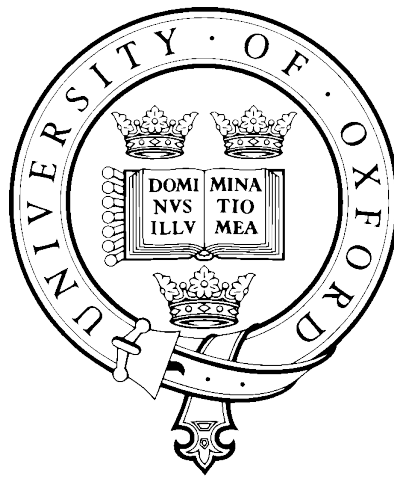


**The Accidental Pilgrimage of a Rich Beggar: The
Account of *tshong dpon* Kha stag 'Dzam yag's
Travels through Tibet, Nepal, and India
(1944-1956)**



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Abstract

The Tibetan literary corpus offers a wide array of (auto)biographical accounts; Tibetans have been recollecting – and narrating – life stories in earnest since the “later diffusion” (Tib. *phyi dar*) of Buddhism in the 11th century. The hybrid essence of life writing, suspended between fact and fiction, finds a perfect expression in the text at the core of the present dissertation, i.e. the journal (Tib. *nyin deb*) of a 20th century Khams pa trader, Kha stag 'Dzam yag. The text records the events, travels, and impressions experienced by the author between 1944 and 1956; structured like a diary, this autodiegetic text, originally written in a scroll-paper format, was later edited and finally published in India in 1997.

Two different heuristic devices, i.e. narratology and socio-economic analysis, are used in the present dissertation to analyse the structure and content of the *nyin deb*, as well as the author's idiosyncrasies emerging from the process of narrativisation. Whereas the narratological approach allows the identification of the interplay of memory, self, and culture in the socio-historical context of mid-20th century Tibet, the socio-economic analysis reflects on the *nyin deb* as a form of social history rather than personal narrative. The identification of “true”, historical facts confirms the author's claims to factuality, thus providing unique information and insight regarding the political and economic role of Khams pa traders in 1940s-1950s Tibet, as well as the development of new pilgrimage rituals and the emergence of forms of “spiritual tourism” in modern India.

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The D.Phil process is a journey in its own, whether you are doing fieldwork or slaving away in the library, and, as many other travellers before me, I made new friends along the way, and I am incredibly pleased to call Professor Per Kværne one of them. I cannot express in words my gratitude for his never-failing patience, his careful proof-reading, and, even more, our enriching exchanges.

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*A mia Madre,
per avermi insegnato cosa significhi amare
in maniera incondizionata.*

*A mio Padre,
per non aver mai capito
ed avermi lasciato fare comunque.*

INTRODUCTION

"As for me, I am the one known by the affectionate name of 'Dzam yag and the *dharma* name of Ngag dbang dar rgyas, the one continuously disturbed by mental afflictions. I was born at the centre of the region called Rab shis, considered to be a part of the sGa [district of Yushu], Khams. Up to the age of forty-nine, I went through success and failure, happiness and sadness, sometimes with and sometimes without the disposition and capacities [to dedicate myself] to the *dharma*; had I to write all [the things that happened to me] it would be [endless] like ripples of water. As for [these events], some raise compassion, some inspire renunciation, some fall into the [category] of wrongdoings, and others are humorous, but, since there are too many of them, they will not be the focus of my writing. When I was forty-nine, due to a series of circumstances, I wandered through the three provinces of Tibet, alone, without a lord [to protect me], relying on [the support of my] co-regionals; I shall therefore write a little about the circumambulations and visits [I paid] to extraordinary places and the Three Supports [symbols of the Buddha's body, speech, and mind], so as to keep [them] in my mind."¹

¹ *nyon mongs pas rgyun du myos pa'i gces ming 'dzam yag dang chos ming ngag dbang dar rgyas sogs thogs pa'i rang nyid ni / mdo khams sga yi phyogs su brtsi ba'i rab shis zhes pa'i yul de'i dbus su skye ba blangs nas / lo ngo zhe dgu bar 'byor rgud song ba dang / bde sdug blo kha chos la phyogs ma phyogs chu yi gnyer ma lta bu yod cing bri na / la la ni snying rje skye / la la ni nges 'byung skye / la la ni mtshang la phog / la la ni dgod bro ba sogs mang po yod pas bri bya min / de nas rang lo zhe dgu'i lo la stes dbang stabs kyis / bod chol kha gsum gyi sa'i char / mgo [*mgon] bdag med pa gcig pu yul grogs la bsten nas 'khyams pas / gnas khyad par can dang rten gsum mams bskor zhing / zhal mjal ba yid la 'jags pa'i ched du dbu tsam 'bri bar bya* (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 11-12).

The passage above is the only biographical information Kha stag 'Dzam yag, the author of the text at the core of my dissertation, provides about the years preceding the events that led to the compilation of his journal. In this extremely abridged version of the first forty-eight years of his life, the author provides crucial details about himself – elements that deeply contributed to my understanding of his figure; throughout the writing of this thesis, I kept going back to these lines, until they became the key to my interpretation of 'Dzam yag's personality.

In his seminal essay, Georges Gusdorf boldly claims that “the genre of autobiography seems limited in time and in space: it has not always existed nor does it exist everywhere [...] One would say that it expresses a concern peculiar to Western man [...] the concern, which seems so natural to us, to turn back on one's own past, to recollect one's life in order to narrate it [...]” (1980: 28-29), a statement the veracity of which had already been questioned by Janet Gyatso (1998: 101-102); as is well-known, the Tibetan literary canon presents a wide array of life writing, including the autobiographical type, of

which 'Dzam yag's journal (Tib. *nyin deb*) is but one example. Albeit not an autobiography in the strict sense, the text is an autodiegetic narration of past events, retrospectively recollected in a diary format. The author himself identifies the desire to preserve the memory of past events as the main motivation for his writing, in blunt defiance of Gusdorf's assertion.

As for any autobiographical narrative with claims to factuality, the distinction in the *nyin deb* between factual and fictional is somewhat unclear; the retrospective process of narratisation of facts, together with the reconstruction of the past in the light of the present, allows for fictional elements to partially infringe on the outspoken authorial declaration of factuality, without nonetheless compromising the inherent truth of the facts themselves. Modern literary scholars have recognised the profoundly hybrid status of life writing – suspended as it is between the poles of fact and fiction, a feature confirmed by the *nyin deb* as well.

In the course of my dissertation, I will be using two different heuristic devices, *i.e.* narratology and socio-economic analysis, in an attempt to capture the multi-

layered and complex essence of 'Dzam yag's journal. Whereas from a literary point of view, the *nyin deb* is a peculiar form of autodiegetic writing, structured as a journal/ledger, and prone, as any autobiographical text, to reflect the idiosyncratic tendencies of the author, the factual features at its core make it a valuable source of historical information on mid-20th century Tibet, and, as such, worthy of being analysed from a socio-economic perspective.

Regardless of the actual level of literacy in pre-modern Tibet, an author's social persona could rarely escape the influence of the ideal concepts of personhood transmitted and made culturally acceptable by the textual tradition. The popularity enjoyed by indigenous biographical and hagiographical writings of charismatic individuals ensured the social acceptance of specific kinds of behaviour, which were actively replicated and adapted in daily life. In the case of the *nyin deb*, intertextuality appears to take place in different locations, *i.e.* in the work and in the author. Not only are references to different texts present throughout the journal, but 'Dzam yag himself actively interacts with textual utterances, an experience that thus becomes inherent to the *nyin deb* itself.

Intertextuality raises valid questions about the cognitive and social dimension of textual exposure, interaction, and interpretation in pre-modern Tibet; in the context of the present discussion, the role played by the figure of Mi la ras pa as an ideal concept of personhood is crucial to the development of 'Dzam yag's self-perception and its evolution from a past "narrated self" to a present "narrating self".

The use of narratology as a heuristic device allows identifying the interplay of memory, self, and culture in the socio-historical context of mid-20th century Tibet. The *nyin deb* is the narration of a journey that is both spiritual and physical – the evolution of its author's inner self matching his outer activities, whether they be ritual pilgrimages or trade ventures. The latter represent the factual element around which the journal is structured; by reflecting on the *nyin deb* as a form of social history, distinct from its literary manifestation as autobiographical narrative, I will isolate socio-economic and cultural factors linked to the development of a strong and influential trading class, mainly composed of eastern Tibetan families, and the political weight the latter came

to assume in 20th century Tibet. Moreover, the information contained in 'Dzam yag's journal offers precious insights into the development of new pilgrimage rituals and routes to the holy sites of India and the emergence of what could be understood as a proto-form of "spiritual tourism".

The *nyin deb* is more than a personal story; it is social history as well, as it demonstrates the power of a person's cultural background and the impact of external events in shaping the author's life. The autobiographical narrative of the journal, viewed in its socio-cultural context reveals the economic, political, and religious interactions influencing the self-representation of the author.

Social history has much to learn from personal narratives, for they provide a glimpse of both the nexus of individual lives and the larger socio-cultural context in which those lives are lived. In the *nyin deb*, the connection to Khams in general and with the author's ancestral land (Tib. *pha yul*) in particular is essential for understanding the way the world is perceived and described. Khastag 'Dzam yag is first and foremost a Khams pa; in the thirteen-year period covered in his journal, he travelled extensively inside and outside the plateau,

relying on the support of local Khams pa enclaves, communities created in large cities and trade hubs to facilitate the interaction between fellow countrymen and the surrounding foreign environment.

Synopsis of Chapters

The thesis consists of four chapters, each subdivided into sections and subsections. Generally speaking, the *nyin deb* will be presented and analysed from a socio-economic perspective blended with a narratological approach.

Chapter One introduces the *nyin deb* from a literary point of view. The first three sections of the chapter discuss the complexities inherent in a taxonomic classification of Tibetan literature in general and the correct categorisation of the *nyin deb* in particular, by proposing the adoption of a prototype theory for the identification of the “genre” of travel literature. In presenting 'Dzam yag's text as a narrative autodiegetic product, the last section of Chapter One investigates the hybrid character of the work by questioning its inclusion in the diaristic genre. The chapter ends with a discussion of the autobiographical elements contained in the *nyin deb*, thus highlighting both the socio-historical

context and the influence the cultural and traditional Tibetan milieu exercises on the way the narrator perceives himself and the world surrounding him. The aim of Chapter One is therefore to place the author and his sensibility at the forefront, allowing the scholar to better understand the figure through whom the events and facts narrated in the journal have been filtered.

In Chapter Two and Chapter Three a socio-economic perspective is used to investigate the claims to factuality advocated by the author.

Chapter Two opens with a broad historical overview of the political, cultural, and social developments undergone by the kingdom of Nang chen – an eastern Tibetan polity of which 'Dzam yag's *pha yul* was a territorial division – from the 13th to the 20th centuries. This realm, largely inhabited by nomadic and seminomadic communities, has been almost ignored by Western scholarship, with the sole exception of Maria M. Turek, who has worked extensively on the local hermitic tradition and its revival in times of political and social change. In Chapter Two I will provide a detailed genealogy of the royal lineage of the 'Bru Tre bo, a local clan which ruled the kingdom from the late 13th century up to the

Communist invasion in the 1950s. The chronological reconstruction of the lineage – being of historical value *per se*, due to the understudied status of Nang chen – allows a retracing of the emergence of a non-sectarian (Tib. *ris med*) approach within the royal court of Nang chen since the mid-19th century, as well as its diffusion at a local level. *Ris med* values transpire from the narrative of the *nyin deb*, and no full understanding of the author's personality can be obtained without considering his upbringing in a cultural environment imbued with reformist and revivalist non-sectarian ideals. The second and third sections of Chapter Two focus on Kha stag 'Dzam yag's *pha yul* and the events that led to the composition of his journal. In the fourth and last section of the chapter, questions are raised concerning the real factors that motivated the author's wanderings, and whether they may be correctly considered as "pilgrimages", as himself suggests.

Chapter Three focuses on trade, corroborating the historical knowledge of pre-modern Tibetan economy by the data taken from the *nyin deb* narrative.

Particular attention will be paid to the role that the Khams pa trading

communities played in the Tibetan political arena in the 1940s and 1950s. I will also advance some hypotheses on the economic influence of the *ris med* movement as a trade facilitator, as well as on a possible affiliation of 'Dzam yag with the influential Sa 'du tshang family, for whom the author appears to have worked as trade agent and thanks to whom he managed to obtain a commission from the Khang gsar *bla brang*² of the Ngor E wam chos Idan monastery. By trading for one of the colleges of the Sa skya establishment, he *de facto* gained the title reserved for monastic trade agents, *i.e. tshong dpon* ("chief merchant"). In following some of 'Dzam yag's business ventures to Kalimpong, the chapter briefly dwells on the idiosyncratic character of the Sikkimese trade hub, by the mid-20th century one of the most active centres for the sorting and processing of Tibetan wool, a commodity over which the three largest firms of Tibet – sPang mda' tshang, Sa 'du tshang, and Rwa sgren – held monopoly. In the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s, Kalimpong was a safe harbour for Tibetans of all sorts – pilgrims, traders, and several figures

² The term *bla brang* is used to indicate the institutional residence of an abbot, as well as monastic corporate estate belonging to a lineage of incarnate lamas.

declared *personæ non gratae* by the Tibetan government, *i.e.* the dGa' ldan pho
brang.

Chapter Four deals extensively with pilgrimage and ritual activities – which
clearly represent the core of 'Dzam yag's narrative – and it does so by merging
an economic and a literary approach. The previous chapters, by analysing the
political and socio-economic situation of pre-1959 Tibet, provide the necessary
background for the appraisal of the information of which the journal is a unique
source. In broaching the topic of pilgrimage, it is impossible not to engage in a
literary analysis of the *nyin deb*, for any textual utterance is not created in a
vacuum, but is inscribed in webs of cultural, social, political, and literary
significance; to understand a text means therefore to be aware of the social
conceptions and cultural codes inherent to the context it is produced in.

Whereas the socio-economic approach allows discussing religion as an
independent variable *vis-à-vis* economy, the understanding of the journal as a
narrative text connected to others sheds light on the sense-making and sense-
giving processes at work during a pilgrimage to sacred places. The chapter is

divided into two sections which differ in their approach as well as their focus; the *locus* of investigation will shift from the Tibetan plateau – examined in the first section – to the “holy lands” of India and Nepal – which are the background for the analysis carried out in the second section.

In the first section, the ritual activities and pilgrimage routes, as recorded in the *nyin deb*, will be interpreted in the light of their socio-economic importance; the aim is to identify the power wielded by religious communities, by taking into consideration the amount of money generated by pilgrimages and the different intentions and expectations driving the devotees.

In the second section, narratology will be used as the leading heuristic device.

The author’s impressions of India and its modernity offer a glimpse of the development of new kinds of pilgrimage rituals, as well as on the emergence of a form of spiritual tourism; exoticism enters the narrative, turning the journal/ledger into a real travelogue.

The Conclusion connects the socio-economic and the narratological approach, identifying the major topics discussed in the previous chapters and providing

some final observations on the figure of Kha stag 'Dzam yag and the value of his *nyin deb* as a historical source.

Notes on Spelling Conventions and Dating Systems

All Tibetan names and terms, with the exceptions of some well-known Anglicised names such as Dalai Lama, Panchen Lama, Lhasa, have been rendered according to the Tibetan and Himalayan Library's Extended Wylie Transliteration Scheme (EWTS). The application of the Pīnyīn system has been limited to specific Chinese titles. Sanskrit terms follow standard academic transliteration system.

The years, months, and days are presented in accordance with the Tibetan calendar; the equivalent date in the Gregorian calendar is given in brackets.

The calendrical conversion follows the tables (Phug pa tradition) elaborated by Dieter Schuh (1973).

CHAPTER ONE

Toward a Literary Taxonomy: Travel Accounts in Tibetan Literature

This dissertation is based upon a peculiar form of Tibetan egodocument, compiled by an otherwise unknown Khams pa trader named Kha stag 'Dzam yag, and structured as a personal record of impressions and experiences accumulated by the author over a thirteen-year period (1944 to 1956), a time largely spent journeying and pilgrimaging from Khams to the central and western provinces of Tibet and to India and Nepal. Despite defining himself as a *gnas bskor ba*, i.e. “pilgrim”, 'Dzam yag's merchant's nature transpires from the narrative, a marking of the hybrid literary essence of the *nyin deb*, a journal both private and general.³

Originally written in a scroll-paper format between 1944 and 1956,⁴ the text was later edited by The Tibet House in Delhi and published by

³ For a discussion of the problematic inclusion of the *nyin deb* into the diaristic genre, see Chapter One, p. 82 onwards.

⁴ A further scroll, describing the events from the 25th day of the 6th month of the Fire Monkey Year (August 1st, 1956) to the 13th of the 10th month of the earth dog (November 24th, 1958), was lost by the author in gZhis ka rtse, and no trace of it was to be found at the time of

Indraprastha Press in 1997 with the bilingual title *Phyi lo 1944 nas 1956 bar bod dang bal po rgya gar bcas la gnas bskor bskyod pa'i nyin deb. A Pilgrim's Diary: Tibet, Nepal and India 1944-1956*. In spite of the editorial choice of labelling the work as a *nyin deb*, a term translated in the English version of the title as “diary”, due to its multivalence, 'Dzam yag's account lends itself to different interpretations. A question therefore arises regarding the categorisation of such an autobiographical narrative of travel, trade, and pilgrimage and the way it fits into the landscapes of Tibetan literary genres.

In the following section, I will broach the problematic issue of literary taxonomy, suggesting the adoption of a prototype theory as a specific theoretical model for the identification of an emic “genre” of travel literature. In doing so, I will discuss the different typologies of textual utterances presenting features matching in a greater or lesser degree the requirements for the taxonomy in question, *i.e.* travel literature. The identification of a “genre”, albeit prototypical, places the *nyin deb* within a broader intertextual net, thus fostering

publication in 1997, on the occasion of the centenary of the author's birth (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 8).

a discussion of the cognitive and social dimension of intertextuality in pre-modern Tibet. In the last section of the chapter, I will examine the narrative function of the text, employing narratological tools to illuminate the evolution of the author from “narrated self” to “narrating self”.

1. Toward a Definition of Travel Literature in the Tibetan Literary Corpus

The taxonomic classification of literary genre is, by far, one of the most controversial and uncomfortable processes an academic theorist of literature can embark on.

A number of perennial doubts plague genre theory. Are genres really ‘out there’ in the world, or are they merely the constructions of analysts? Is there a finite taxonomy of genres or are they in principle infinite? [...] Are genres culture-bound or transcultural? (Stam, 2000: 14)

Any approach to a coherent theory of literary genre seems to be affected by an inherent paradox. On the one hand, the everyday contact with different texts has produced in the reader what can be called an “intuitive” taxonomic knowledge, the instinctive ability to identify a particular textual utterance as belonging to one genre or the other and interpret it in accordance with what he

or she considers to be the appropriate generic profile. On the other hand, literary theorists struggle to define and delimit these generic categories in an unambiguous and conclusive way, despite their apparent nature of distinctive structural matrices, easily incorporated into a comprehensive system. Such a discrepancy between a reader's basic intuitive competence and the problematic theoretical elucidation of genres can be ascribed to both the innate tension between the idiosyncratic nature of an individual text and its generic category on one hand and the complex historical, intertextual and contextual framework literary genres are embedded in on the other (de Geest and van Gorp, 1999:33-34; Rheingans, 2015:1).

Literary studies have traditionally been dominated by an ontological and essentialist point of view, the outcome of which is a research mainly aimed at the construction of an overall taxonomic classification that could reduce the apparent diversity of literary texts into a conveniently restricted number of categories and subcategories. This methodological approach proceeds through what can be called a "check-list" selection process: the intrinsic heterogeneity

and specificity of single texts are outweighed by the presence of a substantial number of shared features, thus determining the creation of specific subclasses of textual utterances, namely the literary genres. Standard definitions of genres tend to present them as conventions of content, *e.g.* themes or settings, and/or form, *e.g.* structure and style. According to such a view, each textual element is considered to either belong necessarily to a precise category – given its embodiment of the fundamental characteristics associated with that specific group – or to fall outside it, having failed to meet its requirements. Such a methodological strategy, with its check-list procedure, is meant to generate a perfect determination of literary genres and their boundaries (de Geest and van Gorp, 1999: 36-37).

For this reason, the inclusion or exclusion of a text within a particular category is predominately conceived “in terms of an unambiguous $\{0,1\}$ choice between either ‘is a member of’ (element 1) or ‘is no member of’ (element 0)” (de Geest and van Gorp, 1999: 39). Despite being theoretically attractive, the tendency to categorize genres in a binary and discrete way entails many

difficulties, since genre alignments are not mutually exclusive (Chandler, 1997:

2). In discussing the application of the category of genres to the Tibetan literary

corpus, I will follow the systemic-functionalist perspective suggested by de

Geest and van Gorp by adopting the concept of prototype theory;⁵ the

conceptual flexibility of the latter embraces the basic empirical understanding

that “not all the instances belonging to a specific category are functionally

similar or equally representative of their category as a whole” (1999: 39-40). In

mathematical terms, the binary {0,1} function at the basis of the conceptual

analysis of traditional theories is replaced by a new function covering the entire

interval [0 1], thus taking into consideration not only the boundary cases 0 and

1, but also all the possible values in between.

Membership of a category is [...] in most cases not a question of discrete objective decisions, but primarily a matter of degree. A particular element (a singular text, in our reasoning) may therefore “more inherently” and “to a larger extent” belong to its category (a definite literary genre) than another element although in the final analysis both instances may (in other respects) be considered as

⁵ Based on a theoretical model applied to the field of cognitive psychology and originally developed in the late 1970s by Eleanor Rosch, prototype theories have been integrated into cognitive linguistics since the mid-1990s (de Geest and van Gorp, 1999: 39).

equally valid instances of the same category (de Geest and van Gorp, 1999: 40).

In such a view, the boundaries between genres are no longer clearly defined. The fuzziness introduced by the prototype theory does not exclude, however, a categorization of the literary corpus; on the contrary, the strict structure typical of traditional theoretical approaches is replaced by a more fluid organization within the categories themselves, according to a model that may be thought of in terms of the “centre-periphery” type (de Geest and van Gorp, 1999: 40).

Every generic category is structured upon a “prototype”,

[a]n instance which, on the one hand, maximally represents the category concerned and which, on the other, is strongly category-specific owing to the fact that it shares a minimal amount of characteristics with other neighbouring categories (de Geest and van Gorp, 1999: 41).

This prototype approach represents, in my opinion, a particularly suitable framework in dealing with the Tibetan literary corpus. In their introduction to a collection of essays dedicated to some of the genres of Tibetan literature, Cabezón and Jackson (1996: 16) caution against the applicability of Western

literary concepts to non-Western cultures, especially since the mere existence of an overarching idea of “literature” as such in Tibet is debatable. The difficulty of finding equivalency to the concept of genres – as the term is understood by Western scholarship – may force a revision of the ways scholars discuss Tibetan “literature” (Cabezón and Jackson, 1996: 16).

The same concept of “literature” therefore appears to be problematic; the relationship between author(s) and recipients defines and gives meaning to a text, and in the case of Tibetan literary works, the relationship is primarily didactic, the majority of text elaborated within a religious context.

Traditionally, Tibetan society has always been highly literate⁶ and has placed great value on literary activities and creation; part of the reason is that much of the literary production in the pre-modern period focused on Buddhism and was composed mainly of philosophical texts and liturgical and biographical accounts of lamas. Although there was also a body of secular texts comprising

⁶ As rightly pointed out by Dreyfus (2003: 80), “generalising about literacy in pre-1950 Tibet is no easy matter “ and “any assessment of the spread of literacy across Tibet [...] can only be tentative at best”. It appears that basic literacy was relatively widespread; many people knew how to read – especially in the upper and middle strata of the society – though only a few knew how to write. Regional variations also occurred; it is known that central Tibet had a much lower literacy rate than Khams and Amdo or the nomadic areas in Byang thang. The difficulties of forming a coherent picture of literacy patterns suggest the adoption of a more cautious approach when describing the level of literacy in pre-modern Tibet. On literacy in traditional societies, see, among others, Gough (1968), Tambiah (1968), Dreyfus (2003).

various types of histories (*lo rgyus*, *rgyal rabs*, *chos 'byung*), biographical literature (*rnam thar*), aphoristic writings (*legs bshad*), oral folk songs (*glu gzhas*), bardic tales, and folk stories (*sgrung gtam*), Buddhism cemented all literary creativity in Tibet (Shakya, 2000: 28).⁷

It should be clear by now that the Western concept of literature – broadly conceived as an ensemble of written materials of various content and/or form – struggles to find a proper equivalent in the Tibetan language. It was only in the 1990s that the actual discourse on *rtsom rig* became widespread among Tibetan scholars and the term began to be used to convey a meaning bearing some resemblance to the general notion of literature as it is conceived in Western academia (Rheingans, 2015: 2).⁸ For my purposes, it may therefore

⁷ The author is here taking into consideration only examples of written literature; more could be said about the rich Tibetan oral tradition. Furthermore, I would question Shakya's inclusion of *rnam thar* in secular literature; only a few "life-histories" present an annalistic, anecdotal, quasi-secular structure, while the majority consists of auto/biographies with a strong hagiographic flavour.

⁸ The term *rtsom rig* – from *rtsom* ("to write") and *rig* ("knowledge") – began to be used in the mid-1950s as a calque on the Chinese term *wénxué* ("literature"). From being a mere rendition of a Chinese concept, *rtsom rig* gradually acquired a discursive value and effectively replaced in early 1990s the previous term *snyan ngag* (Skt. *kāvya*), until then used to indicate (any kind of) "literature". The broader understanding of term *snyan ngag* as "belles-lettres" remained dominant among Tibetan scholars up to the mid and late 1980s, and poetic concepts were still employed to discuss prose literature. Debates regarding the construction of a national literature, less dependent on the Indic models, started at the end of the 1980s and by 1991 the term *rtsom rig* was firmly standardised as equivalent of "literature". For more information on the emergence and development of the term *rtsom rig*, see Hartley (2007).

still be worth adopting the more pragmatic and functional point of view suggested by Cabezón and Jackson, thus “stretching” our idea of what literature should be into a representation of “a written canon of knowledge that is of value to human life” (1996: 20). In doing so, literature would be delimited to “those texts whose study yields the kind of knowledge worth having”, a concept conveyed in Tibetan by the word *rig gnas*, defined by the *Bod rgya tshig mdzod chen mo* as “something that is to be known” (Tib. *shes par bya ba'i gnas*), not different from the traditional Chinese idea of literature as “a vehicle for moral instruction” (Cabezón and Jackson, 1996: 17-18), a clear confirmation of the didactic value attributed to written utterances in the Tibetan cultural world.

The remarks made so far may have led to the hasty assumption that the absence of a “pure” Tibetan concept of literature would *de facto* preclude any attempt to formulate an effective taxonomy of literary genres. Even though it is true that the words used in the Tibetan language to indicate a classification – such as *rigs* (“type”), *sde* (“class”) or *rnam pa* (“variety”) – are not

systematically used in reference to an abstract notion of a literary category, it is nevertheless evident that some of the issues related to genre theory were not unknown to Tibetan scholars of the past (Rheingans, 2015: 2). After the 12th century, the translation of thousands of Indian works into Tibetan was almost completed and taxonomic skills were clearly needed for the organization of the written corpus that was gradually taking form. Attempts at clarifying the genre of texts were largely based on Indian typologies developed in the context of the Buddhist doctrine and later adopted and modified in Tibet (Roesler, 2015a:33), but indigenous classifications, applied beyond the confines of Buddhist literature, did exist in the form of catalogues of literary works, *e.g. gsan yig, gsung 'bum, dkar chag*, the purpose of which was the organisation of knowledge rather than a classification of literature in terms of genre (Roesler, 2015a: 40).

One of the best examples of indigenous taxonomy⁹ is provided by the table of contents (Tib. *dkar chag*) of the collected works (Tib. *gsung 'bum*) of some of the most prolific Tibetan authors. Minor changes in the order of the

⁹ For a reflection on genre classifications in Tibetan literature, see Roesler (2015a).

titles listed aside – mainly due to different religious affiliation and/or interests of the authors – these tables of contents are organized by subject, offering a solid basis for a compilation of a list of the literary genres as envisioned by native scholars. Despite the impossibility of presenting a single taxonomic model for the whole Tibetan written corpus and the absence of theoretical discussions of the above-mentioned issues, a subject matter division appears to be the closest equivalent to the Western traditional idea of literary genre (Cabezón and Jackson, 1996: 26-28; Martin, 1996).

As Rheigans (2015: 9) aptly points out, in suggesting the combination of traditional indigenous categories and contemporary academic scholarship,¹⁰ Jeffrey Schoening (1988: 425) outlined a path for future research. Accordingly, a subject matter division will be used hereafter, albeit within the confines of the prototype approach previously discussed, in an attempt to outline a specific genre categorisation of the Tibetan literary corpus, *i.e.* travel literature,

¹⁰ One of the three possible methods identified by Schoening (1988) for classifying Tibetan historical literature, *i.e.* (i) “intrinsic strategy”, using only Tibetan terms, (ii) “extrinsic strategy”, using only Western terms, (iii) “combination strategy”, using a combination of Tibetan and Western terms (in Rheigans, 2015: 9).

comprising texts belonging to travel and pilgrimage literature, as well as auto/biographies and hagiographies.¹¹

If for heuristic reasons some taxonomies are more appealing than others, the question of preferring certain categorical assignments over others remains. As we have seen, essentialist genre theories present a dichotomous perspective on meaning: a text either falls into or outside a precise category, depending on the compatibility of its features with those of the genre matrix.

The illusion of a clear-cut definition of literary genres offered by these traditional approaches may partially explain their continuing and long-lasting impact on literary theory. Due to the strong epistemological value given to a category, its fundamental features are “often erroneously, extended to all instances of the category and are subsequently considered to be necessary and sufficient conditions for all instances of the same category, without exception” (de Geest and van Gorp, 1999:41). The inconsistencies determined by the adoption of

¹¹ Scholars’ dissatisfaction with emic categories has prompted them to expand the implicit Tibetan taxonomies with etic categories, thus employing a variation of Schoening’s “combination strategy” (Rheingans, 2015:14). See for instance Cabezón and Jackson’s meta-categories (1996) and Almogi’s “genre categories” (2005).

such a hypothesis are immediately evident once empirical cases are examined, since it is not uncommon for a text to share just a few characteristics with a particular genre category and yet still be recognized as a genuine – though rather atypical – member of it, despite bearing at the same time more striking resemblances to another, different category. It may even occur that two texts, having virtually no significant elements in common, still function as members of a single category because they both partially, but in a totally different way, present features similar to those characterizing the category in question; there may even be instances where “the exact boundaries between the categories tend to get blurred or to disappear altogether” (de Geest and van Gorp, 1999: 42).

This is indeed the case for the literary category examined in the present chapter. Guidebooks and travel writing belong to what we could call the “genre” of travel literature, a classification including texts of different format and style (Cabezón and Jackson, 1996: 25). It should be stressed once again that we are here following the prototype approach suggested by de Geest and van Gorp,

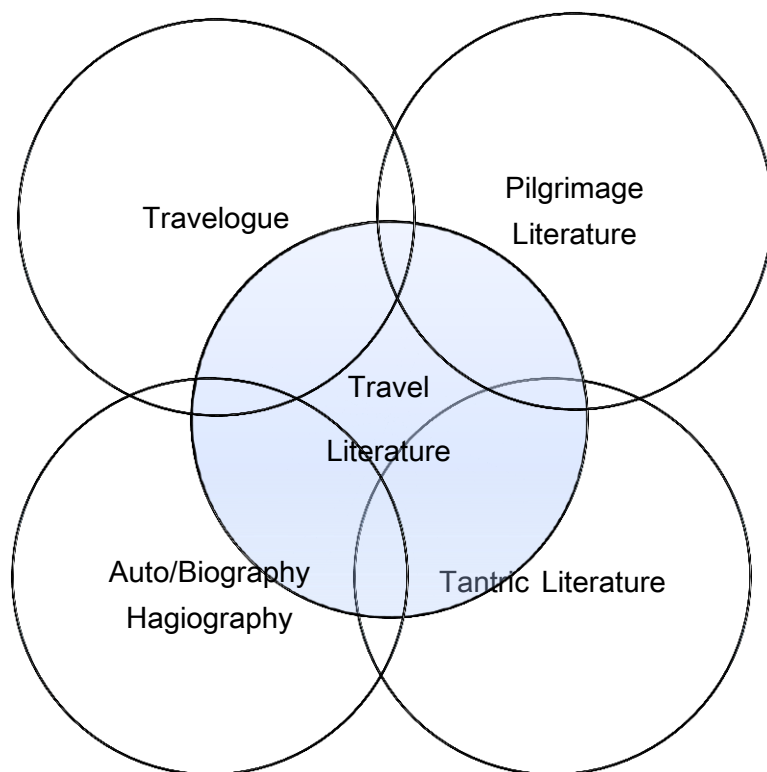
and that the term “genre” is therefore used as a prototypical generic category, a label not necessarily existing in reality, “since it is generally assumed to be a kind of hypothetical cognitive construction, a theoretical ‘fiction’” (de Geest and van Gorp, 1999: 41), useful for our current aim of presenting an overview of those written utterances in Tibetan language which concern geography in general and travel in particular.

Geographical literature *per se* is virtually non-existent in Tibet¹² and what is conventionally termed as Tibetan “geographical” writing consists of historical sources, *i.e.* biographies, hagiographies, letters, catalogues (Vostrikov, 1970: 217); an exception is represented by guidebooks for pilgrims which appear to be the closest instance of indigenous “geographical literature” in the sense of “cultural geography”.¹³

¹² The sole exception is represented by the *go la'i kha byang* (“global descriptions”), see Chapter One, p. 54, fn. 24.

¹³ I am grateful to Per Kværne for pointing out the intrinsic geographical value of guidebooks for pilgrims (private conversation, February 2017).

The practical application of a prototype theory to the Tibetan literary corpus may be roughly represented by a Venn diagram,¹⁴ where each circle represents a “prototype”, an instance ideally expressing the fundamental features of the category it stands for.



The advantages of adopting such an approach are immediately evident.¹⁵ As we can see from the Venn diagram, what we are actually dealing

¹⁴ The applicability of a Venn diagram to represent the relation between the different literary categories connected to pilgrimage has been successfully proven by Ramble (2014: 180). The same concept has been here applied within a prototype theory of categorisation.

¹⁵ Recent literary approaches based on the concept of family resemblance have validated the application of prototypes to the identification of categories; to identify Tibetan texts – both oral

with is an ensemble of texts, whose features match in a greater or lesser degree the requirements of the taxonomy in question, *i.e.* travel literature. The boundaries between prototypical generic categories are fuzzy and organized on the basis of a centre-periphery relation. The overlaps between neighbouring categories create blurred intersections, “grey areas” where some of the most interesting examples of travel writing can be found (de Geest and van Gorp, 1999: 40).

In the following sections, the text types representative of each “prototype” shown in the diagram will be discussed individually, in an attempt to highlight how their specific features play in the construction of a prototype genre of travel literature, of which the *nyin deb* is an example.

1.1. Biographies and Hagiographies

and written – that are considered typical, whether implicitly, *i.e.* through the study of their reception and intertextuality, or explicitly, *i.e.* via author’s statement, may therefore improve our understanding of Tibetan literary taxonomy (Rheingans, 2015: 20).

The biographical works known in Tibetan as *nam (par) thar (pa)* (“complete liberation”)¹⁶ are “biographies either of individuals – written by their own selves or their pupils, or even by later authors, – or of a group of persons linked together by a continuous philosophical or religious tradition” (Vostrikov, 1970: 180). These latter complex works – sometimes grouped under the category of *bla ma brgyud pa'i nam thar* (“biographies of successive teachers”) – present a strong affiliation with another type of biographical collections, namely the *gdan rabs* and *'khrungs rabs*. While the latter deal with the genealogy of the heads of a monastery (Tib. *gdan rabs*) or with the lineage of incarnations (Tib. *'khrungs rabs*), the *bla ma brgyud pa'i nam thar* are based on the succession in receiving and imparting some doctrines or practices within a particular lineage (Tib. *brgyud*) (Vostrikov, 1970: 180). Whereas all of these biographical works contain information on individual persons, their historical value is qualitatively different. The biographies of earlier Buddhist practitioners – especially Indian *siddhas* – abound in legendary elements and, as Vostrikov

¹⁶ Rendition of the Sanskrit word *vimokṣa*. The coinage of the term *nam thar* as equivalent of “life-story” has presumably an indigenous Tibetan origin and appears in the title of biographies from the 11th and 12th centuries onwards (Roesler, 2013: 116).

(1970: 185) cautions us, “the importance of some of these biographical collections, which are typical ‘life-histories of saints’, is more folkloristic than historical”. Most Tibetan biographies describe the life of a Buddhist master and, as such, they do not deal with an “average” kind of life, but with an exemplary one, modelled on Buddhist values (Roesler, 2013: 117). It is therefore worth reminding ourselves that, given the edifying nature of such biographical works, the term “biography” can be, in many cases, substituted with “hagiography” since “in almost every case, personality recedes before a type, it is overruled by some given pattern: the saint, scholar or ascetic are seen in the abstract, not as this or that saint, scholar or ascetic. It is a monastic and edifying literature” (Tucci, 1949: 152).

Whereas Tibetan biographies (Tib. *rnam thar*) and autobiographies (Tib. *rang rnam*) share the presumption that the protagonist has reached full liberation, they differ substantially in the stance assumed by the author in relation to the subject matter. Due to the constraints in Tibetan linguistic convention, the self-written account traditionally refrains from any form of self-

aggrandisement, a stylistic limitation from which a biographer is exempt, being the exhibition of studied reverence for the life story narrated an expected feature of a *nam thar* (Gyatso, 1998: 105).¹⁷

In spite of stylistic differences, *nam thar* and *rang nam* share many similarities and overlap in terms of indigenous writing practice (Gyatso, 1998: 103).¹⁸ Tibetan authors may not draw clear-cut demarcations within the biographical written corpus, but it must be conceded that the process of self-creation did not seem to bother Western scholars of auto/biography either, at least up to the mid-20th century; before then, in fact, the scholarly interest in

¹⁷ Whereas self-effacement is indeed an issue in *rang nam*, a certain propensity towards self-aggrandisement cannot be overlooked; the fine balance between self-deprecation and self-praise, at the core of Tibetan autobiographies, is conveyed in different ways accordingly to the sensibility of the author. Competitive self-aggrandisement appears almost as an obligatory literary exercise in *rang nam* of important historical figures, *e.g.* U rgyan pa rin chen dpal (1229-1309), Tāranātha (1575-1634), and Zhabs dkar tshogs drug rang grol (1781-1851), only to mention a few. See Tucci (1940), Templeman (2012) and Ricard (1994). I am grateful to Prof. Charles Ramble for pointing out the intricacies of self-presentation in *rang nam* (private conversation, June 2017).

¹⁸ The theoretical dichotomy between autobiography, *i.e.* “account written by the self”, and biography, *i.e.* “account written by others”, struggles to fit into the textual reality. The protagonist of a *nam thar* is rarely passive, his or her presence shaping the biographical work, either directly, as it is the case for dictation to a scribe, or indirectly, through quotations from sources, written and/or oral, ascribable to the subject. Similarly, texts labelled as autobiographical writing may present several authors, often being completed and/or edited by the subject’s disciples (Gyatso, 1998: 103). See also Roesler (2014).

“lives” was limited to their being representations of exemplary expressions of the culture that produced them. It was the emergence of a post-modernist sensibility that led to a different approach and to the nowadays dominant attention to text-making and to the literary-historical invention and depiction of reality. The fuzzy boundaries between auto/biographical and hagiographical writing within the Tibetan “genre” of *nam thar* is easier to understand once the narrative nature of these texts is taken into consideration; in any life account – whether it be that of an average person or a saint – the narrator needs a theory of growth, on which the telling of the life story is modelled (Bruner, 2001: 26-28). The same theory of growth and transformation is at the core of Tibetan *nam thar* since “any life-history is *eo ipso* a description of the movement of a person on the path of deliverance (Tib. *nam par thar pa*) from the present or future transitory life” (Vostrikov, 1970: 188). The idea of an inner development of the protagonist is particularly evident in *nam thar* presenting a high literary standard and internal cohesion. It can be understood as “historical novel writing” (Roesler, 2013: 118);¹⁹ in these texts, the “narrated self” interacts

¹⁹ Roesler (2013: 118) suggests classifying these *nam thar* as “historical novel writing”, due to

meaningfully with the social environment and their story follows a narrative pattern culminating with the attainment of enlightenment – a sanctity that is, as Tucci says, “already achieved” (1949: 152).

The lack of distinction between biographical and hagiographical writing led early scholars of Tibetan studies to dismiss the historical value of *nam thar*, restricting their significance to their function as “folkloristic and literary standpoint” (Vostrikov, 1970: 188); however, whereas there is undoubtedly a clear distinction between hagiography and history,²⁰ the historical and geographical value of *nam thar* should not be underestimated. The insertion into the auto/biographical narrative of fragments of chronicles, myths, genealogies, itineraries and dates of the foundation of temples and monasteries delivers precious information on local traditions, which would hardly be available from works of a more general character. Especially

both their narrative complexity and their accepted historical validity by the Tibetan readership, with the *caveat* though that most of these plots have been subject to changes in the process of transmission and redaction, and therefore their categorisation as “novel” may prove problematic according to Western literary standards.

²⁰ “The work of the hagiographer may be historical, but it is not necessarily so. It may assume any literary form suitable to the glorification of the saints, from an official record adapted to the use of the faithful, to a poetical composition of the most exuberant character wholly detached from reality” (Delehay, 1907: 2).

interesting is the treatment of sacred geography in *rnam thar*, as many of these accounts dwell on the pilgrimages undertaken by saints and Buddhist practitioners. It is not unusual, in fact, to be presented with real itineraries, a fundamental source of information in the reconstruction of Tibet's geography and topography (Tucci, 1949: 153), as will become clear in the following section.

1.2. Pilgrimage literature

Whereas the style of the *nyin deb* – an autodiegetic narrative text – provides a rather unproblematic stance of the work *vis-à-vis* the genre of auto/biographical writing, the content of the text – concerned as it is with the author's pilgrimage and ritual activities – calls for an in-depth discussion of the literary category of pilgrimage literature.

Being textual expression of sacred geography, pilgrimage literature records information about the holy environment, its spatial orientation, and its modifications through time. In the case of Tibet, the conversion of an autochthonous Tibetan culture to a Vajrayāna Buddhist one – a process that

started on a large scale at the beginning of the *phyi dar*²¹ – produced a new ideological framework supporting complex pilgrimage networks connecting holy places scattered throughout the plateau. Tibetan literary sources on pilgrimage, such as guide-books (Tib. *gnas bshad*), itineraries (Tib. *lam yig*), catalogues (Tib. *dkar chag*), as well as commentaries on Tantric texts related to sacred geography, contain information about the conversion process of important pre-Buddhist sites; the “opening” of these locations to pilgrimage is often described in the narrative as the outcome of supernatural contests between powerful yogins and local spirits, inevitably resulting in the latter being tamed and “bound by oath” into the protection of the *dharma* (Huber, 2003: 122). Addressing a wide audience, pilgrimage textual sources provide the readers with useful information about holy mountains, lakes or other sacred sites.

In terms of ritual activity, Tibetan pilgrimage is a complex cultural phenomenon, spanning the entire Tibetan society, although the preservation of differences in social status (Buffetrille, 2003: 326) betrays a lack of

²¹ The term *phyi dar* refers to the “later diffusion” of Buddhism in Tibet that occurred from about the 11th century onwards.

communitas,²² a feature Victor Turner (1974: 46-47) considered to be essential to the pilgrimage experience.

Regional boundaries and differences may nevertheless be mitigated and often transcended through the shared experience of a pilgrimage, which offered a rare occasion to travel beyond the confines of one's own village, thus enhancing exchanges between strangers, in a mutual trading of goods as well as information.

By ordering the cycles of pilgrimage according to calendrical cycles, by establishing the locations visited and the routes traversed, and by promoting specific religious teachings, historical narratives, and symbolic interpretations of the landscape and the events taking place within it, the Tibetan religious world constructed for its inhabitants a universe of shared meaning (Kapstein, 1997: 103).

A specific ritual culture of pilgrimage begins to develop in Tibet between the late 10th and late 13th century, a period often referred to as the "later propagation of Buddhist teachings" (Tib. *bstan pa phyi dar*). According to Huber

²² In Turner's (1974: 46-47) view, the unstructured nature of *communitas* conveys a message of union rather than divisiveness, thus generating an inter-personal relationship that is undifferentiated, egalitarian, direct, and non-rational. Due to their liminal character, pilgrimages determine a disruption of the usual customs and conventions forming the "normal" social structure.

(2008: 60), all the basic characteristics of pilgrimage as it emerged in Tibetan societies are derived from earlier Indian models, gradually elaborated and adapted to the indigenous ritual practices.²³ The pre-Buddhist cultural representation of the physical environment – what Furst (1994: 3) defines an “ecological belief system” – imagined it to be populated by a host of deities and spiritual forces, such as the *yul lha*, the *gnyan* and the *btsan* spirits; the need to tame the land, *i.e.* its supernatural inhabitants, is a recurrent theme in the later historians’ accounts of the early period. Even though the origin of land taming rituals is undoubtedly Indian, the emphasis in later Tibetan tradition seems to have shifted from what was envisioned as a military and pragmatic operation to a more spiritual and soteriological understanding.

[T]his trope echoes an important theme of the later Indian Vajrayāna, its emphasis on the suppression and taming of non-Buddhist [...] deities. [...] In finding this image repeatedly applied to the defeat of those parties in Tibet linked to the Bon-po and other local deities, are we seeing a distorted echo of a time when the point was not, or at least not only, to suppress non-Buddhist

²³ Despite the lack of textual evidence about any ritual similar to pilgrimage before the introduction of Buddhism in Tibet, indigenous religious life was characterised by a belief in the sacred nature of mountains, lakes, and caves, and it seems safe to assume that Indian models of pilgrimage have been superimposed on non-institutionalised indigenous beliefs, in a still ongoing synthetic process (Buffetrille, 1998: 19).

deities so as to make the land of Tibet safe for the *dharma*, but rather to suppress the non-Buddhist deities in order to subdue those who supported them? (Samuel, 2005: 108-109).

The superimposition of Buddhism on the framework of indigenous belief systems reveals “worlds within worlds, where the inner realm of the soul appears in the guise of the external world and viceversa” (Sumegi, 2008: 18), since “mountains, lakes, rivers, caves, and passes constitute the geographicity of the Tibetan pilgrim world” (van Spengen, 1998: 39). A great deal of architectural terminology recurs in the description of these landscape “dwellings”, often presented as the “palaces” (Tib. *pho brang*) of the Tantric deities abiding in them (Huber, 1999a: 81). The same concepts apply to certain human-made objects, such as buildings, *e.g.* *stūpas*, and religious icons, or even particular persons, *e.g.* the Dalai Lama, considered to be temporary or permanent bodily “residences” of deities.

Indigenous Tibetan spirits of the land, such as the *yul lha*, are typically worshipped by offerings and prayers for protection rather than pilgrimage and circumambulation; on the other hand, the performance of the latter forms of

worship is central to the Buddhist sacred places (Tib. *gnas*) of Tibet. The Tibetan compound expressions *gnas skor* and *gnas mjal*, respectively “going around a *gnas*” and “meeting/encountering a *gnas*”, clearly convey the kinetic character of pilgrimage (Turner, 1978: xiii), in its sense of a movement around or toward a sacred object (Huber, 1999a: 83; van Spengen, 1998: 37). Loosely translated as “abode”, a *gnas* is specifically used in a religious context to indicate the location or residence of a superior being belonging to the Buddhist pantheon.

Such an abiding (*gnas*) can be within apparently “empty” three-dimensional space, at a fixed geographical location, or within a specific structure or object. In this aspect, *gnas* are attributed a subtle level of reality, claimed to be apparent only to the most spiritually refined persons. But the deity or spirit of a *gnas* is also commonly thought of as embodied, and therefore apparent, in the actual form of physical landscapes and objects, or their substances and materials. Thus, *gnas* may be externally “read” by all interpreters, and a range of physical contacts with them are possible and desirable (Huber, 1999b: 14).

The concepts of both circumambulation of and direct encounter with an “abode” is directly derived from the Indian ritual models of *pradakṣiṇā*²⁴ and *darśana*²⁵, since *gnas* receive a status and a treatment comparable to those accorded to sites associated with the Buddha in Indian Buddhism (Huber, 2008: 60-61). The orthodox representation of pilgrimage heavily relies on classical concepts of *karma* and merit (Tib. *bsod nams*; Skt. *punya*). In this view, a ritual journey results in the accumulation of merit – necessary for a future rebirth on a higher level of cyclic existence (Skt. *saṃsāra*) – and prepares the individual for the ultimate liberation (Skt. *nirvāṇa*) (Huber, 1999b: 12).

At a pilgrimage site, the sacred object and its actual physical surroundings relate synecdochically with the moral and supernatural virtues of the enlightened being associated with them. A *gnas* is considered to be a source of “sacred energy” or “empowerment” (Tib. *byin rlabs*), a concept popularly understood as a “field of power” created by the emanations, in space

²⁴ Ritual circumambulation from left to right of a person or object.

²⁵ It refers to the visual perception of the sacred, the act of seeing and being seen by the deity.

and time, of the deity's energy (Huber, 1999: 15). Power in various forms is exchanged, not only symbolically but substantially. *Byin rlabs* is transferred continuously through contact (Huber, 1999b: 61); spots in the physical environment, the ontological essence of which has been modified by *byin rlabs*, become in turn sources of empowerment. The desire to be blessed leads pilgrims to collect and carry away the substances found at the holy place, such as stones, water, earth or talismans, thus fostering an exchange economy where individual lamas and representatives of monastic communities supply empowered items to pilgrims in return for donations (Huber, 1999b: 15; Huber, 2008: 61).

The economic impact of pilgrimages, especially along the route connecting the provinces of western Tibet to Lhasa and Nepal, should not be overlooked (Buffetrille, 2003: 327). Since economic and socio-economic transactions are an essential feature of the complex system of pilgrimage, no study of the ritual and cosmological aspects of this ritual activity can disregard the economic side of it (McCorriston, 2011: 28; Mack, 2010). Money, tea, and

scarves were donated to monks in exchange for blessing, initiations, medical pills, food and lodging. Ritual “souvenirs” were actively sought and collected in order to be shown and possibly shared with those who did not or could not make the journey, thus extending the impact of the pilgrimage to others (Mack, 2010).

Lhasa was – and still is – a supreme focus of Tibetan pilgrimage, the hub of a pilgrimage network whose routes extended throughout Tibet and well beyond its geographical and cultural boundaries. Moreover, Tibetans had for centuries ventured into the Kathmandu valley, especially during wintertime, for trading and pilgrimage, but in the early 20th century, journeys to places outside the Tibetan cultural sphere of influence, in particular India, became more and more frequent (van Spengen, 1998: 43). During the 11th and 12th centuries, early Buddhist travellers moved from Tibet to India, driven by the desire to study and receive teachings from Indian gurus as well as to perform rituals and pay homage to the great Buddhist holy sites. They became known as the “translators” (Tib. *lo tsa ba*), and were retrospectively considered to be the

founders of the newly emerging Tibetan Buddhist lineages. The accounts of these early Tibetan pilgrims usually take the form of *rnam thar*, which, as we have already seen, only occasionally provide detailed information about itineraries, dates and duration of travel; more often than not, the eulogistic and didactic nature of these “life-stories” overshadows their historical accuracy (Huber, 2008: 59-64).

The existence of several indigenous designations for texts ascribable to the category of pilgrimage literature raises the question of their characteristic or “prototypical” features. In his essay on the religious geography of Tibet, Wylie (1962: 18) divides geographical literature into four categories: *dkar chag*, *lam yig* (“travel guide”), *gnas bshad* (“guide-book”), and *go la’i kha byang* (“global description”). Albeit published more than fifty years ago, Wylie’s categorisation is still a valuable although intuitive system of reference to navigate the textual corpus of pilgrimage literature, and for the sake of convenience, I have opted for a partial adoption of his suggested taxonomy. Out of the four categories, in fact, only the category *go la’i kha byang* cannot be understood as pilgrimage

literature and its features are therefore beyond the scope of the present discussion.²⁶ The other types of pilgrimage literature – *dkar chag*, *lam yig*, and *gnas bshad* or *gnas yig* – will be discussed in the following sections to map out the literary background of the text that is the focus of this dissertation, *i.e.* Kha stag 'Dzam yag's *nyin deb*.

1.2.1. *dkar chag*

A useful and rather reliable source of historical and geographical information are the so called “catalogues”, “inventories”, or “tables of contents” (Tib. *dkar chag*), “texts describing the construction and/or content of items which the Tibetan Buddhist traditions consider holy and capable of bestowing

²⁶ The *go la'i kha byang* (“global descriptions”) are works concerning, as the designation suggests, general geography. To the best of my knowledge, only two texts belong to this category, *i.e.* the *'Dzam gling spyi bshad* (“General Description of Jambudvīpa”) and the *'Dzam gling rgyas bshad* (“Detailed Description of Jambudvīpa”). The first was written in 1777 by Sum pa mkhan po Ye shes dpal 'byor, and its geographical content is limited to the author's knowledge of the world, with one-third of the work exclusively dedicated to India. The second global description, compiled in 1820 by sMin grol sprul sku 'Jam dpal chos kyi bstan 'dzin 'phrin las (1789-1839), is the only work presenting a geography of Tibet, and partly of India, based on Tibetan notions, with many historical references and local legends scattered within it. Unfortunately, in its remaining part, the *'Dzam gling rgyas bshad* proves to be much less informative; in dealing with descriptions of the western world, the author heavily relies on Russian and Chinese sources, as is clearly shown by the untranslated toponyms, and where no reports were available, he resorts to fantastic accounts and rumours (Vostrikov, 1970: 229-230). On the *'Dzam gling rgyas bshad* and its author, see Lobsang Yongdan (2011).

blessings (Tib. *byin rlabs*)” (Martin, 1996: 504). This category includes a variety of texts, the majority of which are simple indexes of collected works (Tib. *gsung ’bum*) or other multivolume written works. Nevertheless, quite a few texts labelled as *dkar chag* have a different nature, being eulogies and inventories of monasteries and shrines, written for visitors and pilgrims (Martin, 1996: 502-503; Tucci, 1949: 153). Due to their content, the value of the latter type of *dkar chag* is mostly historical rather than geographical; usually consisting of a list of the objects found inside a sacred structure or building, *e.g.* statues, *stūpas*, and shrines, these works may include more extensive historical accounts, thus providing information on the establishment of the site and even on the development of local cults (Vostrikov, 1970: 217).

One of the most renowned and celebrated examples of *dkar chag* is undoubtedly the *Lha Idan sprul ba’i gtsug lag khang gi dkar chag shel dkar me long* (“The Crystal Mirror Catalogue of the Emanated Temple of Lha Idan [*i.e.* Lhasa]”). Composed in 1645 by the Fifth Dalai Lama, Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho, it narrates in verse the history of the Jo khang, the main temple of

Lhasa, each verse being followed by an accurate explanation of the same theme in prose. It also presents a compilation of the holy objects contained in this temple (Vostrikov, 1970: 222; Martin, 1996: 504). Referred to as *rten*, “receptacles”, these objects of faith are conventionally divided into *sku rten* or “body receptacle”, *i.e.* icons of Buddhas and divine beings, *gsung rten* or “speech receptacle”, *i.e.* Buddhist scriptures, and *thugs rten* or “mind receptacle”, *i.e.* *stūpa* (Huber, 1999a: 82).

In their description of individual monasteries, some *dkar chag* provide a sketchy biography of their monastic heads, thus quite closely resembling in their subject matter the genealogies of abbots (Tib. *gdan rabs*) mentioned in relation to the *rnam thar*. This type of *dkar chag* is nevertheless quite rare; the historical section is generally limited to the description and glorification of a particular object with no mention of the succession of abbots (Vostrikov, 1970: 219-221).

From a literary point of view, the style and the composition of the *dkar chag* are often unassuming; compiled to provide an easy reading matter to a

varied and not always well educated audience, their language is usually plain and devoid of literary embellishments (Tucci, 1949: 153).

1.2.2. *Lam yig*

As we have seen, the eulogistic nature and often standardized form of a *dkar chag* often prevail over the geographical and historical details, yet other texts, *e.g. lam yig* and *gnas bshad*, although providing a greater amount of information, are, as Tucci complains, “far from the exactness which we admire in the writings of the Chinese travellers” (1940: 26). The Italian scholar laments the presence of “a great deal of legendary and fantastic elements”, weighing down the narrative and making the itinerary itself hard to “be followed from one place to another”; the lack of criteria with regard to the order in which the toponyms are listed;²⁷ and the system followed for indicating the direction taken,²⁸ and for recording distances.²⁹

²⁷ “In some cases the places are mentioned one after another; in other cases our pilgrims seems to forget the intermediate halts and record only the starting-point and the place of arrival” (Tucci, 1940: 26).

²⁸ “Rarely given and even when noted it cannot claim to be always exact” (ibid.).

²⁹ “Never registered except in days: but [...] we do not exactly know the average length of their marches” (ibid.).

Tucci's dissatisfaction with the vagueness of Tibetan travel accounts reflects the difficulties of applying a Western approach to the analysis of a non-Western literature. There is always the risk of being ruled by our own assumptions, a general belief that the content of the text will fit perfectly with our own ideas and expectations. It should be borne in mind, however, that "the main purpose of these authors was less to deliver accurate route descriptions than to instill devotion in their readers through the depiction of the wondrous places they visited" (Ramble, 2014: 185).

The travel accounts Tucci's critique refers to belong to the category of *lam yig*, one of the most interesting examples of pilgrimage literature, being itineraries written by pilgrims for pilgrims. Despite being all narrations of a religious travel, the character of the journey these "travel guides" report may differ significantly. While some of them deliver straightforward information on routes open to ordinary travellers, others are specifically addressed to tantric adepts (Skt. *siddhas*), the latter being the only ones in possession of the supernatural powers necessary for reaching that particular destination.

The Tibetan literary corpus abounds in examples of *lam yig*, but here I will limit myself to itineraries dedicated to two particular locations, *i.e.* Shambhala and Uḍḍiyāna (Tib. U rgyan), places that – whether real of imagined – deeply influenced both tantric and pilgrimage literature of Tibet. Tucci's (1940: 1) identification of Uḍḍiyāna with the Swāt valley has been for a long time taken for granted by the academic world. In the early 1990s, the inconclusive results of archeological investigations conducted in Swāt encouraged a more cautious approach, and the discrepancies shown by archeological and art-historical researches have supported the suggestion of stretching the concept of Uḍḍiyāna beyond the geographical boundaries of the Swāt valley.

The concept of a greater Uḍḍiyāna does not affect its historical existence and, even more significantly, its relationships with the Tibetan plateau. While Uḍḍiyāna was fairly well-known and at least two *lam yig*³⁰ have

³⁰ Namely, U rgyan pa's *lam yig* (13th century) and sTag tshang ras pa's *lam yig* (17th century). U rgyan pa Rin chen dpal's travel to West Tibet and U rgyan (Uḍḍiyāna) has been object of study by Tucci (1940: 10-12) in his work on Tibetan pilgrims in the Swāt valley, but, as Li (2011: 144) points out, "the overall picture of his entire journey is still blurred". Details regarding his travel can be obtained through the comparisons of different biographies, and the manuscript

been compiled about the journey to U rgyan, *i.e.* the Swāt valley, the same cannot be said about Shambhala. Conjectures concerning the historical existence of Shambhala were advanced by Tucci (1940: 3) in his study on the travel accounts of Tibetan pilgrims in the Swāt valley. The Italian scholar ascribes the causes of the lack of historical itineraries to a late popular development of the mystical significance of Shambhala, possibly in a period when the contacts with the country had already come to an end, and the only information Tibetans could rely on came from the early commentators of the *Kālacakratāntra* corpus.³¹ Tucci's hypotheses, lacking substantial evidence,

presented by Tucci looks, in this regard, particularly interesting, due to its apparent lack of literary pretensions. Despite the presence of a great deal of legends, the biography presents an itinerary that can be quite easily followed, from Tibet to Jalandhara, then to India, the Indus, the Swāt valley, the sacred mountain of Ilam, and then back to Kashmir through the Hazara district. At the time of U rgyan pa's visit (mid-13th century), Buddhism had lost its vital force in India due to the expansion of Islam, and therefore these biographies provide valuable data on the Himalayan countries and their history and ethnology. For a short life-story of U rgyan pa, see Roerich (1949: 696; 700-705); on sTag tshang ras pa, see Schwieger (1996).

³¹ The more influential of these first commentaries on the *Kālacakratāntrarāja* and *Vimalaprabhā* are undoubtedly those of Bu ston Rin chen grub (1290-1364). Given the corrupted and cryptic nature of the original Sanskrit and the sometimes unclear characters of the Tibetan translations, Bu ston's comments eased their comprehension and greatly influenced later authors' interpretations (Bernbaum, 1985: 28-29). For a study of the *Kālacakratāntra*, Shambhala, and the *Vimalaprabhā*, see Hammar (2005).

have been progressively abandoned in favour of a more cautious approach,³² promoting the traditional Tibetan concept of Shambhala as a pure land in the human realm, only attainable to those who have accumulated merits and appropriate karmic associations.

According to the *Śrī Kālacakra* and the *Vimalaprabhā* – the basic texts of the *Kālacakra* system – the Buddha taught the *Kālacakratāntra* at Śrī Dhānyakaṭaka,³³ conventionally considered the site of the first preaching of the *Vajrayāna*. The *Kālacakratāntra* was then brought to Shambhala by its *dharma* king, Sucandra, and there preserved and propagated for centuries before being reintroduced to India, and subsequently, to Tibet (Newman, 1987: 70-71; 74-75).

³² On the ongoing discussion regarding a possible historical existence of Shambhala at the time of the composition of the Sanskrit *Kālacakra* system (11th century), see Newman (1991: 83, n.4). For a more general discussion on the origin of the myth of Shambhala and its development, see Bernbaum (1980).

³³ According to the *Kālacakra* tradition, the first teaching of the *Kālacakratāntra* took place at the great *stūpa* of Dhānyakaṭaka, a notable Mahāyāna centre located in the vicinity of the present-day village of Amarāvatī in Guntur District, Andhra Pradesh (Wallace, 2001: 3).

The earliest datable Tibetan itinerary to the land of Shambhala is Man lung gu ru's³⁴ *Sham bha la pa'i lam yig*, embedded in the fourth chapter (ff. 15a-17b1) of the *rMi lam rdzun bshad sgyu ma'i sgra dbyangs chen mo* ("The Great Song of the Deceptive Dream-Like Illusion").³⁵ In a pragmatic fashion, the author of the *lam yig* presents two different routes to Shambhala, depending on whether the traveller sets off on his journey from Nepal or from Central Tibet. Man lung gu ru polemically lays claim to the authenticity of his narrative, directly accusing the Sa skya hierarch 'Phags pa of having created a forged account of Shambhala with the intent of deceiving the Mongol emperor.³⁶ Despite having been heavily influenced by the *Kālacakra* literature, Man lung gu ru's *Sham bha la pa'i lam yig* does not describe any supernatural obstacles

³⁴ *The Blue Annals* states that Man lungs pa was born in 1239, and went to Potala in 1300 (Roerich, 1974: 790-791).

³⁵ A manuscript of the text was discovered by Bernbaum and ascribed by the scholar to Man lung gu ru (1985: 37-38); the attribution of the entire work to the latter appears to be problematic though, as noted by Newman, for whom only the *Sham ba la pa'i lam yig* could be ascribed with certainty to Man lung gu ru, while the rest of the manuscript remains anonymous and possibly the work of a redactor (1996: 488).

³⁶ It is worth mentioning at this point the *sDom pa gsum gyi rab tu dbye ba*, a history written by 'Phags pa's uncle, Sa skya Paṇḍita Kun dga' rgyal mtshan, including a brief reference to Shambhala and its location in a discussion of the cosmographies of the *Kālacakra* and *Abhidharma* (Bernbaum, 1985: 30).

to the ordinary traveller; the mythical land appears to be accessible to anyone who could afford enough pack-horses and provisions (Newman, 1996:488).³⁷

Very different is the case of another Shambhala *lam yig*, the *Grub pa'i gnas chen po sham bha la'i nam bshad 'phags yul kyi rtogs brjod dang bcas pa ngo mtshar bye ba'i 'byung gnas*, better known by the abbreviated title *Sham bha la'i lam yig*, written by the 3rd Panchen Lama,³⁸ Blo bzang dpal Idan ye shes in 1775. In the composition of his “travel guide”, the author draws extensively from a previous work³⁹ describing the route to Kalāpa, the capital of Shambhala (Newman, 1996: 489). Divided into two sections, this *lam yig* is more than a simple itinerary; the first part is dedicated to a description and history of Jambudvīpa in general and India in particular, while the second deals with Shambhala proper. In the latter, Blo bzang dpal Idan ye shes indicates as

³⁷ The author states at the beginning of the text – and reiterates it at the end of each chapter – that the directions for his travel came from the magical illusion of a dream. It is partly on this basis that the 3rd Panchen Lama rejects Man lung gu ru's *lam yig*, expressing doubts as to the veracity of his journey, due to the lack of those supernatural requirements, *e.g.* magical powers and attainments, that the hierarch considers essential for reaching Shambhala (Bernbaum, 1985: 38).

³⁸ The enumeration system of the Panchen lineage here adopted is the one followed by the dGan Idan Pho brang. Blo bzang dpal Idan ye shes is the sixth reincarnation of the lineage, according to the bKra shis lhun po tradition.

³⁹ Namely the *Kalāpāvatāra*, translated from Sanskrit by Tāranātha (1575-1634).

his main source Ārya Amoghāṅkuśa's itinerary, *i.e.* the *Kalāpāvatāra*, dismissing Man lung gu ru's *lam yig* as unreliable. Interestingly, when it comes to the actual description of the kingdom of Shambhala, the author drops the *Kalāpāvatāra*, relying instead on other texts, such as the *Kālacakratāntra* and the *Vimalaprabhā*. He also mentions consulting foreigners about places on the way to Shambhala, probably referring to George Bogle, the British Ambassador to Tibet, who was hosted at the Panchen's court from 1774 to 1775, the same period during which he wrote his *lam yig* (Bernbaum, 1985: 43); as I will discuss in a more detailed fashion in Chapter Four, the Panchen's description of India was heavily influenced by the accounts of Bogle and his companion Hamilton as well as by the reports of pilgrims (Vostrikov, 1970: 232; Huber, 2008: 196-197).

In an adaptation of the spirit of the *Kalāpāvatāra*, Blo bzang dpal Idan ye shes instructs the pilgrims to meditate on their tutelary deity and examine their dreams until a sign of permission appears. Setting off without it would unleash the ire of *nāgas* and *yakṣas*, putting at risk the traveller's life. Hundreds of

thousands of *mantras* and rituals have to be performed in order to cut off all the obstructions coming from humans and non-humans (Bernbaum, 1985: 50-51).

Blo bzang dpal ldan ye shes's reasons to reject Man lung pa's guidebook to Shambhala as an authoritative source are based on what he considers to be a deceptive presentation of the journey itself; in his reasoning, Man lung gu ru's text implies that an ordinary person can go to Shambhala, while only an advanced practitioner endowed with supernatural power can hope to reach the kingdom. It is clear that Blo bzang dpal ldan ye shes is associating the journey to Shambhala with the practice of *sādhana*⁴⁰ leading to the ultimate goal of enlightenment (Bernbaum, 1985: 241).

When it comes to the actual description of the region of Kalāpa, the capital of Shambhala, the 3rd Panchen omits entire portions of the *Kalāpāvatāra*. As Bernbaum points out (1985: 81), Blo bzang dpal ldan ye shes

⁴⁰ Both the *Kalāpāvatāra* and the *Sham bha la'i lam yig* present a juxtaposition of the journey to Shambhala with the performance of a *sādhana* (a means or way of accomplishing a goal, either mundane or spiritual). In the *Sham bha la'i lam yig*, the mythical kingdom is described as a *grub pa'i gnas chen po*, meaning either "the great place of accomplishment" or "the great place of those who are accomplished", thus equating the end of the journey to Shambhala with the attainment of a *sādhana* (Bernbaum, 1985: 233).

adopts almost exclusively the prose sections of the *Kalāpāvatāra*, excluding nearly all the parts in verse.

The hierarch's interest clearly lies in presenting a spiritual rather than physical route to Shambhala; contrary to Man lung gu ru, Blo bzang dpal ldan ye shes discourages common people from embarking on the journey, possibly to protect the "sacred utopia [of Shambhala] with a veil of magic" (Newman, 1996: 492). By the end of the 18th century, in fact, Tibetans had become more familiar with the geography of the Turkish and Mongol regions; the belief in the existence of a vast Buddhist empire stretching beyond their northwestern borders gradually disappeared from the collective imagination. The realisation that Shambhala was nothing more than a wasteland sparsely inhabited by nomads had the potential to undermine the prestige of the 3rd Panchen Lama himself; it was therefore in the interest of Blo bzang dpal ye shes, in his role of "pre-incarnation" of the prophesied king of Shambhala, to dismiss Man lung gu ru's account as false, thus preserving his own future role in the Buddhist apocalypse (Newman, 1996: 492).

Man lung gu ru's and Blo bzang dpal ye shes' *lam yig* are, in my opinion, a perfect example of the two different kinds of "travel guides" I have mentioned at the beginning of the present paragraph; while the first claims to present routes viable to the ordinary traveller, the second is strictly addressed to tantric adepts, the only ones to possess the necessary skills to reach the final destination.

1.2.3. *gNas yig* and *gNas bshad*

Another category of texts described by Wylie (1962: 18) in his attempt to provide a taxonomy of Tibetan geographical literature is that of the *gnas bshad* ("guidebooks"), also referred to as *gnas yig*. Similarly to the *dkar chag*, these works aim at glorifying a particular holy place – whether it be a monastery, a shrine or an entire region – and may therefore contain portrayals of the most illustrious personages connected to the *gnas* as well as accurate descriptions of its architectural and/or environmental characteristics (Vostrikov, 1970: 228). Despite varying in form, style, and content, all *gnas bshad* present a few common features that can be considered typical of the category. They are

compilations of a range of materials, including cosmology, travel instructions, local legends and songs, or personal anecdotes. Like the *dkar chag*, many *gnas bshad* have a strong eulogistic/didactic purpose;⁴¹ they celebrate and advertise specific holy places with the intent of inducing and shaping certain responses from those who consult them, *i.e.* the pilgrims. The oral dimension plays a fundamental role in the circulation of these texts and may be considered as one of the reasons for their popularity among Tibetans; local oral narratives are collected and systematised in written texts, the contents of which are publicly repeated by lamas, shrine-keepers, and local residents (Huber, 1997a:120), in a cyclic process of orality-literacy-oral performance in which the original oral information – reinterpreted in accordance to the view of the author – is delivered to a varied and often partly illiterate audience.

The didactic and eulogistic nature of *gnas yig* plays a fundamental role in the process of negotiation, interpretation and appreciation of the virtues of the holy places visited by pilgrims during their ritual journey (Huber, 1999b: 58);

⁴¹ It is worth stressing that not all *gnas bshad* share the same eulogistic character, *e.g.* mKhyen brtse's *dBus gtsang gnas yig*. The narrative of the famous guide to the sacred places of central Tibet is rather brief and matter of fact. See Ferrari et al. (1958).

without guidance, the pilgrimage itself would be meaningless (Huber, 1999b: 58). In describing and giving sense to the different physical features of the surrounding environment, the guidebooks recreate the stage trodden by deities and holy men, allowing the traveller to reenact their roles (Huber, 1997a: 121).

A *gnas bshad* can be considered, as suggested by Huber (1999b: 60; 71), a “textual map” that provides immediate ways of relating to landscapes and places, delivering information on cosmology, genealogy, history, social relations as well as on geography and topography.⁴²

The *La phyi gnas yig* (“Guidebook to La phyi”)⁴³ can be considered an exemplification of this subgenre. Composed by the Buddhist monk bsTan ’dzin chos kyi blo gros after a pilgrimage in the area of La phyi in 1901, this guidebook narrates the mythological events that transformed the place –

⁴² Graphic representations of Buddha-fields, *sbas yul* (“hidden lands”), or other holy environments, became fully developed in the late 18th century, due to the influence of Chinese landscape painting. These works enjoyed the special status of *sten* and were employed as support for meditative practices. They express the way Tibetans related to the surrounding landscape in terms of sacred geography, and were never meant to be used as means to negotiate a mundane space. Maps showing a new perspectival approach to the landscape made their first appearance only in the 19th century. These few more recent examples, despite retaining a unique Tibetan system of projection and spatial reference, were heavily influenced by the exposure to Western-style cartography (Huber, 1999b: 59).

⁴³ For a study and English translation of the *La phyi gnas yig*, see Huber (1997b; 2006).

located on the border between Nepal and the Tibetan Autonomous Region – into an empowered landscape.⁴⁴ The opening account of the subjugation of the Indian god Rudra by Buddha Vajradhara represents the ideological power struggle between Indian Tantric Buddhism and other Indian and indigenous belief systems. The initial spatial setting for the subjugation of Rudra is the southern cosmic continent of Jambudvīpa, but as the story goes on, the action is restricted to La phyi itself, identified with one of the eight sites on the celestial plane of Heruka's⁴⁵ *maṇḍala*. Even though the triumph over Rudra determines the empowerment of La phyi and its transformation into a Buddhist psycho-cosmogram, it is only through Mi la ras pa's magical abilities that the land is finally "opened" to ordinary human beings. The descriptions of the traces left by the yogin help the pilgrims to relate to the surrounding environment, enabling them to recognize and interpret the features of the landscape as a product of meditative practices and magical displays of power (Huber, 1997a: 123-124).

⁴⁴ La phyi, Ti se, *i.e.* Kailash, and Tsa ri form a well-known trio of holy mountain pilgrimage venues. The association of the area with two interrelated cults, those of the Buddhist Tantric cycle of *Cakrasaṃvara* and the popular Tibetan saint Mi la ras pa (1040-1123), makes La phyi a desirable destination for Tantric adepts and lay practitioners alike (Huber, 1997b: 234).

⁴⁵ Heruka (or Saṃvara) is one of the emanations of Buddha Vajradhara (Huber, 1997a: 123).

The *La phyi gnas yig* exemplifies the negotiating function of these texts; as previously mentioned, the *gnas yig* provide a narrative of the dynamics between supernatural powers as they have developed in time and space – a “textual map” for the pilgrim to safely navigate the surrounding environment and interact with it (Huber 1999b: 71).

1.3. Tantric Literature and “Hidden Lands”

In a discussion dominated by grey areas and fuzzy boundaries, drawing a clear-cut distinction between the representations of sacred geography in pilgrimage literature vs Tantric literature appears a difficult and inconclusive task. As the previous paragraphs have shown, the auto/biographical and geographical “genres” within the corpus of Tibetan pilgrimage literature are mostly involved with places, objects, structures considered by the Tibetans as “abodes” (Tib. *gnas*) of supernatural powers, and as such, focus of interest of a series of cults and rituals.

The transfer of sacred geography and pilgrimage traditions from India to Tibet that took place during the 12th and 13th centuries was heavily shaped by

both Indian and Tibetan Tantrists. The relocation of holy sites onto the plateau became an important part in the process of Buddhisation of Tibet. During the *phyi dar*, the *Yoganiruttaratantra* was introduced and widespread in Tibet by native masters, e.g. 'Broḡ mi (992-1024), Mar pa (1012-1096), Rwa Lo tsā ba (1016-1128) and others, who paid visits to Indian yogins and scholars in order to obtain uncorrupted *Yoganiruttara* lineages (Huber, 2003: 394-395).

During this early period specific Indian holy places were transposed to Tibet, and the legitimacy of the process did not go unquestioned. Sa skya Paṇḡita Kun dga' rgyal mtshan (1182-1251), in his 1232 *sDom gsum rab dbye* ("Discrimination of the Three Vows"), overtly criticises the way in which Buddhist Tantras were interpreted and practised, doubting the applicability of the transposition of Indian holy places to the Tibetan plateau (Huber, 2003: 395-398).⁴⁶

⁴⁶ The legitimization process of the Tibetan locations of the twenty-four sacred places (Skr. *pīṭha*) plays an important part in the Tibetan pilgrimage tradition. Generally speaking, the bKa' brgyud pa and later the dGe lugs pa, both practising the *Samvara* cycle, patronise sites connected to it, such as Ti se, Tsa ri, and La phyi. The Sa skya pa, who also perform rituals connected to the *Samvara* cycle, have long refuted the locations of the twenty-four *pīṭha* in Tibet. Sa skya Paṇḡita's rejection of a superimposition of Indian holy sites to the Tibetan plateau, as

Sa skya Paṇ chen's remarks represent the dynamics of the period, when "the intentions of Buddhisation to introduce and to adapt Indian cult practices to existing Tibetan ones, and the concern to establish Buddhism following strict rational criteria were necessarily going to conflict with each other" (Huber, 2003: 399).

Calling into question the authenticity and legitimacy of pilgrimage practices at indigenous mountain sites, Sa skya Paṇ chen and his followers attracted attention to the problematic issue of transferring the sacred places of Indian cosmography to the Tibetan plateau, thus potentially challenging the expansion of the bKa' brgyud pa lineage, whose branches were heavily committed to ritual pilgrimages to holy mountains, especially Tsa ri, Ti se, and La phyi (Huber, 2003: 400). From the 15th century onwards, bKa' brgyud pa scholars addressed the contents of the *sDom gsum rab dbye*, usually avoiding

expressed in his *sDom gsum rab dbye*, has been endorsed by later Sa skya pa commentaries on Tibetan religious geography (Huber, 1997b: 274). On Sa skya Paṇ chen's refutation of Mt. Ti se as a legitimate site of Buddhist pilgrimage and 'Dzam yag's stance on the matter, see Chapter Four, 1.1.4.1., pp. 271-289.

the doctrinal concerns raised by the Sa skya scholars by dealing with the geographical and cosmographical details of the sites in question.

The distinction between Tantric and ordinary pilgrims, already present in Indian Buddhism and later adapted to the Tibetan context, allows one to distinguish between “wandering” (Tib. *rgyu ba*) and “circumambulating” (Tib. *skor ba*). While the latter is the typical form of pilgrimage worship, “wandering” is an activity performed by Tantric specialists, yogins whose powers (Skt. *siddhi*) allow them to “open” the “hidden lands” (Tib. *sbas yul*), holy places inaccessible to human beings (Huber, 2003: 406).⁴⁷

As thousands of other ordinary pilgrims, or “circumambulators” (Tib. *gnas skor ba*), the author of the *nyin deb* visited the holy places of Buddhism to benefit from the blessing power (Tib. *byin rlabs*) accumulated at those places by the activities of élite Tantra practitioners, the “wanderers” (Huber, 2004: 406).

⁴⁷ *sBas yul* are described in traditional narratives as earthly paradises, resembling the Pure Lands of Mahāyāna tradition. The itineraries toward a *sbas yul*, such as the aforementioned *Sham bha la'i lam yig*, despite providing detailed descriptions of the physical features of the “hidden land” as well as information on its inhabitants, are not meant to be used by common travellers.

1.4. Travelogues

The types of geographical literature examined so far mostly appeal to future travellers, providing them either with routes and textual maps, *i.e.* traditional Tibetan itineraries (Tib. *lam yig*) and guidebooks (Tib. *gnas yig*), or detailed descriptions of a specific place, *i.e.* “inventories” (Tib. *dkar chag*).

According to Western literary criteria, travelogues fulfill a different function, for they speak to people’s thirst for exoticism, leading its readers to a journey that is mental rather than physical. As such, travel books are often conceived as “a sub-species of memoir in which the autobiographical narrative arises from the speaker’s encounter with distant and unfamiliar data, and in which the narrative – unlike that in a novel or a romance – claims validity by constant reference to actuality” (Roberson, 2001: 106).

Talking about travelogues within the Tibetan literary tradition is not an easy task and it seems fair to argue that an equivalent to the Western concept of travel book may be found at the intersection of different categories, especially in those “grey areas” where *nam thar* and *lam yig* overlap. Some

Tibetan itineraries (Tib. *lam yig*) also bear the word *nam thar* in their title, almost in acknowledgement of the influence that a journey has on the author's life – in this sense, a travelogue is concurrently a partial autobiography. In support of this theory, I will discuss five works that, despite being conventionally recognized as *nam thar*, present some of the aspects typical of a travelogue, *i.e.* Chag lo tsā ba Chos rje dpal bzang po's biography (Tib. *Chag lo tsā ba Chos rje dpal bzang po'i nam thar*), U rgyan pa's journey to West Tibet and U rgyan, 'Jigs med gling pa's *Lho phyogs rgya gar gyi gtam* ("Discourse on India to the South"), and two itineraries, *i.e.* Khyung sprul 'Jigs med nam mkha'i rdo rje's and Sangs rgyas bzang po's; albeit sharing a similar contents, these accounts of the travel experiences of Tibetans in India have different function and style.

The biography of Chag lo tsā ba Chos rje dpal bzang po, also known as Dharmasvāmin the translator (Tib. *lo tsā ba*) (1197-1264), was written by his biographer and disciple Chos dpal dar byang, being dictated by the master himself, and may be considered as an eyewitness' account of the incidents and

circumstances reported in the narrative (Altekar, 1959: i). Having completed his education in Tibet, in 1226, at the age of 29, Dharmasvāmin headed for Nepal, at the time a famous centre for the study of Buddhism. Twelve years later, he decided to set off in the direction of Bihar, despite the attempts to dissuade him made by his advisers, concerned about the unstable situation caused by the Muslim invasion. In the 13th century, the flow of Tibetan pilgrims and scholars to India was severely affected by the blocking of the pilgrimage routes between Bodh Gayā, Nālandā, and Vikramaśīlā, and few were brave enough to risk the trip. Dharmasvāmin proved to be one of them when, unmoved by reports of brigands, wild animals, and Muslim soldiers, started his journey alone in 1234 (Altekar, 1959: iv-v).

Devotion was not the only reason moving these earlier pilgrims; Dharmasvāmin, for example, was determined to find the Indian equivalent of specific texts, both *gter ma*⁴⁸ and Tibetan translations from Sanskrit, in order to

⁴⁸ Lit. “treasure”, the term *gter ma* indicates teachings and objects concealed at the time of the Indian Buddhist master and tantric practitioner Padmasambhava (Tib. Padma 'byung gnas) and destined to be retrieved only by special adepts, the *gter ston*. On the *gter ma* tradition, see, among others, Blondeau (1980), Gyatso (1986; 1993; 1996), Davidson (2005: 210-243).

ascertain their authenticity. Behind the *lo tsā ba*'s investigation, there was a specific agenda; by critically challenging the legitimacy of certain texts, he was implicitly questioning the credibility of the newly formed lineages that claimed those texts as having Indian origin (Huber, 2008: 66-67).

Dharmasvāmin's account of his journey to India calls for a comparison with two other well-known travelogues, namely Fǎxiǎn's "Record of Buddhist Kingdoms" and Xuánzàng's "Record of the Western Regions Visited during the Great Tang Dynasty". Written centuries before Dharmasvāmin's account, both Chinese travel books exhibit a first-person narrative, rich in details and personal observations, especially in connection with a visit to a holy site.⁴⁹ Modern scholars have hastily labelled these early travellers as a "pilgrims", a term the accuracy of which appears questionable. Victor and Edith Turner

⁴⁹ Written in the early 5th century, Fǎxiǎn's "Record of Buddhist Kingdoms" documents the author's thirteen-year-long journey across many states of Central and Southeast Asia, in search of the complete *Vinaya Piṭaka* to bring back to China (Tian 2011: 90). Composed two centuries later, Xuánzàng's "Record of the Western Regions Visited during the Great Tang Dynasty" is a historical record of the foreign states and societies neighbouring Tang China. In his interactions with local rulers, he offers the modern scholar not only the impressions of a Chinese pilgrim, but also a rare glimpse into Indian perceptions and knowledge of China in the 7th century (Sen, 2006: 28-30). On Xuánzàng's "Record" and its Western (mis)interpretation, see Deeg (2012).

(2001: 8) define pilgrimage as an “inward movement of the heart”, its goal being the spiritual – and sometimes physical – transformation of the pilgrim. In Fǎxiǎn’s case – but also in Dharmasvāmin’s and Xuánzàng’s – the travel is a quest for books and not a pilgrimage; his sojourn in Magadha, “the centre of the Buddhist holy land” (Huber, 2008: 77), was accidental rather than planned. As I will discuss in Chapter Four, similar questions arise concerning the motivation behind many of the religious visits made by ’Dzam yag between 1944 and 1952; albeit presented by the author as “pilgrimages”, these trips were indeed incidental outcomes of previous business arrangements.

Even though the second work I am presenting in relation to travel accounts of Tibetans in India, *i.e.* ’Jigs med gling pa’s *Lho phyogs rgya gar gyi gtam*, is not, strictly speaking, a travelogue, its narrative format – a feature peculiar to travel books – would seem to be a sufficient reason for its loose inclusion within the “genre”. ’Jigs med gling pa’s aim is, in fact, not to provide a guidebook or an itinerary, but to describe a land as he envisioned it through the account of his disciple, Byang chub rgyal mtshan. The latter was born in 1717 in the Wang district of western Bhutan, and, after being conscripted as a lay

servitor, rose through the ranks to occupy the position of *sha gnyer*, keeper of the meat store. Unable to tolerate a work that was in his eyes repulsive, he fled to Tibet and joined the rNying ma community at sMin grol gling, where he met his future master 'Jigs med gling pa. On returning to Bhutan, Byang chub rgyal mtshan founded a new community in the sTang valley of Bum thang modelled on the reformulated rDzogs chen teachings received by his master. In 1775, Byang chub rgyal mtshan worked for three years as an emissary to the East India Company in Calcutta, directly to the British governor, Hastings, probably on a Bhutanese government commission to raise the issue of Kūch Bihār.⁵⁰ While the parties were struggling to bring the ratification of the treaty toward a speedy and satisfactory conclusion, Byang chub rgyal mtshan had the opportunity to travel around the area of Calcutta, absorbing the foreign customs

⁵⁰ In 1765, when the East Indian Company was taking control over Bengal, Bhutan claimed its right to determine the succession to the throne of Kūch Bihār, its southern neighbour in the northern Bengal plains. In 1771, the abduction of the Rāja of Kūch Bihār provoked the swift reaction of the British; the East Indian Company agreed to force the Bhutanese army out of the small kingdom, in exchange for the perpetual control of the state, half of its annual income, and a refund of the military expenses. Nepal, alarmed by the presence of a British army at its borders, sought the intervention of the 3rd Panchen Lama, in defense of the Bhutanese. In answer to the hierarch's intercession, Warren Hastings agreed to sign a more lenient treaty, in exchange for direct communications with the new ruler of Bhutan and the Panchen himself (Aris, 1995: 2-3).

and formulating those impressions upon which 'Jigs med gling pa built his

Discourse (Aris, 1995: 8-9).

The reliability of this work is sometimes questionable. As Huber (2008: 191) states about the account of a misplaced Vajrāsana offered by 'Jigs med gling pa,

[A]ll the evidence indicates that the description offered above [...] actually refers to the thriving eighteenth-century Hindu pilgrim town of Gayā, and not to Bodh Gayā at all. There were, moreover, further Tibetan candidates for the location of Vajrāsana at the time, and these were also based upon speculation, misinterpretations, and misinformation. All such accounts certainly demonstrate the poor quality and sheer unreliability of information that eighteenth-century Tibetans were receiving about India and its ancient Buddhist sites.

The accuracy of the information delivered by 'Jigs med gling pa's *Discourse* does not affect, however, the value of the work as a source of knowledge about Tibetan attitudes toward foreign lands in general and India in particular (Aris, 1992: 3-11; Aris, 1995: 1). As William Zinsser (2012: 105) says, "[W]hat raises travel writing to literature is not what the writer brings to the

place, but what the place draws out of the writer”, a statement that remains true even in the case of a second-hand account such as the *Discourse*.

Among the five works considered to be illustrative of Tibetan accounts of journeys to India, the itineraries presented in Khyung sprul 'Jigs med nam mkha'i rdo rje's (1897-1956) and Sangs rgyas bzang po's (b. 1894) *rnam thar* are undoubtedly the most relevant to the present discussion; due to their content and function however, I defer the contextualisation and analysis of their itinerary to the last section of the thesis, *i.e.* Chapter Four, which deals with the topic of pilgrimage. I will now continue my discussion of the concept of historical-geographical writing within Tibetan literature by introducing the text at the core of my dissertation, *i.e.* Kha stag 'Dzam yag's *nyin deb*,⁵¹ and examining it through the lense of narratology.

2. A Pilgrim's Diary

⁵¹ The text in question has been kindly brought to my attention by Professor Charles Ramble, the first to acknowledge its distinctive character in his article about Tibetan pilgrimage (2014), the only Western-language work that cites Kha stag 'Dzam yag's *nyin deb*.

The literary hybridity of 'Dzam yag's account may have found a satisfying categorisation in the prototypical "genre" of travel literature, yet questions arise concerning the editorial designation of the text as *nyin deb*, "diary".⁵² The work indeed presents some of the elements a scholar educated in Western literary studies would ascribe to the diaristic genre, *e.g.* a first-person narrator, a chronological narrative punctuated by dates, or an apparent absence of any intended readership. In being the private record of a life process, rather than the finished narrative about a life, the *nyin deb* is undoubtedly closer to a diary than an autobiography, albeit without the "confessional" nature usually associated with the diarist genre. It is "analytical", to borrow Lejeune's words (2009: 71), in that it explains situations in such a way that they can be understood by oneself later on, but not "personal", since it does not put in the foreground the impulses of the soul. It is not surprising therefore to read in the

⁵² In consideration of the content and style of the text, the term *nyin deb* has been henceforth translated as "journal" rather than "diary". In Western literature, the presence of a gender-based bias has shaped the implicit assumption that, whilst journals fulfill some sort of public and educative function in a man's world, diaries are relegated to a private, personal, feminine sphere. For a discussion of journal and gender, see Gannett (1992). 'Dzam yag's *nyin deb* lacks, in my opinion, the intimate features generally ascribed in the Western mind to private diaries; furthermore, the careful annotation of donations, exchanges, sales, and purchases is a strong indicator of the accounting nature of the text, thus vouching for its double function as private journal and ledger, *i.e.* general journal. See also Chapter One, p. 23, fn 3.

very first page of the *nyin deb* that the reason for its existence was 'Dzam yag's desire to firmly fix into his mind the years spent travelling away from his ancestral land.

It has been said that the 'Dzam yag's account records the author's life process, but it does so in a retrospective manner. Whereas most diaries are composed by the subjects while their life is unfolding, and are therefore first and foremost an activity – a way of living before being a way of writing – the *nyin deb* is clearly a recollection of events that have already occurred. There is a certain distance, in time and in space, between the “narrating self” and the “narrated self”; the rhythm of the narrative fluctuates, into a succession of daily annotations and omissions, according to a system typical of a chronicle or account book, where the only date that counts is the date of the reported event rather than the date of writing. It is not unusual in fact that an enumeration of days follows a specific date, as if the author's memory worked backwards from one memorable event to another, filling in the time between the two with a list of toponyms and activities, thus transforming a physical journey into a mental

one. The author was certainly aided in this endeavour of memory recollection by other self-produced textual sources, *e.g.* personal notes, ledgers, and private letters, upon which he relied to reconstruct the past.⁵³

In spite of the pre-packaged label provided by the editors, the *nyin deb* is therefore anything but a simple text to categorise. Its hybrid character, in which features of the diary and autobiography merge to create a peculiar ego-document with clear claims to factuality and a distinct narrative structure, corroborates our understanding of the close relationship between Tibetan autobiographies (Tib. *rang nam*) and personal records. That the life writing impulse in Tibet reflects a long tradition of record-keeping is in fact a well-known fact;⁵⁴ in discussing the interrelatedness of auto/biography and personal diary, Janet Gyatso (1998: 103) correctly draws attention to the role played by the subject's private journal in the composition of biographies/hagiographies

⁵³ 'Dzam yag mentions the keeping of separate ledgers during his business trips, as well as the writing of letters to friends and relatives. See Kha stag 'Dzam yag (1997: 5; 224; 225).

⁵⁴ Record-keeping in Tibet takes many literary forms, *e.g.* journals (Tib. *nyin deb*), daybooks (Tib. *nyin tho*), and receipt records (Tib. *thob yig*, *gsan yig*) (Quintman, 2015: 24).

(Tib. *rnam thar*) and autobiographies (Tib. *rang rnam*), as well as reminding the reader that the auto/biographical writing itself may substitute for such a record.

Contemporary lay writing has been characterised by an explosion of memoirs and other autobiographical works both inside and outside the plateau, expression of the paramountcy of life writing in the Tibetan literary milieu (Hartley and Schiaffini-Vedani, 2008: xviii). In the late 1990s the launch of writing projects in the diaspora led to a flourishing of publications in Tibetan language – the focus on preservation, central to much of the cultural discussion in exile since the 1960s, favoured works perceived as having an intrinsic historical value, *e.g.* 'Dzam yag's travel account.

As described in the introduction to the edited volume, the scrolls were brought to the attention of the director of Tibet House in New Delhi by the maternal nephews of 'Dzam yag.⁵⁵

One needs to assume any account as being true and reliable, whether it be a statement based on what one has actually

⁵⁵ Blo bzang 'jam dbyangs and Theg mchog thabs mkhas; even though the latter is introduced in the *nyin deb* as the *tsha bo che ba*, the “eldest nephew”, it is Blo 'jam who recurs more frequently in the narrative as main assistant and business partner of 'Dzam yag.

witnessed or be it oral narratives of others, so long as they are not compromised by political considerations. Therefore, these diary entries are published herewith, in the hope that it would be of some benefit to readers. I had lovingly preserved the paper scrolls of the meticulous diary entries of my kind maternal uncle Kha stag 'Dzam yag who recorded what he saw, heard and understood during the course of his pilgrimages to holy places in Tibet, India and Nepal, over a period of thirteen years. Once, I happened to show these diaries to rDo bum rin po che, the director of the Tibet House in New Delhi, and he said that, since these diary entries contain a wealth of eye-witness accounts and oral narratives, it would certainly be of value and benefit if these could be properly edited and published.⁵⁶

The editing project – carried out as a collaboration of several experts, and financed, among others, by the German scholar Karl-Heinz Everding – was concluded on June 12th, 1996, in the centenary of 'Dzam yag's birth. Far from being a simple matter, the editing of a text never meant to be published – as it was the case for 'Dzam yag's manuscript – may turn into a breeding ground for ethical dilemmas. The editors are called upon a difficult task, their sensitivity

⁵⁶ *skye bo gang zhig rang nyid mig gi mthong ba dang gzhan gyi kha rgyun dag tu srid gyis bsres lhad med pa'i bden gtam zhig la yid rton byed dgos par brten / da res nyin deb 'di nyid kyis cung zad phan re dang bcas / kho bo'i bka' drin can gyi a zhang kha stag 'dzam yag lags bod dang bal yul rgya gar bcas la / gnas bskor du bskyod pa'i skor sogs mi lo bcu gsum ring nyin re bzhin mthong thos rtogs gsum byung ba'i lo rgyus dag tho bkod pa'i shog dril nams da bar gces pa'i nyar tshags dang / skabs shig ru ldi li bod khang dbu 'dzin rdo bum rin po cher spyen 'bul zhus par / nyin deb 'di nyin nang du dngos mthong dang ngag rgyun gyi lo rgyus mang po 'khod 'dug cing / legs par zhus sgrigs kyis par 'debs thub na phan thogs 'byung nges zhes bka' slob (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 9-10).*

and moral compass the only means to guide them in interpreting the author's intentions and persona. The editorial choice of presenting the text as *nyin deb* accommodates the diaristic rhythm of the text, yet it does little to convey its character of travel literature, thus reiterating the struggle, discussed in the previous sections of this chapter, of finding an emic terminology for such a genre.

The editing and printing of the *nyin deb* is presented, in accordance with the traditional view, as an auspicious offering to the freedom and peace of all beings (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 10), a fitting conclusion to the efforts of an otherwise unknown Khams pa trader who dedicated the last decade of his life to the accumulation of merit, as we shall see in the following chapters.

Before delving deeper into the content of the *nyin deb* and the historical and socio-cultural environment that shaped its author's personality, I would like to pause, albeit briefly, on the narrative structure of the work in question. In a text where narrator, protagonist, and reader are the same, the scholar's desire to know more about its author is often frustrated; 'Dzam yag does not dwell on

the years prior to 1944, and the reader has to content him/herself with the rather scanty biographical sketch presented by the editor Ācārya 'Jam dbyang dbang rgyal⁵⁷ in his introduction to the printed version of the journal.

From the father Kha stag Gra Inga rab brtan, of the rich and wealthy Kha stag clan - from the lineage known as Kha stag ("mouth tiger") due to their eloquence – and the mother Gro bza' mtsho mo, three boys and four girls were born. As for the youngest son, Kha stag 'Dzam yag, he was born in the first part of the [first] month of the Fire Male Monkey Year of the 17th *rab byung* (1896) and his parents nicknamed him 'Dzam yag.⁵⁸ He relied on the activity of trading and herding the livestock, [that were] the means of subsistence [inherited] from his forefathers; from childhood, he studied *dharma* and cultural sciences by enrolling at the monastic community in Klung dgon dGa' ldan thub bstan chos 'khor gling and he served the monastery in various functions.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ This scholar, a member of the lDan ma *khams tshang* of the Blo gsal gling college of 'Bras spungs monastery, joined the Tibet House in Delhi as a Tibetan teacher at the Cultural Institute and willingly assumed the role of chief editor, dedicating all of his free time to the revision and correction of 'Dzam yag's journal (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 10).

⁵⁸ It is clear that the author's *dharma* name, Ngag dbang dar rgyas, was not his appellation of choice since it appears only once in the narrative (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 11).

⁵⁹ *kha stobs btsan pas kha stag tu grags pa'i rigs rgyud las / kha stag tshang zhes nor gyis phyug pa / pha kha stag gra Inga rab brtan dang / ma gro bza' mtsho mo gnyis las / bu gsum dang bu mo bzhi byung ba'i nang tshan / bu chung ba kha stag 'dzam yag ni / rab byung 17 gdong ngan zhes pa me pho spre lo'i yar tshes phyi lo 1896 la skyes shing / pa mas 'dzam yag ces gces ming du btags / pha mes nas 'sho thabs nor phyugs 'tsho skyong dang tshong gi las su brten / chung dus nas klung dgon dGa' ldan thub bstan chos 'khor gling du bsgrig zhugs kyis chos dang rig gzhung la slob gnyer dang / dgon pa'i byed sgo sna tshogs kyis zhabs zhu bsgrubs* (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 2-3).

In his opening statement – cited at the beginning of my Introduction – 'Dzam yag presents the journal as an attempt to record his personal impressions and memories, thus confirming the unambiguous autobiographic nature of the *nyin deb*.⁶⁰ In constructing a relationship between what Bruner calls “individual psychic geography” and “cultural geography” (2001: 33), the journal incorporates a self-making and a world-making dimension, for in telling the motivation for and the means of pilgrimage, the trader is also narrating a story about his own experience of travel and his self-perception as a wandering pilgrim, thus linking the author’s individual representations to a cultural tradition of spiritual journeying and its narrative construction within Tibetan literature.

The autodiegetic nature of the *nyin deb* provides the scholar with another interesting feature to reflect upon, *i.e.* the dual structural core of the autobiographical first-person pronoun, a self that is both “narrating” and

⁶⁰ Whereas, on the one hand, the presence of an introductory section appears to support my rejection of an identification of the *nyin deb* with a full-fledged “diary”, on the other, it raises questions to which I cannot find answer. Given the private nature of the document, why did the author feel the need to introduce himself? If the journal was meant for posterity, did 'Dzam yag have any specific readership in mind? As far as the style of the introduction is concerned, it cannot be ruled out the possibility that, in composing it, the author – a well-read individual – had been inspired by the traditional repertoire of *nam thar* and *rang nam*.

“narrated”.⁶¹ As any autobiographical narrative, the *nyin deb* claims to be non-fictional, for it tells the story of a “real” person, but the narrative process is, in its own nature, constructive and imaginative. Essentially, any autobiographic text, even one’s own memory of events, is somehow arbitrated and crafted, to the point that it is not possible to simply equate actuality with nonfiction (Lehman, 1997: 6). The “narrating self”, in recollecting the memories of past events, revises them retrospectively, thus becoming the agent of focalisation, the point from which the story is told (Schwalm, 2014: 3). By selecting specific elements considered to be relevant, *i.e.* “turning points”, from the virtually endless moments of experience composing one’s own life, the “narrating self” endows the past with a present-influenced meaning, thus connecting the *illic et tunc* with the *hic et nunc*.

Beyond this pivotal first-person duality, other facets of the “self” come into play; among these the idea of “ideological I”, or as Smith defines it, “the concept of personhood culturally available to the narrator when he tells the

⁶¹ On the existence of different “selves” within an autobiographical narrative, see Smith and Watson (2001: 59-61).

story” (1988: 105), appears particularly relevant to our discussion, for the “ideological I” not only reflects the social and intertextual embedding of ’Dzam yag’s narrative but it also reveals the way in which the traditional structures and institutions of self-representation are actively engaged and reinterpreted throughout the *nyin deb* (Schwalm, 2014: 5).

Narratology is therefore a useful heuristic device in the analysis and understanding of ’Dzam yag’s journal, the place it occupies in the Tibetan literary corpus, and the literary and cultural archetypes the author adheres to; no text is created *ex nihilo*, as demonstrated by the numerous meaningful intertextual references found in the trader’s account. It is worth emphasising that in writing an autobiographical account, an author tells his or her own story; he or she creates, in other words, a narrative where the facts – or one’s own recollection of them – are interpreted and organised in accordance with the author’s conception of what his or her life story is. In ’Dzam yag’s case, the “evaluation” aspect, *i.e.* the task of placing sequential events in terms of a meaningful context (Bruner, 2001: 29), is fulfilled through his self-identification

with the figure of the 11th century Tibetan yogin Mi la ras pa, as I will explain in greater detail in Chapter Four. Suffice to say for now that 'Dzam yag adheres to the “sinner-becomes-saint” scheme at the core of the most popular version of the life story of the saint, composed in the 15th century by gTsang smyon Heruka (1452-1507). The trader feels a strong affiliation with Mi la ras pa; as the latter, he suffered oppression and was forced to leave his ancestral land, embarking on pilgrimages without any fixed direction (Tib. *phyogs med kyi gnas bskor*), and his narrative repeatedly hints at the author's desire to cleanse his *karma*, thus conforming to the powerful paradigm that Mil la ras pa's *mam thar* had become for many generations of Tibetans (Turek, 2013: 21).

In discussing Western autobiographical narratives, Bruner draws attention to the marking⁶² of “turning points”, *i.e.* episodes in the narrator's life that lead to decisive changes in a particular belief, conviction, or situation – a feature that the scholar understands as “crucial to the effort to *individualize* a

⁶² By “marking”, Bruner designates a narrative device understood to highlight “what is newsworthy”. To him, “the construction of narrative “turning points” is a way to distinguish what is ordinary and expectable, *i.e.* folk-psychological, from that which is idiosyncratic and quintessentially agentive” (2001: 32).

life, to make it clearly and patently something more than a running off of automatic, folk-psychological canonicity” (2001: 31-32).⁶³ I would like to argue that in the *nyin deb* the function performed by the “marking” of these narrative turning points is opposite to the one described by Bruner since it invariably reconciles 'Dzam yag's narration to the traditional life story he has chosen as an ideal model, *i.e.* Mi la ras pa's *nam thar*. It is in fact the human need to narrate one's own existence, thus giving it a retrospective shape and meaning, that calls for the recourse to socially and culturally acceptable storylines and discourses, appropriately adapted to one's own situation (Doloughan, 2006:141).

Another element worth investigating is the rhetorical aspect of autobiographical writing, *i.e.* the commitment towards a certain set of presumptions about oneself, one's relations to others, one's view of the world, and one's place in it. As I have mentioned previously, 'Dzam yag's self-

⁶³ The notion of “folk psychology” can be understood in at least two different senses, (i) commonsense psychology that explains human behaviour in terms of beliefs, desires, intentions, expectations, preferences, hopes, fears, and so on; (ii) an interpretation of such everyday explanations as part of a folk theory, comprising a network of generalizations employing concepts like belief, desire, and so on. I am here referring to the first interpretation. For further discussion, see Baker (1999).

perception as *gnas skor ba* does not necessarily mirror the kind of behaviour that emerges from his account. Nevertheless, the mask he dons cannot be dismissed as merely fictional; in presenting himself as a *gsar sprang*,⁶⁴ *i.e.* a “new beggar”, the author in fact combines the rhetoric of self-justification, *i.e.* why he behaves in a certain way, with the requirement of the *nam thar* narrative.⁶⁵ As it is often the case in autobiographical writing, the author’s reality becomes *the* reality, and the “life-making” process, just like any other aspect of world-making, heavily depends, to steal Brunes’ words, “upon the symbolic system in which it is conducted – its opportunities and constraints” (2001: 36). In his account, 'Dzam yag amply draws from the pool of cultural interpretations and traditional literature, his desire to follow the steps of the enlightened renunciate hampered by the necessity of accommodating unavoidable material needs, as I will discuss in Chapter Three and Four.

⁶⁴ Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 4.

⁶⁵ By presenting himself as a *gsar sprang*, the author *de facto* sets the traditional figure of the pilgrim-beggar into a new literary framework, *i.e.* the *nyin deb*. I am grateful to Professor Charles Ramble for suggesting the possibility of such an interpretation of the function of the “ideological I” in the text (private conversation, June 2017).

CHAPTER TWO

The Historical and Political Background of 'Dzam yag's Travels

As discussed in the last section of Chapter One, had it not been for a series of events set in motion in India at the end of the 1990s, Kha stag 'Dzam yag would have been yet another victim of historical anonymity. In Chapter One I have examined the peculiar format of the *nyin deb* and discussed its inclusion within the complex intertextual matrix of Tibetan narrative texts. As any self-narration, the journal conveys a meaning that is greater than the sum of its parts; the life-story assumes a *defining* character that goes beyond the function of mere recollection of past events – “our narrative identities are the story we live by” (McAdams et al., 2006: 4, in Bamberg, 2012). As mentioned in the previous chapter, 'Dzam yag adheres to a socially and culturally acceptable storyline; in plotting himself in and across time into a life-story that presents a model of identity largely based on the figure of the great Tibetan saint Mi la ras pa, he follows an ideal of the hermit-scholar strongly promoted during the non-sectarian revival that swept through Khams from the late 19th century onwards.

To understand the link existing in the *nyin deb* between life and narrative, *i.e.* between facts and recollections of events, it is necessary to investigate the background of its author. In the present chapter, I will discuss the figure of Kha stag 'Dzam yag and his upbringing, focusing in particular on the socio-political and religious dynamics of his native land (Tib. *pha yul*)⁶⁶ and the impact these had on shaping his perception of the world. A territorial division of the kingdom of Nang chen, Rab shis was anything but a political and social monad, existing on its own; a spatial and historical contextualisation of the trader's ancestral land needs therefore to be provided. Unfortunately, the scarce information available on the early history of this semi-structured administrative polity has to be extrapolated from a rather intricate royal genealogy. Albeit painfully aware that the complexity of the latter might discourage scholars who do not harbour a specific interest in local history, I do believe that the effort would be amply compensated by the insights gained, especially in relation to the role played by the revivalist and reformist non-sectarian (Tib. *ris med*) movement in the region.

⁶⁶ The literal meaning of *pha yul*, *i.e.* "father land" should be understood in terms of "ancestral land".

1. The Kingdom of Nang chen

Kha stag 'Dzam yag was born at the end of the 19th century in Rab shis, a place located in Zal mo sgang, one of the six ranges of mDo khams (Tuttle, 2011a: 142), a series of mountains that extends southwards between the northern reaches of the 'Bri chu and Nyag chu rivers (Tsomu, 2015: 2). Traditionally divided into six parallel ranges running from northwest to southeast, the geomorphy of the easternmost part of the Tibetan plateau is characterised by deep gorges cut by the four great rivers of Asia, the Salween (Tib. rGyal mo rNgul chu), the Mekong (Tib. rDza chu), the Yangtze (Tib. 'Bri chu), and the latter's tributary, the Yalong (Tib. Nyag chu).⁶⁷

A territorial division of the kingdom of Nang chen up to the 1950s (Tuttle, 2011a: 146), Rab shis⁶⁸ is nowadays part of the Yushu autonomous prefecture, Qinghai province.

⁶⁷ Khams is therefore traditionally known as the "Four Rivers and Six Ranges" (Tib. *chu bzhi sgang drug*).

⁶⁸ Also spelled Rag shul.

At a quick glance, 'Dzam yag's *pha yul* appears to be of little significance within the *nyin deb*; less than a tenth of the journal is in fact dedicated to eastern Tibet. In spite of the paucity of personal information provided by the trader on the years preceding the composition of his travelogue, it is in Rabshis and in the peculiarities of the cultural and religious environment of 20th century Nang chen that the key to understanding the complex personality of 'Dzam yag lies. It is indeed true, to borrow Ovid's words, that "our native soil draws all of us, by I know not what sweetness, and never allows us to forget".⁶⁹

For this reason, I have intentionally restricted the historical analysis of Khams to the areas under the administration of the king (Tib. *rgyal po*) of Nang chen, offering a diachronic survey of the socio-political and religious changes occurring in the territories mentioned in Kha stag 'Dzam yag's account.

1.1. The Administration of the Area of Nang chen from the 13th to the 18th

Centuries

⁶⁹ *Nescio qua natale solum dulcedine cunctos ducit et inmemores non sinit esse sui* (Ovid, *Ex Ponto*, III: 35-36), as translated by Wheeler (1924: 283).

The history of the kingdom of Nang chen relies heavily on historiographic works published both in the Tibetan community in exile and in the PRC;⁷⁰ contrary to the Sino-centric or Lhasa-centric approach of national histories, these works acknowledge the agency of indigenous leaders and local communities, depicting them as actively involved in shaping their own regional identity, being anything but passive spectators of external government politics.

Over the past two decades, Tibetan studies have enjoyed a renewal of historical research and publications by Tibetan scholars, both from the diaspora communities and from inside Tibet. Alongside the larger general histories, particularly interesting are the studies on local histories, which range from records of specific monasteries to histories of whole regions, as well as family genealogies of former Khams pa chieftains and Lhasa officials. In India, in particular, there has been a growth in works written by individual Tibetans in

⁷⁰ The lack of historical records and original documents on Nang chen has been partially bridged in recent years by the publication of a wide range of works on the local religious, historical, and socio-economic tradition. This material includes different genres – *lo rgyus*, *chos 'byung*, *gser phreng*, *rnam thar*, and *rgyal rabs* – often produced by representatives of the most powerful clans of the region, *e.g.* Tre bo, 'Brong pa, and Tshangs gsar. I would like to thank Dr Maria M. Turek for kindly sharing a copy of her article “Monastic Obligations, Hat Change and Lhasa Encroachment: Notes on the Economic System in the Historical Kingdom of Nang chen” (forthcoming).

the attempt to preserve the history of their *pha yul*. One of the most interesting sets of this kind of publications comprises a series of monographs on the history of Khams, which is part of a project carried out by the Amnye Machen Institute. These works have greatly enhanced our historical knowledge of the region, a statement particularly true in the case of Nang chen. The main sources of information for the present chapter are the *Bod ljongs mdo khams nang chen spyi dang bye brag gi byung ba brjod pa ldong 'brong pa'i deb gter smug po*, a historical account of the 'Brong pa tribe of the lDong division in Nang chen, written by the 'Brong pa rgyal po Lam mkhyen and edited as an e-book by Tashi Tsering in 2003; the *Khams stod lo rgyus thor bsdus*, a two-volume work compiled by lDan ma 'Jam dbyangs tshul khrims and *mkhan po* rDo rje and published in Lanzhou in 1995-1997; and the *Yul shul rdzong: dgon sde'i lo rgyus mdor bsdus*, a survey of monasteries and tribal leadership in Yushu prefecture.⁷¹

⁷¹ The survey is an example of the desire, shared by Tibetans inside and outside the country, to reclaim and preserve their own culture and history, especially at a local level. As stated by the editors in the foreword, most of the administrative records and documents preceding the democratic reforms were lost in the disorders following the Chinese invasion and at the time of writing, only a few eyewitnesses were still alive. Despite not bearing clear publication date and

The historical kingdom of Nang chen spanned a wide pastoral area – from the rDza chu basin, where it was mainly centered, to the 'Bri chu river; its existence, dated from the mid-13th century up to the 1950s, became closely connected to that of the neighbouring kingdom of sDe dge to the east, of which Nang chen was a cultural satellite (Turek, 2013: 115).⁷² Between the 11th and the early 13th centuries, the area – strategically located along the trade route connecting Xingqing, the capital of Western Xia, to central Tibet – attracted the interest of the Tanguts, keen to maintain some form of control over the region. Backed by a waning foreign power and heavily relying on the ruling presence of the local 'Ba' rom hierarchs,⁷³ a new polity began to emerge in the early 13th century; by the second half of the 13th century, however, Nang chen had

place, the foreword is dated on January 15th, 1997, thus marking the end of the 1990s as plausible *terminus a quo*. For the present dissertation, only two of the fifty-four chapters, namely those regarding the monastery of Klung dgon dGa' ldan thub bstan chos 'khor gling (n.d.: 9-38) and the tribal divisions in the Yul shul territory (n.d.: 278-287), will be used.

⁷² The royal lineage of Nang chen adopted a religious-political alliance based on a system of chief chaplains (Tib. *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-early 20th centuries with the support and protection provided by the Nang chen court to *ris med* masters hailing from sDe dge.

⁷³ On the relationship between the Tanguts and 'Ba' rom bKa' brgyud, see Sperling (1981; 2004).

gradually lost most of its political and economic importance,⁷⁴ due to the decline of the Tanguts and the rise of the Mongols. In the 14th century internal feuds within the 'Ba' rom led to a succession struggle, at the end of which two clans, the Tshangs sgar and the 'Bru Tre bo, emerged as victorious (Turek, forthcoming); it was from the latter, supported by the Sa skya-Mongol regime, that the dynasty of the Nang chen *rgyal po* originated.

So far only a basic lineage, consisting of names without dates, can be offered for the earliest times of the 'Bru Tre bo clan, and even the reconstruction of such a bare list would have been impossible had it not been for the information contained in some of the religious histories (Tib. *chos 'byung*) of the 'Ba' rom bKa' brgyud and a few oral accounts still extant. The royal lineage of the 'Bru Tre bo began in 1300 C.E., when Chos kyi rgyal mtshan, one of the sons of 'Bru Tre bo A klu,⁷⁵ ascended the throne of Nang

⁷⁴ After the establishment of the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368), a new route going through the less challenging terrain of southern Khams, together with the emergence of Chinese trade hubs, led to Nang chen's loss of significance within the Khams pa political landscape (Turek, forthcoming).

⁷⁵ A member of the 'Bru clan, Tre bo A klu was born in Tre bo rab kha, in the dKar mdzes area in the late 12th century. In the early 13th century he migrated to Upper Khams, to a place in the Zur mang area that he renamed Tre bo rab kha in honour of his original *pha yul*; once resettled,

chen as king (Tib. *rgyal po*); widely respected, the local lord became known as the 'Bru rje, "The Lord of the 'Bru", and appeared to have enjoyed a status of *primus inter pares*.

A detailed list of the genealogy of the 'Bru Tre bo clan is provided by both 'Jam dbyangs tshul khriṃs et al. (1995-1997, 2: 62-64) and 'Brong pa rgyal po (2003: 28-29), who present 'Bru Tre bo A Klu as contemporary with early 13th century masters, *i.e.* the eight *mahāsiddhas* (Tib. *grub chen*)⁷⁶ of sGa pa.⁷⁷ At that time, the areas of sGa pa and lDan ma were renowned for their hermitages and meditation centres, connected to the Yel pa and 'Ba' rom subsects of the bKa' brgyud school; prominent among the masters of the latter were 'Gro mgon Ti shri ras pa (1164-1236)⁷⁸ and his disciples gSang ba Lus med rdo rje (1227-1292) and gSang ba Ras pa dkar po Shes rab byang chub

he married Karmo bza' dkar mo, a woman from the 'Be clan ('Jam dbyangs tshul khriṃs et al. 1995-1997, 2: 62).

⁷⁶ Among the eight *mahāsiddhas* were sPyan snga Shes rab byung gnas, a close disciple of 'Bri gung sKyob pa 'jig rten gsum mgon (1143-1217), rGyal dbang dbon, mThil rDo rje grags (1210/1211-1278/1279), Khams mgyogs rDo rje snying po, sNang ba mtha' yas, and Legs ldan nag po. See also Jackson (2003: 528; 683, fn 1476).

⁷⁷ The sGa clan produced several Bon po intellectuals, including the 14th century sGa ston Tshul khriṃs rgyal mtshan. This clan may be related to that of gShen chen Klu dga', the sGa tsha dMu (Martin, 2001: 127, fn 10).

⁷⁸ Also known as Ti shri ras pa Shes rab ras chen, he acted as state chaplain (Tib. *dbu bla*) for the Tangut king (Sperling, 1987: 33).

(1198/1199-1262).⁷⁹ Before the 'Bru Tre bo clan seized the throne of Nang chen in the 14th century, thus starting a royal lineage that continued until the Communist invasion in the 1950s, Nang chen's twenty-five pastoral tribes (Tib. *dpon khag nyi shu tsa lnga*) and eighteen monastic districts (Tib. *ri khag bco brgyad*)⁸⁰ had been governed by "a succession of ascetics, whose proficiency in the *gtum mo* practice⁸¹ earned them the designation of *ras pa*, and who at the same time, were principal holders of the 'Ba' rom school" (Turek, 2013: 115).

At the death of Ras pa dkar po in 1262, the Sa skya master 'Gro mgon Chos rgyal 'Phags pa (1235-1280) granted to gSang ba Lus med rdo rje, a

⁷⁹ gSang ba Ras pa dkar po survived the demise of the Tangut empire and attracted the attention of the Mongol emperor Qubilai. The establishment of Tibetan imperial preceptors at a foreign court predated the patronage accorded to the Sa skya by the Mongols. As the case of the 'Ba' rom masters shows, Tibetan clerics acted as sacral figures serving non-Tibetan monarchs since the Tangut times (Sperling, 1987: 34).

⁸⁰ The division into pastoral tribes and monastic districts occurred most probably in the mid-13th century with the advent of the Mongols (Gruschke, 2004: 105-108; 'Jam dbyangs tshul khrim et al., 1995-1997, 2: 79-87; Turek, 2013: 116). As for the eighteen monastic districts (Tib. *ri khag bco brgyad*), each of them was headed by a major bKa' brgyud monastery; for a list of the *ri khag bco brgyad*, see 'Jam dbyangs tshul khrim et al. (1995-1997, 2: 88-105).

⁸¹ The *gtum mo*, or "Inner Heat" practice, is one of the Six Yogas of Nāropa (Tib. *Nā ro chos drug*); the latter, together with the *Mahāmudrā* teachings, form the core of the bKa' brgyud heritage.

close disciple of Ras pa dkar po and the heir of the 'Ba' rom doctrine,⁸² the control over upper and central Nang chen. The appointment as ruler of Lus med rdo rje, a member of the locally prominent Tshangs gsar clan, sanctioned the union of religious and secular power, by turning the 'Ba' rom lineage holders into temporal rulers. When Lus med rdo rje's nephew Byang chub gzhon nu (1254-1323) came to power, the emergence of politicised parties within the 'Ba' rom shattered the political stability of the kingdom.⁸³ Pressured by the Sa skya-influenced fraction, Byang chub gzhon nu lost control of the monastic and political capital Nang so chen mo to the aristocratic family of 'Bru Tre bo. In the Iron Mouse Year of the 5th *rab byung* (1300 C.E.), the 'Bru Tre bo prince Chos kyi rgyal mtshan was installed on the throne of Nang so chen mo ('Jam dbyangs tshul khri ms et al. 1995-1997, 2: 63; 'Brong pa rgyal po, 2003: 29; Turek, 2013: 116-117); officially recognised by imperial decree as king (Tib. *rgyal po*) of Nang chen, he enforced the law of the religious government (Tib.

⁸² He took his first monastic vows (Tib. *rab 'byung*) from sPyan snga Byang chub mgon po (13th-14th centuries).

⁸³ Despite his position of prominence within the school, Lus med rdo rje failed to secure the transfer of authority to a single lineage holder; the presence of four concurrent principal successors determined the gradual decentralisation of the 'Ba' rom and the loss of Nang chen's political stability ('Brong pa rgyal po, 2003: 231-232; Turek, 2013: 121).

chos srid) on the six places⁸⁴ presented to him as myriarchy subjects.⁸⁵ By 1324 the kingdom was divided into two territories of equal status according to the Sa skya-Mongol system; the control the Tshangs gsar clan wielded over upper-central Nang chen gradually subsided, together with their independence from the Nang chen *rgyal po* (Turek, 2013: 117).

Starting from the 14th century, the 'Ba' rom, whose leading force had been vital in the initial stage of Nag chen's existence, suffered a decentralising process that led to a substantial decline (Turek, 2013: 116) – their local paramountcy threatened, as we shall see, by other traditions, *e.g.* Sa skya and Karma bKa' brgyud.

The 'Bru Tre bo royal lineage continued through the offspring of A yu ba, Chos kyi rgyal mtshan's brother. The firstborn, Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan, followed in his uncle's footsteps by taking ordination from him and thus

⁸⁴ The six places were gTam mkhar skya, Cham mkhar mdar, rJi gyi thang, lCi rag ne (also known as lCi 'dab kha), Lho rta shod, 'Dan rag thag ('Brong pa rgyal po, 2003: 29-30).

⁸⁵ It should be noted that the reference to myriarchy subjects implies the acceptance by Chos kyi rgyal mtshan of the supremacy of the *mchod yon* relationship between the Mongol court and the Sa skya (see Sperling, 1987: 35). The 13th century incorporation of Tibet within the Mongol Empire did not affect the political and military freedom of the minor kingdoms and chiefdoms on the eastern Tibetan frontiers (Coleman, 2014: 5).

ascending on the monastic throne; the second son, Kun dga' 'bum, became the secular leader. In a system common to ruling families holding both temporal and religious power, the father handed the throne down to one of his sons – in Kun dga' 'bum's case the choice fell on sDe pa seng ge – while the other siblings entered the monastic life, often under the protection of their paternal uncles.⁸⁶ sDe pa seng ge's position was filled first by his son Grags pa rgyal mtshan, then by the latter's son and grandson. The latter, *nang so*⁸⁷ Sangs rgyas grags pa, strengthened the ties between the royal family and the bKa' brgyud by entering into a spiritual relationship with the 12th abbot of sTag lung, Kun mkhyen Ngag dbang grags pa (1418-1496), from whom he received the ordination name of dPal ldan grags pa. His example was followed by his

⁸⁶ It is worth noticing that the local 'Ba' rom school preferred the uncle-nephew model of monastic succession – similar to the one in use among the Sa skya and the 'Phag mo gru of central Tibet – to the reincarnation (Tib. *sprul sku*) system introduced by the bKa' brgyud elsewhere in Tibet.

⁸⁷ The term *nang so* and the competence associated with this office are yet to be determined. Petech (1990: 132) dates its origin to the Mongol occupation of Tibet, when it designated a position equatable with that of a secretary in the hierarchy of the proxy government at Sa skya monastery. The term could also be used to indicate, especially in the eastern Tibetan context, a place, or an office, to which one can go. See van der Kuijp and Tuttle (2014: 470).

nephews Chos skyong skyabs and *go shrī*⁸⁸ Chos dpal grags pa, who jointly invited the 7th Karma pa Chos grags rgya mtsho (1454-1506) to Nang chen; the encounter between the Karma pa and *go shrī* Chos dpal grags pa was punctuated by the ritual exchange of initiations, offerings, and titles.⁸⁹ While *go shrī* Chos dpal grags pa held the monastic throne, his brother Chos skyong skyabs maintained the secular rule, which was shared after him by two of his sons, *i.e.* the firstborn, Nam mkha' bzang po, and the last-born, bKra shis bzang po. The first extended the boundaries of the kingdom to the north, settling in Yag gsum stod pa,⁹⁰ while the second ruled over the southern territories, the Nang chen smad ma ('Jam dbyangs tshul khrims et al. 1995-1997, 2: 65-68; 'Brong pa rgyal po, 2003:30-32).

⁸⁸ Tibetan rendition of the Chinese *guó shī* ("national preceptor"), title established at the time of the Yuan administration to indicate an official relation of bureaucratic character between the emperor and the lama appointed as *guó shī* (Seyfort Ruegg, 2013: 217).

⁸⁹ The 7th Karmapa bestowed to *go shrī* Chos dpal grags pa the appellation of Karma Chos dpal grags pa and bestowed on him a *she bam*, an official document assigning lands, tenants, and estates to monasteries and private individuals ('Jam dbyangs tshul khrims, 1997: 68; 'Brong pa rgyal po, 2003: 31)

⁹⁰ Area populated by Mongol families and for that reason indicated in the historical records as Hor Nang chen stod pa ('Brong pa rgyal po, 2003: 31).

Nam mkha' bzang po's younger son Seng ge rgyal mtshan⁹¹ succeeded his father on the throne of Yag gsum stod pa, marrying first a member of the ruling family of Upper 'Jang and later the chieftainess of sTag lung, with whom he had no sons. The ruler of Nang chen smad ma, bKra shis bzang po, had two wives, a Mongol and a representative of the Khyung clan, but only the first bore children. At the death of bKra shis bzang po, Seng ge rgyal mtshan claimed the throne of Nang chen smad ma, despite the opposition of his wife the chieftainess, his ministers, and his subjects. Trusting that he would be able to come back to Yag gsum stod pa whenever he desired, Seng ge rgyal mtshan swore an oath and marched to his late uncle's seat. His project was short-lived; surrounded by enemies he was incapable of safely returning to his kingdom. The throne of Nang chen smad pa was then entrusted to the *rgyal rgan* bSod nams bzang po, bKra shis bzang po's brother, who acted as regent (Tib. *khri tshab*). When the Mongol army invaded the upper region of Nang chen, the *rgyal rgan* was forced to move to the lower part of the kingdom, and for a short

⁹¹ Nam mkha' bzang po's elder son, Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan, chose the monastic life ('Jam dbyangs tshul khribs, 1997: 68; 'Brong pa rgyal po, 2003: 32).

while, the northern territories were lost ('Jam dbyangs tshul khriims et al. 1995-1997, 2: 68-69; 'Brong pa rgyal po, 2003: 32).

As for the two children bKra shis bzang po had with his Mongol wife, the first, Rin mgon, took monastic vows from his father's uncle, *go shri* Chos dpal grags pa, while the second, Gur mgon, held the secular throne. The latter's firstborn, bSod nams dpal ldan, born in the Wood Horse Year of the 10th *rab byung* (1594), obtained from the 9th Karmapa dBang phyug rdo rje, whom he had invited to the Nang chen monastery of sKu 'bum,⁹² the title of *go shri*. His son, bSod nams rnam rgyal, received the title of *go shri* from the 6th Zhwa dmar pa of the lineage of sKyu ra, Gar dbang chos kyi dbang phyug mchog (1504-1630), and entered a *mchod yon*⁹³ relationship with the Sa skya bdag

⁹² The earliest 'Ba' rom bKa' brgyud monasteries in Nang chen established by Ti shri ras pa's successor, sPyan Inga Ras pa dkar po (1198-1262). The complex became the epitome of the union of spiritual and secular power after the creation of a *mchod yon* relationship between Ras pa dkar po and Godan khan in 1239 (Turek, 2013: 116).

⁹³ Also spelled *yon mchod*, it indicates a relationship between an "officiant-preceptor" (Tib. *mchod gnas*) and a "patron" (Tib. *yon bdag*). The term *mchod yon* was formalised at the time of 'Phags pa Blo gros rgyal mtshan dpal bzang po and Qubilai, who reigned as khan from 1260. For more information on the historiography and semantic of the term, see Seyfort Ruegg (1991).

chen Kun dga' blo gros;⁹⁴ his appointment as king of Nang chen was officially recognized by edict (Tib. *'ja' sa*) ('Jam dbyangs tshul khriṃs et al. 1995-1997, 2: 69; 'Brong pa rgyal po, 2003: 33).

The royal lineage continued with bSod rnam rgyal mtshan's son, *i.e.* Kun dga' grags pa, grandson, *i.e.* Kun dga' rgyal mtshan, and great-grandson, *i.e.* Blo gros rgyal po, who invited the 1st Che tshang rGyal dbang dkon mchog rin chen (1590-1654) to Nang chen, as confirmed by the *'Bri gung gdan rabs gser phreng*, a genealogy of the 'Bri gung pa lineage compiled by the 4th Che tshang bsTan 'dzin pad ma'i rgyal mtshan (1770-1826). According to this work (1989: 264), the 1st Che tshang bestowed an empowerment of *bla ma* Nor bu rgya mtsho⁹⁵ on the 2nd mGar chen bsTan 'dzin phun tshogs⁹⁶ and the Nang chen *dpon* Blo gros rgyal po, who were in a *mchod yon* relationship. The 1st Che tshang visited the Yel pa establishments of Nang chen, reaching the district of

⁹⁴ The creation of a "patron-priest" relation is presented as the renewal of the *mchod yon* connection between 'Phags pa and the king Tre bo Chos kyi rgyal mtshan ('Brong pa rgyal po, 2003: 33).

⁹⁵ *gTer ma* on the *nirmāṇakāya* aspect of Padmasambhava revealed by the *gter ston* Padma gling pa (1450?-1521).

⁹⁶ 'Bri gung bKa' brgyud master born in 1578 in mDo smad Yul shul. After a period of time spent at the 'Bri gung monastery, he returned to Nang chen where he assumed the role of *dbu bla chen po* ("main spiritual advisor") of the king (dKon mchog rgya mtsho, 2004: 464)

Nag shod through the monastery of Byang rta rna ('Brong pa rgyal po, 2003: 33).⁹⁷

According to historiographic sources, Blo gros rgyal po commissioned the construction of thirteen new monastic establishments, upholding the two systems (Tib. *lugs gnyis*).⁹⁸ During his reign, relationships with representatives of the bKa' brgyud pa orders continued, as shown by the invitation extended by the mGar chen to the 1st Chung tshang Kun mkhyen rig 'dzin chos grags (1595-1659), who visited the royal palace of Nang chen during his travels in Khams. On Blo gros rgyal po's death, his younger son Karma rab brtan was enthroned by the 5th Si tu Chos kyi rgyal mtshan (1562/1586-1632/1657)⁹⁹ as the *go shri*

⁹⁷ The Byang rta rna monastery belonged to the Yel pa subsect of the 'Bri gung bKa' brgyud pa ('Jam dbyangs tshul khrims et al., 1995-1997, 1: 63-64).

⁹⁸ The "two systems" refers to the union of *chos lugs* and *srid lugs*, i.e. spiritual and temporal powers, a form of theocratic government established by the 5th Dalai Lama in the mid-17th century.

⁹⁹ 'Brong pa rgyal po presents Karma rab brtan as *go shri*, but he confusingly introduces him with his new name, which had been bestowed upon him by his spiritual master, the 5th Si tu, with the title of *kwang ting go shri* (Ch. *guàn dǐng guó shī*), a rather unlikely possibility since the imperial title of *guàn dǐng guó shī*, literally "national teacher consecrated by sprinkling" (Chün-fang, 1998: 915), was reserved for Tibetan lamas; interestingly, it was the 5th Si tu Chos kyi rgyal mtshan who was bearing the title of *kwang ting go shri*, which had been given to him by the Ming Emperor Chongzhen in the first half of the 17th century. On the relationship between the Ming and Buddhism, see Chün-fang (1998: 893-952).

Rab brtan lhun 'grub dpal bzang ('Jam dbyangs tshul khriims et al. 1995-1997, 2: 70; 'Brong pa rgyal po, 2003: 35).

In spite of its rather peripheral location, the kingdom was involved in the events that led to the establishment of the dGa' Idan pho brang government in the mid-17th century, since the turmoil caused by the king of Be ri's military advance in Khams spread to Nang chen as well; when Don yod rdo rje's army reached the Nang chen sKu 'bum monastery, where the revenue from the 'u lag¹⁰⁰ taxes of the Tre rab kha area had been collected since the 12th century, the Nang chen rgyal po was forced to leave and the main seat of the 'Ba' rom was destroyed. The following events are well known: in 1637, Güshri khan reached the Kokonor Lake with his army and, after having defeated the troops of Choghtu Khong Taiji,¹⁰¹ he moved toward the central province of dBus as a pilgrim. In Lhasa he met with the 5th Dalai Lama, who proclaimed him bsTan 'dzin chos kyi rgyal po, "*Dharma* king, holder of the doctrine". On the 5th month

¹⁰⁰ Compulsory service required from the *mi ser* as a form of taxation, the 'u lag could consist in human or animal *corvée* labour. On the status of *mi ser* and on the heuristic applicability of the term "serfdom" to the socio-political environment of premodern Tibet, see Goldstein (1971; 1986; 1988; 1989b), Miller (1987; 1988), Coleman (1998), Barnett (2008), Bischoff (2014).

¹⁰¹ A Khalkha nobleman supporting the Karma bKa' brgyud who established himself around the Kokonor Lake in Qinghai.

of the Earth Rabbit Year (June 1639), troops were sent out to Be ri by the Nang chen king Rab brtan lhun 'grub and the *dpon taiji* of 'Brong pa smad¹⁰² Karma Rab bstan 'brong pa. The war led by the Mongol army on the king of Be ri, Don yod rdo rje, saw the involvement of many local lords, especially the 'Brong pa *be hu*¹⁰³ and the ex-minister of the Be ri king 'Brug pa gNyer rgod ma ('Jam dbyangs tshul khri ms et al. 1995-1997, 2: 70-71; 'Brong pa rgyal po, 2003: 35-36).¹⁰⁴

At Rab brtan lhun 'grub's death in 1643, his nephew Nang chen A nyog¹⁰⁵ ascended to the throne; he was at the time only nine. Four years later, he was granted an audience with the 5th Dalai Lama, with whom he entered

¹⁰² The 'Brong smad *be hu* belonged to the twenty-five *dem chi*, the tribal divisions controlling the territory around sKye dgu mdo ('Brong pa rgyal po Lam mkhyen, 2003: 59).

¹⁰³ See Chapter Two, 1.2, p. 123.

¹⁰⁴ Born in Go 'jo, gNyer rgod ma rose to the status of great minister (Tib. *blon chen*) and treasurer (Tib. *phyag mdzod*) of Don yod rdo je. His Buddhist faith antagonised the king, a fervent supporter of Bon. Having escaped an assassination attempt, gNyer rgod ma took refuge in central Tibet, participating in the destruction by the Mongol army of the king of Be ri and of his allies the gTsang rulers. For more information on gNyer rgod ma, see Thub bstan shes rab rgya mtsho (2002: 236-244).

¹⁰⁵ Also known as Mi dbang rin chen rnam rgyal or bKra shis dar ma bstan srung. Nang chen A nyog is briefly mentioned in the section relative to the service and homage paid to the monastic communities and the establishment of new monasteries between the Water Dog (1622) and the Iron Horse (1630) Years. "*mi sde la brten pa'i 'bab yong sogs nang chen a nyog gis sbyar yig bston med gang yin la rgyab gnon gtan tshigs bgyis*" (Ngag bdang blo bzang rgya mtsho, 2009(8): p. 463).

into a *mchod yon* relationship;¹⁰⁶ the connection with the dGa' ldan pho brang government was strengthened by the establishment of dGe lugs monasteries, colleges, and meditation centres throughout the Nang chen territory and the bestowal of awards bearing the golden handprint of the Dalai Lama. A nyog was flanked by four "chief chaplains" (Tib. *dbu bla*), selected among the 'Bri gung *bu chen*,¹⁰⁷ *i.e.* the 3rd Lho chen, dKon mchog phrin las rnam rgyal, the 2nd mGar chen bsTan 'dzin phun tshogs, 'Khrul zhig Phrin las rgya mtsho,¹⁰⁸ and Byams me chos rje. At the time of A nyog's death, the throne was entrusted to his son Lho dKon mchog phrin las rnam rgyal; under his reign, a series of local wars¹⁰⁹ led to the loss by fire of the royal palace. What was meant to be a temporary relocation of the throne of Tre bo to the encampment

¹⁰⁶ According to 'Brong pa rgyal po (2003: 36), A nyog had been previously granted by the Great Fifth the attributes of *Nang chen blo bzang dbang grags* ("The famous, powerful, and intelligent one of Nang chen") and *byang phyogs dbang bskur rgyal po* ("King enthroned [to rule over] the northern direction").

¹⁰⁷ See Chapter Two, 1.2, p. 123.

¹⁰⁸ Despite being listed among the one hundred and thirteen 'Bri gung *bu chen*, 'Khrul zhig Phrin las rgya mtsho did not belong to the 'Bri gung school, even though he received teachings from various other bKa' brgyud subsects, *i.e.* Mar pa, Dwags po, 'Brug pa, as well as Phag mo gru and Rwa lung. See TBRC (P894).

¹⁰⁹ The sources agree in portraying dKon mchog *rgyal po* as involved in a feud with the king of Sa dam, in northwestern Yunnan. According to historical texts, the king of Nang chen joined forces with the son of a Mongol khan; the relationship with the Mongols was strengthened by a marriage alliance ('Jam dbyangs tshul khrims, 1997, 2: 73; 'Brong pa rgyal po, 2003: 36).

of g.Yer chen sgar, rapidly turned into the permanent settlement of Nang chen sgar, the capital of the kingdom. The oldest of dKon mchog rgyal po's sons, Tshe dbang phrin las mthar phyin, was recognised as the reincarnation of his grandfather A nyog, as prophesised by the 1st Che tshang skyabs mgon rgyal dbang dKon mchog ratna (1590-1654); at the age of twenty, he received from the Qing court the title, seal, and estate of *taiji*,¹¹⁰ through which his control over the territory of Nang chen was legitimised. In the following years, Tshe dbang phrin las mthar phyin went on pilgrimage to Lhasa, where he met with the 7th Dalai Lama sKal bzang rgya mtsho,¹¹¹ Pho lha nas bSod nams stobs

¹¹⁰ The title of *taiji* was granted by the Qing court to local rulers of tributary states; originally used by the Mongols for princes of blood, the title was later incorporated into the Qing ranking system and equated to the second class in the official rank (Ch. *èr pīn*) (Noda, 2016: 166).

¹¹¹ In 1718 the Qing troops entered Tibet from the north, from Xining through Kokonor and Tsa 'dam, and from the south, from Sichuan through Dar rtse mdo, Li thang, and 'Ba' thang, and occupied those territories (Petech, 1972: 66-67). At the time of the fall of Lhasa in 1720, the Manchu escorted the 7th Dalai Lama from sKu 'bum monastery, where he had been enthroned in 1716, and supervised his installment in Lhasa. The arrival of sKal bzang rgya mtsho in the Potala Palace marked the beginning of the Qing protectorate over Tibet; a territorial re-arrangement also took place, handing the control over the whole of southeastern Tibet – from Dar tse mdo to the borders of the central province of gTsang – to the Manchu governor of Sichuan. The agreement proved unsatisfactory over time, however, and was revised in 1725 (Petech, 1972: 77-78), when a border stone was erected at Bum La, a pass between the rDza chu and the 'Bri chu, the watershed between the two rivers marking the boundary. The area west of the watershed fell under the administration of the dGa' ldan pho brang, while the territories to the east were ruled by native chiefs under the supervision of the governor of Sichuan (Kolmaš, 1967: 41-42).

rgyas, and several other important lay and religious officials. The sources agree in presenting a very active king, who strove to make Nang chen a point of attraction for the most renowned bKa' brgyud masters of the time, such as the 3rd Khams sprul Kun dga' bstan 'dzin,¹¹² the 11th Karma pa Ye she rdo rje, the sTag lung pa,¹¹³ the Si tu Dharma ka ra,¹¹⁴ and the 2nd 'Bri gung chung tshang Don grub chos rgyal, who was received at Nang chen sgar in 1709, when he was only five year old ('Brong pa rgyal po, 2003: 36-38).¹¹⁵

1.2. The Administration under Manchu Control: The *Tusi* System¹¹⁶

While the process of decentralisation that started in the early 14th century brought the 'Ba' rom to the verge of a political and religious insignificance, the court of the Nang chen *rgyal po* continued to attract some of the most important

¹¹² The 3rd Khams sprul (1680-1728) received the transmissions of various bKa' brgyud subsects, *i.e.* Mar pa, Dwags po, 'Brug pa, as well as Phag mo gru and Rwa lung. See TBRC (P923). The Nang chen rgyal po was one of his disciples.

¹¹³ Possibly the sTag lung pa in question was bKra shis 'jam dpal rgya mtsho (1672-1706), who received transmissions of Mar pa, Dwags po, and sTag lung bKa' brgyud subsects, as well as the Phag mo gru. See TBRC (P951).

¹¹⁴ As Tshe dbang phrin las mthar phyin, Si tu Dharma ka ra too was a disciple of the 3rd Khams sprul.

¹¹⁵ The 2nd 'Bri gung chung tshang was born in 1704 in 'Jang yul, an area in Yunnan brought under the control of Nang chen at the time of dKon mchog phrin las rnam rgyal (mid-17th century).

¹¹⁶ For a detailed analysis of the Qing expansion in Khams, see Dai (2009) and Wang (2011).

spiritual figures of the time, maintaining a close relationship in particular with representatives of different bKa' brgyud subsects, *e.g.* the Karma and the 'Bri gung.

In 1731, Nang chen was placed under the administration of the Qing *amban* at Xining, but the control exerted by the Manchu representative was only nominal, since the *rgyal po* continued to wield political and, to some extent, religious control over his kingdom (Gruschke, 2004: 105-108; Turek, 2013: 117). The territories falling under the control of the Manchu government presented an administrative system typical of the peripheries of the Chinese empire, introduced for the first time during the Mongol Yuan dynasty and reproduced almost unaltered from the late 14th to the 19th centuries. In a five hundred-year span, China's southwest frontier changed from being a periphery governed during the Yuan (1271-1368) and Ming (1368-1644) dynasties by a multitude of local leaders, many of whom had been recognized as *tusi*,¹¹⁷ or

¹¹⁷ The confirmation of the local chieftains and headmen's status through the bestowal of hereditary imperial titles and official positions, often referred to as the *tusi* system, was one of the most effective ways adopted by the imperial dynasties to deal with minority people within the empire (Goldstein, 1994: 80).

native officials, into a region increasingly administrated in the late Ming and Qing (1644-1911) period by state-appointed civilian officials (Herman, 2006: 135).¹¹⁸ The importance of those titles to the Qing was more symbolic than economic, since it confirmed the indigenous leaders' nominal submission to the court.¹¹⁹ Without the need for costly military campaigns and the expensive regular bureaucracy, the Manchus were able to incorporate Khams within the imperial system by simply turning, in the official discourse, the Tibetan *rgyal po*, *de ba*, and *dpon po* into *tusi* (Tsomu, 2015: 26). The Qing control over the indigenous leaders and their territories – even those over whom the Manchus

¹¹⁸ As aptly pointed out by Tsomu (2015: 26), the Qing dynasty was compelled to follow the Ming precedent of indirect rule, since it did not have, at the time of its establishment, the political and economic resources to put the frontiers under its rule. The majority of the frontier leaders who, at the time of Ming, had accepted military-rank *tusi* titles continued to exercise authority over their localities, as they did prior to acquiring a *tusi* status. This indirect system of rule, where the local *tusi* were officially subordinate to the emperor but *de facto* independent of the state's control, changed by the late Ming with the implementation of the *gǎitǔ guī liú* policy, an administrative regularisation replacing local military-rank *tusi* with state-appointed civilian officials (Herman, 2006: 137-138). In the case of Khams, the *gǎitǔ guī liú* was not enforced until the Qing dynasty, and it consisted of multiple methods of frontier change, where each polity was managed differently; it was only in times of friction between local powers that the state had an opportunity for intervention, and even then there could be no guarantee of success (Wang, 2011:139).

¹¹⁹ Rockhill (1975: 221-222) clearly states the lack of authority of the Qing representatives over the local rulers. Their responsibilities were restricted to protect and administrate the Chinese trade, report to Dar rtse mdo on the conditions of their territory, and forward government couriers, troops, etc.

were believed to have a stronger influence, such as 'Ba' thang and Li thang – was nominal and weak at best.¹²⁰ The relationship between the local leaders and the Qing court fluctuated according to the strength of the latter. The titles bestowed by the emperors legitimated and bolstered the native chiefs' authority, and the military protection granted by the Qing troops was vital to prevent foreign invasion. At the same time though, the ambivalent attitude adopted by the Khams pa toward the Manchu suzerainty meant a constant strain on overlapping authorities, especially after the late Qing reforms in the early 20th century (Tsomu, 2015: 28-29).¹²¹

When Tshe dbang phrin las mthar phyin died at the age of thirty-seven, the throne was entrusted to his step-brother¹²² rDo rje tshe dbang who became known for his religious piety and generous support of monastic

¹²⁰ As late as the start of the 20th century, Khams remained a complex patchwork of independent and semi-independent polities, effectively beyond the direct administrative reach of both Qing and Lhasa officials (Relyea, 2015: 964).

¹²¹ For firsthand Western accounts of the Sino-Tibetan borders at the beginning of the 20th century, see Ekvall (1977), Stubel (1958), and Teichman (1922).

¹²² dKon mchog phrin las rnam rgyal, Tshe dbang phrin las mthar phyin's father, had two wives. With the first he had two sons, Tshe dbang phrin las mthar phyin and bKra shis mtsho rgyal, who died when twenty-six; the second wife bore a son, rDo rje tshe dbang, and a daughter ('Jam dbyangs tshul khriims, 1997: 73; 'Brong pa rgyal po, 2003: 38).

establishments; in 1737, an invitation was sent to the 3rd 'Bri gung Che tshang dKon mchog bstan 'dzin 'gro 'dul, who complied two years later. At the time of his visit, the master was welcomed by more than one hundred people, among whom were the Lho rin po che Chos kyi rgya mtsho, the mGar sprul Chos kyi nyi ma, and the great minister A shag rDo rje mgon po. The latter's rise to power started in 1724, when he was sent as representative of the king to the Qing court; the Yongzheng Emperor had summoned all the local chieftains, but three months went by before rDo rje tshe dbang answered the imperial call by entrusting the diplomatic mission to his minister. 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*,¹²³ *hor 'dra*,¹²⁴ *rgan chen*, and *bcu dpon*¹²⁵ (*Yul shul rdzong: dgon sde'i lo rgyus mdor bsdus*, n.d.: 281;

¹²³ It seems plausible to see in the *rgan res* and *rgan chen* the elder representative of the

'Brong pa rgyal po, 2003: 39). The king of Nang chen had jurisdiction over several tribes, the most important of which were the twenty-five Dem mchi, the seven A khro, and the three rGya khag; it was thanks to the diplomatic skills of A shag rDo rje mgon po that rDo rje tshe dbang ensured his predominance over the other lesser lords, each of whom desired to see his title equated to the *chan hu* rank. It is clear from the sources that the latter was considered a *primus inter pares*, since his appointment was meant to be the outcome of an internal election ('Brong pa rgyal po, 2003: 38-40).

At rDo rje tshe dbang's death, his older son, dKon mchog dpal 'byor tshe brtan, at the time only sixteen, was confirmed *chan hu* by imperial decree, and during his lifetime, many bKa' brgyud masters, *e.g.* Dwags po sprul sku, the 7th 'Brug chen dKar brgyud 'phrin las shing rta, continued to visit Nang chen.

communities (see Tuttle, 2011b). In other sections of the *Yul shul rdzong dgon sde'i lo rgyus mdor bsdus* (n.d.: 281) the simple term *rgan po*, "elder", is used.

¹²⁴ The term indicates local representatives or village headmen who functioned as the ruler's agents or deputies responsible for administering *corvée* labour (Tsomu, 2015:7).

¹²⁵ The title possibly corresponds to the Chinese *shí zǒng*, the commander of ten households (see Tuttle, 2011b). It was bestowed to lesser headmen usually appointed by the major headmen or were elected by the population of a village or a tribe to rule over them (Tsomu, 2015:10).

The next kings of Nang chen, dKon mchog dpal 'byor tshe brtan's son¹²⁶ and grandson, both went to Lhasa and had audiences with the 8th and 9th Dalai Lamas respectively; at the death of bSod nams chos 'phel, dKon mchog dpal 'byor tshe brtan's grandson, the power was held for a while by his wife and then handed down to his middle son dKon mchog lha rgyal, since the firstborn had been recognised as a *sprul sku*. dKon mchog lha rgyal showed a remarkable non-sectarian attitude, receiving teachings from masters belonging to the Sa kya, dGe lugs, bKa' brgyud, and rNying ma traditions ('Brong pa rgyal po, 2003: 40).¹²⁷

The friendly relationship between the 'Bri gung masters and the court of Nang chen continued throughout the latter part of the 19th century, when both the 30th and the 32nd 'Bri gung abbots, Lho Nus ldan rdo rje and Thugs rje nyi ma, visited the kingdom – in 1863 and 1878, respectively. In 1901, at the death of the Nang chen *rgyal po* sTobs skyid 'das pa, it was the son of one of his

¹²⁶ Don 'grub tshe brtan received his seal and title from the amban in Xining and married a woman from the Gra'u *be hu*, whose household controlled the area around sKye dgu mdo.

¹²⁷ 'Brong pa rgyal po (2003: 41) mentions the 5th 'Bri gung Che tshang Thugs rje nyi ma (1828-1881/1885/1889), the 14th Karma pa Theg mchog rdo rje (1798/1799-1868/1869), the 9th Si tu Padma Nyin byed dbang po (1774-1853), and the *gter ston* mChog gyur gling pa (1829-1870), one of the founders of the *ris med* movement.

mistresses, Tshe ring lha rgyal, who was raised to the throne, allegedly in accordance with what had been prophesised in the 15th century by the 5th Karma pa, De bzhin gshegs pa ('Brong pa rgyal po, 2003: 41).

From the early 13th up to the late 18th century, the kingdom of Nang chen presented the traits of a polity mainly dominated by the bKa' brgyud subsects, *i.e.* 'Ba' rom, 'Bri gung, and Karma. By favouring individual efforts in seclusion rather than a life in a collective, the strongly meditative bKa' brgyud school fostered the creation and diffusion of retreats and meditation centres – an “institutionalised, systematic aspect of hermitism” (Turek, 2013: 35) – that, in turn, became vital in supporting and facilitating the socio-religious revival carried out by late 19th and early 20th century *ris med* masters in the whole area of Nang chen.¹²⁸ The concept of the independent spirited “scholar-yogin” (Tib. *mkhas sgrub*), ideally embodied by the figure of Mi la ras pa, fit perfectly into “the 19th century eastern Tibetan, non-dGe lugs pa intellectual and religious milieu” (Turek, 2013: 31). The *ris med* activists keenly promoted Mi la ras pa's autonomous quest for genuine and authentic precepts and gurus as the

¹²⁸ On the *ris med* movement, see also Chapter 4, pp. 246-251.

expression of both pan-Buddhist hermitism¹²⁹ and lack of pronounced sectarian divisions.¹³⁰ Although 'Jam dbyangs mKhyen brtse'i dbang po (1820-1892), 'Jam mgon Kong sprul (1813?-1899), and 'Jam mgon Mi pham rgya mtsho (1846-1912) – to name only a few leading figures of the *ris med* movement – certainly drew attention to the role played by monastic traditions in creating religious dissent through the creation of rigid sectarian distinctions, they never advocated a rejection of monasticism; on the contrary, similarly to Mi la ras pa's pupil, sGam po pa bSod nams rin chen (1079-1153),¹³¹ they effectively associated retreat practice with monastic life (Turek, 2012: 439), spending as much time in solitary confinement at their hermitages as they did teaching at their monastic seats (Turek, 2012: 439; Turek, 2013: 31-32).

¹²⁹ The desire of the *ris med* masters to restore an unadulterated practice in accordance with the original Indian scriptures was accompanied by an emphasis on the genuineness of the indigenous Buddhist culture (Smith, 2001: 232). Mi la ras pa and other codified and founding figures of native lineages were therefore celebrated as products of the indigenous Buddhist legacy (Turek, 2013: 31).

¹³⁰ In the 10th-11th centuries, Buddhist schools (Tib. *chos lugs*) were still in the process of formation, and practitioners did not identify their religious identity through an affiliation to a certain school (Turek, 2013: 32).

¹³¹ Dwags po Lha rje ("The Physician from Dwags po"), a.k.a sGam po pa, originally a bKa' gdams monk, began one of the main disciples of Mi la ras pa. He played a major role in the institutionalisation of the bKa' brgyud school, providing Mi la ras pa's teaching with a monastic and scholastic setting. See Aris (1977: 218, fn. 32), Roberts (2007: 3), Turek (2013: 33).

In discussing the background, structure, and most important traits of the religious landscape of the kingdom of Nang chen between the late 13th and late 18th centuries, the previous subsections have also depicted the historical setting for the subsequent development and diffusion of the *ris med* values from the neighbouring kingdom of sDe dge. In the late 18th century and early 19th century, the emergence of non-sectarianism (Tib. *ris med*)¹³² in Buddhist thought and practice promoted the preservation of doctrines, ceremonies, texts, and minor lineages through a programme of search for, collection of, and passing down of various traditions and rituals; the non-sectarian approach had a long-lasting impact on the cultural and religious networks of the whole of eastern Tibet (Turek, 2013: 36). The tendency to a reinvigoration of a non-sectarian approach and the revival of minor lineages and practices emerged forcefully in late 19th century sDe dge through the activities of bKa' brgyud, rNying ma, and, to a lesser extent, Sa skya masters. However, despite an overall common understanding, 'Jam mgon Kong sprul (1813?-1899), 'Jam

¹³² Based on the Kong sprul's expression "*ris su ma chad pa*", *i.e.*, "undivided by bias", the term *ris med* occurs in different forms, *e.g.* *phyogs med pa*, *ris med pa*, *phyogs med ris med pa*. On the possible English renditions of the term, see Smith (1970: 19-21), Aris (1977: 206), Hartley (1997: 49), Turek (2013: 47).

dbyangs mKhyen brtse'i dbang po (1820-1892), 'Ju Mi pham rgya mtsho (1846-1912), and mChog gyur gling pa (1829-1870) were unlikely to have perceived themselves as founders of a *ris med* "movement".¹³³ Much of the activities and concepts at the core of the *ris med* was in fact a continuation of early ventures undertaken by previous masters in the attempt to reach consensus and synthesis (Smith, 2001: 227-274). The foremost aspiration of the non-sectarian approach was the creation of a new ideal of the Buddhist practitioner, in line with the figure of the hermit-scholar Mi la ras pa (Turek, 2013: 47); the disregard the great saint showed to possessions became the hallmark of a yogin free of attachment to wealth or worldly things, an attitude that 'Dzam yag himself describes as striving to achieve throughout his narrative. The ideal of high-mindedness, complete detachment, and strict self-discipline promoted by the *ris med* movement was thoroughly internalised by the trader – as proved by his *nyin deb*, filled as it is with references to Mi la ras pa. I have already mentioned in Chapter One the function of the "ideological I" in autobiographical writing; it is my understanding that this function is performed in 'Dzam yag's

¹³³ On the problematic identification of *ris med* as "movement", see Samuel (1993), Gardner (2006), Powers (1995), Oldmeadow (2012), and Turek (2013).

narrative by the figure of the great saint, the embodiment of ideal “personhood” as culturally and traditionally promoted in Tibet.¹³⁴

1.3. The Administration in the Republican Period (1912-1949)¹³⁵

With the outbreak of the Chinese Revolution, the Manchus stopped their proactive policies on the southwestern borders,¹³⁶ and the Tibetan government, taking advantage of the chaotic situation in inland China, removed all Manchu soldiers and officials from the territories under the control of the dGa’ ldan pho brang, thus starting a period of *de facto* independence. In 1913 the British proposed a tripartite conference on Tibet’s status to be held in India, at Simla;

¹³⁴ On the non-sectarian character of ‘Dzam yag’s pilgrimages, see Chapter Four, p. 246 onwards.

¹³⁵ For a study of the imperial expansion in Sichuan’s Tibetan borderlands in the late Qing dynasty, see Wang (2011).

¹³⁶ From the end of the 18th century and throughout the 19th century, the Qing dynasty became increasingly preoccupied with internal problems, and the court officials in Peking lost interest in intervening in Tibetan affairs. Things changed at the beginning of the 20th century, when the government of British India launched a campaign aimed at countering the supposed Russian influence in Tibet. In 1905, the Qing court started a series of new programs in the southwest with the intent of consolidating central authority over the area. These projects included the elimination of local autonomous Tibetan chiefdoms in Khams and the reduction of the number of monks in the monasteries, thus causing disaffection in the local population that culminated in an uprising led by monks (Lin, 2006: 9). The swift retaliation of the Manchus and the military occupation of the ‘Ba’ thang area, with the implementation of new rules to tighten the control over Khams and eventually all over Tibet, were nullified with the demise of the Qing dynasty in 1911 (Goldstein, 1989: 46; Goldstein, Sherap, and Siebenschuh, 2004: 2).

the plan advanced by Britain revolved around the creation of an Inner and Outer Tibet, under different degrees of Chinese and Tibetan control (Watson, 1966: 58). The Chinese government rejected the British proposal and forced its delegate to return to Beijing although he had already signed the draft. The failure to define the Sino-Tibetan frontier led to the border war of 1917-1918, when the Tibetan army attacked the Chinese garrison stationed in Chab mdo, claiming the whole of Khams. The British were once more forced to intervene in order to avoid more serious consequences; the truce determined the Sino-Tibetan border at the 'Bri chu river, where it remained until the early 1950s, when the troops of the People's Liberation Army entered Tibet and started the "peaceful liberation" of the country (Lin, 2006: 11).

In 1915, Nang chen was brought under the nominal administration of the Chinese warlord Ma Bufang, who came to replace the figure of the *amban*; Ma Bufang, who resided in the distant Xining, had no desire to become involved in local affairs, his interest being limited to the trade hub of sKye dgu mdo (Turek, 2013: 118). During the Nationalist era, and especially in the 1920s and 1930s,

public opinion in China from time to time urged the implementation of a nationalistic and revolutionary frontier policy, fueled by Chiang Kai-shek's reiterated claims over the "lost" peripheral territories, considered to be an inseparable part of the Republic of China. As it is often the case, however, propaganda and realpolitik were at odds; the Kuomintang government was eager to extend its power from the lower 'Bri chu to other parts of China, and control over Tibet was nothing more than a minor item on its political agenda (Lin, 2006: 13). Around 1931-1932, a series of clashes occurred along the Sino-Tibetan border between the Lhasa army and the semi-independent warlords¹³⁷ of Xikang¹³⁸ and Qinghai. Both the Tibetan government and the warlords based their maintenance on the commercial centres and the

¹³⁷ The politicization of the military that accompanied the 1911 revolution, as well as the increasing legitimization of the use of military power for political purposes, set the conditions for the nascent warlordism (McCord, 1993: 79). In the 1930s, military governors became more and more autonomous from the central government, and political decisions began to be taken by individual military commanders. As McCord (1993: 310) points out, "modern China's warlords emerged within [...] a continuing crisis of political authority that followed the fall of the imperial system".

¹³⁸ The idea of creating a province including the Khams territories on the eastern side of the 'Bri chu river emerged in late 19th century, when the Qing court was desperately attempting to counteract foreign imperialism through Han colonization of the frontier regions. It was only in 1939, under the Nationalist government that the Xikang province was finally established, but the project was short-lived, since the Communist government abolished it in 1955 (Wenbin, 2002: 60).

monasteries in the area. Dar rtse mdo was by far the most important of the trade hubs of the area since it was there that the tea traders gathered and arranged the transportation and the sale of hundreds of thousands of brick tea loads to central Tibet and south Qinghai. Other key centres were Chab mdo – seat of the governor-general on the Lhasa-controlled west bank of the 'Bri chu – and sKye dgu mdo – centre for the distribution and transfer of commodities in the south Qinghai area. Neither Lhasa nor Nanking was willing to relinquish control of these powerful sources of income (Lin, 2006: 59-60). The laws launched by the Nationalist government to reiterate the illegality of any form of local chieftdom on the peripheral regions failed to be implemented; the influence exerted by native headmen and kings surpassed that of the government officials. Furthermore, the Khams pa, despite being ethnically Tibetans, did not recognise the authority of Lhasa either, so similar problems were faced in the territories under the dGa' Idan pho brang administration (Lin, 2006: 67).

In 1932, when the army sent by the dGa' Idan pho brang to put down the turmoil that had spread throughout Khams arrived in sKye dgu mdo, the

accommodating attitude showed by the king gained the praise of the 2nd mChog gling dKon mchog 'gyur med; according to the latter, in fact, it was due to Tshe ring lha rgyal's wise behaviour that his subjects suffered no harm in spite of the widespread climate of violence. In 1930, the troops from Lhasa had been sent to aid the monks at Dar rgyas monastery, bringing dKar mdzes and Nya rong under control, but their victory was only temporary. In 1931 the Chinese army defeated the Tibetan soldiers and destroyed Dar rgyas, scattering the surviving monks on the western side of the 'Bri chu river (Wenbin, 2002: fn. 190, 62; 'Brong pa rgyal po, 2003: 42). Separate truces were signed between the Tibetans and the Ma generals¹³⁹ and the Chinese warlord Liu Wenhui in 1933 (Gruschke, 2004: 32; Lin, 2006: 65-66); encounters were held in Nang chen sgar, leading some to believe that the king played a role as facilitator (Shakabpa, 1976, 2: 230; 'Brong pa rgyal po, 2003: 42).

As late as the 1950s, neither Lhasa nor Nanking was capable of exerting effective control over the tribal society of the border areas of Xikang, Qinghai,

¹³⁹ Hui warlords, all surnamed Ma, who led armies and *de facto* controlled wide areas of Qinghai, Gansu, and Ningxia during the late Qing and Republican period. See Lipman (1984).

and Tibet. The resolution of cross-tribal or cross-border disputes was left in the hands of local chieftains, who settled the issue in accordance with the traditional tribal regulations, without the interference of local officials. The chieftain system, dismantled by the late Qing dynasty, was essentially revived in Xikang during the 1930s, giving rise to serious doubt on whether or not the Nationalist government was willing to incorporate Khams into its sphere of dominion (Lin, 2006: 69).

As a matter of fact, the "high degree autonomy" formula presented by Chiang Kai-shek in 1945 in a speech addressed to the Military Office Commission was not a novel proposition. Already in 1933, the frontier planners submitted a report to the Nationalist leader, describing how the Qing court regulated its Tibetan affairs, and how the dGa' Idan pho brang managed to exert control over the border regions by leaving a high degree of autonomy to the local officials. It was the planners' belief that the administration of the territories along the Sino-Tibetan border could be entrusted to local Tibetans; in 1932, the warlord of Sichuan Liu Wenhui formalized the position of some of his

Tibetan agents¹⁴⁰ by giving them a regular position in the military bureaucracy (Lawson, 2013: 304). Despite this high-sounding principle of high degree autonomy, the Nationalist government failed to establish a close relationship with Tibet, since the influential circles in the Kuomintang did not agree with Chiang's proposition (Lin, 2006:171-175). Furthermore, the promise of high degree autonomy played as a bargaining card *vis-à-vis* the Lhasa authorities never convinced the latter, whose final goal was complete independence (Lin, 2006: 180).

In his study on the Chinese rule in Khams between 1911 and 1949, Lawson (2013: 302) states that “the functioning of the Chinese warlord regimes in Khams and their ability to repress Khampa self-rule movements depended on their capacity to deal with two basic problems”, namely the necessity to

¹⁴⁰ Interestingly, the local agents of Liu's government were still called *tusi*, even though the *tusi* system had been abolished by Zhao Erfeng at the beginning of the 20th century (Lawson, 2013: 304).

raise more revenue locally¹⁴¹ and to find ways of transporting civil and military personnel without the aid of the Chinese central government.¹⁴²

After the 1911 revolution, the colonial regime created by the Qing in Khams was cut adrift by the emergence of warlordism. The Chinese warlords in Republican-period Khams were not real agents of the Kuomintang government;¹⁴³ the impossibility of receiving economic support from the Nanking government forced them to modify or elaborate aspects of the policies left by the Qing (Lawson, 2013: 312). Engrossed in their power games, the different warlords in China began to lose control over their territories to the

¹⁴¹ The warlords expanded taxes on livestock and land title, which translated in allowing private ownership of the *huāng*, a term literally indicating a space “overgrown with weeds” and later commonly understood as “wasteland” (Knechtges, 2015: 65); the *huāng* were considered in the Qing period to be state properties that could be rented, but not sold, to anyone who wished to cultivate them (Lawson, 2013: 308).

¹⁴² With the increasing bureaucratization that accompanied the developmental state brought by Chinese officials, the traditional *’u lag* system, the *corvée* labour for government transport, could not cope with the growing demands of the new apparatus. In the Republican period, many attempts were made to solve the problems connected to the *’u lag* system, one of which was the complete removal of the service and its replacement with government-owned ranches providing livestock for government and military purposes. By doing so, the Chinese hoped to bypass the local rulers whose power over transport equated actual control of every activity; it was not rare for local agents to use their position in the *’u lag* system to derive personal profit, thus carving for themselves niches of semi-independent authority (Lawson, 2013: 303-304).

¹⁴³ For a detailed study of the relation between the Nationalist regime and the Tibetan local leaders, see Lin (2006 and 2011).

native chiefs and kings. In the 1940s the control exerted by the Nationalists over Sichuan and Xikang provinces was constantly challenged by the local population. In 1949, when the Kuomintang finally lost the war against the Communists, many Nationalists escaped from mainland China and sought refuge in Taiwan (Kar rgyal don grub, 1992: 159-160).

1.4. The Advent of the Communists: From the “Peaceful Liberation” to the Dalai Lama’s Exile (1949-1959)

A year after the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (1949), the beloved king Tshe ring lha rgyal died while in retreat (’Brong pa rgyal po, 2003: 44), and his departure was accompanied by a process of transfer of power from local rulers to the Chinese communists; the old power structures were assimilated within the administration of the new People’s Republic of China. Tshe ring lha rgyal’s death, occurring concurrently with the Communist occupation of sKye dgu mdo, was later interpreted by some as the actualisation

of the 5th Karma pa's prophecy.¹⁴⁴ Be that as it may, the incorporation of the former king bKra shis tshe dbang stob rgyal (1910-1961) into the new Chinese power structures was realised in 1951, with his nomination as head of the newly established Tibetan People's Autonomous Prefecture of Yushu or Upper Khams (Tib. *Khams stod dam yu shul bod rigs sa khongs rang skyong*). The reforms of collectivisation introduced in Khams between 1956 and 1958 proved to be particularly difficult to implement in Nang chen, a largely pastoral area; the nomadic herdsmen were forced to settle and the secular *be hu* system was eventually eliminated. As is well known, the socialist collectivisation wreaked havoc on the local economy, causing the collapse of the socio-political structure and traditional ways of living, resulting in an extensive revolt that swept throughout Khams.¹⁴⁵ The first revolts started in 1956, when the launch of a new political program of democratic reforms made evident to the local

¹⁴⁴ According to 'Brong pa rgyal po (2003: 42), the 5th Karma pa had prophesied the advent of a great king, known as the "Nang chen thugs rje chen po" ("The Compassionate One of Nang chen"), whose death would mark the beginning of a degenerate era.

¹⁴⁵ The revolt taking place in Nang chen between the spring and the winter 1958 ended with the destruction of several monasteries, the execution of some of the incarnate lamas and the closure of all religious institutions in the Yushu Province until the late 1970s ('Brong pa rgyal po, 2003: 44-46; Turek, 2013: 119).

population the impossibility of a peaceful coexistence and collaboration with the Chinese (McGranahan, 2010: 67-68).¹⁴⁶ Sino-Tibetan relations plummeted in the following years, until they reached a breaking point in 1959 with the flight of the Dalai Lama from Lhasa and his subsequent exile in India.

2. The Internal Fragmentation of Khams: 'Dzam yag's *pha yul*

Until the 1949 invasion the border fixed at the upper valley of the 'Bri chu river was nothing more than a line on a map,¹⁴⁷ with no major difference in terms of administration between the territories on the western and eastern banks. In both cases the day-to-day administration was left in the hands of indigenous chieftains and kings, who were nominally under the control of Tibetan or Chinese representatives, whose seats were respectively in Chab mdo and Dar rtse mdo.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁶ Maltreatment of local people by the PLA troops had already started in eastern Tibet at the beginning of the 1950s. For a detailed account of the Tibetan allegations of violation of specific articles of the universal declaration of human rights, see the report to the International Commission of Jurists by its legal inquiry committee on Tibet (1960: 81-133).

¹⁴⁷ In relation to his travel along the Xikang and Qinghai border in 1947, Magot (1955: 109) says: "The empirical line which Chinese cartographers, more concerned with prestige than with accuracy, drew on their maps bears no relation to accuracy".

¹⁴⁸ Xining was the seat of A mdo province.

The majority of the publications coming from the Tibetan community in exile deal with the territories on the eastern bank of the 'Bri chu;¹⁴⁹ nevertheless, the complexity of the political fragmentation of Khams and the concurrent existence of “semi-independent tribes, states, and monastic principalities” (Aris, 1992: 13) allow for the use of those works as an example of the political and social situation in the region, even in those areas under the nominal control of the dGa' ldan pho brang mentioned by 'Dzam yag,¹⁵⁰ who travelled through them on his journey to the central provinces of dBus and gTsang.

As McGranahan (2010: 41-42) points out,

The region of Kham [...] consists of some thirty-odd *pha yul*, a term which translates literally as “father land” and structurally as native place, areas, or territories. Each *pha yul* is composed of a series of villages and monasteries of varying sizes and sects, often separated by massive mountain ranges and the rivers that cut through them. Prior to 1950, Khampa systems of governance varied by area – some were kingdoms, others were chiefdoms, and still others were governed by hereditary lamas. The entirety of

¹⁴⁹ For examples of modern local histories of eastern Tibetan kingdoms, such as sDe dge and Cha phreng, see Kar rgyal don grub (1992) and Yangs gling rdo rje (1995).

¹⁵⁰ Between 1944 and 1945, 'Dzam yag travelled through sDe dge, Lha thog, Chab mdo, Ri bo che, and Nag chu, finally reaching dBus through 'Phan po.

some *pha yul* was one administrative unit, while other *pha yul* were governed via separate internal units [...] *Pha yul* were flexible in form, had no generic or shared administrative format, and were defined as much by social markers as by political ones [...] Feuding was common, and bandits roamed the mountainous terrain. Differences between *pha yul* were marked in both secular and sacred ways, through dialect, clothing, and ornamentation as well as through lamas, sects, and the deities associated with local landscapes [...] For the most part, daily life in Kham was regulated not by direct or even absentee Lhasan (or Chinese) authorities, but by local rulers.

Moving from a state level to a regional one provides a valuable sense of how Tibetans perceived, organized, and understood their local environment; the non-sectarian developments that occurred within the monastic and hermitic network of Nang chen up to the mid-20th century played a fundamental role in shaping 'Dzam yag's approach to pilgrimage and ritual activities.¹⁵¹ All the historical studies presented so far, *i.e.* 'Jam dbyangs tshul khrims et al. (1995-1997, 1: 51-52), 'Brong pa rgyal po (2003: 81-82), Tshangs gsar (2005: 237-238), agree in describing Nang chen as "the nest of the cotton-clad ones,"¹⁵² the

¹⁵¹ On 'Dzam yag's non-sectarianism, see Chapter Four, p. 246 onwards.

¹⁵² The term *ras tshang* refers in this context to the hermitism of the 'Ba' rom bKa' brgyud, whose widespread activities supported the emergence of Nang chen as an organised polity in the mid-13th century ('Jam dbyangs tshul khrims et al., 1995-1997: 51-52; Tshangs gsar, 2005: 237-238).

community of meditators” (Tib. *ras tshang sgom sde*) – a congenial environment for the meditative retreats and ritual activities of the *ris med* hermit-scholars, the majority of whom had quite an eclectic background that may have encouraged a non-sectarian and universalistic approach.¹⁵³

Furthermore, the prominence of the bKa’ brgyud tradition favoured the spreading of non-sectarian forms of hermitages and practices;¹⁵⁴ masters of different schools travelled from monastery to monastery, offering empowerments and teachings and creating new spiritual connections, often interacting with local lords and wealthy families.

’Dzam yag’s narrative corroborates the diffusion, almost at a capillary level, of a *ris med* mindset within the social and religious environment of

¹⁵³ Kong sprul, born into a Bon family, initially received rNying ma teachings, but made his name as a Karma bKa’gyud; mKhyen brtse, a Sa skya-Ngor *sprul sku*, studied at Zhe chen and took his monastic vows at sMin sgrol gling, both rNying ma institutions; mChog gling first joined the ’Bri gung bKa’ brgyud monasteries of dPal med and Nang chen sgar, but his fame was mainly connected to the teachings of the rNying ma. For more information on the *ris med* founders, see, among others, Smith (2001: 235-272), Schaik (2011: 165-169), Powers and Templeman (2012), Turek (2013: 44-45).

¹⁵⁴ Since the 12th century, the developing bKa’ brgyud monasticism provided, to use Samuel’s (1993: 477) words, “a context in which the *clerical* and the Tantric synthesis could develop further”. Mi la ras pa’s successor sGam po pa (1079-1153) had the merit of bringing hermitism down from the mountain and into the monasteries. On sGam po pa’s changes to the bKa’ brgyud curriculum, see Guenther (1986).

eastern Tibet prior to the Communist invasion, a non-sectarian approach that imbues his experience of the world and the origin of which has to be traced back to his *pha yul*, Rab shis.

2.1. Rab shis: Geographical Features and Tribal Divisions

In his foreword to the *nyin deb*, the chief editor Ācārya 'Jam dbyangs dbang rgyal depicts Rab shis in the following terms,

In the district known by all, called the Six Ranges of Lower Dokham, there is 'Bri zla zal mo sgang, home of spotted dris and yaks [...] In particular, because the region is very beautiful and pleasant, endowed with various auspicious marks,¹⁵⁵ it is called Rab shis or Rag shul.¹⁵⁶

A similar description is provided by the *Yul shul rdzong: dgon sde'i lo rgyus mdor bsdus*, in the section concerning the monastic seat of Klung dgon dGa' Idan thub bstan chos 'khor gling; following a literary trope recurring in

¹⁵⁵ References to the presence of auspicious geomantic marks represent a trope of Tibetan literature on sacred geography. For more information on literary representations of sacred geography within the Tibetan literary canon, see Huber (1990; 1997a; 1997b; 1999a; 1999b; 2003; 2004; 2006; 2008), Roesler (2007), Buffetrille (1998; 2003).

¹⁵⁶ *smad mdo khams sgang drug ces yongs su grags pa'i nang tshan / zal mo 'bri g.yag gi bsti gnas / 'bri zla zal mo sgang zhes [...] bye brag ljongs rab tu mdzes shing nyams dga' ba / bkra shis pa'i dge mtshan du ma dang ldan pas / rab shis sam / rag shul zhes 'bod pa* (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 1).

texts on sacred geography, Rab shis is here presented as “a land utterly propitious and blessed”¹⁵⁷ with “several auspicious geomantic marks in the main and intermediate directions”.¹⁵⁸

Both texts agree in portraying a territory divided into eighteen socio-economic entities, called “large groups” (Tib. *shog chen*)¹⁵⁹ or “tribes” (Tib. *sde shog*),¹⁶⁰ placed under the rule of the Rab shis *be hu*. Albeit part of the kingdom of Nang chen, 'Dzam yag's *pha yul* was only marginally affected by the *rgyal po*'s authority, since the polity was, in all intents and purposes, “more of a formal kingdom than an actual monarchy” (Turek, 2013: 118). The lord of Rab shis was part of a group of six local *be hu*¹⁶¹ who controlled the area around sKye dgu mdo; among them, the Rab shis *be hu* was in charge of a total of two thousand small households (Tib. *dud tshang*) and eight thousand and sixty-five

¹⁵⁷ [...] *rab tu dge zhing bkra shis pa'i yul ljongs* (*Yul shul rdzong: dgon sde'i lo rgyus mdor bsdus*, n.d.: 49).

¹⁵⁸ [...] *phyogs dang phyogs mtshams rnams su sa'i dpyad la dge ba'i mtshan ma du ma dang ldan par* (*Yul shul rdzong: dgon sde'i lo rgyus mdor bsdus*, n.d.: 49).

¹⁵⁹ [...] *rab shis be hu mam tshang gis bdag tu bzung ba'i rab shis shog chen bco brgyad gyi sa [...]* (*Yul shul rdzong: dgon sde'i lo rgyus mdor bsdus*, n.d.: 49).

¹⁶⁰ [...] *rab shis dpon dang 'bangs sde shog bco brgyad ces su grangs pa'i yul [...]* (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 2).

¹⁶¹ The six subdivision were Rab shis *be hu*, Ra rda *be hu*, Bu chen *be hu*, Gra'u *be hu*, Rong po *be hu*, and A khro *be hu* (*Yul shul rdzong: dgon sde'i lo rgyus mdor bsdus*, n.d.: 287).

people (*Yul shul rdzong: dgon sde'i lo rgyus mdor bsdus*, n.d.: 279).¹⁶² The lineage of the ruling family of Rab shis came into being with the creation of the *be hu* ranking system; the title was hereditary, handed down from father to son. The territories under the jurisdiction of the Rab shis *be hu* included seventeen¹⁶³ *be cang* and four *rgan chen*. The Kha stag 'gan stobs household, to which 'Dzam yag belonged, is listed among the *be cang* of Rab shis; its villages were located in 'Be ma zhog kha, and counted 140 families (Tib. *dud khyim*) and 563 people, numbers that made of it one of the biggest territorial entities under the Rab shis *be hu* (*Yul shul rdzong: dgon sde'i lo rgyus mdor bsdus*, n.d.: 280).

Nang chen presented a decentralised political structure without an elaborate bureaucracy, where the secular rulers and the monastic institutions shared authority over the population. Relationships among these political entities were fluid and constantly subject to the changing interest of the

¹⁶² The amount included both lay and monastic population (*Yul shul rdzong: dgon sde'i lo rgyus mdor bsdus*, n.d.: 279).

¹⁶³ Interestingly, both the *Yul shul rdzong dgon sde'i lo rgyus mdor bsdus* (n.d.: 49) and 'Dzam yag's *nyin deb* (1997: 2) mention eighteen, and not seventeen, socio-economic entities, addressing them as "large groups" (Tib. *shog chen*) and "tribes" (Tib. *sde shog*) respectively.

different parts – marriage alliances, mutual agreement, and feuding were at the base of the network connecting the various leaders.

It is now time to turn our full attention to 'Dzam yag and the events that changed his life, transforming a wealthy *tshong dpon* into a wandering pilgrim.

3. Refugee, Tradesman, or Pilgrim? The Beginning of 'Dzam yag's Journey

3.1. "I have been thrown as a new beggar into the world": A Heart-

Breaking Farewell

'Dzam yag's misfortunes started at the beginning of the 1940s, when he became involved in a feud between representatives of the Rab shis *be hu* and some of the major reincarnations of Klung dgon dGa' Idan thub bstan chos 'khor gling. Before presenting 'Dzam yag's own description of the events leading to the requisition of his properties, I would like to pause, albeit briefly, on the different characters mentioned in the account, in order to shed some light on the relationships between them as well as the repercussions their feud had on Rab shis as a socio-political unit.

According to 'Dzam yag's narrative, the death of mThu stobs rnam rgyal, at the time head of the Rab shis *be hu* household, left a power vacuum soon filled by his brother dGe don and by the lama 'Jam seng, an important reincarnation of Klung dgon monastery. Their rule, described by the author as "strict", soon became unpopular and rumours began to be spread to create disagreements between the ruling household and the two leaders. The sudden demise of Kar rdor, mThu stob rnam rgyal's older son, occurring at Klung dgon, was presented to the family members of the Rab shis *be hu* as a murder perpetrated by dGe don and 'Jam seng, with the collaboration of 'Dzam yag himself, in order to get rid of the legitimate heir.

In his own words,

[...] while the lord of Rab shis, mThu stobs rnam rgyal, had held a powerful and elevated status as a ruler, his subjects' good fortune was slightly inferior. After he passed away in Chamdo [Tib. Chab mdo], since the political rule of both his brother, lord dGe don and the *sprul sku* 'Jam seng¹⁶⁴ was strict, several people, such as Ba

¹⁶⁴ The *Yul shul rdzong: dgon sde'i lo rgyus mdor bsdus* (n.d.: 27) mentions four 'Jam seng reincarnations, without providing any chronology for the lineage. It is possible though that the master mentioned in 'Dzam yag's diary may be the fourth and last one of the line, 'Jam dpal bsod nams rgya mtsho. This hypothesis finds corroboration in the mentioning of the third reincarnation, 'Jam dbyangs lung rigs seng ge, as spiritual teacher of 'Jam dbyangs blo gter

gor, Blo brtan, and others were seized by the demons of bias and envy. While they were causing various disagreements between the ruling household, dGe don, 'Jam seng and myself, the older son [of the household], lord Kar rdor, the one who was caring the most about the subjects and me, suddenly died in Klung dgon due to bad circumstances. [As for] the cause of that, we were blamed for his sickness, since it was said that he died because lord dGe don, lama 'Jam seng and myself poisoned him. Actually, these unfounded accusations were made exclusively for getting lord dGe don and lama 'Jam seng to reveal their strategy and confiscating my wealth. In the 12th month of the Iron Dragon Year in the 16th *rab byung* (January 1941), soldiers were sent from the military encampment of the household to Klung dgon and many lamas, the most important of whom was lama 'Jam seng, were killed. I was taken from Klung dgon as a prisoner [and brought] to the household encampment. Iron chains were put on my hands and legs and, on top of that, many people tied my arms with ropes. I was fastened to a pole, put into captivity and punished in various ways. It didn't matter how much I pleaded by giving reasons about the innocence of the lama, the teacher and myself [...]

I was sentenced without any guilt to six months of prison and, as for the wealth and estate that I accumulated in a lifetime, [so much] that I didn't have to wish for any other human wealth, all this was taken away from me. I was ousted as a new beggar, with just my body.¹⁶⁵

dbang po, a Sa skya master of Ngor E wam chos Idan who lived between 1847 and 1914 ('Jam dbyangs blo gter dbang po, 1998: 910-911).

¹⁶⁵ *rab shis dpon mthu stobs rnam rgyal zhes / chab srid dpal gyi mngon par mtho ba zhig
bzhugs yod pa der rab shis sde 'bangs bsod nams kyi bgo skal cung zad dman te / chab mdo
ru dgongs pa rdzogs rjes / khong gi sku mched dpon dge don dang sprul sku 'jam seng gnyis
kyis srid dbang btsan pas / ba gor blo brtan sogs mi sna 'ga' zhig phyogs lhung dang phrag dog*

The terrible events experienced by 'Dzam yag find historical validation in the *Yul shul rdzong: dgon sde'i lo rgyus mdor bsdus*, albeit within a less dramatic and exhaustive narrative.

In the Iron Dragon Year of the 16th *rab byung* (1940), he [*i.e.* A ra ba tsa, one of the Klung dgon reincarnations] left [searching for] refuge from the disturbances of the fighting in Rab shis, and all the wealth and possessions of the *bla brang* [=monastic estate] were confiscated.¹⁶⁶

gdon gyis snying la zin te / dpon tshang dang / dge don / bla ma 'jam seng / nga rang bcas kyis dbar dbyen dkrug sna tshogs bgyid bzhin pa'i skabs / sras che ba dpon kar rdor zhes / 'bangs dang nga rab bcas la gzigs skyong che ba de klung dgon du glo bur rkyen ngan gyis 'das grongs shor bar / de yi rgyu rkyen dpon dge don / bla ma 'jam seng / nga rang bcas kyis dug sprad pa'i dbang gyis grongs pa red / ces snyung ba'i nyes khag bzhag ste / don du dpon dge don dang bla ma 'jam seng gnyis kyis jus bstan len rgyu dang / nga rang gyi rgyu nor rtsis bzhes bya rgyu kho nar / ma nyes khag g.yogs byas te / rab byung 16 lcags pho 'brug lo'i zla 12 tshes la / dpon tshang bzhugs sgar nas klung dgon du dmag mi btang ste / bla ma 'jam seng gtsos grwa slob mang po bkrongs / nga rang klung dgon nas bzung khrid kyis dpon tshang sgar la / rkang lcags dang lag lcags / ma tshad mi mang gyis lag pa rgyab la thag pas bsdams / ka ba la btags te btson du bcugs pa sogs khirms spyod sna tshogs byas shing / nged bla ma dpon slob la nag nyes sna gcig med lugs rgyu mtshan gang gi sgo nas ji tsam zhus kyang [...] khyon bsdams zla ba drug khirms 'og du nyes med khirms sbyar dang / tshe gcig bsags pa'i nor longs sbyod gnas gzhi dang bcas pa ni / mi nor gzhan la smon mi dgos pa zhig yod pa / de thams cad rtsis bzhes byas te / nga rang lus gcig pur gsar sprang btang ba (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 3-4).

¹⁶⁶ *rab byung bcu drug pa'i lcags lug [*'brug] phyi lo 1940 lor / rab shis nang 'khrug sogs kyis dus zing gyi nyen g.yol la phebs skabs bla brang gi sku rgyu phyag zog yongs rdzogs 'phrog (Yul shul rdzong: dgon sde'i lo rgyus mdor bsdus, n.d.: 20).*

The A ra ba tsa reincarnation¹⁶⁷ fled to an unidentified nearby location, where he took under his protection some disciples and entered into a secret union with a woman called bsTan 'dzin sgrol ma, thus renouncing his abbatial rights. On his deathbed, he asked for permission to sit for a last time on his throne, but his plea fell on deaf ears with the local lord. The impossibility of reinstating himself on the monastic seat was said to have negatively affected his reincarnation who died before being enthroned, at the tender age of five (*Yul shul rdzong: dgon sde'i lo rgyus mdor bsdus*, nd.: 20).

Even though no direct mention is made in the *Yul shul rdzong: dgon sde'i lo rgyus mdor bsdus* of violent acts against monks,¹⁶⁸ it would seem clear that the events described in the two texts may indeed be the same.

3.2. Rivalries and Power Struggles in Rab shis

¹⁶⁷ The *Yul shul rdzong: dgon sde'i lo rgyus mdor bsdus* (n.d.: 27-28) lists eleven reincarnation lineages seated at Klung shod gling monastery: rMu za, Nyi sprul, 'Jam seng, rNam dga', sKal rdo, Ba ra, A ra ba tsa, Be sprul, Ra sgra, Byon sprul, g.Yang bla ma. The rMu za, 'Jam seng, and A ra ba tsa lamas are mentioned in 'Dzam yag's *nyin deb* as well.

¹⁶⁸ The murder of monks, despite being an act punishable with death sentence, occurred frequently during armed skirmishes involving monasteries. See Thargyal (2007: 192).

The Qing tendency to avoid interfering with local affairs causing struggles for power and feuds among influential individuals – often representatives of different branches of the same ruling family – remained a common feature of 20th century Khams. In the light of that, 'Dzam yag's involvement in the controversy between the ruling head of the Rab shis *be hu* household and some of the leaders of Klung dgon was just an unfortunate event. Judging from the narrative, he seemed to have been nothing more than a wealthy pawn dragged into a game of power which ended up crushing him. Whether or not he knowingly participated in Kar rdor's murder – supposing he had been killed – is something we can only speculate about. Taking into account both 'Dzam yag's and the *Yul shul rdzong: dgon sde'i lo rgyus mdor bsdus*'s narratives, his participation in any kind of subversive plan seems rather unlikely, especially if he had enjoyed – as he says – Kar rdor's protection. His innocence is further supported by the lack of actual proof against him: after a six-month imprisonment, he was released virtually unharmed, the only long-lasting punishment imposed upon him being of economic nature. As 'Dzam yag himself suggests, the confiscation of his land and property appeared to have

been the real motivation behind his incarceration. In his own words, “these unfounded accusations were made exclusively for [...] confiscating my wealth”.

Conflicts having economic and political causes were not uncommon in eastern Tibet, where the competition among local aristocratic families, internally weakened by inner-party personal rivalries and factional feuds, led to a process of political disintegration in the 20th century and the emergence – especially in the area of sDe dge – of small “kingdoms”, whose main concern was to exert control over their opponents. With the exclusion of those areas directly bordering China, *i.e.* 'Ba' thang and Li thang,¹⁶⁹ the influence of the Chinese government in the region was only mildly felt, at least until the beginning of the 1950s.¹⁷⁰

As stated by Thargyal (2007: 18),

¹⁶⁹ By the late 19th century, many Chinese officials started to re-evaluate the importance played by the Khams border in the maintenance of political and economic stability in Sichuan; thus, at the turn of the 20th century, small-scale land reclamation projects began in the 'Ba' thang area (Coleman, 2014: 190-191).

¹⁷⁰ Whereas the Tibetan government lost control over Amdo in 1724, the Sino-Tibetan border in Khams kept fluctuating between 1865 and 1932, crystallizing eventually in 1932 at the Upper Yangtze River (Tib. *'Bri chu*). From that year onwards, all the ethnic Tibetan areas east of the river fell under the administration of China (Goldstein, 1994: 86).

[...] the prevailing political environment in Dege, and in Khams in general up to the mid-20th century, had an impact, however discretely, upon the interrelationships between Tibetan superordinates and subordinates throughout the region. That is to say, political developments made local agents increasingly aware of unprecedented scope or room of maneuvering or exploiting their opportunity situations.

The absolute and rather arbitrary power exerted by the lord of Rab shis perfectly fitted the political environment of the time, in which “individual and provincial ambition and aspirations could be asserted in an unprecedented manner” (Thargyal, 2007: 184). At the beginning of the 20th century, the mosaic-like structure of Khams included up to twenty-five political entities – ranging from independent and semi-independent native states and kingdoms to stateless areas – virtually unable to coexist peacefully. The lingering inter-state conflicts over land, the schemes and feuds within the ruling households, and other internal and external factors that weakened the political cohesion of the region contributed, paradoxically, to maintain its relative independence from any foreign power, be it the dGa’ ldan pho brang or the Chinese government (Thargyal, 2007: 183-184).

Religious leaders did not hesitate to get involved in the competition for the control of land either, and cases similar to Rab shis, where tensions between a monastery and an aristocratic family resulted in an open conflict, were not rare. For example, in the early 20th century, a skirmish over a small border village arose between the ruling household of sDe dge and the hierarch of a monastery located northwest of the kingdom. Even though the quarrel was settled in favour of the sDe dge household, feelings of resentment kept simmering up to the point of attracting the attention of the Chinese resident in Xining, who had, at least nominally, juridical and political authority over the estates of the monastery. By involving a foreign power in an internal dispute, the hierarch made it virtually impossible for the lord of sDe dge to advance any claim over the monastic land (Thargyal, 2007: 185).

The swift and brutal reaction of the Rab shis *be hu* highlights the inability of the Lhasa authorities to exert firm control over the eastern Tibetan provinces. Since its installment in 1918, the position of the Governor-general of mDo smad

(Tib. *mdo smad spyi khyab*)¹⁷¹ became – at least nominally – the supreme judicial authority of the province; as such, all local cases of murder were expected to be reported to his seat in Chab mdo. Nevertheless, in peripheral areas, where control was weakened by distance and the greater independence of the local rulers, justice was often administrated directly through the application of mediation, payment of indemnities, and physical punishment (Ekvall, 1964: 1111). The decision of the Rab shis *be hu* household to assume the right to condemn and punish the “seditious” monks of Klung dgon and, with them, 'Dzam yag, appears therefore in line with customs in force in many areas of Khams and A mdo as late as the mid-20th century.

3.3. Jurisdiction and Punishment

As stressed by Ekvall (1964) in his study on law and individuals among Tibetan nomads, the individual's reaction to the pressure of the community consensus to a large extent depends on the status of the community itself.

¹⁷¹ The role of the mDo smad *spyi khyab* was to act as governor-general, administrating from his seat in Chab mdo the areas of eastern Tibet under direct control of the dGa' ldan pho brang. The post was held concurrently by one of the *bka' blon*. Parallel positions to the mDo smad *spyi khyab* were those of the Lho kha *spyi khyab*, the governor-general of the southern provinces, and of the Gro mo *spyi khyab*, the governor-general of the Chu 'bi Valley (Petech, 1973: 13-14).

Whereas in a nomadic community the individual was free to pack up his tent and leave the encampment for some time, members of sedentary and semi-pastoral communities did not enjoy the same freedom. The confiscation of property and social estrangement imposed on 'Dzam yag were therefore rather likely outcomes in case of conflict.

[I]f pressured beyond what he [*i.e.* the individual] was willing to bear, he were to choose flight and alienation from his community, he would have to leave the house and fields behind him and could hope to get away with the barest minimum of personal wealth (Ekvall, 1964: 1113).

In his own recollection of the events, 'Dzam yag claims to have been kept in prison for about six months, waiting for his trial; judged guilty of treason, he was stripped of all his wealth and forced to live, in his own words, "as a beggar". At the time of his capture, the author's hands and feet were bound with iron chains, a physical punishment used in premodern Tibet as a form of reprimand for the most common crimes.

'Dzam yag's rather offhanded account of the time spent as a prisoner at the lord's military camp can be ascribed to an understandable unwillingness to recall what must have been one of the darkest periods of his life. Nevertheless,

the few hints scattered in the text may be just enough to sustain some speculations. He was, by his own admission, “fastened to a pole” and “punished in various way”, most probably by whipping.

While the central goal of the imperial Confucianism was the creation of a regularised society, which prized above all social and political stability,¹⁷² the Tibetan legal system was influenced by the doctrine of harmony between politics and religion (Tib. *chos dang srid kyi khrims*), a concept that acquired paramount importance with the institution of the dGa’ Idan pho brang government in the mid-17th century. The legal codes in use in Lhasa until the Chinese invasion, known in Tibetan as the *zhal lce bcu drug* (“the sixteen laws”),¹⁷³ claimed to be based on the “sixteen pure human rules” (Tib. *mi chos gtsang ma bcu drug*)¹⁷⁴ and demonstrated how Buddhist ethics became intimately intertwined with the political and legal legitimacy of the central

¹⁷² For a thorough study on the spirit of traditional Chinese law, see MacCormack (1996).

¹⁷³ Copies of the *zhal lce* were printed and distributed all over Tibet (Pirie, 2013: 172).

¹⁷⁴ A moral code said in traditional Tibetan historiography to have been developed by King Srong btsan sgam po in the 7th century.

Tibetan polity (Pirie, 2006: 174).¹⁷⁵ Nevertheless, the application of the law in local contexts diverged quite extensively from the moral rules dictated by the *zhal lce*; the Tibetan legal system was a complex one, in which different elements kept overlapping and a great deal of freedom was granted to the local administrators, even more so in peripheral areas as Khams.

As 'Dzam yag's case illustrates, justice was delivered when the events that occurred were agreed upon by all the parties involved. In order to do so, suspects were kept in jail until their confession matched the accusations. In Tibet, as in China, whipping was considered a legitimate means to expedite the process of reaching factual consonance, and it could occur before, during, and after the imprisonment (French, 2002: 302; 322).

In pre-1959 Tibet, the majority of criminal offences were punished through a combination of economic, physical, and labour punishments, each of which found its own *raison d'être* within the traditional law codes. The application of physical punishment addressed both the need to impress on the

¹⁷⁵ On the historicity of Tibet's legal traditions, especially those attributed to Srong btsan sgam po, see Uray (1972) and Schuh (1984).

offender the gravity of his actions and to educate the populace, showing them the dangers entailed in breaking the laws. Economic penalties – by compensating the victim – restored the social balance and served to discourage recidivism (French, 2002: 320-321). After being physically punished through incarceration and torture, 'Dzam yag was stripped of all his wealth and properties, which had been judged to be the economic retribution for the part he played in disrupting the social order of the region.

4. 'Dzam yag's Pilgrimage: Religious Zeal or Survival Instinct?

'Dzam yag's *nyin deb* opens on the 5th month of the Monkey Year (June 1944) with the author's decision to depart from the monastery of Klung dgon and set off on a pilgrimage without a fixed destination (Tib. *phyogs med kyi gnas bskor*), following the ideal of the wandering pilgrim that in Mi la ras pa had its finest representative. Released from prison in 1941 – an event that the trader defined, in a rather dramatic fashion, as the ousting of a “new beggar” (Tib. *gsar sprang*) – the trader nonetheless managed to commission a full reading of the *bKa' 'gyur* by the monks of the Lam rim college (Tib. *grwa*

tshang) of the local dGe lugs establishment, a task for which he donated 258 silver coins (Tib. *dn̄gul srang*). Faithful to his training as a merchant, the author kept accurate track of all the gifts and money he distributed during his travels; for now it will suffice to present as an example of his recording skills the list of offerings he made to his root-guru¹⁷⁶ and other important reincarnations who assisted him at the time of his departure.

In the 8th month [September 1944], in the presence of lama rMu za sKyabs mgon rDo rje 'chang and his [four] disciples, I sought from the five of them the One Hundred Empowerments of Vairocana and made an offering of one hundred silver *srang*. After that, I offered to the Omniscient Lord sKyo brags bsTan pa'i snying po who came to Klung dgon two released yaks,¹⁷⁷ one small brick of tea, Chinese silver coins, and silk [...]
I asked rDo rje 'chang sKal bzang rnam rgyal, the master of the doctrine of [Klung dgon], the matchless reincarnation in the three worlds, for supplications and aspirational prayers, [offering him] brown sugar and very white silk. After that, having offered brown

¹⁷⁶ rDo rje 'chang sKal bzang rnam rgyal, introduced in the *Yul shul rdzong: dgon sde'i lo rgyus mdor bsdus* (n.d.: 29) as one of the abbots of the Lam rim college of Klung dgon.

¹⁷⁷ Life liberation or "animal release" (Tib. *tshe thar*) – the rescue of animals in danger of being slaughtered and their release into their natural habitat – was and still is an important practice in Tibetan Buddhism. The animals, cared for by a family or a monastery, were left free to graze without harm until their natural death. The practice is considered to be a means of cultivating compassion and gaining karmic merit. For more information on the ceremony of "animal release", see Shiu and Stokes (2008).

sugar and very white silk, I paid my respect to lama rMu za sKyabs mgon rDo rje 'chang.¹⁷⁸

Before leaving the monastery of Klung dgon, 'Dzam yag sought teachings from bsTan pa'i snying po, a visiting reincarnation from sKyo brags,¹⁷⁹ who on that occasion bestowed upon him a long-life empowerment (Tib. *tshe dbang*),¹⁸⁰ "slapping [him] with the hand and press[ing him] down with his foot".¹⁸¹ Furthermore, the venerable lama instructed 'Dzam yag according to a vision he had had regarding the trader's immediate future.

¹⁷⁸ *zla 8 tshes la bla ma rmu za skyabs mgo rdo rje 'chang dpon slob lnga yi mdun nas kun rigs rnam par snang mdzad kyi dbang brgya zhus nas dngul sgor mo gcig brgya 100 yis yon phul / de nas rje thams cad mkhyen pa skyo brags bstan pa'i snying po klung dgon du phebs pa la rang gis tshe g.yag gnyis / ja bag chung gcig / dā yang dang dar bcas phul te [...]* *thub bstan chos 'khor gling gi bstan pa'i spyi bdag rdo rje 'chang skal bzang rnam rgyal zhes / srid pa gsum na 'gran zla dang bral ba'i yang srid dam pa la / gsol ba dang smon lam zhus te / bu ram dang dar rab dkar bcas / de nas bla ma rmu za skyabs mgon rdo rje 'chang la bu ram dan dar rab dkar bcas phul nas gus 'dud byas* (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 12-13).

¹⁷⁹ One of the 'Ba' rom bKa' brgyud monasteries located in the kingdom of Nang chen ('Jam dbyangs tshul khriṃs et al. 1995-1997, 2: 47). For more information on sKyo brag and its religious lineages, secular history and sacred geography, see Turek (2013).

¹⁸⁰ Long-life empowerments are popular ritual events connected to longevity deities, the main ones being Amitāyus, White Tārā, and Uṣṇīṣavijayā. *Tshe dbang* are to be found in all schools of Tibetan Buddhism with regional and sectarian variations, and could be understood, at a basic level, as the conferral of long-life and health by the lama upon those receiving the empowerment. These rituals are considered relatively easy to perform and to maintain since they do not require long preparatory retreats on the part of the lama or daily commitments of practice from the devotee. For more information on *tshe dbang*, see Samuel (1993: 262) and Gerke (2011: 229-268).

¹⁸¹ *[...] phyag gis lcag zhabs kyis gnan nas* (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 12).

“Not long from now, beyond the 10th day of the 10th month of the Monkey Year [November 25th, 1944], without delay, go on a pilgrimage without a [specific] direction – [whether it is] Central Tibet or Mount Kailash, it will be good for both your present and future life”.¹⁸²

The possibility of leaving Khams and all its problems behind, at the time of his departure no more than a seed planted in the back of his mind, became a few months later the explicit motivation for his wanderings. Nevertheless, the desire to pay homage to the sacred places of Buddhism – albeit legitimate and plausible in itself – only partially answers the question regarding the motivation behind his journey. Pilgrimage represents a vital component of Tibetan religious life – paying homage to religious sites is undoubtedly considered to be a very effective way to accumulate merit, purify one’s own *karma*, and bring about more fortune and possibly a better rebirth. While ’Dzam yag’s decision to don the robe of a pilgrim and set off on his religious journey is not surprising

¹⁸² *da ni yun ma ring bar sprel zla 10 tshes 10 phan ma ’gyangs pa / dbus gtsang dang gangs ti se’am phyogs med kyi gnas bskor du song dang / ’di phyi gnyis nas bzang ngo* (Kha stag ’Dzam yag, 1997: 12).

per se,¹⁸³ its timing strikes one as odd and raises questions, especially when other elements are taken into consideration. At the time of his departure from Rab shis, the trader was forty-eight and in poor health. He suffered, by his own admission, from recurrent rheumatic pains and fever.

At that time [*i.e.* the 10th month of the Monkey Year; November 1944], I got very sick and it was difficult to distinguish [if it was] sickness caused by defilement, cold, rheumatism or something else.¹⁸⁴

In spite of bsTan pa'i snying po's vision, 'Dzam yag did not set off immediately on a *phyogs med kyi gnas bskor* – rather he spent several months dawdling in the area of lDan ma and sGa pa, visiting monasteries and hermitages and paying visits to representatives of the local nobility. Things changed suddenly, and permanently, in the second half of 1945: what prompted a fragile, middle-aged man to start a journey which at best would be taxing, both physically and emotionally, without a clear destination in mind?

¹⁸³ Sudden death within the family, illnesses, and economic hardship were often perceived as the consequence of evil or negative actions in this or former lives to be eliminated through pilgrimage.

¹⁸⁴ *de'i skabs rang la grib dang grang ba grum bu sogs dbye dka' ba'i nad babs shin tu lci mo byung* (Kha stag 'Dzam yag: 17-18).

A possible answer may be found in the final section of the diary's

introduction, where 'Dzam yag addresses directly the current lord of Rab shis,

Given the sudden death of many relatives and neighbours, above all the father of your household, mThu stobs rnam rgyal and [his?] son Chab mdo lcags ra sprul sku,¹⁸⁵ and [the one] of my parents, my brothers, attendants and most of my relatives, who should be blamed for the circumstances of their deaths? From my forefathers onwards, father and son, including myself, we have [never] spoken badly of our lords; rather, we have done nothing else than fulfill our service for both the military encampment and the monastery. We did not cause discord between the lord and his subjects; we did not cause dissent between the uncle and the nephew. You and your relatives who are part of the ruling family, please look with compassion on me, [someone who is] innocent, unaware of cruel ways and humble. Please show compassion by granting my possession back in my hands and by reconciling lord and servants, chief and subjects.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁵ 'Dzam yag is most probably referring to Blo 'jam 'phrin las rnam rgyal, the 9th lCags ra sprul sku, the reincarnation lineage of Chab mdo byams pa gling. He was born in dGa' stod rag shul (a.k.a. Rab shis) in the Wood Rabbit Year of the 15th *rab byung* (1915) and suddenly died in the Water Bird Year of the 16th *rab byung* (1933), at the early age of eighteen. According to Byams pa chos grags (n.d.: 325), his father was called Thub lha. It is not clear to me why 'Dzam yag mentions the lCags ra sprul sku's death in relation to the events that took place in Rab shis in 1940.

¹⁸⁶ *dpon khyed rang tshang gi yab mthu stobs rnam rgyal dang sras chab mdo lcags ra sprul sku gcos / nye 'brel nye rgyud mang po zhig glo bur du 'das grongs song ba dang / nga rang gi pha ma / spun zla / nye 'khor nye rgyud phal che ba 'chi shor bas / de rnams kyi na 'dre 'chi rkyen gyi skyon khag su la byed / nga rang gi pha mes nas bzung pha bu bdag bcas kyi ring sgar dgon gnyis la zhabs zhu kho na bsgrubs pa las / sde dpon kha rdib ma byas / dpon g.yog skra kha ma dkrug khu tshan dbar dbyen ma byas / srol ngan gyi las mi shes pa'i nyes med nyam chung bdag la / khyed dpon khag nye 'brel rnams kyis brtse gzigs mdzad de / rang rgyu rang lag gnang ba dang dpon g.yog 'go 'bangs sgrigs thabs bcas mkhyen mkhyen* (Kha stag

Written on the 15th day of the 5th month of the Female Wood Bird Year of the 16th *rab byung* (June 24th, 1945) and entrusted to bSod nams lha rgyal, a son of the Yar mgo household, the ruling family of Seng sgang,¹⁸⁷ this plea shows a man desperate to prove his innocence by clearly stating that his are “true words explaining the actions, the words, the objects etc. as they really were”.¹⁸⁸

As hinted above, the entreaty was meant to be delivered through bSod nams lha rgyal:¹⁸⁹ the involvement of a high-ranking figure of the local ruling class indicates the trader’s perception of the damage suffered by his reputation in the eyes of the Rab shis *be hu* as well as the influence and good connections he still enjoyed at a local level. A peculiar beggar indeed is one

¹⁸⁷ 'Dzam yag: 5).

¹⁸⁷ Place on the right side of the 'Bri chu river.

¹⁸⁸ *rab byung 16 nang tshan sa skyong zhes pa shing mo bya lo'i zla 5 tshes 15 la 'bri klung gser ldan gyi g.yas zur seng sgang yar mgo dpon tshang sras bsod nams lha rgyal phyag rgyud du / bya ba rang bzhin brjod pa / tshig rang bzhin brjod pa / rdzas rang bzhin brjod pa sogs / rang bzhin brjod pa'i bden tshig 'di [...]* (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 5).

¹⁸⁹ The protection granted by bSod nams lha rgyal and his mother dPal lha to 'Dzam yag went beyond a few days at their palace in 'Bri chu Seng sgang; the hospitality, initially offered for the winter period, was further extended to spring, due to the guest's health conditions.

having plenty of friends in high places. During his travels, shelter and support were often offered by representatives of the local nobility, people with whom 'Dzam yag entertained social and economic relations. A perfect example of that is given in the account of his stay at the Yar mgo's palace; bSod nams lha rgyal and his mother took particular care of their guest, hosting him for months and making sure that he received all the cures he needed to recover from his sickness. Ironically enough, their attentions caused 'Dzam yag to almost lose his life; as mentioned beforehand, our author had been taken by a strong fever while at 'Bri chu. Determined to attend a ritual of empowerment given by rDo rje 'chang dpal ldan tshul khriims¹⁹⁰ in the hermitage of dGe ba'i ri khrod, he joined the session and

[...] completely received the profound empowerment, without missing any part, leaning with perseverance on a bamboo stick.¹⁹¹

¹⁹⁰ Student of a student of 'Jam dbyangs blo gter dbang po (1849-1914), head teacher (Tib. *dpon slob*) at the Sakya monastery of Ngor E wam chos ldan, near gZhis ka rtse. For more information about the role the monastery of Ngor E wam chos ldan played in 'Dzam yag's life, see in particular Chapter Three, p. 186 onwards.

¹⁹¹ [...] *brtson 'grus kyis lus sba 'kar la brten nas zab dbang chad dum ma shor ba mthar phyin pa thob* (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 18).

At the time of leaving the hermitage, 'Dzam yag's health had severely deteriorated, as he himself noted,

[...] at the end of that, all the disciples made offerings in the presence of the lama as a gesture of gratitude, and returned to their own places. As for me, since my condition was very serious and in that state there was no hope [for me] to ride a horse or a pack animal, relying on the great kindness of the mother of the Yar mgo household, dPal lha, and the manager bSod nams, I was transported on a palanquin by many men.¹⁹²

Unfortunately for 'Dzam yag, fever and rheumatism became the least of his problems, once an unexpected event took place on his way back to the Yar mgo's palace,

[...] because we had to go by a very difficult path, and because of the narrowness of the road, I fell into a precipice from my uplifted position and broke two or three ribs. I lay down for two months, and since I was unable to move, at that time I suffered from holes [*i.e.* blisters] on the back of my body [...] At that time I was in great pain and I became helpless, but I took the medicines and food

¹⁹² *de'i mtshams su bla ma'i drung du slob ma'i tshogs rnam kyis bka' drin gtang rag gi yon phul ste / rang rang gi gnas su song / bdag ni nad babs lci bas rta khal sogs la re ba bral skabs / yar mgo'i dpal lha zhes ma yum de dang gnyer pa bsod nams bcas kyis sku drin shin tu che ba la brten nas / mi mang gis do li la btegs ste* (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 18).

that mother dPal lha gave me, and through her kind care I recovered in short time.¹⁹³

It was during the months spent as a guest of the Yar mgo household that 'Dzam yag came to terms with his situation; in the 6th month of the Wood Bird Year (July 1945), whilst visiting some of the monasteries located in the area of the 'Bri chu river, he decided to make Lhasa the final destination of his pilgrimage, thus realizing what had been said to him by bsTan pa'i snying po at the time of his departure from Rab shis.

[...] Since, once again, I had to go there [*i.e.* to Seng sgang Yar mgo], after proceeding [through] 'Bri klung ko ba, I came by stages to the Seng sgang Yar mgo household. After that, I planned to wander on a pilgrimage without directions, [visiting places] such as Lhasa [...] It happened that I travelled in the direction of Lhasa on the 27th day of the 6th month of the Wood Bird Year [August 4th, 1945].¹⁹⁴

¹⁹³ [...] *lam bgrod shin tu dka' yang bgrod dgos byung bas / lam 'phrang dog nas nga rang stegs gi thog nas g.yang la ril /zag\ nas / lus kyi rtsibs ma gnyis gsum chag / zla ba gnyis tsam ring la nyal zhing 'gul skyod mi thub pa byung bas / lus kyi tshangs ra bug pa sogs nya ngan byung skabs [...] de skabs shin tu nyam nga ste 'u thug song yang / ma yum dpal lhas sman dang / zas kyi sbyin pa sogs la brten nas brtse bas skyong bas re zhig yar drags gyur* (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 18-19).

¹⁹⁴ *slar yang yar bskyod rgyu byung bas / 'bri klung ko ba dong nas rim bzhin seng sgang yar mgo tshang la phyin / de nas lha ldan sogs rgyal khams phyogs med kyi gnas bskor la bskyod rtsis byas zhing [...] bya lo'i zla 6 tshes 27 la lha ldan phyogs la bskyod rgyu byung* (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 22).

The resolution to head towards the Tibetan capital represented a turning point in 'Dzam yag's life, since he never returned to Khams; his travels led him in fact to central Tibet, where he found in gZhis ka rtse a place to settle – at least temporarily.

Another question still needs to be addressed: why did 'Dzam yag leave the monastery of Klung dgon to begin with? Once again a diachronic reading of the diary presents us with some useful information.

The next day,¹⁹⁵ since the attendants and the commanders¹⁹⁶ needed to take horses and pack animals [granted as] *corvée* transportation from the postal station¹⁹⁷ in Lha thog dKar leb, we arrived there. As for me, I was without the support of *corvée* and so on [= I was not entitled to the 'u lag]; in particular the king of Lha thog supported the lord of Rab shis and suspected me, an innocent and humble [man], of having caused harm; for three

¹⁹⁵ The events are taking place a few weeks after he left the household of Yar mgo in the direction of Lhasa.

¹⁹⁶ 'Dzam yag had previously joined a company of monks and soldiers. The latter comprised a commander of a twenty-five-soldier unit (Tib. *zhal ngo*), two corporals of a ten-soldier unit (Tib. *bcu dpon*), and five attendants (Tib. *dpon g.yog*) from the camp of 'Jam mda'. As military, they were entitled to avail themselves of 'u lag animals (Kha stag 'Dzam yag: 1997: 24-25).

¹⁹⁷ The *rgya tshugs* were part of the postal service system established by the Qing dynasty. The stations were set at a day's journey apart and provided riding animals for those who carried a travel document. Their function was comparable to the Tibetan *sa tshig*, post stations generally located at half a day's walking distance from each other, in order to allow the peasant to do a round trip to the next station in one single day. The necessity of being ready for unexpected visitors forced the *mi ser* to always keep some pack animals in the vicinity of the station rather than in the upper pasture areas (Goldstein, 1989: 4-5).

days I did not stay in there, [but] hiding in an isolated area in the lower valley of mDzo rdzi dgon,¹⁹⁸ a pleasant looking [place] where there were many wooden huts, at night taking good precautions [against] thieves and measures [against] bandits, I was able to take care of myself.¹⁹⁹

As hinted in the passage above, the imprisonment and trial 'Dzam yag endured in 1940 had failed to clear his name; on the contrary, it appears that the lord of Rab shis, dGe don, was still convinced of 'Dzam yag's involvement in the death of his nephew Kar rdor. It is my understanding that the reason behind the trader's decision to leave must be sought in the fear of retaliation from the Rab shis *be hu* household. In the light of this hypothesis, 'Dzam yag's initial reticence in choosing any direction and his dawdling nearby Rab shis may be attributed to his hope to reach some sort of mediation with dGe don, possibly through the help of bSod nams lha rgyal, to whom he entrusted a plea, as mentioned above. He remained in the area of the 'Bri chu river for several

¹⁹⁸ Karma bKa' rgyud monastery founded in the 18th century by the Si tu Chos kyi 'byung gnas in Lha thog.

¹⁹⁹ *de'i phyi nyin lha thog dkar leb la rgya tshugs de nas / rogs dmag dpon mams rta khal 'u lag len dgos par brten der babs / bdag ni 'u lag sogs kyi phan grogs med pa dang / khyad par lha thog rgyal pos rab shis dpon gyi rgyab skyor byed cing / kho bo nyes med nyam chung la gnod kyi dogs nas / der ma 'dug pa zhag gsum gyi ring / mdzo rdzi dgon gyi mar nang lung khog de la / shing gi spyil bu mang po yod pa nyams spro ba zhig 'dug pa der yib nas / mtshan mo rkun dogs legs po dang / jag chings sogs byas te mgo thon gyur* (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 25).

months, recovering his health while waiting for an answer from the Rab shis *be hu* that never came.

'Dzam yag's pilgrimage to Lhasa may have been mainly motivated by the silence with which his olive branch was received, more than by religious zeal.

Interestingly, the motivation behind 'Dzam yag's travels changes with time. The original idea of embarking on a pilgrimage to Lhasa was the outcome of external events, beyond his control; the trader may have thought that by recording his display of religious piety he could prove his innocence to the lord of Rab shis. At the beginning of his journey, the hope of being able to regain his possessions and return to his natal land was still strong. Little by little, in the course of his travels, 'Dzam yag's focus changes. His confidence in being able to clear his name makes way for a new awareness and a stronger feeling of resignation. It is his ability to take advantage of the moment without looking back that makes 'Dzam yag the perfect example of the perseverance and the acumen required to gain the title of *tshong dpon* – qualities necessary to be an

active member of the influential Khams pa trading firms, as the next chapter will show.

CHAPTER THREE

The Life of a Trader in 20th Century Tibet

In the previous chapter attention was brought to 'Dzam yag's upbringing and the social status of his family within the region of Rab shis. As mentioned in the introduction to the *nyin deb*, the Kha stag household had relied for generations on a combination of animal husbandry and trading, a common way of livelihood among nomadic and seminomadic communities of eastern Tibet. Before the confiscation of his properties and estate, 'Dzam yag had owned, by his own admission, such an amount of wealth that he had no desire for more, a statement that confirms the existence in pre-modern Tibet of a stratum of wealthy individuals whose position within the hierarchical social system could be defined as "intermediate". As Travers (2013: 142) states in relation to central Tibetan society of the 20th century,

[...] we find almost no studies of the intermediate groups, between traditional elites such as aristocrats and high lamas on the one hand and the farmers and the nomads on the other, even though they seem to become more numerous with the modernization of Tibet and the development of trade, especially in cities like Lhasa.

In his journal, 'Dzam yag gives an account of the business relationships he entertained with important figures of the time – chieftains, nobles, merchants, government officials – thus revealing how “professional groups and social stratum were intertwined in the intermediate social groups” (Travers, 2013: 143). Albeit picturesque, Bell’s notorious description of Tibet as a “mercantile nation”, where “almost all the people from time to time engage in commerce” (1928: 125), only scratches the surface of the complex network of trade routes connecting Tibet to the economic-worlds (*économies-monde*)²⁰⁰ of China and India. Whereas the importance of the traditional barter complex is indisputable, and mainly rested on the exchange of wool and salt for food grain and tea, the geopolitical fluctuations of the world markets and the changes in the neighbouring economic-worlds in the first decades of the 20th century determined a spatial relocation of the Tibetan trade fluxes from the east to the

²⁰⁰ The concept of a regional economic-world has been first introduced by van Spengen (2013) to describe the systems of China and India *vis-à-vis* Tibet. According to the author (2013: 491), his method of analysis is based on work of Fernand Braudel and his idea of *économie-monde*, defined as “un morceau de la planète économiquement autonome, capable pour l'essentiel de se suffire à lui-même et auquel ses liaisons et ses échanges intérieurs confèrent une certaine unité organique” (Braudel, 1979: 12).

south, where the *Pax Britannica* guaranteed the safety of roads and the almost unrestricted movements of goods (van Spengen, 2013: 501).

The barter complex that for centuries regulated the exchange of salt and wool for food grain and tea along the Sino-Tibetan borders slowly changed at the beginning of the 20th century, when the chronic disturbances in a fading imperial China and the turmoil following the establishment of the new republic contributed to diverting the trade networks towards the Himalayan regions. That was in particular the case for the wool trade; the Khams pa merchants who, as late as the 1910s, monopolised the wool trade along the Sino-Tibetan borderlands were slowly forced to move their activities to the trade hubs in central Tibet and northern India, where they opened new branches run by their agents. The wool trade was mostly, to borrow van Spengen's words (2013:497), "an outwardly directed phenomenon", different from the "inward-looking affair" of tea trade. Although the commercialisation and exchange of extremely fine wool was a centuries-old tradition along the western borders of

Tibet,²⁰¹ the northeastern areas of the plateau emerged as a centre of production only in the 1890s, when the local trade reached a scale large enough to attract the attention of foreign buyers. By the end of the 19th century up to the late 1920s, the wool produced in the nomadic and seminomadic areas of A mdo and Khams was mainly funnelled in the eastward direction; from the Gansu border, the Tibetan wool reached, through Hui middlemen, the northeastern coasts of China, and from there it was shipped to Europe and America. After the mid-1920s,²⁰² the upheavals in Gansu and Ningxia, as well as the growing Japanese influence in Manchuria, marked the decline of the Tibet-Chinese wool trade. The closure of the Chinese route, in spite of the increasing in global consumption and demand of wool, led to several developments in the provinces of Khams and A mdo. Large monastic establishments, such as sKu 'bum and Bla brang, provided the infrastructures

²⁰¹ The shawl-wool, or *pashm*, was well-known and sought after in Europe since the Middle Ages. The Ladakhi monopoly on the *pashm* trade, started in the 15th century, was broken at the end of the 19th century due to pressure from the British Rāj (van Spengen, 2013: 497-498).

²⁰² During the interwar years (1919-1939), the whole global economy suffered a period of disturbance, characterised by wild fluctuations in demands, due to one major boom (1919-1920), one major drop (1920-1922), and one of the deepest and longest depressions of modern times (1929-1933).

for the budding trade, while entire towns and villages turned into entrepôts for wool; it was from sKye dgu mdo, for instance, that the wool found its way to the foreign markets – via Sichuan until the early decades of the 20th century and via Lhasa and Kalimpong from the 1930s onwards. The scale of the Tibetan wool trade contributed to accelerating the locational shift of the long-distance trade via the central Himalayas, a process already started in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (van Spengen, 2013: 496-499); after the Younghusband expedition (1904), logistical changes within the distribution system had determined the relocation of the wool market from Darjeeling to Kalimpong, at the time just an ordinary barricaded village in the Himalayan foothills.²⁰³ It was only a matter of time before the town, conveniently located close to the passes of rNa thos la and Je leb la and ensuring an easy access to the harbour of Calcutta, developed into a buzzing trade hub; by the early 1930s, the town was bursting with traders and adventurers coming from all over Asia and beyond.

The market of some of the most sought-after items of trade was run by agents

²⁰³ After the Younghusband expedition and the consequent opening of the Chu 'bi (Chumbi) valley and installment of trading agents in rGyal rtse and Gro mo (Yatung), Kalimpong became one of the most important commercial hubs of region, as well as the main centre for the sorting and processing of Tibetan wool (Harris, 2013: 207).

of a few Tibetan trading families, mostly hailing from Khams, whose interests were closely intertwined with those of the dGa' ldan pho brang and the largest monasteries of central and eastern Tibet.

1. Khams pa Trading Families

By the time of 'Dzam yag's departure from the Nang chen kingdom, wool covered almost 90 percent of Tibetan international exports, most of it being sold at Kalimpong; by the turn of the 20th century the centre had definitely replaced Kathmandu as a major trade hub, to the point that even the Newari merchants had moved their stores and warehouses to West Bengal, the end of the trade route connecting India to Central Asia via Sikkim. A newly arisen category of traders from central and eastern Tibet started distinguishing themselves by their skills and ambition, competing in the southward-bound wool trade with the local Marwaris.²⁰⁴ Among those new traders, particularly

²⁰⁴ Originally migrating traders from Rajputana, the traditional Marwari activities of financing warring Rajput kings and trading along the caravan routes of northern India and central Asia was halted by the establishment of the *Pax Britannica* and the consequent relocation of the trade fluxes. In this new scenario, the Marwaris migrated to the new Indian trade hubs – Calcutta, Mumbai, Kalimpong – where they took control over the main segments of the market, often acting as brokers for Europeans (Kudaisya, 2009: 88-89; 103).

active were the members of the sPang mda' tshang, whose fortunes started at the beginning of the century, when the leader of the family, Nyi rgyal, gained the favour of the 13th Dalai Lama. In less than fifty years – from the end the 19th century to the 1920s – this fairly obscure trading family of eastern Tibet imposed itself in the social circles of Lhasa, conquering the trust of the ruling elite and thus securing the monopoly of the wool trade. The sPang mda' tshang, however, were only the avant-garde of a new powerful social class, bound to play an important role in the political events of the following decades. By opening the path for the ambitious eastern Tibetan traders, the sPang mda' tshang contributed, albeit indirectly, to the rise of other Khams pa trading families and their agents; they became instrumental in the socio-economic consolidation of the “intermediate class”, therefore contributing to the creation of an environment conducive to 'Dzam yag's business, as I will discuss in the following sections.

1.1. The Evolution of a Household: From sPom mda' tshang to sPang mda'

tshang²⁰⁵

Similarly to the Kha stag household, the sPom mda' tshang owed much of their local socio-economic status to the connection created with a religious establishment. Originally from rDza ba sgang, an area near Chab mdo, the sPom mda' tshang grew to become one of the most powerful trading firms of Tibet following their union with the influential Sa skya 'Khon family,²⁰⁶ and the consequent appointment of sPom mda' to one of the Sa skya estates in dMar khams.²⁰⁷ The governance of an entire domain, consisting of agro-pastoral areas, a monastery and an attached community, led to an identity change; the family became known as sPang mda' tshang, a name subsequently extended to whole territory under their control (McGranahan, 2002:106-107).

²⁰⁵ Hailing from an area of Chab mdo called rDza ba sPom mda', the family was known under two different names – sPom mda' tshang (clearly deriving from their place of origin) and the more common sPang mda' tshang (McGranahan, 2002:105).

²⁰⁶ In the late-19th century, bsTan 'dzin bzang mo, one of the daughters of the 'Khon family, was married into the sPom mda' tshang family (McGranahan, 2002: 106).

²⁰⁷ The correct spelling of the post is disputed. McGranahan (2002: 106) spells the name as rGya skeg dpon, while Cassinelli and Ekvall (1969: 361) propose rGya khag.

The relocation into a richer area provided the financial means needed by the household to increase the scale of their trade. At the beginning of the 20th century, Nyi rgyal, the head of the family, moved the business to Lhasa, and the sPang mda' tshang started to gain recognition among the urban elite. The embedding of the family within the social texture of Lhasa culminated in the union of the sPang mda' tshang with the Byang gling, a local trading family. The marriage of two daughters of the Byang gling with Nyi rgyal's sons, 'Jam dpal and Thob rgyal, was further strengthened by cross-wedding, since the brothers married each other's bride. The two couples lived as a one family; their only child, a daughter, Pad ma Chos skyid, took the sPang mda' tshang name, while the son of the Byang gling family changed his name to sPang mda' zur pa, or Spang zur (McGranahan, 2002: 110).

Early 20th century Lhasa was a place teeming with people coming from all over the plateau; Khams pa traders, such as 'Dzam yag, could easily find familiar places and names, small enclaves of Khams pa identity recreated by the expatriate community. In contrast to other trading families who were slowly

emerging at the time as fierce competitors, *e.g.* the Sa 'du tshang or the A 'brug tshang, the sPang mda' tshang had higher aspirations; they wanted not only to succeed economically, but to have their financial influence recognised at a social and political level within the Tibetan administration. Whereas the union with the Sa skya 'Khon family had determined the relocation of the sPom mda' and the consequent change of name to sPang mda', it was the financial acumen of Nyi rgyal that drastically affected the destiny of the family. At the time of his arrival in Lhasa, Nyi rgyal joined the ranks of the ordinary traders that almost every day reached the town seeking their fortune; the young sPang mda' nurtured great expectations, however, and even greater ambitions.

The rise of the sPang mda' tshang has been the subject of numerous studies;²⁰⁸ in the context of the present dissertation, the most important elements are the connections Nyi rgyal entertained with different monastic establishments and the role played by the *ris med* movement as a trade facilitator. As discussed in Chapter Two, the late 19th century saw the reinvigoration of a non-sectarian approach and the revival of minor lineages

²⁰⁸ See Goldstein (1989a) and McGranahan (2002; 2005; 2015).

and practices; this tendency, controversially defined in Western scholarship as a “movement”, deeply imbued the socio-cultural environment of eastern Tibet, thus providing unifying values to the growing Khams pa trading communities that had relocated to the central provinces of dBus and gTsang. The unbiased approach to all Tibetan Buddhist traditions – a common feature among the eastern Tibetan traders in general, and Khams pa in particular – appears to be one of the factors promoting their socio-economic paramountcy in 20th century Tibet, as demonstrated by the ease with which sPang mda’ tshang Nyi rgyal dealt with the various monastic institutions, regardless of his own family affiliation. Whereas the fostering of religious tolerance and intellectual liberalism has been repeatedly associated with the *ris med* movement, the economic impact that the non-sectarian values had on the socio-cultural environment of the plateau in the 20th century appears to be surprisingly understudied. As pointed out by Turek (2012: 429), the *ris med* masters cultivated spiritual goals that “did not exclude some hints of a political agenda, as they promoted eastern Tibetan cultural value and autonomy”; since non-sectarian values did contribute to the emergence of a socio-political Khams pa

identity, it may not be far-fetched to ascribe to members of the trading community the application of a similar attitude for the sake of economic gain. A certain pragmatism was, after all, present since the very beginning of the movement; in the 19th century, the royal family of sDe dge had prized religious tolerance by supporting six large monasteries of various religious denominations, *i.e.* Sa skya, rNying ma, and bKa' brgyud. At a closer look, though, it is clear that the royal sponsorship was mutually convenient; whereas the establishments enjoyed an official protectorate and could influence the court through the dispatch of royal chaplains (Tib. *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. sDe dge and Nang chen are but two instances where realpolitik used the *ris med* values to pursue non-religious aims; I would suggest, as a working hypothesis, that the same could be said of the economic pragmatism shown by Khams pa traders, such as sPang mda'

tshang Nyi gyal and 'Dzam yag himself, in their dealings with establishments of diverse religious denominations.²⁰⁹

Nyi rgyal used money borrowed from friends and acquaintances to make large donations to the three dGe lugs pa seats of dGa' ldan, Se ra, and 'Bras spungs, in spite of his connections with the Sa skya 'Khon family. In this way, he attracted the attention of the city residents; people began to praise his generosity and piety, and rumours were spread about the alleged wealth of the sPang mda' tshang. The name of Nyi rgyal began to be associated with trustworthiness and financial stability, features that, added to his devotion, made him the perfect candidate for the monasteries' financial needs. The absence of banks in pre-modern Tibet meant that the majority of the monastic funds had to be stored outside the treasury, often at the houses of the most trusted sponsors. In exchange for his services, Nyi rgyal was allowed to use part of the money as capital for his financial enterprises: under the protection of

²⁰⁹ 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) and the Thakalis who controlled the salt trade down to the Kali Gandaki in Nepal (Manzardo, 1982). I am grateful to Professor Charles Ramble for bringing this factor to my attention (private conversation, June 2017).

“The Three Seats”, *i.e.* the monasteries of dGa’ Idan, ’Bras spungs, and Se ra, the fortune of the sPang mda’ tshang rapidly increased. Nyi rgyal’s success gained him the support of the lay and monastic elites, and the attention of the 13th Dalai Lama, of whom he became a favourite. As the official trade agent of the dGa’ Idan pho brang, Nyi rgyal was granted the monopoly on the extremely profitable wool trade (McGranahan, 2002: 111-112).

1.2 Kha stag ’Dzam yag and the Sa ’du tshang: A Khams pa Business

World

The influential role played first by the Sa skya and later by the dGe lugs in supporting and strengthening the sPang mda’ tshang’s claims to power mirrors to a certain extent ’Dzam yag’s personal story. Like the sPom mda’, the Kha stag were connected to a religious establishment, *i.e.* the dGe lugs monastery of Klung dgon dGa’ Idan thub bstan chos ’khor gling, and were actively involved in the local trade, a venture further expanded by ’Dzam yag in the years following 1944 and culminating in 1952 with his appointment as trade agent (Tib. *tshong dpon*) in the service of the Khang gsar *bla brang* of the 65th

Ngor chen Ngag dbang blo gros gzhan phan snying po (1876-1953), at the time abbot of the Sa skya monastery of Ngor E wam chos ldan in the gZhis ka rtse area. On the 11th month of the Water Dragon Year (December 1952), a call from the Khang gsar *bla brang* reached 'Dzam yag at the Sa 'du tshang's house in gZhis ka rtse, where the trader was based at the time (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 212).

The author does not elaborate on the events leading to his stay in one of the Sa 'du tshang's properties, but it is undeniable that the Khams pa trading firm played an important role in 'Dzam yag's life since 1945 – and possibly even before that date. At the beginning of the 20th century, A bo bhu, head of the Sa 'du household and father of Rin chen Sa 'du tshang,²¹⁰ moved from sGa khog, at the easternmost borders of the kingdom of Nang chen, to the village of Gling tshang, a nomadic area lying about thirty kilometres west of dKar mdzes and only three kilometres east of Dar rgyas monastery, one of the largest monastic

²¹⁰ Rinchen Sa 'du tshang (1928-2015) received a Western education first in Kalimpong and later in Darjeeling. From 1946, he was involved in diplomatic missions for the dGa' ldan pho brang, following the Dalai Lama into exile in 1959 and occupying several civil appointments up to 1980, when he resigned from the post of *bka' blon* and representative of the Bureau of the Dalai Lama in New Delhi. For more information on his life, see Rinchen Sadutshang, 2016.

instalments of the Tre hor region,²¹¹ which extended from the sDe dge khro la²¹² to rTa'u dzong. It appears plausible that the connection between the Kha stag family and the Sa 'du tshang preceded the latter's relocation in dKar mdzes; hailing from the same area of Nang chen, the two families might have collaborated in local trading ventures, entertaining relations that continued after the Sa 'du's relocation to dKar mdzes.

In his memoirs, *A Life Unforeseen* (2016), Rin chen Sa 'du tshang offers important information on his family, especially in regards to their way of handling trading and business transactions. The household, as many others in Khams, was polyandrous – Rin chen himself married his brother's wife – and the business was carried out by two branches of the family; brothers and uncles took turns in running the offices established in Lhasa, Kalimpong, and other trade hubs. A male representative was always on site to manage the family's estate in Gling tshang, and in the late 1950s it was Rin chen's eldest

²¹¹ Tre hor was part of the five Hor pa states, independent political entities with overlapping boundaries, located to the east of the valley of dKar mdzes, east of sDe dge on the Upper Nyag chu. The Hor pa states included Brag mgo, Tre hor, Khang gsar, Ma zur, and Be ri (Powers and Templeman, 2012: 299).

²¹² A pass marking the border between sDe dge on the west and dKar mdzes on the east.

brother and co-husband Blo dGe 'dun who took care of the ancestral residence in Khams. As the author recalls, during his childhood, the family business was run by his cousins, Blo bzang 'gyur med and bSod nams chos 'phel, while he and his older siblings attended school and took part, from time to time, in the trading activities. It was the custom for the younger members of the household to be sent off on a trading trip with a senior manager, who accompanied and advised them until they felt confident enough to take the whole business in their own hands (Sadutshang, 2016: 5).

The first of the several Sa 'du tshang's mansions in Lhasa was located in the eastern neighbourhood of sBra nag zhol²¹³ – a two-storey building with a large inner courtyard, capable of hosting the constant flow of pack animals and commodities being loaded and unloaded; at the time, the household dealt mainly in wool and tea, with the odd consumer items and construction materials from India (Sadutshang, 2016: 16). In 1936, at the tender age of eight, Rin chen was sent with his immediate older brother dBang rdor to Kalimpong for

²¹³ The sBra nag zhol, literally “Black Tent Below” (Barnett, 2006: 175), was situated on the northeastern side of the old city of Lhasa.

education. From the early 1930s, the business between Tibet and India gained new momentum, especially along the Sikkimese route, and the largest Khams pa trading families set up offices and warehouses in both Phag ri and Kalimpong. In the mid-1930s, the Sa 'du tshang occupied a two-storey wooden house about a kilometre and a half from the centre of the town; the members of the family resided on the upper floor, while the ground floor accommodated the two managers' quarters and a storeroom. Commodities such as wool and consumer goods were kept in the a large godown²¹⁴ adjacent to the main house; the building had a large compound on the front, wide enough to host for a few days the pack animals to and from Tibet (Sadutshang, 2016: 30).

In an interview with Melvyn Goldstein (TOHP: H0059), Rin chen Sa 'du tshang clarifies certain aspects of the wool business in Tibet, shedding some light on the activities carried out by his family's business managers; whereas the majority of the Sa 'du tshang's agents came from the household's estate in

²¹⁴ Before the American ban on commodities produced in Communist countries, the main product the Sa 'du tshang dealt with was wool: "My family was doing very good business in exporting wool from Tibet to India, and during their last trip [in the early 1930s], my cousin Gyurme [Tib. 'Gyur med] and my eldest brother Lo Gedun [Tib. Blo dGe 'dun] had bought this large warehouse with a view to expanding business, ultimately exporting wool directly to England and the U.S.A." (Sadutshang, 2016: 30).

the Tre hor region in the dKar mdzes area, hiring traders from other areas was not unusual.²¹⁵ Among those was certainly 'Dzam yag himself; native of the sGa khog area as Sa 'du tshang A bo bhu, the trader claims throughout his *nyin deb* close relationships with both members of the household and other traders from Tre hor.²¹⁶

The call from the Khang gsar *bla brang* followed a five-month stay of both 'Dzam yag and Rin chen rdo rje at Ngor E wam chos ldan; the two traders

²¹⁵ By the 1930s, most of the Khams pa trading families – the Sa 'du tshang included – had moved their main offices to Lhasa and opened branches in Nag chu, gZhis ka rtse, Phag ri, and Kalimpong, where they had several trade agents (TOHP: H0059).

²¹⁶ On the occasion of his visit to bKra shis lhun po in 1946, 'Dzam yag met with rDo rje rNam rgyal, the business manager of the Sa 'du tshang in gZhis ka rtse, and with a *tshong dpon* from dGong thog in Tre hor, Rin chen rdo rje, whose name appears time and time again as one of the author's business partners (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 46; 61-62) and companions during his pilgrimage to India (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 143). From bKra shis lhun po, the trader moved to Zha lu where he attended the celebrations for the *sa ga zla ba* (the fourth month of the Tibetan calendar) of the Fire Dog Year (May 1946), together with another companion from Tre hor, a monk named Pad ma rnam rgyal. Once back in gZhis ka rtse, 'Dzam yag acted as a trade agent for a certain bKra shis nor bu, the treasurer and government appointed trader of the Gra'u household, the strongest *be hu* of the Yul shul area. At the time, the trader transported 100 *do bo* (about 3,500 kg) of butter from gZhis ka rtse to Lhasa (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 66). A month later, when in Lha sa, the author acted again as a dealer for bKra shis nor bu, buying 773 *khal* and 5 *nyag* (around 14,560kg) of butter packed into 96 leather bags (Tib. *mar ltang*), paying for each *khal* 33 *srang*. In addition, he bought further 73 *khal* of butter, paying for them 780 *srang*. He calculated that, by selling these goods, he earned 26,297 *srang*, 2 *zho*, and 5 *skar* (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 68). bKra shis nor bu makes another appearance in a note dated to the 2nd month of the Iron Tiger Year (March 1950), when 'Dzam yag made a donation to Ngor E wam chos ldan on his behalf (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 189).

had attended a series of teachings and empowerments. According to the *nyin deb*, the author outdid his *dharma* companions with the generosity of his offerings, a factor that possibly contributed to attracting the attention of the Ngor chen's treasurer. As discussed in relation to sPang mda' tshang Nyi rgyal's rise to fortune, prodigality towards religious institutions was traditionally associated with trustworthiness, a feature expected from a monastic trade agent (Tib. *tshong dpon*).

According to the author, the Khang gsar *bla brang* invested in the trading venture to Kalimpong 15,000 *dbyin sgor*, a term used in Tibetan language to indicate British currency (Kha stag 'Dzam yag. 1997: 224). Had that been the case, the sum entrusted to the trader would have been astonishing; in consideration of the small dimensions of the caravan and the lack of substantial information regarding the kinds of goods purchased and/or sold, a reading of the term *dbyin sgor* as rupees appears more likely.²¹⁷ Only scanty information

²¹⁷ Indian rupees are usually rendered in Tibetan as *hin sgor*, but 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 Professor Charles Ramble for clarifying the difficult interpretation of the term to me (private conversation, June 2017).

is provided on the hiring of a caravan leader and two assistants for the loading of the pack animals; in spite of the lack of details recorded in the *nyin deb*, it is clear that the author was acutely aware of representing the Ngor chen's interests. In his journal he reports to have kept track of all the exchanges on a separate ledger²¹⁸ that he presented to the Khang gsar treasurer upon his return to the Sa skya establishment in gTsang; he personally ensured that the abbot's goods were safely allocated (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 224).

2. Kalimpong

2.1. Kha stag 'Dzam yag's Business Trips to Kalimpong

In the previous paragraph I have suggested that the relationship between the author of the *nyin deb* and the Sa 'du tshang family may predate 1945, in consideration of the common origin of the two households. The first reference to a connection with the Sa 'du tshang appears to support my

²¹⁸ During the trading trip 'Dzam yag kept a separate ledger where he noted every transaction, from the goods loaded and unloaded to his own personal expenses; it is unfortunate that he did not include this information in his personal journal. The reference to other textual sources ascribable to the author may explain the general lack of details concerning his business, which could have been recorded on separate ledgers to which the trader had no longer access at the time of writing his journal.

hypothesis since it is dated as early as 1946, on the occasion of the first of the author's business trips to Kalimpong; at the time 'Dzam yag had just reached the village of Phag ri in Phag ri rdzong,²¹⁹ the district headquarters where custom fees on exported goods had to be paid and, whilst waiting for his merchandise to be checked, the author lodged in one of the Sa 'du tshang's local houses (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 52).²²⁰

'Dzam yag visited Kalimpong six times in the thirteen years covered by his journal. The first trip occurred on the 12th month of the Wood Bird Year (February 1946),²²¹ followed by others on the 12th month of the Earth Mouse Year (December 1948-January 1949), the 11th month of the Earth Ox Year (December 1949), the 11th month of the Water Dragon Year (December 1952),

²¹⁹ By 1936, the Sa 'du tshang had a manager permanently stationed in Phag ri (Sadutshang, 2016: 28).

²²⁰ *rang nyid phag ri sa 'du tshang la 'dug cing rgya zong rnams khral sprod sho gam blangs* (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 52).

²²¹ The importance of Kalimpong as a trade hub is confirmed by the numerous foreigners visiting its market; in his notes, 'Dzam yag records the presence of Hindu Ka yan (a cast of traders originally from Gujarat and specialised in business dealings with Tibet), Pahā ri ba [*pa] (possibly a Tibetan rendition of *pahārī*, a wide term applied to a social group of Himalayan people living in nowadays India, Nepal, and Pakistan), Kashmiri, Nepalese, Chinese, Americans, British, Burmese, Bhutanese, Mongolians, and Tibetans (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 52).

the 9th month of the Water Snake Year (October 1953), and finally on the 3rd month of the Earth Pig Year (April 1959).

The first of 'Dzam yag's recorded trips (1946) provides some interesting information on the wages and taxes Tibetan traders were expected to pay on their journey from central Tibet to India.²²² On the 9th day of the 10th month of

²²² Valuable information regarding the wool trade in the 1940s and 1950s is also found in an essay written by Shar chen bKra shis tshe ring, a trading agent for the monastic establishment of dGa' ldan chos 'khor gling in Shangs, gZhis ka rtse district; the text was published in 1996 as part of the 19th issue of *Bod kyi rig gnas lo rgyus dpyad gzhi'i rgyu cha bdams bsgrigs*, a collection of articles on Tibetan history and culture. According to bKra shis tshe ring, in the 1940s the price of a bundle of wool on the Kalimpong market oscillated between 50-60 (wool of medium quality from the Shangs valley) and 70-75 silver *srang* (wool of higher quality from gZhis ka rtse). Generally speaking, the bundles of wool were referred to as *mon do*, a Tibetan rendition of the Anglo-Hindi word *maund*, a unit of weight used in India and other parts of Asia. Its value varied greatly according to locality; in India, a *maund* went from 25 to 82.286 pounds (11 to 37.4 kg), the latter being the standard *maund* adopted by the Tibetans. In mid-20th century, the Shar chen family was dealing in terms of 3,000-4,000 *mon do* of wool per year; caravans made up of 20 yaks and about 13-14 donkeys transported the loads to Phag ri, and, from there, to Kalimpong. In Phag ri, the *mon do* were unloaded and loaded again onto local animals for each of which a transport fee was applied, *e.g.* 15-20 silver *srang* per yak and 14-15 silver *srang* per donkey; the caravan was therefore entrusted to a local guide, especially appointed for the task of conducting the animals to the trade hub. Trade occurred during winter time, and to accommodate the needs of the Tibetans, most people of the Mon district hired their animals and travelled back and forth between Phag ri and Kalimpong, up to 12-13 times per season. The situation changed drastically in 1950, when the American ban *de facto* stopped the transactions of wool on the Kalimpong market; it was only in 1956 that a business agreement was signed and the Tibetan wool was once again sold in Kalimpong. The reinstated wool trade was however short-lived; in 1959 the Communist government imposed a restriction on the export of wool, and the *mon do* still in the Tibetan warehouses were sold on the Chinese market. For more information on the years following the American ban, see Shar chen bKra shis tshe ring (1996: 167-172).

the Wood Bird Year (November 12th, 1945), the trader left Lhasa, reaching gZhis ka rtse thirteen days later (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 45-46), accompanied by a hired labourer and several mules. During his stay in gZhis ka rtse, 'Dzam yag was hosted by Rin chen rdo rje, a *tshong dpon* from dGong thog in Tre hor, most probably another agent of the Sa 'du tshang. On the 25th of the 10th month (November 29th, 1945), the two of them went to bKra shis lhun po, where they discussed business with a certain Blo rdo rje, presented in the *nyin deb* as the treasurer of gZigs rgyab, a lama from Tre hor (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 46). Three days later, 'Dzam yag set off with one of his nephews to Lha sa, with the intent of buying commodities to be sold in India. On the 11th month of the Wood Bird Year (January 1946), 'Dzam yag returned to gZhis ka rtse, bringing with him goods for the markets of Kalimpong; on the way the trader met with his nephew Blo 'jam,²²³ who was then passing through

²²³ Blo bzang 'jam dbyangs certainly appears as a figure connecting 'Dzam yag to his *pha yul*. The nephew was one of the main business collaborators of the author and, on more than one occasion, delivered messages to his uncle's family.

gTsang.²²⁴ At the time of leaving central Tibet, 'Dzam yag "joined some mule drivers who were going to Kalimpong, paying [their] wages for the transport of Chinese goods",²²⁵ and, on the 25th day of the 12th month of the Wood Bird Year (February 27th, 1946), they set off following the road crossing the Myang chu.²²⁶ A few days later, having left behind the rGyal rtse district, the company reached Phag ri, thus approaching the Sikkimese border. Leaving Phag ri the next day, 'Dzam yag and his companions continued toward Kalimpong, but, at the border, they were forced to show their merchandise and pay further taxes.

At Shar gsing ma.²²⁷ we had to show our loads and after that, because I had to pay a custom tax to the governmental office at sPel 'phel thang, I showed the documents [listing the goods I was transporting].²²⁸

Having arrived at Kalimpong at midday, 'Dzam yag immediately moved toward the market to sell his merchandise; the debts taken on during the

²²⁴ *tshong mjug sgril zog rnams bdal gla lha sa nas gzhi rtser gtang nas bdal mi drel pa de dang 'dres nas / bya lo'i zla 12 tshes la gtsang phyogs yar bskyor pa'i skabs su nga'i tsha bo blo 'jam khams nas slebs par phrad* (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 48).

²²⁵ *rgya zong rnams bdal gla ka sbug du gtong ba'i drel ba dang 'grogs nas* (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 50).

²²⁶ Main river of the district of rGyal rtse, flowing from gZhis ka rtse to Khang dmar rdzong.

²²⁷ A township and administrative seat located in Lower Gro mo, at the border with Sikkim.

²²⁸ *shar sems (*gsing) ma la do bo rnams ston dgos / de nas spel 'phel thang du gzhung sa la yar sho gam sprod dgos pas rtsis sprad byas* (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 52).

business trip were cleared and the remainder of the profit he made was saved for religious offerings.²²⁹

Taxes were, not surprisingly, a source of constant distress and frustration for the author; while passing through the Chab mdo area, on the 7th month of the Wood Bird Year (August 1945), 'Dzam yag commented on the rather arbitrary imposition of salt taxes (Tib. *tsha shog*) by dGa' ldan pho brang officials; these taxes affected in particular travellers from other provinces (Tib. *mgon*), and several Khams pa – 'Dzam yag included – thereby lost a small fortune (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 26). In another note dated to the 7th month of the Iron Tiger Year (August 1950), the author lamented the greed of certain lords of the central provinces of dBus and gTsang, who, after having accumulated a great deal of wool, imposed a monopoly on the market, fixing the price and prohibiting the purchase of cheaper wool from their subjects. At the time, the district leader of gNam ru²³⁰ summoned all the merchants who travelled to the area for trade and fined them for infringement of the newly

²²⁹ [...] *nga rang gi tshong chas rnams der btsongs nas bu lon rnams sprad cing / chos rgyags rten khe phran tsam byung* (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 53).

²³⁰ District located on the northeast of Lhasa.

established law; 'Dzam yag, who was among them, lost 29 *srang*. In his journal, the author compares the “shameless custom fees” (Tib. *'khrel med sho gam*) to falling rain, vouching to never return to that place for trade (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 194).

2.2. The Sikkimese Route: Travelling from Central Tibet to India in the Late 1940s and Early 1950s

While discussing 'Dzam yag's business ventures to Kalimpong, I would like to pause briefly on the role that the Sikkimese trade hub played in the 1940s and 1950s as a “safe harbour” for Tibetan pilgrims, merchants, and intellectuals.

In the aftermath of the Younghusband expedition of 1904, the opening of the Chu 'bi (Chumbi) valley²³¹ and the consequent installment of British trade agents in rGyal rtse and Gro mo²³² determined the rise of Kalimpong as one of the most important trade hubs of Asia. Although John Adam, the Secretary of

²³¹ Situated at the intersection of Sikkim, Bhutan, and Tibet, the valley offered the perfect location for the establishment of a trade mart easily reached by caravans from gZhis ka rtse and Lhasa.

²³² Better known as Yatung or Yadong in English literature.

the Indian Government, was the first, in the mid-1820s, to sense the potential of a Sikkimese route,²³³ easier and shorter than the Nepalese one, the passages over the rNa thos la and Je leb la passes became popular only at the beginning of the 20th century, with the revival of the British interests in Tibet.

'Dzam yag's business trips to Kalimpong followed a well-known route connecting the main towns of the dBus and gTsang provinces to the southern Himalayan border. On his way from gZhis ka rtse to Kalimpong, he travelled via Zhwa lu monastery, rGyal rtse, 'Phag ri, Gro mo (Yatung), sNar thang, Phag gdog can (Padamchen), Rong lus chu kar (Rongli), and Spos gdong (Pedong). Leaving Lhasa in the direction of Sikkim eight years before, Rin chen Sa 'du tshang followed the same route, a journey that took him and his entourage nineteen days (Sadutshang, 1997: 27-30); 'Dzam yag arrived in Kalimpong more than a month after having left gZhis ka rtse, a difference in time due in

²³³ At the time, there were four routes to China available to British merchants. The first, and least troublesome, was the one through the Treaty Ports along the Chinese coast. The others were overland routes from the British possessions in India that shared a border with China: Upper Burma, the Himalayan Indian territories, and Kashmir (Lamb, 1960: 143).

part to the slowness of the pack animals and in part to the several stops made at the different sacred places along the way.

2.2.1. Roads and Transports

Even as late as the end of the 1950s, transportation in Tibet was heavily conditioned by the geomorphological nature and climatic conditions of the plateau. Prior to 1960s and the infrastructural developments brought by the Communist invasion, transport in Tibet relied on a combination of water networks and road systems. Rivers and streams played a fundamental role in both local and long-distance trade; waterways and bridges allowed for a speedier transit of porters, pack animals, and commodities. Despite the abundance of waterways, bridges were conspicuously sparse throughout the plateau: only a few riverbanks could support the cofferdams needed to support the structure. Even the broad riverbeds of the sKyid chu and Yar klung gTsang po did not allow for the construction of bridges able to span their entire width. The seasonal changes prevented the construction of long structures; the renowned iron chain bridges of lCags zam and Nya mgo span only one of the

many streams in which the Yar klung is braided (Lange, 2014: 91). Rivers in Tibet were rarely crossed above water – coracles, propelled by poles and wooden paddles or pulled by ropes, made up for the absence of solid structures, bringing good money to the local ferrymen. Despite being a common feature, crossing churning rivers in coracles, heavily loaded with commodities and animals, was not an easy task. In a note dating back to sometime in the second half of the Wood Bird Year (1945), 'Dzam yag (1997: 35) recalls an incident that occurred during the crossing of a river near Phumdo, in Lhun grub rdzong. The iron bridge spanning the stream was deemed unapt to support the weight of the pack animals, and the group the trader had joined started to lead the horses towards the water. A nomad, who was escorting the caravan as part of his 'u lag services,²³⁴ got caught by surprise by the momentum of the animals, and was dragged into the deep waters. Panicking, the man, who was quickly pulled towards the middle of the river, hung on to the tail of 'Dzam yag's horse, and pulled by the animal he safely reached the other bank. The fortunate outcome was welcomed with jokes and

²³⁴ On the 'u lag system, see Chapter Two, p. 115, fn. 97.

laughs, but such events frequently had different and more dramatic consequences.

The episode confirms the common knowledge that overland transport on the Tibetan plateau could be carried out almost exclusively by animal power (Lange, 2014: 74). Goods were transported on the back of horses, donkeys, sheep, and yaks; where the roads – most often mere tracks or pathways – were treacherous for the animals, the bundles were unloaded and distributed among human porters; that was also the case for high altitude passes and hill stations in the Himalayas, where the precipitous terrain rendered porters and pack animals essential (Sharma, 2016: 91). The loss of an animal was an event to be avoided by all means, for the survival of the entire venture depended on the well-being of the pack animals; the *nyin deb* is rich in anecdotes regarding horses (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 28; 115), yaks (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 34), or sheep (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 207) injured along the way. When no remedy could be found, the animals were slaughtered and their meat eaten, a

practice that never failed to trigger 'Dzam yag's empathetic response to the suffering of another living being.²³⁵

The steepness of the trails and the harsh weather conditions were among the first causes of death among animals and humans alike; even the crossing of the rNa thos la and Je leb la passes could be done only by using local porters, since the paths were unsuitable for animals. On the other side of the Himalayas, the transport conditions were very different. Buses and trains made the movement of people and goods quicker and easier. Since 1878 a rail line connected Calcutta to Siliguri, and the construction as early as 1891 of a narrow gauge railroad, spanning the gorge between Siliguri and Darjeeling, reduced the travel time from the hill-stations to the Indian plains to less than twenty-four hours (Sharma, 2016: 89). For many Tibetans, a journey to India represented their first encounter with modernity; as late as the 1950s, "the exotic appearance and mysterious motive power of rail transport" (Huber, 2008:

²³⁵ On the occasion of the slaughtering of three sheep, the author confesses to have suffered terrible guilt, and to make up for his wrongdoings he engaged in prostrations, prayers, and donations to the monastic communities encountered along the way (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 207).

309) were still a source of amazement and bewilderment for pilgrims and travellers hailing from the plateau.

2.3. The Idiosyncratic Essence of Kalimpong: Cosmopolitanism and Covert

Activities. *The Tibet Mirror*

As mentioned in the previous paragraphs, the favourable geographic location of Kalimpong, close to the rNa thos la and Je leb la and to Darjeeling, contributed to transforming it into a new economic centre; by the early 1930s, the town was teeming with traders and adventurers coming from all over Asia and beyond.

To borrow Hackett's (2008) words, "by the 1930s Kalimpong had much to offer a Tibetophile". The stimulating and effervescent environment of the local Tibetan community fostered the publication of the first long-lasting newspaper in Tibetan language, *i.e.* the *Yul phyogs so so'i gsar 'gyur me long* (The Mirror of News from All Parts of the World). Printed from 1925 to 1963, the

journal, later to be known simply as *The Tibet Mirror*,²³⁶ was mainly concerned with world affairs, listed under the heading of “international affairs” (Tib. *yu/ gzhan gyi gnas tshul*). The publisher was a Christian catechist born in sPi ti, rDo rje mThar phyin; raised by a Moravian missionary in Himachal Pradesh, he came to Kalimpong in the 1920s and started working for the Church of Scotland (Engelhardt, 2011: 205-208). During his visit to the hill town in 1945, the Japanese Hisao Kimura heard of mThar phyin’s work from a Mongolian artist, who warned him about the publisher’s peculiarities,

“[He is a] very strange man. But a very good one. He owns the newspaper here. It’s the only Tibetan newspaper there is, and it goes from here to Lhasa and Sikkim...everywhere there are Tibetans to read it.”

“What is so strange about him?”

“His religion. He is Tibetan [...] But he has the same religion as the English. Can you imagine that? A Tibetan but not a Buddhist. But he’s open-minded, not like the missionaries. He often uses his printing press to print maps and guides of the holy places of India for pilgrims. Everyone who comes through meets him, and some learned scholars and high lamas stay with him every year” (Kimura, 1990: 135-136).

²³⁶ The English title *The Tibet Mirror* was added by mThar phyin rather late, around 1948 (Engelhardt, 2011: 210).

mThar phyin's intentions in creating *The Tibet Mirror* have been thoroughly investigated by Tsering Shakya in his dissertation on the emergence of modern Tibetan literature; as the scholar correctly points out (2004: 18), in the border region of the Himalayan foothills the Tibetans had the chance to assert themselves, away from the pressure of Lhasa – dominated as it was by the ecclesiastic elite and the aristocracy – and close to the metropolitan culture of colonial India.

In his choice of Kalimpong as location for his publication efforts, mThar phyin demonstrated a remarkable logistic and marketing acumen. By the mid-1920s, the trade hub had become the centre of Indo-Tibetan trade, and pilgrims, merchants, and prominent exiled Tibetan aristocrats frequented the hill town. The economic importance of the town transpires from the pages of *The Tibet Mirror*, the financial section on the back page of the journal listed the prices of goods commonly traded between India and Tibet, as well as the cost of transportation between Lhasa and Kalimpong (Shakya, 2004:18-19). The Tibetan readership was therefore provided with firsthand information about the

prices for items traded in Tibet as they were valued on the open markets of Kalimpong, Calcutta and London.²³⁷

The influence of the *The Tibet Mirror* went beyond the restricted confines of the Himalayan hills, reaching the Tibetan-speaking population who lived beyond the political area directly administrated by Lhasa; by collecting the accounts of pilgrims and traders from eastern Tibet, as well as stories coming from Tibetan language speaking areas such as Bhutan and Ladakh, mThar phyin's newspaper partially contributed to the construction of a sense of Tibetan national identity (Shakya, 2004: 22-23). Even though no mention is made in the *nyin deb* to either *The Tibet Mirror* or its publisher, the odds of 'Dzam yag not having perused a copy of the newspaper are almost nil. As both a trader and a well-read individual, the author most certainly was aware of the

²³⁷ Even though Kalimpong got its fame as a wool trade hub, wool was not the only Tibetan commodity widely appreciated and sought after; among the Tibetan items most requested on the market were white and black yak tails – the first considerably more expensive than the latter, pig bristle, musk deer with or without fur, snow-leopard, golden lynx, fox, and marmot hides, medicinal plants, and tea bricks; other goods, subject to market fluctuations, were cans of kerosene. Currency exchanges, as well as the value of silver and gold, based on quotations in Calcutta, were also reported. As for the Tibetan traders, they were keen buyers of Indian textiles, grain, and various paraphernalia coming from the West, such as watches, fountain pens, glasses, etc. See Harris (2013).

existence of a Tibetan language periodical printed in Kalimpong, and might even have checked the financial section before heading to the market.

Unfortunately, only conjectures may be offered in this regard, due to the lack of textual proof.

2.3.1. The Economic Section of *The Tibet Mirror*. The Importance of the Wool Trade in Kalimpong

A quick glance at the pages of *The Tibet Mirror* confirms the importance of Kalimpong as commercial hub for the wool trade. Wool represented, as late as 1944, almost 90 percent of Tibet's annual export, with most of the loads being dispatched to England and the east coast of America. The Tibetan market grew so dependent on the international wool trade that the cuts in the exports caused by World War II heavily affected the country's economy. In the decade before the war, Kalimpong had become a terrain of competition between the Marwari from India and representatives of large trading families from eastern Tibet (van Spengen, 2013: 500). Among the latter, the most influential were the sPang mda' tshang, whose fortunes started, as mentioned

in the previous sections, at the beginning of the century, when the leader of the family, Nyi rgyal, gained the favour of the 13th Dalai Lama; by the 1920s, the family acted as main trade agent for the Tibetan government, enjoying the monopoly over the wool trade. The closer connection with British India after the Younghusband mission, and the chaotic situation in China in the 1920s and 1930s, contributed to reinforcing the southern connection, with the overland route heading from Tibet to Calcutta and other Indian centres through Sikkim (van Spengen, 2013: 500).

The business-oriented nature of Kalimpong was aptly captured by mThar phyin's newspaper. The economic section was the core of the journal and presented the readers with the market fluctuations, as well as the most important events affecting Asian economy. Volume XX, issue number 1, published on the 1st of April, 1952, announces the signing of the "Terms and Conditions of Business" between Tibetan traders and representatives of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. The incorporation of Tibet into China in 1951 had a devastating impact on the wool export trade since it brought to an

end any transactions with the United States, at the time the country's main business partner (Goldstein, 2007: 263). In 1951, following the signing of the Seventeen-Point Agreement for the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet, the U.S. Treasury Department passed regulations prohibiting business transactions with Communist China, and thus with Tibet. Aware of the consequences such a ban would have on the country's economy, the Tibetan foreign minister Sne'u shar Thub bstan thar pa immediately raised the issue with the American representative at Kalimpong, but to no avail; the import of Tibetan wool coming from areas under Chinese control had been prohibited (Goldstein, 2007:263). As reported in *The Tibet Mirror* (1952a: 7),

Even though the majority of the wool - [considered] a big necessity in America – bought by Americans is [of] Tibetan [origin], on January 31st, 1952, a bulletin was sent from the Foreign Department at Washington. Since many clauses were stipulated, among which the decision that hereafter no goods whatsoever coming from Communist countries should be bought, this caused the Tibetan traders to sustain a great loss due to the incorporation of Tibet into China. They reduced the price of the wool to the Indian factories as much as they could, to the point that they became unable to recoup the costs. In December of last year, the head of the [Tibetan] Traders' Association, the Governor of Gro mo and fourth rank [in the Tibetan aristocratic system]

sPom [sPang] mda' tshang,²³⁸ together with the various representatives [of the Association], put forward a request to Mr. Kling si, the consul of the People's Republic of China in Calcutta, [demanding] the latter's government to courteously look at the quality of the Tibetan wool that had already reached the area of Kalimpong. Taking responsibility [for the matter], Mr. Kling si together with the China Bank discussed it with the Russian government. When a special trade deputy from Moscow – TRADE AGENT OF U.S.S.R, IN INDIA – arrived at the Russian trade bureau in Calcutta, Rwa [sgreng], sPom [mda' tshang], and Sa ['du tshang] arranged [a group of] about seven delegates, plus Mr. Tse rnam, the deputy secretary of the Association; on March 21st [the group] met in Calcutta with consul Mr. Kling si and the Russian agent together with the manager of China Bank; on meeting [the latter], they [*i.e.* the Tibetan delegates] had a detailed discussion regarding the nature and origin [of the problem]. A decision was taken concerning the way of buying and selling wool, and the manner of effecting the payment – “TERMS AND CONDITIONS OF BUSINESS”. Because the Russians had no previous experience of how to trade Tibetan wool with regard to the price of the wool, they carefully examined the quality of the wool. The Tibetan merchants remained in a state of hopefulness about the possibility of receiving an offer when [the Russian representative] returned [to his bureau] with the quality of the wool and the like; the same representative, who had come from Moscow, in accordance with the two [*i.e.* Consul Mr. Kling si and the China Bank manager], would quickly send an offer telegram saying how much he would pay [for the wool] – such is the news reported. Even though it has not been decided yet how much wool

²³⁸ Blo bzang yar 'phel sPang mda' tshang (1900?-1972/73) was granted the fourth rank in the Tibetan government (Tib. *rim bzhi*), an appointment that included the post of Tibetan Trade Agent in Yatung (Tib. *Gro mo*) as well as the title of Governor of the Chu 'bi Valley (Tib. *gro mo spyi khyab*).

should be separated into black and white and made into bundles at Kalimpong, it will certainly help Tibetan trade in general.²³⁹

According to an article published in 1951 in *The New York Times*, prior to the enforcement of the ban 2,000,000 pounds of wool were purchased yearly by the United States from the eastern regions of Tibet (Harris, 2013: 39). The

²³⁹ *bod kyi bal nams a mi ri kar mgo gnad* [**dgos gnas*] *che ba'i bal phal che ba a mi ri ka bas nyo mus kyang 'das lo 1952 zla ba dang po ta rig 31 nyin a mi ri ka wa shing kron* Treasury Department, Foreign Assets Control, Washington, 25, D.C. *nas btang ba'i rtsa tshig* (ANNOUNCED) *'drem* [**grem*] *spel byas gsal bod rgya gmar* [**dmar*] *khongs su song gshis da cha dmar po'i yul nas thon pa'i dngos zog gang yang nyo rgyu min pa thag chod pa sogs don tshan mang tsam 'khod par btan* [**brten*] *rgya gar khul gyi bzo 'phrul khag sogs nas kyang bal gong gcog gang thub kyis bod kyi tshong pa nams la gyong gun ci che 'i 'gro sdod dang / sprod len kyang mi thub pa'i gnas su gyur bzhin pa'i skabs su bod tshong e so se shan gyi dbu bzhugs mi rje gro spyi rim bzhi spom mda' ba mchog dang 'thus mi khag bcas snga lo zla ba 12 pa'i nang ka tar rgya nag mi dmangs srid gzhung rgyal khab kyi sku tshab kling si brgyud bod kyi bal ka phag* [**ka sbug*] *khul 'byor zin pa nams srid bzhung rang nas spus gzigs mdzad rogs zhes snyan 'bul zhus 'dug par kling si mchog dang / ci na sbeng* (China Bank) *bcas nas thugs ' khur che bzhes kyis u ru su'i rgyal khab tu bka' mol gnang ste ka ta u ru su' tshong don las khungs* TRADE AGENT OF U.S.S.R., IN INDIA, *yod mus khar nye char ma se ko* (MASCOW) *nas dmigs gsal tshong don sku tshab zhig ka tar ched 'byor zin pa'i brda lan byung 'phral rwa spom sa gsum gyi* [**gyis*] *gcos* [**bcos*] *e so se shan gyi sku tshab seg re kre ri sku zhabs tshe rnam lhan rgyas bcas 'thus mi bdun tsam spyi zla 3 tshes 21 nyin ka tar ched bcar kyis srid gzhung sku tshab kling si mchog dang / ru su'i sku tshab lhan rgyas ci na sbeng gi ma ni 'jer* (Manager of China Bank) *bcas ngo mjal thog gnas lugs yong rkyen bka' mol zhib phra zhus pa'i snying por / bal nyo tshong gtong phyogs rin dngul sprod len byed stang sogs kyi chod don* TERMS AND CONDITIONS OF BUSINESS, *zhes pa gtan 'bebs zin pa dang / bal gong thad u ru sus de snga bod kyi bal nyo tshong byed myong med stabs bal gyi spus tshad blta zhib nan gtan byas te ring min tar thog rin 'di tsam sprod thub zhes pa'i* (Offer) *o phar gtong rgyu bcas gnyis mos kyis ma se ko nas phebs pa'i sku tshab de bzhin bal gyi spus tshad dang bcas phyir phebs zin 'dug par bod tshong nams ring min* (Offer) *o phar 'byor rgyu'i re ba ci che'i ngang du bzhugs 'dug pa'i gnas tshul go thos byung / ka sbug tu bal dkar nag dbyer 'byed dang sgam khri rgyag rgyu sogs ji byed da lta gtan 'khel mi 'dug kyang bod tshong spyir phan pa'i thabs shes gnang gi yod bsha' red* (*The Tibet Mirror*, 1952a: 7).

loss of a major trade partner caused a dramatic drop in the price of Tibetan wool, with the consequent suspension of transactions in Kalimpong. As the United States cut their economic ties with China, 4,000,000 pounds of wool were left rotting in the warehouses of Kalimpong (Harris, 2013: 39). In an attempt to avoid an economic breakdown, the Chinese government stepped in, inflating the value of the Tibetan wool by purchasing it at a price higher than the one set by the market (Goldstein, 2007: 264). By the mid-1950s, 70 percent of the wool trade between Tibet and India had been bought out by the Chinese State Trading Company directly from Tibetan traders, thus cutting at the source a long-standing business relationship for traditional Newar and Marwari traders based in Kalimpong (Shakya, 1999: 115).

While the large trading families strove to come to terms with the loss of their American partners, the emergence of China as the strongest market represented for many small and medium-scale traders a blessing in disguise. Indian products were in high demand among the soldiers of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) stationed in Lhasa, and these commodities were easy to

carry back by peddlers and pilgrims on their way home from the Indian plains (Harris, 2013: 39).

In his newspaper, mThar phyin presented a selection of the most relevant news from the Indian and international press, making them available for his Tibetan readers (Shakya, 2004: 20). It is therefore not surprising that the events reported by the first issue of the 1952 edition of *The Tibet Mirror* were first brought to the attention of an English-speaking audience by the *New York Times*. The opening of a profitable market did not go unnoticed: the interest showed by the Russians and the Czechs for the relatively cheap Tibetan wool was paralleled by the active support provided by the Chinese government to the Tibetan economy: that year, the People's Republic purchased 8,000,000 pounds of surplus wool "to help the Tibetan government tide over the current financial crisis caused by a slump in wool trade" (in Harris, 2013: 39).

In the following double number of *The Tibet Mirror* (1952b: 7), the wool trade is still the issue at the core of the business section. The editor, having reminded the readers of the hardships and losses Tibetan trading firms had

gone through since the U.S. ban on their wool, proceeds to report the development of the economic agreement reached in March between the U.S.S.R. and the People's Republic of China in regard to the purchase of wool.

As was recorded in last month's newspaper [the April issue] that, after the head of the Tibetan traders' association, the honourable mPom mda' tshang, governor of Gro mo and fourth rank [of the Tibetan nobility] and the delegates had held talks with the Chinese consul in Calcutta, they had discussions with the representative of the U.S.S.R. As the quality of the wool was examined, it was expected that a clear answer as to what could be offered would be made via telegraph without delay. Not receiving a clear answer on time, the Tibetan small traders were a bit lost not knowing what to do. A few sold at a loss; it is said that, after selling at around fifty-six rupees [per *mon dq*], they returned [to Tibet] [...]. Recently, on April 22nd, 1952, a telegram was sent from Lhasa to the Tibet Traders Association in Kalimpong. It was received on the 26th of the same month at 6pm; [this is] a true reproduction in English script [...] *TRUE COPY OF TELEGRAM RECEIVED FROM TIBET TRADERS ASSOCIATION LHASA. LHASA.22.4.52 KALIMPONG.26.4.52. At 6P.M. Tibetan Traders Association, Kalimpong. "For the improvement of Tibetan trade Chinese Govt. helped us in settling to sell all Tibetan wools to the factory of China; they also offered good price so don't intend to sell whatever wool reached there. AAA Inform all Tibetan traders accordingly. AAA Detailed letter posted continued. Tibetan Traders."* [...] Although it is said that 185 rupees are paid for a

mon do of white wool, at the moment no one is buying or selling.²⁴⁰

On page 11 of the same issue, mThar phyin reports allegations regarding the Communist Party's decision of purchasing 80,000 *mon do* of Tibetan white wool, offering 184 rupees per *mon do*, a measure eagerly welcomed by the representatives of the sPang mda' tshang, Sa 'du tshang, and Rwa sgren trading firms, as well as by a few other merchants. The news is followed by the printed copy of a telegram – originally in English and translated by the editor in Tibetan for the sake of the Tibetan-speaking audience – sent

²⁴⁰ *snga zla'i gsar shog tu bkod gsal bod tshong e so se shan gyi dbu bzhugs mi rje gro spyi sku ngo spom mda' mchog dang 'thus mi khag nas ka tar rgya gzhung sku tshab dang bka' mol ngang rjes u ru su'i sku tshab dang bka' mol thog bal gyi spus tshad blta zhib kyis ring min tar thog rin 'di tsam sprod thub ces pa'i lan gsal byed rgyu bcas 'dug rung | lan gsal dus thog 'byor min bod kyi tshong chung rnams 'gro 'dod [*sdod] ma shes tsam du lus te kha shas nas 'pham tshong brgyab ste sgor lnga bcu drug cu tsam la btsongs nas log skad | da lam gnas tshul 'byor gsal | nye sngon spyi zla bzhi pa'i tshes nyer gnyis nyin Lhasa nas ka sbug bod tshong e so se shan la lcags'phrin btang ba 'dir tshes nyer drug gong [*dgong] thag tshod drug par 'byor ba'i dbyin yig 'dra shus [*bshus] ngo ma [...] TRUE COPY OF TELEGRAM RECEIVED FROM TIBET TRADERS ASSOCIATION LHASA. LHASA. 22.04.52 KALIMPONG. 26.04.52 At 6 P.M. TIBETAN TRADERS ASSOCIATION, KALIMPONG. "For the improvement of Tibetan trade Chinese Govt. helped us in settling to sell all Tibetan wools to the factory of China they also offered good price so don't intend to sell whatever wool reached there AAA Inform all Tibetan traders accordingly AAA Detailed letter posted continued. Tibetan Traders." [...] bal dkar rkyang mon dor sgor 185 tsam re sprod kyi yod skad kyang da lta nyo tshong byed mkhan ni mi 'dug (The Tibet Mirror, 1952b: 7).*

from Lhasa to the head of the sPang mda' tshang household and addressed to all the traders in Kalimpong.

*“COPY OF TELEGRAM RECEIVED FROM PANGDA TSHANG
LHASA. Dated Lhasa, 22.5.1952. Kalimpong, 22.5.1952.*

To Tibet Traders Association, Kalimpong.

*Regarding wool price posting detail letter AAA Tell all traders they must tell exact number of wool loads they possess neither less nor much because they shall have to take oath and give signed document for possession of wool AAA Enquiry will be sent later on and if anybody has lied he has to suffer badly AAA Nobody should try to tell lie because every body [sic] know each others' [sic] wool loads possession and how much he has sold already AAA If any body [sic] tells lie and found later on the settlement of wool business will be thought as no settlement at all and the person should be responsible for the matter so take document accordingly from all wool Traders and send here immediately”
(The Tibet Mirror, 1952b:11).*

The Tibetan translation of the telegram is followed by a handy list of information to be contained in the registers of every owner of wool loads in Kalimpong.

1. The name and place of residence of the trader. 2. Region of origin. 3. Place of residence in Kalimpong. 4. Year in which the wool has been purchased. 5. Calendrical date (day and month). 6. Place of origin of the wool purchased. 7. Number of eventual helpers for the wool purchased. 8. Wool lost along the way. 9. [Wool] that is in 'Phag ri. 10. [Wool] that

has reached Kalimpong. 11. [Wool] that has been sold in 'Phag ri and Kalimpong. 12. Whatever wool of the Water Dragon Year [1952] is in Kalimpong. 13. Year in which the above-mentioned wool reached Kalimpong. 14. State clearly the location of the warehouse²⁴¹ in which the above-mentioned wool is [stocked] in Kalimpong. 15. Whether or not the above-mentioned wool in Kalimpong has been entrusted as a security loan. 16. Whether or not other people's wool has been mixed with the above-mentioned wool.²⁴²

The American ban and the emergence of China and the U.S.S.R. as new business partners produced a series of shock waves bound to unsettle the markets of Kalimpong. The forced stop of the wool transactions triggered a shift in the traders' attention. Other products, especially those bought by the Chinese garrisons stationed in Lhasa, acquired new value in the eyes of visitors and merchants alike.

3. The Hazards of the Job: On Robbery, Cheating, and Floods

²⁴¹ The new regulations were clearly addressed to the wealthiest Tibetan traders in Kalimpong, the only ones who could afford to keep warehouses at 'Phag ri and Kalimpong (Harris, 2013: 38).

²⁴² 1. *tshong pa'i ming dang sdod gnas* / 2. *yul gyi ming* / 3. *ka sbug sdod gnas* / 4. *bal nyos pa'i lo khams* / 5. *zla dus tshes grangs* / 6. *bal nyos sa'i yul* / 7. *bal nyos pa lag yod do grangs* / 8. *bal lam phyogs khag tu lus pa* / 9. *phag rir yod pa* / 10. *ka sbug tu 'byor zin pa* / 11. *phag ri dang ka sbug tu btshongs pa* / 12. *ka sbug tu chu 'brug lo'i bal ji yod* / 13. *ka sbug tu gong gsal bal 'byor lo khams* / 14. *ka sbug tu gong bal gyi do khang gar yod kha gsal* / 15. *ka sbug tu gong bal gte gcol* [**lta bcol*] *du bzhang yod med* / 16. *gong bal nang mi gzhan gyi bal 'dres yod med* (*The Tibet Mirror*, 1952b: 12).

Investing in long-distance trade was a serious business that could make or break the fortunes of entire families. As an elderly woman from a small trading family admitted to Harris (2013: 35), “selling wool is very dangerous. Because if you have good luck, you will be very rich, but if not, you will be broke”. In the 1940s and 1950s, Tibetan traders faced great risks in transporting their loads, since the quality of the wool was easily affected by the weather, and caravans were common targets for thieves and robbers. Traders preferred to travel in large groups made up of hundreds of pack animals, often escorted by armed men. On the 10th month of the Monkey Year (November, 1944), 'Dzam yag records the first of many encounters with road bandits; in that occasion, the presence of two armed horsemen, who had been sent from the dKar Dil mgo household as an escort, discouraged the robbers and averted a possible confrontation (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997:14), but such easy escapes represented lucky exceptions. In the following year, the trader reports the loss of many horses to bandits and only in a few cases were the animals – and the goods they were transporting – retrieved.

Due to the lack of information provided in the *nyin deb* regarding the nature of 'Dzam yag's 1952 business trip to Kalimpong,²⁴³ nothing more than speculations can be offered regarding the kinds of commodities he dealt with. It is safe to assume that, given the economic and political situation of the time and the limited number of pack animals and men he hired, the author did not engage in wool trade at this time,²⁴⁴ all Tibetan wool having been redirected to the Chinese market.²⁴⁵ A great deal of confusion concerning the purchase and sale of this commodity was indeed very much present among the traders of Kalimpong, as shown by a series of announcements printed on the ninth issue of *The Tibet Mirror* (1952c: 8).

It is not certain at the moment whether Tibetan traders, having purchased [wool] from the common people, are obliged to sell to

²⁴³ On the reasons for the absence of details regarding the business trip, see Chapter Three, p. 192, fn. 213.

²⁴⁴ It is not clear whether the 15,000 British pounds he refers to have to be considered the value of the goods entrusted to him or the sum he was allowed to invest once in Kalimpong. The reduced dimensions of the caravan– the author mentions the hiring of a leader and two assistants – corroborates the hypothesis that no bundles of wool were involved, since their heavy weight would have required a much larger number of helpers and pack animals (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 224).

²⁴⁵ I am grateful to Dr Tina Harris for having confirmed my hypothesis (private exchange, September 2016).

the thirteen traders;²⁴⁶ whether they are allowed, having bought [the wool] with their own capital money, to sell according to their own desire; whether it is permitted for other traders [who are] under the thirteen ones, having collected [their own capital], to join the association [...] It was requested that from now on wool must be sold to the Chinese, it is allowed to ask for the [payment of the] price of the wool as soon as the wool has been handed over [to the buyer]. If it happens that [there is] someone who offers a price that is higher than the [one offered by the] Chinese, not only it should be permitted to sell, in accordance with the discussion held in Peking [*i.e.* Beijing] with the traders' representatives, [but] there should also be no restriction for trading in Tibet [for the trader concerned].²⁴⁷

Wool trade or not, it is indisputable that the 1952 business venture marked a watershed moment in 'Dzam yag's life; after that date, the trader's business, until then limited to small and medium-size level, increased

²⁴⁶ The author here refers to thirteen traders based at Lhasa who administrated a common capital fund, to the creation of which the Chinese government largely contributed, used to buy new Tibetan wool (*The Tibet Mirror*, 1952c: 8).

²⁴⁷ *bod kyi tshong pa dmangs mams nas nyo sgrub thog tshong bcu gsum por tshong dgos pa pa* [sic] *yin nam / yang na rang rang so so'i ma rtsas nyos te rang rang so so'i 'dod mos ltar ' tshong chog gi yod pa yin nam / yang na tshong pa bcu gsum po'i khongs su tshong pa gzhan dag kyang ma rtsa bsdus te skyid sdug tu 'dzul chog gi yod dam med da lta zhib gsal cha ma rtogs so [...]* *slad phyin rgya mir bal 'tshong dgos na bal rtsis sprad ma thag tu bal rin zhu chog pa dang / rgya mi las lhag pa'i rin gong 'phar ma sprod mkhan 'byung na pe cing tu tshong pa'i ' thus mir bka' mol gnang ba ltar tshong chog pa ma zad bod khul tshong ra bkag sdom med pa zhus skad* (*The Tibet Mirror*, 1952c: 8).

considerably.²⁴⁸ To give an idea of the fortune of the *tshong dpon*, it will suffice to say that, on the 3rd month of the Wood Horse Year (May 1954), on the occasion of the Kālacakra initiation bestowed in bKra shis lhun po by the 10th Panchen lama Chos kyi rgyal mtshan at the request of the Tre hor gZig rgyab rin po che,²⁴⁹ 'Dzam yag offered to the latter a two-arm span long *nang mdzod*,²⁵⁰ 240 *srang* and a few *zub she*.²⁵¹ To the establishment of bKra shis lhun po, the *tshong dpon* donated incense, Chinese silver coins (Tib. *dā yang*), *maṇḍalas*, and 670 *srang* worth of Indian margarine²⁵² for the replenishment of the monastery's golden lamps. In memory of his master and patron, the late 65th Ngor chen,²⁵³ 'Dzam yag sent to Ngor E wam chos ldan an amount of

²⁴⁸ Before 1952, the author acted as a trade agent mostly for government officials. In 1946 he traded for bKra shis nor bu (see fn. 199) and the secretary (Tib. *mgron gnyer*) bKra shis tshe ring (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 74).

²⁴⁹ sNgags chen Tre hor gZig rgyab *sprul sku*. Reincarnation lineage from Tre hor in Khams based at the bKra shis lhun po rgyud pa grwa tshang.

²⁵⁰ Type of ceremonial scarf of high quality.

²⁵¹ High quality ceremonial scarf.

²⁵² The *shing mar*, or Indian margarine, was used as a cheap substitute for butter. Prior to 1959, tins of *shing mar* were imported from Kalimpong via Gangtok and the rNa thos la pass. I thank Mr. Tsering Gonkatsang (University of Oxford) for having shared with me his knowledge.

²⁵³ Ngag dbang mKhyen brtse Thub bstan snying po died on the 13th day of the 4th month of Water Snake Year (May 25th, 1953). For the details of the funeral ceremony, see Kha stag 'Dzam yag (1997: 226).

margarine sufficient to fuel 100 butter lamps, to be lit in front of the abbot's reliquary at the Khang gsar *bla brang*.

By 1954 'Dzam yag's dealings were in the numbers of more than 70 *do bo*²⁵⁴ (about 2,500kg) of merchandise; like many other traders from the central provinces of dBus and gTsang, he dealt directly with the nomads living in Nag chu and Bar khams. Trust was a key element, since the deals were conducted on a credit basis; the traders advanced whatever items the nomads requested. In case of wool, a certain amount of weight loss had to be taken into account, as Rin chen Sa 'du tshang himself confesses,

The wool the nomads supplied was bundled up into loads which were about 35 kg., which is like 70-75 pounds. You weighed it when you took it away, but they prepared the load. The wool was twisted into thick ropes. You just trusted them by looking at the outside of the bundle and maybe a little inside. You had to judge the quality from the outside. [However, sometimes y]ou also got some sorts of other things inside these ropes of wool [...] it was very difficult to find out because they were really tightly bound [...] All that had to be taken into consideration. *A 30 percent loss in weight and in quality was expected.* (TOHAP: H0059) [Emphasis added]

²⁵⁴ Weight unit equivalent to ca. 35 kg.

Being somehow “expected” – to borrow Rin chen’s words – these losses did not heavily affect traders, whose concern was reserved for more serious threats to their business, such as bandits and natural disasters. Thefts, landslides, and floods could result in the complete loss of an entire caravan, with severe economic fallout. In the summer of 1954, ’Dzam yag and his nephew decided to store their goods in Lhasa in anticipation of the winter months, and moved the 70 *do bo* of bundled goods from gZhis ka rtse to the river banks of the ’U yug dma’, where they were carried away by the great flood that destroyed most of rGyal rtse and a quarter of gZhis ka rtse. The fury of the water swept away entire villages, bringing death and devastation.²⁵⁵ ’Dzam yag himself was not left unscathed, since more than 60 of his bundled loads were lost in the deluge; in an attempt to recover some of his financial losses, he sent what was still in his possession – 40 bundles of raw cotton and 100 *khal* (about

²⁵⁵ The flood hit the prefectures of rGyal rtse and Pa rnam on July 17th, 1954. More than 170 villages were submerged; among the 16,180 people affected by the natural disaster, 691 drowned and 34 died due to the severity of their injuries. 10,074 houses were destroyed, and thousands of animals were lost in the deluge. On the rescue activities carried out by the Tibet Work Committee, the Tibetan government, and the State Council in Beijing, see *Bod kyi rig gnas lo rgyus dpyad gzhi’i rgyu cha bdams bsgribs* (2003: 17-19).

1,300 kg) of grain – to Nag chu, entrusting his nephew Blo 'jam to cut the best deal possible with the nomads (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 234-235).

4. The Role of Traders in Tibet prior to 1959: An Emic Perspective

As discussed in Chapter One, the hybrid nature of the *nyin deb* – an autobiographic narrative suspended between the factual and the fictional – allows the application of diverse heuristic tools. In this chapter, I have studied the figure of Kha stag 'Dzam yag in the light of his social and economic rise to the rank of trade agent (Tib. *tshong dpon*) for the Khang gsar *bla brang*, thus identifying some of the events supporting the claims to factuality of the author. Events recollected and revised by the “narrating self” have therefore been analysed for historical and factual value, and used to corroborate our knowledge of the socio-economic environment of 20th century Tibet and the adjacent regions.

Taking a cue from Ernest Hemingway's remark in his novel *A Moveable Feast*,²⁵⁶ the *nyin deb* too may be understood as a semi-fictional text that *illuminates* facts; whether the content of the journal truly represents the author's personal story or a flattering version of it, the text cannot be dismissed as a work of fiction, since the facts narrated by the author do possess a truth value.

The information contained in the *nyin deb* does provide the scholar with an emic perspective on the role played by Khams pa traders at a time of great socio-economic and political changes.²⁵⁷ The offerings made by 'Dzam yag after 1952 demonstrate the financial importance that wealthy sponsors, such as the *tshong dpon* and the largest trading families, had for religious masters and monastic communities, as well as their weight in internal political matters.

²⁵⁶ "If the reader prefers, this book, *i.e.* *A Moveable Feast*, may be regarded as fiction. But there is always the chance that such a book of fiction may throw some light on what has been written as fact" (Hemingway, 1964: ix).

²⁵⁷ In describing the trade routes and the goods traded and/or bartered at the time, the *nyin deb* correspond to our understanding of the contemporary historical and economic constellations, thus vouching for the accuracy of the current scholarship.

Contrary to what became a shared opinion among Chinese and Western scholars²⁵⁸ alike in the 1970s and 1980s, pre-modern Tibetan society cannot be interpreted as a feudal system, intrinsically divided between two opposite social groups – the landowners on the one hand and the *mi ser*²⁵⁹ on the other. This interpretation, a by-product of the superimposition of a medieval reading on Tibetan society, largely fails to capture the nuances and peculiarities of those social strata which could not be easily ascribed to these two broad categories (Travers, 2013: 142-143). The presence of social groups that entertained relations with the higher strata of the society – whether aristocrats or monastic officials – who were literate and wealthy, and occupied the fringes of the lowest nobility, often marrying into it, is certainly at odds with any image of pre-modern Tibet as a crystallized and somehow immutable society.

Interactions between the upper middle stratum – those who Travers (2013:

²⁵⁸ See Carrasco (1959), Stein (1972), Goldstein (1968, 1971, 1973, 1986, 1989), Petech (2013).

²⁵⁹ Many pages have been written on Tibetan land ownership and on the socio-juridical conditions of the *mi ser*, the peasants bound to a hereditary plot of land owned by a lord or a government representative. On the heuristic applicability of the term “serfdom” to the socio-political environment of pre-modern Tibet, see Goldstein (in particular 1986 and 1988), Miller (1987; 1988), Coleman (1998), Barnett (2008), Bischoff (2014).

144) calls “elite commoners” – and members of the lower-ranking aristocracy were common and often officialised by marriage or ennoblement. It was in this fuzziness of social boundaries that 'Dzam yag and members of the most important Khams pa trading families interacted, carefully threading socio-economic networks that allowed them to gain a substantial political weight in a remarkably short time. Persistence and financial acumen were the features required to rise above one's own conditions; the sPang mda' tshang themselves, originally a fairly obscure Khams pa trading family, grew to be one of the richest households in the whole of Tibet in less than fifty years.²⁶⁰

4.1. The Political Weight of Khams pa Traders in Mid-20th Century Tibet

²⁶⁰ At the beginning of the 20th century, the head of the household sPang mda' Nyi ma rgyal mtshan set up a base in Lhasa, offering his services to the officials of the dGa' ldan pho brang and winning the protection of the Dalai Lama. The fortunes of the family increased under his sons – 'Jam dpal, Rab dga', and Thob rgyal. By 1921, year of Nyi ma rgyal mtshan's death, the representatives of sPang mda' tshang trading firm not only entertained close relationships with some of the most influential officials of the dGa' ldan pho brang but were also the sole agents of the Tibetan government in the lucrative business of the international wool trade (Goldstein, 1989a: 177-178). Their monopoly ended in the 1930s, and other families, such as the Sa 'du tshang and A 'brug tshang, started dealing with wool and long-distance trade.

'Dzam yag does not discuss political events – no mention is made of the Chinese invasion²⁶¹ nor the Khams pa resistance²⁶² – but, as an active member of the trading community, he was involved in various communal activities, such as the offering of a golden throne to the Fourteenth Dalai Lama as a sign of appreciation from the traders of Khams and A mdo for the 1957 bestowal of the Kālacakra and Lam rim chen mo teachings, held concurrently with a *brtan bzhuks* (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 8).²⁶³ The author seems unaware of the underlying political significance of the offering, presented by him as a pious gesture at a time of uncertainty and turmoil. In reality, the *brtan bzhuks*, originally proposed and strongly promoted by mGon po bkra shis A 'brug tshang,²⁶⁴ was part of a scheme planned by the latter with the CIA's support.

²⁶¹ The only reference to the Communist invasion is dated to the 3rd of the 4th month of the Earth Pig Year (May 10th, 1959), when early in the morning, news of calamities caused by “red flames” (Tib. *me lce dmar po*), as the author calls them, reached gZhis ka rtse. 'Dzam yag left in a hurry, bringing with him only some cloth-wrapped texts (Tib. *dpe cha*) and leaving to his nephew Blo 'jam the dispatch of pack animals loaded with food and bedding to the Ngor Klu lding *bla brang*. From Ngor E wam chos ldan, they set off in the direction of Kalimpong, a trip that marked the beginning of their exile in India (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 248).

²⁶² By the early 1950s, southern Khams was already experiencing guerrilla warfare.

²⁶³ Elaborate longevity ritual consisting in the making of offerings to the protector deities to ensure the long life of the Dalai Lama (Ardley, 2002: xii).

²⁶⁴ One of the most powerful and wealthy Khams pa trading households in Lhasa, the A 'brug tshang played an important role in the years following the Chinese invasion, when their head

The news regarding the Dalai Lama's willingness to bestow a three-day initiation with teachings spread like wildfire throughout Tibet, quickly assuming a nationalistic nature and challenging the Chinese control over the plateau. mGon po bkra shis' initiative, initially restricted to the Khams pa traders, gained the approval of Byams pa rgya mtsho, a prominent merchant from Bla brang, and consequently the economic support of the whole Lhasa-based A mdo ba community. The excitement and public expectations grew like a fever, and the committee in charge of the event proposed the donation of a golden throne to be realized with offerings coming not only from the wealthy traders of A mdo and Khams, but from all people of good will of Tibet, in a show of loyalty and faith towards the figure of the Dalai Lama (Andrutsang, 1973: 51-52; Jamyang Norbu, 2014).

mGon po bkra shis, a businessman turned into a freedom fighter, created a network of merchants united against the Chinese. Their group, initially focused on exerting pressure on the PRC for the release of political prisoners and spreading support to the Dalai Lama, evolved in 1958 into a guerrilla army, the "Khams Four Rivers, Six Ranges Tibetan Defenders of the Faith Volunteer Army", best known as "Four Rivers, Six Ranges" (Tib. *Chu bzhi sgang drug*). For more information on the *Chu bzhi sgang drug*, see Andrugsang (1973), Ardley (2003), Goldstein (2007), McGranahan (2010).

The involvement of traders in the political scene was not restricted to members of the most important trading families. In 1956, a merchant from Li thang named A lo Chos mdzad Tshe ring rdo rje,²⁶⁵ together with two low-ranking government officials, Lha phyug Grags pa 'phrin las and 'Bum thang rGyal mtshan blo bzang, promoted the creation of the *Mi dmangs tshogs 'dus*, a group claiming to represent the masses in their desire for a free Tibet.²⁶⁶ The leading organisers of the movement were mainly traders and government officials: mGon po bkra shis A 'brug tshang himself was among the activists (Powers and Templeman, 2012: 439). Despite not having taken an active part in the movement, 'Dzam yag enthusiastically joined the project for the construction of the golden throne, thus unintentionally adding his economic weight to the political influence the trading community was able to exert on the political scene.

²⁶⁵ A successful trader, A lo Chos mdzad Tse ring rdo rje's fortunes came primarily from the commerce between Tibet and India. He was famous for having introduced the use of iron beams, thus revolutionising traditional construction techniques (Powers and Templeman, 2012: 439).

²⁶⁶ The principal activities carried out by the *Mi dmangs tshogs 'dus* consisted in the putting up of posters calling for the end of the Chinese rule, the sponsorship of long-life rituals for the Dalai Lama and the propitiation of wrathful deities, and welfare initiatives in support of the refugees who had escaped from eastern Tibet (Powers and Templeman, 2012: 439).

The factual elements contained in Dzam yag's journal offer a new perspective on two decades – the 1940s and the 1950s – that had been crucial to the history of Tibet. Despite not dwelling on the political events of the time, the author's account corroborates the existence of a close correlation between economics and politics in pre-modern Tibet; the heavy reliance of the dGa'ldan pho brang government on the services of Khams pa traders allowed them considerable bargaining power in the political field. In narrating his own recollection of events, 'Dzam yag unknowingly showed how the tight-knit Khams pa trading communities of Lhasa, gZhis ka rtse, and rGyal rtse used their economic influences to shape a sense of “national” identity *vis-à-vis* the Chinese, strengthening in the meanwhile their own sense of local centrality *vis-à-vis* the dGa' ldan pho brang.

CHAPTER FOUR

Pilgrimage

In Chapter Three mention has been made of monastic communities and estates as economic entities, in particular with reference to their involvement in financial enterprises. In an effort to emphasise the importance of the Khams pa traders' agency, the complexity of monastic involvement in financial transactions has been approached by considering religion as a dependent variable, sensitive to the fluctuations of the economy. Despite being, in principle, self-existent and self-sufficient entities, the Tibetan monasteries (Tib. *dgon pa*) contained within themselves a wide variety of institutions, different in size, composition, and social function; in pre-modern Tibet, the *dgon pa* were at the same time "military outposts, economic agents, guardians and guarantors of trading centres, as well as primarily religious entities" (Samuel, 2013: 11). Prior to 1959, monasteries were "an omnipresent feature of regional organization and political-economic dominance" (van Spengen, 2000: 74); they controlled estates, livestock, handicraft workshops, and engaged in trade and

loan businesses (Tucci, 1980: 158). The profits from trading ventures were a variable but considerable source of income for *dgon pa* and *bla brang*. With its intricate network of parent and branch monasteries, the monastic system constituted a web of doctrinal and economic control spread throughout the plateau. The largest monastic communities often hosted local storehouses for sought-after commodities, such as tea and wool; the fluctuations of the world market, as well as setbacks due to geo-political bearings on trade routes had repercussions for those *dgon pa* involved in long-distance commerce. As economic entities, monasteries and monastic estates were influenced by the vagaries of the markets and heavily dependent on the services of trade agents for the diversification of their assets.

As discussed in Chapter Three, in mid-20th century Tibet, the intertwining of economic interests between sectors of the “elite commoners” and government representatives led to an increase in the political force wielded by Khams pa trading firms on the policies pursued by the dGa’ ldan pho brang. As an active member of the eastern Tibetan communities of Lhasa and gZhis ka

rtse, 'Dzam yag contributed to the consolidation of their power by taking part in communal activities and events. The influence exerted by Khams pa traders did not limit itself to the secular sphere, but extended to that of religion as well, since these trade agents worked as proxies for monastic communities, estates, and incarnated lamas on whose behalf they purchased and sold commodities.

Albeit not inconsiderable, the income obtained from trade and moneylending was not the only source of funding for the monastic communities. In this chapter, attention will be brought to monastic rituals and pilgrimage practices, both inside and outside Tibet, by analysing their economic and social importance. In order to do so, the heuristic frame previously adopted to tackle the problematic interdependency of economy and monasteries/monastic communities will be adjusted to consider religion as an independent variable capable of producing economic outcomes.

Particularly relevant for its economic impact, pilgrimage may arguably be understood as complex circulative systems “strongly vectored toward specific places ranging from local to national and even supranational” (Bhardwaj, 2009:

49), a dynamic and self-organised structure depending on the existence of centres that possess a strong attractive power – a “spiritual magnetism”, in the words of Preston (1992: 33). As pointed out by Bhardwaj (2009: 50), “pilgrimage activity [...] is never exactly replicative”, but it flows and changes within a time-space frame, acting similarly to a living system. The circulation of pilgrims often coincides with the emergence and growth of different kinds of exchanges – goods, ritual objects, food, and money – which are integrated into the system and reproduced by generations of pilgrims (McKay, 1998: 2). Interdependent and complementary, economic and pilgrimage networks influence each other, growing and changing according to the chronological and spatial evolution of the pathways converging and connecting to the sacred places that represent points of attraction²⁶⁷ for pilgrims and traders alike.

²⁶⁷ To use van Spengen’s (1998: 40) words, “though it is impossible to tell whether pilgrimage created trade or vice versa, it seems undeniable that the large flows of pilgrims generated by Lhasa and a few other centres of national importance contributed to the growth of a trade network spanning the length and breadth of Tibet and even beyond.”

Monastic communities, perceived as fields of merit by the Buddhist laity,²⁶⁸ relied on basic endowments from the lay society; goods, food, money, and sometimes land were provided in exchange for religious services,²⁶⁹ since “the economic success and social acceptance [of monastic communities] rested in their functional ability to translate economic gain into religious merit” (van Spengen, 2000: 79). The emergence and diffusion of large monastic complexes determined the creation of new centres of power – spiritual “magnets” that attracted devotees and pilgrims. Trade connections flourished along pilgrimage routes, the flow of goods mirroring the circulation of people, with markets and lodgings springing up near monasteries, shrines, and holy

²⁶⁸ The idea of monastic communities (Skt. *saṅgha*) as a “field of merit” (Skt. *puṇyakṣetra*; Tib. *tshogs zhing*) is found in many Pāli texts. The laymen’s offerings to the monastic community are conceived as seeds of good karma sown in the “field of the merit”; by bringing them to fruition, the *saṅgha* allows the donors to reap the benefits of their actions (Mills, 2003: 61). On the ideological and practical dynamics of the *spyi sa* (“community property”) system, see Miller (1961).

²⁶⁹ It was not unusual for rich patrons to request the ritual services of high lamas and reincarnates. For example, in a note dated to the 3rd of the 10th month of the Iron Tiger Year (November 12th, 1950), the sTag ser mdun gling tshang, a wealthy household in Shang bya phu (‘U yug district, gTsang), invited the ‘Jam mgon Kong sprul rin po che (1904-1953) to perform a tantric feast (Skt. *gaṇacakra*) and a Tārā ritual. ‘Dzam yag was among those who attended the ceremonies and donated 12 *srang* and silk to the value of 25 *srang*. Furthermore, since he received the empowerment of Hayagrīva, Vajrapāṇi, and Garuḍa (Tib. *rTa Phyag Khyung gsum*), he paid an additional initiation price in the form of a pair of seals in an ivory box and a bowl of parched barley flour (Kha stag ‘Dzam yag, 1997: 196).

places (McKay, 1998: 2). In the analysis of pilgrimage activities, the economic dimension represents a methodological key issue; to borrow Preston's words (1992: 43), "virtually every pilgrimage is associated with a field of economic exchange, as in fairs, carnivals, and permanent or temporary marketplaces. Materials are redistributed as pilgrims enter sacred centers, then disperse."

The topic of pilgrimage and ritual activities – at the core of 'Dzam yag's journal – provide the perfect merging ground of narratology and economics – the two main heuristic devices used in approaching the structure and content of 'Dzam yag's *nyin deb*. The discussion of literary theory carried out in Chapter One provided the necessary foundation for the understanding of the *nyin deb* as a narrative text, apt to be interpreted through a narratological lens. The presence of an intertextual dialogue between the journal and other narrative forms²⁷⁰ offers grounds for reflection on the influence wielded by textual utterances in the interpretative process at the base of formulations of sacred geography, as well as on the way the author of the *nyin deb* perceives himself

²⁷⁰ I am here referring in particular to "hagiographical/biographical" (Tib. *rnam thar*) and "geographical" (Tib. *gnas yig, dkar chag*) texts.

and his personal predicament. In discussing and appraising the experience of pilgrimage activities and involvement in ritual performances, I propose to investigate the relationship between lay and clerical sectors of Tibetan society by focusing on economic exchange; in order to do so, the present chapter is divided into two sections which differ in their approach as well as their focus.

In the first section, the *locus* of investigation is the Tibetan plateau; ritual activities and pilgrimage routes are analysed through the lens of 'Dzam yag's account. In continuity with previous discussions on trade and society, the economic approach is employed as a tool in analysing the power wielded by religious communities, the amount of money generated by pilgrimages to sacred sites, and the different aims and intentions driving the devotees.

In the second section, the change of *locus* – from Tibet to the “holy lands” of India and Nepal – shifts the discourse to the process of the Tibetan reinvention of India as a “sacred Buddhist terrain of pilgrimage” (Huber, 2008: 32). 'Dzam yag's travel notes testify to the existence, as late as the mid-1940s, of a distinctive pilgrimage circuit, developed under the influence of modern

forms of Buddhist revival, the circulation and diffusion of which increased noticeably in the first half of the 20th century. The author himself was not immune to the fascination that “the land of the noble ones” (Tib. *'phags pa'i yul*) held in the Tibetan imagery; on the contrary, exoticism deeply influenced the way he experienced his pilgrimage. Paradoxically, it is in the places most connected to the life of the Buddha that 'Dzam yag's spirituality feels the least engaged. The inquiring mind that brought him to take a firm stance on the significance and meaning of pilgrimage activities to certain sacred sites of the Tibetan plateau gives way for a more subdued and passive acceptance of the intrinsic value of the places he visits in South Asia. It is during his stay in northern India and Nepal that the *nyin deb* really assumes the features of a travelogue, and from time to time the author himself seems to slip out of character, assuming the *ante litteram* features of a modern tourist.

1. Ritual Activities and Pilgrimage in Tibet

The richness of ritual practices associated with pilgrimage to sacred spaces and powerful places in Tibet is such as to constitute a field of research

in its own right. The complexities of the historical and social interactions, as well as the high degree of syncretism and assimilation, contributed to the development of an extraordinarily broad range of rituals and rites, the origin and meaning of which never failed to enthrall the scholars. Whereas earlier scholarship tended to engage with pilgrimage practices through the literary medium,²⁷¹ the trend has recently shifted towards a more anthropological approach; moving from the texts to the field, scholars have started investigating the way the Tibetan practitioners themselves relate to a certain cult apparatus or system of values (McKay, 1998: 4-5; Huber, 1999: 10). When dealing with textual sources, it is in fact important to remember their *prescriptive* nature and therefore refrain from treating them too casually “as though they were actually *descriptive* of local thought and action” (Huber, 2008: 35 – emphasis added). Whereas it is indisputable that native practitioners actively draw from a shared pool of symbols, categories, and metaphors, they do so in accordance with the context they operate in. Pilgrimage literature is therefore important in providing

²⁷¹ Pilgrimage literature, as textual expression of sacred geography, records information about the holy environment, its spatial orientation, and its modifications through time. See Chapter One, pp. 44-71.

guidance to sacred places, but, at the same time a “different, apparently conflicting, geographical conception” (Ramble, 1999: 4) could be held simultaneously by those who visit holy sites. In his journal 'Dzam yag admittedly relies on oral sources – in the form of caretakers and villagers – but also on various forms of pilgrimage texts, in particular *dkar chag* and *gnas yig*;²⁷² several of the descriptions of places jotted down by the author were in fact based on *gnas yig* and local narratives.²⁷³

1.1. Pilgrimage Activities: The Mundane Aspect of 'Dzam yag's Spiritual

Quest, 1944-1952

²⁷² For a description of the different types of pilgrimage literature, see Chapter One, pp. 44-71.

²⁷³ For instance, while passing through 'Dam gzhung rdzong on his way from Nag chu to Lhasa, 'Dzam yag paid a local boy, no more than 15 years old, to guide him to the *stūpa* of Sha ra ba (an important bKa' gdams pa lama of the 12th century) and show him what remained of a great monastery established there by the master. The notes include an extract from the *dkar chag* of the holy place (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 82-83; see Roesler and Roesler 2004: 55-73 for a reproduction of the *dkar chag* in full). In the 12th month of the Fire Pig Year (January 1948), during his visit to sMra bo lcog, a rNying ma monastery belonging to the mNga' bdag lineage in Lho brag, 'Dzam yag records having borrowed a *gnas nyig* of the place from one of local lamas (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 110). In the late part of the Earth Mouse Year (1949), while in Kathmandu, the author laments the impossibility of visiting all the sacred objects and sites mentioned in the various *gnas yig* he had access to, thus demonstrating the importance that such texts had in shaping Tibetan pilgrims' activities and expectations (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 156).

Whereas from 1952 up to 1959, 'Dzam yag's religious life mostly revolved around esoteric rituals and monetary offerings, the situation prior to his encounter with Dam pa rin po che and the consequent appointment as *tshong dpon* was rather different. From 1944 to 1951, the author embarked on a series of pilgrimages to sacred places and powerful "spaces" on the Tibetan plateau, with the intent of cleansing his *karma* and consequently improving his social and financial conditions. As correctly pointed out by McKay (1998: 1),

[...] pilgrimage is generally defined as a journey to a sanctified place, undertaken in the expectation of *future spiritual and/or worldly benefit*. [Emphasis added]

While the last years covered by the *nyin deb* show a man mostly concerned with the accumulation of merit for his next life, the period immediately following 1944 portrays quite a different person. At that time, the loss of his financial means and the increasing difficulties in making a living in Rab shis prompted 'Dzam yag to a drastic change of life; in a short poem

written after his first pilgrimage to India,²⁷⁴ he ponders on past events, comparing his situation to that of the great Tibetan saint Mi la ras pa (c. 1052 – c. 1135).²⁷⁵

Because the lord of Rab shis expropriated all of Kha stag 'Dzam yag's wealth – just like in the past Mi la ras pa was robbed of his heritage by his paternal uncle and aunt – I [*i.e.* Kha stag 'Dzam yag] could not stay in my homeland and I wandered to the borders. Having wandered to the borders, I reached the central province of dBus, and even though I had to be under cover [by keeping a low profile], my eyes could see far and wide. Having abandoned [the hope to return to] my fatherland, I obtained peace of mind;²⁷⁶ having circumambulated the supports and sacred places of the four regions of central Tibet and paid homage to the

²⁷⁴ Already in Kalimpong for business, 'Dzam yag joined a group of pilgrims from Tre hor and set off to the holy places of northern India on the 28th day of the 12th month of Wood Bird Year (March 2nd, 1946) (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 53-55). See Chapter Four, 2.1., pp. 334-335.

²⁷⁵ The dates of the birth and death of the saint adopted here are the ones provided by the *yogin's* most famous biographer, gTsang smyon Heruka (1452-1507). Early literary sources largely disagree on the year of Mi la ras pa's birth – usually listing the animal but not the element of the sexagenary cycle – and on his lifespan. The problematic identification of Mi la ras pa's dates has bedeviled European and North American scholarship; Alexander Csoma de Kőrös, the first Western academic to address the saint's chronology, miscalculated the date of Mi la ras pa's birth provided in the chronological tables of *sde srid* Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho's *Vaidūrya dkar po*, converting the Iron Dragon Year to the Gregorian year 1038 instead of 1040, an error that lingered in scholarship up to the early 20th century. The tradition of dating Mi la ras pa's birth to an Iron Dragon Year was overshadowed in Tibet, and consequently in the West, by the appearance of a new chronology provided by gTsang smyon Heruka's version. According to the latter, the saint was born on a Water Dragon Year, corresponding to 1052 AD. For a detailed study on the vagaries of Mi la ras pa's dates, see Quintman (2013: 3-26).

²⁷⁶ The same concept recurs again in a note dated on the Iron Tiger Year (1950); in this case the author supports his reflections on the presence of a silver lining hidden in apparently negative events by making reference to the *Nītisāstra* (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 193).

[two] forms of Buddha Śākyamuni [in Lhasa], I dedicate a prayer,
out of equanimity and compassion, to all sentient beings –
whether enemies, friends, or people [having] neutral disposition
[towards me].²⁷⁷

The association with *Mi la ras pa* is telling of 'Dzam yag's attitude at the time. Betrayed and lost, he struggled to accept the unfair treatment and the calumny he received from his lord; like the famous saint, he too suffered exile from his fatherland. Pilgrimage was the traditional answer to the sudden emergence of obstacles and difficulties. By prostrating and circumambulating, the pilgrim surrenders himself to the kindness of the deities, bodily engaging in the psychophysical cleansing of defilements and sins and absorbing of the blessings of the sacred places (Huber, 1999b: 16). By defining himself as a "new beggar" (Tib. *gsar sprang*), 'Dzam yag placed himself within the tradition of the itinerant pilgrims, wandering lay practitioners – "professional pilgrims"

²⁷⁷ *sngar zhig mi la'i pha nor rnams / a khu a nes 'phrog pa bzhin / kha stag 'dzam yag rgyu nor kun / rab shis dpon pos 'phrog rkyen gyis / rang yul ma chags sa mtha' 'khyams / mtha' ru 'khyams pas dbus su slebs / mgo bo btums pas rgyang mig mthong / pha yul spangs pas zhe sdang zhi / dbus gtsang ru bzhi gnas rten skor / jo shaka [sic] rnam par zhal mjal nas / dgra gnyen bar ma thams cad la / btang snyoms byams pas bsngo smon brjod //* (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 55).

(van Spengen, 1998: 46) – who were accustomed to travel throughout the Tibetan cultural world.²⁷⁸

Between 1945 and 1951, 'Dzam yag visited Lhasa and the surrounding areas at least three times, went to the lake Manasarovar and Mt. Kailash once, and had innumerable occasions to pay homage to the most sacred monastic establishments of the central provinces of dBus and gTsang. Despite metaphorically donning the humble robe of a pilgrim, his status as trader differs from that of the average *gnas skor ba*. His socio-economic conditions and his familiarity with influential eastern Tibetan merchants gave him the unique chance to directly interact with masters and reincarnates, requesting divinations, private meetings, and blessings from them.

1.1.1. *Phyogs med* and *Ris med*: The “Unbiased” Wanderings of a New

Beggar

²⁷⁸ There are many examples of wandering pilgrims within the Tibetan tradition. For a study of some of these figures, see for instance, Ricard (1994), Ramble (1995), Kværne (1998), Havnevik (1998), Quintman (2013, 2015).

It would be impossible in the present dissertation to provide a complete list of all the places – monasteries, hermitages, mountains, lakes, springs, and other sacred spaces – mentioned in the *nyin deb*. Throughout his pilgrimages – be they regional, superregional, or international – the trader shows a remarkably non-sectarian and unbiased approach, in perfect accordance with the tenets promulgated by the *ris med* movement. As discussed in Chapter Two, by the mid-19th century, the territories of sGa pa and sDe dge saw the spread of non-sectarianism and inclusiveness, ideas already present in Tibetan Buddhism, but fostered by the activities of teachers and *sprul sku* belonging to different traditions. Scholars such as dPal sprul O rgyan 'jigs med chos kyi dbang po (1808-1887), 'Jam dbyangs mkhyen brtse dbyang po (1820-1892), 'Jam mgon Kong sprul Blo gros mtha' yas (1813-1899), and 'Jam mgon Mi pham rgya mtsho (1846-1912) took the lead of the *ris med* movement, the main aim of which was “to counteract the sectarian disputes and violence that frequently marred Tibetan Buddhism” (Karma Phuntsho, 2005: 50). The interregional conflicts that in past centuries had placed different schools in

opposition to each other²⁷⁹ had assumed a more local aspect in the 18th century, focused in particular in the area of sDe dge.²⁸⁰

The dGe lugs missionary efforts and the forced prozelytising that followed the defeat of mGon po rnam rgyal by the Lhasa army (1865) deeply concerned the *ris med* masters, who perceived the dGe lugs scholasticism based on the *bsdus grwa* literature as excessively rigid, verbose, and arid.²⁸¹ In an attempt to counteract a homogenisation of the Buddhist traditions through the adoption of the dGe lugs curriculum, the *ris med* teachers promoted a “reorientation of religious study to the Indian originals and an eclectic approach of professing the essential teachings of all Tibetan traditions in spite of one’s own religious affiliation” (Karma Phuntsho, 2005: 51).

²⁷⁹ Just to cite a few examples, major conflicts occurred in the 13th and 14th centuries between Sa skya and 'Bri gung, and in the 17th century between the bKa' brgyud and the dGe lugs.

²⁸⁰ The Ngor pa attempt to reduce rNying ma dominance of the sDe dge royal patronage caused a civil rebellion, resulting in the imprisonment of the queen and her spiritual master 'Jigs med phrin las 'od zer in 1798. In 1848, a war occurred between the dGe lugs establishment of 'Ba' chos sde and the sPungs ri dgon nang, an affiliate of dPal spungs; in 1863, the dGa' ldan pho brang government intervened to repel the Nyag rong invasion led by mGon po rnam rgyal, thus extending its power over sDe dge (Karma Phuntsho, 2005: 50; Power and Templeman, 2012: 336; Tsomu, 2013: 59-61).

²⁸¹ The term *bsdus grwa* indicates the introductory courses or classes in dialectics, divided into three categories: *bsdus grwa* (“ontology”), *blo rigs* (“epistemology”), and *rtags rigs* (“logic”). Without mastering the summarized topics of the *bsdus grwa*, a student could not advance any further in the dGe lugs scholastic tradition (Onoda, 1996: 187).

Born and raised in an environment imbued with non-sectarian values, 'Dzam yag's receptivity towards an impartial appreciation of all religious traditions is hardly surprising; albeit educated in a dGe lugs establishment – the largest in the area of sKye dgu mdo – he received empowerments and teachings from masters of different schools, showing a deep understanding of the *lam 'bras* ("Path and Result")²⁸² system and literature as taught by the Sa skya. Albeit 'Dzam yag's non-sectarianism transpires clearly from his notes, it is in the foreword to the edited version of the *nyin deb* that his support to religious non-sectarianism is first expressed and clearly verbalized.²⁸³ It is plausible that the trader did not perceive his eclectic and inclusive approach as an element

²⁸² The tantric tradition of the *lam 'bras* ("Path and Result") was initially received by 'Broḡ mi Lo tsā ba Shākyā ye shes (993-1077?) from the Indian master Gayadhara (d. 1103). 'Broḡ 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; 'Broḡ mi's translation continued to be orally transmitted and memorized for hundreds of years, before being eventually written down. Over the centuries, the different lineages of the *lam 'bras* were slowly absorbed into the Sa skya school, currently the only holders of the tradition of the "Path and Result" in Tibetan Buddhism (Stearns, 2001: 6-8).

²⁸³ Considerable information concerning the persona of Kha stag 'Dzam yag is provided in the foreword to the *nyin deb*. I am here referring to the description of the funerary rites following his death and the commemorative discourse offered 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 (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 6-7).

worth of mentioning, a frame of mind he shared with other Khams pa, as the following pages will show.

In his pilgrimages inside and outside Tibet, 'Dzam yag appears to adhere to the well-known tradition of roaming without a fixed destination (Tib. *phyogs med*), an attitude he shared with many other wandering pilgrims. In reality, far from being the outcome of impromptu decisions, his religious visits followed precise agendas and were strongly dependent on his business activities.

Even though the search for mundane results – whether good health, financial security, or social stability – appears to have fueled the majority of the religious activities carried out by 'Dzam yag between 1944 and 1952, the visits paid to Lhasa and the travels through the southeastern region of Lho kha, the pilgrimage to lake Manasarovar and Mt. Kailash, as well as the numerous meetings he had with the retired abbot (Tib. *mkhan zur*) Thar rtse rin po che represent, for different reasons, some of the most significant events experienced by the trader in the 1944-1952 period. In the following paragraphs,

passages from the *nyin deb* regarding those activities will be presented and discussed through economic and literary lenses. The application of two different but equally valid heuristic devices provides a better understanding of the value of 'Dzam yag's experiences, placing them within their social and cultural context.

1.1.2. Lhasa

'Dzam yag's *nyin deb* accounts for three distinct visits to Lhasa; even though business was the main reason behind these visits – occurring a few months apart from each other – the trader does not offer any details about the trade he was involved in or the networking he engaged in. The journal omits the mundane aspects of his stay in Lhasa; as creator of his own narrative, 'Dzam yag does not diverge from the image of the pious and humble man he chose for himself. The few references he makes to financial transactions and trips to the market are almost lost among the countless visits he paid to the sacred sites of the town. His sojourns in Lhasa were organised around a

routine of circumambulations, prostrations, and offerings to the major religious “supports” (Tib. *sten*).

The first of 'Dzam yag's recorded visits dates back to the 20th day of the 9th month of the Wood Bird Year (October 26th, 1945); as soon as he reached the town, the trader headed to the Ra mo che to pay homage to the images of Avalokiteśvara (Tib. *Thugs rje chen po*) and Jo bo yid bzhin nor bu,²⁸⁴ to each of which he offered Chinese silk; the fabric, being of one arm's-length, was beautifully decorated with drawings of the three longevity deities (Tib. *tshe lha nam gsum*). The next day he set off at dawn to complete the external circumambulation (Tib. *phyi'i gling skor*) of Lhasa, and reaching the Ra mo che from the north, he offered an arm-span long scarf embroidered with an image of Amitāyus to the Jo bo Mi bskyod rdo je,²⁸⁵ prostrating in front of the image and concluding his visit with several circumambulations of the shrine of Amitāyus (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 42). The predominant role played by the

²⁸⁴ “Lord [who is] the wish-fulfilling jewel”. Statue portraying Buddha Śākyamuni at the age of twelve; it was brought as dowry by Wen Cheng Kong jo, the Chinese wife of the Tibetan king Srong btsan sgam po (ca. 604-650).

²⁸⁵ “Lord [who is] the unmovable vajra”. Statue portraying Buddha Śākyamuni at the age of eight; it was brought as dowry by Bhṛkufī (Tib. Lha cig khri btsun), the Nepalese wife of the Tibetan king Srong btsan sgam po.

longevity deities – in particular Amitāyus – in this phase of 'Dzam yag's life is telling of the uncertainties he was facing at the time. His main concerns regarded his poor health²⁸⁶ and the strain placed on it by his financial difficulties; by entrusting himself to the deity of infinite life, the trader clearly hoped to cleanse the defilements and bodily imbalances at the root of his sicknesses.

On the 22nd of the 9th month (October 28th, 1945), the auspicious day of the descent of the Buddha from Tuṣita,²⁸⁷ he offered clarified butter for the replenishment of the golden lamps in front of the statues of the eleven-faced Avalokiteśvara (Tib. *Thugs rje chen po bcu gcig zhal*) and, while a rich sponsor donated to the Jo bo yid bzhin nor bu a large golden lamp filled with butter, he made an offering for the gilding of the image (Tib. *gser gso*). He then paid a visit to Jo bo Mi bskyod rdo rje at the Ra mo che, refilling the lamps in front of

²⁸⁶ 'Dzam yag suffered from a chronic rheumatic disorder that made him prone to recurrent bouts of fever. See Chapter Two (p. 163) for the first mention of his condition in the *nyin deb*.

²⁸⁷ In Buddhist cosmology, Tuṣita is the fourth highest of the six heavens within the sensuous realm (Skr. *kāmadhātu*) and abode of bodhisattvas. It is from Tuṣita that the deity Śvetaketu departed to incarnate as Śākyamuni in Māyā's womb. The festival mentioned by 'Dzam yag celebrates the auspicious event. See Buswell and Lopez (2013: 930).

the image twice and burning some *gser yig*.²⁸⁸ Leaving the shrine, 'Dzam yag returned to the gTsug lag khang, where he donated “drop-offerings” (Tib. *mchod thigs*)²⁸⁹ to all the images of the three-story building, fervently praying for the welfare of all beings. At the end of his visit, he reached the market, where he purchased several books (Tib. *dpe cha*), among which was a *dkar chag* of Lhasa.²⁹⁰ In a note dated to the 3rd day of the 10th month of the Wood Bird Year (November 7th, 1945), 'Dzam yag recalls having caught a glimpse of the 14th Dalai Lama, who was at the time travelling in a palanquin from his summer residence at the Nor bu gling ka to the Po ta la. The event was received by the traveller with great joy and perceived as an extremely auspicious sign (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 43-44).

²⁸⁸ Pieces of paper on which the name of a dead person is written with gold ink. Their burning is perceived as a commemorative offering. Since 'Dzam yag does not provide any explanation why he made those offerings, only speculations can be advanced. It is possible that the trader was acting as a proxy and that the burning of the *gser yig* was made on behalf of an acquaintance of his.

²⁸⁹ Offering consisting in drops of clarified butter or oil used to refill lamps previously offered by other devotees.

²⁹⁰ 'Dzam yag does not elaborate on the nature of the *dkar chag*; it seems plausible that it may have been the famous catalogue of the main temple of Lhasa known as *Lha ldan sprul ba'i gtsug lag khang gi dkar chag shel dkar me long*. Composed by the 5th Dalai Lama Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho in 1644, it consists of a detailed description in verse of the “supports” (Tib. *rten*) contained in the gTsug lag khang. Each stanza is followed by a prose paraphrase. See Vostrikov (1970: 222-223).

During his nine-day stay, the trader covered daily the entire length of the *gling skor*²⁹¹ and paid homage to the main holy objects of the principal temples and shrines, exerting himself for the accumulation of merit. The lack of substantial means was clearly a major concern for 'Dzam yag; being used to having at his disposal considerable wealth, the trader-turned-pilgrim struggled to adjust to his new conditions. A pilgrimage to Lhasa was for many Tibetans the accomplishment of a lifetime, and even though it is evident from the journal that the trader had been to the holy places of dBus before, the limitations imposed by his predicaments pushed him to exert himself through an active engagement in ritual activities such as prostrations and circumambulation, the physical strain of the body compensating for the dearth of financial offerings. Refilling of butter lamps, offering of ceremonial scarves (Tib. *kha btags*), and the occasional donation of 2 or 3 *srang* were the only material offerings 'Dzam yag could afford at the time; what was lacking in monetary terms was nevertheless amply compensated by prostrations, circumambulations, and prayers. In his daily visits to the sacred sites of Lhasa, the trader joined the

²⁹¹ Lit. "outer circumambulation path"; it enclosed the centre of Lhasa, the Po ta la, and ICags po ri for a total length of 8 km.

constant flow of devotees and pilgrims who engaged in similar acts of worship and faith, thus creating and preserving a devotional pattern claimed to provide mental clarity and emotional happiness.²⁹²

On one of his last days in Lhasa, the trader ventured to the top of dMar po ri to visit the Po ta la palace; at the foot of the hill, he met a monk official (Tib. *rtse drung*) on his way to the *drung ja*, the compulsory daily tea meeting all monk officials were expected to attend. Hearing about 'Dzam yag's intentions, the official suggested an alternative route to him,

“Since it is very important for your obtaining an auspicious outcome, you should go up to pay homage to the rTse Po ta la from the ‘Path of Liberation’ through the northern passage; on the way down, you should descend through a different gate”.²⁹³

Following the official's advice, the trader climbed up the “Path of Liberation”, and once inside the palace he visited some of its major sacred

²⁹² “At that time [9th month of the Wood Bird Year (October 1945)], during my nine-day stay in Lhasa, almost each day I did an outer circumambulation and visited the holy sites without interruption [...] I was happy” (*de'i skabs nga rang lha sar zhag dgu tsam 'dug ring phal cher gling bskor re dang lha mjal re ma chag pa byas [...] blo sems bde ba'i ngang la gnas* (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 43).

²⁹³ *khyed rang rten 'brel gyis gnad 'gag che bas / rtser mchod mjal 'gro ba la yar lam byang brgyud thar lam nas 'gro dgos / mar shog sgo gzhan zhig nas 'bab rgyu kha yong* (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 43).

objects, such as the statue of Ārya Lokeśvara, self-originated from a white sandalwood tree;²⁹⁴ the footprints of Padmasambhava and Tsong kha pa; and many self-arisen *ma ṇi* stones. Three times he circumambulated the golden reliquary (Tib. *gser sdong 'dzam gling rgyan gcig*) built by the *sde srid* Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho to host the remains of the 5th Dalai Lama, and the relief *maṇḍala* models (Tib. *bkod pa*) in gilded copper of the celestial palaces of the tantric deities Kālacakra, Guhyasamāja, Cakrasaṃvara, and Vajrabhairava.

The journal accounts for a total of three visits to Lhasa, all occurring within a few months from each other; after his sojourn there in the Wood Bird Year (1945), 'Dzam yag returned to the holy city two more times in the 5th and 12th month of Fire Dog Year (June 1946 and January 1947). From the Fire Pig Year (1947) onwards, the trader enjoyed a greater stability – culminating in his taking residence in gZhis ka rtse; more and more engrossed in his trading and

²⁹⁴ According to the *Ma ṇi bka' 'bum* (lit. “The One-Hundred Thousand Pronouncements [Regarding] [the Prayer] Maṇi”), the statue was one of a set of four, known as “The Four Brothers Ārya [Avalokiteśvara],” self-originated from the trunk of a white sandalwood tree. The images appeared at the time of Srong btsan sgam po, who, informed by a vision of the existence of the statues in a grove in Nepal, entrusted the task of “inviting” the deities to Tibet to a monk. The latter, emanated from a hair placed between Srong bstan sgam po’s eyebrows, is often referred to as *sprul ba'i dge slong*. See Buswell and Lopez (2013: 526).

sponsoring activities in gTsang, 'Dzam yag's "obsession" for Lhasa waned, replaced by a more consistent participation in the ritual life of the monastic establishments of bKra shis lhun po and Ngor E wam chos ldan.

The first of these subsequent visits to the holy city dates to the 13th day of the 5th month (June 22nd, 1945), two days before the "universal incense offering" (Tib. *'dzam gling spyi bsangs*); on that occasion, the trader joined the celebrations at Se ra monastery, paying homage to the Karma shar lha²⁹⁵ and burning incense in honour of the goddess rDo rje sgrol ma. During his brief sojourn, he visited the main sacred objects of the gTsug lag khang, Ra mo che, and rTse Po ta la, stopping by the Zhol printing house (Tib. *par khang*) to pay homage to the 'speech supports' that were created there. During his stay, the trader actively engaged in circumambulations, counting 265 *skor ra* of the Jo khang and 265 *skor ra* of the Jo bo Mi bskyod rdo rje. On the 4th day of the 6th month (July 13th, 1945) he attended the restoration ceremony of the holy objects and images of the gTsug lag khang led by the 14th Dalai Lama; 'Dzam

²⁹⁵ Oracle connected to Se ra monastery, and celebrated during the *'dzam gling spyi bsangs* festival. See Bell (Diary XI: 21).

yag was able to catch a glimpse of this incarnation of Avalokiteśvara, which prompted him to make an aspirational prayer. On the 30th day of the 6th month (August 8th, 1945), on the auspicious day celebrating the murder of Glang dar ma, people from the four districts of Lhasa, the various monastic centres, and the nearby villages came to celebrate, and the Tibetan opera (Tib. *A lce lha mo*) was performed at Nor bu gling ka (Kha stag 'dzam yag, 1997: 68-70).

The last of the recorded visits of 'Dzam yag to Lhasa began on the 7th day of the 12th month of the Fire Dog Year (January 29th, 1947) and is presented in the journal as a mere list of offerings made to the different religious “supports” (Tib. *rten*) of the main temples and shrines; despite the brief stay – only five days – the trader donated a considerable amount of gold and tea, showing the desire to “recompense” the deities for having shown him their favour (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997:77-78).

Between the first and the third visit, 'Dzam yag embarked on a series of long-distance business ventures that significantly increased his financial means. In the months prior to his second visit (5th month of the Fire Dog Year,

June 1945), he contributed a considerable amount of money, *i.e.* 100 *srang*, to the realisation of copies of the thirteen volumes of the *gzhung chen bcu gsum*²⁹⁶ to be donated to the scriptural college (Tib. *bshad grwa*) of Ngor E wam chos Idan (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 62). His last visit to Lhasa, dated to the 12th month of the Fire Dog Year (January 1947), was preceded by a thirty-two day stay in Nag chu, a period spent by the trader dealing in wool; it is plausible therefore that the increase in monetary liquidity was mainly due to the successful trade business carried out prior to his final journey to the town.

Between 1944 and 1952, 'Dzam yag travelled extensively inside and outside the plateau,²⁹⁷ sometimes dealing on his own behalf and sometimes as a proxy for others, either religious or lay. The trader's visits to Lhasa and, especially, the way he chose to narrate them in his *nyin deb* are exemplary of the ontological predicament he recurrently falls pray to, *i.e.* his incapacity to

²⁹⁶ Thirteen classical treatises on Buddhist philosophy translated from Sanskrit into Tibetan. Since the 20th century, the thirteen texts, the topics of which range from *Vinaya* to *Abhidharma* to *Mādhyamaka*, are at the core of the *sūtra* curriculum in the rNying ma and Sa skya institutions, due to the efforts of mKhan po gZhang dga' (1871-1927), who composed commentaries on these scriptures, availing himself of Sanskrit materials. See Pearcey (2015).

²⁹⁷ Between the end of 1945 and the beginning of 1950, 'Dzam yag visited the holy sites of Buddhism in northern India and Nepal. See Chapter 4, section 2, p. 324 onwards.

reconcile material and mundane needs with religious and soteriological desires.

Whereas in the journal 'Dzam yag is free to reconstruct the events in a different light, presenting his trips to Lhasa as pilgrimages, in reality they were incidental visits made possible by his business. Despite his efforts to hide such concerns within the lines, the market, the sales and purchases, the business meetings, and the travel arrangements loom in the background, always threatening to disrupt his religious practices and spiritual concentration.

1.1.3. Travelling through Lho kha: Yar lung and the Sacred Places

Connected to Padmasambhava, Mar pa, and Mi la ras pa

It has been repeatedly stated that the experience of a pilgrimage does not take place in a cultural or, even more importantly for our discussion, a literary vacuum. A wealth of literature has been produced on sacred sites in Tibet,²⁹⁸ and 'Dzam yag's experiences and ritual activities place themselves within a long tradition. Textual sources – whether oral or written – not only acknowledge and validate the sacrality of a place but also provide a frame of

²⁹⁸ For a bibliography of Tibetan-language guidebooks to sacred places inside and outside the plateau, see Br nder (2008:15-108).

reference without which the pilgrimage itself would be meaningless; the descriptive and prescriptive nature of pilgrimage literature acts as an authoritative force molding and influencing the perception of the pilgrims, and represents a meaning-making framework that 'Dzam yag's narrative does not depart from. It has already been mentioned how references to *dkar chag*, *gnas yig*, and local accounts are scattered throughout the journal, and often represent the backbone of many of the author's descriptions. As a well-read individual, 'Dzam yag had been exposed to a wide array of different textual sources which he seems to have interiorised as a subconscious structure of understanding and motivation, providing the moving force to his ritual journeys. The *nyin deb* develops over a constant, albeit often silent, dialogue with and between such textual utterances, in a game of cross-references and intertextuality that gives meaning and value to the trader's personal undertaking. From an academic point of view, the peregrinations undertaken by the trader throughout the 1944-1952 period do not differ from the extended pilgrimages made by both the 1st rDzong gsar 'Jam dbyangs mKhyen brtse'i dbang po Kun dga' bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan (1820-1892) during the second half

of the 19th century²⁹⁹ and the 3rd Kaḥ thog Si tu Chos kyi rgya mtsho (1880-1925) in 1920.³⁰⁰ Even though no mention is made by the trader of either rDzong gsar rin po che's or Kaḥ thog Si tu rin po che's narration, it is safe to say that 'Dzam yag's wanderings, albeit ostensibly spontaneous in their nature, situated themselves within a precise mental and literary framework. The superimposition of narratives on the landscape is after all a part of the constant process of Buddhisation as well as an expression of the way through which Tibetans come to understand the world around them. It has already been argued in Chapter One that certain texts, such as the *gnas yig*, have a strongly didactic and eulogistic nature, and that they play a fundamental role in the process of negotiation, interpretation and appreciation of the virtues of holy places. In describing and giving sense to the different physical features of the

²⁹⁹ I am here referring to the famous *dBus gtsang gi gnas rten rags rim gyi mtshan byang mdor bsdus dad pa'i sa bon*, as recorded in the master's collected writings (Tib. *gsung 'bum*) by the disciple *dge bshes* Karma bKra shis chos 'phel. An English translation of this work – based on preliminary drafts by Alfonsa Ferrari, later completed and edited by Luciano Petech with the collaboration of Hugh Richardson – was published in 1958. For an updated treatment of mKhyen brtse'i dbang po's work, see Akester (2016).

³⁰⁰ The 3rd Kaḥ thog Si tu was a student of 'Jam dbyang mKhyen brtse'i dbang po. In his pilgrimage through central Tibet he demonstrated that he shared his master's predilection for the rNying ma, bKa' brgyud, and Sa skya establishments. The Kaḥ thog Si tu's pilgrimage is recorded in his work titled *dBus gtsang gi gnas yig*. See Chos kyi rgya mtsho (2001).

surrounding environment, the guidebooks recreate the stage trodden by deities and holy men, allowing the traveller to reenact their roles (Huber, 1997a: 121).

A pilgrimage is a journey on a physical as well as a super-mundane plane, the understanding of which requires the employment of specific lenses and tools, literature on sacred geography being one of them. An analysis of the trader's journey to Lho kha, a southeastern region of the Tibetan plateau strongly associated with the Yar lung dynasty and the figure of Padmasambhava, ought to take into consideration the intertextual nexus hidden behind the mere listing of toponyms; the choice of places to visit is in fact far from being casual, but rather corresponds to a precise social, religious, historical, and cultural interpretation of the sacredness of the Tibetan plateau.

Having set off from bSam yas, 'Dzam yag and his nephew Blo 'jam entered Lho kha, and after having visited the complex of Kun bzang nag khrod,³⁰¹ founded in 1158 by *dge bshes* Phag mo gru pa rDo rje rgyal po

³⁰¹ Most of 'Dzam yag's information on the establishment is drawn from a *gnas yig* and an abridged version of the *rnam thar* of Phag mo gru pa rDo rje rgyal po. According to the tradition, the latter founded the monastery of Kung bzang po'i gnas khrod with the intent of taming the whole world, the fame of the establishment shining bright like the full moon in the sky (Kha stag

(1110-1170), on the 12th month of the Earth Mouse Year (January 1949) they reached Zangs ri mkhar dmar, a Phag mo gru monastery and an important site in the transmission of the *gcod*³⁰² ritual. The complex is mainly renowned in connection to the activities of Ma gcig lab sgron ma (1055-1149),³⁰³ a Tibetan *yoginī* from whom several lineages of the *gcod* practice originated. Her meditation cave, located on the western side of Zangs ri mkhar dmar, was particularly renowned for the presence of many “self-originated” *ṛten*, to which the trader offered 25 *srang*. In the late afternoon 'Dzam yag and Blo 'jam crossed the gTsang po river and moved southeastwards to rTsed thang dgon (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 96-97). The bKa' brgyud monastery was established in 1350 by Si tu Byang chub rgyal mtshan (1302-1364), the founder

'Dzam yag, 1997: 93-94). For a short biography of Phag mo gru pa rDo rje rgyal po, see Mi nyag mgon po et al. (2000: 63-69).

³⁰² Lit. “cutting-off”, the *gcod* tradition, attributed to Ma gcig lab sgron, was a system that combined teachings and precepts from the Indian *sūtras* with the *yoginī*'s personal meditation experiences derived from the *Prajñāpāramitā* and Vajrayāna instructions. Her technique, unique and often referred to as “The Cutting-Off [Ritual] of the *Mahāmudrā*” (Tib. *dam chos phyag rgya chen po'i gcod yul*), was adapted to the different needs of her disciples, thus creating diverse meditation methods that eventually generated separate lineages (Edou, 1996: 6). For a description of the practice, see Edou (1996, especially pp. 39-56) and Harding (2003).

³⁰³ Many Western publications have been dedicated to the figure of Ma gcig lab sgron ma. See Gyatso (1985), Allione (1984), Edou (1996), Kollmar-Paulenz (1998), Orofino (2000), Harding (2003).

of the Phag mo gru dynasty and ruler of Tibet from 1354 until his death. The monastery was later converted into a dGe lugs establishment, and became known as rTsed thang lnga mchod grwa tshang, since its monastic community used to pay *lnga mchod*³⁰⁴ to dGa' ldan chos 'khor.³⁰⁵

From rTsed thang dgon, the two pilgrims moved to Yar lung Shel brag, a meditation cave where Padmasambhava is said to have dwelled for three years during which he received visions of peaceful and wrathful deities; the place contained many blessed objects, such as a speaking statue of Guru Rin po che, twenty-one self-originated Tārās, footprints of the tantric master, and symbolic letters (Tib. *brda yig*) written by the *ḍakinīs* (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 100-101).

³⁰⁴ Religious fee paid in support of the celebration for the anniversary of gTsong kha pa's death on the 25th day of the 10th month.

³⁰⁵ *'di ni thog mar tā yi si tu byang chub rgyal mtshan gyis phyag btab pa'i bka' brgyud pa'i dgon pa grags can rtsed thang dgon zhes pa de yin 'dug pa la / phyis su rje tsong kha pa'i mdzad 'phrin rten 'brel las grub mtha' dge lugs pa chags shing / 'jam dbyangs gyang thims ma zhes pa'i gyang dang / jo bo rje'i thugs dam gyi rten thub pa gser gling ma sogs dus 'gyur ma byung bar du mjal rgyu yod la / dge 'dun zhal grangs kyang brgya lhag yod / lnga mchod ces pa ni chu lho rgyud du dga' ldan lnga mchod thog mar gtong mkhan dgon de yin stabs mtshan de ltar thogs par 'khod* (Chos 'phel, 2002: 42)

'Dzam yag and Blo 'jam's pilgrimage through Yar lung mirrors the itinerary described in mKhyen brtse's and Kaḥ thog Sit tu's guides; from Shel brag, the two headed down to the plain of rTsed thang, visiting the shrine of rTsed thang g.yu, founded by the mother of king Khri srong lde brtsan, and believed to be the place where gNya' khri btsan po³⁰⁶ descended from heaven (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 102).

Moving southwards from the plain, they reached Ras chung phug, a monastery erected near the meditation cave of the bKa' brgyud master Ras chung pa (1084-1161); the complex presented many elements related not only to the latter but to other representatives of his aural lineage (Tib. *snyan brgyud*)³⁰⁷ as well.

³⁰⁶ According to a pre-Buddhist version of the myth of the sacred sovereignty of Tibet preserved in a Dun-huang manuscript, gNya' khri btsan po was the first of the divine kings to descend from heaven to rule the country. For a detailed bibliography on the topic, see Kværne (1981).

³⁰⁷ A system of liturgies, ritual manuals, and tantric commentaries, together with their aural instructions, based primarily on the *Cakrasaṃvaratantra*. Promulgated by the Indian *siddhas* Tilopa and Naropa and transmitted in Tibet by Mar pa and Mi la ras pa, they were received by Ras chung pa and consequently became known as *ras chung snyan brgyud*. The teachings of the most prominent disciples of Mi la ras pa – Ras chung pa, sGam po pa bSod nam rin chen, and Ngan rdzongs ras pa – were later codified as the “Three cycles of aural lineage instructions” (Tib. *snyan brgyud skor gsum*) by the 15th century *yogin* gTsang smyon Heruka, also known as the author of Mi la ras pa's *nam thar* (Buswell and Lopez, 2013: 699).

In recording mKhyen brtse's pilgrimage in Yar lung, his guidebook presents a circular path including six chief destinations; three sanctuaries (Tib. *gnas gsum*) – Shel brag, Khra 'brug, and either Ras chung phug or 'Om bu lha khang –³⁰⁸ and three *mchod rten* (Tib. *rten gsum*) – rTag spyen 'bum pa, dGon thang 'bum pa, and Tshe chu 'bum pa (Ferrari, 1958: 49-50; Dowman, 1988: 173). The presence of the same locations in 'Dzam yag's *nyin deb* proves, on the one hand, the existence of a recognised and accepted pilgrimage route through Lho kha, and, on the other, further confirms the prescriptive power of textual utterances in the sense-giving and sense-making processes at the core of sacred geography; the recorded experiences of previous Buddhist masters provide frames of meaning and interpretative schemas that the devotees employ in their relation with the surrounding environment.

'Dzam yag and Blo 'jam's pilgrimage through the southeastern region of Lho kha follows almost in every detail the route travelled a century earlier by mKhyen brtse. From rTsed thang they moved towards the south of the gTsang

³⁰⁸ The compiler of the guide admits the existence of a controversy over the identification of the third *gnas*. See Ferrari and Petech (1958: 49) and Dowman (1988: 173).

po; following the river upstream, they passed through the Yar lung region, reaching Lho brag, the birthplace of Mar pa and a bKa' brgyud stronghold. Before leaving Lho brag and heading towards gTsang and rGyal rtse, the two pilgrims visited two other important places connected to the popular narrative of Mi la ras pa, namely Sras mkhar dgu thog³⁰⁹ and Lho Gro bo lung. Both complexes, the first a towered fortress³¹⁰ and the second a hermitage, hosted the saint's master Mar pa, and became important superregional pilgrimage sites.

It has been stated that the value of a pilgrimage depends on the efforts made by the pilgrim. Between 1944 and 1952, the lack of economic means was, on the one hand, a main concern and the reason behind many of the exertions 'Dzam yag submitted himself to; on the other hand though, unable to offer anything else than himself, he actively engaged in the physical aspects of

³⁰⁹ Sras mkhar dgu thog (lit. "Nine-story tower [of] the son") was built by the saint as a form of ascetic penance and initiation price. The compound *sras mkhar* may be a hypercorrection of *gsas mkhar*, a Bon term meaning "temple"; the term *gsas* (lit. "god") is an authentic non-Tibetan word. I am grateful to Per Kværne for sharing his knowledge on the topic (private conversation, March 2017).

³¹⁰ On Mi la ras pa's trial of the towers and the political and religious meaning behind it, see Gianotti (1991: 67-75).

the pilgrimage, often at the cost of his own health. In the passage below, the trader reflects on the limitations of his own body and the illusory control man has over time, closing with a typical Buddhist reflection on the necessity to engage in pious activities while one can. He also displays his knowledge of the Buddhist traditions by quoting Pha dam pa Sangs rgyas, the famous but elusive 11th century *Zhi byed* master. Trade, although hinted at by the fact that he is carrying heavy loads with him, is not addressed explicitly and is entirely overshadowed by the religious activity.

On different occasions in the past, I did not go to the top [of the Sras mkhar tower] because I had heavy loads [with me] and I could only circumambulate it from the outside. The following day, at sunrise, I armed myself with courage, and even though I only did a single circumambulation, it was a rather strong sensation for my body. As for the youngsters, they do not think much of doing many circumambulations [...] As Pha dam pa said, “If one cannot engage in ascetism at the time of his or her blooming youth, then, when one reaches old age, there is no hope he or she can do that.” One should engage in religious hardships when young [because] when one gets old everything is difficult.³¹¹

³¹¹ *sngar dus dang mi 'dra ba bgrang bya yis khur lci bas mtha' bskor las rtse bskor 'gro ma phod / phyi nyin nyi ma 'char ba dang mnyam du sems la dpa' bskangs nas gos rkyang du skor ba gcig thon tsam byung yang / lus la tshor ba che tsam 'dug / gzhon pa rnams ni grangs mang skor ba la ngal ba cher med pa 'dra [...] pha dam pas kyang gzhon sha rgyas kyi dus su dka' thub ma byas na / rgas dus 'byung bas mi len {ding ri ba} / zhes gsungs pa'i gzhon pa so dkar*

1.1.4. Pilgrimage to mNga' ris

1.1.4.1. Gangs Ti se and mTsho Ma pham

On the 1st day of the 5th month of the Earth Ox Year (June 27th, 1949), 'Dzam yag joined a group of pilgrims on their way to Mt. Kailash (Tib. *Gangs Ti se*) via southwest Tibet, thus fulfilling a long-awaited wish of his. Before setting off, the trader commissioned the performance of a day-long ritual at bKra shis lhun po by four monks³¹² in order to dispel whatever obstacles might arise on his way. On their way from gTsang to mNga' ris, 'Dzam yag and his companions stopped by renowned monastic establishments, such as sNar thang dgon, Sa skya dgon, and Ding ri glang 'khor dgon. At the latter, the trader paid homage to the meditation cave of the Pha gcig dam pa sangs rgyas (d. 1117), the founder of the complex; the caretaker, a certain dPa' bo dbang 'dus, collected water from a nearby spring and allowed 'Dzam yag to drink it and use

gyi dus su chos la dka' thub dgos shing rgas tshar na yong ba dka' mo 'dug (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 116). The presence of the term *ding ri ba* (lit. "native of Ding ri") seems to suggest a quote from Pha dam pa Sangs rgyas' *Ding ri brgya rtsa ma*, a famous series of aphorisms addressed by the master to the people of Ding ri.

³¹² For their ritual performance, the monks received a statue of the value of 60 *srang* (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 158).

it for ablutions.³¹³ The sacred mountain of Jo mo glang ma (Mt. Everest), visible to the south of Ding ri, was honoured with offerings to the bsTan ma bcu gnyis.³¹⁴ The presence of holy places – sacred to Bon po and Buddhists alike – does not escape 'Dzam yag's attention, and it is only the responsibility for the pack animals he had been entrusted with by the *tshong dpon* Nyi ma phun tshogs³¹⁵ that prevented him from leaving the safety of the group and venturing out on the trail on his own. As pointed out by McKay (1998: 8-9), numerous were the lay travellers whose economic existence revolved around trading at pilgrimage sites, and that raises the wider question of when pilgrimage ended and secular lifestyle started; in 'Dzam yag's case, the two activities were inextricably intertwined.

³¹³ Even though Tibetan pilgrims rarely bathe in sacred waters (Huber, 1999b: 17), in his journal 'Dzam yag makes several references to the use of water collected from holy springs for the purpose of ablution (Tib. *khrus*).

³¹⁴ Twelve female local spirits who were converted by Padmasambhava and bound to protect Jo mo glang ma, which is considered to be one of the five most sacred mountains of Tibet. See Nebesky-Wojkowitz (1956: 181-198).

³¹⁵ The reference to pack animals strengthens the assumption that in the years 1944-1952 'Dzam yag's religious visits and pilgrimage activities were highly dependent on business arrangements and logistics. It should be also recalled that sPu hreng was an ancient trading post attracting, as late as the 1950s, numerous traders, peddlers, and pilgrims from all over Tibet and beyond. I am grateful to Dr Franz Xaver Erhard for the information (private conversation, June 2017).

During the two months spent in the western province of mNga' ris,³¹⁶

'Dzam yag and his companions visited the most important sites connected with the figures of Padmasambhava and Mi la ras pa, for Buddhist visitors the main characters in the narrative fueling the sacredness of the Kailash-Manasarovar complex. Even though Mt. Kailash – or Gangs Ti se, as the Tibetans refer to it – has come to embody a universal sacred site for Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike, the history of the place has gone largely unexplored, its status accepted without any attempt at critical analysis. Despite being supported by the claims of modern commentators,³¹⁷ textual proof of an early established sacrality of Mt. Kailash and Lake Manasarovar has yet to be found. The mountain described in ancient Indic texts is in fact a heavenly landscape bearing little, if any, resemblance to the earthly complex.

³¹⁶ 'Dzam yag adheres to the traditional tripartite division of mNga' ris (Tib. *stod mnga' ris skor gsum*) in the Snow Land of sPu hreng (Tib. *spu hreng gangs kyi skor*), the Slate Land of Gu ge (Tib. *gu ge g.ya' yis skor*), and the Water Land of Ru thog (Tib. *ru thog mtsho yis skor*) (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 168-169).

³¹⁷ In his *Ti se gnas bshad*, the 34th 'Bri gung bKa' brgyud dKon mchog bstan 'dzin Chos kyi blo 'gros (1801-1859) provides four different descriptions of Mt. Ti se, according to the views of non-Buddhists, Hindus, Hīnayāna followers, and Vajrayāna practitioners respectively. See Huber and Rigzin (1995: 14-15).

As for Tibetan historical sources on Kailash-Manasarovar, any reference to a holy mountain retains the features of a literary trope, a metaphor rather than a specific place with unique geographic features. Elevated to being a sacred centre in the 11th century, Mt. Kailash soon became a topic of controversy among representatives of different schools of Tibetan Buddhism, due to the instrumentalisation of Indic cosmology and prophetic schemata by the bKa' brgyud subsects;³¹⁸ additionally, at the time of the first textual compositions, the focus of sacredness was not the mountain *per se* but the lake later identified with Manasarovar (McKay, 2015: 2-3),³¹⁹ called in Tibetan Ma pham and considered to be the abode of serpent spirits (Skt. *nāga*; Tib. *klu*).³²⁰ The Buddhisation³²¹ of Kailash-Manasarovar was part of a multi-

³¹⁸ On the sacred geography controversy and the development of Tantric Buddhist pilgrimage sites in Tibet, see Huber (2003).

³¹⁹ Early Tibetan sources conformed to wider Indic beliefs attributing a major spiritual reverence to bodies of water rather than mountains (McKay, 2015: 3). Bodies of water – whether lakes or springs – appeared to have been often perceived as sacred; at the beginning of the Earth Mouse Year (1948), 'Dzam yag records the performance of seven circumambulations around the Phu ma g.yu mtsho, a saltwater lake in Upper Lho brag, considered to be an important pilgrimage site (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 131; Richardson, 1998: 324).

³²⁰ With the “opening” of the pilgrimage route by the 'Brug pa master rGod tshang pa mGon po rdo rje (1189-1258), the central ritual observance of Buddhist pilgrimage to the site shifted from the circumambulation of the lake Manasarovar to the circumambulation of the mountain (McKay, 2015: 302).

dimensional and wider process of transference of Indic Buddhist sacred geography to the Tibetan plateau by hierarchs of the various branches of the bKa' brgyud school, a transformation that occurred mainly on a mythological level, through the superimposition of the *maṇḍala*³²² of the Tantric deity Cakrasaṃvara (Tib. *'Khor lo bde mchog*)³²³ onto the landscape and its concurrent association with the activities of Padmasambhava and Mi la ras pa (McKay, 2015: 6-7).

The assimilation of territorial deities (Tib. *yul lha*) into the Buddhist pantheon and their transformation into sacred mountains (Tib. *gnas ri*)³²⁴ has

³²¹ The Buddhist “conquest” of Tibet was a multi-levelled process, in which fundamental aspects were the subjugation (Tib. *'dul ba*) of the landscape and its autochthonous deities. For a discussion on the process of Buddhisation, see Huber (1997: 246), Buffetrille (1998: 18-34), McKay (2015: 275).

³²² On the origin and importance of the *maṇḍala* model in sacred geography, see Macdonald (1997), Huber (1999: 26), McKay (2015: 308-312).

³²³ Crucial in the establishment of Kailash as *gnas ri* was not a single ritual event – whether Mi la ras pa's claim or rGod tshang pa mGon po rdo rje's “opening” of the circumambulation route – but rather the myth of the subjugation of the Śaivite deity Maheśvara by Cakrasaṃvara, an event understood to have occurred in mythological times (McKay, 2015: 313).

³²⁴ Whereas the origin of the *yul lha* is intimately connected with the process of identity construction of the local tribes – for whom the mountain served as an identity marker – *gnas ris* were usually the outcome of a programme of superimposition of external cosmogonies – whether Buddhist or Bon (McKay, 2015: 273-274).

been the topic of several studies³²⁵ and does not need to be reexamined at present. Nevertheless, in the case of Kailash-Manasano var, the absence of traces solely ascribable to a *yul lha* cult, and the prominence of elements typical of a Buddhist sacred mountain, *e.g.* circumambulations, the “opening” of the site by a historical figure, and the “ritual appropriation of space, in which written sources serve an important function” (Karmay, 1994: 115) seem to strongly indicate that Ti se was rather detached from the local context and its sacrality came almost completely from the overlaying of Buddhist concepts (McKay, 2015: 274-275).

The modern perception of Kailash as “the most sacred place in Tibet” (McKay, 2015: 8) for Hindus, Buddhists, and Bon po actually dates only to the 20th century, and is largely due to the convergent efforts of outsiders – whether Europeans, Indians, or central or eastern Tibetans, all of whom were nurturing and promoting their own images of the mountain realms (McKay, 2015: 9).

’Dzam yag, too, contributed to the establishment of the Kailash myth, joining the thousands of pilgrims who constantly journeyed to the province of mNga’

³²⁵ See in particular Huber (1999b).

ris. In his journal, the trader completely endorses the narrative of Kailash as *axis mundi*,³²⁶ adhering to the popular tale of Mi la ras pa's conquest of the mountain and the conversion of the Bon po master Na ro Bon chung. While ascending the massif, 'Dzam yag and his companions halted in front of the cave where the Bon po was supposed to have meditated, giving the trader an occasion to jot down an abridged version of the famous episode of Mi la ras pa's life story, thus unconsciously engaging in an intertextual dialogue that is at the core of an ongoing meaning-making process of sacred geography.

As 'Dzam yag renders the legend, the great Buddhist saint visited the sacred place at the end of the 11th century; at the time of crossing one of the mountain passes, he was welcomed by a party of *ḍakinīs* and local deities by whom he was offered the mountain as a place of meditation for him and his

³²⁶ As pointed out by McKay (2015: 273), "the modern understanding of Kailas-Manasarovar as a 'World mountain' is largely shaped by Indic perspectives and owes little to Tibetan understandings of the sites". In canonical Indic Buddhism there are various references to a heavenly mountain named Kelasa, but the late Mahāyāna-Tantric forms of Buddhism that spread in Tibet after the 11th century interpreted the sacred geography of the territory in a very different way. The concept of "World mountain", passed down in Tibet during the first dissemination of Buddhism (Tib. *snga dar*, 7th-9th centuries), was not related to or identified with Ti se or any other earthly complex, since mountains were used as metaphors (McKay, 2015: 278). See also Huber (2003: 392-424).

disciples. The place came to be known as mGur la, the “Song’s Pass”, in celebration of Mi la ras pa’s performance of a song (Tib. *mgur*) as a gesture of gratitude to the deities; in his notes, the trader records the presence of footprints on the surrounding rocks, just one of the several wondrous signs left by spiritual masters who on different occasions visited the holy mountain (Kha stag ’Dzam yag, 1997: 167).

The region of sPu hrengs in mNga’ ris rose to fame mainly due to the activities of the ’Bri gung and Karma subsects,³²⁷ who engaged in an active conversion of landscape and local deities, thus more sharply defining the doctrinal identity of Buddhism and sectarian orders (McKay, 2015: 290-291).

The local narrative embraced the process of Buddhisation, presenting the area as a *locus* of interest, mentioned by the Buddha himself, and filled with auspicious geomantic signs. In his journal, ’Dzam yag lists some of the holiest

³²⁷ Gangs Ti se and Ma pham soon became a field of dispute between the two bKa’ brgyud subsects; by the late 12th century, the favourable socio-political condition of mNga’ ris had attracted so many renunciates that the rights to practice at the sacred sites became a matter of contestation by the various bKa’ brgyud followers. The matter was finally settled around 1215 with the predominance of the ’Bri gung and the consequent institutionalisation of a stable and organised form of pilgrimage. See Vitali (1996: 407) and McKay (2015:300-301). For a study and partial translation of ’Bri gung chung tshang’s *Ti se gnas bshad* (“Guide-book to Ti se”), see Huber and Rinzin (1995: 10-47).

spots,³²⁸ recalling the importance held by sPu hrengs in many traditions, and the necessity for the pilgrim to rely on the experiences of supreme beings as narrated in their accounts, since personal defilements may prevent the devotee from fully perceiving the sacredness of the place, its blessed essence hidden beneath its mundane and earthly aspect. The *nyin deb* reiterates the myth of an early sacrality of Kailash-Manasarovar; drawing from the biographies (Tib. *rtogs brjod*) of Mar pa and Mi la ras pa, 'Dzam yag presents a place the holy nature of which was recognised by the Buddha himself, an acknowledgement further confirmed by Mi la ras pa's claim to the lake and mountain (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 169). According to the Buddhist narrative,³²⁹ the dispute between the saint and Na ro Bon chung mirrors the opposition, already existing as early

³²⁸ To attract the trader's attention there were Lang ka [the demon that chose] sPu hrengs [as its abode] (Tib. *Lang ka sPu reng*), Palace of the Prince Nor bu bzang po (Tib. *rGyal bu Nor bzang gi brang*), Cave of the 2,000 Queens (Tib. *bTsun mo nyis stong gi phug pa*), the Asura Sky Cave, a rock-shelter or cave from where Beautiful Goddess flew in the sky (Tib. *Yid 'phrog lha mo nam mkhar 'phur ba'i bya skyibs a sur nam phug*), Holy Spring the Mere Sight of which Liberates from *Samsāra* (Tib. *Chu mig mthong ba rang gro*), and Palace of the Four Great *Nāgas* (Tib. *Klu chen bzhi yi pho brang*) (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 169).

³²⁹ The existence of Na ro Bon chung was unknown in the Bon religion and appears to be a creation of later Buddhist narrative (Martin, 2001: 118-119).

as the 11th century,³³⁰ between Buddhism and the indigenous tradition in the form of Bon; “the two belief systems used their own formulations of indigenous categories of deities and ways of seeing the landscape as part of that contestation” (McKay, 2015: 291). The competition between the magical powers of two renunciates, the Buddhist Mi la ras pa and the Bon po Na ro, is traditionally presented as the moment in which Gangs Ti se (Mt. Kailash) became established as *gnas ri*, a sacred Buddhist mountain. There are many accounts³³¹ of Mi la ras pa’s reasons to travel to Ti se; whether it was for the benefit of the nomads or at the advice of his master Mar pa, the saint is accredited to have visited the site in 1093, and his presence began to be framed in terms of a Buddhist *versus* Bon competition, that ended with the superimposition onto the place of the *maṇḍala* of Cakrasaṃvara, Mi la ras pa’s tutelary deity. As correctly stated by McKay (2015: 295),

³³⁰ Rin chen bzang po (958-1055) “selected only those places for establishing (temples) [...] which were either the centres of Bon-po faith or the local gods” (Thakur, 2001: 35). See also Thakur (2011: 209-218).

³³¹ Different reasons for Mi la ras pa’s presence at Ti se are for instance given in *The Blue Annals* (1476) and Mi la ras pa’s biography (1488) (McKay, 2015: 292). For a detailed study of Mi la ras pa’s biographies, see Quintman (2015).

The predictions attributed to Marpa or Naropa concerning Milarepa's achievements were [...] retrospective validations rather than historical explanations, for the truths they contain exist in the world of myth.

The first claims to an early sacrality of Ti se were advanced by 'Jig rten mgon po (1143-1217), the founder of the 'Bri gung pa, a century after Mi la ras pa's visit to mNga' ris; the first practitioners, sent to Kailash, Tsa ri, and La phyi by the 'Bri gung masters Gling ras pa (1128-1188) and 'Jig rten mgon po, attracted others, thus contributing to the progressive institutionalisation of a pilgrimage practice to these sites sacred to the bKa' bryud. 'Dzam yag adheres to the 'Bri gung subsect's narrative of the mountain as a place praised by the Buddha and Padmasambhava, and blessed by Atiśa and the five hundred *arhats*.³³² As the trader explains in his journal, many arguments were advanced by 'Bri gung representatives supporting the holiness of Gangs Ti se, and their praises found resonance in the words of Blo bzang chos kyi rgyal mtshan, the 4th Panchen Lama (1570-1662); nonetheless, confusion was caused by a few disciples of Kun dga' rgyal mtshan (1182-1251), commonly known as Sa kya

³³² According to the tradition, there were five hundred disciples who attended the First Council held at Rājagṛha after the passing away of the Buddha.

Paṇḍita, who passed judgment on the validity of Ti se as a pilgrimage site, with no other reason than mistaken loyalty to their master's position (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 170).³³³ Whilst at the time of 'Dzam yag's pilgrimage, the circumambulation of Mt. Kailash was a well-established superregional ritual activity, the bKa' brgyud projection of the *maṇḍala* of their tutelary deity onto the mountain had not gone uncontested at the time of its formulation. Some of the claims integral to the process of Buddhisation soon became the subject of criticism, most notably by Sa skya Paṇ chen (Huber, 1997b: 274; Huber, 2003: 397-403; McKay, 2015: 317) who openly condemned some of the new tendencies in Tibetan sacred geography and pilgrimage. In his 1232 *sDom gsum rab dbye* ("Discrimination of the Three Vows"), the scholar engaged with the current themes of the time, overtly refusing the identification of the Snow Mountain and the Anavatapta Ocean mentioned in the *Abhidharmakośa* and in the *Śrīkālacakratantra* with Ti se and Ma pham respectively, justifying his

³³³ Sa skya Paṇḍita's criticism of the identification of Tibetan sacred mountains with the Indian cosmology was upheld by the Sa skya. The Bka' brgyud pa, who had many hermitages in the Kailash region, argued against Sa skya Paṇḍita's stance, see for example the 6th Chung tshang Rin po che's "Guide to Mt. Ti se", *i.e.* *Gangs ri chen po ti se dang mtsho chen ma dros pa bcas kyi sngon byung gi lo rgyus mdor bsdus su brjod pa'i rab byed shed dkar me long*.

positions with a strict adherence to the original Indian texts (Huber, 2003: 398).

Nevertheless, the same textual sources backing Sa skya Paṇ chen's refutation of Ti se as *axis mundi* recur in 'Dzam yag's diary more than 700 years later, in a section describing the geomantic features of the massif.³³⁴

As for the four rivers that look like they were pouring down from the mouths of mountains [resembling] four living beings: [starting] from the east, [the rivers] fall [from] the mouth of the excellent horse to Grog shog, [from the beak of] the peacock to sPu hrengs, [from the mouth of] the lion to La dwags, [from the mouth of] the elephant to Gu ge, and these are [signs] for everyone to see.³³⁵

The main points in Sa skya Paṇ chen's criticism of the shifting of sacred places from India to the Tibetan plateau lay in his concern for the way the Buddhist Tantras were interpreted and practised, and his desire to demonstrate the falsehood of the specific sacred geography formulated for their own political and religious advantage by certain sects of Tibetan Buddhism. To use Huber's

³³⁴ A very similar description of the four rivers hailing from animal-shaped mountains appears in Sa skya Paṇ chen's *sDom gsum rab dbye* (in Huber, 2003: 399). The two passages differ only on the nature of one of the animals; whereas the *sūtra* presents an ox, 'Dzam yag's journal reports a peacock.

³³⁵ *ri srog chags 'dra ba bzhi yi kha nas 'bab pa'i kha 'bab kyi chu bo chen po bzhi ni | shar nas rta mchog kha 'babs grog shog yul la 'bab | rma bya kha 'bab spu hrengs yul la 'bab | seng ge kha 'bab la dwags yul la 'bab | glang chen kha 'bab gu ge gi yul la 'bab pa sogs kun gyis mthong ba yod cing 'dug* (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 170).

(2003: 400) words, “not only do Ti-se and Tsa-ri fail to qualify as such sites [*i.e.* holy places], but there is nothing whatever to be gained by Buddhists performing pilgrimage to them.” Sa skya Paṇ chen’s position was upheld by his disciples, and, according to ’Dzam yag, contributed to “generating uncertainty among all beings”;³³⁶ despite the general opposition of the Sa skya pa though, Ti se – as well as the other two main bKa’ brgyud holy mountains, La phyi and Tsa ri –³³⁷ kept gaining credibility as holy sites, and pilgrimage activities grew exponentially since the “opening” of the route in the mid-13th century.

Another point of discussion among pilgrims was the number of circumambulations (Tib. *skor ra*) to be performed in order to cleanse one’s own *karma*. According to the ’Brug pa master gTsang pa rgya ras (1191-1211), quoted by ’Dzam yag, one *skor ra* was said to purify the obscurations of a lifetime, ten *skor ra* atoned for the defilements of an aeon (Skt. *kalpa*; Tib. *skal pa*), but the completion of one hundred *skor ra* would ensure the obtainment in a single lifetime of the eight good qualities and the ten signs of successful

³³⁶ *skye bo kun ’phyang mo nyug tu gyur* (Kha stag ’Dzam yag, 1997: 170).

³³⁷ Ti se, La phyi, and Tsa ri were understood as representing respectively the Body, Speech, and Mind of Cakrasaṃvara, the tutelary deity of the bKa’ brgyud (McKay, 2015: 313).

practice. For the locals however, thirteen was the number of circumambulations sufficient for the purification of one's own sins; as 'Dzam yag records in his *nyin deb*, thirteen was in fact the number of *skor ra* performed by a Khams pa woman who accidentally killed her child while crossing the sGrol ma pass. With her mind clouded by thirst and fatigue, the woman forgetfully immersed herself into the water of a *'khrus mtsho* (lit. "ablution lake"), causing the death of the baby she was carrying on her back. Grieving and moaning, she started prostrating, completing thirteen circumambulations of the mountain, at the end of which a footprint appeared on the rock, symbolising the cleansing of her defilements (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 171). The *'khrus mtsho* was later sealed with a lid, and the access to its water was limited to a few days a year; 'Dzam yag and his companions were fortunate enough to visit the place on one of those rare occasions, thus having the chance to bathe and make offerings there (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 172).

Once on the other side of the mGur pass, the pilgrims resumed their journey through sPu hrengs, camping for the night at a village near rTsa bu lha

khang, formerly a branch monastery (Tib. *dgon lag*) of the Sa skya establishment of gTsang Byang chub gling. The next day the group visited the Sa skya complex of 'Khor chags dgon, paying homage to the 'Khor chags Jo bo rigs gsum mgon po.³³⁸ Even though the three images enjoyed similar fame and devotion in the region, the legend behind the creation of the Mañjuśrī statue caught 'Dzam yag's fascination, prompting him to record an abridged version of it in his journal. According to local tradition, in the 10th century the place was visited by seven Indian *ācārya* each of whom was carrying a load of silver. Tired and eager to move on, they entrusted the precious metal to the local *dharma* king and bodhisattva (Tib. *chos rgyal byang chub sems dpa*),³³⁹ on the understanding that, if none of them came to reclaim the loads, after three years the silver would be his. The ruler did as requested, and when the third year came and went, he sought the advice of a pious lama; assured that the silver was a sign of spiritual accomplishment, the king summoned the best Tibetan

³³⁸ Statues portraying the Lords of the Three Families, *e.g.* the bodhisattvas Avalokiteśvara, Mañjuśrī, and Vajrapāṇi.

³³⁹ Vitali (1996: 258-265) suggests the name king Lha Idan as possible founder of the Rin chen brtsegs pa'i gtsug lag khang and sponsor of the silver statue of Mañjuśrī. See Orofino (2007: 87-88).

craftsmen with the intention of commissioning the creation of a supreme statue.

Before the artists could touch the metal though, an image of Mañjuśrī self-

originated from it. The king ordered for the blessed statue to be transported

from the plain of Bye ma'i thang to the dKar dung castle, but at the moment of

crossing the flat river banks of the rMa bya kha 'bab, Mañjuśrī spoke, affirming

his desire to stay in the place where he was formed (Kha stag 'Dzam yag,

1997: 167-168; Orofino, 2007: 88).³⁴⁰ A monastery was built by the king to host

the “support” (Tib. *rten*), and the other two Jo bo statues – Avalokiteśvara and

Vajrapāṇi – were added by the king rNam lde mgon in the 13th century (Orofino,

2007: 88).

The end of the circumambulation route of Kailash, accomplished by the pilgrims on the 19th day of the 7th month of the Earth Ox Year (September 12th,

³⁴⁰ “In this place I was formed, in this place I want to stay” (*nga yang 'di na 'khor / chags yang 'di na chags*). The complex of 'Khor chags dgon lies on the riverbanks of rMa bya kha 'bab; despite differing on the identity of the founder, historical sources agree on dating its erection to 996. According to the *'Khor chags dkar chag*, written in 1880 by Ngag dbang bsod nams rgyal mtshan, the Ngor Khang gsar mkhan po, the 'Khor chags *gtsug lag khang* was originally built to house the silver Jo bo; in his journal, 'Dzam yag refers to the *dkar chag* as the main textual source he consulted on the local history of the place. For more information on the monastery of 'Khor chags dgon, see Orofino (2007).

1949), was marked by the presentation of a universal incense-offering (Tib.

'dzam gling spyi bsangs) to Gangs Ti se.

By the end of the 1940s, the sacred geography controversy over Gangs Ti se/Mt. Kailash had reached an impasse; whereas most of the pilgrims – including 'Dzam yag – accepted the bKa' brgyud identification of the complex with a proper Tantric pilgrimage site, only a few Sa skya pa – mainly lineage holders and scholars – still refused to include the mountain among their pilgrimage destinations. Albeit adhering to the bKa' brgyud interpretation of Ti se as a site connected to the *Cakrasaṃvaratantra*, 'Dzam yag remained strictly *ris med* in his approach; his critical remark regarding the followers of Sa skya Paṇḍita, blamed for the confusion regarding the value of the complex as pilgrimage destination, did not affect his decision to visit most of the Sa skya establishments in sPu hrengs. It is also worth recalling at this point the personal connection the trader entertained with the Sa skya centre of Ngor E wam chos Idan in general and with Ngag dbang blo gros gzhan phan snying po (1876-

1952) in particular; in the light of that, the non-sectarian acceptance of Ti se as a Tantric site by 'Dzam yag can be fully appreciated.

1.1.4.2. From mNga' ris to gZhis ka rtse

After the offering, the group started to head back to gTsang, leaving behind the western province of mNga' ris and reaching Ri bo bkra bzang, a location mentioned in legendary narratives of Padmasambhava. 'Dzam yag calls it a “supreme sacred place prophesised by Śākyamuni Buddha,”³⁴¹ and briefly recalls its connection to the tantric master. It was said that on his way to U rgyan from central Tibet, Padmasambhava spent seven days at Ri bo bkra bzang; the place, blessed by his presence, was filled with wondrous signs, such as the appearance of an eight-year-old Vajrakumāra (Tib. *rDo rje gzhon nu*), a blue *hūṃ* symbol of speech, and a self-arisen five-pointed vajra. The master left his footprint in the cave where he meditated, and a shrine was built at the retreat place to host images, the most important of which was a speaking

³⁴¹ *shākya thub pas lung bstan pa'i gnas chen* (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 185).

statue of Padmasambhava, handmade by the *gter gton* Rig 'dzin rGod kyi ldem 'phru can (1337-1409).³⁴²

The next stop in the pilgrim's journey back to gZhis ka rtse was Ngam ring chos sde, an ancient monastery and seat of the La stod byang rulers. As 'Dzam yag records, at the time of the kings of gTsang, the throne holder enjoyed power and wealth, but the rise of Güshri khan and the defeat of the gTsang dynasty led to a loss of prestige for the monastic complex,

[Ngam ring chos sde] deteriorated, and insects were making nests inside the ear of the Maitreya statue.³⁴³

Things changed with the conversion of the monastery from Sa skya to dGe lugs in 1650; at the time of his visit, 'Dzam yag records the presence of 300 monks and praises the pristine condition of the monastic "supports". In his journey through the western areas of gTsang, the trader passed by many

³⁴² Treasure discoverer who initiated the Northern Treasures (Tib. *byang gter*) tradition, Rig 'dzin rGod kyi ldem 'phru can was born in gNyan yul, on the eastern side of Ri bo bkra bzang. According to legend, at the age of twelve, three feathery growths appeared on his head, thus gaining him the appellation of *rgod kyi ldem 'phru can* (lit. "having the crest of a vulture"); by the time he was twenty-four, the number of feathers had grown to five. See Powers and Templeman (2012: 584).

³⁴³ *dgon de nyams chag gyur nas / dgon de'i byams chen khyad 'phags de'i snyan du 'bum yis tshang bcas* (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 177).

monasteries that, just as Ngam ring chos sde, had been converted to dGe lugs pa in the 17th century, following the orders of the 5th Dalai Lama. That was, for instance, the case of Lha rtse chos gling; founded in 1250 as a Sa skya establishment, the complex became of paramount importance for the dGe lugs after its reformation in 1649. As 'Dzam yag rightly points out, Lha rtse chos gling was the fourth of the thirteen monastic seats that were converted in the region during that period.³⁴⁴ At the time of the trader's visit, the monastery hosted more than 400 monks, to each of whom he donated as individual offering 1 *zho*, adding to that 500 *srang* for the *bla brang*. Before setting off from Lha rtse chos gling, 'Dzam yag completed a circumambulation of the monastic complex, the fortress (Tib. *rdzong*), and the village (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 177).

³⁴⁴ The rise to power of the dGe lugs in 1642 was followed by a series of forced conversions, especially in the 1680s and 1690s, when the *sde srid* Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho set aside the more tolerant religious views of the 5th Dalai Lama, increasing the number of establishments – especially bKa' brgyud and Bon – converted to dGe lugs. In case of conversion, the original name of the monastery was preceded by the word *dga' ldan*, following the example of the establishments newly founded by the 5th Dalai Lama. On the conversion of Lha rtse chos gling, see Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho (2009, 5: 205-210). A description of the complex is provided by the 3rd Kaḥ thog Si tu Chos kyi rgya mtsho (1880-1923/1925) in his *dBus gtsang gnas yig* (1999: 330-333).

On the 24th day of the 9th month of the Earth Ox Year (November 14th, 1949), the group of pilgrims stopped by Padma sgrub phug, the meditation cave of gNubs Nam mkha'i snying po (8th-9th century)³⁴⁵ in the rGyang yon mo valley, where the *gter ston* Rig 'dzin rGod kyi ldem 'phru can had accepted the *gSol 'debs le'u bdun ma*³⁴⁶ as *gter ma*.

Leaving rGyang behind on the 28th day of the 9th month of the Earth Ox Year (November 18th, 1949), the group reached the hermitage of mDzad pa, residence of the sKyabs mgon mDzad chen rin po che, who bestowed on them the profound empowerment of Nā ro mkha' spyod,³⁴⁷ for which 'Dzam yag offered an initiation fee of 18 *srang*, to which he added 16 *srang* to be divided among the thirteen monks present (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 180). After that, they passed through Grwa dar mo che, the seat of the Sa skya *gter ston* Tshar

³⁴⁵ One of the first seven Tibetans to be ordained by Śāntarakṣita and counted as one of the twenty-five main disciples (Tib. *rje 'bangs nyer lnga*) of Padmasambhava.

³⁴⁶ "The Seven-Chapter Reverential Petition (to Padmasambhava)", a hidden treasure said have been concealed by Mu khri btsan po, son of king Khri strong lde'u btsan, discovered by the latter's reincarnation bZang po grags pa, and entrusted, together with other *gter ma*, to sTon pa bSod nams dbang phyug in 1365, who handed them on to Rig 'dzin rGod kyi ldem 'phru can. See Boord (2013).

³⁴⁷ Lineage of instructions on Vajrayoginī as transmitted from the deity to Naropa.

chen Blo gsal rgya mtsho (1502-1566)³⁴⁸ and approached the peak of Lha rtse rdzong, a place blessed by 'Phags pa. According to the local tradition,³⁴⁹ those who died there would be saved from the lowest rebirths regardless of the amount of sins accumulated in their life. Having completed a series of prostrations and circumambulations, the pilgrims proceeded towards gZhis ka rtse, visiting the meditation cave of the *mahāsiddha* Gayādhara (994-1043), located in the northeastern direction of the fortress of Lha rtse; the Sa skya establishment of Mu gu lung dgon, seat of 'Bro g mi lo tsā ba (ca. 992-1043), and the small Jo nang monastery of Char lung rdo rje brag rdzong. Despite being at a walking distance from the latter, 'Dzam yag could not persuade his companions to visit the place in the Mu gu valley where Gayādhara was said to

³⁴⁸ The 13th Zhwa lu abbot and one of the most important masters of the *lam 'bras* together with Sa chen Kun dga' snying po (1092-1158) and Ngor chen Kun dga' bzang po (1382-1456). He received from his master Kun spangs rDo ring pa the *slob bshad* ("Explanations for the Disciple"), a special transmission of oral esoteric instructions on the *lam 'bras*. While Tshar chen began to write down some of these instructions, the responsibility of recording his definitive explication of the Hevajra practice according to the *slob bshad* tradition fell to his main students 'Jam dbyangs mkhyen brtse'i dbang phyug and Mang thos klu sgrub rgya mtsho (Stearns, 2001: 41-42). For a biography of Tshar chen Blo gsal rgya mtsho, see Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho (2009, 12: 266-434)

³⁴⁹ 'Dzam yag ascribes the origin of the toponym, a corruption of the original Lhags rtse, to 'Phags pa, who moved by the beauty of the place at dawn, named it "The Peak (Tib. *rtse*) Reached (Tib. *lhags*) [by the Sun]" (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 181).

have taught the *lam 'bras* and where his disciples' meditation caves lay in ruins (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 181-182).

From Lha rtse rdzong the pilgrims turned towards the heartland of the Jo nang school, reaching what used to be its most famous establishment, Phun tshogs gling, before its forced conversion to the dGe lugs school in 1635.³⁵⁰

'Dzam yag provides a detailed description of the complex and the stories connected to it; in particular, he records the presence of a set of footprints left by 'Jam dbyangs chos rje bKra shis dpal ldan (1379-1449), the founder of 'Bras spungs monastery, who used to travel back and forth between the foot of the mountain and its peak (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 182).

The outbreak of an epidemic in the area of g.Yu thog dgon discouraged the group from attending the ritual dances (Tib. *'cham*) performed at the

³⁵⁰ The conversion was marked by the change of name from rTag brtan Phun tshogs gling to dGa' ldan Phun tshogs gling. The monastery, founded in 1615, was the seat of Kun dga' snying po, better known as Tāranātha. As correctly recorded by 'Dzam yag (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 182), Tāranātha had been recognised as the reincarnation of Kṛṣṇācārya (Tib. Nag po spyod pa), one of the eighty-four *mahāsiddhas*, by *mkhan chen* Lung rigs rgya mtsho, a 16th century Jo nang master.

monastic complex, redirecting them to the plain of Shab dkar po,³⁵¹ a place renowned for the activities of Rwa lo tsā ba rDo rje grags (1016-1128/1198). According to the popular narrative, the master ploughed and spread seeds on the dry and hard soil of the plain, obtaining overnight a harvest sufficient to feed the famished locals, whose fields had been drought-stricken. In his notes, the trader cannot help but remark on the average-looking condition of the place, reclaimed centuries before by the lords of gTsang and used since for agricultural purposes, regardless of any blessings bestowed by Rwa lo tsā ba on the field; taking a cue from that, 'Dzam yag quotes a passage from the "Golden Light Sūtra" (Tib. *gSer 'od dam pa'i mdo*), pondering on the ways the actions of rulers and ministers may negatively affect their subjects (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 185). From Shab dkar po, the pilgrims passed by Bo dong g.Yu thog dgon³⁵² and Rog gtso dgon.³⁵³

³⁵¹ Also known as Shab rjed gling.

³⁵² The monastic seat of Khro phu lo tsā ba Byams pa dpal bzang (1173-1225).

³⁵³ According to the local story, a *dge bshes* of the monastery, envious of Rwa lo tsā ba's accomplishments, started to harass the master, who, in a magical display of his *siddhi*, turned the *dge bshes* into a donkey (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 186).

The five-month journey to Gangs Ti se via gTsang ended on the 13th day of the 10th month of the Earth Ox Year (December 2nd, 1949) with the arrival of 'Dzam yag and his companions to gZhis ka rtse; albeit presented by the trader as a pilgrimage, it is clear from the details provided in the account that the religious visits were once again collateral to more pressing financial matters.³⁵⁴

1.1.5. Visits to mKhan zur Thar rtse Rin po che

I will conclude the section on the pilgrimage route and ritual activities carried out by 'Dzam yag in Tibet with an analysis of the visits he paid to the retired abbot (Tib. *mkhan zur*) Thar rtse rin po che. Meetings such as this were generally motivated by mundane rather than spiritual purposes; the distress caused by an ambiguous socio-economic status and the fear of being involved in risky business ventures, as well as the choice of a suitable pilgrimage venue were legitimate causes of concern to which the trader struggled to find an answer. Resorting to divination – whether dice, dough-balls, rosaries, or

³⁵⁴ At the time of approaching the mGur la, 'Dzam yag confesses his initial desire to leave the group to pay homage to the sacred sites surrounding Ti se, but the responsibility of a caravan of pack animals entrusted to him by the *tshong dpon* Nyi ma phun tshogs prevented him from doing so (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 182).

interpretation of accidental signs –³⁵⁵ is a practice integral to Tibetan cultural life and seamlessly integrated into the Buddhist sphere. By consulting a diviner or medium, virtually any challenging situation can be assessed and dealt with; the application of appropriate remedial actions, *i.e.* rituals, to be performed by either the petitioners themselves or a spiritual professional, allows for the removal of obstructions and the purification of defilements.

Mundane events concerning health, business, and everyday uncertainties fueled the layman's desire for divination, and 'Dzam yag was certainly not alone in his quest for answers. The more renowned the master was, the more sought-after his services were; private meetings were rare and often the outcome of consistent patronage. The relationship between 'Dzam yag and Thar rtse rin po che – as it emerges from the pages of the *nyin deb* – appears to predate the audience granted on the 4th month of the Fire Dog Year (May 1946), the first of the ten encounters recorded in the journal. It is worth quoting the section extensively, as it features elements that are characteristic of the interaction between the two of them,

³⁵⁵ On Tibetan divination, see Tseten (1995).

After having given it some thought, and still doubting whether I should go towards the central province of dBus or on a pilgrimage to Mt. Kailash, as the proverb goes – “if you don’t know it yourself, ask a lama” – I sought the old *mkhan po* Thar rtse rin po che for a divination, and the signs were auspicious [for my] going that year to either Lhasa, Nag chu, or Rong po.³⁵⁶

Faithful to his pragmatic nature, 'Dzam yag opted for the dBus province; at the time, with neither wealth nor trading goods, he accepted to deliver 100 *do bo* (ca. 35kg each) of butter to Lhasa on behalf of bKra shis nor bu, the treasurer of the Gra'u household in gZhis ka rtse. The task allowed him to earn money and, at the same time, to go on a pilgrimage to the holy city (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 66).

Many were the meetings that followed in the following year; 'Dzam yag met the *rin po che* twice³⁵⁷ when the latter was still acting as abbot at Ngor E wam chos ldan, and seven times after the Iron Tiger Year (1950), when the

³⁵⁶ *nyam blo 'ga' btang nas da ni dbus phyogs la 'gro'am / stod gangs ri gnas skor 'gro'am snyan pa'i the tshom skye ba'i ngang zhig tu rang gi mi shes bla mar dris zer ba'i dpe bzhin du / bdag gis thar rtse mkhan rgan la brtag pa zhus nas / da lo lha ldan nam / nag chu'am rong po phyogs la bskyod shin tu bzang babs* (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 65-66).

³⁵⁷ On the 10th month of the Earth Mouse Year (December 1948) and on the 2nd month of the Earth Ox Year (March 1949).

master renounced his role of *mkhan po*³⁵⁸ and retired to lead a spiritual life at the Chu bzang ri khrod,³⁵⁹ where the trader visited him regularly until his passing away in 1952. The first of these encounters in the new abode occurred on the 3rd month of the Iron Tiger Year (April 1950), when the trader was on his way to 'Dzam thag; on that occasion, he offered him a *bka' btags* of the value of 40 *srang*, some medicine made from the fruits of Myrolaban,³⁶⁰ a self-arisen stone glittering in gold, and a divination dice (Tib. *zho mo*) painted with Indian enamel. Before leaving, 'Dzam yag, uncertain on the direction to take for cutting the best deals with the nomads, requested the *mkhan zur* to perform a divination on the matter. The spiritual connection between 'Dzam yag and the ex-abbot, who was at the time living in seclusion, is a recurrent theme in the journal, and it is rather telling that all the meetings occurring between the two of them concern mundane affairs.

³⁵⁸ Thus becoming a *mkhan zur*, an "ex-abbot".

³⁵⁹ Hermitage on the west side of U 'yug mda' mdo.

³⁶⁰ The fruits of *Terminalia chebula*, commonly known as Chebulic Myrolaban, are considered to be a panacea in both Ayurvedic and Tibetan medicine. See Dash (1976).

On the 5th month of the Iron Tiger Year (June 1950), while on his way back from 'Dzam thag, the trader paid another visit to the *mkhan zur* Thar rtse rin po che, seeking and receiving the empowerment and the protection circle (Tib. *srung 'khor*) of mGon dkar yid bzhin nor bu,³⁶¹ paying 8 *srang* as initiation fee (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 191). Five months later, he returned to Chu bzang, looking for direction on matters related to business: the divination performed by the ex-abbot suggested the sale of the wool the trader had purchased; following the master's instructions, 'Dzam yag maximised his gain and happily used the profit to support his offerings (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 206). The trader met the *mkhan zur*, who was at the time rather old, two more times before the latter's death; the last meeting took place on the 1st month of the Water Dragon Year (February 1952) in gZhis ka rtse. The ex-abbot, who was on his way to Khams, bestowed on 'Dzam yag and a few other fortunate disciples an Amitāyus-Hayagrīva initiation. On that occasion, knowing that the *rin po che* was heading to sGa pa, the trader invited him to his house for

³⁶¹ "The White Protector Wish-fulfilling Jewel", the main variant form of the black or blue-black six-armed Mahākāla. The deity is usually evoked to eliminate spiritual and material poverty and to bring abundance.

dinner, and after asking him for a divination about present and future events, he produced a blessed statue of Mañjuśrī, which he had been entrusted with by a relative of his root-guru (Tib. *rtsa ba'i bla ma*) rDo rje 'chang Ra nyag skal bzang niam rgyal dpal bzang po. The *mkhan zur* Thar rtse rin po che, moved by the gift, accepted the statue as *rten* and reciprocated with a statue of rDo rje 'chang, to be given to the relative of the trader's root-guru. The acting as a middleman between two religious figures is indicative of the kinds of social interactions 'Dzam yag was involved in just a few months shy of his appointment as *tshong dpon* of the Ngor Khang gsar *bla brang*. The Water Dragon Year (1952) marks a change in the trader's approach to life; no more divinations were to be sought by 'Dzam yag, whose main concerns shifted from a mundane to a soteriological plane – or, to use Samuel's terms, from a “pragmatic” orientation, inspired by his difficult social and financial situation, to a more “bodhi-oriented” approach as soon as his circumstances allowed this.

1.2. Ritual Activities: The Soteriological Aspect of 'Dzam yag's Spiritual

Quest, 1952-1956

Whereas in the period between 1944 and 1952 the extemporaneous nature of 'Dzam yag's visits to religious places on the plateau was largely influenced by the precariousness of his situation, his appointment as *tshong dpon* of the Khang gsar *bla brang* at the end of 1952 marked the emergence of a recognisable pattern in his movements. Before delving deeper into the activities carried out by 'Dzam yag in the last years of his life, the events that led to such a significant change in the trader's situation deserve to be brought to attention and analysed.

On the 23rd day of the 6th month of the Water Dragon Year (August 15th, 1952), 'Dzam yag attended the oral transmission (Tib. *lung*) of the *lam 'bras* teachings by Khang gsar rDo rje 'chang Dam pa rin po che at Ngor E wam chos ldan. Among the practitioners, there were the 8-year-old head of the Sa skya sGrol ma pho brang, Ngag dbang kun dga' theg chen dpal 'bar 'phrin las dbang gyi rgyal po,³⁶² his mother sPel chung, the abbot of the 'Phan khang *bla brang*, Ngag dbang mkhas grub rgya mtsho, and the bDag chen rin po che,

³⁶² Representative of the sGrol ma pho brang, one of the two extant branches of the 'Khon family lineage, the ancient hierarchs of Sa skya, he was recognised as the 41st Sa skya *khri 'dzin* by the 14th Dalai Lama in 1951 and officially enthroned on 1959.

'Jigs bral bdag chen sa skya (1929-2016),³⁶³ who opened the ceremonies with a longevity prayer dedicated to the 65th Ngor chen. During his five-month stay at Ngor E wam chos ldan, 'Dzam yag had the opportunity, to use his own words, to “outshine [his] friends and *dharma* brothers”;³⁶⁴ he offered to the Sa skya *khri 'dzin* a rosary of prayer beads (Skt. *mālā*) made of amber and adorned with three pieces of coral, pleading him to be accepted as his disciple (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 218). On the 17th of the 8th month of the Water Dragon Year (October 6th, 1952), the trader joined his *dharma* brothers in the offering of common tea³⁶⁵ and individual distributions (Tib. *sku 'gyed*) of money, food, butter lamps, ceremonial scarves, and other “excellent things”³⁶⁶ for a total of 850 *srang*. Less than a month later, on the 14th of the 9th month (November 2nd, 1952), on the auspicious day dedicated to Sa skya Kun dga'

³⁶³ The bDag chen rin po che was the representative of the other surviving branch of the 'Khon family, the Phun tshogs pho brang.

³⁶⁴ *da res grogs rdo rje spun rnams las mchog du gyur pa* (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 218).

³⁶⁵ The *dgon pa* were financially supported by a combination of instituted income (coming from the accumulation of non-monetary assets and lucrative activities such as the buying, selling, and lending at interest of both land and seed resources) and ritual sponsorship. For rituals performed in the main prayer hall of the monastery, the sponsors were requested to provide the so-called “common tea” (Tib. *mang ja*) – several cups of butter tea accompanied by roasted barley flour (Tib. *rtsam pa*) – to be served to the whole gathering (Mills, 2003: 62-63).

³⁶⁶ *gya nom pa* (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 220).

snying po (109bestowed the profou2-1158),³⁶⁷ the 65th Ngor chen, who was at the time 77, nd empowerment (Tib. *zab dbang*) of Amitāyus, followed the next day by the Amitāyus-Hayagrīva initiation granted by the 41st Sa skya *khri 'dzin*.

Longevity rituals – believed to increase the merit and the lifespan of those fortunate enough to receive them – were undoubtedly some of the most requested and frequently performed esoteric ceremonies. As recorded in the *nyin deb*, the bestowal of the Amitāyus empowerment by the 65th Ngor chen attracted thousands of monks and lay people – regardless of age, status, and gender – and an impromptu encampment sprang up outside Ngor E wam chos ldan to host them. During the period spent by the trader at the Ngor establishment, a third longevity ritual was sponsored by the Zhwa lu rin po che; the ceremony, led by the 65th Ngor chen, was performed in the presence of the new incarnation of Thar rtse rin po che rDo rje 'chang 'Phrin las, the bDag chen rin po che, the latter's consort, and the general assembly of lamas and monks.

The active participation in the *lam 'bras* teaching sessions and esoteric rituals, as well as the close friendship which tied him to the wealthy and well-

³⁶⁷ The first of the five Sa skya patriarchs (Tib. *sa skya gong ma rnam lnga*).

connected *tshong dpon* Rin chen rdo rje, appear to have been the main factors at play in determining 'Dzam yag's change of fortune. As recorded in a note dated to the 22nd day of the 9th month of the Water Dragon Year (November 10th, 1952) (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 222), Rin chen rdo rje contributed to the installment of a gilded copper statue of Avalokiteśvara in the new shrine, the construction of which had been sponsored by Thar rtse rin po che; 'Dzam yag was among those who offered common tea, rice soup, and individual distribution of money to the assembly led by the 65th Ngor chen, and including the 41st Sa skya *khri 'dzin*, Thar rtse rin po che, and the ex-abbot (Tib. *khri zur*) 'Phan khang rin po che. On that occasion, the trader donated 245 *srang*, quite a fortune considering his financial means at the time. On the 2nd day of the 11th month of the Water Dragon Year (December 18th, 1952), the day before the end of the *lam 'bras* teaching session, 'Dzam yag brought to completion 1,300 circumambulations of the fifteen *mchod rten* of Ngor E wam chos ldan,³⁶⁸ dedicating the accomplishment to the merit of all beings. The increasing

³⁶⁸ The author mentions in particular the reliquary of Ngor chen Kun dga' bzang po (1382-1456) and the eight Sugata *stūpas* built by the latter's disciple, Mus chen Sems dpa' chen po (1388-1469).

relevance placed by the trader on circumambulation practices is indicative of a shift in priorities; whereas in the years preceding 1952, the performance of activities such as prostrations, circumambulations of “supports” (Tib. *rten*), and sponsorship of rituals mainly aimed at the achievement of mundane results, from the end of the Water Dragon Year (1952) onwards, 'Dzam yag became more and more concerned with the afterlife and consequently with the accumulation of merit.

From 1953 up to 1959, the trader travelled regularly throughout the provinces of dBus and gTsang, going from the nomadic areas of Nag chu and Byang thang to the trade hubs of northern India and Sikkim; the increase in 'Dzam yag's financial means was concurrent with an intensification of both his devotional practices in bKra shis lhun po and his active participation in empowerment sessions. In the years immediately preceding the Chinese invasion, the focus of 'Dzam yag's spiritual activities shifted from spontaneous pilgrimages to sacred places to what can be considered a programme of systematic donations to different monastic communities. In its last pages, the

nyin deb ceases to be a journal and turns into a ledger: empowerments and teachings are listed one after the other, together with the amount of money and goods given in exchange for the blessings received, in a constant flow of offerings – a glimpse of what the wealthy sponsors were willing to bestow in their quest for “accumulation of merit” (Tib. *bsod nams kyi tshogs*). Despite being quantifiable, the merit (Skr. *punya*, Tib. *bsod nams*) accumulated from the sponsorship of a ritual was, at least theoretically, independent from the extent of the offering made, since the purity of the faith and the sense of sacrifice with which the alms were given are considered the only relevant aspects (Mills, 2003: 61). While the impact of a substantial donation may have been tangential in spiritual terms, the same could not be said about its social impact: the display of pious generosity was unquestionably expected from the richest strata of society. Constant meaning-making processes were at play to accommodate the mundane business activities with the spiritual detachment encouraged by the Buddhist teachings; donations to monastic communities contributed to redeeming the donor’s *karma* by neutralising the sinful and

contaminating nature of money dealing.³⁶⁹ As early as the 1st month of the Iron Rabbit Year (February 1951), on the occasion of the *sMon lam* ceremony in Lhasa, 'Dzam yag offered scarves, common tea, and individual donations to the monastic units (Tib. *khang tshan*) gathered in prayer,³⁷⁰ for a total of 5,550 silver *srang*, thus “giving a meaning to an illusory wealth”.³⁷¹ The author often describes his business affairs as temporary distractions³⁷² or “heedless actions”,³⁷³ the value of which rests in their being a support to the ritual activities of the *sangha*.

³⁶⁹ In his memoir, A 'brug mGon po bkra shis candidly admits that he “felt that in making these offerings [he] was making the right use of [his] wealth” (Andrugtsang, 1973: 10).

³⁷⁰ The author also mentions the presentation of letters requesting refuge (Tib. *skyabs tho*) and prayers to be dedicated to someone's merit (Tib. *bsngo yig*), thus showing the rather common practice of acting as a proxy for those who could not physically attend certain ceremonies or religious feasts (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 199).

³⁷¹ *sgyu ma'i nor la snying po blangs so* (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 199).

³⁷² “Having finished to clear my debts and collect my loans from close friends and regular customers of sKye dgu mdo, I spent some time thinking and focusing on worldly affairs” (*skye mdo'i dga' grogs dang / tshong shag mams la phar sprad tshur bsdus kyis bya ba mams zin par byas nas / 'jig rten gyi chos nyid la yid gtad pa dang dran tsam re byas [...]*) (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 13).

“I rested [in Nag chu] and got myself engrossed in worldly affairs by giving on the one hand and collecting on the other” (*phar sprod dang tshur bsdus kyis 'jig rten gyi bya ba la g.yengs shing ngal gsos*) (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 82).

³⁷³ *bag med kyi bya ba* (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 211).

The improvement of 'Dzam yag's financial means and his consequent success in business brought about changes in his approach to spirituality. At the time of his departure from Rab shis, 'Dzam yag was still very uncertain about his future; despite realising quite early that the chances of ever returning to his home region were rather slim,³⁷⁴ he felt reluctant to commit himself to any particular course of action. sKyo brags bsTan pa'i snying po's injunction³⁷⁵ was not a providential catalyst of future events, but rather an expression of the general understanding of pilgrimage as a redemptive and purifying activity; by paying homage to the sacred places of Tibet, pilgrims actively sought to cleanse their sins and embodied defilements, perceived as the root of one's own bad *karma* (Huber, 1999b: 150).³⁷⁶ Prescriptive narratives, such as

³⁷⁴ "On the 6th day of the 5th month of the Wood Bird Year (June 14th, 1945), feeling sad because there was no turning back home for me and deeply missing the kindness and blessings of my root-lama, since I had nothing I could rely on for protection anymore apart from the Three Jewels, after setting my mind on the all the holy places of dBus [that I would visit] one after the other, I took off like a bird." (*bya lo'i zla 5 tshes nyin bdag la pha yul du 'khor sa med pas yid skyo ba'i ngang / dus rgyun du skyabs dkon mchog gsum las med pas / rje bla ma'i bka' drin dang byin rlabs dran lhang nge ba'i ngang / rim gyis dbus kyi lha rten rnams snying gi dkyil du bzhag nas bya nam 'phang la spyod pa bzhin song ngo*) (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 24).

³⁷⁵ See Chapter Two, section 4, pp. 161-162.

³⁷⁶ Defilement (Tib. *sgrib pa*) and sin (Tib. *sdig pa*) are considered to be "negative, obstructive, unlucky, and even threatening (to health, longevity, fertility, prosperity, etc.) aspects of ordinary

pilgrimage literature and *nam thar*, have often explained and justified pilgrimages – as well as other religious rituals – through a common set of themes, including specific “models” (Tib. *dpe*) related to

[...] defilement and purification; illness and healing; influencing the course and processes of physical life, death, and future life (e.g., rebirth and final liberation from it); gaining efficacy in the phenomenal world or powers to influence its operation; the extension of perception beyond the mundane limits of space and time; the coercion and conversion or destruction of that which is perceived as an obstruction or a threat; and maintaining advantageous contacts and identifications with nonhuman forces in both the local and universal cosmos (Huber, 1999b:11).

In the same vein, between 1944 and 1952, 'Dzam yag actively sought, through the bodily engaging activity of pilgrimage, to cleanse and purify what he considered to be the outcome of previous misdeeds. The main concern behind these activities seems to have been his fortune in the present life, a concern presumably triggered by the dramatic events he had gone through. Therefore the consistent and frequent requests for divinations could be similarly

human social and material existence” (Huber, 1999b: 16). Pilgrimage is conceived as an effective way of removing and purifying embodied *sgrib pa* and *sdig pa*, by cleansing the psychophysical person, through either the actions of the pilgrim's body, e.g. prostrations, circumambulations, or the transformative effect of contact with the sacred place (Tib. *gnas*) (Huber, 1999b: 16-17).

interpreted as a way to gain some insights in how to improve his social and financial situation.

It seems that the relative stability brought by the appointment as *tshong dpon* caused the author's apprehensions to shift from the present to the future; the mundane success and a considerable flow of income waned in favour of a more detached approach to life. His energies focused on obtaining mental clarity and spiritual purity; the money gained through business transactions was valued only in relation to the kind of offerings that it allowed him to make.

The following paragraph analyses the last five years covered by the *nyin deb*, thus engaging with some of the issues already discussed in Chapter Three. The economic power wielded by eastern Tibetan traders in the decades preceding 1959 deeply influenced the socio-political environment of the dGa' ldan pho brang government, but it also played a vital role in the life and existence of religious communities. In time of dire needs, spiritual support is much sought after, and it is therefore not surprising that between 1949 and 1959 a great number of esoteric rituals and rites were held with the intent of

exorcising obstructions and stimulating the emergence of favourable conditions. An example of the kind of ceremonies performed at that time is provided in a note dated to the 4th day of the 3rd month of the Wood Horse Year (May 6th, 1954), when the 10th Panchen Lama bestowed a Kālacakra empowerment at bKra shis lhun po, under the sponsorship of the Tre hor gZigs rgyab rin po che.

'Dzam yag records the various stages of the ritual, spanning over almost two weeks, and attended by “hundreds of thousands of disciples” (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 232),³⁷⁷

[o]n the 4th day, the Panchen Lama started the initiatory rites³⁷⁸ for the Kālacakra. On the 9th day, the preparatory rituals³⁷⁹ of the great empowerment [were carried out according to] the dPal mo transmission of Thugs rje chen po (“Great Compassionate One”, *i.e.* Avalokiteśvara). On the 10th day, the main body [of the empowerment was given]. On the 14th day, preparations were made for the Kālacakra empowerment. On the 15th day, the main body [of the practice was performed]. On the 16th the high initiations [were bestowed]. On the 18th there was the reading

³⁷⁷ *slob bu 'bum phrag las brgyal ba* (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 232).

³⁷⁸ Through the initiatory rites (Skt. *abhiṣeka*; Tib. *dbang*) the practitioner is *empowered* and as such he is deemed ready to receive the instructions and hear the *tantras*.

³⁷⁹ Any ritual consists of three parts: the preparatory part (Tib. *sta gon*), the main part (Tib. *dngos gzhi*), and the concluding part (Tib. *mjug chog*). See Bentor (1996: 96).

transmission of the fulfilled supreme higher initiations,³⁸⁰ the Hundred Deities of Tuṣita,³⁸¹ the Aiming at Loving-kindness,³⁸² and so on, and circumambulations of the Gaṇacakra offerings [were made] in three stages. As a sign of gratitude, Tre hor gZigs rgyab rin po che offered the payment of the initiation price twice, once before [the beginning of the ritual] and once after [its conclusion].³⁸³

The passage continues by listing other items donated by Tre hor rin po che as part of the thanksgiving for the teachings (Tib. *gtang rag*) – sacred objects, jewels, substantial amounts of gold and silver in different forms of

³⁸⁰ The four high initiations (Tib. *dbang gong ma*) and the four supreme higher initiations (Tib. *dbang gong chen yongs su rdzogs pa*) can be understood as comprising two vase initiations (Tib. *bum pa'i dbang*, Skt. *kalaśābhiṣeka*), two secret initiations (Tib. *gsang ba'i dbang*, Skt. *guhyābhiṣeka*), two knowledge-wisdom initiation (Tib. *shes rab ye shes kyi dbang*, Skt. *prajñājñānābhiṣeka*), and the provisional word initiation followed by the definitive word initiation (Tib. *tshig dbang rin po che*). See bsTan 'dzin rgya mtsho and Hopkins (1985: 68).

³⁸¹ “The Hundred Deities of Tuṣita” (Tib. *dga' ldan lha brgya ma*) is a prayer dedicated to Tsong kha pa, and expression of the devotion to one's own *guru*.

³⁸² “The Aiming at Loving-Kindness” (Tib. *dmigs brtse ma*) is a famous prayer to Tsong kha pa.

³⁸³ *shing pho rta lo zla 3 tshes 4 la paN chen snang ba mtha' yas kyis dpal dus kyi 'khor lo'i bka' dbang rin po che slob bu 'bum phrag las brgal bar gnang ba'i yon bdag tre hor gzigs rgyab rin po ches zhus / tshes 4 nyin dus 'khor slob ma rjes 'dzin / tshes 9 nyin thugs rje chen mo [*po] lugs kyi dbang chen sta gon / tshes 10 nyin dngos gzhi / tshes 14 la dus 'khor dbang gi sta gon / tshes 15 la dbang chen dngos gzhi / tshes 17 nyin dbang gong ma / tshes 18 nyin dbang gong chen yongs su rdzogs pa dang / dga' ldan lha brgya dang / dmigs brtse ma bcas kyi ljags lung / tshogs kyi 'khor lo rim pa gsum du bskor te/ gzigs rgyab rin po che nas 'bul chen thengs gcig sngon du phul zin pa dang/ thengs gnyis pa dbang yon bka' drin gtang rag gi 'bul pa* (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 232-233).

currency,³⁸⁴ and non-monetary articles.³⁸⁵ As a gift for the profound empowerments obtained, the trader and his nephew Blo 'jam offered a pair of high-quality ceremonial scarves (Tib. *nyin mo bde legs*) of the length of an arm-span and several silk scarves (Tib. *zub she*) having a value of 240 *srang*. To that they added 670 *srang* worth of margarine (Tib. *shing mar*) to be used for the golden lamps of bKra shis lhun po's shrines.

Whereas the accumulation of wealth is not much of an issue in Buddhist societies, as far as the laity is concerned – on the contrary, material success is considered a sign of virtue, a result of good *karma* – the *attitude* the individual holds towards it does raise ethical questions since greed or desire would be considered expressions of attachment. Already in early Buddhism, the question of how to deal with wealth is addressed, and in many passages of the *Āṅguttara Nikāya*, the Buddha indicates the support of spiritual teachers and

³⁸⁴ 106 *tolā* (Indian weight measure equal to 11.34 gr) of gold, 180 *rdo tshad* (Tibetan weight measure equal to 1.81 kg) of silver Chinese *rta rmig* (coin shaped as a horse's hoof), and many Chinese silver coins (Tib. *dā yang*) in sealed bags (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 233).

³⁸⁵ Among the items listed there are many rolls of brocade made of five types of silk, 500 woolen pouches each containing 5 *rdo tshad* (1.81 kg) in silver *zho*, sweets, brown sugar, fruits, butter, several bags of barley, 200 bags of rice, 50 boxes of fine tea, and 50 bags of tea balls (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 233).

monks to be a proper use of wealth (Essen, 2011: 64). Such sponsorship of the *sarigha* by the wealthy laity lay at the heart of the Buddhist communities and was thought to increase the merit of the donors and thus improve their karma. Similarly, in Tibetan Buddhism the sponsorship of rituals for improvement of one's own physical and social conditions is common practice, and the *nyin deb* contains several examples of rites paid for by either the author or an acquaintance of his. In the aftermath of the great flood that hit gZhis ka rtse and rGyal rtse in 1954,³⁸⁶ for instance, Rin chen rdo rje, 'Dzam yag's friend and business partner, sponsored a five-day recitation of the bKa' 'gyur "with the intent of exorcising any obstacles to favourable conditions".³⁸⁷ The ritual was performed by one hundred and twenty-three monks, each of whom received 6 *srang* a day as individual donation. Inspired by his friend, the author added one *srang* a day per monk, totalling 615 *srang* (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 235).

In the following months, other empowerments took place at bKra shis lhun po; several of them were led by Chu dbar rin po che, a reincarnate lama

³⁸⁶ See Chapter Three, p. 224.

³⁸⁷ *rkyen bgegs bar chad bzlog phyir* (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 235).

from sNye thang Rwa stod, residing in the Tantric (Tib. *gsang sngags*) *bla brang* in gZhis ka rtse. During his stay, the master visited bKra shis lhun po and bestowed the initiation (Tib. *rjes dbang*) of rTa Phyag Khyung gsum,³⁸⁸ and a Tārā empowerment transmitted by the bKa' gdams pa lineage of Lho brag grub chen Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan (1326-1401), marking the end of the session with the donation of a statue of Tārā. 'Dzam yag offered 34 *srang* as a sign of appreciation; the trader was so impressed by Chu dbar rin po che³⁸⁹ that he openly professed his devotion and his intention to become one of the lama's devotees. At that time, 'Dzam yag commissioned 23,500 *tsa tsa*³⁹⁰ of the Tshe lha rnam gsum³⁹¹ to be dedicated to his parents' merit, making an offering to the craftsman of a bronze vase of very good quality, clothes and shoes, and a few silver coins (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 236).

³⁸⁸ The three tutelary deities Hayagrīva (Tib. *rta mgrin*), Vajrapāni (Tib. *phyag na rdo rje*), and Garuḍa (Tib. *bya khyung*).

³⁸⁹ Apparently, Chu dbar rin po che recited by heart the entire oral tantric instructions, without ever looking at the scriptures (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 236).

³⁹⁰ Small relief images, traditionally made of clay and usually presented for extensive offerings.

³⁹¹ The three deities of longevity, Amitāyus (Tib. *tshe dpag med*), White Tārā (Tib. *sgrol dkar*), and [Uṣṇīṣa-]Vijayā (Tib. *rnam rgyal ma*).

Khams pa traders were among the most generous supporters of central Tibetan monastic communities, often competing with each other in an amicable way.³⁹² The Wood Horse Year (1954) was a period of great financial expenditure for 'Dzam yag and some of his closest companions; on the 4th day of the 6th month (August 2nd, 1954), the trader joined the already mentioned Rin chen rdo rje in a common donation for the performance of a One-Thousand Offering (Tib. *stong mchod*)³⁹³ held at Sa skya dgon. Whereas Rin chen offered to the Sa skya *sprul sku* two statues – a gilded copper Avalokiteśvara with a thousand hands and a human-sized Buddha – 'Dzam yag contributed with a

³⁹² As early as the 30th day of the 8th month of the Earth Mouse Year (November 1st, 1948), 'Dzam yag followed the virtuous example of his *dharma* friend and business companion Rin chen rdo rje; whereas the latter offered a distribution of 3 *zho* to each monk and lama attending the general assembly at bKra shis lhun po, followed by a *mang ja* and 8 *zho* distribution to each member of the Tre hor monastic college, the author distributed one *srang* to each monk and lama sitting at the general assembly, and one *zho* to each member of the Tre hor monastic college, plus a couple of *srang* to the chant leader for the recitation of particular prayers. He also bought 9 *zho* worth of incense, for a total amount of 532 *srang*, a substantial sum considering his finances at the time (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 140).

³⁹³ The name of the festival, celebrated by the Sa skya pa every year on the 4th day of the 6th lunar month, refers to the lighting of a thousand butter lamps to commemorate the sixteen *arhats* (Powers, 1995: 229).

little more than a *rdog po*³⁹⁴ of silver, to which he added 8 *nyag*³⁹⁵ of butter (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 236).

The *nying deb* reveals that donations were not limited to specific religious occasions or institutions, but were distributed to various monasteries of different denominations and lineages along 'Dzam yag's travel routes. On the 28th day of the 11th month of the Wood Horse Year (January 22nd, 1955), he offered a *tamka* to each monk and lama sitting at the great assembly of bKra shis lhun po, donating silk scarves, butter and 8 balls of tea for the *mang ja* and 3 *zho* as individual distribution to the members of the rGya khang tshang,³⁹⁶ for a total sum of 1,144 silver *srang*. In the following weeks, the trader moved to Kalimpong for business; on the road he stopped by the bKa' gdams seat of sNar thang dgon; a small 'Brug pa bKa' brgyud monastery at Jo mo kha rag, a sacred mountain in gTsang province; and the seat of the Karma pa, mTshur phu, in sTod lung. There he offered a *tamka* to each monk and lama, and butter

³⁹⁴ Weight measure equal to 1.81 kg.

³⁹⁵ Weight measure equal to 120 gr.

³⁹⁶ The area of recruitment (Tib. *thob khongs*) of the dormitory was the region 'Dzam yag hailed from (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 237).

and tea for the *mang ja* for a total of 400 silver *srang*, to which he added 40 *srang* for the performance of a Tārā ritual (Tib. *sgrol chog*). While crossing the village at the foot of the monastery, he recognised in a *tsa tsa* maker an old friend of his from whom he commissioned 10,000 images of the Three Longevity Deities (Tib. *tshe lha nam gsum*). He paid homage to other small monastic and tantric communities on his way to Sikkim, offering money and ceremonial scarves for a total amount of 180 *srang* (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 238).

The routine of donations, offerings, and circumambulations continued almost without interruptions up to second half of the 3rd month of the Wood Horse Year (May 1954), until the 'Brug pa Chos mgon rtse sprul rin po che,³⁹⁷ who had lived most of his life in a meditation centre that he himself had established at the sacred mountain of Jo mo kha rag, set off on a journey to pay homage to the most important religious sites of gTsang, *e.g.* bKra shis lhun po, rGyal rtse, sNar thang, etc., before secluding himself in retreat.

³⁹⁷ The 8th 'Brug pa Chos mgon sprul sku, also known as bShad sgrub chos kyi nyin dge. See TBRC P8LS12750.

Interestingly, 'Dzam yag offered the master various kinds of medicines (Tib. *smān*)³⁹⁸ and soil and water that he had gathered from the holy sites he had visited (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 239-240). The collection of items from places considered to be "blessed" (Tib. *byin gyis brlabs*) is a common practice in Tibetan Buddhism, and it is part of the experience of pilgrimage as a communal activity: the harvesting of the "blessings" (Tib. *byin*) of the sites through portable items, such as stones, pinches of soil or dust, water, etc., allows for either a direct consumption of the power of the place or its

³⁹⁸ Herbal medicines were considered items of luxury trade, frequently collected by pilgrims during their visits to sacred places. Pilgrimage sites and monasteries often hosted centres of production and sale of medicinal herbs, used to cure many temporary and chronic illnesses (van Spengen, 1998: 41-42). As many other Tibetans, 'Dzam yag made extensive use of *smān* and *smān grub*, the latter being a medicine that had undergone a process through which it was "perfected, consummated, activated and made ready to heal" (Craig, 2011:218). Far more powerful than the average herbal pill, the *smān grub* are deemed able to cure any acute and/or chronic illnesses, the causes of which are considered to be karmic rather than the outcome of natural imbalances. In a note dated to the 1st month of the Mouse Year (February 1949), while visiting Lha yag gu ru lha khang, the seat of the *gter ston* Gu ru chos kyi dbang phyug (1212-1270) in Lho brag, 'Dzam yag reports that he was called to assist a local woman who had fallen ill during the night. Not knowing what was the cause of her sickness, since her family swore she had no shortcomings, 'Dzam yag prayed to the Three Jewels and by dawn her condition seemed to have improved. Suddenly, though, her bodily functions failed; concerned for the woman's life, the trader decided to part with his precious *smān grub*, and gave her two of the pills he had obtained from the Karma pa, together with some salt used to dry the corpse of rDo rje 'chang sKal bzang nam rgyal. By his own admission, at the time of his departure he did not know if the remedies had been of any benefit, but the family of the woman appeared to be happy since they thanked him with beans and lentils for his mule and one *rdo* of meat and a plate full of rice and porridge (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 129-130).

transportation and further distribution (Huber, 1999b: 15), as in this case. The gifts were presumably meant to protect or invigorate the master during his journey and following retreat.

On the occasion of the Wood Horse Year (1954) Sa ga zla ba,³⁹⁹ 'Dzam yag and his nephew Blo 'jam offered alms to beggars and gave individual distributions to the monks and lamas seated in the great assembly of bKra shis lhun po, for a total amount of 900 *srang* (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 240).

Around the same time, a request sent by the incarnation of Tre hor gdong thog⁴⁰⁰ reached gZhis ka rtse. The *sprul sku's* monastic complex, hosting a community of one hundred monks, was in urgent need of restoration. The plea for financial support had been entrusted to a few messengers and addressed to “people of good will.” 'Dzam yag answered by providing 10 bundles (Tib. *bag cha*) of red dye for the painting of the shrine of the protector deities (Tib. *srung ma khang*) and 25 Chinese silver coins to be used as capital endowment and

³⁹⁹ One of four major Buddhist celebrations, it occurs on the full moon (15th) of the 4th lunar month of the Tibetan calendar. It celebrates Buddha Śākyamuni's birth, enlightenment and *parinirvāṇa*.

⁴⁰⁰ Tre hor gdong thog Ngag dbang theg mchog bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan (b. 1933). The *sprul sku* is mentioned in Martin and Bendor (1997: 187) as the author of a chronology of the most important events in Tibetan history.

source of income for the monastic community (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 241).

I would like to conclude this section on the economic aspect of 'Dzam yag's participation in ritual activities in the late stage of his life with a note dated to the 15th of the 8th month of the Wood Sheep Year (October 1st, 1955) concerning the consecration and offering of a gilded copper *mchod rten* having the height of an arrow. The *mchod rten*, commissioned in the Water Dragon Year (1952), required three years to be brought to completion; the meticulous nature of the trader appears evident in his careful listing of both the items gathered in the assemblage of the *mchod rten* and their respective costs. The consecration of the *mchod rten*, for the realisation of which 'Dzam yag paid 6,874 silver *srang* and 5 *zho*, started on the 1st day of the 6th month of the Wood Sheep Year (July 20th, 1955); the ritual continued on the 4th day (July 23rd) with a Gaṇacakra celebration. The *mchod rten* was eventually sent to Lhasa and donated to the Rwa sa 'phrul snang Jo khang (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 241-243).

The way in which the realisation and completion of the *mchod rten* is presented is emblematic of 'Dzam yag's attitude as it emerges through the pages of his journal. The difficulties inherent in a categorisation of the *nyin deb* have been discussed elsewhere;⁴⁰¹ it will therefore suffice to mention just a few key elements in the present context. The *nyin deb* is a personal narrative in which different literary genres converge – it is concurrently a diary, a ledger, a guide-book, and a travelogue; its contents have passed through a cultural and literary filter to accommodate the mindframe of 'Dzam yag who embodies simultaneously the author and the intended reader. The journal was in fact a *private* document used by the trader to keep track of his transactions, encounters, travels, and offerings – in that being a remarkable attestation to the economics of merit at the core of Tibetan Buddhism.

The last years covered by the *nyin deb* include a succession of circumambulations of the outer and inner circuit of bKra shis lhun po,⁴⁰² and

⁴⁰¹ See Chapter One, in particular section 2, pp. 82-88.

⁴⁰² The meticulous nature of 'Dzam yag is evident in his accurate recording of the numbers of circumambulations made within a specific amount of time. For instance, on the 16th day of the 9th month of the Wood Sheep Year (October 30th, 1955), he calculated that between the 5th day of the 3rd month of the Wood Sheep Year (April 27th, 1955) up to that day, he had completed

various offerings to the different monastic communities visited in the course of his business trips. As mentioned earlier, at the end of his life the author's concerns are directed towards the next life; the accumulation of fortune is no longer an aim but a tool, and time and money are dedicated to increasing the merit of all beings. The economic pull of the Khams pa traders eventually yields to the eschatological power of spirituality, and religion becomes, in the equation of life, the independent variable.

2. Pilgrimage in India and Nepal

Having examined at great length some of the aspects of 'Dzam yag's pilgrimage and ritual activities in Tibet, it is now time to discuss the religious visits he paid on three different occasions to the "holy land" of India and to Nepal. It is no coincidence that those trips fell within the 1944-1952 period, a time of 'Dzam yag's life characterised – as discussed on the previous pages – by material needs, instilling in him an overpowering desire to cleanse his bodily defilements and sins in order to better his social and financial conditions. The

196 outer circumambulations and 2,240 inner circumambulations, the merit of which he dedicated to all beings (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 243).

major role played by trade in 'Dzam yag's choice of sacred places to visit has already been pointed out; his were indeed "accidental" pilgrimages,⁴⁰³ often collateral to his main occupation, *i.e.* business dealings. Whereas the subordination, so to speak, of 'Dzam yag's ritual activities to his business commitments is hardly surprising, especially considering the general overlapping of trade and pilgrimage networks in premodern Tibet, his constant dismissal of economic ventures and obligations, often described as unavoidable nuisances, sets a pattern of self-representation that is repeated throughout the *nyin deb*. The narrative nature of the journal allows the author to reshape himself, reinterpreting his actions through his own intentions, thus extrapolating them from the pragmatic context they are embedded in. In doing so, 'Dzam yag is able to portray his presence in Lhasa, or any other religiously significant place for that matter, as the outcome of a pious desire to expiate and cleanse his defilements rather than the fortuitous outcome of a business trip.

⁴⁰³ On the "accidental" nature of other famous pilgrimages to India, *e.g.* Fāxiǎn, Xuánzàng, and Dharmasvāmin, see Chapter One, section 1.4, pp. 75-82.

The same model is at work in his description of two of the three pilgrimages he embarked on between the end of the Wood Bird (February 1946) and the beginning of the Iron Tiger (1950) Years. Despite being defined as pilgrimages (Tib. *gnas skor*), only the second of the three Indian journeys qualifies as such; both the first and the third of his Indian travels appear in fact to have been the result of a series of unplanned circumstances mainly motivated by economic reasons. Before delving deeper into 'Dzam yag's journeys, I will discuss, albeit briefly, the phenomenon of Tibetan pilgrimage to India to provide some basic background.

Prostrations, circumambulations, and offerings performed by Tibetan Buddhists are part of what Huber defines as the "ritual ensemble" of the pilgrimage activity, "additional rites amplify[ing] the ascetic dimensions of a pilgrimage in various ways, helping the pilgrim to maximize the experience of sacred sites and sacra that are worshipped individually" (2008: 310-311). As any other human performance, pilgrimages are subject to change and innovations; rituals are constantly negotiated, adopted, and discarded, even

more so in areas of active cultural and religious interactions, as was the case at the ancient Indian Buddhist holy sites after they had been rediscovered and become accessible in the late 19th-early 20th centuries.

The Tibetan acquisition and appropriation of non-Tibetan Buddhist ritual traditions, *e.g.* offering of lamps⁴⁰⁴ and worship of the Buddha's stone footprints, at Bodh Gayā has already been discussed elsewhere (Huber, 2008: 311-312) and need not to be repeated. Similar examples of ritual adaptation can be found in the *nyin deb* with regard to the performance of a ritual bathing in the sacred pool of the Mahābodhi Temple. Even though in the context of Tibetan pilgrimage the language describing the cleansing of the defilements invokes an imagery of water,⁴⁰⁵ "most Tibetans rarely (if ever) bathe as pilgrims" (Huber, 1999b: 17), since the performance of the practice entails to them a notion of inner, rather than outer, purification.

⁴⁰⁴ The offering of lamps, a feature of Buddhist ritual life in Tibet, appears not to have been an activity performed by the early Tibetan pilgrims to Bodh Gayā, since no mention of it is found in the accounts from the 12th to the 19th century (Huber, 2008: 311).

⁴⁰⁵ The sins are often said to have been "washed off" (Tib. *'khrus*).

Notwithstanding the inherent Tibetan reluctance to full body immersions, the exposure to the ubiquitous Indian practice of ritual bathing in water, *e.g.* rivers, lakes, or tanks, gradually influenced the attitude of those pilgrims who, in increasing number, travelled to India between the 1920s and 1950s. Particularly telling in this regard is a passage from the *nyin deb* concerning the bathing pool at the Mahābodhi complex at the time of the first of 'Dzam yag's recorded pilgrimages.

I thought [it would have been] a good thing [to go] inside the pool [that was] south [of the Bodhi Tree] where the *arhats* used to bathe; I went in to bathe and when I was about to die because I did not know how to swim, some Indian pilgrims were so kind to pull me out of the water.⁴⁰⁶

'Dzam yag's dangerous attempt at imitating the ritual behaviour exhibited by the non-Tibetan pilgrims visiting Vajrāsana is representative of the changes Tibetan pilgrimage rituals underwent following the programme of colonial archeological discovery conducted throughout the Indian subcontinent during the later 19th and early 20th centuries. For the first time since the 13th century,

⁴⁰⁶ *lhor dgra bcom rnam sku 'khrus gsol sa'i rdzing bu nang du nga rang dag snang byas te khrus la zhugs pas / chu rkyal ma shes rkyen 'chi la nyer skabs / rgya gar pa rnam kyis chu nas bton par bka' drin che byung* (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 54).

“all the early Indian Buddhist holy sites that had laid neglected, ruined, and in many cases completely buried for many hundreds of years [...] were systematically rediscovered, excavated, mapped, restored, and preserved” (Huber, 2008: 252-253), and thus offered to the eyes and devotion of Asian and Western Buddhists alike.

In their choice of destinations and means of travel, 'Dzam yag and his companions conformed to the most common trends among Tibetan pilgrims in the mid-1940s, whose itineraries almost invariably included Bodh Gayā and Sārnāth, two of the four major sites⁴⁰⁷ connected to the life of Gautama Buddha, and the nearby spots linked to the narrative of Buddha's life, *e.g.* the Nairāñjanā river;⁴⁰⁸ as well as Śītavana (Tib. *dur khrod bsil ba'i tsha*),⁴⁰⁹ the meditation cave of Śabara,⁴¹⁰ and Vaiśālī.

⁴⁰⁷ In the post-Gupta era of Indian Buddhism (500-750 CE) a network of eight sites based upon a narrative of the Buddha's life story, appeared to have gained wider circulation. According to the scheme, to the main four biographical events that were assumed to have taken place at Lumbinī (Buddha's birth), Bodh Gayā (Buddha's awakening), Rṣipatana/Sārnāth (Buddha's first teaching), and Kuśinagara (Buddha's *parinirvāṇa*), four secondary events were added, which were accredited to have occurred at Śrāvastī, Rājagṛha, Vaiśālī, and Sāṃkāśya (Huber, 2008: 22).

⁴⁰⁸ According to the narrative of the life of the Buddha, Siddhārtha spent six or seven years in ascetic meditation (Skt. *duṣkaracaryā*, Tib. *dka' ba spyad*) on the riverbank of the Nairāñjanā.

The fame of Vaiśālī was largely due to its inclusion in the scheme of eight sacred sites which rose to the status of new orthodoxy in the late 19th-early 20th centuries; as Leoshko (2003: 68) aptly remarks, the ancient scheme of eight “biographical” sites came “to define sacred Buddhist geography in the 20th century”. The first artistic and textual descriptions of the eight scenes of the Buddha’s life dated to the last major era of Indian Buddhism, the Pāla period (8th-12th centuries), and the textual sources were translated and preserved in various extant Chinese and Tibetan versions. Whereas each scene was connected to a specific place and *stūpa*, the cult of these eight sites and their corresponding commemorative monuments “were never treated *in practice* by

The way the story was received, propagated, and later elaborated made the Nairāñjanā the single Indian river Tibetans associated in any significant way with pilgrimage to the major sites of the Buddha. On the Tibetan “appropriation” of the Nairāñjanā river, see Sørensen (1994: 55, 192, 267). From the late 17th century on, a new and more positive perception of another Indian river, the Ganges, began to spread in Tibet, due to the progressive Tibetan assimilation of the Hindu sacred geography. For some examples of the Tibetan ritual use of Ganges water by modern pilgrims, see Kværne (1998: 77), Huber (2000: 6; 2008: 211).

⁴⁰⁹ The “Cool Grove” was one of the Indian Tantric charnel grounds (Skt. *śmaśāna*) mostly visited by early Tibetan pilgrims. Despite being considered by Tibetans as a celebrated place of Buddhist Tantric practice since the 11th century, Śītavana was neither one of the eight charnel grounds (Skt. *aṣṭa śmaśāna*) listed in the corpus of the Buddhist *Yoginītantras* and their commentaries nor a holy place in the sacred geography of India (Skt. *pīṭha*) (Huber, 2008: 97); apparently, the site enjoyed a separate cult (Tucci, 1949, 2: 542).

⁴¹⁰ One of the eighty-four *mahāsiddhas*, student of Nāgārjuna and teacher of Maitrīpa, considered by the Tibetans a forefather of the bKa’ bgyud lineage.

earlier Buddhists as a group or network of eight distinctly related places of pilgrimage” (Huber, 2008: 28), a statement particularly true for Tibetans, whose approach to the representations of the *stūpas* at the “eight great places” (Skt. *aṣṭamahāsthānacaitya*; Tib. *gnas chen po brgyad kyi mchod rten*) had been commemorative in function up to the late 19th century. In the early 20th century, the convergence of speculations and interpretations by both Western scholars, especially art historians,⁴¹¹ and modern Buddhist revivalists⁴¹² determined the emergence of a pilgrimage cult based around the eight Indian Buddhist sites as they were depicted in Pāla sculptures and texts, a reinterpretation of the *gnas chen po brgyad* that deeply affected the modern scholarly perception of the significance that the cult of these places had in Tibetan Buddhism. During the

⁴¹¹ Particularly influential in validating the historical accuracy of a pilgrimage circuit based on the eight sites of Buddha’s life were John Marshall (1876-1958), the first scholar to specifically link the set of eight sites depicted on a series of sculptured Pāla stone stelae with eight geographical sites, and Alfred Foucher (1865-1952), who explicitly connected the practice and economy of ancient Buddhist pilgrimage to the eight sites that he and Marshall had identified and grouped (Huber, 2008: 29-30). For first-hand accounts, see Marshall (1907) and Foucher (1917).

⁴¹² Buddhist Modernism or Modern Buddhism gathers, to quote McMahan (2008: 6), “forms of Buddhism that have emerged out of an engagement with the dominant cultural and intellectual forces of modernity”. In being a revival movement, it reinterprets Buddhism as a “rational way of thought” by emphasising reason, meditation, and the rediscovery of canonical texts (Bechert, 1966 in McMahan, 2008: 7).

first half of the 20th century, the Tibetan understanding and practices related to India were challenged and transformed; the discovery of ancient Buddhist sites and the diffusion of Buddhist modernism based on monumental archaeology and European Orientalist studies drastically modified the Tibetan vision of India as “holy land” (Huber, 2008: 252). The authenticity of many of the uniquely Tibetan sacred places⁴¹³ identified between the 13th and the late 19th centuries suddenly became questionable whereas early Buddhist sites⁴¹⁴ having no prior historical mentioning in relation to the Tibetan pilgrimage circuit attained a scientifically approved authority. In the first half of the 20th century changes affected the Tibetan pilgrims’ choices of destination and itineraries, as well as

⁴¹³ The demise of Buddhism in India in the 13th century and the consequent disruption of Tibetan pilgrimages in the Middle Ganges region up to the mid-18th century promoted a conceptual shifting of the “holy land” to the northwest and the northeast of the Indian subcontinent, areas easily accessible from the plateau. This recreation of “replicas” of the “holy land” was at the basis of the Tibetan “rediscovery” of Kuśinagar – the site linked to the Buddha’s attainment of the *parinirvāṇa* – at Hājo in Assam, more than five hundred kilometres to the east of the original site, located at Māthākuwar in Uttar Pradesh. By bringing back to light long lost ancient sites, among which the original Kuśinagar, the programme of monumental archaeology financed by the British Rāj in the late 19th century caused the loss of interest in those areas of northwestern and northeastern India where Tibetans had established their unique Buddhist sites. See Huber (2008: 125-165).

⁴¹⁴ These sites, rediscovered and restored by the colonial scholars of Buddhism between the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries, were mainly unknown to Tibetans, being rarely mentioned in Tibetan Buddhist sources. They included Sāñcī, Kauśāmbī, Takṣaśilā, Ajaṇṭā, Ellorā, and Nāgārjunikoṇḍa (Huber, 2008: 328).

their mode of transportation. Buddhist modernists actively promoted the use of new forms of transport in order to encourage and facilitate pan-Buddhist pilgrimage to the revived sites of the Middle Ganges region. The Indian railway system, servicing most of the excavated and restored Buddhist places from the first decades of the 20th century, and the establishment of modern and functional rest houses at the major pilgrimage sites were some of the most revolutionary initiatives undertaken by the Indian representatives of the Buddhist revival movement (Huber, 2008: 303-304). The Maha Bodhi Society,⁴¹⁵ in particular, targeted the tourist end of the travel spectrum, launching a publication campaign; journal articles, pamphlets, guides, and even a photographic album were released throughout the 1930s and 1940s. With the opening of the Indo-Tibetan border in the early 20th century and the possibility of travelling in relative safety and comfort, a pilgrimage to India came to represent for a wide range of Tibetans a chance to personally experience

⁴¹⁵ Institution founded in 1891 by the Sinhalese Don David Hēvāvitarana (1864-1933), better known as Anagārika Dharmapāla. The Maha Bodhi Society contributed greatly towards generating interest in Buddhism within and outside the Indian subcontinent. Similar modernist movements were created in Bengal in 1891 by Kripasharan (the Bauddha Dharmankur Sabha) and in South India in 1980 by Paṇḍit Iyothē Thass (the Sakya Buddhist Society, also known as the South Indian Buddhist Association) (Singh, 2010: 195).

modernity. 'Dzam yag himself – an educated and wealthy member of the “elite commoners” – was not immune to the fascination of the rapid changes brought by technological progress. The attention of the trader, focused on the performance of rituals and offerings during his travels to the sacred sites of dBus and gTsang, is apparently led astray by the endless distractions that leisure time offered him in India. Almost imperceptibly, a tourist agenda begins to appear in the *nyin deb*'s narrative, thus adding a new layer of complexity to the multifaceted identity of 'Dzam yag – trader, pilgrim, and now tourist – while the journal finally assumes, albeit only for a few pages, the features of a real travelogue, as the following paragraphs will show.

2.1. First Pilgrimage to India, 1946

The first of 'Dzam yag's visits to the sacred sites of Indian Buddhism spanned a few weeks between the 12th month of the Wood Bird Year (February 1946) and the 1st month of the Fire Dog Year (March 1946) (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 53-55); the trader, at the time in Kalimpong for business, records,

rather off-handedly, a casual encounter with two Khams pa pilgrims⁴¹⁶ and his impromptu decision to join them in a pilgrimage to the holy places of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 53). 'Dzam yag and his companions set off to Calcutta via Siliguri, and from there to Bodh Gayā and Sārnāth; due to its brief duration and its choice of destinations, centered on two of the main sites of Indian Buddhism, *i.e.* Bodh Gayā and Sārnāth, the pilgrimage does not diverge from itineraries common among early 20th century Tibetan pilgrims, and its value for the present discussion is limited to its combination of commerce and religious visits, in accordance with what appears to be 'Dzam yag's general *modus operandi* up to late 1940s-early 1950s.

2.2. Second Pilgrimage to India and First Pilgrimage to Nepal, 1949

The second of 'Dzam yag's recorded pilgrimages started on the 30th of the 11th month of the Earth Mouse Year (February 27th, 1949)⁴¹⁷ and spanned a

⁴¹⁶ Hailing respectively from Chab mdo and Tre hor (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 53).

⁴¹⁷ The actual preparations – logistical as well as ritual – began a few weeks before; in a note dated the 13th of the 11th month of the Earth Mouse Year (January 11th, 1949), 'Dzam yag and Rin chen rdo rje visited the majority of the religious objects housed at bKra shis lhun po, offering up to 12 *srang* and 5 *zho* to ensure the removal of any obstacles that might impede their quest (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 142).

twenty-day period, ending on the 20th day of the 1st month of the Earth Ox Year (March 19th, 1949). As previously mentioned, the 1949 visit to the holy sites of India and Nepal appears to have been almost exclusively motivated by religious intentions⁴¹⁸ and, as such, provides a valuable first-hand account of the development of new pilgrimage-related rituals at the sites of the Buddha, as well as a reflection on the progressive merging of pilgrimage and tourism, a process initiated in the late 19th century by the colonial phenomenon of monumental archaeology and the “musealisation” of the restored ancient sites, culminating with the advertising efforts of the Buddhist modernists in the 1930s and 1940s (Huber 2003: 255, 305).

On the following pages I will investigate two different aspects characterising the 1949 itinerary, as recorded in the *nyin deb*; on the one hand, the emergence of what could be defined, for lack of better terms, as a form of spiritual tourism, and, on the other, the preservation of pilgrimage practices at

⁴¹⁸ The only reference to business activities regards a brief visit to the market and textile factories of Vārāṇasī (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 145; Ramble, 2014: 187-188).

sites in northwest India⁴¹⁹ dating back to the late 19th century and carried out by pilgrims from the high plateau – in particular Khams pa.

2.2.1. Diverging from Mainstream Itineraries

The Tibetan presence in the Middle Ganges region – virtually non-existent prior to the dramatic events following the Younghusband Expedition (1904) – increased noticeably during the 1920s, reaching a critical mass by the end of the 1940s and the beginning of the 1950s. Tibetan pilgrims' itineraries began to conform to specific trends, mainly based on destinations of choice, modes of transportation, and seasonal movements;⁴²⁰ pilgrimages undertaken in India between the 1930s and 1940s by representatives of different sections of the Tibetan society, despite being profoundly personal and individual experiences, show remarkable similitudes linked to the development and

⁴¹⁹ I am here referring to those areas in Punjab, *e.g.* Rewalsar, Maṇḍī, Amritsar, where projects of re-imagination and religious colonisation determined the installment of “unique Tibetan Buddhist sites” (Huber, 2008: 307).

⁴²⁰ The Buddhist pilgrimage season for most of non-Indian visitors, including Tibetans, fell during the cool season (November to February) (Huber, 2008: 295).

affirmation of specific patterns. Those itineraries⁴²¹ included almost invariably visits to Bodh Gayā and Sārnāth, and to large cities of India, such as Vārānasī and Calcutta. The latter, often incorporated within the pilgrimage route for economic and touristic reasons, represented, together with Kalimpong, a perfect point of entry for the hundreds of pilgrims who flocked to India during the cool season; the presence of large Tibetan enclaves eased the pilgrims' encounter with the foreign land, ensuring support and facilitating the creation of groups of fellow countrymen.⁴²²

⁴²¹ The following is a chronological list of itineraries comparing the destinations of choice of Tibetan pilgrims, Buddhists and Bon po, in the first half of the 20th century; the sites visited are presented after the pilgrim's name (when known) and the date in which the journey took place. Khyung sprul 'Jigs med nam mkha'i rdo rje, 1930: Rampur, Rewalsar, Śimlā, Kālkā, Ambhālā, Sahāranpur, Haridvār, Murādābād, Lucknow, Vārānasī, Bodh Gayā, Gayā, Vārānasī, Allāhābād, Kaunpur, Āgrā, Delhi, Amritsar, Maṇḍī, and Rewalsar (Kværne, 1998: 77-78); Sangs rgyas bzang po, 1933: Bodh Gayā and Nepal, and 1934: Rājgir, Sārnāth, Kuśinagar, Rewalsar, Nepal (Ehrhard, 2003: 102-103); rKyang btsun Sher niam, 1940s: Gorakhpur, Sārnāth, Vārānasī, Lucknow, Haridvār, Dehrādūn, Amritsar, Kāngra, Maṇḍī, Delhi, Bodh Gayā, Raxaul, and Nepal (Ramble, 1995: 109-112); mGon po bKra shis A 'brug tshang, 1942: Amritsar, Vārānasī, Bodh Gayā, Nālandā (Andrutshang, 1973: 10); Padma rgya mtsho, 1945: Vārānasī, Bodh Gayā, Guwahati, Kalimpong (Siiger, 1951: 9). The above sources are by no means exhaustive, although I consider them to be representative of the trends of the time. On the reasons behind Tibetan pilgrimages to non-Buddhist Indian sites, *e.g.* Lucknow, Haridvār, etc., see Huber (2008: 205-207).

⁴²² As previously mentioned, it was the casual encounter with two fellow Khams pa that prompted the first of 'Dzam yag's recorded pilgrimages; similarly, on the 30th of the 11th month of the Earth Mouse Year (January 29th, 1949), 'Dzam yag and Rin chen rdo rje travelled from

From the 1790s, when they were first enforced, up to the 1910s, the Qing century-long restrictions on travel to India and Nepal *de facto* stopped the influx of Tibetans to India, a situation that affected the status of Tibetan Buddhism in Calcutta as well. Pilgrims who travelled to Bengal in the early 20th century appear to have been unaware of the existence of a “unique, hybrid Tibetan Buddhist-Gosain⁴²³ temple” (Huber, 2008: 215) in the Howrah district of greater Calcutta; built in 1776, the complex⁴²⁴ was the outcome of the 3rd Panchen Lama’s⁴²⁵ (Blo bzang dpal ldan ye shes’, 1738-1780) desire to revive the 11th to 13th century period of active Tibetan Buddhist connections with India. The Panchen Lama’s efforts were representative of a new Tibetan

Kalimpong to Calcutta with a group of Kham pa pilgrims from the region of rGyal thang (Kha stag ’Dzam yag, 1997: 142).

⁴²³ Gosain is a generic term indicating a large and complex Indian mendicant movement developed during the 18th century. Its representatives, often called in Tibetan sources *atsara* (a phonetic rendering of the Sanskrit *ācārya*, meaning “religious preceptor/scholar”), were mostly mendicant pilgrim-traders who travelled extensively in central Tibet during the period. The court of the 3rd Panchen Lama in particular attracted flocks of Gosains, due to his role as sponsor and patron (Huber, 2008: 196-197). For more information on the presence of Gosain in Tibet, and especially at bKra shis lhun po, see Markham (1879: 124-125) and Clarke (1998: 64).

⁴²⁴ The whole Tibetan complex, comprising the temple, a garden, and several residences, became known the Bhoṭ Bagan (“Tibetan Garden”), while the actual temple building was referred to as either the Bhoṭ Mandir (“Tibetan Temple”) or the Bhoṭ Maṭh (“Tibetan Monastery”) (Huber, 2008: 222).

⁴²⁵ I am following here the dGa’ ldan pho brang system of counting the Panchen Lamas. The bKra shis lhun po system designs Blo bzang dpal ldan ye shes as the sixth incumbent in the Panchen lineage.

understanding of India as a land of Buddhism, a process that led to the reinterpretation of Hindu holy sites as testimonies of the survival of Indian Buddhism. Blo bzang dpal ldan ye shes' enthusiasm for the current status of Buddhism in India had been largely fuelled by Tāranātha's writings⁴²⁶ and his own interpretation of the information carried by the Gosains who regularly visited bKra shis lhun po. The Bhoṭ Bagan, entrusted to Pūraṇ Giri (1745-1795)⁴²⁷ and his lineage descendants, functioned as both a temple and a rest house for pilgrims hailing from the high plateau and the surrounding Himalayan regions for about thirty years during the late 18th and the early 19th centuries.

⁴²⁶ The Jo nang pa scholar Tāranātha Kun dga' snying po (1575-1634) was instrumental in shaping Tibetan knowledge of the sacred geography of India from the late 16th up to the end of the 19th centuries; his traditional historical and historiographical accounts of Indian Buddhism and Tantric Siddha traditions in the subcontinent had been deeply influenced by his interaction with the master Buddhaguptanātha, a widely travelled Indian representative of the Nāth Siddha tradition. Tāranātha's authority with regard to matters concerning Buddhist development in India went unquestioned among the Tibetan readership, and many non-Buddhist sites listed in his works were uncritically accepted and incorporated in later works on India (Huber, 2008: 205-206). For an English translation of Tāranātha's History of Buddhism in India (Tib. *rGya gar chos 'byung*), see Lama Chimpa and Chattopadhyaya (1970).

⁴²⁷ Pūraṇ Giri was the most trusted and talented of the Panchen's Gosain agents. His diplomatic and organisational skills proved to be essential in mediating the complex intercultural dialogue between the different world of 1770s Bengal and bKra shis lhun po (Huber, 2008: 220). Words of appreciation for his efforts were expressed by the 3rd Panchen Lama himself in a passport (Tib. *lam yig*) dated 1774, in which the Gosain was granted a life-allowance (Das, 1915: app. 3, pp. 4, 43).

The death of Pūraṇ Giri's immediate disciple, Daljit Giri (d. 1836),⁴²⁸ and the closure of the Indo-Tibetan borders by the Qing, effectively cut off the presence of Tibetan pilgrims to the Bhoṭ Bagan, thus marking its removal from Tibetan knowledge of India throughout the 19th and 20th centuries (Huber, 2008: 225).

Robert Orsi (2005: 167) quite rightly speaks of “religious messiness”, an element particularly relevant when talking about the Tibetan perception of India as “holy land”. At the time of 'Dzam yag's visits to Bengal, no memory remained of the Bhoṭ Bagan, replaced, as it were, by new holy sites, originally and unambiguously Hindu; particularly popular among them was the Kālīghāṭ, the Kālī temple on the Hoogly riverbanks. The *nyin deb* recounts two visits, *i.e.* 1946 and 1949, paid by the trader to the sacred image of *ka [li ka] ta'i dpal ldan lha mo* (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 53).⁴²⁹ The identification of dPal ldan lha mo with Kālī has been treated in detail elsewhere,⁴³⁰ and I will therefore restrict

⁴²⁸ It appears that from the mid-19th century onwards the ritual life of the site gradually moved towards a combination of general Hinduism and the particular form of Śaivism performed by Pūraṇ Giri and his followers, who belonged the Giri or Mountain sect of the Daśanāmi order (Huber, 2008: 223), established by Śaṅkara in the 9th century (Sullivan, 1997: 65).

⁴²⁹ Also simply referred to as *ka [li ka] ta'i lha mo* (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 142).

⁴³⁰ On the figure of Kālī in Tibetan Buddhism, see Loseries-Leick (1996); for a detailed study of dPal ldan lha mo, see Nebesky-Wojkowitz (1956: 22-37).

my observations to the case in question. It is clear from 'Dzam yag's notes that he and his travel companions equated the image hosted in the Kālīghāṭ to a form of dPal lha mo, an extremely popular *dharma* protector; to her the trader offered flowers, incense, butter lamps, and silver *maṇḍalas* (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 53, 142). It appears from the *nyin deb* that the Kālī temple was an active site of Tibetan Buddhist pilgrimage in the mid-20th century, at least for those pilgrims familiar with the local terrain.⁴³¹

While travelling through the Middle Ganges region, 'Dzam yag and Rin chen rdo rje did conform – rather unsurprisingly – to some of the common trends of 20th century Tibetan pilgrimage, thus joining the ranks of Buddhist devotees who flocked to Bodh Gayā by the hundreds to engage in traditional ritual activities, *e.g.* prostrations, circumambulations, prayers, and offerings of incense and butter lamps. By the late 1940s, the “spiritual magnetism” of the restored locations of the Middle Ganges region had partially eclipsed the

⁴³¹ It is clear from the narrative that 'Dzam yag was no stranger to Calcutta. The commercial networks set up by Tibetan trading firms included branches in Kalimpong and Calcutta (van Spengen, 2000: 140-141). If 'Dzam yag was, as speculated in Chapter Three, an agent of the Sa 'du tshang, his familiarity with the city could be easily ascribable to previous business trips he undertook for the firm.

importance held in the Tibetan imagery by traditionally unique sites of Tibetan Buddhism in northwestern and eastern areas of India. Albeit still featuring in the 1930s and early 1940s itineraries of Tibetan pilgrims, places such as the Lotus Lake (Tib. mTsho Pad ma) at Rewalsar in the Punjab Hills or Hājo in Assam had lost most of their spiritual magnetism by the end of the 1940s (Huber, 2008: 307).

In the case of the itinerary recorded in the *nyin deb* and dated to 1949, the partial conformity to general trends in travel and choice of destination appears to have been limited to a few of the most famous locations in the Middle Ganges area. After the invariable visits to the sites that had become the major focus of the Buddhist revivalist movements and the restorations brought about by the Government of India,⁴³² 'Dzam yag and Rin chen rdo rje's journey deviates from mainstream and pan-Buddhist pilgrimage routes. Their itinerary extended beyond West Bengal, Bihar, and Uttar Pradesh to incorporate unique

⁴³² Bodh Gayā (and sites connected to the legend of the Buddha located nearby), Vaiśālī, Gṛdhrakūṭaparvata (Tib. Bya rgod phung po ri), Vārāṇasī, and Sārnāth (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 142-145). On the reinvention of Buddhism and Buddhist sites in modern India, see Singh (2010).

Tibetan sacred sites identified during the 19th century in the aftermath of a series of political crises,⁴³³ displacements, and migrations that led to the opening of new frontiers in the region of Punjab, a territory eventually to be re-imagined and incorporated into the ever-changing map of the terrain of the Buddha in India (Huber, 2008: 222).

The inclusion of traditional and unique Tibetan sites located in the Punjab conforms to a pilgrimage trend in vogue during the 1930s-early 1940s, especially among Buddhist and Bon po followers of the *ris med* approach. Scholarship⁴³⁴ on contemporary accounts of pilgrimages to India's northwestern regions has not so far taken into consideration the non-sectarian inclination of their compilers as a possible motivating factor behind their choice of destination. I would therefore like to briefly dwell on two of those accounts, namely Sangs rgyas bzang po's and Khyung sprul 'Jigs med nam mkha'i rdo rje's, as examined by Ehrhard (2003), and Kværne (1998) and Li (2008)

⁴³³ In the aftermath of the 1792 Gorkha-Tibetan war, the Qing introduced a series of administrative reforms aimed at controlling Tibetan relations with neighbouring countries through the closure of borders. From 1793 to 1904, potential new waves of Tibetan pilgrims to India, Nepal, Kashmir, and Ladakh were completely thwarted. On the Gorkha war period, see Richardson (1974: 27-28).

⁴³⁴ See Ramble (1995; 2014), Kværne (1998), Ehrhard (2003), Li (2008).

respectively, and compare them to the narrative provided in the *nyin deb*. It is my understanding, in fact, that the inclusion of sites connected with the legend of Padmasambhava, a figure occupying a “primary place over Buddha Śākyamuni in a whole range of rituals and narratives in Tibetan religion” (Huber, 2008: 238), may be interpreted in the light of the influence on eastern Tibetans in general, and 'Dzam yag and Rin chen rdo rje in particular, by religious non-sectarianism. As discussed in relation to his pilgrimages to the eastern and central provinces of Tibet, the trader visited establishments belonging to different traditions of Tibetan Buddhism, actively seeking empowerments from masters from various sects. Sangs rgyas bzang po and Khyung sprul rin po che were both contemporaries of 'Dzam yag, and shared with him a strong *ris med* identity. The process of re-invigorating and strengthening traditionally Buddhist non-sectarian thought and practice, initiated in the mid-19th century by spiritual masters gravitating around the sDe dge court, unfolded up to 1950s and beyond, still influencing modern developments in Tibetan Buddhism (McDougal: 2016: 26).

The peak of the *ris med* movement, with its revival of minority lineages and philosophical views, occurred concurrently with a great renaissance of the rNying ma tradition that took place mainly in Khams at the hands of scholars and masters,⁴³⁵ many of whom were later involved in the non-sectarian movement. The 19th century saw a burst of new scholarship and *gter ma* revelation,⁴³⁶ as well as the compilation, classification, and reproduction of the extant rNying ma literature (Karma Phuntsho, 2005: 50). The revivification of the rNying ma coincided with the opening of new frontiers for Tibetan reinvention and religious colonization; in the 19th century, the controversy⁴³⁷

⁴³⁵ The leading scholars of the rNying ma renaissance were dPal sprul O rgyan 'Jigs med chos kyi dbang po (1808-1887), 'Jam mgon Kong sprul Blo gros mtha' yas (1813-1899), dGe rtse 'Gyur med tshe dbang mchog grub (1761-1829), rGyal sras gZhan phan mtha' yas (1800-1855), mKhan chen Pad ma rdo rje (19th century), 'Jam dbyangs mKhyen brtse dbang po (1820-1892), 'Jam mgon Mi pham rgya mtsho (1846-1912), and the *gter ston* mChog gyur gling pa (1829-1870) (Karma Phuntsho, 2005: 50).

⁴³⁶ Interestingly, a biography of Padmasambhava as a Bon po sage by 'Jam dbyang mKhyen brtse'i dbang po, together with several other Bon, or semi-Bon, ritual texts were included in the *Rin chen gter mdzod chen mo*, the gargantuan collection of *gter ma* gathered and, in the case of certain ritual and explanatory texts, authored by Kong sprul Blo gros mtha' yas, himself a Bon po prior to his conversion to Buddhism (Martin, 2001: 136-137).

⁴³⁷ Whereas various Tibetan historians belonging to the bKa' brgyud, Sa skya, and dGe lugs, *i.e.* the *gsar ma* traditions, agreed in locating Za hor somewhere in Bengal, starting from the 14th century, the popular hagiographies of Padmasambhava compiled by the rNying ma placed Za hor in the northwest of India, closer to Uḍḍiyāna, the alleged birthplace of Padmasambhava. The relocation of Za hor occurred smoothly in the texts, but failed to find recognition on the ground. Tibetans who travelled westwards, *e.g.* rGod tshang pa mGon po rdo rje, U rgyan pa

over the geographic identification of Zahor, a holy place connected with the narrative of Padmasambhava's life, was resolved by the rNying ma in favour of Maṇḍi, a district in the lower hills of present-day Himachal Pradesh. A small lake, Rewalsar, was identified with the "Lotus Lake" (Tib. mTsho Pad ma) created by Padmasambhava, the mythical spot where the master was born and also survived a trial by fire (Snellgrove, 1957: 173).⁴³⁸

In view of what has been said so far, it is easy to fully appreciate the attraction wielded by Rewalsar on Sangs rgyas bzang po,⁴³⁹ an early 20th century rNying ma pa. Born in Khams in 1894, Sangs rgyas bzang po's spiritual career was deeply influenced by the rNying ma master gZhan phan chos kyi snang ba (1871-1927),⁴⁴⁰ one of the most significant figures of the non-

Rin chen dpal, sTag tshan ras pa Ngag dbang rgya mtsho, identified no region named Za hor (Huber, 2008: 239-240). See also Tucci (1940) and Li (2011).

⁴³⁸ According to the Tibetan hagiographies, Za hor was the site where Padmasambhava was set on fire by the local king as a punishment for having seduced his daughter, the nun-princess Mandāravā; the master came out unscathed from the pyre, transforming the burning ground into a lake and arising from a lotus at its centre.

⁴³⁹ The writings of Sangs rgyas bzang po are part of the Tucci Tibetan Fund and I could not personally access them. I am here therefore relying on Ehrhard's study (2003).

⁴⁴⁰ Better known by the nickname gZhan dga'.

sectarian revivalism in eastern Tibet.⁴⁴¹ From 1916 up to 1927, Sangs rgyas bzang po studied under gZhan dga' and other rNying ma masters, attending teachings held at the establishments of rDzogs chen,⁴⁴² Zhe chen,⁴⁴³ and Zur mang.⁴⁴⁴

After the death of his gZhan dga', Sangs rgyas bzang po embarked on a series of pilgrimages which led him from eastern Tibet to the central provinces of dBus and gTsang, and from there, on different occasions, to India. In 1935, he visited the historical sites connected with the life of Gautama Buddha, *i.e.* Rājgir, Sārnāth, Kuśinagar, and Lumbinī, thereafter moving on to Maṇḍi and

⁴⁴¹ In addition to his studies on the rNying ma teachings, he received the full commentaries, empowerments, and esoteric instructions of the Sa skya *lam 'bras* system by 'Jam mgon blo gter dbang po (1847-1914).

⁴⁴² One of the six primary, or “mother”, monasteries of the rNying ma tradition. Founded in 1685 by Grub dbang Pad ma rig 'dzin under the patronage of Chos rgyal Sangs rgyas stan pa, rDzogs chen dgon pa is an early example of the ecumenical approach adopted in the 17th century by the royal house of sDe dge, which sponsored indifferently bKa' brgyud and rNying ma establishments.

⁴⁴³ One of the six primary, or “mother”, monasteries of the rNying ma tradition. Located in sDe dge, it was originally a meditation centre (Tib. *sgrub sde*) founded by gTer chen Nyi ma grags pa in 1692.

⁴⁴⁴ Monastery located in Nang chen and founded in 1483. It belongs to the Zur mang bKa' brgyud tradition; the flux of devotees and masters from one establishment to the other, regardless of their sectarian affiliation, is testimony to the rapid embracement of the “impartial” view of the *ris med* movement by leading figures of the rNying ma and gSar ma schools, as well as Bon.

Rewalsar (Ehrhard, 2003: 103); by the mid-19th century the association of mTsho Pad ma with Padmasambhava and his consort Mandāravā was completed, and the presence of Tibetan beggar-pilgrims living in the area at that time was recorded in at least one Tibetan account (Havnevik, 1999: 141-153).

'Dzam yag and Rin chen rdo rje followed the same route travelled by Sangs rgyas bzang po only fourteen years previously, reaching a town he introduces as “the present-day [district] capital called Maṇḍi, the prior capital of the kingdom of Za hor”.⁴⁴⁵ From there, they moved to Rewalsar, and, in describing the lake and its surroundings, the trader adheres to the popular narrative promoted by the rNying ma hagiographies (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 147-148). In his notes, the trader points out the presence of a small Tibetan temple, the pitiful state of which had been a topic of discussion among the Buddhist community in the previous decade. The relevance of the site as a pilgrimage venue for Tibetan Buddhists had not in fact escaped the attention of Indian Buddhist modernists who, in the early 1930s, signaled the need to

⁴⁴⁵ *sngar za hor rgyal sar deng sang maṇ ḍi rgyal sa zhes* (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 147).

restore and revive what in their eyes appeared as a neglected and possibly endangered ancient Buddhist site. Their appeal was taken up by a Sinhalese Buddhist, P. P. Siriwardhana, who actively sponsored the restoration of the shrine (Huber, 2008: 307-308); at the time of his visit in 1949, 'Dzam yag was impressed by the silk banners with printed *dhāraṇīs* and *mantras* surrounding the lake (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 148).

In addition to Rewalsar, several other sites scattered throughout the northwestern region of India were popularly identified by Tibetans with Padmasambhava's lake. One of these was the sacred tank of the Golden Temple in the city of Amritsar, the heartland of Sikhism (Huber, 2008: 242); interestingly, Amritsar became – albeit for different reasons – a pilgrimage destination for Buddhists and Bon po alike. Khyung sprul rin po che, a representative of the new wave of *ris med* Bon po,⁴⁴⁶ visited the Punjab region a few years prior to 'Dzam yag,⁴⁴⁷ while making a series of journeys combining

⁴⁴⁶ His encounter in 1948 with the 16th Karma pa is only but one of the examples of Khyung sprul rin po che's ecumenical attitude. As Kværne (1998: 80) aptly points out, "Bon and Buddhism seem to have been equally valid in his view."

⁴⁴⁷ The main source for the life of Khyung sprul is contained in his biography, written by his disciple dPal Idan tshul khriims (1902-1973) in the 1930s; albeit the text is not, strictly speaking,

pilgrimage and missionary activities (Kværne, 1998: 73). The itineraries he followed during his visits to the sacred sites of India and Nepal are remarkably similar to the one travelled almost two decades later by 'Dzam yag and Rin chen rdo rje, which is not surprising since Khyung sprul, just like Sangs rgyas bzang po, was 'Dzam yag's contemporary and shared with him a strong *ris med* identity.

Khyung sprul rin po che (1897-1955) was born into a family of the A mdo Ga rgya aristocratic lineage in Khyung po,⁴⁴⁸ Khams; the whole of his spiritual life was inspired by the *ris med* movement, and in accordance with its non-sectarian and unbiased approach he made no distinctions between Bon po and Buddhist teachings (Alay, 2011: 205).⁴⁴⁹ In promoting their non-sectarian views,

an autobiography, the narrative is often in the first person, possibly due to its being largely based either on Khyung sprul's notes or on the master's direct dictation (Kværne, 1998: 72; Li, 2008: 3). Khyung sprul rin po che travelled to India on three occasions; during the first of his stays, from 1922 to 1925, he visited Rewalsar/mTsho Pad ma (Kværne, 1998: 71, 76; Li, 2008: 27). The visit to Amritsar occurred in the earlier months of the second of his journeys (1930-1935) (Kværne, 1998: 78).

⁴⁴⁸ The area of Khyung po spanned over present-day Chab mdo and Nag chu prefectures. On the Khyung po clan, see Sørensen (1994: 179, n. 508).

⁴⁴⁹ Khyung sprul received his full *drang srong* vows in the Bon po scholastic tradition of sMan ri monastery in gTsang in 1919; in 1924, he joined the Buddhist community of *rdzogs chen* practitioners led by bDe ba'i rgyal po, from whom he received the Buddhist name 'Jigs med

in fact, mKhyen brtse and Kong sprul incorporated certain Bon rituals, thus following a trend long established within the rNying ma tradition – especially in Khams; in the late 19th-early 20th centuries, the figure of Padmasambhava became the common denominator among Bon and *ris med* Buddhism, especially rNying ma and bKa' brgyud. The religious attraction exerted on the Bon po by sites such as Rewalsar and Amritsar was mainly due to their perception of Padmasambhava as a “universal teacher”, who could even take the form of Bon teachers (Martin, 2001: 138).⁴⁵⁰

As Kværne (1998: 78) remarks, Khyung sprul provides a rather “brief and matter-of-fact description” of the Golden Temple of Amritsar, which he inaccurately refers to as “Guru Nanak’s Palace” (Tib. *gu ru Na nig gi pho brang*); quite different in its lyricism and imaginative composition is the

nam mkha'i rdo rje. Eventually, he became known as Khyung sprul 'Jigs med nam mkha'i rdo rje, or, more simply, Khyung sprul (Alay, 2011: 205).

⁴⁵⁰ This view accommodates the existence of the so-called *dran pa yab sras gsum* – Dran pa nam mkha' and his twin sons g.Yung drung mthong grol (believed to be identical to Padmasambhava) and Tshe dbang rig 'dzin (Karmay, 2005: 19). The triad became especially important to the New Bon (Tib. *bon gsar ma*) movement, the origin of which can be dated back to the mid-14th century. The expression *bon gsar ma* started to be used in the 18th century to indicate the activities of Sangs rgyas gling pa (1705-1735) aimed at creating a system based on an entirely new set of revealed works. From that time onwards, the movement gained popularity in the eastern areas of Khams (Martin, 2001: 138, fn 41; Achard, 2013: 83).

account⁴⁵¹ of another Bon po pilgrim from Khyung po, a certain rKyang btsun Shes rab niam rgyal; in describing the complex,⁴⁵² he conflated “the essence of the sect [*i.e.* Sikhism]” with “the sphere of the supreme Bon”, presenting the Golden Temple as “a citadel for the life-force of the eternal [Bon] tantras” (Ramble, 1995: 110; 2014: 186).⁴⁵³ Contrary to his Bon po contemporary, 'Dzam yag correctly identifies the Golden Temple as the most sacred shrine of Sikhism,⁴⁵⁴ albeit adhering to the narrative that sees the place as a reliquary for sacred objects connected to Padmasambhava and his consort Mandāravā.

“We visited some ornaments [kept] in a shrine [and] said to be, according to the tradition, the body ornaments of princess

⁴⁵¹ The work in question is titled *rGya gnas gyis [*kyi] dkar chags dri med dwangs shel dang lam yig mdor bsdu*. See Ramble (1995: 108-112).

⁴⁵² The author calls Amritsar “rGya mkhar ba chod, [also] known as A 'bar”, thus identifying the holy city of the Sikhs with the palace built by Mi lus bsam legs (Ramble, 1995: 109).

⁴⁵³ Due to the similarities in the appearance of the Sikhs (especially in their wearing turbans and beards) and the descriptions of ancient Bon po, rKyang btsun Shes rab niam rgyal identified Amritsar with rGya mkhar ba chod (see footnote 448). The author describes the turbans as “bird horns” (Tib. *bya ru*) – a distinguishing feature of the eighteen kings of Zhang zhung and early Bon po priests (Ramble, 1995: 110).

⁴⁵⁴ Amritsar is described as “the capital [and] holy place blessed by the noble man called Guru Nanak, the teacher of the religious tradition of Sikhism” (Tib. *si kha'i chos lugs kyi ston pa gu ru nā nak zhes skyes bu des byin gyis brlabs pa'i gnas mchog rgyal sa*) (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 145). For a full translation and discussion of the passage, see Ramble (2014: 188).

Mandāravā, and, in [another] shrine [we saw] the ritual objects said to be those of Guru Rin po che”.⁴⁵⁵

When it comes to the itinerary travelled by 'Dzam yag and Rin chen rdo rje during the second of the recorded pilgrimages in India, it is not its conformity with the trends in vogue at the end of the 1940s-beginning of the 1950s that deserves scholarly attention, but rather its divergence from them. The choice of sites connected to the legend of Padmasambhava, and, therefore, to the rNying ma map of the holy land, may be interpreted as a reaffirmation of the *ris med* identity of the two pilgrims – a non-sectarian attitude shared by many Khams pa, Buddhists and Bon po alike, from the mid-19th century up to the present day.

2.2.2. A Bird-eye's View of the Sacred Sites of Nepal

In the last days of the 12th month of the Earth Mouse Year (January 1949), 'Dzam yag and his *dharma* companion headed from Raxaul to the Indo-Nepalese border, reaching Svayambhūnāth on the 29th day of the 12th month

⁴⁵⁵ *lha khang gcig gi nang du lha lcam man da ra'i sku rgyan red zer srol can rgyan chas dang / yang lha khang zhig la o rgyan rin po che'i nyer spyod yin zer ba rnams kyang mjal* (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 146).

(February 27th, 1949). In his journal, the trader lists in detail the sites visited and the ritual activities engaged in, as well as some of the encounters made on the way,⁴⁵⁶ concluding his Nepalese experience with a bird-eye's view of all the sacred sites of Nepal, an all-inclusive description of "the inconceivable holy places and objects" (Tib. *gnas rten bsam gyis mi khyab pa*) a Buddhist pilgrim was expected to visit. This literary map was largely based on information drawn from *gnas yig*,⁴⁵⁷ as the trader himself confesses.

"We did not have the chance to perform an accurate pilgrimage according to the guide-books written in the past, but we dedicated

⁴⁵⁶ One of these encounters occurred during their visit to the Boudhanāth *stūpa*, when they met a Tibetan pilgrim, a certain Rus dkar jo; the latter attracted the attention of 'Dzam yag by asking for an astrological divination, for which he paid in incense, and by offering a donation for a *spyān 'byed* (lit. "opening of the eyes") ceremony, a term referring to the conclusive, and most important, stage in the consecration of an image of a deity, the painting of the eyes (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 153).

⁴⁵⁷ Unfortunately, as it is often the case in the *nyin deb*, the author does not provide actual titles. Being well-read, 'Dzam yag was certainly familiar with the two 18th century works "Guide-book of Nepal" (Tib. *bal yul gnas yig*), printed in 1774, and "Guide to Holy Places of Nepal" (Tib. *bal po'i gnas kyi dkar chag*), composed between 1755 and 1768, of Ngag dbang rdo rje and the 4th Khams sprul Chos kyi nyi ma respectively. The authors both appear to have been bKa' brgyud pa, even though Ngag dbang rdo rje shows strong rNying ma leanings in his work, by referring to Padmasambhava as a "Second Buddha" (Tib. *sangs rgyas gnyis pa*). See Dowman (1981: 188, 190) and Buffetrille (2012: 169).

the merit of our virtuous deeds and focused our prayers on having the possibility to visit [Nepal] another time.”⁴⁵⁸

The passage asserts strongly the importance given to guide-books in the construction of pilgrims’ expectations and self-perceptions of the ritual activities. The *gnas yig* clearly formed the core of ’Dzam yag’s knowledge of Nepal as a sacred land, and provided him with the necessary information about the holy environment, its spatial orientation, and its modification through time.

The trader’s literary map of the sacred geography of Nepal is structured around traditional Buddhist sites of the Kathmandu valley, *e.g.* Ri bo ’bigs byed,⁴⁵⁹ Svayambhūnāth, and Pāṭan; from there, the description moves along the four directions, thus composing a network of holy sites, connected to one another to

⁴⁵⁸ *rang re rnams gong du bris zin pa las gnas yig nang ltar zhib mjal byed pa’i long khoms ma byung yang / da dung lan cig mjal ba’i smon lam phur tshugs su ’debs pa dang / dge ba byang chub du bsngos* (Kha stag ’Dzam yag, 1997: 156).

⁴⁵⁹ Ri bo ’bigs byed, or Vindhya Range, is a discontinuous chain of mountain ridges, hill ranges, highlands, and plateaus in west-central India; however, the same appellative is used to indicate a mountain north of Kathmandu. In his description of the sacred places of Nepal, Bla ma bTsang po places it half-a-day’s journey north of city, while the *Bal yul mchod rten ’phags pa shing kun dang de’i gnas gzhan rnams kyi dkar chag* (folio 5b, in Wylie 1970: 45) locates it northwest of Svayambhūnāth (Wylie, 1970: 23); in accordance with the tradition, ’Dzam yag locates the mountain on the northwestern side of Svayambhūnāth, and identifies its peak as the seat of Buddha and his two close disciples. On the east side of Ri bo ’bigs byed, the trader locates one of Nāgārjuna’s meditation caves, known to the locals as Jamacho (Kha stag ’Dzam yag, 1997: 152, 154).

form a mental chart of the territory that could be ideally used by other Tibetans to navigate their way on the ground (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 154-156).

Whereas the actual pilgrimage was limited to the most famous – and accessible – sites of the Kathmandu Valley,⁴⁶⁰ the recreation of the sacred geography of Nepal, albeit only in the form of a textual map, affirms the multifaceted nature of the *nyin deb* – journal, ledger, *gnas yig*, and, as I will show in the following paragraph, tourist narrative.

2.2.3. Pilgrimage as an Experience of Tourism

The study and conceptualisation of complex phenomena like travel and tourism require a multidisciplinary approach and the combination of different research methods. Before the 1970s, studies of the relationship between religion, pilgrimage, and tourism commonly considered them as separate subjects not apt to be interrelated or compared, despite the fact that the development of tourism cannot be understood without taking into consideration

⁴⁶⁰ The sites visited were Kathmandu, Pāṭan (Tib. Ye rang), Svayambunāth, the Nāgārjuna Hill, the Vulture Peak, the Karnadīp cremation ground, Boudhnāth, and the Talking Tārā at Bhaktapur (Tib. Kho krom). For detailed descriptions of the holy places of the Kathmandu Valley – mainly based on Khams sprul Chos kyi nyi ma's *bal po'i gnas kyi dkar chag* – see Dowman (1981: 205-284).

religion and the practice of pilgrimage. As Collins-Kreiner and Gatrell (2006: 33)

argue,

It is impossible to understand the development of [...] tourism without studying religion and understanding the pilgrimage phenomenon.

The research on pilgrimage has recently shifted towards post-modernism, thus adopting approaches that challenge existing theories and reject clear-cut divisions typical of a scholarship that perceived pilgrimage as uniquely motivated by religious elements. The post-modernist tends to place the individual experiences at the forefront, emphasising the subjective over the objective (Collins-Kreiner, 2010: 441-442); moreover, the attempt made to “classify tourists as pilgrims in the context of heritage and root-seeking tours” (Collins-Kreiner, 2010: 445) offers a valuable starting point to our discussion on the Tibetan perception of India and its sacred sites at the time of 'Dzam yag's travels.

The revitalisation, or better, the reinvention, of Buddhism in modern India might not have happened were it not for the visual presence of material

remains of ancient Buddhist sites, still extant and visible despite Buddhism's decline and peripheralisation during the early medieval period (7th-13th centuries) and the vandalism inflicted by time and colonial archeologists. These remains provided the anchors for the Buddhist revival, on which the propagandistic activities of modern pan-Buddhist movements, such as the Maha Bodhi Society, were hinged. Starting from the late 19th century, the ancient sites of Buddhism in India were restored and opened to the devotion of pilgrims hailing from all over Asia. Anthropological studies have long established the presence of a strong extra-religious dimension to the pilgrimage phenomenon: the intertwining of trade, pilgrimage, and politics has been subject of many studies, of which the present dissertation is but an example. The acknowledgment in the scholarship of the blurred and poorly classified ties between pilgrimage and tourism led to a post-modern approach rejecting the "rigid dichotomies between pilgrimage and tourism or pilgrims and tourist" (Badone and Rosenam, 2002: 2). Far from being conceptual opposites, pilgrimage and tourism often blend in what is generally referred to as "spiritual tourism"; the multiple and changing motivations of travellers make their

interests and activities oscillate – either consciously or subconsciously – from tourism to pilgrimage and vice versa (Collins-Kreiner, 2010: 443).

The religious agenda, strongly pushed forward throughout 'Dzam yag's narrative, is only but one of the reasons motivating his "pilgrimages" – the destinations of choice being often dictated by economics, logistics, and mere convenience. The peculiarity of the 1949 journey to India and Nepal lies in its being a "real" pilgrimage, devoid of any business of relevance and, as such, free from the time and movement restrictions imposed by trade schedules. The freedom enjoyed by 'Dzam yag and Rin chen rdo rje provides them with leisure time, a key feature of tourism; the journey is as important as the destination, the trains, boats, and motorcars – wonders of modernity – not simply means to reach the sacred sites, but something to be thoroughly enjoyed and appreciated. Concurrently though, streets and railways too, to use Bauman's words (1996: 20), "may prove to be obstacles rather than help, traps rather than thorough-fare. They may misguide, divert from the straight path, lead astray".

[From Lumbinī] we headed back to Nautanwā (Tib. Na'u tan wa), reaching the village at midnight. From there, we moved back to Gorakhpur (Tib. Gho rag pur) [and] we [ended up] doing three trips instead of one. Due to the inexperience of our interpreter, not only we had to [suffer] some physical hardships and pay double train fare, but we passed through a station called Balrāmpur (Tib. Bal rām pur), going a bit too far north. Since in the village of Śrāvastī (Tib. mNyan yod) there were blessed ruins, such as that of the place where the Buddha gave food to the helpless [in] the Jetavana grove (Tib. rGyal bu rgyal byed kyi tshal), I told the interpreter that in no way would I not visit [the town]. [But] the latter confused the two names, Balrāmpur and Gorakhpur, and we ended up going up and then down, missing Śrāvastī; we [*i.e.* 'Dzam yag and Rin chen rdo rje] considered the fact of not being able to visit this holy place [*i.e.* Śrāvastī] as a sign of former bad karma and we prayed, feeling regretful.⁴⁶¹

Albeit rather exceptional within the context of the *nyin deb* – 'Dzam yag's journey is in fact remarkably free of serious complications – the incident reported above confirms the importance played by the Indian railway service in the modern pilgrimage industry created and fostered by the Maha Bodhi

⁴⁶¹ *na'u tan wa slar yang log pas nam dgung slebs | de nas kyang gho rag pur bar rang log byas | lam gcig la lam gsum brgyud dgos byung ba de ni | skad sgyur ma mkhas pa'i dbang gis | lus kyi dka' tsheds dang re li'i gla 'phar ma bcas sprod dgos byung ba ma zad de'i yar tsam la bal rām pur zhes | Ti san zhig brgyud nas | mnyan yod kyi grong khyer rgyal bu rgyal byed kyi tshal | khyim bdag mgon med zas sbyin gyi kun dga' ra ba sogs zhig shul gnas byin can yod pas ma mjal thabs med yin zhes skad sgyur la smras kyang | khong pas bal rām pur dang gho rag pur gnyis ming go nor gyis mnyan yod zur nas yar shog dang mar shog bcas song kyang sngon las dbang gis mnyan yod kyi gnas ma mjal bas rang re rnam yid pham bo gyur kyang yid smon byas* (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 150).

Society. Tibetan pilgrims rapidly adapted to the rail system, taking advantage of the comfort and the convenience rail travel added to the pilgrimage experience. Virtually no Tibetan visiting India for the first time had ever seen a train, and railways had a high curiosity value among the pilgrims from the high plateau (Huber, 2008: 307-308).⁴⁶²

Already in the mid-1920s, Khyung sprul rin po che made ample use of the rail service during the first of his travels in the subcontinent; his accounts contain detailed annotations of the fares paid as well as the exact times of departures and arrivals. The advantages of the modern railway system did not escape the practical mind of the Bon po pilgrim, even though he thought nothing of Western technology and scientific progress; to borrow Kværne's words (1998: 71), "Khyung-sprul was not, it seems [...] eager to assimilate the knowledge and ways of thought of the outside world. Spiritually and intellectually he remained inside the traditional Tibetan world." Contrary to

⁴⁶² 'Dzam yag himself was utterly amazed by the technology of the Indian rail transport, his wonder at the speed and power of trains, boats, and motorcars nicely summed up in a poem marking the end of the first pilgrimage to India (1946), expressing in verse his appreciation of the rapidity of these marvellous machines (Tib. *'phrul 'khor ngo mtshar can*) that could cover in a day the distance a man walked in a month (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 57-58).

Khyung sprul's attitude, 'Dzam yag was utterly fascinated by modernity; the sections on his travels in India are filled with descriptions of trains, stations, boats, and motorcars. His amazement at the speed and technology was shared by another self-proclaimed pilgrim from Tibet, dGe 'dun chos 'phel, one of most controversial figures of modern Tibet. Many pages have been written on his iconoclastic stance and ironic humour, and I will therefore refrain from providing unnecessary biographical minutiae.⁴⁶³ The aspect of main interest to the present discussion lies in dGe 'dun chos 'phel's activities as promoter of India as a "holy land" among the Tibetan readership. As is well known, the A mdo scholar authored the first systematic guide-book to sacred sites of India in Tibetan language; even though other travel accounts had been composed by early 20th century Tibetan pilgrims, dGe 'dun chos 'phel's *Guide-book for Travel to the Holy Places of India* (Tib. *rGya gar gyi gnas chen khag la 'grod pa'i lam yig*) – henceforth referred to as the *Guide to India* – was unique in its synthetic and critical approach to Indian Buddhist sites and their historical location, its functional lists of modern means of transportation, and its inclusion of some of

⁴⁶³ On the figure of dGe 'dun chos 'phel, see, among others, Karmay (1980), Stoddard (1985a, 1985b, 1988), Lopez (1995; 2006), Mengele (1999).

the first examples of modern Tibetan cartography drawn by the author himself (Huber, 2000: 19). dGe 'dun chos 'phel started working on the composition of the *Guide to India* during his first pilgrimage in 1934-1935; the draft was reviewed following further travels in 1937, and finally published in 1939. The author extended the latter in 1945-1946, a version that was first printed in 1950, and which became the base for the later reprints and edited versions (Huber, 2000: 13).

At the time of the first draft – the mid-1930s – dGe 'dun chos 'phel was personally involved with the activities of the Maha Bodhi Society; the figure of Anagārika Dharmapāla deeply influenced the perception of the A mdo ba scholar, who, in his writings, presents capsule biographies of the pan-Buddhist leader, presenting him to his Tibetan readership as a *mahātmā*, a “great soul”, who was striving for the sake of all Buddhists. As rightly pointed out by Huber (2000: 17), “the possibility should be seriously considered that the Maha Bodhi Society itself, or one of its active members, actually requested Gedun Chöphel to compose the *Guide to India* for its missionary publications program.”

In spite of its author's claim of providing an entirely accurate and new description of the sacred geography of the holy land, the *Guide to India* is not devoid of shortcomings; dGe 'dun chos 'phel's extreme confidence in presenting the material hides inconsistencies and anomalies due to the scholar's idiosyncratic interpretations of Buddhist historical geography, fantastic stories, and outright mistakes.⁴⁶⁴ Notwithstanding, the *Guide to India* has continued to be circulated and used by Tibetan pilgrims up to the present day; even if chronological reasons exclude the possibility that 'Dzam yag's journeys were based on dGe 'dun chos 'phel's *Guide to India*, it is undeniable that the cultural milieu that facilitated the creation of such a guide-book was the same that allowed pilgrims from the plateau to have access to railway maps and guesthouse locations. The sacred sites of early Indian Buddhism turned, by the end of the 1930s, into touristic places of attractions, thanks to the publicity efforts of the Maha Bodhi Society and other Buddhist modernists. Kalimpong, the conduit for much of the political, economic, and religious traffic of the first half of the 20th century, became an important operative base; rDo rje mThar

⁴⁶⁴ See, for instance, the replacement of the name of Vaiśālī with that of Nālandā in his listing of the eight great *stūpas* (Huber, 2000: 111, note 3).

phyin, publisher of *The Tibet Mirror*, was known to give assistance to Tibetan pilgrims *en route* to the Middle Ganges regions, printing leaflets and maps and allowing them to stay at his warehouse (Huber, 2000: 18-19). 'Dzam yag never mentions in his notes either rDo rje mThar phyin or dGe 'dun chos 'phel, but he was certainly not alone in his ventures. On the contrary, he could rely on local people, almost certainly prior acquaintances, who provided him and his companions with help and support. During his stay in Nepal, he counted on the hospitality of local residents, who facilitated the two pilgrims on their tour of the Kathmandu Valley (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 151), and whose kindness the trader fondly recalls.

We returned [from Boudnāth] to the Nepalese house at Pāṭan; after cooking dinner, [our] Nepalese [host] arranged for a motorcar, and sent two Nepalese representatives as our escorts to a place three miles away. [These acts of] kindness made me feel both nostalgic and joyful.⁴⁶⁵

Whereas Khyung sprul rin po che, dGe 'dun chos 'phel, Sangs rgyas bzang po, and rKyang btsun Shes rab nram rgyal travelled through India on

⁴⁶⁵ *ye rang rgyal sa'i grong gnas shis [*gzhi] bal po tshang phyin / lto g.yos nas bal pos mo Tor bcasgra sgrigs / ngos [*ngo] tshab bal po gnyis mi li gsum gyi sar bskyel ma byas / bka' drin de rnam yid la bcags shing dga' ba yang byung* (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 154).

very limited means, 'Dzam yag and his *dharma* companion did not spare money. As a matter of fact, the trader is very precise in providing the total amount of his expenditures for the two of his pilgrimages;⁴⁶⁶ he was not, despite his attempt to say otherwise, an “average” pilgrim. His financial means, although more modest than those he would claim after 1952, were such as to allow him to hire interpreters, take trains and motorcars, and, more generally, to reduce the discomforts of the journey to a minimum.

It has been said that leisure is one of the features of tourism, and certainly the attendance at shows and local attractions qualifies as a hedonic experience; interestingly, the strict attitude showed by the trader during his “pilgrimages” in central Tibet softens during his stay in the subcontinent. 'Dzam

⁴⁶⁶ Not surprisingly, 'Dzam yag records only the amount of money spent during the last two pilgrimages (1949 and 1949-1950); as discussed in Chapter Three, the trader faced some financial hurdles in the first years following his departure from Rab shis. At the time of the 1946 pilgrimage to the subcontinent, his means ought to have been rather limited and possibly not worthy, at least in the author's eyes, to be registered. In the late 1940s, 'Dzam yag's wealth rapidly increased; at the end of the second of his pilgrimages he had spent more than 40 Tibetan *rdo tshad*, that is to say more than 2,000 silver *srang* (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 156). The third pilgrimage, shorter than the previous one, cost him 11 Tibetan *rdo tshad*, the equivalent of 550 silver *srang* (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 189).

yag the pilgrim turns into 'Dzam yag the “tourist”, whose enjoyment of the present and its distractions is not tainted by guilt.

We stayed for the night in the outskirts of a village [on the river banks] of the Lohit River; there we got distracted for a while by illusionists, bear dances, and other entertainments.⁴⁶⁷

The event described above occurred during the third, and last, of 'Dzam yag's recorded pilgrimages to India, a journey that led the trader to Hājo in Assam, one of the sites that were traditionally unique to Tibetan Buddhism in northeastern areas of India, as we shall see in the following section.

2.3. Third Pilgrimage to India, 1949-1950

The third of the recorded pilgrimages ideally marks the end of a cycle; very much like the first journey, it appeared to have been the outcome of an impromptu decision. No rituals nor preparations were made in advance; at the time of setting off, on the 9th day of the 11th month of the Earth Ox Year (December 28th, 1949), the trader was already in Kalimpong, where he had been for some time, buying goods to be sent to Tibet via rGyal rtse. Seemingly

⁴⁶⁷ *chu bo lo hi ta'i grong 'gram zhag gcig bsdad / der mig 'phrul mkhan dang dom gyi rtsed mo bcas la cung zad g.yeng* (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 188-189).

he joined a pair of his Khams pa friends, his usual travel companion Rin chen rdo rje and a certain Blo [bzang] 'phrin las,⁴⁶⁸ in what appears to have been a business trip. The three men hired an interpreter and headed eastwards via Siliguri; from there, they took a train to the banks of the Lohit river, and after a two-day boat trip they finally reached a place that 'Dzam yag identifies in his journal as Kuśinagar (Tib. *rTswa mchog grong*), in alignment with uniquely Tibetan traditions concerning the rediscovery of the site of the Buddha's death and *parinirvāṇa* at Hājo, Assam (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 188).

The Kuśinagar that became one of the most popular Indian destinations for Tibetan Buddhist pilgrims from the 16th up to the first decades of the 20th century was located more than five hundred kilometres from the actual site of ancient Kuśinagar in the Middle Ganges region. No historical records account for a Tibetan frequentation of the site during the period of direct contact with India up to the 13th century; already at the time of Xuánzàng's visit, in the 7th century, the complex was allegedly desolated and in ruins (Huber, 2008: 128).

⁴⁶⁸ 'Dzam yag defines Rin chen rdo rje and Blo 'phrin las as "fellow pilgrims" (Tib. *gnas rogs*) (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 187).

The original location of Kuśinagar in Māthākuwar was identified with some degree of certainty in 1875-1876 by colonial archeologists, and reconfirmed by the discovery of further inscriptions in the first decade of the 20th century. Whereas the actual site of ancient Kuśinagar never attracted Tibetan pilgrims, the Tibetan Kuśinagar “rediscovered” in Assam through visionary revelations in the late 16th-early 17th centuries began a process of shifting terrain that culminated with the creation of “the Tibetan replica of the holy land in Assam” (Huber, 2008: 127). The identification of ancient sites of Indian Buddhism in western Assam – a region the Tibetan Vajrayāna narratives present as the location of powerful Tantric cult sites – imbued the area with a Buddhist invented history and culture. During the late 16th-early 17th centuries, the Tibetan readership was particularly exposed to the writings of the historian Tāranātha (1575-1634), who, in identifying Assam with Kāmarūpa,⁴⁶⁹ presented

⁴⁶⁹ One of the twenty-four *mahāpīṭha* mentioned in Tantric texts. The Tibetans first obtained knowledge of the *pīṭha* through the *Yoginītantras*, such as the *Samvaratantra* corpus; the latter present the *pīṭha* (Tib. *gnas*) as having a dual nature, being both external cult sites of specialised pilgrimage and internal sites within the yogin’s body engaged in meditational practice. Tibetan interpreters understood the arrangement of the twenty-four *pīṭha* as given in the *Samvaratantra* as actual geographical locations, thus identifying the Indian subcontinent with the *vajrakāya*, the adamant body (Huber, 2008: 86-92). On the non-Buddhist origins of the *pīṭha* system, see Sanderson (1994).

the region as both an ancient Buddhist site and a centre for the activities of Vajrayāna *siddhas*. The superimposition of the entire sacred geography of the original Buddhist Magadha on Assam created a convenient replica of the holy land, in which the most important sites had been transposed and compressed to fit in the local topography, a facsimile that a visiting pilgrim could tour in a day or two (Huber, 2008: 131-137).

By the late 17th- early 18th centuries Hājo had evolved into a fully Tibetanised place, the area ritually marked and reinterpreted, local cultural and physical features thoroughly re-inscribed and appropriated by the Tibetans (Huber, 2008: 142); pilgrims from the plateau, especially Khams pa, visited the sites, some of them at the same time engaging in trade or labour in the local Assamese markets. The fame of Hājo/Kuśinagar among the Khams pa resisted the discovery of the actual ancient site in the Middle Ganges region (Huber, 2008: 139); Assam remained a popular destination among eastern Tibetans up to the 20th century, as 'Dzam yag's account proves. By that time, Tibetan pilgrims had already been warned that the identification of Hājo as the site of

Buddha's death and *parinirvāṇa* had been an unfortunate mistake, and guidebooks were written in the mid-20th century⁴⁷⁰ to address the issue. 'Dzam yag was certainly aware of the correct location of ancient Kuśinagar, since he visited the site during the second of his recorded pilgrimages, and rightly identifies it as the place of Buddha's *parinirvāṇa* (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 149). Nevertheless, the spiritual magnetism wielded by Hājo on Khams pa pilgrims continued unaffected during the modern period of Buddhist revival in India, and as late as the mid-1940s pilgrims from eastern Tibet used to complete their pilgrimage of the holy land by heading directly to Assam (Huber, 2008: 154).

From Hājo, 'Dzam yag and his companions moved to Guwahati (Tib. *gho ha ti*), where they visited the Śaivaite complex of the Umānanda Temple; according to the trader's notes, the small shrine, located on the homonymous island, was built on the ruins of one of Ānanda's meditation centres. The author continues to report what appears to be a fictional reconstruction of a

⁴⁷⁰ In his *Guide to India*, dGe 'dun chos 'phel provides the pilgrims with clear instructions on how to reach Māthākuwar (Huber, 2000: 43, 61).

Buddhist history of the place by conflating Tibetan and local elements. The island is described as the residence of the Bodhisattva Ape (Tib. *spre'u byang chub sems dpa'*), a mythical monkey, which was the object of the pilgrims' visit. To the best of my knowledge, there is no additional evidence supporting the identification of the Umānanda Temple as either a place sacred to both Buddhist and non-Buddhist or the abode of a Bodhisattva Ape; the translation of the passage concerning the island and the legend of the *spre'u byang chub sems dpa'* must therefore suffice as testimony to the existence of such a narrative.

In the morning, after buying from the market pure offering candles and fruits to offer to the Bodhisattva Ape, we took again a small boat and paid the fares. We went to the river island, at the centre of which, [among] various kinds of rocks, hills, grass, and trees there was a place where the close disciple [of the Buddha] Ānanda used to stay. Nowadays, on the ruins of the destroyed shrine, another temple has been built, [sacred to] all kinds of [religious] traditions, Buddhist and non-Buddhist alike. Since in the past it used to be Ānanda's meditation centre, we did prostrations, circumambulations, and offered prayers, incense, and butter lamps. Once upon a time, at the base of a bodhi tree, there were two monkeys – a white one and a black one – which were one thousand year old, but the old white one had died. The one thousand year old black monkey with white eye-lashes had

climbed to the top of the tree and we offered [it] a fruit, but, since it did not climb down, after handing over the fruit and the other offerings to the caretaker, we prayed, before going back to Guwahati on board of a small boat.⁴⁷¹

The third of the recorded pilgrimages, concluded on the 2nd month of the Iron Tiger Year (March 1950), was characterised by a peculiar choice of destinations. As described above, 'Dzam yag and his companions limited their travelling to the northeastern regions of India, visiting obsolete Tibetan sacred places⁴⁷² and clearly distancing themselves from the pan-Buddhist "mainstream" pilgrimage itineraries.

3. Closing the Circle

⁴⁷¹ *nangs pa tshong 'dus nas mchod pa 'bul rgyur yang la gtsang ma dang spre'u byang chub sems dpa' la 'bul rgyu shing thog nyos nas / slar yang gru chung de la gla brngan sprad de song chu bo de'i gling bar brag dang ri 'bur la rtsi shing sna tshogs skyes pa'i dbus su nye gnas kun dga' bo bzhugs pa'i gnas / deng sang lha khang nyam chag song ba'i shul la / lha khang zhig gsar bzhengs 'dug pa de phyi nang gi lugs yin cha ma chod [*cho] kyang / sngon kun dga' bo bzhugs pa'i sgrub gnas yin pas phyag bskor dang smon lam spos mar me yis mchod / sngon dus ljon shing de'i khron na spre'u dkar nag zung lo stong lon pa zhig yod kyang spre'l rgan dkar po grongs tshar 'dug / spre'u nag po rdzi ma dkar po can bgrang bya lo stong lon pa zhig shing gi rtse la yod pa de la shing thog gi mchod pa byas kyang 'ong ba mi 'dug pas shing thog dang bza' bca' rnam dkar gnyer gyi phyag tu bzhag nas gsol ba smon lam gyi ngang nas gru chung la zhugs nas gho ha Ti la phyin (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 188).*

⁴⁷² In addition to Hājo and the Umānanda Temple, 'Dzam yag and his companions visited the shrine dedicated to the 13th Dalai Lama's protective deities at Darjeeling (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 189).

'Dzam yag returned to central Tibet in the Iron Tiger Year (1950); he would set foot in India nine years later, no longer as a pilgrim but as an asylum seeker, fleeing the PLA troops. He died in Buxal, West Bengal in 1961; his story is marked by a double estrangement, from his *pha yul* first and his country later. He returned to gZhis ka rtse a few years before his appointment as *gtsong dpon* for the Ngor chen, an event that radically changed his approach to life, as I have attempted to explain in the present chapter.

Between 1944 and 1951, 'Dzam yag's spiritual quest had a distinctive "mundane" aspect; the nature of his pilgrimage was mainly coincidental to trade ventures, his focus being on the performance of rituals with the intent of cleansing his *karma*, thus improving his social and financial situation. On the contrary, during the 1952-1959 period, 'Dzam yag's religious life assumed a "soteriological" character; less and less involved in business transactions, the trader, who by 1947 had taken residence in gZhis ka rtse, mostly exerted himself in ritual activities at the monastic establishments of bKra shis lhun po and Ngor E wam chos ldan.

Transitional between these two different phases of 'Dzam yag's life, the journeys to India and Nepal have a liminal character, marking a shift of *locus* and perspective. As any autobiographical narrative, the *nyin deb* too presents different personas – the figure of 'Dzam yag changing according to the mask he decides to don, simultaneously poor beggar, pious hermit, clever trader, wealthy sponsor, and curious tourist.

CONCLUSION

Despite claims to factuality, any autobiographical writing is inevitably constructive – in telling his or her own retrospective story, the author is, for all intents and purposes, creating a form of textual “self-fashioning”, thus projecting, whether consciously or unconsciously, an idealised version of her- or himself within a given historical, social, and cultural framework. The distinction between “narrating self” and “narrated self” becomes therefore an essential *caveat* in the discussion of autodiegetic texts; the dual structural core of the first-person narrator reflects the difficulties of balancing the autobiographical circular narrative, for the *hic et nunc*, *i.e.* the present, is both the end and the condition of its narration. In recollecting the past, the “narrating self” struggles between truthfulness and self-deception, factual accounting and self-conscious fictionalising, while trying at the same time to accommodate the system of values, norms, worldviews, and collective visions shaping the society they are part of.

At the core of life writing there is, as 'Dzam yag himself remarks at the very beginning of his journal, the desire to remember and preserve memories and impressions, and I have cited his statement in the Introduction as an inspiration for the present dissertation, for it is his recollection, or rather, his *reinterpretation* of the events he experienced between 1944 and 1956 that provides the *fil rouge* holding together the various chapters of this thesis.

In being culturally specific and subject to historical change, any autobiographical writing is a form of social action that makes sense of a personal experience in terms of general relevance; the value of the *nyin deb* lies therefore in its author's efforts to accommodate the story of a unique, individualised narrating subject into a culturally and socially accepted mold, whilst preserving the claim to referential truthfulness.

Concluding my discussion on the figure of Kha stag 'Dzam yag and his travel account, I will recall the two methodological approaches I have attempted to combine throughout the present dissertation, *i.e.* narratology and the socio-economic perspective. Whereas narratology allows the sensitivity and

uniqueness of the author's voice to be heard, thus acknowledging his attempts to reconcile the idiosyncratic inconsistencies inherent in his double nature as trader and pilgrim, the socio-economic approach answers the scholar's thirst for an "objective" knowledge, based on facts and numbers, that allows quantifying – so to speak – the power dynamics on both a local, *e.g.* 'Dzam yag *vs* the local ruler of Rab shis, and national level, *e.g.* the Khams pa trading communities *vs* the dGa' ldan pho brang government.

1. The *Nyin deb* from a Narratological Point of View: "Turning Points" in the Narrative

In Chapter One I have discussed the importance of "turning points" and the function and features they assume in the 'Dzam yag's narrative, *i.e.* the identification of and adherence to a socially and culturally acceptable storyline. For this particular interpretation, I have identified three major "turning points", each exemplifying the struggle to reconcile the conflicting models of behaviour and self-representation embedded in a typically Tibetan setting. These dynamic tensions, emerging in the *nyin deb* as idiosyncratic combinations of different

and opposite identities and social functions, *e.g. gnas skor ba* vs *tshong dpon*, are eventually resolved in the author's shifting of perspective following his appointment as *tshong dpon*.

First "Turning Point": "I have been thrown as a new beggar into the world"

At a first glance, the *nyin deb* yields little if any information of its author's life prior to the dramatic events of 1940; the account starts with 'Dzam yag's decision to leave his ancestral land and set off on a pilgrimage with no fixed direction. The opening statement – the same I have cited in the Introduction and taken as an inspiration for the construction of my argument – offers however a glimpse on a rather complex personality, who had had a life rich in experiences of various sorts. Enrolled as child in the local monastic community of Klung gdon, 'Dzam yag struggled to reconcile his natural inclinations to the expectations of his social environment. Mass monasticism was encouraged in traditional Tibetan society, especially among the nomadic and seminomadic communities of eastern Tibet, and it was not unusual for the last born son to take the monastic robe; nevertheless, the author of the *nyin deb* preferred the

worldly ways of his forefathers to a life spent within the walls of the dGe lugs establishment. He actively engaged in herding and trading, thus earning considerable wealth and consequently the respect of the community. The 1940 trial and the consequent confiscations and social estrangement destroyed in a few months what had been built over a lifetime – in the plea he entrusted to bSod nams lha rgyal in 1945, 'Dzam yag directly addressed his former lord, calling in vain for the maintenance and respect of cross-generational bonds of trust. As discussed at length in Chapter Two, faced with a concrete threat of retaliation, the dispossessed trader eventually renounced his claims to reinstatement and fully embraced his condition of *phyogs med gnas skor ba*, finding in the archetypical figure of the wandering pilgrim Mi la ras pa a socially and culturally acceptable concept of “personhood” to which he could conform.

Second “Turning Point”: “Just like in the past Mi la ras pa”

As seen in Chapter Four, in a short poem dated 1945 'Dzam yag compares his misfortunes to those endured by Mi la ras pa; just as the great saint was betrayed by the people he trusted the most, the trader too was forced to

abandon his properties, leaving the safety of his *pha yul* for a life of wandering.

The second “turning point” in the *nyin deb* narrative has therefore to be sought

in the author’s final acceptance of the impossibility of returning to Rab shis; by

taking the figure of Mi la ras pa as his “ideological I”, the trader embarks on a

journey that is both physical and spiritual. Albeit initially directed at the

improvement of his own personal situation, 'Dzam yag's merit-making

enterprise grew to embrace all beings, to whose sake he dedicated most of his

last ritual activities. In Chapter Two I have outlined the history of the kingdom of

Nang chen – of which Rab shis was a territorial division – focusing in particular

on the emergence of a distinctive *ris med* approach at the end of the 19th

century, under the reign of dKon mchog lha rgyal, whose court hosted Sa skya,

dGe lugs, bKa' brgyud, and rNying ma masters. The diffusion of hermitages

and the presence of hermitic networks connecting monastic communities

throughout the kingdom undoubtedly facilitated the revivalist and reformist

activities of the 19th and 20th centuries *ris med* practitioners in their effort to

revive meditation practices and philosophical tenets on the verge of extinction.

The figure of the great yogin-saint became the epitome of any hermit's goal, *i.e.*

liberation and enlightenment “in this body and life-time” (Tib. *tshe gcig lus gcig*); between 1945 and 1952, 'Dzam yag dedicated himself to the practice of circumambulations and visits to sacred places, striving to cleanse his *karma* and accumulate merit. In spite of the constant referral to Mi la ras pa's narrative, the *nyin deb* reveals the image of a man much involved in worldly matters – most of his “pilgrimages” were in fact the collateral outcome of business ventures. It is worth noticing once again the constructive process behind the “narrated self”, which appears to be, to all intents and purposes, a creation of the retrospective reflection of the “narrating self”. As in any autobiographical narrative, there is in the *nyin deb* a desire to resolve ambiguity, to give a sense to one's own life – the text being a testimony to the author's spiritual growth.

The appeasing effect of the second “turning point”, *i.e.* 'Dzam yag's self-identification with Mi la ras pa, did not, however, have a long-lasting effect; despite his best intentions, the trader struggled to adhere to the detached, otherworldly attitude traditionally expected from hermits. As discussed in

Chapters Three and Four, most of the religious activities performed by 'Dzam yag between 1944 and 1952 sought a mundane result – good health, financial security, or social stability. Although described in the *nyin deb* as “pilgrimages”, 'Dzam yag's visits to the sacred places of the plateau were *de facto* incidental to planned business trips, and, as such, subject to strict schedules and predetermined itineraries. During the nine-year period, the trader travelled extensively inside and outside the plateau, reviving connections with representatives of the highest strata of Tibetan society and thus gaining acceptance and respect within the close-knit Khams pa trading communities of central Tibet.

Third “Turning Point”: 'Dzam yag as *tshong dpon*

The Water Dragon year (1952) marks the end of the author's incapacity to reconcile material and mundane needs with soteriological and spiritual desires; the inner split caused by the forced coexistence of conflicting behavioural models, *i.e.* “wandering pilgrim” *vs* trader, is finally overcome. At the end of a five-month stay at the Sa skya establishment of Ngor E wam chos ldan, 'Dzam

yag is a different man; by active participation in the oral transmission of the *lam 'bras* system by the 65th Ngor chen himself, the trader – according to his own self-understanding and -representation – realises the fundamental unity of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*. The qualities of a *buddha*, already present in any human being, can only be obtained through the removal of obscurations and the transformation of one's body, speech, and mind. Less and less interested in mundane gain, 'Dzam yag shifts his concerns towards the afterlife and the accumulation of merit for the sake of all beings through the performance of specific ritual activities, *i.e.* circumambulations, prostrations, and offerings to support the *saṅgha*.

Albeit an important step on the path to spiritual growth of the “narrated self”, 'Dzam yag's internalisation of the core meaning of the *lam 'bras* system does not represent *per se* a “turning point” in the narrative. On the contrary, the key factors leading to a crucial change in the narrative flux, *i.e.* his appointment as trade agent for the Khang gсар *bla brang*, should be sought in his attendance and active involvement in the empowerments and ritual sessions performed at

Ngor E wam. At the time of his stay at the Sa skya establishment, the author often joined his *dharma* companion Rin chen rdo rje – a *tshong dpon* from Tre hor – in conspicuous offerings to both the monastic community and the masters bestowing the empowerments. By promoting his image as a devout sponsor, affiliated with influential people such as Rin chen and the Sa 'du tshang, of whom he was a guest, 'Dzam yag certainly attracted the attention of the Khang gsar's treasurer. Paradoxically, his spiritual and soteriological interests furthered his worldly recognition and success, in a merging of religious and economic elements that are at the core of the socio-economic approach I have used to present the *nyin deb* as a factual account, worthy of being considered a valid source of historical information.

2. “True words explaining the actions, the words, the objects, etc. as they

really were”: The Fine Line between Facts and Fiction

I have so far identified the outcome of an analysis employing narratology as a heuristic device, based on the assumption that, as any autobiographical narrative, the *nyin deb* is by its very nature partially constructive and

imaginative. In the second part of my concluding remarks, I will present the results of the above socio-economic study of 'Dzam yag's journal that validates its author's claims to factuality.

Recent studies in the literary field have marked the emergence of a hybrid form of autobiographical writing, in which the factual and the fictional merge, mix, and intertwine. Facts are constantly subject to manipulation through processes of narrativisation, selection, expansion, and omission that contribute to the coming into play of fiction. It would be a mistake though to dismiss the non-fictional, historical value of the *nyin deb*; whereas it is true that 'Dzam yag's journal can and should be considered in the light of its being a narrative text, the information it contains has a degree of verifiability making it valuable to any scholar of Tibetan social history. The presence of unavoidable manipulations of facts by no means implies that the facts themselves are false or that all the testimonies about the past are to be discarded; on the contrary, as I have highlighted in Chapter Two and Chapter Three, peculiarities of the socio-cultural and economic environment 'Dzam yag operated in transpire through

the narrative, enhancing the scholar's comprehension of such a historically pregnant period for Asia in general, and Tibet in particular.

By the mid-20th century, the economy of Tibet was in the hands of a few, extremely influential Khams pa trading families, *e.g.* sPang mda' tshang, Sa 'du tshang, and A 'brug tshang; by controlling the trade routes and the market of the most sought-after items, these firms had ensured a tight grip on the policies of the dGa' ldan pho brang, some of their members even being enlisted into government service, *e.g.* Nyi ma rgyal mtshan sPang mda' tshang and Rin chen Sa 'du tshang. Although 'Dzam yag does not discuss politics, the *nyin deb* contains information regarding important events of the time, such as the offering of the golden throne to the 14th Dalai Lama by the eastern Tibetan trading communities in 1957, a gesture the heavily political significance of which the author seemed genuinely unaware.

Another feature worthy of consideration is the role that the non-sectarian approach had as a trade facilitator. Albeit pursuing mainly spiritual goals, the activities of the *ris med* masters did not exclude hints of a political agenda, as

they fostered eastern Tibetan cultural values, as well as the creation of a sense of a Khams pa identity that became embedded in the trading communities scattered throughout the plateau. By embracing a non-sectarian view, the traders were allowed a discrete space for manoeuvring in their relationships with the different traditions of Tibetan Buddhism, as emblematically shown by Nyi rgyal sPang mda' tshang's rise to fortune. Albeit related by blood to the Sa skya 'Khon family, the head of the sPang mda' in fact promoted himself, and consequently his family, as a major sponsor of the dGe lugs tradition by making substantial donations to their three major seats of central Tibet, *i.e.* dGa' Idan, 'Bras spungs, and Se ra. Through his careful choice of sponsoring, Nyi rgyal *de facto* enhanced his chances to be hired as a monastic trade agent and to be noticed by the Dalai Lama's entourage. 'Dzam yag's tendency to favour a non-sectarian approach is evident throughout the narrative – even after his appointment as Khang gsar *tshong dpon*, he continued to financially support different monastic communities, regardless of their affiliation, taking pride in distinguishing himself from his *dharma* companions. A similar attitude

was shared by his business associate Rin chen rdo rje, a chief-merchant from Tre hor and possibly another agent of the Sa 'du tshang family.

Whereas it would be inaccurate to hastily ascribe 'Dzam yag's non-sectarian attitude to mere cynicism and pragmatism, too often the influence *ris med* values wielded in facilitating the rise – both politically and economically – of Khams pa trading firms in the late 19th and 20th centuries has been, in my opinion, underestimated. Scholars agree in acknowledging the religious aspect of the revivalist and reformist non-sectarian approach as developed from the mid-19th century in Khams, but the socio-economic impact of the *ris med* movement on the contemporary Tibetan environment has rarely been considered. My dissertation provides just one example of the intertwining of economics and religion in Tibet during the first half of the 20th century, offering a glimpse of the inner dynamics of the Khams pa trading communities, concurrently shedding light on the non-sectarian attitude of their main representatives, *i.e.* the *tshong dpon*.

Donations and offerings to monastic establishments and individual masters are a well-known part of Tibetan culture, and for most Tibetans they were one of their main expenditures, made for one's own, as well as all beings', sake. Albeit aware of the socio-economic importance of donations, most researchers have limited their attention to the receiving side of the donation, and to the teachings and rituals bestowed in exchange for the offering. The *nyin deb*, on the other hand, presents the real, financial worth of the offering-making activity, a process of mutual exchange essential to the subsistence of Tibetan mass monasticism. I have mentioned in Chapter One the dual nature of the *nyin deb*, *i.e.* its being both a private and a general journal, and it is in its nature of being a ledger that the scholar finds the most interesting data for a study of the economic life and standard of living in mid-20th century Tibet, especially in consideration of the incremental growth 'Dzam yag's finances underwent throughout the thirteen-year period covered by his journal.

In discussing the value of *nyin deb* as a source of factual information, there is yet another factor that has to be accounted for, *i.e.* the emergence in the 20th

century of pilgrimage as an experience of tourism. As explained in Chapter Four, the propagandistic activities of modern pan-Buddhist societies, together with the re-opening of ancient sites of Indian Buddhism, contributed to revitalising the concept of India as a “holy land” among Tibetan pilgrims, for most of whom a journey to the Middle Ganges region represented the first encounter with modernity; trains, motorcars, and boats were wonders to be thoroughly enjoyed and appreciated. Leisure appears to be a crucial component to the development of forms of spiritual tourism; the 19th and 20th centuries marked, in their own way, a “leisure revolution” in global terms, for leisure is part of the process of modernisation and one of its social and cultural consequences.

The emergence of a modern pilgrimage industry in India, created and fostered by pan-Buddhist movements like the Maha Bodhi Society, routinized the ritual activity; the railway system added comfort and convenience, thus turning the experience of pilgrimage into a growing commercialisation of leisure. The ease with which Tibetan pilgrims adopted modern means of transport marked the

emergence of a change in ritual behaviour; the traditional modes of walking to the holy places – a strenuous engagement of the body understood as a “cleansing” of the moral defilements hindering the path to enlightenment – was gradually replaced by a more pragmatic approach to the pilgrimage as ritual activity. The *nyin deb* confirms this trend, recording the author and his companions continuously hopping on and off carriages, motorcars, and boats, always concerned about missing a connection or getting stranded in a forsaken place.

Leisure is, by its very nature, associated with a certain degree of pecuniary strength; in order to enjoy the pleasures of life, one needs to be free of immediate concerns. As a member of the elite commoners, the author of the *nyin deb* had the necessary resources to finance his leisure activities, taking time off from the menial tasks of trade and business. Nevertheless, in order to gain and hold the esteem of his peers it was not sufficient for 'Dzam yag to merely possess wealth, for the latter has to be displayed in a way sanctioned by tradition. From a Buddhist perspective, the accumulation of wealth, albeit not

negative in itself, has the potential of becoming a source of attachment, thus creating fear and greed; in order to dispel its potential amorality, wealth should be used to support the monastic community, perceived as a “field of merit” for its capacity to turn material offerings into spiritual merit for all beings.

Interestingly, it is upon this inextricable connection between religion and economics that Khams pa traders were able to build their socio-political power.

The interests of dGa’ ldan pho brang, as well as those of entire networks of monastic communities spread throughout the plateau, relied on the activities of the largest trading firms’ agents. By the early decades of the 20th century, the eastern Tibetan traders had started to use their economic weight as a political leverage, and the Khams pa and A mdo ba communities of central Tibet began to develop a sense of national proto-identity, based on shared values, those promulgated by the revivalist and reformist *ris med* movement being among them.

In my conclusive remarks, I have identified the issues resulting from the close connection between life, narration, and identity. Whereas the *nyin deb*, as any

autobiographical narrative, presents features of fiction, due to the retrospective approach adopted by the “narrating self” in the attempt to make sense of his own life in terms acceptable to the socio-cultural and traditional environment he was embedded in, the claims to factuality, far from being dismissible, provide the scholar with valuable information and insights on trade, travel, transportation, and socio-religious activities in 1940s-1950s Tibet. It is said that history is made of personal stories, and Dzam yag’s is certainly one of them. The emic perspective provided by his journal is unique; trader and pilgrim, Khams pa and Tibetan, sponsor and protégée, the text offers the scholar of pre-modern Tibetan history an array of different points of view on events otherwise known only through the conventional indigenous historiographical writing.

APPENDIX I

TABLE A

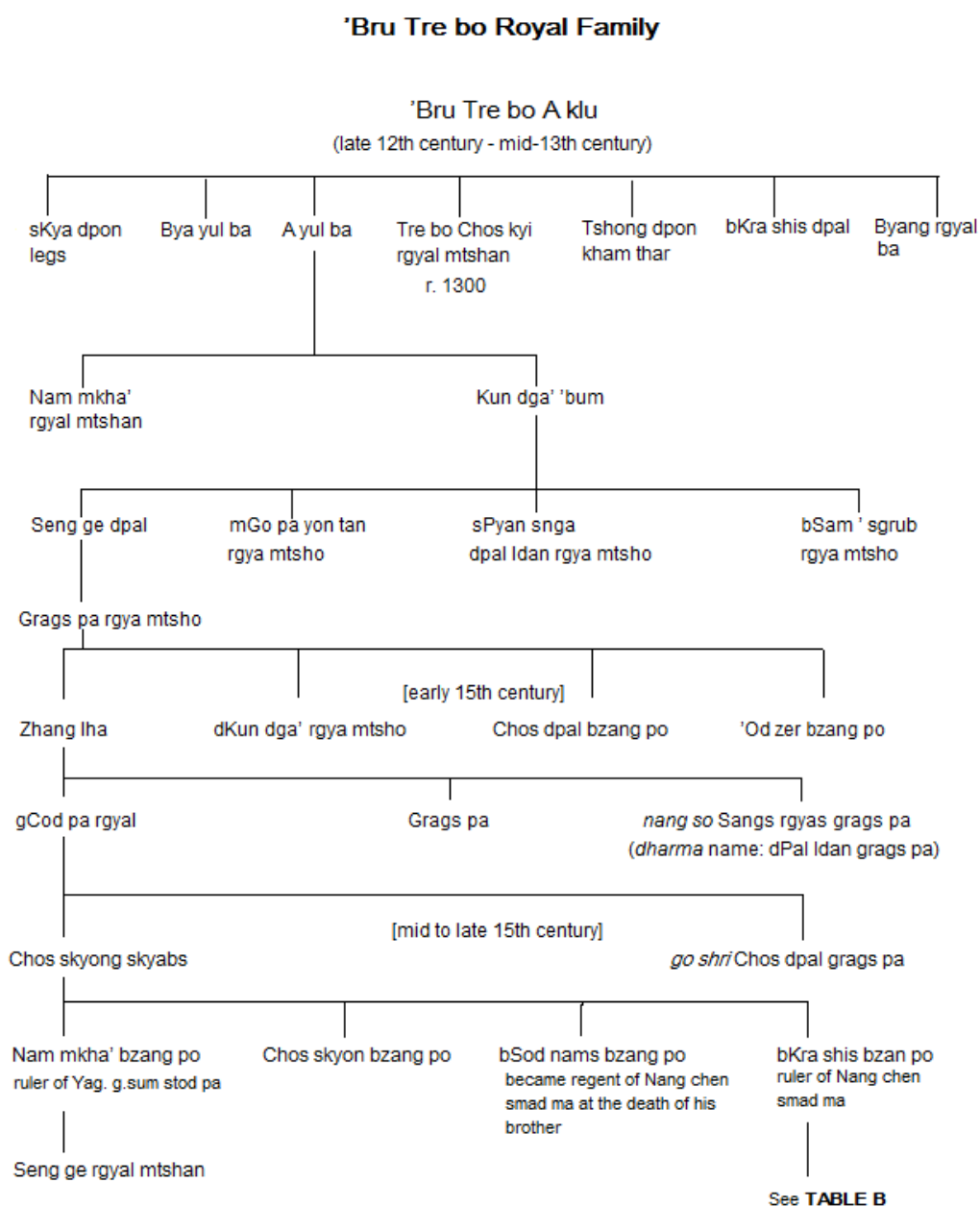
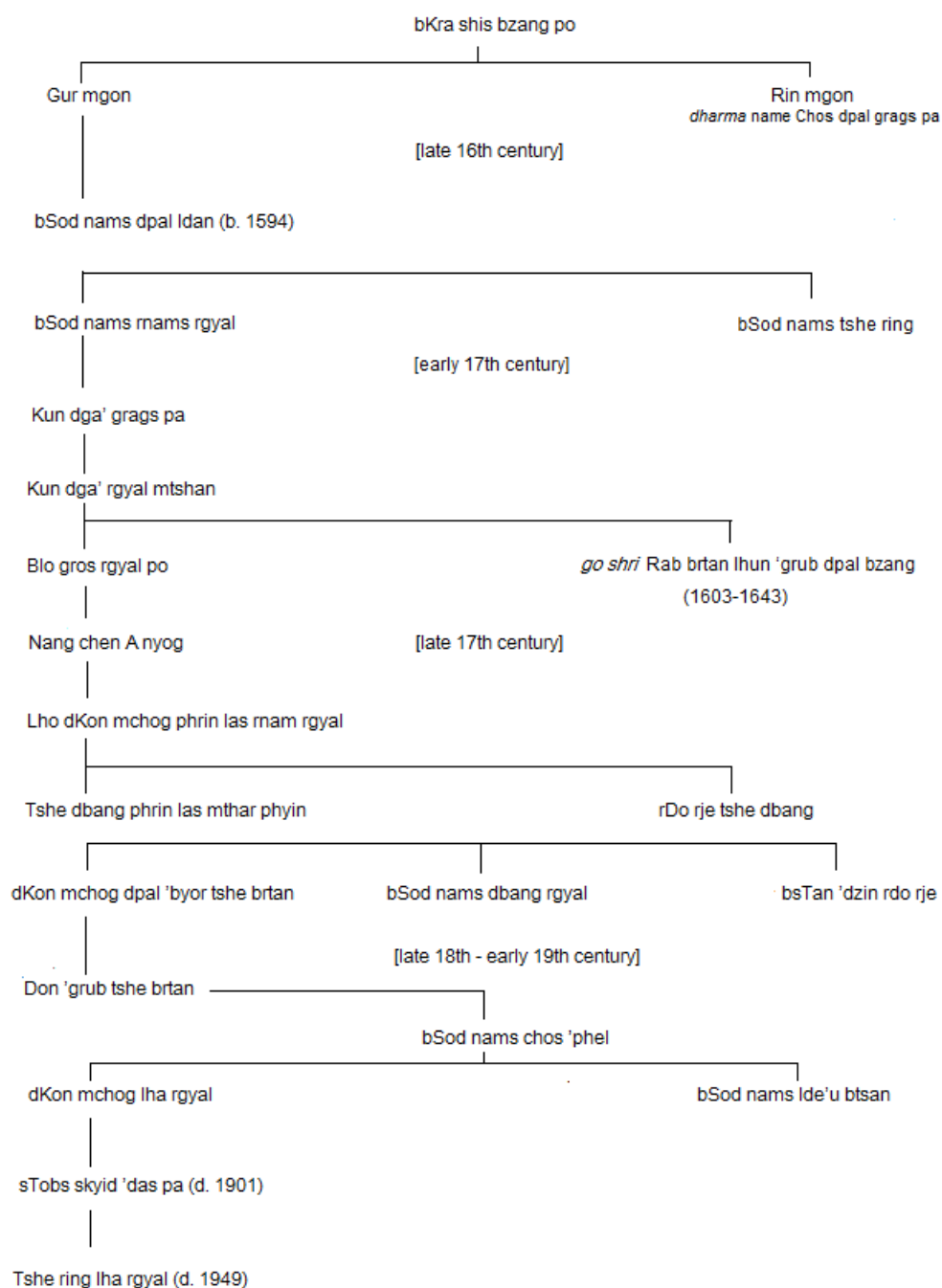


TABLE B



APPENDIX II

Currency of Tibet

1. Brief Historical Survey

As late as the 17th century, Tibet had no currency. Trade was carried out either on a barter basis – a type of transaction characteristic of low economic standards (Boulnois, 2003: 136) – or through ingots of silver and gold. Whereas some coins of countries bordering Tibet found their way into the plateau, their use and circulation was limited to the commercial hubs of eastern and central Tibet.

Between the 1640s and 1792, the coinage circulating in Tibet was mainly constituted by silver *mohar*,⁴⁷³ minted by the Newari kingdoms of Kathmandu, Pāṭan, and Bhaktapur (Bertsch, 2002: 1). The privilege of striking silver coins for Tibet was first granted to the king Bhima Malla, who, after leading a

⁴⁷³ The *mohar* was the currency of the Newari kingdoms of the Kathmandu valley, in use from the 16th century until 1932. The first coins to be struck by the Malla dynasty (between 1545 and 1639) – the *ṭam ga* – had a weight of about 10 grams. In 1640, a major currency reform decreased the weight standard of the silver coins to 5.4 grams; the new minted coins became known as *mohar* (Rhodes et al., 1989:56). The Nepalese *mohar* circulated at a value of 15 *skar ma* in Tibet; small change was provided by cutting the coins in fractions of $\frac{2}{3}$, $\frac{1}{2}$, and $\frac{1}{3}$ *mohar*, equivalent to 10, 7 $\frac{1}{2}$, and 5 *skar ma* (Rhodes et al., 1989: 207).

successful campaign into Tibet, managed to negotiate a treaty. Kathmandu obtained a right of minting coins for Tibet; it was agreed that these coins would circulate only within the plateau and Tibet would either provide the silver required for the minting or would pay for Nepali coins with gold (Rhodes et al., 1989: 72). The minting process proved to be extremely profitable for the Newari kingdoms, as William Kirkpatrick (1811: 211-212) noted in his accounts,

[...] all the silver brought into Nepaul from Tibet, in the way of commerce, must be carried to the mint at Kathmandu, no silver bullion being allowed to pass into Hindostan. In exchange for his bullion the merchant receives Nepaul rupees, the Government deriving a profit of twelve percent from the transaction, four percent being charged on account of the coinage and eight arising from the alloy of the rupee.

With respect to gold, it has usually been a monopoly in the hands of the Government, who obliged the traders from Tibet to sell it at the mint at the rate of eight rupees per tolah.

The conquest of the Kathmandu valley by the Gurkha in 1769 marked the end of a long-lasting agreement. The *mohar* especially struck for the Tibetan market⁴⁷⁴ had become so debased that the new rulers refused to mint fresh

⁴⁷⁴ In 1775, a new coinage agreement was reached between the Shah ruler Pratap Simha and the dGa' ldan pho brang government. Nepal agreed to strike special debased *mohar* in an alloy of two parts silver, one part copper, especially for export to Tibet (Rhodes et al., 1989: 121).

coins for Tibet, unless the circulation of the old base coin on the plateau was stopped, or new exchange rates between the base and the pure coinage were established (Rhodes et al., 1989: 206); the refusal of the Tibetans to oblige was followed by a war between Nepal and Tibet (Walsh, 1973:23-24; Rhodes et al., 1989: 122). Prompted by the need to introduce more coins into the economy, the dGa' ldan pho brang government attempted to cast its own coinage, largely based on the material and type of the Newari coins. A mint was opened in Lhasa in 1791 and a locally made *kong par ṭam ka* began to be struck. The production was stopped two years later and the mint was re-opened only in 1836 (Rhodes et al., 1989: 206). Between 1792 and 1835, the Qing court sponsored the construction and operation of another Lhasa-based mint. The Sino-Tibetan *ṭam ka* bore bilingual inscriptions; Chinese on one side, Tibetan on the other. While the minting of *ṭam ka* was carried out only in the 58th year of the Qianglong rule, silver *zho* weighing about 3.7 grams were struck in the Qianglong, Jiaqing, and Daoguang eras. No more Sino-Tibetan coins were minted after the 16th year of the Daoguang period (1836) (Bertsch, 2002:1).

In 1836 the Tibetan government resumed the project of self-minted coinage which had been abandoned in 1794; the *kong par ṭam ka*, as the coins were known since their first appearance in 1792, presented a design strongly inspired by the Newari *mohar* and left unchanged for decades. Each *ṭam ka* has a date struck on one of its sides, conventionally marking the year in which it was minted.⁴⁷⁵ In many cases though, the same year appears on coins struck at different times, an occurrence known in numismatics as “frozen date”, therefore making futile any attempt to present a chronological analysis of the minting production. The so-called *dga' ldan ṭam ka*, a silver coin weighing about 5.3 grams, was the most commonly produced *kong par ṭam ka* from 1850 up until 1948. Thirteen major varieties in design have been so far catalogued, with thirty-seven minor ones, a number that might possibly rise to fifty or more. The tail-side of the coins shows the eight auspicious signs (Skt. *aṣṭamaṅgala*; Tib. *bkra shis rtags brgyad*), usually arrayed around a lotus. Their order and design varied over time. The two sides of the coin present the same orientation, the

⁴⁷⁵ Five different sets of dates have been so far identified. Each date is divided into two numbers: the first one indicates the *rab byung*, the second one the year within the cycle: 13- 45 (1791), 13-46 (1792), 13-47 (1793), 15-24 (1890), and 15-25 (1891) (Bertsch, 2002: 8).

tail-side bearing the inscription *dga' ldan pho brang phyogs las rnam rgyal*

("The dGa' ldan pho brang victorious in all directions"); the characters of the legend, derived from an earlier style, perfectly fit inside eight circles (Bertsch, 2002: 1).

From 1850, the Indian rupee gained great favour among the Tibetan traders, up to the point of being the only currency to be used in eastern Tibet; between 1903 and 1911, the Chinese government endeavoured to reduce the economic predominance of the Indian rupee by issuing a coin struck in Sichuan, *i.e.* the Sichuan rupee, which gained some degree of popularity among the traders active on the Sino-Tibetan border. For a few months, between 1910 and 1911, the Chinese currency assumed predominance in central Tibet, due to the fact that the Lhasa mint fell under the Chinese authority and a new type of Sino-Tibetan coinage was introduced (Bertsch, 2002: 1).

The decades between 1912 and 1959 represent the swansong of the Tibetan currency; the dGa' ldan pho brang government, in an attempt to free its economy from the influence exerted by both the Chinese and the Indian

currencies, actively sustained the local production of coins and banknotes. In spite of the fact that the design of the coins was still Newari, and that the printing and minting techniques had been acquired from British India, the new Tibetan money, mainly struck or printed in Lhasa, bore no mention of any foreign authority. The Indian rupee managed to maintain some value among the traders who travelled south to the markets of Kalimpong and India, while the Sichuan rupee gradually lost its appeal and became insignificant by the 1950s. The last coins to be struck under Tibetan authority date to 1954, while the last banknotes of 100 *srang* were issued in 1959; since then, the Chinese Rén mín bì Yuan has become the currency in use in Tibet.

2. Tibetan Coins and Banknotes

Two currency unit systems were in use in Tibet during the time of the production of coins and paper money. The first system, based on the *srang*, was probably introduced from China at the time of the Tibetan Empire; the *srang* is frequently mentioned in *The Blue Annals* as the main unit of account for gold and silver (Roerich, 1976: 112; 927; 1026-1927). Used primarily as a

silver weight from the 13th century onward, the first issue of a *srang* silver coin⁴⁷⁶ occurred only in 1908, with its standard reduced to half of its original weight – from 37 to 18.65 grams; new silver coins with *srang* denomination were issued in 1933, with a value of three *srang* and a weight equal to the Indian rupee, *i.e.* 19.683 grams.⁴⁷⁷ Four years later, the first 100 *ṭam srang* banknotes appeared on the market, and, by that time, the *srang* standard had been further reduced to one third of the Indian rupee (Bertsch, 2002: 3).

Between 1953 and 1954, the issue of a five *srang* coin in the early *dga' ldan ṭam ga* style betrayed a further reduction in the standard of the silver *srang*; the coin was minted in good silver and had a weight of about five grams. According to the value/weight ratio, the standard of the silver *srang* had reached 1/37th of its original weight standard (Bertsch, 2002: 3).

2.1. Tibetan Currency Units as Presented in the *Nyin deb*

⁴⁷⁶ It is worth remembering here that although the coins minted with *srang* denomination were treated as made of 100 percent pure silver, the actual percentage being just above 80 percent (Bertsch, 2002: 3).

⁴⁷⁷ The Indian rupee enjoyed wide circulation in Tibet since its introduction as uniform coin system in British India in 1835. For more information, see Chakravarty (1979).

A brief appendix entitled “Tibetan Currency: Ways of Measuring and Photographs” (Tib. *bod dngul rtsis stangs dang 'dra par*) closes the printed edition of the edited version of the *nyin deb*. As the heading suggests, what follows is a thorough description of the different kinds of Tibetan money in use in the mid-20th century inclusive of photographs of coins and paper money.

Tibetan coins were categorised as *kha gang*, *skar ma*, *skar phyed brgyad*, *ṭam ka*, *zho*, *srang*, *rdo tshad*. As for their value,

2 <i>khang ma</i>	=	1 <i>skar ma</i>
3 <i>khang ma</i>	=	1 <i>skar phyed brgyad</i>
2 <i>skar ma</i>	=	1 <i>zho</i>
3 <i>skar ma</i>	=	1 <i>ṭam ka</i>
2 <i>ṭam ka</i>	=	3 <i>zho</i>
10 <i>zho</i>	=	1 <i>srang</i>
50 <i>srang</i>	=	1 <i>rdo tshad</i>

Coins were minted [from different metals, e.g.] gold *ṭam*, silver *ṭam*, copper *ṭam*, etc. Copper of good quality [was used] for the 1 *kha gang* coin, the *skar phyed brgyad* coin, the 5 *skar* coin, the 1 *zho* coin, the 3 *zho* coin, the 5 *zho* coin etc. Pure [unalloyed] silver [was used for] the *ṭam ka dkar* coin, the 1 *srang* silver coin, the 10 *ṭam srang* silver coin, and there is also a 10 *srang* silver coin alloyed with copper. Pure gold [was used for] the gold *ṭam* [coin]; each of these coins had, at the centre [of] the head-side, all kinds of [auspicious] drawings, e.g. the flaming jewel, the snow lion, the

eight-petal lotus, the eight spoked wheel, the sun and the moon, the lion, the vase decorated with lotuses, etc. The phrase “dGa’ ldan pho brang, victorious in all directions” [was inscribed] around the rim [of the head-side], and, at the centre of the tail-side, there were all kinds of [auspicious] drawings, *e.g.* the blissful jewel, the flaming jewel, the vase decorated with lotuses, etc., and around the rim [of the tail-side] the eight auspicious signs [were inscribed]. The sixty-year cycle (Tib *rab byung*), the year, the value of the *srang*, *zho*, *skar ma*, etc. were [also] impressed [on the coin]. Furthermore, as for the types of paper money made of Tibetan paper, there were notes for the 5 *srang*, the 7 ½ *srang*, the 10 *srang*, the 25 *srang*, and the 100 *srang*.⁴⁷⁸

The different nomenclatures introduced in the above passage were

subdivisions within a complex currency system practically based on *srang* and

ṭam ka. Generally speaking, *dngul srang* and *ṭam srang* were used concurrently

⁴⁷⁸ *bod dngul gyi nram grangs la | kha gang | skar ma | skar phyed brgyad | ṭam ga (*ka) | zho | srang| rdo tshad dang | rtsis stangs ni | kha gang gnyis la skar ma gcig | kha gang gsum la skar phyed brgyad gcig | skar ma gnyis la zho gcig skar ma gsum la ṭam ga (*ka) gcig | ṭam ga (*ka) gnyis la zho gsum | zho bcu la srang gcig | srang lnga bcu la rdo tshad gcig ces 'bod | de nams zangs ṭam | dngul ṭam gser ṭam sogs yod pa'i kha gang | skar phyed brgyad | skar lnga sgor mo | zho gang sgor mo | zho gsum sgor mo | zho lnga sgor mo sogs zangs spus legs | dngul gyi srang gang sgor mo | dngul gyi zho lnga sgor mo | dngul gyi ṭam ga (*ka) dkar po | dngul gyi srang gsum sgor mo | dngul ṭam srang bcu sgor mo sogs dngul lhad med dang | dngul la zangs kyi lhad can srang bcu sgor mo zhig kyang yod | gser ṭam nams gser gtsang ma dang | de nams mdun dkyil la | nor bu me 'bar | gangs ri seng ge can | pad ma 'dab brgyad | 'khor lo rtsibs brgyad | nyi zla | seng ge | bum pa pad mas brgyan pa spgs ri mo ci rigs | mtha' skor dga' ldan pho brang phyogs las nram rgyal zhes dang | rgyab dkyil la nor bu dga' 'khyil | nor bu me 'bar | bum pa pad mas brgyan pa | mtha' skor bkra shis rtags brgyad kyi ri mo ci rigs | rab byung lo dus | srang | zho | skar ma sogs kyi rin tshad bcas 'khod pa | gzhan yang bod shog las bzos pa'i shog dngul rigs la srang lnga'i shog dngul | srang bdun dang phyed ka'i shog dngul | srang bcu'i shog dngul | srang nyer lnga'i shog dngul | srang brgya yi shog dngul bcas kyang yod | / (Kha stag 'Dzam yag, 1997: 261).*

with no difference in value between the two units. Another unit of account mentioned in the appendix is the *rdo tshad* which was equal to 50 *ngul srang*.

The *ṭam*, also spelled *ṭam ka*, *ṭang ka*, or *ṭrang ka*, was first introduced into Tibet from Nepal with a weight of 10.5 grams of silver. In 1640, the Malla dynasty decreased the standard to 5.6 grams, and the new coins, the *mohar*, gained great popularity in Tibet, where they were known as the “Nepalese *ṭam*” (Tib. *bal ṭam*). At the end of the Tibet-Nepal war of 1792, Tibet revoked the minting privilege accorded to Nepal in the 17th century, and *zho* and the *ṭam ka* coins soon became the main currency units used on the plateau. The 1908 *srang*, initially struck in a few specimens, failed to find great diffusion. Due to the high content of silver per coin, the *srang* was considered a safe haven by the wealthiest classes, who hoarded the coins, thus preventing their circulation (Bertsch, 2002: 4). In light of this, 'Dzam yag's prodigality during his visits to the various monastic communities and pilgrimage sites is even more staggering; on numerous occasions the author donated *srang* for ritual services and prayers.

The following table presents the various coin subdivisions according to Bertsch (2002: 4-5).

1 <i>dingul srang</i> (<i>srang gang</i>)	= 10 <i>zho</i>	= 6 <i>ṭam ka</i> + 1 <i>zho</i>
1 <i>zho</i> (<i>zho gang</i>)	= 10 <i>skar</i>	= 4 <i>kha</i>
1 <i>kha</i> (<i>kha gang</i>)	= 2 ½ <i>skar</i>	

When the first Tibetan banknotes were introduced to the market, the *srang* had yet to be firmly established as the main unit of currency; it is therefore not surprising that it was the *ṭam* rather than the *srang* to be chosen as denomination for the paper notes. At the time of their first circulation in 1914, the value of 1 *ṭam* was equivalent to 0.12 US\$.

The following tables, based on Bertsch (2002: 5), show the subdivisions of the *srang* and *ṭam* (Table 1) and the value of the early *ṭam* banknotes expressed in the *srang* system (Table 2).

Table 1

1 <i>ṭam ka</i>	= 1 ½ <i>zho</i>	= 15 <i>skar</i>	= 6 <i>kha</i>
1 <i>srang</i>	= 10 <i>zho</i>	= 100 <i>skar</i>	
1 <i>srang</i>	= 6 ⅔ <i>ṭam ka</i>		
1 <i>ṭam ka</i>	= 0.15 <i>srang</i>		
1 <i>zho gang</i>	= 10 <i>skar</i>	= 4 <i>kha</i>	
½ <i>ṭam ka</i>	= 1 <i>phyed brgyad</i>	= 7 ½ <i>skar</i>	
⅓ <i>ṭam ka</i>	= 1 <i>skar ma lnga</i>	= 5 <i>skar</i>	
⅙ <i>ṭam ka</i>	= 1 <i>kha gang</i>	= 2 ½ <i>skar</i>	
1 <i>kha chag</i>	= 6 <i>kha</i>	12 ½ <i>skar</i>	

Table 2

5 <i>ṭam</i>	= 7 <i>zho</i> + 5 <i>skar</i>	= 7 ½ <i>zho</i>	= ¾ <i>srang</i>
10 <i>ṭam</i>	= 1 <i>srang</i> + 5 <i>zho</i>	= 1 ½ <i>srang</i>	
15 <i>ṭam</i>	= 2 <i>srang</i> + 2 <i>zho</i> + 5 <i>skar</i>	= 2 ¼ <i>srang</i>	
25 <i>ṭam</i>	= 3 <i>srang</i> + 7 <i>zho</i> + 5 <i>skar</i>	= 3 ¾ <i>srang</i>	
50 <i>ṭam</i>	= 7 <i>srang</i> + 5 <i>zho</i>	= 7 ½ <i>srang</i>	

MAPS

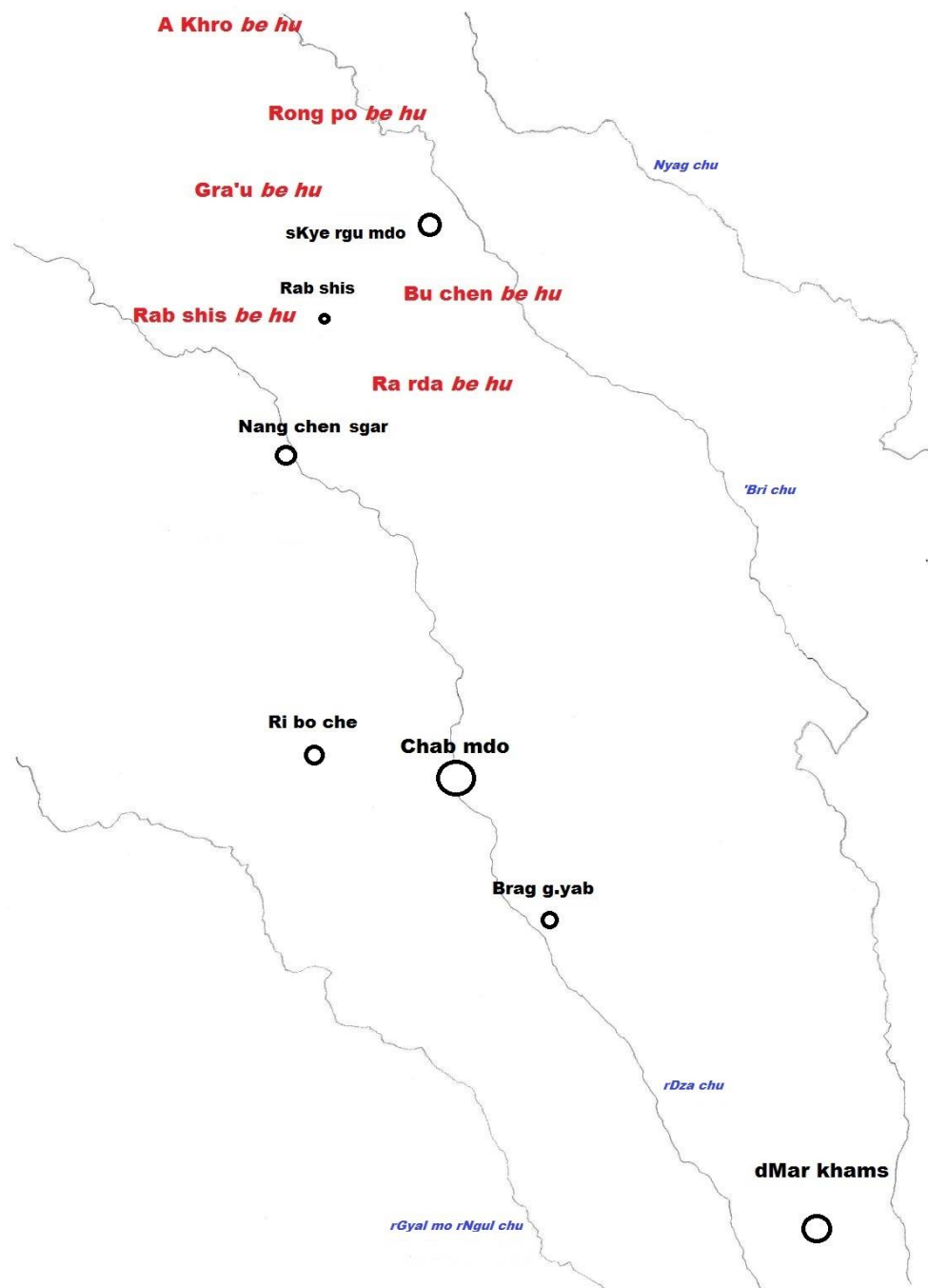


MAP 1. Tibetan Plateau. Source stepmap.com (approximate locations drawn

by Lucia M.S. Galli)



MAP 2. Eastern Tibetan plateau. Source stepmap.com (approximate locations drawn by Lucia M.S. Galli)



MAP 3. The six *be hu* household surrounding sKye dgu mdo, Nang chen

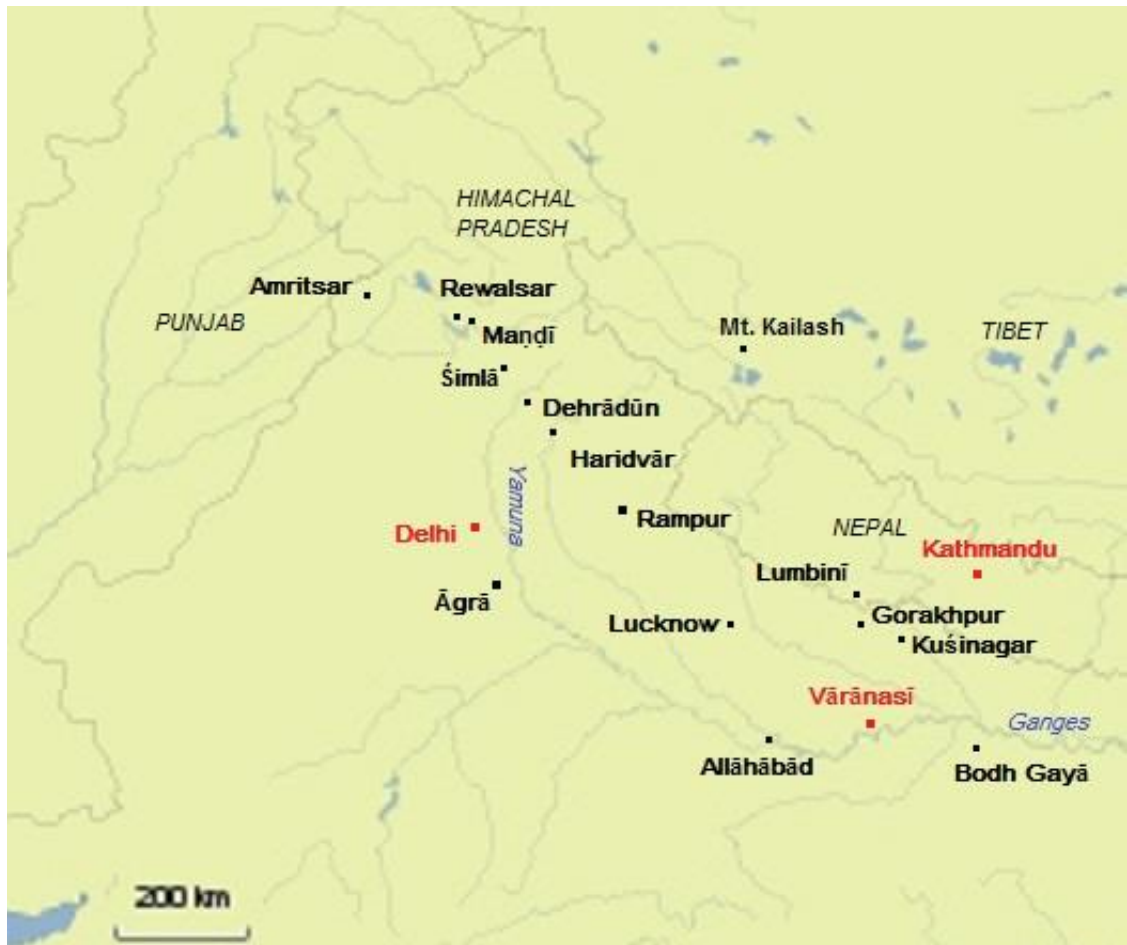
Kingdom. Source Ryavec (2015: 157) (approximate locations drawn by Lucia

M.S. Galli)



MAP 4. Northeast India. Source stepmap.com (approximate locations drawn by

Lucia M.S. Galli)



MAP 5. Northwest India. Source stepmap.com (approximate locations drawn by

Lucia M.S. Galli)

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