

EX ORIENTE LUMINA
HISTORIAE VARIAE MULTIETHNICAE

**Festskrift tillägnad Juha Janhunen
på hans 61. födelsedag 12.2.2013**

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Edited by

**Tiina Hyytiäinen, Lotta Jalava,
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A SHORT INTRODUCTION TO TIBETAN KINSHIP TERMS IN A-MDO

Wuqi Chenaktsang

INTRODUCTION

Kinship is defined as the relationship between family members, while kinship terms classify kin in different categories in order to indicate proximity between different kin. There are two functions of kinship terms: to indirectly refer to kin and to directly address kin. My own experience as a young boy growing up in A-mdo demonstrates how kinship terms can be confusing. I was shocked when classmates from a neighboring county used *a-p(h)a-che* ('great brother' or 'elder brother')¹ or *a-p(h)a-chung* ('second older brother') to describe their brothers. My first reaction was to wonder how a person could have more than one *a-p(h)a* ('father'). I came to understand that they chose this term to refer to their brothers, even though most Tibetans use *a-p(h)a* to refer to and address their fathers. After undertaking several fieldworks in A-mdo from 2007 to 2011, I found that many Tibetan tribes in A-mdo choose *a-rgya* to address fathers, while the term *a-p(h)a* refers to elder brothers.

Studying Tibetan kinship terms is vital to gaining an understanding of Tibetan social relationships and cultural practices. So far I have only found two articles (Benedict 1942; Dpa'-ris Sangs-rgyas 2005) that specifically discuss Tibetan kinship terminology. Benedict, an American researcher, primarily relied on the traveling notes of missionaries in Tibet to interpret the origins of Tibetan kinship terms, restructuring classical Tibetan kinship terms in a chart in order to provide an overall picture. Dpa'-ris Sangs-rgyas wrote his article in Tibetan, providing a table of Tibetan-Chinese kinship terms with Tibetan sources.² These two researchers compare Tibetan kinship terms with Chinese ones, although there is disagreement of their interpretations of Tibetan kinship terms.

1 A-mdo-bas (Tibetans from A-mdo) pronounce the classical Tibetan term *a-pha* (father) as *a-pa*.

2 Due to space limitations, this article does not include the chart from Benedict and the table from Dpa'-ris Sangs-rgyas.

Present-day A-mdo-bas (Tibetans from A-mdo) do not apply Tibetan kinship terms properly, at least according to the original meaning of those terms; people often swap, mispronounce, and misplace kinship terms. The above example from my schoolmates demonstrates how A-mdo-bas swap kinship terms.

The original goal of this article was to introduce a comprehensive overview of kinship terminology among Tibetans in A-mdo, but because of space limitations it ended up becoming a very brief introduction. Using qualitative methodology and a cultural relativist framework, this article seeks to understand individual or localized categories of kinship terms in A-mdo. The research established that kinship terms among A-mdo-bas are gender-based and progress from the general to specific. The research also discovered that different groups of A-mdo-bas use kinship terms differently, although there are some commonalities. A cultural relativist framework is used because I believe that cultural phenomena are relatively true within a local context, timeframe, and/or geographic location. This research also applies a constructivist model, as it intends to explain what local kinship terms mean and how local villagers use them. As I will discuss in detail below, A-mdo villagers in the same village may use kinship terms differently, even though the words themselves have the same sounds and characters.

I collected the data by interviewing male and female villagers in A-mdo in 2007 and 2010. Fifteen of the interviews were conducted in person, and five were conducted over the telephone. All of the interviews were recorded, which supplemented my memory and notes and allowed me to later analyze the interviews in depth. All of the interviews were conducted in the Tibetan A-mdo language or the local dialect. I also crosschecked the interview materials with available literature in English, Tibetan, and Chinese. Tibet has very rich and complicated kinship terms, but many of the important ones have been lost in A-mdo. It is crucial to explore how A-mdo-bas apply and give meaning to kinship terms in different ways.

SIMPLE EXAMPLES OF TIBETAN KINSHIP TERMS IN A-MDO

Grandparents

A-mdo-bas commonly use *a-yi* for grandmother (both father's mother and mother's mother). The meaning of *yi* can be traced back to the classical kinship term *phyi*, which means 'grandmother' with the gender modifier *-mo*. A-mdo-bas omit the root letter *ph* when they say *phyi*, however, such that it sounds like *yi* (with only the sub-joined letter *ya* and the vowel *i* being pronounced). It is clear that *a-yi* is a combination of prefixing *a-* and *yi* without the root letter *ph*. This is not just a kinship terminology phenomenon in A-mdo, but a linguistic trend.

Another example of lost pronunciation of a root letter is seen in the verb *byed* ('to do'). In daily life, A-mdo-bas pronounce this word as *yed* or *yid*, omitting the phoneme of the root letter *b* and losing the original sound *shed/ched*. I will not dig deeply into this linguistic issue because of our focus here on kinship terms, rather than on arbitrary pronunciation tendencies among A-mdo Tibetan speakers.

There are other issues with kinship terminology: meanings are uncertain and one term can have many meanings. We noticed that people from some places refer to wives, women, or a mother's elder sisters as *a-yi* or *a-ye*. Many people in A-mdo use *a-yi* to address old women who are over 60 years old. In Dpa'-ris (Chinese: 天祝县), Tibetans refer to their grandmother as *a-ma-yi*, a combination of *a-ma* and *phyi-mo*. Some villagers, especially in nomadic areas, use *ma rgan* or *a-ma che* for grandmother. These two terms have a similar meaning of 'great mother' or 'old mother', since the root letter is *ma* ('mother'), modified by two different adjectives, *rgan* and *che*, 'old' and 'great'. *A-ma che* also means 'mother's older sister' in some A-mdo regions. As a Tibetan saying indicates: "uncle or *a-khu* is half of father; aunt or *a-ne* is half of mother".

Similarly, A-mdo-bas refer to a grandfather as *a-pha che*, which means 'great father' or 'old father'. Below we see that some villagers use this term to describe an older brother or a father's older brother. In some A-mdo areas, people use the term *a-rgya* to refer to their grandfather, father, or brother; the original meaning of the term *rgya*, however, could be 'older brother', because *rgya* means 'great' or 'big'. The opposite of this term is *a-che*, which means 'older sister'. Dpa'-ris Sangs-rgyas confirms that old Tibetan textbooks used *a-rgya* for older brother (interviewed in December 2009). The most common usage of this term today is for father (in the nomadic areas of A-mdo) and for older brother or elder man (in agricultural areas). *A-spo* (sound like *a-bu*) is the most popular term for grandfather among Tibetan villagers in *Ba yan* County (Chinese: 化隆县; Pinyin: *Hualong xian*) and *Gro tshang* (Chinese: 乐都县; Pinyin: *Ledu xian*). This term evolved from classical Tibetan *spo-bo* ('father's father' or 'mother's father'). However, the most common term for grandfather is *a-myes* in colloquial language and *mes-po* in classical writing, although some scholars assume that *mes-po* is the respectful form of *spo-bo*. The term *mes* or *myes* means 'ancestor'. In some areas in A-mdo, one uses *a-mye* as a term for 'father-in-law'. According to Benedict's (1942: 327) explanation of this matter:

As a result of cross-cousin marriage, the mother's brother becomes the father-in-law, and the mother's brother's son becomes the wife's brother. With the advent of teknonymy, the father-in-law is called 'grandfather' (the child's term), and, as a result of the above equation, mother's brother becomes 'grandfather'.

I noticed some groups in Rtse khog County where a bride or wife must address all kinsmen who are older than her as *a-mye* or ‘grandfather’. This discovery may indicate that some Tibetans have a tradition of calling a father-in-law or other patrilineal kinsman in-law ‘grandfather’ without cross-cousin marriage. It is obvious that Tibetans practice cross-cousin marriage, but the problem is that the newly married couple has to address their in-laws before their child has a chance to address their grandparents from both sides of the male and female parents.

Parents and their siblings

A-ma is a very common kinship term used by Tibetans in A-mdo to refer to mothers. Benedict (1942: 316) points out: “The regular parent terms in Tibetan are *a-ma* ‘mother’ and *a-pha* ‘father’, from the almost universally extended TB [Tibeto-Burmese] roots *ma and *p’a, respectively.” Although there are many alternative terms for father in A-mdo and other Tibetan regions, all A-mdo-bas recognize *a-ma* as mother without any other alternative terms. A-mdo-bas modify this term with suffixes to create new meanings. For instance, some people in A-mdo use *a-ma che* (‘great mother’ or ‘older mother’) or *a-ma chung* (‘small mother’ or ‘younger mother’) to refer to a mother’s older sister or younger sister, respectively. We also see from above that some natives use this term to indicate a grandmother when *a-ma* modifies *rgan mo* (‘old woman’) or *che* (‘big’ or ‘great’). Of course, *a-ma rgan-mo* is not only a term for grandmother but also for mother. This lengthy term can be shortened as *ma rgan* to indicate mother.

In contrast, A-mdo-bas have many different expressions for father, and those terms might have meanings other than father. The term *a-p(h)a* is common in A-mdo, but it is not the only term used for father. The use of *a-p(h)a* to specify father is not only used by A-mdo-bas, but is also found in classical Tibetan. In Mandarin (and other languages), one can find similar terms for father (for example, *papa*, *ba* 爸). Other terms for father found in A-mdo are more difficult to explain, but are also more unique. Many groups in A-mdo (especially in nomadic areas) use *a-rgya* to refer to father. In this case, the term for father, *a-pha*, loses its original character and indicates older brother. Many A-mdo-bas also use *a-rgya* to designate a father-in-law, older brother, or elder man.

In A-mdo, *a-ne* is used for father’s sister, and some places it used for mother’s sister as well. It also has the meaning of nun, mother-in-law, woman, or female. As Benedict (1942: 317) explains: “The term ‘*a-ne-ne-ne-mo* is applied to ‘father’s brother’s wife’ (Das) and mother’s brother’s wife’ (JASCHKE) [*sic*] as well as to ‘father’s sister’, and has the additional meanings ‘woman, female’ and even ‘nun’

(CSOMA) [*sic*]. In Western Tibetan, this term is used for ‘wife, partner, and spouse’ (JASCHKE) [*sic*].”

These meanings are not consistent. In English, the terms ‘uncle’ and ‘aunt’ have very fixed definitions. According to the *Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* (2009, online), an uncle is the brother of someone’s mother or father or the husband of someone’s aunt. An aunt is the sister of someone’s mother or father or the wife of someone’s uncle. Dpa'-ris Sangs-rgyas (2005: 63) argues that *a-ne* is literally a specific term for father’s brother’s wife and that *ma ce* and *ma sring* refer to mother’s older and younger sister respectively. The father’s sister is addressed as *snyid-mo*, while her husband is called *snyid-po*. His article also provides specific terms for father and mother’s brother and sister’s child in a table, which shows that Tibetans practice a patrilineal system.

Researchers may need to pay special attention to the variation of the term *a-ne* when conducting fieldwork or research on kinship terms in A-mdo. We should not accept one meaning and ignore others. Because villagers in A-mdo may use the term *a-ne* to identify different people, it can be difficult to understand which person they are referring to, even if the researcher knows the context or is in the area. For instance, if one says, “My *a-ne* xx (her name) will visit us”, we cannot exactly know the relationship of the speaker and the woman. She could be his or her father’s sister, mother’s sister, uncle’s wife, or mother-in-law. We can, however, exclude other meanings (such as woman or nun). It is crucial to ask specific questions of the speaker in order to clarify whom he or she is talking about. It is a tradition in A-mdo for local people to add a person’s name after the kinship term, except in the case of *a-ma* and *ap(h)a* if the latter refers to father (in some regions, *a-p(h)a* refers to an older brother, in which case one may add the name after *a-p(h)a*). A person normally has one mother and father, making it unnecessary to mention their names. In contrast, a person can have more than one uncle, aunt, brother, sister, and even grandfather and grandmother, with the terms *a-mye* and *a-yi* being used to designate one’s father’s father and mother’s father, father’s mother, and mother’s mother.

In some places, people use *a-ma che/ce* for mother’s mother. Confusion occurs when villagers apply *a-ma che* for a mother’s older sister. Dpa'-ris Sangs-rgyas (2005: 63) mentions that *ma ce* is used to refer to the mother’s older sister, while *ma sring* is the mother’s younger sister. Benedict (1942) argues that *sru* is used to refer to the mother’s sister in classical Tibetan, but I have not found such a tradition anywhere in A-mdo. *The New Tibetan Dictionary* (Bsam-gtan 2006: 829) also lists *sru* as *sru-mo*, defining it as an older brother’s wife when she is addressed by her husband’s younger siblings. A married woman, for instance, is referred to as *ma sru* or *ma sru-mo*. According to my fieldwork, most people

in A-mdo prefer to use *a-ne* for both the father's sister and the mother's sister. Dpa'-ris Sangs-rgyas argues that *snyid-mo* is a father's older sister.

Many A-mdo-bas employ one term, *a-zhang*, for both the father's brother and mother's brother, though two different words for these exist in the A-mdo dialect and in classical Tibetan. *Zhang* is a very important kinship term because it refers to a mother's brother in classical Tibetan.

I have to mention that *a-zhang* is also used for father-in-law in some areas of A-mdo. Many A-mdo-bas distinguish the term *a-khu*, 'father's brother' and *a-zhang* 'mother's brother' in daily life; an outsider may be confused by the term *a-khu* because the term has different meanings to A-mdo villagers. Benedict (1942: 317–318) believes: "Tibetans have shifted **k'u* from 'mother's brother' to 'father's brother'. This development, peculiar to Tibetan, certainly is to be interpreted as a product of a distinctively Tibetan feature, fraternal polyandry."

There are possible other unknown reasons for switching *khu* and *zhang*, if a shift has actually occurred. It could be argued that this is random behavior or misuse of terms by young generations. For example, in Rtse khog County and several other places in A-mdo, people transpose the term *a-p(h)a* for father and *a-rgya* for older brother. They use *a-rgya* to address fathers and *a-p(h)a* to indicate older brothers. Some neighboring villages have adopted half of this convention, using *a-rgya* to address fathers and a variation of this term, *a-rga*, to address older brothers. I will analyze these two terms later in this chapter. Furthermore, some groups in A-mdo only use *a-khu* to identify both a father and a mother's brother, while *a-zhang* indicates father-in-law. Other groups employ *a-zhang* to designate both father and mother's brother, adding *a-khu* before a monk's name to show respect. However, these examples show how the shift of kinship terms could reflect random behavior or a misuse of terminology rather than a conscious effort to differently represent the local marriage system.

DISCUSSION

Kinship terms play significant cultural and social roles in A-mdo, and the arbitrary use of these terms may confuse locals and non-locals alike. Local people speak a Tibetan dialect with standard or formalized kinship terms, and these are recorded in dictionaries. However, a language is as alive as the people who speak it, and the living generations of the region practice or use kinship terms in ways that are different from formal versions (classical Tibetan). We can only find a few kinship terms that share similar meanings, although modifiers may affect the meaning of the kinship terms. The word for mother, *ma* or *a-ma*, and the word for sister, *che/ce* or *a-che/ce*, are the only consistent terms used among A-mdo-bas

and other Tibetans. In most cases, *a-p(h)a* is a popular and universal term in all regions of Tibet. For all other words, we see different terms used for identifying the relationships of kin. Some kinship terms have similar roots but actually refer to completely different kin. For instance, Benedict (1942) assumed that the term *sru* referred to a mother's sister, but in the A-mdo context, it often refers to an elder sister-in-law or to a woman in general. Benedict also mentioned that *a-sru* means a woman in western or central Tibet, but he did not point out that it can also mean sister-in-law, which is its principal interpretation in A-mdo.

One prominent finding was that one object or signifier can easily have two or more meanings, even within a very similar cultural context. For example, we cannot find the kinship term *a-yi* in a Tibetan dictionary. The only record of the term appears when scholars use it in the course of editing colloquial language textbooks for non-Tibetans, defining *a-yi* as 'grandmother' in A-mdo. However, data from this research has shown that many local people use this term to refer to their wives or to women in general. Another example of this phenomenon is that some villages in A-mdo use *a-p(h)a* when referring to an older brother, even though *a-p(h)a* generally refers to father. As Barker & Galasinski (2001: 3) point out: "Language as a tool is to suggest that we do things with languages so that, in the context of social usage, meanings can be temporarily stabilized for practical purposes." We find that this hypothesis is compatible with the characteristics of kinship terminology.

Oral language not only challenges word formation, but it can also create problems in correctly recognizing the sound of a word. For instance, Tibetan scholars have not reached an agreement about how to analyze *zha-yi* 'kid', as well as *zhi-lu* 'son' or 'boy' and *zhi-mo* 'daughter' or 'girl'. My assumption regarding the origin of these terms is that *zha-yi* is the word *byis* (of the Tibetan term *byis-pa* for 'child'), separated into two words or sounds. The root letter of this term is *ba*, which combines with the subjoined letter *ya* to produce the sound *sha* (which is identical with the Tibetan consonant *zha*). As Sung Kuo-ming & Lha Byams Rgyal (2005: 21) confirm, "all three labial consonants *pa*, *pha*, *ba* are merged into one sound [*sha*], the same as *zha*, when taking *ya-btags* ['subjoined letters']". The *yi* is a combination of the subjoined letter *ya* and vowel *i*. This assumption is applicable for other terms (like *a-yi*, *zhi-lu*, and *zhimo*). In A-mdo, Tibetans have developed inconsistent kinship terms, and these terms lead to difficulty in communication among neighbors. As Sung Kuo-ming & Lha Byams Rgyal (2005: 110) suggest, "In the vast A-mdo region, the family or kinship terms are far from unified. Students (as well as native A-mdo speakers) may need to learn different terms when visiting different places."

We can argue that Tibetan kinship terms demonstrate that instability is characteristic of signs or signifiers in a cultural context. Thus we cannot assume that their meanings are fixed at one point in time, even across similar cultures. Variations of meanings are possible even in the same culture. What we can conclude is that people (individually and collectively) will create new meanings for a word or object as a result of their own experiences and intentions. Government policy can also profoundly and directly affect kinship terminology. For instance, the one-child policy of the People's Republic of China will abolish kinship terms such as uncle and aunt, and other related terms in China, in spite of the fact that China has the most diverse range of kinship terms in the world. This policy may also gradually influence Tibetan kinship terms in the future. It seems to be true that kinship terms are a symbolic cultural system, a system that is formed by language habits.

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