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SA SPANG MDA' GNAM SPANG MDA': MURDER, HISTORY, AND SOCIAL POLITICS IN 1920S LHASA

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Sa spang mda' gnam spang mda'
The earth is Pangda’s, the sky is Pangda’s.

On a dark and stormy night, people had gathered in Lhasa’s Twenty-

eighth Park, (nyi shu'i gling ga), to celebrate ‘djam gling spyi bsangs,
the Universal Smoke Offering Day. Throughout the day, people pic-
nicked and gambled in tents set up throughout the park. With the
exception of the weather, the atmosphere was festive—people eating,
drinking, and otherwise enjoying themselves. Beer maids roamed
from tent to tent refilling chang bowls,93 singing, and flirting. Much
of Lhasa’s high society was there. The flaps of their tents were down,
perhaps as much as to prevent prying eyes as to provide shelter from
the weather. Inside one particular tent, dimly lit by oil lamps and

candles, a group of men played mahjong and drank chang. As they
played, a thunder and lightning storm developed. Outside the tent,
two men huddled, nervously preparing for their own festival activi-
ties. Then, as one or another of the men inside the tent contemplated
his next play, there was a ferocious roar of thunder, followed by a
flash of lightning. The lightning illuminated the tent, and through
chang-glazed eyes, they saw that one of the men had fallen over.
Outside the tent, the two men were already gone, swiftly making
their escape through the alleys of Lhasa. The man who had fallen
was dead, murdered with just one shot fired precisely at the time of
the thunder, so as not to be heard and thus giving the assassins just

92 The original title of this paper, as delivered at the Ninth Seminar of the
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Pangdatsang family in the United States, Switzerland, and India.
93 Chang is Tibetan barley beer.
enough time to make their get away. This was 1921 and the murdered man was Pangda Nyigyal, the head of the Pangdatsang family, a Khampa trader settled in Lhasa and a favorite of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama.

The dramatic story of the murder of Pangda Nyigyal is still told today by Tibetans. Eyes wide, voices lowered, narrators seven decades distant from the event drape their narration in suspense and conspiracy enabled first, by the fact that the murder was never solved, and second, by the controversial place of the Pangdatsang family in modern Tibetan society and history. This article follows both branches of suspense, and is two stories in one. It is first a study of the murder of Pangda Nyigyal and the histories his murder has generated, and it is also the beginnings of a history of the Pangdatsang family and of the relations between region, class, and politics in Tibetan society.

In the first half of the last century, simultaneous with Tibet’s uneasy exploration of outside ideas about modernity and the nation-state, the Tibetan merchant class was attempting to carve out a new bourgeois social space in Lhasa’s aristocrat-dominated society. The attempts of this group, many of who were trading families from the eastern Tibet region of Kham, were a challenge to rigid hierarchies of regional status and social class in a national imaginary that privileged the Central Tibetan aristocracy. Genealogy and heritage trumped earned wealth and power in early twentieth century Lhasa, but financial success was beginning to infringe on the bastions of social prestige. Thus, although ascribed status still prevailed over achieved status, Tibet’s new bourgeoisie did have its share of success stories. Among Khampas, the two most successful trading firms were those of the Sadhutsang family from Kanze and the Pangdatsang family from Markham. Along with the Reting Labrang, they were referred to as re spom sa gsum, “Reting-Pangda-Sadhu, the Three.” In Kailimpog today, forty-odd years after the trade route between India and Tibet was closed, they are remembered as “the sun, star, and jewels of Tibet.”

Sa spang mda’ gnam spang mda’. “The earth is Pangda’s, the sky is Pangda’s.” I first heard this phrase from one of Pangda’s former mule herders. Since then numerous Tibetans have quoted it to me, often telling me stories of how Pangda’s servants would invoke it when committing an offense, saying, “I am connected to Pangda, what are you going to do to me?” This insolence was possible only through the power of the Pangdatsang family, one that rose seemingly from nowhere to great power, and which in the span of two generations became one of the wealthiest—if not the wealthiest—families in all of Tibet. From Kham, the family was wildly successful in Lhasa. The story of its members ranges back and forth between India, China, Kham, and Lhasa, covering ground ranging from the Tibetan economy and trade to politics both lay and monastic, from relations with Nationalist China and British India to intrigues of all sorts of shapes and sizes. In this article I draw on an eclectic array of oral and written sources to present less well-known aspects of the family. Thus, instead of bringing new material to bear on the 1934 Pangda rebellion in Kham or Rapga’s Tibet Improvement Party in 1940s Kailimpog, I focus on Nyigyal, the family patriarch, and his shepherding of the family in their rise to national prominence.

Lightning Strikes: The Making of the Pangdatsang Family

Our story begins in Chamdo. The rise of the Pangdatsang family from local power to regional power, and then to national power took place in a relatively short span of time and under two different names—Pangdatsang and Pomdatsang. In the mid-nineteenth century, the Pomdatsang (Spom mda’ shang) family, based in a Sakya...

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294 A labrang is the property and wealth of an incarnation lama accumulated over a series of incarnations. Reting Rimpoché, the incarnation lama associated with Sera Monastery’s Je College, had a substantial labrang that was, among other things, successfully engaged in trade.

295 In 1952, American intelligence officers observed that “Pangdatsang, Sadutsang, and Reting Labrang...have formed a syndicate operating at Kailimpog...to promote the wool trade.” U.S. Intelligence report, June 27, 1952, NARA document.


297 An off-color version of this story also circulates. One of Pangda’s mule herders was caught relieving his bowels on the side of the road in Kailimpog, and upon being scolded, responded, “The earth is Pangda’s, the sky is Pangda’s. If I don’t shit here, where am I supposed to shit?” (sa spang mda’ gnam spang mda’ skyag pa ’di ru ma dbang na ga par gong gsogs red). Most versions of the story that I was told included only the first phrase, whether the second phrase was edited out for me or added to the original by others for comic effect, I do not know.

298 Khampa family names often affix tshang, romanized as “tsang,” to them. Tshang literally means “nest,” but “Pangdatsang” may be translated as “House of
area of Chamdo called Rdza ba Spom mda', were traders and spon-
sors of the Sakya family and sect. At this time, Tenzin Zangmo,
one of the sisters of the head of the Sakya family, was married into
the Pomda family. The family was given a Sakya post in Markham,
an important district south of Chamdo, and relocated there. One off-
spring of the Pomda-Sakya union was Nyima Gyaltse, or Nyigyal,
under whom the family's power would be consolidated through a
combination of business acumen and religious patronage. Connect-
ions to the Sakya family were an important part of the ascent of the
Pangdatsangs.

The Sakya family was one of the most powerful in all of Tibet.
From the town and monastery of Sakya in central Tibet, they had
risen to power in the thirteenth century. Sakya rule over Tibet
lasted for only about a century, but the importance of the family and
religious tradition did not wane. Unique in Tibet, Sakya is the name
of a family, their estate, a monastery, and one of the four main
schools of Tibetan Buddhism. In addition to the Sakya monasteries
found throughout Tibet, the Sakyaas maintained a degree of political
autonomy in eleven different areas of Tibet through the 1950s,
including two territories in eastern Tibet—Damthog and Markham.
The Sakya post in Markham was one of the eighteen dpon or
chietlain positions in Markham and was called the Gyakeg Pon
(Rgya skeg dpon). This is the position given to the Pomda family.

The domain included the nomad area of Jindok and the mixed farm-
ing-nomadic area of Gushod, as well as the Gyakeg monastery and
community. The position was usually given to a lama from Sakya
who would stay for three to five years as both head of the monastery
and the lay community. In contrast to this system, the Pomda
family was awarded the post as a hereditary one in perpetuity. This
meant that the family was now ruler of a unique area, one which paid
taxes to Sakya, but from which the Lhasa government could levy
work, or collect an "outer tax." The granting of this Sakya post provided
material benefits to the family, spiritual benefits in the form
of strong protector deities Dorje Dakden (Rdo rje grags ldan) and
Thog goe (Thog rgod), attendants of the powerful deity Tsi mar
(Ts'i dmar ra), as well as one of the Sakya 'bag mo, or witches,
and an identity change in the form of a new name. The area of
Markham that they moved to was called Spang mda', and the family
took on this name, referring to themselves as Spang mda' tshang,
or Pangdatsang, rather than the earlier Spom mda' tshang. This
relatively recent change of name means that both names—Spom
mda' and Spang mda'—are still used to refer to the family. The
family themselves prefer the Spang mda' name, transliterating it as
"Pangda," and I follow their preference here.

The new position in Markham did not curtail the Pangda trading
business, but rather provided the financial means for expansion.
Pangda Nyigyal moved to Lhasa and began coordinating long-dist-
tance trade from there. It is at this point that the family gains recog-
nition preserved in broader historical memory within the Tibetan
community. Over the course of several dozen interviews with
Khampa and Lhasa Tibetans about the Pangdatsang family, of those

Pangda. In Lhasa, the word gzim shag, an honorific for house, was used instead of

tshang.

290 Known as Rdza ba sgang or Rdza ba Dpa' shod Rdzong. Oral information
from Tashi Tsering, Phupa Tsetop, and Baba Lekshay. Pangda family members that
I have interviewed were unaware that the family was originally from Chamdo.

291 The story of the family's rise to local power requires further investigation.
Pangdatsang family members contend that the family was locally powerful for gen-
erations. Wangmo Yuthok Pangdatsang recalls that in the first half of the twentieth
century, the Pangdatsang brothers could recite family history going back four or five
generations. Their ancestral stories were of powerful and respected local chieftains
who had good relations with the people they governed. Interview, Wangmo Yuthok

292 On the Sakya family and religious tradition, see Samuel 1993, Cassinelli and
Ekvall 1989, and Chogyay 1983. For personal narratives, see Sakya and Emery 1990,
and Norbu 1987.

293 Cassinelli and Ekvall 1969:32.

294 Phupa 1998:7. Phupa gives the spelling as rgya dkar; Cassinelli and Ekvall as
rgya khag. I choose to follow instead Sakya Trichen Takshu Tinley Rinchen who
spells the name rgya skeg.


296 Cassinelli and Ekvall 1969:30 downplay the importance of the eastern Sakya areas. In addition, they erroneously claim that "no people from these
eastern regions were of any importance in the governmental and religious affairs of
Sa skya preper."


298 On Tibetan deities, see Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1956. On the Sa skya 'bag mo,
see Wangdu 1952.

299 Wangmo Yuthok Pangda recalls that papers her father, Pangda Yampel, submitted
to the Dalai Lama would come back with the name Spang mda' crossed out and
Spom mda' written in instead (Interview, June 2, 2000). Several individuals have
suggested that the reason for preferring Spom mda' could be because Spang mda' is a
close homonym for the term sprang po which means "beggar."
who were able to explain the origins of the family’s rise to power, all told me similar stories. Collectively, they were as follows:

When the Thirteenth Dalai Lama fled Lhasa to the Tibetan border with India following the fall of the Qing Dynasty in 1911, Pangdu Nyigyal provided free transport of all his goods to and from Lhasa, as well as a bodyguard of some 2-300 Khampa troops. Once His Holiness was safely returned to Lhasa, he called Pangdu Nyigyal to see him, asking him what he wanted in return for services provided. Nyigyal replied that he was a businessman and didn’t know about politics, but could His Holiness give him the business powers of the Central Government? His Holiness said very well and sent the orders to the Kashag, the Tibetan cabinet. The Kashag asked Nyigyal, “If you give us one million gomro, then what will you give us next year?” He wisely replied, “Two million.” The deal was struck, and Pangdu’s star began to rise. As the Central Tibetan Government business agent, Pangdu bought wool at half the regular price from the sellers and others were not allowed to buy until he had bought his fill. He also paid only half the transportation costs, and others had to wait to move their goods until all of his had been transported. Other traders, wool sellers, and transporters did not like this and became jealous.

This oral history of Pangdu’s fortuitous encounter with, and service to, the Thirteenth Dalai Lama sets the date of the family’s rise in 1912. But while Nyigyal did aid the Dalai Lama, and was later favored for this service, the Pangdu family was on the rise prior to 1912. British colonial records housed in London help us extend this study further back by several years. Although Tibet was never colonized by Britain, the British Empire and its agents amassed and created massive amounts of documentation regarding Tibet. The importance of knowledge in the imperial project of rule extended to places and peoples outside the boundaries of rule. In Tibet we see this through British attempts to ensure that Tibet developed in ways compatible with the interests of Great Britain and British India. British policy in Tibet in the early twentieth century had three objectives: first, to cultivate a pro-British sentiment among the Tibetan elite; second, to influence Tibetan diplomatic affairs; and third, to develop trade as a key component of British-Tibetan relations. With this third concern in mind, they noted with alarm every time the Tibetan Government made trade decisions that went against British notions of a fair and open market that underlay the various trade treaties between the governments of India and Tibet.

Protest over trade arrangements, often directed at the Tibetan Government’s favoring of the Pangdu family, was a frequent form of British communication with Lhasa. The first British protest against Pangdatsang favoritism was in 1909, three years before Nyigyal provided aid and escort to the Dalai Lama. On May 26, 1909, the Tibetan Government granted the sole right to purchase wool and yak tails to three traders: “the Kunsang family of Lhasa, Jimpa of Chema (or Garusha from Lhasa, if Jimpa declined), and Pu-nye-chang from the Pom-do-tsang family.” The British were joined in their protests over these grants by the eighteen major traders of the Chumbi valley, on the Indian-Tibetan border and through which ran the Kalimpung-Lhasa road. Yu Lien, the Chinese representative in Lhasa, was also against the trade grants and gave orders for the grant to be cancelled. His orders were promptly ignored, as were the other protests, and the grant recipients began to reap their benefits. The trading powers of the Pangdu firm in particular began to grow, and monopolies over the wool trade—the chief domestic product of Tibet—continued to be granted to Pangdu Nyigyal by the government. Pangdu was also a major importer of tea and silks from China, and had representatives throughout China, including Beijing and Shanghai. By 1920, Pangdu Nyigyal was recognized as the leading Tibetan trader, a fact not lost on the British. Sir Charles Bell, Political Officer in Sikkim (with responsibilities for Tibet) off and on from 1904 through 1921, provides a rare written description of Pangdu Nyigyal.

During my time in Tibet, the chief Tibetan merchant was a man named Pom-da-tsang. I met him in Lhasa. He had branches in Calcutta, Shanghai, and Peking, and formerly had maintained a branch in Japan also. His business with India was chiefly in wool, but he exported also yak-tails and other commodities. To Peking he sent woolen cloth, as well as the skins of fox, stone marten, lynx, marmot, etc. He imported great quantities of Chinese silk, etc. Pom-da-tsang emphasized the necessity of knowing the different patterns on the silk, for some districts

309 Tsepon W.D. Shakha found also writes about “Nyima Gyalpo Pandatsang of Markham” aiding the Dalai Lama in 1912; see his 1967:243, and 1976:208.
310 On race policy as a project of knowledge as well as rule, see Cohn 1996, on British policy towards Tibet, see McKay 1997, and McGranahan in press.

311 JOR L/F+S/10/138 Tibet. Trade Monopolies, 1909-1918. In addition, the grant for hides went to the Getutsang family from Kham for Rs. 20,000/- per year.
312 Bell’s meeting with Pangdu Nyigyal took place at some point between November 1920 and October 1921, the only time that Bell was in Lhasa. For information on the Bell Mission to Lhasa, see McKay 1997.
in Tibet favor one pattern, others another. The silk which came from Russia, he asserted, was of good quality only; there was nothing second-rate. It was more costly than the most expensive Chinese silk.\footnote{Bell 1992:130.}

Pangda was also one of the few Khampa traders who paid for goods in Dartsendo or Chengdu with drafts payable in Shanghai.\footnote{Coates letter, Tachienlu, November 22, 1916.}

At some time in the 1910s, as the family became more successful in Lhasa, they made the decision to join forces with the Jaling (Byang gling) family, a family of traders from Lhasa.\footnote{Interviews, Wangmo Yuthok Pangda, June 2, 2000; Surkhang Lhacham, Oakland, May 1, 2000.} The two daughters of the Jaling family, Sonam and Tsedon, married with the two Pangda sons Yampel and Tobgyal, but this was not all; to more closely tie the families together, the husbands also married each other’s wives. This was done with an official ceremony, after which the two families lived together as one. From the unions of the parents, only one child was born, a daughter, Pema Chockyi. She was given the Pangda name, and the original son of the Jaling family took the name Spang mdwa’ zur pa, or Pangslur (Spang zur),\footnote{Zur (“corner”) is a suffix given to family names when the occasion arises that a secondary branch of the family needs a name for official use.} when he went into government service.\footnote{He eventually went as a mag pa to the Tethong family which meant that the Pangda name was not continued. Mag pa is the term for a man who at the time of marriage leaves his family’s home to live with his wife’s family. He becomes a member, often the head, of the new family and takes their family name as his own. This is commonly done in families where there are no sons, and thus no one to carry on the family name.} This union of families combined not only two trading families, but also created deeper ties for the Khampa Pangda family with communities in Lhasa.

Social divisions in Lhasa were not only along class lines, but regional ones, with Tibetans from the provinces added into Central Tibetan social hierarchies. Two arenas in which there was considerable latitude for crossing divisions and bringing together different communities were trade and religion. Both trade and religion cut across social and regional divides in general, while recreating such divisions internally, e.g., through regional trade associations and monastic colleges or houses organized around regional affiliation. Khampa traders passing through Lhasa could easily find Khampa worlds in the capital—places to stay and drink, lamas to seek blessings from. These were familiar worlds, and most traders were perhaps content to operate within these frameworks.\footnote{An additional and unofficial realm in which divisions of class and region were crossed was in the world of sexual relations. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper, liberal Tibetan sexual mores allowed for transgressions of social boundaries through male-female sexual relations, especially between traders and women in towns along trading routes.} Pangda Nyigyal, however, had aspirations beyond Khampa expatriate life in Lhasa; his merger with the Jaling family, his efforts at business expansion, and his relationship with the Dalai Lama are ample evidence. One question remains unanswered by historical memory in exile and British colonial archives: why was Pangda Nyigyal awarded the 1909 trade concession? What exactly had brought him to the attention of the Tibetan Government?

The key to unlocking the story of the Pangdatsang family’s successes in Lhasa was entrusted to Nyigyal’s grandson, Manang Sonam Tobgyal. Son of Pema Choekyi, Manang Sonam Tobgyal spent much of his childhood and teen years in the household of his uncle Yampel. Pangda Yampel, along with his brothers Rapga and Tobgyal, would regale the younger generation with stories of the past, including Nyigyal’s early years in Lhasa. As family lore goes, Nyigyal came to Lhasa as an ordinary Khampa trader. He did not have much money, but was a clever man, and he had a plan. Shortly after his arrival in Lhasa, Nyigyal borrowed money from friends and then made large contributions to the “three monasteries”—Sera, Drepung, and Ganden.\footnote{Sera, Drepung, and Ganden were the three main monasteries associated with the Tibetan Government. Each was Gelugpa, supported thousands of monks from all regions of Tibet, and supplied high-level monastic officials to the government.} He gave all of his capital to them, leaving nothing for himself. In Tibet, at this time, there were no banks, so people were responsible for keeping their own money. Across all levels of society, from poorest to wealthiest, giving alms was a popular means of accumulating merit, and as a result, the monasteries were very cash-rich. After Nyigyal made large donations to each of these monasteries, people began to talk. Word spread about Nyigyal’s generosity, and the monastic officials thought that Pangda Nyigyal must be a very rich Khampa trader who had just arrived in Lhasa. The monasteries were not fond of keeping large amounts of money on their grounds, and with no banks available, would store money at the
homes of their trusted sponsors. Pangda Nyigyal, having shown himself to be a valuable sponsor, was asked to store their money; he agreed, and used this money as the capital with which to build his successful business. Reflecting back on Nyigyal’s plan, his grandson says, “That’s how it all started. With the protection of these three monasteries, you are safe in Tibet.”

Nyigyal was indeed safe. He garnered not only the support of both lay and monastic officials in the Tibetan government, but became a favorite (spyen gsal) of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama. The Thirteenth Dalai Lama had several favorites over the course of his tenure; being a favorite of the Dalai Lama meant rare access to His Holiness, and privileges in political, social, and economic realms as well. Manang Sonam Tobgyal suggests that perhaps Nyigyal, a bright and capable Khampa and a devoted religious sponsor, caught the attention of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama, who was an especially open-minded man, interested in building stronger relations with Kham. Pangda Nyigyal’s personal acumen and monastic connections aside, his association with the Thirteenth Dalai Lama—and the later close association of his sons with the Dalai Lama and his chief favorite Kumbela—provided the Pangda family with the means to unparalleled wealth as well as social and political influence. If those responsible for killing Nyigyal thought that his death would bring down the family, they were very wrong.

Unsolved Crimes: Storytelling and the Politics of History

The past is like the scene of a crime: if the deed itself is irrecoverable, its traces may still remain.321

History is only such when there are two versions of the same story. Pangdatsang family history provides no exception to this rule, and is ripe with gossip, innuendo, secrets, and speculations aired behind mostly closed doors. The story of Nyigyal’s assassination—a crime that remains unsolved today—raises important questions about historical knowledge. Who killed Pangda Nyigyal and why? The inability to solve the crime, or perhaps the unwillingness to solve the crime, results in a seemingly unfinished history, in which social politics are hinted at, names are whispered, and truths are sidelined. While the “deed” and its doer may be “irrecoverable” in the present, other aspects of this history are as important as its missing facts. I turn now to explore how this history has been told, and by whom, asking how it has been edited to fit the “central interpretive devices” of Tibetan society at the various times of its telling.322 Alongside a tracking of the murderer, therefore, we shall also track the possibilities for history as configured by shifts in Tibetan social and political worlds in the 1920s and ensuing decades.

History in this instance is lo rgyus, a category with no pre-set subject, told in narrative rather than its earlier format as annals. The histories that I draw on in this discussion of Pangda Nyigyal’s murder are both ones written and told shortly after the murder, as well as ones narrated for me in the last several years. In combining sources I look not just for information about the murder, but for the ways that stories about the murder have and have not been told. Historian Alessandro Portelli contends that oral histories tell us as much, if not more, about meaning than about events.323 To follow, Luise White suggests that historical facts emerge from social truths and vice versa.324 The case of Pangda Nyigyal’s murder offers such a dual commentary on the murder itself as well as on social politics in Lhasa and beyond. Viewing history as a combination of fact and meaning opens our investigation to the conditions that led to Pangda Nyigyal’s murder and also to the various possibilities of interpretation and transmission for stories of his murder. This approach recognizes that events are not real solely because they happened, but because their reality is secured by remembering and telling them in culturally meaningful ways.325

Nyigyal was a wealthy and important man at the time of his death, but still a Khampa newcomer to Lhasa society, and the possibilities for narrating his murder reflect that status. His death also took place at a time of sparse literacy in Tibet. There were no newspapers in Lhasa in 1921, and any prison or governmental records that might have been kept are not currently accessible. Thus, although crime is

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322 Steedman 1986:5.
323 Portelli 1981.
325 White 1987:20; Scarry 1996.
considered by historians to be an event generative of a surplus of sources. In the case of Nyigyal’s murder, this expectation does not hold true. To my knowledge, only two individuals wrote about the assassination; the rest of our sources are oral. All accounts of the assassination are second-hand; we have no available eyewitness accounts. Nevertheless, traces remain.

The clearest statement on the murder is short and to the point: “On the evening of the 16th, in Lhasa, the devoted sponsor Pangda Nyigyal was shot by a bad person while he was in a tent during Zamling Kyisang.” This diary entry was written in 1922 by Takshu Tinley Rinchen, the Sakya Trichen, head of the Sakya family and religious sect. The Sakya Trichen had kept a diary since the age of eight, and was a fastidious recorder of the world around him. His collected diaries, including many accounts of his interactions with the Pangdatsang family, were edited and published as his autobiography in 1974 by his chief disciple, the Venerable Jampal Sangpo, Abbot of Sakya Monastery. Takshu Tinley Rinchen records his first association with the Pangdatsang family in 1882 at age eleven when he gave a long life initiation teaching to Sonam Palgyal, “the storekeeper of Gyakeg Pomdatsang.” In 1915, he assumed the position of Sakya Trichen from his father, Kunga Nyingpo, and in 1920, he made a ceremonial visit to Lhasa. His activities there included at least seven different recorded ceremonies and teachings done on behalf of Pangda Nyigyal.

The year before Nyigyal’s murder, 1920, the Year of the Iron Monkey, was a busy one for the Sakya Trichen. He was in Lhasa tending to his own religious activities and monastic responsibilities, as well as giving a large number of teachings to his individual sponsors. Over the course of the year, Sakya Trichen gave Nyigyal his family, associates, and servants numerous long life initiation teachings, rituals for deities (e.g., rta phyag khyung gsum), rituals for prosperity (g.yang sgrub nor bu’i chog rgya), and teachings that he himself had composed. Nyigyal in turn made many generous offerings to the Sakya Trichen, his mother, wife, and three children, including religious objects (such as Mandral Tensum which represents the body, speech, and mind of the Buddha), high quality brocades, tea, and barley, as well as cash. During the seven day prosperity ceremony, Pangda Nyigyal confided to Sakya Trichen that he had paid back all of his debt to the government and to relatives, and had now accumulated a large sum of money. He had decided to divide this money in thirds, with one-third to go to His Holiness the Dalai Lama, one-third to Gyakeg Monastery in Markhem for expansion and to support 500 monks, and the remaining one-third to Sakya Monastery. Sakya Trichen records that he praised this plan, telling Nyigyal, “To give such an amount of money to the great monastery makes your human life useful and plants a seed of goodness for your future lives.” Shortly after, Pangda Nyigyal was murdered.

Sakya Trichen’s account of the year leading up to Pangda Nyigyal’s murder offers no direct commentary on why Nyigyal was killed, much less who the “bad person” behind the deed could be. Indirectly, however, the character sketch he provides of Nyigyal is one of a devoted religious sponsor, moreover, one who had just paid off all of his outstanding debts, and was perhaps poised to take his trading firm to new heights of success. While Sakya Trichen refrains from commenting on trade jealousies or speculating on who might have killed Nyigyal, other narrators do not hold back such comments. In the oral histories of Pangda Nyigyal’s assassination that I have collected, all narrators knew that he had been shot while picnicking, all knew that this had been during a thunder and lightning storm, and all knew who was suspected of ordering the assassination. Of those interviewed who chose to share the suspect’s name with me, the same person, a Tibetan aristocrat, was named again and again without fail, but always with qualification; e.g., “Who killed [Pangda Nyigyal] remained a mystery. Nobody knew exactly who killed him or for what reason. Of course, people had their suspicions about who

326 See the collected essays in Muir and Ruggiero 1994, especially their “Afterword: Crime and the Writing of History,” pp.226-236.
327 I thank Tashi Tsering of the Amnye Machen Institute in Dharamsala for directing me to these texts.
329 Khri chen 1974:4 ("Preface").
332 Khri chen 1974:3 ("Preface"). In Lhasa, Sakya Trichen had his second visit with the Thirteenth Dalai Lama and made visits to many monasteries and pilgrimage sites. He also did ceremonies for the Tibetan Government, “at which a number of miracles are said to have occurred.”
335 Khri chen 1974:626.
the killer was.”336 The only narrator to confidently name the murderer, and to write about it, was Alo Chonzed.337

Alo Chonzed, a Khampa born and raised in Lhasa, a leader of Mi-
mang Tsongdu, the popular anti-Chinese Tibetan People’s Organiza-
tion in the 1950s, was in later decades a vocal critic of the Tibetan
Government-in-Exile. His handwritten and self-published 617-page
history of Tibet was banned by the Tibetan Government-in-Exile, and
circulates in only limited numbers. It is in this book, Bod kyi gnas lugs bden ‘dzin sgo phyre ba’i lde mig zhes bya ba a lo chos mdzad kyi gdam, spyi lo 1920 nas 1982 bar, or The Key That Opens the Door of Truth to the Tibetan Situation: Materials on Modern Ti-
betan History, that the most detailed account of Pangda Nyigyal’s
murder is available.338 Alo Chonzed’s interest in the case was per-
sonal; his uncle Aten was arrested for the crime, imprisoned and tort-
tured before his innocence was proven and he was released from jail.

The murder of Pangda Nyigyal was not an ordinary crime. His so-
cial rank was high enough that the case appears to have been a politi-
cal rather than legal affair, adjudicated by prison and government
officials rather than through the court system.339 As Alo Chonzed
tells the story, Nyigyal’s assassination was acted upon swiftly. Sakya
Trichen confirms this, writing that he received a letter from Pangda
Nyima stating that “about ten men” confessed to being involved in
Nyigyal’s murder, and except for two who were still at large, the cul-
cricts had all been put in jail.340 Nyima concluded the letter by saying
that they were not sure who else was involved in the murder, and
requested religious objects from Sakya Trichen to protect the re-
main ing family members against harm from weapons. In response,
Sakya Trichen sent him shirts that his father and uncle had worn, and
a kha brtags, a white silk scarf, with eleven knots tied in it. While the
Pangdatsang family was now well protected, Khampa Aten’s trou-
bles were just beginning. In the following paragraphs, I present a
paraphrase of Alo Chonzed’s narration of the story.

Khampa Aten was arrested for the murder of Pangda Nyigyal be-
cause of his association with the Dzangtsatsang family. This family,
Khampa traders from Lithang, was suspected of competition with the
Pangdatsang family. Based on his association with the Dzang-tsa-
tsangs, Khampa Aten was placed in the Shol Pangting Prison below
the Potala, the Dalai Lama’s palace and monastery. He protested his
innocence to no avail. He was whipped with the “Interrogation Whip” (tsha ’dri rta lleg mang po gzhus) and received the stone hat (rdo zhma) treatment of popping out one’s eyeballs (mig hril phyi
’don ba’i khrims gcod byas). He was made to kneel on tiny stones in
front of Pangda Yampel, but he still did not confess to the murder.
Finally, without any resolution on his innocence or guilt, he was
dismissed from prison. Upset that his innocence had not yet been
proved, Khampa Aten demanded to know who had accused him of
the crime. There was “nothing Aten could do—he had been wrong-
fully accused, severely tortured, and he thought to himself, “I need to
temporarily accept this suffering and retaliate against my enemy in the
future.” He went home, continued to press for details about his
accuser, and as time passed, became more and more agitated with the
lack of movement on the case. He decided to take action, specifically
to kill two people—one prison official and one member of the Pang-
datsang family—the two groups that he thought “were the only ones
against me.” He began to make arrangements to get his family safely
out of town to distant Golok in Amdo and to draft up his own assas-
sination plans.

In the midst of his planning, Khampa Aten received two important
visitors. Two officials of Sera monastery, from the Mey Pomra
College, the Venerable Adzadipjik and the administrator Lori came to
visit. They advised Aten to keep his Khampa bravado in check and to
seek redress through legal channels. Their counsel to him was as
follows:

Concerning your problem, by immediately retaliating without knowing
who caused the problem, that is, if you go past the point of no return
by showing the Sign of Kham (i.e., by retaliating),341 then it will be
difficult for those [family members] who have left and those who have
stayed. Beyond that, it is important for you to wait for a legal decision
on your innocence or guilt. We think that we should all go together to
see the current powerful renowned aristocrat of the Tibetan Govern-

337 The Tibetan spelling is A lo chos mdzad. I transliterate this name as Alo Chonzed, following his own preference—Alo Chhonzed—but with a single rather than double ‘h.’
338 Chonzed 1983.
339 See French 1995 on political and legal status of murder cases and those in-
volving important persons, especially pp.115-6.
341 In Tibetan, khangs rtags bstan, meaning to retaliate, to kill, to be brave.
ment, Ara Karpo, the Chamberlain of the Potala (mgon ngyer chen mo). We will ask him to tell His Holiness the Dalai Lama that you were wrongly accused of killing Pomda Nyijang and were tortured by means of the stone hat, etc., and finally, no decision was ever made on your innocence or guilt. By telling this, a decision on your innocence or guilt will be made in a short time and we will have no regrets.

These two lamas were the family’s spiritual advisors and Aten accepted their advice, shelving his assassination plan. Twice the three men appeared before Ara Karpo, the Chamberlain. Aten was told that the case would be resolved gradually, and that he would remain calm until the resolution. Ara Karpo gave him religious offerings (phyag tsha and dam rdzab), and told him to accept that “through the grace of the Three Jewels (dkon mchog gsum), the power of truth, and the uncheating nature of karma, the wrongfully accused may be cleared. The recent torture of the wrongfully accused will cleanse the bad karma from the murder of Takya’s son, etc.” This advice calmed Khampa Aten, such that “the fire went out and the smoke disappeared.” The crime remained unsolved for many years. Finally, the situation became clear—the murder was due to jealousy, but the jealous party was not the Dzangtsatsang family.

Earlier, His Holiness the Thirteenth Dalai Lama had appointed two of his favorites, the Honorable Tsarong Dasang Damlu and Pangda Nyigyal, to high government posts. Tsarong and Pangda were equally wealthy and there were jealousies between them. During the Universal Smoke Offering Festival, Tsarong hired General Tsogo to shoot Pangda in Lhasa’s Twentieth Park. General Tsogo, however, was not just the “red-handed murderer,” but wealthy and powerful in his own right. Neither he nor Tsarong were ever accused of or punished for the crime. Eventually Tsarong confessed that General Tsogo was the culprit, and as a result, Uncle Aten was released from jail. Following this, Chamberlain Ara Karpo, who had clearly known the persons involved, pardoned Khampa Aten.

His name cleared, Khampa Aten benefited from acts of contrition by the Tsarong and Pangdatsang families. Both families gave Aten generous assistance as a result of his suffering from being wrongfully accused. He received “money, goods, start-up funds for business (tshong rtsa), and so on.” The families were also generous to Alo Chonzed, sharing their secrets with him (ngag rang la snying gtam bshad pa) and providing him with business assistance (tshong mkhos). The new bonds between Aten’s family and the Tsarong and Pangda families seemingly erased his suffering in prison. Alo Chonzed closes his discussion of Pangda Nyigyal’s assassination with this confirmation of the new good relations between families—"From that, we remained as friends with sincere minds clear as a cloudless sky and dustless ground.” Thus ends Alo Chonzed’s version of the Pangda Nyigyal’s murder.

For Aten and Alo Chonzed, the story had a happy ending. Things were well in Lhasa. However, was the murder solved? Were Tsarong and Tsogo really responsible for the murder? In exile, most people claim “they have heard” that the person behind the killing of Pangda Nyigyal was Tsarong. However, there have always been other stories in circulation, and recently one of these was revived. In addition to the suspicions cast on Tsarong, people would say that a Khampa family was behind the assassination. While some were possibly referring to the Dzangtsatsang family, others meant a different family, from a different part of Kham altogether. A recent arrival to New York, a man from Derge, claims that a Derge Khampa was responsible for Nyigyal’s murder. His story was told to me by a third party, a Khampa man who had always believed that Tsarong was behind the assassination. This story goes as follows:

Pangda Nyigyal had two Khampa business managers, brothers who had worked for him for many years and who were from Derge. They decided to desert his firm without telling him and set off for Jyezkundo. Pangda got word of their scheme and got the Central Tibetan Government to arrest them upon their arrival in Jyezkundo. There was a scuffle during their arrest and the eldest brother was killed. The younger

343 Alo Chonzed uses not just the Spom mda’ spelling of the family name, but gives Nyigyal’s name as Nyi jang. This appears to be a variation on the Khampa contraction of Nyi rgyan for Nyigyal.
344 The “Three Jewels” are the Buddha, the dharma, and the sangha.
345 Although Alo Chonzed writes that Aten believed his connection to the Dzangtsatsang family was the cause for his arrest, it appears that his connection to another murder, i.e., of “Takya’s son,” was also a cause for suspicion. Later in the text, Alo Chonzed states that “Killer” Uncle Aten’s reputation for great bravery also cast suspicion on him.
346 A biography of Tsarong, written by his son, was recently published. The Pangdatsang family is not mentioned in it. See Tsarong 2000.
brother made his way back to Derge where he stayed for several years, plotting his return to Lhasa and his revenge on Pangda. When he did go back to Tibet, he and a servant carried out the plan, enlisting the services of a Khampa beer maid to find Pangda Nyigyal in the closed tents. The Khampa man—whose name I don’t know—escaped back to Derge, but his servant was eventually arrested, sent to jail, tortured and died there. The story was kept as a community secret by the villagers who feared the repercussions from the Pangda family. It is only now, they say, in the times of the Chinese, when Pangda is no longer powerful, that the story can be told.\textsuperscript{347}

Histories untold are not necessarily forgotten. Khampas from this area of Derge, for example, preserved this story about Pangda Nyigyal’s murder, restricting its circulation until the repercussions for telling the story diminished. The lack of need for closure for this history of a murder is partially a product of Tibetan forms of truth. In her study of the Tibetan legal system, Rebecca French identifies two forms of truth: as “an ideal and separate standard” and “as consensus.” Truth as consensus was factual consonance: “the facts given by both sides had to agree, not with reality, but with each other.”\textsuperscript{348} The story of Pangda Nyigyal’s assassination contains elements of both kinds of truths without assigning ranked value to them. Truth as ideal and separate standard told the story of what happened, while truth as factual consonance revealed (partially) who did it. In the 1920s, both Pangda and Tsarong were families that were on the rise, and as the next three decades passed, each family only grew more powerful. The possibilities for history, and for types of historical truth, were limited by the social politics of the day.

Feuds between powerful families in the insular world of the Tibetan aristocracy could be socially and economically destructive, something that these ambitious families could not afford. It was not in the best interest of either to carry on a public and violent feud with the other family. Nor was it in the interest of curious spectators to solve crimes of murder and history that those in power chose to leave publicly unsolved. Tibetan society in 1920s Lhasa was full of rigid social divisions that have spilled over into the exile community. Today’s narrators in exile include the same cautious qualifications in their story of who was responsible for the murder that their mothers and grandfathers included in the versions they told them: “People suspect it was Tsarong,” “Tsarong was always said to be the killer,” and the like. To level such a charge at a powerful aristocrat—for Tsarong represented not just himself, but his family, as did Pangda Nyigyal—would be to invite trouble upon oneself, and it might also be lying.

The passage of time brings with it changes in sociopolitical arrangements, some drastic, such as the creation of a refugee community and exile government, and some more subtle, such as the persistence of ascribed status amidst a new recognition of achieved status in exile. These changes shift the boundaries for history and for truth. Alo Chonzed, socially and politically estranged from the Tibetan status quo, and “sharing secrets” with the Tsarong and Pangda families, wrote that Tsarong and Tsogo were the killers, and that this was the ideal and separate truth. Derge villagers, recognizing the Pangdatang family’s loss of retributive power, challenged the consensus truth that Tsarong was responsible for the murder, installing instead their own candidate for the role of singularly true murderer. These shifting parameters of truth do not change the possibility for the joint existence of both forms, nor do they diminish the importance of truth for Tibetans. While Tibetans in general place a high premium on the reliability of one’s word, Khampas in particular take pride (to a fault in the opinion of other Tibetans) in being straightforward and honest. They also, however, as was shown with the two monks’ scolding of Khampa Aten, are renowned for their bravery and obstinacy. “To show the Sign of Kham,” khams rtags bstan, meant to retaliate, to kill, to be brave. As the saying goes, the best horses are from Amdo, the best religion from U-Tsang, and the best men from Kham.

Pangda Nyigyal’s sons were Khampas from head to toe, inside and out, according to their descendants. In this instance, however, they forsook Khampa traditions of honor for aristocratic notions of propriety, choosing not to push for a definitive solution to, or public airing of, the crime. Although they suspected Tsarong, they chose to focus on sponsoring ceremonies for their deceased father rather than seeking revenge for his murder.\textsuperscript{349} Years later, when his daughter

\begin{footnotes}
  \footnotetext{347}{Interview, Kalsang Gyatotsang, April 6, 2000, New York.}
  \footnotetext{348}{French 1995:137.}
  \footnotetext{349}{Sakya Trichen reports conducting numerous ceremonies on behalf of Pangda Nyigyal following his murder; the last recorded one was in 1932, the same year that Nyigyal’s mother Tenzin Zangmo died, and four years before Sakya Trichen himself passed away. Khri chen 1974, 2:605.}
\end{footnotes}
asked him about the murder, Pangda Yamphel told her not to think or speak about it. “So many people were punished by the government that it is best not to talk about it, just to leave it as it is,” he would say.\footnote{\textsuperscript{330} Interview, Wangmo Yuthok Pangdatsang, June 2, 2000.} He kept his word, for his daughter learned only later from friends that Tsarong was suspected of the crime; in the Pangdatsang household, at least between generations, the murder was not discussed. Families have their secrets, their censored stories, and they keep these concealed from the rest of the world as well as from each other.\footnote{\textsuperscript{331} See the rich discussion of the poetics and politics of family pasts in Kuhn 1995.} Nyigyal’s death, however, transcended the realm of family history into that of public story. The public and dramatic murder of Pangda Nyigyal, a small-scale trader from Kham self-made into a man of power in Lhasa—a Tibetan variation on the American dream—was and is a story that people tell conspiratorially, heads shaking in disbelief. We may never know whether Tsarong was indeed behind the murder, or if he merely patronized Khampa Aten and his family to cover for another’s deeds. Likewise were the brothers from Derge indeed the killers and not just fabricating their own “Sign of Kham” story once they had returned back home from the big city? We may never know, and yet this history is by no means unfinished.

\textit{Conclusion}

While Pangda Nyigyal’s untimely death left few documentary traces, it left a visible imprint on the social imagination of numerous Tibetans. Implicit in many of the stories I was told about him, and explicit in some, was the linking of his death to his growing economic and social power. Khampa traders were not unique in Lhasa; however, ones who amassed stupendous wealth and who made inroads into insular Lhasa society were unique, and in some regards, unwelcome. Histories of Pangda Nyigyal’s murder contain the same sort of social hesitancy that accompanied relations between wealthy Khampa traders and established Lhasa aristocrats. These histories go only so far, following the push and pull between the currents of change and those of social protocol. Nyigyal, from a Sakya family, was not just indebted to the Thirteenth Dalai Lama, but devoted to him, and taught the same devotion to his children. With the death of the Dalai Lama in 1933, Pangda Nyigyal’s sons were among those who maintained visions of a modern Tibet. Their stories, which I tell elsewhere, are held accountable to the same mix of social hierarchies and political commitments, albeit hierarchies and commitments adjusted in response to a different, and more urgent, series of changes.

In closing, I return to the story of Nyigyal’s assassination, to a prophecy of the almost simultaneous rise and fall of a family. For Nyigyal had been warned not to go to the picnic. It was a bad month, \textit{tshub chen po red}, one full of obstacles, according to Sakya Trichen Takshu Tinley Rinchen. Nyigyal’s wife came to the same conclusion. She had the ability to go into trance, which the Sakya Trichen himself had witnessed. He wrote that she “was said to be entered by Dorje Drakden and to prophesy worldly activities which appeared to be surprisingly real.” He inspected her while she was in trance, and wrote, “It looked to be true.”\footnote{\textsuperscript{332} Khri chen 1974, 1:421. He writes, “Yangchen, the wife of Nyigyal Gyakeg Pondatsang was said to get entranced ....”} While in trance, she told Nyigyal not to go to the party. He promised her that he would not spend the night, that there would be lots of servants on watch, and that she should not worry as nothing would happen. As it turned out, it was raining, it was a dark and stormy night, the servants were seeking their own shelter elsewhere, and the rest, as they say, is history.
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