

Proto-Tibeto-Burman Grain Crops

Dr. David Bradley

La Trobe University, Australia

D.Bradley@latrobe.edu.au

The Tibeto-Burman languages are spread over the entire Himalayan region, from Kashmir in the west, across northern South Asia, southwestern China and northern mainland Southeast Asia, in a wide variety of ecological zones from very high altitude to tropical. They include over 200 languages falling into four major subgroups (Bodic, Sal, Burmic, Qiangic), with many additional smaller subgroups. Much ink has been spilled in the linguistic literature about the original homeland of the early Tibeto-Burman groups, but it is clear that this must have been south and west of the early Chinese civilization in the upper Yellow River valley. One frequent hypothesis is that the area of greatest genetic linguistic diversity within a language group is the point of origin; on this criterion, this would be in the mountains of northeastern India and northern Burma, where three of the four major subgroups meet and there are many additional smaller subgroups as well. If this is so, we would expect highland grain crops to have been the staple.

The Tibeto-Burman languages with the longest literary history include Tibetan (7th C. AD) and Burmese (early 12th C AD). Tibetan tradition lists five main crops including four grains plus beans. Burmese tradition has seven main grain crops. Sagart (1999) has hypothesized that the Sinitic groups had four major crops: three grains, *Setaria* millet, *Panicum* millet and rice, plus beans, with wheat introduced about 4000 years ago.

Even for grains first domesticated elsewhere, it is not unreasonable for there to have been proto-Tibeto-Burman etyma (cognate words) if they were introduced early enough. This paper will explore some of the etyma that we would expect to find among Tibeto-Burman groups for the grain crops domesticated in the area, including rice, millets including *Setaria*, *Panicum* and *Eleusine coracana* as well as buckwheat, Job's tears and older introduced crops such as sorghum, wheat, barley and oats.