

Building Trust Within and Without. The Role of Costly Signalling, Ethnic Kinship, and Non-Sectarianism in the Socio-Economic Affirmation of 20th-century Khams pa Trading Firms

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Religious signalling, reputation, and trustworthiness

Recent theoretical developments in the study of religion postulate trust as functional to the creation of cooperatively derived benefits offered by religious groups, thus connecting ritualised and communal aspects of social behaviour to empirically tractable measures of costs and outcomes.¹ In the face of an increased sophistication of materialistic and evolutionary analyses of economic exchanges, egoist-based models have repeatedly failed to satisfactorily explain the more formalised and participatory facets of social behaviour, those that appear to be driven by cultural meaning and collective interests. To understand actions that translate into unmeasurable benefits or that favour groups over their members a different approach is needed, one that integrates, through a “costly signalling” theory, all those social, symbolic, and prestige-related aspects of individualising strategy.² The application of signalling theory³ to the religious and socio-economic context of 20th-century Tibet appears particularly apt, as it allows, to borrow Rebecca Bliege Bird and Eric Alden Smith’s words, “to articulate idealist notions of the intangible social benefits that might be gained through symbolic representations of self with more materialist notions of individuals as self-interested but socially embedded decision makers.”⁴

To be more to the point, the existence of conflicting mechanisms and tendencies—religious inputs on one hand, and economic outcomes on the other—may be understood in the light of the

¹ See Sosis and Alcorta (2003).

² See Bliege Bird and Smith (2005).

³ Originally developed by evolutionary biologists to explain animal behaviour, signalling theory—also known as costly signalling or handicap theory—has been recently used by evolutionary anthropologists, economists, and cognitive scientists to study human communications. See, among others, Irons (2001) and Cronk (2005).

⁴ Bliege Bird and Smith (2005: 222).

epiphenomenal benefits acquired by the individual in being recognised, both internal and externally, as part of a specific religious group. Religion maintains intra-group solidarity by demanding costly obligations, be they in terms of time, energy, material costs or physical and physiological pain,⁵ yet it is through the voluntary payment of these obligations that an individual generates a credible guarantee—becomes, in other words, *trustworthy*. This credibility, gained within the religious group, reverberates on a wider, social level: by participating in ritual activities and sponsoring religious practices, the individual *signals* his or her commitment to collective cooperation⁶ and, even more importantly from a Buddhist perspective, his or her willingness to invest in behaviours that could benefit the society as a whole. To be effective, rituals must be performed communally: members' participation must be observable and verifiable to reap appropriate social consensus and prestige. The net effect of religious inputs translates, according to what theorised by Pierre Bourdieu, into a symbolic capital in no way different from an economic one.⁷ The accumulation of the first is just as "rational", to use the French sociologist's words, as the accumulation of the second, "particularly since such capital may be freely converted to one form to another, ultimately in order to gain advantages in the form of additional wealth, power, alliances, and marriage partners."⁸

This last remark appears particularly relevant in the context of the late 19th- and early 20th-century Khams pa traders' relocation in the urban areas of Central Tibet. Virtually "foreigners", these Eastern Tibetans tapped into a pool of shared religious beliefs and conventions to facilitate their integration within the local social fabric. By actively participating in ritual performances and publicly sponsoring initiations and community-oriented activities, members of the sPang mda' tshang, Sa 'du tshang or A 'brug tshang, just to name a few, attracted the attention of the upper strata, imposing themselves as both competitors and peers. Through their involvement in communal rites that hinged upon group solidarity and cooperation, Khams pa traders demonstrated to rightly *belong* as fellow believers, regardless of their different origin, dialect or ancestral sectarian affiliation. Although one does not need to be part of a religious group to engage in costly rituals (an aspect explored in the following section), the connection with the supernatural positively enforces the efficacy of the rituals themselves, surrounded as they are by preternatural beliefs the prescriptive nature of which is undisputable and makes them more stable than any

⁵ Sosis (2005: 8).

⁶ See Irons (2001) and Sosis (2003).

⁷ Bourdieu (1977).

⁸ Bliege Bird and Smith (2005: 223).

nonspiritual values that may motivate secular rites.⁹

As abovementioned, many of the Eastern Tibetans who moved to Lhasa, gZhis ka rtse or rGyal rtse at the turn of the 20th century began an active patronage of the major monastic establishments of Central Tibet. That such conspicuous displays of wealth occurred within the religious sphere is indicative of the semiotic nature of costly signals. For a message to come across, in fact, a shared cultural knowledge must be presupposed: both signaller and recipient must, in other words, be mutually aware of what is being communicated. It is religion, more specifically Tibetan Buddhism, that here provides a common interpretative ground, a frame of reference that ensures that signals are correctly transmitted and received. If the functions of this system of communication must be clear to its users, equally important is the sincerity of the message delivered: in a social environment in which signallers and recipients have partially competing interests (as was the case for wealthy Khams pa and Central Tibetan elites), the persistence of reliable communication can be assured only if both parties agree on honesty as the most mutually profitable course of action. As theorised by Bliege Bird and Smith,

Costly signaling is a symbolic-capital explanation for [communal] sharing that focuses on its benefits for both givers and receivers. It applies particularly to displays which are characterized by (1) the extension of consumption rights to multiple others regardless of their exchange relationship to the "giver," (2) distribution or consumption in a social arena in which knowledge of the distribution is transmitted to multiple others, and (3) the dependence of the ability to produce the display upon some hidden attribute of the donor in which observers (who may or may not be recipients of the material donation) have a significant interest.¹⁰

The costly religious displays performed by Khams pa devotees during common rituals perfectly fits such a theoretic frame, since they (1) addressed the whole *dharma* community (both monastic and lay); (2) were performed in a public setting; (3) showed the signallers' hidden attribute (i.e. their wealth) to interested observers (i.e. Central Tibetan upper strata), manifested how such an attribute could benefit both sides, and demonstrated that such signals of attribute quality remained credible through a constant reiteration of the investment.¹¹

⁹ Ruffle and Sosis (2003).

¹⁰ Bliege Bird and Smith (2005: 226).

¹¹ "[...] when signalers are competing with others in their social group regarding their commitment to delivering collective goods in order to retain [...] privileges, they may need to continue signaling even if others are quite familiar with the competitors. To cease signaling would in effect signal inability or unwillingness to

Costly displays establish or reinforce social status and aid the acquisition of prestige through activities that unambiguously reveal the participants' skills or hidden qualities.¹² By publicly exhibiting their ability to "waste" time, energy, and resources in the sponsoring of rituals that benefitted both observers and signallers, Khams pa traders drew the attention of competitors, posing themselves as worthy allies and partners.

That such a partnership could result in marriage alliances and eventual merging of households is demonstrated by the well-known case of the sPang mda' tshang.¹³ In the aftermath of his relocation in Lhasa, at the beginning of the 20th century, the head of the family sPang mda' Nyi rgyal (1865?–1921) dove deep into the intricacies of the local socio-political scene. Calling upon kinship ties to finance large donations to dGa' ldan, Se ra, and 'Bras spungs—the main monastic seats of the dGe lugs pa—Nyi rgyal gave proof of remarkable financial acumen. Drawing on previously acquired trust (built through repeated exchanges with friends, kin, and acquaintances), he translated an economic capital into a symbolic one, thus signalling to interested observers, be they the direct receivers of his offerings or external spectators, his hidden attributes of wealth and reliability. Nyi rgyal's costly displays gained him the trust of the monastic institutions which in turn became his main clients and financiers. In a positive feedback cycle, the sPang mda' tshang increased their social standing, attracting the attention of the urban elites. Competitors, such as local traders, quickly turned into potential allies: in the 1920s, Nyi rgyal's sons,¹⁴ Blo bzang yar 'phel (c.1900–1972/3) and sTobs rgyal (1904–1972/3), married two daughters of the Byang gling, a Lhasan trading family. The alliance was further strengthened by cross-wedding, with the four living as one unit. The polygynandrous union bore only one daughter, sPang mda' Padma chos skyid, yet, by that time, the name of the Khams pa household was synonymous with power and social standing, to the extent that the even the son of the Byang gling claimed closer connection to them by changing his family name to sPang mda' zur pa, or sPang zur.¹⁵ The costly signalling strategy employed by Nyi rgyal had been

continue in the role of [...] patron, thereby yielding the perks of [...] leadership to competitors" (Bliege Bird and Smith 2005: 237).

¹² See Boone (1998).

¹³ On the sPang mda' tshang, see, in particular, McGranahan (2002, 2010, 2015).

¹⁴ sPang mda' Nyi rgyal had four sons—Nyi ma (1883–1943?), Blo bzang yar 'phel, Rab dga' bstan 'dzin lhun 'grub (1902–1976) and sTobs rgyal—and at least one daughter named 'Chi med. Nyi rgyal fathered his eldest son out of wedlock, yet his wife, Nyi kar ma, raised Nyi ma as if he was her own, for he was born from a relative of hers, another daughter of the Grong smad tshang, a family from sMar khams (McGranahan 2016).

¹⁵ McGranahan (2002: 110).

so successful that his household eventually surpassed, in terms of wealth and prestige, the same allies who contributed to ease their inclusion into the local social fabric.

The case of sPang mda' Nyi rgyal shows how signals that emerge for one purpose may be co-opted for another: costly religious markers do not only signal intra-group commitment and the existence of mutual benefits for both signaller and receiver; they are also used by outsiders to gauge and evaluate the signaller's trustworthiness.¹⁶ Competitive intra-group dynamics may furthermore result in costly displays: in these cases, costly signals function as discriminant factors in measuring skill levels among group members.

Several instances of such a "game of skill" are contained in the personal annotations of Kha stag 'Dzam yag, a 20th-century Khams pa trader who recounted in a diary format (*nyin deb*) thirteen years of his life (from 1944 to 1956), a period he mostly spent travelling, trading, and pilgrimaging between Tibet, India, and Nepal.¹⁷ A note dated to the 23rd day of the 6th month of the Water Dragon Year (August 13, 1952) presents a list of the donations made in occasion of the transmission of the Lam 'bras and Hevajra teachings¹⁸ by Ngag dbang blo gros gzhan phan snying po (1876–1952), the throne holder (Ngor chen rDo rje 'chang) of the Sa skya establishment of Ngor E wam chos ldan.¹⁹ As the trader recounts,

I prayed at the *dharma* gathering, offering to the great abbot Ngag dbang blo gros gzhan phan snying po 25 *srang*, silks, and so on. I even offered 10 *srang* to the abbot of Phan khang [i.e. one of the four *bla brang* of Ngor E wam chos ldan]. I then visited the "supports" of the old and new shrines of Ngor and offered a *maṇḍala* [having a value] of 2 *srang*. That time I outshone my *dharma* brothers.²⁰

Intra-group competition had the merit of reinforcing the strength of the group itself (i.e. the participants in the *dharma* assembly) by motivating its members to better their fellows, thus solving collective action problems. In the production of a costly group-level signal, in fact, any

¹⁶ Sosis (2005: 21).

¹⁷ For a study of Kha stag 'Dzam yag and the literary features of his "diary" (*nyin deb*), see Galli (2019b, 2019c).

¹⁸ For a general introduction to the Hevajra and Lam 'bras teachings, see Sobish (2008: 1–18).

¹⁹ For an in-depth study of the Ngor tradition, with particular reference to the figure of his founder Ngor chen Kun dga' bzang po (1382–1456), see Heimbel (2017).

²⁰ *bdag gis kyang mkhan chen rdo rje 'chang ngag dbang blo gros gzhan phan snying po la srang nyer lnga 25 dar bcas phul te chos gral du gsol ba btab / yang 'phan khang mkhan rin po che la srang bcu 10 dang / de nas ngor gyi lha khang gsar rnying gi rten rnam mjal / srang gnyis kyi maṇḍala phul / da res grogs rdo rje spun rnam las mchog du gyur pa* (*Nyin deb*: 217–218).

heterogenous group, be it religious or secular, incurs in the risk of free riders, that is members who refrain from contributing to the production of the signal (i.e. the offerings) and “ride” on the signalling efforts of the others. To avoid a potential failure of the collective action, several measures are taken, such as resorting to systems of monitoring and punishments (a solution that will be discussed in the following pages) or to individuals willing to bear full costs. When there is a discrepancy among group members in terms of costs and benefits of signalling, as in the case of the ritual sponsorship described above, those who have more to gain from signalling (i.e. Khams pa traders) have in fact the greater incentives to cover the full cost of the signal production.²¹

It is worth noticing, however, that the competitions reported in ‘Dzam yag’s *nyin deb* occur among members belonging to two different, yet coexisting, groups: the *dharma* brothers to whom the author refers above also were, as he revealed further on in his annotations, fellow co-regionals and chief-merchants (*tshong dpon*). That was indeed the case of Rin chen rdo rje, one of ‘Dzam yag’s closest friends and a frequent business partner of his from dGong thog in Tre hor, Khams.

Once, when the great shrine built by Ngor E wam Kun dga’ bzang po (1382–1456) was rather ruined, Rin chen rdo rje of dGong thog, Trehor, made a religious offering in the great shrine that had been restored by the abbot of Thar rtse (i.e. one of the four *bla brang* of Ngor E wam chos ldan) rDo rje ‘chang ‘Phrin las rgyal bstan grub brnyes sngags ‘chang and, on the 22nd of the 9th month [of the Water Dragon Year; November 8, 1952], the day of the permanent instalment of a good quality statue in gilded copper of Avalokiteśvara, I was among those who offered common tea, rice soup, individual alms, and so on to the precious gathering [of spiritual] heads—rDo rje ‘chang Ngag dbang blo gros gzhan phan snying po, sGrol ma pho brang Ngag dbang kung dga’ theg chen dpal ‘bar ‘phrin las dbang gyi rgyal po (i.e. the 41st Sa skya khri chen), the throne holder for the new incarnate of Thar rtse, the ex-abbot of Phan khang (i.e. one of the four *bla brang* of Ngor E wam chos ldan), the Ngor Khang gсар zhabs drung (i.e. Ngag dbang blo gros bstan ‘dzin snying po), and others—and I too, in appreciation, made offerings to the lamas and *sprul sku*. I donated to the whole monastic community 5 *zho* in individual donations and spent more than 245 *srang*.²²

²¹ Bliege Bird and Smith (2005: 235).

²² *yang skabs shig la ngor e wam kun dga’ bzang pos bzhengs pa’i lha khang chen po cung zad nyams skabs / thar rtse mkhan chen rdo rje ‘chang ‘phrin las rgyal bstan grub brnyes sngags ‘chang des nyams gso yang bzhengs mdzad pa’i lha khang chen po nang la / tre hor gdong thog rin chen rdo rjes mchod ‘bul dang / spyen ras gzigs kyi gser zangs sku chen legs gtan bzhag mdzad pa’i nyin zla 9 tshes 22 la rdo rje ‘chang ngag dbang blo gros gzhan phan snying po / sgrol ma pho brang ngag dbang kun dga’ theg chen dpal ‘bar ‘phrin las*

The instance above shows the economic efficacy and social pervasiveness of intra-group costly signalling: the competition in which Kha stag 'Dzam yag and Rin chen rdo rje engage as *dharma* brothers reproduces, in a religious context, the socio-economic rivalry opposing them as *tshong dpon* and agents of the same Khams pa trading firm, namely the Sa 'du tshang. The enacting of costly signals in a specific group (i.e. the *dharma* gathering) here directly affects the social standing of the individual within other groups (e.g. Eastern Tibetan trade communities, urban upper strata, wealthy sponsors). The positive feedback cycle triggered by the accumulation of spiritual capital is exemplified by 'Dzam yag's appointment as trade agent for the Khang gсар, the *bla brang* of the Ngor chen rDo rje 'chang, in the latter months of the Water Dragon Year (1952–1953), following his active participation in and generous sponsorship of the religious rituals and teaching sessions held at the Sa skya establishment. As the trader himself recounts in a diary note,

In the 11th month of the Water Dragon Year (mid-December 1952–mid-January 1953) I was living with the Sa 'du tshang in gZhis ka rtse. [At the that time,] the Ngor E wam Khang gсар *bla brang* sent us—a chief-manager (i.e. 'Dzam yag) and two helpers for the mule trains²³—in a trade venture to Kalimpong, India, to buy commodities up and above a value of 15,000 rupees.²⁴ Because of that, knowing that I was at the service of the precious lama (i.e. the Ngor chen rDo rje 'chang) and having focused my body, speech, and mind by taking [full] responsibility, I returned to gZhis ka rtse on the 20th of the 1st month [of the Water Snake Year; March 5, 1953] by taking care of the goods, after having carefully bought, sold, added loads, paid fees and so on. After that, I then delivered to the treasurer most [of the items] as the lama's belongings, and I focused on buying foodstuffs and selling drinks²⁵ and

*dbang gyi rgyal po / thar rtse yang srid ngor gyi khri las thog pa / khri zur 'phar [*phar] khang rin po che / khang gсар zhabs drung rin po che bcas dbu bzhugs 'dus tshogs rin po che la mang ja / 'bras thug sku 'gyed bcas phul ba'i gras nas rang gis kyang rjes su yi rang gyis bla sprul rnam la 'bul ba / grwa mang la sku 'gyed zho lnga re bcas phul / srang nyis brgya zhe lnga 245 lhag tsam song (Nyin deb: 222).*

²³ Caravans were made up of *lag*, trains of seven to ten mules.

²⁴ The text reads *sbyin sgor*, lit. “English money/sterling pound”, yet the term is likely a typo for *hin sgor*, lit. “Hindu coin, rupees”. At the time of 'Dzam yag's business venture (1952), the relatively new independence of India could have justified the use of *dbyin* either as a near-homophone for *hin* or as a slight anachronism for the [British]-Indian rupee. I am grateful to Charles Ramble for clarifying the ambiguous interpretation of the term to me (private conversation, June 2017).

²⁵ I here opted for a literal rendition of the original *za nyon 'thung tshong*, although the latter is most likely to be amended to *za 'thung nyo tshong*, “trading foodstuffs and drinks”—it was not unusual for private contractors to pursue personal business on the side, and it seems plausible that this is what 'Dzam yag is here implying: he probably bought various supplies in Kalimpong with the intent of selling

[other] necessary tasks.²⁶

The extract above confirms the functional role that restrained forms of intra-group competition have in ensuring a successful outcome of group actions: allowing single members to gain additional self-benefits from their contribution to the cooperative efforts of the group eventually enhances the positive resolution of any collective action problems.²⁷

The hypothesis, recently advanced by several evolutionary scholars,²⁸ that social bonding—of which religious participation is but a form—may be a facilitator of intra-group cooperation rather than an end in itself, acknowledges the functional role that the process holds in generating credible guarantee. It stands to reason that for any human social interactions to occur, a certain degree of trust and commitment must be presupposed between the parties involved. The problem of assessing others' trustworthiness is, nevertheless, fraught with difficulties.

When faced with the conditions of collective action, the incentive to display false commitment signals is especially high, since individuals can achieve their greatest gains by refraining from cooperation while others cooperate. Therefore, whenever an individual can achieve net benefits from defection, credible signals of cooperative intentions tend to be those that are too costly for defectors to imitate.²⁹

As previously mentioned, the costliness of religious obligations is such as to reduce the likelihood of an individual displaying a false commitment signal, thus promoting intra- and inter-group trust. Contrary to previous views of pre-modern Tibetan societies as crystallised and virtually devoid of social mobility, recent scholarship has argued for instances of inter-group mobility, particularly during the 20th century.³⁰

them on his return to Tibet. I thank Kalsang Norbu Gurung for assisting me in clarifying this passage (private conversation April 14, 2020).

²⁶ *zla 11 tshes nang gzhis rtser sa 'du tshang la bsdad / ngor e wam khang gsar bla brang tshong don du rang nyid rgya gar ka sbug la dbyin sgor chig khri lnga stong 15000 las lhag tsam gyis nyo bca' 'go 'dzin dang / lag rogs mi gnyis bcas btang song bas / rje bla ma'i zhabs zhu yin snyam pa'i theg pa khur len gyis lus ngag yid gsum bsgrims nas tshur nyo phar tshong dang do bo bsdoms pa / bdal gtong ba sogs gzab nas rgyu nor mgo thon gyis gzhis rtse zla 1 tshes 20 la slebs / de nas rje bla ma'i sku chas rnam phyag mdzod la phal cher rtis sprod dang rang gi za nyo 'thung tshong dang nyer mkho ba'i las ka rnam sgrin bzhin pa'i ngang nas (Nyin deb: 224).*

²⁷ Bliege Bird and Smith (2005: 235).

²⁸ See, among others, Bulbulia (2004), Cronk (1994), Irons (2001), Nesse (1999), Rapaport (1999), Sosis (2003), Sosis and Alcorta (2003), Steadman and Palmer (1995).

²⁹ Sosis (2005: 8)

³⁰ Particularly relevant in this regard are the volumes published within the research project "Social History of Tibetan Societies, 17th–20th Centuries" (SHTS). See

In environments where individuals maintain several, sometimes conflicting, social identities, trusting behaviours become essential in the pursuit of collective goals. In circumstances where conflicts of interests emerge, the trust bond is restored and reinforced by a commonality of mutual religious beliefs and convictions, since religions provide moral guidelines as well as a common hierarchy of values.³¹ Although mainly based on trust, collective actions involving actors sharing a religious identity may also rely on a social and spiritual system of control that disincentivises free riders and detractors. Punishments carried out within a religious community can be extremely effective as they affect economic associations as well as social relations; the danger of supernatural sanctions (e.g. accumulation of bad *karma*, rebirth in lower realms) contributes to alter the payoff of any interactions, thus mitigating the trust dilemma among strangers.³²

Costly prosocial behaviours are nevertheless not restricted to religious groups alone, as virtually any human association requires some level of cooperation, the achievement of which demands the elimination of defectors through altruistic cooperation (e.g. Khams pa traders willing to bear the full costs of the ritual offerings) or altruistic punishment, whereby individual members take upon themselves the cost of punishing free riders for the sake of the entire group, thus reinforcing its internal cohesion.³³ It is known that the adoption of monitoring and punitive systems modifies the payoff of social interactions, replacing trust with cost-effective sanctions, such as ostracism, physical punishments or financial penalties,³⁴ and that kinship is the yardstick against which other criteria (including reciprocity, prosociality, obligation, and moral sense) are measured.³⁵ Similarly to any other kin-based groups, Khams pa trading families promoted cooperative actions through reputational rewards and punishment threats, thus making intra-group trust virtually unwarranted. As Roy Rappaport observes,

In tribal societies, ethics are an immediate and perceptible aspect of relations among people who are, for the most part, not only known to each other but stand in well-defined relationships to each other. Reciprocal (although not necessarily symmetrical) obligation is the cement if not, in fact, the ground of all such relationships, and the obligations they entail are usually quite clearly specified. Violations of obligation inevitably become evident, often quickly, and sanctions against breach

Ramble, Schwieger and Travers (eds, 2013), Bischoff and Mullard (eds, 2017), Bischoff and Travers (eds, 2018).

³¹ Sosis (2005: 18–19).

³² See Bulbulia (2004), Johnson and Kruger (2004), Sosis (2003, 2005).

³³ See Boyd *et al.* (2003).

³⁴ Sigmund *et al.* (2001), Sosis (2005).

³⁵ Madsen *et al.* (2007).

of obligation are essential elements of reciprocity's fundamental structure. [...] That prestige as much as or even more than wealth is among the chief rewards of life properly lived in societies in which reciprocity prevails also encourages vigorous, valorous and generous fulfillment of obligation.³⁶

It was the prescriptive nature of reciprocity within kin-based groups that ensured social control and the solution of intra-group conflict. The establishment of inner structures that strengthen the efficacy of social penalties and reputational status is central to the maintenance of internal order, since "reputation is essential for fostering social behavior among selfish agents, and [...] it is considerably more effective with punishment than with reward".³⁷ Such a stability ostensibly benefitted the Khams pa trading firms in gaining the high level of trust attributed to them by outsiders, to the extent that they came to dominate distinctive economic niches (e.g. wool and cotton trade).

Risky transactions: kinship, ethnic nepotism, and trust

Although little is known to date of the inner configuration of Khams pa communities operating in dBus-gTsang, the scanty information in our possession depicts a clan-centred network regulated by kinship ties. Corporately managed, the Lhasa-based Khams pa community was administrated by "headsmen" (*'go gts'o*), who, by virtue of their reputation, were appointed as spokesmen of their co-regionals. One's own link to the ancestral land (*pha yul*) did not fade with relocation, rather it became tighter and fiercer. Each Eastern Tibetan became therefore included, by representation, into a specific household, regardless of a direct blood-relation to its members, as place of origin now sufficed to claim kinship ties.

Accordingly, the sPang mda' tshang acted as "chiefs" for Khams pa men hailing from the areas of dMar khams and Sa 'du, the rGya nag tshang for those from dKar mdzes and Tre hor, the A 'brug tshang and the Ja ma tshang for the fellow countrymen from Li thang, the Tsha sprul tshang and the Chos drug tshang for those from Go jo, whereas the traders Dam pa blo gros and A bag were the representatives of the people from Tshab rong.³⁸ The corporative clan-like structure assured

³⁶ Rappaport (1999: 204).

³⁷ Sigmund *et al.* (2001: 10757).

³⁸ Lhag pa don grub (2009: 369). The heuristics of clan-like organisation in interpreting the functioning of Khams pa trading communities finds an unexpected corroboration in Kha stag 'Dzam yag's association to the Sa 'du tshang. At the turn of the 20th century, the head of the household Sa 'du A pho phu (father of the well-known Blo dge 'dun and Rin chen) moved the family from sGa thog, at the easternmost borders of the kingdom of Nang chen, to dKar mdzes rdzong, in the Tre hor region.

control over the enlarged community, guaranteeing the maintenance of the householders' reputation, both inside and outside the group formed by the Khams pa expats. It was also responsibility of the firms (here intended as corporations) to emit appropriate costly signals by gathering funds for the sponsoring of public entertainments (e.g. picnics) or religious offerings.³⁹

Religious markers and costly signals positively affected the proliferation of non-repeated inter-group trust,⁴⁰ yet Khams pa traders were unlikely to extend trust indiscriminately. As several scholars demonstrated,⁴¹ in social systems characterised by close-knit communities, trust relations with kin occur at the expenses of trust with unrelated individuals.

Examples of the corporative nature of Khams pa trading families and the inner dynamics of their clan-based associations may be found in Lhag pa don grub's novel *Drel pa'i mi tshe* ("Life of a Muleteer"). I argued for the inclusion of literary texts in general, and *Drel pa'i mi tshe* in particular, as source of historical inquiry elsewhere,⁴² attesting the factual verisimilitude of the work by comparing selected passages to information found in contemporary non-literary texts. One of such excerpts concerns a written agreement (*gan rgya*) drafted between a Lhasan noble (Thub bstan 'od snang) and a *tshong dpon* of the gSer tsha tshang (Rab brtan) following an incident involving the murder of one of the Khams pa chief-merchant's aiders by hand of Zla ba phun tshogs, main character and servant of the noble in question. For the sake of the present discussion, the excerpt is hereby reproduced in its entirety.

On the 12th day of the 9th month of the Earth Ox Year (November 2, 1949), the people concerned, names and seals listed below, submit to the Justice Commissioner the contents of this clear and irrevocable agreement. The main points are as follows: Zla ba phun tshogs, the muleteer of the *sku ngo* Thub bstan 'od snang, the incumbent

Although most of the affiliates of the trading firms hailed from that area, the Sa 'du tshang must have appeared as the most suitable referent among the Khams pa trading firms to 'Dzam yag, who was born in Rab shis, sGa thog. Surprisingly, Lhag pa don grub's list of leading Eastern Tibetan families does not include the Sa 'du tshang, regardless of their active presence in Lhasa since the first decades of the 20th century, and ascribes the role of spokesmen for the areas of dKar mdzes and Tre hor to the rGya nag tshang (incidentally, the family is also mentioned in *Nyin deb* [208] as the owners of a building in the sBra nag zhol neighbourhood in Lhasa).

³⁹ Lhag pa don grub (2009: 369).

⁴⁰ The existence of internal codes of honour increases the degree of perceived trustworthiness of a group among external-group members. See Sosis (2005).

⁴¹ See Cook (2001).

⁴² Galli (2019a).

Commissioner of the Western district of Phag ri, and Ngag dbang rig 'dzin, mule-driver of the mDo khams gSer tsha tshang, disagreeing on who had priority and right of way on the docks of the iron bridge, fought and attacked each other. Eventually, Zla ba phun tshogs used a pistol to shoot Ngag dbang rig 'dzin, thus taking his life. Consequently, the parties involved on both sides, having discussed the matter in person, and in accordance with the code of law for the compensation in case of manslaughter, have agreed that Zla ba phun tshog will pay 1,000 silver *srang* to Ngag dbang rig 'dzin's family without any kind of delay or excuses. After receiving the recompense, the relatives of the deceased are prohibited from renewing the dispute, [for that would be] like inflaming an old wound and, especially, from resorting to any kind of physical attacks to take revenge according to the Khams pa custom of "Life for a Life". Should any contravention of the agreement occur on behalf of either of the two parties, the liable party shall be required to immediately pay a fine of 100 gold *srang* and, subject to the severity of the criminal offence, the golden yoke of law shall be enforced firmly. Sealed by the parties to attest the clear resolution of the case in the above terms: gSer tsha tshang *tshong dpon* Rab brtan, the guarantors Khams tshang dGe legs and rNam sras.⁴³

The agreement clearly states the existence of a legal system external to and superseding any intra-group punitive system (i.e. the golden yoke of the law embodied by the *khrim bdag rin po che*, a conventional form addressing whichever official was representing the Dalai Lama as legal and judicial administrator at the time of the drafting of the contract),⁴⁴ yet what mostly interests us here is the identity of one of the guarantors, namely the Khams pa (gSer tsha) dGe legs. The latter is in fact a kinsman of the *tshong dpon* of the gSer tsha tshang, the aggrieved party in the dispute: it is clear from the *gan rgya* that the matter, despite having been initially reported to the local official in charge of the law,

⁴³ *sa glang zla 9 tshes 12 nyin lugs gong ma khrims bdag rin po che'i zhabs drung du zhu ba | ming rtags gsham gsal do bdag rnam nas blos blangs 'gyur med kyi gan rgya gtsang 'bul zhu snying | don rtsa phag ri rdzong nub las thog pa sku ngo thub bstan 'od snang lags kyi drel pa zla ba phun tshogs dang | mdo khams gser tsha tshang gyi drel rjes ngag dbang rig 'dzin gnyis lcags zam gru khar 'don snga phyi'i thad ma mthun par 'thab res rgol res byas mthar zla ba phun tshogs kyiis 'phril mda' spyad de ngag dbang rig 'dzin 'chi lam du btang ba'i mi srog bcad pa des phyogs gnyis kyi do bdag ngo ma gros mol byas nas mi bsad stong 'jal gyi zhal lce ltar zla ba phun tshogs phyogs nas ngag dbang rig 'dzin phyogs su dngul srang chig stong tham pa 'jal sprod ka kor med pa bya rgyu dang | 'das po'i spun nye rnam nas dngul 'bab byung phyin slad rna rnying bskyar 'bar gyis rtsod rnyog rigs dang | lhag par khams lugs kyi sha lan len pa zhes srog la rgol ba sogs gtan nas byas mi chog | gal srid do bdag su thad nas 'gal rigs byung tshe 'ba' nyes gser srang brgya tham pa 'phral sgrub thog nyes don la gzhiigs te bka' khrims gser gyi gnya' shing de thog tu 'bebs rgyu bcad tshig 'khrun gtsang chod zin pa do bdag gser tsha tshong dpon rab brtan nas rtags | khag theg 'gan len khams tshang dge legs nas rtags | khag theg 'gan len rnam sras nas rtags / (Drel pa'i mi tsho: 243–244).*

⁴⁴ See Schneider (2002).

was then privately settled within the Khams pa trading community of Lhasa in adherence with an internalised kin-based system centred on reputation, compensation, and threats of social punishments. Tellingly, the levels of trust here at work span different social groups: the Justice Commissioner, a friend of Thub bstan 'od snang, informs the latter of the grievous situation in which one of his servants is involved; in turn, the noble calls in favours asking dGe legs to act as a mediator with his fellow gSer tsha kinsman Rab brtan.

The growth of business activity and the consequent increasing number of firms' associates pushed the ties of kinship beyond the close family circle to include, as previously hinted, unrelated members, who were incorporated as affiliates or putative kin. In the early 1970s, William D. Hamilton revised his famous theory of inclusive fitness⁴⁵ to accommodate interactions between random members of the population, on the basis that "altruism could be adaptive between genetically similar non-kin, such as co-ethnics".⁴⁶ According to such a view, ethnic kinship could be quantified and compared to family kinship, a heuristic which proves functional in describing the dynamics of trust within ethnic minorities. To keep to the example offered by the excerpt quoted above, had he been in his *pha yul*, Rab brtan would have felt no compulsion to intervene in favour of Ngag dbang rig 'dzin's family, as they were not blood relatives. Yet, within the "foreign" environment represented by the Lhasan urban scene, Rab brtan's relation with Ngag dbang rig 'dzin's master dGe legs acts as aggregating force, effectively tightening the level of closeness between the *tshong dpon* and the late muleteer—from fellow clansmen (low degree of connection) to affiliates of the gSer tsha tshang (high degree of connection)—de facto making them "ethnic kin". Such a quantification of ethnic kinship appears particularly palatable as it adds plausibility to the theory of ethnic nepotism, whereby the solidarity developed within ethnic groups is modelled on family feelings, as members think of themselves as extended kin groups.⁴⁷

Evolutionary theories on ethnic nepotism and kin offer insights into the nature of trust among families and ethnically bonded networks in risky enterprises. In her study of Chinese trading networks in Malaysia, Janet Tai Landa posits that "under conditions of contract uncertainty, a rational trader will have the incentive to reduce uncertainty,

⁴⁵ First proposed in 1964, Hamilton's theory predicts that instances of altruistic behaviours are directly correlated to the degree of relatedness between the individuals. Also known as "kin selection" (term coined by the evolutionary biologist Maynard Smith in 1964), such theory has proven successful in predicting variation in human altruism towards kin of different proximity. See Salter (2007).

⁴⁶ Salter (2007: 541).

⁴⁷ See Eibl-Eibesfeldt (1982), van den Berghe (1981).

hence reducing transaction costs of enforcing contracts, by particularizing exchange relations on the basis of kinship or ethnicity".⁴⁸ Similarly to Landa's Chinese middlemen, Khams pa traders also resorted to categorisations, classifying their business partners according to kinship, clanship, territory, and ethnicity, according to the degree of social distance existing between themselves and the other party. The main preoccupation of Landa's subjects is to protect themselves from breach of contract in economies lacking a suitable legal framework enforcing stipulations: to overcome the risk of financial losses, Malaysia-based Chinese trading communities select partners who acknowledge and obey to the same informal institution, namely the Confucian code of ethics. In the case of 20th-century Khams pa firms, the presence of an external legal system that could adjudicate controversies was further strengthened by the existence of an intra-group structure based on reputation and punishment. Ethnic nepotism finds corroboration in Kha stag 'Dzam yag's *nyin deb*, wherein instances of preferential treatment toward kin are frequent: among the trader's business partners and clients we find almost exclusively Khams pa hailing from the area of Nang chen and Tre hor.⁴⁹ Some of these names occur repeatedly throughout the diary, as was the case for rDo rje rnam rgyal, the business manager of the Sa 'du tshang in gZhis ka rtse;⁵⁰ the previously mentioned Rin chen rdo rje from Tre hor, 'Dzam yag's business partner,⁵¹ *dharma* brother,⁵² and pilgrim companion;⁵³ and bKra shis nor bu, the treasurer and government appointed trader of the Gra'u household, the strongest *be hu* of the Yul shul area in Nang chen.⁵⁴

By recognising patterns of mutual aid obligations between people with varying degrees of social distance—near kinsmen (e.g. family members), distant kinsmen in extended family and lineage, clansmen, affiliates, co-religionists—Khams pa trading firms operated through a system of ethnic nepotism that allowed them to protect their members against any perceived external threats. The strength of these Eastern

⁴⁸ Landa (2002: 133).

⁴⁹ Consequent to his affiliation to the Tre hor-based Sa 'du tshang, 'Dzam yag's system of alliance extended to include Khams pa hailing from that area as putative kin, see footnote 38.

⁵⁰ *Nyin deb*: 46.

⁵¹ *Nyin deb*: 46; 61–62.

⁵² *Nyin deb*: 222–224.

⁵³ *Nyin deb*: 143.

⁵⁴ *Nyin deb*: 66; 68; 189. According to the *tusi* system, the king of Nang chen was recognised as *chan hu* (Ch. *qiān hù*), a commander of one thousand households, under which there were eighteen major and fifteen minor divisions, each headed by a lord, whose titles were converted to *be hu* (Ch. *bǎi hù*, commanders of one hundred households) and *be cang* (Ch. *bǎi zhàng*, commanders of fifty households) respectively. Lesser ranks were indicated by other positions, e.g. *rgan res*, *hor 'dra*, *rgan chen*, and *bcu dpon* (*Yul shul rdzong*: 281; 'Brong pa rgyal po 2003: 39).

Tibetan corporation became apparent during the wool crisis of 1951–1952, when the American embargo on any products from Communist China (including the newly-incorporated Tibet) affected terribly the traders of Kalimpong who profited from selling wool abroad. Frantically trying to reduce their losses, the largest Khams pa firms—the sPang mda' tshang and the Sa 'du tshang—held close consultations with the Chinese government, eventually striking a deal for the purchase of 80,000 maunds of wool at the end of May 1952.⁵⁵ The stocks held by Tibetan traders, “including the large business houses Pandatsang, Sandutsang, and Retting, amounted to about 60,000 maunds. A further balance of 20,000 maunds were lying at Phari trade mart and at places between Lhasa and Phari”.⁵⁶ Such a sleight of hand—a telling display of the mechanisms of ethnic nepotism—predictably benefitted the group formed by large- and medium-size Tibetan traders at the expenses of any “outsiders”, namely all those Indian merchants and small-size Tibetan middlemen who were in practice cut off from the deal.

The ris med effect: religious eclecticism and economic pragmatism

The arguments advanced so far support the expediency of postulating a fine balance of costly signalling on one hand and ethnic nepotism on the other as heuristics of the rapid affirmation of Khams pa trading firms within the socio-economic and political fabric of 20th-century Tibet. Scholars of Tibetan Studies are no strangers to the application of evolutionary and anthropological theories, and, despite the inevitable shortcomings derived from the lack of substantial quantitative data, the conceptual framework offered in the previous sections does not diverge from the latest trends in the field. Yet, costly displays and kinship ties only partially explain the ease with which Khams pa traders inserted themselves into a complex network of religious competitors and safely and successfully navigated the intricacies of sectarian affiliations. A possible answer to such questions may lie, I would posit, in that same cultural milieu in which most of these traders were born, an environment characterised by religious openness and impartiality that were expressed through specific sets of moral values and social norms.

⁵⁵ “The Chinese Communist government decided to buy 80,000 *mon do* of Tibetan wool. It is said that in Calcutta 184 rupees will be paid for the pure white wool and immediately the representatives of the sPom mda', Sa 'du, and Rwa greng, and furthermore a few traders, came for trading their wool” / *rgya gung phran tang gzhung nas bod kyi bal mon do 80,000 tham pa nyo gtan 'khel te bal dbye phye dkar rkyang la ka la la tar mon dor sgor 184 sprod rgyu yin skad dang ring min spom sa ra [*rwa] gsum gyi sku tshab dang / gzhan yang tshong pa kha shag rtsis sprod len ched du phebs kyi yod skad thos // (Tibet Mirror: 11).*

⁵⁶ *Himalayan Times*, June 1, 1952, page 11, as quoted in Harris (2017: 212).

In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the re-emergence of a non-sectarian attitude in Buddhist thought and practice fostered the preservation of endangered doctrines, ceremonies, texts, and minor lineages. Such religious eclecticism, known as *ris med*, had a long-lasting impact on the cultural and religious networks of Eastern Tibet, contributing to the local interiorisation of a new ideal of Buddhist practitioner, modelled on the figure of the hermit-scholar Mi la ras pa.⁵⁷ Although often defined as “movement”,⁵⁸ *ris med* was in reality a continuation of earlier attempts at synthesis⁵⁹ that were reinvigorated in late 19th-century sDe dge through the activities of bKa’ brgyud, rNying ma, and Sa skya masters⁶⁰ and that led to a strengthening of scholasticism among the non-dGe lugs schools. The establishment of scriptural colleges (*bshad grwa*) and the increased reliance on commentarial works of authoritative figures, such as ‘Ju Mi pham rgya mtsho (1846–1912) for the rNying ma and Go rams pa bSod nams seng ge (1429–1489) for the Sa skya, created a new atmosphere of scholarly debate and disputation, wherein initial passionate refusals of dGe lugs views and tenets eventually mitigated into a more “impartial” approach, the emphasis of which was on unification rather than differentiation.

On a root-level, such an openness towards impartiality gradually translated into a relaxed religious praxis: locals participated in ritual activities performed at Sa skya monasteries, took initiations with rNying ma masters, sponsored bKa’ rgyud establishments, and went on pilgrimages to the main dGe lus seats in Central Tibet. Whilst the fostering of religious tolerance and intellectual liberalism are acknowledged facets of non-sectarianism, *ris med* masters also cultivated spiritual goals that “did not exclude some hints of a political agenda, as

⁵⁷ See Turek (2013).

⁵⁸ On the problematic identification of *ris med* as “movement”, see, among others, Samuel (1993), Gardner (2006), Powers (1995), Oldmeadow (2012), Turek (2013), and Deroche (2018).

⁵⁹ Smith (2001), Deroche (2018).

⁶⁰ Most active in the revivification of a non-sectarian approach and in the revival of minor lineages and practices—to the extent of being considered the “founders” of the *ris med* “movement”—were ‘Jam mgon Kong sprul Blo gros mtha’ yas (1813–1899), ‘Jam dbyangs mKhyen brtse’i dbang po (1820–1892), mChog gyur gling pa (1829–1870), and ‘Ju Mi pham rgya mtsho (1846–1912), although the latter’s inclusion may be due more to ‘Jam dbyangs mKhyen brtse’i dbang po’s bewildering interest in his commentarial works rather than a real non-sectarian attitude of Mi pham, notoriously a strong supporter of rNying ma tenets (see Phuntsho 2005). Due to early *ris med* emphasis on schools’ peculiarities rather than similarities, the same idea of “non-sectarianism” has been contested by some scholars (see, for instance, Samuels’ [1993] juxtaposition of “Rimé shamans” and “Geluk clerics” or Deroche’s [2018] argument for the adoption of the term “trans-sectarianism” in consideration of the profoundly sectarian identity maintained by the key actors of late 19th- and early 20th-century *ris med*). For an overview of different approaches to *ris med* in 20th-century Tibet, see Pearcey (2016).

they promoted Eastern Tibetan cultural value and autonomy”⁶¹ and arguably contributed to the emergence of a socio-political proto-identity among the Khams pa, especially within the expat communities in Central Tibet and India.

As discussed above, the sharing of religious beliefs and the partaking in common rituals are means to reinforce intra-group solidarity and cohesion. Given the corporative nature of Eastern Tibetan trading firms, one would expect a “prioritisation”, even perfunctory, of ancestral sectarian affiliations, yet the internalisation of a non-sectarian, impartial approach essentially instigated the active sponsorship of several monastic institutions, regardless of any prior connections the group (here intended as extended family) may have created with a particular school. As we have seen, it was through patronage and participation in rituals and empowerments that Khams pa trading firms showed their hidden qualities (i.e. financial assets) to interested observers, yet the choice of the playfield, so to speak, was just as important as the amount of energy, effort, and money invested in the costly displays. In other words, while sponsoring *dharma* activities was a positive deed in itself, regardless of the field of merit (i.e. monastic community) chosen, not all fields, to keep with the Buddhist metaphor, were equal in their symbolic, and therefore economic, payoff. In arguing for the existence of a certain pragmatism among Khams pa trading firms in their religious costly signalling, I am not negating the existence of real, heartfelt motivations behind the active involvement of social actors in religious rituals nor I am implying that such a behaviour hid any forms of callous opportunism. Rather, my aim is to argue for a wider impact of *ris med*, one that went beyond the philosophical disputes among masters to affect the socio-economic life of the communities that internalised the non-sectarian, impartial values.

Furthermore, it is worth recalling that a certain expediency had characterised the revival of *ris med* values and approaches since its re-emergence in 19th-century sDe dge, where the local royal family had prized religious tolerance by supporting six large monasteries of various religious denominations, i.e. Sa skya, rNying ma, and bKa' brgyud. The royal sponsorship was mutually convenient: whereas the establishments enjoyed an official protectorate and could influence the court through the dispatch of royal chaplains (*dbu bla*), the king could in turn rely on the presence of strong local monasteries to contain the rise of influence of the dGe lugs school, and, with it, the political encroachment of the dGa' ldan pho brang government.⁶² sDe dge and the

⁶¹ Turek (2012: 429).

⁶² Hartley (1997).

neighbouring kingdom Nang chen⁶³ are but two instances where real-politik used *ris med* values to pursue non-religious aims, yet the possibility that non-sectarianism may have similarly affected the socio-economic dynamics of 20th-century Tibetan communities is surprisingly understudied, regardless of attested instances of spiritual eclecticism among several trading groups active in the Himalayas.⁶⁴

The argument for considering a non-sectarian attitude as a facilitator in the rise of status of Khams pa trading firms in the 20th century admittedly suffers from a paucity of information on the inner structure of such corporations, yet the lack of quantitative data can be partially covered by a qualitative analysis. In the following pages I will offer two case-studies, namely those of sPang mda' Nyi rgyal and Kha stag 'Dzam yag.⁶⁵

Of these two names, Nyi rgyal's is certainly the best-known, as the sPang mda' tshang became the epitome—together with the Sa 'du tshang and the monastic firm of Rwa sgreng—of powerful Tibetan trading companies. The family hailed from the Chab mdo district of dPa' shod rdzong, more precisely from Tsha ba sPom mda',⁶⁶ an area that incidentally gave the household its original appellative, sPom mda' tshang. Located on the upper side of the rGya mo rngul chu (Salween River), Tsha ba sPom mda' was crossed by a mountain pass

⁶³ The royal lineage of Nang chen adopted a religious-political alliance based on a system of chief chaplains (*dbu bla*) similar to the one in force in the kingdom of sDe dge (see Hartley 1997: 41–44). The ties between the two kingdoms, strengthened by a series of political marriages, culminated in the late 19th and early 20th centuries with the support and protection provided by the Nang chen court to *ris med* masters hailing from sDe dge. On the emergence and development of *ris med* in Nang chen, see Turek (2013) and Galli (2019d).

⁶⁴ Spiritual eclecticism and multi-faith attitude were common to other trading communities of the Himalayan regions, most notably the Newaris merchants in Lhasa (Todd 1993), the Thakalis, who controlled the salt trade down to the Kali Gandaki in Nepal (Manzardo 1982), and the Nepalese Manangis (Ratanapruck 2007). I am grateful to Charles Ramble for bringing this factor to my attention (private conversation, June 2017).

⁶⁵ Kha stag 'Dzam yag remained a strenuous supporter of the *ris med* approach until the end of his life: "Immediately [after his death, in 1961], many non-sectarian holy *sprul sku* transferred his consciousness and more than 1,500 monks, offering supplications such as aspirational prayers for his rebirth in the Pure Land and the *King of Aspirational Prayers for Auspicious Deeds* (Skt. *bhadracarya-praṇidhāna-rāja*; Tib. *bzang po spyod pa'i smon lam gyi rgyal po*), blessed the transfer of his consciousness to the Pure Land." *de ma thag ris med kyi bla sprul skyes chen dam pa mang pos 'pho ba 'debs pa dang dge 'dun chig stong lnga brgya lhag tsam gyis / bde can dag pa'i zhing du skye ba'i smon lam dang / bzang po spyod pa'i smon lam gyi rgyal po sogs kyi sgo nas thugs smon gnang ste / dag pa'i zhing du 'pho par byin gyis brlabs pa mdzad* (Nyin deb: 6).

⁶⁶ Although McGranahan (2002: 106) spells the area as rDza ba sPom mda', offering as alternative names rDza ba sgan and rDza ba dPa' shod rdzong, the spelling Tsha ba is the most attested.

which delimited the territories of nine local groups (*shog khag*): Ga ma, Thang nyer, Lob, and sPir phyir on one side of the mountain pass, in a deep ravine along the rGya mo rngul chu, and Khe si, Sog khri, and the three divisions of sPom mda' proper on the other.⁶⁷ According to Carole McGranahan, the family was locally renowned as traders and patrons of the Sa skya sect, a sponsorship that culminated in a marriage alliance with the powerful Central Tibetan Sa skya 'Khon in the mid-19th century.⁶⁸ It seems plausible that the sPom mda' tshang may have been among the major benefactors of the local Sa skya monastery in sPir phyir, which 'Jigs med dbang rgyal lists among the establishments of the sect in Tsha ba rong.⁶⁹ Be as it may, their union with the 'Khon family determined a shift in power as well as in territory, for the sPom mda' were relocated in sMar khams, southeast of Chab mdo, in one of the eighteen chieftains (*dpon*) positions directly administrated by the Sa skya.⁷⁰ Since the area they moved to was known as sPang mda', the household abandoned their ancestral name in favour of an identification with their new territorial estate, thus anticipating the subsequent change in their fortune's tide. The new position, granted hereditarily, increased the wealth of the family exponentially, and, in the span of a few generations, an offspring of the sPom mda'/'Khon's union, Nyi rgyal, moved the family to Lhasa, much closer to the Central Tibetan trade marts and the profitable Indo-Tibetan route.⁷¹

The unfolding of Nyi rgyal's story, and that of his sons, is well-known, yet the influence that an impartial attitude to religious sectarianism played in the sPang mda' tshang's subsequent prosperity has been regrettably neglected. In relocating to Lhasa—the universally acknowledged spiritual, if not political, centre of whole Tibet—Nyi rgyal immediately turned his attentions to the main seats of the dGe lugs pa. It was to Se ra, 'Bras spungs, and dGa' ldan that he chose to pay the most costly displays, so costly, in fact, that he had to resort to loans to afford them. Such a behaviour, ostensibly in contrast with the

⁶⁷ Most of the information on the topography of dPa' shod rdzong have been drawn from an anonymous entry in the Tibetan version of Wikipedia (<http://bo.wikipedia.org/wiki/དཔལ་ཤོད་རྫོང་།>). Despite the impossibility of ascertaining the source of the material, the data appear consistent with historical evidence and scholarly assessment. See, for instance, the definition of *dpa' shod* provided by the *Bod rgya tshig mdzod chen mo* (1627).

⁶⁸ McGranahan (2002: 106).

⁶⁹ 'Jigs med dbang rgyal (2009, f. 75), as quoted in Jackson (2015: 247, fn. 21). Recent surveys of monastic establishments in Tsha ba rong list no Sa skya monastery, yet the sole Tsha ba rong khams tshan of Nalendra monastery ('Phan yul) must have had around thirteen branches in the area. See Jackson (2015).

⁷⁰ McGranahan (2002: 106). The name of the post is recorded under different spellings: *rgya khag* (Cassinelli and Ekvall 1969), *rgya dkar* (Phu pa Tshe ring stobs rgyas 1998), and *rgya skeg* (McGranahan 2002).

⁷¹ McGranahan (2002).

sPang mda' tshang's family bonds with the 'Khon—and, by extension, with the Sa skya sect—is easily understood when framed in terms of impartiality and openness, the same values strongly promoted by *ris med*. That the choice of costly signalling a purported wealth fell on the most powerful and attended monastic communities of Central Tibet is arguably casual.⁷² In drawing such connections between facts (i.e. offerings and sponsorship) and intents (i.e. personal faith) I am not dismissing the individual's deep-seated connection and affinity towards the Sa skya tenets and beliefs,⁷³ but merely suggesting the possibility that a non-sectarian attitude may have had a role in facilitating the integration first and the supremacy later of a newly relocated Khams pa household in the socio-economic fabric of late 19th- and early 20th-century Lhasa.

Religious eclecticism certainly well-suits the flexible nature of traders, sensible as they are to the changing tides of markets, customers, and suppliers. To consider sPang mda' Nyi rgyal's decision of heavily investing in costly displays at the dGe lugs seats as anything but the outcome of a careful, yet risky, financial assessment would be, I would argue, a naïve misconception. The head of the family was patently aware of the undercurrents of the new environment he moved into and acted accordingly: to put it bluntly, the dGe lugs pa offered the most visible and best-connected platform from which broadcasting the family's assets, and that was reason enough to prioritise such a public support of these establishments at the earliest, and more crucial, days of the sPang mda' tshang's relocation to Lhasa.

Similar in its development, although opposite in its outcome, is the instance offered by Kha stag 'Dzam yag, whose ancestral affiliation to the dGe lugs pa faded in the face of his active sponsorship of the Sa skya pa in the years immediately preceding and following his 1952-appointment as *tshong dpon*. Before delving any deeper into the factors that determined such a preference, a few words on the man himself are in order.

⁷² McGranahan (2002) refers explicitly to Nyi rgyal's generous donations to the three seats as a reason for the interest the dGa' ldan pho brang took in him, an interest that led to the grant of a trade concession in 1909, later commutated into a monopoly over the wool trade that terminated only in the 1930s.

⁷³ The strong ties kept by Nyi rgyal with the Sa skya sect are confirmed by the diary entries of Drag shul 'Phrin las rin chen (1871–1935), the 39th Sa skya khri chen, wherein sPang mda' Nyi rgyal is portrayed as a most generous benefactor. Several notes dated to 1919 (two years prior to Nyi rgyal's murder) record the sPang mda' tshang (here intended as corporation) as being actively involved in long life initiations, rituals of prosperity, and teachings, for which they offered religious objects, brocades, and provisions. It was in one of these occasions that Nyi rgyal allegedly confided to Drag shul 'Phrin las rin chen his desire to equally allocate part of his profits between the Dalai Lama, the Sa skya establishment of rGya skeg, and the Sa skya seat. See *Rtogs brjod* and McGranahan (2002).

Born in 1897 in Rab shis, sGa pa,⁷⁴ as the youngest son of the Kha stag tshang,⁷⁵ Ngag dbang dar rgyas, better known as 'Dzam yag, followed his forefathers' step by enrolling at a young age at the local monastery of Rab shis klung dgon dGa' ldan thub bstan chos 'khor gling, the largest dGe lugs institution of northern Khams.⁷⁶ Despite its remarkable size, Rab shis klung dgon was just one of the five branches of Rag nyag dgon Phun tshogs theg chen gling, an establishment founded in the late 12th or early 13th century by Khams mgyogs rDo rje snying po, a disciple of 'Bri gung pa Rin chen dpal (1143–1217) and allegedly the initiator and main propagator of the 'Bri gung teachings in Yul shul. Rag nyag changed its sectarian adherence at time of the 3rd Dalai Lama (1543–1588), thus becoming one of the few dGe lugs centres in northern Khams, a fate that befell Rab shis klung dgon as well: originally a Bon establishment, it experienced a relatively brief 'Bri gung interlude (from 1390 to 1578) before being converted to dGe lugs in the late 16th century.⁷⁷

The predominance of bKa' brgyud subsects (e.g. 'Ba' rom, Yel pa, Karma, 'Bri gung) as well as Sa skya and rNying ma in the Nang chen area must be factored into any assessment of 'Dzam yag's costly signalling in the decades covered in his *nyin deb*. In 1944, prior to his departure from Rab shis, in addition to the propitiatory rituals and blessings he requested from his root-guru rDo rje 'chang sKal bzang rnam rgyal,⁷⁸ 'Dzam yag also sought teachings from bsTan pa'i snying po, a visiting *sprul sku* from the 'Ba' rom monastery of sKyo brags,⁷⁹ who instructed him to embark on a pilgrimage with no directions (*phyogs med kyi gnas bskor du song*) on the basis of a vision he had had of the

⁷⁴ The region of sGa pa, also known as sGa khog or simply sGa, although politically subordinate to the Nang chen *rgyal po*, was de facto administered from sKye rgu mdo by the Gra'u, whose secular rule on the area was gradually supplanted by the rule of the main reincarnations of Don 'grub gling during the Qing dynasty (Gruschke 2004: 106–108). Among the *phyi sde* (the "outer regions" in relation to the royal seat of Nang chen sgar), the "leading tribes", each with their own chieftain (*be hu*), were Gra'u, Bu chen, Rong po, A khro, Gur tsha, and Rab shis (also spelled Rag shul) (Jackson 2003: 523).

⁷⁵ Kha stag Gra lnga rab brtan (father) and Gro bza' mtsho mo (mother) had three sons and four daughters (*Nyin deb*: 2).

⁷⁶ The Kha stag tshang must have been rather wealthy as they had relied on herding and trade for generations, and controlled lands and servants (tellingly, the adjective used in the *nyin deb* to describe the author's family is *nor gyis phyug pa*, lit. "rich in cattle"). In the years preceding his forced departure from Rab shis (occurred in 1944), 'Dzam yag reported to have sponsored the construction of a multi-storied golden *stūpa* located inside the assembly hall (*Nyin deb*: 2–3).

⁷⁷ *Yul shul rdzong* (3–4).

⁷⁸ Abbot of the Lam rim college of Rab shis klung dgon (*Yul shul rdzong*: 29).

⁷⁹ 'Ba' rom bKa' brgyud monastery located in the kingdom of Nang chen (*Khams stod lo rgyus*, vol. 2: 47; Gruschke 2004: 133–134). For more information on sKyo brag and its religious lineages, secular history and sacred geography, see Turek (2013).

trader's future.⁸⁰ The presence of a 'Ba' rom master in a dGe lugs establishment is indicative of the atmosphere of eclecticism and impartiality imbuing northern Khams in general, and the area of Nang chen in particular.⁸¹ In an entry recorded in the latter part of the 10th month of the Wood Monkey Year (November 1944), 'Dzam yag—who was at the time guest of the Yar mgo tshang, the ruling family of Seng sgang⁸²—recounts, with a certain animation, his active participation in a ritual empowerment held in the hermitage of dGe ba'i ri khrod by rDo rje 'chang dPal ldan tshul khrim, the student of a student of 'Jam dbyangs blo gter dbang po (1849–1914), a late head teacher (*dpon slob*) at the monastery of Ngor E wam chos ldan.⁸³ References to the Ngor school, a Sa skya subsect, are attested throughout the *nyin deb*, an instance hardly surprising in consideration of the impact that such a tradition had on the trader's life, and, more extensively, on that of his business associates: the main seat in gZhis ka rtse was where many of the Sa 'du tshang's affiliates signalled their wealth and trustworthiness through costly displays. The connection between a member of the Kha stag tshang—who had been, for generations, tied to the Rab shis klung dgon—and the Ngor subsect might be traced back to the same trading activities that supported 'Dzam yag's sponsorship of the dGe lugs establishment in Lower Rab shis. As confirmed by several diary entries, the trader was not only familiar with the trade mart of sKye rgu mdo and its surroundings, but boasted acquaintance with some of the personnel⁸⁴ of the local ruling family, the Gra'u, who, incidentally, were the protectors and main benefactors of Don 'grub gling, the principal Ngor-Sa skya institution in the area.⁸⁵ As recounted in another note dated to the same month of the Wood Monkey Year (November 1944),

Having gone to sKye dgon [i.e. sKye rgu'i Don 'grub gling], I circumambulated the outer circuit and offered some oblations such as fulfilment-petitions and the like. After settling my affairs, paying debts to and collecting loans from friends and business partners of sKye rgu mdo, I became totally engrossed with worldly matters.⁸⁶

⁸⁰ *Nyin deb*: 12.

⁸¹ See Galli (2019d).

⁸² Place on the banks of the 'Bri klung gser ldan.

⁸³ *Nyin deb*: 17–18.

⁸⁴ One of those was the abovementioned bKra shis nor bu, treasurer and government appointed trader of the Gra'u household.

⁸⁵ Gruschke (2004: 38–45).

⁸⁶ *skye dgon la phyin nas gling bskor dang / bskang gsol khag bcas gsol kha / de nas skye mdo'i dga' grogs dang / tshong shag rnams la phar sprad tshur bsdu kyis bya ba rnams zin par byas nas / 'jig rten gyi chos nyid la yid gtad pa dang dran tsam re byas nas [...]* (*Nyin deb*: 13).

The “giving and taking” (*phar sprad tshur bsdus*) activities mentioned in the excerpt above support the claim of 'Dzam yag's familiarity with sKye rgu mdo and its socio-economic settings; more interesting for the present discussion is though the brief reference to Don 'grub gling. Founded in the late 15th century,⁸⁷ the monastery was further developed by bDag chen pa rgya gar Shes rab rgyal mtshan (1436/39–1465/86/94), son of the 18th Sa skya khri 'dzin, who turned the nearby bKa' brgyud establishments into two ancillary Sa skya institutions later incorporated into the main monastic building. The construction project was completed in the 18th century by dPal ldan chos skyong (1702–1760), the 34th abbot of Ngor.⁸⁹ The connection between Don 'grub gling and Ngor E wam chos ldan continued in the following centuries,⁹⁰ to the extent that no apprentice could be granted permission to wear the regular monastic robe unless he had been trained at the main seat in gTsang.⁹¹

The influence of the Ngor subsect in the area of sKye rgu mdo may explain 'Dzam yag's deep understanding of the *lam 'bras* (“Path and Result”)⁹² system and literature as taught by the Sa skya, as well as his

⁸⁷ *Khams stod lo rgyus* (vol. 1: 79) dates the construction to the Water Horse Year of the 8th *rab byung* (1462). The area of sKye rgu mdo was notoriously a Bon stronghold: Don 'grub gling itself is said to lie over the ruins of a 13th-century Bon po monastery, at the time under the care of the Gra'u family, who resided in a palace nearby. In the 14th century, the Bon po establishment disappeared, replaced by two small bKa' brgyud buildings, later converted to Sa skya (*Khams stod lo rgyus*, vol. 1: 79; Gruschke 2004: 39–40).

⁸⁹ According to *Khams stod lo rgyus* (vol. 1: 79), the first abbot of Ngor E wam chos ldan to visit the monastery was the 31st, bKra shis lhun grub (1672–1739), in the Water Sheep Year of the 12th *rab byung* (1703). At the time of his visit, new temples and protectors' shrines were built. Under the guidance of dPal ldan chos skyong, the 34th throne-holder of Ngor, the main hall, the construction of which had started in the Fire Tiger Year of the 12th *rab byung* (1746), was brought to completion in Earth Snake Year of the 13th *rab byung* (1749).

⁹⁰ As late as 20th century, these connections were still strong: in the Water Pig Year of the 16th *rab byung* (1983), the throne-holder of Ngor E wam, Klu lding mkhan chen 'Jam dbyangs bstan pa'i nyi ma, bestowed empowerments and vows to thousands of monks. In the Water Bird Year (1993), the Klu ldings zhabs drung and the Thar rtse zhabs drung gave teachings at 'Don 'grub gling in front of 2,000 monks (*Khams stod lo rgyus*, vol. 1: 80).

⁹¹ Gruschke (2004: 40–43).

⁹² The tantric tradition of the *lam 'bras* (“Path and Result”) was initially received by 'Brog mi Lo tsā ba Shākya ye shes (993–1077?) from the Indian master Gayadhara (d. 1103). 'Brog mi translated a number of Tantric scriptures and commentaries, including the *Hevajra Tantra* and Virūpa's *rDo rje tshig rkang* (“The Vajra Verse”), the basic text of the *lam 'bras*. Contrary to other esoteric systems passed down through a series of Indian teachers, the *rDo rje tshig rkang* did not rely on written texts; 'Brog mi's translation continued to be orally transmitted and memorized for hundreds of years, before being eventually transcribed. Over the centuries, the different lineages of the *lam 'bras* were slowly absorbed into the Sa skya school,

choice of Ngor E wam chos ldan as a main field of investment for his costly displays. The same could be said for his business associates and Sa 'du tshang's affiliates, most of whom came, as we have seen, from Tre hor, a dGe lugs stronghold wherein Sa skya pockets still existed.⁹³ One of these was certainly Gong thog dgon, a branch monastery of the Nalendra subsect partially converted to Ngor pa; not surprisingly, Gong thog is also the place of origin of Rin chen rdo rje, 'Dzam yag's trade partner and *dharma* brother. Be as it may, the links tying 'Dzam yag to Ngor E wam chos ldan long preceded his participation to the five-month teaching session in the Water Dragon Year (1952), as the trader himself confirms in an entry dated to the 19th day of the 4th month of the Water Snake Year (June 1, 1953).

Having happily donated a capital endowment of 100 *srang* in the Iron Bird Year (1921) to the ten permanent resident lamas and disciples of the scriptural college in Ngor, a profit of one *srang* per lama and disciple accrued yearly. On the 19th day of the 4th month of the Water Snake Year (June 1, 1953), I added to that [sum] 125 *srang*, for a total of 225 *srang*; not only each year abbot and students would receive a stable income of 2 *srang* each, I too increase my longevity and merits by supporting the teachings.⁹⁴

References to prior personal connections between 'Dzam yag and representatives of the Ngor-Sa skya seat are repeatedly attested throughout the *nyin deb*, an instance corroborating the argument that sees a deliberate correlation between costly displays and the environment wherein they are enacted. Ngor E wam chos ldan represented, for 'Dzam yag, a financially secure option: he could rely on a well-established net of *dharma* companions, who were, incidentally, also co-affiliates to the Sa 'du tshang and his co-regionals; furthermore, the capital endowment he had set up in 1921 ensured him a certain trustworthiness and reinforced his status as reliable sponsor. The active participation to rituals, empowerments, and common offerings contributed to

currently the only holders of the tradition of the "Path and Result" in Tibetan Buddhism (Stearns 2001: 6–8).

⁹³ The dGe lugs pa presence in the Hor states dated back to the 5th Dalai Lama. In the 17th century, the dGe lugs master Ngag dbang phun tshogs (1668–1746) established thirteen main monasteries, some of which being institutions belonging to other sects and forcefully converted. See Dbyangs can snyems pa'i lang tsho (1983: 42–57).

⁹⁴ *ngor gzhung la bshad grwa rgyun 'dzugs bla grwa bcu tсам yod par / bdag gis kyang rjes su yi rang gis lcags bya lor srang brgya 100 tham pa thebs rtsa bzhag nas / lo re bzhin bla grwa re la srang gang re bskyed babs yod pas / de'i thog chu sprul zla 4 tshes 19 nyin srang chig brgya nyer lnga 125 bsnan te bsdoms srang nyis brgya nyer lnga 225 byas te lo re bzhin mkhan slob re la srang gnyis 2 re bskyed babs yod pa gtan bzhag shing / slar yang bstan pa gnas shing / bdag nyid tshes dang bsod nams rgyas nas [...]* (*Nyin deb*: 226–227).

strengthen the inner cohesion of the core group formed of Tre hor-hailing traders of which 'Dzam yag was part and whose costly signalling extended beyond the walls of the Ngor seat to other extremely competitive and highly visible "fields", such as the dGe lugs establishments in bKra shis lhun po and Lhasa. It is in the former that on the 30th day of the 8th month of the Earth Mouse Year (November 1, 1948) 'Dzam yag engaged in a "friendly" competition with Rin chen rdo rje, investing 532 *srang* and 9 *zho*,⁹⁵ nothing compared to the 5,550 *srang* he offered during the sMon lam celebrations in Lhasa in the 1st month of the Iron Rabbit Year (February 1951)⁹⁶ or the 4,794 *srang* that went in common teas and individual offerings to the rGya khams tshan of 'Bras spung Blo gsal gling on the 15th day of the 1st month of the Fire Monkey Year (February 26, 1956).⁹⁷

The last instances are indicative of the kind of sectarian fluidity and economic flexibility which were the by-products of a *ris med* approach: in a display of impartiality and non-preferential treatment of schools and traditions, Khams pa traders effectively penetrated multiple social groups and milieus, thus maximising the positive outcomes of costly signalling. In 'Dzam yag's case, the most expensive investments paid to the dGe lugs pa occurred at specific times (e.g. *sa ga zla ba*, sMon lam chen mo) and places (e.g. bKra shis lhun po, Jo khang, the Tre hor khams tshan of 'Bras spungs Blo gsal gling)—in other words, when and where his signals had the best chances to be noticed and appreciated.

Final thoughts

In spite of the abundance of recent studies on the socio-economic rise and political influence of Khams pa trading households in 20th-century Tibet,⁹⁸ the paucity of information on the internal organisation and workings of these groups still hampers a full scholarly understanding of the dynamics that led to their affirmation within a competitive and relatively crystallised social fabric.

Costly signalling theory has the potential explanatory value to address the mutually convenient relationship Khams pa traders established with monastic communities, framing it as a facilitator in the process of integration. By showing public adherence to a socially acknowledged and validated pattern (e.g. participation to common religious

⁹⁵ *Nyin deb*: 140.

⁹⁶ *Nyin deb*: 198–199.

⁹⁷ *Nyin deb*: 245.

⁹⁸ See, among others, Andrugtsang (1973), McGranahan (2002, 2005, 2015), van Spengen (2000), Harris (2013), Travers (2013), Sadutshang (2016), Tsomu (2016a, 2016b).

rituals), representatives of the Eastern Tibetan firms displayed their hidden qualities (e.g. wealth, trustworthiness), provided intra- and inter-group benefits, and met the conditions for honest communication between the parties involved. The trust thus earned was further strengthened through the application of an internal system of control and punishment, guaranteed by the clan-like structure upon which the firms were built. It is known that kinship and religious practices encourage social and economic cooperation in groups: the existence of mutual obligations and intra-group sanctions ensures the resolution of collective action problems, thus increasing the reputation of the group itself vis-à-vis outsiders. As was the case with other trading communities in Asia, Khams pa firms demonstrated a remarkable ease in navigating the complex network of social connections and sectarian affiliations, a feature that may be partially ascribed to the relaxed religious praxis prompted by *ris med* values of impartiality and eclecticism. In suggesting an understanding of non-sectarianism that goes beyond the scholarly debates and philosophical sophistications to contemplate a more pragmatic view, I am merely positing that symbolic capital gain and economic benefits may be possible by-products of sincere religious openness and inclusiveness. To support such a postulation, I presented the cases of two traders who exhibited a remarkable non-sectarian approach, namely sPang mda' Nyi rgyal and Kha stag 'Dzam yag:⁹⁹ most of their costly displays occurred at specific times and places—so to reap, as we have seen, the best results—yet the devotion that deeply imbued their most private moments makes it impossible to question the authenticity of their faith. Whereas Nyi rgyal dedicated part of his earnings to the maintenance of rGya skeg monastery (a rather poor investment in costly displays given the small size and relative peripheral relevance of the establishment), 'Dzam yag kept a personal record of his circumambulations (*skor ba*) of bKra shis lhun po, a solitary activity he dedicated to the benefit of all sentient beings.¹⁰⁰

The virtual monopoly of trade within Tibet and the socio-political influence enjoyed by Khams pa trading firms in the first half of 20th

⁹⁹ 'Dzam yag's non-sectarianism transpires clearly from his notes, yet it is in the foreword to the edited version of the *nyin deb* that his religious non-sectarianism is clearly stated. Particularly relevant is the commemorative discourse offered at the time of the trader's funeral by Kha stag O rgyan chos 'phel, *mkhan po* of the meditation centre of the Karma bKa' brgyud monastery of Kha 'gu dgon in sGa pa (*Nyin deb*: 6–7).

¹⁰⁰ Between the 25th day of the 11th month of the Iron Tiger Year (January 22, 1952) and the 23rd day of the 6th month of the Water Dragon Year (August 13, 1952), 'Dzam yag accumulated 225 circumambulations of the outer circuit (*phyi skor*) and 3,225 circumambulations of the inner circuit (*nang skor*) of bKra shis lhun po (*Nyin deb*: 217).

century were certainly the outcome of different, concurrent factors, most of which still awaits rigorous scholarly analysis. The adoption of a heuristic framework that integrates costly signalling theory with an observation of the ties between kinship and religious practices offers a valuable tool to understand the role played by honest communication in the development of intra- and inter-group trust, by securing social benefits that have real materialistic consequences. As a final provocation, I have argued for an interpretation of non-sectarianism as possible trade facilitator, in consideration of the flexible nature exhibited by several Asian trading communities embedded in an eclectic religious environment.¹⁰¹

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¹⁰¹ Contemporary masters' biographical writings may offer valuable information on the socio-economic influence that Khams pa traders exerted over the religious establishments of the time, especially in relation to their role as patrons (*sbyin bdag*). Such a comparative analysis may also shed some light on the non-sectarian attitude of this social group, furthering our knowledge of the intertwining networks they created throughout the plateau and beyond. I thank Carole McGranahan for pointing this out to me (private conversation, July 2019).

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