Contributions on the Study of the Mongolian, Turkic, and Manchu-Tungusic Peoples, Languages and Cultures
Dedicated to Jerzy Tulisow
on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday

Faculty of Oriental Studies, Warsaw
A WINDOW ONTO THE OTHER

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Edited by Agata Bareja-Starzyńska,
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Published with the financial support of the President of Mongolia
Tsakhyagiin Elbegdorj

Reviewed by:
Prof. dr hab. Tadeusz Majda

Cover design:
Adam Borowski

Cover:
Jerzy Tulisow at the Tsantans in 1968

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Jerzy Tulisow
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Preface

The title of this volume, A Window onto the Other: Contributions on the Study of the Mongolian, Turkic and Manchu-Tungusic Peoples, Languages and Cultures, containing research dedicated to Jerzy Tulisow on the occasion of his seventieth birthday, is a reference to his beginnings in Oriental Studies. As explained in his biography (by Jan Rogala), Jerzy Tulisow was attracted by a scene which he came upon one day while passing through the campus of the University of Warsaw. Through an open window in one of the university buildings he chanced to observe and – having then stopped – to listen to one of Professor Stanisław Kałużyński’s brilliant lectures. Jerzy Tulisow was then and there literally driven to enter the world of the fascinating Other: the Mongols, Turks, Manchus, and other Tungusic peoples and their cultures. A window usually serves as a metaphor for opportunity, access to something and entry into another world. Let us explore then the world of those peoples and cultures so loved by Jerzy Tulisow, as presented in these contributions dedicated to the commemoration of his seventieth birthday.

Disciples, friends and colleagues admire his all-encompassing knowledge, eloquence and elegance, unlimited interest in different cultures and sympathetic understanding of others, as well as his gentle sense of humour.

We know his passion for adventure; his romantic and poetic character, reflected both in his writings and his life; and his love of nature, people and animals. A true humanity shows itself in all of Jerzy Tulisow’s undertakings.

In gratitude for all that we have received from him, we wish Jerzy Tulisow many more travels and new experiences, fascinating research opportunities and fresh inspirations!

On behalf of all of his disciples, friends and colleagues,

Agata Bareja-Starzyńska
EMILIA RÓŻA SUŁEK
(Humboldt University, Berlin)

Invisible Mongols. Observations from Fieldwork in Tibet¹

Story#0: The restaurant

In the township where I worked there was only one restaurant. They sold only one dish, a kind of hot pot served in a clay bowl, in which large slices of meat floated in a thick broth. A small television set showed only one program, but with a bit of luck one could play one of the scratched VCDs collected on a dusty shelf. There were neither many tables nor customers, but pastoralists from more remote townships stopped here on their way to the county town, and township officials, teachers and personnel of the local clinic came for entertainment. I also spent hours staring at the films and eating the soup, day after day. The woman running the restaurant was not from here. She was from Rarja (Rwa rgya), from the Jasag (Ja sags) tribe.² Being trained as a Mongolist, I had an instant association with the Mongolian word zasaγ, and asked if the tribe was of Mongol origin.³ Yes, it was – the woman said. It is the tribe from which Aряγ Gebsγi (A ryag dge bshes) received the land to build Rarja Monastery, famous in north-eastern Tibet.

¹ My thanks, first and foremost, to Agata Bąraγ-Śtarzyńska for inviting me to this volume. Not only is it a pleasure to contribute to this publication, but without her encouragement this article would have never been written. I am also indebted to several other persons who in various ways assisted me in writing, first of all Bianca Holleman, Fernanda Pirie, Tsering Tshar, but also Gerald Roche, Lena Jabb, Benedikt Lindske, Reinier Laalmar, and Roman Praczkowski. Finally, I extend my thanks to Toni Huber and Philip Salzman for their friendly support in giving this paper its final shape.

² Rarja is used both as the name of a monastery and a bigger area having administrative status of a ‘town’ (Cham dgra). ‘Rarja’ and other Tibetan words appear in this essay in two forms. One is their simplified phonetic equivalent (from the region discussed), and the other (after their first use) transliteration according to the system of Turrell Wylie.

³ Zasaγ is a word of many meanings. In this context it is a title of a head of an autonomous banner or a socio-political unit in the Mongolian administration system of the Qing dynasty. Banners in Qinghai were replaced with the PRC administration units. In Inner Mongolia they remained as a county level division. On zasaγ cf. Atwood 2004: 617.
What is this article about?

This article brings together fragments of stories and experiences gathered in various places in Golok. They come from research conducted on a topic which neither focused upon the Mongols living in Tibet nor dealt with Tibetan-Mongol relations. However, during my work in this presumably very Tibetan environment and with very Tibetan people, I had repeated encounters with a layer of 'Mongol reality' which used to characterize, and to some degree still does, features of cultural experience, history and identity in this region. Though visible to a person with eyes trained to see Mongolian themes and ears attuned to the Mongolian language, this reality appeared to be hidden from the eyes and ears of the vast majority of local inhabitants, not to mention outsiders. Though I conducted research in Tibet, I came across narratives, allusions, place names, and even melodies which belonged to this Mongolian dimension of local identity. The stories about these encounters are dispersed throughout my fieldnotes and diaries and if not brought together in this article, they would remain confined to my drawer like so many other things that one notes down, but later on deems of no use for scholarly publication. The present contribution is thus a sum of my observations from the moments when the Mongolian past shone through the Tibetan present. Or -- to put it in a different way -- when traces of the old Mongolian painting made themselves visible on the canvas covered with another, newer picture.

Story #1: The elusive Mongolness of Arig Gebshi

Rajarja Monastery is located at the foothills of Amnye Chumngön (A myes khyung sngon), a red rock formation raising on the northern banks of the Machu (rMa chu) or Yellow River. It was founded by Arig Gebshi Jampa Gelek Jalsen (A rig dge bshes byams pa dge legs rgyal mtsphan), also known as Jalsen Özer (rGyal mtsphan 'od zer) (1726–1803), born in Arig Cheb (A rig khyeb) not far from the Amnye Machen (A myes rma chen) mountain range. Arig Gebshi studied for many years in Central Tibet, and on his return established Rajarja Monastery in 1769. He headed it for over twenty years before handing the responsibilities over to Hangza Pandita Lobzang Darje (Shing bza' pandi ta blo bzang dar rgyas, 1753–1824), who is believed to be a reincarnation of Tsongkhapa's mother, Hangza Achö (Shing bza' a chos); Arig Gebshi himself did not

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8 Tsongkhangpa Lobzang Donkpa (Thong khra pa blo bzang don skyabs) (1357–1419) was a famous Buddhist teacher, originally from Amdo, whose activities led to the formation of the Gelug (dGe legs) school.

9 Kols and Thoshea state that since it reopened (1982 is the year of its official reopening according to the Religious Affairs Bureau in Golok TAP), Rajarja was a poor monastery and was rebuilt thanks to the support of the local population and pilgrims (2005: 52). My informants in Rajarja said that the government also contributed money to it as a compensation for the destruction brought during the Cultural Revolution. Several construction projects were underway in 2010, including a temple for Arig Gebshi's statue, part of which survived the turmoil of the 1960s. In 2010, the monastery generated its own income and was involved in several business enterprises.

10 Zhibergs and yulhas (yl bu) is a class of dei loci, mountain or territorial deities, belonging to what Giuseppe Tucci called a 'folk religion' of Tibet (1980: 163ff).


12 According to the Sog County government website, the county has 59,100 inhabitants of which 93% are Mongols (Anonymous 2013). Mongolian identity in Soggo receives strong support from the government, with Mongolian language taught at schools, and used – next to Chinese – as signs in public places (cf. Diehl 2007). At least part of the population sees this support as a manifestation of the principle of divide et impera or intentional attempt at weakening Tibetan identity. I thank Fernanda Pire for sharing this observation.

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4 Golok (mGo log), today a Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture (hereafter TAP) in Qinghai Province, PRC. It takes its name after Golok tribes, which constitute the majority of its population.

5 The material presented here was collected in 2009–2010 during research on caterpillar fungus trade in Golok and transformations of the pastoral economy (Sulek 2009, 2010, 2012, 2014). Longer excerpts from the interviews and fieldnotes (edited for this article) are followed by the year of recording.

6 For more about the monastery, called Ganden Tashi Junga (dGa idan bsha a shis 'byung gnas), cf. 'Phrin las 2008: 8–23.

7 For information about Arig Gebshi's life, see rGyal mtsphan 'od zer 2004: 1–8.
(sBrang nag), who are another population group in Golok TAP, fought were called Sogpo, Arig Sogpo or Arig.13 I asked who these Sogpos and Arigs in the narratives were, and my informants said that both names referred to various groups of Mongols. Seen in this light, Arig Gebshi should also be a Mongol and some sources call him so: Joseph Rock, for example, who stayed in Rarja in 1926, said that he was a “Mongol from Kuku-Nor” (1956: 66).14 However, while on a collective level the equation between the Arigs and Mongols was often made, on the level of individuals – especially important Buddhist figures such as Arig Gebshi – it was less certain. My informants identified the Arigs with the Mongols (when they spoke about them as their former enemies), but they did not consider the founder of Rarja Monastery to be a Mongol, too. On the contrary, the tulku and monks I interviewed said clearly: “Arig Gebshi was not a Mongol. He was a real Tibetan”.

Whether the name Arig denotes people of Mongolian stock is not clear, and some studies explain that they were not Mongols, but Tibetans who allied with them (CPPCC 1999: 25). This may be historically correct, but everyday understandings of history in particular localities can be different. Present-day fieldwork shows that some Arigs (in this case from Sog County) do indeed see themselves as successors to the Mongols who ruled the area in the past, and identify themselves with the Mongols and Mongol territory (Pirie 2013: 81–82). What their origins are is another topic, and we do not know whether they are of partly Mongol or entirely Mongol descent. Is it possible that they were not Mongol, but because of their political allegiance were classified as such by their neighbors and that persisted into future generations? Did they accept it as their self-image? The truth is probably multiple, as groups called Arig in this part of the plateau are many. What is more, private identities do not have to follow the written word. Looking from today’s perspective, reconstructing identities from the time before the People’s Republic of China is a difficult task, as the system of sha ethnic minz u divided people into new categories and gave them new labels, which often, but not always, followed what people thought about themselves.15 This system has had a profound impact on the way people thought about themselves, as Shinjilt showed in the example of the population of Sogpo

13 Wannkhals live mainly in Machen County, trace their origins to the Rebkong (Reb kong) region (which historically was bigger than a county of this name in Malho, rMa lho, TAP, Qinghai, cf. Dhompon 2011: 36), and speak a different dialect than Goloks. Their material culture, family ceremonies, and religious affiliations also show their distinctiveness from Goloks, even if these differences are sometimes exaggerated. In the past, some Wannkhals tribes were allied with Goloks as their ‘outer tribes’ or phyi ide (phyl ide), others kept their separate status. More on this topic cf. Sulek 2010. 

14 Rock wrongly assumed in his diaries that Arig Gebshi came from the “Arik tribe beyond the Kokonor” (2003: 105). Indeed, there are Arigs northeast of the Kuku Nor Lake (today Misoqsahan, Misbhu byang, TAP, Qinghai), which must have misled Rock in his analysis.

15 The term sha ethnic minz u refers to fifty-six officially recognized ‘nationalities’ constituting the population of the PRC. On the process of how they were identified and benefits associated with this status cf. Gladney 2004: 9ff and Mackerras 1994.

16 People there switched between their minz u identities depending on what was convenient in a given context and period. As Hildegard Diemberger observed, the line between being a Mongol and Tibetan was crossed back and forth (2007: 117). The case of the complex Arig identity appeared in her analysis, too.

Independently of who the Arigs are, my informants showed an interesting selective approach to history. They identified the Arigs with Mongols, but suspended this identification for some personages who – because of their extraordinary role or position – they preferred to be Tibetan. Or, to turn it the other way round, they recognized Arig Gebshi as a Tibetan, but did not admit as Tibetans those Arigs with whom their ancestors battled over the land: they were for them Mongols, regardless of whether by birth or political choice. My informants from Golok were not an exception in their flexible approach to this topic, and Shinjilt’s study about Sog County showed that the Arig identity is subject to continuous reinterpretation both by them and their neighbours, and swings between the poles of Mongol- and Tibetanness (2004: 30). In a situation of territorial conflict, such as with the Ngultra (dNgul ra’i) tribe from Machu (rMa chu) County in Kanho (Kan lho TAP, Gansu; analyzed by Shinjilt 2007 and Pirie 2012) the Arigs were treated as Mongols both by their Sogpo neighbours who supported them, and by their Tibetan opponents from Ngultra. The latter are said to have attacked the Arigs with the call to ‘drive the Mongols away’, i.e. using the same phrase which appears in the Golok narratives about the past (Shinjilt 2007: 352).

Story#2: Golok belonged to the Mongols

One does not need to look far to find stories about the Golok highlands being inhabited by the Mongols in the past. These stories belong to the Goloks and Wannkals’ migration narratives and are alive in people’s memories. Both groups admit that they have not lived since times immemorial in what is today called Golok, but that they settled there when the region was under the control of the Mongols. How Golok happened to be in Mongol hands during the past was briefly explained by a Golok monk from Gabde (dGa’ bde) County:

These Mongols weren’t big in the beginning, but enlarged their land. (...) Changkar Jelwo (Phying gur rgyal bo) conquered two thirds of the globe and the Mongols came all around Golok. We still have people in Golok who say they’re Mongolian roots. After him, there was Tendzin Chöjel (bsTan ‘dzin chos rgyal), who believed in Buddhism, and came to Tibet with peaceful intentions. But later on, there’s another one, Lhabzang (Lха…)

For discussion of how the Mongols were classified in the minz u system cf. the above mentioned study. Here, it is enough to say that the Jasags (who are of Mongolian descent, both according to them and their neighbors) were registered as Tibetans, and the Arigs of Sog County, who are said to be historically Tibetan, changed their minz u identity to Mongolian (Shinjilt 2004: 26).
bzang) and this one was evil. He invaded Tibet and killed Desi Sanje Jamtsa (sDe srid sangs rgyas rgya mtsho). So among the Mongols there are good and bad people alike, and some khas (jelmo, rgyal bo) believed in Buddhism so much that they offered their tribes to Labrang (bLa brang) and Rebkong (Rebkong) [monasteries]. [2009]

All persons mentioned in this account are well known in Tibetan and Mongolian history. Changkar Jelwo, literally the “King of Feel Tents” referring to the Mongol yurt, is a Tibetan epithet for Genghis Khan, who needs no introduction. Tendzin Choje or Gusri Khan (1582–1655) was a leader of the Khoshut Oirats, whose troops assisted the 5th Dalai Lama Ngawang Lobzang Jamtsa (Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho) in his rise to power in 1642. He held the title of the King of Tibet, and settled with his tribes in the Kuku Nor region. Another Khoshut khan, Lhazhong (1698–1717), marched into Lhasa with different intentions: to depose the 6th Dalai Lama, Tsangyang Jamtsa (Thyang dbyangs rgya mtsho), kill regent Desi Sanje Jamtsa and install a new Dalai Lama of his choice. Desi Sanje Jamtsa (1653–1705) was a famous regent who concealed the death of the 5th Dalai Lama from the Qing emperor, continued building the Potala (Po ta la) Palace, and authored a number of studies on medicine and other topics, which made him one of the most prolific scholars of his time. Finally, Labrang and Rebkong (today in Gansu and Qinghai respectively) are well known for their Buddhist monasteries: Labrang Tashichil (bLa brang bkra shis 'khyil) and Rongwo Gonchen (Rong bo dgon chen) or Rongwo Dechen Chokorling (Rong bo bde chen chos 'khor gling).17 Both had under their jurisdiction large tracks of land as well as communities of Mongolian (and Tibetan) pastoralists inhabiting these. They were known as the lhardo (lha sde) or lay supporters who provided the monasteries with taxes, donations, labour and military force.18

All these well-known names belong to the ‘big history’ studied and celebrated across Tibet and beyond. However, there is also a ‘small history’ built of events whose importance has not been recognized outside of the small locale, one populated by personages who do not feature in ‘big history’ books. In this modest local history, the memory of Tibetan-Mongolian relations is constructed around battles and various clashes and small; one of them is told in Story5.19 These conflicts (especially between Goloks and Mongols) were part of the Tibetan migration to the north, which started in the 18th century and resulted in the Mongols being displaced from territories which they had come to occupy partly thanks to the political support they had shown to the 5th Dalai Lama. This migration and conflicts on the grassland connected to it are described in historical and academic sources (e.g. Bulag 2002: 38ff) and find their reflection in foreign travel reports (e.g. Przeval’ski 1875: 287, Tafel 1914: 291ff). But, they are also remembered by the pastoralists, who eagerly tell how their ancestors pushed the Mongols out of their lands. The same informant said:

In the beginning, there were very many Mongols in Golok, in Darlag (Dar lag), Gabde and Jigdir (gCig sgril) [counties]. They were driven away by the Goloks. As for the Wranaks, I don’t know what they did. Maybe they mixed with the Mongols? Maybe half of them are Mongols? Even though we, the Goloks, drove the Mongols away, some of them stayed behind and we have places called Sogrima (Sog ru ma) and Sogkor (Sog skor). Maybe Metsang (dmde bshangs) and Dzawu (drga bo) also had some brave men (...), who fought against the Mongols, but I’m not sure about it. I’m not from among them. As a Golok I know things about Goloks, not about Wranaks. We know that in Gabde there’re no Mongol tribes, but the Goloks didn’t go up to the Metsang places, such as Domkhok (sDom khog) and others, and so maybe they’re mixed there.

The idea of being of mixed origins appeared also later in the same interview. It seemed that to find out who is who can be more complicated than shorthand ethnic labels such as ‘Tibetan’ and ‘Mongol’ suggest. The man cited above then continued his story about the Mongols who retreated from Golok, and who lost not only a significant part of their earlier lands, but also much of their culture:

Now, the Mongols live in Sog County. People there speak Tibetan, their culture and everything is Tibetan, but they say they’re Mongols. The father can be Mongol and the mother Tibetan, but they still say they’re Mongols. They are ‘Tibetan-Mongols’ (Wolso, Bod sog). [2009]

Where being a ‘Mongol’ ends and being a ‘Tibetan’ starts is difficult to say, and this article does not intend to answer the question. These categories of the nation-state flatten the picture, reducing its multi-dimensional complexity into a black and white sketch. As Max Atdmann remarked in his study about the 19th century conflicts in the Kuku Nor region, such essentialized categories as ‘Tibetan’ and ‘Mongol’ had limited relevance in this setting, and what seemed to have a bigger significance was affiliation with local political structures, ways of life, and lineages: ‘small identities’ were more important than ‘big’ ones (2010: 43ff). A closer look at the nation (or ethnicity) based categories of Mongol- and Tibetanness reveals many shades of grey between these categories and different levels of strangeness and familiarity. ‘Sogpo’ is a broad term covering people of
Mongolia, Inner Mongolia within the PRC, and the Mongols on the Tibetan plateau. If the Mongols were strangers, those from Tibet were ‘familiar strangers’ to borrow the title of Jonathan Lipman’s book about the Hui (1997). Calling them Wolos or ‘Tibetan-Mongols’ assigns them a place in-between, making them more ‘ours’ and more familiar than those in other parts of China or Mongolia.

**Story#3: Black Tents**

Golok is inhabited by a large number of pastoral tribes, some termed *dewa* (*sde ba*), and some *tsowa* (*tsho ba*), depending upon their size, importance, and linguistic custom. Some of these tribes do not identify with the name Golok under which the region is known, but call themselves Wranakah. This name, which translates as ‘Black Tent’, sounds surprising in the context of pastoral Tibet, where black tents were a common form of dwelling and where, as a result, nearly all pastoralists were ‘black-tent-pastoralists’ as Matthias Herrmanns argued (1949: 45). ‘Ethnic’ and other collective appellatives are supposed to be based on distinctions that could serve as identity markers and differentiate the name holders from those who were — in one way or another — different. In that respect, the name Wranakah did not seem to fulfill this function at least as long as the Wranakhs were placed in the Tibetan (black tent dwelling) context. If all Tibetan pastoralists lived in black tents, why should one group of them choose to call itself ‘Black Tents’? This appears illogical.

To find the answer to this riddle, I asked pastoralists and local historians how the name Wranakah originated. The explanation “because we live [or lived] in black tents” told only part of the story, and — without a wider context — did not seem to make sense. I asked, “Did you call yourself Wranakah by yourselves? If yes, why, if your neighbors used the same type of dwelling? Or was this name given to you by others who did not live in black tents?” “Yes”, came the answer, “It was actually given to us by Mongols.”

It comes from the times when we lived next to them, and they had white yurts instead of tents.” Though some Wranakah informants stated that the name was coined by Goloks, who lived in white tents when they first arrived in their present-day settlements, the theory locating the beginnings of the name in the time when the Wranakhs and the Mongols were neighbours was more common. It is partly confirmed by historical sources that mention a term *Rongwo wra kar nak* (*Rong bo sbra dkar nag*) (lit. ‘white and black tents from Rongwo’) referring to the tribes ‘offered’ to Ngawang Trinle Jamtsos (*Ngag dbang phrin las rgya mtsho*), the abbot of Rongwo Gonchen (1678–1734), by a Mongol *gimwang* (cf. *Jigs med theg mchog* 1988: 761–762). The latter was Daicing Qoshici Tsagun Danjii (d. 1735), Gushri Khan’s great grandson and the first Mongol ruler in the region who received the *gimwang* title from the Manchu emperor. This is the generous Buddhist khan mentioned in Story#2. The *Rongwo wra kar nak* were Rongwo Gonchen’s *tharde*, and the ancestors of the Wranakhs were in this group, together with other white tent (or yurt) dwelling tribes. When they left Rebkong they took the name ‘Black Tents’ with them.

The genesis of the name Wranakah sketched above is very likely. However, the tribes who called themselves Wranakah also lived far away from Rebkong and Golok, around the Kuku Nor lake, according to 19th and early 20th century reports. It is an open question whether the name Wranakah is still used as a self-appellative by any communities living there. My informants believed that it has fallen out of use everywhere outside of Golok, where it underwent a spectacular change and became a cornerstone of the group identity of the prefecture’s non-Golok tribes. While it seems that it was used as a generic term in earlier times meaning ‘people of black tents’ (who probably often, but not always, were Tibetan), today the name is used in a similar way as such well-established group appellatives as ‘Golok’. Regardless of the intricacies of its history, it is clear that nowadays when the Wranakhs live together with the Goloks enclosed within the borders of one administrative unit, they use this name to stress their distinct identity. If the name really was a Mongolian invention and the yurt dwelling Mongols acted as a ‘mirror’ which magnified the otherness of their neighbours’ living patterns, they have to be credited with creating or contributing to the creation of the name Wranakah, and together with it part of the Wranakhs’ identity. And thus, though a shared neighbourhood with Mongols belongs to a closed chapter in Golok history, it is still tangible in the name Wranakah that the local pastoralists so successfully adopted.

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20 On Tibetan terms *tsowa* and *dewa* cf. Levine ad, and Firic 2005. My research confirmed Nancy Levine’s observations, but showed that the use of these terms can also depend on a linguistic custom: a tribe could be called *dewa* even if it theoretically fulfilled conditions of being a *tsowa*. It seems that the situation is even more complicated, and while in most cases I observed that the idea of common descent was the basis of tribal affiliation, it did not have to be, as Fernanda Firic remarked, as people (or groups) changed their allegiance from one tribe to another or moved for ecological reasons (2005: 12). It means that instead of looking for simple identities, one should focus on historical residues finding their trace in the complex identities within the pastoral context. This argument connects to a discussion about tribes in Mongolia (cf. Saeath 2007, Atwood 2010 and forthcoming).

21 See above and Sulek 2010.

22 This not only refers to historians *sems stricto* or persons who are historians by profession, but also amateur scholars who are teachers or officials who pursue historical searches and are considered experts in the field of local history. Some of them have published or hope to published the results of their work in book form. I am indebted to all of them, although not having their explicit authorization I refrain from mentioning their names.

23 Chin. *gimwang* or a ‘prince of the first rank’ was the highest title given to Mongols by the Qing administration. On the political circumstances of how a Mongol khan became a *gimwang* cf. Bulag 2002: 31, Wu 1995: 59ff and Pettich 1972.

24 The list of authors who wrote about the Wranakhs is too long to be given here, and can be found in Sulek 2010: 24ff.

25 Eversall, for example, wrote that “some Mongol tribes in the northeast (…) have changed from the yurt to the black tent (…) and are now known as the sBa Nag Pa (black shelter ones)” (1966: 65).
Story#4: Place names

After numerous battles, the Mongols are said to have left the land, and the ancestors of the Goloks and Wranakhs settled in their new territories. However, the Mongols have not completely disappeared from the landscape. They left behind traces: toponyms, whose existence on the map is a local Mongolian heritage. As one Golok man admitted, "It was the Mongols who originally lived here, and later on the Goloks enlarged their land and drove them away. That's why we have Mongolian names here".

The signs of the former Mongolian presence in Golok are many, as is true in the rest of northeast Tibet. The fact that Western and Russian explorers' accounts of Tibet in the 19th and early 20th century often use toponyms deriving from Mongolian rather than Tibetan language is not only a result of the authors' reliance on Mongolian-speaking interpreters or their bias to see these areas through a lens favoring the Mongols; it also comes from the latter's actual—previous or contemporary—presence there. Therefore, complaints like George Pereira's that it is a 'great error' to use Mongolian names for Tibetan-inhabited places, are not fully justified. Mongolian toponyms, as well as Tibetan ones alluding to the Mongolian past, are also found in those parts of Golok not typically considered Mongolian, such as the northeast of Machen County. The Köchü (Ko chu) river in Gable river (where there are no Mongol tribes as the monk in Story#3 said) comes from 'Blue River' (khöök in Mongolian means 'blue'). Sogrima township in Jigdrel alludes to the Mongols who must have at some point lived there (though nowadays there are none, as informants stressed), and Amnye Wayin (A manyes ba yan), which is a mountain and territorial god in Machen, comes from Mongolian word bayan or 'rich'.

While it is clear to Tibetan speakers that names such as Sogrima carry an obvious association with the Mongols, other names, such as Amnye Wayin, do not; therefore their meaning is often unintelligible for their Tibetan users. However, having discussed the name Amnye Wayin with the pastoralists living at the foothills of this mountain, I heard that this name, though Mongolian, is factually correct. The mountain is, indeed, rich in mineral resources, as they said, and hides the golden throne of Majel Bumra (rMa rgyal spom ra), the Amnye Machen mountain god, the chief one in this part of Golok.

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Story#5: The Red Stone

The Mongols left their traces in the many place names in Golok that are based on Mongolian words and sometimes have a meaning understandable only in the Mongolian language. But, events which took place in the 'small history' of the region are inscribed upon the historical topography of the place, as well, and are recalled to this day by its inhabitants. One of these stories (here narrated by a Wranakh man over 70 years old) tells of Arig Dormar (A rig rdo rmar) who was a leader of the Arigs and died in a fight with the Goloks.

One day, people from Arig came to camp in Gukhog (dGu khog), and then the Washuls (Wa shul) from the upper part [of the river] came to drive them away. They fought on the plain where horse races are held and Arig Dormar was killed. People say that there's a red stone growing on this spot where he was killed. It seems that it wasn't placed there by anyone, but grew by itself. [At this point the man's wife says of Arig Dormar, "Maybe he was a demon"]. The Goloks must have been brave men, because people say that a Golok man rested his foot against a rock when he was shooting his bow at Arig Dormar with such a strength that the sole of his buri (bos rus; felt boot) went into the rock and left an imprint which can still be seen today. The stone is growing, and when it reaches human size the land will be taken back by the Arigs, as some people say. (...) But this is just a story from the old society.

[2010]

The name Dormar in Tibetan means Red Stone. Hearing the story, I assumed that the real Arig man's identity has been forgotten (or has never been known), but he survived in people's memory nicknamed after the stone that his blood stained. Or was there no person who was his prototype, and only the unusually coloured stone and the memories of battles fought there in the past led to the creation of the imaginary figure of the Arig leader? Fascinated by the prophecy that the Arigs (or Mongols) are going to re-conquer their land when the stone reaches man-size, I tried to find the place where the Red Stone was, but to no avail. Few people had heard of it, and no one could tell me where it was, especially since there were several locations where horse races were held. Maybe, indeed, the story about Arig Dormar's death belonged to the 'old society' as the times before the People's Republic of China are colloquially called. Or maybe it belonged to the 'small history' of the place. This local history exists as long it is told, and goes away with those who knew it.

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On a map showing his route to Lhasa, Pereira noted that while lakes Kuku Nor and Gang Nor can be called with their Mongolian names, "further south there are no Mongols, and such Mongol names as Tossam (...) Nor, Boianu-korg for the great range, Oring Nor, etc., are entirely unknown to any Tibetan or Chinese" (italics added, ERS (Pereira 1923: 130).

Colours and adjectives like 'rich' are common in Mongolian place names. Kuku Nor and Bayankala Mountains (Mong. Bayan Khar, khor meaning 'black') are other well-known examples of their use in Qinghai and Sichuan.

Amnye Machen (6,208 m) located in Machen County is an important sacred mountain in Golok. It is the chief of many chidags surrounding it, including Amnye Wayin which is one of its guards or gatekeepers. Amnye Machen is a goal of large pilgrimages held every twelve years. The next year of such pilgrimage is 2014. On the mountain and pilgrimages see Buffetrille 2007 and 1997.

Guchu (dGu chu) is a river in Machen County, and a tributary of Machu or Yellow River.
Story#6: The Dörvöds

The name Dörvöd (Dür būd) intrigued me from the beginning of my research. In the Tibetan language, it is the name of a tribe (dewa) and clan (rū, rūs) in Golok. However, it has obvious Mongolian roots and exists also in Mongolian contexts. Historically, it was a name of one of four major tribes of Oprat or the so-called Western Mongols. In present-day Mongolia, the Dörvöds are recognized as one of its ethnic groups or nationalities, and live mostly in Uvs aimag in the northwest of the country. In Tibet, people carrying this name (the ‘Tibetan Dörvöd’ we could say) are scattered across Golok, with presumably the biggest number in Gabde County.

Dörvöds in Golok have many distinguished members. One of them is Aku Chöyon (A khū chos dbyings), a founder of Lhari Tashi Thondrol Dokha (Lha ri bkra shis nying grol rdo kha) monastery, which in people’s everyday conversations is simply called Aku Chöyon’s monastery (A khū chos dbyings dgon) after its founder. The monastery lies at the edge of Dawu (rTa bo) town in Machen County, was established in 2004, has many young students and grows with the local population’s and external donors’ material support. Aku Chöyon or Jadrel Chöyon Rangdröl (Bya bral chos dbyings rang grol), born in 1945, is a figure held in visible reverence by the local population. His biographies say that he spent part of his life as a hermit, lived in mountain caves, and kept a vow of silence which gained for him the nickname ‘Golok kākpa’ (kūkg pa) or ‘the mute from Golok’. Aku Chöyon still has a rather modest lifestyle: people say that he has only one set of monastic robes, and I often saw him walking through the town instead of being driven in a limousine as many other religious hierarchies were. I was repeatedly told about phenomena associated with him, which in a Western paradigm would be classified as miracles, but which for him did not seem unusual. He could be in two places at the same time, walk on the surface of water, and travel in space. As one woman said, he was seen in one end of Golok in the morning and then appear at the other end just a few hours later; a ‘normal’ travel speed between these places took a full day, even with the fastest mechanical means of transport.

When a rumour reached me that Aku Chöyon comes from a Mongolian family, I was not surprised. In fact, things seemed to fit well together, he was a Dörvöd after all. I do not know from whom I heard it, but this information must have circulated in the local society before it reached my ears. It is a valid question to ask whether one should pay attention to rumours and gossip, especially in the field, and whether they can be material for a scholarly analysis. But they are an important part of social life and they often contain important grains of truth. ‘Gossip’ and ‘rumour’ are analytically problematic terms that evade definite characterization: what makes an act speech and a piece of information gossip depends on the context and the one who is making the judgment. Scholars debate gossip’s purpose, arguing for cohesion-building and control (Gluckman 1963), or saying that it is a tool used by individuals to foster their agendas and undermine those of others (Paine 1967). But apart from looking at the social roles gossip plays, one can say that this “genre of informal communication”, as Robert Paine called it, can convey information belonging to a silenced part of history, identity or events in one’s biography, parts which one does not want to make public but which slip out of control. While gossip can be spread to discredit someone, some information can be deemed ‘gossip’ precisely because it is seen as discrediting. Maybe it was not a coincidence that the news about the Mongolian roots of Aku Chöyon’s family was fervidly denied when I openly asked about this detail in his biography: everybody assured me that Aku Chöyon is a real Tibetan. The enthusiasm with which these assurances were made resembled what I had heard about Arig Gebshi before. I might have been wrong, but I felt that my informants found this question irritating.

In 2010, I took part in a Dörvöd event in Gabde called nyeru (nye ju) in which Dörvöds from all over Golok gathered, even those living in the farthest ends of Jigdril County. After the gathering, during which horse races and a sumptuous feast were held, I had a conversation with a local government official, himself a Dörvöd, a dedicated scholar of local histories, and a person with a rich library and vast knowledge. We discussed the origins of the name Dörvöd. When I asked him his opinion, he stated that the Dörvöds came from the area of Sogpo, but that his searches for the name’s etymology were unsuccessful. “Maybe in Mongolian this name has a meaning, but nobody knows it here”, he said. Indeed, in Mongolian ‘Dörvöd’ has a meaning: it comes from dör (or ‘four’) (t-sud is a plural suffix). Though to my informant it did not make a particular sense why a group of people be called ‘the Fours’, he accepted this explanation,

30 Dörvöds (also Döreb, Döbet or Derbet) as an Oprat tribe appear in the 16th century, but the name Döreb functioning also as a clan name a few centuries earlier. The Oprats (who have the lack of Chinggisid ancestry as a unifying feature) live not only in Russia (Kalmykia) and Western Mongolia, but also in China: in Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, Gansu and Qinghai (the so-called Upper or Deed Mongols). It is worth stressing that Oprat (and wider) Mongolian tribes were not consanguineal but political-ethnic units (Atwood 2010). On Oprats and Dörvöds cf. Atwood 2004: 190, 419.

31 The word tribe is not used today to Dörvöds, Darkhans, Khaliks or other groups in present-day Mongolia, and was – by the decision of the National Congress – replaced with a more “progressive” equivalent. For Mongolian terminology and political background of the decision whether various population groups are tribes, ethnic groups or nationalities, cf. Bulag 1998: 31ff.

32 This refers to the practice of ngag cbe (ngog cba) or refraining from speaking, practiced often in connection with a religious retreat, but on a smaller scale also by lay people. Two Chinese language biographies of Aku Chöyon circulated in his monastery, both as warm photographs: Lhari Tashi Tongchao Dukha styiun shilile (A Short Historical Account of Lhari Tashi Tongchao Dukha (Monastery)) and Guo Shuo de dngongi ngeochu Xizhu Qiuyang renbog jiaoxi (A Biographical Sketch of Xizhu Qiuyang Rinoche, the Great Accomplished One of Golok). The former did not contain any bibliographic data, and the latter was reprinted from Naoru 1999, but without page numbers.

33 This rumour about Aku Chöyon’s ancestry was not the only questioning of the Tibetan origin of various persons or groups. Similar suggestions about the Warnaks was made in Story #3. Another interesting example refers to the conflict between the Arigs and Ngalums mentioned before: one Ngalum tribe that refused to take part in it was – as the rumour said – Mongolian (Shajigil 2007: 344).

34 Nyeru means something like a ‘tea for relatives’ (from nyero, nye bo, or relatives, and ju or tea) and is a yearly gathering during which members of the tribe exchange information about their camping sites and important events in their communities. Previously, nyeru has been only attended by men, but is now open also to women.
especially as no other was convincing enough. The Dörvös, he assumed, must have brought this name with them from Sogpo. But, as he stressed, they trace their origins not to the Mongols, but to Central Tibet, to the Sakya Khön (Sa skya khön) lineage and the person of Lharje Drak Nawa (Lha rje brag sna ba) who arrived in northeast Tibet in the 13th century in order to propagate Buddhism. A belief in this ancestor is shared by many groups (also Wranakhis) who live or lived in Reb Kong (Dhorndup 2011: 37). After arriving in Golok, the Dörvös received land from the Archung (A skyong) tribe in exchange for military aid. However, a conflict they were involved in led to their expulsion, and until the 1940s they stayed in Menrima (RMe’u ru ma, township in Ngowa, rNga ba, county in Ngawa Tibetan and Qiāng Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan). Despite the Dörvös’ different origin and the complex paths they took, they became an integral part of the Golok tribes, not having the ‘outer tribe’ status that the Wranakhis had. Even if they carried a Mongolian name, there was no doubt that they were real Tibetans: “I am absolutely sure about it”, the Dörvös official said.

Story#7: A lullaby

From the Fieldnotes: Sitting in a teahouse in Dawu and eating potato soup, which A. always cooks for me. We are talking about king Gesar (who was from Golok, as many people believe) and the Mongols. I am trying to locate the place where

35 “People try to give sense to their names”, he said, and mentioned a ‘folk etymology’ which associates the name Dörvös with a saying duhred dunkd (duhred dunkd; from duhre ‘channel group’), and a belief that Dörvös are so courageous that even if killed and placed in a channel, they would pull themselves together and stand up. What spoke in favor of the Mongolian roots of the name was, as he remarked, that in older literature the name was written as Dur bud (which is a modern spelling), but Dur bud is closer to its historical version.

36 This is a good example of the dynamic situation in the Golok highlands characterized by high individual and group mobility. The above story connects to the mission to Chongqiu where the Goloks appealed to Chiang K’i-sheh for his assistance against the military campaigns led against them by Ma Bufang, the governor of Qinghai. It took place in 1942, and the Dörvös escorted the Golok envoy back from Sichuan. After that the Archung leaders allowed the Dörvös to return to their land. The Golok missions to Chiang K’i-sheh are barely known outside Golok and the only Western study which takes up this topic is Holleman (forthcoming).

37 King Gesar (Ge sar), the protagonist of the famous Tibetan oral epic, is a very popular character in Golok. There are two statues of him in Dawu, Mayül Gesar Epic Village or Mayül Gesar Rigne Nyenngag Drongsa (Ma yul ge sar rig gnas rnyan ngag grong ston) in Gabde, and Gesar Palace or Gesar Songdruk Podrang (Ge sar song drug pho brang) in Darlag. The number of initiatives connected with him are many, and include open competitions in singing the Gesar epic, programs on the Golok television channel showing Golok bands singing the epic, and a series of books published under the auspices of normon Guru Jamtse (pter ston ru rgyal mtshan) and his office. Many people and tribes claim their connection to Gesar’s lineage, and Dörvös are no exception. During one interview, I heard that Dörvös is Gesar’s tribe. In any case, the epic is very much alive among the Dörvös from among whom came many acclaimed epic bards. The Dörvös were also instrumental in founding the Mayül Gesar Epic Village (cf. Recognition Letter at the Ling Gesar International Facebook account, the link under LGI 2013).

Ariq Dormar’s stone is. When discussing the prophecy that the Aris will re-conquer the Golok highlands, I suddenly hear G. [the owner of the teahouse] humming a barely audible tune. He explains that his grandfather used to sing him a Mongolian lullaby. He did not remember the words, but the melody pushed itself through more recent layers of his memory evoked by some association: the tune came out of his throat in a direct transmission from the childhood layers of his memory. Unfortunately, I could not record it, and the question is when will he be able to hum it again, as melodies come to our mind and disappear as they wish. [2010]

Based on his observations made in 1930s and 1940s, Robert Ekvall, wrote that in northeast Tibet, “many tribes whose language is now Tibetan are known as Mongols, and there are also some tribes so designated who still speak Mongolian” (1977: 11). He admitted, however, that Mongolian speakers were few, and the language lost its role of identity marker (ibid.). This is typical of how the situation of the Mongols in Tibet is described. In fact, they are often called ‘Tibetanised Mongols’, and the monk in Story#3 also remarked on the paradox of their identity: they “speak Tibetan, their culture and everything is Tibetan, but they say they’re Mongols”. Maybe their Mongolian (or Oirat, to follow linguistic classification) language became forgotten, but maybe some traces of it are still possible to find. The restaurant owner from Story#6 said she does not speak Mongolian, and she certainly did not. But there is a space between knowing the language and having forgotten it, between the active ability to use it and its total absence from memory. In favorable circumstances, the traces of it, some remnants of the language once used or at least heard, can come to the surface. G., the teahouse owner, did not speak Mongolian either, but he could hum the lullaby which his grandfather had sung, and it turned out that he remembered some numerals, too. He remembered these bits and pieces of the former linguistic fabric rather suddenly after a long discussion with the Dörvös official about Ariq Dormar’s stone.

From my Fieldnotes: Coming back to the name Dörvös, S. [the official who I interviewed] asks me to count in Mongolian. I need to concentrate, as Tibetan numbers push themselves forth instead of Mongolian ones. I start: neg, khyor, gurav, döröv, tav... S. writes down the Mongolian pronunciation using Tibetan ka kha ga nga alphabet. I repeat the numbers patiently until he gets them right. He reads: neg, khyor, gurav, döröv... and stops for a moment: similarity between this numeral and his tribe name is obvious, even in modern Mongolian language or Khalkh dialect. G. [the teahouse owner] asks: “Can you say ‘one’ again? Was it neg?” With a blink of his eye, he starts humming: "zuuny ne-eg, zuuny khor-oy." His grandfather taught him counting, he says, and explains to the perplexed listeners (who did not expect that he speaks any ‘foreign’ language apart from Chinese) that zuun in Mongolian is the same as Tibetan ria (brya) or a hundred.38

38 The process of Tibetanisation of Mongols in Qianghai is a fact stated by many authors (although it can be understood in various ways). The name ‘Wesoq’ used in Story2 can also be understood as ‘Tibetanised Mongols’, as Shangjil suggests (2004: 27).

39 Zuuny neg, zuuny khyor (how my Khalkh dialect trained ear heard it) sounds actually more like tsong neg, tsong khyor (in Oirat dialect), and is part of a ‘number song’ sung during felt making. The pastoralists in
I clap my hands with joy. This is what I waited for! It was one of those moments when a hidden picture suddenly reveals itself to your eyes. Now, when G. remembers the cardinal numbers, he says: "Yes, sure, Dövdö comes from döriv. No doubt about it!" G. is in his mid-forties. He is Golok, and lived in Gabde all his life. But his grandmother was from Ramja. The time when she sang him the lullaby and taught numbers must have been over thirty years ago, during the 1970s. [2010]

What do these stories show?

This article was not conceived to present a full picture of Tibetan-Mongol relations or offer definite answers to complicated questions about local histories and identities. It was meant as a loosely organized record of my encounters with Mongolian themes in a Tibetan setting within my research region. Each of them could be used in a more advanced analysis of the complex Mongol-Tibetan relations and dynamic identities of the inhabitants of this part of the Tibetan plateau. These bits and pieces of observation and fieldwork experiences presented above have something in common and reveal several things. They show how the past is inscribed in the present, that in topographic names (Story#4), histories embodied in local topography (Story#5), ethnonyms, group identities (Story#2), mutual attitudes and stereotypes (Story#1 and #5) all maintained in social life. On a more general level, they demonstrate that not everything that scholars or local people consider to be Tibetan is really so, or at least is rather ambiguous, and that there are a multitude of streams contributing to the construction of the local identities, whose sources may lay elsewhere. Naturalized by the local populations, these streams either get a quality stamp of Tibetanness or, in other cases, pose a mystery to those who search for roots and meanings of strange sounding names and obscure histories. A careful analysis - and a hybrid academic background can be of use here - allows for re-reading and re-interpreting them.

Anthropologists can bring a significant input into the societies they study, questioning old structures, bringing new material for cultural digestion, and triggering - consciously or not - the process of self-reflection, reinterpretation, and the revaluing of identities, behaviours, life patterns, value systems and beliefs. Social anthropology is more than mere observation, it entails interventions (even if one does not like this word) which suggest alternative realities. What these casual and marginal observations reveal is that there is some Mongol undercurrent to the local experience of the past in the area one usually thinks of as northeastern Tibet; it comes to the surface at more or less unexpected moments. The eight stories show that the past is still tangible and speaks to us through the ambiguities in present-day reality.

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