Despite its prominent position in the eastern Himalayas, near the border of South vs. SE Asia and sandwiched between India and China, very little is known about Bhutanese prehistory. Only six of Bhutan’s approximately 20 languages have been studied to any degree (Driem 1998; Andvik 2010; Hyslop 2011; Driem 1995; Genetti 2009; Driem 2007; Nishida 2009) and one pre-historical archaeological study been conducted (Meyer et al. 2009). The aim of this study is to advance our understanding of Bhutan’s past through linguistic study of grains used by Bhutan’s disparate ethnolinguistic groups.

The estimated (based on definitions of ‘language’ versus ‘dialect’) 20 languages indigenous to Bhutan all belong to the Tibeto-Burman (TB) language family. Dzongkha, spoken in the west, is linguistically a dialect of Tibetan. The next largest language group is Tshangla, unclassified TB, spoken in the east. East Bodish languages (linguistic ‘cousins’ of Tibetan) are spoken in the central and north-eastern portions of the country, bridging the gap between Dzongkha and Tshangla. ’Olekha, Gongduk and Lhokpu are other unclassified Tibeto-Burman languages spoken in small, isolated pockets in various places throughout the Kingdom.

Rice is grown and consumed by all these ethnolinguistic groups and has an increased association with prestige. Different linguistic roots are used for different stages of the paddy > cooked rice process amongst the different languages. For example, Kurtôp ipa refers to cooked rice while in Khengkha it refers to paddy. For ‘paddy’, Kurtôp and Dzongkha reflect different reflexes of the same root: Kurtôp nras versus Dzongkha hjâ while in Phobjip sem reflects a root not currently found elsewhere in Bhutan.

There are three different millets used in Bhutan. Foxtail millet (Setaria italica) is ran in Kurtôp, yangre in Khengkha and khê in Dzongkha. Data for four languages show four different roots for finger millet (Eleusine coracana): Khengkha kongpu, ’Olekha kombala, Dzongkha mòmbja, and Kurtôp thre, which is presumably cognate with the Dzongkha word for Setaria. Panicum miliaceum in Dzongkha is pcham.

Other grains cultivated in Bhutan are wheat (Kurtôp go; Dzongkha kâ Phobjip kar), Barley (Kurtôp nas; Phobjip nes; Dzongkha nâ), Bitter Buckwheat (Kurtôp brama; Phobjip brêm; Dzongkha bj’ô), Sweet Buckwheat (Kurtôp cara; Dzongkha and Phobjip gere), and maize (Kurtôp bachukpa; Dzongkha and Phobjip geza).

The linguistic data are presented together with photographs and relevant ethnobotanical information (such as processes employed in processing). We also present the data in light of a linguistic map of the country, allowing the researchers to make better inferences about the linguistic relationship of the lexical roots and (as opposed to?) the actual development of cultivation of each grain throughout the region.

References:


Genetti, Carol. 2009. An introduction to Dzala, an East Bodish language of Bhutan presented at the 15th Himalayan Languages Symposium, August 1, Eugene, OR.

