The Salt Trade: Rupshu’s Annual Trek to Tso Kar

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It was growing dark in Tharchen’s stone-walled store-house at Thugje, but preparations were still under way for the salt march the next day. While Angchuk was busy collecting saddle-bags and repairing holes in them, Tharchen searched for rope. Some bags were beyond repair and these were discarded, yet others were full with the previous year’s salt (tshwa). These were quickly emptied, and added to the heap of bags. By nightfall, the brothers had amassed a pile of twenty-five saddle-bags and were now ready to make the journey to Tso Kar.

One of the main salt lakes in Ladakh is Tso Kar, and this lies within Rupshu.1 While the lake is renowned throughout Ladakh for its salt today, this has not always been the case. It was only after Ladakh's border with Tibet closed in the early 1960s that Tso Kar became the focus as a source for salt. Prior to this the Rupshupa had rarely, if ever, attempted to remove salt from the lake. In fact, many of them go so far as to claim that there was no salt there. Others said that there was salt there, but that it was not good for human consumption and so they fed it only to their livestock. Yet others maintained that even if there was salt, they never bothered about it because they got all the salt they wanted from Tibet.

1. All government records and most previous literature on the area have given the spelling of the lake as Tso Kar (ntsło dkar). This has led many people to refer to the lake as ‘White Lake’ (Cunningham 1854: 140, Francke 1910: 61). However, the Rupshupa said that they never referred to the lake by that name and it was only because everyone else called it this that they also began to do so. There are two lakes in the area, and according to them they distinguished between the two lakes by calling them fresh water lake (slan mtsho), and salt water lake (though salt water is known as tshwa chu, the lake is called dug mtsho). They said that the name Tso Kar came about as the result of the word they used to refer to the path between the two lakes, which is mtsho gar. However, this paper follows the convention and refers to the lake as Tso Kar.

Rupshu lies in the northeastern part of Ladakh, on the edge of the Changthang (byang gang) or ‘Northern Plateau’.2 It is one of the highest inhabited regions in the area with altitudes ranging from 12,000 to 17,000 feet. The Rupshupa are pastoral nomads, and they herd sheep (lug), goats (ra ma), and yaks (g.yag). Their economy is based on the trade in livestock, salt, pashmina, and wool.

This paper presents Rupshu’s yearly trek to Tso Kar and describes the method by which the removal of salt is organised. The first section examines the former status of the salt trade in Rupshu, and looks at the transformations that have occurred there after the border with Tibet closed. The next section explores the issue of how salt was ‘found’ at Tso Kar once the old trade routes were abandoned. The following sections examine the system by which salt is collected from the lake and then distributed. Finally this paper looks at why the salt trade in Rupshu persists when, in the wider context of the Himalayas, the trade has been marginalised or abandoned.

The old trade in salt

Until the sixties Tibet supplied most of the Himalayan region with salt. The trade in salt in Ladakh was such that Tibetan Changpas would bring it to Ladakh,3 or the Changpas within Ladakh, from places such as Rupshu, would go to Tibet to collect salt. Each year, after New Year (lo gsar) the Rupshupa would make the journey to the Mindum and Kyeltse salt lakes in Western Tibet. Men with large herds would take about 200 to 300 sheep, while those with smaller herds would generally accompany them working in exchange for this favour. Once back in Rupshu they would first take the salt to trade in exchange for barley grain (nas) in Zanskar. According to Rizvi, the salt was coveted by the Zanskaris as:

Even the poorest cultivator, whose fields and livestock barely yielded subsistence for himself and his family had no choice but to keep a little barley aside for the Rupshupa, as the only alternative to eating saltless food — an unthinkable prospect. It was not only the people — their livestock too required salt. (Rizvi, in press)

2. Changthang spans a thousand miles from Ladakh in the west, across Central and North Tibet, to the Chinese province of Qinghai in the east (Goldstein and Beall 1990: 41).

3. The fair at Chemdi in Ladakh is widely remembered for the presence of Changpa from Tibet who mainly brought salt to trade.
Fig. 1. Men generally work together while removing salt from Tso Kar. Here four men help each other carry their tins filled with salt to the bank of the lake.

Fig. 2. Once each man has removed his quota of salt from the lake, they then sit near their piles and fill their saddle-bags with salt.

Fig. 3. The sheep and goats are tied together before the saddle-bags are loaded on to their backs.

Fig. 4. Sheep and goats leave Tso Kar with the salt.
Further, Rupshu’s salt did not stop in Zanskar, but eventually found its way as far as the Kashmir Valley and Skardu in Baltistan (ibid).

Later in the year, usually in August, the Rupshupa would travel to the annual fair held at Dozum, near Himachal, and trade their salt for tea, sugar, spices, rice, and other food products. Dozum was a fair ground to which traders came from Rupshu, Tibet, Zanskar, Ladakh, Kulu, Chamba, Lahaul, and Rampur. In addition, farmers from Lower Ladakh (or Sham) would come to Rupshu with apricots, grain, walnuts, and white radish to trade for salt.

This system of trade continued until the extension of Communist China’s rule over Tibet in the 1950s. The subsequent closure of the Ladakh-Tibet border not only affected trade in the region, but also led to the building of roads. This resulted in the introduction of vehicular traffic which led in turn to the abandonment of the old trading routes. At the same time, ration depots were opened, stocked with foodgrains and sea salt brought up from the plains and sold at highly subsidised rates. The first of Rupshu’s trading journeys to cease was the one to Tibet for salt. However, though they turned to salt-producing lakes within Rupshu, they no longer felt the need to make the journey to the fair at Dozum, as foodgrains and other commodities now came to them via the ration trucks. The farmers from Lower Ladakh also gradually stopped coming to Rupshu, and the few that still do, now make the journey by jeep. The trade with Zanskar was the last to stop and continued for another ten to fifteen years, ending as recently as the late eighties.

Since the last thirty-five years the Rupshupa have been collecting salt from Tso Kar. Before then many of them claim that there was no salt in the lake. The next section explores the issue of how salt was ‘found’ there.

The ‘discovery’ of salt

When we could no longer go to Tibet and the Tibetans came to live here, there was an old man among them called Azem. It is said that one winter Azem went to Tso Kar and took out salt from the lake. He loaded this onto his sheep and was taking them to his tent when some people from Rupshu saw him. They ran after him, and when they saw the salt they were curious to know where he had got it from. Azem showed us, and then we had our own salt here.

While some of the Rupshupa credit Azem with ‘discovering’ salt, another version ascribes it to the intervention of the Geological Survey of India.

Once the Survey people from Leh came here. They did some tests on the water in the lake. We think they put something in the lake because after that we started getting salt. But whatever it was they put in the lake we don’t know. The other thing was that after that the lake never again froze in winter.

This account is also reiterated by other Ladakhis and Tsering Dorje, Leh’s Assistant Commissioner, stated:

Though at first there was no salt at Tso Kar, it only came about when the Geological Survey came and put some medicine in the lake, then salt began forming in the lake.

Yet another version, maintained by the former palace trader (mKhar tson gpa) Baba Siddique, is that there was always a little salt in the lake but the people did not eat it because it was not considered to be as good as what came from Tibet. He added that it was some tourists who put ‘medicine’ in the lake and then the salt became good.

I have my doubts whether the Geological Survey of India or the tourists actually put something in the lake. Perhaps the Survey ran some tests at the lake that showed that the salt there was suitable for human consumption. According to the geologist J. T. Gergan, Tso Kar is a lake that is drying up, with the result that its salinity is increasing and more salt is being formed.

4. To Ladakhis this place is known as Dozum, and in Hindi it is Patseo. Both names refer to the term ‘stone bridge’. Today it is called Mandi Nagar.
5. James Crowden, a researcher based in Zanskar, recalled that though the trade had already started dwindling in the eighties, the turning point came in 1987 when winter arrived earlier than expected. That year it suddenly snowed as the Rupshupa were leaving Zanskar with the result that most of their livestock perished. After this disaster they decided not to go to Zanskar any more as it was dangerous, as well as futile, now that they had the road (personal communication, Leh, August 1993).
7. In the past, the Rupshupa used to make frequent crossings over the frozen lake and they say they are now not able to do this as the lake no longer freezes. J.T. Gergan, a geologist in Ladakh, attributes this to the increasing salinity in the lake (personal communication, Leh, August 1993).
9. There were eight families in Leh who were appointed as palace traders and they received certain privileges, such as exemption from tax and homes in Rudok, in return for some service to the royal family (Ghani Sheikh n.d.).
While the Rupshupa may claim that it was only in the late fifties that they learnt about the presence of salt at Tso Kar, other accounts disagree with this. There is a local legend that talks of the origin of the salt lake, and attributes its creation to a lama called Yulsa Gespo.11

Yulsa Gespo took the form of a poor, old man and decided to go to Korzok because there was a zhabs bro (song and dance) going on there. He very much wanted to join in the dancing, but none of the girls would give him their hand or play with him. Instead they made fun of him because he was dirty and poor, and smelt a lot. At this he got very annoyed and thought that these girls are very rude. There was only one girl there who was nice to him, and gave him some food to eat.

He left Korzok and went to Rupshu. When he reached Tso Kar, he saw that there was also a zhabs bro going on there and decided to join in. The girls gave him their hands, and they all danced and played with him. Yulsa Gespo was happy. Then he thought to himself and said, I must teach those girls at Korzok a lesson. At this he got very annoyed and thought that these girls are very rude. There was not tell us that salt was removed from there. However, another legend re-

It is said that at that time there was a huge lake at Tso Kar. There was so much water that this entire valley was covered in it. Yulsa Gespo swallowed up all this water and started to walk towards Korzok. At Polo Konka he turned around to see what he had done and he laughed at the thought of his action. His nose itched and suddenly he sneezed. Some water came out from his nostrils and formed the two small lakes that are at Tso Kar today. One is fresh water, the other salt.

As Yulsa Gespo walked on his way he got tired and thirsty, and decided to stop for a rest. He made some tea, and as he was pouring it into his cup some of the tea spilt on to the ground. This formed the lake, Khajang Kuru.

Finally he reached Korzok. He searched for the only girl there who had been good to him and told her that her uncle, who lived at the top of the mountain, was calling her, and that she should hurry up and go to him.12 Then he walked up another mountain, called Tsag Shang, and from the top of it he let out all the water from his mouth. Everybody at Korzok drowned, except for the girl who had been kind to him. And that was how the lake Tsomoriri was formed.

While this narrative confirms the presence of the salt lake at Tso Kar it does not tell us that salt was removed from there. However, another legend re-

11. According to Nawang Pema, the head lama at Korzok Gompa, Yulsa Gespo was not a human but a being who inhabits the world of supernatural deities and spirits. He generally lives in the mountains, and cannot be seen by humans. He is said to see what good or bad things people do, and then respond depending on their respective actions. A person who does a good deed is rewarded, and one who is bad will be severely punished. However, there were others in Rupshu who said that Yulsa Gespo was Chenrezig (the god of compassion) in disguise.

12. The mountain which the girl ran up is called A jang ri ("Uncle’s mountain").

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13. The cult of ‘hidden lands’ (sbras yul), which mainly developed in Tibet, is said to have arisen out of pressures at times of political and religious cataclysm by offering refuge to the faithful (Aris 1990: 97). In the case of the sbras yul at Rupshu, it was established as a result of the following events: in those days Chenrezig used to live near Thugje Gompa and one day a girl (she was probably some sort of demoness) decided she wanted to play a joke on him. She called out to him that the water in the lake was rising. To save himself and all the other Rupshupa, Chenrezig ran with them into the mountain. How do we know this? There is a small tunnel in the mountain that marks Chenrezig’s path. At the end of this there is an outline of his body, but this is not visible to everyone and only those with good faith can see it. The result of this is that all the people whom he saved became the sbras yul mi. The monastery at Thugje was later built around this tunnel.


15. The reference is to facial and body hair, but she referred to it as bil (wool) and not shra (hair).
melting. It is consumed all over Ladakh, and is carried as far as Kashmir (1875: 299-300).

This is followed by a reference in an administrative report (dated 1880) by W.H. Johnson, governor of Ladakh in the late 19th century: "... the Tsokar Salt Lakes continue to deteriorate — the yield for the year having only been 415 maunds'.' It appears puzzling then, that Francke still maintains that on the northern shore of the lake, common salt is deposited which is collected by the nomads who trade with it and this is consumed all over Ladakh, and even in Kashmir. However, Koelz's account differs with those given above. He led an expedition through the region in 1931, and though he mentions that the water there is strongly saline and that the local people collect salt, he says that it is fit only for cattle. His is the only version that coincides with those of the elders in both Leh and Rupshu. The late Tonyot Shah, a trader and envoy on Ladakh's Lopchak mission to Tibet, stated that they never ate the salt from Tso Kar because it used to make one's stomach swell up (personal communication, Leh, April 1992).

Based on these conflicting accounts it is difficult to deduce the events concerning the removal of salt from Tso Kar before the 1960s. It is a known fact that the salt there was fed to livestock, a practice that continues today. What is not clear is whether or not the Rupshupa traded in the salt from here. It could be that poorer people with fewer head of livestock, who could not make the long journey to the salt lakes in Tibet, went instead to Tso Kar. This remains the custom followed by owners of large and small herds in Rupshu today, and the next section outlines the present practise of removal of salt from Tso Kar.

16. W.H. Johnson 1880: 5. 17. Francke 1907: 62. 18. Koelz 1931: 108. 19. This point was reiterated by Sonam Dawa at the conference who said that Ladakhis generally preferred the taste of salt from Tibet to that from Tso Kar. 20. There are two varieties of salt found at Tso Kar that are fed to livestock: the first is ba za and the other dgo rong. Drew identified ba za as carbonate of soda, and dgo rong as a mixture of sulphate of magnesia with a compound of soda (1875: 300). Francke also mentions the same compositions (1907: 62). Unlike the salt for human consumption, which is obtainable only once a year, these other two varieties are always available.

The march for salt

Each fall the Rupshupa drive their herds of sheep and goats to Tso Kar, and set up camp around the bank of the lake. The sheep and goats will bring back saddle-bags filled with salt, each animal carrying a load of fifteen to twenty kilogram. Horses and yaks are also used by those who have many, but most men have relatively few and so prefer to use their more numerous sheep and goats. However, it is customary to take only the male livestock because the female are usually not strong enough to carry the weight of the salt. Further, women rarely accompany the men and so there is nobody to milk them.

Only men attend the salt march, and it is mandatory for each tent to send at least one man to collect his share of the salt. Men who do not appear at the salt march are still responsible for ensuring that their share of the salt is collected, and in their absence this duty generally falls on a relative.

Once the salt lake is reached the men first pitch their tents, fortify them with tea, and prepare themselves for the work ahead. Some put on rubber boots, others remove their leather ones and roll up their trousers. A few wear sun-glasses to cut the glare of the sun reflecting from the white surface of the salt flat. They gather their tools, which consist of pick axes, shovels, and large tins.

21. There is no fixed date for the removal of salt, but this generally takes place during September or October. It all depends on the amount of rainfall that has occurred during summer and on how quickly the water in the lake dries up. In a year of poor rain the Rupshupas have even been known to collect salt as early as July. In 1992, the year I lived in Rupshu, salt was collected in the first week of October and some men said that it was late that year. The system appears to be the same as that observed in Tibet by Goldstein and Beall where the salt, about a foot deep, appears to be replenished in summer when, according to the nomads, the dry salt bed is covered by a foot of brackish water (1990: 117).

22. Three types of saddle-bags are woven in Rupshu, and while their basic shape remains the same they differ in size depending on the various animals that carry them. The smallest is the lug sgal made for sheep and goats, the next largest is the rtab ra for horses, and the largest is the da sgal for yaks.

23. As a rule men do not milk, but those who do not have a large herd are forced to bring their female livestock. At times such as these, they may bring a daughter along to do the milking or have to succumb to doing it themselves.

24. All men use the same size and shape of tins, and these are prepared by removing the top lid and puncturing the bottom with holes so that any excess water in the salt can drain off. Two more holes are made towards the top of the tin, on two opposite sides, and a stick is passed through these to function as a handle.
For the purposes of salt collection the men are divided into four groups known as chu lag, and each is led by a chu dpon. While the chu dpon is changed every year, the members of a chu lag remain the same. Each chu lag includes seventeen to eighteen men, and though they may be related they are not necessarily members of the same pha spun (patrilineal group). There are two basic reasons behind this system, which began only when Rupshu started removing salt from Tso Kar. The first is to safeguard the lake and its precincts; while the second is to ensure the peaceful removal of salt from the lake, as described here.

In the centre of the lake the kotwal presides over a meeting of the heads of the four chu lag. With the pointed edge of a pick axe he draws a line across the surface of the lake, dividing it into roughly four equal parts. Then he takes out a pair of dice and rolls them between the four chu dpon. The chu dpon with the highest number decides which quarter of the lake his men will remove salt from. The man with the second highest number chooses next, and so on until all four chu lag are allotted a section of the lake. The kotwal explained that the division of the lake into four parts is to deter the men from randomly removing salt from anywhere they choose, and to pre-empt clashes between men who decide they want to take salt from the same place. The other condition of this salt march is that each man must fill 25 saddle-bags with salt. This is to ensure two things. The first is that everyone participates in the removal of salt and does their share of the work, and the second is the equal distribution of salt. The owners of small herds had once grumbled that it was not fair that men with large herds could take out more salt than them, and so this rule was enforced.

As soon as the kotwal has finished rolling his dice and the lake is portioned off, the removal of salt can commence. Each group of men move out on to their section of the lake. The men tend to work in teams, rather than individually, and while some pound the crust of the salt lake and break the salt into small bits, others load it into the tins. The remaining men carry the saddle-bags. Towards evening, when the work is over, each man marks his pile of salt with a yak or sheep horn, an old boot, a twig, or a saddle-bag, so that they can tell them apart. The salt is then left overnight on the sides of the lake. The next day, the salt is allowed to dry in the sun before it is packed into the saddle-bags. Each man sits and fills his own saddle-bags and then sews them closed (Fig. 2). They try not to overload the bags, otherwise they will be too heavy for the sheep and goats to carry back. Further, they have to be careful that there are no pointed bits of salt that will jab into the livestock's back, so the salt is vigorously tamped into the bags. It is evening by the time all the saddle-bags are filled and piled, ready to be loaded on to the livestock the next morning.

Early the next day, the sheep and goats are driven to Tso Kar and the saddle-bags are tied across their backs, with some difficulty, and the march back to camp begins (Figs. 2 and 4).

Although the annual practice of removing salt from Tso Kar endures today, there is another conflicting and controversial issue which concerns the ownership of the lake. The next section discusses this.

Who owns Tso Kar?

While Rupshu has always maintained that the lake belongs to them, since the late seventies Kharnak (another nomadic pastoral group to the west of Rupshu) has begun to stake a claim to Tso Kar. As proof Rupshu states that their traditional camping grounds are located in the vicinity, and so is their monastery, Thugje. Further, old land records in the archival and revenue offices in Leh, dating back to 1908, demonstrate Rupshu’s ownership of Tso Kar.

On the other hand Kharnak, with the backing of Hemis Gompa, the largest and one of the wealthiest monasteries in Ladakh, began encroaching on Rupshu’s land from the west, a long time ago. In 1982, an agreement was made between Kharnak and Rupshu, under the supervision of the Assistant Commissioner of Nyoma, which stated that Rupshu must supply Kharnak

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25. In areas of Ladakh where agriculture is practiced the chu dpon is in charge of the system of irrigation, and he controls the amount of water that is given to each farmer for watering his field (Murdoch 1981: 262).
26. The volume of salt held by one saddle-bag is roughly equivalent to that held by one tin, and so each man has to take out 25 tins of salt in order to fill 25 saddle-bags.
27. If the salt has not dried sufficiently, then the men may dry it again back at camp. The salt is not washed before it is eaten.
28. The land settlement records of 1908-9 to this day remain the most recent comprehensive mapping of Ladakhi space, and continue to be the most important legal document referred to in cases of disputes over land within Ladakh, but also serves to underpin Indian territorial claims (Van Beek 1996: 109).
29. The most recent encroachment, that of Zara, took place in the seventies, about the same time as when they began making claims to Tso Kar.
with 8,000 kilograms of salt annually. In exchange for this Kharnak must pay Rupshu Rs.400. This agreement was drawn up for a period of five years, but after it expired Kharnak once again repeated their demand that Tso Kar belonged to them.

In 1987 and 1988 the fight turned vicious and Rupshu and Kharnak went to battle against each other. They fought with knives and sling-shots, and though nobody was killed, many men were badly injured. The police were called in, and Rupshu took the case to court. Tsering Samphel, a Member of the Congress Party at that time, who was sent out to Rupshu to survey the situation stated:

There is little doubt that Tso Kar belongs to Rupshu. It is just that these Kharnak people are more influential and financially stronger because they have the support of Hemis that they are trying to take it away from them. In the courts it was agreed after the fight that Kharnak would pay a fine of Rs.3,000 to each family in Rupshu, but when the agreement was written up it said that Kharnak would pay Rs.3,000 to the whole of Rupshu!39

When the courts proved futile, Rupshu approached the Ladakh Buddhist Association for an out of court settlement and a compromise was reached between the two places. The terms of the agreement state that while only Rupshu has access to the lake, they must give a portion of the salt to Kharnak. This was fixed at 800 saddle-bags, in exchange for which Kharnak would pay Rupshu 25 paise for each bag. Thus, as soon as the salt reaches Rupshu a message is sent to Kharnak to come and collect their share of the salt. Each tent in Rupshu contributes eight or nine saddle-bags towards Kharnak's share. Some men in Rupshu deride this agreement and said it was made only because their chief at that time had been weak: 'Look, we do so much hard work removing this salt and Kharnak gets it for free!'

However, the issue is not simply one of salt, but concerns the larger one of land and grass. The vicinity of Tso Kar yields some of the best grazing lands, and it was this along with the salt lake that Rupshu was trying to protect from a takeover by Kharnak. What has now become a major concern of Rupshu's is to prevent trespassers from encroaching on Tso Kar. These may be in the form of ‘salt thieves’ (tshwa rkun ma), or other livestock from neighbouring areas such as Korzok or Kharnak. To deter intruders, guards (srung pa) are posted at the lake and its precincts for a period of four to five months, from June to October or November. Five guards are posted at one time, and they are changed every eight days. Four guards are chosen from each chu lag, and the fifth is a Tibetan.33 Encroachers are fined, and stray livestock are generally apprehended and brought back to Rupshu. If no one comes to claim them then the chief sells the animals and the money goes towards Rupshu’s communal use. After Kharnak has received its share of the salt, the rest is then dispersed or consumed. The last section looks at the manner in which this is done.

Distribution of salt

Though three varieties of salt exist at Tso Kar, it is only the salt fit for human consumption that they go to collect each year and use for trade. Once Kharnak has been given its due, each tent then keeps what they require for their own consumption.32 Depending on the number of people in the tent this can vary, but usually about seven saddle-bags are kept back for a year. Each man will also give a certain portion of his salt to the monasteries at Korzok and Thujje, and to any visiting religious heads. The remainder is bartered or sold for cash.

Most of this exchange is carried out with the villages on the other side of the Taglang La: Gya, Meru, and Rumtse. The more enterprising men will carry their salt on to Leh, and trade it there and in the villages along the way. However, the men make it a point not to trade their salt with villages further up the Indus valley, generally because these places are not directly accessible by road from Rupshu.33

Salt is usually bartered for barley; in 1992 the rate of exchange was by equal volume: one saddle-bag of salt in exchange for one saddle-bag of bar-

31. Though the Tibetans living in Rupshu are not allowed to join in the salt collection their livestock are permitted to eat the grass growing there. Therefore, they are also responsible for guarding the area.
32. Some of this salt is also given away on the second day of the salt march when the Rupshupa sit filling their saddle-bags. Men from Korzok, or the Tibetans, turn up at the lake and plead for salt, or ask if they may be allowed to remove some from the lake themselves. Since no one but a Rupshupa is allowed to remove salt, they generally give away a little from their own piles.
33. This does not mean they will not trade their salt with people from these areas. What happens nowadays is that the two sides generally meet in Leh, and the exchange of salt is carried out there.
ley. It is rarely sold for cash, but when it has been, the price was Rs.2 for a kilogram.\(^4\)

The salt trade does not hold the same prominence as it once did, and the Rupshupa say that their salt is now practically given away for free. ‘This is because everyone now buys government salt and no one wants our salt any more.’\(^5\) In Tibet, Goldstein and Beall report that the Changpas trek for salt has now become an option because cheaper ocean salt competes with their rock salt, and the Chinese government has made dirt roads leading to many of the main salt flats in Western Tibet and has started hauling salt from the lakes in trucks.\(^6\) This has meant that the trek is no longer profitable for the Changpas. However, these changes have decreased, but not eliminated, the market for this salt. Goldstein and Beall state that the reason why this salt trade continues, though in a marginal form, is that many Himalayan and Tibetan villagers still prefer the taste of the local salt.\(^7\) The same is true for Rupshu, as Sonam Angchuk confirmed:

Except for us Changpas, whether Tibetan or Ladakhi, we still like the salt from here and we still use it. As long as that doesn’t stop we will go on taking salt from Tso Kar (personal communication, Rupshu, November 1992).\(^8\)

The salt is also popular with some of the elderly people in Leh, and Baba Siddique is one of them who ensures that he always has a supply for his family members for their support and encouragement. Baba Siddique, Tonyot Shah remarked that the difference between Changthang salt and the salt supplied by the government was that he never fell ill when he consumed the former. ‘And now I eat this government salt and they say I have blood pressure!’

Apart from this matter of personal taste and preference, the annual salt collection remains an expression of male identity in Rupshu and demonstrates their ties to Tso Kar. Thus, the event is an important occasion and one which the Rupshupa hope will endure for many years.\(^9\)

Bibliography


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An Eighteenth-Century Bhutanese Lama's Journey to Ladakh

John Bray and Chris Butters

Jamgon Ngawang Gyaltsen was a senior Drukpa Kagyu ('Brug pa bka’rgyud) lama from Bhutan who visited Ladakh in the early years of the eighteenth century during the reign of King Nyima Namgyal. His visit helped reinforce existing links between the two kingdoms. This account of Ngawang Gyaltsen’s travels in Ladakh is based on his biography, a copy of which survives in the National Library of Bhutan in Thimphu.

Ladakh and Bhutan have obvious historical similarities as Himalayan kingdoms sharing a common religious culture but a distinct political status from Tibet. Despite their distance from each other, they shared a further link through their rulers’ common allegiance to the Drukpa Kagyu sect, and this connection was particularly important in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

This article discusses one episode in the relations between the two countries in the early eighteenth century: the visit to Ladakh of a senior Bhutanese lama, Jamgon Ngawang Gyaltsen (Byams.mgon ngag.dbang rgyal.mtshan 1647-1732). The account of his visit is based on Ngawang Gyaltsen’s biography, which was prepared by Shakya Rinchen (Shakya rin.chen 1710-59), the ninth Je Khenpo of Bhutan. The full title of the biography is: Sku.bzhis'i dbang phyug rje.btsun ngag.dbang rgyal.mtshan gyi rnam.par thar.pa tham. cas mkhyen.pa'i rol.mo zhes.bya.ba. A copy is held in the National Library of Bhutan in Thimphu, and this is all the more valuable because the original woodblocks were destroyed in a fire at Punakha about a century ago. The section of the biography which is concerned with Ladakh is contained in folios 126b to 174a.

The article has its origins in a brief visit I (John Bray) made to Bhutan in 1994. I took the opportunity to make informal enquiries about historical links between Bhutan and Ladakh, and was advised to consult Lobpon Pemala (Slob.dpon padma tshe.dbang), the distinguished Bhutanese historian, who was