

Princess from Tibet

Walking along Barkhor, the visitor to modern Lhasa may come across the Mandala Hotel, just on the south-western bend of the famous promenade circulating the Jokhang. According to present day travellers, the hotel does not excel with qualities such as friendliness and hospitality of the staff or cleanliness of the rooms but offers a lot to those who are eager to look out the window on the lively scenes down on Barkhor and let their eyes wander over the roofs of 'old' Lhasa to the golden tops of the Jokhang.

Prior to the Chinese invasion, this place facing the Kashag (cabinet building) was occupied by Samdrup Phodrang (*bsam 'grub pho brang*), the ancient mansion of a noble family by the same name. The house of Samdrup Phodrang - according to Tibetan custom usually contracted to 'Sampho' - belonged to the exclusive circle of Yabshi, clans that had given birth to a Dalai Lama. In the case of the Sampho family, this was the 7th Dalai Lama, Kelzang Gyatsho (1708 - 1757), whose name lived on as well in Kelzang Darchen, a huge flagpole just in front of the building.



This was the setting into which Sangey Deki (*sangs rgyas bde skyid*) was born in 1932. She was the lastborn of the six children from her father's first marriage. The girl was just five years old, when her mother Sonam Yangkyi (1901 - 1937) passed away. ¹ Her father, Theji Tsewang Rigzin Namgyal Samdrup Phodrang (1904 - 1973), was a distinguished third-rank dignitary to be appointed Kalon (minister) of the Tibetan government in 1957 and Magchi (general) of the Tibetan army in 1959. ²

In 1947, Theji Sampho led the Tibetan delegation to the Asian Relations Conference in Delhi. Meeting in Dromo, the eight member deputation reached the Indian capital travelling via Gangtok and Calcutta. ³ It's likely that either the stopover in Gangtok or a longer stay in Kalimpong before returning to Tibet provided the opportunity to initiate negotiations between the Theji and Chogyal Tashi Namgyal for the marriage of the Theji's daughter with the Chogyal's second-born son and heir apparent, Palden Thondup Namgyal. Thus, the crown prince wrote to his confidant Rustomji in April 1950: *"I am not married as yet but my parents have at last caught up with me and they have made me agree to marriage and I am engaged to a young lady in Lhasa ..."* ⁴

By chance, the elder brother of the bride-to-be was a member of the Tibetan delegation as well. Rimshi Tenzin Dhondup Samdrup Phodrang or, in short, Sampho Se was a secretary of the Kashag, at that time. The delegates were to prove their worth in their diplomatic steps to hold the Chinese Guomintang delegates and their claims at bay. Four years later, Sampho Se was a member of a diplomatic mission, again. This time, however, negotiations with the successive Communist regime were not as successful. While in Beijing, the Tibetan delegates were virtually trapped and forced to sign a pre-fabricated 'Agreement on Measures for the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet' with seals forged by the Chinese (May 23, 1951). ⁵ The Chinese did not even bother about a misspelling in Sampho's fake seal.

The royal wedding took place in August 1950 at the Tsuklakhang in Gangtok. The princely couple was blessed with a first son - Tenzing Kunzang Jigme - in 1952, followed by another son - Tobgyal Wangchuk Tenzing - in 1953 and a daughter - Yangchen Dolma - in 1956.

The short life of the princess at the palace saw a number of social and diplomatic highlights. In 1952, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru graced Sikkim with a state visit. In turn, the princely couple visited India as state guests in March 1954 in connection with the Maharajkumar's promotion to the rank of a Lieutenant-Colonel of the Indian army and conferment of Padma Bhushan by the President of India. The following year, accompanied by other members of the royal family and the Dewan of Sikkim, they participated in the Republic Day festivities in Delhi at the invitation of the Government of India. Finally, the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama blessed the Kingdom with their presence on their way to the celebrations of the 2500th Buddha Jayanti, in November 1956. The Dalai Lama and his entourage again had a month-long sojourn in Gangtok before returning to Tibet, in early March 1957.⁶

While Palden Thondup Namgyal was highly present in the media in connection with all these events - not only as the crown prince of Sikkim but also in his assignment as the head of the Mahabodhi Society of India, the organisation that had invited the supreme lamas of Tibet - his wife is very rarely seen in official and press photographs of the era.



Apparently, the princess saw her prime responsibility in the loving mission of childbearing and raising a family. Though it was common practice that Maharani Kunzang Dechen and her sisters-in-law excelled with noted appearance even at the international stage - which included India, at that time - Sangey Dekila limited her public activities to a mainly local level such as the inauguration of the new Lall Market in 1956, to mention a documented event. Besides, she reportedly acted as the official hostess at invitations and receptions at the palace on behalf of Chogyal Tashi Namgyal standing in for the Maharani who had retired from the court.

In the wake of the general disorientation in Tibet following the Chinese occupation, the Theji as well as Sampho Se seemingly tilted towards cooperation with the invaders. The father was appointed to the Kashag at a time when the nomination of Kalons was increasingly compromised with the likes and dislikes of the Communists. The son was made partially responsible for the signing of the Seventeen Point Agreement, while Sampho Yudon, the second wife of the Theji, happened to become a vice-chairperson of the 'Lhasa Patriotic Women's Association' established upon request of the Chinese as early as in 1952.⁷ In the Lhasa uprising, in March 1959, Sampho Se joined the masses that had gathered around Norbu Lingka in defence of the Dalai Lama. Meanwhile, Kalon Sampho was received with stone pelting by the alert crowd when he tried to approach the summer palace. They, both, paid dearly for their involvement, including Thamzing (humiliating public propaganda trials) and long-term detention. In the case of Sampho Tenzin Dhondup this came down to nearly twenty years in labour camps (Laogai) before he was released and went into exile in India.

The turmoils in Tibet certainly were a cause of sorrow for the princess as for everybody else concerned. However, she did not live to witness the ultimate capture of her native country not to mention the one of her new homeland. A further pregnancy was to prove fatal, *"just as things were going better between them. (It had been an arranged marriage,*

and in the beginning she wasn't happy)" as Hope Cooke reports.⁸ The princess passed away on 17th June 1957 due to inner bleedings caused by gestational complications. The Wheel of Life had turned full circle with a still younger mother leaving behind a still younger lastborn daughter. A weathered Chorten at Lukshyama, the royal cremation ground above Gangtok, remains a visible memorial to the present day.

Observers supposing that international attention for the royal family arose in the following decade only, may be surprised to learn that the demise of the princess was reported worldwide - though with some delay - for which a snippet⁹ from a US local paper be quoted as an example.

With her untimely death, another Queen of Hearts was born. The Sikkimese keep fond memories of H. H. Sangey Dekila to the present day not only as the mother of the present Chogyal but also for her gleaming beauty and as an icon of a past lost for ever. People's remembrance forms the hidden memorial of the Tibetan princess.

Sikkim mourns Death of its Princess

Business stopped and flags flew at half-mast in Gangtok when the Princess of Sikkim died. She was Maharajkumarani Sangay Dicky, 25, wife of Lieut-Colonel P. T. Namgyal, heir apparent to Sikkim, which is a protectorate of India near the India-Tibet border. She was the daughter of Dzassa Samdup Phodang, of Tibet, and left two sons and a daughter.

The Samdrup Phodrang family prominently patronized Nyingma masters such as Jamyang Khyentse Chokyi Lodro¹⁰, Dudjom Rinpoche, Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche or Chadrak Gyel Dorje Rinpoche. Jigme Sampho Rinpoche, the second brother-german of the princess, is considered the Yangsi of the great Dzogchen master Tokden Shakya Shri and a disciple of Chadrak Rinpoche. Following in the footsteps of his uncle, Wangchuk Namgyal sought for refuge and guidance by the same master. Having lost his temporal power, the Chogyal committed himself to the development of spiritual leadership holding high the heritage of both, his father and his mother, of Sikkim and Tibet.

Stefan Daehler

The present paper includes substantial inputs by **Tenzin C. Tashi** and **Jamyang Norbu**. Best thanks!

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¹ bSam 'grub Pho brang bsTan dzin Don grub, mi tshe'i rba rabs 'khrugs po, Rajpur, 1987, p. 379

² Luciano Petech, *Aristocracy and Government in Tibet 1728 - 1959*, Roma, 1973, p. 37

³ Claude Arpi, *Fifty Years ago: The Asian Relations Conference*, phayul.com, 2007

⁴ Nari Rustomji, *Sikkim: A Himalayan Tragedy*, Ahmedabad, 1987, p.28

⁵ Tsepon W. D. Shakabpa, *Tibet: A Political History*, New York, 1984, p. 304

⁶ The Dalai Lama's prolonged stay in Sikkim made observers wonder whether he'd return to Tibet at all. Meanwhile, Radio Peiping preventively reported at least twice that he had returned to Lhasa.

⁷ Tibetan Women's Association, *Breaking the Shackles: 50 Years of Tibetan Women's Struggle*, Dharamsala, 2009, pp. 2 - 3. The Chinese had managed to rope in a considerable number of Lhasa noblewomen. The charter members acted in tune with the general policy of appeasement, hence, accepting membership was not necessarily a disgrace in itself.

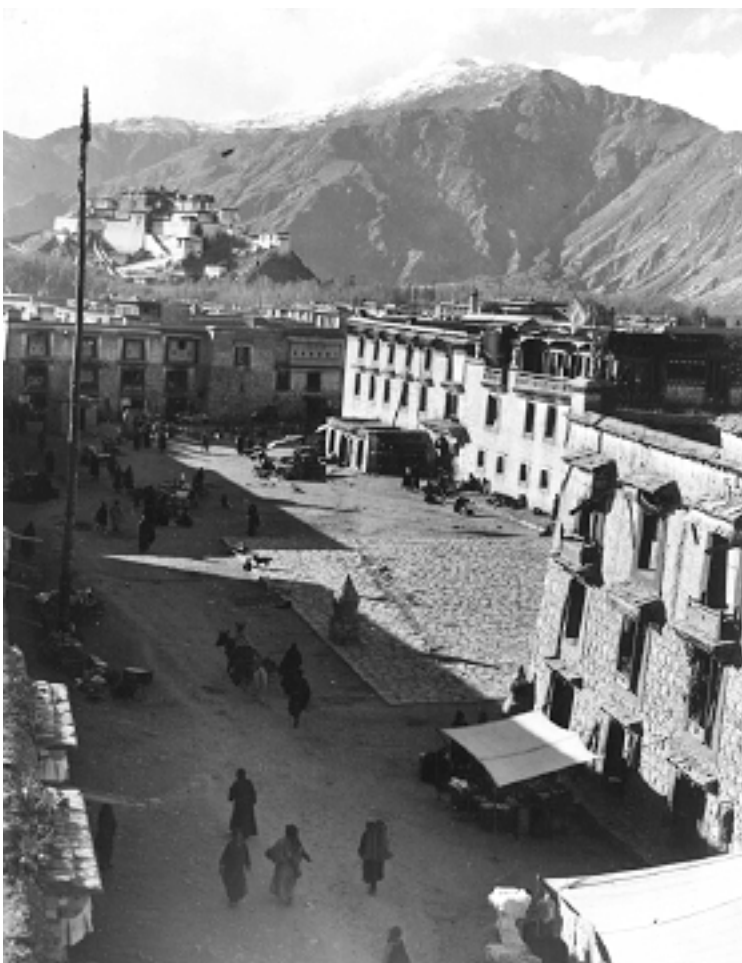
⁸ Hope Cooke, *Time Change*, New York, 1980, p. 84

⁹ Alton Evening Telegraph, Alton IL, August 21, 1957, p. 3

¹⁰ Testified, for example, in the epilogue of his *Melody of the Nectar of Immortality*, which reads: "Thus bowing down with all the three doors, this was written by Jamyang Khyentse Chokyi Lodro, the holder of the name of the reincarnation of Jamyang Khyentse, from the Eastern Region of Dokham, while praying with great respect, at the residence of Samdrup Phodrang, South of Rasa Trulnang Temple, in Lhasa, Central Tibet."



Gutor procession at Barkhor, Losar 1939, with **Samdrup Phodrang** in the background.
 (Photo Credit: Ernst Schaefer, 1939; © German Federal Archive, Inv. Nr. 135-S-16-16-31)



Opposite view: **Barkhor** widening to a square in front of Samdrup Phodrang. The Kashag on the right, Kelzang Darchen on the left, the Potala in the background.

(Photo Credit: Frederick Spencer Chapman, 27 October 1936; © The British Museum)



Sampho Family in the early 1940ies.

Back row from left to right: Jigme Sampho Rinpoche - Theji Tsewang Rigzin - Rimshi Tenzin Dhondup - Yudon Pomdatshang (second wife of the Theji)

Front row from left to right: Sangey Deki - Samdup Norbu and Tsewang Samphel (half-brothers from the second marriage), Yangchen Dolkar.

(Photo Credit: © Jamyang Norbu Collection, High Asia Archives)



The **Royal Wedding**, Tsuklakhang, Gangtok, August 1950. From left to right: Sangey Deki Samdrup Phodrang - Crown Prince Palden Thondup Namgyal - Prince Jigdal Tsewang Namgyal (George)

(Photo Credit: Das Photo, Darjeeling)



Young Family: Crown Princess with Wangchuk, Crown Prince holding Tenzing
(Photo Credit: Nari K. Rustomji)



'Group Portrait with Lady', details not known, possibly Delhi, 1955

Front row from left to right: Dewan Nari K. Rustomji - Triloki Nath Kaul (IFS) - Crown Prince Palden Thondup Namgyal - Crown Princess Sangey Deki - Princess Pema Choki Yabshi Yuthok - Princess Sonam Padeun Namgyal