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A Century of Trade and Tension: Stakeholders in the Kali Gandaki Salt Route, Mid-19th to Mid-20th Centuries

Charles Ramble

En posant la fragilité interne des sociétés segmentaires, leur décomposition constitutionnelle, le Don transpose, de la périphérie au centre même de la vie sociale et de l'épisode fortuit à la présence continue, la classique alternative entre guerre et commerce. (Sahlins 1968: 16–17)

Introduction

The Kali Gandaki Valley of Nepal was for centuries one of the main commercial highways between the Gangetic Plains and the Tibetan Plateau (Cf. fig. 6.1. Map of Mustang District). The commerce that the route carried entailed a very diverse range of goods, but the main commodities of exchange were grain from the south and salt from the north. The period for which we have the most documentation began in 1862 with the establishment of a monopoly on the collection of revenue from this exchange, and ended almost exactly a century later with the closure of Nepal's northern border by the Chinese Government. Much is known about the way in which trade in the region operated thanks mainly to the pioneering work of Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf (1966, 1967, 1975), which formed the point of departure for work by later writers, notably Dor Bahadur Bista (1971), Andrew Manzardo (1978, 1982) and Michael Vinding (1998, a work that subsumes the content of numerous earlier articles). Most of the research in question has been carried out by anthropologists and (to a lesser extent) geographers, who, in most cases, derived their information from interviews with the key actors. More than any of the other authors, perhaps, Michael Vinding has made good use of the official documents available in the *Regmi Research*

Series.¹ The period under consideration here is treated in the third chapter of his monograph *The Thakali* (1998, especially 75–92); this section draws on his earlier publications and the work of other authors—especially Furer-Haimendorf’s *Himalayan Traders* (1975)—and for the sake of convenience I will use Vinding’s work as the basis of much of the background information presented here.

The use of local documents has been a rather insignificant component of research on commerce in the Kali Gandaki, and there is no doubt that such records would enhance the picture we now have in a number of directions. Detailed records of goods that passed through the main customs offices and checkpoints are still preserved in a number of local trading houses, and these would constitute a very valuable base for further investigation. It is likely that most of the documents in the families that controlled the trade deal with quantifiable aspects of the commerce, and while there is no doubt much to be learned from this material, the emphasis in the present contribution will be on the social groups that were involved in the trade, and tensions and crises that periodically rocked the delicate balance of their interests. All the groups concerned sought to derive the greatest possible benefit from the trade route, but each was keenly aware that too vigorous a pursuit of its own advantage ran the risk of causing the mechanism to break down, to its own and to everyone else’s loss.

There are documents from the 17th and 18th centuries that tell us both about the nature of the goods that were being transported at that time, and also about the minor principalities that were controlling the route at various points. The information from these documents is, unfortunately, rather local and piecemeal, but it is at least apparent from them that the political and social context of the trade route was quite different at that time from the period with which we are concerned here (Schuh 1994, 1995). Before proceeding further, it may be convenient to list the main stakeholders in the Kali Gandaki trade (see map).

1. Tibetans, including the Tibetan government
2. Upper Lo, including the King of Lo
3. Baragaon: that is, Lower Lo (nineteen communities)

¹ The *Regmi Research Series* is a twenty-one-volume collection of English-language translations or summaries of Nepali archives. The full collection may be found online at: <http://www.digitalhimalaya.com/collections/journals/regmi/>, accessed 29 July 2017.

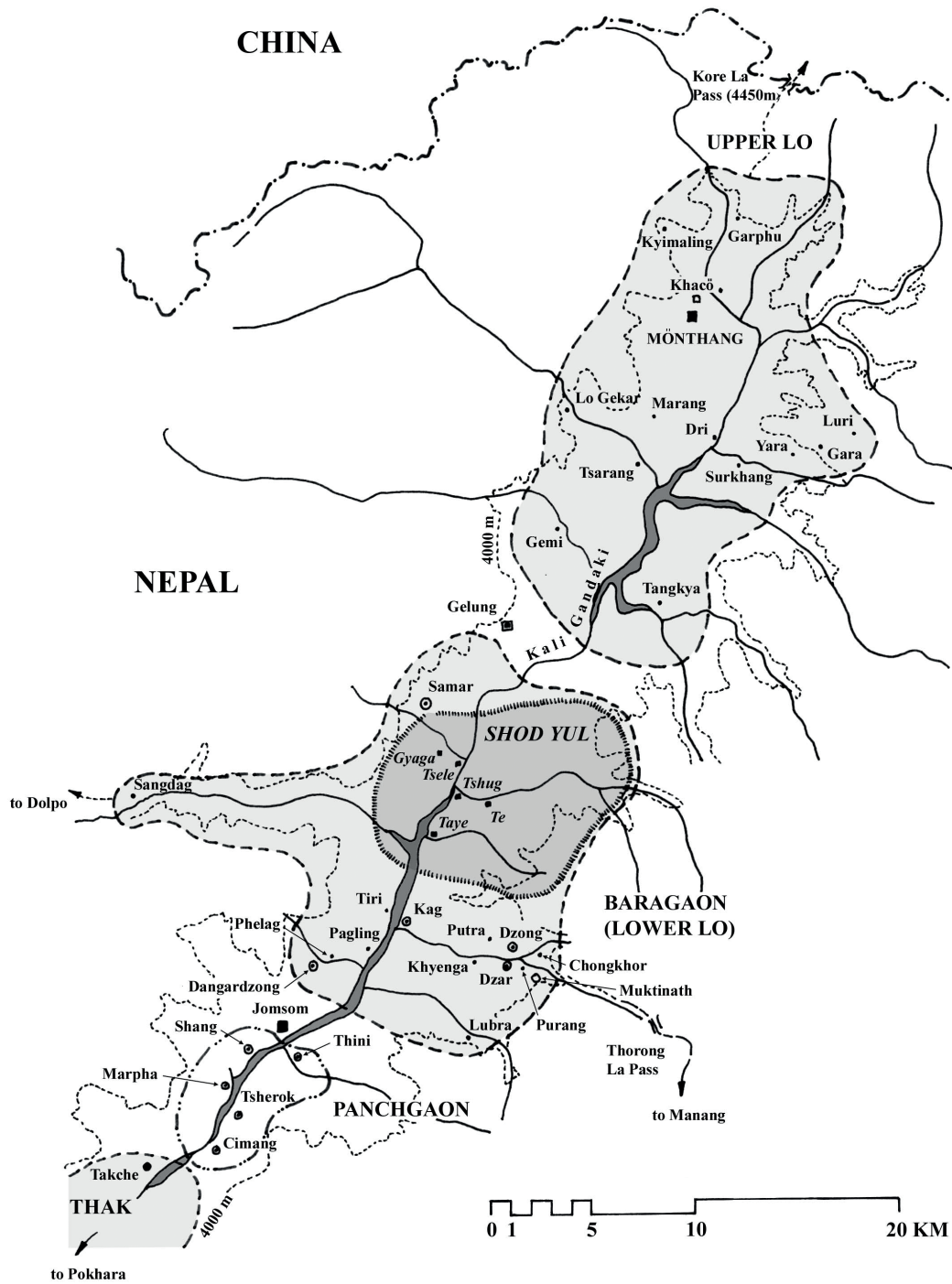


Fig. 6.1. Map of Mustang District, showing the enclaves of Upper Lo, Baragaon, Panchgaon and Thak. The broken lines highlight the “core” areas of the enclaves, and do not correspond to the boundaries of their much more extensive territories (drawing by Niels Gutschow).

- 3a. The commoners of Baragaon, often known as “Ngazhab” (*mnga’ zhabs*, lit. “subjects”)
- 3b. The aristocracy of Baragaon
4. Panchgaon (“the Five Villages”)
5. Thaksatsae
6. The Government of Nepal
7. Neighbouring districts, notably Manang
8. Various outsiders who were parasitic on the system, viz. thieves and brigands.

The list is not comprehensive, but rather represents the groups that feature in the available documents. In certain cases it is clear that some of these groups comprise entities whose interests may by no means have coincided exactly. This is probably true, for example, with nos 1 and 2: the interests of the King of Lo and his subjects are likely to have been as divergent in certain respects as those of Tibetan nomads—who brought the salt from the Northern Plateau to the border—and the Tibetan government must surely have been. However, from the vantage point offered by the sources at our disposal, which are primarily from Southern Mustang, the distinctions are irrelevant. By contrast, the difference between interest groups within Baragaon—the commoners and the aristocracy—does have some significance.

There is a very substantial literature on the relationship—or rather, the inverse relationship—between exchange and conflict. “Exchange” may take many forms, and includes the gift-giving of classical anthropological literature as well as commerce, although—as the epigraph from Marshall Sahlins suggests—it may not always be necessary to distinguish too sharply between these. The article from which the epigraph is drawn compares two visions of civilisation: on the one hand, the world of Hobbes’ *Leviathan* and, on the other, that of Mauss’ *The Gift*. Baldly stated, for Hobbes civilisation comes about when individuals forgo their right to self-interested violence by casting their lot with the figure of the ruler. The societies that feature in *The Gift*, by contrast, are acephalous, and gift-exchange is an important mechanism for preserving peace among them. Trade relations, too, are widely seen as a counterpoint to war, and at least one economist has gone so far as to generate mathematical models to quantify the relationship between commerce and hostility between two states:

The price of being belligerent is an implicit price that increases with the level of trade. *Ceteris paribus*, the greater the amount of trade, the higher the price of conflict, and the less the amount of conflict that is demanded [...]. Doubling trade between two countries would lead to about a 15% to 19% decline in the net frequency of dyadic hostility. (Polachek 1980: 61–63)

The fact that we are dealing here with commercial trade rather than symbolic gift-exchange obviates the need to engage with some of the thornier issues raised by Mauss—such as the mysterious locus of the obligation to reciprocate; it does, however, present other interesting complexities. The Kali Gandaki trade route lies within Nepal, and in the period under consideration the area was firmly under the authority of the Kathmandu-based Rana government. Nevertheless, it is clear from the documents that fluidity of trade and peace among the stakeholders was not achieved by fiat. Trade was periodically interrupted by disputes between groups, and its resumption was not enforced by governmental authority but through local reconciliation. While the district does not constitute a segmentary society of the sort evoked by Sahlins, it shares with such societies the feature of comprising small units that were often in conflict with adjacent enclaves, but might coalesce with these against a more distant menace.² The particular complexity of the situation was this: that the groups with which an enclave exchanged commodities were not neighbours, but entities that lay much farther afield; however, the entities with which there was the highest incidence of conflict were, precisely, one's neighbours. The easiest way to hurt the neighbours was to damage their trading profits by imposing arbitrary transit duties and tariffs, or confiscating their merchandise. But any such victory was pyrrhic, because there was nothing easier for a group that had been punished in this way than to impose reciprocal penalties. Furthermore, local conflicts that entailed such punitive measures hurt everyone in the chain, and saw prompt mediation by other stakeholders to ensure that blockages in the system were cleared and trade could get moving again.

² Examples of the way these temporary alliances were formed and dissolved in Southern Mustang are given in Ramble 2008: 71–98.

Sources

Previously unpublished information in the present contribution is derived from two sets of documents. The first is a collection of Nepali archives that were in the possession of the late Sankarman Serchan, a member of the Thakali family that is associated with the salt monopoly more than any other. Sankarman kindly permitted me and my assistant Nyima Drandul to photograph the collection in 1995. Summaries of the contents of this archive were made by Harischandra Lal Singh. The other sources are Tibetan documents from the collective archive of Baragaon, which Nyima Drandul and I photographed in 1993. This collection is due to be published as *Tibetan Sources 4*.³ The Nepali documents are especially useful because they record many of the important discussions that took place and decisions that were made concerning the administration of the commerce, whereas the Tibetan documents offer insights into some of the tensions between the stakeholders.

Trading patterns

Broadly speaking, Tibetans were permitted to bring salt down as far as Lo Monthang, the main town in Lo—its capital when it was still a kingdom. They were not permitted to travel any further south. The main northern entrepôt, however, was Tradum, situated some sixty kilometres north of the border as the crow flies (cf. Ramble 2015). This was the northern limit for traders from Nepal. Here the Lopas and Baragaonles (respectively, the inhabitants of Lo and Baragaon) would meet the nomads who had brought salt from the Northern Plateau. The Baragaonles were allowed to transport the salt to the main customs office at Dana, whereas the Lopas were permitted to go only as far south as Tukche. The southbound salt could be exchanged for grain at various points along the way, and the rate was fixed by the authorities, whether the government of Nepal or the contractors who held the monopoly. The rate of exchange varied along the way, the highest ratio of grain being in

³ Documents from Sankarman Serchan's archive are referenced here as "SS", followed by the document and page number (for example, SS/2.3). Documents from the Baragaon archive are cited as "Bar." followed by the number allocated to them in *Tibetan Sources 4*.

Lo Monthang, and the lowest at Dana. Thus a document dated 1936 cites the following prices for a mana⁴ of salt at different points along the way:

Lo Monthang	1:36
Baragaon	1:21
Panchgaon	1:18
Tukche	1:16
Nabrankot	1:15
Lete/Ghasa	1:14
Pairathapala	1:13
Dana	1:12

Although the values are expressed in terms of rupees, salt and grain were usually exchanged directly. Until 1862 the aristocracy of Baragaon were collecting revenues on commercial goods passing through Kag. Lopas and Baragaonles could transport their salt south as far as Dana and, after payment of further duty, convey it down to the lowland markets. In this year the Government of Nepal introduced a policy of auctioning off the right to collect revenue to the highest bidder. The first holder of the contract was a certain Captain Hem Karna Khadka Chetri, but thereafter, until its abolition in 1928, tenure of the monopoly was predominantly—though not exclusively—held by Balbir Thakali, a member of the powerful Serchan clan, and his descendants.⁵ Balbir's son secured the contract for 82 000 rupees in 1876; in 1885, another member of the Serchan family acquired it for 97 000 rupees. By the early twentieth century the figure had increased to 150 000 rupees for a year's tenure. This was the equivalent of 56 kilos of gold, which meant that, for the contract to be profitable, at least 2.7 metric tonnes of salt would have to pass through the customs office every day (Vinding 1998: 82–83).

Holders of the monopoly had exclusive rights to acquire all the salt that came down the Kali Gandaki, and then to exchange it for grain. The fact that they were receiving grain, rather than cash, in exchange, raises the question of how they were able to produce the huge amounts of cash the government demanded for the monopoly. Matters were complicated for the holders of the monopoly by the fact that the Kali Gandaki was not the only option for Tibetan traders to sell their salt to middlemen. Parallel to and east of the Kali

⁴ A mana is a volumetric measure equal to 0.545 litres.

⁵ For the succession of contractors, see Vinding 1998: 74–85, esp. 81.

Gandaki is the Marsyangdi River, another trade highway where the *subbas*—customs contractors—were not Thakalis but Gurungs. In the 1920s the price of the salt contract fell from 150 000 rupees to 110 000 and then to 90 000. The reason for this may well have been the competition from the Gurungs, who were offering a better price for salt than the 34 rupees per mana they were getting in Mustang. Vinding discusses other possible reasons for this decline (*ibid.*: 83).

The salt monopoly was highly unpopular with everyone who did not directly benefit from it—that is to say, the government and the contractors. Prior to the monopoly the customs office had been at Dana—well to the south of Mustang District—but the *subbas* moved it north to Tukche, a major Thakali settlement on the main trade route. When the monopoly finally ended in 1927 the office moved to Jomsom for much of the next three decades, though discussions about where it should be located continued for many years. It is an extraordinary fact that, through all the discussions, not a single document makes any mention of the elephant in the room: that is, that revenues on incoming salt were actually being paid several days' walk south of the border between Tibet and Nepal, and that, for fiscal purposes, the population north of Jomsom (who are ethnically Tibetan) were being treated as foreigners.

Nepal's dependence on Tibet for its salt rankled in Kathmandu. During the period of the monopoly there had been four disputes between Nepal and Tibet over salt, and Chandra Shamsheer Rana, who served as prime minister from 1901 to 1929, was determined to find ways of enhancing salt production within the country. In 1924 a British-Indian advisor by the name of B.L. Shahi had been invited to Nepal to provide training in salt production, and he recommended that Nepalese citizens be sent to Sambhar, in Rajasthan, to see how salt was produced at India's largest saline lake (SS/12).

One of the people who travelled to India to undergo training was Hitman Serchan, who spent nine months at Sambhar. Hitman, who had held the monopoly from 1924 to 1925, and his brother Mohanman, who succeeded him to become the last holder of the monopoly, were subsequently awarded a contract to develop salt production at seven locations in Nepal. The most productive of these sites was Tshaurong (known in Nepali as Chaparu), a salina located in the upper reaches of the Narshing River, an eastern tributary of the Kali Gandaki that runs past the villages of Te and Tshug.⁶ According

⁶ For the local importance of Tshaurong as a site sacred to Padmasambhava, see Ramble 2008: 188.

to the terms of the 25-year contract, no taxes would be levied on any of the salt produced for the first ten years. Thereafter, for the remaining 15 years, the salt would be taxable at the low rate of 75 paise per maund (SS/9.1).⁷

That Te and Tshug had (and still have) equal usufruct of this source is made clear in an undated document from Te:

The purpose of this document, a copy of which is to be given to both Te and Tshug: since ancient times the two communities have had equal rights to the water, and this state of affairs shall endure until the end of the world age. They have equal rights to draw the water, to drink it, and to eat it [*za* in this context may mean simply 'use', but it may also imply the solid salt that crystallises out of this water]. This continued to be the case even later on, in the time of the nobleman [i.e. the representative in Kag?] of the King of Jumla. Then a dispute arose, and the King of Jumla decreed that Te and Tshug should use the salt water equally according to tradition, and each side has a document to this effect. A dispute over the same issue flared up in a Hare year [1879?], and the intermediaries listed [below?] have settled the matter with a decision that honours both precedents: on the one hand, the tradition that has pertained since the origin of the communities, and on the other the written confirmation issued by the King of Jumla. They have decided that usage should be equal with respect to drawing, drinking and eating [the crystal solute of?] this water. The two parties have understood this, and agree to abide by the mediators' decision. No opposition as much as the buzzing of a fly shall be raised. The fine for violating this agreement shall be 100 rupees. (HMA/Te/Tib/43)⁸

Since salt from Tibet and salt from the new salina were conveyed down exactly the same route south of a confluence of the Narshing Khola with the Kali Gandaki, the Dana customs office would periodically check the salt that was being produced at Tshaurong and also at the Dana checkpoint (SS/15, Mar/Apr 1928).

In autumn of the same year the suspicions of the revenue officers were aroused by a shipment of salt that Mohanman's sons had brought to the depot. They claimed that it was from the Tshaurong salina, and therefore duty free,

⁷ Nepal used the British Indian maund, which was standardised as 82.28 lbs.

⁸ The edited text and a facsimile of this document are to be found in *Tibetan Sources 1*.

but the officers concluded from its appearance that it was actually dutiable Tibetan salt that the brothers were trying to slip past them. Mohanman seems to have argued in his (or his sons') defence that the salt from the two different sources had become accidentally mixed in the course of the two-day journey between the salina and the customs office. In the same month Mohanman—who was clearly thinking well ahead—petitioned the government of Nepal that, after the end of the contract a quarter of a century thence, Tshaurong salt that was being stored in Dana should be taxed at the rate that was in effect at the time it was actually produced (SS/16.3, Oct/Nov 1928). Problems with the Tshaurong salina arose again in 1934, when government inspectors were once more sent to investigate the authenticity of claims made by the Serchan contractors for expenses made for infrastructural developments.

Traders in the Kali Gandaki received a brief respite in 1929 when, following the death of Chandra Shamsher, revenues on salt were rescinded for the festive period known as Sindhurjatra that marked the accession of his successor, Bhim Shamser, to the prime ministership. In the south of Nepal the corresponding commodity that received similar exemption was cotton (SS/14, Jan/Feb 1929).

For reasons that are not clear, the resentment felt in Baragaon at the Thakalis' tenure of the monopoly seems to have become especially acute in 1912. The period from 1905 to 1910 had seen the contract being held by two non-Thakalis in succession (Manilal Gurung and his son, Nar Jang), but in 1911 it returned to the Serchan family, and we can only surmise that Baragaon, or at least the aristocracy of the enclave, had been profitably aligned with the Gurung faction. In any event, in 1912, traders from Manang who had crossed the Thorang La pass into Mustang to follow the Kali Gandaki route up to the border found themselves blocked at Samar, the northernmost town in Baragaon. Representatives of the "Three counties of Nyeshang"—that is, Manang—sent an impeccably polite letter to Baragaon. The text of the letter is as follows:

To all the people of Baragaon who are led by their masters, foremost among them being the lords of Lower Lo *sku zhabs* Jamyang and *sku zhabs* Takla Wangyal, the source of benefits and peace and who know the Two Traditions, from the Three Counties of Manang, who are led by their headmen and officials. The subject is as follows: Baragaon in Lower Lo and the so-called Three Counties of Nyeshang, have from the past down to the present shared common interests. Helping each other

without either side harming the other benefits both, since harming one would be damaging to the other. Now we have heard it said that we shall not be allowed to go towards Upper Lo beyond Samar. We, the Three Counties, have accordingly sent two people to present this petition, with sincere thanks in advance for your reply. It would be very desirable to preserve the status quo of previous generations. Sunday, the first day of the 5th month in a Water Rat year, from the Three Counties of Nyeshang. (Bar. 19, cf. fig. 6.2)

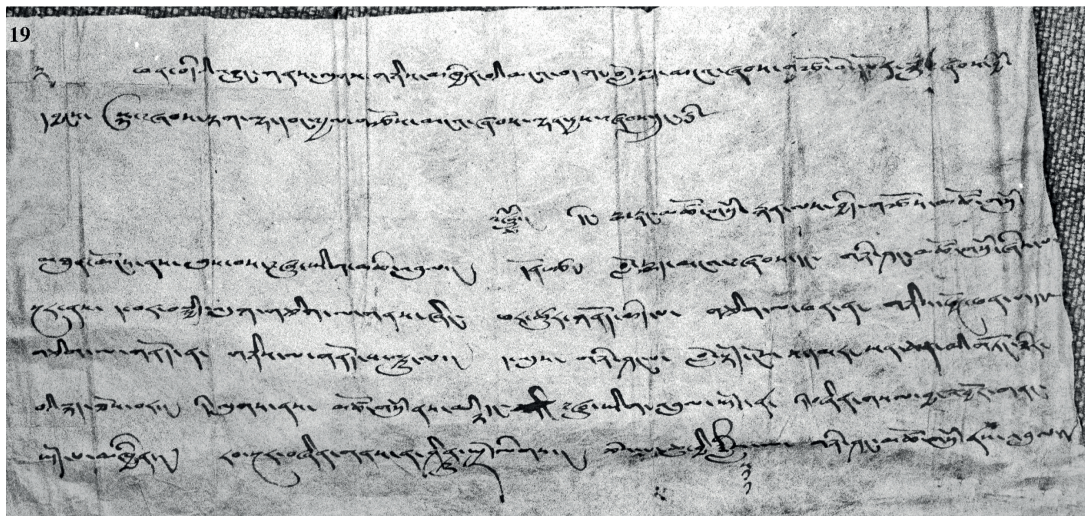


Fig. 6.2. Document Bar. 19, letter of 1912 from Nyeshang to Baragaon, protesting the prevention of their traders from travelling to Upper Lo.

The implication in this letter that the restriction was imposed by the Baragaon aristocracy is supported by another letter, preserved in the enclave's archives, that followed five months later. This document was issued by “the lordly precious tax office in the town of Dana, Thak”, and addressed to “The headmen (*rgan pa*), constables (*rol po*) and ordinary people (*mi ser*) of the eighteen communities of Lower Lo (Bar. 20, cf. fig. 6.3). The letter implies that Thak's monopoly of the salt-trade has been threatened by four men “carrying guns”: *sku zhabs* Zangdor, *sku zhabs* Khamsum, Jamyang and Takla Wangyal, who all feature in other documents as prominent lords of Baragaon. The villagers should treat the customs post as if it were “a second government depot”. The salt trade should not be interrupted but should continue regularly with the involvement of as many people as possible up and down the valley. If the salt trade is broken, the customs post will suffer a financial loss. As a result of this, a request will have to be sent to the palace (*rgyal khang*)

(in Kathmandu?). The villagers should decide what they ought to do about it. The letter is apparently a thinly-veiled threat. It states emphatically that only the four named people are responsible for the interruption in the flow of trade. Perhaps the people of Baragaon were using some other trade route or forcing their way past the customs? It is unlikely that the entire trade itself had stopped. Whatever the case, the letter seems to be offering the villagers a face-saving device to return to normal practice by simultaneously identifying four individuals as the guilty parties and suggesting that there may be government reprisals if they do not comply.

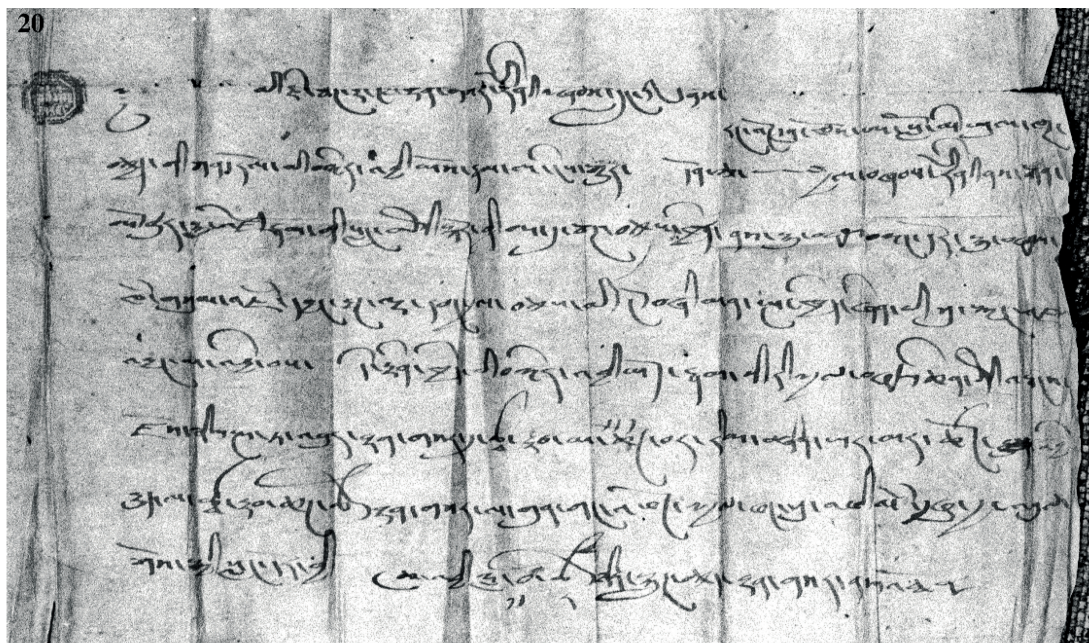


Fig. 6.3. Document Bar. 20, letter of 1912 from revenue office in Dana, referring to a threat by four armed aristocrats from Baragaon.

The valley of the Kali Gandaki is very wide, and it would have been difficult, even at its narrowest points, for the officials who manned the customs office and the checkpoint to ensure that all travellers registered their loads. Smuggling was a problem for the contractors, who in 1917 vented their irritation in an exasperated letter to the people of Baragaon (Bar. 21). The holder of the monopoly at this time was Ganesh Bahadur—a member of the Serchan clan—and the letter is issued by him and his two nephews, Hitman and Mohanman, who would themselves be the last two holders of the monopoly. Ganesh Bahadur reminded the Baragaonles that the *subbas* were not only contractors but also the guarantors of the tax of 825 rupees that the

enclave paid annually to the government. This relationship was fixed by a mutual agreement of which Baragaon had a written copy, an agreement—so the letter seems to say—that also committed the Baragaonles to paying duty on salt at the Tukche checkpoint. Ganesh Bahadur was aware that traders from the north were “leaping over their taxes” (*khral mchong*)—that is to say, skirting around the customs office—but the difficulty of policing the trail is apparent in his rather plaintive insistence that the legal commitment has the character of a sacred bond that the smugglers are violating at the risk of divine reprisals: “If any officials acting on your behalf break the promise may the gods listed above [although in fact no gods are listed] punish them, since this is inauspicious”.⁹

The task of representing Baragaon in dealings with Kathmandu was originally shouldered by the local nobility, but after the rise of the *subbas*, the customs-brokers from Thak, this mediatory role was assumed by a Thakali warden, called the *spyi khyab*. The people of Baragaon are said to have requested the intervention of the powerful Serchan family sometime in the 1930s. Baragaon was duly apportioned out between prominent brothers. Mohanman took over the wardenship of Southern Baragaon, while the five Shöyul and two villages of Panchgaon fell to Hitman. The two parts of Baragaon were united under a single warden in the next generation. For part of his long career, the last warden of Baragaon, Sankarman Serchan, combined this unofficial role with the official one of tax-collector (Nep. *tālukdar*). The warden advised the villagers of Baragaon about developments in government policy, intervened in local disputes, and when occasion demanded, summoned general assemblies of the enclave. He was assisted by a team of eight “supervisors” (*spyan btsug*) who were appointed on the basis of their personal competence, and these in turn would liaise with villages through their headmen.

As mentioned earlier, the available documents are generally concerned with processes for damage limitation in times of conflict, and their preoccupation with immediate circumstances means that we often have no information about the background to the crisis. In 1932 (or so we may assume—the relevant document dates from March 1933) Baragaon imposed a ban on Lopas carrying salt and grain through its territory. On this occasion, at least, it appears that the *subba* and the Baragaonles were on the same side.

⁹ *khyed rnams...phyogs pa su phyogs nas dam tshig btangs na dgong khod gi lha srung ma rnams nas tshar spyad skra mi shi ba* (Bar. 21, lines 9–11).

The latter confiscated several donkey-loads of northbound grain from a group of Lopas, and impounded it at a depot in Thak. The dispute was settled and the blockade lifted, but the Lopas then claimed (on what grounds we do not know) that the confiscated grain had been purloined. Later, however, they conceded that this claim had been a malicious one, and once they had gone to Thak to collect their goods from the depot, they sent Baragaon a letter to confirm that they had recovered their property, and the normal flow of trade was resumed (Bar. 22).

Tensions between Lo and Baragaon would flare up periodically. Apart from blocking the route or confiscating merchandise, enclaves would periodically impose transit duties on traders crossing their territory. This was the case in 1955, when a trader called Jigme Chöphel was told that he would have to pay a tariff to transport his goods through Baragaon. Baragaon made the blatantly false claim that this was normal practice, but Jigme Chöphel refused to pay, on the grounds that there was no precedent for such a tariff, that he had never in his life paid so much as a quarter of a rupee in transit fees, and that if anyone in Lo could be found who could attest to having paid such a fee he would willingly pay Baragaon a sum of 500 rupees (Bar. 30). The insistence that he pay transit tax was clearly a gesture of harassment by Baragaon against their northern neighbour for reasons that are not disclosed.

A few months after the 1932 dispute with Lo, Baragaon was again at odds with its neighbours, this time to the south. The village of Marpha is the only one of the five communities of Panchgaon that lies directly on the trade route, and northern traders would often use the settlement as an overnight halt. In the first half of 1933—as all too often, for reasons that we do not know—Marpha imposed a ban on the sale of food and animal fodder to Baragaonle traders. The nobility of Baragaon retaliated with a tit-for-tat measure:

Since the people of Marpha are refusing food to our people and fodder to our animals, we people of Lower Lo respond to their refusal to provide fodder as follows: first, there shall be no trading of salt in Marpha; second, there shall be no purchasing of arak and beer to drink [in Marpha]; and third, when animals from Marpha come to our communities they may not be given fodder.

Anyone who broke this rule was to be penalised with a fine of 5 rupees (Bar. 24). We do not know how the matter was resolved, but it is unlikely to have persisted for long: the damage to the common interests of these trading

communities would have been too great to make any such reciprocal boycott worth anyone's while.

This seems to have been a particularly turbulent period for trade relations, and measures were taken to resolve the tensions in a meeting attended by representatives of all the enclaves: Thak, Panchgaon, Baragaon, Gelung and Lo. I have not seen the document that recorded the event, but it seems to have been a landmark occasion, since the resolutions of later disputes (for example Bar. 26 of 1947) refer to it as an agreement to which all parties should continue to adhere. Several other documents refer to meetings of two or more of the enclaves, and even if they give very few details about the purpose or proceedings of the assemblies, it is at least clear that commerce along the Kali Gandaki claimed the collective attention of the enclaves more than any other issue.

Thieves and brigands

Impediments to the flow of trade were not always the result of conflicts between the main groups. In 1940 Sankarman travelled to Tibet on official business. His father, the *subba* Mohanman, sent him a letter, but the bearer of the letter was robbed on the way. The letter and various other items were recovered, and the incident led to Mohanman's coordination of an agreement among all the enclaves to the effect that stolen goods that had been brought into their territory should be returned to their owner (SS/5.1).

By the mid-1940s, major political changes were taking place in the Sino-Tibetan borderlands, and it was not long before Mustang began to feel the effects of the unrest. In 1946 a large group of Tibetans—men, women and children—from Kham arrived as far south as Kag, armed with guns and swords. They robbed travellers and terrified the locals by firing into the air, but retreated north again when they sensed that the local communities were planning an attack on them (SS/11.3).

These fugitives from the war in Eastern Tibet were not always anonymous: at least one of them made his way into Mustang folklore. In 1956 Sankarman received a letter from the small community of Chötsong, on the border of Tibet. The letter contained three points, of which the third was a plaintive cry for help:

The one called Dobdob Yeshe Zangpo has stolen property from within Nepal: 800 yak-loads of salt, and from seven households with [a population of] approximately thirty people within Nepal (or: with his retinue of thirty men [living in seven tents]) [he has taken] 2 000 sheep, 800 goats, nearly 1 000 yaks and thirty mules and horses. Dobdob Yeshe has already stolen (*zas*) this much property and livestock from within Nepal. After a potentially mortal engagement with a soldier at Nyichung [a location on the Nepal-Tibet border], Dobdob Yeshe would have killed him had he [the Dobdob?] not been restrained by the [people?] of Chötsong. There is no conflict between anyone in the four northern mountain communities and the people living within Nepal. In Nepal and Tibet the only person who causes trouble is Dobdob Yeshe. (Bar. 32)

Dobdob Yeshe Zangpo was a well-known borderland bandit of Tibetan origin whose main rival was another bandit called Amdo Godra. During the 1960s Dobdob Yeshe Zangpo managed to have him killed by friends he had made in the Tibetan guerrilla movement, the Chu bzhi sgang drug. In his old age, Yeshe Zangpo became devoutly religious, gave away his property to good causes and died in the Tibetan refugee camp in Dhorpatan, in Nepal. He is reported to have passed into the post-mortem meditative state known as *thugs dam*, an indication of spiritual achievement that caused his enemies great annoyance. He is now remembered in Mustang as a kind of folk hero, and there are even songs about his adventures. The term *ldab ldob* (spelt *dob dob* in the document) usually denotes a class of warrior monks in the great Gelugpa (dGe lugs pa) monasteries,¹⁰ but in the case of Yeshe Zangpo the sobriquet may simply have been an appropriate nickname for a romantic thug. Sankarman claimed that Dobdob Yeshe Zangpo respected him because he had once worsted the brigand in a contest of marksmanship with rifles during an encounter in Northern Lo.

Fixing the border

Following the end of the salt monopoly in 1927, there was a great deal of discussion about the future location of the checkpoints and customs offices. The different interest groups had their own preferences about where it should

¹⁰ For a pioneering study of monastic *ldab ldob*, see Goldstein 1964.

be placed, but a site near Jomsom, the present headquarters of Mustang, was eventually decided upon, and the rights to the collection of revenue were contracted out to members of the Serchan family. According to Vinding,

the government established, in 1928, a customs office in Jomsom and entrusted the collection of customs duties to government officials. This system did not function satisfactorily, and in 1930 the government appointed some members of Balbir's lineage as customs collectors in Jomsom against an annual payment of Rs 12,000. This contract was only of minor importance to the Thakali subba and the management of the customs office was entrusted to some relatives from Jomsom.

A footnote at this point adds the following information:

In 1954 the government closed down the Jomsom customs office and the collection of customs duties on salt entering Nepal was done only at the customs office at Nechung in Lo near the Tibetan border. It is not known when the customs office at Nechung was established. (Vinding 1998: 88)

Vinding mentions Fürer-Haimendorf's assertion that the office was operational in the 1930s. This claim, made in *Himalayan Traders*, states: "In the 1930s when the customs post was situated at Netsung [i.e. Nyichung] in Lo, Thakali traders would go there in the months of May and June to meet regular trade partners coming from nearby villages as well as from Tibet" (Fürer-Haimendorf (von) 1975: 191). I have seen no documents to suggest that the customs office was anywhere other than in the Thak area at this time. Unless the Nyichung office was a short-lived experiment (that was to be revived in the 1950s), we should consider the possibility that this border post was not a revenue office but simply a trade mart.

The decision to open the office in Jomsom had actually been taken before the end of the salt monopoly. On 28 Kartik 1984 BS (13 November 1927) an order was issued to the effect that a main revenue office should be opened here (SS/18), whereas the monopoly was officially terminated on the last day of that year (corresponding to 13 April 1928) (SS/25.3). According to a document in Sankarman's archive, the contract on the office lapsed on 13 April 1955 (the last day of Caitra 2011 BS; SS/1.3). It is certain at least that by June 1955, in spite of lingering doubts, there was no need for the Baragaonles to pay revenues at Jomsom. They had probably heard that the customs office

was going to be moved, but waited to take their merchandise up to Baragaon until they were sure that the post had been closed. They received confirmation of its closure in a letter from Subba Sankarman in 1955:

To the wise and blessed leaders of wide Ngazhab. The subject is as follows: I spoke to the government office in Baglung and it appears that you need not pay taxes at the Jomsom revenue office. They said that you can take up whatever grain and merchandise you have in the Thak area. It appears that you will not need to arrange a time for [an emergency] meeting of Ngazhab [that had been planned]. (Bar. 31)

The date of 1954 given by Vinding for its closure is nevertheless supported by other documents suggesting that, even if the contract still had some months to run, it may have been abandoned prematurely in favour of a new site. The Jomsom office was highly unpopular with all the northerners, and in this year a group of Lopas who resented having to pay duties at this location attacked the office and threw all the weights and measures into the river (SS/1.3, Oct/Nov 1954). It is possible that the office was moved from Jomsom to Dana for the remaining six months or so of the contract, since we know that the Dana office had been contracted to Nagendraman (Sankarman's elder brother) from 1954 to 1955 (SS/4.3). If there was indeed such a move, it may have been precipitated by the Lopas' attack. The communities of Lo and Gelung were strongly in favour of the customs office being moved south to Tatopani, and they expressed this view in an open letter sent in May 1954.

16th day of the 4th month in a Wood Horse Year [May 1954]. To the presence of the precious master of the law, the supreme one of the dual tradition, the source of benefits and happiness, we address [the following]. The essential purpose of our presenting to you this written document that has been drawn up freely and willingly by us, whose names are set out below: concerning the revenues to be paid at the tax office in Jomsom, Baragaon and the Seven Counties of Lo have been enduring great suffering, and therefore Baragaon Ngazhab, the commonly-appointed headmen of the Seven Counties of Lo and the wardens of each region held a meeting. They reached an agreement to the effect that, henceforth, the revenue office in Jomsom should be completely removed. The second point is that the Jomsom tax office be moved to Tatopani (Chu tshan). The third point is that the people living

above Tatopani and below the Kore La pass, the border between the Gorkha [kingdom] and Tibet, should all pay whatever tax obligations might be imposed on them for their ruler, the great king of Gorkha and that, henceforth, there should be no revenue office at Jomsom. This is the decision that we took and from which we shall not deviate. If there should arise any new chatter, entailing mutual accusations (lit. ‘not me but him’), making inquiries after assuming a position of superiority, cooked meat reverting to [being raw], being caught by the forest or skidding on the meadow,¹¹ mutual accusation and [claiming ignorance on the grounds of] not having understood or heard—we shall not utter so much as a sesame-seed of such discourse. But if such things are uttered...¹² Ngazhab shall pay a fine of 9 000 rupees, and if an individual village violates [the agreement] it should pay a fine of 1 000 rupees and make a promise that, in future, the terms of the agreement should be upheld. Signatories: the headman of Monthang, Tshering Döndrub the steward, acting on behalf of the Dharmaraja Wangdü Nyingpo; Warden Karma Rabgye; Warden Sonam Wangdü; the headman of Shari (eastern Mustang), Dorje; the headmen of De and Tangkya; the headman of Tsarang and Marang, Phurpa; the headman of Gemi and Dragmar, Tshering; the headman of Tshonub, Norbu; the headman of Tshoshar, Wangdu Tshering of Samdzong; the community of Gelung requests that the terms of the written agreement be preserved, and its headman, Ngawang Tshultrim, sets his mark. Sonam Wangdü sets his mark as the scribe of two [copies of this] document that are the same with respect to their content. (Bar. 28)

¹¹ These are stock phrases that commonly feature in contracts. In the case of the majority of such expressions, the implication is that the agreement should be binding until certain impossible conditions are fulfilled—that is to say, for eternity. In other cases, the relevance is far from certain. Documents from South Mustang feature a variety of enigmatic formulations that appear not to occur in similar texts from Tibet. For examples, see Ramble and Nyima Drandul 2017.

¹² The remainder of this sentence is unclear, as the meaning of *zur gsal phud na* in the present context is obscure. The document is stated below to be a duplicate, and it appears that the copyist may have made an “eye-skip” error in the transcription at this point. The likely omission is along the lines of “if either of the two regions, Upper Lo or Baragaon, deviates from this ruling, then Upper Lo or...”. Ngazhab, “the subjects”, is widely used as a collective name for the commoner population of Baragaon, and since it has already been used in this way in the fourth line of the document it is unlikely here to mean anything else.

The document is worth our consideration. The gist of it is that the participants in the meeting to which it refers—representatives of Baragaon, Gelung and Lo—all agreed that the customs office be moved to Tatopani—well below the southern border of Mustang District, a measure that would (it is implied) ensure fiscal equality among all those who lived between there and the Tibetan border. The claim that “they reached an agreement” notwithstanding, the list of signatories makes it clear that not all the participants at the meeting were party to the accord: Baragaon is absent. It had certainly not agreed to the stipulation that it should forfeit 9 000 rupees in the event of failure to comply by the terms of the agreement. The document is an agreement among the communities north of Baragaon, but as an agreement among trading partner enclaves it is little more than an expression of wishful thinking.

The Lopas’ claim that it was in the common interest of all those living between the Kore La pass and Tatopani to shift the office to the latter location is disingenuous. Few Lopas, if any, traded south of Tatopani, whereas groups living further downstream on the Kali Gandaki would have been seriously affected by such a move. Contrary to the Lopas’ assertion, Baragaon actually favoured the small village of Nyichung—the northernmost settlement in Mustang before the Tibetan border—as the site of the office. At some point in 1954 the zonal administration in Baglung issued an order that the office should be established in Nyichung, and after some hesitation about whether Baglung had the authority to do this, the order was confirmed by the Finance Ministry in Kathmandu on 31 August 1954 (SS/22.3). The Nyichung post must have been established shortly after this, since the zonal revenue office in Baglung wrote to the Dana office to enquire how it was working. However, the Nyichung post was apparently not yet in operation. This is implied in a letter sent by Sankarman to his elder brother Nagendraman, the holder of the Dana contract, reminding him that his contract had expired and that he should hand over the weights and measures to be taken up to Nyichung (SS/4.3). Four years later the weights and measures had still not been moved to Nyichung. Moreover, matters were further complicated by a dispute between certain communities of the Shöyul of Baragaon, and a growing rift between powerful members of the Serchan family. Matters came to a head in late 1959, and eleven of the villages of Baragaon held a meeting to decide how best to proceed. The following document is the outcome of that meeting.

To the precious master of the law, most exalted of men: a written agreement to confirm the decision taken by the petitioners whose names

are given below. The subject is as follows: on Monday, the fourteenth day of the tenth month in an Earth Pig year [1959], a written agreement from Baragaon. From past times, among the nineteen communities of Baragaon, Te is to be regarded as one county [of eight] according to local law,¹³ and this should remain the case in the future. The tax collectors have separated, and in order to do things in the proper way according to the customs of the various villages, since the Bird Year [1957] the three-quarter county of Taye has not paid its taxes to the king [i.e. the government of Nepal], he [Sankarman] instructed them to pay their taxes. However, [the people of Taye] said they will not pay. If they forcibly avoid paying the royal tax to the tax collector, since the Baglung revenue office has not dropped the matter, Taye's taxes of two years have been paid by the tax collector. He asked them to repay him the financial loan, but they have not repaid this loan. This [is the first point]. [Secondly,] the weighing-scales with which taxes had to be paid previously in Jomsom: the order of the senior official of Baglung to take them to Nyichung in Lo has still not been obeyed. Furthermore, when the people of Taye come to discuss the matter, the assembled people of Baragaon, one person from each hearth, two men between the ages of eighteen and sixty, shall go [to the meeting] and bring back a detailed account. After returning from getting a detailed account [of the discussion] in Taye, they should bring back a detailed account from the half-county of Kag as to why there has been no compliance in taking the scales [to Nyichung]. The men who go there may by no means carry weapons of any kind. There will be a meeting on Thursday, the 17th day of this month, at Cangcang Lungpa.¹⁴ There will be a fine for not attending. If a village does not comply, it shall pay a fine of 1 000 rupees, and if a household fails to comply it shall pay a fine of 100 rupees without making any excuses. It has been decided that a convocation shall be issued for that day. (Bar. 15)

¹³ The nineteen communities of Baragaon were grouped into eight "counties" or "sectors" (*tsho*), the proportion of a county that each constituted being the basis of its tax dues. For a list of the counties and communities they comprised, see Ramble 2008: 35.

¹⁴ The venue for general assemblies of Baragaon rotated around three sites, of which Cangcang Lungpa, a short distance to the south of Kag, was one.

The document is signed by eleven villages from Baragaon, including two of the Shöyul. Some of the crucial points in this document would have remained completely obscure had Sankarman himself not agreed to comment on it in the course of our interview. The communities of Taye and Tshug had a dispute, possibly about grazing boundaries. In order to further their case, they sought the support of “Subba Cime”—probably the nickname of Indraman Serchan, Hitman’s son and Sankarman’s cousin.¹⁵ There was a precedent for such a move on the part of Te, who had also sided with him in an earlier dispute with Gelung. The Tayepas—like the Tepas before them—threatened to abandon their membership of Baragaon. Insofar as he held the official position of *tālukdar*, or tax-collector, Sankarman was still responsible for Taye’s government tax payments, a role in which Hitman could not replace him since his status as Taye’s advocate was one of informal mediation.¹⁶ Because of Taye’s refusal to pay its taxes, Sankarman was obliged to advance the sum. One purpose of this meeting was to attempt to reach a solution to the impasse. Sankarman blamed the situation on a particularly intractable Tayepa by the name of Dawa Dorje. Among other things, the latter came to be known for assassinating a number of Tibetan guerrillas, who would soon start to congregate in Mustang, and he was eventually killed by them. The second purpose of the meeting concerned the customs post, which until about this time had been located in Jomsom. Baragaon asked Sankarman to request the Baglung office to move it up to Nyichung, on the Tibetan border, so that only international trade be taxed. This move was strongly opposed by the Lopas, most of whose trading activities took place north of the border. The task of carrying out the move was allocated to the village of Kag, one of the communities in Baragaon. Following Kag’s refusal, on grounds of the danger of violent resistance from Lo, to convey the scales north, Tanka Prasad, a relative of Sankarman Serchan, undertook to carry out the task himself. He succeeded in delivering the weights and measures to the newly-established Nyichung customs office, but on his return journey was pursued south by a party of hostile Lopas. His pursuers caught up with him at the sacred caves

¹⁵ *Cime* is a South Mustang Tibetan dialect term meaning “little”; the nickname probably derives from the fact that Indraman was the son and successor of Hitman, who had previously been the warden of the Shöyul. According to Vinding, Indraman had remained in the region to take care of family matters after his two older brothers had left to attend to business interests in Southern Nepal, and the two youngest had gone to college in India (Vinding 1998: 90).

¹⁶ Hitman had been the *spyi khyab* of the five Shöyul, but the wardenship of the entirety of Baragaon, including these communities, later passed to his nephew Sankarman.

of Congshi Ranjung, on Gelung's territory. Tanka Prasad took the rifle from one of the soldiers who was accompanying him and shot one of the attackers dead. He escaped with his life, but the incident is said to have destroyed his political career.

The end of the trade route

The Kali Gandaki's days as a conduit for the salt trade were by now nearly over. The construction of a motorable road in Southern Nepal had already opened the way to imports of inexpensive Indian salt, but developments on the northern border were a more decisive factor. The Nepal-Tibet border was redrawn—and officially closed by the Chinese—only in 1962, but there is evidence to suggest that measures to bring an end to commerce between Tibet and Nepal across the Mustang border were taken two years earlier. On 28 June 1960, a mixed group of Nepalese civilians and soldiers, all in plain clothes and all unarmed, were fired on by a large detachment—an estimated 2 000 troops—of the Chinese army in the Kore La area. One soldier was killed on the spot and another was wounded. In the diplomatic storm that followed, Chou En-lai apologised for the shooting, dismissing it as the result of “carelessness on the part of certain low ranking personnel of Chinese troops”. He insisted, however, that the shooting had taken place on the Chinese side of the border, and that the reason for the soldiers having infringed on the 20-kilometre demilitarised zone that had been agreed with Nepal was to pursue “rebel bandits” who were using Mustang as a base. However, B.P. Koirala, Nepal's prime minister, maintained that the shots had been fired within Nepalese territory. The episode has been examined with characteristic lucidity in a recent article by General Sir Sam Cowan (2016), from which the above quotation from Chou En-lai is taken. There is insufficient space here to reproduce Cowan's analysis in any detail, but it is nevertheless worth citing the main points in his understanding of the event, including the inconsistencies in Chou's explanation. To begin with, based on a study of the topography of the Kore La area (for which his article provides maps and photographs), he is unequivocal that the shooting occurred on Nepalese territory. Secondly, Chou's contention that the Chinese soldiers were acting against “rebel bandits” is implausible, because Mustang did not become a base for the Tibetan resistance movement until the following

year, 1961.¹⁷ Why, then, was the PLA present in such large numbers on the Nepal-Tibetan border? The author's conclusion may be quoted here as an appropriate ending for the present article, since it explains succinctly how the centuries-old tradition of commerce was abruptly brought to an end by a deliberate severing of the link between the main partners.

It is possible that the primary aim of this large deployment of troops was to secure and close the border areas as a means of signaling and establishing Chinese control. From the earliest stages of its military occupation of Tibet, China's cutting off of Tibet's traditional commercial links with Nepali traders in the areas of the northern border was a high priority. By doing this, China achieved another of its main objectives: establishing total control over Tibet's nomadic population. However, Article IV of the China-Nepal Boundary Agreement specifically banned armed personnel from operating within 20 kilometers of the border. This would have left the main passes clear for cross-border trade to continue on the same basis as before, something that China was determined to stop. Even though there was an assurance that Chinese troops would withdraw after 'the suppression of the rebel bandits', this would again leave the passes open. Perhaps, therefore, the repeated stress in Chou En-lai's letters on the threat posed by these 'Tibetan rebel bandits making harassment within our territory' was intended to provide a cover to circumvent the 20 kilometer border restriction zone. It also had the additional advantages of distracting attention from the killing of the unarmed Subedar and of weakening and embarrassing B.P. Koirala. (Cowan 2016)

¹⁷ The first men from Kham began to assemble in Mustang in September 1960, three months after the incident, and only on 2 April 1961 did they receive their first airdrop of weapons from the CIA.

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