

An Old Tibetan Variant for the Word "Fox"

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In his comparative study, *Sino-Tibetan: a Conspectus*, P. K. Benedict reconstructs for Proto-Tibeto-Burman (PTB) a form **gwa* "fox" (1972:34). In Written Tibetan (WT) this proto-form yields the word *wa* "fox." Benedict observes that in medial position his PTB **-wa-* regularly gives Tibetan *-o-*. It would therefore seem that it is only where **wa* appears in absolute initial position in Tibetan that it essentially retains its PTB form. In principle this formulation is reasonable, though one wonders on general phonological grounds why rounding should have failed to take place here.¹

The word *wa* "fox" is well-attested in WT texts and dictionaries. In the modern Lhasa dialect it survives in the forms *wa-* or *wə-* [low-short tone] (Goldstein 1978:961). In Amdo Sherpa we find *wa* [H] (Nagano 1980:155). In the Ngari dialects we find a form *a* in various tones (Qu and Tan 1983:292-3). In Amdo Ndzorge we have *κæ* (Sun 1986:204). And in Amchog we get *Ra* (Wu 1982:114). All of these modern reflexes point to an earlier form having an unrounded vowel and therefore agree well with the WT form.

I am aware of at least one occurrence of the free form *wa* "fox" in an Old Tibetan (OT) text (i.e. Pelliot tibétain [P.T.] 2099, Spanien and Imaeda 1978-79: plate 617, line 18, spelled *wa'*). And I know of two certain occurrences of it in compounds. The first of these appears in a Dunhuang Tibetan manuscript, P.T. 990 (Spanien and Imaeda, plates 297-304). It is found in the damaged though clearly legible second line of the text in the compound *wa-prug* (= WT *wa-phrug*) "fox cub." The second example is in P.T. 1072 (Spanien and Imaeda, plates 403-413). This document is a legal text dealing with the penalties and liabilities incurred by those held responsible for hunting accidents. *Wa* is found in the compound *wa-dom*, which denotes a badge of disgrace to be attached (*btags*) to someone who through cowardice has failed to rescue another from falling beneath a yak (lines 91 and 95). The word *dom* is known from WT dictionaries where it is defined as a tassel or hanging ornament. There is also a reduplicative compound *dom-dom*, meaning an ornamental fringe hung from a horse's neck. The word *wa-dom* therefore apparently means "fox-pendant" or "fox-tassel." In Chinese sources there is independent

¹ A close analogy with Lahu suggests itself. The PLB rhyme **-wa* > Lh. *-u* (e.g. 'cattle' PLB **nwa²* > Lh. *nũ*, 'span' PLB **twa¹* > Lh. *thu*), but PLB *wa²* 'bamboo' > Lh. *vã*. [Ed.]

corroboration for this. The *Jiu Tangshu* 舊唐書 account of Tibet contains the following comment (Bona ed.):

196A:2a 臨陣敗北者懸狐尾於其首表其似狐之怯

Pelliot (1961:3): "Quand quelqu'un est défait en combattant et s'enfuit, on lui attache sur la tête une queue de renard pour montrer qu'il a la couardise du renard."

The corresponding *Xin Tangshu* 新唐書 entry similarly says:

216A:2a 敗懦者垂狐尾於首示辱不得列于人

Pelliot (1961:81): "A ceux qui ont été battus et se sont montrés peureux, ils attachent sur la tête une queue de renard pour leur faire honte et [montrer] qu'ils ne peuvent être rangés parmi les hommes."

In conclusion, the existence of the syllable *wa* "fox" in OT seems firmly established. But what is more interesting to us here is that, in addition to P.T. 1072, there exists another parallel and very similar juridical text dealing with the laws of the hunt. This manuscript, P.T. 1071, has been studied by Chen and Wang (1983:12-56) and Richardson (1990:5-27); and in it the badge of dishonor is called not *wa-dom* but *'o-dom*, where it is generally agreed (Chen and Wang, p. 55, note 28; Richardson, pp. 18 and 20) that *'o-* is equivalent to *wa* "fox." Now from a diachronic standpoint this is quite interesting. One might suppose that an earlier **wa* should yield later *wo*, but in fact no such syllable exists in WT except as an artificial numerical cypher. In OT texts there are examples of *wo* in transcriptions of Chinese words, but in native texts there is only one occurrence known to me. It appears in the Old Tibetan Chronicle (Spanien and Imaeda, plate 573, line 416) and has been misread there by Bacot as *'ob* (1940-6:127, n. 9). What it really means seems uncertain. But in any case, the usual development of Benedict's earlier **-wa-* is not to Tibetan *-wo-* but rather to *-o-*. And in initial position, this vowel would have to be written in Tibetan as *'o-*. What we may suppose, then, is that *'o-* in *'o-dom* is actually the expected "regular" reflex of earlier **wa* (< **gwa* ?). This *'o* may already have been a marginal variant form in OT times; and it was presumably completely replaced by competing *wa* at a very early date, since it is *wa* which is represented in WT and in most if not all of the modern dialects.

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