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Interaction, followed by Varia

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Palden Gyal



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The Meu Kingdom. Unravelling the history of a Tibetan polity in the Sino-Tibetan borderlands, 1700-1930

Le royaume de Meu. L'histoire d'une politique tibétaine dans les régions frontalières sino-tibétaines, 1700-1930

Palden Gyal

- In the 1920s and 1930s, nearly a century ago, northeastern Tibet (Amdo) saw conquests by Qinghai Muslim generals, notably Ma Qi 馬麒 (1869-1931) and Ma Bufang 馬步芳 (1903-1977), through violent expeditions. Concurrently, southeastern Tibet (Kham) fell under the control of the Chinese warlord Liu Wenhui (1895-1976). Between these regions lays the modern-day Ngawa Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture (Tib. Rnga ba bod rigs dang chang rigs rang skyong khul; Ch. Aba Zangzu Qiangzu zizhi zhou 阿坝藏族羌族自治州). During the early 1950s, this region represented one of the last eastern Tibetan frontiers that succumbed to Chinese control. Among the formidable independent polities situated on the eastern edge of the Tibetan Plateau, the Meu Kingdom (Tib. Rme'u), ruled by its last king Pelgon Trinle Raptan (Tib. Dpal mgon 'phrin las rab brtan, 1916-1966), stood prominently. Two other neighbouring powerful polities in the vicinity were the Gyelrong (Tib. Rgyal rong) Kingdoms of Choktse (Tib. Mchog tse) and Trochu/Somang (Tib. Khro chu; So mang). These polities had resided on the periphery of the Tibetan Plateau for several centuries, skilfully navigating their position and relations with the Qing court, Mongols, and the Tibetan state in Lhasa. During the peak of the power struggle between the Communists and Nationalists at their doorstep, these Tibetan polities were unaware of the impending and fateful encounter with a new imperial regime, which proved to be far more powerful and brutal than its predecessors. Nevertheless, they engaged in conflicts against each other, vying for territorial expansion and regional dominance. This paper, while providing essential contextual background, touches briefly on the expansive

topic of Eastern Tibet's political history, but it mainly focuses on the Meu Kingdom, delving into its origins and tracing its rise as a regional power in southern Amdo, spanning from the early 18th century to the early 20th century¹.

Ngawa: a fragment of Ngari?

- 2 Before its incorporation into the People's Republic of China in the early 1950s, Ngawa (Tib. Rnga ba; Ch. Aba 阿坝) was a region with a highly diverse religious, ethnic, and political landscape. Besides the monastic institutions of different Tibetan Buddhist sects, including the Jonang (Tib. Jo nang) tradition, it is home to some of the most important and earliest Bon monasteries in Eastern Tibet. Although it is difficult to determine the demographics of Ngawa before the 1950s, there was a sizable population of Hui Muslims who had been seasonal traders for several decades but permanently settled in Ngawa circa 1910. In the next two decades, some Muslim traders from Songpan migrated to Ngawa, while more Hui Muslims from Linxia (Gansu Province) settled in Ngawa fleeing the violent sectarian conflicts in 1929 (*Aba xian zhi* 阿坝县志, Anonymous 1989, pp. 592-593). According to another Chinese gazetteer, the entire current-day greater Ngawa Region was referred to as Misang (Tib. Mi sang) in the 6th century, and it was a territory of the Tanguts (Tib. Mi nyag) and a vassal of the Azha (Tib. A 'zha; Ch. Tuyuhun 吐谷浑) (*Rnga ba khul sa gnas lo rgyus* 1996, p. 24). Both Tibetan and Chinese historical records extensively document the existence of these kingdoms, and it is well known that the Tibetan Empire (618-842) expanded eastward through massive military expeditions. "The old Tibetan annals" record the empire's expansion and occupation of several small kingdoms, including Azha, where military governments (Tib. *khrom*) were established in the middle of the 7th century (Beckwith 2013, p. 136; Dotson 2009, pp. 37-42). For instance, in 638, Songtsen Gampo launched an attack on the Tanguts and Qiang communities in the Zungchu Region (Tib. Zung chu; Ch. Songzhou 松州), which is situated immediately east of Ngawa. Following a few military encounters, these groups surrendered to Tibet (*Rgya'i yig tshang du 'khod p'i bod dang 'brel b'i lo rgyus* 2012, pp. 2-4). The "fort remains of Ngawa" (*rnga ba'i mkhar shul*) are thought to be the remains of a Tang fort that was destroyed when the Tibetans defeated the Tang army during their eastward expansion (Dmu dge bsam gtan 1987, pp. 253, 272). Following the disintegration of the Tibetan Empire in 842, Ngawa, along with much of Amdo, came under the jurisdiction of the Tsongkha (Tib. Tsong kha) Kingdom. There are claims that a portion of Ngawa was inhabited by descendants of the Tibetan imperial border army (Dmu dge bsam gtan 1987, p. 253).
- 3 In "Religious history of Dome" (c. 1863), Drakgonpa Konchok Tenpa Rapgye (Tib. Brag dgon pa dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas; hereafter, "Drakgonpa", 1801-1869) classifies Ngawa into three geographical bodies as the Upper, Middle, and Lower Ngawa (Tib. Rnga ba stod smad bar gsum) (Brag dgon pa 1981), but Muge Samten (Tib. Dmu dge bsam gtan) notes that it was classified as just Upper and Lower Ngawa in the past (Dmu dge bsam gtan 1987, p. 257). It is not clear when these regional divisions came to define Ngawa geographically, but by the early 18th century, there were around forty different political communities spread across the region from Gyato Dorzhar (Tib. Rgya stod rdor zhar) neighbouring Golok (Tib. Mgo log) polities to Meruma (Tib. Rme'u ru ma) communities bordering Dzoge (Tib. Mdzod dge). Most of them were small political entities consisting of a few hundred households under the leadership of a headman

(Tib. Dpon po) or headwoman (Tib. Dpon mo) whose authority was typically tied to his or her ancestral and/or patronage connection to a local monastery. As we shall explore in detail below, the Meu Kingdom was the most powerful in Ngawa, which had, at times, conquered most of both the Upper and Lower Ngawa communities. Interestingly, while each of the six Aren (Tib. A ran tsho ba drug) communities of Upper Ngawa was independently governed by over twenty headmen, they collectively became a vassal polity of Labrang Monastery (Tib. Bla brang dgon). The extant written sources corroborate the histories of these communities, at least for the last three centuries, although most of these political communities emerged after the gradual decline and demise of the Khoshot Mongol rule of Tibet in the early 18th century (Gung thang bstan pa'i sgron me 1990, pp. 423-424; Brag mgon pa 1981, pp. 755-757). The inter-sectarian and intra-sectarian conflicts and competition for influence over different communities shaped and defined the constantly shifting political geography of Ngawa. Ngawa's complex internal political configurations, coupled with its location on the border of Sichuan, Gansu, and Qinghai provinces, posed a significant challenge for the Chinese in the early 1950s. They deliberated extensively on how to incorporate Ngawa communities into the new administrative system. The early communist leaders considered either incorporating Ngawa, or at least parts of it, into Qinghai or Gansu before establishing a Tibetan autonomous prefecture, encompassing most of Gyelrong's polities, and attaching it to Sichuan Province. Interestingly, some traditional leaders of Upper Ngawa even urged the Chinese to merge their region with Gansu, alongside Labrang (Hor gtsang 'jigs med 2009, p. 193).

- 4 Arguably, as we shall explore, the name “Ngawa” (Tib. Rnga ba) may also reflect the history of Tibetan migration to the east during or following Songtsen Gampo's expeditions. There are two contending narratives regarding the origin of the place name in its local oral histories: the first story maintains that Ngawa derives from Ngari (Tib. Mnga' ri), a region in Western Tibet, and contends that the name reflects a connection to the ancestral homeland of the people who settled in there. In the “Intertwined history of the Meu lords and subjects” (*Rme'u sa dbang chen po rje 'bangs mnyam 'brel gyi byung ba*, Chos 'phel 1993), Trungyik Chophel (Tib. Drung yig chos 'phel, 1925-2003), the former secretary of the Meu Kingdom, suggests that the name is an abbreviation of “those from Ngari” (Tib. Mnga' ri ba), where “ba” acts as a nominalizer and the middle syllable is elided (Chos 'phel 1993, pp. 5-6). I should note that this is not a simple abbreviation, it takes an orthographic transformation to get “rnga” from “mnga” but in an oral culture, such transformations seem commonplace. Thus, given the predominance of oral traditions in Tibet and their role in preserving historical memory and cultural continuity, there is some ground for considering this narrative. Of greater significance, an orally transmitted and widely known saying reinforces this interpretation, stating: “It is not Ngawa but Ngari. The fragment of a thousand-households from Ngari. Split like a shoulder-blade of meat” (Tib. *Rnga ba ma red mnga' ba red// stod mnga' ris chad ki dum bu red// sha sog pa bgos pa'i tshal ba red//*, Chos 'phel 1993, p. 5). Additionally, Chophel notes that, prior to Chinese occupation, pilgrims and monks of Ngawa were given residence and admission in Ngari Khangtsens (monastic dormitory of Ngari monks) at the monasteries in Central Tibetan monasteries. He claims this as a testament to Ngawa's ancestral connection to Ngari (*ibid.*, p. 5).
- 5 The second local narrative about the origin of its place name draws attention to the geography of Ngawa. It claims that the geographic shape of Ngawa is identical to the appearance of a “drum” (Tib. *rnga*), a circular basin, and the second syllable (*ba*)

nominalises the first syllable “rnga”, and therefore, Ngawa stands for “those from the drum-shaped valley” (Rnga ba blo tshe 2015, p. 332). However, while it is still probable that the name originated after its geography, Ngawa Valley bears no resemblance to the shape of a circular drum. It is a long flat-floored valley in the shape of a horse’s torso, which again, interestingly, relates to the local saying “It is not the trunk of a drum, it is a horse’s torso” (Tib. *rnga khog ma red, rta khog red*) (Rnga ba blo tshe 2015, p. 331). When the communities in the more mountainous region of Lower Ngawa such as Acham (Tib. A 'khyams) township are included, there is no single contiguous geographical feature that joins all Ngawa. Therefore, it remains challenging to definitively assess the two narratives.

A historiographical debate: what’s in a name?

- 6 As a way of examining the source materials, here I turn to a brief discussion of a historiographical debate concerning the varied spelling of the Meu Kingdom’s name which has given rise to divergent origin narratives. In the Meu Kingdom, kings and queens were generally referred to with three terms of varying spellings as the clan’s name (Meu [Tib. Rme'u], Me [Tib. Rme], and Me [Tib. Dme]). “Me” (Rme) is a variant of “Rme'u” clan name, and thus, there are mainly two camps. Although this might seem inconsequential, it has sparked a series of debates concerning the origin of the kingdom and its clan history (Drung yig chos 'phel 1993; Hor gtsang 'jigs med 2009; Remdo seng ge 2015). The name and its variations have interpretative implications about its clan origin and history. I shall briefly examine their arguments and propose how we could move beyond texts and oral accounts to explore the supposed connections between Ngawa and Ngari or between the Meu Kingdom and Ngari. While the etymological arguments of these historians are contentious, it is noteworthy that these historiographical discourses emerged in a period marked by a proliferation of local history works in the nineties and noughties. These unofficial works aimed to resist and offer alternative narratives to officially produced Tibetan gazetteers in Chinese (Ch. *difangzhi* 地方誌) and local literary and historical materials (Ch. *wenshi ziliao* 文史資料). They often sought to romanticise and glorify their past histories by attempting to establish connections with Central Tibet or the Tibetan Empire. It is essential to keep this historiographical context in mind as scholars engage with these debates and polemics.
- 7 The recent historiographical debate surrounding the Meu Kingdom’s name and clan origin arises from Hortsang Jikme (Tib. Hor gtsang 'jigs med)’s scepticism regarding Trungyik Chophel’s source and excessive reliance on oral narratives. Similarly, historian and scholar Muge Samten also accuses Chophel of fabrication (Dmu dge bsamgtan 1987, p. 253; Hor gtsang 'jigs med 2009, p. 147). Regarding the use of Meu (Tib. Rme'u), Jikme contends, in his “Greater history of Amdo”, that it is a recent alteration by historians loyal to the Meu Kingdom, specifically the Meu Kingdom’s secretary Chophel, to disentangle the Meu Kingdom from Golok and to glorify its past by connecting it to Ngari (Hor gtsang 'jigs med 2009, pp. 154-157). Relying on “Flower garden. A treasury of clan history” (*Rus mzdod me tog skyed tshal*, c. 1850), Hortsang Jikme links the origin of the Ngawa Meu lord’s ancestry to Golok which presents a story of internecine affair connected to the Me (Tib. Dme) family from the period of Mongol invasion of Golok in the 17th century. The story goes that Metsang (Tib. Dme tshang)

originated from a certain Golok aristocrat named Meta (Tib. Dme rta) who killed his relative Lubum Kyap for escorting the way of the invading Mongols to Golok. Thus, Jikme maintains that the correct spelling is “Dme” which derives from the internecine (Tib. Nang dme) act (Hor gtsang 'jigs med 2009, p. 148). The word “dme” stands for a condition of blood impurity brought about by murder or violent crimes among members of the same clan. In this narrative, it is asserted that the Meu clans of Ngawa are affiliated with the clan Achak Dri (Tib. A lcags 'bri). However, a divergence arises within the text, as the authors of “Flower garden” claim that the Meu ruler of Ngawa hails from the Dra (Tib. Sbra) clan, one of Tibet’s six foundational clans (Bkra shis rgya mtsho & Thugs mchog rdo rje 1992, p. 117). Curiously, this incongruity has been overlooked in previous studies. One reason why this account is valuable, and to some extent authoritative, is not because it is well founded but because it remains to be one of the oldest written accounts of Amdo history. Important works like Drakgonpa’s “Religious history of Dome” (Mdo smad chos 'byung) draw on “Flower garden” and use “dme” in their works (Brag mgon pa 1981). Thus, Jikme contends that the use of other variations undermines previous scholarship (Hor gtsang 'jigs med 2009, p. 155).

- 8 Before we turn to others and their responses, it is useful to contextualise the text “Flower garden. A treasury of clan history”. It was “compiled” (Tib. Bsgrigs) by the brothers Trashhi Gyatso (Tib. bkra shis rgya mtsho, 1814-1874) and Tukchok Dorje (Tib. Thugs mchog rdo rje, 1806-1864?), circa 1850. The former was a lay scholar and a trusted advisor to Golok chiefs while the latter was a *trulku* at Kathok Monastery (Tib. Ka thog). The text is fraught with mythical stories like the daughters of the local deity Nyenbo Yutse (Tib. Gnyan po g.yu rtse) marrying princes of the Golok chief (Bkra shis rgya mtsho & Thugs mchog rdo rje 1992, pp. 38-39) or the absurd claim that the Manchu imperial clan of Aisin Gioro is Dra (Tib. Sdra) clan of Tibetan ancestry (*ibid.*, p. 23). The authors were well-known specialists of the Gesar (Tib. Ge sar) epic, and it is not surprising that their clan history is enmeshed with myths and legends. It is important to note that during the authors’ time or at the time of writing, the Meu Kingdom was indeed governed by a descendant of Golok. However, this succession occurred after the Meu’s royal bloodline ended due to a king with no heir. The authors only briefly mention the Meu ruler’s clan affiliation with Golok without providing much additional information about the kingdom. By then, the Meu Kingdom had over a century of history. The failure to explore sources beyond this text when tracing the history of the Meu Kingdom appears to have contributed to the historiographical confusion. Additionally, it’s worth noting that the text explicitly acknowledges itself as a clan history based on oral narratives (*ibid.*, p. 123). Hence, historians should approach it critically, recognising its reliance on oral tradition, despite its significance as one of the earliest written records on Amdo.
- 9 Likewise, Trungyik Chopel’s “Intertwined history of the Meu lords and subjects” (Chos 'phel 1993) must be approached with caution and read against other historical literature and archival materials. This short text about the Meu Kingdom attempts to trace and connect the origin of the Meu rulers to Ladakh Meu clan (Tib. bla dwags rme'u), a subclan of the Dong (Tib. Ldong) clan that lived in the Ngari Region and gradually migrated and spread to Central Tibet during the Tibetan imperial period (Chos 'phel 1993, pp. 3-4). He notes that in the early Tibetan imperial period, a part of the Meu clan led by Meu Gyelgyi Lhunpo (Tib. Rgyal gyi lhun po) migrated to the “right *ru*” (administrative unit) of Central Tibet, and gradually the clan flourished in Central Tibet and spread to places like Nyemo (Tib. Snye mo). Then, sometime during the reign

of Emperor Trisong Detsen (Tib. Khri srong lde btsan, 755-797), many sub-clans of the Meu clan migrated to Eastern Tibet, and then gradually, the ancestors of the Meu Kingdom which consisted of eighteen families settled in the Ngawa region circa 860 (*ibid.*, p. 4). Chophel's detailed clan history of the Meu clan of Ngari and its migration history to Eastern Tibet is reputedly based on a clan history text of a Bonpo household in Ngawa, and the text seems to have been lost during the tumultuous period of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). The family, Bontsang (Tib. Dbon tshang), is said to be descendants of one of the eighteen Meu clan families that originally migrated to Ngawa, and this unnamed clan history text is, by all accounts, a history of Nangshik Monastery (Tib. Snang zig dgon) and its patron clans. Chophel's history of the Meu Kingdom is problematic for obvious reasons. Firstly, it raises concerns about its reliance on a disappeared clan history as a basis for understanding the kingdom's origins and evolution. Secondly, it provides an extensive migration history of the Meu clan during the Tibetan imperial period, which is difficult to establish for any region in Eastern Tibet. Yet, the Meu clan's purported relation to Bon and the Bonpo Monastery seems indicative of a historical connection the Meu clans of Ngari had to the religion, and it is somewhat consistent with Chophel's narrative of the Meu Kingdom's origin and history. As we shall explore below, the rulers of the kingdom were patrons of Bonpo monasteries in Ngawa before they also became supporters of Buddhist institutions. Interestingly, Chophel alludes to the old Ngawa local saying: "It is not Ngawa but Ngari. The fragment of a thousand households from Ngari. Split like a shoulder blade of meat", and posits that it is such anecdotes that preserve people's sense of collective identity and historical memory (Chos 'phel 1993, p. 5). This statement supports Chophel's position that the Meu rulers were part of the Ladakh Meu clan widespread in Ngari. However, these claims are still conjectural. People of Ngawa may have migrated from Ngari and indeed have a degree of cultural and linguistic affinity to Ngari, but it still fails to account for a reliable connection between the Meu clan and Ngari without more concrete evidence.

- 10 Nevertheless, with the emergence of recently unearthed historical materials such as edicts and letters, we can now confirm that the use of Meu (Tib. Rme'u or Rme) was not a recent creation by historians like Trungyik Chophel. For instance, the founding edict of Ngawa Kirti Monastery (Tib. Rnga ba kirti dgon), issued by Kirti Lobzang Trinle (Tib. Kirti blo bzang 'phrin las; 1849-1904), along with official letters and edicts from the Meu Kingdom, all consistently employ the terms Meu (Tib. Rme'u) or Me (Tib. Rme). As discussed below, the edict was issued in 1870 and the letters are from the first half of the 20th century. Additionally, as Redo Sengge (Tib. Re mdo seng ge, 2015) demonstrates, although hagiographies are not always reliable sources of historical information, biographical works such as the biography of Shingza Shedrup Damcho Gyatso (Tib. Shing za Bshad sgrub dam chos rgya mtsho; 1898-1937), biography of the 5th Jamyang Zhepa (Tib. 'Jam dbyangs bzhad pa, 1916-1947) by Zhabdrung Konchok Gyatso (Tib. Zhabs drung dkon mchog rgya mtsho) as well as the biography of Jikme Damchoe Gyatso (Tib. 'Jigs med dam chos rgya mtsho, 1898-1946) by Tseten Zhabdrung (Tib. Tshe tan zhabs drung) all maintain Meu or Me (Re mdo seng ge 2015, pp. 301-303). Furthermore, the collected works of Jamyang Tupten Gyatso (Tib. 'Jam dbyang thub stan rgya tsho, b. 1866) and Shardza Trashi Gyeltsen (Tib. Shar rdza Bkra shis rgyal mtshan, 1859-1933) also use Me and Meu. Thus, all things considered, I keep Meu as the name and spelling of the kingdom. Yet, the question of the Meu clan's origin from Ngari and its supposed relation with Meu clans in Ladakh still remain to be established. If we

retrieve or somehow discover Trungyik Chopel's lost clan history, it might elucidate this aspect of the Meu Kingdom's early history. Nonetheless, a more productive avenue for investigating the historical relationship, or lack thereof, between Ngawa and Ngari or between the Meu clans of Ngawa and Ngari (including Ladakh) seems to be conducting research on local folklore, including folk songs and dances, language, and material culture such as architecture and traditional dress. The limitations of institutional history could be mitigated by paying attention to cultural and material practices and histories.

- 11 The compendium of Tibetan historical writings as well as primary source materials on the Meu Kingdom (*Rme'u sa dbang chen po rgyal 'bangs mnyam 'brel gyi lo rgus phyogs sgrigs* [abbreviated hereafter as HWMLS 2015]) is the first and the only collected work on the history of the kingdom. It was published on the centennial birthday of the last king Pelgon Trinle Rapten by the Kirti Jopa Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies, Dharamsala. It includes research articles as well as a collection of documents such as edicts and letters, copies of which were acquired from various affiliated monasteries and families from inside Tibet. The duplicates as well as some of the original documents are housed at Kirti Getsa Tsokpa (Tib. Kirti'i dge rtsa tshogs pa) in Dharamsala. It also includes oral histories (Tib. *ngag rgyun lo rgyus*) based on interviews and personal narratives of individuals like Meu Gonpo Tso (Tib. Rme'u mgon po mtsho, b. 1940) and Gongun Tsondu (Tib. Sgo sngun brtson 'grus, 1931-1998), a former officer whose father and father-in-law were both ministers of the Meu Kingdom. As noted, this is not entirely a volume of primary source materials, but it remains one of the principal Tibetan sources for this research in addition to several biographies of 18th and 19th century Amdo lamas like Kunkhyen Jikme Wangpo (Tib. Kun mkhyen 'jigs med dbang po) and Kirti Lobzang Trinle. I also cross-examine biographical sources with general histories such as Drakgonpa's "Religious history of Dome" (Brag mgon pa c. 1863) and Hortsang Jikme's "Greater history of Amdo" (Hor gtsang 'jigs med 2009). To reduce overwhelming reliance on materials produced by Geluk (Tib. dge lugs) scholars and historians, I draw on Lodro Drakpa (Tib. Blo gros grags pa)'s "The lamp of moon. A history of the Jonang tradition" (Blo gros grags pa 1992) as well as Bonpo accounts. Most excitingly, during my archival research at Academia Sinica (IHP) and National Palace Museum in Taiwan (2023), I stumbled upon several Qing archival materials that pertain to the Meu Kingdom, offering valuable insights into its political history and its relationship with the Qing court. These previously untapped Chinese language materials have the potential to bridge certain gaps in the kingdom's history and, on a broader scale, provide clarity on the position of traditional Tibetan polities in the Sino-Tibetan borderlands during the 18th and 19th centuries. I also utilise published Qing archival materials, including the memorials of Nian Gengyao (1679-1726) translated from Manchu into Chinese (1995), as well as "The veritable records of the Qing" (*Qing shilu* 1982).

The rise of Tibetan polities in Eastern Tibet

- 12 The rise of the Meu Kingdom in Ngawa was evidently connected to the decline of Khoshot Mongol rule of Eastern Tibet after Lozang Tendzin (Tib. Blo bzang bstan 'dzin)'s rebellion (1723-1724) against the Qing Empire (1644-1911) and the gradual withdrawal of Mongol communities to the north of the Kokonor. Nian Gengyao's

suppression of the rebellion and the subsequent conquest of the Kokonor Region and northern Amdo completely transformed the political geography of Eastern Tibet.

- 13 In the late 14th century, under the leadership of Dri Lhagyel Bum (Tib. 'Bri lha rgyal 'bum), the ancestors of Golok migrated from Kham to Dorol (Tib. Rdo rol), which is presumably somewhere in the present-day Pema (Tib. Pad ma) county in Golok. Over the following centuries, they established a relatively powerful chiefdom by conquering its neighbouring groups known as the Nyen (Tib. Gnyan), Khara (Tib. Mkha' ra), and Bale (Tib. Ba le). According to "Flower garden. A treasury of clan history", Ngawa came under the rule of Golok sometime in the late 15th century during the reign of Phakthar (Tib. Phag thar, b. 1441) as one of its six administrative units (Tib. Rmar rol ma lag drug) (Bkra shis rgya mtsho & Thugs mchog rdo rje 1992, pp. 40-44; Dmu dge bsam gtan 1987, p. 251). The historical religious landscape of Golok and Ngawa from that period seems to bear some evidence of Golok's regional power and expansion. Although direct disciples of Tsongkhapa (Tib. Tsong kha pa) like Tsakho Ngakwang Drakpa (Tib. Tsha kho ngag dbang grags pa, b. 1365) had established Geluk monasteries in Ngawa, Gelukpa presence was minimal in Ngawa until the early 18th century. The number of Geluk institutions begins to increase in the 18th century and more drastically in the 19th century across Amdo (Tuttle 2012, 2017). This was also the case in Ngawa. Ngawa remained a place of eclectic beliefs and practices where the Bon religion and the Jonang tradition thrived alongside other traditions. As we shall explore, Geluk hierarchs like Jikme Wangpo saw Ngawa as a dark borderland and an essential field of missionary activity (Tib. Gdul zhing).
- 14 In 1639, Gushri Khan (1582-1655) launched a military campaign and annihilated Beri Donyo Dorje (Tib. Be ri Don yod rdo rje, d. 1641) in retaliation for the latter's alleged collaboration with Tsangpa Desi (Tib. Gtsang pa sde srid), the party that schemed a massive attack on Gelukpas in Central Tibet. The Khoshots led by Gushri Khan conquered by seeking surrender or subduing through military force most Tibetan polities in Eastern Tibet. Around 1640, Gushri Khan's general Taiji Shara captured and killed Nakthar (Tib. Nag thar), one of the most powerful chieftains of Golok, who refused to surrender to the Mongols. Nathar's courage and dogged refusal to surrender to the Mongols earned him legendary status as an unyielding hero in Golok's oral narratives (Don 'grub dbang rgyal 1991, pp. 30-33; Dmu dge bsam gtan 1987, p. 245). Thus, much of Eastern Tibet came to be ruled directly or indirectly by the sons and grandsons of Gushri Khan until the early 18th century (Dbal mang pan di ta 1990, pp. 69-72; Nga dbang mkhyen rab 1992, pp. 44-46). According to Muge Samten, Ngawa and Dzamtang (Tib. Dzam thang) broke free from the rule of Golok when Erdeni Jinong's (Tsewang Tendzin, d. 1735) Mongol troops invaded Golok in response to their raids on Lhasa-bound merchants (Dmu dge bsam gtan 1987, p. 256). In this context, Hortsang Jikme incorrectly assumes that Ngawa was under Golok rule until at least 1855 (Hor gtsang 'jigs med 2009, p. 153). However, Tibetan historical literature, such as Jikme Wangpo's biography and Drakgonpa's "Religious history of Dome", suggests that Ngawa had already fragmented into several smaller polities in the middle of the 18th century. The Qing imperial memorials presented below provide compelling evidence, affirming the existence of Ngawa polities, including the Meu Kingdom, as early as the 1720s.
- 15 The Yongzheng Emperor's (r. 1722-1735) suppression of Lozang Tendzin's rebellion in 1724 was a consequential blow to the Khoshots in Inner Asia. The end of the Khoshot

Khanate (1642-1717) not only had a direct implication on the future of the Ganden Podrang (Tib. Dga' ldan pho brang) Government in Central Tibet but also had an immediate effect on the geopolitics of Tibetan polities in Eastern Tibet (Petech 1972; Dmu dge bsam gtan 1987; Bsam 'phel 2018). Eastern Tibet in the 18th century saw the emergence of many small polities of which some became considerable regional powers while others were subsumed under belligerent neighbours in constantly changing political geographies. The Meu Kingdom of Ngawa has its origins in the second half of the 17th century, but it emerged as a powerful chieftainship following the end of Khoshot rule of Eastern Tibet in the early 18th century. According to local narratives, Kelzang Dondrup (Tib. Skal bzang don grub) was the fourth in a series of fourteen rulers that governed the Meu Kingdom, but none of his predecessors appear in written historical documents nor do oral accounts connect them to any specific historical events (Chos 'phel, p. 7). As we shall see in the following, from the histories of religious traditions and hagiographies such as “Lamp of moon. A history of the Jonang tradition” (*Jo nang chos 'byung zla ba'i sgron me*) or the biography of Konchok Jikme Wangpo (1728-1791), written in 1798, we know that the early rulers of the Meu Kingdom were patrons of Jonang and Bonpo monasteries in the region. Although the Gelukpa had a presence in Ngawa as early as the 15th century, they had little influence in the region until much later. Thus, evidently, Geluk hagiographies and religious histories aren't adequate to gain a clearer understanding of the Meu Kingdom's early history. This paper draws on non-Geluk histories, biographies and unexplored Qing archival materials in constructing an institutional history of the Meu Kingdom.

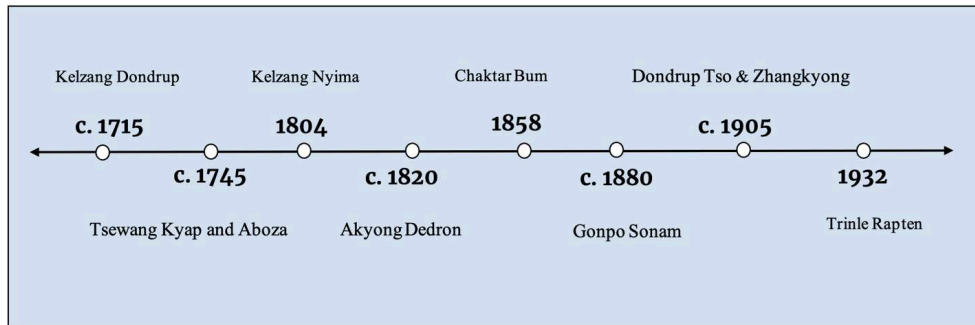
- 16 From the above brief geopolitical context of Inner Asia and Sino-Tibetan borderlands in the late 17th and early 18th centuries, we could infer how the era of Geluk-Khoshot alliance and rule of Eastern Tibet by Khoshot Mongol princes disrupted the existing Tibetan political institutions and reconfigured inter-polity relations and political boundaries (Bsam 'phel 2018, p. 514). The collapse of Khoshot rule after Lozang Tendzin's rebellion also had a similar effect on the geopolitical situation of Eastern Tibet. Crucially, the Qing court exerted a substantial influence in shaping diverse political entities in Eastern Tibet, particularly during the reigns of Yongzheng and Qianlong (r. 1735-1796). The bestowal of imperial titles of all sorts and ranks by the Qing court began in the late 17th century and saw its heyday in the aftermath of Khoshot Mongol rule of Eastern Tibet in the early 18th century (Kung 2018, p. 114). Explored in detail below, the Khoshot intervention in Eastern Tibet resulted in the rise of the Meu Kingdom in Middle Ngawa during the late 17th century. The Meu ruler's authority was strengthened by a title from the Qing court, enabling the kingdom to expand and conquer neighbouring territories by the mid-18th century.

The Meu Kingdom: an institutional history

- 17 As mentioned earlier, the Meu emerged in the early decades of the Khoshot Mongols' rule over Eastern Tibet in the second half of the 17th century. However, unlike other regions in Tibet, there is scant evidence indicating how the Khoshot Mongols governed the communities of Ngawa and Gyelrong during this Mongol resurgence in the 17th century. Trungyik Chopel lists Meu Pedong Druk (Tib. Rme'u Pad sdong drug), Meu Relba Drakcho (Tib. Rme'u Ral ba brag gcod), and Meu Pabo Takshamchen (Tib. Rme'u Dpa' bo stag sham can) as the first three rulers that preceded Meu Kelzang

Dondrup (Chos 'phel 1993, p. 7), but these names do not appear in any other accounts. It is hard to verify these figures since we have no information about them beyond their names and since Chophel's unnamed clan history is no longer extant. Besides, these names appear to be epithets as opposed to common names. Thus, it is difficult to think of them as real historical actors without more evidence.

Figure 1. A tentative illustration of the Meu 's regnal periods



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- 18 The first Meu ruler to appear in historical documents and oral narratives is Kelzang Dondrup (c. 1680-c. 1750), often preceded by the designation “Techu” (Tib. *Thes cu*). He lived sometime in the late 17th and early 18th centuries during the Khoshot Mongol rule of Eastern Tibet. The latest mention of Kelzang Dondrup in Qing historical materials is from June 1743, where a report on suppressing rebels in Golok mentions Meu Dondrup, who was asked to keep a certain hostage (*Gaozong shilu*, *juan* 191, 18a-19a). He was the only Meu ruler that had the title “Techu” in his name. All later rulers only have the epithets king and queen (Tib. *rgyal po*; *rgyal mo*); ruler (Tib. *dbon po*; *dbon mo*), or lord (Tib. *sa dbang*; Ch. *tusi* 土司 or *tumu* 土目). Identifying Techu with Taiji (Mo. *tayiji*), a title primarily given by the Qing court to the members of the Borjigin clan, most historical literature on the Meu polity presumes the title to have been given to the Meu ruler by the Mongols sometime in the second half of the 17th century (Chos 'phel 1993; Sengge 2015). However, there is no evidence of such a high title being conferred upon a Tibetan ruler in Eastern Tibet by the Khoshot Mongols or Manchu emperors. According to “Lamp of moon”, the Meu rulers were minor rulers during the period when Mongols ruled Amdo. Later, a certain Chinese military leader elevated the authority of the Meu ruler, and consequently, “Emperor Da Laoye” (Tib. *Gong ma ta lo ye*) awarded a “*jasay*” position to Meu Kelzang Dondrup in the fire-horse year (Blo gros grags pa 1992, p. 519). As we shall see below, this probably was in 1726. Kelzang Dondrup was a patron of Se Bonpo Lhundrup Gyeltsen (Tib. *Bse dpon po lhun 'grub rgyal mtshan*), a Jonang scholar who founded the Se Monastery in Ngawa sometime in the late 17th century. Se Monastery (Tib. *Bse dgon pa*) was then only an encampment (Tib. *sgar*). It states that Meu Kelzang Dondrup and Se Bonpo Lhundrup Gyeltsen established a priest and patron relationship (*choyon*, Tib. *mchod yon*). Since Se Bonpo Lhundrup Gyeltsen was a student of Tāranātha (1575-1634), he was likely a senior contemporary of Meu Kelzang Dondrup.
- 19 However, from the memorials of Nian Gengyao, the Governor-General of Sichuan and Shaanxi (1721-1725), which include two reports that contain information about the Meu ruler Kelzang Dondrup (*Nian Gengyao Man-Han zouzhe yibian* 年羹尧满汉奏折译编

1995), we could infer that the title “Techu” was the Tibetan rendering of “tu qian hu” 土千户. As elucidated further below, the title of “tu qian hu” (thousand household leader) was bestowed upon indigenous Tibetan rulers in Qing’s frontier regions of Sichuan and Gansu, serving as a hereditary military position since the early 18th century (Gelek 2002, p. 41). In the first month of Yongzheng’s second year (1724), Nian Gengyao sends a memorial about his suppression of the Mongols in northern Amdo, and it mentions,

[...] another group of rebels suddenly appeared and attacked us, and one soldier of our Aba chieftain was killed and another injured. Our soldiers were furious. They surrounded the rebels and killed many of them and captured fourteen men and women alive (*Nian Gengyao Man-Han zouzhe yibian* 1995, p. 71).

- 20 Again, four months later, a memorial from Nian Gengyao reports on the aftermath of the pacification of Lozang Tendzin’s rebellion. Nian Gengyao praises the military exploits of a few Tibetan chieftains, including that of the Meu (Ch. Mo 墨) and Washul (Ch. A shu 阿樹) polities that contributed to the military expeditions against Lozang Tendzin and the rebels. Most importantly, it recommends and requests the emperor to grant the title of Pacification Commissioner (Ch. Anfu si 安撫司) to Meu Dondrup (Ch. Mo Danzhu 墨丹住) for his contributions. It singles Meu Dondrup out because the Washul chief had already received the title (*Nian Gengyao Man-Han zouzhe yibian* 1995, pp. 290-291). Reading these memorials in the context of Tibetan historical sources and oral narratives, it looks like either a rank of *jasay* or Pacification Commissioner (*an fu si* 安撫司) was awarded to Meu Kelzang Dondrup, and as “Lamp of moon” notes, it was probably awarded in the fire-horse year of 1726, two years after Nian Gengyao’s recommendation and when the threat of Lozang Tendzin’s rebellion was fully wiped out.
- 21 Furthermore, “Flower Garden” also notes that Qing officials Nian Gengyao (Tib. Nyan gong ya'e) and a certain “san da laoye” (Tib. zan ta lo ye) elevated the dominion (Tib. *mnga' thang mtho bar byas*) of the Meu ruler (*Rus mzdod me tog skyed tshal*, p. 117). While it is hard to determine whether the title translated into real political authority on the ground, the bestowal of this title certainly elevated the apparent status of the Meu ruler as an equal to the neighbouring polities like that of Golok and Gyelrong, at least in the eyes of the Qing court. Perhaps, from a regional geopolitical perspective, Kelzang Dondrup’s marriage with a princess of Gyelrong Choktse polity validates his ennoblement and position as a rising ruler in the early 18th century. Although Kelzang Dondrup was referred to as *tusi* 土司 or *tumu* 土目 in these Yongzheng era memorials, we cannot confirm from available sources what was exactly the title bestowed to him in 1726. However, nearly a century later, we find the Meu rulers addressed as “thousand household leaders” (Tib. *stong dbon*; Ch. *qianhu* 千户) and it is likely that he was conferred upon a *tu qianhu* or *qianhu* title that was inherited by the future Meu rulers. I shall elaborate on this memorial below.
- 22 Extant Tibetan sources and oral narratives such as Chophel’s history of the Meu rulers maintain that a ruler by the name of Namse Karzhing (Tib. Gnam sa'i bkar zhing) succeeded Meu Kelzang Dondrup (Dmu dge bsam gtan 1987, p. 258; Chos 'phel 1993, p. 7). However, it is likely that Namse Karzhing was just a eulogised appellation for Kelzang Dondrup as “the leader that separated the sky and the earth”. An epithet like this might seem unwarranted for a leader of a thousand households polity, but it underscores Kelzang Dondrup’s relative authority and ascendancy in the history of the kingdom. These sources aid little in determining the dates or even the sequence of

certain events, but they maintain that during Namse Karzhing or Kelzang Dondrup, the Meu's palace was moved from its original location in Khashi (Tib. KhA shi, Kha shul or Mkhar shul), a village on the border of Middle and Upper Ngawa (Chos 'phel 1993, p. 7). Some accounts claim that the town's name Khashi is derived from "mkhar shul" as "the remains of the fort" while others maintain Khashi to be a form of Khashul as one of the eighteen *shul* clans (Tib. *shul chen bco brgyad*). In any case, the palace was moved to Gyelkhang Ngo (Tib. Rgyal khang ngo) in Middle Ngawa sometime in the early 18th century. The exact date of this relocation could not be determined, but this relocation might point to a certain shift in the regional geopolitical situation. In other words, it coincides with the emergence of Tibetan polities following the withdrawal and destruction of Khoshot Mongol rule of Tibetan regions in the early 18th century. Upper Ngawa was consisted of Tsodruk (Tib. Tsho drug), Adu (Tib. A 'du) and Trosik (Tib. Sbro tshigs). Tsodruk communities were ruled by around 25 headmen of which Gyato Dorzhar was the more dominant ruler (Dmu dge bsam gtan 1987, p. 268; Hor gtsang 'jigs med 2009, pp. 187-200). Although the size of their dominions differed considerably, especially by the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Qing documents from the early 19th century give equal status to the Meu and Dorzhar rulers (see the documents discussed below). It is plausible that the Meu and Dorzhar polities were then similar political entities in terms of their territorial size and population. The relocation of the palace from Khashi was likely prompted by the emergence of polities like Gyato Dorzhar in Upper Ngawa. Kelzang Dondrup not only moved his palace from a disadvantageous zone to a tactically strong and secure location but also tried to expand his dominion and influence by securing a marital alliance with one of the Suwa (Tib. Bsu ba) chiefs of Upper Ngawa for his successor (Brag dgon pa 1981, p. 760). As later conflicts between the two polities would bring to light, Tsodruk communities were a perennial annoyance and at times a considerable threat to the Meu Kingdom because the former had the support of the powerful Labrang Monastery (Nietupski 2010, p. 84).

- 23 By the mid-18th century, the Meu Kingdom had established itself as a regional hegemon in southern Amdo. Tsewang Kyap (Tib. Tshe dbang skyabs, c. 1720-c. 1780), the son of Kelzang Dondrup and a Choktse princess, succeeded to the throne of the Meu Kingdom sometime around 1747 (*Gaozong shilu*, *juan* 294, 14-15)². Tsewang married Aboza (Tib. A 'bos bza', c. 1730-1804), a daughter of the Abo chieftain (Tib. A 'bos dbon) of Suwa, one of the Tsodruk communities of Upper Ngawa. As suggested above, this marital alliance with a chiefdom of Upper Ngawa clearly reflects the Meu Kingdom's expansionary ambitions in the region. Tsewang Kyap and Aboza invited Kirti Tenpe Gyeltsen, the 5th Kirti *trulku*, to the Meu palace for the first time in 1760 and established a preceptor-donor (*choyon*) relationship with the Geluk hierarch (Hor gtsang 'jigs med 2009, pp. 170-171). At the time, Kirti Tenpe Gyeltsen was invited by Komkachu Ramjampa (Tib. Dkom bka' bcu Ram 'byams pa) of Komtsang (Tib. Dkom tshang) in Suwa, Upper Ngawa (Chos 'phel 1993, p. 8). The Meu rulers famously maintained a non-sectarian (Tib. Ris med) religious policy when it comes to supporting religious institutions and activities. As indicated above, they supported the Jonang monasteries in a time of crisis for the tradition as well as Bonpo monasteries like Nangzhik (Tib. Snang zhig) and Tokden (Tib. Rtog ldan) by maintaining similar relationships with all the religious institutions under its dominion. However, Tsewang Kyap's encounter with the 5th Kirti *trulku* marked a turning point for the Meu Kingdom for this preceptor-donor relationship endured and flourished over the next two centuries, and gradually, a

branch Kirti Monastery became the principal religious institution of the Meu Kingdom. During this historic visit, Kirti Tenpe Gyeltsen designated Lha Chenpo (Tib. Lha chen po; Skt. Mahādeva) as the personal protector deity of the Meu Kingdom and Dardzom Takri Dradul (Tib. Dar 'dzom stag ri dgra 'dul) as the mountain deity of the dominion (Rnga ba blo tshe 2015, p. 332). He also composed a sacrificial ritual text for the kingdom and performed several ritual and liturgical ceremonies. Since then, all the successive Kirti hierarchs became the root spiritual teachers or preceptors (Tib. *mchod gnas*) of the Meu kings and queens (Re mdo seng ge 2015, p. 308).

- 24 The Tibet-Sichuan frontier witnessed an intense and geopolitically volatile period during the second and third quarters of the 18th century. During this period, the Tibetan polities of Chuchen (Tib. Chu chen) and Tsanlha (Tib. Btsan lha) in Gyelrong were engaged in what Qing imperial narratives referred to as the “Jinchuan Campaigns or Jinchuan zhi yi 金川之役 (1747-1749; 1771-1776)”, resisting Qing imperial intervention and participating in two prolonged wars against Qing forces. Agui (1717-1797), the Manchu general who played a major role in the suppression of these “rebellions” in Gyelrong, submits a memorial to Emperor Qianlong (1711-1799) in 1764, which accuses Golok chieftain Makzor Gonpo (Ch. Makesuer Gunbu 瑪克蘇爾衮布) of raids and expansionism, and mentions in passing that the chieftains of Aba and Washul were informed to be vigilant of future raids (Agui 1764, *Gong zhong dang Qianlong chao zou zhe*, vol. 22, p. 305). This memorial is the only document I have found that offers an insight into the Meu Kingdom from the Qianlong era. However, there are numerous references to the Meu polity in the “Veritable records of the Qing” (*Qing shilu*), indicating the presence of archival documents related to the Meu polity in the Qing archives.
- 25 The third Gungtang *trulku* (Tib. Gung thang sprul sku), Konchok Tenpe Dronme (Tib. Dkon mchog bstan pa'i sgron me, 1762-1823), notes that the Meu ruler came to receive Jikme Wangpo along with other leaders of the region during his first visit to Ngawa in 1775, and Jikme Wangpo established three classes and composed a monastic guideline for the new monastery in Ngawa which was principally a college of Buddhist dialectics (Gung thang bstan pa'i sgron me 1990, pp. 249-250). His second and last visit to Ngawa took place fifteen years later (1790), and although Meu Aboza was among the leaders that received him, the Meu Kingdom was by then no longer on good terms with Labrang or Jikme Wangpo. Tenpe Dronme records that Dorzhar of Upper Ngawa tried to advise the Meu ruler, but because of the latter's delusions, she did not listen (*ibid.*, p. 424). It is not clear from Tenpe Dronme's description what the situation was about but Drakgonpa's “Religious History of Dome” and oral narratives help us fill in the gaps. Drakgonpa affirms that the unnamed monastery was a dialectical college (Tib. *mtshan nyid grwa tshang*) founded by Trichen Konchok Dechen (1737-1796), the fourth abbot of Labrang, but it didn't survive long because of certain enemies (*ibid.*, pp. 755, 760). It was in Rurutang (Tib. Ru ru thang), a territory of the Meu Kingdom in Middle Ngawa, and the monastery was destroyed to the ground sometime between 1775 and 1790, allegedly at the behest of the Meu ruler (Chos 'phel 1993, pp. 9-10). However, the act was not necessarily a sectarian or anti-Geluk campaign because the Meu Kingdom supported Geluk institutions like Kashi Monastery at the time. Rather, it was a direct response to Labrang's *lhade* (Tib. lha sde) expansionism in Ngawa. This event seems to have inaugurated the long history of antagonism and rivalry between the Meu Kingdom and

Labrang Monastery over the next two centuries. It also indicates that the Meu Kingdom was not committed to a single religion, sect, or religious institution at the time.

- 26 Konchok Jikme Wangpo was very ill during his final visit to Ngawa in 1790, but he considered this event to be critical for propagating the “undefiled” (Tib. *dri ma med pa*) Geluk tradition in Ngawa, a land of diverse religious institutions and identities. Tenpe Dronme references Gendun Drup’s statement of proselytisation that “a menacing fort must be built in the land of the enemy” to underscore the significance of building another Geluk monastery in Ngawa (Gung thang bstan pa'i sgron me 1990, p. 423). During Jikme Wangpo’s visit in 1790, Meu King Tsewang Kyap had already passed away and Queen Aboza was governing the kingdom. By then, the Meu Kingdom had expanded and conquered most of Upper Ngawa. Dakgonpa tells, “in the Iron-Dog Year (1790), Jamyang Zhepa (Jikme Wangpo) visited Ngawa. Chief Dorzhar had lost most of his communities [to the Meu Kingdom], and he came to seek help. Dorzhar had appealed to the Meu queen Aboza that she can keep Ngoshu (sngo shul) and Zito (zi stod) communities but return the rest to Upper Ngawa. However, she did not listen. A representative was sent to Chengdu, and then, Songpan [subprefecture office] settled the matter. The eight Aren communities were taken from the Meu Kingdom and attached to Jamyang Zhepa’s subjects (Brag dgon pa 1981, p. 755)”. Evidently, this new geopolitical situation and the project of re-establishing a Labrang branch monastery in Ngawa necessitated Jikme Wangpo’s visit. This journey, which took place despite his deteriorated health condition, demonstrates Jikme Wangpo’s commitment and the urgency of this mission for Labrang. It must be understood as a classic case of *lhade* (*lhade*) geopolitics and competition. Observing the huge Bonpo monasteries as well as monasteries of other Tibetan Buddhist sects including the troublesome and rebellious Jonang tradition, the Geluk hierarch saw the region as an important field of Geluk missionary activity. Unfortunately, Jikme Wangpo did not live to see Gomang Monastery (Tib. Sgo mang dgon) built in Ngawa. He died later that year. A year later the new branch monastery of Labrang was established by Tenpe Dronme in Upper Ngawa and the Tsodruk communities became its subjects. The Meu Kingdom’s main Geluk monastery, Ngawa Kirti Monastery, was yet to be founded. It took a few generations for the Meu Kingdom to favourably commit to a single sect or a religious institution. Tsewang Kyap and Aboza had begun to expand their territory by conquering neighbouring communities sometime after 1775. Tsewang Kyap did not live long; he likely passed away in the late 1770s. A memorial from “The veritable records of the Qing”, dated September 1764, attests to Tsewang Kyap’s existence, as he was deployed alongside the Dege king and others for inspection in the Golok territories (*Gaozong shilu*, *juan* 717, pp. 15-17). Another report indicates a military conflict between the Meu and Golok polities in late 1776. Qing officials faced challenges in mediating the conflict due to its connection with a murder case involving an individual named Sekor Raptern (Ch. Sikuer Labutan 斯枯尔拉布坦) (*Gaozong shilu*, *juan* 1018, pp. 13-14). Notably, this report does not mention Tsewang Kyap. Unlike earlier queens of the Meu Kingdom, we find the exploits of Queen Aboza mentioned in not only Tibetan historical sources but also in Qing official reports, as we shall explore below. She was a powerful queen who ruled the Meu Kingdom after Tsewang Kyap’s demise for over two decades.
- 27 From above, we learn that at a period prior to the founding of the two biggest Geluk monasteries in Ngawa, Geluk hierarchs like Jikme Wangpo and Tenpe Dronme were actively propagating the Geluk tradition and expanding their *lhade* communities in southern Amdo. Their activities had direct geopolitical implications for Ngawa because

a *lhade* or “divine community” is not just a religious institution and affiliation but also a political and economic institution. As opposed to simple projects of building religious institutions and networks, these were in practice more like “nation-building” projects which tied lay communities to local monasteries through complicated networks of theologically sanctioned economic and political relations. The study of *lhade* and its role in Tibetan governance practices and social structure in Eastern Tibet remains gravely understudied. In any event, in short, a *lhade* of a monastery is the collective of lay subjects that are obligated to pay annual contributions to the monastery in the form of tea ceremonies (Tib. *mang ja*), monk tax (Tib. *ser khral*) as well as other forms of services. In return, monks of the monastery would perform all the rituals including funerary rites for its *lhade* communities. The communities within a *lhade* of a monastery are differentiated based on a hierarchy of categories that determine a community’s relation and responsibility to the given monastery. For instance, some monasteries differentiate *lhade* from *mide* (Tib. *mi sde*), or as Nietupski calls it “worldly communities” (2010, p. 67), in which case the *mide* community would have fewer responsibilities to the monastery than its *lhade* community. It represents the degree of affiliation and subjecthood to the monastery³.

- 28 18th-century Amdo incarnates like Jikme Wangpo and Tenpe Dronme sought to grow Labrang’s power by building branch monasteries and recruiting *lhade* communities all over Amdo. A classic example of Geluk *lhade* expansionism from the late 18th century was the case of Gomang Monastery in Upper Ngawa. It was ruled indirectly by Labrang Monastery with the Tsodruk communities as its *lhade* (Nietupski 2010, pp. 76-77). Since then, with the monastic base of Gomang Monastery, Labrang sent its representatives to Upper Ngawa, although they had little actual political authority over the six communities. As Tenpe Dronme states, Gomang Monastery was conceived as a “fort” of the Geluk school to strike at the heart of an ecumenically dangerous territory and a dark borderland (Tib. *mtha khob mun pa’i yul*). The history of *lhade* geopolitics in Ngawa is the subject of another research article. It is noteworthy that the early Kirti *trulkus* did not have much of a presence in Ngawa’s religious landscape until the 5th Kirti Tenpe Gyeltsen, and most remarkably, during the 8th Kirti Lobzang Trinle. They were active in Dzoge and Gyelrong areas, and interestingly, the early Kirti *trulkus* were not confined to a singular location like a regional *kyabgon* (Tib. *skyab mgon*). Their fields of spiritual exploits covered vast areas and many communities in Amdo and even Mongolia (Zhwa dmar pundita & Thub bstan rgya mtsho 2007, p. 220). It was only the later Kirti *trulkus* who were seen as the *kyabgon* of certain communities in Ngawa, Gyelrong and Dzoge.
- 29 After the demise of Tsewang Kyap, Queen Aboza ruled the kingdom until her death in 1804. Tibetan historical materials maintain that the kingdom began to decline during her rule, and this “decline” points to the severance of Upper Ngawa’s Tsodruk communities which were conquered over a decade earlier (Gung thang bstan pa’i sgron me 1990, pp. 440-441; Re mdo seng ge 2015, p. 309). As indicated above, Tenpe Dronme seized hold of Upper Ngawa with the help of Qing officials in Chengdu and Songpan subprefecture office and founded the Gomang Monastery in 1791. This territorial shrinkage was a setback, but the kingdom was still a regional power that stood against the dominant Labrang polity at its height. In 1804, Qing officials in Sichuan received the news of Aboza’s death and they filed a report to the Qing court concerning the succession issue of the Meu Kingdom. The memorial states that Dong Jiaozeng 董教增 (1750-1822), the chief envoy of Sichuan, received information from the Songpan subprefecture office (Ch. Songpan ting 松潘廳) that the female *qianhu* of Mocang

(Ch. Mocang 墨倉) of Middle Aba, Abumusa (Ch. Abumusa 阿布木薩) contracted an illness, and despite taking medicines, she died on the second day of the first month. It requests the Qing court to approve the succession of the throne by Aboza's grandson Kelzang Trashi (Ch. Garang Zhashe 噶讓札舍, 1787-c. 1820) who is eighteen years old and the only legitimate descendant of Aboza. In addition, it specifically mentions that “every one of the barbarians and their neighbours agrees to accept this transfer of power” (Neige daku dang'an 內閣大庫檔案, Academia Sinica, no. 5338). This bilingual memorial (Chinese and Manchu) seems to be the only Qing archival document found in the Grand Secretariat Archives at Academia Sinica that concern the Meu Kingdom of Ngawa. When comparing Gyelrong polities situated on the eastern edge of the Tibetan Plateau, it becomes evident that there are significantly fewer Qing archival materials available for the Ngawa and Golok polities, although Golok frequently appears in reports about raids and bandits. This seems to indicate that the Qing court had relatively limited information and interaction with these remote and largely nomadic polities. In any event, firstly, the above memorial provides us with a date and some information about Queen Aboza's death and the transfer of power to her grandson, Kelzang Trashi. It shows that Muge Samten's conjecture was mistaken (Dmu dge bsam gtan 1987, p. 265). Instead of Aboza, it is probable that either Kelsang Trashi's mother or Akyong Dedron (Tib. A skyong bde sgron) was the Meu Queen that extended the invitation to the 7th Kirti Kunga Choepak (Tib. Kirti kun dga' chos 'phags, 1797-1848) in 1827. Queen Aboza was long gone. Coincidentally, this allows us to roughly estimate the regnal period of Queen Akyong Dedron (c. 1820-1858).

- 30 Most notably, the above memorial demonstrates a crucial distinction between the Tibetan frontier regions and the rest of Southwest China. While most of Southwest China underwent the *gaitu guiliu* 改土歸流 policy (Hostetler 2001; Giersch 2006; Dai 2009; Herman 2014), which transformed chieftainships into regular district administrative system, Tibetan political institutions remained unchanged and operated as semi-independent entities under Qing rule. After the fall of the Qing Empire in 1911, several Tibetan polities, including the Meu Kingdom and the Gyelrong polities, maintained their political independence throughout the Republican period (1911-1949). This demonstrates that neither the *gaitu guiliu* policy of the Yongzheng Emperor nor the aggressive campaigns against the Gyelrong polities by the Qianlong Emperor resulted in a complete transformation of the traditional political system of Tibetan polities in Qing's Sichuan frontier. While the above memorial does not definitively confirm whether the *qianhu* title translated into tangible political authority on the ground, it does suggest that the Qing provincial bureaucrats and local Songpan officials were well informed about the leadership changes and the political situation of Tibetan polities in the Sino-Tibetan borderlands. Moreover, it remains unclear whether the Meu Kingdom truly required a stamp of approval for the leadership transition. The memorial explicitly indicates that their recommendation for such “approval” was based on the positive opinions and perceptions of the Meu Kingdom's subjects, the “barbarians masses” (Ch. *yi zhong* 夷眾), and its neighbouring polities.
- 31 Upon cross-examining this Qing memorial with the available Tibetan historical sources, a slight discrepancy emerges in the name “Kelzang Trashi”, with some Tibetan sources referring to him as Kelzang Nyima (Tib. Skal bzang nyi ma). If Kelzang Trashi was indeed the grandson of Aboza, as stated in the memorial, one possibility is that Kelzang Nyima was her son, who might have died young. However, given the chronological proximity to the subsequent Meu ruler as well as the claim that Kelzang Nyima died

heirless (Chos 'phel 1993, p. 12), these were not two different individuals but the same person that inherited the throne after Aboza. Tibetan sources maintain that his reign was a period of political decay and spiritual degradation. Kelzang Nyima was a weak and ineffectual ruler. He was not fit or able to engage with the public, let alone rule a kingdom. It appears that he became a figure of public ridicule and laughter, and his ministers largely ruled the kingdom during his reign (*ibid.*, p. 12). Kelzang Nyima's marriage to Akyong Dedron, a princess of the Golok Akyong (Tib. A skyong) polity, is not documented in any historical source. However, this assumption is inferred from her reign over the Meu Kingdom in the mid-18th century and the indication that she hailed from the neighbouring Akyong polity. During Kelzang Nyima's reign, Sharkha Penden (Tib. Shar kha dpal ldan) was the most powerful minister. He married Akyong Dedron's sister. It seems that he was the *de facto* ruler of the kingdom for a period (c. 1805-1820), but there were also power struggles among the ministers that effectively weakened the kingdom. Kelzang Nyima died young and heirless, and with him, the Meu Kingdom's bloodline came to an end (Chos 'phel 1993, p. 12). Akyong Dedron continued to rule the kingdom along with the help of another powerful minister named Mekon (Tib. Rme dkon).

- 32 During the reign of Akyong Dedron, circa 1855, tea traders of Ngawa were attacked by Golok bandits in a raid when the traders were on their way from Songpan to Ngawa transporting merchandise. The tea traders defended themselves with rifles, and in a series of shootouts between the two groups, they killed the Golok chieftain's son Wangchen Bum (Tib. Dbang chen 'bum). Around three years following this incident, Golok Akyong launched a retaliatory attack on Ngawa and annihilated the communities associated with the tea traders, and allegedly the killer of Wangchen Bum was burnt alive along with his house set on fire. The Meu Kingdom was helpless and subservient to the Golok chief. Thus, according to Golok historical narratives, Golok Akyong chieftain Ngakwang Tendzin (Tib. Ngag dbang bstan 'dzin, b. 1782) invaded Ngawa and enthroned his nephew Chaktar Bum (Tib. Lcags thar 'bum) of Washul as the ruler of the Meu Kingdom (Don 'grub dbang rgyal 1991, pp. 150-152). Yet, Ngawa's local narratives maintain that he was invited as a "substitute son" (Tib. *sras dod*) to rule the kingdom since he was also the nephew of Queen Dedron (Chos 'phel 1993, p. 16). At any rate, Chaktar Bum, the son of Golok Washul chieftain, became the ruler of the Meu Kingdom around 1858. Instead of becoming a vassal or an ally of Golok Akyong, Chaktar Bum ruled the Meu Kingdom as an independent and rival polity.
- 33 In 1860, Queen Dedron and Minister Mekon invited the 8th Kirti *trulku*, Lobzang Trinle (1849 -1904), to the Meu Kingdom. This was incidentally exactly a century since Kirti Tenpe Gyeltsen's visit. It was apparently a period of decline and deterioration of the Meu Kingdom. The earlier Meu king had died heirless, and then the kingdom underwent a military attack by Golok Akyong and narrowly escaped its complete annihilation. Thus, the primary purpose of this visit was not only to restore their preceptor-donor relationship established a century ago but also to purify and decontaminate the spiritual pollution and defilements that allegedly plagued and tormented the Meu Kingdom with several setbacks. Rumours circulated attributing the decline of the Meu Kingdom and the birth of the intellectually challenged prince to the spiritual pollution of sacred texts and religious objects held within the kingdom (Chos 'phel 1993, pp. 14-15). An elaborate story describes how the protector deity had

transformed into an evil ghost, and the vicinity of the Meu palace became inhabited by spirits. However, the implications of these events remain unclear.

- 34 Chaktar Bum married Tsering Drolma (Tib. Tshe ring sgrol ma), a princess of the Gyelrong Choktse polity. She was popularly known as the White-Haired Queen (Tib. Rgyal mo Skra dkar ma). Again, in 1870, Chaktar Bum and Queen Dedron invited Kirti Lobzang Trinle to formally inaugurate the construction of Ngawa Kirti Monastery. This time it was a concerted effort of the four rulers (Tib. *rgyal po*): Golok Akyong Gyelpo (Tib. Mgo log a skyong rgyal po), Gyelrong Choktse Gyelpo (Tib. Rgyal rong mchog rtse rgyal po), Washul Sertha Gyelpo (Tib. Dbal shul gser rta rgyal po), and Ngawa Meu Gyelpo (Tib. Rnga ba rme'u rgyal po) who came together to establish a new Kirti monastery in Ngawa. An edict stamped with the seals of the four patrons and the Kirti Labrang states that the monastery belongs collectively to the four kingdoms with Meu Kingdom as the principal patron and Kirti *trulku* as the root teacher of the monastery. It also delineates the structure of the monastery's *lhade* by appointing the twelve Malon (Tib. Ma blon) communities as the inner *lhade* and the rest under the Meu Kingdom as its outer *lhade* (HWMLS 2015, p. 481). Lobzang Trinle's visit to Ngawa remains an interesting and uncanny reenactment of the religious exploits of Jikme Wangpo and Tenpe Dronme in southern Amdo a century ago. One might say that he came to finish what his earlier Geluk hierarchs only partially achieved. Jikme Wangpo's initial monastery in Rurutang was destroyed by "enemies" dispatched by the Meu Kingdom, but Kirti Lobzang Trinle succeeded in establishing a new Kirti monastery on the same grassland and even closer to the heart of Middle Ngawa. Although this is not the first Geluk monastery under the Meu Kingdom, as we shall explore, it marked an important era for the kingdom and its patronage of the Geluk tradition.

Figure 2. The founding edict of Ngawa Kirti Monastery, seal-stamps of the four kingdoms and the Kirti Labrang



© HWMLS 2015, p. 481

- 35 Given the history of *lhade* geopolitics in the region, Lobzang Trinle was strategically forward-looking and perceptive to the Ngawa people's religious sensibility and the need to preempt potential sources of contention and conflict. In the founding edict issued by the Kirti Labrang, it stipulates that monk tax (Tib. *ser khral*) should not be

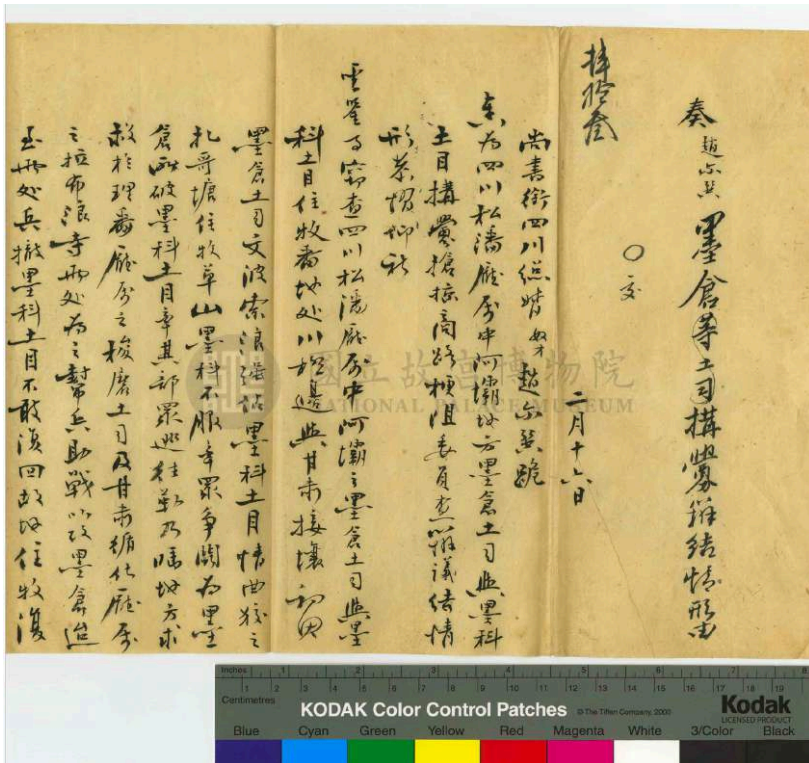
imposed upon the Malon communities, despite the fact that they are the main *lhade* communities of the new monastery as offered by the Meu Kingdom. It recognises that these communities are followers of different faiths and sects, and they must not be burdened with the obligation (HWMLS 2015, pp. 482-484). This strategic caution coincides with or comes on the heels of *lhade*-related conflicts between Labrang, Khyokho, and Ngawa circa 1870 (Dmu dge bsam gtan 1987, p. 267). Furthermore, although this came much later (1920), an edict issued by the 6th Shartsang (Tib. Shar tshang) of Rebgong (Tib. Reb gong) regarding the new Geluk monastery in Ngawa also commands and appraises people of his support and respect for Kirti Lobzang Trinle, and proclaims in plain terms that “Rebgong will go to war if there is anyone that hurts the new Kirti monastery and its *lhade* communities in Ngawa” (HWMLS 2015, p. 491). It is obvious that these edicts illustrate the tense climate of *lhade* geopolitics in Ngawa in those early years, but it was the commitment and support of the Meu rulers for this institution that it flourished into one of the biggest Geluk monasteries in Amdo. Besides, born to a well-connected family in Rebgong, Kirti Lobzang Trinle was inarguably one of the most reputable and charismatic Geluk scholars of his time in Amdo. He travelled extensively across Tibet and Mongolia giving Kālacakra empowerment and teachings (Zhwa dmar pundita & Thub bstan rgya mtsho 2007, pp. 220-232).

- 36 During the reign of Gonpo Sonam (Tib. Mgon po bsod nams, 1871-1920), the son of Chaktar Bum and Tsering Drolma, the Meu Kingdom pursued territorial expansion through a series of violent campaigns and tactics. Meu Gonpo Sonam gained notoriety for his ruthless conquests, which led to the kingdom’s largest expansion in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He is said to have conquered over fifty small polities in the neighbouring regions of Lower Ngawa, Upper Ngawa, and Golok, extending Meu’s dominion as far as Golok Pema (Tib. Mgo log pad ma), Washul Serta (Tib. Dbal shul gser rta), and Dzoge. Weaker polities often surrendered to Meu Gonpo Sonam to avoid the ravages of war and violence. Tragically, instances were recorded where entire families of chiefs, like Tharatsang (Tib. Tha ra tshang), were massacred, while others were compelled to surrender and become vassals (Dmu dge bsam gtan 1987, pp. 259-262; Rnga ba blo tshe 2015, pp. 334-336). The murdered chief of Thara (Tib. Tha ra), Dramdul (Tib. Dgra 'dul), became a local deity, and there is a line of mediums for this deity to this day. The two children of Dramdul, a boy and a girl, were also massacred by Gonpo Sonam’s agents while they were escaping to the neighbouring Suwa Village (Berounský 2012b).
- 37 Sometime in the late 19th century, circa 1890, the Tsodruk leaders of Upper Ngawa resisted and rebelled against Labrang Monastery, seeking refuge and protection from the Meu Kingdom. A report from “The veritable records of the Qing”, dated 1892 (18th year of Guangxu reign), mentions that bandits from Labrang Monastery crossed the border into Sichuan. They attacked, burned, and looted several communities in Upper Ngawa, including the six Sewa (Ch. 色凹; Tib. Tsho ba drug) communities (*Dezong shilu, juan* 309, pp. 3-4). Interestingly, as discussed below, this incident was highlighted in the *Shenbao* 申報 (Shanghai News, f. 1872) newspaper, nearly two decades later, in the context of another conflict involving the polities of Meu, Somang, and Labrang.
- 38 The Qing official sources from the period provide a portrayal of Gonpo Sonam (Ch. Wenbo Solang 文波索浪) as a violent and ambitious leader who instigated a series of disruptive encounters, including an invasion of Mekor (Tib. Rme skor) community,

resulting in significant disruptions to the trade routes near Songpan. A memorial presented to the Qing court by Sichuan Governor-General Zhao Erxun 趙爾巽 (1844-1927), in February 1910, describes the violent conflicts between the Meu polity and its neighbouring Mekor community, which escalated into a larger inter-polity dispute involving Meu, Somang, and Labrang polities. The Mekor leader sought assistance from Somang and Labrang to confront Meu's aggression, posing a threat to the safety of tea traders in the region. Consequently, a Qing official named Ma Baoguo 馬保國 was dispatched to address the situation (Zhao Erxun 1910). "The veritable records of the Qing" (*Qing shilu*) provides a concise entry about the incident. It cites a memorial submitted by Zhao Erxun to the Qing court, and states, "[In] Middle Aba, which comes under the Songpan office, the Meu chieftain and Mekor headman (Ch. *tumu*) plunder and obstruct the trade route" (*Xuantong zhengji*, juan 32, pp. 2-3). Additionally, the *Shenbao* newspaper provides a more detailed account of the incident, connecting it to a previous conflict between these polities. According to the *Shenbao*, Labrang had seized several communities of Ngawa in 1892, and the issue remained unresolved for five years. Most importantly, it records that Qing officials were unable to resolve the issue, leading to the intervention of a Tibetan monk or *trulku* named Gendun Wangpo (Tib. Dge 'dun dbang po, Ch. Gedeng Wenbao 格登文包) to mediate the conflict (*Shenbao* 1910).

- 39 These Qing official records offer valuable insights into the scale of the conflict between the Meu Kingdom and the Labrang-Trochu (Tib. Khro chu) alliance, leading to disruptions in trade routes in the Sino-Tibetan frontier. Moreover, they unveil the Qing's state capacity, or lack thereof, in effectively resolving such complex conflicts and understanding the intricate *lhade* networks spanning across the Sino-Tibetan frontiers of Gansu and Sichuan. The resolution of such conflicts has often hinged on the intervention of revered religious leaders, acknowledged, and respected by all parties involved. Their profound influence and esteemed standing in society have played a crucial role in facilitating peaceful resolutions and restoring stability in these communities. Particularly noteworthy is the Qing government's utilisation of the influence of Tibetan and Mongolian lamas to manage Inner Asian frontier crises and conflicts.

Figure 3. A fragment of Zhao Erxun's memorial from 1910



© Source: Palace Memorials, National Palace Museum, Taipei, Taiwan

- 40 As an act of confession and in hope of atonement for sin, not only did Gonpo Sonam actively participate in the construction of a temple at Kirti Monastery, but he also revitalised the tradition of Mani Month (Tib. Ma ni dza sgrub), a non-sectarian religious gathering held annually for an entire month. It was a way of collectively repenting for sins of violence committed against households like Tharatsang and Mowatsang (Tib. Mo ba tshang) (Chos 'phel 1993; HWMLS 2015, pp. 83-85). The origins of the Mani Month tradition can be traced back to Aboza, who initiated it as an alternative to her inability to undertake a pilgrimage to Lhasa. Over time, the event grew in popularity, becoming a cherished annual occasion in Ngawa that continues to be observed to this very day. Even Bonpos came alongside Buddhists to partake in this inclusive celebration. Interestingly, the end of the Mani Month was marked by a celebratory fair called “pottery festival” (Tib. rdza khrom), as organised by the Meu Kingdom. Initially, the festival primarily featured the exquisite craftsmanship of different villages, including their local pottery works. However, as time passed, it transformed into a grand regional fair that attracted participation from neighbouring communities. Alongside the showcase of craftsmanship, the festival incorporated a rich array of cultural activities, such as horse-racing events.
- 41 Gonpo Sonam took a bride from Golok Akyong, and according to Muge Samten, this marriage didn't end well because the bride had an affair with a minister, and Queen Tsering Drolma had to resolve the matter with the help of her uncle Choktse Gyelpo (Dmu dge bsam gtan 1987, pp. 382-383). Gonpo Sonam's second marriage was with Sonam Dron (Tib. Bsod rnam sgron), a sister of the Golok Khangsar (Tib. Mgo log khang sar) chieftain. Sonam Dron did not live long after the birth of Pelchen Dondrup Tso (Tib. Dpal chen don 'grub mtsho, c. 1890-1936). Gonpo Sonam himself died at the age of

49, in a twist of fate, as he was involved in a fatal accident at the construction site of a temple in Kirti Monastery (Chos 'phel 1993, p. 21).

- 42 Pelchen Dondrup Tso grew up to become a powerful queen. Even after her marriage, she continued to wield significant political influence. In 1929, when the Christian missionary Robert Ekvall (1898-1978) visited the Meu Kingdom in Ngawa, he observed that “the queen was the true ruler because she was the royal line. The king was just the prince consort in a way” (Evangelism & Missions Archives 1979, Transcript, p. 20). It is worth noting that the Meu Kingdom was occasionally ruled by queens in the absence or early demise of its kings. Moreover, matrilineal lineage was a common practice, with the kingdom’s royal princesses receiving *makpa* (Tib. *mag ba*) or bridegrooms from neighbouring polities. The institution of *makpa* and its social functions appear to be an overlooked area in social and cultural studies, deserving careful scholarly attention and research. Dondrup Tso married Zhangkyong Trashi (Tib. Zhang skyong bkra shis, 1885?-1944?), son of Golok chieftain Wangchen Bum, sometime around 1915. Dondrup Tso and Zhangkyong’s reign continued the expansionist agenda of the Meu Kingdom, but larger political events in Eastern Tibet did not leave them much space for political consolidation and expansion. Perhaps one of Zhangkyong’s achievements is his preemptive action in securing Ngawa from the Muslim General Ma Bufang during the latter’s brutal campaigns across Amdo. Zhangkyong purportedly benefited from Kirti Lama’s generational friendship with the Ma chiefs of Qinghai. He went to Xining with a gift of five hundred horses to make an alliance with the Ma family (Chos 'phel 1993, p. 51; HWMLS 2015, p. 428). He succeeded in establishing a good political rapport with the Ma chiefs that avowedly not only stopped them from invading Ngawa but also earned diplomatic capital which served the Meu rulers well in future political developments. When Ma Bufang was appointed as the General of Xining by the Nationalist Government in 1934, he invited the Meu ruler as a guest who attended the celebration with a huge cavalry of entourage and gifts (Kirti blo bzang bstan 'dzin 2015, pp. 428-429; Hor gtsang 'jigs med 2009, p. 385). This friendship with Ma Bufang was seen as a threat by the chief of Trochu when the two polities went to war against each other in the 1940s. Zhangkyong’s reign was marked by a series of conflicts with Labrang and its *lhade* Chukama (Tib. Chu kha ma) in the early 20th century, and despite Kirti Lobzang Trinle’s interventions to resolve the conflicts, tensions persisted until China’s takeover in the early 1950s. For instance, the 5th Jamyang Zhepa’s father, Gonpo Dondrup (Tib. Mgon po don 'grub), came to Upper Ngawa to exert control over traditional leaders of the Tsodruk communities who rebelled against Labrang. When their encounters resulted in the death of some community leaders, the Meu ruler intervened, requiring the involvement of Khangsar Panchen (Tib. Khang gsar pan chen) and the chief of Amchok (Tib. A mchog) to mediate and halt the war between Labrang and Meu (Dmu dge bsam gtan 1987, pp. 262-263; Chos 'phel 1993, p. 22). After several generations of *lhade*-induced conflict over Upper Ngawa between Labrang and Meu Kingdom, the resolution reached by the 5th Jamyang Zhepa (Lobzang Jamyang Yeshe Tenpe Gyeltsen, Tib. Blo bzang 'jam dbyangs ye shes bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan, 1916-1947) and Meu Zhangkyong seems to have settled the long-standing conflict and rivalry. The last king of the Meu Kingdom, Pelgon Trinle Rapten, ascended to the throne in 1932. The first decade of Trinle Rapten’s reign, a period of relative peace, witnessed the increase of his influence in southern Amdo and the prosperity of his communities. Trinle Rapten, a deeply religious figure, was admired and respected by his people. He remains the only Meu ruler to earn the epithet “religious king” (Tib. *chos*

rgyal). As indicated above, a second article on the Meu Kingdom in the 20th century will focus on the life of Trinle Rapten, the tumultuous events of the democratic reforms of the late 1950s, and the whirlwind of the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s, in the wake of which Rapten committed suicide.

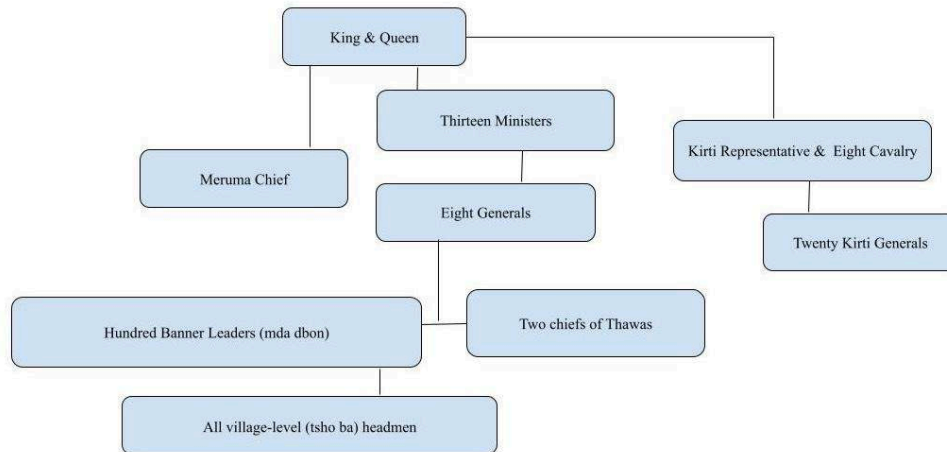
- 43 In the early 20th century, Western missionaries, such as Robert Ekvall, were stationed on the Sino-Tibetan borderlands and embarked on several visits to the Meu Kingdom with the aim of propagating Christianity. Ekvall, in his *Gateway to Tibet* (1938), recounts how a group of Christian missionaries including himself undertook their initial expedition to the “independent principality of Ngawa” in 1923 (Ekvall 1938, p. 74), followed by a few subsequent trips (*ibid.*, p. 82). The missionaries perceived Ngawa as a “promising” and “fruitful” mission field, nurturing the hope of establishing a mission station (*ibid.*, p. 191). However, their encounters were met with challenges. In a 1979 interview, Ekvall recalled how the letter of introduction to the Meu ruler did not explicitly mention their purpose of spreading the gospel. Consequently, upon discovering the true intent of the missionaries’ visit, they were eventually forced to leave Ngawa (Evangelism & Missions Archives 1979, Transcript, p. 18). Another missionary, Robert Carlson (1928-), made several observations during his visit to Ngawa and the Meu Kingdom in 1940. He noted the high literacy levels among non-clerical Tibetans in the region and praised the Meu Kingdom for successfully prohibiting banditry, thereby creating a safe environment for travellers compared to other Tibetan borderland regions (Evangelism & Missions Archives 1982, Transcript, p. 13, p. 3). In Ngawa, there exists a local saying, “the land of the gold-carrying old lady” (Tib. *rgan mo ser khur ma’i sa cha*), which functions as an epithet signifying a remarkable level of security and public trust.
- 44 In the 1920s and 1930s, when Ma Bufang occupied much of Amdo and Liu Wenhui 劉文輝 (1895-1976) established the nominal Xikang Province in Kham, Meu Kingdom was one of the few independent Tibetan polities in Eastern Tibet. Like the rulers of Choktse and Trochu polities in Gyelrong, Trinle Rapten observed the political upheaval that has swept China with the nationalists and communists competing for power and walked a tightrope trying to keep a balanced relationship between the two opposing factions (Gyal 2020). Ironically, until the very last minute, these independent polities were embroiled in war among themselves for territorial expansion and disputes. Trinle Rapten had also inherited an inter-communal feud with the neighbouring Chukama pastoralists from his grandfather Gonpo Sonam. This too grew into an armed conflict until it was resolved in the late 1940s.

Dominion and governance

- 45 The Meu Kingdom was powerful and belligerent at times during which it conquered many communities including parts of Golok to the west as well as parts of Dzoge and Gyelrong to the east and south. The Meu Kingdom was primarily a polity of Middle Ngawa which expanded and seized many communities of Lower Ngawa and at times of Upper Ngawa and neighbouring regions. During the reign of Kelzang Dondrup, its territory grew after seizing neighbouring communities. The Meu polity was at its height during its last three reigns of Gonpo Sonam, Zhangkyong Trashi, and Trinle Rapten. However, it is difficult to present an accurate picture of its dominion and territory because political geographies and borders were a constantly changing

phenomenon in these semi-nomadic polities of Eastern Tibet. Thus, any effort to map the dominion of the kingdom seems futile, for it is bound to be incomplete and limited. The Meu Kingdom's governmental structure seems more durable than its political boundary, and therefore, a basic sketch of its administrative system is presented below.

Figure 4. A rough sketch of the polity's governmental structure



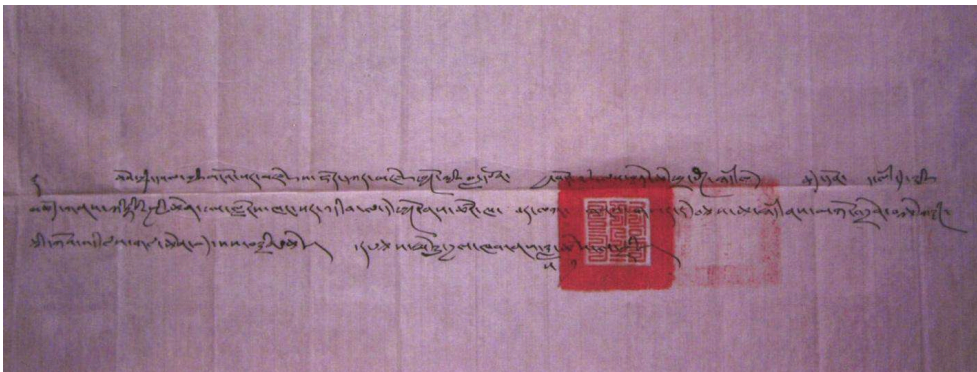
© Palden Gyal

- 46 This preliminary sketch is based on Tibetan language sources and oral narratives as a proximate outline of the Meu Kingdom's governmental structure prior to its dissolution and replacement by the colonial government of China with the advent of the communists in the 1950s. Yet, this wasn't the same governmental structure throughout its history of two and a half centuries. This probably only represents the administrative structure of the Meu Kingdom at its height. It is safe to assume that most of these positions were periodic roles, except for a handful of administrative staff, including a secretary, steward, and security personnel. Also, the above sketch includes the twenty representatives of Kirti Labrang under the Meu Kingdom, as well as the eight cavalries and entourage of the Kirti *trulku*. However, it is neither clear where their positions fit in the hierarchy of administrative roles, nor is it evident if these were regular positions or just ceremonial roles. The Meu Kingdom not only had a representative stationed at Ngawa Kirti Monastery but also had a palace in the vicinity of the monastic compounds (HWMLS 2015, p. 67). The Kirti Labrang also functioned as a monastic polity that had its secular rulers, the family and the descendants of the 5th Kirti Tenpe Gyeltsen called Kirti Mitsatsang (Tib. Kirti'i mi rtsa tshang). The communities of Kirti polity extended over large swathes of territory from northern Gyelrong, Dzoge, and Tewo (Tib. The bo). United in their patronage of the Kirti hierarchs, the Meu and Kirti polities were allies and assisted each other in times of conflict with neighbouring polities. Thawa (Tib. Mtha' ba) is an interesting social group in many parts of Amdo and their social histories seem to uncover histories of internal migration, exile, and urban development. It refers to communities that are formed organically around a monastery or a town, often composed of migrants with different social and religious backgrounds. There are two Thawa communities located near Kirti Monastery and Ngawa city. A significant portion of Ngawa's Thawa communities

consists of refugees from Golok who fled Ma Bufang's invasion and bloodshed in the 1920s and 1930s and subsequently became subjects of the Meu Kingdom.

- 47 Regarding its legal system and practices such as the adjudication of public disputes, the Meu Kingdom had a basic legal code that was based on Tibetan legal codes from the imperial period (Tib. *lha chos dge ba bcu dang mi chos gtsang ma bcu drug*). It was the foundation upon which different communities within the Meu Kingdom developed and implemented slightly different civil and criminal legal practices. For instance, Meruma, an inner dominion of the kingdom, had legal practices that are more stringent than what was applied in the outer dominions (HWMLS 2015, pp. 62-63). In general, it seems that the Meu Kingdom implemented a strict criminal code. As indicated above, not only banditry was prohibited, and in the early 20th century, most of the inmates in its prison were folks involved in some form of theft or feud. Serious crimes were punished with mutilation or even banishment. In the 1930s and 1940s, involvement in the sale and production of opium was considered a serious crime. Interestingly, there is also an indication of “environmental laws” in the Meu Kingdom. An edict issued by the Meu king in the iron-snake year of 1941 prohibits the cutting of trees in Takmalung (Tib. *Stag ma lung*) Valley (HWMLS 2015, p. 397). It stresses no matter who, people of high or low social status, all offenders would be punished accordingly.
- 48 The Meu ruler's letters of introduction for his representatives travelling to and across different polities of Eastern Tibet served as “passports” (Tib. *lam yig*) which not only provided them with access but also secured assistance such as corvée service from those addressees. For instance, the following letter introduces the Kirti General (Tib. *spyi chen*) to Lhapon (Tib. *bla dbon*) of Hor Karze (Tib. *Hor Dkar mdzes*) and requests him to provide the General with corvée Tib. 'u *lag*) assistance as he was there on a business mission.

Figure 5. A *lam yig* of the Meu Kingdom



© Source: HWMLS 2015, p. 494

Conclusion: “a children’s game”

- 49 The Tibetan novelist Alai's “The dust settles” (Tib. *chen ai luo ding*; translated as “Red poppies” by Howard Goldblatt and Sylvia Li-Chun Lin) is purportedly based on the history of the Choktse chieftain which presents a clear description of the chaotic life in the Sino-Tibetan borderlands before the advent of the Chinese in the 1950s. His illustration of the territorial disputes and conflicts between the Tibetan chieftains

lends a striking resemblance to the real events between the Meu, Trochu (Somang), and Choktse polities in the 1940s.

- 50 Unaware of the enormity of the political whirlwind that has overtaken China and that it would annihilate their “national dreams” of political existence in unprecedented ways, in the 1940s, Tibetan polities of Trochu and Meu occupied themselves with scheming and carrying out a series of massive rangeland wars against each other to settle territorial disputes. The last years of Trinle Rapten’s reign were spent pursuing a dream of territorial expansion and revenge against the belligerent Trochu chieftain Dorje Pelzang (Tib. Rdo rje dpal bzang, Ch. 蘇永和 1909-1981) who had taken over the Somang Kingdom of Gyelrong and expanded his influence over other Gyelrong polities such as Zigak (Tib. Rdzi 'gag). Other vassalages of Trochu and Meu were also involved in these rangeland wars in Kakhok (Tib. Rka khog), or as the Chinese called it, on the “Red grassland” (Tib. *dmar thang*; Ch. *hong yuan yuan* 红原), resulting in many lives lost on both sides. The Choktse chieftain was related to both Meu and Trochu rulers, so he intervened and mediated between the two polities. In 1954, when Tibetan chieftains from Eastern Tibet joined the Dalai Lama and Panchen Lama in Beijing, and when they were on tour in China, witnessing the military might and technology of the Chinese, Trinle Rapten is said to have told Dorje Pelzang: “our combats were children’s game”, and reportedly, their grudges were reconciled then and there (HWMLS 2015, p. 165).

Figure 6. From left to right: the 10th Panchen Lama, Meu Trinle Rapten, the 14th Dalai Lama, Chone Gyelpo (Tib. Co ne rgyal po), Labrang Apa Alo (Tib. Bla brang a pha a lo), and Puntsok Wangyel (Tib. Phun tshogs dbang rgyal) (?) in Beijing in 1954



© Source: HWMLS 2015 p. 505, photographer unknown

- 51 Trinle Rapten’s trip to Beijing in 1954, alongside other Eastern Tibetan leaders, held great significance for his political perspectives and future pursuits. During this visit, he had the privilege of meeting with the Dalai Lama on multiple occasions, affording him numerous opportunities to deliberate on the future of his polity and the possibility of a unified Tibet. This exceptional access was made possible through the introduction by Trichang Rinpoche (Tib. Khri byang rin po che) (Lozang Yeshe Tendzin Gyatso, Tib. Blo bzang ye shes bstan 'dzin rgya mtsho, 1901-1981), the Dalai Lama’s tutor, who held a deep admiration for Trinle Rapten’s root lama, Kirti *trulku* (Sgo sngun brtson 'grus 2015, p. 183). Although there are no written records to substantiate these interactions,

oral accounts suggest that before the democratic reforms in Eastern Tibet, Trinle Rapten and other Eastern Tibetan leaders like Jago Topden (Tib. Bya rgod stobs ldan) of Derge (Tib. Sde dge) and Apa Alo (Tib. A pha a lo, Ch. Huang Zhengqing 黄正清) of Labrang, appealed to the central government of China for the establishment of an “Inner Tibet”, a unified autonomous region comprised of all the Eastern Tibetan polities (HWMLS 2015, p. 3). Despite their efforts not leading to the desired outcome, the possibility of relevant documents becoming available opens the opportunity for a more comprehensive analysis of this episode. Such an examination could provide valuable insights into how Eastern Tibetan leaders envisioned a political future for Tibet, particularly for Tibetan communities that are currently incorporated into several Chinese provinces.

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NOTES

1. The extensive materials amassed during my year-long research trips in Taiwan, India, and Nepal posed a challenge for consolidation into a single research article. Therefore, a second installment, part 2, is currently underway, focusing on the history of Meu Kingdom in the 20th century. This forthcoming article delves into the turbulent events of the 1940s and offers an exploration of the life of the last ruler, Pelgon Trinle Rabten. In addition, I conducted interviews with key figures associated with the Meu Kingdom and compiled a wealth of unstudied Chinese language materials. Stay tuned for its publication.
2. A minor discrepancy emerges in the transliteration of Kelzang Dondrup's son's name. "The veritable records of the Qing" records it as "Cao Wang Beng" 曹旺蚌, whereas Tibetan sources indicate it as Tsewang Kyap. While the first two syllables align with the Tibetan name, "Beng" deviates from the Tibetan "Kyap" and seems to reflect the Tibetan term "Bum" (Tib. 'Bum). Hence, it is plausible that he was recognised by both names, Tsewang Kyap and Tsewang Bum.
3. The definition of *lhade* provided above serves as a working concept for this study. While it exhibits similarities to *chozhi* (Tib. *chos gzhis*; religious estates) in Central Tibet and parts of Kham established by the Ganden Phodrang government in the 17th century, there are crucial differences, particularly concerning mutual obligations and the hierarchy of relationships a community could maintain with a local monastery. Existing scholarship offers varied definitions of the term, yet there is a notable absence of in-depth investigation beyond cursory remarks and analysis (Nietupski 2010; Berounský 2012a). Comparing it to lay-clerical relations in Christian societies, the author intends to write a conceptual and historical piece on the subject in a separate article.

ABSTRACTS

This paper traces the political and institutional history of the Meu (Tib. Rme'u) Kingdom, which emerged in the early 18th century and gained regional prominence by the late 19th century. Utilising local Tibetan and Chinese historical sources, oral history, and western missionary accounts, it investigates how the ecumenical stance of Meu rulers fostered the kingdom's growth in a diverse religious landscape. The study delves into Meu's political history, examining its connection to the Qing court as well as the development of monastic institutions and the role of influential religious figures like the Kirti lineages. It demonstrates that monastic-lay affiliations (*lhade*, Tib. lha sde or "divine communities" in Tibetan) were pivotal to Tibetan political power and diplomacy, shedding light on the *choyon* (Tib. *Mchod yon*) model of Tibetan political thought. It underscores the significance of *lhade* in reinterpreting this model and provides insights into the nature of political governance in the Sino-Tibetan borderlands, revealing intricate dynamics in regional and transregional religio-political networks influencing inter-polity relations and diplomacy.

Cet article retrace l'histoire politique et institutionnelle du royaume de Meu (Tib. Rme'u) apparu au début du XVIII^e siècle et qui a acquis une importance régionale à la fin du XIX^e siècle. À l'aide de sources historiques locales tibétaines et chinoises, d'histoires orales et de récits de missionnaires occidentaux, il étudie comment la position œcuménique des dirigeants de Meu a favorisé la croissance du royaume dans un paysage religieux diversifié. L'étude se penche sur l'histoire politique de Meu, en examinant ses liens avec la cour des Qing ainsi que le développement des institutions monastiques et le rôle de figures religieuses influentes telles que les lignées de Kirti. Elle démontre que les affiliations entre monastères et laïcs (*lhade*, Tib. Lha sde ou « communautés divines » en tibétain) ont joué un rôle central dans le pouvoir politique tibétain et la diplomatie, mettant en lumière le modèle *choyon* (Tib. *Mchod yon*) de la pensée politique tibétaine. Elle souligne l'importance du *lhade* dans la réinterprétation de ce modèle et donne un aperçu de la nature de la gouvernance politique dans les zones frontalières sino-tibétaines, révélant des dynamiques complexes dans les réseaux politico-religieux régionaux et transrégionaux qui influencent les relations interpolitiques et la diplomatie.

INDEX

Mots-clés: Tibet, frontière, royaume de Meu, Amdo

Keywords: Tibet, border, Meu Kingdom, Amdo

AUTHOR

PALDEN GYAL

Palden Gyal is currently a Ph.D. candidate at Columbia University, specialising in Modern Tibetan and Late Imperial Chinese history in the Department of East Asian Languages & Cultures. His dissertation project, tentatively titled "Shifting Terrains of Authority. Religio-political Governance in the Sino-Tibetan Borderlands, 1720-1950", delves into the historical context of Tibetan polities in the Sino-Tibetan borderlands, exploring the intricate relationships between

religious and temporal institutions against the background of Qing imperial expansion into Inner Asia in the 18th century. It attempts to offer a rich and multidimensional framework for understanding the dynamics of authority and power in this region from the 18th to the 20th century.

palden.gyal@columbia.edu