

**REPORT ON THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON ORIGINS AND
MIGRATIONS AMONG TIBETO-BURMAN SPEAKERS OF THE
EXTENDED EASTERN HIMALAYA**

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An international, interdisciplinary conference on origins and migrations among Tibeto-Burman speakers of the “Extended Eastern Himalaya” was staged by the Humboldt University Institute for Asian and African Studies over three glorious spring days in Berlin this May.¹ The conference convenors Toni Huber (Tibetan studies, Humboldt University) and Stuart Blackburn (Folklore, SOAS) assembled a diverse field of presenters, discussants and other participants from a wide range of disciplines – including folklorists, Tibetologists, (other) anthropologists, historians, geographers, and linguists – with the goal of addressing the vexing twin problems of “origins” and “migrations” among T-B speakers in an area stretching from central Arunachal Pradesh to upland Southeast Asia and Southwest China. Despite the diversity of approaches represented and the breadth and complexity of the field addressed, the conference was marked throughout by fascinating and often unexpected convergences of viewpoint and a uniformly collegial and collaborative atmosphere. This was certainly due in no small part to the evidently high competence of the conference organizers and their assistants (mainly Humboldt University graduate students), who ferried participants efficiently but in an always relaxed manner from hotel to venue, room to restaurant, and discussion to discussion, and in the end brought off a logistically challenging event without even the slightest hitch.

The stage was initially set by F.K. Lehman (Chit Hlaing; Univ. of Illinois) and Robbins Burling (Univ. of Michigan), who lost no time in dispensing with the popularly-held view that an entire population (nation, tribe, etc.) might be said to have “originated” in one place and “migrated” *en masse* to another. Instead, they both argued, places of “origin” and putative migration routes alike are as subject to reinterpretation and change as the populations themselves are to mixture with neighbouring groups and shifts in status, identity and group-affiliations over space and over time. Lehman’s and Burling’s themes surfaced repeatedly throughout the remainder of the conference as participants grappled from a variety of perspectives with the nature and reliability of various types of evidence

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for “origins” and “migrations” (and indeed, of group-identity or group-coherence) among T-B populations of the chosen area.²

Another perspective – taken by most of the remaining speakers of Day 1 – was that of the meanings and uses of “origins” and “movements” in terms of the traditional cosmogonies and other ritual texts of various T-B groups themselves. Papers along these lines were presented by Martin Gaenszle (Univ. of Vienna) and Charles McKhann (Whitman College), as well as by Stuart Blackburn, treating rituals and myths among Rai, Naxi/Nuosu and Apatani communities respectively. Michael Oppitz (Univ. of Zürich) also crystallized the notion, widely-held among T-B groups, of a “northern origin” in his paper “Coming from the North”. The convergence or divergence of the concepts “north”, “(vertically) upward” and “upriver” thenceforth provided an important point of reference throughout the remainder of the conference.

Day 2 turned first to linguistic concerns, with François Jacquesson (CNRS, Paris) and Mark Post (RCLT, La Trobe University) providing highly complementary papers on the search for concrete and population-specific linguistic evidence for local migrations as partial explanation for the spreads and declines of various Tani, “Naga” and Bodo-Garo (and possibly other not-yet-identified) languages of North East India. George van Driem (Univ. of Leiden) also provided an expansive view of genetic sampling data adduced to date, and provoked a lively discussion concerning the relationship of genetic data to ongoing questions of origins and indigenous land claims in the modern nation-state context.

Following coffee, Toni Huber reported on concrete evidence for (and causes of) local migrations experienced in the 20th century by the Western Tani groups Tagin, Mra and Na (Bengni) along the Tibetan/Arunachali border region, where he is currently focusing a large-scale ethnographic project upon these critically underdocumented societies. Alex Aisher (Univ. of Sussex) next invoked the important notion of (linguistically) structured genealogies in discussing the history of the Nyishi (W. Tani) tribe of Arunachal Pradesh; the implications of patrilineal versus matrilineal descent systems for our understanding of “origins” and population “histories” were also discussed and debated in this context. The focus on migration dynamics continued with an illuminating discussion of network theory, which Geoff Childs (Washington University) argued to provide a useful model for understanding self-sustaining and progressively-increasing processes (*not* punctual “events”) of migration in the region. Sarit Chaudhuri of Rajiv Gandhi University (a.k.a. Arunachal University, Itanagar, Arunachal Pradesh) finally provided a first-hand account of the emerging political dimensions of origins and migrations in the rapidly-developing tribally-dominated societies of Arunachal Pradesh, preceded by a video-documented discussion of Idu soul journeys by Gerhard Heller (Heidelberg).

² LaPolla (2001) was a much-discussed paper in this context; regrettably, Prof. LaPolla was unable to attend the event.

Following a night of revelry in the cavernous and futuristic Sony Centre, where great fascination over both nature and name of the voluminous, domelike Bavarian dessert *Germknödel* (yeast dumpling) was shared by all, the final Day's papers focused on questions of identity and affiliations in the rapidly-changing national, sub-national and trans-national contexts of the Burma/India/Tibet/China border regions. While Koen Wellens (Univ. of Oslo) discussed contested discourses of origins in terms of the rapidly-evolving experiences and contexts of the Xifan (SW China), Kerstin Grothmann (Humboldt University) and Atsuko Ibata (Delhi University) reported on ongoing fieldwork among the Mechuka Memba and Nyishi communities of Arunachal Pradesh, respectively. Ibata's paper in particular highlighted current reactions among traditional *Donyi-Polo* (Sun-(and)-Moon) practitioners to the sudden and rapidly-increasing influx of institutionalized religions such as Hinduism and Christianity to the region, making it clear that intensive study of this complex religious tradition is urgently required before many of its more traditional dimensions become permanently inaccessible to research. The final papers by Mandy Sadan (SOAS) and Marion Wettstein (Univ. of Zürich) provided provocative accounts of emerging political realities in the Jingpho and "Naga" areas, reminding the participants that the questions under discussion were not only of academic, but also of urgent local and political concern.

At the close of the conference, the convenors announced their intention to produce an edited volume of papers, a decision which would appear promising indeed in light of the relative success that they have had in bringing researchers with such seemingly incongruent approaches and methods into productive discussion over a basically common set of questions. What do "origins" mean to groups, and how are they used by groups? What is a "migration"; if it is not a punctual "event", then what sort of a process is it (and/or can anything *else* account for the spread of languages and cultures across space and time)? What are the kinds of evidence that can be brought to bear on such questions in an area largely lacking in written and archaeological records, how reliable are they, and how can they be correlated? A gradual realization seemed to take hold to the effect that no one field could "solve" these and similar problems, but that interdisciplinary and intercommunity collaboration would instead be needed—urgently, in view of the sheer scale of anthropological and linguistic work which remains to be conducted in the area. In this spirit, François Jacquesson also introduced the Brahmaputra Studies project,³ a resource for social scientists with interest in the north-east India region (including a useful Directory to which scholars are invited to visit and contribute their own professional information and contact details), and Mark Post invited anthropologists to forge collaborative links with international and local linguists participating in the annual conferences of the North East Indian Linguistic Society (see Konnerth & Wood, this issue). With luck, the common ground established by many participants at this conference will be able to be maintained and expanded.

³ <http://www.vjf.cnrs.fr/brahmaputra/index.htm>

REFERENCES

- LaPolla, Randy J. 2001. The Role of Migration and Language Contact in the Development of the Sino-Tibetan Language Family. In R. M. W. Dixon & A. Y. Aikhenvald (eds.), *Areal Diffusion and Genetic Inheritance: Case Studies in Language Change*, 225-254. Oxford: Oxford University Press.