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*Visions of People, Place and Authority*

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SA SPANG MDA' GNAM SPANG MDA': MURDER, HISTORY,  
AND SOCIAL POLITICS IN 1920S LHASA<sup>292</sup>

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*Sa spang mda' gnam spang mda'*

The earth is Pangda's, the sky is Pangda's.

On a dark and stormy night, people had gathered in Lhasa's Twentieth Park, (*nyi shu'i gling ga*), to celebrate 'dzam gling *spyi bsangs*, the Universal Smoke Offering Day. Throughout the day, people picked and gambled in tents set up throughout the park. With the exception of the weather, the atmosphere was festive—people eating, drinking, and otherwise enjoying themselves. Beer maids roamed from tent to tent refilling *chang* bowls,<sup>293</sup> singing, and flirting. Much of Lhasa's high society was there. The flaps of their tents were down, perhaps as much as to prevent prying eyes as to provide shelter from the weather. Inside one particular tent, dimly lit by oil lamps and candles, a group of men played mahjong and drank *chang*. As they played, a thunder and lightning storm developed. Outside the tent, two men huddled, nervously preparing for their own festival activities. Then, as one or another of the men inside the tent contemplated his next play, there was a ferocious roar of thunder, followed by a flash of lightning. The lightning illuminated the tent, and through chang-glazed eyes, they saw that one of the men had fallen over. Outside the tent, the two men were already gone, swiftly making their escape through the alleys of Lhasa. The man who had fallen was dead, murdered with just one shot fired precisely at the time of the thunder, so as not to be heard and thus giving the assassins just

<sup>292</sup> The original title of this paper, as delivered at the Ninth Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies, June 24-30, 2000, in Leiden, The Netherlands, was "Sa spom mda' gnam spom mda': Earth, Sky, and the Pangdatsang Family." The Social Science Research Council (U.S.A.) and the American Institute of Indian Studies provided funding for research. Many people provided gracious assistance and advice in the research for and writing of this paper; thank you to Tashi Tsering, Lobsang Shastri, Chopel, Champa Lhunpo, Tenzin Bhagen, Larry Epstein, Ann Stoler, and Leslie Pincus. A very special thank you to members of the Pangdatsang family in the United States, Switzerland, and India.

<sup>293</sup> *Chang* is Tibetan barley beer.

enough time to make their get away. This was 1921 and the murdered man was Pangda Nyigyal, the head of the Pangdatsang family, a Khampa trader settled in Lhasa and a favorite of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama.

The dramatic story of the murder of Pangda Nyigyal is still told today by Tibetans. Eyes wide, voices lowered, narrators seven decades distant from the event drape their narration in suspense and conspiracy enabled first, by the fact that the murder was never solved, and second, by the controversial place of the Pangdatsang family in modern Tibetan society and history. This article follows both branches of suspense, and is two stories in one. It is first a study of the murder of Pangda Nyigyal and the histories his murder has generated, and it is also the beginnings of a history of the Pangdatsang family and of the relations between region, class, and politics in Tibetan society.

In the first half of the last century, simultaneous with Tibet's uneasy exploration of outside ideas about modernity and the nation-state, the Tibetan merchant class was attempting to carve out a new bourgeois social space in Lhasa's aristocrat-dominated society. The attempts of this group, many of who were trading families from the eastern Tibet region of Kham, were a challenge to rigid hierarchies of regional status and social class in a national imaginary that privileged the Central Tibetan aristocracy. Genealogy and heritage trumped earned wealth and power in early twentieth century Lhasa, but financial success was beginning to infringe on the bastions of social prestige. Thus, although ascribed status still prevailed over achieved status, Tibet's new bourgeoisie did have its share of success stories. Among Khampas, the two most successful trading firms were those of the Sadhutsang family from Kanze and the Pangdatsang family from Markham. Along with the Reting Labrang,<sup>294</sup> they were referred to as *re spom sa gsum*, "Reting-Pangda-Sadhu, the Three."<sup>295</sup> In Kalimpong today, forty-odd years after the trade route between India

<sup>294</sup> A labrang is the property and wealth of an incarnate lama accumulated over a series of incarnations. Reting Rimpoche, the incarnate lama associated with Sera Monastery's Je College, had a substantial labrang that was, among other things, successfully engaged in trade.

<sup>295</sup> In 1952, American intelligence officers observed that "Pangdatsang, Sadutsang, and Reting Labrang...have formed a syndicate operating at Kalimpong...to promote the wool trade." U.S. Intelligence report, June 27, 1952, NARA document.

and Tibet was closed, they are remembered as "the sun, star, and jewels of Tibet."<sup>296</sup>

*Sa spang mda' gnam spang mda'*. "The earth is Pangda's, the sky is Pangda's." I first heard this phrase from one of Pangda's former mule herders. Since then numerous Tibetans have quoted it to me, often telling me stories of how Pangda's servants would invoke it when committing an offense, saying, "I am connected to Pangda, what are you going to do to me?"<sup>297</sup> This insolence was possible only through the power of the Pangdatsang family, one that rose seemingly from nowhere to great power, and which in the span of two generations became one of the wealthiest—if not *the* wealthiest—families in all of Tibet. From Kham, the family was wildly successful in Lhasa. The story of its members ranges back and forth between India, China, Kham, and Lhasa, covering ground ranging from the Tibetan economy and trade to politics both lay and monastic, from relations with Nationalist China and British India to intrigues of all sorts of shapes and sizes. In this article I draw on an eclectic array of oral and written sources to present less well-known aspects of the family. Thus, instead of bringing new material to bear on the 1934 Pangda rebellion in Kham or Rapga's Tibet Improvement Party in 1940s Kalimpong, I focus on Nyigyal, the family patriarch, and his shepherding of the family in their rise to national prominence.

### *Lightning Strikes: The Making of the Pangdatsang Family*

Our story begins in Chamdo. The rise of the Pangdatsang family from local power to regional power, and then to national power took place in a relatively short span of time and under two different names—Pangdatsang and Pomdatsang. In the mid-nineteenth century, the Pomdatsang (Spom mda' tshang) family,<sup>298</sup> based in a Sakya

<sup>296</sup> Interview, Dawa Dhondup, March 24, 1998, Kalimpong.

<sup>297</sup> An off-color version of this story also circulates. One of Pangda's mule herders was caught relieving his bowels on the side of the road in Kalimpong, and upon being scolded, responded, "The earth is Pangda's, the sky is Pangda's. If I don't shit here, where am I supposed to shit?" (*sa spang mda' gnam spang mda' shiyag pa di ru ma btang na ga par giong dgos red*). Most versions of the story that I was told included only the first phrase, whether the second phrase was edited out for me or added to the original by others for comic effect, I do not know.

<sup>298</sup> Khampa family names often affix *tshang*, romanized as "tsang," to them. *Tshang* literally means "nest," but "Pangdatsang" may be translated as "House of

area of Chamdo called Rdza ba Spom mda',<sup>299</sup> were traders and sponsors of the Sakya family and sect.<sup>300</sup> At this time, Tenzin Zangmo, one of the sisters of the head of the Sakya family, was married into the Pomda family. The family was given a Sakya post in Markham, an important district south of Chamdo, and relocated there. One offspring of the Pomda-Sakya union was Nyima Gyaltzen, or Nyigyal, under whom the family's power would be consolidated through a combination of business acumen and religious patronage. Connections to the Sakya family were an important part of the ascent of the Pangdatsangs.

The Sakya family was one of the most powerful in all of Tibet. From the town and monastery of Sakya in central Tibet, they had risen to power in the thirteenth century.<sup>301</sup> Sakya rule over Tibet lasted for only about a century, but the importance of the family and religious tradition did not wane. Unique in Tibet, Sakya is the name of a family, their estate, a monastery, and one of the four main schools of Tibetan Buddhism. In addition to the Sakya monasteries found throughout Tibet, the Sakyas maintained a degree of political autonomy in eleven different areas of Tibet through the 1950s, including two territories in eastern Tibet—Damthog and Markham.<sup>302</sup>

The Sakya post in Markham was one of the eighteen *dpon* or chieftain positions in Markham and was called the Gyakeg Pon (Rgya skeg dpon).<sup>303</sup> This is the position given to the Pomda family.

Pangda." In Lhasa, the word *gzim shag*, an honorific for house, was used instead of *tshang*.

<sup>299</sup> Known as Rdza ba sngang or Rdza ba Dpa' shod Rdzong. Oral information from Tashi Tsering, Phupa Tsetop, and Baba Lekshay. Pangda family members that I have interviewed were unaware that the family was originally from Chamdo.

<sup>300</sup> The story of the family's rise to local power requires further investigation. Pangdatsang family members contend that the family was locally powerful for generations. Wangmo Yuthok Pangdatsang recalls that in the first half of the twentieth century, the Pangdatsang brothers could recite family history going back four or five generations. Their ancestral stories were of powerful and respected local chieftains who had good relations with the people they governed. Interview, Wangmo Yuthok Pangdatsang, Seattle, June 2, 2000.

<sup>301</sup> On the Sakya family and religious tradition, see Samuel 1993, Cassinelli and Ekvall 1969, and Chogay 1983. For personal narratives, see Sakya and Emery 1990, and Norbu 1987.

<sup>302</sup> Cassinelli and Ekvall 1969:32.

<sup>303</sup> Phupa 1998:7. Phupa gives the spelling as *rgya dkar*. Cassinelli and Ekvall as *rgya khag*. I choose to follow instead Sakya Trichen Takshu Tinley Rinchen who spells the name *rgya skeg*.

The domain included the nomad area of Jindok and the mixed farming-nomadic area of Gushod, as well as the Gyakeg monastery and community.<sup>304</sup> The position was usually given to a lama from Sakya who would stay for three to five years as both head of the monastery and the lay community.<sup>305</sup> In contrast to this system, the Pomda family was awarded the post as a hereditary one in perpetuity. This meant that the family was now ruler of a unique area, one which paid taxes to Sakya, but from which the Lhasa government could levy work, or collect an "outer tax."<sup>306</sup> The granting of this Sakya post provided material benefits to the family, spiritual benefits in the form of strong protector deities Dorje Dakden (Rdo rje grags ldan) and Thog goe (Thog rgod), attendants of the powerful deity Tsi mar (Tsi'u dmar ra), as well as one of the Sakya '*bag mo*, or witches,<sup>307</sup> and an identity change in the form of a new name. The area of Markham that they moved to was called Spang mda', and the family took on this name, referring to themselves as Spang mda' tshang, or Pangdatsang, rather than the earlier Spom mda' tshang. This relatively recent change of name means that both names—Spom mda' and Spang mda'—are still used to refer to the family. The family themselves prefer the Spang mda' name, transliterating it as "Pangda," and I follow their preference here.<sup>308</sup>

The new position in Markham did not curtail the Pangda trading business, but rather provided the financial means for expansion. Pangda Nyigyal moved to Lhasa and began coordinating long-distance trade from there. It is at this point that the family gains recognition preserved in broader historical memory within the Tibetan community. Over the course of several dozen interviews with Khampa and Lhasa Tibetans about the Pangdatsang family, of those

<sup>304</sup> Phupa 1998:7.

<sup>305</sup> Phupa 1998:7. Cassinelli and Ekvall 1969:30 downplay the importance of the eastern Sakya areas. In addition, they erroneously claim that "no people from these eastern regions were of any importance in the governmental and religious affairs of Sa skya proper."

<sup>306</sup> Cassinelli and Ekvall 1969:361.

<sup>307</sup> On Tibetan deities, see Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1956. On the Sa skya '*bag mo*, see Wangdu 1995.

<sup>308</sup> Wangmo Yuthok Pangda recalls that papers her father, Pangda Yamphel, submitted to the Dalai Lama would come back with the name Spang mda' crossed out and Spom mda' written in instead (Interview, June 2, 2000). Several individuals have suggested that the reason for preferring Spom mda' could be because Spang mda' is a close homonym for the term *sprang po* which means "beggar."

who were able to explain the origins of the family's rise to power, all told me similar stories. Collectively, they were as follows:

When the Thirteenth Dalai Lama fled Lhasa to the Tibetan border with India following the fall of the Qing Dynasty in 1911, Pangda Nyigyal provided free transport of all his goods to and from Lhasa, as well as a bodyguard of some 2-300 Khampa troops.<sup>309</sup> Once His Holiness was safely returned to Lhasa, he called Pangda Nyigyal to see him, asking him what he wanted in return for services provided. Nyigyal replied that he was a businessman and didn't know about politics, but could His Holiness give him the business powers of the Central Government? His Holiness said very well and sent the orders to the Kashag, the Tibetan cabinet. The Kashag asked Nyigyal, "If we give you one million gorno, then what will you give us next year?" He wisely replied, "Two million." The deal was struck, and Pangda's star began to rise. As the Central Tibetan Government business agent, Pangda bought wool at half the regular price from the sellers and others were not allowed to buy until he had bought his fill. He also paid only half the transportation costs, and others had to wait to move their goods until all of his had been transported. Other traders, wool sellers, and transporters did not like this and became jealous.

This oral history of Pangda's fortuitous encounter with, and service to, the Thirteenth Dalai Lama sets the date of the family's rise in 1912. But while Nyigyal did aid the Dalai Lama, and was later favored for this service, the Pangda family was on the rise prior to 1912. British colonial records housed in London help us extend this study further back by several years. Although Tibet was never colonized by Britain, the British Empire and its agents amassed and created massive amounts of documentation regarding Tibet. The importance of knowledge in the imperial project of rule extended to places and peoples outside the boundaries of rule. In Tibet we see this through British attempts to ensure that Tibet developed in ways compatible with the interests of Great Britain and British India.<sup>310</sup> British policy in Tibet in the early twentieth century had three objectives: first, to cultivate a pro-British sentiment among the Tibetan elite; second, to influence Tibetan diplomatic affairs; and third, to develop trade as a key component of British-Tibetan relations. With this third concern in mind, they noted with alarm every time the Tibetan Government

<sup>309</sup> Tsepon W.D. Shakabpa also writes about "Nyima Gyalpo Pandatshang of Markham" aiding the Dalai Lama in 1912; see his 1967:243, and 1976:208.

<sup>310</sup> On European colonialism as a project of knowledge as well as rule, see Cohn 1996, on British policy towards Tibet, see McKay 1997, and McGranahan in press.

made trade decisions that went against British notions of a fair and open market that underlay the various trade treaties between the governments of India and Tibet.

Protest over trade arrangements, often directed at the Tibetan Government's favoring of the Pangda family, was a frequent form of British communication with Lhasa. The first British protest against Pangdatsang favoritism was in 1909, three years before Nyigyal provided aid and escort to the Dalai Lama. On May 26, 1909, the Tibetan Government granted the sole right to purchase wool and yak tails to three traders: "the Kumsang family of Lhasa, Jimpa of Chema (or Garusha from Lhasa, if Jimpa declined), and Pu-nye-chang from the Pom-do-tsang family."<sup>311</sup> The British were joined in their protests over these grants by the eighteen major traders of the Chumbi valley, on the Indian-Tibetan border and through which ran the Kalimpong-Lhasa road. Yu Lien, the Chinese representative in Lhasa, was also against the trade grants and gave orders for the grant to be cancelled. His orders were promptly ignored, as were the other protests, and the grant recipients began to reap their benefits. The trading powers of the Pangda firm in particular began to grow, and monopolies over the wool trade—the chief domestic product of Tibet—continued to be granted to Pangda Nyigyal by the government. Pangda was also a major importer of tea and silks from China, and had representatives throughout China, including Beijing and Shanghai. By 1920, Pangda Nyigyal was recognized as the leading Tibetan trader, a fact not lost on the British. Sir Charles Bell, Political Officer in Sikkim (with responsibilities for Tibet) off and on from 1904 through 1921, provides a rare written description of Pangda Nyigyal.

During my time in Tibet, the chief Tibetan merchant was a man named Pom-da-tsang. I met him in Lhasa.<sup>312</sup> He had branches in Calcutta, Shanghai, and Peking, and formerly had maintained a branch in Japan also. His business with India was chiefly in wool, but he exported also yak-tails and other commodities. To Peking he sent woolen cloth, as well as the skins of fox, stone marten, lynx, marmot, etc. He imported great quantities of Chinese silk.... Pom-da-tsang emphasized the necessity of knowing the different patterns on the silk, for some districts

<sup>311</sup> IOR L/P+S/10/138 Tibet. Trade Monopolies, 1909-1918. In addition, the grant for hides went to the Getutsang family from Kham for Rs. 20,000/- per year.

<sup>312</sup> Bell's meeting with Pangda Nyigyal took place at some point between November 1920 and October 1921, the only time that Bell was in Lhasa. For information on the Bell Mission to Lhasa, see McKay 1997.

in Tibet favor one pattern, others another. The silk which came from Russia, he asserted, was of good quality only; there was nothing second rate. It was more costly than the most expensive Chinese silk.<sup>313</sup>

Pangda was also one of the few Khampa traders who paid for goods in Dartsendo or Chengdu with drafts payable in Shanghai.<sup>314</sup>

At some time in the 1910s, as the family became more successful in Lhasa, they made the decision to join forces with the Jangling (Byang gling) family, a family of traders from Lhasa.<sup>315</sup> The two daughters of the Jangling family, Sonam and Tsedon, married with the two Pangda sons Yamphel and Tobgyal, but this was not all; to more closely tie the families together, the husbands also married each other's wives. This was done with an official ceremony, after which the two families lived together as one. From the unions of the parents, only one child was born, a daughter, Pema Choekyi. She was given the Pangda name, and the original son of the Jangling family took the name Spang mda' zur pa, or Pangsur (Spang zur),<sup>316</sup> when he went into government service.<sup>317</sup> This union of families combined not only two trading families, but also created deeper ties for the Khampa Pangda family with communities in Lhasa.

Social divisions in Lhasa were not only along class lines, but regional ones, with Tibetans from the provinces added into Central Tibetan social hierarchies. Two arenas in which there was considerable latitude for crossing divisions and bringing together different communities were trade and religion. Both trade and religion cut across social and regional divides in general, while recreating such divisions internally, e.g., through regional trade associations and monastic colleges or houses organized around regional affiliation. Khampa traders passing through Lhasa could easily find Khampa

<sup>313</sup> Bell 1992:130.

<sup>314</sup> IOR L/P+S/1/190, File P921. Tibet, Trade in Tachienlu and the Marches. O.R. Coates letter, Tachienlu, November 22, 1916.

<sup>315</sup> Interviews, Wangmo Yuthok Pangda, June 2, 2000; Surkhang Lhacham, Oakland, May 1, 2000.

<sup>316</sup> Zur ("corner") is a suffix given to family names when the occasion arises that a secondary branch of the family needs a name for official use.

<sup>317</sup> He eventually went as a *mag pa* to the Tethong family which meant that the Pangsur name was not continued. *Mag pa* is the term for a man who at the time of marriage leaves his family's home to live with his wife's family. He becomes a member, often the head, of the new family and takes their family name as his own. This is commonly done in families where there are no sons, and thus no one to carry on the family name.

worlds in the capital—places to stay and drink, lamas to seek blessings from. These were familiar worlds, and most traders were perhaps content to operate within these frameworks.<sup>318</sup> Pangda Nyigyal, however, had aspirations beyond Khampa expatriate life in Lhasa; his merger with the Jangling family, his efforts at business expansion, and his relationship with the Dalai Lama are ample evidence. One question remains unanswered by historical memory in exile and British colonial archives: why was Pangda Nyigyal awarded the 1909 trade concession? What exactly had brought him to the attention of the Tibetan Government?

The key to unlocking the story of the Pangdatsang family's successes in Lhasa was entrusted to Nyigyal's grandson, Manang Sonam Tobgyal. Son of Pema Choekyi, Manang Sonam Tobgyal spent much of his childhood and teen years in the household of his uncle Yamphel. Pangda Yamphel, along with his brothers Rapga and Tobgyal, would regale the younger generation with stories of the past, including Nyigyal's early years in Lhasa. As family lore goes, Nyigyal came to Lhasa as an ordinary Khampa trader. He did not have much money, but was a clever man, and he had a plan. Shortly after his arrival in Lhasa, Nyigyal borrowed money from friends and then made large contributions to the "three monasteries"—Sera, Drepung, and Ganden.<sup>319</sup> He gave all of his capital to them, leaving nothing for himself. In Tibet, at this time, there were no banks, so people were responsible for keeping their own money. Across all levels of society, from poorest to wealthiest, giving alms was a popular means of accumulating merit, and as a result, the monasteries were very cash-rich. After Nyigyal made large donations to each of these monasteries, people began to talk. Word spread about Nyigyal's generosity, and the monastic officials thought that Pangda Nyigyal must be a very rich Khampa trader who had just arrived in Lhasa. The monasteries were not fond of keeping large amounts of money on their grounds, and with no banks available, would store money at the

<sup>318</sup> An additional and unofficial realm in which divisions of class and region were crossed was in the world of sexual relations. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper, liberal Tibetan sexual mores allowed for transgressions of social boundaries through male-female sexual relations, especially between traders and women in towns along trading routes.

<sup>319</sup> Sera, Drepung, and Ganden were the three main monasteries associated with the Tibetan Government. Each was Gelugpa, supported thousands of monks from all regions of Tibet, and supplied high-level monastic officials to the government.

homes of their trusted sponsors. Pangda Nyigyal, having shown himself to be a valuable sponsor, was asked to store their money; he agreed, and used this money as the capital with which to build his successful business. Reflecting back on Nyigyal's plan, his grandson says, "That's how it all started. With the protection of these three monasteries, you are safe in Tibet."<sup>320</sup>

Nyigyal was indeed safe. He garnered not only the support of both lay and monastic officials in the Tibetan government, but became a favorite (*spyang gsal*) of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama. The Thirteenth Dalai Lama had several favorites over the course of his tenure; being a favorite of the Dalai Lama meant rare access to His Holiness, and privileges in political, social, and economic realms as well. Manang Sonam Tobgyal suggests that perhaps Nyigyal, a bright and capable Khampa and a devoted religious sponsor, caught the attention of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama, who was an especially open-minded man, interested in building stronger relations with Kham. Pangda Nyigyal's personal acumen and monastic connections aside, his association with the Thirteenth Dalai Lama—and the later close association of his sons with the Dalai Lama and his chief favorite Kumbela—provided the Pangda family with the means to unparalleled wealth as well as social and political influence. If those responsible for killing Nyigyal thought that his death would bring down the family, they were very wrong.

#### *Unsolved Crimes: Storytelling and the Politics of History*

The past is like the scene of a crime: if the deed itself is irrecoverable, its traces may still remain.<sup>321</sup>

History is only such when there are two versions of the same story. Pangdatsang family history provides no exception to this rule, and is ripe with gossip, innuendo, secrets, and speculations aired behind mostly closed doors. The story of Nyigyal's assassination—a crime that remains unsolved today—raises important questions about historical knowledge. Who killed Pangda Nyigyal and why? The inability to solve the crime, or perhaps the *unwillingness* to solve the

crime, results in a seemingly unfinished history, in which social politics are hinted at, names are whispered, and truths are sidelined. While the "deed" and its doer may be "irrecoverable" in the present, other aspects of this history are as important as its missing facts. I turn now to explore how this history has been told, and by whom, asking how it has been edited to fit the "central interpretive devices" of Tibetan society at the various times of its telling.<sup>322</sup> Alongside a tracking of the murderer, therefore, we shall also track the possibilities for history as configured by shifts in Tibetan social and political worlds in the 1920s and ensuing decades.

History in this instance is *lo rgyus*, a category with no pre-set subject, told in narrative rather than its earlier format as annals. The histories that I draw on in this discussion of Pangda Nyigyal's murder are both ones written and told shortly after the murder, as well as ones narrated for me in the last several years. In combining sources I look not just for information about the murder, but for the ways that stories about the murder have and have not been told. Historian Alessandro Portelli contends that oral histories tell us as much, if not more, about meaning than about events.<sup>323</sup> To follow, Luise White suggests that historical facts emerge from social truths and vice versa.<sup>324</sup> The case of Pangda Nyigyal's murder offers such a dual commentary on the murder itself as well as on social politics in Lhasa and beyond. Viewing history as a combination of fact and meaning opens our investigation to the conditions that led to Pangda Nyigyal's murder and also to the various possibilities of interpretation and transmission for stories of his murder. This approach recognizes that events are not real solely because they happened, but because their reality is secured by remembering and telling them in culturally meaningful ways.<sup>325</sup>

Nyigyal was a wealthy and important man at the time of his death, but still a Khampa newcomer to Lhasa society, and the possibilities for narrating his murder reflect that status. His death also took place at a time of sparse literacy in Tibet. There were no newspapers in Lhasa in 1921, and any prison or governmental records that might have been kept are not currently accessible. Thus, although crime is

<sup>322</sup> Steedman 1986:5.

<sup>323</sup> Portelli 1981.

<sup>324</sup> White 2000:33-4.

<sup>325</sup> White 1987:20; Scarry 1996.

<sup>320</sup> Interview, Manang Sonam Tobgyal, July 1, 2000, Luzern, Switzerland; also phone interview, May 30, 2000.

<sup>321</sup> Kuhn 1995:4.

considered by historians to be an event generative of a surplus of sources,<sup>326</sup> in the case of Nyigyal's murder, this expectation does not hold true. To my knowledge, only two individuals wrote about the assassination,<sup>327</sup> the rest of our sources are oral. All accounts of the assassination are second-hand; we have no available eyewitness accounts. Nevertheless, traces remain.

The clearest statement on the murder is short and to the point: "On the evening of the 16<sup>th</sup>, in Lhasa, the devoted sponsor Pangda Nyigyal was shot by a bad person while he was in a tent during Zamling Kyisang."<sup>328</sup> This diary entry was written in 1922 by Takshu Tinley Rinchen, the Sakya Trichen, head of the Sakya family and religious sect. The Sakya Trichen had kept a diary since the age of eight, and was a fastidious recorder of the world around him.<sup>329</sup> His collected diaries, including many accounts of his interactions with the Pangdatsang family, were edited and published as his autobiography in 1974 by his chief disciple, the Venerable Jampal Sangpo, Abbot of Sakya Monastery.<sup>330</sup> Takshu Tinley Rinchen records his first association with the Pangdatsang family in 1882 at age eleven when he gave a long life initiation teaching to Sonam Palgyal, "the storekeeper of Gyakeg Pomdatsang."<sup>331</sup> In 1915, he assumed the position of Sakya Trichen from his father, Kunga Nyingpo, and in 1920, he made a ceremonial visit to Lhasa.<sup>332</sup> His activities there included at least seven different recorded ceremonies and teachings done on behalf of Pangda Nyigyal.

The year before Nyigyal's murder, 1920, the Year of the Iron Monkey, was a busy one for the Sakya Trichen. He was in Lhasa tending to his own religious activities and monastic responsibilities, as well as giving a large number of teachings to his individual sponsors. Over the course of the year, Sakya Trichen gave Nyigyal his

<sup>326</sup> See the collected essays in Muir and Ruggiero 1994, especially their "Afterword: Crime and the Writing of History," pp.226-236.

<sup>327</sup> I thank Tashi Tsering of the Amnye Machen Institute in Dharamsala for directing me to these texts.

<sup>328</sup> Khri chen 1974, 1:840.

<sup>329</sup> Khri chen 1974:4 ("Preface").

<sup>330</sup> Khri chen 1974.

<sup>331</sup> Khri chen 1974, 1:81-2.

<sup>332</sup> Khri chen 1974:3 ("Preface"). In Lhasa, Sakya Trichen had his second visit with the Thirteenth Dalai Lama and made visits to many monasteries and pilgrimage sites. He also did ceremonies for the Tibetan Government, "at which a number of miracles are said to have occurred."

family, associates, and servants numerous long life initiation teachings, rituals for deities (e.g., *rita phyag khyung gsum*), rituals for prosperity (*g-yang sgrub nor bu'i chog rgya*), and teachings that he himself had composed.<sup>333</sup> Nyigyal in turn made many generous offerings to the Sakya Trichen, his mother, wife, and three children, including religious objects (such as Mandral Tensum which represents the body, speech, and mind of the Buddha), high quality brocades, tea, and barley, as well as cash.<sup>334</sup> During the seven day prosperity ceremony, Pangda Nyigyal confided to Sakya Trichen that he had paid back all of his debt to the government and to relatives, and had now accumulated a large sum of money. He had decided to divide this money in thirds, with one-third to go to His Holiness the Dalai Lama, one-third to Gyakeg Monastery in Markham for expansion and to support 500 monks, and the remaining one-third to Sakya Monastery. Sakya Trichen records that he praised this plan, telling Nyigyal, "To give such an amount of money to the great monastery makes your human life useful and plants a seed of goodness for your future lives."<sup>335</sup> Shortly after, Pangda Nyigyal was murdered.

Sakya Trichen's account of the year leading up to Pangda Nyigyal's murder offers no direct commentary on why Nyigyal was killed, much less who the "bad person" behind the deed could be. Indirectly, however, the character sketch he provides of Nyigyal is one of a devoted religious sponsor, moreover, one who had just paid off all of his outstanding debts, and was perhaps poised to take his trading firm to new heights of success. While Sakya Trichen refrains from commenting on trade jealousies or speculating on who might have killed Nyigyal, other narrators do not hold back such comments. In the oral histories of Pangda Nyigyal's assassination that I have collected, all narrators knew that he had been shot while picking, all knew that this had been during a thunder and lightning storm, and all knew who was suspected of ordering the assassination. Of those interviewed who chose to share the suspect's name with me, the same person, a Tibetan aristocrat, was named again and again without fail, but always with qualification; e.g., "Who killed [Pangda Nyigyal] remained a mystery. Nobody knew exactly who killed him or for what reason. Of course, people had their suspicions about who

<sup>333</sup> Khri chen 1974:608-649.

<sup>334</sup> Khri chen 1974:645, 648.

<sup>335</sup> Khri chen 1974:626.



the killer was.<sup>336</sup> The only narrator to confidently name the murderer, and to write about it, was Alo Chonzed.<sup>337</sup>

Alo Chonzed, a Khampa born and raised in Lhasa, a leader of Miamang Tsongdu, the popular anti-Chinese Tibetan People's Organization in the 1950s, was in later decades a vocal critic of the Tibetan Government-in-Exile. His handwritten and self-published 617-page history of Tibet was banned by the Tibetan Government-in-Exile, and circulates in only limited numbers. It is in this book, *Bod kyi gnas lugs bden 'dzin sgo phye ba'i lde mig zhes bya ba a lo chos mdzad kyi gdams, spyi lo 1920 nas 1982 bar*, or *The Key That Opens the Door of Truth to the Tibetan Situation: Materials on Modern Tibetan History*, that the most detailed account of Pangda Nyigyal's murder is available.<sup>338</sup> Alo Chonzed's interest in the case was personal; his uncle Aten was arrested for the crime, imprisoned and tortured before his innocence was proven and he was released from jail.

The murder of Pangda Nyigyal was not an ordinary crime. His social rank was high enough that the case appears to have been a political rather than legal affair, adjudicated by prison and government officials rather than through the court system.<sup>339</sup> As Alo Chonzed tells the story, Nyigyal's assassination was acted upon swiftly. Sakya Trichen confirms this, writing that he received a letter from Pangda Nyima stating that "about ten men" confessed to being involved in Nyigyal's murder, and except for two who were still at large, the culprits had all been put in jail.<sup>340</sup> Nyima concluded the letter by saying that they were not sure who else was involved in the murder, and requested religious objects from Sakya Trichen to protect the remaining family members against harm from weapons. In response, Sakya Trichen sent him shirts that his father and uncle had worn, and a *kha btags*, a white silk scarf, with eleven knots tied in it. While the Pangdatsang family was now well protected, Khampa Aten's troubles were just beginning. In the following paragraphs, I present a paraphrase of Alo Chonzed's narration of the story.

<sup>336</sup> Interview, Anonymous, November 3, 1997, Kathmandu.

<sup>337</sup> The Tibetan spelling is *A lo chos mdzad*. I transliterate this name as Alo Chonzed, following his own preference—Alo Chonzed—but with a single rather than double 'h.'

<sup>338</sup> Chonzed 1983.

<sup>339</sup> See French 1995 on political and legal status of murder cases and those involving important persons, especially pp. 115-6.

<sup>340</sup> Khri chen 1974, 2:51-3.

Khampa Aten was arrested for the murder of Pangda Nyigyal because of his association with the Dzangtsatsang family. This family, Khampa traders from Lithang, was suspected of competition with the Pangdatsang family. Based on his association with the Dzang-tsatsangs, Khampa Aten was placed in the Shol Pangting Prison below the Potala, the Dalai Lama's palace and monastery. He protested his innocence to no avail. He was whipped with the "Interrogation Whip" (*tsha 'dri rta lcag mang po gzhus*) and received the stone hat (*rdo zhwa*) treatment of popping out one's eyeballs (*mig hril phyir 'don ba'i khrims gcod byas*). He was made to kneel on tiny stones in front of Pangda Yamphel, but he still did not confess to the murder. Finally, without any resolution on his innocence or guilt, he was dismissed from prison. Upset that his innocence had not yet been proved, Khampa Aten demanded to know who had accused him of the crime. There was "nothing Aten could do—he had been wrongfully accused, severely tortured, and he thought to himself, "I need to temporarily accept this suffering and retaliate against my enemy in the future." He went home, continued to press for details about his accuser, and as time passed, became more and more agitated with the lack of movement on the case. He decided to take action, specifically to kill two people—one prison official and one member of the Pangdatsang family—the two groups that he thought "were the only ones against me." He began to make arrangements to get his family safely out of town to distant Golok in Amdo and to draft up his own assassination plans.

In the midst of his planning, Khampa Aten received two important visitors. Two officials of Sera monastery, from the Mey Pomra College, the Venerable Adzadpijak and the administrator Lori came to visit. They advised Aten keep his Khampa bravado in check and to seek redress through legal channels. Their counsel to him was as follows:

Concerning your problem, by immediately retaliating without knowing who caused the problem, that is, if you go past the point of no return by showing the Sign of Kham (*i.e.*, by retaliating),<sup>341</sup> then it will be difficult for those [family members] who have left and those who have stayed. Beyond that, it is important for you to wait for a legal decision on your innocence or guilt. We think that we should all go together to see the current powerful renowned aristocrat of the Tibetan Govern-

<sup>341</sup> In Tibetan, *khamts rtags bstan*, meaning to retaliate, to kill, to be brave.

ment. Ara Karpo, the Chamberlain of the Potala (*mgron gnyer chen mo*).<sup>342</sup> We will ask him to tell His Holiness the Dalai Lama that you were wrongfully accused of killing Pomda Nyijang<sup>343</sup> and were tortured by means of the stone hat, etc., and finally, no decision was ever made on your innocence or guilt. By telling this, a decision on your innocence or guilt will be made in a short time and we will have no regrets.

These two lamas were the family's spiritual advisors and Aten accepted their advice, shelving his assassination plan. Twice the three men appeared before Ara Karpo, the Chamberlain. Aten was told that the case would be resolved gradually, and that he was to remain calm until the resolution. Ara Karpo gave him religious offerings (*phyag tsha* and *dam rdzas*), and told him to accept that "through the grace of the Three Jewels (*akon mchog gsum*),<sup>344</sup> the power of truth, and the uncheating nature of karma, the wrongfully accused may be cleared. The recent torture of the wrongfully accused will cleanse the bad karma from the murder of Takya's son, etc."<sup>345</sup> This advice calmed Khampa Aten, such that "the fire went out and the smoke disappeared." The crime remained unsolved for many years. Finally, the situation became clear—the murder was due to jealousy, but the jealous party was not the Dzangtsatsang family.

Earlier, His Holiness the Thirteenth Dalai Lama had appointed two of his favorites, the Honorable Tsarong Dasang Damdrul and Pangda Nyigygal, to high government posts. Tsarong and Pangda were equally wealthy and there were jealousies between them. During the Universal Smoke Offering Festival, Tsarong hired General Tsogo to shoot Pangda in Lhasa's Twentieth Park. General Tsogo, however, was not just the "red-handed murderer," but wealthy and powerful in his own right. Neither he nor Tsarong were ever accused of or punished for the crime. Eventually Tsarong confessed that Gen-

<sup>342</sup> "Ara Karpo" means "white beard," a nickname for the Potala Chamberlain, Tempa Dargye.

<sup>343</sup> Alo Chonzed uses not just the Spom mda' spelling of the family name, but gives Nyigygal's name as Nyi jang. This appears to be a variation on the Khampa contraction of Nyi rgyam for Nyigygal.

<sup>344</sup> The "Three Jewels" are the Buddha, the dharma, and the sangha.

<sup>345</sup> Although Alo Chonzed writes that Aten believed his connection to the Dzangtsatsang family was the cause for his arrest, it appears that his connection to another murder, i.e., of "Takya's son," was also a cause for suspicion. Later in the text, Alo Chonzed states that "Killer" Uncle Aten's reputation for great bravery also cast suspicion on him.

eral Tsogo was the culprit, and as a result, Uncle Aten was released from jail.<sup>346</sup> Following this, Chamberlain Ara Karpo, who had clearly known the persons involved, pardoned Khampa Aten.

His name cleared, Khampa Aten benefited from acts of contrition by the Tsarong and Pangdatsang families. Both families gave Aten generous assistance as a result of his suffering from being wrongfully accused. He received "money, goods, start-up funds for business (*ishong rtsa*), and so on." The families were also generous to Alo Chonzed, sharing their secrets with him (*naga rang la snying gnam bshad pa*) and providing him with business assistance (*ishong mkhos*). The new bonds between Aten's family and the Tsarong and Pangda families seemingly erased his suffering in prison. Alo Chonzed closes his discussion of Pangda Nyigygal's assassination with this confirmation of the new good relations between families—"From that, we remained as friends with sincere minds clear as a cloudless sky and dustless ground." Thus ends Alo Chonzed's version of the Pangda Nyigygal's murder.

For Aten and Alo Chonzed, the story had a happy ending. Things were well in Lhasa. However, was the murder solved? Were Tsarong and Tsogo really responsible for the murder? In exile, most people claim "they have heard" that the person behind the killing of Pangda Nyigygal was Tsarong. However, there have always been other stories in circulation, and recently one of these was revived. In addition to the suspicions cast on Tsarong, people would say that a Khampa family was behind the assassination. While some were possibly referring to the Dzangtsatsang family, others meant a different family, from a different part of Kham altogether. A recent arrival to New York, a man from Derge, claims that a Derge Khampa was responsible for Nyigygal's murder. His story was told to me by a third party, a Khampa man who had always believed that Tsarong was behind the assassination. This story goes as follows:

Pangda Nyigygal had two Khampa business managers, brothers who had worked for him for many years and who were from Derge. They decided to desert his firm without telling him and set off for Jyekundo. Pangda got word of their scheme and got the Central Tibetan Government to arrest them upon their arrival in Jyekundo. There was a scuffle during their arrest and the eldest brother was killed. The younger

<sup>346</sup> A biography of Tsarong, written by his son, was recently published. The Pangdatsang family is not mentioned in it. See Tsarong 2000.

brother made his way back to Derge where he stayed for several years, plotting his return to Lhasa and his revenge on Pangda. When he did go back to Tibet, he and a servant carried out the plan, enlisting the services of a Khampa beer maid to find Pangda Nyigyal in the closed tents. The Khampa man—whose name I don't know—escaped back to Derge, but his servant was eventually arrested, sent to jail, tortured and died there. The story was kept as a community secret by the villagers who feared the repercussions from the Pangda family. It is only now, they say, in the times of the Chinese, when Pangda is no longer powerful, that the story can be told.<sup>347</sup>

Histories untold are not necessarily forgotten. Khampas from this area of Derge, for example, preserved this story about Pangda Nyigyal's murder, restricting its circulation until the repercussions for telling the story diminished. The lack of a need for closure for this history of a murder is partially a product of Tibetan forms of truth. In her study of the Tibetan legal system, Rebecca French identifies two forms of truth: as "an ideal and separate standard" and "as consensus." Truth as consensus was factual consonance: "the facts given by both sides had to agree, not with reality, but with each other."<sup>348</sup> The story of Pangda Nyigyal's assassination contains elements of both kinds of truths without assigning ranked value to them. Truth as ideal and separate standard told the story of what happened, while truth as factual consonance revealed (partially) who did it. In the 1920s, both Pangda and Tsarong were families that were on the rise, and as the next three decades passed, each family only grew more powerful. The possibilities for history, and for types of historical truth, were limited by the social politics of the day.

Feuds between powerful families in the insular world of the Tibetan aristocracy could be socially and economically destructive, something that these ambitious families could not afford. It was not in the best interest of either to carry on a public and violent feud with the other family. Nor was it in the interest of curious spectators to solve crimes of murder and history that those in power chose to leave publicly unsolved. Tibetan society in 1920s Lhasa was full of rigid social divisions that have spilled over into the exile community. Today's narrators in exile include the same cautious qualifications in their story of who was responsible for the murder that their mothers and grandfathers included in the versions they told them: "People

<sup>347</sup> Interview, Kalsang Gyatotsang, April 6, 2000, New York.

<sup>348</sup> French 1995:137.

suspect it was Tsarong," "Tsarong was always said to be the killer," and the like. To level such a charge at a powerful aristocrat—for Tsarong represented not just himself, but his family, as did Pangda Nyigyal—would be to invite trouble upon oneself, and it might also be lying.

The passage of time brings with it changes in sociopolitical arrangements, some drastic, such as the creation of a refugee community and exile government, and some more subtle, such as the persistence of ascribed status amidst a new recognition of achieved status in exile. These changes shift the boundaries for history and for truth. Alo Chonzed, socially and politically estranged from the Tibetan status quo, and "sharing secrets" with the Tsarong and Pangda families, wrote that Tsarong and Tsogo were the killers, and that this was the ideal and separate truth. Derge villagers, recognizing the Pangdatsang family's loss of retributive power, challenged the consensus truth that Tsarong was responsible for the murder, installing instead their own candidate for the role of singularly true murderer. These shifting parameters of truth do not change the possibility for the joint existence of both forms, nor do they diminish the importance of truth for Tibetans. While Tibetans in general place a high premium on the reliability of one's word, Khampas in particular take pride (to a fault in the opinion of other Tibetans) in being straightforward and honest. They also, however, as was shown with the two monks' scolding of Khampa Aten, are renowned for their bravery and obstinacy. "To show the Sign of Kham," *kham rtags bstan*, meant to retaliate, to kill, to be brave. As the saying goes, the best horses are from Amdo, the best religion from U-Tsang, and the best *men* from Kham.

Pangda Nyigyal's sons were Khampas from head to toe, inside and out, according to their descendants. In this instance, however, they forsook Khampa traditions of honor for aristocratic notions of propriety, choosing not to push for a definitive solution to, or public airing of, the crime. Although they suspected Tsarong, they chose to focus on sponsoring ceremonies for their deceased father rather than seeking revenge for his murder.<sup>349</sup> Years later, when his daughter

<sup>349</sup> Sakya Trichen reports conducting numerous ceremonies on behalf of Pangda Nyigyal following his murder; the last recorded one was in 1932, the same year that Nyigyal's mother Tenzin Zangmo died, and four years before Sakya Trichen himself passed away. Khri chen 1974, 2:605.

asked him about the murder, Pangda Yamphel told her not to think or speak about it. "So many people were punished by the government that it is best not to talk about it, just to leave it as it is," he would say.<sup>350</sup> He kept his word, for his daughter learned only later from friends that Tsarong was suspected of the crime; in the Pangdatsang household, at least between generations, the murder was not discussed. Families have their secrets, their censored stories, and they keep these concealed from the rest of the world as well as from each other.<sup>351</sup> Nyigyal's death, however, transcended the realm of family history into that of public story. The public and dramatic murder of Pangda Nyigyal, a small-scale trader from Kham self-made into a man of power in Lhasa—a Tibetan variation on the American dream—was and is a story that people tell conspiratorially, heads shaking in disbelief. We may never know whether Tsarong was indeed behind the murder, or if he merely patronized Khampa Aten and his family to cover for another's deeds. Likewise were the brothers from Derge indeed the killers and not just fabricating their own "Sign of Kham" story once they had returned back home from the big city? We may never know, and yet this history is by no means unfinished.

### Conclusion

While Pangda Nyigyal's untimely death left few documentary traces, it left a visible imprint on the social imagination of numerous Tibetans. Implicit in many of the stories I was told about him, and explicit in some, was the linking of his death to his growing economic and social power. Khampa traders were not unique in Lhasa; however, ones who amassed stupendous wealth and who made inroads into insular Lhasa society were unique, and in some regards, unwelcome. Histories of Pangda Nyigyal's murder contain the same sort of social hesitancy that accompanied relations between wealthy Khampa traders and established Lhasa aristocrats. These histories go only so far, following the push and pull between the currents of change and those of social protocol. Nyigyal, from a Sakya family, was not just indebted to the Thirteenth Dalai Lama, but devoted to him, and taught the same devotion to his children. With the death of the Dalai Lama

<sup>350</sup> Interview, Wangmo Yuthok Pangdatsang, June 2, 2000.

<sup>351</sup> See the rich discussion of the poetics and politics of family pasts in Kuhn 1995.

in 1933, Pangda Nyigyal's sons were among those who maintained visions of a modern Tibet. Their stories, which I tell elsewhere, are held accountable to the same mix of social hierarchies and political commitments, albeit hierarchies and commitments adjusted in response to a different, and more urgent, series of changes.

In closing, I return to the story of Nyigyal's assassination, to a prophecy of the almost simultaneous rise and fall of a family. For Nyigyal had been warned not to go to the picnic. It was a bad month, *'tshub chen po red*, one full of obstacles, according to Sakya Trichen Takshu Tinley Rinchen. Nyigyal's wife came to the same conclusion. She had the ability to go into trance, which the Sakya Trichen himself had witnessed. He wrote that she "was said to be entered by Dorje Drakden and to prophesy worldly activities which appeared to be surprisingly real." He inspected her while she was in trance, and wrote, "It looked to be true."<sup>352</sup> While in trance, she told Nyigyal not to go to the party. He promised her that he would not spend the night, that there would be lots of servants on watch, and that she should not worry as nothing would happen. As it turned out, it was raining, it was a dark and stormy night, the servants were seeking their own shelter elsewhere, and the rest, as they say, is history.

<sup>352</sup> Khri chen 1974, 1:421. He writes, "Yangchen, the wife of Nyigyal Gyakeg Pomdatsang was said to get entranced...."

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