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Naawa (Sankhuwasabha, Nepal) – Language Snapshot

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Language Names:	Naaba, Nawa Sherpa, Nage
Language Family:	Tibeto-Burman > Bodish
ISO 639-3 Code:	nao
Glottolog Code:	naab1241
Population:	approximately 1,000
Location:	27.839651, 87.389330
Vitality rating:	vigorous

Summary

Naawa is a Tibeto-Burman language with Bodish language features that is spoken in five villages in the north-eastern Sankhuwasabha district of Nepal and two villages in the Shigatse region of southern China. While the Naawa people have long perceived themselves as culturally and linguistically distinct from other regionally dominant groups, such as, Lhomi and Tibetan, it was not officially recognized by the Nepali government as a distinct language group until 2020 at the recommendation of the national language commission (Khabarhub 2020). At this time, Naawa has no descriptive grammar and only brief accounts of the language community are available. Increased transportation, expanding internationalization, changing demographics, and other forces of globalization are contributing to Naawa migration outside of their natal villages. While the language vitality of Naawa is considered vigorous according to both Eberhard, Simons & Fenning (2021) and Hammarström et al. (2020), their small population makes them particularly vulnerable to becoming an endangered language in the globalizing world. Therefore, language documentation and description of the Naawa language will be a valuable asset to the ongoing vitality of the language for years to come.

नेपाली भाषा सारांश

नावा भाषा नेपालको उत्तर-पूर्वमा अवस्थित संखुवा-सभा जिल्लाका पाँच गाउँहरू र चीनको दक्षिणी भेगको सिगात्से क्षेत्रका दुई गाउँहरूमा बोलिने बोडिस भाषाको विशेषताहरू भएको भोट-बर्मेली भाषा हो। उक्त गाउँहरूमा बौद्ध धर्मगुरुहरूले (लामाहरू) आफ्ना शिष्यहरूलाई तिब्बती सम्भोटा लिपि पढ्न र लेख्न सिकाउने भएतापनि उक्त लेखाइको भाषा र नावा समुदायले बोल्ने भाषामा भिन्नता रहेको छ। नावा भाषा बोल्ने व्यक्तिहरूले त्यस क्षेत्रका अन्य प्रभुत्व समुह भन्दा साँस्कृतिक र भाषिक रूपमा आफूलाई सदैव भिन्न रूपमा लिँदै आएतापनि नेपाल सरकारले नावा भाषालाई सन् २०२० सम्म एक भिन्न भाषाको रूपमा आधिकारिक मान्यता दिएको थिएन। हाल यस नावा भाषाको वर्णनात्मक व्याकरण नभएको र यस भाषा बोल्ने समुदायको संक्षिप्त विवरण मात्र उपलब्ध रहेको छ। यातायातको सुविधा, अन्तर्राष्ट्रियकरणको विस्तार, जनसाङ्ख्यिकीमा भएको परिवर्तन तथा विश्वव्यापीकरणका अन्य अवयवहरूले नावा भाषा बोल्ने समुदायका व्यक्तिहरू आफू जन्मिएको ठाउँबाट अन्यत्र बसाई सर्ने प्रवृत्तिमा योगदान पुर्याइरहेका छन्। विश्वका भाषाहरू सम्बन्धी प्रकाशन -एथ्नोलोग (एबरहाड, साइमन्स र फेनिङ, २०२१) र विश्वका न्यून पहिचान भएका भाषाहरूको सूची- ग्लोटोलोग (ह्यामरस्ट्रोम हराड र फोर्केल, रोबर्ट र हास्पेलमाथ, मार्टिन र ब्याङ्क, सिवास्टियन, २०२०) दुवै प्रकाशनहरूका अनुसार नावा समुदायका व्यक्तिहरूको भाषिक महत्व उच्च मानिँएता पनि नावाहरूको न्यून जनसङ्ख्याको कारणले यस भाषा हालको भू-मण्डलीकृत विश्वमा लोपोन्मुख हुने जोखिम बढाएको छ। तसर्थ नावा भाषाको अभिलेखिकरण र वर्णन कार्य यस भाषाको जीवन्तताका लागि अनन्तकालसम्म एक महत्वपूर्ण सम्पत्ति हुनेछ।

1. Overview

The natal villages of the Naawa are located in the northeastern Sankhuwasabha district of Nepal, and two villages across the border in China. Until the 1950s, the Naawa people of Nepal were permitted to travel as far as Lhasa, Tibet without any restrictions. At present, they may cross the border for a few days provided they have a pass issued by the Nepali government. However, since March 2020 this temporary border crossing access has been terminated due to Covid-19 restrictions. It remains to be seen when this privilege will be reinstated.

According to their oral history, the Naawa people originally settled in present day China and then moved to *kima-thanga* 'fern field' as early as 1650 Bikram Sambhat (1582 in the Gregorian calendar). It is generally believed that these pioneering ancestors are descendants of *Kimbu Riti*, which possibly refers to the predecessors of the Solu Khumbu Valley Sherpa people.

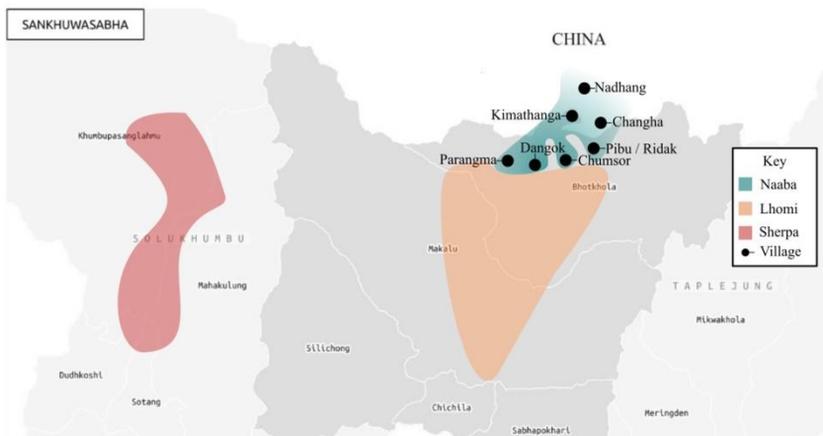


Figure 1: Naawa villages and other important language regions in the northeastern Sankhuwasabha district of Nepal. The Naawa villages in China are also called Dendang (Nadhang) and Phabuk (Changba). Map adapted from <https://ehrpinspection.nra.gov.np/maps?district=9>

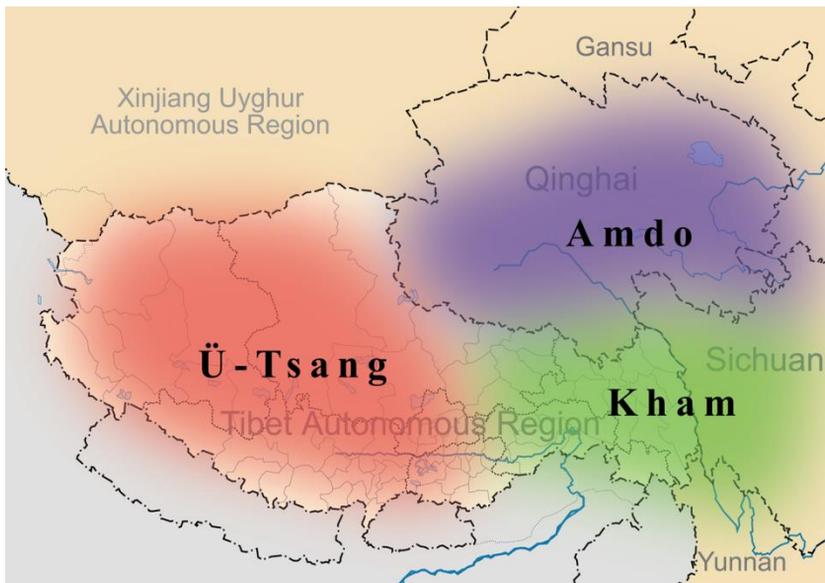


Figure 2: Geographical area of Tibetan: Ü-Tsang, Amdo, and Kham.

Though the village *lamas* ‘spiritual practitioners’ teach their disciples to read and write the Tibetan Sambhotta script, there are disparities between this written language and the language spoken by the Naawa community.¹

2. Genetic classification

According to Matisoff (2003), the Tibeto-Burman language family includes some 250-300 languages; while nine of these have more than 1 million speakers, 123 have fewer than 10,000. The Naawa are estimated to number 1,000, and their small population is not abnormal for Tibeto-Burman languages. While knowledge of the Tibeto-Burman language family has been developing, according to Thurgood (2003) the amount of work remaining far outweighs what has been accomplished. Until more conclusive evidence is presented, languages like Naawa will remain unclassified beyond the Bodish classification.

Scholars have developed a variety of cladistic structures to specify the Bodish sub-group within the Tibeto-Burman language family. Figure 3 and Figure 4 are commonly referred to in the current literature. Some scholars have also recognized that the cladistic structures can be misleading as they fail to account for language change and language contact.²

¹ For example, according to Pemba Naawa, who was trained in written Tibetan in Kimathangka, *kəmnuk* ‘pen’ and *ʃenuk* ‘pencil’ are Naawa words. However, in my experience other Naawa people are unaware of these words, instead, they use *nugul* ‘pen, pencil’ or Nepali *kalam* ‘pen’.

² This led van Driem (2011) to develop the ‘Fallen Leaves’ model of Tibeto-Burman languages.

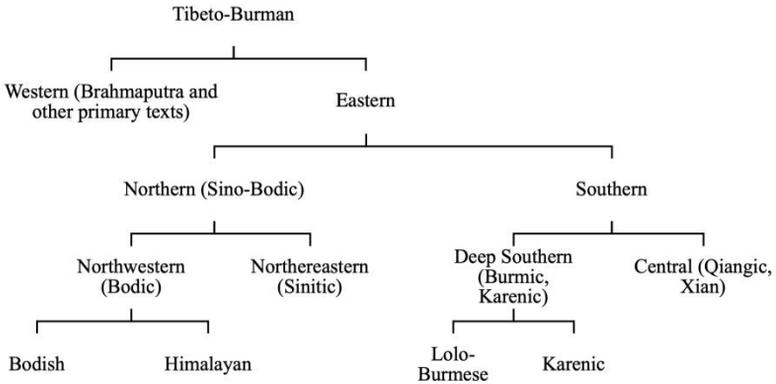


Figure 3: Tree diagram of the Tibeto-Burman language family (van Driem 2005, in Hyslop 2014).

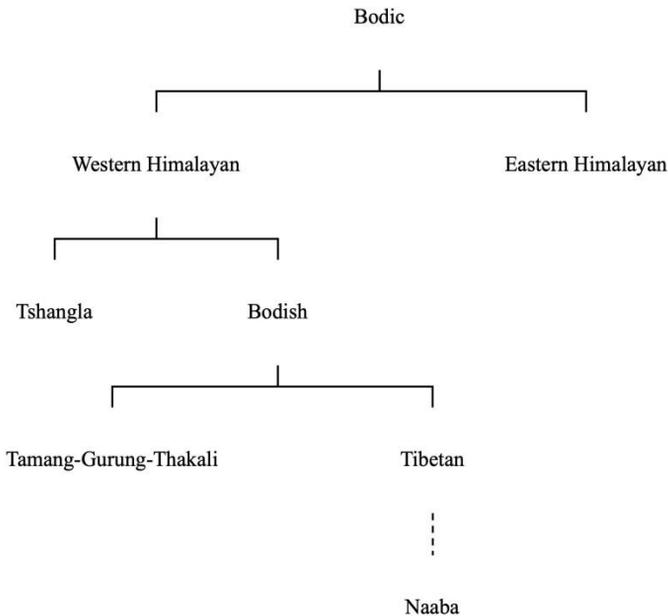


Figure 4: Tree diagram of the Bodic subfamily (DeLancey 2003). Research thus far indicates that Naawa is a Tibetan language.

At present, there seems to be some disagreement about how to delineate the Bodish subgroup. While Hyslop (2014) is closely aligned with more traditional cladistic conventions, Tournadre (2013) seeks to introduce the term ‘Tibetic languages’ to refer to Bodic and Bodish languages since they are

believed to have developed from Classical Literary Tibetan, dated from the seventh to ninth centuries. My comparisons between Naawa and Classical Literary Tibetan have also demonstrated regular sound changes derived from the latter (see Condra n.d.). This is foundational evidence supporting the classification of Naawa as a Bodish language, also cited by Eberhard, Simons & Fenning (2021).

3. Linguistic neighborhood

Naawa has several grammatical features³ and lexical items in common with other Tibetan languages. My preliminary comparison between Naawa and five other Tibetan languages,⁴ indicates that the Naawa tonal system is similar to Solu Khumbu Valley Sherpa, which has word level tone met with a melody on the second syllable.⁵ However, there is no regular language contact between the Naawa and the Solu Khumbu Valley Sherpa in Sankhuwasabha, in contrast to Lhomi, Makalu Sherpa, Central (Lhasa) Tibetan, Thudam,⁶ and Nepali. In Nepal, the Lhomi have the closest geographical proximity to Naawa villages, however, the two languages have remained distinct. Outside their natal villages, Naawa people have settled in Khandbari and Kathmandu where there are more options for education, employment, and medical care. Jenjen Naawa reports that, as of 2020, there are fifty households with at least one Naawa individual in Kathmandu.

According to Gawne (2017), in the past several hundred years migration has been a regular occurrence in the Himalayan region. Several populations still remain in the regions where they relocated. The earliest known migration was the Walungge, who arrived in what is known as the Nepal's Taplejung District around the seventh century where they became powerful regional traders (Wangyal 2009). Gawne (2017) records three large populations migrating from the Melamchi and Helambu Valleys (west of Solu Khumbu) to the more temperate regions of Ramechhap, Lamjung, and Illam. These multiple migrations have made the Himalaya region linguistically complex, making it difficult to distinguish between languages or develop historical linguistic theories.

³ An example is the gender affixes *po-/mo-* 'masculine, feminine.'

⁴ Based on Watters (2002).

⁵ See Watters (1999).

⁶ See Clark (2019) for more information on the languages spoken to the east of Naawa.



Figure 5. Kimathangka – photo from the middle of the village. Depicting traditional stone houses with modern tin roofs and solar panels. Photo © 2021 Mark A. Condra

4. Language vitality and contact

Current observation in the Naawa villages reveals that the language is vigorous, with families speaking it in their homes amongst themselves, and children acquiring it as a first language (see also Eberhard, Simons & Fenning 2021, Hammarström et al. 2020). The Naawa people's proximity to the more populous Lhomi has also led them to speak Lhomi when interacting with each other. Inter-marriage between Naawa and Lhomi has also led to increased language contact, so that among mixed couples delineation between Naawa and Lhomi lexical items is not always clear. In my observation, Lhomi has become the dominant language used in households regardless of the background of the mother or father.

The government of Nepal provides education for most Naawa children, except for a private primary school in the Bhot Khola region which some Naawa children attend. When possible, this primary school in Bhot Khola uses English as the medium for instruction; the government schools in the region use Nepali medium. While the government of Nepal maintains legal provision for Naawa children to attend primary school in their own language, instruction in Naawa village schools is given via Nepali, with English as a curriculum subject. Meanwhile, Naawa remains the most ubiquitous mode of communication on the playground.

One of the reasons Naawa people identify themselves as separate from the Lhomi is their different forms of Buddhism. Naawa *lamas* perceive Lhomi Buddhism to be mixed with Bon religion and their own form of Buddhism to be pure. The Naawa practice a branch of Tibetan Buddhism called Karma Kagyu. Chhejap Lhomi has observed that Lhomi Buddhism is also being practiced in the Naawa villages of Dangok and Parangma. In addition to religion, proximity to Lhomi villages has also influenced the Naawa speaker population. Increased interaction between the youth of Hongong (Lhomi) and Parangma (Naawa) who attend school in Hongong has resulted in Naawa youth tending to favor Lhomi instead of their parents' language. As a result, in Parangma many Naawa young people have indicated that they prefer Lhomi to Naawa and this has been confirmed in my interactions. Another factor may be the Lhomi literacy program in Hongong's primary school, spearheaded by the Nepali non-government organization Nepal Lhomi Society 'NELHOS'. Children who attend school in villages where NELHOS works are taught the Lhomi language. Seeing the benefit of their literacy program among their own people, NELHOS has also begun working in conjunction with the Nepali schools in Naawa villages to develop an orthography for Naawa in the hope that this will benefit the Naawa people in the same way that literacy development has benefitted their own people.

5. Current research

I am currently undertaking my MA in Intercultural Studies at Biola University (to be completed December 2021). I have been conducting fieldwork in Nepal in conjunction with the Central Department of Linguistics at Tribhuvan University since 2019, working with a variety of language speakers in Kathmandu, Khandbari, and the villages of Kimathangka and Dangok. The language community and I are compiling a Naawa-English-Nepali dictionary through word elicitation and natural speech collection. Additionally, I am studying the phonology and morphosyntax of Naawa, and exploring its historical linguistic connections. While shared innovations are the best evidence for establishing genetic sub-grouping relationships with other languages, Tournadre (2013) recognizes that the historical comparative method has so far not provided a clear picture of the Bodish subgroup. Thus, I hope that my work on Naawa morphosyntax will contribute to better understanding of Bodish, and that a dictionary will provide Naawa speakers with a resource for advancing their own language use. However, due to the small population and the increasing effects of migration and language shift I also believe that it is important to begin archiving materials on Naawa while it is still vigorous. In summary, future work includes dictionary development, linguistic analysis, and digital archiving.

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