

Lepcha Chieftains of the 17th–18th Centuries, Based on Tibetan and Bhutanese Sources⁺

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The ruler Gaebboo Achyok (*Rgyal-po A-mchog*) is undoubtedly the most highly celebrated Lepcha cultural hero. It was he who led a valiant attempt during the second half of the 17th century to assert the authority of the Lepcha people over their ancestral lands in the region of modern Kalimpong and the hill country near South-west Bhutan. Although his story has been told by previous authors,¹ much is still based on legend and conflicting secondary sources. So, it is worth reviewing the primary original, written documents in the context of broader events of his era.

In the mid-17th century, the newly formed nation states in Tibet, Bhutan and Sikkim were actively establishing their borders along the Himalayan chain. Bhutan, as a state founded by Zhabdrung Rinpoche Ngawang Namgyal on the basis of the Drukpa Kagyudpa form of Buddhism, was strongly opposed by the Gelugpa Tibetan government of the 5th Dalai Lama. The smaller and less powerful Sikkim state looked primarily to Nyingmapa Buddhist inspiration, although in the circumstances the 1st Sikkim Chogyal Phuntsho Namgyal and

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¹ See especially Shakabpa (1967; 1976); Aris (1979); D.C. Roy et al (1998); D.T. Tamlong (2010); Ardussi (2011), and articles and references in various issues of the journal *Lepcha Aachulay Magazine*.

his successors allied themselves with Tibet and became patrons of the Dalai Lamas.



Figure 1: A portrait of Gaeboo Achyok. Photo credit: Achuley - *A Bilingual Journal Illustrating the Lepcha Way of Life*, 2004.

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The Zhabdrung Rinpoche died in 1651. But with Bhutan still in a state of war with Tibet, and in the absence of a clear line of succession, his death was concealed and his rule perpetuated by a series of civil regents called Deb Raja in British sources, or Desi (*Sde srid*) by the Bhutanese themselves. The spiritual authority of the Zhabdrung remained vested in various of his reincarnate successors, who with few notable exceptions never themselves held the reigns of civil power.

Gaeboo Achyok's story first comes to our attention at the onset of a major war launched in 1668 by the Mongol forces of the 5th Dalai Lama against Bhutan, in support of a minor Gelugpa Lama of eastern Bhutan named the Merak (*Me rag*) Lama who was also at war with the Bhutanese. However, this war was also touched off by alleged Bhutanese depredations in territories bordering Sikkim, between the lower Chumbi Valley and Darjeeling. At the time in question these districts do not seem to have been controlled by any larger state, and consisted largely of mountainous jungles, thinly populated by Indic tribesmen, Lepchas, Bhutias and Tibetan settlers, most or all of whom were loosely classed as *Mon pa* in the Tibetan racial scheme. The population mixture between lower Sikkim and southwestern Bhutan seems to have been fairly uniform. Intermigration was frequent and ties of kinship were only then being interrupted by newly emerging national borders described earlier.

The biography of the Tibetan monk of the Barawa sect named Kunchok Gyaltsan (1601-1687) sheds independent light on the Damsang area in the period just prior to the war of 1668 between Bhutan and Tibet. The Barawa (*'Ba'-ra-ba*) were a branch of the Drukpa school un-allied to the Zhabdrung Rinpoche of Bhutan. Having been driven out of Bhutan in about 1634, this monk constructed several small monasteries in the region near what is now Kalimpong and eastern Sikkim, including one named *Mon-lug* at Damsang. His monastery began to grow in prosperity, within a local community

dominated, as he says, by “*Lho-Mon* (i.e. Lepcha or Bhutanese) monks of crude behaviour,”² meaning presumably that they were not friendly to Choje Barawa. After many years at Damsang he returned ca. 1660 to his home monastery in Tibet. In 1663 he returned to Damsang, but in the interval certain Lamas from Bhutan had begun to encroach upon his territories while a Lepcha chieftain named Monpa Amchok (*Mon-pa A-mchog*) had risen to local prominence through depredations of a kind which incurred the wrath of both his local Drukpa and Barawa patrons. “It was a time of great strife,” Kunchok Gyaltshan’s biographer writes, and faced with the loss of patronage and the decline of his mission, he abandoned Damsang for friendlier districts to the north.³ From the context of events we can be quite certain that the man known to Tibetans and Bhutanese as Monpa Amchok is none other than the Gaebboo Achyok of Lepcha tradition. Based on this text, we can probably date the rise of Gaebboo Achyok’s power to the period 1660-’63.

The ruins of the Lepcha fort of Damsang lie on a strategically located ridge about 20 miles North-east of Kalimpong, possessing a broad vista over the village of Pedong and the woodlands reaching northward towards the Tibetan frontier, and as far as the Haa valley of Western Bhutan. It would become the roadway taken in 1904 by the Younghusband expedition in its march against Tibet.

During the five years after Choje Barawa’s departure from Damsang, pressure mounted against the Lepcha from Bhutanese settlers supported from their new regional border

² Rin-chen-bstan-pa’i-gsal-byed, *Grub thob chen po dkon mchog rgyal mtshan gyi rnam thar mdor bsdus ngo mtshar bdud rtsi’i chu brgyun* (sic): 14.a-15.a.

³ Ibid: 18.b-22.b. The first scholar to take notice of this text as a source of information about Monpa Amchok was Tsipon Shakabpa, in the Tibetan edition of his history of Tibet (See Shakabpa (1976) vol. 1: 448), written after he had moved to the Kalimpong area and become knowledgeable about Lepcha traditions.

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fortress of Daling/Dalingkha (*Brda-gling-kha*). Although there is no certain documentation, there is a strong possibility that Daling was originally another Lepcha fort, taken by the Bhutanese during their expansion of state territory towards the southwest during the late 1650's. We will soon see that it was in his attempt to retake Daling that Gaeboo Achyok or Monpa Amchok lost his life.

The 3rd Desi of Bhutan Mingyur Tenpa (r. 1667-1680) pursued vigorous expansionist policies in all territorial directions, which brought him into fierce conflict with Tibet on both the eastern and western border. Under this threat, in what I would consider a rather bold move, Monpa Amchok went to Lhasa where he gained an audience with the 5th Dalai Lama during the 9th month of 1668, as recorded in the latter's biography. As usual in such texts, the details of their conversation are not recorded, but two months later Tibet invaded Bhutan on behalf of both Monpa Amchok and the Merak Lama of eastern Bhutan.⁴

To the Dalai Lama, both men were Monpa, and he may have conflated their ethnic identities into one, even though Gaeboo Achyok was Lepcha and the Merak Lama a Sharchop from eastern Bhutan. In the centuries-old Tibetan world view, her southern frontier was an expanse dotted with clusters of uncivilized Monpa people. For sure, the Merak Lama was a Gelugpa follower, and perhaps Monpa Amchok convinced the Dalai Lama that he, too, was a supporter of the Gelugpa, or at least sided with his patron the Chogyal of Sikkim. One can speculate on the tactics and arguments advanced during their audience.

However, the war went badly for Tibet and a peace treaty was negotiated by officials from Tashilhunpo with an armistice

⁴ *L5DL*, vol. 2: 66.b, 70.b-71.a;

intended to last through 1675.⁵ When the Dalai Lama learned early in 1675 that Bhutan was secretly preparing to launch an army against Monpa Amchok, even before the expiration of the 1669 treaty, he ordered a quick pre-emptive attack in which a small Bhutanese frontier outpost in lower Chumbi named Tengdung Dzong (*Steng-gdung-rdzong*) was burned down. After several months of unproductive negotiations, the Tibetan government sealed the southern border trade routes and prepared for a new war against Bhutan. Both governments ordered their state monasteries, in Lhasa and Punakha, to perform ritual propitiation of the wrathful deities, aimed to ensure victory over each other.⁶

But once again the Bhutanese were victorious along all its borders. By the 3rd month of 1676 Bhutan's south-western border fortress at Dalingkha was retaken from the Lepcha. Gaeboo Achyok (i.e. Monpa Amchok) was captured and put to death. Messengers returned to Bhutan reporting that his head and arms had been staked on a pole, information which caused the leading Bhutanese reincarnation and future 4th Desi Tenzin Rabgye (1638-1696) to compose a prayer of compassion in memory of the Lepcha warrior:

Wherever they reside in the six-fold wheel of existence,
There are no beings unworthy of compassion.
Especially must the hearts of monks.
Bear even greater love for those who commit great evil.

The rebellious Mon-pa villages in the area Between Bhutan and Damsang were brought back under Bhutanese administration. The Bhutanese, believing victory had been won, recalled their

⁵ The treaty date is noted in *AIPC*: 27.a. Shakabpa (*Tibet*: 119) misconstrued the date to mean the Wood-Hare year of 1615. But there was no treaty in that year, and the error is corrected in the revised Tibetan version of his work (*Bod kyi srid don rgyal rabs*: vol. 1, pp. 447-48).

⁶ *L5DL*, vol. 2: 275.b-276.b; *SDE-SRID* 4: 93.b.

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armies and performed the customary rites of thanksgiving to their protective deities.⁷

Monpa Adzin, Successor of Monpa Amchok

Thus we can be quite certain of Gaeboo Achyok's death during the 3rd Tibetan month of 1676. When forced to take sides, he elected to go with Tibet, a decision that led to his death when Bhutan, against great odds, defeated the more powerful armies of her northern neighbour. Whereas to Choje Barawa and no doubt to the Bhutanese, he was "a southerner of crude behavior," to the modern Lepcha community of Kalimpong he became a cultural hero for standing up to the stronger armies of Bhutan, for directly assaulting and seizing for a time the fortress of Dalingkha, and no doubt also for his courage in making a personal appeal before the 5th Dalai Lama in Lhasa. But was he truly the last Lepcha king, as claimed in some modern writings?

Fighting between Bhutan and Tibet over possession of the lower Chumbi Valley and Kalimpong district did not end with his death. At first the Dalai Lama favoured negotiation, hoping to return Monpa Amchok's villages to the authority of Sikkim. By this time, it should be remembered, Sikkim's first king had acknowledged fealty to Lhasa, at least through religious ties of the "lama – patron" nature. The Sikkim Chogyal Phuntsho Namgyal had also paid personal respects to the Dalai Lama in Lhasa. Issues concerning Sikkim and Chumbi simmered with Bhutan, but over the next ten years or so, Tibet became preoccupied with a costly war in Ladakh and other domestic concerns. Thus, a treaty negotiated with Bhutan in 1679 held for several years, at least in the eastern sector.

In 1680 a new ruler came to the throne in Bhutan, the famous 4th Desi Tenzin Rabgye (1638-1696). In contrast to the harsh,

⁷ These events are described in the Bhutanese source, *SDE-SRID* 4: 94.b.

aggressive approach of his predecessor the 3rd Desi Mingyur Tenpa, Tenzin Rabgye preferred to use negotiation and conciliation in both domestic and foreign policies.

Among the Lepcha, there also emerged in the early 1680's another local leader, an apparent successor to Monpa Amchok. He is known in Bhutanese sources as Monpa Adzin (*Mon-pa A-'dzin*).⁸ His people inhabited the same general area as Monpa Amchok, and like his predecessor he found himself caught between aggressive postures of Tibet and Bhutan.

Unlike Monpa Amchok, however, Monpa Adzin seems to have played off both sides, for what rewards we do not know, and so in 1685 a major negotiation between Tibet, Bhutan, and Monpa Adzin's people began at southern Tibetan fortress of Phari, located at the head of the Chumbi valley. This negotiation over land rights in lower Chumbi wore on for more than two years. The lead Tibetan negotiator Grongnyer Gyalthagne was said by the Bhutanese to have acted in very bad faith, and once again state rituals against him were undertaken in Punakha.⁹ Predictably, the Bhutanese protective deities came to their assistance and Gyalthagne died of smallpox at Gyantse early in the following year. The news was received in Bhutan with a large festival of thanksgiving, during which the *mgon-khang* or temple to the protective deities at the Bhutanese capital fortress of Wangdiphodrang was renamed "Celebration Temple of the Protective Deities" (*Gtang-rag-mgon-khang*) in commemoration of the event.¹⁰

Finally, Bhutan and Tibet hammered out a settlement relating to the lower Chumbi and Damsang lands early in 1687. The precise terms are unknown, but the Bhutanese claim that

⁸ The main source on his life is *SDE SRID 4: 187.b- 188.b*.

⁹ *SDE SRID 4: 188.a*.

¹⁰ *Ibid: 188.a-b*.

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Monpa Adzin had finally elected to side with them, and this may have been the turning point in the discussions.

The role of the Sikkim state in these events is quite obscure, and probably insignificant. The real issue had been between Tibet and Bhutan, and both countries dispatched over one hundred officials and retainers for the treaty-signing at Phari. As earlier, the Sakya hierarch Kunga Tashi and the Panchen Lama's treasurer mediated for Tibet, whose principal negotiator was the Lhasa Zhung Gronyer Changkhyimne Ngawang Lobzang Gyamtsho.¹¹ Signatories for Bhutan included the new Tashichhodzong Dzongpon Tenzin Norbu, the Paro Governor Ngawang Penjor, several lesser Dzongpon from the western valleys, and Bhutan's famous treaty writer named *Drung-yig* Tandin Wangyal (1646-1711).¹²

Following these events, competition over land rights in lower Chumbi continued between Bhutan and Tibet. During the 1690's Bhutan continued to gain territory encroaching on what is now Kalimpong and eastern Sikkim, in spite of Tenzin Rabgye's admonition to his frontier lieutenants that they not do so. During negotiations with a local ruler in the area (perhaps a Lepcha, but we do not know) Bhutan regained its position at Damsang and a border cairn was erected on the location.¹³ Bhutanese incursions into Sikkim proper, as well as Chumbi, is asserted in numerous sources from this period,

¹¹ Ibid: 191.a-b; *Shākya'i dge slong blo bzang ye shes kyi spyod tshul gsal bar byed pa ngor dkar can gyi 'phreng ba*: 101.b. On Chang-khyim-nas, cf. Petech, *Aristocracy and Government*: 105-106.

¹² Tandin Wangyal (*Rta mgrin dbang rgyal*) was regarded as the rebirth of a disciple of the 10th Black Hat Karmapa Chos-dbyings-rdo-rje. He may have been Tibetan by birth. He became a notable literary figure in Bhutan, the author of a commentary on the *Kāvyaḍarsha* among other works. His skills as poet and secretary (*Drung-yig*) were exploited on numerous occasions to draft diplomatic correspondence and treaties with Tibet, and he was one of Tenzin Rabgye's closest advisors and friends (cf. *SDE SRID 4*: 369.b-371.a).

¹³ *SDE SRID 4*: 253.b, 291.b, 309.a-310.a.

apparently unstoppable by any of the responsible governments.

Beyond this, there are no further references to Lepcha local rulers in our sources during the 17th century, and so it could be a fact that the rather aggressive, persistent Bhutanese westward advance overwhelmed their small, independent communities at that time.

A note should be made here about the evidence from the *Denjong Gyalrab* or *History of Sikkim*, compiled in 1908 by Their Highnesses Maharaja Sir Thutob & Maharani Yeshay. Professor Per Sorensen and myself have been engaged for several years in preparing a new translation of this book, the existing text being only an English typescript translation by the famous Sikkimese scholar Kazi Dawa Samdup and several versions of a Tibetan language original. We have come to the conclusion that there exist a number of significant chronological errors in this work, in particular in the sections dealing with relations between Sikkim and Bhutan. We urge caution in using this source for dating the matters about Gaeboo Achyok, and refer readers to our discussion in the eventual book.

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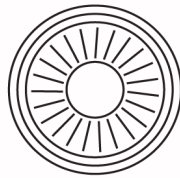
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