

Debt, Dependency and the Moravian Mission in Kinnaur, 1865–1924

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In 1895 and 1896 the German missionary Theodor Schreve (1860–1930) wrote to the Moravian Church’s Mission Board in Herrnhut, south-east Germany, to share a combination of good news and a set of continuing dilemmas. He was writing from Poo (sPu, now often spelt “Pooh” or “Pu”) in Kinnaur, close to the border with Tibet. His predecessor Eduard Pagell, who had founded the station in 1865, had been able to baptise no more than a handful of converts before his death in 1883. By contrast Schreve, who had arrived in Poo in 1890, believed that the seeds sown by Pagell had at last borne fruit and that there was now a good prospect of further baptisms. That was the good news.

Schreve’s dilemmas related to the economic and social status of the prospective new Christians. Poo had some 600 inhabitants and, taken as a whole, it was one the most prosperous villages in the region as well as an important trading hub. However, the village’s wealth was unevenly distributed. There was a substantial underclass, many of whom lived in desperate poverty, and all the would-be converts came from this group. In the harsh winters, they depended on loans of grain borrowed from the richer households. The difficulty of paying back these loans meant that they were effectively bound to their more prosperous neighbours in a form of bonded servitude. The converts’ debts and lowly social status scarcely provided a secure foundation for the new Christian community.

As a solution, Schreve argued that it was essential for the mission to look after the Christians’ bodily needs as well as their spiritual welfare. He therefore proposed to provide them with new sources of decent employment by founding a small wool industry and purchasing farmland which the mission would manage. At the same time, he recognised the possibility that potential converts would turn to the church in order to satisfy their material needs rather than out of a concern for their spiritual welfare. He argued that there was no choice but to accept this risk. In this essay, I examine the historical circumstances that contributed to Schreve’s dilemmas and discuss the outcomes of his choices.

Many aspects of Poo's encounter with Christianity are particular to its locality and to the Moravian church but the story has a wider regional significance. Although Poo lies on the Indian side of the border with Tibet, its inhabitants speak a Tibetan dialect. As will be seen, its social structure had many aspects that were distinctive to Upper Kinnaur, but it can nonetheless be seen as a variant of patterns that applied across the wider Tibetan cultural arena. The missionaries learnt to speak the local dialect; they spent longer in Kinnaur than any other category of Westerner; and they were more deeply involved in local people's lives. Their testimony therefore represents an important historical record in a region that is otherwise poorly documented. More than that, the successes and failures of their spiritual and economic endeavours amounted to a social experiment that sheds light both on the missionaries themselves and on the society that they attempted to serve.

The essay is primarily based on a critical reading of missionary letters in the monthly *Missionsblatt aus der Brüdergemeine* ("Moravian Mission Magazine") that was published in Herrnhut from 1839 to 1937. As with any other historical record, it is important to take full account of the motives of the authors and editors when evaluating these sources. As Frank Seeliger points out, the *Missionsblatt* publishers edited and to some degree censored the missionaries' letters before distributing them in print to a wider audience of mission supporters.¹ Their interests focused on church life rather than, for example, a detailed examination of local cultural practices at festival times. Nevertheless, taken as a whole, the published letters provide a remarkably detailed portrayal of missionary life, including failures as well as successes. Importantly for the purposes of this essay, the letters have much to say about the poorer sections of society, a group whose interests are at best scantily documented elsewhere. For the years after the First World War, I have also been able to consult manuscript records held at Moravian Church House, London. To date I have not been able to consult the manuscript records for Poo held at the Moravian Church archive (Archiv der Brüder-Unität) in Herrnhut but hope to be able to do so in future.

Faith, status and economic enterprise in the Moravian church

Consciously and unconsciously, the Poo missionaries were heirs to a set of attitudes inherited from their 18th- and 19th-century Moravian predecessors. The Moravian ethos included a strong emphasis on the need for a personal relationship with God, together with a belief in the

¹ Seeliger (2003: 29).

importance of community, as well as the need for creative work, including commercial enterprise. The Moravians of course shared these values with a wide range of other Christian groups, but their particular institutional history led to a distinctive version of the Protestant work ethic that highlighted the importance of earning one's own living and avoiding indebtedness.

In 1722 a succession of Protestant refugees from Moravia (now part of the Czech Republic) fled to south-eastern Germany, where they were able to find sanctuary on the estate of Count Nikolaus von Zinzendorf (1700–1760).² They belonged to a tradition stemming from the *Unitas Fratrum* ("Unity of Brethren") which had been founded in Bohemia in 1457 but suppressed in its original homelands in the aftermath of the Thirty Years War (1618–1648). With Zinzendorf's support, they founded a new settlement known as Herrnhut ("The Lord's Watch"). The formal name of the church is still *Unitas Fratrum*. In Germany, it is known as the Herrnhuter Brüdergemeine.

On their arrival in Germany, the refugees faced the immediate challenge of economic survival. Perhaps echoing the Israelites following their flight from Egypt, one woman is said to have exclaimed, "Where do we find bread in this wilderness?"³ Most of them had been peasant farmers but Zinzendorf had not allocated them sufficient land to earn their living from agriculture. The eventual outcome was that Herrnhut became a community of craftspeople, benefitting from its location on a main road between the local towns of Zittau and Löbau.

In 1727 Zinzendorf exercised his authority as *Gutsherr* ("feudal lord") to draw up the *Herrschaftliche Gebote und Verbote* ("Seigneurial Precepts and Prohibitions"), in effect a constitution for the nascent community.⁴ The document laid down that the inhabitants should be free men and women, not bound by any form of serfdom. Article 7 said that every inhabitant should work and "eat his own bread": only when they became old, sick or incapable would the community support them.⁵ Article 23 forbade any lending or borrowing without the express advance permission from Zinzendorf in his capacity as lord of the manor.

The Moravians sent their first missionaries to the West Indies in

² Standard histories of the church and its missions include Hamilton and Hamilton (1967) and Beck (1981).

³ "Wo nehmen wir Brot her in dieser Wüste?" Uttendörfer (1925: 14). The translations from German into English here and elsewhere in this essay are my own.

⁴ Uttendörfer (1925: 18–24).

⁵ The German original is: "Ein jeder Einwohner zu Herrnhut soll arbeiten und sein eigen Brot essen. Wenn er aber alt, krank und unvermögend ist, soll ihn die Gemeine ernähren."

1732, to Greenland in 1733, to Surinam in 1735, and to South Africa in 1737. In the course of the 18th century, they went on to establish missions in Labrador and North America, as well as making unsuccessful attempts in regions as diverse as Algeria, Persia, the Nicobar Islands, Central Russia, and Lapland. The pioneer missionaries to the Danish West Indies, David Nitschmann and Johann Leonhard Dober, were artisans rather than theologians: Nitschmann was a carpenter while Dober was a potter. In principle the missionaries were supposed to earn their own livelihoods. In practice they and their successors did not always achieve this ideal, but the church placed a high value on economic self-sufficiency where this was achievable.

Zinzendorf's personal leadership laid a deep and at times paradoxical imprint on the revived Moravian Unity.⁶ From his childhood he had been a Pietist in the Lutheran tradition with a powerful personal devotion to Jesus Christ. Unusually for one of his aristocratic background, he chose to dedicate his life to Christian service and, without feeling any need to break his ties with the Lutherans, became a Bishop of the renewed Unity in 1737. He believed that all members of the community were brothers and sisters in the faith but at the same time retained his high social status as a German aristocrat. For him, the most important point was that everyone, regardless of status, should fulfil his or her vocation as laid down by God.

Work was therefore a divine calling and faithfulness to this vocation had an almost sacramental quality: "One does not work simply to live, rather one lives for the sake of work, and when one has no more work to do, one suffers or passes away".⁷ Zinzendorf acknowledged his own lack of competence in financial matters. However, he came to believe that commercial work could be a divine calling as long as it was conducted with a view to serving the wider community. In the course of the 18th century, the church developed an international commercial network, one of whose objectives was to provide financial support for the missions.⁸

Zinzendorf's financial incompetence became all the more apparent during the period in the 1740s that is known in Moravian terminology as the *Sichtungszeit* ("Sifting Time").⁹ During these years, he neglected the management of the church while his close followers—including his son Christian Rhenatus (1727–1752)—indulged in an extended period

⁶ For a standard biography in English, see Weinlick (1956).

⁷ Vogt (2002: 166). The German original is: "Man arbeitet nicht allein dass man lebt, sondern man lebt um der Arbeit willen, und wenn man nichts mehr zu arbeiten hat, so leidet man oder entschläft".

⁸ On this network, see in particular Danker (1971), Engel (2011) and Hüsigen (2013).

⁹ On the "Sifting Time", see Peucker (2015).

of sentimental religious enthusiasm. The church's financial resources were already overstretched following its rapid international expansion in the 1730s. The outcome was that by 1753 the church was brought to the verge of bankruptcy.¹⁰ Zinzendorf's successors, notably August Gottlieb Spangenberg (1704–1792), restored its finances. However, it took the rest of the century before the church had fully paid off its debts and restored its international reputation. The outcome was to reinforce the importance of hard work and thrift, not only to pay off the church's debts but to support its missionary activities. The various Moravian settlements and missionary outposts differed on the details of their financial management but shared a common ethos: the mission stations were still expected to do what they could to be self-supporting.

Early Moravian engagement in the Western Himalaya

The Himalaya mission fitted with Moravian tradition in that the two pioneers, Eduard Pagell and Wilhelm Heyde (1825–1908), were both artisans by training: Pagell had worked as a stonemason¹¹ while Heyde was the son of a gardener and had served as a plumber's apprentice.¹² As will be seen, there was to be a strong economic component to their early missionary activities.

Pagell and Heyde set out from Herrnhut in 1853 and travelled via London to Calcutta (now Kolkata).¹³ Two years earlier, the German missionary Karl Gützlaff had made an appeal for missionaries to the Chinese Empire. Mindful of their earlier engagement with the Mongols, the Moravians decided to aim for Mongolia. However, since Russia and the Chinese interior were closed to them, they decided to explore an alternative route via India and Central Asia. In 1854 Pagell and Heyde arrived in Kotgarh, close to the river Sutlej some 50 miles from Simla and spent the winter there with a fellow German missionary who was in the service of the London-based Church Missionary Society (CMS). In 1855 they made an exploratory expedition to Ladakh and Spiti. However, finding that the Tibetan border was closed to them, they applied to their Herrnhut superiors and to the British authorities to establish a mission station in Kyelang (Kye lang, now also known as Keylong, Lahul). Both gave their approval, and they began work on the construction of the mission house in the summer of 1856.

Kyelang had the advantage of being conveniently located on a trade

¹⁰ Mason (2001: 9–11).

¹¹ Schreve (n.d.: 6).

¹² Heyde (1921: 6).

¹³ For the early history of the mission, see Bray (2005).

and pilgrimage route connecting the Indian plains with Ladakh and Tibet. From now on Tibet became their main focus in place of Mongolia. In 1857 they were joined by Heinrich August Jäschke (1817–1883), a former schoolteacher, who became best known for his linguistic researches and his Tibetan translation of the New Testament. Their household was completed in 1859 with the arrival of three brides, selected by the Mission Board in a form of arranged marriage. Pagell went to Calcutta to meet them and married his own bride, Friederike Mechtel, there.

A further advantage of Lahul was that it came under direct—albeit somewhat loose—British administration as part of Punjab province. Captain Hay, the Assistant Commissioner of Kulu, promised them government assistance in setting up the mission. During the summer months his successors regularly visited Kyelang during their administrative visits to Lahul. In their official capacity, they gave financial support to the mission to set up a school. Already in 1857, the missionaries experimented with the cultivation of potatoes, introducing them to the region for the first time. Later, the British helped the Moravians to acquire more land and provided them with an official subsidy to finance the construction of the necessary irrigation canals. The hope was that the Moravians would be able to contribute to the region's wider social and economic development.

The first converts, Nicodemus Sonam Stobgyas and Samuel Joldan, were baptised in 1865. They were from Ladakh rather than Lahul. Ladakh belonged to the territories of the Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir and they were members of a wider group of Ladakhis who had fled their homeland to escape oppressive taxation. The majority of the mission's subsequent converts in Kyelang were likewise from Ladakh. Apparently under the influence of Hindu custom, Lahulis would not eat with Christians, and local would-be converts faced intense social pressure not to join the Moravians.

Meanwhile, in 1864 Pagell undertook another reconnaissance journey to select a site for a new mission. He chose the village of Poo in the Kinnaur region of the upper Sutlej valley which lay close to the Shipki pass leading into Tibet. As with Kyelang, the hope was that Poo would serve as an advance post, making it possible to expand into Tibet as soon as it became open to foreigners. An important factor in his calculations was the construction of the so-called Hindustan-Tibet road from Simla toward the Tibetan border.¹⁴ On his reconnaissance visit in 1864 he noted that the construction of the road had required several thousand workers for several years, and food supplies were

¹⁴ On the Hindustan-Tibet Road, see Gardner (2014).

therefore expensive.¹⁵ The Moravians hoped that the completion of the road would lead to greater economic engagement with Tibet on the part of British India, and that the mission would benefit.

Kinnaur differed from Lahul in that it was part of the princely state of Bashahr, meaning that it did not come under direct British administration.¹⁶ Instead, the Raja of Bashahr in principle exercised a high degree of local autonomy. However, he was subject to the “advice” of a Simla-based British official known as the Superintendent of the Simla Hill States. In later years, the Raja’s autonomy was also constrained by a series of agreements with the Imperial Forestry Service. When necessary, Pagell could and did appeal for the support of British officialdom. However, their lines of authority were indirect and therefore less effective than in Lahul. In practice, Pagell and his successors therefore had to negotiate with a series of overlapping authorities at both the state and the local levels.

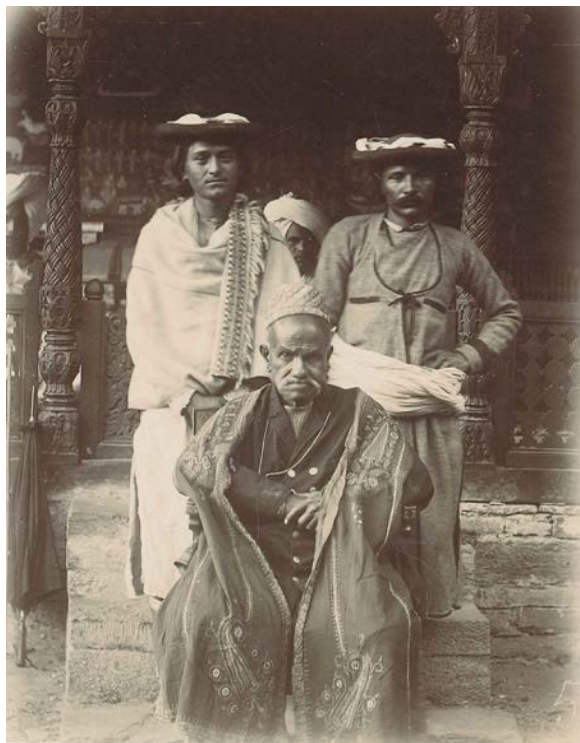


Fig. 1 — Raja Shamsher Singh, c. 1910. Photo courtesy of Moravian Church House, London.

¹⁵ Pagell, June 1864. MB 29 (1865), 29.

¹⁶ On Bashahr’s relationship with the British in this period, see Datta (1997), Moran (2007) and Jahoda (2015).

From a missionary perspective, a further complication lay in the fact that the basis of the Raja's authority was religious rather than secular. In principle, everyone in Bashahr was subject to *deotā ka raj*, "rule by deity".¹⁷ The Raja ruled on behalf of the Bhimakali, the most powerful of these deities, whose seat was in Sarahan. Bhimakali herself sat at the apex of a hierarchy of deities which paralleled—or rather constituted—a hierarchy of governance.¹⁸ Next in seniority to the Raja were three wazirs, each of whom were associated with their own local *deotā*. Poo fell within the territory of the Powari wazir.

In May 1865 Pagell set out from Kotgarh, where he had spent the winter at the CMS station, accompanied by a team of carpenters. In Rampur he called on Raja Shamsheer Singh who appeared well-disposed and issued him with a *parwana* (permit) authorising him to cut as much wood as he needed to construct the mission house.¹⁹ However, when he reached Chini (now Kalpa) he met a delegation of 16 men from Poo who tried to prevent him travelling any further. It seems that a soothsayer had predicted that the village would suffer from drought if a missionary settled among them. Pagell believed that this protest had been instigated by the local wazir, who had himself hoped to make use of the land that Pagell had acquired, and he expressed the view that the Raja did not have sufficient authority in his kingdom. Eventually, he overcame the villagers' resistance by appealing to the Raja and the English Commissioner.

The political economy in Poo

The people of Upper Kinnaur were mostly Tibetan Buddhists, and in earlier centuries their territory had been part of the Western Tibetan kingdom of Guge. However, they were nonetheless subject to *deotā ka raj*: Buddhist and Hindu belief and social practice overlapped. Every few years the Raja's deity made a formal visitation to Poo, even if the Raja himself never did so. Schreve describes one such occasion in the 1890s:

Towards the end of 1893, after a four-year absence, the Raja's deity again visited our village, ostensibly to bless the land but in reality (and

¹⁷ Sutherland (2006).

¹⁸ Singh (1989) shows that the *deotā*, or rather the committees acting on their behalf, have in recent times served as an important informal source of credit to local borrowers. Moravian sources make no reference to this practice in Poo in the period under review. It is possible that richer households may have been able to access credit through this means, but almost certainly not the poorer families who are the main focus of this paper.

¹⁹ Pagell, Poo, 23 June 1865. MB 29 (1865), 238.

the villagers saw this visitation in the same way) to fill the pockets of the deity's priests. In addition to free board and lodging, the latter requisitioned a good number of sacrificial animals as well as a tax of one anna per head. The Poo people's participation in the deity's festivities was not enthusiastic. This fact pleased us, still more the fact that the festivities were interrupted on Sunday and that, in addition to non-Christian villagers, a good number of the deity's priests, some of whom understood Tibetan, came to our church.²⁰

As in other parts of the Western Himalayas the household was the key social unit and, according to F. A. Redslob, who served in the Himalaya from 1871 to 1891, the village operated more as a 'republic' at the local level:

By contrast with Lahaul, a more republican spirit—preserved from earlier times—is apparent among the people here. In Lahaul, alongside and in spite of the British government, the old noble families continue to exercise force and pressure on the people, and the word of the aristocrats is decisive. Here, by contrast, all important and less important community matters are discussed and decided in the community council. This gathers next to the communal temple below a tall alder tree. Every head of the household from the farmers is entitled to speak in the council but no one from the lower castes has a seat or a voice.²¹

Poo occupied an intermediate space between the Indian foothills and Tibet not only in religious practices but also with regard to its economy. It was possible to sow two harvests a year, and agriculture was supplemented by an annual cycle of trade.²² Kinnaur still benefited from a 17th-century treaty signed by Bashahr Raja Kehri Singh and the Lhasa government which meant that traders from Bashahr were able to trade in Tibet free of taxes.²³ As Schreve describes the annual cycle:

In June the villagers—that is one man who is competent in trade from each of the better houses—move with their flocks of sheep to Tibet. The boldest press quite far into the interior because the wool is cheaper the farther they go. In October they come back with their flocks who are laden with packages of wool. Each sheep carries eight *batti* (32 lb). These are then driven straightaway to Rampur, the capital of Kinnaur,

²⁰ Schreve, Poo, 12 March 1894. MB 58 (1894), 301–302.

²¹ "Zur Charakterisierung der tibetischen Grenzprovinzen. Aus dem Diarium von Poo 1884." MB 49 (1885), 150.

²² See van Spengen (2000) for an overview of wider patterns of Himalayan trade and Jahoda (2015: 128–129) for a closer look at the trade between Bashahr and Tibet.

²³ For the historical background and text of the treaty, see Halkias (2009).

where a great wool market takes place every year.²⁴ There they not only relieve the sheep of their loads but also shear them of their own wool and sell it.²⁵

In the next stage of the cycle, the sheep and their owners spent several months in the Himalayan foothills:

While the sheep have performed their trading role they don't come straight back to their homeland because the shortage of fodder during the winter means that they wouldn't have enough to live on. Rather they are driven to meadows near Simla and Mandi where they have good pastures in the winter.²⁶ There they stay under the watch of shepherds until the spring. Only then do they set out on the return journey to their homeland in Poo, but not with empty backs. Instead, they are loaded with grain because, however much grain is grown here, it is not sufficient for all needs.²⁷

These trading activities brought considerable wealth to the richer households, but there were wide economic and social disparities on both sides of the Tibetan border. On a visit to Poo in the summer of 1874, Redslob wrote that:

The Poo people are traders, prosperous to an extent, and have lent out much money, particularly in the poorer region of Tibet. Not infrequently, it happens that the Poo people bring back people who cannot pay and send them to work as labourers, in effect slaves. I saw many such Tibetan slaves and slave children.²⁸

Similarly, there were wide social disparities within the local population in Poo. As Redslob reported ten years later:

The farmers are "Nangpa" [*nang pa*], i.e. "insiders" within the religious community whereas the cottagers are "Pipa" [*phyi pa*], i.e. outsiders. In Poo the Nangpa bear unmistakably the features of the Mongolian race whereas the Pipa betray Indian descent. In contrast to the land-owning Nangpa, the Pipa are craftspeople and they distinguish between higher and lower castes according to the craft that they practice. Woodworkers, weavers, tailors and shoemakers may distinguish

²⁴ This was the Lavi Fair, which still takes place every year, although it has lost its former role as a focus for Indo-Tibetan trade.

²⁵ Schreve, Poo, 10 May 1891. MB 55 (1891), 340. See Singh (2019 124–153) for a discussion of wider patterns in the history of the "trader pastoralists of Kinnaur".

²⁶ If they went beyond Bashahr, they had to purchase trading rights from local rulers. Personal e-mail communication from Arik Moran, 21 May 2020.

²⁷ Personal e-mail communication from Arik Moran, 21 May 2020.

²⁸ "Br. Redslobs Reise von Kyalang durch Spiti nach Poo." MB 39 (1875), 3.

between themselves but stand higher than metalworkers; iron, gold- and silversmiths. Musicians occupy the lowest social and customary status.²⁹

Redslob drew a contrast with European conceptions of goldsmiths, silversmiths and musicians, who were regarded as high-status practitioners of the arts (*Künsten*). He noted that similar social distinctions were also apparent in Lahul—and he might have added Ladakh as well—but they were more evident in Poo because the proportion of Pipa was higher.³⁰ He commented that such practices did not arise from Buddhism but were to be observed far inside Tibet.³¹



Fig. 2 — A Poo blacksmith family. Note the hookah (water pipe tobacco). The wife is using a small spindle to spin wool. Photo by Ada Burroughs, c. 1920, courtesy of Gillian Crofton.

Writing in 1891, Schreve likewise reported on the social divide between Nangpa and Pipa and attributed it to the influence of Brahmanical Hindus. He noted that the lower castes were not actually pariahs, although they could descend to this status if they became

²⁹ "Zur Charakterisierung der tibetischen Grenzprovinzen. Aus dem Diarium von Poo 1884." MB 49 (1885), 150.

³⁰ On Ladakhi social hierarchies, see Kaplanian (1981:171–190) and Erdmann (1983).

³¹ Levine (1992: 336) noted on the basis of research conducted in 1990 that ironworkers in Khochar (Western Tibet) were said to be of mixed Indian and Tibetan origin: they held the lowest social status, and were thought to be physically unclean.

ritually unclean by eating with pariahs or Christians.³² In that case they could only return to their former status at a price:

If a pariah wishes to be accepted back into his caste, he has to go to the king of Kinnaur and bring a present according to his means of at least six rupees. Then he is sprinkled with water that ostensibly comes from the Ganges and reinstated into the privileges of his former caste.³³

In 1899 Reinhold Schnabel, who served in the Himalaya between 1895 and 1916, reported an incident demonstrating that these caste distinctions were directly linked to Poo's status as part of the Hindu kingdom of Bashahr. Together with his local assistants, he made a short trip to Shipki on the far side of the Tibetan border, which was marked by a glacial stream. Here he reports what happened next:

Hardly had we passed [the stream] when everyone threw down their loads and sat down comfortably together. Here it seemed irrelevant whether one was Nangpa (insider) or Pipa (outsider) or pariah. The hookah (water pipe) was passed from hand to hand and people smoked freely. Someone fetched delicious water from the stream: the Sahib had to taste it as well. In short, I at first had no idea what was going on until Padaka [...] said that here on Tibetan soil all caste distinctions fell away.³⁴

The first phase of mission activity

Having established himself in Poo, Pagell set out to win the villagers' trust, noting that it would be inappropriate to be over-hasty because "it is not they who invited us here but rather we who imposed ourselves on them".³⁵ Together with Heyde he had received basic medical training at Berlin's Charité Hospital before setting out for India, and it seems that he was appreciated primarily as a doctor. In December 1866, he happily reported that even the local indigenous medical practitioners turned to him for advice, and his patients included members of the delegation who had tried to prevent him coming to Poo.³⁶

It seems that he also managed to attract an audience for his Sunday services, making use of an accordion and, for example, reporting in early 1866 that some seven to eight people came regularly.³⁷ Also, in

³² Schreve, Poo, 10 May 1891. MB 55 (1891), 336.

³³ Schreve, Poo, 10 May 1891. MB 55 (1891), 336.

³⁴ Schnabel, "Von Poo nach Tibet hinein." MB 63 (1899), 199.

³⁵ Pagell, Poo, February 1866, MB 30 (1866), 256.

³⁶ Pagell, Poo, 8 December 1866. MB 31 (1866), 85.

³⁷ Pagell, Poo, 8 December 1866. MB 31 (1866), 85.

the winter months, when the children were not expected to support their parents by looking after their livestock on the hillsides, he started a small school. In March 1869, he reported that he had had an attendance of eight to ten boys each day but that their powers of concentration were limited.³⁸

In the summer months, he made a series of missionary journeys around the region, preaching the Gospel where he could, and negotiating various setbacks. For example, in 1870 he planned to go to Spiti but found that the bridges on his planned route had been removed.³⁹ It emerged that Fateh Singh, an illegitimate brother of the Raja, had staged a rebellion and carved out a small personal kingdom. Perhaps fearing that Pagell was in league with the British, Fateh Singh gave strict orders that he should not be allowed to pass. Pagell instead travelled down to Simla where he reported these events.⁴⁰ The British Commissioner suggested that he might wish to stay away but, later in the year, Fateh Singh was captured.

Pagell made only a few converts. The first was Baldan (dPal ldan?) who was from a village three days' journey downstream and came to Poo to help with the carpentry work. Pagell reported that baptismal instruction was slow because he "belonged to the poor people who have to bear a heavy yoke imposed by wealthy people and this has a crippling influence on their minds and spirits from childhood".⁴¹ However, in November 1868 Pagell felt able to baptise him under the name "Joseph". On 20 December, he baptised Joseph's three children, and later began instruction for his wife Tsering Butrid (Tshe ring dbu 'khrid). He also continued teaching Sigden, the illegitimate son of a smith and a Nangpa girl, whom he had adopted as a foster child.⁴²

A further candidate was Jamyang Tsering, a young man from Poo who had no possessions apart from his clothes and a soup bowl. In 1870 Pagell reported that he had given Jamyang Tsering employment. He and his wife were doing their best to take care of him in material matters but he noted that "All the poor people here are born debtors, and their housekeeping is reckless, without any foresight."⁴³ He was holding back an amount of money from Jamyang Tsering's monthly wages. Apparently, both Jamyang Tsering and Joseph were grateful for this practice and glad that their debts were diminishing. Pagell added that the harvest had been very poor that year and therefore there was a prospect of much hardship for poorer people. On 5

³⁸ Pagell, Poo, 8 March 1869. MB 33 (1869), 123.

³⁹ Pagell, Poo, 13 September 1870. MB 35 (1871), 76.

⁴⁰ Pagell, 12 December 1870. MB 35 (1871), 171-175.

⁴¹ Pagell, Poo, 26 November 1868. MB 33 (1869), 72.

⁴² Pagell, Poo, 8 March 1869. MB 33 (1869), 124. Schreve, Poo, 14 July 1891.

⁴³ Pagell, Poo, 12 December 1870. MB 35 (1871), 175.

February 1871 Jamyang Tsering was baptised under the name "Jonathan" and Sigdan as "Benjamin".⁴⁴

Debt continued to be a concern. In September 1874 Pagell reported that Joseph had gone to the village of Nisang, some days' journey away, apparently without Pagell's approval, and was working as a woodcutter. By December he was back, but living in the village rather than with the mission.⁴⁵ Pagell commented that "That too is good because everyone in the village sees that Christianity does not inevitably involve living with the teacher and depending on him for external matters."⁴⁶

Continuing to reflect on debt, Pagell wrote on 29 March 1876:

Our people's perception that we must in the end help them out of their need arose because we took them in when they came to us in this connection. At that time each of them had more than Rs 80 debt which rose from year to year because of the 25% interest that they had to pay. We took it for a duty of Christian love to give them an advance on their debts which they could pay off step by step through their work. However, we later realised that these people cannot endure a worry-free life because after their debts had been paid off they immediately fell into a new one.⁴⁷

He was now more careful in the help that he gave to the two Christian families so that they were saying, "The 'lama' [i.e. Pagell] is no longer as good he was in the beginning".⁴⁸ A further concern was that Joseph had been eating food from "heathen festivals" and had therefore been excluded from Holy Communion. From Pagell's perspective, eating such food could be seen as a way of sliding back into heathendom. However, if Christians were not able to take part in local festivals, they were cut off from an important aspect of communal life.

In January 1883 Pagell and his wife died within a few days of each other. Redslob came from Kyelang and took over the Poo mission until 1885 when he moved to Leh (Ladakh). Redslob took a similar view to his predecessor:

The people have a quite different character from our Christians in Kyelang just as the people here are altogether differently inclined from our Ladakhis and Lahaulis. Their character inclines more to fecklessness and hedonism [*Unzuverlässigkeit und Genusszucht*], and the second characteristic leads to their being caught up in debt. So, for

⁴⁴ Pagell, Poo, 6 March 1871. MB 35 (1871), 219.

⁴⁵ Pagell, Poo, 2 December 1874. MB 39 (1875), 131.

⁴⁶ Pagell, Poo, 2 December 1874. MB 39 (1875), 131.

⁴⁷ Pagell, Poo, 29 March 1876. MB 40 (1876), 226.

⁴⁸ Pagell, Poo, 29 March 1876. MB 40 (1876), 226.

example, Jonathan is committed to a bondage for the whole summer to a rich villager. I do not think this is satisfactory and seek to free him as far as I can, but he makes that difficult for me because of his great fecklessness.⁴⁹

Redslob was replaced by Julius Weber, who served in Poo from 1884 until 1891, when he too moved to Leh. Weber's reports reflect frequent discouragement. In a review in May 1888, he noted that after twenty years of work there was no local Christian who was fit to receive Holy Communion and queried whether the time had come to preach the Gospel in the region.⁵⁰ He suggested that this was less the fault of individuals and more to do with local social relationships (*hiesige Verhältnisse*). Echoing Pagell, perhaps unconsciously, he added, "They have not called us: I would almost say that we imposed ourselves on them".⁵¹

"One sows and another reaps"

In November 1890, Theodor Schreve came to Poo and, together with his wife, stayed for nearly thirteen years. From his writings, he comes across as a perceptive and sympathetic observer of local conditions who also had strong practical skills. He was able to revive the small congregation and place it on a much stronger footing so that by the time he left there were thirty-three members. In the late 1890s, Schreve wrote a pamphlet whose title, *Einer Säet, der andre erntet*, echoes John 4: 37 ("One sows and another reaps"). He argued that, even if Pagell had seen few results from his work, he had prepared the ground for a "harvest" reaped by his successor.

From the outset, Schreve took a clear-eyed view of the social conditions of his flock:

Because of his debts Jonathan has been sold to a farmer as a slave (*Sklave*). From early in the morning until late at night he is stuck in work. In such circumstances it is quite impossible to improve his understanding [of Christian teachings].⁵²

Benjamin was likewise exposed to debts because of his addiction to playing dice. Schreve recalled that at one point he had come to the verge of suicide after losing Rs 25 through gambling. Schreve saw the

⁴⁹ Redslob, Poo, 2 February–12 March 1884. MB 48 (1884), 171.

⁵⁰ "Westhimalaya. Poo und Leh Brief von Weber aus Poo vom 7.5.88." MB 52 (1888), 207–209.

⁵¹ Weber, Poo, 7 May 1888. MB 52 (1888), 207.

⁵² Schreve, Poo, 14 July 1891. MB 56 (1892), 147.

indebtedness of these two individuals as part of a wider pattern. In May 1892 he cited a particularly painful case:

The richest and therefore unfortunately the most influential man in the village had so mistreated an old man who was his debtor, that one feared for his life. Not content with that, they locked him in a latrine, and he was supposed to stay there until he had paid his debts.⁵³

Schreve managed to secure the release of the victim but the mission faced a social backlash in that irrigation water to its fields was cut off while he was away from Poo.

Against this background, he argued that there was no room for “polemic” in the mission: it was more important to provide practical assistance.⁵⁴ In 1891 he made a “timid beginning” (*schüchternen Versuch*) in agriculture by planting potatoes, peaches, apples, pears and nut trees.⁵⁵ The following year, he started looking for agricultural land with a view to making the Christian community self-dependent.⁵⁶ Echoing a constant theme in the history of the mission, he acknowledged that people might approach the mission with material objectives in mind:

There are also people who come two or three times to the church service in order—as they think—to make themselves amenable to us. They then come up with their actual purpose, which is a request to borrow money—a suggestion that I firmly reject.⁵⁷

However, he added:

This failed speculation appears in a somewhat milder light if one takes into consideration that the general custom here in trade and commerce is to seek advances for all sorts of different things. I myself am often obliged to pay in advance for butter, wood etc some time before receiving the goods. That is especially necessary when buying grain. If I adopt this practice, I receive a greater quantity than I would if only paid at the moment of delivery.⁵⁸

Schreve was able to bring Jonathan and Benjamin back into the congregation, and in the course of the early 1890s there were a handful of other baptisms. These included: Schreve’s servant girl in 1892; the

⁵³ “Aus dem Jahresbericht (Januar–Dezember 1892).” MB 57 (1893), 341.

⁵⁴ “Aus dem Jahresbericht (Januar–Dezember 1892).” MB 57 (1893), 341.

⁵⁵ Schreve, Poo, 10 May and 12 June 1891. MB 55 (1891), 335.

⁵⁶ Heyde, Kyelang, 11 October 1892. MB 57 (1893), 118.

⁵⁷ Schreve, Poo, 10 May and 12 June 1891. MB 55 (1891), 335.

⁵⁸ Schreve, Poo, 10 May and 12 June 1891. MB 55 (1891), 335.

mission schoolteacher Sonam Gyaltsan, who took the baptismal name Paulu, in April 1893; and the servant girl's mother in January 1894. Paulu was from Spiti and had attended the Kyelang mission school: he later played an important role as an evangelist for the mission. Unlike the other converts, he was a *nangpa* and he in any case earned his living from the mission. The others were all *pipa* and had difficulties earning their livelihoods. This was part of a broader social problem. As Schreve wrote in March 1894:

It is impossible for the poor people to buy grain in the village. Just as elsewhere misers rejoice in the quantities of money that they have accumulated, so rich misers here gloat over their grain. Here in Poo there are about 70 households. Eight of these households have such a surplus of grain that they could feed the entire village. Instead they hoard it and even in bitter need share nothing with their fellows. Such stupidity is beyond my understanding. Among these rich people there is one who in winter takes on poor people for little benefit, thus incurring the anger of his rich peers. About 30 houses have a sufficiency in that the harvest from their fields covers their requirements. The remainder are in constant need.⁵⁹

This situation posed a particular danger for the nascent Christian congregation:

If they seek their income in the same way as before, their Christian way of life will be severely endangered. This applies to the family that we have recently taken on. The father and one of the daughters are contracted as servants to pay off their debts. They receive food for their work, i.e. only in the summer, but otherwise nothing at all. In winter their creditors give them an advance of four rupees' worth of grain which is enough to save them from death but not enough to live on.⁶⁰

In these circumstances, the pattern of debt became an unending cycle:

[...] they return to their creditors in the spring in order to work off the winter advance that in the meantime has increased at the rate of 25% interest, or actually 50% because the loan is only for half a year. So it

⁵⁹ Schreve, Poo, 12 March 1894. MB 58 (1894), 301. Jahoda (2015: 121) argues that social and economic divisions between the richer and poorer sections of society were widening during this period, and this was partly the result of a trend towards greater monetarisation resulting from tax reforms introduced under British influence. An additional factor was that the richer households were in a much stronger position to benefit from trading opportunities than the poorer households.

⁶⁰ Schreve, Poo, 12 March 1894. MB 58 (1894), 299.

continues from year to year and there can be no question of their being free of debt. More than 20 families live in this manner in Poo.⁶¹

His conclusion was that the mission had the duty to fight against these grievances with all its strength because this was the only way to build up a healthy Christian community. In addition to acquiring more land for agriculture, his solution was to develop a “wool industry” to provide a livelihood for the Christians during the winter months when there was no agricultural work. In the first instance, this “industry” consisted mainly of spinning. Later, Schreve was able to acquire an improved type of loom so that the mission could weave blankets.



Fig. 3 — The “wool industry” in Poo, c. 1920. Photo: Ada Burroughs, courtesy of Gillian Crofton.

In 1895 Schreve was at last able to report that, after three years of negotiation, he had secured the mission’s access to the fallow land that he hoped to bring into cultivation. This was a major task:

In one week I employed 40 workers, so 15% of the [working] population of Poo. I pitched my tent on the mountain in order to lead the work from there. Shortly before sunrise I gathered the work team for a morning blessing. I drew on the Lord’s Sermon on the Mount. A prayer concluded the morning blessing and then we set to work.⁶²

With satisfaction, he noted:

⁶¹ Schreve, Poo, 12 March 1894. MB 58 (1894), 299.

⁶² Schreve, Poo, 13 May 1895. MB 59 (1895), 335.

Through this work we have come into the closest contact with a great part of the population and we may hope that the Word of God, which is communicated at the morning blessing before work, will fall on good soil here and there. In coming years if the work increases, more of our Christians will find work here, thus escaping from their unjust relationship with their employers in the village.⁶³

As a further illustration of the urgent need for social uplift, he added:

Our Christians are so poor that it would not be possible for them to exist if the mission did not offer them a livelihood. For example, they carefully gather the potato peelings that are discarded from our household and they welcome the tea leaves that we throw away so that they can use them for a second infusion.⁶⁴

In his subsequent correspondence with the Mission Board in Germany, Schreve repeatedly returned to the question whether people would seek to become Christians for the sake of material benefits. For example, in a letter from Poo in July 1895, he wrote that it was quite possible that this might be the case. However, he expressed the hope that in the end the power of the Gospel would turn their hearts even if they had initially been attracted to the Christianity for material reasons.⁶⁵ He again emphasised the need to prevent the Christian converts from falling back into debt. On a practical note, he reported that he was helping Benjamin to pay off a debt of Rs 170 by deducting Rs 2 a month from his wages. He had adopted a similar arrangement with Jonathan.

After a visit to Simla later in 1895, Schreve reported that some missionaries from other churches had been critical of his approach, although his CMS colleague in Kotgarh was more sympathetic. The *Missionsblatt* included an editorial comment supporting his strategy:

Missionaries who do not wish to bother themselves with the life situation of the people in their care cut themselves off wilfully from the opportunity to practice love, and to alleviate the material suffering of innocent people, to be merciful to others, as our heavenly Father is merciful to us.⁶⁶

The editorial concluded on the hopeful note that such measures would be no more than temporary until such time as the mission would have lifted people from debt and need, and inculcated the virtues of "order,

⁶³ Schreve, Poo, 13 May 1895. MB 59 (1895), 335.

⁶⁴ Schreve, Poo, 13 May 1895. MB 59 (1895), 335.

⁶⁵ Schreve, Poo, 11 July 1895. MB 59 (1895), 431.

⁶⁶ Editorial comment. MB 60 (1896), 171.

hard work, prudence, and thrift" (*Ordnung, Fleiss, Umsicht und Wirtschaftlichkeit*).

At least in the short term, Schreve was able to report a degree of success. At Easter 1897 he wrote that he had baptised fourteen adults, thus doubling the size of the Christian community. In this case, caste restrictions worked to the mission's advantage. As noted above, Christians were treated as pariahs. When some of the older women heard that their younger relatives wished to become Christians, they decided to seek baptism too because they wanted to continue to eat together.⁶⁷ One of the new converts was an oracle, who said he wished to be relieved from the spirit who used to possess him.⁶⁸ His fellow villagers tried to dissuade him, even offering him a field as an incentive to continue his services, but he insisted on going ahead.⁶⁹ Some of the richer farmer threatened to refuse work to the new converts, and a monk spoke against the baptisms, but another respected villager said that the new Christians had done well to adopt the new faith.

Advance, decline and closure

Schreve returned to Germany in 1903, primarily because of his wife's ill-health, and later served as a missionary in South Africa, where he died in 1930. There were further baptisms after he had left so that by 1907 there were sixty-nine church members, making Poo the largest of the Moravian congregations in the Himalayan region (In addition to Kyalang, the others now included Leh and Khalatse in Ladakh).⁷⁰ By this time the hostility of the richer villagers had abated, in part because they needed the labour of the congregation members.⁷¹ The early years of the 20th century represented a brief zenith in the history of the mission.

⁶⁷ Schreve, Poo, 1 March 1897. MB 62 (1898), 248.

⁶⁸ Schreve, Poo, 15 March 1897. MB 62 (1898), 250.

⁶⁹ Schreve, Poo, 27 March 1897. MB 62 (1898), 251.

⁷⁰ "Poo", *Periodical Accounts Relating to Moravian Missions* 6 (1907) (72), 760. "Status of the Congregations and their Christian Membership." PA 8 (1912) (90), 305.

⁷¹ MB 71 (1907), 243.



Fig. 4 — Schnabel and his congregation in Poo, c. 1905. Photo courtesy of Moravian Church House, London.

Schreve had been joined for short periods in Poo by fellow missionaries Julius Bruske, who served in Kyelang, Poo, and Chini from 1894 to 1908, and Reinhold Schnabel. From 1906 onwards the plan was that there should be two missionary couples in Poo. In the years before and during the First World War, the missionaries who served there included the following, together with their wives and families: Reinhold Schnabel (returning to Poo a second time), Hermann Kunick (who served in the Himalaya from 1904–1931), Hermann Marx (1903–1919), and Henry Burroughs (1913–1926). Marx, who was known for his carpentry skills, built a second mission bungalow, and in 1914 opened a polyclinic with four wards. In January 1914 he treated 156 outpatients, as well as six inpatients.⁷² Meanwhile, the mission school continued operations, and both the farm and the wool industry provided income and employment for the Christian community. In 1916 the Raja of Bashahr ordered 100 pairs of woollen socks for Indian soldiers serving in the war.⁷³ In the event the knitters of Poo were able to produce as many as 300 pairs.

Despite these outward signs of success, the missionaries continued to express concern about the spiritual commitment of their congregation. For example, in the summer of 1907 Marx wrote of the congregation members:

⁷² “Poo”, *Periodical Accounts Relating to Moravian Missions* 6 (1907) (72), 760. “Status of the Congregations and their Christian Membership.” PA 8 (1912) (90), 305.

⁷³ MB 80 (1916): 72, 166.

Despite their participation in religious services and many pious sermons, their heart is far from the living God because they did not and do not now seek salvation for their immortal souls but rather to fill their stomachs as well as finding work and other material assistance from the missionary. Most of our Christians are very, very poor [...] often begging with their hungry children in front of our doors. If one sees this poverty, one can understand that there is a danger that the members of the lower caste will change religion for the sake of external benefits.⁷⁴



*Fig. 5 — The second mission bungalow with the village behind, c. 1920.
Photo: Ada Burroughs, courtesy of Gillian Crofton.*

Following the precedent set by Schreve, the mission continued to provide congregation members with material assistance. However, writing in 1908, Marx explained that this practice could be a source of conflict:

In order to help our Christians in winter, the Mission Board has permitted us to keep a supply of corn which we sell to our people at cost so that they do not become dependent on the uncharitable rich people. In April our supply was exhausted: we called the community together and told them they would have to seek grain in neighbouring villages. That stirred up discontent. One troublemaker declared: "If the Sahib doesn't give us grain any more, we don't want to come to church any more. What use is the Christian religion? We have no benefit from

⁷⁴ Stand der Pooer Gemeinde." MB 72 (1908), 6.

it". The others expressed themselves in the same terms, but they still don't want to break with us, and came to church on Sunday.⁷⁵

Missionary life continued to offer both hope and discouragement. In 1910 Marx described the congregation's Christmas celebrations but then told the story of a woman who had recently renounced Christianity, thirteen years after being baptised by Schreve.⁷⁶ Together with her family, she had gone to the village head and formally drunk holy water, ostensibly from the river Ganges, which a travelling wool trader had procured from the Raja of Bashahr for a price of Rs 2 and 4 annas. In doing so, she renounced Christianity and resumed her former caste status. Marx noted that she and her family had already been distancing themselves from the church for the previous eighteen months, but he only discovered that she had finally left the faith when he heard of the sudden death of her daughter as a result of a heart attack. When he visited the house, he found a Buddhist monk taking care of the funeral arrangements. Marx expressed his sorrow that this family as well as other former Christians had apparently taken off Christianity "like a cloak".

The Poo annual report for 1911 stated that the congregation had declined from sixty-nine to thirty-nine in the previous four years, and a further reduction was impending: "the majority of the members were baptized in times of outward distress and their Christianity has not stood the test of time".⁷⁷ They were therefore either leaving of their own accord or their names had to be struck off the register.

The British missionary Henry Burroughs, who came to Poo in 1916, described the mission in similarly gloomy terms. In September 1919 he wrote:

It is the rule of the village to pay servants in grain, so the missionaries have to make that provision. All our Christians are poor and in order to keep them from contracting debts with rich people, as they would surely do, we try to help them by selling grain from the mission. The idea is good but the practical working thereof is not always satisfactory as one cannot tell whether some of them think they come to church in order to pass muster as Christians and so get their grain, or whether it is otherwise.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Stand der Pooer Gemeinde." MB 72 (1908), 6.

⁷⁶ "Letztjährige Weihnachtserlebnisse in Poo (Himalaya)." MB 75 (1911), 274–275.

⁷⁷ "Status of the Congregations and their Christian Membership." PA 8 (1912) (90), 305.

⁷⁸ Henry Burroughs to Arthur Ward 15 August 1919. Tibet Letters. Moravian Church House (London). Hereafter MCH. For a memoir of Henry and Ada Burroughs' experiences in Kinnaur and Ladakh, see Bass and Burroughs (2018).

The mission land presented similar contradictions. In a “plea from the heart” written in February 1920, Henry Burroughs’ wife Ada reviewed the past history of the mission, recalling that “Br. Schreve thought it desirable to help the people to pay off their debts because they were practically serving as slaves for the rich men, bound down by debt and accumulated interest.”⁷⁹ The result was a series of baptisms. However, time proved that the Christians’ “motives were not for salvation through Christ, but for material needs”. On the day that Ada wrote the letter, one of the congregation members had complained to her: “If you do not give us a better field, then we shall not come to services.” As Ada observed:

She expressed the real heart of the matter! To get a field, they must keep our rules, attend service etc! So now, that is why they come at all [...] If they did not come, they would not get a field. These fields are a curse now, not a blessing.

As a consequence of the First World War, German citizens such as Schnabel had had to leave the mission field, and the Moravians were now severely short of funds. The future of the Poo mission was therefore already in question when Bishop Arthur Ward came on an official visitation from London in late 1920. He decided to give Poo another chance, but the situation did not improve. In May 1921, Henry Burroughs wrote in similar terms to before:

The chief cause of trouble at Poo is I am forced to think that most if not all of the Poo people entered the congregation from a wrong motive (material) rather than seeking a Saviour. Fields and getting debts paid can be very strong incentives in a place like Poo, and we are now getting the backwash of all this, even although we now have the second generation. They are nominal Christians who lack the experience we term conversion.⁸⁰

F. E. Peter, who served in the Himalayas from 1898 to 1936, took over the Poo mission in 1922. After a period of further review, he recommended that there was no option but to wind up the mission’s affairs, and the Moravians finally withdrew in 1924.

Despite the mission’s closure the Moravians remained in intermittent contact with what was left of the Poo congregation. In 1929, Benjamin—one of Pagell’s first converts—passed away.⁸¹ Deva Ram, the village headman, took advantage of a visit by the British official Edward Wakefield to pass on this news to Bishop Ward in

⁷⁹ Ada Burroughs to Arthur Ward, 24 February 1920. MCH.

⁸⁰ Henry Burroughs to Br. Klesel, 4 May 1921. Tibet Letters. MCH.

⁸¹ Wakefield to Ward, Poo, 16 October 1929. Tibet Letters. MCH.

London. In fulfilment of a promise to Ward, he had looked after Benjamin in his old age, and arranged for him to be buried beside Pagell. In the same year, Dewazung Dana, a Ladakhi Christian who had been ordained as a minister in 1920, visited the village.⁸² He stayed ten days and held two services. People were busy in the fields during the daytime, but he held meetings almost every evening. He wrote that it was sad for the Poo Christians “not to have anyone looking after their spiritual welfare” and suggested that they move to Leh. Apparently, the young men and women agreed to do so, and Peter—who was now in Leh—said that the church would pay their expenses. Later, two women took up the offer.⁸³ As late as 1955 when another Ladakhi Christian visited Poo, there were still two old ladies who had remained faithful to the church.⁸⁴ They too were invited to move to Leh where they took up a new role as caretakers of the Gospel Inn which the church had built in Leh bazaar to provide hospitality to travellers visiting the town.

The Poo mission left one important legacy in the person of Dorje Tharchin (rDo rje mthar byin, 1890–1876) who was often known as “Babu Tharchin” and is best known for his work producing a Tibetan-language newspaper, the *Tibet Mirror*, from 1925 until the early 1970s.⁸⁵ Tharchin was the illegitimate son of Sodnama, Schreve’s servant girl, who had been baptized in 1892. Like many of the other Poo Christians he had been born into the smith fraternity.⁸⁶ As a young man he came into contact first with the CMS mission in Kotgarh and then the Indian Christian evangelist Sadhu Sundar Singh (1889–1929). In 1924 he briefly corresponded with the Moravians about the possibility of his returning to Poo.⁸⁷ However, he ultimately spent most of the rest of his life based in Kalimpong, West Bengal, where he was later ordained as a minister in the Presbyterian church. Through his newspaper and publishing house Tharchin exercised an important influence on the Tibetan cultural and intellectual life of his time. He is the one shining example of a Poo villager who, through his contacts with Christianity, transcended his original social status. It is hard to imagine that he could have achieved so much if he had remained in Poo.

Wider perspectives

⁸² Report of Dewazung’s Visit to Poo, 1 July 1929. Tibet Letters. MCH.

⁸³ “Annual Report for the West Himalayan Mission for 1931–32.” PA 140 (1933), 195.

⁸⁴ “Western Himalaya. Report for January 1955 to March 1956.” PA 164 (1956), 4.

⁸⁵ On Tharchin, see in particular Fader (2001–2009), Willock (2016), and Sawerthal (2018).

⁸⁶ See Fader Vol 1 (2001: 1–116) for an extended discussion of Tharchin’s family origins and early life.

⁸⁷ Letters from F. E. Peter., 25 March 1924, 20 May 1924. Tibet letters. MCH.

In a 1909 report, the Poo missionaries presented a painful list of the weaknesses in character that were typical of their congregation and then suggested that these weaknesses were the consequence of many generations of oppression of the people.⁸⁸ This may have been so in several respects. It was not simply that the lack of educational opportunities limited the villagers' ability to grapple with the strange concepts of a new religion. More than that, the many "generations of oppression" made it hard for them to imagine a life free from dependency. Virtues such as thrift, which are characteristic of the "Protestant ethic", make little sense if there is in any case no hope of escaping from bondage.

At the heart of the missionary's dilemma there was a paradox. In order to set the Christians free from social oppression, they ended up making them dependent on the mission. Frustrating though this may have been for the missionaries, the Poo Christians were blunt in expressing their view of this relationship: it amounted in effect to a "contract" where the villagers offered religious observance in return for social protection. This concept was entirely alien to the missionaries who believed that one can never "earn" God's forgiveness. Rather, the believer can only respond to God's grace, which is freely given. It was therefore impossible to purchase salvation through some sort of contractual exchange. However, the villagers' viewpoint may make more sense when seen in a wider regional perspective.

As Peter Schwieger points out in his contribution to this volume, concepts of debt in Tibetan societies have been little studied, and this is particularly true of the kinds of debt, including debt bondage, that were incurred by the poorest sections of society. One reason for the shortage of records may be that contracting parties—particularly the bonded labourers themselves—were more likely to be illiterate and less likely to be of direct interest to the state. Nevertheless, there are scattered references here and there. For Mustang, Charles Ramble records an instance, possibly from the 17th century, where individuals were enslaved for life because they were unable to pay poll taxes.⁸⁹ As noted above, Redslob reported in 1874 that rich traders from Kinnaur had acquired Tibetan "slaves" who were unable to pay their debts. The American scholar and diplomat William Rockhill writes of poor pilgrims in Eastern Tibet who may "become indebted to someone for the amount of his board"⁹⁰ and thereby obliged to work for his creditor

⁸⁸ Anon. "Unsere Himalaya-Mission im Jahre 1908." MB 73 (1909), 221.

⁸⁹ Ramble (2008:195, 203–204).

⁹⁰ Rockhill (1891: 285–286).

for four or five years.⁹¹ Similarly, the Japanese monk Ekai Kawaguchi wrote of poor people who might seek loans from their lords to keep the “wolf of hunger” from the door.⁹² Since there is no hope of repayment, the debtor is obliged to offer his son or daughter as a servant to the creditor, and “these pitiable children grow up to be practically slaves [...]”. Nancy Levine shows that indebtedness was widespread in mid-20th-century Ngari: she notes “most Western Tibetans in smaller allotments became caught in a spiral of debt they could not repay”,⁹³ although she does not refer specifically to bonded labour.

Jeannine Bischoff’s analysis of a rare written “obligation contract” (*gan rgya*) from Central Tibet is especially interesting because it points to the ideological concepts that—at least in principle—might underly bonded labour arrangements.⁹⁴ This particular contract concerns a *mi ser* named Chos dar whose mother had taken out a loan in order to bring up her four children. After her death, the children had inherited the debt. Three of the four children had been able to pay off their shares. Since Chos dar had not been able to do so, he had opted for life-long servitude in the local monastic household (*bla brang*) to pay off the debt. As Bischoff points out, Chos dar would have done this simply because he had no assets, and this was his best option for survival. He was therefore making a choice, albeit in circumstances where there were few alternatives other than flight, and the contract expresses his gratitude. Bischoff argues that: “Seen from the perspective of the benevolence granting authority, the language of the contract indicates acceptance of the duty to take care of social inferiors”.⁹⁵ The bonded labour arrangement imposed reciprocal obligations on both sides.

One no doubt needs to be cautious in applying concepts from Central Tibet to Kinnaur, which would have been exposed to “Indian” cultural influences. Nevertheless, to offer a hypothesis, I suggest that similar social principles may have applied in Poo, at least in theory. As noted above, Schreve remarked in the 1890s that the rich villagers’ loans were sufficient to prevent their debtors from dying but not enough to live on, and this suggests that the practical application of these principles—if they existed—was far from benevolent. All the same, the Poo Christians who were dependent on the mission seem to

⁹¹ In the same passage Rockhill writes of the Tibetans’ practice in Tsarong of acquiring slaves from the tribes of neighbouring non-Tibetan regions to the south and east. On debt, dependency and servitude in these border regions, see Lazcano (1999) and Gros (2016).

⁹² Kawaguchi (1909: 430–431).

⁹³ Levine (1992: 342).

⁹⁴ Bischoff (2017).

⁹⁵ Bischoff (2017: 164).

have expected it to provide them with sustenance as of right, and this perhaps partly explains the anger of the “troublemaker” who denounced Marx for his failure to provide subsidised grain in 1908. From his perspective, the mission had failed to keep its side of an agreement that may have been tacit but was nevertheless real.

Turning to the Indian side of the Himalaya, there are ample examples of bonded labour systems, with many local variations, continuing into recent times. For other parts of the Simla Hill States in the period before Indian independence, Chaman Lal Datta writes of the system whereby people held land in return for specified services (*Beth*) such as cultivating the land of their superiors or collecting wood.⁹⁶ There was a class of indebted *Bethu* (providers of these services) who took on loans on occasions such as marriages, and never paid off the principal, so that the debt bondage arrangement continued for generations. On a similar note Mahesh Sharma presents a case study of a Saivite monastery in Sirmaur district which offered loans in return for bonded labour in the 1920s and the 1930s.⁹⁷ Jean-Claude Galey, who conducted his research in Tehri Garhwal (now part of the Indian state of Uttarakhand) in the 1970s, provides an extended set of case studies for that region.⁹⁸ In Tehri Garhwal, debt bondage represented far more than a simple financial transaction, and there were no precise calculations to measure how far the extent of the debtor’s labour correlated with the amount of the loan. Indeed, the debtor might never pay off his loan from one generation to the next, but the system nevertheless functioned with a degree of consensus. From the debtor’s perspective, the arrangement provided a degree of security: “A relationship of bondage is better than no relationship at all”.⁹⁹ More than that, the various manifestations of debt were part of a hierarchical relationship that extended all the way from the poorest members of society via its rulers to the deities.

Further to the east, and even closer to the present day, there is an extensive literature on bonded labour in Nepal. To take one example, Birendra Giri shows how people whose families have lived as bonded labourers for generations often find it hard to manage their lives independently.¹⁰⁰ In many cases, their most feasible survival strategy is to maintain some kind of relationship with their former employers.

On the missionary side, there is likewise an extensive body of experience concerning the hazards—as well as the opportunities—of combining spiritual direction with economic opportunity. The

⁹⁶ Datta (1997: 109–110).

⁹⁷ Sharma (1999).

⁹⁸ Galey (1983).

⁹⁹ Galey (1983: 82).

¹⁰⁰ Giri (2010: 34).

Moravians in Kinnaur were well-aware of the potential for mixed messages and conflicts of interest when the missionaries extended credit or other forms of economic support to their potential followers. For example, in 1876 Pagell reported that he had been reading about the experience of the Moravian missionaries in Labrador in the far north of Canada and saw parallels with his own situation.¹⁰¹

From the late 18th century until 1926, the Moravians in Labrador combined trade with evangelism in the belief that this was the only effective way to operate in the region's distinctive social and economic conditions.¹⁰² In the process they frequently extended credit to the local Inuit, but tensions arose when they sought repayment from their easy-going debtors. The Moravians' roles as traders, with clear moral and commercial views on the need to pay one's debts, conflicted with their roles as would-be spiritual leaders.

Similarly, in the 1890s when Schreve made his proposals for the development of the wool industry and the mission farm, he was aware of both positive and negative precedents. He acknowledged that the mission's engagement with economic enterprise was not ideal but nevertheless argued that, at least for the time being, it was essential. One of the precedents that he cited was the Basel Mission's experience in southern India. The mission had experimented with a range of different industries, and in 1846, its Mangalore branch imported a European loom, thus establishing the beginnings of a weaving industry.¹⁰³ In 1865 the mission's activities expanded into tile-making and by 1914 its industrial enterprises in India employed as many as 3,636 people.¹⁰⁴ The Basel Mission's motivations were the same as the Moravians': to provide decent employment for people, especially Christian converts, who might otherwise have been socially disadvantaged and to give a practical demonstration of an ethical approach to earning one's livelihood. No doubt the social environment in southern India was different but, as Schreve argued at the time, the Basel Mission's experience suggests that his own approach was not misconceived in principle.

Unlike the Basel Mission, the Moravians ultimately failed in their primary objective of fostering a sustainable self-dependent Christian community in Kinnaur. Sometimes historians benefitting from hindsight are better able to identify the sources of such failures than contemporaries. This is not the case here. Schreve and his colleagues were fully aware of the risks that they faced, and the potential for conflicts of interest between their religious and economic roles. In their

¹⁰¹ Pagell, Poo, 29 March 1876, MB 40 (1876), 226.

¹⁰² Danker (1971: 43–50).

¹⁰³ Danker (1871: 83–92).

¹⁰⁴ Danker (1971: 91), Joseph (2018).

efforts to establish an economic basis for the Christian community, as well as their medical work, they alleviated much human suffering. It would have been inconsistent with their own values not to have made the attempt.

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