

Mapping Tibet's Amdo Province, ca. 1650–1850*

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At the height of its political power in the eighteenth century, the Qing dynasty (1636/44–1911) controlled a vast swath of Eurasia, including Manchuria, Mongolia, Chinese Turkestan, Tibet, and China (Crossley 1999: 3). The Qing's territory during this period, minus Mongolia, would correspond more or less to the territory of the modern Chinese nation-state (Hostetler 2001: 33–34). The Qing conquest of Mongolia and Xinjiang between 1680–1760 has been characterized by a prominent historian as a “major world historical event” (Perdue 2010: 10). In order for the success of its military campaigns in Eurasia, the Qing needed to secure key frontier areas to serve as a launching point. During the early Qing period, the frontier area of interest was the northeast frontier of modern-day Shanxi, Gansu, and Ningxia provinces (Dai 2009: 108). From the eighteenth century onward, the Qing shifted its attention to the frontier regions of the southwest, included Sichuan and Yunnan provinces (Dai 2009: 36).

From the Qing perspective, these frontier areas represented the borderlands of empire—areas meant to be incorporated into the Chinese cultural world (Tsomo 2009: 57). For instance, Qing officials viewed Yunnan province as being occupied by “barbarians,” variously described as “tyrannical, proud, and untamed” and who could be “civilized by exposure to imperial morality and humanity” (Giersch 2006: 90). In the case of Qing perceptions of Tibet, Tibet and its populations were simultaneously portrayed with both disdain and awe; disdain at the “unruly” people and harsh terrain, and awe at the landscape and different culture (Wang 2011: 21). In contrast, the indigenous peoples of the frontier regions did not see themselves as inhabitants of borderlands in need of civilization, but rather civilizational centers in and of themselves with their own names for the places in which they lived

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(Giersch 2006: 84).

This essay participates in this latter perspective on the Qing's borderlands, following in the footsteps of recent studies of self-representation by inhabitants of frontiers of the Qing empire.¹ I examine texts by seven major Tibetan Buddhist authors from the mid-seventeenth to the mid-nineteenth century that depict the Amdo (a mdo) region of eastern Tibet, which is situated in modern day Qinghai, Sichuan, and Gansu provinces of the PRC. The authors include Tibetans and Tibetanized Mongols, members of the Geluk and Nyingma sects, and monks and yogis. Whereas the Qing dynasty and Lhasa treated Amdo as a frontier region, these Amdo authors conceived of the area as a distinctive geographical entity that was an integral part of a pan-plateau conception of Tibet.

The first substantive articulation of the idea of Amdo occurred in the mid-seventeenth century during the height of Geluk expansion into the region. As central Tibet and the Khoshot Mongols lost their influence in Amdo and the Qing dynasty vied for control of the region in the eighteenth century, powerful local Geluk monastics composed narrative maps that articulated the territorial integrity of the Amdo region in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These "mapping monastics" can be considered a local third power—in between the Qing empire and the Ganden Potrang government—who asserted their authority over the region. These local monastic leaders drew their power from the massive network of Geluk monasteries that encompassed central Tibet, Amdo, and Mongolia. In addition, two Nyingma figures also took part in placing Amdo on the map through their autobiographies and songs. This demonstrates how the development of the idea of Amdo during this period was not only an endeavor limited to Geluk monastics. Finally, the mapping of the Amdo region by these authors needs to be considered within the contexts of: (1) the imperial mapping projects of eighteenth-century Eurasia and (2) the Qing and Ganden Potrang governments marking their nascent national borders in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, respectively. The maps of these authors provide the foundation for the modern idea of Amdo as one of the three provinces of contemporary Tibet.

The Amdo Region

Amdo is Tibet's northeastern province (Central Tibetan Administration). Roughly the size of France, it is situated mainly in modern day Qinghai province of the PRC and also includes sections of Sichuan and

¹ Examples include C. Patterson Giersch (2006), Wim van Spengen and Lama Jabb (2009), Johan Elverskog (2008), and James Millward (1998).

Gansu provinces. Historically, this region was located at the cross-roads of Tibet, China, Mongolia, Minyak, Tangut, and other empires, making it a critical buffer area between regional powers (Nietupski 2011: 2). Although the Amdo region was part of the Tibetan empire and subsequent Chinese, Mongol, and Manchu led dynasties, the region has never been held under a single ruler, but instead, controlled by fiercely independent local leaders. Historically, this region has also been ethnically diverse. Today, it is home to Tibetans, Mongols, Mongers, Hui, Salar, Han Chinese, and others (Nietupski 2011: 1).

In contemporary times, Tibet's northeastern province is most often referred to as "Amdo." However, historically, the term "Domé" (mdo smad) was more commonly used to refer to the region. "Domé" has been used since Tibetan imperial times (seventh through ninth centuries) (Tuttle 2011: 145 n. 17). The exact territory that corresponds to the term "Domé" (mdo smad) has shifted throughout history (Tuttle 2011: 145-6 n.17-18). In the sources examined in this piece, both the terms "Domé" and "Amdo" are used, although Domé is used with more frequency. In this essay, I use the term that mirrors the articulation of the concept in the source I am examining. Similarly, in accord with the majority of authors examined in this essay, I use the term "Tibet" (bod) to refer to a pan-plateau concept of Tibet and the term "central Tibet" to denote Tibet's historical center of "Ü-Tsang" (dbus gtsang).

The concept of Amdo as "a single cultural territory of this vast scope" arose only with the rise of the Geluk sect in the region beginning in the sixteenth century (Tuttle n.d.). Up until the publication of Desi Sangyé Gyatso's *The Golden Beryl* (1698), a survey of Geluk monasteries across the Tibetan plateau, religious histories (chos 'byung) written in central Tibet only included information about Amdo insofar as it was pertinent to central Tibet (Tuttle 2011:153, 161). Even then, Sangyé Gyatso's work does not use "Amdo" as a geographical organizational principle (Tuttle n.d.). Thus, although sites within Amdo have played key roles in Tibet's history since the imperial period, for much of history the region was a considered a backwater by the civilizational centers of Lhasa and Beijing.

Beginning in the mid-seventeenth century writers from the Amdo region devoted entire works to describing the region, literally writing themselves into Tibetan history and geography (Tuttle n.d.). Descriptions of Amdo reached their most multi-faceted articulation in the nineteenth century. This newfound assertiveness of authors from Amdo coincides with the rise and spread of the Geluk sect in the region assisted by Khoshot Mongol support. The political and religio-cultural rise of the Amdo region was also buttressed by economic and population growth precipitated by the arrival of New World crops such as potatoes and maize, the influx of European silver into the economy,

and the demand for wool in Chinese trading ports beginning in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Ryavec 2015:124). The spread of Geluk monasteries into the grasslands of southwest Amdo from mid-eighteenth to late nineteenth centuries may also have been supported by economic growth in the area (Tuttle 2012: 138-9).

The Geluk Sect's Expansion and the Initial Rise of the Amdo Region

The development of the concept of Amdo is associated with the rise of the Geluk sect in the region. Although the Geluk sect was present there since the fifteenth century, it was the Third Dalai Lama Sonam Gyatso's (1543-1588) visit to Lake Kokonor that precipitated the large-scale spread of the Geluk sect into Amdo (Tuttle 2013: 131-3). Prior to the Third Dalai Lama's visit in 1578, there were fewer than 60 Geluk monasteries in Amdo; over the next two centuries, there were more than 350 Geluk monasteries (Tuttle 2013: 585). The conversion of pre-existent monasteries to the Geluk sect and the establishment of new ones was part of the Geluk sect's ambitions to expand its monastic network beyond central Tibet into Amdo and Mongolia with the co-operation of the Khoshot Mongol in the mid seventeenth to mid eighteenth centuries (Sullivan 2021: 2). This was part of the Fifth Dalai Lama's theocratic government's goal of supporting the flourishing of Buddhism in Tibet, especially through his own Geluk sect (Goldstein 2009: 409). Brenton Sullivan has likened its expansionist program to a "religious empire" (Sullivan 2021: 11, 22).

Kalden Gyatso

Kalden Gyatso (1607-1677), the abbot of Rongwo monastery, played a major role in facilitating the initial spread of the Geluk sect in Amdo. He was of Tibetan descent. His disciples would go on to found monastic colleges across the Amdo region (Sujata 2005: 375). Kalden Gyatso's (1607-1677) *A Short History of the Way the Teachings Spread in Amdo Domé* (*mdo smad a mdo'i phyogs su bstan pa dar tshul gyi lo rgyus mdor bsdud*) (1652) (hereafter referred to as *A Short History*) is the first known Tibetan language work to focus entirely on the Amdo region. He composed this text during the height of Geluk monastic expansion into the region (Tuttle 2012: 135-6). Thus, Kalden Gyatso's impulse to establish the idea of Amdo as a distinct cultural territory that is part of Tibet is tied to the Geluk sect's expansionist ambitions into the area.

The title of Kalden Gyatso's text combines two common terms used to refer to the Amdo region: Domé (*mdo smad*) and Amdo (*a mdo*). In his *Collected Songs*, Kalden Gyatso uses the terms "Domé," "Amdo,"

and “Domé Amdo” interchangeably (Skal Idan 1994: 228, 124, 225). Sometimes, he adds the word “land” (yul) to it such as in the following expressions: “a mdo’i yul,” and “yul mdo smad” (Skal Idan 1994: 127, 228). Kalden Gyatso’s portrayal of Amdo has geographic, linguistic and communal dimensions. There is the sense that Amdo is a “vast region” (yangs pa’i sa yi cha) located in the “north” (Skal Idan 1994: 214, 156, 254-5). The region’s distinctive language is also showcased in his songs when he uses the grammatical structure of “e + verb” to ask questions (Skal Idan 1994: 77). Kalden uses the expression “the people of Dokham” (mdo khams kyi mi) within the context of observing that the people from the region had faith in Buddhism (Skal Idan 1994: 359). Although this is but a single reference, it suggests the idea of the inhabitants of this region as a collective.

Kalden Gyatso conveys a pan-plateau concept of Tibet through the terms “the Country of Tibet” (bod kyi yul), “Snow Ranges [of] Tibet” (bod gangs khrod), or “Tibet, Land of Snows” (bod kha ba can) (Skal Idan 1994: 210, 228, 250). Kalden Gyatso does not use the term “bod” to refer to central Tibet. Instead, he uses the terms Ü-Tsang (dbus gtsang), “the four horns of Ü-Tsang (dbus gtsang ru bzhi) or simply, “the Center” (dbus) (Skal Idan 1994: 51, 115, 123, 127, 145, 254). He divides Tibet into three main regions: “central Tibet” (dbus gtsang), “Upper [Region]: Three Districts of Ngari” (stod mnga ris skor gsum), and “Lower [Region]: the Three Ranges of Dokham” (smad mdo khams sgang gsum) (Sujata 2005: 10-11; Skal Idan 1994: 288-9). Kalden Gyatso does not identify these three ranges, and so it is not clear how Amdo fits into them.² Nevertheless, he gives the impression that Amdo is part of Tibet in a passage where he zooms in to Amdo from a larger geographical frame of reference. He begins from the widest geographical lens, the world (’dzam gling), zooms into the “Land of Snows” (gangs can khrod), and finally to Amdo (Skal Idan 1994: 330).

Sumpa Khenpo

The eighteenth century was a period of religious and cultural efflorescence in Amdo. During this time, the Amdo region, in comparison to central Tibet and Kham, boasted the greatest number of monasteries, produced the greatest volume of Collected Works, and had the largest number of new incarnate lamas (Kim 2018: 35-48). Gönlung monastery was the largest monastery in Tibetan cultural world, with over 7000

² According to Victoria Sujata (2005: 11, n.34), “mdo khams sgang gsum” refers to mdo khams (previously called smad khams), mdo smad (previously called g.yer mo thang), and tsong kha (gyi thang). Gray Tuttle (2011: 140) proposes a different correspondence.

monks (Tuttle 2012: 135). Sumpa Khenpo (1704-1788) was a throneholder of Gönlung (dgon lung) Monastery during this period. As was common for the Geluk monastic leadership of the period and region, he was a Tibetanized Mongol (Kim 2018: 28).

Sumpa Khenpo composed the *Annals of Kokonor* in 1748 (published 1786) at the request of Gushri Khan's descendants (Yang 1969: 5, 7; Sum pa 1982: 55; Tuttle 2011: 162). The word "Kokonor," is the Mongolian word for "blue lake" (Tib. mtsho sngon; Ch. Qinghai). It describes the Mongol administrative polity led by Gushri Khan and his descendants adjacent to Qinghai Lake that governed large areas of Amdo. After the rebellion led by the Khoshot Mongols against the Qing failed in 1723, the Khoshot Mongols lost their power over the region. Within this context, it is not surprising that they would request Sumpa Khenpo to recount the glorious past of their renowned patriarch.

As the title of the work suggests, the dominant concept within the *Annals of Kokonor* is that of "Kokonor." Nevertheless, Sumpa Khenpo does discuss "Dokham" (mdo khams) and "Amdo" (a mdo)—terms that he uses interchangeably. For instance, he describes "Dokham" as one of the regions of Tibet (Sum pa 1982: 2). Elsewhere, he describes the region of Pari (dpa' ris) as being in "Amdo" (Sum pa 1982: 6; Yang 1969: 30). He also uses the term "Amdo" when describing the geography of Tibet and Mongolia (Sum pa 1982: 47).

In *Annals of Kokonor*, Amdo is a part of a pan- plateau concept of Tibet. For instance, in his description of the moment when Gushri Khan is crowned king of Tibet, he notes "Everywhere in Tibet, from Gangs-te-se down to Mdo-khams, the people became patrons of the dGe-lugs pa" (Yang 1969: 40; Sum pa 1982: 16). According to Sumpa Khenpo, "Tibet, Land of Snows" (bod kha ba can) is one of the six great countries (yul chen drug) according to the *Kalacakra Tantra* (Sum pa 1982: 2). Sumpa Khenpo divides Tibet into "Tibet" (bod) and "Greater Tibet" (bod chen) (Sum pa 1982: 2). Within "Tibet" are the highlands of Ngari (mnga' ris skor gsum) and the midlands of central Tibet (dbus gtsang ru bzhi ru lag) (Sum pa 1982: 2). Within "Greater Tibet" are the lowlands of Dokham (mdo khams) (Sum pa 1982: 2). While Sumpa Khenpo includes the Kham region in his narrative map of Tibet's geography, he is not explicit as to whether or not "Southern Kham" (lho khams) is a part of Dokham (Sum pa 1982: 50-51). In his description of Tibet in his *General Description of the World*, he implies that Kham is part of Dokham when he describes it as "the subsequently incorporated [region of] Great Southern Kham [in the] lowlands" (phyi ma zung gi phyogs gtogs kyi lho khams chen po smad) (Sum pa 2012: 23-4).

Sumpa Khenpo's *Annals of Kokonor* is influenced by the genre of

world geography that existed within the context of large-scale mapping projects by the empires of Eurasia in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Perdue 2010: 263-4).³ These maps were central to consolidating internal rule while establishing territorial boundaries (Hostetler 2001:74). In particular, the Qing dynasty's two great atlases—by emperors Kangxi and Qianlong—were both compiled in the eighteenth century (Millward 1999: 68, 70-1). Tibetan lamas were involved in these mapping initiatives; the Kangxi emperor sent two Tibetan lamas well versed in geometry and arithmetic to complete land surveys of Tibet (Yongdan 2011: 76). Although official dynastic maps like the Qianlong atlas remained state secrets until the nineteenth century (Millward 1999: 72, 89), Sumpa Khenpo was clearly influenced by the idea of world geography suggesting that mapping was a *zeitgeist* amongst the elite in the eighteenth-century Qing dynasty. Reading the *Annals of Kokonor* in this context, Sumpa Khenpo's mapping of Kokonor and Amdo as part of Tibet can be read as a way of asserting the distinctiveness of this cultural territory and the Khoshot Mongols as the leaders.

Labrang Monastery and the Apex of the Development of the Concept of Amdo

In the nineteenth century, Labrang replaced Kumbum and Gönlung as the main Geluk monastic power in Amdo. At its height, Labrang monastery had many of the trappings of a polity. It controlled a vast swath of territory, levied taxes on the inhabitants of its estates, and was the local political and legal authority (Nietupski 2011: 70-71, 81). Labrang also possessed well-endowed treasuries with multiple revenue streams including donations, religious levies, agriculture, livestock management corvée labor, money lending, sponsorship, and taxes (Nietupski 2011: 82-92). In order to manage its land, resources, and people, the institution created large scale bureaucratic structures for governance (Nietupski 2011: 79).

Belmang Pandita

During this period, the Second Belmang Pandita Konchok Gyeltsen (1764-1853) (dbal mang dkon mchog rgyal mtshan), a throneholder of Labrang monastery, initiated an “unprecedented outpouring of

³ Indeed, Sumpa Khenpo composed Tibet's first world geography, *General Description of the World: a Marvelous and Elegant Discussion* ('dzam gling spyi bshad ngo mtshar gdam snyan) (hereafter referred to as *General Description*).

historical and geographic writing" (Oidtmann 2014: 266-7). Lamenting the lack of histories about "the district of the land of Domé" (yul mdo smad kyi ljong), he encouraged his disciple Drakgönpa to compose one, citing Kelden Gyatso's and Sumpa Khenpo's works as precedents (Oidtmann 2014: 272). With the decline of both the Qing dynasty and Ganden Potrang government in central Tibet and the flourishing of the Amdo region during this period, the leaders of the powerful Labrang monastery wanted to assert the significance of their region. By encouraging works about Amdo, Belmang asserts the territorial, religious, and cultural integrity of the region which is in turn connected to Geluk monastic power through their authorship.

Although Belmang did not compose a work on the Amdo region, his *A Ladder for Guiding the Youth: Lessons Summarizing the History of India, Tibet, and Mongolia* (henceforth referred to as *History*) (completed in 1819-1821) includes a robust discussion about Amdo (Oidtmann 2014: 290). He composed this work as a response to the deterioration of the Mongol banners and the Qing's attempts to assert its supremacy over the Geluk establishment (Oidtmann 2016: 64). His proposed solution was to impose Buddhist – specifically Geluk – law across the Tibetan plateau (Oidtmann 2015: 112). The desire to unify the Tibetan plateau using a Geluk interpretation of Buddhist law is in line with the idea of the Geluk sect as a "religious empire."

Belmang's *History* has a long section devoted to retelling the history of Gushri Khan and his descendants in Amdo. Belmang uses both the terms "Amdo" (a mdo) and "Domé" (mdo smad) to refer to the region. For instance, he describes Gushri's descendant coming to "Domé" and becoming an abbot (mkhan po) of Kumbum and Tashikhyil monasteries (Dbal mang 1990: 76). In another section on the treasure tradition (gter ma), Belmang describes how some people in "Amdo" recount stories of texts falling from the sky (Dbal mang 1990: 201). Still, the references in the text few and far between in comparison to the concept of Kokonor (mtsho sngon or khu khu nor). This is not surprising given the text's strong focus on the history of Gushri Khan and his descendants and Kokonor being the headquarters of his polity. Belmang states, "Since Kökenuur is the vital juncture of China, Tibet, and Mongolia, it is essential to control it" (Oidtmann 2015: 137; Dbal mang 1990: 176). He considers Kokonor to be a region within Amdo. He mentions that under the rule of Gushri Khan's third son King Tsewang Tenzin (aka Gyelpo Junang) (1699-1735), the "entire Amdo was happy" in addition to the other areas under his rule such as the Kham region and so forth (Dbal mang 1990: 74).

Belmang portrays Amdo as part of a pan-plateau concept of "Tibet—its three regions" (bod chol kha gsum) or "Tibet in general" (bod spyi). He identifies the initial unification of "Tibet in general" to the

Tibetan imperial period (7th through 9th centuries) (Dbal mang 1990: 22, 34). Belmang demonstrates admiration for the rule of Buddhist law; he observes that “beings all across the three regions of Tibet” (bod chol kha gsum gyi ‘gro ba) were able to enjoy Buddhism because of King Songsten Gampo’s sixteen Buddhist-based laws (Dbal mang 1990: 28). Belmang identifies the Sakya Mongol period as another one in which Tibet was unified (Dbal mang 1990: 40). He describes how Kublai Khan, after defeating all of Tibet, China, Mongolia, offered “Tibet—its three regions” to his teacher Pakpa (Dbal mang 1990: 60-61). He claims that “Songsten Gampo’s territories are equal to Oirat’s territories and Khalka Jingga’s territories (Dbal mang 1990: 176; Oidtman 2016: 71). The three regions of Tibet include central Tibet—identified as “Tibet” (bod), the “Center” (dbus) or “Ü-Tsang” (dbus gtsang) (Dbal mang 1990: 83, 86, 91); Kham (mdo khams or khams) (Dbal mang 1990: 71, 83, 210); Ngari (Dbal mang 1990: 22, 31, 209-210); and Amdo/Domé.

Drakgönpa

Drakgönpa Könchok Gyeltsen (1800/1-1869) headed Labrang monastery at the height of its power. His *Oceanic Annals* (*Deb ther rgya mtsho*) (1865), composed at the encouragement of Belmang Pandita, is the most detailed and multi-faceted treatment of the Amdo region in early modern Tibetan literature. The *Oceanic Annals* belongs to the annals (deb ther) genre, which was “written by politically powerful figures, seeking to establish claims to regional or at the very least local authority for themselves and/or the traditions with which they were associated” (Tuttle 2011: 166). In addition, Drakgönpa’s text was influenced by the genre of world geography (Tuttle 2011: 153). Drakgönpa’s detailed narrative mapping of the Amdo region represents a political document “seeking to assert at least a literary authority over territory” (Tuttle 2011: 168). Indeed, Gray Tuttle argues that the text can be read as “a tacit challenge to even the authority of the Dalai Lamas” by asserting the power of Labrang monastery and its abbots as heirs to the Mongol princes of the region (Tuttle 2011: 168-9). This claim makes sense when considering Labrang monastery’s power, the Geluk sect’s expansionist ambitions, and the role of maps in incorporating conquered territories and consolidating internal rule by empires of Eurasia.

Drakgönpa uses both the terms “Amdo” and “Domé” to refer to the Amdo region, with the latter used with more frequency. An example of his usage of the term Domé is to describe the birthplace of Tsongkhapa (Brag dgon 1982: 21). Drakgönpa, also sometimes adds the term for “district” or “region” (ljongs) to the word Domé (Brag dgon 1982: 3, 15, 16.). Drakgönpa explains the origin of the toponym

"Amdo": the "A" comes from "mountains behind the snows [of] A [nyé Ma] chen" (a chen gangs rgyab gi ri) and it is combined with the word "confluence" (mdo) (Brag dgon 1982: 2).

Drakönpa provides a detailed narrative mapping of the Amdo region. Mapping out the sacred sites of the Amdo region asserts the significance of the region as a territory. Drakgön also discusses the history of Amdo in detail, giving yet another dimension to the concept of Amdo he is reinforcing. For instance, he recounts the history of Princess Konjo and others who travelled through the region on their way to central Tibet during Tibet's Imperial Period, "creating the initial karmic connection for Buddhism to spread in the Domé region" (Drakgön 1982: 16). He also recounts the story of the Three Wise Men who fled central Tibet due to King Lang Darma's persecution of Buddhism in the mid-ninth century and came to Achung Namdzong and Dentik (Brag dgon 1982: 17-19). It was due to their actions that Tibet was able to retain its Vinaya tradition which was subsequently retransmitted back to central Tibet in the mid tenth century.

Another way that Drakgönpa links Amdo to central Tibet and Tibet's imperial period is through highlighting genealogical connections. He describes how the lineage (mi rgyud) of most of the people in north and south Domé are descended from people placed there at the border of Tibet and China by king Trisong Detsen (Brag dgon 1982: 16). Some of those people are even descendants of ancient and prestigious families such as that of the Sakya/Khön clan, Marpa, Palchen Galo (dpal chen rga lo), Ngok (rngog), and the king of Tsang (Brag dgon 1982: 16-17). Drakönpa also notes that the language spoken by these Tibetans preserves many ancient words (Brag dgon 1982: 16). Not only does this connect many of the Tibetans of Amdo to central Tibetans genealogically, but it also anchors the Tibetans of Amdo to the Tibetan empire.

In the *Oceanic Annals*, Amdo is a part of a pan-plateau concept of Tibet. Drakgönpa refers to this using various terms, including "realm of Tibet" (bod kyi yul kham and bod kham), "country of Tibet" (bod yul), and "Tibet Land of Snows" (bod gangs can) (Brag dgon 1982: 1). The regions (nang gses kyis phye ba) within Tibet are "the three circuits of upper Mnga' ris" (stod mnga' ris skor gsum), "the middle Four Horns of Central Tibet" (bar dbus gtsang ru bzhi), "Six Ranges of Mdo Kham in Middle Kham" (mdo kham sgang drug), and "the Three Ranges" (sgang gsum) (Brag dgon 1982: 1, Tuttle 2011: 139-140). It is not explicit in the *Oceanic Annals* where the Amdo region fits into the framework of the Three Ranges. Gray Tuttle suggests that the latter two ranges, "Range of Yermo" (g.yer mo thang) and "Range of Tsongkha" (tsong kha la gyi thang) may be where Amdo's territory begins (Tuttle 2011: 143). Tuttle notices that Amdo's territory is "tacked on in a rather hodge-podge way" as part of the Three Ranges

to Drakgönpa's schema of Ngari, Ü-Tsang, Dokham, and the Three Ranges (Tuttle 2011: 145). Drakgönpa also uses the framework of "The Three Regions" (chol kha gsum) of Tibet: "central Tibet, the region of the Dharma" (dbus gtsang chos kyi chol kha), "upper Tö, the region of humans" (mdo stod mi'i chol kha), and "lower Tö, the region of horses" (mdo smad rta'i chol kha) (Brag dgon 1982: 2).⁴

Drakgönpa's impulse to articulate the Amdo region occurred within the context of a shifting world order in which "sovereignty was gradually becoming increasingly tied to territorial integrity" (Hostetler 2001: 74). Viewed from this perspective, Drakgönpa asserts the territorial integrity of the region through his narrative mapping of Amdo, contributing to the modern idea of Amdo as one of the three provinces of Tibet. In the nineteenth century both the Qing Dynasty and Lhasa's Ganden Potrang government were attempting to secure their nascent national borders. The Qing dynasty had already incorporated much of the Amdo region as the jurisdiction of Qinghai in 1724 (Dai 2009: 95). The Qing dynasty became increasingly aggressive about securing its southwestern frontier in the 1730s (Dai 2009: 101-2). In the nineteenth century, both the Qing dynasty and the Ganden Potrang government vied to annex sections of Kham, the province directly to the south of Amdo that would ultimately be incorporated into the PRC as parts of Sichuan, Yunnan, and Gansu provinces (Gros 2019: 143; Gardner 2010:104; Tsomo 2014: 221, 231-238). In response to this, Jamgön Kongtrul (1813-1899), a Tibetan Buddhist luminary composed a narrative map entitled "The Twenty-Five Great Sites of Khams" (*mdo khams gnas chen nyer lnga*) (1868). This text used religious symbolism to unite the sacred sites of Kham and represent it as separate from the territory ruled by central Tibet (Gardner 2010: 98, 102, 104). Jamgön Kongtrul was the first author to establish the territorial identity of Kham through indigenous modes of mapmaking (Gardner 2006: xiii). Jamgön Kongtrul's narrative map established the concept of Kham as a religio-cultural territory in the same way that Drakgönpa's *Oceanic Annals* and other works examined in this paper established the territorial integrity of Amdo. Together, these works contribute to securing an indigenous articulation of place that crystalized in the modern concept of Tibet consisting of the three provinces of Amdo, Kham, and central Tibet.

⁴ This latter references is also found in Sumpa Khenpo's work (Sum pa 2012: 25)

Tsenpo Nomonhan

Tibet's second world geography, *Detailed Description of the World* ('Dzam gling rgyas bshad) (1830) (hereafter referred to as *Detailed Description*), gives a robust portrayal of the Amdo region and how it relates to the rest of Tibet. Its author was the Fourth Tsenpo Nomonhan ('Jam dpal chos kyi bstan 'dzin 'phrin las) (1789-1838), a Geluk reincarnate lama who was likely of Mongol descent (Yongdan 2011: 80-1; Tuttle 2011: 163). Although his home monastery was Ganden Damchöling (dga' ldan dam chos gling) in Amdo, he went to Beijing as the Qing emperor's seal-holding lama after completing his monastic training in Lhasa (Yongdan 2011: 81). He spent time at Labrang monastery shortly before composing his *Detailed Description* (Oidtmann 2014: 267).

Tsenpo Nomonhan refers to Tibet as the "country of Tibet" (bod kyi yul) (Wylie 1958: 2, 55). He describes the border between Amdo and China, and did not consider Tibet to be a part of China (Yongdan 2011: 100). Nomonhan divides Tibet into three main regions: "upper three districts of Ngari" (stod mnga' ris skor gsum), "middle [region of] the four horns of central Tibet" (dbus gtsang ru bzhi), and "lower [region of] six ranges of Dokham" (mdo khams sgang drug) (Wylie 1958: 11, 66). In another place in the text, he refers to Dokham as having three ranges (mdo khams sgang gsum) (Wylie 1958: 40, 102). Nomonhan is the only author surveyed in this essay who is explicit about how the concept of Amdo relates to the six ranges of Dokham. In the section on Dokham, he mentions the six ranges (sgang), with the latter three being Markham Range (smar kham sgang), Minyak Range (mi nyag sgang), and Yarmo Range (g.yar mo sgang) (Wylie 1958: 40, 102). He states explicitly that g.yar mo sgang is included within the Amdo region (Wylie 1958: 52-53, 118). Elsewhere in the text, he further delineates the borders of Amdo when he describes how east of the village (sde) of Tongkor (stong skor) in Kham, the "Domé Amdo" region begins (Wylie 1958: 109). The fact that Nomonhan is the only author to describe Amdo's territory in detail in the mid-nineteenth century supports the idea that "Amdo" was an evolving concept that reached its most specific territorial definition in the nineteenth century. Nomonhan also portrays Amdo as an integral part of Tibet's territory.

Nomonhan refers to Amdo using both the terms "Domé" and "Amdo" such as in the case of "the place of Domé Amdo" (mdo smad a mdo'i sa cha) (Wylie 1958: 109). He maps out the Amdo region in detail, including valleys, villages, monasteries, and sacred sites (Wylie 1958: 110-118). He lists the sites in the different regions of the Tibetan plateau in rapid succession, including more elaborate descriptions of important Geluk-affiliated sites such as Labrang, Rongwo, and Kumbum monasteries (Wylie 1958: 110-113). Like Drakgönpa, Nomonhan

traces the Tibetan settlements (*bod sde*) of the Amdo region to the Tang dynasty (Wylie 1958: 117, 52). He also evokes the legend of the Tibetans (*bod yul gyi mi rnam*) being descended from Avalokiteśvara emanated as a monkey (Wylie 1958: 118, 53). This latter point connects Amdo to the rest of Tibet in a genealogical manner.

Nomonhan also describes the diversity of the people in Amdo. For instance, he describes the diverse ethnicities who inhabit the Amdo region including Tibetans, Chinese, Mongols, Muslims, and Zalars (Wylie 1958: 112-3). At the same time, he portrays a sense of cohesion among the people in Amdo as in the case when he criticizes how “some of our own Amdo [people]” (*rang re a mdo*) do not believe that the 100,000 self-originated images of Mañjuśrī that appeared on the white sandalwood tree that sprouted from Tsongkhapa’s umbilical cord at Kumbum monastery are a true miracle, but instead, they believe that these images were etched on the tree with needles” (Wylie 1958: 113, 49). One way that Nomonhan’s discussion of Tibetans differs from other authors in this paper is that he seems to bear the influence of European race theory. Throughout the work, he is preoccupied with determining who are of “true” (*dnegos*) Tibetan ethnicity (*bod kyi rigs*). For instance, he claims that the people of Minyak (*mi nyag*), Gyelrong (*gyal rong*), and Mili (*mi li*) are “not true Tibetans” (*bod dnegos min*) (Wylie 1958: 107, 44-45). On the other hand, he determines that populations residing northwest of Ladakh and Ruthok are of Tibetan ethnicity (*bod kyi rigs*) but culturally “Malakse” (Wylie 1958: 62, 8).

Nyingma Contributions to the Development of the Idea of Amdo

Still, Geluk authors were not the only ones who played a role in the development of the idea of Amdo. In this section, I analyze the portrayal of Amdo and Tibet in the works of two non-Geluk authors. One author belonged to the Nyingma sect and the other received his early training in the Nyingma sect but later self-identified as non-sectarian. The Nyingma sect claims a long history in the Amdo region dating to the eighth century figure Padmasambhava. Their teachings and practices were passed down through local family and community lineages until Rigdzin Palden Tashi (1688-1743) (hereafter referred to as RPT) founded the Tantric Community of Rebgong (*reb kong sngags mang*) in the eighteenth century. The Tantric Community of Rebgong’s members consist of “*ngakpa*” (*sngags pa*), which refers to non-celibate tantric practitioners. In contrast to Geluk monastics, the Nyingma *ngakpa* are permitted to marry and produce families. Through the founding the Tantric Community of Rebgong, RPT gave the pre-existent *ngakpa* in Rebgong a sense of unity and distinct identity (Dhondup 2011:15).

In comparison to the Geluk monastic networks, Nyingma communities were of lesser means, supporting themselves through farming or offering religious services to local families rather than from the patronage of Mongol princes (Dhondup 2011: 23). RPT was active in areas of Reb kong where the Geluk had weak or no influence (Dhondup 2011: 3, 19). Nevertheless, within the context of the Amdo region, it is important not to overemphasize sectarian division between Nyingma and Geluk sects. As was common for boys from Nyingma families from Rebong, RPT receive monastic scholarly training at Geluk-affiliated monasteries in Amdo and central Tibet, ultimately achieving a *geshé* (dge bshes) degree (Dhondup 2011: 11-12). Similarly, Shabkar received his novice monastic vows from a prominent Geluk teacher, Arik Geshé (Zhabs dkar 2003a, vol. 1: 56.5-57.2).

Rigdzin Palden Tashi

Rigdzin Palden Tashi (1688-1743) (hereafter referred to as RPT) was an older contemporary of Sumpa Khenpo. He was of Tibetan descent. RPT's *Autobiography* (rang rnam) and *Collection of Vajra Songs* (rdo rje'i gsung mgrur) give us an idea of how he portrayed "Tibet" and "Amdo." RPT conveys a pan-plateau concept of Tibet through terms such as "country of Tibet" (bod yul), "kingdom of Tibet" (bod kyi rgyal khams), and "realm of Tibet" (bod khams) (rig 'dzin 2002c, 199, 210, 271; rig 'dzin 2002a, 14). Sometimes, he uses the metonym of snow mountains as in the cases of "Kingdom of the Land of Snows" (kha ba can gyi rgyal khams), "Tibet, Land of Snows, Medicinal Realm" (bod yul kha ba'i sman ljongs) or "Tibet, Realm of Snows" (bod gangs can ljong) (rig 'dzin 2002a: 2; rig 'dzin 2002c: 272, 257, 260).

RPT divides a pan-plateau Tibet into "Tibet" (bod) and "greater Tibet" or "kingdom of greater Tibet" (bod chen po or chen po bod kyi rgyal khams). He includes central Tibet—referred to as "the center of Tibet" (bod yul dbus) or "Ü-Tsang" (dbus gtsang)—in "Tibet" (rig 'dzin 2002a: 9, 11, 15; rig 'dzin 2002b: 129, 131; rig 'dzin 2002c: 208, 121). He includes Dokham (mdo khams) in "greater Tibet" (rig 'dzin 2002a: 10). He explains that there was a time when his home valley of Rebong—which is a part of lower Dokham (mdo khams smad)—was administered as part of China (rig 'dzin 2002a: 9-10). Nevertheless, citing texts that describe Machen Pomra as the guardian deity of greater Tibet and the twelve Tenma being bound under oath, RPT establishes that the Dokham region (mdo khams) is unambiguously a part of greater Tibet (rig 'dzin 2002a: 10).⁵ Sumpa Khenpo and RPT

⁵ In the source text, there are a couple of anomalies that are worth noting. Quoting an unnamed supplication liturgy (brtan gsol), the passage states

are the only two authors examined in this paper to use the “great/little” schema to categorize regions of Tibet, suggesting that this concept may have been current in the eighteenth century. Roughly a century later, Tsenpo Nomonhan would disagree with characterizing central Tibet (dbus gtsang) as “little Tibet” (bod chung ngu) and Dokham as “great Tibet” (bod chen po) (Wylie 1958: 11, 66). RPT further divides greater Tibet, or Dokham, into “upper Kham” and “lower Dokham,” which corresponds roughly to the concept of the modern-day Tibetan provinces of Kham and Amdo (rig ‘dzin 2002c: 209). RPT spent a decade in Kham and is one of the few authors mentioned in this paper who describe it in any detail (rig ‘dzin 2002a: 9).

The concept of “Domé” (mdo smad) and “lower Dokham” are present in RPT’s *Autobiography* and *Vajra Songs* (rig ‘dzin 2002b: 140, 148; rig ‘dzin 2002c: 209, 210, 266). He connects the Amdo region to Tibet’s historical center by drawing genealogical links between his family genealogy and the mythic father of the Tibetan people, a monkey-bodhisattva who was the emanation of Avalokiteśvara (rig ‘dzin 2002a: 2). RPT recounts that his father’s family are descendants of Dru Nyima (‘bru nyi ma), one of the six offspring of the monkey-bodhisattva (rig ‘dzin 2002a: 8). They are a particular branch of that family who migrated to and settled in lower Dokham.

While the concept of the Domé region is present in RPT’s autobiography and songs, he is more often preoccupied with his home valley Rebgong. For instance, he portrays Rebgong as being a place whose history possesses good karmic connections (rten ‘brel bzang) (rig ‘dzin 2002a: 9). He describes the sacred sites of Rebgong and compares the Nine Places of Rebgong to the abodes of deities (rig ‘dzin 2002c: 272-3; rig ‘dzin 2002b: 174). He even compares Rebgong’s rivers and mountains to that of central Tibet (rig ‘dzin 2002a: 10). This more localized focus reflects the fact that RPT’s activities were mostly localized and did not involved inter-regional politics the way his Geluk counterparts did.

that Langkar Peltsek bound the twelve Tenma under oath “for the stability and good of the land of China.” The standard account of this history is that Padmasambhava bound the twelve Tenma under oath for the sake of the stability of Buddhism in Tibet. The original Tibetan for the passage is: de ltar yul phyogs de’i mi rigs phal cher ni bod dang bod chen po gnyis su phyed ba’i chen po bod kyi rgyal khams su gtogs shing/ sngon dus rgyas bzung ba’i rgya yul gyi gras su’ng gtogs so/ /spom ra’i gsol mchod du/ chen po bod kyi rgyal khams skyong ba’i lha zhes dang/brtan gsol du/ rgya yul de ni brtan bzang du/ /bshes gnyen rlangs dkar dpal brtsegs kyis bstan ma bcu gnyis dam la btags/ /zhes mdo khams yongs grags la chen po bod du gtogs shing sa cha rgya yul brtan bzang ni brtan bzang la kha ‘di nyid yin par mngon no/ (rig ‘dzin 2002a:10)

Shabkar

Shabkar was an older contemporary of Drakgönpa and Tsenpo No-monhan. Like RPT, he was of Tibetan descent and began his religious training with the Nyingma *ngakpa* community in the Rebgong Valley. Unlike the Geluk monastics surveyed in this paper, he was not a reincarnate lama nor a throne holder, but rather, an itinerant monk-yogi who travelled across the Tibetan plateau, teaching, meditating, and singing songs of realization (*mgur*). He self-identified as non-sectarian. Amdo and Tibet are central themes in his *Autobiography* (volume 1 completed in 1837 and volume 2 in 1850), demonstrating that the concepts were not merely a preoccupation of Geluk leaders.

Shabkar uses the terms “country of Tibet” (*bod yul*), “realm of Tibet” (*bod khams*), and “kingdom of Tibet” (*rgyal khams*) to convey a pan-plateau sense of Tibet in his autobiography. When he expresses the desire go on pilgrimage to India, the Lion-Faced *Dākinī* appears to him in a vision, advising him to “stay in Tibet” (*bod yul tu bzhugs*) (Zhabs dkar, *Snyigs dus*, Zhabs dkar 2003a, vol. 1: 689.2-4; Shabkar 2001: 398). While at Tsipri, he prays for “auspiciousness to encompass the realm of Tibet” (*bkra shis pas bod khams khyab gyur cig*) (Zhabs dkar 2003a, vol. 1: 776.4-5; Shabkar 2001: 449). Finally, he describes Avalokiteśvara as the patron deity of “the country of Tibet, Land of Snows” (*bod kha ba can gyi rgyal khams*) (Zhabs dkar 2003a, vol. 1: 618.4; Shabkar 2001: 357).

Unlike some of the other authors examined in this article, Shabkar does not divide Tibet into the “Three Regions” (*chol kha gsum*). Instead, he uses the term “districts” (*gzhung*) (Zhabs dkar 2003a, vol. 1: 233.6; Shabkar 2001: 138). The regions within Tibet include central Tibet, which Shabkar describes as “Ü-Tsang” (*dbus gtsang*), “Ü” (*dbus*), or “the center of Tibet” (*bod yul gyi dbus*) (Zhabs dkar 2003a, vol. 1: 233.6, 753.1; Shabkar 2001:138, 434; Zhabs dkar 2003a, vol. 2: 45.2, 131.4); Amdo/Domé; and Ngari (*mnga' ris*) (Zhabs dkar, 2003a, vol. 2: 267.2). He mentions the Kham region as a place people need to pass through on the way to central Tibet from Amdo (Zhabs dkar 2003a, vol. 2: 63.5, 301.3, 510.6-11.1; Zhabs dkar 2003a, vol. 1: 421.5, 323.4; Shabkar 2001: 245, 187).

In his autobiography, Shabkar gives a robust sense of Amdo as a geographic space, with linguistic, community, and historic dimensions. In his autobiography and songs, Shabkar used both “Domé” (*mdo smad*) and “Amdo” (*a mdo*) to describe the Amdo region, using the former term with greater frequency (Pang 2011: 194-5). He used both “Amdo” and “Domé” to refer to Amdo as a place. For instance, he describes his homeland as “Domé” (*rang yul mdo smad*) (Zhabs dkar 2003a, vol. 1: 849.6, Shabkar 2001: 485). Elsewhere, he describes a

pilgrim returning to Trika in “Amdo” (Zhabs dkar 2003a, vol. 1: 482; Shabkar 2001: 283). When he refers to language or people, he uses the word “Amdo.” For example, Shabkar mentions how the Ninth Dalai Lama referred to him as “Amdo lama” and smiled when he spoke Amdo language (a mdo'i skad) (Shabkar 2001: 225; Zhabs dkar 2003, vol. 1: 388.6-89). Shabkar also uses the term “Amdowa” (a mdo pa) to describe the people of Amdo as a collective. For instance, he sings a song to “Amdowas” (Zhabs dkar 2003, vol. 1: 943.4; Shabkar 2001: 529). Finally, Shabkar gives a robust sense of Amdo as a geographic space. Two-thirds of his autobiography takes place in Amdo. The chapter titles of his autobiography and songs reflect key sacred sites of the Amdo region such as Mount Machen and the Blue Lake. Moreover, Shabkar describes sacred sites and his interactions with them in detail (Pang 2024: 57). From a historical perspective, Shabkar also acknowledges the critical role of the Three Wise Men and the site of Achung Namdzong in Amdo for preserving the eastern Vinaya tradition (Pang 2024: 56).

Conclusion

This article examined how seven authors writing in the Tibetan language on the Qing frontier between the mid-seventeenth through mid-nineteenth centuries portrayed their home region of Amdo. The rise and development of the concept of Amdo was inextricably intertwined with the expansion of the Geluk sect into the region. The Geluk monastics surveyed in this paper portray Amdo as a distinct geographical entity that is an integral part of a pan-plateau concept of Tibet. Writing during a historical moment in which the empires of Eurasia were engaged in mapping activities to consolidate their territorial claims, these monastics' narrative mapping of Amdo represent a local third power asserting their control over a region on the far reaches of central Tibet's and the Qing dynasty's grasp. In turn, these Geluk authors were part of the Geluk sect's expansionist ambitions into Amdo, Mongolia and beyond; indeed, each Geluk author examined in this paper flourished during a key moment of the Geluk expansion into the Amdo region. Nevertheless, non-Geluk authors from Amdo also participated in the development of the concept of Amdo and its relationship to Tibet, which demonstrates that development of the idea of Amdo was not limited to the Geluk sect. The mapping of Amdo occurred within the context of Beijing and Lhasa attempting to secure their nascent national borders in the nineteenth century. The narrative maps of figures from eastern Tibet such as Drakgönpa and Jamgön Kongtrul helped to lay the foundation for the idea of Tibet consisting of the three provinces of Amdo, Kham, and central Tibet.

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