

**ETHNOHISTORIC NOTES ON THE ANCIENT TIBETAN  
KINGDOM OF sPO BO AND ITS INFLUENCE ON  
THE EASTERN HIMALAYAS<sup>1</sup>**

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Translated from Spanish by Rita Granda

*...In late 1910 the Pome people killed a senior Chinese official. The Chinese replied with a punitive expedition which provoked open rebellion. In early 1911 Chung Ying, who had been in command of the flying column which entered Lhasa in February 1910, was sent to Pome with some 300 men in the hope that he could pacify the district. He met with scant success, and was soon recalled and replaced by Lo Ch'ing-ch'i, the Amban Lien Yü's private secretary, who had recently returned from an abortive mission to Darjeeling to persuade the Dalai Lama to come home to Tibet. Lo Ch'ing-ch'i had with him perhaps 1000 of the best troops in the Lhasa garrison, and he was soon reinforced by a contingent of Chao Erh-feng's men of the Marches, and by most of the garrison in Zayul. This force achieved some initial successes, but it was quite unable to subdue the Pome tribesmen, who took to guerrilla campaigning in the hills. The Chinese supply and medical services were not up to the strain imposed upon them. Lo Ch'ing-ch'i's army diminished rapidly in size and its morale deteriorated drastically. When Amban Lien Yü recalled the survivors<sup>2</sup> back to Lhasa in late 1911 they were already on the verge of mutiny. As soon as they learned of the Revolution, which had just broken out in China they refused any longer to obey their officers and they put their commander to death.*

*The Chinese were in control of Pome and Zayul for a very short time. By late 1911 the Pome venture had ended in disaster...*

*(Lamb, Alastair. The McMahon Line. A Study in the Relations Between India, China and Tibet, 1904 to 1914. Volume II: Hardinge, McMahon and the Simla Conference. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966. : 277).*

### Introduction

**A**t the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the kingdom of sPo bo, also referred to as sPo yul<sup>3</sup>, was one of the least known areas of the many kingdoms and semi-independent principalities in Tibet's traditional political environment. The inhabitants of sPo bo had a reputation of being such fearful savages that most intruders, who might have tried to approach their land, stayed away<sup>4</sup>.

sPo yul, or "country of sPo ", is located in the eastern Himalayas, northeast of the bend in the great gTsang po River<sup>5</sup>. Unlike most of Tibet, this area is humid and fertile and it is covered in dense forests and steep gorges. Wheat, barley, peaches and nuts grow in abundance. sPo yul is also known for its production of honey, spices, bamboo and medicinal plants. The area is home to various Tibeto-Burmese ethnic groups known as the

<sup>1</sup> I am immensely grateful to Françoise Pommaret as this article would not have come to light without her wholehearted support, and valuable suggestions and corrections. Since I am not a Tibetan specialist, and many toponyms or names in this relatively unknown region do not have transliteration, I have left some names as they appear in the different Western sources.

<sup>2</sup> Over a third of the original contingent was killed by the sPo ba. Lamb, 1966 : 372.

<sup>3</sup> According to Teichman, sPo yul signifies "Land of Incense". Teichman probably confuses sPo with spos which indeed means incense. Teichman, 1922 : 31, n. 1. The current administrative body for this area is referred to as Bomi or Bome in Chinese terminology.

<sup>4</sup> David-Neel, 1929: 191, 302-305; Kingdon-Ward, F., 1937: 190; Kaulback, 1938: 95-96; Hanbury-Tracy, 1938: 89, 121; Bailey, 1945: 108, 129; 1957: 154, 157.

<sup>5</sup> The gTsang po River crosses all of southern Tibet, then flows into Arunachal in India, where it is called the Siang River, and finally becomes the Brahmaputra.

Mon pa and the Klo pa<sup>6</sup>. In addition to these two, the main ethnic group is made up of local Tibetans known as the sPo ba, who appear to be the result of an ethnic fusion between Tibetans and different tribes from east of the Himalayas.

sPo yul is divided into two different areas: sPo stod, or upper sPo, and sPo smad, or lower sPo. The centre of the sPo bo kingdom was in the sPo smad area, although sPo bo also controlled sPo stod and the Padma bkod<sup>7</sup> district. At times, sPo bo's influence was felt even further than the great Himalayan mountain range, and the kingdom received tribute from the Klo pa (mainly Adi) and Mon pa tribes from the southern part of the frontier. sPo bo enjoyed a great level of autonomy in its relationship with the government in Lhasa; so much so that the region could almost be considered independent.

### Origins of the sPo ba Monarchy

The pride and love of independence of the people of sPo bo is ancient; their area has been very important in Tibet's history from time immemorial. According to some traditions, the male forest monkey and the female rock demon who gave rise to all Tibetans, first met in sPo yul<sup>8</sup>. Also, the most secret doctrine, or yang gsang, regarding the origin of the first king of Tibet claims that Nya khri btsan po was born in sPo bo and that his mother was a sPo ba woman named Mos btsun<sup>9</sup>. One author has even speculated that the Tibetan word for Tibet, Bod, may have derived from sPo, which would place the original Tibetan core in sPo ba country<sup>10</sup>.

The sPo ba monarchy traces its ancestors to the ancient dynasty of the first Tibetan kings of the Yar lung Valley. The sPo yul kings claim to be descendants of King Dri gum who, according to legend, was the first Tibetan sky-king to be buried in a royal tomb; his body did not ascend to the heavens because the cord linking him to the sky had accidentally been cut.

Dri gum was assassinated by a subject named Lon gnam who then usurped power. After Dri gum's death, his three sons fled to the nearby districts of Nyang, Kong po, and sPo yul. But Lo ngnam was later killed by Ru lag skyes, the son of the queen and the god Yar lha sham po. To restore the royal lineage, Rula kye then made Prince Bya khri return to Yarlung, where he was crowned as sPu de gung rgyal<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> The original Tibetan term, Klo pa, means "barbarian". Currently, the Chinese prefer to call these groups Lhoba, which is a more politically correct term that means "Southern". The main Klo pa ethnic groups in the sPo yul-Padma bkod area were the Abor, now known as the Adi, and the Mishmi. The Mon pa are now called Moinba in official Chinese terminology.

<sup>7</sup> Kaulbak, 1938: 121.

<sup>8</sup> Stein, 1972: 28.

<sup>9</sup> Norbu, 1995: 16. Samten Karmay also mentions this same origin. Karmay, 1998: 290, 294.

<sup>10</sup> Kingdon-Ward, F., 1937: 190; Kindgon-Ward, 2001: 238.

<sup>11</sup> This version was taken from R. A. Stein. Stein, 1972: 49. Dudjom Rinpoche, the deceased superior of the rNying ma order who descended from the royal sPo ba lineage, also refers to this version of the legend. Chatri (Bya khri), Dri gum's middle son, fled to Ka gnam and took possession of Puworong (sPo yul), where he built a residence. Dudjom Rinpoche, 1991. Section One: 972, Section Two: 99. Shakabpa also cited Chatri as successor, though without connecting him to sPo yul. Shakabpa, 1984: 23-24.

According to Phur bu rdo rje in the *sPo bo 'i lo rgyus*, which is the only known modern publication with a genealogy, though incomplete, of the royal sPo ba dynasty<sup>12</sup>, Bya khri had been in sPo yul for over ten years and left three sons there when he returned to Yar lung as the new king of Tibet. One of his son's, dBra, had three children, and four lineages arose from the eldest son, dBra dkar dvags ma'i mgar. From these four, the lineage of lHa rje dpal byams kyi chos brgyud is identified with the ancestors of the Ka gnam sde pa<sup>13</sup>.

Other versions, taken from historical documents in Dunhuang and an inscription from the beginning of the 9<sup>th</sup> century in Kong po, only mention two sons: Sha khri and Nya khri<sup>14</sup>. According to Rgya-mtsho Don-grub, Nya khri was Prince dKar po of Kong po, a position which would later be known as the Ka gnam sde pa or Ka gnam rgyal po<sup>15</sup>, the King of Ka gnam<sup>16</sup>.

The descendants of Nya khri's royal lineage continued to govern Kong po (and sPo yul) while Sha khri's parallel branch established itself in the Yar lung Valley. Both areas fell under the direct control of Yar lung during the reign of gNam ri slon mtshan (6<sup>th</sup> century), the father of the great Srong btsan sgam po. But the Kong po locals rebelled when Srong btsan was just a child and he had to wait until his term of office before they were again included under Yar lung's command. Also, according to a Kong po inscription, the princes of Kong po maintained certain rights under the governments of Srong btsan sgam po's descendants<sup>17</sup>: The Emperor even took it upon himself to guarantee that only members of Prince dKar po's clan could succeed the prince as head of the dynasty. If a direct descendant could not be found, the successor could be one of the Emperor's close relatives or someone chosen by him. The servants and land belonging to the prince, as well as collected taxes and services, continued to be respected. And when it was time to offer tribute to the Emperor, payment could be made with different products: barley, rice, or grapes. During the reigns of Kri srong lde btsan (742-797) and Kri lde Srong btsan (c. 804-815), Kong po received the special status of rgyal phran, or feudal principality, and it was not included in the geographic and military division of the country. These privileges were retained because of common ancestral origins with the btsan po, or emperor<sup>18</sup>.

As previously noted, Don-grub states that Prince Kar po of Kong po would later be known as the Ka gnam sde pa but he does not offer any

<sup>12</sup> 1988. *sPo bo 'i lo-rgyus*. Lhasa: Bod-ljongs mi-dmangs dpe-skrun-khang. A good part of the information contained in this History of sPo bo, written in Tibetan, has been made accessible to the western reader by Peter Schwiieger along with other valuable notes. Schwiieger, 2002. I would like to thank Toni Huber for pointing out this article to me, and for giving me a copy.

<sup>13</sup> Schwiieger, 2002: 217.

<sup>14</sup> Norbu includes both versions: the one that places Chatri as successor, or sPu de gung rgyal. Norbu, 1995: xix, 17, 43; and the version taken from the *Red Annals* of Tsalpa Yung Dorje, which gives the title to Nyatri (Nya khri). Norbu, 1995: xix.

<sup>15</sup> The Tibetan word for king is rgyal po and sde pa refers to the leader of a community but they often refer to the same concept.

<sup>16</sup> Don-grub, 1989: 84. Gyurme Dorje also cites Jatri (Nya khri) as the ancestor of the Ka gnam monarchs. Dorje, 1996: 476.

<sup>17</sup> These rights only refer to Prince dKar po of Kong po; Ka gnam sde pa is never cited in the inscription.

<sup>18</sup> Don-grub, 1989: 84; Karmay, 1998: 213, 214; Ramble, 1999: 16.

information to base this statement on, nor does he explain how or why this transition occurred. As a result of this change, all of the successive sPo ba kings considered themselves as descendants of the Emperor Dri gum. Their privileges were preserved over time and the rulers of sPo yul did not become subject to the direct control of the subsequent central government in Lhasa. Plus, they would hold the title of Ka gnam rgyal po, or King of Ka gnam.

Phur bu rdo rje's version may be closer to reality as it is based on known records from sPo yul, such as the *rGyal rabs gsal ba 'i me long* and other oral and written sources. According to Phur bu rdo rje's version, Bya khri was the first to install himself in sPo yul, and his descendants continued the royal lineage, independent of whoever was governing in Kong po.

In either case, nothing is known regarding the situation in sPo yul and the governance of the area during the many generations after the establishment of the lHa rje dpal byams kyi chos brgyud lineage as the royal sPo ba lineage. During the 22<sup>nd</sup> generation, Phur bu rdo rje refers to sGom byon dpal gyi rtse mo, who was born towards the second half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century<sup>19</sup>. Of his four sons, Phur bu 'bum became the leader of the country while the other three dedicated themselves to religion. One of them, mGar dam pa, founded the bka' brgyud pa Monastery of Phu lung Chos lding Rin chen spungs during the middle of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. His successor the abbot Darma 'bum and the lama 'Phags pa helped strengthen control and extended the territories of the sPo ba government. As a result, during the reign of Phur bu 'bum's son, dpon rgan A nyag, the country was united and the area for collecting taxes was expanded.

### **The Emergence and Consolidation of the Institution of the Ka gnam sde pa**

The son of dpon rgan A nyag, dPa' rstal blo gros bzang po, also known as dkon gnyer sPo spo, constructed a palace in Ka gnam, and was the first to be known by the title Ka gnam sde pa or Ka gnam rgyal po. The entire kingdom was united under his control and his government collected tribute from all of sPo bo as well as Kong po and lHo rong<sup>20</sup>, and some parts of Khams. The *sPo bo 'i lo rgyus* indicates that his control over all of these lands existed to benefit Buddhist teachings<sup>21</sup>. As the territory expanded, administration was reorganized into three units: Shar, dKor and Thog. In Ka gnam, the sPo ba king constructed the fortification Ka gnam Srin po rDzong to defend himself from his enemies.

There is no noteworthy information on the reigns of the next three rgyal po but we do know that the 5<sup>th</sup> Ka gnam sde pa, mGyar khyung 'bum, governed the country during the second half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. It was during this period that the rnying ma pa gter ston<sup>22</sup> Sangs rgyas gling pa

<sup>19</sup> Phur bu rdo rje claims that sGom byon dpal gyi rtse mo was born in 1180 but Schwieger claims that another source gives this date for the birth of one of his children. Schwieger, 2002: 218.

<sup>20</sup> lHo rong is located in Chab mdo, Khams.

<sup>21</sup> Schwieger, 2002: 219.

<sup>22</sup> The gter ston or "treasure finders" were religious persons dedicated to finding "hidden treasures" (gter), generally sacred texts that were written by saints during times of

(1340-1396) discovered various hidden treasures in Tsa ri, including the seal called Phyag tham rnam bcu dbang ldan that would later be used as the Ka gnam sde pa's seal. Sangs rgyas gling pa also found a gter on the massif of the gNam lcags ' bar ba (7750 m.) in northern Padma bkod<sup>23</sup>. The sPo ba king became the protector of the gter ma teachings, as mentioned in the prophecies, and Sangs rgyas gling pa offered parts of his found treasures as sacred objects for the king's enthronement.

After listening to the opinion of the leaders from the three sections of the country, Gam, Ba li and Ka gnam, the Ka gnam sde pa chose the youngest of his nine children, dBang ldan bsod nams grags pa, to occupy the throne<sup>24</sup>.

Under the reign of the 6<sup>th</sup> Ka gnam sde pa, seven children from the leading families were sent to study in the province of dBus in central Tibet where the dGe lugs branch of Tibetan Buddhism had started to gain strength. The influence of the Karma Bka' brgyud branch grew during the periods that Tibet was under the control of the Sa skya and Phag mo grub pa (13<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> centuries), and extended to Kong po and southeastern Tibet, where it is recorded together with the rNying ma branch. The first disagreements between the different Buddhist schools began to arise during the reign of the 6<sup>th</sup> Ka gnam rgyal po. Though the three schools were spread across three parts of the country, the different regions continued to be united under the figure of the Ka gnam sde pa.

In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the famous saint Thang stong rgyal po (1385-1464?)<sup>25</sup>, visited sPo bo and the king himself, the 7<sup>th</sup> Ka gnam sde pa dPon chen Ga ris, became a follower and took a wife based on his advice. By the middle of the century, the dGe lugs pa reached sPo stod, and established a monastic state called Chu mdo<sup>26</sup>. The Chos rDzong Monastery and the bKra shis chos gling Monastery in Sum 'dzom arose around 1464<sup>27</sup>. After the rule of three undocumented rgyal po, the Ka gnam and the Yid 'ong Monasteries were established in sPo smad during the reign of the 11<sup>th</sup> rgyal po, bSod nams Odzer. From then on, tensions between the leaders of the three parts of the country, sPo stod, sPo smad and sPo bar<sup>28</sup>, increased due to the dominance of a different religious school in each area.

After the 11<sup>th</sup> Ka gnam sde pa, the trail of successors is again lost until the Qosot Mongols invaded Tibet in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The Mongols, who supported the dGe lugs School, destroyed many bon po and bka' brgyud pa

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persecution or religious decay, as a means of ensuring their survival. Padmasambhava was the most important of these gter-generating saints, at least in the rNying ma pa tradition.

<sup>23</sup> Schwieger, 2002: 220; Dorje, 1996: 297.

<sup>24</sup> Though it is not clear if these regions correspond to the previously cited Shar, dKor and Thog, we can deduce from this fact that since at least the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the sPo ba government relied on a council of leaders who acted as ministers to the Ka gnam sde pa.

<sup>25</sup> Thang stong rgyal po is known for, amongst other things, building bridges made of iron chains in Tibet and Bhutan, and for opening the route to the Klo pa territory in Kong po. He was a great inventor and has been called the "Tibetan Leonardo da Vinci". Khalen, 1993; Stein, 1972: 79; Ramble, 1997: 199-200.

<sup>26</sup> This was one of the ten monasteries affiliated with the Sera byes College which was part of the great Sera monastic complex. Tibetan Buddhist Resource Center (TBRC), Resource Code: G2518.

<sup>27</sup> Gruschke, 2004: 129.

<sup>28</sup> sPo bar means middle sPo, though the exact location is not clear as most modern references only divide the country into upper sPo (sPo stod) and lower sPo (sPo smad).

monasteries in 1640. Since the Ka gnam sde pa at the time was the protector of the bKa' brgyud School<sup>29</sup>, a violent battle was triggered in which the sPo ba suffered the most. After defeating the sPo ba, the Mongols burnt Ka gnam Srin po rDzong, the palace erected in the capital by the first Ka gnam sde pa, and prohibited all the bka' brgyud pa books and doctrines. The 20<sup>th</sup> Ka gnam rgyal po, dPon rgan, decided to flee to the west towards Dvag po and Lho kha. But in the course of his flight, he met a man who offered to settle him on his own land with servants to help build a new palace. The king accepted and the Pad ma dkar po Palace was constructed at a location that was called bShol ba kha. Schwieger feels that this is the same place as Showa or Shöwa, recorded by western visitors as the residence for the Ka gnam sde pa at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This is quite possible, and would explain the capital's transfer from Ka gnam to bShol ba kha<sup>30</sup>.

During the reign of the 5<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama (1617-1682), another important tension with the Lhasa government arose. The Dalai Lama gave the Pag shod Monastery land that belonged to the royal estates of the sPo bo king; the land was inhabited by approximately 800 families, and included their forced labour. Gruschke points to this interference as the possible seed for later conflicts with the Tibetan government, resulting in the invasion and assimilation of the kingdom in the second quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>31</sup>.

A new factor occurring in the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century contributed to an increase in the religious and political importance of sPo bo. At this time, a legend attributed to Padmasambhava circulated around Tibet. It referred to an earthly paradise, located in the forested extensions of the eastern Himalayas that would serve as refuge for Buddhists in times of tragedy and persecution; a sanctuary where the fruit grew in abundance and the harvests were always rich.

### **The Search for the Promised Land, and the Splendour of the sPo ba Dynasty**

Due to inaccessibility, sPo yul and Padma bkod in particular, had already served as places of refuge from civil wars or invasions on many occasions. But now, the remoteness and isolation of the territories were enhanced by the added belief of a great number of Tibetans that in some hidden location of its wild expanses, there was a land of paradise where they could free themselves from material constrictions and dedicate their existence to cultivating dharma in peace. Padma bkod thus became one of Buddhism's sacred Hidden Lands (sbas yul), and probably the most relevant for Tibetans.

Since the sPo ba government controlled the Padma bkod district and the access route to paradise, the many yogis and gter ston who arrived in search of the Hidden Land also searched for protection and support for

<sup>29</sup> Phur bu rdo rje also adds that the Ka gnam sde pa was the patron of the Phu lung Monastery, cited by Schwieger. Schwieger, 2002: 222, n. 27. Nevertheless, Gruschke places the Ka gnam sde pa as a follower of the rNying ma School, without specifying the time period. According to him, this would explain the majority of rNying ma pa monasteries, in the country. Gruschke, 2004: 129.

<sup>30</sup> Schwieger, 2002: 222.

<sup>31</sup> I would like to thank Andreas Gruschke for sending me the information regarding the sPo yul prior to his recent publication. Gruschke, 2004: 126.

their activities by the Ka gnam sde pa. The kingdom thus acquired a strategic and symbolic role in the Tibetan Buddhist world, especially for the followers of the rNying ma and bKa' brgyud schools.

The first pilgrim's guide to the sacred land was written by the rnying ma pa gter ston Rig 'dzin 'Ja 'tshon snying po (1585-1656). According to him, anyone entering Padma bkod would obtain a vajra-body and dissolve within the rays of a rainbow. And, anyone who took just seven steps towards the sacred land was assured rebirth in paradise in their next reincarnation<sup>32</sup>.

'Ja 'tshon snying po entrusted his disciple Rig 'dzin bdul 'dul rdo rje (1615-1672) with the tasks of converting to Buddhism the tribes who inhabited the narrow Brahamaputra gorge, and opening the road to the Promised Land. bDud 'dul rdo rje went to sPo yul, where he found a number of gter and "opened" many Hidden Lands. Having found a description of the route to Padma bkod in the sPo bo Dung chu 'i Lha khang<sup>33</sup>, he headed there with a number of disciples and found an entrance to the Hidden Land. Later, aided by local hunters, he designed a map of the pilgrim's route to Padma bkod.

bDud 'dul rdo rje transferred his teachings to sTag sham Nus ldan rdo rje (1655-?). This rnying ma pa gter ston was known as the "sPo bo gter ston" since his teachings mainly extended over this area and his reincarnation lineage was supported by the rgyal po of Ka gnam. He was also known as the "dGa' ba lung gter ston" because he "opened" the location of sPo bo dGa' ba lung, where he established a monastery. And, it was here that he discovered the *Yi dam dgongs 'dus rta mchog rol pa*, which contained important information on sacred Padma bkod sites and on the differences between their "12 external territories, 40 internal gorges and 16 secret territories". During Nus ldan rdo rje's time period, there were no permanent Tibetan settlements in the area; the Hidden Land only consisted of hunting territories that were populated by the fierce Mishmi and Abor tribes<sup>34</sup>. His visionary guidebooks were the basis for Tibet's subsequent exploration of Padma bkod during the 18<sup>th</sup> century<sup>35</sup>.

The bka' brgyud pa master Rig 'dzin Chos rje gling pa (1682 - ?) received a prophecy from Nus ldan rdo rje designating him as the person to open the door to the Hidden Land. In 1717, in the middle of the invasion of Lhasa by the Dzungar Mongols, he headed for Padma bkod by way of sPo yul, where he passed on his teachings to the Klo pa and converted many of them<sup>36</sup>.

<sup>32</sup> Sardar-Afkhami, 1996:2.

<sup>33</sup> This historic temple in sPo bo is located in Sum 'dzom, and is dated to the period of the first kings. According to one rNying ma pa tradition, it is one of the four yang 'dul temples that Srong btsan sgam po had constructed to "control the area beyond the frontier", and it would have been called Tshang pa rlung gnon. Sum 'dzom is located between the town of Ra 'og and Ka gnam. The temples from this period had great significance for the gter ston of southern Tibet and their search for the sacred lands: specifically in sPo bo mDung chu 'i lha khang, bDud 'dul rdo rje, Chos rje gling pa and rDo rje thogs med discovered many hidden treasures before leaving for the Promised Land of Padma bkod. Ehrhard, 1999: 233, 235-6.

<sup>34</sup> The Abor are currently known as the "Adi".

<sup>35</sup> Ehrhard, 1999: 232, 237; Sardar-Afkhami, 1996: 2.

<sup>36</sup> According to the text that Sardar-Afkhami quotes as Chos-byung [sic]: "Having arrived in Spu bo, he endeavored towards opening the 'door' of the sacred place of Padma-bkod...Bestowing the religious pronouncements onto the people of Klo who were like beasts, he laid down the

Shortly afterwards, he suffered a rheumatic attack and died on the border with Klo<sup>37</sup>. After his death, a few Klo pa hunters insisted that they had seen his body emanating in the depth of the jungle, surrounded by an entourage of female companions. The Chos rje gling pa lineage continued and became the strong point for Buddhism in the Klo pa territories north of Padma bkod<sup>38</sup>.

The story of his trip to Padma bkod was preserved by Sle lung bZhad pa'i rdo rje, one of Chos rje gling pa's disciples and contemporaries. It describes how in 1729 Padma bkod was controlled by the sPo ba king, who exercised his power by denying the central Tibetans the right to enter the place. In Ehrhard's words: "... *Sle-lung bZhad-pa'i rdo-rje entered the inner part of the 'hidden valley' by way of gNam-lcags 'bar-ba and Padma shel-ri. Before he did so, he received a written message from the court of the Kah-gnam sde pa, in which it was stated: 'This Padmo-bkod belongs solely to the people of Kah-gnam; it is not a place that the inhabitants of dBus and gTsang may enter' ...*"<sup>39</sup>.

The strength and power of the sPo ba dynasty grew in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. During this period, the 21<sup>st</sup> Ka gnam sde pa, Nyi ma rgyal po<sup>40</sup>, ordered the construction of the sPo bo khang tshang, or the "sPo bo Monastic College" in the great Sera Monastery on the outskirts of Lhasa. The sPo bo khang tshang had 80 pillars, which sheltered all of the sPo ba monks who arrived in Sera to complete their studies. sPo yul also sent many monks to the Tsha ba khang tshang in the Ganden Monastery and the Gangs ri khang tshang in the Drepung Monastery. The Ka gnam sde pa sent money and offers of tea to these three great dge lugs pa centres. Also, there was a camping area for sPo bo monks in the bka' brgyud pa Monastery of 'Bri gung.

It was during the reign of the 21<sup>st</sup> Ka gnam sde pa that the Tibetan government established the welcoming protocol for the Ka gnam sde pa's visits to Lhasa. When the rgyal po headed for the capital, the first Tibetan delegation greeted him in Kong po rGya mda', the second in Mal gro gung dkar and finally the third welcomed him in lHa gdong sang dkar, near the Holy City. The government of the Dalai Lama thus acknowledged the Ka gnam sde pa's importance and high position, as well as his descent from the first Tibetan kings. The custom whereby the sPo ba monarch would give a certain amount of butter during the sMon lam festival, which was celebrated annually in Lhasa<sup>41</sup>, was also initiated at this time.

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*inclination for religion. The Klo in turn paid homage and reverence according to the customs of the country". Sardar-Afkhami, 1990: 6.*

<sup>37</sup> Klo or Klo yul is the land of the Klo pa, most of which is currently located in Arunachal Pradesh in India.

<sup>38</sup> Sardar-Afkhami, 1996: 6.

<sup>39</sup> Ehrhard, 1999: 237. Note the reference to "the people of Kah-gnam" though the capital was located in bShol ba kha at the time. Bailey also found that as late as 1913, many years after the capital had been moved, official documents continued to be dated in sPo Ka gnam, and officials in the kingdom were known amongst the sPo ba as Ka gnam pa. Bailey, 1957: 89.

<sup>40</sup> The information from the *sPo bo 'i lo-rgyus*, provided by Schwieger, places him as the 21<sup>st</sup> Ka gnam sde pa. But considering that he was the patron of the 5<sup>th</sup> sGam po pa, O rgyan 'Gro 'dul gling pa, who was born in 1757, his reign could not have started much earlier than the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. If we consider that the 20<sup>th</sup> Ka gnam sde pa, dPon rgan, fled from the Qosot Mongols in 1640, this time period appears to be too long to be covered by only two rulers. Schwieger, 2002: 222; Ehrhard, 1999: 235.

<sup>41</sup> Schwieger, 2002: 222.



King Nyi ma also strengthened the relationship between the religious master and the patron that was already common in other parts of the Tibetan world. The specific master was the bka' brgyud pa O rgyan 'Gro 'dul gling pa<sup>42</sup>, who was the 5<sup>th</sup> sGam po pa<sup>43</sup> (1757 - ?). Together with Rig 'dzin rDo rje thogs med, the "Brag gsum gter ston"<sup>44</sup>, (1746-1797), received support from the sPo ba monarchy to carry out activities in sPo yul and in Padma bkod. After his return to sPo yul from central Tibet, O rgyan 'Gro 'dul gling pa removed numerous gter from the temple of Bu chu and attempted to open various hidden sites in Padma bkod, with the patronage of Nyi ma rgyal po. He was also in charge of the renovation of the famous sPo bo Dung chu 'i Lha khang. It is plausible that king Nyi ma may have looked for advantages other than the strictly religious in a master-patron relationship, especially if we consider that sGam po pa was a specialist in the rituals for repelling military invasion<sup>45</sup>.

During the time of Nyi ma rgyal po, the rnying ma pa monastery of Brag rtsa ri khrod, where the sacred writings of the *Kangyur* were sculpted in stone, was constructed. This *Kangyur* was named *bShol ba khri ra* and it is the only one in this style in all of Tibet. The king was also the patron of the rDo dung, rBa kha, and Yid 'ong Monasteries. During his reign, the sPo bo territory was again expanded, bringing the regions of sPo lung, Mon tsho khag lnga (or the "five lakes of Mon") and Pyan brug under sPo bo control.

According to the *sPo bo 'i lo rgyus*, the Ka gnam sde pa Nyi ma was a wise and just king, who worked for the benefit of the country and his religion. He ordered convicted criminals to redeem their actions by doing works to benefit the people, such as restoring monasteries, constructing bridges over rivers, cleaning and renovating roads, and constructing irrigation canals. Royal taxes were collected annually. For every 'bo of cultivated seed in the fields, the people had to hand over a bre of barley and a small quantity of butter<sup>46</sup>. A small part of the barley harvest had to be handed-over to the Tibetan government. From then on, various fortifications were built in different parts of the sPo ba geography with the resulting emergence of rdzong in Ka gnam, Yid 'ong, sTong 'jug, sNye po, 'Dem chung, bZung sna, 'Dom chu, rDo dung and sPyan 'brug. Various ministers were sent to these areas as district governors.

### The Beginnings of the Kingdom's Decline

At the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the sacred Padma bkod land continued to exercise an enormous attraction, especially for the "treasure seekers" or the rnying ma pa and bka' brgyud pa gter ston, who also enjoyed the support and patronage of the rulers of sPo yul.

At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the teachings of O rgyan 'Gro 'dul gling pa and of Kun bzang 'Od zer Gar bang had spread throughout the

<sup>42</sup> Ehrhard, 1999: 229, 235; Sardar-Afkhami, 1996: 3, 4.

<sup>43</sup> Abbot of the Dwasg la sGampo Monastery.

<sup>44</sup> Brag gsum is a lake in the neighbouring province of Kong po where Rig 'dzin rDo rje thogs med found his first gter.

<sup>45</sup> It appears that on his trip to Central Tibet, he participated in a number of these rituals in order to repel the attacks of the Gorkha armies of Nepal.

<sup>46</sup> A 'bo is approximately equal to 20 bre; a bre roughly corresponds to a liter or two pints. Schwieger, 2002: 223.

Mon pa clans<sup>47</sup> who had migrated from Bhutan and Mon yul to Padma bkod at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. But neither this nor Chos rje gling pa's relative success with the Klo pa could liberate the Tibetan pilgrims from this local threat.

The many travellers who headed for Padma bkod in search of the Promised Land, finally found themselves in a reality that was abysmally far from earthly paradise: a terrain that was horribly precipitous; a climate that was persistently rainy and cloudy; jungles infested with snakes and leeches; and, finally, a decidedly hostile native population who did not hesitate to attack the pilgrims at every opportunity. Nevertheless, for the common pilgrim, all of these adversities signified a kind of spiritual cleansing and the fierce Klo pa natives were regarded as the guardians of the Hidden Land.

The sPo ba monarchy represented the only possible protection from the Klo pa, but the monarchy had begun to weaken since the times of Nyi ma rgyal po. Successive generations of Nyi ma's descendants chose a Ka gnam sde pa and sent the rest of the male members of the royal family to marry the daughters of the country's noble lineages, who usually provided district governors for the rgyal po. This was the case of the Nyi log and dGon rtsa sde pa families. After the reign of the 24<sup>th</sup> Ka gnam sde pa, Nyi ma's great-grandson, sPras po gsang sngags, who was also known as Zla ba rgyal po, struggles between the different governors became regular, which contributed to the kingdom's diminished power<sup>48</sup>.

sPo bo also experienced conflicts in its relationship with the central Tibetan authority. In 1834, the regent of Tibet, Tshe smon gling, sent one of his ministers, bka' blon Don grub rDo rje Sha tra, to sPo yul at the head of an army. His mission was to crush the Ka gnam sde pa for refusing to pay taxes to the government in Lhasa as required by Tibetan law. The struggle finally ended in Lhasa's favour, and sPo yul was obliged to pay its taxes in accordance with the law.

During the reign of the 25<sup>th</sup> Ka gnam sde pa, sPras po bsod nams dbyangs chen, sPo yul was invaded by troops allied to both the government of Tibet and the Emperor of the Qing Dynasty in China. The armies were sent to support the Shul mo Monastery, which maintained a dispute with the Ka gnam rgyal po. After a three-year-long war, an agreement was finally reached but, unexpectedly, the monastery's representative killed the Ka gnam sde pa. To end the conflict, the allied troops ordered Shul mo to compensate sPo yul, and then returned to Lhasa. The powerful sde pa from 'Dzoms mtha, one of the king's governors, had a family member named sPras po pad ma, marry the sisters of the assassinated leader, which made him the 26<sup>th</sup> Ka gnam sde pa. The sde pa also awarded sPras po pad ma the title of sPo bo spyi khab<sup>49</sup>.

<sup>47</sup> Kun bzang 'Od zer Gar dbang himself was born into a Mon pa family in Padma bkod.

<sup>48</sup> Zla ba rgyal po also had to face a rebellion from one of his ministers, but the results of this struggle are uncertain. Schwieger, 2002: 223-224.

<sup>49</sup> Schwieger explores the possibility that both invasions, the first referred to by Shakabpa and the second recorded in the *sPo bo 'i lo-rgyus*, were actually the same invasion. But as he himself notes, if the 1834 date is correct, it would mean an extraordinarily long reign for sPras po pad ma, who occupied the throne until his assassination in 1911. It would be equally extraordinary that one of his wives and the widow of his predecessor would be graced with the same longevity. In 1913, Bailey heard them referred to as the "Poba Queens". Perhaps Bailey was confused by the fact that they were sisters-in-law, as he

The 26<sup>th</sup> Ka gnam sde pa received little respect from the people of sPo yul since he did not belong to the royal Ka gnam pa lineage and he did not behave like his predecessors: he was greedy and preoccupied with the amassing of material riches; he felt a certain inclination towards thieves and highwaymen; he reduced donations to local monasteries and eliminated sPo yul's contributions to Sera, Ganden and Drepung; he was tardy in handing-over the amounts of butter that he should have paid to the Lhasa government; and, he surrounded himself with a group of thieves, bandits and cheats who became his personal soldiers and robbed travellers and traders passing through the country. During sPras po pad ma's term in office, tensions increased even more amongst the district governors as well as between them and the Ka gnam sde pa.

Despite this, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the sPo bo rgyal po, sPras po pad ma, continued to exercise political authority in Padma bkod since the population, who were mostly Buddhists, paid a series of taxes such as butter, pelts, etc. to the sPo ba king in exchange for protection from Klo pa attacks<sup>50</sup>. sPo bo also contributed 100 soldiers to the troops who were sent to the great Tsa ri pilgrimage to protect pilgrims from attacks<sup>51</sup>.

### **The Political and Social Situation in sPo bo at the Beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century**

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the kingdom was still reasonably strong and it enjoyed actual independence from Lhasa. It exercised control over Padma bkod and even collected taxes from various Klo pa towns in the southern Great Himalayas, and it had a diverse population of varied ethnic origins all subject to the authority of the Ka gnam sde pa.

The government of the Dalai Lama did not exercise any real political control over sPo bo. The only payment that the sPo ba were obliged to make was a yearly tax to the Lhasa government consisting of 100 ke<sup>52</sup> of butter to be delivered to the official of the rTse la rDzong district, or rdzong dpon, in neighbouring Kong po<sup>53</sup>.

The country's internal political organization was complex, as the kingdom was divided into small, semi-autonomous feudal principalities and other areas under the direct authority of the bShol ba kha government. The Ka gnam sde pa governed with the help of a council of 10 ministers. Five feudal leaders, known collectively as the sde dkar lnga, were under the Ka gnam sde pa's authority, and they were in charge of their respective districts: Tang smad, Khar lhag, dGon rtsa, Gar thog and Nyi log. These

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referred to them as sisters. He also refers to the mother of both though she could only be the mother of one of them, and her continued existence would be even more extraordinary. Because of these details, this hypothesis is not very realistic. Also, Shakabpa only mentions a raid by the Tibetans, not by troops allied to Tibet and China. Therefore, the invasion by mixed troops must have taken place a long time after the Tibetan regent's attack in 1834. Shakabpa, 1984: 176; Schwieger, 2002: 224, n. 36; Bailey, 1957: 70, 86-87, 92.

<sup>50</sup> Sardar-Afkhami, 2001: 159.

<sup>51</sup> Many of the pilgrims were sPo ba. Bailey, 1957: 200.

<sup>52</sup> 12 ke are roughly equal to 1 load.

<sup>53</sup> Bailey, 1957: 157. This obligation derived from the war that the sPo ba lost when the allied Tibetan-Chinese troops came to the aid of the Shul mo Monastery, probably during the second half of the 19th century. Schwieger, 2002: 225.

leaders were obliged to pay tribute to the king and, in exchange, they enjoyed considerable autonomy. The most powerful, the leader in Nyi log, had 100 families under his control and the least powerful controlled the destiny of 15 homes<sup>54</sup>.

As previously noted, sPo ba's power also extended over Padma bkod and a few Klo pa groups living even further south. Three sPo ba officials, two laymen and a reincarnated lama, were in charge of the administration of the Hidden Land. The amount of taxes paid to the Ka gnam sde pa varied according to the population: in Makti, each home paid three bre (about 2.7 kg.) of rice a year and three trang ka (about Rs. 1) or cotton cloth every other year; in Hangjo, Tambu, Pari and Me tog, every house paid eight bre (approximately 7 kg.) of rice and one trang ka per year. Taxes paid by the first two hamlets were sent directly to bShol ba kha, while the taxes from Pari and Me tog were designated for the maintenance of the Rin chen spungs Monastery. But the tax that caused the largest misuse of time and resources, and created the most animosity amongst the Padma bkod residents, was the 'u lag system. This tax obliged peasants to transport any traveller authorized by the government, on their journey through the area<sup>55</sup>.

In the case of the Klo pa to the south of the great Himalayan barrier, their obligation to offer tribute to the sPo ba monarchy came from the various military expeditions that the Tibetans had launched to punish the Klo pa for attacking pilgrims and the settlements located near the border. As a result of their victories, the authorities in Kong po and sPo bo exercised their influence as far south as Karko and Shimong in the Siang Valley in India's Arunachal Pradesh<sup>56</sup>.

The population under bShol ba kha's administration was made up of a variety of ethnicities. Since time immemorial, the aboriginal Klo pa populations resided in Padma bkod and a large part of sPo bo, and the native Tibetan element, the sPo ba, lived alongside them. At the time of the arrival of the first Europeans at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the sPo ba appear to have already experienced an important genetic exchange with their neighbours.

To visitors, the sPo ba look very different from the standard Tibetan from Lhasa, and their features, height, customs and degree of "savageness" are closer to the Klo pa tribes of the eastern Himalayas<sup>57</sup>.

In addition to these two native populations, over time, another group grew in importance within the sPo yul population. This group was made up of people who arrived, attracted by the legend of the Promised Land of Padma bkod, and ended up permanently settling on sPo ba lands, as in the case of the Mon pa who came from Eastern Bhutan and Mon yul<sup>58</sup>. The

<sup>54</sup> Bailey, 1957: 88, 95; Carrasco, 1959: 137-138.

<sup>55</sup> Carrasco, 1959: 138; Bailey, 1957: 75.

<sup>56</sup> Lamb, 1966: 538, 578.

<sup>57</sup> Their short stature, dark skin and long, loose hair were especially noteworthy. Lamb, 1966: 343; Hanbury-Tracy, 1938: 99, 119; Kaulback, 1938: 121, 134; Kingdon-Ward, 2001: 237-238; Taring, 1992: 69; Ian Baker: personal communication, May 21, 1999.

<sup>58</sup> Bailey and Dunbar indicate that in 1913 the Drukpa [*sic*] or immigrants from Eastern Bhutan, still considered themselves as subjects of the Tongsa Pönlop, Ugyen Wangchuck, who became the first king of Bhutan in 1907. However, they also recognized the authority of sPo bo, or in their case, the authority of the governors placed in Kong po by the Tibetan government. The Drug pa tribes thought they should visit the king of Bhutan to pay their respects at least once a lifetime. The Mon pa came from Mon yul, the rTa dbang (Tawang) area that is currently in Arunachal Pradesh in India, and together with the Drug pa, they

pressure of the Mon pa together with that of the Tibetans displaced the majority of the indigenous Klo pa further to the south, into what is now Arunachal Pradesh in India. Another important segment of the sPo yul population was the Khams pa, who also arrived in search of a hidden paradise, escaping from invasions and disasters. But paradise was not the only motive for emigrating to the southeast: many people who arrived in sPo yul were outlaws. The image of Padma bkod as a land of religious refuge, together with the semi-independent political situation with respects to Lhasa, and the isolation of the land led many fugitives to settle in sPo ba territory<sup>59</sup>.

Although little is known of the population's daily conditions, comfort and economic prosperity were probably not common amongst the sPo ba. This would explain, for example, the significant incidence of goiter in the sPo ba population, which probably stemmed from deficient nutrition and a lack of hygiene. The practice of marauding and stealing, so frequently attributed to the people of sPo yul, also fits the hypothesis that resources were scarce, and that the situation was eased by snatching provisions from pilgrims crossing their territory or from compatriots in neighbouring areas<sup>60</sup>. Despite the fact that sPo yul is not a poor land, many may have suffered these alleged shortages as a result of: the population's subjugation to a variety of titular states, with the obligation of paying tribute; their primitive agricultural technology; their bellicosity, which frequently involved internal fighting<sup>61</sup>; and the country's relative isolation.

Kinthup, a Sikkimese pundit<sup>62</sup>, describes his 1879 exploration of Tsangpo and reveals the fact that a type of forced labour was present in the country during this period. Kinthup himself was sold by his traveling companion and became the slave of the rdzong dpon of sTong 'jug rDzong, in the extreme northwest of sPo smad. In the end, the abbot of the Mar spungs Monastery liberated Kinthup after paying his owner 50 rupees<sup>63</sup>.

### Political and Cultural Expansion Southward

Around 1901, terrible floods wiped out the valley of the Yid 'ong River, leaving hundreds of people with their fields and houses submerged under a great lake. As a result, many of them decided to leave in search of the Promised Land of Padma bkod. Together with pilgrims from Khams, who

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emigrated to Padma bkod at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The blending process that Bailey found to be active within both groups finally gave way to one single community, now known as the Mon pa. Bailey, 1957: 74; Lamb, 1966: 320-321; Dunbar, 1984: 266.

<sup>59</sup> Kaulbak, 1938: 121.

<sup>60</sup> Goiter was common in the eastern Himalayas; it is related to a deficient diet especially one lacking iodine. Hanbury-Tracy, 1938: 129; Kingdon-Ward, 1937: 45-46, 52; Dunbar, 1984: 251; Mya-Tu, M., 1966: 120-134. Apparently, robbing and marauding were frequent activities for the sPo ba, which gave them a reputation of ferociousness and cruelty that extended over all of Tibet, though it may have been partially exaggerated, as some European travelers who entered these areas claim to have met friendly, helpful people (Kaulback, 1938: 134; Hanbury-Tracy, 1938: 98, 126).

<sup>61</sup> Hanbury-Tracy, 1938: 91; Bailey, 1957: 97.

<sup>62</sup> The pundit were native explorers who worked for the British Empire in India. Kinthup tried to verify if the gTsang po and the Brahmaputra were really the same river.

<sup>63</sup> Bailey, 1945: 12; Bailey, 1957: 19-20. This type of servitude or slavery was common all across the eastern Himalayas. Gros, 1996; Lazcano, 1999; Huber, 1999: 217; Thakur, 2003.

were escaping the atrocities of the Chinese General Zhao Erfeng<sup>64</sup> in their lands, they crossed the great Himalayan mountain range in 1902 and entered the valleys of the Dri and Mathun rivers now in Arunachal Pradesh, India, which were inhabited by the Chulikatta or Idu Mishmi. They established a colony at Mipi in the Mathun Valley and, at first they were accepted by the locals from whom they bought land. But soon, more sPo ba and Khams pa started to arrive.

At this time, Rje drung Byam pa 'byung gnas, a gter ston from Ri bo che in Khams, embarked upon his search for Padma bkod. With the support of the Ka gnam sde pa, Rje drung first established himself in Chimdro then he crossed the Himalayas and founded the dKar mo gling Temple near Mipi. Despite the fact that many of his followers lost their lives on the road, Rje drung arrived in Mipi with approximately 2,000 pilgrims from sPo yul and many other parts of Khams. This provoked a rise in tensions between the Tibetan immigrants and the local Mishmi. Faced with the disappointment of not finding paradise and threatened by Klo pa hostility, many of the newcomers decided to return home. But quite a few were unable to do so because of bad weather and a shortage of food, and their bodies were abandoned forever in the high Himalayan passes. The main group that remained in Mipi maintained a reasonable coexistence with the Mishmi for about two years. However, before long the Tibetans tried to interfere in the religious life of the Idu by objecting to the local custom of burying the dead with their personal belongings. The Tibetans told the Idu that they should sell the articles for profit and later, they even asked the Idu to hand over their properties, claiming they would look after them. Puhipidi, the spokesperson for the Tibetans, was visiting different settlements trying to persuade their hosts, when he met a local leader named Becha Iku who told him that the Idu were not about to abandon their customs. This provoked a dispute that ended in the assassination of Puhipidi and, after many negotiations and ambushes, culminated in an open war between the two communities that lasted for many years<sup>65</sup>.

The Abor lived a bit further west in the Siang Valley, and they frequently provoked skirmishes with the Tibetans. In 1905, they launched an attack of great magnitude that reached as far north as dGe gling, close to the confluence with the Chimdro River. This alarmed the sPo ba authorities and they reacted by sending a disciplinary expedition to punish the wild Klo pa, who were conquered and expelled. The Klo pa were also obliged to acknowledge that the true border lay south of Jido, a town located 16 km. south of the McMahon Line, which in 1914 became the border between Tibet and India. The sPo ba also claimed the right to collect taxes in various places south of Jido, reaching as far as Shimong and Karko, located 64 km. south of the McMahon Line, though they never attempted to establish a regular administration in these lands<sup>66</sup>.

<sup>64</sup> For eastern Tibetans, the cruelty of this general and the barbarity unleashed by the troops under his orders had earned him the nickname of "Zhao, the Butcher".

<sup>65</sup> Bailey, 1957: 36-37; Bhattacharjee, 1983: 32.

<sup>66</sup> Bailey, 1957: 75; Lamb, 1966: 321, 578. In 1939, R. W. Godfrey, the British Political Officer for the Sadiya Frontier Tract, visited Shimong and Karko and found that both populations were still paying taxes to Tibetan officials, who sometimes collected forced manual labour as well. It seemed possible that after the collapse of sPo ba independence in 1931, collection activities would pass into the hands of the Tibetan government. To avoid this Tibetan influence, in 1941 the British established patrols in Karko and Riga. In 1955, after

The Tibetan search for the Hidden Land continued. Around 1906, another important group made up of a few thousand pilgrims crossed the high passes of the eastern Himalayas, then entered the area by the wrong route and ended up settling in the Yang sang chu, or Nyigong, valley. Their descendants are now known as the "Khamba" of the Upper Siang district in Arunachal. The origin of this group is undoubtedly sPo ba and its members currently claim that the community originated in an area known as Kanam Showa Phudung [*sic*]<sup>67</sup>.

There are indications that the Ka gnam sde pa's authority often crossed the Himalayan frontiers, reaching diverse Mon pa and Klo pa tribes to the south of the great mountain range. For example, T. K. Battacharjee points out how in the oral tradition of the Tangam Abor, the sPo ba monarch took them under his protection and intervened on various occasions, defending them from attacks by the Memba and later the Shimong Abor. In both cases, the king did not even have to send his troops, since the mere threat of punishment and the excessive display of his power were enough to make the attackers respect his authority<sup>68</sup>. The Ka gnam sde pa's protection of the Tangam Abor might explain why subsequent sPo ba immigrants to the Yang sang chu valley settled peacefully in the Tangam area and did not have the same difficulties as their compatriots in nearby Mipi.

Returning to the war in Mipi, according to the oral history of the Idu Mishmi, the Tibetans sent men along the passes and they carried guns to protect their interests. As a result, many Idu lost their lives as they did not have firearms. It is logical to assume that this help from Tibet originated from the Ka gnam sde pa's government, given Mipi's location bordering sPo bo, the mainly sPo ba origins of the majority of immigrants, and the Ka gnam pa's strategic interest in strengthening his influence among the tribes to the south of the frontier. Nevertheless, the Idu were aware of their disadvantage and soon started to use more intelligent tactics. Hidden by the lush jungles of the eastern Himalayas, they attacked the Tibetans by surprise with poisoned arrows then quickly disappeared. Losses were high and more deaths occurred as the Tibetans were not used to this environment. Little by little, disillusionment spread among them and the majority returned to Tibet in 1909, although approximately 100 stayed in Mipi<sup>69</sup>.

Towards the southwest, the influence of the sPo ba reached as far as Bhutan. Since the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the incarnations from the rBa kha Monastery in sPo yul, known as the rBa kha sprul sku, were connected to the lineage of the Pad gling gsung sprul of the Lha lung Monastery in lHo brag; both were repositories for the teachings of gTer bdag gling pa. Through this connection, in 1891 the 8<sup>th</sup> rBa kha, Khams gsum rig 'dzin yongs grol, came into contact with Ugyen Wangchuck, who later became

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India's independence, Indian officials from Tuting and Mechukha, in the past known as Pachakshiri, met in Kong po with the Gaza sde pa and with the Padma bkod rdzong dpon, in order to finally settle the issue. Nyori, 1993: 77.

<sup>67</sup> Dutta Choudhury, 1978: 56; Singh, 1995: 167.

<sup>68</sup> Bhattacharjee, 1975: 19-23. Although no date is given, both incidents could not have occurred before the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, since the Memba are none other than the Mon pa of Pachakshiri, the area today known as Mechukha. They had arrived in these lands at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and were subjects of the famous Lha klu family of Lhasa.

<sup>69</sup> Bailey, 1957: 36-38; Bhattacharjee, 1983: 33.

the first king of Bhutan. The rBa kha sprul sku became the future king's choir master and Ugyen Wangchuck assisted in the restoration of the rBa kha Monastery with numerous donations. Since then, relations between this religious lineage from sPo bo and the royal Bhutanese family, and especially with the central Bumthang area, were vigorously maintained<sup>70</sup>.

### Invasions and the End of Independence

The second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century initiated a period in which the sPo ba faced three cruel invasions and met the permanent end to their long independence.

From the beginning of the new century, China's military presence in Khams increased and slowly moved towards central Tibet. In February 1910, the recently appointed High Commissioner for Tibet, Zhao Erfeng, invaded Lhasa with his troops and took control of the city, prompting the Dalai Lama's flight to India. With a good portion of central and eastern Tibet under his control, Zhao soon fixed his gaze on the southeastern areas of rDza yul and sPo yul. Both territories had strategic importance for the Chinese since they held the shortest route between Lhasa and Yunnan, and they gave access to tribal areas in the hills of British Assam. Plus, these areas had an unusually low altitude for the Tibetan environment and a climate that was much more tolerable for future Chinese settlers. As a result, Zhao Erfeng, whose cruelty had already been felt by many eastern Tibetans, was determined to occupy these areas. By August 1910, rDza yul had fallen into the hands of the Chinese, who then began to expand their administration towards sPo yul. But the sPo ba were not as easy to conquer as their neighbours.

Before the Chinese troops arrived, the sPo ba leaders met for discussion at the fortification in Chu mdo and they all agreed to attack the enemy. However, instead of preparing for war, the 26<sup>th</sup> Ka gnam sde pa sPras po pad ma and his younger brother Blo bzang prepared to safeguard their wealth and move it to Pyan brug and Klo. This enraged the governor of Gar thog and the gnyer pa<sup>71</sup> of the Phu lung Monastery so, in agreement with other local leaders, they sent a message to the sPyan 'brug rdzong dpon explaining what had happened. They called the rgyal po a "devil-king" and demanded that he and his brother be put to death. The Pyan 'brug rdzong dpon agreed and advised the rdzong dpon in Me tog and Da 'o bu to initiate a revolt. When Blo bzang arrived in sPyan 'brug, the governor came out and pretended to welcome him when, suddenly, his men killed Blo bzang and eleven of his servants. At the same time in Me tog, Da 'o bu and the rdzong dpon Ba ri Bu chung waited for sPras po pad ma as he headed for the safety of Klo, then assassinated him and two servants. Thus ended the life of the 26<sup>th</sup> Ka gnam sde pa, and the country was left without a leader in the face of the Chinese threat<sup>72</sup>.

<sup>70</sup> I would like to thank Françoise Pommaret for pointing out this connection. Pommaret, 2003. pp: 95-96.

<sup>71</sup> This title is roughly equivalent to "administrator".

<sup>72</sup> Schwieger, 2004: 227. Bailey also refers to the king's assassination, though he attributes the deed to the Mon pa of Bungmo, who were paid by the Chinese. Bailey, 1957: 87. This story was told by the Queens' gnyer pa but, keeping in mind that he was the official in charge of the murdered king's wife and sister-in-law, it may not have been correct on his part to



Shortly afterwards, a disciplinary expedition, justified by the assassination of a Chinese official, reached the country and instantly unleashed an open uprising. Even after successive reinforcements and two changes in commanding officers, the Chinese troops were not able to crush the natives who took advantage of the precipitous landscape to use guerilla tactics. Chinese morale and provisions fell until two thirds of the troops finally returned to Lhasa at the end of 1911, without having achieved their goal.

Despite the Chinese troops' experience and the fact that sPo yul found itself in an unstable situation after the sudden death of their king, the invader was defeated because of two factors: the natives' knowledge of the terrain, which some had probably used already in their activities as bandits; and their strong independent nature. The sPo ba did not consider themselves as subjects of either Lhasa or China. According to Bailey, the main trait shared by the diverse ethnic groups living under the Ka gnam sde pa was their hatred of the Chinese<sup>73</sup>. Nevertheless, there was a high price to pay. In 1913, Bailey and Morshead witnessed the devastation caused by the Chinese: the rDo dung Monastery and the Pad ma dkar po Royal Palace in bShol ba kha were destroyed; an infinite number of homes belonging to simple peasants were burned; many men were killed, including the governor of Gar thog; and many fields were left uncultivated when their owners escaped, causing a shortage of food for the population<sup>74</sup>.

Meanwhile, the gter ston Rje drung Byams pa, who was in Padma bkod, had to stop his search for the Lotus Crystal Mountain (Padma Shel ri) because of the Chinese invasion. He returned to Khams, leaving his followers in Mipi without a spiritual guide and without protection from the Idu. The harassment continued and, towards 1918, after the Idu attacked Mipi, the few survivors decided to end the Padma bkod adventure and they returned to Tibet<sup>75</sup>.

Following the assassination of the Ka gnam sde pa, there was not a single male candidate who could occupy the sPo ba throne. As a result, the position was temporarily assumed by both the Ka gnam sde pa's main wife, sNang gsal (his youngest wife, Tig tig, had already died), and by the 25<sup>th</sup> rgyal po's widow, Anu Zla ba. Since sNang gsal was the 25<sup>th</sup> rgyal po's sister, she and Anu Zla ba were sisters-in-law. In 1913, Bailey and Morshead traveled to bShol ba kha with the gnyer pa Nam rgyal, who represented the queens, but he apologized and made them understand that it was not advisable for them to meet the queens<sup>76</sup>. A woman in the royal family had a son and a daughter with Kri pa, the governor of dGon rtsa. Their son was recognized as a sprul sku of the Byams pa gling Monastery in Chab mdo. Their daughter married the powerful governor of Nyi log and her son, dBang chen bdud 'dul, became the 27<sup>th</sup> and last Ka gnam sde pa of sPo bo<sup>77</sup>.

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refer to the tale of the king's bad behaviour and his assassination at the hands of his own people. Given the great hostility that the sPo ba felt towards the Chinese, it would have been difficult to find a better scapegoat.

<sup>73</sup> Bailey, 1957: 75, 110.

<sup>74</sup> Bailey, 1957: 92, 104; Schwieger, 2002: 228.

<sup>75</sup> Bhattacharjee, 1983: 33; Dutta Choudhury, 1978: 56.

<sup>76</sup> As noted by Schwieger, the two sisters-in-law must have been the "Poba Queens" that Bailey had heard about. Bailey, 1957: 87. Schwieger, 2002: 228, n. 50.

<sup>77</sup> Schwieger, 2002: 228.

dBang chen bdud 'dul was pre-occupied with avenging his ancestor's assassination, which resulted in the death of Da 'o bu and a member of the Ba ri Bu chung family, as the rdzong dpon had already died. The call of Padma bkod continued to exert an irresistible attraction on many Khams pa and sPo ba at this time. During his 1924 trip to the gorges of the gTsang po River, Kingdon-Ward met many pilgrims who were still looking for the Promised Land<sup>78</sup>.

At first, relations between Lhasa and the new monarch appeared to be smooth. It may have helped that the rgyal po married Tshe ring sgröl ma, the youngest sister of Tsa rong zhabs pad, the famous aristocrat from Lhasa who had great influence over the Tibetan government<sup>79</sup>. But the alleged honeymoon did not last very long<sup>80</sup>. Encouraged by the previous success against the Chinese, the Ka gnam rgyal po decided to stop paying the tribute owed to the central government and he prohibited Tibetan officials from entering his territory. bKa' blon Khri mon, the Tibetan governor in Khams, attempted an agreement with the Ka gnam pa and placed Rutsa Kenchung as his representative in sPo bo. But the sPo ba disobeyed the representative's orders, and killed one of his servants and fifteen soldiers from the Tibetan Army. Rutsa Kenchung had to entrench with his troops in the Chu mdo Monastery, and finally fled to Chab mdo disguised as a sPo ba. In 1926, bKa' blon Khri mon was replaced as governor in Khams by bKa' blon Menkhab Todpa, who sent General (mda' dpon) sTag sna to sPo yul at the head of a regiment. After affecting a peaceful agreement in 1928, the Ka gnam sde pa assassinated five of the general's emissaries and war broke out. The sPo ba king, intimidated by the Tibetan offensive, immediately escaped to India with four of his assistants. The next day, General sTag sna was killed by sPo ba soldiers hiding in the forest and, upon hearing the news, the Tibetan troops disbanded and fled to Ri bo che rDzong. Some time later, the governor Menkhab Todpa sent approximately 3,000 men to sPo yul along five different routes. After three months of intense fighting, the troops of the central Tibetan government finally attained victory. They confiscated the rgyal po's properties, captured four of his ministers, and escorted them to Lhasa.

The government of the 13<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama declared that the 27<sup>th</sup> Ka gnam sde pa had been deposed and, from then on, sPo bo became one more district under Lhasa administration. But the Tibetans feared the return of the Ka gnam rgyal po since the sPo ba people were loyal to him, so they also sent 50 men to search for him in the Klo pa jungles, which were theoretically under British control. According to Don-grub, the soldiers did not find the Ka gnam sde pa but they were afraid to admit their failure to

<sup>78</sup> Kingdon-Ward, 2001: 146-147.

<sup>79</sup> Don-grub, 1989: 87; Schwieger, 2002: 229; Tsarong, 2000: 58.

<sup>80</sup> In his father's biography, Dundul Namgyal Tsarong recounts how Tsa rong invited his sister and the rgyal po to Lhasa where he tried to persuade the Ka gnam sde pa to peacefully yield control of sPo bo to the central government, promising to pay him back with a title for life that would acknowledge his high rank. The sPo ba king left Lhasa without reaching an agreement with Tsa rong and later rejected a new invitation, though his wife, Tshe ring sgröl ma, returned to Lhasa for good. Don-grub, nevertheless, only cites what seems to be the second invitation: after the Ka gnam pa's wife left with all her wealth, and while she was headed back to Lhasa, dBang chen bdud 'dul was warned in Tang me by representatives of the Yid `ong district that it was a trap, so he returned to his palace, and his wife stayed in Lhasa with her treasures. Tsarong, 2000: 58; Don-grub, 1989: 87.

the government. Instead they brought the head of a dead man and presented it to the sPo ba as the head of their rgyal po. But the sPo ba were not in the least bit terrified as they knew it was not the head of their leader since the dead man's teeth were different from the king's. Thus, they continued to be confident of the Ka gnam sde pa's return, though he never would as he died a short time after in Klo pa territory<sup>81</sup>. That was the end of dBang chen bdub 'dul, the 27th and last Ka gnam sde pa of sPo bo, and the end of a millennium of sPo ba independence.

Since 1931, the government of Tibet tried to keep order by maintaining two garrisons, in Chu mdo and Chos rDzong, but they do not seem to have achieved their objective. Hanbury-Tracy, in his 1936 trip, visited the Chos rDzong governor who had been placed by Lhasa. The rdzong dpon told him that, four months earlier, the sPo ba had attacked him in his own fortification, in retaliation for a fine that he had imposed on them for disobeying orders. The Tibetan official had to return to the Chu mdo garrison, which sent him a personal guard of 10 men.

Despite the fact that the kingdom is sometimes called sPo smad which indicates that the Ka gnam sde pa's strong point was lower sPo yul, where both Ka gnam and bShol ba kha were located, and that the sPo bo king had less control over sPo stod or upper sPo yul, where the political influence of Lhasa and the religious influence of the dGe lugs School was more powerful<sup>82</sup>, Hanbury-Tracy and his companion Kaulback found evidence of destruction caused by the Tibetan troops in the sPo stod area. In addition to the cited rebellion in Chos rDzong, the authors described the ruin and desolation found in places like Chu mdo and Danshing, an unequivocal sign that the fight against the central government had been bloody and the victors' punishment, vicious. Furthermore, maintaining garrisons in Chu mdo and Chos rDzong, both located in sPo stod, may indicate that the population was not exactly loyal to Lhasa, but rather reluctant to accept its administration<sup>83</sup>.

Kaulback found the last sPo ba princess in bShol ba kha, which was plunged in destruction in a now a leaderless country. The Tibetans gave lands to the princess and kept her in bShol ba kha as a kind of hostage to ensure the good behaviour of the proud sPo ba. But the princess seemed oblivious to these political disputes as all of her interest was focused on Kaulback taking her back with him on his return to India<sup>84</sup>.

According to Rgya-mtsho Don-grub, conditions grew worse for the sPo ba after their permanent loss of independence, especially their obligation to supply the hated 'u lag service, and many decided to flee. A large number of them probably continued swelling the ranks of the believers who

<sup>81</sup> The circumstances surrounding his death are not clear. Don-grub tells of how Sonam Bankra returned from the south and told the sPo ba that the Ka gnam pa had died from alcoholism. On the other hand, Tai Nyori shows how in 1931 one of the Ka gnam sde pa's followers, Kemi Tsering, blamed the Padam Abor for the death of their leader, and even convinced the Shimong Abor and the Memba to attack the Komkar, a group allied to the Padam, in order to avenge the assassination of their lord. Finally, Tsarong thinks that the rgyal po died from an attack of dysentery. Don-grub, 1989: 89; Nyori, 1993: 76-77; Tsarong, 2000: 58.

<sup>82</sup> Even so, towards the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the 9<sup>th</sup> Ka gnam sde pa, Kun dga rgyal mtshan, had already been "Lord of the Gods" (lha dag) for the Chu mdo Monastery, and had erected the Za la kha ba residence there. Schwieger, 2004: 221.

<sup>83</sup> Hanbury-Tracy, 1938: 121, 151, 165, 169; Kaulback, 1938: 133.

<sup>84</sup> Kaulback, 1938: 133.

searched for refuge in Padma bkod during dark times. No one in sPo bo imagined that in a few years, events would provide the Hidden Land with a massive new group of pilgrims.

In 1950, Mao Zedong's Popular Liberation Army invaded the kingdom of the Dalai Lama. The sPo ba had the opportunity to certify their reputation as savages for the last time when the army passed through sPo yul. In the Su La Pass, which gives access to bShol ba kha from Padma bkod, more than 100 Chinese were killed by the sPo ba in the same location and situation as in 1911<sup>85</sup>. It was the last act of a world that was beginning to disappear. In the following years, many Tibetans fled in search of the Promised Land. In 1956, Bka' gyur Rin po che, a disciple of Rje drung Byams pa, led a group of unfortunates but they were unable to find paradise, and the abuses suffered during the trip weakened them. They did manage to cross the frontier and settle in Tuting, in Arunachal Pradesh. The following year, another disciple of Rje drung, Lhab rdong sprul sku, had more success and, together with his followers, settled in a fertile frontier valley where yaks were pastured and barley was grown. But, three years later, they were removed by helicopter by Indian Army commandos. In 1959, the Chinese Army perpetrated its military occupation and produced the last flood of pilgrims searching for refuge in the sacred lands of the Buddhist prophecies<sup>86</sup>.

### Conclusion

The old kingdom of sPo bo, having enjoyed a long independence in Tibetan history, finally fell during the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Among the factors involved was the increase in power struggles between the leading families since the reign of the 24<sup>th</sup> Ka gnam sde pa, which had provoked the death of his three successors in extra-ordinary circumstances, amongst other things. But, without a doubt, Lhasa's decision at some point in time to fix its gaze on sPo bo and begin to plan its assimilation, a plan that also encouraged internal struggles, was more significant to the fall of the kingdom. sPo yul was an important location from a strategic and geopolitical point of view: the shortest routes from Lhasa to Chab mdo and Lhasa to Yunnan passed through this territory; and sPo yul gave access to British Assam on the other side. From this point of view, Tibet's interest in sPo yul was shared by China and Britain. But also, as the legend of Padma bkod spread all over Tibet, the sPo ba country saw itself imbued by a new symbolic power. It thus acquired the role of the jealous guardian and administrator of paradise. From a political-religious point of view, there was also strong opposition between the central state, which was strongly dominated by monastic communities and governed by the dge lugs pa hierarchy with the Dalai Lama at its head, and the outlying kingdom, which was governed by a layperson who promoted a more secular and basically individualistic type of religion, as represented by the rnying ma pa and bka' brgyud pa gter ston. The patronage exercised by the Ka gnam rgyal po over those searching for the Promised Land served to legitimize his regime through religion, consolidated his position of quasi-independence, and

<sup>85</sup> McRae, 2002: 145.

<sup>86</sup> Sardar-Afkhami, 2001: 172-173.

extended his influence and prestige over wide areas of the eastern Himalayas. This probably led him to miscalculate when he pulled too tightly on the cord of relations with the central government and became a very annoying “dwarf” for Lhasa, thus triggering the final collapse.

It seems that none of the protagonists was aware of the emergence of a new immensely larger power as they were involved in the struggle to defend their respective interests. Nor did they foresee that in a few decades, that new power would burst in and impose a new vision of the world, whereby everything of significance to them until then, would lose its meaning.

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