

BOOK REVIEW

FRANÇOISE POMMARET

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mKha' spyod 'Bras mo ljongs kyi gtsug nor sprul pa'i rnal 'byor mched bzhi brgyud 'dzin dang bcas pa'i byung ba brjod pa blo gсар gzhon nu' i dga' ston.

Khenpo Lha Tshering, *A Saga of Sikkim's supremely revered four pioneer Nyingmapa reincarnates and their torchbearers*, Khenpo L. Tshering, Gangtok, 2002, 263 pp., language: Tibetan. Only the cover carries a title in English.

This book is a welcome contribution to the knowledge of the history of Sikkim ('Bras mo ljongs), and to the links between the rNying ma pa religious school and the kings of Sikkim, called *chos rgyal*, dharmaraja, like the Tibetan kings; thus this term underlines the religious component of their function.

The knowledge about the ancient history of Sikkim is scanty so far, and it is hoped that the forthcoming publication of Per Sorensen and John Ardussi, presenting the text and the translation of the famous *'Bras ljongs rgyal rabs dvangs shel me long* (1908) by lHa lcam Ye shes sgrol ma, will come out soon. This publication is under the patronage of Her Majesty Ashi Kesang Dorji Wangchuck, Queen Mother of Bhutan and lHa lcam Ye shes sgrol ma's granddaughter.

Khenpo Lha Tshering uses this text as one of his primary sources, but it is not the only one. In fact, he lists more than 45 sources (pp. 1-5), including Tibetan and Bhutanese sources, and says in his introduction that the writing of this work took him seven years. There is no doubt that Khenpo Lha Tshering possesses great knowledge and has done extensive research. He compares sources and discusses their validity either in his notes or in the text itself. For example, in the chapter on the Ka thog pa lamas in Sikkim, he does not hesitate to state that the history is not clear (pp.19-22). It must be regretted, however, that the exact sources for certain chapters are not mentioned more often in the notes.

As the author intended, the book is divided into six chapters (*le'u*), with an introduction and a bibliography of the sources preceding each

chapter. However, the numbering of sections in Roman numerals – probably done at the time of the lay-out – , is very confusing as it divides the work into sections without clearly indicating which are the chapters and which are the sub-sections. Not only does this blur the chapter divisions but it also makes the sub-sections of a chapter look like independent chapters.

Khenpo Lha Tshering's book would have benefited from some additional, careful proofreading and a layout following more closely the author's intentions. The table of contents appears to indicate a juxtaposition of small chapters, whereas the author had set up a very logical sequence throughout – which also explains the title.

According to Khenpo Lha Tshering's indications in Tibetan, the contents of his work are as follows:

CHAPTER ONE (pp. 1-11): Prophecies concerning Sikkim as a hidden land and the advent of the monarchy.

CHAPTER TWO (pp. 12-26) includes: The history of the famous saint Rig 'dzin rgod ldem and his 'opening of the door' of Sikkim as a sacred land (*gnas*). Rig 'dzin rgod ldem (1337-1408) is the initiator of the Rediscovered texts of the North (Byang gter) and the founder of the monastery of rDo rje brag in gTsang, which was relocated on the left bank of the gTsang po in Central Tibet in the 17th century. He is thus considered as the first holder of the Byang gter teachings of rDor rje brag. Next comes the history of Ka thog pa bzhag bla Ye shes 'bum and Mon Ka thog pa bSod nams rgyal mtshan, followed by the history of the second Rig 'dzin rgod ldem, mNga' ris Rig 'dzin legs ldan rje (1512-1625), and his activity at lHa ri snying phug in Sikkim. Rig 'dzin legs ldan rje was the brother of the great mNga' ris Pan chen Padma dbang rgyal (1487-1543) and the second holder of the Byang gter teachings of rDor rje brag.

CHAPTER THREE (pp. 27-64) is devoted to mNga' bdag sems dpa' chen po Phun tshogs rig 'dzin (born in 1591/2 -1654) and his lineage. He was the founder of the monastery of Brag dkar bKra shis lding (Tashiding) in Sikkim, and his lineage was known in Sikkim as the mNga' bdag pa (cf. *Gazetteer of Sikkim*, 1894). He claimed to belong to the lineage of the great Treasure discoverer mNga' bdag nyang ral Nyima 'od zer.

CHAPTER FOUR (pp. 65-190), the longest of the six chapters, is devoted to the life of the famous rNyingma pa saint lHa btsun nam mkha'i 'jigs med, also known as lHa btsun chen po, and the two reincarnations of his lineage. Born in southern Tibet in 1597, lHa btsun chen po arrived in Sikkim in 1641 and meditated at several places

including Yoksum (Yug bsam) Tashiding and Pemayangtse. The life of lHa btsun nam mkha'i 'jigs med is covered from p. 65 to p.142. The life of his second reincarnation, lHa btsun ngag dbang kun bzang 'jigs med, is the shortest (born in Bumthang, Bhutan, in 1656, died in 1675, pp. 143-147), while the life of the third, the great lHa btsun 'jigs med dpa' bo (1682- ?), and his deeds and achievements are dealt with extensively from p. 147-195. This lineage was affiliated to sMin grol gling, the other famous rNying ma pa monastery on the right bank of the gTsang po in Central Tibet, where lHa btsun 'jigs med dpa' bo spent his early years. lHa btsun 'jigs med dpa' bo and the king Phyag rdor nam rgyal (1686-1717) of Sikkim built Pemayangtse (Padma yang rtse) monastery on the model of sMin grol gling.

CHAPTER FIVE (pp. 196-229) deals with the early history of Sikkim before the 17th century and the lives of the kings of Sikkim until the 6th King rNam rgyal phun tshogs (1733-1780). This chapter is a logical follow-up to Chapters Two, Three and Four, as it is said that the three lamas (lHa btsun chen po, mNga' bdag sems dpa' chen po Phun tshogs rigs 'dzin and Ka thog mTshungs med chos rje kun tu bzang po) from the three different rNyingma pa lineages who were in Sikkim in 1642, met at Yug bsam and chose Phun tshogs nam rgyal as the first king of Sikkim.

CHAPTER SIX (pp. 230-263) is devoted to some rNying ma pa lineage holders of the early translation of Tantra, such as the Ka thog pa, as well as to other lamas such as rDor rje glingpa (1346-1405). However, if this editorial choice makes sense in a purely religious context, it might have been better, from a chronological point of view, to place the lives of the two Ka thog pa lamas – Dam pa bde gshegs (1134-1204 or 1122-1192), founder of Ka thog monastery in Khams, and mTshungs med chos rje kun tu bzang po (17th century) –, in Chapter Two, before the chapter on the kings.

In spite of its editorial shortcomings, this work is a very useful and well-researched history of Sikkim, providing a wealth of information previously only to be obtained from various, widely scattered sources. The text also allows the reader a glimpse of the interactions between Sikkim and its neighbours Tibet, Bhutan and Nepal, during the course of its history.

As is the case with many historians, Khenpo Lha Tshering wrote his work with an underlying ideology in mind, and this makes it all the more interesting. He emphasizes the pre-eminence of the rNyingma pa school in the history of the country, and more particularly of the lineages upheld at Tashiding (bKra shis lding) monastery – from where

he is originally. It also reaffirms, in a subtle way, the legitimacy of the rNam rgyal dynasty because it was created by religious figures.

To conclude one could say that beyond the historical and religious facts it offers, this book represents a quest for the identity and roots of Sikkim in light of the fact that it is now an Indian state.

This book can be ordered from:

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Gangtok 737102
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Soft cover Rs 225, hard cover Rs 310, postage and handling charges (international) Rs 200. Please send your currency's equivalent by postal money order.