

A study of Khyung Sprul and his monastery Gur gyam

Sonam Chogyal

My paper focuses on Gur gyam Monastery in Mnga' ris, i.e. western Tibet and on the life of its founder, Khyung sprul Rinpoche (1897–1957). The primary source for my work is the two-volume biography of Khyung sprul, composed by his disciple Dpal ldan tshul khrims and published in India in 1957. I have also done fieldwork in Mnga' ris in 1998, interviewing disciples of Khung sprul as well as local administrators. I have also studied letters exchanged between Khyung sprul and local officials at the time, and a translation of two such letters are included in my thesis in order to demonstrate the official relationship between a monastery and the government in old Tibet.

Khyung sprul travelled widely and he went on pilgrimage to holy Buddhist sites in India twice, in 1922 and in 1925 respectively. The reason for his later travels to India in 1946 and 1948 was to print Bon scripture. Khyung sprul's activities outside Tibet have been studied by Per Kvaerne in an article from 1998. I have therefore focused on the construction of the monastery and Khyung sprul's activities in Tibet. In the mean time, I have studied how the monastery obtained land, animals, forest, and servants as donations from the government, from ordinary people, from noble families and even from foreign countries. I have also focused on the policies of the regional and the central government towards the establishment of this monastery, which belong to Bon religion.

Khyung sprul was born into a wealthy family and his father was minister of the King of Hor, in the Nag chu area, to the north of Lhasa. Khyung sprul was educated by many learned masters of the Bonpo tradition, as well as by many masters of various Buddhist traditions in Tibet. After he finished his religious studies at the Sman ri monastery in Gtsang, Khyung sprul was a wandering lama, preaching Bon wherever he came. After many years of staying in remote area, he felt the need for a permanent residence. In 1936, he built his own monastery in Mnga' ris.

Khyung sprul was well known in western Tibet as a religious master, local mediator and astrologer, he was even widely sought as a healer with magical abilities in Tibet and the district of Kinnur in northern India. He came to dedicate his life to restoring the Bon tradition which had disappeared in western Tibet, and he built monasteries in sacred places in order to help people avert conflicts, disease and to promote peace and harmony for the region.

Gur gyam was built and run entirely according to the traditional ways that have been practised for nearly a thousand years in Tibet. During its construction, many officials of the local government as well as many religious masters from other religious schools gave their support to the monastery. Although it functioned for only two decades, the

treasures, the precious scriptures, and the religious objects that were preserved in the monastery at the time could compete with many other older monasteries in Tibet. Unfortunately, Gur gyam monastery was destroyed during the Cultural Revolution.

The restoration of Bon and Buddhist monasteries in western Tibet started again in the early 1980s. Not long after the reestablishment of Gur gyam in 1987, all the religious activities such as performing rituals, staying in retreat and doing pilgrimages were actively revitalized. At present, the monastery is small compared what it used to be and there are only six monks, and Gur gyam monastery is the only Bonpo institutions in western Tibet. The monks who live and maintain the monastery come from far beyond the region where the monastery is located. The process of rebuilding the monastery is still going on and it attracts many Bonpo believers and scholars as well as tourists again.