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Notes on an ethnonym from East Nepal

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The largest of the Tibeto-Burman speaking ethnic groups of East Nepal, whose languages were surveyed by the Nepal Linguistic Survey (1980–1986) under the direction of Werner Winter, is known as *Limbu* in Nepali but has the autonym *Yakthung*. This latter name has piqued the imagination of etymologists, of whom one of the most distinguished is cited in the Linguistic Survey of India, in the article on the closely related Yakha (Grierson 1908: 305):

> According to Sir Herbert Risley, the tribe call themselves *yak-thomba* or yakherds, with reference to the tradition that this was their characteristic occupation before they crossed the Himalaya into Eastern Nepal. Compare the denomination *yak-thung-ba* which the Limbus apply to themselves.

Linguists (e.g. van Driem 1987: xix) have been justifiably skeptical of this etymology, not least because there is no evidence that the Limbu crossed the Himalaya, or that they ever kept yaks. During my own fieldwork among the Limbu, beginning in 1977, I have heard etymologies connecting *Yakthungba* with the root *thuŋ* 'to drink', *toŋba* 'drinking vessel' etc. One of my sources put his etymological speculations on tape, at the end of a conversation about the Limbu custom of "paddy-dancing"; the recording and transcription are available for browsing on the Internet (Michailovsky 2000).

The first real advance in our understanding of the ethnonym is due to Werner Winter (Hansson 1991: 106; Winter, p.c.):

> The ethnic label of yak-thung corresponds to Camling rodong, Sangpang rodung, Khaling radu, Chourase raRu 'Rai Kiranti' (with regular r-y- correspondences); all these attestations appear to point to an earlier *rak-dung or *rak-dong as a common Kiranti ethnonym.

The name Yakthung/Rodong is thus widely attested in the East Himalayish (Shafer 1955) or Kiranti language group, but not, to my knowledge, in Prof. Winter's favorite Kiranti language, Bantawa. As usual, the details are not entirely straightforward, and I will have to ask Indo-Europeanists to bear with the relatively primitive state of Kiranti reconstruction.

The initial correspondence, reflecting Proto-Kiranti (PK) **r*, poses the fewest problems, being well known since the work of Robert Shafer (1953: 148–149; see also van Driem 1990). Table 1 provides examples in the languages which have reflexes of our ethnonym, plus Bantawa; the etyma BODY, SALT and STAND are cited by Shafer and van Driem.[1]

Table 1. Reflexes of Proto-Kiranti **r*

	West Kiranti		Central Kiranti		South Kiranti			East Kiranti	
	bah	wam	dum	kg	kul	cam	ban	yam	lim
Shafer *r	r	r	r	r	ɡ, r	r	y	y	y
KIRAT	rɔdi	rāːḍu	roʔdɨ	raadu	rɔːdu	roduŋ		yakkhaba	yakthuŋ
BODY		rām	ram	rwaam	ɡam	ram	yam		yam
ORPHAN				reskap	geskupə	raichakupa	hettshakuppa		yɛtchaba
USE			roŋ-	roŋ-	gɔŋ-	raŋ-	yaŋ-	yaks-	yaŋ-
SALT#1			rɨm	ram	rum	rum	yum	yum	yum
SCREEN	ript-	ript-	riˈmsi-				ipt-	yiˈp-	iːpt-
STAND#1	rap-	yāpt-	rep-	rep-	thɔ rep-	rep-	ep-	yeˈp-	yɛp-
SLAVE				ˈru	rɔ				yɔk

As for the rime, velar finals are generally preserved in Limbu, Yamphu and Bantawa, but often lost elsewhere, with backing and rounding of the vowel (Winter 1987: 731). In Central and West Kiranti, the vocalic systems have often been multiplied under the influence of finals, with the creation of front rounded or centralized vowels in Bahing and in Khaling (Michailovsky 1975). Fronting is generally inhibited by velar finals, even where these are subsequently lost. Thus, in the 10-vowel system of Bahing, for example, the rime **ak* generally has the reflex *ɔk*, or, in contexts where the final is lost, *ɔː*. This is particularly clear in conjugated forms of the verb. Khaling *aa* and Kulung *ɔː* are also characteristic of syllables with final *k*. The examples below are intended to illustrate the correspondences of PK **ak*. Although there is some uncertainty (between *a*/*ɔ*/*o*), **rak* is quite well supported as the first syllable of our ethnonym.

Table 2. Reflexes of PK **ak*

	West Kiranti		Central Kiranti		South Kiranti			East Kiranti	
	bah	wam	dum	kg	kul	cam	ban	yam	lim
	o, ɔk	ā, āk	oʔ, ok...	o, ok, aa	ɔː, ok	o	ak	ak	ak, ok, ɔk
PIG	po	pā	poʔo	ˈpo	bɔː	bose	bak	akma	phak
LOOM	to		toʔo	ˈto	dɔː	do	dak	ak-	thak
RHODOD'N	tɔksel		tokpeʔ	taakti	dɔːbet		dakbuŋ		thokphɛt
SHAMAN	nɔkco	nākso	naksœ	ˈnokco	nokchɔ	nochuŋ	nakchoŋ		
SHOULDER			bokto	ˈbhaataa	bɔutɔ		baktaŋ	akkr^aŋ	phɔktaŋ
BANANA			ŋyeˈləksi	leŋaasi	liŋɔːsi	ŋosi	ŋaksi		

The initial of the second syllable shows a regular correspondence between South Kiranti *d*, Limbu *th*, and Yamphu zero; the pertinent feature in Limbu is the aspiration, since Limbu does not have an opposition of voicing. However, the expected correspondence in Central and West Kiranti is *t*, not *d* (Michailovsky 1994; Winter 1987: 730). See the examples LOOM and RHODODENDRON in table 1 above.

The second-syllable rime is straightforward in South and East Kiranti, cf. STONE and FLOWER in table 3 below. For the loss of final *ŋ* in Kulung *rɔːdu*, cf. Limbu *hutluŋ*, Kulung *hullu* 'hearthstone'; Kulung final *ŋ* may be more easily lost in polysyllables than in monosyllables. But in West Kiranti, the fronting in Bahing *rɔdi* is difficult to explain, since in Bahing **u* is generally fronted to *ü* only in open syllables, or before non-velar finals. Thus Bahing *di* would more readily reflect **di* or **du* (via **dü*) than **duŋ*. Elsewhere in West and Central Kiranti, the conditions under which PK **u* is fronted have not been fully elucidated; I have shown (to appear) that the preceding initial plays a role in Dumi verb stems (cf. Ebert (1997: 10) for Camling). Note the Thulung doublet *li*, *liu* in TOOTH, showing the passage from **u* to *i*.

Thus, while the second syllable *duŋ* in South Kiranti corresponds regularly to Limbu *thuŋ*, the initial *d* in Central and West Kiranti and the Bahing rime *i* are problematic. In fact, it may be that the ethnonym, or this part of it, has been borrowed from a South Kiranti language (Kulung?) with second syllable *du*.

Table 3. Reflexes of PK **uŋ* and **u* rimes.

	West Kiranti			Central Kiranti		South Kiranti			East Kiranti	
	bah	wam	thu	dum	kg	kul	cam	ban	yam	lim
PK *uŋ	u, uŋ	uŋ	u, uŋ	u	uŋ	uŋ	uŋ	uŋ	uŋ	uŋ
COLD	dzu		ju	dzuʔu	jhung	cuŋ	cuŋ	cuŋ	cuŋ	cuŋ
STONE	luŋ	luŋ	luŋ	lu	luŋ	luŋ	luŋto	luŋ	ruŋguʔwa	luŋ
FLOW'R	phuŋ		buŋma	puma	puŋme	buŋ	buwa, buŋwa	buŋ	uŋ	phuŋ
PK *u	ü	u	iu	ɨ	u, ü					
TOOTH	khlü		li, liu	ŋilo˙	ŋalu					
WATER	ʔbɔːkü	kāːku	ku	kɨ	ku	kawa				
SNAKE	büsa	bisā		bhi˙	'bhey	pu	pucho	pï	pusæ˙ʔ	
WHO?	sü	ācu	siu		'sü					
GOOD	nü-	ʔdu-	niu-	nɨ-	nü-	nə-	ni-	nu-	nu-	nu-

Note

1. The languages cited (and tentative subgroups) are: West Kiranti: Bahing, Wambule, Thulung; Central Kiranti: Dumi, Khaling; South Kiranti: Kulung, Camling, Bantawa; East Kiranti: Yamphu, Limbu. Forms are cited in the transcriptions of the original sources, except that the velar nasal has been retranscribed as *ŋ* in Wambule, Khaling and Camling. The letter *y* represents IPA *j* (yod). Bahing *ü* represents centralized *i* or *u*; Bantawa *ï* represents unrounded *u*; Thulung *ɨu* represents fronted *u*.

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