

# Language Documentation and Description

ISSN 2756-1224

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This article appears in: *Language Documentation and Description*,  
vol 20. Editor: Peter K. Austin

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Cite this article: Budha, Jag Bahadur, Maya Daurio & Mark Turin. 2021.  
Tichurong (Nepal) - Language Snapshot. *Language Documentation and  
Description* 20, 189-197.

Link to this article: <http://www.elpublishing.org/PID/235>

This electronic version first published: December 2021



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# Tichurong (Nepal) – Language Snapshot

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<b>Language Name:</b>	Tichurong
<b>Dialects:</b>	None
<b>Family:</b>	Tibeto-Burman > Bodish > Tichurong
<b>ISO 639-3 Code:</b>	tcn
<b>Glottolog Code:</b>	tich1238
<b>Population:</b>	2,700 speakers
<b>Location:</b>	28.8826, 82.9989 (Tichurong valley, Dolpa, Nepal)
<b>Written Form:</b>	No established or standardized form
<b>Vitality rating:</b>	ranked as 6a (Vigorous) by Ethnologue

## Summary

Tichurong is an unwritten Tibeto-Burman language spoken by approximately 2,700 people across eighteen villages in the Tichurong valley in the northwestern district of Dolpa in Nepal. It is also known as Poike, Poinke, Rongke, and Tichurongke; it continues to be used in everyday interactions, but differs in usage according to age and gender. It is one of two languages native to the Tichurong valley, the other being Kaike (ISO 639-3 code: kzq and Glottolog Code: kaik1246). Almost all residents of the Tichurong valley also speak Nepali and Tibetan, and some also speak Kaike, making the community decidedly multilingual. Through Nepal's Language Commission, a sociolinguistic survey of Tichurong was conducted in 2018, and the language is one of 15 recently identified by the Central Department of

Linguistics as warranting further research. While Tichurong is unaccounted for in all previous censuses and linguistic surveys, it has been highlighted by linguists studying Kaike. The Nepal Magar Writers Association hosted a study seminar in 2021 facilitated by two linguists to identify prominent phonological and morphological features of the Tichurong language.

## Summary in Nepali

तिछुरोड भाषा नेपालको डोल्पा जिल्ला स्थित तिछुरोड उपत्यकामा रहेका अठार वटा गाउँका करिब २,७०० स्थानियले बोल्ने गर्दछन्। यो भोटबर्मन भाषा लिपि रहित छ र यसलाई पोइके, पोइन्के, रोड्के र तिछुरोड्के जस्ता नामहरुले पनि चिनाईन्छ। दैनिक हिसाबमा बोलिए पनि उमेर र लिङ्ग अनुसार यसको प्रयोगमा भिन्नता पाईन्छ। तिछुरोड उपत्यकामा बोलिने दुई भाषाहरु मध्ये यो एक हो, अर्कोलाई काइके भनिन्छ (ISO 639-3 code: kzq र Glottolog Code: kaik1246) तिछुरोडका प्राय सबै बासिन्दा तिछुरोड भाषा साथै नेपाली र तिब्बती बोल्ने गर्दछन्, केहि काइके पनि बोल्छन्, यस हिसाबले सो समुदाय बहुभाषि भएको प्रष्ट छ। नेपालको भाषा आयोगले सन् २०१८ मा तिछुरोडको एउटा सामाजिक तथा भाषिक सर्वेक्षण गरेको थियो । हालै भाषाविज्ञान केन्द्रीय विभाग बमोजिम थप अनुसन्धान आवश्यक परेका १५ भाषा अन्तर्गत तिछुरोड भाषालाई पनि पहिचान गरिएको छ। साबिकका जनगणना र भाषिक सर्वेक्षणमा तिछुरोड भाषाको उल्लेख नभए पनि, काइके भाषा अध्ययन गर्ने भाषाविद्हरुले यसको टिप्पनी गरेको चाहिँ पाइन्छ। नेपाल मगर लेखक संघले सन् २०२१ मा तिछुरोड भाषाका प्रमुख स्वनिमवैज्ञानिक तथा पदवैज्ञानिक विशेषताहरु पहिचान गर्नुलाई दुई भाषाविद्को सहकार्यमा अध्ययन गोष्ठी आयोजना गरेको थियो।

## 1. Overview

Tichurong is a Tibeto-Burman language spoken primarily by members of the Magar ethnic community of the Tichurong valley in Dolpa district in north-western Nepal, and also by scattered households belonging to different ethnic groups, particularly in Banthada village. Tichurong is understood to be closely related to other highland languages spoken in this area of Nepal south of the Tibetan border (Honda 2018). The language is known variously as Poike, Poinke, Rongke, and Tichurongke. The glossonyms *Poike* and *Poinke*, both of which are local pronunciations of the Tibetan term *bod skad* meaning ‘the Tibetan language’, are most commonly employed by community members themselves, while the terms *Tichurong* and *Rongke* are used by people of Upper Dolpo to refer to the language. Generally speaking, inhabitants of the Dolpo valley refer to the Tichurong-speaking community and residents of the Tichurong valley as *Tichurongba* or *Rongba* (-ba being a common Tibetan nominalizer), and refer to Hindu lowlanders as *Monpa* (cf. Pommaret 1994). The terms *Rongba* and *Rongke* derive from the Tibetan word *rong* ‘lower (and often fertile) valley’, and are most commonly used to refer to people who live

downslope or away from the Himalayan mountains. Hindu lowlanders refer to the people of Tichurong as *Tarali*, without differentiating between Tichurong and Kaike speakers, the latter being a Tibeto-Burman language of the Bodish group (Regmi 2013a). Here we refer to the language using the geographical glossonym *Tichurong*, or *Tichurongke* (-*ke* being the Tibetan term for ‘language’, from Written Tibetan *skad*) as the language is exclusively spoken in the Tichurong valley and the glossonym *Tichurong* represents an emerging consensus among speakers about how they wish to be represented and identified in public spaces.

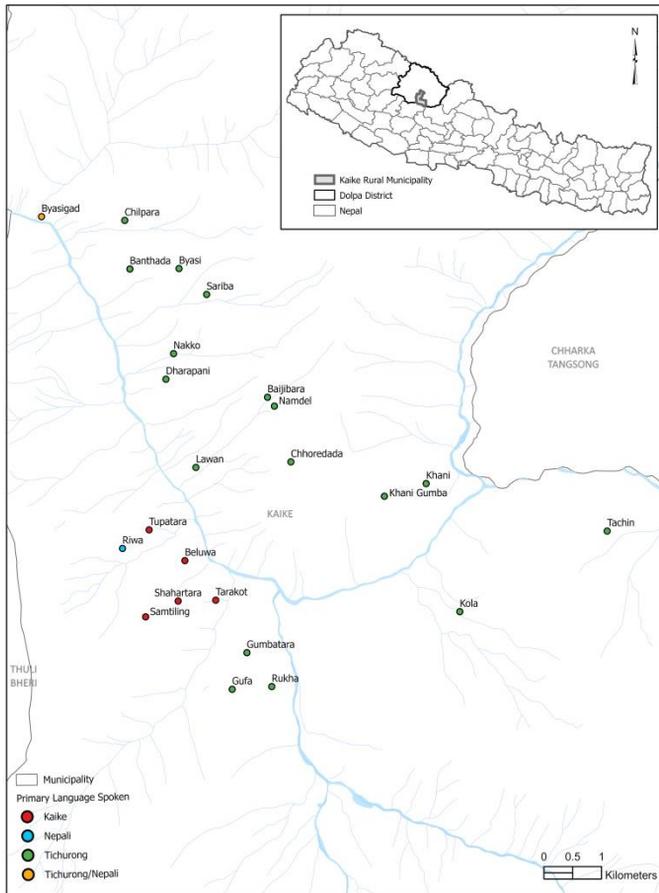


Figure 1: The geographic distribution of primary languages spoken across the Tichurong valley. Map © 2021 Maya Daurio

There are various interpretations and possible etymologies for the term Tichurong. In one analysis, Tichurong is understood to be a variant of *Tiserong*, itself derived from the toponym *Tise* (Kind 2012), which refers to Mount Kailash, and *rong*, meaning valley. In another interpretation, and one that is preferred by members of the community, Tichurong derives from Tibetan *ti* ‘valuable’ (cf. Witzel 1993), *chu* ‘water’, and *rong* (cf. Gurung 1980).

The Tichurong language is spoken in 18 out of 24 villages in the Tichurong valley, depicted in Figure 1. The smallest hamlets of just a few houses do not appear in the map. According to the decennial census of Nepal conducted in 2011, there were 780 households and 3,576 people in the Tichurong valley across Lawan and Sahartara Village Development Committees (VDCs) (Government of Nepal 2014a), which have since been combined to form the Kaike Rural Municipality, as a result of local elections in 2017. A new census is currently underway. Gumbatara is the largest Tichurong-speaking village, followed in decreasing order of size (both in terms of population and number of households) by Kola, Baijibara, Banthada, Khani, Chilpara, Lawan, Tachin, Rukha, Dharapani, Byasi, Khani Gumba, Sariba (Syala), Namdel, Gufa, Nakko, and Chhoredada. In the village of Byasigad, five out of 16 households speak Tichurong; the remainder speak Nepali. As a result of a 2019 field survey conducted by Jag Bahadur Budha, at the behest of the Kaike Rural Municipality, we understand the Tichurong language to be spoken by 2,700 individuals.



Figure 2: The largest Tichurong-speaking village of Gumbatara. Photo Jag Bahadur Budha.

The Tichurong valley is deeply incised by the Thuli Bher river, which flows along the valley floor with steep valley walls rising up on each side and ranging in elevation from 2,340m to 6,000m. Villages are distributed along both sides of the river, with the bulk of them on the northeast side. Tichurong lies about 270km from Kathmandu. There is one airstrip serving all of Dolpa in Jupal, with flights from Nepalgunj and Surkhet.

## **2. Sociolinguistic context**

The Federal Republic of Nepal is ethnically and linguistically highly diverse, with 129 unique spoken languages (Bhattarai 2019) and 125 castes/ethnic groups (Government of Nepal 2014b). Tichurong was one of 15 additional languages designated for surveying in 2017 by the Central Department of Linguistics in cooperation with the Language Commission (Regmi 2020: 248).

Tichurong is an oral language, and its speakers belong to the Magar ethnic community. In Nepal, there are a number of ethnic communities who speak more than one mother tongue; the Magar are a case in point, as they speak four distinct languages: Kham, Kaike, Tichurong, Dhut (Regmi 2020: 236), illustrating how ethnic and linguistic affiliation do not always correspond. Nepal is a multilingual country, in which its people speak more than one language in different domains (Gautam 2021), and residents of the Tichurong valley are no exception. Kaike is spoken in five villages (all on the southwest side of the Thuli Bheri River), and Kaike speakers are trilingual, also speaking Tichurong and Nepali (Honda 2008; Regmi 2013b). Nepali is spoken throughout the valley by all villagers, though not typically as a primary language, except in Riwa (Fisher 1987). Although the majority of villages where Tichurong is the primary spoken language are on the northeast side of the river opposite from the Kaike-speaking villages, the largest Tichurong-speaking village, Gumbatara, is on the southwest side of the river and maintains close relations with the largest of these neighbouring Kaike-speaking villages, Sahartara (Fisher 1987; Regmi 2013b). Four additional Tichurong-speaking villages are also situated on the southwest side of the river.

Patterns of Tichurong language use vary by age, gender, and literacy. According to research by Jag Bahadur Budha and a preliminary study seminar in Kathmandu, Tichurong speakers, none of whom are monolingual, above 50 years old and below 14 years of age are the primary speakers of the language, because these age groups tend to live in the valley. Children up to 14 years are able to gain education in the valley, although access varies widely based on distance to the only secondary school, located in Sahartara (Daurio 2012). While children speak Nepali at school, they continue to speak Tichurong at home. Those aged 15-49 are more mobile, and leave the valley for education and employment opportunities, where they are exposed to Nepali, Hindi, and English, through media and everyday interactions. While women are more

likely to use Tichurong in all domains, men tend to use Nepali for counting, humour, and in primarily male spaces such as community meetings and political discussions. Lower levels of literacy in Nepali are associated with greater use of Tichurong in all areas, and literate residents of the valley use Nepali for writing letters and recording meeting minutes.



*Figure 3: The Tichurong speaking village of Lawan appears on the right side of the Thuli Bheri river. Photo © 2021 Jag Bahadur Budha.*

### **3. Available resources**

Some information about Tichurong comes from linguists who have studied the Kaike language. Regmi (2013a) describes the multilingualism of Kaike speakers and references close contact between Kaike and Tichurong speakers, resulting in the former's competence in both, in addition to Nepali (Regmi 2013b: 162). Honda (2008: 89) notes that Kaike is spoken in an area where 'a Tibetan dialect called Tichyurongbā is dominant'. Honda (2018) noted that 'Tichyurong Tibetan' had never been investigated, while also determining that Kaike has a large number of Tibetan loanwords, most of them recent and possibly borrowed from Tichurong. Adhikari (2018) reported that there are no variations in Tichurong across the villages of Gumbatara, Kola, Tachin, and Khani (अधिकारी २०७५).

Although Tichurong has yet to be included in a national census, the Language Commission has recognized that more research is needed on the

language. In their 2021 annual report ‘Poike’ is identified as a language, along with four other languages which the commission notes were not included in the 2011 census (भाषा आयोग २०७७). Regmi (2021) references ‘Poinke’ as one of three languages spoken by Kaike speakers, and the dominant language of the Tichurong valley by number of speakers.

In March 2021, the *Nepal Magar Writers Association* in Kathmandu hosted a study seminar facilitated by two linguists, Amrit Yonjan Tamang and Tara Mani Rai, to identify phonological and morphological features of Tichurong. Together with Honda’s survey, this lays the foundations for a better understanding of the genetic affiliation of the language. Tamang and Rai’s preliminary findings identified 35 consonant phonemes, including six major vowels, six nasal vowels, six long vowels, and noted the following significant features of Tichurong:

1. verbs do not exhibit complex conjugational morphology, and there is no verb agreement either by person or by number;
2. there is no gender agreement;
3. it is consistently ergative: the subject of intransitive verbs and object of transitive verbs behave the same;
4. it is tonal.

#### 4. Current research

National censuses and surveys have failed to account for the specificity of linguistic diversity in the Tichurong valley (Government of Nepal 2014a; 2014b). It goes without saying that the residents have always known full well what languages they speak and that they have no need of a national census to advise them (correctly or incorrectly) of what they already understand through lived experience. Fortunately, multiple linguists, including at key institutions such as the Central Department of Linguistics at Tribhuvan University, Kirtipur, and the recently established Language Commission of Nepal (Bhattarai 2019), have identified the importance of more consistent surveys and systematic censuses across Nepal (Turin 2000; Yadava 2003; Regmi 2013c, 2020, 2021), and specifically in the Tichurong valley (Karki 2021; Regmi 2020).

We hope this Snapshot contributes to a better understanding of the unique linguistic diversity of the Tichurong valley and supports the case for a systematic review of both the language and its speakers.

## Acknowledgements

The authors are grateful to three anonymous peer reviewers who offered generous, substantive, and constructively critical commentary from which we have benefited a great deal. This contribution has been significantly strengthened through the process of double-blind peer review. In addition, we thank Peter K. Austin for his generosity and editorial professionalism.

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