

On Tibetan's view of nature — seen from a Tibetan dialect spoken in Langtang valley —

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1. Introduction

That Tibet has a rich stock of the language is not surprising. Over the centuries, Tibetans have produced a highly complex religious and philosophical or Buddhist conceptual vocabulary, with which it is now capable of coining new words corresponding to any technical terms of modern times. On the other hand, the Tibetan speaking groups of Nepal Himalaya, the other Tibetans who are Nepali citizens, seem to have had a different line of the culture from the Tibetans'.

Those groups, dwelling in the high Himalaya, had been far from the center of Tibetan history and out of direct contact with Nepalese civilization until the middle of this century, while there certainly existed some political pressures and cultural influences from the north and the south. They are on the whole frontiers of both Tibet and Nepal. The most striking feature of those groups lies in that they have adapted their socio-economic lives into an environment isolated culturally and geographically from the outer world and they have cast a model there, and created a culture that is sufficiently unique onto itself that it would not be wrong to call it "of Nepal Himalaya".

This paper attempts to examine how such a cultural and environmental isolation had influenced upon their language by giving an example of the Langtangwas (literary glang-' phrang-ba, people of the Langtang valley, the term designated by the people themselves), one of the Tibetan speaking groups of Nepal Himalaya, focussing on their viewpoints of nature and natural phenomena.

2. Background

The Langtang valley is a small and steep valley of

the Langtang Khola. It is surrounded by high mountains in three directions. The valley opens only to the west where it meets the Bhote Khosi (later the Trisuli Khosi), in the far northeast edge of Rasuwa District in Central Nepal, to which a communication network is opened. Langtang Gaon Panchayat (village community/88 householders and 446 inhabitants according to a census Dec. '85) occupies three-fourths of the full length of the valley. The socio-economic lives of the Langtangwas are based on the transhumance of Yak, cattle and their hybrids and small scale agriculture : a few cereals, potato and turnip on the terraced plain located in the middle of the valley.

3. Tibetan's view of nature and natural phenomena

As presented in Langtang Vocabulary attached to the end of this paper, their viewpoints of nature and natural phenomena are closely connected with geographical features of the valley. There can be observed some peculiar expressions and some categories rich in vocabulary implicating their geographical backgrounds. Their viewpoints can be classified into two : one based on a religious conception and the other based on their agro-pastoral lives.

3. 1. Viewpoints based on a religious conception

A religion of the Langtang valley is a complex one which harmonized Tibetan Buddhism with Shamanism. Since a fairly long time before the first settler group, who were pre-Buddhists, arrived in the valley, the valley of Langtang had been one of the Buddhist's sanctuaries. This tradition is often concerned in some kind of natural phenomena, for example, a snow avalanche *khāyōō* (cf Langtang Vocabulary II) is believed to take place when the valley is defiled by immoral behavior such as

intrigue, sexual intercourse or pregnancy before marriage. The sanctity of the valley is conceived by the Langtangwas to be guarded by the numerous good and evil spirits inhabiting the elements of nature such as rocks, ponds, and mountains. The Langtangwas then address these elements using the names of the personified spirits. When asked the name of a certain mountain, if a villager replies using the general name *khag* or *khagri*, we thus understand that the mountain is not believed to be possessed by a spirit.

3. 2. Viewpoints based on agro-pastoral life

The space of the Langtang valley is geologically classified into seven categories; glacier, debris-covered glacier, rock wall (upper parts are often covered with ice), Little Ice Age moraine, *Betula-Rhododendron* forest, *Abies-Tsuga* forest and grazing grass land (Ono and Sadakane (1986). Only the last three categories are adaptable for agro-pastoralism, while the larger part of the surface of the valley is useless for them as signified by themselves (cf I, II, and III). It is obvious that this geoecological feature places a physical limitation on their socio-economic lives and has a great influence on their occupations. A rich Langtang vocabulary concerning glacier, for example, and on the contrary a very poor one on time and astronomy (cf V) may suggest Langtangwas' viewpoints of nature based on their agro-pastoral lives.

The Langtang Vocabulary of nature and natural phenomena presented below has the following contents;

I. Landscape & Geomorphology

soil and stone

hill, mountain and field

water, river, valley and others

II. Glacial Geomorphology

III. Agriculture & Natural Disaster

IV. Meteorology

seasonal period

snowfall and rainfall

wind

temperature

V. Time & Astronomy

LANGTANG VOCABULARY

Notes

- 1) One Tibetan dialect spoken in the Langtang valley is the so-called Kyirong (literary skyid-grong) Dialect, the distribution of which extends to the right upper bank of the Langtang Khola, contiguous to the left upper bank of the Bhote Khosi (later the Trisuli Khosi from its confluence of the Langtang Khola) from around the former Skyid-grong Rdzong. A study of the Kyirong Dialect was detailed by R. Beilmeier (1982), and the phonetical transcription presented in this paper follows basically his system.
- 2) The vocabulary corresponding to the basic terms of natural science suggested by the members of GEN-LP (Glaciological Expedition of Nepal-Langtang Project 1985–86), were collected while walking with villagers through almost all the territories of their agro-pastoral lives covering from 3000 to 5000m in elevation.
- 3) The written Tibetan form corresponding to a Tibetan dialect spoken in the Langtang valley is put in parentheses. In some cases, a noun may refer to a specific geophysical feature only in certain locations. In these cases, we have given one or two typical examples, separated from the English definition by a slash. The common usage and other additional explanations to the vocabulary are given after an oblique-line. The entries are arranged in order to show the derivation of the vocabulary.
- 4) Transcription of the written Tibetan follows the system of Kitamura and Nishida (1960).

Tibetan Alphabet

ka	kha	ga	nga
ca	cha	ja	nya
ta	tha	da	na
pa	pha	ba	ma
tsha	tsha	dza	wa
zha	za	'a	ya
ra	la	sha	sa
ha	a		

- 5) The followings are frequently referred to; Chang and Shefts (1964), Das (1902), Goldstein and Nornang (1978), Jäschke (1881), Les Missionnaires Catholiques du Tibet (1899), Turner (1981) and Zhung (1985).

I. Landscape & Geomorphology

soil and stone

sā (sa) : soil, earth, ground

sāpcā (sa cha) : land, country, place

sāthāktāk : ground which has a flat surface or terraced field

pēmā (bye ma) : sand

pēbīṅ (bye sdings) : sandy terrace, river terrace/
Tsondu ; also place-name of the terraced field
lying between Kyangchen and the Langtang
Khola→(cf Appendix) *Syn*; pēmā dīndīṅ (—sdings
sdings)/upper Gomna→

thālā (thal) : fine sand, soil, dust

dō (rdo) : general term for stone

phāmō : a block of rock

brāā (brag) : rocky hill, rock

brāagō (—mgo) : top of rocky mountain

brāakēē (—skad) : voice of rock, viz., echo

brāakyāṅ (brag gyang) : rock wall /Brangtshang
in Yul ; south-facing rock wall of the valley

brāašer (brag ser) : yellow rock, yellow band

hill, mountain and field

kanggūū (sgang rgyud) : ridge, a chain of mountains

rī (ri) : general term for hill, mountain but not snow-
capped cf II. khāṅ (gangs)rigtsēn (ri gi btsan) : peak of mountain, tsen of
mountain cf tsēn (btsan) : a species of demon
class inhabiting a given locality and sometimes
entering into a person visiting the place for a brief
period and causing thereafter serious illness. (Das
p. 1003)

rigāā (ri 'gag) : highlands

lā (la) : mountain pass

lādūppā (la dug pa) : mountain sickness

lādūppā lāṅ (—langs) : to rise mountain sickness

lāgū lūṅgū (la dgu lung dgu) : nine passes and nine
valleys or an expression for the long and hard
journey to the mountainous country being away
from home.lāptsē (la rtse) : summit of a mountain pass and also
stones piled up at the pass, cairnlāptsē tsūptūr : inflection point of a mountain and also
cairn piled at the pointthāṅkā (thang ka) : plain, flat field, alluvial plain/
Nesapari Thangka→

pāṅkā (spang ka) : greensward, hill meadow

/pāṅ mēlōṅ (—me long) : meadow of mirror and
also place-name→

pagrī (spang ri) : gentle grassy hill /Yala→

kyūrtāṅ (skyur thang) : shrubby plain /Chadang→
or very commonly seen alongside the river or
swamp of the valley

thālnūmp : level land, plain, lower land /Kathmandu

baptā bōptō : uneven land, ups and downs of flat path,
or an expression for the difficult path where big
stones and rocks hinder the traveler from
walking.

bōdōō : small hill, projecting hill

dīṅjā (sdings cha) : mountain foot

deplōṅ : inclination, slope

khēmā : steep acclivity

thūrtū : steep declivity

water, river, valley and others

chū (chu) : general term for water and river

tsāṅbō (gtsang po) : large river /Kyirong Tsangbo :
the local name of the Bhote Khosi, Tsangbo : the
local name of the Langtang Kholayārcū (dbyar chu) : Summer river, intermittent river /
Chubar Chu, Sangne Chu→ X gūṅcū (rgyun chu)
ḍawā dūnbēē chūtēṅsā (zla ba bdun pa'i chu ldang
sa) : a spot where the river rises during the 7th
Tibetan month (Aug-sept.) and also the place-
name locataed near Numothang *Syn* ; nāmcū
(gnam chu)nāmcū (gnam chu) : river which rises during the rainy
season X gūṅcū (rgyun chu)

gūṅcū (rgyun chu) : constant river X yārcū, nāmcū

chūṇḍām (chu 'gram) : bank of a river

chūḍāṅbā (chu phran pa) : place where many tribu-
taries are gathered ; fan /Tsondu→

chūmjāl (chu gcal) : waterfall, water spread

chūgār (chu dkar) : river of white turbid color /upper
tributary of Chubar Chu near Mundro→*Syn* ; omācū ('o ma chu) : river of milky color

luppō (lu po) : pool containing spring

lūkcū (lu chu) : stream which rises from luppō

X khāṅcū (gangs chu)

tūpcū (sgrub chu) : self-originated water (in a religious
sense)/the water, which is dropping from the
surface of rock in a cave, is regarded as a holy
water by the villagers.tūppō (sgrub po) : self-originated spring (in a religious
sense)/Chadang Tuppo : spring of Chadang,
which is one of the pilgrim sites of the valley.

chūlīṅ (chu gling) : small sands in a river

chūdzēn (chu tshan) : hot spring

chūjēp : swamp /Chorten Thangka in Yul

na_jēp : swamp, marsh, moor, peat /Ribar (the source of Chubi Chu) →

tshō (mtsho) : lake, pool, pond

tshō t̄inr̄ibū (—gting ring po) : deep lake

tshūūkām (mtsho bskams) : lake dried up /place-name given to the restiges of lakes located in the north end of Yala. tshō kām dū : the lake has dried up.

chūūlūg : ravine, valley

rōg (rong) : defile, deep george, valley

rōgbā (rong pa) : people of valley, viz. Nepalese people

lūgzhūr (lung gzhur) : center or bottom of valley

naāūg (nags klung) : forest, dense forest

naāndzām (nags mtshams) : boundary line of forest, forest limit

II. Glacial Geomorphology

dzaṅ : debris covered glacier, barren land / Lirung Gl., Langtang Gl., etc.

dza_līg : ablation area where big stones and rocks accumulated obstructing people and cattle to pass. / around Yangphu, hillside of Nesapari→

dzaṅshal (rdzab bshal) : landslide, landsliding slope / upper Pi'ung, Menchamsa→

dza_rōd : old ablation area where big stones and rocks are fixed with soil, grass, shrubs and the like ; side moraine /Chaldangma→

dzerēp shīgrūp : devastated plain mixed with stones, sand, shrubs, driftwoods and the like /Khyimjung, Chadang→

dōrūū (rdo rud) : breccia

pe_sā (bye sa) : sandstone /those place-names like Tarchipesa and Dopesa may have derived from the nature of the soil→

ūlūg : cirque /Pi'ung, Jonongbo located to the west slope of Tserko, Tsangbu→

khārūū (kha rud) : snowslide, debris or avalanche, which falls only during the summer time

khāyōō (kha g-yog) : avalanche which falls together with strong wind, rocks and stones /This does harm to men and cattle when the valley is defiled by the immoral behavior, but generally falls from Mt. Langtang Lirung to the rivers Peebe Chu and Chu Barma during the winter time ; powder snow avalanche?

khag (gangs) : glacier-ice, general term for snowy mountain *Syn* ; khagrī (gangs ri) : snowy mountain

khagcū (gangs chu) : melt water of glacier ice, river which rises from snowy mountain X lukcū

surkāg : ice ridge

tshērkāg (tsher gangs), khāwēē tshērkāg (kha ba'i—) :

sérac, glacier-ice

hāgdāg gēgbū (hang gdang 'gas bug) : crevice

cf hāgdāg : vacancy gēgbū : crack hole

III. Agriculture & Natural Disaster

tōntōd (ston thog) : autumnal crop, harvest

tōntōd kārṇāg tsīi sōg : The crop was damaged by the long spell of dry weather. tōntōd yaā sōg : The autumnal crop was abundant.

zhīg (zhing) : unirrigated field, farm, arable land

hezhiṅ : potato field

breezhīi ('bras gzhis) : paddy field, irrigated field

sā (sa) : soil, land /Langtangwa classify the nature of the soil for agriculture into two categories, i. e. sā presā : dust soil of the Langtang valley, and sā dakpā : cleyey soil of the lower land, which has enough humidity even no rain-fall.

sā temō (sa bde mo) : prosperous land, good earth /A black soil is thought to be a good soil and Tsherbeche, Pangmelong, Yala and Langshisa are regarded as lhēē teshōd (lhas bde shog) : the best pasture→

sābrāā : erosion, specially of the bank /Peebe Chu

sāngūl (sa 'gul) : earthquake

khār : field and land that has been devastated by the overflowing /upper Tsherbeche→

ruī (rud) : falling, falling mass, collapse, that which has slipped down

ruī kyap sōg dū (—rgyab song 'dug) : the land has slipped down /*cf* chūrūū, khārūū, dōrūū ruishāl

chūrūū (chu rud) : deluge, flood

chū gēg sōg dū : The river has cleaved by the flood.

ruishāl (rud bshal) : collapsed area where stones and rocks are accumulated by landslip or wash out / Chubi Chu, Pi 'ung→

baptō ('bab rdo) : stonefall

IV. Meteorology

seasonal period

pīkā (spyid kha) : spring

yārka (dbyar kha) : summer

yārka tshōō sōg (—tshos song) : Summer has ripened, *i. e.*, Summer has come (to crop)

sērka (ser kha) : hail season, autumn

gūnkā (dgun kha) : winter

nīntōd (nyi ldog) : summer and winter solstice

snowfall and rainfall

nām (gnam) : sky, heaven, weather, rain
 nāmñön thāñēē duū (— sngon mtha' yas 'dug) : The
 azure sky extends endlessly, *i. e.*, very fine
 weather. nām kyapnā khāwā kyakk duū (—
 brgyab na kha ba rgyag gi 'dug) : If it rained, then
 it become snowing.

nām kārnāñ : long spell of dry weather, drought
 ja ('ja') : rainbow /If it happens after the rain-shower
 in the afternoon, then it is fine next day. If it
 appears above the plains, then it rains soon. If it
 bridges over the Tsangbo, then fine days last for
 a month long.

ñikīm (nyi 'khyims) : halo, circle around the sun
 āmā ñimā ñikīm phüp sōñ : The mother sun has
 put on halo, /"it will rain after one fine day".

ḍākīm (zla 'khyims) : halo, circle around the moon
 āu ḍagār ḍākīm phüp sōñ : The uncle moon has
 put on halo, /"fine day will last for a month".

bruū ('brug) : dragon, thunder
 bruū ḍulkk duū (— 'grul gyi 'dug) : The dragon is
 passing, the thunder rolls or an expression for the
 thunder

tshīlām (tshig lam) : lightning
 tshīlām kyūūkk duū (— 'khyug gi 'dug) : the
 lightning is rapidly running.

prīñbā (sprin pa) : high cloud of fine weather
 prīñmar (sprin dmar) : morning glow /If it appears
 early in the morning, it rains in the evening.

mārwan (dmar dbang) : sunset glow /If it appears, it is
 fine for a month long.

pālmō : haze, mist or clouds which creep on the ground
 pālmō gaā sōñ (—bgags song) : The haze has
 screened from view.

brañbrīñ (sbrang sprin) : cloudy
 nām brañbrīñ duū (gnam— 'dug) : The sky is
 cloudy. cf (sbrang char) : drizzle

bañ khāssēbā ('bang kha gse ba) : fog thickened
 zhā (bzha') : damp, moisture
 zhā zhuū sōñ (—zhugs song) : [cloth or food] has
 got damp.

silbā (zil ba) : dew
 ḍop la silbā chāā sōñ : Dew has fallen on the grass.
 müppā (smug pa) : dense fog, cloud
 müppā kāmpō (—skam po) : dry fog ; müppā
 ñakpō (—nag po) : rain cloud ; müppā thüm sōñ
 (— 'thums song) : [we] were wrapped up by the
 dense fog.

simbū (zim bu) : drizzle /but only of the summer
 season at high altitude [higher than villages]
 lāñbā (rlangs pa) : vapour

khāwā (kha wa) : snow, snowfall
 khāmōcōr : sleet
 tātātāñ (dar sdong) : formed ice, icicle
 ḍop : phenomenon that the surface of snow is hard-
 ened by wind or the sun ; crust
 pāmō (ba mo) : frost, hoar frost
 sērā (ser ba) : hail

wind

lhāābā (lhags pa) : wind
 lhāābā mārōñ kyakk duū (—mar rong rgyag gi
 'dug) : The wind blows downwards in the ravine
 [in the morning] ; mountain wind
 lhāābā yarōñ kyakk duū (—yar ron—) : The wind
 blows upwards in the ravine [in the evening] ;
 valley wind
 urtsūp (bu 'tshub) : snow-storm, storm, gust of wind
 lūñkōr (rlung 'khor) : tornado, whirlwind

temperature

nāmsīr : weather, climate
 nāmsīr tshōō sōñ = yārkā tshōō sōñ
 ḍōō (drod) : warmth
 sā la ḍōō kyēē sōñ (sa la — skyes song) : The
 warmth generated to the ground, *i. e.*, it became
 warm. ḍōōtōñ (— gtong) : to give warmth to
 [water, liquor].
 ḍōōlāñ (drod rlangs) : vapour from warmth ; tempera-
 ture ḍōōlāñ tshāñbō (— tshang po) : agreeable
 weather or temperature
 khyāābō ('khyag po) : [to feel] cold, freezing
 ḍaṇmō (grang mo) : chilly, cold
 nām ḍaṇmō : it is cold.
 ḍomō (dro mo) : lukewarm
 tshāñdī : hot [by touch]
 tshēpā (tshad pa) : heat, hot, fever
 tshēpā tshāñdī : it is hot [weather] .
 dzarī (<Nepalese jaṇo : cold, chilly ?) : cold / but of
 the rainy season
 silpō (bsil po) : cold, refreshing
 nām silpō : fresh air
 lōñpā (rlon pa) : wet, humidity, moist

V. Time & Astronomy

time

- gōṅjō (dgong jo) : early evening, evening
 gōṅmō (dgong mo) : night, late evening
 ṅāṭō (snga dro) : early morning
 chāṇdāā : beer time ; about nine in the morning when the head of a family drinks beer before setting to work.
 chōṅāl : for a few hours after dinner till asleep ; about nine to ten in the evening
 ṅīmā (nyi ma) : day, daytime, the sun
 ṅīmā phēē (nyi ma phyed) : one half of the sun, noon, midday
 ṅīmēē dzerkā (nyi ma'i dzad kha) : about the time when the sun is declining
 ṅīmēē shārkā (nyi ma'i shar kha) : about the time when the sun is rising
 ṅamlāṅ (nam langs) : day break
 ṅamlāṅ sālāā chēē sōṅ duū (— gza' bdag chas song 'dug) : The sky waked up, the chief of planets, *i. e.*, the sun, has appeared to set forth.
 ṅamsīmā (nam sad ma) : dawn, early in the morning
 ṅamṣūūmā (nam srod ma) : twilight in the evening time ; dusk ṅam ṣūūkin duū (nam sros kyin 'dug) : The night is setting in.
 nup phēē (nub phyed) : one half of the time during the sun's disappearance ; midnight
 nupkōō : the latter half of nup, late night, three or four in the morning
 belā (Nepalese belā) : time, leisure, opportunity
 belā mīnduū ṅamṣūūkk duū (— mī 'dug nam srod gyi 'dug) : The night is about setting in, (we) have no leisure time.
 rōṅbēē dzarsā (rong pa'i 'dzar rag bza') : lunch-time of the Nepalese people ; about two or three in the afternoon

astronomy

- kārmā (skar ma) : star, constellation, asterism, astrology, planet *cf* sṅa (gza')
 kārmā shār sōṅ duū (skar ma shar song 'dug) : stars have come out. kārmā tsōppā (— btsog pa) : injurious day
 kārmā mīndūū (skar ma smin drug) : the pleiades
 thōrāṅ kārcēn (tho rangs skar chen) : big star of the dawn, morning star
 chūgār (chu skar) : planet which presides over water element, *i. e.*, Mercury

megār (me skar) : planet which presides over fire element, *i. e.*, Mars

leṭṭūpshī (las gru bzhi) : Cygnus

dzambliṅ ('dzam bu'i gling) : earth, world

dāwā (zla ba) : moon, month

dagār (zla dkar) : moon, moonlight

tshēgyēē dagār (tshes brgyad —) : the eighth day moon

nāmkāṅ (gnam gang) : new-moon

sṅa (gza') : planet ; the days of the week, viz., sṅa ṅīmā (gza' nyi ma) : Sunday, sṅa dāwā — zla ba) : Monday, sṅa mīgmā (— mig dmar) : Tuesday, sṅa lhākpā (— lhag pa) : Wednesday, sṅa phūrbū (— phur bu) : Thursday, sṅa pāsāṅ (— wa sangs) : Friday, sṅa pēnbā (— spen pa) : Saturday

sāndzīn (gza' 'dzin) : planet-seizer, eclips

āmā ṅīmā la sāndzīn ṅṅkk duū : The planet-seizer is coming to the mother sun, *i. e.*, solar eclips.
 dagār la sāndzīn ṅṅkk duū : The planet-seizer is coming to the moon, *i. e.*, lunar eclips / When it occurs, villagers make a big noise to drive away the planet-seizer that is believed to be a kind of animal.

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