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## Pilgrims in Search of Sacred Lands

“Sacred landscape is a constellation of natural phenomena constituted as a meaningful system by means of artificial and religious signs, by telling names or etiological stories fixed to certain places, and by rituals which actualize the space.” (Cancik, 1985–1986: 260)

### Introduction

Tibetan pilgrimage practices have attracted a lot of scholarly interest in recent years, and it seems that some Tibetologists have become pilgrims themselves, engaged in search for sacred lands in the Himalayan valleys and in Tibet proper. Concerning the motivation of the individual Tibetan pilgrim who descends from the harsh climate of the trans-Himalaya to the heat and humidity of the regions in the south, I quote two statements that can be found in the relevant literature. They were produced by Tibetan pilgrims – a layman and an educated *lama* – when asked for the “basic reason” or “main cause” (*rtsa don*) for their spiritual travels:

Why did I go on pilgrimage you ask? All of pilgrimage comes from the utterance of the Buddha. Without the utterance of the Buddha nothing of pilgrimage would exist. Because of the utterance of the Buddha I made the round of the *gNas*. The utterance of the Buddha was the *rTsa-don*.  
*gNas-skor* comes out of the utterance of the Buddha just as all of reli-

gion has so come into being .... It is not like the rules which are set down in the *sūtras* and which one must obey, yet it is the utterance of the Buddha, nevertheless, which is the root of pilgrimage.<sup>1</sup>

Concerning the motivation of Tibetologists in their search for understanding sacred lands we will not find the same unanimity; but we can detect at least one common feature with the Tibetan pilgrims. The “utterance of the Buddha” again functions as the mainspring of their endeavours: this is the case if we take this expression in the sense of religious books or texts of Buddhism, especially those which describe the spiritual qualities of a landscape considered sacred by the Tibetan tradition. Obtaining a copy of the so-called “guidebook” (*lam yig*) or “inventory” (*dkar chag[s]*) of a specific site means for the Tibetologist to gain access to the “utterance of the Buddha” describing that specific site.

Since the inventory to the region of Mustang as a sacred land has already been dealt with on several occasions – and since the subject of this paper is the “search” of pilgrims – I propose to follow another track: I will consult the “biographies” (*rnam thar*) of two Tibetan *lamas* who have visited the pilgrimage sites in northern and southern Mustang at different times.<sup>2</sup> We thus get a glimpse into the sacred landscape as it was conceived by individual pilgrims. Like the guidebooks and the inventories, the biographies survive as manuscripts in village temples and in households or in modern day library collections.

1 For making available the writings of Sangye Sangpo from the Tucci Tibetan Fund I have to acknowledge the help of E. De Rossi Filibeck and the staff of the Istituto per l’Africa et l’Oriente, Rome. Words of thanks also to Niels Gutschow for providing the two maps, to John Harrison for the sketch of Gekar, and to Hilde Peetz for joining a tour to Northern Mustang in the summer of 1995. Ekvall & Downs 1987: 129; “utterance of the Buddha” is the translation of *sangs rgyas kyi bka’*. The Tibetan terms *gnas* and *gnas skor* can be translated respectively as “sacred site” and “to move round [a] sacred site[s]”, i. e. to go on pilgrimage.

2 For the *dkar-chag[s]* genre as the primary “literary aspect” of Tibetan pilgrimage see Large-Blondeau 1960: 213–15. A critical stance against this genre as “only superficially helpful” and as “obliterat[ing] landscape” is taken by Huber 1994: 34 and by Ramble 1995: 115–16; compare the view in Ehrhard 1997: 336–346 that the existence of corresponding texts, i. e. inventories and guide-books, generates perception of sacred landscape in the Tibetan cultural sphere.

Map documenting Orgyen Chöphel's pilgrimages to Bodhnāth and Svayambhūnāth in Nepal in 1791 and to Mustang in 1801.  
Drawing Niels Gutschow



### Orgyen Chöphel and his travels to Congzhi and Muktināth

This *lama* was born in the year 1755 in the region of the sacred mountain Kang Tise (Kailāśa) in Western Tibet. He received the name Orgyen Chöphel (“The one who increases the teaching of Orgyen [Rinpoche]”) because he was born on the tenth day of the Tibetan month, which is dedicated to the memory of Guru Padmasambhava. The most important teacher of Orgyen Chöphel was a Sakyapa master from the Ngorpa tradition called Ngawang Kunga Lhundrub (d. 1773); this master had founded a monastery at the site of Pöri near the sacred lake Mapham Tsho (Mānosārovar), and it was there that the young boy received his spiritual training.<sup>3</sup> A special feature of this training was that he obtained mainly transmissions of “treasure

teachings” (*gter chos*) of the Nyingmapa school from the discoveries of Rigzin Garwang Dorje (1640–1685) and Rigzin Jatsön Nyingpo (1585–1656); this is not surprising given that his teacher, Ngawang Kunga Lhundrub, was regarded as an incarnation of the last-named treasure-discoverer.

Until his thirty-fifth year, i. e. up to 1790, Orgyen Chöphel stayed mainly at the monastery of Pöri, and he interrupted his spiritual practices only occasionally to visit important temples in the Kang Tise region. The autobiography mentions especially the temple of Khochak (Khojarnāth) as the main goal of these “regional pilgrimages” of Orgyen Chöphel; on this spot he circumambulated and paid his respects to the three statues of Mañjuśrī, Avalokiteśvara and Vajrapāṇi, known to Tibetan pilgrims under the name “Lords [who are the] protectors of the three [tantric] families” (*jo bo rigs gsum mgon po*).



*Svayambhūnāth in Nepal: Orgyen Chöphel brought offerings to this site in 1791, photo Niels Gutschow, 1986.*

<sup>3</sup> For the early education of Orgyen Chöphel see rNam-thar I, fols. 27b/2–36b/2 (*chos sgor zhugs pa'i gros byas tshul*); the complete text covers events up to the year 1811. Pöri is an old sacred site in the Mapham Tsho region known to followers of the Bönpo school; see Tenzin Namdak: *Lung gi snying po*, pp. 40.17–18. For the term “The great sacred sites, the mountains and the lake, [these] three” (*gnas chen ri mtsho gsum*) – comprising the two mountains Kang Tise and Pöri, together with the sacred lake Mapham Tsho – see also (Bellezza 1997: 16).

The first of his travels which can be understood in the sense of a “transregional pilgrimage” started in 1791 and brought Orgyen Chöphel to the region of Mangyül and its district town Kyirong. After visiting the temple of Jamdrin he came into the presence of the famous Jowo Wati Sangpo, a statue of Padmapāṇi Lokeśvara which is believed to have manifested itself miraculously from a sandalwood tree. He then met the “incarnation” (*sprul sku*) of his teacher Ngawang Kunga Lhündrub in the monastery of Draphu Chöling. Afterwards the journey continued on to Nepal, where he brought offerings to the *stūpas* of Svayambhūnāth and Bodhnāth, but was not able to visit the minor shrines in the valley. Here we have to keep in mind that in 1791 the Nepal-Tibet war was in its final stage and that – according to the words of Orgyen Chöphel – the danger of attracting diseases was very high. The return trip led through the valley of Lande, and after paying another visit to the incarnation of his teacher

in Draphu Chöling the pilgrim came to the end of his wanderings in the temple of Tradün in the area of Jang, like Jamdrin a religious building which was said to have been erected by Songtsen Gampo, considered to be the first Buddhist king of Tibet.<sup>4</sup>

The temple of Tradün in Jang served now as the starting point for the second “transregional pilgrimage” of Orgyen Chöphel; it began exactly ten years after the journey to Mangyül and Nepal, i. e. in 1801. This journey brought him to the sacred sites of Northern and Southern Mustang and also in close – and not so close – contact with the rulers of these regions. After reaching Mönthang, the capital of Northern Mustang, the Nyingmapa teacher from Western Tibet soon obtained an audience with Wangyal Dorje, the “Dharmarāja” (*chos rgyal*) of Mustang. The reason for this swift contact was a renovation project in the Kang Tise area which had received financial assistance from the king of Mustang in recent times.

*Chörten in the cave of Congzhi near Samar in northern Mustang*



<sup>4</sup> The description of the pilgrimage to Mangyül and the Nepal Valley can be found in *rNam-thar* I, fols. 101b/3–106b/6. The most accessible pilgrimage guide to the temple of Khojarnāth is by Ngawang Sönam Gyaltzen, another member of the Ngorpa tradition: *Rin chen vaiḍūrya sngon po'i pi va'*. For the significance of temples dating to the early royal period in the search for Himalayan sacred lands see Ehrhard 1994: 10–11.

The conversation between the king and the *lama* touched mainly upon this renovation and the spiritual affiliations of Wangyal Dorje and Orgyen Chöphel; the king himself stated that he belonged to “the teaching tradition of the great Vidyādhara” (*rig 'dzin chen po'i chos brgyud*) i. e. the lineage of Kathog Rigdzin Tsewang Norbu (1698–1755). For the *lama* it was the proper moment to reflect upon the motivation for his journey to Mustang:

[If you ask:] “What is the reason that I have come now to this country?” it is to circumambulate and offer prayers to the sacred places [here], the principal ones [being] the “Hundred-and-some Springs” – the pilgrimage site which was prophesied in the *brTag gnyis*, [i. e.] the *Hevajratantra* – and the *vihāra* of Gekar with the nine roofs: the earliest [case of] taming the ground in the realm of Tibet which the Guru [Padmasambhava] [undertook].<sup>5</sup>



*Pilgrims to the cave of Congzhi embrace limestone concretions that are said to alleviate bodily disorders.*



*Access path leading up the cliff towards the cave of Congzhi, photos Niels Gutschow, April 1992.*

<sup>5</sup> See rNam-thar I, fol. 144a/6-b/1 (*da lam sa phyogs 'dir yong ba don ga lags / kye rdo rje rtsa brgyud (=rgyud) rtag (=brtag) gnyis las / lung zin gnas chen chu mig brgya rtsa dang / gu ru'i bod khams sa 'dul snga ba dge sgar gtsug lag dgu thog gi (=gis) tsos (=gtsos) gnas skor smon lam 'debs pa ...*). Although the site is known in most of the sources under the name “[Temple of] White Virtue” (*dge dkar*), the meaning is here “Encampment of Virtue” (*dge sgar*). This spelling is also preserved in “dGon-pa sGar” as contained in a modern pilgrimage guide; see Menla Phüntshog: dNgul dkar me long, p. 88.5–6.

6 For the process of the transposition of the Vajrakāya as set down in the Buddhist tantras in the case of Muktināth see Ehrhard 1993: 23–24. The term *sa-dul* and its implications for the Himalayan experience was dealt with by Aris 1990: 94–96. A temple in the Barbond Valley, between Jumla and Muktināth, bears the name “Temple where the ground was tamed” (*sa 'dul dgon pa*); see Ehrhard, 1998: 5–7.

7 A part of the *gnas-yig* of Congzhi was also incorporated into the inventory of the pilgrimage places of the Muktināth area; see Ehrhard, 1993: 29–30. A more complete text with the title *Cong zhi rang byon gyi gnas yig* can be found in Menlha Phüntshog: *dNgul dkar me long*, pp. 89–90.

8 The pilgrimage to Congzhi, Muktināth and Gekar is contained in *rNam-thar* I, fols. 152b/6–156b/2; for further information on the teacher Gyalwang Senge see Ehrhard 1998: 4 & note 5. The rise of the Tibetan enclave in the Muktināth Valley and the lineage of its rulers up to the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century is dealt with by Schuh 1995: 42–54; for the political situation in the Muktināth Valley in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the position of Northern Mustang during the transition of power from Jumla to the king of Gorkha see also Schuh 1994: 42–53 & 54–68. Compare the description of the role of Wangyal Dorje during the Nepal-Tibet war in Jackson 1984: 151; this king of Mustang also renovated the temple of Gekar.

9 The first and second chapters of the autobiography of Sangye Sangpo (written in 1945) are devoted to the region of his birth and its religious traditions, and to his own spiritual training; see *rNam-thar* II, fols. 3a–9a (*skyes pa'i yul gyi rnam grangs bshad pa*), and fols. 9a–30a (*dam pa'i lha chos la zhugs nas dka' ba spyad tshul*).

This statement by Orgyen Chöphel to the king of Mustang gives us a first impression of the strategy governing how sacred landscape was created in a Himalayan context, and of the way individual sites became places which kept up the memory of Buddhist saints like Padmasambhava. In the case of Muktināth – or “Hundred-and-some Springs” as it was known to Tibetan pilgrims – the toponym *Munmu-ni*, one of the four “fields” (*kṣetra*) according to the Indian *pīṭha*-tradition of the Hevajratāntra, was transplanted from an Indian setting to the Himalayan region of southern Mustang. Generally this transposition entailed the formation of pilgrimage centres in the Tibet of the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries.

The act of “taming the ground” (*sa 'dul*) has particular relevance to the introduction of Buddhism into Tibet and to the Himalayan experience of it. The temples said to have been built during the reign of King Songtsen Gampo were erected “to tame the borders and the areas beyond the borders”, and the legends of how Padmasambhava subdued the local spirits and converted wild and uncultivated regions to the Buddhist faith are uncountable. The case of the *vihāra* of Gekar in Northern Mustang was seen as the prototype of this act of taming the earth by erecting religious edifices, and we will have a closer look at this temple later on.<sup>6</sup> Let us follow now again the steps of Orgyen Chöphel and see if there are further memorial sites that he encountered during his pilgrimage in Mustang.

Having paid his respects at the different monasteries and temples of Mönthang and having received a “passport, [i. e.] an official document” (*lam yig bka' shog*) from King Wangyal Dorje, the *lama* left the capital of Northern Mustang and reached the town of Tsarang [= *tsang rang*] soon afterwards. There he learned of a pilgrimage site known for its many sacred items that had formed naturally; this place was known by the name Congzhi [= *g/cong [g/zhi]*], a term referring to a limestone or calcite concretion which – according to the Tibetan medical tradition – is able to alleviate bodily disorders. Orgyen Chöphel followed the route to this cave and could identify the different sacred items according to a “praise of the sacred site” (*gnas bstod*) by a certain Mipham Phüntshog Sherab or Tagtse Kukye (1654–1715); this teacher of the Drugpa Kagyüpa school had been active at the court of the Mustang king Samdrub Pelbar and was a disciple of the famous yogin Rangrig Repa (d. 1683). There exist several versions of the “guide to the sacred site” and they all refer to the visions of this Tagtse Kukye, namely the different forms of tantric gods and goddesses in the limestone concretion of the cave; these texts also mention that Padmasambhava had set foot there.<sup>7</sup>

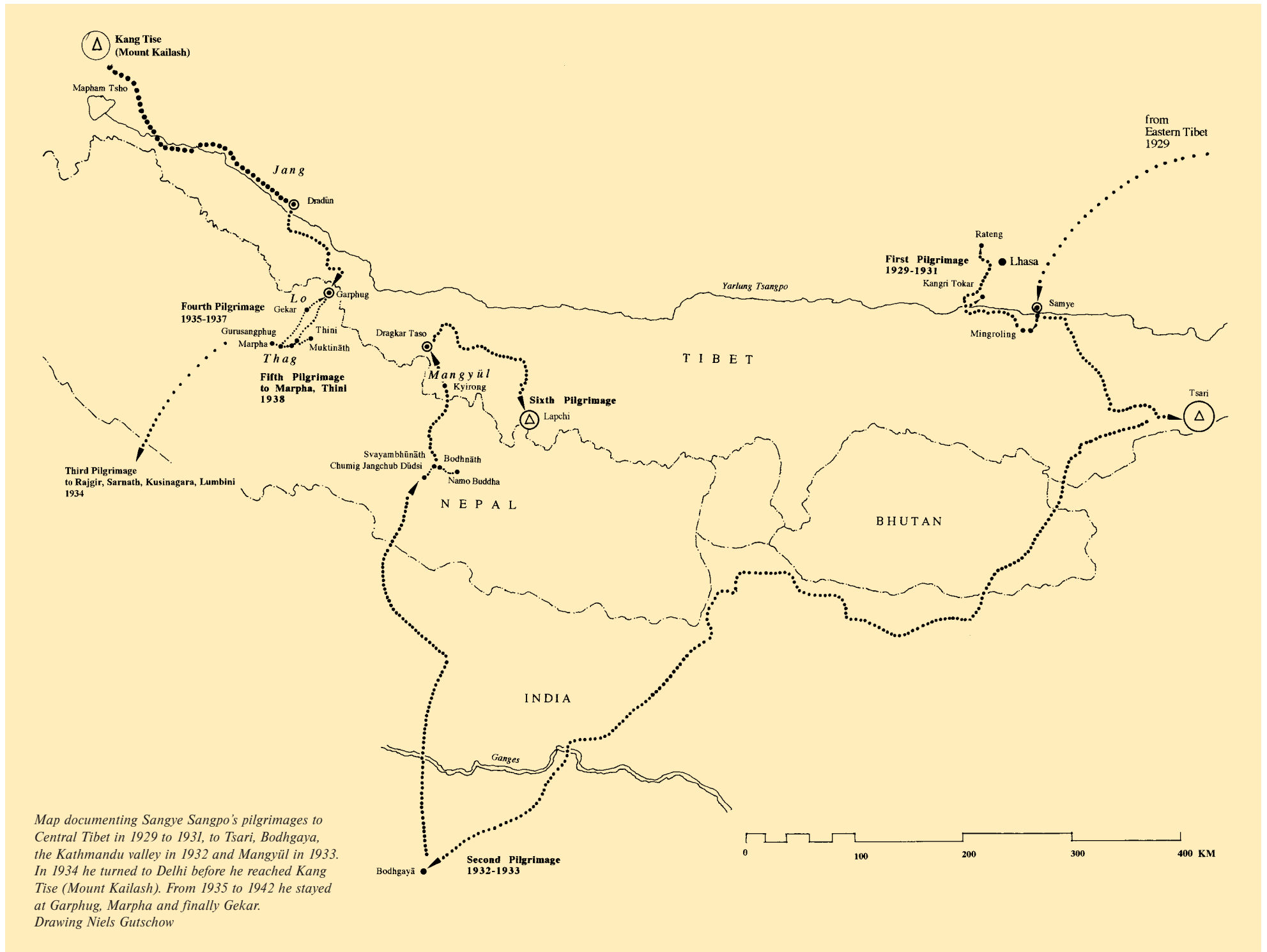
The description of Muktināth contained in the autobiography of

Orgyen Chöphel is of some historical interest since it is stated, for example, that the pagoda-style temple near the water-spouts had been erected by a king of Jumla; another temple in the “sacred field” (*muk-tikṣetra*) is associated with a Tibetan master called Gyalwang Senge (b. 1628). Among the further details of Orgyen Chöphel’s stay in the Muktināth Valley one should also highlight the fact that he failed to accept the invitation of Drowo Pelgön, the ruler of Dzar (*rdzar*). True to his bond with the “king of upper Mustang” (*glo stod rgyal po*), he only gave religious instructions to an uncle of Drowo Pelgön. The ruler himself is referred to by the name “king of lower Mustang” (*glo smad rgyal po*). The *lama* stated why he kept his distance from him: “[it was] a time when the kings of Mustang, the upper and the lower [one], were not in agreement [with each other]” (*glo rgyal stod smad mi 'grig pa'i dus*).

On his return trip to the north Orgyen Chöphel did not stop in the village of Samar (*sa dmar*) but took up quarters on the road above Congzhi. After passing the so-called “Hundred-and-some *stūpas*” (*mchod rten brgya rtsa*) he finally reached the *vihāra* of Gekar. Offerings were presented there in the shrines of the upper and lower floors.<sup>8</sup> Without paying further attention to Orgyen Chöphel’s second stay at the court of Mönthang and the exchange of religious teachings between himself and King Wangyal Dorje, we shall now turn to another pilgrim and teacher of the Nyingmapa school; he was also attracted to the sacred sites of Mustang, and especially to the temple of Gekar.

#### Sangye Sangpo and his activities at Gekar and Garphug

This *lama* originated in the region of Kham in Eastern Tibet, where he was born in the year 1894. He received the name Sangye Sangpo (“Good Buddha”) from Orgyen Chemchog, a teacher who was regarded as an incarnation of Longchenpa (1308–1364); the list of his early teachers also includes the treasure-discoverer Sögyal Rinpoche (1856–1926). The most important influence on the spiritual career of Sangye Sangpo was exercised by the Khampa master Shenphen Chökyi Nangwa (1871–1927), generally known by his nickname Shen-ga (*gzhan dga'*). In the period from his twenty-third to his thirty-fourth year – i. e. from 1916 up to 1927 – Sangye Sangpo attended mainly upon this teacher, who gave a new orientation to the non-Gelugpa traditions of Buddhist learning in Eastern Tibet; the chief places where he studied under Shen-ga and other masters of the Nyingmapa tradition were the monasteries of Dzogchen, Shechen and Surmang.<sup>9</sup>



Map documenting Sangye Sangpo's pilgrimages to Central Tibet in 1929 to 1931, to Tsari, Bodhgaya, the Kathmandu valley in 1932 and Mangyül in 1933. In 1934 he turned to Delhi before he reached Kang Tise (Mount Kailash). From 1935 to 1942 he stayed at Garphug, Marpha and finally Gekar. Drawing Niels Gutschow



After the death of his main teacher Sangye Sangpo embarked on a journey which we can call an “international pilgrimage”. Leaving Eastern Tibet in 1928, he reached the monastery of Samye and the sacred sites located nearby in the year 1929; up to 1931 he stayed in Central Tibet, visiting such monasteries as Dorjedrag and Mindröling, paying homage to statues like the Jowo Jampäl Dorje in Rateng, and seeing places like Kangri Tökar, the favourite hermitage of Longchenpa. It should be noted that he exchanged teachings along the way with other religious dignitaries, one being the Zim-og Rinpoche (born 1884) of Phenyül Nalendra; this institution was at that time one of the few large Sakyapa monasteries within a day or two’s journey from Lhasa. During this very period a “seminary for textual exposition” (*bshad grwa*) at Phenyül Nalendra was headed by another Khampa disciple of Shen-ga.

For Sangye Sangpo the time had not yet come for a fixed abode and regular sessions of teachings. In 1932 – a “monkey year” (*sprel lo*), the year in which pilgrimages to Tsari are traditionally undertaken – he had the idea of joining the great pilgrimage to that sacred land in the south-eastern border region of Tibet. Having attended religious ceremonies conducted by Drigung Kyabgön Shiwä Lodrö (1886–1943), he left for the monastery of Dagla Gampo and afterwards arrived at the holy mountain Dagpa Shelri and other pilgrimage places in Tsari; the autobiography makes special mention of the auspicious signs that occurred when Sangye Sangpo paid his respects to the statue of the Jarne Jowo.<sup>10</sup> Crossing over to Bhutan (*brug yul*), the pilgrim continued on to India, where he visited Bodhgaya, the historic site of Buddha Śākyamuni’s enlightenment. The next country he saw was Nepal and the objects of his veneration there were the shrines of Svayambhünāth, Bodhnāth and Namo Buddha, recognised by Tibetan pilgrims as the “three kinds of *stūpas*” (*mchod rten rnam gsum*). At a memorial site of Padmasambhava to the south-west of the Kathmandu valley, which is called by Tibetans “Spring Enlightenment Nectar” (*Chu mig byang chub bdud rtsi*) and by Nepalese “Rṣiśvara”, he met a fellow pilgrim who reported to him about the numerous sacred items that are located in the region of Mangyül, the foremost one being the statue of Jowo Wati Sangpo in Kyirong. The lama from Kham followed up this hint in his search for sacred lands, and was soon circumambulating the building which housed the self-manifested Avalokiteśvara and the temple of Jamdrin.

Passing his thirty-ninth year in 1933, he finally arrived at a small monastery where he found some rest from his tireless travelling and which served as a kind of base camp for his activities during the next twelve years. This monastery was located at Dragkar Taso, the famous





Left and opposite  
Bodhgaya: Sangye Sangpo visited the  
site of Buddha Śākyamuni's enlighten-  
ment in northern India in 1932, photos  
Niels Gutschow, 1996.

site of Tibet's great *yogin* Milarepa; the teacher from Kham was given a warm welcome there by the resident lama Tenzin Norbu (1899–1959) and his father Trinle Chöwang (1879–1940). In the company of father and son he made excursions to other sacred sites in the region and undertook a retreat for several months. Sangye Sangpo also conducted teaching-sessions at Dragkar Taso, and among his audience we find two persons who hailed from the region of Northern Mustang. They were Kushab Ludrup and his son, who was called Garphug Tulku; we can thus identify them as the *lamas* in charge of the monastery Garphug. In 1934 Kushab Ludrup issued an official invitation to the Khampa teacher to visit their monastery, which is located to the northeast of Mönthang.<sup>10</sup>

It took another year before Sangye Sangpo followed up this invitation.

The reason was another pilgrimage to India and Nepal, where he was able to visit further historical sites associated with the life of Buddha Śākyamuni, i. e. Rajgir, Sarnath, Kushinagara and Lumbini. Passing the sacred lake of Tsho Pema or Rewalsar, north of Mandir, and after a prolonged stay in Delhi he took the route through Kinnaur to the Kang Tise region. Before circumambulating the sacred mountain several times – performing the so-called “circle of the snow [-mountain]” (*gangs skor*) – he met there the Bönpo master Khyung Trül Jigme Namkha Dorje (1897–1955), himself a disciple of Pema Dewä Gyelpo (1873–1933) from Kham.

As in the case of Orgyen Chöphel, the temple of Tradün in Jang served Sangye Sangpo as the starting point for another section of his “international pilgrimage”: the sacred sites of Mustang. In 1935 he

10 The third and final chapter of the autobiography contains the travels of Sangye Sangpo which I have labelled “international pilgrimage”; see rNam-thar II, fols. 30a–73b (*rgyal khams nges med du don gnyis gzugs brnyan gyi rang bzhin bya ba byed pa'i tshul*). The description of the journey to Tsari can be found *ibid.* fols. 40a/4–43b/4. For the *lama* from Kham who taught the tradition of Shen-ga at Phenyül Nalendra see Jackson 1998: 144–151.

11 A description of the pilgrimage to Bhutan, India and Nepal is contained in rNam-thar II, fols. 43b/4–45a/3; for the travels in the region of Mangyül in the years 1933 and 1934 see *ibid.*, fols. 45a/3–50b/1. For the succession of the resident *lamas* of Dragkar Taso after the period of Chökyi Wangchuk (1775–1837) see Tenzin Norbu: Kha skong, pp. 5.1ff. This text was written at the behest of Sangye Sangpo!







reached the monastery of Garphug, characterising the site with the words: “it is known to have received the blessings of [Kathog] Rigzin Tshewang Norbu” (*rig 'dzin tshe dbang nor bu'i byin rlabs par grags pa*). Staying there for the rest of the year, he composed several works, including a guidebook to the pilgrimage places in India (*rgya gar gnas yig*).

The next year he journeyed to the south in the company of Garphug Tulku. The description of the sacred landscape contained in the autobiography of Sangye Sangpo differs from the earlier one of Orgyen Chöphel in one particular aspect: it includes memorial sites of Padmasambhava to the south of Muktināth and in the region of Thag. The first place he visited was the village of Thini [=som bhi] and a temple, containing the relics of Padmasambhava which had come forth from a treasure of Rigzin Dūdul Dorje (1615–1672) from Kham. In Thag it was a cave that reminded the Tibetan pilgrim of the former presence of Padmasambhava; it was called the “Secret Cave of the Guru” (*gu ru gsang phug*). Having stopped in the monasteries of Marpha [=mar phag] and Tsherok [=tshe rog], he then directed his steps to the site of “Hundred-and-some Springs”, i. e. Muktināth. Sangye Sangpo thus visited the sacred sites that make up the main part of the inventory of the pilgrimage places in Mustang. The text itself starts with Muktināth and ends with a description of the Dhaulagiri Himal and the “Secret Cave of the Guru”.<sup>12</sup>

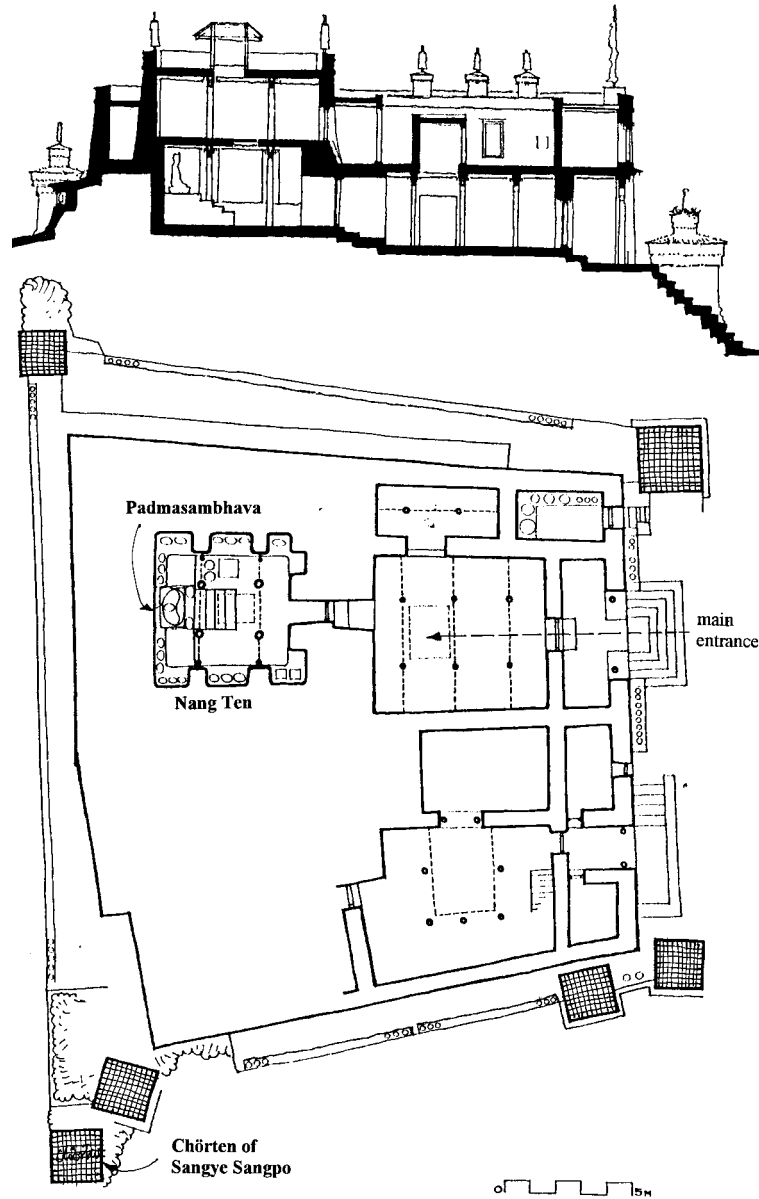
After this first pilgrimage to southern Mustang and the region of Thag the lama from Kham proceeded to the temple of Gekar in the year 1937; his stay at this most important pilgrimage site of northern Mustang lasted for nearly five years, i. e. up to 1942. Among his first activities there the autobiography mentions a “minor renovation” (*zhig gso phran*) of the *vihāra* and the composition of a guidebook to that place.

Although this text has not surfaced up to now, we have at least a reference to the etiological myth of the sacred site as it was written down in this text. Sangye Sangpo refers to that myth the occasion of building a new “house for spiritual practices” (*sgrub khang*) there:

“Now, what is called “Lowo Gekar”: when Guru Rinpoche [=Padmasambhava] erected [the monastery of] Sameye, because the gods and spirits headed by the *nāgas* [snakes] and *rākṣasīs* [demonesses] created obstacles, [he had] to suppress [them and thus] erected on the heart of the supine *rākṣasī* of Mustang a nine-storied *vihāra*, and on her [outstretched] limbs hundred-and-some *stūpas* and so on. [This has been written down] more extensively in the description of the sacred site. Accordingly I gave the name “Island of All embracing

Light” to that site of spiritual practice, which is said to have been that [same] hermitage that was in earlier times called the “Treasure-place” [of Sangye Lama].

As this quotation shows, the mythical foundation of the temple of Gekar is closely connected with the erection of Tibet’s oldest monas-



Gekar: ground plan and section of the monastery, where Sangye Sangpo stayed from 1937 to 1942, survey and drawing John Harrison, 1996.

tery by the Buddhist saint Padmasambhava. The act of pinning down the demoness – or taming the ground – which we generally know from the legends concerning King Songtsen Gampo, is thereby applied to the local context of Mustang. Another hint of the antiquity of the site is its status as a place, where Sangye Lama (b. ca. 1000), the first treasure-discoverer of the Nyingmapa school, had unearthed some of his findings. The aura of the sacred landscape also inspired Sangye Sangpo: he wrote down a general introduction to the philosophical and spiritual doctrine of that school, and in 1938 also erected a stūpa near the temple, filling it with precious relics.<sup>13</sup>

At the end of this year a second pilgrimage was conducted to Southern Mustang; on that occasion he followed an invitation of the “sponsors of the region of Thag” (*thags phyogs sbyin bdag rnams*). Having made offerings at the so-called secret cave, he again put up at the monastery of Marpha and conducted rituals for the local population; in the process the custom of sacrificing animals (*dmarmchod*) was changed into one of using substitute offering substances (*dkarmchod*). He then visited again Gompa Gang [=dgon pa sgang], i. e. the monastery near Thini, where relics from the findings of Rigzin Düdul Dorje were kept, and paid special attention to the religious buildings, which were in a state of decay at that time. Concerning teachers who had earlier stayed there, the name of Kathog Rigzin (1644–1699) from “the region of the gorge of Jumla” (*rong ’dzum lang phyogs*), a direct disciple of Orgyen Pälsang (1617–1677), who had founded the monastery. The former presence of Kathog Rigdzin was still felt and sensed by the pilgrim, the syllable *hūm* having manifested miraculously on a resting place during the visit of this master from Kham in 1750.

Returning to Gekar, Sangye Sangpo settled down to stay there for most of the time until the year 1942; either there or at Garphug he instructed a growing number of disciples. He also followed up on an invitation to Mönthang and gave teachings to a group of Sakyapa monks headed by a certain Tashi Chöphel. Eventually he left Mustang and, using his base camp in Dragkar Taso for another journey – this time to the sacred sites of Milarepa in Lachi – he finally settled in the region of Mangyül for longer sessions of teachings; among the persons who sent their disciples to him we find the Bhutanese lama Sherab Dorje (1884–1945). In that region Sangye Sangpo had a residence of his own which he called “Palace of Great Bliss” (*bde chen pho brang*); it was there that his work on the Dzogchen doctrine, written in Gekar, was carved on wooden blocks, sponsored by the local population.<sup>14</sup>

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Kang Tise (Mount Kailash), the sacred mountain of Tibet, which Sangye Sangpo circumambulated in 1935, photo Jaroslav Poncar

Opposite

Above: Garphug: the monastery in northern Mustang where Sangye Sangpo stayed in 1935, photo 1996

Below: The “Hundred-and-some springs” of Muktināth, visited by Sangye Sangpo in 1935, photo October 1991

12 The second journey to Nepal and India, the arrival in Northern Mustang and the journey to the sacred sites of Southern Mustang can be found in rNam-thar II, fols. 50b/1–55a/3. For the travels of the fellow pilgrim Khyung Trül Jigme Namkha Dorje in India, Kinnaur and the Kang Tise region – in the years 1933–1935 – see Kvaerne, 1988: 77–80. The main part of the inventory of the sacred sites of the Mustang area concerns the Dhaulagiri Himal; see Ehrhard, 1993: 28–29. A guidebook of the Bönpo school that idealizes and spiritualizes the Dhaulagiri Himal – written in 1863 – is mentioned by Ramble 1995: 105–7.

13 For the quotation see rNam-thar II, fol. 55b/3–5 (*de yang glo bo dge dkar zhes gu ru rin po che'i bsam yas bzhengs pa la klu srin gtsos lha 'dre'i bar chad byas bas kha gnon du glo bo srin mo rgan (=gan) skyal (=kyal) gyi snying gar lha khang dgu thog dang yan lag rnams la mchod rten brgya rtsa bzhengs pa sogs rgyas par gnas yig bzhin du bdag gi (=gis) ri khrod de nyid sngon gter gnas yin zer ba'i bsgrub (=sgrub) gnas la 'od gsal kun khyab gling zhes ming btags pa'o*). The text on the Dzogchen doctrine was purchased by Tucci in 1954 and is part of the collection of the ISIAO; see Tucci 1956: 14 and Sangye Sangpo: Padma'i rgyal tshab. Concerning Sangye Lama and his findings see – among others – Vitali 1997: 1026.



Above and right: Gekar, the valley and the monastery with the stūpa erected by Sangye Sangpo in the southwestern corner, photos 1992 and 1996

## Conclusion

The pilgrimages of Orgyen Chöphel and Sangye Sangpo and their search for sacred lands in Northern and Southern Mustang have led us to several sites and corresponding legends. It should now be possible - by reviewing the individual sites once again - to sketch the different cultural contexts which framed the sacred landscape in this particular Himalayan region. First we have to consider the following three possibilities through which a particular piece of territory was perceived in an idealised and spiritualised way:

1. In the case of Muktināth we could see how a sacred realm was created by transplanting the spiritual geography of the Buddhist *tantras* from India to the Himalayan region. The pilgrimage site came into being through an act of transposition or transcription.
2. The legendary topography of the foundation myth of Gekar is a good example of how sacred landscape was created by etiological stories. Religious buildings - and statues - kept alive the memory of

14 The description of the second journey to Southern Mustang and Thag can be found in *rNam-thar II*, fols. 57b/4-59a/2. For the teachers connected with Gompa Gang - or Kutshab Ternga [=sku tshab gter lnga], as the place is known to pilgrims - see (Ehrhard in press). The visit of Kathog Rigdzin to the site can be found in Chökyi Wangchuk: *Ngo mtshar dad pa'i rol mtsho*, pp. 220.3-4 & 221.2-4. The syllable *hūm* had manifested when Kathog Rigzin had a vision of his teacher Orgyen Tenzin (1657-1737), whom he had earlier met at Sandül Gompa in 1730; for this Nyingmapa master, who also hailed from the "region of the gorge of Jumla", and his stay in Gompa Gang in 1699 see Ehrhard, 1998: 4-9 & note 15. A first notice of Sangye Sangpo's influence on the changing customs of sacrifice in Thag was given by Tucci 1956: 14; compare now the observations by Ramble 1997: 399, 410.





an important event in the mythical past (a statue of Padmasambhava in his likeness is kept to the present day in the *vihāra* of Gekar).

3. Memorial sites are also based on historical narratives as documented by the site of Gompa Gang or Kutshab Ternga. The narratives in this case refer to the foundation of the monastery by Orgyen Pālsang

(in 1668) or to later visits by great religious teachers like Kathog Rigdzin from Khams (in 1750).

The two caves that we encountered in Northern and Southern Mustang – i. e. Congzhi and the “Secret Cave of the Guru” – show that this is not a clear-cut scheme and that two possibilities can also

*The Kali Gandaki Valley opening up towards Southern Mustang at Kag, photo Niels Gutschow, April 1992*

apply to a specific site at the same time. First, it is stated, by both the inventory and the autobiographies considered here, that Padmasambhava set foot on these two spots on the left bank of the Kalī Gandakī River; the caves are thus included in the legendary topography of the saint's activities in Mustang. Secondly, the two caves can also be considered as memorial sites; this becomes more clear when we look at the corresponding historical narratives associated with them.

Through texts like the above-mentioned praise of the sacred site a visitor to Congzhi in Northern Mustang is reminded of the former presence of a Drugpa Kagyü master who was active at the court of the king of Mustang in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. It is thus plausible to argue that the site gained prominence as a goal for pilgrims at about this time. If the thesis holds that the initial vision which was responsible for the idealisation and spiritualisation of the Dhaulagiri Himal – and the region of Thag – can be traced back to a member of the princely family of Dzar (in the Muktināth Valley) in the year 1740, on the other hand, the time frame for the popularisation of the cave in southern Mustang would be the 18<sup>th</sup> century. We could thus speak of a process of sacralising the natural environment in a movement from north to south.<sup>15</sup> There is still little knowledge about the founding dates of monasteries in the region of Thag. But at least in the case of Tsherok, which was visited by Sangye Sangpo, the fact is now available that its founder was a certain Künsang Rigdröl Dorje (1731–1792) from Mangyül.<sup>16</sup> This is another piece of evidence that the 18<sup>th</sup> century can be taken as the particular period when the influence of Buddhist teachers made itself felt in that territory, where Southern Mustang was bordering on the kingdom of Parbat.

Reconsidering finally the regional, the transregional and the inter-

national pilgrimages of Orgyen Chöphel and Sangye Sangpo and this time paying special attention to the objects of worship mentioned in their autobiographies, we can allow the different statues of the transcendent Bodhisattvas which they encountered during their searches for sacred lands to come into focus. In Western Tibet the Lords [who are] the protectors of the three [tantric] families obviously enjoyed great popularity, in Central Tibet it was the Mañjuśrī statue in Rateng that attracted pilgrims, and in South-eastern Tibet prayers were directed towards the Jowo of Jarme. As attested in both autobiographies, on the route through Mangyül – which connected Nepal and Tibet – the self-manifested statue of the Jowo Wati Sangpo, the “Lord of Kyirong”, counted as the most important goal for Tibetan travellers. A naturally formed icon of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara was also located in the region of Thag, and according to the exhortations contained in the inventory of the sacred sites of Mustang the Tibetan pilgrims on their way to India were supposed to visit the “Great Snowmountain [=Dhaulagiri Himal], the Secret Cave, [and] the Lord [Avalokiteśvara], these three” (*gangs chen gsang phug jo bo 'di gsum*). The legends surrounding this Nari Jowo should definitely be seen in connection with those concerning the Jowo Wati Sangpo; it is known, for example, that the custodians of the statue in Thag had contact in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the religious teacher in Mangyül who had been responsible for the upkeep of the Lord of Kyirong.<sup>17</sup> As an important component of the sacred landscape as perceived by Buddhist pilgrims, such statues of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara were able to confer special blessings, because they were not created artificially by human hands, but had arisen by themselves from the natural environment.

15 The statue of Padmasambhava in his likeness is the “inner sacred item” (*nang rten*) of the *vihāra* of Gekar; see Menlha Phüntshog: *dNgul dkar me long*, p. 88.3–4 (*de'i nang rten tsandan las grub pa'i gu ru nga 'dra bzhengs pa*), and p. 88.6 (*de'i nang rten gtso bo gu ru nga 'dra*). For arguments concerning the dating of the inventory of the sacred sites of the Muktināth area see Ehrhard, 1993: 30.

16 A description of the monastery of Tsherok is given by Rai, 1994: 73–76; for data on the founding lama of this monastery see Chökyi Wangchuk: *Tshangs pa'i do shal*, fol. 17a/1–5. Orgyan Chöphel met Künsang Rigdröl Dorje during his pilgrimage to Mangyül in the year 1791; see *rNam-thar I*, fol. 106a/7-b/1.

17 More details on the stone statue of the “Lord of Nari” [= *sna-ri / gnya' ri jo bo*] above Larjung and on its description in the inventory are given by Ehrhard 1993: 29 & 34, note 21; compare the information on the so-called “Ārya [Avalokiteśvara] who liberates from the six forms of existence” (*phags pa 'gro ba drug sgrol*) in Lahul (West Tibet) in Schubert 1935: 127–136. The iconographical details of this statue apply also to the one above Larjung; thus the doubts of Vinding 1998: 290, note 19, concerning a form of Avalokiteśvara with six arms should be cleared away. For the visits of the custodians responsible for the statue in Thag to the region of Mangyül see Chökyi Wangchuk: *Khrul snang sgyu ma'i rol rtsed*, fols. 225b/5 ff., 229b/5 ff. & 257/6 ff.; these journeys took place during the year 1831.