

# The salt trips in Tibet and the Himalayas: extraction and trade in pre-modern times<sup>1</sup>

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*Nam-ri-Srong-tsan [...] arrived at the northern desert plain where he slew a fierce Dong (wild yak) with terrible horns called Thal-Kar-ro-ring. Then, while riding fast, the carcass of the yak, which he had bound with the straps of his saddle, fell down on the ground. In order to take it up, the king alighted from his horse, when he found himself on an extensive salt bank. This was the inexhaustible mine called Chyang-gi-tshva which still supplies the greater portion of Tibet with salt. Before the discovery of this salt mine, there was a very scanty supply of salt in Tibet.<sup>2</sup>*

1881 Sarat Chandra Das,  
*Contributions on the religion, History, &c. of Tibet*

## Introduction

**S**alt has always been a fundamental product in the history of mankind. Settlements appeared or died out in relation to their ease or difficulty in accessing it. It also served as currency for commercial transactions, and its vital importance is reflected in the term "salary" (derived from the Latin *salarium*), which makes it possible for millions of people to satisfy their vital needs.

In the Tibetan and Himalayan context this importance is even greater. In Tibet, salt is considered one of the "four pillars of life":

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<sup>1</sup> I am very grateful to Alex McKay for his valuable advice and encouragement and for polishing the English. I am also very grateful to John Bray for his encouragement and good advice.

<sup>2</sup> The importance that Tibetans attach to salt is manifested in the attribution of its discovery to the Yar-lung dynasty emperor Namri Songtsen, father of the great Songtsen Gampo. Das 1882, p. 217; Haahr 1969, pp. 331-332; Ngag-dBang Blo-bZang rGya-mTSHo (Fifth Dalai Lama of Tibet) 2008 (1643), p. 12. Likewise its high status in Tibetan culture is revealed in the embalming with salt of the corpse of the 5th Dalai Lama, and the veneration of that salt by the faithful, since it was considered that the salt that had been in contact with his body could benefit people because it had the characteristic of identifying with him: the salt *was* the body of the Great Fifth. Schaeffer 2004, p. 13. In the Hindu tradition salt also appears in some of its founding legends: a Sanskrit myth tells that Śiva first revealed his identity to a Gaddi shepherd he employed to transport salt, after he himself manifested as a shepherd near Lake Gaurikund. McKay 2015, p. 165.

tsampa, meat, salt and tea. Tibetans are tireless drinkers of tea, which they mix with salt and yak butter. Its excessive consumption, and the role of salt as a bargaining chip to obtain the so necessary and scarce cereal, made it essential to obtain large quantities of the product. On the other hand, in the southern slopes of the Himalayas the value of salt was even greater, given its great scarcity in these lands. The low intake of salt in the diet of its inhabitants resulted in the common occurrence of endemic goiter due to lack of iodine among its peoples, especially in the eastern Himalayas.

In ancient times, before the collision of tectonic plates originated the Himalayas, the Tibetan plateau was covered by a great sea. The many salty lakes that remain were the main deposits of such a precious commodity for Tibetans.

Three main sources have historically supplied salt to the Tibetan world. From the lakes of the inhospitable Changthang (the high and icy northern region of the plateau), salt was extracted that reached western and central Tibet, as well as Ladakh, Nepal and Bhutan. The northeastern province of Amdo is also home to a large salt expanse: the grassy Tsaidam ("brackish marsh") salt flat. The salt from its lakes was consumed in Amdo and reached the northern part of Kham. Finally, in the southeast, most of Kham and the easternmost part of the Himalayas were supplied by the terraced saltpans at Tsakalho, on the banks of the Dzachu (upper Mekong) river.

## **The Changthang and the Himalayas**

### **The salt harvesting**

The Changtang contains countless salt lakes. The Nam tso or "celestial lake", the Drangyer tso, the La nGa tso (Rakshastal), or the Siling tso are some of the most important. Historically the task of extracting salt from the lakes has fallen exclusively to the nomads or Drokpas. Only they were able to withstand the extreme conditions of the terrain and possessed the mobility and capacity necessary for transportation.

When spring arrived, around April, the Drokpas set out to the lakes in search of salt. It was an exclusively male job. Women were not allowed to go to the salt lake. In each group of saltmen (about 5 - 8 men), family roles were reproduced and each member was assigned a role to play. The "father" was in charge of making offerings to burn, distributing meat in the group and visiting the tents to collect all the opinions if there was something to discuss. The "mother" took care of everyone and cooked and made tea for them. The "son" (*bopu* or *bopsa*) was the trainee and had to learn from the elders how to ex-

tract the salt, handle the tools, place the wool sacks on the animals, etc. The *zopon* or keeper of the animals had to find pasture and water for them, take care of them, and treat them if they got sick.

For the Drokpas salt lakes are considered a divine gift given to humans. It is said that there were 12 salt lakes in the north that had been dug and blessed by Guru Rinpoche. The nomads believe each lake is the heart of a Living Buddha, and they also believe the lakes are the home of other local deities. Because of these beliefs the process of travel to the lake, and the extraction and collection of the salt was a highly ritualised process.

Once the point was reached from where they could no longer see the mountains that were home to their local deities, the saltmen had always to follow the established rules. This was because they were beyond the scope of their local protective deities and, therefore, if they did not comply with the rules or offended the divinities of the territories they passed through and/or of the lake, those deities could get angry and punish them in some way. So as not to irritate the local deities and to protect themselves from the demons that inhabit the north they followed a very strict script. Each member occupied his position within the group and even had his assigned place within the tent, they had to observe good behavior among themselves and respect a series of prohibitions: it was forbidden to have disputes and discussions, contact with women, meet recklessly with the locals, expel flatulences, and even that beggars, women and dogs spent the night near the camp. They had also to speak the "salt language".

Very little is known about this secret "language". It is passed down from father to son and is never spoken in the presence of women. It seems to be used by most traditional saltmen and probably varies with each Tibetan dialect, although in eastern Changthang it could be more uniform. It is primarily made up of specialised jargon or slang, consisting of the local dialect with some systematic changes made to make it incomprehensible to others, and with a lot of vocabulary known only to themselves. The "salt language" contains many vulgarisms and also has a "spicy" or erotic connotation. Speaking this jargon during the expedition could be an excuse for the saltmen to be able to talk about sex and joke about women without their dignity and social status being weakened. This type of slang among people who carry out a trade is not exclusive to the "men of salt" and it occurs in other groups in Tibet such as hunters.<sup>3</sup>

The Drokpas could take up to 20 days to reach the lake. The ani-

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<sup>3</sup> Xirab 2006. I thank Ulrike Koch (20 July 2020), John Vincent Bellezza (21 July 2020), Gerald Roche (23 July 2020), and Hiroyuki Suzuki (8 August 2020) for their comments (personal communications via e-mail).

mals they drove to transport the salt on the return trip were usually yaks but they could also be sheep and goats. Yaks can carry about 30 kg. each, about twice as much as sheep and goats. But sheep and goats have the advantage of saving time for nomads, as once loaded with bags of salt they do not need to be unloaded until they reach their destination.

Upon reaching the lake, the nomads began to break the salt into small pieces with yak or sheep horns, and accumulated it in conical piles with wooden scrapers. Later they filled the sacks and sewed them shut. When they had all the salt collected, they took the animals out to graze and load them with the sacks. Next day they started their return trip. The process of collecting salt in the lake usually took about 8 days.

### **Towards the Himalayas**

After a few months of rest, and with the arrival of summer, another caravan started up again. It took at least a month to reach the Himalayan border, where summer trade fairs were held. This time the specific rules governing the extraction of salt did not come into play, nor did their members have to be the same. Nor do they spoke any language other than their local dialect of Tibetan. The aim of the caravan was to exchange salt (and to a lesser extent other goods such as butter or wool) for products that did not exist in the Tibetan highlands: barley, wheat, leather, rice and vegetables.

In pre-modern times (before 1950 and the Chinese administration), many routes left the solitary nomadic camps of the Changthang towards the high mountain passes of the south. Defying the dangers that threatened men and animals (bandits, wild animals, precipices and terrible temperatures) the caravan crossed them, and on the back of mules and yaks, the precious merchandise reached as far away as Baltistan, Ladakh, Zaskar, Spiti, Kinnaur, Garwhal, Kumaon, the middle hills of Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan and Monyul.

### **Taxes and intermediaries**

The Ganden Phodrang government stationed officials at crucial points along the southern routes to collect taxes from these traders, usually in the population centres that they passed through or on the banks of the rivers that were to be crossed. Once they arrived in the last villages before the border, the Drokpas exchanged their merchandise with people who arrived from the other side of the pass bringing the desired products from the south: vegetables, sugar, and especially barley, corn and wheat. These traders were generically

referred to as Bhotias, that is, culturally and linguistically Tibetan groups living on the Indian, Nepalese or Bhutanese side of the border. These Bhotias acted as intermediaries with the peoples further south, and it was they who brought the salt to Kashmir and the Himalayan midlands.<sup>4</sup> Both among the Drokpas and Bhotias, and between them and the peoples further south was the institution known as "commercial friendship" or "fictive kin" (*netsang*, literally "nesting place"): each family had as partners another specific family in the other groups, with whom it traded preferentially over the years and served as a hostess when they were visiting its lands. This relationship went from father to son.

On the routes from the lakes of Ngari (in the western Changthang) to Ladakh, Kinnaur or Humla, the salt tax was paid in Ruthok, or in Purang. Only in one case were those coming from across the border allowed to collect their own salt: the nomads of the Rupshu (western end of the Changthang Plateau entering Ladakh) had an agreement with the Tibetan government that allowed them to collect on Mimdum and Gyalitse lakes. The leave was granted by an official in Ruthok in favor of the *goba* (chief) of Rupshu, and the Changpas or Rupshupas also paid the tax on the collected salt to the Government of Tibet.

Along the banks of the sprawling Yarlung Tsangpo the *tsasho*,<sup>5</sup> or salt tax collecting officials, waited patiently at the ferry crossings that nomads would necessarily have to cross to reach the Himalayan butresses.<sup>6</sup> The many routes that led to the border markets were required to cross this obstacle.

In Nepal, the income from the salt trade was very high and the Nepalese state also collected a tax through the *subbas* who had a monopoly on the distribution of the salt brought in from the north.<sup>7</sup> The importance of this trade was so great that the poor quality of the imported salt (being mixed with sand) was even one of the excuses of the Gorkhas to declare war on Tibet in the late 18th century.<sup>8</sup>

### Himalayan markets

Diverse people from all corners of the southern fringe of the Ti-

<sup>4</sup> Sometimes there was a chain of intermediaries that had to be respected. In Zanskar, for example, the Zanskaris (who received the Tibetan salt from the Rupshu nomads) exchanged it with the Bods of Paldar, and the Bods in turn with the Paharis, with a consequent increase in the price of the product. Riaboff 2008, p. 109.

<sup>5</sup> Sangyay, Thupten and Tsepag Rigzin 1986, p. 45; Tibet Oral History Project 2014, p. 14.

<sup>6</sup> Brauen 2002, p. 40.

<sup>7</sup> Von der Heide 1988, p. 22-23.

<sup>8</sup> Dai 2009, p. 135.

betosphere appeared at these trade fairs, exchanging merchandise, ideas, news, dialects, religious forms, and ways of life. In addition to merchants, lamas, pilgrims, nomads, aristocrats, vagabonds and outlaws would gather in the markets, as well as representatives of princes, monasteries and Tibetan polities, adding vitality and appeal to these fairs.

In Purang under the holy Kailash and next to Lake Manasarovar, people from distant Kinnaur, Bhotias of Garwhal and Kumaon, Limiwas, Humlis and Mugulis, carried the salt to take it through the high steps to their homes, keep some and resell the rest in more distant places. In Tradün, the Lobas of Mustang also loaded the salt to carry it through the narrow canyon of the Kali Gandaki to the Hindu villages of the middle region of Nepal. Further east, in Kyirong and Rongshar the Nubripas, Langtangpas and Sherpas collected the salt that would reach the eastern valleys of Nepal.

In Phari, at the head of the Chumbi Valley, Sikimese<sup>9</sup> and Western Bhutanese bought salt and sold it at the Gangtok and Paro markets. Further east of the Chumbi Valley the salt reaching Bhutan and Monyul was already coming from the easternmost part of the Changthang, from Nakchu and also from nearby Yamdrok tso. Near this lake, in Taklung Tshondu, there was a large seven-day fair attended by central Bhutanese who came loaded with rice, paper, brown sugar, bamboo, fabrics and medicinal herbs, in addition to some Indian goods. These Bumthaps returned with salt, tea, silk, musk, gold dust, dried lamb legs and sheepskins. Northeastern Bhutanese merchants also carried their rice through the icy pass of Me la<sup>10</sup> to barter in Dongkhar or Tsona Dzong, where traders from Assam and especially Monpas from the Monyul corridor also came. Rice was highly prized by the Lhasa aristocracy and in Tibet it was a state monopoly. In Tsona there was a *drekhang* or "rice house", run by a Tibetan government official who was the only person with whom the Monpas and Bhutanese were allowed to exchange their rice. On the south-east route leading to Tawang, and on the south-west route to Bhutan, there were two caravan stations charging tolls to merchants.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The Lepchas and Lhapos of Sikkim believe that their sacred mountain, the Kangchenjunga, holds in its five peaks five valuable treasures that will be available to humans in times of need. The treasure of the first peak is salt, which confirms once again the high value given to it by the Himalayan peoples. Balikci 2008, p. 91.

<sup>10</sup> I thank Jigme Tshelthrim Wangyal for his comments (personal communication via e-mail, 11 July 2020).

<sup>11</sup> Toni Huber points out that beyond charging these fees, the objective of these stations was to control the rice and salt traffic monopolies between Monyul and Tibet. Huber 2020, vol. 1, p. 33; Lange 2020, p. 239.

Porters were usually traders themselves but sometimes they were peasants subject to *ulag* or forced labor, which was part of the tax burden on them and consisted of providing transportation to officials and political and religious elites (and to their goods).<sup>12</sup>

At times the Tibetans also crossed the border: the Drokpas neighbouring the Dolpopas went sometimes down to the Dolpo valleys and were taken into the homes of their *netsang* or fictive kin (trading partners), where the exchange took place. In Bhutan, Tibetans crossed the border to exchange their products at the Tsampa<sup>13</sup> trading station, which was the main market for the salt trade with Bumthang. Tibetan traders also crossed the border to exchange their goods in Trashiyangtse and Trashigang, especially at the pilgrimage festivals of Chorten Kora and Gomphu Kora.<sup>14</sup> The same was true of neighbouring Gorsam Chorten in Monyul.<sup>15</sup>

### Amdo

*wu yi tshwa mtsho dkar mo*  
*lha mo stong gi bla mtsho*

*The soul lake of one thousand goddesses*  
*It is the White salt lake of Wu*<sup>16</sup>

### Sources of salt in Amdo

In northeastern Tibet, in the Amdo region, the marshy lands of Tsaidam contain a number of salt lakes that have historically supplied salt to the Amdowas, as well as to the northernmost area of Kham.

Surrounded by brackish and marshy sands is the great Tso Ngonpo or "Blue Lake" (better known by its Mongolian name -Koko

<sup>12</sup> Such was the case of some Bhutanese bringing rice to Tibet through Tawang, as mentioned by Huber in: Lange 2018, p. 120, or of the Ladakhis transporting salt to Kashmir as part of the same tax (called locally here *begar*); Bray 2008, p. 50.

<sup>13</sup> Jigme Namgyal, the father of Bhutan's first king Ugyen Wangchuk, was stationed at this station as a *tsongpon* ("master-trader") or representative of the powerful Trongsa district. During this time, around 1847, at the nearby Lhalung monastery he met his wife, Pema Choki, who would later become the mother of the first king of Bhutan. Pommaret 2010, p. 51. Phuntso 2013, p. 431-432. In those years, the Chumey Naktsang from Bumthang is also recorded as being a long term trader in salt in Tsampa. Pain 2004, p. 172; Pain and Deki Pema 2008, p. 205.

<sup>14</sup> Trade routes were often through pilgrimage centers, as was the case here. Schrempf 2018, p. 343-344.

<sup>15</sup> Gohain 2020, p. 53.

<sup>16</sup> Ancient song of the salt collectors in praise of Lake Tsaka. Wenchanjia 2014, pp. 114-115.

nor- or Chinese -Qinghai hu-) whose salt was distributed by the nomadic groups, reaching eastward to the lands bordering China, and southward to the agricultural valleys of the Upper Dri chu (Yangtse) and of the Upper Nyak chu (Yalong) in Kham, where it was exchanged for grain.<sup>17</sup>

Many other smaller lakes in the Tsaidam were also exploited and their salt transported on yaks or camels<sup>18</sup> to reach its destination. From Dabusun nor, Mongolian and Tibetan nomads carried the salt to the town of Tongkhor, an important trade center in the Amdo-Gansu border area in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, from where, along with salt, Amdo wool and lamb skins were also exported to China.<sup>19</sup> Lake Tsaka or Chaka ("Salt Lake") or Wu yi tsa tso ("Bubbling Salt Lake")<sup>20</sup> in Ulan area was also another major supplier of salt consumed in Thrika (now Guide), Kumbum (present-day Huangzhong) and other parts of Amdo.

### The trip to the lake

As noted, salt expeditions were carried out exclusively by men. Each man usually took about 15 yaks. Sometimes they borrowed a yak if they did not have enough. According to custom if someone lent yaks, frames or sacks to carry salt that person was then entitled to receive a share of the goods collected. Usually the earnings supplemented the economy of the herders or farmers. But becoming a salt man had other benefits as well: it conferred a reputation of being a 'real man': an added masculinity that facilitated success with women.<sup>21</sup>

Fall and early winter was the best time to leave. At that time of year the swamps and rivers are frozen in the area and animals can pass through. There is also plenty of fuel (dried yak or sheep dung) for heating and cooking. As in central Tibet, the journey began after visiting the monastery, where offerings were made to the gods and a lama chose an auspicious day to depart. Every day, upon rising, the men would offer *bsang* (incense) and prayers to the local deities to gain their favor.<sup>22</sup> The care of the animals was essential at all times to

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<sup>17</sup> Van Spengen 2013, p. 495-496.

<sup>18</sup> In the sandy northeastern lands (and depending on the routes) it was often necessary to resort to camels, given the difficulty of yaks and mules in this terrain. Wenchangjia 2014, pp. 110-113.

<sup>19</sup> Tsybikov 2017, p. 31; Van Spengen 2000, pp. 101-104; Coales 1919, p.242.

<sup>20</sup> According to legend, the Mongolian king Bang A ma gave the locals a salt spring, which became this Lake Tsaka. Nyangchakja 2016, pp: 73-75.

<sup>21</sup> Sangs rgyas tshé ring 2019, p. 296.

<sup>22</sup> In the past many Amdowa tribes had their salt station or *tshwa sgo* on the shores of Lake *Wu yi tshwa mtsho* (Lake Tsaka). There they burned *bsang* and sprinkled water from the lake skyward to venerate the 1,000 female deities believed inhab-



ensure the success of the journey. Finding places where they could feed properly, giving them the necessary rest, protecting them from wolves, recovering them when they escaped at night, or loading them correctly were all arts that had to be mastered if the expedition was to be successful. Experience in salt extraction was also important, although in some cases it was possible to resort to experienced local men who picked it up and sold it in the lake to traders.<sup>23</sup> There were different types of salt and black salt was considered the highest quality in this area.<sup>24</sup> When they returned home with the goods, members of the harvesting team would gather to celebrate the *tsaw bvi nang skyid*<sup>25</sup> feast, which means "happy gathering of salt porters".

### The journey of the caravans

Nowadays salt is very easy to get in any Amdo town, but in the past it was very expensive and difficult to obtain. On the other hand, and like in the Changthang, in many parts of Amdo there were no conditions for cereal cultivation, so the only way to obtain it was through exchanges of salt for grain. Salt from the lakes was transported along with other livestock products loaded on yaks, sheep or camels to the agricultural areas, where it was exchanged for the coveted grain. It was transported by the nomads of the lake area themselves, although sometimes it was traders from the agricultural areas who came to the lakes.

South of the Tsaidam ran the great *tsa lam* (salt route) that transported the salt from the three lakes mentioned above and many others to the commercial centers of the Amdo valleys.

Splitting from the main *lam*, various branches went to the southwest, south, east and northeast. Long journeys of twenty days or more were occasionally undertaken, sometimes reaching the distant lands of central Tibet.<sup>26</sup> Other routes ran southwards to Northern Kham, eastwards to the Chinese plain of Sichuan, and northeastwards to Gansu and Inner Mongolia. On these long journeys the merchants also had to watch out for bandits. The traders never strayed far from their rifles and swords and usually slept in their leather shoes and sheepskin robes, just in case it was necessary to get

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iting the lake so that they would grant more salt. Wenchanjia 2014, pp. 114.

<sup>23</sup> Sangs rgyas tshe ring 2019, p. 298. Sometimes communities living nearby took on such work, but mostly they merely imposed a small tax on the traders for allowing them to do it themselves. Ekvall 1968, p. 55.

<sup>24</sup> Sangs rgyas tshe ring 2019, pp: 298, 301. The source does not explain why its quality is superior.

<sup>25</sup> De Khar, Wan 2003. p. 76.

<sup>26</sup> De Khar 2003, p. 72.

up suddenly.

In southern Amdo, in the vicinity of the sacred Amnye Machen peak, the ferocious Goloks were surely exempt from such concerns, since their reputation as fierce warriors and their own banditry preceded them throughout the Tibetan world. These hardy nomads also extracted salt from Tsam tso Lake (now in the process of disappearing) and traded it for wood, sap and pine resin with traders from northwestern Sichuan. According to Grenard, the Goloks also collected salt from the twin lakes Kyaring tso and Ngoring tso and exercised "a lucrative trade, for they make sure of a monopoly in it through the terror with which they inspire their neighbours".<sup>27</sup>

Pilgrimage routes also served as trade routes here, and caravans heading in search of salt would pass by the sacred mountain. Once loaded, they would camp on the banks of the Kyaring tso and Ngoring tso before leaving the Golok country and heading west to sell their salt in Nakchu and even Lhasa.<sup>28</sup> The Goloks themselves also took their salt annually to the Tsangpo valley and exchanged it for grain near Nang dzong in Kongpo.<sup>29</sup>

### The salt trade

At the beginning of the 20th century, the only mineral wealth of the region that was exported to China was salt. The Chinese and Muslims of Amdo acted as intermediaries between the Amdowa Tibetans and the Chinese world of Gansu and northern Sichuan. The salt was accompanied by medicinal herbs, furs, hides, leather, deer antlers, musk and horses, but above all wool, which was the other main commodity Amdo exported to China. Another business as profitable as it was dangerous was that of arms trafficking, which supplied the soldiers of the Chinese feudal lords, those of the Tibetan princes and chiefs, the armories of the monasteries, and the bandit groups that plagued the roads of Amdo and Kham.<sup>30</sup>

Reflecting its multi-ethnic and multi-cultural reality, Amdo's trading centers were bustling with Mongol and Tibetan nomads, Hui and Salar Muslims, Tu peasants and local Han Chinese, Golok warriors and Chinese merchants; and in its many *xiejias*,<sup>31</sup> salt was exchanged

<sup>27</sup> Grenard 1904. pp. 196, 369-370. The Kyaring tso and Ngoring tso, from which the Goloks obtained salt, are not strictly saltwater lakes, but salt is found along their banks. This is enough to be considered by Tibetans as *tsaka*. Rockhill 1892, p. 778.

<sup>28</sup> Fuchs 2011.

<sup>29</sup> Van Spengen 2000, p. 102.

<sup>30</sup> Ekvall 1939, p. 7.

<sup>31</sup> A *xiejia* in Amdo was an inn where non-Chinese traders, i.e., Tibetans, Mongols or Muslims, stayed. *Xiejia* also meant innkeeper or regent of the inn. These were obliged to keep a record of merchants and transactions in their inns, and to serve

for barley, wheat flour, oil and pears; although it was sometimes also paid for with silver coins,<sup>32</sup> and even with opium in the Shar-kog/Zungchu (ch. Songpan) area.<sup>33</sup> Rigmon (ch. Daotanghe), Tongkhor and Thrika were some of the main points of the salt trade. But of them all Thongkor/Tangar (today's Chengguan or Huangyuan) was undoubtedly the most important in Amdo. In 1727 it was recognized as an official frontier market by the Qing dynasty, and by the mid-18th century it had become the main center of the salt trade in the region.

Located at a strategic crossroads of trade routes on the Sino-Tibetan border, its growing importance during the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries made it the seat of a *tshong spyi*, one of the Dalai Lama's commercial agents. This *tshong spyi* would inform Lhasa of the passage of Tsaidam salt and Amdo wool to the Chinese lowlands, and about Sichuan grain and tea passing to the nomadic interior regions, as well as the conditions of transactions and the powers involved in them, in addition to representing Tibetan interests and procuring goods for his government.

Traders also took advantage of the Buddhist pilgrimage routes to do business. Thus the Sangchu and Rushar fairs benefited from the large influx of pilgrims to the large monastic complexes of Labrang and Kumbum respectively, especially when major festivals were held. The monasteries sometimes provided storage facilities for the merchants, always taking a percentage in cash or, more probably, kind, and also received many in-kind donations from the pilgrims, including salt, which they traded in the Gansu and Sichuan markets. Thus, monks and lamas were often involved in commercial transactions, both on behalf of their monasteries and as individuals.<sup>34</sup>

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as interpreters and mediators in disputes. In neighboring Kham the equivalent of this institution bore the name *guozhuang*, and in the Yunnan part *madian*. Horlemann 2012. pp. 109, 117-118.

<sup>32</sup> In the 1950s in Kumbum, two silver coins were paid for each bag of black salt. Sangs rgyas tsho ring 2019. p. 301.

<sup>33</sup> In Zungchu, far from the Tsaidam lakes, salt was imported from both Tsaidam and China. In their markets the nomadic Amdowas offered it along with their butter, wool and sheep and yak skins. Chinese merchants also brought Chinese salt along with tea, silk, cotton and porcelain. At the end of the Qing dynasty and in the years of the Republic, opium traffickers also came to its streets and those of Zitsa Degu (Ch. Jiuzhaigou, formerly Nanping), Ngaba or Barkham to exchange it for salt, grain, tea, textiles, precious metals and arms. In the southeastern corner of Amdo (bordering Kham and the Chinese Sichuan) opium was widely introduced. The business was dominated by Han and Hui businessmen from Sichuan and Gansu but Tibetan businessmen and monastery administrators in the area were also involved in the trade. It thus became a common medium of exchange. Kang and Sutton 2016. pp: 140-142, 156; Hayes 2016. p. 60-62.

<sup>34</sup> Horlemann 2012, p. 111-112.

### The political control: the Ma clan

The Mongols of the area<sup>35</sup> had dominated the salt trade since the end of the Ming dynasty and continued to do so at least until the early 19th century. During this century Mongol economic power was gradually replaced by the influence of the Hui Muslims and the local Han (Chinese). In 1907-1908 the Qing Empire reestablished the salt bureau.<sup>36</sup> But in 1915 the Hui Muslim warlord Ma Qi became the first of the Qinghai governors of the influential Ma family. From then on the chieftains of this powerful family controlled the province with an iron fist (especially the bloodthirsty Ma Bufang) and taxed the Amdo salt and wool trade.<sup>37</sup> The Ma established a semi-independent government from Peking in Si-ning (now Xining). Their fiscal voracity provoked several rebellions that were quelled with extreme violence, and as a result of their greed many Amdowas experienced misery. When the People's Liberation Army defeated his soldiers and took Lanzhou, Ma fled with his extraordinary fortune to Saudi Arabia.

### Kham and the Extended Eastern Himalayas

*The man has faith inside; the earth has salt inside*  
Premi proverb<sup>38</sup>

In southeastern Tibet, on the banks of the Mekong River (known in Tibetan as Dza chu and in Chinese as Lacang jiang) are the salt pans of Tsakalho (Naxi: Yerkalo, Yakalo; Ch. Yanjing), which have historically supplied salt to much of Kham and the nearby Extended East-

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<sup>35</sup> Although their presence dates back further, the bulk of the Amdo Mongols appear to be descended from those who arrived with the establishment in the 17th century of a Mongol Oirat polity in Koko nor by Gushri Khan. Today most of them are Tibetanized and inhabit the Mongol Autonomous County of Henan, in the Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture of Malho (Huangnan) province of Qinghai.

<sup>36</sup> In 1724 the Qing administration had already established a salt bureau in Qinghai but its activity was no more than nominal and it eventually disappeared in 1742. Horlemman 2012, p. 121.

<sup>37</sup> Ma Bufang stood out for his cruelty with the Tibetans, especially with the Goloks. *Golok conflicts (1917–1949)* 2022. Faced with his failure to conquer the lands of the nomadic Washul clan due to the resistance encountered, Ma applied a long trade embargo to the nomads that prevented them from selling their products and deprived them of cereal, tea and salt, essential products in their diet. As a result, they were forced to raid the caravans that passed through their territory in order to survive. Gelek 2003. pp. 45-46.

<sup>38</sup> Picus Sizhi Ding 2014, p. 227. The Premis (Pumis, Prinmis, Xifans) are a Tibeto-Burman ethno-linguistic group living in Muli and southeastern Kham, as well as other parts of the Yunnan-Sichuan border.

ern Himalayan<sup>39</sup> foothills. Salt was also a highly sought-after commodity in this area, and served as a currency for the exchange of goods.

This salt, unlike that which circulated in other Tibetan and Himalayan regions, did not come from the salt lakes of the plateau but from the wells built along the Dza chu that stored salt water from the subsoil. The water is extracted from the wells and poured into salt pans in the form of terraces that give their name to the town where they are located: Tsaka-lho, or "southern salt pans".

The production of Tsakalho and the extent of the area it supplied were considerably less than those of the Changtang salt lakes, and its salt reached mainly central and southern Kham and its adjacent Himalayan areas. In the north of the province the salt from the wells reached Chamdo along with, as noted above, that extracted from the lakes of Nakchu and Tsaidam. Eastwards it reached Dartsedo and southwards it penetrated into Yunnan as far as Gyalhang and Weixi. Westwards the Tsakalho salt would reach Tsawarong and Zayul, as well as the Mishmi Hills of present-day Arunachal, the Myanmar Himalayas, and Nujiang. The salt pans were thus a meeting point for caravans and traders from all these parts of the southeastern Tibetosphere. These diverse peoples also used to exchange other goods, ideas and beliefs, in addition to bringing and spreading news and rumors and establishing social relationships.

### Wells and salt pans

If you look down on Tsakalho from above, the view is breathtaking: along the two banks of the Dzachu, the accumulated brine in its nearly 2700 salt pans shines from the river bed reflecting the sky. These salt pans are arranged in terraces built on the banks with sticks and soil, where the water is left to evaporate in the heat of the sun so that the salt can finally be harvested.

Dozens of tower-like stone wells can be found on both shores, protecting the salt water contained in them from the floods of the river. Desgodins already lists in 1872 fifteen wells on the right bank and thirty on the left bank.<sup>40</sup> Tibet was once covered by an ocean and the underground saltwater lake that supplies these wells is a consequence of that past. Under terraces, and close to wells, are the ponds

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<sup>39</sup> The concept "Extended Eastern Himalayas" was coined by Stuart Blackburn and developed by him together with Toni Huber. It adds to Sikkim and Bhutan present-day Arunachal Pradesh, the Burmese region of Hkakabo Razi, northwestern Yunnan province, and the strip of Tibetan territory contiguous to the north to all of them. Huber 2020, p. 2.

<sup>40</sup> Desgodins 1872, p. 294.

in which water drawn from that wells is deposited for three days, so that impurities remain at the bottom and the salinity of the water increases. In these ponds there are also dozens of saltwater springs, which gush through cracks in the rocks. Local Tibetans consider these springs a "gift from the gods".

On the right bank, west of the river, lies the Tibetan settlement of Jada, with its hundred or so white houses scattered among fields of barley and wheat. For about three kilometers, its salt pans follow one another in a fairly wide and open terrain that receives more sunshine than the opposite bank. The soil on this shore is clayey, so the salt that is stored in the salt pans when the water evaporates takes on a pinkish hue. This pinkish salt is "peach blossom salt", colloquially called "red salt".<sup>41</sup> Red salt contains more impurities than white salt, so its price is lower. It is mainly used for livestock consumption.

On the opposite shore, to the east, is the village of Lower Tsakalho whose inhabitants are mostly of Naxi ethnicity, although they are partially Tibetanized. The terrain here is steeper, and its salt pans are covered by a thin layer of sand. The salt collected here is white and purer, and its price is higher than that of red salt. It is intended for human consumption and is used in the preparation of *tsampa* and Tibetan tea (salted and with yak butter). High Tsakalho (the "Yerkalo" of the missionaries and the "Yanjing" of the Chinese), which is the current administrative center, sits on top of the salt flats of Lower Tsakalho.

### Women and the salt industry

Unlike the case of the salt lakes, the extraction of salt water from the wells and the collection of salt from the terraces has been an exclusively female task. After the rainy season, which is the only season when salt cannot be produced, Naxi and Tibetan women on both shores prepare for the work. The first task is to fix the terraces and ponds that have been damaged by the river floods. They repair the bottom of the terraces with soil and sticks and rebuild the ponds. Once both are ready, they open the wells again to start drawing salt water again.

The women's work is very hard and strenuous. Using a ladder, they descend to the bottom of the wells (sometimes down to ten meters) to load their buckets with salt water. The Naxi women of Lower Tsakalho go down to the wells, and come back up with wooden tubes or buckets loaded with salt water weighing about 15 kg. In Jada the Tibetan women usually carry two buckets of 10kg each. This opera-

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<sup>41</sup> This "red salt" is different from that of Pakistan and the rock salt of Bhutan.

tion is carried out more than 100 times a day. The collected water is first poured into the ponds. The more water that is deposited, the more concentrated the salt water will be, and the higher the quality of the salt it will produce. Once three days have passed, the water is again transported in buckets to the terraces, where it is poured through a wicker basket so as not to bore through the surface of the salt pan. The water is left to evaporate by the wind and the heat of the sun until the salt is ready to be collected.

The first collection provides the highest quality salt intended exclusively for human consumption. The salt collected in the second batch is also edible but is of lower quality and is mainly used for animal consumption. The third was also destined for livestock in the old days but today it is usually poured back into the ponds to increase their salinity. There is a type of salt that is even more highly valued than that of the first collection: under the terraces the water is filtered and the dripping ends up forming salt stalactites that are considered to be of the highest purity and quality.

Tsakalho tradition expressly forbids men from being involved in salt production. For over 1000 years and countless generations the art of salt making has been passed down from mother to daughter. They are the sole stewards of the "gift of the wind and sun" which is their livelihood and even allows them to support their families. In the months of April, May and June, which are the most fruitful for harvesting, salt can be collected up to three times a day. A single person can produce more than 50 kg of salt in one day.

### **The origin of salt mines**

It is not known exactly when salt exploitation began in Tsakalho, but the practise is certainly very old. According to a local Naxi legend the sacred mountain Damyon, which stands in front of the village and is one of the "daughters" of Kawa Karpo and Mianzumu, was on her way to Lhasa when she stopped in Tsakalho to rest. Seeing how poor the people were there she took pity and gave them a golden rooster and a silver hen. With the rising of the Dza chu the banks were flooded and the footsteps of the golden rooster became the saltwater wells of Jada, on the right bank. The footprints of the silver hen became the wells of the Lower Tsakalho. The rooster could roam freely and that is why there are so many wells in Jada. The hen, on the other hand, had more limited mobility because she had to take care of her eggs, so there are considerably fewer wells in the Lower Tsakalho.<sup>42</sup> On the

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<sup>42</sup> Mu-gwan 2008; Lee 2006. In Tibetan mythology the sacred mountain par excellence of the area, the Kawa Karpo, is a male deity who is "married" to a female

other hand, according to some sources, the salt pans date back to times before the Tibetan Empire. In the famous battle of Qiangling, the great hero of the Tibetan epic par excellence, Gesar of Ling, defeated the Naxi king Qiangba, and thus took possession of the salt pans of Tsakalho.<sup>43</sup>

It is also worth noting that in the oral tradition of the Rawang people which describe the route of their migration from Tibet to northern Myanmar in ancestral times, there is talk of a stop they made at *shòwá ādām*. Here *tòn shǎwálong* "second shawalong son", stayed and occupied the place. It is interesting to note that the Tsawarongba of Menkung in the Salween are called by the Rawangs "Shawalong". Tsawarong, Tibetan for "hot valley," lies immediately southwest of the salt flats. An account also appears of a salt source where "the salt, drying naturally, is taken up as coarse sand, continuously, *mà-bǎt tòngzòm* 'unending-sweet-saltlick', producing the *zipìp shǎlaq* 'sand-coarse-salt'". Of all the salt springs near the Rawang area, only one spring produces salt that fits this description: that of Tsakalho.<sup>44</sup> With all the necessary reservations, this version would be in line with the hypothesis of the great antiquity of the salt pans.

### A disputed territory

Both its strategic location (situated between the territories administered by Tibet, Sichuan and Yunnan) and the important income derived from the salt trade, turned Tsakalho's domain into a coveted target for the various powers deployed on the borderlands. As early as the 8<sup>th</sup> century it was a notable commercial node connecting the Tibetan Empire with the flourishing kingdom of Nanzhao, and an

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deity who is another neighboring mountain: Mianzumu. This couple has "relatives" who are also other nearby mountains, although depending on the areas vary the versions about which ones they are. In the Markham area three "daughters" are referred to, in other parts two, and in others the couple has "sons", "uncle", "army", etc., instead of "daughters"; these "relatives" always being mountains. To the Tsakalho people the sacred mountain Damyon is itself a female deity. Kingdon-Ward 1924, p. 102; Nakamura 2013, p. 118. The name "Damyon" is not Tibetan but Naxi, which seems to indicate that the origin of the deity is also Naxi. The local version of the legend could have been adapted by the Naxi community for prestige within the wider regional Tibeto-Naxi network of southern Kham. I thank Li-hua Ying, John Studley, Katia Buffetrille, Jan Salick, Bob Moseley, Jim Goodman, and Brendan Galipeau (personal communications March 6-14, 2021) for their comments.

<sup>43</sup> I have not been able to find any academic source confirming such a relationship between Tsakalho and Gesar de Ling. All sources are web pages of Chinese travel agencies and similar. Zhao Yuanzhi 2006; *Salt Well Town on the 'Roof of the World'* 2006; *Salt well* 2022; *Yanjing Ancient Salt Fields in Markam County* 201\_.

<sup>44</sup> Morse 1966, p. 203.



important salt center in the region, as well as an obligatory passage for Yunnan tea on its way to Lhasa. During the 15<sup>th</sup> century the powerful Naxi kingdom ruled by the Mu family from Jang Sadam (Lijiang) expanded northward to Bathang and Lithang, thus gaining control of the salt pans. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, during the transitional period from the Ming to the Qing dynasty in China, Tsakalho came under the jurisdiction of Bathang, which still paid taxes to the Mu of Lijiang. In the military campaign against the Dzungar Mongols in 1719, the Qing armies occupied Bathang, which passed into the hands of Sichuan. This control was increasingly weakened by the influence of the Bathang khampa chiefs and the powerful Gelukpa monasteries in the area.<sup>45</sup> By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Tsakalho was included in the territory of the Bathang "principality". Bathang, on the left bank of the Dri chu, was one of the semi-independent political entities of eastern Kham. It was ruled by two *depa* or local chiefs who, in official Chinese discourse, held the title of *tusi*.<sup>46</sup> These *depa* were among the main beneficiaries of the increasing taxes obtained from the tea trade and the salt industry. Along with them, and with the support of Lhasa, the Gelukpa branch monasteries also exercised important political influence over the area; both were involved in commercial transactions that served their own interests.

Despite the "gift" of salt, most of the population did not enjoy a good life and was extremely poor. The two *depa* sent officials to Tsakalho to collect salt. The locals had to provide them with lodging and sustenance for three months a year, buy them tea at the price imposed by them, and transport the salt themselves to Bathang. The revenues from the salt trade were mostly, and depending on the time, in the hands of these Bathang *depa*, of the monasteries of Lhagong and Ba Chode supported by Central Tibet, and of the Qing officials dependent on the "warlords" who ruled Sichuan or Yunnan. Local Khampa and Naxi traders only benefited from a small part of the profits generated by salt production.<sup>47</sup>

In the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century a new force had joined the race for influence on the frontier: the French Catholic missionaries of the Missions Étrangères de Paris had settled in Bathang, and later in Tsakalho where after founding a church in 1865, in 1870 they bought

<sup>45</sup> The great monastery of Ba Chode, in Bathang, was the main and most powerful in the region. The one from Lhagong (Lhaweng, Lawok) in Tsakalho administered the affairs of the salt trade. Coleman 2014, pp. 296.

<sup>46</sup> Wang 2011, p. 57. The Qing dynasty granted the title of *tusi* to the hereditary local chiefs of Kham to show nominal control over the area, since theoretically these *tusi* owed obedience to the emperor. But in practice the real power was in the hands of these indigenous "kings" (*gyalpo*) and chiefs (*depa* -literally "in charge"-).

<sup>47</sup> Bray 2019, p. 165.

and leased land and began to build the mission of Yerkalo.<sup>48</sup> The community of converts was growing, nourished by Tibetans and mostly by people belonging to the Tibeto-Burman ethno-linguistic groups of the area: Naxis, Lisus, Nus, Drungs etc.<sup>49</sup> The new converts were thus removed from the orbit of the Buddhist monasteries and their economic dependence. This new situation undermined the influence of the monks and provoked their hostility towards the newly arrived "foreign lamas". The growing tension between the Catholic missionaries (who were joined by Protestants at the turn of the century) and the Buddhist monasteries led to several violent episodes or "mission cases" from 1873 onwards, the last of which in 1905 resulted in several missionaries being killed.<sup>50</sup> The uprising against the missionaries and against the Qing troops broke out in Bathang, and soon spread throughout southern Kham.

### **Zhao Erfeng and the control of the salt flats**

In June 1905 Qing officer Zhao Erfeng was sent from Chengdu to Bathang to restore order. Zhao quickly took control and was characterized by the extreme cruelty of his methods, which earned him the nickname "Zhao the Butcher" among the Khampa. He quickly set in motion his project to exploit the resources of the territory and to sinicize Kham and impose Chinese culture and Confucian values, which he considered superior to the "barbaric" Tibetan customs. To this end, he launched a relentless military campaign against Tibet and promoted the transfer of Chinese settlers to Kham by offering them supposedly virgin land to cultivate.

Zhao knew that if he was to achieve his goals he could not pass up such a substantial source of revenue as that provided by the Tsakalho salt taxes. In late 1905 he established a salt tax office there that met with immediate opposition from the local Lhagong monastery, which had until then managed the benefits from the salt trade. After a year of fruitless negotiations with the monks, Zhao sent a large contingent of troops against the monastery, although he justified his attack by citing the need to stabilize the situation to defend the border and to suppress banditry in the area. The violence deployed by the soldiers led many farmers to abandon their wells and terraces for more than a year. After they returned to the salt pans Zhao was still not satisfied with the taxes obtained, and enacted heavy fines against salt smug-

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<sup>48</sup> Bray 2019, p. 165.

<sup>49</sup> At that time several of these groups were known by other exonyms: the present-day Naxis were known as Mossos, the Nus as Lutzus or Lutzes and the Drungs as Kiutzus or Tarons.

<sup>50</sup> Relyea 2010, pp. 184-186.

gling. After a series of battles between his troops and the Lhagong monks allied with the local Khampa, in 1907 his soldiers finally took over the monastery and expelled the monks. In 1910, after trying with little success to implement the *lijin* system (common in Sichuan) that taxed the transportation of salt, Zhao privatized the collection of salt taxes, in addition to increasing the tax burden on grain.<sup>51</sup> With the power of the monasteries weakened and the local chiefs dismissed he fixed his gaze on the missionaries' properties and, contravening Qing tradition up to that time, set out to end their privileges through his man in Tsakalho, Wang Huitong. But the decline of the Qing dynasty in 1911 and the revolution that followed brought about his fall from grace. In December 1911 Zhao Erfeng, viceroy of Sichuan, was captured and beheaded by Chinese Republican forces.

The fall of the Qing dynasty ushered in a period of great instability, with constant skirmishes between the Tibetan army and Chinese nationalist troops leading to frequent changes in the border line. These forces were joined by other actors such as the governors of Sichuan and Yunnan (the latter briefly occupying Tsakalho in 1912), the Khampa autonomists, and the powerful monastic elites of the area, who allied with each other depending on the moment and according to their own interests. After two Sino-Tibetan wars in 1918 and 1930 that required the mediations of the British Consul in Dartsedo Sir Eric Teichman and the American missionary Marion Duncan, Tsakalho was in 1932 within the borders of Tibet. In 1939 the Republic of China established the province of Xikang which nominally encompassed the territory of Kham, but Chinese control in practice only reached its eastern half east of the Dri chu. The salt pans therefore remained under the Lhasa government until the arrival of the Communist army in 1950.<sup>52</sup>

### The salt trade and caravans

As has been said before, all the activities necessary for the production of salt are exclusively feminine in this region. The men collaborate by collecting firewood and engaging in other small businesses, but above all they have historically been in charge of transporting the salt to places where they can exchange it for a more favorable price for their merchandise. Under the direction of a respected and experienced leader (the *maguotou*) they march in caravans<sup>53</sup> for weeks to

<sup>51</sup> Coleman 2014, p. 351-352, 296-297; Relyea 2010, pp: 206-207; Wang 2011, pp. 129-133.

<sup>52</sup> Coleman 2014, pp. 424-425, 436-443; Relyea 2010, pp. 266-267, 466; Peng 2002, pp. 55-82

<sup>53</sup> In the Tsakalho area the short- and medium-distance caravans usually consisted

reach towns where the value of the salt is higher due to their distance from the salt pans and the isolation of their location. The roads are arduous and dangerous, so the *maguotou's* experience and knowledge about the route and animal care are vital. They must cross perennially snow-capped mountain passes of about 5000 m. in altitude and, until not too long ago, cross mighty rivers with their horses and mules by the old and dangerous system of rope bridges (*liusuo*).<sup>54</sup> But their efforts are almost always rewarded and the caravan completes its journey successfully, getting considerably more grain for its salt than they would at home.

In the case of the Khampa herders closest to the village, it is these same herders who continue to come several times a year to Tsakalho in search of the precious red salt of Jada for their yaks and horses. These need much more salt than humans, and their owners come down from the mountains to the salt pans in a hard journey that can take them 4 days, and in which they cross with their animals over 5000 m high passes. This salt is essential for the Drokpas, who live mainly from their yaks. The shepherds buy the salt in exchange for yak butter, and with the surplus obtained they take advantage of their stay in the village to stock up on barley and all kinds of modern goods in their bustling stores. As was the case in Nepal, according to the institution known as *netsang* or "fictive kin" each shepherd family has traded for generations with the same Jada family, with whom they stay during their visit to the village.

On the other hand, Tsakalho was an obligatory stop for the long-distance caravans that, from southern Yunnan, traveled along the Tea Horse Road to the holy city of Lhasa in central Tibet. In addition to the Pu-erh tea they carried, they bought salt and other goods here, which they would sell at increasingly higher prices as they approached the Tibetan capital.

As we have seen in other cases also here the trade benefited from the passage of pilgrims who came to the area. Buddhist devotees arrived from all over Tibet ready to perform the *kora* or ritual circumambulation of the sacred Kawa Karpo Mountain, and would take the opportunity to acquire the renowned Tsakalho salt. So would devotees who came to visit a temple in nearby Lhadun famous for hous-

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of horses and mules, although nearby nomads regularly went to the salt pans with their yaks in search of red salt. Long-distance caravans that brought tea from Yunnan and continued on to Lhasa and beyond, substituted their horses for yaks past Tsakalho when the altitude and cold became unbearable for the former.

<sup>54</sup> These zip-line bridges consisted of a rope made of bamboo and bark that was changed every few years. People sat on straps attached to a sliding piece of wood that was mounted on the rope. Animals and packages were transported from one side of the river to the other in the same way. Today the few surviving bridges of this style are made of rolled steel cables.

ing a figure of Vairocana believed to have been carved by the Chinese princess Wengchen, who passed through the place on her way to Lhasa to marry the Tibetan emperor Songtsen Gampo.<sup>55</sup>

### **The salt in the hills of the Extended Eastern Himalayas**

*There is one commodity which all men, of whatever colour, crave. It influences their lives. No hardship is too great to be borne, if only the need be thereby satisfied. This commodity is not bread, nor opium either, but common salt; common, that is, almost anywhere but in the jungle.*

1930 Frank Kingdon-Ward, "*Plant-Hunting on the Edge of the World*", p. 25  
Myanmar Himalayas

In pre-modern times, in the Extended Eastern Himalayas, the extreme scarcity of salt made this product probably the most valuable commodity for trade. The usual diet in these areas was deficient in iodine due to insufficient salt intake, and caused cases of goiter to be very abundant among the southeastern Tibetans and Tibeto-Burman-speaking groups inhabiting the region.

Tsakalho salt reached many areas of southeastern Tibet and the eastern tip of the Himalayas after passing through several hands, increasing its final price. F. K. L. Chit Hlaing writes that "*The communities owning salt wells always held central political positions in the network of inter-group relations, not only with respect to lowland kingdoms but also with regard to neighboring hill peoples*".<sup>56</sup> In the upper valleys of the Drung (Dulong) and Nu (Salween) rivers, Naxi and Tibetan traders exchanged the precious salt from the salt pans for herbs, agricultural products and cloth. Agents of the Naxi *tusi* (local ruler) and representatives of the wealthy independent Tibetan chiefs or of the powerful temples set a high price for the goods and sometimes imposed their exchange -evidently on very favorable terms for them- for medicinal plants, grain, gold and textiles to the tribal communities. The local Drungs and Nus were often forced to accept loans at high interest rates that drove them deeper and deeper into debt until they became virtual slaves. Travelers and Christian missionaries who settled in the area in the late 19th and early 20th centuries testified to this situation of slavery, which was common in this area of northwestern

<sup>55</sup> Trijang Rinpoche 2018, p. 88; Karmay 2009, p. 65. Even closer to Tsakalho, pilgrims visit a cave containing three spontaneously "self-generated" (*rangjyung*) figures on the rock, which are believed to represent precisely Songtsen Gampo and his wives, the Chinese and Nepalese princesses. Duncan 1952, p. 123.

<sup>56</sup> F. K. L. Chit Hlaing, 2007, p. xli.

Yunnan and in the adjoining Tibetan districts of Tsawarong and Zayul.<sup>57</sup>

In the Seinghku and Adung valleys in the Hkakabo Razi region (in the far north of Myanmar) salt was also the central product of trade with the outside world. Because of its great scarcity it was a highly coveted and valuable commodity. The Myanmar's Tibetans, Drungs and Rawangs of the area were totally dependent on salt from Tibet and acquired it in exchange for furs, medicinal plants and animal parts. They usually visited Rima and Jite on the Tibetan side, although Tibetan, Lisu, and Chinese traders from Yunnan sometimes brought the precious commodity to their lands also. Here, too, the locals suffered exploitation by some of these traders, who sometimes took advantage of these incursions to capture slaves among them.<sup>58</sup>

In the Mishmi Hills Tibetan and Chinese traders and small groups of Mishmis crossed the passes of the upper Dibang basin, or the border of the Lohit or Zayul chu valley,<sup>59</sup> exchanging the precious salt, Tibetan swords, coarse woolen cloaks and copper pots for the famous medicinal plant *mishmee-teeta*, musk, bear skins and other jungle products. The Zakhriings/Meyors of Walong also purchased salt from the Tibetan side of the border.<sup>60</sup>

Further west, the salt obtained in Pe (Kongpo) by the Adis who crossed the Doshong la, came from the Nakchu lakes. At the Pe customs house a Tibetan official collected the rice, corn and cane they were carrying and distributed the salt in exchange. A representative of the king of Powo or Kanam Depa also collected the tax set for his lord.<sup>61</sup>

Still further west the Apa Tanis manufactured their own "salt", the *tapyo*,<sup>62</sup> which is obtained from the ashes produced by burning a cane that grows in the rice fields. This *tapyo* greatly reduced their dependence on the Nyishi middlemen who obtained their salt from Tibet, and explains the almost total absence of goiter cases among the Apa Tanis.

### The arrival of modernity

In central Tibet the 1950 invasion and subsequent extension of Chinese administration over the Dalai Lama's territory drastically changed the exploitation of salt, and especially its trade with the

<sup>57</sup> Bray 2019, p. 154, 159; Gros 2016; Kingdon-Ward 1937, p. 276; Lazcano 1999.

<sup>58</sup> Kaulback 1934, pp. 228-229; Kingdon-Ward 1937, pp. 70, 157; Klieger 2006, p. 248.

<sup>59</sup> Blackburn 2004, p. 34; Chouvy 2014, p. 22; Hilaly 2017, p. 78.

<sup>60</sup> Dutta Choudhury, p. 163.

<sup>61</sup> Kingdon-Ward 1926, pp: 187, 305-308

<sup>62</sup> Sarma, 2017.

southern slope of the Himalayas. After the 1959 Tibetan uprising in Lhasa, the Himalayan border was sealed, cutting off the transnational salt trade and eroding the *netsang* trade friendship relations between fictive kin on both sides of the border.<sup>63</sup> In Amdo after the fall of Ma Bufang and the proclamation of the new People's Republic of China in 1949, major changes were also experienced. The new administration began to manage the merchandise of several local producers with personnel transferred from the salt offices of Shanxi and Shaanxi as well as brought in from Xining. In addition, in just the first ten years after the establishment of the Chinese communist regime, the Tsaidam region grew from about 16,000 inhabitants (mostly Mongolian and Tibetan) to about 250,000 (mostly Han Chinese).<sup>64</sup> In Tsakalho, after the invasion of the Maoist troops in 1950, the exploitation of the wells also came under the control of the local administration.

In the 1960s, with the dark period of the Cultural Revolution, the system of "popular communes" was imposed in agricultural, livestock and mining production. Thus, the exploitation of salt by communal teams and the use of trucks for its transportation put an end to artisanal extraction and the rituals of the saltmen and of the women of Tsakalho. Harvesting for individual or family benefit gave way to the exploitation of lakes and salt pans by communes of men and women working for the state.

At the end of the 1970's, after the disastrous results obtained, this unfortunate period came to an end and a new stage of economic reforms began that ended collectivization, allowed the start-up of private companies, and put an end to price controls and regulations. Although it was again possible to extract salt individually or in small family groups, work was almost always done for local governments.

These reforms were accompanied in the 1980s by a certain political opening that allowed greater flexibility at some border crossings, and some Himalayan areas recovered at least part of their old trade. Traditional saltmen, wary of the use of trucks because they offended the deities of the lakes, were also allowed to resume their traditional activity. Likewise, with the opening up, the people of Tsakalho were able to obtain more profit from the salt they worked, when the government approved their right to produce and sell salt autonomously. With liberalized production, the sale of salt flourished again and the streets of Tsakalho regained some of their former dynamism.

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<sup>63</sup> Although exceptionally some areas such as Limi and Upper Humla in northwestern Nepal were allowed to maintain the transnational salt-grain trade. Saxer 2013, p. 39. Others regions like Wallung, in northeastern Nepal, found new trading opportunities after the gradual opening of the Nepal-Tibet border since the mid-1960s. Saxer 2012.

<sup>64</sup> Rohlf 2016, p. 49.

But after this slight resurgence, the industrial exploitation of the salt lakes by Chinese companies with modern machinery spread inexorably until it ended up imposing itself almost entirely. In the southeast, on the other hand, the extractive activity of the salt mines continued (according to a Chinese source at the end of the 2000s, about 150,000 kg of salt were produced in Tsakalho),<sup>65</sup> but its economic and commercial importance was also losing weight due to the growing ease of acquiring the product in places where formerly the dependence on salt from wells was absolute.

Caravans and small-scale salt trade subsist today in some parts of the Himalayas. But their great volume and generalization in the region is now a thing of the past. The last caravans are nearing extinction, and with them also disappears the testimony of a way of life and a culture that marked the life of the region for more than a millennium.

### Conclusion

For centuries the caravaneers trading salt and their clients established, as a consequence of their commercial alliances, social, cultural and friendship links.

Since the 1960s and because the closing of the border with Tibet, these ties were progressively weakened and the Himalayan peoples had to look for new agents with whom to trade and in whom to find new referents. So they were forced to reorient themselves towards the south, and Tibetan salt was replaced by Indian or Nepalese iodized salt that arrived by helicopters and later by the new roads.<sup>66</sup> This contributed to a loss of a shared social sphere and a weakening of their ancient cultural universe.<sup>67</sup> Also within Tibet, with the generalization of roads on the plateau, products began to arrive from China by truck, and the flow of goods brought by the caravans -and thus of the social and cultural relations they generated- was considerably reduced.

Since the slight opening of the 1980s, the tenuous revitalization of the Himalayan caravans and of the salt production of Tsakalho has generated a new social and cultural impact on these populations that has little to do with what they experienced in the old days:

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<sup>65</sup> Penkgyi 2008, pp. 32-33.

<sup>66</sup> Some, such as the Rupshu Ladakhi nomads, took advantage of the opportunity of having a nearby salt lake inside the Indian side of the border (the Tso Kar) and reproduced their earlier practices to extract salt from it. Ahmed 1999.

<sup>67</sup> Only the Himalayan peoples' taste for Tibetan salt and the properties they attribute to it have made it possible for a small-scale trade to survive where the border is allowed to be crossed, or minor smuggling where the borders are still closed.



Unlike in the past, the most coveted goods brought by the few caravans that still cross the Himalayas are no longer salt, wool, or religious artifacts, but Chinese manufactured goods such as cell phones, TVs, DVDs, electronic devices, modern clothing, and consumables of all kinds.<sup>68</sup> In recent times China's enormous economic strength has placed trans-Himalayan trade in the new Asian economy driven by Beijing's quest for new markets. Its *Great Western Development Strategy* has meant the construction of quality infrastructures in Tibet that facilitates and makes cheaper the arrival of products from China. Currently there are many roads to the Himalayas and a railway from Beijing to Lhasa which already has a branch to the Arunachal border and will soon have another to the Nepalese border. The Himalayan populations near the open passes<sup>69</sup> enjoy now -thanks to the skyrocketing prices of the caterpillar fungus or *yartsa gunbu* they collect<sup>70</sup>- a significant accumulation of capital; and nowadays China has become the provider of all the goods they want and need.

As for the salt pans, due to the decline of the industry, the place is being relocated in the tourist exploitation projects in the area aimed at the increasing Chinese population in the area. In 2009 the salt pans were declared a "site of protected cultural relic" in the Tibet Autonomous Region.<sup>71</sup> The cultural richness of Tsakalho, with its ancient and spectacular traditional salt flats on the Mekong, and with its Catholic population that grows grapes to produce wine, and regularly attends the only Catholic church within the limits of the Autonomous Region of Tibet, fits perfectly in the "Greater Shangrila"<sup>72</sup> tourist circuit pro-

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<sup>68</sup> Bauer 2014, p. 163, 167; Harris 2008, pp. 209, 213; Harris 2013, p. 63-64, 67; Murton 2016, p. 105; Saxer 2013, p. 48; Saxer 2017, p. 78; Schrempf 2018, pp. 336, 350; Wangdi 2004; Wong How Man 2020, p. 19.

<sup>69</sup> Several border crossings on the frontier with Nepal were joined by others in the Indo-Tibetan border such as Shipki la, Nathu la, etc. Even in many places where border crossings are still closed, Chinese goods find their way to the south through smuggling.

<sup>70</sup> Bauer 2014, p. 165-170; Childs and Choedup 2014; Winkler 2017.

<sup>71</sup> Asian Alpine E-News 69 2020, p 20.

<sup>72</sup> At the beginning of the 21st century the nearby Gyalthang (Chinese: Zhongdian) area was officially renamed "Shangrila County", with the clear intention of turning the region into a powerful tourist destination. This first step was followed by others: the "Three Parallel Rivers and Meili Snow Mountain Area" (alluding to the Salween, Mekong and Yangtze canyons and the sacred Kawa Karpo) was declared a UNESCO World Natural Heritage Site; the nearby town of Chatreng (Chinese: Xiangcheng) was also renamed "Shambhala", and new icons, such as the "exoticism" of the Tibetan Catholic villages (with their beautiful churches and vineyards inherited from the French and Swiss missionaries), have been incorporated to sell a broad "Greater Shangrila" tourist circuit including the entire border area between the Tibet Autonomous Region, Yunnan and Sichuan. Galipeau 2018, pp. 354, 364.

ject<sup>73</sup> that includes the entire border area between the Tibet Autonomous Region, Yunnan and Sichuan. The village was also an obligatory crossing point in the "Ancient Tea Horse Road" that is now claimed in the Chinese imaginary as a national cultural heritage.<sup>74</sup> Both circuits are presented by the tourism sector to the new affluent class of Han urbanites as endowed with great attractiveness and exoticism that allow them to know and apprehend the diversity of their country.

In general terms we could conclude that, in the pre-modern period, the trade and distribution of salt extracted in the traditional way and transported by caravans that crossed large tracts of territory exercised a cohesive function in the Tibetan world, especially in the more peripheral areas of the Himalayas that in many cases were not subject to the political control of Lhasa. This continuous flow of relationships fueled (with a few exceptions) their sense of belonging to the same cultural world in which Tibetan Buddhism and the holy city of Lhasa were fundamental poles of reference. The permanent connection with other peoples from different areas of that great Tibetosphere maintained the social, cultural, linguistic and religious ties with them, thus revitalizing the cultural life of Tibetan civilization, which flowed vigorously through the trade routes and nodes. The strength of such links also weakened the importance of the official ascription of some areas to other political entities, whose centers of power were often perceived as very distant, and whose effective power was felt very vaguely at best.

However, if the old caravan trade reinforced the links of the Himalayan peoples with traditional Tibetan society, today on the contrary, the new forms of exchange act as a channel that transmits to the developing populations of the Himalayas the economic power of China and the attraction of its modernity, and which includes them in the new Asian economic sphere dominated by China. Even the current activity in the salt pans is nowadays framed in tourist projects that seem to symbolically reinforce Chinese national pride rather than energize inter-Tibetan and trans-Himalayan relations as the well-salt trade did in pre-modern times.

After the decline of the second half of the 20th century, the trans-Himalayan residual commercial activity that survives today and the current "shangrilazation" of the Tsakalho salt pans act symbolically in a very different sense than in the past: reinforcing the image of China

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<sup>73</sup> The Chinese writer Fan Wen warns of the danger of the salt-pans becoming just a stage where locals play a role for tourists, and advocates that they become "part of history gloriously retired from service" Ying 2014, p. 38.

<sup>74</sup> Sigley 2012; Sigley 2021a, pp. 3, 5, 13-14; Sigley 2021b, pp. 163-168.

as a referent of development and modernity, and contributing to the vindication of its national unity through its cultural heritage respectively.

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