

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).

I would even contend that outsiders might often have a certain objectivity in nomenclatural matters that people too close to the situation might lack. After all, it is hardwired into human nature to have chauvinistic feelings toward one's own language, so connected to one's innermost identity. This can be seen in cases where a language group is known by two hyphenated names. I vividly remember a talk by a Cambodian scholar at one of the early Sino-Tibetan Conferences, the whole point of which was that the term *Mon-Khmer* should be abandoned in favor of *Khmer-Mon*, since the Khmer are so much more important than the Mon. Further afield, in the Balkans, the Novy Sad agreement of 1954 formally sanctioned the use of either *Srpsko-Hrvatski* or *Hrvatsko-Srpski* as a language name, and in 1967 Croatian was declared to be a separate language from Serbian, with many bad consequences.¹¹ German scholars have always referred to Indo-European in a rather proprietary way as *Indo-Germanisch*.¹²

Nothing in fact is more unstable than the political correctness of glossonyms, loconyms,¹³ and ethnonyms, including their orthographic representations. We have lived through a period when spellings like *Kampuchea* and *Amerika* were favored by the American left. *Pilipino* is now preferred to *Tagalog* as a language name, even though most inhabitants of the Philippines do not speak *Tagalog* natively.¹⁴ The term *Oriental* is now very much on the run in the U.S., since it is viewed in many quarters as hopelessly "retro" and chauvinistic.¹⁵ (The Berkeley Oriental Languages Department, of which I have fond memories from my student days, changed its name several years ago to "East Asian Languages and Cultures".) "Oriental" is in fact a prime example of those terms of variable scope mentioned above. It has been used in

¹¹ Personal communication, Ronelle Alexander.

¹² It would be interesting to find out whether most Germans realize that they are called by several different names in the various European languages, which have generalized the names of particular Germanic tribes (e.g. the Alemanni > Fr. Allemands) to the entire nation-state. The English cognate of the German autonym, *Deutsch*, is of course applied to a different nation-state, the Netherlands.

¹³ Changing a place-name is a sure symbol of political victory (Saigon > Ho Chi Minh City; St. Petersburg > Leningrad > St. Petersburg; Santo Domingo > Ciudad Trujillo > Santo Domingo; Leopoldville > Kinshasa, etc.), or throwing off the vestiges of colonialism (Bombay > Mumbai, Rangoon > Yangon, etc.). The Dutch seem never to have forgiven us for switching from New Amsterdam to New York.

¹⁴ Strangely enough, there seems never to have been a movement to change the name of the country itself, even though it was named in 1542 for a Spanish prince, later Philip II of Spain, and even though its initial consonant /f/ is lacking in Philippine languages.

¹⁵ This must seem strange, e.g. to the French, for whom *oriental* is a perfectly normal word. I am not aware of any movement by the University of Paris to sanitize the name of its *Faculté des Langues Orientales*, familiarly known as *Les Langues O*. But one wonders how long JAOS will be able to hold out, or London's *School of Oriental and African Studies*.

a broad sense to designate “everything east of Suez”, as by the venerable *Journal of the American Oriental Society* (JAOS), which publishes articles mostly on the “Near East” and South Asia. For some people, “Oriental” is applied only to the “Far East”. For many, “Near East” and “Far East” are also objectionable for their Europocentrism, and it seems safer to operate with purely geographic continental terms like Northwest Asia, Northeast Asia, South Asia, etc. The term “Indo-China” is now in severe disrepute, since it has colonialist connotations, and implies that all of Southeast Asian culture derives from India and China.

The designation “Lolo” is now felt to be pejorative in China, with the preferred term now being Yi, written with the anodyne character 彝 *yí* ‘sacrificial wine vessel’. Few people bother to remember that this is merely a graphic substitution of one homophonous character for another, the original having been 夷 *yí* ‘barbarian’.¹⁶

Ethno-/loco-/glossonyms are assigned on a totally irrational basis; they shift their connotations and their scope constantly; and paradoxically some of the most absurd “misnomers” turn out to be the most durable. We need only think of the “American Indians”. In fact it is only by the grace of God that we are not called Vespuccians instead of Americans!¹⁷

I am not persuaded by either the geographical or the sociolinguistic objections that have been raised to *Kamarupan*. Surely it is going a bit too far to maintain, with van Driem, that *Kamarupan* calls up dire images of “the colonization of the Brahmapūtra fluvial plains by an Aryan lelite and their continuing socio-economic, political and cultural domination over the native Tibeto-Burman peoples of the region.” Scholars should steer a middle course between nomenclatural insensitivity and hypersensitivity.¹⁸ If anything,

¹⁶ By the way, it is striking that the major TB subgroup to which Loloish (or Yi) belongs has already been called by at least five different hyphenated names by the handful of scholars who have been working on them: Burmese-Lolo, Lolo-Burmese, Yi-Burmese, Burmese-Yipho, Mran-Ni.

¹⁷ As every schoolboy knows, the Western Hemisphere owes its continental names to the Italian navigator Amerigo Vespucci (1451-1512).

¹⁸ Hypersensitivity can extend even to bound morphemes. I have seen objections to the suffix *-ish*, in ethnic adjectives like *Jewish*, since *-ish* is also used rather pejoratively with approximative adjectives (*bluish*, *youngish*); but surely this is silly, in view of, e.g. *English*! Similar criticism has been levelled at the suffix *-ese*, which I have heard characterized as “only applied to peoples, usually Asian, whom one dislikes” (cf. words referring to specially limited varieties of language like *journalese*, *motherese*). Actually the only such suffix that I personally feel to be mildly pejorative is the *-iard* in *Spaniard*, which makes one think of French words like *clochard* ‘bum’, *richard* ‘moneybags’, *mouchard* ‘stool-pigeon’. Recently there has been a movement to ban the Indo-Aryan suffix *-i* from the names of the TB languages of Nepal (e.g. Newar, Magar, Sunwar, instead of Newari, Magari, Sunwari) in order to distinguish them from IA languages like Nepali, Maithili. (Interestingly enough, *Newar* and *Nepal* come from the same root.)

Kamarupan should raise a nostalgic smile. It is hard to think it is still (or was ever) seen as a term of oppression by the TB population. There is little reason, by the way, to think that the Tibeto-Burmans are more "native" to this part of the world than several other groups.

An actual resident of the part of India in question, Dr. Dipankar Moral, has an interesting typological perspective on all this. Dr. Moral is an ethnically Assamese linguist who is a specialist in Bodo-Garo. He likes *Kamarupan*, and would even extend it to all the languages of the area, regardless of whether they are Indo-Aryan or Tibeto-Burman: "As for your query about *Kamarupan*, I must say there is nothing wrong in using this word to refer to the TB languages of this area. However, I feel that *Kamarupan* should include all the languages spoken in the Brahmaputra valley since recorded history. The earlier name of Assam was *Kāmarūpa* and it referred to the entire stretch that extended from the Dhubri district to the Dibrugarh district of modern Assam. The present name came into being with the entry of the Tai Ahoms into this part of the world in the 13th century. Xuan Zang's travelogue in the 7th c. A.D. has a reference to Kamarupa where he opined that the languages of Kamarupa differ from that of mid-India, indicating even at that early date some kind of a different linguistic area in this region. This is true because large scale diffusion has been taking place between Asamiya and the TB languages of the area for several centuries, resulting in a Tibeto-Burmanisation of Asamiya and Indo-Aryanisation of the TB languages of the Brahmaputra Valley. The resultant typological characteristics of the languages of this valley have yet to be studied in detail... From an academic point of view your choice of *Kamarupan* should not create any confusion. I feel this will begin a new chapter in the typological study of the languages of the Brahmaputra Valley and their reconstruction..." And again, "I cannot constantly help thinking how apt your coinage of the term *Kamarupan* will be to collectively name these languages and lump them typologically together."¹⁹

What are the alternatives to *Kamarupan*? *Western Tibeto-Burman* is colorless, too inclusive, and misleading. Burling suggests "the accurate, though admittedly awkward, expression '*the TB languages of Northeastern India*' ." Awkward indeed, but it is actually worse than that! As emphasized above, it is not just Northeast India that is meant to be covered by *Kamarupan*, but also vast tracts of Burma, Bangladesh, etc. as well. Perhaps we should amend Burling's suggestion to "the TB languages of Northeastern India and adjacent areas". That has a real swing to it!^{20/21}

¹⁹ Personal communications, 29 August and 6 October, 1999.

²⁰ During the brief period when Egypt and Syria were joined as the "United Arab Republic" (ca. 1958-61), some wag writing for *Time* Magazine paraphrased the famous line in *Antony*

While no term will satisfy everybody, I am sticking with *Kamarupan*, with a good conscience, for a number of additional reasons:

•*Kamarupa* is esthetically pleasing, evoking a nice Sanskrit folk etymology: *Form (rūpa) of Love (kāma)*. It is easily pronounceable, even in Japanese.

•It is no vaguer than *Himalayish*, the other catchall term for an internally diverse TB phylum. A couple of branches of TB already have Sinospheric Chinese names: *Baic* and *Qiangic*. Why can't we have a couple of Indospheric ones as well: *Himalayish* and *Kamarupan*?²²

•As both Jacquesson and Moral point out, the name *Kamarupa* is of considerable antiquity, since it appears in the the travel memoirs of the famous Tang Dynasty pilgrim **Xuan Zang** (ca. 630 A.D.), where it is called **Kamolupo**.

•*Kamarupan* has already achieved a certain currency. For one thing, it is already enshrined in the labyrinthine relational databases of STEDT, and it would be pointless and laborious to try to change it now, even if there were a better alternative. Too frequent name-changing serves no purpose, and only leads to more confusion.²³

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and *Cleopatra* (Act IV, Scene 16), uttered as Mark Antony is expiring in Cleopatra's arms, "I am dying, Egypt, dying!", as "I am dying, Southern Region of the United Arab Republic, dying!"

²¹ A similar jawbreaker is the name adopted in the U.N. for Macedonia, in order to avoid offending Greece: "The-Former-Yugoslav-Republic-of-Macedonia".

²² For the terms *Sinosphere* and *Indosphere*, see JAM 1990.

²³ Of course everybody would like to name a new subgroup, or rename an old one, an itch I have called "neosubgroupitis" (JAM 1999). It is indeed a joy when a new subgroup has been validated by the marshalling of conclusive evidence, as e.g. by J. Sun 1993, who demonstrated the validity of a "Tani" nucleus as a subpart of Mirish.

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