

On first looking into Paul K. Benedict's SINO-TIBETAN

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That there is a link between Mon Khmer and Tibeto-Burman is sufficiently well established, and documented, to require no further debate. Anthropologists who have worked in the "Tribal Belt" stretching from Northeast India to Myanmar and beyond have remarked on the close affinity between these language families.

Northeast India is, perhaps, peculiarly situated in that today one finds a Mon-Khmer speech form existing in isolation among groups belonging to the Tibeto-Burman language family, a later-generation kin as it were, and Tai, a close neighbour. This is Khasi which is spoken in its various forms in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills of the State of Meghalaya. A cursory look at the map of Northeast India will show how isolated actually Khasi is. To the immediate west is Garo Hills whose inhabitants are of Tibeto-Burman stock. Similarly, its closest neighbour to the east - the North Cachar Hills. Farther afield, in the hills bordering Assam from Arunachal Pradesh through Nagaland, Manipur and Tripura, all the hill tribes belong to the Tibeto-Burman stock.

It is conceivable that the Khasis were pushed into their present corner by the inroads of the more numerous Tibeto-Burman immigrants from the east and it is also conceivable that here in the present habitat they were determined to make a stand and succeeded. The factors that contributed to this success were not only the impenetrable forests surrounding the central highlands in that period but, perhaps more likely, the deadly diseases that were endemic to that area until very recent times. True, trickles of Tibeto-Burman elements represented by the Mikirs penetrated that deadly belt and succeeded in entering the Khasi language area.

This assumption is sustainable when we discover the extent to which Khasi has otherwise been able to hold its own against the onslaughts of its new neighbours. Mutual influences in course of time could have taken place, but the virility displayed by Khasi in the late historical period helped it to develop according to its own genius.

An initially casual scrutiny on my part of the Appendix on Tibeto-Burman roots in Dr. Benedict's *Sino-Tibetan* quickly engendered a more active interest, chiefly because of the comparatively large number of roots which find recognizably matching items in Khasi.

There is, admittedly, a danger in looking too much into resemblances in form in the glossaries of disparate language forms. On the other hand, to ignore

them and discount the possibility of their having a common origin may well defeat the interests of scholarship. The danger is greater possibly in regard to monosyllabic forms which may turn out to be no more than fortuitous coincidences. When, however, the number of items selected for comparison show a high degree of agreement, the likelihood of coincidence may reasonably be set aside until a more plausible explanation can be offered. When again these are supplemented by items of more than one syllable, chance may quite sensibly be ruled out.

Scholars with greater access to study material, who moreover have time on their side, can, I believe, profitably delve further into the question, and degree, of affinity between Mon-Khmer and Tibeto-Burman, and the examples shown below are a few of those that Dr. Benedict has included in the section of Tibeto-Burman Roots. These should be weighed in the balance of scholarship and be accepted if they are not found wanting.

It is probably logical to assume that mutual influences would be more likely between language groups that are in close proximity to each other, though in regard to roots, resemblances may be attributed to family connections at one period or another. Glottochronology should be an interesting area of research which can reveal many interesting secrets, consideration being given to such factors as sound changes which have played so significant a role in the development of Indo-Aryan languages.

It may be relevant to take the following examples from Franklin E. Huffman (1990). For the purpose of this section, *ng* has been substituted for the IPA symbol representing the velar nasal, *nj* for that representing the palatal nasal (lamino-alveolar nasal), *ə* for the semi-vowel and *h* for the final glottal stop.

/chloong/	'high'	Cp. Khasi	(Kh) jrong
/tey/	'hand'	Cp. Khasi	kti or 'ti
/tjih/	'earth'	Cp. Khasi	ktieh-Clay, Mud
/caa/	'to eat'	Cp. Khasi	dialect/sae/. Cf. bsa-To feed.
/kuan/	'offspring'	Cp. Khasi	khun
/ic/	'faeces'	Cp. Khasi	eit/ec/
/mat/	'eye'	Cp. Khasi	khmat or 'mat'
/nguuc/	'to swallow'	Cp. Khasi	nguid
/klinj/	'oil'	Cp. Khasi	khlein (Fat, Grease)
/cay/	'louse'	Cp. Khasi	ksi-Head Louse
/khnih/	'rat'	Cp. Khasi	khnai
/təmiih/	'new'	Cp. Khasi	thymmai
/thrang/	'animal horn'	Cp. Khasi	reng
/kətang/	'bitter'	Cp. Khasi	kthang
/khphrip/	'to blink'	Cp. Khasi	khapbrip (also 'To wink')
/pəukh/	'blow'	Cp. Khasi	pakhuh
/tual/	'cotton'	Cp. Khasi	(dial) tula
/yaam/	'to cry'	Cp. Khasi	iam/jaam/
/chngay/	'distant'	Cp. Khasi	jngai
/kaah/	'fish'	Cp. Khasi	(doh) kha
/mpat/	'grass'	Cp. Khasi	kynbat/kymbat/
/cuh-cuh/	'insert'	Cp. Khasi	bsuh;suh/soh/
/taah/	'to paint'	Cp. Khasi	tah

The following are selected items from Dr. Benedict's *Tibeto-Burman Roots* (Appendix I, pp. 1999-209, ff):

Tibeto-Burman	Meaning	Khasi	Meaning
ble	'slippery'	ble-ble	'slime'
day	'that'	-tai	'that'
dza	'eat'	sa (dial)	'eat'
		bsa	'feed'
grok	'ravine'	kroh*	'rocky recesses on cliff face'
klaw	'dig out'	khlaw	'dig out'
(m)-hla	'demon'	kla	'demon'
ka:k	'cough up'	kyr-khah	'hawk up'
klup	'cover, wrap'	Kup	'cover oneself entirely'
		khilup (adv)	
kok	'bark, rind'	khoh	'to peel rind, bark'
kuk	'basket'	khoh	'carrying basket'
ku:k	'strip, pare'	khoh	'to peel off'
kut	'scrape'	khud	'to scrape, grate'
kyam	'cold'	kjam	'cold'
(m) kyen	'know'	kan (dial)	'know'
la	'leaf'	sla	'leaf'
(k-) la (B-L)	'tiger'	khla	'tiger'
lak	'arm'	klah (-kti)	'arm length'
nga	'I'	nga	'I'
u-prok-prok	'toad'	hynroh	'toad'
.....	khroh (dial)	
pu:k	'belly'	kpoh	'belly, abdomen'
rey	'cane'	(th) ri	'cane'
roŋ	'tiger'	krung (dial)	'leopard'
rwat	'stiff'	jwat	'stiff, tough'
sreng	'squirrel'	risang	'squirrel'
sung	'smell, scent'	sieng	'to carry far (of strong smells)'

Also the following:

syam = sam	'iron'	ta-sam	'iron'
su (w)	'grandchild'	ksiew	'grandchild'
tap = təp, dəp	'fold'	tap	'fold'
		(syr) tap	'layer'
m-(t) sin = m-tsyen	'nail, claw'	tyrsim	'nail, claw'
ya	'night'	synia/s'nja/	'night'
ya:r	'spread, extend'	iar/jaar/	'extend'
yuw, yəw	'leak'	jaw	'leak'

Tibeto-Burman	Meaning	Khasi	Meaning
lang	'falcon, vulture, eagle, kite, hawk'	(kh) lieng	'kite'
		lang	'(a prefix in names of several species of birds and flying creatures) viz. langdkhur (dove); langbyrkaw (green pigeon); langlit (parakeet) or langbadur (flying fox). cp. slang=the so-called black bulbul.'
(m-) liy = (m) l'y	'boat'	lieng, li (dial)	'boat'
(m-) lyak (s-) lyak	'lick; tongue'	jliah, thylliej	'lick; tongue'
ni (y)	'aunt'	nia	'aunt'
d-kiy/d-kəy	'barking deer'	skei/'kei	'barking deer'
s-ring	'elongate'	ring	'stretch'
kap	'fork of legs'	khap	'to pinch (as with pincers)'
kap	'groin'	skhep	'hip, groin'

Be it said that the interest that gripped me was sufficiently stimulating to encourage me to undertake the natural, though tentative, quest in this area of investigation. Once in a while, real gems dropped into my lap! While working in the Wancho area of the then Northeastern Frontier Agency in the mid-1960's, I was pleasantly surprised to learn that the Wancho word for 'buttocks' is *khongtoi*, the exact word, with the same pronunciation, as in Khasi! It may be mentioned that the Wancho country is some 300 kilometers to the north-east of Shillong within the Khasi-speaking area, and the two areas are separated from each other by the plains and foothills of Assam. Mention of the name "Khassie Nullah" or Khassie Channel in Pemberton's Report (1835) as applied to a pass across the Patkai Range separating Myanmar from India came to mind, reminding me of an old legend extant among the Khasis up to my childhood days in the 1920's that they came to their present habitat across mountains to the east! Could the name "Khassie" have a connection with the name of the Khasi tribe? The Wanchos themselves are a branch of the Naga tribe with distribution on both sides of the above range. About the same time I learned that the word for "hornbill" in Tangkhul Naga is almost exactly the same as the Khasi "kohkarang"!

As has been mentioned, the nearest Tibeto-Burman tribe to the Khasis is the Garo tribe to the west. They and the Khasis are the predominant tribes in the State of Meghalaya. Curiously, however, there seem to be only a few matching terms in the language of the two. Either the physical factors mentioned earlier that prevented large-scale contact between the Khasis and their Tibeto-Burman neighbours in every direction were too formidable, or the Khasis in the earliest period felt that they had in their own language an adequate instrument whereby to express their thoughts without feeling the need to look elsewhere.

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