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Tibetan First Person Singular Pronouns

Abstract

In a series of papers I have explored the development of the personal pronoun system in different periods of Tibetan linguistics history (Hill 2007, 2010, 2013, 2015). In this paper, I focus on first person singular pronouns, surveying my own previous findings and filling in the picture with further gleanings from version A and (where the passage in question is missing in A) version E of the Old Tibetan *Rāmāyaṇa* (de Jong 1989). When the evidence of the *Rāmāyaṇa* is insufficient, I further consult other Dunhuang texts, the *Mdzaṅs-blun*, and the *Vinayakṣudrakavastu* (*Ḥdul ba phran tshegs kyi gźi*, D.6). Apart from a few Dunhuang texts, these sources are all translations or adaptations of foreign literature into Tibetan.

Keywords: Tibetan, grammar, personal pronoun, linguistics

In a series of papers I have explored the development of the personal pronoun system in different periods of Tibetan linguistics history (Hill 2007, 2010, 2013, 2015).[1] In this paper, I focus on first person singular pronouns, surveying my own previous findings and filling in the picture with further gleanings from version A and (where the passage in question is missing in A) version E of the Old Tibetan *Rāmāyaṇa* (de Jong 1989). When the evidence of the *Rāmāyaṇa* is insufficient, I further consult other Dunhuang texts, the *Mdzaṅs-blun*, and the *Vinayakṣudrakavastu* (*Ḥdul ba phran tshegs kyi gźi*,

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D.6). Apart from a few Dunhuang texts, these sources are all translations or adaptations of foreign literature into Tibetan.

Tibetan boasts a wide range of first person singulars; I have collected examples of *ṅa*, *bdag*, *ṅan-bu, kho-bo,* and *kho-mo*. In both the *Mi la ras paḥi rnam thar* (Hill 2007: 282–284) and the Old Tibetan texts examined in Hill (2010: 550–554) the first person singular pronoun *ṅa* is used when addressing social equals or social inferiors whereas *bdag* is used to show the speaker's low status or deference. The Old Tibetan *Rāmāyaṇa* confirms this pattern. Thus, *ṅa* is used by a seer speaking to Malyapanta (example 1), Upade to the devaputras (example 2), king Rāma to queen Sīta and his brother Lakṣana (example 3), and a prince of eagles when introducing himself to the three monkeys Pagśu, Sindu and Hanumān, who are to him perfect strangers (example 4).[2]

(1) *lha-ḥi draṅ-sroṅ-gyis bkaḥ stsal-pa « **ṅa** nĭ tshaṅs-paḥi loṅ-spyod-la ma chags-ste //*
A divine seer said, "**I** (*ṅa*) am not desirous of the wealth of Brahma,..." (Rāma E 34–35).

(2) *ṅa-ḥi dṅos-grubs sbyin-na myi ḥdod-dam ?*
"If (I) were to give you **my** (*ṅa-ḥĭ*) siddhi, would you not want it?" (Rāma A 37–38).

(3) *rgyal-po źal-nas // « **ṅas** ri-dags bsñag-gĭs // Lag-śa-na gar yaṅ ma ḥgro-bar // lha-mo sruṅ-śig ! » ches gsuṅ-ste*
The king said: "**I** (*ṅas*) shall pursue the deer. Lakṣana, guard the queen without going anywhere!" (Rāma A 148–149).[3]

(4) *bya na-re « **ṅa-ḥĭ** pha nĭ bya khyuṅ-gi rgyal-po-ste // « A-ga-ḥdzaḥ-ya » źes byaḥ / de-la bu spun gñis yod-pa-la / **ṅa** nĭ pho-bo « Pa-daḥ » źes bya //*
The bird said: "**My** (*ṅa-ḥĭ*) father is the king of the eagles, Agajaya by name. He has two sons. **I** (*ṅa*) am the elder one, Pada by name." (Rāma A 227–228).

Daśagrīva's use of *ṅa* while addressing the god Viṣṇu may appear to contradict the generalization that it is used to address equals or inferiors (example 5), but the point of this episode is to show Daśagrīva's inappropriate haughtiness. He, ridiculously, regards Viṣṇu as his equal or inferior, and Viṣṇu unambiguously puts him in his place.

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[2]   I punctuate textual citations to aid the ease of reading them, as is standard in Classics and Sinology.

[3]   An anonymous referee suggests translating "Because (*gis*) I shall pursue the deer, Lakṣana, guard the queen so that (*bar*) she cannot (? *ma*) go anywhere!" To translate a verb followed by *-gis* as 'because' is not correct. The evidence presented by Hoffmann (1955) suggests this construction is primarily used for first person futures, as seen here. In addition, there is no need to take any clause ending in *-par* as a purpose clause, and indeed to do so would often be absurd, e.g. *gser tha-mal-paḥi mdog-can-gyi bu-mo yaṅ rñed-par dkaḥ ste* 'a girl the color of common gold is hard to find' (D5, vol. 9, p. 36).

(5) *Mdaḥ-śa-gri-ba na-re « **ṅa** nĭ thab-mo-la ḥoṅs-na // cĭ-ste naṅ-du ḥgro ?
» źes byas-pa-daṅ //*
Daśagrīva said, "**I** (*ṅa*) have come for a fight; why should (I) go inside?"
(Rāma E 73).

Cases of *bdag* as a first person singular to emphasize the humility or low status of
the speaker include Rāma addressing his father (example 6) and Hanumān writing an
apologetic letter to Rāma (example 7).

(6) *yab-la gsol-pa // « **bdag** nĭ yab-kyi sku-yon-du bsṅos-te / rgyal-srĭd loṅ-
spyod-daṅ / ḥdu ḥdzĭ-la ma chags-par spaṅs-nas // draṅ-sroṅ-gi spyad-pa
[sp]yo[d]-chiṅ / dben-ba-ḥĭ gnasu mchi-ḥo » źes gsol-nas //*
He said to his father, "**I** (*bdag*) dedicate myself as a gift to my father and
having no attachment to worldly affairs, renounce the reign. (I) will practice
the practice of a seer, going to an isolated place." (Rāma A 80–82).[4]

(7) ***bdag** tsam-gyi tshoṅ-la / byams-pa khyod-las myi bźugs-pa-ḥĭ steṅ-du //
byams-pa-ḥĭ bkaḥ-drĭn mod-kyi / prin yĭg tsam-gyis rtag-du sñun gsol-ba-ḥĭ
rigsna /*
"Not only is there no affection for one like **me** (*bdag*) except from you,
but also (I) received the favor of your affection. (I) should have continually
enquired by letter after your health." (Rāma A 350–351).

The humilific force of *bdag* can also be used for rhetorical effect rather than to show
that the status of the speaker is lower than that of the addressee. When introducing himself
to three monkeys, the prince of eagles, Pada, initially uses *ṅa* (reflecting his equal status),
but when describing how his kindheartedness results in his pitiful downfall *bdag* is the
pronoun he prefers (example 8, the expanded context of example 4).

(8) *bya na-re « **ṅa**-ḥĭ pha nĭ bya khyuṅ-gi rgyal-po-ste // « A-ga-ḥdzaḥ-ya »
źes byaḥ / de-la bu spun gñis yod-pa-la / **ṅa** nĭ pho-bo « Pa-daḥ » źes
bya // nu-bo ni « Sam-pa-daḥ » źes byaḥ // ṅed gñis rgyal srid ltod-pa /
las / dam bchas-paḥ rĭ rab-kyi rtse-mo-nas / ḥphur-te // gaṅ mgyogs-pas
// rgyal-srĭd bkur-bar byas-pa-las / tha-gĭ tsam-gyis **bdag** mgyogste / slar
bltas-na // nu-bo-ḥi ḥdab-ma ñi-mas tshĭg-la thug-nas / slar log-nas / nu-bo
rogs byas-pa-daṅ **bdag** ñĭ-mas tshig-ste / baṅ bul-nas // rgyal srid kyaṅ
ma thob-ste // da-ltar ḥdĭ-na ḥdug-pa yin-no. » źes zer-ro. //*
The bird said: "**My** (*ṅa-ḥĭ*) father is the king of the eagles, Agajaya by
name. He has two sons. **I** (*ṅa*) am the elder one, Pada by name. My
younger brother is called Sampada. We both fought for the kingdom. We

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⁴ An anonymous referee suggests translating "[I] have renounced the reign so that (*par*) I don't attach to pleasures
and worldly affairs. Hence (*nas*), I will practise the practice of a seer and go to an isolated place." On -*par* for
purpose clauses see the preceding note. The translation of -*nas* as 'hence' is inappropriate. The main use of -*nas*
is to indicate that there is no change of subject (see Zadoks 2000, Haller 2009).

pledged that the reign should be taken away by him who was the swiftest in flying from the peak of mount Meru. **I** (*bdag*) was slightly swifter but, when (I) looked behind me, (I) saw that the wing of my younger brother was on the point of being burned by the sun. (I) returned and assisted my younger brother. **I** (*bdag*) was burned by the sun and being slow in the race I did not obtain the reign. Now, (I) am here." (Rāma A 227–231).

One may be surprised to see Manlyapanta address his nephews the devaputras using the humble *bdag*, but because in context he is attempting to elicit pity from his nephews, his choice of first person pronoun is appropriate.

(9) *lha-ḥĭ sras rnams-la // Man-lya pan-tas gsol-paḥ //* **bdag** *lta žĭg mchis-pa // srin-zad-kyi nĭ ḥphro-ma / shĭng-zad-kyĭ ni dum-bu*
Manlyapanta said to the devaputras, "I (*bdag*) am the last of the fallen demons, the twig of a fallen tree..." (Rāma A 05-06).

This rhetorical use of *bdag* is frequently detectable in the speech of Sīta, when she complains of her lot in life (examples 10 and 11).

(10) *lha-mo žal-nas / ḥdĭ skad mchi-ḥo. // «* **bdag** *nĭ rgyal-po Ra-ma-na-ḥĭ btsun-mo dam-pa Sĭ-ta lags mthu ldan gaṅ žig / brtse-bar myi dgoṅs-sam? // myĭ sdug gzugs-chan ḥdĭ-las prog-du gsol » žes mchi-ste /*
The queen said these words, "I (*bdag*) am Sīta, the chief wife of king Rāma. Is there no powerful person who has pity? Please take (me) away from this ugly demon." (Rāma A 185–187),

(11) *lha-mo-ḥi žal-nas // « ... noṅs nĭ ma noṅs-na / rgyal-po-ḥi thugs taṅ myĭ ḥthad-par gyur-na //* **bdag** *nĭ mchi-bar ḥtshal » žes / mchiste /*
The queen said, "... (I) have not committed any offense whatsoever but if I do not suit the king, **I** (*bdag*) wish to go." (Rāma A 387–400).

Some examples of *bdag* are difficult to account for either on the basis of the speaker's low status or on the basis of a speaker's appeal to his own pitiful circumstance. Since humility requires a relationship with another, before whom one is humble, it is a surprise to see *bdag* used inside of thoughts. These contexts lack an addressee and thus an interpretation in terms of status or humility is not possible (examples 12–15).

(12) *bu de skyes-te bsams-pa // « yul-myĭ khyim-tse thams-cad-la // pha ma-daṅ gñen bžes yod-na //* **bdag**-*gyĭ pha ma-daṅ gñen gdun ga-re ? » sñam-nas //*
The son grew up and thought: "If all the neighbors in the land have parents and relatives, who are **my** (*bdag-gyĭ*) parents and relatives?" (Rāma E 23–24).[5]

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[5] The *Old Tibetan Chronicle* (PT 1287) furnishes a similar passage, this time in dialogue, in which a son asks his mother about his origins: *ma-la myĭ gaṅ bya gaṅ-la rjo-bo yod-na ṅa-ḥi rjo-bo gar-re ? / myi gaṅ bya*

(13) « **bdag** nǐ mthu chuṅ-bas myǐ nus // skyabs chen-po ḥgaḥ źig-la brten-te // bsam-pa bsgrub-par bsams-nas

He thought: "As **I** (*bdag*) have little power I am unable to do so. By relying on a great protector I shall accomplish my purpose." (Rāma E 29–30).

(14) btsun-mos bsams-pa / « bdag ji ltar bu myed-de myǐ dgaḥ-źiṅ sems myǐ bde-ba bźin-du / chun-ma yaṅ de bźin sems myǐ bde. » sñam-nas /

The queen thought: "Just as **I** (*bdag*), being without child, am unhappy and my mind grieves, so too the mind of the junior queen must also grieve." (Rāma A 68–70).

(15) « bdag-la ltar ma bthub-pa sñiṅ-na myed-pas gnod-pa źig bya-bar bsam-ste /

"Because he is unable to look at **me** (*bdag*) and there is nothing in his heart, I will do him harm", she thought. (Rāma A 130).

I am unable to account for the use of *bdag* in thoughts.

The Old Tibetan version of the *Rāmāyaṇa* offers a first person singular pronoun *ṅan-bu* which is yet more humble than *bdag*. Foucaux acknowledges this pronoun, but does not distinguish its use from other first person pronouns (1858: 47). Cordier recognizes *ṅan-bu* as one of several "formes d'humilité" (1907: 45). In the story of Rāma, this pronoun demands pity for the speaker. In example 16 Marīcī is speaking to Daśagrīva and in 17 queen Sīta is speaking to Lakṣmaṇa:

(16) de-nas rgyal-pos ṅan-bu bsñags-pa-daṅ / slad-na jo-bos lha-mo rgus-śig / ṅan-bu nǐ mdaḥs phog-ste ḥgum-na

"Then the king will pursue **me** (*ṅan-bu*). Thereafter, my lord, ravish the queen! **I** (*ṅan-bu*) will be hit by an arrow and die." (Rāma A 142–143);

(17) lha-mo khroste // « jo-bo myed-na // ṅan-bu bsruṅ-ste cha jǐ mchis ? /

The lady grew angry, "Without a lord what is the good of protecting **me** (*ṅan-bu*)?" (Rāma A 154).

As a lexical item *ṅan-bu* is a diminutive nominal derived from *ṅan* 'be bad, evil'. In the *Envoys of Phywa to Dmu* (PT 0126) while addressing the lord of Dmu the envoys of Phywa habitually refer to themselves as *bdag-cag ṅan-pa* 'we vulgar fellows'.

(18) **bdag-cag ṅan-pa** yaṅ lha-la ni yon ḥbul / Dmu rje-la ni bkod tsam ḥbul-źiṅ spyaṅ-ṅar mchis . / /-paḥi pho-ña lags . » / / /

"**We vulgar fellows**, come before [you] merely offering an oblation to the god and offering governance to the lord of Dmu, are messengers." (ll. 114–115, also cf. ll. 129, 131, 135, 152, 159, and 163).

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gaṅ-la / pha yod-na ṅa-ḥi pha ga-re ? źes zer-to / ṅa-la ston-chig ces mchi-na "He said to his mother, «If all men and all birds have a lord, who is my lord? If all birds and all men have a father, who is my father? Tell me!»" (ll. 28–29). The general impoliteness of the son (as shown in his direct imperative) as well as his youth, explains his use of *ṅa* in contrast to the adult and overly polite use of *bdag* by Rāma in addressing his father (example 6).

One might think that this conventionalized usage of the adjective *ṅan-pa* 'vulgar' after a first person pronoun as a transitional stage toward the use of the word as a pronoun in its own right. However, *ṅan-bu* and *bdag-cag ṅan-pa* are not directly comparable since the first is a diminutive and singular in reference, whereas the second is explicitly plural.

The wide array of available first person singular pronouns in the Old Tibetan version of the *Rāmāyaṇa* allows for subtle literary effects. For example, in one passage Marīcī, the minister of Daśagrīva, changes the word he uses for himself three times (example 19, the expanded context of example 16). He begins with the humble *bdag*, typical of his usage in addressing his socially superior employer. Next he switches to the extra-humble *ṅan-bu* demanding pity for the extent of his service, and when he uses *ṅa* as a claim to increased status by virtue of his noble fate.

(19) « *ḥo-na **bdag** nǐ rin-po che-ḥi rǐ-dags śǐg-du bgyiste / Ra-ma-na-daṅ Sǐ-ta gñis-kyi mdun-na mar brgyugs taṅ // bud-myed-las ḥdod-źen che-ba myed-pas / « ḥu nǐ sñogs! » śes mchi-ba-ḥǐ rigs / de-nas rgyal-pos **ṅan-bu** bsñags-pa-daṅ / slad-na jo-bos lha-mo rgus-śig ! / **ṅan-bu** nǐ mdaḥs phog-ste ḥgum-na / **ṅa** rgyal-po Ra-ma-na-ḥi mdaḥs phog-pa lhar skye-bas / gum yaṅ bla. » źes mchi-nas mchis-pa-daṅ /*
"I (*bdag*) shall transform myself into a precious deer and run in front of Rāma and Sīta. Since there is no greater desire than [that of] a woman, she will certainly say, «Pursue it!». Then the king will pursue **me** (*ṅan-bu*). Thereafter, my lord, ravish the queen! **I** (*ṅan-bu*) will be hit by an arrow and die, but being hit by an arrow of king Rāma, **I** (*ṅa*) will be reborn as a god. Therefore, even death is preferable." Having spoken thus, he went away and... (Rāma A 140–144).

Despite the wide array of first person singulars in the Old Tibetan *Rāmāyaṇa*, it fails to use the gender specific forms *kho-bo* (male) and *kho-mo* (female). Although I have previously discussed the use of *kho-bo* in the *Old Tibetan Chronicle* (Hill 2010: 554–555), because I had no contrasting examples of *kho-mo* at that time, I failed to note the gendered nature of these pronouns. The two pronouns *kho-bo* and *kho-mo* appear contrastively in the ritual narrative PT 1040. In this text the lady Ta-ṅa Puṅ-mo-taṅ uses *ko-mo* after accidentally causing the death of her third husband (example 20).

(20) *myi **ko-mo** byed-de*
"**I** (*kho-mo*), this person, have done this." (ll. 98–99).

After the suicide of Ta-ṅa Puṅ-mo-taṅ, the lord of Bal uses *kho-bo* in the words of his decision to take her wealth for himself (example 21).

(21) *na-niṅ gźe-niṅ sṅa-naḥ / / gseṅ lde-daṅ Spra-źal Taṅ-baḥi dkor-daṅ dad-du ruṅ na di-riṅ saṅ lta-na myi **ko-boḥi** nor-daṅ dad-du ruṅ-graṅ ?*

"Last year, the year before, in the past (this) was suitable as the treasure of Gseṅ-lde and Spra-źal Thaṅ-ba. Today, tomorrow, is it not suitable as **my** (*ko-boḥi*) treasure?" (ll. 108–110).

The use of *kho-mo* with female speakers also occurs regularly in the *Mdzaṅs blun* (examples 22 and 23).[6]

(22) *chuṅ-mas smras-pa « ci-ste khyod-daṅ khyo-śug-tu gyur-na/ khyod mi sdug che-bas* **kho-mos** *khyod bor-te mtshan-mo bros-su ḥoṅ-ṅo »*
The wife said, "However, if (I) were to be married with you, because you are very ugly, abandoning you, **I** (*kho-mos*) would run away at night." (*Mdzaṅs blun*, D.341, vol. 74, p. 170a).

(23) *chuṅ-mas yaṅ rab-tu dgaḥ-nas/ tshoṅ-pa-la smras-pa «* **kho-moḥi** *khyim-thab-kyis kyaṅ gnaṅ-gi/ / de bźin du gyis-śig ! » ces bsgoḥo*
The wife was very happy and said to the merchant, "Since **my** (*kho-moḥi*) husband agrees, do it like that!" (*Mdzaṅs blun*, D.341, vol. 74, p. 190a).

Although *kho-bo* often occurs in the text as well, it is seldom as explicit that the speaker of *kho-bo* is male, perhaps this is because the texts assumes a male referent unless specified otherwise.

The *Vinayakṣudrakavastu* (*Ḥdul ba phran tshegs kyi gźi*, D.6) provides incontrovertible evidence that *kho-bo* was male and *kho-mo* is female. The story is about a cleric who has been badly treated by a barber and is in desperate need of a haircut. The story is told twice in nearly identical words, first about a monk and then about a nun. The Dolpo manuscript, which reflects an earlier unrevised translation uses *ṅa* in both passages (24a and b), whereas the other Kanjurs[7] use *kho-bo* in the passage about the monks (25a) and *kho-mo* in the passage about nuns (25b).

(24a) *des smras-pa « tshe-daṅ ldan-ba bzo-bo-la bden-par smra-ba dkon-no » źes khyod-kyis ma thos-saṃ/ ?* **ṅa** *skra ḥdregs-mkhan mod-kyi bcom-ldan-ḥdas-kyis ma gnaṅ-ṅo //*
He said: "O venerable sir, hast thou not heard that for workmen telling the truth is rare. **I** (*ṅa*) indeed am a barber, but the Bhagavān does not permit it."[8]

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6   The wife in example 23 on the same page speaks to her husband with the more polite *bdag*.

7   I happen to have collated this passage across ten Kanjur versions. The sigla employed follow the Viennese conventions (https://www.istb.univie.ac.at/kanjur/xml4/xml/, accessed 11 May 2016), which in turn take Harrison & Eimer (1997) as a point of departure. For D, C, Q, Y, and H the edition here follows the collation of the *Dpe bsdur ma*. I have collated J, N, S, U and Z myself. To avoid clutter in the edition I use "Ts." (for Tshal-pa) in place of "DUCJQY". I follow the punctuation of D in text, rather than attempting to reconstruct the original punctuation; variant punctuations appear in the notes.

8   This passage is found at Do189a.

(24b) *des smras-ba « ḥphags-ma khyod-kyis bzo-bo-[la] bden-bar smra-ba dgon*
(recte dkon) no źes [ma] thos-saṃ ? / **ṅa** *ni skra ḥdreg-ḥkhan myod-kyi /*
bcom-ldan-ḥdas-kyis [ma] gnaṅo / »
She said: "O noble lady, hast thou (not) heard that (for) workmen speaking
truthfully is rare? **I** (*ṅa*) am indeed a hair barber, but the Bhagavān does
(not) permit it."[9]

(25a) *des smras-pa / « tshe-daṅ ldan-pa bzo-bo-la bden-par smra-ba dkon*[10]*-no*
źes khyod-kyis ma thos-sam/ ? **kho-bo** *ni skra ḥdreg*[11] *kyaṅ mkhas-na*[12]
bcom-ldan-ḥdas-kyis ma gnaṅ-ṅo //
He said, "O venerable sir, hast thou not heard that for workmen speaking
truthfully is rare? **I** (*kho-bo*) know how to shave hair, but the Bhagavān
does not permit it."[13]

(25b) *des smras-pa / « ḥphags-ma khyod-kyis bzo-bo-la bden-par smra-ba dkon-*
par ma thos-sam/[14] *?* **kho**[15]**-mo** *ni skra ḥdreg*[16] *mkhas-na*[17] *ḥon kyaṅ bcom-*
ldan-ḥdas-kyis ma gnaṅ-ṅo[18] *»*
She said: "O noble lady, hast thou not heard that for workmen speaking
truthfully is rare? **I** (*kho-mo*) know how to shave hair, but the Bhagavān
does not permit it."[19]

In summary, *ṅa* is the most basic first person singular pronoun; it is used when
addressing social equals or social inferiors; *bdag* is used for deference or to solicit pity;
ṅan-bu is a yet more humble and pitiful form; *kho-bo* is used for male speakers and
kho-mo for female speakers. These latter two pronouns appear not to be humble. Two
remaining points of unclearity include the use of *bdag* in thought and what nuance *kho-bo/*
kho-mo add to distinguish them from *ṅa*. Put differently, what motivates a speaker to
use a gender specific form when a gender neutral form is available?

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[9] This passage is found at Do193a. Material in brackets is present in all other Kanjur versions and is provided
here to make sense of the passage.

[10] DUCJ,Q,HN,SZ *dkon*, Y *dkan*.

[11] N,SZ *ḥdreg*, Ts.,H *ḥbreg*.

[12] N adds.

[13] This passage is found at D200a-b, J205b, N317b–318a, S300b, U200a–b, Z316a, Pdm 495–496.

[14] U omit /.

[15] DUJ,QY,HN,SZ *mo*, C *bo*.

[16] N,SZ *ḥdreg*, Ts.,H *ḥbreg*.

[17] SZ add /.

[18] N has *gnaṅo*.

[19] This passage is found at D204b, J209b, N323b, S306b, U204b, Z322b, Pdm 505.

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