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Where the roads from Tibet, India, and Bhutan meet: The monastery bKa' brgyud dgon gsar in the Chumbi valley

The monastery bKa' brgyud dgon gsar is nestled on a mountain slope five kilometers from the village Shar gsing ma in Gro mo, the Chumbi valley. Today, Shar gsing ma is better known under the Chinese name Yatung, because it has served as headquarter of the Chinese governor.¹ These parts of Gro mo, that once belonged to the hidden land of 'Bras mo ljongs, known today as Sikkim, were annexed by the Chinese Amban in 1792, but Sikkimese herders were still allowed to graze their cattle there. Furthermore, the royal family of Sikkim used to reside in Gro mo during summer from 1814 to 1888, because their summer palace was located there.² Today, it is a border region in the south-west of Tibet, dividing India from China, and it serves mainly a strategic purpose. But in the past decades, it was both a spot for pilgrims on their way from Tibet to Bhutan or to Sikkim as well as for western explorers on their way to Tibet.

The bKa' brgyud monastery in Gro mo lies on an important strategic spot, where ancient trade routes from Sikkim and West Bengal meet and proceed to Lhasa: One route comes from Kalimpong via the Jelep La pass, the other one from Gangtok via the Nathu La pass. Additionally, roads lead into Bhutan in the East.³ The monastery bKa' brgyud dgon gsar, also known as Gro mo bKa' brgyud dgon dga' ldan tshe [m]chog gling or bKa' brgyud tshe [m]chog gling, was founded by followers of the 'Ba' ra ba bKa' brgyud pa tradition during the twelfth Tibetan *rab byung*, between 1678 and 1746. This monastery developed into the main seat of the bKa' brgyud sPrul sku, a lineage within the 'Ba' ra ba tradition, that emerged in the seventeenth century and is still existing these days. According to the hagiographies of masters belonging to the 'Ba' ra ba tradition, the monastery was established by Grub mchog Ngag dbang don ldan,

Corrigenda:
The royal family of
Sikkim used to reside in
Gro mo during summer
from the 1780s to 1888
(not from 1814 to 1881).

¹ See Chan (1994, p. 798), McKay (1997, p. 87), and Tucci (1956, p. 17).

² See Bajpai (1999, pp. 16-19), Mullard (2011, p. 40, note 25), and Mullard and Wongchuk (2010, pp. 85-90).

³ See Chan (1994, pp. 798-800), Gyurme Dorje (1998, pp. 361-2), and Tucci (1956, p. 15). For a map showing the strategical position of the monastery bKa' brgyud dgon gsar see Fig. 1.

a disciple of Ngag dbang rgyal mtshan.⁴ A more recent publication names one Grub dbang mTshams pa mnga' bdag as founder of this monastery.⁵ In the 1950s, the bKa' brgyud sPrul sku 'Jigs med Ngag dbang bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan (1939-2007) left the monastery in Gro mo due to the difficult political situation and took refuge in Sikkim, where he established a new monastery as a new seat of the bKa' brgyud sPrul sku in Chandmari, which is lying close to the Sikkimese capital of Gangtok in the 1980s.

In the following, I will show the significance of the monastery bKa' brgyud dgon gsar as a meeting and resting place for masters of the 'Ba' ra ba tradition on their way from Tibet to Bhutan and Sikkim. Additionally, I will give some accounts of western explorers, mountaineers, and seekers, who visited this monastery in the course of their journeys to Tibet and who described the monastery and encounters with its members in their notes and reports.

1. Meeting place for 'Ba' ra ba masters

The 'Ba' ra ba bKa' brgyud tradition derives its name from the place 'Ba' ra brag in the Shangs valley, where the founder of this tradition, 'Ba' ra ba rGyal mtshan dpal bzang (1310-91), also known as rJe 'Ba' ra ba, was born.⁶ His main teacher was Zur phug pa (1263-1330), a 'Brug pa master, from whom he also received the *Ri chos skor gsum*, which became important teachings within the

⁴ See *gSer phreng/a* (Vol. 4, 6.2-5 and 151.6-152.3). Ngag dbang rgyal mtshan founded the monastery sGril ma gsang sngags chos sdings in Khams bu, in the vicinity of Phag ri. He was a disciple of dKon mchog rgyal mtshan (1601-87). The latter brought the teachings of the 'Ba' ra ba to the newly opened Hidden Land of 'Bras mo ljongs, present-day Sikkim, in the 17th century. He is also known as first bKa' brgyud sPrul sku. This lineage is sometimes called Grub thob sPrul sku as the first in this row, dKon mchog rgyal mtshan, held this title. The monastery sGril ma gsang sngags was regarded as main monastery, the bKa' brgyud dgon gsar as branch monastery. For further reading on the monastery bKa' brgyud dgon gsar, see Erschbamer (2015 and forthcoming). On dKon mchog rgyal mtshan see Erschbamer (2011, 2013, and 2015).

⁵ See Blo bzang byams pa: *Gro mo bka' brgyud dgon dga' ldan tshe chog gling gi lo rgyus*.

⁶ The 'Brug pa bKa' brgyud pa, one of the eight minor traditions (*chung brgyad*) among the many traditions belonging to the bKa' brgyud pa, produced different subtraditions, the sTod 'brug established by rGod tshang pa mGon po rdo rje (1198-1258) being one of them. The latter is again classified into different branches, among which the Yang dgon bKa' brgyud pa was founded by Yang dgon pa (1213-56/8). Finally, the 'Ba' ra ba bKa' brgyud pa emerged from this tradition. For an overview of the many branches of the bKa' brgyud pa see, among others, Czaja (2013, p. 77, note 56), Erschbamer (2015, pp. 3-6), and Smith (2001, pp. 41-6).

'Ba' ra ba tradition.⁷ Additionally, rJe 'Ba' ra ba studied under many renowned masters of his time, among whom Bu ston Rin chen grub (1290-1364), Dol po pa Shes rab rgyal mtshan (1292-1361), and the third Karma pa Rang byung rdo rje (1284-1339) were the most famous. Dol po pa Shes rab rgyal mtshan, who introduced a new dharma language (*chos skad*), claimed that Buddha nature exists in sentient beings, it is permanent and thus empty of other (*gzhan stong*). In this way it is the absolute truth but covered by defilement, which is impermanent and empty of self (*rang stong*). Bu ston Rin chen grub, on the other hand, asserted that Buddha nature is not existing in sentient beings. Furthermore, the teachings on Buddha nature are provisory (*drang don*) and thus need further interpretation. What 'Ba' ra ba rGyal mtshan dpal bzang did, was to unify these two positions, which, on the first glimpse, are contradictory. He said that both taught the preliminary or provisory meaning of Buddha nature, which needs further interpretation. rJe 'Ba' ra ba had a Mahāmudrā (*phyag rgya chen po*) exposition of Buddha nature, combining emptiness with clarity and awareness. He taught that Buddha nature developed into a cyclic existence (*'khor ba*) if it is not understood that it is closely connected with clarity and emptiness. But if one is aware of this, then Buddha nature becomes the true nature of a Buddha (*chos sku*).⁸

The fourteenth century was an unsteady political time in Tibet: dBus gTsang was suffering a civil war, in course of which the Sa skya, to whom rJe 'Ba' ra ba was closely connected, lost their power in favor of the Phag mo grub pa. As a result, rJe 'Ba' ra ba searched for a safer place to practice, which he eventually found in present-day Bhutan. Several journeys took him there, where he soon found many followers and patrons who offered him different monasteries, the most important ones being [g]Shong[s] chen kha north of sPu na kha and 'Brang[s] rgyas [kha] in sPa gro. As rJe 'Ba' ra ba passed away at the latter site, it developed into an important pilgrimage site for members of the 'Ba' ra ba tradition.⁹

⁷ The Mountain Dharma Trilogy or *Ri chos skor gsum* are teachings once written by the great yogin Yang dgon pa (1213-56/8). On this text as well as on the significance of the „teachings for hermits“ (*ri chos*) see Higgins (2015).

⁸ The collected writings of rJe 'Ba' ra ba were published as a fourteen volume work in 1970 comprising his verse exegesis of Buddhist thought along with autocommentary texts and further philosophical writings; see *bKa' 'bum*. On rJe 'Ba' ra ba and his understanding of Buddha nature in contradiction to Bu ston and Dol po pa see also Mathes (2008, pp. 113-25) and Stearns (2010, p. 24).

⁹ See Aris (1979, p. 183), Ardussi (2002, pp. 5-16), Erschbamer (2015, pp. 187-90), and Karma Phuntsho (2013, pp. 130-1 and 182-4). rJe 'Ba' ra ba was not the only one to go to Bhutan as Tibet was facing a time of turmoil, the rNying ma teacher Klong chen Rab

Different masters belonging to the 'Ba' ra ba cared for the monasteries in Bhutan up to the seventeenth century, among them the aforementioned dKon mchog rgyal mtshan, the first bKa' brgyud sPrul sku. He was chased out of Bhutan, because he belonged to the five groups of teachers who did not support Zhabs drung rin po che Ngag dbang rnam rgyal (1594-1651), the unifier of Bhutan, who had to leave Tibet as his opponent had been recognised as rebirth of Padma dkar po (1527-92). In course of these events, the 'Ba' ra ba gradually vanished from Bhutan.¹⁰ During the same time, dKon mchog rgyal mtshan concentrated his activities to the previously opened land of 'Bras mo ljongs, Sikkim. As masters of the 'Ba' ra ba tradition travelled from Tibet to the 'Ba' ra ba sites in Bhutan and to monasteries belonging to the 'Ba' ra ba tradition in Sikkim, it is not surprising, that a 'Ba' ra ba monastery was established in the junction of these routes in the Chumbi valley: the bKa' brgyud dgon gsar. In the following some details will be given on two important masters of the 'Ba' ra ba transmission lineage, who both had a close relationship with that monastery and were members of the 'Jam [dpal] gling [pa] family from sKyid grong in the south-west of Tibet, O rgyan Ngag dbang ye shes (1700-60) and Rig 'dzin Chos dbyings rdo rje (1772-1838).

1.1 O rgyan Ngag dbang ye shes¹¹

One son of Blo gros chos 'phel (1665-1728) from the 'Jam [dpal] gling [pa] family from sKyid grong was O rgyan Ngag dbang ye shes (1700-60). In the 16th century, the 'Ba' ra ba master Nam mkha' rdo rje (1486-1553) brought the 'Ba' ra ba teachings to Mang yul Gung thang. After having studied under Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan (1475-1530), who is the incarnation of rje 'Ba' ra ba and thus also known as 'Ba' ra ba sPrul sku, Nam mkha' rdo rje returned to his homeregion and established a village monastery in the upper part of the village Grwa in sKyid grong. The 'Jam [dpal] gling [pa] family soon started to follow the 'Ba' ra ba tradition besides the Sa skya tradition which they originally belonged to. During the lifetime of Blo gros chos 'phel, the 'Jam [dpal] gling [pa] family from

'byams pa (1308-64), for instance, also left for Bhutan and concentrated his activities there, too; see Karma Phuntsho (2013, p. 156-8).

¹⁰ See, among others, Aris (1979, pp. 208-11), Baruah (2000, pp. 253-6), Imaeda (2011, pp. 39-76), and Karma Phuntsho (2013, pp. 207-54). Padma dkar po was the fourth 'Brug chen, head of the 'Brug pa bKa' brgyud pa.

¹¹ His hagiography, which is entitled *rje btsun bla ma dam pa rdo rje 'chang kun mkhyen o rgyan ngag dbang ye shes dpal bzang po'i rnam thar dpag bsam ljon shing*, is part of *gSer phreng/a* and was also published more recently in *gSer phreng/b*. For some general information on O rgyan Ngag dbang ye shes see Ehrhard (2009, p. 26, note 31 and 2012) and Erschbamer (2015, p. 134).

sKyid grong looked after the village monastery erected by Nam mkha' rdo rje and promoted their teachings.¹²

O rgyan Ngag dbang ye shes, also known as Kun mkhyen chos rje Rin po che, left sKyid grong in 1734 to stay as resident teacher at 'Ba' ra in the Shangs valley until 1740. Afterwards, he returned to sKyid grong and started to collect the writings of rJe 'Ba' ra ba and to execute them as blockprints.¹³

O rgyan Ngag dbang ye shes had a close relationship with the second bKa' brgyud sPrul sku bsTan 'dzin nyi zla (d. 1753), whom he advised to build an assembly hall in the bKa' brgyud dgon gsar.¹⁴

In 1752, O rgyan Ngag dbang ye shes travelled to the bKa' brgyud dgon gsar in the Chumbi valley, where he bestowed the bKa' brgyud sPrul sku bsTan 'dzin nyi zla with teachings. Then he proceeded with his journey and visited the 'Ba' ra ba site 'Brang[s] rgyas [kha] in sPa gro, Bhutan.¹⁵

Another journey to this 'Ba' ra ba monastery in the Chumbi valley is recorded, in course of which O rgyan Ngag dbang ye shes appointed a representative of the monastery and was responsible for the erection of statues.

From the beginning of an iron dragon year [= 1760] onwards, [O rgyan Ngag dbang ye shes] looked after the masters and students from the Gro mo bKa' brgyud dgon gsar together with [bestowing them with] instructions regarding *Gcod rgyal thang ma*. [Furthermore, he] taught publicly the precious teachings of Buddha and was responsible for the newly creating images of the four aspects [of] the root teacher. Meanwhile, Bla dpon Ye shes rgyal mtshan passed

¹² The 'Jam [dpal] gling [pa] family left Tibet in the 1950s and settled in McLeod Ganj, Dharamsala, where the monastery bKra shis chos gling was established. On the 'Jam [dpal] gling [pa] family see, among others, Chos dbyings rdo rje: *'Jam dpal bde chen gling pa'i gdung rabs skor gsal ba*, Blo gro chos 'phel: *rTen gsum gzhengs pa'i dkar chag*, and Erschbamer (2015, pp. 169-74 and 210). On Nam mkha' rdo rje see Ehrhard (2000, pp. 51-65).

¹³ See *gSer phreng/a* (Vol. 3, 531.1-532.4). These writings are preserved and were published in a fourteen volume work in 1970, which is entitled *rJe 'ba' ra ba chen po rgyal mtshan dpal bzang gi bka' 'bum : A Tibetan Encyclopedia of Buddhist Scholasticism*. The last of these volumes contains a catalogue (*dkar chag*), written by the same O rgyan Ngag dbang ye shes. In 1741, he also supervised the completion of a manuscript that contained collected tantras, such as the *rNying ma rgyud 'bum*; see Ehrhard (2012).

¹⁴ See *gSer phreng/a* (Vol. 3, 514.5-515.1 and Vol. 4 153.6-154.2), Ehrhard (2009, p. 200, note 32), and Erschbamer (2015, p. 145).

¹⁵ See *gSer phreng/a* (Vol. 3, 557.5-559.2).

away in the south. Thereafter, Chos grags rgyal mtshan was bestowed with empowerments of the *Bla sgrub byin rlabs gter mdzod*¹⁶ and [he] was appointed the position of spiritual preceptor of the [monastery] Gro mo bKa' brgyud dgon gsar. [Chos grags rgyal mtshan] was bestowed with a white ceremonial scarf [and] the meditation hat of the master himself. Having scattered the flowers of the enthronement [and] of auspicious woods [he] was decorated with white ceremonial scarfs as virtuous action from attendants, monks, and disciples. Then [O rgyan Ngag dbang ye shes] departed.¹⁷

1.2 Rig 'dzin Chos dbyings rdo rje¹⁸

Rig 'dzin Chos dbyings rdo rje (1772-1838) was also a member of the above mentioned 'Jam [dpal] gling [pa] family from sKyid grong. Like O rgyan Ngag dbang ye shes, he also looked after the 'Ba' ra ba sites in sKyid grong and stayed as resident teacher in 'Ba' ra brag in the Shangs valley, where he undertook renovation work in 1823 and performed a consecration ceremony in the following year. Rig 'dzin Chos dbyings rdo rje had close links to the third bKa' brgyud sPrul sku Ngag dbang chos kyi rgya mtsho (1755-1831), who was his teacher, and who was born in La chen in Northern Sikkim. As the main seat of the bKa' brgyud sPrul sku was the monastery bKa' brgyud dgon gsar, Rig 'dzin Chos dbyings rdo rje travelled several times to this monastery in the Chumbi

¹⁶ This text was written by rJe 'Ba' ra ba, the founding father of the 'Ba' ra ba bKa' bgyud pa, and is comprised in his collected writings, there entitled *Bla ma sgrub thabs byin rlabs kyi gter mdzod*; see bKa' 'bum (Vol. 12, 406-449). For a catalogue of the works of rJe 'Ba' ra ba see Erschbamer (2015).

¹⁷ See gSer phreng/a (Vol. 3, 599.1-4): *lcag 'brug gi lo 'go nas gro mo bka' brgyud dgon gsar ba dpon slob rnams la gcod rgyal thang ma'i khrid bcas skyongs bar mdzad / rgyal ba'i bka' 'gyur rin po che gsung sgrogs dang / rtsa ba'i bla ba (= ma) rnam bzhi'i snang brnyan yang gsar bzhangs la mdzad la / lhor bla dpon ye shes rgyal mtshan sku gshegs pas chos grags rgyal mtshan la bla sgrub byin rlabs gter mdzod kyi dbang bcas scal (= stsal) te gro mo bka' brgyud dgon gsar gyi bla mar bsko bzhang gnang ba'i rje nyid kyi dbu zhwa sgom gzhu lha rdzas bcas scal (= stsal) nas mnga' gsol shis brjod kyi me tog 'thor bar mdzad tshe sku 'khor gra (= grwa) slob rnams kyi legs bya'i lha rdzas sogs bstar te phyir phebs.*

¹⁸ The extensive autobiography of Rig 'dzin Chos dbyings rdo rje, which is entitled *Bya bral rnal 'byor pa rig 'dzin chos dbyings rdo rje'i 'di sna 'khrul pa'i rol rtsed rtogs brjod gyi tshul du gleng ba rma bya dga' ba'i 'brag sgra*, is the final text comprised in the *gSer phreng/a* and was published more recently in *gSer phreng/b*. For some notes on this master, see also Ehrhard (2009, p. 201, note 35).

valley to meet his teacher and to receive various teachings. During one such visit, the anniversary of the passing away of the abovementioned O rgyan Ngag dbang ye shes was celebrated.

The monastic community [of bKa' brgyud dgon gsar in the Chumbi valley] performed a memorial celebration of Kun mkhyen chos rje [= O rgyan Ngag dbang ye shes] in form of an extensive commemoration service on the 27th day. A feast gathering together with white ceremonial scarfs, one *zho* of gold as well as 15 silver coins were offered in the small private chamber.¹⁹

The monastery bKa' brgyud dgon gsar served Rig 'dzin Chos dbyings rdo rje as starting point for several visits of the ancient 'Ba' ra ba sites in Bhutan. For instance in 1828, he travelled to the monastery of bKa' brgyud dgon gsar for the festivities on the occasion of the conclusion of renovations and consecration of different statues. Then he travelled onwards and reached the Bhutanese region of Ha[d]. After having visited different sites in sPa gro, Bhutan, he returned via Ha[d] to the monastery of bKa' brgyud dgon gsar.²⁰

Although his teacher Ngag dbang chos kyi rgya mtsho passed away in 1831, Rig 'dzin Chos dbyings rdo rje still stayed in close contact with the monastery bKa' brgyud dgon gsar. He was even responsible for the recognition of his teacher's rebirth. In 1836, Rig 'dzin Chos dbyings rdo rje was informed that two candidates were found, one from Sikkim and the other one from Bhutan. Then he travelled to the 'Ba' ra ba monastery in the Chumbi valley, invited the candidate from Bhutan, a native from sPa gro in Western Bhutan, and carried out the necessary examinations. Afterwards, he accepted the Bhutanese candidate, sKal bzang chos dbyings rgya mtsho (nineteenth century), as incarnation of his teacher and hence enthroned him as fourth bKa' brgyud sPrul sku.²¹

¹⁹ See gSer phreng/a (Vol. 4, 420.5-6): *kun mkhyen chos rje'i dus dran nyer bdun kyi nyin gra* (= *grwa*) *tshang tshogs chen la sku mchod rgyas par btang / gzim chung du tshogs 'khor dang bcas lha rdzas / gser zho gang / dngul tam bco lnga bcas phul*. One *zho* of gold corresponds to 3.7 gram of silver; see, among others, Pahlke (2012, p. 192, note 245).

²⁰ See gSer phreng/a (Vol. 4, 578.2-588.5).

²¹ See gSer phreng/a (Vol. 4, 624.1-626.3) and Erschbamer (2015, p. 156). sKal bzang chos dbyings rgya mtsho is the central figure on a painted scroll (*thang ka*), where the different masters of the 'Ba' ra ba transmission lineage are depicted. This *thang ka*, which once was in the possession of the 'Jam [dpal] gling [pa] family from sKyid grong, is now housed in the Five Continents Museum Munich, formerly State Museum of Ethnology (Völkerkundemuseum). For a description of this *thang ka* see Ehrhard (2009).

2. Accounts of westerners visiting the bKa' brgyud dgon gsar

In course of the so-called Great Game, the British entered Tibet in 1903-04 and went as far as Lhasa as answer to the Russian exploration of Tibet some years earlier. This British expedition was led by Francis Younghusband (1863-1942) and thus is also known as Younghusband Mission. As a result of this expedition, the Tibetans were forced to sign a treaty, which allowed the British, to station one British trade agent at Gyantse, one at Yatung in the Chumbi valley, and one at Gartok.²² In the following, the British were stationed there, such as Charles Bell (1870-1945)²³ or Hugh Richardson (1905-2000),²⁴ who became interested in Tibet and its culture, and who published some important books on this subject. But not only the British entered Tibet, also Americans, French, Germans, Italians, Japanese, and Russians did so.²⁵ Several expeditions, such as those led by the Italian Tibetologist Giuseppe Tucci (1894-1984), or the German Schäfer Expedition, just to name a few, took the ancient trade routes from India to Tibet. By entering Tibet from the Indian subcontinent via Sikkim, they had to pass the Chumbi valley and by doing so also the 'Ba' ra ba monastery bKa' brgyud dgon gsar. What follows are different accounts of the members of expeditions that led through the Chumbi valley and thus passed and also visited the monastery bKa' brgyud dgon gsar.

2.1 Occurrences at the monastery bKa' brgyud dgon gsar

During the Younghusband Expedition in 1903-04, Younghusband visited the bKa' brgyud monastery coming from Sikkim via the Nathu La pass and proceeding to Lhasa. In the account of this mission is described an episode according to which the bKa' brgyud monastery had been involved in a scandal some years prior to Younghusbands visit. Because of this incident the older monas-

²² See McKay (1997, xx).

²³ Bell shot lots of photos during his time in the Himalaya; for those photographs, which are preserved in the Pitt Rivers Museum Oxford, consult <http://tibet.prm.ox.ac.uk/>, for the Charles Bell Tibetan collection in the Liverpool museum see <http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/wml/collections/ethnology/asia/tibet/charles-bell/>.

²⁴ During the time Richardson served as Sub-Divisional Officer in Bengal from 1932-34, he was caught up by Tibet and its culture. In 1936-37, he accompanied Gould on his mission to Lhasa, on which also Chapman, who will be dealt with later, participated. Gould also helped Richardson to get the position as Trade Agent at Gyantse. Richardson spent many years in Tibet. In 1950, he left Tibet due to the political changes and started a second career as Tibetologist; see, among others, Harris ed. (2003, pp. 148-51). Photographs from his time in Tibet are housed in the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford and can be viewed under <http://tibet.prm.ox.ac.uk/>.

²⁵ See Harris (2007, p. 73).

tery was destroyed and a new, and more beautiful, temple was established within one mile of the old one.²⁶

The engineer and civil servant in British India, John Claude White (1853-1918), visited the bKa' brgyud monastery on his mission to Bhutan in 1905. There he met the sixth bKa' brgyud sPrul sku Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho, who was born in Ha[d], Western Bhutan. According to White, the fifth bKa' brgyud sPrul sku Thub bstan 'od ldan, a native of sPa gro in Western Bhutan, had died in the 1880s. Rumors were that he was probably killed.²⁷

2.2 The great practitioner and abbot Ajo Rin po che

After the passing away of the sixth bKa' brgyud sPrul sku Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho, Ajo Rin po che ran the 'Ba' ra ba monastery bKa' brgyud dgon gsar until the next incarnation was found and was old enough to head a monastery. He was a great master of meditation and, like most of the monks living in this monastery, married. Whereas the other monks wore the traditional robes of monks, Ajo Rin po che wore a white robe with red stripes, had long hair that he knotted up, and white earrings, as he was an ascetic and follower of the great yogin Mi la ras pa.²⁸ Being quite influential in Tibet as well as in Sikkim and Bhutan, he had many patrons with whose help he established a two-storeyed temple.²⁹

Two further westerners that travelled via Sikkim to Tibet passed the bKa' brgyud dgon gsar monastery in the Chumbi valley, and met Ajo Rin po che there. In this regard, accounts of the British mountaineer Chapman (1907-71) and the German Buddhist Anagarika Govinda (1898-1985), will be given.

The British Army officer and mountaineer Frederick Spencer Chapman (1907-71) was invited by Basil Gould (1883-1956) to join him on his mission to Lhasa carried out in 1936-37.³⁰ On August 2nd, 1936, the expedition reached the bKa'

²⁶ See Landon (1905, p. 60).

²⁷ See White (1909, p. 109). For further reading on the fifth and sixth bKa' brgyud sPrul sku, who both died quite young, see Erschbamer (2015, p. 157). One can speculate, that these events were the reason why the old monastery was destroyed, as described above.

²⁸ Mi la ras pa, whose dates are ambiguous (1028-1111, 1040-1123, or 1052-1135), is the most renowned Tibetan yogin, who became famous for his idealistic life. After having chosen the wrong way, which included doing harm to others, he followed the right path toward liberation and studied hard under Mar pa (1012-97). Dwags po lha rje sGam po pa (1079-1153), from whom the different branches and sub-branches of the bKa' brgyud pa tradition emerged, was his main disciple; see, among others, Kapstein (2006, pp. 104-5) and Tucci (1988, pp. 16-26).

²⁹ See Govinda (2005, pp. 255-61).

³⁰ Gould was the British Political Officer of Bhutan, Sikkim, and Tibet from 1935 to 1945.

brgyud dgon gsar in the Chumbi valley. They found several reliquary shrines in the circumstances of the monastery. Chapman described the monastery as follows:

We followed them [= musicians] through a most attractive wooden gateway into a large cobbled courtyard where a crowd of monks welcomed us. Behind carved pillars there was an ambulatory right round the yard with ancient-looking frescoes on the walls, depicting fierce gods embracing, meditating Buddhas, multi-headed Buddhas, Buddhas with blue, green or red skins-hundreds of Buddhas, and all different; also the wheel of life depicting man's vicissitudes through endless cycles of existence. A fine pony was tied to a pole in the centre of the court; many dogs prowled round.³¹

In the abbot's room they were welcomed by Ajo Rin po che, who maintained this position as abbot for twenty-seven years. Chapman described Ajo Rin po che as an aged man, wearing a grey robe, and having his long hair tied up. He wore earrings as well as rings on his fingers.³² After his return from the Lhasa expedition, Chapman was the first mountaineer to be allowed to climb the holy mountain Chomolhari (Jo mo lha ri), located in Bhutan on the border to Tibet. In course of this expedition, he led four men from Sikkim, passed again the monastery bKa' brgyud dgon gsar in Gro mo and met the abbot Ajo Rin po che, who, together with some monks, was chopping wood below the monastery.³³ Some years later, in the 1940s, the German Ernst Lothar Hoffmann (1898-1985), better known as Lama Anagarika Govinda, stayed at the monastery bKa' brgyud dgon gsar. He studied under many important Buddhist masters in Sri Lanka, India, and Tibet and became known for his books on Buddhism. The religious marriage of Lama Govinda and Li Gotami was performed by Ajo Rin po che. Lama Govinda has dedicated one chapter in his *Way of the White Clouds* to Tsé-Chöling (Tshe [m]chog gling), which is just another name of the bKa'

³¹ Chapman (1945, p. 193). During this visit, Chapman and other members of the expedition took photographs from the monastery and the monks living there. Ajo Rin po che is also depicted on various of these photos, which are now preserved in the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford and accessible on <http://tibet.prm.ox.ac.uk/>.

³² See Chapman (1945, pp. 191-4).

³³ See Chapman (1945, p. 132).

brgyud dgon gsar in the Chumbi valley.³⁴ Also during the time of Lama Govinda's visit, Ajo Rin po che ran the monastery. The above-mentioned bKa' brgyud sPrul sku, Ngag dbang bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan (1939-2007) was about nine year old and thus too young to act as abbot for the monastery. The young sPrul sku lived in a shrine room, where many precious painted scrolls (*thang ka*) were housed.

According to Lama Govinda, Ajo Rin po che, by then 105 years old, was the first Buddhist monk who was officially greeted by the Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru (1889-1964), in 1958, when the latter was on an official visit in Bhutan. Even in the late 1950s, the only roads to reach Bhutan were the ancient trade routes from India via Tibet. There, in the Chumbi valley, where the roads from Tibet, Sikkim, and Bhutan meet, lies the monastery bKa' brgyud dgon gsar.³⁵

3. Concluding remarks

The monastery bKa' brgyud dgon gsar in the Chumbi valley was the main seat of the bKa' brgyud or Grub thob sPrul sku. It served as starting and meeting point for various masters of the 'Ba' ra ba bKa' brgyud pa tradition, who travelled from Tibet to Bhutan and to Sikkim to look after 'Ba' ra ba sites and to teach followers living there. Then, in the beginning of the twentieth century, British officers were stationed in the Chumbi valley. They also visited the monastery bKa' brgyud dgon gsar and wrote about these encounters in their reports. Additionally, different expeditions, which were led from Sikkim to Tibet, passed the monastery and thus descriptions can be found in the expedition's reports. The members of the monastery left this place due to the political situation in the 1950 and took asylum in Sikkim. In the 1980s, the Chinese government financed renovations of this monastery and stationed some monks there.

³⁴ See Govinda (2005, pp. 229-34).

³⁵ See Govinda (2005, pp. 219-24), where a photo of Ajo Rin po che is depicted, Lopez (1998, pp. 59-61), and Winkler (1990, pp. 61 and 66-8).

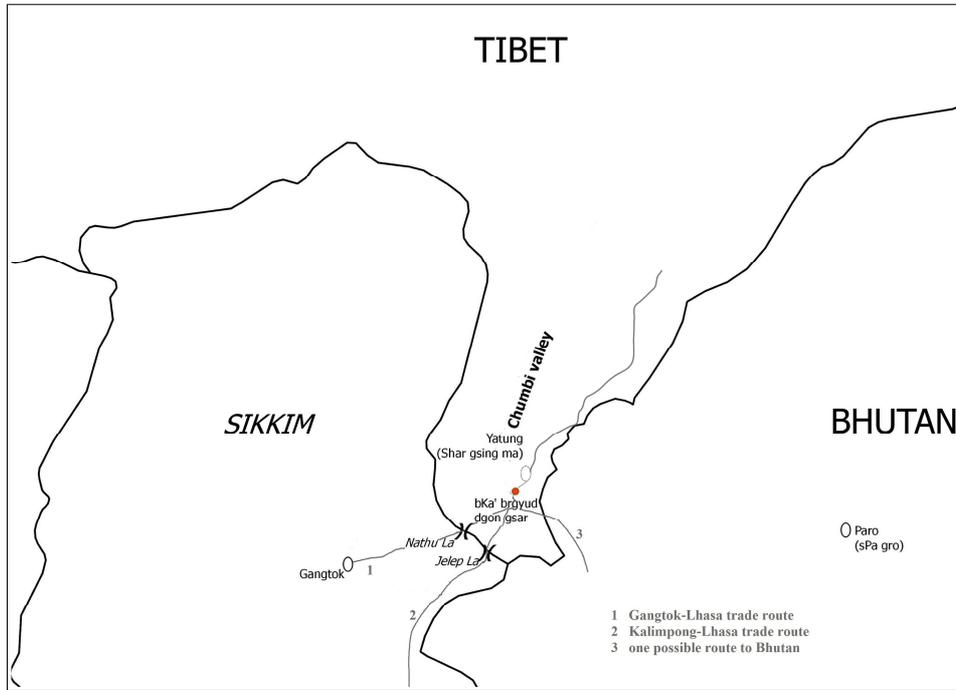


Fig. 1: Map showing the strategical position of the 'Ba' ra ba monastery bKa' brgyud dgon gsar in the Chumbi valley.

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The Chumbi valley in Tibet, at the heart of the Doklam stand-off between Indian and Chinese troops, is no stranger to geopolitical contests. In an earlier age, a prominent chapter of the Great Game, a relentless 19th century competition for control for the gates of India between imperial Britain and Tsarist Russia, was written in the valley's Himalayan villages and towns. Fearing that a Russian political gambit in Lhasa could undermine British India's trade and commercial interests in Tibet, George Nathaniel Curzon, then Viceroy of India, picked Francis Younghusband, a blue-blooded explorer, s