

Buddhism in Tsum:

Global connections, contemporary transformations, and Buddhist identity in a high mountain valley of Nepal¹

A tale from the field

It was an early winter morning, in late November, when I began to leave my friends' house in Chhekampar (*chos khang pag srog*), the largest village in upper Tsum. From the veranda, I spotted a guide most probably from the Nepali lowlands with a Canadian hiker.

They approached the wooden ladder that leads from the inner courtyard of the traditional housing complex up to the veranda and moved inside to the central living room. There, people use to have convivial gatherings around the wood-burning stove, not at least owing to large amounts of homemade alcohol that frequently supports the conversations. The trekking season was already over and few foreigners normally enter the valley during these freezing winters. I figured that the two young men were on the way to lower altitudes and needed rest and food. To my surprise, the guide's left foot was wrapped in a spotless white bandage. This indicated a very recent injury given that at these altitudes and being without roads, people and garbs quickly become grime-covered through manual labor. With a commiserative look on his face, the guide began to tell how the kitchen of Tsum's main nunnery, Rachen Jangchub Choling, caught fire the evening before.

Rachen Nunnery was founded by the Bhutanese Lama Drukpa Rinpoche Ngawang Palsang in 1905. In advanced years, his reincarnation, the 2nd Drukpa Rinpoche Ngawang Khenrab offered Rachen Nunnery (and also nearby Mu Monastery) to Kopan Monastery and therefore, to the FPMT (Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition)². Since Kopan Monastery was entrusted with managing Rachen Nunnery in 2003, it has been introducing a new educational system. Nuns now travel to Kathmandu during the cold Himalayan winter months to continue classes at Khachoe Ghakyil Ling Nunnery, a branch of Kopan Monastery, leaving only some senior nuns behind as well as the chanting leader (*dbu mdzad*, *dbu chung*) and a small number of young nuns who take care of the senior's needs and attend to the nunnery's various fields of responsibility.

The guide recalled that he suddenly woke up at night, hearing screams. As he went outside to see where the voices came from, he saw nuns trying to extinguish a fire that was quickly spreading through the kitchen. With the little water coming from the almost-frozen taps, it seemed impossible to fight the flames and out of duty, he joined the fire fighting. Between them, the fire was extinguished—but at a cost to the guide, and his injured foot. The flames had left only scorched walls and nowhere to prepare food in winter. The kitchen and its utensils were gone or blackened.

As I had been living at Rachen Nunnery for five months, this incident was of particular interest for me. When I arrived at the main site of my fieldwork around two hours after hearing the guide's news, I was even more astonished as I realized that neither during this particular night, nor in the following days had people from nearby villages come to help. However, in the interviews I had

¹ Please note that all titles are tentative as they only reflect current research ideas.

² The FPMT is one of the largest transnational Tibetan Buddhist organizations arising from the Tibetan diaspora, comprising more than 150 monasteries and nunneries, city centers, study groups, and retreat facilities, social and community projects, and publishing companies (see www.fpmt.org).

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conducted with Tsum's local population before, the villages' elders vividly remembered that in past times, people had frequently given assistance to the nunnery, not only when the stone roof of the main assembly hall collapsed about two decades ago, but also in day to day life. Until recently, the religious landscape of the valley was characterized by a close mutual relationship between nuns and villagers. In exchange for ritual services (*shabs brtan*), prayers (*smon lam*), and extended periods of fasting practice (*smyung gnas*), the nuns were offered roasted barley flour, potatoes, butter, and firewood. I asked myself, what had changed? The soot-blackened nuns sadly carried sacks of burnt cooking utensils from the kitchen to the nearby river.

The situation eventually became worse. Another winter evening, the disciplinarian (*dge bskos*) gathered all nuns in the main assembly hall. She announced that with Ngakyu (*sngags rgyud*) and Leru (*gle ru*) refusing them the collection of firewood, all eleven villages of upper Tsum but one now prohibited the nuns from the community forests. The few nuns staying at the convent these days were perplexed. From this day onwards, they had to walk for around two hours each way to collect fallen branches for cooking, preparing tea, and heating their rooms. As a consequence, the majority of senior nuns who suffers from arthritis were excluded from the manual labor. They now depended on the younger generation whose physical health allows them to carry the heavy loaded wooden baskets through rough terrain and on slippery mountain paths. The nuns knew that they would be able to endure this winter. But they frequently asked themselves, what would happen if the only remaining village prohibited them the community forest, too? What would happen when their friends and fellow nuns return in spring and the convent's living quarters would house eighty plus nuns again? And what about the winters to come? My friends' eyes were filled with tears when they expressed concern about their living conditions in the near future. However, as some of my interlocutors had told me, in the past Tsum's local population followed the custom of every household giving firewood to the monastic community (*tshogs shing*). What had gone wrong in recent years?

Research context

This Phd project attempts to explore contemporary transformations in the lives of Tibetan Buddhist nuns in Nepal, with particular attention to the rapidly growing connections between transnational Buddhist networks and local Himalayan communities. It focuses on one specific local, Jangchub Choling Rachen Nunnery in Tsum, northern Gorkha District, and discusses how ten years of FPMT's involvement at the nunnery has affected not only the nuns' self-identification, but led to contested discourses about modernity, development, and place throughout the valley. The new religious orientation that came with the FPMT's assumption of the nunnery's management in 2003 as well as new construction projects, has resulted in a serious conflict with the local population about land rights, Buddhist identity, and belonging that go far beyond monastic living quarters and influence the religious culture, ritual structures, and the economic relationships of an entire community.

Questions that are of particular importance for this dissertation are, for instance, how is identity defined, understood, and contested in contemporary religious expressions? How do identity-conceptions interact with notions of belonging, place, and commonality in this particular Himalayan region? How do historical memories that are embedded in religious narratives and community-knowledge shape conceptions about being "Tsumpa"? What does it mean to belong to Tsum? Are current attempts to create a unified identity as Tsumpa a response to the rise of ethnic politics in the modern Nepalese state?

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This PhD draws upon extensive ethnographic investigations of these contexts in order to shed light on the creation of new patterns of Buddhist identity and belonging in the Himalayan region. It attempts to emphasize this issue by exploring religious, sociocultural and economic discourses that construct self and identity within Tibetan Buddhist communities of Nepal's northern borderlands and highlights the diverse and often conflicting social interactions that make up contemporary Tibetan Buddhist monasticism.

The appropriation of identity, belonging, and also ethnicity for political and religious means is certainly nothing new in Nepal. However, it is in terms of particular Tibetan-speaking Himalayan communities that were previously summarized under the inaccurate and discriminating category "Bhotiya", irrespective of their religious, cultural, social, and linguistic differences (see Ramble 2004). To understand this, I briefly draw on the modern political history of Nepal and the place marginalized Buddhist groups have taken in it as new federal structures of the state are increasingly affecting the traditional social fabric and are leading to new mechanisms of making and unmaking identities in the changing world of the Himalayas.

Cultural change and the rise of ethnic politics in Nepal

From 1769, when Prithvi Narayan Shah forcefully unified about sixty former independent political entities and laid the foundation of what later came to know as the state of Nepal, high caste Hindu elite groups have been ruling the country.³ Hindu political sovereignty was codified by Jang Bahadur Rana's *muluki ain* or legal code in 1854 (see Höfer 1979) that applied the Hindu social order to the whole state, attempting to encompass the entire population into a single caste hierarchy. During Shah (1768-1846) and Rana (1846-1951) periods, the rulers created an ideological framework based upon Hindu culture and world order that were forced upon their subjects. By utilizing Hinduism as symbolic foundation of the kingdom and applying various homogenization measures, Nepal's ethnic groups were located in the lower social strata of the society that prevented them from active political participation.

Regarding the northern Himalayan regions and other outlying areas, Shah and Rana policies either followed a system that ensured the loyalty of provincial elites by permitting them a reasonable degree of authority—as it was the case for the former kingdoms of Mustang and Jumla—, or totally neglected them. For instance, as Childs (2000, 2001) notes, the time of Nubri's incorporation into the Nepalese state and its subsequent position can only be vaguely defined. Being most probably part of the Western Tibetan kingdom of Gungthang (*gung thang*), Nubri was integrated within the administrative district of Dzongka (*rdzong dga'*) in the nineteenth century and was only assigned to the Gorkha kingdom after the second Tibetan-Nepali conflict in 1855/1856. Michael Aris' note taken from the "Report on the University of California Expedition to Kutang and Nubri in Northern Nepal in Autumn 1973" clearly reflects the situation of many ethnic Tibetan enclaves throughout Nepal's northern borderlands: "In practice, [...] the area is so remote and inaccessible that for all intents and purposes its people always seem to have managed their own affairs independent of governments" (1975: 62).

The marginalization of ethnic groups as well as lower Hindu castes was further intensified during the era of King Mahendra's *panchayat* system (1962-1990). The king held de facto power over the executive, judicial, and legislative bodies, as well as the army as he solely consulted a hierarchy of

³ See Hangen (2010), Krämer (2003), Pfaff-Czarnecka (2004), and Whelpton (2005) for a more detailed analysis of Nepal's political history.

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councils (ne. *pancāyat*) at the village and district levels. In favor of Hindu royalty, a high degree of power concentration characterized Nepalese politics, totally disregarding the multi-ethnicity of its society. In the 1970s and 1980s however, a politicized ethnic consciousness arose among Nepal's many minorities who slowly began to create forums to preserve their cultural identity and to mobilize against the enforced assimilation of the Hindu dominated state. This led to the abolition of the Panchayat system and from the 1990s onwards, eventually gave rise to a constitution drafting process. In written form at least, the new constitution allowed all people to leave their subject status behind and emerge as citizens. Minority groups, not all of which have been historically-formed entities, started to make use of criteria such as language, religion, and place, and therefore drew attention to their own history in order to claim their status as equal citizens. Yet the Nepalese kingdom was declared as multi-ethnic and multi-lingual, it once more refused to introduce institutions and regulations for a broader participation of its ethnic groups in decision-making bodies. As a matter of course, the minorities' call for a secular state had been vehemently opposed. At this time, some organizations were created to represent the interests of non-Hindu religious groups in general, such as the Nepal Buddhist Federation (NBF), and of Himalayan Buddhist groups in particular, such as the Tsum Welfare Committee (TWC). At this stage however, the latter were not particularly concerned with stressing the cultural identity of the people they represented. They were founded as charitable and community service associations in order to connect people migrated to Kathmandu with their kin in mountainous regions and to provide assistance in times of crises, such as illness and death. The social orientation of the various associations has changed towards questions about ethnic and cultural identity in the light of further political transformations that occurred in the aftermath of the People's War.

The Constituent Assembly elections held in 2008 completely transformed Nepal's political landscape. Not only did the Maoists unexpectedly emerge as the largest party. The new Madhesi parties that represented most people of the southern Tarai (the plains situated on the border to India) became the fourth largest group. The Maoist started to lead a fragile coalition and, together with the Madhesi, they argued that Nepal needed an "ethnic federalism". In April, the assembly agreed to abolish monarchy and to make Nepal a federal republic, therefore ending the decade-long insurgency. The call for devolution of state power and for the formation of new states created along ethnic lines was meant to address the marginalization of *janajāti* ('ethnic', 'indigenous') groups and Madhesis that accompanied the Nepali state from its inception. So far, the Janajati groups have not entered the parliament, but the issue became the main argument of the 'peace process' that envisaged far-reaching structural changes. After decades of homogenization measures it was now ethnic and cultural diversity that characterized the political discourse. Many Nepalese publicly redefined their national identity and were concerned to establish how it relates to the cultures and traditions of ethnic minorities. Up to the present date, however, the interim government continuously has failed to reach a consensus on drafting a new constitution.

Interestingly, Tibetan Buddhist Himalayan enclaves have entered the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities or NEFIN (previously NEFEN, the umbrella organization representing 48 Janajati member organizations distributed across the entire country) not as Bhotyias, but as Sherpas, Tamangs, and so forth, that means as 'ethnic minority groups' based on their particular communities. In this regard, it is significant to note that it is not only the current political rhetoric of the modern Nepalese state that plays an important part in moulding the cultural identity of the Tibetan-Buddhist communities in the Himalayan region, but also external influences that deserve closer examination.

The global spread of Buddhism

Considering previous works of Geoff Childs (2004) and Charles Ramble (2004), I suggest that in their project of creating particular identities along conceptions of belonging and place, people from Tibetan-speaking enclaves are highly influenced by a distinctively modern phenomenon, which is transnational Buddhism. It is well known that twenty-first century Tibetan Buddhism presents important changes in the social and cultural milieu of the religion. The rapidly growing connections between Western Buddhists, Chinese and South Asian followers of the religion, Tibetans inside their homeland and in their diaspora, as well as Himalayan communities are leading to new patterns of economic patronage, administrative organization, gender dynamics, political hierarchy, pilgrimage, religious tourism, and media relations. Thereby, the boundaries between different actors have become increasingly blurred, not only through constant practices of imagining and re-imagining Buddhism, but also through the negotiation of personal identity and meaning in a field where Buddhist practice is simultaneously culturally specific and universal. It is this complex fabric of fluidity and entanglement that Bhushan and Zablocki call “Transbuddhism” (2009: 4).

Foreign patronage, in particular from the Buddhist population of Malaysia, Singapore, and Taiwan, but also from Europe and North America, has led to a proliferation of monastic institutions in exile in recent years. However, stringent Chinese border politics and demographic changes in the Tibetan exile population gave rise to hitherto unknown recruitment patterns of monastic institutions. At present, nuns and monks living in Nepal and India come predominantly from the Himalayan regions. Thus, the ethnic Tibetan communities are given a main responsibility in the attempt to preserve the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, a fact that results in various migration patterns. Through modern media and communication technology the Himalayan Buddhist population is aware of the images global adherents of the Buddha’s teachings as well as modern trekking literature are promulgating about them and their native places. In their attempt to represent themselves as equal citizens of the Nepali state and to take part in the process of creating a “new Nepal” (ne. *naya nepāl*), ethnic Tibetan enclaves deliberately make use of these concepts.

Regarding Tsum, the gradual dissolution of a century-old ritual relationship between nuns and villagers through the afore-mentioned conflict that emerged upon Kopan Monastery’s take-over of Rachen Nunnery, led to new patterns of constructing identity and notions of belonging. In April 2012, the Nepalese Prime Minister visited Tsum to take part in Tsum Valley Shyakya Festival. The main purpose of the event was to spread the message of peace and non-violence by reviving a contract dated back to the 1st Drukpa Rinpoche that prohibited the killing of all living beings, including animals, in the valley. The underlying idea relates to the eight-century Buddhist saint Padmasambhava who is ascribed the preliminary role in bringing Buddhism to Tibet. According to Buddhist mythology, Padmasambhava sealed so-called ‘hidden valleys’ (*sbas yul*) or realms of spiritual purity throughout the Himalayas that are to be opened one day in order to provide refuge to communities in need. With Nubri, Kutang, and neighboring areas inside the Tibetan Autonomous Region, Tsum is said to form part of Beyul Kyimolung; a fact that is continuously referred to at present by various local actors in order to create a new identity of being “Tsumpa”. Thus, this PhD projects tries to shed light on the complex dynamics of transnational Buddhism, the Nepalese state, and local Himalayan communities in their quest for creating new notions of identity and belonging.