



HAL
open science

**A nineteenth-century Bonpo pilgrim in Western Tibet
and Nepal: episodes from the life of dKar-ru grub-dbang
bsTan-'dzin rin-chen.**

Charles Ramble

► **To cite this version:**

Charles Ramble. A nineteenth-century Bonpo pilgrim in Western Tibet and Nepal: episodes from the life of dKar-ru grub-dbang bsTan-'dzin rin-chen.. *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines*, 2008, 15 (2), pp.481-502. hal-03112029

HAL Id: hal-03112029

<https://hal.science/hal-03112029>


Submitted on 2 Feb 2021

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

A NINETEENTH-CENTURY BONPO PILGRIM IN WESTERN TIBET
AND NEPAL: EPISODES FROM THE LIFE OF DKAR RU GRUB
DBANG BS'TAN 'DZIN RIN CHEN

Charles Ramble

 Kar ru Grub dbang bsTan 'dzin rin chen rgyal mtshan bde can snying po is best known as the nineteenth-century author of the *Gangs ti se dkar chag*, the longest and most elaborate of the (admittedly few) Bonpo guides to Mt Kailash. The general impression of the author that we distil from this work is of a rather tetchy Bonpo polemicist and the most important architect of what we may, for want of a better term, refer to as “Zhangzhung nationalism”. Among his other writings, Karu (as I shall refer to him henceforth for the sake of simplicity) also wrote an autobiography that has attracted very little scholarly attention. This lengthy work, consisting of 575 pages (folio sides), does nothing to dispel the image of Karu as a staunch champion of his faith; but it does offer an altogether more nuanced three-dimensional portrait of its protagonist than the *Gangs ti se dkar chag* allows.

Inasmuch as the work (which I shall henceforth refer to as the *Autobiography*) is a *rnam thar*, it is coloured by hagiographic features that conventionally justify its composition as an exemplary account of a life dedicated to the goal of spiritual liberation. His visionary encounter with divinities and sages, and the narratives of the acute hardships he endured in his quest will surely be a fund of moral support for anyone who reads the work for its inspirational message; but Karu was an inveterate traveller, whose peregrinations took him the length and breadth of Tibet, across much of the Nepal Himalaya, through Kathmandu – which he visited several times – and as far as the Indian borderlands. In the course of his journeys he met as wide a cross-section of the region’s population as it is possible to imagine: clerical hierarchs of different Buddhist schools and other religions, as well as kings, ministers, governors, ordinary monks and nuns, traders, customs officers, nomads, farmers and outcastes. The conversations he had with these people range from lengthy debates on philosophical or doctrinal topics to casual exchanges among fellow-travellers. A feature of these encounters is that Karu’s interlocutors are all real people, and not just vectors of prefabricated attitudes set up for demolition by his exemplary discourse. Contrary to what we might have expected from the author of the *Gangs ti se dkar chag*, Bonpos in the narrative receive no special favours above Buddhists; some of his sharpest barbs are directed at his co-religionists, while he is often lyrical about the open-mindedness and civility he received from the most unexpected quarters, such as self-avowed opponents of Bon, Hindus, and, on one occasion, a community of marmot-hunting Tibetan pariahs. The ethnographic cameos he offers of the exotic Himalayan communities

among whom he sojourned provide some of the delightful and fascinating aspects of the work.

It is, of course, impossible to do justice to such a long and complex work within the confines of the present article, and an examination of the intriguing doctrinal debates recorded by Karu must be altogether forgone for the sake of brevity. The purpose of this preliminary account, then, will be: to present the circumstances in which the work was written; to outline its general structure and literary features; to identify Karu's family background and his early life, and the reasons for his abandonment of his native region; to offer a few salient examples of encounters he had during his travels. Karu left Nepal for the last time in 1852, and before his death in 1861 was an important figure in the religious politics of the Bonpos in Central and East Tibet. I hope in the future to undertake a more extensive study of this and other works by Karu, but for the present it must be enough to offer a glimpse into the rich and eventful life of this well-travelled Bonpo pilgrim.

Although the English title of the work describes it as an autobiography, the text is characterised by the authorial ambiguity that is typical of many such accounts. The events were related by the master, but set down in writing by one of his disciples, a certain Rin chen phun tshogs from rGyal rong. The later parts of the work appear to be a collection of eulogies composed by other disciples and associates. The degree to which his amanuensis altered and edited his master's narrative is difficult to tell, but his mediation is apparent in certain formal and stylistic features: notably the fact that honorific terminology is applied to Karu, and that the entirety of the text is in verse; the bulk of the narrative consists of lines of nine syllables, though the lines of the introductory passages are longer, while an assortment of other metres are used to characterise the devotional songs and other eulogies offered to Karu. The difficulties created by the irregularity of the orthography are exacerbated by the fact that genitive and agentive forms are used apparently interchangeably throughout.

The occasion for embarking on the project of an (auto)biography arises in Kyirong, where Karu and a handful of his disciples have just completed a number of domestic rituals for a prominent member of the rDo dmar pa family. (This in itself is interesting, since the rDo dmar pa are an eminent clan of rNying ma pa *sngags pa*.)¹ The master is being regaled with songs, dances and gifts when Rin chen phun tshogs, who has been in retreat in a nearby cave, entreats the master to compose his life story. Karu at first demurs, dismissing the idea as a pointless exercise: it would be the story of a life in which nothing had been achieved, a record of the laughter of beggars, and as vain as beating an old dog ever harder with a stick, like wind in an empty valley, or listening attentively outside a hollow cave (9-10). Karu remains intractable for a further two months; a period of hope and expectation

¹ For the history of the rDo dmar pa family, see Brag sne Kun bzang chos 'phel 1996.

that makes Rin chen phun tshogs feel as if he is sitting naked in the cold and dark and waiting for the sun to come up. And at last Karu relents, and agrees – just to satisfy his disciple’s wishes – to give an account of whatever he can remember about his life.

The work is divided into twelve chapters, each ending with a descriptive title. While these chapters are ostensibly thematic, a particularly convenient aspect of the narrative is the interpolation of the author’s age, as well as the date, before the events that are recorded in any given year. This enables the reader to establish a clear chronology of the activities that are described – such as the composition of certain texts, the occurrence of epidemics, and the travels and other deeds of certain well-known religious and secular figures.

While the first chapter is concerned with preliminary considerations, largely connected with the merits and demerits of the *rnam thar* genre, exemplary precedents for such writing and so forth, the biography proper begins in the second chapter (17ff.). The scene is set: Karu and his disciples are in sMan lung in sKyid grong, which is stated to be a part of Zhang zhung. A nearby mountain, mTshal ri, is described lavishly in terms of the conventional marvellous features it presents if seen from an “inner” and “secret” point of view: its vase-like form, its square foundations, its streams of nectar, and its tripartite vertical division into realms inhabited respectively by the lama and *yi dam* at the peak, the vidyadharas and dakinis that swarm like clouds around the mountain’s neck, and the Bon protectors at its base (17-18).

Before his birth, the account tells us, Karu was entreated to accept incarnation by hosts of divinities who addressed him as “the emanation of the great *vidyādhara* sNya chen” – a reference to the legendary sage sNya chen Li shu stag ring that recurs in the work with considerable frequency. They besought him to take birth in mDo smad Hor; and then, in the course of his life, to reject worldly wealth like a nest of venomous snakes, to perform austerities such as “essence extraction” (*bcud len*); to receive his lama’s teachings like nectar; and, among other things but above all, to compose a systematic presentation of the sacred white snow-mountain Ti se, the great soul-mountain of gYung drung Bon, and to spread the doctrine in the ten directions of the barbarous south like a fire across a grassland (23-24).

Karu was duly conceived in the first month of an Iron Bird year (1801), in the town of Sog sde bon dgon, which is located in the valley named Khra zhu, in the east of the savage borderland of Hor (in Khams).² His father was She tsu wer ma of the Bāi’u ldong dmar clan, and his mother Dang ra g.yu mi of the rGyal rmog sog po clan. His actual birth took place at sunrise on the eighth day of the tenth month of that year (24-25). Within three days of his birth Karu fell seriously ill, but recovered within a hundred days thanks to the intervention of a large cohort of gods and goddesses (25).

² The statement in the English preface to the *Autobiography* that “his birthplace was western Tibet in the vicinity of Ti-se” is therefore incorrect.

The first of his many visions occurred in his second year, when he had an encounter with a hero of sNya chen Li shu stag ring, who revealed to him his accomplishments of earlier lives and bestowed numerous teachings on him (26-30). His descriptive guide to Kailsah, the *Gangs ti se dkar chag*, was perhaps prefigured by a vision of the mountain he had in his fifth year, which presents Ti se, its environs and its denizens in highly structured numerical sets (mainly based on the number 33). The vision ended with a eulogy offered him by a group of saints and divinities who prophesied that he would receive the mind-treasure of the rDzogs chen dMar khrid [*dug lnga rang grol*] in his 25th year (30-36).

A relative on his mother's side – perhaps his maternal great-uncle – named A mye rGyal rmog A rgyas – recommended to Karu's parents that he should be given a monastic education, since he was so clearly the incarnation of a lama, and he gave young Karu the name A yang. The following year his father approached the local monastery of Nor gling, and the boy was duly admitted under the tutelage of a certain lDang lnga Kun dga'. It was on the third day of the Sa ga zla ba in a Fire Tiger year (1806) that Karu began to learn the Tibetan alphabet (36-39). Two years later, in 1808, he moved into A tsho shes tshus house in Nor gling monastery, and took his upāsaka vows in the presence of an incarnation of sTong rgyung mthu chen, a *drang srong* (corresponding to the rank of *dge slong*) named gYung drung rgyal ba, who was the head of the monastery at that time. At this ceremony he was given the name bsTan 'dzin dbang phyug.

The monastery of Nor gling – or, to give it its full name, Sog rTing ngu bon dgon Nor bu gling – was founded in 1748 by lHun grub dbang ldan, who was born in sDe dge, in Khams. Karu would later succeed gYung drung rgyal ba as the seventh head of the monastery, and was responsible for building the monastery's assembly hall during his incumbency (Karmay and Nagano 2003: 85-87). gYung drung rgyal ba's predecessor was a certain dPal ldan tshul khirms, whom Karu refers to in the *Autobiography* as his own root lama.

The five years that followed Karu's matriculation into Nor gling were his honeymoon period with the monastery and monastic life. Following a detailed account of the ceremonial routines of the community, he remarks that he felt as blissful as if he were in paradise, and that after receiving the four initiations of sGrib sbyang rin chen sgron ma from an important reincarnate lama (*mchog sprul chen po*) named bsTan 'dzin dbang drag he had the impression that he was actually meeting the gods in heaven. No one, he thought, could possibly be as happy as he was.

His precocious scholarly achievements were given public recognition when one of the proctors of Nor gling, gYung drung 'od zer, bestowed on him a "hero's cloth" (*dpa' dar*) and sang his praises to the assembly of monks: although many young novices had joined the monastery since its establishment, none had got to don monkish robes within just three years of their arrival; the boy was a credit to his father (whom the proctor referred to as Ka ru Bris pa) who was excellent and

wise, eloquent, courageous and – most pertinently, we might be forgiven for suspecting – wealthy. The monks applauded Karu by blowing loudly on their conches (41-42); but as every schoolchild knows, this sort of public approbation of diligence and scholarly merit by a figure of academic authority can be a poisoned chalice – as Karu would soon discover for himself. Karu took his vinaya vows at the age of ten. The biography describes in great detail the procedures followed in the course of the ceremony, the observances that were enjoined on him, and the ritual during which he was given this ordination name: *bsTan 'dzin rin chen*.

For the year 1812 Karu records an unpleasant event that occurred when he was away from the monastery to take part in the funeral rites for a local notable: an “internal theft” (*nang rkun*) in the monastery that resulted in the loss of all his possessions – his hat, his boots, his bowl and his clothing. His family demanded an inquiry into the affair, but because of the scandal and disrepute this would have brought down on the monastery Karu assured them that the crime had not been committed by one of the monks. The same year marked the end of his halcyon days in Nor gling monastery, with the deaths of both his grandparents and his influential father (55). Two years later there was a major blow when his family's herds of livestock were wiped out by an epidemic. The household itself disintegrated and its members dispersed. This sudden decline into poverty and the death of his father meant that the young prodigy was now defenceless against the vengeful resentment his privileged treatment had provoked among his peers, and the name-calling and bullying began in earnest (56).

In 1819 he was instructed by one of his teachers, a certain Drang srong Tshul khrim – possibly dPal ldan tshul khrim, his root lama – to undertake a 149-day retreat in a mountain hermitage (58). The detailed description of the instructions he was given provide the justification for the title of this, the third, chapter: “the [part of the] biography in which I studied closely with my lama and received initiations, oral transmissions, instructions and so forth” (66).

The contemplative life suited Karu, and he spent extended periods of the subsequent years in his mountain hermitage. This, too, elicited the jealousy and hostility of other members of the monastic community, “who wished to place obstructions in my path”. Nor gling was requested to provide 21 monks to perform a ceremony for the royal gShen family (*rgyal rigs gshen*):

But because of heavy snow the animals we had would not be able to go. It was one of the rules of Nor gling monastery that the younger members would have to carry on their backs as much as they could. If there was any younger member who said he wouldn't be able to go, he would surely be dismissed from the community – so the proctors

would proclaim emphatically in their addresses to the assembly. I therefore had no choice but to interrupt my retreat and go (74).³

The importance of the gShen family in the area is borne out by the fact that in this same year (1822) the monastery's liturgical tradition was changed from the "old" (*rnying*) to the new, gShen system (*gshen lugs gsar lugs*). Because of the long spells he had spent in retreat Karu had failed to learn this new convention and was cautioned by the proctors. He applied himself diligently and mastered the new format within a month – an achievement that was appreciated by some of his seniors but that stimulated even greater hostility towards him among the majority of his peers (74-75).

The following year (1823), while he was in reclusion, the high-ranking reincarnate lama mentioned above, bsTan 'dzin dbang drag, began a 100-day retreat in the same location with some of his acolytes from the monastery who "had achieved the title of 'contemplative'" (*rtogs ldan ming thob* – Karu's formulation is certainly ironic). The latter were unconfident about how to carry out retreats, and in their jealousy of Karu they accused him of being in competition with the lama, which made Karu apprehensive about his imminent audience with him. Far from admonishing him, however, the master publicly praised the diligence shown by "Ka ru *rtogs ldan*"; which did little to help his popularity (76). During this period, Karu had to leave his retreat to go and perform a ceremony his mother's house.

Then they again messed up my place, as before, by leaving excrement and other disgusting things in my dwelling. And on top of that, a certain contemplative who was actually an anchorite in nothing other than name, said to me: "Day and night you go around the hills and valleys; you are either robbing the monks' cells or chasing women, or stealing sheep from the villages – you're in possession of meat and cheese that you didn't have before!" (78).⁴

The incident led to Karu being publicly berated in highly abusive terms by "the greatest vow-breaker among them, a sinful robber-chief with heretical views, who held the title of 'head proctor' (*khriims chen*), named Rad sla wer ma". The censure he received – ostensibly

³ *Kha ba che phyir nor yod 'gro mi thub / gzhon pa rgyab khur thub tshad 'gro dgos pa'i / nor gling bla ma grwa tshangs bsgrig lam yin / gzhon pa mi 'gro zer ba'i mi 'byung na / dgon pa'i sgrig nas gtong nges go bar gyis / zhes zer dge bskos tshogs gtam ches cher byed / de nas dbang med mtshams grol 'gro dgos byung /*

Note: all citations from the Autobiography are presented in unedited form, as they appear in the text. Contracted forms (*bsdus yig*) are indicated in the transliteration by the use of hyphens.

⁴ *Yang skyar sngar ltar nang du rkyag pa dang / rdzas ngan sna tshogs phab nas gang ngan byas / de ltar ma zad rtogs ldan kho'o yang / ri khrod bsdad pa'i ming tsam ma gtogs pa / ri 'gro lung 'gro nyin mtshan med par 'gro / yang na grwa gshag rkun ma rgyab sams 'am / yang na nag mo'i sham du 'gro ba 'am / yang na yul sde rnam kyi lug sku bsam / sngar yang med pa'i sha dang chur ba 'dug /*

conveying the words of *mchog sprul* bsTan 'dzin dbang drag – was the last straw. The injustice of his punishment, combined with the ambient hostility towards him and a dream he had had in which he visited the thirteen foremost sacred sites of Bon, persuaded him to leave the monastery to embark on a pilgrimage. Following in the footsteps of “the princely Kun grol [grags pa]” (*kun grol rgyal sras*; b. 1700) he headed south-west, visiting all the main pilgrimage sites (*bla rten*) and ending up in Kong po Bon ri, where he had several inspirational visions.

Interrupting his pilgrimage because of concerns about his family he returned to Nor gling, where he found that the previous antipathy towards him had abated somewhat (84). The following year, in accordance with the prophecy cited above, he received from a certain A snyen shes rgyal the essential precepts of the *dMar khrid dug lnga rang grol*, which had a profound effect on him (85-88).

In 1825 he embarked on a longer pilgrimage with four companions. The journey, which lasted almost three years, took the group through the main sites of Central Tibet – sMan ri, mKhar sna, and Dar lding among others — as well as Buddhist centres such as bKra shis lhun po and Sa skya. From there they travelled westwards as far as the Sutlej Valley, “visiting all the sacred sites of Zhang zhung” (*zhang zhung gi gnas kun mjal*) – more than a score of which are listed, a record that makes this account particularly helpful for students of Bon pilgrimage – before returning to Nor gling in 1828 (88-90).

In 1829 Karu was given leave of absence from the monastery to perform funeral rites in a private household where a certain Ba tsha dBang rgyal had died. The most memorable event this year was an attack by a large band of brigands.

About three hundred mounted bandits descended on the settlement of some 25 households. They attacked at daybreak, just as the sun was rising. They killed about nine men and horses, and after seizing whatever valuables and livestock (*nor*) there was they melted away like a rainbow. Although I'd been struck by arrows and all sorts of other weaponry, I didn't suffer a single wound. On my return to Nor gling monastery everyone was completely amazed at my quality of invulnerability.⁵

Karu's patron had been impoverished as a result of the lightning raid, but recompensed him for his services with whatever food and clothing he could (91-92).

⁵ *De tshe dgra jag 'jigs pa 'di ltar byung / me dud nyer lnga'i grangs tsam yod pa la / dgra jag rta pa sum brgya tsam zhig byung / nam lang nyi shar bar nas dmags rgyab ste / mi rta dgu tsam bsad nas gang yod nor / phrog bcom byas nas 'ja' yal ltar du song / de tshe bdag la mda' mtshon kun brdeg kyang / lus la mtshon cha cir yang tshugs ma gyur / de ltar nor gling dgon du sleb tsam na / bdag la mtshon gyis ma tshugs yon-tan la / kun gyis ya mtshan ches cher byed par 'dug /.*

The sixth chapter opens with a portentous assessment of the present degenerate age, where people are bestial and their words and deeds in particular are the objects of the author's censure.

Bonpos act in ways that violate Bon, and revile the Bon religion; Buddhists behave in un-Buddhist ways and destroy their own doctrine; people from the central regions speak and dress like those from the borders, while people from the borderlands take on the speech and clothing of dBus; ... vulgar spirit-mediums fill the land, vaunting themselves as "heroes" and "heroines", making clairvoyant prophecies for all and sundry; they perform rituals for guiding the dead and for reversing the misfortunes of the living; those who are not reincarnate lamas act as if they were, [while others] claim to be treasure-revealers; yet others, claiming to be prophets, lead women around like dogs; ancient monasteries, monuments and power-places are now visited and revered by only very few, while new monasteries, shrines and sacred sites are the objects of offerings and devotions, and are given fancy names....⁶

And as a consequence non-virtuous acts proliferate, and natural catastrophes occur (97).

In the course of one of his visions (104-106) Karu was instructed by his teacher "to raise the victory-banner of the doctrine in all places" (*phyogs med gnas su*) – and he obeyed these directions so promptly that people wondered whether he had taken to the air, or fallen off a cliff, or had been swept away by a torrent, or eaten by wild beasts. This vanishing act brings to an end the sixth chapter, "the [part of the] biography in which I received prophecies from divinities and my lama, and abandoned my milieu and my native land" (106).

Life for a pilgrim could be a hazardous affair. Karu records two close shaves he had shortly after embarking on his journey in 1829 when, "after wandering through empty places, I came to the place known as Nag chu". First, bandits:

Although I had nothing, they told me I was a horse-thief and took my clothing, and beat me savagely with their weapons. But thanks to my lama's compassion my body became as hard as rock, and the bandits were amazed. Later, someone called rDo ring rgam pang skar ma took pity on me, providing me clothing and food before sending me on my way.⁷

⁶ ...bon po bon min spyod cing bon la sdang / chos pa chos min ston cing rang bstan bshig / dbus mi mtha' skad 'don zhing mtha' chas byed / mtha' mi'i dbus skad 'don zhing dbus chas byed / ...lha pa lha ma ma rab rgyal khams gang / dpa' bo dpa' mo yin zer che skad 'don / dngos shes lung bstan kun la de'i byed / gshin po'i yar 'dren gson po'i rkyen zlog byed / sprul min sprul 'dra gter ston yin zhes smra / lung bstan yod ces bud med khyi ltar khrid / ri lung rgyug cing jag rkun khyi ra byed / rgyal khrims chos khrims gshig cing grub thob zer / dgon rnying rten rnying gnas rnying khyad 'phags la / bskor phyag mchod 'bul byed pa shin tu nyung / dgon gsar rten gsar gnas gsar yin tshad la / mchod 'bul bskor byed ming brtags mtshan snyan gsol /.

⁷ Cir yang med kyang rkun bu mang tsam gyis / khyod ni rta rkun yin zhes lus gos 'phrog mtshon gyi lus la brdung bsdeg mang byas kyang / bla ma'i thugs-rje'i lus 'di ldo ltar gyur /

And then, mastiffs:

At the place called A 'dams glang gling gong I had the following terrifying encounter with dogs. These were hounds of the Degenerate Age that been nourished with the flesh of human corpses and dead horses. A pack of about thirty of them attacked me. But while they were in the process of biting and dragging me and pulling me around, a man on a white horse came by. They went off after him, and I was saved.⁸

But Karu took these misfortunes in his stride, seeing them all as opportunities for the purification of his body (*lus kyi sdug bsngal sbyongs*;107).

The places he went on to visit are described in varying degrees of detail, and cursory treatments of the external, physical manifestation of the sites are generally followed by elaborations of their appearance when seen with inner vision, and the author's religious loyalties are never far away. The Potala, for example, may look like a large town – indeed, it is the very vision of the Six Realms in one; but seen inwardly it is a Bonpo phenomenon, and anyone who reveres it with prostrations and circumambulations will surely be born in 'Ol mo lung ring. In a similar vein, Buddhist protectors such as bSam yas Brag btsan dmar po and the yaksha of lHa sa, rTsi['u] dmar and lCam sring, declared their support for him (110), assuring him that his onward journey to gTsang would be free of obstacles. rTsi'u dmar soon gave evidence of his good faith: manifesting as a storm of red dust he forced Karu to take shelter in a corral where he met a large party of officials from Lhasa, whose leader gave him gifts and received teachings from him (111).

One of the places he visited on this itinerary was gYu rtse, a barren but atmospheric site located in modern Nag chu prefecture, regarded by Bonpos as one of the 37 celebrated "Assembly Places" (*'du gnas*). In the course of a visit I made here in 1997 with my colleague Hildegard Diemberger I was happy to discover a number of short works that Karu had written and left here almost 170 years earlier – fragments of devotional pieces that to the best of my knowledge constitute the earliest known compositions attributable to him.

Irritated by the fact that numerous Bonpo sites had come to associated with Rig 'dzin rGod ldem (*slob dpon rgod ldem shakya bzang po*) and the true origins of the site confused by the construction of Buddhist temples and stupas, Karu made use of his time in gYu rtse to carry out a detailed examination of the relevant Buddhist and Bonpo *byang gter* literature. His research proved invaluable in a debate he had

rkun bu kun kyang ya mtshan cher byas song / de tshe rdo ring rgam pang skar ma zhes / snying rje cher ldan zhig gi lus gos dang / kha zas ster zhing lam bstan grogs kyang byas /
⁸ *De 'tshams a 'dams glang gling gong du yang / ku kur khyi yi 'jigs pa 'di ltar byung / dus ngan mi ro rta ro'i 'grang pa'i khyi / ztag gzig lta bu sum cu'i grangs tsam gyi / bdas nas za drud 'then gsum byed pa'i tshe / de phyir rta pa dkar po gcig thon nas / de la 'ded tshe rang yang 'jigs las thar /*

with a Buddhist visitor to gYu rtse, a physician called E mchi Blo bzang from Khams. In response to Karu's assertion that the nearby site of Zhal brag zang zang was a Bonpo sacred site, the physician flew into a rage and accused Karu of being a superstitious heretic. Karu replied patiently by pointing out that in the Sa dge rnying 'brug byang gter, the "gTer ston rgyal ba rGod ldem" himself states that he was incarnation of the twelfth-century Bonpo *gter ston* dPon gas Khyung rgod rtsal; which abruptly ended the argument (121).

Karu left gYu rtse for "Zhang zhung Pra thun rlung tshal" – almost certainly the mTha' 'dul temple of Pra dun rtse – which he identifies as an essentially Bonpo site. From here he intended to go to Muktinath (Chu mig brgya rtsa) in Nepal, but on reaching the sKo ra Pass that leads to Blo bo (this spelling and Glo bo are used interchangeably), he was confronted by the local protectress (*zhing skyongs* [sic] *lha mo*), who told him that the time had not yet come for him to extend his mission to Blo bo; he should rather go to Central Tibet and the Kailash area (122).

Karu then records a touching episode that occurred while he was near a place called Zhang zhung Dum pa tshal, where he had gone to see hand- and footprints and the meditation cave of sTon pa gShen rab. He went to beg alms at a nearby settlement of outcaste artisans who were hunters (*mgar ba rigs ngan khyi ra ba*). Reading the prelude to this passage, my heart sank in anticipation of a formulaic conversion scene in which Karu would persuade the hunters to give up their sinful livelihood. Far from it:

I had a little of the tea and tsampa they'd offered me for sustenance, but it affected my vital wind and left me completely breathless, and for a whole day I was like a lifeless corpse. "The yogi's dead", the outcastes said, and they were all terrified. Then after I recovered and got up, all the outcastes said to me: "Yogi, you've over-exerted yourself, and because you haven't eaten properly in a long time your vital wind is affected. Without meat (*dmar bcud*) you won't get better. We've killed many harmless animals, so please have some of this meat to purge our sins". Then they offered me the meat of kyang (wild donkey) and marmot. "I am one to whom the razor of the Enlightened One has been applied",⁹ I replied. "You are good-hearted (*bsam bzang*) and wonderfully meritorious people, but even if it costs me my life I won't eat kyang and marmot meat". They all wept. Then one of them, by the name of mGar ra bKra shis, said, "Even if you don't [eat the meat of] a marmot that has fed on the grass of clean hillsides, or drunk the water of clean valleys, if you just have a tiny piece of kyang meat you'll be able to continue your austerities without interruption. You'll again be able to visit sacred sites where you can accumulate virtue; our sins will be purged and the accumulations [of means and knowledge] for living creatures will be perfected. Have this, and we shall take on ourselves whatever fault may come of it." So they besought me and prostrated and told their rosaries. At that I felt so compassionate to them that I

⁹ Meaning, of course, that he was a shaven-headed monk.

thought, well, whatever happens, and I drank a bowl of broth. At that my awareness became acute and I felt a physical improvement. I stayed for three days, and though I didn't eat the meat I drank a bowl of broth every day, and felt better in mind and body. I offered them all an appropriate prayer of dedication (122-23).¹⁰

Not long after this episode Karu gave up meat and blood for thirteen years. However, this decision seems to have been motivated less by his experience with the outcastes who saved his life than the practice of "essence extraction" (*bcud len*), which he presently took up with enthusiasm. In point of fact, he appears to have abstained from meat for longer than the initial thirteen years: at the age of 47, five years beyond the expiry of this period, he fell ill in Dolpo and was encouraged by a physician to eat meat for the sake of his health. On this occasion he declined, and instead offered a disquisition on the spiritual benefits of vegetarianism (321-22).

His subsequent travels in Western Tibet took him, in 1830, to the celebrated monastery of 'Khor chag, near the Nepalese border. It was at this point that one of his companions, Ngag dbang lhun grub, announced that there were five households of his relatives in nearby Humla ('Om lo) – and the pilgrims duly set off down the Karnali Valley into Nepal. Although they visited numerous Bonpo sites, it was a community of Indian sadhus (*rgya gar gu ru dzwo ki*) that particularly caught his attention. These ascetics – "who live for three hundred years" – "were performing many amazing austerities", which he records in detail: practices such as disjointing their own arms and joining their hands on the crowns of their heads in a permanently frozen attitude; nurturing plants in the palms of their hands until they grew to a height of around six feet; maintaining unbroken silence; abstaining from eating and instead depending for nutrition on milk drawn in through the nose; never sitting down; never rising from a prone position (125).

He was also as fascinated by the unfamiliar domestic animals (Indian sheep with long tails, Indian goats the size of horses, buffaloes

¹⁰ *Ja rtsam phran bu gtad pa'i bcud zos tshé / rlung la phog nas lan cig dbugs chad de / nyin gang gcig la shi ba'i ro ltar mtshungs / rigs ngan rnams kyis rnal 'byor grongs zer nas / kun kyang 'jigs skrag ches cher byed par 'dug / de nas dbugs gsos yar la lang pa'i phyir / rigs ngan kun gyi bdag la 'di ltar zer / rnal 'byor khyed ni dka' thub sdug bsrang che / nyi mang mi zas med pa'i rlung skyon yin / dmar bcud med nas khyed ni gsos mi 'gyur / nged kyi nyes med ri dags mang bsad pa'i / de yi sdig sbyang phyir du sha 'di bzhes / zhes zer rkyang dang phyi ba'i sha yang gter / bdag ni sangs-rgyas skra gri phog pa'i mi / khyed rnams bsam bzang ha cang bsod nams che / shi na'ang rkyang dang phyi ba'i sha mi za / zhes bya kun kyang mig nas mchi ma blug / der nang mgar ra bkra-shis zhes bya ba'i / ri gtsang rtswa za lung gtsang chu 'thung ba'i / phyi pa min na rkyang sha til tsam zhiig / bzhes nas khyed rang dka' thub thog med 'dug / slar yang dge sbyor sgrub pa'i rten du 'ong / nged cag sdig sbyang sems tshogs rdzogs 'ong / 'di bzhes nyes 'gal gang yod bdag gis khur / zhes zer kun gyi phyag-'tshal ma ni bgrangs / de la bdag-gis snying rje cher shor nas / ji ltar 'ong zhes sha khu phor gang btung / de phyir rig pa gsal zhing lus bde byung / de nas zhag gsum der bsad nyin re bzhin / sha yang ma zos khu pa phor re btung / de tshé lus bde rig pa hur du song / de rnams kun la bsngo smon yang dag byas /.*

and white cows) as by the wildlife: tigers, leopards, poisonous water snakes, black turtles (or frogs), “water sprites” – presumably crocodiles – peacocks, cuckoos and parakeets. He offers a succinct description of the people who inhabit the Nepal-India borderlands: the men wear no clothes apart from cotton turbans, while the women wear only skirts, with bangles on their arms and legs; they give their daughters in marriage at the age of eight, and for all communal activities (*skyid sdug gang byed*) they play string instruments, sing, play drums and dance (125-26). Since the description of these people is quite similar in other respects to the inhabitants of the Kathmandu Valley, whom we shall encounter presently, I shall not reproduce his ethnography in further detail.

Karu found several patrons in western Nepal, including a certain Na ga klu'i rgyal po, for whom he performed priestly duties for the next two years. Although he was generally well received wherever he went, he remarks that the area of West Tibet known as Hor yul was particularly marked by hostility to Bon. Here, deaths among people and cattle, heavy snowfalls and sandstorms were routinely explained as the result of maledictions (*ltas ngan*) from the lands of the Bonpos. One of his patrons here was a local chieftain (*mgo pa*), but Karu, sensitive to the prejudice he had encountered, discreetly withheld from him the information that his chaplain (*bla ma a mchod*) was a Bonpo (126). But others discovered his religious affiliation and subjected him to a litany of insults – artisan, butcher, outcaste, corpse carrier *inter al.* – adding that he would impair the life of his patron and those associated with him. Eventually, the *mgo pa* himself confronted Karu with the matter of his provenance. Karu's enraged response was a searing evocation of caricatures about Bonpos from the east: “I am from Khams, that land of brigands, and I reduce my enemies to dust and ashes; I am a follower of the Bon religion, a black heretic, and if anyone treats me badly I'll tear apart his body, his life and his senses; I am a monk from the *grwa tshang* of Thob rgyal sman ri ...”, (127). The *mgo pa*, to his credit, smiled cheerfully and answered, in some embarrassment, “Oh, sman ri – that's the same school as bKra shis lhun po,” and he asked Karu to continue to act as his chaplain. The spontaneous association between sman ri and bKra shis lhun po that the *mgo pa* made is intriguing. The Panchen Lama at this time was dPal ldan bstan pa'i nyi ma (1782-1853). The previous incumbent but one had been Blo bzang ye shes (1663-1737), a member of the Bonpo Bru family, but it would be surprising if the association between Bon and the throne of bKra shis lhun po was still current a century later. The *mgo pa*'s acceptance salvaged Karu's reputation, and the two even went so far as to swear an oath of association as preceptor and patron (*mchod yon*), a bond that was to last until the latter's death in 1856 (129; 481).

Karu went on to travel extensively in the Kailash area. It was during this trip that he accumulated most of the material that formed the basis

for his guide to Kailash, the *Gangs Ti se dkar chag*, that was written in 1844.¹¹

I shall pass over these travels and encounters to the occasion when, in 1833, he was staying at a place called Gung chung zhur mo brag. While he was in meditation the protective divinity of the place (*zhing skyong*) appeared to him with the announcement that the time had now come for him “to convert Kha rag [and] Glo bo” (147).

He set off with a small party of eastern Tibetan pilgrims, and after crossing many passes and rivers, reached the sacred site of Muktinath (*chu mig brgya rtsa*), where he saw the flames that miraculously burn on earth, stone and water – as they continue to do down to the present day. In a nearby monastery he met a scholarly monk to whom he introduced himself by the title he had borne in Khams: *rtogs ldan*. The scholar burst into laughter and advised Karu not to use this title of himself locally, as it was a cause of embarrassment: a certain rTogs ldan drang srong from Kong po who had lived in the area, he explained,

“was in a relationship: he referred to this wife as ‘mother’; but then she had a child from their incestuous union, so ‘*rtogs ldan* from Kong po’ [has come to mean] someone who is the husband of his own mother. And what’s more, in this area ‘*rtogs ldan*’ denotes the ‘husbands’ of the nuns with matted hair. You really shouldn’t use the word *rtogs ldan* – much better to call yourself ‘*bla ma grub thob!*’” (149-50).¹²

Karu asked the helpful scholar about the nearby Bonpo village of Klu brag and was told that the inhabitants practised both “white” and “black” Bon, and that there were two eminent figures in residence: a

¹¹ The *Gangs ti se dkar chag* was written in 1844. The preface to Prats and Norbu’s edition of this work states that, at the time, “the author was dwelling in the sGrub-k’añ’od-gsal-rañ-šar meditation cave of the monastic community of gYung-druñ-bstan-pa’i-gliñ of the Šel-žig abbey, in the Zal-mo-sgañ area (K’ams) (1989: xxii). The *Autobiography* makes no reference to the author travelling to Khams in this year: on the contrary, he seems to have spent almost the entirety of his time in the vicinity of Lake Dang ra. In fact the colophon to the dKar chag gives the location as: *zhang zhung bon gyi ’du gnas zal mo’i sgang / rta sgo lha btsan mched bdun mdun gyi zhol / dang ra g.yu mtsho sngon mo’i g.yas kyi zur / dge rgan lha btsan dkar po’i g.yon gyi zur /...*(106)

At the “Assembly Place” Zal mo’i sgang of Zhang zhung Bon, at the foot of the seven lha btsan brothers of Mt rTa sgo, at the right-hand edge of the Blue Lake Dang ra, at the left-hand edge of Mt dGe rgan lha btsan dkar po...

It is clear from this brief extract that the Zal mo’i sgang in question is not the well-known area of Khams, but a locality of the same name in the vicinity of Mt rTa sgo and Lake Dang ra in Western Tibet. Although Karu describes Zal mo’i sgang as a “dus gnas” – i.e., one of the 37 “Assembly Places” of Bonpo sacred geography, it does not feature in either of the two lists given in Karmay 172: 40-41. Both rTa sgo and Dang ra are, however, cited in the second of the two lists.

¹² *Kho’o nang tshang gnyis byung skyes dman la / a ma yin zhes tha ma nal bu byung / rkong po’i rtogs ldan a ma’i khyo ga zhes / de ltar ma zad ’di yul kha des la / rtogs ldan ral can a ne’i khyo ga zer / rtogs ldan ming de ha cang ma zer cig / zhes smras bla ma grub thob zer na dge /.*

certain “Grandfather” (*mi me = mes mes*)¹³ Drang srong, and an elderly monk from Amdo known as dBon po’i dbu bla. There was, however, a problem insofar as the ritual procedures with which the latter was familiar were not the same as those from Klu brag. They went on to have a discussion about the *sri gnon* ritual for the subjugation of vampires (*sri*), in which Karu explained to him the necessity – which is to the present day a contentious matter for the Bonpo priests of Klu brag – for burning the captured consciousness of the vampire in the course of the exorcism. The discussion continued to the more general matter of the difference between “black” and “white” Bon, which Karu sets out at length. His lucid exposition of these categories (150-55) provides a very helpful “emic” understanding of these contentious terms.

When Karu arrived in Klu brag he found the little community gathered in the village temple, drinking beer as a prelude to the harvesting. The people, whom he found warm and hospitable, offered him water and firewood, and asked for religious instructions. The Ya ngal clan, which had founded Klu brag around the beginning of the 12th century, was still present in the village; but although the family has continued to flourish in Dolpo, the archives of Klu brag reveal that it did not survive here into the twentieth century: the members of the lineage he met were the last of the line in Mustang.

Then, as now, Klu brag was a community of hereditary householder-priests, and Karu seems to have been taken aback by the offence to his expectations about standards of monastic discipline. When he raised the matter he received the reply that ordained monks did occasionally come from Tibet to spend time in the settlement; but that after a few years they generally succumbed to alcohol and women (156).

Karu’s response to what he perceived as the spiritual need of the community was to set down in writing the meditation system he had received as a mind-treasure in his 25th year: the *dMar khrid dug lnga rang grol*, which to this day features in the annual ritual cycle of Klu brag (155).¹⁴ He also enjoined the Klu brag pas to renounce Black Bon (157) –

¹³ “Grandfather” in this context does not necessarily signify age; even now it is used as an honorific prefix in Klu brag for religious figures. When the relatively youthful reincarnate lama of Jomsom took up residence in the village after completing his education in India he was – and still is – referred to as “Mes mes sprul sku”.

¹⁴ The colophon to the fourth part of the *dMar khrid dug lnga rang grol* (*dMar khrid* 431-38) states that it was written at the sacred site of sTag ri ’khra bo in the Kailash area: *Khyung ka ru ba’i sprang ’khyams po bstan ’dzin rin chen du ’bod pa’i / ’dzam bu gling gis dbus dkyil / ti tse gangs kyi g.yas zur / ma pang mtsho yi g.yon zur / stag ri khra bo’i gnas de ru gang dran gang shar du bris pa’o / (437)*

However, it appears that this refers to the fourth section alone. The colophons to the first three sections contain no information about where Karu was when he wrote them, and no dates for the work are provided anywhere. In fact the published version of the work represents only a part of Karu’s extensive writings on the *dMar khrid dug lnga rang grol*. The original manuscripts are preserved in the village of Klu brag, in Mustang, but I have not yet been able to discern from these the date and place of their composition.

an intriguing prohibition insofar as it implies that animal sacrifice may have been practised here at the time – as it was in most of the surrounding Buddhist villages until the 1950s.

This was the first of several visits Karu made to a community for which he clearly developed a close attachment. He cites a passage from the lineage history of the Ya ngal clan, in which the community's founder, Yang ston (= Ya ngal gyi ston pa) bKra shis rgyal mtshan, observes that the spiritual qualities of the place are such that a meditator can achieve more in a week here than in a year anywhere else; and in spite of the dubious conventional morality of the people, "They will follow no religious tradition other than their own Bon faith, even so much as a sesame-seed, even if they were to fly off into the air" (161).¹⁵

After relating encounters he had at Muktinath with a Sa skya pa tantrist and an Indian sadhu – both of them striking for their open-minded lack of sectarianism – he offers one of his welcome ethnographic summaries, this time of the area of southern Mustang:

The dress of the people of this area is as follows: the men tie their hair up in topknots, and wear Tibetan clothing; the women wear turquoise headdresses and chubas. They are good-hearted, argumentative, amenable and prone to jealousy. The wide variety of languages that are spoken here include Nepali, Newari, Se skad and Tibetan. The people greatly enjoy singing and dancing, and are not much interested in merit. They are traders, and carry their loads on their backs. Their sustenance consists of rice, tsampa, beer and spirits. Tibetan food, tea and butter are rather scarce, and the [varieties of?] food and drink are limited. By way of livestock they have cattle, goats, sheep, dzos and horses. Since animals are rarely slaughtered, there are few meat and blood products. Their household property consists of grain and woven broadcloth, and it is only through trade that they have things such as gold and silver. Although there are few men in the religious community there is a sizeable female component. The Bon religion is present, along with the rNying ma pa and Sa skya pa schools of Buddhism. Among the men there are only lay followers, and not even any novice monks. The celibate females undergo a three-year retreat; the yogic results are significant, and they are very kind-hearted (160).¹⁶

In 1834 Karu travelled north to Tre ba – a Bonpo enclave north-east of sKyid grong – where he was the object of jealousy and hostility on the

¹⁵ *rang lugs bon 'di ma rtogs grub mtha' gzhan / mkha' la 'phur yang nges shes til mi byed /*

¹⁶ *De yul mi rnams cha lugs 'di ltar 'dug / pho rnams mgo la thor cog bod kyi chas / mo rnams mgo la g.yu zhur smad gos cher / sems dkar kha tsha bcos sla chags sdang che / skad lug yon dang bal po gser skad dang / bod skad la sogs sna tshogs shes par 'dug / glu gar rol rtsad las la shim du dga / bsod nam cher med khe tshong mi khyur byed / kha zas 'bras rtsam chang dang a rag byed / bod zas ja mar dkon zhiing bza' btung snyung / sgo zog ba glang ra lug mdzo dang rta / sems srog gcod nyung zhiing sha khrag dkon / nang zog 'bru rigs snam 'phrug tshong ma gtogs / gser dngul la sogs nang zog cher mi 'byung / dge 'dun pho sde cher med mo sde mang / chos lugs bon dang rnying ma sa skar (sic) 'dug / pho rnams dge snyen ma rtogs rab byung med / mo rnams gtsang btsun lo gsum chod pa dang / rtsa rlung ltags thon byams sems ldan pa yod /*

part of the monks of Bya dur monastery (165). He returned to Glo bo shortly afterwards and undertook a 100-day retreat in the temple of Ge kar. Glo bo Ge kar is highly revered for its association with Padmasambhava, and one of the visitors during Karu's stay was the King of Glo bo, 'Jam pa dgra 'dul, who descended on the place with a retinue of thirty riders in the course of a summer festival. The king tested Karu's mettle with questions about the etymology of the name of sTon pa gshen rab mi bo, and the eight-syllable mantra of the Bonpos. The well-rehearsed answers were so thorough that the king invited Karu to his palace to perform rituals for him, adding that he had two Bonpo chaplains in residence. The king clearly had an enquiring mind, and took advantage of Karu's presence to challenge his new chaplain on a number of contentious issues, such as the geographical location of 'Ol mo lung ring and the doctrinal distinctiveness of Bon. These discussions provided the stimulus for Karu to write an explanatory book about Bon, but unfortunately this work has not come to light.

The king was by no means the only dignitary of Mustang with whom Karu was to have dealings. In the same year he was invited by the Duke of Southern Baragaon, Khri thob dpon po Gung rgyal and another nobleman, Zil gnon (175). Both of these individuals feature as prominent figures in the archives of the region (Ramble 1998: 314-15, 317; Schuh 1994: 44). Three years later Gung rgyal again invited him to perform domestic rituals for him; and in 1846, shortly after Gung rgyal's death, Karu was asked to officiate at funeral rites for his departed patron (305).

Karu's sojourn with the king ended when a delegation of three nuns came to invite him back to Klu brag. It was during this second stay in the Bonpo community that Karu supplemented his well-established renown as a scholar with a reputation for possessing extraordinary powers. Against the advice of the villagers he embarked on a retreat in one of the caves high above the settlement. Heavy snow cut him off from the community, which was unable either to provide him with necessities or to escort him down. After several days of peering vainly through the falling snow in the hope of a party of villagers coming to rescue him, a rainbow appeared, and he saw five people approaching his cave. But as they drew nearer he saw that they were not Tibetan men: they were women, naked except for bone ornaments and red-and-white flowers sprouting from their *bhāga*. The visitors bore him down to the settlement, where the amazed villagers found him. "Did you fly?" they asked. Some sceptics looked for his footprints in the snow, but could find no traces of his descent (174-75).

Karu made numerous visits to Klu brag over the course of the next seventeen years. The *Autobiography* provides a great deal of valuable information about the religious organisation of the community at the time, but there is insufficient space here to examine these observations. I hope to give them the attention they deserve in a future work concerned more specifically with the religious life of Klu brag. In any event, it is clear that Karu and the people of Klu brag developed a

warm relationship during these visits. Two of his closest disciples, bsTan 'dzin nyi ma and his nephew Nyi ma bstan 'dzin, were both Klu brag pas of the Glo bo Chos tsong clan. The official "passport" (*lam 'khyer*) on which the three travelled through Tibet was kept in the village until recently. In 1863, two years after Karu's death, bsTan 'dzin nyi ma wrote a collection of devotional verses in honour of his late teacher under the title *sNyigs dus kyi rnal 'byor ba bstan 'dzin nyi ma'i gsung ba'i blo sbyong dang 'brel ba'i mgur ma*.¹⁷ Apart from his legacy of the *dMar khrid dug lnga rang grol*, Karu's main contribution to the community was the village temple, gYung drung phun tshogs gling, the building of which he sponsored in 1846. Karu provided rice, tea, beer, tsampa and meat to a value of 300 Gorkha *ṭam* (*go ṭam*); the geomantic rites were performed by a reincarnate lama from Gung thang, while a craftsman from Dolpo saw to the carpentry; the work was completed by the entire community of Klu brag – then numbering around fifty people – within the space of one-and-a-half months (305).

As we might expect, the Bonpo settlements of Dolpo claimed a good deal of Karu's attention over these years, but for lack of space his many activities and encounters there must also be passed over in the present article. I shall, instead, present some of his experiences in the Kathmandu Valley and the adjacent Buddhist areas to the north.

In 1838 Karu travelled down via Kutang and Nubri, in the Manaslu region of Nepal, down to the Kathmandu Valley, where he spent several months. One of the places that particularly attracted his attention was Swayambhunath (Phags pa shing kun), where he had numerous visions. The sight of Karu begging for alms here by the side of road with a few companions proved irresistible for a passing group of sadhus. The language in which they attempt to communicate in the following extract is a convincing pot-pourri of the mangled Hindi and Nepali in which an Indian cleric and a Tibetan pilgrim are very likely to have conversed:

At that point there came the so-called chief priest of the King of Nepal, known as the "Venerable Great Teacher from India" with a retinue of around three hundred sadhus. They were naked but for red turbans around their heads and red loincloths around their nether parts. The chief of these sadhus, who was in a completely green palanquin with glass windows, said, "O *bābā*, *ghar kahā ho?*" which means, "Brother, what country are you from?" To which I replied, "*ghar mahācina ho*", meaning, "My home is in China". My disciples and I had our mandalas, staffs and bowls in front of us, and he remarked about them: "*vaise*¹⁸ *kyā ho? hāt ho ki?*" – "What's that you have? Might it be your market stall?"

¹⁷ This work has been printed in India by the Tibetan Bonpo Monastic Centre (Dolanji), but the publication is unavailable to me at the time of writing. The text at my disposal is a copy I made from the original manuscript, kept in Klu brag.

¹⁸ In spite of the helpful Tibetan translations he provides, some of Karu's Hindi/Nepali formulations are opaque, and my renderings are therefore speculative.

“deutā pujā ghar ni ho” I replied: “That’s the shrine for worshipping our gods”. At that he climbed down from his palanquin and said, *“Bābā, unka māḷ mero hami samāe holā?”* Meaning, “Is it all right if I handle these things of yours?”

“Chune holā holā,” – “Yes, yes, you may touch them.”

“Accha ho, accha ho,” he said – “Ah, you’re a good man!” After this point neither of us could really understand what the other was saying, and dPal ‘byor of sKyid rong stepped in as interpreter (198-99).¹⁹

The chief sadhu then asked him about the tantric tradition of having consorts (*rig ma*), and whether it has been abandoned by everyone in Tibet. The ensuing discussion so pleased the sadhu that he offered to draw up Karu’s horoscope, and duly proceeded to work it out on a stone. Among the details that emerged from his calculations were that Karu had been a great lama in a previous life; he had mastered all the sciences and had had the ability to fly. The two exchanged gifts, and continued to see each other for the next three days until the sadhu and his retinue returned to India (198-201).

A later visit Karu made to Kathmandu in 1843, when he visited other sacred sites such as Namobuddha (sTag mo lus sbyin) and Baudha (Bya rung kha shor), provides the opportunity for one of his ethnographic set pieces, this time about the Newars, whose un-Tibetan bathing habits elicit from him one of the most delightful analogies in the whole work:

The people aren’t greatly interested in their future lives or the cultivation of merit; they’re good-hearted, amenable, and earnest in pursuit of the here-and-now. They do not care much about the welfare of others, and don’t know a great deal about virtue and sin. Though there is no hostility, there is an army and they possess weaponry; the men have no proper clothing but cover their lower halves with loincloths; they have cotton turbans and golden earrings. The women wear red cloth headdresses, tie their hair in a chignon, and have gold nose-rings with pendants; they have bracelets on their arms and legs, and they don’t need shoes. They eat once a day and quench their thirst with water. They keep very clean and wash themselves the way ducks do. They eat rice, millet and maize, as well as chicken, fish, eggs, garlic and onions. As their domestic animals they keep elephants, buffaloes,

¹⁹ *de mtshams yam bu rgyal po’i dbu bla zhes / rgya gar ma ha gu ru ‘ju zhes pa / bla ma dzwa ki dpon g.yog sum brgya tsam / gos med gcer bu mgo la thod dmar dkris / gsang ba’i mtshan mar dhu ti dmar-po dkris / de nang gu ru dzwa ki gtso bo yi / khri gang ljang la shel sgo yod pa’i nang / ho bha ba ghar gang ho zhes pa / de gang zhe na’ang / mched grogs pha yul gang nas yin zhes so / de la bdag gi ghar ma ha tsi ni ho zhes pas / de gang zhes na / pha yul rgya nag nas yin zhes-so / nged rang dpon slob rnam kyī mdun du ma ‘dal mkhar sil lhung bzed sogs yod pa de la / yang kho’o u si ca ho / ha kra ho ci zhes pa / khyod kyī de gang yin khrom bkram sa e yin zhes-so / de la bdag gis rde’u ta’i pu dzwa ghar ni ho zhes pas / lha yi mchod pa ‘bul ba’i rten yin-no zhes so / der kho’o khri khar nas mar babs bha ba u nu ka mal me ro ha mi sa ma’i ho la / zhes pa khyod gyi bca’ lags ‘di la nga yi rags su rung ngam zhes so / bdag gis ‘dzus na’i ho la ho la zhes pa / la legs so rag na ‘ong drag zhes so byas pas / der kho rang a ca ho a ca ho zhes pa / ha ha khyod yag po red zhes so / de nas phan tshun go brda’ ma khrol tshe / skyid rong dpal ‘byor zhes pa’i lo tsa bsgyur /.*

cows and bulls, as well as dogs, goats, pigs and suchlike, and also chickens and horses. The hills and valleys are completely covered with fields and settlements. In the forests there are different kinds of wild animals such as barking deer (?), wild bovines, wild goats, wild boar and wild people, as well as jackals, tigers, leopards, bears, goral and sambar deer (?). For “god” they say *deuta*, and for “lama” they say *guru*. “King” is *mahārāja* and “queen” is *mahārāni*. “Minister” is *jarnal* (= “general”), and “general” is *jamindar*.... For “worshipping divinities” they say *puja garne*.²⁰ The objects of their worship are Mahādeva and Durga, to whom they make blood-sacrifices. They pray to them and ask for phenomenal powers. When a man dies, his wife is burned alive with him.... (235-36).²¹

His subsequent travels in the region of Tsum and Nubri brought him into contact with a community of householder-priests whose attitudes towards celibate monasticism clearly took him by surprise. Among other things, the author of the following passage might well be grateful that he was a nineteenth-century Tibetan, or we would surely accuse him of perpetrating the Orientalist fantasy of a twentieth-century Englishman.

People of that land who are a hundred years old look as if they are of the same age as Tibetans who are thirty. With the exception of true siblings they behave quite unashamedly with one another, and speak without reserve. There are no lamas or monks, ordained or otherwise, who observe rules, but all are tantric householders who frequent women. They belong to the rNying ma pa and bKa' brgyud pa schools. Consequently, if you tell the people in this area that you're an ordained monk, they'll think it's a complete fabrication, because to be a lama you need to be a member of the appropriate clan; and since monks therefore have to maintain their patrilineages, anyone who says he doesn't sleep with women is regarded as a liar. To say that you don't need a woman is very badly considered, or else an indication that you're sterile or homosexual. It causes utter revulsion. Or else, if you say you've given up women they think you're making it up, and guffaw loudly—everyone just laughs in amazement. “Our country is a Hidden Land; the

²⁰ The vocabulary list he provides here is of course in Nepali, as opposed to Newari.

²¹ *Mi rnams phyi tshes dge sgrub byed pa med / sems dkar bcos sla kha tshar rang don 'bad / gzhan phan cher med dge sdig cher mi shes / dgra sdang med kyang dmag dang go mtshon bsags / pho rnams gos med dhu ti 'og sgor skris / mgo la ras thod rna la gser lung btags / mo rnams ras dam mgo la dar dmar thod / skra yang ltag mdud sna la gser snas chu / rkang gdub lag gdug rkang lham mi dgos pa / kha zas nyin re lto re kha skom chu / gtsang sbra che ba ngang pa'i khru byed 'dra / kha zas 'bras dang ko to ma ge dang / bya sha nya sha sgong nga sgog tsong byed / sgo zog glang chen ma he ba dang glang / khi ra phag sogs bya dang rta sogs 'dug / sa zhing yul mkhar ri lung med par gang / ri la ri d'wag kri sna sha ra dang / glang rgod ra rgod phag rgod mi rgod dang / lce spyang stag gzigs dom dang rgya gor ra / kha sha la sogs ri dags sna tshogs 'dug / lha la rde'u ta bla mar ghu ru ho / rgyal po mahaa ra dza rgyal mo la / mahaa rad ni blon po 'jar rnyal zhes / dmag dpon dzwa ma dar zhes dmag mi yang / ... dkon mchog mchod pa spu dza ghar ni zhes / skyabs yul dbang phyug yab yum dmar mchod byed / 'dod gsol smon lam 'debs cing dngos grub zhu / pho shi mo yang lhan du gson sreg byed /*

men are heroes and the women heroines, and anyone who lives here is really happy..." (262-63).²²

After his final departure from Nepal in 1852, Karu spent the remaining decade of his life occupied with religious responsibilities. In gTsang he was the root lama of the throne-holder of sMan ri, and was closely involved with the Bru family at the time when its last scion, bsTan pa'i dbang phyug, was recognised as the Eighth Panchen Lama – an event that was to lead to the extinction of this eminent Bonpo line; and in Khams, he became the head of his former monastery, Nor gling. These activities lie outside the scope of the present account, and I hope to give them the attention they deserve in a separate study. The excerpt with which I would like to close this overview concerns an episode that occurred during a visit he made in 1843 to the Nepal-Tibet borderlands in the region of sKyid grong, and describes his departure from a community where he had enjoyed a warm reception. The passage epitomises Karu's keen eye for unfamiliar ethnographic detail, while at the same time providing a vignette of real value to anyone interested in Tibetan folk ritual, particularly in ceremonies related to the acquisition and preservation of prosperity and good fortune. It is, furthermore, an appropriate way to bid a temporary valediction to a remarkable traveller:

When we left, all the men and women wiped me and my disciples down with white cloths, and in sing-song voices they repeated the words "*Phywa* (sic) and *g.yang*, don't leave us, don't wander off, but collect here!" Then they accompanied us up to a certain point, where they made offerings, including purifying smoke for the gods and valedictory drinks of beer. The accompanying party remained there, but told us that we ought to turn around and look three times: looking back three times is an auspicious gesture to signify that even if we don't meet again in this life we should do so in the next. And each time we looked back the people called out, "Victory to the gods!" (267-68).²³

²² *de yul mi rnams lo brgya lon pa dang / bod kyis mi rnams sum cu lon pa gnyis / rgas gzhon lo mnyam 'dra 'dra 'dug pa'o / pha bu ma bu rtsam las ma gtog pa'i / ngo tsha cher med kha yi lab chos smras / bla ma grwa pa dge slong khirms ldan med / kun kyang sngags 'chang khyim pa bud med brten / chos lugs rnying ma bka' rgyud lugs srol 'dug / der brten de yul dge slong yin zhe na / de la shin du bden par mi 'dzin pa / bla ma yin na gdung rgyud dgos pa yin / grwa pa de bzhin rgyud 'dzin dgos nges pa'i / bu med spang zhes de ni shin tu rdzun / bud med mi dgos de ni mtshan ngan nam / yang na rab chad ma ning rigs ngan yin / zhes zer kun gyi skyug bro ngan pa byed / de ltar ma yin bud med spang zhes na / shin tu rdzun zhing rab du bgod re bro / zhes smras kun kyang ha ha bgod cing mtshar / bdag sogs rnams kyi yul ni sbas yul yin / pho rnams dpa'o mo rnams dpa' mo yin / 'di ru bsdad na shin tu spro bar 'gyur /*

²³ *phebs tshe nged rang dpon slob rnam la yang / pho mo kun gyi dar dkar g.yab kyi phyis / phywa g.yang ma 'gro ma 'khyam 'dir 'dus zhes / glu dbyangs skad kyi yang yang 'bod par byas / de nas sa bskor gcig du skyel ma byed / mchod 'bul lha bsang skyel chang la sogs byed / skyel ma der sdod nged rang rnams kyi yang / yang yang phyir mig lan gsum blta dgos zhes / lan gsum bltas pa'i 'di ru ma mjal yang / phyi ma mjal ba'i rten 'brel [y]in zhes zer / lan re ltas tshe lha rgyal re re 'bod /.*

REFERENCES

Autobiography:

The Autobiography of dKar-ru Grub-dbang bsTan-'dzin rin-chen. (dPal snya chen rig 'dzin mchog gi rnam sprul bāi'u ldong btsun grub pa'i dbang phyug bstan 'dzin rin chen rgyal mtshan bde chen snying po can gyi rnam par thar pa rmad 'byung yon tan yid bzhin nor bu'i gter.) Dolanji: Tibetan Bonpo Monastic Centre, 1974.

Brag sne Kun bzang chos 'phel 1996. *rNam grol rtsangs rdo dmar pa'i gdung rabs lo rgyus deb ther padma rā ga'i do shal.* Compiled by Dakney Kunsang Chophel. Dharamsala.

Gangs ti se dkar chag:

Gans-ti-se'i dkar-chag: a Bon-po Story of the Sacred Mountain Ti-se and the Blue Lake Ma-paṅ. N. Norbu and R. Prats (eds.), Roma: IsMEO, 1989.

dMar khrid dug lnga rang grol: Practical Instructions of Bonpo Meditative Practice by dKar-ru grub-dbang bsTan-'dzin-rin-chen. New Thobgyal (Dolanji): Tibetan Bonpo Monastic Centre, 1972.

Karmay, S.G. and Y. Nagano (eds) 2003. *A Survey of Bonpo Monasteries in the Himalaya.* Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology.

Ramble, C. 2008. *Tibetan Sources for a Social History of Mustang, Nepal. Volume 1: the Archive of Te.* Sankt Augustin: VGH Wissenschaftsverlag.

Schuh, D. 1994. Investigations in the history of the Muktinath Valley and adjacent areas, part I. *Ancient Nepal* 137, 9-91.

