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THE 'BA' RA BA TEACHINGS REACH THE  
HIDDEN LAND OF DEMOJONG ('BRAS MO LJONGS) :  
MAHĀSIDDHA DKON MCHOG RGYAL MTSHAN (1601-1687)  
AND THE TAMING OF DEMONS IN CHUNGTHANG<sup>1</sup>

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*Introduction*

The term bKa' brgyud refers to tantric teachings, which are transmitted orally from teacher to disciple. It sums up many lines which go back either to Dwags po lha rje, i.e. sGam po pa (1079-1153), the main student of the famous Mi la ras pa, or to Khyung po rnal 'byor.<sup>2</sup> Khyung po rnal 'byor founded the Shangs pa bKa' brgyud pa, a tradition which has almost disappeared. In contrast, many different lines deriving from the Dwags po bKa' brgyud pa still exist today.<sup>3</sup> One of these lines is called 'Ba' ra ba bKa' brgyud pa, a tradition which has received little attention, but once had monasteries and followers at different places in Tibet, Bhutan and Sikkim.<sup>4</sup>

The Mahāsiddha dKon mchog rgyal mtshan (1601-1687) was the first to establish a 'Ba' ra ba monastery in the hidden land of 'Bras mo ljongs. Therefore he can be regarded as the founder of the 'Ba' ra ba teachings in Sikkim. It is noteworthy that according to the common Sikkimese perception, the first bKa' brgyud pa monasteries were built by Karma bKa' brgyud pas in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and not by members of the 'Ba' ra ba bKa' brgyud pa tradition in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, as it will emerge from this paper.

The following observations are the results of a literary and ethnographic research. Among the literary sources is the hagiography

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- 1 First of all, I owe special thanks to Prof. Dr Franz-Karl Ehrhard for suggesting a study of the 'Ba' ra ba bKa' brgyud pa school. Furthermore, I am grateful to Mr Tashi Densapa, Dr Anna Balikci-Denjongpa and Tsultsem Gyatso Acharya as well as to Jenny Bentley. They were all very helpful during my fieldwork in Sikkim in 2010. I am also thankful to Mr Tashi Tsering from the Amnye Machen Institute for his support during my research for my M.A. thesis.
  - 2 The biographical data of Khyung po rnal 'byor is ambiguous. Sometimes 978/990-1127 is reported, in other cases 1002-1064. The same applies to the life dates of Mi la ras pa, where the following are given: 1028-1111, 1040-1123 or 1052-1135.
  - 3 See Smith (2001, pp. 40-46).
  - 4 I am currently working on a history of the 'Ba' ra ba bKa' brgyud pa as a PhD project.

of dKon mchog rgyal mtshan, which was written by his disciple Rin chen bstan pa'i gsal byed (1658-1696) in 1693.<sup>5</sup>

*Some notes on the 'Ba' ra ba bKa' brgyud pa*

The 'Brug pa tradition, which was founded by Gling ras pa Padma rdo rje (1128-1188), is one of the so-called eight minor bKa' brgyud pa lineages. The name derives from the first 'Brug pa monastery called gNam 'brug, which was established by gTsang pa rGya ras (1161-1211), a disciple of Gling ras pa. In the course of time, many different transmission lines appeared among the 'Brug pa. The 'Ba' ra ba tradition is an offshoot of the Yang dgon bKa' brgyud pa, founded by Yang dgon pa (1213-1256/1258), which again is a sub-branch of the sTod 'brug, established by rGod tshang pa (1189-1258).<sup>6</sup>

The 'Ba' ra ba bKa' brgyud pa school was named after the place 'Ba' ra brag in the Shangs valley, which lies in central Tibet, about 30 km from gZhis ka rtse. 'Ba' ra ba rGyal mtshan dpal bzang po (1310-1391), who was regarded as an incarnation of Yang dgon pa and who was the founding father of this tradition, was born there. He travelled several times to Bhutan, where the monastery 'Brang rgyas kha was build for him in sPa gro. He passed away in this monastery and afterwards it became an important pilgrimage site for his successors.<sup>7</sup>

During the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Nam mkha' rdo rje (1486-1553) brought the 'Ba' ra ba teachings to Mang yul Gung thang. He spent his last years in the village Grwa, a village between sKyid grong and the valley of Lan dhe. One of his benefactors was Drung pa sNyan grags dbang

5 The hagiography is part of the *bKa' brgyud gser phreng chen mo*, published in 1970 and more recently in 2010; see *gSer-phreng/a* and *gSer-phreng/b*. The part dealing with dKon mchog rgyal mtshan's travels to Sikkim was edited and published in Bkra shis tshe ring: *'Bras ljongs nang dgon sde khag gcig gi chags rabs yig cha bzhugs*, pp. 26-39. For a complete edition and a translation of the text see Erschbamer (2011). The author Rin chen bstan pa'i gsal byed, a member of the lCe family of Zhwa lu, was regarded as the 3<sup>rd</sup> incarnation of rJe 'Ba' ra ba, the founding father of the 'Ba' ra ba tradition. He travelled several times to Sikkim to meet his teacher dKon mchog rgyal mtshan.

6 See Ehrhard (2000, p. 51), Ehrhard (2009, pp. 184-188) and Smith (2001, pp. 44-45). Unfortunately, the 'Ba' ra ba tradition sometimes is mistakenly confused with the 'Ba' rom bKa' brgyud pa or the Shangs pa bKa' brgyud pa. Both, the Shangs pa and the 'Ba' ra ba were linked to the Shangs valley, but they are two completely different traditions. The 'Ba' rom, having a similar name as the 'Ba' ra ba, is one of the four greater branches of the Dwags po bKa' brgyud pa.

7 See Aris (1979, pp. 181-184), Ardussi (2002, pp. 5-16), Ehrhard (2000, p. 52) and Ehrhard (2009, p. 189, note 13).

po, a member of the 'Jam [dpal] gling [pa] family, who popularised the 'Ba' ra ba tradition.<sup>8</sup>

*Mahāsiddha dKon mchog rgyal mtshan (1601-1687)*

dKon mchog rgyal mtshan, who was born in Grwa in 1601, received his name from Sangs rgyas chos 'phel, a member of the 'Jam [dpal] gling [pa] family.<sup>9</sup> dKon mchog rgyal mtshan got different reading authorisations, for example for the *bKa' brgyud gser 'phreng* and the *'Ba' ra bka' 'bum*. Then he heard about the 2<sup>nd</sup> 'Ba' ra ba sPrul sku Karma gSal byed (d. 1658), who was travelling to Grwa to receive 'Ba' ra ba teachings from Nam mkha' rgyal po, a 'Ba' ra ba master who was staying in that region at that time.

Afterwards [he] heard that 'Ba' ra ba Karma gSal byed, the master and some disciples, were coming [to Grwa phu chos gling] in order to request the 'Ba' ra ba doctrine from Bya btang Nam mkha' rgyal po. [dKon mchog rgyal mtshan] was utterly pleased as [he] went to meet [him]. Like father and son meeting each other, their minds melted into one. At that time, they listened together to the entire 'Ba' ra teachings of Pha Nam mkha' rgyal po.<sup>10</sup>

- 8 See Ehrhard (2000, p. 51 and p. 65). Srong btsan sgam po (7<sup>th</sup> century), the first Buddhist king of Tibet, is said to have placed 100 or 500 monks in that region, which is why the place became known as Grwa. Grwa is an abbreviation for Grwa pa, which means monk. Another explanation is that the monks, supposed to have been sent by Srong btsan sgam po, drew a Buddhist monastic boundary and built a monastery in one corner (tib. *grwa*) of that boundary; see Chos dbyings rdo rje: “*Jam dpal bde chen gling pa'i gdung rabs skor gsal ba*”, pp. 56-57, Ehrhard (2004, p. 115 and p. 422, note 198), Jäschke (2003, p. 75) and Vitali (2007, p. 287). For the printing activities of the 'Ba' ra ba in this region see Ehrhard (2000).
- 9 The 'Jam [dpal] gling [pa] family already lived in Grwa during the Yar [k]lung[s] dynasty. During a visit of sKyid grong, Sa skya Paṇḍita Kun dga' rgyal mtshan (1182-1251) named their family monastery 'Jam dpal bde chen gling, the name under which the family itself became known. Sangs rgyas chos 'phel was a son of Drung pa sNyan grags dbang po, the person who acted as an important donor during the time the 'Ba' ra ba teachings reached sKyid grong; see Chos dbyings rdo rje: “*Jam dpal bde chen gling pa'i gdung rabs skor gsal ba*”, pp. 56-64, Ehrhard (2009, p. 197) and Vitali (2007, pp. 287-291 and 295-303).
- 10 Compare *gSer-phreng/a* (Vol. 3, 99.6-100.2); *de nas skabs cig [= shig] tu / 'ba' ra ba karma gsal byed dpon slob* [= *slob*] 'ga' / [100] *bya btang namkha' [= nam mkha'] rgyal po'i drung na 'bar chos zhus ba la phebs 'dug zer ba bsan [= gsan] pas / shin tu nas brnyes [= mnyes] nas 'jal [= mjal] du phebs pas / phan tshun yab sras mjal ba ltar / thug [= thugs] yid cig [= gcig] 'dres su gyur nas / der pha namkha' [= nam mkha'] rgyal po la / 'bar chos yongs rdzogs lhan du bsan [= gsan]*. See also Erschbamer (2011, p. 26). Nam mkha' rgyal po (16<sup>th</sup> century) took his first vows in

After taking the vows of a novice, dKon mchog rgyal mtshan went to 'Ba' ra brag in the Shangs valley to study under Karma gSal byed, who became his main teacher. He travelled several times to Bhutan, before he received a prophecy from his teacher, telling him to go to the previously opened sBas yul 'Bras mo ljongs (i.e. present-day Sikkim). According to the hagiography of dKon mchog rgyal mtshan, he met the Buddhist ruler Phun tshogs rnam rgyal and visited the sacred site of Tashiding.<sup>11</sup>

Subsequently, he constructed his own monastery in the 'Mon style' (*mon lugs*) in a place called 'Dam bzang:

Then [dKon mchog rgyal mtshan] went to 'Dam bzang. Afterwards [he] met Zhal ngo dKon mchog bstan pa. 'As donations for my teachings are provided, [I] will stay here!' [he] said forcefully. He established a monastery in the *mon*-style. Excellent offerings, just like 500 *khal* of rice, horses, pure *tsam pa*, rigorous copper pots, a roll of cotton and perfectly complete honours serving teacher and students were made. Then [he] stayed in a one-pointed practice: [he] increased the meditation experience and great benefit arose. All superior and inferior sentient beings of that region became his donors. The master himself erected a temple and a great assembly hall [in which was housed] a golden statue of Vajradhāra equal to the seize of a four-year-old child [containing] different kinds of stones and soil from the sacred sites of India and Tibet, 'increasing relics' of the Buddha [Śākyamuni], bones and hairs of the previous teachers and the white

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'Ba' ra brag. He travelled to many places before he reached sKyid grong, where he taught the 'Ba' ra ba teachings. He passed away in that region; see Ehrhard (2009, p. 194). For his complete hagiography see *gSer-phreng/a* (Vol. 3, 23-36).

<sup>11</sup> See *gSer-phreng/a* (Vol. 3, 112.5-113.1), Ehrhard (2009, p. 196) and Erschbamer (2011, pp. 39-40). During the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Sikkim was opened for the Buddhist doctrine by three Tibetan rNying ma Bla mas. They entered the land on different points and enthroned Phun tshogs rnam rgyal as first Buddhist ruler; see Dokhampa (2003, pp. 26-27), Mullard (2005b, pp. 31-48), Mullard (2011b, pp. 43-46) and Yeshe Dolma (1908, pp. 15-19). For further reading on the three Tibetan Bla mas see Ehrhard (2005), Mullard (2005b), Mullard (2011b, pp. 89-138), Rig'dzin dngos grub mdokham: "*rNal 'byor mched bzhi'i rnam thar mdor bsdus : A Short Biography of Naljor Chedzhi*", pp. 58-86 and Vandenhsken (2006, pp. 73-79). For further reading on the first Buddhist ruler of Sikkim see mKhan po Chos dbang: *sBas yul 'bras mo ljongs kyi chos srid dang 'brel ba'i rgyal rabs lo rgyus bden don kun gsal me long*, pp. 112-119, Chos rgyal mThu stobs rnam rgyal rGyal mo Ye shes sgrol ma: *'Bras ljongs rgyal rabs*, pp. 42-58, Rig'dzin dngos grub mdo kham: "*rNal 'byor mched bzhi'i rnam thar mdor bsdus : A Short Biography of Naljor Chedzhi*", pp. 86-94 and Risley (2010, pp. 10-11); for further reading on Tashiding and the formation of Sikkim see Mullard (2003, pp. 13-24). For more information regarding the early history of Sikkim see Mullard (2005a), Mullard (2011a) and Mullard (2011b).

and red *bodhicitta* of Ācārya Padmasambhava, father [and] mother, together with many blessed *dhāranīs*.<sup>12</sup>

Afterwards, he returned to Tibet and stayed for awhile at the main residence of the 'Ba' ra ba at 'Ba' ra brag. Then he decided to return to 'Dam bzang to act for the welfare of sentient beings. After several years he came back to 'Ba' ra brag, where he gave different teachings during the summer. In autumn, he set forth on his last journey, which took him to Northern Sikkim.

### *Taming of Demons in Chungthang*

dKon mchog rgyal mtshan travelled to bTsun mo rin chen thang (i.e. present-day Chungthang in Northern Sikkim). As he arrived, he saw demons, which caused great harm to the locals: Due to a lake-spirit, there was no water in the village, which is why the Mahāsiddha gave different blessings and a new spring of water appeared. Furthermore, he saw a stone looking like a snake-head. He recognised it as an evil demon, which would cause misfortune for the village.

Then [dKon mchog rgyal mtshan] reached bTsun mo rin chen thang [and the following] took place: Because of magical power of a local territorial divinity, it snowed heavily. Teacher and disciple were worn down. In a faithful vision, the master [recognised] the bad-temperate people being a snake-like demon and a lake spirit of the so-called old teachings. [They were] tall, [had] red eyes and stared with [their] big, wide-open eyes [and they] caused various kinds of cruelty due to two

12 Compare *gSer-phreng/a* (Vol. 3, 116.4-117.4); 'dam bzang du phebs so // de nas zhal ngo dkon mchog bstan pa dang 'jal [= mjal] nas / bdag gi bstan pa'i sbyin bdag byed pas 'dir bzhugs pa zhu zhes gsol ba nan tan btab nas / mon lug [= lugs] kyi dgon pa yang btab / 'bras khal lnga brgya dang chib [= chibs] pa gsol 'byo khro zang [= zangs] dar mnan ras yug la sogs pa'i 'bul ba bzang po dang / dpon slob rnam la zhabs tog snyen [= bsnyen] bkur phun sum tshogs pa mdzad / der [117] sgrub pa la rtse gcig tu bzhugs pas / thugs dam 'phel zhing bogs che ba byung / yul de'i skye bo chog [= mchog] dman thams cad kyang sbyin bdag tu gyur / rje nyid rang gis kyang dgon par lha khang cig dang / 'du khang chen po cig rdo rje chang [= 'chang] gi gser sku byis pa lo bzhi pa'i bong dang mnyam pa cig la / rgya bod kyi gnas khyad par can gyi sa sna rdo sna dang / sangs rgyas kyi 'phel gdungs [= gdung] / bla ma gong ma rnam kyi dbus [= dbu] skra dang pur rus / slob dpon pad ma yab yum gyi byang sems dkar dmar sogs / bzung [= gzungs] byin rlabs can du ma dang ldan pa zhiig bzhengs pa gnang nas. See also Ardussi (2011, p. 36), Ehrhard (2009, p. 196) and Erschbamer (2011, p. 44). It is not clear, where exactly dKon mchog rgyal mtshan built this monastery. However, the name of the place probably refers to the area around modern Kalimpong, a town in West Bengal, which even today is called Damsang by local Lepchas; see Ardussi (2011, p. 36) and Mullard (2011a, p. 54).

bad-temperate women. [dKon mchog rgyal mtshan] subdued [the demons] by compassion and through the power of his concentration and they promised to produce dutiful buddha activity.<sup>13</sup>

dKon mchog rgyal mtshan erected a monastery consisting of a temple and an assembly hall to tame the demons.<sup>14</sup> He spent his final years in Chungthang, where he passed away in 1687. According to his last instructions, his disciple Rin chen bstan pa'i gsal byed travelled from Tibet to Northern Sikkim to perform the necessary rituals and to bring the relics of his teacher to the main residence at 'Ba' ra brag in the Shangs valley. A statue of the deceased master was built by craftsmen from rTse gdong, a Sa skya monastery not far from gZhis ka rtse.

Nowadays the monastery follows rNying ma pa tradition. In the 1980s Lendup Lepcha, Panchayat of Chungthang, did some research on dKon mchog rgyal mtshan, being aware that this monastery was once established by the 'Ba' ra ba. He found a depiction of the master according to which a statue was built. The statue was put on the altar of the monastery in Chungthang. Locals still tell the story about how dKon mchog rgyal mtshan tamed the demons and thus prevented greater harm for the village. Apart from the snake-like stone, a tiny spring of water is located in the vicinity of the monastery. According to local perception, it appeared after dKon mchog rgyal mtshan had given several blessings.<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, one can visit a mChod rten on a hill above the village. It is very tiny, adorned by prayer flags and with a tree growing in the middle. The 'Ba' ra mchod rten, as it is called by locals, was erected to commemorate dKon mchog rgyal mtshan and his virtuous deeds.

13 Compare *gSer-phreng/a* (Vol. 3, 131.5-132.2); *de nas btsun mo rin chen thang la phebs par btsams [= brtsams] pa la / gzhi bdag gi cho 'phrul gyi kha ba cher babs nas dpon slob [= slob] rnams 'o rgyal [= brgyal] ba byung / khyad par rje nyid dad kyi gzigs snang la chos sngon pa zer ba'i* [132] *klu bdud de dang / mtsho sman de gnyis gyi mi nag po gzugs che zhing mig dmar zhing che [= mche] ba gdang [= sdang] mig tu bsgrad pa cig [= gcig] dang bud med nag mo cig [= gcig] gnyis kyis / gdug rtsub sna tshogs byed du byung bas / byams pas ting nge 'dzin gyi dbang du sdus [= bsdus] pas bka' nyan gyi 'phrin las sgrubs [= sgrub] par khas blangs.*

14 See bKra shis tshe ring: *'Bras ljongs nang dgon sde khag gcig gi chags rabs yig cha bzhugs*, pp. 109-110, Ehrhard (2009, p. 196) and Erschbamer (2011, pp. 57-58). The stone looking like a snake-head can still be seen today.

15 This stone and spring of water is not to be confused with Guru gnas do of Chungthang, the rock and water source related to Guru Padmasambhava, which is located in a different place in Chungthang.

### Conclusion

Several meaningful events took place in Sikkim in the 17<sup>th</sup> century: the land was opened for the Buddhist doctrine, the first Buddhist ruler was enthroned and the first Buddhist monasteries were established. The rNying ma pa tradition is connected to all these occurrences. Thus it is understandable that, according to common Sikkimese historiography, they are considered to be the main tradition which disseminated the Buddhist doctrine at that time. Nevertheless, they were not the sole tradition that spread from Tibet to Sikkim soon after the opening of the land. From the above it emerges that the 'Ba' ra ba bKa' brgyud pa school was present in Sikkim in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. This fact has not received much attention, but it can be proved with written and oral evidences.

Today a few monasteries in Sikkim follow the tradition of the 'Ba' ra ba, among the three largest ones are Ri nag, rTsa brngas and sPa phyug. However, they do not seem to be connected to the first 'Ba' ra ba monastery which was established in Chungthang.

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