

AN ACCOUNT OF PADMA-BKOD: A HIDDEN LAND IN SOUTHEASTERN TIBET

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Padma-bkod is the most famous of Tibet's legendary hidden lands (*sbas-yul*). Located in a forgotten corner of south-east Tibet where the Brahmaputra River cuts a deep chasm towards the plains of northern India, this region is separated by mountains and dense forests. Surrounded by a formidable ring of high passes, the difficult journey to the sacred sites of this hidden-valley is possible only in late summer, when the blizzards briefly abate, and a path can be cut in the snow.

Over the centuries the inaccessible ravines of Padma-bkod served as an ideal refuge from the invasions and civil wars which shook Tibet. According to ancient prophecies attributed to Padmasambhava (8th cent.), the patron saint of Tibetan Buddhism, somewhere in this untamed wilderness Tibetans believed they would find an earthly paradise; a pure realm abounding in fruits and self sown crops which would provide a sanctuary during the Buddhist dark-age. For the yogis of the Rnying-ma and Bka'-brgyud orders who held the transmission lineage of these prophecies, the journey into the Brahmaputra gorge became an obsession. Defying fierce tribes, wild animals, and a variety of tropical disease, they repeatedly entered this wilderness trying to open the doors to its earthly paradise.

The legends of Padma-bkod first spread in Tibet in the middle of the 17th century. Guidebooks to the hidden land appeared in the prophetic revelations of the Rnying-ma-pa *gter-ston* Rig-'dzin 'Ja'-tshon- snying-po (1585-

1656) who lived during the turbulent reign of the 5th Dalai Lama.¹ For 'Ja'-tshon-snying-po, Padma-bkod was the ultimate pilgrimage to undertake in this final dark age (*kali yuga*). Those who enter this realm, he says, obtain the 'vajra-body' and dissolve into rainbow light upon death. Merely taking seven steps towards Padma-bkod guarantees rebirth in this pure realm after death. (*Lam-yig*: 13; 4-6). When the Qosot Mongols overran Central Tibet in the middle of the 17th century, Ja'-tshon-snying-po appointed his disciple Rig-'dzin Bdud-'dul-rdo-rje (1615-72) to convert the aboriginal tribes of the Brahmaputra gorge to the Buddha's teachings and open the way to the hidden land.

Bdud-'dul-rdo-rje journeyed to the kingdom of Spo-bo, situated at the entrance to the vast wilderness of the Brahmaputra gorge. According to local tradition, he mapped a circumambulatory pilgrimage path around Padma-bkod, called '*Padma-Śrī*'. This master in turn passed on his teachings to Stag-sham-pa Nus-ldan-rdo-rje (1655-1708), a famed Rnying-ma-pa master from Kham who had settled in the kingdom of Spo-bo and discovered many hidden *gter-ma* teachings. In the prophecies of the *Rtsa gsum yi dam dgongs 'dus*, Stag-sham-pa describes eight hidden lands which unfold like the petals of a lotus in Tibet, at the center of which he locates Padma-bkod, which he further subdivides 'into the 12 outer territories, the 40 inner ravines, and the 16 secret territories.'²

During Stag-sham-pa's time Padma-bkod was still an uncharted hunting ground inhabited by a fierce confederation of Mishmi and Abor tribes; vassals of the warrior kings of Ahom who had overran the Assam Valley and enslaved the Naga (Johri 1933: 34-5). In his visions, Stag-sham-pa perceived this untamed wilderness as the geographic representation of the goddess Vajravārahī; his own secret tutelary deity. The ritual pilgrimage through the

1 See *Sbas yul Padma bkod kyi lam yig dang sku tshab padma bshes gnyen 'gro dul dang skye bdun dkar chags*; in the collection: *Sbas yul padma bkod kyi lam yig ma 'ongs lung bstan sna tshogs phyogs gcig tu bsdus pa'i gsung pod*. Tezu: 1974; fols. 1-35. Also see Ehrhard, 1994, for discussion of material related to this hidden land in the *gter-ma* cycle called *Rdo-rje khro lod rtsal gyi sgrub skor*.

2 (Yi-dam:521). See also Ehrhard (1994) for further discussion of Stag-sham-pa Nus-ldan-rdo-rje's guidebooks to Padma-bkod in the *gter-ma* cycles *Yi dam dgongs 'dus rta mchog rol-pa*, and the *Rta-mgrin dgongs 'dus*. For a general discussion of *Sbas-yul* including Padma-bkod in the prophetic revelations of Stag-sham-pa see *Bla ma rdo-rje gro lod kyi rnam thar*, Delhi: 1985.



The great bend of the tsangpo River (View from Zachu/Pemako).

4 / *Kailash*



Rinchenpung Gompa, Pemako.

'cakras' of her body followed the Brahmaputra river which symbolized her central channel, beginning from her head in Tibet and culminating in her womb somewhere in the jungles of Northern India.³ The outer journey through the cloud forest became an inner journey of self-discovery, and the landscape itself became a reflection of the yogi's own 'body-mandala' visualized in meditation. Stag-sham-pa's visionary guidebooks became the basis for the exploration of Padma-bkod and the identification of her 'cakras' at the turn of the next century.

When the Dzungar Mongols sacked Lhasa in 1717, many *gter-stons* familiar with the prophecies of Padmasambhava believed that the final wars signaling the decline of the Buddhist teachings were at hand. According to Chos-rje-gling-pa alias 'Dzam-gling-rdo-rje-rtsal, (b. 1682), the abbot of the Bka'-brgyud cloister of Ras-chung-phug in Yar-klung, the time had come to escape to the hidden land of Padma-bkod.⁴

Although this master was a reincarnate lama of the Bka'-brgyud order, he was particularly drawn towards the teachings of the Rnying-ma-pa school. Early in his career Chos-rje-gling-pa had already received a prophecy from the Rnying-ma-pa *gter-ston* Stag-sham Nus-ldan-rdo-rje, designating him as one who would open the doors of the hidden land (*Rnam-thar:325;5*). As the Dzungar armies carried their bloody campaign to the cloisters of southeastern

³ It is unclear when Padma-bkod was first identified with the body of the goddess Vajravarahi possessing 5 'cakras'. Sle-lung bzhad-pa'i rdo-rje (b. 1697) while travelling to Padma-bkod in the 1729 already refers to sections of the Rta-mgrin dgongs-'dus of Stag-sham-pa which contained the description of Padma-bkod having 5 'cakras.' see *The Collected Works (Gsung 'Bum) of Sle-lung Rje-drung Bzhad-pai-rdo-rje*. Vol. 8, Leh: 1984.

⁴ On the identification of this master as the reincarnation of the former abbot of Ras-chung-phug, Zhabs-drung 'Chi-med-dbang-po see the *Bod du byung ba'i gsang sngags snga 'gyur gyi bstan 'dzin skyes mchog rim byon gyi rnam thar nor bu'i do shal*. Dalhousie: 1976, fol. 322; line 2. Of special interest is the account of Chos-rje-gling-pa's journey to Central Tibet prior to his escape to Padma-bkod, during which he is hosted by both the Kar-ma-pa and Shwa-dmar-pa hierarchs, and is also counted as one of those present at the enthronement of the 'pseudo' 7th Dalai lama. He is also reported to have gained a personal audience with Lhazang Khan, the Qosot chieftan and the then de-facto ruler of Central Tibet.

Tibet, Chos-rje-gling-pa and his followers fled to Padma-bkod from the high passes in the kingdom of Spo-bo:

[During] a time of great unimaginable persecution of the the 'Ancient Teachings' by the Dzungars, [who were] the manifestation of [the Mara] Kāmadeva, this master set his mind for the departure to the hidden land called 'Lotus Grove' (*Sbas-yul padma'i-tshal*). Having arrived in Spu-bo, he endeavored towards opening the 'door' of the sacred place of Padma-bkod.....having written clarifications and guidebooks, he put all his visions into writing. Bestowing the religious pronouncements onto the people of Klo who were like beasts, he laid down the inclination for religion. The Klo in turn paid homage and reverence according to the customs of the country.⁵

The career of this master in Padma-bkod was cut short when he suddenly contracted a sharp rheumatic attack and passed away in the damp cloud forests of the hidden land. But even after his death, Klo-pa hunters of 'pure' disposition, reported seeing his emanational body surrounded by a retinue of female companions deep in the jungle slopes (*Rnam-thar: 326; 1-2*). Chos-rje-gling-pa's lineage endured and became the bedrock of Buddhism in the Klo-pa inhabited territories of Northern Padma-bkod.

His reincarnation, Kun-bzang-'od-zer Gar-bang-Chi-med-rdo-rje (b. 1763) was born into a Mon-pa family in Padma-bkod where he continued to develop and spread the teachings of his predecessor called the 'Immortal Heart-drop' (*Chi med thugs thig*). Like his former incarnation Kun-bzang-'od-zer showed a keen interest in mapping out the sacred geography of the hidden land. He is remembered as a skilled Buddhist wizard who 'reopened' the head and throat 'cakras' of the hidden-valley, and brought into his following the people of Klo

⁵ *Gu bkhra'i Chos byung*, Sinkiang, p. 415:..*dga' rab dbang phyug gi rnam 'phrul rdzun gar bas rnying bstan mtha' dag dmigs med du rgyas 'debs pa'i tshes rje 'di nyid sbas yul padma'i tshal du phebs pa'i thugs gra bsgrigs te spu bor phebs nas padma bkod kyi gnas sgo 'byed pa'i thugs rtsol gnang/ rim gyis gnas nang du phebs pas....gnas kyi gsal cha dang lam yig sogs mdzad nas gzigs snang thams cad gtan la phab/ klo mi dud 'gro 'dra ba de rnams la'ng bka' chos bstsal nas chos kyi bag chags 'jog par mdzad/ klo rnams kyi kyang dad gus dang zhabs tog yul lugs dang bstun pa'i bsnyen bkur bstabs/...*

and Mon 'by means of the four [pacifying, increasing, bewitching, and destroying] activities' (*Chos-byung*: 529).

In the late 18th century, even after the fires of the Dzungar invasion subsided, the legendary land of Padma-bkod continued to attract maverick Tibetan yogis in search of vision and adventure. The career of the 5th Sgam-po-pa O-rgyan-'Gro-'dul-gling-pa (b.1757), the scion of the ancient Lha-rgya-ri family who ascended to the abbacy of Dvag-lha-sgam-po is a case in point.

Early in his career this Bka'-brgyud master also showed a strong predilection for the rediscovered *gter-ma* teachings of the Rnying-ma-pa school. He received initiations from the *gter-ston* of Padma-bkod Kun-bzang-'od-zer Gar-bang-Chi-med-rdo-rje, and further teachings from Bde-chen-rgyal-po the *gter-ston* of 'Brug-thang who further inducted the young 5th Sgam-po-pa into the apocalyptic ideology of the Rnying-ma-pa order. Initiated into the secret language of *gter-ston*, the 5th Sgam-po-pa obtained specific instructions on the necessity to 'open' the door to the hidden land and perform fierce magic rituals to turn back military invasions which threatened Tibet (*Rnam-thar*: 341: 5-6).

Then, when war broke out between Nepal and Tibet, several inauspicious omens appeared in the vicinity of Lhasa. People reported seeing a strange beast which was neither a tiger or a leopard, the cry of an elephant arose from the lake at 'Bam-ra, and the great flag pole at Dga'-ldan fell down (*Rnam-thar II*: 197). At this time the 5th Sgam-po-pa travelled to the sacred shrines of Central Tibet where he participated in rituals to repel the invading armies of the King of Gorkha. He then returned to Spo-bo, and with the support of the local king, Nyi-ma-rgyal-po, he attempted further to open the hidden sites of Padma-bkod (*Rnam-thar*: 342-3).

Reunited with Kun-bzang-'od-zer, they became the principle recipients of the teachings of Rig-'dzin Rdo-rje-thogs-med (1746-97), called *The Seven Profound Teachings of the Luminous Web Opening the Gate of the Hidden land* (*Tshe-'grub 'od gyi 'dra-ba zab chos bdun pa sbas-yul gnas sgo byed*). Collectively these three lamas became known in local tradition as the 'Three

Vidhyādaras of the Hidden land'.⁶ Their teachings, especially the *gter-ma* cycle of the *Luminous Web*, spread among the numerous Mon-pa clans migrating to Padma-bkod from Bhutan at the end of the 18th century.

After Rdo-rje-thogs-med's death, the 5th Sgam-po-pa ventured further down the Brahmaputra gorge to reveal the sacred site corresponding to the Goddess' heart. At dawn, on the 9th day of the 5th month of the Wood-Tiger year 1794, an *acārya* and a woman in ragged clothes appeared to him in a dream instructing him to build a temple on a nearby hill in the shape of a rice heap (*Rnam-thar II: 722*). Rising above the confluence of Brahmaputra and Shumo rivers this hill was located in the hunting grounds of the Klo-pa tribes. The tribal elders fearing that the drum-beating and conch-blowing of Buddhist monks would scare away the wild game, submitted an exorbitant list of demands, which included a gift of cows, yak half-breeds, pigs, chickens, wool cloth, swords, knives, axes, copper utensils, and silver ornaments (*Rnam-thar II: 723*).⁷

⁶ For the list of 'sbas-yul rig-'dzin rnam-gsum' see Dudjoms Rinpoche (1991). For an alternative list see *Spo-bo lo rgyus*.

⁷ While the conception of Padma-bkod as the geographic representation of Vajrayogini started to gain currency after the 17th century, there was not always agreement as to the topographical identification of her *cakras*. The *Spo-bo lo rgyus*, quoted by Ehrhard identifies Bod-lung-pa as the heart of the Goddess and Rin-chen spungs as the navel *cakra*. This identification also accords with information contained in *Gnas gsol bar ched kun sel phrin las myur 'grub* by the 2nd Chos-rje gling-pa, Kun-bzang 'Od-zer Gar-dbang Chi-med Rdo-rje.

Scholars up to now were working under the impression that the 'cakras' of the Goddess represented precise topographical locations (see Stein 1988; Ehrhard 1991). What is interesting about Kun-bzang 'Od-zer's text is that it identifies the 'cakras' of the Goddess not with specific places but entire sections of the Brahmaputra gorge. The throat *cakra*, for example, not only covers Mngon-po gnas but extends all the way to Dga'-lde. Similarly, the heart area comprises a vast region beginning from Kong-yul, passing through Bod-lung-pa and ending at Rin-chen-spungs, which is considered to be the beginning of the navel *cakra*.

But it seems that there was not always an effort to correlate with past visions of the Goddess' 'cakras'. Instead, each lama seems to have identified the 'cakras' of the Goddess with his own personal visual field of reference depending on where they settled in Padma-bkod. For a different topographical identification of the 'cakras' see Sle-lung Bzhad-pa'i rdo-rje, who following sections of Stag-sham Nus-ldan Rdo-rje's *Rta-mgrin dgongs 'dus* locates Rin-chen-spung at the

Surrounded on all sides by valleys which fanned out like the petals of a lotus, Rin-chen-spungs became the center of religious life in Padma-bkod. The guidebook of the *Luminous Web* describes the protector deity of the heart *cakra* of Padma-bkod as the Indian god Shiva (*dbang-phyug*), and in the surrounding groves one is said to find a plethora of healing plants and wild fruits such as the delicious 'tamanta', which feeds up to five people (*Lam-yig: 285*).

In the *gter-ma* cycle of the 'Luminous Web' we also find what appears to be the first Tibetan discussion of hallucigenic plants. Near Rin-chen-spungs one is said to find a plant called the 'cutting of the *kleshas*'. By eating this it is said that one forgets food, and the 'knots' (*mdud*) of the bodies subtle channels are untied producing visions of various Buddha fields.⁸

Padma-bkod, with its perpetual rain, wild animals and fierce tribes may not have conformed to most peoples idea of paradise, but for the 5th Sgam-po-pa and his disciples it was the perfect 'tantric' paradise. The journey through this untamed wilderness was heaven and hell at the same time, and as such it became a skillfull means for the testing and transformation of the human spirit in this dark age. Comparing it to Devikōṭa, one of India's legendary tantric assembly grounds, the 5th Sgam-po-pa says 'the actions of whoever enters this place are beyond good and evil.'⁹

heart, as does Rdo-rje Thogs-med in the *Tshe sgrub 'od kyi dra ba'i lam byang rnying gi mun sel*.

8 *Ibid.* fols. 294-95: *nyon mongs kun gcod rtsa mchog sus zes pa % rtsa mdud kun grol shing khams sna tshogs mthong % bza' btung rtogs pa yid la mi skye zhing % tin nge 'dzin rang ? rgyud la skye bar 'gyur % tshangs pa'i dbyangs ldan dus gsum mkhyen par 'gyur %* A further description of these five special plants occurs in the *Rtsa mchog rman pa lnga rtags thabs gsal ba'i me long*; in *Sbas yul padma bkod kyi lam yig ma 'ongs lung bstan sna tshogs phyogs gcig tu bsdu pa'i gsung pod*; fol. 250-63).

9 *E.ma.ho/ dus gsum rgyal ba'i zhing mchog gnas kyi mchog// o rgyan byin rlabs de wi ko ta'i sa// gangs can bod kyi lho nub rgya bod mtshams// gzugs can gang phyin las la bzang ngan med//* from *Sbas-yul padma-bkod kyi lam-yig*, a handwritten text in cursive script on damaged rice paper signed by O-rgyan Gro-'dul gling-pa. Photographed from the library of Ka-ba sprul-sku of Chamdo in August 1995 by the author. Deposited at the Sanskrit Library, Harvard University.

For the yogi initiated into the secret topics of the Mother Tantras, the physical landscape of Padma-bkod served as a geographical referent for deeper levels of meditative vision. The guidebook of the *Luminous Web* describe Rinchen-spungs as just a rock shaped like a 'pitched tent', but on the 'inner' level it is said to be the temple of *herukas*. On the 'secret' level the hill is described as the transformed mandala of emotions and thoughts represented by the 100 peaceful and wrathful deities of the *zhi-'khro* tantra, and its 'innermost secret' reality is equated with the non-dual awareness mandala of the primordial Buddha Samantabhadra, the symbol of perfect realization (*Lam-yig*: 265-66).

For the ordinary pilgrim who could not directly experience these visionary levels, the physical journey through Padma-bkod became the ultimate exercise in pure vision. The warlike aborigines were seen as the fierce human gatekeepers of the hidden land, venomous snakes on the path were considered supports for mindfulness, and the leeches were believed to be sucking away ones sins. Even the hunters inhabiting the Brahmaputra gorge saw their activity as a sacramental rite. Convinced that they live in the perfect 'tantric' paradise, they came to believe that the minds of the animals they kill are instantly liberated and the venison is '*tshog-sha*': the symbolic meat offering of a Buddhist tantric feast.¹⁰

Celebrating the paradoxical power of the hidden land in a spiritual song, Rdo-rje-drag-sngag-tsal, the 5th Sgam-po-pa's foremost disciple, calls Padma-bkod the paradise of the future Buddha Maitreya, praising her medicinal groves filled with rainbows and the sonorous voice of *dākinīs*. At the same time, however, he describes it as a gathering place of fierce *btsan* spirits, teeming with tigers, leopards, bears, and poisonous snakes baring their fangs.¹¹

¹⁰ On several of my visits to Padma-bkod, our Monpa porters insisted on bringing their guns to hunt Takin (*Budorcas taxicolor*). According to their oral tradition the 5th Sgam-po-pa permitted them to conceive of the hunt as a sacramental rite. According to a convenient legend this beast is a *gter-ma* created for the people of the hidden land by Padmasambhava as a source of food. I found no textual source which confirms this claim, but the Monpas tracked down this beast with impunity without fearing any karmic repercussions. To justify their act they point to a little space between the horns of this magnificent beast to show where the mind of the animal is automatically liberated after being killed.

¹¹ *Ma bzhengs lun gyis grub pa'i rang byung padma bkod chen/ ma dang mkha' 'gro rgya mthso snang stong 'ja' 'od 'khyil ba'i/ ma-'ong dus kyi tha ma las*

The paradoxical power of the hidden land was probably best exemplified by the summer pilgrimage to the mountain of Kun-'dus rdors-sems-pho-brang initiated by the 5th Sgam-po-pa. Perceived as the holy abode of the Buddhist deity Vajrasattva, the outer circumambulation route of this mountain extended into the territory of the 'black' Klo-pa (*klo-nag*), a term used to identify the unconverted Abor and Mishmi tribes still living beyond the fray of Buddhism. For the intrepid and often naive Tibetan pilgrim the benefits of completing one round of this peak was said to equal 39 visits to the ancient Jokhang temple in Lhasa (*Lam-yig*: 202-3). Risking their lives, every year pilgrims from various parts of Eastern Tibet attempted to circumambulate this mountain under the threat of Mishmi arrows.

The 5th Sgam-po-pa's principal gurus incarnated as his sons and immediate disciples, continuing the missionary work among the Mon-pa and Klo-pa populations of Padma-bkod.¹² By the close of the 19th century, the Buddhist inhabitants of hidden land paid taxes to the king of Spo in butter and pelts, and he in return protected their villages against attacks from the

'phro 'jams pa'i gdan sa/ ma btsegs rdo rje bra dzongs dus gsum rgyal ba'i shing kham/ og min padma bkod chen bsam zhing snang ba'i skyid byung/ rang sems rnam par dag pa'i glu byangs mchod pa bul lo/ gung sngon nam mkha'i 'byings nas 'ja' tshon sprin dkar khyug khyug/ o rgyan mkha' 'gro rgya mtsho zhal mjal gsung nyan lang lang/.... From the O-rgyan Rdo-rje Drag-sngags kyis gsungs pa'i padma bkod kyis yon tan rdzogs pa'i glus byangs. Handwritten text copied from the library of Phun-tshogs-rnam-rgyal of Padma-bkod in May 1996 by the author. Deposited at the Sanskrit Library, Harvard University.

- 12 Bde-chen-rgyal-po reincarnated as Sgam-po-pa's eldest son Rgyal-sras Bde-chen-gling-pa who established his seat at the village of Yid-'ong-phel on the right bank of the Brahmaputra opposite Rin-chen-spungs. From here he initiated the pilgrimage to the holy mountain of Buddha-tshe-phug. According to one local tradition Rdor-sems pho-brang and Buddha-tshe-phug are known respectively as the 'father' (*yab*) and 'mother' (*yum*) pilgrimage sites. The 2nd Chos-rje-gling-pa, Kun-bzang-'od-zer reincarnated as another one of the 5th Sgam-po-pa's sons; Gar-dbang-Bstan-pa'i -nyi-ma. He continued to reside and teach at the village of Dga'-lde, the traditional seat of the Chos-rje-gling-pa incarnations in Northern Padma-bkod. Rdo-rje-thogs-med was also recognized as the 5th Sgam-po-pa's disciple Rdo-rje-drag-sngag-tsal. He continued to expand the gter-ma cycle of the *Luminous Web* brought to light by his previous incarnation.

'black' Klo-pa. For the Rnying-ma-pa order, Padma-bkod became not only a refuge from foreign invasions and religious persecution, but a testing ground for Buddhism as a 'taming' force. The hidden land became the focus of an archetypal encounter between the 'civilized' center and the 'barbaric' periphery.

The Tibetans, however, were not the only ones obsessed with entering this wild frontier. For the last British imperial explorers Padma-bkod harbored one of Asia's last geographical riddles. It was into this nearly impenetrable region that the Tsang-po River disappeared from the Tibetan plateau, amid speculation that it eventually emerged in India as the Brahmaputra river.

In an effort to determine whether the Tsang-po and the Brahmaputra were the same river, the Survey of India trained Tibetan speaking secret agents called 'pundits'. Equipped with dummy prayer wheels in which they hid their paper and tools, they were instructed to use their rosaries to count paces, and measure altitude by boiling water.¹³

The 'pundits' failed to follow the entire course of the river from Tibet to India due to the hostility of the Klo-pa tribes, but their accounts convinced many that the Tsang-po and the Brahmaputra rivers were indeed the same. There remained, however, a further unsolved riddle. The river lost so much

¹³ The bravest of these 'pundits' was a Sikkimese man called Kintup who along with a Mongolian lama was sent to explore the Tsangpo gorge in 1880. He was equipped with a dummy prayer wheel containing the paper and tools necessary for making a record of his journey and was to use his prayer beads to count distances in paces. Once in the gorge, he was to drill information into logs and release them into the river to be picked up downstream by the Survey in Assam. Having accrued a gambling debt along the way, the Mongolian lama sold Kintup into slavery and was never heard of again. Kintup escaped into the gorge, until his master's envoys caught up with him at the village of Marpung, near Rin-chen-spungs, where he convinced the local lama to buy him as his own servant. Then, on the pretext of going on pilgrimage, he left several times to cut and release his logs. These went unnoticed however, for the Survey had already given up looking for them. Unable to follow the Tsang-po River all the way from Tibet to India because of the hostility of the Abor tribes, Kintup was forced to return home retracing his footsteps through Tibet. For the story of Kintup see F.M. Bailey, *No Passport to Tibet*, London: 1957.

altitude in such a short distance between Tibet and India, that many geographers speculated that the unobserved sections of the gorge harbored giant waterfalls, surpassing even those of the Niagara.

In 1913, Captain Moreshead and Lieutenant Bailey, the first westerners to enter Padma-bkod, set off in search of the fabled waterfalls. Their journey began from Mipi, where they encountered a group of frightened Tibetans searching for the hidden land. Treating them for spear wounds suffered in a Mishmi ambush, Bailey writes:

Here in Mipi we had come upon these seekers for the promised land. But they had not found it. The exact geographical position of Pemako was imprecise. All that was known was that somewhere on the Dihang-lohit watershed there was a holy mountain of glass and around this holy mountain lay fertile valleys (Bailey 1957: 35-7).

The wounded Tibetans Bailey encountered were part of a wave of refugees from various parts of eastern Tibet, escaping the depredations of the Chinese warlord Chao Erh-Feng? The first wave of about a hundred Tibetans entered the upper valleys of Padma-bkod over the passes at the head of the Dri, Matun and Tsu valleys in 1902, where they settled among the Chulikattas Mishmis from whom they bought land. Then in the following years about two thousand more Tibetans set out from Kham, Der-ge, Spo-bo and other places. Among this exodus many were the followers of Rje-drung-'Jam-pa-byung-gnas, a Rnying-ma-pa *gter-ston* from Ri-bo-che, whose attempts further to reveal the sacred sites of the hidden land reached into India.

With the support of the king of Spo-bo, Rje-drung first settled in the Chimdro Valley in Northern Padma-bkod, from where he attempted to locate the geographical site corresponding to the womb *cakra* of the Goddess. His search led his party into the lands of the Chulikatta Mishmi in Arunachal Pradesh where he built a temple near the village of Mipi called Dkar-mo-gling. Somewhere in this wilderness supposedly lay the legendary Lotus Crystal Mountain, '*Padma-shel-ri*', described as a 'snow mountain like a heaped mandala.' Around this mountain Rje-drung describes 'eight great valleys and many sub-valleys. Some connect to this mountain, and some do not. There is room for two-thirds of the world's population. It is the thousand-petalled lotus island. It is the assembly which protects from evil invaders. It is the force that turns back disease, weapons and invaders. It is the weapon that kills the

cause, the three poisons, and the fruit. It is the all-encompassing glorious citadel.' ¹⁴

Rje-drung was forced to interrupt his search for this legendary mountain when the armies of the Kuomintang attacked Spo-bo, forcing the local king to flee and take refuge with the British at Sadiya in Assam. Leaving his party behind in Padma-bkod, Rje-drung returned to Kham to help rebuild his home city of Ri-bo-che after it was sacked by the Chinese. Upon arrival he was arrested by malicious Tibetan officials on trumped up charges of sedition and imprisoned at Byang Stag-lung where he passed away shortly after.

Rje-drung's followers in Padma-bkod were now left stranded in the wilderness of the Brahmaputra gorge without spiritual guidance or military protection against the Klo-pa tribes. According to one account quarrels arose when the Tibetans began stealing from Mishmi grain stores.¹⁵ In the ensuing battle, Bailey explains that although the Tibetans were armed, the reflections off their matchlock rifles made them easy targets for the Mishmi archers who picked them off with poisoned arrows. 'Experts at jungle warfare,' the Mishmi laid ambushes and set traps on the jungle paths and attacked the Tibetans at every opportunity. They also set fire to the Tibetans' houses and crops' (Bailey 1957: 35-37).

Failing to negotiate a lasting truce between the Tibetans and the Mishmi, the British expedition traversed the Yangyap-la and the Pungpung-la, reaching the main Tibetan settlements in Northern Padma-bkod. From here Bailey and Moreshead entered the Brahmaputra gorge mapping the river upstream between the mountains of Gyala Pelri and Namche Barwa. Their expedition failed to discover any giant waterfalls, but they left roughly 30 miles of the river unobserved around the place called the 'great bend'.

¹⁴ *Rtsa gsum yid bzhin nor bu'i chos sde las sbas yul lam yig gsal ba'i sgron me. Fol. 235-6, ... 'di dang 'brel dang ma 'brel ba'i % lung chen brgyad lung phran mang% 'jam gling sum gnyis shong ba yod% snogs stong ldan padma gling% mtha' dmag gdug can srung ba'i gong% nad 'mtshon mu ge bzlog pa'i dpung% dug gsum rgyu 'bras bsad pa'i mtshon% kun 'dus dpal gyi grong khyer yin% in Sbas yul padma bkod kyi lam yig ma 'ongs lung bstan sna tshogs phyogs gcig tu bsdus pa'i gsung pod.*

¹⁵ Oral account of the headman of Shinku village in Chimdro (Northern Padma-bkod).

In 1924 the famous English plant collector Francis Kingdon Ward once again attempted to determine whether such water-falls existed in the Brahmaputra gorge, but he was also forced to turn back short of about 5 miles of the 'great bend'. At this time Kingdon Ward observed that many Tibetans from Kham and Spo-bo were still coming in search of the promised land. He writes:

...the only thing common to the whole region being perpetual rain; snakes and wild animals, giant stinging nettles and myriads of biting and blood-sucking ticks, hornets, flies, and leeches...Why, it may be asked, this anxiety to settle in Pemako? It is because this is the promised land of the Tibetan prophecy. This prophecy was to the effect that, when their religion was persecuted in Tibet, the people should go to Pemako, a land flowing with milk and honey, where the crops grew of their own accord. Most races have their promised land, and such legendary places must necessarily be somewhat inaccessible, hidden behind misty barriers where ordinary men do not go... (Kingdon Ward 1926: 110-11).

Not everyone was so impressed, however. In Tibet rival scholars such as Rje-btsun Shes-rab-rgya-mtsho (b.1884), the notorious polemicist of the Dge-lugs-pa order, denounced the Padma-bkod guidebooks as lies, accusing false Rnying-ma-pa and Bka'-brgyud-pa *gter-ston* of leading people to their deaths.

The people of this land are, for the most part, of wild disposition. Dressing in ape-skins, [and] brandishing long swords they engage in the revelry of dogs, monkeys and the like.....[the guidebooks] say whoever wishing to go takes seven steps towards this sacred place, even if he dies, he will be certainly reborn in this place. Ha Ha!¹⁶

¹⁶ *Rje btsun shes rab rgya mtsho 'jam dpal dgyes pa'i blo gros kyi gsung rtsom pod gsum pa bzhugs so*, p. 457....*yul de'i mi rnams phal cher gtum po'i rang bzhin/ spral slog gyon zhing gri ring thogs nas khyi dang spre'u sogs rol du khrid de.....gangs can bod kyi lho nub rgya bod mtshams/ gzugs can gang phyin lus la bzung ngan med/ gnas der 'gro 'dod gom pa bdun bor na/ shi bar gyur kyang gnas der nges par skye/ zhes smras/ ha ha!* Shes-rabs Rgya-mtsho himself was probably unaware that the spiritual patriarch of his own school, the 13th Dalai lama, had secretly dispatched a mission to Padma-bkod. According to Bha-ka sprul-sku these envoys were Dpal-'bar gter-ston 'Gro-'dul-drag-sngags-gling-pa and Chamdo Phags-pa-la an eminent Dge-lugs-pa lama from

Such derisory remarks, however, did not detract from the appeal of Padma-bkod. When the Chinese Red Army forced the Dalai Lama to escape from Tibet in 1959, thousands of Tibetans again went in search of the hidden land. Confronted with the hazards of travelling to this cloud forest, many became disillusioned and headed south for India. Soon, Indian border posts were overrun by thousands of Tibetans on the brink of starvation, relating gripping accounts of their search for a legendary crystal mountain in a region of dense jungle separated by snow covered mountains below the bend of the Brahmaputra River.

Interpreting the hardships as a test for the human spirit, some Tibetans remained in Padma-bkod. In 1956 Bka'-gyur Rinpoche, one of Rje-drung's disciples travelled into the uninhabited valleys below the mountain Kun-'dus-rdor-sems-pho-brang. Here, according to local tradition, Bka'-gyur Rinpoche had many profound visions. On one occasion it is reported that he entered a waterfall emerging into a valley filled with the songs of *dākinīs*. He interpreted this as the 'innermost secret place' (*Yang-gsang-gnas*), but his followers were apparently unable to 'enter' this visionary dimension of the hidden land. Succumbing to the hardships of the physical journey, the party continued further south settling in Tuting, under Indian jurisdiction.

A year later in 1957, Lha-brdong sprul-sku, another disciple of Rje-drung, travelled from Northern Padma-bkod with seven households to the uninhabited valleys south of the mountain Kun-'dus-rdors-sems-pho-brang. In these fertile valleys they herded yaks and cows, and successfully cultivated barley. After three years they were spotted by an Indian helicopter gunship on border patrol. Indian commandos were sent up to relocate the Tibetans.¹⁷

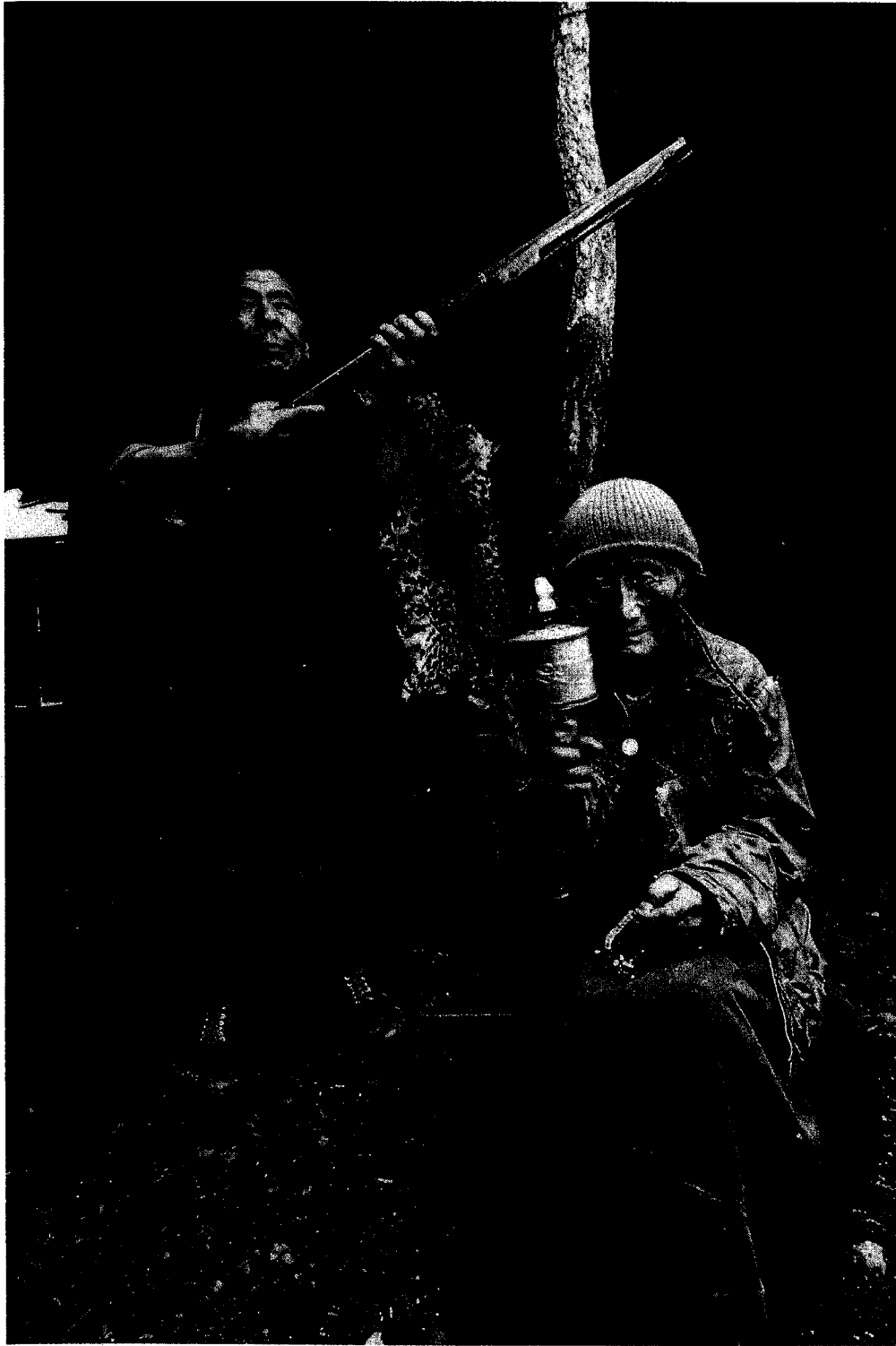
Today many parts of Padma-bkod remain unexplored. Many Tibetans believe that the time to open the 'innermost secret place' of the hidden land has not yet come. Access to this area remains difficult, for on either side two of Asia's most powerful armies confront each other in a border dispute. As a

Chamdo. This mission reached as far as Kila'-gyu-rdzong, after which it returned. At the moment, no further information concerning these personalities has come forth. It is hoped however, that sources will eventually be found to shed light on the 13th Dalai Lama's secret mission to Padma-bkod.

17 Lha-brdong sprul-sku's family now lives in Tezu.



Cham dancer wearing Khyung (garuda) mask.



A Monpa household.

hidden land, some would argue, Padma-bkod could not be more ideally located.

Abbreviations

Rnam-thar = *Bod du byung ba'i gsang sngags snga 'gyur gyi bstan 'dzin skyes mchog rim byon gyi rnam thar nor bu'i do shal*. Author: Kun-bzang nges don klong yangs (19th cent.) Pub. Damchoe Sangpo: Dalhousie, 1976

Rnam-thar II = *The Autobiography of the Fifth Sgam-po Mchog-sprul of Dwags-la Sgam-po O-rgyan 'Gro-'dul'-gling-pa* (b. 1757) Pub. Chopal Lama, Darjeeling, 1985.

Chos-byung = *Bstan pa'i snying po gsang chen snga 'gyur nges don zab mo'i chos ky'i 'byung ba gsal bar byed pa'i legs bshad mkhas pa dga' byed ngo mtshar gtam gyi rol mtsho*. Author: Stag-sgang mkhas-mchog Ngag-dbangblo-gros, Gu-ru Bkra-shis (19th cent.). Sinkiang: Mtsho sngon mi rigs par khang, 1990.

Sbas-yul = *Sbas yul padma bkod ky'i lam yig ma 'ongs lung bstan sna tshogs phyogs gcig tu bsdus pa'i gsung pod*. A Collection of Prophecies of Things to Come and Accounts of Padma-bkod from the Library of Rī-bo-che Rje-drun of Padma-bkod.' Published by Tseten Dorji, Tibetan Nyingmapa Monastery, Tezu, Arunachal Pradesh, 1974.

Rtsa-gsum = *Rtsa gsum yi dam dgongs 'dus*. A Collection of Nyingmapa Teachings Rediscovered by Stag-sham Nus-ldan-rdo-rje. Vol. I. D. Gyaltzan and L. Lekshay, New Delhi, 1972.

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