

# Language and Culture in Northeast India and Beyond

IN HONOR OF ROBBINS BURLING

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An obscure word for ‘ancestral deity’ in some  
East Bodish and neighbouring Himalayan  
languages and Qiang:  
Ethnographic records towards a hypothesis<sup>1</sup>

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## 1 Introduction

**D**uring documentation of a specific community festival staged at Himalayan sites across eastern Bhutan and immediately adjacent districts of Arunachal Pradesh (India), I recorded a previously unnoticed word best understood as meaning ‘ancestral deity’ or ‘ancestral being’. Across a range of neighbouring languages in this region, the word’s variable spoken forms include *se/ce/zhi* (Dzala, Dakpa, Kurtöp), *zhe* (Khengkha, Chocha-ngacha) and *chi/chis* (Tshangla). Moreover, in local manuscripts used during the same type of festival by communities speaking all of the aforementioned languages, the Tibetan script orthographies *se*, *zhi*, *[g/b]zhe[s]*, *[r]je*, *pyi* and *phyi* occur for the same word. What appears to be the same or a closely related word occurs among speakers of as yet unclassified languages/dialects in far western Arunachal Pradesh with the spoken forms *chik* (Rahung Sartang), *khik/khit* (Mey/Sherdukpen) and highly likely also *tchat* (Bugun). These latter occurrences, too, are all related to the same type of festival. The word is found used as a stand-alone substantive or in compounds, and is regularly appended to formal proper names

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<sup>1</sup> Fieldwork undertaken between 2009 and 2014 was funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, the Humboldt University of Berlin and the Australian Research Council for a series of projects investigating aspects of culture, social organisation and ritual among communities speaking East Bodish languages and some of their immediate neighbours who share similar patterns and practices. I thank the Centre for Bhutan Studies (Thimphu) and the State Government of Arunachal Pradesh for their ongoing support of my research. I am grateful to my research associate Gwendolyn Hyslop for helpful comments on a draft version of the paper, and to Johanna Prien for her proof-reading.

as a final, classificatory suffix. However, the distribution of both types of usage in speech and written texts is particular to certain language communities.

Herein I provide a brief survey of occurrences and possible cognates of this particular word for 'ancestral deity'. My own records are based upon systematically gathered ethnographic data sampled from highland populations dwelling between Bhutan's Jamkhar Chu river valley in the west, and the Tawang and West Kameng districts of Arunachal Pradesh in the east. While the word's forms and their application are certainly of interest, the social and cultural contexts in which they are embedded and meaningful are just as crucial. I will use both to propose a hypothesis about why this word is only in use among a specific set of neighbouring peoples occupying a well-defined geographic zone of the eastern Himalayas, and that it and other evidence demonstrate an older Qiangic-speaking ancestor population in the same region.

For the sake of brevity, and to address a wider readership here, a large volume of complex ethnographic data is merely summarized from my existing publications and forthcoming monograph detailing ancestral cults and revitalization rites in this part of the Himalayas.<sup>2</sup>

## 2 Ritual and social context

Regardless of the spoken languages sampled for this word meaning 'ancestral deity', or the location of any manuscripts in which it is written, the ethnographic context for its occurrence across its known range is highly consistent and exclusive. I will now briefly outline this. To my present knowledge, occurrences of the word are primarily in relation to calendric, community festivals with rites oriented towards vitality, fertility and success in production. The word always classifies and/or forms a name element of the principal deities or beings reckoned as the ultimate providers of those life-supporting powers and benefits. The main examples of such festivals at any site are mostly performed during Winter, but they can occur as post-harvest events anytime between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> lunar months. In the midland to highland eastern Himalayas and neighbouring Tibetan Plateau lands to the north, this represents the annual period of transition in the production cycle, when rites of revitalization and renewal are typically enacted for the coming year.

Where this word for 'ancestral deity' occurs among speakers of East Bodish languages, and certain communities of their immediate neighbours who speak Chocha-ngacha and Tshangla,<sup>3</sup> we have strong correlative data in the

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<sup>2</sup> See Huber (2013, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2015ms, in press).

<sup>3</sup> Concerning these languages, the East Bodish group (including Dakpa, Dzala, Khengkha and Kurtöp discussed herein) are "closely related to, but not directly descended from Classical Tibetan" (see Hyslop 2013 for a recent overview), while Chocha-ngacha is a form of Tibetan or 'Tibetic' (Tournadre 2014) and Tshangla currently remains unclassified in relation to neighbouring Tibeto-Burman languages.

form of narratives of origin, associated rites and honorific titles that the principal *se/ce/zhi/zhe* and *chis/chik/khik/khit/(?)tchat* beings addressed during the same festivals are regarded as ancestors of local human descent groups. In the regional rhetoric of relatedness, descent groups here includes persons who ‘share the same bone’ or a common, inherited agnatic transmission. While expressions of ‘bone sharing’ group social organisation can vary according to context – as clans, lineages, agnatic collectives or natal households – they always form the main ceremonial groups worshipping in such festivals, which have been described as ‘clan’ ceremonies by the few observers who took note of them. During the period between 2009 and 2014, I recorded both living and defunct forms of this type of festival at more than seventy sites across the region, with the ‘ancestral deity’ word used in the context of more than fifty of them. To date, only a few, basic accounts of these festivals have become available, with the ‘ancestral deity’ word recorded in only two cases.<sup>4</sup>

This ‘ancestral deity’ type only exists within a specific cosmological context, which in turn informs all narratives and myths about these beings, as well as the festivals for their calendric worship. Such beings are invariably associated with the upward vertical axis, which by extension is the ultimate source of all the revitalizing powers and benefits worshippers aspire to. Most examples of this ‘ancestral deity’ type throughout the western and northern range where festivals dedicated to them occur are considered to dwell at the top of the sky arranged in a series of nine, thirteen or more ascending levels. In far eastern areas, the same beings have often become hypostatized onto highland topographical features – upland catchment areas, ridges and hilltops – but equally seem to dwell in the skies surrounding them according to local descriptions. Such ‘settlement’ of ancestral or clan deities, and their concomitant redefinition over time as land or territorial numina, is commonplace along the Himalayas, being a typical indicator of historical migration into an area by the community in question.<sup>5</sup> At certain sites around Dirang, for example, myths and rites for the ‘ancestral deity’ type clearly demonstrate such transitions having occurred there in the past, since aspects of both older ‘sky’-based and more recent ‘land’-based identities survive for the same deities.

Most of the descent groups worshipping this ‘ancestral deity’ type have a dedicated and usually hereditary ritual specialist who conducts the calendric festival, and again the cosmological context determines the specific rites they conduct. For example, for a wide range of these festivals, the specialists must invite the ‘ancestral deity’ down to the ritual site by reciting verbal ritual journeys with upward/upstream and/or vertical itineraries followed by a return

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<sup>4</sup> See Dollfus and Jacquesson 2013 based upon participant observation of Khiksaba at Rupa, and Ugyen Pelgen 2004 who only reports informant reconstructions for Khar phud at Tsamang. Other reliable descriptions are Billorey 1976 and 1978 on Pla at Lhau, Lham Dorji 2004 on Roop at Goleng, and Dorji Penjore 2004 for Kharpu at Wamling.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Diemberger (1997: 315–316). See also Diemberger (1993: 97) on the Kumbo of east Nepal.

journey. These festivals, their rites and their ritual specialists are usually closely associated with the word *bon* meaning ‘rite’, and the identity Bon defining a certain mythological background. However, they have no documented connection with the organized, historical Tibetan religion calling itself g.Yung-drung Bon, and represent a unique development existing parallel to it.

In summary, we can best describe the cultural pattern within which the *se/ce/zhi/zhe/chi/chis/chik/khik/khit/(?)tchat* word occurs as a form of ancestor propitiation for revitalization of descent groups. Its dynamics not only represent what Guntram Hazod identifies as the ‘invitation principle’<sup>6</sup> characteristic of the older cultic system evident in Tibet around the start of the second millennium, they also strongly evoke Maurice Bloch’s concept of the ‘transcendental social’.<sup>7</sup>

### 3 Occurrences

#### 3.1 Speakers of East Bodish languages and Chocha-ngacha

The oldest known occurrence of this ‘ancestral deity’ word is the *-se* classificatory suffix in the name Gu-se lang-ling<sup>8</sup> recorded in *rGyal rigs* manuscripts first composed in 1688 and written in Classical Tibetan.<sup>9</sup> Although the earliest record we have, this *-se* form is linguistically the most innovative,<sup>10</sup> and thus must represent a particular artefact of the recording of the *rGyal rigs* itself.<sup>11</sup> In the section on gDung origins in this text, Gu-se lang-ling appears as an emanation of the male ‘sky-deity’ (*gnam-lha*) ‘O-de gung-rgyal, who himself is something

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<sup>6</sup> See Hazod 2014, who contrasts it with “ritual discourses of barbarizing and civilizing” typical of post-imperial Tibetan religions.

<sup>7</sup> Bloch 2008.

<sup>8</sup> The single source for the *lang-ling* element in the name remains the *rGyal rigs*, and its currently unidentified sources for the gDung narratives (the vexing mention of *bon thang la 'od dkar gyi yig gter* in the *rGyal rigs* finds no parallel reference in the more than one hundred local manuscripts related to the cult I examined in Bhutan and the Mon-yul Corridor). Tibetan *lang[-ma]-ling* and its local variants have poetic associations with bird flight, fish and river water, and trees swaying and in this manner occur as an embellishment in myths about regional ancestral deities. *Lang-ling* also occurs in Old Tibetan names for primordial characters associated with the ‘south’ (lHo) in ‘ritual antecedent narratives’ (*rabs*) recorded in pre-11<sup>th</sup> century documents; see Huber 2015 ms.

<sup>9</sup> Most known *rGyal rigs* manuscripts and their content have been critically evaluated by Aris 1979, 1986, Ardussi 2004, 2007, 2009, and Hazod 2006.

<sup>10</sup> Gwendolyn Hyslop informs me that “For reasons of mechanical physics, the change of *k > ch > sh > s* is very common cross-linguistically but there is no basis for a change to happen the other way around” (personal communication, August 2015).

<sup>11</sup> According to available information on the author/compiler of the *rGyal rigs*, a Buddhist cleric named Ngag-dbang, he was no doubt a Tsanglha speaker from the Kha-gling area of far east Bhutan in a region completely outside of the distribution zone of the ancestral cult we are dealing with herein. Moreover, the vagueness of transcriptions into Classical Tibetan by non-Tibetans is already well attested in Himalayan regions.

of an ‘alpha’-progenitor in older Tibetan myths. He is always categorized as a *lha* which refers to beings dwelling up the vertical cosmic axis, as well as a *pho-lha* meaning the deity of persons and groups who share the same ‘bone’ transmission, and thus have a common agnatic unit or patriclan. ‘O-de gung-rgyal sends his ‘*lha* son’ Gu-se lang-ling down to earth to become the eventual ancestor of human gDung lineages, who are represented by speakers of the East Bodish languages Bumthap and Khengkha in this particular narrative. This deity also takes the Tibetan *lha*, *gnam-lha* and *pho-lha* designations of his ‘father’, ‘O-de gung-rgyal. Today, the name and the cult – or its surviving traces – of the old deity Gu-se, who is locally called Guzhi/Guse/Guzhe/Gurce/Gurzhe/Guruzhe/Gurse (variously written Gu-zhi, Gu-se, Gur-[r]je, Gur-[b]zhe[s], Gur-se and so on), occurs at scores of sites distributed east to west from Tawang across to the Jamkhar Chu valley in Kheng Chikor, and north to south from Kurtö down to Kheng Bjoka.

It is important to note that the old Gu-se deity is subject to a double classification. For example, if one attends a festival staged by Chocha-ngacha speakers, and hears ‘*lha* Gurzhe’ chanted in an oral ritual text, or reads *lha* Gurbzhe in the local manuscripts, this represents the being named Gu classed as both a *lha* of the upper world and an ‘ancestral deity’ here marked by spoken *zhe* and written *-bzhe*. This classificatory doubling is found everywhere the word for ‘ancestral deity’ occurs. It is a strong indicator of how the whole cult of ancestral beings within the region has an older substratum, reflected in the *zhe* or *-bzhe* and other local equivalents, which has been articulated with or overlaid by a later, more explicitly Tibetan substratum, represented by the *lha*.

The majority of communities who still worship this old Gu-se deity speak East Bodish languages, although a significant minority of Chocha-ngacha-speakers along the west bank of the mid-Kuri Chu river valley do as well. This latter group have long lived adjacent to, and had contacts with, speakers of East Bodish languages to their north (Kurtöp, Dzala), west (Bumthap) and south (Khengkha) who also maintain the Gu-se cult. It remains an open question whether Chocha-ngacha-speakers acquired the Gu-se cult from East Bodish-speaking neighbours via migration and/or uxorilocal marriage – the only possible transmission mechanisms for hereditary cults of agnatic ancestors – or whether they had a much older, ancestral basis for it. However, concerning presence of the Gu-se cult in any Tshangla-speaking environment we have far more certainty. In such cases it is strictly an epiphenomenon, always traceable to contacts via historical migrations and affinal alliances with speakers of East Bodish languages and Chocha-ngacha. It is also noteworthy that, within this distribution, it is only in the Dzala and Dakpa speaking zone<sup>12</sup> that we find any

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<sup>12</sup> Following van Driem’s 2007 treatment of Dzala and Dakpa as separate languages forming a coherent sub-group within East Bodish, Hyslop and Karma Tshering 2010, Bodt 2012: 288–290 and Hyslop 2013: sec. 3 and fig. 2 have promoted the idea that all Dzala and Dakpa dialects might better be grouped as a single language.

evidence of *se/ce/zhi/zhe* (written *se*, [r]je, zhi, [g/b]zhe[s]) actually used as a substantive, rather than merely as the suffix on the name Gu-se and its local variants.

Moreover, with a bulk of new ethnographic data available, it appears that the wide-spread but singular cult of Gu-se represents a regional exception. Indeed, the highest concentrations of ‘ancestral deities’ with the classificatory name suffix in question only occur in the myths and rites of Dzala and Dakpa speakers settled in parallel valleys along the Khoma Chu and upper Kolong Chu river catchments in northeast Bhutan, and in the Tawang district to the east. Thus, in local oral chants and ritual manuscripts used in these valleys to celebrate both surviving and recently defunct festivals for ancestral deities, in addition to occurrences of Gu-se name variants we find the written names Khu-brang-zhe, Chus-zhes, Tha’u-rje, ’Thing-se-zhe, [m]Tho’u-[g/b]zhe[s] (also Tho’u-je), [g]Nam-['r]dor-zhe (also Nam-’dir-zhe), rNa’u-rje, Phong-phong-zhe, Mo-bzhe and Yo-long-rje. They all feature in myths and rites as clan ancestor beings who descend from the sky. Moreover, in most communities where these deities are still worshipped, clan social organization is evident until today, including groups settled in parts of the upper Khoma Chu and Kolong Chu river valleys within Bhutan.<sup>13</sup>

So far, the data indicate that occurrences of this ‘ancestral deity’ word and its attendant cultural context are primarily related to speakers of East Bodish languages, and secondarily to those speakers of other languages within their immediate socio-historical orbits. Overall, the phenomenon is more highly developed in far northern areas compared with what is found as one moves southwards. Data collected south of the Ze La pass, and thus south of the main Dakpa-speaking zone within the historical Mon-yul Corridor (today’s Tawang district), repeats these patterns. South of the Ze La we find no evidence of the older cult of Gu-se, yet that of his ‘father’, *lha* ’O-de gung-rgyal, is certainly present, as it is also in parts of Tawang to the north.

### 3.2 Speakers of Dirang Tshangla

Examples of the same festivals I defined as ‘ancestor propitiation for revitalization of descent groups’ also exist in the Dirang circle of West Kameng district. Yet, there the phenomenon is restricted to very specific sites and groups. This area has the most complex social-historical landscape of any within my research region. Most communities are composed of strata of migrant residues representing both arrivals and settlements in different waves and via gradual diffusion, and the cultural and linguistic traces of this are everywhere in evidence. Among those communities whose main language today is the Dirang dialect of Tshangla, the festival type that concerns us is celebrated at only a handful of

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<sup>13</sup> One makes this point since it is generally assumed that living clan organisation ceased long ago in Bhutan, and that mere historical or mythical traces of it remain.

sites. Those worship communities each have a documented historical settlement record of at least three to six centuries in depth, but many are certainly older. In every case they have origin and migration narratives claiming descent from Dakpa-speakers in Tawang or from specific Tibetan Plateau peoples/regions. They also share a form of two-tiered social and ritual organization based upon both clan and status group membership typical of complex migrant societies. This not only regulates affinity and other relations, but also strongly determines that only those agnatic groups whose claims of ancestry from the ‘north’ are accepted are included as ritual sponsors in communal worship of ancestral deities. Finally, in both the oral and written ritual texts used during their ‘clan’ festivals, the basic Tibetan liturgical language employed is influenced by a whole range of distinct Dakpa terms and expressions not evident in any form of Tshangla.

Among these Dirang Tshangla-speaking worship communities, the spoken term to refer to their ‘clan’ deities is *chis* (rarely *chi*),<sup>14</sup> written somewhat idiosyncratically as both *pyi* and *phyi* in local documents using Tibetan script. Thus, their ‘clan’ festivals are colloquially referred to as *chis*, *chisöshe* or *chisöwen*, generally meaning ‘propitiation of the *chis*’. There are simple stone altars termed (*sa*) *narang*, literally ‘(place to) rest on a journey’ – a word of Dakpa origin<sup>15</sup> – located in the sacred groves beyond the village precincts where such festivals are celebrated, and to which the deities are conducted down along the vertical axis with a verbal ritual journey to be hosted and addressed. During festivals, these altars are termed *chis narang*, ‘rest on the journey [for] the *chis*’. The same double classification of ancestral deities we noted for Gu-se to the west is also evident for *chis* in Dirang. A *chis* being worshipped during a *chisöshe* festival can also be titled *lha* and the event termed alternatively *lhasöshe*; these usages are interchangeable in colloquial speech. The same deities also have a parallel, local cosmological classification as *phu* (‘upland’), but it is telling that this latter category name is never exchanged with *chis* in the manner that *lha* is.

In summary, the data from Dirang for attestably long-established communities nowadays speaking Tshangla indicate an older cultic substratum of ancestral worship occurring together with a certain type of social organization and ritual language, all of which is shared with – and highly likely originated within – the East Bodish zone further north. Concomitantly, and as is evident in Bhutan, there appear to be no inherent connections with this cultural pattern in any Dirang Tshangla-speaking groups who lack ancestral connections north-

<sup>14</sup> The respectful, oral address to these same deities during rites is the Dakpa kin term *achi*.

<sup>15</sup> Derived from Dakpa *sa* ‘earth/land’ or ‘place’ (*sacha*), *ngai* ‘rest’ with *rang nang* ‘road’ or ‘way’. Note that *sa narang* has many cognates in communities of East Bodish and Chocha-ngacha speakers at sites where the same ancestral cult festivals include verbal ritual journeys, e.g. *nasa*, *ngalsa* and *ngetsosa* (written *sna sa*, *ngal sa*, also *ngal ’tsho sa*; cf. Tibetan *ngal ba* ‘tiredness’, *ngal gso ba* lit. ‘to cure tiredness’).



wards. Negative evidence can also be added here for anomalous populations who have no discernable roots in the region, such as the Brokpa, Lishpa and Chugpa. Brokpa groups speaking a form of Tibetan and representing descendants of later migrants<sup>16</sup> into the region from the north are settled around the highland margins of, and within Dirang and Tawang districts. The Lishpa and Chugpa speaking as yet unclassified language/dialects – albeit often held to share affinities with Mey/Sherdukpen, Sartang and Bugun – are settled at the village site named Lish and in the adjacent Chug valley, although, as actual social entities and identities, they have left no traces in any historical documents prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Affinal relations with these small groups have been shunned by long-established Dirang communities, a sure sign of their standing as more recent migrants with no position in the older clan and status hierarchy. As we would expect, the Brokpa, Lishpa and Chugpa neither have any form of the ‘ancestor propitiation for revitalization of descent groups’ cultural pattern, nor the social organization and language that goes along with it.

### 3.3 Speakers of Sartang, Mey/Sherdukpen and Bugun

My regional ethnographic survey of ancestral cults and festivals extended to the Rahungpa community who speak a language/dialect recently called Sartang (i.e. formerly But Monpa). I documented the annual winter ‘clan’ festival named Chiksaybu celebrated at the old – and now mostly abandoned – Rahung village site just to the north of the Bomdi La pass in Dirang district. The Rahungpa themselves say they speak a dialect of the same language known as Mey/Sherdukpen found south of the Bomdi La. These two communities split following a major conflict documented at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with the Rahungpa subsequently maintaining a longer period of client relations with Tshangla-speaking patrons across the valley at Thempang.<sup>17</sup> Having documented Thempang’s ‘clan’ festival, I compared it and other examples of the *chisöshe* type of festivals celebrated to the north around Dirang with the organization and rites of the Rahungpa’s Chiksaybu festival. These are socially and ritually close in various respects. Chiksaybu is explained as ‘worship of the *chik*’, and is a cognate of *chisöshe/chisöwen* elsewhere in Dirang. The two *chik* deities addressed during the festival, Manjang and Mani, are also co-classified as *phu* like the *chis* elsewhere in Dirang.

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<sup>16</sup> Bodt’s (2012: 327) claim of a southward Brokpa migration ‘safely dated to the second half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century’ has no historical basis. The oldest mention of this group in a *rGyal rigs* manuscript cannot date earlier than 1688 (Ardussi 2007), while the oldest known *Khyung gdung rabs* manuscript detailing the group’s own migration dates to 1756 (*rab byung bcu gsum pa’i me pho byi ba’i lo*), and we have precious little idea of what transpired in this region during the intervening four and a half centuries.

<sup>17</sup> On the events in 1810–1811, See Blo-bzang Thabs-mkhas ca. 1826: 11b–12b; cf. MacKenzie 1884: 19 on the impacts of this conflict on Thempang’s relations with Asam. Collective memories of the conflict are preserved in the oral folk histories of both Thempang and Rahung.

While the ceremonial groups and many of the rites performed during Chiksaybu parallel those used to the north, none of the chants in that festival was based upon a Tibetan or Dakpa liturgical language. This is highly likely due to the fact that the present hereditary lineage of *chopji[do]* ritual specialists who oversee the rites of Chiksaybu are not from any Rahungpa clan, but had been brought in following the 19<sup>th</sup> century Rahungpa split with the Sherdukpen. The *chopji[do]* originally hail from But (a.k.a. Jirigaon), the easternmost of the four Sartang-speaking communities, and are thus further removed from the historical influence of Tibetan and Dakpa speakers along the main premodern trade routes of the Mon-yul Corridor.

A short ethnographic account of the winter ‘clan’ festival named Khiksaba celebrated at Rupa south of the Bomdi La pass by Mey/Sherdukpen speakers was recently published. The authors of that study noted both *khik* and *khit* as terms meaning ‘deity’ in the context of Khiksaba, which itself is glossed as ‘Khik ritual/festival’.<sup>18</sup> The clan-based ceremonial groups at the event address two beings named Sung Khit/Khik and Soro Khit. In these names, it appears *khit* functions as a classificatory suffix or postposition marker, as do cognate terms for ‘ancestral deity’ further north and west. As with all the other cases cited above, these deities are co-classified as *phu*<sup>19</sup> and also *lo*, with Mey/Sherdukpen *lo* being spoken for occurrences of Tibetan *lha* in their ritual vocabulary which is essentially the same as that found everywhere to the north, for example *loyak* for *lhayak* (*lha-g.yag*, the sacrificial bovine presented to the deity), *lochang* for *lhachang* (*lha-chang*, the sacrificial beer for the deity), *lo-blang* for *lhabrang* (*lha-brang*, the ritual shelter for hosting the deity), and so on.<sup>20</sup> The term designating the only indigenous Sherdukpen ritual specialist, and the one who presides over Khiksaba, is *zizi* also reported as *jiji*, *chizi* and *khikzizi*.<sup>21</sup>

Comparing the data on the Sherdukpen Khiksaba with my own on Rahung Chiksaybu and other festivals celebrated throughout Dirang and Tawang, there is no doubt they are all derived from the same set of social and cultural patterns. This is particularly evident within the Sherdukpen festival. While Khiksaba includes ‘indigenous’ components of purely local significance, many of its key rites, ritual actors and their costumes and titles are simply identical with those occurring in the once common – now nearly defunct – Pla festivals around Tawang, as well as in festivals further west in the Dzala-speaking zone. Like other festivals of ‘ancestor propitiation for revitalization of descent groups’ everywhere else throughout the region, Khiksaba features a great deal of sung ritual texts performed by different types of actors. For all other festivals, these ritual

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<sup>18</sup> Dollfus and Jacquesson 2013: 4, 145.

<sup>19</sup> See Sharma 1961: 75 “Phu Sawang Sorra: It is a deity residing in the Rupa area.”

<sup>20</sup> Dollfus and Jacquesson 2013: 4, 145.

<sup>21</sup> See Elwin 1958: 243, Sarkar 1980: 65, Rinchin Dondrup 1988: 52, Dollfus and Jacquesson 2013: 4, 145.

texts provide key comparative evidence for understanding such events from cultural-historical and linguistic perspectives, and it is a source of regret that the recent study of Khiksaba includes but a half dozen lines of original song text from such a large and rich corpus. What the authors of the study do report on these song texts is an important piece of information which I was also told repeatedly at Rahung by those familiar with the Khiksaba festival: the main language of the Khiksaba songs is not Mey/Sherdukpen, or any other related language for that matter. Rather, it is Dakpa, or ‘Brahmi’<sup>22</sup> – as Dakpa is commonly named in this part of the Mon-yul Corridor – albeit slightly influenced in places by Mey/Sherdukpen.

The final, relevant record is the word variously recorded as *cha/chak/chchak/kashyat/tchat* among Bugun speakers who are direct neighbours of the Sherdukpen. This word occurs in the name of a single Bugun winter festival celebrated over the past half century that we know of at both Wanghoo and Singchung villages. The few available descriptions of the festival reveal that it generally fits with the ‘ancestor propitiation for revitalization of descent groups’ pattern, and that ‘clan’ units had been a central feature of its internal organization.<sup>23</sup> Different writers have named these Bugun festivals Chasoai, Chak-Sowai, Chchaksowa or Kashyat-sowai, with the latest version, Tchat Sowai, proposed by Vanessa Cholez, whose recent research includes some observation of these festivals.<sup>24</sup> Apart from this, I do not know what status the word *tchat* might have in Bugun language more generally. The few records of spoken Bugun available include *jab-riet* ‘propitiation’ and *mise-siya* ‘worship’, while *sowai* and *sabo* appear to be verbs designating only certain Bugun festivals and not others.<sup>25</sup> These latter verb forms are cognate with *söshe*, *söwen*, *saybu* and *saba* in all the cases of ‘ancestral deity’ festivals we examined further north, and all relate to Tibetan *gsol-ba*<sup>26</sup> (pronounced *solwa*, *söwa*) occurring in the ritual vocabulary of festivals in the Dakpa and Dzala areas. A final point of interest is that while Bugun Tchat Sowai festivals certainly share elements in common with Sherdukpen Khiksaba, both the Tchat Sowai and the

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<sup>22</sup> Dollfus and Jacquesson 2013: 101 n.10 state of Brahmi “This term certainly refers to a form of Sanskrit or Pali.”, although the Brahmi = Dakpa equation has long been known; cf. Barua 1995: 243, van Driem 2001: 916–917, Duarah 1990: 6.

<sup>23</sup> The few published details can be found in Deuri 1971, Dhar 1995: 188, Ghosh 1992: 71–74, Grewal 1997: 89–94, Pandey 1991: 87, Pandey 1996: 81, 83, 85–88 and Rinchin Dondrup 1990: vi, 100.

<sup>24</sup> Vanessa Cholez (personal communication) attended Tchat Sowai festivals as an aspect of her doctoral dissertation research in progress. Photographs Vanessa kindly sent me from the Wanghoo Tchat Sowai celebrated during 2012 clearly revealed its material affinity with both the Sherdukpen Khiksaba and Rahung Chiksaybu festivals.

<sup>25</sup> Rinchin Dondrup 1990: vi, 56, 100, Pandey 1996: 82–83.

<sup>26</sup> This Tibetan verb is often glossed as ‘worship, propitiation’, which is generally acceptable, while in contexts of ancestral festivals it more specifically means ‘request, take [i.e. life-powers and support of ancestral deities]’ and ‘give, serve [i.e. in respectful hosting of ancestral deities]’.

Chiksaybu at Rahung share aspects in common which are not – or no longer – represented in Khiksaba.<sup>27</sup>

The available Bugun data remains ‘thinner’ than all other cases cited above, and caution is prudent when drawing any conclusions. It does however suggest that *tchat* occurring in a social and ritual context more or less identical to other festivals in the region represents the southernmost form in an existing *chis/chik/khik/khit* continuum found to the north.

## 4 Qiangic and Naic cognates

Beyond the communities and their languages included within my survey above, I was unable to identify convincing cognates for these ‘ancestral’ deity words in other spoken languages within this general region of the eastern Himalayas. Similarly, those Tibetan dialects spoken in immediately adjacent regions of the Plateau system to the north, feature nothing comparable. Neither Old Tibetan<sup>28</sup> nor Classical Tibetan lexical funds offer anything cognate. This last result was the more surprising. Beyond consulting lexicons, for Tibetan sources I specifically investigated documents we know were composed or circulated in the southern Tibetan borderlands immediately north of the research region, as well as a range of narratives which are philologically proven source materials for many details of the cults of ’O-de gung-rgyal, Gu-se and other deities worshipped during the festivals that concern us.

A closely cognate term for ‘deity’ and ‘ancestral deity/being’, and one used as both a classificatory suffix on names and a substantive, occurs in dialects of the Qiang language spoken in the Min Shan mountains and associated river valleys, and nowadays divided into Northern Qiang and Southern Qiang. Interestingly, the word occurs there with a similar phonetic variation to that attested in data from my research area. Here one can usefully cite the early 20<sup>th</sup> century observations by David C. Graham on the names of, and classification for the major ancestral deity of premodern Qiang populations:

[. . .] in nearly all communities he is called Mu-bya-sei, Mu-byei-sei, Mu-bya-shi, Mu-ta-be-ts’e, M-byei-sei, or Ma-byei-chi. Ch’i, sei, shi or ts’e

<sup>27</sup> The best example is the significant role of the *massi* (Bugun) or *mashee* (Rahung) ritual actor; see Pandey 1996: 85–87, Huber 2015 b.

<sup>28</sup> The sole candidate would have been Old Tibetan *gsas* (today pronounced *say*). See the single occurrence in the divination text ITJ 738: 3v44–45: *khyim gi lha bzang po ’am pha myes gsas bzang po*, ‘a good/positive *lha* of the house, or a good/positive *gsas* [of] the paternal ancestors’. However, this is not supported by *gsas* occurrences elsewhere in the Old Tibetan corpus, which indicate auxiliary beings for ritual specialists as well as such specialists themselves (often appearing as primordial archetypes in myths), and there *gsas* is often qualified by *drag* ‘strong’, ‘intense’. Old Tibetan *gzhe* may be relevant, but is similarly inconclusive. In context it appears to mean a ‘past time’ of some unit (e.g. year), as in later Classical Tibetan *gzhes*; see notes on Old Tibetan *gzhe* in Dotson 2013: 336 n.32.

means 'god,' and the other two syllables mean 'sky.' Literally it means sky god. At least at Mushang-chai, Lung-ch'i-chai, and Tung-men-wai, where Christian influence has been strong, he is called Abba Ch'i. Abba means 'father' [. . .] in most localities among the Ch'iang it may be used with any god, and is always applied to the male ancestor god, Abba Sei. (Graham 1958: 45)<sup>29</sup>

In their transcriptions of, and notes on premodern Qiang ritual texts and rites, both Graham and his contemporary Hu Chien-min recorded the names of dozens of individual Qiang deities bearing forms of this same *ch'i/sei/shi/ts'e* 'deity' term/suffix.<sup>30</sup> The range of Qiang spoken forms and meanings noted by Graham, Hu Chien-min and Wen Yu<sup>31</sup> prior to the 1950s have all since been recorded by linguists who more recently studied dialects of Qiang spoken throughout the Min Shan region within western Sichuan.<sup>32</sup> Demonstrating that these Qiang terms for 'deity' and 'ancestral deity' are more than a coincidence in relation to the 'ancestral deity' word in my research area is not difficult using ethnographic data.

If 'ancestral deity' terms from both Bhutan and the Mon-yul Corridor and the Qiang area represent true cognates that have survived through time from some common origin, we would also expect common identities for ancestral beings to have also survived along with the terms. There are in fact several strong candidates. Let us first recall that the older written name Gu-se and its later variants from Bhutan and the Mon-yul Corridor all literally mean 'Gu ancestral deity/being', and that this ancestral identity is the most wide-spread within the region, indicating that at some point during the past Gu must have been considered an important ancestor for the migrant peoples who carried his cult with them. According to origin narratives recorded during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century among Northern Qiang and Southern Qiang speakers, Gu La (or Gula) was the identity of the old, ancestral Qiang themselves, at the time they migrated southwards down the eastern Marches of the Tibetan Plateau system, to settle in their present territory of the Min Shan ranges.<sup>33</sup> Additionally, the name recorded as Gkow-la-tsu also named this early Qiang ancestor.<sup>34</sup>

The above forms of the Gu mythological name do not only occur within the Min Shan ranges, but are found as well in other neighbouring areas where

<sup>29</sup> Graham's system of assigning tones using superscript numbers is omitted here.

<sup>30</sup> See Graham 1958: 45–52, 69–70, Hu Chien-Min 1941: 5–14.

<sup>31</sup> On the so-called Chiu Tzu Ying dialect, see Wen Yu 1950: 25 *ts'e* 'god', spirit, cf. 36 *yo p'xi ts'e* 'white stone god', cf. also Hu Chien-Min 1941: 5.

<sup>32</sup> See Evans 2001: 125, 356 (cf. also 301–302 on entires for 'soul') who treated six different Qiang dialects, and LaPolla 2003: 170 *xsi* 'diety (family god)' in the dialect in Mao County.

<sup>33</sup> Graham 1958: 7, 100. Note also the Qiang deity name Shi-gu-tzé record by Hu Chien-min 1941: 10.

<sup>34</sup> Rock 1948: 9 n.2, Rock 1952, II: 581 citing data collected by T. Torrance at Li-fan hsien. Whenever citing Rock's transcription of Naxi, I have adopted the conversion used in Oppitz and Hsu 1998: 19 to replace Rock's superscript numbers registering tones.

Qiangic and related Naic languages are spoken today. We have written Tibetan records of the already ‘deified’ form Gu-se or Gu-zi as toponyms and mythological motifs in parts of far eastern Tibet where Qiangic languages such as Muya/Munya (earlier Minyak) are spoken further westwards of the Min Shan ranges.<sup>35</sup> The Gkow-la-tsu form is also found preserved as Gkâw-là-ts’ú’ in Naxi ritual texts to designate the apical ancestor of the four primordial Naxi clans.<sup>36</sup> This common ancestor claimed by both peoples is not surprising, since the Naxi are widely considered by themselves and outside observers to be migrants from the north, and a branch of an earlier Qiang ancestor population. It is noteworthy that, along with Gu, these Gkow/Gkâw variants are also of interest in my research region since origin myths, clan names and toponyms – which together represent the ‘classic’ cultural domains for preservation of ancestral identities – in the parallel valleys settled with Kurtöp, Dzala and Dakpa speakers feature so many significant Ku, Khu, Ko and Kho names.

Concerning further identities possibly shared between ancestral worship in Bhutan and the Mon-yul Corridor and among the Qiang, the name Mo-bzhe occurring in manuscripts from the Dakpa- and Dzala-speaking zone is also of interest. Mo-bzhe meaning the ‘Mo ancestral deity/being’ can be compared with the Qiang deity Mo-ts’o described by Graham as being ‘male, regarded as the equivalent of the ancestors’, while the deity Mo-bo-sei (and Mo-go-i-shi) also has intimate ancestral associations as the god of the hearth place, represented by one of the three hearth stones or tripod legs surrounding the fire place (the other two stones/legs are ‘A-ba-sei, the male ancestor, and A-ta-sei, the female ancestor’).<sup>37</sup> A final example is Tho’u-zhe, the ‘Tho’u ancestral deity/being’, who is significant in ritual texts from the Khoma Chu and upper Kholong Chu river valleys of far northeast Bhutan, and who can be compared with a Qiang deity named Do-dzu-sei, whom Graham identifies as the ‘door god . . . who keeps demons out of homes’.<sup>38</sup>

In addition to claiming cognates for words and exploring name-matching, a great deal of ethnographic data from all the populations just cited can be subject to rigorous comparison. To briefly cite just one among a range of examples explored in my forthcoming monograph (Huber 2015 ms), and an example I already laid out a set of reference points for appreciating above, we can take the contexts, actors, exterior forms and symbolic content of communal festivals. Among the Naxi and the Qiang, who are claimed to be branches of an earlier

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<sup>35</sup> When first discussing the Gu-se name in the *rGyal rigs*, Aris 1979: 127 pointed out that Rolf Stein identified the toponym Gu-se or Gling Gu-se (also written ‘Gu-zi, mGu-zi) in the far east of the Tibetan Plateau, in association with the Gesar epic and the Rlangs clan. Stein 1959: 128, 174 n.75 also noted that Gu-se or ‘Gu-zi skya-rengs and ‘Gu-zi shong-dkar are all names occurring in the Gesar epic.

<sup>36</sup> Rock 1955: 151 n.10, and Rock 1952, II: 581 who made the equation between the Qiang and Naxi ancestor figures.

<sup>37</sup> Graham 1958: 48–49, cf. 46 fig. 3, plate 15 caption.

<sup>38</sup> Graham 1958: 48.

common population, we find that both peoples share their oldest form of communal, calendric rite, the so-called ‘Propitiation of Heaven’ festival (*Muân bpò*’ in Naxi).<sup>39</sup> Such festivals – at least in all the records for premodern occurrences of them – were organized on the lines of clan-based, ‘bone sharing’ descent units who formed the main ceremonial groups. The major annual events were staged during Winter around the lunar new year, in sacred groves at simple stone altars on the outskirts of villages, and at which these ceremonial groups addressed sky beings reckoned as ancestors to ensure their annual revitalization. This is the exact cultural pattern we find in the research data from east Bhutan and the Mon-yul Corridor. As an interpretive exercise, I compared my own ethnographic documentation of ‘clan’ festivals in certain parts of the Mon-yul Corridor with accounts of the Naxi ‘Propitiation of Heaven’ festivals, while I consulted the less extensive Qiang data on the same festival type in parallel. There are some differences, yet the overall result is that the festivals from the two distant regions are almost identical right down to fine details. The same positive results can be obtained by comparing cosmologies, myths, other types of rites and cultural practices, items of material culture unique to both areas, and so on, as I do in detail in my forthcoming monograph (Huber 2015ms). The specificity in those comparisons across such a wide range of indices is impressive. To be sure, it far exceeds the usual, cautious references to ‘family resemblances’ mooted by anthropologists when comparing features from distant societies speaking Tibeto-Burman languages.

Qiangic and Naic languages are not considered closely related to those in the East Bodish group.<sup>40</sup> If convincing evidence of significant past links between their speakers can be established, this may have potential ramifications for our understanding of Tibeto-Burman historical linguistics.

## 5 Summary and hypothesis

My survey results for the word meaning ‘ancestral deity’ roughly define two ‘paths’ along which forms of the word are distributed (see figure 1). One path of *se/ce/zhi/zhe* forms extends in an approximate arch west from Tawang, across to Kurtö and down the Kuri Chu to points in southernmost Kheng, while the other path of *chis/chik/khik/khit/(?)tchat* forms runs down the Mon-yul Corridor between the southern flanks of the Ze La pass and the southern flanks of the Bomdi La pass. It is to be noted that these two paths basically move around either side of, and therefore completely by-pass, what is today’s large, core area of Tshangla-speakers. There are three findings I can demonstrate beyond doubt:

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<sup>39</sup> See Rock 1948, McKhann 1992, Rock and Oppitz 1998.

<sup>40</sup> See Jacques and Michaud 2011 for the most recent review of Qiangic and Naic languages.

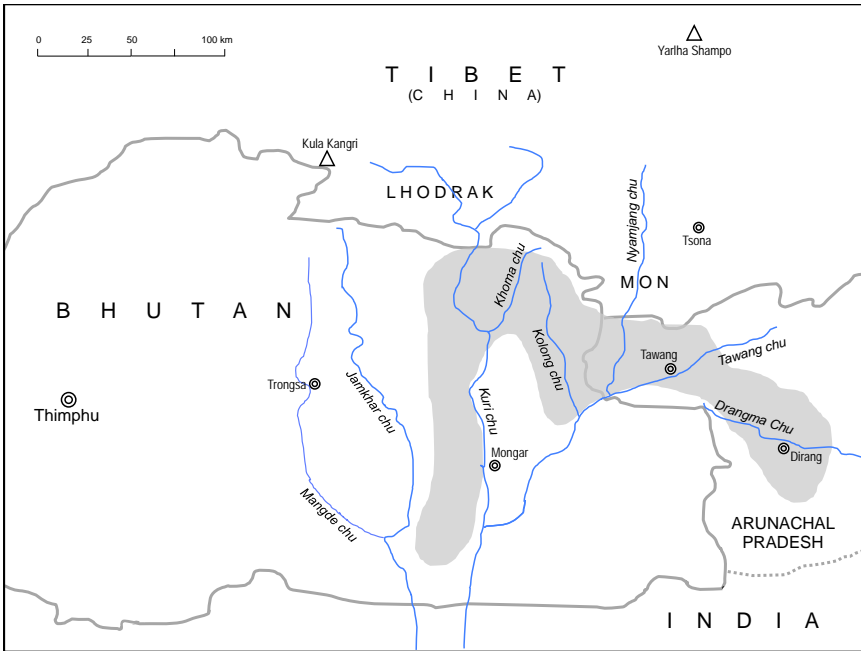


FIGURE 1– Distribution region for ‘ancestral deity’ word forms

- i. All forms of the word are closely nested within, and more or less exclusive to, a shared and very specific social and cultural pattern I have described herein as ‘ancestor propitiation for revitalization of descent groups’;
- ii. The Dzala and Dakpa speaking valleys to the north appear to be the historical centre of gravity for preservation or sophisticated development of the same social and cultural pattern, and, in the case of the Dakpa-speakers of Tawang, they also appear to have been migratory carriers – and possibly also a source for local emulations – of significant aspects of this pattern southwards down the Mon-yul Corridor, at least as far as the Sherdukpen settlement region just south of the Bomdi La;
- iii. Ancestral deities originally classified by both *se/ce/zhi/zhe* and *chis/chik/khik/khit/(?)tchat* forms of the word were co-classified with Tibetan (e.g. *lha*, *pho-lha*) and possibly local cultic categories (e.g. *phu*). This is regionally evident. These might best be understood as traces of syncretic moments, when an integral and inherently conservative cult of ancestral deities was accommodated both with what was there before it arrived, and what came along later in its wake.



The above points, taken together with the Qiang and Naxi cognates and comparisons I explored, encourage me to propose a hypothesis with the following points:

- i. Some earlier population stratum sharing common ancestral roots with the Qiangic and Naic speaking peoples along the south-eastern Marches of the Tibetan Plateau system was once established in the series of parallel highland valleys of what is today far north-eastern Bhutan and the Tawang district of India.
- ii. They, or their already locally assimilated descendants, spread southward, most likely incrementally via micro-migrations<sup>41</sup> and intermarriage, along the two ‘paths’ indicated by the presence and traces of their ancestral cult today.

This hypothesis has both limits and potential for development to address outstanding questions. Firstly, while it is Dzala and Dakpa speakers who nowadays occupy the valleys where a hypothetical ancestral population with Qiangic and Naic roots seems most likely to have been concentrated in and spread out from, we are unable to address the question of how the former and the latter once stood in relation to each other – which was there initially, or were they one and the same, or was one assimilated into the other, and so on?

Furthermore, Rolf Stein already proposed that Qiangic speakers, namely the somewhat amorphous ‘ancient Ch’iang’ and the Minyak, were components among various proto-Tibetan ancestral populations who migrated from east to west onto the Plateau, and whose descendants together with others eventually became the ‘Tibetans’ of the historical period. Realizing there could be no conventional historical accounting of such early Ch’iang and Minyak migrants, Stein drew together various indicators from Chinese historiography, narratives about Tibetan ‘proto-clans’, locations of old stone-tower architecture, and some conceptual-linguistic comparisons.<sup>42</sup> Rather than puzzling over vague, contradictory and mostly rather late Tibetan historiographic texts, as has been the trend in scholarship since Stein’s proposal, his ideas about these proto-Tibetan ancestral populations will best be demonstrated with a specific geographical focus and empirical evidence, as I have attempted to begin herein.

Finally, the vaguely known peoples of southernmost central Tibet who were collectively labelled *Dung* or *Dung-reng* and represented as aggressive misfits by mediaeval Tibetan historians, have already featured in various explorative discussions about migration, language and social and cultural history

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<sup>41</sup> Micro-migrations are the most realistic model we have for conceiving premodern population movements within eastern Himalayan environments; see Huber 2012.

<sup>42</sup> Stein 1951, 1957, 1961, 1972.

within my research region.<sup>43</sup> For a variety of reasons – which would require another substantial article to do justice to – the so-called Shar Dung of Lhodrak (see figure 1), who migrated southwards into my research region during the mid-14<sup>th</sup> century, emerge as the most likely candidate population with probable Qiangic and Naic roots to fit in my hypothesis. That is a topic I explore in my forthcoming monograph *Source of Life* (Huber 2015ms).

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<sup>43</sup> See, for examples, Aris 1979: chapt. 5, fig. 4, Ardussi 2004, Bodt 2012: 326–327, Karma Phuntsho 2013: 120–133.

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