed *y*, would yield something like the *t* in *tube* or the *d* in *duke* (p. 6) and that the combinations with a subscribed *r*, which yield a retroflex pronunciation (with the tongue bent backwards) would not differ from the ordinary dentals (p. 6). On the other hand, he correctly observes that the superscribed *r* and *l*, which are silent in most of the Tibetan languages and dialects, may be carried over to a preceding syllable, when this ends in a vowel, as in *rdo-rje* becoming *dor-je* (p. 7f.). Csoma, however, does not comment on the fact that in the Ladakhi dialects of Leh and the western parts, the superscribed consonants are regularly pronounced. He also seems not to have noticed that in the Zangskar dialects, such combinations lead to a particular ‘fricative’ (chafed) pronunciation.

The reader acquainted with classical texts will also find some inconsistencies in the description of the verbal auxiliaries, for instance, when Csoma describes the auxiliary *’dug* as a past tense form of *yin* and *yod* or generally as a past tense auxiliary or when he gives *yod-pa* as a participle (or nominal form) of *yin* (pp. 84–88). In these cases, Csoma might have been misled by his teacher, who, for his part, might have confounded various colloquial usages with the written language. On the other hand, Csoma also provides some helpful examples of verb stem

formation and the transitive-causative derivation (pp. 75–83; perhaps the most difficult part of Tibetan grammar) and a list of verb forms (pp. 115–145). He likewise gives useful lists of adjectives (pp. 49–62), adverbs (pp. 95–100), postpositions (pp. 101–103), conjunctions and interjections (pp. 104–106), as well as of honorific terms (pp. 32–36). In the appendix, he also introduces into the Tibetan calendrical system and discusses a Tibetan chronological table (147–157, 181–202), and finally, he presents some specimen of Tibetan handwriting (40 lithographed pages).

Csoma, however, was not only the first scholar to write a useful dictionary and grammar, he was also the first who published reasonable translations, introductory articles on the Tibetan culture and thinking, as well as the first descriptions of the contents of the Tibetan Buddhist canon, certainly not without the help of his Zanskari teacher: *Geographical notice of Tibet* (1832), *Note on the origin of the Kāla-Chakra and Adi Buddha systems* (1833), *Tibetan symbolical names, used as numerals* (1834), *Analysis of a Tibetan medical work* (1835), *Enumeration of historical and grammatical works to be met in Tibet* (1838), *A brief notice of the Subhāshita Ratna Nidhi [Legs-par bshad-pa rin-po-che'i gter] of Saskya Pandita, with extracts and translations* (posthumous 1855, 1856; with 234 of the 454 verses), *Analysis of the Dulva* (Tib. 'Dul-ba, Skr. *Vinaya*; 1836), *Notices on the life of Shakya* (1839), analyses of various Kanjur texts and an *Abstract of the contents of the Bstan-Hgyur* (1839) – to mention only the most important works. In his list of historical and grammatical works, he Csoma mentions the *sgrungs* literature or “fabulous narratives”, and particularly the *Ge-sar sgrungs* of a “war-like ancient king in central Asia, [which] is much celebrated in Tibet”.

In his views on Tibetan culture, identity, and language, Csoma was clearly influenced by his teacher and the idealistic nationalist attitude common among Tibetan scholars. In his *Geographical notice on Tibet* (J.A.S.B. I (1832): 122ff.), he states at the beginning and at the end:

The vast mountainous tract ... may be called by the general name of “Tibet,” since the Tibetan language is understood everywhere from Beltistan (or Little Tibet) down to the frontier of China, although there be several corrupt dialects of it, and the inhabitants of these countries, in general, have the same manners and customs, ...

They differ much from each other in their stature, character, dress, and in the accent with which they pronounce the Tibetan language. But they can all understand each other.

At all times and all over the world, religious elites have looked down on the vernaculars or the actually spoken languages as a ‘deviation’ from the written standard and thus as a ‘corruption’. They are unwilling to accept that languages develop over time and do not only change pronunciations or meanings but also the grammatical structure until they might split into something different. Like Hindi or Urdu are not just ‘corrupt’ Sanskrit or French (which Csoma had learnt) is not corrupt Latin (which Csoma had likewise learnt), the various colloquial Tibetan languages are not just ‘corrupt’ *chos-skad* or Classical Tibetan, they are simply different.

If Csoma had paid more attention to the spoken language, he would have become aware that the Ladakhi language and its dialects not only differ from the spellings of *chos-skad* (and the Central Tibetan reading style) with respect to pronunciation, but more fundamentally also with respect to grammar. If Csoma had paid more attention to his environment, he would also have had a lot to say about the customs and the society in Zangla or Ladakh, but he dedicated himself solely to *chos-skad* and the Buddhist literature.

Csoma's contributions to the study of *chos-skad* and the Buddhist literature cannot be under-estimated, and as far as this is part of the Ladakhi culture, he also contributed to the understanding of the Ladakhi culture. However, he had to share the unpleasant fate of so many a pioneer, namely that in the course of time, his achievements have been surpassed by his successors.

Bibliographical note:

Csoma's works have been reprinted in four volumes by the Akadémiai Kiadó, Budapest, 1984, under the editorship of József Terjek (vol. 1: Dictionary, vol. 2: Grammar, vol. 3: Sanskrit-Tibetan-English vocabulary, vol. 4: Tibetan Studies). Each volume is supplied with a biographical sketch: *Alexander Csoma de Kőrös a short biography* by József Terjek (pp. iii–xxxii), from which the biographical details of this article have been drawn.

I also drew upon John Bray, *Missionaries, officials and the making of the 1826 Dictionary of the Bhotanta, or Boutan Language*, 2008, Zentralasiatische Studien 37: 33–75.

Another interesting biographical sketch is Imre Bangha, *Alexander Csoma de Kőrös*. [http://sogorcsaba.eu/docs/bangha\\_imre.doc](http://sogorcsaba.eu/docs/bangha_imre.doc).

Some biographical details can also be found in the Wikipedia: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sándor\\_Kőrösi\\_Csoma](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sándor_Kőrösi_Csoma).

The most complete biography is said to be by Tivadar Duka, *Life and works of Alexander Csoma de Kőrös: a biography compiled chiefly from hitherto unpublished data: with a brief notice of each of his published works and essays, as well as of his still extant manuscripts*, London: Trübner, 1885.

Nevertheless, I should also like to point to the work of our late IALS member: Marczell, Peter J. *Alexander Csoma de Kőrös*. 2 vols., Kolkata: Asiatic Society, 2007.