

IN DEFENSE OF KAMARUPAN

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For some time now I have been using the term *Kamarupan* as a collective rubric for the dozens of Tibeto-Burman languages of Northeast India and adjacent areas of Western Burma,¹ Bangladesh, and Tibet (see, e.g. JAM 1991). This is the center of linguistic diversity of the whole TB family, including subnuclei of languages that have been grouped into Kuki-Chin-Naga, Bodo-Garo (Barish), Mirish (Abor-Miri-Dafla), as well as several languages which cannot so far be classified (e.g. Meithei, Mikir, Mru, Sulong). This vast region has also been home to speakers of Tai (Ahom, Thai Khamti), Austroasiatic (Khasi, Santali), and Indo-Aryan languages, creating an ethnic and linguistic mosaic with a complicated history.²

Objections to *Kamarupan* have come from several quarters recently. Rob Burling (*LTBA*, this issue) praises my admission of ignorance over the subgrouping of the dozens of languages of the region, and seems to recognize the necessity of a term to refer to them collectively, but cannot accept "Kamarupan", on both geographical and sociopolitical grounds. At the present day, Burling points out, "Kamrup" now properly refers only to the Indo-Aryan speaking area in the Brahmaputra Valley, especially around Gauhati. To generalize the term, he feels, would make a lot of minority peoples unhappy. "Kamrup means this single district, not the whole of Assam, let alone the whole of Northeastern India". Burling goes on to claim that "we do not use geographically defined terms for the TB languages of Burma, China, or Nepal, and I see no reason for such a term for Northeastern India." Furthermore, my use of *Kamarupan* is but another example of the "presumptuousness" of outsiders in giving names to other people's languages and language groups.

François Jacquesson echoes these arguments in an entertaining personal communication (July 1999), intended "to support Robbins Burling's opinion that *Kamarupan* as a language group label means nothing... *Kamarupan* is only the dream of a Mogol..." Jacquesson explains that "In the whole history of

¹ I see no point in linguists adopting the politically incorrect neonym Myanmar for this country. What would we call the language: Myanmarese? What becomes of Burmese-Lolo, or Lolo-Burmese? See Bradley's suggestion "Mran-Ni" (1995).

² For authoritative accounts of "Assamese" history, see, e.g. Gait 1926, Barbarua 1968, Basu 1970, Barua 1973.

northeastern India, Kāmarūpa never was what we call Assam . . . Kāmarūpa is a rather old term in the literature describing the westernmost province of what is now Assam and the eastern part of West Bengal... Upper Assam was never *Kamarupa* in any case . . . No Assamese would tell you that Kamrup is the whole of Assam. Far from it . . .” Jacquesson adds that Kamrup is the part of Lower Assam which is linked with a certain temple dedicated to “Kāmakhya, the god of Lust, a kind of discreet Priapus”, located on the Nilachal (“Blue Hill”) near Gauhati. “This is Kamrup for Assamese people. It is a well-known name and part of Lower Assam, with difficult borders; it was...the most difficult part to conquer for the Ahom power, because it was so far downstream; but of course for this very reason it was the first one to be invaded by the Mogols, who came from the west. This is why the name remained among the short-sighted Mogols...as a shorthand for Assam itself . . .”

Finally, George van Driem (1998:50) weighs in on this question: “In addition to its vagueness, the term Kāmarūpan could be regarded as objectionable. The name is evidently taken from the mediaeval Hindu kingdom Kāmarūpa, which flourished from the fourth to thirteenth century in what today is Assam, with its capital Prāgjyotisapura near present-day Gauhati (Guvāhātī). Although a colourful name, Kāmarūpan is an inappropriate label for two reasons: Most of the languages of the group are spoken outside of the territory of the ancient kingdom of Kāmarūpa. Secondly, the name alludes neither to the indigenous Tibeto-Burman peoples of the area, nor to their cultures, but celebrates the colonization of the Brahmapūtra fluvial plains by an Aryan elite and their continuing socio-economic, political and cultural domination over the native Tibeto-Burman peoples of the region...”³

Before attempting to respond to all this, let me just say that I am not exactly insensitive to problems of TB linguistic nomenclature, and have introduced a set of terms for discussing them more precisely, that seem to have acquired wide acceptance.⁴

Let us take the geographical arguments first. It is a commonplace that ethno-/glossonyms are not all of the same level of generality. Some are used as higher-order taxonomic terms, or loosely for a whole group of culturally and/or genetically close languages. The reasons for the success of such names are probably of two sorts. Either outgroup people can’t be bothered to make fine distinctions among different groups perceived to be interchangeable in their inferiority; or else a certain name has gained more prestige than others in its

³ In this 1998 article, van Driem does credit me with coining *Kamarupan*, unlike in “Sino-Bodic” (1997:463) where he puts it into a family tree without attribution, as a kind of synonym for Burling’s “Sal” group (see below).

⁴ See especially JAM 1986, 1995, where I introduced terms like *autonym*, *exonym*, *paleonym*, *neonym*, *loconym*.

region, so that smaller or more marginal groups are pleased to be called by the more general name (e.g. Naga, Kham, Kachin/Jingpho). Two "Old Kuki" tribes, the Lamkang and the Moyon-Monshang, call themselves "Nagas" to outsiders who ask (Marrison 1967:387, 392). The members of the Bhuda, Gharti, Pun, and Rokha subtribes, who speak "Kham", call themselves "Magars", a tribe of recognized ancient standing in West Nepal. This name was adopted not only by Kham speakers but also by other ethnic communities belonging to the Tamang-Gurung-Thakali group, e.g. the Chantyal Magars and the Tarali Magars (Watters 1975:72). The Maru, Atsi (=Zaiwa), and Lashi (along with even smaller groups like the Bola and Hpun) consider themselves to be "Kachin" or "Jingpho" in the broad sense, and on this the Jingpho themselves seem to agree. The Chinese also accept this, and treat Maru and Zaiwa as "languages of the Jingpho nationality" (e.g. *Jǐngpō-zú Zàiwǎ-yǔ*), along with Jingpho itself (JAM 1995:ix-xvi; Dai Qingxia (this issue).

I have deliberately expanded the scope of *Kamarupan*, even beyond the wildest dreams of any Moghul or Ahom prince. To observe that "Kamrup means this single district, not the whole of Assam, let alone the whole of Northeastern India" is quite beside the point.⁵ My use of Kamarupan is abstract and neutral, so broad that it could never be confused with any political reality. It is meant to cover not only the TB languages of NE India (spoken in the modern states of Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Assam, Nagaland, Mizoram, Tripura, Manipur), but also those spoken over wide swaths of territory in adjacent areas of Burma⁶ and Bangladesh, and even in corners of Tibet.⁷ As indicated above, these include not only the vast and unruly complex of languages lumped together as Kuki-Chin-Naga, the more uniform languages of the Bodo-Garo group, and the heterogeneous and aberrant Mirish languages of Arunachal Pradesh, but several other important languages which have yet to be

⁵ It should of course be pointed out that there is nothing geographically, linguistically or ethnically constant or pure about the name *Assam* itself. Even though Assamese is an Indo-Aryan language, the name "Assam" is itself of Tai origin, and is in fact an allofam of other Tai ethno-/glossonyms like *Ahom*, *Shan*, *Siam*. Incidentally, the Ahom name for Assam was *Mungdunsun Kham* "country full of golden gardens" (Basu 1970:4).

⁶ Western Burma remains a virtual terra incognita to outside scholars. Many of the TB languages of this region were studied by A. Weidert (see Weidert 1987), though unfortunately most of the material he collected has been lost.

⁷ As always there is no one-to-one correlation between political and linguistic divisions. Examples may be multiplied at will: Lushai (the preferred neonym is Mizo) of the Indian state of Mizoram is a member of the Central Chin group, most other members of which are spoken in the Chin Hills of Burma; Kokborok is spoken both in Tripura and in Bangladesh, etc.

convincingly subgrouped, including Sulong (A.P.), Mikir (Meghalaya), Meithei (Manipur),⁸ and Mru (Arakan, Bangladesh).

It is hard to see what Burling means when he claims that "we do not use geographically defined terms for the TB languages of Burma, China, or Nepal." *Himalayish* (as a subgroup of TB) is exactly such a geographically defined term. With another suffix, *Himalayan* is often used to refer to all the languages of the region, whether TB or Indo-Aryan. In its usage for a subgroup of TB, *Himalayish* is no more precise or less vague than *Kamarupan*. There is nobody trying to reconstruct anything remotely like a "Proto-Himalayish" at the moment, any more than there is anyone daring to attempt a "Proto-Kamarupan". What one has in both of these great linguistic agglomerates is a congeries of locally reconstructible sub-families like (in the Nepal case) "Tamangic" or "Tamang-Gurung-Thakali-Manang" in W. Central Nepal, and Rai (=Kiranti) of W. Nepal, along with many individual languages that have resisted classification (Newar, Sunwar, Magar, Kham), living cheek-by-jowl with Indo-Aryan languages, especially Nepali.

And what is the suggested term "Western Tibeto-Burman" (favored, e.g. by Bradley 1994 and adopted by van Driem 1997) if not geographical? It is misleading as well, since the westernmost TB languages (Shafer's "West Himalayish" group spoken in regions like Uttar Pradesh)⁹ have little similarity to the languages of NE India and adjacent regions.

Passing on to the sociolinguistic aspects of the question, I must take a bit of umbrage at Burling's charge of "presumptuousness" in giving a name to other people's languages and language groups. After all, wasn't it Burling himself who coined the lovely term "the Sal languages" (1983) to comprise a genetic grouping of Northern Naga (Konyak), Bodo-Garo, and Jingpho?¹⁰ One can hardly imagine all the speakers of these languages suddenly agreeing to call themselves Salians. Still less can one imagine Rob Burling, skilled anthropologist that he is, attempting to cram such a name down their throats.

⁸ Until very recently linguist native speakers of this language preferred the name Meitei (Mitei, Meithei, Meitheiron) for this language, but apparently they are now required by the government to call it Manipuri, a geographical designation. Cf. the Cumulative Index of LTBA for references to the following articles: Chelliah 1990 (2 articles); C.Y. Singh 1989, 1991, 1995, 1998; W.R. Singh 1989; Thoudam 1979, 1982, 1989.

⁹ A very recent new source of data on these remote languages is Sharma and Krishan (LaPolla ed.) 2000.

¹⁰ This grouping was based on certain lexical commonalities including the root *sal 'sun', otherwise unattested in TB. These similarities were noted as far back as the *Linguistic Survey of India* (Grierson and Konow, eds. 1903-28), where they were lumped implicitly into a "Bodo-Naga-Kachin" phylum. The names of the still controversial American Indian superfamilies proposed by A. Kroeber, *Hokan* and *Penutian*, are similarly based on individual lexical items, in this case the numeral TWO: *hok* or *hwak* in Hokan languages, vs. *pen* or *uti* in Penutian (pers. comm., Leanne Hinton).