1. Introduction

The establishment of the monastery of Kaḥ thog in eastern Tibet in the year 1159 marked an important step in the consolidation of the Rnying ma pa school of Tibetan Buddhism. Its founder, Kaḥ dam pa Bde gshegs (1122–1192), occupies a prominent place in the transmission known as the ‘Spoken Teachings’ (bka’ ma). This specific teaching tradition was further spread by a number of abbots, known collectively as the ‘Succession of Teachers [Consisting of] Thirteen [Persons]’ (bla rabs bcu gsum). According to one way of counting, the list begins with Spyan snga Bsod nams ’bum [pa] (b. 1222) and ends with Mkhas grub Ye shes rgyal mtshan (1395–1458); the two immediate successors of Kaḥ dam pa Bde gshegs, Gtsang ston Rdo rje rgyal mtshan (1126–1216) and Byams pa ’bum [pa] (1179–1252), are not included in this particular list of successive regents of the glorious Kaḥ thog monastery.¹

In the historiographical literature of the Rnying ma pa school, the period of the next series of abbots—called the ‘Succession of Attendants [Consisting of] Thirteen [Persons]’ (drung rabs bcu gsum)—is characterised by an increasing influence of the tradition of the ‘Treasure Teachings’ (gter ma), which led to a slight diminishing of the importance of the Spoken Teachings tradition. This event is linked to the journey of Drung Nam mkha’ seng ge, the first in this list of abbots, to the region of Lho brag, where he became the ‘master of the teachings’ (chos bdag) of the treasure-cycles of Rig ‘dzin Ratna gling-

¹ See Bya bral Rin po che Sangs rgyas rdo rje (b. 1913), Dpal rgyal rgyal ba kaḥ thog pa’i gdan rabs bryud ‘dzin dang bcas pa’i byung ba brjod pa rin po che’i phreng ba lta bu’i gtam, n.p., n.d., fol. 31a/5–37a/4. The author states that this way of counting follows the Mtshan bsdoms gsol ’debs of the teachers of Kaḥ thog composed by Kaḥ thog Si tu Chos kyi rgya mtsho (1880–1925), Ibid.: fol. 31b/1–2. The same authority is acknowledged by Mkhan chen ’Jam dbyangs rgyal mtshan (b.1929), Gsang chen bstan pa’i chu ‘go rgyal ba kah thog pa’i lo rgyus mdor bsdu brjod pa’ chi med lha’i rnga sgra ngo mtshar rna ba’i dga’ ston. Chengdu: Si khron mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 1996, 54.3–5.
pa (1403–1478). This particular phase of new spiritual developments within the teaching lineages of Kaṭṭh thog in the 15th century was also the period when the exponent who would later create a subschool known as the Lho mon Kaṭṭh thog pa or Mon lugs Kaṭṭh thog pa received his training.²

A first assessment of the history of this subschool in Bhutan was provided by the late Michael Aris. He opened his sketch of the Rnying ma pa in Bhutan with a treatment of the Lho mon Kaṭṭh thog pa, whom he called “[t]he first Rnying ma pa to arrive in a formal sense”. According to the historical sources available to him, it was one of the abbots of the above-mentioned first group of regents of Kaṭṭh thog, a certain Dbu ’od Ye shes ’bum [pa], who in the 13th century made his way to Bhutan on his way to Sikkim and founded in Spa gro Stag tshang the monastery of O ryan rtse mo; the location of this old residence of the Kaṭṭh thog pa tradition was immediately above the main shrine of Stag tshang. It is further stated that this master had two disciples, namely Bsod nams rgyal mtshan and the latter’s son Rnam grol bzang po, who both settled at Stag tshang in the Spa gro valley.³

It was further noted by Aris that there exists a biography of Bsod nams rgyal mtshan by a certain Rnam grol bzang po, and also an autobiography, but he was obviously not in a position to consult these works. As we now have access to the biographical tradition of this teacher from Kaṭṭh thog closely connected with the religious history of Sikkim and Bhutan, I want to readdress the issue of the arrival of the Lho mon Kaṭṭh thog pa in the Himalayan valleys, and in particular at the famous Padmasambhava shrine near Paro. This will be done in three steps: clarifying the identity of Ye shes ’bum [pa] from Kaṭṭh thog monastery, giving an overview of the life of Bsod nams rgyal mtshan, with special reference to his activities in Sikkim and Bhutan, and, finally, relating the story of the foundation of O ryan rtse mo.

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² For the change in doctrinal emphasis from the Spoken Teachings to Treasure Teachings within the teaching lineages of Kah thog in the 15th century see Ehrhard 1990: 88, note 20. For the counting of Nam mkha’ seng ge as the first Drung and the difficulties of dating him see Eimer 2002: 331.

³ See Aris 1979: 153–54. There are two different sets of dates for Dbu ’od Ye shes ’bum[pa], the third member of the bla rabs bcu gsum according to the enumeration advocated by Kaṭṭh thog Si tu Chos kyi rgya mtsho. As documented by Eimer 2002: 327–28, 330, these dates are either 1254–1327 or 1242–1315. For the Lho mon Kaṭṭh thog pa in Bhutan compare also Aris 1994: 23, “The Kathogpa school of eastern Tibet operated from within the Nyingmapa and established an early branch in Bhutan”.