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Meme Lama Sonam Zangpo's Kurseong Years: A Note on Factors in the Foundation of a Modern Bhutanese Religious Community outside of Bhutan

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In Kurseong, a small Himalayan town in the Darjeeling district of North Bengal, India, a small stupa sits perched in a village a small trek away from the main road connecting Darjeeling with the plains. The stupa itself is simple – only about one metre in height and width – and resembles many others in the area. The fresh coat of red, blue and yellow paint on its edges though suggests that the local community at least continue to revere it, and the establishment of a new monastery just a few meters away confirms that the site is regarded as sanctified. However, the area is not associated with Guru Rinpoche, or any other major Tantric deity, or local protector. Instead, the sanctification of the site comes from the fact that it was home to a highly regarded religious master in the area: a Buddhist teacher and meditator known as Lopen Sonam Zangpo (*Slop dpon Bsod nams bzang po*, 1892-1984)¹, the very same Sonam Zangpo who is known as Meme Lama (*Me me bla ma*) in Bhutan, and who is regarded as one of the most important religious figures of twentieth century Bhutanese history.

The stupa at Kurseong remains as the only physical relic of the community established there by Lama Sonam Zangpo in the early to mid-1960s. What is significant about this site for

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¹ These dates of birth and death are contested by different sources. The other most commonly given date of birth is 1888, and date of death is 1983. The dates used in this article are based on my interviews with several of Lama Sonam Zangpo's students.

Bhutanese studies is that firstly, it represents a site outside of Bhutan that has become regarded as sacred due to its association with a modern Bhutanese religious figure. Secondly, Lama Sonam Zangpo is often considered to have established communities exclusively in Bhutan after his return there from studying in Tibet in around the 1930s. This site is therefore an important piece of evidence of an often forgotten chapter in his life, and in the history of modern Bhutanese Buddhism.



Stūpa constructed at Kurseong, Darjeeling District, West Bengal by Meme Lama Sonam Zangpo, c. 1960s; photo by author, 2007.

The histories of religious sites and the communities connected to them can be frustrating to trace out: they may be shrouded in mythology without fixed dates, or perhaps details regarding the early human involvement with the sites

remain vague or uncertain. However, as the literature regarding sacred space in Tibetan cultural areas has established, sites often become sacred through a gradual process, that begins with the establishment of a community in an area associated with a deity or important historical figure. The site at Kurseong represents an important example of a developing sacred site that has been rendered sanctified by the residence of Lama Sonam Zangpo. The current efforts to establish a monastery there demonstrates that it is continued significance and appropriateness for spiritual practice: however, the stūpa is all that remains physically of Lama Sonam Zangpo's time in Kurseong. This paper is a brief attempt to fill in this period of Lama Sonam Zangpo's life, and to provide an exploration of some of the factors that influence the development of religious communities.

The Life of Meme Lama Sonam Zangpo

Lama Sonam Zangpo was one of the most important figures in twentieth century Bhutanese Buddhism. He was noteworthy as a teacher of the Royal family, and also due to his status as one of the main students, or heart sons (*thugs sras*) of the influential trans-Tibetan and Himalayan Buddhist teacher, Tokden Shakya Shri (*Rtogs ldan Śākya shrī*, 1853-1919). Later in life, Lama Sonam Zangpo developed his own trans-Himalayan following, with students travelling from as far away as Ladakh and Kinnaur to study with him in Bhutan.

Lama Sonam Zangpo was born in 1892 into an important family of Kurto Ruling (*Kur toe rus gling*), and apparently had links to the current Royal family (at that time, the family of the Trongsa Ponlop). He was born during a period of rapid historical change for Bhutan, but from a young age is said to only have been interested in religion. This led him to join the monastic community at Lhundruptse Dzong (*Lhun grub tshe'i rdzong*) where he studied for a short time before moving to Tharpa Ling (*Thar pa'i gling*) in Bumthang (*Bum thang*) to

perform his preliminary practices. (Nyoshul Khenpo, 2005: 443)

According to Nyoshul Khenpo's account of his life, which appears to be one of the most complete written accounts available, Lama Sonam Zangpo travelled to Kham (*Khams*) to study with Shakya Shri in his teens and stayed there for "more than 12 years." (Nyoshul Khenpo, 2005: 443) If we take twelve years as a guide, it would seem that he travelled to Khams around 1907-1908, which would have made him around sixteen years old at time of departure. He studied with Shakya Shri in Kham and Tsari (*Tsa ri*) until his teacher's death in 1919. To commemorate Shakya Shri, Shakya Shri's sons and students renovated major stupas in the Kathmandu Valley between 1919-1921, and Lama Sonam Zangpo was a crucial actor in these renovations. He also became a highly renowned teacher within Shakya Shri's community, and even held the title of "heart son" (*thugs sras*), which was reserved for only the most close and capable of Shakya Shri's students.

After his teacher's death, Lama Sonam Zangpo taught for a number of years in Shakya Shri's community at Kyiphuk (*Skyid phug*) in Tsari before returning to Bhutan. There he quickly became a highly acclaimed teacher, and founded a unique religious community.

The Nature of Lama Sonam Zangpo's Community

Lama Sonam Zangpo's community did not have a fixed monastery or retreat centre: instead, it was unique in that it moved between sites every few years. In this way, it appeared to have been similar to a Gar (*sgar*), a roaming religious encampment that was common in Eastern Tibet. (Jacoby, 2007: 122) The community remained constantly on the move, setting up at sites that were geographically remote and often long abandoned, and according to several of his students,

Meme Lama Sonam Zangpo's Kurseong Years

Lama Sonam Zangpo did not remain anywhere for more than three years.² Nyoshul Khenpo describes his movements in the following terms:

Over time, [Lama Sonam Zangpo] planted the victory banner of spiritual practice at all of the principal holy sites and places of accomplishment in Tibet and Bhutan— Tsari, the hidden valley of Khenjong, Takstang in Bhutan, and so forth— never deviating from a schedule of four practice sessions daily. Sonam Zangpo did not spend a single day in the worldly atmosphere of towns and villages, but instead frequented mountainsides and isolated places, applying himself one-pointedly to spiritual practice focusing on the very essence... He conferred on many fortunate students the advice and instructions of profound teachings such as the Six Yogas of Naropa and Dzogchen. (Nyoshul Khenpo, 2005:444)

According to Rinzin Wangchuk, between 1939 and 1961 Lama Sonam Zangpo lived in an area known as Khempa Jong (*Mkhan pa ljongs*), a hidden land of Guru Rinpoche in Eastern Bhutan that was discovered by Pema Lingpa (*Pad ma gling pa*) in the 14th century. This is an extremely remote area.

According to the religious interpretation Khempa Jong exists even today as a baeyul imperceptible to the outside world. The site, where Khempa Jong was believed to be hidden, [sic] is located in the extreme northern reaches of the Kurichu, nearly three days walk from Lhuentse Dzong. The area is remote, accessible only by a crude and extremely risky path. About 50 wooden ladders sustain the path on the slippery and

² I am indebted to several of Meme Lama Sonam Zangpo's students, Se Rinpoche (Manali, India) and Lama Thinley Namgyal (Kathmandu, Nepal) for insights regarding their teacher.

steep parts and across numerous streams. One false step on these ladders could plunge the traveler into steep gorges. Horses can be used only on the first day. (Wangchuk, 2004:47)

Lama Sonam Zangpo's Movement to Kurseong

The fate of this site, which is now described as “inhospitable and dominated by bamboo groves,” is revealed in the following description by Rinzin Wangchuk: in Lama Sonam Zangpo's time it was

... a community of about 62 households, all devoted to religious pursuits. Dzongsar Jamyang Khentse was born there on June 18, 1961. Four months after his birth the place, quite close to the Tibetan border, was vacated because of the tensions resulting from the Sino-Indian war in 1962. Dzongsar Jamgyang [sic] Kh[y]entse recalls that there was a complete village when his parents and grandparents were living here, and today everything has disappeared like a fairy tale. (Wangchuk, 2004:48)

The Sino-Indian War was therefore the temporal context that influenced the shift of Lama Sonam Zangpo's community yet again. In 1962 Lama Sonam Zangpo made the interesting decision to establish a new base at Kurseong, over the Bhutanese border, rather than elsewhere in Bhutan. His motives for doing this are unclear. Perhaps this decision was in response to the uncertain geo-political situation on the border; or, he may have received an invitation from one of his many students.

Lama Sonam Zangpo's activities at Kurseong appear to mirror his activities elsewhere. He spent most of his time meditating, and several times a day would call students individually or in groups for teaching sessions. Locals recall that he lived in a

simple hut. Remarkably, the hut's appearance has been documented for posterity in the 1966 documentary *The Message of the Tibetans*, made by French filmmaker Arnaud Desjardins. This amazing film documents the material realities of life in India for newly arrived Tibetans in the early 1960s. Lama Sonam Zangpo is seen several times in the documentary, and provides meditation instructions on watching the mind to the director in the section regarding Tantra. This resource is extraordinary for its depiction of Lama's simple living conditions, as well as its recording of several students demonstrating yoga practices under Lama Sonam Zangpo's counsel.

The film also portrays the local community: not only are Bhutanese and other Himalayan students of Lama Sonam Zangpo shown circumambulating the newly finished stūpa (which is the same that remains there today), but local patrons, including Newari, Subba, Lepcha, Sikkimese and Tibetan visitors, are also known visiting him there.

Conclusion: The End - and the Beginning - of the Kurseong Community, and the Influence of Modern Transnational History on Local Sacred Site Foundation

After approximately three years at Kurseong, Meme Lama Sonam Zangpo returned to Bhutan. There he continued to actively teach up until his death in 1984. He remains a revered Bhutanese religious figure, and his students and family members (most famously, his grandson Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche) remain crucial figures in the Bhutanese Buddhist establishment. His influence stretches well beyond Bhutan however. Most notably, in the 1970s he was responsible for printing and distributing his teacher Shakya Shri's *Collected Works*. His contribution to the ongoing vitality and promulgation of this lineage through ensuring the continuity of its textual corpus cannot be overstated.

As well as his role in preserving Shakya Shri's lineage, Lama Sonam Zangpo's years in Kurseong demonstrate that he was highly regarded by diverse Himalayan communities in his own right. However, his spiritual efficacy was also susceptible to the ebbs and flows of broader transnational history during his life, as demonstrated by the movement of his community from Khempa Jong to Kurseong in late 1961 in response to tensions on the Sino-Indian border. Though he only remained there for three to four years, he left a lasting impression: today, almost fifty years later, local villagers remember him with great affection for his warmth and kindness. His spiritual power is also held in esteem, as evidenced by the efforts of a Nyingmapa lama to build a new monastery in the environs on the site that was previously occupied by his simple hut. Meme Lama Sonam Zangpo's settlement at Kurseong was transitory, like his other retreats, and was not intended to be permanent. However, the lasting symbol of the stupa suggests that he set in motion the development of an intriguing Bhutanese sacred site outside of Bhutan. Given the esteem in which he is held elsewhere in the Eastern Himalayas, including in Sikkim and Arunachal, this site may not be alone, and could be just one in a network of modern, developing sacred spaces associated with Lama Sonam Zangpo that confirm his status as a crucial trans-Himalayan Buddhist teacher.

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