

Centering the Histories of Tibetan Place Names¹

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Abstract: This essay documents the richness of meanings encapsulated by Tibetan place names through a study of the name Golok and how it can reflect, embody, and guide historical memory, social relations, and relational ties to more-than-human beings.

Keywords: Geographical names, Indigenous knowledge, local histories, Golok.

Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o has observed that language is not simply a means of communication but a “collective memory bank of a people’s experience in history” and is entwined with how we perceive ourselves and our place in the world (1986, 15-16). Lama Jabb (2015) further posits that language not only records experiences but also shapes how individuals and societies are able to think, feel, and communicate. I follow these approaches to viewing language as neither strictly functional for communication nor deterministic of perceptions and worldviews but as articulations that can guide, shape, and

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enrich experiences and understandings of the world around us, sometimes in ways that resist easy translation. In this essay, I explore these approaches by taking the example of Tibetan place names. Tibetan place names are increasingly rendered into or replaced by the administrative units of the Chinese state, or even forgotten as Tibetans spend less time in their home places.² What knowledge systems and perceptual worlds might be obscured or written over in the process?

As researchers, we also often take place names for granted as naturalized backdrops to our research. But as I hope to show, Tibetan place names themselves, far from being labels of place easily translatable between languages, act as a “collective memory bank” capable of shaping experiences and relationships in the world. Specifically, Tibetan place names can reflect, embody, and guide ecological knowledge, historical memory, social relations, and relational ties to more-than-human beings. While it is beyond the scope of this short essay to discuss each of these aspects in detail, here I demonstrate a few aspects of this process through the example of the name Golok (མགོ་ལོག་).

To the unfamiliar eye, many Tibetan landscapes, full of rolling grasslands and endless mountain passes, may appear to be empty spaces—uninhabited and pristine. Yet these places are highly legible, often in fine spatial detail, to those who dwell there or frequent them through the use of place names. While many of us may associate place names with built structures like houses and streets,³ we must also understand that relationships between people and places are not always embodied in structurally built forms. Such relationships between people, land, and more-than-human beings can also shape the physical environment and

2 These are of course part of broader state processes of replacing Indigenous categories, knowledge, and practices with those legible to and governable by the state. For a discussion on this, see Huatse Gyal 2021.

3 For instance, both Bachelard 1994[1958] and Heidegger 1971 argue that the activities of building and dwelling are fundamental to bringing about a material manifestation of both the human imagination and an innate disposition of the physical landscape, such as a house. For them, coming from a Western philosophical context, the act of building produces meaningful locations, but they fail to take into account other forms of meaningful place making.

can manifest in rich traditions of oral histories that both reflect and maintain such relationships⁴.

There are various oral and written histories regarding the meaning and origin of the name Golok and I will draw on local historiography through interviews and the 1991 *Golok Genealogy* (མགོ་ལོག་རུས་མཛོད།) compiled by Gylung Tashi Gyamtso (ཁྱི་ལུང་བཀ་ཤེས་བླ་མཚོ།) and Gylung Tukchok Dorje (ཁྱི་ལུང་བུགས་མཚོ།). Invariably, the name Golok is bound up with its origin stories and refers not just to the place but also to the people and their specific history moving through various Tibetan lands and how their relations with this particular place transformed both people and place to become “Golok.” The Golok origin stories share similar themes with those of some other eastern Tibetan communities, stories that stretch back to a beginning point in collective memories set in the Tibetan Imperial period (7th-9th c.) and located in central or western Tibet.

According to a local Golok scholar, whom I shall call Jikmé, Golok people originally came from Ladakh sometime during the Tibetan Empire, sought better pastures in Damzhung (འདམ་གཞུང་།), then moved on to reside in a place called Gukok Valley (འགྲུ་ལོག་ལུང་།) in the realm of the King of Ling (ལྷིང་།), in present day Pelyül County in Kardzé (དཀར་མཛོལ་དབལ་ཡུལ་རྫོང་།)⁵. In one variation of the origin story, the lineage of one of the sons of Nyenpo Yütsé (གཞན་པོ་ལྷ་མཚེ།), a powerful mountain deity in the southeastern part of Golok, had many households whose women were of human lineage. Five young women from such households went on pilgrimage to several sacred mountains in southeastern Tibet⁶.

4 Indigenous Studies scholars have documented the reciprocal and relational nature of Indigenous relationships with places. See for instance: Alfred and Corntassel (2005); Corntassel (2013); Simpson (2013); Weaver (2001). Keith Basso in his seminal 1996 study, *Wisdom Sits in Places* demonstrates the rich social functions of place names for the Western Apache (now in Arizona, United States) that are often attached to unbuilt landscapes.

5 Interview with Jikmé, 2015.

6 In the oral version, this pilgrimage was to Khawakarpo (ཁ་བ་དཀར་པོ།). Interview with Jikmé, 2015. In the *Golok Genealogy*, this pilgrimage included Katok Dorjeden (ཀ་ཚོག་རྗོ་རྗེ་གདན།) in Kardzé and Khawakarpo and the Chicken-footed Mountain (རི་ཚོ་བྱ་རྒྱུད་།) in current-day Yunnan (p. 27).

On the way back, they passed through Gukok Valley and met a chieftain by the name of Dri Lhagyel (འབྲི་ལྷ་རྒྱལ།). One of the young women, Nyenza (གཉན་བཟའ། literally, “the consort from Nyen”), became his wife while the others returned home. From Dri Lhagyel and Nyenza came the lineage of leaders of what later became known as the Golok *tsowa* (ཚོ་བ།) (*Golok Genealogy* 1991, 27-28)⁷. The leading lineages of the Golok people are literally the human de-scendants of the mountain deity, Nyenpo Yütsé.



View over Zalmogang Range with Nyenpo Yütsé and his gatekeepers (ཟའ་མོ་སྐང་རྒྱུད་ཀྱི་གཉན་པོ་གཡུ་ཚང་དང་དེའི་སློང་།). Photo by the author.

Relations soured with the King of Ling, and one night, the powerful mountain deity, Amnye Machen (the maternal uncle of Nyenpo Yütsé), appeared in the dream of Nyenza, prophesying that she would return to her ancestral land. So Nyenza and Dri Lhagyel took four hundred households and went to

7 A very similar version was also recounted by Jikmé in an interview (2015).

Markok (མར་ཁོག) in present day Pema County, Golok (མགོ་ལོག་བད་མ་རྫོང་།). There, they ended up fighting the original inhabitants of these lands, the Nyen, Khar, and Ba *dewa* (གཉན་མཁར་བ་སྤེ་བ་གསུམ།), who were defeated and fled to surrounding areas. This victory in Markok is considered to be the original site from which the people and place became Golok (*Golok Genealogy* 27-28).⁸

As illustrated in these stories, familial and genealogical relations extend to important protector deities inhabiting the land. In this way, Golok people are also brought into the genealogical relations tying together sacred mountains and lakes in Tibet: The father of Nyenpo Yütsé in Golok is Mount Kailash (གངས་རིན་པོ་ཆེ།) and the mother is Lake Mapham (མ་པམ་གཡུ་མཚོ།), both in Western Tibet; the maternal uncle is Amnye Machen in central Golok (མ་རྒྱལ་སྐོམ་ར།); the nephew is Nyenchen Thangla in Central Tibet (གཉན་ཆེན་ཐང་ག།); and the grand-father is Zhagdra Lhatse in Minyak (བཞག་བྲ་ལྷ་ཚེ།); not to mention the immediate family and court of Nyenpo Yütsé himself, who populate the local landscapes in southeastern Golok⁹.

The meaning of the name Golok itself has various explanations. According to some, the Golok people were originally known as Gulok (འགུ་ལོག) after the name Gukok Valley in Ling where they had earlier settled. In this version, Golok is simply a variation, or error, in spelling the original name, Gulok.¹⁰ But the implication is that the people of Gukok Valley brought their previous place name with them to their new homeland. In another version, the name Golok is taken literally to mean “overturning the heads” of the Nyen, Khar, and Ba, i.e., the victorious events that produced the land and people of Golok (*Golok Genealogy*, 30-31).

8 A very similar version was also recounted by Jikmé in an interview (2015).

9 Interview with Jikmé, 2015.

10 As several local Golok scholars, including Jikmé, pointed out, the place name “Gulok” appears in Dunhuang documents. Indeed, Gulok appears in P.T. 1287 as a site where Chinese armies suffered devastating defeat and is renamed “Gulok, the Chinese burial ground” as a result: རྒྱའི་དམག་ཐོན་ཉོན་ཇོ་སངས་དང། འགུའ་ལོག་སྐང་དུ་གཡུལ་སྐྱད་ནས། རྒྱ་མང་པོ་བཅུངས་ཤི། འགུའ་ལོག་རྒྱ་དུར་དུ་བཏགས་ལོ།

The precise location of Gulok is not identifiable in this particular textual context, but it is notable that the name appears in this early document.

Bound up in the name Golok མགོ་ལོག་ is a history where the Tibetan Imperial period is an important starting point, linking Golok peoples with the common history of Tibetan peoples broadly construed. But the name Golok also contains within it a significant series of events that tie a people to a particular place. In the case of the Golok people, what binds land and people together is a genealogical relationship to a sacred mountain deity, as well as a shared history of migration and hardships. Furthermore, this genealogical tie to a local mountain deity locates the place and people of Golok within a map of genealogical relations to a broader region of sacred mountain deities that extends across much of the Tibetan Plateau.

In other words, packed into these two morphemes are the rich histories and meanings that tie a people and place together in history to the present¹¹. Within many Tibetan place names are histories and meanings that often exceed simple translation and can shape the relationships people have with the places they inhabit in the present. Foregrounding the richness of Tibetan place names in our research, translations, and everyday conversations can illuminate the myriad ways in which uniquely Tibetan senses of the world are constituted by and in the places they are part of.

11 To be sure, my focus on the larger place name Golok in this essay does diminish the roles of other, more localized, place names that also have a role in constituting the overall meanings of Golok. There are numerous stories centered on local sites in Golok that can activate shared memories and weave together the history of the region and people of Golok. For instance, the Nyenpo Yütsé Environmental Conservation Group (2018) has compiled an incredibly detailed encyclopedia of the Nyenpo Yütsé region that includes its flora and fauna, geological and hydrological features, sacred sites, local histories, origin stories, stories tied to specific local sites, monasteries, ruins, and much more.

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