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## Fading Colors of the Tibetan Prayer Flag

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# Fading Colors of the Tibetan Prayer Flag

Emilia Roza Sulek

2014 was a Horse Year. Such a year, occurring every twelve years in Tibetan calendar, is considered the best time for a pilgrimage, particularly to sacred mountains. In the region of Golok, the most prominent of them is Amnye Machen (A myes rma chen). It takes about one week to perform circumambulation of Amnye Machen in the usual way: on foot. But in 2014, a new possibility opened: to perform the pilgrimage by car. This paper describes the experiences of a car pilgrimage around Amnye Machen which the author performed in 2014. It shows how different the new pilgrimage route is from the one followed by non-motorized pilgrims and how different experiences it brings. It also describes the landscape affected by the establishment of Mt. Amyesmachén National Geological Park in the area of Amnye Machen and construction works connected to it.

**Keywords:** Tibet, Golok, Amnye Machen, sacred mountains, pilgrimage, *lungta*, prayer flags.

2014 was a Horse Year in the Tibetan lunar calendar. Such a year, occurring every twelve years, is considered the best time for a pilgrimage, particularly to sacred mountains. In the region of Golok (mGo log), the most prominent such mountain is Amnye Machen (A myes rma chen). Some pilgrims visit this site in other years, but the Horse Year attracts the largest number of visitors.<sup>1</sup> Finally, 'my' Horse Year had arrived: the first opportunity for me to could perform this pilgrimage.

It normally takes one week to perform *kora* (*skor ba*) or circumambulation of Amnye Machen in the usual way: on foot. It took triple this time if one performed prostrations. But in 2014, a new possibility opened: to perform *kora* by car. This shortened the journey to one or two days. Seeing a motorized pilgrimage as a solution to the problem of my tight fieldwork calendar, I started to look for a car. In this land of vast distances, public transport was almost non-existent. But renting a car was not easy, as local drivers had high expectations about the material riches hidden in foreign wallets. The first driver, who I found through friends, wanted 10,000 RMB (over \$1,600) for a one day drive. If we did not to return before nightfall, I would have to pay double. The second driver, found through an advertisement on the street, asked for 2,000 RMB regardless of whether we return on the same day or not.<sup>2</sup> This was more moderate, but still too high.

I abandoned the idea of visiting Amnye Machen by car. One should be cautious with mountain gods, the pastoralists with whom I work often told me. If Magyel Pomra

(rMa rgyal spom ra), the mighty god of Amnye Machen, did not want me in his sacred precincts, I should not impose myself upon him. And if he wanted me to be there, he would create for me another travel opportunity.

Like a *deus ex machina*, such an opportunity suddenly materialized. It took the shape of a metallic four-wheel drive carrying a family of pastoralists who wanted to perform the pilgrimage one more time before winter. They had one free seat and agreed to do a favor for their elderly uncle, a friend of mine. They would drive me to Amnye Machen.

The car picked me up at 4 am. It was pitch black outside. I wore all of the warm clothes I had in addition to items a Tibetan friend forced upon me, including trekking trousers, a hat and gloves.

“You will be at nearly 5,000 m altitude!” she said, barring my way as I tried to leave the flat. I begrudgingly accepted her offerings. I was to realize later that her image of the pilgrimage was as inaccurate as mine: she could not imagine comforts of the new car-*kora* route. In our car, I was the most bundled up passenger: the driver sported a thin suit, his wife a summer robe with an imitation silk shirt. Two girls in jeans and cotton sweaters slept under a blanket in the back seat.

We left Dawu (rTa wo), the capital of Golok Prefecture, and drove through Gabde (gDa’ bde) County, then Tanlag (Tang legs/Dwangs legs), Tanzhung (Tang gzhung/Dwangs gzhung) and Chamahe (Khra ma hi) Townships. The sun rose, but we still did not enter the *kora* route. At last, after six hours spent in the car, we reached a place which I thought was the entrance to the *kora*. I sprung out of the car with a camera in my hand to document everything around, but other passengers did not follow. Only the driver walked slowly to a shop to buy a box of *lungta* (*rlung rta*), small paper-prints with an image of a ‘wind horse’ symbolizing people’s luck and carrying their prayers. People throw them into the air when crossing a mountain pass or passing a *labtse* (*la btsas*) or cairn for religious offerings. The *lungta* box, a special edition for the Horse Year, landed on the back seat and we drove further.

Traveling through the desolate landscape, I compared my observations with the notes I had made before departure. I had prepared for this journey by reading literature about the pilgrimage to Amnye Machen, drawing my own map, and memorizing place names and stories connected to them.<sup>3</sup> But the more I compared the world outside with what I knew from the literature, the less I understood. Neither high mountain peaks nor spectacular rock formations were to be seen. I saw no trace of pilgrims. My fellow trav-

ellers’ behavior did nothing to inspire a sense of holiness.

Only the girls in the back seat acted with traces of ‘religious’ behavior: every now and then they rolled down a window and threw a handful of *lungta* into the air. But they did this at unexpected moments, disconnected from the usual circumstances in which *lungta* are used. The girls’ favorite moment was when a truck approached us from the opposite direction bringing a gust of wind which blew the *lungta* back into the car. The wind-horse prints whirled around our heads and landed in our laps, on the seats and the floor. Heavily loaded trucks passed us frequently. This ‘wind ritual’ continued. Their ritual also had a musical side to it. Both girls attended a school, as was made clear by their repertoire, sung to the accompaniment of the car engine: Chinese children songs, then something Tibetan, and then, as a sign of the ‘proper’ music education, the notes of the C-major scale. The seven *solfege* syllables merged with the six syllables of the mantra of Avalokiteshvara. Sung in one breath, *do re mi fa sol la si* fused with *om ma ni pad me hum* to form a new mantra on this journey.

Suddenly, we stopped. Huashixia Township in Martod (rMa stod) County was unremarkable: a transit point between Xining and Yushu (Yul shul).<sup>4</sup> It was noon: the best time for lunch in a Hui restaurant. We were still more than 50 kilometers away from the north-west entrance to the pilgrims’ route.

Our second stop was at the Anymachen Tibetan Culture Center (A myes rma chen gangs ljongs rig mdzod slob gling) near Dawu Zhuma (rTa wo zhol ma) Township.<sup>5</sup> The township village showed signs of busy construction with new houses being built and old ones repainted. In the Tibetan Culture Center, buckets of paint stood in the yard and the walls screamed with colours. The Center resembled a monastery, but was actually an institution for general education and vocational training, funded by a Tibetan lama from Kham and sponsored by Chinese donors. At the time of our visit, the building was empty. Flickering electric butter lamps and chanting from a cassette player filled the hall. In front of the building stood a parking ground and a basketball court—useful only for those who had enough stamina to exercise at this altitude. A few restaurants with English ‘Tibetan Food’ signs suggested that the township had prepared itself for foreign tourists. A road leading towards Amnye Machen passed through a gate with a trilingual (Chinese, Tibetan, and English) inscription which read, “Mt. Amyesrmachen National Geological Park” (original spelling). A stele on the roadside informed passers-by that this was “Top of the World, Buddhism Wonderland.”

We entered the old pilgrims' route by about 3pm. One recognized it by prayer flags lining the road and tent-hotels offering pilgrims a bowl of soup and a place to stay. The pilgrims, women and men of various age, some in Tibetan-style robes and other in outdoor clothing, walked steadily along the road. Almost all of them wore facemasks. I was to discover that these were important not only because of the strong sun but also because of dust.

Soon, we had arrived at our third stop: Drokdü Nyakha ('Brog bsdu nyag kha), the first place on our route whose name appeared in Katia Buffetrille's reports from her pilgrimage performed in earlier Horse Years. From here one could see the northern side of Amnye Machen. The mountain shone like glass. It was not a snow mountain; it was a crystal mountain on which the sun burned snow into ice. The name of this place, 'The Comb Where Nomads Gather,' matched this feeling well: all pilgrims stopped here, both those travelling on foot and by vehicle. Cars lined up along the road. The sound of honking horns filled the air and people flocked in front of the shops to buy snacks and religious paraphernalia. It was a place of intensive business and religious life, one serving another.<sup>6</sup> One could buy incense, holy pictures, juniper twigs, and liquor for offerings, butter lamps to light in a small tin house at the roadside, and, last but not least, *lungta* prints.

A path between the stalls led to a *labtse*. The earth, freezing at night and thawing during the day, was kneaded like dough by hundreds of feet. Walking around the *labtse*, the pilgrims poured liquor on the stones and sent *lungta* into the air. These *lungta* did not travel far: they fell on the mud

and merged with it to form multi-coloured organic goo. Empty liquor bottles landed at a pile of rubbish beside the *labtse* and shone in the sun almost as strong as the ice-covered mountain. A few steps further, we passed a *stupa* and a wall of *mani* stones, evenly cut slabs with prayers carved with a drilling machine. On the other side of the road, a path led uphill. People squeezed under the low-hanging strings of prayer flags and held on to them so as not to slip in the mud. From the top of the hill, we could see Amnye Machen in its full glory. Pilgrims pulled out their mobile phones to take photographs. Wind squeezed tears from our eyes. Maybe it was not the wind, but *sacrum* and beauty? Some pilgrims walked further to collect holy earth and stones; others slide down the hill to their cars and companions to continue their journey.

Everything that came later eclipsed impressions from the earlier part of the route. The area around Amnye Machen seemed to be preparing itself for the opening of the National Geological Park whose gate we entered driving from Dawu Zhuma. The Park was approved by the Ministry of Land and Resources earlier that year, but plans for establishing this park had begun as early as 2009, when the pastoralists near Amnye Machen told me that they would have to leave their land and settle in town. Now, the park looked like a cross between a mining operation and a construction site. An expressway was being built as were a series of viewing platforms, each large enough to accommodate several tourist busses. Gigantic pylons rose from the grassland as if competing with the size of Amnye Machen. The entire infrastructure seemed to suffer from elephantiasis: its scale was proportional to the planners'



Figure 1. At Drokdü Nyakha.  
(Sulek, 2014)

exuberant ambitions, not the local tourist industry, or the sacred landscape itself.

Planners were employing local materials, perhaps to save on costs: gravel and sand were mined on the site. Concrete blocks and other construction elements lay in disarray on the grassland as if discarded by a hurricane. Bagging machines, concrete mixers, and trucks choked the road. The dust was thick, as if a desert storm had just blown through. Pilgrims resembled mobile sculptures: people bathed in monochrome grey. Those who performed *kora* by prostrating around the mountain suffered most: they prostrated, stretched their body face down on the ground, then got up, walked three steps and started the process again. Wrapped in plastic folia, they took rest on concrete blocks, stared at the string of cars, each of which stirred up a new wave of dust. Then these pilgrims continued their journey between trucks and *kora* cars.

As we drove on, the road got worse and the evening grew darker. While the asphalt road from Chamahe to Dawu Zhuma was new, that path ahead of us was much older. Driving through Yekhog (g.Yas khog) and Chuwarna (Chu dbar sna), we manoeuvred between piles of gravel and holes in the road left by the use of heavy construction equipment. Our field of vision was limited to several meters. Sometimes, in the lights of the trucks coming from the opposite direction, we saw straggling pilgrims who slowly left the road to walk through the grassland. We drove almost without break. Once the driver took water from a spring, causing protests of other drivers who were anxious to return home before night fell. It was six in the evening, then seven, and then eight.

The car jumped in the dark, the girls grew nauseated. I took a headache pill. It was not the altitude, but intense emotions, I told myself. I tried to reconstruct where we were. It felt like the road to Domkhok (sDom khog), where I had conducted research, but it looked different now. Only at Sangykha (bSang gi kha), a mountain pass where a small Gesar temple stood, did I recognize where we were. It was indeed the road to Domkhok, but how different it looked! The earth on both sides of the road had been excavated and tents for construction workers were positioned on areas of untouched terrain. This tent town was adorned with flags and draped in poster slogans. Someone had warned me in Xining before I left, “You won’t recognize Domkhok, if you went there now. The place you knew doesn’t exist anymore.”

The distant lights of Dawu filled me with joy. After 500 km and 18 hours on the road we were arriving home. When I reconstruct a picture of the *kora* around Amnye Machen which I had in my mind, I must admit that I imagined a narrow path through withered grassland, walking among snowfields and glaciers, through hazy air and in the piercing cold I knew so well. I found none of these sensations on my car *kora* route. My face must have betrayed my sense of shock and disappointment, for when I arrived home, my friend said, “You look like a destroyed woman.” I smoothed out my clothes. “Mentally destroyed,” she added.

Upon returning home, I discovered a *lungta* stuck to the sole of my shoe. Even as a non-Buddhist, I was disturbed by this sight. A holy object should not touch the defiled bottom of a shoe. I recalled a Tibetan telling me that some monasteries in Lhasa considered forbidding the sale of *lungta* and prayer flags. The clerics argued that the flags so thickly covered sacred mountains and other places that people, *nolens volens*, stepped upon them and this was inauspicious—even offensive. Whether such prohibitions are a method to achieve anything is a question of personal judgement. However, Buddhist clerics have taken to making educational and reformist edicts in recent years, whether in the context of restricting dietary habits, prohibiting cigarettes, drinking, and gambling, sanctioning the use of animal fur on clothing, chiding pastoralists to keep their black yak hair tents, prohibiting the slaughter of livestock, or questioning other economic practices.<sup>7</sup> Was it now time for prayer flags?

**Emilia Roza Sulek** is a social anthropologist, Mongolist, and Tibetologist. She graduated from the University of Warsaw and received her PhD from the Humboldt University of Berlin. In her dissertation, she analyzed consequences of an economic boom in trade in caterpillar fungus with a focus on agency and entrepreneurship demonstrated in a pastoral region of Golok. She has also written about processes of identity-making and oral history in the ethnically and politically complex borderland areas between the Tibetan plateau and China. She is a lecturer at the Department of Social Anthropology and Cultural Studies, University of Zurich.

The author thanks Katia Buffetrille, Yūsuke Bessho and Anna Sehnalova for their feedback and sharing the experiences from their pilgrimage to Amnye Machen.

## Endnotes

1. My informants interpreted the reasons why the Horse Year is auspicious for a pilgrimage to Amnye Machen differently. Some said that this is the year when the mountain first *appeared* and compared it to the mountain's birthday. Others believed that the Horse Year is good for pilgrimage to *all* sacred mountains, while the Sheep Year is good for visiting sacred lakes. Indeed, the Horse Year is important also for Kailash, but not for all mountains. For example, Tsari (Tsa ri) one should visit during the Monkey Year (Huber 1999) and Nyanchen Tanglha (gNyan chen thang lha) during the Sheep Year (Ekvall and Downs 1987). The latter example, however, would confirm my informant's conviction that the Sheep Year is auspicious for sacred lakes, as the pilgrimage to Nyengchen Tanglha entails visiting the mountain's 'partner' i.e. the lake Namtso (gNam mtsho).
2. A regular price for non-foreigners was much lower: 300-500 RMB per seat or 1200 for renting the whole car cf. Sehnalova (In press).
3. The richest sources of information about pilgrimage to Amnye Machen are studies by Buffetrille (1994, 1997, 2003) and Bessho (2005, 2013, 2014).
4. Tibetan name of this township is Dzorgen Rawa (mDzo rgan rwa ba). However, it is one of those cases when Tibetan speakers prefer using the Chinese name over the local one.
5. This is the official English name of this institution. More about the Center cf. Levin (2012).
6. For an analysis of the pilgrimage route as a 'commercial resource' (based on observations conducted during the same 2014 Horse Year), cf. Bessho (2014).

7. Cf. Gaerrang (2015), Gayley (2016) and—with the longest list of examples—Buffetrille (2015). Attempts at controlling alcohol consumption or appeals to the pastoralists to use black tents instead of mass produced ones I also documented during various phases of my research, starting in 2007. Local NGOs and other socially engaged figures in Golok also advocate not using *lungta* and glass bottles or *at least* cleaning the latter, cf. Sulek (2017).

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