

The Tibetan Noun Final -s

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The hypothesis to be discussed in this paper is that final -s of some written Tibetan nouns is the relic of a "collective" ending, no longer productive at the time of the earliest known Tibetan texts. The main evidence for the original meaning of the ending is the existence of a series of doublets, each comprising a member with, and a member without the final -s. In most cases, the member without the -s includes the meaning "part", "piece", "individual", "unit", or "whole one"; while the member with the -s includes a meaning like "series", "set" or "totality".

1. rnam/rnams

The syllable rnam is usually found as part of the noun rnam-pa "section", "component", "unit", "part", etc. (also, "appearance"), but occurs as a word in itself in the sense of "individual". In this latter usage it operates as a virtually redundant classifier between a countable noun and its numeral.

In the bulk of the Tibetan literature, the syllable rnams is a noun particle, generally regarded as a plural marker. It could more accurately be described as a "definite plural" particle when following a single noun, meaning "(all) the ...-s"; or as a "collective" particle when following the last in a list nouns, meaning something like "all these". The individual nouns in the list may denote singular or plural referents.

In the earlier stratum of the literature, rnams also occurs as a noun, alongside its use as a particle, sometimes in the same text (e.g. Richardson, Zhva'i lha-khang inscription E26, 36).

Historically, one may postulate the stages in the development of rnams as: a) noun; b) noun and particle; c) particle. (Many Tibetan particles now in stage c) may have had a similar history. A modern example of a stage b) item is nanq "inside", which in older literature always seems to be a noun.)

The most obvious explanation of the graphic alternation -s in rnam/rnams is as the counterpart of a semantic opposition "singular" or "indefinite plural"/"definite plural" or "collective". It is not a simple singular/plural opposition, since rnam before numerals denotes a plural referent, while rnams may denote referents in a list which are themselves singular. rnams itself now fulfills the same function that I believe final -s performed at an earlier stage: a function whose traces may still be discerned in the examples below. (In recent years rnams has lost ground to the particle tsho. An interesting expression in modern colloquial Lhasa Tibetan is khved-rnam(s)-tsho "you (plural)". rnam(s) is no longer productive in this dialect, and has been fossilized in a few such lexemes, all referring to collectives, to the point where Tibetans disagree on its spelling.)

cha/chas

cha, like rnam-pa, means "part"; also "fraction", "share", "one of a ir", etc. As an element of longer nouns it often means "thing" (as in colloquial Lhasa Tibetan cha-lag "thing"): also "implement", "ornament", "item dress". (Also sometimes "appearance", as in cha-byad; compare rnam-pa).

chas is given in dictionaries as meaning "thing", "things", but I can find no sure example of its denoting a singular referent, even among the instances cited by dictionaries which translate it as "thing". Usually it implies a complete set or outfit of "things", particularly tools, implements or equipment for some specific occupation. Commonly it means "clothes", "personal effects" cf. bu-mo'i chas and English "women's things".

kham/khams

kham, (like bag and re to be discussed below) means "bit", "small piece"; Jeschke says "of anything", though all examples known to me refer to foodstuffs.

khams is glossed by rigs in Chos-grags, and translated as "classe", "série d'êtres", "espèce" by Desgodins (see No. 4 below).

khams also means "realm", "domain", "region". Although this example is not as convincing as most of the others, a "realm" could be thought of as the collection of its parts or "bits". The other meaning of khams, "element", might seem at first sight to contradict the "collective" hypothesis, but again the element (earth, air, fire, etc.) could be regarded as the collective expression of a set of diverse individual phenomena (what they have in common).

rig/rigs

rigs means "species", "race", "breed", "caste", "family". It is one of a number of words meaning some sort of "series", with both synchronic and diachronic dimensions, ably discussed by R.A. Stein.

One might hope to find a word *rig, meaning "individual"; "part" or the like. Jaeschke gives rig as a Ladakhi alternative to zhig "some", "one", "a bit" (compare re-zhig below). This could easily be no more than dialectal variation, but in view of the other examples discussed it seems worth mentioning as a possibility.

rab/rabs

A word sharing much of the same semantic field as rigs is rabs "race", "lineage", "kind", "chronological account", "story". I have noted only one example of an apparently "singular" rab, but it seems clear enough. It is in TD II, 141 6: ko-'gong rab drug, where rab drug seems to be equivalent to nam drug. Unfortunately the word ko-'gong is unknown. Thomas takes it to be a proper name, but this is by no means necessary in the context, and no such name is known elsewhere.

6. bag/bags

bag means "a bit", "a little", sometimes glossed as cung-zad (compare re-zhiq below). Not a very common word in this meaning, it seems to occur mostly in bag-tsam, as in such phrases as bag-tsam ma-lus-par (TLTD II, 97 A) "not a bit remaining", "totally". chos-grags also gives bag-re.

bags is rare, but known to some dictionaries in bags-kyis "progressively", "by degrees", "bit by bit". Interestingly, it is said by Das to be the same as rims-kyis (see below). A clear case occurs in Emmerick 141 where he translates it "one by one", and equates it with rim-gyis. The word bags-rim "series" occurs in a work by Klong-chen-pa (p. 576; see list of works cited).

7. rim/rims

rim occurs most commonly in rim-pa "stage", "degree", "position" etc.; also in other combinations such as rim gcig "once". In the bulk of the literature rim seems indifferently singular or collective; rim-pa meaning "series", and rim-pas or rim-gyis "by degrees".

There are however some occurrences, particularly in the earlier literature, of a syllable rims with a collective sense. As noted above, Das glosses bags-kyis by rims-kyis, although given the general reliability of his dictionary on points of spelling, perhaps not too much weight should be placed on this. He also quotes an etymology of rims-nad "epidemic" from the Man-ngag rgyud: rim-gyis 'gos-pa'i phyir (i.e. something like "progressive" disease). Again, this could be just etymological guesswork.

Genuine cases of rims include the following: a) go-rims, Emmerick 113, "sequence" (=Sanskrit krama, Suv.); b) go-rims, dPa'bo 36r, "sequence", "order": bran-mos phrin-gi go-rims nor-ste, "the serving maid got the order of the message wrong"; c) stod-rims, Emmerick, "upper ranks" (better than his alternative "respectfully" - see also cases of stod-rims referred to in TLTD III, 139)); d) so-rims, TLTD II, 260, "roster of soldiers" (= so-res).

8. re/res

re means "one", "single", "a bit", "some", etc., often occurring in re-zhiq, "something", "a while". Like bag it is glossed by cung-zad.

The most usual meaning of res is "turn" or "turns". It is used mainly with a collective or plural meaning, in such expressions as res-kyis "by turns" (compare rims-kyis and bags-kyis, "by degrees"), "every time"; res-'ga' "sometimes", and even alone to mean "at times" (= mtshams-mtshams Das). From the Tun-huang documents we have so-res = so-rims "roster of soldiers". It does seem possible to use res in the singular, but even then a single turn at least implies the existence of a whole series of turns.

9. ling/lings

ling-pa means "piece"; it "often" = rnam-pa (Das). Like rnam, ling is used without the -pa before numerals, e.g. ling bzhi "four parts" (usually of an animal carcass). It is also used to mean "bundle" or "single package", e.g. ling skyur-du phob-pas "throwing down my bundle" (Milarepa 57); ling-gis 'dril-ba "to pack up into a parcel" (Jaeschke).

lings is given by the dictionaries as "hunt". However, it is not just any sort of hunt, but one "in which a number of people are engaged" (Jaeschke). According to Chos-grags it is a hunt in which the game is surrounded by the hunters - a sort of "round-up".

Chos-grags also glosses lings-kyis by thams-cad "all", "total" (see below). Admittedly he gives the same meaning for ling-gis, but as we have seen Jaeschke has an alternative and perhaps more correct meaning for this.

1. tham/thams; theb/thebs; them/thems

These three pairs are treated together as there seems to be some etymological relationship and/or mutual contamination among them.

The three members with final -s have clearly collective meanings. thams occurs in thams-cad "all", "total"; thebs means "series", "order", "succession"; while thems-pa and thems-tshang according to Chos-grags mean "complete set" (gang-tshang, 'gye-grangs tshang-ba).

theb, according to Jaeschke, is a variant of them which he gives in the verbal form them-pa "to be full, complete". This would seem to link it with tham "complete", "one whole ..." in such expressions as bcu tham-pa "ten". them also occurs, however, in them-pa, "threshold", them-skas "stairs", and, more relevantly, them-rim "step", "rung", "rank".

Although the meaning of "full", "complete" might seem to contradict the hypothesis of singularity, this is not necessarily the case. A whole unit or entity may be a subdivision of a large totality. A good parallel in Tibetan is the word gang "whole", "all" which when used with units of mensuration often means "one" (in the sense of "one whole ..."). Thus bcu tham-pa could be thought of as meaning "one (group of) ten". On the other hand there may be implications here of derivation from verbs, as there is a verb 'tham "to join, unite". It might be better to reserve judgement on theb/thebs and tham/thams, if them(-rim)/thems(-pa) seems clear enough.

. gzhi/gzhis

gzhi means "ground", "basis", usually in a figurative or abstract sense, though it occurs in sa-gzhi "territory", "site" as well as in a few other more concrete terms.

gzhis occurs mostly in gzhis-ka "estate"; an essentially legal term meaning all the land and associated property comprising an inheritable and usually inseparable whole.

There are many other nouns with final -s which could be adduced in support of my present hypothesis, but their value as evidence would be weaker, either because of the lack of a "singular" counterpart (e.g. yongs "total", "all"), or because of possible confusion with the well-known verb final -s which often seem to have had a "past" or "perfective" function (e.g. mang/mangs/dmangs - compare the verb mang/mangs). No doubt "collective" final -s is only one of several -s endings which have been attached to nouns at various stages in the history of the language. Benedict, for example, (p. 176) has pointed to a final -s on words claimed to have been borrowed from Austro-Thai (e.g. phyugus "attle" - incidentally collective/plural in literary Tibetan, though can be singular in spoken dialects). I confine myself here to the observation that the vast majority of nouns with -s have referents which are either abstract (byings "space", "sphere"; dbyangs "melody"), non-countable (gros "counsel"; yags "provisions"), or concrete objects which are yet not precisely