

Rig 'dzin Dpal ldan bkra shis (1688–1743) and the emergence of a tantric commu- nity in Reb kong, A mdo (Qinghai)

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Introduction

The tantric practitioners from Reb kong in the north-eastern part of Tibet are widely known among the Tibetans for possessing great magical power (*mthu*). Despite their significance within the Tibetan world, this community has received little attention in western scholarship. This article addresses the gap by looking at the life of Rig 'dzin Dpal ldan bkra shis, a Buddhist adept from Reb kong who spread the tantric tradition in his native place and who later became known as the founder of the Reb kong tantric community, known as the Reb kong *sngags mang*. I will explore Rig 'dzin Dpal ldan bkra shis's strategies of community building and highlight the efforts and challenges he faced while trying to spread the Rnying ma tradition in an area that was dominated by a Dge lugs monastery. This paper will argue that Rig 'dzin Dpal ldan bkra shis succeeded in promoting his teachings and recruiting new disciples because of two reasons: his extensive travels and the existing religious demography of the area. It will be shown that his travels in and around Reb kong had a tremendous impact on mobilising and fostering a community while many of the places he visited were historically inhabited by communities following a different tradition of Tibetan Buddhism than that of the Dge lugs. Rig 'dzin Dpal ldan bkra shis thus capitalised on this geographical setting and promoted his teachings in particular in areas where the Dge lugs pa had little or no influence.

Recent works on Tibetan auto/biographies have drawn our attention to this literary genre as a means to explore and understand socio-historical circumstances.¹ It is with this intention that I analyse the autobiography of Rig 'dzin Dpal ldan bkra shis, while at the same time attempting to trace the early history of the Reb kong *sngags mang*. I begin by mapping out a broad history of the Rnying ma tradition in Reb kong. I then turn to the life of Rig 'dzin Dpal ldan bkra shis and show why, after having had a Dge lugs education, he went on to study the Rnying ma tradition. Next, I discuss his efforts to establish the community of tantric practitioners. I argue that his travels in and around Reb kong were instrumental in creating such a community. Finally, I look at the relationship between the Rnying ma and the Dge lugs in Reb kong.

It might be worthwhile to locate first the place of our interest. Reb kong lies in the traditional province of A mdo, north-east Tibet. At present, Reb kong is located in Rma lho prefecture, Qinghai province.² With 65.2%, Tibetans count as the majority of the population in Reb kong county; the rest of the population is made up of Han Chinese, Mongol, Monguor, Salar, Hui and Bao'an.³

Rong bo Bde chen chos skor gling, better known as Rong bo monastery, is the largest Dge lugs monastery in Reb kong and also counts as one of the major Dge lugs pa monasteries in A mdo. The monastery was founded in 1342 by the first *nang so* family of Reb kong, the traditional rulers of that place.⁴ Rong bo monastery became firmly entrenched in the Dge lugs tradition with the emergence of the Shar lineage; the most famous being the first, Shar Skal ldan rgya mtsho (1606–1677). The Rnying ma and the Bon tradition are also represented in Reb kong with monasteries such as G.ya' ma Bkra shis 'khyil, the monastery of the famous yogi Zhabs

¹ Germano 1998; Gyatso 1998; Schaeffer 2004; Diemberger 2007.

² Reb kong is the capital town of Rma lho prefecture as well as the name of the county (Chin. Tongren).

³ <http://www.huangnan.gov.cn/html/124/1973.html>, accessed 9 December 2010.

⁴ Gling rgya Bla ma tshe ring 2002: 12 & 143; 'Jigs med Theg mchog 1988: 92. For more on the title of *nang so*, see Dhondup 2011.

dkar Tshogs drug rang grol (1781–1851), and Bon brgya monastery, currently headed by A lag Bon brgya, Dge legs Lhun grub rgya mtsho (b. 1935).⁵ Our interest here is on the Rnying ma tradition and how the tantric practitioners of that tradition became a unified community in Reb kong.

Early Rnying ma activities in Reb kong

The majority of the sources about early Rnying ma activities in Reb kong seemed to have been lost over the time. In many cases, we have only names of individuals without further information about their background, affiliation, names of teachers or disciples. It is therefore almost impossible at this moment to establish a definite chronology of the emergence of the Rnying ma tradition in Reb kong and in view of this, the examples below merely provide a broad sketch of the process of Rnying ma tantric community formation in Reb kong from the twelfth through the seventeenth century.

The little available literature marks the beginning of the Rnying ma tradition with the arrival of Padmasambhava, who is believed to have visited Reb kong, bound under oath many spirits and hid treasures in the area.⁶ He is further said to have prophesied eight places in the vicinity of Reb kong where eight accomplished yogis later practiced and attained realization.⁷ The sources also state that

⁵ The full name of the monastery is Sman ri Bshad sgrub smin grol gling.

⁶ 'Jigs med Theg mchog 1988: 42; Lce nag tshang Hūm chen and Ye shes 'Od zer sgröl ma 2004: Introduction.

⁷ The eight places are: Bcu gcig Shel gyi grub gnas (the meditation place of Grub chen Kaḥ thog rdo rje dbang po); Stag lung Grub gnas (the meditation place of 'Od de Gung rgyal); Spyang gi Rwa rtse phug pa'i grub gnas (the meditation place of Drub chen ma Gsod shul li 'ur ba); Brag dkar Grub gnas in 'Dam bu (the meditation place of the 'Phags pa Li khrod); Mtha' smug Rdzong (the meditation place of A mthu Sngags pa g.yu rnungog); Mkhargong Brag dmar (the meditation place of 'Bol gyi Byang chub sems pa); Skya rgan Grub gnas (the meditation place of Bse yi Rgyal ba byang chub); Gong mo Grub gnas (the meditation place of the Bonpo master Dran pa Nam mkha). See Lce nag tshang Hūm chen and Ye shes 'Od zer sgröl ma 2004: 2–19; 'Jigs med Theg mchog 1988: 49–64. Ricard 2001: 22 and Blo bzang

some of the eight yogis were disciples of Lha lung Dpal gyi rdo rje, who escaped to A mdo after assassinating Glang dar ma (803–42), the last emperor who persecuted Buddhists in the ninth century.⁸ Of the eight yogis, the majority lived from 1027–1087; four of them were natives from Reb kong.⁹

Not faraway from Reb kong, in the neighbouring county of Ba yan, lies Dan tig Shel brag, one of the most revered places in A mdo and an important site within the history of Tibetan Buddhism.¹⁰ It was there that the three monks, known as the “three wise men” (*mkhas pa mi gsum*), escaped from central Tibet during Glang dar ma’s reign and later ordained Dgongs pa Rab gsal, preserving thus the Vinaya lineage.¹¹ The other historically important place also associated with the three wise men is A chung Gnam rdzong in the nearby Gcan tsha county, where Lha lung Dpal gyi rdo rje joined the three wise men.¹² The site later became the residence of thirteen great Rnying ma Lamas (*gnam rdzong sgar kha bcu gsum*).¹³

The Rnying ma tradition passed down from then onwards, either by a teacher to a disciple or within the family, such as that from A mthu G.yu rngog, one of the eight yogis mentioned above, to one of his decedents, the renowned Rig ’dzin Sngags ’chang bkra shis ’bum.¹⁴

In 1176, Rig ’dzin Rdo rje from Lhasa arrived in Zho ’ong, a village belonging to Reb kong. After giving to a crowd of tantric

mkhyen rab 2005: 95–98 identify the eight places in a slightly different way.

⁸ ’Jigs med Theg mchog 1988: 46.

⁹ The names of the four from Reb kong are: Shu li ’urba, Li khrod, A mthu G.yu rngog and Bse yi Rgyal ba byang chub. See Lce nag tshang Hūṃ chen and Ye shes ’Od zer sgrol ma 2004: Introduction & 2–19.

¹⁰ See also van Schaik 2009.

¹¹ For an interesting account on how monastic Buddhism was passed on during this time, see van Schaik 2010.

¹² Dudjom Rinpoche 1991: 524; Lce nag tshang Hūṃ chen and Ye shes ’Od zer sgrol ma 2004: 492.

¹³ For the names of the Lamas, see Lce nag tshang Hūṃ chen and Ye shes ’Od zer sgrol ma 2004: 493–494.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 415.

practitioners some important empowerments and guidance on ritual practices, hundred individuals decided to become his disciples and one of the earliest communities of tantric practitioners, known as The Hundred Tantric Practitioners from Zho 'ong (*Zho 'ong sngags brgya*), came into existence. This community was made up of thirty locals from Zho 'ong, forty tantric practitioners from lower Reb kong and Rdo sbis, ten from Snang ra, Khri ga and upper Reb kong.¹⁵

As scanty as this information may seem, it nevertheless provides us with some reflection. We learn first of all that prior to the arrival of Rig 'dzin Rdo rje, tantric practitioners already existed in Zho 'ong and in other areas in Reb kong. This should not surprise us too much, for it is well known that even though official Buddhism disintegrated between the mid 9th and early 11th century, popular Buddhism continued to be practiced all over Tibet. The sources mention in particular a group of individuals – the Arhats (*Dgra bcom pa*) – who were also known among the Tibetans as sngags pa, tantric practitioners.¹⁶ Davidson writes that these individuals “were ritually involved in esoteric practice” but had “a weak awareness of the Buddhist intellectual or ethical matrix.”¹⁷

Second, Rig 'dzin Rdo rje made the arduous journey from central Tibet to Reb kong in eastern Tibet. A close connection between the north-east and central Tibet was already established whereby A mdo, as this north-eastern part is traditionally known, had become a refuge for those fleeing from the Buddhist persecution. In addition, the Tsong kha region was thriving with monasteries and temples and many from central Tibet “went there for the spark of their religious revival.”¹⁸

Third, Rig 'dzin Rdo rje's visit to Reb kong falls during a time period when scholarly disciples were assembled and religious communities and centres were established. By the eleventh century,

¹⁵ Ibid. 206.

¹⁶ Davidson 2005: 78; Karmay 1998: 7.

¹⁷ Davidson 2005: 79.

¹⁸ Ibid. 92.

some Rnying ma representatives were searching for a pure esoteric form of Buddhism and young Tibetans were sent to India to study and bring back the authentic teachings of the Tantra.¹⁹ We may then place Rig 'dzin Rdo rje's mission to Reb kong within the context of teaching and transmitting the newly translated ritual and esoteric texts, while at the same time trying to reinstate authentic Buddhist practices and religious authority.

The village of 'Ja' mo provides an excellent example of how a tantric practitioner community established itself in Reb kong.²⁰ The first who stands out in this regard is Grub chen Rdo rje tshe ring (1325–1403), who initiated the Rnying ma tradition in his native village. The sources do not provide us with further information regarding the religious tradition held in that village prior to Grub chen Rdo rje tshe ring's initiative, but most probably it must be that of the Sa skya and/or Bon. Born in 1325, he studied under the Rnying ma Lama Grub chen Chos rdor and Lama Rig 'dzin Ku ma ra dza, before travelling to Khams and central Tibet to study with different teachers.²¹ At the age of forty-six he returned to A mdo and upon his arrival, he gave empowerments, transmissions and teachings to the tantric practitioners and nuns from Khri ga. After thirty disciples decided to take the vows of a lay devotee, an assembly hall was built for them which later turned into a small Rnying ma pa monastery, known as 'Ja' mo's monastery.²²

The next great sngags pa to emerge from this village was Grub chen Stobs ldan rgya mtsho (1374–1449). He first entered Rong bo monastery, established in 1342 by Bsam gtan Rin chen, the son of the ruler of Reb kong.²³ Even though Grub chen Stobs ldan rgya mtsho excelled in his studies, he decided to leave the monastery at the age of twenty and continued with his practice at home with Grub chen Rdo rje tshe ring, from whom he received many empow-

¹⁹ Ibid. 117–122.

²⁰ Lce nag tshang Hūm chen and Ye shes 'Od zer sgrol ma 2004: 192–204.

²¹ Ibid. 193.

²² A hundred or so years later, the monastery turned into a Bon po monastery.

²³ For more on the rulers of Reb kong, see Dhondup 2011.

erments and transmissions. Like his teacher, he travelled to Khams and central Tibet to study with other Rnying ma masters. At the age of fifty, he returned to 'Ja' mo and continued with the tantric tradition established by his teacher Grub chen Rdo rje tshe ring. He and his contemporaries were known as the Thirty Tantrika from 'Ja' mo (*'Ja' mo'i Sngags 'chang ba sum bcu*).²⁴

Little information is available on Lung rtogs Stobs rgyas (1413–1459) and Sngags 'chang Bsod names rdo rje (1407–1484), except that they both were close disciples of Grub chen Stobs ldan rgya mtsho. Lung rtogs 'Jigs med stobs ldan (b.1441) was a student of Sngags 'chang Bsod names rdo rje. He initiated the tradition of 'cham dance among 'Ja' mo's tantric community.²⁵ This tradition still continues up to present day where the 'cham dance is performed on the twenty-ninth day of the first month of the Tibetan calendar.

Other known tantric practitioners who were born in the village of 'Ja' mo include Bsam gtan Rdo rje, a disciple of Lung rtogs 'Jigs med stobs ldan, who was said to be a powerful master of black magic, Rin chen Stobs rgyas (1503–1553), Theg chen Rgya mtsho (1519–1587), Rdo rje Phur ba (1568–1648), Sangs rgyas Rgya mtsho (1570–1647), Blo bzang Thub bstan rgya mtsho (1595–1668), who founded of the Tantric College of Rong bo monastery, Bsod nam Rgya mtsho (1624–1671), 'Ja' mo Pad ma 'bum (1686–1743), 'Ja' mo Ngag dbang grags pa (1738–1804) and Dkon mchog Bstan 'dzin nyi ma (1781–1854). 'Ja' mo thus appears as one of the few villages which has a written record of tantric practitioners from the 14th century onwards. The mentioned personalities were standing out in their community because of their spiritual or yogic achievements.

Further away towards Gcan tsa was the tantric community of Blon chos, known as The Eighty Monks and Tantric Practitioners of Blon chos (*Blon chos ban sngags brgyad cu*).²⁶ This community

²⁴ Lce nag tshang Hūm chen and Ye shes 'Od zer sgrol ma 2004: 197.

²⁵ Ibid. 198.

²⁶ Ibid. 296. The “ban” refers to the followers of the Bka' gdams school and the “sngags” to the Sa skya school.

was made up by members of the Bka' gdams and Sa skya school and was established sometime in the mid thirteenth century under the initiative of Lha rje brag sna ba, the first ruler of Reb kong and himself an accomplished tantric practitioner of the Sa skya school.

Mag gсар Sngags 'chang pad ma bdud 'dul (1527–1604) practised at Mag gсар Dmar ldang ma, a site dating back to 1356.²⁷ It later turned into a monastery and became the monastic seat of Mag gсар Paṇḍita kun bzang stobs ldan dbang po (1781–1832), an important figure within the Reb kong tantric community.

As we see, the tantric practitioners have been part of Reb kong's socio-religious life for a long time. One of the most notable tantric practitioners during the early time was Lha rje brag sna ba, who under the order of the Sa skya hierarch settled down in Reb kong in the thirteenth century, and who later became the first ruler of Reb kong (*Rong bo tsang*). Elites like him who were originally from central Tibet or learned locals from Reb kong were the ones who transmitted the tradition to the lay followers and more importantly, who guided them through complex esoteric scriptures and rituals. Over the time, small sites of worship were built, networks of communities were formed, but a structured community with rules for its members, organised rituals to follow and a monastic site was absent so far.

Rig 'dzin Dpal ldan bkra shis

Like 'Ja' mo or Zho 'ong, most of the villages where tantric practitioners lived and practiced were located in the periphery of Reb kong. One of such a village was Rgyal bo chu ca, the birth place of Rig 'dzin Dpal ldan bkra shis. Unlike his father, who was a lay tantric practitioner, Rig 'dzin Dpal ldan bkra shis was ordained at the age of thirteen and entered the College of Philosophy at Rong bo monastery.²⁸ Coming from a Rnying ma pa background, he went to study at a Dge lugs monastery. What might have motivated him to make this choice? Rig 'dzin Dpal ldan bkra shis's parents might

²⁷ Ibid. 178.

²⁸ Rig 'dzin Dpal ldan bkra shis 2002: 11.

have simply wanted him to become a monk and therefore enrolled him at the nearest and largest monastery in the area, which was Rong bo monastery. A more practical reason might be related to the fact that Rong bo monastery was the most convenient and logical choice to send one's child to receive a proper monastic education even though it followed a different tradition. This reasoning seemed to be fairly common amongst members of other schools where many first acquired a basic monastic education at this Dge lugs monastery before embarking on a journey to central Tibet or Khams to study at other monasteries or with teachers of their own tradition.²⁹ But it is also noteworthy to remind here that religious boundaries were flexible. The tantric practitioners who were members of the Rnying ma tradition were also paying their respect to certain Lamas of Rong bo monastery. For example, Zhabs dkar, the best known yogi from Reb kong was highly respectful of the then Shar Skal Idan rgya mtsho, the head of Rong bo monastery. He writes: “When I entered the presence of the Precious Omniscient One of Shar, I offered him a full set of robes...I venerated him as my root teacher, thinking of him always present above my head as a crown jewel.”³⁰ Even nowadays, the picture of the current Shar Skal Idan rgya mtsho can be seen in many Rnying ma tantric halls.³¹

After five years of studying at Rong bo monastery, Rig 'dzin Dpal Idan bkra shis decided to go on a pilgrimage to central Tibet. Shortly before returning to his native land, a relative and a friend convinced him not only to stay in Lhasa but to continue with his studies at 'Bras spung monastery.³² For the next four years, he studied at Sgo mang College (*Sgo mang grwa tshang*) of 'Bras spung monastery and received his Dge bshes degree from that monas-

²⁹ A prominent figure from Reb kong, who also had a Dge lugs training but hailed from a Rnying ma family was Dge 'dun Chos 'phel.

³⁰ Ricard 2001: 491.

³¹ The term ‘tantric hall’ here refers to the Tibetan word *sngags khang*, an assembly hall where tantric practitioners gather for their religious activities. In Reb kong, most of the villages where tantric practitioners reside also have a ‘tantric hall.’

³² Rig 'dzin Dpal Idan bkra shis 2002: 8; 'Jigs med Theg mchog 1988: 615.

tery, the highest academic degree within the Dge lugs tradition.³³ Sgo mang College was a favourite college for many from A mdo and Mongolia and other A mdo Lamas who studied at Sgo mang around the same time were the second Shar Ngag dbang 'phrin las rgya mtsho (1678–1739) and the first 'Jam dbyangs bzhad pa Ngag dbang brtson 'grus (1648–1721).³⁴ The latter founded in 1709 Bla brang monastery (*Bla brang bkra shis 'khyil*) and made a name for himself by becoming the abbot of Sgo mang College as well as authoring numerous works.

The making of a community

For Rig 'dzin Dpal ldan bkra shis, the initial seed for turning to the Rnying ma pa tradition was already planted by his family. He came from a household of tantric practitioners who followed the Rnying ma tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. As such, he must have been used to the Rnying ma ritual and liturgy services performed at numerous occasions at home and by his family members. His decision to follow the Rnying ma tradition would therefore seem like a natural step, but unlike anybody else in his family, he went to pursue a Dge lugs career and even obtained the Dge bshes degree from 'Bras spung monastery.

What other reasons prompted him to go back to his own root and to pursue the Rnying ma tradition? The first was an important meeting with Zur chen Sprul sku, whose previous incarnation counted the fifth Dalai Lama as one of his disciples.³⁵ From him, Rig 'dzin Dpal ldan bkra shis received among others the empowerment and transmissions of the Northern Treasure (*byang gter*) and Nyang ral Nyi ma 'od zer's (1124–1192) gter ma teachings, Bka' brgyad Bde gshegs 'dus pa.³⁶ Rig 'dzin Dpal ldan bkra shis also came to the realisation that he did not have any intentions to

³³ Brag mgon pa Dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas 1982: 326.

³⁴ Rje 'jigs med Dam chos rgya mtsho 1997: 266; Nietupski 2008.

³⁵ This is the second Zur chen Sprul sku, the reincarnation of Zur chen Chos dbyings rang grol (1604–1669).

³⁶ Rig 'dzin Dpal ldan bkra shis 2002: 27.

become a high scholar but was more interested in deepening his meditation skills.³⁷ Consequently, he travelled in 1715 to Smin grol gling where he stayed for the next two years. There, he received teachings from the two sons of Gter bdag Gling pa (1646–1714), founder of Smin grol gling.³⁸ He continued with his Rnying ma training with another stay at Rdo rje brag, the other major Rnying ma monastery in central Tibet.

When he returned to Lhasa, he was forced to suddenly leave the capital. Rig 'dzin Dpal ldan bkra shis provides the following reasons: The Dzungar invasion of 1717 and the consequent Rnying ma persecution was the first. Second, he did not feel welcomed anymore within the college. The abbot and the disciplinarian were showing their discontent to him because of his Rnying ma leanings. In addition, he was having disturbing dreams, which he interpreted as unfavourable omens. Leaving all these complications behind, he arrived in Khams Srin mo rdzong in Ri bo che, the seat of Gter ston Nyi ma grags pa (1647–1710).³⁹ There, he would spend many years studying and perfecting himself in his spiritual practice.

However, another version of him having to leave central Tibet is described in the *Mdo smad chos 'byung*, written by Brag dgon pa Dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas (1801–1866), the 49th throne holder of Bla brang monastery. In there, it states that Rig 'dzin Dpal ldan bkra shis did not abide by the laws of 'Bras spung monastery and was spreading the Rnying ma teachings. Being charged with this 'offense,' he was sent to a confinement room from where he fled.⁴⁰ We will never know the real reasons for his escape but the Dge lugs background of the author and the slightly biased attitude shown towards other traditions in the book certainly needs to be taken into consideration when reading this passage.

³⁷ Ibid. 13. This remark also reflects the traditional Tibetan view that the Rnying ma pa are more concerned with meditation whereas the Dge lugs pa are absorbed in scholarship.

³⁸ Ibid. 27.

³⁹ Ibid. 14.

⁴⁰ Brag mgon pa Dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas 1982: 326.

In 1727, at the age of thirty-nine, Rig 'dzin Dpal ldan bkra shis returned to Reb kong.⁴¹ From that year onwards until 1742, he travelled around Reb kong and further to actively promote the Rnying ma tantric tradition. He justifies his missionary action by telling the reader that he had received a prophecy to study and to spread the secret doctrine.⁴² Also, when he returned to Reb kong, he found the place had deteriorated during his absence. He writes:

The people nowadays behave themselves like devils...The Lamas and the rulers are deceitful...Most of the religious communities in Reb kong are jealous of each other. The people from Bses and Rgyal bo are imbeciles. The *nang so* of Reb kong are evil and big sinners. In upper, lower and everywhere in Reb kong, people are vicious...They would even eat the flesh of one's own mother, if one says so.⁴³

Expressing such disappointments, he concludes: "At a time of such degeneration, the Ritual of the Tenth Day will be of great benefit."⁴⁴

He chose 'Bal gyi Mkhar gong la kha, one of the eight holy sites in Reb kong and the meditation place of the Bodhisattva of 'Bol (*'Bol gyi byang chub sems pa*), as the site of his first teaching. The location carries a symbolic meaning, for not only was the site one of the eight places prophesied by Padmasambhava, but the eight yogis who practiced at these places were the first renowned tantric practitioners, who laid down the foundation for a tradition for which Reb kong became widely known. Thus, by choosing to give his first teaching at this particular place, Rig 'dzin Dpal ldan bkra shis not only associated himself within this tradition, but he was also attempting to create his own legacy.

Although Rig 'dzin Dpal ldan bkra shis was an ordained and celibate tantric practitioner, it has to be noted that most of his followers were non-scholastic, lay tantric practitioners. The already existing monastery in his native village gradually turned into his seat and became known as Rig 'dzin Rab 'phel gling. There, he

⁴¹ Rig 'dzin Dpal ldan bkra shis 2002: 16.

⁴² Ibid. 2.

⁴³ Ibid. 182–183.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 183.

gathered the tantric practitioners from Reb kong and conferred to them the teachings of the Eight Commands (*Bka' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa*) and other empowerments.⁴⁵ At the same time, he ordered each of the tantric practitioner communities to observe the four dharma sessions a year and re-established the Ritual of the Tenth Day, dedicated to the Indian master Padmasambhava. Most importantly, he enforced rules among the tantric practitioners and wrote down a constitution which was to be observed by all the tantric practitioners living and practising in Reb kong.⁴⁶ For these reasons, local practitioners and scholars attributed him as having laid the foundation for what later became known as Reb kong *sngags mang*, the Tantric Community of Reb kong.⁴⁷ What is worth remembering is that Rig 'dzin Dpal ldan bkra shis did not only unify the community of tantric practitioners, but, as Nyang Snang mdzad rdo rje (1798–1874), another influential member of the Reb kong *sngags mang* writes, he also played a significant role in re-introducing and spreading the Rnying ma teachings in Reb kong.⁴⁸

To summarise so far: First and foremost, a prophecy sparked Rig 'dzin Dpal ldan bkra shis's urge to study and to spread the secret doctrine. In particular, the deities mentioned the name of Zur chen Sprul sku, from whom he received important teachings and instructions.⁴⁹ Following the advice of the deities, he trained in the Rnying ma tradition and consequently educated and revived his own community. Before his initiative, there was little uniformity among the tantric practitioners of Reb kong – they also did not do much to distinguish themselves from members of other religious traditions. Through his efforts, new rules, ritual practices and religious ceremonies were introduced which enabled the tantric practitioners to secure a distinct identity.

⁴⁵ Lce nag tshang Hūm chen and Ye shes 'Od zer sgrol ma 2004: 27.

⁴⁶ Ibid. 27. This document does not exist anymore.

⁴⁷ Ibid. 8; 'Jigs med Theg mchog 1988: 615. Chu skyes Dge 'dun dpal bzang 2007: 369.

⁴⁸ Nyang Snang mdzad rdo rje 2006: 157.

⁴⁹ Rig 'dzin Dpal ldan bkra shis 2002: 13.

Location, mobility and religious networks

Beside trade purposes, one of the main motives for Tibetans to travel was to acquire knowledge or to undertake pilgrimage. Thon mi Sam bho Ta, for example, travelled in the seventh century to India and upon his return, he developed the Tibetan alphabet. The translator Rin chen Bzang po (957–1055) travelled twice to Kashmir in the tenth century.⁵⁰ In his second trip, he was accompanied by 15 other young Tibetans who were sent with him to study Sanskrit. Individuals closer to our region of interest who travelled abroad to India or Nepal include Zhabs dkar Tshogs drug rang grol and Dge 'dun Chos 'phel (1903–1951).⁵¹ The latter penned down a pilgrimage guide, *Guide to India (Rgya gar gyi gnas chen khag la 'grod pa'i lam yig)*, the first of its kind by a Tibetan.⁵² Most of the travels, however, were within Tibet itself. Travelling was a necessity, given Tibet's vast physical expanse. We thus encounter within the history of Tibetan Buddhism many itinerant, the most notable being Mi la ras pa, the famous yogi and poet of the eleventh century.

Travelling for religious purposes was an important part in the lives of Tibetans. With regards to travel on pilgrimage, Kapstein even suggest that “pilgrimage was traditionally one of the central phenomena contributing to, and perhaps even to some extent engendering, the cultural unity of Tibet.”⁵³ Such travel impulse is of course not a phenomenon found only in Tibet, but is as Buswell Jr. writes, “an integral part of Buddhism since its very inception.”⁵⁴ Korean monks travelled to China to study during the sixth and seventh centuries and the monk Hyecho even made the arduous pilgrimage to India and Inner Asia in the eight century.⁵⁵ The Chinese monk Xuanzang (596–664) travelled to India in search of Buddhist

⁵⁰ Karmay 1998: 6, n. 26.

⁵¹ See Ricard 2001; Huber 2000.

⁵² See Huber 2000.

⁵³ Kapstein 1997: 103. For an interesting reading on the subject of Tibetan pilgrimage, see Huber 1999.

⁵⁴ Buswell 2009: 1055.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 1057.

texts, as did his predecessor Faxian (337–422). Xuanzang's travel accounts later became the source for *Xiyou Ji* (Journey to the West or also known as 'Monkey'), one of the greatest Chinese novels. A generation later, it was Yijing (635–713) who travelled to India and Sumatra.

Tibetan travel accounts, mostly in the form of guidebooks “constitute a popular and widely circulated type of religious literature.”⁵⁶ Huber goes on to state that as a genre, “pilgrimage guidebooks have a very significant oral dimension.”⁵⁷ Travel accounts are also included within auto/biographies. In there, we learn in detail the encounters with Buddhist masters or the visits of sacred sites and hermitages. Tibetans thus travelled to meditate at a remote cave, to meet a religious teacher, to study at a distant learning centre or to pay homage at a sacred site.

The traveller, for the most part a male religious figure with some financial resources, took great risks to reach his destination. The harsh weather, bad road conditions, accidents and bandits were some of the dangers he faced. The successful return to one's native place brought not only respect and an increased status within the community, but also more knowledge, merit and experience.

The accounts of the traveller document the spiritual encounters and achievements and provide a guide for future disciples and generations. At the same time, it also demonstrates the sacrifices made on the part of the author to achieve spiritual advancements. Travelling also provided an opportunity to create religious networks and religious communities. The travels of Rig 'dzin Dpal ldan bkra shis can be seen within this context. As I laid out at the beginning of this paper, his travels were instrumental in promoting his teachings and in unifying the community of the tantric practitioners in Reb kong. Like many contemporaries, Rig 'dzin Dpal ldan bkra shis travelled across Tibet to study with different teachers and thus played an important part in transmitting certain lineages

⁵⁶ Huber 1997: 121.

⁵⁷ Ibid. 120

in Reb kong.⁵⁸ I will now take a closer look at Rig 'dzin Dpal ldan bkra shis's travels, in particular his travels to study the Rnying ma tradition and his journey across Reb kong to spread the Rnying ma teachings.

Upon deciding to become a Rnying ma pa, he travelled in 1715 from Lhasa to Smin grol gling. It seems very fitting that he first travelled to that monastery, for Smin grol gling was founded not long ago and was as one of the leading Rnying ma monasteries of that time. There, he studied with the two sons of Gter bdag Gling pa. He then travelled to Rdo rje brag, the other major Rnying ma monastery in central Tibet.

The next major travel would lead him to Khams, east Tibet, where he spent nearly ten years studying, returning to his native place only in 1727. At that time, Khams represented one of the leading learning centres for the Rnying ma pa. Not only were some renowned Rnying ma scholars and adepts residing there, but Kaḥ thog, Dpal yul and Rdzogs chen – three of the six important Rnying ma monasteries – were all located in that region. But Tibetans did not only travel from central or north-east Tibet to Khams. Rnying ma Lamas from Khams were also travelling to other places. For example, Dge rtse 'Gyur med tshe dbang mchog grub (1761–1829), the most influential Lama at Kaḥ thog, travelled for a year in A mdo where he taught at monasteries and in nomad communities or Rdo grub chen 'Jigs med phrin las 'od zer (1745–1821) travelled from Khams to Sog po, the Mongolian enclave located not far from Reb kong.⁵⁹

In Khams, Rig 'dzin Dpal ldan bkra shis received from O rgyan Bstan 'dzin (1701–1727), the son of Gter ston Nyi ma grags pa, the complete transmission of Nyi ma grags pa's treasures (*gter ma*). The places in Khams where he studied included Dkar shod, Nag shod and Sog shod.

⁵⁸ Annabella Pitkin briefly mentions the relationship between travelling and lineage transmission. See Pitkin 2004.

⁵⁹ Ronis 2009: 182; Dbal mang Paṇḍita dkon mchog rgyal mtshan 1990: 120.

The travels of Rig 'dzin Dpal ldan bkra shis, to central Tibet and to Khams, were extremely important in terms of lineage transmission. It was him who introduced the tradition of Smin grol gling, The Northern Treasures (*byang gter*) and Nyi ma Grags pa's treasures in Reb kong. These traditions are still practiced within the present community of tantric practitioners.⁶⁰ Once he returned to Reb kong, he actively started to tour the region. The places he visited included Mdo ba, Go sde, Smad pa, Glang rgya, Kha ra ba dur, Zho 'phang, Chu bzang, Sdong skam and so forth. The names of the villages, the number of people who attended his teachings and what he taught to them take up seven lengthy pages in his autobiography. Many of the places Rig 'dzin Dpal ldan bkra shis visited were already inhabited by tantric practitioners and most were relatively far from the centre of Reb kong, where the Dge lugs tradition was the more privileged one. The villages located near the historical centre, such as The bo, Sog ru, Seng ge gshong or Gnyan thog, were followers of the Dge lugs pa; some were also patron communities (*lha sde*) of that Dge lugs monastery.⁶¹

The location thus played an important part in Rig 'dzin Dpal ldan bkra shis's missionary activity. The villages where tantric practitioners lived were located in relative isolation from Rong bo monastery. This isolation proved to be of advantage, for it provided an ideal setting to pursue an alternative path while at the same time escaping the influence of Rong bo monastery. Rig 'dzin Dpal ldan bkra shis capitalised on this historically existing geographical divide and focused his teachings in villages such as Spyang lung, Mgar tshe, So nag, Chu bzang, Pad ma rong or Chu ma – villages which are located outside the power radius of Rong bo monastery.⁶²

⁶⁰ The Smin grol gling tradition seems to have declined over the years. Although some tantric communities maintain that they are practising the Smin grol gling tradition, in reality, they practice the Northern Treasure tradition. Communication with Lce nag tshang Hūm chen, 15 February 2011.

⁶¹ Of the seven villages which are included within Rong bo Sde bdun (The Seven Villages of Rong bo) – the patron community (*lha sde*) of the ruler of Rong bo (Rong bo dpon tsang) – two, 'Ja' mo and Tsho bzhi, have a tradition of tantric practitioners.

⁶² Rig 'dzin Dpal ldan bkra shis 2002: 17–20.

At these remote places, he was able to give teachings to the many individuals without the direct interference and competition from the Dge lugs.

The Rnying ma – Dge lugs rivalry

During the lifetime of Rig 'dzin Dpal ldan bkra shis, Rong bo monastery was an influential Dge lugs monastery which enjoyed close connections not only to the ruling family of Reb kong – the second Shar was born within the *nang so* family – but it maintained close relations to the powerful Kokonor Mongol prince and Bla brang monastery.⁶³ One other nearby Dge lugs monastery, Sku 'bum, which suffered severely under the Manchu in 1723, was gradually taking its former position as one of the great monasteries in A mdo. Surrounded by such powerful Dge lugs monasteries, Rig 'dzin Dpal ldan bkra shis nevertheless persevered in carving out a space for the Rnying ma pa. Naturally, this was not well-seen by some Dge lugs pa scholars and the relationship between the two traditions was strained.

But the tense relationship between the two schools was not exclusive to Reb kong. If we look back in history, inter-sectarian rivalries were common. The Dzungar invasion of 1717 is a prime example of Rnying ma pa persecution, with Smin grol gling and Rdo rje brag being destroyed, followed by an edict which proclaimed the prohibition to practice the Rnying ma tradition.⁶⁴ Or, the Fifth Dalai Lama banished the Jo nang from Central Tibet and some Bon po monasteries had to convert to the Dge lugs tradition.⁶⁵ During his reign, works of some Jo nang, Sa skya, Bka' brgyud and Rnying ma scholars were banned for political or philosophical/doctrinal reasons.⁶⁶ The best examples of critiquing other traditions can be seen in the polemical works, a well established and important gen-

⁶³ Brag mgon pa Dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas 1982: 308; Rje 'jigs med Dam chos rgya mtsho 1997: 262–263 & 284.

⁶⁴ Petech 1950: 44–92.

⁶⁵ Karmay 2005; Smith 2001: 242.

⁶⁶ Smith 2004.

re in Tibet that dates back to the late tenth century.⁶⁷ Cabezón's excellent study on this subject makes here an introduction redundant. Suffice it to say that this genre was extremely popular because "polemics is spectacle: the greats in conversation with the greats about issues that are central to a tradition."⁶⁸

The sectarian conflict became more complex with the appearance of the treasure texts with some refusing to acknowledge its authenticity (i.e. the Dge lugs and a branch of the Sa skya pa), while others accepting some of the texts (i.e. the Bka' brgyud and the Sa skya) and still others firmly confirming its authenticity (i.e. the Rnying ma pa).⁶⁹ Among the Dge lugs scholars who refused to acknowledge its authenticity was Dbal mang Paṇḍita dkon mchog rgyal mtshan (1764–1853), the 24th abbot of Bla brang monastery.⁷⁰ Sum pa Mkhan po (1704–1788), another A mdo Dge lugs scholar of Monguor origin, also declared his doubts over such treasure texts.⁷¹ But it was no other than his own student, Thu'u bkwan Blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma (1737–1802) who wrote a reply to his master. Like some other important Dge lugs scholars from A mdo, Thu'u bkwan was a Rnying ma sympathiser.⁷²

Rig 'dzin Dpal ldan bkra shis's own belief in the Rnying ma tradition was constantly challenged. On many occasions, lay tantric practitioners came to see him when in doubt about provocative issues raised by the Dge lugs monks from Rong bo monastery – these would range from questioning Padmasambhava as a historical figure to whether this Indian master really visited Tibet or not.⁷³ Or, he would get into trouble with some monks and scholars from Rong

⁶⁷ Cabezón and Dargyay 2007: 21.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* 4.

⁶⁹ Kapstein 2000: 127–128.

⁷⁰ Dbal mang Paṇḍita dkon mchog rgyal mtshan 1990: 193.

⁷¹ Kapstein 2000: chapter 7.

⁷² *Ibid.* 129 and 256 n. 62.

⁷³ Rig 'dzin Dpal ldan bkra shis 2002: 36.

bo monastery, who were bad-mouthing him because of his Rnying ma affiliation.⁷⁴

Rig 'dzin Dpal ldan bkra shis seemed to hold high regard for the first Shar Skal ldan rgya mtsho, whom he admired for his non-secular views, but he lists the atrocities of the others towards the tantric practitioners:

In the past, the whole lineage of the hundred chieftain of Sad kyil was destroyed by the Rong bo Lamas [i.e. Dge lugs pa] and chieftains. Rgya zhur Lcags phreng can [a famous tantric practitioner from Reb kong] was arrested and handed over to the Chinese emperor... Brag dkar Sngags ram pa's temple was destroyed. G.yer chung Sngags ram pa was temporarily expelled to La mo Gyes thang [in Gcan tsa] and Go sde Rab 'byams pa was delivered to the Mongols. The Lama of 'Jam was tied to a wheel...The monks from Spang dkar thang [a Dge lugs monastery] burned down the tantric hall of 'Jam...and cut off the hair [of the tantric practitioners].⁷⁵

The accusations might have been exaggerated, but it nevertheless reveals the simmering tension between the two competing schools. Rig 'dzin Dpal ldan bkra shis also felt misunderstood by the second Shar, the head of Rong bo monastery. He writes: “when I went to see Rong bo tsang [Shar], he said that according to some monks, I tell others that they should not pray. Why is it so, he asked me. When he said this to me, it was like as if I am an outsider (*phyi rol pa*).”⁷⁶ Rig 'dzin Dpal ldan bkra shis then laments that this was like saying to him that “a white goat does not fit with a flock of sheep” (*ra dkar po lug khyur mi tshud pa*).⁷⁷

Mkhan chen Dge 'dun rgya mtsho (1679–1765), a well-known Dge lugs Lama and tutor of the third Shar, also had a long feud with Rig 'dzin Dpal ldan bkra shis.⁷⁸ In all fairness, it must be said that this feud might have been partly motivated by interpersonal com-

⁷⁴ Ibid. 91–104.

⁷⁵ Ibid. 189.

⁷⁶ Ibid. 115.

⁷⁷ Ibid. 115.

⁷⁸ Brag mgon pa Dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas 1982: 326.

petition – both lamas were from the same area and studied at the same college in 'Bras spung.⁷⁹ They both excelled in their studies and obtained the Dge bshes degree. The path started to divert when one had to 'flee' the monastery like a thief while the other made a triumphant return to Reb kong to take on the post of the abbot at Rong bo monastery.⁸⁰ Jealousy therefore probably has played a part in their relationship, which was further accentuated by Rig 'dzin Dpal ldan bkra shis witnessing the Dzungar's brutality towards his own sect.

As a community, the tantric practitioners were feeling disadvantaged. Not only were they in an embryonic state, but unlike the Dge lugs, whose patrons were the Kokonor Mongol princes, they did not have a powerful political ally who was looking after their interest. Their tradition was a rural tradition and consisted mainly of lay practitioners who earned a living from a small patch of land they owned; their income was at times supplemented by the religious services they offered. There was also at that time no Rnying ma pa monastery in the area which could compete with the size and stature of Rong bo monastery.

It was only much later, when the fourth Mongol prince from Sog po, *junwang* (prince of second rank) Ngag dbang dar rgyas (1740–1807), became a Rnying ma pa follower that the tantric practitioners had their most powerful ally.⁸¹ The rulers of Sog po trace their origin back to Gu shi han (1582–1655). Tshe dbang Bstan 'dzin (aka Tsaghan bstan 'dzin), a grandson of Gu shi han, became the first *qinwang* (prince of first rank) of Sog po, a title which he received from the Qing. By opting to follow the Rnying ma tradition, Ngag dbang Dar rgyas placed Bla brang monastery in a delicate situation. In the past, the monastery had relied on the Mongol royals as their loyal patrons. Fearing that their patron-priest relationship might come to an end and that he might influence his subjects to

⁷⁹ Ibid. 313.

⁸⁰ Ibid. 314.

⁸¹ For the life of Ngag dbang Dar rgyas, see Lce nag tshang Hūm chen 2007. For a history of Sog po, see Dhondup and Diemberger 2002; Dhondup 2002.

convert, some attempted to demonstrate that the Rnying ma tradition was not beneficial for the Mongols. As the historian and abbot of Bla brang monastery writes: “In this regard, the Great Fifth said that it would be improper for the Mongols, especially those from the Kokonor area and in particular for the descendents of Gu shi han, to follow the Rnying ma tradition.”⁸² The same author also blames the downfall of Blo bzang Bstan ’dzin, another grandson of Gu shi han, who led a rebellion against the Qing, to his faith in the Rnying ma pa.⁸³

It is thus not surprising if some Dge lugs scholars were harbouring a grudge against Rig ’dzin Dpal ldan bkra shis as he clearly presented a threat for them. Not only was he teaching a tradition which was different than theirs, but in doing so, he was also recruiting new believers and enlarging *his* sphere of influence. In other words, they saw Rig ’dzin Dpal ldan bkra shis as a direct competitor for influence and power.

Conclusion

Rig ’dzin Dpal ldan bkra shis’s well-deserved title as the founder of Reb kong’s tantric community was the result of a combination of circumstances. He found himself in a position as somebody who was the most appropriate and articulate to spread the Rnying ma teachings in the area. Moreover, as a celibate tantric practitioner, he commanded more respect from his devotees who were in majority lay practitioners. We also have to take into account that at that time few from his background and in Reb kong were knowledgeable or had a scholastic training like him. Rig ’dzin Dpal ldan bkra shis had not only studied at one of the great monasteries of Tibet but he had also practiced with some of the most revered masters of the Rnying ma pa tradition. He therefore exemplified a rare case among the tantric practitioners of Reb kong and inevitably stood out.

⁸² Dbal mang Paṇḍita dkon mchog rgyal mtshan 1990: 120.

⁸³ *Ibid.* 161.

Rig 'dzin Dpal ldan bkra shis promoted the Rnying ma tradition in communities which were far from the centre and hence Dge lugs influence. In his missionary efforts, he enlarged and provided a structure for the tantric community. His extensive travels enabled him to form new or to merge existing communities of tantric practitioners, while at the same time introducing new traditions and lineages in Reb kong. His travels across the Reb kong valley and beyond were thus an important element in the lineage transmission and a way to widen his audience and to legitimise his own authority.

Transmission of Smin gling tradition in Reb kong



Gter bdag Gling pa



Pad ma 'Gyur med rgya mtsho



Rig 'dzin Dpal ldan bkra shis

↙	↓	↓	↘
Reb kong	Rtse khog	Hwa lung	Zhun hwa
Rig 'dzin Rab 'phel gling	Nags rgya'i Mtshams thog	Brag dkar bu rgyud Pad ma chos 'phel gling	Chu bzang Pad ma lcog
G.ya' ma Bkra shis 'khyil	Mgon shul Mtshams thog		
Khyung mgon			
many tantric halls belonging to the community of the shaded side (srib lta sngags mang).			



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