

40. *An Old Form of Elective Government in the Chumbi Valley.*—
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An interesting form of elective government exists in the Chumbi Valley which has been in force from time immemorial and is probably of very great antiquity. Although at the present time its functions are merely the local administration under the control of the *Jongpons*, the Tibetan officials at Phari, it, no doubt, survives in its present form from the time when it was the independent Government of a small republic state. Until recent years the control exercised by Tibet over the affairs of Tromo, which is the Tibetan name for the country known to Europeans as the Chumbi Valley, has been merely nominal and has consisted in the payment of an annual tribute by the Tromowas to the Tibetan officials at Phari, and the obligation to provide *ulu* or transport for Tibetan officials visiting the valley, whose visits were, however, of very rare occurrence. The Tromowas (བློ་མོ་བ་) are in fact a distinct people from the Tibetans. They never speak of themselves as "Tibetans," Po'pa (བོ་པ་) and no Tibetan ever speaks of them as Tibetans. Their language, though a dialect of Tibetan, contains many distinctive words and forms, which alone points to a separate origin, and their customs differ in many respects.

Even in Tromo itself there are two distinct races, the Upper Tromowas, who inhabit the upper portion of the Chumbi Valley, and the Lower Tromowas, who inhabit the lower or southern portion.

The dialect spoken by these two races differs, and their customs also shew marked and characteristic differences, shewing their distinct origin. To make this clear I give the following extract from the introduction to my vocabulary of the Tromowas dialect:¹ "To shew how these two peoples, living in intercourse with one another, have maintained their distinction in other respects than in dialect, it is only necessary to mention one or two points of difference. Many of the Upper Tromowas are of the old Bon-pa religion, which was the religion of Tibet before the introduction of Buddhism, whereas none of the Lower Tromowas are. The Upper Tromowa men wear the pigtail, whereas the Lower Tromowa men cut the hair short like the Bhutanese. The Upper Tromowa women wear the hair in two plaits, which are united down the back. The Lower Tromowa women, while making the hair in two plaits, tie these separately round the head and do not let them hang down. In the matter of the men's dress, too, there was a difference until recent years,

¹ A Vocabulary of the Tromowa Dialect of Tibetan by E. H. C. Walsh; Bengal Secretariat Book Depot (page ii).

“ as the Lower Tromowas wore the Bhutanese form and material of clothing ; and though all except the older men have given this up and wear the Tibetan form of dress worn by the Upper Tromowas, a few of the older men still wear the Bhutanese form of dress.¹

“ As to their respective origins, the tradition of the Upper Tromowas is that there were certain original inhabitants who have always lived in the valley from pre-historic times. These are known as *Khyim-ser-Rawa-nang-pa*, ‘ Those within the fence of the golden house.’ Next after these come the *Chi-pon Tsang-khor*, who immigrated here from the *Khams* province of Tibet. This is said to have been a very long while ago, and there is no history of their coming. A second immigration known as *Nam-khen-pa*, the ‘ sky knowers,’ are said to have come from *Sakya*, subsequently to the *Chi-pons*, though the date of their arrival is also not known. These three classes have all intermarried and become one people.

“ The Lower Tromowas say that the original inhabitants of the lower valley were called *Sakya-pas*, namely, ‘ men of Sakya,’ who were probably an offshoot of that second immigration into Upper Tromo. Subsequently the *Ha-pas*, people of the province of Ha in Bhutan, came in about 400 years ago with a Chieftain named *Shab-Dung Lha Rinpoche*, who held possession of the Valley for a time, and they subsequently remained and settled down there.”

The point is of interest as shewing how the Upper Tromowas have maintained their racial distinction, which accounts for the existence of a form of electoral government peculiar to themselves.

Since 1889, a distinct but similar elective local government has existed in Lower Tromo into which it was then introduced by the Tibetans, on the model, with certain minor modifications, of that existing in Upper Tromo. The reason for its introduction was that since the Sikhim War of 1888 the Tibetans found it necessary to exercise direct control over the Chumbi Valley, and found that although the organisation of the Upper Tromo was able to supply them with any transport or supplies that their officials or troops might require, there was no such organisation in Lower Tromo, and they therefore constituted one on the same model as that which they found in Upper Tromo.

As already stated, until recent years, The Tibetan Government interfered very little with the Chumbi Valley, more than receiving their annual tribute, and in the fact that more serious criminal offences had to be referred for punishment either to the *Jongpons* or to the Government at Lhasa.

The local administration of Upper Tromo is by two officers called *Kongdus*, who act jointly and are elected for a term of three years. The election is made from the *Tsho-pas* or headmen of the villages. These *Tsho-pas* are themselves elected by their

¹ *Op. cit.*, p. ii.

villagers, but when once elected continue to be *Tsho-pas* unless the villagers were to remove their name which would only be done on the ground of old age or loss of money or position or anything else that would render them unfit to hold the office of *Kongdu*. The number of *Tsho-pas* in each village is not limited.

Once every three years on the 15th day of the 4th month, the villagers all assemble at a fixed meeting-place near Galingkha, the principal village of Upper Tromo, and present to the two *Kongdus* for the time being, a list of the *Tsho-pas* of their respective villages. For the purpose of election, Upper Tromo is divided into two divisions, one of which consists of the upper and lower villages of Galingkha and the other of the remaining seven villages of the upper valley. The *Kongdus* are elected alternately from these two divisions.

From the lists presented by the villagers the two *Kongdus* select the names of the four persons in the other division to their own, whom they consider to be the most suitable to be the next *Kongdu*. They then throw with three dice in the name of each of the four persons they have selected, and the two who obtain the highest throw are chosen as the *Kongdus* for the coming term of three years.

This ceremony takes place before an old stone altar situated under a tree, and sacred to the *Yul-Lha* or deity of the locality, before which is placed the banner which is the insignia of the *Kongdu's* office. It has no connection with the Buddhist religion, and points to an anterior origin. The two *Kongdus* thus selected then decide between themselves which is to be the *Thri-pa* (ཐྱི་པ་) or Chairman.

The one who is recognised as having the superior wealth or social influence is always chosen, but if the two selected candidates should consider themselves equal, the elder man becomes *Thri-pa*. The *Thri-pa* has the right of keeping the banner in his house.

The newly-elected *Kongdus* do not enter on office at once. This is done in the eleventh month when another ceremony takes place and a yak is sacrificed at the stone altar already mentioned. The yak is skinned and the skin is placed in front of the altar with the head of the yak resting on the altar, and the new *Kongdus* place their hand on the bleeding skin and take an oath on the sacrifice that they will administer justice "even between their own son and their enemy." The outgoing *Kongdus* then make over to them their banner, the insignia of their office, and with the banner they take over all the rights and powers of the office.

The *Kongdus* say that they do not hold their power from the Tibetan Government but from the *Yul-Lha*, the local deity, that they originally got the banner from him and have always held their power from him. The administration is thus theocratic as well as elective, and the god also takes part in the selection, through the result of the throwing of the dice before his altar.

The duties of the *Kongdus* to Government are to pay the annual tribute and to provide any transport or supplies that the Government may require. This falls under the following heads: *Ula*—supply of coolies; *mi-hrang*—supply of messenger; *tao*—supply of transport and riding mules and ponies; *khyem*—supply of yak transport; *tsa-thre*—supply of grass; *shing-thre*—supply of wood; *thab-yog*—supply of personal servants to officers while on tour.

The revenue paid to the Tibetan Government consists of 40 strangs (Rs. 100) for the grazing rights on the Lingma thang plain and on the hills; 120 bundles of bamboos, 60 wooden beams and 8 maunds of *tsod* leaves, which are used for dyeing. To meet these and other expenses, the *Kongdus* assess the land rent, a grazing rent, a house tax, which is really a personal tax as it is levied on the circumstances of the family and not on the value of the house, and a cattle tax. These taxes are assessed by the newly appointed *Kongdus* and remain in force for their term of office of three years. Should the amount so raised in any year not be sufficient to meet expenses, the house tax can be levied more than once in the year.

These funds are entirely under the control of the *Kongdus* and a large portion of them is spent on entertainment at the two ceremonies of the election of *Kongdus* and of their taking over charge of their office, at the quarterly meetings of the *Tsho-pas* and on any other special occasion, and in contributions to the various village *Lha-khangs* or temples, and towards religious ceremonies.

The people have absolute confidence in the *Kongdus*, and as they are men of sufficient substance, could recover from them in case of default; but I was told that such a case had never occurred. The *Kongdus*, apart from public opinion, are also restrained by the oath taken before the *Yul-Lha* on taking office, and would consider that any breach of trust in respect of the funds would bring them divine punishment and misfortune. They render a quarterly account of expenditure to the *Tsho-pas*, who assemble for the purpose. The *Kongdus* are exempted from land rent and all taxes during the term they hold office, and they also receive a present from each village at the ceremony of taking charge of their office, but receive no other remuneration.

The *Kongdus* also decide all civil disputes and questions of family right such as the share of the property which a woman is entitled to if a divorce is granted on her application. They also try criminal offences other than thefts, grievous hurt, by which is implied loss of a limb, and murder, which have to be referred to the Tibetan officials at Phari. They also make regulations for the allotment of the grazing grounds among the different villages, the maintenance of the village forest reserve, and enforce the local customs generally. They have the power of inflicting fine or beating. Though they are of the people themselves, their orders are invariably respected. I had nearly a year's experience of the working of this system when I was in Chumbi, as all supplies

and local transport were obtained through the *Kongdus* of the upper and lower valley, and I was struck by the manner in which the villagers carried out their orders and supplied the portion of any requisition which they allotted to a particular village without disputing the allotment.

Each *Kongdu* has under him four officers known as *La-yoks*, who perform the duties of orderlies and messengers and carry the orders of the *Kongdu* to the *Tsho-pas*. He has one *La-yok* for each of the *Tshos* or divisions into which the villages are divided for the purpose of grazing rights. The *La-yoks* hold their land rent-free and are exempted from taxes, and also each receive a yearly sum of 9 *srangs* (Rs. 22-8) as salary.

The land rent is levied on the amount of land held, which is estimated from the amount of seed sown on it, and comes to about As. 15 per acre. For the purpose of the house tax there are eight classes which are each assessed at a different rate, varying from Rs. 5 for the highest to As. 2 for the lowest class. The class in which each household is placed is decided by the new *Kongdus* at the first meeting of the *Tsho-pas*, who assist them in making the assessment, and also report whether any land has changed hands from one family to another; for no one is allowed to part with his lands to an outsider. Thus a man of Upper Tromo may not even sell or mortgage land to a man of Lower Tromo. Nor is anyone allowed to part with the whole of his land, lest he should leave the country and so be lost to the house tax and to the liability to personal service.

In the case of the grazing grounds, a fixed sum of 5 *srangs* (Rs. 12-8) is allotted to each of the 19 grazing grounds into which the various ranges of hills in the different villages are divided. These are allotted by the *Kongdus* between the different villages of the four *Tshos* groups, and the amount of rent paid by each group therefore depends on the number of grazing grounds allotted to it. This and the distribution of the grazing rent to each village is decided by the *Kongdus* at the meeting of the *Tsho-pas*.

Another of the duties of the *Kongdus* is to regulate the cutting of the grass on the Lingma thang plain, which is the chief grass supply for the winter's hay. The plain is closed to grazing on a fixed day, the 5th day of the 5th month (June), and one of the *La-yoks* is stationed there to see that no one grazes cattle or mules upon it. Anyone doing so is liable to fine or beating under order of the *Kongdus*. On either the 6th or 7th of the 9th month (October), everybody assembles from all the villages and the *Kongdus* take their banner and encamp at the lower end of the plain. They then worship the *Yul-Lha*, and after the ceremony the *Kongdus* declare that the grass can be cut. Everyone then sets to work at once to cut the grass, and the cutting is completed in about a week. This furnishes the supply of hay for the winter.

As has been already mentioned, the Tibetan Government, when it wanted to create an organised administration in Lower Tromo,

took the Upper Tromo administration as its model, and the two Commissioners deputed (the *Ta-Lama* and the *Lhalu Shapa*) introduced it with certain modifications.

Although, therefore, the system, as it exists in Lower Tromo, is of no historical interest, it is interesting as shewing the alterations which were made from the original system of Upper Tromo, and also from the fact that the Tibetan Government gave the *Kongdus* a banner as their insignia of office, similar to that held in their own right by the Upper Tromo *Kongdus*. The Lower Tromo *Kongdus* have also, on their own account, adopted some of the ceremonies of the Upper Tromowas, except that in respect to the *Yak* sacrifice on the ceremony of their appointment.

The alterations which the Tibetan Commissioners made from the ancient system of Upper Tromo were: The number of *Kongdus* has been fixed at three instead of two, and they are appointed annually and hold their office for one year instead of for a term of three years. The elective system by which every village chose its own *Tsho-pas* from whom the *Kongdus* selected and who assist the *Kongdus* in their assessments, has also been altered. Eighteen *Tsho-pas* were appointed to represent the eleven villages of Lower Tromo, and from these the *Kongdus* are selected in rotation: the first three for the first year, the next three for the second, and so on, so that all the list is worked through in six years and the office then comes back to the first three again. Any *Tsho-pa* may, however, resign when the village which he represents elects the *Tsho-pa* to take his place on the roster, and similarly in the case of death. The *Tsho-pas* are so arranged on the list that each group of three represents three different villages; there can never be two *Kongdus* from the same village at the same time.

The three *Kongdus* on taking office elect one of themselves as *Thri-pa* or Chairman, and take over the banner from the outgoing *Kongdu*, and the *Thri-pa* keeps the banner in his house. They also take an oath before the banner to administer justice truly "even between their own son and their enemy."

Their duties are the same as those of Upper Tromo.