

## LEPCHA ORTHOGRAPHY: AN EARLIER AND A LATER STAGE

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It is remarkable that the language of the Lepchas, with only 34,894 speakers recorded for it in 1909, “roughly estimated as follows: – Sikkim...25,000; Darjeeling...9,894” (*Linguistic survey of India* III/1 p.233), when Nepali was just beginning to oust the numerous tribal languages of Sikkim and eastern Nepal, should be so prominent in Sino-Tibetan reconstruction; but both Bodman (1980, 1988) and Chang and Chang (1975) have made quite wide use of Lepcha cognates. Indeed, Chang and Chang (1975:398) declare that “the frequent usefulness of comparisons with Lepcha will be apparent in our discussions below”. One of Bodman’s (1980:73) examples, “*ta-rók* ‘six’, Tibetan *drug*, Chinese \*C-rùk”, appears in §2.2.1 below. Where romanised, all my Lepcha examples are in accordance with Mainwaring (1876), though with slight modifications, including those cited from Grünwedel’s editing of Mainwaring (1898).

It is because of this fairly wide use of Lepcha in Tibeto-Burman and Sino-Tibetan reconstruction that I consider variation in Lepcha spelling to be important. If Lepcha cognates are to be reliable for this purpose, inconsistencies in spelling need to be accounted for; otherwise they are liable to cause confusion to specialists in this field.

The Lepcha language is also remarkable for having a script of its own, a distinction that it shares with only two other languages of the Himalayas, Newari and Limbu (see Sprigg 1983:306-308 and Sprigg 1986:27-29). The Lepcha script, it has been claimed, was devised by the third Rajah of Sikkim, Chador Namgyal (1700–1717) (Risley 1894:13). If this account of its origin is correct, the script had been in existence for at least a hundred years by the time that the two earliest datable texts known to me were written; they are eyewitness accounts of the murder of the Lepcha Prime Minister of Sikkim, in 1826 (Risley 1894:19), and together form item 190 in the Foreign Department’s ‘Persian’ section of the National Archive, Delhi, dated 14 April 1828. The one I have cited in this article, as item (i), is headed *gyá-mú-nun shu* ‘submitted by Gyamu’. Twenty-one years later, in 1849, came a short statement of accounts, which I have published in Sprigg (1983); this is my source (ii). The next sources that I have used are printed: Colonel (later General) G.B. Mainwaring’s grammar (Mainwaring 1876) and his dictionary (Mainwaring 1898). These two sources, (iii)

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and (iv), are approximately one hundred years old. Finally, as a contemporary source, my source (v), I have drawn on my typescript copy of Tamsang (1994).

The interesting thing for me about these five sources, jointly extending over a period of 165 years, is that the later sources show fairly systematic differences in spelling from the earlier sources. I interpret these differences as evidence of a move away from a Tibetan model at an earlier stage of the language's orthography towards a later stage in which the model is closer to the Devanagari script, used for Hindustani and Nepali.

Since space is limited, it is necessary to keep comments on the fifteen types of variation to the minimum, and let the chronological order of the change, (i) 1828, (ii) 1849, (iii) 1876, (iv) 1898, and (v) 1994, speak for itself.

# 1. FINAL VOWEL ([ə:]); CHANGE FROM -a TO -â

I have used the circumflex to romanise "a sort of circumflex...called *rân*" (Mainwaring 1876:5), which Grünwedel has accounted for as a loan word from Tibetan, *sgron* 'cover, lay over, adorn':

	issue	cause to issue	know	date	pool	warm	certain	hand
i.	<i>pla</i>	<i>plya</i>	<i>ya</i>					
ii.				<i>tsha</i>	<i>da</i>			
iii.	<i>pla</i>		<i>ya/yâ</i>		<i>da</i>	'â	<i>nga</i>	('â-) <i>ka/kâ</i>
iv.	<i>pla</i>	<i>plya</i>	<i>ya/yâ</i>	<i>tsha</i>	<i>da</i>	'a'â	<i>nga/ngâ</i>	('â-) <i>ka/kâ</i>
v.	<i>plâ</i>	<i>plyâ</i>	<i>yâ</i>	<i>tshâ</i>	<i>dâ</i>	'a		<i>ka</i>

## 1.1 GRAMMATOLOGY AND THE SYMBOLS FOR -a AND -â

The above examples show a close relationship between the -a spelling and the -â spelling for these vowel-final lexical items, so close that one spelling can easily develop into the other; but from the point of view of grammatological categories the two types of spelling are very different: the -â type of spelling, as in *yâ* 𑄧 'know', for example, is alphabetic; and the two sounds have their own separate symbols, the syllabic vowel sound ([ə:]) being symbolised by the circumflex-like superscript symbol *rân*. The -a spellings, on the other hand, are diphonic; and the two sounds of *ya* 𑄧 'know' have a single symbol; so both the initial sound and its following syllabic vowel sound ([ə:]) share this symbol.

In Lepcha it is only that single syllabic-vowel unit, pronounced [ə:], that is (or used to be in 1828 and 1849) symbolised diphonically, the other syllabic vowel units having each its own alphabetic symbol; Japanese, on the other hand, makes much wider use of the diphonic category, for all five syllabic vowels, in forty out of the fifty members of the *gojuu on*; for example *ka*, *ki*, *ku*, *ke*, *ko*, *ya*, *yu*, *yo*, *wa*, *wo*, leaving only *a* and *o*, *u*, and the various forms of *i* and *e*, and the final consonant -*n* to monophonic symbolisation.

The example *ya* or *yâ*  $\varepsilon/\tilde{\varepsilon}$  'know' in the above table, like a number of other verbal items that have a vowel-final root, has an inflected form in *-m*, for example *yâm-bo*  $\tilde{\varepsilon}$  to 'one acquainted with'; cf. also *á-âm* 'warmth' (Mainwaring 1876:100, 111), *plâm-bo* 'going forth', *plyâm kón* 'let it issue' (Mainwaring 1898:228). These inflected forms are consonant-final ([ə:m]) and, as such, are invariably spelt with the *rân* vowel symbol. Possibly this obligatory spelling *-âm*, with the *rân* symbol, for these consonant-final inflected forms made it easier for this same alphabetic spelling to spread to their corresponding root forms, helping to promote the change from *-a* to *-â*.

## 2. FINAL CONSONANT ([*-am/p/t/n/r/l*; *-ɲk/ŋ*; *-ɛm/p/t/n/r/l*])

### 2.1 FINAL [*-am/p/t/n/r/l*]; CHANGE FROM *-am/p/t/n/r/l* TO *ám/p/t/n/r/l*

#### 2.1.1 [*-am*]; CHANGE FROM *-am* TO *-ám*

	three	-ing	altogether	Lingdam (?slope crown)
i.	<i>sam/sám</i>	<i>-bam/bám</i>		
ii.	<i>sam/sám</i>		<i>gun-jam</i>	<i>líng-dam</i>
iii.	<i>sám</i>	<i>-bám</i>		
iv.	<i>sam/sám</i>	<i>-bam/bám</i>	<i>gun-jám</i>	<i>dám</i>
v.	<i>sám</i>	<i>-bám</i>	<i>gun-jám</i>	<i>dám</i>

#### 2.1.2 [*-ap*]; CHANGE FROM *-ap* TO *-áp*

	-teen	bury	noose-trap	short	knock together
ii.	<i>thap</i>				
iii.	<i>tháp</i>	<i>lap</i>			
iv.	<i>tháp</i>	<i>lap/láp</i>	<i>tap/táp</i>	<i>map</i>	<i>bap/báp</i>
v.	<i>tháp</i>	<i>láp</i>	<i>táp</i>		<i>báp</i>

#### 2.1.3 [*-at*]; CHANGE FROM *-at* TO *-át* (BUT IN SOME WORDS *-ât*)

	prime minister	blow	earth	mouldy	copulate
i.	<i>sháng-zat</i>				
iii.		<i>mat</i>	<i>fat</i>		
iv.	<i>chóng/chang-zât</i>	<i>mat/mut</i>	<i>fat/fát</i>	<i>mat/mát</i>	'at/'át
v.	<i>cháng-zât</i>	<i>mát</i>	<i>fát</i>	<i>mát</i>	'át

## 2.1.4 [-an]; CHANGE FROM -an TO -án

	having	burn	drink (n.)	watcher	warm
i.	-bán				
iii.	-bán/ban	fan	'á-than	ran-bo	
iv.	-ban/bán	fan/fán	'á-than	ran-bo	'an
v.	-bán	fán	('á-thóng)	(róng-bú)	'án

## 2.1.5 [-ar]; CHANGE FROM -ar TO -ár (BUT IN SOME WORDS -âr)

	therefore	price	rust	rotten	prosper
i.	'ar-nun				
ii.		far/fár			
iii.	'âr-nun	fár			
iv.	'âr-nun	fár	far/fár	sar/sár/ser	tar/tár
v.	'âr-nun	fár	fár		tár

## 2.1.6 [-al]; CHANGE FROM -al TO -ál

	new	dibble	tomorrow	fall off
iii.	'al	mal	lúk-kal	
iv.	'al/'ál	mál	lúk-kal	fal/fál
v.	'ál	mál	lúk-kál	

## 2.2 FINAL [-ɒk/ŋ]; CHANGE FROM -ak/ng TO -ók/ng

## 2.2.1 [-ɒk]; CHANGE FROM -ak TO -ók

	seven	six	pour	target	stomach	hurt	befall
ii.	ka-kyak	ta-rak					
iii.	ka-kyak	ta-rak	lak	mak	ta-bak	dak	zak
iv.	ka-kyak	ta-rak	lak	mak	ta-bak	dak	zak
v.	ka-kyók	ta-rók	lók	mók	ta-bók	dók	zók

## 2.2.2 [-ɒŋ]; CHANGE FROM -ang (nyín-dó) TO -óng

	now	upon	stone	Lepcha	tiger
i.	'á-lang				
iii.	'á-lang	'á-plang	lang	róng	sa-thang
iv.	'á-lang	'á-plang	lang	róng/rang	sa-thang/thóng
v.	'á-lóng	'á-plóng	lang	róng	sa-thóng