

Mahāmudrā in India and Tibet

Edited by

Roger R. Jackson
Klaus-Dieter Mathes



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A Neglected Bka' brgyud Lineage: the Rngog from Gzhung and the Rngog pa Bka' brgyud Transmission

Cécile Ducher

1 Introduction

In the 1540s, Tshar chen Blo gsal rgya mtsho (1502–1566/67) came to the Gzhung valley, where he met one of his masters, Rngog Bsod nams bstan 'dzin, from whom he had received the seven *maṇḍalas* of the Rngog and the outer *sādhana* of Dud sol ma a few years earlier.¹ Tshar chen was again offered the outer *sādhana* of Dud sol ma, for she was the protector of Mar pa Lo tsā ba Chos kyi blo gros (1000–1081?)² and the Rngog lineage, and he felt an irreversible trust in the guru. Bsod nams bstan 'dzin was worried, however, because there was in Gzhung an enemy he could not eliminate because, he suspected, the enemy also propitiated Dud sol ma. Tshar chen agreed to help Bsod nams bstan 'dzin and went to a nearby mountain, where he practiced the ritual of the fierce protector for several months. When he came back, Rngog Bsod nams bstan 'dzin told him signs of success had appeared and handed to him the secret *sādhana* of Dud sol ma, which could only be granted to someone who would definitely be a holder of the Rngog teachings. After that, Tshar chen dreamt that he purified his negativities, and felt even more trust and certainty in the guru, considering his subjugation of Rngog's enemy as a guru-yoga practice. Despite that success story, less than a century later, the seat of Spre'u zhing was empty and the administration of the Fifth Dalai Lama handed the precincts over to the neighbouring Gong dkar Monastery. This was the end of an illustrious family whose roots went as far back as the Tibetan Empire. The present essay recounts the story of this family, and describes their transmissions.

¹ *Tshar chen rnam thar*, 556–561.

² No consensus has been reached on Mar pa's dates of birth and death. The ones generally recognized in the West (1012–1097) come from the *Deb ther sngon po*, and were not widely accepted in Mar pa's biographical tradition until recently. As in the case of the Rngog, I follow the *Lho rong chos 'byung*'s dates. See Ducher 2017b, 301–306, for details and argumentation.

2 The Mar pa Bka' brgyud Tradition

It is generally accepted that Mahāmudrā and the Six Doctrines of Nāropa are the core of all Bka' brgyud lineages. As the contributions by the authors of this volume amply demonstrate, the Bka' brgyud school is not a monolithic tradition; Mahāmudrā can be approached from many different angles, and approaches to the Six Doctrines are similarly varied. This study is concerned with one specific but relatively forgotten Bka' brgyud lineage coming from Mar pa Lo tsā ba and one of his four main disciples, Rngog Chos sku rdo rje (1023–1090).³

Mar pa brought from India to Tibet a large corpus of meditation techniques associated with most of the famous Highest Yogatantras of the period (*Guhyasamāja*, *Hevajra*, *Cakrasaṃvara*, *Mahāmāyā*, *Buddhakapāla*, and *Catuṣpīṭha*) and his Mar pa Bka' brgyud tradition became especially distinguished by the key instructions Mar pa received from Nāropa, Maitrīpa and other masters. The *Hevajra* tradition, for instance, is famous in both the Sa skya and Bka' brgyud lineages. Sa skya pas adhere to a strong exegetical tradition of the *Hevajra* root-tantra and its two main explanatory tantras, the *Vajrapañjara* and the *Samputa*; Mar pa's tradition, on the other hand, is mainly based on the root-tantra and the *Vajrapañjara*, as well as on Nāropa's key instructions, but

3 The Rngog lineage is known from six main sources, all derived from the first, *Bla ma rngog pa yab sras rim par byon pa'i nam thar rin po che'i rgyan gyi phreng ba*, henceforth ST1. This group biography of Mar pa and all successive Rngog family masters was compiled in 1360 by Dpal gyi rdo rje, a student of several of them. The version we have was copied several decades later by Pūnyaśrī (Bsod nams dpal), during a transmission of the Rngog tradition by Rngog Byang chub dpal (1360–1446). It was continued and summarized at about the same time (maybe in the 1410s or 1420s) by an unknown author in the *Rje btsun mar rngog bka' brgyud kyi mdzad nam mdor bsdus*, henceforth ST2. These two were used by Rngog Byang chub dpal to compile his *Rje mar pa nas brgyud pa'i rngog gzhung pa yab sras kyi bla ma'i nam thar nor bu'i phreng ba*, henceforth ST3, in the 1430s. These three sources were stored in 'Bras spungs's Gnas bcu lha khang from the time of the Fifth Dalai Lama and published a few years ago together with ten volumes of tantric commentaries from the Rngog tradition (see bibliography for details). Until then, the main sources of knowledge about this tradition were the *Lho rong chos 'byung* (compiled by Tshe dbang rgyal [1400?–1470?] in 1446), the *Deb ther sngon po* (compiled by 'Gos Lo tsā ba Gzhon nu dpal [1392–1481] in 1476), and the *Mkhas pa'i dga' ston* (compiled by Dpa' bo Gtsug lag phreng ba [1504–1566] between 1545 and 1555). All three rely heavily on one or several of these three texts as well as on the personal relationship of the first two authors with Rngog Byang chub dpal. Although ST1, ST2 and ST3 give the animal year of birth and the age at death of each Rngog family member, they do not provide the relevant element. Exact dates are provided in the *Lho rong chos 'byung* and the *Deb ther sngon po*. The former generally chooses one cycle of 12 years earlier than the latter. I generally follow the *Lho rong chos 'byung*'s dates unless otherwise indicated. See the family tree below pp. 168–169 for details.

not on the *Samputa*.⁴ As a consequence, early “Bka’ brgyud” masters (before they were called such) often studied in detail with other teachers. For instance, Sgam po pa (1079–1153) trained with Bka’ gdams pa lamas and Phag mo gru pa Rdo rje rgyal po (1110–1170) with Sa chen Kun dga’ snying po (1092–1158), before each turned to a Bka’ brgyud guru (Mi la ras pa and Sgam po pa, respectively), receiving key meditative instructions. From there they went on to attain the accomplishments of that practice, thus becoming holders of the Bka’ brgyud lineage.

Mar pa’s transmission was made up of three main components, blended in different ways by the many disciples who inherited and practiced it:

- tantric practices associated with the creation phase (*bskyed rim*);
- practices associated with the perfection phase (*rdzogs rim*), the so-called Six Doctrines of Nāropa. These two are subsumed under the term “path of methods” (*thabs lam*);
- Mahāmudrā, or the “path of liberation” (*grol lam*).

The practice of *mahāmudrā* is understood in various ways, here summarized by Klaus-Dieter Mathes:⁵

Mantra-mahāmudrā is transmitted through the Vajrayāna path of method, which involves Tantric empowerment. Essence *mahāmudrā* leads to the sudden or instantaneous realisation of one’s natural mind (*tha mal gyi shes pa*). It requires a realised master who bestows a particular type of blessing called the “empowerment” of vajra-wisdom on a receptive and qualified disciple. *Sūtra-mahāmudrā* is characterised by Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche⁶ as being connected with the Pāramitāyāna, while at the same time being in accordance with Tantra, and mainly consists in resting one’s mind in the state of non-conceptual wisdom. He further describes the method of this approach as being hidden in the Sūtras, wherefore *sūtra-mahāmudrā* is also called the hidden or secret path of the Sūtras (*mdo’i gsang lam*).

The Rngog transmission, like Mar pa’s, is mainly concerned with the first aspect, Mantra Mahāmudrā. One does not find among the ten volumes of tantric commentaries coming from the Rngog tradition any text related to Essence Mahāmudrā or Sūtra Mahāmudrā, or progressive explanations containing instructions on calm abiding (*zhi gnas*) and insight (*lhag mthong*). Thus,

4 See Sobisch 2008: 146 n. 114, for details.

5 Mathes 2006: 201–202. See also Mathes 2016.

6 Callahan 2001: xxvif.

although Rngog masters received over the years most teachings available in Tibet, their own tradition was exclusively tantric, and proposed one specific way of attaining ultimate realization (*mahāmudrā*) through tantric means.⁷

As illustrated by the introductory story, the Rngog tradition ceased to be essentially a family lineage in the fifteenth century, and we lose track of them sometime between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. By then, their spiritual teaching was mostly transmitted by masters outside of the Rngog family. The fourth Zhwa dmar pa (1453–1524), whose teachings about Mahāmudrā are discussed by Martina Draszczyk in this volume, played an especially important role in systemizing the Rngog tradition, as did other individuals like Kun dga' grol mchog (1507–1565), Tāranātha (1507–1566), and Karma Chags med (1613–1678). The works (*sādhana*s, empowerment rituals, and tantric commentaries) of these masters as well as those authored within the Rngog pa lineage were the sources used by 'Jam mgon Kong sprul Blo gros mtha' yas (1813–1899) when he compiled his *Treasury of Bka' brgyud Mantras* (*Bka' brgyud sngags mdzod*, henceforth KGND⁸) in 1854. Kong sprul used the term “Mar rngog Bka' brgyud” in the title of the collection's index in order to describe its content.⁹ He conceived it as a compilation of Bka' brgyud tantras, as opposed to key instructions of the various Tibetan traditions (the *Gdams ngag mdzod*), Rnying ma Treasures (the *Rin chen gter mdzod*), an encyclopaedia of the various fields of knowledge (the *Shes bya mdzod*), or Kong sprul's personal compositions on various subjects (the *Rgya chen bka' mdzod*). The KGND is divided into three main parts: the first, the “initial virtue,” is made up of practices for long life (White Tārā, Amitāyus, and Mar pa's three special deities) and for opening to blessing (*bla ma mchod pa*). The “middling virtue” is made up of thirteen Highest Yogatantras associated with sixteen transmissions. Out of these sixteen, nine transmissions transited via the Rngog, two came from Mar pa through his disciple Mtshur ston dbang nge (Buddhakaṇḍa and Guhyasamāja), two from Mar pa through Mi la ras pa (Cakrasaṃvara five deities and Vajravārāḥī) and three from other masters altogether (Red Yamāntaka, Vajrabhairava and Vajrapāṇi). The “final virtue” is associated with protector practices (Vajramahākāla, Four-Arm Mahākāla, Dud sol ma, and the

7 This essay is the summary of my Ph.D. dissertation, entitled “A Lineage in Time: The Vicissitudes of the rNgog pa bka' brgyud from the 11th through 19th Centuries,” prepared under the supervision of Professor Matthew Kapstein and defended in December 2017 at the École Pratique des Hautes Études (Ducher 2017b). In several cases, the full argument that led to one particular declaration is found in the dissertation and cannot be developed here for lack of space.

8 Abbreviations used appear in the bibliography. See Ducher 2019 for details on that collection.

9 KGND, I: 1.

Five Tshe ring ma sisters). As demonstrated by the title of the introduction and the content of this compilation, a large part of the tantric heritage coming from Mar pa and what we call “Bka’ brgyud” passed through members of the Rngog family lineage.

Before the dispersion of the Rngog pa teachings in several orders and their compilation in the KGND, the Rngog family played an important role in the transmission of Mar pa’s tantras in Tibet. I will therefore first give a broad outline of the main transmissions and will then turn towards the more human aspect of the lineage, with a description of the family line and their relationship with other masters.

3 The Seven *Maṇḍalas* of the Rngog (*rngog dkyil bdun*)

In the Rngog accounts of their religious and family lineage (ST₁, ST₂, and ST₃), their transmission is called the “Rngog pa Teaching” (*rngog pa’i chos/chos skor*) or “Paternal Teaching” (*pha chos*); in lists of teachings received or in other catalogues, it is generally referred to as the “Rngog Tradition” (*rngog lugs*). This family heritage is made up of eight main transmissions and a few others that figure in the KGND but were not considered representative of the Rngog tradition even though some lineages passed through them.¹⁰ The eight are seven *maṇḍalas* associated with the creation phase of the Highest Yogatantras, and the practice of one protector, Dud sol ma. From the fifteenth century onwards, when these cycles started to be mainly transmitted outside of the Rngog family, the name used to refer to their tradition was the “Seven *Maṇḍalas* of the Rngog” (*rngog dkyil bdun*). The first occurrence of this particular formulation is found in the biography of Khriṃs khang Lo tsā ba (d. 1482) included within the *Deb ther sngon po*.¹¹ Although similar expressions appear at approximately

10 These transmissions are White Tārā (*vid bzhin ’khor lo rngog lugs*, see KGNG 1:16), Peaceful Cakrasaṃvara Vajrasattva (*bde mchog zhi ba rdor sems*, KGNG 1: 23), Six-Cakravartin Cakrasaṃvara (*bde mchog ’khor los sgyur drug*, KGNG 1: 27), and Vajramahākāla (*rdo rje nag po chen po; mar pa’i snyan rgyud*, KGNG 1: 39). It must be noted that there exist several lineages of each transmission, all received by Kong sprul, only some of which passed through the Rngogs.

11 *Deb ther sngon po*, 948, 952, 964, 966, 972: *rngog dkyil bdun*. The biography of Khriṃs khang Lo tsā ba (who died in 1482, that is to say after the compilation of the *Deb ther sngon po* in 1476, and after the death of ’Gos Lo tsā ba in 1481) was added by the editors of the *Deb ther sngon po* at the time of printing. It is a summary of the longer text by the Fourth Zhwa dmar and was composed by Karma ’Phrin las pa (1456–1539; see Ehrhard 2002: 27–31 and van der Kuijp 2006). The biography authored by the Fourth

the same time,¹² it is likely that the exact phrase was coined by the author of the biography, Karma 'Phrin las pa (1456–1539), and it became widespread in later centuries because of the success of the *Deb ther sngon po*.

Chos rdor is known to have received Mar pa's "exegetic lineage" (*bshad brgyud*) and to have been the one who preserved extensively the tantric commentaries that Mar pa had received in India and enriched with profound key instructions. In most biographies, this legacy is described as the result of three cycles of teachings received as a consequence of three great donations. The first donation was made shortly after the first meeting, in between Mar pa's two journeys to India. Mar pa was invited to Gzhung and granted Chos rdor his foremost practice – associated with the *Hevajratantra* – which became central in the Rngog pa lineage. The second donation occurred at the end of Mar pa's life. It was made up of books and everything that Chos rdor could bring to Lho brag, and served as a support for the transmission of the *Catuspīṭhatantra*. The final cycle, the *Mahāmāyātantra*, was also received in Lho brag, after Chos rdor brought his entire herd as a gift to Mar pa. Through these three donations, Chos rdor became the lineage holder of six *maṇḍalas* and of the protector Dud sol ma.

3.1 *Hevajra*

The first two *maṇḍalas* are practices associated with the Hevajra root-tantra,¹³ in which the meditator creates a nine-deity *maṇḍala* of Hevajra and a fifteen-deity *maṇḍala* of his consort Nairātmyā.¹⁴ As noted above, the *Hevajratantra*

Zhwa dmar contains the words *rngog pa'i dkyil 'khor bdun po* (e.g., p. 283), but not the short-hand *rngog dkyil bdun*.

- 12 The *Rgya bod kyi chos 'byung rin po che* by Dge ye Tshul khriims seng ge (dates unknown), compiled in 1474, contains the expressions *rngog pa'i dkyil 'khor bdun*, f. 30:2. Another student of Byang chub dpal, Kun dga' rnam rgyal (1432–1496) refers to the *rngog pa'i dbang bdun* in his *List of Teachings Received* (*Rdzong pa kun dga' rnam rgyal gyi gsan yig*, 415).
- 13 The name of the *Hevajratantra* is translated as *Kye'i rdo rje* in the Sa skya tradition, but *Dgyes pa rdo rje* (*dgyes rdor*) in the Rngog tradition, though 'Brog mi's translation of the root-tantra was used in both cases. The Rngogs also refer to it by the tantra's alternative name, the *Two Chapters* (*Dvikalpa*, *Brtag gnyis*).
- 14 The practices associated with these *maṇḍalas* were compiled by Kong sprul in the KGND. A few years later, Blo gter dbang po (1847–1914) reused Kong sprul's versions of the seven *maṇḍalas* in the *Rgyud sde kun btus*, which gathers 139 *maṇḍalas* associated with all four classes of tantras. Representations of these *maṇḍalas* were commissioned in the Ngor Monastery in the late 19th century, and safely brought into exile by the Ngor abbot Bsod nams rgya mtsho (1930–1988). He, together with Musashi Tachikawa and other Japanese scholars, reproduced the *maṇḍalas* and published clear schemas of them, with the names of all deities (Tachikawa 1989 and 1991). Raghu Vira and Lokesh Chandra also published the line drawings of the *maṇḍalas* (Vira 1967). For the Hevajra *maṇḍala* see Vira 1967:

has two main “explanatory tantras” (*bshad rgyud*), the *Vajrapañjara*¹⁵ and the *Samputa*.¹⁶ The Rngog were holders of the first, an uncommon explanatory tantra referring only to the Hevajra root-tantra, which makes up the third *maṇḍala*, with forty-nine deities.¹⁷ Mar pa’s tradition of the *Hevajratantra*, according to Kong sprul,¹⁸ is mostly based on Nāropa’s and Maitrīpa’s oral instructions as well as on the Indian traditions of Saroruhavajra (*Mtsho skyes rdo rje*) and Ḍombīheruka.¹⁹ There are plenty of commentaries on this tantra in the Rngog pa lineage, but the most famous is the *Rin po che’i rgyan ’dra*, composed by Rngog Mdo sde (1078–1154) as a replacement for his father’s lost *Rin po che’i rgyan*.²⁰

3.2 *Bsre ’pho*

Rngog Chos rdor’s personal deity, like Mar pa’s, was Hevajra. The form of the Six Doctrines of Nāropa (*na ro chos drug*) practiced in the Rngog tradition was therefore especially related to the *Hevajratantra* and referred to by the term “Merging and Transference” (*bsre ’pho*), also called the “Six Doctrines of the Rngog.”²¹ As Tāranātha explains in the introduction to his *Manual of*

vol. 3, *maṇḍala* 107; Tachikawa 1991: 182. For the Nairātmyā *maṇḍala*, see Vira 1967: vol. 3, *maṇḍala* 108; Tachikawa 1991: 183.

15 *Mkha’ ’gro ma rdo rje gur* (in short *Gur*), Tōhoku 419.

16 *Yang dag par sbyor ba* (often called *Dpal kha sbyor*), Tōhoku 381.

17 Vira 1967: vol. 3, *maṇḍala* 111; Tachikawa 1991: 186–187.

18 KGND, 1: 5–6.

19 For a presentation of the Hevajra literature (the root and explanatory tantras) and the eight traditions that developed in India, see Sobisch 2008: 29–49. The eight are the “six great chariot systems” (*shing rta’i srol chen po drug*) and the “two systems of pith instructions” (*man ngag lugs*). Mar pa’s tradition is one of these two, and is explained on pp. 46–48. According to Sobisch (2008: 26 n. 36), Saroruhavajra is generally identified as Padmavajra (Padma rdo rje) in Sa skya pa literature. See also Szántó 2015b for a general presentation of the *Hevajratantra*.

20 NKSBB, vol. 3. For these texts and other commentaries composed within the Rngog tradition, see Sobisch 2008: 47–48.

21 See SByD, 3: 239 (Kongtrül 2008: 162–163) for a short description of the eight traditions, and vol. 3: 325 (Kongtrül 2007: 149–152) for the various syntheses of the genre “Six Doctrines” that were developed in the early Bka’ brgyud schools. The name *Bsre ’pho* was also used in the ’Brug pa bka’ brgyud lineage, covering a meaning larger than that applied in the Rngog tradition. The Fourth ’Brug chen, Padma dkar po (1527–1592), compiled two volumes on the topic. He held several Rngog pa lineages: one came down from Mar pa, Rngog Chos rdor, and Mi la ras pa, another from Gtsang pa rgya ras (the First ’Brug chen, 1161–1211) and Rngog Mdo sde’s grandson Rdo rje seng ge (1140–1207), and yet another from Kun dga’ dpal ’byor (the Second ’Brug chen, 1428–1476) and Rngog Byang chub dpal. See Tāranātha: *Jo bo nā ro pa’i khyad chos bsre ’pho’i khrid rdo rje’i theg par brgod pa’i shing rta chen po*, 10–12.

Instruction on the Hevajratantra in the Mar pa Tradition, although all of Mar pa's instructions on the completion phase can be referred to by the expressions "merging" and "transference," the combined term "Merging and Transference" applies more specifically to the instructions related to the *Hevajratantra*.²² There are completion phases associated with the other *maṇḍalas*, but Merging and Transference was the main system practiced in the Rngog tradition.²³

3.3 *Catuṣpīṭha*

The next two *maṇḍalas* derive from the *Catuṣpīṭhatantra*²⁴ and are centered on the seventy-seven-deity *maṇḍala* of Yogāmbara (*Rnal 'byor nam mkha'*)²⁵ and the thirteen-deity *maṇḍala* of his consort Jñāneśvarī (*Ye shes dbang phyug ma*).²⁶ This *yoginītantra* was less widespread than the *Hevajratantra* in Tibet, where Mar pa's tradition became one of the most successful. According to most sources, Chos rdor received from Mar pa the root tantra together with two explanatory tantras, the *Great Explanatory Tantra*²⁷ and the **Mantrāṃśa*.²⁸ The latter is the fourth chapter of the *Maṇḍalopāyikā*, the "ritual of the *maṇḍala*,"²⁹ which was responsible for thoroughly reshaping the pantheon of the cult by replacing the main female deity of the root tantra, Jñānaḍākinī, with her male consort, Yogāmbara. Mar pa received this transmission from several masters, most notably Nāropa in India and Spyi ther pa in Nepal.³⁰

22 *Dgyes pa rdo rje mar lugs kyi khrid yig 'khrul med nges gsang*. KGND, 2: 110: *spyir mar pa'i gdams ngag rdzogs rim thams cad la | bsre ba dang 'pho ba'i brda chad re mdzad mod kyang |gdams ngag 'di la ni khyad par du yang dgyes pa rdo rje'i 'khrul bsre 'pho zhes grags so*. For a general presentation of the practices related to Merging (*bsre ba*) in the early Bka' brgyud lineages, see Kemp 2015.

23 Kong sprul includes most of these traditions in the KGND, and briefly explains them in the SByD (Kongtrül 2008: 179–186 for *Catuṣpīṭha* and *Mahāmāyā*).

24 *Gdan bzhi*, Tōhoku 428. See Szántó 2015b for a general presentation of this tantra, its title, sources, pantheon, language and contents. The Bka' 'gyur version was translated by Gayādhara and 'Gos Khug pa Lhas btsas.

25 Vira 1967, vol. 2, *maṇḍala* 87; Tachikawa 1991: 152–154.

26 Vira 1967, vol. 2, *maṇḍala* 88; Tachikawa 1991: 155.

27 *Bshad rgyud chen mo*; Tōhoku 430. See Szántó 2012: 89–91.

28 *Dpal gdan bzhi pa'i bshad pa'i rgyud kyi rgyal po sngags kyi cha*; Tōhoku 429. See Szántó 2012: 89.

29 Szántó 2012: 123–152. He explains that there were three versions of that text, the third (Tōhoku 1613) being the most popular. Although its long title is *Rgyud kyi rgyal po dpal gdan bzhi pa zhes bya ba'i dkyil 'khor gyi cho ga snying po mdor bsags pa*, it was generally known in Tibet with the short title *Snying po mdor bsags pa*, used in the Rngog tradition.

30 See lineages in KGND, 1: 31–33.

3.4 *Mahāmāyā*

The sixth *maṇḍala* comes from the *Mahāmāyātāntṛa*, and has five deities.³¹ The Rngog transmission is that of Kukuripa, which Mar pa received from Śāntibhadra, otherwise known as Kukuripa Junior. According to Tāranātha, Mar pa also received the traditions of Ratnākaraśānti and Kṛṣṇa (*Nag po*), but the lineage he spread in Tibet is that of Kukuripa “ornamented by Nāropa’s instructions.”³² Kukuripa’s transmission is made up of seven teachings: the tantra itself; three *sādhana*s related to the creation phase;³³ the *Key-Instructions on Suchness* and its commentary, related to the completion phase;³⁴ and a *maṇḍala* ritual.³⁵ All were translated by ‘Gos Khug pa Lhas brtsas (11th cent.), except the two on suchness (translated by Lo chen Rin chen bzang po, 958–1055). They were revised by Klog skya Shes rab rtsegs, in collaboration with Rngog Chos rdor.

The Rngogs held two more important cycles, Dud sol ma and the *Nāmasaṅgīti*. Some, such as Tshar chen and the Fifth Dalai Lama, argued that Dud sol ma should be included within the seven *maṇḍalas* instead of the *Nāmasaṅgīti*.³⁶ Kong sprul asserts that even though the Rngog transmission of the *Nāmasaṅgīti* is not a proper Highest Yogatantra transmission (the Gsang ldan tradition practiced by the Rngogs is a Yogatantra-level interpretation of the *Nāmasaṅgīti*), Chos rdor received the Highest Yogatantra blessing of *Nāmasaṅgīti* from Mar pa, hence his tradition qualifies as Highest Yoga although it is externally Yoga.³⁷ The Dud sol ma transmission, on the other hand, is not a proper Highest Yogatantra but a protector of the *Catuspīṭhatantra*, and therefore does not qualify as a *maṇḍala* and cannot be included in the seven *maṇḍalas*, although her transmission, unlike that of the *Nāmasaṅgīti*, comes from Mar pa.

31 *Dpal sgyu 'phrul chen mo'i rgyud*, Tōhoku 425. An English translation is available on the 84,000 website: <http://read.84000.co/#UT22084-080-009/title> (accessed on 2017/03/10). Vira 1967: vol. 2, *maṇḍala* 86; Tachikawa 1991: 151–152.

32 Tāranātha: *Dpal rgyud kyi rgyal po sgyu 'phrul chen mo ma hā mā ya'i rgya cher bshad pa de kho na nyid kyi sgron ma*. In *Gsung 'bum dpe dur ma*, 22: 60–61.

33 See for instance Rngog Thogs med grags's commentary, NKSb, 10: 8.

34 *De kho na nyid kyi man ngag*, Tōhoku 1632, and its commentary, Tōhoku 1633. For instructions on the completion phase of the *Mahāmāyātāntṛa*, see Kongtrül 2008: 183–186 and 387–392.

35 *Sgyu 'phrul chen mo'i sgrub pa'i thabs kyi dkyil 'khor gyi cho ga*, Tōhoku 1630.

36 DL5 *thob yig*, 369a.

37 KGND, I: 36–37.

3.5 *Dud sol ma*

Although she is not included in the seven *maṇḍalas*, Dud sol ma is the hallmark of the Rngog tradition and is considered the special protector predicted by Nāropa for their exegetical lineage. Her full name is “the Great Black Glorious Goddess (*śrī devī*), Charnel Ground Owner, Terrifying Charcoal Smoke-[coloured] Lady” (*Dpal ldan lha mo nag mo chen mo dur khrod kyi bdag mo 'jigs byed dud pa'i sol ba can*), for short Dud sol ma (Skt.: Dhūmāṅgārī).³⁸ Another name is “Powerful Lady of the Desire Domain” (*'Dod kham s dbang phyug ma*). She was initially the protector of the *Catuṣpīṭha* and *Hevajra* tantras, and later became the protector of the Rngog Bka' brgyud pa tantric lore in general. Her name can be found in several texts from the *Catuṣpīṭha* cult, chiefly the *Maṇḍalopāyikā* (Tōhoku 1613) and Rnam par rgyal ba'i dbang po'i sde's *Sādhana of Yogāmbara* (Tōhoku 1619).³⁹ We know of her practice mainly through Kong sprul's compilation in the KGND, introduced by Tshar chen Blo gsal rgya mtsho's story, alluded to at the opening of the present essay.⁴⁰ According to Tshar chen,⁴¹ Mar pa had three main protectors, called Ka ka rtsal, Thod 'phreng can,⁴² and Dud sol ma, all protectors of the *Catuṣpīṭhatantra*. Rngog Chos rdor, like Mar pa before him, chose Dud sol ma after seeing his master offering *gtor mas* to her every morning.

3.6 *Nāmasaṅgīti*

Unlike all previous transmissions, the fifty-three-deity *maṇḍala* of the *Nāmasaṅgīti*⁴³ does not come from Mar pa but from a tradition imported in Tibet by the Indian *pañḍita* Smṛtijñānakīrti. There exist many commentaries on the *Nāmasaṅgīti*, classified within the various classes of tantras, from

38 Her name is sometimes spelled Dud gsol ma “Smoke-clad Lady” (Skt.: Dhūmavas or Dhūmavātī) but this spelling does not figure in the KGND or in Rngog-related texts. The Sanskrit name Dhūmāṅgārī corresponds to the Tibetan Dud sol ma, and is found in several Sanskrit manuscripts of the *Catuṣpīṭha* cycle, for instance the *Yogāmbarasādhanopāyikā* of Amitavajra (Szántó 2012: 170–172). Her name also appears in several fragments related to the *Catuṣpīṭha* cult (Szántó 2012: 180). It is noteworthy that the original title of the *Dud sol ma'i sgrub thabs* (Tōhoku 1769) composed by Vanaratna (1384–1468) is given as *Dhūmāṅgārīsādhana*. The translator was Khrims khang Lo tsā ba, who had previously received that transmission from Rngog Byang chub dpal.

39 Rnam par rgyal ba'i dbang po'i sde (*Vijayendrasena) was a Newar scholar (see Lo Bue 1997: 637). According to Szántó 2008: 4 n. 15, Amitavajra may be his initiation name.

40 KGND, 6: 53–410. Tshar chen's *Dud sol ma dkar chag* is on pp. 53–67.

41 KGND, 6: 55–57.

42 In ST2, 34 and ST3, 72–73, they are also called Kaṃ ka rtsal and Thod 'phreng rtsal. No further details about these protectors are available to me.

43 *Mtshan yang dag par brjod pa*, Tōhoku 360. See Vira 1967: vol. 1, *maṇḍala* 41B; Tachikawa 1991: 82–83.

Yoga to Mahāyoga, Yoginī, and “Non-Dual” (i.e., Kālacakra) tantras.⁴⁴ The tradition followed by the Rngog is that derived from Vilāsavajra’s (*sgeg pa’i rdo rje*)⁴⁵ commentary, the *Explanation of the Meaning of the Name-mantra*, corresponding to the Yogatantra division and called Gsang ldan, “Endowed with Secret.”⁴⁶

Smṛtijñānakīrti was an Indian *paṇḍita* who lived in the mid-tenth/beginning of the eleventh century.⁴⁷ After the death of his translator, he was stranded in Tibet and accompanied some merchants to Khams, where he learned Tibetan from his disciple, Ngag gi dbang phyug. Ngag gi dbang phyug’s student was Shes rab rdo rje, sometimes said to be from Spu rangs, and sometimes from Khams. According to Bu ston, he was born in Spu rangs but moved early to Khams, where he spent a long time. As a result, he was called Khams pa Shes rab rdo rje. Smṛtijñānakīrti’s translations spread in Tibet, and the Central Tibetan Bye ma lung pa Chos kyi seng ge came to know about them. He felt great devotion for that tradition of the *Nāmasaṅgīti* and received it from Sūryasiddhi in Spu rangs. Rngog Chos rdor met Bye ma lung pa several years later and received the transmission completely from him. At that time, Khams pa Shes rab rdo rje returned to Central Tibet and studied the *Nāmasaṅgīti* again with Bye ma lung pa, as well as with Sūryasiddhi. When Rngog Chos rdor heard that he held the transmissions of both Smṛtijñānakīrti – the Eastern Tradition (*smad lugs*) – and Sūryasiddhi – the Western Tradition (*stod lugs*) – he invited Khams pa Shes rab rdo rje to Gzhung, where the latter stayed for a year. Chos rdor then

44 See Tribe 1994: 128–129 n. 21.

45 There are many mistranslations, in Tibetan and in Sanskrit, of the name of this master, who was first only known through his Tibetan name, Sgeg pa’i rdo rje. As pointed out in Davidson 1981 (18–19 n. 18), in the West the name Sgeg pa’i rdo rje was often wrongly back-translated as Līlāvajra (e.g., in Roerich’s *Blue Annals*) or Lalitavajra (Rol pa’i rdo rje), which led to the erroneous attribution of several of Lalitavajra’s texts to Vilāsavajra. As further shown in Tribe 1994 (18–23), the colophon of Vilāsavajra’s commentary was mistranslated in Tibetan, which led to an identification of Vilāsavajra with his uncle Agrabodhi (*byang chub mchog*). With the retrieval of several Indian manuscripts, it became clear that the two are different. They wrote five texts, all translated by Smṛtijñānakīrti in Eastern Tibet in the early 11th century, that make up the Gsang ldan Tradition (Tōhoku 2533, 2579, 2580, 2581, 2582).

46 *Mtshan yang dag par brjod pa’i rgya cher ’grel pa mtshan gsang sngags kyi don du rnam par lta ba*, in short *Sngags don rnam gzigs*, Tōhoku 2533, edited and partially translated in Tribe 1994. The text was translated by Smṛtisrījñāna and revised by Vajrapāṇi and Klog skya Shes rab brtsegs. The *sādhana* that gave its name to the tradition is the *’Phags pa ’jam dpal gyi mtshan yang dag par brjod pa’i sgrub pa’i thabs* (Tōhoku 2579). The names come from the title given in the colophon: *’Phags pa mtshan yang dag par brjod pa’i gsang ba dang ldan pa’i sgrub thabs || slob dpon chen po dpal ldan byang chub mchog gis mdzad pa rdzogs so*. The Sanskrit version, although sometimes reconstructed as *Guhyāpanna, is not attested.

47 This account is based on NKS B, 16: 68–72 and Bu ston’s *Yogatantra*, 134–135 and 176–180.

passed on all the traditions to his son, Rngog Mdo sde, and the Rngog pa tradition of the *Nāmasaṅgīti* became famous, eventually reaching Bu ston and others. In the *Deb ther sngon po*, 'Gos lo singles out the Rngog pa transmission of the Gsang ldan tradition as the main one still alive at his time (1476).⁴⁸

4 A Family Tracing Its Ancestry to the Tibetan Empire

After this short presentation of the practices most commonly associated with the Rngog, we can now turn to the history of that family. Before it became an important religious lineage in the eleventh century, the Rngog was a noble family that traced its roots to the pre-Imperial period of Lha tho tho ri Gnyan btsan, in the fifth century CE.⁴⁹ There were many generations between then and the eleventh century, but in the present context we can only mention the most important ones. Rngog Dpal khrom is said to have accompanied Thon mi Sam bho ṭa to India and played an administrative role at the time of Srong btsan sgam po (r. 617–649/50). His grandson, Rngog Btsan gnya', was a warrior who served Khri Dus srong (676–704). Rngog Btsan gnya's grandson, Rngog Btsan gzigs snang ba, lived at the time of Khri Srong sde btsan (742–800) and became a disciple of Padmasambhava. These ancestors were common to Rngog Chos rdor, Rngog Legs pa'i shes rab (11th cent.) and his nephew Rngog Blo ldan shes rab (1059–1109), who were the first two abbots of the Gsang phu institute of learning.⁵⁰ Four generations before Chos rdor, the family branched: Legs pa'i shes rab's ancestor, Yul sbyin, settled in a village on the northern shore of the Yar 'brog lake called Sgog, while Chos rdor's great-great-grandfather, Dpal le, settled in 'Dam can. At some point in the intervening generations, Rngog Chos rdor's forefathers settled in the Gzhung valley.

There are several other masters with the name “Rngog” who lived during the first centuries of the second spread of the doctrine, and a short presentation may prove helpful in distinguishing them from the Rngog from Gzhung. One family in particular became famous for its Guhyasamāja transmission, known as the Rngog Tradition of Guhyasamāja. It should not be confused with the Mar Tradition of the same tantra, which was passed on by Mar pa and his disciple Mtshur ston dbang nge (and not through Rngog Chos rdor). The name of

48 Roerich 1949: 428; *Deb ther sngon po*, 434.

49 The pre-11th century-account of the Rngog family is in ST1, 3:5 to 6:4; for a complete account, see Ducher 2017b: 207–216, and especially p. 207 for a visual representation of the family line according to ST3. See above, p. ??, for the family line from Chos rdor onwards.

50 See Kramer 2007: 31–35 and his Tibetan sources, especially *Deb ther sngon po*, 391–392 (Roerich 1949: 324).

this family is not completely certain.⁵¹ the first in the religious lineage, Rdog or Rngog Ye shes seng ge (11th cent.), received the *Guhyasamājatantra* from 'Gos Khug pa Lhas bstas. Then the transmission passed to his son, Rdog/Rngog Nyi ma seng ge (also known as Mu ni), and his grandson, Rdog/Rngog Āryadeva. This line is not related to Rngog Chos rdor; Ye shes seng ge immigrated from Rtsong kha in the eleventh century, and no mention is found in his family history, the *Rdog rabs*, of Chos rdor's ancestors, such as Rngog Dpal khrom, etc. He may, however, be distantly related to Rngog/Rdog Byang chub 'byung gnas, the main disciple of Klu mes Shes rab tshul khriṃs,⁵² who took part in the re-introduction of the Vinaya in Central Tibet after the period of fragmentation. Klu mes founded the monastery of Yer pa Ba reng, near Lha sa; Rngog/Rdog Byang chub 'byung gnas took up the abbacy after him and welcomed Atiśa there. According to the *Rdog rabs*, when Atiśa inquired about his caste and clan, he replied that he was from a royal caste in India and belonged to the Rdog clan, as his ancestor was the king Dgra ngan's minister, called Rdog.⁵³ The same ancestry, in the same source, is provided for Rdog/Rngog Mu ni.

5 The Rngog Family from Gzhung

Chos rdor was born in the Lho ka region, in the Gzhung valley branching south of the Gtsang po river, which is now called Rnam rab, and is situated a few kilometers from the present Lhasa Gongkar Airport. His house was situated in Ri bo, and he later built a temple called Ri bo khyung lding.⁵⁴ There and in Lho brag, Chos rdor received Mar pa's empowerments, tantric commentaries, and key-instructions and thus became a holder – along with Mar pa's

51 For more details, see Ducher 2017b, 216–221. Their family account is recorded in the *Rdog rabs gsal ba'i me long*, where the spelling *rdog* is used, and in Bu ston's *Religious History of Guhyasamāja* (*Gsang 'dus chos 'byung*, 78–79), where it is written *rngog*. Sørensen (2007: 420–21) believes they should be called Rdog, and I am also of this opinion. My main reason is that, just as in the *Rdog rabs*, the spelling Rdog is used in ST1 (p. 14:7: *brdog*) and ST3 (p. 40:3: *rdog*) to refer to a Rdog Mun pa can, which may be identical with Rdog Mu ni. Mu dge bsam gtan (1914–1993, *Gsung 'bum*, 3: 11–12) also considers that the spelling Rdog is correct because there are still people with that name in Rnga ba and Dmu dge, his home region. Both spellings, Rngog and Rdog, coexist in Tibetan sources, and it is not possible to conclusively decide the matter.

52 Roerich 1949: 74.

53 *Rdog rabs*, 142–143. (Manuscript version, pp. 5–6).

54 For the etymology of the names of the Rngog seats Ri bo khyung lding and Spre'u zhing, see *Mkhas pa'i dga' ston*, 777 and 779.

other disciples Mtshur ston and Mes ston – of Mar pa's "exegetical lineage" (*bshad brgyud*), while Mi la ras pa received Mar pa's "practice lineage" (*bsgrub brgyud*). Chos rdor passed these instructions on to his son, Rngog Mdo sde, thus initiating a family lineage that, according to Mar pa's declaration, would be blessed by Nāropa for seven generations.⁵⁵

5.1 *Rngog Mdo sde (1078–1154)*

Rngog Mdo sde was in the first generation after Chos rdor, and a very important master of twelfth-century Tibet. After the grassroots efforts of eleventh-century Tibetans to import into Tibet India's latest transmissions, there came a time when lineages increasingly organized themselves as distinct and recognizable orders. Although Mdo sde did not meet Sgam po pa, he was his contemporary, and labored to establish the Rngog lineage as the legitimate line inheriting Mar pa's tantric transmission, just as Sgam po pa was instrumental in defining the Dwags po Bka' brgyud as the merging of the sūtra-based Bka' gdams system stressing a gradual path (*lam rim*) and the tantra-based Bka' brgyud system emphasizing Mahāmudrā.⁵⁶ Mdo sde, and his family after him, became the legitimate holder of the Mar pa Bka' brgyud tantric system by presenting himself as Mar pa's "son," both at a spiritual level (by receiving his teaching directly) and at a pseudo-biological level. As far as the latter is concerned, it is noteworthy that Rngog Mdo sde is named after Mar pa's own son, Mar pa Mdo sde, who famously died without being able to retransmit his father's teaching. It is certainly not insignificant that almost all of Mar pa's biographies, starting with the one composed by Rngog Mdo sde, state:⁵⁷

Your family lineage will disappear like a sky-flower
But your religious lineage, with the continuity of a river,
Will be uninterrupted.

55 ST1, 23: 4–5: *khyad par du jo bo na ro pa'i gsung nas | khyod kyi bgryud pa bdun tshun chad du | byin gyi brlob pa la nga rang gis 'ong ba yin gsung*. The *Lho rong chos 'byung*, 65, identifies Byang chub dpal as the seventh-generation master of the Rngog seat blessed by Mar pa (*rje mar pas rngog gi gdan sa mi rabs bdun du byin gyis brlabs zhes pa'i bdun tshigs ni bla ma 'di yin*).

56 See Scheuermann 2015.

57 *Rje mar pa'i rnam thar*. In *'Bri gung bka' brgyud chos mdzod chen mo*, vol. 5: 183: *rigs rgyud nam mkha'i me tog yal | chos rgyud chu bo'i rgyun dang ldan | rgyun chad med par 'byung ba yin*. For more details about this biography and its attribution to Rngog Mdo sde, see Ducher 2017a: 64–69.

This interruption of Mar pa's family lineage was used by the Rngogs to present themselves as Mar pa's legitimate heirs.⁵⁸ To achieve this at a concrete level, Mdo sde gathered all of Mar pa's relics – which had been shared among his children – and enshrined them in Gzhung. At a narrative level, it was accomplished in the Rngog genealogies by describing first Mar pa's ancestors and life-story, and then the Rngog's ancestors and life-stories. This way, the Rngogs merged their own noble family line with Mar pa's prestigious religious line, thus capturing the symbolic capital of both. This strategy remained successful in the following centuries. When 'Jam dbyangs Mkhyen brtse dbang po (1820–1892) came to Gzhung in 1848, for instance, he had a vision of Mar pa and Rngog Chos rdor, received their blessing, and revived the Mar pa Bka' brgyud oral transmission.⁵⁹ His stay at the then-forlorn seat of the Rngogs further inspired him to encourage Kong sprul to compile the *Treasury of Bka' brgyud Mantras* (*Bka' brgyud sngags mdzod*), which was, as mentioned earlier, largely made up of the Rngog pa Bka' brgyud lines of transmission.

Rngog Mdo sde was born when his father was fifty-five, and he therefore lost him while quite young, at twelve. The genealogies insist, however, that he met Mar pa and received the *Hevajratantra* empowerment from him, and that he received all the other cycles from his father, and again later from his father's disciples. Mdo sde further established relationships with many important masters of the twelfth century, especially focusing on translators (*lo tsā bas*), who were a source of legitimacy at that time of revival of Indian Buddhism in Tibet.

Mdo sde had many children, from two wives. He had a first son, Jo tshul (1103–1146), by a tantric consort in Gtsang. His other children were born from his main wife, Jo skyabs. Among them, the elder, Jo thog (1108–1144), composed several commentaries and was a great scholar. Even though Mdo sde was blessed with a long life, his tragedy was to lose all his children, from younger to elder. Despite the dangerous setback this represents for a family lineage, he managed to teach his three grandsons, and the line continued. The first two, Rgyal tsha Ra mo (1134–1170) and Rgyal tsha Rdo rje seng ge (1140–1207) were Jo thog's sons and legitimate heirs of the Rngog line. Even though they continued to hold the seat and transmit Mar pa's teaching, their own children did not live up to their forefather's standards, and it was their cousin, Rngog Gtsang tsha

⁵⁸ See Ducher 2016 for a description of the quick disappearance of Mar pa's legacy in his own seat, Gro bo lung. In the decades after Mar pa's death, his sons lost their house to another family, the Se bro, and their father's relics to another spiritual lineage, the Rngogs.

⁵⁹ Akester 2016: 266.

Kun dga' rdo rje, who is considered the second of the seven generations to be blessed by Nāropa.

5.2 *Rngog Kun dga' rdo rje (1145–1222)*

When Mdo sde died in 1154, Ra mo and Rdo rje seng ge took responsibility for the seat, Ri bo khyung lding. Kun dga' rdo rje became a disciple of Ra mo, from whom he continuously received the teachings he heard from Mdo sde as a child. Then, for three years, he attended upon Mal nag pa, a hermit considered the master who had received the most Rngog transmissions, and later went to tour Khams. The Rngog teaching was already famous as far as the Tangut Kingdom,⁶⁰ but no Rngog master had visited there, so Kun dga' rdo rje attracted many disciples. When he came back to Central Tibet, he established his residence at a new place in the Gzhung valley, called Spre'u zhing.⁶¹ After his cousin Rdo rje seng ge died in 1207, Kun dga' rdo rje shared the Rngog's wealth with his cousins: they inherited the land and temple, and he received Mar pa's relics and other religious items. From this point onwards, there were two branches of the Rngogs in Gzhung: the Gtsang tsha line (the name probably coming from Kun dga' rdo rje's mother's origin in Gtsang) and the Rgyal tsha line. The Gtsang tshas established themselves in Spre'u zhing, and the Rgyal tshas remained in Ri bo khyung lding. In the fifteenth century, the two seats coexisted, and individuals of the two lines continued to transmit the Rngog *maṇḍalas*. In the Rngog's historiographical documents, less detail is provided for the Rgyal tsha line than for the Gtsang tsha, and their denomination as the "lower seat" (*gdan sa 'og ma*) suggests that it was the Spre'u zhing branch, the "higher seat" (*gdan sa gong ma*), that quickly became most influential, Mar pa's relics thus continuing to mark the locus of his actual lineage.

5.3 *Gzi brjid grags pa (1190–1269)*

Gzi brjid grags pa was the first of the important Rngog masters to be ordained. He received his vows from Ba char ba, a disciple of Bya 'dul 'dzin pa Brtson 'grus 'bar (c. 1100–1174), founder of a learning institute in Zul phu Monastery. He heard and retransmitted the Rngog teachings, and enlarged the newly founded seat of Spre'u zhing, adding a monastery to what was until now only a residence. He and his brother Rgyal po dga' (1193–1272) had

60 Hou 2017.

61 According to the *Mkhas pa'i dga' ston*, 779, this could be translated at "Spre'u's Field," i.e., a field offered to Kun dga' rdo rje by a land-holder of the region called Spre'u.

long lives and were successful in passing on the teaching and land to the next generation.

5.4 *Rin chen bzang po (1243–1319)*⁶²

Rin chen bzang po received all the transmissions accumulated by his Rngog ancestors from his uncle, the seat-holder Gzi brjid grags, and his father, Rgyal po dga'. He was ordained at Zul phu and became the abbot of Spre'u zhing when his uncle died. In the late 1270s, he went to Eastern Tibet, and his elder brother, Seng ge sgra, became the interim abbot. Rin chen bzang po attracted many students from all over Tibet, enlarged the seat, and commissioned a copy of the canon in silver and gold letters. He was considered an incarnation of Mar pa, and wrote a biography about the translator. Like most of his other works on the *Vajrapañjaratantra*, the Gsang ldan tradition of the *Nāmasaṃgīti*, and the *Mahāmāyātāntra*, however, the biography is not available in the newly reproduced collections.

5.5 *Chos kyi rgyal mtshan (1283–1359)*

Although it is not stated that Rngog Chos kyi rgyal mtshan became a monk, he certainly did, as he studied at Zul phu, gave the novice vows to his nephew Don grub dpal, had no children, and ascended the seat of Spre'u zhing, which at the time had become a large monastery. He travelled as far as the city of Dar rtse mdo in Khams, where he met many masters and gained disciples, further enlarging the monastery with the funds he received. He authored a large commentary on the Hevajra root-tantra,⁶³ as well as manuals on the *Nāmasaṃgīti* and *gaṇacakras*, today unavailable.

5.6 *Don grub dpal (1331–1398)*⁶⁴

Don grub dpal received the novice ordination from his uncle, Chos kyi rgyal mtshan, and full ordination later at Zul phu. Despite being a monk, he married a woman called Dkar khrom, with whom he had a son, Byang chub dpal, who became the last important throne-holder of Spre'u zhing. Don grub dpal continued his family lineage, but not much is known about him, except the identity of his masters and disciples.

62 Although I follow the *Lho rong chos 'byung*'s dates in earlier cases, here the chronology makes more sense if the first son of Rgyal po dga' (1193–1272), Seng ge sgra, is born in 1235 and Rin chen bzang po in 1243, as stated in the *Deb ther sngon po*. Both sources agree on the date of birth of the third child, Chos rdor, in 1246.

63 NKSb, vols. 12 and 13, NKCK, 5: 31–604.

64 The *Deb ther sngon po*'s dates are provisionally favoured over those of the *Lho rong chos 'byung* (1319–1386). The sources for Don grub dpal's life are ST2, ST3, and later texts, but not ST1, which was composed in 1360, when he was still alive.

5.7 *Byang chub dpal (1360–1446)*

Rngog Byang chub dpal was considered the seventh lama of the Rngog seat blessed by Nāropa.⁶⁵ He received all the Rngog cycles from his father, Don grub dpal, and a great-uncle, Sangs yon. Although he taught regularly at Spre'u zhing, his activity was not very successful during the first part of his life, probably for political reasons. After Tsong kha pa praised him highly for his scholarship, he attracted many disciples from various traditions, such as the author of the *Deb ther sngon po*, 'Gos Lo tsā ba Gzhon nu dpal (1392–1481), the 'Bras spungs abbot, 'Jam dbyangs chos rje Bkra shis dpal ldan (1379–1449) and the founder of the Sa skya monastery of Gong dkar, Kun dga' rnam rgyal (1432–1496).⁶⁶ In 1441, he was invited to the court of the Phag mo gru pa ruler, Grags pa 'byung gnas (1414–1445), to transmit the seven *maṇḍalas*. Among those present was Khrims khang Lo tsā ba Bsod nams rgya mtsho (1424–1482), who together with 'Gos Lo tsā ba retransmitted the Rngog cycles to the fourth Zhwa dmar, Chos grags ye shes (1453–1522), who labored greatly for the development of the Rngog pa Bka' brgyud transmission by composing *sādhana*s and commentaries and spreading it widely.⁶⁷ Although Byang chub dpal had two children who took responsibility for Spre'u zhing after him, he handed over his lineage and such treasures as Nāropa's six bone ornaments to the second 'Brug chen, Kun dga' dpal 'byor (1428–1476).⁶⁸

6 Spre'u zhing after Byang chub dpal

Byang chub dpal's son, Bkra shis dpal ba, was installed as Spre'u zhing's abbot during his father's lifetime. His son, Byang chub dpal grub, was the abbot in 1476 and remained in the seat until at least 1500, the year Rgod tshang ras chen (1482–1559) received several transmissions from him.⁶⁹ Another important

65 Main sources are *Deb ther sngon po*, 496–498 and *Lho rong chos 'byung*, 64–65. Both authors were direct disciples of Byang chub dpal. For more details see Ducher 2017b, chapter 11.4 (pp. 329–345).

66 For the relationship between Kun dga' rnam rgyal and Byang chub dpal, see Fermer 2009: 126–129; for a general introduction to Gong dkar chos sde and its art, see Jackson and Fermer 2016, as well as Akester 2016: 255–260.

67 For the transmission from Byang chub dpal to Khrims khang Lo tsā ba, see Ehrhard 2002: 38; for that from Khrims khang Lo tsā ba to the Fourth Zhwa dmar, Ehrhard 2002: 91.

68 *Pad dkar gsung 'bum*, 2: 610–611. The second 'Brug chen's biography states that Kun dga' dpal 'byor was Byang chub dpal's doctrine holder (*chos bdag po*) and presided over Byang chub dpal's funeral ceremonies, at the latter's request.

69 Ehrhard 2010: 141 for the translation and p. 152 for the Tibetan version of Rgod tshang ras chen's autobiography. For more details on the Rngogs after Byang chub dpal, see Ducher 2017b, chapter 11.5 (pp. 346–362).

master at the time of Byang chub dpal and in the following decades was his distant cousin, Rngog Bsod noms don grub of the Rgyal tsha branch, whose name occurs in the *gsan yig* of the Fifth Dalai Lama and in the biography of Gong dkar ba Kun dga' rnam rgyal. Kun dga' rnam rgyal relates that he received the Rngog *maṇḍalas* from Byang chub dpal but reading transmissions and explanations from Bsod noms don grub, who authored several texts in the NKCK and KGND.⁷⁰

One of Bsod noms don grub's sons, or nephews, was Rngog ston Bsod noms lhun po, who was Kun dga' rnam rgyal's disciple. He established a new seat, Thar pa gling, which may have been in the lower Gzhung valley.⁷¹ This was where Tshar chen – whose involvement with the practice of Dud sol ma was introduced above – met Bsod noms lhun po's son, Rngog Bsod noms bstan 'dzin.⁷² This last-known Rngog scion of the Rgyal tsha branch gave the Rngog *maṇḍalas* to Tshar chen, and also taught the Rnying ma master Mnga' ris Paṇ chen Padma dbang rgyal (1487–1542) in the late 1520s.⁷³ We saw in the introduction that in the 1540s, Bsod noms bstan 'dzin had an enemy he could not subdue because they both propitiated Dud sol ma. Although this is speculative, it is possible that this obliquely refers to the last known lama of the Gtsang tsha branch, Blo gros dpal bzang, from whom Kun dga' grol mchog (1507–1565) received, at about the same time, the seven *maṇḍalas*, Merging and Transference, as well as Dud sol ma and other teachings.⁷⁴ The last member of the Gtsang tsha Rngog known to have lived in Spre'u zhing was Rngog 'Jam dbyangs 'od zer, who taught to Mgon po Bsod noms mchog ldan (1603–1659), a Sa skya lama based for many years in Gong dkar chos sde and one of the tutors of the Fifth Dalai Lama.⁷⁵

70 DL5 *thob yig*, 1: 369a: *dud sol ma'i phyi sgrub thun mong ba'i rjes gnang gi brgyud pa*; Fermer 2009: 126–129.

71 In 2014, I went to a village called Thar pa gling, located on the western side of the mouth of the Rnam rab valley. Although no one there knew the history of the settlement, there was a Dud sol ma temple, and it is possible that this place was the original residence of “Thar pa gling pa Bsod noms bstan 'dzin.”

72 *Tshar chen rnam thar*, 557: *gzhung rngog tshang 'og ma thar pa gling*.

73 *Bka' ma mdo dbang gi bla ma brgyud pa'i rnam thar*, 304–335. The particular passage about Bsod noms bstan 'dzin is on p. 322.

74 KGND, 1: 31, 36, 40 and 41: In the lineages of the KGND, he is described as the master who gave the transmissions of Mahāmāyā, Nāmasamgīti, Vajramahākāla, and Dud sol ma to Kun dga' grol mchog. These transmissions are also mentioned in the biography of Kun dga' grol mchog (*Kun dga' grol mchog blo gsal rgya mtsho'i gsung 'bum*, 2: 575).

75 *Mgon po bsod noms mchog ldan rnam thar*, 303.

In the middle of the seventeenth century, probably after the death of Rngog 'Jam dbyangs 'od zer, Gong dkar chos sde took responsibility over the precincts. A retreat center affiliated with Gong dkar was built, and although Spre'u zhing and related temples were destroyed during the Dzungar invasion in 1718, Mar pa's relics remained an object of pilgrimage until the beginning of the twentieth century.⁷⁶ What was left – mainly two reliquaries, one with Mar pa's relics and one with the remains of one of the Rngogs, as well as sacred texts and a statue of Vajradhara – was completely destroyed during the Cultural Revolution.⁷⁷ In 1985, a small temple was built. Since 2012, another temple maintained by Gong dkar chos sde has replaced the old one. On the slope opposite the temple stand ruins commemorating the place where Rngog Chos rdor left a foot-print on a boulder and disappeared to Khecara. In the middle of this quiet and beautiful place grows a large walnut tree in which birds sing, evoking the memory that this forlorn place used to be the heartland of the Rngog pa Bka' brgyud transmission.

7 Conclusion

The Rngog Bka' brgyud pas, as a family and as a religious lineage, played an important role in the preservation and diffusion of Mar pa's tantric cycles. Although the general representation associated with the Bka' brgyud order is that of the yogi Mi la ras pa and his strong emphasis on meditation (especially related to the *Cakrasaṃvaratantra* and the Six Doctrines of Nāropa), one must remember that another central contribution of Mar pa to Tibetan Buddhism was to import a rich tantric commentarial tradition, centered on Nāropa's and Maitrīpa's key instructions. Among the seven Rngog *maṇḍalas* and associated commentaries, some spread to other lineages and remain central in the Tibetan tantric traditions. The traditions of Catuspīṭha and Mahāmāyā, still available today, come from Mar pa through the Rngog, as is the Hevajra tradition followed in the Bka' brgyud lineage. Although individual members of the family travelled far and wide, the Rngog tradition remained a small lineage

76 See for example the visits there of Bsod nams dbang phyug (1660–1731; Snellgrove 1967: 255), 'Jam dbyangs mkhyen brtse dbang po (1820–1892; Akester 2016: 264–267), Kaḥ thog Si tu Chos kyi rgya mtsho (1880–1923/25; *dBus gtsang gnas yig*, 119–120) and the 39th Sa skya throne-holder, Drag shul Phrin las rin chen (1871–1935; *Diaries of Drag shul Phrin las rin chen*, 1: 696–697).

77 See *Dgong dkar chos sde'i gnas yig*, 93 for an account of the history of Spre'u zhing under Gong dkar chos sde's supervision.

that kept to the Gzhung valley and built its identity as the legitimate heir of Mar pa's tantric legacy. Although the teachings received and taught over the centuries evolved with the surrounding society, the signature Rngog transmission remained the seven *maṇḍalas* and *Dud sol ma*. It is striking that this specificity was expressed by the phrase "Seven *Maṇḍalas* of the Rngogs" only when the Rngog family ceased to play any significant role in the religious landscape of Central Tibet. At that point, the religious lineage took over the family line, and *Spre'u zhing* remained as the symbolic trace of a glorious past.

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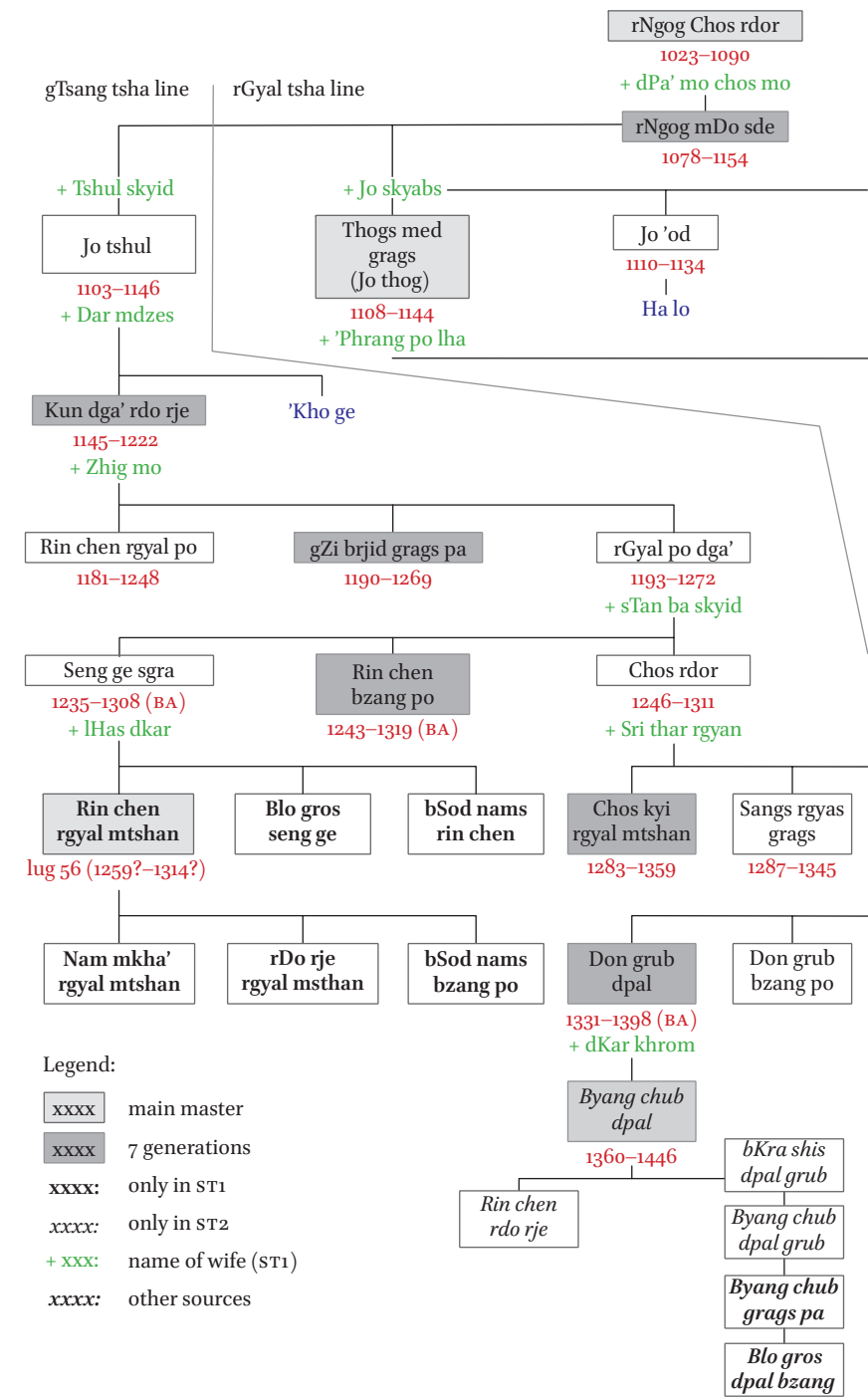


FIGURE 4.1 Name of masters after Byang chub dpal in *dGa' ston*, 779 and *Kun dga' grol mchog rnam thar* for gTsang tsha line; *Tshar chen* for rGyal tsha

