# THE KIRATI RITUAL LANGUAGE:
## EVIDENCE FROM CHHINTANG AND CHHULUNG

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*This paper deals with the languages used in the rituals practised in Chhintang and Chhulung speech communities. Kirati people have their own culture guided by the mundum. There are four ethnic groups with more than 26 different languages. They have their own separate ritual practices and ritual language. Chhintang and Chhulung have a distinct type of ritual language which is spoken to perform any kind of ritual performances. It has a lot of archaic types of nouns which would be interesting for morpho-semantic analysis. Specially, binomials are unique properties of the ritual language and too complex structurally.*

**Keywords:** *Ritual, ethnic groups, invocations, binomial*

## 1. The ethnonym: *Kirat*

The term *kirat* is uttered as *kirãt* but there are two terms widely used in the written practice. They are *kirat* and *kirant*. In some writings, nasalization is characterized by /n/. It can sometimes mislead to the readers so the community activists refer to use the term *kirat* while writing. This is the reason that I have used the term *kirat*. The term *kirat* has received only a little discussion, but there exist a few documents about the *kirat* and *kirati* which help to understand the term. In Nepalese history, *kirati* people, who once ruled over the then Nepal, perhaps present day's Kathmandu valley for centuries, were defeated by an ancestor of the Licchavi dynasty, namely, Jayadev I in 250 A.D. (Gurung 2006). It is suspected that *kirati* people migrated to the eastern part of Nepal.

Similarly, the terms *kirat* and *kirati* are found in several old texts. They are described and documented in the old Sanskrit holy texts, namely the Mahabharat and the Ramayan. In these epics, *kirat* is taken a as 'an infamous warring race inhabiting the mountains of the north and northeast. For the most part they were looked upon as uncouth barbarians on the border to civilized India, living as gatherers of fruit and tubers, and by hunting and fishing. Among other things, their 'golden' skin colour, the hair knot lying on the top of their head, and a knife related to the Nepalese *khukuri* are cited as being characteristic of them' (Levi 1985II:74-78, as cited in Gaenszle 2000:4). It proves that *kirati* are ancient inhabitants of Nepal, even if the epics of the Hindu depict the *kirati* as an infamous warring race and uncouth barbarians, which seems to be a biased documentation towards *kirati*.

Similarly, the Buddha, the founder of the Buddhist religion, was more or less related to Kirat. S.K. Chatarjee in his book 'Kiratko Janakirti' documents that 'Buddha, who is considered as one of the greatest leaders and teachers of mankind, was thought to be of pure or of mixed Kirat origin" (as cited in Chemjong 2003:1). In this way, we can say that

Kirati ruled over the present day's Nepal before the Lord Buddha's birth, whether the Lord Buddha himself belonged to the Kirat or not.

Chemjong (2003) documents (as cited from New Biblical Atlas of London Religious Trace) the 'term *kirat* is a corrupt form of *kiriat, kiryat or kirjath*, which mean a fort or town in Moabite language of the Mediterranean region. When they populated here, they built many forts and towns and called them *kiriat-hime, kiryat-yarim, kirjath-arba, kiryat-baal, kiryat-hujro, kiryat-sanna, kiryatsapher*, which indicate the meaning of the town and fort of the forest, or the town of the god Baal, or the town of books, or the town of palm trees'. When we analyze this documentation about *kirat*, it is far from the facts and it seems to be not more than a guess work. The term *kirat* cannot be derived from the Moabite language spoken in the Mediterranean region. This is because there are many myths about the origin of *kirat*. According to some versions of *kirat* mythology, *kirat* originated in and around Bara Chhetra, a bank of the Arun River, which lies in Sunsari District, eastern Nepal. In this way, it is difficult to conclude that whether *kirati* migrated from the Mediterranean region or somewhere else.

*Kirat* is a cover term which includes multiple ethnic groups, namely Rai, Limbu, Yakkha and Sunuwar. All of these ethnic groups are subsumed under the *kirat*. The term Rai was not originally an ethnonym, but the Hindu king conferred the title Rai (rāja N <rājan SK) to the chieftains of East Nepal. (Gaenszle 2000:3). Their generation started to call themselves 'Rais' offspring' (rāikosantān N) and the other people also started to call them in this way (rāikosantān N). In the course of time, the title Rai metamorphosed into a distinct ethnonym. Rai people basically live in different VDCs (Village Development Committee) of Solukhumbu, Okhaldunga, Khotang, Bhojpur, Sangkhuwasava, Dhankuta, Pachthar, Ilam, Udayapur but they are settling in different places of the world. It is interesting issue to say is that Rais speak more than 23 separate languages but most of the Rai languages are undocumented to date and are on the verge of extinction (Rai 2011). Similarly, Limbu is another ethnic group under the *kirat*. The Limbus call themselves as *Yakthung* to refer to both male and female. They call *Yakthungba* to refer to the male and *Yakthungma*to the female (Tumbahang 2007). They are basically living in different VDCs of Dhankuta, Terhathum, Taplejung, Pachthar but now they are settling in different places. They have their own language with some dialects and culture. Similarly, Yakkha people are also another ethnic group under the *kirat*. Originally, they live in different VDCs of Dhankuta, Sangkhuwasava, Terhathum but they are scattering in different parts of Nepal and abroad. Yakkha people have their own language and culture like Limbu. Similarly, Sunuwar, also known as *koich* is another ethnic name. Originally, they live in different VDCs of Okhaldhunga, Ramechap districts but they are settling in different parts of the world. They have their own language and culture.

## 2. Mundum and the ritual language

The term *mundum* is etymologically still unidentified but it is widely used as a cover term for *kirati* oral tradition. The word *mundum* is pronounced differently by different

language speakers but there are three varieties which are widely used. They are *mundum, muddum and mundhum* (Rai 2009). Variants of pronunciation happen simply because of presence or absence of phoneme. In most of the *Kirati* languages, there is no aspirated /d$^h$/ sound so they cannot pronounce *mundhum*. But, Limbu people pronounce it as *mundhum* because of presence of aspirated /d$^h$/ sound in Limbu. I have selected the term *mundum*. There are several interpretations of the *mundum* in different perspectives but the term *mundum* can be glossed as 'oral tradition', 'ancestral knowledge', or - more generally -'traditional way of life' (Gaenszle 2002). This interpretation is very much convincible. The *mundum* is really an oral tradition with ancestral knowledge which helps them to memorize the traditional way of life. This orality is transferred from generation to generation through the rituals and the rituals are performed by *wattong* 'knowledgeable elder'.

*Mundum* is an umbrella concept which basically deals with three things. They are myths, rituals and specific language (Rai 2011). Myth and the ritual are not one and the same. They are very closely related to each other but they are also different to a certain extent. Myths and rituals are two folds of a coin. Each ritual may have its own mythology in the sense that any ritual originated from a certain event might have turned into myths in these days. Myths are really a traditional narrative which may or may not be the real events. Nobody knows about the validity of myths because it is an age-old narrative. In the *Kirati* community, there are several rituals, traditions, beliefs and norms which are based on the myths. Myth is one of the strong phenomena among *Kirati* people. Sometimes, there may be confusion about the importance of myth and ritual. Debate is open for all whether the ritual dominates the myth or the myth dominates the ritual. Ritual and myth cannot be distinguished easily in some cases because they are closely interwoven and interrelated. However, ritual follows myth in majority cases. The main feature of the *mundum* is myth because myth is interesting and important in the *Kirati* community (Rai 2007).

Similarly, rituals are a series of actions which are always performed in the same way, especially as part of the religious ceremony. Ritual is a part and parcel of human life. Human beings cannot be separated from rituals. They go side by side. There are several rituals found in every community. *Kirati* people are well-off in rituals. Rituals found in *Kirati* are very interesting because of different features like specific language, setting, offering, timing, performance etc. Rituals performed by Kirati people are based on the *Kirati* myths. Myths narrate the origin, setting, timing, offering, performance of all rituals. Some of the issues they answer are: What type of setting is needed? At what time these rituals are worshipped? What things are offered and what is the style of performance? Such issues can possibly address by myths so rituals are closely associated with myths (Rai 2007).

The last feature of the *mundum* is the specific language. Language used for daily communication is not used in the performance of the rituals. The *dowa* or *wattong* 'ritual experts' who perform the various types of rites and rituals speak the specific language. This specific language is broadly called *mundum* language. This *mundum* language is also

categorized into two varieties. They are the shamanic language and ritual language. The shamanic language is only used by the *dowa* 'shamans' who possess the deity while performing the shamanic session during the night and the ritual language which is spoken by not only *dowa* but also *wattong* 'knowledgeable elders in the rituals'. The fact is that for expressing the ritual language, there is not necessary to be a shaman. The ritual language can be expressed by *wattong* 'knowledgeable elder's and in most of the villages, knowledgeable elders are speaking the ritual language (Rai 2011). The shamanic language is very difficult to linguistically analyze because of lack of intelligibility because they speak the language with playing the drum. They express the shamanic language in noisy context. There are a number of studies of the ritual language studied by some scholars (Allen 1978, Gaenszle 2002, Rai 2007, 2009, 2011). The ritual language is one variety of language which is only used on the occasion of the ritual performance. The ritual language is different from the ordinary language to some extent. What many people think of it mistakenly is that anybody who speaks the ordinary language can understand the ritual language. This is not the fact. For this case, many studies have shown that the ritual language and the ordinary language are not the one and the same but there are a number of differences between them (Allen 1978, Gaenszle 2002, Rai 2007).

## 3. The ritual language

As mentioned above, the ritual language is one of the varieties of the *mundum* language. It is totally oral but fixed structured type of the language. The ritual language has four major types that are ceremonial dialogues, lay invocations, invocations of the elders, ritual texts of the initiated ritual specialists (Gaenszle 2002). This paper does not deal with all four types of the ritual language but deals with only invocations of the elders. This type of ritual speech plays an important role in rituals. The invocations of the elders, here, mean the invocations of the *wattong*. All elders cannot work as *wattong*. Those knowledgeable elders who can perform the rituals and speak the ritual speech are called *wattong*. Similarly, if somebody who is too young knows about the rituals and can speak the ritual speech, he cannot work as *wattong*. That's why all *wattong*s are elder but not all elders are *wattong*.

Invocations of the *wattong*s include many types of ritual texts which are spoken by the *wattong*. In this type of ritual texts, invocations are used to address to various ancestral beings. They might be different deities, hearthstones (Gaenszle 2002). In this paper, I analyze the data collected from the Chhintang and Chhulung rituals. Both are sub-ethnic of Rai group. They originally settle in Chhintang and Askhisalla VDCs of Dhankuta respectively. The word Chhintang is phonetically pronounced as *chintaŋ* and Chhulung is also phonetically pronounced as *chiliŋ*. But I have used the term Chhintang and Chhulung for my writing convenience.

## 3.1. Sample texts from Chhintang

This is a real text which was used to worship the Budhahang deity in Chhintang. This text was spoken by *chambakmaila* (Bhakta Bir Tuprihang Rai). This text is taken from Rai

(2007) which was collected by a team of Chhintang Puma Documentation Project (CPDP). So, I must be thankful to all who involved to CPDP for this data. For linguistic analysis, I have named words from ritual language as C-RL, words from Chhintang ordinary language as C and words from Nepali language as N.

### Sample_text_1

| he | parmeswora | misreko | haŋma | thakura | alise |
|----|-----------|---------|-------|---------|-------|
| he | parameśvara | misreko | haŋma | thakura | a-lis-e |
| ADDR | Lord | FILLER | deity | senior | 2-be-PST |
| N | N | C-RL | C-RL | C/N | C- C -C |

Oh. Lord, you became deity.

### Sample_text_2

| warila | kundala | ambira | legura | phuwasa | tamphukpa |
|--------|---------|--------|--------|---------|-----------|
| warila | kundala | ambira | legura | phuwasa | taŋphusa |
| a_samet | a_ sameta_place | | a_place | noble | noble |
| C-RL | C-RL | C-RL | C-RL | C-RL | C-RL |

You became a big deity settled in Ambira and Legura (Akhisalla)

### Sample_text_3

| sirjana | gurjana | tubasa | rakpasa |
|---------|---------|--------|---------|
| sirjana | gurjani | tubasa | rakpasa |
| creation | creation | grandfather | great-grandfather |
| C/N-RL | C-RL | C-RL | C-RL |

| sritaŋma | muntaŋma | siriminethami | taŋma | na | alise |
|----------|----------|---------------|-------|-----|-------|
| sritaŋma | muntaŋma | siriminethami | taŋma | na | a-lis-e |
| lord.of.luck | lord.of.mundum | accepted | head | PTCL | 2-be-PST |
| C-RL | C-RL | C-RL | C-RL | C | CCC |

(You became) our ancestors, creator, lord of luck, lord of mundum.

### Sample_text_4

| chãya | chuya | taŋma | na | alise |
|-------|-------|-------|-----|-------|
| chãya | chuya | taŋma | na | a-lis-e |
| protection | protection | head | PTCL | 2-be-PST |
| C-RL | C-RL | C-RL | C | C- C -C |

You became a big deity.

### Sample_text_5

| satte | taŋma | baca | taŋma | na | alise |
|-------|-------|------|-------|-----|-------|
| satya | taŋma | baca | taŋma | na | a-lis-e |
| truth | head | promise | head | PTCL | 2-be -PST |
| C/N | C-RL | C/N | C-RL | C | C- C -C |

You became the deity of truth and promise.

*Sample_text_6*
batta        misreko      tuplachoŋ      berichoŋ     garikana
batta        misreko      tuplachoŋ      berichoŋ     gar -ikana
that.much    FILLER     banana's.leaf     banana.leaf   do -SEQ
C        C-RL       C-RLC-RL       N
(He has) offered things on the banana leaf.

*Sample_text_7*
sibicoŋ        meŋmacoŋ     garikana
sibicoŋ        meŋmacoŋ     gar-ikana
ginger         gingertip      do -SEQ
C-RL         C-RL        N
(He has) offered ginger.

*Sample_text_8*
acheta     pati  garikana
achetā     pati    gar -ikana
sacred.rice   leaf    do -SEQ
N         N       N
(He has) offered sacred rice and holy leaves.

## 3.2. Sample text from Chhulung

I myself collected this ritual text during my short field work in Chhulung area in 2011. I have identified the words from the Chhulung ritual language as Ch-RL, words from Chhulung ordinary language as Ch and words from Nepali as N.

*Sample_text_1*
*baba   parmeswora khan bhonekona    ambirahaŋ lo*
baba   parmeswora khan bhoneko-na         ambira-haŋ    lo
Oh Lord         2s    saying-PTCL    Ambira-king   PTCL
N    N         Ch   N         Ch-RL
Oh, Lord you became the king Ambirhang.

*Sample_text_2*
*rucchehaŋ lo alisachekina*
rucchehaŋ      loa-lis-a-che-kina
Rucche-king    PTCL 2-be-PST-d-SEQ
Ch-RL      Ch
You became the king Rucchehang.

*Sample_text_3*
*khan   bhonekona    naibakna*
khan   bhoneko-na   naibak-na
2s saying-PTCL here-PTCL

Ch   N           Ch
You (are) here.

*Sample_text_4*
*kãsi dillima uthapanna alisache*

| kãsi | dillima | uthapanna | a-lis-a-che |
|------|---------|-----------|-------------|
| place_name | | origin | 2-be-PST-d |
| N | N | N | Ch |

You originated in Kasi/Delhi.

*Sample_text_5*
*alisache na*

| a-lis-a-che | na |
|-------------|------|
| 2-be-PST-d | PTCL |
| Ch | Ch |

You became (originated there).

## 3.3. Ritual nouns

In the ritual speech, the ritual nouns play an important role. There are some words in the sample texts which are not found in the ordinary language. The ritual nouns found in the ritual speech can be categorized into two types. They are independent nouns and paired nouns. Independent nouns occur alone whereas paired nouns cannot occur alone. Such paired nouns are called binomial which will be analyzed next topic (Allen 1978, Gaenszle 2002, Rai 2007). Both of these nouns are strange even for native speakers. Such archaic types of noun are found in the ritual speech. In the sample texts, there are a lot of independent and paired ritual nouns. For examples, in Chhintang, *amibira*and*legura* are ritual nouns used to refer to left and right part of Akhisalla VDC of Dhankuta, east Nepal respectively. Similarly, another example for paired nouns from Chhintang is *sibicoŋmeŋmacoŋ* which means 'ginger'. *sibicoŋmeŋmacoŋ* is a typical example of paired nouns which cannot be separated to each other. They come together and give a single meaning. In ordinary language, ginger is called *phidaŋ*. In this way, ritual nouns are one of the important components of the ritual speech. Same case exactly happens to the Chhulung ritual speech.

In ritual speech, there are different types of nouns except typical ritual nouns. Some nouns are from ordinary language and some nouns are from the Nepali language, a national lingua franca. There is no doubt that typical ritual nouns are one of the most characteristic features of the ritual language but other nouns from different languages are also equally important. In the sample text mentioned above, there are several nouns borrowed from the ordinary speaking language and the Nepali language. For examples, *haŋma* is a word found in the Chhintang and Chhulung ritual speech which is borrowed from the ordinary language. Similarly, there are Nepali words like *parmeswora*, *baba* found in the Chhintang and Chhulung ritual speech. Nouns found in the ritual speech are very much interesting issues to statistically analysis of the code mixing but the fact is that

the typical ritual nouns are being replaced by words from the Nepali and ordinary language. While analyzing both Chhintang and Chhulung, Chhulung is more influenced by the Nepali language. In traditional counting, out of 18 nouns in the Chhintang ritual speech, 3 words were from Nepali, 5 words were from ordinary and 10 were pure ritual words. On contrary, in Chhulung, 7 words were from Nepali, 7 words were from ordinary and 4 words were ritual words.

### 3.4. Binomials

The term binomial was coined by Nicholas J Allen for the first time in the field of ritual language analysis (Allen 1978). The binomial feature makes the *mundum* texts more poetical and different from the ordinary language. The basic characteristic feature of the binomials is that two nouns come together without any predictable chance and that they cannott stand alone. They are stuck up so closely that they cannot be separated with each other. If they are separated, then they become meaningless. Technically, binomials found in the ritual speech consist of two-three syllabic limbs, the last syllable of each limb being identical' (Gaenszle 2002).

According to structure makes up of the binomials, they can be categorized into two types. They are regular and irregular (Rai 2007). Regular binomials are of typical binomials which strictly follows the technical definition of binomials. For examples, *tuplachoŋberichoŋ* 'tip of the banana leaves' is an example of regular binomial which follows the technical definition. Here, *tuplachoŋberichoŋ* seems to be two nouns but they are a paired noun and both of them give a single meaning. If we try to separate one from the other, they cannot be meaningful. So, they are closely stuck up to each other and *tuplachoŋ* is a first limb and *berichoŋ* is a second limb. Both of them have three syllables and the last syllable of each limb are identical. This is what is typical characteristic of regular binomials.

On the contrary, irregular binomials are different from regular binomials which are several kind of deviations from the ideal form (Gaenszle 2000, Rai 2009). The irregular binomials are irregularly structured. It refers to that there is no any typical or regular feature which helps to predict its structure. For example, *acheta pati* is also a type of binomial borrowed from Nepali but it does not represent the typical struture of binomials.

### 3.5. Ritual verbs

Verbs used in the ritual language are not interesting because all of them are borrowed from either the ordinary language or from the Nepali language. There is no typical verbs used in the ritual speech. For examples, *alise, garikana* are verbs which have been found in the Chintang ritual speech. The verb *alise* is morphologically broken as *a-lis-e.* Here, *a-* refers to 2, *lis-* is stem which means be and *-e* is a past morpheme. *alise* is glossed as 'you became'. This is simply a feature of the Chhintang ordinary language. Similarly, other verb found in the Chhintang ritual speech is *garikana* which is a Nepali verb. Though it is a Nepali verb, it has been a property of Chhintang ritual verb. The verb *garikana* is

morphologically broken as *gar-ikana* which is glossed as doing because *gar* refers to 'do' and *–ikana* is a 'sequential marker'. Similarly, same case is found in Chhulung. Verbs in the Chhulung ritual speech are borrowed from the ordinary language. For example, *alisache* is morphologically broken as *a-lis-a-che* which is glossed as 'you two became' because *a-* refers to 2, *lis-* means 'be' and *-a-* is a past morpheme and *–che* refers to dual marker. In this way, verbs found in the ritual speech are not so different from the ordinary language and they are not so interesting for linguistic analysis.

### 3.6. Ritual syntax

Syntactic features are not so complex in Tibeto-Burman languages in comparison to Indo-European/Aryan language. Syntax in ritual speech is not much difference from the ordinary language. In the ritual speech, all sentences are performed in declarative sentence. The interesting thing is that they do not use any kind of honorific construction. It can be suspected that there should be honorific construction in sentence construction because they are addressing to the deities and recalling ancestors. In sentence construction, such features are no observed linguistically so far. But, though there is no honorific form, there is a honorific function through the use of subjunctive verb forms (Gaenszle et al. 2005). In Chintang, the tenseless verb form is a 'subjunctive', as described by Bickel et al. (2007), following the proposal in Bickel (1996) on a parallel form in Belhare. This form represents a higher level of politeness and thus an honorific function in the Chintang ritual language. In the ritual context, instead of using a straightforward imperative (which would be intrusive), a person addresses/requests the deities in the second person (sg/d/p) using an ordinary verb in subjunctive form (Rai 2007). For example, the verb *apuĩsum* found in ritual speech is morphologically broken as *a- puĩs -u -m* which is glossed as 2- produce -3P -2nsA. This construction is translated as 'you (all) produced it' but in the ritual speech, it would be understood as 'may you (all) produce it (i.e. the crops, etc.). Another important issue of the ritual syntax is clause combining. There are two type of clause combining. They are non-finite clauses and finite clauses. The most common type of clause combining found in the ritual speech is converb and sequential which are the same as found in the ordinary language.

### 4. Conclusion

Kirati people have their own culture guided by the *mundum*. While performing any type of rituals, they use a distinct language which is called *Kirati* ritual language. There are four ethnic groups with more than 26 different languages. They have their own separate ritual practices and ritual language. This study is based on the two linguistic groups. They are Chhintang and Chhulung who originally settlle in Chhintang and Akhisalla VDC of Dhankuta, east Nepal.

The ritual language is a distinct type of language which is spoken to perform any kind of ritual performances. It cannot be spoken by everybody but spoken by only the knowledgeable elders. It has a lot of archaic types of nouns which would be interesting to morpho-semantically analyze and can help us to find out the tradition way of their life

and ancestral knowledge. It is really different from the ordinary language to some extent because it is a formal structuredness, a melodic, well balanced and pleasant form of speaking and poetic parallelism and follows certain rules (Gaenszle 2002).

In Chhintang and Chhulung ritual speech, a few elders are using the ritual language but they have forgotten many things. As a result, they are mixing many words from the ordinary language and the Nepali language. That is sad news for anybody who wants to study the oral practice and tradition. In comparison between them, Chhintang is relatively safe in maintaining their ritual practices including language than that of Chhulung. In the *Kirati* ritual language including Chhintang and Chhulung, verbs and syntax are not so interesting for scientific analysis whereas nouns are so interesting. Specially, binomials are unique properties of the ritual language and too complex structurally. So, it is very much interesting to study the binomials morpho-semantically.

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