

FROM HERMIT TO SAINT: THE LIFE OF NYANG  
SNANG MDZAD RDO RJE (1798–1874)<sup>1</sup>

YANGDON DHONDUP

Gazing down the lush green valley of Rebkong from his retreat just below the mountain peak, Nyang snang mdzad rdo rje, composed this song and thus paid homage to Bkra shis chos gling, the hermitage where he had spent months and years in solitude:

Homage to my teacher, the supreme and true Vajradhara!  
To the wish-fulfilling jewel, my protector!  
I have faith in you and I supplicate to you.  
Please protect us with your compassion.

This place called Bkra shis chos gling,  
I praise it by showering it with flowers.  
Many holy masters have set foot upon this place.  
This is a place at which to accomplish the supreme religion!

This place is enchanting; the mind becomes pure.  
It is a place for those who possess experience and realisation.  
If I say this place has such quality  
The virtuous gods, the owners of this place, will be pleased!  
The mountain takes the shape of a king sitting on a cushion.  
Like the ministers, the other mountains elegantly surround it.

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[...]

This place is adorned with auspicious signs —  
 Signs of plentiful good fortune.  
 How complete and rich in virtue,  
 How fortunate to be able to stay at a place like this!

To the later generation and to the believers,  
 This is the place to accomplish the path to the next life!

To those who have agreed to go into retreat  
 If you want to stay in retreat, stay at this place!

To the practitioners of the three stages of the Great Perfection  
 If you want to complete your practice, stay at this place!

In order to attain knowledge, come and stay at this place!

[...]

May this place have good fortune, good harvest  
 And gather many practitioners to this place.  
 May their days pass in carrying out Dharma actions!  
 May fortune and prosperity progress!  
 May all fortune be complete!  
 (Nyang snang mdzad rdo rje 2006: 21)



Fig. 1: Portrait of Nyang snang mdzad rdo rje (detail from Thangka painting owned by the Ngakmang Research Institute).

This paper traces the life of Nyang snang mdzad rdo rje, a hermit and Buddhist master known to his contemporaries as *Nyang gyi mtshams pa*, the Hermit of Nyang.<sup>2</sup> Born into a household of ordinary tantric practitioners of no significant

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<sup>2</sup> Ricard 2001: 591 erroneously states that the Hermit of Nyang is called Blo bzang bstan pa'i nyi ma (1811–1861). Blo bzang bstan pa'i nyi ma was the nephew of Nyang snang mdzad rdo rje and was called by birth Kun dga' nor bu. He was then recognized as A lags bzang po and was also referred to as Blo bzang bstan pa'i nyi ma. See Nyang snang mdzad rdo rje 2006: 46–50 and 'Jigs med theg mchog 1988: 533.

social standing, he became a member of the famed Rebkong tantric community (*Reb kong sngags mang*) and went on to become a disciple of Zhabs dkar tshogs drug rang grol (1781–1850), one of the most formidable Buddhist masters in the history of Tibet. What made Nyang snang mdzad rdo rje stand out were his dedication to a celibate life, his religious practices, the teachings he gave and his unassuming role as the editor and compiler of Zhabs dkar's works. With such qualities he slowly established himself as one of the highest ranking members of the Rebkong tantric community.

I will draw attention to Nyang snang mdzad rdo rje's role as a scribe and explore the tradition of scribal practices within a religious community as a means to propagate or preserve their religious identity. In this context, I will illustrate the change or 're-invention' of this scribal tradition by taking as an example the publishing activities of the Ngakmang Research Institute in Xining, Qinghai (PRC).<sup>3</sup>

This article is also a preliminary investigation into the history of the Rebkong tantric community, known as *Reb kong phur thogs stong dang dgu brgya* (Rebkong's One Thousand Nine Hundred Ritual Dagger Holders), one of the largest and best known communities of tantric practitioners in Tibet. It will also introduce for the first time some of the influential figures of that community who have attained spiritual eminence outside their community and region, the most famous being Zhabs dkar tshogs drug rang grol.<sup>4</sup>

To date, scholarly interest in this community has been confined to an anthropological inquiry into large scale ritual practices (Sihlé 2006). The only modern study of a yogin from Rebkong is Matthieu Ricard's beautifully translated autobiography of Zhabs dkar tshogs drug rang grol (Ricard 2001). Other recent studies concerning the area of Rebkong are biographical or

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<sup>3</sup> The Ngakmang Research Institute was founded in 2000 by the brothers Humchen and Nida Chenagtsang. Nowadays, the Institute has expanded with branches all over the world.

<sup>4</sup> I will not deal in this paper with the life of Zhabs dkar, which can be found in detail in Ricard 2001.

anthropological studies (Stoddard 1985; Bhum 1995; Epstein and Peng 1999; Stevenson 1999, 2002; Sujata 2005).

Inside Tibet, the Ngakmang Research Institute has generated since 2000 an enormous output of literature (historical, ritual and exegetical texts) relating to this community. It is thanks to their efforts that the history and culture of that tradition has been made available for the public. The reprinted and rediscovered texts reveal a continuity of that tradition in the area which dates back to the legendary eighth century tantric master, Padmasambhava, known in Tibet as Gu ru Rin po che.



Fig 2: Monk typing Tibetan texts at the office of the Ngakmang Research Institute, Xining (PRC)

When did the tradition of the tantric practitioners (*sngags pa*) start to exist and flourish in Rebkong? The written sources roughly agree that the tradition began

with the arrival of the eight disciples of Lha lung dpal gyi rdo rje, one of the twenty-five disciples of Padmasambhava and also considered to be the assassin of King Glang dar ma in 842.<sup>5</sup> Padmasambhava himself supposedly visited Rebkong during the eighth century and opened “eight holy sites for the saints” (*grub thob gnas brgyad*) in the area.<sup>6</sup> The adherents of the Rebkong tantric community thus trace their lineage back to Padmasambhava. This is not surprising since this Indian master is known for his esoteric teachings and his association with the transmission of the tantric cycle of Vajrakīla, the wrathful deity revered by the tantric practitioners (Kapstein 2000: 155–160; Germano 2002; Boord 1993).

The Rebkong tantric community did not acquire a name or a structure until the time of Rig ’dzin dpal ldan bkra shis (1688–1742), a native of Rgyal bo chu ca, a village located about fifteen kilometres from Rebkong. Locals know him under the name of A lags rgyal bo, a reference to the lineage of Rgyal bo (Rig ’dzin dpal ldan bkra shis 2002: 3). Interestingly, the well known intellectual and modernist scholar Dge ’dun chos ’phel (1904–1951) was historically linked to Rig ’dzin dpal ldan bkra shis—his father, Sngags ’chang rdo rje rnam rgyal (also known as A lags dpal ldan) was the fourth reincarnation of Rig ’dzin dpal ldan bkra shis.

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<sup>5</sup> ’Jigs med theg mchog 1988: 37–48; Lce nag tshang hum chen and Ye shes ’od zer sgrol ma (eds) 2004: 3–7 and [http://www.ngakmang.org.au/NM\\_History.htm](http://www.ngakmang.org.au/NM_History.htm)

<sup>6</sup> The eight holy sites where the eight yogis practised are Stag lung shel gyi ri bo (the meditation place of Shel gyi ’od de gung rgyal), Spyang phu’i lha brag dkar po (the meditation place of Drub chen shul lu ’ur ba), Brag dkar gser khang in ’Dam bu (the meditation place of the Klu grol (or Li khrod)), Mtha’ smug rdzong dmar dgon pa (the meditation place of A mthu sngags pa g.yu rngog), Shel del chos kyi pho brang (the meditation place of Shel gyi ’od de gung rgyal), Do ri dpal gyi ri rtse (the meditation place of rgyal bo’i bla mchod), Gong mo’i gur khang brag rtsa (the meditation place of the Bonpo master Dran pa nam mkha) and ’Bal gyi mkhar gong la kha (the meditation place of ’Bol gyi byang chub sems pa). For more on this, see ’Jigs med theg mchog 1988: 49–64. Ricard 2001: 22 identifies the eight places in a slightly different way.

Rig 'dzin dpal ldan bkra shis was ordained at the age of thirteen and studied with his uncle for a few years. Like many tantric masters of his time, he received an ecumenical training, spending eight years in Rong bo dgon chen, the main Dge lugs monastery in Rebkong (Ibid.: 11). Among his teachers were both Dge lugs and Rnying ma masters such as Shes rabs bkra shis from Rong bo dgon chen, Pad ma 'gyur med rgya mtsho, one of the throne holders of the Rnying ma monastery of Smin grol gling, and Pad ma 'phrin las, a Rnying ma master of the Rdo rje brag monastery (Lce nag tshang hum chen and Ye shes 'od zer sgrol ma 2004: 29). He travelled to Central Tibet for further studies. While in Lhasa, he witnessed the Dzungar invasion of 1717. Like many of his contemporary Rnying ma pa adherents, he became a target of persecution and escaped to Khams, where he took the opportunity to receive teachings from different lamas and to visit monasteries and pilgrimage sites (Rig 'dzin dpal ldan bkra shis 2002: 14–28). Ten years later, he returned to his village.

Soon after his return to Rebkong, he summoned all the tantric practitioners to Rig 'dzin rab 'phel gling monastery located in his native village and which later became his monastic seat. He established mandatory prayer sessions and laid down the community's constitution and code of conduct (Ibid.). From then onwards, the Rebkong tantric community began to flourish. His efforts to organise the tantric community and to spread the teachings within the many tantric households in and around Rebkong gained him the title of founder of the Rebkong tantric community.

His legacies are the prayer sessions such as the *Mkha' 'gro tshogs skor* (Gaṇacakra feast offering for the Ḍākinīs) and the *Bka' brgyad sgrub chen* (The Great Accomplishment of the Eight Transmission Deities) which are still performed by tantric practitioners throughout the Rebkong area.

Rig 'dzin dpal ldan bkra shis's disciples claim that his 'adversaries' issued a ban on the search for his reincarnation and the reprinting of his texts (Lce nag tshang hum chen and Ye shes 'od zer sgrol ma (eds) 2004: 31). This remark refers to the tension between the Dge lugs monks and the Rnying ma tantric practitioners, whereby certain practices of the tantric practitioners were

regarded with suspicion by the more conservative Dge lugs scholars.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, his lineage survives, and a third reincarnation was widely recognised as the Rdzog chen master Chos dbyings stobs ldan rdo rje (1785–1848), founder of Ko'u sde dgon rdzogs chen nam rgyal gling and one of the main disciples of Rdo grub chen 'jigs med phrin las 'od zer (1745–1821) (Thondup 1984: 92). The fifth and last reincarnation of Rig 'dzin dpal ldan bkra shis passed away in 1933.

Another charismatic figure of the Rebkong tantric community was Spyang lung dpal chen nam mkha' 'jigs med (1757–1821), an accomplished master known also for his scathing remarks on the wanton lifestyle of the tantric practitioners and his occasional outbursts of ill-temper.<sup>8</sup> So far, no written texts have surfaced from this Buddhist master but the history of his monastic seat, Khyung mgon mi 'gyur rdo rje gling, his biography and the numerous mentions of his name in other biographies and autobiographies give ample evidence of his status as an extremely knowledgeable and revered master.

His disciples claim that Padmasambhava predicted the birth of Spyang lung dpal chen nam mkha' 'jigs med in one of his prophecies and he is also credited with having revealed treasures such as a footprint of Padmasambhava and a statue of Srong btsan sgam po (Lce nag tshang hum chen and Ye shes 'od zer sgrol ma (eds) 2004: 40, 730).

It was during his lifetime that the community acquired the name *Reb kong phur thogs stong dang dgu brgya* (Rebkong's One Thousand Nine Hundred Ritual Dagger Holders). The figure of the 'ritual dagger holders' was drawn

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<sup>7</sup> In *Mdo smad chos 'byung*, the author describes Rig 'dzin dpal ldan bkra shis as a Treasure Revealer but states that his practices are neither *Ban* nor *Bon*, i.e. neither Buddhist nor of the Bon religion. See Brag mgon pa dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas: 326.

<sup>8</sup> I refer here to the dates as provided in Lce nag tshang hum chen and Ye shes 'od zer sgrol ma (eds) 2004: 41 & 50. The Tibetan Buddhist Resource Center gives the dates of Spyang lung pa nam mkha' 'jigs med as 1769–1833/1834. In Ricard 2001: 591, the dates are given as 1769–1833.



from the assembled tantric practitioners attending the fifteen-day ritual ceremony at Khyung mgon monastery, around 1810 (Ibid.: 46). During the ceremony, each of the participants was presented with the gift of a wooden ritual dagger. By the end of the ceremony, Spyang lung dpal chen nam mkha' 'jigs med had distributed one thousand nine hundred wooden daggers and it was established that this figure roughly reflected the number of tantric practitioners living and practising in Rebkong.

Spyang lung dpal chen nam mkha' 'jigs med studied with, among others, Smin gling khri chen 'phrin las nam rgyal (1765–1812), 'Jigs med gling pa (1729/1730–1798), Rdo grub chen 'jigs med phrin las 'od zer (1745–1821) and Mkharrdo Rinpoche (18<sup>th</sup> century).<sup>9</sup> In 1802, he returned to Rebkong from Central Tibet and Khams and transmitted the teachings of the Smin grol gling tradition and the *Klong chen snying thig* (The Heart-Essence of the Great Expanse) cycle.

A disciple of Spyang lung dpal chen nam mkha' 'jigs med was Grub chen pad ma rang grol (1786–1838),<sup>10</sup> who was born in Sa bzang in Sog po, the Mongolian enclave south of Rebkong. Pad ma rang grol was also a close disciple of Zhabs dkar and Chos rgyal ngag dbang dar rgyas (1736–1807), the Mongolian throne holder of Sog po and one of the principal teachers of Zhabs dkar.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Probably, it is the second (Chos ldan dbang po, 18th century) or the third (Chos skyid rdo rje, died ca. 1820) Mkharrdo Rinpoche.

<sup>10</sup> The exact date of the death of Pad ma rang grol is confusing. In his biography it is stated that he died at the age of fifty-three, in the year of the earth dog. This would mean 1838 in the western calendar. In the autobiography of Nyang snang mdzad rdo rje, he records the death of Pad ma rang grol when he (Nyang snang mdzad rdo rje) was aged forty-five. This would make the year 1842. Matthieu Ricard notes in his translation of Zhabs dkar's autobiography that Pad ma rang grol passed away in 1837. For the works of Pad ma rang grol, see Pad ma rang grol 2005.

<sup>11</sup> For more on Chos rgyal ngag dbang dar rgyas see Lee nag tshang hum chen 2007 and Ricard 2001: 565–67.

Other important members of the Rebkong tantric community include the *gter ston* and tantric master Khams bla khrag 'thung nam mkha' rgya mtsho (1788–1859), who founded the monastery Dgon la kha o rgyan nam grol gling in 1818. His seat later became the main centre for the tantric practitioners of the southern part of Rebkong.

With such great masters in their community, the Rebkong tantric community soon established a name throughout the region. Its growing fame coincides roughly with the increasing religious and political influence of the Rnying ma pa in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.<sup>12</sup> As Gene Smith writes: “During this period, four out of the six greatest Rnying ma pa monasteries of Tibet were founded: Rdo rje brag (c. 1610) and Grwa phyi o rgyan smin grol gling (1656) in Central Tibet; Ru dam rdzogs chen o rgyan bsam gtan chos gling (1685) and Zhe chen (c. 1734) in the nomadic area between Khams and Central Tibet; and Kah thog Rdo rje gdan (1656) and Dpal yul nam rgyal byang chub gling (1665) in Khams.”<sup>13</sup>

The Rebkong tantric community, despite a lean period during the Cultural Revolution, has survived until the present day. Some have recreated the tradition in areas where it has diminished,<sup>14</sup> while others are simply continuing with the revival of the old tradition. The interest shown by the younger

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<sup>12</sup> For more information on the background of the Rnying ma pa during this time, see Smith 2001: 13–31.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.: 17. The date given by Gene Smith on the founding of Smin grol gling differs from that by Jake Dalton, who writes that the monastery was founded in 1676 (cf. Dalton 2006: 91).

<sup>14</sup> Sog po (present day Henan county), the Mongolian enclave in Qinghai Province is historically known as having strong links with the Dge lugs. The Kings and Princes of Sog po were, for example, the main patrons of Bla brang monastery, the largest Dge lugs monastery in the area. It was only Chos rgyal ngag dbang dar rgyas (1736–1807), the Mongolian ruler and spiritual teacher of Zhabs dkar, who adopted the Rnying ma tradition. On the life of Chos rgyal ngag dbang dar rgyas, see Lce nag tshang hum chen 2007.

generation in this community and the relatively recent founding of the Ngakmang Research Institute are new developments within the tradition which suggests that modernity does not necessarily weaken tradition. The Ngakmang Research Institute, for example, has over the years established itself as one of the most active agents in creating and asserting collective identity. The question remains whether the founding of the Ngakmang Research Institute is an answer to the enforced modernity or whether Ngakmang Research Institute itself is a modern answer to Tibet's current state.

### **The Tāntrika**<sup>15</sup>

Tantric practitioners occupy an important position within the lay community, whose members rely on them during public or personal crises. Many lead a non-celibate life, are engaged in various professions but have vowed not to break their sacred commitments, amongst which avoiding the 'Fourteen Root Downfalls' (*rtsa ltung bcu bzhi*) is fundamental.<sup>16</sup>

The activities they perform for the community include, among others, divination, creating astrological charts, controlling the weather, making amulets, prescribing medicine, performing rituals, and pacifying and exorcising spirits. Some of these activities are also performed by Lamas and monks in

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<sup>15</sup> This article focuses only on the religious identity and training of the tantric practitioner.

<sup>16</sup> The Fourteen Root Downfalls are: 1) disparaging the teacher, 2) transgressing the words of the Buddhas, 3) harbouring hostility to one's vajra companions, 4) abandoning love for sentient beings, 5) abandoning the enlightened attitude, 6) disparaging the Dharma, 7) revealing secret teachings to those who are immature, 8) abusing the five components, 9) doubting the doctrine, 10) having compassion for evil-doers, 11) persisting in conceptualising that which cannot be described in words, 12) criticising those who have faith, 13) breaking the commitments that have been undertaken, 14) denigrating women. See Nyi zla he ru ka 2003: 92. There are other root and branch vows which a tantric practitioner should not violate, such as the eight branch vows and the twenty-five branch vows.

monastic institutions. The tantric practitioners, by virtue of living within the community, seem to have created a stronger social bond with the lay community, whose members in turn rely on the tantric practitioner to perform such activities.

The villages where tantric practitioners live are called *sngags sde*. Those with such a name have their own *sngags khang* or ‘tantric houses’ in which they hold their regular prayer sessions.<sup>17</sup> The status of the tantric practitioner is often hereditary. However, a person who is not able to prove that s/he has a family lineage but only shows genuine faith and devotion can also train to become a *tāntrika*.

The educational path of a tantric practitioner takes between twelve to eighteen years and involves rigorous training and practise in reciting mantra, meditation, reading, ritual liturgies, receiving esoteric instructions and transmissions and staying in solitary retreats (Nyi zla he ru ka 2003: 90–92).

A tantric practitioner must first find a qualified teacher who will guide the initiate through the different phases of the spiritual training. Ideally, the student should find a teacher with whom she or he feels a connection. As one continues with the practice, the relationship between the teacher and disciple takes a more important and intimate role with the student accepting her or his teacher as one’s root Lama.

The initial phase consists of performing the preliminary practices (*sngon ’gro*), as a foundation to purify one’s mind and to accumulate merit.<sup>18</sup> The importance of the preliminary practices is emphasised by Zhabs dkar, who, while travelling in Skyid grong, south-east Tibet, tells his disciples:

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<sup>17</sup> For a history of some of these villages, see Gling rgya bla ma tshe ring 2002.

<sup>18</sup> The traditional preliminary practice consists of making 100,000 Mandala offerings to generate merit through generosity, reciting 100,000 refuge prayers to increase one’s confidence, making 100,000 prostrations to counteract pride and reciting 100,000 Vajrasattva mantras to purify obstacles. The total number of ritual acts amounts at the end to five hundred thousand.

These days some people say, “There is no need to expend great effort on the preliminary practices. What’s the point of so much complication? It’s enough just to practise Mahāmūdra, devoid of all elaborations.” But this is like saying, “Though I can’t chew butter, I shall chew stones.” Don’t listen to such nonsense...If the preliminary practice is profound, the main practise will be profound. (Ricard 2001: 373)

Experienced tantric practitioners take between six months to three years for the completion of the preliminary practices. After completing the preliminary practices, the disciple receives a specific empowerment from her or his root Lama. The disciple then deepens his or her practice by taking part in a one-month retreat, reciting the mantra for one’s tutelary deity (*yi dam*) and meditating on it, practising the yogic techniques of channel and vital air (*rtsa rlung*), the rejuvenation practice (*bcud len*), the practice of the inner heat (*gtum mo*), the seminal practice of the lower orifice (*’og sgo thig le’i nyams len*) and studying the mantra and practising the gestures of the Four Activities (*las bzhi*), which consist of pacifying (*zhi*), enrichment (*rgyas*), subjugating (*dbang*) and wrath (*drag*). (Nyi zla he ru ka 2003: 90–92)

A tantric practitioner is also known as a *Gos dkar lchang lo can*, a person wearing a white robe and having long hair. According to the doctrine, a practitioner should be someone whose hair is left long, whose dress is left white and whose mind is left innate (*skra ma bcos pa lchang lo, gos ma bcos pa dkar po, sems ma bcos pa gnyug ma*) (Ibid.: 86). White signifies the practitioner’s good intention and the shawl therefore has to be of that colour.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> To be more precise, the outer gown is dark blue with triangle-shaped sleeves, the inner gown is red and the shawl is white coloured. However, it seems that nowadays the practitioners have different ways of dressing - some wear the red monk’s robe, others wear a white under garment (*sham thabs*) and a white shawl, or white under garment with a red shawl or red under garment with a white shawl. The dress should be worn during the ritual of subjugating spirits. For more details, see Nyi zla he ru ka 2003: 84–85.

The hair should not be washed (*skru*), brushed (*shad*), shaved (*bzhar*) or cut (*gtub*), but instead is coiled on top of the head (Ibid.: 88). The right side of the topknot (*thor cog*, *thod cog* or *thod gtsugs*) stands for the Ḍāka (*dpa' bo* or hero) and the left side for the Ḍakinī (*dpa' mo* or heroine) (Ibid.: 89).

The importance for a tantric practitioner of having long hair is so great that those who do not have much hair have to wear a false plaited topknot during the rituals. Thus, the long hair and the white shawl are the hallmarks of a tāntrika.

With such a rigorous training, it is not surprising to hear that nowadays, not many even finish the preliminary practices. Within the present-day Rebkong tantric community, it seems a tantric practitioner is allowed to wear the white robe once she or he has completed mastering the *gtum mo* (practice of inner heat).<sup>20</sup>

### The Monastic Centres

Rebkong has been a Dge lugs pa stronghold since the seventeenth century.<sup>21</sup> Earlier, the 'Bri gung bka' brgyud and Sa skya schools played a major role in the religious history of Rebkong ('Jigs med theg mchog 1988: 65–192). The tantric community from Rebkong, on the other hand, is an independent subgroup of the Rnying ma pa tradition.<sup>22</sup> However, within the local area the influence of these practitioners seems to be eclipsed by the more powerful order, the Dge lugs. By claiming an alternative form of religious power and therefore providing another form of access to the transcendental, the tantric practitioners, with their less centralised and hierarchical community, were not compatible with the Dge lugs and increasingly became under suspicion. Their

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<sup>20</sup> Discussion with Lce nag tshang hum chen, Xining, August 2006.

<sup>21</sup> This refers to the time when Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho (1606–1677) became the head of the Shar skal ldan lineage of Rong bo monastery. Rong bo bde chen chos 'khor gling was founded in 1342 by Rong bo bsam gtan rin chen. For more on this, see Brag mgon pa dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas: 304–11.

<sup>22</sup> I am leaving out here the tantric communities that belong to the Bon order.

exclusion is evident in the setting of these monasteries, which are all located in the outskirts of Rebkong, beyond the power orbit.

The members of the Rebkong tantric community were affiliated to two branches, the *Srib kyi gdan sa gsum* (the three seats on the shady side) and the *Nyin gyi dgon pa gsum* (the three monasteries on the sunny side). These refer to the location of the monasteries on each side of the mountains near the town, with the Dgu River marking the border between the two traditions and their sites.

The main monasteries which belong to the ‘shady side’ are Rig ’dzin dpal ldan bkra shis’s seat, Rig ’dzin rab ’phel gling; Spyang lung dpal chen nam mkha’ ’jigs med’s monastery, Khyung mgon mi ’gyur rdo rje gling and Zhabs dkar tshogs drug rang grol’s monastic seat, G.ya’ ma bkra shis ’khyil.

The main monasteries on the ‘sunny side’ are Chos dbyings stobs ldan rdo rje’s seat, Ko’u sde dgon rdzogs chen nam rgyal gling,<sup>23</sup> Khams bla khrag ’thung nam mkha’ rgya mtsho’s seat, Dgon la kha o rgyan nam grol gling; and Mag gsar kun bzang stob ldan dbang po’s seat, Rig ’dzin pad ma nam grol gling.

Those belonging to the ‘shady side’ followed the tradition of Smin grol gling; the followers of the ‘sunny side’ emphasised the teachings of Klong chen snying thig, the cycle of teachings revealed by ’Jigs med gling pa (1730–1798).

The tantric community was thus known as the *Nyin lta (mtha or tha) sngags mang*, the tantric community of the sunny side and the *Srib lta sngags mang*, the tantric community of the shady side. Nyang Snang mdzad rdo rje, by being a disciple of Zhabs dkar tshogs drug rang grol, was a member of the *Srib lta sngags mang*, the tantric community of the shady side’.

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<sup>23</sup> Considering that Chos dbyings stobs ldan rdo rje is seen as the third reincarnation of Rig ’dzin dpal ldan bkra shis, he should belong to the *Srib lta sngags mang* (Tantric community of the shady side). However, his monastery is considered as one of the main monasteries of the *Nyin lta sngags mang* (Tantric community of the sunny side). It therefore seems that Chos dbyings stobs ldan rdo rje created his new incarnation lineage with the founding of his monastery.

### The Hermit of Nyang

The life of Nyang snang mdzad rdo rje is particularly relevant in the context of this book on the production and dissemination of texts because he dedicated his whole life to this purpose. As an industrious scribe and editor of numerous religious texts, he actively promoted the diffusion and transmission of the *sngags pa* practice. But let me first introduce the manuscript before presenting his life.

The autobiography is entitled *Precious Garland: The Life Story of Snang mdzad rdo rje, born in Nyang*.<sup>24</sup> The copy in Xining had been handwritten in *dbu med* (cursive) script and consisted of fifty-four folios. The first two front pages contained illustrations of the Buddha Śā kyamuni, Padmasambhava, Spyang lung dpal chen nam mkha' 'jigs med and Pad ma rang grol.

The autobiography is composed in *skung yig* (abbreviated writing), which was later deciphered and re-written in *dbu can* (headed letters). This part of the text runs to one hundred and sixty pages. In addition to that, disciples of Nyang snang mdzad rdo rje have produced a biography of him, which consists of thirty pages.<sup>25</sup> The original copy of the autobiography, the deciphered version, and the biography are all in the possession of the Ngakmang Research Institute in Xining, Qinghai (PRC).

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<sup>24</sup> *Nyang skyes snang mdzad rdo rje'i rnam thar rin chen phreng ba.*

<sup>25</sup> *Gsang chen btsan pa'i gsal byed rje btsun snang mdzad rdo rje rin po che'i sku tshes tha ma'i rnam thar byung tshul u pa la'i chun po.*





Fig 3: Nyang snang mdzad rdo rje's autobiography. Original manuscript in possession of the Ngakmang Research Institute.

The life of Nyang snang mdzad rdo rje starts in a hamlet called Nyang, near Rebkong. It is the year of the horse. In the western calendar, it was 1798. An uncle offers incense to the deities and names the new born child Pad ma dbang rgyal.

Being born into a household of tantric practitioners, Nyang snang mdzad rdo rje grows up in an environment where he is used to seeing his father or other elders of the immediate family perform rituals and religious practices. Thus, one of his favourite childhood games was to make *gtor ma* (offering cakes) from the soil and throw them occasionally to his play mates. Or he would draw an effigy of a person he disliked, recite a maledictory mantra, perform the necessary rituals and hope that his curse would work.

When he was five years old, he writes on his clothes the word 'monk', a sign to reveal to others that he wanted to live the life of a celibate practitioner. This seems to be a rather unusual wish given the fact that most of the tantric

practitioners in his surroundings were lay tantric practitioners. By emphasising this childhood wish in his writing, Nyang snang mdzad rdo rje actually models his life on that of his master, Zhabs dkar tshogs drug rang grol, who had been ordained at the age of twenty.<sup>26</sup>

From a very young age, Nyang snang mdzad rdo rje observed the supernatural powers of the tantric practitioners. Thus, when a wolf kills one of the family's goats, he seeks revenge by resorting to mystic power. Seeing how the elders perform wrathful rituals, the boy, aged seven, performs a ritual practice to kill the wolf. When he hears later that a wolf has been killed by a hunter, he happily believes that his curse has worked.

### **Buddhist Education**

The early years of Nyang snang mdzad rdo rje revolve around learning and perfecting Tibetan calligraphy, memorising prayers, learning to paint thangkas and making ritual objects. He begins his Buddhist education with his two uncles of whom one, Dkon mchog, seems to have made a lasting impression on him. He recalls his childhood memories of that uncle: "I was angry at him [Dkon mchog] and regarded him like an enemy. [...] He was very strict with me and often beat me" (Nyang snang mdzad rdo rje 2006: 5). Dkon mchog thus made him memorise Buddhist texts and prayers and sometimes he would lock the young boy inside the room and make him recite for several consecutive days the prayers he had learned. The rigorous studies combined with the strict teaching methods of his uncle seemed too much for the nine year old boy. Nyang snang mdzad rdo rje admits he was so desperate that he is even tempted by the idea of committing suicide (Ibid.). But he thinks of a better way of getting rid of his uncle: he prepares a *gtor ma*, draws the effigy of the uncle on it, recites some maledictory mantras, and visualises the curse to the uncle. The uncle, however, continues to live for another ten years.

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<sup>26</sup> Ricard 2001: 33. For a discussion on how Tibetan life stories repeat certain idealised models, see Gyatso 1999: 102–114.

When Nyang snang mdzad rdo rje is eight years old, he meets Pad ma rang grol. The encounter with his future teacher is depicted as an auspicious moment in his autobiography as Pad ma rang grol predicts to others: “This child will be a good practitioner” (Ibid.: 4). Nyang snang mdzad rdo rje then receives his first oral transmission of the preliminary practices from him. With the receipt of the transmission, Pad ma rang grol becomes the guru of Nyang snang mdzad rdo rje. Thus, at the age of eight, he fulfils the prerequisite of becoming a tantric practitioner.

At the age of fifteen, Nyang snang mdzad rdo rje takes his monastic vows and is given the name Bstan 'dzin rgya mtsho. Ten years later, he is fully ordained.

Nyang snang mdzad rdo rje wears a monastic robe but according to the tradition of a tantric practitioner, he keeps his hair long. Inevitably, he becomes the subject of mockery for his unusual appearance. He tells of an incident he encounters when he wore his monk's robe for a teaching:

At that time, I had long hair. I wore my monk's robe and went to the teachings. On the way, some monks pulled my robes and asked me whether I would sell my robes to them. I felt ashamed. (Nyang snang mdzad rdo rje 2006: 12)

In his autobiography, Zhabs dkar had also mentions the reaction of others to his long hair:

I went to Doby [Rdo bis] Monastery and had robes made. In those days my hair was about three feet long. One of the monks at the hermitages seized a sharp wool-shearing knife and teased me, saying, “Eh, what a nice sheep from Sho'ong! Looks like he's ready to be sheared!” Everybody around burst into laughter. (Ricard 2001: 33)

Following the earlier advice of Khyung lung ras pa dam tshigs rdo rje, the twenty-three year old Nyang snang mdzad rdo rje goes for a one-year retreat

where he perfects the *yi dam* (tutelary deity) practice. His meditative experiences take him to unknown places where he is shown the Naga treasure text and assumes the form of *Rta mgrin* (Hayagrīva) and kills *Ra hu la* (Rāhula), the black demon. He gains confidence in his ability to visualise and sees himself sitting on a throne and giving empowerments to others or subduing harmful spirits from the underworld. From then onwards, Nyang snang mdzad rdo rje follows many masters and starts copying or writing down their works. He is also invited by the public to perform rituals or to calculate astrological charts for them. At the age of thirty, he becomes a Vajra master, a person able to teach the secret doctrines (Nyang snang mdzad rdo rje 2006: 15).

Nyang snang mdzad rdo rje receives the teachings and transmissions of many Buddhist masters, but the main teachers he follows are Pad ma rang grol and Zhabs dkar.

### **The Master's Scribe**

At the age of thirty one, Nyang snang mdzad rdo rje meets Zhabs dkar, who had returned from Central Tibet. He follows Zhabs dkar's teachings at G.ya' ma bkra shis 'kyil and the first task given to Nyang snang mdzad rdo rje is to write down *Mi shes mun pa thug po sel ba'i lam rim gsal ba'i sgron* (The Torch That Illuminates the Stages of the Path and Dispels the Darkness of Ignorance), a work on the *lam rim* (Stages of the path) which Zhabs dkar composed. After completing this, he gathers all the *mgur* (spiritual hymns) by Zhabs dkar and writes them down.

Zhabs dkar also instructs him to write down the biography of Spyang lung dpal chen nam mkha' 'jigs med. As Nyang snang mdzad rdo rje recalls:

One day, Rinpoche [Zhabs dkar] said, "There should be an autobiography of your Lama Spyang lung Rinpoche for the later generation. Write down a draft and bring it to me." Thus, during the *Mani* session, the doctors from Bde kha and Spyang lung Rinpoche's disciples compared their notes and wrote a draft. They thought the biography was too short.

During the morning meditation of the Sadhana practice, I saw in a dream experience symbolic scripts [Dākinī writing] filling the assembly hall. [These letters were] the best U chen letters [I have seen] and I was satisfied. I told this to the others and they all agreed that it was a sign that the life story [of Spyang lung Rinpoche] had to be concise.

I gave the draft to Rinpoche [Zhabs dkar] who was at that time in retreat. He said: “Oh, take this draft and while on retreat, concentrate yourself and write a biography and bring it to me on the eleventh day of the fourth month.” I thus stayed in retreat and wrote the biography. On the eleventh day of the fourth month, I handed it to Rinpoche. He said: “If the life story is well written, I will give you a reward. If it is not well written, I will have you pay a fine of one gold coin.” Having read it, he put a Kha btags [ceremonial scarf] on top of a cup filled with yoghurt and said that it was well written. He then wrote the concluding part and handed it to me. (Ibid.: 18)

Zhabs dkar also gives him the task of collecting the works of Pad ma rang grol. Not only that, it is Zhabs dkar who instructs Nyang snang mdzad rdo rje to put his own works in a statue in order for others to know in the future that he has been the collector of Zhabs dkar’s work:

Move your chapel to Bkra shis chos gling, at the top of the mountain. In the [chapel], place a statue of U rgyan Rinpoche [Padmasambhava]. To its right, place a statue of the Great Compassionate [Avalokiteśvara]. To the left, place a statue of yourself. In there, put all your written works. Later, when people come to see [it], they will say that these are the complete works of the Hermit of Nyang, the collector of Lama Zhabs dkar’s teachings. (Ibid.: 26)

Many of Zhabs dkar’s works become the subject of Nyang snang mdzad rdo rje’s teachings, which he transmitted to other members of the Rebkong tantric community and to the lay community. When Zhabs dkar realises that he has not long to live, he urges Nyang snang mdzad rdo rje to finish writing the end-verses to all the volumes of works he has collected. Soon afterwards, Zhabs dkar dies.

The remaining years of Nyang snang mdzad rdo rje's life are spent in giving blessings, teachings, transmissions, rebuilding and consecrating chapels, pacifying tribal feuds, curing people from illnesses and spending time in retreat.

When 'Jigs med theg mchog stan pa rgyal mtshan (1853–1914) was recognised as the second reincarnation of Zhabs dkar, Nyang snang mdzad rdo rje becomes one of his teachers. The disciple becomes the teacher as the teacher becomes the disciple.

When Nyang snang mdzad rdo rje died in 1874, he was one of the influential figures of the Rebkong tantric community and over the years had attracted a large group of disciples. The number of high Lamas and tantric practitioners present at his funeral revealed the extent of his importance within the community (See Lce nag tshang hum chen and Ye shes 'od zer sgrol ma 2004: 886–904). Many of his own works have survived and have been reprinted by the Ngakmang Research Institute in Xining (Nyang snang mdzad rdo rje 2006). Although his biographers write that prayers were performed for the swift return of a reincarnation, so far no reincarnation of Nyang snang mdzad rdo rje has been found.

To sum up, the activities of Nyang snang mdzad rdo rje did not end with copying and collating materials—routine tasks which are commonly associated with that of the scribe. He took a more active role by transmitting and interpreting the teachings of Zhabs dkar to other practitioners. In doing so, he was instrumental in preserving and ensuring the continuity of a tradition.

### **Conclusion**

The tantric community's decentralised and non-hierarchical structure, coupled with the bypassing of the officially sanctioned monastic centres, allowed more flexibility and freedom for the recognition and development of outstanding and charismatic individuals.<sup>27</sup> By taking the route of the tantric practitioner,

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<sup>27</sup> For a discussion on this, see Gyatso and Havnevik (eds) 2005: 12.

Buddhist masters such as Zhabs dkar tshogs drug rang grol or Nyang snang mdzad rdo rje found an avenue to distinguish themselves outside the conventional monastic institutions.

After his death, Nyang snang mdzad rdo rje, once an ordinary celibate tantric practitioner, became known as Rje btsun Snang mdzad rdo rje Rin po che, or the Revered Precious Snang mdzad rdo rje. During his lifetime, however, he was widely known as *Nyang gyi mtshams pa*, the Hermit of Nyang, an epithet referring to his long solitary retreats.

Among Nyang snang mdzad rdo rje's major contributions to the tantric community is his work as a scribe and cataloguer. Without the *dkar chag* (catalogue) written by him, it would have been almost impossible, for example, for the Ngakmang Research Institute to find the complete guidance text composed by Rdzog chen chos dbyings stobs ldan rdo rje to the *Rta phag yid bzhin nor bu* (The Wish-fulfilling Gem, Hayagrīva and Vārāhī).<sup>28</sup>

The reason why this cycle of teachings holds such great importance for the Institute is that the lineage of *The Wish-fulfilling Gem, Hayagrīva and Vārāhī* was spread throughout A mdo by Zhabs dkar. The teachings are presently practised in A chung rnam rdzong, Sho'ong, Thun de and Mgo log. The significance of Nyang snang mdzad rdo rje's role and his activity as a scribe in retracing this guidance text is not to be underestimated.

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<sup>28</sup> The treasure text *Rta phag yid bzhin nor bu* was revealed by Kun bzang bde chen rgyal po (b. in 1736 and died before 1791), known in other areas and times as Kha rag gter ston, Kong po gter chen or 'Brug thang gter ston. For a short biography on Kun bzang bde chen rgyal po and the lineage of *The Wish-fulfilling Gem, Hayagrīva and Vārāhī* see Ricard 2001: 569–76. The teachings of *The Wish-fulfilling Gem, Hayagrīva and Vārāhī* date back to Padmasambhava who is said to have transmitted them to his consort Ye shes mtsho rgyal. The cycle of teachings have not been interrupted since then and have been transmitted through great masters including Chos rgyal ngag gi dbang po, Zhabs dkar tshogs drug rang grol, 'Gro mgon pad ma rgya mtsho, Shug gseb rje btsun chos nyid bzang mo and Dil mgo mkhyen brtse.

The activities of the Ngakmang Research Institute do not differ too far from the ones performed by Nyang snang mdzad rdo rje. The Institute contributes to the self-conscious revival by re-printing lost and rare manuscripts. The institute has also imported a social ethic to the tradition and is involved in humanitarian projects such as promoting literacy and health projects. It has introduced some innovations into the tradition—a good example is the founding of a tantric practitioners' school where young Tibetans are trained in tantric and secular education. It is tempting to conclude from this by saying that they are involved in what Hobsbawm and Ranger termed 'the invention of tradition' (Hobsbawm and Ranger (eds) 1992). But more research needs to be conducted before any conclusion can be reached on such questions.

Just as Nyang snang mdzad rdo rje was engaged in copying, collating and annotating manuscripts, the Ngakmang Research Institute, while it uses modern technologies, is following in his steps in the practices of integrating editorial and printing activities within a religious tradition. The scribal practice has a long tradition in Tibet and it is evident that this tradition, facilitated with modern technologies, is being continued up to the present day.



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