“Ergativity in Milarepa’s Rnam-thar”: another viewpoint

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This paper was written in reaction to A. Saxena’s 1989 article [LTBA 12.2:35-40], and takes issue both with its initial analysis of the data and in the conclusions it draws from them about ergativity. I would also like to suggest a system of prosodic analysis for Tibetan which would automatically minimize the possibilities for analytical errors in matters like these.

I. The corrections.

Before reviewing Saxena’s remarks on ergativity in the corpus, I’d like to offer corrections to the examples and translations provided. I follow Saxena’s numbers but also cite the DeJong edition’s page and line.

#1 (42:12) This example may be presented as follows: ...mna·mas thog·draṅs... with mna·mas analysed as mna·ma+s. Saxena translates this as ‘The son’s wife pulled the roof.’ Perhaps the problem here is that this is a mere fragment of a sentence, not even a clause. We need to look at a larger part of the sentence: this phrase is describing the group of people upon whom Mila is going to wreak his vengeance with a giant scorpion-wraith: ...baṅ·ston-gyi sar a·khui bu·rnams·daṅ mna·mas thog·

draṅs ṇed ma·smad-la śin·tu ṇdaṅ‘-bai mi·zla sum·cu so·lṇa ṇaṅdu ‘dzom ‘...at the wedding site 35 people were gathered inside, headed up by Uncle’s sons and the bride, who were very hostile to our family.’ There is no mention of a ‘roof’ in the Tibetan: even as a root, below the syntactic level, thog here has its traditional meaning of ‘on top, above’. There is likewise no pulling being done: thogs·draṅs is a single word, an adjective meaning ‘led by, headed up by’ and equivalent to the (here) more commonly seen phrase gtso byas-pai.

#4 (39:1) khoṅ grols·po·rnams·ni phyag·rten sna-re-

tsam·las mi·gton·bar ‘dug. Saxena: ‘The friends didn’t give a portion of the souvenir with the letter.’ I instead translate: ‘As for those friends, they didn’t give more than a couple of kinds of gifts’ (in contrast to all that Mila gave). phyag·rten is a ‘greeting-gift’, not ‘souvenir with letter’, sna means ‘kind, sort’, and re here means ‘some, a little bit’, las is ‘than, compared to’.
#5 (39:2) ṇas gser·g'yu kun phul-te: gser·g'yu kun means 'all the gold and turquoise', not 'the whole turquoise'.

#7 (43:20) de-stobs-kyis mi·ṣi byun-ba kun-gyis thos-nas 'tshogs-te. Saxena: 'Hearing by what power these people had been killed, the villagers gathered together.' I translate (literally): 'Everyone, having heard of the occurrence of deaths by that power, gathered together.' The issue here is not the general meaning as much as the syntactic analysis which Saxena uses then for other purposes: ṣi is not a perfective verb here, it is a part of the substantive word mi·ṣi (further examples are in Yú Dàoquán's dictionary of modern Lhasa usage); mi·ṣi byun-ba is a gerundial phrase meaning 'that deaths came about' which in turn serves as the direct object of thos-nas 'hearing/having heard'.

#8 (39:12) ṇa-ni yid-cig ma·ches-te... Saxena: 'I was not very great.' Dempsey: 'I didn't have even a bit of faith.' or: 'I didn't believe any of it'. Mila says this when his companions are satisfied that they have learned some real sorcery and can go back home; he feels he has learned nothing useful. yid ches-pa is a common verbal phrase meaning 'to believe'; I can't imagine how Saxena thought that yid 'mind' was an imperative form of yin 'to be', a copula which has no imperative. -cig means 'a little bit of'.

#9 (37:27) khyed grogs-po-rnams-kyis skul·lcag gyis-la mthu śin-tu [not śi-tu] mkhas-pa-žig slobs-ṣog-cig! Saxena: 'So you, his companions, should exhort him and spur him on to become deeply skilled in magic.' Dempsey: 'You (his) friends exhort (him) and come back having learned (to be) very skillful at magic!'

The problem here again is mainly Saxena's morphosyntactic analysis: skul is not the hortative form of a verb, it is the first syllable of the noun skul·lcag 'exhortation, admonishment' which forms a transitive verbal phrase with gyis. gyis is the imperative of the verb byed-pa 'to do, make', it is certainly not an instrumental marker. Saxena's mysterious -la is common in old colloquial texts and simply means 'and'; it is only used directly after an imperative form.¹ slobs is not a noun, it is the second imperative: 'learn!' and is followed by an "auxiliary imperative" ṣog 'come!' The two words could alternately be analysed as an allegro form of 'having learned, come!' Such directional auxiliaries to imperatives also occur, for instance, in Chinese and Korean.

¹ For these special uses cf. Hahn Section 14.5.
II. Ergativity.

Now that the examples are clearer, let's look at their use in a discussion of ergativity.

Before the first example, Saxena declares that ergative markers only occur in this text "when the verb is in the perfective in simple clauses." (In a footnote Saxena explains "Perfective" as what is traditionally called "Past.") This is not true: for example, 26:11-17 is a long imperative sentence which, much abbreviated, means, "I ask that, helping us, you tell us your story." The subject-agent 'you' is khye-d-kyis (26:12), clearly carrying the ergative marker, but the verbs 'helping' gzun'/'bzung'-zi (26:13) and 'tell' gsun' (26:16) are not perfective.² The spelling of the verbs, as is often the case, is equivocal, and anyway irrelevant in a colloquial text; the context and usage are clearly related to the future, not the past. This is a good place to point out that Saxena's method of using verbs spelled with distinct aspectual forms in order to prove split ergativity is not helpful, at least with vernacular texts. Many verbs, such as gzun'/'bzung' 'to seize' used in this example and in Saxena's #2, have for many centuries had identical pronunciations for two or more of the forms—in Saxena's example rko-(b)rkos-brkos-rkos the past, future, and imperative are all pronounced the same in most dialects. As a result, in any Tibetan text (but especially in a vernacularly-oriented text) the silent letters freely dance through the manuscripts in random confusion; one can never say, 'See, this has a b- prefix: it must be a perfective form.' Interpretation can only be based on the phonology represented (as interpreted by a native speaker) and the sentence's context.

Another example is 31:20-21. In the phrase bu-'dis khyim-sopher-ba-dan 'when this boy will be able to manage the household' bu-'di 'this boy' has the ergative suffix, but again the (non-finite) verb is referring to the future and is certainly neither perfective nor future-perfective. A few lines later (31:25) the dying father's last words ṇa si-dur khun-nas blta-o 'I will be watching from the grave' are interesting because most of the editions have the simple ṇa but edition A, the normative edition which DeJong perversely chose to favor, has what is probably a "correction" to ṇas.

² Of the older editions available to me, four—including de Jong's normalising A—have gzung', the future form, and two have bzung', the past form; the prefix is actually irrelevant in this context (as well as for this type of Tibetan in general): the verb functions here as a non-finite coordinator; the finite verb most closely linked with the ergative-marker is the imperative form gsun' 'tell about!'. The entire sentence is a request for a future action.
Another example of the ergative with the future is 34:29 ɲed 'di-na-yod-pa kun-gyis-kyan ci·grag-re ster. 'All of us here will give (you) the best (that we can).’ The next line also has the same sort of usage. Another particularly clear example is 37:14 where Mila’s distraught mother is challenging him to learn sorcery and get their revenge. She concludes e-yon ltos-daŋ! ‘See if you can do it (lit: whether it will happen)!’ and Mila replies ɲas e-yon blta-o! I’ll see if I can do it!’ Here the ergative ɲas is again clearly linked with a future form.

In 51:23-25 we can see that the use of the ergative can be contrastive: ɲa is used with the quasi-future phrase byed-pa yin-pas (byed is normally the “present” form) but ɲas is used with bya-o ‘will do’, a clear future form. In 46:15-16 ɲa da·lta-raŋ-‘oŋ’-gis ‘I’ll be right back’ the verb is in the future, but there is no ergative. Pending a more exhaustive analysis of the text I can only say that the situation seems complex and not in accord with Saxena’s simple analysis.

Regarding Saxena’s analysis of ergativity in the examples, some clarification would be in order: if #3 lacks the ergative marker on a·ma due to its verb not being perfective, the verb is not p·hrad—part of a gerund not even linked with a·ma—but the verb sña’m‘ at the end of the sentence (missing from Saxena’s example). In #7 the syllables Saxena marks with (PF) are not really verbs (syntactically), so it cannot prove the point. The last example (#9) is curious in that it would seem to be proof that the ergative is not needed in certain transitive clauses in this text, but the only agent in the example is clearly marked with the ergative!

III. Interpretation of voicing.

To balance out the above criticism I would now like to bring up a few examples which illustrate the complexities of verbal voice in Tibetan. Saxena defines ‘ergative marker’ as “the marker which comes with the subject when the verb is either transitive or an agent-taking intransitive verb in the perfective.” I have already argued against limiting it to the perfective; what I’m wondering about now is, just what do we mean by the subject of a sentence? Consider, from the same text, 24:8 yaŋ mos khrid-nas sanṣ·rgyas·kyi žabs·drun·du phyin‘...again led by her I went into the presence of the Buddha...’ The subject of the immediately preceding clause is Rechung’s guide Bharima; with yaŋ there is a switch, but how subtle it is! The subject, in the sense of the one who undergoes the action of the verb khrid ‘led’, is Rechung speaking in the first person, but this subject is not to be found in the