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Sartang (West Kameng district, Arunachal Pradesh, India) – Language Contexts

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Language Name:	Sartang, previously Butpa ~ Bootpa, But Monpa ~ Boot Monpa
Varieties:	Khnũji (Khoinapa), Dəcĩji (Butpa), Khtamji (Khoitampa) and Rəphüngji (Rahungpa)
Language Family:	Trans-Himalayan (a.k.a. Tibeto-Burman), Kho-Bwa cluster, Western Kho-Bwa
ISO 639-3 Code:	onp
Glottolog Code:	sart1249
Population:	~ 2000
Location:	Khoina (27°20'34.55"N; 92°30'45.58"E), Jerigaon (27°19'59.35"N; 92°28'23.18"E), Nafra circle; Khoitam (27°19'11.99"N; 92°24'33.27"E), Rahung (27°18'55.77"N; 92°23'10.50"E), Thembang circle, all in West Kameng district, Arunachal Pradesh, India.
Vitality rating:	not assessed, see below

Summary

Sartang is a recently coined name for a Scheduled Tribe inhabiting four villages and their associated hamlets in West Kameng district of the state of Arunachal Pradesh in India. Sartang also refers to the four linguistic varieties that the people belonging to this Scheduled Tribe speak. Sartang is a Trans-Himalayan language belonging to the Western Kho-Bwa languages of the Kho-Bwa cluster. Because of low speaker numbers and rapid socio-economic developments in the area, Sartang may be considered vulnerable. This paper provides an initial overview of the four Sartang varieties, their purported origin, their history, their genetic classification, their contact languages, the language use, and attitudes, and two characteristic aspects of the Sartang culture.

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सरतांग भारत में अरुणाचल प्रदेश राज्य के पश्चिम कामेंग जिले में चार गांवों और उनके संबंधित गांवों में रहने वाली एक अनुसूचित जनजाति के लिए हाल ही में गढ़ा गया नाम है। सरतांग उन चार भाषाई किस्मों को भी संदर्भित करता है जो इस अनुसूचित जनजाति के लोग बोलते हैं। सरतांग एक ट्रांस-हिमालयी भाषा है जो खो-बवा क्लस्टर की पश्चिमी खो-बवा भाषाओं से संबंधित है। कम वक्ता संख्या और क्षेत्र में तेजी से सामाजिक-आर्थिक विकास के कारण, सरतांग को कमजोर माना जा सकता है। यह पत्र चार सरतांग किस्मों, उनके कथित मूल, उनके इतिहास, उनके आनुवंशिक वर्गीकरण, उनकी संपर्क भाषा, भाषा उपयोग और दृष्टिकोण, और सरतांग संस्कृति के दो विशिष्ट पहलुओं का प्रारंभिक अवलोकन प्रदान करता है।

1. Introduction

Sartang is a language belonging to the proposed Kho-Bwa cluster of the Trans-Himalayan (Tibeto-Burman) language family spoken in four villages and their associated hamlets of West Kameng district in the state of Arunachal Pradesh, India (see Figure 1, 2). The speaker population is around 2,000 people. The language is still in use among all age groups in the rural setting, but speaker numbers are low for the individual varieties and a shift to Hindi among certain population subgroups (mixed marriages, rural-urban migrants) can be observed, threatening future transmission of the linguistic varieties.

This paper provides an initial overview of Sartang, the language and its speakers. I start with a discussion of the name of the people and the language in the past and at present, the villages where the varieties are spoken and the approximate speaker population in Section 2. Section 3 covers the little information we have about the history of the Sartang speakers within the wider context of the history of the region. In Section 4, I explain why and how the Sartang Scheduled Tribe, speaking the Sartang language, came into existence. Section 5 overviews the scant available literature on the Sartang. Section 6 discusses the possible classification of Sartang within the language family. In Section 7, I make some observations regarding the linguistic environment in which Sartang is spoken, and in Section 8, I outline language use and attitudes. Finally, in Section 9, I focus on the social organisation and the religious beliefs as two rather distinctive features of Sartang culture.

The data on which this paper is based were collected during various visits to the four Sartang villages and the district capital Bomdila between April 2012 and December 2018. Visits typically lasted one to three days per location, with repeat visits made to several villages. The bulk of the material was collected in May 2013, May 2014, and October and November 2018. The recordings that were made consist of lexical data, grammatical information, and ethnographic notes. These materials will be made available in open access online as part of the publication by Bodt (forthcoming).

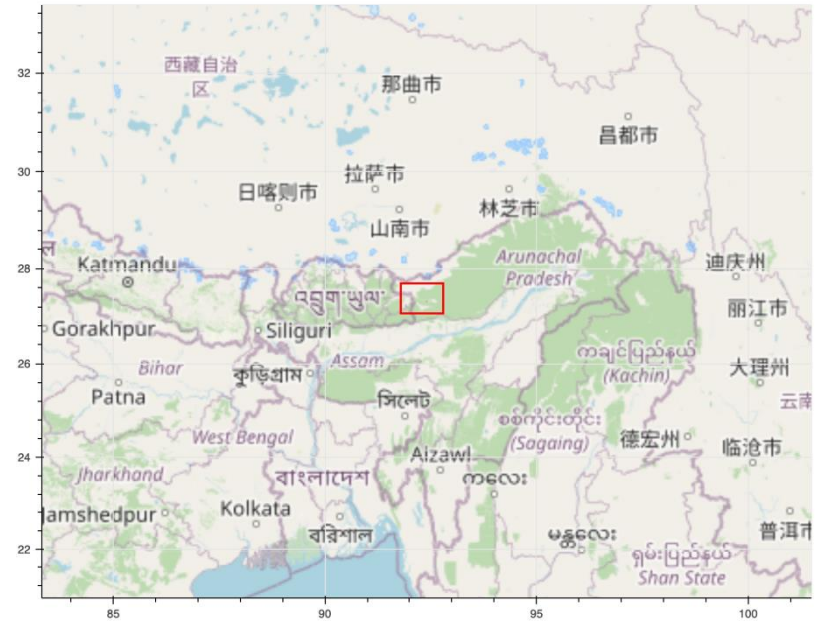

Figure 1: The eastern Himalayas, with the area of Figure 2 indicated (baseline © OpenStreetMap contributors, modified by Mei-Shin Wu, used with permission).

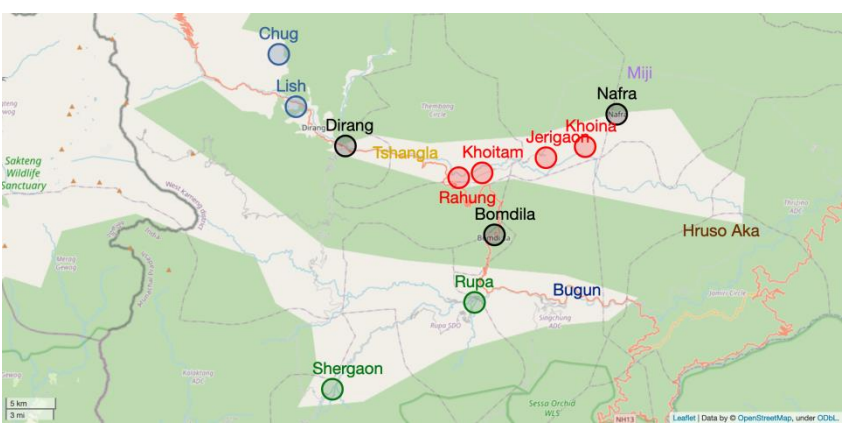

Figure 2: Location of the Sartang villages and their neighbours (baseline © OpenStreetMap contributors, modified by Mei-Shin Wu, used with permission).

2. Language name and speakers

Until the early years of the 21st century, the people of the four villages speaking the linguistic varieties now known as Sartang were most commonly known in the area by the exonyms given to them by the Tshangla speakers and subsequently adopted by the mixed Tibetan and Monpa religious and secular authorities from Tawang. However, among themselves they use four autonyms with partially transparent etymologies. All these endonyms end on the suffix *-ji* [-dʒi], deriving from the suffix *-bi 'people of'.[1]

The people of Khoina typically self-refer as *Khnũji* [kʰnũdʒi]. This name derives from *kʰa.nʷaŋ, which reflects a prefix *kʰa- 'soil', and *nʷaŋ is probably an archaic form for 'house'. The first two syllables also appear in the Sartang names for their Miji and Hruso Aka neighbours, *Khnũ* [kʰnũ] 'Miji' (from *kʰa.nʷaŋ) and *Khnũso* 'Hruso Aka' [kʰnũsɔː] (from *kʰa.nʷaŋ.sʲaw, with *a.sʲaw either meaning 'rich' or 'body; people'). The people of Jerigaon refer to themselves as *Dəcĩji* [dətʃĩdʒi], deriving from *da.pʲim.bi. As a prefix, *da- occurs in some nouns and adjectives. The syllable *pʲim is perhaps related to *a.pʲim 'sweet'. Alternatively, they are known as *Khcĩji* [kʰtʃĩdʒi], with the 'soil-prefix' rather than the *da-prefix. The people of Khoitam are known by the name *Khtamji* [kʰ.tam.dʒi], derived from *kʰa.sʲa.taŋ.bi, which incorporates both the soil-prefix and the word *sʲa.taŋ, which can mean either 'Puroik' or 'slave'. The endonym of the people of Rahung is *Rəphüngji* [rəpʰyŋdʒi], likely derived from *ra.pʰuŋ.bi, and this is the only endonym which, except for the suffix, may have a non-native etymology.

The name Khoina is likely derived from the endonym Khnũ and first appears as Konia in the writings of the British army captain Nevill (Nevill 1914). The people of Jerigaon (and by extension the people of Khoina) were known as Butpa to the Tshangla and Tawang Monpa (Dakpa) speakers and the Tibetans, but because of the homophony with Hindi भूत *bhūt* 'ghost', in the 1980s this was changed to Jerigaon, a transcription of *dziriŋgãũ* 'village of humans' (from Sartang *dzəriŋ* 'human, person' and Hindi गाँव 'village'). Still, the name Butpa, But Monpa or Boot Monpa persisted in the literature right into the 21st century (e.g., Dondrup 2004). Neither the name Khoina nor the name But seems to have had a written Tibetan version, indicating the limited influence of the Tibetan administration in these villages. The people of Khoitam and Rahung were known to the Monpas and Tibetans as Khoitampa and Rahungpa, respectively, and their villages were obliged to submit tax to the Tibetan authorities, which explains why the names of these

[1] All reconstructions represent PWKB, Proto-Western Kho-Bwa. The source of all these reconstructions is Bodt (forthcoming), with some reconstructions also available in Bodt (2019) and Bodt (2021).

villages have written Tibetan versions. The name Khoitam, which is written in Tibetan as *khul-dam*, is based on spoken Tshangla *kʰuitam*, which in turn is based on the endonym Khtam. The name Rahung is written in Tibetan as *ra-huṅ*.

In the early years of the 21st century, a renewed sense of social, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic consciousness developed among a section of the people of the four villages. This resulted in the coining of the name Sartang and a subsequent official request for recognition as a separate Scheduled Tribe in 2004, which was recently approved by both houses of the Indian parliament (see below). Hence, Sartang is both the name generally accepted by the speakers and the name that will be officially used in the administrative records. The neologism Sartang has an opaque etymology. According to some (often Buddhist and religiously educated) speakers, it is the local pronunciation of Tibetan *sar* 'new' or *śar* 'East' and *thaṅ* 'plain'. In the mountainous Eastern Himalayas, plain, flat areas are a rarity, and they have been important locations for human settlements. Hence, toponyms with forms meaning 'plain or flat area' are common across the region. However, other speakers state that the name is derived from *Sar*, the name of a headdress used by the religious practitioners, and *Tang*, which is one of their major deities.

Hence, Sartang encompasses the four distinct linguistic varieties that, depending on which criteria are applied, can be considered four dialects in a dialect continuum, two distinct languages, or even four distinct languages. To add to the complexity of the situation, although generally considered a separate language and certainly regarded as a separate Scheduled Tribe, the two varieties of nearby Sherdukpen could, again depending on the criteria applied, be considered part of the same language, dialects within the same dialect continuum, or two dialects of a separate language.

Figure 3: The clustered Sartang village of Khoina. Photo © 2014 Tim Bodt.

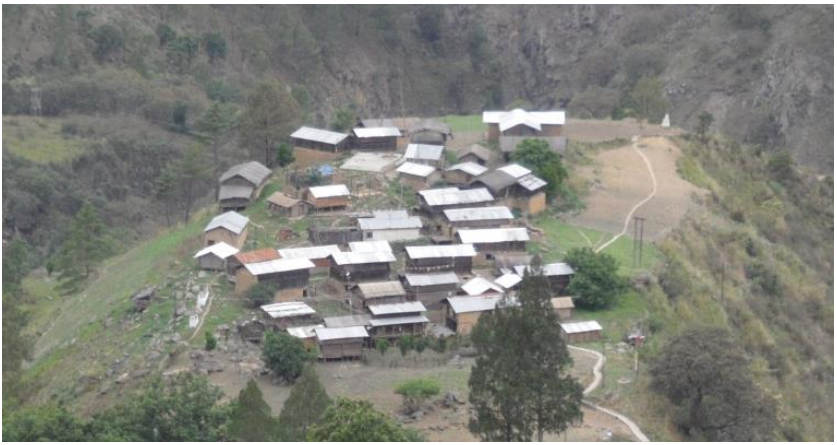

Figure 4: The clustered Sartang village of Rahung. Photo © 2013 Tim Bodt.

The Sartang varieties are spoken in four main, original villages and several hamlets, many of which came into existence only in the last two decades along the main roads through the area. The Rahung variety is spoken by around 600 people in the original Rahung village (Figure 4) and the hamlets of Darbu ('Chauda Mile / 14 Mile'), Dangsing ('Chaubis Nala / 24 Stream'), Tinghe Pam, 'Che Mile / 6 Mile', 'Paanch Mile / 5 Mile', 'Nau Mile / 9 Mile' and Sandanpam ('Tin Mile / 3 Mile'): as many of the Hindi names of these hamlets indicate, they are mostly located along the Bomdila to Dirang and Bomdila to Nafra roads. The Khoitam variety is spoken by around 500 people in the original Khoitam village, in Khodru hamlet ('Labour Camp') on the Bomdila to Nafra road, and in the fast-growing settlement of Salari (local name Mosihĩ), which has developed into a kind of central Sartang 'capital'. The Jerigaon variety is spoken by perhaps 400 people in the village of Jerigaon and the settlement of Kirafarm (from Hindi कीड़ा *kīḍā* 'bug', i.e., a place housing a silkworm farm), whereas the Khoina dialect is spoken by around 500 people in old Khoina village (Figure 3) and the nearby hamlet of Dingchang, in the settlement of Saidel (local name Deshuk Leca) on the Bomdila to Nafra road, and in the remote hamlet of Dünglo on the opposite bank of the Gongri river.

3. History

As is the case for many ethnolinguistic groups of Arunachal Pradesh, little is known about the history of the Sartang people. There are no written records predating the early 20th century British records. There have been no archaeological excavations in the area, but surface finds of Neolithic axes and

adzes are common. In Jerigaon, the ground where all the community rituals and festivals are conducted has a collection of lying and standing megaliths[2] in its centre (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Megaliths in Jerigaon. Photo © 2014 Tim Bodt.

Despite this lack of historical context, the Sartang people have a rich oral history recounting their origins, settlement, migration, and relations with their neighbours. Only a few of these histories have been recorded, transcribed, and translated (e.g., Dondrup 1987; Bodt 2014b). The general narrative of these stories relates of a migrant group from the east mixing with a migrant group from the north, with the resulting ethnic group then spreading across the Gongri river valley (Sartang, Khispi, and Duhumbi) and into the Tenga river valley (Sherdukpen). The available linguistic evidence, in the form of shared phonological innovations, is also supportive of this idea (Bodt forthcoming). Their amalgamation into a single group and subsequent dispersal across the area seems to have been triggered by subsequent migrations of people from outside the area. In turn, the Sartang communities adopted migrants from different ethnolinguistic backgrounds into their midst, which is still reflected in their clan system.

[2] As one of the reviewers of this paper rightly pointed out, the lithic monuments in the Sartang villages are not really 'mega'. Nonetheless, they appear to have been purposely collected and placed in these specific locations, and because of their resemblance to some of the megalithic sites in the Khasi and Jaintia hills of Meghalaya, I refer to them by the same name.

The Sartang never seem to have been particularly numerous or powerful. On the contrary, they were loosely brought under the control of other communities: the Tshangla speakers of Thembang and Dirang villages, superseded by the Tibetan administration (e.g., Mizuno & Tenpa (2015: 31–35); local sources) and their Tawang Monpa and Tshangla subsidiaries, and the kings and chiefs of the Miji and Hruso Aka (e.g., Grewal 1992; Dusu 2013; local sources). The Tibetans imposed a tax and labour corvee system, in which Sartang villagers had to weave bamboo mats and baskets and collect madder dye (Rahung and Khoitam) or produce earthenware pots (Jerigaon), and carry those items to the regional administrative centre at Dirang. However, the authority of the Tibetans was relatively weak north of the Gongri river and east of the (Buddhist) Monpa villages of Thembang and Lagam, and often did not include Khoina, Jerigaon, or the Miji and Hruso Aka areas. Until the early 20th century, the Hruso Aka were another regional force to be reckoned with, and the Miji often joined them as their allies. In the first quarter of the 20th century, the position of the Hruso Aka was weakened, and various Miji chieftains and clans gained more control. Both the Hruso Aka and Mijis conducted yearly raids on the Sartang villages, in which they took food grains, woven cloth, live animals, salt, cooking utensils, and whatever else they might need. This dual pressure of taxation and raids greatly affected the Sartang villages.

In fact, in one of the first known references to Sartang speakers, the British Captain Nevill commented on the extremely deprived and poor condition of the people of the 'Monba' villages of Konia (Khoina) and But (Jerigaon) that he visited on the 4th February 1914 (Nevill 1914). According to his report, this situation was attributable to the Miji, who forced the people of Konia and But to cultivate for them. Local oral history similarly recounts how precarious living conditions in the Sartang villages were at the time, with a steadily decreasing population and erosion of the social fabric and cultural practices as a result. The situation slightly improved in the 1940s when the British established an army outpost at But to check the raids by the Miji and Hruso Aka, and an army outpost in Dirang to limit the influence of the Tibetans. After Indian independence, the situation reverted again, and as recently as 1962, the year that China invaded the region, the Sartang villages witnessed their final Miji raid. In subsequent years, there were some changes in the area as the Indian administration extended its developmental activities. However, because of the administrative setup, it was mainly the Miji of Nafra and the Monpa of Thembang who benefited from this. The Sartang villages continued to be deprived and marginalised well into the 21st century.

4. The Sartang scheduled tribe

In the early years of the 21st century, there was a growing ethnic consciousness among a section of the Sartang speakers. Although the Sartang were till then

considered Monpa, some of them became more aware of the fact that their language was unlike the other Monpa languages, and that their belief system was different from Buddhism. At the same, they realised that their language and belief system were also unlike that of the other dominant group in the area, the Miji. They recognised that among the four villages they shared a linguistic origin, customs, history, and religious heritage. Moreover, they realised that their submergence under the Monpa Scheduled Tribe and their administrative division – Khoina and Jerigaon villages under the Miji-dominated Nafra circle, and Rahung and Khoitam villages under the Tshangla-dominated Thembang circle – severely curtailed their access to resources under India's Scheduled Tribes legislations. Until the present day, only a few Sartang can be found in government positions of any importance, and the Sartang villages were regularly the last among those of the region to have access to education, healthcare, agricultural inputs and subsidies, infrastructure, electricity, and the mobile network. Because of these realisations, since 2004, the people of Rahung, Khoitam, Jerigaon, and Khoina have been pursuing recognition as a separate Scheduled Tribe. In addition to the cultural objective of asserting their own distinct identity, the movement promoting Sartang as a separate Scheduled Tribe also aims to obtain greater political leverage to promote socio-economic development. In order to be recognised as a Scheduled Tribe in India, several criteria have to be fulfilled. Therefore, the people promoting the request clarified that they inhabit a delineated geographical area and that since time immemorial they have shared a unique history, culture, and traditions. They combined one of the communal festivals, earlier celebrated in the individual villages, into the pan-Sartang Tang festival. They also recognised Tangyü as their shared religion. Moreover, they agreed upon a standardised dress style for men and for women (Figure 6), which is a modernised version of the traditional Sartang dress, itself combining elements also found in the Sherdukpen, Miji and Monpa dress styles.

Figure 6: The standardised Sartang dress style. Photo © 2012 Lobsang Tashi Yamchodu, used with permission.

In 2017, the Union Home Minister, Kiren Rijiju, who is a member of the Miji tribal group from Nafra, assured the Sartang of inclusion of their tribe in the Union ST list (Arunachal Times 2017). Similarly, in 2018, the Chief Minister of Arunachal Pradesh, Pema Khandu, who is a member of the Monpa tribal group from Tawang, said that the issue of according Scheduled Tribe status to the Sartang community "is being favourably handled by the union tribal affairs ministry and could materialise soon" (Arunachal Times 2018). In 2019, the central government approved the introduction in parliament of what came to be known as the 'Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order (Amendment) Bill, 2018' (Arunachal Times 2019). Then, on 13th February 2019, the part of the bill applying to Arunachal Pradesh was passed by the *Rajya Sabha* (Council of States, the Upper House of India's bicameral Parliament) as the 'Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order (Third Amendment) Bill, 2019'.[3] The relevant part of the Bill reads:

> The Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order, 1950 specifies the tribal communities which are deemed to be Scheduled Tribes. The Bill amends Part 18 of the Order which specifies the Scheduled Tribes in Arunachal Pradesh. The Bill inserts 5 entries for granting Scheduled Tribe status to these communities. These are: [...] (iii) Monpa, Memba, Sartang, Sajolang (Miji) [...] The Bill removes reference to six tribes. These are: [...] and (vi) Momba.[4]

The Bill was passed by the *Lok Sabha* (House of the People, the Lower House of India's Parliament) on 9th August 2021.[5]

Official recognition of the Sartang as a Scheduled Tribe will likely be followed by redrawing of the circle boundaries of West Kameng district. This would place all four Sartang villages within a single circle. However, such redrawing may meet political resistance from the Thembang Tshangla and Nafra Miji communities, especially because the separation of Rahung and Khoitam villages may leave Thembang too small population-wise to be retained as a separate circle. How this political power play will evolve in the future remains to be seen.

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[3] prsindia.org/billtrack/the-constitution-scheduled-tribes-order-third-amendment-bill-2019, accessed 2021-07-25.

[4] prsindia.org/files/bills_acts/bills_parliament/Constitution%20(Scheduled%20Tribes)%20order%203rd%20(A)%20Bill,%202019.pdf, accessed 2021-07-25.

[5] https://prsindia.org/billtrack/the-constitution-scheduled-tribes-order-amendment-bill-2021, accessed 2021-08-25.

5. Existing literature

The available literature on the Sartang and their language is limited. Dondrup (1987) is a short historical account, while Dondrup (2004) is the only linguistic description, unfortunately plagued by a mixture of linguistic varieties (providing forms of at least Jerigaon and Rahung without distinction) and an impressionistic transcription devoid of phonetic and phonemic detail and consistency. The survey by Abraham et al. (2018[2005]) was originally aimed specifically at Sartang (But Monpa) but was then expanded to include more languages of western Arunachal Pradesh, in particular the languages of the Monpa Scheduled Tribe. The survey contains a list of 307 lexical items in 30 doculects, including items from two Darbu (i.e., Rahung), one Khoitam, and one Khoina Sartang speaker. There is some reference to Sartang in Jacquesson (2015), and in Blench's unpublished work.[6] Perhaps the most extended sources of lexical data are Bodt (2019; 2021[7]), and Bodt (2021) and its supplements.

6. Classification

Sartang's closest linguistic relatives are Sherdukpen (IS0 639-3 sdp, Glottolog Code: sher1256), and the more distantly related languages Lishpa (IS0 639-3 lsh, Glottolog Code: lish1235), and Chugpa (IS0 639-3 cvg, Glottolog Code: chug1252). Together, the eight varieties of these four languages form a small but coherent sub-group of the Trans-Himalayan language family, Western Kho-Bwa (WKB, see Bodt 2014a). The ancestral language, Proto-Western Kho-Bwa, has been reconstructed by Bodt (2019; 2021; forthcoming). Both lexical and phonological innovations (Lieberherr & Bodt 2017; Bodt 2019; Bodt 2021; Bodt forthcoming) and a recent computational phylogenetic study (Wu, Bodt & Tresoldi forthcoming) provide insights into the internal phylogeny of WKB (Figure 7). Khispi and Duhumbi are a separate branch of WKB, diverging from the Sartang and Sherdukpen varieties around 1143 years before present (95% Height Posterior Density 592–1800,[8] posterior probability 1.0[9]). Khoina and Jerigaon form a sub-branch of the Sartang and

[6] www.rogerblench.info/Language/NEI/Kamengic/Mey/General/Linguistics/Comparative%20Mey%20wordlist.pdf, accessed 2021-07-27.

[7] www.zenodo.org/record/1210131#.YOcn6OgzY2w, accessed 2021-07-27.

[8] in 95% of all sampled trees the date falls within this date range.

[9] the probability that the tree is correct, assuming that the model is correct. A posterior probability of 1.0 means that this specific split is found in all the trees that the model generated.

Sherdukpen varieties, diverging from the other varieties at around the same time that Khispi and Duhumbi differentiated, i.e., roughly 350–400 years before present. Rahung occupies an intermediate position between Rupa and Shergaon, Sherdukpen and Khoitam. These four varieties developed during the last two centuries. This conclusion needs further confirmation on the basis of morphological and grammatical evidence.

While the internal classification of WKB is no longer a point of contention, there is more uncertainty about the position of WKB within the Trans-Himalayan language family. Since Sun (1992: 80), there has been a presumed relation between Sherdukpen and Lishpa-Butpa (and consequently all the Sartang varieties and Chugpa) and the languages he knew as Bugun (IS0 639-3 bgg, Glottolog Code: bugu1246) and Sulung (Puroik, IS0 639-3 suv, Glottolog Code: puro1234). Subsequently, van Driem (2001: 473–479) proposed the name Kho-Bwa cluster for this subgroup of the language family. In Lieberherr & Bodt (2017), Bodt (forthcoming) and Wu, Bodt & Tresoldi (forthcoming) there is additional evidence that the Kho-Bwa cluster is, indeed, a valid subgroup of Trans-Himalayan, with two unique phonological innovations (*m- > b- and *s- > Ø-) and Puroik, Bugun, and WKB sharing more lexical material with each other than with any other language under consideration.

Nevertheless, several authors have expressed reservations about the Trans-Himalayan affiliation of all the Kho-Bwa languages (Blench & Post 2014: 78, 92) or of Puroik (Post & Burling 2017). Indeed, the core of the Kho-Bwa languages may:

(1) represent one or multiple hitherto unknown and perhaps isolate linguistic strata;
(2) have a till now unrecognised affiliation with other language stocks, for example, Austroasiatic; or
(3) be Trans-Himalayan languages that have been profoundly impacted by such non-Trans-Himalayan linguistic strata.

All of these would explain the phonological, lexical, and syntactic idiosyncrasies that these languages (and, indeed, many others in the eastern Himalayan region) display when compared to the better described Trans-Himalayan languages such as Tibetan and Burmese. But as Sun (1992: 80 fn. 19), Matisoff (2009: 309), and van Driem (2001: 476 –477) already remarked, the phonological aberrance, in particular of Puroik, may be masking their otherwise solid Trans-Himalayan nature. Only more detailed studies, comparing data from the increasingly better descriptions of the diverse languages of the eastern Himalayan region, can provide further insights.

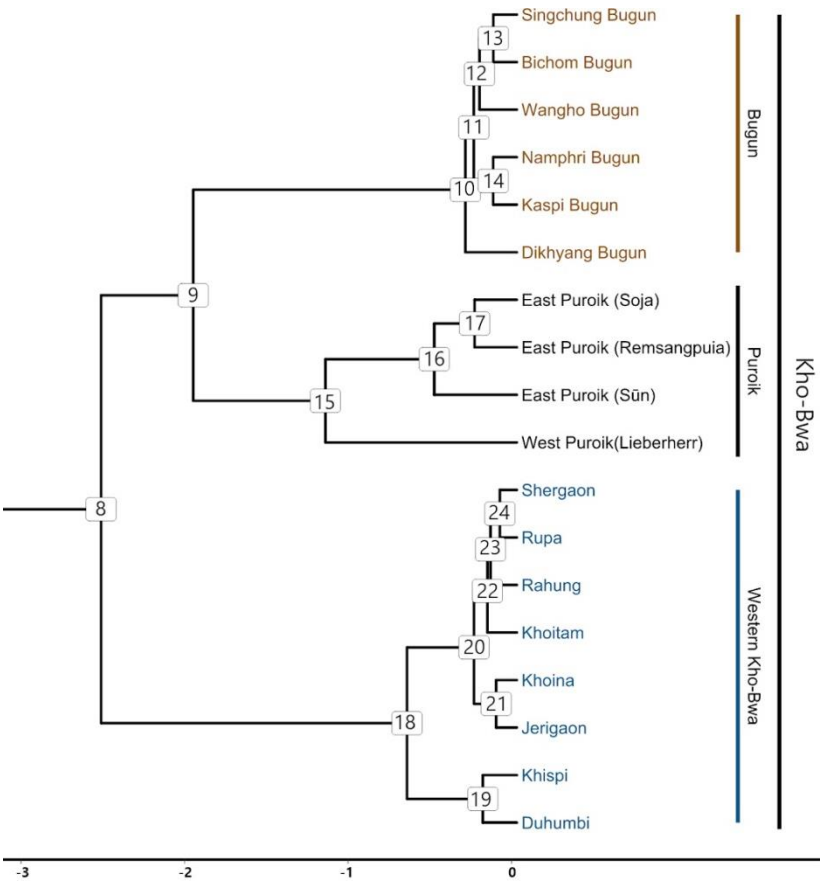

Figure 7: Classification of the Kho-Bwa languages (adapted from Figure 2 in Wu, Bodt & Tresoldi forthcoming, used with permission).

7. Linguistic environment

Abraham et al. (2018[2005]: 13) found lexical similarity scores between the Sartang varieties ranging from 52% (Khoina and Khoitam) to 78% (two Darbu speakers). When Abraham et al. played a recording of a Darbu (Rahung) Sartang story in Khoina, the respondents indicated that "the language of the story was the same as the way people talk in their village, and everyone said that they comprehended the story fully" (Abraham et al. 2018[2005]: 17). Lexical similarity scores between the Sartang and the Sherdukpen varieties ranged between 49% (Khoitam and Shergaon) and 59% (Darbu and Rupa). The Abraham et al. survey also showed through Recorded Text Testing that on average, comprehension of Darbu (Rahung) Sartang among Rupa Sherdukpen speakers was 55%, with a range between 10% and 100%, with high scores attributed to travel and prior exposure to Sartang (Abraham et al. 2018[2005]: 17). Abraham et al. concluded that there is sufficient information to suggest inadequate comprehension between Sartang and Sherdukpen. Phonological and lexical data suggest that while there may be some degree of understanding between Rupa (and, to a lesser extent, Shergaon) Sherdukpen and Rahung (and to a lesser extent Khoitam) Sartang, comprehensibility with Jerigaon and Khoina is much less. Abraham et al. (2018[2005]: 18) found that Sartang speakers most commonly communicate with Rupa Sherdukpen visitors in Sartang, and that Rupa Sherdukpen speakers most commonly communicate with Sartang visitors in Rupa Sherdukpen.

The Sartang varieties of Khoina and Jerigaon have been somewhat influenced phonologically and lexically by the nearby languages, Miji (Sajolang, IS0 639-3 sjl, Glottolog Code: saja1240), spoken in the nearby Nafra valley, and Hruso Aka. These two may belong to the so-called Hrusish languages (Bodt & Lieberherr 2015), although conclusive evidence for this has not been presented yet. Phonological impact is particularly audible in Khoina, which has retroflex fricatives and affricates that are reminiscent of the rich fricative and affricate inventory of Miji and Hruso Aka.

The Sartang people of Jerigaon and Khoina also contract marital relations with Puroik speakers of Bulu village (Lieberherr 2017), and the people of Khoitam are in close contact with Bugun speakers of Dikhyang village. However, because of the presumed genealogical relationship between the Sartang varieties, Bugun, and Puroik, it is difficult to distinguish between inherited and contact features.

To the west, the main contact language is Tshangla or Tshangla Monpa (IS0 639-3 tsj, Glottolog Code: tsha1247),[10] spoken in the major villages of Thembang and Dirang. In addition, migrants with a linguistic background of Tibetan, Brokpa, and Chocangaca (all Central Bodish) and Tawang Monpa (East Bodish) have historically settled in the Sartang villages, particularly Khoitam and Rahung, which, moreover, were more subject to Tibetan and Monpa administration and taxation. Hence, unsurprisingly, Abraham et al. (2018[2005]: 18) found that Sartang speakers most commonly communicate with Tawang Monpa speakers in Tawang Monpa, while Dirang Tshangla speakers communicate with Sartang visitors in Dirang Tshangla, Hindi, or a mix of these two.

8. Language use and attitudes

Eberhard, Simons & Fennig (2021) classify Sartang in EAS category 6a (vigorous) and claim the language is not endangered. The empirical basis for this assessment is unclear, but perhaps based on Abraham et al. (2018[2005]: 10), who state that:

> In general, from the questionnaire responses, speakers from the groups studied use their mother tongue widely in all domains, except in the market and with neighbouring villagers who speak a different language. All language groups have an overall positive attitude towards their own mother tongue, as well as a positive attitude towards Hindi, which is the language of wider communication. Therefore, it appears that the vitality of the languages is also not in question in the immediate future.

However, these results are not representative for Sartang or its varieties, as Abraham et al. clubbed together all the linguistic varieties that are spoken by Monpa and Sherdukpen Scheduled Tribes (Abraham et al. 2018[2005]: 22). Moreover, the survey dates from nearly 20 years before, and socio-economic changes in the meantime have been more profound than those in the first 50 years after Indian independence. Sartang may not be ‘endangered’, but that does not mean it’s not ‘in danger’.

[10] The Monpa Scheduled Tribe groups together several distinct ethnolinguistic groups speaking unrelated languages, cf. for more information Bodt (2014b). The Tshangla speakers of Dirang are one of those groups. Although Tshangla is commonly assigned to the Bodish branch of Trans-Himalayan languages (Shafer 1955: 100-101; van Driem 2001: 991), a strong Bodish superstrate may actually mask a non-Bodish genetic affiliation.

Personal observations among the Sartang communities indicates that there are several clear threats to language vitality. Speaker numbers for all varieties are low, with only a few hundred speakers each. In the present rural setting, parents whose main occupation is agriculture still pass on the language to their children. Until perhaps 10 years ago school enrolment and progress beyond primary school in the villages was low, however at present children are commonly sent to boarding schools outside the villages. These schools, which all have a Christian, Hindu, or Tibetan Buddhist religious affiliation, require communication almost exclusively in Hindi or English. While school-going children may still speak their own language at home in the village, they will no longer use it in other environments where they spend most of their time. Moreover, as intermarriages outside the home village are becoming more and more common, parents often speak Hindi and not their own mother tongue to their children. This is even more pronounced among Sartang speakers who have already moved to urban areas, in particular Bomdila town. There, in mixed marriages (for example, Sartang and Monpa, or Sartang and Nepali), and even in marriages in which both spouses are Sartang, the main language of communication is Hindi. Changes in pronunciation, loss of lexicon, and erosion of grammatical phenomena can all be observed among younger, educated, and urban speakers, and the rapid shift to Hindi is another threat. If no positive action is taken, the best that can be hoped for is that a 'standard' Sartang may develop and survive, accepting that dialectal differences are likely to disappear in the near future. While language death and endangerment are often defined in terms of languages ceasing to be spoken at all, in many speech communities it is the erosion and loss of linguistic diversity – and the wealth of information and knowledge associated with it – that is most imminent and irreversible, a fact perhaps not appreciated often enough.

Figure 8: Three generations of Sartang women in Khoina on their return from a community festival. Obvious intergenerational changes in the favoured dress and apparel are often mirrored in differences in language use and attitudes to the mother tongue. Photo © 2012 Lobsang Tashi Yamchodu, used with permission.

One of the ways in which the Sartang language could be promoted is through mother tongue education in the local primary schools, the benefits of which are widely recognised, including by UNESCO, which advocates for 'multilingual education' in at least three languages in education: the mother tongue(s), a regional or national language, and an international language, with education based on the mother tongue(s) in the early years of schooling.[11] Similarly, Article 30 of the Indian Constitution states that linguistic minorities have the right to establish and administer educational institutions, and Article 350A states that:

[11] en.unesco.org/themes/gced/languages, accessed 2021-07-25

> it shall be the endeavour of every State and every local authority within the State to provide adequate facilities for instruction in the mother-tongue at the primary stage of education to children belonging to linguistic minority groups.

Hence, education in primary schools in the Sartang areas should preferably be in that language, at least partially; this is more likely to be implemented now that the Sartang are recognised as separate minority, and if the areas form a separate administrative unit. However, in 2014, the Supreme Court of India ruled that the state has no power under Article 350A of the Constitution to *compel* linguistic minorities to choose their mother tongue as the *only* medium of instruction.[12]

A complicating factor is that in the Monpa-dominated areas of Arunachal Pradesh, Bhoti, which is basically an exile Tibetan koiné based on Lhasa Tibetan, has been widely promoted as the mother tongue of *all* the people belonging to the Monpa Scheduled Tribe, hitherto including the Sartang, and even the Sherdukpen and Bugun. This has unfortunately diverted attention from the documentation and description of the wide variety of languages and linguistic varieties spoken by the Monpa Scheduled Tribe (see Bodt 2014a for an overview) and the development of teaching materials and literature in them. Many Sartang people hope that recognition as a distinct Scheduled Tribe will stimulate further development of their language, and thus contribute to its preservation and promotion.

9. Aspects of culture

Within the scope of this article, I focus on two aspects that set the Sartang apart from most of their immediate neighbours: (1) social organisation, and (2) religious beliefs. Just like their unique linguistic heritage, their clan system and their mixture of religious beliefs is largely the result of their unique origins, migration, and settlement history.

Like most communities in Arunachal Pradesh, the Sartang are a patriarchal, patrilineal, and patrilocal society. Moreover, like most of the tribal communities in the state, the society is divided into exogamous, patrilineal clans. The number of clans and the individual clan histories greatly differs among the four Sartang villages and seems to reflect the distinct successive layers of population. As new migrant groups were adopted into the individual villages, new clans emerged. On the other hand, outbreaks of communicable

[12] www.indiatoday.in/education-today/news/story/state-cant-impose-mother-tongue-in-primary-schools-supreme-court-191886-2014-05-07, accessed 2021-07-25

diseases or a lack of marriable partners could lead to the demise of existing clans. Some of the clans occur in two or more villages: This may be due to a common origin, or through later inter-village migrations. Other clans are specific to certain villages. The maximum number of clans can be found in Khoina, presumably the oldest Sartang village, where there are ten clans in five pairs, with intermarriage between members of the paired clans prohibited. In Jerigaon, there are five clans, one of which is said to have come from Rahung and another one from Tibet. In Khoitam, there are eight clans, including two that are said to have arrived from Tibet, and one considered to originate in Rahung. The seven clans in Rahung reflect the most diverse, migration-related setup, with two clans having come from Khoina, four from Tibet, and one being the descendants of Chocangaca speakers from Bhutan. More detailed information on the clans of the Sartang people can be found in Bodt (2014b: 166–167).

The Sartang people follow a unique indigenous belief system that has hitherto been largely overlooked. In terms of rituals, ceremonies, and festivals it has some similarities to the belief system of the Sherdukpen described in Dollfus and Jacquesson (2013), but there are also many distinct features. Some perfunctory notes on the Sartang belief system can be found in Bodt (2014b; forthcoming)[13] and Huber (2020I: 547–548). The Sartang belief system is distinct from Tibetan Buddhism as practiced in the Monpa areas, but also distinct from that of the Miji, the Hruso Aka, the Bugun, the Puroik, and indeed, any of the tribes of the area. As practices are changing rapidly, there is an urgent need for a thorough study of the various Sartang deities, rituals, ceremonies, practitioners, and festivals.

There seem to be three distinct forms of religious practice in the Sartang areas: Rituals related to the worship of ancestral deities; rituals related to the worship of local deities; and curative rituals. The worship of the ancestral deities, a male moon-deity *Tang* [taŋ] and a female sun-deity *Yü* [jy:] and their four sons from which the lineages of the four villages descend has been promoted to the pan-Sartang *Tangyü* 'religion'. The yearly community festival, earlier celebrated separately in the individual villages and known by village-specific names, has now been promoted to the pan-Sartang *Tang* festival, annually celebrated in one of the four villages on a rotation basis. Animal sacrifice of a yak, a cow, sheep and chickens is an integral part of the festival when celebrated in the individual villages, but Hindu reservations against cow sacrifice and Buddhist reservations against animal sacrifice in general have meant that the animal sacrifices are more and more relegated to the margins of the communally observed festival. The practice of animal sacrifice, and the

[13] www.zenodo.org/record/1203628#.YOcn1-gzY2w

central structure at which it takes place (see Figure 5 for the megaliths in Jerigaon and Figure 9 for the bamboo, vine, wood, and foliage structure in Khoina), the reliance on orally transmitted liturgy rather than on written scriptures, and the general structure and outline of the rituals is clearly relatable to the traditional animist beliefs and rituals of the Miji, Hruso Aka, Puroik, Nyishi and other tribes to the east. This attests to an ancient indigenous ethnolinguistic stratum that precedes subsequent additions from Tibet.

Figure 9: The dzongnõ *in Khoina, around which the community rituals are centred. Photo © Tim Bodt.*

The local deities are called *Phu* and *Da* (sometimes *Phü* and *Do* in local speech). The *Phu* are positive, pure, and clean deities of the higher peaks, mountains, and ridges, and provide sustenance to the people through the natural resources, including the land, the water, the forests, and the animals. The *Da* are negative, impure, obscure inhabitants of low-lying groves, marshes, swamps, and ponds, and can cause obstruction to people through epidemics, mental and physical illness, loss of cattle, natural disasters, and weather phenomena. Their propitiation takes place during annual rituals in the individual villages. Whereas animal sacrifice was earlier part of the ritual, in many cases, this has now been replaced by the release of 'ransom' cattle in the forest. The deity is believed to inhabit the hump of the animal for a year, and the next festival, the deity temporarily ascends from the hump, receives its offerings, and descends back into the hump. The names *Phu* and *Da* and the practices associated with them, such as the male *bropa* and the female *broma*, young virgin acolytes of the ritual specialists (see Huber 2020: 442–443, 507), have parallels among the practices found across eastern Bhutan and western Arunachal Pradesh. They appear to have an origin on the Tibetan plateau, and this practice has been partially absorbed in local Tibetan Buddhist ritual.

Figure 10: Two male bropa *with characteristic turbans during a community festival in Khoina village. Photo courtesy Mr. Lobsang Tashi Yamchodu.*

In Sartang belief, every human being has several *awung*, a kind of life essence comparable to Tibetan *bla* and Tshangla *yong*, often (incorrectly) translated in English as 'soul'. These *awung* can be hijacked by malevolent spirits, which causes physical or mental illness. Because men have five *awung*, whereas women have six, women are more susceptible to illness than men. The local religious practitioners will perform healing rituals, which will find the entity that took the *awung*, and offer a ransom for its safe return. This ransom often involves animal sacrifice. We can find similar traditions in both the Buddhist cultures to the west, and in the non-Buddhist tribal cultures to the east.

There are three kinds of religious practitioners among the Sartang, each fulfilling their own respective role within the rituals mentioned above. The *chikji*, wearing a characteristic two-pronged headdress, is responsible for the community rituals addressing the ancestors. The *chikji* is commonly from Khoina or descends from a lineage from Khoina, even in Jerigaon, Khoitam, and Rahung, attesting to the primary position of Khoina village and its clans. The *chöpji dop* oversees the community rituals for the *Phu* and *Da* and performs curative rituals, and he attains his position after studying with an experienced practitioner. The *rom*, finally, is a spirit medium, who becomes possessed by one or more local deities that speak through him. Commonly, when a *chöpji dop* can not identify and cure a person or relief a situation, the *rom* is consulted. The *rom* will also be called to relay any messages from those who have passed away to the bereaved family members and community, including outstanding dues and scores, giving the *rom* a powerful position within Sartang society.

Even in the Sherdukpen village of Rupa, the priests from Khoina and Rahung are well-respected. Moreover, there has traditionally been a kind of patron-saint relationship between the village of Thembang and the Sartang villages, in which Sartang religious practitioners performed certain religious duties during the Thembang community rituals (Huber 2020: 437–444). As I argue in Bodt (forthcoming), the role of these ritual specialists, the autochthonous deity they propitiate, the location of the shrine where they propitiate and the forces that these specialists control are much more crucial to the festival than Huber seems to acknowledge. In addition, up until the present, the *yumin* (the Tshangla word for *rom* 'spirit medium') of Thembang village originally hails from Jerigaon. This may all be further indications that the Sartang presence in the area and their belief system predates that of the Tshangla speakers of Thembang and their ritual beliefs.

Figure 11: Two Sartang religious practitioners with distinctive headgear during annual communal rites, Rahung, January 15th, 2020. Photo © Dr. Michiko Wakita, used with permission.

While the rituals for the *Phu* and *Da* are commonly in a hybrid language of Sartang, Tibetan, Tawang Monpa, and Tshangla, the *Tangyü* rituals and the orations during the curative rituals are commonly in Sartang. In addition to their ritual function, the *chikji* are also the repositories of the Sartang history. They have memorised the origin and migration histories, know the background and origin of all the clans, and are hence important repositories of knowledge about the Sartang.

There are Tibetan Buddhist temples in Darbu, Rahung and Salari, and a significant proportion of the people of Rahung and Khoitam consider themselves nominally Buddhist. Traditionally, Buddhist lay priests from Thembang village would conduct the rituals in the Sartang villages. In the late 20th century, that role was largely taken over by Bhutanese lay monks settled in Salari and Tibetan monks who had resettled in the monastery in Bomdila. There are some Sartang enrolled as monks in several Tibetan Buddhist monasteries in the area, elsewhere in India and in Nepal. Some tension exists between the proponents of the indigenous religion and the Buddhists, mainly because of the issue of animal sacrifices. Otherwise, the relations are cordial, and most people participate in festivals of either faith. Buddhism in the

Sartang communities has not influenced the indigenous faith to the same extent as it has among the Sherdukpen.

During the past decade, a growing number of Sartang people have converted to various evangelical Christian denominations, especially in Khoina and Jerigaon villages. Access to education and healthcare are often primary reasons for conversion. Christian converts often no longer participate in communal festivals and distance themselves from some of the most visible outward cultural traits which they consider related to the old 'pagan' beliefs. This increasingly results in communal tension. In Khoina village, converted Christians refusing to participate in the community rituals have been asked to move to Saidel hamlet on the main Bomdila to Nafra road.

10. Conclusion

Like many small languages of marginalised peoples, the four varieties of Sartang and the history, culture, and traditions of their speakers have not yet received the attention from linguists, anthropologists, and ethnographers that they deserve. This can be partially attributed to the restricted access for non-indigenous researchers to Arunachal Pradesh. Hopefully, this short context description will kindle the interest of readers, in particular graduate, post-graduate and prospective PhD students of linguistics and community linguists in India and abroad to work on the Sartang varieties. A grammatical description of any of the four Sartang varieties will provide a substantial contribution to our understanding of these enigmatic linguistic varieties. From a historical-comparative perspective, Khoina, being generally considered the most archaic and conservative of the Sartang varieties, would warrant description. But from a language revival and revitalisation perspective, the variety of Khoitam is often indicated to be the intermediate and therefore the most suitable variety. Any description of the language would ideally also pay attention to the context in which the language is spoken. Hopefully, this descriptive grammar will be followed by a functional grammar and community and teaching materials that will ensure that Sartang continues to be spoken well into the future.

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