

PER KVÆRNE

(Oslo)

Tibetan Studies in Norway up to 1975

Abstract

The paper gives a brief survey of Norwegian scholars and missionaries who have, to a greater or lesser degree, been involved in Tibetan studies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, starting with Christopher Andreas Holmboe (1796–1882), and continuing with the internationally well-known scholars Sten Konow (1867–1948) and Georg Morgenstierne (1892–1978). Thereafter two missionaries are presented, Theo Sørensen (1873–1959) and Edward Amundsen (1873–1928), and finally the Swedish scholar Nils Simonsson (1920–1994) who taught at the University of Oslo 1963–1975. The presentation does not continue beyond 1975, but a list of relevant doctoral dissertations up to the present is appended.

It is customary to begin a survey of this kind by presenting a venerable ancestor who has the useful function of providing a field of studies with an ancient pedigree. I would therefore like to mention in the briefest possible terms an astonishing work by Christopher Andreas Holmboe (1796–1882) who, in 1825, became the first professor of Oriental Languages at the University of Oslo, eventually becoming a distinguished numismatist.¹ Among his many publications is a short study (74 pp.) published in 1857, entitled *Traces de buddhisme en Norvège avant l'introduction du christianisme*. In it he argues that many aspects of the religion of the ancient Norsemen can only be explained as being the result of contact with Buddhism. Time does not allow us to take a closer look at this fascinating but unlikely theory, but it must be said that at least Holmboe was aware of contemporary Buddhist studies and quoted scholars like Burnouf, Hodgson, his compatriot Lassen and others. I mention him here as he was, as far as I am aware,

¹ *Norsk biografisk leksikon*, Oslo (Kunnskapsforlaget), 2001, vol. 4, pp. 342–343.

the first Norwegian scholar to make use of Tibetan material; he referred to *chortens*, to 'mani walls' and also discussed the mantra "Om mani padme-hom".²

We now turn to a scholar whose name is well-known, Sten Konow (17.4.1867–29.6.1948).³ Trained as an Indologist, Konow obtained his doctorate at Halle in 1893 (a study of the *Sâma-vidhâna-brâhmaṇa*), became assistant professor in Oslo in 1899, and thereafter worked as an assistant between 1900–1903 in the project resulting in Grierson's *Linguistic Survey of India*. It is in this connection that we find his only Tibetologically relevant work, viz. Part I of Volume III of the *Linguistic Survey of India*. Volume III deals with the Tibetan-Burman group of languages, and Part I, published in 1909, deals with the Tibetan dialects as well as what he calls "the Himalayan Dialects" and "the North Assam Group". Part I is a massive volume, comprising 650 folio pages. Konow was also responsible for Parts II and III, where he presented the Bodo, Naga, and Kachin groups (II) and the Kuki-Chin and Burma groups, but these parts do not concern us here.

Among the Tibetan dialects which are presented by Konow in Part I, we find, moving from West to East along the Himalayan chain, Western dialects such as Balti, Purik, Ladakhi, and Lahuli; and Central Tibetan dialects, principally U-skad, Spiti, Nyamkat, Sharpa, Dänjong-kâ, and Lhoke. Konow was a gifted linguist who described all these varieties of Tibetan in a competent way, and his "Introduction" (pp. 1–31) is, I think, still useful and largely valid today.

Having completed a stint as Government Epigraphist for India in the years 1906–1910, Konow was appointed Professor of Indian Philology at the University of Oslo in 1910. He occupied this chair until he retired in 1937. In 1922 he was co-founder of the journal *Acta Orientalia*, which is still published in Oslo and in which many Tibetological articles have appeared over the years.

Although Konow was an Indologist, perhaps some of his most significant work concerned the Iranian language of Khotan in Central Asia, which opened access to an important body of Buddhist literature. However, this does not concern us here, beyond noting that he was a friend of F.W. Thomas, the author of *Tibetan Literary Texts and Documents Concerning Chinese Turkestan* (1935–1963). Hence we proceed to the next scholar, Georg Morgenstierne, who not only succeeded Konow in occupying the Chair of Indology in Oslo, but also was his son-in-law.

George Morgenstierne (3.1.1892–3.3.1978)⁴ is regarded as one of the most outstanding scholars within Oriental studies in Norway, and a major biography of his life has recently been published in Oslo, written by a respected historian, Nils Johan

² I reproduce Holmboe's spelling of the mantra. C.A. Holmboe, *Traces de buddhisme en Norvège avant l'introduction du christianisme*, Paris, 1857, p. 60.

³ *Norsk biografisk leksikon*, Oslo, 2002, vol. 5, pp. 333–334.

⁴ Full name: Georg Valentin von Munthe af Morgenstierne, *Norsk biografisk leksikon*, Oslo, 2003, vol. 6, pp. 355–356.

Ringdal.⁵ Morgenstierne's fame is chiefly due to his pioneer studies of the languages of Afghanistan and what is today northwestern Pakistan. His monumental six-volume *Indo-Iranian Frontier Languages* (1929–1967, reprinted in 1973), is a landmark in this regard.

It is probably less well-known that in the early years of his academic career he devoted considerable time and effort to the study of Tibetan texts. It is likely that his interest in Tibet was aroused in his early youth, when, in his own words, “I was a passionate reader of books of travel... in particular Hedin, on whom I became quite an expert”.⁶ After having studied Greek and Latin for a couple of years, he decided to concentrate on Indian philology, which he studied in Bonn in 1914 with Hermann Jacobi and from the autumn of 1915 with Heinrich Lüders in Berlin. While in Berlin, he started studying Tibetan with Herman Beck, under whose guidance he read the Tibetan versions of the *Lalitavistara* and the *Udânnavarga*. For the study of Sanskrit poetry in Tibetan translation, Beck was undoubtedly the leading expert in Europe at the time. In a later account of his studies, he wrote, “I also made an attempt at studying Beck's edition of the Tibetan translation of the *Meghadûta*.⁷ But it was tough going.”

After a brief stay in Oslo, Morgenstierne returned to Berlin in October 1918 in order to pass his doctoral exam. The war was not yet over and the University was closed, but Beck was able to arrange for a special permission for Morgenstierne to appear before the board of examiners in private. Beck himself examined him in Tibetan. “I was the first candidate he had ever had, so he was just as anxious as I. But he was most amiable, and all went well”.

Morgenstierne's doctoral thesis was a study of classical Sanskrit drama, and he decided to continue his studies in this direction. This also involved using sources in Tibetan. “In the autumn of 1920 I copied in London Candragomin's drama *Lokânanda*, which only exists in Tibetan translation.” Morgenstierne prepared an edition and translation of this play, the importance of which he was fully aware. Among his papers, Morgenstierne left a complete transliteration of the Tibetan text of the *Lokânanda* (68 foolscap pages), made on the basis of the copies of the Tanjur preserved in the British Museum and the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. He also wrote a synopsis of the entire play, partly in English but mainly in Norwegian (10 pp.), a translation of the prose parts of the play with notes (likewise mainly in Norwegian, 99 pp.), and prepared an extensive card-index of all Tibetan words, with their Sanskrit equivalents.

In order to provide a firm basis for the planned edition and translation of *Lokânanda*, he also made a transliteration of the Tibetan text of Harshadeva's *Nâgânanda* (115 pp.), resulting in the article “The Tibetan Version of the *Nâgânanda*” (*Acta Orientalia* vol. II

⁵ Nils Johan Ringdal: *Georg Valentin von Munthe af Morgenstiernes forunderlige liv og reiser* [GVvMaM's singular life and travels], Oslo (Aschehoug), 2008. I also rely on parts of my article “Georg Morgenstierne and Tibetan Studies”, *The Journal of the Tibet Society*, vol. 1 (1981), pp. 40–43.

⁶ Unpublished ms., Oslo University Library.

⁷ Herman Beck: *Die tibetische Übersetzung von Kâlidâsa's Meghadûta. Nach dem roten und schwarzen Tanjur herausgegeben und ins Deutsche übertragen*, Berlin, 1906.

(1924), pp. 39–54). Undoubtedly *Morgenstierne* intended to complete his study of the Tibetan translations of these Sanskrit plays, but as it turned out, this was the only Tibetological article he published. By 1920 he was already turning towards Iranian studies, and in 1924 he made the first of many field-trips to Afghanistan and Chitral. In 1937 he was appointed as *Konow*'s successor to the chair of Indian language and culture at the University of Oslo.

Morgenstierne's interest in Tibet and Tibetan literature had a sequel. While in Berlin, he had read several of *Milarepa*'s songs, based on *Berthold Laufer*'s edition,⁸ later confessing, "I was deeply impressed by his description of the mountain scenery in Tibet". In later years he published a translation into Norwegian of three of *Milarepa*'s songs.⁹

I now move on to two Norwegians who cannot be styled academics, but who nevertheless made significant contributions to Tibetan studies. I refer to the two missionaries *Theo Sørensen*¹⁰ and *Edward Amundsen*.

Theo Sørensen (24.5.1873–2.12.1959)¹¹ hailed from the town of Kristiansand on the south coast of Norway. His social background was modest and his education limited to the compulsory five years of primary school. At the age of sixteen he experienced a religious breakthrough, and he soon decided to become a missionary. At the age of nineteen he went to England where he studied for a couple of years at a Bible college, and finally, in 1894, travelled to India where he stayed for two years in Darjeeling and Kalimpong, working for a project called "The Tibetan Pioneer Mission." Due to the British policy of not allowing foreigners to enter Tibet, he decided to try to reach Tibet from China. After his arrival in China in 1896, he joined the well-established society, China Inland Mission and spent the next two years learning Chinese. Concerning his studies of Chinese and Tibetan, *Sørensen* later remarked, "Learning the Chinese language was a pleasure compared to the difficult Tibetan. Memory and a feeling for music is a great help." Finally he settled in the border town of Tatsienlu (Tibetan Dartsendo, now: Kangting), and started his work as a missionary.¹² There were several other missionaries stationed in Tatsienlu – a Roman Catholic as well as an Adventist – but relations do not seem to have been particularly cordial: *Genschow*, travelling through Tatsienlu at the time, refers to "Herr *Soerensen*, the English missionary" and adds that the latter had never even met his French Roman Catholic colleague who lived next door.¹³

⁸ "Zwei Legenden des Milaraspa", *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft*, vol 15,4 (1901), pp. 1–44, and "Aus den Geschichten und Liedern des Milaraspa", *Denkschriften der Wiener Akademie*, Phil.-hist. Kl., XLVIII, 2 (1902), pp. 1–62.

⁹ "Milaraspa", *Filologen* 16,1 (Oslo 1958), p. 17.

¹⁰ Norwegian "ø" is the equivalent of German, Swedish etc. "ö".

¹¹ *Norsk biografisk leksikon*, Oslo, 2005, vol. 9, p. 90; Per Kværne, *A Norwegian Traveller in Tibet. Theo Sørensen and the Tibetan Collection at the Oslo University Library*, New Delhi (Manjushrî Publishing House), 1973, with further references.

¹² *Kværne*, *A Norwegian Traveller*, p. 3.

¹³ A. *Genschow*, *Unter Chinesen und Tibetanern*, Rostock, 1905, p. 251.

As a missionary, Sørensen did not succeed in winning many converts, but he seems to have got on very well with Tibetans, who preferred to call him Sonam Tsering. His ability to communicate well with Tibetans stood him in good stead during several extended journeys through Eastern Tibet, bringing him as far as Chamdo. He also visited places like Batang and Derge. Although his primary purpose was to distribute Christian tracts which he himself had written in Tibetan,¹⁴ he also collected Tibetan texts, and thanks to his efforts in this regard, the University of Oslo eventually acquired a complete set of the Tibetan Buddhist canonical scriptures, viz. a set of the Narthang edition of the Kanjur (102 volumes) and a beautiful mint copy of the Derge edition of the Tenjur (212 volumes). Sørensen had brought these books – 314 huge volumes – to Oslo as early as 1923, and for many years, when relatively few copies of these Tibetan texts were available in the West, the Oslo Kanjur and Tenjur were often consulted by scholars.¹⁵ He also brought a large number of other Tibetan texts to Oslo, mainly Nyingma as well as Bon texts, some of which are still unique in the West.¹⁶

Sørensen was elected a Fellow of The Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland in recognition of his great knowledge of Tibetan and of Eastern Tibet; he also became a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society.¹⁷ While not a scholar, he nevertheless had great practical knowledge of Tibetan, and the collections he brought back to Norway continue to be of considerable importance.

After a brief spell in Norway in 1923–1924, he returned to China, this time to Beijing where he worked until his final return to his home country in 1936, after which his life seems to have been largely uneventful.

While Sørensen has received some attention, especially as the source of the Tibetan collections in Oslo, Edward Amundsen (27.1.1873–21.12.1928), born in the same year as Sørensen and coming from much the same social background in the

¹⁴ Among other tracts written by Sørensen are *gTso bo Ye shu'i chos dang Sangs rgyas kyi chos gnyis kyi bye brag 'byed pa'i bshad pa* [An explanation of the difference between the religions of the Lord Jesus and the Buddha] and *bDen pa'i chos kyi dri lan* [A catechism of the true religion], cf. Kværne, *op. cit.*, p. 59 n. 6. and n. 7.

¹⁵ On the Oslo Kanjur and Tenjur, see Arvid S. Kapelrud, “Østasiatisk samling i Universitetsbiblioteket i Oslo” [The East Asia collection in the Oslo University Library], *Norsk Årbok for Bibliotek og Forskning* [Norwegian Year Book for Libraries and Research], 1953, pp. 47–56. Sørensen initially offered to sell these books to a private foundation, the Institute for Comparative Research in Human Culture in Oslo (Instituttet for sammenlignende kulturforskning), founded in 1922; when the Board would not allocate the necessary funds, the collection was bought by a member of the Board, Gunnar Knudsen, a former Prime Minister of Norway, and donated to the Institute. The books were subsequently deposited in the Oslo University Library, see Leiv Amundsen, *Instituttet for sammenlignende kulturforskning 1922–1972*, Oslo (Universitetsforlaget), 1972, p. 86.

¹⁶ Kværne, *A Norwegian Traveller*, p. 32. This book also contains a catalogue of the Tibetan texts of the Sørensen collection, other than the Kanjur and the Tenjur.

¹⁷ Kværne, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

same coastal region of southern Norway, is much less known.¹⁸ Yet in several respects his significance as a scholar as well as an explorer was greater than that of Sørensen.

Amundsen accompanied Sørensen to Darjeeling and Kalimpong. He quickly learnt Tibetan, and was able (in contrast to Sørensen) to penetrate into Central Tibet and is reported to have arrived within eight days' travel to Lhasa. Unfortunately I have no further information concerning this journey. In 1896 the two Norwegians travelled together to China, but Amundsen went more or less straight on to Tatsienlu. From this border town he set out on what was to be his great Tibetan expedition, travelling around south-eastern Tibet to the Tibetan kingdoms of Chagla and Mili, and discovering the great bend of the Yangtze River north of Yunnan.

In 1900 the Boxer uprising in China forced Amundsen to leave the country. He returned to India, or rather to Sikkim, where he spent a few years. In 1903 he was back in Yunnan where he entered the service of The British Bible Society, before returning to Norway in 1911. After a few more years in China, from 1918 or 1919, he finally returned to his native country in 1924. His health was not good, and he died in 1928.

Amundsen published a brief report on his journey in Eastern Tibet in the *Geographical Journal* in 1899–1900¹⁹. In recognition of his discoveries, he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society as early as 1903. His linguistic work was no less significant. In 1903 he published a *Primer of Standard Tibetan* in Darjeeling, and in the same year he revised and published Vincent Henderson's *Tibetan Manual, with Vocabulary* (Calcutta 1903). In Tibetan he published a hymn book as well as a catechism.²⁰ Amundsen is also one of the early authors to write novels based on life in Tibet. In 1910 he published a novel with the rather charming title: *In the Land of the Lamas. The Story of Trashilhamo a Tibetan Lassie. In which are described Tibetan Character, Life, Customs, and History* (London and Edinburgh, 1910). I shall not reveal the plot of this novel, beyond saying that in my opinion it is quite well written and that it does give evidence of the author's intimate knowledge of the life of ordinary Tibetans. It is also well provided with interesting photos.

As a curious detail I may perhaps add that there is a variety of rhododendron that is named after Amundsen, the *rhododendron amundsenianum*. This plant, which grows in south-western China, was thus named as a token of gratitude to Amundsen by an Austrian botanist who was the first to describe it, viz. Heinrich von Handel-Mazzetti (1882–1940) who travelled around China in 1914–1919, including Yunnan, where he met the Norwegian missionary. According to Handel-Mazzetti, Amundsen was responsible for assuring that the former's botanical specimens reached Vienna after the

¹⁸ Kai Arvid Køhler, "Edward Amundsen – en norsk misjonær, språkforsker og oppdagelsesreisende (1873–1928)" [E.A. – a Norwegian missionary, linguist and explorer], in: *Telemark historie. Tidsskrift for Telemark Historielag*, no. 6 (1985), pp. 130–147.

¹⁹ "A Journey through South-Western Szechuan", *Geographical Journal*, vol. XV (1899), pp. 620–625 and vol. XVI (1900), pp. 531–537.

²⁰ *Tibetan Catechism*, Calcutta 1906 (*Chos kyi dri lan*); hymn book, date unknown (*gTso bo Ma shi ka'i mgur ma*).

war ended. In 1915 Amundsen was sacked by The British Bible Society, probably because he was perceived as having helped a citizen of an enemy state.²¹

We turn finally to Nils Simonsson (12.11.1920–22.5.1994), a scholar who strictly speaking was not Norwegian, but whose most active period as a scholar and teacher was at the University of Oslo, where, succeeding Georg Morgenstierne, he taught from 1963 to 1975.²²

Simonsson was born in Jämtland in northern Sweden, in a district which borders Norway. He told me that when he was a child, his family would make an annual shopping excursion “to town”, by which was meant the Norwegian town of Trondheim. In fact, his native region used to be part of Norway, so we can almost claim him as being one of our own. Simonsson studied Russian as well as Indology at the University of Uppsala, and subsequently spent six months in Paris in 1949 where he studied Tibetan with Marcelle Lalou.

The major contribution of Nils Simonsson was his doctoral dissertation, *Indo-tibetische Studien. Die Methoden der tibetischen Übersetzer, untersucht im Hinblick auf die Bedeutung ihrer Übersetzungen für die Sanskritphilologie* (1957). Behind this somewhat dry title one finds a brilliant, fundamental study of the principles, laid down by the Tibetans in the ninth century A.D., of the vast work of translating Buddhist texts from Sanskrit into Tibetan. His dissertation still remains indispensable today, and is referred to by all serious studies of the Indo-Tibetan textual tradition.²³

Nils Simonsson was appointed to the Chair of Indian Philology and Literature at the University of Oslo in 1963, as the successor of Georg Morgenstierne. His students (the author of this paper being among them) soon came to appreciate the fact that he had an amazing linguistic versatility: he thoroughly mastered not only Asian languages such as Sanskrit, Pali, Hindi, Tamil and Tibetan, but was also proficient in Finnish, Russian and Polish. “He had an extraordinary capacity to inspire enthusiasm in his students for philological studies.”²⁴ After coming to Oslo, his published work was, however, mainly in Indian studies, including several short but extremely perceptive contributions to Indian philosophy. He remained in Oslo until 1975, when he became professor of Sanskrit and Comparative Indo-European Linguistics at the University of Uppsala in Sweden.

²¹ Per M. Jørgensen, “Edvard Amundsen – en norsk rhododendron-misjonær?” [E.A. – a Norwegian rhododendron missionary?], in: *Lapprosen. Medlemsblad for den norske Rhododendronforening* [Rhododendron lapponicum. Journal of the Norwegian Rhododendron Society], vol.11 no.3 (2008), pp. 4–6.

²² Per Kværne: “In Memoriam Nils Simonsson (1920–1994)”, in: *Orientalia Suecana*, vol. XLIII–XLIV (1994–1995), pp. 5–6; bibliography, compiled by Eivind Kahrs, in Eivind Kahrs (ed.), *Kalyānamitrârâganam. Essays in Honour of Nils Simonsson*, Oslo (The Institute for Comparative Research in Human Culture), 1986, pp. ix–xiii.

²³ Quoted from Kværne, “In Memoriam”, p. 5.

²⁴ Kværne, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

S i m o n s s o n's most important contribution to Tibetan studies during his years in Oslo was probably his activity as a teacher of Classical Tibetan. For one year (1967–1968), he was able to provide paid employment as a university language instructor in Tibetan to a learned Tibetan monk, whose name at that time was S a n g y e T e n z i n. I recall admiring the enthusiasm with which S i m o n s s o n plunged into learning spoken Tibetan and Tibetan pronunciation from his Tibetan teacher – until then, like so many Western scholars of his generation, he had read Tibetan as he read Latin, i.e. as it is written, producing sounds, consonant clusters and all, which are probably only to be heard among Ladakhis or Baltis. The Tibetan monk subsequently became the abbot of the Bon monastery in India, taking the name L u n g t o k T e n p a i N y i m a. This venerable lama is now well-known in many parts of the world, including Poland, where he gave an address at the University of Warsaw in June 2006.

S i m o n s s o n's publications of Tibetological relevance during his Oslo years were all translations of Tibetan literature into Swedish. Thus, he published translations of several of M i l a r e p a's songs,²⁵ and a complete translation of the love songs of T s h a n g y a n g G y a t s h o, the Sixth Dalai Lama.²⁶

It is convenient to break off this account at about 1975. Fortunately, this does not mean that Tibetology in Norway came to an end in that year. This is not the place to survey the entire field of Tibetology in Norway during subsequent decades. However, the doctoral dissertations listed below indicate the scope of these studies. A fairly large number of M.A. theses have also been written, but they will not be enumerated here. It will be noticed that in recent years the trend seems to be towards studies based on social anthropology, conforming to a trend in contemporary Tibetan studies worldwide.

1977

Per K v æ r n e: *An Anthology of Buddhist Tantric Songs. A Study of the Caryâgîti* (Faculty of Arts, University of Oslo), Det Norske Videnskaps-Akademi. II Hist.-Filos. Klasse. Skrifter. Ny Serie No. 14; Oslo (Universitetsforlaget), 1977; ISBN 82-00-01614-5. [As the title indicates, the main focus of this work is Indological; however, it also deals with problems related to Tibetan translations from Indian languages].

1993

Jens B r a a r v i g: *Akṣayamatīrdeśasūtra. Vol. I: Edition of extant manuscripts with an index; Vol. II: The Tradition of Imperishability in Buddhist Thought* (Faculty of Arts, University of Oslo), Oslo (Solum Forlag), 1993. ISBN 82-560-0917-9. [Vol. I contains a critical edition of the various versions of this sūtra, including the Tibetan text; Vol. II makes extensive use of Tibetan sources].

²⁵ "Milarepa. Tjugosju ting som försvinner" [Milarepa. Twenty-seven transient things], *Orientaliska Studier*, vol. 3 (1970), and a selection of songs in: Stig W i k a n d e r (ed.), *Orientalisk diktning*, Stockholm (Almqvist & Wiksell), 1970, pp. 169–175.

²⁶ Stig W i k a n d e r (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 175–184.

1999

Hanna H a v n e v i k: *The Life of Jetsun Lochen Rinpoche (1865-1951) as Told in Her Autobiography*, 2 vols. (Faculty of Arts, University of Oslo). ISSN 0806-3222.

2001

Axel Kristian S t r ø m: *Continuity, Adaptation and Innovation. Tibetan Monastic Colleges in India* (Department of Social Anthropology, Faculty of Social Science, University of Oslo).

2003

Ingun Bruskeland A m u n d s e n: *On Sacred Architecture and the Dzongs of Bhutan. Tradition and Transition in the Architectural History of the Himalayas* (Oslo School of Architecture). ISBN 82-547-0160-1.

2005

Åshild K o l å s: *Ethnic Tourism in Shangrila. Representations of Place and Tibetan Identity* (Department of Social Anthropology, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Oslo). ISBN 82-7720-012-9.

2006

Koen W e l l e n s: *Consecrating the Premi house. Ritual, community and the state in the borderlands of East Tibet* (Faculty of Arts, University of Oslo). ISSN 0806-3222.

2007

Heidi F j e l d: *The Rise of the Polyandrous House: Marriage, Kinship and Social Mobility in Rural Tsang, Tibet* (Department of Social Anthropology, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Oslo). ISSN 1504-3991.