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Zab gcod – in memory of Meme Khemchok Dorje: an essay in honour of Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak's 100th "Birthday"

Blezer, H.W.A.; Yungdrung, T.; Ramble, C.

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CELEBRATING 100 YEARS OF WISDOM

Honouring His Eminence Yongdzin
Lopon Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche's 100th Birthday

Edited by
Khenchen Tenpa Yungdrung Rinpoche
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A Note from the Publisher

One of the first books published by our press, an interview with a Bon master, was *The Healthy Mind Interviews: Khenpo Nyima Wangyal* by Henry M. Vyner, M.D., in 2004. The following year, we published *The Oral Tradition from Zhang-Zhung* by John Myrdhin Reynolds, with a foreword by Lopon Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche, and I accompanied the author to Triten Norbutse to present the book. Receiving a blessing from such an extraordinary and compassionate master was an immense honor and a humbling experience. This encounter marked the beginning of our profound connection with the Bon tradition and with Yongdzin Rinpoche. Since that time, we have had the honor of publishing numerous works on Bonpo practices and history, and have always made these books our top priority.

It is with the utmost respect and gratitude that we present this festschrift, dedicated to honoring the 100th birthday of the revered master.

– Bidur Dangol

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Introduction

This collection is intended to honour one of the most remarkable people any of us is ever likely to meet. While the very fact of attaining such a venerable age places Yongdzin Lopön Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche in a small minority of the world's population – around one-tenth of one percent – there can be few people, however many years they may have behind them, who have lived such extraordinary lives of dedication to the enrichment of universal well-being and the sum of human knowledge. Yongdzin Rinpoche can look down from the lofty summit of his years and his achievements to see his extraordinary legacy flourishing on the four continents that surround him, amid the wreckage of the formidable obstacles that he overcame thanks to his single-minded determination.

There are several accounts of his life in numerous languages, ranging from short encyclopedia entries to full-length biographies,[1] but since some readers may not be familiar with them, it would be appropriate to use this introduction to set out some of the main landmarks in his long journey.

1 For two English-language accounts, see Reynolds 2005, 367–380, and *The Life of a Great Bonpo Master,* 2020.

Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche was born in a Fire Tiger year – 1926 – in Khyungpo, part of the region of East Tibet known as Kham. His childhood name was Chime Yungdrung. His father, Paksam, belonged to a clan called Drewo, and his mother, Gachung, was from a lineage of eminent painters named Dongdo. One of her nephews, Dongdo Tsering Yangphel, a highly skilled painter of murals and thangkas, was to become an important influence in his young cousin's life. Financial difficulties and illness made life difficult for Chime Yungdrung's parents, and from the age of seven he was taken care of by a monk uncle who lived in the nearby monastery of Tengchen. It was under the tutelage of this uncle that he learned to read and write and to take part in religious activities. When Chime Yungdrung was eleven years old his uncle passed away, and he went to live with his mother's family, where he followed a painter's apprenticeship with his cousin Tsering Yangphel. In the course of his training, he accompanied his cousin and teams of painters to carry out commissions for monasteries and private patrons in Kham. These visits, as well as pilgrimages to nearby sites, brought him into contact with important religious figures and holy places in the region. Many of these places lay several days walk away from his home; but his first real break from his land came at the age of 15, when he joined his cousin and a group of painters who had been invited to decorate the walls of a new temple that had been built at Yungdrung Ling monastery near Shigatse, in West-Central Tibet. While his cousin was reluctant to let him join the group, his mother was even more staunchly opposed. But she knew her son well enough to suspect that he might run away from home after the departure of the team, and she eventually relented.

This apparent stubbornness was an early sign of the single-mindedness that would mark his pursuit of any course of action he considered to be the right one. Chime Yungdrung duly set off with the team of eight painters, a journey that took them two months on foot. The commission took two years to complete, but when the team began to make preparations to return to Kham, Chime Yungdrung decided that he would remain behind to pursue the religious studies he had begun during the course of the visit – again, in the face of strenuous opposition from his cousin Tsering Yangphel, who dreaded the

reaction he would face from the boy's mother when she learned he had left him behind.

In 1942, when he was seventeen years old, Chime Yungdrung took ordination from two senior monks of Menri – the parent monastery of Yungdrung Ling – and received the name Tenzin Namdak. Shortly after this he and two monk companions set off on a pilgrimage to the holy places of Nepal, including Mustang and Kathmandu, where, forty-five years later, he would establish the monastery of Triten Norbutse where he now resides. From Nepal they travelled on to West Tibet, where they visited Mount Kailash and other sacred sites associated with the ancient masters who are believed to have been active in this region when it was still known as Zhangzhung. Returning to Yungdrung Ling, Tenzin Namdak – the future Yongdzin Rinpoche – immersed himself in the intensive study of the different domains of Bon, supporting himself by undertaking short commissions as a thangka painter. But spiritual advancement was his main consideration of this time, and he accordingly undertook a four-year retreat in a cave on the shores of a lake called Gyerru, in the fastnesses of the Changthang, Tibet's Northern Plateau. He had been drawn to this location by the presence of Yongdzin Tshultrim Gyaltsen, more commonly known as Gangru Pönlop (1893–1967), who had been the senior teacher at Yungdrung Ling for eighteen years, and had withdrawn to this location to spend the next twenty years of his life in solitary meditation. At first, the hermit was reluctant to take on a new student, but the young Tenzin Namdak's entreaties prevailed, and Gangru Pönlop agreed to give teachings to the young monk who, though he did not know at the time, was to become his most illustrious disciple. Following his retreat, on Gangru Pönlop's advice, he did not go back to his family home in Khyungpo, but instead went to Menri, where he attended the dialectics school that had recently been established by Kyabje Meutön Yongdzin Sangye Tenzin (1912–1978), who was to become his main teacher.

In 1952, in his 27th year, Tenzin Namdak took his *geshe* degree and became the senior teacher (*lopön*) of Menri monastery. He also took full ordination, and was given the name Lodrö Gyaltsen, but the fact that he continued to use the name from his first ordination, and that he retained the position of senior

teacher when Menri was later reestablished in India, meant that for most of his life he has been known as Lopön Tenzin Namdak. In fact, his duties at the monastery went far beyond teaching, and owing to the inexperience of the young abbot who was appointed during his tenure, he found himself intensively engaged with seeking funding for the monastery and for taking care of its day-to-day administration.

Times were changing, and disturbing reports of the activities of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in the east of Tibet reached the little monastic community with increasing frequency. In May 1959 Lopön Tenzin Namdak was in Sezhig, a small Bon monastery on the shores of Dangra Lake, north of Menri, when he heard of the Lhasa uprising against the Chinese presence, the crushing response of the PLA and the flight of the Dalai Lama into exile. He understood that it would be unsafe for him to remain in Tibet in the current climate of hostility to all religious figures and institutions, but could not leave without knowing how his fellows in Menri were faring. Chinese cadres had in fact arrived at the monastery and had begun their campaign of reeducation. The abbot, Sherab Lodrö, and a group of some thirty monks decided to leave, and set off towards Sezhig one night under cover of darkness. On two occasions they ran into armed groups of Chinese soldiers who fired on them, and by the time they reached Sezhig they had lost a dozen of their number. Together with Lopön Tenzin Namdak and others, including the monks of Yungdrung Ling, the group began to make its way to the southern border of Tibet, but not far to the west of Dangra Lake their camp was attacked by a detachment of the PLA. Several members of the group were killed, while Lopön Tenzin Namdak himself was shot through the leg and left for dead. He was rescued at night by the Menri abbot Sherab Lodrö and another monk who had hidden themselves in some nearby caves, and was taken to a tent near the house of a certain Tshewang Norbu, known as Dashö Lama, who tended his wound. Lopön Tenzin Namdak and his companions had managed to rescue a number of precious relics when they left Menri, the most valuable of these being the reliquary of Nyamme Sherab Gyaltsen, the founder of the monastery. Lopön Tenzin Namdak kept the relics with him in his tent, until Sherab Lodrö and Dashö Lama were able to remove them discreetly and hide them in a cave. Here they remained, undiscovered, until the 1980s, when the relaxation of

official restrictions on religious observances made it possible for Dashö Lama to recover them and restore them to Menri.

The Chinese authorities had been informed of Lopön Tenzin Namdak's presence at Dashö Lama's house, and his companions were instructed to transfer him to a prison camp as soon as he was sufficiently recovered to travel. Knowing that this would mean – at best – a long prison sentence, as soon as he was able to walk the group set off towards the camp as a diversion and then, at night, reversed their direction to embark on a circuitous journey towards the Nepal border. Walking by night and lying low by day, after twenty-two nights the party finally crossed the Korala pass into the safety of Nepal's Mustang district.

While Lopön Tenzin Namdak's personal safety was now assured, the future of the Bon religion itself was far from certain: in the People's Republic of China the persecution of religious institutions, Buddhist and Bon alike, would soon intensify with the onset of the Cultural Revolution, while the Bonpo refugees in India were relatively few in number – just one percent of the Tibetan exile population – and scattered across several locations. Since international aid at that time was being channeled through Tibetan structures that had little regard for the Bon religion, there was a real risk that the members of the Bonpo community would be diffused into the predominantly Buddhist refugee camps and lose their religious identity altogether. While in Kathmandu, Lopön Tenzin Namdak met David Snellgrove, the future Professor of Tibetan Studies at the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). At that time, most of what was known in the West about the Bon religion was filtered through the prism of Buddhist historians' writings on the subject, and by no means all of this literature was either sympathetic to Bon or factually accurate. Snellgrove, who had spent protracted periods among indigenous Bonpo communities in the remote enclave of Dolpo in Nepal, appreciated that a better understanding of the religion could be arrived at only through a study of the Bonpos' own scriptural tradition. His consultations with Lopön Tenzin Namdak led to the long-term plan to undertake a close study and translation of representative passages from the 14th-century *Ziji*, a project that, as noted earlier, culminated in the publication of *The Nine Ways of Bon* in 1967.

Thanks to financial support from the Rockefeller Foundation, David Snellgrove was able to invite Lopön Tenzin Namdak and two other monks to England for more than two years. In 1962 these two monks, Sangye Tenzin and Samten Gyaltsen, later came to be internationally known as, respectively, Menri Tridzin Lungtok Tenpai Nyima Rinpoche, the 33rd Throne Holder of Menri monastery, and Samten Karmay, one of the most highly regarded authorities on Tibetan civilization in the Western academic tradition.

Lopön Tenzin Namdak's sojourn in England gave him an opportunity to learn English, to experience the life and culture of the European university environment, and to collaborate with David Snellgrove on the translation of parts of the *Ziji*. But the welfare of the Bon community and the survival of the Bon religion remained uppermost in his thoughts, as the letters he sent to Nepal and India at that time reveal. It is clear from the following excerpts that he wished to bring comfort to his anxious followers, while at the same time offering a global perspective to reassure them that Tibetans were not the only people in the world at that time to be suffering persecution and exile.

> ...on 2 April I wrote to the Dalai Lama, telling him generally about how things were over here, and especially because he knows that our Eternal Bon religion is a part of the pure doctrine of the Enlightened Ones. I asked that he look with loving kindness on us, the surviving lamas and monks of Menri, who are, as he knows, the holders of the doctrine of this tradition in Nepal, and especially that he should not abandon his support for the unimpaired preservation of the transmission of the teachings of this spiritual tradition of Eternal Bon. On the 18th of this month I received a reply, in which he promised that he would never cease to look on us with loving kindness.
>
> ...these days there are a great many refugees in the world: there are around one million people who have fled China and Hong Kong as well as a very large number in Europe who, in recent times, fled into the mountains and have not dared to return – in countries such as Hungary, Poland and Czechoslovakia. The majority of these are able to survive thanks only to their own resourcefulness. In these [Western] countries the people have good food and clothing, but I haven't

> seen anyone who has the time to concentrate on spiritual practice. ... These days, there are the same dangers everywhere, each greater than the next: over there between China and India, and here between the United States and Russia, and if this becomes any more serious there is a real danger that the world could be reduced to dust. In the conflict over here, all humans would be destroyed for sure without even a single thing beyond insects surviving. Do be aware that whatever blessings you may have now, you at least have them; and that whatever you have not got now, you may never have.[2]

Following his return to India in 1964, Lopön Tenzin Namdak's priority was to find an area of land that could become a settlement for the Bonpos in exile. This difficult task was, sadly, made even harder by opposition from influential members of the exile Tibetan community to the establishment of a haven for followers of Bon, but his trademark determination eventually won through. Thanks to funding from the Catholic Relief Services, and with the blessing of the ever supportive Dalai Lama, in March 1967 the New Thobgyal Bon settlement was founded in Dolanji, in Himachal Pradesh. The refugees began to gather at the site and to farm the land, and before long the community was self-sufficient. A school, a clinic and administrative offices were soon added. Work then began on the new Menri monastery, and in 1969 Lopön Tenzin Namdak oversaw the complex procedure that would lead to the appointment of Sangye Tenzin as its 33rd Throne-Holder, with the abbatial name of Lungtok Tenpai Nyima. The building was completed in 1972, and Lopön Tenzin Namdak divided his time between training the next generation of monks, publishing Bon scriptures, writing his own works and generally managing the monastery. He also continued to assist Western researchers: in 1969 he had been invited to the University of Munich by Helmut Hoffman, who had written a pioneering book about Bon as early as 1950,[3] and helped the Western – and Japanese – scholars of Bon who were beginning to visit Dolanji in small but ever-increasing numbers. Monastic training in Tibet had been a haphazard affair, and one of Lopön Tenzin Namdak's main achievements during this period was the development of a systematic nine-year curriculum leading to

2 Letters dated 25 April and 31 October 1963. For more extensive extracts of these and other letters, see *The Life of a Great Bonpo Master*, 171–172.

3 Hoffmann 1950.

the degree of *geshe*. This curriculum was presented to the Central Tibetan Administration in Dharamsala, and was given official approval in 1977.[4]

With the graduation of the first six *geshe*s in 1986, Lopön Tenzin Namdak could begin to turn his attention to other matters. The Chinese government had begun to relax its restrictions on visiting Tibet, and Lopön Tenzin Namdak took this opportunity to travel to sites within what was by now the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) and culturally Tibetan areas in adjacent provinces. This was a bittersweet journey. While he was able to visit places – including Menri and Yungdrung Ling monasteries – where he had spent his formative years and to meet surviving friends and fellow monks from these early days, to see at first hand the destruction that had been wrought in the places that had meant so much to him filled him with a terrible sadness. The visit did, however, give him the opportunity to see his aging mother – the first time they had met in forty-five years.

In the knowledge that every year from then on Menri would see a new cohort of qualified *geshe*s, Lopön Tenzin Namdak was reassured about future of the religion that he had done so much to preserve and cherish. He did not, however, settle into a comfortable retirement but embarked on a project to build another major monastery in Nepal, a country that hosted a sizable Bonpo refugee community and also a number of long-established Bon enclaves in the highland areas of Dolpo and Mustang. With the help of the indefatigable Paljor Norbu, an area of land was acquired in Kathmandu to the west of the sacred site of Swayambhunath, on the very edge of Nagarjun Forest. In the following year, 1987, the new monastery of Triten Norbutse was officially founded. The monastery, which now flourishes under the guidance of its abbot Khenchen Tenpa Yungdrung Rinpoche, has been the main residence of Lopön Tenzin Namdak ever since then.

Most of the Westerners with whom Lopön Tenzin Namdak had had dealings were interested in Bon primarily from an academic perspective. From that time on, however, increasing numbers of non-Tibetans were beginning to engage with Bon not just as a cultural phenomenon but as a spiritual system,

4 Further components were added over the course of the time, and the curriculum now takes thirteen years to complete.

and in addition to receiving international visitors in search of guidance he travelled to Europe, and later to North America and Mexico, at the invitation of the small groups of followers who were beginning to emerge in these countries. Triten Norbutse was not the last monastery that Lopön Tenzin Namdak was to establish. The political instability of Nepal during the Maoist insurgency of 1996 to 2006, combined with the growing Western interest in Bon, were major incentives for the creation of a stable base for the Bon religion in Europe. In 2001, the Shenten Dargye Ling Association, comprising a number of European followers, was registered in France, and set about the task of finding a location that might serve as a permanent centre for the international Bon community. In 2005 Loel Guinness, the founder of the Kalpa Group and a disciple of Yongdzin Rinpoche, purchased a property near the village of Blou, in France's Loire Valley, and donated it to the Association. The Château de la Modetaïs, which had previously accommodated a small community of Catholic monks, was duly consecrated as Shenten Dargye Ling Monastery in the summer of that year. In 2006 it was accorded the status of a *congrégation* by the Ministry of the Interior of the French Government, which meant that from then on it had the official status of a recognised religion in Europe. Shenten Dargye Ling became a spiritual hub for Bon followers from around the world, and Yongdzin Rinpoche would give teachings there for several months of each year. Even though Triten Norbutse is now his permanent residence, his presence continues to be strongly felt in Shenten Dargye Ling and Menri, just as it continues to be felt by anyone who has ever had the privilege of meeting him.

Tibetans and non-Tibetans alike have turned to Yongdzin Rinpoche over the course of many decades for advice in both scholarly matters and spiritual development, and he has bestowed his help in both of these domains with the same generosity and consummate skill. The chapters in this volume reflect these two different registers of Western engagement with Bon. Some of the contributors to the present volume are professional or freelance scholars; some are Bon practitioners, and still others are both. This is not a conventional Festschrift – an assemblage of academic papers that a professor might be presented with by his or her students and colleagues on retirement – but a far more diverse collection, including academic investigations, personal reflections, expressions of devotion, photographic compositions and translations

Chapter 5

Zab gcod – In Memory of Meme Khemchok Dorje: An Essay in Honour of Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak's 100th "Birthday"

Henk Blezer

What is the mark of a great person? Is this in measure of their outstanding personal qualities, skills, and accomplishments, or rather of the excellent qualities that they inculcate and nurture in others? Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche stands tall on both counts. While I only had the pleasure of meeting Yongdzin Rinpoche twice, in private meetings in 2005, in his Labrang in Triten Norbutse, his influence was felt everywhere in the exile *bon po* community, and throughout my work on Bon. Not much of exile Bon would be standing if it were not for his tireless work, support and wisdom, whether that be lobbying for land,[1] construction work; publishing Tibetan texts; teaching monks, both in *bshad grwa* and *sgrub grwa* settings;[2] mobilising lay people; but also working with academics: bringing out the best in each. Yongdzin Rinpoche, together with the former Abbot of Menri, Trizin Lungtok Tenpai Nyima Rinpoche, Samten Gyaltsen Karmay, in collaboration with the late David Snellgrove, Per

1 Cf. Skorupski 1983, 1; this brief pamphlet also is a good source for the early history of the Menri Bon community.

2 The scriptural and practice "colleges". Bonpos in exile have had to give priority to preserving their scriptural heritage; Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak Rinpoche always strives to create practice opportunities as well (oral, Menri Trizin, 1998).

Fig. 1: Meme Khemchok Dorje at Redna Menling, HP India, Jed Verity 2008

Kvaerne, Yasuhiko Nagano *et al.*, triggered a paradigm shift in Bon Studies. Many of the people contributing to this volume testify to that profound and lasting influence.

In this modest contribution, I should like to honour Yongdzin Rinpoche by remembering, by way of example, one of those many lives that were deeply impacted by his wisdom and support: that of the late Meme Khemchok Dorje (mes mes mkhas mchog rdo rje), a devout lay person from the Dolanji settlement in India. Pushing ninety, he still attended the Triten Norbutse 2020 Fifth International Conference on Bon: true to his name, Khemchok was passionate about Bon Studies (*mkhas mchog* means an eminently learned person or a true scholar). I here make available selected interviews recorded late in 2008, which are part of larger, forthcoming publication on Khemchok Dorje's performance

of *Zab gcod*. I shall present Khemchok Dorje's account of his personal connection to the practice of *Zab gcod* and part of an interview on its performance,[3] all as much as possible in his own voice and words, to the extent that most of the text is a stylistically slightly adjusted 'paraphrase' of his recollections and answers in the 2008 interviews. His practical devotion and scholarly bent stand out very clearly.

Meme Khemchok Dorje

It was fall 2005, Ponlob Trinley Nyima Rinpoche, the head teacher at the scriptural college or "Dialectic School" (Tib. *bshad grwa*) of Menri Monastery, and myself, were reading rather esoteric Great Perfection texts in the Ponlob's private quarters, when Meme Khemchok came barging in. He seemed to be on some urgent business. But not so urgent that his piercing, always sparkling and somewhat restlessly scanning eyes did not notice that we were reading Tibetan Bon texts. Without much ceremony or introduction, he blurted out sternly, in his intractably fast Western Tibetan tongue, and in a register of suspicion: "What are you reading?" The Ponlob answered, only to be questioned again, with more suspicion than before, now almost accusatory in tone: "Are you reading these texts with HIM?" Ponlob: "That is OK, he is a scholar". Turning to me, Khemchok continued with a passionate, veritable sermon: "How long will you keep reading texts, when will you start practising Bon? How long do you think you will live: how much time do you think you still have?" All with serious and concerned mien but entirely in good cheer, nonetheless. There was something engagingly devoted, in a *bon po* way, about his person and demeanour. Sometime later, he approached me with a truly exquisite *gcod* drum (*rnga*), on a business proposal, and later with a *Bar do thos grol* manuscript, which he had heard I was working on at the time.

I had been forewarned, in 1998, by the Menri Abbot, Lungtok Tenpai Nyima Rinpoche.[4] Khemchok was in the habit of sneaking up on unsuspecting monks when they were relaxing, openly questioning their discipline and eager for an opportunity to lecture them on their laxity –or just playing pranks on them:

4 Lung rtogs bsTan pa'i Nyi ma Rin po che (1929–2017), the 33rd Throne-Holder of Menri (Tib. sMan ri Khri 'dzin), the previous Abbot of the Menri Monastery in exile (India), Pel Shenten Menriling (dpal gshen bstan sman ri gling).

kind of a trickster, and always with that lively sparkle in his eyes; yet, dead-serious about matters of dedication to the study of Bon and monastic discipline.

According to the Abbot, he had started out as a Tibetan Nyingmapa (rnying ma pa or Old School) Buddhist, but now had been living in this *bon po* settlement of New Thobgyal, in Dolanji,[5] for quite a long time; in fact, in 1998, when we first met, Khemchok was the "leader" of the settlement. He clearly was well-respected and a man of authority in his community and was also known as an ardent and dedicated practitioner. He passed away in October of 2022, at about 90 years of age.[6]

Khemchok was a naughty boy, the Abbot told me with a chuckle (also 1998), his mother couldn't handle him. They did not live far from where his future teacher, Khyungtrül Rinpoche,[7] was staying in Kinnaur at the time (1941). Khemchok's mother served as Khyungtrül's assistant.[8] At the end of her tether with the boy, she pleaded with Khyungtrül Rinpoche to take the wayward child with him. But the venerable lama, as always on a busy (travel and publishing) schedule had no use for the company of an unruly eight-year-old boy. Some of Khyungtrül Rinpoche's yaks, however, were grazing near Khemchok's house – bound to return to Rinpoche's in the evening, as yaks usually do – and his mother at her wits' end was not prepared to take no for an answer ... So, just as Khyungtrül Rinpoche was about to return home to Western Tibet (i.e., to Gur gyam), she schemed to make Rinpoche an offer that he could not refuse and tied the little boy down on one of Khyungtrül Rinpoche's yaks and spurred on the yak, safely home bound with extra cargo. Khyungtrül Rinpoche was in for a nice surprise that evening. Khemchok thus became a monk at Khyungtrül Rinpoche's Monastery in Gur gyam, in the year 1942, when he was about 9 years old. The Menri Abbot was a great storyteller. I spent many evenings listening to him reminiscing about "old" Tibet, his views

5 See Skorupski (1986).

6 That would be approximately 89 years according to European count, as Tibetans also count the year in the womb. The uncertainty in the dating relates to the fact that Khemchok's exact date of birth is presently not known to me.

7 Khyung sprul Rin po che, aka Ga rgya 'Jigs med Nam mkha'i rDo rje (1897–1955), a famous and influential *bon po* lama, active in western Tibet. See Millard 2009; see also Blezer 2007 and 2009.

8 Millard 2009, 155.

Fig. 2: Meme Khemchok Dorje (left) and Geshe Nyima Woeser Choekhortsang (right, translator) at the porch of Redna Menling Nunnery, enjoying a cup of tea and banter before the interview, Henk Blezer 2008

and insights on Bon: all captivating stories, in assonance with time-honoured Indic storytelling traditions, indeed, "a veritable ocean of stories".[9] Tibetan culture is, paradoxically, known as an oral culture that knows how to write. But Meme Khemchok, for his part, was quite a formidable storyteller himself, indeed as they say, "the story is true because *I* tell it ...":

> ... just before Khyungtrül was about to return to Tibet, he told his mother that he had dreamt that he had seen a lama leaving on a horse, and he went to him to receive a blessing. Whilst doing this his hand got caught in the horse's stirrup, and consequently he was

9 Cf. the *Kathāsaritsāgara*, *Ocean of the Streams of Stories*, probably an eleventh-century compilation by Somadeva.

Fig. 3: Left to right: camera crew Rudi de Bleser and Benno van den Bogaert, and the translator Geshe A Sonam, interviewing a senior nun; Henk Blezer 2008

pulled to the temple of bSod nams 'brug rgyas in the village of Lid. His mother took this as an auspicious sign, and asked Khyungtrül to take her son with him. Thus in 1942 Khemchok became a monk and went to live at Guru Gyam. (Millard 2009, 155; based on a 2010 interview with Khemchok)

Fig. 4: Meme Khemchok Dorje explaining *gcod* Redna Menling, Henk Blezer 2008

Meme Khemchok Dorje's Engagements with *Zab gCod* (transcript[10])

This *Zabchö* (*Zab gcod*) is a teaching of Sangngak Lingpa (gsang sngags gling pa), the great treasure discoverer (*tertön*, *gter ston*), and his wife is Dechen Wangmo (bde chen dbang mo), the great Khandro (mKha 'gro [ma]). This teaching originated with Tsewang Rigzin (tshe dbang rig 'dzin),[11] Tsewang Rigzin himself. He transmitted it as a discovery [*gter ma*], which was revealed

10 Interview with Meme Khemchok on his history and experiences with the practice of *Zab gcod*, 27 October 2008; present were Meme Khemchok, Geshe Nyima Woeser, Rudi de Bleser, Benno van den Bogaert and Henk Blezer. Both the video recordings and an edited transcript of Geshe Nyima Woeser's simultaneous translation are available.

11 An important early *bon po* lineage master and saint in Bon historiography, closely connected to New Bon narratives (see Blezer 2013, 131), partly considered active outside positivist historicity. See Achard (2013 and 2022) for a more elaborate discussion of this figure in relation to New Bon.

by Sangngak Lingpa. And Khyungtrül Rinpoche (khyung sprul rin po che)[12] got this transmission from one of the great tantric practitioners from Domé (mdo smad), Amdo province.[13] I in turn got this teaching, empowerment, and transmission from Khyungtrül Rinpoche. I originally got the *lung* transmission before, but the empowerment and the teaching itself[14] came only a few years before he[15] died.[16] Almost fourteen of his followers got this teaching, in small groups of seven.

Amongst the fourteen, he[17] chose seven followers to receive the innermost and most important *damtsik* (*dam tshig*),[18] the full commitment or vows. He told them not only to get the teachings, but also to do this practice for the rest of their life. But before receiving the teachings, they also needed to do retreat for 100 days. During these 100 days you really need to practise hard and stay away from your usual life. You are not allowed to have contact with other people and for 100 days, each day you have to recite the heart mantra of the teaching 10,000 times and do one *ganapuja* (*tshogs* [offering a 'feast']) and four times *Chö* (*gcod*) itself. You have to do this each day. And in between, during small breaks, you are not allowed to do small pieces of your worldly work, like sewing, painting, writing, whatever, and talking to others, like this ... We really need to do this retreat for 100 days. At that time, you have to follow many observances (rules), such as, physically, you are not allowed to shave your head or beard and everything, and you are not allowed to take a bath, and other things like this. And you have to recite the heart mantra 10,000 times, each day.

12 The above-mentioned teacher of Meme Khemchok.

13 It is clear that Khyung sprul did not get the teaching directly from gSang sngags Gling pa (1864 [1865]–1951?) or bDe chen dBang mo (1868–1927?; known to be a student of Shar rdza bKra shis rGyal mtshan [1859–1933 or 1935]), but from some other famous practitioner from the same mDo smad area in Eastern Tibet where they were active; it is not clear at this point who this great practitioner from Domé is.

14 The reading transmission: *lung dbang khrid*: reading transmission, empowerment and guidance or teaching.

15 I.e., the mentioned Khyungtrül Rinpoche.

16 I.e., a few years before 1955.

17 I.e., Khyungtrül Rinpoche.

18 Practice vows, which commit the adepts to maintain their practice.

After the 100 days are completed, you do a *jinseg* (*sbyin sreg*) or fire offering. After the *jinseg*, you also have to do *dogpa* (*zlog pa*),[19] and then *sungwa* (*srung ba*),[20] and all these things. And having almost finished all the preliminary practices – whatever is mentioned in the text – after that, then we visited Khyungtrül Rinpoche, our teacher. Rinpoche told us: "Now you have to go and travel in *nyensa* (*gnyan sa*), fearful places, and do this practice, and you have to collect some material from these places". Suppose you have to visit 100 different scary places, 100 different mountains and other places like this, there you have to collect 100 different pieces of wood, 100 different stones, types of sand, everything, things like this. Now, we were going to follow this, but in between the Cultural Revolution happened,[21] and we didn't get a chance to continue our practice and to travel in all these fearful places; but actually this ought to be done ... and you have to practise in such places, such as in 100 different cemeteries (etc.), you have to go there and practise at night, and do all these things. You have to go to places that are possessed by some 'landlord' or *zhidak* (*gzhi bdag*),[22] places which are owned by local deities, places where people do not dare to go. So, you have to go there and practise and get something, energy [laughs ...], and get something for everyone, for whoever is suffering there, and you visualise offering [your body etc.].

At the time when the Chinese arrived,[23] in a place called Dongpo Rimar, there was a man called Sonam Wangdü. He helped and was [my] benefactor (*jindak*, *sbyin bdag*). And thanks to this, in a cave called Gyamtsher – it is really remote – I spent almost 3 months, to practise that (*Chö*). Only at that one time after the start of the Cultural Revolution I got a chance to practise *Chö*. After that I had to leave Tibet and came to India.

After leaving Tibet and coming to India, I met my wife. After that I never got any chance to practise and really go on retreat for *Chö*. Just ordinary, whatever

19 Rituals for averting or repelling evil, misfortune or attacks of black magic.

20 Rites of protection.

21 I.e., 1966.

22 Literally the owner or lord of the ground, deity of the locality, often the local protective deity; cf. *genius loci*. Cf. the cognate category of *sa bdag*, owner or lord of the soil; the *sa bdag* are easily offended and often need to be propitiated and appeased before digging or disturbing the soil.

23 That must also have been around 1966.

I do: morning and evening prayers. And thus, for so many years, I didn't do retreats on this. Now, by the blessing of His Holiness Menri Trizin Rinpoche (sman ri khri 'dzin rin po che),[24] now I get a chance to practise all these things again and I can come back to my practice and everything, so I think I really was lucky to be able to come back, so before that [laughs] ...

In 1967, we came through UP (Uttar Pradesh) in a group of 420 people. And we went to the south, to Mundgod. So, I arrived there. In Mundgod, I worked for about 2 or 3 years. There I got some special function to serve the community. Later, I got a message from Peltsül (dPal ldan Tshul khrims, 1904–1972),[25] asking me to come here [Menri]. When I came here, Peltsül had already written his Tenjung (*bsTan 'byung*),[26] very much in *khyuyik*-type,[27] small letters, in *khyug*, *khyug yig* notes, so many small, small notes. So, Peltsül is my own teacher, so he let me copy all these things. And, for one week, I stayed in Tsering Wangyal's house to copy all these things.[28]

After that I met Yongdzin Sangye Tenzin[29] and Lopön Tenzin Namdak, [30] and they really liked me. And Yongdzin Sangye Tenzin called me: and he had brought the *Tawa Thogbeb* text[31] from Dolpo. Some pages were missing, half

24 Recently, the Menri Abbot asked Khemchok to teach the nuns of Redna Menling; in fact, particularly teaching them *gcod*, as for instance the *mKha' 'gro rgyas rgyangs*, explained by him later on. After Khemchok's performance of *Zab gcod*, two of his students also gave a brief performance.

25 Another student of Khyung sprul Rinpoche and a famous *bon po* historian and the biographer of his teacher.

26 Reception history of the Bon teachings.

27 *Khyug yig*: a 'fast', cursive writing style.

28 Tsering Wangyal's house, where he copied "all these things" is near the nunnery.

29 Yongs 'dzin Sangs rgyas bsTan 'dzin (1912–1978) was the first head teacher or *slob dpon* of Menri Monastery in exile (India); earlier he also acted as *slob dpon* in the original Menri Monastery in Tibet (*yongs 'dzin* is an honorary title often conferred after retirement). See, e.g., https://treasuryoflives.org/biographies/view/Sanggye-Tenzin/P9302, by Jean-Luc Achard, also for references, and see also Achard (2022, 13). His dates are sometimes given as 1917–1977 and the age as 67, but that does not seem to add up; he died at age 66, on April 28th, 1978, in Menri in exile (India).

30 Slob dpon bsTan 'dzin rNam dag (b. 1926), the second head teacher and the centennial celebrated in this volume, who retired a long time ago and since then has been addressed as *yongs 'dzin*, and (now also) former Abbot of Triten Norbutse, Nepal, which he founded in 1987, after retiring as *slob dpon* from Menri Monastery; for more data on his life and times, see the contributions elsewhere in this volume).

31 I.e., the *lTa ba thog 'beb*, a dzokchen (*rdzogs chen*) text.

missing, and he called me to see him and he told me that he will instruct me how to write everything. And then I copied the complete *Tawa Thogbeb*.

After that Yongdzin Rinpoche[32] called me and said: "You are very helpful here". At that time the texts were very rare. Some texts were from Dolpo, where there is a very different way of writing, and some are written very small and with many abbreviations. They let me copy all these things. And from then on, I stayed in one place for 16 years and copied almost 46 *pecha* (*dpe cha*),[33] *poti*: books, by hand. Now all the owners[34] are different: Tsering Wangyal, Pasang Lachung(?),[35] Tashi Dorje ..., they have different benefactors[36] of Yongdzin Rinpoche's [publishing project]; altogether 46 books. And thus they published all these works. Yongdzin Rinpoche was also publishing all the dialectic texts (*yikcha*, *yig cha*) for the Dialectic School. And I again had to copy and write all these books and also even some small texts for Rinpoche, and even some personal daily prayers (*khadön*, *kha 'don*) I had to copy.

I am actually from a southern settlement.[37] So, while I was working here with Yongdzin Rinpoche, he said: "And so now you will stay here, and I will give you my sister's house". So, the house I got here belongs to Yongdzin Rinpoche's sister. So, from then on, I had to stay far away from my wife and daughter. She is still alive, 82 years old; she is living in the south. I left for all this work, and lived here, and we came to live far apart. But my son is here, he is working in Dharamsala, on medical things.

After staying and settling here, after that, following Yongdzin Rinpoche's wish, I stayed for three years as a settlement officer. After that again, the settlement voted for me, for another three years as a settlement officer. And finally, serving like this: lastly, I came here, working at the nunnery, teaching. Now, I am satisfied about my life. I have reached the age of 76, and now my deepest wish is fulfilled through Rinpoche's grace: practising, teaching and everything.

32 I.e., the earlier Sangye Tenzin.

33 There seems to be some confusion about the number, 46 or 64.

34 I.e., publishers.

35 Not clearly audible.

36 I.e., sponsors.

37 I.e., Mundgod.

Passing on Knowledge to Others and *gCod* Dance (Transcript)

[Two students of Meme Khemchok perform *tsoklu* (*tshogs glu*): young nuns chanting (*tshogs glu*), relevant excerpt from an interview, later that year][38]
Benno van den Bogaert: *Is this done before, during or after?*

This ritual is not done during *Chö* performance, but during the hundred days of retreat. Every day, they offer *tsok* (*tshogs*). After offering *tsok* to the deities and everything, when they offer to the Lamas; then they use this chanting.

Why do you teach Chö *to the nuns and not in the monastery?*

[NB. monks do in fact study *Chö. But the point of the question was: why do nuns practice it more often?*]

In the past, in Tibet, nuns didn't debate, study, and graduate as Geshes. Nuns mostly do retreats, and they do *Chö* practice; they did different practices; and it goes higher and higher. So, this is how the tradition came down and this is how the nuns here also got their *Chö* teaching.

Chö comes from the root of dakinis. Those nuns are like dakinis; therefore, they hold more seeds for this practice. That is why nuns practice more *Chö* and the like. In Buddhism that is the same.

Is there anybody who is following this practice (Zabchö)*?*

Maybe in Tibet, in Khams or Gurgyam there will be some monks or someone who is practising, but not here, no. At the time they came into exile, there were several people who were practising *Chö* and who were very smart and experienced in that.

38 Interview with Meme Khemchok on the practice of *Zab gcod*, 1 November 2008; present were Meme Khemchok, Geshe A Sonam, Rudi de Bleser, Benno van den Bogaert and Henk Blezer. Both the audio recording and an edited transcript of Geshe A Sonam's simultaneous translation are available for reference. I again kept the first-person account and as much as possible the voice and couleur locale of the second translator, also a learned Menri monk. The voluminous texts and Khemchok's detailed explanation of *Zab gcod* will be discussed in said later publication. Another (2005) interview on Khyung sprul Rin po che, Gur gyam, and mKhar gdong ri, also still awaits publication.

Fig. 5: and Fig. 6: Two Redna Menling nuns – a little bit shy at the beginning – chanting *Tshogs glu* in close harmony, under their teacher Khemchok Dorje's watchful eye (video stills 2008)

Fig. 7: Young nun studying in the courtyard of Redna Menling, Henk Blezer 2008

What about Chö *dance* (chöcham, gcod 'cham)*?*

There is something called *Chö* dance. Why do they do this *Chö* dance?

When someone dies, we take the corpse to the birds' place for sky burial.

Then they chop the body down and if the vulture can't come, then they do a dance to imitate the vultures: then the vultures come. Some practitioners imitate the vultures to lure them. I saw this but he never did it myself. We look for the right place to put the corpse: it should be a wide place, not too narrow. On the stomach they cut a cross. And then the vultures come. Sometimes the vultures don't come; then someone makes tea and they wait ... Then they do *Chö* again and invite the vultures.] They bring the corpse to the birds, chop the body and bring it to them. There is a mantra that is recited also. Some [*gcod* practitioners] already started beating the drums when taking the corpse from the house and invite the birds into a particular place, and they do *Chö* and all those things. But only some do it like that; it doesn't look like everyone does it that way.

A Few Parting Words

Whether the Abbot's story is historical or embellished or whether Khemchok's story of his special, auspicious dream is, it doesn't really matter: his life, presence and person cannot fail to impress; perhaps even more so because his is one of those extraordinarily ordinary Tibetan lives.

He left the safety and comfort of his mother's house at a young age, perhaps involuntarily, and engaged in an arduous religious life as a monk in Gur Gyam, one of the most inhospitable areas of Western Tibet (at least notorious since the ancient song attributed to the disenchanted, romantically neglected Queen Sad mar kar).[39] Losing his home in Tibet to the Cultural Revolution, dreams shattered, practice disrupted, and exiled to one of the (then) poorer settlements in India; from a monk's to a married life; then separated from his wife ... When I last spoke to him in 2008, I saw an old man struggling up the hill, but also a man at peace with his life, (grate)fully immersed again in the practice that has been at the centre of his whole life, as a monk and *bon po* practitioner.

Khemchok was 76 years old at the time of the recording and walked with a cane, bent over in an angle of ninety degrees from the hip, struggling to mount the "high seat". Then this fragile, old man chanted *Zab gcod:* a confident, strong and melodious voice: a vibrant, forceful outburst of energy, pregnant with feeling and devotion, that virtually pressed us, the audience, against the wall. One can only surmise the dark hues of pain and suffering of shattered dreams of a lost Tibet and guess how much hope and fear resonated in the eerie colourings of these haunting *gCod* melodies. Fears confronted on a daily basis, until the one who fears is no more: not problems to avoid but opportunities to face. The *as if* quality of ritual performance, as play,[40] generates and dissolves identity in confrontation with fear. Meme Khemchok Dorje is no more: may he be at peace and this unique and powerful tradition of *Zab gcod* continue to flourish, for as long as Tibetan *bon po* and other people suffer, and have the courage and soul to confront their fears and teach others.

Fig. 8: Meme Khemchok Dorje at Redna Menling, pictures are of the late Menri Abbot (video still 2008)

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There is a brief interview by Fred Gales and Marlous Lazal with the author for the BOS (Buddhist Broadcast) Radio 5, *De Middenweg*, Sunday 13-6-2010, 22:30–23:00h (file went offline soon after demise of the BOS): *Zab gcod* by Meme Khemchok Dorje (and the *mKha' 'gro'i gad rgyang [gcod]* by the nuns of Redna Menling).