

# Kīrti Monastery of Ngawa: Its History and Recent Situation

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## Introduction

**F**or good reasons one can consider Ngawa town in Amdo<sup>1</sup> to be the heart of both the recent protests (starting in 2008) and the self-immolations (since 2009). Though no precise information is available, some 25 from the total of 37 cases of self-immolations have taken place in Ngawa or were done by former inhabitants of Ngawa up to the time of writing the paper (June 2012). Despite the large number of monasteries surrounding Ngawa, all evidence points to the Kīrti monastery of Geluk tradition as being one of the main sources of the protests: 14 self-immolators are reported to be monks or former monks of Kīrti monastery.<sup>2</sup>

This paper looks at the present situation through the lens of history since the historical background of the nerve-centre of the Tibetan protest might certainly help us to understand the circumstances of so many self-immolations in this monastery.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In the mass media this place is frequently referred to by its Chinese name Aba. The Tibetan toponym Ngawa is usually explained in two ways in the texts. The first explanation says that the shape of the valley, where Ngawa appeared, resembles that of a drum (*nga*) and so it gave the name to the locality (Ngawa: “Drum-like”). Another explanation says that Tibetans came here in the 8<sup>th</sup> century from Ngari in Western Tibet. Ngawa should be thus taken as abbreviation of Ngari (“Those from Ngari”). Cf. Dmu dge bsam gtan. “Mdo smad kyi lo rgyus,” In *Rje dmu dge bsam gtan rgya mtsho'i gsung 'bum*. pod gsum pa, pp. 279-383. Xining: Mtsho sngon mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 1997, pp. 304-305; Blo bzang chos 'phel, *Rnga yul kirti dgon gyi chags rim*. Place unspecified, 1992, p. 6.

<sup>2</sup> See Katia Buffetrille's contribution in this issue.

<sup>3</sup> Very little is known about the history of this place in scholarly literature. Available in English are articles dealing solely with the Bonpo monastery Nangshik, located not far from the town itself (Per Kværne, “The monastery sNang zhiḡ of the Bon religion in the rNga ba district of Amdo,” In P. Daffina (ed.) *Revista degli Studii Orientali* 63, *Indo-Sino-Tibetica: Studi in onore di Luciano Petech*, Rome: Bardi, 1990, pp. 207-222; Donatella Rossi, “The monastic lineage of sNang zhiḡ dgon pa in A mdo rNga ba,” In *The Tibet journal*, Winter 1998, pp. 58-71) or not always reliable account of Kīrti monastery in Ngawa by Gruschke (Andreas Gruschke, *The Cultural Monuments of Tibet's Outer Provinces, Amdo*. 2 vols. Bangkok: White Lotus Press 2001, pp. 63-64). Moreover, a non-scholarly, but highly interesting source on Kīrti monasteries is Robert Ekvall's novel *The Lama Knows*, which takes place

The following sections will first concentrate on the Kīrti masters, then on the Megyal kings and finally offer some brief considerations based on observations made in Ngawa during my fieldwork in the years 2004-2007 and 2010.

### The lineage of the Kīrti masters

Tradition claims that the origin of the lineage of the Kīrti masters goes back to the disciple of Tsongkhapa known under the strange nickname of “Black Tongued One” (Chenakpa/Jaknagpa, 1374-1450). The nickname is explained by a syllable “Ā” that allegedly appeared on his tongue. His monastic name was Rongchen Gendun Gyaltshen.<sup>4</sup> After his studies in Central Tibet he returned to Amdo and founded a temple (Kālari Gone Trashi Lhundrup), known also as Kāla hermitage (Kāla ritro). This temple, located some 100kms south of Ngawa, remains an important pilgrimage place and hermitage full of miraculous rock-imprints, treasures and curiosities. These features are witness to the fact that it was not only the Black Tongued One, but also his successors who were renowned as wonder-workers and powerful tantric masters.

The name Kīrti was acquired allegedly through the name of the tribe that became subject of the “Black Tongued” master, called Gur-tima. He thus started to be called Gurti lama (Gur, meaning probably “tent”).<sup>5</sup> However, the name is mostly written as Kīrti these days and taken as the Sanskrit equivalent of the Tibetan term *drakpa* (“renowned”).<sup>6</sup>

### The Lineage of Kīrti masters

1. Rongchen Gendun Gyaltshen or “The Black-Tongued One” 1374-1450
2. Tenpa Rinchen 1474-1558

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in the beginning of 20th century (Robert B. Ekvall, *The Lama Knows: A Tibetan Legend Is Born*. New Delhi-Bombay-Calcutta: Oxford and IBH Publishing, 1979).

<sup>4</sup> For details on Black Tongued One see Brag dgon pa dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas. *Mdo smad chos 'byung* (*Deb ther rgya mtsho*). Lanzhou: Kan su mi rigs dpe skrun khang 1982, p. 721; Blo bzang chos 'phel. *op. cit.*, 1992, pp. 5-6; Anonymous a. *Rnam thar gser phreng/ glegs bam dang po/ rong chen bstan pa'i sgron me kirti sku phreng rim byon gyi 'khrung rabs rnam thar phyogs sgrigs*. Distributed from Amdo Ngawa Kīrti monastery (place and date unspecified), pp. 5-32.

<sup>5</sup> Blo bzang chos 'phel, *op. cit.*, 1992, pp. 7-8.

<sup>6</sup> This name is interpreted in such a sense in Brag dgon pa dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas, *op. cit.*, 1982, p. 721.

3. Tenpa Rapgye 1564-1643
4. Lobsang Jamyang 1656-1708
5. Lobsang Tenpay Gyaltshen 1712- 1771
6. Gendun Chokyi Wangchuk 1772-1796
7. Kunga Chophak Thupten Nyima 1797-1849
8. Lobsang Trinley Tenpa Gyatso 1850-1904
9. Kalsang Lodro Kunga Lungtok Gyatso 1905-1920
10. Ngagwang Lobsang Tenpa Tsering 1919-1939
11. Lobsang Tenzin Jikme Yeshe Gyatso 1942-

The third Kīrti master, Tenpa Rapgye (1564-1643) ranks among the important masters of the whole lineage. It is reported that he was renowned for his abilities as a tantric master. He allegedly tamed a number of local deities in Amdo and frequented pilgrimage places. Particularly interesting is the report of him as a tamer of the local deity in the locality of Taktshang Lhamo, north of Dzorge; he is also credited with the opening of the holy cave of Mahākāla, retrieving the “treasure” in the form of a ritual dagger and leaving behind several footprints in the rocks.<sup>7</sup>

Later, in the 18th century, during the life of the Great fifth Kīrti Lobsang Tenpay Gyaltshen (1712-1771), Taktshang Lhamo became the main seat of the Kīrti masters. There he built the foundation of Lhamo Kīrti Monastery (called Namgyal Dechen Ling), which, up to the present, is considered to be the “mother-monastery” (*magon/ densa*). The fifth Kīrti also seemed to expend much effort in establishing ties with secular leaders in the wider areas of Amdo and Kham. Thus, he is reported to have established a “priest-patron” (*choyon*) relationship with the Derge king Tenpa Tsering (1678-1738).<sup>8</sup>

But what interests us more here is that it was him who first established ties with the lords of Ngawa. As we will later see, the kings of Ngawa were not very powerful at that time and the zenith of their influence in Amdo was yet to come. In several Tibetan sources it is repeated that the fifth Kīrti master was invited by the lord of Ngawa, Mepon Tshewangkyap, and his wife Aboza around the year 1760. He appointed the deity Tshangpa to be the protector of the king and arranged ritual nets (*do*) and other “supports” (*ten*) for the worship of

<sup>7</sup> For references on Tenpa Rapgye, see Anonymous a, *op. cit.*, pp. 212-226, 243-290; Anonymous c. 1999. “Stag tshang lha mo kirti dgon pa’i lo rgyus mdor bsdus.” In Skal bzang, Padma sgron (eds.), *Mdzod dge’i bod rgyud nang bstan dgon ste so so’i lo rgyus mdor bsdus*, 1999, pp. 380-399; Brag dgon pa dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas, *op. cit.*, 1982, pp. 716-717; Blo bzang chos ’phel, *op. cit.*, 1992, pp. 10-11.

<sup>8</sup> For the biography of the fifth Kīrti see Anonymous c, *op. cit.*, pp. 380-399; Brag dgon pa dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas, *op. cit.*, 1982, pp. 717-719; Anonymous a, *op. cit.*, pp. 232-234, 330-334, 370-371; Blo bzang chos ’phel, *op. cit.*, 1992, pp. 12-14.

the deity.<sup>9</sup> Then he tamed the main local deity Dardzom and composed a ritual text (*sangyik*) for his worship. According to the text he also established priest-patron (*choyon*) ties with the king.<sup>10</sup> In the light of later development one can expect that the meeting was a bit over-emphasised in the later sources especially with regard to the “priest-patron relationship,” which is an ornamental expression often used without considering the actual situation. But the story is surely an indication of the first contacts between the future lords of Ngawa, those called Megyal (also spelt Metshang or Mepon), and the Kīrti masters.

All next Kīrti masters are credited with enlarging the Taktshang Lhamo monastery, but the person of the eighth Kīrti master Lobsang Trinley Tenpa Gyatso (1849-1904) stands out among them. He was the founder of the Kīrti monastery in Ngawa and a person who established close ties with the kings of Ngawa, who were later highly influential in the expansion of the power of Kīrti masters over southern Amdo. From the time of the eighth Kīrti master the fortunes of the Kīrti monasteries became bound up with the increasing power of Ngawa kings.<sup>11</sup>

The former secretary of the last king of Ngawa describes how the family of the Ngawa kings invited the eighth Kīrti master in order to avert certain inauspicious circumstances around the year 1860.<sup>12</sup> It is said that the eighth Kīrti master (at age 12) purified the formerly arranged “supports” of the protective deity Tshangpa established by the fifth Kīrti master, which according to some people had been overtaken by demons (*dre*). The inauspiciousness surrounding the king of Ngawa is specifically described as the danger of an interruption in

<sup>9</sup> This deity possessed (at least during the life of the eighth Kīrti master) a renowned deity-medium in the area of Dzorge, who was close to the Kīrti masters. The medium is frequently mentioned in the hagiography of the eighth Kīrti master.

<sup>10</sup> Blo bzang chos 'phel, *op. cit.*, 1992, pp. 13-14; Blo bzang chos 'phel, *Rme'u sa dbang chen po rje 'bangs mnyam 'brel gyi byung ba gang nges mdo tsam brjod pa phyi rabs rna ba'i bdud rtsi zhes bya ba*. Place unspecified, 1993, p. 8; Dmu dge bsam gtan, *op. cit.*, 1997, p. 321.

<sup>11</sup> For an extensive biography of the eighth Kīrti see Zhwa dmar paṇḍita Dge 'dun bstan 'dzin rgya mtsho - Lcang lung khri rgan 'jam dbyangs thub bstan rgya mtsho, “Rigs dang dkyil 'khor rgya mtsho'i mnga' bdag rje btsun blo bzang 'phrin las bstan pa rgya mtsho dpal bzang po'i rnam par thar pa ngo mtshar rtsibs stong bkra ba'i gser gyi 'khor lo thub bstan mdzes rgyan zhes bya ba bzhugs,” In *Rnam thar gser phreng/ gleng bam gsum pa stod chaj/ gleg bam bzhi pa smad chaj/ rong chen bstan pa'i sgron me skyabs mchog blo bzang 'phrin las kyi rnam thar chen mo*. II volumes. Distributed from Amdo Ngawa Kīrti monastery, 2007 (place of publishing unspecified).

<sup>12</sup> Blo bzang chos 'phel, *op. cit.*, 1992, pp. 28-32.

the family line, due to his one and only successor said to be mad (*lenpa*).<sup>13</sup>

The founding of the Kīrti monastery in Ngawa is connected with the visit of the eighth Kīrti master to Ngawa some ten years later, around 1870. In the Tibetan sources this act is called “reestablishment.” It is said that there already existed a small Gelukpa monastery known as Dongkhu monastery founded in 1723 by a certain Dongkhu Phuntsok Tshang,<sup>14</sup> It seems to have been connected with possible interests of Labrang monastery in gaining influence in the area. Through its “reestablishment” by Kīrti, the influence of Labrang monastery was probably weakened. In the wider perspective this can be seen as part of the process of rapid “gelukpatisation” of Amdo in the 19th century, and at the same time as a sign of competition between several powerful centers of Gelukpa tradition. Not long after the founding of Ngawa Kīrti monastery in 1870, there broke out a war around 1880 between Labrang monastery and the united Golok, Tshakho and Ngawa tribes.<sup>15</sup>

It was the eighth Kīrti who built up, through the network of Kīrti monasteries, a power capable of challenging the existing Gelukpa strongholds. His biography contains notes on his almost constant travels, during which he tamed local deities and established ties with existing monasteries, lords and tribal leaders, mostly in the area of southern Amdo.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Blo bzang chos 'phel, *op. cit.*, 1993, pp. 16-17.

<sup>14</sup> The eighth Kīrti master only found a new place for the reestablished monastery in cooperation with the Me king of Ngawa. It is worth of note that around Ngawa there was very little presence of Gelukpa monasteries (Gomang, established in 1791 by Gungthang of Labrang; Amchok, established in 1823), as if the area were resisting the “gelukpatisation” of Amdo at that time. The oldest monasteries in Ngawa were those of Bon tradition (11th or 12th centuries) and later there appeared also Sakya monasteries (Sagang Gon, established in 18th century), Jonang (Segon, established around 1620) and Nyingma ones (Yangogon, in 1627). Cf. Skäl bzang ngag dbang dam chos, *Rnga rdzong yongs kyi grub sde so so'i chos 'byung*. Rnga yul sngo shul dgon do dam u yon lhan khang. Ngawa (date unspecified); Bstan 'dzin (ed.), *Aba zhou zangchuan fojiao siyuan gaikuang*. Krung go bod kyi skad yig sde tshan mtho rim nang bstan slob gling gi bod rgyud nang bstan zhib 'jug khang (date and place unspecified).

<sup>15</sup> For interesting references on rivalry between Ngawa and Labrang monastery, see Dmu dge bsam gtan, *op. cit.*, 1997, pp. 323-326. The influence of Labrang monastery was present in Ngawa in the form of several subjected tribes (*lhade*), who probably became subjected to it in order to avoid the increasing power of Me kings.

<sup>16</sup> For the purpose of illustration, in the rather small area of Thewo today, some nine monasteries out of 22 are counted among the “branch monasteries” of Kīrti (cf. D. Berounský, “Lapsed Buddhists, evil tobacco and the opening of the Bon pilgrimage place of Dmu ri in the Thewo region of Amdo,” In *Pandanus '07*, Prague, Triton, 2007, pp. 165-234 (172, note 10). Its influence stretched between Ser-

Other monasteries around Ngawa were considered to be subjects of the Ngawa king Megyal (the sources mention some 18 monasteries that were subject to him,<sup>17</sup> but Ngawa Kīrti monastery remained independent and was the main focus of the kings' patronage. The king of Ngawa considered the eighth Kīrti master to be his "root master" and according to the texts he even had one of his residences within the monastery (the so-called Megyal Khang).

The next two Kīrti masters, the ninth and tenth, died at young ages. Interestingly, Robert Ekvall dedicates one of his novels to the conflict between two candidates for the reincarnation of the tenth Kīrti, which according to him divided the whole of Amdo.<sup>18</sup> In the Tibetan sources we hardly find any details on this beyond a few general notes. It is mentioned that the Kīrti monastery of Ngawa housed some 1700-1800 monks in the 1950s.<sup>19</sup>

The contemporary eleventh Kīrti (b. 1942) fled to India following the events of 1959. In 1992 he established the Kīrti monastery in Dharamsala and between the years 1997-1999 he held the position of *Kalon* when he was appointed as the Minister of Education in the Tibetan exile government.

Since Ngawa Kīrti monastery enjoyed a rather elevated position through its close relationship to the Ngawa kings, they too deserve a closer look.

### Me Kings of Ngawa

It seems that the Megyal family, the designation by which the kings of Ngawa are known these days, had rather limited power in the area until the 19th century, controlling a few tribes near Ngawa and being just one among a number of tribal chiefs (*pon*). Their family name varies in the sources. The secretary of the last king of Ngawa writes the name as Rme'u and explains that he belonged to the clan with the same name that moved to Amdo from Central Tibet. However, a number of sources give alternative spellings, such as Dme or Rme.

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tha, northern Gyalrong, Dzorge, Thewo, and southern Golok. I did not come across a complete list of their branch monasteries and subjected villages.

<sup>17</sup> For the list of these monasteries, see Blo bzang chos 'phel, *op. cit.*, 1993, p. 25.

<sup>18</sup> Ekvall, *op. cit.*, 1979.

<sup>19</sup> Re mdo sengge. *Kirti tshang dang 'brel ba'i ngag rgyun lo rgyus nyams myong rgan po'i gtam phreng/ deb phreng dang po/ dri lan byed po/ ja tshogs sprul sku blo bzang don grub*. Dharamsala: Kirti Jépa Datsang, 2002, p. 28.

“Tshang” is also spelt Tshang or Sang. The appellation “king” (*gyal*) probably appeared in the 19th century.<sup>20</sup>

### Kings and Queen of Ngawa

1. Tshewangkyap, mid of 18th century
2. Aboza, 18th-19th century
3. Chaktharbum, 19th century
4. Gompo Sonam, 1871-1913
5. Shingkyong, ?
6. Pal Gompo Trinley Rapten, 1916-1966

We know the name of Metshang, Tshewangkyap, from the time when the fifth Kīrti master visited Ngawa around 1760. It is not clear whether he or his wife was considered to be the leader. She was known under the name Aboza, and she is mentioned more frequently in the texts under the titles of *ponmo* (female leader) or *gyalmo* (queen). At that time it seems that Jamyang Zhepa from Labrang monastery established some ties with them hoping that the Gelukpa tradition would spread there.<sup>21</sup>

As was already mentioned, one of his descendants is said to have been born somewhat mad (*lenpa*). The father (recorded simply as Metshang) therefore adopted the youngest son of the Golok leader

<sup>20</sup> The *History of Doctrine in Amdo* by Dragonpa Konchog Tenpa Rapgye from the year 1865 knows him already as a Megyal, i.e. “king” (see Brag dgon pa dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas *opt. cit.*, 1982, p. 755), while other sources such as the hagiography of the eighth Kīrti master call him Mepon (Zhwa dmar paṅḍita Dge ’dun bstan ’dzin rgya mtsho - Lcang lung khri rgan ’jam dbyangs thub bstan rgya mtsho, *op. cit.*). Some sources attempt to trace back the ancient past of this family including the Meu clan, but it is not reliable since it is often based on the oral tradition; Muge Samten repeats that “it is uncertain” (see Blo bzang chos ’phel, , *cit.*, 1992, pp. 2-8; Dmu dge bsam gtan , *cit.*, 1997, pp. 310-312, Hor gtsang ’jigs med, *et al. Mdo smad lo rgyus chen mo las sde tsho’i skor, glegs bam dang po (Mdo smad chos ’byung chen mo*, vol. II). Dharamsala: Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, 2009, pp. 153-157).

<sup>21</sup> Muge Samten does not speak at all about Tshewangkyab in his text and takes for granted that Aboza was the leader of Me in 1790 during the visit of the second Jamyang Zhepa of Labrang monastery (Dmu dge bsam gtan, *op. cit.*, 1997, p. 320). It might be possible that Tshewangkyab had already passed away. He is mentioned by the former secretary of Ngawa kings, but not very clearly, stating that he was a leader around the year 1760, during the time of the visit of the fifth Kīrti master (Blo bzang chos ’phel, *op. cit.*, 1993, p. 8). Discussion concerning the visit of Jamyang Zhepa in 1790 and the ensuing conflicts are discussed in Hor gtsang, *op. cit.*, 2009, pp. 168-169; Blo bzang chos ’phel, *op. cit.*, 1993, pp. 8-13.

from Sertha called Chaktharbum who was then installed as the leader of Metshang (Metshang *pon*). Sources make it clear that he was present in Ngawa in 1870. He in turn married the daughter of the leader of Tshakho (northern Gyalrong), Choktseza Tsering Drolma, known to the sources as “White-Haired One” (Trakarma). These truly diplomatic acts of adoption and marriage led the Ngawa kings out from under the dominance of the Goloks and fostered a kind of alliance between the Goloks, the Ngawa king and the ruler of Tshakho.<sup>22</sup> These events happened in the second half of the 19th century and were contemporary with the time during which the eighth Kīrti founded Kīrti Monastery in Ngawa. As has been mentioned above, the three allies fought around 1880 against villages subjugated to Labrang.<sup>23</sup>

Chaktharbum first took as wife one of the daughters of the Golok leader of the respected Akyong family and in 1871 their son Gompo Sonam was born.<sup>24</sup> During his father's reign, Megyal Gompo Sonam subjugated and in some cases also killed several local tribal leaders around Ngawa.<sup>25</sup>

At least some such details appear concerning a certain leader, Ludrup from the Mowatshang family. In the text written by the secretary of the last king it is said that this leader employed some tantric master to cast spells on Megyal who later killed him together with his two sons, throwing them into the river. Megyal cut off the hand of a remaining man from the family, and the wife of the murdered leader had her nose cut off. Two young daughters were sent off and all the property was taken over by Metshang Gompo Sonam.<sup>26</sup>

Another similar case concerns a murdered leader from Thara village, near Ngawa. He was killed by Megyal together with his two children. It is believed in this village that the assassinated leader became a demon and only after his taming by a master from the Bonpo monastery Nangshik, did he become a protective deity. Until now the deity possesses his deity-medium from Thara village. This story is only remembered in the oral tradition of Thara village.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Blo bzang chos 'phel, *op. cit.*, 1993, pp.16-17.

<sup>23</sup> Dmu dge bsam gtan, *op. cit.*, 1997, p. 323.

<sup>24</sup> However, the history somehow repeated in his case. She was unfaithful to him and escaped with her lover to Choktse. The mother of the Megyal (Trakarma) led troops there and the lover, being the chief of Choktse, was forced to offer large part of his property (Hor gtsang, *op. cit.*, 2009, p. 159).

<sup>25</sup> Rang sa'i tsho dpon a 'dus 'jam ral/ rme srib klu mgon/ thar ba bu/ mkhar ba sang sogs kyis gong dpon la mgo ma sgur bar gdug rtsub ci 'khyol byas pas 'jig rten pha rol tu btang (Blo bzang chos 'phel, *op. cit.*, 1993, p. 20).

<sup>26</sup> Blo bzang chos 'phel, *op. cit.*, 1993, p. 20; Hor gtsang, *op. cit.*, 2009, p. 167.

<sup>27</sup> The present deity medium in Thara village will be the subject of a separate article to be published in *Mongolo-Tibetica Pragensia* '12.



Gompo Sonam later married another lady from the Akyong family who was named Sonam Dron.<sup>28</sup> They both had a daughter called Palchen Dondruptso. Later, Gompo Sonam died accidentally in 1913 during the construction of one of the temples of Kīrti monastery.<sup>29</sup> His only child, his daughter, married a son from a noble Golok family called Shingkyong<sup>30</sup> who was then installed as a Megyal. In 1916 a son, Pal Gompo Trinley Raptan, was born to them.

It was this son who later became the Megyal of Ngawa and he is still remembered by the inhabitants of Ngawa and considered as a truly powerful and admirable king, particularly for those people associated with Kīrti monastery. During his rule the greater part of southern Amdo was united under his power and thus his reign could be seen as a climax of the effort of his last two predecessors. One of the sources says that the last three kings of Ngawa annihilated altogether some 80 lords and chiefs; some were killed, some surrendered.<sup>31</sup> The spread of his power was accompanied by the traditional support of Kīrti monasteries and their masters, and even deepened during his rule. It was he who sponsored the construction of the new temples in the monastery and the printing of the collected works of the Kīrti masters. The newly recognized tenth Kīrti master was even related to him.<sup>32</sup>

Megyal Trinley Raptan organized militarily the subjugated areas. He had up to 18 ministers (*lonpo*); subordinate to them were the so-called *gopo*. Each village had its village officer (*tshomi*) and military leader (*makpon*). Villages were divided into 5 different categories according to wealth, and then different taxes and military obligations were required from them. The villages of Kīrti monasteries (*lhade*) were exempted from obligations, but Megyal helped the Kīrti monasteries administer them.<sup>33</sup> The former secretary of Megyal lists the

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<sup>28</sup> A sister of Pon Kalsang Dramdul and Nyima Dondrup (Hor gtsang, *op. cit.*, 2009, p. 159).

<sup>29</sup> Blo bzang chos 'phel, *op. cit.*, 1993, p. 21; Hor gtsang, *op. cit.*, 2009, pp. 159-160.

<sup>30</sup> A son of Bopa Topgyal from the family of Golok Wangchenbum and Getseza (Hor gtsang, *op. cit.*, 2009, p. 160).

<sup>31</sup> Hor gtsang, *op. cit.*, 2009, p. 167.

<sup>32</sup> Blo bzang chos 'phel, *op. cit.*, 1993, p. 23; Hor gtsang, *op. cit.*, 2009, p. 160.

<sup>33</sup> For more detailed notes on organization see Blo bzang chos 'phel, *op. cit.*, 1993 and Hor gtsang, *op. cit.*, 2009. There are some quite interesting comments by the missionary Robert Dean Carleson, who travelled with Robert Ekvall to Ngawa around the year 1940. He reports that unlike the other areas of Amdo, there were no robbers in the lands subjugated to Ngawa king. He also says that in Ngawa they distributed large number of missionary texts translated into Tibetan. He explains that in comparison with other areas the literacy rate was rather high there. These notes might complement the picture of the Ngawa of those days. <http://www2.wheaton.edu/bgc/archives/GUIDES/205.htm> (Papers of Robert

number of households (*dukha*) subjugated by the kings in the past and they exceeded 10.000.<sup>34</sup>

It seems that this pragmatic and well-organised king of Ngawa was respected by the dreaded warlord Ma Bufang (1903–1975) and later also by the Communists.<sup>35</sup> It is reported that in 1949 his minister travelled to Lanzhou and offered gifts to the Communist leader. In 1953 Megyal helped to pacify a rebellion in Dzorge and in 1954 he visited Beijing and took part in the Great People's Assembly there, where he met the 14th Dalai Lama. After his travels to Central Tibet in 1956, he was appointed to several administrative positions in Ngawa district and in Sichuan province. But the beginning of the Cultural Revolution in 1966 was fatal for him. He is reported to have committed suicide during that year.<sup>36</sup>

### Recent situation

There are a rather large number of Buddhist monasteries near Ngawa. During my field research in the years 2004-2007 and 2010, I came into closer contact with monks of the Jonang monastery of Segon, the Bonpo monastery of Nangshik and Kīrti monastery.

There were a dozen Han believers in the summer of 2010 in the Jonang monastery. Apparently, part of the strategy of some highly positioned monks was to attract potential believers and donors to the monastery by opening some branch temples and monasteries in China proper. Most of my acquaintances of the monastery did not support the protests that occurred at that time.

Nangshik monastery is probably the largest Bonpo monastery in Tibet today and has a considerably long history, stretching back to the 12th century. During my visit there in 2010, i.e. after the wave of

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Dean Carlson - Collection 205, a missionary in Amdo in the first half of 20<sup>th</sup> century).

<sup>34</sup> Blo bzang chos 'phel, *op. cit.*, 1993, pp. 34-40.

<sup>35</sup> The Tibetan sources contain memories of the first appearance of the Communist troops in Ngawa. They came here around 1934, destroyed Kīrti monastery and burnt the residence of the king. After some three months they drew back (Remdo senge, *op. cit.*, 2002, pp. 102 ff.). Their presence later in Ngawa, around the year 1950, was not accompanied with such violence.

<sup>36</sup> Blo bzang chos 'phel, *op. cit.*, 1993, pp. 52-55; Hor gtsang, *op. cit.*, 2009, pp. 161-170; Dmu dge bsam gtan, *op. cit.*, 1997, pp. 318-319. He had two daughters. Both of them enrolled in a military school and later served as nurses in the army. The older daughter Tsering Drolma died in 1969. The younger daughter Gompotso later worked in Xinjiang, then as a teacher in Beijing. In 1989 she escaped to Dharamsala (India), where she is living now with her older daughter. Her son and daughter still remain in China.

the 2008 protests and the first case of self-immolation in Kīrti monastery (February 2009), the monks of the monastery expressed disapproval of the protests of Kīrti monks. According to them, the situation was far from ideal before the protests started in 2008, but was slowly improving.

As for Kīrti monastery, I was impressed by some of the monastery's monks' interest in its history. The monastery is very traditional, and it looked like the main aim was to restore the ways of the "old world" (*jikten nyingpa*), as Tibetans sometimes call pre-China times. This interest turned out to derive in part from the fact that the monastery enjoyed in the past status and power well beyond that of any other monastery in the area. The kings of Ngawa and the renowned scholars from Kīrti monastery's past were apparently heroes for them and also constituted a strong part of their own identity. When taking into account the historical outline concerning the kings of Ngawa and the Kīrti masters, it becomes apparent that the monks are strongly affected by their past history, which is seen as a golden time. The above-mentioned Jonang and Bonpo monasteries were often losers in the past, their bounded villages (*lhade/mide*) were frequently subjugated by Megyal. Such facts of course prevent them from looking at the recent past as a time of glory.

The number of monks in Kīrti monastery had been estimated to almost 3000 before the protests but the largest part of them were children-monks attending the school beside the monastery itself. This was seen by monks as a promising success, which was achieved through numerous lay sponsors and despite the obstructions of the authorities. This was regarded as a partial return to the past glory of the monastery.

I am inclined to see such historical awareness on the part of the Kīrti monks as one of the strong reasons why this specific monastery became the centre of the protests and also of the self-immolations. Yet, this historical awareness constitutes definitely only a partial explanation. One must take into account the specifics of the locality and the attempt to reconstruct the world-view of its inhabitants, which is undoubtedly religious.

One could hypothetically speculate about the role of the Kīrti monastery deity-medium. He is a monk and has attained rather recently the status of "reincarnated master." I have dealt with him elsewhere.<sup>37</sup> It must be stressed that deities, namely the local deities, play very important roles in Amdo. One should bear in mind that the

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<sup>37</sup> Daniel Berounský, "Powerful Hero (*Dpa' rtsal*): Protective Deity from the 19th century Amdo and his mediums," in *Mongolo-Tibetica Pragensia*. Special Issue: *Mediums and Shamans in Central Asia*. Vol. 1/2, 2008, pp. 67-115.

Kīrti masters in the past came to power by taming a large number of them. The current deity-medium was ritually approved in 2000. Let me repeat the words recorded during the process of instructing the deity as a part of the ritual of “opening of the door of the deity” (*lha goche*), when the deity possessing him was instructed in the following way:

Now, when the state of Teaching and governance is desperate, it is necessary to act with union between people and deities. This is the time of approaching the clear truth... Now, the time has come that the deities have to show their power.

It might well be that we will never learn what the role of the oracle for the local people was during these turbulent times. According to some Tibetans such evocation of “desperate state” and call for “union between people and deities” is a common utterance during such kind of ceremony. But the possibility that it acquired stronger meaning among the population nostalgic of an idealised past should be also considered. We may thus conclude with open question: Are the deities also involved in self-immolations?

### GLOSSARY

Transcription	Transliteration	Tibetan
Aboza	A 'bos bza' A 'bus bza'	ཨ་འབོས་བཟའ། ཨ་འབུས་བཟའ།
Akyong	A skyong	ཨ་སྐྱོང།
Amchok	A mchog	ཨ་མཚོག།
Amdo	A mdo	ཨ་མདོ།
Bonpo	Bon po	བོན་པོ།
Bopa Topgyal	'Bos pa stobs rgyal	འབོས་པ་སྟོབས་རྒྱལ།
Chaktharbum	Lcags thar 'bum	ལྷགས་ཐར་འབུམ།
Chenakgpa	Lce nag pa	ལྷེ་ནག་པ།
Jaknagpa	Ljags nag pa	ལྷགས་ནག་པ།
Choktse	Cog tse	ཚོག་ཚེ།
Choktseza Tser-	Cog tse bza' Tshe ring	ཚོག་ཚེ་བཟའ་ཚེ་རིང་རྒྱལ་མ།

ing Drolma	sgrol ma	
<i>choyon</i>	mchod yon	མཚོད་ཡོན།
Dardzom	Dar 'dzom	དར་འཛོམ།
<i>densa gon</i>	<i>gdan sa dgon</i>	གདན་ས་དགོན།
Derge	Sde dge	སྡེ་དགེ།
<i>do</i>	<i>mdos</i>	མདོས།
Dongkhu monas- tery	Gdong khu dgon pa	གདོང་ཁུ་དགོན་པ།
Dongkhu Phuntsok Tshang	Gdong khu tshogs tshang	གདོང་ཁུ་ཕུན་ཚོགས་ཚང།
<i>drakpa</i>	<i>grags pa</i>	གྲགས་པ།
<i>dre</i>	'dre	འདྲེ།
<i>dukha</i>	<i>dud kha</i>	དུད་ཀ།
Dzorge	Mdzod dge	མཛོད་དགེ།
Geluk	dge lugs	དགེ་ལུགས།
Gelukpa	dge lugs pa	དགེ་ལུགས་པ།
Gendun Chokyi Wangchuk	Dge 'dun chos kyi dbang phyug	དགེ་འདུན་ཚེས་ཀྱི་དབང་ཕྱུག
Getseza	Dge rtse bza'	དགེ་རྩེ་བཟའ།
Golok	Mgo log	མགོ་ལོག།
Golok Wangchenbum	Mgo log dbang chen 'bum	མགོ་ལོག་དབང་ཚེན་འབུམ།
Gomang	Sgo mang	སྒོ་མང།
Gompo Sonam	Mgon po bsod nams	མགོན་པོ་བསོད་ནམས།
Gompotso	Mgon po 'tsho	མགོན་པོ་འཚོ།
<i>gopo</i>	<i>rgod po</i>	རྒོད་པོ།
Gungthang	Gung thang	གུང་ཐང།
<i>gyal</i>	<i>rgyal</i>	རྒྱལ།
<i>gyalmo</i>	<i>rgyal mo.</i>	རྒྱལ་མོ།
Gyalrong	Rgyal rong	རྒྱལ་རོང།

Jamyang Zhepa	'Jams dbyangs bzhad pa	འཇམ་དབྱངས་བཞད་པ།
<i>jikten nyingpa</i>	<i>'jigs rten rnying pa</i>	འཇིགས་རྟེན་རྟིང་པ།
Jonang	Jo nang	ཇོ་ནང།
Kāla ritro	Kā la ri khrod	ཀལ་ལ་རི་ཁྲོད།
Kālari Gone Trashi Lhündrup	Kā la ri'i dgon gnas bkra shis lhun grub	ཀལ་ལ་རི་འི་དགོན་ནས་བཀྲ་ཤིས་ལུང་གྲུབ།
<i>kalon</i>	<i>bka' blon</i>	བཀའ་བསྐྱོན།
Kalsang Lodro Kunga Lungtog Gyatso	Bskal bzang blo gros kun dga' lung rtogs rgya mtsho	བསྐྱལ་བཟང་བློ་གྲོས་ཀུན་དགའ་ལུང་རྟོགས་རྒྱལ་མཚོ།
Kīrti	Kīrti	ཀིརྟི།
Kunga Chophak Thupten Nyima	Kun dga' chos 'phags thub bstan nyi ma	ཀུན་དགའ་ཚེས་འཕགས་ཐུབ་བསྟན་ཉི་མ།
Labrang	Bla brang	བླ་བྲང།
<i>lenpa</i>	<i>glen pa</i>	གླེན་པ།
<i>lha goche</i>	<i>lha sgo phye</i>	ལྷ་སྐོ་ཕྱེ།
<i>lhade</i>	<i>lha sde</i>	ལྷ་སྡེ།
<i>lonpo</i>	<i>blon po</i>	བློན་པོ།
Lobsang Jamyang	Blo bzang 'jam dbyangs	བློ་བཟང་འཇམ་དབྱངས་།
Lobsang Tenzin Jikme Yeshe Gyatso	Blo bzang bstan 'dzin 'jigs med ye shes rgya mtsho	བློ་བསང་བསྟན་འཛིན་འཇིགས་མེད་ཡེ་ཤེས་རྒྱལ་མཚོ།
Lobsang Tenpay Gyaltsen	Blo bzang bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan	བློ་བཟང་བསྟན་པའི་རྒྱལ་མཚན།
Lobsang Trinley Tenpa Gyatso	Blo bzang 'phrin las bstan pa rgya mtsho	བློ་བཟང་འཕྲིན་ལས་བསྟན་པ་རྒྱལ་མཚོ།
Ludrup	Klu grub	ལུ་གྲུབ།
<i>magon</i>	<i>ma dgon</i>	མ་དགོན།
<i>makpon</i>	<i>dmag dpon</i>	དམག་དཔོན།
Megyal	Dme rgyal Rme rgyal	དམེ་རྒྱལ། མེ་རྒྱལ།

Megyal Khang	Rme rgyal khang	མི་རྒྱལ་ཁང།
Megyalmo	Dme rgyal mo	དམེ་རྒྱལ་མོ།
	Rme rgyal mo	མི་རྒྱལ་མོ།
Mepon Tshewangkyap	Dme dpon Tshe dbang skyabs	དམེ་དཔོན་ཚོ་དབང་རྒྱབས།
Metshang pon	Dme tshang dpon	དམེ་ཚང་དཔོན།
	Rme tshang dpon	མི་ཚང་དཔོན།
	Rme'u tshang dpon	མི་འུ་ཚང་དཔོན།
<i>mide</i>	<i>mi sde</i>	མི་སྡེ།
Mowatshang	Mo ba tshang	མོ་བ་ཚང།
Namgyal Dechen Ling	Rnam rgyal bde chen gling	ནམ་རྒྱལ་བདེ་ཆེན་གླིང།
Nangshik	Snang zhig	སྣང་ཞིག།
<i>nga</i>	<i>nga</i>	ང།
Ngari	Mnga' ris	མངའ་རིས།
Ngagwang Lobsang Tenpa Tsering	Ngag dbang blo bzang bstan pa tshe ring	ངག་དབང་རྩོམ་ཐང་བསྟན་པ་ཚེ་རིང།
Ngawa	Rnga ba	ང་བ།
	Mnga' ba	མངའ་བ།
Nyima Dondrup	Nyi ma don grub	ཉི་མ་དོན་གྲུབ།
Pal Gompo Trinley Rapten	Dpal mgon po 'phrin las rab brtan	དཔལ་མགོན་པོ་འཕྲིན་ལས་རབ་བརྟན།
Palchen Dondruptsho	Dpal chen don grub mtsho	དཔལ་ཆེན་དོན་གྲུབ་མཚོ།
<i>pon</i>	<i>dpon</i>	དཔོན།
Pon Kalsang Dramdul	Dpon Skal bzang dgra 'dul	དཔོན་སྐལ་བཟང་དག་འདུལ།
<i>ponmo</i>	<i>dpon mo</i>	དཔོན་མོ།
Rongchen Gendun Gyaltshe	Rong chen dge 'dun rgyal mtshan	རོང་ཆེན་དགེ་འདུན་རྒྱལ་མཚན།
Sagang Gon	Sa sgang dgon	ས་སྣང་དགོན།
<i>sangyik</i>	<i>bsang yig</i>	བསང་ཡིག།

Segon	Bse dgon	བསེ་དགོན།
Sertha	Gser thal	གསེར་ཐལ།
	Gser thar	གསེར་ཐར།
	Gser rta	གསེར་རྟ།
Shingkyong	Zhing skyong	ཞིང་སྐོང།
Sonam Dron	Bsod nams sgron	བསོད་ནམས་སྟོན།
Taktshang Lhamo	Stag tshang lha mo	སྟག་ཚང་ལྷ་མོ།
Tenpa Rinchen	Bstan pa rin chen	བསྟན་པ་རིན་ཆེན།
Tenpa Tsering	Bstan pa tshe ring	བསྟན་པ་ཚེ་རིང།
Tenpa Rapgye	Bstan pa rab rgyas	བསྟན་པ་ཡར་རྒྱལ།
Thara	Thar ba	ཐར་བ།
	Tha ra	ཐ་ར།
	Thar ra	ཐར་ར།
Trinley Rapten: see Pal Gompo Trinley Rapten		
Trakarma	Skra dkar ma	སྐྱ་དཀར་མ།
Tshakho	Tsha kho	ཚ་ཁོ།
Tshangpa	Tshangs pa	ཚངས་པ།
Tsering Drolma	Tshe ring sgrol ma	ཚེ་རིང་སྟོལ་མ།
Tshewangkyap	Tshe dbang skyabs	ཚེ་དབང་སྐྱབས།
<i>tshomi</i>	<i>tsho mi</i>	ཚོ་མི།
Tsongkhapa	Tsong kha pa	ཙོང་ཁ་པ།
Yangogon	Yas ngo'i dgon	ཡས་ངོ་འི་དགོན།

