LINGUISTIC NOTES ON AN AMDOYA TEXT

by

A. RÖNA-TAS (Szeged)

Studies of Tibetan linguistic history are hampered by many factors. The most well known of them is the major difference between the written language and the various types of the spoken vernaculars. Different sources are at our disposal and with their assistance it is possible to tentatively reconstruct some of the main traits of the earlier stages of Spoken Tibetan. It is, however, a unique case that as early as the turn of the

In Language 44, 1968, 147-149 R.A. Miller following and correcting the earlier attempts of Roerich and Miibida suggested the following periodisation of the history of Tibetan:

I. Proto-Tibetan (7-8th century)
II. Old Tibetan (7th century - first part of the 9th century)
III.a. Old Church Tibetan
III.b. Old Tibetan (proper)
III. Late Old Tibetan (first part of the 9th century - 10th century)
IV. Classical Tibetan
IV.I. Literary Tibetan
IV. Middle Tibetan (10th - beginning of the 11th century)
IV.I. Early Middle Tibetan, literary texts
IV.II. Late Middle Tibetan, literary texts
IV.ii. Middle Spoken Tibetan (Ims)
IV.ii. Middle Spoken Tibetan (Ims-ch'0am)
V. New Tibetan (11th - 19th centuries)
VI. Modern Tibetan (20th century - )
VII.a. Modern Literary Tibetan
VII.b. Central Tibetan
VII.c. Lhasa
VII.d. Shigatse
VII.e. Chamba, etc.

The basic problem with this periodisation was pointed out by Miller himself who wrote: "The principal problem of the above system is that it is too largely based upon historical criteria and too little related to specific linguistic features ..... It also attempts to delimit periods in the history of the language almost solely by reference to texts and literary documents which, because of the early development of canonical orthographic traditions in Tibetan culture seldom reflect changes in the language to any notable extent, except inadvertance or scribal blunder." (p.149)
18th and 19th centuries, a Tibetan scholar endeavoured to fix the spoken form of his mother tongue through the means of written Tibetan.

At the second Csoma de Körös Symposium, Professor Steinkellner - in a very instructive short communication² - drew attention to a text written by Guṇ thān dkon mchog bstan pa’i sgron me alias Guṇ thān ’Jam pa’i dbyaṅs (1762–1823). He remarked that this text, being a chapter in the tenth volume of the collected works of this learned dge lugs pa scholar³ "... had evidently been written in colloquial language". He gave a short biography of Guṇ thān pa, which is now complemented by the work, written in Tibetan, of the gshen Lobsang Dargyay. We learn that Guṇ thān pa was born in the morning of the 8th day of the 2nd month in the water-horse year of the 13th rab byaṅ, in the south-eastern part of mBo smad, in mBuod dge smad. He was admitted to the Dzo ge monastery bRigs bis chos glaṅ at the age of five, to Labrang at the age of seven and went to Central Tibet at the age of seventeen, in 1788. There he studied in the sGo maṅ grva tshan of Brāhma spuns and returned to Labrang in 1792. The text was written between 1792 and his death in 1823. In conclusion, Steinkellner summed up: "... with this text we have a piece of late 18th century Amdoana-dialect before us, which, considering the cultural circumstances, could hardly have been recorded more precisely."

The "deciphering" and the linguistic interpretation of the text presented many difficulties. Therefore, on the advice of friends, the opportunity of my short stay at the University of Bloomington, Indiana, in 1980 was used to ask Professor Thubten Norbu - himself educated in Amdo -