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The Wranahs. A Story of Discovering, and Forgetting the Tibetan Tribes of Amnye Machen*

Abstract

Golok Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture has a reputation for its bare landscape, severe climate and wild temperament of its inhabitants: the Golok nomads, whom the literature on Tibet made into a symbol of banditry and outlawness. Golok, however, is not home only to Goloks. In and around the Amnye Machen mountains, the range of Tibet's holy peaks, the majority of the population belong to Wranah tribes. The Wranahs, claiming different origins and speaking a dialect other than the Goloks', see themselves as different from their neighbors with whom they share the area they live in, but history and identity only to a certain degree. Contemporary Western literature is silent about the Wranahs, but old reports by the colonial era explorers reveal much about the Wranah tribes from the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. This article follows the Wranahs from the time they entered the pages of Russian and Western writings until the moment they suddenly and for a long time disappeared from the ethnographies of the region. It thus attempts to re-introduce the Wranahs into the Western academic literature.

Among the Books. Personal Introduction

The first time in my life when I entered the thick walls of the Section of Inner Asian Peoples of the University of Warsaw was sometime in summer 1997. At that time I was working on my seminar paper on Tibetan nomads, that was later, following

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Professor Stanisław Godziński's advice, published in *Przegląd Orientalistyczny* (Sułek 1999). What brought me there was searching for books that could fuel my early university years' investigations. It was long before the rooms got renovated: the old wooden stairs leading to the second floor creaked, and the walls in the rooms were still covered with bookshelves full of precious first editions of classics on Tibet, Mongolia and other places in Asia. In the years to come I was to become a student of the Section and regularly breathed in the dusty air of the old library that once belonged to Władysław Kotwicz,¹ a Polish professor of Oriental Studies, and that was successfully carrying my attention away from certain other lectures and seminars.

Traveling through the spines of the books lining the shelves I desired to take them home to read the observations of long-gone travelers on the life of the Tibetans and Mongols from the *circa* century ago. Owing to Prof. Godziński's kindness I was soon given a somewhat unofficial chance to take one selected book away. It was Régis-Evariste Huc and Joseph Gabet's *Souvenirs d'un voyage dans la Tartarie, le Thibet, et la Chine pendant les années 1844, 1845 et 1846* in its Russian translation. Sitting at the bus stop at Krakowskie Przedmieście Street in front of the University I must have missed quite a few buses engrossed in Huc's travelogue, not knowing at that time of the accusations of fictionalizing many parts of his narrative brought against the author by subsequent explorers. Later on the time came for Anna Potanina's sympathetic account of her trip through Mongolia and North-East Tibet, which, published in 1895 after Anna's premature death in China, was one of the first ones that a woman wrote from Tibet, and Aleksei Pozdnev's meticulous *Ocherki byta buddiiskikh monastyrei* based on his long work in the steppe monasteries of Mongolia.² The possibility of having intimate contact with these no doubt costly volumes (some of them carrying personal dedications from the authors, whom Kotwicz knew or who knew him) was something that I truly cherished in those years.

I always considered Warsaw's 'mongolistyka' [Mongolian Studies], as it is commonly called, as my home university unit, where, as I believed, I was able to develop personal ties

kindness in sharing with me her knowledge on Schäfer and his writing on Golok, and to Angus Cargill who generously helped with giving this paper its final look. I am also greatly indebted to Róża Sułek, my Mum, who introduced me to the intricacies of studying scholars' private libraries and whose valuable comments enriched my work.

¹ Władysław Kotwicz (1872–1944), a Polish scholar, till 1923 in Russia, since then in Poland, established Far Eastern Studies on the university in Lvov, a head of the Polish Oriental Society, and editor of *Rocznik Orientalistyczny*. Kotwicz specialized in Mongolian languages (particularly Kalmyk), and elaborated on a hypothesis on Altaic language family arguing that the affinity between Mongolian, Turkic and Tungusic languages can be explained by similarities in language structure and way of life of their users rather than by genetic connection. He wrote on Yellow Uyghurs of Gansu, nomadic imperia on the steppes of Asia (claiming there was actually one nomadic imperium throughout the history, just with changes of dynasties or ethnic groups ruling it) and on the letters of Il-khans of Persia to Philip the Fair (arguing that by the 14th century the Mongols have become the messengers of universal peace). For details of biography and work of Kotwicz cf. Lewicki 1953.

² For English translation cf. Pozdnev 1978.

with the professors who generously shared with me their knowledge and book resources. Professor Godziński, who used to give passionate lectures on the contemporary history of Tibet, was among the first to hear a promise that I made to myself to conduct fieldwork in Tibet one day, and, more concretely, fieldwork among pastoralists in what was historically called Golok (*mGo log*),³ and what is today part of the Golok Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture under the People's Republic of China. Ten years was to pass before I was finally able to visit Golok and start my research there. When I finally came there, the reality only slowly drilled into my mind. It was as if somebody who enjoyed reading old travel narratives suddenly found his way to the yellowish pages of those books. With one difference: that this picture of Golok, the contemporary one, was far more than merely a match for any of its historical descriptions. It was more exciting than anything I have found in books. But books were not only my departure point. There were also the point of my return.

Among the Nomads

When spending my first days with nomads in the Amnye Machen (*A mnyes rma chen*) mountains, the range of sacred peaks and abode of the important territorial god, Magyel Pomra (*rMa rgyal spom ra*), whose power may even transcend customary borders of the land of Golok, I felt a bitter sting of disappointment. Tibetan highlands with wind-swept valleys, covered with scanty brownish vegetation and dotted with herds of yaks and sheep were a place that I had long dreamt about. Gasping for the air at night sleeping under a shiny poster with Mao Zedong (his waning importance was reflected in his position within the house: all 'better' rooms housed rather framed portraits of the Dalai Lama or the late and widely revered 10th Panchen Lama), I was glad I no more had to read books which, albeit captivating, were still abstract to me when I could not see the real people behind the lengthy passages by the old time explorers. Instead of imagining the sound of yaks' grunting I could simply let them wake me up in the morning now.

But in a daytime I sat in the spacious kitchen of the young couple's winter house and looked my hosts in the face asking myself: "Do Goloks really look like that?" I have never consciously seen any Golok with my own eyes, except those immortalized in the early black and white photos taken by Joseph Rock on his unlucky expedition to Amnye Machen in 1926. However I was still too deaf to be able to hear people saying: "We're the Wranahs (*sBra nag*). They're the Goloks". "Well – I thought – yet another tribal division within the Golok people", who were after all well described as comprising of tens if not hundreds of larger and smaller tribes of sometimes diverse origin (Hermann 2002: 245). At that time, as a researcher, I still thought I 'knew better',

³ Throughout the text the approximate phonetic form of Tibetan names and words has been used. It is followed after the first occurrence by their formal transliteration according to the Wylie system.

and only later did I understand that had I listened more carefully I would have sooner known the reasons of my “disappointment” with the first encounter with the supposed Goloks (even though, and this needs to be stressed here, my nomad friends were lovely companions and good hosts).

The following months and up-coming rounds of fieldwork made me listen to people more carefully, and also more systematically collect the answers for the questions that nurtured me. Tibetan robes made at the tailors’ shop could have been of different styles, for example. The robes from Bamma (*Pad ma*), on the southern tip of Golok, where the highlands merge into the woods, were plain, brown or black (according to the 2008 fashion design). Those from the North, where Amnye Machen rises above the highlands, loaded with embroidery and patchworked, were said to me to reflect the ‘cheap taste’ of the Wranahs. Although I considered myself a sworn enemy of all essentialist attempts to over-generalize knowledge of Tibetans as some homogenous group of people, I had to notice that such essentialist-like statements, just on a smaller scale, were repeatedly made to me by Tibetans around. “Have another bowl of soup. Don’t behave like a Wranah”, I was told, for example. “Goloks can make true friends, Wranahs are changeable” I heard on another occasion. Or: “If a Golok causes a car accident, he runs away. A Wranah stays and pays for the damage”, somebody declared to me. Hours spent examining photos (it is no secret that photography has gained some popularity among the nomads) with somebody’s finger wandering through the picture and pointing at the photographed persons: “She’s Wranah, he’s Golok” etc. And finally, an elderly leader of one of the tribes said: *Golok zer na Golok re. Wranah zer na Wranah re. Temo zig re. (mGo log zer na mgo log red. sBra nag zer na sBra nag red. Te mo zig red)* “Goloks are Goloks. Wranahs are Wranahs. That’s how it is”. That was the shortest explanation of the differences between the two.

Having observed and studied the differences between the languages the two groups spoke, the narratives of their origin, and the everyday ‘folklore’ of jocular representations of their identity, I tried to dig in my memory for any references about the Wranahs that I might have read some time ago, but which I forgot. Rock must have been mentioning this name when staying in Raja (*Ra rgya*) monastery at the Machu (*rMa chu*) or Yellow River, or walking towards Amnye Machen. In fact, he hadn’t. When in the field, using the simple internet facilities in the prefecture town, I emailed several scholars who, as I hoped, might have known anything about the Wranahs. In fact, they didn’t. When my Chinese visa finally expired and political unrest in Tibet did not allow me to return to the field as soon as I wanted, I turned to Professor Kotwicz’s library again. This time with a specific goal: find possible references to the Wranahs, people whom the academic world seemed not to know. What resulted was weeks of reading which brought a wealth of data. It turned out that the Wranahs were actually ‘discovered’ and described at least several times at the turn of the late 19th and early 20th century in Western and Russian literature. Only later did they drop out of the academic gaze. This paper brings the story of discovering and forgetting the Wranahs again.

The Wranahs' Whereabouts

The Tibetan name Wranah (*sBra nag*), taken literally, means 'black tent'. Tibetans who self-ascribe to a group called "Wranah" live on a large area of Qinghai Province, and within the Golok Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in several townships of Machen (*rMa chen*) county. Their territories include: Dawu Gong (*rTa bo Gong*), Dawu Zhol (*rTa bo Zhol*), Domkhok (*sDom khog*), and Gangri (*Gangs ri*). This makes the Amnye Machen circumambulation circuit largely within the precincts of the Wranahs' territory. While after the 1950s' the pastoralists in the area have generally shared the experience of being incorporated into a socialist-style modern state, in the pre-PRC Tibet their situation and political allegiances differed. The Wranahs of Dawu and Metsang (*dMe tshang*) tribes allied with the Goloks but the Yonzhis (*gYon bzhi*), for example, living on the edge of today's Prefecture, remained independent from the Goloks. The dynamics of intertribal relations and politics within the area are still only briefly documented in Western academic writing.

Independently of what the situation was like in the pre-PRC Golok, and whether the Wranah tribes allied with the Goloks or not, the sense of distinct identity is generally voiced in the modern Wranah/Golok mixed society of Machen county. The Wranahs who participated in my fieldwork presented themselves to me as people conscious of their identity as distinct from the Goloks' and tracing their history back to Central Tibet from where they came to where they live now. Moreover, they are conscious of the fact that their tribes inhabiting today's Golok TAP share this identity with other Tibetans living in the neighboring prefectures of Mtsolho (*mTsho lho*), Mtsonub (*mTsho nub*) and Malho (*rMa lho*) of Qinghai. At the same time they stressed the lack of one unifying structure organizing them under one leadership, at least in the past two centuries. The informal leaders of the Wranah communities in Golok openly rejected the hypothesis of their Mongolian origin, and emphasized the Wranahs' rejection of any interference in their internal matters coming from the outside. This was illustrated by their rejection of any of the Ma clan's attempts to tax them or extract gold from their territories, and the following punitive campaigns by Ma's armies which struck them heavily. While this part of the 20th century history of the area has been documented in unofficial written accounts such as *gYon ru rong skor tsho ba'i lo rgyus*, the conflicts and opposition to the incorporation of the Wranah territories into the PRC are proudly recounted in certain heavily persecuted tribes, whose representatives boast that even within the precincts of already ill-reputed Golok they, and not any of the Goloks, were the most uncompromising.

"Discovering" and Describing

Tibet in the 19th and 20th century was virtually besieged by foreign explorers. It was so especially from 1875, which was the publication date of Nikolai Przhval'ski's

Mongoliia i strana Tangutov,⁴ the first in the series of his impressive travel accounts from Tibet. Przheval'skii traveled extensively in Mongolia, East Turkestan, and Tibet in 1870–1888. His was a scientific mind, but his trips were not only his private whim. Przheval'skii was generously supported by the government in St Petersburg and his expeditions had many features of a foreign intelligence mission. To use Joseph Conrad's expression coined for the nineteenth century marriage of science and empire building, Przheval'skii was an exemplary proponent of "militant geography" (Conrad 1926: 31). Year-by-year were his caravans becoming more heavily armed, but even an extra escort of Cossacks that were given to him to fight his way to Lhasa if necessary did not help – he never managed to reach the town. Year-by-year he was also becoming more political in his writings, and more condescending towards the locals in his travels. His famous words: "three things are necessary for the success of long and dangerous journeys in Central Asia – money, a gun, and a whip" (1888: 50) are symptomatic of this approach.

Mongoliia i strana Tangutov is a summary of Przheval'skii's three-year-long peregrinations through Mongolia and Tibet in 1870–1873. It is an enjoyable reading, relatively unspoiled by the author's later preoccupation with politics that finds its zenith in an essay *Sovremennoe polozhenie Tsentral'noi Azii* (*The Current Situation of Central Asia*, 1886) advocating an open conflict with China to annex Mongolia, East Turkestan and at least parts of Tibet to Russia. Still closer to an adventure book than to a political pamphlet on the inferiority of Asians, needing the Tsar's assistance to stand up and mature, it presents a story of the origins of the so-called Khara-Tanguts (in the English translation "Tangutans"). A story that Przheval'skii was told somewhere around the Blue Lake or Mtsongön (*mTsho sngon*) by the Mongols living on the grassland stretching along its shores (1876: 151–153):

"Several hundred years ago a people of Tangutan race lived on the shores of Koko-nor, called Yegurs, who professed Buddhism, and belonged to the red-capped sect. These Yegurs were continually plundering the caravans of pilgrims on their way from Mongolia to Tibet until the Oliuth prince Gushi-Khan, who ruled in North-Western Mongolia, marched an army to Koko-nor to subdue them. The Yegurs were partly exterminated, but some of them escaped to North-West Kan-su, where they mixed with the other inhabitants.

After the subjection of the Yegurs, some of the Oliuth (Eleuth) troops returned to the north, but others settled in Koko-nor; their descendants are the Mongolian inhabitants of the present day. Some hundred of them emigrated to Tibet where their posterity has multiplied and now numbers

⁴ English translation published as *Mongolia, the Tangut Country, and the Solitudes of North-East Tibet being a Narrative of Three Years Travel in Eastern High Asia* in London one year later. In the following paper English language quotations from Przheval'skii are given according to this edition.

eight hundred yurtas divided into eight koshungs (banners). They live six days' journey to the south-west of the village of Nagchu, where they cultivate the soil and bear the name of Damsok Mongols, after the little river on whose banks they are settled.

The tradition further says that when the Yegurs were destroyed by the Mongols, one old woman, with three daughters, all in the family way, escaped to the right bank of the Hoang-ho. Here the daughters gave birth to the three sons, from whom are descended the Kara-Tangutans, or, *as they call themselves*, the Banik-Koksum. During the course of many years they increased in number and returned to Koko-nor, where they were first obliged to defend themselves against the Mongols, but as they became more powerful in their turn took to plundering."

Przheval'skii traveled with Mongolian-speaking interpreters. He himself complained of difficulties in communication in territories inhabited by Tibetans and not, like in Tsaidam or to a large degree around the Blue Lake, by the Mongols: "I usually spoke in Russian to the Cossack, who interpreted into Mongolian, the Mongol in his turn rendering the meaning into Tangutan. Allowing for the limited intelligence of the Cossack, the stupidity of the Mongol, and the suspicion of the Tangutan, some idea may be formed of our difficulties in studying the language," Przheval'skii admitted in what today would be a rather politically incorrect style. (1876: 112) The above story (Przheval'skii calls it a legend) is also told from a Mongolian perspective, reflected, for example, in the ethnonym Khara-Tangutan used throughout the text. The whole passage would look irrelevant to us if the author had not mentioned how the people he described *called themselves*, and not only how they *were called* by their Mongolian neighbors. Banik-Koksum is a distortion of Wranah kaksym (*sBra nag khag gsum*), or "Three Divisions of Wranahs", and is a concept parallel to other tripartite divisions met among the Goloks forming a body called Golok kaksym (*mGo log khag gsum*) and in other parts of Tibet. Przheval'skii's *Banik* opens the list of variations of the name Wranah. This name, written as *Banyk*, *Banak*, *Bannak*, *Bana* or even *Ponaga*, will be coming up again in other authors' books.

More than a decade later a route along the southern shores of the Blue Lake and then deeper into the plateau was made by William W. Rockhill. As did Przheval'skii, Rockhill left books and diaries that became classical mines of data about Tibet. However, while Przheval'skii set off to Tibet as a servant of his state rather than independent traveler, Rockhill was following his own dream. The ethos of their traveling, and their methods differed. Thus, reading Rockhill's accounts one doesn't have a feeling that it is his *country* speaking through the author's mouth, as it is with Przheval'skii's highly ideological and politically utilitarian writing. "I always wore Tibetan dress, and lived as the people did, on *tsampa* and tea. In fact, during the whole journey I never used any European articles of dress or food", Rockhill says (PRGS 1889: 733–734). Although some details in his narratives were carefully glossed

over (Wimmel 2003: 41) Rockhill's approach to meeting local inhabitants of the areas he had traveled through was still worlds apart from Przheval'skii's cautious attempts to avoid contacts with them. But Rockhill's plans to reach Lhasa were thwarted too.

In his *Diary of a Journey through Mongolia and Tibet*⁵ Rockhill explains what follows: "All the clans of Koko-nor Tibetans belonged to eight tribes with the cognomen *Na* (or *Nag*), so they became known by the hybrid term of *Pa-na ka*, or *Pa-na-ka sum* "the eight Na families" or "the three (divisions) of the eight Na families". The latter designation appears to be of more recent date than the former and refers, I am told, to the three sections of country over which they are now spread, *i.e.*, the tribes north of the Koko-nor, those south of it, and those living south of the Yellow River or Ma h'aré Panaka. This name of Panaka or Panaka-sum they have now adopted as their ethnic appellation, and they speak of themselves, as "we Panakasum" (*Na-ts'ang Panakasum*) (1894: 112–113). This was a complex excerpt, as it numbered some 36,000 families (the most numerous were those living North of the Blue Lake, who numbered more than twice those living South of it and along the southern side of the upper Machu) (1894: 115). Rockhill gives the names of the Panaka's 'bands' around the Blue Lake, and brings some visual data: an array of spindles, knives, and other artifacts belonging to the Panakas' every day use illustrates the *Diary*. On top of all that Rockhill's readers can literally look a Wranah in the eye in the photos that are captioned as showing the Panakas, be that on the background of their herds or in their camps that the traveler passed on his route.

Within less than twenty years time we were informed about the origins, internal structure of the Wranahs and got the first rough quantitative data regarding their numbers. The next episode in "Wranahology" belonged to Grigorii Grum-Grzimaïlo, one of the team of two brothers who explored Asia at the turn of the century. Grigorii criticized Przheval'skii for his lack of understanding or even interest in the local cultures and peoples, and extensively, and in a very personal tone, described the Wranahs, with whom, when staying on the grassland around the Blue Lake, the brothers established friendly contacts. In contrast to Przheval'skii, who frequently complained of the local peoples, Grum-Grzimaïlo praised the good food and kindhearted hospitality of the Wranahs, and took pleasure in disagreeing with his predecessor's observations on their dirtiness, selfish nature and fondness for robbery. He noted: "The joy with which they hosted us was, as it seemed, completely authentic, and didn't suggest their wish to provoke us to offer them gifts". They "were generally so tactful when dealing with us that our preconceived idea of them as savages with most unpredictable temper very quickly had to be abandoned" (both Grum-Grzimaïlo 1907: 17).⁶ Finally, having agreed that the Wranahs had a bad reputation for their raiding habits, and that they did

⁵ Russian translation of Rockhill's *Diary* in the Kotwicz's collection of the University of Warsaw.

⁶ Grum-Grzimaïlo's book in the Kotwicz's collection at the University of Warsaw, Grum-Grzimaïlo 1907.

raid neighboring Mongol camps, Grum-Grzmailo stressed a cultural dimension of this phenomenon. “Isn’t it the youth’s desire to show off its courage that plays the main role here?”, he asked (1907: 18), and emphasized that none of his belongings got stolen or lost in unknown circumstances during the expedition’s stay among the Wranahs.

Grum-Grzmailo, who clearly had a soft spot for the Wranahs, saw the weakness in his very subjective judgments. But he was also the author of something much less vulnerable to moods or prejudices: a glossary consisting of 244 words, phrases and sentences of the language that the people among whom he stayed spoke (Grum-Grzmailo 1899: 417–420).⁷ This was the first step in studying the language of the Wranahs. The next one was made by George *alias* Iurii Roerich, a son of the Russian painter and mystic who set out for a journey through Central Asia and Tibet in 1925–1929. The father was in search of the mythical land of Shambhala, and the son, who accompanied his parents on this Roerich Central Asian Expedition, as the family project was called, used this golden opportunity to observe and collect information, and study languages. Many years later, Roerich argued that there are three ‘dialects’ used by Tibetans in the North-East Tibet. These are: Amdo, Golok and Wranah (Roerich 1958: 6). He stressed the tense relations between the Goloks and the Wranahs who were often at dagger’s point: “The continual inter-tribal strife between the Goloks and their neighbors the Banaks, who by the end of the 18th century found themselves pushed back to the Yellow River, and also the vandalism they practiced along the caravan routes helped them to entrench themselves in what to all practical purposes proved a closed area,” Roerich explained (Roerich 1961: 240–241). In all his writings he mentioned the Wranahs as a separate group, along with others such as Nyarongwas, Khampas, Horpas, Tsaidam Mongols and the like. (Roerich 1933: 738)

The Wranahs’ distinctness from other Tibetans was also suggested by Robert B. Ekvall’s observations. During his years spent in the North-East Tibet between 1926 and 1941 as a missionary and anthropologist, Ekval gained insight into many aspects of the socio-cultural life of the nomads of this corner of the plateau. On this experience he relied later in his numerous publications. He argued: “Some Mongol tribes in the northeast who have become Tibetanized have changed from the yurt to the black tent as they have changed language from Mongolian to Tibetan and are now known as the *sBa Nag Ba* (black shelter ones).” (Ekval 1968: 65) And in another place: “Within the aBrog Pa [nomads] are a number of subcategories: the *sBa Nag* (black tents), an agglomeration of tribes in A mDo; the *mGo Log* (rebels), tribes noted for their lawlessness and banditry; and the *Byang Pa* (north ones), nomads of the high northern Plain” (Ekval 1968: 20). On a map accompanying Ekval’s *Cultural Relations on the Kansu-Tibetan Border* the name “Wanak” appears East of Machu above Raja monastery.

Until now the Wranahs seemed to enjoy the attention of the travelers, who, approaching Tibet from the North-East corner had to pass through their territories. Next to lengthy

⁷ Cf. Kara 1984. Tables with “Peculiarities of Amdowa and Panak’a Pronunciation” are found also in Rockhill 1891: 363–368.

descriptions of the Wranahs by the already quoted authors (here only small pieces of their ‘ethnographies’ are cited) there was a number of occasional references by other travelers, also those who crossed the Wranah’s land on their way out of Tibet. Fernand Grenard was a member of a French expedition in 1893, a very unlucky one as its other leader, Jules Dutreuil de Rhins died after a fight with Tibetans in a village somewhere north of Jyekundo (*sKye rgu mdo*). Grenard, who survived this tragic journey and continued to Xining, noted down: “On the 7th of July, we found a camp of Panak Tibetan, numbering some ten heads, on the shore of the Peritun Cho. These Tibetans, who watch their herds on horseback, in the Mongolian manner, have a rather bad reputation as thieves, but they are not so quarrelsome as the Goloks and do not, like these, travel in large bands. They were not greatly to be feared, therefore, and we had only to look after our goods to protect them” (Grenard 1974: 197). Grenard mentions that Wranah men, same as Goloks, have their heads shaved, but that the former (at least those from the shores of the Blue Lake) are “much nearer to the Mongols than the other Tibetans” in their physical appearance (Grenard 1974[1904]: 245, 224).

Capitan M.S. Wellby on his surveying trip traversed a huge expanse of land between Ladakh and Beijing in 1896. On his route he had to cross a “district inhabited by the Bana tribes, who are noted for their predatory habits” – he says. When passing through their grazing lands dotted with black tents, immense flocks of sheep, and herds of yaks, Lobsan, the expedition’s guide, warned the travelers to march with their guns loaded as the warlike Bana men, numerous and well armed, never missed a chance to raid a caravan. Wellby goes on to explain the name “Bana-khasum”, as he has it: “They are represented on the map by the name “Bana-khasum,” “sum,” meaning three – that is to say, there are three of these Bana tribes, who live round and about the regions of the Koko Nor Lake. These three tribes are again divided into eighteen small tribes, each with a separate chief, the whole being under the Sining Amban or Tsongt’u”. (Wellby 1996[1898]: 238–239).

A German geographer, Albert Tafel set out on his first trip through China and Tibet in 1905. In his book, *Meine Tibetreise*,⁸ which sums up minutiae of his travel, Tafel explains that North-East Tibet is inhabited by three tribes (*Stämme*) of Tibetan nomads or the “tent-Tibetans” (*Zelttibetern*) as he calls them. These are: Banagkaksum, ngGolokhkaksum and Mah’ah’akami (his spelling, Tafel 1914, II: 177). The first name (Tafel renders it as Baner, Banag or Waner) is said to refer to all Tibetan nomads of the steppes around the Blue Lake and comes, as he explains, from black tents that they have for their houses. These nomads split into a number of smaller tribes that fight and raid each other, Tafel states, and he gives the names of the six of their most influential leaders, whose loyalty the Republican Government was trying hard to win (Tafel 1914: 177).

Throughout the history of Western attempts to describe Tibet there were also other examples of early scientific accounts and travel stories reporting on the Wranahs. Whether

⁸ Tafel’s narrative in Kotwicz’s collection at the University of Warsaw.

or not the authors based their descriptions on their direct experience from the area remains to be judged. Some mentioned the Wranahs briefly (Futterer 1901: 278), others elaborated on their encountering them. Susie Rijnhart, who was among the most unlucky travellers to Tibet, lost her husband and son on her way to Lhasa in 1898, calls the name Panaka repeatedly when describing her stay on the steppes south to the Blue Lake, and seems to be replacing this name freely with “Kokonor Tibetans” not providing any further details on how should these two names be understood (Rijnhart 1901: 173ff). More information is given by Frederick Thomas, although he draws from secondary sources mostly: ‘The name accepted by them, in common with all Tibetans of the Koko-nor region is *Panak’a*, usually with the addition of *sum*, ‘three’ with reference to the triple division stated above.’ (Thomas 1948: 21) Thomas tries to summarize all what was written in the West about the Wranah tribes, and repeats that the name comes from the nomads’ black tent and can be used to all “Koko-nor (nomad) Tibetans” (Thomas 1948: 21).

The very name “Black Tent” (one can easily imagine that black yak hair tents could have served a sort of identity marker where they neighbored with white felt yurts on the grassland) was also the source of trouble. Matthias Hermanns, a missionary and an anthropologist of the Viennese school of Pater Wilhelm Schmidt, worked in the North-East Tibet for many years in the 30s and 40s of the 20th century. He intensively studied the life and culture of Tibetan nomads, and in his classic, *Die Nomaden von Tibet*, criticized the whole Wranah story as built on a misunderstanding. Pointing to the fact that nearly all Tibetan nomads have (or in his times had) black tents as their houses, Hermanns states: “In European literature this name is falsely explained up to this day. Rockhill translates Pa na ka or Pa na ka sum as “the eight families Na or three divisions of the eight families Na” (...) This derivation is not correct. Instead, the Brag kha sum means „the three parts (tribes) of black tent people and is a general term for nomads.” (Hermann 1949: 45) If one accepts Hermanns’ understanding of “wranah” as a customary appellative given to each and every Tibetan nomad one has to reject Przheval’skii and Rockhill’s observations about Wranahs as a group with a distinct history, structure and identity that sets it apart against the background of other pastoralists of the North-East Tibet, the Wranahs would merge into an undifferentiated mass of Tibetan nomads living on the Tibetan Plateau then. And this is what has happened.

In the shadow of Goloks

Beyond a shadow of a doubt Tibet was a popular destination for many nineteenth- and early twentieth-century adventure-seekers: sportsmen, missionaries, early ethnographers, travel writers, and intelligencers sent by the British Crown, or Tsarist and later Soviet governments involved in the Great Game over supremacy in Asia. In their travel accounts Golok and its nomads gained bad reputation for their ‘predatory habits’ and hostility to visitors – they didn’t seem particularly welcoming to foreign explorers who wanted to

trespass on their land (cf. Horlemann 2007). This ill-fame was sometimes shared, in the travelers' books, by the Goloks' neighbors, the Wranahs. Real 'accidents' that happened to travelers in Golok or from the hands of its inhabitants are however rarely described. What is described is more often a lack of cooperation on the side of the nomads of Golok, or their unwillingness to hire guides who would lead the expedition through their territories. This in its turn was frequently explained by the impossibility of guaranteeing self-passage through the highlands crisscrossed by a network of intertribal relations, and often also intertribal feuds (Kozlov 1907: 326,⁹ Walravens 2003: 102–103). Thus few travelers had direct experience from this part of today's Golok TAP where the Wranahs lived, and whoever the Wranahs were thought to be, their presence was noticed mainly around the Blue Lake, and more seldom in Amnye Machen.

The ill-famed Goloks who awoke ambivalent feelings in the travelers, that at the same time desired to visit their land and feared encountering its dreadful inhabitants (cf. Schäfer 1938, Filchner 1950) stole some fame from the Wranahs, who remained in their shadow in much of the literature. It was always "the Goloks" referred to, even if all coordinates of places described suggested that it was rather their less-known neighbors that the traveler meant.¹⁰ Rock's classic on exploration around Amnye Machen is silent on the name Wranah. The Metsang and Dawu nomads, Rock admits, consisted originally of Tibetan pastoralists who joined the Khangsar (*Khang gsar*) Goloks for protection, but he still commonly referred to them by their political affiliation (Rock 1956: 124). He mentioned that there were (albeit very few) examples of tribes who resisted the power of Goloks, also in Amnye Machen. By that he probably meant some Wranahs. The Wranahs can also hide behind Schäfer's "Watanomaden" (Schäfer 1938: 81).¹¹ The number of publications based on direct observations conducted among the Wranahs, and, even more broadly, in Golok falls dramatically in the second half of the 20th century, and it is by no means an exception in Tibet. Only the 1980s' liberalization in China, which opened the doors of Tibet to tourists and scholars alike, and which coincided with the international academic community's shift towards researching modern Tibetan societies (Barnett 2008: xiii) allowed for new research and created some hope for new publications to emerge. However, to no avail can one look for anything about the Wranahs. Although they do probably hide, for example, in Katia Buffetrille's remark on Amnye Machen: "the mGo log and *other nomad tribes* do not prevent "strangers" from entering their territory" anymore (Buffetrille 2003:12; stress added), to my knowledge no study was devoted to them as such. Paradoxically, the most informative so far is Gyurme Dorje's *Tibet Handbook* which mentions Banak nomads as legitimate indigenous inhabitants of the area, along with the Goloks (Gyurme Dorje 1999: 509). And so

⁹ Kozlov's book in Kotwicz's collection at the University of Warsaw.

¹⁰ An example comes from a book (albeit not academic) by Rowell, which gives photos of "Golok nomads" living in Gangri or Xueshan (as it is often called also by the Tibetans) commune (1984: 156, 165). According to all my observations and discussions with the local people those pictured by Rowell were certainly Wranahs.

¹¹ "Tibetans from Wang tag tribes" are also mentioned by Hermanns (1959: 28, and photo no. 17).

the disparity between the *Handbook*'s baseline information and the lack of references to Wranahs in other, purely brand, sources becomes even more striking.

Conclusion

It is beyond the scope of this article to answer the question who the Wranahs are and who they aren't. Given the size of the land that the Wranahs inhabit, and multilayered divisions inside the group which splits into numerous tribes, this question cannot be satisfactorily answered. Thus, for the time being one should probably leave aside the past debates altogether, or if one wants to return to them, one should remember that the contemporary observations reflecting today's state of affairs, do not necessarily have to speak about the past. Also my observations from Amnye Machen, which is a contact zone between the Goloks and Wranahs, where the identity factor gains in vibrancy, do not need to reflect the situation as it is elsewhere. Although, as my Wranah research partners assured me, at some level they share identity with the (Wranah) Tibetans from other administrative units within Qinghai, the Wranah entity should nevertheless be seen in terms of the Barthian 'organization of diversity' rather than any clearly bounded homogeneity of unified consciousness (cf. Barth 1969). The Wranahs are still awaiting a thorough study, either by Tibetan or foreign authors, in their both present-day aspect and in historical dimension that would help to shed light on their history, or at least this history's representations. The initial step in this direction was made by Padma Tshering (2004) and several Wranah tribal leaders who, in order to preserve the knowledge of their societies' past, undertook the task of writing it.

It is tempting to ask why did the Wranahs get forgotten so easily. On the maps in Das (1902) or Bell (1928) the names Banakhasum and Panakasum feature distinctively, but disappear later only to show how remarkable is the discontinuity in the academic writing. On the one hand, the field of Tibetan Studies has noted a virtual disappearance of literature based on actual research or experience inside Tibet in the early decades of the PRC existence. On the other, Russian language sources, which constitute a big part of *descriptive* material on the Wranahs, remain out of reach of a large part of the international academia where the knowledge of Russian is rather an exception than a rule. So while some accounts by Przheval'skii, Kozlov or Obruchev can be accessed in their English or German versions, the data gathered by Grum-Grzimaïlo, Roborovskii or Baradiin can be reached only by those with certain level of language fluency. This weakness, manifested again and again, was lamented by many scholars: "The legacy of Russian/Soviet *vostokovedenie* [Oriental Studies] has been the subject of extensive writing within its native setting but has received little attention elsewhere. In fact, even among those who, like Edward Said, have attended to the ideological dimension of "Orientalism" in something of a comparative perspective (at least within the European community), the Russian variant might just as well have been never existed. The marginalization of this legacy by the dominant Euro-American

academic discourse is testimony to both the linguistic handicaps of non-Russianists (...) and, contrarily, the indifference of Russianists.” (Brower 1997: xix) All in all, the case of the Wranahs shows how many topics that were once started have never been taken up again in Tibetan Studies.

This article has another aim too. It seeks to bring attention to the book collection of Professor Kotwicz. In contrast to scholars’ manuscripts, diaries, and correspondence, their private libraries do not usually enjoy attention of the future students, and slowly but surely fall into oblivion. But it is through them that the scholarly life was once begun, especially where the shortage of books in the public library system seemed to never decrease. Compared to books collected by public institutions, which are merely latent potentials awaiting being used by somebody, those belonging to the scholars’ private collections are potentials put into action (Sulek 2004: 1). Kotwicz’s library bears witness to how Oriental Studies were once understood and managed, what the politics of science-making in his lifetime were, its centers of power and academic authority, and the directions of intellectual flows. Observing the kaleidoscope of volumes which Kotwicz gathered throughout his life one is able to grow in awareness of the development that this field has undergone. As such his collection deserves a study, and is still awaiting it.

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