

The Gowa Sonam Lineage in Prok (mgo ba bsod rnam s rgyud pa)

Interview with Ngawang Namgyal (NN) with contributions by Sonam Chonzom (SC)

Interview by Geoff Childs (GC) and Namgyal Choedup (NC)

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Translated by Namgyal Choedup

Note: Gowa (mgo ba) means “leader” or “headman”; Sonam is a personal name.

NN: We come from Tibet. We came to Chang Tepas Tsangma. The person whose lineage (rgyud pa) is named after is named Sonam. In Tibet they call him a Gowa (mgo ba); here we call him a pönpo (dpon po). First he came down to Lho, then one of our ancestors came to Li. Our ancestor, Sonam Tenzin, came to Prok. His son was Jampa Wangyal whose eldest son was Gyaltzen, my father. The middle son is Ongyal. The youngest son is a tulku, Rangrig Dorje. He had a naturally occurring letter A on his head. My father had two sons. My elder brother is Silnon Dorje, I am the younger. My older brother has no sons but four daughters. Lhakpa Diki, the eldest daughter, is married to Ata Chuk. Another is Dorje Gyaltzen’s wife, Karma. She is the youngest. Tsering Diki, one of the middle ones, died. She had a daughter and a son. My father’s brother (agu) has three sons. I have four sons, some I send to school and some to religion. The tulku Rangrig Dorje has one daughter (sras mo), she is married to Amji Wangchuk in Kathmandu.

GC: Is your lineage considered high or low?

NN: It is a high status lineage.

SC: When people marry it is considered a high lineage. My uncle (agu) took a Gowa Sonam wife, and my mother is also Gowa Sonam. Our parents told us that Gowa Sonam is high, but I don’t know which other ones are high.

NN: We are not ordinary low lineage. Our lineage is high status. We even challenged the government in Tibet which is why we were chased out of Tibet.

SC: You guys aren’t smart, that’s why you were chased from Tibet.

NC: Please tell us about the old history when you were chased out of Tibet.

NN: The fight with the government happened because of water. We irrigate by rotation, but our people are stubborn. When it was someone else’s turn to irrigate we took it; that is the root

cause of the fight with the government. My father died when I was eight, so I couldn't ask him about history. We say from 1-20 a person is a child, 20-40 is a man, and 40-60 is an elder. When I was 8 I became without father, so how could I ask anything?

Our kyelha (skye lha; birth deity) is Kangri Lhabtsen [Kailash], so we keep it. But we've forgotten about our male lineage deity (rus lha; literally, bone deity). Everyone in our lineage from Lho to Li to Prok consider this to be our kyelha. Kangri Lhasbsen is the yab (father), and Apchi Lhamo is the yum (mother).

NC: When do you propitiate him?

NN: Once in the fall, once in spring. We propitiate him right here in our home. We do gyennga lhabtsang (rgyan lnga lha bsangs), I have a text [for reciting]. We burn juniper branches (bsangs), we do it right in the home. We do it for both the yab and yum. We do it in the third and ninth months, but this ninth month is black (zla nag; inauspicious) so I'll do it in the 10th month. I do the ritual. I don't know our rus lha. My birth deity is here, Kyemen Tsomen [a deity associated with Khal Tso, a lake above Prok], but my ancestral birth deity (mes mes skye lha) is Gangri Lhabtsen. That is the birth deity of Gowa Sonam. It is said we came from Kham, but it is not clear.

GC: Was he a headman (mgo ba) in Nepal or Tibet?

NN: Yes, in Chang gyu [Tibet], in Tapa Chang [unclear where this is]. We are a high gyupa here. Nowadays our customs are to wash the plates. In the past our custom was to lick them clean. We don't mix our plates with lower people, we put them higher up. It has become better these days. We are higher status gyupa. We are not ordinary ones who sit in the corner.

NC: Who do members of your gyupa marry?

SC: We take brides from equal status lineages. If they marry from outside, we distance ourselves from them. We look for equal status brides.

NN: In our village, my wife's gyupa is highest status; we took a bride from them. We have a saying, if you take a person you take from higher up, if you take land you take it from lower (mi chig lang na tho sa nas len; shing gcig lang na ma sa nas len). The lower lands are more fertile. If we take a person from higher up [higher status], because we are high they accept. If we are from lower [status] they would not accept. We are not like yawa (ya ba?; outcastes) and other groups. In Sama there is Siri Ngadag (mnga' bdag; high ranking lineage of lamas). Here we have

Kunu Thakur [Thakuri lineage ancestor sent to Nubri to be subba (tax collector) on behalf of Nepali government]. These are the highest. I'm not an ordinary person, so I'll take a high status bride as well [laughs]. Times are changing, but during my time it remained this way. My kids may bring a high or low status partner, who knows?

SC: Don't say that, we should teach our kids. Your father passed away at 8, you don't know history. Now you should teach our kids.

NC: What if your kid marries a foreigner?

NN: Times have changed, old things don't work anymore. Even if I tell Geoff that he won't agree. In past I eat remains from father's bowl, but these days people wash the bowls. Old traditions are dying out now. Now you can't take the position that I'm high and I'm right.