

A Brief History of Nub-ri: Ethnic Interface, Sacred Geography, and Historical Migrations in a Himalayan Locality¹

Abstract

Nub-ri is a frontier area of mixed Tibetan and Ghale ethnicity transecting the border between Tibet and Nepal. This paper examines primary sources relating to the history of Nub-ri, including Tibetan histories, administrative documents, and oral narratives. The intent is to document the history of this area and analyze long-term associations between local and regional processes prior to the time that Nub-ri was divided between Tibet and Nepal in 1856. The paper illustrates how the current socio-cultural milieu developed and was partially shaped by exogenous forces.

1 Preliminary Considerations

Nub-ri is a region of high elevation transecting the border between Tibet and Nepal's Gorkha District. Traditionally the area comprised the upper reaches of the Buri River in Nepal as well as areas to the north of the Himalayan passes. Existing for centuries as a frontier area [defined by van Spengen as "a border area in which the effective territorial control of the central state is limited" (2000: 49)], today Nub-ri is inhabited by a mixture of ethnic Tibetans and Ghales.²

Until recently Nub-ri remained an ethnographic *terra incognita*, being described sketchily in only a few scholarly works (Kawakita 1957, Aris 1975, Dobremez & Jest 1976, Snellgrove 1989).³ A paucity of written sources pertaining to the history of the area comes as no surprise, since the area never constituted an independent kingdom, nor was it ever a major cultural center from where trends emanated and disseminated.⁴ Regardless, the residents of Nub-ri never existed in a political, economic, or cultural vacuum, so it is possible to gain some insights into migrations and settlement patterns by interpreting the evidence that does exist in light of

regional historical processes. Doing so can highlight how macro-level political and economic developments helped shape the indigenous milieus that are often the focus of anthropological studies in the Himalayas. A similar approach has long been advocated in anthropology from the perspective of political economy (see Wolf 1982, Roseberry 1994). However, in the case of Nub-ri the incomplete and often ambiguous nature of the data mitigates against situating the analysis in such a theoretical framework. At this point it is preferable to present and clarify the existing data in order to reveal historical processes that may have been common throughout the region. This study rejects any hint of systemic closure, and instead examines the impact that exogenous forces had on settlement history and the rise of social structures in Nub-ri.

Nub-ri is no exception to the rule that political and ethnic boundaries fluctuate through time. Prior to the 1850s Nub-ri was a part of Tibet, albeit a frontier area. Nub-ri only became incorporated within the political domains of Nepal after the second Tibeto-Nepali conflict (1855-1856) that resulted in the division of Nub-ri into segments located in Nepal and Tibet (China), as reflected by today's international border. Since Nepali sources pertaining to Nub-ri have yet to be accessed, the present discussion is limited to the period up until that conflict.

Nub-ri spans several ecological zones, from relative lowlands (2,000 meters) where the land is fertile and forests abound, to upland villages (3,000 meters and above) where the residents engage in a typical agro-pastoral highland economy, to the high Himalayan grazing grounds (above 4,000 meters) that support large bovine populations, and finally to the Tibetan Plateau beyond those passes. For the sake of clarity, Nub-ri is divided as follows in this paper: Northern Nub-ri refers to that part which is on the northern slope of the Himalayas in what is now Tibet (China). Upper Nub-ri refers to the highest stretches of the Buri Gandhaki lying to the south of the Himalayan barrier where the villages range in altitude from 2,550 to 3,800 meters. Finally, Ku-tang refers to a distinct area of lower elevation (1,800 to 2,500 meters) partially isolated by thick forests and deep gorges. The inhabitants of Upper and Northern Nub-ri are for the most part Tibetan in origin and speak a Western Tibetan dialect, while the people of Ku-tang are a blend of ethnic Tibetans and Ghales whose language is not mutually intelligible with any Tibetan dialect. Ku-tang has always been considered distinct from Nub-ri, yet is included in this historical sketch since intensive long-term contacts between the contiguous

areas have resulted in a high level of social, economic, and religious interdependence.

2 Nub-ri and Gung-thang

The early history of Nub-ri is best understood in light of the history of Western Tibet, or mNga'-ris sKor-gsum (see Tucci 1956, Petech 1977, 1978, 1980, 1984, and 1994, Beckwith 1987, Vitali 1996). Prior to the rise of the Tibetan Empire, Western Tibet was the home of the Zhang-zhung kingdom that was conquered by Srong-btsan sGam-po around 645 C. E. (Uray 1972: 6). Afterwards it was incorporated into the nascent Tibetan Empire as a principality, the capital of which was located at Khyung-lung Fort (Lalou 1965: 204). Very little is known about Zhang-zhung, yet by virtue of geographical proximity, Nub-ri could have been a part of that kingdom.

Srong-btsan sGam-po extended his influence to the area north of Nub-ri through the establishment of a "border taming" (*mtha'-dul*) temple at sPra-dun-rtse, one of a series of temples that was conceived of as a means to symbolically stake out Tibetan territory and from where Buddhism (and political control) could be extended to the non-Tibetan border regions (Aris 1979: 28). sPra-dun-rtse and its branch at Legs-rtse were to play an important role in Nub-ri history.

After the assassination in 842 C. E. of gLang-dar-ma, Tibet's last emperor, descendants of the royal family migrated westward to establish new kingdoms. According to most sources gLang-dar-ma's grandson *mnga'-bdag* dPal-'khor-btsan had two sons, the elder being bKra-shis brTsegs-pa-dpal and the younger being sKyid-lde Nyi-ma-mgon. sKyid-lde Nyi-ma-mgon migrated to mNga'-ris and took control of a vast stretch of territory that was then divided by his three sons into the Western Tibetan kingdoms of La-dwags, Pu-rangs/Ya-rtse, and Gu-ge respectively (see Tucci 1956: 51-60, Sørensen 1994, Vitali 1996 for discussions of the genealogies). bKra-shis brTsegs-pa-dpal's grandson 'Od-lde migrated to Mang-yul Gung-thang shortly thereafter and established a kingdom. Although the Gung-thang rulers represent the senior-most line of descent from the medieval Tibetan emperors, they were overshadowed in later historical accounts by their cousins to the west, presumably due to the latter's involvement with the reintroduction of Buddhism into Tibet. Nevertheless, the Gung-thang kings did make their presence known on the Himalayan frontier.

The earliest indirect evidence of Upper Nub-ri's settlement history is found in the writings of Mi-la Ras-pa (1040-1123) who journeyed to the area during the late eleventh century (rDo-rje mgur-drug: 67b-68a). At rNal-'byor Cave, a site presently identified with a cave above the village of Ros,⁵ Mi-la Ras-pa states that he went to a "land of a different language", meaning that the residents spoke a vernacular that was dissimilar to Tibetan (Aris 1975: 50). Mi-la Ras-pa denigrates Upper Nub-ri as an "uncultured realm of darkness" (*mtha'-'khob mun-pa'i smag-rum*) and its inhabitants as "bovines" (*dud-'gro*) (rDo-rje mgur-drug: 67b-68a), a derogatory observation indicating that he considered them to be less than human. Similar remarks about peoples inhabiting the Tibetan borderlands were common among Tibetan travelers through the ages. Mi-la Ras-pa's statements can be interpreted to mean that Nub-ri at the time of his visit was inhabited by a non-Tibetan people who did not practice Buddhism. Since the account of Mi-la Ras-pa's journey was not written until the late fifteenth century, this evidence is by no means conclusive.

Northern and Upper Nub-ri were probably incorporated into the Gung-thang realm shortly after the inception of that kingdom. Kah:thog *rig-'dzin* Tshe-dbang Nor-bu, an eminent eighteenth century Tibetan historian (for a brief biography see Richardson 1967), states that the domain of Gung-thang stretched from Se-rib⁶ in the southwest to Ting-wa-ri⁷ in the southeast, with Ros⁸ and the mountain dPung-rgyan (Nep: Manaslu) occupying the middle border region (Gung-thang gdung-rabs: 90). From Tshe-dbang Nor-bu's description it seems as if Nub-ri held some symbolic significance for the Gung-thang rulers: "In the middle of Gung-thang is lofty and rugged Nub-ri. The mountain to the right resembles a king seated on a throne. The mountain to the left resembles a queen pregnant with child. At the place called Tho-le in the upland pasture they [the Gung-thang rulers?] took up residence and built a fort" (Gung-thang gdung-rabs: 92).⁹

The best hint for the timing of Nub-ri's incorporation into Gung-thang is found in the following passage from Tshe-dbang Nor-bu's history: "During his reign, Lha-mchog-lde [late 11th C.E.], the eldest [son of bTsan-lde], extended his realm beyond its extent of former times. In Nub-ri, the rugged mountainous area in the center [of his realm] which resembles a great highland wrapped in a silk curtain, he built Physis-khab-gong Palace – a royal residence together with an enclosure. That was at the time when Mi-la Ras-pa was attaining complete perfection and went to Za-'og Cave" (Gung-thang gdung-rabs: 93).¹⁰

During the twelfth century the 'Bri-gung-pa bKa'-rgyud-pas made significant headway in Western Tibet. Their success was partially attributable to royal patronage from the rulers of Gu-ge, Pu-rangs, and Ya-rtse (Petech 1978). During the last years of the twelfth century, Northern Nub-ri was under the religious sway of the 'Bri-gung-pas (Vitali 1996: 395). However this changed between 1195 and 1200 with the founding of rTa-sga Monastery by Sangs-rgyas Tshal-pa.¹¹ rTa-sga is situated just beyond the current border of Nepal in Northern Nub-ri.

Some sources state that the Tshal-pas were among the first Tibetan Buddhists to make contact with the Mongols, having received royal patronage as early as 1215 (Petech 1983: 180). During the thirteenth century different Tibetan sects were patronized by separate branches of the Mongol royal family. Khubilai initially patronized the Tshal-pas, but then shifted his allegiance to the Sa-skyapas, who eventually emerged as the most powerful of the Tibetan sects of the thirteenth century under Sa-skya Pandita and his nephew 'Phags-pa Blo-gros rGyal-mtshan (Petech 1983: 182-183). Whereas the 'Bri-gung-pas continued to oppose Mongol domination until their monastery was sacked in 1290 (Petech 1983: 189), the Tshal-pas cast their lot with Sa-skya. During the thirteenth century the Gung-thang kings formed a marital union with the Sa-skya royalty. bTsun-lde, the ninth king of Gung-thang, married 'Phags-pa Blo-gros rGyal-mtshan's sister Nyi-'bum (Bod-rje gdung-rabs: 15b-16a). 'Phags-pa had been appointed "Imperial Preceptor" over Tibet by Kubilai (Shakabpa 1988: 65), so Gung-thang and Sa-skya were close political allies at that crucial time in Tibetan history. Gung-thang remained semi-independent, at least economically, for the Mongol census specifically mentions that 767 households (*hor-dud*) were subjects of that kingdom (Petech 1990: 53). Whether or not Nub-ri was included in this census cannot be determined.

Gung-thang control over Nub-ri was threatened by an invasion between 1235 and 1239 (see Vitali 1996: 447-448, n.748 on the establishment of these dates) by the kingdom of Ya-rtse (Nep: Khāsa or Khasiyā) centered in Jumla, Western Nepal.¹² One result was that mGon-po-lde (the father of bTsun-lde), the Gung-thang ruler at that time, was deposed (Vitali 1996) and then died (or was killed) in Nub-ri (Gung-thang gdung-rabs: 93). The tide quickly turned, for the second war with Ya-rtse around 1250 resulted in victory and the reclamation of Gung-thang domains (Vitali 1996: 449, n.752). A few decades later (1277-1280) Gung-thang forces under the leadership of the king 'Bum-lde-mgon (bTsun-lde's son)

extended the boundaries of their realm and built a series of forts. One of these was presumably the fort referred to in the following passage: “In order to suppress the barbarous border region (*mtha'-'khob*) of Nub-ri, he [’Bum-lde-mgon] built Brag-rdzong Nag-po (Black Cliff Fort) at Rod [Ros]” (Gung-thang gdung-rabs: 108).¹³ Whether Upper Nub-ri was ethnically Tibetan at that time is uncertain, especially in light of the similarity to Mi-la Ras-pa’s description of the area as a “barbarous border region”. As mentioned before, such comments are generally applied by Tibetans to non-Tibetan areas along the Himalayan borderlands. The remains of several forts are still visible in Nub-ri, most notably one across the river from Ros. Albeit of uncertain antiquity, the ruins sits on a level plain above a cliff dropping to the river and below a cliff rising to peaks, so the descriptive name (Black Cliff Fort) seems appropriate. The garrisoning of this fort may represent the first expansion of ethnic Tibetans into Upper Nub-ri.

Jumla military influence in Northern Nub-ri was again present during the reigns of the Ya-rtse kings Ādityamalla (d. 1328?) and Punyamalla, as evidenced by two copper-plate inscriptions of 1321 and 1337 formerly in the possession of rTa-sga Monastery.¹⁴ The first directs the lama of rTa-sga to perform an annual long-life ceremony (*sku-rim*) for the benefit of the Ya-rtse ruler, and in compensation rTa-sga would receive protection against the theft of their property. The second document makes similar references to the ceremonies, and further provides a tax exemption for the monastery. The shift from an antagonistic relationship to one of cooperation between Gung-thang and Ya-rtse is perhaps related to the fact that Ādityamalla had been a “princely monk” (*lha-btsun*) at Sa-skya prior to his ascendancy (Petech 1980: 94), and thus Sa-skya may have been trying to influence Ya-rtse through Ādityamalla (Vitali 1996: 457). While establishing cordial relations with the Tibetan neighbors to the north, Ādityamalla embarked upon a series of military campaigns against the Kathmandu Valley (Petech 1980: 95, Pandey 1997: 134). The copper-plate inscriptions are the last evidence we have for Ya-rtse presence in Northern Nub-ri. Their influence must have waned shortly thereafter since the kingdom collapsed during the middle of the fourteenth century (Pandey 1997: 139-146). Meanwhile, the Sa-skya-Gung-thang alliance unraveled just prior to the collapse of the Yüan Dynasty. In 1345 a rebellion led by the king of Gung-thang was launched against Mongol-Sa-skya authority. Mongol troops were dispatched and the revolt quelled (Petech 1990).

3 The Hidden Land (*sbas-yul*) and the mNga'-bdag Lineage

By the late fourteenth century the Gung-thang kings aligned themselves with the rNying-ma-pas, as evidenced by the royal patronage given to *rig-'dzin* rGod-ldem-can (see Ehrhard 1997).¹⁵ This remarkable “treasure revealer” (*gter-ston*) was active throughout the Himalayas during the late fourteenth century when he opened many “hidden lands” (*sbas-yul*), sacred domains that are meant to be settlement destinations for descendents of Tibet’s imperial emperors during times of crisis (Childs 1999; Ehrhard 1999). Tshe-dbang Nor-bu writes that Phun-tshogs-lde, the fourteenth king in the Gung-thang line of succession, invited *rig-'dzin* rGod-ldem-can to establish residence at nearby Ri-bo dPal-'bar Monastery (situated near Rag-ma village in sKyid-grong) in 1389, and from there *rig-'dzin* rGod-ldem-can traveled to Nub-ri to open the hidden land sKyid-mo-lung (Gung-thang gdung-rabs: 119).

A guide to sKyid-mo-lung that is attributed to (but not necessarily written by) the great *gter-ston* comments: “Tibetan is spoken in the upper part [of the valley]. In the lower part [of the valley], there are many dissimilar languages” (sKyid-mo-lung lam-yig: 2a). This statement mirrors the current ethno-linguistic division of the valley. A Western Tibetan dialect is spoken in Upper and Northern Nub-ri, as opposed to a unique vernacular in Ku-tang that seems to be a blend of Ghale and Tibetan. However, the dating of the text cited above is uncertain. Although the document may not originate from the time of *rig-'dzin* rGod-ldem-can, it certainly existed when the “Mongol Repeller” (*sog bzlog-pa*) Blo-gros rGyal-mtshan (b. 1552) exhorted his disciples to seek safety in Nub-ri during a time of political upheaval (Sog-bzlog nam-thar: 16b), and in the late seventeenth century when Gar-dbang rDo-rje (1640-1685)¹⁶ visited Upper Nub-ri and Ku-tang using *rig-'dzin* rGod-ldem-can’s writings as a guide (see Gar-rdor nam-thar).

Padma Don-grub (1668-1744), a lama born and raised in Ku-tang, confirms that the ethnic division existed in the late seventeenth century. Before embarking upon a journey to Tibet in 1688 some people expressed concern over his inability to speak an intelligible dialect of Tibetan. Furthermore, residents of Upper Nub-ri referred to he and his companion as “valley dwellers” (*rong-pa*), a generic term used by Tibetans to describe those non-Tibetans inhabiting lower areas (Pad-don nam-thar: 10b-12a). Similarly, Tshe-dbang Nor-bu who visited Northern Nub-ri in 1729 refers to a disciple from Ku-tang as hailing from Mon, a term traditionally re-

served for the non-Tibetan Himalayan border dwellers. In contrast, he places Northern (and Upper?) Nub-ri firmly within mNga'-ris, or Western Tibet (see Chab-shog khag). The linguistic references suggest that the first wave of ethnically Tibetan settlers (as opposed to troops garrisoning the fort) may have been present in Upper Nub-ri as early as the late fourteenth century, but were certainly established by the seventeenth century.

The identification of a "hidden land" (*sbas-yul*) in Nub-ri is significant from the perspective of the structure of historical migrations. Many prophecies (*lung-bstan*) from the fourteenth century onward state that the time to seek refuge in a hidden land is portended by Mongol invasions and threats to the lineage of the Gung-thang kings. Moreover, the same texts instruct potential settlers of a hidden land that they must be accompanied by a genealogical descendent of the imperial lineage (Childs 1999). The widely disseminated prediction of Gung-tang termination came to fruition during the seventeenth century. Tshe-dbang Nor-bu writes, "In the Iron Monkey Year of the tenth *rab-byung* [1620] the army of the king of gTsang seized Gung-thang. The lineage of the Gung-thang kings, tantric practitioners of Padmasambhava's teachings, vanished completely because the merit of Tibet was extirpated. Then, twenty-one years later in the Iron Snake Year [1641], the Oirat [Mongol] army seized the realm of gTsang" (Bod-rje gdung-rabs: 15b-16a).¹⁷

The Gung-thang lineage, a branch of Tibet's medieval imperial family that had managed to proliferate for nearly eight hundred years after the fall of the empire, was finally extinguished in 1620. However, they were not the only living descendents of the royal family living in the area, for a collateral lineage was still inhabiting the border taming (*mtha'-dul*) temple of sPra-dun-rtse and its affiliate Legs-rtse. Members of their lineage migrated to Nub-ri at an undetermined date that may have coincided with the demise of the Gung-thang kings.

The potential timing of the migration of sPra-dun-rtse's lamas to Nub-ri raises the intriguing possibility that the move occurred in response to the aforementioned prophecies and the existence of the hidden land sanctuary. Evidence for such an argument is circumstantial. In 1661 the Fifth Dalai Lama (Ngag-dbang Blo-bzang rGya-mtsho) issued a decree recognizing formal control over sPra-dun-rtse and Legs-rtse by lamas described as being descendents of the royal lineage. According to this document, "At this time [the demise of the Tibetan empire in 842 C.E.] the Ruler (*mnga'-bdag*) dPal-mgon [took control of Mang-yul Gung-thang] on account of the strong karmic force of aspirations made in previous lives.

Thenceforth, in order that it might convert those beings on the district frontiers who were difficult to convert, this undefiled lineage extending in a line from the Rulers (*mnga'-bdag*), the Religious Kings, acted as the incumbents (*gnas-'dzin*) of this temple of sPra-dun-rtse, an 'academy to tame the border' (*mtha'-dul*) . . . and (also) as the proprietors (*'dzin-bdag*) of the monastery of Legs-rtse, both its mother house and daughter house" (Aris 1975).¹⁸

The term *mnga'-bdag*, translated above by Aris as 'ruler', is generally reserved for patrilineal descendents of the Tibetan imperial line. mNga'-bdag is precisely the lineage name (*rgyud-pa'i ming*) applied to the householder lamas of Ros – the ones who currently possess the manuscript of the Fifth Dalai Lama's decree. This document constitutes important evidence that members of this lineage and their predecessors from sPra-dun-rtse and Legs-rtse were genealogically related to the kings of Gung-thang. bKra-shis rDo-rje, a senior lama of Ros' mNga'-bdag lineage who is widely acknowledged as the best informed person on local history, claims that members of the Ros community invited a junior brother of sPra-dun-rtse's incumbent to be the lama for their village. He accepted the offer. In the early 1900s the lineage holder of sPra-dun-rtse failed to produce an heir, so one of the junior members of the collateral lineage in Ros was invited back to reside there. That is how the unique document came to be housed in Ros, and not sPra-dun-rtse where it was originally issued.

The lamas of Ros assert that they are members of the descent lineage (*rgyud-pa*) of the medieval Tibetan emperor Khri-srong Lde-btsan. Other sources of evidence bolster this claim, such as the fact that their protector is gNyan-chen Thang-lha, a deity who has long been associated with the royal lineage (see Bellezza 1997). Furthermore, more than two and a half centuries ago Tshe-dbang Nor-bu wrote, "It is said that the king of La-dwags is one who belongs to the lineage of the many sons of Rig-pa-mgon [a.k.a. dPal-lde, son of sKyid-lde Nyi-ma-mgon and first king of La-dwags], Lord of Mar-yul. Not only was [his lineage] not severed, but now the *mnga'-bdag* descent lineages (*rigs-rgyud*), those who wear tiger-skin coats (*stag-shams-can*), are powerful and wealthy. They have dispersed to 'Bras-mo-ljongs (Sikkim),¹⁹ Nub-ri, Gro-shod,²⁰ and elsewhere" (Bod-rje gdung-rabs: 16b).²¹ A legend from Nub-ri recounts a bridal exchange with La-dwags in former times, perhaps indirect evidence of such a connection. However, according to bKra-shis rDo-rje, he and his cousins represent a collateral lineage of the lamas who controlled sPra-dun-

rtse and Legs-rtse. Based on the Fifth Dalai Lama's edict, this would make them a collateral lineage of the Gung-thang branch.

The date of the settlement of the mNga'-bdag ancestors in Upper Nub-ri can be established within limits. The earliest mention of the lineage occurs when Padma Don-grub of Ku-tang met with a mNga'-bdag lama in Ros in 1688, the year he went on pilgrimage to Tibet (Pad-don nam-thar: 11a). No earlier references are found, so we must rely on genealogical reconstruction to establish the date of mNga'-bdag migration to Upper Nubri. Oppitz (1968) uses a 25 year generational gap to reckon the Sherpa's date of migration to Khumbu, whereas both Clarke (1980) and Fricke (1994) use 20 years as the generational time span in their studies. Based on demographic evidence I believe that, in the case of the mNga'-bdag genealogy, neither of these figures is defensible. Today, a man in Ros is about 26 years old on average when his first child is born. Due to a high rate of infant mortality (23 per cent) and the fact that there is roughly a 50 per cent chance that the first birth will be a girl, a 20 to 25 year time interval between male generations is too short. Data on the timing of fatherhood among seven living or recently deceased mNga'-bdag males reveals that, on average, their first surviving sons (and successors due to the rule of primogeniture) were born when they were about 30. A 30 year inter-generational gap between lama and son/successor can be used as a rough guideline for establishing dates, bearing in mind that the potential for error due to stochastic variation is considerable.

The following is a list of Ros' lamas (provided by bKra-shis rDo-rje) with their approximate dates of birth calculated according to a 30 year generational gap: Karma 'Gyur-med rDo-rje (1948 - present); 'Phrin-las rGya-mtsho (1908/9 – 1951); 'Phrin-las 'Od-zer (1880); 'Gyur-med sNyan-grags (1850); bsTan-pa'i rGyal-mtshan (1820); Thub-bstan rDo-rje (1790); Kun-bzang Ye-shes 'Gyur-med (1760); Mi-'gyur Padma bsTan-'dzin (1730); 'Gyur-med Padma mThu-stobs (1700); Seng-ge rNam-rgyal (1670); bKra-shis rNam-rgyal (1640); Yon-tan Phun-tshogs (1610).

As mentioned above, the mNga'-bdag lamas were preceded in Upper Nub-ri by members of other descent lineages (*rgyud-pa*) who settled and then extended the invitation. Two of these descent lineages claim to have migrated to Upper Nub-ri from Northern Nub-ri, while one is said to have come from Barpak, a Ghale village in Gorkha District. Yon-tan Phun-tshogs, a younger brother to the incumbent at sPra-dun-rtse, was the first mNga'-bdag ancestor to settle in Ros. According to the above genealogical reckonings Yon-tan Phun-tshogs was probably born around 1610.

bKra-shis rNam-rgyal, Yon-tan Phun-tshogs' son, is credited with improving the environment for human habitation by piercing the earth with his ritual dagger (*phur-ba*) at the nearby winter pasture. A spring welled up that continues to be a reliable, year-round source of water – a critical resource without which the bovine population could not live through the winter. Thus, bKra-shis rNam-rgyal is recognized as the one who performed the miraculous act that converted the environment from a marginal land into an economically productive zone for human habitation. This symbolic act of landscape transformation bolsters the lamas' claim of spiritual authority in the region.

The concurrence of mNga'-bdag migration (early 1600s) and the demise of the Gung-thang lineage (1620) is probably not coincidental, especially in light of the nearby hidden land that is designated as a refuge for royal descendents during times of political crisis. According to a general guide to such hidden lands, "By removing the pot of precious stone filled with a measure of gold from the side of the door of sPra-dun-rtse's central temple, the place, path, and time will be right for those who wish to go to the valley of Ku-tang" (sPyi'i them-byang: 9a).²² The connection between perceptions of the sacred landscape, political prophecies, and actual migrations emanating from sPra-dun-rtse is intriguing, but nevertheless remains speculative.

4 Shifting Political Boundaries

During the early eighteenth century Tibet fell under Manchu domination (Qing Dynasty). At the time many lands in southwestern Tibet were placed under the administration of the Panchen Lamas in order to create a rivalry between them and the Dalai Lamas (Aris 1979). Gung-thang subsequently became incorporated within the administrative district (*rdzong*) of rDzong-dga', and fell under the jurisdiction of the Panchen Lamas. Evidence that Nub-ri and Ku-tang became parts of rDzong-dga' District is found in the Iron Tiger Year [1830] Tax Assessment (lCags-stag zhib-gzhung: 333), which was based on a 1740 prototype (see Surkhang 1966 and 1986 for descriptions of such documents). The extent of direct rule in Nub-ri, however, is not clear. The biography of Padma Don-grub refers to a government representative being stationed at Nang-'dzar on the northern slope of the Himalayas (Pad-don rnam-thar: 11b). No mention was

made of Tibetan government presence on the southern slope of the mountains.

Padma Dbang-'dus (b. 1697), a disciple of Padma Don-grub, provides evidence that the Bhutanese were religiously (and perhaps politically) active in Ku-tang during the late seventeenth century. His maternal uncle acted as a translator between the Bhutanese and Gorkha (Pad-dbang rnam-thar: 8b). In the past Bhutan exerted influence over many Himalayan areas including Dolpo (Snellgrove 1992) through religious institutions. At one time there may have been a 'Brug-pa bKa'-rgyud monastery in Ku-tang (Aris 1975). Also, according to legend the first temple founded at Ros was bKa'-rgyud-pa. Whether it was affiliated with the 'Brug-pa branch or the Karma-pa branch is unclear, although enduring connections with the Karma-pas indicate the latter. Ruins of that early structure are still faintly visible to the west of the current temple's site. Oral accounts state that the previous temple burned down long ago in a large and sudden conflagration. A new temple was subsequently built, and since that time religious affiliation has been predominantly rNying-ma-pa. Although the timing of these events is unclear, the current temple in Ros (Padma Chos-gling – a name that clearly indicates rNying-ma affiliation) was previously called bKa'-rgyud Chos-gling.

Prior to Gorkha ascendancy in Nepal, the possibility of Newar Malla (i.e., Kathmandu Valley) control over Nub-ri can be discounted, since by all accounts they had a difficult enough time holding onto the trade route extending up the Trisuli Valley to sKyid-grong. Furthermore, it is unlikely that one of the twenty-four minor kingdoms (Chaubisi *rājas*) of pre-unification Nepal asserted control up to Nub-ri following the collapse of the Ya-rtse kingdom. Some of these did maintain alliances with Tibetans to the north, and in one case the Parvat *rāja* rescued the king of Glo sMan-thang after the latter had been captured in battle around 1720 by Surathaśāhī, the ruler of Jumla (Pandey 1997: 204). The closest Chaubisi kingdom to the west of Nub-ri was Lamjung, which was economically connected with the residents of nearby Nyi-shang and sNar-phu (Gurung 1977). Although Lamjung had the potential to control commercial traffic coming from Nub-ri via the Larkye Pass, trade in the region was probably insignificant prior to the middle of the nineteenth century when trans-Himalayan commerce increased dramatically in connection with economic conditions and infrastructure improvements in British-India (van Spengen 2000).

By the 1720s Gorkha had become an important regional power, dominating areas up to the Trisuli River. Since a major objective of the Shah rulers was to control trans-Himalayan commerce, they may have cast an eye toward Nub-ri, yet as just mentioned the volume of trade via Nub-ri was probably minimal at the time of unification. Evidence suggests that Nub-ri remained beyond the direct administration of Gorkha even after Kathmandu had been conquered in 1769. Specifically, the above cited Iron Tiger Tax Assessment of 1830 placed Nub-ri squarely within the administrative realm of rDzong-dga' District in Tibet. Of peripheral interest are several tax documents showing that some members of gTsang, a village in Northern Nub-ri, farmed the land of and paid their taxes to bKra-shis bSam-gtan-gling Monastery in sKyid-grong until at least the middle of the nineteenth century (see Schuh 1988, Findbuchs 7, 204, and 277). During the first major conflict with Tibet (1788-1792, see Stiller 1975: 192-214; Shakabpa 1984: 158-169), Gorkha control may have extended into Nub-ri for a brief period of time when rDzong-dga' was occupied and sacked. However, the Gorkha forces were pushed back to Kathmandu in 1792 by a joint Manchu-Tibetan army and the former border was reestablished.

In 1855 another conflict erupted between Tibet and Nepal. Jang Bahadur Shah took charge over much of southern Tibet, including once again rDzong-dga' (Rose 1971: 108-116; Shakabpa 1984: 181-182). After peace agreements were reached in 1856, Jang Bahadur relinquished control over most of the occupied territories, including rDzong-dga' and sKyid-grong. One of his long-standing defense concerns was the inability to secure territory up to the watershed above sKyid-grong and gNya'-nang. Although he handed those areas back to Tibet following the war, he apparently pushed the border in Nub-ri to the natural barrier presented by the high Himalayan passes. According to oral historical accounts this was the time when Nub-ri was divided. Northern Nub-ri remained in Tibet, while Upper Nub-ri and Ku-tang became part of Nepal. Nepali administrative documents that are still kept in Nub-ri and mainly deal with taxation bear the stamp of Jang Bahadur. These are held by the descendants of an ethnically Takuri *subbha* who was sent to settle in the area and collect taxes on behalf of the Gorkha rulers.

Further evidence for the timing of this division comes from the journal of a pundit who was dispatched by the British to reconnoiter routes into Tibet. The Iron Tiger Tax Assessment clearly places Nub-ri and Ku-tang within rDzong-dga' District in 1830, yet when the pundit passed

through Upper Nub-ri in 1861 on his way to Tibet he states that the area south of the pass was considered to be Nepal's territory. Only after crossing the Himalayan divide did the pundit enter an area administered by Tibet (Montgomerie 1868). Thus, it is reasonable to conclude that the aftermath of the Tibet-Nepal war in 1855-1856 resulted in Nepal's establishment of formal control over Upper Nub-ri and Ku-tang.

5 An Enduring Legacy

To summarize, Nub-ri first appears in historical sources as a part of Gung-thang, where it remained until the demise of that kingdom. Afterwards Nub-ri became a part of rDzong-dga' District, and finally was split between Nepal and Tibet following the border war of 1855-1856. Initially, Upper Nub-ri and Ku-tang were inhabited by non-Tibetan peoples, who were gradually replaced by or assimilated with Tibetan migrants from Northern Nub-ri and elsewhere.

This study has intentionally focused on regional historical processes in order to reveal how some aspects of contemporary Nub-ri society came into being. Legacies of the historical connections are clearly evident today. For example, the residents of Rud village in Northern Nub-ri escaped the political upheavals in Tibet during the 1960s with the aid of the rTa-sga copper-plates issued by the Jumla kings in the early fourteenth century. These were presented to the Nepali government as documentary evidence that the villagers from Rud had a right to settle on land to the south of the Himalayan watershed. The government recognized the validity of their claim, and hence the village of bSam-mdo in Upper Nub-ri came into existence. In essence the people of Rud in Northern Nub-ri used a historical precedence to escape political and economic instability in Tibet.

The migration of the mNga'-bdag lamas from sPra-dun-rtse to Ros has lasting social implications in Upper Nub-ri. They have retained access to corvee labor (*'u-lag*), one of the elements of their hereditary rights as the lamas of sPra-dun-rtse. In an economy where labor is a limiting factor on household production, such an advantage has permitted them to gain control over a considerable proportion of the resources in the village of Ros. Furthermore, the presence of a lama lineage in Ros and the absence of comparable lineages in other nearby villages has a large impact on demographic trends, most notably fertility and rates of population growth. Each monk and nun initiated by one of the mNga'-bdag lamas must repay

their master through a specified number of days working at the lama's household each year. Such an incentive helps explain why there are so many more nuns in Ros than in neighboring villages – a factor that is directly responsible for a lower birth rate and slower rate of population growth (Childs 2001a, 2001b).

Although the Tibetan communities of the Himalaya have long been the focus of anthropological studies, we still know very little about the historical developments that brought such peoples to the periphery of the Tibetan world. One of the characteristic features of indigenous Tibetan populations of the Himalayas is their diversity, suggesting that migrations occurred in different waves for perhaps entirely different reasons. Interpreting Nub-ri's past in the context of regional history has hopefully illuminated processes that are similar and/or dissimilar with other areas. Such processes have comparative implications that can help us gain a better appreciation for settlement patterns in the high Himalayan valleys of Tibet, Nepal, and India.

Notes

- 1 I would like to thank lamas bKra-shis rDo-rje, Tshe-dbang rGya-mtsho, and Rig-'dzin rDo-rje of Ros for their patience in providing me with documents, oral accounts, and discussions that clarified many ambiguous points. None of my work in Nub-ri would have been possible without the generous hospitality and guidance of bKra-shis Don-grub. Furthermore, I would like to acknowledge Christopher Beckwith, Roberto Vitali, and Michael Walter for their many helpful suggestions with earlier versions of this paper. Fieldwork in Nub-ri during 1995 and 1997 was supported by grants from the Wenner-Gren Foundation and Fulbright-Hays, while the writing was supported by a Mellon Fellowship at the Australian National University, Canberra.
- 2 Ghailes are a branch of the Gurungs who are concentrated in the middle hills of Central Nepal. Ghailes speak a Tibeto-Burman language, consider themselves to have originated in Tibet (Pignède 1993), and have maintained social and economic contacts with Tibetans for several centuries. It is not unprecedented for Ghailes who inhabit highland valleys of Nepal to become culturally affiliated with Tibetans through enduring contacts (e.g., the residents of Nyishang, see van Spengen 2000). Until recently Ghailes of Barpak, Gorkha District, undertook annual trade trips to Nubri.
- 3 For an ethnographic, demographic, and economic description of Nubri see Childs (1998).
- 4 A scarcity of indigenous written source material has long been an impediment to historical studies of highland Tibetan communities in Nepal. Existing at the periph-

ery of the Tibetan cultural world, literacy in border communities is often rudimentary, and is geared primarily toward the recitation of liturgical works. Nevertheless, several scholars have made impressive headway by drawing upon indigenous written (e.g., Oppitz 1968; Gauchan and Vinding 1977; Clarke 1980; Macdonald 1980; Jackson 1978, 1984; Snellgrove 1992) and oral sources (e.g., Vinding 1978; Rauber 1980; Levine 1976; Ortner 1989). Furthermore Nepali administrative documents have shed light on historical processes and the connections between highland localities and the nascent Gorkha state (e.g., Pant and Pierce 1989), and British colonial documents have proved invaluable for the study of trans-Himalayan exchange networks (e.g., van Spengen 2000).

- 5 Ros is the indigenous name for the village that is more commonly known in Nepal as Samagaon, or Sama.
- 6 Se-rib is located in the Kali Gandakhi Valley of lower Glo sMan-thang (Nep: Mustang) (see Jackson 1978). An ethnically Tibetan enclave, it currently falls within the borders of Nepal.
- 7 Unidentified.
- 8 The spelling used by Tshe-dbang Nor-bu (Rod) leaves open the possibility for two interpretations. The first is Ros, the principle village of Upper Nub-ri. The closest village to Ros on the northern slope of the Himalayas is Rud, which has a similar yet distinct pronunciation. Therefore, Tshe-dbang Nor-bu could be referring to either Ros or Rud, but since the place name is mentioned in connection with the mountain dPung-rgyan (Nep: Manaslu), the author must be referring to Ros. dPung-rgyan dominates Ros and is the seat of the village's protector (*yul-lha*).
- 9 gung thang gi dbus nub ri gzar zhing mtho ba/ g.yas ri rgyal po khri la bzhugs pa lta bu/ g.yon ri btsun mo bu khur 'dra ba/ thang stod tho le zhes par gdan phab ste sku mkhar brtsigs/
- 10 gcen lha mchog lde'i sku rings su mnga' thang yang sngar las 'phel bar gyur cing/ gshongs dbus nub ri steng po che dar yol bres pa lta bur pho brang physis khab gong du grags pa sku mkhar lcags 'ob dang bcas pa byas/ de tsam na rje btsun chen po mi la ras pa yang grub pa brnyes te za 'og phug tu phebs pa dang dus mtshungs zer ba yang don la gnas pa nyid do/
- 11 See Deb-ther dmar-po (126-149) for biographical information; on the founding of rTa-sga see Vitali (1996: 394-395 n.639) and Tshe-nor rnam-thar (127). Sangs-rgyas Tshal-pa was a disciple of Lha-phyug Nyi-ma 'Od, who himself was a disciple of Zhang Rin-po-che (see Roerich 1988: 711-715 for biographical information), the founder of the Tshal-pa branch of the bKa'-rgyud-pa sect (Wylie 1962: 84, 158).
- 12 Ya-rtse (Nep: Khāsa or Khasiyā) is the Tibetan name of a kingdom that was originally part of Pu-rangs, but later became an independent entity. As a separate kingdom, it was centered near Jumla in what is now Western Nepal, and was ruled by a line of Malla kings (not to be confused with the Mallas of medieval Kathmandu). The history of the Jumla Malla kingdom has been discussed by Tucci (1956), Petech (1980), Vitali (1996), and Pandey (1997).
- 13 nub ri mtha' 'khob kha gnon du/ rod kyī brag rdzong nag po brtsigs/
- 14 The plates were photographed in the past, and the Nepali texts have been referred to before (Petech 1980; Pandey 1997). Unfortunately I was unable to view the

originals, but only a blurred photograph. I would like to thank rDo-rje Bla-ma of bSam-mdo village for kindly providing me with a handwritten copy of the copper plates. Those versions are transcribed below, however since I did not personally view the originals I cannot vouch for accuracy. The accompanying translation is modified from an anonymous English translation that I came across in bSam-mdo village.

Plate 1: om sva sti/ chos skyong ba'i rgyal po a jid dmal gyi dka' lung/ shar phyogs su brkos pa'i dmag dpon/ blon po gri kha ba ar ba dnang mi/ 'khor ba dmag mi rnams la gsal ba/ rta sga ba'i rgon pa ma bu lag dang bcas pa rnams/ deng rgyal po yin na mchod kyi sku'i rim 'gro byed bcug pa yin pas/ khong la sus kyang ma 'phrog ma 'then/ snyad btags pa'i slong 'gro/ 'dod 'chu gang yang ma byed par bde bar rim 'gro byed chug byas nas 'dzin rgyu'i zangs yig byin cing/ 'di la sus ma rtsis par song na gser skar cig tho rong len cing lus kyi stend du tsar drag po byas dus re 'khangs ma byed byal sva'un zla ba'i tshes bcu la skye tsher bris/

“This order is issued by the religious king A-jid-dmal [Ādityamalla] to the honorable minister Gri-kha-ba Ar-ba, the military leader appointed to the eastern region, and to all the military personnel under him. The rTa-sga monastery, mother and sons [i.e., main center and branches], are entrusted to perform a *sku-rim* offering for [the benefit of] the king. By doing so nobody is entitled to plunder or remove [any property belonging to them], nor intimidate them by force. If they perform the *sku-rim* offering, they should be left in peace. As a guarantee [of the agreement], this copper engraving is being given [to rTa-sga]. One weight of gold shall be taken immediately from whomsoever does not obey this command, and when a severe body punishment is given to him [the offender], he should not regret it. This is issued on the 10th day of the month of Saun.”

Plate 2: om sva sti/ chos skyong ba'i rgyal po shri pun dmal gyi bka' lung/ shar phyogs su bskos pa'i mi dpon/ tser rje a ti kar kar gyi las byed rnams dang/ dus tshor kyi 'grim 'grul byed pa'i dmag dpon dmag mi rnams la bsal ba rta sga sa 'di ba sngang kyang/ rgyal po na rims kyi sku'i rim 'gro dang/ sgom sgrub byed cing sdod pa'i don la phyag rgya gsum 'chug cing/ nyid kyi 'ang sku'i rim 'grol bang 'bums don zer nas/ bla ma bkra shis kun gsal pa zhu ba nan che ba 'dug pa'i don la/ rta sga ba'i ma'u snga dang bcas pa rnams dang rud snyings ko don g.yang la bsbogs pa rnams su/ khral sdud glods ka snyang btags pa'i o pa gang yang mi byed/ gal te phyag rgya mthong bzhin mi ming byung na/ khyed ring phod par zhus/ gser skar cig gi kra ro yod cing/ ngag chad gla nas brdzang ba yin pas go bar gyis/ glang lo zla ba gsum pa'i nyi shu gsum la/ rgyal sa che' shang gza' nas/

“This order is issued by the great religious king Sri dPun-dmal [Punyamalla] to the lord A-ti-kar, the appointed leader of the eastern region, to the officers of the fort, and to the military commander and his troops who make period inspections. The rTa-sga lama has been continually performing *sku-rim*, undertaking retreats and meditation, and has also agreed to read the *'Bum* scriptures for the King. The lama bKra-shis Kun-gsal-pa has emphatically requested that the rTa-sga monastery, mother and sons, and the prosperous subjects of Rud village be released from the collection of taxes, nor should they be intimidated by force. Whosoever seeing this order acts contrarily shall in retribution pay a weight of gold so that everybody shall understand [the consequences]. This is being issued from the great royal resi-

dence of Shang-gza' 23rd day of the 3rd month in the Ox Year."

- 15 *rig-'dzin* rGod-ldem-can founded the Byang-gter ("Northern Treasure") branch of the rNying-ma-pas which remained politically influential until Mongol persecution in the eighteenth century (Petech 1988). The Byang-gter school was to a certain extent anti-Mongol, as evidence by the fact that they practiced "army repelling" rituals (*dmag-bzlog*) and disseminated many anti-Mongol prophecies (*lung-bstan*), which may explain why their adherents often incurred the wrath of the Mongols. For biographic information on *rig-'dzin* rGod-ldem-can, see the following: rGod-ldem rnam-thar (summarized by Boord (1993); Gu-bkra chos-'byung: 483-489; gTer-ston brgya-rtsa: 121b-123a; Byin-rlabs gter-mtsho: 51a-53a; Dudjom Rinpoche (1991: 780-783); and Dargyay (1979: 129-132).
- 16 According to one source he was born in "g.Yam village of Nub-ri" (Gu-bkra chos-'byung), and according to another he was born in "mNyal village of Ku-tang in Nub-ri, Western Tibet" (Byin-brlabs gter-mtsho: 54a). Both references undoubtedly refer to the village of sNyam, situated in Northern Nub-ri.
- 17 de ltar mched dang khri rab ma bsgrang bar/ yab sras rkyad bsgrangs rgyal rab nyer gsum mthar/ rab byung bcu pa'i lcags pho sprel lo la/ gtsang pa rgyal po'i dpung gi gung thang blang/ gu ru'i sngags pa gung thang rgyal po'i gdung/ gangs can bsod nams bog bas de tsam gyur/ de nas nyer gcig lo 'das lcags sbrul la/ o rod dpung gi gtsang pa'i rgyal srid blang/ lcags sprel de nas da lta'i shing glang bar/ mi lo brgya dang nyi shu rtsa lnga song/
- 18 Aris published a photograph of this document along with a partial translation of the text. Since the photograph is illegible, and since the manuscript has great historical value, I have provided a transliteration based on my own photographs. I would like to thank Tshe-dbang rGya-mtsho for permitting to photograph this unique document. 'nyin byed gyi snang bas gsal ba'i skye sgu spyis dang/ bye drag gre phan mgo pa/ dga' ldan chos 'phel/ spru drag/ bstan don las bzhi'i rjes su 'brel ba'i sne mor mngags slebs/ bsdud dang bskul blda' byed mi sogs mdor na spyi bo gnam bstan gyi ser skya mchog dman mtha' dag la springs pa/ mang bkur rgyal po'i gdung dri ma med pa rje gnya' khri btsan po nas/ rgyal rab mu tig gi 'phreng ba zam ma chad par rim par byon pa'i nang nas/ 'jam dbyangs sprul pa khri srong lde btsan gyis mkhan slob rnam gdan drangs pa'i bod yul mun pa'i gling 'di nyid mdo sngags chos gyi nyi mas gsal bar mdzad pa sogs bstan 'gro'i rtsa lag tu gyur pa la/ bdud sdig to can rgyal rigs su srid pa bzung ba glang dar ma'i btsan gyis thub bstan rin po che nyams dma' bar byas shing/ 'od srungs nas rgyal rab bsil bur song ba'i dus/ sngon smon gyi las shugs btsan pos mnga' bdag dpal mgon gyis mang yul bzung ba las rims par mched pa'i mnga' bdag chos gyi rgyal po'i gdung dri ma med pa 'di nyid/ stod mon gyi kha mtshams gdul dka'i 'gro ba rnam ched du 'dul ba'i phyir chos rgyal srong btsan sgam po'i phyag ris su bstar ba'i lha ldan rdo rje gdan gyi sa gnad mtha' 'dul gyi gtsug lag khang byang spra dun tse'i lha khang 'di'i gnas 'dzin dang/ legs tse dgon gnas ma bu gang yin 'dzin bdag mdzad pa nas bzung/ rgyal bstan spyi dang byed brag snga 'gyur rnying ma'i bstan pa la sma med pa'i zhabs 'degs su 'gyur che ba byung 'dug kyang/ gnas dus kyi bstan pa'i bgegs chags lta bus nyams chag che ba byung 'dug pa bod 'bangs bde thabs su dmigs sngar rgyun bzhin tshugs par spra dun lha khang dang/ legs tse dgon ma bu la gtogs pa'i ser leb/ 'grog rigs so hug grwa rgyun dgon gnyer gyi gong g.yag la ga khral/

'u lag sogs sngar rgyun gang yin las khral rigs gsar 'gel dang/ shi gson gyi dkor sa dge khongs ris su ma chad pa'i sbyin bdag skyong ba sogs sgrub chag 'jags gsum chu khyi phan gyi gtan tshigs la me bya bar bsgyur bkod ma song ba'i gnas bzhin snyon med babs mtshungs ci yin la 'di nas kyang rgyab bsnon byin pa yin pas mthun rkyen du gang 'gro las gnod 'gal log par 'gro ba ma byed par bde bar yi ge 'dzin chug/ lcags glang zla 2 tshes 1 la gru 'dzin 'phags pa'i gzhal med khang chen po po ta la nas bris/

- 19 A genealogical text entitled Myang-gi gdung-rabs details the Sikkim branch of the family. Dawa Kazi Samdup states that the rulers of Sikkim may have descended from Khri-srong lDe-btsan (Rock 1953: 928).
- 20 Wylie identifies Gro-shod (Gro-shod; mNga'-ris Dro-shod in 'Dzam-gling rgyas-bshad) as an area in the vicinity of sPra-dun-rtse (1962: 124, n.83). Tshe-dbang Nor-bu is referring here to the incumbents of sPra-dun-rtse and Legs-rtse mentioned in the Fifth Dalai Lama's decree.
- 21 mar yul bdag po rig pa mgon la sras mang du byung ba'i rgyud la dwags rgyal po yang yin zer chod pa med pa ni mnga' bdag stag shams can de yi rigs rgyud da lta stobs 'byor shin tu dbul yang 'bras ljong sa nub ri gro shod sogs su thor bu yod pa rnams so/
- 22 skyid mo lung du 'gro ba rnams/ pra thum gyi khang dbus ma'i sgo 'gram na mu med gyi rdza ma gser bre dpe bskang pa yod pas de thon la ku thang gi rong la gnas dang lam khang dus gcig la thob/

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