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RELATING TO TIBET: NARRATIVES OF ORIGIN & MIGRATION AMONG HIGHLANDERS OF THE FAR EASTERN HIMALAYA

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Introduction

This paper presents the beginnings of an ethnographically¹ based analysis of relations between various highland societies of the far eastern Himalaya and their Tibetan-speaking neighbours on the high plateau. Uniquely, the research considers the perspective of the former group. Due to restrictions of access, there have been few possibilities to undertake research directly among Himalayan highland populations² living immediately south of Tibet in the present-day Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh. Consequently, reliable scholarship on many of the region's inhabitants is poorly developed or non-

¹ Data was gathered over 14 months spent living in Mra settlements in Limeking Circle (Upper Subansiri District, Arunachal Pradesh) between 2004 and 2007. Since 2006, the project "Between Tibetanization and Tribalization: Towards a New Anthropology of Tibeto-Burman Speaking Highlanders in Arunachal Pradesh" has been funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, Bonn. I am grateful to Stuart Blackburn for his useful comments on a draft of this paper.

² In addition to the Mra discussed herein, other populations living immediately along the Tibetan border in the wider region include (from west to east), upland Bangru/Bengru groups (including some Puroik or Sulung), Bai, Na, Bokar, Bori, Tangam and Idu. Small populations of each group also live north of the McMahon Line under Chinese administration, where they are collectively classified as the Luoba (or Lhoba) nationality (*minzu*). Note that in official documents written in Tibetan, the Chinese state has substituted the long-standing classical Tibetan spelling Klo pa or 'barbarian' with the innocuous Lho pa, meaning 'southerner'.

existent. One perspective which we have had available for these societies is that of the Tibetans, who have long referred to their southern neighbours in this region using a strong discourse of cultural superiority. Accordingly, they have labelled these peoples 'barbarians' using the generic and highly pejorative ethnonym K_{lo} pa (and its descriptive variants Dkar klo, K_{lo} kha bkra, etc.). Hence, Tibetan accounts describe them as living 'beyond the pale' (*mtha'* 'khob) and thus requiring 'suppression' (*non pa*) and 'civilizing' (*'dul ba*). Tibetan textual sources which mention the K_{lo} pa in this region go back many centuries, however for the most part they present prejudiced clichés and beyond this offer very little in the way of usable information.³ This one-sided Tibetan view of such highland societies masks a great deal of historical and social complexity which exists throughout the far eastern Himalaya. With new research possibilities, we can now begin to systematically consider the perspectives of some far eastern Himalayan highlanders, and even look back at Tibet by way of them. Considering the centuries of consistently negative Tibetan representations and treatment of such peoples, it is perhaps slightly surprising to find strong feelings of relatedness towards Tibet and Tibetans among these societies south of the high plateau. This paper explains possible reasons for these ideas, especially as they are expressed in oral stories and chants.

Herein I will briefly discuss the Mra, a small (popn. ca. 350) exogamous community living in deep, jungle covered gorges along the upper course of the

³ For example, see the 16th century history by the 2nd Dpa' bo, Gtsug lag 'phreng ba (1989: II, 1047), for a reference to the 3rd Zhwa dmar pa, Chos dpal ye shes (1406–1452), having to intervene in conflicts between Kong po Tibetans and K_{lo} pa groups to the south in 1434. The late 16th– or early 17th century hagiography of Thang stong rgyal po (b.1361) by Lo chen 'Gyur med bde chen (1982: 136, 138, 142–148, 150–152) has accounts of K_{lo} pa groups adjacent to Tsari (Rtsa ri) district in what must have been the early decades of the 15th century.

Subansiri River (See Fig.1), immediately adjacent to the de facto Indo-Tibetan border (McMahon Line) in Arunachal Pradesh.

The Mra, who live mainly as swidden cultivators and hunters, first drew my attention because of a unique political and ritual relationship they once maintained with the Lhasa-based Ganden Phodrang state in Central Tibet. As I have documented elsewhere using Tibetan sources, the Mra negotiated payments of tribute every 12 years from the Ganden Phodrang in return for allowing safe passage of pilgrims across their lands to the south of the famous Tibetan holy mountain of Tsari, Dakpa Shelri (5735m). They also received certain annual taxes from Tibetan border villages at Tsari.⁴ Thus, the Mra appear historically unique in the far eastern Himalaya highlands, since other populations living immediately south of the Tibetan border paid taxes of one form or another northwards to the Tibetans. The Mra are also of interest due to their former role as key middlemen in the southward flow of Tibetan trade goods into the Subansiri Valley system. All such relations with Tibet came to an abrupt halt nearly half a century ago, when modern nation-states forcefully inserted themselves into the Mra's small, remote but therefore politically autonomous corner of the Himalaya. Colonization⁵ of Mra territory by the Indian state in 1956 was followed in 1959 by full-scale Chinese occupation of adjacent Tibetan areas, and an ensuing southward flow of neighbouring Tibetans into the upper Subansiri region as refugees. The Sino-Indian border war of 1962, and the resulting militarization along the contested McMahon Line, have cut all Mra contacts with Tibet up until today.

⁴ Huber 1997, 1999. Being dependent upon Tibetan sources in my earlier research, I was unable to identify Mra and neighbouring groups using local autonyms. Mra have been described by the Tibetans variously as Mérongwa (Smad rong ba), Tinglo (Gting klo) or Migyitün Lopa (Mi khyim bdun klo pa).

⁵ I do not hesitate to identify the modern Indian state as 'colonial' herein. This best describes both historical facts on the ground and the attitude towards the state of the Mra and their neighbours who were incorporated into India.

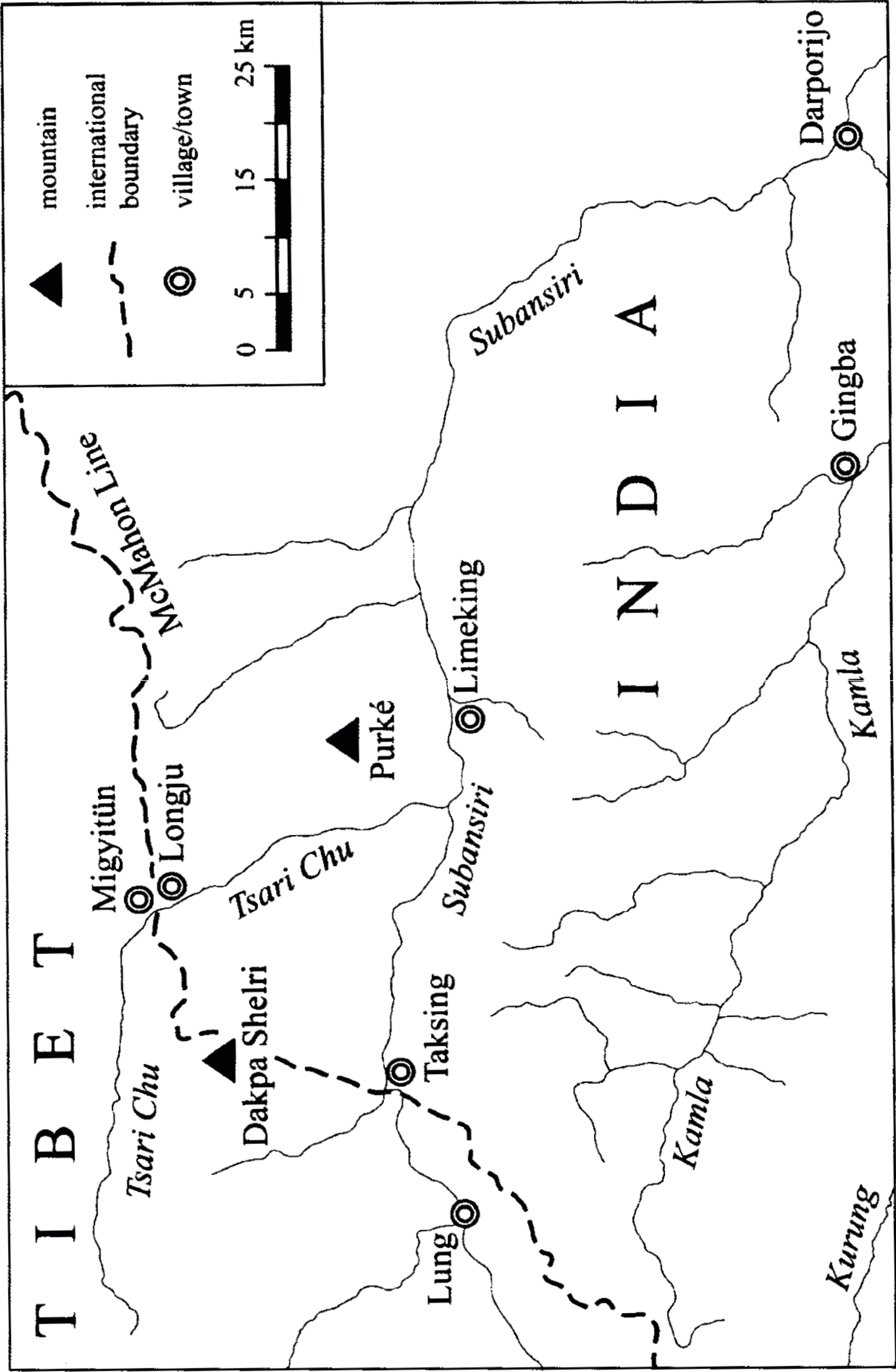


Fig. 1: Map of Upper Subansiri region (scale approximate)

During the past 50 years, Mra settlements have become gradually integrated into the Indian state, albeit as a rather under-developed periphery. This process has set in motion many complex changes, the most profound of which has been the realignment of Mra relations away from Tibet and towards the Indian state and other nearby highland societies in Arunachal Pradesh. One of my research interests concerns the impact that this shift in orientation has had upon Mra self-identity and their notions of ethnic relatedness.⁶

One compelling question about Mra self-identity concerns their purported 'ethnic' connections with Tibet. Seen from the viewpoint of ethnography—that is, language,⁷ subsistence systems, material culture, kinship and social organisation, ritual and cosmology, and so on—the Mra share no significant affiliations with the 'Tibetan' peoples immediately to their north. Nevertheless, they constantly stress both their origins as being in Tibet and their relatedness with the Tibetans. The Mra and all their immediate tribal neighbours have no written languages. Apart from mere attempts to record their name, no ethnographic record of the Mra appears in the writings of outside observers prior to 1956, and any later material is extremely scanty. Thus, almost all available sources which represent the Mra's own views about their origins, migration and sense of ethnic relatedness are found in different forms of oral narrative, namely chants, spoken stories, and genealogical enumerations. I will present and analyze examples of these below, and I will argue that the claims they contain are best understood as identity constructions which make sense in the context of contemporary social conditions and recent history.

⁶ Ethnic relatedness was instrumentalized in the region initially by the Chinese and Indian states during the 1950s. Both states directed propaganda towards local populations during their contest for control of the McMahon Line; see examples in Bhargava (1964: 60), Krishnatry (1997: 22) and Sailo (1957: 2, 29).

⁷ Among the central Tibeto-Burman languages, spoken Mra is one of the northernmost forms of the recently-described Western Tani (Sun 1993) or Adi-Mising-Nishi (Bradley 2002: 92) group. Like many of its eastern Himalayan cognates, it has no written form.

Recorded oral narratives which purport to represent the past, and which are usually referred to as oral history, have fairly often been used in research on Tibet but seldom critically discussed. Scholars of Tibet have expressed two different perspectives about such oral materials. One viewpoint considers whether or not oral history can provide valid historical ‘facts’, and on this basis either accepts (usually with qualifications) or rejects it. The other view focuses instead upon the social and cultural meanings oral history might have in terms of identity, memory, and so forth, within local communities.⁸ My own interpretation is aligned with this latter perspective, and in any case, our attempts to try and recover how things ‘really were’ in the Mra past can never overcome the mid-20th century historical horizon offered by available written and photographic sources. My own position is highly divergent from that of scholars in India and China who have written recently about the highlanders of Arunachal Pradesh. Generally, they consider oral history to be unproblematic,⁹ and often take it literally as evidence of ancient southwards migrations of local populations down from the Tibetan plateau and into the hill tracts of the eastern Himalayas.¹⁰

Identities of the Mra and their Others

One important dimension of social change throughout the eastern Himalaya has been the modern Indian state’s project—inherited from their British colonial predecessors—to ‘tribalize’ local populations. This has tended to produced

⁸ For examples of the former position, see Schuh (1994: 11, 40–41) and Goldstein (1989: xxi–xxiii), and for the latter, see McGranahan (2001: 64–66) and Schwieger (2002).

⁹ For examples, see the essays in the “Historiography” section in Dutta (1997: 1–37).

¹⁰ For example, Nyori (1993: chapter 2), and especially Riddi (2006: 14) on the Tagins. Blackburn (2003/2004), who has reviewed the literature and hypotheses on origins and migrations of Arunachal Pradesh peoples, notes a dominant trend which claims the Tibetan plateau as an ancient homeland.

multiple layers of local identity. It is partly against this background that some of the material presented below is best understood. Already by the late 1950s, the Indian state classified the Mra as members of the larger Tagin tribe, which was then considered to be the dominant tribe in the administrative district of Upper Subansiri.¹¹ The name Tagin is little more than a convenient fiction of modern Indian colonialism, with no evidence that it was used in the past as any kind of collective identity in the district. While such 'tribes' were first designated by the state due to its interests in administration and control, they soon gained a social life as imagined communities. To greater or lesser degrees, local peoples themselves identify with and promote such tribal identities for strategic reasons when dealing with the state and with other neighbouring 'tribal' groups.¹² More recently, tribal names and definitions have become reified in Arunachal Pradesh once again in new ways due to the introduction of the party-based Indian electoral system.

The Mra recognize their official tribal ethnonym of Tagin as a recent, externally applied label. They also use it strategically, or purely for

¹¹ Political Officer B.C. Bhuyan first officially applied the name Tagin in 1951; Riddi (2006: 9). Despite strong socio-cultural and linguistic continuities between Subansiri populations and their regional neighbours, as well as significant local variety, Indian anthropologists have simply reified the administrative label Tagin. They consistently identify Tagins as "an entirely separate group" (Bhikshu Kondinya 1979), as "a major tribe" (Das 1995) who are "unique" (Sakar 1999), with a distinct "Tagin language" (Das Gupta 1983) and annual festival (Pandey 1981: 67–72). Tagin is currently listed as a Scheduled Tribe by the Government of India; Ministry of Tribal Affairs (2005: 99).

¹² By-passing anthropological debates, the terms 'tribe' and 'tribal' now serve as important regional identity markers which people use with a certain degree of pride in the far eastern Himalaya. All indigenous residents of Arunachal Pradesh have consciously adopted the English label 'tribal' to distinguish themselves from other citizens of India who hail from outside the region—principally those speaking Indo-Aryan languages.

convenience, when dealing with members of other officially designated tribes outside of their region or with government officials and visiting Indian military personnel. Their autonym Mra (sometimes written Mara) is recognized by outsiders as being just one of many 'clan' names within the larger Tagin tribe. In spite—and perhaps because—of this ongoing 'tribalisation', Mra themselves maintain a very strong sense of their independent origins, descent, and identity, all of which for them points towards Tibet. Mra primarily use individual clan autonyms to talk of neighbouring populations with whom they have direct contact and intermarry. An exception to this is that all clans downstream of the Menyi Siko tributary along the Subansiri Valley are collectively called Mayou, a name which carries very strong pejorative overtones. Mra employ other officially accepted and commonly used tribal ethno- and autonyms, such as Nyishi, Adi or Apatani, to describe more distant populations beyond the district headquarters at Darporijo. Above this level of identification, there are some common collective terms referring to larger 'outsider' groups. Non-Chinese peoples of the Tibetan plateau are all known as Nyimak, which is somewhat equivalent to our generic Western expression 'Tibetan'. Plains people or outsiders from south of the Himalayan tribal hills are collectively known as Nyipak, being roughly understood as 'the Indians'. Today, both terms—and their cognates in other local dialects throughout the region—generally mean 'non-tribal foreigners' from the northern and southern geopolitical spheres of recent historical significance. Additionally, one often hears Mra use the borrowed Tibetan name Kungten (Gung bran, lit. 'Communist') to speak of the Chinese in Tibet, and Gyagar (Rgya gar) to refer to Indians. Both terms were probably learned only during the late 1950s and early 1960s, especially when Tibetan refugees from neighbouring border areas temporarily resided in Mra settlements for several years after 1959.

Dangde Chants

In Mra culture, past persons and events are invoked in certain types of chants, spoken narratives and genealogical enumerations, the use of which is context

bound and the content of which can overlap across these genres. One type of chant which can invoke origins and descent is locally classified as *dangde*. The free translation given below is of a *dangde* concerning Mra origins (transcribed in Appendix A). It was chanted by a 65 year old man who has *nyijik* status. The *nyijik* are men who conduct divination and minor rituals on behalf of others, who assist the *nyibu* ('shamanic priests'), act as negotiators in disputes and are regarded as somewhat superior repositories of local knowledge. I elicited and recorded¹³ it one day during a casual conversation while socializing and drinking together with this informant, when I asked whether the Mra had any 'songs'. I resorted to the Hindi word *gana* since the Mra have no words for 'song' (nor any concept of or vocabulary for 'music', and no known musical instruments). My Mra assistant amplified my question with the term *binang*, which is a generic word referring to 'chants' commonly used only during rituals, and usually addressing spirits or narrating the steps of a ritual. After an accumulated period of a year spent living with the Mra, I had only encountered *binang* ritual chants, and had never heard of *dangde* despite ongoing inquiries about types of oral expression. When the *dangde* began, my male assistant, who is in his 20s, became excited and said he only vaguely recalled hearing such chants as a very young child. Older women in the vicinity gave smiling nods of approval, their eyes tinged with hints of nostalgic recollection. Such chants have gradually fallen out of use since Indian colonization in the 1950s, and today they are only known by older men, and mainly those who have *nyijik* status.

¹³ Recorded at Limeking, 29.01.2007, and transcribed (see Appendix A) and translated by myself and Tapi Mra, with the aid of a commentary by the chanter and another senior *nyijik*. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first attempt at writing oral Mra. While Tapi and I jointly conceived the orthography, we are acutely aware of its phonological inadequacy, which we hope to rectify in future publications; see, for example, Bradley (2005).

Dangde are also chanted on subjects such as hunting, the natural environment and trading expeditions to Tibet. Those I recorded were typically 5–10 minutes long and mainly had the character of a type of short, explanatory story, often related via metaphoric and poetic language (*beri*). For example, the *dangde* I recorded on Mra trade with the Tibetans uses the vocabulary of marriage exchange and weddings to represent trade transactions and goods (which is of interest because the Tibetans have long maintained a complete marriage bar towards the Mra). The *beri* language used in *dangde* is obviously partly unintelligible to most Mra speakers, especially younger people. The example presented below concerning Mra origins was one that I specifically requested on this theme, and which the informant chanted without hesitation. When another elderly *nyijik* overheard us discussing the interpretation of this *dangde* a few days later, and heard it played on my digital recorder, he immediately recognized it and began to chant along and correct or embellish minor points, which indicated that this was a shared narrative which had previously circulated, and was not just pure improvisation for my present benefit.

Translation

Today, this day,
[I will relate what happened in the land of] Ancestor Kojum.¹⁴
In the ancient time of origins,

¹⁴ The male Atu Kojum is often mentioned as the ‘Tibetan ancestor’ of the Mra and their immediate neighbours (esp. Na and Nyilo). Kojum’s descendents appear to constitute a separate group akin to the ‘Tani peoples’, but one descended from the female Nyido (‘rain’ or ‘sky’) rather than from the male trickster-ancestor Abo Tani. The neighbouring Nyilo report that the first man, Abo Tani, married a woman from Tibet named Kojung Mapung, whose son Nyiko had a son Kojum who is the ancestor of both the Tsari Sarma Tibetans and the Nyilo. The Nyilo also call themselves Kojum Abu, ‘[descendents of] Father Kojum’.

When the first union took place,
Elder sister Panee
And elder brother Pabu
Were conceived.
In ancient times, they fell down
From the sky,
And arrived on the high plateau.
They tried to settle down there.¹⁵
Elder sister Panee and elder brother Pabu,
Planted radishes and mustard.
They built a house.
They built a fine house.
It was our first building.
On the high plateau,
Elder brother Pabu and elder sister Panee,
Built their house.
By evening it was finished, but the next morning it fell down
again.
They planted our radishes and mustard.
By evening they had been planted, but next morning they were
wilted and dry.
Then, younger sister Manee and younger brother Mabu
Built a house in the land of Ancestor Kojum.
By evening it was finished, and next morning they inspected it.
Their house was fine and well built.
It was decorated with chains of gold and silver.¹⁶

¹⁵ Paired (implicitly incestuous) siblings as primary human ancestors is a common theme in origin narratives in the far eastern Himalaya (Elwin 1958: 97-8), and in east Nepal; see Gaenzle 2000: 275, who understands the motif symbolically as “endogamy par excellence” (note that the Mra are completely exogamous).

Younger sister Manee and younger brother Mabu,
 Planted onions, chillies,
 Radishes and mustard.
 These all grew well and abundantly.
 But, younger sister and younger brother
 Began to weep and embrace elder sister and elder brother, who
 told them:
 “We, elder sister Panee and elder brother Pabu, are inherently
 unable to live on the high plateau.
 We, elder sister Panee and elder brother Pabu,
 Will build our house in the lowlands, in a foreign place.”
 Then they built a house of wood and grass [in the lowlands].
 Their house was fine and well built.
 Therefore, Elder sister Panee and elder brother Pabu
 And younger sister Manee and younger brother Mabu,
 Went their separate ways.
 Elder sister Panee and elder brother Pabu went down to the
 lowlands.
 In between them both,
 We, the Mra, [now] live at the Purké Mountain.¹⁷
 Descended from Nyido,¹⁸ Doking, Kingra and Mra,

¹⁶ Short lengths of fine (5mm) metal chain (a cheap factory product, silver in colour) called *gayi* or *patcho* began entering the Mra area during the early 20th century via barter trade from Tibet, and was used as ornamentation on clothing.

¹⁷ Purké is a snow-covered 4700m peak immediately north of Mra settlements. Its name is invoked during rituals and it is the most culturally significant landscape feature for Mra after the Subansiri River.

¹⁸ Nyido (or Nido), ‘sky’ or ‘rain’, the daughter of mother sun goddess Donyi, is the most commonly cited ultimate progenitor of the Mra, Na, Nyilo, Bai and some northern Bengru groups. Descent from the sky is a more widespread origin notion among

Up in the sky, and from Panee and Manee,
 We were all born of the same origins.
 We, both Kingra and Mra,
 Up in the land of Ancestor Kojum,
 Fell down upon the back of a horse.
 However, we the Mra of Purké Mountain,
 We landed on a stone instead.
 The Tibetans landed on the back of that horse.
 We [Mra] were inherently unable to do that.
 This is an ancient story,
 Is it not?

Discussion of the *Dangde*

One interesting feature of this origins *dangde* is that it combines two related narrative elements about human origins which normally occur completely separately. Both concern sibling pairs. In fact, pairs or sets of siblings, who often compete or fight and separate, is a very common motif in origin and foundation narratives among many Tibeto-Burman speakers of the Tibetan plateau and its Himalayan periphery, including the local populations in northern-central Arunachal Pradesh.¹⁹ The first element concerns the sister-

highlanders of western Arunachal Pradesh. Atsuko Ibata's Aka informants believe they descended from Nyido or the 'sky' (pers. comm. Feb. 2007; see also Kennedy 1914). Puroik (Sulung) believe that they are descendents of divine beings in heaven whom the god of rain (Kamug) ordered down to earth; Deuri 1982: 47.

¹⁹ For example: Levine (1988: 30) for west Nepal; Allen (1980: 3) and Gaenzle (2000: 270–77) for east Nepal; Wellens (2006: 130) for southwest Yunnan; Rinzin Thargyal (2007: 35) for Kham; Jacobs (1990: 58, 66) for the Naga Hills. For groups just east of the Mra, see Elwin (1958: 99–100, 206) and Kumar (1979: 14) on the Bori, Kumar (1979: 8–9) on the Pailibo, Dhasmana (1979: 20–21) on the Ramo, and my field notes (2002) on the Bokar.

brother pairs Panee/Pabu (elder) and Manee/Mabu (younger) who are mentioned initially, and whose names have only ever appeared in genealogical lists enumerating the very first ancestors. The *dangde* provides a complete narrative about them. What the genealogies (see Appendix B, i.) and their commentaries make clearer is that Panee/Pabu and Manee/Mabu are the ancestors of the other 'foreign peoples' who live either to the north on the Tibetan plateau—those known as Nyimak—or to the south of the hills—those known as Nyipak—in relation to the Mra world space.²⁰ It is only through their cousins, Kingra and Migra/Mra (the two forms are fully interchangeable), that common descent from Nyido with the Tibetans is claimed.

The second element concerns a pair of brothers, Kingra and Migra/Mra, who are only briefly mentioned toward the end of the *dangde* as ancestors. In other narratives to be presented in the following section, we always get a complete (albeit brief) story about how these brothers actively compete and then separate due to jealousy or conflict. Mra is invariably cast as the unsuccessful one, and he goes down into the gorge and jungle country of the Subansiri River while his successful brother Kingra remains up on the high and dry Tibetan plateau. The motif concerning Kingra and Mra falling down upon the back of the horse and stone respectively, which is only briefly mentioned towards the end of this *dangde*, is in fact common to all narratives about Mra origins (see below). Importantly, the site where this supposedly occurred is physically set right on the old border between Tibetans and Mra, near a place which both populations call Longju.²¹ This is actually a Tibetan place name,

²⁰ The roughly east-west axis along the Himalaya is thought of by Mra as a zone of 'other tribals like us', and thus not inherently 'foreign'. The linguistic parallel here is that there are distinctive terms for 'north' and 'south', while east and west are often simply referred to as *donyi* to mean 'sunrise' and 'sunset'.

²¹ As far as we know, the five house settlement of Longju was only occupied in about 1942 by Puri clan migrants who fled up the Tsari Chu to escape famine and epidemic disease in the Naba district; Sailo (1957, part 2: 34). The Longju population were

Lung mjug, meaning 'lower end of the valley', and it describes the last area before the relatively flat Tsari Chu river valley below Migyitün begins to fall steeply away into forested gorge country. It thus marks a point of transition between two different ecological zones to which the Tibetans and the Mra are respectively adapted.

The same narrative of the brothers and the horse also exists among Tibetans living north of the Mra, who also recognize its geographical setting between the two populations at Longju. It is perhaps significant that origins via descent from the sky is an ancient and widely spread narrative motif among Tibetans and Mongols. Moreover, the horse, which appears as a motif in most Mra origin accounts, is a very common Tibetan domestic animal but is completely absent from the rugged, jungle covered far eastern Himalayan highlands and even from the Tibetan border villages with which Mra had contact, and thus an animal foreign to Mra experience.²² Such narrative borrowings from Tibet are not unique in this region. The Ramo, a neighbouring population immediately to the east, also have an origin narrative based on a migrating sibling pair named Pane and Mane, and it is completely mixed with purely Tibetan motifs and names which we know came from their immediate north.²³

barely influenced by Tibetan culture; Sailo (1957, part 1: 84-84). After 1959, they became refugees in Ging village (Chakma 1961: 8), and some of their descendents live in Orak today. Longju is notorious in modern Sino-Indian history as one of the initial flash points of the border dispute which triggered the 1962 war along the McMahon Line.

²² The Mra word for 'horse', *sekyi* (cf. Na = *seki*, Bokar = *shaki*), is a very close cognate of other names for large wild—as opposed to domestic—animals, and is not related to Tibetan words for horse.

²³ Dhasmana (1979: 21) reports "two brothers" with personal names "Ame Pane" and "Birne Mane", residing in Tibet at Same Segong (Tibetan = Tsari Tsagong). The unsuccessful one migrates south across the Himalaya where his two younger sons choose the place of settlement with arrow shots. The arrow shot motif is common in central Tibetan "foundation" narratives (e.g. Karmay 1998: 200-201, Carbezón 1997:

Spoken Prose Narratives

The Mra also use spoken prose narratives to discuss origins. These all involve the story presented above about competing siblings who are presented as the ancestors of the Tibetans and the Mra respectively. This story, in its variations (I have 10 oral variations so far), is fairly widely known among the Mra, and also by some of their immediate ‘tribal’ neighbours and the Tibetans just to the north. The story of the brothers Kingra and Migra/Mra was first recorded in 1956 (Variation 3 below), but beyond that we have no prior record of it. I have already indicted above the presence of what I consider borrowed (or perhaps shared) Tibetan motifs and names in this story. Here I will present four different variations (1–4) of the story collected over the past 50 years, plus two closely related variations (5–6) from neighbouring groups, together with details about the narrators and the context of each telling.

Variation 1. Elicited during an interview (22.3.2004) with the headman of Limeking Village (ca. 60 yrs), who is a son of the last pre-colonial Mra ‘big man’, Chebé Mra. One of this informant’s aunts (his father’s brother’s wife) narrated Variation 3 below in 1956. His own narration here immediately preceded his extensive enumeration of the entire Mra clan genealogy, with its five branches through 15 generations:

17, Vitali 1990: 89), and is one associated with Tsari Tsagong in Tibetan texts since the 16th century; Huber (1999: 63, 71). Dhasmana has misunderstood this narrative because standard female kinship terms have been confused with male personal names: in all northernmost Central dialects (Na, Mra, Bokar, Bori, etc.) ‘Ame Pane’ would mean ‘elder sister Pane’ and ‘Birne Mane’ would mean ‘younger sister Mane’, as they do in the Mra narratives.

The Mra originally descended from the Sky (Nyido) who is also the Rain Mother. She coupled with Abo Tani,²⁴ and then the two brothers, Migra—who we call Mra—and Kingra, came down from the sky above. This happened in the Longju area, where a horse first fell down from the sky. Then Mra fell down from the sky, intending to land on the back of that horse. But he missed. Later, his brother Kingra fell down from the sky and landed sitting right upon the horse. The two brothers started living together and cultivating land. When they had gathered in the crops they stored their harvests separately. Mra's yield was not as successful as Kingra's. After the harvest was stored, Kingra discovered that some of his portion was missing. The brothers began to quarrel about this. Kingra blamed Mra for the theft. After this dispute, Kingra went up to Tibet and Mra moved down the Les Siko (= Tsari Chu) river valley until he came to its confluence with the river Sinyik (Subansiri) at Gelling Sinyik. Then Mra moved further down the Subansiri to the areas of Orak, Nyare, Ging and Limeking [where the Mra have settlements today]. Kingra went up to Tibet and established a Kingra village. Then, Helu people came down from Tibet to settle at Longju. Because of this, Helu paid taxes to both Mra and Kingra. The Helu were Tibetans, not tribals.

Variation 2. A Tibetan language version, elicited during an interview (20.2.2007) with a 76 year old former Tibetan headman of Migyitün Village near Longju. This informant had regular contacts with Mra families who were his trade partners until 1959, after which he lived 2 years in Limeking with the Mra as a refugee, and was then resettled in a refugee camp in north India. He still remembers how to speak passable Mra dialect although he has had little contact with Mra for about 4 decades:

²⁴ This is the only Mra version which mentions the progenitor figure Abo Tani. Mra and their near neighbours generally omit or downplay Abo Tani in all discussions of culture, claiming Nyido as their primary ancestor instead.

Three brothers fell down to earth from the sky at Kingkor Thang (Dkyil 'khor thang) near Longju. Two of them landed on a stone while the last one landed upon the ground. They began to cultivate the soil and the youngest brother proved to be the best in growing crops. The two elder brothers were jealous, so they threw their younger brother's harvest in the Tsari River (Rtsa ri chu = Les Siko). The youngest brother tried to save his grain, jumping into the river in order to retrieve it. The water carried both the grain and the younger brother downstream to the country where the Mra settled. The middle brother went up to settle in the Kyimdong Dzong (Rkyem sdong rdzong) area, between Tsari and Kongbo. The eldest brother remained at Migyitün, and from then on he had to pay taxes to the other two brothers, both to Kyimdong Dzong and to the Mra. [5 minutes later the informant added:] Tagachen (Rta'i sga can, 'Possessing a horse's saddle') is the name of the stone upon which you can see the footprints of the two elder brothers who fell from the sky and landed on the stone in the origin story. The stone has the shape of a horse's saddle, and is located at Kingkor Thang, halfway between Migyitün and Longju.

Variation 3. Recorded unsolicited by Gita Krishnatry (1932–1987) on 22.2.1956 at Limeking, during a conversation with the wife of Chebé Mra's elder brother, who was then an elderly women originally from Dogi Nalo, a place well downstream of the Mra area.²⁵ Their meeting took place during the first few days of the earliest contact between Indians and the Mra. Gita Krishnatry's husband, Surendra Mohan Krishnatry (b. 1921), was leader of the first Indian exploratory expedition to the upper Subansiri River.²⁶ They knew no local languages and used tribal interpreters from other areas to translate the narrative:

²⁵ See Krishnatry (1997: 110).

²⁶ S.M. Krishnatry also served 6 years (until 1954) as an Indian government representative in Tibet, before joining the Indian Frontier Administrative Service in the eastern Himalaya.

Long, long ago after the creation of sun and moon and earth, two brothers fell down from the sky along with the rain. They were known as Kangra and Mara. They fell in the area of Migyitün or Helu. Unfortunately, Mara fell on a stone while his brother fell on the back of a yak. Kangra, by the grace of Sechi-Nyido inherited automatically lots of heads of yak and other useful things which he could get in exchange for yak. But poor Mara inherited only stones and rocks where he could not even cultivate. He could not bear the taunts of his richer brother. One day in a fit of jealousy he stole few yaks from Kangra. Kangra gave him serious warning, but even then Mara again went and tried to steal. Kangra collected his house-hold goods, fought and defeated Mara, who then left Helu, migrated and came over to Menyi side (of the border) [i.e. into the Subansiri gorge to the south]. That is how Mara people descended from Nyido (rain) and looked down upon lower Tagins (descendents from Abo Tani) as something of a lower order.

Variation 4. Recorded unsolicited during a conversation (27.3.2006) with a 70 year old *nyijik* of Rao Village. One year earlier, this informant had already told me a short version of this narrative similar to the others above. He suddenly recalled this during a conversation about tax payments which the Tibetan government had once made to the Mra, and then announced, “Now I will tell you the full story”:

Long ago, Migra and Kingra appeared from the sky at Longju. Kingra was always superior to his brother in farming. Migra stole grain, so they quarrelled and separated. Kingra left and settled along the Tee Tsangpo river in Tibet. The quarrelling took place near Longju at a spot called Thang Pobu. Migra himself also went along the Tsangpo and kept following it downstream until he reached Pasighat. He stayed a few days and found only bitter tasting soil there [unfit for growing crops]. Continuing, he reached the Subansiri River and went upstream, and then arrived at Darporijo, where the soil was also bitter, and so he continued upstream until Siyum, at the Pargi Nala, but the soil was bitter there as well. He went up to Nacho, but the soil

there was bitter too. Further upstream, he reached Naba where a stone called Naba Lingney²⁷—which is still there—rose out of the ground when he arrived. The soil there was bitter too, and there was a tree called Jojing Singri, which was the only tree growing in the region. Then further up at Nyilo Migra crossed to the north bank of the Subansiri. There was a tree there called Bingra Lagtong. Then he reached Deluriang, but there were many *uyu* (local spirits) there, especially one female *uyu* with one breast, one eye, one tooth, and long, long hair flowing down her back. Her name was Limeking Yamik. She wanted to kill Migra, but he fought her and found they were of equal strength. So she transformed into a red female horse but could still not beat him. Finally, Migra defeated her, and she turned into a wild bird and flew across to Limeking [on the opposite bank of the river]. So Migra also turned into a wild bird and chased her to Limeking. Then she turned into a red horse again and went back across the river to the rock cliff above Deluriang where there is the long, fine waterfall today. She began to make motions like she was washing her hair and water began to flow down the cliff there. Migra chased her and tried to burn her with fire, but the waterfall now extinguished it. So she has remained living there. Every so many years, some Mra who were trying to cross the rocks at that place would fall down and die, so it was unsuitable for settlement. The northern ridge you can see above Deluriang if you look across the river from Limeking is called Danona, meaning ‘demon ridge’, and it was named after her head. The waterfall is called Eshimi, or ‘demon’s hair water’. She is still over there today. On top of the Danona range there are many lakes and their master is Khru Dongpay, who is one of the mountains over that side. The other mountain is called Loma Pangtong. These two mountains are in the range called Purké Mountain. Then, Migra went to Limeking, and continued on to Hejing Tatar just along the north bank between Deluriang and Bartok.

²⁷ This stone is the site of one origin narrative of the Na people (see Variation 5 below). The Na live west of the Mra along the Subansiri at a higher altitude adjacent to the Tibetan border, with a remnant community in Tibet itself, and they are partially Tibetanized.

Another *uyu* was there, but he could not kill it because it had transformed into a huge rock. That rock is called Hejing Tatar and is still there today. Then he reached Badok and killed the three *uyu* who lived there, those named Badok Sair, Moru Chapu and Regé Boku. Moru Chapu he killed with his spear, Regé Boku also, and Badok Sair he cut in half with his sword. These *uyu* turned into stones, which can still be seen there today with the marks of their death on them. Then he went on to Ging and killed the *uyu* there called Gingyang, and he killed its dog as well. Today one can see the rocks on the roadside near Ging, one split in two by his sword, which is Gingyang, and the other which is his dog. Migra then went to Phobar above Badok where he killed the *uyu* named Phobar Yabar. A stone which is the soul of Phobar Yabar is still there, green in colour and the size of your small tape-recorder. This stone can disappear; for instance if you try to keep it in a box it will disappear from inside. It can also walk from one place to another. Then Migra went up to Muri. He killed the *uyu* there, Muri Yeri, whose stone form can be seen there today. Then he proceeded to Meep, opposite lower Orak, and killed the *uyu* there named Meep Yup. Then he went to Orak and killed Letho Yetho, the Orak *uyu*, and then went on up to Nyare and killed the *uyu* there, Nyare Yéré. Then he went to Darjing Sele, the river pool at the hanging bridge below Orak. Migra proceeded downstream along the riverbank at Darjing and along to the confluence of the Yigtay Nala below Muri. At the confluence, he found a small boy, and he wanted to kill that boy because he thought he was also an *uyu*. The boy made some gestures to indicate that Migra should not kill him. The boy wore a cap made out of green moss upon his head. Then the boy spoke, and said, "Lo, bu. Lo, bu" (meaning: "I am local [*lo*]. You are a foreigner [*bu*]"). Migra sat down. He grabbed the moss cap from off of the boy's head with his left hand, and with his right he held the blade of his sword against the boy's throat, and said, "Golo. Gobu" (meaning: "You are local. I am a foreigner.") The boy said, "I agree" and stood up, and suddenly he was the height of a man the size of Migra himself. Then the man told Migra the names of all the places

he had visited on his journey up the Subansiri, as well as the names of all the *uyu* he had killed at them. He said, “Migra, before you arrived here all the Golo²⁸ [people] had been killed and eaten by those *uyu* which you have now killed. Thus, it would be better if you can also kill the female *uyu* called Limeking Yarmik, as well as the *uyu* Hejing Tatar near Badok. It will be dangerous if they remain alive.” After that, both Golo and Gobu lived together and constructed a house and a jungle garden area. Then, after another generation, at the time of ancestor Ragé, the Tibetans to the north began the Dolo²⁹ pilgrimage around Takpa Shingri (Dag pa shel ri) Mountain. They were not successful the first time they attempted it. When they tried to drink the water around the mountain, they swelled up and died. Those staying in caves were crushed when the caves collapsed. When they tried to sleep under the trees, they were killed by falling branches, and so on. At that time, only a few powerful lamas were able to complete the pilgrimage circuit, everyone else failed or died trying. Then the Tibetans sent a message to the Dalai Lama asking, “Why was the pilgrimage unsuccessful?” Thus, the Dalai Lama read through all the old texts, and in one he found a story about the origins of the Mra clan and the other peoples of the world. It narrated the origins of Kingra and Migra, Panee and Pabu, and Manee and Mabu. The Dalai Lama thought that the Tibetans should search for the descendents of Migra. Thus, they sent a messenger down to the Subansiri. The Tibetan messenger crossed the Salaba Pass above Orak and descended to Meep, and he met with the Mra people there, Migra’s descendents. Then the Dalai Lama said, “The Tibetan people who lost their lives on the Tsari pilgrimage did so due to the *uyu* living in the land of the

²⁸ Also known as Gilu/Gilo. There are various narratives about these purported pre-Mra inhabitants of the upper Subansiri; for one recorded in 1956, see Krishnatry (1997: 111).

²⁹ By Dolo, Mra refer to the 12-yearly Rongkor (Rong skor) pilgrimage which passed over Mra territory at Tsari, and especially the ritualized tax payment that immediately preceded it, which Tibetans called Lodzong (Klo rdzong); ‘Dolo’ may be the Mra phonetic equivalent for this latter Tibetan name.

Mra.” After that, the Dalai Lama decided to offer the Mra a pilgrimage tax, the Dolo. He said, “If a tax is given, then both the landowners and the spirits will be satisfied and the pilgrimage will take place without problems.” Then, some representatives of the Dalai Lama went to Longju, and they recorded in writing the land ownership of all the different Mra who had land in the area. This first representative of the Dalai Lama at Migyitün [near Longju] was a lama named Laya Kyilung.³⁰ All the stone buildings at Longju that the Tibetans used were those made by the brothers Kingra and Migra who had left the area and abandoned them. All the Tibetans at Longju came from Central Tibet.

Variation 5. Variations 5 and 6 were both collected (using local translators) by Li Jian Shang and other ethnologists from the Nationalities Research Institute, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, during field work (April to August of 1981) among the small Na, Bai and Bengru population remnants living north of the McMahon Line in southern Tibet.³¹ Whether the narratives were elicited by the Chinese researchers or not is unclear from their notes. Variation 5 was reported by Bai³² informants. I have given equivalents for the Chinese renderings of local names where they are apparent:

³⁰ Mra rendering of the Tibetan name Laya Kyilung, as the “first representative of the Dalai Lama at Migyitün”, is strongly reminiscent of Tibetan “Lelung Jedrung” which was the name of a politically important lama (Sle lung rje drung, Bzhad pa’i rdo rje of ‘Ol dga’, b. 1697) with close contacts to both the Sixth and Seventh Dalai Lamas, and who is credited with the 18th century founding of the Tsari Rongkor pilgrimage; see Huber (1999: 155, 157).

³¹ See Li Jian Shang *et al.* (1987: 250). I am grateful to Huadan Zhaxi for translating the Chinese.

³² The Bai clan name is found in the upper Kamla and Subansiri rivers. Small numbers of Bai live in Na villages on both sides of the McMahon Line and also in Naba village downstream from Limeking.

Three brothers, the eldest of whom was Na, the second oldest Maya [Mra] and the youngest Bayi [Bai], descended together from the sky. They initially lived in Huluyang [Helu] area nearby Mijidong [Migyitün] and then separated in order to each develop their own family economies. The eldest brother first moved to Labaningla [Naba Lingney] and then to Xuelong Sige area near Longdi. His first location was then given to his youngest brother. The second brother moved to Buruduoquo. The youngest brother migrated to Labaningla [Naba Lingney]. The eldest brother's descendents are the people of the Na tribe, the second brother's descendents are the people of the Maya [Mra] tribe, and the youngest brother's descendents are of the Bayi [Bai] tribe.

Variation 6. Collection details as per Variation 5, but reported by Bengru informants:³³

Liede Luodeng, the female ancestor of the Bengru, Bayi [Bai], Maya [Mra], Na, Dazu [?] and Burui [Puroik, i.e. Sulung] descended from the sky. She originally lived in the sky together with some animals. Everyone worried since nothing grew in the sky. She sent a bird named Mazuo Bulie to this world to check if it was suitable for human beings to live in. This bird found a lot of trees but no other vegetation. As it was ready to return to report the findings, without thinking it deposited its own excrements upon the ground. Having heard its report, Liede Luodeng thought it was very interesting that there were trees but no other vegetation and thus sent a stallion named Jibo Buneng to check again. The stallion found vegetation on the spot where the bird deposited excrement and reported this. Having found out there was vegetation on the earth, Liede Luodeng descended from the sky with all animals including horses and sheep. On the earth, all beings except Abadani [Abo Tani] were ghosts, and all were eager to marry Liede Luodeng when she descended to this earth. Abadani, then the sole human being, proposed to marry her as did the ghosts, but she refused. Both the ghosts and Abadani longed to get married with her, and finally Abadani came up with a very

³³ See Li Jian Shang *et al.* (1987: 248–49).

clever idea. He begged a fly to carry his semen and enter Liede Luodeng's vagina when she bent over to wash her head and her buttocks would be exposed. Henceforth, her stomach became bigger and bigger. She did not know why and assumed she was sick. She summoned a priest to exorcise the evil spirits and cure her. All efforts came of nothing. Only when she gave birth did she realize why. When the child was one year old, she asked him to identify his father. Everyone knew that Liede Luodeng's child was going to identify his father, and so they all tried to become the chosen one, as did Abadani himself. He wore ragged clothes and remained aloof from the crowd, and in so doing he stood out. Liede Luodeng made *odeng* (i.e. *rtsam pa*) out of rice flour and giving it to her child she instructed, "Give it to the person who you think is your father." The child passed back and forth through the crowd, and finally called out "Father!" when he came out of the crowd and saw Abadani and then presented it to him. Abadani and Liede Luodeng married after his paternity had been confirmed. They had six sons: Maya [Mra], Bayi [Bai], Na, Dazu, Bengru and Sulong [Sulung/Puroik]. When they grew up, their parents divided cattle, pigs and grains among them. Five of the brothers sowed their grain and herded their animals in the hills. Sulong, the youngest and most beloved child, obtained more animals of top quality and said "I should not herd my animals in the hills since they will be exposed to rain", and so he kept them at home. Before too long, he found it boring constantly caring for the animals at home, and so slaughtered them all for meat consumption. He ate all of his grain rather than sowing fields with it. The other brothers all prospered by herding animals which increased their number and by sowing crops which resulted in good harvests. Sulong had nothing to eat and was obliged to borrow food from his brother, Bengru. Bengru, who inherited a wild sago palm³⁴ forest from his parents, told him, "You take care of this forest and eat it when you are hungry." Thereafter, this forest ensured his survival. Sulong, nevertheless, thought that

³⁴ Chinese *daxie* here refers to *tachi* or *tashi* (the wild sago palm) in Subansiri and Kamla dialects. The Puroik/Sulung are well-known for harvesting and eating this wild food.

without a master he would be unable to survive. One day, he cut a frond off a wild sago palm and trimmed it. He gave the stem to Bengru and said, "I am your slave from now on. If I disobey, you lash me with this stem." Since then, the off-spring of the six brothers evolved into six tribes, among whom the Sulongs became the slaves of the other tribes.

Discussion of the Narratives

What these narratives reveal is ways in which a basic story or core of elements/motifs can be embellished to serve the interests of each teller or a certain social context. Variation 1 is simply giving the framework or background context for a more thorough enumeration of the whole clan genealogy, and it keeps to the main points found in almost all the variations I have recorded. Unlike the two 'outsider' Variations (2 & 3), it pays more attention to the all-important geography of Mra settlement. Variation 2 by a Tibetan narrator focuses more on his own geography of significance. It roots the story directly onto the local ground where he lived and ensures that the curse of multiple taxation, which was always a great burden for this teller's own community, is logically explained by introducing a third brother. Variation 3 reflects an encounter between a familiar outsider to the Mra community—an in-married wife—telling a complete outsider—the colonial official's wife on tour—something about the local world the latter had just entered. The teller was from a downstream community whom the Mra pejoratively refer to as the Mayou. As the teller indicates at the end, the Mra have always regarded their downstream neighbours with great disdain, while viewing themselves as superior precisely due to their claimed Tibetan origins. The teller is thus partly explaining her natal community's status via her affinal community's story. The identities drawn out here, as in all these narratives, all point to a fairly typical dynamic of kinship. They can function rhetorically to distance oneself from one's affines, who, in the case of the exogamous Mra, are ethnographically identical with them. The ethnographically different Tibetan neighbours have in fact always emphatically barred marriage with Mra, yet the narrative

emphasizes the Mra themselves as a kind of extension of the prestigious Tibetan sphere.

The very much longer Variation 4 seeks to cover a range of different, but related topics. Of initial interest to me, is that this informant is letting us know that the Mra were not the first people to appear and settle in their present home area, since the ill-fated Golo people were there before them. This is something that many Mra know but do not like to be too explicit about, or even avoid admitting, probably so that nobody can turn up one day and say "I am a survivor of the Golo people, please give me rights to our original land and resources." I base this supposition upon my experience of Mra reactions towards claims and distribution of rights. Among Mra, this particular informant prides himself on having a superior knowledge of times past, and when telling Variation 4 to me he knew I already had knowledge of the Golo. Secondly, the account of the process of bringing the local world space under control for habitation through heroic conquest of the *uyu*, and even their turning to stone, etc., from one settlement site to the next until the whole Mra area has been covered is all too familiar to a Tibetanist. It is precisely the motif complex found in narratives about Tibetan Buddhism's most famous founder-hero, Padmasambhava, whose stories are also associated with the nearby Tibetan landscape of Tsari just to the north of the Mra territory. As a young man, this informant lived up at Longju alongside Tibetans, something most Mra never did, and he also had close contacts with several Tibetan lamas and their lay followers who lived temporarily in Ging after fleeing from the Chinese.

The final significant element in Variation 4, that the Mra were given some positive recognition from the highest authority of pre-modern Tibet, is most telling. The Tibetans, especially high lamas and the Lhasa elite discussed here, were always highly negative towards the Mra. They regarded the Mra as completely uncivilized barbarians whom one would never trust, nor allow onto one's territory, let alone consider marrying. What we do know about past relations between the Mra and the Tibetans is that they often involved conflict, with the latter making tributary payments to the Mra only under threat of

violence against pilgrims who traversed Mra territory. Variation 4 puts a highly positive gloss on formerly bad or highly ambivalent relations. Moreover, it locates the Mra's own oral traditions in Tibetan written texts—something I myself have never found any trace of during 20 years of research into such sources. This point itself reveals much about the personal history of the teller. Although he never received any formal education, this informant was the first Mra to learn how to read and write after a fashion. He began to teach himself as a young man when he worked occasionally as a local guide for touring Indian officials or army officers. He can only write phonetically what he hears, or copy what he sees. In a culture where men usually walk around with an assortment of machetes, knives, shotguns and musk deer fangs filled with snake-bite antidote about their persons, this informant always has a small battered notebook and a pen about him, just in case something needs to be written down. More than any other Mra of his generation, he has a keen sense that documents and textuality can be keys to power, and his former and present colonial masters have provided many examples of this possibility. Moreover, this informant's sub-clan is the one which lost the most access to their lands up along the Tibetan border as a result of Sino-Indian militarization. He is the only Mra who actively protests this fact to the Indian government and asks for compensation. His interest in highlighting the existence of textual records from the Tibetan side must be seen in the context of his on-going claims against the state. He even hinted on occasion that the sooner I publish a book about the 'real situation' of the Mra, the better.

Variations 5 and 6 are constructing Mra origins from the point of view of other populations in the region, the Bai and Bengru. Significantly, the tellers are members of remnants of those two groups living in Tibet, where they have been totally isolated from their Indian clansmen to the south since 1962. Characteristic of these tiny tribal remnant settlements in Tibet, which are collectively defined in China with the blanket identity 'Luoba', is that they comprise a mixture of small groups from various clans who hail from different regions on the Indian side, but who live together in Tibet. In the past, the

Tibetans isolated these minority tribal settlers in Tibet both socially and physically, and they were accorded the absolute lowest status until Chinese colonization took place. Whereas groups on the Indian side have origin narratives that often distance themselves from their neighbours, in these variations from Tibet it is the common origins of the different clans that is emphasized. The competing sibling motif is employed again in Variation 6, but this time to account for the position of the Puroik or Sulung as the slaves of all others groups, which indeed reflected social reality until (and in some cases after) the official liberation of slaves in the region—during 1959 on the Chinese side and in 1965 on the Indian side.

Conclusions

Mra representations of their origins, migration and their relatedness to other peoples are distributed over several different genres of oral expression. No single genre seems to provide any kind of global account, although each genre implicates the others. In studying this body of materials there are two factors which cannot be overlooked. First, we do know that such oral accounts of origin and relatedness circulate among Mra and their neighbours, and that they have been maintained over time. However, the exact contexts for such local transmissions and exchanges have never been observed. Moreover, there is the fact that all the recorded versions of this material we have are actually products of Mra encounters with outsiders, namely with myself, Indian officials or Chinese researchers. Most of these encounters occurred during a period of profound transformations in the social and political life of the region. Instrumentalist theories of identity production and representation, as well as ethnography, invariably indicate exogenous events like colonialism and state formation, and the complex processes they set in train, as typical trigger factors for reification of indigenous notions of ethnicity. Our findings in the upper Subansiri region reveal another case in point. The second issue to emphasize is that it is impossible to imagine how any outsider could appreciate or utilize these narratives without a fairly intimate knowledge of the tellers who reported

them, the social environments in which they have been produced, the intended recipients and their relationship to the tellers, not to mention a knowledge of spoken Mra and Subansiri history as well as Tibetan language, history and culture.

Returning to my initial question about why the Mra as hill-dwellers who are a demonstrably non-Tibetan plateau population, maintain narratives of Tibetan origins and relatedness, I find the following four points central for any possible interpretation:

i. As far as the pre-colonial period is concerned, the former regional importance which the Mra enjoyed until 1959 flowed from distinct local advantages they possessed and sought to monopolize. First, their territory encompassed the only low altitude, snow-free access route up to the Tibetan plateau throughout this whole region of the Himalaya, and this allowed a very extended trading season compared to any other neighbouring border groups. Second, there were the aforementioned economic and political relations the Mra maintained with Tibetans to the north. Without these advantages, the Mra would have been just one more fairly impoverished group of subsistence cultivators and hunters like all of their near neighbours living in the same environment. Indeed, this is what the Mra themselves became within a decade or so of losing these advantages in the wake of Indian and Chinese colonialism. I am therefore not surprised that Mra representations of origins focus around both the uniqueness of their connection to the area of the trade route and upon their relatedness to Tibetans as well.

ii. Like all representations of identity, the origin claims in the above Mra narratives not only define who they are, but also who they are not. The nemesis of Mra society has long been the Mayou, the other mono-clan communities living downstream along the Subansiri River, and with whom the Mra actually share an extremely close ethnographic and linguistic affinity. So-called Mayou groups posed the biggest threat to the Mra monopoly over the trade conduit to Tibet because they sometimes mounted hostile raids and regularly sought a share of the various revenues which the Mra received from the Tibetans.

Unsurprisingly, Mra negativity towards the Mayou is almost identical to Tibetan negativity towards the Mra themselves. Apart from periods of outright conflict with Mayou clans, Mra more or less maintained a cordon sanitaire between themselves and their would-be competitors downstream, and their origin narratives would help to maintain and justify this.

iii. This survey of Mra origin narratives has not convinced me of their claim to be related with Tibetans through a common ancestor some 15 generations ago. However, I do think it is an open question as to whether some of the ancestors of the Mra were at one time temporarily (perhaps seasonally) living at a higher altitude than they do today (1500–2000m), in or nearby the area in which they claim to have fallen to earth at Longju (2750m). We know, for example, that various tribal populations did remain in these Tibetan border regions as slaves, and visited them as seasonal labourers, traders, and as occasional invaders. Moreover, the Mra and their immediate non-Tibetan neighbours are rather mobile societies—I sometimes think of them as ‘jungle nomads’—and they have undergone many small-scale local migrations already during the 20th century in response to a host of different ecological, social, economic and epidemiological challenges and changes. Thus, their previous but temporary residence in, or migration through, a nearby section of the lower margins of the Tibetan plateau is easily conceivable.

iv. Finally, if we consider the continued existence of Mra claims of relatedness with Tibetans, they still have relevance in the context of the changing circumstances of the past 50 years. Mra relations with both the Indian and the Chinese states as powerful outsiders, who continue to vie for control over their borderland territory, are at best strategically ambivalent. Both states have made positive overtures towards the Mra. India and China have intentionally left Mra on the sidelines of any actual armed conflict in the region since both states desire the loyalty and collaboration of local populations. Today, Mra glorify their past political autonomy and links with Tibet, while also harbouring brooding resentments toward both India and China. There is, however, little publicly voiced criticism of either colonial power. In part, this

reflects a pragmatic realism in the face of a large military population in the neighbourhood plus intelligence agents who actively look for signs of disloyalty towards India and infiltration of Chinese influences; criticism of the nation-state can easily be recast as treason along its contested borders. Mra now view themselves, along with the Tibetan refugees they once sheltered, as victims and losers in the international conflict which has played out across their former domain. Mra narratives of origins and relatedness might express this current sense of shared bad fortune in the face of recent history.

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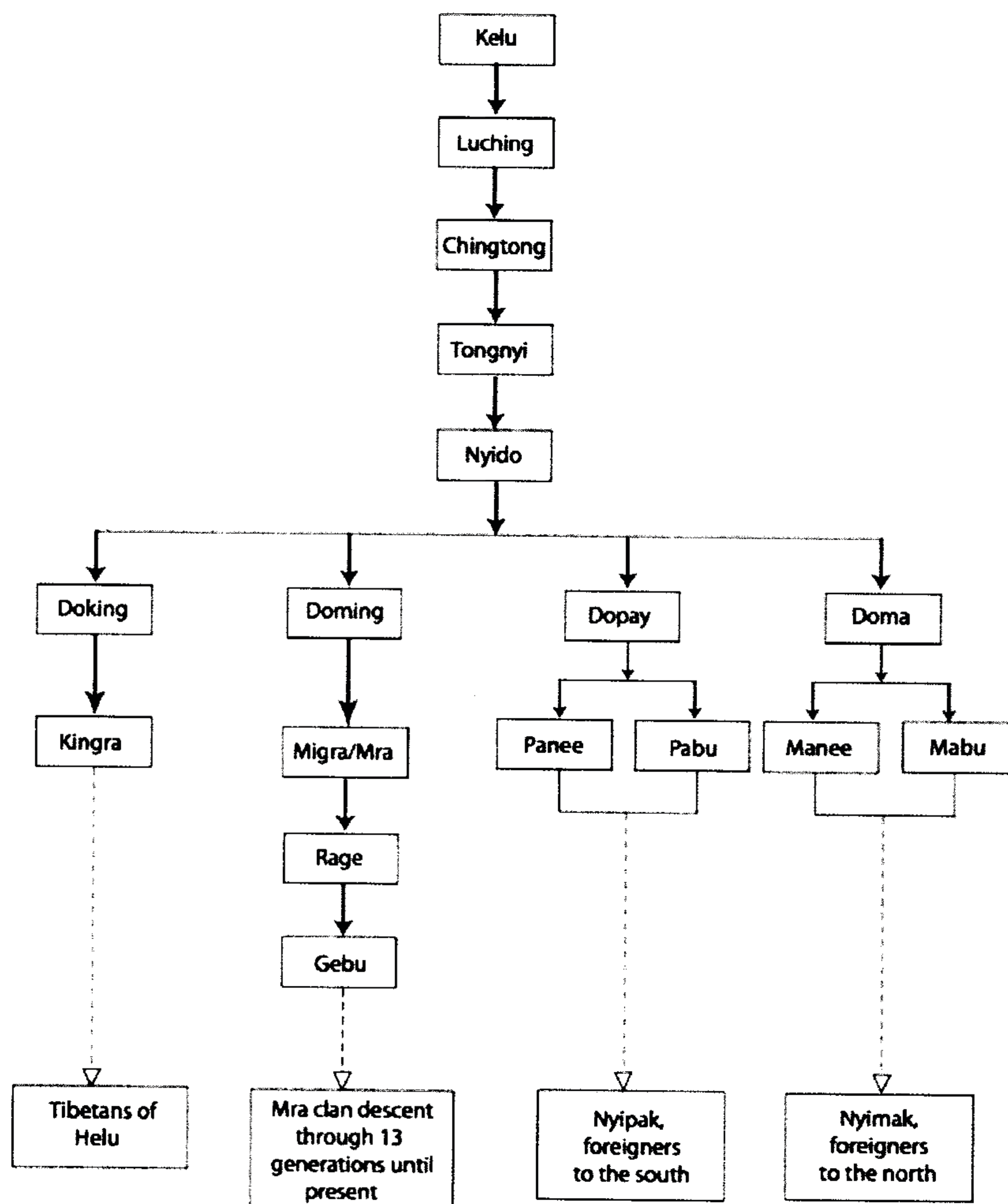
Appendix A: Transcription of *Dangde* Chant

- 1 silu alu
- 2 atu kojum
- 3 kulu diri'bok dilu
- 4 hila padii lu
- 5 anii panee
- 6 abeng pabu
- 7 dongar tab'nii
- 8 kulu dotte batang
- 9 doge tab'nii
- 10 dol ringdong lu
- 11 doge gelu nang he
- 12 anii panee la abeng pabu
- 13 yengpiph yengbee ngo lilu tab'nii
- 14 kardong tungnang he
- 15 karlo panang he
- 16 palu tab'nii
- 17 patu pakee nga
- 18 dol ringdong lu
- 19 abeng pabu la anii panee
- 20 dol ringdong lu
- 21 kardong tung he
- 22 ayong he aru baiyak chongchak tula
- 23 yengpiph yengbee
- 24 lilung linang he
- 25 ayong linang aru narog he sesok tuku la
- 26 barme manee la baru mabu
- 27 atu kojum lu peling kardong ha
- 28 ayong patula aru kale kunang he
- 29 kardong yaalong he rapong tuku la
- 30 an'i ge taje ahe ge taje
- 31 jering tab'kula
- 32 barme manee baru mabu

- 33 jokok jalok yengpipph yengbee
34 lilung ha lilik kunang he
35 hetung gayer tuklu
36 anii la barme abeng la baru
37 garkong garlong
38 garyo garjo lakula
39 nga anii panee nga abeng pabu
40 dol ringdong lu nadong tingtak kuma bo
41 anii panee nga abeng pabu nga
42 najege laring lu napakge laring lu
43 kardong tungnang he
44 dongnu hangb'ub kardong
45 pisu piya kardong ha
46 yaalong he rapong tukula
47 anii panee la abeng pabu
48 barme manee la baru mabu
49 ho doge gepe sulee pene bo
50 naje nyoa ha be anii panee la abeng pabu
51 barme manee la baru mabu dol ringdong lu
52 heke gera lu
53 purk march ha
54 nyido doka kangra mra ha
55 teh nido da'p ge panee manee
56 leke be bokle pane bo
57 nga kangra la mra boni
58 atu ge kojum lu
59 kebu ge linglo lu
60 ngo purk march ha
61 paling ge linglo lu gepe yanang
62 dape genang he kebu ge linglo gepe lakala genang he
63 nadong tungtak kumani
64 kalu nitee he
65 he laka

Appendix B: Genealogies

i. Origins of different peoples, by a 70 yr. Mra *nyijik* (28.2.2005)



ii. The first recorded Mra genealogy, collected by an Indian official in 1957 (Sailo 1957: Appendix B). I strongly suspect this was narrated by leading Mra "big man" Mra Chebé (d. ca. 1984). His own sub-clan lineage of Runyu (left column) is all that is given here in complete form, and we know he had marriage relations with both Puri of Longju (middle column lineage) and Na Taluk (right column lineage). Due to Chebé's power, he was the local leader who always received the most attention during the first few years of Indian colonization.

