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Archives from Tibet and the Himalayan Borderlands: Notes on Form and Content

Abstract: While Tibetan literary production generally evokes images of cloth-bound loose-leaf longbooks filling the shelves of monasteries, the culture also has a well-developed, though less widely known, archival tradition. The documents that make up these archives differ from books with respect to terminology, form, script, content and storage. Archival literature has received relatively little scholarly attention, but it nevertheless constitutes a vitally important source for our understanding of domains such as law, taxation and social history. Archives from Central Tibet tell us about the relations between authorities—mainly the government, the church and the aristocracy—and the peasantry; but it is mainly thanks to archival collections from culturally Tibetan areas in countries adjacent to China (notably India and Nepal) that we can obtain a privileged insight into the lives of local communities in past centuries.

1 Books and documents

Certain cultures make no categorical difference between a library and an archive. This is not the case of Tibet, which distinguishes between the two in terms of systems of storage, the material aspects of the texts in question, the types of script used and their subject matter. As far as books are concerned, Tibetan distinguishes between two main kinds. One, known as *pecha* (*dpe cha*),¹ is the traditional looseleaf longbook, sometimes referred to as the *pothi* format after the Indian term for the model on which it was based. The Indian prototype is made out of palm leaves, and it is this form that the Tibetan longbook reproduces in paper. The folios of Indian books were kept in order by a pair of strings that passed through their entire thickness. Tibetan books do not have these strings, but some books—especially certain larger-format categories of canonical works—have two small circles drawn on each folio as a sort of pious vestige

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1 Tibetan terms will be presented in a roughly phonetic form, followed by an orthographic transliteration at their first occurrence.

of the ancestral design. The other type of book is the modern Western-style book, known as *dep* (Tib. *deb*). The term *dep* is an abbreviation of the older *dephther* (*deb ther*), ‘records’ or ‘annals’. *Deb ther* corresponds to the Persian and Arabic *daftar*, meaning the same thing, and *daftar* is in turn derived from the Greek *diphthera*, ‘skin’—a writing surface. Since the form and content of *deb* and the systems used for storing them are not significantly different from those that are familiar in the case of Western books, they will not concern us here. *Pecha* are now produced by modern methods, such as laser printing or, in India until relatively recently, offset lithography. Traditionally, however, they were of two types: blockprints and manuscripts, production methods that continue even now to be widely used.

Certain fantastic claims to the contrary notwithstanding, all forms of the Tibetan script are derived from a seventh-century Indian model known as Gupta or Late Brahmi. Over the course of centuries, more rounded and eventually a true cursive form of the script developed. Nearly all blockprints and many manuscripts feature the ‘headed’ Tibetan script, *ucen* (*dbu can*), though many manuscripts also use one or another of several more rounded, ‘headless’ *ume* (*dbu med*) varieties.

Pecha volumes are often wrapped in a cloth called *pere* (*dpe ras*, ‘*pecha* cloth’). The volume is then sandwiched between two wooden boards, which are often quite lavishly decorated objects, and then tightly bound with a cloth or leather strap. If they are pressed between boards in this way, the cloth wrapping is sometimes dispensed with. *Pecha* are normally stored either in the temples and assembly hall of a monastery, or in a library, *pendzökhang* (*dpe mdzod khang*, lit. ‘treasury of books’), a term that is also used for libraries of modern Western-style books. The storage shelves for *pechas* are adapted to their general form and the particular size of certain volumes, and are therefore relatively deep. The shelves usually consist of open wooden frames with a pigeonhole for one or more volumes, and the volumes themselves are stored so that they are perpendicular to the wall against which the shelves stand. The contents of the volume are identified by a cloth label tucked into the wrapping and displayed on the end, sometimes covered by a cloth flap that can be lifted to reveal the information beneath. *Pecha* are used for a vast array of subjects: religious and philosophical treatises, rituals, histories, biographies, scientific works and many other topics besides. The paper used for making *pecha* tends to be relatively rigid, an advantage in the case of liturgical texts in that it permits monks and priests to turn folios easily with one hand, while leaving the other free to manipulate ritual objects and musical instruments in the course of a ceremony. Thickness is sometimes obtained by gluing several layers together.

To these features of *pecha* we may contrast the kind of material that one is likely to find in a Tibetan archive. In short, these are all documents, known as *yikcha* or *yiktsak* (*yig cha*, *yig tshags*). They do not consist of longbook-style folios, but

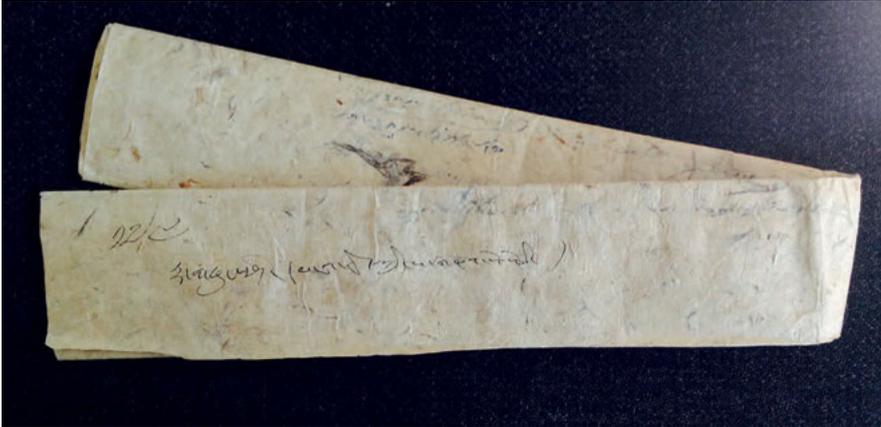


Fig. 1: Folded document from western Tibet. Photo: Charles Ramble.

are usually written on a single side of a sheet of paper. The size and shape of such sheets varies considerably. A receipt for a donation to a monastery, for example, may require just two or three lines of text. Typically, such a receipt will have a fore-shortened 'landscape' format, perhaps five centimetres or so along its vertical axis, and twenty centimetres wide. Longer documents tend to be in 'portrait' format, and if more space is required, further sheets are glued to the ends of those that have been filled. Documents that have been extended in this way may measure several metres in length. The paper for documents is much thinner than that preferred for *pechas*. It generally consists of a single layer, and the plants that are sometimes used—such as *Stellera* spp.—produce a softer and more pliable material. Documents are stored by folding them horizontally, beginning roughly a centimetre from the end, and working upwards. It is common practice to begin writing a document several centimetres from the top of the sheet, so that the blank section can be wrapped around the folded document to form a protective envelope. Once the series of horizontal folds has been completed, the document, which now resembles a flattened scroll, is folded in half along a vertical axis, and a brief note about its contents may be inscribed on the outside (Fig. 1).

Documents are occasionally folded concertina-style, but this is something of a rarity. Other forms of documents include booklets made by folding a set of pages in half along a horizontal axis and stitching them together along the fold. This format, which is sometimes referred to as the *depth* style, may serve a wide range of genres. As the name indicates (see above), it is often used for records of one sort or another, such as tax payments and liabilities, endowments for rituals, and legal manuals. However, the generic range is not restricted to texts that one

might typically find in archives, and may include historical and didactic works that were intended for public recitation. These volumes tend to be quite small, and may have been designed for ease of transportation and to be held while the reader was standing in a public assembly.

Less commonly, the stitching may bind the pages at the left margin to resemble a Western-style book, although the pages have the shape of longbook folios rather than a 'portrait' format. Stitched texts of this sort are also commonly used for almanacs as well as manuals for divination and astrology.

It is common practice to protect documents with cloth or leather reinforcement. In the case of single-sheet documents, the paper may be pasted onto a silk backing, and the procedure for folding the document will be the same as if it were unprotected. Stitched books, too, may have covers, consisting of cotton or silk cloth or, more rarely, leather.

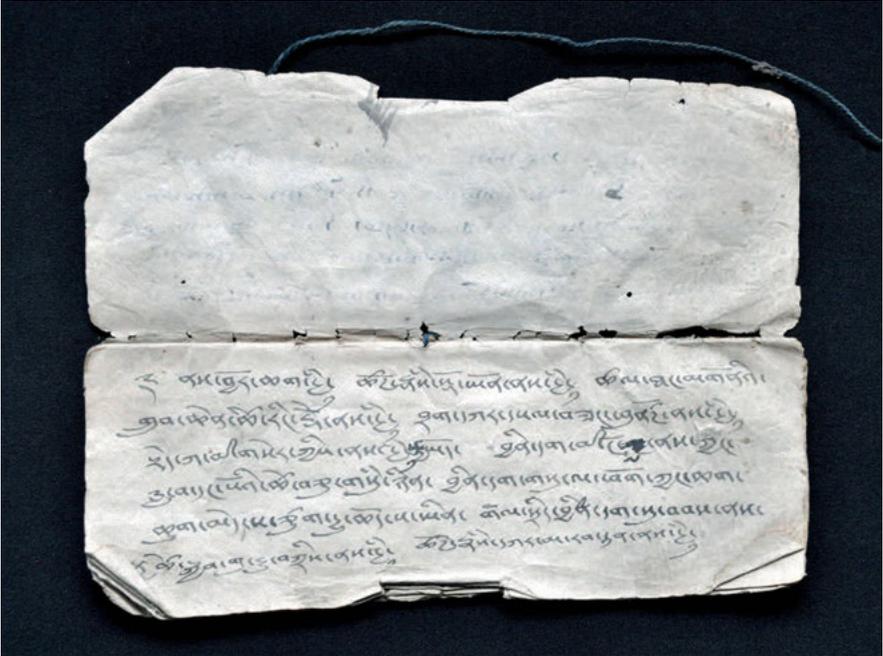


Fig. 2: *Depth* style register from southern Mustang, Nepal. Photo: Agnieszka Helman-Ważny.



Fig. 3: Silk cloth-backed document from western Tibet. Photo: Charles Ramble.



Fig. 4: Cotton cloth-backed register of endowments for temple ceremonies, Mustang, Nepal.

The script that is used for writing documents is almost never *ucen*, the headed form; nor indeed do documents use the various types of large *ume*, the ‘headless’ variety, that frequently occur in *pecha*. The headless category subsumes a wide variety of styles, ranging from the clearly formed, unconnected letters typical of *pecha* to a fluid hand that can properly be described as cursive. Tibetan has names to describe numerous sub-categories of headless script, depending on features such as the length of the descenders, the form of the vowels and so forth. Most official documents were written in the cursive script, known as *khyuk* (*'khyug*). This script was a requirement for private documents in Central Tibet, though a slightly more formal version, known as *sharma* (*gshar ma*), was sometimes used until the end of the nineteenth century (Schneider 2002, 417). In the examples from the Himalayan borderlands that will be considered below, we are likely to find a wider variety of hands than is generally to be found in Central Tibetan collections. This variety is likely to be the result of the setting in which scribes were trained. Many scribes were hereditary village lamas who would have been taught to write not in a school or monastery but at home, by their fathers, or else by another lama to whom their basic education had been entrusted. This situation would favour a greater degree of scribal idiosyncrasy than an environment in which the transmission of stylistic norms was more regulated.

An obstacle facing any attempt to classify scripts in provincial archives is that the formal Tibetan scriptural categories denote ideal types, whereas in reality there are numerous intermediate forms that do not correspond precisely to one category or another. Whereas some documents are written in *khyuk*, and in others the script is closer to the more rounded, larger-lettered *tshuk* (*tshugs*), most fall into the category called *khyukmatshuk* (*'khyug ma tshugs*, lit. ‘neither *khyuk* nor *tshuk*’): that is, a script that exhibits features of both.

2 Archival collections

Documents are not stored in libraries but in archives. The usual term for an archive is *yiktsang* (*yig tshang*), literally a ‘nest of letters’. The documents themselves may be kept in a variety of different ways. They may, for instance, be collected together into cloth wallets or kept in leather or metal trunks, or wicker baskets, or even sacks, which are often suspended from rafters to protect them from the depredations of rodents.



Fig. 5: Family archive from southern Mustang, Nepal. Photo: Agnieszka Helman-Ważny.



Fig. 6: Family archives from southern Mustang, Nepal. Photo: Agnieszka Helman-Ważny.



Fig. 7: Lhasa magistrates (detail). Photo: Sir Charles Bell, 1921. Courtesy of Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford.

Fig. 7, a photograph of magistrates in Lhasa that was taken in 1924, shows what was probably a common way of archiving legal documents—by stringing them together and attaching them to a pillar.

Archives of one sort or another are known to have existed ever since Tibet developed a system of writing early in its imperial period (seventh to ninth centuries), and remnants of archives have survived from all periods and regimes since then. However, the most prolific producer of documents in Tibetan history was unquestionably the Ganden Phodrang and its related institutions. The Ganden Phodrang was the name of the government that was established by the Fifth Dalai Lama in 1642 with the patronage and military support of the Oirat Mongol leader Gushri Khan, the founder of the Qoshot Khanate. The military campaigns

led by Gushri resulted in the defeat of the Dalai Lamas' political rivals, and the unification of the country under the rule of Lhasa for the first time since the collapse of the empire seven centuries earlier, albeit across a much more limited territory. The Ganden Phodrang government lasted until it was dismantled following the Lhasa uprising against the Communist Chinese presence in 1959, and the flight of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama to India.

Under the Ganden Phodrang, there were three entities that were entitled to receive revenue from estates, which consisted of agrarian and pastoral communities. These were the state itself, the aristocracy, and—the largest landholder—the Buddhist church. The management of these peasant estates generated a wealth of documentation, to which we must add other categories, such as correspondence related to international relations. In the four hundred years of its existence, the Ganden Phodrang and its satellites generated a vast quantity of documentary material that was archived in government and monastic repositories, as well as the private collections of noble families.

3 Archives and social history

The destruction of archives that took place in Tibet between 1959 and the end of the Cultural Revolution in the 1970s resulted in the obliteration of most of this material. Communist propaganda photos from the period proudly show the immolation of entire archives at public gatherings.² The stated justification for this destruction was the argument that the documents symbolised the oppression of the population through indebtedness and bonded servitude, and the pyres were a dramatic expression of the people's liberation from their condition of abjection. Current opinions about conditions in Tibet before 1959 are starkly polarised: it was either a paradise on earth, or else it was a feudal hell. Knowledge of the reality of the situation cannot advance by simple reiteration of either position, but through the analysis of the administrative documents of that time. The millions of documents that were destroyed between the 1950s and the 1970s may well have been perceived as symbols of fiscal and legal oppression, but their destruction means that the possibility of knowing the condition of the peasantry in the areas of Tibet concerned has been lost for ever. The most and systematic scholarly studies of the social system under the Ganden Phodrang government are provided by

² For one such public immolation of archives, see <https://s-media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/736x/96/b1/d1/96b1d1433483efc4a3c688b6aa8573c6.jpg>

the work of Melvyn Goldstein although, as anthropological studies based substantially on interviews, they naturally cover only the last period of the old Tibetan government (e.g. Goldstein 1968, 1971). Goldstein's well-defined characterisation of the socio-economic structure of 'old' Tibet as a form of serfdom has provoked much criticism, much of it far less well justified and documented than his own position. What most accounts lack are, on the one hand, extensive and representative philological and diplomatic analyses of archived materials, which would provide a solid basis for the examination of the whole legal, administrative and bureaucratic processes involved; and on the other hand, analyses of material that might offer insights into earlier periods of the Ganden Phodrang. Such material has been edited and analysed extensively by Dieter Schuh, who has pioneered the field of diplomatics within Tibetan Studies (see for example Schuh 1988, 2008), but the examination of such material on a larger scale as sources for a social history has only begun within the past few years.³ Studies of Tibetan history have been based almost exclusively on historiographic sources. Now that other sources are available they, too, should come to form the basis of scholarly writing. This will not only complete our picture of Tibet's past, but also modify it in many ways.

The destruction of archives in Tibet may have been very extensive, but it was not complete. It is estimated that there are some two to three million documents in the National Archives in Lhasa. This institution even publishes a Chinese-language periodical with the English title *Tibetan Archives*. Selections from the archive occasionally appear in its pages, and though examples of this material are always very welcome, the fact that each selection is made only after a careful vetting of its contents necessarily compromises the value of such material for research on any aspect of social history: this sort of selectiveness gives us a very partial view of what was surely a complex overall picture. In 1998, the University of Bonn initiated a DFG-funded collaborative project with the Archives of the Tibet Autonomous Region to digitise a part of the collection. The corpus that was selected for attention was the archive of the monastery of Kundeling, which is located close to Lhasa itself. 2,700 documents were digitised, and may now be consulted online on the website *Digitized Tibetan Archives Material at Bonn University*.⁴ These documents, which cover the period from the thirteenth to the twentieth centuries, as well as those contained in Schuh (1988), are a priceless resource for our understanding of the relationship between a well-known monastery of the dominant school of Tibetan Buddhism and the revenue-yielding

³ See, for instance, Ramble/Schwieger/Travers 2013.

⁴ <http://www.dtab.uni-bonn.de/tibdoc/index1.htm>

peasant estates that were under its control. Perhaps the most important thing about the documents in this archive is precisely that—they are an archive, something that is qualitatively more than merely the sum of the parts that make it up. As interesting as an individual document may be, the availability of the context in which it was produced might make it possible for us to see the event to which it relates unfolding over the course of time, or perhaps to realise that it is an aberration, conveying a message that is at odds with the evidence of the other material available. An example of two such documents will be given at the end of this article. Access to a large number of documents that span an extended period is essential if we are ever to begin to address the vexed questions that underlie certain political, social and economic institutions—the matter of whether Tibet was a feudal society or not being just one of these.

We are very fortunate indeed that certain archival collections from Central Tibetan dependencies and semi-autonomous enclaves were brought into exile by groups of refugees who fled Tibet in 1959. A catalogue of one such collection from the south-western part of Central Tibet, notably the principality of Porong (Pong rong) and nearby areas, has recently been published by Hanna Schneider (2012). The importance of such archives is that they significantly modify the image of the Tibetan polity as a homogenous entity under a monumental centralised bureaucracy. Although principalities such as Porong were within the political orbit of the Dalai Lamas, they enjoyed considerable autonomy under hereditary rulers, and sometimes with their own system of priesthood.

4 Tibetan archives in the Himalayan region

The Tibetan cultural area extends beyond the territory of the PRC to include numerous enclaves in contiguous parts of the Himalayan region. Certain areas of Pakistan and India that now follow Islam have retained their use of the Tibetan language, and archives from some of these regions—such as Purig in northwest India—have been published by Dieter Schuh. The same author has also published archival collections from Ladakh and Spiti, also in northwest India (Schuh 2008, 2016).

Mention has been made above of the losses to Tibet's archival heritage suffered during the period of democratic reform and the Cultural Revolution, but there are factors other than politically motivated excesses that can lead to such destruction. The late Professor Tsering Gyalpo, a senior researcher at the Tibetan Academy of Social Science in Lhasa, was brought up in a nomad family in the far west of Tibet. On one occasion in the 1990s when he was revisiting his family while on leave, he noticed a young male relative making cheese by straining whey from curd through

what appeared to be an unusually fine piece of cloth. On inspecting it more closely he saw that the cloth was a length of silk brocade, and he asked his relative where he had found it. The young man replied that, after the recent death of one of the clan elders the family had sorted through his belongings and found numerous such pieces of brocade. Some were quite old and worn, but it was found that if the paper that was glued to one side of each of the pieces was peeled off, the cloth itself made a fine curd strainer. Tsering Gyalpo then realised that the items to which the young man was referring were in fact old cloth-backed documents, and he was able to salvage those that were left from being converted into dairy accessories.⁵

A similar chance encounter was responsible for saving a particularly important Tibetan archive from oblivion. The country of Sikkim, located in the eastern Himalayas, was created in the seventeenth century. It later became a protectorate under the British Raj, and was eventually incorporated into the Republic of India as a state in 1975. The uncrowned son of the last king to rule, the Chögyal, is a devout Buddhist, and in the 1990s in a visionary moment he decided to make a bonfire of the palace archives on the grounds that they were emblems of ephemeral worldly affairs. He heaped up the documents and set light to the pile. As luck would have it, a member of the Namgyal Research Institute for Tibetology, which is situated in Gangtok, the capital of Sikkim, happened to be passing. He extinguished the fire and took the collection to the institute. The documents were later digitised, and a catalogue of them published by Saul Mullard and Hissey Wangchuk (2010).

The Sikkim Palace Archive comprises over 700 documents, ranging in topic from village-level land disputes to legal codes introduced by the government. This collection of materials illustrates the relationship between the common people of Sikkim and the state, which was defined not only by the political structures of Sikkim, but also through legal cases and law codes. Indeed, unlike other monarchic polities, the relationship between king and subjects was an intimate one, defined by the right of people, even from the lowest social strata, to correspond directly with the king over legal disputes. This collection contains examples from most regions of Sikkim, in which individuals wrote directly to the king about legal cases, ranging in scale from minor disputes over uprooting of cardamom plants, for example, to major conflicts between powerful estates. The archives also include royal decrees and tax documents, lists of government expenditure, trade licences, and government loans, all of which are vital to understanding the economic history of the region. This archive, together with smaller collections that have recently come to light in Sikkim, have effectively made it possible to rewrite important chapters of the

5 Tsering Gyalpo, personal communication 1998.

early history of the principality (Mullard 2009), while providing important information for the analysis of stratification, taxation, legal codes and the relationship between people and state with other areas of Tibet and the Himalaya.

Insofar as most of the examples discussed above are the archives of monasteries or else political centres of one sort or another, the type of documents they contain are to a great extent concerned with ‘vertical’ communication between authorities and ordinary people. Even if, as in the case of Sikkim, there was a certain amount of ‘upward’ correspondence in the form of petitions to the ruler or higher authorities, much of the material in these collections consists of edicts and other orders to social inferiors, records of ceremonies and other official events, lists of gifts, financial matters and suchlike. These collections contain relatively few documents concerning dealings between villagers; the overwhelming majority of them consist of different categories of communication from institutions or individuals in positions of authority to lower-ranking members of the population, such as the peasantry.

An exception to this general pattern is to be found in the archives of Mustang, a district of Nepal that was an autonomous kingdom until the late eighteenth century. The southern part of the kingdom had seceded from the north earlier than this, and was ruled by a succession of dukes who belonged to a local noble family. After the Gorkhas’ annexation of the entire territory during their unification of Nepal, the king and the duke became the representatives of the Kathmandu-based government of the new country, and retained a high degree of autonomy. There is evidence that, prior to the arrival of the ancestors of those local rulers, many of the communities in the territory operated as something akin to miniature democratic city states, with elected rotating leaders and a strong sense of integrity (several of them were even endogamous), and this system survived both monarchic rule and modern government structures in the form of a vibrant civil society down to the present day. Consequently, with the exception of a few letters from the King of Mustang, local dignitaries and monasteries in Tibet, much the greater part of the archives concern dealings *inter pares*. Many private households and most communities possess archives of documents dealing with a wide range of mainly secular affairs. (Where religion does feature in these, it is usually in relation to the financial or organisational aspects of ceremonies.) Community archives are usually kept in a public building; responsibility for their care lies with the annually-rotating headmen, and they may be opened only in the presence of the village assembly. Alternatively, the box of documents may be kept in the house of one headmen, and the key with the other. In the case of private archives, the status of some households is such that the archives contain a certain

proportion of items of a public character. Private archives typically consist of documents such as contracts for loans of grain or cash, sales of land, wills, disputes over ownership and inheritance of property. Community archives may be classified according to various criteria, but broadly fall into two categories: documents relating to internal affairs and those concerned with dealings with outsiders. The former includes records of community gatherings, rules for local natural resource management (such as forests, water and grazing), disputes between fellow-villagers that were mediated by the community, and annual grain taxes to the communal fund. Those dealing with outsiders may include pasture boundary agreements with neighbours, and directives or other correspondence from political authorities such as the King of Mustang or the Government of Nepal.

5 What can we learn from archives?

As mentioned earlier, local archives are the only reliable basis we have for addressing general themes such as whether Tibet had a feudal economy. They are also the only source we have for the actual operation of institutions for which there is an abundance of prescriptive literature. This is the case with Tibetan law, for example. Although there are numerous law codes from different periods of Tibetan history, we should be careful about taking them at face value, or assuming that they were actually applied in practice. James Scott has alerted us to the existence of ‘hidden transcripts’—the oral or written strategies adopted by ‘subaltern’ groups to express collective dissent, and their refusal to subscribe in anything other than a superficial way to the ideology of the dominant powers (Scott 1990). Two examples of such ‘hidden transcripts’ from Mustang may be cited by way of an illustration. The documents in question, which both date from the late nineteenth century, are from two communities that are situated some six hours’ walk from each other. The first contains a general formulation for the management of disputes within the community:

There should be no legal disputes within the community. But if there are, should [the disputants] go down to the government court without paying money to the community they shall be fined 8 rupees. After paying one flask of beer and 1 anna [one-sixteenth of a rupee] to the headmen, one rupee shall be taken from each of the disputants, and the headmen shall sit and pass judgment. One rupee shall be given to the community, and one rupee shall be for the headmen. If someone rejects [the judgment], he may not go [to the courthouse] before paying 1 anna [to the community]. If the dispute is settled internally, one part

[of the deposited sum] shall be taken from the winner, and two parts from the loser, and the council...shall take it.⁶

The document explicitly states that members of the village could, if they wished, take their disputes to be heard in the government court. However, in order to do so they first had to pay a fee to the community, and failure to pay this fee would have been punishable by a fine. There was an obvious preference for dealing with legal issues within the community, without having recourse to government structures. The second example concerns a particular case in which a villager was fined for carelessness while irrigating his fields.

While Kāmi Sarki was irrigating his fields, the water ran into the community house, and his goats were seized [as security]. In violation of his fine and customary village law he went to the government court, where he received a [favourable] judgment. However, when he was later tried according to community law, because he did not know that he had violated village law in going [to court] the fine of 50 rupees was reduced to 25 rupees.⁷

In this particular village, it seems, there was a blanket prohibition on taking any internal dispute to a government court. Is it possible that a similar reluctance to turn to official legal channels prevailed in villages in Central Tibet? We do not know; if villages ever did have archives that contained the answer, they have either been lost or destroyed.

6 The lives of people without history

While there is little in the archives of Mustang that might tell us about its political or economic relations with the rest of Nepal or Tibet, the documents do offer a rare insight into the day-to-day concerns of local communities: the regulation of taxes and the use of natural resources, counts of livestock, and conflicts with neighbouring settlements over territorial boundaries, among other things. But beyond what they might tell us about local institutions and social organisation, the archives shine a patchy but nevertheless precious light onto the lives of ordinary people. As in the case of Europe or America, historians of Tibet have understandably focused on the bigger picture relating to the nation of Tibet and its affairs with its neighbours, with the vicissitudes of the religious schools, and the

⁶ Undated Tibetan document from the village of Shang, southern Mustang, photographed by Charles Ramble and Nyima Drandul in 1993.

⁷ *Tibetan Sources 1*, document HMA/Te/Tib/23.

fortunes of great men. The perspective of ‘history from below’, which owes so much to the French *Annales* school that flourished between the two World Wars, has not yet featured prominently in historical writing on Tibetan societies. Founded in 1929 by Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre, the school has broadly favoured a focus on what would later come to be known, in Gramsci’s phrase, as ‘subaltern’ groups, in combination with methods of other disciplines in the social sciences. Among the more recent authors in this lineage we might count Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, whose best-known work, *Montaillou*, catalogues three decades in the life of a mediaeval French community through the records of the Inquisition (Le Roy Ladurie 1978); and, even more pertinently, Carlo Ginzburg, whose studies of heterodoxy and witchcraft in the Friuli have so enriched our perspectives on popular religion in Early Modern Europe (1980a, 1980b).

In spite of their macabre context, and allowing for inevitable distortions, inquisition records such as these—the experiences and beliefs of subjects extracted under interrogation over a protracted period—offer rare opportunities for developing a three-dimensional profile of the individuals in question, as the historians cited above have amply demonstrated. Mercifully, there are no such records as these in Mustang, although the testimonies of defendants in court cases can illuminate a single event (an elopement, a fight, a theft) by presenting the same incident from a number of different perspectives.

Some of the documents have a touch of the absurd: the record of a quarrel between two people, one of whom had failed to honour an undertaking that he would give the other a quid of chewing tobacco; others give a picture of desperation and drama, as when, in the late seventeenth century villagers who were besieged during a war were forced to take refuge from an invading army, ‘starving in the cliff caves of the birds’ and surviving on nothing but buckwheat husks; and glimpses of private sadness, like that of a young woman named Ngachok Butri, abandoned by the man who left her pregnant, wandering the freezing hills of Mustang in mid-winter while her father fretted that ‘she has taken her own life from the cliffs or in the river’.

Family archives are a particularly valuable source. Individually, the kinds of documents contained in such collections may not be particularly inspiring—contracts for sale of fields, inheritance disputes, arguments over fiscal payments, loan receipts and so forth—but taken together they can tell us a great deal about the life and character of a person. Biographical writing is a very abundant and popular genre in Tibet. However, since the purpose of life writing is to present an exemplary spiritual life, much of this literature is hagiographic, and tells us little about the mundane day-to-day life of the subjects. At the opposite extreme to

such accounts of saintly lives we have the archive of a family of hereditary Buddhist lamas from southern Mustang. The last member of the line died, heirless, in 1992, but the archives remained in a wicker basket in the abandoned family house. This archive made it possible to reconstruct the history of the family over six generations, and although some of this information is rather skeletal, there are enough documents pertaining to certain individuals that we can obtain a reasonably substantial picture of their lives. ‘Substantial’ is not the same as ‘rounded’: if classical Tibetan biography focuses on the subject’s piety to the exclusion of all else, documents are likely to emphasise the contrary characteristics. If a person generates a large volume of such material, that is likely to be because he (or she) was embroiled in disputes, or was litigious, or the target of lawsuits—or, in the case of one of the lamas in the family, Ösal Dorje, all the above.

The picture that emerges from the archives is not the beatific face that we would have seen from his biography, had he or anyone else thought to write one. Ösal Dorje, who probably died some time in the second decade of the twentieth century, emerges from the archives as acquisitive, ruthless, and probably violent. In 1907, for example, he was accused of brutally beating a personal enemy and of practising destructive black magic. But of course, this portrait is no more rounded a picture of the man than we would have had from that unwritten hagiography: while it may be true that Tibetan biographies tend to inflate the spiritual qualities of the protagonist, the very nature of archival documents casts the subject in an unfavourable light and underrepresents his spiritual qualities. Given the circumstances of Ösal Dorje’s birth and childhood, it is obvious that he had to fight to make his way in the world. He was the illegitimate son of a feckless trader, and his mother had forfeited her inheritance rights by virtue of this brief liaison. Before her death she bequeathed to him the house she had been grudgingly allocated by her brother, but was later evicted from it on the grounds that the property was non-impartible. He inherited absolutely nothing. There is little in such a childhood to foster open-handed generosity or financial recklessness.

Here I would like to return to a point made earlier, about the immense value of an archive as opposed to an individual document, however spectacular or interesting the document may be. An archive provides documents with a context without which they might be completely misleading. Two examples will serve to illustrate this point. One is a claim by Ösal Dorje’s son, Tenpa Gyaltzen, that he is the rightful heir to the house that his father had inhabited. Ösal Dorje had inherited the house from his mother, Phurba Angmo, who had two brothers. To support his claim, Tenpa Gyaltzen cites the will of his great-grandmother—Phurba Angmo’s mother—to the effect that ‘this house of ours, from its topmost point to its foundations, shall be the exclusive possession of our daughter Phurba Angmo,

who gave us the filial service that ought to have been provided by all three of our children, and not in the possession of her two brothers'. Tenpa Gyaltsen won the case against the cousin who wanted to evict him. If this document was all we had to go on, we might have no reason to doubt the veracity of the argument, and would probably derive a sense of satisfaction from the thought that justice had been done, and that the disadvantaged Tenpa Gyaltsen and his father Ösal Dorje had been allowed to retain the property. In fact, the situation was more complicated than this. Phurpa Angmo had got on well with her older brother, Rigden, but not the younger, Rangdrol. The two brothers allowed her to live in a small house belonging to the main estate, but in 1866, after the death of Rigden, who had protected her, Rangdrol wanted to evict her—and he would have been legally entitled to do so because her welfare was technically not his responsibility but that of her common-law husband. Thanks to the intercession of intermediaries, however, she was allowed to remain in the house under certain conditions:

Phurba Angmo was distressed at having no house in which to live, and begged Lama Rangdrol and his son Tshewang Bumpa to lend her a house in which to live until her death. But the lama and his son refused, and the petitioners begged them respectfully [to change their minds]. This is document of agreement between the two parties. Until Phurba Angmo's death, the lama and his son may not turn her out of the house, forbidding her to live in it.⁸

According to this excerpt, then, Tenpa Gyaltsen's grandmother, Phurba Angmo, had been permitted to occupy the house until her death, after which it would not be inherited by her son, Ösal Dorje, but should revert to the main estate. The will that Tenpa Gyaltsen cited forty-six years later, in which Phurba Angmo's mother is reported to have bequeathed the house to her, obviously never existed. He simply made it up. In the event, the court's decision was later reversed, and Tenpa Gyaltsen had to move to another village.

The other document, which dates from 1906, concerns a community of nuns from a group of four villages. From the seventeenth century until this time, it was customary for the second of three daughters born into any family in these four villages to join a local convent named Künzang Chöling. The convent stands on the territory of one of these four villages, named Tshug. Te, which is also mentioned in the document, is another of these four villages. Upper Tshognam is the name of the area in Te to which Lama Ösal Dorje moved after his eviction from his previous house, which stood on the territory of Tshug.

⁸ *Tibetan Sources* 2, document HMA/LTshognam/Tib/08.

Seven nuns of Te [who are then named] have been dragged outside by the nuns of Tshug's convent, who expelled them with the notification that they need never come back. Henceforth these nuns shall be affiliated with the temple of Upper Tshognam, and the lama [Ösal Dorje] has agreed to this proposal.⁹

The nuns of Te, then, were mistreated by their sisters in Künzang Chöling and were forced to leave their convent. Fortunately for them, Ösal Dorje, the lama of Tshognam, agreed to become their mentor. A contemporary document from the archive of the convent itself presents a rather different version of this event. On the day in question, the nuns of Te had failed to arrive for the beginning of a ceremony, and only turned up after it was over. According to the written testimony of the other nuns,

We asked them why they had come so late, but they... said, 'From this day on, we beg to take our leave!' We nuns invited them to sit down with us and to have some beer, but they refused to have any, and left amid much shouting and yelling. On a later occasion, when the preceptor Sister Pen Trashi died, we sent our steward to call the nuns of Te to take part in the prayers, they did not come; and when we sent them the 'corpse food' [the food that is distributed after the death of an individual], they refused to accept it, saying that they were no longer members of the convent. ... Now these seven nuns have made an illicit agreement with a new religious establishment, Upper Tshognam. ... They should not be allowed to join the temple of Upper Tshognam, and we ask the law to apprehend them and to compel them to return them to our nunnery, which from past times has been the convent of our community.¹⁰

When the construction of the convent of Künzang Chöling was completed in 1696, Mustang was still a vassal of the powerful kingdom of Jumla, in the far west of what is now Nepal. A minister of Jumla who visited the building in the company of its founder described it as 'the jewel in the crown of the realm'. Since it stood on land belonging to Tshug, the convent was a source of considerable pride for the settlement. The rift in the community of nuns that Lama Ösal Dorje had managed to achieve was a double victory for him: he had succeeded in consolidating his position as a lama of some consequence in Upper Tshognam by gathering under his tutelage all the nuns from the village of Te; and incidentally, by purloining these nuns from Künzang Chöling, he had dealt a fatal blow to a convent that for three centuries had been the glory of the village from whose territory he had been evicted.

⁹ *Tibetan Sources 2*, document HMA/UTshognam/Tib/23.

¹⁰ Unpublished document from the archive of Tshug: HMA/Tshug/Tib/1/04.

I had photographed the archive of this family of lamas in 1993, and in 2016 returned with my colleague Agnieszka Helman-Ważny to reexamine them for codicological features. The new owner of the abandoned building managed to find them in the basket in which they were contained in the house's chapel. When Dr Helman-Ważny returned in 2017 to complete her work, the owner of the house, who was renovating it to convert it into a lodge, informed her that he had thrown them away. Archives such as these do not tell us about famous battles, or the achievements of saints and kings, or affairs of state. They are, however, the only window we have onto the lives of local priests like Ösal Dorje and his family, forgotten nuns, and ordinary villagers; the kinds of things that were important to them and their daily triumphs and disappointments. It does not need a Cultural Revolution to obliterate their memory. As the photos of the two village archives show (Figs 3, 4), the documents are unprepossessing scraps of paper, resembling nothing so much as litter; all it takes is a morning of house-cleaning to erase all traces of a family for ever.

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