

The syllable finals of Tibetan loan words
in Lepcha orthography

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I. Reading and writing

Though Lepcha has probably been written at least since the reign of Chador Namgyal, the third Maharajah of Sikkim (1700-1717), the number of Lepchas with the skill to read and write the Lepcha script must always have been very small: a first estimate of the Lepcha population of Sikkim, in 1840, put it at only three thousand; in the Sikkim census of 1891 a total of 5,762 was recorded, to which should be added the Lepcha population of the Darjeeling District of Bengal, numbering 3,952 according to the 1872 census.¹ It seems a fair assumption that only about a quarter of those 19th-century totals could have been adult males, and, therefore potentially literate in Lepcha. Moreover, the Lepcha population was scattered over a wide area; and the tree population was sufficiently numerous at that time to make communications difficult: The gazetteer of Sikkim records that nowhere in Sikkim was there a settlement large enough even to be termed a village.² In the 18th century, therefore, reading and writing were probably confined to a few handfuls of Lepcha monks, perhaps less than a hundred, rendering Tibetan Buddhist texts into Lepcha;³ in the following century, in 1845, Stark and Niebel, Christian missionaries in Darjeeling, began extending Lepcha literature somewhat by translating The Bible. The year 1849 saw the beginning of printing in Lepcha, with Genesis and part of Exodus being printed at the Baptist Mission Press, Calcutta. Printing must have brought with it a greater consistency in letter shapes.

II. Vowel symbols

A. Tibetan

As far as vowel symbols are concerned, the Tibetan script has five, as I see it, three of which are superscript, i, e, and o, the fourth, u, is subscript, and the fifth, a, is symbolized syllabically or semi-syllabically, sharing a symbol with one of the thirty gsal-byed sum-cu, or radicals:

ཀྱ --- ཀྱ (ka --- a, [ka] --- [ʔa]),

but alphabetically, by the postscript symbol a chung,

- ཀྱ (-'), e.g. དཀྱ (dga'),

when it is necessary to avoid confusion between a syllable containing a member of the (five) sngon-'jug, or prefix, series, prescript g, d, b, m, and ', and a syllable containing a member of the gsal-byed sum-cu in initial position, e.g.

ཀྱ (dag).⁴

B. Lepcha

In order to symbolize the Tibetan vowel sounds the Lepcha script deploys a set of eight vowel symbols in open syllables, and a slightly different set, of nine, in closed syllables, with average phonetic values as follows:

open:	{	<u>-a</u>	<u>-á</u>	<u>-i</u>	<u>-u</u>	<u>-ú</u>	<u>-e</u>	<u>-o</u>	<u>-ó</u>	
	{	[-ə:]	-a:	-i:	-u:	-u:	-e:	-ε:	-o:	-ɔ:
	{	[-ə:-	-a-	-i/i-	-y-	-u/ɔ-	-e-	-ε-	-o-	-ɔ-
closed:	{	<u>-á</u>	<u>-á</u>	<u>-í</u>	<u>-u</u>	<u>-ú</u>	<u>-e</u>	<u>-ya</u>	<u>-o</u>	<u>-ó</u> :
e.g.										
open:		-	-c	ɿ-	-)	-j	ɿ	ɿ	ɿ-	ɿ~
closed:		~	"	ɿ~	"	"	"	-v	"	"

It will be seen from the above series that two vowel symbols, i and o, are prescript, three, á, u, and ú, are postscript, as also is ya, one (e) is subscript, one (á) is superscript, and two (í and ó) are at once prescript and superscript, while for a the same principle as for Tibetan, sharing a symbol with an initial consonant, has been followed.⁵

Some writers, however, use á instead of a, e.g.

ᱠᱟᱨ 'á-ka for ᱠᱟᱨ 'á-ka [akə:] 'hand',

thus making the representation of the vowels entirely alphabetic, with one symbol to each vowel.

To add to the confusion, a, which I have shown above only in the open-syllable series, is used by some writers in the closed-syllable series where others use á, e.g.

ᱥᱤ sam for ᱥᱤ sám [sam] 'three',

even by the same writer; this becomes possible because of the difference that I have shown above in the number of vowel symbols as between open syllables and closed syllables (and between nasal-initial and non-nasal-initial syllables).⁶

The relationship of the vowel symbols to the initial-consonant symbols suggests that the general principle has been followed of turning the model script, possibly a cursive Tibetan hand of the 'khyug-yig type, counter-clockwise through ninety degrees, with the result that the Lepcha symbols corresponding to the Tibetan superscript vowel symbols i and o are prescript, and the Lepcha u and ú are not subscript but postscript (e, however, is, irregularly, not prescript but subscript).⁷ Such a process would be familiar to Tibetan monks (and, perhaps, to Chador Namgyal himself during his years of exile in Lhasa) through the practice of using the symbols t-, th-, d-, n-, and sh- reversed for the

Sanskrit retroflex series ṭ-, ṭh-, ḍ-, ṇ-, and ṣ-, none of which had been introduced into the Tibetan script in its original form.³ Accordingly, all the symbols corresponding to the rjes-'jug of the Tibetan script except two, -g, -d, -n, -b, -m, -r, and -l, appear in Lepcha not as postscript but as superscript; only -ng and its complementarily distributed anusvara-like symbol nyin-dō (Tib. nyi-zla 'sun-moon') -ang [-vŋ] differ, being prescript, with -ng preceding the prescript vowel symbols ī, o, and ō; e.g.

‘ ̣ ̤ ̥ ̦ ̧ ̨; but ‘- and ̣-

-k -t -n -p -m -r -l; -ng -ang ([-vŋ]).

The ninth and tenth members of the rjes-'jug class, -' and -s, have no corresponding symbol in Lepcha, except for the possibility that -ā is derived from -'. If so, it is irregular, in being postscript rather than superscript (unless Haarh is correct in attributing its origin to the subscript a-chung used in Tibetan as equivalent to the ā of Sanskrit; 1959, 119).

The ya-btags and ra-btags symbols of Tibetan, which are subscript, appear regularly as postscript symbols in Lepcha; e.g.

ʎ, ʎ; kya, kra [kjə: krə:].

Something rather similar to the turning principle, the mirror image, has been applied within the Lepcha script itself, to devise ml- from m-; e.g.

ma ɾ; ɾ m̄la;

but the other members of the lateralized series do not follow this principle, and, moreover, have no model in Tibetan:

ʎ	ɾ	ɸ	ɸ	ɸ	×
<u>kla</u>	<u>gla</u>	<u>pla</u>	<u>fla</u>	<u>bla</u>	<u>hla</u>

(gla and fla seem to be modifications of ga and fa by adding a cross-bar or a loop).⁹

III. Khampa Tibetan into Lepcha orthography

Having outlined the orthographic resources available to Lepcha writers at least by the 1840s (when Hodgson made a first collection of Lepcha manuscript books), including alternative means of symbolizing [ə:] in open syllables as ā or as ā̂, and [a] as ā or as ā, I can now proceed to my main task of describing how Lepchas seem to have dealt with the problem of fitting Tibetan loan-words into a Lepcha mould, bearing in mind the important fact that the majority of the Tibetans with whom the Lepchas first came in contact were immigrants from Kham, in the east of the Tibetan-speaking area, via the Chumbi valley;¹⁰ their descendants claim Khampa ancestry to this day.¹¹

A. Tibetan -a, -ag(s), -ang(s), -ab(s), -am(s), -ar

With this Khampa origin in mind perhaps the most interesting relationship in Lepcha loan-word orthography is:

	i	ii	iii	iv	v	vi	
T.	<u>-a</u>	<u>-ag(s)</u>	<u>-ang(s)</u>	<u>-ab(s)</u>	<u>-am(s)</u>	<u>-ar</u>	
L.	<u>-ó</u>	<u>-ak/-ók</u>	<u>-ang/-óng</u>	<u>-óp</u>	<u>-óm</u>	<u>-ór/-ó</u>	/-ó/
	[-ɔ:12]	-ɔk/-ɔ:	-ɔŋ	-ɔp	-ɔm	-ɔr/-ɔ:]	

e.g.

i. rma brnya gla ja 'dra-'dra dbu-skra
mó nyó ló có rán-ró ([d-]) 'ú-kró ([t-])
 sore borrow wages tea equal hair

rgya kha mkha' dbu-zhwa na-bza' slob-grwa
gyó/gyá khó/khá khó/khá 'ú-shó ná-zó lóp-kró ([t-])
 hundred mouth heavens hat clothes school

bya , snag-tsha khra nyi-zla
byó nók-tshó hró nyín-dó
 bird/fowl ink hawk sun-moon [symbol]

ii. ldag g.yag (b) klags/klog phyag nag snag-tsha a-rag
lók 'yók hlók chók nók nók-tshó 'á-rók
 lick yak read hand black ink arrack

bshags bag-chags ljags don-dag khrag thag-ring
shók pak/pók-chó jó/ják tân-dók hrók thak/thák-ring
 repentance compassion tongue meaning blood long distance

lag

lók

hand

iii. glang mang dmangs gnang dbang nang chang
lóng móng móng nóng bóng nóng chóng/cháng
 ox many crowd bless, grant power inside beer

-khang btang/gtong zangs a-zhang bang-chen rkang
-góng tóng/tong sóng 'á-jóng póng-cen kóng/káng
 house dispatch/give copper uncle messenger foot