

# The Power of Wealth - Economy and Social Status in Pre-Modern Tibetan Communities

Lucia Galli, Kalsang Norbu Gurung, Jean-Luc Achard

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# Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines

## The Power of Wealth

## Economy and Social Status in Pre-Modern Tibetan Communities

Edited by Lucia Galli & Kalsang Norbu Gurung



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jeanluc.achard@sfr.fr

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## Economy and Social Status
## in Pre-Modern Tibetan Communities

Edited by Lucia Galli & Kalsang Norbu Gurung


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# Introduction

Lucia Galli and Kalsang Norbu Gurung

This volume is the second in a series of thematic collections produced within the framework of *Social Status in the Tibetan World* (*TibStat*), a research project funded by the French National Research Agency (ANR) and the German Research Council (DFG).[1] With the concept of status as it was construed, maintained, and propagated within Tibetan societies still at the core of their interest, the contributions of this special issue of *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines* investigate the impact of economic factors on the indigenous social dynamics, extending their examination to issues of group domination, economic inequality, social resistance and change.

The unequal distribution of wealth and power, and consequently, the relative status of one individual to another, have been the subject of Western scholarly analysis for centuries, yet when it comes to Tibetan Studies, works offering any in-depth scrutiny on the matter are startlingly few and far between.[2] Still, relations of status represent a major factor in any inter-personal behaviour, since the possibility to access the relatively restricted number of highly esteemed social

[1] The first volume of the series, "Reflections on Social Status in the Tibetan World", was published in *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines*, issue 49, see Galli and Schwieger (2019). *TibStat* was meant as an ideal continuation of the previous ANR/DFG research project "Social History of Tibetan Societies, 17th–20th Centuries" (*SHTS*), the results of which were presented into three thematic collective volumes (Ramble, Schwieger and Travers 2013, Bischoff and Mullard 2017, Bischoff and Travers 2018) and into four monographs (Ramble 2008, 2015, 2019, (forthcoming)). The contributions contained in this volume were originally presented in Panel 51 ("The Relationship Between Economic and Social Status in the Tibetan World until the mid-20th Century") at the 15th Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies, Paris 2019.

[2] Despite the amount of Western scholarship dedicated to the intricacies of Tibetan social structure, the number of works actually centring on the interplay of social and economic status are surprisingly limited and often the outcome of a few scholars' taking on the matter of landownership and the correlated issue of serfdom, as it is the case for the earliest studies by Carrasco (1959), Goldstein (1971, 1986, 1988), Miller (1987, 1988) and the most recent ones by Bischoff (2013, 2017). For a more general overview of economy and trade in Tibet, see, in particular, van Spengen (2000) and Harris (2013). On the value of gift-giving in Tibetan societies, see Bischoff and Travers (2018).

Galli Lucia and Gurung Kalsang Norbu, "Introduction", *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines*, no. 57, Janvier 2021, pp. 5-19.

positions is clearly affected by one's own position within the group hierarchy.

Although the human tendency to control and manage resources to ensure social standing is a primordial need, reproduced and shared in different contexts, times, and forms—from myths, religious and literary texts to philosophical and political discussions—the debate pertinent here mainly originated in 18th-century Europe, when the positivist tendency to apply reason and progress to any field of learning, including historical affairs, enforced the assumption that status inequalities depended exclusively on power *obtained through* and *expressed in* economic prerogatives. Rooted in the rationalism of the Enlightenment, these concepts further developed into 19th-century ideas of inequality and oppression formulated as functions of economic relations. Social interactions then began to be defined in terms of predominance and control: the legacy of Karl Marx's theory of class and domination, broadly construed as the control wielded by one group over the production and reproduction of another, proved to be long-lasting and far-reaching. Arguing against Marx's materialistic interpretation of history and his conviction that "[t]he mode of production of material life determines the general character of the social, political, and intellectual processes of life",[3] Max Weber proposed a more nuanced concept of social relations, thereby denying economic factors that universal and dominant power ascribed to them by the Marxist matrix.[4] Ideas and values shaping people's life, as well as any legitimising process of inequality, were, in other words, to be understood as a product of a particular time and setting, where different aspects—economic, social, and religious—co-occurred.[5] Among the two competing approaches to social knowledge that were monopolising Western scholarly debate at the end of the 19th century—the idiographic method and its focus on particular scientific facts and processes *versus* the nomothetic one and its research for general laws of society—Weber came down squarely on the side of the latter, although his understanding of Carl Menger's

[3] Marx (1904, 10).

[4] Weber ([1905] 1930, [1921] 1968).

[5] Wolf (1999, 41). Openly critical of Marx's historical materialism and economic determinism, Weber built upon the theory presented in *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus* (*The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, first translated into English in 1930) in 1905 to elaborate an economic sociology wherein inequality is defined in terms of difference in life chances rather than exploitation. His main work, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft. Grundriß der verstehenden Soziologie* (*Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, first translated into English in 1968), published posthumously in 1921, made a profound impression on the field of social science, due to its systematic examination of social structures and their inner laws and tendencies and its critical stance towards Marxism and socialist thought. For an in-depth analysis of Weber's *magnus opus*, see, among others, Camic, Gorski and Trubek (2005).

methodological individualism was historical rather than ontological, as the "individual" was not recognised by Weber as being an entity that remained constant across time.[6]

Whereas the Marxist concept of social domination as economically based still appeases the common-sense imagery of an automatic correlation between *authority* and *wealth*, the emphasis placed by Weber first and later Antonio Gramsci and Louis Althusser on social and ideational factors productively pushed the reflection on inequality beyond the restrictions imposed by economic forces to include the role played by ideological and cultural strategies in the establishment and maintenance of subordinate relations.[7] Althusser, in particular, turned the issue of hegemony on its head, arguing for an understanding of power as deeply heterogeneous: by maintaining that economic relations themselves had an inherently strong political and ideological structure, he defined the concepts of wealth, status, and class as mutually translatable but not entirely reducible to one another.[8] The stress posed on the heterogeneity of social forms, and the relations of powers created by and within them, soon revealed the limits inherent to the concept of inequality construed "as the conditions of rank or status ordering, or as the relative distribution of power in society".[9]

In the attempt to capture the complexities of non-Western and/or pre-capitalist societies, later scholars began to address vocabularies that were "more productive to think of power relationally",[10] using concepts such as dominance and resistance to "define the nature of difference, the process of subordination, the creation of social categories of the ineligible, the inferior and the outsider in different social and historical settings".[11] Taking their cue from the works of Paul Ricœur, Pierre Bourdieu, and Michel Foucault, late 20th-century social scientists and historians gradually moved away from the certainties posited by structural analyses, opening their inquiry to notions that integrated the topics of age, sex, and class and the way they affect power relations. In inextricably linking social relations and the resulting status inequalities with values other than economic, an idea of status as a *social construct* that is constantly negotiated by interacting individuals and groups began to affirm itself, thus arguing for a concept the forms of which were deemed to be *culturally specific* because dependent upon the particular historical, cultural, and geographical setting creating it. Although not devoid of critics, the theories advanced

6 Caldwell (2006).
7 Miller, Rowlands and Tilley (1989), Wolf (1999, 44–47).
8 Althusser (1984), Miller, Rowlands and Tilley (1989, 10).
9 Miller, Rowlands and Tilley (1989, 2).
10 Wolf (1999, 66).
11 Miller, Rowlands and Tilley (1989, 3).

by structuralists first and poststructuralists later contributed to shape the still ongoing discourse on power and dominance in Western academia,[12] providing interesting and fruitful venues of investigation for non-Western contexts, such as the one explored by the contributions presented in this volume.

The issue opens with an essay by Peter Schwieger, the first of two chapters by the author, in which he broaches one of the most intriguing and lesser known aspects of the socio-economic history of the dGa' ldan pho brang period: money lending. Basing his study on figures originally gathered in the 1950s and successively reproduced and broadcast in Communist propaganda—from leaflets and books printed in the 1960s to more recent websites publicising the PRC's policy towards Tibet—, Schwieger offers an informative overview of the process, identifying lenders and borrowers and fleshing up the bare data with colourful details drawn from contemporary sources. The picture that emerges is that of a complex yet largely informal exchange system, the inner dynamics of which were normalised by customary control mechanisms. In delving into the technicalities of interest rates and repayment methods, Schwieger uncovers the inherent intergroup domination practices upon which the whole process was built, as the divide between the two acting parties—the lenders and the borrowers—patently mirrored the one severing the socio-economic tissue of pre-modern Central Tibet. By accumulating *wealth*, and therefore *positive social value*, the dominant social groups (i.e. the government, the monasteries, and the nobility) ensured themselves total control over money lending, which in turn granted them dominance over the lowest strata (i.e. dependent farmers). Here, the Marxist axiom that equates *economic power* with *authority* reveals its compelling simplicity: by recurring to legal procedures, such as the drafting of private documents (*gan rgya*), the lending party safeguarded themselves against borrowers' default, thus actively using hierarchy-enhancing institutions (e.g. legal and criminal justice systems) to secure their own interest. While insolvency was legally (and socially) punished and several instruments were available to lenders to minimise their risks, no law was ever issued to protect borrowers against usury. Obligations were, in other words, *expected* to be fulfilled, and it was not unusual for debts to be bequeathed from father to son, to the point of becoming an inescapable state of bondage and serfdom.

Further elaborating on the joint issue of debt and dependency, John Bray reconstructs the history of the Moravian Mission in Poo, Kinnaur, and the fascinating tug-of-war engaged in by the local German missionaries over the souls of its inhabitants. Basing his study on a critical

[12] Han (2014).

reading of missionary letters published in the monthly *Missionsblatt aus der Brüdergmeine* ("Moravian Mission Magazine"), Bray retraces the steps taken by the first missionaries, starting with Eduard Pagell and his frustrated attempts to spread the Gospel in the rural community of Poo. Part of the princely state of Bashahr and mainly populated by Tibetan Buddhists, the village was a religious and cultural melting pot where Buddhist and Hindu beliefs and social practices overlapped, and economic disparities affected residents' daily life at both an individual and group level. Poverty and debt shackled the poorest castes, mostly cottagers of Indian origin, and thwarted their mind and spirit—a "crippling influence" that Pagell's successor, Theodor Schreve, was set to shatter. Upon his arrival in Poo in November 1890, the missionary recognised in the endemic indebtedness the main threat to the nascent Christian community and immediately began to implement aid supports. At the time of Schreve's departure in 1903, Poo was the largest Christian congregation in the Himalayan region, yet the social experiment conjured by the Moravians did not stand the test of time, and by 1924, the station was closed due to the converts' lack of commitment and their materialist approach to the faith. In his concluding remarks, Bray convincingly presents the interaction between the German missionaries and the locals in the light of a cultural and ideational miscommunication: whereas the first framed conversion as a freeing act, the latter saw it as a contractual obligation, subject to specific conditions. Thrift, perseverance, and hard work—virtues that the Protestant ethic valued as paramount to a life devoid of dependence—failed to answer the needs of the locals, as they did not fit within their conceptual framework. In his engaging study of the history of debt, David Graeber interrogates himself at length on the moral quagmire that debt represents, as the expectations connected to "owing" appear to be powerful ones, shared across civilisations and times.[13] As Bray points out, in the case of the bonded labour system, the owing side owned in turn, as debt went both ways: debtors relinquished control over their freedom in exchange of protection and security, a process that hierarchically connected the lowest classes to the highest ones, in an institutional perpetuation of social dominance.

Bonded labour has been by far one of the most discussed—and controversial—topics of pre-modern Tibet, yet the same cannot be said of another facet of its rural history: farm leasing. In his contribution, Kensaku Okawa aims to shed some light on the topic by examining the institution of *zhing skal*, a unique form of land leasing practised in the Mal gro gung dkar region. Drawing from field research conducted by Chinese ethnographers in the 1950s, Okawa reconstructs the historical

[13] Graeber (2011).

development of *zhing skal*, exposing the complexities of a system that he sees as illustrative of a progressive shift from bonded labour to contract economy. Although limited to a relatively restricted area, the phenomenon evolved into two distinct local manifestations, identified by Okawa as Hor khang and 'Bri gung in consideration of the respective zones of emergence. In comparing the two forms of land leasing—interpreted in his study as indicative of "the intertwining of social change and 'modernisation'"—Okawa plots the evolution of *zhing skal* from the "one-on-one" work field system of Hor khang (still largely based on a bonded labour mentality) to the contract-based type of 'Bri gung. Product of long-term negotiations between local landlords and their dependent farmers, the form of *zhing skal* practised in early 20th-century 'Bri gung successfully merged the needs of the dominant groups (e.g. constant income against low output) with those of the lower ones (e.g. total control over surplus products), thus representing a localised, yet effective attempt at a socio-economic modernisation. In Mal gro gung dkar, change occurred at a micro-level, as farmers acted within the social hierarchy to attenuate the landlords' power over tools of dominance (e.g. corvée labour) and to better their living conditions without threatening the *status quo*.

Our contributors' scrutiny has been so far concentrated on the lower sectors of society, admittedly the most affected by economic inequality and group dominance dynamics, not only, as Antonio Gramsci would say it, at an institutional level, but at a deeper, ideological and cultural one. The "subaltern" groups described by Schwieger, Bray, and Okawa were in fact active participants in the preservation and implementation of the very same hegemonic processes that confined them at the bottom of the social ladder. Originally defined by Weber as an "effective claim for social esteem",[14] status is, in and by itself, hierarchical, as it can be viewed as "either a hierarchy of *rewards* and as a hierarchy of *displays*—or both simultaneously",[15] the functionality of which "require[s] a relatively stable acquiescence (begrudging or not) from the 'have-nots'".[16] Such compliance translates into displays of deference—visual expressions paid to high-status holders in symbolic acknowledgement of their dominance and/or prestige.[17] The

14 Weber ([1921] 1968).

15 Henrich and Gil-White (2001, 166, emphasis added).

16 Weisfeld and Beresford (1982) as quoted in Henrich and Gil-White (2001, 166).

17 Social asymmetries have been variously (and inconsistently) labelled, regardless of the differences inherent to the term used. Although often used as equivalent to "status" and synonymous with one another, concepts such as "influence", "prestige", "power", and "dominance" differ greatly, as they convey different types of leadership. While "influence" and "prestige" involve persuasion and non-agonistic sources, "power" and "dominance" entail force and agonistic confrontation (Henrich and Gil-White 2001).

offering of tangible goods figures predominantly in the following study by Lobsang Yongdan on the exchange of European timepieces between Tibetan religious figures and members of the Qing dynasty. The patterns and significance of gifting in Tibetan societies have been recently explored by Jeannine Bischoff and Alice Travers, and Yongdan's contribution is an ideal continuation of the discussion carried out in their collective volume. As the editors of *Commerce and Community* aptly point out, "exchange, be it of gifts or of traded goods, through barter, or payment in kind or monetary means, creates reciprocity and obligations on a social level; […] it directly contributes to the shaping of social and political status".[18] Any investigations of gift systems must closely examine the nature of the goods exchanged, for selection pressures may be at work in favouring certain items rather than others. The adoption of a poststructuralist understanding of economic phenomena "has undermined the idea of economic value itself as an intrinsic and permanent quality of an object" as "[t]he very process of exchange bears the economic value of an object, the production of commodities being a cultural and cognitive process".[19] In other words, the *value* of the object exchanged goes beyond its economic worth to impinge upon its symbolic importance within the exchange process itself: in the practice examined by Yongdan, the donation of European timepieces occurred in the context of a *mchod yon* ("patron-priest") relationship, with the gift being the visual representation of the bond—spiritual and political—existing between the giving (the Qing emperors) and the receiving parties (Tibetan lamas). The choice of a foreign object added to the symbolic value of the gesture, as the possession and/or (over)consumption of exceptional goods of non-indigenous origin are one of the means through which elite social status is signalled. Although by the 18th century most of the timepieces circulating in the Qing court were produced in local workshops, the finesse of the craftsmanship ensured that only those of higher status could have access to them.

In his work on consumption preferences, Bourdieu remarks on the connection between variations in consumption patterns and social inequalities, asserting that the first not only reflect the key forms of the latter, but also cater for their reproduction and preservation through time.[20] As "a system of relatively autonomous but structurally homologous fields of production, circulation and consumption of various forms of cultural and material sources",[21] Bourdieu's concept of society presents a separation into classes formed by individuals who share

18 Bischoff and Travers (2018, 13).
19 Babić (2005, 76).
20 Bourdieu (1984), Babić (2005, 80).
21 Brubaker (1985, 748).

similar conditions of existence, similar dispositions, and therefore similar *tastes*: dominant groups, in other words, signal their higher status by adopting a peculiar lifestyle through which they broadcast a capital that is both *economic* and *cultural*. Following a similar vein of enquiry, Teresa Raffelsberger explores the culture of aristocracy adopted by the rNam rgyal dynasty of Ladakh, from its representation of wealth to its forms of interaction, exposing in doing so its dependence on a broad network of different social groups and professions. From her analysis it clearly emerges how the policy implemented by the kings of Ladakh was aimed at gaining, and retaining, full control over the material and social resources at their disposal—a strategy of dominance that was pursued politically, economically, and symbolically. Active displays of power and authority were used to promote specific ideas and concepts of rulership, in a self-perpetuating hierarchy-enhancing circular process that had its hub in the king. The consumption patterns of the high-status groups pushed the production and circulation of various forms of commodities, incentivised commerce and trans-regional trade, and made of their seats a point of attraction for individuals from all paths of life, from professionals to beggars.

The relevance that physical centres of power, such as royal and monastic seats, acquired in the Tibetan socio-economic and political milieus is akin to Ian Morris' notion of Greek burial as a reflection of *social structure*—buildings that become idealised projects, a "mental" template of the society, to be distinguished from its actual organisation, the concrete state of affairs. Ideology, for Morris, manifests itself in the gap between social *structure* (the way things are meant to be) and social *organisation* (the way things are).[22] Rituals, both spiritual and secular, allow the enactment of structure and provide a sanctioned stage upon which to display one's own status and advance one's own claims to power. If it is true, as Laurie Bagwell and B. Douglas Bernheim argue, that status ultimately depends on relative wealth,[23] the direct observation of the latter becomes, in times of ritual performance, vital. In her contribution, Lucia Galli explores the role that costly-signalling, ethnic kinship, and a common non-sectarian attitude played in the social affirmation of Khams pa trading firms in the first half of the 20th century. Whereas, Galli claims, ritual performance efficaciously signalled group commitment and expedited Eastern Tibetan traders' integration into the urban environment of Central Tibet, the trustworthiness of the firms' members, often employed by monastic establishments and incarnates as personal trade agents (*tshong dpon*), much relied on the clan-like structure of the families themselves, based, as they

[22] Morris (1987).
[23] Bagwell and Bernheim (1992).

were, on principles of reciprocal obligations and shared beliefs. In examining the enacting of specific costly signals, such as generous sponsorship of religious rituals and teaching sessions, Galli opens the floor to questions regarding the offering system in force in monastic institutions, from its more practical aspects, such as the actual share distribution, to ethical issues surrounding the economic transactions within a religious environment.

In tracing the emergence and development of the Tibetan term *dkor*, a concept generally translated as "wealth" or "possession", Berthe Jansen offers an engaging reconstruction of a meaning-making process that led to "a gradual shift from the material to the immaterial". Turning on its head any theories of "commodification of religion", Jansen presents *dkor* as the outcome of an opposite process, whereby tangible, commodifiable objects acquired an intangible, yet potentially harmful, quality. Reconstructing the use of the term since its first instances in Dunhuang texts, Jansen elegantly peels through the multi-layered nuances of the concept and its progressive association, evident in later Tibetan Buddhist literature, with a pronounced karmic weight, often of negative connotation. To "eat *dkor*" becomes therefore a proverbial expression to indicate the wrongful partaking of common goods to which one has no right, and for which harsh punishment will be exacted, in this life and the next. As Jansen warns us, the complexity of *dkor* lies in its "unavoidability": no one who "lives off religion" may refrain from incurring its polluting effects. While rituals of purification may cleanse the monks' karma, many are the cautionary tales that urge for a spiritual compensation of what has been received as *dkor* (e.g. offerings, alms). While the complexity of the term prevents the endorsement of a translation upon another, Jansen convincingly identifies its most basic feature in a unique, very Tibetan, sense of indebtedness—towards the Three Jewels, one's teacher, one's sponsor, the society as a whole, and even to the government—thus reaffirming the prominent role that Buddhism exerts in all aspects of the devotees' life, including the most secular, prosaic ones.

With their focus on donations as the external expression of social status (Galli) or potential karmic threat (Jansen), the previous contributions have furthered our appreciation of the socio-economic and religious importance of offerings, yet detailed information on the nitty-gritties of the process is relatively scarce. Kalsang Norbu Gurung's study of what Robert Ekvall (1964) defined as "the religious observance of offerings"[24] aims to bridge the gap in the field by providing a quantitative analysis of the shares (*skal ba*) allotted to each monastic rank according to the regulations detailed in the monastery's

[24] Ekvall (1964).

rulebooks (*bca' yig*). Using the monastic system as a frame of reference, Gurung further extends his analysis to the secular sector, by presenting examples of offerings made to government officials and individuals on the basis of an official record of expenditure drafted by two officials of sPo rong between 1891 and 1895. Although special circumstances may account for exceptions, when it came to the actual amount of the donation, the social positions of both giver and receiver were, by and large, the main factor at play: donors were expected to contribute according to their means, and the offering had to take into consideration the rank of the beneficiary, be they monks or government officials. Similarly to other formal institutions, the system of donation was essentially a hierarchy-enhancing scheme—a top-down structure of privilege through which high-status individuals preserved and promoted their socio-economic dominance by granting public *recognition* to representatives of lower classes against their fellows.

Pervasive as it may have been, under the dGa' ldan pho brang administration such a system merged almost seamlessly with the other forms of payment methods for government services, as compellingly showed in the second of Peter Schwieger's contributions. The study centres on the construction of the Red Palace, the highest of the two main buildings forming the Potala, seat of the Dalai Lama and administrative centre of the Central Tibetan government since the mid-17th century. Designed to accommodate the golden reliquary of the Great Fifth, the edifice required three years for its realisation, with hundreds of labourers, craftsmen, and workhands present on site at any given time. Meant as an elegant counterpart to the utilitarian, solid look of the White Palace, the Red Palace brimmed with painters, sculptors, and engravers, as its inner halls were decorated with statues and murals. It is on the latter that Schwieger concentrates his attention, offering reproductions of close-ups the circulation of which has been so far limited to Chinese publications. The account written by *sde srid* Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho, regent of the Fifth Dalai Lama and the mastermind behind the architectural project, provides a textual map of the various phases of the process, consigning to history the name of each craftsmen, as well as the amount owed by the government for their services. The list of expenses and farewell gifts carefully recorded by the *sde srid* depicts a clear "chain of command", where supervisors, representatives of estates, and specialised workers were arranged according to their expertise and responsibility. Workhands, mustered by the dGa' ldan pho drang administration and comprising most of the common workforce, formed the bottom of the ladder: although their services counted as unpaid, bonded labour (*'u lag*), the government was responsible for their welfare, as it had to cover for their basic necessities, providing them staple food, lodgings, and medical care for the whole

duration of their employment on site. Sociological literature acknowledges that different occupations have different social status and that the prestige that comes with being associated to a particular profession may in turn positively influence the economic outcome of the latter, especially in terms of wages.[25] Schwieger's latest contribution further corroborates Gurung's and Yongdan's insights, in so much that in premodern Tibet the demands of social status influenced the wage structure, be it expressed through offerings, gifts or actual salaries.

It seems fit to conclude our discussion where we began it: *wealth* and *power*, or, better yet, the *power of wealth*, especially in the matter of law and justice. In his contribution on crime and punishment in the early 19th-century Mustang (Nepal), Charles Ramble introduces the thorny—and still very much relevant—entanglement of legal discrimination and economic inequality. Although reports of cases in which economic circumstances dramatically affected a person's standing in society may be found in several textual sources, especially of biographical nature—Ramble himself presents two of such instances, both concerning important religious figures—it is in the dry language of legal documents that the actuality of financial "weakness" and its repercussion on the very same principle of egalitarianism emerge more starkly. In selecting brief excerpts from the criminal records of Geling, Upper Mustang, Ramble shows "just how far the ideal of equality under the law—*drag zhan med pa*—was translated into reality." Among the offences recorded, theft is by far the most common, and the one the punishment of which was more influenced by the economic, rather the social, status of the perpetrators: any failures to pay the required fine, either by the lack of financial means or wealthy guarantors, were harshly met, and often led to the loss of indivisible commodities, be they houses, personal freedom, or, in the worst cases, limbs. Ramble sees such a disparity in punishments as a manifestation of a more profound divide between social *ideology* and social *praxis*: whether in Tibetan Buddhism wealth is neither positively nor negatively connoted, discriminations born from socio-economic inequalities de facto affected the indigents' position in front of the law, putting them at a disadvantage. To borrow Ramble's words, "everyone may have been equal under the law, but in practice some were clearly less equal than others."

The ways in which economic factors influence society and the individual's stand in it are complex and multifaceted, and defeat simplistic generalisations: prototypical stimuli and underlying psychologies behind prestige and dominance processes are in constant flux, and differ greatly in relation to time, space, and inner socio-cultural

[25] Fershtman and Weiss (1993).

sophistications. In broaching issues of economic inequality, social mobility (or lack of thereof), and hierarchy-enhancing institutions in Tibetan societies, the present contributions have the merit of corroborating previous scholarship on the topic by adding new pieces to a fascinating, and still largely inchoate, puzzle. As such, the editors see this volume as complementary to the works produced within the framework of the ANR/DFG research projects in their common effort to further our understanding of social status in Tibet while maintaining a multi-disciplinary approach to the matter at hand. We are deeply aware that the choice of positing our enquiry against a Western theoretical background may be at odds with the most relativist and postmodernist stances that invite scholars to reject any culture-bound view, yet we find ourselves unwilling to relinquish potentially useful (although tainted and imperfect) hermeneutical tools for the sake of an ideological "purity". History and social sciences are a mixture of objective and subjective, as any arrangement and/or interpretation of facts is by itself a social and political construct. In offering different readings of the economic mechanisms and dynamics at play in forming, preserving, and morphing social status in pre-modern Tibet, the present volume aims to move forward from the rigid positions of the formalist-substantivist debate by adopting those models that better allows to appreciate the idiosyncrasies and complexities of a unique human reality.

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# Lenders and Borrowers in Tibetan Society

Peter Schwieger
(University of Bonn)

*Was the Tibetan economy a money economy or was it a subsistence or barter economy?*

Since the 17th century coin money—at first minted in Nepal and by the end of the 18th century minted in Lhasa—was circulating in Tibet. However, in this period, coin money was not the only means of payment. Rather, payment in the form of commodity money predominated. Moreover, the Tibetan economy always remained to a large extent a subsistence economy supplemented by bartering, the direct exchange of goods without a medium of exchange. Trading took place at fairly modest dimensions. Therefore, we cannot speak of a money economy for the dGa' ldan pho brang era. This even applied for the first half of the 20th century, when the 13th Dalai Lama had silver coins minted near Lhasa and soon had the first Tibetan banknotes printed.

The practice of money lending was not considered dishonourable in Tibetan society and, as such, it was not left to outsiders or marginalised groups as it was the case with other occupations, like butchers or corpse cutters. Instead, lending loans was done by all those who had the necessary capital. That lending was not left to outsiders in society may be one reason that in Tibet something like a bank system was never developed. The other reason was the aforementioned form of economy that in Tibet prevailed.

In such an economy, lending transactions were processed more through natural products than through money, first and foremost barley, but also other goods such as lentils, tea, and cotton fabrics. In nomad areas loans given in the form of essential commodities, including cereals and tea, were usually repaid in the autumn in the form of nomad products, such as butter, meat or caterpillar fungus (*dbyar rtsa dgun 'bu*). However, loans granted and paid back in cash or silver did exist as well.

I know of no examples that in Tibet wars and constructions of impressive governmental or monastic buildings were financed by loans borrowed by the Tibetan government or the Buddhist clergy. As it is well known, especially the clergy invested much capital in

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construction and decoration of religious buildings. However, these were completely financed by donations, dues, corvée labour and interest of loans lent out to one's own or others' dependent farmers and nomads.

*Who were the lenders and at what rates were loans granted?*

The main lenders in Tibetan society were the government, the monasteries and the nobility. In this context, the term government comprises all administrative levels from the government offices at the top down to the district governors. Apparently more or less all offices of the government granted loans.[1] Among those granting loans in great amounts was the government office called 'Bru phogs las khungs or 'Bru khang las khungs, which was founded only in 1950 to finance the payment of salaries through barley loans.[2] For the year 1955, the barley loaned by this office totalled 697,573 *khal*.[3] *Khal* was a dry measure, calculated through the use of a wooden box called *'bo*. Heinrich Jäschke had already observed that the *'bo* "seems to be very variable as to quantity",[4] but regardless of the size of the *'bo* used in various Tibetan regions, the quantity measured with this box was always called one *khal*. However, in the first half of the 17th century, Karma bstan skyong (1606–1642, reigned 1621–1642), the last gTsang pa ruler, had standardised the volume measure of the *'bo* with regard to his Central Tibetan dominion. This standardised measure box was called *mkhar ru* or *gtan tshigs mkhar ru*.[5] Afterwards, the standardised *mkhar ru* was also in use for governmental purposes during the time of the dGa' ldan pho brang government established in 1642. Specifications for the *khal* given in Western literature are for the most part given in weight. Mostly the *mkhar ru* was used to measure barley, the common grain in Tibet. Despite the use of standardised measuring containers in Central Tibet, the equivalent given in Western literature for one *khal* of barley measured with it vary between 27 and 33 pounds.[6] This circumstance may be explained through differences with regard to the bulk density, the quality or the moisture of the grain.[7] The calculations made in this article

1 Tshe ring don grub *et al.* (1991, I: 616).
2 Goldstein (2001: 771).
3 Tshe ring don grub *et al.* (1991, I: 616–617).
4 Jäschke (1881: 395).
5 Zhang Yisun *et al.* (1998: 300), Rdo sbis (2016: 214–215). I assume that the term *bstan 'dzin mkhar ru* (Goldstein 1971: 8; 2001: 448, 479) is just a misspelling of *gtan tshigs mkhar ru*.
6 Macdonald (1929: 224), Bell (1928: 301).
7 It should also be noted that according to observations made by Ekai Kawaguchi (1909: 555–556), in certain cases the Tibetan government instructed its tax collectors

are based on the figures provided by Alan Winnington according to whom in 1955 in Central Tibet 1 *khal* grain was equal to about 28 lb or 13 kg.[8] This would mean that more than nine million kg or 9,000 metric tons of grain would have been loaned by the 'Bru phogs las khungs in one year.[9] Since the interest rate was about 10 percent, the annual profit was nearly 70,000 *khal* (69,757 *khal*).[10]

Various government treasury offices, such as the Bla phyag las khungs, the rTse phyag las khungs, the Thebs sbyar las khungs, and the rNam sras gan mdzod, figured among the great lenders.

Founded already at the time of the 5th Dalai Lama, the Bla phyag las khungs was mainly in charge of financing the ongoing supply of tea and butter to the three large dGe lugs pa monasteries around Lhasa as well as covering the expenditures for offering and religious service in the Jokhang temple, the Potala, and all the other monastic institutions of the dGe lugs pa in and around Lhasa.[11] Mentioning this treasury under the name Bla brang, Charles Bell noted that it used to lend out money at an interest rate of 14 percent.[12]

Known also as Phral bde las khungs, the rTse phyag las khungs treasury office had been probably established at the time of *sde srid* Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho (1653–1705) in the so-called White Palace of the Potala and was in charge of the supply for the Dalai Lama's personal needs.[13]

Another major lender was also the office called Thebs sbyar las khungs responsible for financing the annual *smon lam* festival.[14]

Bell mentions another great government treasury located in the Potala, called "The Treasury of the Sons of Heaven" and functioning as a reserve treasury.[15] The English name given by him is actually a mistranslation based on a misspelling of the Tibetan name rNam sras

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to use special measure boxes, which were either larger or smaller than the usual ones, as a form of punishment or favour.

8 Winnington (1959: 167). Winnington had visited Tibet in the same year in which the above-mentioned amount of grain was lent out by the 'Bru phogs las khungs. The equivalence can nonetheless only serve as an approximation.

9 For comparison, in the year 2018 the entire German production of winter wheat, the most common grain, was almost 20 million metric tons (Statista 2019).

10 Tshe ring don grub *et al.* (1991, I: 616).

11 Rdo sbis (2016: 1289–1290), Padma skal bzang and Blo bzang tshe brtan (1991: 34–42).

12 Bell ([1946] 1987: 185).

13 Rdo sbis (2016: 1477–1478), Dung dkar (2002: 1679–1680). Bell lists this treasury under the name Trede (*'phral bde*) without mentioning it specifically as a lender ([1946] 1987: 186). See also Padma skal bzang and Blo bzang tshe brtan (1991: 29–31).

14 Tshe ring don grub *et al.* (1991, I: 616), Goldstein (2001: 501). According to Rdo sbis (2016: 874), the function of this office was to provide capital for regular offerings.

15 Bell ([1946] 1987: 186).

gan mdzod or rTse rnam sras gan mdzod.[16] Bell notes that "this treasury also makes large loans, and its rate of interest as a rule is less, being about ten percent, for the sums lent are large, and the security demanded is first class".[17] According to Heinrich Harrer, this treasury was known as a lender of silver to wealthy Tibetans.[18]

In addition to the government treasuries, the Dalai Lama himself acted as lender through his own treasuries, the mDzod sbug and the mDzod chung, both containing, among other things, the gifts donated to the Dalai Lama out of reverence. Each year, these two treasuries granted loans: for the year 1950 the amount of money lent totalled a bit more than 3 million (3,038,581) *dngul srang*.[19] The interest on these loans was in the order of 303,858 *srang*, thus setting the interest rate at 10 percent.[20] Gyalo Thondup, the elder brother of the 14th Dalai Lama, reported that his father was able to take out loans from the Dalai Lama's treasury for his trading activities at an annual interest rate of 7 or 8 percent,[21] although this may have been a special privilege. In principle though, loans were said to be accessible to everyone against appropriate collateral.

It seems that all Tibetan monasteries acted as lenders because there was no religious or moral restriction on loans and interest. On the contrary, they were even encouraged by the Dalai Lama to do so. Berthe Jansen has hinted to a *bca' yig* of the 13th Dalai Lama issued for the rNying ma pa monastery of sMin grol gling in 1933, which explicitly

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16 rNam sras is the abbreviation of rNam thos sras, the Tibetan translation of Skt. Vaiśravaṇa, which is the name of one of the so-called guardian kings of the four directions. In Tibet he is in particular regarded as a god of wealth.

17 Bell ([1946] 1987: 186–187).

18 Brauen (1974: 132). The name of the treasury is here given in a corrupted spelling as rNan sras gan mdzod. See also Dung dkar (2002: 1239) and Rdo sbis (2016: 1476).

19 Up to the early 20th century, the *dngul srang*, "silver tael", has been a weight unit for silver also used as a unit of value. Thus, *dngul srang* had become a basic silver currency not minted in the form of coins. Although various coins, struck for Tibet, circulated since the 17th century, there existed no one denominated *dngul srang*. The first Tibetan silver coins by this name were issued by 13th Dalai Lama only in 1908. While the former value unit called *dngul srang* weighed about 37 g of silver, the first *dngul srang* coin was only half that weight, with an 80 percent fineness. Later, not only *dngul srang* coins with different denominations—denominations of 3, 5, and 10 *srang*—were issued, but the term *dngul srang* also appeared on Tibetan paper money. Moreover, beside *dngul srang*, the term *ṭam srang* came into use without there being a difference in value. The 10 *dngul srang* coin struck between 1948 and 1951 had only a fineness of 14 percent; see Bertsch (2002: 3–5, 9, 19, 27–29.) According to Chinese publications, in the year 1950, fifteen *dngul srang* equalled one silver dollar; such a rate is given in various sources, for example, Robutsering (1994: 13), Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Germany (2009). A silver dollar weighed about 26,7 g and was composed of 90 percent silver.

20 Tshe ring don grub *et al.* (1991, I: 615–616), Robutsering (1994: 13).

21 Thondup and Thurston (2015: 50).

calls for using donations to give out as loans.[22] Another example is a decree issued by the 13th Dalai Lama in favour of 'Bras spungs Monastery in 1924, which urges to grant loans and collect interest in order to finance the regular offerings.[23] The three great dGe lugs pa monasteries around Lhasa were the greatest lenders. For 1959, the year of the so-called Democratic Reforms, it was calculated that they had together a total of 1,623,273 *khal* of grain in outstanding loans, for which they annually collected 285,692 *khal* as interest, thus setting the rate at 17,6 percent. It was stated that they also had outstanding loans in cash (*dngul bun*) totalling 51,058,592 *srang*, for which they would annually collect an interest of 1,402,380 *srang*. If the latter figure is correct, it would either correspond to an unusually low interest rate of 2,75 percent only, differing significantly from the other rates, or indicate an unusually high default rate.[24] Returns on loans are said to have accounted for 25 to 30 percent of the total income of the three big monasteries.[25]

In addition to the monasteries, the numerous *bla brang*, the households of the reincarnated lamas, also granted loans. For example, regarding the *bla brang* of Khri byang *rin po che* Blo bzang ye shes bstan 'dzin rgya mtsho (1901–1981), the outstanding loans for 1959 were calculated as 97,729 *khal* of grain, for which 19,545 *khal* were collected annually as interest (20 percent interest rate). The *bla brang*'s outstanding loans in cash (*dngul bun*) totalled altogether 823,249 *sgor mo* (i.e. Tibetan currency unit or *dngul srang*), for which 164,129 *dngul srang* were collected annually as interest. This is again a rate of 20 percent.[26]

In general, the aristocrats used to grant loans in grain against an annual interest of 25 or 20 percent, and loans in cash against an annual interest of 20 percent. For example, a noble landlord in gZhis ka rtse had given out loans of 15,000 *khal* in grain for which he annually collected 3,000 *khal* as interest. This corresponds to a 20 percent interest rate.[27] Similar figures have been reported from an aristocrat, whose estate was further up the river gTsang po in lHa rtse district in gTsang province. The interest rates for loans lent out by him to dependant farmers living in his own district as well as in neighbouring districts, were—for the most part—20 percent (*lnga drug 'gro ba*). However, for loans not paid back within one year the interest rates could vary;

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22 Jansen (2018: 108).
23 Tshe ring don grub *et al.* (1991, I: 616).
24 While the figures for grain in outstanding loans have been repeated in a leaflet published in 1994 (*Bericht über die Menschenrechte in Tibet*, part III), I was not able to find the figures for outstanding loans in cash mentioned anywhere else.
25 Tshe ring don grub *et al.* (1991, I: 617).
26 Tshe ring don grub *et al.* (1991, I: 618).
27 Tshe ring don grub *et al.* (1991, I: 618–619).

examples of 16.7 percent and 20 percent (*drug bdun 'gro ba'am/ bcu skyed*) are mentioned.[28] The yearly amount of grain and the amount of money available to the landlord for lending varied. On average, it is said to have been about 10,000 *khal* of grain and 20,000 *dngul srang*, from which he earned an annual interest income of about 1,700 *khal* of grain and 3,500 *dngul srang*. This corresponds to 17 or 17.5 percent of the loan amount.[29] Overall, the interest income of the nobility should have accounted for about 15 to 20 percent of their total income.[30]

What is striking is that the loans given out by the government had the lowest interest rate, no matter whether they were granted in grain or in cash. However, it is mentioned that often landlords borrowed from the government at low interest rates and loaned out that capital to their own farmers at a high interest rate.[31] It looks as if the government acted in such cases like a central bank providing loans with low interest rates to other lenders. The comparatively low interest rate would then be justified by a lower default risk.

Comparing the shares of the total loans granted by the three main lenders—the government, the monasteries and the aristocracy—the biggest quota came from the monasteries, followed by the various government offices that, overall, gave out more loans than the aristocracy. According to an exemplary study for the areas of sTeng chen, rGyal rtse, and Pa snam, 40 to 50 percent of the local loans were granted by the monasteries, 20 to 25 percent by the government, and 15 to 20 percent by the nobility. The other lenders, usually stewards taking care of the estates and more wealthy families among the tax farmers, accounted for 5 to 10 percent.[32]

Of course, the reliability of the figures resulting from the surveys and interviews of the 1950s is debatable, as the chances to verify them are currently rather limited. Yet, we do have a few hints. Hanna Schneider's catalogue of documents from Southwest Tibet contains three loan contracts, revealing an annual interest rate between 20 and 25 percent.[33] Namri Dagyab, who was able to interview contemporary witnesses, states that monasteries gave loans primarily in the form of grain and usually required an annual interest of 25 percent.[34] Alan Winnington interviewed an individual cultivating tax fields of an aristocratic manor in the Central Tibetan province of gTsang. Based on his

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28 For an explanation of the Tibetan way of expressing percentages, see Zhang Yisun *et al.* (1998: 702, 753, 1333). See Goldstein (1968: 119).

29 Chab spel and Lha smon (1996: 232–233). I am grateful to Lucia Galli for pointing this source.

30 Tshe ring don grub *et al.* (1991, I: 618).

31 Tshe ring don grub *et al.* (1991, I: 619).

32 Tshe ring don grub *et al.* (1991, I: 619).

33 Schneider (2012: nos. 8, 37, 38).

34 Dagyab (2009: 179).

informant's answers, he calculated that annually the peasant had to borrow 50 quarters (635 kilograms) of seeds and had to pay 10 quarters (127 kilograms) grain as interest.[35] This would be a rate of almost 20 percent.[36] These figures are more or less in line with those presented as result of the survey done in Central Tibet in the 1950s.

One might ask if there have ever been attempts to regulate the amount of interest by fixing an upper limit by law: to my knowledge, the amount of interest was never regulated by law in Tibet before the Chinese invasion of 1951. Although higher interest rates were sporadically registered,[37] an average of 20 percent interest rate appeared to have been, all in all, the norm. Such an average was the combination of two factors: an extremely low interest rate increased the risk of default, whereas an excessively high interest rate amplified the probability of peasant debtors fleeing their land. I am not aware of any discussions about the moral aspects of high interest rates.

This leads us to question whether there were from time to time—especially after natural disasters or wars affecting the peasantry—government-mandated general debt reliefs. In this respect, I am only aware that at the end of the 18th century, after the Gurkha war, the Ambans, the representatives of the Qing emperor in Lhasa, pushed for the peasants to be exempted from taxes so as to persuade them to return to their abandoned fields.[38] Though it is not explicitly stated, I assume that this exemption also included the abatement of old tax debts and the interest raised on them. It was only towards the very end of the dGa' ldan pho brang rule in Tibet, in 1953, that there was a systematic attempt by the Tibetan government to fundamentally reform the loan system. However, the government was unable to implement the reforms it had drawn up.[39]

### *Who were the borrowers?*

Loans were mostly taken by dependent farmers to buy seeds, pay taxes, meet old liabilities, and secure their livelihood—in particular when a bad harvest or a crop failure due to a natural disaster had to be compensated. Loans were also lent so that the dependent farmers and nomads could pay for everyday necessities that were sold to them by either their lords or merchants.[40] Dependent farmers usually

35 Winnington (1957: 167).
36 This is also the average interest rate reported by Winnington for loans lent out by monks for a period of six months (Winnington 1957: 54).
37 Winnington (1957: 167).
38 Dabringhaus (1994: 138, 171–172).
39 Goldstein (2007: 459–463, 553–560), Winnington (1959: 168).
40 Tshe ring don grub *et al.* (1991, I: 620).

obtained their loans from their own landlord or, in special instances, from neighbouring landlords. Such a case is mentioned above with regard to a noble landlord. But also the three large dGe lugs pa monasteries around Lhasa granted loans to farmers belonging to other landlords.[41] No dependent farmer could, however, accept a loan from another landlord without the explicit approval of his own landlord, no matter how high or low the interest rate might be. This obviously presented an obstacle when in 1951 the Chinese Communists offered interest-free loans to Tibetan farmers.[42]

In addition, lending for commercial activities did exist but not to a large extent. According to the statements of contemporary witnesses, it seems to have been common practice for monasteries to loan money to merchants, often former monks, to trade on behalf of the monastery. Such loans were called *tshong bskur* or *tshong skur*. Customarily, they were paid back all at once together with a higher interest rate than usually demanded.[43] An extreme example of such a practice has been reported orally by Tibetan informants to Carole McGranahan. According to her sources, in return for a favour, the 13th Dalai Lama granted the head of the Eastern Tibetan sPang mda' tshang family one million *sgor mo* of Tibetan money as start-up capital for business, with the *caveat* that double the amount had to be repaid the following year. Trade arrangements with the Tibetan government were said to have then favoured the family. Their head was also rumoured to have been very successful in convincing the three large monasteries near Lhasa to entrust him with their money for "storage", thus making it available to him for further business enterprises.[44]

Within the upper strata it was primarily members of the aristocracy who applied for loans. For instance, it is said that it was customary for landlords in gTsang to "borrow" capital for lending out loans from the taxes, which they owed the government or the household of bKra shis lhun po monastery.[45] Yet, aristocrats did not apply for loans only when acting as second lenders: according to oral information received by Alice Travers from interviews with members of the Tibetan aristocracy, it was for example expected that lay officials organised outrageously expensive parties that hosted several hundred people; as a result, some officials became heavily indebted.[46] However, it seems that aristocrats

41 Tshe ring don grub *et al.* (1991, I: 617).
42 Winnington (1957: 171).
43 Dagyab (2009: 178–179). For the term *tshong skur*, see also Zhang Yisun *et al*. (1998: 2294) (same wording: Rdo sbis 2016: 1541) and Goldstein (2001: 886): "sending sb. to do trading for oneself".
44 McGranahan (2002: 108–112).
45 Chab spel and Lha smon (1996: 233).
46 Travers (2012: 173–175).

often were given the privilege of receiving interest-free loans from the Tibetan government to cover their expenses.[47] But not only did nobles get into debt because they borrowed capital for commercial transactions or they had to finance social obligations in connection with their civil service. Sometimes the reason was just a lavish lifestyle as it seems to have been the case with the lay official Ka shod pa.[48]

*How were liability and collateral regulated?*

Loans were certified by issuing obligation contracts, called *gan rgya*. The document set out the names of the lender and the borrower, the amount of the loan and that of interest, as well as the repayment modalities, including the repayment period. As long as an indebted household was not wiped out, non-repaid debts were inherited within the paternal line of a family: there were loans that were not repaid for generations.[49]

It has been stated that it was obligatory to call a guarantor when taking out a loan.[50] For sure a guarantor was often required, but I doubt whether this was a general rule, because there also existed other options to ensure a security to the lender. A guarantor had to assume responsibility when a household could not meet its payment obligations or evaded their obligation through flight or even in the case the debtor family was wiped out. Whenever several households applied for a loan, they could mutually function as guarantor. If the entire village took out a loan, the village head had to act as a guarantor.[51]

Another way of providing security for the lender was to give something as a pledge, called *gta' ma* or *gte ma* in Tibetan. The lender retained the pledge until the loan was repaid.[52] Even without the formal provision of a pledge, it was customary in the case of debt default to seize possessions of the debtor. Thus, even the tax fields of an indebted farmer could be confiscated. In such a case, the farmer was obliged to cultivate the fields, although the entire harvest was then taken by the lender. Thus it could occur that a tax farmer lost all his tax fields, but was nevertheless still treated as a tax farmer, that is to say, he was still obliged to do corvée labour, an obligation that did not normally affect dependents who had no tax fields of their own to cultivate. Such

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47 British archives: IOR/L/P&S/7/222/1878 and PRO/FO/371/53613 ex. 277/71/10. I wish to thank Alice Travers for providing me with British archives' references for loans granted to members of the Tibetan aristocracy.

48 Goldstein (1989: 618-619), British archives: FO/371/76315 ex. F8285/1021/10.

49 Tshe ring don grub *et al.* (1991, I: 620).

50 Tshe ring don grub *et al.* (1991, I: 623).

51 Tshe ring don grub *et al.* (1991, I: 623).

52 Dagyab (2009: 175).

farmers were called *khral zhing med pa'i khral pa*, "tax-farmers without tax fields".[53]

Finally, debt bondage was another well-documented result of hopeless debt. In such a case, either oneself or members of one's own family were given into debt bondage.[54]

### *Conclusion*

Flexibility was certainly not one of the strengths of the Tibetan social system. Social mobility was relatively low, and the socioeconomic status was already fixed at birth for most of the population. The loan system was just one of various ways to consolidate the social hierarchy. It was not a key, for example, to enable large-scale start-up funding for individual economic ventures and perhaps enhance social advancement. Except for a small group of merchants, it served the borrowers as a means to bridge emergencies and financial embarrassments. While noble borrowers often had access to low-interest or even interest-free loans, dependent farmers were forced to pay high interest on their loans. Although high interest rates seemed profitable to lenders at first glance, they thereby consistently ignored that the hopeless indebtedness of the dependent peasant population—often inherited from one generation to the next—paralysed any economic initiative of the peasants, and consequently kept the landlords' economic profits comparatively low. Since the portion of the aristocracy was the smallest one among the lenders, we hardly can speak of a system that unilaterally favoured individuals of the upper strata. The greatest beneficiary was the clergy, as it was the greatest lender. But—unlike the aristocracy—the clergy was not a beneficiary in the sense that the system allowed the monks and lamas a lavish lifestyle. The clergy invested all the profit in its buildings as well as in its religious services, sincerely believing that this would benefit in the end the entire population. In this way, however, all capital was withdrawn from a productive economy, and, as a result, there never was any social and economic improvement for the many dependent peasants who were forced to take up loans.

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[53] Tshe ring don grub *et al.* (1991, I: 620–622).

[54] Bischoff (2017: 158, 163, 168), Kawaguchi (1909: 430–431).

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# Debt, Dependency and the Moravian Mission in Kinnaur, 1865–1924

John Bray

In 1895 and 1896 the German missionary Theodor Schreve (1860–1930) wrote to the Moravian Church's Mission Board in Herrnhut, south-east Germany, to share a combination of good news and a set of continuing dilemmas. He was writing from Poo (sPu, now often spelt "Pooh" or "Pu") in Kinnaur, close to the border with Tibet. His predecessor Eduard Pagell, who had founded the station in 1865, had been able to baptise no more than a handful of converts before his death in 1883. By contrast Schreve, who had arrived in Poo in 1890, believed that the seeds sown by Pagell had at last borne fruit and that there was now a good prospect of further baptisms. That was the good news.

Schreve's dilemmas related to the economic and social status of the prospective new Christians. Poo had some 600 inhabitants and, taken as a whole, it was one the most prosperous villages in the region as well as an important trading hub. However, the village's wealth was unevenly distributed. There was a substantial underclass, many of whom lived in desperate poverty, and all the would-be converts came from this group. In the harsh winters, they depended on loans of grain borrowed from the richer households. The difficulty of paying back these loans meant that they were effectively bound to their more prosperous neighbours in a form of bonded servitude. The converts' debts and lowly social status scarcely provided a secure foundation for the new Christian community.

As a solution, Schreve argued that it was essential for the mission to look after the Christians' bodily needs as well as their spiritual welfare. He therefore proposed to provide them with new sources of decent employment by founding a small wool industry and purchasing farmland which the mission would manage. At the same time, he recognised the possibility that potential converts would turn to the church in order to satisfy their material needs rather than out of a concern for their spiritual welfare. He argued that there was no choice but to accept this risk. In this essay, I examine the historical circumstances that contributed to Schreve's dilemmas and discuss the outcomes of his choices.

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Many aspects of Poo's encounter with Christianity are particular to its locality and to the Moravian church but the story has a wider regional significance. Although Poo lies on the Indian side of the border with Tibet, its inhabitants speak a Tibetan dialect. As will be seen, its social structure had many aspects that were distinctive to Upper Kinnaur, but it can nonetheless be seen as a variant of patterns that applied across the wider Tibetan cultural arena. The missionaries learnt to speak the local dialect; they spent longer in Kinnaur than any other category of Westerner; and they were more deeply involved in local people's lives. Their testimony therefore represents an important historical record in a region that is otherwise poorly documented. More than that, the successes and failures of their spiritual and economic endeavours amounted to a social experiment that sheds light both on the missionaries themselves and on the society that they attempted to serve.

The essay is primarily based on a critical reading of missionary letters in the monthly *Missionsblatt aus der Brüdergmeine* ("Moravian Mission Magazine") that was published in Herrnhut from 1839 to 1937. As with any other historical record, it is important to take full account of the motives of the authors and editors when evaluating these sources. As Frank Seeliger points out, the *Missionsblatt* publishers edited and to some degree censored the missionaries' letters before distributing them in print to a wider audience of mission supporters.[1] Their interests focused on church life rather than, for example, a detailed examination of local cultural practices at festival times. Nevertheless, taken as a whole, the published letters provide a remarkably detailed portrayal of missionary life, including failures as well as successes. Importantly for the purposes of this essay, the letters have much to say about the poorer sections of society, a group whose interests are at best scantily documented elsewhere. For the years after the First World War, I have also been able to consult manuscript records held at Moravian Church House, London. To date I have not been able to consult the manuscript records for Poo held at the Moravian Church archive (Archiv der Brüder-Unität) in Herrnhut but hope to be able to do so in future.

### *Faith, status and economic enterprise in the Moravian church*

Consciously and unconsciously, the Poo missionaries were heirs to a set of attitudes inherited from their 18th- and 19th-century Moravian predecessors. The Moravian ethos included a strong emphasis on the need for a personal relationship with God, together with a belief in the

[1] Seeliger (2003: 29).

importance of community, as well as the need for creative work, including commercial enterprise. The Moravians of course shared these values with a wide range of other Christian groups, but their particular institutional history led to a distinctive version of the Protestant work ethic that highlighted the importance of earning one's own living and avoiding indebtedness.

In 1722 a succession of Protestant refugees from Moravia (now part of the Czech Republic) fled to south-eastern Germany, where they were able to find sanctuary on the estate of Count Nikolaus von Zinzendorf (1700–1760).[2] They belonged to a tradition stemming from the Unitas Fratrum ("Unity of Brethren") which had been founded in Bohemia in 1457 but suppressed in its original homelands in the aftermath of the Thirty Years War (1618–1648). With Zinzendorf's support, they founded a new settlement known as Herrnhut ("The Lord's Watch"). The formal name of the church is still Unitas Fratrum. In Germany, it is known as the Herrnhuter Brüdergemeine.

On their arrival in Germany, the refugees faced the immediate challenge of economic survival. Perhaps echoing the Israelites following their flight from Egypt, one woman is said to have exclaimed, "Where do we find bread in this wilderness?".[3] Most of them had been peasant farmers but Zinzendorf had not allocated them sufficient land to earn their living from agriculture. The eventual outcome was that Herrnhut became a community of craftspeople, benefitting from its location on a main road between the local towns of Zittau and Löbau.

In 1727 Zinzendorf exercised his authority as *Gutsherr* ("feudal lord") to draw up the *Herrschaftliche Gebote und Verbote* ("Seigneurial Precepts and Prohibitions"), in effect a constitution for the nascent community.[4] The document laid down that the inhabitants should be free men and women, not bound by any form of serfdom. Article 7 said that every inhabitant should work and "eat his own bread": only when they became old, sick or incapable would the community support them.[5] Article 23 forbade any lending or borrowing without the express advance permission from Zinzendorf in his capacity as lord of the manor.

The Moravians sent their first missionaries to the West Indies in

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2 Standard histories of the church and its missions include Hamilton and Hamilton (1967) and Beck (1981).

3 "Wo nehmen wir Brot her in dieser Wüste?" Uttendörfer (1925: 14). The translations from German into English here and elsewhere in this essay are my own.

4 Uttendörfer (1925: 18–24).

5 The German original is: "Ein jeder Einwohner zu Herrnhut soll arbeiten und sein eigen Brot essen. Wenn er aber alt, krank und unvermögend ist, soll ihn die Gemeine ernähren."

1732, to Greenland in 1733, to Surinam in 1735, and to South Africa in 1737. In the course of the 18th century, they went on to establish missions in Labrador and North America, as well as making unsuccessful attempts in regions as diverse as Algeria, Persia, the Nicobar Islands, Central Russia, and Lapland. The pioneer missionaries to the Danish West Indies, David Nitschmann and Johann Leonhard Dober, were artisans rather than theologians: Nitschmann was a carpenter while Dober was a potter. In principle the missionaries were supposed to earn their own livelihoods. In practice they and their successors did not always achieve this ideal, but the church placed a high value on economic self-sufficiency where this was achievable.

Zinzendorf's personal leadership laid a deep and at times paradoxical imprint on the revived Moravian Unity. [6] From his childhood he had been a Pietist in the Lutheran tradition with a powerful personal devotion to Jesus Christ. Unusually for one of his aristocratic background, he chose to dedicate his life to Christian service and, without feeling any need to break his ties with the Lutherans, became a Bishop of the renewed Unity in 1737. He believed that all members of the community were brothers and sisters in the faith but at the same time retained his high social status as a German aristocrat. For him, the most important point was that everyone, regardless of status, should fulfil his or her vocation as laid down by God.

Work was therefore a divine calling and faithfulness to this vocation had an almost sacramental quality: "One does not work simply to live, rather one lives for the sake of work, and when one has no more work to do, one suffers or passes away". [7] Zinzendorf acknowledged his own lack of competence in financial matters. However, he came to believe that commercial work could be a divine calling as long as it was conducted with a view to serving the wider community. In the course of the 18th century, the church developed an international commercial network, one of whose objectives was to provide financial support for the missions.[8]

Zinzendorf's financial incompetence became all the more apparent during the period in the 1740s that is known in Moravian terminology as the *Sichtungszeit* ("Sifting Time").[9] During these years, he neglected the management of the church while his close followers—including his son Christian Renatus (1727–1752)—indulged in an extended period

6 For a standard biography in English, see Weinlick (1956).

7 Vogt (2002: 166). The German original is: "Man arbeitet nicht allein dass man lebt, sondern man lebt um der Arbeit willen, und wenn man nichts mehr zu arbeiten hat, so leidet man oder entschläft".

8 On this network, see in particular Danker (1971), Engel (2011) and Hüsgen (2013).

9 On the "Sifting Time", see Peucker (2015).

of sentimental religious enthusiasm. The church's financial resources were already overstretched following its rapid international expansion in the 1730s. The outcome was that by 1753 the church was brought to the verge of bankruptcy.[10] Zinzendorf's successors, notably August Gottlieb Spangenberg (1704–1792), restored its finances. However, it took the rest of the century before the church had fully paid off its debts and restored its international reputation. The outcome was to reinforce the importance of hard work and thrift, not only to pay off the church's debts but to support its missionary activities. The various Moravian settlements and missionary outposts differed on the details of their financial management but shared a common ethos: the mission stations were still expected to do what they could to be self-supporting.

### *Early Moravian engagement in the Western Himalaya*

The Himalaya mission fitted with Moravian tradition in that the two pioneers, Eduard Pagell and Wilhelm Heyde (1825–1908), were both artisans by training: Pagell had worked as a stonemason[11] while Heyde was the son of a gardener and had served as a plumber's apprentice.[12] As will be seen, there was to be a strong economic component to their early missionary activities.

Pagell and Heyde set out from Herrnhut in 1853 and travelled via London to Calcutta (now Kolkata).[13] Two years earlier, the German missionary Karl Gützlaff had made an appeal for missionaries to the Chinese Empire. Mindful of their earlier engagement with the Mongols, the Moravians decided to aim for Mongolia. However, since Russia and the Chinese interior were closed to them, they decided to explore an alternative route via India and Central Asia. In 1854 Pagell and Heyde arrived in Kotgarh, close to the river Sutlej some 50 miles from Simla and spent the winter there with a fellow German missionary who was in the service of the London-based Church Missionary Society (CMS). In 1855 they made an exploratory expedition to Ladakh and Spiti. However, finding that the Tibetan border was closed to them, they applied to their Herrnhut superiors and to the British authorities to establish a mission station in Kyelang (Kye lang, now also known as Keylong, Lahul). Both gave their approval, and they began work on the construction of the mission house in the summer of 1856.

Kyelang had the advantage of being conveniently located on a trade

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10 Mason (2001: 9–11).
11 Schreve (n.d.: 6).
12 Heyde (1921: 6).
13 For the early history of the mission, see Bray (2005).

and pilgrimage route connecting the Indian plains with Ladakh and Tibet. From now on Tibet became their main focus in place of Mongolia. In 1857 they were joined by Heinrich August Jäschke (1817–1883), a former schoolteacher, who became best known for his linguistic researches and his Tibetan translation of the New Testament. Their household was completed in 1859 with the arrival of three brides, selected by the Mission Board in a form of arranged marriage. Pagell went to Calcutta to meet them and married his own bride, Friederike Mechtle, there.

A further advantage of Lahul was that it came under direct—albeit somewhat loose—British administration as part of Punjab province. Captain Hay, the Assistant Commissioner of Kulu, promised them government assistance in setting up the mission. During the summer months his successors regularly visited Kyelang during their administrative visits to Lahul. In their official capacity, they gave financial support to the mission to set up a school. Already in 1857, the missionaries experimented with the cultivation of potatoes, introducing them to the region for the first time. Later, the British helped the Moravians to acquire more land and provided them with an official subsidy to finance the construction of the necessary irrigation canals. The hope was that the Moravians would be able to contribute to the region's wider social and economic development.

The first converts, Nicodemus Sonam Stobgyas and Samuel Joldan, were baptised in 1865. They were from Ladakh rather than Lahul. Ladakh belonged to the territories of the Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir and they were members of a wider group of Ladakhis who had fled their homeland to escape oppressive taxation. The majority of the mission's subsequent converts in Kyelang were likewise from Ladakh. Apparently under the influence of Hindu custom, Lahulis would not eat with Christians, and local would-be converts faced intense social pressure not to join the Moravians.

Meanwhile, in 1864 Pagell undertook another reconnaissance journey to select a site for a new mission. He chose the village of Poo in the Kinnaur region of the upper Sutlej valley which lay close to the Shipki pass leading into Tibet. As with Kyelang, the hope was that Poo would serve as an advance post, making it possible to expand into Tibet as soon as it became open to foreigners. An important factor in his calculations was the construction of the so-called Hindustan-Tibet road from Simla toward the Tibetan border.[14] On his reconnaissance visit in 1864 he noted that the construction of the road had required several thousand workers for several years, and food supplies were

[14] On the Hindustan-Tibet Road, see Gardner (2014).

therefore expensive.[15] The Moravians hoped that the completion of the road would lead to greater economic engagement with Tibet on the part of British India, and that the mission would benefit.

Kinnaur differed from Lahul in that it was part of the princely state of Bashahr, meaning that it did not come under direct British administration.[16] Instead, the Raja of Bashahr in principle exercised a high degree of local autonomy. However, he was subject to the "advice" of a Simla-based British official known as the Superintendent of the Simla Hill States. In later years, the Raja's autonomy was also constrained by a series of agreements with the Imperial Forestry Service. When necessary, Pagell could and did appeal for the support of British officialdom. However, their lines of authority were indirect and therefore less effective than in Lahul. In practice, Pagell and his successors therefore had to negotiate with a series of overlapping authorities at both the state and the local levels.

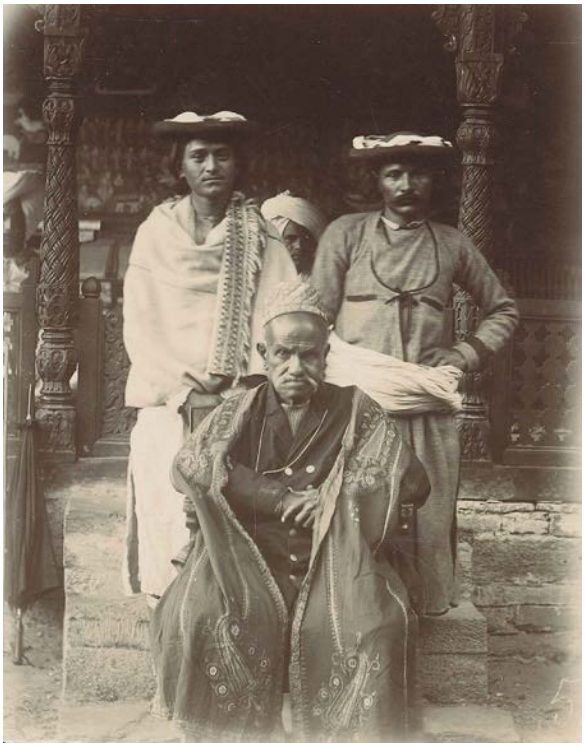


*Fig. 1 — Raja Shamsher Singh, c. 1910. Photo courtesy of Moravian Church House, London.*

[15] Pagell, June 1864. MB 29 (1865), 29.

[16] On Bashahr's relationship with the British in this period, see Datta (1997), Moran (2007) and Jahoda (2015).

From a missionary perspective, a further complication lay in the fact that the basis of the Raja's authority was religious rather than secular. In principle, everyone in Bashahr was subject to *deotā ka raj*, "rule by deity".[17] The Raja ruled on behalf of the Bhimakali, the most powerful of these deities, whose seat was in Sarahan. Bhimakali herself sat at the apex of a hierarchy of deities which paralleled—or rather constituted—a hierarchy of governance.[18] Next in seniority to the Raja were three wazirs, each of whom were associated with their own local *deotā*. Poo fell within the territory of the Powari wazir.

In May 1865 Pagell set out from Kotgarh, where he had spent the winter at the CMS station, accompanied by a team of carpenters. In Rampur he called on Raja Shamsher Singh who appeared well-disposed and issued him with a *parwana* (permit) authorising him to cut as much wood as he needed to construct the mission house.[19] However, when he reached Chini (now Kalpa) he met a delegation of 16 men from Poo who tried to prevent him travelling any further. It seems that a soothsayer had predicted that the village would suffer from drought if a missionary settled among them. Pagell believed that this protest had been instigated by the local wazir, who had himself hoped to make use of the land that Pagell had acquired, and he expressed the view that the Raja did not have sufficient authority in his kingdom. Eventually, he overcame the villagers' resistance by appealing to the Raja and the English Commissioner.

### *The political economy in Poo*

The people of Upper Kinnaur were mostly Tibetan Buddhists, and in earlier centuries their territory had been part of the Western Tibetan kingdom of Guge. However, they were nonetheless subject to *deotā ka raj*: Buddhist and Hindu belief and social practice overlapped. Every few years the Raja's deity made a formal visitation to Poo, even if the Raja himself never did so. Schreve describes one such occasion in the 1890s:

> Towards the end of 1893, after a four-year absence, the Raja's deity again visited our village, ostensibly to bless the land but in reality (and

[17] Sutherland (2006).

[18] Singh (1989) shows that the *deotā*, or rather the committees acting on their behalf, have in recent times served as an important informal source of credit to local borrowers. Moravian sources make no reference to this practice in Poo in the period under review. It is possible that richer households may have been able to access credit through this means, but almost certainly not the poorer families who are the main focus of this paper.

[19] Pagell, Poo, 23 June 1865. MB 29 (1865), 238.

> the villagers saw this visitation in the same way) to fill the pockets of the deity's priests. In addition to free board and lodging, the latter requisitioned a good number of sacrificial animals as well as a tax of one anna per head. The Poo people's participation in the deity's festivities was not enthusiastic. This fact pleased us, still more the fact that the festivities were interrupted on Sunday and that, in addition to non-Christian villagers, a good number of the deity's priests, some of whom understood Tibetan, came to our church.[20]

As in other parts of the Western Himalayas the household was the key social unit and, according to F. A. Redslob, who served in the Himalaya from 1871 to 1891, the village operated more as a 'republic' at the local level:

> By contrast with Lahaul, a more republican spirit—preserved from earlier times—is apparent among the people here. In Lahaul, alongside and in spite of the British government, the old noble families continue to exercise force and pressure on the people, and the word of the aristocrats is decisive. Here, by contrast, all important and less important community matters are discussed and decided in the community council. This gathers next to the communal temple below a tall alder tree. Every head of the household from the farmers is entitled to speak in the council but no one from the lower castes has a seat or a voice.[21]

Poo occupied an intermediate space between the Indian foothills and Tibet not only in religious practices but also with regard to its economy. It was possible to sow two harvests a year, and agriculture was supplemented by an annual cycle of trade.[22] Kinnaur still benefited from a 17th-century treaty signed by Bashahr Raja Kehri Singh and the Lhasa government which meant that traders from Bashahr were able to trade in Tibet free of taxes.[23] As Schreve describes the annual cycle:

> In June the villagers—that is one man who is competent in trade from each of the better houses—move with their flocks of sheep to Tibet. The boldest press quite far into the interior because the wool is cheaper the farther they go. In October they come back with their flocks who are laden with packages of wool. Each sheep carries eight *batti* (32 lb). These are then driven straightaway to Rampur, the capital of Kinnaur,

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20 Schreve, Poo, 12 March 1894. MB 58 (1894), 301–302.

21 "Zur Charakterisierung der tibetischen Grenzprovinzen. Aus dem Diarium von Poo 1884." MB 49 (1885), 150.

22 See van Spengen (2000) for an overview of wider patterns of Himalayan trade and Jahoda (2015: 128–129) for a closer look at the trade between Bashahr and Tibet.

23 For the historical background and text of the treaty, see Halkias (2009).

> where a great wool market takes place every year.[24] There they not only relieve the sheep of their loads but also shear them of their own wool and sell it.[25]

In the next stage of the cycle, the sheep and their owners spent several months in the Himalayan foothills:

> While the sheep have performed their trading role they don't come straight back to their homeland because the shortage of fodder during the winter means that they wouldn't have enough to live on. Rather they are driven to meadows near Simla and Mandi where they have good pastures in the winter.[26] There they stay under the watch of shepherds until the spring. Only then do they set out on the return journey to their homeland in Poo, but not with empty backs. Instead, they are loaded with grain because, however much grain is grown here, it is not sufficient for all needs.[27]

These trading activities brought considerable wealth to the richer households, but there were wide economic and social disparities on both sides of the Tibetan border. On a visit to Poo in the summer of 1874, Redslob wrote that:

> The Poo people are traders, prosperous to an extent, and have lent out much money, particularly in the poorer region of Tibet. Not infrequently, it happens that the Poo people bring back people who cannot pay and send them to work as labourers, in effect slaves. I saw many such Tibetan slaves and slave children.[28]

Similarly, there were wide social disparities within the local population in Poo. As Redslob reported ten years later:

> The farmers are "Nangpa" [*nang pa*], i.e. "insiders" within the religious community whereas the cottagers are "Pipa" [*phyi pa*], i.e. outsiders. In Poo the Nangpa bear unmistakably the features of the Mongolian race whereas the Pipa betray Indian descent. In contrast to the land-owning Nangpa, the Pipa are craftspeople and they distinguish between higher and lower castes according to the craft that they practice. Woodworkers, weavers, tailors and shoemakers may distinguish

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[24] This was the Lavi Fair, which still takes place every year, although it has lost its former role as a focus for Indo-Tibetan trade.

[25] Schreve, Poo, 10 May 1891. MB 55 (1891), 340. See Singh (2019 124–153) for a discussion of wider patterns in the history of the "trader pastoralists of Kinnaur".

[26] If they went beyond Bashahr, they had to purchase trading rights from local rulers. Personal e-mail communication from Arik Moran, 21 May 2020.

[27] Personal e-mail communication from Arik Moran, 21 May 2020.

[28] "Br. Redslobs Reise von Kyelang durch Spiti nach Poo." MB 39 (1875), 3.

> between themselves but stand higher than metalworkers; iron, gold- and silversmiths. Musicians occupy the lowest social and customary status.[29]

Redslob drew a contrast with European conceptions of goldsmiths, silversmiths and musicians, who were regarded as high-status practitioners of the arts (*Künsten*). He noted that similar social distinctions were also apparent in Lahul—and he might have added Ladakh as well—but they were move evident in Poo because the proportion of Pipa was higher.[30] He commented that such practices did not arise from Buddhism but were to be observed far inside Tibet.[31]



*Fig. 2 — A Poo blacksmith family. Note the hookah (water pipe tobacco). The wife is using a small spindle to spin wool. Photo by Ada Burroughs, c. 1920, courtesy of Gillian Crofton.*

Writing in 1891, Schreve likewise reported on the social divide between Nangpa and Pipa and attributed it to the influence of Brahmanical Hindus. He noted that the lower castes were not actually pariahs, although they could descend to this status if they became

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29 "Zur Charakterisierung der tibetischen Grenzprovinzen. Aus dem Diarium von Poo 1884." MB 49 (1885), 150.

30 On Ladakhi social hierarchies, see Kaplanian (1981:171–190) and Erdmann (1983).

31 Levine (1992: 336) noted on the basis of research conducted in 1990 that iron–workers in Khochar (Western Tibet) were said to be of mixed Indian and Tibetan origin: they held the lowest social status, and were thought to be physically unclean.

ritually unclean by eating with pariahs or Christians.[32] In that case they could only return to their former status at a price:

> If a pariah wishes to be accepted back into his caste, he has to go to the king of Kinnaur and bring a present according to his means of at least six rupees. Then he is sprinkled with water that ostensibly comes from the Ganges and reinstated into the privileges of his former caste.[33]

In 1899 Reinhold Schnabel, who served in the Himalaya between 1895 and 1916, reported an incident demonstrating that these caste distinctions were directly linked to Poo's status as part of the Hindu kingdom of Bashahr. Together with his local assistants, he made a short trip to Shipki on the far side of the Tibetan border, which was marked by a glacial stream. Here he reports what happened next:

> Hardly had we passed [the stream] when everyone threw down their loads and sat down comfortably together. Here it seemed irrelevant whether one was Nangpa (insider) or Pipa (outsider) or pariah. The hookah (water pipe) was passed from hand to hand and people smoked freely. Someone fetched delicious water from the stream: the Sahib had to taste it as well. In short, I at first had no idea what was going on until Padaka […] said that here on Tibetan soil all caste distinctions fell away.[34]

### *The first phase of mission activity*

Having established himself in Poo, Pagell set out to win the villagers' trust, noting that it would be inappropriate to be over-hasty because "it is not they who invited us here but rather we who imposed ourselves on them".[35] Together with Heyde he had received basic medical training at Berlin's Charité Hospital before setting out for India, and it seems that he was appreciated primarily as a doctor. In December 1866, he happily reported that even the local indigenous medical practitioners turned to him for advice, and his patients included members of the delegation who had tried to prevent him coming to Poo.[36]

It seems that he also managed to attract an audience for his Sunday services, making use of an accordion and, for example, reporting in early 1866 that some seven to eight people came regularly.[37] Also, in

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32 Schreve, Poo, 10 May 1891. MB 55 (1891), 336.
33 Schreve, Poo, 10 May 1891. MB 55 (1891), 336.
34 Schnabel, "Von Poo nach Tibet hinein." MB 63 (1899), 199.
35 Pagell, Poo, February 1866, MB 30 (1866), 256.
36 Pagell, Poo, 8 December 1866. MB 31 (1866), 85.
37 Pagell, Poo, 8 December 1866. MB 31 (1866), 85.

the winter months, when the children were not expected to support their parents by looking after their livestock on the hillsides, he started a small school. In March 1869, he reported that he had had an attendance of eight to ten boys each day but that their powers of concentration were limited.[38]

In the summer months, he made a series of missionary journeys around the region, preaching the Gospel where he could, and negotiating various setbacks. For example, in 1870 he planned to go to Spiti but found that the bridges on his planned route had been removed.[39] It emerged that Fateh Singh, an illegitimate brother of the Raja, had staged a rebellion and carved out a small personal kingdom. Perhaps fearing that Pagell was in league with the British, Fateh Singh gave strict orders that he should not be allowed to pass. Pagell instead travelled down to Simla where he reported these events.[40] The British Commissioner suggested that he might wish to stay away but, later in the year, Fateh Singh was captured.

Pagell made only a few converts. The first was Baldan (dPal ldan?) who was from a village three days' journey downstream and came to Poo to help with the carpentry work. Pagell reported that baptismal instruction was slow because he "belonged to the poor people who have to bear a heavy yoke imposed by wealthy people and this has a crippling influence on their minds and spirits from childhood".[41] However, in November 1868 Pagell felt able to baptise him under the name "Joseph". On 20 December, he baptised Joseph's three children, and later began instruction for his wife Tsering Butrid (Tshe ring dbu 'khrid). He also continued teaching Sigden, the illegitimate son of a smith and a Nangpa girl, whom he had adopted as a foster child.[42]

A further candidate was Jamyang Tsering, a young man from Poo who had no possessions apart from his clothes and a soup bowl. In 1870 Pagell reported that he had given Jamyang Tsering employment. He and his wife were doing their best to take care of him in material matters but he noted that "All the poor people here are born debtors, and their housekeeping is reckless, without any foresight."[43] He was holding back an amount of money from Jamyang Tsering's monthly wages. Apparently, both Jamyang Tsering and Joseph were grateful for this practice and glad that their debts were diminishing. Pagell added that the harvest had been very poor that year and therefore there was a prospect of much hardship for poorer people. On 5

38 Pagell, Poo, 8 March 1869. MB 33 (1869), 123.
39 Pagell, Poo, 13 September 1870. MB 35 (1871), 76.
40 Pagell, 12 December 1870. MB 35 (1871), 171–175.
41 Pagell, Poo, 26 November 1868. MB 33 (1869), 72.
42 Pagell, Poo, 8 March 1869. MB 33 (1869), 124. Schreve, Poo, 14 July 1891.
43 Pagell, Poo, 12 December 1870. MB 35 (1871), 175.

February 1871 Jamyang Tsering was baptised under the name "Jonathan" and Sigdan as "Benjamin".[44]

Debt continued to be a concern. In September 1874 Pagell reported that Joseph had gone to the village of Nisang, some days' journey away, apparently without Pagell's approval, and was working as a woodcutter. By December he was back, but living in the village rather than with the mission.[45] Pagell commented that "That too is good because everyone in the village sees that Christianity does not inevitably involve living with the teacher and depending on him for external matters."[46]

Continuing to reflect on debt, Pagell wrote on 29 March 1876:

> Our people's perception that we must in the end help them out of their need arose because we took them in when they came to us in this connection. At that time each of them had more than Rs 80 debt which rose from year to year because of the 25% interest that they had to pay. We took it for a duty of Christian love to give them an advance on their debts which they could pay off step by step through their work. However, we later realised that these people cannot endure a worry-free life because after their debts had been paid off they immediately fell into a new one.[47]

He was now more careful in the help that he gave to the two Christian families so that they were saying, "The 'lama' [i.e. Pagell] is no longer as good he was in the beginning".[48] A further concern was that Joseph had been eating food from "heathen festivals" and had therefore been excluded from Holy Communion. From Pagell's perspective, eating such food could be seen as a way of sliding back into heathendom. However, if Christians were not able to take part in local festivals, they were cut off from an important aspect of communal life.

In January 1883 Pagell and his wife died within a few days of each other. Redslob came from Kyelang and took over the Poo mission until 1885 when he moved to Leh (Ladakh). Redslob took a similar view to his predecessor:

> The people have a quite different character from our Christians in Kyelang just as the people here are altogether differently inclined from our Ladakhis and Lahaulis. Their character inclines more to fecklessness and hedonism [*Unzuverlässigkeit und Genusszucht*], and the second characteristic leads to their being caught up in debt. So, for

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44 Pagell, Poo. 6 March 1871. MB 35 (1871), 219.
45 Pagell, Poo, 2 December 1874. MB 39 (1875), 131.
46 Pagell, Poo, 2 December 1874. MB 39 (1875), 131.
47 Pagell, Poo, 29 March 1876. MB 40 (1876), 226.
48 Pagell, Poo, 29 March 1876. MB 40 (1876), 226.

> example, Jonathan is committed to a bondage for the whole summer to a rich villager. I do not think this is satisfactory and seek to free him as far as I can, but he makes that difficult for me because of his great fecklessness.[49]

Redslob was replaced by Julius Weber, who served in Poo from 1884 until 1891, when he too moved to Leh. Weber's reports reflect frequent discouragement. In a review in May 1888, he noted that after twenty years of work there was no local Christian who was fit to receive Holy Communion and queried whether the time had come to preach the Gospel in the region.[50] He suggested that this was less the fault of individuals and more to do with local social relationships (*hiesige Verhältnisse*). Echoing Pagell, perhaps unconsciously, he added, "They have not called us: I would almost say that we imposed ourselves on them".[51]

### *"One sows and another reaps"*

In November 1890, Theodor Schreve came to Poo and, together with his wife, stayed for nearly thirteen years. From his writings, he comes across as a perceptive and sympathetic observer of local conditions who also had strong practical skills. He was able to revive the small congregation and place it on a much stronger footing so that by the time he left there were thirty-three members. In the late 1890s, Schreve wrote a pamphlet whose title, *Einer Säet, der andre erntet*, echoes John 4: 37 ("One sows and another reaps"). He argued that, even if Pagell had seen few results from his work, he had prepared the ground for a "harvest" reaped by his successor.

From the outset, Schreve took a clear-eyed view of the social conditions of his flock:

> Because of his debts Jonathan has been sold to a farmer as a slave (*Sklave*). From early in the morning until late at night he is stuck in work. In such circumstances it is quite impossible to improve his understanding [of Christian teachings].[52]

Benjamin was likewise exposed to debts because of his addiction to playing dice. Schreve recalled that at one point he had come to the verge of suicide after losing Rs 25 through gambling. Schreve saw the

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49 Redslob, Poo, 2 February–12 March 1884. MB 48 (1884), 171.
50 "Westhimalaya. Poo und Leh Brief von Weber aus Poo vom 7.5.88." MB 52 (1888), 207–209.
51 Weber, Poo, 7 May 1888. MB 52 (1888), 207.
52 Schreve, Poo, 14 July 1891. MB 56 (1892), 147.

indebtedness of these two individuals as part of a wider pattern. In May 1892 he cited a particularly painful case:

> The richest and therefore unfortunately the most influential man in the village had so mistreated an old man who was his debtor, that one feared for his life. Not content with that, they locked him in a latrine, and he was supposed to stay there until he had paid his debts.[53]

Schreve managed to secure the release of the victim but the mission faced a social backlash in that irrigation water to its fields was cut off while he was away from Poo.

Against this background, he argued that there was no room for "polemic" in the mission: it was more important to provide practical assistance.[54] In 1891 he made a "timid beginning" (*schüchterner Versuch*) in agriculture by planting potatoes, peaches, apples, pears and nut trees.[55] The following year, he started looking for agricultural land with a view to making the Christian community self-dependent.[56] Echoing a constant theme in the history of the mission, he acknowledged that people might approach the mission with material objectives in mind:

> There are also people who come two or three times to the church service in order—as they think—to make themselves amenable to us. They then come up with their actual purpose, which is a request to borrow money—a suggestion that I firmly reject.[57]

However, he added:

> This failed speculation appears in a somewhat milder light if one takes into consideration that the general custom here in trade and commerce is to seek advances for all sorts of different things. I myself am often obliged to pay in advance for butter, wood etc some time before receiving the goods. That is especially necessary when buying grain. If I adopt this practice, I receive a greater quantity than I would if only paid at the moment of delivery.[58]

Schreve was able to bring Jonathan and Benjamin back into the congregation, and in the course of the early 1890s there were a handful of other baptisms. These included: Schreve's servant girl in 1892; the

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53 "Aus dem Jahresbericht (Januar–Dezember 1892)." MB 57 (1893), 341.
54 "Aus dem Jahresbericht (Januar–Dezember 1892)." MB 57 (1893), 341.
55 Schreve, Poo, 10 May and 12 June 1891. MB 55 (1891), 335.
56 Heyde, Kyelang, 11 October 1892. MB 57 (1893), 118.
57 Schreve, Poo, 10 May and 12 June 1891. MB 55 (1891), 335.
58 Schreve, Poo, 10 May and 12 June 1891. MB 55 (1891), 335.

mission schoolteacher Sonam Gyaltsan, who took the baptismal name Paulu, in April 1893; and the servant girl's mother in January 1894. Paulu was from Spiti and had attended the Kyelang mission school: he later played an important role as an evangelist for the mission. Unlike the other converts, he was a *nangpa* and he in any case earnt his living from the mission. The others were all *pipa* and had difficulties earning their livelihoods. This was part of a broader social problem. As Schreve wrote in March 1894:

> It is impossible for the poor people to buy grain in the village. Just as elsewhere misers rejoice in the quantities of money that they have accumulated, so rich misers here gloat over their grain. Here in Poo there are about 70 households. Eight of these households have such a surplus of grain that they could feed the entire village. Instead they hoard it and even in bitter need share nothing with their fellows. Such stupidity is beyond my understanding. Among these rich people there is one who in winter takes on poor people for little benefit, thus incurring the anger of his rich peers. About 30 houses have a sufficiency in that the harvest from their fields covers their requirements. The remainder are in constant need.[59]

This situation posed a particular danger for the nascent Christian congregation:

> If they seek their income in the same way as before, their Christian way of life will be severely endangered. This applies to the family that we have recently taken on. The father and one of the daughters are contracted as servants to pay off their debts. They receive food for their work, i.e. only in the summer, but otherwise nothing at all. In winter their creditors give them an advance of four rupees' worth of grain which is enough to save them from death but not enough to live on.[60]

In these circumstances, the pattern of debt became an unending cycle:

> […] they return to their creditors in the spring in order to work off the winter advance that in the meantime has increased at the rate of 25% interest, or actually 50% because the loan is only for half a year. So it

[59] Schreve, Poo, 12 March 1894. MB 58 (1894), 301. Jahoda (2015: 121) argues that social and economic divisions between the richer and poorer sections of society were widening during this period, and this was partly the result of a trend towards greater monetarisation resulting from tax reforms introduced under British influence. An additional factor was that the richer households were in a much stronger position to benefit from trading opportunities than the poorer households.

[60] Schreve, Poo, 12 March 1894. MB 58 (1894), 299.

> continues from year to year and there can be no question of their being free of debt. More than 20 families live in this manner in Poo.[61]

His conclusion was that the mission had the duty to fight against these grievances with all its strength because this was the only way to build up a healthy Christian community. In addition to acquiring more land for agriculture, his solution was to develop a "wool industry" to provide a livelihood for the Christians during the winter months when there was no agricultural work. In the first instance, this "industry' consisted mainly of spinning. Later, Schreve was able to acquire an improved type of loom so that the mission could weave blankets.



*Fig. 3 — The "wool industry" in Poo, c. 1920. Photo: Ada Burroughs, courtesy of Gillian Crofton.*

In 1895 Schreve was at last able to report that, after three years of negotiation, he had secured the mission's access to the fallow land that he hoped to bring into cultivation. This was a major task:

> In one week I employed 40 workers, so 15% of the [working] population of Poo. I pitched my tent on the mountain in order to lead the work from there. Shortly before sunrise I gathered the work team for a morning blessing. I drew on the Lord's Sermon on the Mount. A prayer concluded the morning blessing and then we set to work.[62]

With satisfaction, he noted:

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61 Schreve, Poo, 12 March 1894. MB 58 (1894), 299.
62 Schreve, Poo, 13 May 1895. MB 59 (1895), 335.

> Through this work we have come into the closest contact with a great part of the population and we may hope that the Word of God, which is communicated at the morning blessing before work, will fall on good soil here and there. In coming years if the work increases, more of our Christians will find work here, thus escaping from their unjust relationship with their employers in the village.[63]

As a further illustration of the urgent need for social uplift, he added:

> Our Christians are so poor that it would not be possible for them to exist if the mission did not offer them a livelihood. For example, they carefully gather the potato peelings that are discarded from our household and they welcome the tea leaves that we throw away so that they can use them for a second infusion.[64]

In his subsequent correspondence with the Mission Board in Germany, Schreve repeatedly returned to the question whether people would seek to become Christians for the sake of material benefits. For example, in a letter from Poo in July 1895, he wrote that it was quite possible that this might be the case. However, he expressed the hope that in the end the power of the Gospel would turn their hearts even if they had initially been attracted to the Christianity for material reasons.[65] He again emphasised the need to prevent the Christian converts from falling back into debt. On a practical note, he reported that he was helping Benjamin to pay off a debt of Rs 170 by deducting Rs 2 a month from his wages. He had adopted a similar arrangement with Jonathan.

After a visit to Simla later in 1895, Schreve reported that some missionaries from other churches had been critical of his approach, although his CMS colleague in Kotgarh was more sympathetic. The *Missionsblatt* included an editorial comment supporting his strategy:

> Missionaries who do not wish to bother themselves with the life situation of the people in their care cut themselves off wilfully from the opportunity to practice love, and to alleviate the material suffering of innocent people, to be merciful to others, as our heavenly Father is merciful to us.[66]

The editorial concluded on the hopeful note that such measures would be no more than temporary until such time as the mission would have lifted people from debt and need, and inculcated the virtues of "order,

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63 Schreve, Poo, 13 May 1895. MB 59 (1895), 335.
64 Schreve, Poo, 13 May 1895. MB 59 (1895), 335.
65 Schreve, Poo, 11 July 1895. MB 59 (1895), 431.
66 Editorial comment. MB 60 (1896), 171.

hard work, prudence, and thrift" (*Ordnung, Fleiss, Umsicht und Wirtschaftlichkeit*).

At least in the short term, Schreve was able to report a degree of success. At Easter 1897 he wrote that he had baptised fourteen adults, thus doubling the size of the Christian community. In this case, caste restrictions worked to the mission's advantage. As noted above, Christians were treated as pariahs. When some of the older women heard that their younger relatives wished to become Christians, they decided to seek baptism too because they wanted to continue to eat together.[67] One of the new converts was an oracle, who said he wished to be relieved from the spirit who used to possess him.[68] His fellow villagers tried to dissuade him, even offering him a field as an incentive to continue his services, but he insisted on going ahead.[69] Some of the richer farmer threatened to refuse work to the new converts, and a monk spoke against the baptisms, but another respected villager said that the new Christians had done well to adopt the new faith.

*Advance, decline and closure*

Schreve returned to Germany in 1903, primarily because of his wife's ill–health, and later served as a missionary in South Africa, where he died in 1930. There were further baptisms after he had left so that by 1907 there were sixty-nine church members, making Poo the largest of the Moravian congregations in the Himalayan region (In addition to Kyelang, the others now included Leh and Khalatse in Ladakh).[70] By this time the hostility of the richer villagers had abated, in part because they needed the labour of the congregation members.[71] The early years of the 20th century represented a brief zenith in the history of the mission.

67 Schreve, Poo, 1 March 1897. MB 62 (1898), 248.
68 Schreve, Poo, 15 March 1897. MB 62 (1898), 250.
69 Schreve, Poo, 27 March 1897. MB 62 (1898), 251.
70 "Poo", *Periodical Accounts Relating to Moravian Missions* 6 (1907) (72), 760. "Status of the Congregations and their Christian Membership." PA 8 (1912) (90), 305.
71 MB 71 (1907), 243.



*Fig. 4 — Schnabel and his congregation in Poo, c. 1905. Photo courtesy of Moravian Church House, London.*

Schreve had been joined for short periods in Poo by fellow missionaries Julius Bruske, who served in Kyelang, Poo, and Chini from 1894 to 1908, and Reinhold Schnabel. From 1906 onwards the plan was that there should be two missionary couples in Poo. In the years before and during the First World War, the missionaries who served there included the following, together with their wives and families: Reinhold Schnabel (returning to Poo a second time), Hermann Kunick (who served in the Himalaya from 1904–1931), Hermann Marx (1903–1919), and Henry Burroughs (1913–1926). Marx, who was known for his carpentry skills, built a second mission bungalow, and in 1914 opened a polyclinic with four wards. In January 1914 he treated 156 outpatients, as well as six inpatients.[72] Meanwhile, the mission school continued operations, and both the farm and the wool industry provided income and employment for the Christian community. In 1916 the Raja of Bashahr ordered 100 pairs of woollen socks for Indian soldiers serving in the war.[73] In the event the knitters of Poo were able to produce as many as 300 pairs.

Despite these outward signs of success, the missionaries continued to express concern about the spiritual commitment of their congregation. For example, in the summer of 1907 Marx wrote of the congregation members:

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[72] "Poo", *Periodical Accounts Relating to Moravian Missions* 6 (1907) (72), 760. "Status of the Congregations and their Christian Membership." PA 8 (1912) (90), 305.

[73] MB 80 (1916): 72, 166.

> Despite their participation in religious services and many pious sermons, their heart is far from the living God because they did not and do not now seek salvation for their immortal souls but rather to fill their stomachs as well as finding work and other material assistance from the missionary. Most of our Christians are very, very poor […] often begging with their hungry children in front of our doors. If one sees this poverty, one can understand that there is a danger that the members of the lower caste will change religion for the sake of external benefits.[74]



*Fig. 5 — The second mission bungalow with the village behind, c. 1920. Photo: Ada Burroughs, courtesy of Gillian Crofton.*

Following the precedent set by Schreve, the mission continued to provide congregation members with material assistance. However, writing in 1908, Marx explained that this practice could be a source of conflict:

> In order to help our Christians in winter, the Mission Board has permitted us to keep a supply of corn which we sell to our people at cost so that they do not became dependent on the uncharitable rich people. In April our supply was exhausted: we called the community together and told them they would have to seek grain in neighbouring villages. That stirred up discontent. One troublemaker declared: "If the Sahib doesn't give us grain any more, we don't want to come to church any more. What use is the Christian religion? We have no benefit from

[74] Stand der Pooer Gemeinde." MB 72 (1908), 6.

> it". The others expressed themselves in the same terms, but they still don't want to break with us, and came to church on Sunday.[75]

Missionary life continued to offer both hope and discouragement. In 1910 Marx described the congregation's Christmas celebrations but then told the story of a woman who had recently renounced Christianity, thirteen years after being baptised by Schreve.[76] Together with her family, she had gone to the village head and formally drunk holy water, ostensibly from the river Ganges, which a travelling wool trader had procured from the Raja of Bashahr for a price of Rs 2 and 4 annas. In doing so, she renounced Christianity and resumed her former caste status. Marx noted that she and her family had already been distancing themselves from the church for the previous eighteen months, but he only discovered that she had finally left the faith when he heard of the sudden death of her daughter as a result of a heart attack. When he visited the house, he found a Buddhist monk taking care of the funeral arrangements. Marx expressed his sorrow that this family as well as other former Christians had apparently taken off Christianity "like a cloak".

The Poo annual report for 1911 stated that the congregation had declined from sixty-nine to thirty-nine in the previous four years, and a further reduction was impending: "the majority of the members were baptized in times of outward distress and their Christianity has not stood the test of time".[77] They were therefore either leaving of their own accord or their names had to be struck off the register.

The British missionary Henry Burroughs, who came to Poo in 1916, described the mission in similarly gloomy terms. In September 1919 he wrote:

> It is the rule of the village to pay servants in grain, so the missionaries have to make that provision. All our Christians are poor and in order to keep them from contracting debts with rich people, as they would surely do, we try to help them by selling grain from the mission. The idea is good but the practical working thereof is not always satisfactory as one cannot tell whether some of them think they come to church in order to pass muster as Christians and so get their grain, or whether it is otherwise.[78]

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75 Stand der Pooer Gemeinde." MB 72 (1908), 6.

76 "Letztjährige Weihnachtserlebnisse in Poo (Himalaya)." MB 75 (1911), 274–275.

77 "Status of the Congregations and their Christian Membership." PA 8 (1912) (90), 305.

78 Henry Burroughs to Arthur Ward 15 August 1919. Tibet Letters. Moravian Church House (London). Hereafter MCH. For a memoir of Henry and Ada Burroughs' experiences in Kinnaur and Ladakh, see Bass and Burroughs (2018).

The mission land presented similar contradictions. In a "plea from the heart" written in February 1920, Henry Burroughs' wife Ada reviewed the past history of the mission, recalling that "Br. Schreve thought it desirable to help the people to pay off their debts because they were practically serving as slaves for the rich men, bound down by debt and accumulated interest."[79] The result was a series of baptisms. However, time proved that the Christians' "motives were not for salvation through Christ, but for material needs". On the day that Ada wrote the letter, one of the congregation members had complained to her: "If you do not give us a better field, then we shall not come to services." As Ada observed:

> She expressed the real heart of the matter! To get a field, they must keep our rules, attend service etc! So now, that is why they come at all [...] If they did not come, they would not get a field. These fields are a curse now, not a blessing.

As a consequence of the First World War, German citizens such as Schnabel had had to leave the mission field, and the Moravians were now severely short of funds. The future of the Poo mission was therefore already in question when Bishop Arthur Ward came on an official visitation from London in late 1920. He decided to give Poo another chance, but the situation did not improve. In May 1921, Henry Burroughs wrote in similar terms to before:

> The chief cause of trouble at Poo is I am forced to think that most if not all of the Poo people entered the congregation from a wrong motive (material) rather than seeking a Saviour. Fields and getting debts paid can be very strong incentives in a place like Poo, and we are now getting the backwash of all this, even although we now have the second generation. They are nominal Christians who lack the experience we term conversion.[80]

F. E. Peter, who served in the Himalayas from 1898 to 1936, took over the Poo mission in 1922. After a period of further review, he recommended that there was no option but to wind up the mission's affairs, and the Moravians finally withdrew in 1924.

Despite the mission's closure the Moravians remained in intermittent contact with what was left of the Poo congregation. In 1929, Benjamin—one of Pagell's first converts—passed away.[81] Deva Ram, the village headman, took advantage of a visit by the British official Edward Wakefield to pass on this news to Bishop Ward in

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[79] Ada Burroughs to Arthur Ward, 24 February 1920. MCH.
[80] Henry Burroughs to Br. Klesel, 4 May 1921. Tibet Letters. MCH.
[81] Wakefield to Ward, Poo, 16 October 1929. Tibet Letters. MCH.

London. In fulfilment of a promise to Ward, he had looked after Benjamin in his old age, and arranged for him to be buried beside Pagell. In the same year, Dewazung Dana, a Ladakhi Christian who had been ordained as a minister in 1920, visited the village.[82] He stayed ten days and held two services. People were busy in the fields during the daytime, but he held meetings almost every evening. He wrote that it was sad for the Poo Christians "not to have anyone looking after their spiritual welfare" and suggested that they move to Leh. Apparently, the young men and women agreed to do so, and Peter—who was now in Leh—said that the church would pay their expenses. Later, two women took up the offer.[83] As late as 1955 when another Ladakhi Christian visited Poo, there were still two old ladies who had remained faithful to the church.[84] They too were invited to move to Leh where they took up a new role as caretakers of the Gospel Inn which the church had built in Leh bazaar to provide hospitality to travellers visiting the town.

The Poo mission left one important legacy in the person of Dorje Tharchin (rDo rje mthar byin, 1890–1876) who was often known as "Babu Tharchin" and is best known for his work producing a Tibetan-language newspaper, the *Tibet Mirror*, from 1925 until the early 1970s.[85] Tharchin was the illegitimate son of Sodnama, Schreve's servant girl, who had been baptized in 1892. Like many of the other Poo Christians he had been born into the smith fraternity.[86] As a young man he came into contact first with the CMS mission in Kotgarh and then the Indian Christian evangelist Sadhu Sundar Singh (1889–1929). In 1924 he briefly corresponded with the Moravians about the possibility of his returning to Poo.[87] However, he ultimately spent most of the rest of his life based in Kalimpong, West Bengal, where he was later ordained as a minister in the Presbyterian church. Through his newspaper and publishing house Tharchin exercised an important influence on the Tibetan cultural and intellectual life of his time. He is the one shining example of a Poo villager who, through his contacts with Christianity, transcended his original social status. It is hard to imagine that he could have achieved so much if he had remained in Poo.

## *Wider perspectives*

82 Report of Dewazung's Visit to Poo, 1 July 1929. Tibet Letters. MCH.
83 "Annual Report for the West Himalayan Mission for 1931–32." PA 140 (1933), 195.
84 "Western Himalaya. Report for January 1955 to March 1956." PA 164 (1956), 4.
85 On Tharchin, see in particular Fader (2001–2009), Willock (2016), and Sawerthal (2018).
86 See Fader Vol 1 (2001: 1–116) for an extended discussion of Tharchin's family origins and early life.
87 Letters from F. E. Peter., 25 March 1924, 20 May 1924. Tibet letters. MCH.

In a 1909 report, the Poo missionaries presented a painful list of the weaknesses in character that were typical of their congregation and then suggested that these weaknesses were the consequence of many generations of oppression of the people.[88] This may have been so in several respects. It was not simply that the lack of educational opportunities limited the villagers' ability to grapple with the strange concepts of a new religion. More than that, the many "generations of oppression" made it hard for them to imagine a life free from dependency. Virtues such as thrift, which are characteristic of the "Protestant ethic", make little sense if there is in any case no hope of escaping from bondage.

At the heart of the missionary's dilemma there was a paradox. In order to set the Christians free from social oppression, they ended up making them dependent on the mission. Frustrating though this may have been for the missionaries, the Poo Christians were blunt in expressing their view of this relationship: it amounted in effect to a "contract" where the villagers offered religious observance in return for social protection. This concept was entirely alien to the missionaries who believed that one can never "earn" God's forgiveness. Rather, the believer can only respond to God's grace, which is freely given. It was therefore impossible to purchase salvation through some sort of contractual exchange. However, the villagers' viewpoint may make more sense when seen in a wider regional perspective.

As Peter Schwieger points out in his contribution to this volume, concepts of debt in Tibetan societies have been little studied, and this is particularly true of the kinds of debt, including debt bondage, that were incurred by the poorest sections of society. One reason for the shortage of records may be that contracting parties—particularly the bonded labourers themselves—were more likely to be illiterate and less likely to be of direct interest to the state. Nevertheless, there are scattered references here and there. For Mustang, Charles Ramble records an instance, possibly from the 17th century, where individuals were enslaved for life because they were unable to pay poll taxes.[89] As noted above, Redslob reported in 1874 that rich traders from Kinnaur had acquired Tibetan "slaves" who were unable to pay their debts. The American scholar and diplomat William Rockhill writes of poor pilgrims in Eastern Tibet who may "become indebted to someone for the amount of his board"[90] and thereby obliged to work for his creditor

88 Anon. "Unsere Himalaya-Mission im Jahre 1908." MB 73 (1909), 221.
89 Ramble (2008:195, 203–204).
90 Rockhill (1891: 285–286).

for four or five years.[91] Similarly, the Japanese monk Ekai Kawaguchi wrote of poor people who might seek loans from their lords to keep the "wolf of hunger" from the door.[92] Since there is no hope of repayment, the debtor is obliged to offer his son or daughter as a servant to the creditor, and "these pitiable children grow up to be practically slaves […]". Nancy Levine shows that indebtedness was widespread in mid-20th-century Ngari: she notes "most Western Tibetans in smaller allotments became caught in a spiral of debt they could not repay",[93] although she does not refer specifically to bonded labour.

Jeannine Bischoff's analysis of a rare written "obligation contract" (*gan rgya*) from Central Tibet is especially interesting because it points to the ideological concepts that—at least in principle—might underly bonded labour arrangements.[94] This particular contract concerns a *mi ser* named Chos dar whose mother had taken out a loan in order to bring up her four children. After her death, the children had inherited the debt. Three of the four children had been able to pay off their shares. Since Chos dar had not been able to do so, he had opted for life-long servitude in the local monastic household (*bla brang*) to pay off the debt. As Bischoff points out, Chos dar would have done this simply because he had no assets, and this was his best option for survival. He was therefore making a choice, albeit in circumstances where there were few alternatives other than flight, and the contract expresses his gratitude. Bischoff argues that: "Seen from the perspective of the benevolence granting authority, the language of the contract indicates acceptance of the duty to take care of social inferiors".[95] The bonded labour arrangement imposed reciprocal obligations on both sides.

One no doubt needs to be cautious in applying concepts from Central Tibet to Kinnaur, which would have been exposed to "Indian" cultural influences. Nevertheless, to offer a hypothesis, I suggest that similar social principles may have applied in Poo, at least in theory. As noted above, Schreve remarked in the 1890s that the rich villagers' loans were sufficient to prevent their debtors from dying but not enough to live on, and this suggests that the practical application of these principles—if they existed—was far from benevolent. All the same, the Poo Christians who were dependent on the mission seem to

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91 In the same passage Rockhill writes of the Tibetans' practice in Tsarong of acquiring slaves from the tribes of neighbouring non-Tibetan regions to the south and east. On debt, dependency and servitude in these border regions, see Lazcano (1999) and Gros (2016).

92 Kawaguchi (1909: 430–431).

93 Levine (1992: 342).

94 Bischoff (2017).

95 Bischoff (2017: 164).

have expected it to provide them with sustenance as of right, and this perhaps partly explains the anger of the "troublemaker" who denounced Marx for his failure to provide subsidised grain in 1908. From his perspective, the mission had failed to keep its side of an agreement that may have been tacit but was nevertheless real.

Turning to the Indian side of the Himalaya, there are ample examples of bonded labour systems, with many local variations, continuing into recent times. For other parts of the Simla Hill States in the period before Indian independence, Chaman Lal Datta writes of the system whereby people held land in return for specified services (*Beth*) such as cultivating the land of their superiors or collecting wood.[96] There was a class of indebted *Bethu* (providers of these services) who took on loans on occasions such as marriages, and never paid off the principal, so that the debt bondage arrangement continued for generations. On a similar note Mahesh Sharma presents a case study of a Saivite monastery in Sirmaur district which offered loans in return for bonded labour in the 1920s and the 1930s.[97] Jean-Claude Galey, who conducted his research in Tehri Garhwal (now part of the Indian state of Uttarakhand) in the 1970s, provides an extended set of case studies for that region.[98] In Tehri Garhwal, debt bondage represented far more than a simple financial transaction, and there were no precise calculations to measure how far the extent of the debtor's labour correlated with the amount of the loan. Indeed, the debtor might never pay off his loan from one generation to the next, but the system nevertheless functioned with a degree of consensus. From the debtor's perspective, the arrangement provided a degree of security: "A relationship of bondage is better than no relationship at all".[99] More than that, the various manifestations of debt were part of a hierarchical relationship that extended all the way from the poorest members of society via its rulers to the deities.

Further to the east, and even closer to the present day, there is an extensive literature on bonded labour in Nepal. To take one example, Birendra Giri shows how people whose families have lived as bonded labourers for generations often find it hard to manage their lives independently.[100] In many cases, their most feasible survival strategy is to maintain some kind of relationship with their former employers.

On the missionary side, there is likewise an extensive body of experience concerning the hazards—as well as the opportunities—of combining spiritual direction with economic opportunity. The

96 Datta (1997: 109–110).
97 Sharma (1999).
98 Galey (1983).
99 Galey (1983: 82).
100 Giri (2010: 34).

Moravians in Kinnaur were well-aware of the potential for mixed messages and conflicts of interest when the missionaries extended credit or other forms of economic support to their potential followers. For example, in 1876 Pagell reported that he had been reading about the experience of the Moravian missionaries in Labrador in the far north of Canada and saw parallels with his own situation.[101]

From the late 18th century until 1926, the Moravians in Labrador combined trade with evangelism in the belief that this was the only effective way to operate in the region's distinctive social and economic conditions.[102] In the process they frequently extended credit to the local Inuit, but tensions arose when they sought repayment from their easy-going debtors. The Moravians' roles as traders, with clear moral and commercial views on the need to pay one's debts, conflicted with their roles as would-be spiritual leaders.

Similarly, in the 1890s when Schreve made his proposals for the development of the wool industry and the mission farm, he was aware of both positive and negative precedents. He acknowledged that the mission's engagement with economic enterprise was not ideal but nevertheless argued that, at least for the time being, it was essential. One of the precedents that he cited was the Basel Mission's experience in southern India. The mission had experimented with a range of different industries, and in 1846, its Mangalore branch imported a European loom, thus establishing the beginnings of a weaving industry.[103] In 1865 the mission's activities expanded into tile–making and by 1914 its industrial enterprises in India employed as many as 3,636 people.[104] The Basel Mission's motivations were the same as the Moravians': to provide decent employment for people, especially Christian converts, who might otherwise have been socially disadvantaged and to give a practical demonstration of an ethical approach to earning one's livelihood. No doubt the social environment in southern India was different but, as Schreve argued at the time, the Basel Mission's experience suggests that his own approach was not misconceived in principle.

Unlike the Basel Mission, the Moravians ultimately failed in their primary objective of fostering a sustainable self–dependent Christian community in Kinnaur. Sometimes historians benefitting from hindsight are better able to identify the sources of such failures than contemporaries. This is not the case here. Schreve and his colleagues were fully aware of the risks that they faced, and the potential for conflicts of interest between their religious and economic roles. In their

[101] Pagell, Poo, 29 March 1876, MB 40 (1876), 226.
[102] Danker (1971: 43–50).
[103] Danker (1871: 83–92).
[104] Danker (1971: 91), Joseph (2018).

efforts to establish an economic basis for the Christian community, as well as their medical work, they alleviated much human suffering. It would have been inconsistent with their own values not to have made the attempt.

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# Latent Modernisation in Traditional Tibet: An Essay on the Evolution of Land Lease Systems in Tibetan Rural Society

Kensaku Okawa
(Nihon University, Tokyo)

## *Introduction*

Although much has been written about the social system in traditional Tibet,[1] many topics remain to be investigated. Among these, the land lease system suffers a lack of scholarly attention, despite its being an indispensable part of the rural economy of traditional Tibetan society. The present article aims to shed new light on the rural history of Central Tibet during the first half of the 20th century by examining a particular land leasing institution, known as *zhing skal*, that was locally practised in Mal gro gung dkar, a region located 100 kilometres northeast of Lhasa.

The reasons for investigating such a system, and others related to it, are manifold, as land lease practices reflected the changes undergone at a local level by pre-modern Tibetan institutions. In an effort to establish a typology of villages and social organisations, previous scholarship presented a rather static picture of traditional Tibet,[2] overlooking aspects of social change that might have affected their structure. The *zhing skal* institution is clearly an instance of such neglected factors, as it experienced continuous transformations and development throughout the first half of the 20th century. As such, a close examination of this system provides important insights into the intertwining of social change and "modernisation", since the evolution of *zhing skal* followed an inconspicuous yet important land reformation that facilitated a more balanced relationship between landlords and their dependant peasants.

In the present article, I will firstly argue for the existence of a

[1] We can list studies by Goldstein (1968, 1971a, 1971b, 1971c, 1971d, 1973, 1986), French (2002), Fjeld (2005), Bischoff (2013), and Gurung (2016) as examples of important achievements in this field. In the present article, "traditional Tibetan society" indicates Central Tibetan society under the rule of the Dalai Lama's government, and most of the cases examined date to the first half of the 20th century.

[2] Goldstein (1968, 1971a), French (2002).

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nascent form of a voluntary modernisation movement within traditional Tibet and provide a dynamic picture of the changing social system. Secondly, due to the extremely local nature of this institution (to the best of my knowledge unique in the whole Tibet), this study will also present a specific local history, thus enriching our knowledge of the socio-economic and legal conditions in force under the Dalai Lama's government. Thirdly, the choice of such a peculiar case study will illuminate the existence of a contract-based economy, thus supporting the argument for an understanding of pre-modern rural economy as a variable mixture of contractual and corvée economies.[3]

Previous studies of Tibetan rural history insist that the basic economic relationship within a *gzhis ka*, or manorial estate, was based on a corvée economy.[4] It must be noted that Melvyn Goldstein, a leading figure in this field, carefully distinguishes between manorial estates and *grong gseb*, or autonomous villages.[5] I will here argue that such aspects of contract-based economy may be found even in manorial estates where the corvée principle seems dominant.

With these points in mind, I will now proceed to reconstruct the institution of *zhing skal* in the Mal gro gung dkar region, and to discuss social change, especially within a rural setting, and the peculiar form of Tibet's grass-roots modernisation process.

### *Basic premises: source, name, place, and estate system*

Before delving any deeper in the matter at hand, a few words on the source of this study and the land lease system are in order. I will also provide some background information on the Mal gro gung dkar region and the basic structure of manorial estate villages in traditional Tibet.

As previously hinted, much of the relevance of the *zhing skal* system lies in its relative neglected status in both Western and present-day Chinese scholarship. Interestingly, Chinese scholars had recorded some information about this institution in the 1950s, but regrettably they did so in a non-systematic, fragmented, and confusing way. Such materials, collected by Chinese ethnographers in the course of fieldworks carried out in Central Tibet in the 1950s, were later published in *Zangzu Shehui Lishi Diaocha* ("Research on Tibetan Society and History", hereafter *ZSLD*), a six-volume report which constitutes an

[3] Okawa (2018).
[4] Goldstein (1989).
[5] Goldstein (1968, 1971a). For an evaluation of this dichotomy between a manorial estate and an autonomous village, see also Okawa (2018).

important corpus of instances of rural life in traditional Tibetan society.[6]

Since *ZSLD* was written in Chinese, no proper Tibetan spellings were given in most cases. That is unfortunately the case for the land lease system that is the subject of this study: *ZSLD* transliterates as *xingui* (新桂), a term that I reconstructed as a rendition of the Tibetan *zhing skal*, in accordance with the corpus' claim that the meaning of the word was "divided field".[7]

*Zhing skal* seems to be a locally specific custom practised in Mal gro gung dkar: when the *ZSLD* team conducted their research there in the 1950s, the Dalai Lama's government possessed seven villages out of 82 in the region.[8] Aristocrats and monasteries occupied most of the arable lands in Mal gro gung dkar: amongst these, the aristocratic household Hor khang and the 'Bri gung monastery had the largest estates and were the most powerful land-owners.[9] For the sake of convenience, the region is here divided into two parts, one in the south-west and one in the north-east, each identified with the entity that controlled the largest portion of their land, namely the Hor khang (south-west) and the 'Bri gung (north-east). Although *zhing skal* was practised in both areas, the form and management of this system shows clear differences, a fact that raises interesting questions in terms of social change in pre-modern Tibet. According to *ZSLD*, the *zhing skal* system was first introduced in the 'Bri gung area where it underwent some transformations in the course of its long history.[10] On the contrary, *zhing skal* seems to be a relatively new custom in the Hor khang area, and that allowed for its original structure to be preserved as late as the 1950s.

In advocating the importance of distinguishing between a manorial estate and an autonomous village, Goldstein defined the first as "an estate divided into demesne and tenement lands with attached serfs".[11]

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6 See Okawa (2014, 2016a) for an analysis of this report. Please note that the Chinese title of the report has been erroneously presented as *XSLD* (Ch. *Xizang Shehui Lishi Diaocha*) in Okawa (2014). Here I correct it as *ZSLD* (Ch. *Zangzu Shehui Lishi Diaocha*).

7 *ZSLD*, v. 1: 113. The term was also listed in major dictionaries such as Zhang (ed. 1993) and Goldstein (ed. 2001) as "allotted field". Note that the editors of the new-reprinted version of the reports gave the Tibetan spelling for the word as *zhing rgod* (*ZSLD*, v. 1: 113). That seems, however, highly unlikely. Further research is admittedly needed to address the proper spelling. It is also worth being noted that this word might have many variants; such is the case for many terms in official documents.

8 *ZSLD*, v. 1: 53.

9 The power balance between the Tibetan government and local powers, such as aristocrats and monasteries, is discussed in Goldstein (1971d, 1973) and Okawa (2016b).

10 *ZSLD*, v. 1: 64.

11 Goldstein (1968: 104).

All of the serfs, or dependant peasants, owed many obligations, including the duty of cultivating the landlords' personal fields (demesne fields) in return for the permission to cultivate tenement fields from which the peasantry derived their subsistence.[12] In other words, the landlords exchanged recognition of peasants' tenement land tenures in return for unpaid labour on their demesne fields. This picture clearly shows a strong similarity to the so-called "classical" estate system in the Western Middle Ages,[13] or a close connection with Leninist ideas of a pure corvée economy.[14]

The barter exchange between land tenure and unpaid labour as mediated by a demesne-tenement relationship was not a free contract, but a compulsory and asymmetrical one. From the landlords' point of view, such corvée system was well-suited to the traditional rural Tibetan economy and ecology: it has been frequently pointed out in previous scholarship that, when suffering from a chronic lack of labour forces, landlords tended to seek people rather than land in traditional Tibet.[15] In light of this, land-owners aimed to minimise human costs in various ways, the corvée or demesne-tenement relationship being one of them. In such an unbalanced power relationship, the landlords were liberated from the task of taking care of their dependant peasants' subsistence (contrary to slavery), a situation that enabled them to save the human cost of managing the everyday life of their dependant peasants. In return for this, the landlords renounced to a portion of the harvest,[16] lending a portion of their land to their dependant peasants as tenement fields. This barter principle minimised the interactions between the landlords and their dependant peasants and was therefore conductive an efficient workload management. Due to a general underdevelopment of social communication, lack of governance technology, and chronic lack of human resources caused by several ecological limitations, this laissez-faire, low-cost principle gradually became one of the most basic tenets of Tibetan rural economy. As I will demonstrate in the following sections, acknowledging the existence of such principle

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12 Goldstein (1989: 3)

13 Arable fields of manorial estates in early Medieval Europe were "divided into two closely interdependent parts. On the one hand there was the demesne, known also to historians as the 'reserve', all the produce of which was taken directly by the lord; on the other hand there were the tenements, small or medium-sized peasant holdings […]" (Bloch 1989: 241).

14 "The entire land of a given unit of agrarian economy i.e. of a given estate, was divided into the lords' land and the peasants' land" (Lenin 1972: 191).

15 Bell (1994: 29), Samuel (1993: 61–62). Samuel, inspired by Tambiah's famous thesis on Southeast Asian kingship (1976), pointed out this divergence between the rule over peasants and the rule over land in the Tibetan context (1993: 69).

16 Goldstein remarks that from two third to one half of the estate was demesne, and the remaining was the tenement in general (1989: 3).

is functional to any discourse on social change in traditional Tibet.

With these premises in mind, I will now turn my attention to the land lease systems in general, and the *zhing skal* in particular.

## *Land lease systems in traditional Tibet*

### *Village lease and sublease*

Land lease systems prevailed in the traditional Tibetan rural society.[17] At first glance, lease systems contradict the notion of a corvée economy, since lands were mainly leased through a contract. However, the lease systems practised in traditional Tibet were not an exception or deviation from the barter-based, laissez-faire, and low-cost principle that dominated the rural economy of pre-modern Tibet: on the contrary, land leases were another effective way of minimising the management costs without decreasing the income gained from the field. Since many types of land lease systems other than *zhing skal* existed, I will discuss each of them in turn.

Leased land was not only limited to a small piece of field within a village; in many cases, a village in its entirety was also leased. Before examining the land lease systems within villages, I will briefly describe such whole-village leases, or *gzhis bogs*,[18] by presenting the case of Blon po gzhis ka, a government estate in the Mal gro gung dkar region that had been leased to Yon tan, a local taxpayer peasant (*khral pa*).[19]

Blon po gzhis ka was a manorial estate that included both demesne and tenement fields and totalled 295 *khal* of demesne field and 120 *khal* of tenement field. One *khal* of barley is equivalent to approximately 14 kilograms. When it is used to specify an area in an agricultural field, one *khal* indicates the area in which one *khal* of seed grain could be sown. As such, the actual area of one *khal* of land would differ tremendously according to its fertility. Yon tan had to pay 1,000-*srang* monetary leasing fee (roughly equivalent to the price of 295 *khal* of barley grain in the 1950s) to the government annually. As is calculated, the leasing fee was one *khal* of grain for one *khal* of land per year. Yon tan could resort to the corvée labour of the eight families of inner taxpayers (*nang khral pa*)[20] in the estate. However, these labour forces of his

[17] When referring to the institution of "human lease", Goldstein simply states that "the most common item leased in Tibet was agricultural land" (1971b: 526), a claim that was no further discussed.

[18] *gZhis* indicates estate or manorial estate, and *bogs* means lease.

[19] For *khral pa,* or taxpayer, and other social stratifications in Tibetan commoners, see Goldstein (1971a, 1971b) and Okawa (2014).

[20] The inner tax (*nang khral*) was a tax paid directly to the lord in each village or estate. Usually the inner tax was performed as unpaid labour service on the landlord's demesne field. Inner taxpayers (*nang khral pa*) were those who belonged to a land

inner taxpayers were not enough to cultivate his 295 *khal* of demesne field. Therefore, he also had had to relied on other labour forces existing in the estate, namely, other eight families of *du gnam* (landless outsider labourers) who were working on Yon tan's demesne field based on annual contract base.[21]

All of the harvest from the demesne field went to Yon tan, who paid the leasing fee to the government from the demesne land's profit. In a sense, Yon tan internally ruled over and managed the estate as if he was the estate's owner. Interestingly, on top of the demesne fields and tenement lands, the Blon po estate included roughly other 500 *khal* of field, which were cultivated by four families of taxpayers. They were not dependent on Yon tan and had almost nothing to do with the management of the latter's demesne field.[22] Their only obligation consisted in the payment of an "outer tax" (*phyi khral*), in the form of transportation service for government purposes,[23] and they therefore belonged to the category of "outer taxpayers" (*phyi khral pa*).[24] Out of the four families, only one belonged to the Blon po estate, the others being the subjects of different landowners. Since their 500 *khal* of field was too large to be cultivated by only four families, they tried to hire the before-mentioned eight families of *du gnam*.

This kind of whole-village lease was virtually omnipresent in the first half of the 20th century in Central Tibet, and especially in Mal gro gung dkar. For example, of the seven government estates of the region, six were leased out: five to taxpayer peasants who resided in their respective estates and one to two parties, namely a local taxpayer peasant and the Thar pa monastery.[25] This indicates that 85 percent of the government lands were neither autonomous villages nor directly under the management of the government. This whole-village lease was certainly widespread, so much so that there even existed a village

where they owed an obligation to pay an inner tax. For more on inner taxpayer, see Okawa (2014).

21 For *du gnam*, see Okawa (2016c). Note that since other employers (four families of outer taxpayers) were also existed in this estate, not all the labour forces of these eight families of *dud chung* were contracted to working on the Yon tan's demesne fields.

22 They provided unpaid labour on Yon tan's demesne field for only one day per year. That was nothing more than a residual custom of a symbolic act of showing respect for bsTan rgyal gling monastery, former owner of this estate up to 1899; the estate was later confiscated by the government in the aftermath of the De mo incident (*ZSLD*, v. 1: 171).

23 In pre-modern Tibet, any tax directly paid to the government was known as "outer tax" (*phyi khral*).

24 For outer tax, inner tax, outer taxpayer, and inner taxpayer, see Okawa (2014, 2016a).

25 *ZSLD*, v. 1: 61–62.

sublease system, as demonstrated by the case of the Gyaka estate.[26] Owned by the dGa' ldan bla spyi, the managing office of dGa' ldan monastery, this religious estate held 800 *khal* of demesne fields originally attached to the monastic establishment. In the past it had been leased to a soldier of the Dalai Lama's bodyguard regiment, who had to pay, according to the original contract, 1,000 *khal* of grain per year. However, the soldier subleased the estate to the dGa' ldan byang rtse college (*grwa tshang*), which dispatched two monks to act as estate managers and collect the harvest from the demesne field, in addition to other corvée services. From these incomes, the dGa' ldan byang tshe college paid 1,000 *khal* of grain to the dGa' ldan bla spyi as a leasing fee and 150 *khal* of grain to the soldier as a middle margin fee, or *gzhog bogs*. At the soldier's death, the right of earning a subleasing fee was inherited by one of his relatives, a monk official.[27] These examples show that whole-village leases were commonly practised across many levels of society.

### *Bog zhing and phyed shad*

In addition to the entire-village lease system, there also existed several land lease customs which were practised on a more basic level and had as object of lease a small lots of arable field; instances of such systems were *bog zhing*, *phyed shad*,[28] and *zhing skal*. Whereas the first two (*bog zhing* and *phyed shad*) were common throughout Central Tibet, the third (*zhing skal*) was only practised in Mal gro gung dkar. Before discussing the characteristics of *zhing skal* and its role in Tibetan rural economy, I will examine the first two.

Both *bog zhing* and *phyed shad* were widely practised in Central Tibet, as the presence of these terms in present-day dictionaries demonstrates. Goldstein renders *bog zhing* as "leased field".[29] However, this term not only indicated the object of lease but also the leasing system itself: as recorded in a *bog zhing* contract, the tenant had an obligation towards the lender to pay a fixed amount of crop (which was decided in prior negotiations) as a leasing fee. Goldstein's translation of *phyed shad* presents a more detailed definition as a "lease system where half of the crop from the field goes to the owner".[30] In view of this, I will use *bog zhing* and *phyed shad* as "fixed crop land lease contract" and "half crop land lease contract", respectively. To closer inspect these two systems, I will now examine the internal land structure of rNam

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26 I could not identify the original Tibetan spelling.
27 *ZSLD*, v. 1: 60.
28 Many variants existed for the term, such as *phyed, shas*, and *shad*.
29 Goldstein (2001: 725).
30 Goldstein (2001: 698).

sras gling gzhis ka, the estate of the aristocrat rNam sras gling, which was located in the Lho kha region in the southern part of Central Tibet.

Since the structure of the rNam srad gling estate has been discussed in previous studies,[31] a few words of introduction will suffice here. Out of 1,522 *khal* of arable fields, the landlord rNam srad gling possessed 1,191 *khal*. The remaining 331 *khal* of fields were owned by the Dalai Lama's government and other aristocrats and monasteries. rNam srad gling's fields were divided into four parts according to their roles in the management of the estate: 501 *khal* were demesne fields, whilst 571 *khal* were provided to the dependant peasants as tenement fields. The remaining 119 *khal* functioned as leased fields, with 90 *khal* given as *bog zhing*, or fixed crop land lease contract lands, and 29 *khal* as *phyed shad*, or half crop land lease contract lands.[32] These two fields were exclusively used for land lease purposes and the tenements of these fields were always rNam srad gling's dependant peasants who cultivated the demesne fields of the estate. In the case of *bog zhing*, the landlord required four to six *khal* of grain in return for one *khal* of leased field. The rate of the leasing fee was decided in advance according to the fertility of the land. At first glance, this leasing fee seems relatively hefty for the tenant,[33] yet, according to *ZSLD*, the peasants still preferred this system to the corvée labour one, as they said that "cultivating *bog zhing* is better than corvée farming, since there is no need to perform many other corvée obligations", and they further confessed to prefer *phyed shad* system to *bog zhing*: "cultivating *phyed shad* is far better than cultivating *bog zhing*, since there is no need to worry about a bad harvest year".[34]

The peasants' preference for *phyed shad* to *bog zhing* is interesting and worthy of consideration. Since fixed amount leasing fees (such as *bog zhing*) allowed tenant peasants to accumulate surplus products more easily than the fixed rate leasing fees (such as *phyed shad*), *bog zhing* would seem to be a preferable contract, as it is conducive to individual economic gains. Tibetan peasants' preference for economic stability rather than speculative economic management is a clear indication of their basic economic attitudes, which strongly remind the moral economy of peasants discussed by James Scott.[35] As such, the existence of the land lease system gave peasants some, albeit limited,

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31 Okawa (2014).

32 *ZSLD*, v. 2: 99–100.

33 *ZSLD* records many sowing ratios in Central Tibet in the 1950s. The average was from six to ten for barley, meaning that six to ten *khal* of barley could be obtained from one *khal* of seed crop (or one *khal* of land). Other sources say that, in general, the leasing fee for one *khal* of land was from two to three *khal* of barley grain; see, for instance, Wang (1989: 34).

34 *ZSLD*, v. 2: 99–100.

35 Scott (1977).

alternatives in their labour management strategies. Furthermore, it has been already noted that the lease fields within the estate were separated from the landlord's demesne fields and treated as a distinct object of contract. Thus, their existence signified in itself the birth of a nascent contract economy within the midst of demesne field, the centre of a corvée economy. With these points in mind, we now turn our attention to the main focus of this article, the system of *zhing skal*.

## *The institution of zhing skal*

### *Zhing skal in the Hor khang area*

Although specific to the Mal gro gung dkar region, the practice of *zhing skal* presented a certain complexity and several local differentiations. The compilers of *ZSLD* failed to provide a clear explanation of such a system diversity; consequently, it is necessary to distinguish between at least two of the various types of *zhing skal* in force in the region, namely the form of *zhing skal* practised in the Hor khang area and that observed in the 'Bri gung area. According to *ZSLD*, the institution of *zhing skal* was first introduced in the 'Bri gung fields, and only later implemented in the Hor khang-owned ones. Since the custom had experienced a long history of development and change in the 'Bri gung area, *zhing skal* practiced there was complex and included many variants. Any analysis of *zhing skal* in 'Bri gung therefore cast light on local historical developments of this land system, which must be corroborated by insights on its original characteristics as provided by the study of *zhing skal* in Hor khang. A comparison of the two forms of land lease allows the reconstruction of the hitherto unknown changes undergone by land use in Tibetan rural society.

Firstly, I will discuss a work field system that characterises *zhing skal* in the Hor khang area. *Zhing skal* were contract-based and a work field (*las zhing* or *gla zhing*) was attached to each *zhing skal* field. To examine how this procedure worked, I will refer to an example from rGya ma gzhis ka, the largest and predominant estate of the Hor khang family.

sKar ma was a *dud chung*,[36] or small householder peasant, who lived in the rGya ma estate and had a *zhing skal* contract with his landlord Hor khang. The estate-owner was to lease eight *khal* from its demesne fields. Of this eight *khal*, four were leased to sKar ma as *zhing skal* fields, and he had an obligation to cultivate them. All of the harvest from these four *khal* of land went to the estate; in return for the unpaid

[36] On *dud chung* and other commoners' social status in traditional Tibet, see Okawa (2014, 2016a).

labour on *zhing skal* fields, sKar ma could use the remaining four *khal* of land as his work field, over which he had full rights with the sole exception of selling it.[37] Since the size of *zhing skal* fields and work fields was in most cases equal, I term this basic form of *zhing skal* as a "one-on-one" work field system. It is important to point out that this relationship between *zhing skal* fields and work fields was the same as the relationship between the demesne fields and tenement ones. The reproduction of the demesne-tenement relationship within the demesne fields was therefore a fractal reflection of the same barter exchange principle that I pointed out as a basic tenet of Tibetan rural economy. In the *zhing skal* contract, the transaction between the lender and tenant was reduced to a minimum, as was the case for corvée labour. The most striking difference between the demesne-tenement relationship and *zhing skal*-work field one was the contractual nature of *zhing skal*, as the latter was contracted on free will and agreement, and the relationship between the lender and tenant was not as asymmetrical as in the case of the corvée in force in a demesne-tenement system. It is also important to point out that, whilst the demesne and tenement fields were geographically separated, *zhing skal* and work fields were originally the same part of a demesne field, and their close proximity often led to wrong attribution, since they were only nominally differentiated. Due to such blurred distinctions, the institution of *zhing skal* appeared to have been by its own nature extremely unstable, a point that finds support in the ambiguity of the word *zhing skal* itself. In *ZSLD*, the term alternatively indicates the whole sum of the *zhing skal* land and the work fields, whilst in other cases its usage covers only the demesne-like land and does not include the work fields. The geographical proximity, institutional instability, and language ambiguity are all important elements to consider as they played a critical role in the social change, as we will see.

*Zhing skal* clearly had its own advantages both for the landlord and the peasant. From the landlord's point of view, such a system was equally as energy-saving as the management of demesne lands based on corvée labour, with the additional bonus of being more profitable, since the corvée system's productivity in demesne fields was predictably low: with the landlord taking all of the harvest, the corvée farmers had no incentive to work any harder than their obligations imposed them to.[38] In such a situation, corvée farmers frequently resorted to modest sabotage as an everyday form of resistance,[39] preferring to save their energy for carrying out work in their tenement field. As late as the 1950s, low productivity of the corvée labour in the demesne fields

[37] *ZSLD*, v. 1: 113–114.
[38] Bloch (1970: 91).
[39] Scott (1985).

was still rampant, as confirmed by the statistics reported in *ZSLD*: based on observations in the 'Bri gung area, 34 days were needed to cultivate one *khal* of demesne fields, whilst only 29–31 days were needed to cultivate three *khal* of tenement fields. This means that the labour productivity of corvée farming on the demesne fields was one third lower than the farming in tenement lands.[40] Because of this low outcome, the landlord usually dispatched a labour manager (*las dpon*) to supervise the collective corvée works on the demesne fields. Without the surveillance and coercion imposed by these supervisors, corvée farmers would have not exerted themselves. When taking these points into consideration, the advantage of *zhing skal* for a landlord is apparent: since both the *zhing skal* and work fields were originally part of a demesne field prior to the drafting of the *zhing skal* contract, through the latter the landlord was able to reconvert a part of the low productive and high-cost demesne fields into a profitable and cost-free land unit.

Although *zhing skal*, in a narrow sense, was demesne-like, its geographical proximity with the work fields precluded the peasants a clear-cut distinction between the two units at the time of farming them. Therefore, the peasants worked hard on the demesne-like *zhing skal* fields as well as on their work fields, meaning that the landlord no longer needed to dispatch a *las dpon* to supervise the unpaid corvée work. As such, the institute of *zhing skal* gave landowners a new and more efficient way of managing their demesne fields, thus turning landlords into land managers. This system appears to have been attractive for the peasants as well, as it liberated them from low-incentive group-farming work in demesne fields and enabling them to save labour time for their own leased lands. *Zhing skal* also provided them with more tenement-like work fields in addition to their original tenement ones. In other words, *zhing skal* contract would provide them a chance to integrating landlord's demesne fields into their tenement fields.[41]

Being advantageous for both the landlord and peasant, the *zhing skal* system rapidly spread within the Mal gro gung dkar region during the first half of the 20th century, a situation clearly demonstrated by the case of dGe hor gzhi ka, a local government estate. Similarly to Blon po gzhis ka, this estate originally belonged to bsTan rgyas gling, the

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40 *ZSLD*, v. 1: 63.

41 If we compare the institution of *zhing skal* with similar cases in Western Europe, it shows strong similarity with the "lot-corvée" (Morimoto 2005) or "task-work" (Fr. *culture aux pièces*) systems (Bloch 1970). Bloch says, "the demesne fields which had once been the responsibility of tenants owing task-works were gradually being absorbed into the holdings of those who had previously been burdened with working them" (1970: 95–96).

main monastery of the De mo *ho thug thu*, a powerful reincarnation line. The government confiscated the estate in 1899, in the aftermath of De mo's alleged attempt to assassinate the 13th Dalai Lama. *ZSLD* provides numerical figures of the changes undergone by the land structure of the estate: according to the survey, dGe hor gzhi ka held approximately 300 *khal* of demesne fields at the time of bsTan rgyal gling, that is, prior to 1899, while in 1957, when the *ZSLD* compilers carried out their research, the estate consisted of 30 *khal* of demesne fields and 250–260 *khal* of *zhing skal* fields.[42] Such figures clearly indicate that nearly 90 percent of the original demesne fields were transformed into *zhing skal* land in the first half of the 20th century. Although this might be an extreme instance, it is indicative of the strong tendency towards a land transformation—a movement from demesne to *zhing skal*—that occurred in rural Tibet at the time.

From the points discussed above, it seems clear that the central core of this practice, as carried out in the Hor khang area, was a "one-on-one" work field system. I will now present a more complex and slightly different version of this system as it was implemented in the 'Bri gung area, where *zhing skal* was first introduced and where it developed over two centuries.

### *Zhing skal in the 'Bri gung area*

As previously mentioned, the *zhing skal* system practised in the 'Bri gung area shows interesting differences from the one in Hor khang. *Zhing skal* prevailed in the 'Bri gung area as no manor house existed locally due to the lack of need to supervise the corvée group work of the dependant peasants on a landlord's demesne fields.[43] It must be noted that, according to *ZSLD*, the 'Bri gung peasants who cultivated *zhing skal* land could not remember, at the time of the survey, whether they had been given a "one-on-one" work field,[44] meaning that the *ZSLD* researchers failed to identify many work fields as *zhing skal* : the *zhing skal* tenant peasants in 'Bri gung in fact paid a fixed amount of leasing fee to their landowner.[45] If that was the case, then the system in force locally was the same of *bog zhing*—the fixed and lease contract mentioned earlier. It might be noted, for the sake of clarity, that this does not mean that no *bog zhing* land existed in the 'Bri gung area. All three lease systems (*bog zhing*, *phyed shad*, and *zhing skal*) were present there. *Zhing skal* and *bog zhing* in the area showed no differences in appearance, and only the name of each of the leased lands allowed to

[42] *ZSLD*, v. 1: 210–211.
[43] *ZSLD*, v. 1: 65.
[44] *ZSLD*, v. 1: 64.
[45] *ZSLD*, v. 1: 64.

differentiate them. One important point about *zhing skal* fields in the 'Bri gung area was their high leasing fees when compared to *bog zhing*. For example, in the Thar skyid estate of 'Bri gung monastery, the fixed leasing fee for one *khal* of *zhing skal* land was eight *khal*,[46] which roughly equated to the total amount of one-year's harvest in Central Tibet at that time. However, if this is true, and *zhing skal* was just a heavy burden compared to *bog zhing*, then what was the benefit for the 'Bri gung peasants who signed this type of contract without a work field?

Firstly, let us consider the situation of the Chewo estate.[47] This estate belonged to 'Bri gung monastery and included 130 *khal* of *zhing skal* land. Out of 130 *khal*, 50 *khal* were leased to *du gnam*, or "landless outsider labourers", in the manner of the "one-on-one" work field system.[48] The *du gnam* were a category of people who did not belong to the estate in which they resided but worked for it on a contractual basis. They usually received a *mi bogs*, or "human lease", which was permission from their landlords to leave their original villages and move somewhere else where they would resettle to work for large land-holding peasants or landlords.[49] I refer to this category as "freelance outsider labourers". Although most of the *du gnam* remained on one estate for a long period of time, they were considered as newcomers vis-à-vis the peasants who were the subjects of the landlords of each estate. Given the long history of the *zhing skal* system in the area, and the fact that old *zhing skal* peasants had already forgotten the existence of the "one-on-one" work field attached to their land,[50] I argue that the "one-on-one" work field was originally given not only to the newcomers *du gnam* but also to the all 'Bri gung peasants who entered a *zhing skal* contract; the practice had simply been forgotten by the 'Bri gung peasants by the time the *ZSLD* research team visited the area.

The reason for this collective "memory loss" is rather clear when the nature of the *zhing skal* practice is considered: in the 'Bri gung area *zhing skal* land lease was in fact managed through the payment of a fixed fee, as if it was a *bog zhing* lease. The tenant peasants tended to pay the leasing fee from the total harvest gathered from all the fields over which they possessed rights, thus making the distinction between demesne-like *zhing skal* lands and work fields pointless. The ambiguity of the term *zhing skal* also played an important role in this mingling

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46 *ZSLD*, v. 1: 210.
47 I could not identify the original Tibetan spelling.
48 *ZSLD*, v. 1: 207.
49 For the institute of *mi bogs*, see Goldstein (1971b). Note that the categories of *mi bogs* and *du gnam* basically overlapped, as both terms indicated the same group of people (Okawa 2016c).
50 ZSLD, v. 1: 64.

process, as it could either exclude or include the work field attached to the demesne-like *zhing skal*. The relationship between the demesne-like *zhing skal* and the work field was also characterised by geographical proximity, since the two fields were originally part of the same piece of demesne field. We can speculate that the tenant peasants and their landlords did not usually pay much attention to differentiate between *zhing skal* and work fields. In a Chinese report regarding the conditions in the Lho kha district prior to the 1950s, it is noted that landlords were not as interested in supervising *bog zhing* lands as they were in controlling *phyed shad* fields.[51] That is hardly surprising, as once the leasing fee was fixed, the landlord had no incentive to supervise the actual management of the land: the fees paid to them remained the same regardless of harvest productivity. The same logic applied in the case of *zhing skal* in the 'Bri gung area, as the leasing fee was settled at the time of drafting the contract. All the points above—ambiguous terminology, geographical proximity, and landlord indifference—obscure the distinction between demesne-like *zhing skal* lands and the work fields. I argue that in the case of 'Bri gung, the work field originally attached to the demesne-like *zhing skal* land was gradually integrated into the tenement fields of the peasants through this process. That would explain the apparently high leasing fee of *zhing skal* fields in comparison to *bog zhing* ones. The leasing fee for one *khal* of land was not eight *khal* as figures in *ZSLD*; in reality, those eight *khal* were paid in return for two *khal* of land: one *khal* of *zhing skal* land *plus* one *khal* of work field. The work field had been progressively absorbed into the peasants' tenements and their origin forgotten.[52]

In other words, the leasing fee for one *khal* land was not eight *khal* but four *khal*, and this figure (four *khal*) was similar to the average leasing fee for one *khal* of *bog zhing* land. We can find supporting evidence for this argument in fragmented descriptions recorded in *ZSLD*: for instance, in one of the autonomous villages belonging to 'Bri gung monastery, the monastic establishment recovered 50 *khal* of land when an old contract for 26 *khal* of *zhing skal* land was cancelled.[53] The other 24 *khal* formed a "one-on-one" work field. This episode indicates that work field were originally granted at the time of drafting a contract, and then inherited and absorbed into peasants' tenement fields. Such a process led to the enlargement of the peasant's tenement lands and

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51 *XSNQ*: 57.

52 The memory is oral and very unstable by nature. This plasticity of memory plays an important role for social change as Bloch pointed out: "In short, human memory was the sole arbiter […] Now the memory of man is singularly pliant and an imperfect instrument; it is quite miraculous how thoroughly it can forget and distort" (1970: 70).

53 *ZSLD*, v. 1: 64.

the decline of the landlord's demesne fields, a fact that shows how the balance between landlords and peasants experienced inconspicuous but significant local transformations.

## *Conclusion*

As discussed, the variable mixture of corvée and contract economies was one of the basic characteristics of Tibetan rural economy. It is important to note that these two systems were not clearly separated from each other but overlapped, as the institution of *zhing skal* and its evolution demonstrate. Although *zhing skal* in the Hor khang area was contracted according to free will, such arrangement was a fractal reproduction of the corvée system, wherein tenants had to cultivate the landowner's demesne-like fields. Although these obligations became in time monetised, this structure was clearly based on a corvée mode of production. If the *zhing skal* system in force in the Hor khang area represented the nascent form of the institution, the custom implemented in 'Bri gung (where the practice originated and developed) should be understood as its developed configuration. These two variations of *zhing skal*, although different from each other, still had important characteristics in common. The actual transaction and social communication between the lender and the tenant were minimised in both cases and this is compatible with the laissez-faire, low-cost principle of Tibet's traditional rural economy. Contrary to the corvée system, landlords were liberated from many of the costs of demesne management since they had not to concern themselves with sabotage or inefficiency from their dependant peasants. On the other hand, the peasants were freed from participating in directly controlled group works of demesne lands, and could concentrate more on incentive farming, thus gaining the possibility of accumulating surplus product. On top of that, this custom even provided dependent peasants with a chance to enlarging their tenement fields by absorbing landlord's demesne fields. Therefore, this change was fairly accepted by both concerned parties as a reasonable, that is, rational change for both of them.

When discussing modernisation in traditional Tibet, one might be reminded of the reforms that were promoted by prominent political figures such as the 13th Dalai Lama, Lung shar or even the Chinese Communist Party.[54] Yet, such approaches fail to give proper consideration to the grass-root origins of the social change that affected local rural life. The institution of *zhing skal* and its evolution were not the outcome of a plan designed from above, rather they were the product of long-term negotiations between local landlords and their dependant

[54] Goldstein (1989).

peasants.

As I have demonstrated, such a system had its own advantages and solved the inefficiency inherent to the corvée without deviating from the basic principles of rural economy. As such, the invention and introduction of *zhing skal* in the Mal gro gung dkar region swung the balance between corvée and contract economies towards the latter, thus making of the *zhing skal* land lease system a nascent contract economy born within, not without, a corvée economy. This local, rural, and little-known balancing process of social relationships must be understood as a latent modernisation of pre-modern rural Tibet. Latent because it happened at a basic level, found no place in political history, and did not radically contradict those basic tenets of rural economy, yet it contributed to modernise land use in rural Tibet. The trajectory of this latent modernisation could not fully come to term due to the abrupt intervention of the Democratic Reform (Ch. *Minzhu Gaige*) implemented by the Chinese Communist Party in 1959, which totally changed the course of Tibetan history. Be as it may, acknowledging the existence of such a latent change of land system in pre-modern Tibet illuminates a hitherto unknown face of traditional Tibetan society, casting new light on instances of socio-economic change and widening our understanding of Tibetan rural life.

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# Timepieces as Gifts: Exploring European Clocks and Watches in Tibet

Lobsang Yongdan
(Bonn University)

## *Background*

Tibetans, like any other civilisation, were concerned about timekeeping and the measurement of time. Before the introduction of European mechanical clocks or watches, Tibetans used various methods to measure and keep time. Various concepts and terms, which described the measurement of time, appeared in Buddhist scriptures and scholarly works. In some Tibetan villages in Amdo, for example, they used butter lamps and incense as time measuring instruments and they even had special terms such as *thun rkong* ("candle session ") and *thun spos* ("incense session") to describe them.

Tibetan Buddhism is filled with many ritual practices and norms. Many of them deal with timekeeping and time measurements. Similar to the Islamic tradition of fasting during the month of Ramadan, Buddhism also has fasting traditions that require precise time management. When fasting, Buddhist practitioners are required to engage in specific tasks at specific times, the latter an order that ranges from when to wake up to when to eat breakfast and pray, etc. Likewise, the daily schedule for Tibetan monks' is regulated by Buddhist doctrine discipline (*'dul khrims*) and rules (*bca' yig*) that require a strict adherence to time.

Tibet has a long tradition of studying and engaging in astronomy, and the precision of time measurement was discussed and debated among astronomers and calendar makers. As celestial stars are constantly moving around, time measurement was important to determine the accuracy of measuring the years, months, and days as well as the moments of time. After Buddhism came to Tibet in 7th century, the ancient Indian system of time measurement was introduced: day and night were divided into sixty water clock measurements that were based on the number of breaths. One healthy man was believed to inhale 360 times in an hour. As it was thought that there were sixty hours in a day and night, a man would have inhaled a total of 21,600 breaths. Another time measuring equipment was the water clock where sixty

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drops were counted as one night.[1] In other words, one hundred twenty water drops were seen to measure one day and one night.

The tantric text known as *Rgyud rdo rje mkha' 'gro* (*The Daka Vajra tantra*) describes in detail how to make a copper buckets for water clocks and sundials.[2] Perhaps, following this text, Tibetans may have developed various water clocks or clepsydrae to measure time. Although I have not seen any clepsydra in Tibet, according to bSam grub rgya mtsho (1923–2006), a famous astronomer from Amdo, copper buckets were commonly used in Lhasa to measure time. Three layers of buckets of water were used to measure the time.[3]

*Tibetan twelve Zodiac times*

| *Tibetan names* | *English names* | *Zodiac Signs* | *Modern times* |
|---|---|---|---|
| ནམ་གུང་། | Midnight | ཨྱི་ག། Rat | 11 p.m. to 1 a.m. |
| ནམ་ཡོལ་སྐྱེད། | Half past midnight | གླང་ Ox | 1 to 3 a.m |
| ཐོ་རངས། | Early morning | སྟག། Tiger | 3 to 5 a.m. |
| ནམ་ལངས། | Daybreak | ཡོས། Rabbit | 5 to 7 a.m. |
| ཉི་ཤར། | Sunrise | འབྲུག། Dragon | 7 to 9 a.m. |
| ཉི་དྲོས། | Morning | སྦྲུལ། Snake | 9 to 11 a.m. |
| ཉིན་སྐྱེད། | Noon | རྟ། Horse | 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. |
| ཉིན་སྐྱེད་ཡོལ། | Afternoon | ལུག། Sheep | 1 to 3 p.m. |
| ཉི་སྨུར། | Late afternoon | སྤྲེལ། Monkey | 3 to 5 p.m. |
| ཉི་ནུབ། | Sunset | བྱ། Bird | 5 to 7 p.m. |
| ཁ་སྐོས། | Evening | ཁྱི། Dog | 7 to 9 p.m. |
| སྐོང་འགོར། | Late evening | ཕག Pig | 9 to 11 p.m. |

*European timepieces*

The introduction of European timepieces to Tibet in the 18th century was one of most important historical events for Tibetan astronomy and it occurred at the juncture of European explorations and missionary activities in Asia and the Tibetan Buddhist missionary activities in

1 Ngag dbang nyi ma (1982: 443–444).

2 *zangs ma srang ni bcu gnyis la / / snod ni dpangs su sor brgyad dang / / rgyar ni sor mo bcu gnyis pa / / legs pa nyid du brdung bar bya / / gser ni 'ol se sum cu las / / sor drug pa yi tshad tsam du / / thur ma legs par brdungs nas ni / / thur ma de yis bu ga ni / / zangs ma'i snod la mkhas pas dbug / / chu ni rnyog ma med pa las / / srang ni drug cu'i tshad du bya / / srang 'dis chu tshod tshad yin te / / skye bo rnams la phan phyir bshad / /* (*Rdo rje mkha' 'gro* , 2009: 152–153).

3 He wrote several works on Tibetan astronomy and calendar making science. In one of these, he expounds on the history of this particular form of water clock.

Inner Asia. The mechanical clock was a distinctively European invention, first mentioned around 1300s.[4] Joseph Needham, author of a series of books on science and civilisation in China, defines it as "one of the greatest scientific achievements of all science and technology".[5] It has an escapement that allows a rotating wheel to turn slowly, continuously, and with context speed. The fundamental difference between water clock and mechanical clock is that the first involves a continuous process, which is the flow of water through an hole, whereas a mechanical clock depends on a mechanical motion that, by continuously repeating itself, divides time uniformly into discrete segments.[6]

It is not easy to pinpoint the exact arrival of European clocks in Tibet, due to its location at the crossroads of several civilisations: historically, in fact, there were several trade routes that connected Tibet to the rest of the world. In the south, it was connected to Nepal, India, and Bhutan and in the north and the east it was bordered by China and Inner Asia. Two of the most important trade routes were the Northern Route, or *byang lam*, which referred to routes heading towards Zunghar, and the Eastern Route, or *shar lam,* which referred to the routes to China.

Along these transnational religious and commercial networks, many foreign ideas and products were exchanged, which some eventually ending up in Tibet. From 13th century onwards, Tibet was closely linked to the Mongol Empires and the Yuan dynasty. Tibetan Buddhism also became an important religious and cultural force in Inner Asia at this time, making Tibet a significant part of the political, cultural, and religious networks.

By the 17th century, Europeans had built sophisticated vessels and obtained enough navigational knowledge to travel virtually anywhere in the world. Driven by commercial and religious activities, Europeans expanded their trade networks and sent missionaries all over the world. In Inner Asia, by the early 17th century, there were three important empires, the European Muscovite (1613–1917), the Zunghar Khanate (1671–1760), and the Manchu Qing (1644–1911), who were all contending for power in the heart of Eurasia.[7]

Occurring within such Inner Asian networks, Tibetan encounters with Europeans determined the introduction of new crops and products as well as ideas and knowledge. During the time of the 5th Dalai Lama, Galdan Boshugtu Khan (1644–1697), a leader of the Zunghar Khanate, had contacts with the Russians, from whom he bought a camera obscura, an old European form of camera. He then carried it with

4 Wigelsworth (2006: 130).
5 Needham (1965: 435).
6 Whitrow (1989: 99).
7 Perdue (2005: 1).

him to Tibet and presented it to the 5th Dalai Lama as a present.[8] Even George Bogle (1746–1781) reported to have seen a camera obscura at the residence of 6th Panchen Lama Blo bzang dpal ldan ye shes (1738–1780),[9] at the time of his stay in bKra shis lhun po Monastery in 1775.

At the turn of the 18th century, we see one of the earliest instances of European timepieces being bought to Tibet, leading to the mechanical clock being added to the Tibetan vocabulary. In 1698, the ex-abbot of sGo mang grwa tshang (one of the colleges of 'Bras spungs Monastery), sent his greeting party to the 6th Dalai Lama Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho (1683–1706). Thor god Don grub rgya mtsho came from the Torghuts, one of the major subgroups of the Four Oirats in the Western Mongolia. In 1618, many from the Torghuts left for Caspian Sea on the banks of the Volga River and established the Kalmyk Khanate. Thor god Don grub rgya mtsho was born in a Torghut family and came to Lhasa at a young age to study at sGo mang grwa tshang. In 1673, he became the 29th abbot of the college, leaving for Kalmyk soon afterwards. In 1704, he came back to Lhasa and was appointed abbot of Li thang Monastery in Kham by the Tibetan Government.[10]

In 1698, he dispatched a few staff members from Kalmyk to Lhasa to see the 6th Dalai Lama. In the latter's biography, *sde srid* Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho (1653–1705), the regent of the Dalai Lama, recorded that Thor god Don grub rgya mtsho sent many gifts, including what he called "the wheel of understanding time" or "*dus rtogs 'khor lo*".[11] *Dus tshod*, which refers to mechanical timepieces, was a new word specifically created to indicate European mechanical pieces.

In 19th century, as the Russian Empire expanded its territories into Central Asia, extensive contacts took place between Russians and Mongols. Through this relationship, many European timepieces were brought to Tibet. For example, Bla ma dkar po (1835–1895), a Tibetan military general in Xinjiang, lists many timepieces in his gift registry, carried by him from Xinjiang to Amdo in late 19th century.[12] Since there were no watch and clock makers in Xinjiang at that time, we can come to the conclusion that these timepieces must have been bought from Russian traders, with whom he had contact, and then brought to Tibet.

It is worth noticing that these exchanges did not occur directly between Tibetans and Europeans, but rather through intermediaries such as the Mongols or other Central Asians. The Northern Route certainly represented an important network in the creation of these contacts, as it facilitated the introduction of quite a few European products

8 Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho (2009: 119).
9 Teltscher (2013: 107).
10 Bstan pa bstan 'dzin (2003: 57–58).
11 Sde srid sangs rgyas rgya mtsho (1989: 450).
12 Skal bzang legs bshad (1994: 351–352).

to Tibet, among which figured the same mechanical timepieces.

*The Jesuits' clocks in Beijing*

The scarce information available on the diffusion of European timepieces along the Northern Route is counterbalanced by what we know of the situation on the Eastern Route, an important commercial and human network that connected Tibet with China. Even though Tibetan lamas visited and established their presence in Beijing throughout the Yuan and the Ming dynasties, it was during the Manchu period that their relationship with the court became more extensive and deeper. The reason behind this was the Manchus' connection with the Mongols, who were followers of Tibetan Buddhism and political allies through matrimony; as such, Tibetans' ties with the Manchus preceded the latter's conquest of China in 1644.

After coming to Beijing and establishing a new dynasty under the name of the Qing, the Manchus invited many Tibetan lamas and scholars to their imperial court. Like the Jesuit missionaries, these spiritual masters engaged themselves not only in religious matters but also in political ones. They concerned themselves with the affairs of the state, which included Inner Asia and Tibet. They were further involved in making map and translating a great number of religious works from Tibetan to Mongolian and Manchu and from Chinese into Tibetan and Mongolian.[13] At this cosmopolitan Qing court, many Tibetan lamas had their first encounters with European clocks.

This leads us to a very important question: why were there European clocks at the Qing court in the first place? This had primarily to do with the Qing emperors' interest in many aspects of European science and technologies. In the 16th century, during the later Ming dynasty several European Jesuits, led by the Italian Jesuit priest Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), came to China to preach and spread Christianity. When he came to China, Ricci brought some timekeeping pieces with him. During his stay at the court, he presented several clocks to the Ming emperor himself.[14]

After the Manchus took over the Ming dynasty, the Qing emperors also employed Jesuits and asked them to make clocks for the court and the people associated with it. During the reign of the Kangxi Emperor, a number of *zuo fang* ("workshops") were established, one of which devoted to the making of Western style clocks. During Qianlong's reign (1735–1796), there were two locations in the Forbidden City for making clocks for imperial consumptions, and one of these was in

[13] Yongdan (2015, 2017).
[14] Tang (2015: 259–263).

Yuanming Yuan, which is also known as the Old Summer Palace in Beijing.

One of the first Europeans to introduce Western clocks at the Qing court was Father Jean–Mathieu de Ventavon (1733–1787), a French Jesuit who had been trained as a clockmaker in France. In 1766, he came to Beijing where he served the Qianlong Emperor for twenty years in this capacity. In his later years, according to a letter to the Lazarist Josper Rauto Bertin dated November 17, 1786, he made an automation that could, at the Emperor's request, write in Manchu and even in Mongolian. He further states that they "will know how to write in Tibetan".[15]

During the Qianlong's reign, the imperial court produced an encyclopedia of dresses and styles in fashion known as *Huangchao liqi tushi* 皇朝禮器圖式 ("Illustrations of Imperial Ritual Paraphernalia"), in which were included descriptions of several European timepieces and clocks, the latter an indication of the imperial court's endorsement of these foreign objects as part of imperial ritual paraphernalia.

Indeed, there are many Tibetan written records, dated to the Qing dynasty, that mention European timepieces, some even providing specific details on how they were made and by whom. One of these written records comes from *Rje bla ma srid zhi'i gtsug rgyan paṇ chen thams cad mkhyen pa blo bzang dpal ldan ye shes dpal bzang po'i zhal snga nas kyi rnam par thar pa nyi ma'i 'od zer zhes bya ba* ("The Guru Lama's Crown Ornament of the World Omniscient One, Blo bzang dpal ldan ye shes's Biographical Account Known as Sunlight"), the biography of the 6th Panchen Blo bzang dpal ldan ye shes written by his student, the 2nd 'Jam dbyangs bzhad pa kun mkhyen 'Jigs med dbang po (1728–1791) from Bla brang Monastery.

In this biography, the author mentions several instances where the emperor gave many European timepieces to Blo bzang dpal ldan ye shes. Once the Qianlong invited the Panchen Lama to come to Beijing. On his way there, at rDang la, one of the highest mountain paths in Tibet, the Panchen Lama received a watch from the Qianlong with a message saying,

> Here I do not allow lCang skya hu thog thu to prostrate in front of me. Since the Panchen is the great Lama from the west, you do not need to prostrate in the front of my portrait. Now I have sent this special watch for you. It is good for your well-being.[16]

[15] Pagani (2001: 54).

[16] 'Jigs med dbang po (2002, vol 2: 774–775).



*A clock mounted on the top of a pavilion with eight Tibetan Buddhist auspicious signs and Sanskrit mantra of the six-syllable. Made at the imperial workshop in Beijing by European Jesuits during Qianlong's reign (50x23x17 cm, the Palace Museum, 2020).*

Since the Panchen Lama was traveling a long distance on horses, the Qianlong was sensitive and considerate enough to send the master one of his personal time-keeping devices in the belief that this might bring relief to the Panchen Lama's stress caused by the long journey. Similarly, when the Panchen Lama arrived in Chengde, formerly known as Jehol, a Tibetan monastic town in China, he was presented with many gifts by the Qianlong; one of these was the *zimingzhong*, or "self-

sounding bell". According to the 6th Panchen Blo bzang dpal ldan ye shes' biography,

> On the day, the great Emperor Manjushri sent Pachong Amban with imperial family treasures and a great mechanical clock which had been decorated with a majestic bird and a table for the clock. The bird makes a sound every hour that passes.[17]

More importantly, after arriving in Beijing, the Qianlong presented another Kālacakra clock to the Panchen Lama. Again, according to the biography,

> The Emperor sent a minister to present a clock to him. This clock was made by a European worker and constructed according to the Kālacakra time. The Panchen Lama was pleased to receive it, and he generously gave the gifts to the official and replied to the Emperor.[18]

Before the Panchen Lama entered Beijing, the Qianlong ordered some European Jesuits to make this specially designed clock for the Panchen Lama. The biography does not say much about the details of the clock except that Europeans made it. So, the person(s) who designed it, the materials used, details of motifs as well as dials are not known. However, by mentioning that it was made by Europeans, it indicates that its manufacture could be attributed to the imperial workshop in Beijing, with the possible collaboration of some Tibetan lamas who knew the Kālacakra tradition of time measurement. According to the Kālacakra, a stellar day—in other words, one day and one night—is divided into sixty hours, each hour into seconds, and each second into six breath times. Each breath time is considered as a healthy man's one breath time. This measurement was unlike anything that the Jesuits were using for calculating time. At that time, many Tibetan lama scholars, including lCang skya rol pa'i rdo rje (1717–1786), lived in Beijing: it appears therefore likely a Tibetan Buddhist scholar provided the details of all the Tibetan numerals to the Jesuits, who in turn built the timepieces that the Qianlong had ordered upon those instructions.

From the Panchen Lama's biography, it is clear that Jesuit clocks had been used as exchange gifts between Tibetan lamas and the Qing emperors for a long time. Although it is not certain how much widespread these clocks were, it is nevertheless known that they circulated among members of the Tibetan religious elite like the 6th Panchen Lama. By the time of the Qianlong, *dus tshod* was the standard term used to describe the European mechanical timepieces.

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[17] 'Jigs med dbang po (2002, vol 2: 1011).
[18] 'Jigs med dbang po (2002, vol.2: 1014–1015).

*The name and usage*

Whenever a new object is introduced into a cultural milieu, it needs to be named and identified by the receiving culture. Tibetan civilisation already knew and used items to measure time, e.g. water clocks, candle clocks and incense clocks, yet the European mechanical clock was radically foreign to them. It was produced outside Tibet and then imported or brought into the plateau: when this new object started to circulate, a new term was needed to refer to it. As its use became widespread, at least two terms emerged to describe it: one of them was, as *sde srid* Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho's writings show, *dus rtogs 'khor lo*, "the wheel of understanding time". In the 18th century, when European mechanical clocks became well-known, *dus tshod* affirmed itself as the standard term to describe them. It was not only used by 'Jigs med dbang po in the biography of the 6th Panchen Lama, but also by other scholars. For example, while describing one of the episodes of lCang skya rol pa'i rdo rje at Mount Wutai, Thu'u bkan Blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma (1737–1802), a scholar from Amdo, wrote,

> Once he was in Mount Wutai, one monk bought a magnificent walking stick watch in the market and offered it to him. After seeing it, he said that it was the exact same walking stick watch that the Yongzheng Emperor (1678–1735) used when he was strolling around the garden.[19]

The etymology of *dus tshod* is not clear and it may be a translation of the Chinese term *Shichen biao* 時辰表, "time–table". In *Huangchao liqi tushi, Shichen biao*, the term is used to describe what we might call the pocket watch. Still, from 18th century onwards, *dus tshod* became the standard term to describe the mechanical timepieces that had originated in Europe.

How did the Tibetans use these clocks? Like anywhere else in the world, Tibetans mostly used them for keeping time. However, because of its accuracy and precision, starting from the 18th century, several scholars working on astronomy advocated or used the mechanical clock to measure time. This was an important development. As mentioned earlier, historically, Tibetan astronomers used sundials to measure time and calculate the locations of places, but these objects were not as accurate in their measurements as the mechanical clocks. Thus, as soon as the Tibetans discovered European timepieces, some of the astronomers argued for their use. Among these scholars, A kyā Blo

[19] Blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma (1989: 603).

bzang bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan (1708–1768),[20] a Tibetan astronomer who introduced Pythagorean theorem to Tibet, recommended the use of European clocks instead of the traditional sundial.

In the past, Tibetans had largely relied on ancient Indian Tantric works like the Kālacakra to determine the time in specific locations. In the 15th century, mKhas grub Nor bzang rgya mtsho (1423–1513), an important astronomer, had used the Kālacakra Tantra to assert that there were thirty–six hours in the equivalent of a day during Tibet's longest summers, and slightly less in China. Yet A kyā Blo bzang bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan believed that this system could not measure time and location accurately, and instead suggested that periods of observation should be used to measure time,

> Instead of relying on the words of the Tantra and some contemporary works on measuring time, [we] should be using good measuring practices like watch to observe time from morning to evening, when people can see their hands clearly, even in the longest summers.[21]

Similarly, another important scholar in Amdo, Sum pa ye shes dpal 'byor (1704–1788), also known as Sum pa mkhan po, wrote,

> According to magical mechanical clock, which was originated in Xiyang 西洋 (Europe) but was made at the imperial court in Beijing, time of Amdo is […].[22]

Here he says that he used Jesuit made mechanical timepiece to measure time while doing his astronomical observations. From these references, we can clearly see that from 18th century onwards, the term *dus tshod* was no longer used by lamas alone, as elite scholars began to employ timepieces not only to keep time, as shown in the works of astronomers such as A kyā Blo bzang bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan and Sum pa ye shes dpal 'byor, but also for astronomical observations.

*How were these objects exchanged?*

Since there were no watch and clock manufacture in Tibet, these timepieces were brought from outside Tibet. In the early years, at least till the 18th century, most of these exchanges occurred in the context of a *mchod yon* ("priest and patron") relationship, a religious relationship which existed between a lama and lay person, in particularly between Tibetan lamas and Inner Asian rulers. The question is how we

[20] Yongdan (2018).
[21] Blo bzang bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan (2000: 43a).
[22] Sum pa mkhan po (2015, vol 20: 414).

understand this relation. It largely depends on the how we view Tibetan relationship with Inner Asian rulers and particularly the Qing dynasty. In general, there are great debates among historians about the nature of the Qing dynasty. For the most part, there are three models of Qing history. The first is the Sino-centric model. In spite of their origins as a nomadic people from the northeast of China, alternatively known as Jurchen or Manchu, the Manchu themselves accepted that they were "Chinese" and that therefore the Qing dynasty was a Chinese dynasty. The second model is the Empire model. Most Western scholars consider that of the Qing an empire due to its geographical vastness, different ethnicities, religions, and diverse political and economic systems. The third model is the emerging "Altaic" school, where emphasis is placed on the Manchus' Inner Asiatic roots: since the Qing emperor was seen as the universal ruler, the Tibetan lamas were conceived as his subject. It means that all the exchanges that occurred between Tibetan religious masters and the Qing emperor took place in the context of the Chinese Empire, between, in other words, superiors and subordinates. It not only symbolises the status of relationship between giver and receiver but is also seen as a political and economic system that existed through the exchange of gifts. These models are important as they explain the Qing's relationship with Tibetans and other Inner Asian subjects.

For most Tibetan Buddhist historians, all these exchanges occurred within the concept of the *mchod yon* relationship and the devotees-students were those who gave or offered something unique and precious to their lamas. In the case of Thor god Don grub rgya mtsho's sending a watch to the 6th Dalai Lama, it was clear that this gift was given as a part of teacher-student relationship. Thor god Don grub rgya mtsho was the student of the 5th Dalai Lama; at his master's death, Thor god Don grub rgya mtsho sent these gifts from Xinjiang to the new reincarnation who had been found by the regent—he did so to show his respect to his reincarnated teacher and to maintain its previous relationship. Generally speaking, the use of the honorific terms in conversational language does not necessarily define the speaker's status as a low one. In a display of humility, high-ranking people could in fact use the same honorific words to address inferiors. However, in the written language, in particular in Amdo, terms like *phul* are conventionally used to describe the offering of something by someone of low or equal status, be it in religious or political terms, to a high-ranking individual, in this case the 6th Dalai Lama. In light of that, the choice of naming these gift-offerings by Thor god Don grub rgya mtsho to his master's reincarnation as *phul* is telling of the sort of bond that existed between these two figures.

Significantly, the idea of superior and subordinate violates the

principle at the base of a *mchod yon* relationship. The student does not offer things to the lamas to control and dominate him. Rather, it is the teacher who guides the student, to lead him or her to enlightenment or salvation. If the student's status, in this case an emperor, was higher than that of the master, then it violated the principle of the *mchod yon* relationship. Thus, when exploring the history of European watches and clocks in Tibet, we should pay attention to how these timepieces were exchanged between Tibetan lamas and the Qing emperors and what specific terms were used to describe them. In the context of *gnang* ("to give") and *phul* ("to offer"), these two words have the same meaning, namely offering something to someone, however they have completely different connotations when they involve the Qing emperor and Tibetan lamas. Thus, I would argue that such exchanges should not be reduced into a simple relationship between superior and subordinate. The *mchod yon* was both a religious relationship between a lama and a lay person and an economical one that symbolised the status of the bond between the giver and the receiver and assumed the aspect of a political system expressing itself through gift exchanges.

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# Economic Resources to Stabilise Power in Ladakh During the rNam rgyal Dynasty (16th–19th Centuries)

Teresa Raffelsberger
(University of Bonn)

## *Introduction*

The kings of Ladakh were primarily assigned their social status as members of the rNam rgyal lineage, however their exclusive right of power acquired by birth had to be backed up not only through diplomatic and military means but also on an economic level. The noble families and their social status did depend upon middlemen and, to a large extent, on the rural population: it was the services and goods provided by the lower class of society that made the elaborate lifestyle of the aristocracy possible in the first place. Economic resources were not only important for the preservation and representation of the king's own status—they also influenced the ruler's political decisions regarding his territory and shaped his communication and interaction with other kingdoms. Maintaining control over these resources was therefore one of the most important requirements to hold the position of supreme ruler. This paper focuses on the strategies the kings of Ladakh applied to secure their social status by economic means, including questions such as: What were the economic resources of the Ladakhi kingdom? How were they used to maintain power? And which social groups played a part?

## *The rNam rgyal Dynasty*

The last four centuries of the kingdom of Ladakh were characterised by political changes and territorial conflicts. However, a good dozen throne holders and their staff were able to maintain the rule of the rNam rgyal dynasty astonishingly stable between the 16th and 19th centuries. On the one hand the kings of Ladakh tried to establish themselves as a centre of power towards the neighbouring smaller Muslim and Buddhist kingdoms. On the other hand they found themselves located in the midst of a network of different empires and polities (above all the Mughal Empire and the Tibet), which often perceived Ladakh as geographical and political periphery over which they strove for direct or indirect rule.

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The rNam rgyal dynasty has its beginnings already in the 15th century, when *lha chen* Bha gan[1] united the kingdom under his leadership. Little is known about this formative period of the dynasty: the political fate of the first throne holders is only vaguely outlined in the kingdom's chronicles (*La dwags rgyal rabs*). The first half of the 16th century was marked by invasions of surrounding rulers. Especially the military attacks under the leadership of the Central Asian general Mirza Haidar Dughlat—who was in the service of the Mughal Empire—temporarily endangered the rule of the Ladakhi kings.[2] Other Muslim rulers also began to extend their influence towards Ladakh: after successful campaigns of the chief of Skardo, king 'Jam dbyang rnam rgyal (r. 1595?–1616) and members of the aristocracy were captured. According to the *La dwags rgyal rabs*, the Ladakhi king fell in love with the Muslim princess during his imprisonment, married her, and later on was handed back his dominion by the bride's father.[3]

Under Seng ge rnam rgyal (r. 1616–1623; 1624–1642), the dynasty reached its height at the beginning of the 17th century. Several successful military campaigns made it possible to annex large parts of the neighbouring areas.[4] The king's close relationship with the scholar sTag tsang ras pa (1574–1651), together with royal patronage of the monasteries founded by him made the 'Brug pa the leading school in Ladakh. This caused tensions with the dGe lugs pa, who at the same time pulled the strings in Tibet. Seng ge rnam rgyal's defeat against the Mughals at the end of 1639 brought political trouble and caused him to cut off the trade routes to the west—a decision which is said to have had far-reaching and dramatic consequences for the kingdom's economy.[5]

After his death, the dominion was divided among his sons: Guge, Zanskar, and Spiti were given to the younger princes. Ladakh was henceforth ruled by bDe ldan rnam rgyal (r. 1642–1694). His policy was influenced by the relations with Tibet and Kashmir, which was at that time under Mughal rule. The diplomatic contacts between these powers, initially peaceful, progressively deteriorated, as Ladakh's partisanship to Bhutan led to increasing tensions with Tibet. Several

1 The exact dates of *lha chen* Bha gan are very unclear. Based on the calculation of the average length of reign in Ladakh, Petech suggests the years 1460–1485 (1977: 25). Although the accuracy of Petech's dating has been questioned, among others by Schuh, and since more recent studies on the earlier stages of the rNam rgyal dynasty have yet to be advanced, the dates of each king's reign will be hereafter presented in accordance with the provisional chronology proposed in Petech (1977).

2 Petech (1977: 25–26).

3 Francke (1926: 106).

4 Francke (1926: 108).

5 Petech (1977: 46–53).

military confrontations culminated in the Tibet-Ladakh-Mughal War of 1679–1684. The conditions negotiated afterwards shaped Ladakh's relations with Tibet as well as Kashmir for the rest of the kingdoms' independence: in addition to the establishment of regular tribute missions and restrictions on trade, Ladakh lost a large part of its western dominion to the Tibetan government.[6]

At the end of the 17th century Nyi ma rnam rgyal (r. 1694–1729) ascended the throne. His period of government was characterised by a restructuring of the judiciary system as well as active contact with important religious figures of various Buddhist schools. Besides sending tribute missions to the main monasteries of the dGe lugs pa in Tibet, Nyi ma rnam rgyal also strengthened the relations with the followers of the Bhutanese 'Brug pa bka' rgyud. In foreign policy he tried to establish diplomatic relations with all neighbouring rulers: envoys were sent among others to the Mughal Empire and the Chinese court, in order to ensure the security of important trade routes and minimise conflicts in the border areas. Due to the influence of his second wife Zi-zi Khatun, however, the Ladakhi army became increasingly involved in smaller military combats on the border with Baltistan.[7]

bDe skyong rnam rgyal (r. 1729–1739) continued his father's policy towards India and China. The events of the following decades were affected by a major internal political crisis that led to the division of the kingdom into two spheres of influence (one under the rule of Purig and the other under the rule of Leh). This partition took place after a series of latent conflicts fuelled by the personal interests of various actors: especially queen Zi-zi Khatun and the family around the *bka' blon* ("prime minister")[8] Tshul khrims rdo rje seemed to pursue their own agenda.[9] In the middle of the 18th century, the Tibetan lama Kaḥ thog rig 'dzin Tshe dbang nor bu (1698–1755) was entrusted with negotiations between the opposing parties and the results were recorded in

6 Petech (1977: 74–80). For a wider discussion on context and consequences of the war, see for example Ahmad (1968), Schuh (1983), Emmer (2007), Schwieger (2015) and Bray (2018).

7 Petech (1977: 83–93).

8 In contrast to the old Tibetan administration, where *bka' blon* usually refers to the four cabinet ministers of the *bka' shag*, the title is used in a slightly different way in the context of the Ladakh kingdom: according to Cunningham (1854: 285), there were four or five "governors of district" who were given the title *bka' blon* amongst which a prime minister was chosen. This prime minister resided at the royal capital and was entrusted with governmental affairs. He is often only referred to as *bka' blon* although he had a higher rank in the administration than the other district governors who carried the same title. Depending on the source, there are other names and titles for the position of prime minister: besides *bka' blon* one also finds for example *gung blon*, *chos blon chen po*, *dbang gyi bka' blon* or *bka' blon che ba*. See Cunningham (1854: 285–286), Gergan (1976: 607), and Petech (1977: 155).

9 Francke (1926: 120–121).

the Treaty of Hanle of 1753.[10] The most important points included the procedure for the territorial reintegration of the two dominions under one rule, the regulation of succession within the royal family to avoid similar situations in the future, the pardon of the family of the minister Tshul khrims rdo rje, who had fallen out of favour with the king of Leh, and the regulations on customs duties and traffic on the trade routes to Kashmir.[11]

After the political reunification of the kingdom, the affairs of government fell in the hands of Tshe dbang rnam rgyal (r. 1753–1782). During this period, Ladakh's domestic political situation was marked by great tensions between the king, his government staff, and the common people. The chronicles describe the king as easily influenced and accuse him of costing the state disproportionate sums due to his love for horses.[12] In 1782 his rule was ended by a people's revolt: the rebels occupied Leh, and the king and his minister had to seek refuge in the monastery of Hemis. To protect his life and that of his minister, Tshe dbang rnam rgyal finally announced his abdication; he was given some land and from then on devoted himself entirely to his horses.[13]

At the end of the 18th century, renewed military conflicts with the neighbouring Baltic minor kingdoms challenged the political fortunes of the kings of Ladakh. While the relations with Tibet and China were maintained over the following decades by diplomatic missions, the economic and political relations with the neighbouring north-western regions underwent a decisive change: with the conquest of Kashmir in 1819 by Ranjit Singh (1780–1839)—who belonged to the Sikh and was the first ruler of the united Punjab—a new player appeared within the regional structure of power. Ranjit Singh demanded tribute and gifts from the Ladakhi royal court, which it seems were then paid regularly.[14] By this time the kings of Ladakh had already lost most of their political significance and more and more sovereignty over the kingdom's territory, especially in the south, had been relinquished during the last decades of the dynasty. With the invasion of the Dogra in 1834, the period of the independent kingdom finally came to an end and a few years later Ladakh was incorporated into the state of Jammu and Kashmir under ruler Gulab Sing.[15]

### *Context and aspects of royal economic policy*

[10] The original text of this treaty has been edited, translated, and analysed by Schwieger (1999).
[11] Schwieger (1999: 80–82).
[12] Francke (1926: 122–123).
[13] Petech (1977: 118).
[14] Petech (1977: 130–135).
[15] Petech (1977: 151).

The goal of successful and persistent rule was primarily to secure peace and order within one's own domain and to establish politically stable relations with surrounding authorities. Wherever the kings or their deputies succeeded in this, persistent and foreseeable conditions were created, which ultimately benefited economic activities as a whole. Power in general manifests itself in the combination of sovereignty—in terms of discourse on legitimation and representation, territorial control, and communication—and interaction policies towards others. Consequently, the strategies to maintain and stabilise power must take all these aspects into account, including economic resources, which are of crucial importance at all levels, as they form amongst others the material basis of power for the ruling individuals and institutions.

The economic system of Ladakh at the time of the rNam rgyal dynasty was mainly based on the agricultural sector. Most of the population were farmers or peasants and rendered services in the cultivation of land or animal herding. Agricultural production had to ensure the basic needs of everyday life and mainly consisted in food and building materials. As in other Tibetan societies at that time, money played almost no role in the administration of the kingdom: services were paid for by the transfer of land and privileges, while taxes were paid in natural products or by labour. However, Ladakh's strategic location—at the crossroads of regional and supra-regional trade routes—provided the kingdom with a second economic pillar, allowing its rulers to profit from the import and export business of various goods:

> While local trade in subsistence commodities like salt, butter and barley was basic to the economy […], Ladakh was unique in that a trade in high-value luxury commodity was integrated with that in subsistence commodities.[16]

Contrary to what happened in European medieval societies, the economic importance of trade and crafts in the Tibetan milieu did not really contribute to the formation of a powerful middle class.[17] Although individual artists, traders, and their families held important positions within the Ladakhi kingdom during the rNam rgyal dynasty, their activities were largely controlled by the state, with the ruling class enjoying the highest profits. While aristocracy, court officials, and monastic establishments used their social status to their own financial advantage, the common people were cut off from economic possibilities

[16] Rizvi ([2005] 2011: 309).
[17] Carrasco (1959: 214).

and subjected to repression and exploitation.[18] To borrow from Pedro Carrasco, "social differences based on trade and industry reinforce the stratification based on land and the control of political power".[19]

What were the possibilities and means that kings possessed to interfere with the economic system? First and foremost, rulers created instruments for structuring economic activities and set the framework for trade and agricultural production (e.g. by fixing customs duties, taxes, and levies; distributing land and fields or founding and controlling centres for the exchange of goods). In the light of that, it is hardly surprising that the political action (or non-action) of the kings usually bore consequences for economic processes, regardless of any conscious economic-based motives behind it. Especially in the context of pre-modern societies, it is virtually impossible to clearly differentiate political/legal, religious/cultural, and economic spheres within the ruling system, as those rather influenced, overlapped, and conditioned each other. For example, military or diplomatic interventions could determine not only the political but also the economic fortunes of a kingdom, while economic circumstances in turn sometimes guided the actions of the ruler, for example in the area of legislation.[20] Pierre Bourdieu argues that economic capital can only be used in conjunction with social and cultural capital for real exercise of power: whereas economic capital is first and foremost seen as the material goods that one possesses and that can be converted into money, cultural and social capital (e.g. titles of nobility) can also be transformed into economic capital under certain conditions.[21] In accordance with these categorizations, I define the concept of economic resources for my purposes as follows:

- in the classical sense, as material goods which are produced, exchanged, traded, and/or acquired (e.g. food, clothing, jewellery, technical equipment, weapons, furniture);
- as social goods which are not primarily of material or even economic nature, but with which economic opportunities or advantages go hand in hand (e.g. offices, rights of land use, tax reduction);
- as services (labour), representing an economic factor by which goods are made available or usable in the first place (e.g. transport services, cultivating fields or certain handicrafts).

The production and circulation of these goods was the main purpose

[18] Sheik (2010a: 55).
[19] Carrasco (1959: 214).
[20] McCormick (2005: 69–71).
[21] Bourdieu ([1992] 2015:52).

of the kingdom's economic system and various social groups engaged in the process. The kings of Ladakh needed to gain and retain control over these material and social resources in order to maintain their position of power. The strategies they adopted to do so can be observed on three levels: first in the surroundings of the royal seat as the centre of power and representation; secondly within the policies regarding their own territory; and ultimately in the interaction with other authorities.

*Promotion and display of socio-economic status*

Every form of domination requires a certain degree of public display in order to determine discourses about one's rule and to ensure a positive perception of it. Through a system of signs, symbols, and behavioural patterns, one could usually express position and rank, friendship and hostility in a non-verbal way.[22] Demonstrations of power and status aim to consolidate the desired social order and maintain a kind of aristocratic identity. It could either be oriented outwards to clarify structures that go beyond the court or it could serve to create a certain "exclusive" sense of belonging only among court members.[23] The royal court served as a stage for representation, where the king permanently presented himself to his immediate environment and clarified his social and economic status through his lifestyle. The spectrum of self-representation in this regard ranges from language, gestures, facial expressions, posture, clothing, equipment, and luxury items to ceremonial forms of collective action such as dance, banquet, procession and so forth. By choosing certain goods, accessories, attributes, and rituals, the rulers could strengthen and illustrate their own position and claim of power. All this was directly perceived and reflected by the closest environment. Therefore the ruler's appearance had to correspond with certain expectations which came hand in hand with his position of power. As Michael McCormick points out, promoting the king's individual lifestyle also had a significant influence on the economic system in general, since a big part of the movable and immovable wealth of society was concentrated in the king's treasure, court, and estates.[24] Royal luxury and consumption boosted the economy and involved a whole range of different groups: for instance craftsmen and traders who produced, designed or imported certain goods and riches which were then used to embellish the appearance of the king and his living space.

Ideals of royal function and appearance manifest themselves in a

[22] Althoff ([1997] 2014: 232).
[23] Ragotzky and Wenzel (1990: 11).
[24] McCormick (2005: 61).

wide variety of media, such as architecture, visual arts, music, and literature.[25] A series of wall paintings depicting members of the rNam rgyal dynasty can give an idea of how the representation of their socio-economic status might have looked like—or at least, how it was perceived by others. Since commissioners and artists of these paintings are usually unknown, one can only speculate on the degree of realism, but the sceneries reflect certain ideals and conceptions concerning the aristocratic upper class. These depictions of donors, which are typical of Tibetan cultural areas, can be found in temples spread all over Ladakh. The types of representation vary considerably: while, for example, Seng ge rnam rgyal's depiction in Hemis is oriented towards Tibetan-Chinese style, other paintings integrate elements of Central Asian art.[26] Some show the ruler paying homage to spiritual figures, in others the royal family is at the centre of festive celebrations. In both cases the richly ornamented and patterned fabrics of the king's clothing are just as indicative of his exclusive status as the material and style of other attributes and furnishings—for instance headgear, throne, vestments, parasol, teapots and so forth (see Figs. 1 and 2). The king's appearance is also addressed in written media. Portuguese Jesuit Franzisco de Azevedo, who came to Leh in 1631, writes about his impression of king Seng ge rnam rgyal:

> He wore a rather dirty upper garment of some red material, a mantle of the same, and a thread-bare cap. […] [E]ither ear was adorned with turquoise and a large coral, whilst he wore a string of skull-bones round his neck […]. He was sitting […] on an ornamental carpet of crimson velvet of the time of Mathusala.[27]

The *La dwags rgyal rabs* contains all kinds of references to the king's wealth: for example, his personal religious utensils are said to be made of gold and silver.[28] Furthermore, acts of presenting exclusive goods to religious dignitaries are highlighted. Especially the list of gifts and treasures that Seng ge rnam rgyal is said to have presented to sTag tshang ras pa aims to impress the reader:

> He presented 100 ponies, 100 yaks, 100 cattle, 1000 sheep, 1000 goats, 1000 silvers (Ladakhi rupees), 100 zho of gold, 3000 loads of grain, one string of pearls, one string of coral beads, one string of turquoises, 25 matchlocks, 25 spears, 25 swords, 15 coats-of-mail, 25 pieces of silk, 10 pieces of brocade, 25 pieces of gauze with and without pattern, 25

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25 Ragotzky and Wenzel (1990: 7).
26 For a detailed analysis regarding the painting of king Seng ge rnam rgyal in Hemis, see Bellini (2012).
27 Wessels (1992: 109).
28 Francke (1926: 109).

pieces of broad gauze for scarfs of blessing, and other presents inconceivable.[29]



*Fig. 1 — Seng ge rnam rgyal, Hemis (Lha khang rnying ma).*

[29] Francke (1926: 109).



*Fig. 2 — bKra shis rnam rgyal, Leh (rNam rgyal rtse mo).*

Even if the gifts described here may be attributed for the most part to the imagination of the historiographers, they do imply a special position of both recipient and giver—in this case the king.

Such use of economic means for religious edification was quite common among the kings of Ladakh. Just as Christian *caritas*[30] was of great importance as an economic principle of action in European Middle Ages, things and services settled in the context of Buddhism could also become economic goods. The propagation and promotion of Buddhism and its institutions was considered one of the main royal tasks; therefore the kings of Ladakh spent numerous riches to increment their religious merits by sponsoring the realisation of *maṇi* walls, *stūpa*, precious manuscripts, and statues, just to name a few. Some legal documents show that services to erect *maṇi* walls and inscribe prayers were in return rewarded by the kings with the allocation of land. In an edict issued 1824 by king Tshe dpal don 'grub rnam rgyal (r. 1802–1837; 1839–1840), it says:

> Earlier, when the new *maṇi* wall at Leh was erected, the *'o ma cig pa*[31] [Don 'grub tshe ring] from Tog accomplished with pure intentions the good services of inscribing the *maṇi* and so forth. As reward for this, he is provided with land of the size of 15 *khal* of seed [...], land of the size of 3 *khal* of seed [...]. In addition, the property of a house [...]; and an area of uncultivated land [...]. All this was transferred.[32]

Such transfer of land, tax revenue or reduction, and other privileges were not only directed to individuals but also to certain monasteries, which in return performed prayers. Specific rituals for the royal family were listed in a number of royal charters, the latter one of the means through which various monastic communities ensured themselves a steady financial support from the ruler. In a document that was probably issued around 1765, the widow of bKra shis rnam rgyal (king of Purig) ordered the transfer of right to levy taxes for a total of 22 *khal* of seed to the monastery sTeng rgyud in Spiti. This transfer was conditional on the provision of various religious services, including death rituals for the late king of Purig and his son, ceremonies for long life and successful reign of the king of Ladakh, ceremonies for long life of the king's mother and the queen, and ceremonies for the welfare of the

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[30] Based on *caritas* ("charity"), Christianity in its early days offered a new concept of social responsibility. Mutual giving and taking gave meaning to both donor and recipient in a material and spiritual exchange system. This charity was used mainly by the nobility and clergy to increase their prestige, but also understood as a guideline of action by guilds of trade and crafts.

[31] According to Schuh (2008: 444), *'o ma cig pa* refers to a family from which a woman is recruited as a wet nurse for the young children of the royal family.

[32] 'Jam dbyang rgyal mtshan (2008: 249–250).

author of the document and her daughter.[33] In several documents, king bDe skyong rnam rgyal rewarded the establishment and performance of an annual ritual for a long life of the king and his family with the transfer of land, taxes, and manpower to the monastery in Matho:

> Thinking that for the lifetime of the king […] and (for the lifetime) of his family (it would be good) if one could establish as a life-prolonging ritual (*tshe grub*) (the regular performance) of a rNam rgyal stong mchod, he said that (it would be good) if a financial basis (*gzhi rten*) would arise for it.[34]

The remission of tax obligations or the transfer of the same to other persons could also be ordered in return for these rituals; apparently, this order was not always followed. An addition on a document by king Phun tshogs rnam rgyal (r. 1739–1753) threatens consequences for the refusal of transport services—probably by the population—and emphasises the importance of these services for the execution of the mentioned rituals.[35]

As Arthur Mark Trewin states, such royal patronage was more than just an economic relationship and the kings clearly expected to take popular credit for their support of monastic institutions.[36] Furthermore the kings had, at least in theory, an exclusive right to demand such special religious services, not only out of an economic power, but also because of their divine authority. Therefore all the "purchased" religious goods (whether material or symbolic in nature) ultimately served to strengthen the social status and prestige of both sides—the ruler and the Buddhist establishment which received the grants of the ruling dynasty.

Representation strategies aimed to promote the king not only as an individual, but also in association with the elites present at court. Ultimately, it was not only a matter of clarifying the position of the ruler, rather of establishing a certain group identity through which the inner circle of power could define itself.[37] Members of the royal household depicted in the paintings are usually no less splendidly designed than the royal family: certain aspects of clothing and jewellery indicate an elevated social as well as economic rank and distinguish them from the normal population (see Fig.3).

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33 Schuh and Heimbel (2019: 82–84).
34 Schuh and (Heimbel 2019: 115).
35 Schuh and Heimbel (2019: 146).
36 Trewin (1995: 246–248).
37 Ragotzky and Wenzel (1990: 7).



*Fig. 3 — Female members of Ladakhi aristocracy, Basgo (Cham ba lha khang).*

According to Abdul Ghani Sheik, oral tradition states "that the aristocracy […] wore dyed clothes, while ordinary people were restricted to plain cloth. The nobility also monopolised the use of foreign materials such as satin, brocade and velvet."[38] William Moorcroft, who reached Ladakh in the early 19th century, confirms this in his records: the headgear of the *bka' blon* and other high officials, for instance, are said here to have been made from Russian silk velvet and Chinese brocade.[39] In addition, Moorcroft lists a whole range of equipment that can be found among the aristocratic class of Ladakh, such as boots of Russian or Chinese leather; necklaces of silver, gold, pearls, coral and turquoise; ornamented tea-pots and cups of Chinese porcelain.[40] The sense of exclusivity and economic superiority through the consumption of certain goods ultimately strengthened the power position of nobles. Alexander Cunningham even claims that these displays of royal luxuries were the only things that really interested the king:

> […] the king was well satisfied both with his minister and with his subjects, if the former gave him sufficient means for the enjoyment of his royal pleasure, and if the latter never disturbed his quiet ease with their

[38] Sheik (2010a: 56).
[39] Moorcroft and Trebeck (1841: 323).
[40] Moorcroft and Trebeck (1841: 326–329).

> complaints.[41]

For some rNam rgyal dynasty throne holders this may well be true. Especially king Tshe dbang rnam rgyal, according to the chronicles, only cared about his horses, wasting vast amounts of state funds for his obsession and thus disrupting the political peace and order.[42]

These means to represent one's own position were supplemented by communal rituals that influenced both life at court and the king's public appearances. A number of social groups were involved in these ceremonies and rewarded with money, land or privileges for their services. In his studies on the musical symbolics of power and authority in Ladakh, Trewin emphasises the importance of the Mon community of musicians, known as *mkhar mon*, under the rNam rgyal dynasty:

> These group of royal musicians resembled a "mercantile guild", which had an economic emphasis and shared probably similar rights and obligations as the palace traders (*mkhar tshong pa*).[43]

The lineage of these court musicians is said to have originated at the beginning of the 17th century when a group of Muslim maids and musicians was sent to Ladakh to attend the wedding of king 'Jam dbyang rnam rgyal with the daughter of the ruler of Kapulu.[44] The musicians were constantly present at court, whether they were needed or not, and probably received a fixed annual salary and land for their services. Their main activities were bound to the public duties and ceremonies of the king.[45] Moorcroft writes:

> […] musical accompaniments […] form part of the state of the higher secular dignitaries, and the Raja is always preceded by minstrels and musicians when he leaves his palace.[46]

Indication of daytimes and music performances to announce and escort the king's participation in sportive contests, such as archery and horse-racing, were also part of the court musicians' tasks. Furthermore they accompanied dances at royal feasts held in the palace and performed songs in the king's honour.[47] The materials of their instruments aimed to reinforce the symbolism of their performances and reflected

41 Cunningham (1854: 257).
42 Francke (1926: 122).
43 Trewin (1995: 185).
44 Sheik (2010b: 70).
45 Trewin (1995: 186).
46 Moorcroft (1841: 344).
47 Trewin (1995: 186).

the king's status. The royal *sur na*[48] for example "was covered with silver inlaid with gold and encrusted ruby, lapis lazuli, coral and turquoise in lotus-flower and peacock motifs".[49] The function of such festivities was to convey, manifest, and promote an ideal identity of the noble class, which constituted the self-image of the ruler and his court.[50] Court musicians' crucial role in the king's display becomes also evident by the fact that they figure in most of the earlier mentioned wall-paintings beside the royal family and their staff.

Another group to be represented in visual media are the court dancers: just like the musicians, they too contributed to the image of the king and his entertainment (see Fig. 4). Selected families were obliged to provide one dancer each whenever the king requested their services and were rewarded with food. Furthermore, it was considered a privilege to be ordered to dance at the royal court and thus contributed to the prestige of these families.[51]



*Fig. 4 — Court musicians and dancers, Leh (rNam rgyal rtse mo).*

Such ritualised display of socio-economic status aimed to influence narratives and promote certain ideals and concepts of rulership. Authority, in general, relies on the approval of the population: this could be secured through violence and coercion, but where rulers fulfil certain expectations by granting their subjects' protection and support, the latter are more willing to comply.[52] The king's public participation in Buddhist festivities can certainly be seen in such a light: Martin

[48] *Sur na* is a wooden flute which is played in traditional folk-music from Central Eurasia, Western Asia, and North Africa.
[49] Trewin (1995: 233).
[50] Ragotzky and Wenzel (1990: 13).
[51] Heber and Heber ([1903] 1976: 210).
[52] Trewin (1995: 203).

Brauen for instance mentions the personal role of the king in a certain ritual, where he would adopt the deity from Nyarma as "crown deity" by offering her a horse and a lion.[53] Although it is hard to reconstruct how much of this description corresponds to the truth, it seems safe to imply that the kings served certain narratives and provided role models through their patronage of Buddhist celebrations in both material and symbolic forms. All these rites of representation—whether at the royal court or in the religious sphere—ultimately embodied norms and values that were important for the self-image of royal figures and thus served to legitimise their power.

Last but not least, social and economic functions of the court as place of everyday life and centre of consumption shaped the architectural environment by creating quarters for aristocracy, crafts, and trade in the immediate vicinity of the royal palace. The royal residence itself dominated the surrounding landscape and conveyed the superior position of its inhabitants. In votive inscriptions, the royal buildings are depicted as heavenly palaces on earth and are therefore symbolically elevated—an attribution of a supernatural aura that reflects the special status of the rulers.[54] The royal palace in Leh—a nine-storeys high building—was constructed during the first half of 17th century by king Seng ge rnam rgyal (see Fig. 5).



*Fig. 5 — Palace and old town in Leh.*

[53] Brauen (1980: 143–144).
[54] Francke and Jina (2003: 123–124).

It was designed by a Muslim carpenter from Baltistan and is said to have been completed within three years.[55] After its construction, Leh Palace remained the main royal seat until the defeat of the kingdom by the Dogra in mid-19th century. Cunningham writes:

> The royal palace at Lé is a large fine-looking building, that towers in lofty pre-eminence over the whole city. […] Its size and height give it a very imposing appearance.[56]

Moorcroft describes the palace as "a conspicuous object on the approach to the city."[57] The palace building stands elevated, above the normal people. The surrounding wall separates the people inside from the world outside—spatially as well as symbolically: those who are outside the palace's walls do not belong to the inner centre of power, nor can they profit from the advantages and amenities of the royal court. Impressive royal seats also testify to the economy of the kingdom: size, furnishings, and architecture give an idea of the financial and human resources required as well as the numerous professions and craftsmanship expertise which were used to build them.

*Economic and political functionality*

The dwelling of the royal court encloses not only a social habitat but also an economic area, namely that of the housekeeping. The palace community is responsible for covering the regular goods and labour needs of everyday life at court. According to Yoseb Gergan, there were a number of offices assigned to this task: the *gnyer pa* ("steward") was in charge of the food storage and the account of incoming and outgoing goods; the *'degs dpon* ("master of scales") weighed incoming commodities; the *shing dpon* ("master of timber") organised the provision and storage of wood and coal; and the *sha gnyer* ("meat steward") was responsible for ensuring the meat supply.[58] One does also find a *lcags gnyer* ("iron steward") mentioned in legal documents.[59] Moorcroft states that the subjects supplied the king with fuel, milk, butter, tea and grass for his cattle; they also contributed to the basic economic maintenance of the elite through their services as servants in the kings household or as labourers in his fields.[60] Further donations for the court's daily needs were corn, wood, apricot, apples, and grapes.[61] In

55 Sheik (2010c: 95).
56 Cunningham (1854: 314–315).
57 Moorcroft (1841: 318).
58 Gergan (1976: 606).
59 See Togdan Rinpoche (2015: 347).
60 Moorcroft (1841: 320).
61 Petech (1977: 159–160).

addition to these natural resources for daily care, the king also received a regular income of about 50,000 rupees. According to Cunningham, this income consisted mainly of various taxes, presents, fees, and customs.[62] This budget was further supplemented by revenue derived from houses alienated for the maintenance of the royal family.[63] However, ensuring the basic provision of food and other goods for the daily operation of the palace could become quite problematic, especially in times of crisis. Two royal edicts, issued in the second half of 18th century, state that due to political incidents—in one case internal unrest, in the other the change of office in the administration—there was a shortage of food at the court. In both instances, a person named 'Gang ba must personally cover for this lack of supply:

> When in the Fire Pig Year riots and accusations arose as a result of inner unrest […] the meat and butter for the kitchen did not arrive. But the 'Gang ba searched for a tricky method and borrowed it. There was no possibility to travel to Sa spo rtse, but he went there without consideration for his life and spent the expenses for the kitchen.[64]

> Accordingly, at the time of change in the office of the meat steward (*sha gnyer*) […], it turned out that food for the fortress did not arrive. For this purpose […] the 'Gang ba separated the meat and the butter etc. for the kitchen and […] according to the instructions of the treasurer […] the butter, meat etc. were sent on loan.[65]

These examples illustrate that the royal court depended on local agricultural production for its everyday needs in order to secure its own livelihood and thus its functionality as centre of power. The fact that the king's subsistence had to be secured even beyond his reign is addressed in the Treaty of Hanle, where the retired king Phun tshogs rnam rgyal is granted land as a property to secure his welfare.[66]

The royal court was not only a place of everyday life and representation, it was also the administrative centre of power from which the destiny of the kingdom was directed. It was here that the king met with his advisers to take political decisions, grant edicts or discuss military strategies. The royal court was thus a knot of social networks and communication, in which a number of different individuals and groups interacted with each other. This social function of the royal court served to bind those persons to the ruler, who in turn was necessarily dependent on their support for his own survival. This was particularly

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62 Cunningham (1854: 270–271).
63 Petech (1977: 159).
64 Schuh (2008: 111–112).
65 Schuh (2008: 117).
66 Schwieger (1999: 197).

true of members of the aristocracy and clergy, whose influence the ruler sought to regulate and control his kingdom. Such equal integration and neutralisation of power elites, at least in theory, is to be regarded as one of the main tasks of the royal court alongside the actual governing of the territory.[67] The functioning of administrative bodies had therefore to be ensured on a personal as well as economic level. Those who supposedly put this operativity at risk—for example by raising the costs of keeping the court or by enriching themselves—were accused of harming the social reputation of the entire government, thus endangering their own position of power. Examples of such situations can be found in several sources. The *La dwags rgyal rabs* mentions that the kings Tshe dbang rnam rgyal and Tshe dpal don 'grub rnam rgyal strained both country and people with their irrational behaviour and disproportionate use of economic resources against the explicit advice of their officials. The text goes on saying:

> As the king again paid no special attention, the treasures he had passed into the hands of other nations. At that time the treasure was lost beyond recovery.[68]

The Treaty of Hanle further claims that there were even some irregularities in the income and expenses of the castle and identifies the *bka' blon* bSod nams lhun grub and his son Tshul khrims rdo rje—who also held the position of prime minister for some time—as responsible of such anomalies:

> […] And again as for the reason that all income and expenses of the castle of Ladakh are free (from receipts), since the time of the minister bSo nams lhun grub […] one has only been doing business for one's own interests. Thus one has taken most of the income and land itself.[69]

> […] Because the minister Tshul khrims rdo rje had no affection for the castle, he kept all external and internal income for himself. By sending each other confidential conversations and letters, the greats were eager for rewards. […] Because the benefits to the king of Ladakh were not great, both inwardly and outwardly, […] great damage was done to the castle […].[70]

It was therefore up to all members of the royal court to ensure that the centre of power functioned properly—on both an economic and administrative level. Besides the satisfaction of daily needs and desires,

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67 Butz and Dannenberg (2004: 33–34), Paravicini (2007: 242–243).
68 Francke (1926: 122–126).
69 Schwieger (1999: 200).
70 Schwieger (1999: 208).

a smooth running of state affairs required the carefully balancing of existing competitions and a tight control over the power aspirations of single individuals. However, as the kingdom's history shows, such issues could by no means always be settled internally and sometimes external mediators were needed to settle conflict situations.

*Controlling the social and economic space*

The way in which power and domination are exercised becomes evident not only in the relationship of the ruler with his advisers and subjects, but also in the way in which the controlled space is dealt with. It is precisely in feudal and patrimonial conditions that dominion over subjects derives from monopolised power over their land. In the sociology of space, the principle of distribution is mentioned as an immanent factor: spaces are used to establish relations between goods, between people, and between goods and people. The constitution of space is based on the use of primary resources to secure one's own placement and to influence the placements of others. Space itself becomes a commodity, a wealth, an object of exchange. Through the control and division of this strategic resource, legal, economic, and political structures are created in the territory of domination. The basis for this is an asymmetrical distribution of access to material and social goods; yet, space and the order constituted within it are never to be seen as static, but as a relational and changeable resource of a political and economic practice.[71] The possibility of influencing these spatial structures can be attributed to four different means:

(1) Wealth, which is to be considered as the primary chance for an increased availability of goods. Since prosperity and riches are mainly in hands of higher classes in society, they therefore earn bigger possibilities in determining spatial and social structures.
(2) Rank, which means that the chance to get access to goods is determined by one's position in the social hierarchy. Those who have higher positions are usually given more space and resources (symbolically and materially).
(3) Affiliation, referring to the possibility of access based on the association to certain groups. For instance, belonging to a community of craftsmen provides opportunities and networks to acquire and exchange certain resources and expertise.
(4) Knowledge, which can be related to symbolic or material processes and grants more possibilities of action. Specific knowledge, for example in the religious sphere, allows people

[71] Löw ([2001] 2017: 214–217).

> to use certain resources and thereby enables them to influence spaces and power structures.

These means to create and influence relations of space—be it on a material, symbolical, economic or social level—always appear in combination and can strengthen or weaken each other: although a person may theoretically have a better chance of obtaining resources through their membership of a specific group, their access to them can still be limited, for example due to insufficient financial means. As social positions can be tied to certain expertise or possessions, the access to knowledge and money is in turn often organised by affiliation or rank.[72] Members of the ruling class in pre-modern societies usually owned these means (e.g. wealth, rank) themselves or could make use of networks of special knowledge and expertise in consideration of their socio-economic status. They therefore represented a decisive factor in the constitution and organisation of all sorts of spaces.

The importance of space and land for maintaining one's own status is particularly evident in royal policies. Relations between centre and periphery, structures of administration, ownership and dependencies, and the control of resources play a central role in this context. Land must certainly be considered as one of the most important instruments to create political, social, and economic structures.[73] In contemporary Tibetan societies, the mobility of land was limited: all land was property of the ruler, who bestowed estates to the nobles and monasteries as government grants and had the right to resume them at will. The sale of land was restricted or even forbidden, and the main form of transfer was inheritance. The common people, bound to these estates, had to provide certain inalienable obligations of service and tax payments.[74] Since the power of disposal and distribution over space was primarily reserved to the king, his possibilities to influence social and economic structures were immense. As previously mentioned, certain social groups which engaged in the representation mechanism of the royal family were rewarded for their services mainly by land allocation. In this way, local centres of specialised communities emerged: these were sustained from generation to generation and their family and business networks often extended across borders.[75] Court

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[72] Löw ([2001] 2017: 212–214).

[73] The significance of land is reflected in the oral lore. As Sheik states, old proverbs show that prosperity and social position were defined by the extent of cultivable land they possessed. One of such proverbs is: "To take a bride by pretending that *tetres* is his main field", where *tetres* describes the largest field belonging to the king of Ladakh (2010a: 53).

[74] Carrasco (1959: 209), Kapstein ([2006] 2012: 176).

[75] Bray ([2011] 2016: 314).

musicians, for example, were provided with estates in Phyang and sometimes even with houses within the capital's citadel, and palace traders were given land in Leh and Ruthog for their subsistence.[76] Land also served as means of payment for certain positions within the administration:

> The uncle […] has taken over the office of the smaller caretaker, but the number of fields was too small. For this reason, the fields belonging to the fortress' own core possession […] were now handed over as permanent possessions.[77]

The transfer of land however did not only occur purely in material form as land ownership or residential space, rather it was usually accompanied by granting access to various economic resources such as the labour of the people living there, certain tax income, and other privileges. The granting of such rights enabled the receiving person with some form of control over defined geographical, social, and economic spaces within the kingdom and created thereby hierarchies across several levels of society. The size and location of the assigned space often reflected social status, degree of economic dependence, and possibilities of political influence. Princes who did not succeed to the throne, for example, were often granted territory at the edge of the kingdom in order to keep them at the greatest possible distance from the centre of power. Or they were—at least theoretically—completely banished from the political sphere by their entering into monasteries.

If officials did not fulfil their duties or were disgraced in front of the king, they were usually deprived of their land. In a document from 1731 it is stated that after the minister Lhun grub was removed from his office, the fields and residence which had been granted to him were confiscated by the fortress, and his family resettled in another area. Such a demotion always carried with it the loss of associated social goods, economic advantages, and thereby rank and power potential. On the other hand, if it were the king who lost control over the selective distribution of land and space to aristocrats with their own agendas, this could in turn threaten his position of power. A prominent case was that of prime minister Tshul khrims rdo rje, a member of an influential noble family that had been in the service of the king for generations. The Treaty of Hanle remarks how, after his appointment as *bka' blon*, he was driven only "[…] by his desire to eat from the power of the king of Ladakh […]".[78] The text further states:

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[76] Trewin (1995: 186), Sheik (2010b: 70).
[77] Schuh (2008: 143).
[78] Schwieger (1999: 233).

> Because at the time of my grandfather Nyi ma, the minister was allowed to use the lands of the castle at will, not a single son of the minister […] was sent to the monastery, and he generously allocated lands of the castle to them. Instead of the daughters from the castle, he sent his own daughters to the princes as brides. (He) pretended that (his) family were even the rulers. (He) hoped that in the end he would actually attain royal rule.[79]

Through these examples it becomes clear that the power to dispose and distribute material and social resources was a key tool in the maintenance of status and power within one's own dominion.

But how was control over these resources assured in border areas? A collection of documents belonging to sTeng rgyud monastery in Spiti,[80] illustrates what power of disposal over spaces, goods, and people may look like in areas where different spheres of influence overlapped: a document dated 1708, for instance, confirms that the monasteries of Spiti, including their monastic villages, were under the jurisdiction of the Tibetan monastery of bKra shis gang, yet economic, military, and political control over the rest of Spiti had been transferred to the government of Ladakh. Spiti was thus divided into two parts, one administrated by a religious establishment, the other by the court. Although the monasteries did not fall within the jurisdiction of Ladakh according to this decree, the Ladakhi king issued several documents in the following years to institutions of the Sa skya school. In these documents it can be seen that economic resources for the execution of an annual ritual in these monasteries had to be assured by the king of Ladakh, since the localities providing them were subordinated to his administration. Furthermore, it was the *bla brang* of the monasteries that had to provide certain goods to the *mkhar dpon* ("governor of a castle") of the Ladakhi administration in the area—even if they were not officially under his authority.[81]

Other documents illustrate the different spheres of influence in a village called Rama: some households were required to pay taxes to a Sa skya monastery, others to a local dGe lugs pa monastery, and others still were directly subordinated to the administration of the king of Ladakh. The fact that this situation could lead to conflicts became apparent when the handling of a broken water channel was discussed in the village: basing themselves on the existing tax duties, the inhabitants considered different authorities to be in charge. Some turned to the monastery with the request to completely rebuild the channel, others complained about these plans to the king of Ladakh. According to

[79] Schwieger (1999: 233).
[80] Published by Dieter Schuh and Jörg Heimbel (2019).
[81] Schuh and Heimbel (2019: xxii ,46, 56).

the documents dealing with this topic, the problem of different responsibilities regarding the rights of water use had been present in this village for over a century. In the end it seems that the issue was somehow solved, and the channel was repaired and used by all parties equally.[82] Although these conflicting situations did not seriously question the separation of power in Spiti as a whole, they show how precarious the circumstances could become at the margins of one's own domain. Regarding the supply and control of economic resources, special strategies were necessary in order to maintain one's own political influence and economic survival in these contested areas.

### *Warfare, commerce, and the economy of gifts*

Finally, the kings' tasks also included securing and demonstrating their social status against other rulers, and they did so through war, trade or diplomacy. All of them depended in different ways on economic resources: in the foreground of all their efforts was the preservation and expansion of their own power. Despite being sometimes unavoidable, military conflicts came at a hefty price due to the inevitable loss of people and material that ensued them. There was no permanent army in Ladakh, and the armed forces were more of an *ad hoc* appointed national militia. In case of war, every family had to provide one soldier, as well as weapons, rations, and an extra-man for transportation, who also acted as a replacement soldier in case of need.[83] It is hardly surprising that the general food supply of the kingdom was at risk in such times of crisis. War always meant a higher consumption of goods and a simultaneous loss of manpower to cover the increase in supplies, since many were otherwise involved and only a few remained to care for the basic needs of the kingdom. According to Sheik, these circumstances even led to quick retreats of invading forces "as local production could not sustain such arm[ies]" for long.[84] Like soldiers, most of the other military positions were also appointed in case of necessity: the prime minister, or any other of the chief ministers, was entrusted the role of commander-in-chief to lead the campaign and was therefore unable to uphold his original duties during the period of military intervention.[85] They were often generously rewarded for their services with material and social goods, as a number of legal documents show:

> When war was waged […], Nga dbang lhun grub settled on the

[82] Schuh and Heimbel (2019: xxvii, 184).
[83] Petech (1977: 160).
[84] Sheik (2010a: 52).
[85] Petech (1977: 160).

> mountain spur and rendered efficient services. Based on this, I gave him the house where Nur ma gzhi lived and which belonged to the fortress.[86]

In addition to this higher consumption of man and material in cases of war, defeats had also to be taken into account, as they always entailed the danger of losing control and power over strategic resources and spaces. On the other hand, conquering areas endowed with economic advantages could benefit the political and financial state of the kingdom. As mentioned in the chronicles, the conquering of Gu ge by Seng ge rnam rgyal brought access to local gold mines and therefore a significant surplus of economic means for the royal court in Ladakh.[87] The proceeds of war were not limited to access to local resources, as they also brought a surplus of humans and animals: "He brought the chiefs of all these (districts) […] (with him) as hostages" and "[…] carried away ponies, yaks, goats, and sheep, and filled the land with them".[88] It should be kept in mind though that the plundering of those very same resources by foreign powers may in turn lead to a serious weakening of one's own economic state.

Commerce was another important instrument of trans-regional interactions. The kings of Ladakh were the largest traders of the kingdom and thus generated profits beyond the local economic production. The royal palace maintained its very own group of merchants (*mkhar tshong pa*) who were mainly involved in the trade of wool. Traders from outside brought in return all different kind of fabrics, precious stones, porcelain, medicine, luxury items, and other commodities.[89] Custom duties imposed on these products represented a large source of revenue for the ruling aristocrats. Moorcroft writes:

> The Raja, the Khalun, and the Lompa[90] also divide between them the produce of the imposts on merchandise in transit, and they all carry on a trade in shawl wool and tea, from which their principal income derived."[91]

Trade meant mobility not only of goods, but also of people and information, and therefore social contacts and forms of exchange across borders. By levying road taxes, issuing so-called *lam yig* ("grants of

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86 Schuh (2008: 123).
87 Francke (1926: 110).
88 Francke (1926: 105, 108).
89 Ahmed (2014: 336).
90 Moorcroft means here the officials residing in the royal capital: so Khalun standing for the prime minister (*bka' blon*) and Lompa for the governor (*blon po*) of Leh.
91 Moorcroft (1841: 335).

passage"), and securing transport labour,[92] the kings could influence and regulate the circulation of goods, people, and animals. In addition, almost all social groups in the country, from the aristocracy to members of the clergy and peasants, were somehow involved in the structures of local or transregional commerce business. The control over routes and networks could therefore guarantee and increase power potentials, as demonstrated by the fact that a blockade of the trade routes was used several times during the rNam rgyal dynasty as means of political pressure. One prominent case occurred in the 18th century: during the separation of the Ladakhi kingdom, Phun tshogs rnam rgyal—who was then king of Purig—caused political troubles by blocking the flow of goods and people between Ladakh and Kashmir. In the Treaty of Hanle it is said:

> The uncle has stopped the travelers, (namely) the merchants and messengers, until today. There was a conflict between Ladakh and Mulbekh. Not only in the end the Kashmiris did not bear it anymore. This certainly makes it a cause of a great deal of conflict between the kingdoms.[93]

The fact that such points were part of peace negotiations in all major conflicts testifies to the general importance of commerce for the political situation of the kingdom. The trade blockade, initiated by Seng ge rnam rgyal and maintained for many years, is said to have been an economic disaster for the Ladakhi kingdom.[94] Dieter Schuh doubts that the impact on the economy was that drastic: on the one hand, this blockade would have relieved the common people of their obligations to "forced and more or less unpaid labour in the transportation sector".[95] On the other, the income from trade had never been spent on military infrastructure or on raising the living standard of ordinary people; instead, it was mainly used to finance luxury goods for the court, the aristocracy, and the monastic establishments. It is also unlikely that the kingdom would have outlived Seng ge rnam rgyal for two centuries if the blockade were having such a great impact on its economic state.[96] The question arises to what extent trade actually contributed to Ladakh's economic strength. Of course, such a blockade caused financial losses especially for the upper class by eliminating

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92 The common Tibetan term for such obligatory or corvée transport labour is *'u lag*. In the Indian Himalayas it is also known with the Persian/Urdu term *begar*. For details on nature and development of transport labour in Ladakh, see Grist (1994) and Bray (2008 and forthcoming).

93 Schwieger (1999: 224).

94 Petech (1977: 51, 163).

95 Schuh (2014: 153).

96 Schuh and Munshi (2014: 153).

additional sources of income (e.g. road tolls and import taxes) and limiting the availability of luxury items. The common people were more likely to benefit from the blockade though, as certain mandatory services became obsolete. It should not be forgotten, however, that such an obstruction could have effects beyond the economic level. The reduced mobility of people and information due to the blockade of infrastructures was likely to be more of a problem than the loss of access to a few material goods. For example, in the excerpt from the Treaty of Hanle quoted above, not only merchants but also messengers are explicitly mentioned as being affected by the blockade. It is also conceivable that an absolute blockade of strategically important crossroads had an impact on local exchange of information and goods and would then no longer affect only long-distance trade and the country's ruling elite. With that in mind, such a blockade may not have been the ultimate economic ruin of the kingdom—but it could have significantly limited the scope of political action.[97]

Last but not least, commerce did not only dictate terms and conditions for royal policy, since traders themselves played a central role in political communication. In their function as intermediaries between rulers, they did not only represent economic interests but were also instrumental in shaping foreign political relations. A very prominent case in this regard were the Lopchak (*lo phyag*) missions sent from the court of Leh to Lhasa. Established after the Tibet-Ladakh-Mughal War in 1684, these diplomatic missions continued to take place until the mid-20th century and were always tied to the exchange of material goods. Every three years, representatives commissioned by the Ladakhi royal court carried a number of gifts for the local Tibetan government and important monasteries. The list of gifts mentioned in treaties and chronicles included gold, saffron, and cotton cloth. In return, the Tibetan side regularly sent its own diplomatic mission to Ladakh, mainly with tea.[98] In both cases the exporting traders were also granted privileges: they benefited from corvée transport labour on either sides of the frontier and used the journey to their own advantage by trading lucrative goods along the way—these missions thus have always been both political and economic in nature.[99] Although the symbolic action of presenting gifts played a main role on the surface, the items also had an economic value that could not be overlooked and gave them

[97] The critical role of such transportation networks is also emphasised by Goldstein in his study on taxation and structure of the Tibetan village of Samada. He describes the corvée transport system as an important tool "through which the central government maintained communications with all points in the polity with a minimum of personnel and expense" (1971: 25).

[98] Francke (1926: 116), Bray (2018: 44).

[99] Bray (2018: 51).

additional weight: the grant of high-end and luxury goods revealed the prestige and status of its donor as well as of that of the one receiving them; such missions also consumed a whole range of other resources. According to the *La dwags rgyal rabs*, each embassy had to be provided with daily rations for the members, several animals to carry humans and loads, a specific number of men "to act as groom, cook, and servant", and unrestricted fodder for the horses.[100]

Ritualised exchange of gifts formed one of the bases for political communication and interaction with foreign powers during the kingdom's period. However, such tributary relationships and the dependencies expressed by them could be interpreted in very different ways by the involved parties. Even non-payment of tributes in some cases had no major observable consequences for the political status quo. When Seng ge rnam rgyal did not pay his promised tribute to the Mughal Empire, Ladakh remained for all intents and purposes an independent kingdom. It was not until his successor bDe ldan rnam rgyal raised to power that envoys were sent to the Mughal court to make concessions of loyalty. In return, the new emperor Aurangzeb demanded, among other things, the construction of a mosque and the production of coins bearing his name.[101] These political relations and dependencies were thus not a fixed and unchangeable construct, rather presented themselves differently depending on the perspective through which they were seen and had to be negotiated repeatedly during the period of the dynasty. The kings of Ladakh therefore constantly stood within a spectrum between open confrontation and efforts to reach consensus. In this regard, economic resources and networks could play a significant role in the communication with other rulers.

## *Concluding remarks*

In summary, the stabilisation of power in the kingdom of Ladakh was based on various strategies adopted in the fields of representation, administration, and interaction, which were all carried out to some extent with the help of economic means. The king demonstrated his economic and social status by consuming, displaying, donating, and purchasing material and symbolic goods. He influenced the economic and social system by determining, regulating, and controlling framework conditions such as the distribution of land, grants of privileges, and access to resources. He actively participated in the production and circulation of economic goods through his role as a trader and warlord. The

[100] Francke (1926: 116).
[101] Petech (1977: 63).

kingdom's material economic system was based on two key elements: agriculture and trans-regional trade. While the first was primarily intended to cover the daily needs of food, trans-regional trade and its exquisite goods were aimed first and foremost at the aristocratic class: as consumers, they pushed the production and circulation of commodities through their lifestyle. In addition, a whole range of different protagonists were involved in the kingdom's political and economic fortunes. Their services for the ruling class—whether in a representative, administrative, political or religious form—were usually accompanied by economic advantages and often granted them a special social position. The complex network of relations between rulers, elites, and subjects was ultimately based on a system of asymmetrical distribution of material, social, and symbolic goods. When kings lost control over these resources, for example through internal quarrels, trade blockades or military defeats, the social and political order could be destabilised and the ruler's position of power endangered. The control and regulation of access to resources of any kind was therefore essential for building and maintaining the ruler's socio-economic status and political power.

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# Building Trust Within and Without. The Role of Costly Signalling, Ethnic Kinship, and Non-Sectarianism in the Socio-Economic Affirmation of 20th-century Khams pa Trading Firms

Lucia Galli
(EPHE – PSL, CRCAO)

*Religious signalling, reputation, and trustworthiness*

Recent theoretical developments in the study of religion postulate trust as functional to the creation of cooperatively derived benefits offered by religious groups, thus connecting ritualised and communal aspects of social behaviour to empirically tractable measures of costs and outcomes.[1] In the face of an increased sophistication of materialistic and evolutionary analyses of economic exchanges, egoist-based models have repeatedly failed to satisfactorily explain the more formalised and participatory facets of social behaviour, those that appear to be driven by cultural meaning and collective interests. To understand actions that translate into unmeasurable benefits or that favour groups over their members a different approach is needed, one that integrates, through a "costly signalling" theory, all those social, symbolic, and prestige-related aspects of individualising strategy.[2] The application of signalling theory[3] to the religious and socio-economic context of 20th-century Tibet appears particularly apt, as it allows, to borrow Rebecca Bliege Bird and Eric Alden Smith's words, "to articulate idealist notions of the intangible social benefits that might be gained through symbolic representations of self with more materialist notions of individuals as self-interested but socially embedded decision makers."[4]

To be more to the point, the existence of conflicting mechanisms and tendencies—religious inputs on one hand, and economic outcomes on the other—may be understood in the light of the

1 See Sosis and Alcorta (2003).
2 See Bliege Bird and Smith (2005).
3 Originally developed by evolutionary biologists to explain animal behaviour, signalling theory—also known as costly signalling or handicap theory—has been recently used by evolutionary anthropologists, economists, and cognitive scientists to study human communications. See, among others, Irons (2001) and Cronk (2005).
4 Bliege Bird and Smith (2005: 222).

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epiphenomenal benefits acquired by the individual in being recognised, both internal and externally, as part of a specific religious group. Religion maintains intra-group solidarity by demanding costly obligations, be they in terms of time, energy, material costs or physical and physiological pain,[5] yet it is through the voluntary payment of these obligations that an individual generates a credible guarantee—becomes, in other words, *trustworthy*. This credibility, gained within the religious group, reverberates on a wider, social level: by participating in ritual activities and sponsoring religious practices, the individual *signals* his or her commitment to collective cooperation[6] and, even more importantly from a Buddhist perspective, his or her willingness to invest in behaviours that could benefit the society as a whole. To be effective, rituals must be performed communally: members' participation must be observable and verifiable to reap appropriate social consensus and prestige. The net effect of religious inputs translates, according to what theorised by Pierre Bourdieu, into a symbolic capital in no way different from an economic one.[7] The accumulation of the first is just as "rational", to use the French sociologist's words, as the accumulation of the second, "particularly since such capital may be freely converted to one form to another, ultimately in order to gain advantages in the form of additional wealth, power, alliances, and marriage partners."[8]

This last remark appears particularly relevant in the context of the late 19th- and early 20th-century Khams pa traders' relocation in the urban areas of Central Tibet. Virtually "foreigners", these Eastern Tibetans tapped into a pool of shared religious beliefs and conventions to facilitate their integration within the local social fabric. By actively participating in ritual performances and publicly sponsoring initiations and community-oriented activities, members of the sPang mda' tshang, Sa 'du tshang or A 'brug tshang, just to name a few, attracted the attention of the upper strata, imposing themselves as both competitors and peers. Through their involvement in communal rites that hinged upon group solidarity and cooperation, Khams pa traders demonstrated to rightly *belong* as fellow believers, regardless of their different origin, dialect or ancestral sectarian affiliation. Although one does not need to be part of a religious group to engage in costly rituals (an aspect explored in the following section), the connection with the supernatural positively enforces the efficacy of the rituals themselves, surrounded as they are by preternatural beliefs the prescriptive nature of which is undisputable and makes them more stable than any

5 Sosis (2005: 8).
6 See Irons (2001) and Sosis (2003).
7 Bourdieu (1977).
8 Bliege Bird and Smith (2005: 223).

nonspiritual values that may motivate secular rites.[9]

As abovementioned, many of the Eastern Tibetans who moved to Lhasa, gZhis ka rtse or rGyal rtse at the turn of the 20th century began an active patronage of the major monastic establishments of Central Tibet. That such conspicuous displays of wealth occurred within the religious sphere is indicative of the semiotic nature of costly signals. For a message to come across, in fact, a shared cultural knowledge must be presupposed: both signaller and recipient must, in other words, be mutually aware of what is being communicated. It is religion, more specifically Tibetan Buddhism, that here provides a common interpretative ground, a frame of reference that ensures that signals are correctly transmitted and received. If the functions of this system of communication must be clear to its users, equally important is the sincerity of the message delivered: in a social environment in which signallers and recipients have partially competing interests (as was the case for wealthy Khams pa and Central Tibetan elites), the persistence of reliable communication can be assured only if both parties agree on honesty as the most mutually profitable course of action. As theorised by Bliege Bird and Smith,

> Costly signaling is a symbolic-capital explanation for [communal] sharing that focuses on its benefits for both givers and receivers. It applies particularly to displays which are characterized by (1) the extension of consumption rights to multiple others regardless of their exchange relationship to the "giver," (2) distribution or consumption in a social arena in which knowledge of the distribution is transmitted to multiple others, and (3) the dependence of the ability to produce the display upon some hidden attribute of the donor in which observers (who may or may not be recipients of the material donation) have a significant interest.[10]

The costly religious displays performed by Khams pa devotees during common rituals perfectly fits such a theoretic frame, since they (1) addressed the whole *dharma* community (both monastic and lay); (2) were performed in a public setting; (3) showed the signallers' hidden attribute (i.e. their wealth) to interested observers (i.e. Central Tibetan upper strata), manifested how such an attribute could benefit both sides, and demonstrated that such signals of attribute quality remained credible through a constant reiteration of the investment.[11]

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9 Ruffle and Sosis (2003).

10 Bliege Bird and Smith (2005: 226).

11 "[…] when signalers are competing with others in their social group regarding their commitment to delivering collective goods in order to retain […] privileges, they may need to continue signaling even if others are quite familiar with the competitors. To cease signaling would in effect signal inability or unwillingness to

Costly displays establish or reinforce social status and aid the acquisition of prestige through activities that unambiguously reveal the participants' skills or hidden qualities.[12] By publicly exhibiting their ability to "waste" time, energy, and resources in the sponsoring of rituals that benefitted both observers and signallers, Khams pa traders drew the attention of competitors, posing themselves as worthy allies and partners.

That such a partnership could result in marriage alliances and eventual merging of households is demonstrated by the well-known case of the sPang mda' tshang.[13] In the aftermath of his relocation in Lhasa, at the beginning of the 20th century, the head of the family sPang mda' Nyi rgyal (1865?–1921) dove deep into the intricacies of the local sociopolitical scene. Calling upon kinship ties to finance large donations to dGa' ldan, Se ra, and 'Bras spungs—the main monastic seats of the dGe lugs pa—Nyi rgyal gave proof of remarkable financial acumen. Drawing on previously acquired trust (built through repeated exchanges with friends, kin, and acquaintances), he translated an economic capital into a symbolic one, thus signalling to interested observers, be they the direct receivers of his offerings or external spectators, his hidden attributes of wealth and reliability. Nyi rgyal's costly displays gained him the trust of the monastic institutions which in turn became his main clients and financers. In a positive feedback cycle, the sPang mda' tshang increased their social standing, attracting the attention of the urban elites. Competitors, such as local traders, quickly turned into potential allies: in the 1920s, Nyi rgyal's sons,[14] Blo bzang yar 'phel (c.1900–1972/3) and sTobs rgyal (1904–1972/3), married two daughters of the Byang gling, a Lhasan trading family. The alliance was further strengthened by cross-wedding, with the four living as one unit. The polygynandrous union bore only one daughter, sPang mda' Padma chos skyid, yet, by that time, the name of the Khams pa household was synonymous with power and social standing, to the extent that the even the son of the Byang gling claimed closer connection to them by changing his family name to sPang mda' zur pa, or sPang zur.[15] The costly signalling strategy employed by Nyi rgyal had been

continue in the role of […] patron, thereby yielding the perks of […] leadership to competitors" (Bliege Bird and Smith 2005: 237).

12 See Boone (1998).

13 On the sPang mda' tshang, see, in particular, McGranahan (2002, 2010, 2015).

14 sPang mda' Nyi rgyal had four sons—Nyi ma (1883–1943?), Blo bzang yar 'phel, Rab dga' bstan 'dzin lhun 'grub (1902–1976) and sTobs rgyal—and at least one daughter named 'Chi med. Nyi rgyal fathered his eldest son out of wedlock, yet his wife, Nyi kar ma, raised Nyi ma as if he was her own, for he was born from a relative of hers, another daughter of the Grong smad tshang, a family from sMar khams (McGranahan 2016).

15 McGranahan (2002: 110).

so successful that his household eventually surpassed, in terms of wealth and prestige, the same allies who contributed to ease their inclusion into the local social fabric.

The case of sPang mda' Nyi rgyal shows how signals that emerge for one purpose may be co-opted for another: costly religious markers do not only signal intra-group commitment and the existence of mutual benefits for both signaller and receiver; they are also used by outsiders to gauge and evaluate the signaller's trustworthiness.[16] Competitive intra-group dynamics may furthermore result in costly displays: in these cases, costly signals function as discriminant factors in measuring skill levels among group members.

Several instances of such a "game of skill" are contained in the personal annotations of Kha stag 'Dzam yag, a 20th-century Khams pa trader who recounted in a diary format (*nyin deb*) thirteen years of his life (from 1944 to 1956), a period he mostly spent travelling, trading, and pilgrimaging between Tibet, India, and Nepal.[17] A note dated to the 23rd day of the 6th month of the Water Dragon Year (August 13, 1952) presents a list of the donations made in occasion of the transmission of the Lam 'bras and Hevajra teachings[18] by Ngag dbang blo gros gzhan phan snying po (1876–1952), the throne holder (Ngor chen rDo rje 'chang) of the Sa skya establishment of Ngor E wam chos ldan.[19] As the trader recounts,

> I prayed at the *dharma* gathering, offering to the great abbot Ngag dbang blo gros gzhan phan snying po 25 *srang*, silks, and so on. I even offered 10 *srang* to the abbot of Phan khang [i.e. one of the four *bla brang* of Ngor E wam chos ldan]. I then visited the "supports" of the old and new shrines of Ngor and offered a *maṇḍala* [having a value] of 2 *srang*. That time I outshone my *dharma* brothers.[20]

Intra-group competition had the merit of reinforcing the strength of the group itself (i.e. the participants in the *dharma* assembly) by motivating its members to better their fellows, thus solving collective action problems. In the production of a costly group-level signal, in fact, any

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16 Sosis (2005: 21).

17 For a study of Kha stag 'Dzam yag and the literary features of his "diary" (*nyin deb*), see Galli (2019b, 2019c).

18 For a general introduction to the Hevajra and Lam 'bras teachings, see Sobish (2008: 1–18).

19 For an in-depth study of the Ngor tradition, with particular reference to the figure of his founder Ngor chen Kun dga' bzang po (1382–1456), see Heimbel (2017).

20 *bdag gis kyang mkhan chen rdo rje 'chang ngag dbang blo gros gzhan phan snying po la srang nyer lnga 25 dar bcas phul te chos gral du gsol ba btab / yang 'phan khang mkhan rin po che la srang bcu 10 dang / de nas ngor gyi lha khang gsar rnying gi rten rnams mjal / srang gnyis kyi maṇḍala phul / da res grogs rdo rje spun rnams las mchog du gyur pa* (*Nyin deb*: 217–218).

heterogenous group, be it religious or secular, incurs in the risk of free riders, that is members who refrain from contributing to the production of the signal (i.e. the offerings) and "ride" on the signalling efforts of the others. To avoid a potential failure of the collective action, several measures are taken, such as resorting to systems of monitoring and punishments (a solution that will be discussed in the following pages) or to individuals willing to bear full costs. When there is a discrepancy among group members in terms of costs and benefits of signalling, as in the case of the ritual sponsorship described above, those who have more to gain from signalling (i.e. Khams pa traders) have in fact the greater incentives to cover the full cost of the signal production.[21]

It is worth noticing, however, that the competitions reported in 'Dzam yag's *nyin deb* occur among members belonging to two different, yet coexisting, groups: the *dharma* brothers to whom the author refers above also were, as he revealed further on in his annotations, fellow co-regionals and chief-merchants (*tshong dpon*). That was indeed the case of Rin chen rdo rje, one of 'Dzam yag's closest friends and a frequent business partner of his from dGong thog in Tre hor, Khams.

> Once, when the great shrine built by Ngor E wam Kun dga' bzang po (1382–1456) was rather ruined, Rin chen rdo rje of dGong thog, Trehor, made a religious offering in the great shrine that had been restored by the abbot of Thar rtse (i.e. one of the four *bla brang* of Ngor E wam chos ldan) rDo rje 'chang 'Phrin las rgyal bstan grub brnyes sngags 'chang and, on the 22nd of the 9th month [of the Water Dragon Year; November 8, 1952], the day of the permanent instalment of a good quality statue in gilded copper of Avalokiteśvara, I was among those who offered common tea, rice soup, individual alms, and so on to the precious gathering [of spiritual] heads—rDo rje 'chang Ngag dbang blo gros gzhan phan snying po, sGrol ma pho brang Ngag dbang kung dga' theg chen dpal 'bar 'phrin las dbang gyi rgyal po (i.e. the 41st Sa skya khri chen), the throne holder for the new incarnate of Thar rtse, the ex-abbot of Phan khang (i.e. one of the four *bla brang* of Ngor E wam chos ldan), the Ngor Khang gsar zhabs drung (i.e. Ngag dbang blo gros bstan 'dzin snying po), and others—and I too, in appreciation, made offerings to the lamas and *sprul sku*. I donated to the whole monastic community 5 *zho* in individual donations and spent more than 245 *srang*.[22]

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21 Bliege Bird and Smith (2005: 235).

22 *yang skabs shig la ngor e waṃ kun dga' bzang pos bzhengs pa'i lha khang chen po cung zad nyams skabs / thar rtse mkhan chen rdo rje 'chang 'phrin las rgyal bstan grub brnyes sngags 'chang des nyams gso yang bzhengs mdzad pa'i lha khang chen po nang la / tre hor gdong thog rin chen rdo rjes mchod 'bul dang / spyan ras gzigs kyi gser zangs sku chen legs gtan bzhag mdzad pa'i nyin zla 9 tshes 22 la rdo rje 'chang ngag dbang blo gros gzhan phan snying po / sgrol ma pho brang ngag dbang kun dga' theg chen dpal 'bar 'phrin las*

The instance above shows the economic efficacy and social pervasiveness of intra-group costly signalling: the competition in which Kha stag 'Dzam yag and Rin chen rdo rje engage as *dharma* brothers reproduces, in a religious context, the socio-economic rivalry opposing them as *tshong dpon* and agents of the same Khams pa trading firm, namely the Sa 'du tshang. The enacting of costly signals in a specific group (i.e. the *dharma* gathering) here directly affects the social standing of the individual within other groups (e.g. Eastern Tibetan trade communities, urban upper strata, wealthy sponsors). The positive feedback cycle triggered by the accumulation of spiritual capital is exemplified by 'Dzam yag's appointment as trade agent for the Khang gsar, the *bla brang* of the Ngor chen rDo rje 'chang, in the latter months of the Water Dragon Year (1952–1953), following his active participation in and generous sponsorship of the religious rituals and teaching sessions held at the Sa skya establishment. As the trader himself recounts in a diary note,

> In the 11th month of the Water Dragon Year (mid-December 1952-mid-January 1953) I was living with the Sa 'du tshang in gZhis ka rtse. [At the that time,] the Ngor E wam Khang gsar *bla brang* sent us—a chief-manager (i.e. 'Dzam yag) and two helpers for the mule trains[23]—in a trade venture to Kalimpong, India, to buy commodities up and above a value of 15,000 rupees.[24] Because of that, knowing that I was at the service of the precious lama (i.e. the Ngor chen rDo rje 'chang) and having focused my body, speech, and mind by taking [full] responsibility, I returned to gZhis ka rtse on the 20th of the 1st month [of the Water Snake Year; March 5, 1953] by taking care of the goods, after having carefully bought, sold, added loads, paid fees and so on. After that, I then delivered to the treasurer most [of the items] as the lama's belongings, and I focused on buying foodstuffs and selling drinks[25] and

*dbang gyi rgyal po / thar rtse yang srid ngor gyi khri las thog pa / khri zur 'phar [*phar] khang rin po che / khang gsar zhabs drung rin po che bcas dbu bzhugs 'dus tshogs rin po che la mang ja / 'bras thug sku 'gyed bcas phul ba'i gras nas rang gis kyang rjes su yi rang gyis bla sprul rnams la 'bul ba / grwa mang la sku 'gyed zho lnga re bcas phul / srang nyis brgya zhe lnga 245 lhag tsam song* (*Nyin deb*: 222).

23 Caravans were made up of *lag*, trains of seven to ten mules.

24 The text reads *sbyin sgor*, lit. "English money / sterling pound", yet the term is likely a typo for *hin sgor*, lit. "Hindu coin, rupees". At the time of 'Dzam yag's business venture (1952), the relatively new independence of India could have justified the use of *dbyin* either as a near-homophone for *hin* or as a slight anachronism for the [British]-Indian rupee. I am grateful to Charles Ramble for clarifying the ambiguous interpretation of the term to me (private conversation, June 2017).

25 I here opted for a literal rendition of the original *za nyon 'thung tshong*, although the latter is most likely to be amended to *za 'thung nyo tshong*, "trading foodstuffs and drinks"—it was not unusual for private contractors to pursue personal business on the side, and it seems plausible that this is what 'Dzam yag is here implying: he probably bought various supplies in Kalimpong with the intent of selling

> [other] necessary tasks.[26]

The extract above confirms the functional role that restrained forms of intra-group competition have in ensuring a successful outcome of group actions: allowing single members to gain additional self-benefits from their contribution to the cooperative efforts of the group eventually enhances the positive resolution of any collective action problems.[27]

The hypothesis, recently advanced by several evolutionary scholars,[28] that social bonding—of which religious participation is but a form—may be a facilitator of intra-group cooperation rather than an end in itself, acknowledges the functional role that the process holds in generating credible guarantee. It stands to reason that for any human social interactions to occur, a certain degree of trust and commitment must be presupposed between the parties involved. The problem of assessing others' trustworthiness is, nevertheless, fraught with difficulties.

> When faced with the conditions of collective action, the incentive to display false commitment signals is especially high, since individuals can achieve their greatest gains by refraining from cooperation while others cooperate. Therefore, whenever an individual can achieve net benefits from defection, credible signals of cooperative intentions tend to be those that are too costly for defectors to imitate.[29]

As previously mentioned, the costliness of religious obligations is such as to reduce the likelihood of an individual displaying a false commitment signal, thus promoting intra- and inter-group trust. Contrary to previous views of pre-modern Tibetan societies as crystallised and virtually devoid of social mobility, recent scholarship has argued for instances of inter-group mobility, particularly during the 20th century.[30]

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them on his return to Tibet. I thank Kalsang Norbu Gurung for assisting me in clarifying this passage (private conversation April 14, 2020).

26 *zla 11 tshes nang gzhis rtser sa 'du tshang la bsdad / ngor e waṃ khang gsar bla brang tshong don du rang nyid rgya gar ka sbug la dbyin sgor chig khri lnga stong 15000 las lhag tsam gyis nyo bca' 'go 'dzin dang / lag rogs mi gnyis bcas btang song bas / rje bla ma'i zhabs zhu yin snyam pa'i theg pa khur len gyis lus ngag yid gsum bsgrims nas tshur nyo phar tshong dang do bo bsdoms pa / bdal gtong ba sogs gzab nas rgyu nor mgo thon gyis gzhis rtse zla 1 tshes 20 la slebs / de nas rje bla ma'i sku chas rnams phyag mdzod la phal cher rtsis sprod dang rang gi za nyo 'thung tshong dang nyer mkho ba'i las ka rnams sgrim bzhin pa'i ngang nas* (*Nyin deb*: 224).

27 Bliege Bird and Smith (2005: 235).

28 See, among others, Bulbulia (2004), Cronk (1994), Irons (2001), Nesse (1999), Rappaport (1999), Sosis (2003), Sosis and Alcorta (2003), Steadman and Palmer (1995).

29 Sosis (2005: 8)

30 Particularly relevant in this regard are the volumes published within the research project "Social History of Tibetan Societies, 17th–20th Centuries" (SHTS). See

In environments where individuals maintain several, sometimes conflicting, social identities, trusting behaviours become essential in the pursuit of collective goals. In circumstances where conflicts of interests emerge, the trust bond is restored and reinforced by a commonality of mutual religious beliefs and convictions, since religions provide moral guidelines as well as a common hierarchy of values.[31] Although mainly based on trust, collective actions involving actors sharing a religious identity may also rely on a social and spiritual system of control that disincentivises free riders and detractors. Punishments carried out within a religious community can be extremely effective as they affect economic associations as well as social relations; the danger of supernatural sanctions (e.g. accumulation of bad *karma*, rebirth in lower realms) contributes to alter the payoff of any interactions, thus mitigating the trust dilemma among strangers.[32]

Costly prosocial behaviours are nevertheless not restricted to religious groups alone, as virtually any human association requires some level of cooperation, the achievement of which demands the elimination of defectors through altruistic cooperation (e.g. Khams pa traders willing to bear the full costs of the ritual offerings) or altruistic punishment, whereby individual members take upon themselves the cost of punishing free riders for the sake of the entire group, thus reinforcing its internal cohesion.[33] It is known that the adoption of monitoring and punitive systems modifies the payoff of social interactions, replacing trust with cost-effective sanctions, such as ostracism, physical punishments or financial penalties,[34] and that kinship is the yardstick against which other criteria (including reciprocity, prosociality, obligation, and moral sense) are measured.[35] Similarly to any other kin-based groups, Khams pa trading families promoted cooperative actions through reputational rewards and punishment threats, thus making intra-group trust virtually unwarranted. As Roy Rappaport observes,

> In tribal societies, ethics are an immediate and perceptible aspect of relations among people who are, for the most part, not only known to each other but stand in well-defined relationships to each other. Reciprocal (although not necessarily symmetrical) obligation is the cement if not, in fact, the ground of all such relationships, and the obligations they entail are usually quite clearly specified. Violations of obligation inevitably become evident, often quickly, and sanctions against breach

Ramble, Schwieger and Travers (eds, 2013), Bischoff and Mullard (eds, 2017), Bischoff and Travers (eds, 2018).

31 Sosis (2005: 18–19).

32 See Bulbulia (2004), Johnson and Kruger (2004), Sosis (2003, 2005).

33 See Boyd *et al.* (2003).

34 Sigmund *et al.* (2001), Sosis (2005).

35 Madsen *et al.* (2007).

> of obligation are essential elements of reciprocity's fundamental structure. […] That prestige as much as or even more than wealth is among the chief rewards of life properly lived in societies in which reciprocity prevails also encourages vigorous, valorous and generous fulfillment of obligation.[36]

It was the prescriptive nature of reciprocity within kin-based groups that ensured social control and the solution of intra-group conflict. The establishment of inner structures that strengthen the efficacy of social penalties and reputational status is central to the maintenance of internal order, since "reputation is essential for fostering social behavior among selfish agents, and […] it is considerably more effective with punishment than with reward".[37] Such a stability ostensibly benefitted the Khams pa trading firms in gaining the high level of trust attributed to them by outsiders, to the extent that they came to dominate distinctive economic niches (e.g. wool and cotton trade).

*Risky transactions: kinship, ethnic nepotism, and trust*

Although little is known to date of the inner configuration of Khams pa communities operating in dBus-gTsang, the scanty information in our possession depicts a clan-centred network regulated by kinship ties. Corporately managed, the Lhasa-based Khams pa community was administrated by "headsmen" (*'go gtso*), who, by virtue of their reputation, were appointed as spokesmen of their co-regionals. One's own link to the ancestral land (*pha yul*) did not fade with relocation, rather it became tighter and fiercer. Each Eastern Tibetan became therefore included, by representation, into a specific household, regardless of a direct blood-relation to its members, as place of origin now sufficed to claim kinship ties.

Accordingly, the sPang mda' tshang acted as "chiefs" for Khams pa men hailing from the areas of dMar khams and Sa 'du, the rGya nag tshang for those from dKar mdzes and Tre hor, the A 'brug tshang and the Ja ma tshang for the fellow countrymen from Li thang, the Tsha sprul tshang and the Chos drug tshang for those from Go jo, whereas the traders Dam pa blo gros and A bag were the representatives of the people from Tshab rong.[38] The corporative clan-like structure assured

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[36] Rappaport (1999: 204).

[37] Sigmund *et al.* (2001: 10757).

[38] Lhag pa don grub (2009: 369). The heuristics of clan-like organisation in interpreting the functioning of Khams pa trading communities finds an unexpected corroboration in Kha stag 'Dzam yag's association to the Sa 'du tshang. At the turn of the 20th century, the head of the household Sa 'du A pho phu (father of the well-known Blo dge 'dun and Rin chen) moved the family from sGa thog, at the easternmost borders of the kingdom of Nang chen, to dKar mdzes rdzong, in the Tre hor region.

control over the enlarged community, guaranteeing the maintenance of the householders' reputation, both inside and outside the group formed by the Khams pa expats. It was also responsibility of the firms (here intended as corporations) to emit appropriate costly signals by gathering funds for the sponsoring of public entertainments (e.g. picnics) or religious offerings.[39]

Religious markers and costly signals positively affected the proliferation of non-repeated inter-group trust,[40] yet Khams pa traders were unlikely to extend trust indiscriminately. As several scholars demonstrated,[41] in social systems characterised by close-knit communities, trust relations with kin occur at the expenses of trust with unrelated individuals.

Examples of the corporative nature of Khams pa trading families and the inner dynamics of their clan-based associations may be found in Lhag pa don grub's novel *Drel pa'i mi tshe* ("Life of a Muleteer"). I argued for the inclusion of literary texts in general, and *Drel pa'i mi tshe* in particular, as source of historical inquiry elsewhere,[42] attesting the factual verisimilitude of the work by comparing selected passages to information found in contemporary non-literary texts. One of such excerpts concerns a written agreement (*gan rgya*) drafted between a Lhasan noble (Thub bstan 'od snang) and a *tshong dpon* of the gSer tsha tshang (Rab brtan) following an incident involving the murder of one of the Khams pa chief-merchant's aiders by hand of Zla ba phun tshogs, main character and servant of the noble in question. For the sake of the present discussion, the excerpt is hereby reproduced in its entirety.

> On the 12th day of the 9th month of the Earth Ox Year (November 2, 1949), the people concerned, names and seals listed below, submit to the Justice Commissioner the contents of this clear and irrevocable agreement. The main points are as follows: Zla ba phun tshogs, the muleteer of the *sku ngo* Thub bstan 'od snang, the incumbent

Although most of the affiliates of the trading firms hailed from that area, the Sa 'du tshang must have appeared as the most suitable referent among the Khams pa trading firms to 'Dzam yag, who was born in Rab shis, sGa thog. Surprisingly, Lhag pa don grub's list of leading Eastern Tibetan families does not include the Sa 'du tshang, regardless of their active presence in Lhasa since the first decades of the 20th century, and ascribes the role of spokesmen for the areas of dKar mdzes and Tre hor to the rGya nag tshang (incidentally, the family is also mentioned in *Nyin deb* [208] as the owners of a building in the sBra nag zhol neighbourhood in Lhasa).

39 Lhag pa don grub (2009: 369).

40 The existence of internal codes of honour increases the degree of perceived trustworthiness of a group among external-group members. See Sosis (2005).

41 See Cook (2001).

42 Galli (2019a).

> Commissioner of the Western district of Phag ri, and Ngag dbang rig 'dzin, mule-driver of the mDo khams gSer tsha tshang, disagreeing on who had priority and right of way on the docks of the iron bridge, fought and attacked each other. Eventually, Zla ba phun tshogs used a pistol to shoot Ngag dbang rig 'dzin, thus taking his life. Consequently, the parties involved on both sides, having discussed the matter in person, and in accordance with the code of law for the compensation in case of manslaughter, have agreed that Zla ba phun tshog will pay 1,000 silver *srang* to Ngag dbang rig 'dzin's family without any kind of delay or excuses. After receiving the recompense, the relatives of the deceased are prohibited from renewing the dispute, [for that would be] like inflaming an old wound and, especially, from resorting to any kind of physical attacks to take revenge according to the Khams pa custom of "Life for a Life". Should any contravention of the agreement occur on behalf of either of the two parties, the liable party shall be required to immediately pay a fine of 100 gold *srang* and, subject to the severity of the criminal offence, the golden yoke of law shall be enforced firmly. Sealed by the parties to attest the clear resolution of the case in the above terms: gSer tsha tshang *tshong dpon* Rab brtan, the guarantors Khams tshang dGe legs and rNam sras.[43]

The agreement clearly states the existence of a legal system external to and superseding any intra-group punitive system (i.e. the golden yoke of the law embodied by the *khrim bdag rin po che*, a conventional form addressing whichever official was representing the Dalai Lama as legal and judicial administrator at the time of the drafting of the contract),[44] yet what mostly interests us here is the identity of one of the guarantors, namely the Khams pa (gSer tsha) dGe legs. The latter is in fact a kinsman of the *tshong dpon* of the gSer tsha tshang, the aggrieved party in the dispute: it is clear from the *gan rgya* that the matter, despite having been initially reported to the local official in charge of the law,

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[43] *sa glang zla 9 tshes 12 nyin lugs gong ma khrims bdag rin po che'i zhabs drung du zhu ba| ming rtags gsham gsal do bdag rnams nas blos blangs 'gyur med kyi gan rgya gtsang 'bul zhu snying| don rtsa phag ri rdzong nub las thog pa sku ngo thub bstan 'od snang lags kyi drel pa zla ba phun tshogs dang| mdo khams gser tsha tshang gyi drel rjes ngag dbang rig 'dzin gnyis lcags zam gru khar 'don snga phyi'i thad ma mthun par 'thab res rgol res byas mthar zla ba phun tshogs kyis 'phril mda' spyad de ngag dbang rig 'dzin 'chi lam du btang ba'i mi srog bcad pa des phyogs gnyis kyi do bdag ngo ma gros mol byas nas mi bsad stong 'jal gyi zhal lce ltar zla ba phun tshogs phyogs nas ngag dbang rig 'dzin phyogs su dngul srang chig stong tham pa 'jal sprod ka kor med pa bya rgyu dang / 'das po'i spun nye rnams nas dngul 'bab byung phyin slad rma rnying bskyar 'bar gyis rtsod rnyog rigs dang / lhag par khams lugs kyi sha lan len pa zhes srog la rgol ba sogs gtan nas byas mi chog| gal srid do bdag su thad nas 'gal rigs byung tshe 'ba' nyes gser srang brgya tham pa 'phral sgrub thog nyes don la gzhigs te bka' khrims gser gyi gnya' shing de thog tu 'bebs rgyu bcad tshig 'khrun gtsang chod zin pa do bdag gser tsha tshong dpon rab brtan nas rtags| khag theg 'gan len khams tshang dge legs nas rtags| khag theg 'gan len rnam sras nas rtags /* (*Drel pa'i mi tshe*: 243–244).

[44] See Schneider (2002).

was then privately settled within the Khams pa trading community of Lhasa in adherence with an internalised kin-based system centred on reputation, compensation, and threats of social punishments. Tellingly, the levels of trust here at work span different social groups: the Justice Commissioner, a friend of Thub bstan 'od snang, informs the latter of the grievous situation in which one of his servants is involved; in turn, the noble calls in favours asking dGe legs to act as a mediator with his fellow gSer tsha kinsman Rab brtan.

The growth of business activity and the consequent increasing number of firms' associates pushed the ties of kinship beyond the close family circle to include, as previously hinted, unrelated members, who were incorporated as affiliates or putative kin. In the early 1970s, William D. Hamilton revised his famous theory of inclusive fitness[45] to accommodate interactions between random members of the population, on the basis that "altruism could be adaptive between genetically similar non-kin, such as co-ethnics".[46] According to such a view, ethnic kinship could be quantified and compared to family kinship, a heuristic which proves functional in describing the dynamics of trust within ethnic minorities. To keep to the example offered by the excerpt quoted above, had he been in his *pha yul*, Rab brtan would have felt no compulsion to intervene in favour of Ngag dbang rig 'dzin's family, as they were not blood relatives. Yet, within the "foreign" environment represented by the Lhasan urban scene, Rab brtan's relation with Ngag dbang rig 'dzin's master dGe legs acts as aggregating force, effectively tightening the level of closeness between the *tshong dpon* and the late muleteer—from fellow clansmen (low degree of connection) to affiliates of the gSer tsha tshang (high degree of connection)—de facto making them "ethnic kin". Such a quantification of ethnic kinship appears particularly palatable as it adds plausibility to the theory of ethnic nepotism, whereby the solidarity developed within ethnic groups is modelled on family feelings, as members think of themselves as extended kin groups.[47]

Evolutionary theories on ethnic nepotism and kin offer insights into the nature of trust among families and ethnically bonded networks in risky enterprises. In her study of Chinese trading networks in Malaysia, Janet Tai Landa posits that "under conditions of contract uncertainty, a rational trader will have the incentive to reduce uncertainty,

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[45] First proposed in 1964, Hamilton's theory predicts that instances of altruistic behaviours are directly correlated to the degree of relatedness between the individuals. Also known as "kin selection" (term coined by the evolutionary biologist Maynard Smith in 1964), such theory has proven successful in predicting variation in human altruism towards kin of different proximity. See Salter (2007).

[46] Salter (2007: 541).

[47] See Eibl-Eibesfeldt (1982), van den Berghe (1981).

hence reducing transaction costs of enforcing contracts, by particularizing exchange relations on the basis of kinship or ethnicity".[48] Similarly to Landa's Chinese middlemen, Khams pa traders also resorted to categorisations, classifying their business partners according to kinship, clanship, territory, and ethnicity, according to the degree of social distance existing between themselves and the other party. The main preoccupation of Landa's subjects is to protect themselves from breach of contract in economies lacking a suitable legal framework enforcing stipulations: to overcome the risk of financial losses, Malaysia-based Chinese trading communities select partners who acknowledge and obey to the same informal institution, namely the Confucian code of ethics. In the case of 20th-century Khams pa firms, the presence of an external legal system that could adjudicate controversies was further strengthened by the existence of an intra-group structure based on reputation and punishment. Ethnic nepotism finds corroboration in Kha stag 'Dzam yag's *nyin deb*, wherein instances of preferential treatment toward kin are frequent: among the trader's business partners and clients we find almost exclusively Khams pa hailing from the area of Nang chen and Tre hor.[49] Some of these names occur repeatedly throughout the diary, as was the case for rDo rje rnam rgyal, the business manager of the Sa 'du tshang in gZhis ka rtse;[50] the previously mentioned Rin chen rdo rje from Tre hor, 'Dzam yag's business partner,[51] *dharma* brother,[52] and pilgrim companion;[53] and bKra shis nor bu, the treasurer and government appointed trader of the Gra'u household, the strongest *be hu* of the Yul shul area in Nang chen.[54]

By recognising patterns of mutual aid obligations between people with varying degrees of social distance—near kinsmen (e.g. family members), distant kinsmen in extended family and lineage, clansmen, affiliates, co-religionists—Khams pa trading firms operated through a system of ethnic nepotism that allowed them to protect their members against any perceived external threats. The strength of these Eastern

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48 Landa (2002: 133).

49 Consequent to his affiliation to the Tre hor-based Sa 'du tshang, 'Dzam yag's system of alliance extended to include Khams pa hailing from that area as putative kin, see footnote 38.

50 *Nyin deb*: 46.

51 *Nyin deb*: 46; 61–62.

52 *Nyin deb*: 222–224.

53 *Nyin deb*: 143.

54 *Nyin deb*: 66; 68; 189. According to the *tusi* system, the king of Nang chen was recognised as *chan hu* (Ch. *qiān hù*), a commander of one thousand households, under which there were eighteen major and fifteen minor divisions, each headed by a lord, whose titles were converted to *be hu* (Ch. *bǎi hù*, commanders of one hundred households) and *be cang* (Ch. *bǎi zhàng*, commanders of fifty households) respectively. Lesser ranks were indicated by other positions, e.g. *rgan res*, *hor 'dra*, *rgan chen*, and *bcu dpon* (*Yul shul rdzong*: 281; 'Brong pa rgyal po 2003: 39).

Tibetan corporation became apparent during the wool crisis of 1951–1952, when the American embargo on any products from Communist China (including the newly-incorporated Tibet) affected terribly the traders of Kalimpong who profited from selling wool abroad. Frantically trying to reduce their losses, the largest Khams pa firms—the sPang mda' tshang and the Sa 'du tshang—held close consultations with the Chinese government, eventually striking a deal for the purchase of 80,000 maunds of wool at the end of May 1952.[55] The stocks held by Tibetan traders, "including the large business houses Pandatsang, Sandutsang, and Retting, amounted to about 60,000 maunds. A further balance of 20,000 maunds were lying at Phari trade mart and at places between Lhasa and Phari".[56] Such a sleight of hand—a telling display of the mechanisms of ethnic nepotism—predictably benefitted the group formed by large- and medium-size Tibetan traders at the expenses of any "outsiders", namely all those Indian merchants and small-size Tibetan middlemen who were in practice cut off from the deal.

*The ris med effect: religious eclecticism and economic pragmatism*

The arguments advanced so far support the expediency of postulating a fine balance of costly signalling on one hand and ethnic nepotism on the other as heuristics of the rapid affirmation of Khams pa trading firms within the socio-economic and political fabric of 20th-century Tibet. Scholars of Tibetan Studies are no strangers to the application of evolutionary and anthropological theories, and, despite the inevitable shortcomings derived from the lack of substantial quantitative data, the conceptual framework offered in the previous sections does not diverge from the latest trends in the field. Yet, costly displays and kinship ties only partially explain the ease with which Khams pa traders inserted themselves into a complex network of religious competitors and safely and successfully navigated the intricacies of sectarian affiliations. A possible answer to such questions may lie, I would posit, in that same cultural milieu in which most of these traders were born, an environment characterised by religious openness and impartiality that were expressed through specific sets of moral values and social norms.

[55] "The Chinese Communist government decided to buy 80,000 *mon do* of Tibetan wool. It is said that in Calcutta 184 rupees will be paid for the pure white wool and immediately the representatives of the sPom mda', Sa 'du, and Rwa greng, and furthermore a few traders, came for trading their wool" / *rgya gung phran tang gzhung nas bod kyi bal mon do 80,000 tham pa nyo gtan 'khel te bal dbye phye dkar rkyang la ka la la tar mon dor sgor 184 sprod rgyu yin skad dang ring min spom sa ra* [**rwa*] *gsum gyi sku tshab dang* / *gzhan yang tshong pa kha shag rtsis sprod len ched du phebs kyi yod skad thos* // (*Tibet Mirror*: 11).

[56] *Himalayan Times*, June 1, 1952, page 11, as quoted in Harris (2017: 212).

In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the re-emergence of a non-sectarian attitude in Buddhist thought and practice fostered the preservation of endangered doctrines, ceremonies, texts, and minor lineages. Such religious eclecticism, known as *ris med*, had a long-lasting impact on the cultural and religious networks of Eastern Tibet, contributing to the local interiorisation of a new ideal of Buddhist practitioner, modelled on the figure of the hermit-scholar Mi la ras pa.[57] Although often defined as "movement",[58] *ris med* was in reality a continuation of earlier attempts at synthesis[59] that were reinvigorated in late 19th-century sDe dge through the activities of bKa' brgyud, rNying ma, and Sa skya masters[60] and that led to a strengthening of scholasticism among the non-dGe lugs schools. The establishment of scriptural colleges (*bshad grwa*) and the increased reliance on commentarial works of authoritative figures, such as 'Ju Mi pham rgya mtsho (1846–1912) for the rNying ma and Go rams pa bSod nams seng ge (1429–1489) for the Sa skya, created a new atmosphere of scholarly debate and disputation, wherein initial passionate refusals of dGe lugs views and tenets eventually mitigated into a more "impartial" approach, the emphasis of which was on unification rather than differentiation.

On a root-level, such an openness towards impartiality gradually translated into a relaxed religious praxis: locals participated in ritual activities performed at Sa skya monasteries, took initiations with rNying ma masters, sponsored bKa' rgyud establishments, and went on pilgrimages to the main dGe lus seats in Central Tibet. Whilst the fostering of religious tolerance and intellectual liberalism are acknowledged facets of non-sectarianism, *ris med* masters also cultivated spiritual goals that "did not exclude some hints of a political agenda, as

57 See Turek (2013).

58 On the problematic identification of *ris med* as "movement", see, among others, Samuel (1993), Gardner (2006), Powers (1995), Oldmeadow (2012), Turek (2013), and Deroche (2018).

59 Smith (2001), Deroche (2018).

60 Most active in the revivification of a non-sectarian approach and in the revival of minor lineages and practices—to the extent of being considered the "founders" of the *ris med* "movement"—were 'Jam mgon Kong sprul Blo gros mtha' yas (1813–1899), 'Jam dbyangs mKhyen brtse'i dbang po (1820–1892), mChog gyur gling pa (1829–1870), and 'Ju Mi pham rgya mtsho (1846–1912), although the latter's inclusion may be due more to 'Jam dbyangs mKhyen brtse'i dbang po's bewildering interest in his commentarial works rather than a real non-sectarian attitude of Mi pham, notoriously a strong supporter of rNying ma tenets (see Phuntsho 2005). Due to early *ris med* emphasis on schools' peculiarities rather than similarities, the same idea of "non-sectarianism" has been contested by some scholars (see, for instance, Samuels' [1993] juxtaposition of "Rimé shamans" and "Geluk clerics" or Deroche's [2018] argument for the adoption of the term "trans-sectarianism" in consideration of the profoundly sectarian identity maintained by the key actors of late 19th- and early 20th-century *ris med*). For an overview of different approaches to *ris med* in 20th-century Tibet, see Pearcey (2016).

they promoted Eastern Tibetan cultural value and autonomy"[61] and arguably contributed to the emergence of a socio-political proto-identity among the Khams pa, especially within the expat communities in Central Tibet and India.

As discussed above, the sharing of religious beliefs and the partaking in common rituals are means to reinforce intra-group solidarity and cohesion. Given the corporative nature of Eastern Tibetan trading firms, one would expect a "prioritisation", even perfunctory, of ancestral sectarian affiliations, yet the internalisation of a non-sectarian, impartial approach essentially instigated the active sponsorship of several monastic institutions, regardless of any prior connections the group (here intended as extended family) may have created with a particular school. As we have seen, it was through patronage and participation in rituals and empowerments that Khams pa trading firms showed their hidden qualities (i.e. financial assets) to interested observers, yet the choice of the playfield, so to speak, was just as important as the amount of energy, effort, and money invested in the costly displays. In other words, while sponsoring *dharma* activities was a positive deed in itself, regardless of the field of merit (i.e. monastic community) chosen, not all fields, to keep with the Buddhist metaphor, were equal in their symbolic, and therefore economic, payoff. In arguing for the existence of a certain pragmatism among Khams pa trading firms in their religious costly signalling, I am not negating the existence of real, heartfelt motivations behind the active involvement of social actors in religious rituals nor I am implying that such a behaviour hid any forms of callous opportunism. Rather, my aim is to argue for a wider impact of *ris med*, one that went beyond the philosophical disputes among masters to affect the socio-economic life of the communities that internalised the non-sectarian, impartial values.

Furthermore, it is worth recalling that a certain expediency had characterised the revival of *ris med* values and approaches since its re-emergence in 19th-century sDe dge, where the local royal family had prized religious tolerance by supporting six large monasteries of various religious denominations, i.e. Sa skya, rNying ma, and bKa' brgyud. The royal sponsorship was mutually convenient: whereas the establishments enjoyed an official protectorate and could influence the court through the dispatch of royal chaplains (*dbu bla*), the king could in turn rely on the presence of strong local monasteries to contain the rise of influence of the dGe lugs school, and, with it, the political encroachment of the dGa' ldan pho brang government.[62] sDe dge and the

[61] Turek (2012: 429).
[62] Hartley (1997).

neighbouring kingdom Nang chen[63] are but two instances where real-politik used *ris med* values to pursue non-religious aims, yet the possibility that non-sectarianism may have similarly affected the socio-economic dynamics of 20th-century Tibetan communities is surprisingly understudied, regardless of attested instances of spiritual eclecticism among several trading groups active in the Himalayas.[64]

The argument for considering a non-sectarian attitude as a facilitator in the rise of status of Khams pa trading firms in the 20th century admittedly suffers from a paucity of information on the inner structure of such corporations, yet the lack of quantitative data can be partially covered by a qualitative analysis. In the following pages I will offer two case-studies, namely those of sPang mda' Nyi rgyal and Kha stag 'Dzam yag.[65]

Of these two names, Nyi rgyal's is certainly the best-known, as the sPang mda' tshang became the epitome—together with the Sa 'du tshang and the monastic firm of Rwa sgreng—of powerful Tibetan trading companies. The family hailed from the Chab mdo district of dPa' shod rdzong, more precisely from Tsha ba sPom mda',[66] an area that incidentally gave the household its original appellative, sPom mda' tshang. Located on the upper side of the rGya mo rngul chu (Salween River), Tsha ba sPom mda' was crossed by a mountain pass

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63 The royal lineage of Nang chen adopted a religious-political alliance based on a system of chief chaplains (*dbu bla*) similar to the one in force in the kingdom of sDe dge (see Hartley 1997: 41–44). The ties between the two kingdoms, strengthened by a series of political marriages, culminated in the late 19th and early 20th centuries with the support and protection provided by the Nang chen court to *ris med* masters hailing from sDe dge. On the emergence and development of *ris med* in Nang chen, see Turek (2013) and Galli (2019d).

64 Spiritual eclecticism and multi-faith attitude were common to other trading communities of the Himalayan regions, most notably the Newaris merchants in Lhasa (Todd 1993), the Thakalis, who controlled the salt trade down to the Kali Gandaki in Nepal (Manzardo 1982), and the Nepalese Manangis (Ratanapruck 2007). I am grateful to Charles Ramble for bringing this factor to my attention (private conversation, June 2017).

65 Kha stag 'Dzam yag remained a strenuous supporter of the *ris med* approach until the end of his life: "Immediately [after his death, in 1961], many non-sectarian holy *sprul sku* transferred his consciousness and more than 1,500 monks, offering supplications such as aspirational prayers for his rebirth in the Pure Land and the *King of Aspirational Prayers for Auspicious Deeds* (Skt. *bhadracaryā-praṇidhāna-rāja*; Tib. *bzang po spyod pa'i smon lam gyi rgyal po*), blessed the transfer of his consciousness to the Pure Land." *de ma thag ris med kyi bla sprul skyes chen dam pa mang pos 'pho ba 'debs pa dang dge 'dun chig stong lnga brgya lhag tsam gyis / bde can dag pa'i zhing du skye ba'i smon lam dang / bzang po spyod pa'i smon lam gyi rgyal po sogs kyi sgo nas thugs smon gnang ste / dag pa'i zhing du 'pho par byin gyis brlabs pa mdzad* (*Nyin deb*: 6).

66 Although McGranahan (2002: 106) spells the area as rDza ba sPom mda', offering as alternative names rDza ba sgang and rDza ba dPa' shod rdzong, the spelling Tsha ba is the most attested.

which delimited the territories of nine local groups (*shog khag*): Ga ma, Thang nyer, Lob, and sPir phyir on one side of the mountain pass, in a deep ravine along the rGya mo rngul chu, and Khe si, Sog khri, and the three divisions of sPom mda' proper on the other.[67] According to Carole McGranahan, the family was locally renowned as traders and patrons of the Sa skya sect, a sponsorship that culminated in a marriage alliance with the powerful Central Tibetan Sa skya 'Khon in the mid-19th century.[68] It seems plausible that the sPom mda' tshang may have been among the major benefactors of the local Sa skya monastery in sPir phyir, which 'Jigs med dbang rgyal lists among the establishments of the sect in Tsha ba rong.[69] Be as it may, their union with the 'Khon family determined a shift in power as well as in territory, for the sPom mda' were relocated in sMar khams, southeast of Chab mdo, in one of the eighteen chieftains (*dpon*) positions directly administrated by the Sa skya.[70] Since the area they moved to was known as sPang mda', the household abandoned their ancestral name in favour of an identification with their new territorial estate, thus anticipating the subsequent change in their fortune's tide. The new position, granted hereditarily, increased the wealth of the family exponentially, and, in the span of a few generations, an offspring of the sPom mda'//'Khon's union, Nyi rgyal, moved the family to Lhasa, much closer to the Central Tibetan trade marts and the profitable Indo-Tibetan route.[71]

The unfolding of Nyi gyal's story, and that of his sons, is well-known, yet the influence that an impartial attitude to religious sectarianism played in the sPang mda' tshang's subsequent prosperity has been regrettably neglected. In relocating to Lhasa—the universally acknowledged spiritual, if not political, centre of whole Tibet—Nyi rgyal immediately turned his attentions to the main seats of the dGe lugs pa. It was to Se ra, 'Bras spungs, and dGa' ldan that he chose to pay the most costly displays, so costly, in fact, that he had to resort to loans to afford them. Such a behaviour, ostensibly in contrast with the

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[67] Most of the information on the topography of dPa' shod rdzong have been drawn from an anonymous entry in the Tibetan version of Wikipedia (http://bo.wikipedia.org/wiki/ དཔའ་ཤོད་རྫོང་།). Despite the impossibility of ascertaining the source of the material, the data appear consistent with historical evidence and scholarly assessment. See, for instance, the definition of *dpa' shod* provided by the *Bod rgya tshig mdzod chen mo* (1627).

[68] McGranahan (2002: 106).

[69] 'Jigs med dbang rgyal (2009, f. 75), as quoted in Jackson (2015: 247, fn. 21). Recent surveys of monastic establishments in Tsha ba rong list no Sa skya monastery, yet the sole Tsha ba rong khams tshan of Nalendra monastery ('Phan yul) must have had around thirteen branches in the area. See Jackson (2015).

[70] McGranahan (2002: 106). The name of the post is recorded under different spellings: *rgya khag* (Cassinelli and Ekvall 1969), *rgya dkar* (Phu pa Tshe ring stobs rgyas 1998), and *rgya skeg* (McGranahan 2002).

[71] McGranahan (2002).

sPang mda' tshang's family bonds with the 'Khon—and, by extension, with the Sa skya sect—is easily understood when framed in terms of impartiality and openness, the same values strongly promoted by *ris med*. That the choice of costly signalling a purported wealth fell on the most powerful and attended monastic communities of Central Tibet is arguably casual.[72] In drawing such connections between facts (i.e. offerings and sponsorship) and intents (i.e. personal faith) I am not dismissing the individual's deep-seated connection and affinity towards the Sa skya tenets and beliefs,[73] but merely suggesting the possibility that a non-sectarian attitude may have had a role in facilitating the integration first and the supremacy later of a newly relocated Khams pa household in the socio-economic fabric of late 19th- and early 20th-century Lhasa.

Religious eclecticism certainly well-suits the flexible nature of traders, sensible as they are to the changing tides of markets, customers, and suppliers. To consider sPang mda' Nyi rgyal's decision of heavily investing in costly displays at the dGe lugs seats as anything but the outcome of a careful, yet risky, financial assessment would be, I would argue, a naïve misconception. The head of the family was patently aware of the undercurrents of the new environment he moved into and acted accordingly: to put it bluntly, the dGe lugs pa offered the most visible and best-connected platform from which broadcasting the family's assets, and that was reason enough to prioritise such a public support of these establishments at the earliest, and more crucial, days of the sPang mda' tshang's relocation to Lhasa.

Similar in its development, although opposite in its outcome, is the instance offered by Kha stag 'Dzam yag, whose ancestral affiliation to the dGe lugs pa faded in the face of his active sponsorship of the Sa skya pa in the years immediately preceding and following his 1952-appointment as *tshong dpon*. Before delving any deeper into the factors that determined such a preference, a few words on the man himself are in order.

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[72] McGranahan (2002) refers explicitly to Nyi rgyal's generous donations to the three seats as a reason for the interest the dGa' ldan pho brang took in him, an interest that led to the grant of a trade concession in 1909, later commutated into a monopoly over the wool trade that terminated only in the 1930s.

[73] The strong ties kept by Nyi rgyal with the Sa skya sect are confirmed by the diary entries of Drag shul 'Phrin las rin chen (1871–1935), the 39th Sa skya khri chen, wherein sPang mda' Nyi rgyal is portrayed as a most generous benefactor. Several notes dated to 1919 (two years prior to Nyi rgyal's murder) record the sPang mda' tshang (here intended as corporation) as being actively involved in long life initiations, rituals of prosperity, and teachings, for which they offered religious objects, brocades, and provisions. It was in one of these occasions that Nyi rgyal allegedly confided to Drag shul 'Phrin las rin chen his desire to equally allocate part of his profits between the Dalai Lama, the Sa skya establishment of rGya skeg, and the Sa skya seat. See *Rtogs brjod* and McGranahan (2002).

Born in 1897 in Rab shis, sGa pa,[74] as the youngest son of the Kha stag tshang,[75] Ngag dbang dar rgyas, better known as 'Dzam yag, followed his forefathers' step by enrolling at a young age at the local monastery of Rab shis klung dgon dGa' ldan thub bstan chos 'khor gling, the largest dGe lugs institution of northern Khams.[76] Despite its remarkable size, Rab shis klung dgon was just one of the five branches of Rag nyag dgon Phun tshogs theg chen gling, an establishment founded in the late 12th or early 13th century by Khams mgyogs rDo rje snying po, a disciple of 'Bri gung pa Rin chen dpal (1143–1217) and allegedly the initiator and main propagator of the 'Bri gung teachings in Yul shul. Rag nyag changed its sectarian adherence at time of the 3rd Dalai Lama (1543–1588), thus becoming one of the few dGe lugs centres in northern Khams, a fate that befell Rab shis klung dgon as well: originally a Bon establishment, it experienced a relatively brief 'Bri gung interlude (from 1390 to 1578) before being converted to dGe lugs in the late 16th century.[77]

The predominance of bKa' brgyud subsects (e.g. 'Ba' rom, Yel pa, Karma, 'Bri gung) as well as Sa skya and rNying ma in the Nang chen area must be factored into any assessment of 'Dzam yag's costly signalling in the decades covered in his *nyin deb*. In 1944, prior to his departure from Rab shis, in addition to the propitiatory rituals and blessings he requested from his root-guru rDo rje 'chang sKal bzang rnam rgyal,[78] 'Dzam yag also sought teachings from bsTan pa'i snying po, a visiting *sprul sku* from the 'Ba' rom monastery of sKyo brags,[79] who instructed him to embark on a pilgrimage with no directions (*phyogs med kyi gnas bskor du song*) on the basis of a vision he had had of the

[74] The region of sGa pa, also known as sGa khog or simply sGa, although politically subordinate to the Nang chen *rgyal po*, was de facto administered from sKye rgu mdo by the Gra'u, whose secular rule on the area was gradually supplanted by the rule of the main reincarnations of Don 'grub gling during the Qing dynasty (Gruschke 2004: 106–108). Among the *phyi sde* (the "outer regions" in relation to the royal seat of Nang chen sgar), the "leading tribes", each with their own chieftain (*be hu*), were Gra'u, Bu chen, Rong po, A khro, Gur tsha, and Rab shis (also spelled Rag shul) (Jackson 2003: 523).

[75] Kha stag Gra lnga rab brtan (father) and Gro bza' mtsho mo (mother) had three sons and four daughters (*Nyin deb*: 2).

[76] The Kha stag tshang must have been rather wealthy as they had relied on herding and trade for generations, and controlled lands and servants (tellingly, the adjective used in the *nyin deb* to describe the author's family is *nor gyis phyug pa*, lit. "rich in cattle"). In the years preceding his forced departure from Rab shis (occurred in 1944), 'Dzam yag reported to have sponsored the construction of a multi-storied golden *stūpa* located inside the assembly hall (*Nyin deb*: 2–3).

[77] *Yul shul rdzong* (3–4).

[78] Abbot of the Lam rim college of Rab shis klung dgon (*Yul shul rdzong*: 29).

[79] 'Ba' rom bKa' brgyud monastery located in the kingdom of Nang chen (*Khams stod lo rgyus*, vol. 2: 47; Gruschke 2004: 133–134). For more information on sKyo brag and its religious lineages, secular history and sacred geography, see Turek (2013).

trader's future.[80] The presence of a 'Ba' rom master in a dGe lugs establishment is indicative of the atmosphere of eclecticism and impartiality imbuing northern Khams in general, and the area of Nang chen in particular.[81] In an entry recorded in the latter part of the 10th month of the Wood Monkey Year (November 1944), 'Dzam yag—who was at the time guest of the Yar mgo tshang, the ruling family of Seng sgang[82]—recounts, with a certain animation, his active participation in a ritual empowerment held in the hermitage of dGe ba'i ri khrod by rDo rje 'chang dPal ldan tshul khrims, the student of a student of 'Jam dbyangs blo gter dbang po (1849–1914), a late head teacher (*dpon slob*) at the monastery of Ngor E wam chos ldan.[83] References to the Ngor school, a Sa skya subsect, are attested throughout the *nyin deb*, an instance hardly surprising in consideration of the impact that such a tradition had on the trader's life, and, more extensively, on that of his business associates: the main seat in gZhis ka rtse was where many of the Sa 'du tshang's affiliates signalled their wealth and trustworthiness through costly displays. The connection between a member of the Kha stag tshang—who had been, for generations, tied to the Rab shis klung dgon—and the Ngor subsect might be traced back to the same trading activities that supported 'Dzam yag's sponsorship of the dGe lugs establishment in Lower Rab shis. As confirmed by several diary entries, the trader was not only familiar with the trade mart of sKye rgu mdo and its surroundings, but boasted acquaintance with some of the personnel[84] of the local ruling family, the Gra'u, who, incidentally, were the protectors and main benefactors of Don 'grub gling, the principal Ngor-Sa skya institution in the area.[85] As recounted in another note dated to the same month of the Wood Monkey Year (November 1944),

> Having gone to sKye dgon [i.e. sKye rgu'i Don 'grub gling], I circumambulated the outer circuit and offered some oblations such as fulfilment-petitions and the like. After settling my affairs, paying debts to and collecting loans from friends and business partners of sKye rgu mdo, I became totally engrossed with worldly matters.[86]

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80 *Nyin deb*: 12.
81 See Galli (2019d).
82 Place on the banks of the 'Bri klung gser ldan.
83 *Nyin deb*: 17–18.
84 One of those was the abovementioned bKra shis nor bu, treasurer and government appointed trader of the Gra'u household.
85 Gruschke (2004: 38–45).
86 *skye dgon la phyin nas gling bskor dang / bskang gsol khag bcas gsol kha / de nas skye mdo'i dga' grogs dang / tshong shag rnams la phar sprad tshur bsdus kyis bya ba rnams zin par byas nas / 'jig rten gyi chos nyid la yid gtad pa dang dran tsam re byas nas* […] (*Nyin deb*: 13).

The "giving and taking" (*phar sprad tshur bsdus*) activities mentioned in the excerpt above support the claim of 'Dzam yag's familiarity with sKye rgu mdo and its socio-economic settings; more interesting for the present discussion is though the brief reference to Don 'grub gling. Founded in the late 15th century,[87] the monastery was further developed by bDag chen pa rgya gar Shes rab rgyal mtshan (1436/39–1465/86/94), son of the 18th Sa skya khri 'dzin, who turned the nearby bKa' brgyud establishments into two ancillary Sa skya institutions later incorporated into the main monastic building. The construction project was completed in the 18th century by dPal ldan chos skyong (1702–1760), the 34th abbot of Ngor.[89] The connection between Don 'grub gling and Ngor E wam chos ldan continued in the following centuries,[90] to the extent that no apprentice could be granted permission to wear the regular monastic robe unless he had been trained at the main seat in gTsang.[91]

The influence of the Ngor subsect in the area of sKye rgu mdo may explain 'Dzam yag's deep understanding of the *lam 'bras* ("Path and Result")[92] system and literature as taught by the Sa skya, as well as his

87 *Khams stod lo rgyus* (vol. 1: 79) dates the construction to the Water Horse Year of the 8th *rab byung* (1462). The area of sKye rgu mdo was notoriously a Bon stronghold: Don 'grub gling itself is said to lie over the ruins of a 13th-century Bon po monastery, at the time under the care of the Gra'u family, who resided in a palace nearby. In the 14th century, the Bon po establishment disappeared, replaced by two small bKa' brgyud buildings, later converted to Sa skya (*Khams stod lo rgyus*, vol. 1: 79; Gruschke 2004: 39–40).

89 According to *Khams stod lo rgyus* (vol. 1: 79), the first abbot of Ngor E wam chos ldan to visit the monastery was the 31st, bKra shis lhun grub (1672–1739), in the Water Sheep Year of the 12th *rab byung* (1703). At the time of his visit, new temples and protectors' shrines were built. Under the guidance of dPal ldan chos skyong, the 34th throne-holder of Ngor, the main hall, the construction of which had started in the Fire Tiger Year of the 12th *rab byung* (1746), was brought to completion in Earth Snake Year of the 13th *rab byung* (1749).

90 As late as 20th century, these connections were still strong: in the Water Pig Year of the 16th *rab byung* (1983), the throne-holder of Ngor E wam, Klu lding mkhan chen 'Jam dbyangs bstan pa'i nyi ma, bestowed empowerments and vows to thousands of monks. In the Water Bird Year (1993), the Klu ldings zhabs drung and the Thar rtse zhabs drung gave teachings at 'Don 'grub gling in front of 2,000 monks (*Khams stod lo rgyus*, vol. 1: 80).

91 Gruschke (2004: 40–43).

92 The tantric tradition of the *lam 'bras* ("Path and Result") was initially received by 'Brog mi Lo tsā ba Shākya ye shes (993–1077?) from the Indian master Gayadhara (d. 1103). 'Brog mi translated a number of Tantric scriptures and commentaries, including the *Hevajra Tantra* and Virūpa's *rDo rje tshig rkang* ("The Vajra Verse"), the basic text of the *lam 'bras*. Contrary to other esoteric systems passed down through a series of Indian teachers, the *rDo rje tshig rkang* did not rely on written texts; 'Brog mi's translation continued to be orally transmitted and memorized for hundreds of years, before being eventually transcribed. Over the centuries, the different lineages of the *lam 'bras* were slowly absorbed into the Sa skya school,

choice of Ngor E wam chos ldan as a main field of investment for his costly displays. The same could be said for his business associates and Sa 'du tshang's affiliates, most of whom came, as we have seen, from Tre hor, a dGe lugs stronghold wherein Sa skya pockets still existed.[93] One of these was certainly Gong thog dgon, a branch monastery of the Nalendra subsect partially converted to Ngor pa; not surprisingly, Gong thog is also the place of origin of Rin chen rdo rje, 'Dzam yag's trade partner and *dharma* brother. Be as it may, the links tying 'Dzam yag to Ngor E wam chos ldan long preceded his participation to the five-month teaching session in the Water Dragon Year (1952), as the trader himself confirms in an entry dated to the 19th day of the 4th month of the Water Snake Year (June 1, 1953).

> Having happily donated a capital endowment of 100 *srang* in the Iron Bird Year (1921) to the ten permanent resident lamas and disciples of the scriptural college in Ngor, a profit of one *srang* per lama and disciple accrued yearly. On the 19th day of the 4th month of the Water Snake Year (June 1, 1953), I added to that [sum] 125 *srang*, for a total of 225 *srang*; not only each year abbot and students would receive a stable income of 2 *srang* each, I too increase my longevity and merits by supporting the teachings.[94]

References to prior personal connections between 'Dzam yag and representatives of the Ngor-Sa skya seat are repeatedly attested throughout the *nyin deb*, an instance corroborating the argument that sees a deliberate correlation between costly displays and the environment wherein they are enacted. Ngor E wam chos ldan represented, for 'Dzam yag, a financially secure option: he could rely on a well-established net of *dharma* companions, who were, incidentally, also co-affiliates to the Sa 'du tshang and his co-regionals; furthermore, the capital endowment he had set up in 1921 ensured him a certain trustworthiness and reinforced his status as reliable sponsor. The active participation to rituals, empowerments, and common offerings contributed to

currently the only holders of the tradition of the "Path and Result" in Tibetan Buddhism (Stearns 2001: 6–8).

93 The dGe lugs pa presence in the Hor states dated back to the 5th Dalai Lama. In the 17th century, the dGe lugs master Ngag dbang phun tshogs (1668–1746) established thirteen main monasteries, some of which being institutions belonging to other sects and forcefully converted. See Dbyangs can snyems pa'i lang tsho (1983: 42–57).

94 *ngor gzhung la bshad grwa rgyun 'dzugs bla grwa bcu tsam yod par / bdag gis kyang rjes su yi rang gis lcags bya lor srang brgya 100 tham pa thebs rtsa bzhag nas / lo re bzhin bla grwa re la srang gang re bskyed babs yod pas / de'i thog chu sprul zla 4 tshes 19 nyin srang chig brgya nyer lnga 125 bsnan te bsdoms srang nyis brgya nyer lnga 225 byas te lo re bzhin mkhan slob re la srang gnyis 2 re bskyed babs yod pa gtan bzhag shing / slar yang bstan pa gnas shing / bdag nyid tshe dang bsod nams rgyas nas* […] (*Nyin deb*: 226–227).

strengthen the inner cohesion of the core group formed of Tre hor-hailing traders of which 'Dzam yag was part and whose costly signalling extended beyond the walls of the Ngor seat to other extremely competitive and highly visible "fields", such as the dGe lugs establishments in bKra shis lhun po and Lhasa. It is in the former that on the 30th day of the 8th month of the Earth Mouse Year (November 1, 1948) 'Dzam yag engaged in a "friendly" competition with Rin chen rdo rje, investing 532 *srang* and 9 *zho*,[95] nothing compared to the 5,550 *srang* he offered during the sMon lam celebrations in Lhasa in the 1st month of the Iron Rabbit Year (February 1951)[96] or the 4,794 *srang* that went in common teas and individual offerings to the rGya khams tshan of 'Bras spung Blo gsal gling on the 15th day of the 1st month of the Fire Monkey Year (February 26, 1956).[97]

The last instances are indicative of the kind of sectarian fluidity and economic flexibility which were the by-products of a *ris med* approach: in a display of impartiality and non-preferential treatment of schools and traditions, Khams pa traders effectively penetrated multiple social groups and milieus, thus maximising the positive outcomes of costly signalling. In 'Dzam yag's case, the most expensive investments paid to the dGe lugs pa occurred at specific times (e.g. *sa ga zla ba*, sMon lam chen mo) and places (e.g. bKra shis lhun po, Jo khang, the Tre hor khams tshan of 'Bras spungs Blo gsal gling)—in other words, when and where his signals had the best chances to be noticed and appreciated.

## *Final thoughts*

In spite of the abundance of recent studies on the socio-economic rise and political influence of Khams pa trading households in 20th-century Tibet,[98] the paucity of information on the internal organisation and workings of these groups still hampers a full scholarly understanding of the dynamics that led to their affirmation within a competitive and relatively crystallised social fabric.

Costly signalling theory has the potential explanatory value to address the mutually convenient relationship Khams pa traders established with monastic communities, framing it as a facilitator in the process of integration. By showing public adherence to a socially acknowledged and validated pattern (e.g. participation to common religious

[95] *Nyin deb*: 140.
[96] *Nyin deb*: 198–199.
[97] *Nyin deb*: 245.
[98] See, among others, Andrugtsang (1973), McGranahan (2002, 2005, 2015), van Spengen (2000), Harris (2013), Travers (2013), Sadutshang (2016), Tsomu (2016a, 2016b).

rituals), representatives of the Eastern Tibetan firms displayed their hidden qualities (e.g. wealth, trustworthiness), provided intra- and inter-group benefits, and met the conditions for honest communication between the parties involved. The trust thus earned was further strengthened through the application of an internal system of control and punishment, guaranteed by the clan-like structure upon which the firms were built. It is known that kinship and religious practices encourage social and economic cooperation in groups: the existence of mutual obligations and intra-group sanctions ensures the resolution of collective action problems, thus increasing the reputation of the group itself vis-à-vis outsiders. As was the case with other trading communities in Asia, Khams pa firms demonstrated a remarkable ease in navigating the complex network of social connections and sectarian affiliations, a feature that may be partially ascribed to the relaxed religious praxis prompted by *ris med* values of impartiality and eclecticism. In suggesting an understanding of non-sectarianism that goes beyond the scholarly debates and philosophical sophistications to contemplate a more pragmatic view, I am merely positing that symbolic capital gain and economic benefits may be possible by-products of sincere religious openness and inclusiveness. To support such a postulation, I presented the cases of two traders who exhibited a remarkable non-sectarian approach, namely sPang mda' Nyi rgyal and Kha stag 'Dzam yag:[99] most of their costly displays occurred at specific times and places—so to reap, as we have seen, the best results—yet the devotion that deeply imbued their most private moments makes it impossible to question the authenticity of their faith. Whereas Nyi rgyal dedicated part of his earnings to the maintenance of rGya skeg monastery (a rather poor investment in costly displays given the small size and relative peripherical relevance of the establishment), 'Dzam yag kept a personal record of his circumambulations (*skor ba*) of bKra shis lhun po, a solitary activity he dedicated to the benefit of all sentient beings.[100]

The virtual monopoly of trade within Tibet and the socio-political influence enjoyed by Khams pa trading firms in the first half of 20th

[99] 'Dzam yag's non-sectarianism transpires clearly from his notes, yet it is in the foreword to the edited version of the *nyin deb* that his religious non-sectarianism is clearly stated. Particularly relevant is the commemorative discourse offered at the time of the trader's funeral by Kha stag O rgyan chos 'phel, *mkhan po* of the meditation centre of the Karma bKa' brgyud monastery of Kha 'gu dgon in sGa pa (*Nyin deb*: 6–7).

[100] Between the 25th day of the 11th month of the Iron Tiger Year (January 22, 1952) and the 23rd day of the 6th month of the Water Dragon Year (August 13, 1952), 'Dzam yag accumulated 225 circumambulations of the outer circuit (*phyi skor*) and 3,225 circumambulations of the inner circuit (*nang skor*) of bKra shis lhun po (*Nyin deb*: 217).

century were certainly the outcome of different, concurrent factors, most of which still awaits rigorous scholarly analysis. The adoption of a heuristic framework that integrates costly signalling theory with an observation of the ties between kinship and religious practices offers a valuable tool to understand the role played by honest communication in the development of intra- and inter-group trust, by securing social benefits that have real materialistic consequences. As a final provocation, I have argued for an interpretation of non-sectarianism as possible trade facilitator, in consideration of the flexible nature exhibited by several Asian trading communities embedded in an eclectic religious environment.[101]

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[101] Contemporary masters' biographical writings may offer valuable information on the socio-economic influence that Khams pa traders exerted over the religious establishments of the time, especially in relation to their role as patrons (*sbyin bdag*). Such a comparative analysis may also shed some light on the non-sectarian attitude of this social group, furthering our knowledge of the intertwining networks they created throughout the plateau and beyond. I thank Carole McGranahan for pointing this out to me (private conversation, July 2019).

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# From Sacred Commodity to Religio-Economic Conundrum: Tracing the Tibetan Term *dKor*

Berthe Jansen
(Leipzig University)

This article discusses the Tibetan term *dkor*, a concept that appears to have become increasingly complex as it developed over the last millennium up until this day. The most basic connotation of the word *dkor* is "wealth" or "possession", something rather concrete indeed. In contradistinction with what is often called the "commodification of religion", that is to say, "the process of transforming goods, services, ideas, and [...] religion into something that can be bought and sold",[1] I argue in this article that, as time passed, a gradual shift from the material to the immaterial has taken place. In other words, a shift from something that can be bought and sold to something that is intangible yet is thought to have an (invisible) effect on this life and the next. While, at first glance, the word *dkor*, in particular in combination with *nor*—indicating wealth—suggests nothing but positive connotations (except for perhaps the world-renouncing ascetic recluse), this article also hypothesises that the general connotation of the term *dkor* has shifted from a neutral or even positive association to an unmistakably negative one. The very process of tracing the development of this term reveals how Tibetans thought—and still think—about certain aspects of religio-economic transactions, such as what belongs to the (sacred) community and on what terms, the karmic debts incurred by members of that community and those surrounding it, and what we ourselves may be owing to society and how to repay that debt.

## *The development of the word dkor*

Jäschke's dictionary translates *dkor* as: "wealth, riches", but then names a few related expressions current in Central Tibet, namely *mthil dkor*, *yang dkor*, and *sa dkor*, which he "could not get sufficiently explained".[2] The latter terms are given by Das as "foundation, endowment of a monastery", "additional or occasional gifts for the support

[1] Brox and Williams-Oerberg (2015: 6).
[2] Jäschke ([1881] 1995: 11).

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of a religious institution", and "landed endowment of a monastery or religious institution" respectively.[3] The *Bod rgya tshig mdzod chen mo*, while usually very instructive, does not give much information beyond what Jäschke's dictionary states: *dkor* is 1) a word for wealth in general (*nor spyi'i ming*) or could indicate 2) the materials of the faithful (*dad pa'i rdzas*). It gives as an example *dge 'dun gyi dkor*: the Sangha's wealth.[4]

Goldstein's dictionary, that uses mostly modern Tibetan literature as its basis, gives two glosses, the second of which is similar to Jäschke's, while the first translation of *dkor* reads: "wealth or property given out of religious belief." A derived expression "*dkor gyis 'tshig*/*'tshigs*" is given on the same page, which is glossed as "to be corrupted by wealth (for monks—e.g. a monk lives off of alms but doesn't act as a proper monk) [Lit. to be burned by wealth generated from religion]".[5] From the above we can glean that the most elementary meaning of the word is wealth, commodity, or material goods. This is further emphasised in compound words such as *dkor mdzod,* meaning treasury, and *sde dkor,* indicating the wealth of the king. In Dunhuang materials, we find *dkor* often combined with *nor* ("cattle") to indicate someone's possessions, for example in Pt 1285 in the context of funerary rites.[6] Later on, *dkor nor* came to mean "general wealth". In another fragmentary legal record that deals with theft (ITJ 753), the term also denotes something material of some value.[7] However, the other—slightly more complicated—gloss of *dkor* already occurs in these early Tibetan works, namely as the wealth of the Three Jewels (*dkon mchog gsum gyI dkor* and *bkon chogi dkor*, ITJ 740).[8]

While occurring in a legal text of sorts, this phrase clearly reflects the Tibetan usage found in translations of Indic Buddhist texts—mostly *sūtra* and Vinaya works. In these Buddhist materials we find *dkor* mostly in three ways: 1) the possession of the Three Jewels (*dkon mchog gsum gyi dkor*); 2) the possessions of the stūpa (*mchod rten gyi dkor*); and 3) the possessions of the Sangha (*dge 'dun gyi dkor*).[9] The Sanskrit terms that *dkor* translates in this context are relatively simple and non-descript words such as *sva*, *dravya*, or *vasu*, again referring to

3 Das *et al.* (1970: 55).
4 Zhang (1993: 62).
5 Goldstein (2001: 22).
6 Stein (2010: 267).
7 Dotson (2011: 82).
8 Dotson (2011: 85, 86). This work's title has been translated by Dotson as "Replies concerning the dice statutes from the tiger year dice edict" (*stagI lo'I bka'I sho byung be'i sho tshIgs gyI zhus lan*).
9 Alternatively, *dge 'dun phyogs bcu'i dkor*. See for example, Silk (2008: 251; 286–288), and Schopen (1996: 109), citing the *Kṣudrakavastu* (Tog 'dul ba Ta 343a.2–344b.1): "Thieves stole the riches of the Three Jewels" (*dkon mchog gsum gyi dkor*).

material goods. A verse in the *Bodhicaryāvatāra,* for example, notes that if one steals the wealth of the Three Jewels (*ratnatrayasvam*), one will be reborn in the Avīcī hell.[10]

*A Tibetan interpretation: wealth with a negative connotation*

While in later Tibetan Buddhist literature *dkor* maintains the meaning of wealth, a different connotation gains ground, namely that of material good that in some way or another carries karmic weight or implication. The term acquires a complexity that is difficult to encapsulate in a translation, and as I shall point out later on in this article, has been mistranslated or poorly translated on account of this. It is a broad concept used mostly to criticise behaviour conducted by monks, while lay practitioners are not exempt from condemnation. According to *Blazing Splendor: The Memoirs of Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche* (1920–1996), *dkor* "refers to material things offered out of faith to a monastic community or an individual lama for the benefit of a living or deceased person, which—when used for another purpose than the intended—have dire karmic consequences".[11] The term is often used within a monastic setting, in which monks tend to depend greatly on such offerings. In a previous work, I have glossed *dkor* in a monastic context as referring to "monastic wealth", which often has a negative connotation: "For example, someone who 'eats *dkor*' (*dkor bza' mkhan*) in colloquial (and written) Tibetan is someone who sponges off the monastic amenities without doing anything in return".[12]

During a period of fieldwork in North India, I asked a senior monk belonging to a rNying ma monastery about managerial and economic issues to do with his monastery. Instead, he vented his frustrations and said:

> There are some things seriously wrong these days. Take for example the fact that if one out of two sons becomes a monk, it is often him and not the lay son who is able to support his family. But this is not the task of the monk! It is really not supposed to be like this! Still this happens and many people say that one cannot criticise a son taking [financial] care of his family. So, I cannot voice my feelings about this without getting disliked by others. Nonetheless, doing this is *dkor*, which is said to be like an iron ball: to eat it one needs iron cheeks.[13]

He then continued by telling me a story about a monk who took from

[10] See Śāntideva's *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, v. 123/ 53.
[11] Urgyen and Kunsang (2005: 384 n. 128).
[12] Jansen (2018: 226 n. 164).
[13] Interview with a senior monk who chose not to be named, India 2012.

the Sangha and who was reborn as this very strange fishlike creature. Upon finding him, the Buddha explained why he was reborn that way.[14] The dire karmic consequences of misusing that which belongs to the Sangha is also emphasised in an account found in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* (*Khrid yig kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung*)—Patrul Rinpoche's (rDza dPal sprul Rin po che, 1808–1887) work that contains many mentions of *dkor*. In the context of his explanation of how karma works, the author describes an incident involving the great abbot (*mkhan chen*) of Ngor monastery, dPal ldan chos skyong. During a visit to sDe dge, he asked a number of monks to be on the look-out for something unusual along the banks of the Ngulda river (*rngul mda'i chu*). At the very end of the day the monks spotted a large tree-trunk in the water, which they took to the abbot.

> "That must be it", he said. "Split it open." Inside they found a big frog being eaten alive by a mass of insects. After doing a purification ritual, the Abbot said that the frog had been a treasurer of Derge named Pogye. Today they might seem all-powerful, but all those chiefs and high dignitaries who dip into the public purse should think about the ephemeral hells and be careful.[15]

While in this specific instance, the author does not use the phrase *dkor za ba*, but the less common *sde za ba* (here translated as "dip into the public purse"), both the meaning "to misuse the Sangha's wealth" and the karmic consequences of doing so are similar to what the interviewed monk related. This monk further mentioned that one needs iron cheeks in order to eat *dkor*. This is referring to the related Tibetan proverb (*gtam dpe*): *dkor zas za la lcags kyi 'gram pa dgos.* In his book *Buddhism of Tibet*, Laurence Waddell gives a slightly misspelled version of this proverb at the start of a chapter on the daily life and routine of monks—"Lāmas" in his parlance. He glosses this as: "He who eats Lāmas' food, wants iron jaws", but does not elaborate on its meaning.[16]

It is clear that to partake unlawfully in what belongs to the Sangha is associated with ingesting something red hot and potentially painful. This is by no means a Tibetan invention, but rather a reference to the

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[14] While I have not been able to find said story, there are many similar accounts that are told in various Tibetan texts, on which more below.

[15] Patrul Rinpoche *et al*. (1998: 70). *Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung*: 65: *de yin/ sdong dum de gshogs dang gsungs/ sdong dum de gshags pa'i nang na sbal pa chen po zhig la srog chags mang pos za gin 'dug pa de le khrus chog sogs mdzad/ sde dge gnyer pa bo rgyas bya ba zhig gi skye ba yin gsung/ des na mi dpon khe drag sde za ba rnams kyang da lta dbang che yang dmyal gnas 'di dag la bsams nas stabs gzab byed dgos par 'dug/*

[16] Waddell (2015 [1895]: 212). A related proverb, *mi rgyu za bar lcags kyi 'gram pa dgos* ("To eat the wealth of others, one needs cheeks of iron"), can be found in Cüppers and Sørensen (1998: 185).

*Vinayavibhaṅgha* (D003), an Indic work on monastic discipline found in the bKa' 'gyur. The set of monastic guidelines for bKra shis lhun po monastery written in 1876 by the 8th Panchen Lama, for example, refers to *dkor* and its likeness to eating hot iron and cites this work:

> Those who use the food of the faithful (*dad zas*) but do not have ethical discipline have faults that are incredible. The *Vinayavibhaṅgha* says: "As it would be better to eat flaming balls of metal, someone with faulty discipline and without vows is not to eat the offerings from his surroundings."[17]

The very same citation is used frequently in similar contexts. The 7th Dalai Lama, for instance, utilises it in his 1726 monastic guidelines for rNam rgyal monastery. He further elaborates on these words by saying:

> Those who are not ordained and those who have faulty discipline and use the facilities (*dkor*) of the Sangha without restraint destroy themselves, which is very serious. They also defile other members of the Sangha and so are said to be like the frogs with sores. Therefore, once one has become ordained it is important to have pure ethical discipline and restraint.[18]

The 5th Dalai Lama equally employs this quote from the *Vinayavibhaṅgha* in his monastic guidelines for 'Bras spungs monastery and explains that there will be serious karmic results when someone does not keep his vows or a when layperson uses *dkor*.[19] He again cites canonical material, this time the *Sūryagarbhasūtra*, which warns that for those who have become householders, it would be easier to take on fire equal in size to Mount Meru, than to consume that which is the

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[17] *Bkra shis lhun po bca' yig*: 64: *gzhan yang tshul khrims dang mi ldan pas dad zas la spyod pa ni nyes pa dpag tu med pa dang ldan te/ lung rnam 'byed las/ lcags gong me lce 'bar ba dag/ zos par gyur pa mchog yin gyi/ tshul 'chal yang dag mi sdom pas/ yul 'khor bsod snyoms za ba min/*

[18] *Rnam rgyal grwa tshang bca' yig*: 67: *tshul 'chal dang bslab sdom la bag med pa'i rigs dge 'dun gyi dkor la spyod pa rang nyid 'phung 'tshabs shin tu che shing/ dge 'dun gzhan rnams kyang sbags nas sbal pa rma can bzhin 'gyur bar gsungs pas rab tu byung nas tshul khrims dag pa dang bag yod pa gal che/* The same author cites the same source and gives the same explanation save for part of the wording in his monastic guidelines for the Tantric college of sKu 'bum monastery, *Sku 'bum rgyud pa grwa tshang bca' yig*: 13a) *dge 'dun 'bags pa sogs sbal pa rma can bzhin 'gyur bas legs par brtags pa gal che/*. Also see Jansen (2018: 120; 222 n. 35) for this Vinaya citation.

[19] *'Bras spungs bca' yig*: 299: [..] *bslab pa dang mi ldan pa'i gang zag gis dkor la longs spyod pa dang der ma zad khyim pas spyad kyang de dang cha 'dra ba'i nyes dmigs bzod par dka' zhing* [..]

Sangha's.[20] In a previous article on these guidelines and 'Bras spungs monastery in the mid-17th century in general, I commented upon the above cited excerpts:

> Out of context, what the Fifth Dalai Lama addresses here may be read as a discussion on Buddhist ethics. However, it is clear that what is addressed and carefully supported by canonical quotations is a very topical and local problem, namely the exponential growth of the monastic population and the questionable motives and behaviour of some of the inhabitants of Drepung monastery during the late 17th century.[21]

It was clear to the 5th Dalai Lama that there were people in and around 'Bras spungs who were partaking in the sudden riches the monastery had to offer, without being a monk or without behaving sufficiently monk-ish. The problem lay therefore not just with protecting these persons against the negative karma they would otherwise incur but also with preventing the successful religious institution from becoming a magnet for unwanted elements.

With regard to laypeople consuming *dkor*, the consequences were said to be dire indeed. One genre of Tibetan literature in which the karmic results of abusing the Sangha's wealth is a common trope is that of the biographies of the "Death-returners" (*'das log*). In the account of the netherworld as told by the female death-returner Karma dbang 'dzin, which was partially translated by Bryan Cuevas, an old woman she meets in the afterlife tells her how she never returned the possessions (*dkor*) that the monks left in her care, which is one of the reasons why she was reborn in hell.[22] There are many more such accounts, which have not yet been explored or translated, but I expect this theme to be a common one, especially since the target audience of these stories were ordinary laypeople.

It is not just in a monastic setting that *dkor* is thought to be an issue for would-be "professional" religious practitioners. The non-sectarian yogin Zhabs dkar (Tshogs drug rang grol) famously stayed away from institutional religion and is known to have been critical of monks who lived a comfortable life in in their monasteries. In one of his sermons, called *The Sharp Needle* (*rgya khab rnon po*), which is embedded in his autobiography, he admonishes his disciples:

> Not only do you stuff your mouth with the live coals of food offered on behalf of the living and the dead; not only do you misappropriate the belongings and wealth of the guru, the Three Jewels, and the

[20] *'Bras spungs bca' yig: 299*: *nyi ma'i snying po'i mdor/ lhun po dang ni 'dra ba'i me/ blang bar bya ste bzod pa sla'i/ khyim par gyur pas dge 'dun gyi/ longs spyad par ni mi bya'o/*

[21] Jansen (2018: 116).

[22] Cuevas (2012: 89).

> sangha, which you gather from all sides, but you also put these coals into the mouths of your friends and relatives, thus burning everyone—yourself and others. How dare you!
>
> The Buddha said, "It is worse to swallow religious wealth [*dkor zas*] than to swallow eggs made of burning iron." Are you so self-assured that you can think these words of the Buddha to be untrue and that you don't need to take them into account?[23]

What is here translated as "live coals" (*me ma mur = me mar mur*), can also refer to one of the "neighbouring hells" (*nye ba'i dmyal ba*) of the Avīci hell (*mnar med*), and is a translation of Sanskrit *Kukūla* (or *Kukkula*), meaning "[the hell] pit of embers". It appears that this ambiguous reference to the karmic results of abusing *dkor* is not a coincidence. Rather, references to pieces of hot iron or metal are regularly made when discussing the Avīci hell and it is something we see in the *sūtra*s as well.[24] In the Tibetan context, we have seen that this is connected to the abuse of *dkor*. It is noteworthy here that Zhabs dkar expresses a similar concern to that of my monk interviewee, namely that by feeding your friends and relatives with offerings meant for the Sangha or otherwise, one harms them rather than helping them. This brings up the issue of whether an awareness of actually consuming *dkor*, that is to say a sense of complicity or the more Buddhist notion of "intention", is necessary to bear the negative karmic consequences—something which I will discuss later on in this article.

Another aspect that further complicates the gloss of *dkor* is that, according to some, it does not just have to do with *who* uses the donations, but whether the donations are used the way they are intended by the donor. This is expressed in a short Tibetan blog post by someone with the pen-name Khyung thog rgod ("Garuḍa Thunderclap"), who explains the idea of *dkor* with the help of the twelve-volume Bon work

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[23] Shabkar (2001: 381–382). Ricard's translation is not entirely precise but captures the message perfectly. *Zhabs dkar tshogs drug rang grol gyi rnam thar*: 781: *bla ma dkon mchog gi rdzas/ dge 'dun pa'i dkor gshin zas dad zas kyi me ma mur thams cad phyogs phyogs nas bsdus te rang gi kha la brgyab pas mi chog gnyen nye ba thams cad kyi kha nang du brgyab nas rang gzhan thams cad kyi rgyud bsreg phod dam/ sangs rgyas kyi bka' las/ dkor zas 'di lcags gong me 'bar ba khar bcug pa las nyes pa che bar gsungs pas/ khyod la sangs rgyas kyi gsung de mi bden pa'i khungs dang/ brtsi mi dgos pa'i gdeng zhig yod dam/*

[24] For example in the *Sūryagarbhasūtra* (*'Phags pa shin tu rgyas pa chen po'i sde nyi ma'i snying po zhes bya ba'i mdo* D257): 99b: *gang dge slong chos kyis gnas pa rnams la bsngos pa'i longs spyod dang / nye bar spyod pa dang / nor gyi yo byad 'phrog par byed cing / bdag nyid kyis kyang* (100a) *yongs su spyod par byed pa de 'chi ba'i dus byas nas sems can dmyal ba chen po mnar med par skye bar 'gyur ro/ /de der yang tshe bskal par lcags dang zangs bzhun 'thung bar 'gyur zhing / lcags kyi thu lum za bar 'gyur la/ me'i gos dang / longs spyod dang / nye bar spyod pa spyod par byed cing gnod pa mi bzad pa chen po rnam pa sna tshogs nyams su myong bar 'gyur ba yin no/* For a further Tibetan reference, see: *Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung*: 59; 66.

on the life of gShen rab Mi bo, the *Mdo dri med gzi brjid*, which was uncovered in the second half of the 14th century by Blo ldan snying po (b. 1360). The author of the blog defines the consumption of *dkor* as "consuming material goods that do not belong to one or not directing the offerings of the faithful toward their intended purpose".[25] He then cites the *Gzi brjid,* which defines the term *dkor* itself succinctly: "that which is offered with a certain purpose, but which is not directed toward that purpose, but instead used without purpose, is what is called *dkor*".[26] This interpretation, which was first put forward in the second half of the 14th century, leaves the object of the offering open. In other words, one could, as this blogger indeed continues to point out, see the act of consuming *dkor* as something not necessarily connected to the sacred—and, as I will demonstrate in more detail below, *dkor* can indeed also be seen in a more secular context.

To return to the issue of the consumption of *dkor*, we find it often brought up in criticisms of professional religious practitioners. In his short poetical work, *A Three-versed Speech in which the Profound Dharma is Taken up as a Song* (*Chos zab mo glu ru blangs pa'i gtam tshig gsum*), dKon mchog bstan pa'i sgron me (1762–1823), admonishes his audience:

> You, stubborn one, who utilises evil *dkor* (*dkor nag*) of plentiful tasty and sweet foods without restraint, are you really able to drink the broth of molten copper for many hundreds of thousands of years on end?[27]

Once again, we come across a reference to the consumption of some kind of metal, but here the act is of drinking, rather than eating, the substance. It also needs to be noted that the phrase "evil *dkor*" (*dkor nag*) is common in texts that are critical of the behaviour of others. In several works, the consumption of *dkor* is shown to be more akin to imbibing than to ingesting. The rNying ma master rTsa gsum gTer bdag gling pa (also known as gNam lcags rTsa gsum gling pa, 1694–1738) records his ailing mother's last words (*zhal chems*), in which she convinces him to leave the monastery, where he had been living since

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[25] Khyung thog rgod (2015). *rang nyid la mi dbang ba'i nor rdzas la 'bags pa'am yang na dad rdzas dmigs yul du ma things pa.*

[26] Khyung thog rgod (2015). *mdo dri med las/ gang dag dmigs pas 'bul byed pa/ de nyid dmigs par ma things zhing/ mi dmigs pa ru spyod 'jug na/ de la dkor zhes bya ba ste/* The citation as found in the *Mdo dri med gzi brjid* published in the Bon po bka' 'gyur (vol. 25) differs only slightly: 28: *gang dag dmigs pas dbul byed pa/ de nyid dmigs par ma thing cing/ mi dmigs yul la spyod byed na/ de las dkor zhes bya ba ste.* I am grateful to Kalsang Norbu Gurung for finding the correct location of this citation.

[27] *Chos zab mo glu ru blangs pa'i gtam tshig gsum*: 259: *zas zhim mngar 'dzom pa'i dkor nag la/ 'dzem med du spyod pa'i dred po khyod/ lo bye ba 'bum phrag stong gi bar/ zangs zhun gyi khu ba 'thung nus sam/*

childhood:

> Son, you should abandon your post at your home monastery
> Evil *dkor*, non-virtuous food [gained from] snatching and robbing
> Is the poison water of the afflicted ones
> Son, you should abandon self-destructive non-virtuous food
> Wandering aimlessly among mountain ranges
> Is the mountainous solitude where you purify karmic imprints
> Son, you should wander the good sites of the Exalted One
> Taking contentment as your livelihood
> Is the wealth enjoyed through the kindness of the Jewels.[28]

Staying in the monastery and living a comfortable life, subsisting on donations, is here compared to drinking poisoned water. Zhabs dkar equally compares "religious wealth misused" to poisoned water (Shabkar 2001: 376).[29] Interestingly, 'Jig rten mgon po (1143–1217) asserts that the obstacles that *dkor* can create may be avoided by practicing the "yoga of eating" (*zas kyi rnal 'byor*).[30] This seems to pertain to the practice of eating as a "post-meditative observance", in which one visualises oneself as the deity and in that state the food one eats is offered to that enlightened being.[31] In other words, by sacralising the food one has received from donors one avoids defiling oneself by those very gifts.

### *dKor, intention, and purification*

Regardless of whether one ends up drinking or eating *dkor*, the question of intention remains a pertinent one: if one unknowingly uses that which belongs to the Sangha, does it still have negative consequences? Sarah Jacoby, in her gloss of the term *dkor nag* seems to suggest that intention is leading, for the term means: "negative offerings, offered by the faithful that become negative with self-interest when their recipients consume them *without the proper intention and ability* to benefit others".[32] Similarly, in the glossary of the French translation of the

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[28] *Bla ma o rgyan rtsa gsum gling pa chos kyo rgya mtsho'i 'khrungs rabs rnam thar gsal ba'i phreng ba thugs rje rlabs po che'i mchod sdong*: 114–115: *Bu khyed gzhis dgon las 'dzin spongs/ 'phrog bcom sdig zas dkor nag/ nyon mongs can gyi dug chu yin/ bu khyod sdig zas rang phung spongs/ phyogs med ri khrod 'grims pa de/ bag chags sbyong ba'i dben ri yin/ bu khyod 'phags pa'i gnas bzang 'grim/ 'tsho ba chog shes slong ba de/ dkon mchog drin gyis longs spyod yin.*

[29] For the Tibetan see: *Zhabs dkar tshogs drug rang grol gyi rnam thar*: 329a.

[30] *Khams gsum chos kyi rgyal po thub dbang ratna shri'i phyi yi bka' 'bum nor bu'i bang mdzod kyi kha skong*. In *'Jig rten mgon po'i gsung skor* vol. 13, 20: *dkor zas kyi gegs la rdugs na kha zas kyi rnal 'byor bsgom/*

[31] Bentor (2000: 602–603).

[32] Jacoby (2014: 279).

Patrul Rinpoche's *Words of my Perfect Teacher* (*Le Chemin de la grande perfection*) by the Padmakara translation group, the same term is explained to be "offering that one receives without either a pure attitude or the required qualities".[33] In this gain, intention seems to have something to do with it. There are numerous occasions, however, that suggest the negative consequences can occur without being aware of "consuming *dkor*". Alex John Catanese, whose work investigates the practices and ethics of selling Buddhist objects in the Tibetan context, relates the account of dBon ston sKyer sgang pa chos kyi seng ge (1154–1217, Kyergangpa), as found in this treasure revealer's (*gter ston*) hagiography written by dNgul chu Dharmabhadra (1772–1851):

> According to one version of the story, one of Kyergangpa's patrons became poor and sold a *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* in one hundred thousand lines. With the proceeds he prepared a lavish meal and invited Kyergangpa and three other monks to partake in the meal in order to expunge the sin from selling the text. After consuming the food, Kyergangpa fell violently ill and called upon Avalokiteśvara who then revealed to him the true reason for his illness as well as a *torma* (*gtor ma*) ritual to remove the bad karma incurred from eating food paid for with the money earned from the sale of a Dharma text.[34]

In another version, this story continues with the other monks being reborn in one of the hells on account of not purifying their *dkor*. The point of this account is that while ill, sKyer sgang pa meets with Avalokiteśvara, who explains the cause of his pains and gives him a purification ritual, called *brul gtor*, that serves to remedy the results of ingesting *dkor*.[35] The issue that I want to highlight here is that poor sKyer sgang pa used the proceeds of a holy *sūtra* unknowingly and in good faith. Still, he suffered the consequences. If indeed using offerings at any point in time has the potential to bring about negative results for the receiver, it would seem necessary to occasionally perform such a ritual—just in case. This perhaps explains the fact that we have access to a fair number of the—admittedly obscure—subgenre of *brul gtor* ritual texts: the BDRC repository alone contains around twenty of them. According to Catanese, dNgul chu Dharmabhadra draws upon the work by the 4th Panchen Lama, Blo bzang Chos kyi rgyal mtshan (1570–1662), which is focused on this particular ritual, but which does not include the account given above. This very practical ritual text of just four folios has been briefly described as a "Scattering offering to

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[33] Patrul Rinpoche *et al.* (1987: 483). Offrande noire - *dkor nag po,* offrande qu'on obtient sans avoir une attitude pure ni les qualités requises.

[34] Catanese (2019: 42). See also p. 249, n. 14 for various other sources that recount this story.

[35] Catanese (2019: 43).

remove moral defilements".[36] It recommends carrying out the ritual because:

> Conducting the highly praised *brul gtor* [ritual] has been established to purify the obscurations (*sgrib*) [incurred by] such things as using the possession (*dkor*) of the gurus and the Three Jewels and exhausting (*'bags*) them and in particular by accepting payment for the religious images of the gurus and the Three Jewels.[37]

Again, Catanese, citing 'Jam mgon Kong sprul Blo gros mtha' yas (1813–1899), similarly states that misusing *dkor* and the like, just as transgressions of one's tantric vows do, "obscure earlier meditative experiences", and they also prevent new ones from arising.[38] The remedy to purify accumulated *dkor* is to recite the 100-syllable mantra of Vajrasattva. Among confession prayers (*bshags pa*), it is also common to list *dkor* as something that needs to be confessed and subsequently purified (often with as an example the buying and selling of religious images).

Clearly, contrary to what other authors and translators have asserted previously, whether one incurs *dkor* or not is not solely reliant upon one's "intention". Rather, *dkor* is contagious, corrupting, and even the cause of obstacles in one's practice, and one is in continuous danger of incurring it. What is more, several Tibetan works confirm that *dkor* is something that someone who "lives off religion" simply cannot avoid. The monastic guidelines written in 1900 for Dung dkar bkra shis chos rdzong monastery, for example, exhort the monks to behave in a virtuous way, so that by being worthy of offerings they can purify their *dkor*.[39] In a similar vein, the 13th Dalai Lama describes in a set of guidelines for bKra shis dga' ldan chos 'phel gling the materials given by the sponsors out of faith as a kind of debt that is to be repaid by being a good monk.[40] In yet another such work—the

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[36] Wilhelm and Panglung (1979: 53). Hs. or. 1257. SB Berlin. T: *brul gtor dkor sgrib dag byed zla shal chu rgyun,* Streuopfer zur Beseitigung moralischer Befleckung.

[37] Blo bzang chos kyi rgyal mtshan. *Brul gtor dkor sgrib dag byed zla shel chu rgyun*: 10b: *bla ma dang dkon mchog gsum gyi dkor la spyad cing 'bags pa dang/ khyad par bla ma dkon mchog gi sku blus zos pa sogs kyi sgrib pa 'dag pa la mchog tu bsngags pa brul gtor gtong bar 'dod pas*. Here *sku blus zos* is translated as "to accept payment for a religious image", but it literally means "to eat the body's ransom".

[38] Catanese (2019: 59). *Nges don sgron me*: 30a–30b: *nyams myong sngar yod 'grib/ gsar ba mi skye ba'i gegs byed bas.* Catanese neglected to translate the latter phrase.

[39] *Dung dkar bkra shis chos rdzong bca' yig*: 408: *sbyin bdag dad can mi bslu ba'i skor sbyong yin pas mchod 'os 'bad dgos/* Literally, "because the faithful sponsor is [the way] to definitely purify *skor* [sic: *dkor*], one needs to strive to become worthy of offerings (*mchod 'os*)." Also see Jansen (2018: 137–139), for more on monk-sponsor relations.

[40] *Bkra shis dga' ldan chos 'phel gling bca' yig*, 498: *sbyin bdag khag gi dad rdzas bu lon lta bur* [..]. This has also been noted in Jansen (2018: 226, n. 164).

monastic guidelines for 'Bri gung byang chub gling—it is stated that one of the reasons monks go to do prayers (in the assembly hall) is to purify one's own *dkor*.[41] This corroborates the idea that—perhaps regardless of how good a monk or practitioner one is—*dkor* always needs to be purified. A more contemporary, but not substantially different view, is found in the verses written by Ye shes rgya mtsho (b. 1958), a monk from Amdo currently living in Dharamsala, India:

> In the past, under the spell of afflictions and due to carelessness
> I have committed faults and downfalls of which I am remorseful
> Vowing to not commit them again, I myself have confessed them and so should you.
> Having been ordained, *the way we make a living is dkor*:
> The gifts offered to save sick men and women;
> The gifts offered for the dedication of merit for dead men and women.
> I myself have purified them and so should you.[42]

This notion challenges the previously held understandings of the terms *dkor* and *dkor sgrib*, namely that its consumption necessarily needs to involve conscious and negative activities of any kind. José Cabezón, for example, states: "Prohibitions against selling teachings, religious objects, and religious services is an idea that, although of Indian origin, becomes institutionalised in Tibet in the notion of *dkor sgrib*, literally 'the pollution that comes from [stealing] the wealth [that belongs to the three jewels]'".[43] It may be more appropriate to see *dkor sgrib* as some kind of karmic debt incurred by simply engaging with the sacred economy. It is for this reason, I believe, that *dkor sgrib* is often seen in conjunction with the word *lan chags*, which sometimes gets translated as "karmic indebtedness".[44] The phrase *dkor sgrib lan chags* is seen, for example, in rTsa gsum gling pa's earlier cited work.[45]

The same phrase also turns up in a practice text, recently discussed by James Gentry, written by Kong sprul Blo gros mtha' yas (1813–

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41 *'Bri gung byang chub gling bca' yig*: 402: *rang nyid dkor byang phyir chos spyod 'gro gang che dgos/*

42 *'Phags yul gnas mchog d+ha ram sa la'i dben gnas kyi dge sbyong bse ru'i kher gtam*: 270: *nyon mongs dbang song bag med pas/ nyes ltung sngar bsags 'gyod pa dang/ phyis 'byung rab tu sdom sems ngang/ ngas kyang bshag la khyed kyang shogs/ rab tu byung nas 'tsho ba'i thabs/ nad pa nad ma'i skyabs rten dang/ shi bo shi mo bsngo rten dkor/ ngas kyang sbyang la khyed kyang sbyongs/* Italics added.

43 Cabezón (2013: 10, n. 21).

44 As Dan Martin elegantly puts it, in his vocabulary list, this is "a particular type of generalized karma which designates a relationship across lives in which the roles of the parties are reversed (a former master becomes the servant to his former servant, etc.)." See "Tibetan Vocabulary by Dan Martin".

45 *Bla ma o rgyan rtsa gsum gling pa chos kyo rgya mtsho'i 'khrungs rabs rnam thar gsal ba'i phreng ba thugs rje rlabs po che'i mchod sdong*: 113.

1899), *An Astonishing Ocean: An Explication on the Practice of Eleven Liberations, the Ritual Sequence of the Saṃboghakāya Tamer of Beings* (*Longs sku 'gro 'dul gyi las rim grol ba bcu gcig gi lag len gsal byed ngo mtshar rgya mtsho*). Gentry, however, translates *dkor sgrib lan chags* as two separate concepts: "The obscuration of consuming offerings given by the faithful (*dkor sgrib*) and negative karmic debt".[46] It appears more likely that the author intended to treat one single issue. The phrase signifies the notion of debt, something that has been hinted at in the monastic guidelines that were previously cited. This again highlights the idea that *dkor* deals with economics on both religious and down-to-earth levels.

While it is perhaps unavoidable for the "professional" religious practitioner to accrue *dkor*, fortunately there are ways to purify these obscurations, one of which involves the *brul gtor* ritual mentioned earlier. While there are numerous texts that contain these rituals, I cannot do them justice in this article. A study of this subgenre along with its contemporary practice would be advantageous.[47]

*Criticising dkor: the lay-monk divide and the tantrika-monk divide*

As has been briefly indicated previously, it is not uncommon to criticise others for consuming *dkor*. We find examples of monks accusing other monks, laypeople accusing monks, but also monks and/or laypeople accusing practitioners of tantra from taking sacred economic

[46] Gentry (2019: 217). *dkor sgrib lan chags ngan pa sbyong.*

[47] Another such ritual is dNgul chu Dharmabhadra's *Brul gtor dkor sgrib dag byed zla shel chu rgyun gyi 'khrid yig gnad kyi don gsal* (*Gsung 'bum* vol. 3, 450–464). This text also briefly narrates the sKyer sgang pa story. A very simple ritual that lacks the above narrative contextualisation can be found in the Van Manen collection Leiden, entitled *Thugs rje chen po'i brul gtor lan chag dag byed* (2740/M46, 6 fols.). Another similar but very brief text is *'Brul gtor cha lnga'i rim pa* (in *Kaṃ tshang chos spyod sogs kha ton gces btus*, vol. 1: 68–69, TBRC W00EGS1016759). A ritual that seems to derive from a different tradition is that found in the *Compendium of Sādhanā*s (*Grub thabs kun btus*, vol. 11) in a text called *Khro phu brgya rtsa las byung ba'i man ngag nyer mkho 'ga' zhig*. In it, supplication is made to the great compassionate Buddha Vajraprasphoṭaka (rDo je rab 'joms). The text specifies that it contains instructions specifically intended to purify the obscurations caused by things like the selling of images of the Three Jewels, misusing the wealth of the gurus and the Three Jewels, and particularly the wealth of the Sangha, the changing of one's dedications, covetousness, and consuming after extortion. See p. 140: *thugs rje chen po rdo rje rab 'joms kyi sgo nas dkor sgrib sbyong ba'i man ngag 1 de bzhin gshegs pa rdo rje rab 'joms la phyag 'tshal lo/ sku gsung thugs kyi rten gyi glud zos pa dang/ bla ma dkon mchog gi dkor la 'bags pa dang/ khyad par dge 'dun gyi dkor dang/ bsngos pa bsgyur ba dang/ brnab sems dang/ nan btsir du longs spyad pa la sogs pa las kyi sgrib pa thams cad sbyong ba'i man ngag dam pa yin no/* According to the (brief) colophon, the text was written down as per Chos rje lo tsā ba's instruction, referring, in all likelihood, to Chos rje khro phu lo tsā ba (1172–1236).

property without providing sufficient religious compensation. As Jane Caple has noted in this context, criticism of the reliance of monks on offerings can be found in dGe 'dun chos 'phel's work, while there are earlier figures who "were critical of the propensity for spiritual corruption and materialism amongst religious practitioners and their dependency on the wealth and labour of pious nomads and farmers", such as Mi la ras pa (1040–1123), 'Brug pa kun legs (1455–1529), and the previously cited Zhabs dkar (1781–1850/1).[48] In a monastic context, the ones who are most at risk of getting criticised for this are the monks entrusted with financial duties, e.g. the "treasurer" (*phyag mdzod*) but also the "monastic maintenance staff" (*dkon gnyer*/ *dkor gnyer*). Dagyab mentions the monk entrusted with the upkeep of Dolma Lhakhang (sGrol ma lha khang) in the Jokhang in Lhasa:

> The work in Lhasa's city temple Jokhang did not have a mere financial or organizational character. In this context the concept of *dkor* is mentioned. Counted among *dkor* are all the possessions that belong to the Three Jewels, which includes objects on the alter, offering substances, monastic property, and the food in the monastery. Monks may use *dkor*. They compensate this with their own spiritual service in the monastery. To receive *dkor* without suitably compensating it, is seen as a non-virtuous act. Since it is believed that the work in Dolma Lhakhang is not a sufficient spiritual service, there is talk that the temple's keeper accepts *dkor* over the fees [he receives]. And based on this, the temple surveyor's life is shortened. The dependence between *dkor* and appropriate recompense is still part of Tibetan beliefs.[49]

Similarly, Jann Ronis translates a section of Tshe dbang nor bu's *Chag shog khag* (*Collected Letters*), in which a monk in charge of collecting donations to renovate Kaḥ tog monastery stood accused of using the money to support his family. Since there was a danger that the laypeople would completely stop contributing toward the renovation, the

[48] Caple (2019: 64).

[49] Dagyab (2009: 278). Die Arbeit in Lhasas Stadttempel Jokhang hatte nicht nur finanziellen und organisatorischen Charakter. In diesem Zusammenhang fällt der Begriff des *dkor*. Zum *dkor* werden alle Besitztümer gezählt, die zu den drei Juwelen [Buddha (Lehrer), Dharma (Lehre), Sangha (Mönchs- und Nonnengemeinschaft)] gehören, so auch Altargegenstände, Opfersubstanzen, Klosterbesitz, Essen im Kloster. Mönche dürfen das *dkor* nutzen. Die Gegenleistung erbringen sie mit ihrer eigenen spirituellen Leistung im Kloster. Das *dkor* ohne entsprechende Gegenleistung entgegenzunehmen, gilt als unheilsame Handlung. Da man glaubt, dass die Arbeit im Dolma Lhakhang eine zu geringe spirituelle Leistung darstellt, ist die Rede davon, dass der Tempelaufseher über Gebühr *dkor* entgegennimmt. Und aufgrund dessen verkürze sich die Lebensspanne eines Tempelaufsehers. Die Abhängigkeit zwischen *dkor* und angemessener Gegenleistung ist immer noch Bestandteil tibetischer Glaubensvorstellungen.

monastic authorities decided to dispossess the monk in question.[50]

Even incarnated lamas occasionally stand accused of accumulating *dkor*, but it takes a high religious authority to do so. Lama Jabb, in discussing the 5th Dalai Lama's criticisms of the reincarnation system, paraphrases him and writes that he would be glad to see a stop being put to the "stream of dubiously-obtained material offerings (*dkor nag*) that have been flowing uninterruptedly into the Lama's coffers".[51] Much more recently, the 14th Dalai Lama, while giving a teaching on *The Great Stages of the Path* (*Lam rim chen mo*) criticised those teachers of the Dharma who collect donations and use those to buy fancy cars and the like and give nothing back to society. In his words: "This is *dkor*! *dKor*, *dkor nag*!"[52]

Connected to this is another reason for calling monks eaters of *dkor*, namely when they do very little indeed. According to one of Ben Joffe's informants from Amdo, "young, poorly trained novitiates were routinely derided as 'little donation eaters', i.e. *dkor za mkhan* [..]", exactly because they could not religiously compensate what they received.[53] Caple, in her research on contemporary monasteries in Amdo, has noted the same thing, with the term *dkor zas za mkhan* used to indicate those who rely upon offerings, in juxtaposition to those who are "self-reliant".[54] In a monastic context then, there was, and still is, some self-awareness that certain monks live in the monasteries simply for the material gain. As the 5th Dalai Lama stated in his monastic guidelines for 'Bras spungs monastery with regard to the issue of farming:

> If among the residents (*gzhi ba*), there are those without vows and who are after *dkor* who want to do this, then they need to be given lay-clothes for which the permission of the disciplinarian (*dge skos*) has been asked. They are not allowed to do this in monastic robes.[55]

Occasionally, similar wordings are used self-deprecatingly, such as Sog zlog pa Blo gros rgyal mtshan (1552–1624), describing himself as:

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[50] Ronis (2009: 112). Tshe dbang nor bu, *Chag shog khag*: 771: [..] *dkor rdzas bag med khyim gyi gso sbran la gtang zhing* [..]. Ronis writes "the practice by lamas of supporting their extended families with monastic funds was not unheard of, but it was considered a serious wrongdoing that resulted in defilement (*dkor sgrib*)" (2009: 113).

[51] Jabb (2015: 243), citing *Du kū la'i gos bzang* 1984: 248.

[52] See "Bstan 'dzin rgya mtsho (The 14th Dalai Lama) on *dkor*." Since this is just an audio-fragment it is unclear when and where the speech was given.

[53] Joffe (2019: 144).

[54] Caple (2019: 64).

[55] *'Bras spungs bca' yig*: 312: *gzhi ba'i khrod nas sdom ldan min pa'i dkor phyir 'brang mkhan gyis byed pa shar na dge skos la gnang ba zhus pa'i skya chas sprad nas byed pa ma gtogs btsun chas kyis byas mi chog*. Also see Jansen (2018: 116, 7).

"a sloth who consumes *dkor* from the faithful while named 'lama'".[56]

We have seen that institutionalised monasticism is critiqued for facilitating the accumulation of *dkor* among monks. Conversely, Tibetan Buddhist monasteries were and still are subject to scrutiny when it comes to their accrual of wealth. In the Tibetan exile communities, some people voice their unease with regard to the pomp and splendour these institutions sometimes display and with the monasteries' apparent unwillingness to help out those Tibetan settlements that still live in poverty. A very recent anonymous opinion piece, published online in *The Tibet Express* (*Bod kyi bang chen*) maintains that it is likely that with the hardships that Tibetan communities are set to experience on account of the crisis brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic there will be people who will criticise not just the Tibetan government but also the monasteries for not providing (sufficient) financial aid. The authors proceed to explain why monasteries cannot help their surroundings and their main argument is the issue of *dkor*: only monks are to benefit directly from the monastic economy. They repeat the classic arguments presenter earlier, namely that this kind of proceeds (*dkor*) is like iron balls—to eat it one needs "bronze cheeks" (*khro yi 'gram pa*). The authors also claim that only few Tibetan laypeople are aware of and fully understand the ramifications of requesting and taking financial aid from the monasteries, which is why these institutions are still heavily criticised. They conclude with the following:

> As mentioned above, the possessions of the Sangha (*dge 'dun pa'i dkor*) cannot be consumed at will by us male and female laypersons. Therefore, it is not right to criticise the progress made by the monasteries. Rather, [that progress] is solely the result of the great efforts made by the monk officials involved. Even if the monasteries were to make donations, we need to think about whether it is proper to accept them or not. It is definitely not the case that everybody, both poor and rich, can just reach out to the monasteries.[57]

This piece expresses the authors' apprehension that laypeople, not sufficiently aware of the concept and dangers of *dkor*, have started seeing the wealthy monasteries as having the (moral) obligation to help their community out. While monasteries regularly do exactly that—as was

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[56] Gentry (2017: 153–154): *bla ma'i ming thog dkor zan snyoms las mkhan*. The translation has been slightly adapted.

[57] *Bod kyi bang chen issue 798, 15 April 2020: gong du rjod pa bzhin dge 'dun pa'i dkor ni rang re mi skya pho mo dag gis ji dgar za rung ba zhig min la/ dgon pa dag yar rgyas song ba der yang kha rdung gtong 'os pa zhig kyang min par/ 'brel yod las sne dag gis 'bad brtson chen po byas pa'i bras bu nyag gcig tu gyur yod/ dgon sde dag gis mar gnang yod na'ang len rung dang mi rung bsam blo gtong dgos pa las/ dgon sde khag la dbul phyug tshang mas lag pa 'dzed chog chog gcig gtan nas min/* The Tibet Express on *dkor* (2020).

once again seen during the COVID-19 pandemic in India and Nepal[58]—the authors argue that it cannot be expected of them and that one should have reservations with regard to accepting aid from monastic institutions. All, of course, for reasons of *dkor*.

Another type of criticism still heard today comes from monks who disparage those entirely outside of the monastic setting: the tantric practitioners. Tibetan doctor Nida Chenaktsang defends these mantra-holders in a recent book, cited and translated by Joffe. Tantric practitioners (*sngags pa*) are maligned by some monks by saying that:

> They are village ritualists who chase after payments of food and money for religious services (*lto dang dkor*). In this [these monks] are just digging up dirt on other people without acknowledging their own faults. What person [alive] does not chase after food (*lto*) for the sake of survival? There cannot possibly be any difference between staying in a monastery and having "black" donations (*dkor nag*) just be handed to you and receiving offerings of money after you have gone to [*sic*] the difficulty of going out [to people's homes to get it, so in other words these monks have nothing to complain about].[59]

Interestingly, both groups accuse each other of misusing donations in some way or the other. Because *dkor* is a doctrinally "fuzzy" concept these mutual misgivings will likely remain in place. The main concern remains the entanglement of economics with religion. Trine Brox and Elizabeth Williams–Oerberg have noted that "the mix of money and monks, of business and Buddhism, seems to unsettle modern sensibilities".[60] I would argue, taking the above into consideration, that it has always been thus.

### *"Secular" usage and Indo-Tibetan resonances of dkor*

An equally complex question is: how and when do laypeople—in this context, non-religious specialists—engage in the consumption of *dkor*? Naturally, when they steal from the Sangha, it is—in addition to being a criminal offense—also *dkor*. While reflections on the behaviour of ordinary laypeople are not exactly common in pre-modern Tibetan sources, contemporary Tibetan Buddhist teachers occasionally do warn their lay disciples of the dangers of *dkor*.[61] Additionally, in my

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58 See for example Phayul.com (2020).

59 Joffe (2019: 142). Joffe cites Nyi zla he ru ka and Ye shes sgrol ma (2015: 109). The translation has been slightly adapted for reasons of style and readability.

60 Brox and Williams-Oerberg (2015: 12).

61 Interestingly, in a note in the French translation of Patrul Rinpoche's *Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung*, the word *dkor* is glossed in the following way: "*dkor za ba* veut dire, en général, utiliser les biens et les richesses offerts par les fidèles, et surtout en

time living among Tibetans in McLeodganj, whenever a case came to light in which someone had taken community money to use for his personal gain, this person would invariably be accused of consuming *dkor*.[62] Indulging in *dkor* then could be any of the following things: fraud, embezzlement, tax evasion, being on welfare while able to work, and so on. In other words, using the (greater) community's property without having a (moral) right to do so. This is also the position of Geshe Sonam Gyaltsen (*dge bshes* bSod nams rgyal mtshan), a highly respected geshe who teaches at a Dharma centre in the Netherlands. Having had the honour of studying and working with him, I heard him speak of this concept frequently. He expressed his worry about erstwhile volunteers at the Dharma centre, who received either disability allowance or welfare from the Dutch government, but devoted all their time and energy to working at the centre as volunteers—Geshe Sonam Gyaltsen said that this amounted to *dkor* and that any Buddhist institution should have a moral obligation to turn such people away. His view is also communicated in his commentary on a text commonly known as *The Wheel of Sharp Weapons* (*Mtshon cha 'khor lo*). This work, ascribed to the 9th-century Indian master Dharmarakṣita, is one of the few "Indo-Tibetan" texts that utilise the term *dkor* in more morally judgmental ways. While we will return to this work below, this is what Geshe Sonam Gyaltsen's commentary has to say about *dkor*:

> Furthermore, with regard to unlawfully using *dkor* and the way one uses *dkor* unconscientiously: when a monk who has been stained by any of the four root downfalls and is knowingly guilty of this, partakes in monastic tea-sessions, then—while he uses *dkor* unlawfully—he does not do so unconscientiously. And so, when he is, as stated above, knowingly stained with the downfalls, and still thinks nothing of it, he is someone who uses *dkor* while thinking that a monk can digest *dkor*, like a peacock digests poison.
>
> Usually, in the context of what is called *dkor*, one may think that it is only something for the monks and that laypeople have no *dkor*. This is not so: while laypeople do also take the wealth of the Sangha (*dge 'dun gyi dkor*), consuming laypeople's communal property (*spyi rdzas*) that

abuser. *Il désigne parfois l'usage abusif des bien collectifs, des richesses d'un pays, etc., par des personnes en position de pouvoir*. (*dkor za ba* generally means to use the goods and the wealth offered by the faithful, and above all to misuse them. *It sometimes refers to the wrong usage of public goods, of the wealth of a country etc., by people in a position of power*) (Patrul Rinpoche: 1997: 441, n. 58, italics added).

62 I lived in McLeodganj between 2000 and 2005. This article would have benefitted from fieldwork but due to the COVID-19 situation I was not able to travel, which is why this article suffers from a potential overdose of textual materials and possibly outdated information.

> one does not own or living one's life receiving a large salary for work that one does not genuinely carry out is also *dkor*: one should be careful of these things.[63]

The second paragraph proposes the idea that receiving any kind of income or wealth, while not being deserving of it, constitutes as *dkor*, regardless whether there is the involvement of the sacred or not. This is a position that is not dealt with in earlier textual sources, while—as I mentioned previously—it does conform with the contemporary notions of *dkor* among exile Tibetans that I have observed. The first paragraph of the citation comments directly on the following verse of *The Wheel of Sharp Weapons*:

> When I am sick with a chronic ulcer or edema,
> It is the weapon of evil karma turning upon me
> For wrongfully and with no conscience using others' possessions;
> From now on I will renounce acts such as plundering others' possessions.[64]

Thubten Jinpa here translates the term *dkor* in a rather neutral manner as "other's possessions". While this particular work attributed to Dharmarakṣita knows various, at times rather distinct versions, the term *dkor* features in all of them. Although the length of this article does not allow for an extensive treatment of the origins and authorship of this text, there are reservations about the transmission of this work. Tradition teaches us that Atiśa, once Dharmarakṣita's disciple,

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[63] *Theg pa chen po'i blo sbyong mtshon cha 'khor lo'i 'grel pa don ldan lam bzang*, Gajang Tsawa Geshe Sonam Gyaltsen 2003: 32–33: *de yang khrims med kyis dkor la 'bags pa dang bag med kyis dkor la 'bags tshul ni/ de yang grwa pa gang zhig rang la pham pa bzhi pa gang rung gis gos pa shes bzhin du 'gyod pa dang bcas grwa ja mang ja 'gyed la sogs pa la longs spyad na khrims med kyis dkor la 'bags pa yin kyang bag med kyis 'bags pa ma yin la/ rang nyid gong bshad pa ltar gyi ltung bas gos pa shes bzhin du da du'ang ji mi snyam par/ grwa pas dkor 'ju rma byas dug 'ju zer ba yin snyam pa'i sgo nas dkor la 'bag pa yin no/ rgyun ldan dkor zer ba'i tshe grwa pa la ma gtogs khyim par dkor med snyam pa 'dug rung de ltar ma yin te/ khyim pa rnams la'ang dge 'dun gyi dkor za rgyu yod la/ dge 'dun gyi dkor min yang khyim pa'i spyi rdzas lta bu rang la mi dbang bzhin du longs spyad pa dang/ ming don mtshungs pa'i las ka mi* [33] *byed par phog chen po zhig blangs nas mi tshe bskyal nas bsdad pa rnams kyang dkor zas pa yin pas 'di dag zab dgos so/*

[64] Translation by Jinpa (2006: 137). The text itself has a rather wide variety of versions that contain large discrepancies. Jinpa used, among others, the version and the notes by Blo bzang rTa mgrin (1867–1937). There the verse is presented as follows: *bar gcod nad dang dmu chus na ba'i tshe/ khrims med dkor la bag med 'bags pa yig/ las ngang mtshon cha 'khor lo rang la 'khor ba yin/ dan ni dkor 'phrog la sogs spang bar bya/* (*Blo sbyong mtshon cha'i 'khor lo zhes bya ba mchan dang bcas pa*: 329). Geshe Sonam Gyaltsen's version reads: *bad gcong skran dang rma chu ngan pa'i tshe/ khrims med dkor la bag med 'bags pa yis/ las ngan mtshon cha 'khor lo rang la 'khor ba yin / da ni sgo 'phrog la sogs spang bar bya/* (*Theg pa chen po'i blo sbyong mtshon cha 'khor lo'i 'grel pa don ldan lam bzang*: 32 (verse 25))

transmitted this text to 'Brom ston pa. The various colophons, however, cast doubt upon the authorship of this text. Furthermore, the work is not included in today's bsTan 'gyur, nor can it be found in the list of texts in the translation of which Atiśa participated.[65] More significant perhaps is the presence of numerous "un-Indic" elements, some of which are mentioned by Michael Sweet and colleagues, who give examples of references to (Tibetan) divination (*mo*, v. 70) and native demons (*'gong po*, v. 51; 91).

Much is made of what could be seen as the central trope of the work: the peacock's ability to eat and digest poison. Unlike other animals, it thrives and grows lustrous through eating poison, just as the bodhisattva is not harmed by the delusions (*nyon mongs*). Sweet and colleagues claim that this particular simile "appears to be entirely foreign to the Sanskrit literary tradition, as well as to Indian folk traditions".[66] The same trope also occurs in a common proverb, of which there are several slightly divergent versions, connecting the peacock to the concept of *dkor*: "The monk can digest *dkor* [like] the peacock digests poison".[67] While it is unclear whether the proverb is somehow derived from the peacock simile found in *The Wheel of Sharp Weapons* or whether the figure of speech precedes the text, what it suggests is that only (good) monks can somehow transform *dkor*. Regarding the origins of the text, I am of the opinion that the occurrence of the word *dkor,* and more particularly that of the phrase *dkor la 'bags pa*, is yet another indication that the work is likely to have been composed, or put to paper, in Tibetan and not in any Indic language.

As far as I am aware, the only case in which the term *dkor* is used in the sense of the act of misusing the donations of the faithful in the bsTan 'gyur, as opposed to the initial meaning of "wealth", is found in Ratnarakṣita's (c. 1150–1250) **Gaṇacakravidhicintāmāṇi* (*Tshogs kyi 'khor lo'i cho ga yid bzhin nor bu*).[68] In a treatment of the various different kinds of (suitable) masters (*ācārya*) with whom to study tantric rituals, this text also discusses who *should not be one:*

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65 Sweet *et al.* (2001: 8).

66 Sweet *et al.* (2001: 11). While indeed the exact simile does not seem to occur in Indic literature, the story of one of the previous lives of the Buddha, in which he, reborn as "the king of peacocks" Suvarṇabhāsa, grew even more beautiful and lustrous upon being given poison is well-known in Buddhist literature, for example in the *Āryaśrīguptanāmasūtra* (*'phags pa dpal sbas zhes bya ba'i mdo,* D217) and known as the *Mayūrajātaka* in various *jātaka* compilations. See Straube (2009: 316–319). I am thankful to Péter-Dániel Szántó for referring me to this *jātaka*.

67 Cüppers and Sørensen (1998: 48). *grwa pas dkor 'ju / rma byas dug 'ju*. Also see Jabb (2015: 238 n. 28): "The monk digests material offerings. The peacock digests poison. *dKor* denotes material offerings made to individual Lamas and monks or to their institutions. It usually carries a negative connotation because such wealth has been offered on the behalf of the dead."

68 Tōh. 2494: 249a1–254a7. A diplomatic edition can be found in Shizuka (2012).

> Particularly, with regard to lay *ācārya*s, someone who has a woman and consumes *dkor*, who has servants to work the fields and who conducts business and who is ignorant [but] teaches the Dharma for the sake of gifts, is not an *ācārya* of the people (*gaṇācārya*).[69]

The work does not further elaborate what to consume *dkor* means exactly, but it is definitely meant to be pejorative. More significant here is that it appears to be the only "translated" text in which this particular gloss of *dkor* occurs. As with a few of Ratnarakṣita's works, there is doubt as to whether he initially wrote them in an Indic language, or whether they were "translated" into Tibetan on the spot. The colophon of this text states that it was translated by Zhang Lo tsā ba (?–1236, Zhang grub pa dpal bzang po) with oral guidance from the author himself. This, in addition to the fact that this consumption of *dkor* seems to be exclusively Tibetan, displays some of the workings of cultural translation that occurred in addition to the word-by-word translation process.

### *A treatise on dkor*

To my knowledge the only work that deals with *dkor* as its main topic was written by the rNying ma master Rig 'dzin Gar gyi dbang phyug (1858–1930).[70] Daniel Berounsky writes that he was born in Khams and that "he was the author of a number of didactic texts on various 'evils' (*nyes dmigs*), among them texts on the evils of hunting, eating meat, blood offerings, drinking alcohol and a very sexist text on the evil of women".[71] The title page of the 26 folio-long work on the evils of *dkor* reads as follows: *Kimpāka Fruit: The Faults of Consuming dkor, which is Pleasant in the Short Term and Unpleasant in the Long Term* (*Phral dga' phugs sdug dkor la 'bags pa'i nyes pa kimpa'i 'bras bu zhes bya ba bzhugs so*, henceforth *The Faults of dKor, Dkor nyes*). Kimpāka (*trichosanthes palmata*) is used as a metaphor for *dkor*: a fruit found in South Asia, that, contrary to its deceivingly appetising aspect, once opened looks dirty and tastes bad. This text is valuable for its extensive usage of citations

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[69] *Tshogs kyi 'khor lo'i cho ga yid bzhin nor bu:* 250a2: *khyad par khyim pa'i slob dpon ni/ bud med bcas shing dkor zas dang/ zhing las g.yog dang tshong ba dang/ rmongs pa rnyed phyir chos smra ba/ 'di ni tshogs kyi slob dpon min/* I have benefitted from a discussion with Péter-Dániel Szántó on the context of this text and author.

[70] Little else is known about this person, but he is said to have been a direct student of renowned teachers such as 'Jam mgon Kong sprul Blo bros mtha' yas (1813–1900), 'Jam dbyangs mKhyen rtse dbang po (1820–1892), Mi pham rGya mtsho (1846–1912), and Patrul Rinpoche (1808–1887).

[71] Berounsky (2013: 16).

from both Indic[72] and Tibetan literature. Unfortunately, space does not permit an extensive treatment of it here, so a brief outline should suffice. Many of the references to Tibetan works are well-known to us, but there are some that are difficult to place or trace. The work furthermore attempts to systematise the topic of *dkor*—perhaps for the first time ever. *The Faults of dKor* also recounts the various karmic results of indulging in *dkor*, some of which are—even when one is reborn as a human—to be the parent of many children and to be infested with lice and fleas.[73] The work confirms what has been already indicated earlier: that the eaters of *dkor* often come back as semi-magical miserable reptilian or amphibian creatures, that can be perceived and made to appear (often from large boulders) only by highly realised beings. These creatures are invariably bug-ridden, for—it is argued—it is only natural that the eater eventually becomes the eaten.[74]

The author of this text is not as fatalistic as to concede that the obscurations of *dkor* are unavoidable. He cites *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, in which it is suggested that *dkor* can even be "digested", but only if one has attained a certain level, namely when "one possesses the bronze cheeks of the union of the generation and the completion stages, for if any ordinary person consumes [*dkor*] his innards will burn and he will be destroyed."[75] It is further specified that monks—for they are his target audience—can use the offered possessions of the living and the dead when they have the right qualities (*yon tan dang ldan pa*). These twelve qualities are enumerated in four groups of three and refer to the upkeep of one's vows, ethical discipline, and correct behaviour, among others.[76] The text further speaks of the importance of carrying out death rituals and other services for which religious practitioners are remunerated with sincerity and compassion. *The Faults of dKor* gives numerous quotations that emphasise the dangers of a pure economic exchange of rituals for donations—especially in the context of "village rituals" (*grong chog*), when *dkor* is never far away.

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[72] Among others from the *Pratyutpannabuddhasaṃmukhāvasthitasamādhisūtra*, the *Kāśyapaparivarta*, the *Vinayakārika*, the *Bhikṣupriyasūtra* and the *Buddhapiṭakaduḥśīlanigrahasūtra*.

[73] *Dkor nyes*: 6b: *de bzhin du mir skyes pa'i tshe na'ang bu rgyud mang po'i pha ma dang/ sbrang ma dang shig lji ba sogs kyis za 'dug pa 'di'ang dkor gyi lan chags te* [..]. This is interesting, since in many cultures to be a parent of many children is a blessing. In Tibetan regions, however, to have many offspring would constitute as a heavy economic burden. Additionally, the intended audience of this text is clearly monastic: having many children to take care of would be seen as off-putting for many monks.

[74] *Dkor nyes*: 6b: *khyed gshin zas dang dad zad za ring la/ de'i phyir khyed la za ba 'di chos nyid yin/*

[75] *Dkor nyes*: 7b: *dkor nag po 'di lcags bsregs kyi ril bu dang 'dra bas/ bskyed rdzogs zung 'jug gi khro'i 'gram pa dang ldan na ma gtogs/ tha mal pas zos na rgyud tshig cing brlag pa yin gsungs/* See *Kun mkhyen bla ma'i zhal lung* (2001: 133).

[76] *Dkor nyes*: 20b–22a.

Significantly, the work does not refer to specific practices or rituals to purify *dkor*, rather, it sets out to prevent its audience from engaging with *dkor*. A more in-depth study of this text along with the many works that are cited within it would be valuable since it is likely to offer a better idea of the pervasive (monastic) economic ideologies regarding the performance of religious services—something that is often seen to be deeply embedded within the rNying ma tradition. It is these religious services that still today in many places in Tibet and the Himalayas make up a large segment of the income of (rNying ma) religious specialists, so often pejoratively called village ritualists (*grong chog pa*).

### *Concluding remarks: what is dkor?*

In tracing the term *dkor* we see a shift from the material to the immaterial, and from the sacred to the secular, and further from the neutral to the caustic. It is not the case that the gloss changes entirely, but rather that further dimensions are added onto the word itself. That is to say, *dkor* in later (non-canonical and post-Dunhuang) sources can still simply mean wealth, but it can also be so much more than that. While the concept of abusing the possessions of the Sangha (and the karmic consequences this entails) itself is far from foreign to Indic Buddhism, or indeed Buddhist cultures elsewhere,[77] it is apparent that the phrases "to eat *dkor*" (*dkor bza' ba*) and "to use up *dkor*" (*dkor la 'bag pa*) are specific to the Tibetan cultural realm, be it Buddhist or Bon.

Examining a multi-layered term such as *dkor* allows us to catch a glimpse of the complex nature of moral, religious, social, and economic indebtedness that Tibetans perceived to have had and to still have to the Three Jewels, one's teacher, one's sponsor, to the society as a whole, and even to the government—however malign or benign. While the term itself is untranslatable, I think that this is the most basic feature of *dkor*: indebtedness. *dKor* can thus mean: 1) wealth/ possessions/ material/ commodity (for example in Dunhuang texts); 2) the possessions of the Three Jewels, the Sangha or the stūpa (as featured in canonical sources); 3) negative offerings (*dkor nag*), in the sense that either the giver or the receiver is at fault in some way; 4) (spiritual) corruption, embezzlement, or even fraud.

The pervasiveness of this concept among Tibetan societies also demonstrates how seemingly simple economic or religious transactions can and do become quickly loaded with significance. This significance, when encountered in Tibetan writing, has been lost in translation in the past. Previously, scholars have inadvertently mistranslated and misrepresented it, mostly by disregarding the more metaphysical

[77] See for example Gernet ([1956] 1995: 73).

aspects of the word. Zahiruddin Ahmad, for example, in his translation of the autobiography of the 5th Dalai Lama renders the term *dkor zas* as "abstinential food".[78] Per Kvaerne, in his rendition of a Bon practice text *Khro bo dbang chen gyi pho nya'i le 'u*, which describes the deity gTso mchog and which is part of the *Khro bo rgyud drug* (a work on significant Bonpo deities), translates: "Those who destroy the wealth of the holders of ritual drums." This is a likely mistranslation of "*rnga thogs dkor la 'bag pa*", which should be "the holders of ritual drums who use up *dkor*", referring to those who use religious practice to enrich themselves.[79] In other works, such as in an insightful article on the ambiguous nature of the institution of *sprul sku*s by Matthew Kapstein, the word *dkor* is translated simply as "wealth" or "religious wealth".[80] While not wrong per se, it does not convey all that the Tibetan authors originally must have intended.

In other cases, the misunderstanding and subsequent mistranslation of *dkor* lead to a rather divergent interpretation of the text. One example is the translation of a verse written by Blo gsal bstan skyong (b. 1804), who shows himself to be extremely conscientious regarding the income derived from religious services and institutions. Benjamin Wood translates: "Although I've received a small amount of wealth from monasteries like Zha lu, there was never a time when I didn't [somehow] pay back the [monasteries'] donations. In these circumstances, therefore, I used everything virtuously".[81] This should read: "Although I've received limited wealth (*dkor*) from monasteries like Zha lu, while I have not repaid that *dkor*, it is but a trifling matter since it was spent on virtuous things."[82] The main difference here is the

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78 Ahmad (1999: 37).

79 Kvaerne (1989: 120; 124).

80 Kapstein (2002: 106–108).

81 Wood (2013: 48).

82 *zha lu sogs dgon pa'i dkor ni phran tshogs* [*sic*? *tshegs*] *byung rung phar dkor lan bcal ba med pas 'dir kho bos dge phyogs su btang ba 'di dag shin tu snang chung rung*. This is from the author's autobiography, *Rang gi rnam thar du byas pa shel dkar me long*: 620. Elsewhere in his article, Wood misses the point of the argument Blo bzang Bstan skyong makes. He translates: *ser snas dkor nor bsags kyang phung krol gzhi / sred pas zhim dgu gsol yang bshang lci'i son / de dag las ni dam chos thos pa'i nor / bsags pa don ldan rab kyi yang rtse yin* / as:
"Miserly hoarding religious donations is but the basis of a ruined destiny.
Desirously ingesting delicious food is but the cause of piss and shit.
Compared to those [worthless consumptions], an accumulation of the wealth of listening to the holy dharma,
Is the zenith of the most meaningful [holy activity]" (Wood 2013: 46).
In my opinion this should read something more along the lines of:
"The accumulation of wealth (*dkor*) out of greed is the basis for ruin
[Just like] Consuming all kinds of delicious thing out of craving, [leads to] shit and piss
Rather, the accumulation of the treasure of listening to the holy Dharma

understanding of *dkor* as some kind of debt, in this case to monasteries like Zha lu to which the author was affiliated. At the same time, it seems, Blo bzang bstan skyong asserts that that "debt" is only small, since he restored the balance by using whatever he owned and received toward what is good and virtuous. As stated earlier, there is no entirely satisfactory translation for this rather wide-ranging concept, which is why I have left this term largely untranslated in this article. It is my hope, however, that the contents of this article—while far from being comprehensive on the topic—will contribute to a better understanding of this term, which will lead to improved future translations.

At the beginning of this article I hinted at the notion that the historical development of *dkor* follows the reverse process of that of the commodification of Buddhism. This commodification is—as Brox and Williams–Oerberg theorise—not simply a negative development, but can also be understood as "a reaffirmation of the significant religious influence that Buddhism has amidst global market forces and the prominent place of religion, especially Buddhism, in people's lives [...]".[83] If indeed the reverse process holds true, we can perhaps view the transformation from the material to the immaterial in the meaning of *dkor* as the significant and persistent influence of economic transactions on Buddhism as lived and understood by Tibetans. It is probably more accurate, however, to speak of symbiosis—both organised and disorganised Buddhism and Buddhists and the economic spheres that make their religious practices possible are, and always have been, so thoroughly intertwined that to separate them would be as impossible a task as trying to come up with one correct and elegant translation for the term *dkor*.

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Is the absolute pinnacle of what is meaningful."
Here the emphasis lies on not on actually possessing the donations or the wealth, as the translations suggests, but the fact that this is done *out of greed* (*ser snas* is by Wood erroneously translated as an adverb). In other words, there is not necessarily anything wrong with accumulating things, but with the motivation one has while collecting them.

[83] Brox and Williams-Oerberg (2015: 9).

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# Measuring Income Inequality in Tibetan Society: Understanding the Different Amounts of Offerings and the Status of Tibetan Officials

Kalsang Norbu Gurung
(University of Bonn)

## *Introduction*

Tibetans are culturally encouraged to donate, apparently influenced in doing so by the Buddhist concept of giving (Tib. *sbyin pa*, Skt. *dāna*)[1] which has been strongly rooted in Tibetan societies since the introduction of Buddhism in Tibet in the 8th century.[2] Whether it is simply out of faith and generosity or in order to ask for specific help needed from the gift recipient, one does not visit teachers or higher officials empty handed. The Tibetan term for this is *'bul rten* or *'bul ba* (in the noun form) which actually means "the object to offer or to give or to donate".

In my recent publication,[3] I have shown some examples of *'bul ba* offering to government officials from a statement record of expenditures made by two sPo rong officials travelling to gZhis ka rtse and lHa sa in order to settle a dispute regarding the land of the local ruler of sPo rong, now in the district of Shel dkar. Most of these offerings were recorded as *mjal rten*, which can be understood as merely an offering made when seeing or visiting a high-ranking lama or a government official. Some officials were offered substantial amounts of money or presented with expensive gifts, while others received just a few coins or a drink. At a first glance, the offerings made by the two sPo rong officers appear rather arbitrary in their distribution, as if there were the impromptu outcome of individual whims. However, a thorough reading of the document confirms that a certain regulation—or better yet, a "social observance"—of offering was at play. It is evident from the statement record that gifts of similar value and

1 For a Buddhist concept of giving, see "Dana: The Practice of Giving", edited by Bhikkhu Bodhi and available at https://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/various/wheel367.html#prac. For the meaning of gift in other South Asian traditions, see Heim (2004).

2 Robert Ekvall (1964: chapter 6) discusses in great detail the practice of offering (for which he uses the term *mchod pa*) in Tibetan societies, especially regarding its economic and cultural functions.

3 Gurung (2018).

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quantities were consistently donated to officials who were either of the same rank or serving at the same post. In the light of that, several questions come to mind: Why were there differences in the number of offerings, and what do these differences tell us? Were such variations in the amount of offerings consistently regulated? Is it possible to ascribe such differences to a specific social structure? By answering these questions, I aim to quantify the different amounts of the offerings and thus measure the income inequality in Tibetan society. To do so, I will posit the practice of offerings as performed in the secular society against the backdrop of donations in the monastic environment, described by Robert Ekvall as "religious observance of offerings".[4]

## *Offering in Tibetan societies*

The most common and basic object that Tibetans offer at any given occasion is a ceremonial scarf called *kha btags*. Blo bzang don ldan and colleagues describe at least five major types of ceremonial scarves (with additional sub-types based on different quality), providing a brief explanation of their origins and the way they are used in Tibetan society.[5] The abovementioned statement record of expenditures compiled by two sPo rong officials lists at least two types of ceremonial scarf (*a she* and *zub she*), although the presence of further sub-types may be speculated on the basis of the expenses reported, which range from 3.5 *srang* a piece for the cheapest one to 50 *srang* for the most expensive one.[6] Traditionally, most offerings (*'bul ba*), such as money and any other items, are presented upon a ceremonial scarf; the type and the quality of the latter, as well as the modes of offering it—for example, by handing it, placing it on the shoulder or around one's neck, or laying it on the table in front of the seat or throne—are indicative of the social status of either givers or recipients. The use of ceremonial scarves, together with the cultural and political messages exchanged through them by giver and recipient, has been discussed in lengthy detail elsewhere,[7] and in the light of that I will limit my discussion to a particular item usually offered wrapped up in a *kha btags*, i.e. cash.

The term used to indicate money offerings in the Tibetan monastic environment is *'gyed* (honorific, *sku 'gyed*), meaning "ceremonial

4 Ekvall (1964).
5 See Blo bzang don ldan *et al.* (1997).
6 For a more detailed description of the recipients of the ceremonial scarf in the document, see Gurung (2018: 237–238).
7 See, among others, Bell ([1928] 1968: 248–251), Blo bzang don ldan *et al.* (1997), and, more recently, Martin (2016).

offering of money to the monks".[8] Although the *'gyed* offering traditionally includes a variety of items such as foods and clothes, today it is mostly used to refer to money offerings, which the monks receive during a religious assembly. This actually serves as a part of financial income for the whole monastic community, who is largely dependent on sponsors' donations: theoretically, monks receive almost no support from their biological family. However, there are differences in the share that each monastic official or individual monk is entitled to receive at any given assembly. This share is called *'gyed skal* (honorific, *sku skal*), often simply written as *skal* or *skal ba*, a term used in Tibetan language to indicate a "share" or a "fortune" of some kind, such as *rdzong skal* (dowry or the share given to the daughter when she is sent as a bride), *za skal* (the share of food in a funeral ritual or one's fortune in selling food), *zhing skal* (the share of field or allotted land for cultivation), and *nor skal* (the share in which a property is divided in case of family divisions). The share of monastic donation is usually indicated by the number of times its basic quantity—*skal ba* or *ngo skal* (term indicating that the recipient is physically present at the venue)—is offered: twofold (*nyis skal*), threefold (*sum skal*), fourfold (*bzhi skal*), fivefold (*lnga skal*), and so forth, with *'phar skal* used to indicate an "extra share". The basic or minimum share of the offering to the monks is determined by the sponsor's financial capacity, and it is therefore up to the giver to decide. Whereas the amount of the basic share donated is up to the sponsor, the actual number of the shares (and thus the total amount to be paid by the donor) is regulated by the hierarchical status of the monks as clearly stated in the monastic rulebooks (*bca' yig*) that I will show later. Therefore, we can assume that all *'bul ba* offerings, whether to government officials or other individuals, were similarly regulated on the basis of the social status of the recipient. In order to understand the regulation of offering in the Tibetan monastic communities, I will now turn my attention to those sections of monastic rulebooks in which the distribution of donations is explained.

Interestingly, when dealing with the process regulating donations among monks, most of the *bca' yig* examined for the present work refer to a manual titled *'Gyed gtong rtsa tshig*. For instance, in the rulebook of Se ra smad, the 8th Dalai Lama 'Jam dpal rgya mtsho (1758–1804) writes that the distribution of the shares—both monks' portions of donations and foods (*tsha bra*)[9] and high lamas' servings of foods and

[8] The term *'gyed* is a nominal form of the verb *'gyed pa*, equal to the verbs *gtong ba* ("to spend") or *sbyin pa* ("to give/to donate").

[9] Three different spellings, with slightly different meaning, can be found in the Tibetan monastic rulebooks: *tsha bra*, *tsha gra*, and *tsha ra*. According to theTibetan-Chinese dictionary (Zhang *et al.* 1996: 2246), *tsha bra* is the share of foods given to the deceased during a death ritual ceremony. The second one, *tsha gra*, refers to the

drinks (*tsha gzigs*)[10]—is to be performed as instructed in the supplementary text *'Gyed gtong rtsa tshig*.[11] A similar reference is also found in the rulebook of Se ra monastery written by the 7th Dalai Lama bsKal bzang rgya mtsho (1708–1757) in 1737.[12] Those references from the two aforementioned rulebooks clearly show that an official regulation was separately issued to systematise the share of the donation for monks. However, since I have not yet been able to find the *'Gyed gtong rtsa tshig* manual, I cannot explain how exactly the distribution of donation offering is instructed in the text. Fortunately, we do have access to some monastic rulebooks, e.g. the *bca' yig* of 'Bras spungs monastery, that provide us with similar instructions regarding the share of donation.

*Share of offerings in the rulebook of 'Bras spungs monastery*

Together with dGa' ldan and Se ra, 'Bras spungs monastery is one of the three principal seats (*gdan sa*) of the dGe lugs pa school and the largest among the three. It was founded in 1416 (Fire Monkey Year) by 'Jam dbyangs chos rje bkra shis dpal ldan (1379–1449), one of Tsong kha pa's main disciples. As the highest authority in the monastery, the college professors take the full responsibility of both its religious and political administration.[13] The general assembly meeting (*bla spyi*) is presided by the incumbent abbot (*mkhan po khri pa*) as the chairperson, and the members includes all the serving college professors and former-abbots, the prayer leader of the general assembly, two disciplinarians (*zhal ngo*), and the estate manager (*pho brang sde pa*) of the dGa' ldan pho brang residence.[14] After the death of 'Jam dbyangs chos rje bkra shis dpal ldan, the monastery was headed by several masters including the Dalai Lamas, and they were known as the throne-holders (*gdan sa khri pa*).

The primary book of rules and regulations followed by the monks in this monastery is the rulebook of 'Bras spungs monastery written by

parched barley flour (*rtsam pa*) distributed to monks from the government store (Zhang *et al.* 1996: 2242). The third one, *tsha ra*, cannot be found in any dictionary, but it is most probably a phonetic rendering of *tsha gra*.

10 The term *tsha gzigs* means the share of tea and soup offered to extra-ordinary members of the monastery (Zhang *et al*. 1996: 2247).

11 *'gyed dang tsha bra/ tsha gzigs sogs kyi skal ba rnams 'gyed gtong rtsa tshig zur gsal bzhin gtong ba las/ lhag pa blangs mi chog*. See *Ser smad bca' yig*: 500.

12 See *Se ra bca' yig* (101) and also Ye shes kun dga' (1996: 108).

13 At the time of the 3rd Dalai Lama, there were seven colleges (Blo gsal gling, sGo mangs, bDe yangs, Shag skor, Thos bsam gling aka rGyal ba, 'Dul ba, and sNgags pa colleges). Of these, only four (Blo gsal gling, sGo mangs, bDe yangs, and sNgags pa colleges) remain, as the other three were closed down (Byams pa blo gros 1983: 115, 117).

14 Byams pa blo gros (1983: 117).

the 5th Dalai Lama in 1682. The *bca' yig* contains new regulations regarding the share of offerings to monks, issued in place of the old one determined on the basis of the financial status of the sponsor. The section regarding the share of *'gyed* and *tsha ra* offerings is rather lengthy, and, for the sake of convenience, I will therefore separate it into two units. The first concerns the monks who attend a general religious gathering as well as the servants who worked in different capacities while the congregation was held; the second is a list of the management units of the monastic community. The share (*skal*) of the offering in the 1682 rulebook includes all kinds of items, from money to foods and clothes, yet, in today's monastic communities, this regulation became the standard way to convert the share of money offering.

According to the first list, a fortyfold basic share of the offering must be deposited to the dGa' ldan pho brang residence,[15] a fivefold basic share is offered to the former and the incumbent head (*slob dpon khri gdan zur*) of the colleges, and a twofold basic share goes to the teachers who have passed *rigs grwa* examination.[16] A basic share is reserved to the lamas returned from abroad. A fivefold basic share is offered to the prayer leader (*dbu mdzad*), and a sixfold one to the disciplinarian (*dge skos*). An extra or double share (*skal 'phar*) is given to each members, including the ordinary government officials (*gzhung las pa*), the apothecary (*sman sbyin pa*), the prayer reciter (*dmigs brtse ma*), the congregation convener (*chab skad pa*),[17] the trumpet player (*dung mkhan*), the person who makes or prepares the ritual cake (*gtor ma ba*),[18] the assistant of the disciplinarian who gives permission water (*chab ril*

[15] dGa' ldan pho brang is the name given by the 2nd Dalai Lama (1476–1542) to the residence of the Dalai Lamas in 'Bras spungs monastery. The name was then extended to the Tibetan government in Lhasa when the 5th Dalai Lama became the religious and political head of Tibet. Therefore, this share was in principle meant for the Dalai Lama.

[16] The *rigs grwa* examination is one of the four graduate examinations marking the student's education level. These are the *lha ram pa*, the *tshogs ram pa*, the *rigs rams pa*, and the *gling bsre* (arranged from highest to the lowest grade) (*Se ra rtsa tshig*: 757; *Ser smad bca' yig*: 503; Sopa 1983: 26). According to Namri Dagyab (2009: 57, 134), there is a ceremony called *bdun pa'i rigs grwa* held in summer in the seventh month of Tibetan calendar, which is probably the ceremony during which this examination takes place. Geshe Lhundrup Sopa informs us that the examinations for the higher two grades (*lha ram pa* and *tshogs ram pa*) take place in winter in the first and the second months of the Tibetan calendar.

[17] The *dmigs brtse ma* prayer reciter and the congregation convener (*chab skad pa*) are those who summon the monks for religious congregation to the assembly hall.

[18] The one who prepare religious offering and altar.

*ba*),[19] the *khro gnyer*,[20] the kitchen chef (*ja ma lag bde dbu mdzad*, cf. Jansen 2018: 72), the one in charge of collecting firewood, the cook assistant (*thabs g.yog*), and the *tshwa tshul ba*.[21] A basic share is finally given to the cleaners (*'bags sel ba*) and the helpers hired to assist in the kitchen.

Below the relevant passage from the *'Bras spungs bca' yig*:

> *snga thog dngos gzhi sbyin bdag 'byor pa che chung la gzhigs nas lhus gang things byas pa'i dper na dga' ldan pho brang du mtho bzhi bcu/ slob dpon khri gdan zur rnams la lnga skal rigs grwa gcig btang ba'i slob dpon rnams la nyis skal/ phyogs la song ba'i bla ma tshur yong gi ris la ngo skal/ dbu mdzad la lnga skal/ dge skos la drug skal/ gzhung las pa/ sman sbyin pa/ dmigs brtse ma/ chab skad pa/ dung mkhan/ gtor ma pa/ chab ril pa/ khro gnyer/ ja ma lag bde dbu mdzad/ shing gnyer/ thabs g.yog pa bzhi dang tshwa tshul ba gcig sogs la skal 'phar re/ 'bags sel ba gsum la ngo skal re/ thabs g.yog pa bzhi po nas so so'i ram 'degs kyi mi gsum bzhi re sla dgos kyi yod 'dug pa mi 'khyam grub mtha' mi gtsang ba'i rigs mi 'gab pas so so'i skyes yul sogs zhib dpyad pa'i dge skos dang spyi so'i gnyer par gnang ba zhus nas bzhag par skal ba re//*[22]

According to the second list, a fortyfold share of the offering must be deposited to the general store of the monastic community (*spyi pa'i phyag mdzod*) and a twenty-threefold to the treasurer store. A threefold share is offered to the manager (*gnyer pa*) of dGa' ldan pho brang residence, and a twofold one to the general manager (*spyi gnyer*) and the three managers of Phan bde legs bshad gling,[23] bDe yangs pa, and sNgags pa sgrub mchod pa. A sevenfold share is offered to the gNas chung oracle, a fivefold one to the manager of summer retreat (*dbyar gnas kyi gnyer pa*), and basic one to the eight ritual performers of

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[19] The one who gives water of permission to the monks during religious congregation (Zhang *et al.* 1996: 788). In a sense, this person also serves as assistant to the disciplinarian (*dge skos*). He has to pass a leave request to the disciplinarian and if the permission is granted, he has to go to the monk and give water of permission so that the monk can leave the congregation.

[20] Possibly the person who takes care of the cauldrons made of cast iron (*khro*) used for making tea (i.e. *ja khro*) and soup (i.e. *thug khro*) in the monastic kitchen.

[21] I could not figure out its exact meaning, as I found no record of *tshwa tshul ba* in any known dictionary. But, from the context, I assume it refers to the person who is dealing with salt management (*tshwa*) in the monastery.

[22] *'Bras spungs bca' yig*: 179–180.

[23] This college is said to have been founded by the 2nd Dalai Lama, although it was the 3rd Dalai Lama bSod nams rgya mtsho (1543–1588) who formally established it as one of the colleges in 'Bras spungs monastery in 1574, giving it the name rNam rgyal grwa tshang phan bde legs bshad gling (see Blo bzang bsam gtan 2003: 1–2; Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho 2010: 543).

invocations (*gsol kha ba*),[24] the lay officials (*drung 'khor*), the clerks (*nang zan*), the temple caretaker, the one in charge of the rituals, and the registered ordinary monks.

Furthermore, a fourfold basic share is offered to the finance manager (*chos sde spyi so*) of the monastic community and to the *shas bdag*[25] of the summer retreat (*dbyar gnas*) from both Blo gsal gling and sGo mangs colleges. A threefold offering to *spyi pa* of the colleges Phan bde legs bshad gling pa, bDe yangs, and sNgags pa sgrub mchod pa,[26] and one share or the basic share is offered to the monastic households (*bla brang*), the apothecaries, and the temple caretakers (*mchod khang dkon gnyer*) of the three colleges rGyal ba,[27] 'Dul ba and Shag skor ba, as well as to the one in charge of the wages (*phogs do dam pa*) of rGyud stod college and Tā dben pa.[28]

Below, the relevant passage from the *'Bras spungs bca' yig*:

> *spyi pa'i phyag mdzod du mtho bzhi bcu/ gnyer tshang du nyi shu rtsa gsum/ dga' ldan pho brang gi gnyer par sum skal/ spyi gnyer la nyis skal re/ phan bde legs bshad gling pa/ bde yangs pa/ sngags pa sgrub mchod pa gsum gyi gnyer pa sdad dus nyis skal/ gnas chung sku khog la bdun skal/ gsol kha brgyad la ngo skal/ dbyar gnas kyi gnyer par lnga skal/ gzhung gi drung 'khor dang nang zan/ grwa tshang gi skal ba la'ang phyogs la phar song dang tshur slebs bstun do dam pas brda*

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[24] The person who performs invocation rites to the protector deities on someone's request (Zhang *et al.* 1996: 3033).

[25] I was not able to find the exact meaning of the term *shas bdag*, but I presume it could be read as *shas pa*, the person who goes to collect the share of harvested grains from the people who were given a part of agricultural land on lease (*shas la btang ba*) on behalf of the monastic estate. In this case, the collected grains may be used to cover the expenses of the summer retreat.

[26] Robert Ekvall (1964: 195) translates *spyi ba* as "superintendent," and identifies this figure with the head of wealth administration office of the monastery (*spyi khang*), a position often held by two individuals appointed from two to four years. Berthe Jansen (2018: 74–75) identifies two different responsibilities for this position: monastic supervisor or finance manager. Yet, I am not certain what responsibility the *spyi pa* of these three colleges had. The rulebook of Phan bde legs bshad gling (Blo bzang dpal ldan ye shes: 522), one of the three colleges, lists a *spyi so'i sde pa*. This position seems to have carried the responsibility of monastic supervisor, and it may have been identical to the *spyi pa* mentioned here.

[27] This is another name of Thos bsam gling college (see note 13), which is written in five different spelling: *rgyas pa* and *rgyal ba* in *'Bras spungs bca' yig*, *rgyal pa* in the 'Bras spungs history (Byams pa blo gros 1983: 115), *rgyal sa* in Blo bzang phun tshogs (2009: 51) and *rgyal po* and *rgyal pa* in Dung dkar (2002: 1550).

[28] Tā dben is the title given to one of the Sa skya pa master by the Yuan Emperor as the priest of the Mongol King (Zhang *et al.* 1996: 1022; Heimbel 2017: 85). According an official letter (*zhu yig/chab shog*) written by the 5th Dalai Lama in 1655 (*Shing lug chab shog*: 359), there were two messengers of the Emperor of China (*gser yig pa*) who held the title of Tā dben. Thus, it is possible that the Tā dben pa mentioned in the above rulebook could be related to that position.

*sbyar nas yod med kyi dbye ba phyed pa byin/ dge 'phel ba dang dngul chu chos rdzong pa ngo yod/ mchod khang dkon gnyer gyis mtshon gnyer las pa'i rigs sku rim do dam dang grwa pa grangs bcad song nges la ngo skal re/ chos sde spyi so dang dbyar gnas pa'i shas bdag ngo yod/ blo gsal gling pa dang sgo mangs par bzhi re/ phan bde legs bshad gling pa/ bde yangs/ sngags pa sgrub mchod pa gsum gyi spyi par gsum re dang bla brang so sor skal ba re/ rgyas pa/ 'dul ba/ shag skor ba gsum gyi bla brang dang sman sbyin pa/ mchod khang dkon gnyer/ rgyud stod pa'i phogs kyi do dam/ tā dben pa rnams la so sor skal ba re/ ra ma rdzong dpon g.yog bdun ma gtogs gzhan ma'i brel gcod par skal ba gtong len mi byed pa gzhung dang bod pa'i rigs la yin cing khams tshan de ga'i khams par gsum skal btang na bod pa dang nye logs rnams la nyis skal/ dge 'dun spyir mi gnod pa'i ngos rta drung sogs skyid sdug la phan slebs che ba tshor bcu skal tsam gtang ba sogs skyid sdug lan 'jal byed srol 'dug/*[29]

Looking at the way the number of shares were regulated in the *'Bras spungs bca' yig*, it is clear that the offering to the monks were based on their hierarchical rank or on their social responsibilities. Excluding those shares of the offering reserved to the monastic community, the *bla brang*, or the treasure, I will summarise here the offering to the individuals to show the differences from highest to the lowest in share (see Table 1). For instance, the highest share of the offering goes to the disciplinarian (*dge skos*), who receives a sixfold basic share, followed by the head of the colleges and the prayer leader (*dbu mdzad*), who both receive a fivefold share. Then there are the teachers with *rigs grwa* examination, the ordinary government officials, the apothecary, the reciter of the *dmigs brtse ma* prayer, the congregation convener, the trumpet player, the ritual cake maker, the giver of permission water, the *khro gnyer*, the kitchen chef, the one in charge of collecting firewood, the cook assistant, and *tshwa tshul ba*, all of whom receive one extra share, i.e. a twofold portion of the offering. Other workers, like the cleaner and the kitchen helper, receive the basic share. In the case of the management unit, the highest share (a fivefold one) is offered to the manager of summer retreat, followed by a fourfold one to the manager of the monastic finance and to the "manager" of the two bigger colleges' (Blo gsal gling and sGo mangs) summer retreat. A threefold share goes to the manager of the dGa' ldan pho brang residence, and to the *spyi pa*-s of the three smaller colleges (Phan bde legs bshad gling, bDe yangs pa, and sNgags pa sgrub mchod pa). A twofold share is offered to the general manager and to the managers of three smaller colleges. The rest of the members –the performers of the invocation

[29] *'Bras spungs bca' yig*: 180.

ritual, the lay officials, the clerks, the temple caretaker, the one in charge of the ritual, the ordinary monks, the apothecary, the temple caretakers of the three colleges (rGyal ba, 'Dul ba and Shag skor ba), the one in charge of the wages of rGyud stod, and the Tā dben pa—receive only a basic share.

| Recipient | Number of share (basic x fold) | |
|---|---|---|
| | List 1 | List 2 |
| disciplinarian | x 6 | -- |
| the former and the incumbent college heads, prayer leader | x 5 | -- |
| manager of summer retreat | -- | x 5 |
| monastic finance manager, summer retreat "manager" of the two larger colleges | -- | x 4 |
| manager of dGa' ldan pho brang, *spyi pa* of the three smaller colleges | -- | x 3 |
| teacher with *rigs grwa* exam, ordinary government officials, apothecary, prayer reciter, congregation convener, trumpet player, ritual cake maker, permission water giver, *khro gnyer*, kitchen chef, collector in charge of firewood, cook assistant, *tshwa tshul ba* | x 2 | -- |
| general manager, managers of the three smaller colleges | -- | x 2 |
| cleaner, kitchen helper | x 1 | -- |
| invocation ritual performers, lay officials, clerks, temple caretaker, ritualist in charge, ordinary monks, apothecary and temple caretaker of the three colleges, rGyud stod wage giver, Tā dben pa | -- | x 1 |

*Table 1 — Share of offerings in the rulebook of 'Bras spungs monastery.*

*Share of offerings in the rulebook of Chos mdzod gling and its colleges*

There are also numbers of other monastic rulebooks detailing the regulation to be followed when distributing the donations to the monks. However, for the sake of clarity, I will limit my discussion to only one of them, namely the *bca' yig* of dGa' ldan chos mdzod gling monastery in Mongolia, as the text has the merit of clearly showing that the rules in force in the monasteries of Central Tibet were adopted and implement outside the plateau. According to the catalogue of dGa' ldan chos mdzod gling (*Dkar chag dzambu nā da*, 2r–3v) compiled by Lcang lung Paṇḍita Ngag dbang blo bzang bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan (1770–1845), this monastery, also known as dGe 'phel gling, was founded by rJe Blo bzang dpal 'byor lhun grub rab rgyas (ca. 18th century, exact date unknown) in 1743 (Water Pig Year) with the support of his patron Pe'i le dpal 'byor rdo rje, who is described in this *Dkar chag dzambu nā da* as the "lord of the men" (*mi'i dbang phyug*) and a descendant of Genghis Khan. There is hardly anything recorded about this founder, except from Lcang lung Paṇḍita's claim that he was a teacher of Kun mkhyen 'jam dbyangs bzhad pa dkon mchog 'jig med dbang po (1728–1791).

According to the rulebook of dGa' ldan chos mdzod gling written by Lcang lung Paṇḍita, a fivefold basic share of the offering is to be entrusted to the monastic *bla brang*. A threefold share is to be offered to Tā bla ma,[30] while the disciplinarian, the *byang* (*ngu*) ritual priest, and the general manager (*spyi gnyer*) are to be given a twofold one each. All the ordinary monks receive the basic share of the offering.

Here is the relevant passage from the *Chos mdzod gling bca' yig*:

> *'gyed kyi skor la/ 'di gar skal ba lnga/ tā bla ma la skal ba gsum/ dge bskos byang 'dren/ spyi gnyer sogs na mo che khar gnyis skal/ de 'og tshor gnyis la skal 'phar re gtong ba lta bu sngar srol dang bstun nas byed/ dus rgyun bcar sdod kyi grwa pa yin phyin ngo skal gcig/ nad pa mtshams pa sogs yong mi thub nges dang/ bla dpon dge 'dun spyi'i don la song rigs rnams la ngo skal gtong /*[31]

More details of the offering regulation may be found in the rulebooks of dGa' ldan theg chen bshad sgrub gling[32] and mKhas mang thos bsam gling, two dialectic colleges under dGa' ldan chos mdzod gling,

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[30] This title was given to a high-ranking monk official working in the Tibetan government. There are two different ranks of Tā bla ma mentioned in the rulebooks related to dGa' ldan chos mdzod gling monastery: Tā bla ma and college Tā bla ma. It is not known how their functions differed, but we could see that they held different ranks in the rulebook of bShad sgrub gling (*Bshad sgrub gling bca' yig*).

[31] *Chos mdzod gling bca' yig*: 11v.

[32] See *Bshad sgrub gling bca' yig*: 2r.

both texts ascribable to the same writer Lcang lung Paṇḍita. According to the latter, the *bca' yig* of dGa' ldan theg chen bshad sgrub gling was adopted from the rulebook of Se ra byes college, in turn itself probably an adoption from the *Tshogs gtam chen mo* ("The Great Exhortation"), which had been memorised and orally recited during the mass gathering of the college, and was not written down until its first publication in 1991.[33] According to this rulebook, a sevenfold share is offered to the college *bla brang*, a fivefold one to the mTshan nyid bla ma, and a fourfold one to the Tā bla ma of the college (*grwa tshang tā bla ma*). A threefold share goes to the Tā bla ma[34] and the college disciplinarian (*grwa tshang dge bskos*), and a twofold one to the disciplinarian of the great assembly (*tshogs chen dge bskos*), the prayer leader of the college (*grwa tshang dbu mdzad*), and the general manager (*spyi pa'i gnyer pa*). The prayer leader of the great assembly (*tshogs chen dbu mdzad*), the temple caretaker (*dgon gnyer*), the permission water giver, and the cook (*ja ma*) receive the basic share, while the kitchen assistant (*thab g.yog*) and the water fetcher (*chu len pa*) receive only half of the share.

Below, the relevant passage from the *Bshad sgrub gling bca' yig*:

> *bla brang la sku skal bdun/ tā bla ma la sku skal gsum/ mtshan nyid bla ma la sku skal lnga/ grwa tshang tā bla mar sku skal bzhi/ tshogs chen dge bskos la skal pa gnyis/ tshogs chen dbu mdzad la skal ba gcig grwa tshang dge bskos la skal ba gsum/ grwa tshang dbu mdzad dang spyi pa'i gnyer pa la skal ba gnyis re/ dgon gnyer/ chab ril/ ja ma bcas la skal ba re/ thab g.yog chu len pa gnyis la skal phyed re gtong/ bzang smon gyi rgyun 'gyed nas dgon gnyer dung pa sogs la skal ba gnyis re ster ba dmigs bsal/*[35]

A similar regulation is followed in the dialectic college of Thos bsam gling. According to its rulebook (*Thos bsam gling bca' yig*), a sevenfold share is offered to the college *bla brang*, a fivefold one to the mTshan nyid bla ma, and a threefold one to the Tā bla ma and the college disciplinarian. A twofold share is given to the disciplinarian of the great assembly, the prayer leader of the college, and the general manager. All the others, including the prayer leader of the great assembly, the temple caretaker, the permission water giver and the cook receive the basic share; only a half of the share is offered to the kitchen assistant and the water fetcher.

Here is the relevant passage from the *Thos bsam gling bca' yig*:

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[33] For a whole translation of the *Tshogs gtam chen mo*, see Cabezón (1997: 338).

[34] The *Bshad sgrub gling bca' yig* described the post of Tā bla ma seperately from the Tā bla ma of the college (*grwa tshang tā bla ma*), therefore I take them as separate position.

[35] *Bshad sgrub gling bca' yig*: 18v–19r.

*'gyed kyi skor la/ 'di gar sku skal bdun/ tā bla ma la sku skal gsum/ mtshan nyid bla mar sku skal lnga/ tshogs chen dge bskos la skal ba gnyis/ tshogs chen dbu mdzad la skal ba gcig/ gra tshang dge bskos la skal ba gsum/ gra tshang dbu mdzad dang spyi ba'i gnyer pa la skal ba gnyis re/ dgon gnyer/ chab ril/ ja ma bcas la skal ba re/ thab g.yog chu len pa gnyis la skal phyed re gtong /*[36]

The above information shows that the offerings are consistently and systematically regulated in the two dialectic colleges under the same monastery, the latter a fact that demonstrates the uniformity in the rank status in the monastery. However, far from being permanently fixed, this status is temporarily allotted and shifts in accordance with the duties involved in certain events. Such changes are evident in the rulebook for the great sMon lam festival of the dGa' ldan chos mdzod gling monastery.[37] According to this rulebook, in fact, a thirtyfold share is to be offered to the monastic *bla brang*; the next highest recipients of the offering are the abbot of sMon lam festival (*smon lam mkhan po*) and the Tā bla ma, who both receive a sevenfold share of the donation. Then, a fivefold share goes to each college head (*grwa tshang bla ma*), the disciplinarian of the great assembly, and the prayer leader of the great assembly. A fourfold share is reserved to the disciplinarian of the college and the general manager (*spyi gnyer*), while a threefold one goes to college prayer leader, a twofold one to the chant singer (*mchod dbyangs pa*, eight of them in total) and the two disciplinarian assistants (*dge g.yog*). All the others, including the monk servant (*zhal ta pa*),[38] the temple caretaker, the trumpet player, the religious flute player (*rgya gling pa*), the permission water giver, and the *mdo dar* performers (four of them)[39] receive the basic share of the donation.

This is the relevant passage in the *Chos mdzod smon lam bca' yig*:

*'gyed kyi skal ba 'di gar sum cu/ smon lam mkhan po zur du yod tshe*

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[36] *Thos bsam gling bca' yig*: 13r.

[37] See *Chos mdzod smon lam bca' yig*.

[38] A monk who acted as a servant during summer retreat, *dbyar gnas skabs dge 'dun pa spyi la zhabs 'degs zhu mkhan* (Zhang *et al.* 1996: 2380).

[39] In the Tibetan-Chinese dictionary, we find the related entry *mdo dar ma*, which is vaguely described as one particular musical instrument "*rol mo'i bye brag cig*" (Zhang *et al.* 1996: 1383). However, in his very elaborate paper on the history of *mdo dar* in Bla brang bkra shis 'khyil monastery, Gdugs dkar bkra shis (2017) suggests that it is type of musical composition that includes ten different compositions played during a religious ceremony to receive important guests. He further explains that it is currently played with about six different musical instruments. I am indebted to my colleague Dr Lobsang Yongdan for this reference and Lobsang Thapka for his kind explanation of *mdo dar*.

*sku skal bdun/ tā bla ma la skal ba bdun/ gra tshang bla ma rnams dang/ tshogs chen dge bskos tshogs chen dbu mdzad rnams la skal ba lnga/ gra tshang dge bskos dang spyi pa'i gnyer pa la skal ba bzhi/ gra tshang dbu mdzad la skal ba gsum/ mchod dbyangs pa brgyad dang dge g.yog gnyis la skal ba gnyis/ zhal ta pa dgon gnyer dung mkhan/ rgya gling pa rnams la gnyis la skal 'phar re/ chab ril pa/ do dar pa tsho la bzhi la skal 'phar re gtong/*[40]

To summarise all the above information, as organised in the table below (Table 2), the individuals who receive the highest offering within the monastic community of dGa' ldan chos mdzod gling are the abbot of the sMon lam festival and Tā bla ma during the mass gathering of the great sMon lam festival. The abbot of the sMon lam festival seems to be a temporary status only appointed during the festival, as there is no mention of the share for this status in the other rulebooks. Although the Tā bla ma is the highest recipient during the festival, he gets only three shares during the assembly of colleges, that is one share less than the Tā bla ma of the college (*grwa tshang tā bla ma*) and two shares less than mTshan nyid bla ma. mTshan nyid bla ma or the head of the colleges (*grwa tshang bla ma*) receive five shares and that is the highest individual recipient during the college's assembly and the second highest recipient during the sMon lam festival. The second highest recipients during sMon lam festival also include the disciplinarian of the great assembly (*tshogs chen dge skos*) and the prayer leader of the great assembly (*tshogs chen dbu mdzad*). They are offered a fivefold share during the festival, but during the college's assembly they receive less than their counterparts, i.e. the disciplinarian and the prayer leader of the colleges. The disciplinarian of a great assembly receives two shares, and the prayer leader of a great assembly receives only one share, while their counterparts respectively receive three and two shares of the offerings during the college's assembly. This shows how individual statuses fluctuate up and down according to the events, and apparently this has to do with how burdensome is the task that the monastic officials have to carry out during a particular event. This is also clear from the share of offering reserved to the disciplinarian (i.e. fourfold) and the prayer leader (i.e. threefold) of the colleges during the sMon lam festival, a quota that is less than the one received by their counterparts (fivefold, as mentioned above). Another example that illustrates such shifts of status can be seen when looking at the share received by the general manager (*spyi gnyer*). His task seems to be perceived as lighter than the one of disciplinarian of the college, and therefore he receives one share less during the college's assembly, although

[40] *Chos mdzod smon lam bca' yig*: 8r–8v.

during the sMon lam festival his share is equal to the one given to the disciplinarian (i.e. fourfold).

| Recipient | Number of share (basic x fold) | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Chos mdzod | bShad sgrub | Thos bsam | sMon lam |
| abbot of the sMon lam festival | -- | -- | -- | x 7 |
| mTshan nyid bla ma | -- | x 5 | x 5 | -- |
| college Tā bla ma | -- | x 4 | -- | -- |
| Tā bla ma | x 3 | x 3 | x 3 | x 7 |
| head of the colleges | -- | -- | -- | x 5 |
| disciplinarian | x 2 | -- | -- | -- |
| *byang* (*ngu*) ritual priest | x 2 | -- | -- | -- |
| disciplinarian of the college | -- | x 3 | x 3 | x 4 |
| disciplinarian of the great assembly | -- | x 2 | x 2 | x 5 |
| prayer leader of the college | -- | x 2 | x 2 | x 3 |
| prayer leader of the great assembly | -- | x 1 | x 1 | x 5 |
| general manager (*spyi ba'i gnyer pa*) | x 2 | x 2 | x 2 | x 4 |
| chant singer, disciplinarian assistant, monk servant, trumpet player, flute player, *mdo dar* performers | -- | -- | -- | x 2 |
| permission water giver | -- | x 1 | x 1 | x 2 |
| kitchen chef | -- | x 1 | x 1 | -- |
| kitchen assistant | -- | x half | x half | -- |
| water-fetcher | -- | x half | x half | -- |
| water-fetcher | -- | x 1 | x 1 | x 2 |
| ordinary monks | x 1 | -- | -- | -- |

*Table 2 — Share of offerings in the rulebooks of Chos mdzod gling, its two colleges, and sMon lam festival*

*Offering amount in legal documents*

After discussing in detail how the share of donation is regulated in Tibetan monasteries, I will now explain how and why different amounts of offerings were made in the secular context. It is important at this point to remember that, being the head of the state a monk, the social system in Tibet was to some extent influenced by the system of monastic rules and regulations. This is particularly true in the case of the rulebook of 'Bras spungs monastery, as its author, the 5th Dalai Lama, became the head of the Tibetan government. Although the offering obligation in the secular community does not seem to have been subject to written regulations nor was documented in any legal document, a system similar to the one in force in the monasteries was at play in the secular community.

To illustrate the influence wielded by the monastic system on lay customs, I will present examples of offerings made to government officials and individuals as recorded in the document DTAB ID 0200 (SBB 6823). The latter is a record of expenditures made between 1891 and 1895[41] by Khang dkar dbang phyug and sMan phyi bkras don, two officials of sPo rong travelling to gZhis ka rtse and Lhasa in order to settle a dispute regarding the right of land ownership of the sPo rong rje dpon, the local ruler of sPo rong. The expenses include the purchase of gifts items such as foods, clothes and stationery, offerings of money, and their travel expenses on food, lodging and transportation. Most of these offerings were made as *mjal rten* or *'bul rten*, which is traditionally an offering made when paying a simple visit. Since these visits were carried out on behalf of the local ruler of sPo rong, there was certainly an important reason behind the offering accompanying them. Unfortunately, we can only speculate as to why these two sPo rong officials paid such visits, as they did not disclose any specific purpose in their record of expenditures: maybe it was simply to pay respect or to show loyalty to the recipients or to gain support or influence from them over any pending decision in favour of the giver. Some of the offerings were also made as *snyan rten* (a present given when one

[41] The conversion of this period has been confirmed from three references in the document. Firstly, there is a reference of sixty-four days between the 28th day of the 9th month and the 20th (30th) day of the 10th month of the Iron Rabbit Year. This reference fits only if we take 1891 (Iron Rabbit Year) as date of the document. Secondly, there is another reference calculating 3 years, 10 months, and 17 days between the 28th day of 7th month of the Iron Rabbit Year and the 15th day of the 4th month of the Wood Sheep Year. This calculation fits only between 1891 (Iron Rabbit Year) and 1895 (Wood Sheep Year). Thirdly, there was an offering made when the *mchog sprul* of Phur lcog byams mgon *rin po che* (1825–1882) was enthroned. This event can be dated sometime between 1891 and 1895, because it cannot be very far from 1882, year in which Phur lcog byams mgon *rin po che* passed away.

makes an appeal or requests advice or as a reminder of such entreaty),[42] *skyabs rten* (money or presents given when asking for a favour or help in return), and *'don bskul* (offering done when requesting someone to read a prayer or to perform a ritual).

From the Tibetan Buddhist perspective, *skyabs rten* is not considered as a bribe when it is offered to one own's spiritual master; rather it is deemed to be "the offering to request guidance through the spiritual path towards liberation",[43] thus it is a kind of *'bul rten* with a spiritual purpose. However, according to Melvyn Goldstein, in legal documents the term *skyabs rten* is most often used for an offering analogous to a bribe.[44] From the record of expenses, it is clear that, when in gZhis ka rtse, the sPo rong officials twice offered a *skyabs rten* to a person named Chos khang pa who both times refused to accept, only to cave in later when they offered him one ball of butter (*mar hril*) as a departing gift.[45] Another example of this *skyabs rten* used as bribery can be found in the history of Ngam ring district written by Phran rtsa rta mgrin rgyal po: here the author claims to have witnessed first-hand episodes of corruption among the Ngam ring officials, who accepted money as *skyabs rten* to file a case.[46]

The purpose of the offering of *snyan rten*, *skyabs rten* and *'don bskul* may be clearly understood from the context in which the terms appear; sometimes the specific case is even briefly mentioned in the document. Generally speaking, the amount of these offerings seems to be based on the difficulty or urgency of the task requested in favour, rather than with the status of recipient. The last point will become clearer once we examine a few examples of *snyan rten* and *skyabs rten* offerings. For instance, the highest-ranking monk official of dGa' ldan pho brang government, the sPyi khyab mkhan po, was offered 150 *srang*[47] for a normal visit (*mjal rten*), which we can assume was the standard rate for his status. Yet, he was offered less, i.e. 100 *srang*, on one occasion when a *skyabs rten* was given for a *viva voce* request, and more, i.e. 250 *srang* plus a load of rice worthy 450 *srang*, on two different occasions as the

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[42] Alternative terms found in the document are: *snyan zhu bka' slob zhu rten*, *zhabs bskul bka' slob zhu rten, snyan bskul zhu rten,* and *bka' slob zhu rten*.

[43] *mgo 'dren byed rogs zhu ba'i 'bul rten*, see Zhang *et al.* (1996: 143).

[44] Goldstein (2001: 68).

[45] DTAB ID 0200 (SBB6823): [line 122–123] *chos khang par zhabs bskul snga phyi'i skyabs rten bzhes min la brten thon mjal mar hril 1 rin srang 350/*

[46] Phran rtsa rta mgrin rgyal po (1994: 73–74): *grong drag ming chen rnams nas sger mjal sha/ mar/ dngul sogs 'bul srol len rkyang khar khrims chad nyes dngul dang/ rnam kun khrims gtugs byed mkhan gyi sa nas skyabs rten dngul dngos 'bul len/ nyes chad gcod pa sogs rdzong thog rim pas za bed byed lugs rdzong sdod mi 'gro so so'i byed phyogs yin cing/* For the detail study of this source, see Alice Travers (forthcoming).

[47] *Srang* is a Tibetan monetary unit. I have discussed the use of *srang* in Gurung (2018).

*skyabs rten* accompanied a written request (*skyabs 'dzin* or *skyabs zhu'i tshig tho*). The fact that there is a written request attached to the money offering made during the two occasions indicates the urgency of the tasks, which also explains why the amount of offerings differs, although they belong to the same type (i.e. *skyabs rten*) and are made to the same ranking official. A similar example is provided by the offering made to a fourth-ranking finance minister or *rtsis dpon*, who was given 150 *srang* as *snyan rten* and 100 *srang* as *skyabs rten*. This is less than the offering of 250 *srang* as *skyabs rten* made to the official named E zhabs.[48] Even though his position or rank is not known, E zhabs was apparently a very influential and authoritative figure who the sPo rong officials visited about seven times, bringing him gifts of cash, meat, and butter worth more than 1,400 *srang* in total. Likewise, the second person to whom the sPo rong officials paid the most visits was Chos khang pa of gZhis ka rtse. He was offered gifts of meat, butter, rice, paper, and cash mostly as *mjal rten* (only once as *skyabs rten*) worthy more than 4,700 *srang* in total. As mentioned earlier, he twice refused *skyabs rten* offerings—unfortunately, the amount of each donations was not recorded in the document. To conclude, all these examples suggest that, although the gift offerings made as *skyabs rten* or *snyan rten* do not reflect the status of the recipient, they are somewhat indicative of the importance of the requested task.

As mentioned above, the offering known as *mjal rten*, the one made when paying a simple visit, appears to be the most consistent one in terms of amounts, as it was perhaps determined on the basis of one's social rank. As shown in the table below (Table 3), Yab gzhis mTsho mgon chen po was given 250 *srang* (the highest amount offered). Among the others, the highest-ranking monk officials, the sPyi khyab mkhan po (rank 3) and the Bla brang phyag mdzod (rank 4), were both offered an average of 150 *srang*, while the council ministers (rank 3) and the acting council ministers (bKa tshab or bKa 'blon las tshab), the finance ministers (rank 4), and the secretary general (*drung che*) were offered about 100 *srang* for a normal visit (*mjal rten*). The fifth-ranking officials, like the district heads or mayors, and the staffs (rank unknown) of the private treasury of the Dalai Lama (*mdzod sbug*), and the ex-manager of the private chapel of the Dalai Lama (gZim chung lha khang) were offered about 25 to 50 *srang* per meeting, the latter considered as a normal visit (*mjal rten*). The following table (Table 3) lists

[48] In all the seven occurrences in the document, his name is written as *e zhabs* or *e zhabs mchog*, which seems to be title, possibly an abbreviation of *E khang zhabs 'bring*, a section of the government office where the letters and documents were copied. Since no real name or any other description is given, it is difficult to guess his position, rank or social status. However, it is clear from this document that he was in gZhis ka rtse.

the amounts of offerings from the highest (250 *srang*) to the lowest (25 *srang*), accordingly to the official rank of the recipients.

| Recipient | Rank | in *srang* |
|---|---|---|
| Yab gzhis mTsho mgon chen po | 3 | 250 |
| Lha yum chen mo (the great mother) | 3? | 100–150 |
| Ja sag | 3 | 150 |
| sPyi khyab mkhan po | 3 | 150 |
| bKa' blon | 3 | 100 |
| bKa' blon las tshab | 3? | 100 |
| *sku ngo rim bzhi* (4th-ranking official) | 4 | 200 |
| rTsis dpon | 4 | 100 |
| drung che Lha sdings (secretary general) | 4 | 100 |
| Bla phyag | 4 | 150–200 |
| manager of sPyi khyab mkhan po | 4? | 100 |
| *dbus mda' dpon* (sngon lung pa) | 4 | 50 |
| Mi dpon (district heads or mayor) | 5 | 50 |
| rTsis pa | 6 | 150 |
| E zhabs (from gZhis ka rtse) | unknown | 150 |
| Chos khang pa (from gZhis ka rtse) | unknown | 100 |
| rGyal nang sku ngo | unknown | 25–50 |
| ex-manager of gZim chung lha khang | unknown | 25–50 |
| Staff in *mdzod sbug* office | unknown | |

*Table 3 — List of the offerings as mjal rten (only money offerings listed)*

## *Conclusion: measuring income inequality in Tibetan society*

As explained in the previous sections, although in principle the *'gyed* offering may be determined by the donor based on his financial capacity, the existence of a regulation of multiple shares forces the donor to follow the rules established in the *bca' yig* of the monastery, according to which the offering must be calculated following the hierarchical status of the monks. When the offering is made through the monastic administration, such regulations are almost always implemented. In the unlikely case that the recipient's status is ignored, this may be either considered an unfortunate event, as the donor refuses to acknowledge the recipient's rights and thus does not pay sufficient respect (*bskur sti* or *bsnyen bskur*), or an offensive way by which the giver expresses his unwillingness to accept the rightful status of the recipient. Since no Tibetan sponsors dare to go against the religious harmony and cause their own ruin in terms of social prestige, it is almost impossible that

the monastic rules are not followed. In the case that the government or lay official are not offered amounts according to their status or the standard rate for their position, the favour that the giver expects in return may not be accomplished.

Looking at the number of the shares regulated in the monastic rulebooks, we can see how the offering to the monks were made on the basis of their hierarchical rank, or on their social responsibilities. This is clearly illustrated in the excerpts from the 'Bras spungs *bca' yig* quoted above, where the largest shares are given to the highest-ranking monastic officials, such as the disciplinarian (sixfold share), the heads of colleges and prayer leader, whereas the smallest ones go to the lowest-ranking monks, like the kitchen helper (one share). Although the exact share distribution is different, a status-based repartition of the offerings is also found in the rulebook of Chos mdzod gling and its colleges, according to which the highest share goes to the mTshan nyid bla ma (fivefold), followed by the Tā bla ma, the disciplinarian, and the prayer leader, down to the lowest status-holder, namely the water fetcher (half share). This shows that the offerings were consistently and systematically regulated in Tibetan monasteries according to one's status. However, as we have seen, such status shifted up and down, as shown in the case of the numbers of shares received by the Tā bla ma, the disciplinarian, and the prayer leader during the sMon lam festival versus those they got when attending a regular assembly of the college (see Table 2). This shift was apparently due to the difficulty of the task entrusted to the recipients during that particular event.

The regulation of offerings in the monastery has evidently influenced the way in which Tibetans treated the amount of offering to be given in the secular community. However, unlike the regulation in the monastery, offerings at a secular level (e.g. to government officials) were neither written in guidelines nor in rulebooks. The purpose of the offering to the government officials was also different from the offerings made to a monastery, and their amount sometimes seemed to have been based upon the urgency of the requested task, and therefore it was not necessarily determined by the recipient's status (see the case of the *skyabs rten* offerings to the *rtsis dpon* vs E zhabs). However, looking at the different amounts of the offerings recorded in the sPo rong document, particularly in case of *mjal rten*, it appears that the offering was, to some extent, regulated according to the hierarchical status of the recipients. We can see that the higher-ranking officials (like the sPyi khyab mkhan po, the Bla brang phyag mdzod, the council ministers, etc.) were offered more than 100 *srang* per meeting whereas the lower-ranking officials (e.g. district heads or mayors) were paid 25 to 50 *srang* per meeting. In other words, we can say that the giver was

expected to make an offering on the basis of the official rank of the recipient.

In some cases, the variation of the amount given for a *mjal rten* also seems to have been due to the importance of the meeting or the desire to keep a personal relationship intact, the latter factors may explain why the donor made expensive offerings despite the relative low status of the recipient. Such variation in the offerings directly affected the actual income of the recipients, and therefore influenced their economic status and positions within the society. Since the economic status or income of the Tibetan officials depended, among other things, upon the number of visitors that they received, their official social status and prestige also play an important role in securing them visitors, thus allowing them to maintain a high economic status. The competition in offerings is even fiercer today, as a high donation displays the givers' economic status, and increases their reputation in the community.

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# Rule and Labour in Tibet: Constructing the Red Palace of the Potala

Peter Schwieger

(University of Bonn)

## *Introduction*

The dGa' ldan pho brang government came into power in 1642. Just three years later it was decided to erect a new palace on the dMar po ri hill outside Lhasa town. The building was shaped as a fortress and meant for the central administration,[1] and it incorporated the Dalai Lama's personal residence as well as a great assembly hall and the governmental offices. As is well-known, the Potala palace was not only designed as a symbol of power, but also as a visible expression of the great salvation project for Tibet initiated by the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara and spelled out in the historical account composed by the Dalai Lama himself during the same time. It seems that the actual construction work for the so-called White Palace took only two years to complete; by 1648, the inner halls of the palace were teeming with artists, hired to decorate the walls with marvellous murals.[2] The building of the palace must have created a great demand for labour, yet the autobiography of the 5th Dalai Lama is extremely poor in providing details about the building phase: virtually no information is contained in the voluminous text about the actual construction—who were the workers and how labour was organised.

In this regard the White Palace differs sharply from the Red Palace, built forty-five years later on the initiative of *sde srid* Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho as the second great component of the Potala. The regent documented the construction in a comprehensive book—describing not only the numerous accompanying religious ceremonies and listing all the

1 Karmay (2014: 193).
2 Karmay (2014: 216–217).

Schwieger Peter, "Rule and Labour in Tibet: Constructing the Red Palace of the Potala", *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines*, no. 57, Janvier 2021, pp. 216-240.

religious pieces of art contained therein, but also recording many details and aspects of the construction itself. The title of the book is "Register of the reliquary stūpa, the unique ornament of the world, and the temple as its 'support'; a boat for crossing the ocean to the island of liberation, a treasury of blessing".[3]

In addition to this extensive written documentation, Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho provided many other details, such as those of the workshops and various crafts depicted on wall paintings inside the palace. The description covers the murals decorating the eastern part of the corridor attached to the great assembly hall on the second floor of the Red Palace. The single scenes illustrating the construction of the Red Palace are embedded in a common landscape. They are numbered and accompanied by brief captions. Although a systematic documentary of these amazingly informative illustrations is still missing, close-ups of selected images were nevertheless reproduced in various publications of the People's Republic of China and are currently available for consultation.

Strangely enough, Western scholars have so far only superficially turned to Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho's monumental book for details on the construction of the Red Palace. To my knowledge, only Anne Chayet and Ian MacCormack refer to it in any extent. While the first mentions it briefly in an article on the Potala,[4] MacCormack's recent treatment of the work is more extensive. In his dissertation, in fact, he praises the text for its being "absolutely stuffed with details of all varieties".[5] However, due to his line of enquiry, he inevitably restricts his scrutiny to the

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3 *Mchod sdong 'dzam gling rgyan gcig rten gtsug lag khang dang bcas pa'i dkar chag thar gling rgya mtshor bgrod pa'i gru rdzings byin rlabs kyi bang mdzod*. According to the colophon, a first complete version of the book was written down by four different scribes in 1697. The woodblocks for the printing were carved in 1701. Today, several copies of the work are known. For details see MacCormack (2018: 260 note 1). In this article, I refer to the edition published in Lhasa in 1990, hereafter abridged as *Mchod sdong*. A comparison of the relevant passages in the edition of 2016 published by Ser gtsug nang bstan dpe rnying 'tshol bsdu phyogs sgrig khang in Lhasa as well as those in the reproductions of the block prints from the Zhol par khang preserved in the collection of Tsepon W. D. Shakabpa and published by T. Tsepal Taikhang 1973 in New Delhi, both available through TBRC, the Buddhist Digital Resource Center (W1KG25316 and W8223), did not reveal any significant differences.

4 Chayet (2003: 49–50).

5 MacCormack (2018: 264).

theological and cosmological guiding principles for constructing the palace and the layout and decoration of its many rooms and chapels. Therefore, the enormous labour and the organisation necessary to build such an impressive palace in a short period of time still needs to be analysed, and the present paper is intended to be the first step in this direction.

### *The construction of the Red Palace*

The Red Palace was designed to fulfil a function totally different from the one of the White Palace, as the main purpose of the building was to enshrine the corpse of the deceased 5th Dalai Lama. To that end, a big hall was erected with a chapel on its western side containing the huge golden stūpa that was the tomb of the great hierarch.

From the beginning Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho had the intention to complete the entire construction within three years. To adhere to such an ambitious schedule, great numbers of workers had to be recruited. Most of the labour force was provided as *'u lag*, that is to say, as a kind of tax obligation. *'U lag* is the term used by the same Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho to classify the work performed by the subjects of gTsang and dBus, the two provinces of Central Tibet.[6]

Originally, during the Yuan dynasty, the term *'u lag* was only applied to obligations related to the transport services and postal relay stations, in particular as provisions of horses, pack animals, and people for transport as well as the necessary food, fodder, and fuel for the road.[7] Under the dGa' ldan pho brang the term comprised all labour duties which had to be performed for the government, such as construction work, restoration of dams, cutting of wood, transport of wood or grain, arrangement of horses to be supplied as corvée duty, availability of resting places and overnight lodgings for travelling chiefs and Tibetan troops, welcoming and seeing off of government post-riders, etc.

In addition to the ordinary workers and their headmen, supervisors had also to be appointed and special craftsmen had to be engaged—

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6 *Mchod sdong*: 237.

7 In this meaning, the term appears in a whole series of Mongolian- and Tibetan-speaking documents issued for Tibetan recipients of the Yuan period (Mong. *ulaya*). See Everding (2006: part 1, documents nos. I–III, V, VIII, X; part 2, documents nos. XII, XIII, XVI, XVIII, XXII–XXIV).

among them foreign specialists from Nepal, Mongolia, and China. Various kinds of craft had to be coordinated, specialised workshops had to be erected, building materials had to be transported from different places, workers, foremen and craftsmen had all to be supplied with food and lodgings, medical care had to be provided and systems of policing and control be established for security reasons. Furthermore, it was considered important for the success of the project that monks from various monasteries regularly performed rituals to appease the numerous spirits who might have felt disturbed by the construction.

Another problem was the chronic lack of labour force in Tibet: any worker recruited for performing corvée labour on the dMar po ri meant a missing man in their home estates. To bypass the problem, the regent divided the labour amongst workers hailing from different districts. Moreover, he decided that the workers would be replaced after their first year.

The foundation was laid on the 20th day of the 2nd Tibetan month of the Iron Horse Year, corresponding to March 29 or 30, 1690.[8] The actual construction works started on the 11th day of the 1st Tibetan month of the Iron Sheep Year, corresponding to February 9, 1691. The dates were set in accordance with Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho's careful astrological calculations. For the first year of work, 5,507 corvée workers were recruited from different governmental, aristocratic, and monastic estates, most of them located in gTsang.[9] For the second year, another 5,737 workers were recruited, this time from other estates, belonging to the areas of dBus including Southern Tibet.[10] Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho does not mention an exchange of workers for the third year. As illustrated on the wall paintings of the Potala, corvée labourers were mainly required to work in the quarries and carry red clay, stones, and wood to the construction site. Wherever possible, boats were used for transport. While most of the building materials were found in the area around Lhasa, the timber originated mainly from the forests in Southeast Tibet.[11]

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8 *Mchod sdong*: 232, 262. The exact day is described in a very elaborated way in *Mchod sdong*: 232. In brief, it was the 20th day of the 2nd Hor month of the Iron Horse Year: since that month has a second 20th day added, the date corresponds to either March 29 or 30.

9 *Mchod sdong*: 237–238.

10 *Mchod sdong*: 242.

11 *Mchod sdong*: 308.



*Fig. 1 — sdig rag tu bsangs lngan {brngan} sogs sa rdo slong ba'i thab {thabs} dang/ sdo {rdo} gsog 'dren gnang ba/ "[a] The way that earth and stones were 'requested' in sDig rag [through] smoke offerings and so on; and [b] collecting and transporting stones" (Dom po ba Thub bstan rgyal mtshan et al., 1996: 109).*



*Fig. 2 — lha lung du bsangs brngan/ klu gtor dang bcas rdo gsog 'dren gnang ba/ "Collecting and transporting stones in lHa lung together with smoke offerings and gtor ma offerings for the klu [spirits]" (Dom po ba Thub bstan rgyal mtshan et al., 1996: 113).*



*Fig. 3 — skam g.yung du skyid chur ko bal {ba la} rdo 'dren 'jug pa gnang ba/ "Having stones transported on coracles on the sKyi chu in sKam g.yung" (Dom po ba Thub bstan rgyal mtshan et al., 1996: 111).*

More than 10,000 corvée labourers were recruited for the construction of the Red Palace—nothing more than a blurred mass of anonymous workers lacking names and identities. Different is the case for the craftsmen and artisans summoned to the site, since Sang rgyas rgya mtsho took great care not only to list their specialities but to record their individual names as well. The list comprises more than 1,680 names.[12] Among the many names are common ones like bSod nams bkra shis or Blo bzang, rather prestigious ones like rGyal rtse *jo bo* dPal 'byor and on the contrary really degrading ones like sTag rtse Khyi skyag. It is hard to imagine that adults' names such as "Dog shit" (Khyi skyag), "Pig shit" (Phag skyag), "Bad dog" (Khyi lod), "Goat" (Tshe tshe), "Piglet" (Phag phrug) or "Madman" (sMyon pa) did not carry specific social connotations to Tibetan ears. Nevertheless, all these names were simply placed next to each other. It must be also taken into account that not all of the craftsmen listed were constantly present on the construction site. Some stayed for long periods, others for shorter ones.

From the list it appears that two craftsmen were given a prominent role: 'Bog gong Mon pa Blo gros rgyal mtshan, supervisor of all

[12] *Mchod sdong*: 269–283.

craftsmen, boatmen, and construction workers, and gNas gsar pa 'Jam dbyangs dbang po, foreman of all carpenters. Before the actual construction work began, those two men had drawn the exact construction plan based on the original draft made by the regent himself.[13]

The whole process was preceded by the swearing of an oath (*dam tshig*) by both the sponsors (*yon bdag*) and the craftsmen (*bzo bo*), and the taking of their seals by the supervisors. Workshops for the various crafts were then set up: the smiths for copper, cast-iron, and iron, as well as the workshop of the metal engravers, were all set up at the printing house and the *mdzo mo* corral (*mdzo mo ra ba*).



*Fig. 4 — par khang du bal po brdungs 'phrul {'phul} zangs lcags mgar ba khro lug {lugs} sogs kyi bzo grwa 'dzugs pa gnang ba/ "Establishing a workshop for Nepalese metal workers, copper- and iron-smiths, foundry workers, and so on at the printing house." (Dom po ba Thub bstan rgyal mtshan et al., 1996: 110)*

[13] *Mchod sdong*: 235, 287.

The carpenters were located at the dGa' ldan khang gsar on the north side of Lhasa, the workshop of the tailors was at the Bla brang bzo khang, while the experts who pulverised the pigments for making paints had their own workshop at the rGya ri khang gsar.



*Fig. 5 — dga' ldan khang sar {gsar} du shing bzo'i las grwa 'dzugs pa gnang ba "Establishing a workshop for carpenters at the dGa' ldan khang gsar" ('Jam dbyangs, Wang Mingxing et al., 2000: 271).*

In addition, a camp for the headmen and the numerous corvée workers was set up in a park downstream (*chu smad gling kha*).[14]

About 40 supervisors managed the common workers and craftsmen: 'Bog gong Mon pa Blo gros rgyal mtshan was a general supervisor (*spyi khyab do dam*) in charge of all craftsmen and corvée labourers, a function he shared with gZhis ka snying snying. The latter is presented as a general supervisor and as chief (*'go pa*) of the craftsmen from China and all the various metalworkers. Both men seem to have held the same rank on the construction site, as they received exactly the same type and number of gifts upon completion of the work. Others were appointed to

[14] *Mchod sdong*: 238–239, 521.

oversee more specific tasks, like the distribution of tea and soup to the corvée workers, the administration of medical care, the carpentry, the masonry, the iron smithy, the running of the various quarries around Lhasa or the supervision of the boatmen. In addition to the supervisors, there were 39 representatives of a total of 34 private and district estates which had provided serfs as labourers. Some of the estates—rGya ri, sTag rtse, bKra shis lhun po, and sNa rtse—had two or three representatives on site, although their presence on site was not continuous. About 25 living quarters had been reserved to accommodate them in turns.[15]

Interestingly, Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho begins the list of the actual craftsmen with a group of eight Chinese men, supervised by an additional person functioning as their chief. As explicitly mentioned, they were sent to Tibet by the emperor of China, but no mention is made of their specific skills. Their leader figures prominently in the section listing the recipients of special farewell gifts, as he was the third to be granted such privilege after the two general supervisors.[16]

Next, Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho mentions two leaders of a group of Nepalese craftsmen followed by the names of 122 Nepalese craftsmen, who were experts in forging work (*brdung pa*), inlaying with gems (*phra pa*), and a third craft known as *'phul pa*.[17] The leaders or chiefs (*'go pa*) were not identical to the actual foremen (*dbu chen*, *dbu chung*), who are listed within the group of craftsmen.[18]

Hereafter, all the other craftsmen are listed in accordance with their specific craft, each group starting with the names of the greater and the lesser foremen. The following are mentioned in order: 240 icon painters (163 from the so called sMan school and 77 from the mKhyen school); 34 sculptors who made the clay statues; 46 coppersmiths; 29 foundry workers; three goldsmiths; two persons who made the lotus petals functioning as pedestals for the statues; 39 Nepalese workers who polished iron; 215 carpenters; eight woodcarvers; 376 stone masons; 22 plasterers; 85 boatmen and oarsmen for transporting stones and wood on the river; 129 workers who engraved reliefs on gold and silver vessels; 78

15 *Mchod sdong*: 268–269, 287.

16 *Mchod sdong*: 269, 287.

17 On the murals the term is written as *'phrul* (see below: figure 4). It seems to denominate a particular type of metalworking. However, it is not clear to me what kind of metalworking is exactly described by this term and how it differs from the activity termed *rdung*, "beating" the metal.

18 *Mchod sdong*: 269–270, 287.

iron smiths; 143 tailors and needlers including not only the usual greater and lesser foremen but also three general supervisors; 21 Nepalese tailors; nine spinners; and 38 persons pulverizing pigments. The greatest craft group was the one of the stone masons, followed by the icon painters and the carpenters. Nepalese craftsmen made up the largest group of foreign skilled workers. Altogether 184 people are classified as Nepalese. There were also a few Mongolian craftsmen, but they are not listed as a separate group.

All the supervisors and craftsmen as well as the representatives of the estates present at the construction site received a monthly payment (*zla phogs*) in foods: sheep's carcasses, sheep's heads for making soup, grain, salt, oil and cheese measured in bushels called *khal*[19] and consisting of 20 *bre* which again had six *phul*, and tea and butter measured in a unit of weight which was also called *khal*, but divided into 20 *nyag* or *nya ga* which again comprised four *spor*. The payment differed mainly in accordance with the rank or the responsibility of the individual, but also in partial consideration of the specific craft.

At the top level was the class of the so-called "higher persons" (*che kha*), exemplified by the abovementioned general supervisor 'Bog gong Mon pa Blo gros rgyal mtshan. Every month, those people received six *khal* of barley to be roasted and ground into flour (*rtsam pa*) or to be used for making beer, three *khal* of grain as an equivalent of a piece of meat (*sha gcig gi dod khal gsum*), one sheep's carcass, two sheep's heads, two *bre* of salt, two *bre* of oil, three *nyag* of the so-called T'a tshang tea, four *nyag* of the so-called 'U zi tea, one *khal*, and one *nyag* of butter.

Underneath the *che kha* were the specific supervisors, such as those overseeing the carpenters and masons, as well as the lay officials of the government (*drung 'khor*), and the representatives of the highest strata of the manorial lords, who all formed a common salary bracket. Their payment consisted of seven *khal* of grain for making *rtsam pa* and beer, one sheep's carcass, one sheep's head, one *bre* of salt, one *bre* of oil, three *nyag* of T'a tshang tea and nine *nyag* of butter.

Thereafter followed the representatives of estates of medium size like the sGam po ba estate (in Dwags po in South-East Tibet). Each month, they were given six *khal* of grain, one carcass of a small sheep,

[19] On the dry measure called *khal* see Schwieger, "Lenders and borrowers in Tibetan society," in this volume.

one *bre* of salt, cheese, and oil, as well as tea and butter in the same amount as those in the next higher salary bracket.

The representatives sent by the smaller estates received a monthly payment of five *khal* of grain, half of a small sheep's carcass, one *bre* of salt, cheese and oil, one *nyag* of tea and two and a half *nyag* of butter. Minor supervisors like government clerks received the same, only they were given half a *khal* of grain less.

In general, the craftsmen were paid no less than the supervisors and the representatives of the different estates. The salary of the craftsmen differed whether they were greater or lower foremen or ordinary craftsmen. For some crafts, the ordinary craftsmen were differentiated once more into a higher and a lower salary bracket. Moreover, there are some differences in payment between the different crafts. On average, each month the greater foremen received between eight and ten *khal* of grain, one sheep's carcass, two sheep's heads, one *bre* of salt and oil, and between two *spor* and one *nyag* of tea. The amount of butter varied between 1.25 and five *nyag*. The foremen of the icon painters were the only ones who received two sheep's carcasses a month. However, they received less grain and no sheep's heads, but two and a half *bre* of cheese.

The common craftsmen were given seven *khal* of grain, one sheep's carcass, one sheep's head, one *bre* of salt and oil as well as a varying quantity of tea and butter. The icon painters were again an exception, mainly in that they were given ten *bre* of extra grain instead of one sheep's head.

Among the carpenters, masons, plasterers, blacksmiths, and specialists of relief engraving was also a group of common craftsmen of an inferior standing. They received less grain and meat: five and a half or six *khal* of grain, one half of a sheep's carcass and one—in the case of two crafts, none—sheep's head.

Furthermore, there were two groups of specialists who were paid significantly less: the small group of silver and gold smiths and the large group of boatmen, who were listed as part of the craftsmen as well. Both groups had no inner hierarchy, that is to say, no mention is made to any foremen among them. The silver and gold smiths received a monthly payment of three *khal*, six *bre* and four *phul* of *rtsam pa*, one and a half *khal* of grain, a quarter of a sheep's carcass, one sheep's head, one *bre* salt and oil, one *nyag* tea and two and a half *nyag* of butter. The boatmen received four *khal* of *rtsam pa*, one and a half *khal* of grain,

one half of a sheep's carcass, one *bre* of salt, cheese and oil, one *nyag* of tea, two and a half *nyag* of butter and one *nyag* of liquid fat for greasing the leather of the coracles.

Three times a year the work of the craftsmen was inspected.



*Fig. 6 — lo rer bzo grwar gzigs rtogs dang/ zur gsos tshar gsum re gnang ba/ "Thrice a year the workshops were inspected, and additional gifts are granted" (Dom po ba Thub bstan rgyal mtshan et al., 1996: 112).*

*This section illustrates another important aspect of the construction work: the way in which the food was brought to the construction site. In the left bottom corner, we see carcasses provided for the craftsmen. There were mostly sheep slaughtered for feeding the craftsmen. The image shows them headless because the heads were distributed separately, mainly for making soup.*

In accordance with the evaluation of their work, they received additional bonuses in the form of food and material goods, like animal skins, fabrics, clothes, and frankincense. In his report, Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho does not allocate the expenditure made in this connection to individual recipients but meticulously summarises it for each type of goods, no matter whether the quantities were large or small. To illustrate the way in which he carefully kept his accounts, here are some excerpts from his list:[20]

[20] *Mchod sdong*: 283–284.

barley: 81,058 *khal*, 12 *bre* (1 *bre* = twentieth part of a bushel), 1 *phul* (1 sixth of a *bre*)
rice: 245 *khal*, 12 *bre*, 2 *phul*
buckwheat: 2 *bre*, 1 *phul*
fine buckwheat flour: 93 *khal*, 19 *bre*, 5 *phul*
buckwheat flour medium: 8,750 *khal*
coarse buckwheat flour: 128,590 *khal*, 7 *bre*, 3 *phul*
flour and water mixed up together as food for horses, mules, and donkeys (*chu ldur*): 607 *khal*, 18 *bre*
salt: 2,760 *khal*, 3 *bre*, 1 *phul*
cheese: 844 *khal*, 3 *bre*, 4 *phul*
oil: 1,366 *khal*, 12 *bre*, 2.5 *phul*

Since the labour of the thousands of simple workers classified as corvée labourers (*'u lag mi*) was considered a kind of tax obligation, the text does not mention any "salary" (*phogs*) for them. Only the representatives of their manorial estates to which they belonged received a monthly salary during the periods when they were personally present at the construction site. Nevertheless, basic and simple food for the corvée workers was provided and guaranteed by donors. It consisted mainly of tea and soup but also of roasted barley ground into flour and Tibetan beer.[21]

The cost of labour did not include the catering for the numerous guests who appeared on the site every year. Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho mentions assemblies of guests from China, Mongolia, and Tibet as well as messengers from all directions. For such guests alone, about 11,000 head of cattle and sheep were slaughtered every year.[22]

As documented on the murals, the work on the construction site was not without dangers, and fatal work accidents did occur. Apparently, masons and plasterers operated without a scaffold.

[21] *Mchod sdong*: 878–898.
[22] *Mchod sdong*: 831–832.



*Fig. 7 — (first scene) byi las phyin shul gyi rdo 'gril bas rdo bzo ba dang/ gyang ro'i ldeb zhig pas 'ul lag gron pa sogs byad ltas kyi mtshan ma byung ba/ "There occurred signs of black magic, for example that of a mason [whose life] went to waste through rolling stones due to a cat that had run there previously, and that of a corvée labourer [whose life] went to waste through a broken piece of the enclosing wall [of the flat roof]."*

*(second scene) gyang ro rkyen med du log pas 'ul lag gron pa/ "A corvée labourer was 'wasted' because a stone rubble of the enclosing wall [of the flat roof] fell down without reason" (Phun tshogs tshe brtan et al., 2000: 127).*

The construction works lasted until the 20th day of the 4th Tibetan month of the Water Bird Year (May 24, 1693) inclusive. On that day, a stele, known as *Kri'i rdo ring chung ba*, was erected at the bottom of the large staircase leading to the main entrance of the Potala. The stele bears no inscription.[23]

[23] *Mchod sdong*: 245.



*Fig. 8 — kri'i rdo ring chung ba tshal sde pa grags pas do dam mdzad pas skyid chur shan gyis 'dren pa/ "The transport of the smaller Kri stone stele with a small boat on the sKyid chu, supervised by Tshal sde pa Grags pa" (Dom po ba Thub bstan rgyal mtshan et al., 1996: 114).*

The next day a great celebration was held and the craftsmen (*bzo rigs*) together with the supervisors (*do dam*) received their final rewards.[24] The actual construction work was completed within less than two years and four months.

*What was the amount of the actual wages and labour costs and how were they calculated?*

The main unit for calculating the various expenditures was the weight unit for silver called *dngul srang*, consisting of ten *zho*, which again comprised ten *skar* or *skar ma*.[25] By using this unit of account, Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho makes a precise calculation:

> In each year, in terms of [actual] working time, nine months and fifteen days passed. If one stretches this to the number of days of one single available man, it would be 4,971,540 days. If you then calculate one *dngul srang* every 35 days, altogether 142,044 *dngul srang* would be arranged in line, together with 1,395 *dngul srang*, 5 *zho*, and 2 *skar* as costs for the ceremonial scarfs (*kha btags*).[26]

If one assumes that there were a maximum of 110 working days in the third year until completion of the work (presumably there were fewer days because of the New Year celebrations), and if one also assumes that an average of slightly more than 7,300 people were on the construction site in one function or another, the calculation seems plausible.

The account includes all labour costs arising from the regular remuneration and supply of all corvée workers, craftsmen, and officials. Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho gives the share of wages and additional costs for supervisors, government officials (*drung 'khor*), clerks (*nang gzan*), bodyguards (*gzim chung ba*), representatives of the aristocratic,

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24 *Mchod sdong*: 245–246, 284–285.

25 See note 19 in Schwieger (this volume), "Lenders and borrowers in Tibetan society".

26 *lo so sor las rgyun zla ba dgu zhag bco lnga song ba lag yod mi gcig gi nyin grangs su brkyang bar sa ya bzhi dgu 'bum bdun khri chig stong lnga brgya bzhi bcu rnams la nyin sum cu so lnga rer dngul srang re brtsis khyon dngul srang chig 'bum bzhi khri nyis stong zhe bzhi dang kha btags kyi ri* (!) *gong dngul srang stong dang sum brgya go lnga zho lnga skar do rnams bstar* (*Mchod sdong*: 295).

monastic and district estates (*sger pa dang chos sde khag rdzong sdod bcas pa'i ngo tshab*), as well as the different craftsmen, at 40,118 *dngul srang*, 7 *zho* and 2.5 *skar*. The additional costs include the separate rewards, which were given three times a year on the basis of inspections, and some other expenditures considered indispensable, like offerings (*gtor ma*) to the *klu*, the underground living spirits that could be disturbed by the building activities, or provisions given to travellers, possibly craftsmen returning to their home area.[27]

Not included are the material goods given as reward after the completion of the construction. A first list of such goods distributed to supervisors, managers and craftsmen was classified as normal or regular wages (*gla thob 'char can*) and calculated according to the length of time each individual stayed on site. It totalled 15,075 *dngul srang*, 9 *zho* and 8 *skar*.[28] While it is not clear from this first list what kind of goods were given to whom in detail, a second list provides not only a description of the goods given as an additional reward but also to their specific recipients, ordered according to their respective rank. The second series of goods is in fact presented as an unprecedented increase in reward and it had a total value of 27,337 *dngul srang*, 5 *zho*, and 5 *skar*.[29] It is not surprising to notice that the murals of the Red Palace accordingly show two different scenes of distributions of final rewards to the craftsmen.[30]

Taken together, items worth 42,413.53 *dngul srang* were presented at the end. Thus, after the completion of the construction, additional benefits were paid, which corresponded approximately to the total of the monthly salaries.

The sum of the expenses for all the people who worked in one way or another on the construction site—142,044 *dngul srang* for food, 1,395.52 *dngul srang* for the ceremonial scarfs, and 42,413.53 *dngul*

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27 *Mchod sdong*: 513.

28 *Mchod sdong*: 285–286.

29 *Mchod sdong*: 287–295.

30 Unfortunately, I could not find any illustrations of these scenes with readable captions. The spatial arrangement of both scenes in relation to each other can be seen in Dom po ba Thub bstan rgyal mtshan *et al.* (1996: 128–129). The authors' claim that the scenes depict some annual rewards contradicts on the one hand the explanations in Phun tshogs tshe brtan *et al.* (2000: 125–126), and on the other hand the fact that such an event had already been portrayed in another section of the murals (see Fig. 6).

*srang* for final rewards—tallies with the total amount reported by Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho: 185,853.05 *dngul srang*.[31]

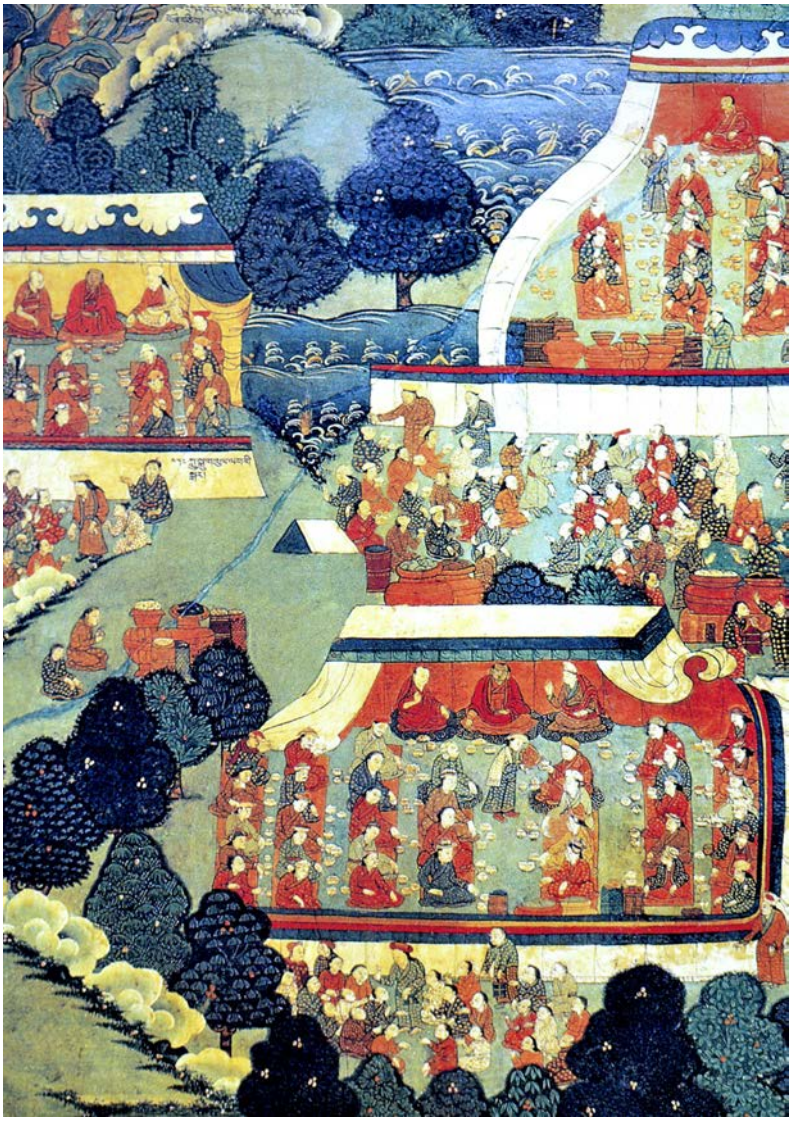


*Fig. 9 — Distribution of rewards to the craftsmen (Dom po ba Thub bstan rgyal mtshan et al., 1996: 126).*

[31] *Mchod sdong*: 513.



*Fig. 10 — Distribution of rewards to the craftsmen (Dom po ba Thub bstan rgyal mtshan et al., 1996: 125).*

## *Conclusion*

Calculating the costs of labour at a mere185,853.05 *dngul srang* seems to contradict the much higher estimates advanced by contemporary Tibetan scholars. To my knowledge, there are at least three modern Tibetan-language publications that report separate expenses incurred during the construction as well as a total sum of the works. All three do this by referring to Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho's *Mchod sdong*.

The first source is a booklet titled *Pho brang po ta la'i lo rgyus phyogs bsgrigs* ("Anthology on the History of the Potala Palace") and compiled by the Management Committee of Cultural Relics of the Tibetan Autonomous Region. It contains the following statement:

> If one adds up the salaries of the leaders of the construction work, the workers, and the craftsmen, it was 1,694,836 *dngul srang*. For the various articles inside the palace, for example the representations of [the Buddha's] body, speech and mind [i.e. statues, scriptures and stūpas] with the exception of the golden stūpa, the unique ornament of the

> world, the expenses were 370,191 *dngul srang*. The expenses for consecration were 69,111 *dngul srang*. These three different expenses add up to 2,134,138 *dngul srang*.[32]

In addition, the complete expenses for producing the giant golden stūpa inside the palace are quantified at 1,041,128 *dngul srang*.[33]

Dung dkar *rin po che* referred twice to the costs of the Red Palace. In his dictionary he states:

> In the 2nd month of the Iron Horse Year of the twelfth sixty years cycle (1690), the construction of the building for the golden stūpa [to keep the remains] of the 5th Dalai Lama was started. In the 4th month of the Water Bird Year (1693) the works on the outer [walls] were completed. In total, 2,134,136 (sic!) *srang* of Chinese silver were spent.[34]

Dung dkar *rin po che* has dealt with the costs in more detail in an article about the Potala contained in his collected works:

> The expenses for the outer walls and the salary for the craftsmen and the managerial staff were 1,694,836 Tibetan *dngul srang* of the time. With the exception of the golden stūpa of the 5th Dalai Lama, the unique ornament of the world, the expenses for the representations of [the Buddha's] body—for example 246 scroll paintings with gold colour, 65 colourful scroll paintings on the biography of the 5th Dalai Lama, and 46 colourful scroll paintings on his secret biography—together with 615 large volumes of excellent religious discourses written with golden

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[32] *ar po'i 'go byed pa dang/ las mi/ bzo pa bcas kyi gla phogs bsdoms na dngul srang sa ya gcig dang drug 'bum dgu khri bzhi stong brgyad brgya so drug dang/ gser gdung 'dzam gling rgyan gcig phud pa'i sku gsung thugs rten sogs pho brang nang gi dngos rigs khag la 'gro song dngul srang sum 'bum bdun khri stong med chig brgya go gcig rab gnas 'gro song dngul srang khri dgu stong chig brgya bcu gcig gong gi 'gro song khag gsum yongs bsdom dngul srang sa ya gnyis dang chig 'bum sum khri bzhi stong chig brgya so brgyad phyin/* (Bod rang skyong ljongs rig dngos do dam u yon lhan khang [1987] 2002: 24).

[33] Bod rang skyong ljongs rig dngos do dam u yon lhan khang ([1987] 2002: 24). As we will see in the excerpt below this number differs slightly from the corresponding one mentioned by Dung dkar *rin po che* and by Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho himself.

[34] *rab byung bcu gnyis pa'i lcag rta (1690) lo'i zla 2 par t'a la'i bla ma sku phreng lnga pa'i gser gdung khang bzhengs 'go tshugs te chu bya (1693) lo'i zla 4 par phyi ngos kyi las grwa mjug bsgril zhing/ khyon bsdoms 'gro gron rgya dngul srang 2134136 song/* (Dung dkar 2002: 1334).

> ink—for example the translated words [of the Buddha] written in gold, the translated treatises [containing the commentaries on the Buddha's words], [works on] medicine and astrology, Bon teachings, and the collected works of the lord Tsong kha pa, the teacher and his disciples—were 370,191 Tibetan *dngul srang* of the time. Regarding the expenses for consecration, there were 69,111 Tibetan *dngul srang*. When you add up these three expenses, it was 2,134,138 Tibetan *dngul srang*.[35]

In addition, Dung dkar *rin po che* also gives the entire cost for building the golden stūpa at 1,041,828 *dngul srang*.[36]

If we try to trace these figures in Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho's book, we indeed find the sums of 1,694,836 *dngul srang*, 370,191 *dngul srang* and 69,111 *dngul srang*, but Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho nowhere adds them to the sum of 2,134,138 *dngul srang*.[37] Just by looking only at Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho's subtotals of the largest amounts (which themselves consist of various subtotals of smaller quantities), one will find that the sums mentioned are not to be added up, but that the two smaller sums are included in the larger one, that indeed includes all the expenses for the Red Palace. Therefore, Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho mentions the larger sum only at the very end of the seventh chapter which lists every expense down to the last detail.

The first of the main subtotals mentioned by him is 1,255,533.5725 *dngul srang*.[38] This sum comprises the expenses for the religious

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35 *phyi'i rtsig pa dang bzo pa lag rtsal pa 'go byed mi sna bcas kyi gla phogs 'gro song skabs de'i bod dngul srang sa ya gcig dang drug 'bum dgu khri bzhi stong brgyad brgya sum cu so drug/ t'a la'i bla ma sku phreng lnga pa'i gser gdung 'dzam gling rgyan gcig phud gser thang nyis brgya zhe drug/ t'a la'i bla ma sku phreng lnga pa'i sku tshe gcig gi rnam thar tshon thang drug cu re lnga/ gsang ba'i rnam thar tshon thang bzhi bcu zhe drug sogs lha khang khag gi sku rten dang/ gser bris kyi bka' 'gyur/ bstan 'gyur/ sman/ rtsis/ bon chos/ rje tsong kha pa yab sras kyi gsung 'bum sogs gser bris kyi gsung rab pod chen drug brgya bco lnga bcas kyi 'gro song skabs de'i bod dngul srang sum 'bum bdun khri stong med brgya dang dgu bcu go gcig/ rab gnas kyi 'gro song la bod dngul srang drug khri dgu stong brgya dang bcu med gcig bcas gong gsal gyi 'gro song khag gsum bsdoms pas bod dngul srang sa ya gnyis dang chig 'bum sum khri bzhi stong brgyad brgya sum cu so brgyad gnas pa/* (Dung dkar 2004: 77–78).

36 Dung dkar (2004: 77–78).

37 *Mchod sdong*: 518.

38 *sa ya gcig nyis 'bum lnga khri lnga stong lnga brgya sum cu so gsum zho lnga skar bdun bzhi cha gcig* (*Mchod sdong*: 506–507). As there were 10 *zho* per *srang* and 10 *skar ma* per *zho*, the digits reported after the decimal point indicate the

objects inside the palace, including the stūpas, the ritual objects and statues of the various chapels attached to the main hall, the two huge applique thangkas to be displayed on the outer walls on special occasions, the scroll paintings, scriptures, and in particular the giant golden stūpa for the remains of the 5th Dalai Lama, which alone is calculated at 1,041,828.085 *dngul srang*.[39] In this context, Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho does not mention the salary for the craftsmen who created the central stūpa as well as the total of eight smaller stūpas flanking it on its right and left side and the many objects in the various chapels. Therefore, I assume that their salary is included in the labour costs of 185,853.05 *dngul srang* mentioned above. By contrast, when listing the cost of production for the thangkas and the scriptures,[40] Sangs rgya rgy mtsho explicitly includes the expenses needed to cover the salaries of the craftsmen and artists as well as their supervisors, since these wage costs are not included in the general labour costs.

The next main subtotal mentioned by Sangs rgyas rgya mtso is 370,191.0025 *dngul srang*.[41] This sum comprises all expenses for the actual building, including its murals as well as the general labour costs of 185,853.05 *dngul srang* analysed in this article.[42]

The third main subtotal of 69,111.905 *dngul srang* is the amount spent for the various rituals (*cho ga*) performed by the monks from the monasteries of rNam par rgyal ba'i phan bde legs bshad gling (i.e. rNam rgyal grwa tshang), rDo rje brag, sMin grol gling, bKra shis lhun po, etc., and other ceremonies, like speaking "words of truth" (*bden tshig*) and the reciting of "expressions of auspiciousness" (*shis pa brjod pa*),

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amount in *zho* (first digit), in *skar ma* (second digit) and in fraction of *skar ma* (third and fourth digits), i.e. 1,255,533 *dngul srang*, 5 *zho* and 7.25 *skar ma*. How this sum is made up in detail is not exactly comprehensible to me. According to my calculation of the various expenses mentioned by Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho (for the golden stūpa, the eight other stūpas, the religious objects of all the seven chapels, the applique thangkas, the other thangkas and the scriptures), the amount should be about 10,417 *dnul srang* higher.

39 *sa ya gcig dang bzhi khri chig stong brgyad brgya nyer brgyad skar phyed dgu* (*Mchod sdong*: 466).

40 *Mchod sdong*: 488–506.

41 *sum 'bum bdun khri stong med chig brgya go gcig skar gyi bzhi cha gcig* (*Mchod sdong*: 518).

42 *Mchod sdong*: 513.

carried out by the monks of the three large monasteries near Lhasa, Se ra, 'Bras spungs, and dGa' ldan.[43]

The total obtained by adding up the three subtotals of 1,255,533.5725 *dngul srang*, 370,191.0025 *dngul srang* and 69,111.905 *dngul srang* is exactly the sum of 1,694,836.48 *dngul srang* mentioned by Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho at the end of the chapter as the total costs for the Red Palace and the objects of its interior.[44] Of these costs, the expenses for the wages of the craftsmen and supervisors as well as the food for the corvée labourers only make up a small part. By far the largest share is accounted for by the golden stūpa, for the construction of which numerous precious materials were used.

Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho also provides information on the purchasing power of *dngul srang* at the time by converting every amount of silver taels into the amount of grain (*'bru*) purchasable with that sum. For example, 1,694,836.48 *dngul srang* was equal to 30,507,056 *khal*, 12 *bre*, and 5.8 *phul*. Thus, according to his calculations, for one *dngul srang* one could buy about 18 Tibetan bushels (*khal*) or roughly 504 pounds or 234 kg of barley.[45] Altogether, the equivalent of about 854,197,568 lb or 396,591.73 metric tons of barley was spent to erect the entire palace, meaning the construction complete with its interior objects.

To allow at least a vague classification of this figure, we can compare it with figures that were roughly calculated by Chinese surveys in the 1950s: by fixing the traditional Tibetan measure unit *khal* as a land area unit and equating one *khal* with one *mu* (亩) of the Chinese surface measure, the calculations bring the arable land of the territory under the jurisdiction of the Dalai Lama to about 3,300,000 *khal*, corresponding to 220,000 hectares.[46] In one example, an annual yield of 74,088 kg grain was calculated for an estate of 1,455 *khal*.[47] Extrapolated to the total arable land available, this would result in an annual yield of approximately 168,035 metric tons. If we accept this figure as an annual

[43] *drug khri dgu stong brgya dang bcu gcig zho dgu skar phyed* (*Mchod sdong*: 518).
[44] *Mchod sdong*: 518.
[45] Here I base 1 *khal* of grain on the same weight as in the article "Lenders and borrowers in Tibetan society" (this volume): 28 lb or 13 kg.
[46] Jin Hui, Ren Yinong and Ma Naihui (1995: 65).
[47] Jin Hui, Ren Yinong and Ma Naihui (1995: 73).

average value, the total costs of the Red Palace would be a bit more than two and a third times the annual production of barley in Tibet.

To fund these costs, numerous donors belonging to the Tibetan aristocracy and clergy supported the construction through their sponsorship. They each undertook it to make a precisely specified contribution to the costs, including the wages of the supervisors and craftsmen or the rations of the corvée workers. In many cases, the value of the donations is noted in the form of gold or silver taels, while in other cases to be mentioned is the number of livestock donated.[48] Thus, the information we receive through Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho's *Mchod sdong* also testifies to the actual engagement of the Central Tibetan elites in the great dGe lugs pa project of establishing its specific type of rule. But above all, the construction of the Red Palace, as described in this book, reveals an ability to organise large construction projects that is possible only to state-like structures with a strong centralised government. It becomes evident that in the second half of the 17th century the Tibetan government with the regent as its head had an enormous pool of labour force and material resources at its disposal, which proves a high degree of control over the society—in particular since we have so far no evidence of serious rebellions or the use of brute force to enforce authority during the construction phase.

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[48] *Mchod sdong*: 839–902.

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# Crime, Punishment and Socio-Economic Status in Mustang (Nepal) in the Early 19th Century

Charles Ramble
(EPHE – PSL, CRCAO)

And it won't make one bit of difference
If I answer right or wrong;
When you're rich, they think you really know.[1]

## *Introduction: parallel hierarchies*

Tibetan societies feature a wide range of hierarchies, with variations over time and from one region to another. Among these are the well-known vertical ordering of society represented in Imperial-era legal schemes, the ranks and honours that structured the army and aristocracy at the same and at later periods, the range of grades found everywhere among the clergy, and the more generalised, *varṇa*-like stratification comprising royalty and/or aristocracy, priesthood, commoners and artisans that has been documented for numerous agrarian enclaves. In addition to these relatively formal schemes there are others of a more informal, though no less influential, character. One of these is the cluster of qualities that we may characterise as "scholarly and spiritual excellence", and another is material wealth. There is no series of clearly defined rungs in either of these two; the scale is rather a continuum from "less" to "more", while in the former case the status that is accorded may have as much to do with reputation and consensus than any measurable criteria.

While each hierarchy has its specific terminology to designate positions, there are also certain pairs of contrasted terms that may be used to denote the opposite ends of any of the schemes listed here. Some of these evoke the image of vertical space, as in *ya-/ma-*, "up, down", and *mtho/dman*, "high, low". Most commonly, however, we find the opposition *drag/zhan*, which may be translated as "powerful/weak", or "great/lowly", among other things, according to the context. The widespread use of such nonspecific oppositions to designate all these

[1] Sheldon Harnick, "If I were a rich man," from *Fiddler on the Roof,* 1964.

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sets may be related to an important feature of this spectrum of hierarchies: they are not hermetically sealed from one another, but betray a certain amount of horizontal leakage, as it were, so that the position a person occupies on one may affect his or her ranking in another, especially when the hierarchies concerned are of the more informal kind. Later in this article I will examine a few cases in which financial "weakness" of certain people affected not just their position in parallel hierarchies, but even undermined a principle of egalitarianism in which they would normally have been included. First, however, let us consider two cases in which a change in economic circumstances dramatically affected the lives of two well-known religious figures.

The first of these is bsTan 'dzin ras pa (1646–1723), a bKa' rgyud pa monk who also happened to be a scion of the most important aristocratic family in South Mustang. The origins of the family are recounted in his autobiography, according to which the founder of the lineage was a certain Byams pa thob rgyal, a minister of the semi-mythical founder of the Tibetan dynasty, gNya' khri btsan po. A more authoritative source has it that the first member of the family to come to Lo—at the instigation of the king—was a certain Khro bo 'bum, who settled in a place called sKye skya sgang, a short distance to the east of Monthang. It was Khro bo 'bum's son, Khro bo skyabs pa, who was sent to the Muktinath Valley to rule southern Lo on behalf of the king in the first half of the 16th century.[2]

bsTan 'dzin ras pa's early childhood was overshadowed by a personal tragedy as well as by the outbreak of war between Mustang and Jumla:

> When my eldest brother Tshe dbang rnam rgyal was eleven, I was seven and the youngest two, my father 'Byor ra rgya mtsho died at the age of thirty-two. We were like the children of hungry ghosts, barely able to speak and walk, and we haunted people's kitchens. [...] A conflict erupted between the king and his ministers [resulting in a war] […] The enemies took away all our cattle and the king's mules took whatever household property there was as provisions for the troops. There was no food or clothing, and all of us, mother and children, were desperate. Although I was a high-born boy, I had no wealth, and everyone despised us, [saying that] we were insignificant and powerless, and of inferior status. […] Then one day the rich Brahman [who had given us a loan] said he needed the money we owed him, and he came to get it, but we could not find the means to pay him. The Brahman said, "If you do not give me what I'm owed I shall take two of the boys with me." [...] My brothers and sisters and I did not even dare to go outside the door, but sat for a long time in

[2] Schuh (1995: 42–43; 52–53).

> hunger. At that, I thought of the proverb which runs, "Without wealth you have no friends; without teeth you cannot eat".[3]

This excerpt contains as explicit an assessment as we could hope to find about how a sharp decline in one's financial position might also affect a hereditary rank that, in theory at least, is independent of economic status. In the event, the family were bailed out by a wealthy uncle who paid off the loan; but, as we shall see, not everyone had a rich relative who might come to the rescue.

A century and a half later, dKar ru grub dbang bsTan 'dzin rin chen, who would later become a major Bon po scholar and author, experienced a very similar reaction among his peers to the collapse of his own family fortune. dKar ru's family was a wealthy one, and his father was known as a scholar and a generous donor. Born in sTeng chen, in Eastern Tibet, in 1801, dKar ru was inducted at an early age into the nearby Nor gling monastery, where he applied himself to his studies with exemplary dedication. He was a model student, and his brilliance and application were praised by his teacher in front of the entire monk body.

> I became a student of a tutor named gYung drung 'od zer, [...] and was delighted by the general consensus that "'Od zer's little monk" was both studious and well-disciplined, and that others were advised to follow my example. In my joy and mounting self-confidence, I thought there was no one like me. I was as full of myself as the proverbial old goat who made it to the top of the cliff; as stylish as the old dog with the decorated tail, and strutting like the old horse in all its trappings—ah, what a marvel!
>
> [My teacher] gYung drung 'od zer, who held the position of proctor, presented me with a congratulatory scarf and addressed the gathering in these words: "You, our lama, who are seated in the centre, and you assembly of monks, hear me! Since he joined the community, this young monk of mine, the son of dKar ru Bris pa, has donned full monastic robes, and within three years he has passed his examinations. He is without equal in the Khyung

[3] *sras che ba tshe dbang rnam rgyal gyi lo bcu gcig / nga lo bdun tha gcung gis lo gnyis lon dus / pha 'byor ra rgya mtsho lo so gnyis la tshe' dus byas / smra shes 'gro shes tsam gi dags bu 'dras thab 'tshang 'khangs / de'i dus rgyal blon gnyis 'khrugs nas* […] / […] *phyi nor thams cad dgra'i khyer nang nor yod tshad rgyal po'i kha tsa dmag rgyags la khyer / lto gos ma 'byor ma bu thams cad sdug bsngal gyi non pa yin / ya rabs bu tsha yin yang nor med kun gyi brnyas bcos kha zhan dbang chung la mig rtsa dma' bar yong 'dug* / […] / *de nas nyin gcig bram ze phyug po gcig gi bu lon dgos zer len du byung spad rgyu ma 'byor bas / bram ze na re nga'i nor mi sprod na bu lon la bu gnyis tsam khrid 'gro zer* / […] / *nged ming sring tsho ni sgo phyi la yang thon mi nus par rgyags med ltogs par du zhing bsdad / de dus nor med gnyen dang bral / so med zas dang bral zhes pa'i dpe de nged la byung* […] / *rNal 'byor gyi dbang phyug*: fols. 1v–2v.

> clan. His father is endowed with great personal qualities, learning and great wealth; he is well-spoken and courageous and ranks among our foremost leaders. I have similar hopes for his son. May he be of service to the doctrine of the enlightened one! If, henceforth, all young monks are like him they, too, will be worthy sons of their fathers! Since this monastery was founded many novices have joined the brotherhood, but never yet has one donned full robes within three years; nor," he concluded with a laugh, "has anyone passed the test of reciting from memory in less than eight or nine years!"
> […] People were really very happy, and would tell others, "You should be like that monk".[4]

Within a few years he would learn the bitter lesson that the scholarly reputation for which he enjoyed such popularity among his fellow-monks was actually harnessed to some of his less cerebral attributes:

> Some time after that my father passed away. [...] Then, in the nature of impermanence, our livestock were afflicted by an epidemic and we lost our herds, and my family broke up and dispersed. Following my father's death we were impoverished and humbled, and my monk friends no longer seemed to hold me in such high regard as in the past. They catalogued faults of mine that they claimed to know about and held me in contempt, calling me dreadful names. Everyone treated me with antipathy and hatred.[5]

The Tibetan Buddhist attitude to wealth is such that it would be

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[4] *g.yung drung 'od zer zhes pa'i dge phrug byas / kun gyi 'od zer grwa chung 'di lta bu / slob gnyer bzang zhing sgrig du bsdod tshug pa / de ltar zer zhing bdag la yid rang bskul / gzhan la 'di bzhin dgos zhes bslab bya bston / de bzhin bdag kyang dga' spro spob ba che / nga rang lta bu su yang med mod bsaṃ / ra rgan brag thog sleb pa'i snang ba mthong / khyi rgan rnga tshom rgyan pa'i 'gying bag ldan / rta rgan chas kyi rgyan ltar phyar phyol 'gro / a la la ho e ma ngo mtshar che /* […] *de la dge skos g.yung drung 'od zer gyi / dpal dar skon zhing 'tshogs gtaṃs 'di ltar zhus / bla ma dbus bzhugs grwa tshang kun kyang gson / nga yi grwa chung ka ru bris pa'i bu / 'di nas bsgrig sgyug dus nas grwa chas tshang / lo gsuṃ dus nas 'tshogs rgyug thaṃs cad 'phrod /* (42) *dkar nag gser gsuṃ mi dang gzhan mi 'dra / pha ni yon tan kun mkhas rgyu nor phyug / gtaṃ mkhas snying che dpon gyi blon gyi che / de'i bu la 'di ltar re ba yod / sangs rgyas bstan la phan thog 'byung bar 'gyur / da phyin grwa' chung kun gyi 'di ltar du / byung na pho rgod a pa'i bu pho yin / dgon 'di chags nas da lta thug bar du / grwa chung grangs mang bsgrig du rgyug yod kyang / lo gsuṃ thug bar grwa chas mi 'grub cing / de bzhin lo grangs brgyad dgu rgyug mi 'phrod / he he zer zhing 'tshogs gtaṃ de ltar byas /* […] */ de la kun gyi grwa pa 'di bzhin mdzod / zer zhing rjes su yi rang kun gyi byed / Autobiography*: 41–42.

[5] *de phyis rang gi pha yang dus 'das nas /* […] (56) *phyugs nor mi rtag nad yaṃs byung phyir stongs / nang tshangs mi rtag so sor dbye zhing song / pha yang dus 'das dbul 'phong nyaṃ chung tshe / gra' rogs kun gyis sngar gyi dag snang med / rus 'bod mngan mtshang 'don nas khyad gsod kyis / ka ru'i bes ring skabs bcu 'byaṃs par zer / kun gyi yid du mi 'gro sdang sdang byed / Autobiography*: 55–56.

impossible to characterise it in a single general formulation. Tibetan Buddhism itself is of course not a homogeneous entity, but embraces a diversity of registers that have different perspectives on the value of material prosperity. The spectrum of attitudes that a religion might offer is amply illustrated by Christianity, which accommodates dogmas ranging from the idealisation and enactment of poverty exemplified by the Franciscan order, through the contradictions of high-church ecclesiastical opulence cohabiting with the execration of Mammon, to the respectability endowed by Calvinism on worldly wealth, and finally to the more extreme reaches of Prosperity Theology that has enjoyed such success since the 1960s.[6]

While poverty is respected as one of the components in the complex of antinomian features that make up the profiles of certain Tibetan saints, it does not seem ever to have been revered as the foundation for a particular way of life as it is in some branches of Christianity. It is considered admirable only to the extent that it is a visible badge of the saint's insouciance about worldly considerations and is by no means a necessary condition of sanctity. Even those Tibetan masters who were the direct heirs of the great Indian *mahāsiddha*s were often indisputably wealthy, and though they may certainly have earned the animosity of their political rivals, there is no suggestion that their contemporary devotees or even the modern bearers of their legacies ever considered their spiritual integrity to have been compromised in any way by their conspicuous materialism. Far from being opposed to spirituality, worldly wealth in a Tibetan Buddhist context is both a tangible sign of acquired merit—the crystallisation of good karma—and also the wherewithal to acquire spiritual advantage by enabling the performance of culturally sanctioned pious deeds, such as the restoration of sacred monuments and the endowment of religious establishments. The conflation of this-worldly and other-worldly value is nowhere more succinctly expressed than in the term *bsod nams*, which may be translated according to the context as either "merit" or "material wealth".

That there is nothing inherently reprehensible about material prosperity is made clear from the following part of the dedication text for the sponsor of various religious works, written around 1500.[7]

> Our devout sponsor, our patron 'Dzom brtan, beautifully ornamented with his glorious wealth; intelligent, striving after virtue in his splendour, with the heroic strength to defeat his strongest foes, and protecting even his lowest subjects with his intellect;

[6] For a historical overview of Prosperity Theology in America and Africa respectively, see Bowler (2013), Nel (2020).

[7] For the full text and translation of this dedication, see Ramble (2018: 195–200).

> having defeated his powerful enemies one after another, causing our lord ruler great gladness; Homage to you, our patron gYung drung 'dzom brtan! Ornamented with a vast intellect and wealth, you have the power to compete with Vaiśravaṇa. I rejoice in your deeds of supporting virtuous actions! Hail to our intelligent patron!

Of course we would not expect to find anything but words of praise in a dedication to a generous patron, but the point is that material wealth is explicitly extolled as part of the complex of virtues that are incarnated in the good gYung drung 'dzom brtan. To be sure, we could find many instances, in the writings of clerics over the centuries, of the disparagement of riches, but the target in such cases is not wealth itself as much as attachment to it. In one particularly interesting account, wealth is condemned not as an accessory of samsaric clinging, but because it is associated with a type of individualism that undermines the integrity of a community; correspondingly, poverty is praised as the symptom of an important virtue: the spirit of collectivity.[8] The story is an oral account that relates the origin of a number of clans inhabiting the large village of Te,[9] in South Mustang. Before migrating to Te, the clans in question inhabited a large settlement called Kog. The people of this village were very rich, but all they could think about was becoming even richer, and they were so intent on this project that they would not even bother to attend funeral ceremonies. On one occasion a certain lama, named Bichuwa,[10] came to Kog. Lama Bichuwa was reputed to have used magical means to destroy a settlement with which he had a contretemps, and the villagers of Kog asked him to destroy their village too, since impoverishment was the only way they could be brought back to participating in funeral ceremonies. But Lama Bichuwa demurred, saying that it was really not such a bad thing to be wealthy, and continued on his way. Since he had not acceded to their request, the villagers turned instead to another lama, named Tragten,[11] the new priest of a neighbouring village. However, he, too, suggested that it was really quite good to be rich. But the villagers continued to entreat him until eventually he gave in. By magical means he induced a landslide that resulted in the collapse of the main irrigation system. The people continued to live for a few more years on their supplies, and when these ran out, went to fix the broken canal. The young men and women tried to build an aqueduct where the tunnel had

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8 An extended version of this account may be found in Ramble (2007: 229).

9 The name appears with various spellings, including gTer, lTe, and sTod.

10 The name Bichuwa is probably derived from the Nepali *bijuwā*, "sorcerer", see Ramble (2007: 228).

11 Since I have not encountered this name in any written work, it is presented here in roughly phonetic form.

disappeared, but were all killed in a second landslide. The village was abandoned shortly thereafter.

Neither lama in this story is distinguished by unworldly spirituality, and neither is impressed by the virtues of poverty: the desire of the wealthy people of Kog to be brought low for religious reasons is not something that either regards as a particularly sensible attitude. The main theme of the story is an ideological conflict: individualistic prosperity versus collective virtue. People's obsession with wealth keeps them from attending funeral feasts. These funeral feasts are ideally held forty-nine days after someone's death, a period that marks the end of the passage of the departed consciousness to rebirth. The family of the deceased invite all the members of the community to eat and drink, and the merit that is accumulated in this way is transferred to their late relative. It is for this reason that the funeral feasts are referred to as *dge ba*, a term that properly means "virtue" but is used in many Himalayan regions as a synonym for *bsod nams*, "merit", perhaps precisely because of the alternative meaning of "material wealth" that this term can have. Funeral feasts are above all community affairs. The participants make a consolatory offering to the bereaved family and in return receive food and drink that they share with all the other members of the village. A *dge ba* ceremony is a collective act of non-profit-making exchange, and this seems to be the moral of the story: material prosperity is an individualistic pursuit that is opposed to the interests of the collectivity. The village is impoverished, most of its members die, and the settlement is abandoned; but the implication is that this outcome is preferable to the alternative. The community lives on in the settlements to which the survivors migrated, whereas the rifts created by prosperity would have resulted in the annihilation of the group.

While the quest for wealth is represented in this story as something inimical to community spirit, disparity of means is even more widely seen as a threat to the social fabric. In such settings, the terms *drag* and *zhan* discussed above are generally understood to be synonyms for "rich" and "poor". The point that is being made is that local laws and civil rights are applicable to everyone irrespective of how well off they might be. This egalitarian ideal is expressed, for example, in a letter from the 17th century in which the same village, Te, reassures the local ruler that public resources have been shared equally:

> This, too, is an instance of how we, the Tepas, have honoured you. We would like to say a few things about the way in which we have been looking after our dependents. Even the dung from the hillsides has been measured out in baskets and divided up equally without consideration of status (*grag zhan yed* [*drag zhan med*]). If it happens that someone is left behind as the orphan of a poor man, we have stipulated that no [poll] taxes need be paid

for such a person before he or she reaches the age of thirteen.[12]

*Social stratification in Tibetan societies*

As observed above, numerous agrarian Tibetan communities are characterised by stratification into four or more ranks or "castes": aristocracy (royalty is sometimes partitioned off as a separate category), priests, commoners, and artisans. Further ranking may take place in each of these. The best known is the stratification of the Central Tibetan nobility that has been documented by numerous authors.[13] Commoners may also be susceptible to such divisions, though the categories in question are locally variable. The commoner population of South Mustang is divided into two levels, the lower of which is referred to as *'u lag*, because they used to perform transportation duties for local rulers, but originally perhaps because they were an indigenous non-Tibetan population that was Tibetanised. Certain *'u lag* villages have their own purely local stratification schemes that play no part in interaction with other communities. An example of this is the hereditary category of "mouths" that until recently underlay a tripartite hierarchy of the clans comprising the village of Te (Ramble 2007: 121–123).

In another settlement, dGer lung—which will be the focus of the remainder of this article—there was until a few decades ago a stratification into ordinary commoners, *zhungba* (*gzhung pa*?) and a few households of higher rank, known as *gyawa* (possibly derived from *rgyal po*, "king"). This bipartition cuts across more conventional caste or divisions and is based on wealth; or more accurately, on the use of one's wealth for the public weal. This is illustrated by the case of a certain *hrewo* (*sras po*, "nobleman"), named Nyi mthu.[14] Nyi mthu was relatively wealthy, and during the annual circumambulation of the fields, when the monks and nuns process around the village territory accompanied by most of the laity carrying books from the monastery, one of the halting places on the route was Nyi mthu's house. Here the visitors would be provided with milk, curd or beer as they preferred, before continuing on their way. In recognition of his generosity, Nyi mthu was accorded the status of *gyawa*. This annual display of largesse continued for many years until he ran into financial difficulties and was forced to discontinue it. As a consequence, Nyi mthu's household was demoted from the status of *gyawa* to that of *zhungba*.[15]

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12 *Tibetan Sources 1*: 202, HMA/Te/Tib/36.

13 See for example Petech (1973), Goldstein (1993), Travers (2008).

14 The spelling of the name given here is conjectural, based on the possibility that it is an abbreviation of Nyi ma mthu stobs.

15 This anecdote was recounted to me in dGer lung by Shes rab bstan 'dzin, the husband of Nyi mthu's granddaughter, September 4, 2019.

*Criminal records of dGer lung*

The archive of dGer lung contains a dozen or so documents that record minor criminal cases.[16] Typically, the documents describe the nature of an offence and specify the punishment that was meted out to the culprit, usually by the village council. Through a close examination of these documents it may be possible to discern just how far the ideal of equality under the law—*drag zhan med pa*—was translated into reality. It is clear that there are disparities in the penalties given for apparently similar offences, but a note of caution should be sounded about the interpretation of these differences. The case histories are generally quite brief, and it may well be that there were unrecorded mitigating or aggravating circumstances that were factors in the severity of the punishment.

The types of offences for which we have records may be grouped into different categories. The dGer lung archive is unusual among other such local collections in that it contains several instances of women being penalised for promiscuity. The men involved in these cases are also named, but there is no indication that they were punished unless they were monks, in which case the authority in charge was not the village council but the monastery. None of the seven other village or community archives I have so far been able to examine contains a record of any such offence. Marital disputes and infidelities are sometimes recorded, but in such a way that they are incidental to the main topic of the document, and we should probably conclude that, in most villages, such matters were regarded as private affairs that were not in themselves the concern of the community.

Other recorded offences for which fines were levied include a failure to attend meetings, defaulting on tax payments, allowing livestock to enter fields, and dereliction of duty when holding a civic office. However, the largest number of recorded offences are related to cases of theft, and it is among these that we should look for possible indications of whether the economic status of the perpetrators might have been a factor in the severity of their punishment. Two cases in particular appear to have incurred exceptionally harsh penalties. Before examining them, however, I would like to summarise a number of other episodes, since they involve certain similar circumstances that we may then be able to eliminate as factors underlying the harshness of the reprisals involved in two particular cases that will be examined closely.

[16] All the documents from dGer lung (locally pronounced both as Gelung and Geling) cited in this article may be found on the website of the projects SHTS and TibStat (see introduction to this volume): http://tibetanhistory.net/documents/mustang/, Geling part 1 and Geling part 2. Photographs of the documents are accompanied by edited transliterations, translations and commentaries.

Accusations of theft were not made lightly, and the evidence suggests that suspects were to be considered innocent until proven guilty. In January 1922 a Tibetan nomad named rDo rje visited dGer lung with eight of his yaks and penned them in one of the village fields. He woke next morning to find that all the yaks were missing their tails: someone had entered the field in the night and cut all the hair from them (probably for making rope or sacking). During the investigation that followed, a villager named Ming 'brigs[17] admitted that he had been out that night, having gone to the fields to look for a missing bullock. On the way back he had met another villager, named Chos skyabs, sitting at the edge of a field. When Ming 'brigs asked him where he was going, he replied that he was on his way to look for a donkey. During the investigation, Chos skyabs insisted that he was not the one who had stolen the tails, and that he had no idea who the thief might be.[18] The village nevertheless felt that the nomad—probably a regular seasonal visitor—ought to be compensated for a loss that had occurred on its territory. In spite of the improbable nature of their accounts—villagers do sometimes wander around at night looking for livestock that they fear might stray into crops, but this was mid-January—neither Ming 'brigs nor Chos skyabs was actually accused of the theft. The conclusion of the council was that "While there is uncertainty about the identity of the thief, because they were unable to give a clear account of what they were doing in the proximity of rDo rje's yaks, Chos skyabs should pay 16 Nepalese *ṭam* and Ming 'brigs should pay 8 Nepalese *ṭam*."[19] Since they had not been caught red-handed they were not found guilty of the crime, in spite of the high probability that at least one of them was the perpetrator, and were instead fined because of the unconvincing nature of their alibis. The owner of the field voluntarily added a further 8 *ṭam* to make a total of 32, and rDo rje was satisfied with this compensation of 4 *ṭam* (2 rupees) per tail.[20]

Suspicion of theft could sometimes lead to robust methods of extracting a confession. In 1879, for example, Kun bzang chos skyabs was accused of stealing grain from the village granary. When he denied the accusation, a certain bSam gtan tried to make him confess by flogging him on the buttocks with a willow switch. When this failed to extract

[17] Here, as in a few other cases below, when it is uncertain what the orthodox spelling of a name might be, I have simply reproduced the orthography given in the document.

[18] Geling 155.

[19] *rkun mo'i lda rci med pa la rdo rje'i dbyags gi sar bleb nas brtaṃ shad ma shes pa'i skyen gi kho po chos skyab la go ṭaṃ 16 ming 'brigs la go ṭaṃ 8* […]/ Geling 161. Excerpts from the Geling archives are given here in unedited form; emendations and discussions of the text of the documents are given in the corresponding entries in http://tibetanhistory.net/documents/mustang/, Geling part 1 and Geling part 2.

[20] Geling 161.

an admission of guilt, it was concluded that he was innocent, and was compensated with 88 measures (*'bo*) of grain. The method may have been crude, but the point again is that a guilty verdict would have been impossible without either conclusive evidence or a confession.[21]

The principle of equality under the law extended to the clerical body of the village. In 1915 a monk named Gro skyabs (*sic*)—who had the reputation for being an unruly drunkard—stole a number of animal hides from the cattle pen belonging to the headman, sTag lha. As would have been the case with a lay offender, he was required to pay the requisite fine for the theft (*kun 'jal*) in addition to making prostrations to the civil and religious authorities of the community.[22]

A few years later there was another robbery in Headman sTag lha's household. A young man named bsTan 'dzin stole a pair of agate (*gzi*) stones and a turquoise belonging to sTag lha's wife, bSod nams dbang mo. bsTan 'dzin had to pay the fine for theft, while his parents and siblings declared that, if he should do any such thing in the future, they would disinherit him. Although it is not stated, the implication is that the family were also the guarantors of the compensation and the fine. As we shall see, the fact that bsTan 'dzin had a family who would ultimately take responsibility for him was no small matter.

Whether or not a thief was a citizen of dGer lung does not appear to have made a difference. In 1908 a villager from Marpha, in south Mustang, stole and slaughtered a goat belonging to a dGer lung ba named 'Phrin las. Whether or not he had to pay a fine or compensation is not recorded, since the document in question merely states that if he should ever again steal from anyone at all, "whether it be the lord or the lama on high, or any cleric or layperson, or any traveller or pilgrim who might be passing through the territory," he would have to pay a fine of 50 rupees.[23] Whatever the case, there is nothing to suggest that, even as an outsider, he was treated any differently from a member of the village.

In 1902 a far more serious theft was perpetrated by three outsiders: two men from Chos tsong,[24] a pastoral community in northeast Mustang, and one Tibetan. They broke into the chapel of the palace and stole a statue of Sa skya Paṇḍita and two gilt images. They were caught in the act, "but even though they were apprehended, like a fire that you blow on only to have it come back and burn your moustache, as the saying goes, on top of committing the theft they fought back against us villagers with rocks and weapons like warrior bandits from

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21 Geling 094.
22 Geling 160.
23 Geling 089.
24 Different spellings of this name, including Chos rdzong, are to be found in other documents and texts.

the Northern Plateau."[25] They were eventually overpowered, however, and would have been subjected "to dGer lung's traditional law and the law of the country"[26] had an eminent lama not earnestly interceded on their behalf.

In the examples cited above, there is no indication that any of the guilty parties was unable to pay the fine imposed, though in the last case the perpetrators seem to have escaped all punishment thanks to the lama's intervention. In several other instances, however, we see that there was doubt about whether offenders had the wherewithal to pay the fines themselves, and as numerous documents testify, in such situations it was common for the person to designate a guarantor who would stand security for him or her.

### *Crime and poverty*

What might happen to a convicted thief who lacked the means to pay the required fine, and who had no one to stand security or to intercede on his or her behalf, is illustrated by the next two cases that will be examined here. At some point in the late 19th century a young man named Gar rgyabs[27] built himself a fine house on dGer lung's territory. We do not know where he came from, but he is likely to have been a younger brother who had decided that he did not wish to be part of a polyandrous household. Having thereby forfeited his inheritance he would have had no land and became a servant in the household—the "palace" (*mkhar*)—of the hereditary ruler, the *sde pa*. He married a woman named dPal bzang mtsho mo, with whom he had a son, rDo rje, who supplemented the family's income by working as the community's goatherd. In 1902, rDo rje was found guilty of stealing five goats belonging to two different owners. Since he had no means to pay the fine, the responsibility was passed on to his family. But the family itself could not pay and were accordingly forced to part with the only thing of value that they owned. The details of the case are recorded in the following document.

> rDo rje, the son of Gar rgyabs who "eats in the palace", has stolen three of 'Ba' krug's and two of Headman sTag lha's goats. Following an investigation, because Gar skyabs was completely lacking the means to pay the compensation, the steward dPal

[25] *'dzin chang byed kyang / me phar bus kyang sma ra tshur tshigs pa'i spe zhin / skun byung pa'i ma tshad nged yul mi rnaṃs la byang thang gis dmag jag nang zhin kyis dgra tshas krad nas rdo dang tshon cha sogs kyi tshur rgol byung* […] Geling 052.

[26] *dgi lung yul pa'i nyes chad bka' khrim mdzad cing rgyal khrim spyi dang mthun pa'i bka' khrim mdzod* / Geling 052.

[27] This is the spelling that is given in the document. It may stand for something like mGar skyabs, an apotropaic name that would mean "Protected by the Artisans".

> ldan and the supervisor Tshe ring said: "When you were young and able, you built a three-room house on dGer lung's land. Now you should make your apologies to the ruler, his wife and their son, and also the abbot (*chos rje*), and explain what has happened." It has been agreed that from now on, the three-roomed house, with sixty-three beams and three doors, is to be given to the community of dGer lung to sell or to do with whatsoever we wish. Gar rgyabs and his wife dPal bzang mtsho mo agree to this.[28]

The value of the house far exceeded that of the stolen goats, but in the absence of any cash, land or trees—which were sometimes given in lieu of cash or grain—they might have used to pay the penalty, they lost the entire property.

As harsh as this episode might seem, the severity of the penalty is eclipsed by one that was imposed in a case that occurred five year later. The events, as far as it is possible to reconstruct them from three documents,[29] were as follows. A woman from dGer lung named rNam rgyal had a thirteen-year old daughter called sGrol ma. We do not know if Namgyal had ever been married, but in 1907 she was living with a Tibetan man named An chung (Lan chung in one of the documents). With rNam rgyal's knowledge or active participation, An chung committed a major theft from the protectors' chapel of dGer lung's monastery. The items taken included a famous gilt copper image of Tārā, various items of ritual paraphernalia and a quantity of grain. An investigation by dGer lung's council found An chung and rNam rgyal guilty of the crime. They were unable to pay the (unspecified) penalty, and in spite of mediation by two respectable outsiders, one an official (*'go ba*) from Tibet, and the other an inhabitant of Te, An chung was sentenced to have his hand cut off. As someone who was probably a vagrant wage-labourer, An chung did not have the means to pay whatever fine was demanded to avoid this punishment, while rNam rgyal, a single mother, would also have been in no position to help him financially. The only asset of value she had was her daughter, sGrol ma:

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[28] *dge lung 'ba' krug gis ra gsuṃ dang / rgan stag lha'i ra gnyis dge lung mkhar nang zan gar rgyabs bu rdo rje yi rkus nas / da laṃ dge lung ka' khrim bdu bdag shar cad nas / dge lung gar rgyabs la rkun 'jal rtsa nas 'bul rgyu med pa'i thogs la bzhu na / gnyer dpal ldan dang sdo raṃ tshe ring rnaṃ byas nas / rang gzhon nyus bdus su / lung pa'i sa cad thogs la mkhang pa phu mdo 3 zos nas nga ris dbang rtsan bang/ cang rang dpon lcaṃ nyi ma dbang mo dang sras chos je la dgong sprol grnang nas / bdus 'di nas gzung bde mkhang pa phu mdo 3 la mdung ma 63 dang mgo 3 thags rtsang chod nas skal pa byi srid bar la / dge lung rgan lha rtsos lung pa cis la phul nas nyo tshong dag tshong gang byed kyang / nga gar rgyabs dang za mi dpal zang tsho mo 2 slo sem rang thad rtags* / Geling 113.

[29] The three documents are: Geling 033 (1907), Geling 048 (1908), and Geling 084 (1914).

> Even though An chung is not sGrol ma's father, her mother rNam rgyal earnestly pleaded with the village not to carry out the punishment of amputating his hand, and offered to give her daughter in compensation for the theft [to serve the community] for the rest of her life. It has been decided that she shall give her daughter [to the community] from today.[30]

In a later document sGrol ma is referred to as "the common servant of the community" (*yul spyi'i g.yog mo*),[31] but the use of the innocent-sounding term "servant" (*g.yog mo*) should not mislead us into thinking that sGrol ma was anything but a slave, a commodity like any other item of public property that might be sold or exchanged: the following year, when she was fourteen, dGer lung sold her to a wealthy trader from Tukche, named Rin chen 'bar ma, for 115 rupees. Slavery would be abolished in Nepal only in 1925, following a declaration made by the Prime Minister, Chandra Shamsher Jang Bahadur Rana, on 28 November of the previous year.[32] So even if dGer lung was acting within the law when it sold sGrol ma, the monastic body intervened in the transaction, insisting that it was improper to sell people.[33] Discussions with various parties followed, leading to a conclusion that was ambiguous, to say the least:

> She should not be sold to anyone [inside or?] outside the village and should be kept where she is; [even] if [there is a proposal to?] sell her within the village, she may not be sold to anyone, whether powerful or weak; but if she is sold at all, it has been requested that she may be sold only to Rin chen 'bar ma for 107 rupees. If her parents come and offer to pay the money and ask her to be returned, the above shall hold true (i.e. her parents may not buy her back).[34]

And so sGrol ma remained in dGer lung as public property until, in 1914, an ordained monk named Ngag dbang blo ldan paid 36 rupees in order to become a part owner. Unfortunately the document in

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30 *rkun 'byal la bu mo grol mis a ba / an chung man kyang/ a ma rnaṃ rgyal dgis ka' khrim lags cad med pa mkhyen mkhyen bzhus nas / bu mo grol ma bur rtsa pa rtsa la phul pa yin pas / bdus 'di ring bzung blte / bu mo phul bzin pa'i thags tsang chod pa yin* / Geling 033.

31 Geling 048.

32 Whyte (1998). For the full English text of the declaration, see Regmi (1972).

33 Geling 048.

34 *yul dang mzhan yul sogs gzhan su la'ang tshong rgyu med cing de khar bzhag rgyu yin cing / gal sri yul nang du brtsong pa dang / gzhan grag shos tha zhan su la'ang tshong mi chog cing ci nas tshong rgyur bas tshe rin chen par pa nyid rang la dngul 107 la tshong chog zhu pa yin / kho rang gi pha ma sleb pa byung tshe dngul phyir logs byas nas bu mo phyir log mdzad rogs zhus pa re la gong gsal chod don* […] / Geling 048.

question[35] is not clear about the terms of the transaction, and it is difficult to know whether this payment represented an equal share or a third of sGrol ma's commercial worth—36 rupees is about one third of the 107 rupees at which she had been valued in 1908. Furthermore, we do not know what being part-owned by the monk implied. It may be that the monastery required a menial servant, or, in the light of the monks' earlier disapproval of her being trafficked, she may have been recruited as a nun for her protection. The life of a nun would certainly not have been a sinecure, but it may have spared her some of the more arduous drudgery, and perhaps other forms of exploitation, that she would have been likely to experience as a full-time village slave.

## *Conclusion*

A visitor to dGer lung's monastery nowadays can ask the caretaker monk to be admitted to the protectors' chapel, the scene of at least two thefts recorded in the documents considered above, and of several others in more recent times. As is well known, such chapels generally contain imagery and objects of a "wrathful" character, in keeping with the nature of the divinities that reside there. These may include charnel ground scenes, assorted weaponry and armour, stuffed carnivores and real or figurative human body parts. If specifically requested, the caretaker will untie a neatly wrapped cloth bundle to reveal a human hand, severed at the wrist. Villagers are unsure about the exact provenance of this hand, but the general consensus is that it belonged to a thief who was caught stealing from the temple. Measures of this sort would have been consistent with those that were widespread in Central Tibet,[36] and serve as a reminder that the sentence of amputation that the council of dGer lung handed down to An chung was not an idle threat.

How are we to explain the severity of the punishments imposed on Gar rgyabs for the theft of five goats perpetrated by his son, which cost him the house he had painstakingly built in his youth; and on rNam rgyal, whose daughter lost her freedom to spare her stepfather the loss of hand? Before pursuing this question further, we must recall the caveat mentioned earlier: that the brevity of the documents at our disposal means that we do not know all the circumstances of the cases concerned, and cannot therefore take into consideration factors that might have determined the course of events, such as bribery or personal friendships and animosities. The cases considered earlier do at least enable us to eliminate other variables: the mere fact of An chung's being an outsider is unlikely to have been a consideration, since other

[35] Geling 084.

[36] For a graphic account of different forms of corporal and capital punishment that were applied in Tibet, see Hummel (1958).

outsiders were treated no differently from citizens of dGer lung. Nor can we attribute the confiscation of Gar rgyab's house to his son's being so injudicious as to steal from sTag lha, a most formidable force in dGer lung over several decades: we have seen at least two other thefts from sTag lha's household that did not result in unusually harsh reprisals. The one thing that marks out the last two cases is that the guilty parties were unable to pay the fines for the thefts they had committed and had no one to stand security for them. They were both poor, and the only assets they had were valuable but indivisible commodities: Gar rgyab's house in one case, and rNam rgyal's daughter sGrol ma on the other.

The topos of the wealthy patron whose resources are translated into social and spiritual benefits is well founded in the social ideology of Tibetan Buddhism; material wealth is not something to be deprecated as a symptom of worldliness but rather valued as the raw material for the production of merit. Wealth becomes a problem only when it risks creating rents or unevennesses in a social fabric that should be both continuous and flat. According to the dogma that no distinction should be made in law between "the powerful and the weak", effectively a metonym for rich and poor, just as the wealthy should not be favoured, so poverty should not be penalised. The number of cases we have examined here are too few in number to enable us to formulate any confident generalisations concerning the application of this ideal, but such evidence as we have seen suggests that a lack of means did put the indigent at a disadvantage, insofar as their inability to pay fines resulted in the loss of possessions of far greater value. In principle, everyone may have been equal under the law, but in practice some were clearly less equal than others.

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