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Geoff Childs
Indiana University

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*A Note on the Tibetan Origin of the Sherpa Serwa Lineage*¹

Geoff Childs
Indiana University

Tracing Tibetan descent lineages through time is a tricky proposition. A single lineage may divide, assume new names, and disseminate. Another hindrance is the tendency to create false pedigrees in order to elevate the prestige of a contemporary lineage by connecting it with illustrious figures from Tibet's past. Despite the potential pitfalls, tracking lineages through time can illuminate historical connections that may otherwise be missed. The purpose of this paper is to connect one of the major Sherpa patrilineages with an important line of hereditary householder lamas (*ngagpa*) in Tibet. By reviewing primary sources, two of which were originally dealt with by Oppitz in his seminal work *Geschichte und Sozialordnung der Sherpa*, new understandings can be added to our murky picture of Sherpa history.

The four Sherpa proto-clans² are named Minyag, Thimi, Chakpa, and Serwa (Oppitz 1968). Some clues to Serwa origins are found in three primary sources.

1. In the autobiography of the Sherpa scholar Sangye Tenzin, the author states that the Serwa (his

mother's lineage) is a branch of the Nyang clan (*Sangs-rgyas nam-thar*: 2b).

2. A passage in a Minyag genealogy found by Oppitz in Solu reads: "The Serwa descend from the patrilineage (*dung*) which has the nature (*ngang*) of rulers (*ngadak*), the Nyang lineage of Nyima Ozer" (Oppitz 1968: 57).³

3. The first 17 lines of an untitled genealogy of the Serwa have been reproduced by Oppitz (1968: 71). It is "a history of the Serwa patrilineage (*ru*) of the Nyang clan (*rig*)."⁴ A portion of this text reads as follows: "This human lineage was born of deities. As for the history of the human lineage which descends from deities just as water descends from the glaciers, the ancestral father was King Tsuglha, and the ancestral mother was Queen Pelmo." After a few generations, we find that, "Serdung Lhatagpo had a son by the name of Nyima Ozer. He had two sons, Nyang-Ser Ralchen and [Nyang]-Yu Ralchen." The Sherpa Serwa lineage descends from Nyang-Ser Ralchen, the elder son of Nyima Ozer.

These citations illustrate the Sherpa perception of a genealogical link between the Serwa and the Nyang clan of Tibet. Who were the Nyang, and where did they come from? And who was Nyima Ozer, the man who is mentioned in two out of the three documents?

According to the Tibetan scholar Migyur Dorje, the Nyang is a branch of the Gar clan (1987: 24). From the

¹ For the sake of readability, Sherpa and Tibetan names and terms are spelled more or less the way they sound. For the sake of accuracy, I have provided Tibetan transliterations of all names and terms used herein:

Clan Names: Nyang = Nyang/Myang, Gar = Mgar, Serwa = Gser-ba, Minyag = Mi-nyag, Thimi = Thimi, Chakpa = Lcags-pa.

Names: Nyangral Nyima Ozer = Nyang-ral Nyi-ma Od-zer, King Tsuglha = Tshug-lha Rgyal-po, Queen Pelmo = Dpal-mo Btsun, Serdung Lhatagpo = Gserdung Lha-rtag-po, Nyang-Ser Ralchen = Nyang-gser Ral-can, Nyang-Yu Ralchen = [Nyang]-yu Ral-can, Nyangtön Chvkyö Khorlo = Nyang-ston Chos-kyi Khor-lo, Mikyö Dorje = Mi-bskyod Rdo-rje, Drogon Namkapal = Gro-mgon Nam-mkha'-dpal, Trisong Detsen = Khri-srong Lde-btsan.

Terms: *dung* = *gdung*, *ngang* = *ngang*, *ngadak* = *mnga'-bdag*, *rü* = *rus*, *rig* = *rigs*, *tertön* = *gter-ston*, *ngagpa* = *sngags-pa*.

² Proto-clan is the term used by Oppitz in reference to the original clans that migrated from Tibet to Solu-Khumbu. These subsequently split into sub-clans.

³ The German translation of the passage reads as follows: "*Sie [the Gser-ba clan] stamen von Ngadak Ngangi Dung ab, der Linie Nyang Nyima Ozer's*" (Oppitz 1968: 57). The Tibetan spelling of a portion of the first clause is reproduced in the index as *mnga'-bdag ngang-gi gdung* (Oppitz 1968: 157), meaning that Ngadak in the Tibetan spelling is *mnga'-bdag* (ruler, one who possesses power), Ngangi is *ngang* (nature, essentiality, character) with the attached genitive participle *gi*, and *Dung* is *gdung*, an honorific term meaning 'bone' or 'patrilineage.'

⁴ An important terminological distinction between *rus* ("bone, patrilineage") and *rig* ("family, clan") is that the latter is more inclusive. There can be many related patrilineages (*rus*) within a single clan (*rigs*).

earliest Tibetan written sources, we know that Gar was a prominent family in medieval times that played a pivotal role in politics during the Tibetan empire (650-842 CE). So powerful did they become, in fact, that the emperor eradicated most members of the Gar clan at the end of the 7th century (Beckwith 1987: 60-61). As for the Nyang, Migyur Dorje has also shown that place names and clan names were integrally related in Tibetan prehistory (1987: 22-26). This seems to have been the case with the Nyang (originally spelled Myang), a clan that coexisted with the Gar during the imperial period. Ancient Tibetan sources list Myangyul ("The Land of Myang") as one of the principalities of medieval Tibet (Lalou 1965), situated south of the Tsangpo River in the region where the major settlements of Gyantse and Shigatse are currently located (Uebach 1988: 512). In medieval times, Nyang clan members wielded considerable power as some of the foremost ministers under the Tibetan emperors (see Beckwith 1987: 20, Shakabpa 1984: 48, Sørensen 1994: 416). Yet unlike their relatives the Gar, the Nyang remained closely allied with the Tibetan rulers throughout the imperial period.

The Tibetan empire collapsed in 842 CE. Subsequently, the most famous member of the Nyang clan was the *tertön* ("treasure discoverer") Nyangral Nyima Ozer (1124-1192), a man who is still regarded as one of the key figures in the history of the Nyingmapa sect of Tibetan Buddhism (Dargyay 1979: 97-103). As his name implies (Nyangral), he was a member of the Nyang clan. His birth place was in Lhotag, situated to the south of the Yarlung valley and to the east of Myangyul. His father, Nyangtön Chökyi Khorlo, was a *ngagpa* (hereditary householder lama), a status that Nyima Ozer inherited as a birthright. Like his father, Nyima Ozer sired his own successors. In many Tibetan sources, Nyima Ozer's name is prefaced by the title *ngadak* ("ruler," "possessed of power"), a title that was handed down to subsequent generations of his descendants (see *Mnga'-bdag bla-ma brgyud-pa'i rnam-thar*). Because of the inclusion of the term *ngadak* in the Minyag genealogical document (number 2, above), the Nyima Ozer in question can be none other than this great 12th century *tertön*, as Oppitz correctly surmised (1968: 57).

Generally, the title *ngadak* implies that one is a direct patrilineal descendant of the ancient line of Tibetan emperors. After the collapse of their empire, Tibetans never reclaimed a position as power brokers in Inner Asian politics. Nevertheless, descendants of the emperors established petty kingdoms throughout the Tibetan Plateau (e.g., Ladakh, Guge, Purang, Gunthang) (see *Bod-rje gdung-rabs*), and in many cases the rulers were considered to have a divine mandate based on their genealogical connection with the emperors. The title *ngadak* was a social distinction signaling an imperial pedigree. Based on the statement from the Minyag Sherpa document (number 2, above) that the Nyang has the "nature" of the *ngadak* (meaning

in this context, the nature or essence of the divine rulers), it seems as if the Sherpa Serwa lineage is descended from the imperial bloodline. Yet such is not the case, since Nyangral Nyima Ozer attained the title of *ngadak* on the grounds that, as an extremely influential religious figure, he was considered to be an incarnation of the emperor Trisong Detsen (d. 797). In fact, he and his descendants are some of the only people to claim the *ngadak* title by virtue of a spiritual link to the emperors through reincarnation rather than a biological link. Neither Nyangral Nyima Ozer nor his predecessors and successors are consanguineously related to the illustrious imperial line.

In no way does the lack of a biological link to the emperors diminish the importance of the Nyang clan. By the 12th century, the Nyang had been fully transformed from their former position of ministers and generals during the Tibetan empire to hereditary householder lamas (*ngagpa*) involved with maintaining and spreading Buddhist traditions. In addition to spiritual duties, *ngagpas* are expected to sire their own successors—just as the Sherpa lamas were expected to do prior to the recent rise of celibate monasticism in Solu-Khumbu.

The question still remains—how is the Sherpa Serwa related to the Nyang? This is where a bit of speculation must come into play. It is well known that Tibetan clans display a tendency to divide into collateral lineages through time. Although Nyang clan members originally inhabited Myangyul in Central Tibet, they were not confined to this geographical area. Through the vicissitudes of historical migrations, clan members dispersed across the plateau. For example, we have already seen that in the 12th century Nyangral Nyima Ozer's family lived in Lhotag, to the east of Myangyul. In other sources we find descendants of Nyangral Nyima Ozer living in Kongpo between Central Tibet (Ü-Tsang) and Eastern Tibet (Kham) (*Gu-bkra chos-'byung*: 383). Some descendants of the Nyang lineage crossed the Himalaya during the 17th century. There is a branch of the Nyang living in Sikkim (see *Myang-gi gdung-rabs*), as well as a lineage of householder lamas inhabiting Yolmo (Helambu) in Nepal who claim descent from Nyima Ozer (Clarke 1980: 10). Wherever they are found, Nyangral Nyima Ozer's descendants are hereditary householder lamas, including the Sherpas of the Serwa lineage. It is no coincidence that Serwa members are the traditional householder lamas in Sherpa society. Nyangral Nyima Ozer was himself a member of a householder lama lineage, and according to our Sherpa sources, the two lineages are genealogically related.

Householder lamas were often not tied to a single locale. Therefore, it is quite possible that the Serwa branch of the Nyang moved into the original homelands of the Sherpas in eastern Tibet prior to the 15th century when they commenced their migration to Solu-Khumbu. The name distinction (Nyang/Serwa) can be explained as a result of lineage fissioning processes, as

indicated in one of the documents (number 3), wherein we see a split between Nyang-Ser Ralchan and Nyang-Yu Ralchan, the sons of Nyima Ozer. Their names indicate that they established separate branch lineages (the Ser—"Golden", and the Yu—"Turquoise" respectively) of the Nyang clan. As Clarke has pointed out in his description of land tenure, temples, and lama families in Yolmo (1980), collateral lineages are often formed when a younger sibling establishes an independent lineage from his elder brother. Both are lamas, and after separating both are considered to be the progenitors of their own lineages. One result is a geographic dissemination of the lineages. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that, prior to the 15th century when the Sherpas commenced their trek across the plateau that resulted in their settling in Solu-Khumbu, a householder lama who was a descendant of Nyangral Nyima Ozer's son Nyang-Ser Ralchen was integrated into Sherpa society, hence the origin of the Serwa lineage.

In summary, primary Sherpa sources claim a genealogical link between their Serwa lamas and the Nyang lineage, an important family during Tibet's imperial and post-imperial past. The key figure in the ancestral linkage is Nyangral Nyima Ozer, a member of the Nyang clan whose own heritage is in the lineage of householder lamas. Obviously, having a pedigree connected with the great Nyangral Nyima Ozer is a mark of prestige. We know that Tibetan genealogies are often embellished upon, or even intentionally modified in order to establish a false pedigree. Therefore, it is by no means certain that the Sherpa Serwa are actual descendants of Nyangral Nyima Ozer. In fact, some inconsistencies suggest a suspect pedigree. Specifically, the Serwa genealogical text lists the father of Nyangral Nyima Ozer as Serdung Lhatagpo, and Nyima Ozer's two sons as Nyang-Ser Ralchen and Nyang-Yu Ralchen. In contrast, most Tibetan sources maintain that the father is Nyangtön Chökyi Khorlo, and the two sons are Mikyö Dorje and Drogon Namkapal. Perhaps we are dealing with a mythical genealogy. On the other hand, we may be dealing with alternative names for the same figures, or perhaps the Serwa genealogies skipped some generations. Regardless of whether the connections are actual or only symbolic, they are significant from the perspective of social prestige - the Serwa lamas claim descent from one of the most illustrious lineages of hereditary lamas in the Tibetan Nyingmapa tradition.

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