

Hidden Lands in the Himalaya – Buddhist eschatology and Himalayan migration

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There are only a few studies written on Yolmo so far. They all agree, that the people of Yolmo consider their ancestors to be those Tibetan lamas, who came about three hundred years ago from the Kyirong area of south-western Tibet and settled in the northern part of today's Helambu, after they got land grants to build temple villages from Malla and Shah kings of Nepal.¹ Graham E. Clarke did expert research on the social organization of the villages in the 70s², and Franz-Karl Erhard contributed tremendously to our knowledge of Buddhist history of the lamas visiting or settling in Yolmo in the 17-18th century³, still, except this general statement on the formation of temple villages mentioned above, the question of the origin of different clans living in Yolmo today and possible events of migration from Tibet to Nepal were never addressed. Given the opportunity to present a paper at SOAS on a workshop titled "Crossing borders in South Asia", I decided to summarize some of my preliminary notes and findings, which I hope to develop into a more elaborate and detailed study in the future.

Based on interviews conducted in Yolmo during my fieldworks, and Buddhist Treasure texts and biographies I translated during the course of my PhD research, I will try to give a general picture of the clans of Yolmo, address the issue of migration, and recount some oral and written histories concerned with the origin of the clans.

¹ Clarke: 1980. Desjarlais 2003: 7.

² Clarke: 1980a, 1980b, 1980c.

³ Ehrhard: 2013. This recent publication contains twenty-six articles and conference papers written by Franz-Karl Ehrhard. Many of them concerns the history of Buddhism in the Himalaya and the activity of treasure-discoverers.

1. Origin and migration

Quite recently, I came across an excellent article written by Geoff Childs⁴, who tries to develop a theoretically-informed framework how migration, as a protracted process has shaped settlement patterns and social structures in the Himalayan region. By applying his approach, I will use theoretical insights of contemporary migration to contextualize and analyse information scattered in old Tibetan sources related to migration in order to understand the process that shaped the structure of society in Yolmo. Before we start looking at our Tibetan sources for reasons why Tibetans wanted to migrate to Yolmo, let's shortly discuss why people migrate in general. Related questions can be framed as push factors (those that force people to leave a place) and pull factors (those that induce people to move to a place). In contemporary research wage factors are the most widely analyzed push and pull factors⁵, but in the context of historical trans-Himalayan migrations we need to focus on push factors like safety threats (civil war, foreign invasion, threat of political or religious persecution), health threats (epidemics), subsistence threats (natural catastrophes like earthquake, drought, flood; crop failure) and demographic factors (increasing population density). Pull factors can be under-utilized resources in areas outside or on the margin of political control, the existence of uninhabited land, easy access to land, social and political security and stability, good food supplies and fertile land, and less risks of natural hazards. When people think about migrating, their decisions are made collectively rather than individually in order to maximize the benefits to the household⁶. Childs has an interesting notion when looking at the migration of refugees leaving Tibet after 1959.⁷ He says that based on the composition of the exile population, he concludes that the original migrant population comprised more males than females, and a large percentage of the refugees came from the border region of Tibet, from where it was easier to cross into exile. A high number of aristocracy fled fearing persecution, and very few people from the lower strata

⁴ Childs 2012.

⁵ Massey 1993: 432-434.

⁶ See Childs 2012:14 and Stark and Bloom 1985, Brettell 2000: 107.

⁷ Childs 2012:14.

of society. All in all, gender, age, proximity to the border and social status had a great significance in migration decision-making not only then but during the whole history of Tibet.

Most migrations start with a few individuals exploring the route and the new place. The information they gather and the networks they form would influence the decision of others who are inclined to leave. These social networks are multilocal and complex, and they facilitate the movement of people, significantly reducing the costs and risks associated with migration.⁸ Networks can be based on weak ties and strong ties and the combinations of the two. Relationships between acquaintances and people of common origin are weak ties and those between friends and kin are strong ties. When individuals migrate, they tend to form weak networks with the host community and as a result, they get assimilated fast into the new community. When families or bigger groups move, they tend to form stronger social networks among themselves and establish distinct ethnic groups instead of assimilating. Another interesting point, especially when looking at people migrating to Yolmo, that diffuse social networks in the form of weak ties constitute a form of social capital.⁹ And as higher socioeconomic groups have more access to information and resources, the strength of weak ties among them is greater. They are in better position to disseminate information through weak networks, because they possess a higher volume of information and good resources to facilitate their own movements and communications with other members of the network. Massey's concept of 'cumulative causation' can also be applied if we look at Kyirong as the sending community, where many lamas came from who settled in Yolmo. He says that "the culture of migration continually influences the propensity for individuals to migrate by shaping people's receptiveness to the idea that moving elsewhere can lead to a better life."¹⁰

⁸ See Childs 2012:15 and Massey 1993, Wilson 1998: 395-96, Portes 1995:12.

⁹ See Childs 2012:16 and Granovetter 1982 and Wilson 1998: 398.

¹⁰ See Childs 2012: 17 and Massey 1990, 1993.

2. Tibetan Buddhist prophecies on “push and pull factors”

From the 14th century on several Tibetan Buddhist works – especially ones written by lamas associated with the Nyingma tradition – are concerned with Hidden Lands, where Tibetans can migrate when attacks of foreign armies and violence endangers human life and the preservation of the Buddhist teaching. Several different genres of literature developed to describe the Hidden Land or Beyul¹¹, the ways to get there, and the external and internal signs showing the time to leave Tibet. For a long time I thought these prophecies to be some kind of “anxiety literature” promoting the idea of a declining age based on Buddhist cosmology, but as I read more of them, they can be seen just as well to be “manuals of escape” or “handbooks for migration”. I would think originally they could have been written as a response to a certain historical situation, but during the centuries they became parts of various compilations, and often new information was added relevant to the era of text production, and they were used for centuries with an ever-changing content shaped by circumstances.

The texts we are going to use for analysis belong to a collection of biographies and prophecies called *Byang gter lung bstan*. It is one of the major collections of the *Byang gter* or ‘Northern Treasure’ tradition, a lineage of the Nyingma School founded by Rigdzin Godem (1337-1408) the famous treasure-revealer of the Gungthang Kingdom. *Lung bstan* will be translated here as prophecy, admitting that the word has a deeper meaning in Tibetan. *Lung* means authorization or transmission via realized speech, and *bstan* means the Buddhist teaching that carries firm authenticity, the teaching coming from the Buddha himself, or a guru belonging to his lineage. I have come across this remarkable collection of texts first in Dharamsala at Library of Tibetan Works and Archives in 2010 while looking for material on Yolmo history.¹² Later I acquired a copy of the same collection from the Tibetan Buddhist Resource Centre.¹³ As I read some of the texts related to Yolmo, I realized that six texts from this collection, all related to the

¹¹ *Sbas yul*

¹² LTWA Acc.no. Ka.3:77-2221

¹³ TBRC LC Classification: BQ7920.C64

Hidden Land of Yolmo Snow Enclosure and discovered by Rigzin Godem, were included also in a collection of Tibetan texts published by one of the Yolmo lamas, Khenpo Nyima Dondrub¹⁴ in Kathmandu in 2003¹⁵. One of the most unique texts of this collection, the *Sbas yul spyi'i them byang* or 'General description of Hidden Lands'¹⁶ gives a very detailed account of the age of decline and places of escape in Tibet and on its borderlands. Although this text has been mentioned by several scholars as an important source for learning about Hidden Lands (Orofino, Ehrhard, Childs), it has not been published in English yet.

2.1. Push factors

All traditional Buddhist cultures presume the existence of an unending cosmology known as *samsāra* that did not posit an eschatology in an absolute sense of the term. However, various relative Buddhist eschatologies were formulated within varied historical conditions wherever Buddhism flourished. In these cosmic visions of decline, not only human conditions are degenerating due to people being driven by afflicting emotions and accumulating negative karma, but also human lifespan becomes shorter.

According to the Mahāyāna tradition, the beginning of this antarakalpa was some kind of Golden Age, when human lifespan was inconceivably long, about eighty thousand years. However, with each generation negative actions – lying, greed, hatred, sexual misconduct, etc. – increased, and as a result, human lifespan decreased. According to the tradition, the first Buddha of this antarakalpa, Krakucchanda Buddha lived when human lifespan was forty thousand years; Kanakamuni Buddha lived when the lifespan was thirty thousand years; Kāśyapa, when the lifespan was twenty thousand years. As our present age is toward the end of this first antarakalpa, lifespan now is less than a hundred years, and in result, Buddha Śākyamuni lived only to the age of 80. According to the

¹⁴ A native of Melamchigyang, who received his khenpo degree from Namdroling Monastery, South India.

¹⁵ KNYD 2003.

¹⁶ Will refer to it from now on as KNYD 1.

Buddhist teaching, in the age of decline the lifespan continues to become shorter until the average life expectancy will be only 10 years. That is the lowest point of the antarakalpa, when "...world-wide armed conflicts will rage only for seven days, during which they will look upon one another as prey."¹⁷ And during this time of war and violence some of them will think: "... Let us not kill or be killed by anyone! Let us make for some grassy thickets or jungle-recesses or clumps of trees. For rivers hard to ford or inaccessible mountains and live on roots and fruits of the forest."¹⁸ These citations are from the Pāli Canon, which was committed into writing in Sri Lanka during the fourth Buddhist Council in the 1st century BCE. It is clear from our Tibetan text that in spite of the number of centuries passed, Buddhist view is based on the same view and same meta-narrative in Tibet, and because of frequent wars, foreign attacks and internal chaos, many lamas think that the final battle mentioned in the sūtra is drawing close. We can safely say, that the main push factors for migration reflected in our Tibetan text are safety threats. The KNYD1 right at the beginning mentions that when central power ceases in Tibet, the Mongolian Black Mudur¹⁹ invades the country and occupies it for 125 years. And even when the Mongol rule perished, there is only chaos left, and it is time to leave Tibet.²⁰ It refers to an event, when the army of the Mongol Dorta the Black invaded Tibet in 1240 (Iron Male Mouse year). It was the time when the Mongolians defeated China and established the Yuan dynasty with its new seat in Beijing. The main political center of Tibet became Sakya, the seat of the Sakya School, who were spiritual advisors of the Yuan emperor. According to the text it was time to leave Tibet, but very few people had the courage to do so. In the last section of the text, there is another historical event mentioned, the fall of the Gungthang kingdom, as another reason to leave Tibet. It says: "Tibet's suffering will start when in Upper Tibet the royal lineage of Mangyul Gungthang will be cut by knife"²¹. The disaster in Tibet will start with a second murder by knife. When the third murder shows that the happiness of Tibet is gone, flee to the hidden lands and southern valleys. That time, those who make it to the Hidden Lands, will find

¹⁷ Ten Suttas 1984: 363.

¹⁸ Dīghanikāya 26.21, Walshe 1987: 402.

¹⁹ See Dudjon 1991: 766, Stein 77-80, Shakabpa 61.

²⁰ This period coincides with the lifetime of Rigzin Godem, who is the assigned author of the text. On authorship and authenticity of the text I wrote elsewhere.

²¹ The Gungthang king will be killed by being stabbed with a knife.

peace. Those, who make it to the southern valleys, don't have to die [from the hand of] evil people. Those, who stay pondering about [the situation] in their homeland²², [...] feel as if crushed by a mountain of duḥkha²³, like a weasel falling into a hole, or wailing as if crushed by a rock, and all of them will be killed. Burning like hay, all the harvest will be destroyed. Those soldiers, who kill everyone, because of their actions, will be reborn in the black house of hell. In such times everyone will be suppressed by duḥkha.”²⁴ This excerpt refers to the year of 1620²⁵, when the king of Tsang conquered Gungthang and exterminated members of its ruling family. That was not the only political problem of the era though. Just a few years later, in 1639, the Gelukpas sought the help of Gushri Khan, the head of Qoshot Mongols to help to defeat the enemies of their school and unify Tibet. Gushri Khan conquered Tibet and displaced the rival dominant school, the Kagyupas. The 5th Dalai Lama, the head of the Gelugpas became the temporal leader of a unified Tibet in 1642, while many Kagyu lamas were killed and their monasteries destroyed by his Mongolian allies. In result, we see Kagyu lamas arriving in Yolmo, like Karma Chosang, who settled in Gotsangling. The third wave of migration I could deduce from Tibetan Lamas' biographies who moved to Yolmo, happened in 1717, when the Dzungar Mongols invaded Tibet, and destroyed many Nyingma monasteries. And we see Nyima Sengge, the Nyingma treasure-revealer founding Tarkeghyang village in 1723, settling down with people accompanying him from the Kyirong area of Tibet. The Dzungar Mongols are often mentioned in Hidden Land texts, but not mentioned in KNYD1, which can lead to the deduction, that the latest parts attached to this compilation were written some time in the 17th century.

Often there are short hints in the text that the lack of social and political stability, civil wars and invasions make sufficient production and subsistence difficult, and notions like “mountains collapse” makes me wonder if they refer to major earthquakes in Tibet.

²² Or with other words delaying to set on the road to go to hidden lands.

²³ The Sanskrit duḥkha (Tib.: *sdug bsngal*) is a central concept of Buddhism. It is translated mostly as “suffering”, as the first of the four truth taught by the Buddha after his enlightenment. It refers to the basic unsatisfactoriness of human existence caused by impermanence. It is quite interesting that the Sanskrit word is used in the text instead of its Tibetan counterpart.

²⁴ KNYD1: 14.

²⁵ It is about the time when Tibetan lamas start migrating and settle in Yolmo.

Another major push factor for Tibetans to leave according to KNYD1 is, that in the declining age, symbolically said, people of every strata of society are shot by Māra's poisonous arrows, the five poisons of Buddhism: desire, ignorance, anger, pride and jealousy, and moral decline causes social instability. The text describes how district chiefs and army commanders burn with anger and jealousy, and fight with each other. Scholars and spiritual teachers turn away from the Dharma and engage in worldly activities. They stop practicing, and only disparage each other. Half of Tibet is in yellow robes, but they are all just pretenders. The ministers and advisors become calculating; don't give advice and don't take advice from others, which cause chaos and civil war. Men are craving for meat all the time, and hunt for deer, catch fish with arrows. When they don't find more, they slaughter their own cattle, eat red meat, drink blood, and at the end of times they eat the flesh of their own fathers. Women spread rumors and slander that causes discord in the family and between masters and servants. Greed and craving grows stronger among people, and they kill each other and take others' wealth. "This is how the seven poisonous arrows of Māra will be shot on Tibet. Similarly to a small bird carried away by a hawk, Tibetans are not able to focus their thoughts, but argue with each other. And because they attack each other and fight, they live only for thirty years. That time, the virtuous ones, possessing the thought of enlightenment²⁶, those having determination and physical strength, entourage and provisions, if they look for the road and size the land, by having skilful means and favourable circumstances will capture all the Hidden Lands."²⁷

Another, and I think a very important push factor for lamas moving to Yolmo was their fear of religious persecution. The text emphasizes the importance of religious practice, and how certain rituals or mantras performed can protect practitioners from being effected by the general moral decline of society. It is also often mentioned that in famous temples like Samye, the first monastery of Tibet, and the Lhasa Tsuglagkhang, the center of the Tibetan mandala, the performance of daily rituals ceased, they are about to be destroyed by foreign armies or already in ruins, which all point to an unfavourable environment for Buddhist practice. It can also mean, that an important consideration

²⁶ Skt.: bodhicitta

²⁷ KNYD1: 4-5.

when deciding to leave Tibet was the chance to preserve Tibetan culture outside Tibet, and be able to continue lineage practices. It is also quite obvious from many Treasure texts, that the idea to live in Hidden Lands was driven by sentiments of the golden age of the imperial era of Tibet (7-10th cent.), and as Childs tried to prove in one of his articles, the reason to reach a Hidden Land could have been to preserve the imperial lineage²⁸. I partly agree with it, in the same time also think, the *rgyal rigs* in these texts doesn't necessary refer to royal origin, but to people with noble ancestry (the word is used in the same sense by Yolmos today), the Tibetan aristocracy, who feared persecution during times of social unrest and foreign invasion.

2.2. Pull factors:

For examining the pull factors of migration, I will look at another text attributed to Rigzin Godem called *Sbas pad ma tshal gyi lam yig* or "Guidebook to the Hidden Lotus Grove"²⁹, a guide written for those who want to find the Hidden Land of Yolmo Snow Enclosure, part of the same collection, the *Byang gter lung bstan*. From the description of Yolmo it seems it is an uninhabited place outside of political control. "If you look from Samye one-two yojana³⁰ far to the southwest, Yolmo Snow Enclosure shall be [there]. It is also called the Hidden Lotus Grove. It has a peak joining six upland valleys and three connected valleys on the slopes of high snow mountains. It is north of Bodh Gaya, northeast of the city of Li³¹, underneath Mangyul³². On a hillside of Buddha Shakyamuni's Lay Follower³³, on the western slope of the Chief of the Twelve Goddesses³⁴. You can see Liyul from that place [from Yolmo]. At the time when people live up to sixty, the path is found, and when the lifespan is about fifty, settlements will be established."³⁵ Yolmo as a Hidden Land is seen as a place where an ideal society can be established, the one like in the golden age of Tibet, and people can live again in a socially

²⁸ Childs 1999.

²⁹ Will refer to it as KNYD2.

³⁰ Measure of distance used in ancient India.

³¹ Kathmandu in this case.

³² *Mang yul*. Part of Lower Western Tibet, Ngari Me. Area of southern Tibet north of Yolmo.

³³ It refers to Genyen Leru, a mountain in Yolmo.

³⁴ *Bstan ma bcu gnyis*: twelve goddesses of Tibet. Here name of a mountain.

³⁵ KNYD2: 20-21.

and politically stable environment in complete harmony. “The king should be born in the year of the ox, dragon or tiger; the queen in the year of the sheep, monkey or bird; the ordained monks should possess knowledge, discipline, and kindness, all three. The Tantric yogi should keep his samaya³⁶; the bonpo should not offend the Se³⁷, and thirteen laymen possessing great physical strength should be present. They should [all] live in harmony, and the kingdom should be governed in accord with the Dharma.” Then the text praises the richness of the natural environment: “On the three plains [...] all kinds of grains grow. As there are various kinds of plants, there are all kinds of herbivores; and because there is nutritious grass, there are all kinds of four-legged animals. If the killing of wild animals is prohibited, the king will enjoy long life. Recite sūtras, [and perform] sādhanās of Amitāyus and Uṣṇīṣavijayā³⁸. Build four stūpas in the four directions of the path, and erect a glorious rice-heap stūpa in the centre; that is the way to make a land fortunate³⁹. [...] There is summer and winter [similarly] to the city of Li. Protect particularly the dharma treasures and tend cattle, horse, sheep in the upper part of the land. On the lower part six grains grow, in the center the imperial law rules. At the three road-gates market places should be established. Furthermore, because it is a fortunate land, people have the treasure of good health, long life and great wealth. Having the five kinds of precious things is the symbol of collected prophetic treasures. If a beast of prey appears in that land, give offering to Leru⁴⁰, if a yeti appears, give offering to Dorje Legpa, if large and small birds appear, give offering to Chati’s snow mountain.”⁴¹ Beyond the fertility of the place and the abundance of food supply, another pull factor could have been the fact, that according to the Treasure teachings Guru Rinpoche blessed these lands, and people can live there under his protection. He also subjugated the local mountain gods and turned them into protectors of the Dharma, so migrants don’t have to be afraid of hostile elemental forces turning against them. And because these local gods are bound under oath to protect Buddhist practitioners who keep their vows, they will also save them from becoming prey of wild animals. Guru Rinpoche’s blessing ensures

³⁶ *Dam tshig*. Series of vows or precepts.

³⁷ *Gsas* is used for Bon deities in general like *Iha* for Buddhists.

³⁸ Visualization practices for long life.

³⁹ By building these stūpas, the holy place will be consecrated.

⁴⁰ Genyen Leru

⁴¹ KNYD2 21-22.

health, long life and prosperity for this life, and it is also the precondition of attaining liberation, the freedom from a “migratory existence”. The KNYD2 rounds off the praise of Yolmo with the following words: “May the door of Ogmin⁴², Ngonga⁴³, Palden, Dechen⁴⁴ and Lerab⁴⁵ one above the other, the five-peaked Khechara⁴⁶, the Potala⁴⁷ and Canglocen⁴⁸, all the law-abiding hidden lands and similar lands, valleys and mountain, ranges, rocky places and caves open when people arrive there, and may they all attain the ordinary and extraordinary without exception! May all beings reach the place of liberation! May they realize the pure land of the three bodies!”

2.3. Networks

As it is shown by the texts, many push and pull factors of migration are present, and there are even some additional ones related to cultural and religious considerations. Rigzin Godem, who [partly] authored this text in the 14th century, and other Treasure-revealer yogis who followed his footsteps can be seen as migration pioneers, who created weak tie networks during their travels in the Himalayan borderlands looking for places to practice, or trying to find Hidden Lands, where the environment supports spiritual realization. The KNYD1 advises its reader to build good relationship with locals on the way, build resting places on the routes to the Hidden Lands, set up small monastic or yogi communities and temples, and in case the traveller has poor livelihood, it even offers ideas where is material treasure hidden (gold, turquoise, *gzi* stones), which can be used partly to support his livelihood, partly for erecting buildings for others following behind: “Those going to Lapchi and Snowy Yolmo! On the east of Sangsang Lhadrak⁴⁹, there is a trench filled with gold and *gzi* stones, each piece is the size of a goat’s liver. Take them, and erect a

⁴² ‘Og min: Akanishta realm

⁴³ Mngon dga’. Abhirati. Akshobhya’s pure land.

⁴⁴ *Bde ba chen po*. Skt. Sukhavati, the western pure land of Amitabha.

⁴⁵ Pure land.

⁴⁶ The buddhafield of Vajra Varahi.

⁴⁷ The pure land of Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva of compassion.

⁴⁸ *Lcang lo can*. The buddhafield of Vajradhara, Vajrapani, Kuvera, Vaishravana.

⁴⁹ *Zang zang lha brag*. THL Place ID: F8193. According to the Northern Treasure tradition, Padma-sambhava concealed a various texts and sacred objects in a maroon casket here, which were revealed by Rigzin Godem in 1366. These were the Northern Treasures.

resthouse in the Gyalthang⁵⁰ valley. On the pass of Nanam⁵¹ create a monastic community.”⁵² The text recounts a long list of material treasures hidden on routes going to the seven hidden lands, which makes it look as if it was a conscious scheme to set up infrastructure and weak tie networks in order to facilitate migration. The Treasure-revealer yogis wandering in the Himalaya in search of Hidden Lands created weak tie networks not only with locals but also with other high lamas, political luminaries, Nepali rulers. As they had good resources to facilitate their movements, they could travel a lot, and had access to a higher volume of information not only by communicating with others, but also by getting access to texts or even circulating books or ideas in the form of teachings themselves.

3. The clan system of Yolmo today:

Kinship is an important social institution that determines one's marriage opportunities and social identity. Yolmos are endogamous at the level of the ethnic group, but exogamous on the level of the clan. Incest taboo prohibits the marriage of members of the same clan. Since it is a patrilineal system, the father's sister's children and the mother's brother's children do not belong to the same clan. Clan membership concerns more than just the reproduction of society, though marriage is what every Yolmo would mention first as the arena where clan membership plays the most important role. In many societies kinship has also great importance in politics, in the management of everyday affairs, in economic investments and business, but in Yolmo society this aspect of clan membership doesn't seem to be much articulated. The kin groups are unilineal that is common in the patrilineal system: the children become members of the father's kin group. Clan membership also determines the transmission of resources between generations; in the non-lama clans the youngest son would inherit the house and the fields (ultimogeniture). It also determines succession, for instance in lama clans, the oldest son would inherit his father's 'office', with all its specified rights and duties. It is

⁵⁰ *Rgyal thang*. Today it is a Tibetan county in the northwest of Yunnan Province.

⁵¹ *Sna nam*, name of a great mountain range in Tibet.

⁵² KNYD1: 12.

very rare that someone is appointed or elected on the basis of personal merit, but it can happen if there is no offspring. The pattern of residence is virilocal, the newly weds settle in the man's household. All valuable resources descend through the agnatic line: inheritance, property rights, succession, place of residence, marriage partner, children and political rights.

It was quite astonishing to learn, that in this area⁵³, the northern part of Helambu, where today local people say there are only "Yolmo villages", Graham E. Clarke observed a completely different situation in the early 70s. He found a society of Lama people living high up on the mountainside in dichotomy with Tamang people, who were their tenant farmers living in the river valley, providing offerings to the Lama people for their religious services and giving their daughters to them in marriage.⁵⁴ Now, forty years later, everyone calls himself a Yolmowa in the villages where I work, and only in the southern part of Helambu can we find Tamang villages in the valley. People present their community as a fairly homogenous Buddhist society, where there is no or very little difference between lama clans and others. Most people would ignore the Bonpos when talking about the village community, who seemed to be an integral part of their society before, as their number is very small in the villages. The Yolmo clan organization shows non-hierarchical characteristics (segmentary), as all members of the clan regard each other as relatives, even if they are not able to name a single living common relative and don't know how close or far their family lineages are from each other. In the same time they all know the story of their common ancestor, the Thogmar Meme (conical)⁵⁵ – the male ancestor or literally the first grandfather – who is the forefather of the clan.

During my fieldworks, I conducted several interviews with Yolmos on their clan histories, and noticed that they use mainly the following three categories for identifying themselves:

⁵³ Tarkeghyang and the neighbouring villages.

⁵⁴ Clarke 1985: 194.

⁵⁵ *Thog mar me me*.

Draft only. Not to be cited or circulated further.

1. The lineage of bone (*rus rgyud*⁵⁶): refers to the clan, the paternal lineage of ancestors.
2. The lineage of race (*mi rgyud*): refers to ethnic group/gotra/*mi rigs*. They would say, they belong to the Lhasa gotra, meaning that they are Nepali people, but the Mongoloid kind.
3. Lineage of Dharma (*chos rgyud*): refers to their religious lineage, the line of their Buddhist teachers, and the set of rituals they perform.

Depending on the social status of their ancestors, they classify their clans (*rus pa*, Y.: *riwa*) as

- a. *rgyal rigs*: royal or noble ancestry
- b. *chos rigs*: lama ancestry
- c. *dmangs rigs*: common ancestry
- d. *bon po rigs*: bon ancestry

On my fieldworks between 2011 and 2013, I have met members of the following clans in the villages I have visited⁵⁷:

Lama clans (*bla ma rus pa*):

1. Nyingma lama (*rnying ma bla ma*)
2. Sermo lama (*gsar ma bla ma*)
3. Tennyi Lingpa lama (*bstan gnyis gling pa bla ma*)
4. Lhalungpa lama (*lha lung pa bla ma*)

Common clans (*dmangs pa 'i rus pa*):

⁵⁶ I used the Wylie system for Tibetan transliteration for Yolmo words in italics. As Yolmo has no written form, I follow the Tibetan orthography in my transliteration, where the Yolmo pronunciation is identical with the standard central Tibetan pronunciation of the word. When the Yolmo pronunciation is different, I added the transcription of the Yolmo word after the Tibetan transliteration.

⁵⁷ Tarkeghyang, Melamchighyang, Sermathang, Taongsa, Nakote, Manikharka, Gangkharka, Gotsangling, Gangyul, Kakani, Thimbu.

7. Dongba
8. Shangba
9. Chaba
10. Tongso
11. Ghale
12. Yöba

There is no village, where members of all clans are present. Every village is usually a community of one lama clan and 4-6 non-lama clans.

4. Written and oral histories on the origin of clans:

4.1. Nyingma lama (*rnying ma bla ma*): The first ancestor of this Yolmo clan is Ngachang Shakya Sangpo, a famous Treasure-finder, who received “introductory lists” (*kha byang*) in Tibet in the first years of the 16th century to open the Hidden Land of the Lotus Grove. He was living in Mangyul that time, and according to the folk story, one day when meditating on Riwo Palbar⁵⁸, he threw his ritual cake⁵⁹ and sandalwood stick high up to the sky, and decided, that he will settle where his *gtor ma* and stick reached the ground. After a lot of walking he still hasn’t found them, and decided to settle and meditate for three years, three months, and three days in a cave. One day, when he was close to finishing his retreat, the local mountain goddess, Ama Yangri⁶⁰ appeared in his vision in the form of a beautiful young girl, and told him: “Your *gtor ma* and stick are close by, just walk down the mountain a bit, and you’ll see them. The *gtor ma* is in the middle of that flat ground, and the sandalwood tree above grew out of your stick”. It was all just as the goddess said, and Ngachang Shakya Sangpo started building a temple on that flat ground. We don’t know much of his life, except that he was born in a village called *Drang so* on the southern part of Tibet, lived and meditated in Mangyul in famous

⁵⁸ ‘The Mountain of Blazing Splendour’, famous place for yogis to meditate in Mangyul, southern Tibet. Milarepa meditated there, and after the Gungthang king donated a temple to Rigdzin Godem, it became the center of *byang gter* practitioners.

⁵⁹ *Gtor ma*

⁶⁰ Ama Yangri is the local protector of Yolmo, the goddess of prosperity. Her residence is on the peak above Tarkeghyang village on 3771 m. Ama Yangri is usually depicted as a dakini riding on a dragon.

places of the Northern Treasure tradition, traveled widely in Tibet and Nepal as a treasure-revealer, extracted a Treasure from the stupa of Samye monastery in 1512, which was the Great Legend of the Stupa Jarung Khashor, and went to Nepal to excavate the stupa and rebuilt it. As many Yolmos started using “Hyolmo” as a group identifier attached after their name, Ngachang Shakya Sangpo’s descendants, the members of the nyingma lama clan, started using Drangsong (*drang song* meaning “Brahmin” or “high cast” in Tibetan) showing that they belong to the oldest and most prestigious group of Yolmowas. This identifier is based on nothing else than a quite unfortunate misspelling of the Treasure-revealer’s native village name *Drang so*. Ngachang Shakya Sangpo not only became the ancestor of a clan in Yolmo, but also the first member of an incarnation lineage, the Yolmowa Chenpos’, whose first five reincarnations lived in Yolmo.

4.2. Sermo lama (*gsar ma bla ma*):

The members of the sermo lama⁶¹ clan consider Karma Chosang, a Tibetan lama to be their ancestor, who came to Yolmo in the early 17th century. As I mentioned already, it was a time of religious persecution in Tibet, and Karma Chosang came to Yolmo exactly during those years when the troops of Gushri Khan were destroying Kagyu monasteries. However, his visit in Yolmo wasn’t the first one of lamas of his school. One of the main disciples of Milarepa’s famous biographer, the Tsangnyon Heruka, Gotshang Repa Natshog Rangdrol⁶² is said to be the founder of Gortsaling⁶³ village in Yolmo Gangra. People think that the name of the settlement derives from his name, because he stayed there for a long time meditating. In the middle of the 16th century, one of his disciples, Jampa Puntshog⁶⁴ visited Gortsaling and consecrated the first temple there in 1556, built by Lama Kunga, who had died before the completion. I was wondering why members of the sermo lama clan consider themselves to be descendants of Karma Chosang, a Kagyu

⁶¹ Though Clarke speculates widely on the meaning of sermo (Clarke 1980a: 53) saying that it could mean ‘monk who broke his vows’ or ‘golden’, I personally think it is the local pronunciation of the Tibetan word *gsar ma*, referring to the new schools developing during the second dissemination of the Teaching in Tibet (kagyupa, sakyapa and later gelukpa), as the forefather of this clan belonged to the Kagyupas.

⁶² *Rgod tshang ras pa sna tshogs rang grol* (1494-1559)

⁶³ The local pronunciation is Gortsaling, but in other parts of Yolmo and in written sources it is mentioned as Rgod tshang gling, the ‘Place of Gotshang’.

⁶⁴ *Byams pa phun tshogs* (1503-1581)

lama who came from Rechung Phug only in the early 17th, when other lamas of the same school and even the same monastery visited the place before. The answer I have found in a locally composed text of his lineage history. It says: „...the story of [how] Karma Chosang came to Yolmo. The place of the lama – who was supported by the donors of Yolmo Snow Enclosure – was Rechung Phug in Tö. Though it is a faraway place, for the sake of the dead and living⁶⁵, they [the donors of Yolmo] went there to invite the lama. Lama Karma Chosang, accompanied by the chant master, Karma Thubten⁶⁶; the master of discipline, Karma Gelek and other students, altogether eight people⁶⁷ came to Yolmo and settled. The very work of the donors was completed. The donors headed by the Yolmo elders supplicated the following way: ‘Precious Guru! The place of the lama – supported by Yolmo donors – is very far. Please, settle here and stay, and accept the life of a householder!’ [The lama said:] ‘I am pure and unstained [a monk with vows], however, if you, donors think this way, I will ask my root lama to consider all the circumstances for the welfare of my donors. If [my] lama doesn’t give permission, I won’t return.’ Karma Thubten, the chant master was appointed to be the lama’s representative in Yolmo, and [the lama, Karma Chosang] went to Tö, to Rechung Phug⁶⁸, and stayed there for three years. Then Shabdrung Drubchog Wangpo⁶⁹ told him: ‘Karma Chosang, you get my permission to become a householder, because your lineage and [your work] is to benefit the people in Yolmo’. After the permission was given, he returned to Yolmo. He took a consort, Ibi⁷⁰ Yidam, and also Lady Ibi Yidam’s daughter⁷¹, Thribtse Yangtshunma. Both ibis’ belonged to the shangba⁷² clan.’⁷³ This is

⁶⁵ *Gshin gson* instead of *shin son*.

⁶⁶ *Cheb gres* is probably a misspelling of *chos khrims*, meaning ‘master of discipline’. See Ehrhard 2004: 599.

⁶⁷ *Dpon slob bryad* instead of *dpon slob gyang*. See Ehrhard 2004: 599.

⁶⁸ *Ras chung phug*: Rechunpa’s cave. It is situated above the confluence of the Yarlung and Chongye rivers in Central Tibet. The cave was the residence of *Rje Ras chung pa Rdo rje Drag* (1083-1161), the renowned disciple of Milarepa, and teacher of Ratna Lingpa. He traveled in India and Nepal, and among others he had a Nepali master in Tibet, Bepo Asu. Another important figure associated with Rechung Phug was *Tsang smyon Heruka* (1452-1507), Milarepa’s biographer, who also widely traveled in Nepal. Both of them were crazy yogis (*smyon ba*), and initiates of Milarepa’s Cakrasamvara-lineage. See Dowman 1988: 187.

⁶⁹ *Dbang po* instead of *dbang pa*. Drubchog Wangpo (1563-1618) was a famous Kagyu master.

⁷⁰ Ibi and Meme are words used in Yolmo for denoting and addressing grandmother and grandfather, but they use these words to refer to maternal and paternal ancestors, or anyone in the family who deserves higher respect.

⁷¹ *Bu mo* can mean daughter but also maid.

quite a different case from the Nyingma Treasure-revealer stories. Here it seems the village had a long relationship with the monastery, which is not near Yolmo on the border, but up in Yarlung in Central Tibet. The villagers were sponsors of the monastery, and invited lamas also before, but a new clan is formed in the community only when the lama became a householder and married two local ladies from the shangba clan. He couldn't be assimilated by marriage, because he is a male and a highly respected Tibetan lama, and the kin groups of Yolmo are patrilinear. In order to become a member of the local community a new clan had to be formed by him and his descendants. The existence of the clan also assured that the lama's temple, land and "office" will be inherited by his direct descendants. And because in lama clans, as I mentioned before, only the oldest son can inherit everything, the younger ones have no other opportunity than create independent collateral lineages. Graham E. Clarke illustrated in detail in his dissertation (1980, unpublished) how birth parity affects the propensity to migrate among members of householder lama families, and how younger sons had a higher propensity to migrate in order to form collateral lineages.

4.3. Tennyi Lingpa lama (*bstan gnyis gling pa bla ma*):

The ancestor of the Tennyi Lingpa clan is Nyima Sengge, a Treasure-revealer, who lived in Kyirong, and a 5th generation descendent of Tennyi Lingpa, a famous Tibetan yogi and Treasure-revealer. According to his biography⁷⁴, Nyima Sengge traveled around the Himalayan region looking for Hidden Lands, and spent considerable time meditating, where the local goddess Ama Yangri appeared in his vision and promised him to provide everything for his livelihood while he is doing retreat in Yolmo. After his travels he returned to Mangyul and he returned to Kathmandu only when he was invited by Jaya Jgajjaya, the ruler of Kathmandu to stop an epidemic. He received a landgrant for his

⁷² They both belonged to the shangba clan. The Tibetan text uses the female form of the same word. Local lamas today would explain the role of these women as donors. They would serve the lama and when the lama has to travel, one of them would accompany him, and the other would take care of the home. They also had children, who inherited the lama's wealth and office, and the younger ones moved to other parts of Yolmo to start new temple villages.

⁷³ *Kar ma pa bla ma'i chags rab*. Manuscript photographed by me in Sermathang in 2012.

⁷⁴ *Gu ru Suurya Sengge'i rnam thar mdor bsdus nges shes 'dren pa'i shing rta*. Manuscript photographed by me in 2006 in Tarkeghyang.

services in 1723. The date shows that he left Tibet just after the Dzungar invasion, and it is even mentioned in his biography, written by his son, that he was doing *dmag zlog* practices to stop the Dzungar army. He married a lady from the Domar clan, another family of famous Tibetan lamas, who were already established nearby in Langtang, but still had strong ties with their Tibetan monasteries. Also in his case we can see the different factors (like fear of persecution because of noble origin, and religious status, living in the border region) supporting the idea of migration, but we can ask why in the Treasure-revealer biographies always the yogi himself is the only hero seemingly traveling by himself, meeting local goddesses and finding Treasures, stopping epidemics, building temples all alone. I think it is only because they are portrayed in their hagiographies like Guru Rinpoche, the “archetype of Treasure-revealers”. From the oral histories of another clan it became clear for me later, that he arrived to Yolmo to settle with a whole village from the Kyirong area, who were the sponsors of the lama.

4.4. Lhalungpa lama (*lha lung pa bla ma*):

Tendzin Norbu, the 3rd Yolmoba Chenpo (1598-1644) as he was busy in Tibet, appointed his disciple Rigzin Togden Wangpo, to be in charge of the temples in Yolmo, and the estate of the great Jarung Kashor Stupa. He also recognized him as a reincarnation of a lineage starting with Lhalung Palgyi Dorje⁷⁵. Rigzin Togden Wangpo or one of his predecessors founded a temple in Milimchim (Melamchighyang), as recounted in the oral tradition of the local elders. Tendzin Norbu’s biography records that while in Yolmo, among other places he also visited the temple of Milimchim. Rigzing Togden Wangpo’s son, Zilnon Wangyal Dorje (1647-1716) was recognized as the 4th Yolmoba Tulku, and the latter’s biography also mentions Milimchim as one of the temples he has to take over after his father’s death. These textual references show that there was a temple in Milimchim before Zilnon Wangyal Dorje founded the Amitabha chapel there some time in the 1670ies following an ancient prophecy by Guru Rinpoche. He installed a clay statue of Buddha Amitabha as the main image, and placed the Guru’s jewel millstone

⁷⁵ The 9th abbot of Samye Monastery, who assassinated King Langdharma in 842.

inside the temple, which is there even today. The Lhalungpa lineage continued with his two sons⁷⁶, who also lived in Yolmo. During the Ranas the Yolmo Lamas fell out of favour, because the Rana government was afraid that they will side with the Tibetans during Chinese-Nepalese war. To spread his influence and control again to this area, Jung Bahadur granted Milimchim and the stewardship of the Boudha Stupa to the first Chini Lama, Taipo Shing in 1859. He was a Nyingmapa Buddhist from Sichuan, China, who settled in Boudha after going there on pilgrimage. In 1853, at the conclusion of the Chinese-Nepalese war, Jung Bahadur invited him to the palace to interpret during the peace discussions. In recognition of his services to the Rana prime minister he got the lands and the stewardship. From this time on Yolmo loses its significance in mediating between Tibet and Nepal, and even its Yolmowa Chenpo lineage moves away to southwestern Tibet.

4.5. - 4.12. Non-lama clans

It would be much too long to include here all the oral histories treasured by the other clans. Instead of going into details, I would just summarize what they told me about their origin. The Dongbas say, their first Meme came from the east, from Solo Khumbu eleven generations ago. His name was Meme Lhabtsen Dharpo and he came with his sister and the Shangba Meme and his sister to do a three years retreat in Yolmo. After the Shangba Meme married the Dongba Ibi, and the Dongba Meme married the Shangba Ibi, their home community disinherited them, so they settled in Yolmo, and worked first as temple servants, and later started their own village temples, the Dongbas in Taongsa, and the Shangbas in Shamger. Chabas say they are originally from the north, from Langthang, and they have two sublineages in Yolmo, one is Langthang Chaba, the other is Parkhang Chaba⁷⁷. The first ancestor of Tongso people was called Meme Karma Wangchug.⁷⁸ The ancestral place of the Tongso clan is Tongsi, a place near Kyirong in southern Tibet.

⁷⁶ Tsedak Dorje and Gyaltsab Dorje

⁷⁷ Parkhang is the name of a village near Nakote on the hillside above the Melamchi Kola.

⁷⁸ The section on Tongsos is based on interviews conducted in 2006 and 2013 with TsD and KT in Tarkeghyang.

Meme Karma Wangchug was a sponsor of Nyima Sengge⁷⁹, the lama of Kyirong, who founded Tarkeghyang village in Yolmo. When the lama decided to move to the southern side of the Himalayas, Meme Karma Wangchug accompanied him with his family, and also another group of sponsors called Ayogpas, who also settled in tarkeghyang but their clan died out later. In Melamchighyang, and on the western part of Yolmo in general, there is a big Ghale population. Ghales might have come earlier from Tibet, but we know for certain, that in Nepal they are one of the four clans of the Gurungs. The Yoeba ancestor was Meme Guru Tshering, who was from a village near Kyirong called Gi'ug. Yoebas have a very entertaining long story about how their ancestor, who was in prison managed to escape twice, and after he killed one of the soldiers chasing him by accident, he really had to escape from Tibet. In Kathmandu he met the then already powerful lama Zilnon Wangyal Dorje⁸⁰, who was also from the same area in Tibet, and who told him to settle down in Milimchim, which was his domain that time.

5. Cumulative causation:

Massey's cumulative causation model illustrates that each case of successful migration alters the culture of migration. Maybe the biggest Yolmo migration happened in the first years of the 20th century, when a number of families moved to the Darjeeling area to find a better living. Though these communities first settled in separate temple villages like Aloorbari, they assimilated fast and don't speak the Yolmo language any more. However, they still consider themselves Yolmos and maintain their clan system. Many Yolmos worked on road constructions in India again in the last decades, especially in Arunachal Pradesh, Spiti and Himachal Pradesh, and when managed to accumulate a bit of profit, they ran restaurants or small shops. Their sons were often sent to monasteries to get free education. From 1991 Yolmos started buying houses in Kathmandu, especially in the Boudha area and setting up businesses. From the late 90s many went abroad to work. The US, Israel, Dubai all has a sizable Yolmo community. These migrant workers often move back to Nepal after 6-7 years of work, whenever they manage to build a big house in the

⁷⁹ The Tennyi Lingpa clan's *thog mar me me*.

⁸⁰ He was the 4th Yolmowa Chenpo (1647-1716).

Kathmandu valley, which provides sufficient income for the years to come. They often leave their children with relatives in Nepal or in boarding schools. The support of the Melamchi Water Project caused a sudden building boom of monasteries since 2005 in Yolmo, and Melamchighyang and Sermathang built big local boarding schools, which helps to retain some of the population. Many people choose to spend most of the year in Kathmandu though, and stay in their village house only during festivals, or during the rainy season.

6. Conclusions:

I have used this opportunity to look at migrations as interrelated processes rather than singular events and see how written and oral sources related to 16-18th century migrations help to elucidate the social structure and an emerging Yolmo identity we experience today. The main points I tried to make in my paper were that the main factors inducing migration (push factors) based on Treasure literature could have been safety threats like foreign invasion, civil war and religious conflicts; subsistence threats like famine, draught, earthquakes or failed harvest, and the fear that because of moral decline the Buddhist teaching and Tibetan culture can't be preserved inside Tibet. Some biographies of lamas also testify, that Tibetan yogis often traveled in the Himalaya, sometimes spending long time in meditation, and often visiting the Kathmandu valley renovating Buddhist monuments like the two most famous stupas, the Jarung Khashor in Bodhnath and the one in Swayambhu. During their journeys they explored remote mountain valleys, and by making friends with local people they created weak tie networks, which they used on return when they moved to Yolmo to settle. From the description of Treasure texts it is also clear, that these Himalayan valleys seemed to be uninhabited places outside of political control, and what made them even more desirable was, that the natural environments was rich, without any difficulties of social or political nature like in Tibet, and it was considered to be a sacred land blessed by Guru Rinpoche. These were discussed as pull factors.

By looking at the clan histories, I tried to show that though all the lama clans came from Tibet, and some other clans were sponsors accompanying them, some Yolmo

clans seem to be indigenous Himalayan groups, who followed an east-west direction in their migration, and territoriality and shared culture that makes all of them to call themselves a Yolmowa today.

I'd like to quote one of the village lamas, who I met in Yolmo, in his small temple on a forested steep hillside in 2012. When I asked him to tell me something about the significance of living in the Hidden land of Yolmo Gangra, he told me the following words:

“The day when Sangye Chomdende (Buddha Shakyamuni) died, his head was pointing towards Yolmo. It was a very good sign showing that Yolmo will be very fortunate in the future. During the final war, when all humans die, only Yolmo people will survive. In that war people will not carry weapons or bombs, they will just use gas. That time you have to recite the mantra (*sngags*) of Dorje Kotak. His mantra will block the poisonous gas. We Yolmos should be like the fish of the same pond. Fish of the same pond never fight each other. We should not think that we are bigger or smaller than others. No one is big or small. The only thing is that people have a different level of knowledge. Is it good if an illiterate person is the head of the school? No. If anyone says “I am big”, it should mean that he has bigger heart and bigger love.”⁸¹

⁸¹ Interview with TKT April, 2013.

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