‘Happy Valley’ Kyirong, Seven Sisters (*ma bdun*), and Tamang Origins

Gabriele Tautscher

In November 1995, I travelled to central and southern Tibet with Guntram Hazod and Tsering Gyalpo.[1] As research collaborators of the program *The Tibetan Mountain Cult* of the Austrian Academy of Sciences (1992–1996 and 1996–1999), and since 1995 in cooperation with the Tibetan Academy of Social Sciences (TASS) in Lhasa, Guntram and I had obtained special permits to conduct field research in Tibet.[2] Tsering Gyalpo from TASS had previously visited us in Austria for joint research and was now accompanying us in Tibet.

We first arrived in Lhasa, and from there visited Tibet’s oldest monastery, Samye (bSam yas), where we circumambulated Gonpo Ri (mGon po ri).[3] We then entered the Yarlung (Yar lung) Valley and went to the nunnery above Tsethang (rTse thang). I was deeply moved by the nuns, particularly an elderly nun who was said to have saved the monastery’s main statue before all monasteries were closed after 1959. In Chongye (‘Phyong rgyas) Valley, Guntram Hazod showed us the impressive ancient royal tombs. We continued our travels to the foot of Tibet’s ancestral mountain, Yarlha Shampo (Yar lha sham po),

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1 The late Tsering Gyalpo/Tshe ring rgyal po (1961–2015), whose unexpected death was a great loss. After our joint fieldwork, he generously helped me with the translations of the field data we had collected in Kyirong.

2 Hildegard Diemberger and Christian Schicklgruber were further collaborators of these Austrian Science Fund (FWF)-funded research projects “Der Bergkult im Verhältnis von Landschaft und Gesellschaft in tibetischen und tibeto-burmesischen Gemeinschaften des Himalaya” (1992–1996) and “Der tibetische Bergkult – Mythologie, Territorialität und Ritual. Untersuchungen zur ‘Ethnologie der Landschaft’ in Gemeinschaften Tibets und des Himalaya” (1996–1999), headed by Prof. Andre Gingrich, University of Vienna, Institute for Social and Cultural Anthropology, in collaboration with the Commission for Social Anthropology of the Austrian Academy of Sciences.

Since 1995 the Austrian Academy of Sciences had an agreement for collaboration with the Tibet Academy of Social Sciences (TASS). The research results have been published in Blondeau and Steinkellner (1996) and Blondeau (1998).

3 Identical with Mount Hepori (Has po ri).

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and stayed at Yazang (gYa' bzang) Monastery, which had been partly restored after the Cultural Revolution (1966–1977).[4]

After a brief return to Lhasa, we travelled westward to the 'Scorpion Lake', Yamdrok Tso (Yar 'brog g.yu mtsho). We stayed in Samding Monastery (bSam sdings dgon pa), the seat of the highest female reincarnation Samding Dorje Phagmo (bSam sdings rdo rje phag mo). From the monastery, we had a magnificent view of the Himalaya bordering Bhutan and across the plain toward the fortress of Nakartse (sNa dkar rtse) and the sacred mountain Nöjin Khangzang (gNod sbyin gangs bzang) beyond. We watched the monks plastering and repainting the monastery and also visited the inner lake. From Yamdrok Tso, our journey continued through Gyantse (rGyal rtse), Shigatse (gZhis ka rtse), Shekar (Shel dkar) and Tingri (Ding ri), and further west to Bodong E Monastery (Bo dong e dgon pa).

It was a journey through central Tibet to the main monasteries and sacred sites that I will always remember. From Guntram Hazod and Tsering Gyalpo I learned about the histories of Tibetan Buddhist monasteries, their religious symbols and important rituals, as well as their political significance. At the same time, we still saw the traces of destruction left by the Cultural Revolution, alongside the remarkable enthusiasm with which people were rebuilding the monasteries. We listened to life stories and observed farmers singing as they worked collectively in the fields or stamping the clay soil of a monastery's roof in two rows—singing in rhythm as if in dance.

My principal field of research as an anthropologist since 1986 has been in Nepal, focusing on the social structure, culture and history of the Tamang, one of the major Tibeto-Burman language groups in central Nepal. Prior to my travel to Tibet, during the full moon of July-August 1995, I participated in the festival at Gosainkund Lake in Rasuwa District, which borders the Kyirong Valley to the south. In many Tamang clan histories, Tibet's first Buddhist monastery, Samye—referred to as Uisamye—is mentioned as their place of origin. The Kyirong Valley is frequently cited as their main route from Tibet to their settlements in Nepal.[5]

Kyirong Valley lies in the northern reaches of the Trisuli River, where it is called Kyirong Chu (or Kyirong Tsangpo). After cutting

[4] See Tsering Gyalbo, Hazod and Sørensen 2000.

[5] Kyirong is written in most Tibetan sources as sKyid rong, "Happy Valley" and sKyid grong ("Happy Town"). Both spellings are found in Gu ge *paṇḍita* Grags pa rgyal mtshan's *Nyi ma'i rigs kyi rgyal rabs*, for example, Mang yul skyid rong (f. 100b3) and Mang yul skyid grong (f. 135b4-5) (personal communication, Tsering Drongshar, 5 Nov. 2025). I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Christian Jahoda for his support and corrections of the Tibetan transcription. Thanks also go to Charles Ramble and Sarah Teetor for valuable comments and improving the English.

through the Himalayan massifs of Ganesh Himal and Langtang Lirung, the river is named Trisuli. Along this river and ancient trade route, in the 1990s, the villages of Barkhu and Dhunche were predominantly inhabited by Tamang. From Barkhu and Dhunche, pilgrimage routes lead up to the sacred Gosainkund Lake (4,380 m). Before the construction of the road to Dhunche and Barkhu in the 1960s, these were the historical summer routes from Kyirong to Kathmandu via Gosainkund and Helambu/Yolmo (Yol mo).

I was interested to learn more about the population of the Kyirong Valley and their relation to the neighbouring Tamang in the south. Therefore, in October-November 1995, we continued our journey from Bodong E past Lake Pelku (dPal khud mtsho) to Dzongka (rDzong kha) (4,300 m), the capital of the former kingdom of Gungthang (Gung thang), and from there to the lower Kyirong Valley—earlier known as Kyirong-Mangyul—a low-lying fertile valley (2,700 m) in southern Tibet, bordering Nepal. Its main town, Kyirong Zhol (sKyid grong zhol), lies 80 km south of Dzongka.

Fifty years earlier, from May to December 1945, Peter Aufschnaiter and Heinrich Harrer had stayed in Kyirong en route to Lhasa after escaping from a British internment camp (see Brauen 1983; Jahoda 2023; Jahoda, Aufschnaiter and Drongshar in this volume). In his diary,[6] Aufschnaiter described the Kyirong Valley as a lush green paradise after arriving from the dry, treeless Tibetan plateau, with pine forests and pasture lands rising toward the snow-covered Himalayas. The first place he and Heinrich Harrer reached was the small plain of Drothang (Gro thang), surrounded by dense, dark forests. Across the river, Aufschnaiter noted the cave Khyangphan Namka Dzong (sKyang phan nam mkha' rdzong), where the demon king of Drothang (Gro thang rgyal po) is said to have appeared to Milarepa (Mi la ras pa).[7] A little further south, in a fairly level side valley, he described the town of Rama (Rag ma), a relatively large settlement at the foot of Mount Ribo Palbar (Ri bo dPal 'bar), which dominated lower Kyirong Valley. According to Peter Aufschnaiter's descriptions in his diary, in 1945 the Kyirong Valley had twenty-six monasteries and temples,

[6] See VMZ S/I/009/01/04 and VMZ S/I/009/01/05. The transcription of these entries made by Claudia C. Aufschnaiter was made available to the author within the research project "Peter Aufschnaiter's scientific Tibet legacy" (directed by Christian Jahoda and funded by the Austrian Science Fund/FWF Grant P35249). The author also wishes to thank the Ethnographic Museum at the University of Zurich (Prof. Dr. Mareile Flitsch, Dr. Martina Wernsdörfer, and lic. phil. Daniela Zurbrügg), for providing access to the materials of Peter Aufschnaiter kept there, Martina Wernsdörfer and Daniela Zurbrügg also for comments on a draft of this paper.

[7] See Aufschnaiter's study of the "lands and places of Milarepa" (Aufschnaiter 1975: 178). On Milarepa (1040–1123), the famous Tibetan yogin and poet, see also Quintman 2014.

three of which belonged to the Gelugpa (dGe lugs pa) school—namely Phawa ('Phags pa [lha khang]), Samtenling (bSam gtan gling), and Jamtrin (Byams sprin). Kyirong Zhol, the main town, then had about 1,000 inhabitants living in 160 households. He described the Kyirong Valley as one of the most prosperous regions in Tibet, owing to its flourishing agriculture, livestock breeding, and trade in salt and rice. The quality of Kyirong roasted barley flour (*rtsam pa*) was renowned throughout Tibet. The region produced two barley harvests per year, its vegetables (potatoes, beets, radishes) were of exceptional quality, and large quantities of butter were produced on the higher pastures.

During his stay in the Kyirong Valley until the end of 1945, Peter Aufschnaiter described in his diary how he met people from the neighbouring Tsum Valley (Tsum pa), Nepali/Newari (Bal po) traders from the Kathmandu Valley (Yambu), and Rongpa from Rasuwa (Riso). He observed Tsumpa and Rongpa from neighbouring Nepal engaged in trade, selling cereals, buying salt, collecting honey, and working as seasonal labourers in the fields. In southern Kyirong, in Lenti (La lte/sdeb), people from Nepal—here he also mentioned the Tamang—still owned high-altitude pastures where they grazed livestock, mainly sheep. He met cattle herders who had come from the villages of Galang or Goltsong in Rasuwa, who also paid duties in Kyirong. During the Hindu Dasain festival in October 1945, thousands of sheep were driven to Yambu and sold there. Balpo traders from Yambu, some of whom lived in Kyirong Zhol, paid taxes to Phawa Monastery in the form of butter.[8] The blacksmiths of Kyirong Zhol belonged to the Nepali community and were members of the Hindu blacksmith caste (Nep. *kāmi*).

Around ten years later, until 1959, Prof. Chapel[9] was the last *rdzong dpon* of Kyirong, the district governor appointed by the Lhasa government.[10] He said that at the beginning of his stay in Kyirong, he hardly understood the language of the people. It contained many words from 'old' Tibetan and differed from the Tibetan language spoken in central Tibet and Kham, and also from the language spoken in Dzongka. Additionally, ethnonyms such as Tamang, Sherpa, and Magar were not used at that time in Kyirong.

Peter Aufschnaiter and Prof. Chapel describe Kyirong at a time when the border between Nepal and Tibet was open, trade between

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8 Diary entries 31 May and 15 June 1945 (VMZ S/I/009/01/04); diary entries 15 August, 14 and 17 October 1945 (VMZ S/I/009/01/05).

9 Chab spel tshe brtan phun tshogs (1922–2013), a famous Tibetan scholar who published many works on the history of Tibet.

10 The interview with Prof. Chapel, assisted by Tsering Gyalpo, took place after our journey to Kyirong in November 1995 at the Tibetan Academy of Social Sciences in Lhasa, where he was a member.

Kyirong and Kathmandu was flourishing, and shepherds used mountain pastures on both sides. Many people—Tsumpa, Rongpa, and Balpo—from the neighboring regions in Nepal bought products from Tibet here, especially salt. Nepalese also worked as farm labourers and porters for traders from Kyirong and Kathmandu.

After the 1959 uprising, the local government of Tibet was disorganised, and a Preparatory Committee for the Founding of the Tibet Autonomous Region was installed. With its foundation in 1965, the Kyirong Valley became part of the Tibet Autonomous Region of the People's Republic of China, within Gyirong County in Shigatse Prefecture. Already since 1959 the movements between Kyirong in Tibet and Rasuwa in Nepal had become increasingly restricted until the border was completely closed in 1962.

Fifty years after Peter Aufschnaiter, in October 1995, Guntram, Tsering, and I travelled by jeep on a rough motorable road past Pelku Tso to Dzongka and further south to Kyirong Zhol, the main town in the Kyirong Valley. We saw Milarepa's Trakar Taso Cave (Brag dkar rta so phug pa) high on a cliff to the right and passed the town of Rama. The valley of Kyirong was still lush and green, but its forests were endangered. The new road made it possible for trucks to transport timber from Kyirong to supply the rest of treeless Tibet with much-needed wood. We stayed in a simple government guesthouse.

The layout of Kyirong Zhol with the Phakpa Lhakhang ('Phags pa lha khang) in the background still resembled Peter Aufschnaiter's sketch (see Fig. 1 and Fig. 2), and the houses were of traditional style and looked the same as he had drawn them in his diary (see Fig. 3 and Fig. 4). Most had two floors built with stone and wood, with covered wooden porches and slanting roofs of wooden planks—just like the houses I had seen further south on the Nepal side in Shyabru, Barkhu, Dhunche and Helambu / Yolmo east of Gosainkund. In contrast, the buildings for military and administrative staff, including our guesthouse, were built with concrete and corrugated metal roofs. All monasteries, temples, fortresses, and the grand houses of Kyirong's upper class had been destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. Their ruins were still clearly visible in 1995. Only the famous Phakpa Lhakhang, built in the Nepali pagoda style, had been restored, though its famous statue had been taken by the Tibetans into exile (Fig. 5 and Fig. 6).[11]

[11] See, for example, Ehrhard (2004) for a detailed study of this temple and its main statue.

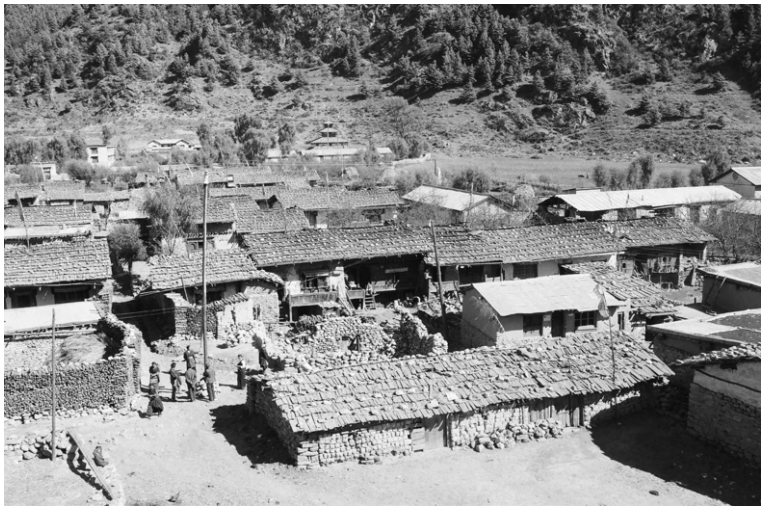


Fig. 1: Kyirong Zhol, October 1995: Rows of traditional houses with wooden shingle roofs, and the pagoda-style Phakpa Lhakhang in the background. Some houses are in ruins; a few have corrugated metal roofs (Tautscher 1995).



Fig. 2: Sketch map of Kyirong Zhol by Peter Aufschnaiter (1945): Layout of the row of houses with the temple Phakpa Lhakhang No. 19 to the north and Partso Lakhang No. 14 (VMZ S/I/009/B10, verso, detail).

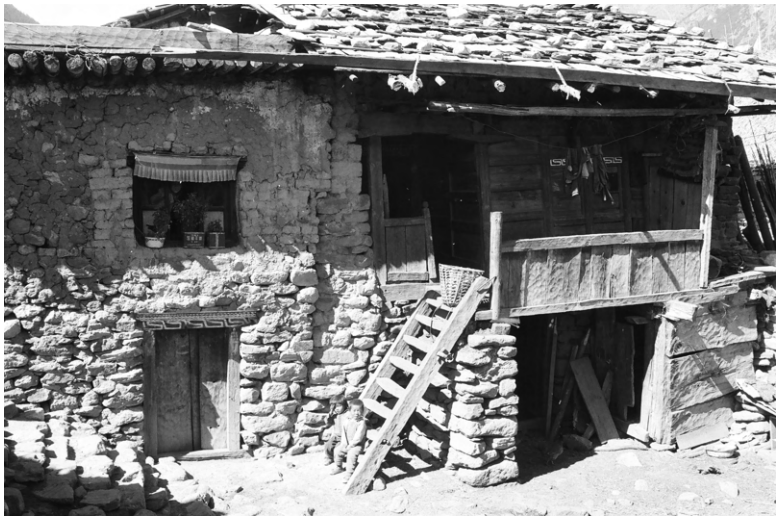


Fig. 3: A traditional Kyirong house, built of stone with a wooden veranda on the first floor, beneath which was originally the place for the web chair. This house looks as if it has been rebuilt in a rough manner (Tautscher 1995).

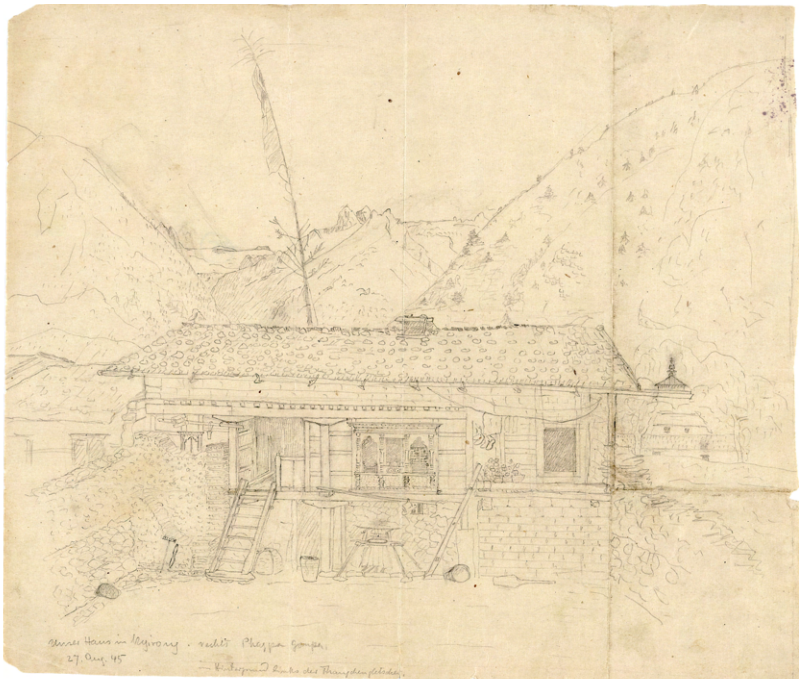


Fig. 4: Sketch by Peter Aufschnaiter (27 August 1945) of the house in Kyirong in which he and Harrer were living. This house is of the same style as that in Fig. 3 but better built. (VMZ S/I/009/B19).

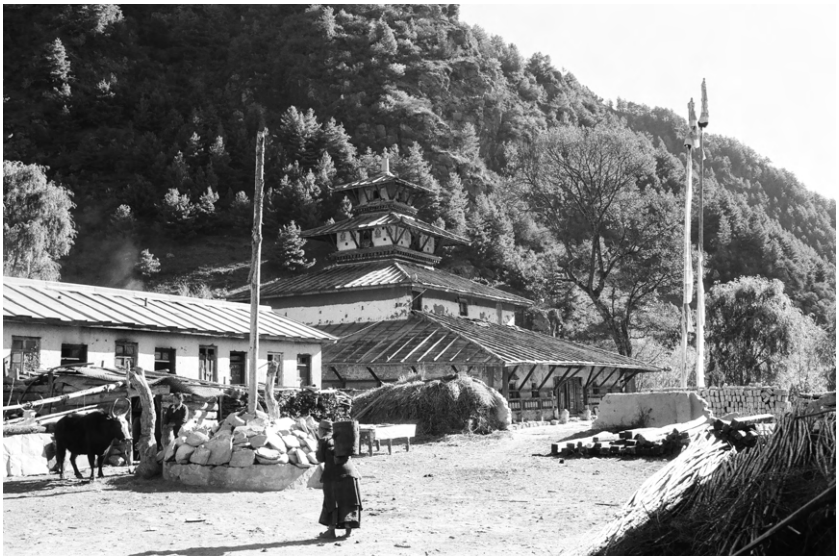


Fig. 5: Phakpa Lhakhang, October 1995: A little battered but still as in P. Aufschnaiter's sketch, with wall paintings on the two upper floors and ground floor; bells and prayer wheels on the ground floor; wood carvings around the front door; and two lions guarding the entrance. Tall prayer flag poles stand in front of the temple (Tautscher 1995).



Fig. 6: Sketch of the Phakpa Lhakhang by P. Aufschnaiter, 24/25 October 1945 (VMZ S/I/009/B17, recto, cropped from original).

1. Kyirong Valley—A historical crossroads: Trading hub and gateway for Buddhism between Tibet and Nepal

From the Kathmandu Valley, the oldest trading route went northward via the market and fortress of Nuwakot (in Tibetan texts named Bal rdzong or Jiangba dzong, an important fortress of the Malla kings guarding the northern frontier), and continued along the Trisuli River, passing through Dhunche, Barkhu, and Syabru. Following the Trisuli River, the route cut through the Himalayas to Kyirong Zhol, the main market where Nepalese and Tibetan traders exchanged their goods. At the town and fortress of Dzongka, the route reached the Tibetan plateau. This caravan route connected Ü (dBus) and Tsang (gTsang) of central Tibet, as well as the nomadic lands of Pelthang (dPal thang) and Porong (sPong rong) to the north, with the Kathmandu Valley in Nepal. The other historic route connecting central Tibet with the south and the Kathmandu Valley lay further east and went through Nyalam (gNya' lam) and Kuti along the Sun Kosi River.

Princess Bhrikuti, a daughter of the Licchavi Dynasty in the Kathmandu Valley, who had married the Tibetan king Songtsen Gampo (Srong btsan sgam po) in the 7th century, is said to have passed through Kyirong Valley. The construction of the main temple in Kyirong, the 'Phags pa lha khang, in Nepali pagoda style is attributed to her by historical sources. Padmasambhava, who in the 8th century was invited by the Tibetan King Trisong Detsen (Khri Srong lde btsan) to establish Buddhism in Tibet, is reported to have travelled to Lhasa through Kathmandu and Kyirong. Jo bo rje/Atīśa (982–1054), the famous Buddhist teacher from India, who arrived in Guge in 1042 at the request of the monk-king Byang chub 'od, also stayed for some time in Kyirong.[12] Milarepa (Mi la ras pa), the famous Tibetan yogin and poet, born 1040 near Dzongka in Tsalung (rTsa lung), meditated in the cave of Trakar Taso, a high cliff on the route between Dzongka and Kyirong.[13] From his teachings emerged the Drukpa ('Brug pa), Drigungpa ('Bri gung pa), and Phamodrupa (Phag mo gru pa) schools, subgroups of the Kagyüpa (bKa' brgyud pa) order, which established Buddhist monasteries in the Kyirong Valley, Lapchi (La phyi), and subsequently in northern Nepal, in Rasuwa, Gosainkund, Helambu/Yolmo and Dolakha district south of Lapchi.[14] In the 13th century the kings of Mangyul Gungthang, under Buddhist Sakya (Sa skya) overlordship, expanded

[12] For details on the history of Mangyul Gungthang from the 13th to 17th century see Everding (2000).

[13] On Milarepa (1040–1123), the famous Tibetan yogin and poet, see also Quintman (2014).

[14] On the Buddhist schools in Western Tibet, Kyirong, and Himalayan regions see Ehrhard (2008).

their power from their capital Dzongka over Western Tibet and the central Himalayan region, including present-day Mustang (Upper and Lower Lo), Dolpo, Manang, Tsum and Kyirong.[15] The Gungthang rulers founded the Mu-khun-srin Fort in Muktinath for the 'domination of the Ta-mang Se Mon' in Lower Lo—today part of Nepal—marking the first mention of the ethnonym Tamang as Se Mon people.[16] C. Ramble (1997: 509) states that the term 'Se' could be comparable to 'Mon', later 'Rongpa'—vague categories rather than precise ethnonyms—and may have been used to refer to people who are now (part of) the Tamang and Gurung of Nepal. With the decline of the Sakya, the power of the Gungthang kings also began to fade. During the rule of the Fifth Dalai Lama, beginning in 1642, Gungthang and Kyirong became an integral part of his new central government of Tibet.

South of Kyirong Zhol (today 50 km by road) in the Trisuli Valley, according to local oral history, Barkhu had been the political centre of petty chiefdoms ruled by Magar, Ghale and then Tamang Thokar kings. The Ghale had possessed a fortress called Yangerdzong near present day Barkhu.[17] According to B. Campbell, who carried out extensive research in that area, prior to the capture of Nuwakot by Prithvi Narayan Shah in 1744, "the area of the upper Trisuli valley must have been a region of petty *dzong*-centred chiefdoms alternately drawn between political accommodations with Kathmandu and Kyirong" (Campbell 1993: 26). Thokar remained the most significant Tamang clan in Barkhu; the Buddhist priest of Barkhu is a Thokar. In 1996, he explained that the ancestor of the Thokar came from central Tibet via Kyirong to Langtang and Gosainkund, then travelled east to Khumbu and finally via Yolmo back to Gosainkund and Barkhu.[18] The history of this Buddhist Thokar ancestor may reflect the political influence of the rulers of southern Tibet through Buddhist religious masters active in the Himalayan region, such as in Tsum, Langtang, Gosainkund, Helambu and Rasuwa. At the same time, it was the policy of the Malla kings in the Kathmandu Valley to grant land to Buddhist priestly lineages from Kyirong in order to strengthen their trade relations. In the 15th century, King Jayayakshya Malla of Bhaktapur (1428–1482) extended his political control northward along the major trade route to Kyirong, reaffirming this with his 1447

[15] See Jackson (1978). The thirteen districts of Mangyul Gungthang were: 1. Gung thang, 2. sKyid rong (Kyirong), 2. Nub ri, 3. Ma zhang rGya tshang pa, 4. Glo stod (Upper Lo), 5. Glo smad (Lower Lo), 6. Dol gru bzhi (Dolpo), 8. bZang brgyud pa, 9. gNyos, 10. dNgul, 11. Phu ri mtsho 'khor, 12. gTsang so Zang tsha ba, 13. Pha bzhi chags (*ibid*.: 211).

[16] See Ramble (1997: 497), citing Jackson (*ibid*.: 212).

[17] The Ghale in this region distinguish themselves from the Tamang but speak the same language and intermarry with the Tamang, mainly Thokar.

[18] Recorded in November 1996. See also below in the section *Kyirong and the Tamang*.

pilgrimage to Lake Gosainkund, when he made it a sacred Hindu site for the Newars of the Kathmandu Valley.[19]

Prithvi Narayan Shah's conquest of the Nuwakot fort in 1744 and the Kathmandu Valley in 1769 changed Kyirong's political situation. The Gorkha kings sought to control Kyirong and Nyalam, the most important trading posts between Tibet and Nepal. A dispute between the Gelugpa and Karma Kagyüpa schools over the Sixth Panchen Lama's inheritance provided the pretext: the Karmapa appealed to Nepal for support, and Nepal seized Kyirong and Nyalam, initiating the first Nepal-Tibet war (1788–1792). The Nepalese army plundered Tashi Lhünpo (bKra shis lhun po) Monastery before being defeated by the Eighth Dalai Lama's forces with Manchu (Qing) assistance. A border was established at Rasuwa Garhi, Kyirong's main temple came under Gelugpa control, and the Kagyüpa school lost its influence. Villagers had to follow Gelugpa law, pay taxes, and send one son to a monastery under the 'monk tax'.

According to Prof. Chapel, prior to the first Tibet-Nepal war, the seat of the *rdzong dpon* of the Lhasa government was the fortress in Rama. Only after the war Kyirong Zhol did receive its own *rdzong dpon*, the east *rdzong dpon* and the west *rdzong dpon*, who presided over the seven *lding dpon* of the seven provinces (*lding bdun*):[20]

1 - Glang bcu, Gra (ta), Khrong se,
2 - Dol po, lCang, sGyid bu,
3 - sPan shing, Tshong 'dus, gNas nub,
4 - sKyid grong zhol,

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19 See Tautscher 2007: 136.

20 This information seems to relate to the early 19th century. Based on research by Dieter Schuh (Schuh 1988, Schuh 2022), according to documents in the archives of the monastery of bKra shis bsam gtan gling in Kyirong, by 1830 at the latest the villages of sKyid grong were (re-)organised into eight administrative units or districts (*lding*) (Schuh 2022: 218). According to the census list (*sKyid grong sgo khra*) drawn up in the Earth Dog (*sa khyi*) year 1958, which recorded the taxable landholdings of the households of the "government farmers" (*gzhung rgyugs pa*) along with other categories of households (*dud chung*, *bogs sgrub*), these eight districts were named as follows: sTod sgo (including the settlements Ma gal, Rag ma, and Gro thang); sPang zhing; Tsong 'dus (besides the settlement of the same name, also gNas nub, gNas shar, Byams gling chos gzhis, and gNya'); Gra (including the villages Gra, Glang chu, Khrom ze / Zho tshong rta mang); La lte stod (sPom pa, sKog le/Gong sle, Lung skyong/Long skyong, mKhar bang/ mKhar sbang with Grong smad and Grong gong, 'Brog); La lte smad (including sBram khang/Gram sgang, sLe, sPang po che, Ko, b/Se chung, La phyi/phig); sKyid zhol (with the settlement divisions sKan pa tsho, sPun gsum tsho, and Bar tsho tsho); Gyes phug (including Gyes phug, Dol po, and Cang). (*ibid*.: 223–224). See also Map 2 in Schuh 2022: 252, showing the eight districts of sKyid grong based on the revised version of the map prepared by Peter Aufschnaiter (VMZ S/I/009/B25).

5 - Lab ye, gSer chung, brKo,
6 - La stod,
7 - La smad.[21]

At a place called Mam, north of the Rasuwa bridge, there were stationed the Tibetan government's border inspectors, who wielded considerable power in Kyirong. Prof. Chapel described a large market in Kyirong Zhol where up to 500 people from Nepal, especially traders from Patan, came—mainly to sell rice and to buy salt. Around twenty-one families were formed through mixed marriages between Kathmandu traders and Kyirong women.

2. *The Seven Sisters* (ma bdun), *ancestresses of Kyirong Zhol*

During our brief stay in Kyirong Zhol, with Tsering Gyalpo's assistance, I arranged a meeting with three elder men and one old woman who still knew the oral histories and had remained there, even during the Cultural Revolution (Fig. 7), one elderly man from Rama joined us later (Fig 8). I asked them about Kyirong's history, whether there were Tamang settlements, and their relations with the Tamang living fur-



Fig. 7: Elders of Kyirong, 31 October 1995: Three elderly men and one elderly woman whom Tsering Gyalpo and I interviewed on the history of Kyirong (Tautscher 1995).

[21] See also sKyid grong gnas nub Phur bu dbang 'dus (2018: 4-13) who provides additional historical information on sKyid grong, on further administrative units, such as nine (*brgya*) *tsho* and eleven *'thus*. Cf. also Sørensen and Hazod (2007: 17), who mention "the 'seven villages of the Kyi-people' (*kyi mi grong bdun*) […] described as settlements of craftsmen who were happy (*skyid*) to work for Srong-btsan sgam-po, i.e. to help to erect his temples (see also Sørensen and Hazod 2005: 53, *et passim*)".



Fig. 8: An elderly man from Rama, 31 October 1995, with his son, a granddaughter and a grandson (Tautscher 1995).

ther south. The first surprise came quickly: even in 1995 they were unfamiliar with the ethnonym Tamang even though Aufschnaiter in his diary had mentioned meeting Tamang from Nepal. They were only familiar with the term Aku Rong for the neighbouring population on the Nepali side and confirmed that some also had marriage alliances with them.

On the oral history of Kyirong Zhol, all agreed that the first inhabitants of Kyirong Zhol go back to seven mothers (in Tibetan *ma bdun*) or seven sisters. A descendant of the family rGyal sgo lho pa (83 years old) said that the first man to have come to Kyirong was named rGyal sgo lho pa—'people of the southern door', indicating that they may have come from the south. He added that this man had seven daughters—the *ma bdun*—who married seven men (it is not known from where they came) to whom the founding of Kyirong Zhol is attributed. To these first seven families (referred to as *skyid ma spun bdun*) were born only three sons, who founded three divisions (*tsho gsum*) of Kyirong Zhol: the oldest brother founded the district Partso (Bar tsho), the second the district Kempo (sKan pa tsho), the third district Busumpa (sPun gsum tsho). Each of the three districts—still in 1995—had its own temple dedicated to a female protector, referred to as *mo lha*. These were also the temples for the 'land god rituals' (*yul lha gsol sa*). The elders explained that over many generations, the three brothers' descendants grew to 70 families in Kyirong Zhol:

– 40 families of the rGyal sgo lho pa, the "people of the southern door", live in the district of Partso—their temple is that of the *mo lha* Ban dkar[22] located at the southern edge of Kyirong. It is the only

[22] Locally explained as meaning 'white power' or the 'white conch shell'.

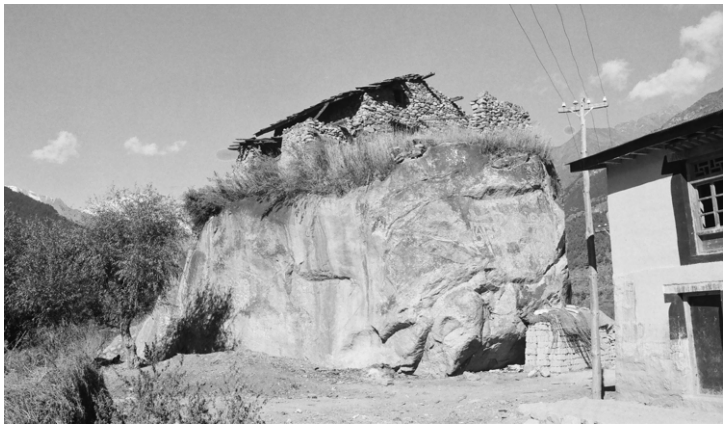


Fig. 9: The ruined Partso Lhakhang, 1995: Perched high on the rock at the western end of Kyirong Zhol (cf. Fig. 2: no.14). (Tautscher 1995).

temple Guntram, Tsering and I did not visit. The Kyirong men described the temple as a stone hut surrounded by trees. In Partso there is also the Buddhist monastery Partso Lhakhang belonging to the Nyingma school, founded by Lama Dunga Rinpoche from Gonsar Monastery further north in Magal (Fig. 9).

– 15 families of the dPe sde (those who brought a collection of texts?) live in the district of Kempo—their temple, located north of Kyirong on the road to Pangshing and Rama, is dedicated to the *ma bdun*, the Seven Sisters. It is the largest of the three temples. It consists

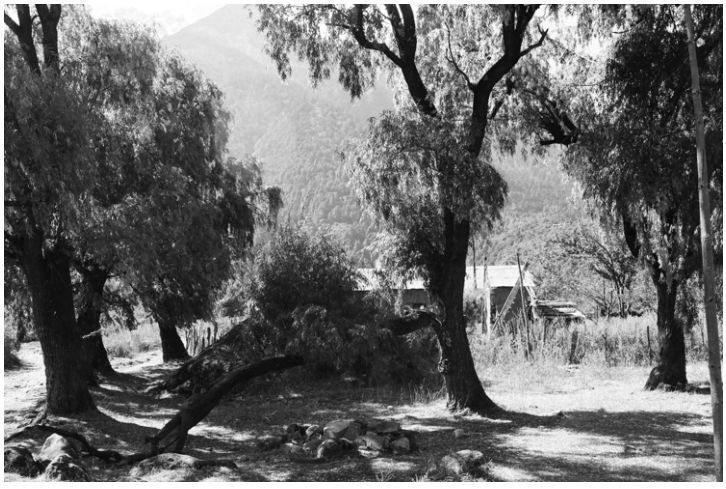


Fig. 10: The Seven Trees of ma bdun*, October 1995: One has fallen over; in the temple compound* ma bdun*, north of Kyirong Zhol on the road to Pangshing. They represent the Seven Sisters, the ancestresses of Kyirong Zhol (Tautscher 1995).*

of a grove of seven trees (species unidentified) said to represent Kyirong's ancestresses, the Seven Sisters (Fig. 10). Next to it is a large rock. A small stone house with a wooden shingle roof, open on the western side, contains a narrow stone platform with Buddhist stone inscriptions. Rods bearing prayer flags are planted to the left and right of the entrance. Three large prayer flags stand in front of the entrance.

– 15 families (name not mentioned by the elders) live in Busumpa; their temple, dedicated to Sa long ma(r), is located in a field to the south-west and nearest to Kyirong Zhol. The temple is enclosed by stone walls on three sides and open to the west. It is covered with a wooden shingle roof. Before the Cultural Revolution, the elders said, the stone house had been taller, and its interior had been decorated with wall paintings. At both sides of the open entrance, stone lions (also called *iwi* [grandmother] Sa long ma) served as guardians (Fig. 11). Inside, there was a stone platform with stone inscriptions (Fig. 12 and Fig. 13). Prayer flags hang beneath the roof and rods bearing small



Fig. 11: The temple of Sa long ma, October 1995 (cf. Fig. 2: No. 22), south of Kyirong Zhol, with the two lions as guardians (Tautscher 1995).



Figs. 12, 13: Weathered stone inscriptions (?) (left); weathered stone with mani stone in the background (right) (Tautscher 1995).

prayer flags were planted on the left and right near the stone lions. Nearby were three peach trees, one of which had dried up. In earlier times, the sacrificial site was surrounded by a small conifer grove. Today it stands in the middle of cultivated fields.

3. Kyirong and the Tamang: Tamang oral histories of migration and origin

One year after this trip to Tibet and Kyirong, in October 1996, together with Parshuram Tamang, then head of the Tamang cultural association Tamang Ghedung, I organised a workshop on Tamang oral histories, clan origins, and migration routes of their ancestors to their present settlements in Nepal.[23] Many of the recorded accounts confirm the importance of Kyirong as the route through which they arrived in Nepal. At the workshop, too, some of the elders recounted their past travels to Kyirong. Kusum Lama, of the Tamang clan Ghising from Dolakha district, travelled to Kyirong around 1954 and reached as far as Dagar (Trakar Taso Cave). "In those days, when we went up there, they called us Aku Rongpa", meaning 'uncle Rongpa', thus referring to them as paternal uncles. He also explained that in the Kyirong language the Tamang clan Thokar is called Jhyaba, and the Moktan there are known as Chyoba. Similarly, Jyambyang Serub Lama from the Gole clan in Dapcha near Namobuddha, who had visited Kyirong a few years before 1959, met members of the Tamang clan Thing and Thokar in Pangshing near Kyirong Zhol and at Gangderku (?), who spoke the Tamang language.[24]

The following oral accounts tell of the Tamang clan's origin in Tibet and Kyirong:

The same Buddhist priest from Dapcha of the Tamang Gole clan told the following story regarding the origin of the Buddhist text *Ruichen Cyopge*, the 'Eighteen Great Clans', the main Tamang text explaining the origin of the eighteen great Tamang clans: "It is said that our grandfather came from Tibet. We say until the time we reached Kerong (Kyirong), we were Tibetans (Tam. *bhoyipa*); there we separated and our history began. Kyirong is the place where our written genealogy (Tam. *dungrab*) originated, our ancestral deities (Tam.

[23] Workshop with Parshuram Tamang, Cultural Association Tamang Ghedung, on oral Tamang histories in Kathmandu in 1996 to which many well-known Tamang Buddhist lamas and elders from central Nepal and the Kathmandu Valley were invited. Their accounts were recorded and translated word by word.

[24] Clarke (1980: 84, footnote 6) also states that many clan names in Helambu/Yolmo originate in Kyirong, such as Dong, Chiawa or Toka (compare with Tam. Jhyaba and Thokar), Chösangba or Mukhtan (Tam. Mokthan), Shyangba or Thing, and Yöba or Waiba.

pholha) were divided and where the text *Ruichen Cyopge* of the eighteen Tamang clans was created. Since then, the Tibetans call us Rongpa."

The Buddhist priests from the village of Barkhu who perform the Buddhist rituals at the festival on Gosainkund (in the name of the descendants of the Karmapa Lama) belong to the Thokar clan.[25] They told the complicated history of the Thokar lineage which in a way also explains the spread of Buddhism in the area: from Gyagar Dorje Den (rGya gar rdo rje gdan, Bodhgayā) they went to Samye in Central Tibet. From these historical Buddhist places the ancestor of the Thokar, Paltisomya by name, came to a cave at a place called Lelung (?), from there he went further south to Dagar (Trakar Taso), then to Kyirong, and to Lengdisyung, the border to Rasuwa. There his son *meme* (*mes mes*) Tsawang Norbu was born. The son cleared the forest nearby in Khangshing (a place halfway up to Gosainkund Lake) and settled there. After the death of his father, he went to Langtang, where he had four sons. One son settled in Shyabru, one in Dimre (his descendants are also in Thongban and Chilime), whereas the second oldest and the youngest ones stayed in Langtang. The youngest went to Noukund, the 'nine lakes' and settled in Yarsa. The second went to Namche where he married, but he left his wife and his parents-in-law behind and went on to Riburma (?), then on the way back he settled in Melamchi (in Yolmo) where he had one son. The son went to see the festival on Gosainthan Mountain and from there settled in Barkhu. Since their ancestors separated in Langtang, this Thokar lineage is called Langtang Gyalba, the 'kings of Langtang', in contrast to the other Thokar lineage, which is called Pare Gyalba (the 'kings of Pare'?). Note, the Tamang villages of Yarsa, Shyabru, and Barkhu are three of the four villages which form the Tamang association (Nep. *guthi*) to organize the full moon festival at Gosainkund Lake under the patronage of the Karmapa Lama, who had received a land donation in Yolmo and the right to build the first Buddhist monastery at Gosainkund Lake. He also mentions Se as the original ethnonym: "In Setang[26] people of the clans Dong, Thokar, and Ghale were living. How did they become 'Sepa'? The people of Setang say that all the people have come down from Kyirong. When they arrived at the place now called Setang, they gave it its name. From there, some went to the east, some to the west, or to other places; each choosing for themselves where they would settle. They came from Tibet with their own ancestor deity (*pholha*). Among some only one son came, one family. When they arrived, they all lived by themselves. When the food was not sufficient for all the people of Setang, they left for different places."

[25] See Tautscher 2006.

[26] Sechung or Sadong south of Kyirong Zhol on a map drawn by Peter Aufschnaiter (VMZ S/I/009/B25).

4. The Seven Sisters mabun *in Tamang tradition*

The 'seven sisters' or 'seven mothers' *mabun* (Tam.) are important female protectresses in Tamang tradition. In the Tamang village Chayarsaba (Dolakha District) the village shaman (Tam. *bompo*) explained: "The 'seven mothers', the *mabun*—in the Hindu reinterpretation the seven Kālī *amas* and Seti Devi—and the fertile water spirits, the *lu* (Tam.), are said to have appeared by themselves to protect the people from diseases and prevent misfortunes. They are the female force connected to the fertile waters of the earth, and they, too, are connected to the shaman's healing powers." Every Tamang village has its ritual centre in the village where the water spirits, the earth deities with the 'seven mothers' *mabun*, reside.

The night before the pilgrimage to Gosainkund Lake, the Tamang shaman in Dhunche of the Thokar clan places on his house altar seven vases with flowers of various colours, which represent the 'seven mothers' *mabun*—also named Gaṅgā—who are considered the 'mothers' of the seven souls (Tam. *bla*) that each child carries. Each of the seven mothers is associated with a fundamental domain in every human being: the white Kālī *ama kakar gyalmo* is responsible for the development of the sense of smell and ability of speech; the yellow Kālī *ama woyiser gyalmo* for the closing of the baby's fontanel; the multi-coloured Kālī *ama chhimi gyalmo* for eyesight and hearing; Kālī *ama lhaden syangmo* (colour unknown) for bodily appearance; Kālī *ama duble syangmo* (colour unknown) for the development of the throat and inner organs; Kālī *ama bude gyalmo* (colour unknown) for intelligence; and Kālī *ama mentsen gyalmo* (colour unknown), which gives the male and female sexual organs. These seven mothers are linked to the well-being of the children just as they are connected to the causes of their diseases: according to the *bompo*, when one of the seven souls leaves the child's body to seek refuge with its mother (*mabun* or Gaṅgā) at the source of Gosainkund Lake, the child becomes ill. The *bompo*'s task is to bring the soul back to the sick child. The *bompo* from Dhunche described this as 'to convince the soul to leave Ganga, and to lead the soul back to the sick child so that the child may heal'. The *bompo*'s aim at the Gosainkund festival is to pay homage to the seven mothers/Gaṅgā to strengthen their relationship with them.[27]

5. Conclusion

In contrast to the dry Tibetan high plateau, the Kyirong Valley is a fertile region with forests, where agrarian life, pastoralism, and trade

[27] See Tautscher 2007: 142–143.

were closely intertwined, and trade between Tibet and Nepal brought considerable wealth. The Kyirong Valley was not just a trade passage, nor was Kyirong Zhol merely a marketplace between Tibet and Nepal. It was also an important zone of cultural encounter and a corridor for migration routes. During the era of Mangyul Gungthang, the rulers, working through Buddhist masters, played a decisive role in the cultural and political absorption of southern Tibet into the central Tibetan state, and in extending their political influence to the neighbouring regions in the south that now belong to Nepal: Rasuwa, Langtang, Tsum, Lapchi, and Mustang. Interestingly, oral history tells us that the first inhabitants of Kyirong Zhol arrived from the "southern gate", while the Tamang trace their origins to Tibet and Kyirong. Only after leaving Kyirong and migrating to the south did they become known as Rongpa and Tamang. Similarities between Kyirong and Rasuwa in Nepal—along the river Trisuli—can be seen in architecture, clothing, and cultural traditions related to pre-Buddhist protector gods and goddesses.

F.-K. Ehrhard compares the 'seven mothers' *ma bdun* of Kyirong with the Tibetan demonesses *ma mo*, beings of malignant nature, who cause epidemic diseases and were pacified and tamed by Padmasambhava. He also describes the *ma bdun* as one of the seven Vajra mothers. Only two of the seven Vajra mother deities are located in Kyirong: "one known as rDo-rje Ma-bdun-ma at a place called So-chu and rDo-rje Sa-lung-ma in Sa-lung" (Ehrhard 2008: 17).[28] This means the seven sisters *ma bdun* have become only one mother among the seven Vajra mothers, also connected to the Drukpa ('Brug pa) lineage said to go back to Ma bdun ma. A Drukpa Kagyupa yogin bore the name of the *ma bdun* goddess and settled where she had been tamed (*ibid*.: 18). He became responsible for the main Buddhist rituals at the *ma bdun* shrine near Kyirong Zhol.

The concept of the 'seven sisters' or 'seven mothers' reveals how shared cultural elements transform across different contexts and distances. For the local residents of Kyirong Zhol, the Seven Sisters (*ma bdun*) are seven ancestresses from whom the three founders of Kyirong Zhol were born, and they also serve as one of the three territorial protectresses of the town. For Tamang shamans in neighbouring Rasuwa, the *mabun* are seven mothers, each associated with one of the seven souls that shape a person and their abilities, and who guard over their well-being.

The further one moves away from a place, and the more abstract the religious concept: the seven sisters or mothers lose their specific

[28] "The presence of a cult of the 'Seven Ma-mo Sisters' (*ma mo mched bdun*) in the sKyid-grong region of Mang-yul Gung-thang is known from the personal memoirs of Brag-dkar rta-so sPrul-sku" (Ehrhard 2008: 15).



Fig. 14: Modern Kyirong Zhol, October 2019: Modern concrete buildings with stone-plastered facades and Tibetan-style windows. The central road, now a pedestrian zone, leads directly to the Phakpa Lhakhang (Tautscher 1995).

local functions and are instead incorporated into higher-level groups of seven mothers—whether as Kālī *amas* in Hindu-influenced Tamang shamanic tradition or as Vajra *amas* in Buddhist contexts—each with different meanings. In Kyirong they are ancestresses and local protectors; in Rasuwa they are soul-guardians; in wider Buddhist cosmology they become one deity among the seven Vajra mothers.

The memories of the last generation—both Kyirongpa and Tamang—reach back to a time when the border between Kyirong and Rasuwa was open, as do the accounts of Peter Aufschnaiter and Prof. Chapel. The 1962 border closure fundamentally transformed the region.

The vibrant, interconnected world documented by Peter Aufschnaiter in 1945—where hundreds of Nepali traders filled Kyirong's markets, shepherds moved freely across mountain pastures, and family ties crossed political boundaries—had been severed for more than three decades by the time of our 1995 fieldwork. Yet the memories of the elders we interviewed in Kyirong remained vivid.

6. Kyirong Today

After two powerful earthquakes in April and May 2015 disrupted the motorable road between Tibet and Nepal via Nyalam and Kuti/Zhangmu, a new highway was constructed: the China National Highway 318, linking Lhasa with the Nepal border via Shigatse, Tingri

and Kyirong. A large land-port bridge at the Nepal border has been operating since 2016. In October 2019, 24 years after the joint fieldwork in October 1995, I passed through Kyirong Valley and Kyirong Zhol again. The highway on the Tibetan side to the border to Nepal was impressive, and Kyirong Zhol had grown into a modern town of five-storey concrete buildings with Tibetan-style decorations. Most were hotels to accommodate tourists and had restaurants—the staff being mainly from Nepal. The main street leading to the Phawa temple was decoratively plastered and lined with planted troughs on both sides (Fig. 14). The pagoda temple which had been freshly plastered and the murals repainted, was surrounded by a park enclosed by a yellow wall with a typical entrance to a Tibetan monastery. I walked around the transformed Kyirong Zhol and the surrounding fields searching for the shrine of *ma bdun*, but my time was short and I could not find it. I hope the seven trees representing (or embodying) the seven sisters, Kyirong's ancestresses, have not disappeared.

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VMZ = Völkerkundemuseum der Universität Zürich / Ethnographic Museum at the University of Zurich (VMZ S/I/009: Legacy of Peter Aufschnaiter).

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