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The Ngari མངའ་རིས་ group of Western Tibetan dialects

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The Tibetan speaking area

Ngari proper

extended Ngari

Map by Chr. Gigaudaut for Tournadre and Sangda Dorje (1998: 6)

1. Problems of Tibetan dialect classification

- The grouping and subgrouping of dialects is often as difficult as the grouping and subgrouping of daughter languages within a language family.

- Dialects are typically grouped according to

  a) political boundaries or ethnical groupings and/or

  b) phonetical and lexical features.

- However, more often than not, dialect boundaries do not match political boundaries or the present-day ethnical groupings.

- Furthermore, merely phonological or lexical features may be more easily borrowed than grammatical features and may thus not be significant for the classification.

- Even more so, when we do not only deal with mere (sub-)dialects, but with larger dialect groups that are not necessarily mutually understandable and may hence also be termed 'languages'.

- For example, according to previous classifications, the boundary separating the so-called 'western archaic Tibetan' or (phonetically) conservative dialects from the so-called 'western innovative Tibetan' or (phonetically) innovative dialects of Ladakh would run east of Leh, while actually the dialect boundary between the Shamskat (Lower Ladakhi) and the Kenhat (Upper Ladakhi) varieties runs west of Leh.

- The Leh dialect itself is 'mixed' in so far as its grammatical features clearly belong to the Kenhat varieties, but its phonetics has been heavily influenced by Shamskat dialects or, more particularly, by Balti immigrants.

- The Kenhat dialects of Upper Ladakh, comprising the upper section of the Indus valley, the side valley of Gya-Miru, and Zanskar, show some striking similarities with the Tibetan dialects of Himachal Pradesh, Spiti, Nako, Namkat, and Tot, and to a greater or lesser extent also with the varieties spoken in Western Tibet.

- Unfortunately, grammatical descriptions in a western language of the dialects of the core area of Western Tibet or the ancient *Mŋaḥris skorsum* are still lacking, except for the peripheral areas of Mustang (Kretschmar 1995), Kyirong (Huber 2005), Dingri (Herrmann 1989), Tabo (Spiti) (Hein, in preparation), and Nako (Saxena, in preparation).

- The peculiar Western Tibetan contrastive (or comparative) marker /(ba-) saŋ/ is described in Hu Tan (1989) .

- Some information is available on the lexicon, and hence also on phonetic features in the Comparative Dictionary of Tibetan Dialects, CDTD (Bielmeier & al., in preparation) and in

- Qu Aitan and Tan Kerang. 1983..

- The common history of the area, however, makes it quite probable that we should find many of the traits common to the languages of Himachal Pradesh, Upper Ladakh, and Zanskar also among the Ngari dialects, which go under the truncated Chinese name of 'Ali' or 'Ari'.

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2. *Mŋaḥris skor sum*

- *Mŋaḥris* is considered to be the legal successor to the half-legendary kingdom (or rather confederacy) of Žaŋžuŋ.

- Like in many other cases, the exact location or extension of pre-Tibetan Žaŋžuŋ is unknown. And so is the extension of *Mŋaḥris* through the ages.

- As far as we know, the, or a, political centre of Žaŋžuŋ was located in or near Khyuŋluŋ, on the Sutlej, somewhat west of the Kailash.

- During the period of the Tibetan Empire the administrative designation Žaŋžuŋ was applied to all conquered areas in the West, covering at least Ladakh and Baltistan, but also parts of present-day Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Khotan.

- Žaŋžuŋ was divided into two administrative units, Žaŋžuŋ smad (Eastern Žaŋžuŋ), possibly the area of the original political entity, and Žaŋžuŋ stod (Western Žaŋžuŋ), possibly the area of the conquered regions. – According to a general convention, *smad* 'low' referred to the east, *stod* 'high' to the west, in contradiction to the geographical realitiy west of the Kailash.

- Žaŋžuŋ stod bordered on the Drugu (var. Grugu) or Western Turks, who at that time settled in Afghanistan and in Ferghana.

- A late post-imperial source, the Vth Dalai Lama's biography of Bsodnams Mchogldan Bstanpaḥi Rgyalmtshan speaks about 'Old Mŋaḥris', that is, imperial Žaŋžuŋ in terms of three *skor*.s, administrative units, namely

- First *skor*: Puraŋs, Maryul (Guge), Zaŋsdkar

- Second *skor*: Li (Khotan), Gruža (Hunza and Nagar), and Sbalte (Baltistan)

- Third *skor*: Žaŋžuŋ and Khrite stod and smad.
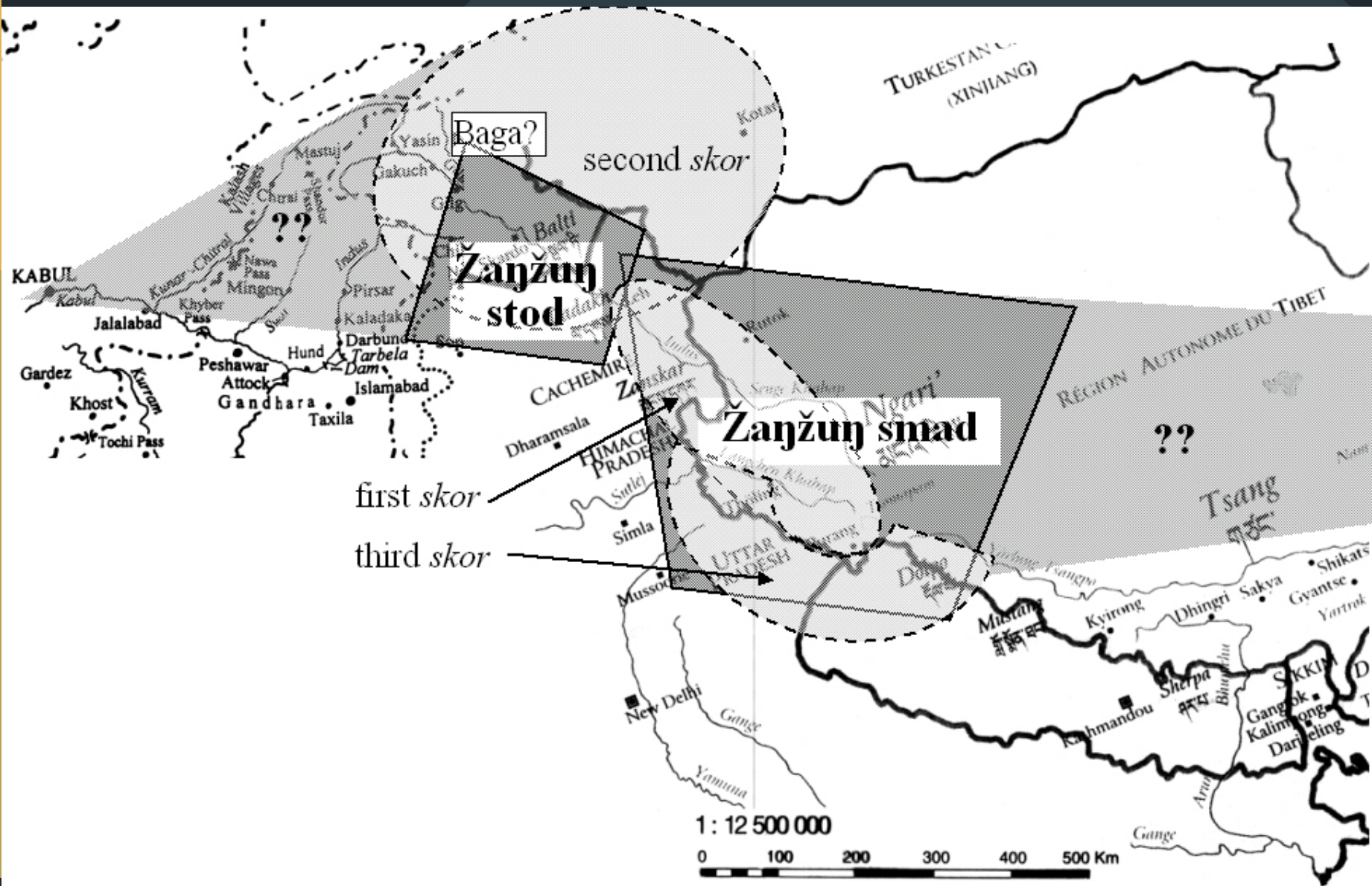
- Post-imperial Žaŋžuŋ was thus located in an eastern extension of pre-imperial Žaŋžuŋ,

- while the core area of Mŋaḥris contained Puraŋs, Khyuŋluŋ, Tholiŋ, and Guge-Maryul, the locations typically associated with Žaŋžuŋ, but also Zaŋsdkar and possibly also parts of the Byaŋthaŋ (Changthang), particularly the area around Rudok.

- At a later time, the designation *Maryul* had been transferred, first to the 'Lake district' of the Rudok area, then to Upper Ladakh, and finally, by the 13th century, to Upper and Lower Ladakh.

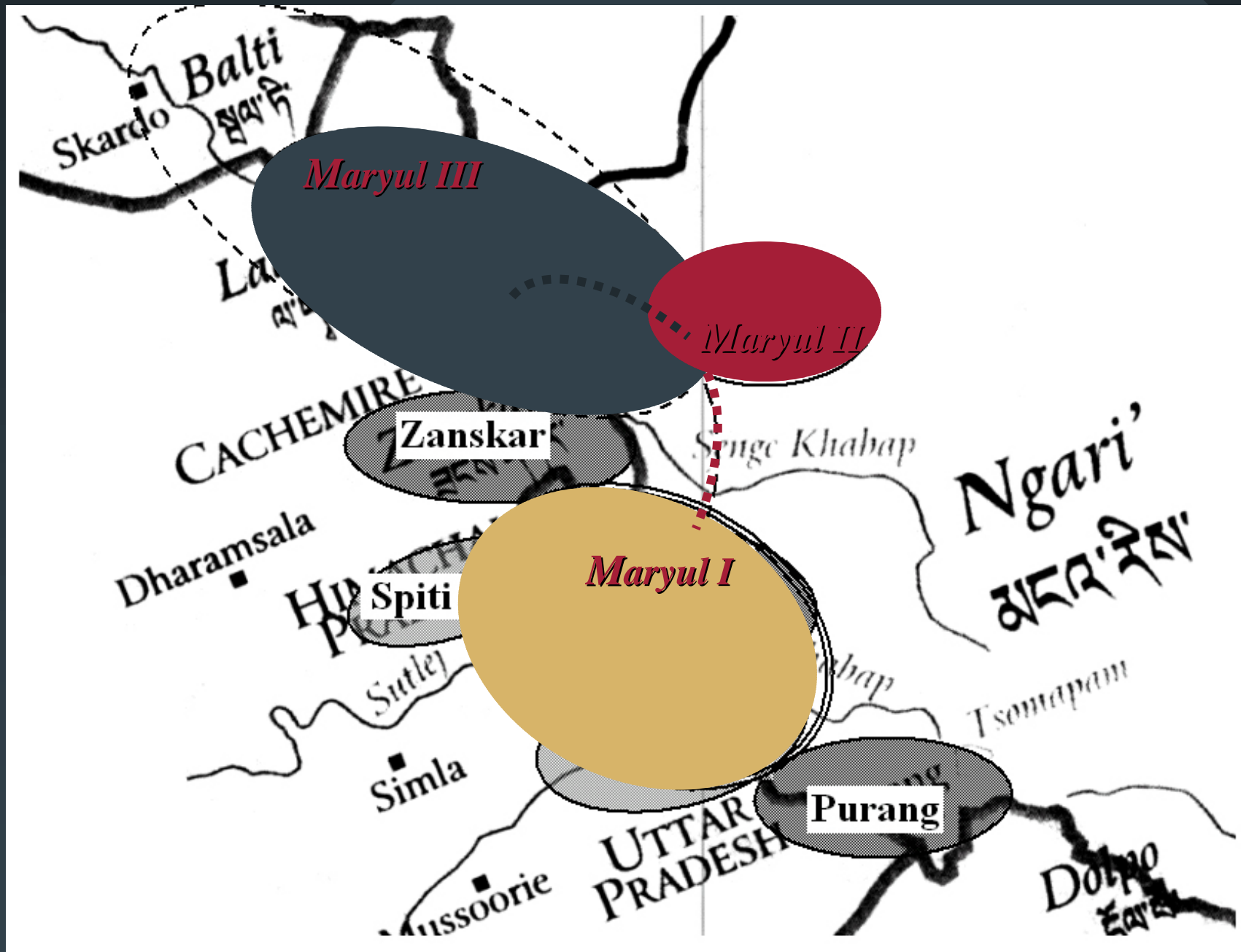# First *skor*

Zanskar

Maryul

Purang

- This name transfer most probably reflected the political aspirations and legitimation needs of the local chiefs, including the Ladakhi kings.

- Many local rulers tried to derive their legitimation from a, in most cases, fictive genealogical link to the old Tibetan imperial dynasty.

- So did the kings of Western Tibet/ Guge. And so did the Ladakhi kings.

- According to the comparatively late Western Tibetan historical sources, the grandson of the last emperor, Skyidlde Ñimamgon, found refuge with the local chief of Guge, married the latter's daughter, established himself as king and, conquered parts of Ladakh.

- Soon after, he divided his kingdom among his three sons, the eldest one, Dpalgyimgon, receiving Maryul, at a later time reinterpreted as Ladakh.

- That a successful conqueror would divide his possessions is as unbelievable as that the eldest son would split off from the main territory and set up a separate kingdom.

- It is clear that the chronicles have manipulated the historical facts in the interest of the de facto rulers.

- Nevertheless, the Ladvags Rgyalrabs provides us with some interesting details:

- Before SkyidIde Ñimamgon took over power, Maryul was under the rule of the 'Gesar' lineage, that is, the lineage of Gya, and he practically took over all the land possessed by the ruler of Gya.

- Lower Ladakh, on the other hand, had been fragmented into various independent village principalities – quite typical for the 'anarchic' or acephalic societies of the Dardic population.

- The opposition between Lower Ladakh and Upper Ladakh reappears at several points in the history and points to different ethnical substrates, reflected even today in different attitudes towards 'Tibetan-ness', sharing of hunted or slaughtered animals, and linguistic 'honesty' or 'crookedness'.

- In the Indus valley, the political, economical, and dialectal boundary between Lower and Upper Ladakh lies at the confluence of the Zanskar and Indus above Snyemo, in the Zanskar valley above Chiling and Yülchung Nyeraks.

- In the Nubra valley the boundary should be found between the areas accessible via Leh and the Kar-dung la and those accessible via Sakti and the Chang la.

Dialect regions of Ladakh

(detail; map not to scale)

Figure 1: Dialect regions of Ladakh (detail; map not to scale)
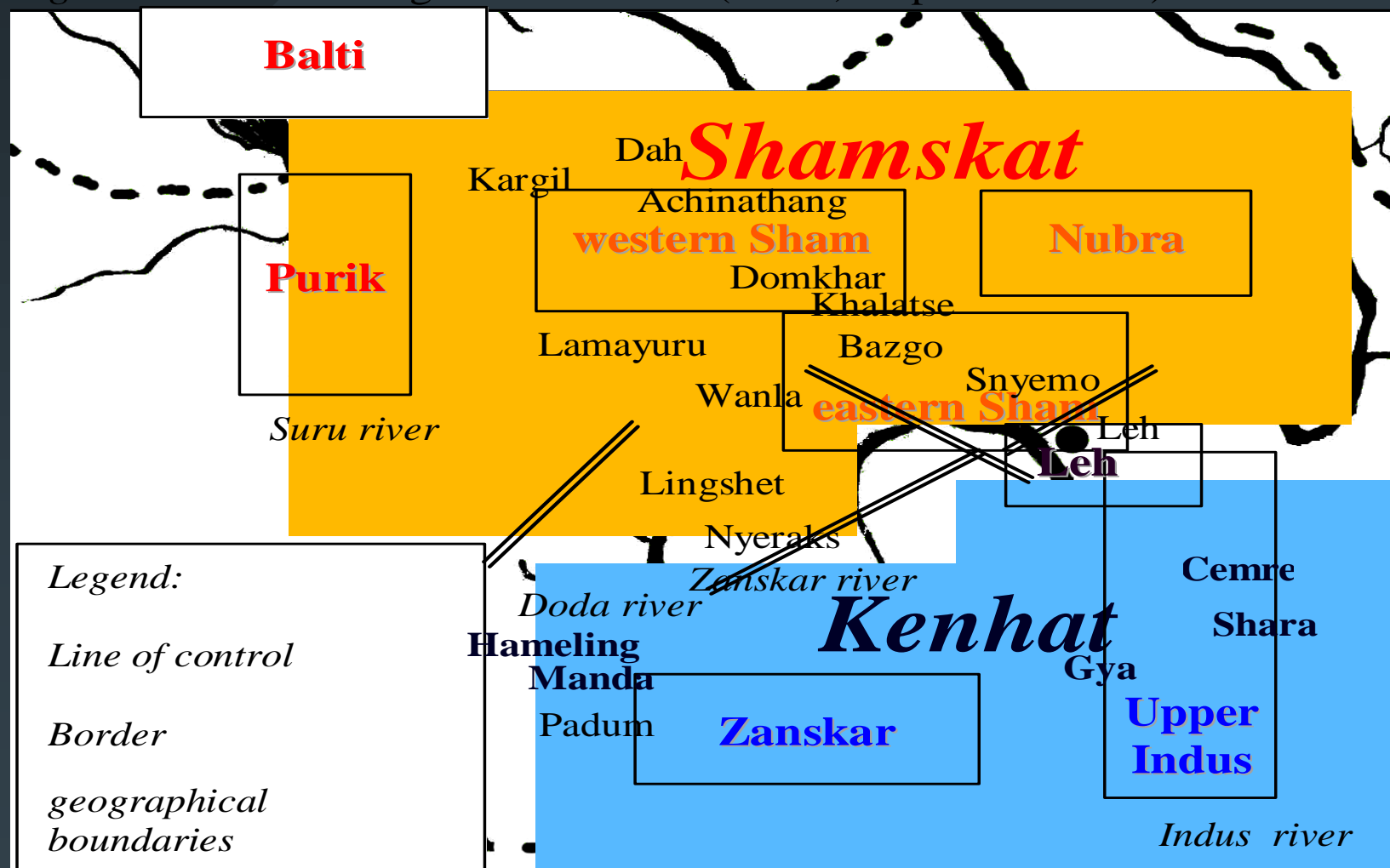
3. The dialects of the core area of Ngari

Map by Chr. Gigaudaut for Tournadre and Sangda Dorje (1998:)

阿里藏语调查点示意图

Tabo

Nako

Namgya

Rutok

Gergye

Gertse

Gar rdzong

Tholing

Tsamda
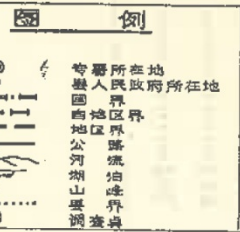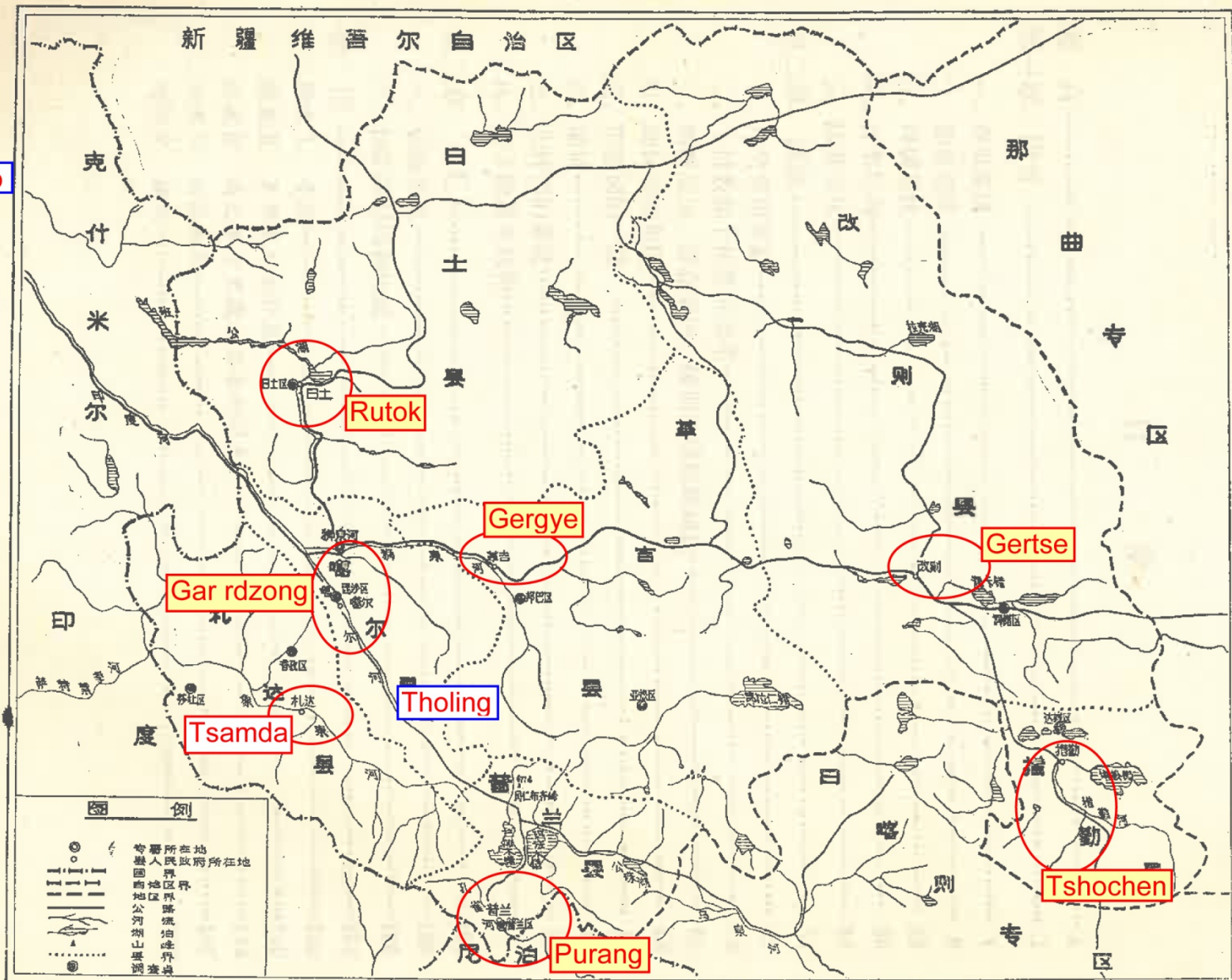
Tshochen

Purang

- Classification according to the CDTD:

'Western Innovative Tibetan'
Ladakhi dialects of Upper Ladakh and Zanskar
NW Indian Border Area (Spiti, Nako, Namgya)
Ngari dialects: Tholing

'Central Tibetan'
Ngari dialects: Rutok, Gar, Gergye, Purang, Tshochen
Northern Nepalese Border Area dialects, Tsang (Shigatse Area), Ü dialects (Lhoka Area, Lhasa)

'Northern Kham Tibetan'
Ngari dialects: Gertse
Nakchu Area, Southern Qinghai Province (Nangchen)

- For the time being, I do not understand the reason, why the Ngari dialects should be distributed over three language groups. All of them behave phonetically quite similar, with minor differences, such as can be observed also among other, better defined dialect groups,

e.g., sby >
tɕ: Gar, Rutok, Purang, Gergye, Tshochen ('CT'), but also Trangtse, Tabo, and Nako ('WIT')
ʑ: Tsamda and Tholing ('WIT'), but also Kham
dʑ: Gertse; Hor Amdo, Nangchen ('NT')

cf. WAT-Shamskat: Balti, Purik: zbj; Sham: dʒ ~ bj; Kenhat: Leh: dʒ

- CT *skra* 'hair'

Tabo, Tholing	ʂā
Nako	ʈʂā
Nam	ʈā
Rudok, Gar, Tshochen	ʂā
Gergye, Purang, Lhasa	ʈʂā
Gertse ('NT')	ʈʂā-
Hor Amdo, Hor Nakchu	ʈā
Ladakh Shamskat, Kenhat	ʂā

- CT *goŋ* 'price, value'

Tabo, Nam	ko̲ŋ
Nako	goŋ
Tholing	ngo̲ŋ
Rudok, Gar, Gergye, Purang, Tshochen	nko̲ŋ
SMustang, WDrokpa	ko̲ŋ
Kyirong	gõ̱:
Dingri	kho̲ŋ
Shigatse	khoŋ
Lhasa	kõ̲:
Gertse ('NT')	ko̲ŋ
Dzongka (ST)	goŋ

- CT *graŋska* 'number', *gri* 'knife'

Tabo	Nam	ṭaŋka	ṭi
Tholing	Nako	ṭ͡saŋka	ṭ͡si
Rudok, Gergye, Purang, Tshochen		ṭ͡saŋka	ṭ͡si
Gar		ṭ͡sã:ka	ṭ͡si
SMustang		ṭaŋka	ṭi
WDrokpa, Dingri			ṭhi
Shigatse, Lhasa		ṭ͡shaŋka	ṭ͡shi
Gertse ('NT')		ṭaŋka	ṭə
Hor Nakchu			ḍi
Hor Amdo			ṭi
Nangchen			ṭiʰ

Kham, Amdo i, u > ə

- CT *glu* 'song'

Tabo, Nako, Nam, Tholing   lū

Rudok, Gar, Purang, Tshochen
all CentrTib dialects   lū
Gergye   lø̄

Gertse   lø̄
Hor Amdo   lɤ̄
Nangchen   ʔlu

Kham, Amdo with vowel ə (or ɤ)

- CT *mgarba* 'blacksmith', *mgo* 'head'

Tabo	Tholing	ŋgara	ŋgo
Nako, Nam			ŋgɔ
Rudok,Gar,Gergye,Purang,Tshochen		nkara	nko
Smustang		gara	go
Jirel			go
WDrokpa, Shigatse, Lhasa		kara	ko
Gertse		ngara	ngo
Hor Amdo		ŋgara	
Hor Nakchu		gara	
Nangchen			ŋgo

- CT *mgyogspa/po* 'fast' (for gs > ∅ see below)

Tabo	ŋɟoːwa
Nako	ɟowa
Nam	ɟoɸa
Tholing	nɟoˀpa
Rudok	ncoˀpa
Gergye	ncoˀwa
Lhasa	coˀpo
Gertse	nɟoˀpa
Hor Nakchu, Hor Amdo	gjokse

- CT *sgrigslam* 'discipline', *sgruŋs* story'

Tholing	dʐəˀlam	dʐuŋ
Tabo		ʂuŋ
Nako		ʈũ:
Nam		ʈūŋ

Rudok, Gar, Gergye, Purang	ʈʂəˀlam	
Rudok		nʈʂum
Gar, Gergye; Tshochen		ʈʂoŋ
Purang		ʈʂuŋ

| Shigatse | ʈʂiklã | ʈʂuɱ |
| Lhasa | ʈʂiˀlam | ʈʂom |

| Gertse | dʐəˀlam | dʐoŋ |
| Hor Nakchu, Hor Amdo | | ɖum |

- CT *brgya* '100', *brgad* '8'

Tabo, Tholing	ɟa	ɟeʔ
Nako		ɟiː
Nam		ɟet
Rudok,Gar,Gergye,Pur.,Tsho.,Lhasa	ca̱	cɛ̱ʔ
Shigatse	ca̱	ci̱
Gertse	ɟa	ɟiʔ
Hor Nakchu	dʑa	

- These examples show that the phonetic data is rather inconclusive:

- By and large, the Gertse data matches with all or some "WIT" dialects (particularly Tabo and Tholing), while it often differs from the "NT" dialects with which it is associated in the CDTD.

- The five Ngari dialects Rudok, Gar, Gergye, Purang, and Tshochen, often match with the Central Tibetan dialects, but they also show features that bring them closer to the "WIT" dialects.

- Some of the "WIT" dialects (particularly Nako) may likewise occasionally pattern with the Central Tibetan dialects.

- These examples also show the limitation of a purely mechanical or automatic comparison.

- One should look thus more closely at the grammatical features as well as particularities in the vocabulary, which may help to group or regroup the dialects with more certainty.

- Unfortunately, there are still no detailed grammatical descriptions available for the core area. And similarly no study about the respective vocabularies.

- One can observe, however, some common features among the dialects of the peripheral area, forming a southern belt.

4. Some more relevant features

4.1. The dialects of the peripheral area

- On either side of the core area, some shared features can be found, on the phonological level, the semantic level, and the grammatical level.

- It seems thus quite likely that as far as such features cannot be found in the core area they might have been lost due to Central Tibetan influence, while the more peripheral areas might have preserved the once shared Western Tibetan particularities.

- The dialects in question are the Kenhat dialects in Ladakh, the dialects of Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand on the western and north-western side, as well as some dialects in the western and south-western part of Central Tibet, such as Western Drokpa, Southern Mustang, Kyirong, and perhaps also Dingri on the south-eastern side of the core area.

- Phonetical features:
loss of CT final cluster *gs*, *ŋs* (± compensatory lengthening, nasalisation), while retaining final *g* > k and final *ŋ*; not found in the core area!

Kenhat:
Gya-Miru generally: *ŋs* > ∅
Zanskar: *ŋs* > ∅, not consistently in all dialects
also *gs* > ∅

Gloskat (Mustang, Kitamura): generally *ŋs* > ∅
Nako, Nam, SMustang (Kretschmar): occasionally *ŋs* > ∅

Tabo, Nako, Nam: often *gs* > ∅
Gloskat, Nubri, Dingri: occasionally *gs* > ∅

- CT *rkaŋlag* 'hands and feet', *gcig* 'one'

Gya, Tabo, Dingri	kāŋlak
Nubri	tɕīk

  CT *lcaks* 'iron', *ḥkhyillcags* 'tent peg', *sgolcaks* 'lock, padlock'

Tabo	tɕhīltɕa,	goltɕa
Nubri		ko̱ltɕa
Dingri		ko̱ntɕa
Gya, SMustang		ʧāk
WDokpa		tɕāk

- CT *rkaŋ* 'marrow, stalk', *khragluŋ* 'anger'

Tabo, SMustang	kāŋ
Nako	ʈhāχluŋ
Nam	ʈhākluŋ

CT *gaŋs* 'ice, glacier',
CT *kluŋs* 'cultivated land'

Gya	kã̱
Nako, Nam	kã̱:
Gya, SMustang	lū

Tabo, Nubri, SMustang	ka̱ŋ

- Semantic features:
the **deictic** and 1P incl or 2P (hon) pronoun *ḥo/ḥu*

Most probably it was originally only a deictic pronoun. The application for the honorific 2P is similar to the usage of the 3P pronouns *er*, *sie*, and *Sie* in German (3P sg > 2P non-familiar; 3P pl > 2P honorific).

The usage for the 1P inclusive plural is possibly due to similar considerations (particularly if the included addressee is of high status).

- Semantic features:
  the **deictic** and 1P incl or 2P (hon) pronoun *ḥo/ḥu*

  deictic, mostly in combination with *de* 'that' > 'that particular one' (between speaker & addressee)

  Sham (ode), Leh (ote)   o-
  Gya (ḥote)   ḥo-

  Nako (oti)   o-

  Gergye (wuri)   wu-

  Nubri (auti)   au-
  Kyirong (o:, o:dī)   o:-
  WDrokpa   hu ~ u

  SMustang   ū ~ ȳ

- Semantic features:
  the **deictic** and 1P incl or 2P (hon) pronoun *ḥo/ḥu*

1P inclusive:

Gya	ɦoɣo
Shara	ɦoɣa
Nyoma	ɦo
Cemre, Zanskari	aho
Spiti, Nyamkat	ɦo-
Tabo	w<u>o</u>-
Nako	<u>o</u>n
Dingri	<u>o</u>raŋ / h<u>u</u>
Drokpa	<u>o</u>raŋ ~ h<u>o</u>(raŋ)
Mustang	<u>a</u>raŋ ~ <u>o</u>raŋ
Kyirong	ɦu

- Semantic features:
  the **deictic** and 1P incl or 2P (hon) pronoun *ḥo/ḥu*

  2P honorific:

  Spiti   wo-
  Tabo   ho̠ ~ wo̠
  Nyamkat   ɦo-

- **Grammatical features**:
  1P present or future auxiliary *k(h)an*

  Cemre, Gya (pres., fut., obsolete) -kan

  Tabo (future) -ka
  Nako (future) -(k)an

  Purang (general facts) -kɛ:n-

  Kyirong (present, future) -kẽ

- **Grammatical features**:
the auxiliary for non-witnessed distant events or generally known facts
kak / kanak < *kha(n)-(yin)-*nag
(cf. the Shamskat auxiliary for non-witnessed distant events: kha(i)ntsok < *kha(n)-(yin)-*tsug and the marker for obvious knowledge khanla)

Leh	-kjak
Zanskari (general facts)	-kak
negated	-kama(na)k
Gya (-ka(na)k- ~ -ha(na)k- ~ -a(na)k)	-{ka(na)k}
negated (general facts)	-{kamanak}
negated (non-witnessed, distant)	ma-V-{ka(na)k}
Tabo	-(k)ak
Nako: (-(k)ʋã:(k), -(k)ã:(k))	-{kã:k}

4.2. The ablative / ergative marker *se/*su: a shared feature among the dialects of the western peripheral area

- The western dialects share an obviously archaic feature, namely the syllabic ablative / ergative marker *se / *su

- This marker is attested two times in the Old Tibetan documents as -se with ablative function (yase ~ yasse 'from above').

- In Classical Tibetan the form -su can be found in combination with the ablative marker: nassu.

- The marker was most probably borrowed into Tibetan in order to derive the ablative markers nas and las from the locative markers na and la, and the instrumental-ergative marker {kyis} from the genitive marker {kyi}.

- Except for the two instances of *-se*, this morpheme is generally shortened to *-s* in all Old Tibetan texts.

- It is possible that the morpheme was borrowed from some Tibeto-Burman language.

- It is found as *-su* with instrumental-ergative function in Darma and as *-se* with ablative function in the Tamangic languages.

- If *-se* is the original form and the form *-su* due to a combination with yet another morpheme, then it would also be possible that the morpheme was borrowed from Indo-Aryan.

- Incidentially, the syllabic ergative marker has been borrowed via Balti into some Dardic languages.

- The form -su (or -so) is found in

Tsamda: ergative		-su
Tabo: ergative		-su-(lu /kun)
Tabo: ablative	Abl + Gen +	-su-(lu /kun)
Nako: ergative, ablative		-su
Nyamkat, Jaḍ (LSI): ergative		-su
Nyamkat (D.D. Sharma): ergative		-so (?)
Gya, Cemre: ablative	Abl +	-su

- The form -se is found in

Tot: ergative	Gen +	-se
Gya: ergative, genitive		-e / -se
Nubra: ergative		-ze
Balti: ergative	Gen (+	-si)

4.3. The contrastive marker *saŋ: shared among the whole Ngari group

- A similarly archaic and most probably related feature is the use of the contrastive morpheme (*ba +) *saŋ, possibly based on the above mentioned morpheme *su or *se plus an additional morpheme.

- Cf. the Classical Tibetan contrastive morpheme *bas*, alternating with the ablative marker *las*, where the syllabic morpheme is again reduced to a mere *-s*.

- The syllabic form is attested in the following dialects (the data for the 'Ari' dialects and Lhasa is from Hu Tan (1989)):

Location				
Lhasa				lɛ
Dingri				ne
Rutok, Tshochen				la
Gar, Tsamda				sū:m
Gergye				sa:ŋ
Purang				sã:
Spiti (LSI), Nako				saŋ
Kenhat (Leh, Gya, Zanskari)			e	saŋ
Shamskat			(ba)	saŋ
Purik	(ba	saŋ)	/ba	tsik
Balti	pa	saŋ	/pa	(tse)

# 5. The preliminary picture

- While each feature described has a different regional distribution, the areas overlap and form a continuum with fuzzy edges.

- Together, these features set the Ngari group apart from all other Tibetan varieties, in particular from its Central Tibetan neighbours.

dialects	saŋ	se/su	ḥu/ḥo	kan	ka(na)k	gs/ŋs> ⊘
other CtrTib	−	−	−	−	−	−
Dingri	−	−	+	−	−	−
Kyirong	−	−	+	+	−	−
SMustang	−	−	+	−	−	(±)
WDrokpa	−	−	+	−	−	−
Rudok	−	−	?	−	−	−
other Ngari	+	−	+	−	−	−
Purang	+	−	+	+	−	−
Tsamda	+	+	+	−	−	−
Nako, Tabo	+	+	+	+	+	±
Nam, Nyam., Tot	+	+	+	?	?	+
Gya	+	+	+	+	+	+
Zanskar	+	−	+	?	+	+
Leh	+	−	−	−	+	−
Sham	+	−	−	−	(kha-)	−
Nubra	+	+	−	?	−	−
Purik	(+)	−	−	−	−	−
Balti	(+)	+	−	−	−	−
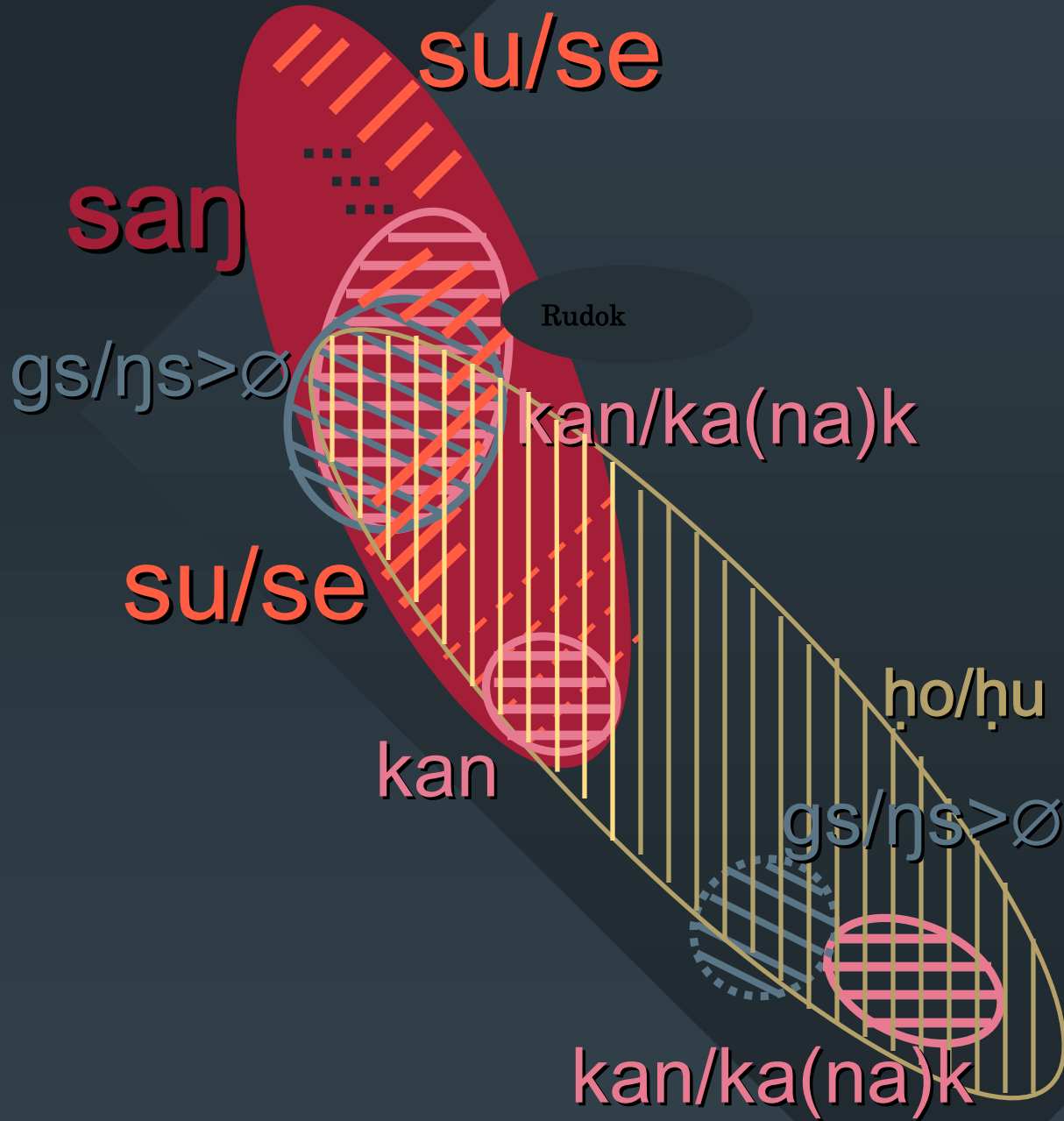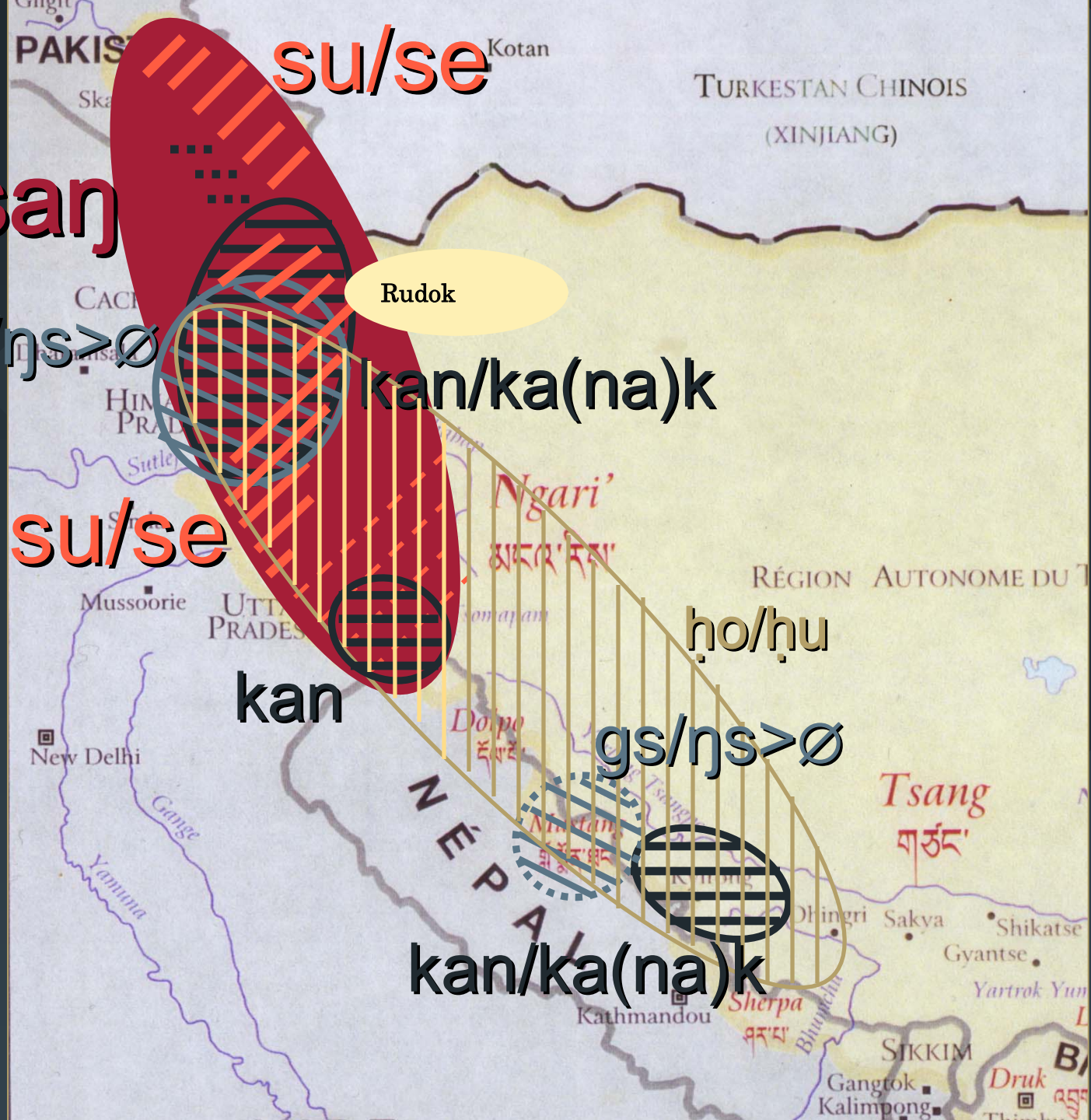
- The most salient feature is the contrastive marker saŋ, which is found throughout the whole core area and the western peripheral extension. This form is an archaism, most probably related to the likewise archaic syllabic ablative / ergative morpheme se / su.

- One might thus expect that this latter morpheme will be found in some more parts of the core area. However, the case markers are more likely to have been replaced by the standard forms than the much less frequently used contrastive morpheme.

- This is, was happened in the Leh dialect and perhaps also in several of the Shamskat dialects.

- Given the the wide-spread attestation across the peripheral areas, I would further expect to find also more attestations or traces of the inferential or generic marker ka(na)k in the area, as well as of the present / future tense marker kan.

6. The morale

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- If one compares specific isoglosses and grammatical features including minor constructions, one will possibly arrive at a different picture than when comparing only the most accessible features, such as phonological shape or a randomised set of lexical items, where a particular meaning or form might not be included or an individual particularity like the deictic pronoun *ḥo/ḥu* becomes statistically irrelevant.

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