

Unity and Diversity: Monastic and Non-monastic Traditions in Amdo



Friday, 30th September – Sunday, 2nd October 2011

Convened by Dr. Yangdon Dhondup, Dr. Ulrich Pagel and Professor Geoffrey Samuel



Venue: The Ollivant Room
St. Michael's College
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PROGRAMME

Friday, 30 September 2011

17.00 Registration followed by dinner

Saturday, 1 October 2011

- 09.15 – 09.30** Dr Ulrich Pagel: Welcome and Housekeeping
- 09.30 – 10.20** Professor Geoffrey Samuel *Rebkong in the Multiethnic Context of Amdo: Religion, Language, Ethnicity, and Identity*
- 10.20 – 10.40** **Tea break**
- 10.40 – 11.30** Professor Charlene Makley *Rebgong's Klu rol and the Politics of Presence: Methodological Considerations*
- 11.30 – 12.20** Dr Colin Millard *Bon Religious Practice in Rebkong*
- 12.20 – 13.20** **Lunch**
- 13.20 – 14.10** Professor Heather Stoddard *A Short Life of Rigzin Palden Tashi (1688-1743) Founder of the '1900 Dagger-Wielding, White-Robed, Long-Haired Yogins of Rebkong' (phur-thog gos- dkar lcang-lo- can) Also Known as the 'Community of the Many Yogins'(sngags mang)*
- 14.10 – 15.00** Dr Yangdon Dhondup *Rebkong's Tantric Practitioners: Origin, History and Development*
- 15.00 – 15.30** **Tea break**
- 15.30 – 16.20** Dr. Nicolas Sihlé *When the officiant becomes the donor: Donor and recipient perspectives on the gift in the context of the Repkong tantrists' major rituals*
- 16.20 – 17.10** Tiina Hyttiainen *Rebkong Ngakmas – The Relationship between their Religious Practices and Local Economics.*
- 17.10 – 18.00** Jane Caple *Narrating monastic revival: stories from Rebgong and Western Bayan*

Sunday, 2 October 2011

- 09.30 – 10.20** Professor Paul Nietupski *The unity of religion and politics: Monastic and nomadic governance in Amdo. The Detri Estate (sde khri nang chen) at Labrang Monastery*
- 10.20 – 10.40** **Tea break**
- 10.40 – 11.30** Dr Hildegard Diemberger *Female Rulers and Female Lamas: Religion and Gender Politics in Early 20th Century Amdo*
- 11.30 – 12.00** Dawn Collins *Dancing the Gods: Modern Transformations of 'Cham in Rebkong*
- 12.00 – 12.30** Closing Discussion
- 12.30** **Lunch**

ABSTRACTS

Geoffrey Samuel (Cardiff University) *Rebkong in the Multiethnic Context of Amdo: Religion, Language, Ethnicity, and Identity.*

Rebkong society can be studied as a patchwork of multiply-differentiated populations (Tibetans of various religious affiliations, Tu and other Mongol-affiliated groups with varying linguistic and cultural heritage, Hui, Han, and so on). Such a perspective can lead to a diffusionist model in which the region presents a kind of residue of real or imagined population movements in the relatively distant past (residues of early Tibetan armies remaining behind in frontier areas, and the like). However, the region's present-day ethnic diversity can also be understood in terms of more recent historical processes driving the creation of ethnic difference. In this perspective, signifiers of connection and of difference, such as common deities worshipped in common by differing populations, or contrasting religious affiliations, may mean both less and more than appears on the surface. In this paper, I make a preliminary attempt to assess the value of these different perspectives, as advanced by a number of recent scholars working in the region, and ask what they can tell us about Rebkong and Amdo as a field within which both monastic and non-monastic varieties of Buddhism and Bon have flourished in recent years.

Charlene Makley (Reed College) *Rebgong's Klu rol and the Politics of Presence: Methodological Considerations*

In this paper, I draw on my fieldwork on the Klu rol festival in Sa dkyid village, and in particular a major conflict in 2006 over the legitimacy of the medium that factionalized the village, to reflect on the methodological implications of research on this valley-wide institution in the context of the massive changes brought with the state-led Great Develop the West campaign. I ask what difference it makes to consider the festival in an irreducibly historical framework versus more prevalent structural-functionalist approaches that consider it as primarily a means for achieving village unity and prosperity. In this light, I argue, we have to develop a pan-regional ethno-history that can account for the politics and ambivalent dialogics of divine presence among Tibetans and their interlocutors in Rebgong.

Colin Millard (Cardiff University) *Bon Religious Practice in Rebkong*

This paper will focus on the Bon religious practice in the Rebkong area. A survey carried out on Bon monasteries in Qinghai in 1996 by the Tibetan scholar Tsering Thar gives 46 Bon villages in Rebkong valley with a total population of around 4368; to this can be added around 4000 nomadic people who are connected with the area and who also follow the Bon

religion. The ritual life of the community is centred around 16 religious institutions: one large monastery called Bongya, and 15 village temples known in Tibetan as *Se khang*. The temples are spread throughout the area. Each village has a ritual connection with both Bongya monastery and the local temple. Ritual is carried out in the 15 Bon village temples by priests known in the area individually as *pon* and collectively as *Bonmang*. They are lay people with families who work as farmers or nomads but who are specialists in Bon Tantric ritual which they carry out individually or collectively in their temples or in villager's houses. The general historical trend in Tibetan culture has been for monastic forms of religious knowledge to dominate and Bongya monastery is the preeminent Bon religious institution in the Rebkong. This paper will consider the ritual role of the Bonmang and Bongya monastery within the Bon community in Rebkong and the extent to which these two institutions work together as one functional unit. That this is the case is demonstrated by the fact that the head of Bongya monastery, the reincarnate lama and renowned scholar Geleg Lhundrub Gyatso, who is generally referred to as Alag Bongya, is also the head of the Rebkong *Bonmang*.

Heather Stoddard (INALCO) *A Short Life of Rigzin Palden Tashi (1688-1743) Founder of the '1900 Dagger-Wielding, White-Robed, Long-Haired Yogins of Rebkong' (phur-thog gos-dkar lcang-lo-can) Also Known as the 'Community of Many Yogins' (sngags-mang)*

Rigzin Palden Tashi was born into the Rlang family in Rebkong, and according to his short autobiography, he took rab byung vows in 1701, before entering Rongwo Gonchen (Thos bsam chos khor gling) to follow basic studies in logic. He does not limit himself to textbooks however, and by the age of 23, he is "pretending" to study philosophy while practicing deity visualisation and receiving initiations. By 1712, "due to obstacles" he begins to practice "powerful rituals" and finds that they suit him quite well. Arriving not long after in Central Tibet, he makes a short pilgrimage and decides that he wants to go straight back home, but friends persuade him to stay, and he enters Gomang College in Drepung, to study for another 4-5 years, attaining recognition as promising young scholar-monk. Then he sets off on pilgrimage around Utsang, murmuring discontent between the lines, and feeling that he just wants to practice and meditate. But once again his fellow monks discourage him, saying it is not a good idea while studying philosophy.

This period coincides with the troubled beginning of the 18th century in Central Tibet. In 1717, the Dzungar Mongols invade Lhasa on the pretext of avenging the death of the 5th Dalai Lama's Regent, Desi Sangye Gyatsho, killed in 1706 by the rival Qoshot Mongols. The awful violence of the attack, the pillaging of Lhasa, the destruction of two major Nyingmapa monasteries, Dorjedrak and Mindroling, and the beheading of several leading Nyingmapa masters, revolts the population and Palden Tashi as well. He falls sick and goes to visit Nechung and Gawadong, the two main oracles of Tibet. They tell him to go to Mindroling, which he does for a short while before fleeing to a remote hermitage in Kham, at Srinmo dzong. Civil war breaks out in Central Tibet, and after quite some journeying to and fro, Palden Tashi decides to return to Rebkong, where in the following year, 1727, he establishes the 1900 Phur-thog gos-dkar lcang-lo-can yogins, and from then on, till just one year before his death, he travels through upper and lower Rebkong and far beyond, giving initiations, transmissions and instructions, re-

establishing the Nyingmapa teachings in the entire region, where they still flourish today. This intense teaching activity comes in the wake of the rapid expansion of the Gelukpa church, as it spreads across Central Asia and into the court of the Manchu emperors in Beijing.

Rigdzin Palden Tashi, as he came to be known; was pursued at key moments in his life by partisan practitioners, and his death in 1742/43 is surrounded by murky circumstances. Yet he remains unbiased in the *ris-med* sense of the term, to the last, as he wrote, “The sky has no colour. If it has how can it be called sky? A yogin has no prejudice, if he has, the how can he be called a yogin?”

Yangdon Dhondup (SOAS) *Reb kong's Tantric Practitioners: Origin, History and Development*

Sources tell us that small scale tantric communities existed in Reb kong as early as the twelfth century. However, Reb kong's tantric community was unified only in the seventeenth century and by the nineteenth century, the community was represented by six small yet renowned monasteries. These monasteries might not have been able to compete in size and stature with their Dge lugs counterparts, but they were nevertheless important places of worship. Founded by some leading figures of the Reb kong tantric community, they provided a site and space for the tantric practitioners to practice their own tradition.

This presentation aims to provide an overview of how Reb kong's tantric community is presented in the traditional literature. I begin by examining the accounts of origin and argue that certain strategies were used by the tantric community to legitimise their tradition. I then look at the six major Rnying ma monasteries and answer the following questions: When did these monasteries emerge? Who were the founding figures? Which tradition did they follow? Who were the members of their community? Next, I explore the structure and organisation of the lay tantric community and the relationship between the Rnying ma monasteries and the lay practitioners. Finally, I analyse the monastic constitution of the different Rnying ma monasteries as well as those of minor tantric communities. I demonstrate that the rules of some of the Rnying ma monasteries are considerably less strict than that of other monasteries elsewhere because of one main reason: its members were predominantly *lay* tantric practitioners. It is precisely this “lay” component that not only explains the difference of rules and monastic duties, but constitutes one of the main elements of their identity. The purpose of this paper is to shed some light on the way the tantric practitioners describe and view their own origin and history.

Nicolas Sihlé (CNRS, France) *When the officiant becomes the donor: Donor and recipient perspectives on the gift in the context of the Repkong tantrists' major rituals*

In Reb-kong, and to some extent in neighboring districts, the Buddhist and Bon-po tantrists (non-monastic tantric ritual specialists, known in Amdo as *dpon* or *sngags-pa*) show some striking features, both from a Tibetan and from a larger, comparative perspective. First and

foremost, one needs to note their sheer demographic mass: in Reb-kong they may number something of the order of 2000 specialists, or between 5 and 10 percent of the adult male population. Tibetan tantrists, as compared to their monastic counterparts, are typically, beyond the local village community, a rather unstructured, non-centralized form of clergy. However, in the Reb-kong context, tantrists appear to be structured also (albeit in not too rigid a way) by their participation in large, supralocal annual ritual gatherings (*chos-thog*) associated with various territorial subunits and partitionings of Reb-kong. In comparative terms, we have here an interesting case of a clergy structured at the supralocal level primarily by territorially based periodic rituals.

The present paper explores one key dimension of these large-scale rituals: the distribution of (in particular monetary) offerings (*'gyed*), from the perspectives, first, of the recipients, and secondly, of the donors. A useful way to contextualize and highlight the importance of such gifts for the (potential) recipients is to examine the wide range of factors that are at play in the decision of individual tantrists to participate or not in a given ritual. The analysis shows that, in fundamental ways, for these householder religious specialists, the question of participation or non-participation in the major religious events of the year is an eminently economic one too (a dimension that tends to receive somewhat short shrift, even in ethnographically based studies of Tibetan religion). For many potential participants, the level of the gift is one key factor.

From the perspective of the donor, a striking feature of some of the Repkong tantrists' annual ritual gatherings is that tantrists themselves are called to become donors, through precisely organized collective modes of designation, vetting or rotation. For rituals with several hundred participants, the expense is enormous. This institutionalized mode of religious giving *by religious specialists* seems to evoke a conflation of lay and specialist roles. One core logic behind this probably lies in the very nature of the religious figure of the tantrist, who in important ways straddles the Tibetan divide between the religious specialist (the man of religion, *chos-pa*) and the lay householder (the man of the transient world, *'jig-rten-pa*).

Tiina Hyytiäinen (University of Helsinki), *Rebkong Ngakmas – The Relationship Between Their Religious Practices and Local Economics.*

This paper is based on my fieldwork in a Tibetan farmer and semi-pastoralist village located in Repkong (*reb gongs*) area. The village women are like most rural Tibetan householders: farming, herding and raising their children. For extra cash income, they collect caterpillar fungus endemic to the Tibetan Plateau. Unlike the average Tibetan householder, however, they observe daily and periodic commitments to tantric Buddhist practices and rituals. Their supervising teacher, Alak (*a lags*), has granted his female disciples (*sngags ma*) at least two of the five Buddhist lay precepts. The most salient one of these vows includes an injunction against killing. Most of their sources of livelihood, however, result in the killing of insects at least. Based on my interviews and observations, I will describe the relationship between religious practices, economic exchange and intra-group cooperation in this area of Amdo. In

addition, I aim to present a typology of the compromises these women need to negotiate in order to maintain their respective goals of financial gain and religious practice.

Jane Caple (University of Leeds) *Narrating monastic revival: stories from Rebgong and Western Bayan*

The speed and extent of the Gelukpa monastic revival has been one of the most extraordinary aspects of the Tibetan Buddhist resurgence in post-Mao China. This paper examines oral and written narratives of the early reform years gathered at monasteries in Rebgong and Western Bayan in 2008-2009. The available literature on the revival has largely been framed in relation to the Chinese state, the shifting public space for religion and culture and the ‘Tibet question’. An exploration of this topic ‘from the ground up’ both thickens our understanding of wider historical processes and also elicits a fresh perspective beyond that of state-monastic interaction.

This paper relates the ‘reopening’ and reconstruction of monasteries in the early 1980s, exploring themes emerging from written and oral recollections of monks and the ‘significant events’ as narrated by them. The story that emerges is not one of negotiation of public space by elites; neither is it tied to the narrative frame of political events and processes that more commonly structure accounts of religious revival in post-Mao China. Rather, it is a story of (sometimes gradual) social re-ordering and the resurgence or reformation of what is conceptualised here as the ‘monastic moral community’, the shared values of which underpin the existence and continuity of Gelukpa monasticism. It is suggested that this reading of the revival provides an important starting point for understanding subsequent monastic development and the serious challenges facing contemporary monks as they try to maintain and develop their institutions in a rapidly changing society. The issue of monastic repopulation is also discussed: although the revival has generally been theorised as a response to the Cultural Revolution and/or an expression of Tibetan identity, the stories of some individuals show that its beginnings are also to be found in a shift from private to public practice, thus illuminating continuities as well as disjunctures with the past. Finally, I briefly explore the evaluative comparisons embedded in my interlocutors’ narratives between the early reform years as a ‘moral past’ and the morally troubled ‘present’, arguing that this is one element in the ‘moral boundary-work’ (Lamont) through which monks have both affirmed the legitimacy of the revival, but also created an ethical space for reforms.

Paul K. Nietupski (John Carroll University) *The unity of religion and politics: Monastic and nomadic governance in Amdo. The Detri Estate (sde khri nang chen) at Labrang Monastery*

The hypothesis of this project is that prior to the dismantling of traditional governing structures in about 1958, there was recognizable and sustainable governance in Amdo. It can be described as acephalous, “headless,” with no central hierarchy, no patrilineal inheritance

of leadership, but rather institutional continuity, and not necessarily even a contiguous territory or uniform structures. Governance of large owned estates was built on or with nomad governance structures, with nomad leaders often under the authority of the monastery offices, a crucial and unifying component of regional governance. Political authority in Amdo, here understood as the relationship between authority figures and people, was in the hands of nomad lords and monastery officials, fueled, as some have argued, by shared ritual and worldview.

Amdo nomad and monastery-owned communities had a system with laws, rulers, and subjects under the authority of an aristocratic and monastic social structure. Owners of property exercised institutionalized rights over both resources and people. Nomad lords and monastic estate owners variously implemented taxes, corvée, and conscription. Lords and lamas enjoyed what has been described as “collective sovereignty.”

Greater Amdo governing offices, both nomadic and monastic included the monastic or nomadic authorities and their inner circles who enforced territorial administrative structures. These were “social relations of obligation,” in which community structures were built on kinship, kinship-like, and non-kin related “ritualized” or “polythetic” family relationships. There were three main political structures: first, the internal monastic officials, in which power shifted between various offices (treasurer, attendant, throne holder, etc) depending on alliances, wealth, and personality; second, the nomadic lords, leaders of *tsowa* (*tsho ba*) and *shokpa* (*shog pa*) groups, their attendants and officers for pasture, water, militia and criminal activity; third, the monastic representatives (*'go ba*), administrators (*sku tshab*), and their officers. Together these three bodies made up the governing infrastructure of the community.

This project proceeds without assuming categories and definitions used for Western democracies, the Manchu imperium, Marxist/materialist or socialist theories. It draws on recent works of Sneath, Scott, Atwood, DiCosmo, Humphrey, Hürelbaatar, Bold, and others. The focus is on key components of Labrang Monastery’s estate governance and the traditional eighteen and later thirty-two estates.

Amdo communities coalesced into quasi-centralized institutions like Labrang, governed like the Mongols by “collections of customary norms” (*törü*). This was a different model of a state redefined in Amdo in a modified version of a “zomia,” with hierarchies, internal structures, and not limited by nomadic mobility.

A key example of such a collection of norms at Labrang was the Detri Estate (*sde khri nang chen*), historically deeply involved with groups in Rebgong. It was established at the founding of Labrang Monastery in 1709 and is a typical example of the thirty-two major institutions. The Detri estate, like all Labrang estates was inherited by lineages of “reborn” lamas, which guaranteed the accumulation of wealth and property. This paper will describe the origins and evolutions of the Detri estate as a case study of Amdo governance.

Hildegard Diemberger (Cambridge University) *Female Rulers and Female Lamas: Religion and Gender Politics in Early 20th Century Amdo*

The area in Qinghai defined in Tibetan as ‘Sogpo’ is what remains of a Mongolian polity that has played a major role in Amdo’s political and religious history for the last three centuries. The rulers of this area, heirs of the 17th century Hoshuud lords of the Kökhnuur, were the founders and patrons of Labrang Tashikyil and were an important local reference for the Qing administration. Political rule was clearly a prerogative of the male members of the ruling family. However, when the Eighth *qinwang* of Henan (Sogpo), Paljor Rabten, died in 1916 he left his young wife Lumantso in a difficult position. Within a brief period of time she had lost not only her husband but also her powerful uncle, the Fourth Jamyang Zheba, head of Labrang monastery. This destabilised the area and made her regency hardly manageable. Lumantso with her two children therefore left the royal residence and took refuge with the female incarnated lama, Gungru Gungtsen of Gengya. This sacred woman, embodiment of a female reincarnation line going back to the 17th century, eventually persuaded her to return to Henan. Soon afterwards Lumantso re-established herself as the de facto ruler of Henan (Sogpo) and reigned as the regent until her son, Kunga Paljor, reached adult age. When he died in 1940, however, she overcame an even bigger challenge because according to the established custom the lack of an heir would have shifted any decision concerning succession to the council of the Mongolian Banners. Lumantso opposed the council: even though her daughter Tashi Tsering as a woman would have been excluded from all ritual practices linked to political rule and would not have been in the position to transmit the ruler’s bones to the next generation, she was enthroned as the legitimate descendant of the *qinwang* lineage. In this paper I explore how this was possible and how a complex interface between religion and politics could be manipulated by skilful women.

Dawn Collins (PhD candidate, Cardiff University) *Dancing the Gods: modern transformations of ’cham in Rebkong*

This paper will explore performative ritual as healing in ’*cham*, drawing upon ethnographic material from Rebkong relating to ’*cham* traditions found in the region. It will examine what the purposes and implications of these ’*cham* may be in relation to purifying and protecting the environment as part of Tibetan notions of healing. It will investigate what roles ’*cham* has traditionally played in Tibetan communities and examine some of their modern transformations in Rebkong, with particular emphasis on the relationship between institutional and popular perceptions of and engagement in its ritual practice. In doing so, it will explore trance in relation to ’*cham*, and how the practice of this in the context of contemporary ’*cham* practices found in Rebkong could be seen as renegotiating or reconfiguring religious authority.