

(DRAFT – Do not quote)

**Panel: Legacies and Social Memory: Missionaries and Scholars in the Ethnic Southwest**

Stéphane GROS

Ph.D. candidate

University of Paris X-Nanterre

Department of Ethnology and Comparative Sociology

stephanegros@hotmail.com

**Ritual and Politics: Missionary Encounters with Local Culture in Northwest Yunnan**

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**Introduction**

Only a little is known of Northwest Yunnan's history and ethnology. We do have an increasing knowledge of the Lijiang region, inhabited by the Naxi (Nakhi), but more remote parts, such as the upper reaches of the Nujiang (Salween River) valley and its surroundings, still remain a marginal field of study. This paper, using an ethno-historical approach, aims to provide some data about the local cultures of this very specific area, where China, Tibet and Burma meet.

Southwest China is a world of many peripheral populations, or "minority nationalities" according to the current terminology in the People's Republic of China. Historically, the northwestern borders of Yunnan province, inhabited by various Tibeto-Burmese groups, lay at the juncture of both Chinese and Tibetan expansion. From the end of the 19th century until the mid 20th century, only a

few travellers and scholars had crossed the mountains to reach the Salween valley and explore the surrounding areas. The French missionaries of the Foreign Missions Society of Paris were not only the first Westerners to discover this part of the Sino-Tibetan borders, but because of their long term relationships with the local populations, were also the ones who were able to provide detailed information about many aspects of this area, including its geographical, cultural and political particularities.

The so-called "Tibet Mission" was created in 1846, when the Pope Grégoire XVI decided to establish Tibet, including its Sichuan and Yunnan border areas, as an autonomous Catholic Mission, under the responsibility of the French Foreign Mission Society of Paris. Some missionaries tried unsuccessfully at first to enter Tibet from Buthan and Sikkim. But finally, Father Renou, who was at first in charge of this Mission, attempted to enter Tibet from Yunnan, and succeeded in settling in the small valley of Bonga, just near the border between Yunnan and Tibet. This was in the year 1854, and marked the very beginnings of the activities of the "Tibet Mission".

The first aim of these French missionaries was to reach Lhasa and convert Tibet to Christianity. But at that time of great instability in the political relations between Tibet and China, they did not succeed in crossing the border to settle within Tibet proper. Their only means of realising this ambitious project, was to settle at first as close as possible to the Tibetan border. From there, they could start to convert locals and prepare themselves to reach further into Tibet. They found northwest Yunnan a good place from which to stay close enough to and remain in contact with Tibetans. But not only Tibetans were living there, as the Salween valley was also inhabited by several Tibeto-Burmese people, mainly the Lisu in the south of the valley, and the Nung (nowadays called Nu in China) in the north. It is mainly among the latter that the French missionaries lived and made converts.

The analysis of missionaries' documents makes it possible to grasp the political situation of these border areas that were coveted by Tibetans, Naxi chiefs and Chinese, and to see by which means each of them tried to enforce its control. More than the history of Christianity in this area, the theme of this paper is the local populations' reactions to this new religion and the presence of the missionaries. These responses, as we shall see, were mainly associated with power relations concerns - or more generally speaking, with politics. And it seems that the way locals, whether Tibetan or Nung, understood the workings of political action was linked with that of ritual action. From this point of view, I will then consider political relations between the local populations at a broader scale and make some more general statements about the role of ritual in political legitimisation.

## **1- A short ethno-history: local political spheres**

First of all, it is necessary to lay out the cultural, socio-economic and political characteristics of this area of northwest Yunnan in order to provide a

better understanding of the situation the French Missionaries had to face at the time of their arrival.

Northwest Yunnan had been a theatre of unceasing conflicts due to both Chinese and Tibetan expansionist policies. Still, this area remained quite independent during the rule of the Tibeto-Burmese Kingdoms that played the role of "buffer" states between Imperial China and Tibet. Under the Tang dynasty (618-907), and with the agreement of the Emperor, the Nanzhao Kingdom came to power (730), unifying the six principalities settled around Er Hai Lake. This "Southern Kingdom" rapidly increased its regional influence, and reinforced its relations with Tibet. After a time of instability, it was replaced by the Dali Kingdom (902). Just as its power was growing, during its conquest of Southwest China the Mongol Yuan dynasty (1206-1367) defeated this kingdom (1253) with the help of the Naxi King of Sandan.<sup>1</sup> Realizing the strategic importance of this small principality, the imperial power took advantage of the opportunity to establish an alliance. The Naxi King therefore became vassal of the Chinese Emperor, and was known under the patronymic name of Mu (1382). The old Sandan became Lijiang, which thereafter centralized political authority over Northwest Yunnan.

Under the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), the Mu family of Lijiang launched a series of military conquest towards Tibetan areas, and was victorious in its northward progression (1548, 1561). Despite this, northwest Yunnan returned to the Dalai-Lama's rule at the beginning of Emperor Kangxi's reign (1662-1723). Again, the Mu family sent its troops against the Tibetans, and their incursions reached the towns of Markham (sMar-khams sGar-thog), Bathang and Lithang in eastern Tibet. Subsequent to a large-scale conquest launched by Emperor Kangxi, these places were soon annexed to Sichuan province. Chinese armies reached Lhasa in 1720, establishing the Chinese protectorate over Tibet.

In northwest Yunnan, like in other parts of China's periphery, the system of hereditary indigenous chiefs (*tusi zhidu*) established during the Yuan and Ming dynasty, helped to maintain the Empire's frontiers and settle the local population by the receipt of tribute. The Naxi chief of the royal family was then administrating the first class Prefecture (*tuzhifu*) of Lijiang. Several Naxi chiefs were also settled in the Mekong valley. But the Qing (1644-1911) imposed a systematic return to central administration (*gaitu guiliu*), appointing Chinese magistrates. Therefore, in 1723, a sub-prefect (*tongpan*) took charge of the territory of Lijiang. Nevertheless, some of the *tusi* remained in office as late as the first half of this century.

This very general background is helpful to present the political configuration of Yunnan's northwest borders. We will see that in the upper Salween valley, for the Nung population, several political legitimacies coexisted, with the empowered parties exercising quite freely their rights on this territory.

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<sup>1</sup> This name, in its Chinese transcription, was employed since the Song dynasty (960-1126). The Naxi Kingdom of Lijiang was known in Tibet under the name of 'Jang (lJang) Sa-tham. Since 1263, the Naxi hereditary chief Mai-liang (A Lang) had the title of Civilian Governor of Sandan (*Sandan guanmin guan*) bestowed by the Chinese Emperor.

## The Naxi *tusi* and the Chinese authorities

As we have just seen, Lijiang Prefecture (*fu*) became the administrative centre of the Sino-Tibetan marches of Yunnan province. Later on, the minor prefecture (*ting*) of Weixi, in the Mekong valley, was established (1729) as a means to put an end to the continuous conflicts between Naxi and Tibetans. The sub-prefect (*tongpan*) of Weixi was therefore in charge of the administration of both the Mekong and Salween valleys.<sup>2</sup> Chinese garrisons were established at different locations, but the Naxi indigenous chiefs of the Mekong valley were confirmed in their office, granted with fiefs and bestowed with military titles. One of them, who took the Chinese patronymic name of Wang, inhabited the village of Yezhi. He had the hereditary grade of Mugua (Mun-kwua, "military governor" in Naxi – see Rock 1947, II: 307), the highest rank after the chief of Lijiang, and also that of lieutenant (*qianzong*) from the Chinese authorities. Two other indigenous chiefs were settled in Kangpu village, one also having the grade of indigenous lieutenant (*tuqianzong*), and the other the grade of indigenous sergeant (*tubazong*). These several Naxi chiefs were locally very influential, and quite independent from Chinese authorities. Sharing between themselves the authority over the Mekong and the Salween valleys inhabitants, their main function was to collect taxes and quell the "rebellions". They were, with the Buddhist temples, the only landowners, at a time when land could not be sold, but only rented in exchange for taxes and corvée. They also had to collect tribute in the name of the Weixi authorities from the population living in their respective territories.

For the period we are more interested in - the time of the arrival of the French missionaries in 1854 - the Kangpu and Yezhi *tusi*, being sometimes rivals, shared authority over the Salween valley between them. The former collected taxes in the northern part of the valley, up to the Tibetan border, while the Yezhi *tusi* ruled over the southern part of the valley. Further to the south, the majority of the Lisu population still remained independent, resisting fiercely any outside intrusion.

It is clear that Imperial China left to these indigenous chiefs the responsibility to administer these territories, confining its own role to establishing garrisons, and collecting tribute through the intermediary of these local chiefs. The Naxi presence in the Mekong valley dates back to quite ancient times, and the office of Mun-kwua attests to their long-time political presence. The establishment of Weixi Prefecture by the Chinese and the application of the *tusi* system seem never to have challenged the status of these already settled Naxi chiefs, but to the contrary further confirmed their authority. The Nung population of the Salween valley, in contact with Tibetans to the north, and Chinese and Naxi to the east, had as many "masters" as they had neighbours.

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<sup>2</sup> The first mention of Naxi chiefs in charge of the region of Weixi (known as Linxi under the Yuan dynasty) is to be found in the Chronicals of the Mu family of Lijiang, where the date given is as 1406, following Rock (1947, II: 313). The Naxi helped in the installation of the Chinese magistrate in the city and funded the construction of the city walls.

## The Buddhist temples and their political connections

Description of this already quite complex political situation would not be complete without giving an insight into the role some monasteries played in this area. They had a real political power, and were part of a complex political, and also familial network with the above mentioned indigenous chiefs.

Buddhist presence in Northwest Yunnan goes back to a quite remote past. Strong links were established through the centuries between the Naxi and some religious authorities in Tibet, mainly the Karmapa.<sup>3</sup>

During the first half of the 18th century, most of the important monasteries of the Mekong valley were reformed and became Gelugpa, as were the big monasteries of Deqin (Deqên) and Dongzhulin. Following the establishment of Weixi Prefecture, new temples were built. In 1731 *Lanjing Si* was built in Weixi itself and in 1734 *Shouguo Si* was built not far from the village of Kangpu. Nearby, in 1753, *Yangbajing Si* was built close to a village called Hongpo. According to missionaries' documents, Shouguo temple, which had intimate links with the *tusi* of Kangpu, was Karmapa and not Gelugpa.

Along the route in the Salween valley, we find only one temple before entering Tibet proper (Tsarong district). This temple was built at the end of the 18th century, in a place called Changputong (nowadays called Bingzhongluo). It was a filial temple of the Shouguo temple near Kangpu. This link between the two temples is significant and is worth more discussion.

It is said that the first Lama to settle at Changputong came from Derge, well known as a Karmapa centre in Eastern Tibet. He passed through Weixi and crossed the mountain range between the Mekong and the Salween, before settling in Changputong. His arrival aroused the hostility of the local Nung population. Until today, oral tradition relates that he managed to impose himself on them through a demonstration of his magical powers. He had two successors who also came from Derge. When the last one died, it was said that he transmigrated near Weixi. His reincarnation was found in a village under the authority of the Kangpu *tusi* who then decided to fund the construction of a new temple in Changputong. This temple was given the Chinese name of *Puhua Si*, and its construction was finished by the end of the 18th century. In fact, the Kangpu *tusi* is said to have funded no less than six temples in the area. Political and religious power were clearly closely linked. The Lamas of this area said that all the temples near Weixi, as well as the one in Changputong, were "Kangpu temples". But after a while, the influence of the *tusi* of Kangpu declined. Because of rivalry with the Chinese authorities, its fief was annexed to the Yezhi *tusi*'s fiefdom at the end of the 19th century. Thereafter, the next person to become head of the Changputong monastery was a close relative to the Yezhi *tusi*.

When, still a child, he came to live in the monastery, his face was soon covered with warts. A divination determined that a powerful spirit, offended by the cutting down of a nearby forest, was the cause of this illness. It was then

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<sup>3</sup> Even before the establishment of Lijiang Prefecture, the Karmapa of Tibet had relationships with the 'Jang King of Satham (i.e. Naxi of Lijiang).

decided to sacrifice to this spirit a white ox, a white goat and a white chicken. For a while, the young Lama returned to the Shouguo monastery, and came back few years later to stay in the Puhua monastery in Changputong.

When Father Renou arrived in the Salween valley in 1854, he was welcomed by this young man in the Puhua Temple in Changputong. He was there representing the religious and civilian authorities. He collected taxes from the locals on behalf of the Chinese authorities in Weixi. As a relative of the *tusi* of Yezhi, he could claim the right to administer all the surrounding territory of Changputong. This was clearly noted by the missionaries, as stated by Launay, the historian of the Mission:

“La lamaserie de Tchamoutong relève directement du Grand Lama de Dégé [Derge](...). Le Grand Lama de Dégé lui donna le diplôme par lequel l’administration de la lamaserie lui était confiée, et il obtint du préfet de Ouy-si [Weixi] le pouvoir de régir sous le titre de Mou-koua, auquel il avait des droits héréditaires, les Loutsés de cette vallée de la Salouen” (Launay 1902, I: 229).

[The Tchamoutong monastery comes directly under the High Lama of Derge (...). The High Lama of Derge gave him the diploma by which he was in charge of the administration of the monastery; he also obtained from the Prefect of Weixi the right to govern the Lutzi of the Salween valley under the title of Mugua, to which he had hereditary rights.]

During the erection of Puhua Temple, missionaries’ documents also relate that several Tibetan families (up to seventy five) were sent to settle in the surroundings of the temple, after the local Nung inhabitants had been expelled from their own lands. The Tibetan families were granted with hereditary land. Later on, a few Chinese also came to cultivate irrigated field-rice.

The establishment of this temple met with some difficulties. As a new religious and political authority, it met with the resistance of the local Nung population, so the magical superiority of the Lama had to be proved to them. It also encountered a malevolent reaction from a local spirit, and this spirit had to be conciliated by a sacrifice. This latter problem, concerning relationships with local earth deities, often plays a key role in political legitimisation processes. We shall see another example when relating the settling of the missionaries.

Let me here summarise the facts. The temple in Changputong (*Puhua Si*) appears to be a branch of Shouguo temple near Kangpu. They were both linked to the Karmapa centre of Derge, in Kham. We can see with the Puhua temple, the strong alliances, and often close familial links, between religious and civilian authorities responsible for the administration of this territory, the collecting of land taxes and other tribute. The *tusi*, as well as the temples of this area, were in charge of tax-free fiefs, collecting from the locals a tax in exchange for the right to cultivate. The *tusi* were also in charge of collecting tribute in the name of the Chinese Prefect of Weixi. In the north of the Salween valley, Puhua temple itself was in charge of tax collecting.

All these local authorities, although under the rule of the Chinese Prefect of Weixi, enjoyed great independence, deriving important private benefit from

taxes and commercial activities. In the north of the Salween valley, they had to conciliate with the Tibetan authorities of Tsarong. They too were collecting different taxes on the same population ruled by Puhua Temple. In fact, a story tells that the *tusi* of Kangpu, who at that time was a woman who had succeeded her husband, invited a Tibetan Lama to cure her son. Very impressed by the magical power of the Lama, she gratefully decided to allow the Tibetans of Tsarong to collect taxes in the upper Salween valley as well as in the Dulong valley. Let me now briefly present the local Tibetan institutions.

### **Tibetan local authorities**

After the Qing dynasty conquest, Kham province of Eastern Tibet was partly divided, the territories of Bathang and Lithang being annexed to Sichuan province, and the southern area consisting of Deqin and Zhongdian being attached to Yunnan. In south Kham, an official (*thil-rje*) appointed by Lhasa resided in Markham. He had under his authority thirteen district governors (*rdzong-dpon*), such as the ones governors of Tsarong and Dzayul, bordering Yunnan province (Carrasco 1972: 141).

At that time, in Kham province as elsewhere in Tibet, land was considered to be state property, and all peasants to whom tenure rights were given had to pay taxes and services (*khral*). The Tibetan Government fixed the amount of taxes, and district officials had to collect them. All the excess collected on the local population was for their own benefit (Carrasco 1972: 92). The land administrators, officials appointed by the government, and hereditary chiefs or monasteries, were granted some land with local families becoming their dependents. According to missionary documents, at that time Tsarong governed around twenty villages, with a total population of five to six thousand families. Of this total, only 270 were tributaries (*khral-pa*), the others being farmers, sharecroppers for the monasteries or serfs of some rich landowner (Goré 1923: 377).

Travelling north from Changputong, we enter Tsarong district of Tibet. On the west bank of the Salween river, the village of Menkong, with a Buddhist monastery (called *Dar-gling* in Tibetan), was the residence of an official. Some of the Nung population was under his rule. It is also to the monastery of Menkong that the Kangpu *tusi* had surrendered the right to collect taxes over all the north part of Changputong's territory and the valley of the Dulong river to the west.

The governor had his own agents and a monopoly on commercial activities. But this privilege was often ceded to monasteries or private merchants (Carrasco 1972: 213). It happened that some officials made use of their authority and used the free transport service (*'u-lag*) due by the peasants for their own private commercial activities, or even imposed their commercial articles on their subjects. A good example of this kind of abuse is given below.

Just south of Menkong, a village called Zha'en (*'Gram-sngon*) was the residence of rich merchants who had the monopoly on all the commerce in the

south of Tsarong region as well as with the Nung communities of Changputong. One of them, called Tsewang (*Tshe-dbang*), had been the direct intermediary with whom Father Renou had to deal with in order to settle in this region. According to the missionaries, Tsewang was one of the four richest families in Tsarong. He seemed to have a legitimate authority and hereditary rights on a territory that included the south of Menkong, the north of Changputong and also the north of the Dulong valley. Through his right to receive taxes and his commercial activities, he managed to indebt the local inhabitants, mainly Nung and Drung. The ones who were unable to repay became his domestic slaves, or sometimes were sold. It is said he himself had around sixty slaves. Let us relate this situation through the words of a missionary.

“Les Arrou [Nu] paient tous les ans un tribut à la Chine ; c’est le lama d’ici [Changputong] qui est chargé de le faire parvenir à Oui-si [Weixi]. De plus, ils doivent aussi payer un petit tribut au mandarin Thibétain de Men-kong ; ce tribut porte le titre d’aumône et consiste en quelques marmites de fer, *ya-tai*, ou toiles du pays, etc... On m’assure que, dans le principe les Arrou ne devaient payer aucun tribut au Thibet, mais les Thibétains, profitant du caractère doux et faible des habitants, demandèrent des présents, puis les exigèrent ; le mandarin exigea le transport gratis des charges de sel ; puis les gros bourgeois de Tsa-kong [Zha’en] firent aussi porter gratuitement leurs charges de sel, sous le nom du Chel-ngo, ensuite en leur propre nom. Si bien que les choses en étaient venues à ce point qu’à l’occasion du tribut, les pauvres Loutsé étaient chaque année obligés de porter 500 à 600 charges de sel qu’on les forçait ensuite d’acheter au prix de cinq charges de céréales pour une de sel. Il y a deux ans [1862], les Loutsé (Arrou) aidés par des chinois établis au pays, firent une petite révolution, secondés aussi d’un régiment de Lissou : ils vinrent en masse au-devant des collecteurs du tribut, auxquels ils signifièrent qu’à l’avenir ils paieraient fidèlement le tribut, mais ne porteraient plus gratis que les dix-sept charges du mandarin ou chel-ngo”. (Desgodins, 1872: 323).

[The Arru people pay a yearly tribute to China; it is the Lama of the place (Changputong) who is in charge of sending it to Weixi. Moreover, they also have to pay a small tribute to the Tibetan mandarin of Menkong; this last is called alms and consists of steel cooking-pots, local cloth, etc... One assured me that in principle the Arru shouldn’t have to pay any tribute to Tibet, but the Tibetans, taking advantage of the weakness and gentleness of the inhabitants, asked for presents, and then required them; the mandarin then required the free transportation of salt loads; then the big bourgeois of Tsa-kong also asked for free transportation of their salt loads, this under the name of the Chel-ngo, and then under their own name. So things had come to the point that when the time came for the tribute, the poor Lutzi had to carry every year around 500 to 600 loads of salt, and were then forced to buy it at the rate of five loads of cereal for one of salt. Two years ago (1862), the Lutzi, helped by the Chinese, settled in the area and assisted by a Lisu regiment, organised a small revolution: they came to the tribute collectors and said that in the future they will regularly pay the tribute, but will only carry for free the seventeen loads of the mandarin or Chel-ngo.]

The complexity of the situation the small Nung communities had to face is quite apparent. In the north of the Salween valley, some villages had taxes and corvée imposed not only by the Kangpu *tusi* and the Temple of Changputong, but also by the civilian and ecclesiastic authorities of Tsarong. This area shows



an intricate interweaving of various spheres of power. Facing the expansion of their more powerful neighbours, the Nung could only oppose by weak resistance and by ephemeral alliances and solidarities.

## **2- French missionaries' first steps to settle**

While settling in the region, the French missionaries had to deal with the local institutions in order to ground their own authority. Consequently, they modified to some extent the political configuration of the area. At the time of their arrival, Chinese authorities were not very strongly implanted in the area.

In 1854, Father Renou arrived in the Salween valley in search of land on which to settle. Pretending to be a Chinese merchant,<sup>4</sup> he first talked about his wish to the head of Puhua Temple in Changputong. He then had an opportunity to meet the rich Tsewang. In only a few days, he obtained the small valley of Bonga, situated within Tsarong, just a few kilometres north of the Yunnan border. An agreement was signed between Renou (and his pretended Merchant Company) on the one side, and Tsewang and his son-in-law on the other side. The contract stipulated that a perpetual rent was to be paid monthly to Tsewang and his son-in-law. They both shared the ownership of this small valley. They had obtained it from the Nung inhabitants, the original owners, who because of heavy debts, had to cede their land to Tsewang. Later on, the authorities of Menkong approved this agreement, and the head of the monastery wrote a new document and the local magistrate set his seal to this document. Father Renou and all the missionaries were therefore free to settle in the valley of Bonga, and to travel within Tsarong too. Soon, another missionary, Father Fage, who enjoyed the hospitality of the monastery of Changputong for several months, joined Renou. In 1855, Fage obtained from this monastery the rental of two farms and their land, one quite close to the monastery itself (in Zhongding village), and the other not far from Bonga (in Qingnatong village). Both were in Chinese territory.<sup>5</sup>

## **From individual to collective conversion**

Apart from a few Chinese servants who had joined the missionaries, the first members of the Catholic community were slaves bought from Tsewang by the missionaries. They successively bought several boys and girls, four the first year, nine the year after, and nine again in 1858. They were orphans or children sold away by their indebted parents. They at first made up the small community of Bonga where they started to learn how to read and pray in Tibetan. The missionaries also bought about a dozen older slaves. There was also a Lama. Because he had broken his vow of chastity, he was told to go on a

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<sup>4</sup> The Nankin Treaty of 1842 did not allow foreign missionaries to act outside open towns. Therefore, they often pretended to be Chinese merchants.

<sup>5</sup> These farms were rented by the Changputong monastery, with the agreement of the Yezhi Mugua. Once again, this shows the relation between the temple and the *tusi* of the Mekong valley. They were ruling the same territory.

pilgrimage of the sacred Kawakarpo mountain with his pregnant mistress, and to kill the baby after birth. As the pilgrimage path passed nearby the valley of Bonga, when they arrived there they were welcomed by the missionary. They both converted and were baptized, as was the new-born baby, who was given the name Mary. The Lama became the new teacher in the school run by the French missionary, and he translated a catechism and prayers into Tibetan.

In 1858, the French priests were progressing in their efforts to establish themselves and were joined by three other missionaries (Durand, Goutelle and Desgodins), but the local authorities started to worry. Tsewang himself decided not to let the missionaries' importance grow too fast. With his son and his son-in-law, they weaved a plot, and claimed the right of ownership of the Bonga valley, taking the case to the Court of Menkong. The residence of the missionaries was soon attacked and all their buildings reduced to ashes along with all their goods, as well as the agreement and related papers concerning the renting of Bonga. Father Renou ran away with his small community and asked for hospitality at the monastery of Changputong.

This was the beginning of the Bonga case, which lasted for three years and went up to the highest authorities in Kham. As the court was about to take its decision in 1861, an Imperial Edict signed by Tongzhi Emperor arrived, in which were mentioned the articles of the Tianjin Treaty allowing Foreign Christian Missions to enter Chinese territory.<sup>6</sup> In July 1862, the lawsuit came to its end, with a victory for the missionaries. It was said that the rent would be paid directly to the official in Menkong. The Peking Government then ceded the land of Bonga to the missionaries in perpetuity, and the writ was ratified by Lhasa.

### **The missionaries, a growing power and a new authority**

After this success, the reputation of Bonga and the missionaries soon spread throughout Tsarong, and the residence of the French missionaries became known by the name "Bonga-dzong" (Launay 1902, I: 385). For the locals, they represented a new authority, being seen as new "chiefs" with their residence (*rdzong*). Some rumours grew about the missionaries. It was said that the Chinese had bestowed a high official rank upon the Vicar, Head of the Mission, and a lot of people in Tsarong started to consider the possibility of enjoying the protection of these new and apparently powerful foreigners. For example, Father Renou stayed in Markham during most of the time of the lawsuit and was still there when a deputation of the Pomi tribe, from Poyul came to him, asking him to come to their country, an invitation that he had to refuse temporarily (Launay 1902, I: 393).

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<sup>6</sup> In the Tianjin Treaty of July 1858, the right to freely preach in inner China was given to missionaries. France was therefore designated as the protective Nation of Catholic Missions. On this occasion, Mgr Thomine Desmazures, Vicar of the Mission, organised an expedition to Lhasa (1861), but his efforts were unsuccessful.

Locally, the sudden death of two of the Tibetan defendants just after the lawsuit was meaningful for the local people. These premature deaths were understood as a punishment for acting against the missionaries.

When it was rented to Father Renou, the Bonga valley was said by the locals to be cursed. Many stories were told of people who had seen spirits there. The place had once been inhabited, but when Father Renou arrived it had already been abandoned, and vegetation had grown wild. The Father invited a lot of Nung people to come and work for him to clear the place. But they left many trees, refusing to cut them down because they believed that spirits inhabited these trees. The missionary showed them that by pronouncing the names of God and Holy Virgin, nothing bad would happen. The Nung learned to pronounce these names and after a while felt no more fear about cutting these kinds of tree.

During the period of settling in, the missionaries also received a letter from the Karmda monastery, in the Mekong valley, north of Degin. This letter, addressed to "the protectors of all living beings, heads of the religious house", asked them to make rain fall on their fields. In fact, a rumour had spread that the missionaries had made rain stop during the time of the construction of their house. The letter ended by saying: "If our people have no rain, they won't be able to pay the tribute". To that, the missionaries sent a reply saying: "We do have special prayers and customs to ask our God for rain", and it will rain a short time later (Launay 1902, I: 249).

The missionaries had acquired territorial legitimacy over Bonga. As we have just seen, this was linked to the ritualised cutting of the trees. The place was the residence of spirits that had something akin to a property right over the land. For the people of this area, clearing forest is a means of reserving for oneself the exploitation of a place. But above all, it is a ritual act. The chief of the village is normally in charge of the cutting of the first tree on a spot to be cultivated, because he has a privileged relation with the divinities. This relationship is related to his political legitimacy. As such, the rule could be formulated as follows: "la maîtrise sur les hommes passe par la maîtrise sur les divinités du sol" [the control over human beings goes through the control over earth divinities]<sup>7</sup>. The missionaries, in appropriating this place, accomplished a ritual act by which they assured their status as the new chiefs. They had the favour of the divinities, and were recognised as "masters of the place" by the population. This also sheds light on Karmda monastery's request. The missionaries, through their relationship with the divinities were also linked with prosperity, and having the power to make rain fall.

In spring 1863, about fifteen Melam (Nung) from Songta village, came to work for the missionaries in Bonga. During their stay, the missionaries organised several ceremonies, such as a baptism ceremony for the instructed children, and tried to impress their visitors. Later, the "head" (*'bas-sras*) of Songta (named after the *zhal-ngo* of Menkong) came for business purposes. After a discussion, he accepted that a missionary come and settle in his village. Fage and Desgodins went to Songta.

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<sup>7</sup> See G. Toffin (1987: 86).

In the village, Father Fage explained to everybody the Christian duties, and the inhabitants organized a council with all men, women and children, in circle under a walnut tree. The whole village (203 inhabitants) decided to embrace Catholicism and be under the protection of the missionaries. There were also six shamans in this village. The missionaries took charge of "liberating them from their obsession" by making them pronounce the name of God and cross themselves, and also by taking their paraphernalia away.

"Nous leur faisons dire, écrit M. Desgodins : Loués soit Jésus et Marie, embrasser le crucifix, faire le signe de la croix, et les congédions en paix, leur demandant seulement de nous apporter leur tambour (...). Tout cela se passait en présence de quatre envoyés du sous-préfet de Menkong qui se trouvaient à Songta" (Launay 1902, I: 388 ; cf. Prouvèze, 1884: 551).

[We made them say, wrote M. Desgodins, Thank Jesus and Mary, made them kiss the crucifix and make the sign of the cross over themselves, and then sent them back in peace, just asking them to bring us their drums (...). All that happened while four envoys of the Menkong sub-prefect were there in Songta.]

The next day, the new converts of Songta, led by Seumapil, one of the orphans living with the missionaries, went around the village to collect all the "fetishes" which he destroyed, threw in the river or burnt.

A few days later, a pupil of the missionaries, a native of Longpu village (120 inhabitants), informed the missionaries that the inhabitants of his village wanted to follow the example of their neighbours in Songta. Father Fage went there, joined by Desgodins. A first prayer was held for the villagers, as was a benediction for the shamans and their drums were taken away and some fetishes destroyed by Seumapil. Tibetan authorities, as in Songta, were there to watch this ceremony.

These two stories of collective conversion are interesting for they show how much the missionaries represented for the Nung people a possibility of escaping the domination of the Tibetan chiefs. Also, the episode of the shamans is essential. They are not only the depositaries of the traditions and myths on which their religious concepts were built. They were above all the intermediaries with the divinities. By giving up their role - symbolised by the fact they gave up their drums and other objects necessary for ritual performances - they in fact ceded this role to the missionaries.

The missionaries, who were occasionally practicing medicine, had already acquired a reputation in this regard. When he arrived in the region, Father Desgodins quickly understood that he could win the favour of the locals by curing people. As he himself said, "since we arrived, they have started to understand that our remedies are more efficient than the vociferations of the mouma [shamans]" (Desgodins 1869: 326). This was one of the best ways to promote more conversions:

"Un vieux bonhomme de Longpou, qui revenait de Djaun (...), me disait : les habitants de Djaun remarquent que depuis que Songta et Longpou sont chrétiens, il n'y a plus de malades parmi eux, ou qu'ils guérissent promptement, tandis que chez

eux à Djagun il y a beaucoup de malades, il y en a qui meurent, les autres ne peuvent pas guérir" (ASMEP, vol. 556 C(1). Lettre de M. Desgodins à M. P. Voisin, Directeur MEP, 4 août 1863 [472]).

[An old man from Longpu who was coming back from Djagun told me that the inhabitants of Djagun noticed that since Songta and Longpu had become Christians, there are no more illness amongst them, or that they recover promptly, whereas in Djagun there are a lot of ill people, with some dying and others unable to recover.]

The new converts were under the auspices of the missionaries and were no longer susceptible to the attacks of malevolent spirits. Missionaries were teaching people that their God was more powerful than the spirits, and that this new religion was more efficient to protect oneself against these bad spirits. There was, in the eyes of the locals, continuity in their way of understanding the relationship with supernatural beings. They still believed in spirits, but Catholicism was there to protect them against the harm they could potentially cause. The magical aspect of rites and prayers performed by the missionaries played an essential role, as did their medical action.

The Nung of Songta and Longpu had at least twenty creditors who were paying interest on debts. Following the repercussions of the lawsuit, the conversion of these two villages also reveals the villagers' economic and political motivations. Father Desgodins made this pragmatic remark: "They became Christians to have something to eat and to pay tribute at the missionaries' expense" (ASMEP, vol. 556 C, Desgodins to Fage, 28 juillet 1864, in: Launay 1902, I: 390). For the Nung, to be under the missionaries' protection was a way to escape from the debt system.

Nearby, in Tsarong to the north, the head of the Bonpo Temple of Tsadam, converted too. After several councils held in the village, all the inhabitants agreed on their collective conversion. Father Durand set up in the temple which became a church. He convened the converted Bonpos and told them his intention to take all the statues out of the temple. After obtaining their agreement, he cut them into pieces with an axe. Rumours rapidly amplified this profanation, and the story reached the French Legation in Peking. The French Minister wrote a letter to the Missionary Society expressing his disapproval.

But soon, the neighbouring villages of Tchrana and Dzina became Christian, and Durand and Desgodins were invited to Bitu, the location of an important Gelugpa monastery, and made a few converts there (Launay 1902, I: 390). The village of Aben decided on its conversion too. As the inhabitants were indebted to the monastery of Menkong, the missionaries decided to settle their debts, and with the agreement of the inhabitants, bought part of their territory for 133 taëls. Close to Bonga, this new territory extended over half of the slope of the sacred Kawakarpo Mountain down towards the Yunnan border.

From 1863, a new plot was woven against the missionaries by the influential families of Tsarong, the civilian and religious authorities, and also by some high ranking Chinese officials. Since their conversion, the inhabitants of Aben village had stopped paying their taxes. The Menkong Lamas threatened them, as well as the Tchrana villagers, and came to see Fathers Fage and

Durand at the ancient Bonpo Temple of Tsadam in order to ask them to stop the conversions. "Otherwise, they said, all the lamas in Tsarong will be poverty-stricken". They also asked the missionaries not to cross the Salween but stay on the one bank (Launay 1902, I: 400 ; Prouvèze 1884: 585).

In August 1863, the sub-prefect of Menkong summoned all Tsarong personages and ordered all Christians to renounce their new religion. He lodged a complaint against the missionaries, together with the head of the monastery. An edict was sent from Lhasa, asking all civilian and religious authorities in Tsarong to act against the Christians. The converts of Longpu had by then already either renounced Catholicism or run away. The Catholics in Tchrana soon gave in too. This edict was also followed by an interdiction against selling any food supply to the missionaries, talk to them or provide accommodation. On 15th June 1864, an edict was circulated in Tsarong, forbidding conversion to Catholicism, but saying that no harm should be done to the missionaries themselves. Longpu, Songta and Aben villages were attacked, but Bonga was spared this time. Desgodins and Durand left the place with a few converts and asked the Changputong Lama for hospitality. Since Changputong was located within Chinese territory, he did not take part in this conflict.

The French Foreign Affairs Minister, informed of these problems, sent a letter to the Superior of the French Foreign Missions Society asking them not to send any more missionaries to the area. He declared the impossibility of providing protection to Christians in Tibet territory proper. For the French diplomats, this Mission had been begun "with more courage than caution and thinking" (Launay 1902, II: 36). Therefore, in 1864, Mgr Chaveau, Vicar of the Mission declared: "I am ordering you not to try to settle within Tibetan territory, but to establish yourselves as strongly as possible in areas under Chinese authority" (Gratuze 1969: 194).

The Tibetan authorities of Menkong forced the villages indebted to the missionaries to resolve their debts and to break off with the missionaries. In fall 1865, Qingnatong was attacked and Father Durand was drowned in the river when trying to run away. Bonga was again set on fire and the converts were captured. They promised to remain Christian but beseeched the missionaries to let them "return to their previous masters" (Launay 1902, I: 453). Fathers Biet and Desgodins were then obliged by the Tibetan authorities to sign a declaration by which they promised to leave Tibet without compensation. This document was sent to the highest Tibetan, Chinese and French authorities.

As we have seen, the often violent opposition between Tibetans and missionaries can not only be seen as a religious conflict. The Tibetans felt threatened in their territorial, political and religious integrity. The missionaries were seen as a foreign threat just as were the Chinese with whom they were often associated.<sup>8</sup> The fact that monasteries were exerting a religious as well as civilian authority, and thus had a strong control over land and people, was definitely a reason for the failure of the missionaries. The coercion of these institutions, and mostly the abuses of the local chiefs drove the population to consider the advantages of becoming Christian. The presence of the

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<sup>8</sup> See for example Teichman (1922: 20) and Bacot (1912: 209).

missionaries brought an alternative: the possibility to participate in a new social order under their protection.

The missionary was the pillar of the community he created, a chief for some, a master for others, and a rich and powerful figure for all. As such, the slaves whom the missionaries bought also enjoyed a higher status. Anyone entering this new community was not only "entering in religion", but was assuming a new identity.

### **3- Political legitimacy and ritual**

The political situation of northwest Yunnan at the time of the French missionaries was a complex interweaving of spheres of power resulting from both Tibetan, Naxi and Chinese efforts to control the area and its population. Chinese authority was still expressed by the presence of the local Naxi indigenous hereditary chiefs (*tusi*), who were directly in charge of the territory, and who combined their interests with those of the Tibetans. For the local populations, gradually deprived of their land, allegiances became multi-layered.

There, as elsewhere in Southeast Asia or the Himalayas, one can see an illustration of Paul Mus' theory about the impact of Indian and Chinese domination process upon peripheral areas. Paul Mus has shown the importance of rituals, as well as the role played by intermediaries with local divinities in the process of political centralisation. It seems that we find something quite similar had occurred in this area.

### **The debt slavery system**

As we have seen, the Sino-Tibetan borders had been the object of rivalry between Naxi, Tibetans and Chinese, so that several powers were simultaneously focused there. At the same time, large-scale commercial activities developed from which the principal actors made good profit. Debt appears to be an institutional means through which to gain control over land and political ascendancy. It was also the institutional grounding for the large-scale development of slavery.

Slavery in this part of the world was unlike the Black slavery that shamed the Western world. In this region, what I call slavery means the selling of people, including adults and children, but with the knowledge that a slave could enjoy a good treatment, as he was also enjoying his master's wealth.

Of great interest is the link between servitude and debt. We have already seen many illustrations of this relationship. Loans with interest were granted to locals by Naxi *tusi*, temples, and some Tibetan chiefs. Commercial activities, like the selling of salt, several kinds of metal tools, cloth and wool, were also in their hands. Missionaries took advantage of the debt slavery system. First of all, they managed to buy numerous slaves to set up their community. For the families who wanted to convert, or even for the villages of Songta, Longpu and Aben, the missionaries had to settle their debts to their creditors, becoming

themselves the new creditors of the communities. When the Tsarong authorities forbade conversions and ordered Christians to renounce their religion, one aspect of the problem was again that of debt. The converts were enjoined to settle their debts to the missionaries.

### **Debt, property and hierarchy**

The debt system also had a role to play in land distribution. The example of Songta and Longpu villages, first owners of the Bonga valley, shows the possibility of land appropriation by this very means of debt relations. The Nung had several creditors to whom they had to cede their land, while remaining farmers themselves. As guarantee for mounting debts, rights over land were finally transferred.

Rights over land had a certain mobility, and land could pass through different hands. Debt is one of the expressions of this mobility, and it also implies changes in social relations. Economic dependency and political submission were closely linked. The creditor, having obtained the economic dependency of part of the population, was potentially a chief.

The enslaved and the indebted were to different degrees the expressions of the establishment of a dependence relationship. From this ensued a power stratification and social organisation, thus revealing the strong link between politics and land rights. From the relationship between an indebted person and his creditor arises a stable relation of political dependency. As such, the creditor-debtor relation is a central paradigm through which to understand the grounding of relationships of dependence.<sup>9</sup> The different types of relationship to land, and the ensuing obligations, were the grounding for a statutory hierarchy, in which the local "tribes" occupied the lowest level. It seems there was only one step from loan to tribute. The fact that the chief is a creditor could be a guarantee of receiving his protection. Moreover, taxes were owed simply because of the existence of a relation of dependence. In fact, submission is the price to pay for protection.

Tibetan, Chinese, indigenous chiefs used this very same process. This is not particular to this area, and the same approach can be extended to other peripheral areas where Chinese expansion occurred. Often, the progressive monopolising of arable land followed colonisation by Han migrants. Soldiers, merchants and state employees agreed on despoiling local population by the mean of loans with usurious interests. Locals progressively became sharecroppers or were forced to take refuge in the mountains. This was particularly obvious during the Chinese conquest of Kham, and was particularly amplified at the beginning of the 20th century when the new Xikang province was about to be established, after rebellion had been quelled in a flow of blood. Writing about this area, a missionary had these words:

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<sup>9</sup> See Galey (1980: 145).



“Les sous-préfets eurent recours tour à tour à l’intimidation, à l’amende et à des stratagèmes peu avouables. L’un d’entre eux mis à la disposition de ses administrés les céréales des greniers publics, et l’on ne manqua pas de profiter de cette bonne occasion, sans se douter que *l’emprunt contracté de la sorte servirait de base à l’impôt !*” (Goré 1923: 390 ; emphasis added).

[The sub-prefects had successively resorted to intimidation, fines, and other shameful stratagems. One of them put at his people’s disposal the cereals in the public granaries, and people made the most of this good opportunity, without suspecting that *the loan taken out this way will be the ground for tribute!*]

## Ritual and political centralization

The role played by the debt system was very important. Another aspect of power relation needs to be discussed. If debt made it possible to ensure control over land, was there another process – such as a ritual one - through which the chief could confirm his political legitimacy, assert his status and his right over land and its inhabitants? To me, there was an important link to the concept of control over earth divinities.

I have already provided a few elements towards an answer to this question, as in the comparison between the approaches through which Puhua Temple and the missionaries became established. We have seen that in these two cases, there was a need to enter into a relationship with divinities, through a ritual act, in order to secure the legitimacy of the new settlers. This ritual act and its relationship to power seems that it was as essential in this area as in other places in China, the Himalayas or Southeast Asia. To show this, let me go back to the relationship between the Mugua of Yezhi and the local population. A. Desgodins provided this interesting fact:

“Tous les sujets Lissous et Lou-tze sont obligés chaque année de venir lui souhaiter la bonne année, accompagnés d’un présent, et le Mou-Koua doit traiter et amuser tout ce monde pendant trois jours. Chaque trois ans aussi il fait distribuer un morceau de viande de bœuf qui vaut à peine quelques centimes, et on doit lui rendre pour cela deux livres de champignons, etc.” (Desgodins 1877: 176).

[All Lisu and Lutzi subjects are required every year to come and wish him a happy new year, bringing a present; and the Mugua has to take good care of all of them for three days. Every three years, he also shares out a piece of beef, which cost only a few pennies, and people have to give him back two pounds of mushrooms etc.]

It seems that this chief, the main authority in this area, organized feasts for his dependents. By these feasts, his status and the political centralisation that he represented was confirmed. His prestige was enhanced as he showed his generosity. We unfortunately do not have any mention of the sacrifice of an ox, but it is meaningful he was sharing out meat. Oxen are, for the local population in this area, the most valuable cattle. It is a symbol of wealth and status. What

needs to be underlined here is the necessity for ritual. Before being political, centralisation is a ritual process.<sup>10</sup>

The ox was a good used in various situations, such as for matrimonial compensation, the "price of a man" when a murder was committed, etc. It was also the main good exchanged for slaves. This last link between the ox and the slave could possibly show that they both were considered as "ritual goods", a kind of symbolic good which can ensure prestige for its holder. All these facts can be linked with J. Bacot's statement:

"Les Loutzés payent un tribut au Moukoua de Yetché en peaux d'ours, d'antilopes, en musc, cire ou argent. Autrefois chaque famille devait fournir un esclave. Avec le temps, l'esclave a été remplacé par une boule de cire représentant une tête humaine. Le Moukoua de Yetché doit leur fournir le sel dont le pays est complètement privé" (Bacot 1908: 465).

[The Lutzi pay to the Mugua of Yezhi a tribute consisting of bear and antelope skins, musk, wax or silver. In the past, each family had to give a slave. Later on, the slave has been replaced by a human head shaped wax ball. The Mugua of Yezhi has to give them salt, of which the country is completely deprived.]

Thus, we return to the topic of slavery, the importance of which I have tried to emphasise. For the empowered ones, what mattered even more than wealth was the superiority gained by prestige, itself confirmed by the amount of dependents, or slaves owned. In other words, this last quotation shows that with the establishment of a relationship of dependence, the slave is owed, and from a relationship based on exchange it transforms into an asymmetrical relationship, characteristic of a dependence.

#### **4- Conclusion**

The history of this part of Yunnan province is extremely muddled, and its study from an historical perspective meets with the lack of substantial documents. Missionaries' sources are for this purpose very helpful for a better understanding of a key period in the history of the local people. Through the history of the settling of the French missionaries, we discovered the extension of the local authorities' influence and the processes of political integration. In this remote area, local people could not escape from the debt system and became potential slaves. Debt permitted the layering of various spheres of power. Still, another aspect of the dependence of the local population is that of political centralisation and ritual legitimacy.

I conclude with some comments about the ox, its role and value in this area. As I have pointed out, it can be seen as a good which enhances status and prestige, as did the number of slaves. The sacrifice of the ox and the sharing of meat is an expression of these local conceptions about prestige and wealth, common among the Tibeto-Burmese people of the area. I found no record of

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<sup>10</sup> See Sagant (1990: 163)

how it was performed by the Naxi chief, as noted in the above quotation from the missionary. But such a sacrifice is still a cultural characteristic of the Drung people today. Even if they abandoned this practice under constraint during the 1950's, its meaning and cultural value is still alive, at least for the elders. This may be related to sacrificial practices also found amongst other groups living in the Himalayan border areas, as well as in mainland Southeast Asia. Ritual as a means of displaying wealth and acquiring or validating status and power is intimately related to political centralization processes, and moreover, the ritual slaughter of animals and the distribution of their flesh appear to be the principle means through which one can acquire (or confirm) power and status (Woodward & Russell, 1989). This could be an interesting field for comparative research.

Thus, another focus of this paper was the things that local people's cultures have in common. We saw that there exists a 'ritual language' that is common to otherwise dissimilar groups. This echoes Leach's view that in Highland Burma, ritual "serves to express the individual's status as a social person in the structural system in which he finds himself for the time being" (1954: 10-11). He also added that "people may speak different languages, wear different kinds of clothes, live in different kinds houses, but they understand each other's ritual. Ritual acts are ways of 'saying things' about social status, and the 'language' in which these things are said is common to the whole Kachin area" (1954: 279). In northwest Yunnan, we saw that there were also common conceptions about human power or potency, but they still need to be researched in more depth.

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