

CLAIMING THE FRONTIER: A NOTE ON THE INCORPORATION OF NUBRI WITHIN THE BORDERS OF NEPAL

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Most of Nepal's northern borderlands are inhabited by ethnic Tibetans who migrated and settled in the Himalayan highlands at various times in history.¹ The reasons for settlement are varied and complex, and in many cases seem to be the direct outcome of geopolitical circumstances and economic opportunities. While many communities initially formed in an ambiguous frontier zone where political control was weak, they were subsequently incorporated into the domains of either Nepal or Tibet through the expansion of state power. In some cases the historical connections between border communities and Tibetan and/or Nepali polities have been fairly well documented. To cite just a few examples: Oppitz's seminal work on Sherpa history documents their migration from eastern Tibet to Solu-Khumbu around 500 years ago (Oppitz 1968, see also Ortner 1989); Jackson has documented the history of the kingdom of Mustang (Glo sMon-thang) (Jackson 1978, 1984); Clarke has demonstrated how the mixed Tibetan and Tamang social hierarchy in Helambu (Yol-mo) came into being (Clarke 1980a, 1980b) and Steinmann has detailed how control was balanced between local leaders and the emerging Nepali state in Walungchung during the last century (Steinmann 1991).

In the absence of detailed documentary evidence, past political affiliations are often difficult to gauge for frontier communities. The Nubri (Nub-ri)² Valley, situated south of the main Himalayan divide at

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2 In this paper all Tibetan place and personal names are transliterated approximately as they sound, followed in the first occurrence by a proper transcription from the written form.

the upper reaches of the Buri Gandhaki in northern Gorkha District, is one such place where the historical ambiguities of political association are difficult to sort out due to the lack of direct and irrefutable data.³ Today Nubri residents pursue a mixed economy of rain-fed agriculture and the herding of large bovines, primarily yaks and yak hybrids. In the past they engaged in a trans-Himalayan trade network linking the nomadic areas to the north with Arughat, Barpak and other Nepali villages to the south. Highland products, primarily salt, sheep, and wool were exchanged for lowland grains. Culturally, the people of Nubri are far more akin to their Tibetan neighbors across the passes than to their Ghale and Gurung neighbors in the south. Strong traditions of Nyingmapa Buddhism are maintained, based on village temples controlled by lineages of married lamas.

According to oral accounts the people in the upper part of the Nubri (Nub-ri) valley migrated long ago from the Tibetan plateau, while the people of the lower part of the valley came from both Tibet and areas to the south that are currently inhabited by Ghales. Based on an enumeration of people according to clan affiliation, people of Tibetan ancestry are more numerous. Today, the inhabitants of Nubri claim Tibetan ethnicity (*mi-rigs*)⁴ yet state that they are subjects (*mi-ser*) of Nepal. The purpose of this contribution is to address the question of precisely when they became subjects of the Nepali state.

Ample evidence exists to show that Nubri used to be a part of the Gungtang (Gung-thang) kingdom that was centered in Dzongga (rDzong-dga') to the northeast of Nubri from the tenth century to its downfall in 1620 at the hands of a rival Tibetan polity.⁵ A history of Dzongga written in 1749 by Tsewang Norbu (Kah:thog *rig-'dzin* Tshe-dbang Nor-bu), an eminent Tibetan scholar, refers specifically to Nubri on several occasions. For example he states that the domain of Gungtang stretched from Serib (Se-rib) in the southwest to Tingwari (Ting-wa-ri) in the southeast, with Rō (Ros) and the mountain Pungyen (dPung-rgyan, Nep: Manaslu)

3 For an ethnographic, historical and demographic account of Nubri see Childs 1998.

4 Some people self-identify as Gurung in the presence of other Nepali people, especially those of high caste. This is presumably a strategy to avoid the stigmatism of being labeled "Bhote", one of the lowest socio-ethnic categorizations in the Nepali caste system (see Höfer 1979).

5 For a more detailed account of the history of Nubri see Childs 2001.

occupying the middle border region (Gung-thang gdung-rabs 1990:90).⁶ Tsewang Norbu attributes symbolic significance to Nubri as a part of Gungtang domain, stating, “In the middle of Gungtang is lofty and rugged Nubri. The mountain to the right resembles a king seated on a throne. The mountain to the left resembles a queen pregnant with child” (Gung-thang gdung-rabs 1990:92). Nubri seems to have been incorporated within Gungtang in the late eleventh century based on the following citation: “During his reign, Lhachogde (Lha-mchog-lde, reigned during the late eleventh century) extended his realm beyond its extent of former times. In Nubri, the rugged mountainous area in the center [of his realm] which resembles a great highland wrapped in a silk curtain, he built the palace known as Upper Chikab (Phyis-khab gong). That was at the time when Milarepa (Mi-la Ras-pa, 1040-1123) was attaining complete perfection...” (Gung-thang gdung-rabs 1990:93). Around 1280 Gungtang’s hold over Nubri was solidified during the reign of Bumdegon (’Bum-lde-mgon) who built a series of forts to protect or control the boundaries of the kingdom. Accordingly, “In order to suppress the barbarous border region of Nubri, he [Bumdegon] built Dragdzong Nagpo (Brag-rdzong Nag-po, Black Cliff Fort) at Rö” (Gung-thang gdung-rabs 1990:108). The remains of this fort are still visible today.

In 1620 the Gungtang kingdom was eradicated by the Tibetan rulers of Tsang (gTsang), Central Tibet, and then in 1641 the former Gungtang domains were subsumed by the Fifth Dalai Lama and his Mongol allies (Bod-rje gdung-rabs 1974:15b-16a). Henceforth the Fifth Dalai Lama commenced to reorganize the entire Tibetan administration covering newly united territories. Dzongga, the former seat of Gungtang power, was made the center of a Tibetan administrative district (*rdzong*). A tax document called the Iron Tiger Year [1830] Tax Assessment, which was based on a 1740 prototype (see Surkhang 1986), lists Nubri as one of the areas within Dzongga District where people farmed land owned by the Tibetan government and paid taxes to that administration via Dzongga (lCags-stag zhib-gzhung 1989:333). Yet when an Indian pundit employed by the British to clandestinely scout routes into Tibet passed through Nubri in 1861, he states that the area south of the Himalayan divide was considered to be Nepali territory. Only after crossing the pass to the north of Nubri

6 Ros (pronounced Rö) is the Tibetan spelling for the village in Nubri known more commonly by its Nepali name Sama, or Samagaon. Serib is located in the Kali Gandhaki Valley of lower Mustang (see Jackson 1978). Tingwari remains unidentified, but I suspect it lay somewhere south of Kyirong (sKyid-grong) in the Trisuli Valley.

did the pundit enter an area administered by Tibet (Montgomerie 1868). A reasonable conclusion can be drawn from this evidence, namely, that the current border in northern Gorkha District between Tibet and Nepal was only recognized and formalized between 1830 and 1861.

The most likely timing of the event corresponds with the third war between Gorkha and Tibet. In 1855 Nepali troops under Jang Bahadur Rana occupied some border areas in southern Tibet, including Kyirong (sKyid-grong) and Dzongga (see Rose 1971:108-116; Shakabpa 1984:181-182; Sever 1993:88-91). After peace agreements were reached in 1856, Jang Bahadur relinquished control over most of the occupied territories. However, one of his long-standing defense objectives was to secure territory up to the Himalayan watershed (Sever 1993:89) since it is far easier to defend the lowlands from the top of a pass than from below. Although forced to relinquish the highlands north of Kyirong following the cessation of hostilities, he apparently pushed the border in Nubri to the natural barrier presented by the high Himalayan passes. According to oral historical accounts, Nubri became part of Nepal in the aftermath of the Nepal-Tibet war of 1855-1856.⁷ Other evidence includes the fact that a man of Thakuri descent was dispatched as *subbā* to settle in Nubri, represent the Nepali government, and collect tax revenues. His descendents still live in Nubri and have become culturally Tibetanized except for certain prohibitions pertaining to the consumption of any animal related to the cow (i.e., *dzo* and *dzomo* which are crosses between yaks and cows). The eldest son in the family held the hereditary position of *subbā* until the advent of the *panchayat* system. Numerous administrative documents, several of which bear the stamp of Jang Bahadur, are still held by the family and attest to the incorporation of Nubri into Jang Bahadur's domains.⁸

Although the precise reasons remain speculative, the main point is clear from the evidence presented above – Nubri was incorporated into the Nepali state at the end of the 1855-1856 war between Nepal and Tibet.

7 This information was related to me by Tashi Dorje, a highly respected lama from Nubri who is widely considered to be the leading authority on Nubri history. He specifically mentions the reign of Jang Bahadur as the time when Nubri became part of Nepal.

8 I have personally viewed these documents and they were recently photographed on microfilm by Dr Klaus-Dieter Mathes of the Nepal-German Manuscript Preservation Project. A detailed study of these documents can shed much light on the implications of Nubri's incorporation within Nepal.

Henceforth the residents of Nubri have held the dual distinction of being ethnic Tibetans who are subjects of Nepal.

Appendix: Tibetan Historical Sources on Nubri

This brief contribution to the history of Nepal's current border in Nubri is based primarily on Tibetan documents. A systematic review of Nepali manuscripts could no doubt throw further light on the situation and illuminate the complexities of the process that have only been briefly sketched in this paper. As for the documentary evidence in Tibetan, both in written and oral forms, it is quite fragmentary. Nevertheless, some of the written sources are readily available to scholars, so to facilitate further research I have provided some brief details below. A more thorough and critical assessment of historical sources is found in Childs 1998.

The earliest mention of Nubri is found in the writings of Milarepa (Mi-la Ras-pa, 1040-1123), who made a journey to the area during the late 11th century and spent time at Naljor Cave (rNal-'byor *phug*) (rDo-rje mgur-drug 1985:67b-68a). Aris refers to the passages contained therein (1975:50). The account is of dubious historical value since it was not written until the late 1400s and like most writings about Milarepa is more concerned with religious insights than details of local culture and history.

Prior to the 1850s the territory considered to comprise Nubri extended to the north of the Himalayan passes and included Taiga (rTa-sga) Monastery, founded by Sangye Tselpa (Sangs-rgyas Tshal-pa) around 1195 (see Vitali 1996:394-395 n.639). Taiga monastery possessed two interesting bilingual (Tibetan and Nepali) copper-plate inscriptions issued by Adityamalla and Punyamalla, kings of Jumla (Yatse/Ya-rtse) during the early 14th century. These land grant documents outline a patron-priest relationship between the Mallas and the incumbent lamas of Taiga. The documents were kept at Taiga monastery until 1959 or 1960 when they were brought across the border. The plates have been photographed and the Nepali texts have been referred to by several scholars (Petech 1980; Pandey 1997).

Nubri is mentioned in texts that center on Tibetan conceptions of sacred space, in particular the "hidden land" of Kyimolung (*sbas-yul* sKyid-mo-lung) situated in the area. According to Nyingmapa traditions, the hidden land is a refuge meant to be settled during a time of political and social upheaval (Childs 1999). The entire guide to Kyimolung is found in a single text (sKyid-mo-lung lam-yig 1983). In addition, there are two collections of prophecies attributed to the discoveries of

Gödemchan (rig-'dzin rGod-ldem-can), namely gSal-ba'i sgron-me (1973) and Ga'u bdun-ma (1983) in which portions of the same guide are found. Although the texts take the form of conversations between Padmasambhava and Tibet's medieval emperors (8th-9th centuries) and are attributed to the discoveries of Gödemchan at Zangzang Lhadag (Zangzang Lha-brag) in 1366, their actual time of composition is unknown. Regardless, the texts contain some interesting insights into the sacred nature of the local landscape and include a few references to the linguistic affiliations of local inhabitants. Kyimolung was definitely a sacred locale on the Tibetan landscape by the 16th century. The infamous "Mongol Repeller" Lodro Gyaltzen (*Sog bzlog-pa* Blo-gros Rgyal-mtshan, b. 1552) prophesizes a major military calamity around Dzongga and goes on to state that those of "pure lineage" should flee and settle in the areas around Nubri (*Sog-bzlog rnam-thar* 1975:16b).

The most interesting document on Nubri history that has come to light is a proclamation sealed by the 5th Dalai Lama (1617-1682) in 1661 that recognizes the legitimacy of the Ngabda (mNga'-bdag) lama lineage's claim of descent from the emperor Trisong Detsen (Khri-srong lDe-btsan, died late 8th or early 9th century). The manuscript is kept in Nubri. Aris published a partial translation of this document (1975:74-75), and a full transliteration of the text has also been published (Childs 2001). The importance of the document is that it legitimates a claim of descent from the Tibetan emperors thereby assuring that the lamas occupy the pinnacle of Nubri's social hierarchy. Furthermore, from this document we know that the ancestors of Nubri's Ngabda lama lineage were living in Traduntse (sPra-dun-rtse), a monastery in Western Tibet to the north of Nubri, during the 1600s.

Additional pieces of evidence for the history of Nubri are found in the biographies of some local lamas, most notably Pema Dondup (Padma Don-grub, 1668-1744) and Pema Wangdu (Padma dBang-'dus, b.1697) (see Pad-don rnam-thar 1979 and Pad-dbang rnam-thar 1979). Descriptions of their travels in the region reveal some of the connections between Nubri and Tibet. Specifically, there was no official Nepali presence in Nubri from Kathmandu or any minor kingdom outside of the valley and that the nearest Tibetan government representative resided in Nangtsar (Nang-tshar), just on the northern side of the passes over the Himalayan barrier. Nubri was probably a frontier area at the time laying beyond the administrative reach of nearby polities. More importantly, these biographies supply a wealth of ethnographic information about the inhabitants of the valley.

Several works by the famous Nyingmapa teacher, historian, and diplomat Tsewang Norbu (Kha:thog rig-'dzin Tshe-dbang Nor-bu, 1698-1755; for biographical information see Richardson 1967) contain information about Nubri. These include two historical works: (1) the genealogy of the descendants of the imperial family who settled in western Tibet (Bod-rje gdung-rabs 1974) and (2) a history of the rulers of the Gungtang kingdom (Gung-thang gdung-rabs 1990). An account of Tsewang Norbu's visit to Nubri in 1729 is contained in his biography (Tshe-nor rnam-thar 1976). Furthermore, a collection of his letters and minor teachings (Chab-shog khag 1977) contains religious instructions for several of his disciples from Nubri. Among Tsewang Norbu writings, Gung-thang gdung-rabs contains the best information on the history of Nubri. Parts of the text have been dealt with by Jackson (1984) and Vitali (1996).

lCags-stag zhib-gzhung (1989) is a taxation list from 1830 (*lcags-stag* = Iron Tiger Year) which is the basis for all government taxation in Tibet at the time. According to Surkhang, *zhib-gzhung* is an abbreviation for *zhib-dpyad gzhung-khra*, meaning "basic list which has been examined carefully" (1966:15). The original taxation list was established in 1740 (an Iron Monkey Year and hence called lCags-spre zhib-gzhung), but was modified in 1840 due to the enormous increase in acreage put under tillage during the intervening years (Surkhang 1966:16). The document is divided according to districts (*rdzong*). Nubri is included as one of the subdivisions of Dzongga District. The amount of taxable government landholdings are delineated, a clear indication that Nubri was at the time unambiguously included within the administrative realm of Tibet.

Regarding Nepali administrative documents, several are in the possession of the descendants of the former subbha of Nubri. Most of these delineate tax obligations and payments and as mentioned above were recently photographed by Klaus-Dieter Mathes of the Nepal-German Manuscript Preservation Project. Microfilms of the manuscripts are housed in Nepal's National Archives. A systematic review of these documents by qualified experts will certainly reveal interesting details on how the local administrative system integrated with the state-level polity.

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