

Names and Nicknames in sKyid grong

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Names that children receive from their parents reveal certain insights about a culture. For example, in many societies parents name their offspring after renowned spiritual predecessors, such as Mohammed in Islamic settings, Ibrahim or Abraham among Muslims, Jews, and Christians, Krishna in Hindu societies, and so forth. Tibetan societies are no exception. sGrol ma, a popular name given to girls, recalls the most famous of all female bodhisattvas in the Tibetan world. In areas of Tibet where rNying ma pa sectarian affiliation predominates, many people are named Pad ma or O rgyan in honor of the great saint Padmasambhava (a.k.a. Pad ma 'byung gnas, O rgyan Rinpoche).¹ More to the point, witness today the proliferation of children born in exile who are given the name bsTan 'dzin as a tribute to bsTan 'dzin rgya mtsho, the present Dalai Lama.

The following is a brief analysis of naming patterns that existed in sKyid grong during the first half of the 20th century. Admittedly, this paper represents a rather trivial contribution to Tibetan Studies. Nevertheless, the data is worthy of presentation since the literature on naming practices in Tibetan societies seems rather scant.² The data in question comes from a 1958 tax register (sgo khra them gan?), a document listing all government taxpayers in sKyid grong, formerly a district-level administrative unit (*rdzong*) in Tibet.³ The document, which lists all 2844 government taxpayers in the district by name, affords a rare glimpse into naming patterns in a Tibetan society at a specified period of time (roughly the first half of the 20th century).⁴ Although the bulk of this current contribution deals with sKyid grong, I will also refer in certain instances to naming practices in neighboring Nub ri, a Tibetan enclave on the Nepal side of the border where I've engaged in extensive field research.⁵

NAMING CHILDREN AND TIBETAN NAMES

Tibetan names are typically composed of two disyllabic components, both of which are given names and not surnames. While some names lack gender specificity (e.g., bKra shis, Tshe ring, and bSod nams), others are used exclusively for females (e.g., Bu khrid and sGrol ma) or males (e.g., rGya mtsho, 'Gyur med, and Don grub). For example, my host in Nub ri is named bKra shis don grub. Nearby lives a person named Tshe dbang don grub. By Don grub we can immediately identify both of them as being males; however their common second name does not mean that they belong to the same family. Family names, clan names, or lineage names are rarely used except by those who occupy the higher rungs of the Tibetan social hierarchy or by those who belong to a lineage of hereditary lamas.⁶

sKyid grong did not have any aristocracy besides the District Commissioners (*rdzong dpon*) who resided there on a temporary basis. Nevertheless, some of the more prominent families in sKyid grong were known according to their house names (*khang ming*), such as Ma gal 'Bar bo [Wealthy (House) of Magal Village] or Sa le Stag nang [Tiger Home of Sale Village]. Perhaps the most famous is a family of physicians who still use their house name, Khang dkar (White House) as a form of surname even in exile (see Tashi Tsering 1994 for a brief history of this family). According to

one member of the Khang dkar family, the house was originally built on White Meadow, a place where Atiśa gave a sermon long ago, and hence the house became known as sPang dkar (White Meadow). At one time in the past many people in the family died, requiring the survivors to continually whitewash the house. Thereafter it became known as Khang dkar.⁷ Besides members of these prominent households in sKyid grong, most people were only known by their given names, or perhaps by their natal villages when traveling away from home [e.g., Ko pa Nor rgyas, meaning Nor rgyas from Ko Village].

In the Tibetan tradition a child can be named after the day on which it is born, after a famous lama or one's root lama, or the name can be derived from parts of the parents' names (Thubten Sangay 1975:16). Although parents can name the child themselves, most prefer that the task be carried out by an incarnate lama in order to assure the child's health and longevity (Norbu Chopel 1983:8). In sKyid grong, as in most Tibetan societies, the naming of children was usually performed by a lama. According to elderly informants from sKyid grong childbirth resulted in birth-pollution (*skyes grib*), a defilement that needed to be cleansed through a ritual burning of incense (*lha bsangs*) performed by a lama. Only afterwards was it possible to name the child.

Some people acquire an entirely different name later in life. Those who embark upon religious vocations receive a religious name (*chos ming*) when formally initiated as a novice. For example, bKra shis rdo rje, a member of the prestigious mNga' bdag lineage of lamas in Nub ri, relates the following story.

My grandfather performed the first hair cutting ritual. After being initiated I was given the name bKra shis rdo rje. bKra shis comes from one of my ancestors in the mNga' bdag lineage named bKra shis rnam rgyal (c. 1600s), whereas rDo rje was a part of my grandfather bsTan 'dzin rdo rje's name.⁸

COMMON NAMES IN sKYID GRONG

The 1958 tax register provides an opportunity to do some rudimentary statistical analysis of common names in sKyid grong. The tendency to name children according to the day they were born is evident from the data presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1: NUMBERS OF PEOPLE WHOSE FIRST NAME IS THEIR DAY OF BIRTH

Day	Tibetans Name	M	F	M/F Ratio	Total	% of total population
Sunday	Nyi ma	104	128	.81	232	8.2
Monday	Zla ba	102	128	.80	230	8.1
Tuesday	Mig dmar	47	60	.77	107	3.8
Wednesday	lHag pa	85	109	.78	195	6.9
Thursday	Phur bu	83	79	1.05	162	5.7
Friday	Pa sangs	65	99	.66	164	5.8
Saturday	sPen ba	51	62	.82	113	4.0
TOTALS		536	665	.81	1201	42.2

* M=Males; F=Females

Roughly two out of every five people from sKyid grong were given a first name according to the day on which they were born. The fact that far more people are named Nyi ma than Mig dmar does not mean that more children were born on Sundays than on Tuesdays. Such a conclusion contradicts the laws of probability. Furthermore, there is no astrological rationale for this pattern, for example naming a

child Nyi ma is not necessarily considered more auspicious than naming a child Mig dmar.⁹ The reason behind this pattern is therefore unknown, yet perhaps it is an aggregate reflection of personal preferences.

An interesting pattern emerges when we examine Column 5, the ratio of males to females who were given each particular name. With the exception of Phur bu and Pa sangs, the ratios are remarkably consistent. Specifically, for every four boys named Nyi ma, Zla ba, Mig dmar, lHag pa, and sPen pa, five girls received the same name. Only some of this difference can be accounted for by the fact that females slightly outnumber males in the population (1444 to 1400). Therefore, the data clearly indicates that people were more apt to name a girl than a boy for the day that she or he was born.

Occasionally children were named after the date of the month upon which they were born. The most auspicious dates of the Tibetan month are the eighth (*tshes pa brgyad*), the tenth (*tshes pa bcu*), the fifteenth (*tshes pa lco lnga*), and the thirtieth (*gnam gang*). In the sKyid grong document we find two people whose first name is Tshes brgyad, four named Tshes bcu, eleven named bCo lnga), and six named gNam gang. Whereas bCo lnga and Tshes bcu were gender neutral names, gNam gang and Tshes brgyad were exclusive to females.

Table 2 lists the most common names in sKyid grong according to the number found as first and second names respectively.

TABLE 2: COMMON NAMES IN SKYID GRONG

Name	1st Name			2nd Name			Total
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	
Tshe ring	81	107	188	104	7	111	299
Nyi ma	104	128	232	0	0	0	232
Zla ba	102	128	230	0	0	0	230
Don 'grub	14	0	14	188	2	190	204
lHag pa	85	109	195	0	0	0	195
Phur bu	83	79	162	0	20	20	182
Pa sangs	65	99	164	0	0	0	164
sGrol ma	0	17	17	0	134	134	151
Nor bu	78	5	83	44	0	44	127
Tshe dbang	60	15	75	49	0	49	124
sPen pa	51	62	113	0	0	0	113
Mig dmar	47	60	107	0	0	0	107
bSod nams	49	41	90	6	0	6	96
bKra shis	59	27	86	7	0	7	93
Bu 'khrid	0	15	15	0	77	77	92
rDo rje	29	4	33	37	1	38	71
Tshe brtan	31	6	37	26	0	26	63
bsTan 'dzin	17	30	47	8	0	8	55
Blo bzang	32	11	43	1	0	1	44
TOTALS	987	943	1931	470	220	690	2621

Although not the most frequently used first name, Tshe ring was by far the most common name in sKyid grong with 299 individuals—more than 10 percent of the entire population—having this as either their first or second name.¹⁰ Nyi ma and Zla ba had the distinction of being the most popular first names. bsTan 'dzin was not a very frequent name in sKyid grong during the early part of the 20th century, in contrast to the current situation among the exile population.¹¹

Table 2 also reveals some naming patterns that are related to gender. Specifically, some names (Nor bu, Tshe dbang, and rDo rje) could be given to females, but were usually reserved for males. Also, some names are gender neutral when used as first names yet more gender specific when given as second names. Tshe ring, dSod nam, bKra shis, Tshe brtan, and bsTan 'dzin are gender neutral as first names but are used almost exclusively for males as second names, whereas Phur bu is used as a second name only for females. Furthermore, we see that some names are used frequently as first names but rarely occur as second names (bSod nam, Blo bzang, bsTan 'dzin, bKra shis, and all the day-names except for Phur bu), while others are almost always used as second names (Don grub¹² for males, sGrol ma and Bu khrid for females being the most striking examples).

The time has come to dispense with the tedium of statistics and move on to a more interesting topic—rare and uncommon names.

UNUSUAL NAMES IN sKYID GRONG

Some of the names that appear in the 1958 tax register are most probably nicknames, several of which are quite original as well as humorous. Table 3 lists some of the unusual names, along with proposed interpretations.¹³ One personal favorite is bKra shis Yar 'gro (Upwardly Mobile bKra shis). He was the son of a landless agricultural laborer (*dud chung ba*)¹⁴ who was apparently not married, so perhaps his mother envisioned that he would one day climb the social hierarchy. Bag thar (Immune from Bride), a male, was also a *dud chung ba*. His name may reflect how difficult it was for such men to attract a wife. Other unusual names include Nor bu bya rгод (Nor bu the Vulture), Phur tshe 'dzu med (The Real Phur bu tshe ring), and rGya sbyin (Immense Charity) who ironically, as a *dud chung ba*, was perhaps not in an ideal position to act as a patron (*sbyin bdag*). Several girls were given names signifying their feminine qualities, such as Me tog (Flower), mChog mdzes (The Most Beautiful), and mDzes rgyas (Flourishing Beauty). Children named lHa skyab and lHa srung were symbolically allocated divine protection (Lha skyabs, Lha bsrung; Protected by Deities). Others have names that refer to skin coloration, such as those named dKar mdog (Whitey), dKar chung (Little White One), sKya lu (Little Pale One), and a woman with the not so flattering appellation sNag snyig (Ink Residue).

TABLE 3: UNUSUAL NAMES IN THE 1958 sKYID GRONG TAX REGISTER

Spelling in 1958 Tax Register	Most Likely Spelling	Number & Gender	Suggested Interpretation
Ka mi	Ka mi	1 female; 6 males	Blacksmith
dKar chung	dKar chung	1 female; 1 male	Little White One
dKar rdog/rtog	dKar mdog	5 females	Whitey
sKya glu/mu/lu	sKya lu	3 females	Little Pale One
mGar ra	mGar ra	2 males	Blacksmith
rGya sbyin	rGya sbyin	1 male	Immense Charity
lNga chog	lNga chog	11 females	Five Is Enough
Chog bad	mChog 'bad	1 female	Supreme Endeavor; Most Excellent Drunk if spelling is mChog bad.
Chog mdzes	mChog mdzes	1 female	The Most Beautiful
'Ching sgröl	'Ching sgröl	1 female	Liberated
mThar phyin	mThar phyin	3 males	Perfection
Dar po/mo	Dar po/mo	1 male; 1 female	Popular

sNag nyig	sNag snyigs	1 female	Ink Residue
Bag 'gro	Bag dro	1 male	Good Natured; He Who Goes As Bride if spelling is Bag 'gro.
Bag thar	Bag thar	1 male	Immune from Bride.
Bu/Bu mo chung	Bu/Bu mo chung	9 males; 2 females	Youngest Son/Daughter
Bu 'dren	Bu 'dren/drangs	1 female	Inviter of Son. Longing for Son if spelling is Bu dran.
(Nor bu) Bya rgod	Bya rgod	1 male	Nor bu the Vulture.
Byor rgyas	'Byor rgyas	1 male	Rising Wealth; Prosperous
Bre srang	Bre srang	1 female	Measuring Cup and Scale.
'Brug mo	'Brug mo	1 female	Dragon Lady
Me tog	Me tog	2 females	Flower
sMin drug	sMin drug	1 male; 1 female	Pleiades. The name of the month when the full moon is in the Pleiades. These two were most likely born during that month.
Tshang chung/ sgrol/don	Tshang chung/ sgrol/don	2 females;3 males	Last Born.
mTshams chod/s	mTshams gcod	4 females	Halt. According to Goldstein (2001:894), the name given when the parents hope no other children will be born afterwards.
mDzes rgyas	mDzes rgyas	1 female	Flourishing Beauty
(Phur tshe) 'Dzu med	'Dzu med	1 male	The Real (i.e., without deception) Phur tshe
Zhe log	Zhe log	1 male	Fed Up; Annoyed.
bZhi chog	bZhi chog	14 females	Four Is Enough
(Bkra shis) Yar 'gro	Yar 'gro	1 male	Upwardly Mobile bKra shis
gSum chog	gSum chog	23 females	Three Is Enough
(Tse ring) Lha skyabs	IHa skyabs	2 males	Tshe ring [who is]
Lha bsrung	IHa bsrung	1 female	Protected by Deities
			Protected by Deities

Two synonymous names with distinctly derogatory connotations occur several times, namely, *mGar ra* (Blacksmith) and its Nepali equivalent *Kami* (Ka mi).¹⁵ According to Tibetans, blacksmiths inhabit the lowest rung of the social hierarchy due to the fact that they work with metal and make the implements associated with sinful acts, such as swords and plow shears. The latter, although essential to the agrarian economy, turn the soil and, as one farmer from Nub ri put it, “Bury the bugs that dwell above the ground and expose those that dwell beneath.” While plowing, Tibetans attempt to mitigate the negative consequences of the entomological massacre by reciting the mantra “Om Ma ni Pad me Hum” each time they complete a furrow. Blacksmiths, as creators of these destructive implements, are relegated to the status of social reprobates.

In the past, sKyid grong society was divided into three broad social classifications (*rigs*) of people with blacksmiths at the lowest in terms of social prestige and purity. One person explained it thus: “The highest social class was Bla brang (Lama’s Palace, i.e., hereditary lamas). They were different from us, they were more pure. Kamis were also different, they were considered dirty (tsog pa). They worked with iron. We in the middle [the general populace] were all the same. Whether taxpayers (*khral pa*) or landless laborers (*dud chung ba*), we were of the same social class, we could drink from the same cup.” Another person stated, “We did not marry with

Kamis, for we considered them to be of inferior social class. They could not enter our houses, they could not drink from our cups, and we could not eat food from their hands.” Another concurred, “Those who worked with iron were the lowest social class. We could not eat together, they had to remain separately. They were not of the same mouth.” These statements reflect Tibetan purity laws whereby those of the same social class are able to share eating and drinking implements since they are “of the same mouth” (*kha gcig pa*). Blacksmiths were considered impure, and hence were not permitted to drink from the same vessels as commoners or clerics, could not enter peoples’ houses, and were restricted to marrying among themselves.

As outcastes, it seems somewhat surprising to find that *Kami* and *mGar ra* were proper names of people in sKyid grong, recognized names in fact that made their way into the 1958 register. Queries revealed that these people were not actual blacksmiths, but were members of the taxpaying general populace (*khral pa*), the middle social class. One woman explained the circumstances whereby a particular person came to have such an unfavorable name, “He was called Kami because many children died [prior to his birth]. They were born then died, born then died. If many children die in succession we would call the next one Kami. Then he will remain [i.e., will not die]. That is our custom.” In other words, the parents tried to devalue their child in the eyes of ever-present malevolent forces as a strategy to protect him from illnesses and death. Similarly, in other areas of Tibet I have heard of children being named Dog Excrement (Khyi skyag) in an attempt to influence their survival chances.

NAMES, GENDER, AND BIRTH PARITY

A gendered dimension to parental preferences for offspring is evident in naming practices in sKyid grong. The status of women in traditional Tibetan societies was compromised in part by the fact that only sons were entitled to inherit the fields and herds of their fathers. In general, sons brought their brides home while daughters were sent away in marriage to other households. The major exception to this rule was when no sons were born to the parents and a matrilocally resident husband (*mag pa*) was brought in for one or more of the daughters. Even this eventuality has consequences that were perceived to be negative for the continuity of the family. For example, while doing a demographic survey in Nub ri one man explained the circumstances of a particular household in the following terms:

They once had seven children, five daughters and two sons. Both the sons, the receivers of the inheritance (pha gzhis 'dzin mkhan), died. Now they only have the daughters who are of no benefit because they will go as brides (mna' ma) to other households. It is the males of the household who place the prayer flag (dar lcog) upon the roof of the house. That is something women cannot do. If a mag pa is brought in for the household, then it is he who will place the prayer flag, so the house will then be possessed by his tutelary deity (pho lha). People need to have sons, otherwise their household is finished.

One elderly woman from sKyid grong summarized gendered attitudes toward children in the following terms: “Sons were better! When we got married we prayed for a son [to be born] first. It was worse if a girl was born [first].” According to another woman from sKyid grong, “In our old customs having sons was considered better. Sons would bring a daughter-in-law (*mna' ma*) into the household. If you have many daughters you need to give them clothing and then you give them away to other households.” Her statement brings to mind the Tibetan proverb,

“[The hen] feeds at home and lays her eggs outside” (Lhamo Pemba 1996:81; *lto de nang la zas/ sgo nga phyi la btang/*).

Fraternal polyandry was the normative (although not exclusive) form of marriage in sKyid grong, a situation that resulted in a surplus of women in the marriage market. It stands to reason that if all the brothers in every household marry a single bride, then many women will be unable to find partners. Therefore, the more daughters one had, the greater the chance that one or more of them would end up as a lifelong spinster. According to custom younger daughters should not marry prior to their elder siblings. Therefore, younger daughters were at a distinct disadvantage when it came to forming marital bonds.

Non-marrying women were common in sKyid grong. Once her brothers brought home their bride, the non-marrying woman typically moved into a separate residence called an “adjunct house” (*zur khang*). Since marriage was not a prerequisite for procreative encounters, these women often bore children out of wedlock (see Childs 2003 on the demographic significance of out-of-wedlock births in sKyid grong). Illegitimate children (*nyal bu*; pronounced *nya lu* in the local vernacular) were not shunned or banished from society. But they were considered somewhat problematic since they stood no chance of inheritance and were a burden on the household economy. In most cases these children ended up as landless laborers (*dud chung ba*).

The purpose of the digression is to point out that having many daughters in sKyid grong was not considered an ideal scenario. A preference for having few daughters is suggested by a peculiar naming practice that is evident in the 1958 tax register. Specifically, some second-born daughters were named gNyis chog (Two Is Enough), third-born daughters were called gSum chog (Three Is Enough), fourth-born bZhi chog (Four Is Enough), and fifth-born lNga chog (Five Is Enough).¹⁶ The custom unambiguously implies that parents did not want to have more daughters. Although this type of parity-specific name for daughters may be unique to sKyid grong, there are other names more common throughout Tibet that indicate gender biases. Bu khrid, a girl’s name, literally means Bring Forth a Son. According to Goldstein, the name is “typically used when a family has a lot of girls and this name is given in the hope that the next child may be a boy” (2001:721). In sKyid grong, two girls bore the name gSum ’gog Bu khrid, literally, Three [Girls] Is Enough, Bring Forth a Son!

Other names signifying birth order include mTshams gcod, Bu chung, Bu mo chung, and anything beginning with Tshang. mTshams gcod literally means “halt”, and according to Goldstein (2001:894) was a name given to a child when parents were hoping it would be the last born. Significantly, it was only daughters who were named thus in sKyid grong. Among these, one was a 21 year old woman who had one 44 year old brother, clear evidence that mTshams gcod’s mother was at the end of her reproductive capabilities when she was born. This assumption is based on the logic that, if a woman bears her first child around age 20 and her last child around age 45 just prior to the onset of menopause, then there can be a 25 year gap between the eldest born and youngest born. In another case, a nine year old girl named mTshams gcod was the illegitimate child of a woman. Perhaps the name was given in the hope that she would not bear any subsequent illegitimate children, although this is just conjecture. In fact, the mother in question did have at least one more illegitimate child after mTshams gcod.

Bu chung (Youngest Son) and its female equivalent Bu mo chung (Youngest Daughter) were names given to what was assumed or hoped to be the last child born during the course of a woman's reproductive life-span. Mothers were generally in their forties when they named a child Bu chung. For example, according to an elderly informant one particular woman gave birth to "hundreds of children." The tax register lists this woman's son Bu chung as being 5 years old in 1958. Her age was listed as 45, so Bu chung was born when his mother was 40. Older siblings who were alive at the time included five brothers (aged 26, 24, 19, 15, and 12), and three sisters (aged 22, 16, and 10). Bu chung did not turn out to be the youngest in the family, as one sibling was born after him. In a few cases a child was named Bu chung or Bu mo chung when the mother was in her thirties, at a time when she clearly had the potential to bear more children. Thus, similar to naming a child gSum chog or mTshams gcod, Bu chung and Bumo chung could also represent an overt appeal to higher powers to prevent any subsequent births.

Finally, in the 1958 sKyid grong tax register there are five people whose name begins with the syllable *Tsang* [(Tshang; one girl each named Tshang chung and Tshang sgröl, three boys named Tshang don. The interpretation of *tshang* as "last born" in this context is based on the term *tshang mjug*, denoting the last born in a litter (Goldstein 2001:873). Here, the meaning of the term apparently extends to the human realm, at least in the boys' cases. As for the girls, Tshang sgröl was actually the first daughter born to a young, married mother, whereas Tshang chung's position in the birth order is impossible to ascertain since she was in her 70s in 1958. The cases of the three boys named Tshang 'don, however, are a bit more clear. One Tshang 'don is listed in the document as *spun* (brother) to a man 18 years his senior. Another, also listed as *spun*, was 15 years younger than his brother. The third is 11 years younger than his sister, and has a brother who is four years older. In all three cases Tshang 'don had the potential to be one of the youngest, if not the youngest, child born in his respective family.

NICKNAMES IN SKYID GRONG

Tibetans have a fondness for nicknames (*ming 'dogs*), which represent an opportunity to mock friends or neighbors in a creative manner. For example, one acquaintance in Nub ri married, but in his own words "discarded" (*g.yug*) his first wife after she failed to bear children. He remarried, but once again no offspring were forthcoming. His first wife, however, remarried and immediately became pregnant with her new partner. This of course left no doubt about the identity of the infertile spouse in the original marriage. Henceforth, this impotent man came to be known to his fellow villagers as mDzo (the sterile cross between a yak and cow). Another man, an only child who inherited the combined wealth of his mother and father, was a strong, hard-working individual. Yet he lacked social graces to attract a wife. Neighbors began to refer to him as Ri nyal (He Who Sleeps in the Hills), explaining that the moniker derives from the impression that he acted more like a bovine than a human. A friend from A mdo told me some contemporary nicknames used in his hometown. gSal le rGyal (King of Conspicuousness) and Lugs rgyal (Fashion King) are given to those who like to dress in flashy clothing. Physical attributes are derided as well, as seen in the nicknames sGong srong (Globular, i.e. fat), and Sha gyong (In Need of Flesh, i.e. skinny). Linguistic borrowings in nicknames have become more common as Tibetans increasingly interact with people from different societies. For

example, one friend told me he used to coerce his schoolmates into performing naughty deeds while growing up in Shigatse during the 1960s. For this he earned the nickname Hsiao Ripin (Ch: Little Japanese). In exile, I have encountered a young lady known as Guri (Nep: cat), an especially dark boy called Afari (Eng: African), and one person known as Florida Sunshine due to his persistent smile and the fact that he attended a university in Florida.

Nicknames were very common in sKyid grong. During the course of reconstructing household structures from the 1958 sKyid grong tax register, people often expressed puzzlement over a certain name listed therein. For example, one man mulled over the names of three women listed in his former neighbor's household. One name he recognized, but the others were a mystery. He finally came to the conclusion that, "The woman listed here [the one he identified by name] had younger sisters, but we did not call them by their names. We called the elder one Middle Born (Bar skyes) and the younger one Whitey (dKar mdog). We gave everybody nicknames."

Nicknames in sKyid grong usually centered on physical attributes or intellectual aptitude. According to one woman, "In the past I was named Pa sangs. However, I was fair skinned, so everybody called me dKar chung (Little White One). It was my nickname." One man explained the origin of his nickname, "My name is sPen pa, but because I have dark skin people call me sPen nag (Black sPen pa). Another person was called Nag mdog (Black Colored). One woman was referred to as mGo ril (Round-Headed, i.e., bald like a monk or nun) because as a child her hair was short cropped and her head especially round. As yet another example of linguistic borrowings, another woman was described in the following terms, "She was black and looked like a bear, so we called her Ba lu (Nep: bear)."

One derogatory nickname was gGen ba, a term that is defined in dictionaries as a person with confused understanding (*shes rmongs*), one who is bad or inferior (*tha shal*), a fool (*blun po*), or a lazy person (*le lo ba*) (Bod rgya tshig mdzod chen mo 1993:428). Jäschke provides the following meanings from Western Tibetan dialects, "idle, lazy, dull, imbecile, e.g. a sickly child, an animal affected with a disease" (1972:81), to which Goldstein adds, "imbecile, idiot, moron, simpleton" (2001:211). In Nub ri people who suffer severe mental disabilities are referred to as *glen ba*, and distinguished from *lkugs pa* which refers to people who are deaf, mute, or have speech impediments. Both terms can be used in a derogatory sense to mean "stupid".

Interviews with elderly people from sKyid grong revealed that those who suffered from severe mental disabilities were generally called *glen ba*. In many cases the actual names of such unfortunate individuals were not even known or had been forgotten. As a nickname, the term could also be applied to people of limited intellect. In describing a former neighbor, one woman stated, "The boy was not very smart (*spyang po*), he was like a *glen ba*." But the nickname was also used in jest for people who were perfectly adept. For example, speaking of a former neighbor one person said, "We called him Glen ba, which was only a nickname. He was not a *glen ba*." Another stated, "Everybody called the father [of a particular family] Glen ba, even though he was a very talented person who could do everything."

Glen ba as a name appears in the 1958 sKyid grong register only once. In this case, a girl is listed as Glen chung (Little Glen ba). The girl was an orphan who worked as a servant (*g.yog po*) in the household of another family after her own parents had died. The fact that she was referred to merely as Little Glen ba is not

very flattering, perhaps indicating that she was not held in high esteem. Glen ba as a nickname is attested in another document from sKyid grong, in this case a “human exchange” document (*mi brjes*) from the archives of bKra shis bsam gtan gling Monastery. The document reads, “The man Glen pa who belongs to bSam gtan gling was exchanged for Blo bzang chos ’phel, the son of ’Chi med who is a government taxpayer from sPang zhing Village. 1929” (Schuh 1988:192, Findbuch 369).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In summary, the 1958 sKyid grong tax document provides a novel opportunity to gain statistical and cultural insights into naming patterns found in one particular Tibetan society. Some of the patterns that have been discerned from the statistical analysis, such as the frequency of naming children after the day of the week on which they were born, may prove to be consistent throughout the Tibetan world. Nevertheless, as with everything associated with Tibetan culture, regional differences are the norm rather than the exception. One of the more interesting findings to emerge from the data seems to be highly localized. Specifically, the naming convention that indicates both birth order and a gender-specific preference for offspring (i.e., gSum chog, bZhi chog, etc.) is not to my knowledge found in other Tibetan areas.¹⁷ However, variations on the theme of using specific names in an attempt to influence the gender of subsequent births no doubt exist elsewhere. After all, there is plenty of evidence that sKyid grong was not the only Tibetan enclave where male offspring were valued more highly than their female siblings (i.e., Levine 1987; Schuler 1987). Hopefully this brief contribution will inspire others to look more closely at naming practices to see what they reveal about Tibetan culture and society.

Notes

1. According to Combe (1992:59) the first part of a person’s name was often an indication of their sectarian affiliation: Pad ma among rNying ma pas, Blo bzang or Byams pa for dGe lugs pas, Karma for sKarma pas, Kun dga’ for Sa skya pas, and g. Yung drung among Bon pos.
2. Some of the early accounts of Tibetan societies contain brief remarks on naming practices (e.g., Bell 1992:197-198; Combe 1992: 59-60; FÜRER-HAIMENDORF 1964: 93-94; Stein 1972: 107). More contemporary ethnographic accounts provide further details from the Himalayas (e.g., Adams 1996: 240; Watkins 1996: 225; Maiden and Farwell 1997: 105-106; Bishop 1998: 13). In one interesting study Hugh Richardson examined names found in early Tibetan records, and deciphered the convention of the time by demonstrating that names contained a clan (*rus*) affiliation, an official title (*mkhan*), and a proper name (*mying*—Old Tibetan spelling) (Richardson 1967). Comparing the list of names published by Richardson with the names from sKyid grong presented herein shows how much has changed since medieval times.
3. The full title of the document is Sa khyi lo’i sKyid grong rdzong rgya dgu’i sgo khra them gan, translated as The Earth Dog Year (1958) Household Contract Being a Census [of Land and People] in the Nine Divisions of sKyid grong District. The manuscript is housed in the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives (LTWA) in Dharamsala, India. I would like to thank Tashi Tsering of the Amnye Machen Institute, Dharamsala, for informing me of the document’s existence; Lobsang Shastri of the LTWA for kindly located it and providing me with access; and Jamyang Tenzin of the LTWA for performing the painstaking task of generating an accurate, typeset copy of the handwritten manuscript. For a description of the document and its significance see Childs (2000), and for a demographic analysis of the data contained therein see Childs (2003).

4. The idea of presenting data on names in sKyid grong stems from a conversation with my friend and colleague, John Bellezza. When I showed him the document, he was immediately struck by some of the more unusual names that appear therein and encouraged me to write something about them. I would like to thank Tsetan Chonjore, Jamyang Tenzin, and Brigitte Huber for their advice on some of the interpretations.
5. Research for the sKyid grong project (1999-2001) was supported by an Andrew Mellon Fellowship in Anthropological Demography at the Australian National University, while the Nub ri research (1995-1997) was funded by grants from Fulbright-Hays and Wenner-Gren.
6. For example, in Nub ri there is a lineage of married lamas (*sngags pa*) who are descendants of Tibet's medieval emperors. By virtue of this connection their descent lineage (*rgyud pa*) is known as mNga' bdag (Possessing Power). However, they do not employ mNga' bdag as a surname. Members of the former Tibetan aristocracy used family names, or names associated with their house and estate. See Petech (1973) for details on many such families and their names.
7. Personal communication with Sritar Purbu, Kathmandu.
8. Personal communication with Tashi Dorje.
9. I would like to thank Phurbu Tsering, astrologer at the Bod gzhung sman rtshis khang in Dharamsala, for pointing this out (personal communication).
10. In some cases only the first syllable of each name is given in the document. For example, a person listed as Tshe nor could be named Tshe ring nor bu, Tshe dbang nor bu, or Tshe brtan nor bu. Weighted averages were calculated for all known occurrences of each variation, and then used to estimate how many instances of Tshe should correspond with each of the three possibilities. Therefore, although I am reasonably confident of accuracy, the figures for Tshe ring, Tshe dbang, and Tshe brtan are nevertheless estimates and thereby subject to error.
11. Naming patterns are bound to change through time. For example, the top five names given to daughters born in the USA in 1958 were Mary, Linda, Susan, Patricia, and Karen, whereas in 2000 they were Emily, Hannah, Madison, Ashley, and Sarah (www.parenting.com).
12. A preference for certain combinations is evident in the case of Don grub. Nearly two-thirds of men having Don grub as a second name had a day-name as their first name, with Phur bu don grub (33), IHag pa don grub (32), and Nyi ma don grub (24) being the most popular combinations.
13. The idea of doing this paper occurred to me after all fieldwork on the project had been completed. Therefore, some of the interpretations remain highly speculative since they have not been confirmed by people from sKyid grong.
14. sKyid grong society, like most Tibetan societies prior to 1959, was stratified according to taxpaying status. Those who held heritable land leases from either the government or a monastery were known as *khral pa* (taxpayers). Those who did not hold such leases but worked as agricultural wage laborers under the *khral pa* were known as *dud chung ba* ("small smoke", often translated as small householders). *Dud chung ba* men did not have the economic security associated with land and access to pastures, and therefore were at a distinct disadvantage when it came to marriage and household formation. The 1958 tax register identifies people according to their taxpaying status. See Goldstein (1971) for village-level details on Tibet's traditional tax system.
15. sKyid grong lies on the border between Nepal and Tibet. Blacksmiths worked on both sides of the border. Kami was the more commonly used appellation for blacksmiths in sKyid grong, although *mgar ra* was used as well.
16. In most cases the spelling in the document is *chog*. However, in a couple of instances the spelling *mchog* occurs. The syllable therefore has two possible spellings, and thereby two possible interpretations. Whereas *mchog* implies something that is most excellent, *chog* means to be suitable or sufficient. In other words, gSum chog could mean "Most

Excellent Third [Born]", or it could mean "Three Is Enough." Elderly informants from sKyid grong explained that the latter connotation and spelling (*chog*) are correct. In other words, gSum chog literally meant Three Is Enough.

17. As this was going to press I came across an article by Lha chog rgyal in which the author discusses "folk traditions" in nomadic regions of A mdo. He includes a section entitled "Names to Prevent Girls from Being Born" (bu mo mi skyed pa'i ming), and writes, "If there are already too many girls in the house, then names are given [to subsequently born girls] such as Bu mo chog, mTshams chod sgröl ma, Da chog, and Bu khrid" (Lha mchog rgyal 2002:345-349).

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