

The Indigenous Communities: West Kameng District (Arunachal Pradesh)

By

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Abstract

West Kameng district of Arunachal Pradesh is home to six linguistic communities belonging to Tibeto-Burman family of languages -Monpa, Shertukpen, Bugun, Aka/Hrusso, Sajolang and Sartang. The present article explores the village-wise distribution of the communities, the social organization and their religion & faith, and some glimpses of the languages.

Keywords

Arunachal Pradesh, Shertukpen, Sartang, Bugun, Aka, and Sajolang

Introduction

West Kameng is one of the administrative districts of Arunachal Pradesh in northeast India. The district is bounded by Tibet in the north, Bhutan in the west, Tawang district in the northwest, East Kameng district in the east, and Assam in the south. It is home to six linguistic communities – Monpa, Shertukpen, Bugun, Aka/Hrusso, Sajolang, and Sartang, with a population of 83,947 as per provisional population 2011.

The Monpas are known to be the primitive tribe of the Tawang and West Kameng districts. They have a close affinity with the Sharchops of Bhutan.

The Shertukpen community is concentrated in Shergaon village or Seinthuk (*thuk* means ‘village’) and 19 villages in the Rupa circle. The name Shertukpen is fabricated from Shergaon and the local name of Rupa by the Monpa i.e. Tukpen. The language spoken in

Shergaon shows some variance with Rupa both in content and function words. The Shertukpen community names their mother tongue as Mye language.

Sartang as spoken in the four major villages - Khoina village and Jerigaon village in Dirang circle and Khoitam/ Salary village and Rahung village in Nafra circles in the West Kameng district of Arunachal Pradesh. Recently, Sartang was included as the Scheduled tribe of Arunachal Pradesh under the Sixth schedule of the Indian Constitution, 2021. The community was previously listed under Monpa.

Sajolang (old name, Miji) resides in a wider area of Nafra circle with more than 30 villages; Tippi (above 200 households) and Sessa in Bhalukpong circle of West Kameng district, and also in Lada circle of East Kameng district.

Aka constitutes a small population of approximately 5000 speakers spread in 24 villages of Thrizino circle of West Kameng.

Bugun resides in the Tenga Valley of the West Kameng district. Tenga is a small alluring green valley, bounded by the Himalayas., and is laid with strategic military base camp. The Bugun population is spread in 9 villages - Singchum, Wanghoo, Kashi, Namfri Magopam, Diching, Sachita, Luchini, Ramusithu, and Bochum villages.

Interestingly, in Bugun, the people of each village is called by different names. The people of Singchum village are called 'Braidua' (dua means 'people') by the rest of the villages; Wanghoo village people are called 'Hakhuang -dua'; Kaspi village people are 'Haying-dua'; Namfri Magopan village people are 'Khajun-dua'; Dichin village people are 'Dasai-dua'; Sachida, Lichini & Ramusithu village people are called 'Haji-dua. Dirang Monpa calls Bugun people 'Munda'; Aka calls Bugun 'Nike', Shertukpen calls Bugun 'Sulung'.

Faith and Beliefs

The various indigenous communities of the West Kameng belt are followers of Mahayana Buddhism. However, the Akas, Bugun, Miji/Sajolang, and Sartang also believe in indigenous Gods and Goddesses and follow animist forms of worship. These are connected to nature,

spirits, agriculture, etc. The Akas are followers of Nyezi-No 'Earth-sky', and Bugun are followers of Pham-kho 'mountain-river'. Miji/ Sajolang worship *Ching-Dang* (reap-grow), the God of Agriculture during the harvest time October-November. According to the native speakers, prior to 1990, they were followers of *Khan*, that is, Goddess Lakshmi. Sartang are worshippers of indigenous God *tang* and *Asu japtang*. The Shertukpen people of Shergaon worship the local deity *Gumbu-maling*, while the Shertukpen of Rupa circle worship *Sungkhip* (deity-six) 'guardian deity' (*sung* is derived from Bhoti language *sungma* means 'top hills of the village') Despite these faiths, Christianity prevails in some proportion of the district among the Akas, Sajolang, Sartang. In the Bugun community, Christianity is comparatively less. Shertukpen and Monpas are particularly followers of Mahayana or Tibetan Buddhism.

The Social Structure

Each linguistic community has its own culture, dress, rituals, and customs. Each of them has its own set of organizations to maintain law and order. And each village may be divided into clans. Polygamy is generally socially sanctioned in these communities. However, monogamy is implemented by most of them. Each of these tribes observes the rule of clan exogamy. Thus, marriages are not possible within the clans or sub-clans. In Shertukpen community, it is possible to have a marriage with maternal cousins. Maternal uncle's offspring is considered to be the prospective bride or bridegroom for paternal aunt's offspring. The kinship terms reflect the social structure and customs of the community. Hence, father-in-law and maternal uncle, and paternal aunt's husband are addressed as *azang*.

The Indigenous Languages - (Mey) Shertukpen, Sartang, Bugun, Aka, and Sajolang

This belt of indigenous communities with Bhutan in the west, Tibet in the north, the Kameng river in the east, and Assam in the south is home to the trans-Himalayan (Tibeto -Burman) language families. (Mey) Shertukpen and Sartang show lexical similarity as seen from the list below. Bugun also shows lexical cognates with Mey of Shergaon (Blench, 2015). Aka and Sajolang are neighboring languages and also show lexical cognates. The comparative word list below followed by Existential and Possessive constructions provides us with the lexical and structural cognates found in these languages.

Vocabulary

Shertukpen	Sartang	Bugun	Aka	Sajolang	Gloss
gu	gu	go	no	nyang	I
ami, amu	amu, ama	amua	anyi	anyi, ane	mother
abo, apo	abo, apa	aphua	ao	aba, abo	father
juhu	juhu, juphu	bofua	muhusa	nuvu	boy
jimi	jumi	bimi	memisa	nimai	girl
odok, adok	adok	ebo	do	mudo, mudobu	big
athung	athung(-du)	dum	achusa	murung	short
ajyap	aja, ajab	wiya	uda	mivi, muni	good
ong	ong	wua	jijo	dai	go
bapa/ba	beh	um	duwa	dudo/do	BE Verb

BE Verbs in Existential Constructions

The BE verb at the end of the existential constructions shows lexical cognates between Sajolang and Aka (du 'BE'), and Sartang (*be* 'BE') and Shertukpen (*ba* 'BE')

Sajolang

1) Nameri-ya thungrang mano **du**
 Nameri-LOC tiger many BE
 'There are tigers in the forest of Nameri.'

Aka

2) Nameri biye-ge hutchu anye **du**
 Nameri forest-LOC tiger many BE
 'There are tigers in the forest of Nameri.'

Sartang

3) wa ale **be/de**
 3SG beautiful BE
 'She is beautiful.'

(Mey) Shertukpen

4) gu yam nekhe/lekhe go/kho rek ai/an(S) **bapa/ba**
 1SG. house behind LOC garden one BE

‘There is a garden behind my house’.

In the following constructions (5,6,7,8), the BE verb at the end of the constructions show variations in the endings of the past in all the languages.

Sajolang

5) Nameri mubu-ya thungrang munao **du-run/rin**
 Nameri forest-LOC tigers many BE-PAST

‘There were tigers in the forests of Nameri.’

Aka

6) Nameri biye-ge hutchu anye **dawa/du-dawa**
 Nameri forest-LOC tiger many BE-PAST

‘There were tigers in the forests of Nameri’

Sartang

7) Nameri rise ro phong ame **be-pude**
 Nameri forest LOC tiger PL BE-PAST

‘There were tigers in Nameri forest.’

(Mey) Shertukpen

8) gu yam nekhe go/kho rek ai/an **bapa -wū/ba-ang**
 1SG. house behind LOC garden one BE –PAST

‘There was a garden behind my house’.

BE-verb in Possessive Constructions

The following Possessive constructions show the use of similar lexical cognates *du* ‘BE verb’ both in Aka and Sajolang for the 1st person pronoun. Sartang shows partial similarity with

Shertukpen in the use of BE verb although the endings for the past tense are varied in all languages.

Sajolang

9) nyang-thai/phrin zuvu/zumai khring/gini **du**
 1SG-POSS son/daughter two BE
 ‘I have two sons’

Aka

10) no sha ksu **du**
 I son two exist
 ‘I have two sons.’

Sartang

11) gothing ani nik **de**
 1SG POSS children two BE
 ‘I have two children.’

(Mey) Shertukpen

12) gu-ũ/gung juhu du-ai/ du-an **bapa/ba**
 1SG -POSS son INDEF BE
 ‘I have one son.’

Aka

13) Delhi-ge noni a **du-wa**
 Delhi-LOC my-house one BE-PAST
 ‘I had a house in Delhi.’

(Chulu-ya) Delhi-ya nyang-phrin nen **du-thai**
 Earlier Delhi-LOC 1SG-POSS house BE-PAST
 ‘I had a house in Delhi.’



Sajolang

14) Nyang-phrin Delhi-ya nen **du**
 1SG-POSS Delhi-LOC house BE

‘I have a house in Delhi.’

Aka

15) Delhi-ge noni a **du**
 Delhi-LOC my-house one BE

‘I have a house in Delhi.’

BE-Inchoative constructions

The following BE- Inchoative (become) future constructions (17, 18) show lexical cognates *lik-mude* and *long-ma* in Sartang and Shertukpen. The BE- Inchoative *liya* in Aka (20) apparently show cognancy with these languages.

Sartang

16) gu doctor **lik-mude**
 1SG doctor BE-FUT

‘I will become a doctor.’

(Mey)Shertukpen

17) gu doctor **long- ma/phu**

1SG doctor BE-FUT

‘I will become a doctor.’

Sajolang

18) nyang doctor **hi-ney**

1SG doctor BE-FUT

‘I will become a doctor.’

Aka

19) no khyo **liya-lebi.**

1SG old BE -PROG

‘I am becoming old.’

Conclusion

The Indigenous communities of the West Kameng district have their own culture and customs. Each of them is a follower of their own Indigenous, ancestral and local deities. Christianity prevails but Tibetan (Mahayana) Buddhism is a more prominent religion in this area. The neighboring languages show lexical cognancy. These are unwritten languages and leave immense scope for research and documentation.

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