

Population History and Identity in the Hidden Land of Pemakö*

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Introduction

This study explores the history of migration by different Buddhist peoples from eastern Bhutan, the neighbouring Tawang area and the Tibetan plateau to the 'hidden land' (Tib. *sbas yul*) of Pemakö, and the circumstances that induced migrants to leave their homelands. The descendants of these diverse migrants who settled in the southern part of Pemakö - the Tuting, Geling and Singa Circles of Upper Siang District, Arunachal Pradesh - became officially classified as the Memba and Khamba¹ 'Scheduled Tribes' (hereafter ST) by the Indian administration during the early 1950s, in order to incorporate them all into the newly independent Indian state.

These ST categories were constructed on the basis of supposed common group origins and spoken language, and thus convey the impression that Upper Siang's Buddhist population consists of two different groups, both of which are internally homogeneous. However, both written sources of the British and post-independence Indian administration and my own fieldwork data demonstrate clearly that Pemakö's

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¹ Khamba is the spelling used by the Indian administration. The common transcription of the Tibetan term is Khampa (Wylie: *kham pa*), which will be used herein.

Buddhist population traces its origins back to a wide variety of homelands. Moreover, the ST labels are themselves exonyms that carry certain stereotypes and negative notions, especially the label Memba. Thus, both the Memba and Khampa labels meet with disapproval by local peoples so labeled.

The present study retraces the various migration histories and movements of Pemakö ancestor populations. This allows some preliminary explanation of the autonyms used by these migrants themselves, in contrast to the generic exonyms, such as Memba and Khampa, that external agents have applied to them. We can also demonstrate that, in large part due to the religious status of the region as a hidden land, Pemakö became an ethno-linguistic melting pot for migrants from many different places. This diverse group nevertheless developed a common Buddhist identity vis-à-vis their non-Buddhist neighbours, while simultaneously maintaining clear group boundaries among themselves according to place of origin and/or residence.

The Pemakö Region

The spatial extent of the Pemakö region can only be approximately determined. It stretches down from the mountain range of Gyala Pelri and Namche Bawar in the north, on either side of the south and south-west flowing Tsangpo River² until the McMahon Line as defined on British, Tibetan and Indian maps after 1914. The western boundary seems to follow the mountain range with the Tamnyen La, Deyang La, Pepung La, and Doshung La connecting Pemakö and Kongpo. The eastern boundary approximates to the southwards flowing Tsangpo, the Shumo Chu, the Kangri Karpo pass down to Tashigong in the Yang Sang Valley area that is bounded by the right bank of the Yang Sang River

² From around Tuting, where the river enters the lower hill regions of the Himalaya, the Tsangpo is known as Siang (earlier also Dihang), and from the plains of Assam it becomes the Brahmaputra.

between Tashigong until Jido.³ This area forms the southern part of Pemakö and, with three of its five major pilgrimage sites, constitutes the main pilgrimage area of Pemakö as a holy place.⁴

Although Pemakö is often imagined and presented as an isolated region, accounts by British explorers and officers of the Indian administration show that it was rather a dynamic hub for peoples both from the Tibetan plateau and the lower hill regions to the south. They came there in search of new places to settle, or on pilgrimage, or traversed the region on trade and tax collecting missions. The imagined isolation of Pemakö might have emerged from the scarcity and nature of material from the past, which mainly focus upon religious aspects of its exploration and opening as a hidden land. The Tibetan Buddhist concept of hidden lands in itself already conveys the idea of isolation and inaccessibility.

Observations at Phe in 1924 by the British naturalist Frank Kingdon Ward reveal a lively movement of people through Pemakö:

The Mönbas were now crossing the Doshong La in hundreds, a few Kampas, Pobas, and Kongbas with them; we also saw three Lopas - presumably the people we call Abors - who had come 25 marches. They had all come to get salt, bringing rice, curry, vegetable dyes, canes [...], maize, tobacco, and a few manufactured articles such as coloured bamboo baskets, garters, and so forth. [...] By the end of October traffic ceased, [...] but at this time not a day passed without fifty or a hundred people coming over – men, women, and children – and Pe, with its camps, and supplies, and people coming and going, presented

³ The Yang Sang River is known by the local population as Nyigong.

⁴ Interview with Tashi Lama, October 2009. According to him these southern pilgrimage places are Riutala, Ditapuri and Pematseri. The other two in the northern part are Kündeling and Buddha Tsebum.

a lively scene. Between one and two thousand must have crossed the Doshong La in October, which made Pemako appear quite thickly populated. But it is not. The area of Pemako cannot be less than 20,000 square miles, and probably a third of the population come to Pe for salt each year. Most of the remainder go to Showa.⁵

Measured against Kingdon Ward's estimation of Pemakö's spatial dimension, the region might have been sparsely populated but, as he notes himself, the number of people coming to Phe only comprised a third of the population. The rugged mountain area of Pemakö allows little space for settlements and farmland. In relation to these stretches of inhabitable land, the population density was higher only along certain river valleys. Up to the end of the 1950s, these valleys functioned as the major transport arteries between the Tibetan plateau and the lower hill regions. Apart from these main routes, the region is criss-crossed by trails connecting the various villages within the Pemakö region. Due to the increasing number of migrants flowing into Pemakö since the beginning of the 20th century, the native inhabitants of the region were, by degrees, displaced from their settlement areas, which often resulted in armed conflicts.

The spatial extent of settlement areas was closely connected with expansion of the Tibetan state's territorial control in Pemakö. By acting as the agents of the Tibetan administration the Buddhist population of Pemakö established themselves as a powerful community, one collecting taxes from other non-Buddhist groups beyond the border (McMahon Line) agreed upon by British-India and Tibet, and controlling exchange and interaction between the Tibetan

⁵ Kingdon Ward (1926: 109). Abor is an Assamese term to collectively label different ethnic groups inhabiting the Siang Valley. These groups are nowadays also known as Adi.

plateau and the lower hill regions to the south.⁶ This situation alerted the British authorities. In the context of the advance of Chinese troops towards Tibet at the beginning of the 20th century, they feared loss of the region as a convenient buffer zone between their Himalayan hill territory and the Tibetan plateau. In order to exercise better control over their virtually unadministered territory, the British administration conducted several expeditions to Pemakö with the aim of building friendly relations between the administration and the population, as well as stabilising relations among the different 'tribal' groups.⁷ In addition to gathering much geographical and natural history data, British explorers recorded whatever facts they were able to obtain about the local populations. The integration of the wide range of local peoples under British-Indian administration lead to pragmatically simplified classifications using exonyms at the time; previous attempts to base such classifications upon local autonyms elsewhere in British Himalayan territories had resulted in thousands of identities being generated.⁸

British classifications of Pemakö peoples were created according to the larger regions where migrants were thought to have originated from and the languages spoken in these regions. The establishment of the category 'Tshangla-speaking Memba' and 'Tibetan-speaking Tibetans' forms the basis for

⁶ Huber (2011) surveys the Tibetan economic and political activities from 1900-1950 in the Eastern Himalaya and shows how the rulers of Powo and the Tibetan Government extended their influence and control from Pemakö southwards beyond the McMahon Line.

⁷ See Reid (1942: 181-266), for a summary of British-Indian administrative history of the Sadiya Frontier Tract between 1885 and 1941.

⁸ Anderson describes the example of Ladakh, "[...] about which the British had so little knowledge that they decided in 1911 to let the population have full freedom to identify themselves as they pleased. Imagine the horror of the bureaucrat when the actual counting started to show that they had on their hands 5,934 "major groups" [...] and 28,478 secondary identifications" (2011: xvii).

the contemporary classification of Upper Siang's Buddhist population. The long-term result has been that, up to the present day, a variety of Pemakö groups are subsumed under these ST categories with an ascribed name that in many cases have no correlation with their autonyms nor their own sense of origins and history.

The 'Hidden Land' Concept as a 'Pull Factor' for Migration

In Tibetan and Himalayan Buddhist narratives, hidden lands or *sbas yul* are places that were once concealed by Padmasambhava along the southern and southeastern slopes of the Himalaya including northern parts of present-day Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh. According to traditional Buddhist interpretations, this region is a zone where the civilised Buddhist world meets the non-Buddhist and therefore uncivilised world of 'tribal' peoples. The hidden lands are presented as places of refuge and preservation in times crisis. Only when these times of crisis have arrived, a predestined Buddhist master will receive a description of the exact position and spatial extent of the hidden land, which can then be opened with particular religious rituals as a precondition to explore the place. Such an exploration is not a single act, often it is carried out by successive Buddhist masters accompanied by a retinue of disciples and lay practitioners. For those who believe in the existence of the hidden lands, and who have profound faith in Buddhism, these places serve as a refuge where they will re-establish social order and preserve Tibetan Buddhist culture for future generations, but also can gain spiritual accomplishment.⁹

Hidden lands are presented as earthly paradises in traditional narratives. Their environmental conditions are highly favourable for large populations subsisting on an agro-pastoral livelihood, because fruits and grains and all kinds of animals are available there without limit, and as long as no

⁹ On characteristics of hidden lands, see Sardar-Afkhami (2006), Childs (1999) and Brauen-Drolma (1985).

animal is injured, meat will be there in abundance. In addition, the settlers will find all other kinds of material goods, such as agricultural and household implements, weapons, medicines and minerals. It is said that everyone who had overcome attachment to one's own family, friends and material wealth and already gained spiritual merits will find the hidden land and live there in comfort.

Although Pemakö is described as just such an earthly paradise, its mundane reality is very different. To reach the place the traveller has to cross high and snow covered mountain passes that often cannot be crossed during winter. Many routes are not accessible for horses or yaks, thus everything must be carried by people upon their own backs. After crossing the mountain crest the traveller descends into a rugged landscape covered with dense forest and subtropical plants. Trails are often overgrown or blocked by landslides, and cane suspension bridges are washed away by the enormous power of mountain streams. In addition to demanding travel, the exhausted traveller faces a subtropical climate with illnesses caused by the heat and humidity,¹⁰ or bites from insects and other venomous reptiles. In addition to this, newcomers were often received with hostility by local populations defending their territory against these intrusions with poisoned arrows. Once migrants made their way into Pemakö, they realised that space for settlements or farmland was very limited and that every plot of usable land had to be wrested from the jungle. These conditions certainly do not make Pemakö appear like an attractive place to settle. However, over the last centuries larger groups as well as individuals from eastern Bhutan, the Tawang region, Poyül and Kham abandoned homes and societies for the arduous and dangerous journey to Pemakö and the hardship of settling there. Why would they do so?

¹⁰ Chöje Lingpa (1682-1720/1725) one of the famous Tertöns active in Pemakö, suffered from a rheumatic disease caused by the subtropical climate and passed away shortly afterwards. See Sardar-Afkhami (2006: 152).

Mongol Invasions and the Beginnings of Migration, 17th-18th Centuries

There is little direct information on the earlier migration movements to Pemakö. However, hagiographies of Buddhist masters present their lives and activities in the context of historical events that first motivated them and their followers to explore the hidden land of Pemakö. The period when the exploration of Pemakö began was marked by regional political turmoil and military conflict. The invasion of Central Tibet by Gushri Khan's Mongol troops, and the ensuing power struggle between the King of Tsang and the Gelugpa school using Mongol military assistance, resulted in 1642 in the Fifth Dalai Lama (1617-1682) ruling over a new Tibetan state. In 1657, a combined force of Tibetan state and Mongol troops attacked Bhutan "along the border between sPa-gro and bKra-shis-gsang and were assisted by some of the traditional leaders within the country who were disaffected with the new 'Brug pa regime".¹¹ Some years later, in 1717, the Dzungar Mongols in their turn sacked Lhasa where "they behaved as savages and rapacious masters, looting all and sundry and even ransacking the tomb of the fifth Dalai Lama".¹²

Being prisoners of such unstable political times, not only did many people feel their existence was threatened, but also that moral values and religious fortunes were in decline. Political turmoil, sectarian struggles and armed conflicts were all interpreted as clear indications that the decline of Buddhist teachings and civilisation has arrived. The Nyingma school in Tibet, in particular, suffered suppression during this period, and among its Buddhist masters, as well as masters from the Kagyü School, awareness of a hidden land refuge in Pemakö spread widely. In the mid-17th century revelations of the treasure discoverer Rigdzin Jatsön Nyingpo (1585-1656), for instance, Pemakö was presented as the ultimate place to realise positive religious destinies, where "(t)hose who enter this realm [...] realise the 'vajra-body' and dissolve into

¹¹ Aris (1979: 124).

¹² Snellgrove and Richardson (1995: 217).

rainbow light upon death. Merely taking seven steps towards *Padma bkod* guarantees rebirth in this pure realm after death.”¹³ From this point on, guided by revealed descriptions and instructions of how to find and ritually open the hidden land of Pemakö, several treasure discoverers accompanied by individuals or small groups travelled into the border region of southeastern Tibet to gradually explore the area of Pemakö.¹⁴

These exploration activities, including the opening of sacred sites, establishment of new settlements and the required infrastructure were carried out in successive waves, sometimes supported by neighbouring populations who provided manpower and other vital necessities.¹⁵ Through these movements in and out of the region, and the networks of people involved, the news of Pemakö’s successful exploration spread widely. Thus, by the mid-18th century, a recognisable group of migrants from eastern Bhutan and adjacent Mönyül already appear to have become settled in Pemakö.¹⁶ During the following centuries, numbers of migrants increased. Reported motivations (called “push and pull factors” in migration studies)¹⁷ for migrations include worsening of living standards due to heavy taxation, labour exploitation, as well as foreign invasions and natural disasters. For several individuals Pemakö, with its rugged landscape and rule by the semi-independent kingdom of Powo, also offered a good place to hide from criminal prosecution.

¹³ Sardar-Afkhami (2006: 146).

¹⁴ For details see Sardar-Afkhami (2006), Erhard (1999a, 1999b), Lazcano (2005).

¹⁵ Based upon Tibetan language sources, I have illustrated such an ongoing process of migration in the exploration of the hidden land of Pachakshiri, nowadays known as the Menchukha Valley (West Siang District of Arunachal Pradesh); see Grothmann (2012).

¹⁶ For example, the Nyingma master Kunzang Wöser Garwang Chimed Dorje (b. 1763) was born into a Mönpa family from Pemakö.

¹⁷ Childs (2012) discusses trans-Himalayan migration from an anthropological point of view and identifies different push and pull factors that have induced migration.

Migration from Eastern Bhutan During the Early 19th Century

According to historical sources, Orgyan Drodül Lingpa (b.1757), recognised as the 5th reincarnation of the Kagyü master Gampopa, was a key 18th century religious figure actively involved in the exploration of Pemakö.¹⁸ By the end of the 18th century, due to his priest-donor relation with the king of Powo who controlled the region of Pemakö, Orgyan Drodül Lingpa travelled down the Tsangpo gorge.¹⁹ In a dream he received instruction to build a temple on a nearby hill. The foundation to Rinchenpung was laid in 1806 and the temple became the centre of religious life in Pemakö.²⁰ It is reported that he, “[...] took under his wing [...] [a whole] assemblage of inhabitants of Klo and Mon”²¹ and his teachings and activities became widely known. Today, a larger group of Pemakö’s population correlates its migration history with the agency of Orgyan Drodül Lingpa.

According to local Pemakö oral traditions, there was an important Lama in Lhasa whose name was Gampopa. His fame had spread widely in Tibet and at the time when he went to Pemakö many people from eastern Bhutan

¹⁸ Although he was recognised as the 5th reincarnation of the Kagyü master Gampopa, he received teachings and initiations from Nyingma masters that enabled him to open hidden lands and perform rituals to repel military invasions. During 1788-1792, Tibet was threatened by the Gorkha from Nepal, which finally led to a war. On the eve of these events, Orgyan Drodül Lingpa travelled to sacred sites in Central Tibet and participated in rituals to ward off this invasion. He returned afterwards to Powo where he invigorated ties with the Kanam Depa, Nyima Gyalpo, the ruler of the Powo kingdom.

¹⁹ See Sardar-Afkhami (2006: 153f). When Chöje Lingpa (b. 1682) travelled to Pemakö in 1717, he received a note from the Powo ruler saying: “This Padmo-bkod belongs solely to the people of Ka-gnam; it is not a place that the inhabitants of dBus and gTsang may enter”; see Ehrhard (1999a: 237, n.12).

²⁰ See Ehrhard (1999a: 229) and Sardar-Afkhami (2006: 154f).

²¹ Ehrhard (1999a: 229).

accompanied him.²² These people not only “were encouraged by the legendary reputation of these ‘hidden lands’”, the reason “to flee there in the 19th century [was] to escape from oppressive taxation in the area of eastern Bhutan and elsewhere”.²³ Local oral accounts describe this situation as follows: “The Mön king was very cruel. People had to work very hard for him. They started to look for a new place to live and so left Mön and thus they came to Pemakö. First a few came and later more and more followed.”²⁴ On their way, these migrants were held up by local non-Buddhist populations described as ‘Lopas’ (Tib. *klo pa*), who only allowed them to pass through their territory after paying a toll. Being unable to pay, the migrants had to stopover and their journey was delayed for almost two years.²⁵ After their arrival in Pemakö the migrants leased a plot of land near Metog from the local Lopa, but the land was covered with trees and bamboo and inhabited by demons and spirits. After these evil forces were expelled from the land the migrants used the wood and bamboo to build houses and they cultivated the land. The good news circulated and more than one hundred households followed.²⁶

In 1913, roughly a century after this major Bhutanese and Mönpa migration movement occurred, George Dunbar visited the Pemakö region and reported that: “About a hundred years ago a band of emigrants from Darma [i.e. Bhutan] crossed the main range, it is conjectured by the Doshung La, and settled in the valley about Marpung, which is probably the oldest

²² Interview with Tashi Lama, October 2009. He is in his 70s and counts himself as the sixth generation of these migrants.

²³ Aris (1980: 9).

²⁴ Interview with Wangden Lama, October 2009, noting here that far eastern Bhutan and the adjacent Tawang region were traditionally designated as Shar Mön or “eastern Mön”. See also the similar testimony in *Menbazu shehui lishi diaocha* (1987-I: 21f). Thanks to Afia Adu-Sanyah for working with me through the Chinese material.

²⁵ See *Menbazu shehui lishi diaocha* (1987-I: 21) and (1987-II: 74).

²⁶ See *Menbazu shehui lishi diaocha* (1987-I: 21).

settlement.”²⁷ From Marpung these migrants gradually spread “ousting the earlier inhabitants from the best land on either bank of the river, but permitting them to remain on their holdings in the unproductive tracts lying immediately below the gorge and about the 29th parallel”.²⁸ Even though these migrants counted themselves at the time as the fourth generation settled in Pemakö²⁹, their ties with Bhutan seem to have remained strong in certain respects, since they once in their lives went back to Bhutan to pay respect to the Trongsa Penlop.³⁰

The historical timeframes in the above accounts correspond to what Bailey was also told in 1913 by a man from Kapu, who claimed his grandfather to be one of the original migrants from Bhutan about hundred years earlier, but which Bailey interprets as “just another way of saying ‘a long while’”. Bailey’s impression was that this time period “had not been so long that the immigrants were truly settled”.³¹ However, in the early 1880s, Kintup, one of the Pandit-explorers, reports several settlements and monasteries between Pemaköchung and Mayum, and we can assume that at the beginning of the 1880s the Buddhist migrants had established them as a recognisable group in the region.³² By

²⁷ Dunbar (1916: 93). Here the place name “Darma” refers to Bhutan. The British commonly used the term “Dharma” or “Dhurma” for the ruler and country of Bhutan. For example, J. D. Hooker (1854: 136) wrote: “The Bhotanese, natives of Bhotan, or of the Dhurma country, are called Dhurma people, in allusion to their spiritual chief, the Dhurma Rajah.”

²⁸ Dunbar (1916: 93). The 29th parallel is approximately on the McMahon Line near Geling.

²⁹ See Dunbar (1916: 105).

³⁰ See Dunbar (1916: 110).

³¹ Bailey (1957: 74).

³² Kintup was sent by the British to Pemakö to explore the course of the Tsangpo. Being sold into slavery by his travel companion in 1881, he stayed almost one year at Tongkyuk Dzong. From there he escaped to Marpung in 1882, serving the head of the local

the start of the 20th century, their settlement area stretched from Payi to Kopu on the right bank of the Tsangpo gorge, and from Pango to Mayum on the left bank.

Several of the non-Buddhist groups were engaged in conflicts with Memba settlers over the limited resources of land and food, and according to the situation they formed alliances among each other that were renounced as quickly as they were tied.³³ Bailey reports that, “[a]bout the year 1905 the Abors raided up the valley and burnt the village of Hangjo below Rinchenpung and penetrated as far as Giling. Up to this time the Powo administration had allowed the frontier villages to settle their accounts with the Abors as best they could, but now became alarmed and sent troops down the Tsangpo valley to help their subjects on the frontier”.³⁴ These battles and the victory over the local non-Buddhist populations are still part of Memba memories in Pemakö.³⁵ In order to consolidate their authority, the Powo administration established an outpost, the Kala Yong Dzong, at Nyereng in the Yang Sang Valley around 1908.³⁶ This military takeover of the valley and the outpost offered security for Buddhist pilgrims and settlers coming down from the Tsangpo and Chimdro Valley. During the following decades, this Powo Tibetan influence in the form of tax collection and trade control extended as far south as the villages of Karko and Simong.³⁷ Nevertheless, the main areas of settlement were, at least up to the beginning of the 1940s, located on the upper stretches of the Tsangpo Valley and, as Godfrey reports after

monastery there for almost another year. For a brief account of his journey from 1880-1884, see Bailey (1957: 19ff.).

³³ Bhattacharjee (1975: 17ff) describes several of these incidents.

³⁴ Bailey (1914: 2).

³⁵ Interview with Wangden Lama, October 2009.

³⁶ See Bailey (1914: 2-3), and Dunbar (1916: 93) for the year of the construction of the Dzong.

³⁷ See Huber (2011).

a flight over the area up to Namche Bawar, only few scattered “Bhutia” villages were recognisable further down stream.³⁸

Migration from Tibet during the 20th Century

During the early 20th century, various waves of migrants from parts of the south-eastern Tibetan plateau, a region generally known as Kham, first began to arrive in areas immediately adjacent to Pemakö, such as the Mishmi Hills to the southeast and Chimdro to the east. In 1906/07, Noel Williamson reported a Tibetan settlement as established in the upper Dibang River area of the Mishmi Hills, whose settlers—originally arriving there for trade—came from the “province of Darge” [i.e. the Derge kingdom] in Kham at an unknown date.³⁹ In 1913, the British Mishmi Expedition explored the upper Mathun Valley and came across a colony of Kham Tibetans settled at Mipi. They were refugees from a devastating flood in the Yidong Valley of Pome which had occurred around the turn of the century, and arrived in the Mishimi area via the neighbouring region of Chimdro.⁴⁰ A further group of about two thousand Tibetans from parts of Kham, Derge, Powo and elsewhere arrived in the Mishmi hills again via Chimdro around 1902/03, guided by Jampa Jungne, the head of Riwoche monastery in Kham. Jampa Jungne interpreted imperial China’s western expansion onto the eastern Tibetan Plateau at the time as a sign to depart for Pemakö, and thus escape military invasion and colonisation. Disillusioned after conflicts with the local Mishmi inhabitants, and convinced that this place was not the hidden

³⁸ Godrey (1942).

³⁹ Williamson (1908: 1). From his geographical coordinates for the “province of Darge”, Lat. 32N, Long. 99E, it is clear he refers here to Derge. The Tibetan names from Williamson’s informants indicate the rivers they crossed to reach the Mishmi Hills included the Tsangpo (“Singpo”), Yangtse (“Dri”), Salween (“Jiama Nu-Chu”) and probably the Mekong (“Tsai La Chu”).

⁴⁰ See Morshead (1921: 28), also Bailey (1914: 4-5), Bailey (1957: 106) and Bentinck (1913: 107) for various reports on the flood and the refugees.

land they sought, the majority of the settlers returned to Tibet around 1909.⁴¹

The numbers of migrants arriving around the Pemakö region from eastern Tibetan regions such as Chamdo, Dragyab, Gonjo and Derge gradually increased, and they mainly settled in the Chimdro valley and around Metog Dzong.⁴² With their fellow countrymen on the southern side of the mountain range, these Tibetan migrants established extensive trade relations with several groups in the Abor Hills.⁴³ During the same period, the Yang Sang Valley within Pemakö became the centre of Buddhist activities, where Buddhist masters and their disciples wandered through the hills discovering religious treasures and establishing several pilgrimage sites that seasonally attracted larger groups of pilgrims. Following the introduction of Indian administration several of these pilgrimage places fell into neglect because “[n]o Tibetans from across the border come nowadays for worship as they used to do in large numbers in the past”.⁴⁴

However, the number of permanent Tibetan settlers in Pemakö continued to increase. While stationed at Tuting, Hrange noted in the 1950s that, “By enquiry I found that these villages came into being some 46 years ago [...]. Some of the Khambas (and I think most of them) came from Chimdru.”⁴⁵ In 1944, James was told by the Head Lama Pema Yeshe that his father was the one who started the Khampa colony in the Yang Sang Valley. At that time Pema Yeshe was

⁴¹ On these refugees, their plight and their travels, see Bailey (1914: 3), Bailey (1957: 36-7), Williamson (1908: 2) and Bhattacharjee (1983: 32). Although Jampa Junge (1856-1922) upheld the teachings of the Kagyü school, as many other masters of this school, he received teachings from important Nyingma masters and was an accomplished treasure revealer.

⁴² Interview with Sonam Paldan, October 2009.

⁴³ See Furze (1932: 6), who described these Tibetan activities in 1932 as an entirely new phenomenon.

⁴⁴ Hrange (1954A: 5).

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

a small boy. Around 1954 Lama Pema Yeshe died and his position as Head Lama was taken over by his son Sangtapji.⁴⁶ Whereas in 1944, only two permanent Tibetan settlements were reported at Nyereng and Tasigong with 23 houses in total,⁴⁷ in 1956 the Buddhist population, most of them being Khampa, consisted of around 350 people and they had established several villages, small monasteries and nunneries in the valley.⁴⁸

Not everyone coming down the Tsangpo or Yang Sang Valley was attracted merely by the pilgrimage sites. Until the mid-1930s, the kingdom of Powo enjoyed a certain degree of independence from the Central Tibetan administration. It is also said that the 26th Kanam Depa of Powo had a penchant for shady characters and surrounded himself with them, and the region became infamous for its marauding gangs.⁴⁹ The wilderness of Pemakö, and the fact that the southern part was controlled by the British and later Indian authorities, offered a good hideout for criminals, outlaws and tax fugitives as is reported in British and Indian administrative documents.⁵⁰

The last major migration movement into Pemakö was set in motion around 1949/50 by China's invasion in Tibet. In the beginning of this exodus, the majority of these refugees came from eastern Tibetan regions hoping to return to their homes after some time, thus they established temporary settlements around Metog Dzong and the Chimdro Valley. The situation in Chimdro must have been tense at that time and most likely due to a constant influx of new refugees, in January 1959 a "land dispute between the Rekho Khambas and the Riwoche

⁴⁶ See James (1948: 3) and Hranga (1954: 25).

⁴⁷ See Williams (1944: 16).

⁴⁸ See SS. Pandit (1956).

⁴⁹ On the History of Powo see Schwieger (2002) and Lazcano (2005).

⁵⁰ For examples, see James (1948: 3), James (1949: 41) and Hranga (1954: 23).

Khambas caused [a] massacre of the former by the latter”.⁵¹ Therefore more and more refugees desired to move further south into the Yang Sang Valley where not only the main pilgrimage sites are located, but also land was available. However, after the establishment of the Indian administrative post in Tuting in 1953, entering Indian Territory became more difficult and people crossing the border usually had to ask for permission. But not only Tibetan refugees have asked for permission to settle permanently on the Indian side.⁵² A number of Pemakö residents from north of the McMahon Line went down on permits to visit the holy places and their relatives, and in fear they might settle in Indian Territory, the Dzongpön of Pemakö requested the Indian administration not to allow any of his people to settle south of the border without his approval, to which the Indian officer agreed, since the Mishmi and Abor groups already had the feeling that Tibetans were encroaching on their land.⁵³

The escape of the Dalai Lama in 1959 was a final signal for thousands to follow him into exile, and many from the nearby region of Kongpo and Pome also set out to Pemakö in the hope of reaching an earthly paradise with an unending supply of food, rivers of milk, and where people didn't have to work to make a living. Often these refugees encountered Chinese troops on their way and many lost their lives or were captured and brought back. But those who were able to escape were welcomed by the local Buddhist population who provided them with food and shelter, as did the Indian Army.⁵⁴ On the eve of the Sino-Indian War in 1962, many of the Memba and Tibetan families who had been settled in the Tsangpo Valley above the McMahon Line for generations,

⁵¹ Jayal (1959: 6).

⁵² See Jayal (1957: 6ff) and Jayal (1959: 6), who cites only a few cases, while it is quite likely the de facto number of illegal immigrants was much higher.

⁵³ See Jayal (1957: 8).

⁵⁴ See Tibet Oral History Project, Interview #92 with Cho Lhamo, 2006.

abandoned their homes and also sought refuge in India. This flow of refugees was finally stopped by the outbreak of the war in October 1962. From the mid-1950s until January 1962, the Indian administration registered 7004 refugees entering the Siang Frontier Division via Mechukha, Manigong and Tuting/Geling.⁵⁵ Most of them were eventually evacuated to different Tibetan settlements around India, but around 1000 were allowed to settle temporarily in Tuting. The reason for all those who decided to settle permanently in southern Pemakö was the sacredness of the land, as I was informed.

Ever since then, Tuting became the biggest settlement for southern Pemakö's Buddhist population. Nevertheless the main areas of distribution, with the Memba settling in the Tsangpo Valley between Tuting and Geling, and the Khampa/Tibetan in the Yang Sang Valley, seem to remain the same up to the present day.

Exonyms and Autonyms for Pemakö's Buddhist Population

As evident from the previous sections, the Buddhist population of Pemakö is a varied mixture of peoples whose ancestors have arrived at different times, from many places and for a wide variety of reasons. This diversity is not reflected in the present-day official classification. As a starting point for my research, I asked my local interview partners from the region about the differences between Memba and Khampa and at first they almost all responded in the same manner: "There are no differences. We have the same tradition. We are all Buddhists, only the tribe is different and the language." This statement leads to the assumption that they are more or less the same people and that classification as Memba or Khampa based on different language and 'tribe' is not really a matter for their concern. However, in reality this classification is actually rejected by many of them. Why?

⁵⁵ See SoTR 1962.

To address the above cited statement, it can be noted that Buddhism has for centuries served as a standard marker for Tibetan plateau and high Himalayan peoples when defining themselves against outside groups.⁵⁶ This is the case for Pemakö's Buddhist peoples, for whom Buddhist identity functions as both an internally unifying reference and the central reference of differentiation towards non-Buddhist neighbours.⁵⁷ Of more specific importance in the above cited statement is the point that tribe and language are different. "The sense of common religion", as Ramble has observed of high Himalayan identities, "was radically opposed to the very strong divisive tendencies of regionalism."⁵⁸ This tendency of regionalism or territorial affiliation is a major aspect of identity formation among Tibetan and Himalayan societies, and accordingly terms designating the place of residence and/or origins most frequently become the name of groups. Sometimes place-based autonyms also derive from particular characteristics of places. For instance, the Memba of Mechukha Valley in north-central Arunachal Pradesh call themselves Nānag, meaning "inhabitants of the holy place", since they believe their valley to be the hidden land of Pachakshiri.

As for the use of exonyms for local populations, this has often been determined by the contact history of outside agents with a given region, and by the amount of specialist knowledge that these agents possessed. Since most of the early European explorer-administrators entered Pemakö from the south, and thus had their initial contacts with the non-Buddhist groups in that zone, they got to know of Buddhist groups further north under the locally used exonym Memba. George Dunbar, for example, adopted the name Memba by which his Tangam informants referred to their Buddhist

⁵⁶ Ramble (1997: 380).

⁵⁷ See for example Huber (1999), Ramble (1997), and Shneiderman (2006).

⁵⁸ Ramble (1997: 383).

neighbours.⁵⁹ Dunbar was told by his Tibetan interpreter that Tibetan-speakers call these people “Dukpa” (i.e. “Drukpa”),⁶⁰ referring to the land of Bhutan (Drukyül), its inhabitants (Drukpa), and its dominant Buddhist school the Drukpa Kagyü. He nevertheless translated it as “savages” and expressed doubts about whether it was a confusion with the word “Drokpa” (i.e. Tib. *‘brog pa*), “as this term seems to be properly applied to the Nomads of Southern Tibet”.⁶¹ We can contrast Dunbar with Frederick Marshman Bailey, himself an accomplished Tibetan speaker and widely travelled throughout the eastern Himalaya and Tibet; he clearly distinguished between these two terms and commented on Pemakö’s population and their language thus:

The descendants of these first immigrants now form to a large extent the population of the valley; they are called Mönbas or Drukpas indiscriminately: the former name means an inhabitant of the Tibetan district of Mönnyul near Tawang, and the latter means Bhutanese. They still speak a dialect of Mönba, the language spoken near Tawang.⁶²

Although Bailey connected the distinction of these two groups to their places of origin, he did not take this into account and decided to designate them all as Memba because of their spoken dialect:

They appeared however to be in the process of destroying the thin barrier which divided Drukpas from Mönbas. They dressed in similar clothes, talked in the same language [...]. Their racial origins were

⁵⁹ See Dunbar (1916: 93).

⁶⁰ The common transcription for the Tibetan word *‘brug* is Druk, sometimes also Drug. Drukyül (Tib. *‘brug yul*), Drukpa (Tib. *‘brug pa*), Drukpa Kagyü (Tib. *‘brug pa bka’ brgyud*).

⁶¹ Dunbar (1916: 102), who also noted in passing that it might refer to the Drukpa Kagyü School.

⁶² Bailey (1914: 2).

becoming obliterated by their need to distinguish themselves from the Lopas, who lived in isolated villages throughout the same country.”⁶³

As opposed to Bailey’s supposition here, one can counter that if indeed dress style and language differences disappeared, it was more likely to be the result of an internal assimilation process among these various migrants, rather than “their need to distinguish themselves” from their Lopa neighbours. Buddhist identity already fulfilled this later requirement, and all Buddhist migrants in Pemakö seem to have developed a common Buddhist identity vis-à-vis their non-Buddhist neighbours. In contradiction to this common Buddhist identity stands the label Memba, a local phonetic variant of the generic term Mönpa, meaning “one from Mön”.⁶⁴

The term Mön/Mönpa has a long and complex attested history of use as an exonym,⁶⁵ and quite possibly an equally long period of use as an autonym. In the context of Pemakö identities within a frontier zone between high plateau societies and those in Himalayan hill tracts to the south, its connotations within a more widely-spread (and represented, at least in elite texts) pre-modern Tibetan Buddhist cosmology and geography are important. From this traditional perspective, the frontier region is a zone within which the ‘civilised’ Buddhist world meets and mixes with the ‘uncivilised’ non-Buddhist world. Everything beyond this frontier zone remains completely beyond civilisation, as benighted, barbaric and wild to varying degrees.⁶⁶ Even though in the course of their histories, many Himalayan populations designated as Mönpa (as both exonym and autonym) were influenced by and converted to Buddhism, a

⁶³ Bailey (1957: 74).

⁶⁴ Variant forms of Mönpa in use include Memba, Menba, Moinba, Mönba, Mumpa, and Mempa.

⁶⁵ Aris (1979: xvi), Aris (1980), Pommaret (1999), and Bellezza (2008: 21f).

⁶⁶ See Huber (2011: 259-261).

lasting stigma of being ‘not yet completely civilised’ remains associated with the name when it is used by or reflected upon by outsiders. Its use can connote condescending attitudes towards these groups, and ranges them potentially close to various non-Buddhist Himalayan populations collectively labelled as Lopa which most emphatically means “barbarians”.⁶⁷ These discourses have clearly remained a sensitive point among Buddhist peoples of Pemakö.

Practising Buddhist religion and having a classical script, the Bhutanese migrants in Pemakö perceived themselves as a proper ‘civilised’ society, and it is thus quite unlikely that they would have accepted Memba as their autonym. My local informants noted that “The Adi used Memba for all the Buddhist people and the Indian Government had better connection with the Adi and so they adopted the name Mönpa.”⁶⁸ Another informant clearly stated that, “We call the tribal Lopa. It carries the notion of lower caste. So the Lopa call us Mönpa. It’s also a little bit degrading.”⁶⁹ Thus, concerning Bailey’s adoption of the name Memba for classifying Pemakö peoples, there is good reason to believe he borrowed it from some of their non-Buddhist neighbours.

The current Tshangla-speaking⁷⁰ population of southern Pemakö explicitly use the autonyms Drukpa and Tshangla as terms of self-reference, the first relating to the place of their

⁶⁷ For some further elaborations on the term Lopa, see Huber (2011), Huber (1999: 179-81), and Huber (1997: 226).

⁶⁸ Interview with Tashi Lama, October 2009. The term Adi comprises a large number of Arunachal’s non-Buddhist groups formerly referred to as Abor.

⁶⁹ Interview with Wangden Lama, October 2009.

⁷⁰ Interview with Tashi Lama, October 2009. Tshangla is also known as Sharchopkha. Linguistic studies support this clear distinction. See Andvik (2010: 6f) who says that the languages spoken in Pemakö and eastern Bhutan are almost identical with only very few differences, and that it differs from the language spoken in the Tawang arera, which is designated as Northern Monpa by Andvik (2010) or Dakpa by van Driem (2001).

origin and the second to the language they speak. They distance themselves from the name Memba/Mönpa, not only due to its derogative connotations, but also because it clearly designates for them inhabitants of the Tawang Corridor region, as opposed to Bhutanese. The same objections were voiced by my informants in the Mechukha Valley to the west of Pemakö, whom the Indian state labels as Memba. Thus, whatever else it may mean to outsiders, Memba/Mönpa is locally viewed as a distinct referent of residence or origins, and one that is undoubtedly Buddhist. Another autonym now used by sections of the Tshangla-speaking population is Lama. This term is actually an exonym ascribed to them by their non-Buddhist neighbours. But since it carries no negative connotations, many migrants adopted Lama as their autonym following their arrival in Indian-controlled areas of Pemakö during the late 1950s and early 1960s, and subsequently insisted that they be registered under this name as an ST category.⁷¹

A certain group of Pemakö's population call themselves Metog-Tshangla. The combination of the place of residence and a spoken language indicates the mixed parentage of the people using this autonym, one parent descending from the earlier Tshangla-speaking migrants and the other from the later arriving Tibetan-speaking eastern Tibetan migrants who settled in the area around Metog Dzong, and thus both languages are native to them.

The official ST category Khampa (i.e. Khamba) has been applied by the Indian administration to all Buddhist peoples in Pemakö whom they could not simply identify as Memba. During an earlier period of British rule, these people were referred to as Tibetans, regardless of their regional origins. However, due to the growing number of migrants arriving from eastern Tibet, the term Khampa became increasingly used in official reports and documents, although it was not consistently applied only to those who de facto came from

⁷¹ Interview with Tashi Lama and Tenzin Drolma, October 2009.

that region. Thus, as an ST category Khampa came to subsume all Tibetan-speaking people regardless of their region of origin on the Tibetan plateau.⁷² Even though local Tibetan-speaking families might have been settled in Pemakö for several generations, since the majority arrived in Upper Siang District between 1959 and 1962, the label Khampa is associated with Tibetan refugee status. Strategically, many families have opted to officially register some of their members as ST Khampa and other members as Tibetan refugees. This decision-making also seems to hold true for some Tshangla-speaking families. Having both ST and refugee status within the one family gives access to advantageous ST policies and benefits from the Indian state, but also benefits provided by the Tibetan Government in Exile.

The last term of self-reference to be mentioned here is the term Pemaköpa, literally “one from Pemakö”. This autonym refers to current place of residence. Most of Pemakö’s Buddhist peoples with a record of several generations of settlement there, regardless of ancestral origins and language, use this general term of self-identification vis-à-vis Tibetan groups from other regions, and to the same effect it is applied to them by Tibetans.

Although the present study primarily focusses upon the Buddhist population of southern Pemakö under the Upper Siang District within Indian-administered territory, a few remarks should be made on the classification of those settled in the northern part of Pemakö within Chinese-administered territory. This region is known today as Motou County, and located in the Nyingtri Prefecture of the present-day Tibet Autonomous Region. During the first census of the People’s Republic of China in 1953/54, “[...] officials tabulated over four hundred different responses to the question of minzu [ethnic group] identity”, and of these later only fifty-five, plus

⁷² Jayal (1957: 6) designates all those as Khampa who “migrated here [Yang Sang Valley] a century ago from the Tibetan provinces of Po, Kombo, Zayul, and Kham Nangche, and also from Bhutan”.

the Han majority group, were officially recognised.⁷³ These minzu groups were investigated by Chinese anthropologists and linguists working for China's "Ethnic Classification Project", resulting in a series of fifty-six official descriptive volumes. The volume on the so-called Menba ethnic group describes peoples inhabiting both the Cuona (Tsona) County north of Tawang, and the Motuo (Metog) County of southern Kongpo. It identifies the origins of the Metog Menbas to be in both eastern Bhutan and the Tawang area, where they are known as Drukpa. The authors of the study explain that after migrating and settling in Pemakö these people have called themselves Menba, and they were therefore classified by the Chinese state as the Menba ethnic minority, or Menbazu in modern Chinese.⁷⁴ As mentioned above, it is certainly unlikely that Menba/Mönpa was really ever used as a self-conscious autonym by anyone residing in Pemakö. It seems more likely that Chinese researchers have adopted the exonym used by neighbouring Tibetans, just as they did with the Tibetan term Lopa to provide a blanket exonym as an official minzu label for all the non-Buddhist peoples of the frontier region.⁷⁵ Tibetan-speakers in Pemakö whom the Indian administration classifies as Khampa, have all been officially subsumed under the general minzu label Zangzu or "Tibetan" by the Chinese state.

Conclusion

The practice of states imposing their own category identities or exonyms upon subject populations with complex ethno-linguistic pedigrees and self-perceptions is a widely known phenomenon. This study of Pemakö provides yet another example of its dynamics. Official category identities tend to erase or distort history, and this is perhaps one of their

⁷³ Mullaney (2010: 2).

⁷⁴ See Menbazu shehui lishi diaocha (1987-I): 20).

⁷⁵ However, to avoid the well-known derogatory pre-modern meaning of Lopa (spelled *klo pa*), the official spelling of the minzu label in Tibetan script was altered to *lho pa* which simply means "southerner".

advantages for new states seeking to forge novel national identities which transcend messy and conflicted (and often contested) pasts. On the other hand, in places like Pemakö, official category identities carry negative connotations as well as contradicting the popular identification practice of place-based ancestry. To date, local resentment and rejection of ascribed labels have been dealt with creatively by Pemakö peoples, including demands to be scheduled under more positively connoted ST labels such as Lama, or the adoption of double identities as members of both a Scheduled Tribe and the Tibetan refugee population.

Glossary of Tibetan Names and Their Spellings

Chamdo	chab mdo
Chimdro, Chimdru	spyang 'brug
Chöje Lingpa	chos rje gling pa
Druk, Drug	'brug
Drukpa	'brug pa
Drukpa Kagyü	'brug pa bka' brgyud
Drukyül	'brug yul
Derge	sde dge
Deyang La	bde yang la
Doshung La	rdo gzhong la
Dragyab	bra g.yab
Dri	'bri
Drokpa	'brog pa
Dzongpön	rdzong dpon
Gampopa Orgyan Drodül Lingpa	sgam po pa o rgyan 'gro 'dul gling pa
Geling	dge gling, dge ring
Gelugpa	dge lugs pa
Gonjo	go 'jo
Gyala Pelri	rgya la dpal ri, skya lha pad ri

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Jampa Jungne	ri bo che rje drung byams pa'i 'byung gnas
Jiama Nu-Chu (Gyamo Ngül Chu)	rgyal mo rngul chu
Kagyü	bka' brgyud
Kanam Depa Nyima Gyalpo	ka gnam sde pa nyi ma rgyal po
Kangri Karpo	gangs ri dkar po
Kham	kham
Khampa	kham pa
Kongpo	kong po
Kunzang Wöser Garwang Chimed Dorje	kun bzang 'od zer gar dbang 'chi med rdo rje
Lopa	klo pa
Manigong	ma ni sgang
Mechukha	sman chu kha
Metog Dzong, Motou	me tog rdzong
Mön, Mon	mon
Mönpa, Memba, Menba	mon pa
Mönyul	mon yul
Namche Bawar	gnam lcags 'bar ba
Nänag	gnas nang
Nyingma	rnying ma
Nyingtri	nying khri
Pachakshiri	sbas chags shing ri
Paro	spa gro
Pemakö, Pemako	pad ma bkod
Pemaköchung	pad ma bkod chung
Phe	phad
Po	spo
Poba	spo ba
Pome	spo smad

Powo	spo bo
Poyül	spo yul
Rinchenpung	rin chen spung
Rigdzin Jatsön Nyingpo	rig 'dzin 'ja' tshon snying po
Riwoche	ri bo che
Tamnyen La	gtam snyan la
Tashigang	bkra shis sgang
Tawang	rta dbang
Tertön	gter ston
Tongkyuk Dzong	stong 'jug rdzong, stong mjug rdzong
Trongsa Penlop	krong sar dpon slob
Tsangpo	gtsang po
Tsai La Chu	rdza chu
Tuting	tu lding
Yang Sang	yang gsang
Yidong	yid 'ong

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