Producing 'South Asian' Tibetan Documents in Highland Nepal, 19th to 20th Centuries: The Emergence and Disappearance of a Local Diplomatic Tradition

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In 1855 the brothers Adolphe and Robert Schlagintweit made an attempt to enter Tibet from its far western border. After some negotiation, the official with whom they were dealing acquiesced to their request on the condition that they should not go beyond the Sutlej river on pain of paying a fine of six ounces (*srang*)[1] of gold. The official drew up an agreement and affixed his seal to it. The brothers were expected to do the same, but possessed no seal. The impasse was resolved when Adolphe applied a mark using the butt of his riding whip, a procedure that the official regarded as acceptable. The two conclusions to be drawn from this episode are, first, that the validation of agreements in Tibet at this time required the application of a seal; and secondly, that it did not matter greatly what object was used to make the impression.[2]

Tibetan religious and secular customs prevailed in many borderland areas outside the territories controlled by the Dalai Lamas or the Qing administration, as they still do outside the People's Republic of China. As these areas have increasingly come under the influence of the political centres of the nations in which they are situated, so they have changed to reflect the dominant cultures of those countries. These

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1   Unless stated otherwise, all terms are Tibetan, rendered in Wylie orthographic form. Much of the research on which this article is based was carried out in the framework of the Franco-German project *The Social History of Tibetan Societies, 17th–20th Centuries* (ANR/DFG, FRAL_2011_SHTS).
2   Schlagintweit 1863: 278. I am indebted to Christoph Cüppers for drawing my attention to this passage.

changes are of course gradual, but in the majority of domains—spoken language, dress conventions and so forth—the intermediate stages are superseded and erased, leaving only the latest forms.

A fortunate exception to this general rule is provided by local documents. Wherever there is a local archive, it may be possible to see the traces of a gradual reorientation of that community away from Tibet and towards its new political and cultural centre of gravity. The present article will examine this process in the case of Baragaon (Nep. Bāhragāū), a mainly Tibetan-speaking enclave in the southern part of Nepal's Mustang District. At the time the Schlagintweit brothers were trying to obtain access to western Tibet, all local documents in Baragaon were written in Tibetan, and the seal was the most authoritative method of validation. Nowadays, private contracts and community documents are for the most part written in Nepali, and seals are rarely used. The transition from a Tibetan to a more South Asian diplomatic practice is observed in a number of features. These include a greater frequency of Nepali legal expressions, and shifts in the use of formulae and signs of validation, such as a preference for thumbprints over crosses and seals, and the use of Devanāgarī script to render certain words.

Most of the documents under consideration here were photographed in the framework of the *Nepal-German Project on High Mountain Archaeology* (1992–1996), under the direction of Dieter Schuh. For the purposes of the present study the documents collected in Baragaon are more interesting than those from the more northerly settlements, where the range of genres is somewhat narrower and the influence of Nepali less apparent. In fact, many northern settlements do not appear to have significant collections. The probable reason is that political authority was concentrated in the figure of the King of Mustang, and if there are records of transactions, it is likely that these were kept in the royal palace of Lo Monthang, the capital of the former kingdom; the archival collection of the palace itself has not been photographed.

Documents from Baragaon: Features of a Local Tradition

The archives of Baragaon represent a wide range of types of documents, but the majority of these may be classified under the general rubric of *gan rgya*, a term that may be translated as "contract", "written agreement" or "covenant" according to the particular context. The validation of *gan rgya* usually requires the participation of at least

two parties, either individuals or groups, but generally more: most *gan rgya* involve a witness and, in the case of dispute-resolution, one or more mediators.

The conventions for the validation of *gan rgya* include formulae such as perpetuity clauses (see Lubin, in this volume). Among the most common are the aspiration that the terms of the agreement should pertain "until the black crow turns white", "until Mt Kailash melts and Lake Manasarovar dries up", "until the world ages end", and so forth. Other formulae advocate appropriate conduct, citing examples of behaviour that should not be exhibited. One should avoid:

- expressing any dissent so much as the buzzing of a fly
- saying "it was not I but he/she"
- blaming the left for the fault of the right, or blaming the son for the fault of the father
- carrying a famous name on the nape of one's neck
- having two lines on one's heart or two tongues in one mouth
- being snagged on the forest branches or skidding on the meadow

These formulae are also to found in contracts from Central Tibet, but there are others that appear to have an entirely local provenance and currency in Mustang. A relatively recent covenant (from 1968) contains a number of clauses that are known only from a few documents, all from Baragaon, and some that are attested in no other document. In the former category we find:

- acting as a single brood of partridges
- that a son with an evil father should not himself be evil
- our community should be as a brimming vessel of milk
- the little hand should only be open…

A formulation that has not been found in any other document is: "The vulture soaring along the cliffs; the goose sailing on the water." While the significance of the last couplet is obscure, it seems likely that those in the first set are not so much perpetuity clauses as exhortations to community solidarity. This is supported by the fact that the first in the series is a declaration that features in numerous covenants and community oaths of loyalty: "Information from the outside should be brought to the inside; internal information should not be taken outside" (Ramble/ Nyima Drandul 2016: 56).

The Use of Non-Tibetan Terms

In addition to such formulaic idiosyncrasies, documents from Bara-gaon feature other peculiarities such as the occurrence of terms belonging to the South Mustang dialect of Tibetan (SMT), as well as from Seke (*se skad*), a Tibeto-Burman language that is spoken in a few settlements. While these traits may represent legal and administrative usage that is distinctive of a particular enclave in Nepal, the 'South Asianness' of the documents is to be found even more obviously in other features, notably terminology and validation procedures. It is well established that Tibetan contains a certain number of loanwords from Indo-European languages.[3] Perhaps the best-known example of such a loan is the Tibetan word *deb,* signifying a Western-style book. *Deb* is an abbreviation of *deb ther,* a Tibetan rendering of *daftar,* the Persian (and Arabic) term for "records", which is in turn derived from the Greek *diphthera*, "skin"—a writing surface. Administrative documents from Central Tibet do not contain many foreign terms (other than those referring directly to non-Tibetan institutions). This is also true of the earliest such documents we have from South Mus-tang, dating from the late 17th century. In the second half of the 19th century, however, under the Rana regime, Nepali legal terms appear with considerable frequency. Written communications between vil-lages and government institutions written in Kathmandu or in Mus-tang necessitated translation into the appropriate language, and it is likely that many of the Tibetan language case records that we find in local archives were drafts of petitions and responses that would subsequently be rendered into Nepali, or else Tibetan translations of Nepali court proceedings. However, the occurrence of Nepali terms in documents related to intra-village affairs points to an internalisation of national judicial conventions. Before turning to the use of legal terminology, mention may be made of the haphazard appearance of loanwords and Nepali expressions in the documents, something that we would be unlikely to find in documents from Tibet. A letter from the tax office in Dana (southern Mustang) to the people of Baragaon, dated 1912, refers to an attack on the local customs post by four armed noblemen from Baragaon. The document specifies that the attack-ers were carrying *si la du bogs. Si la* almost certainly represents the

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3   For a general discussion of the Indo-European stratum in the Tibetan lexicon, see Beckwith/Walter 1997.

Turkish term *silah,* meaning "weapon"; *du bogs* is an orthographic variant of the more usual spelling *tu pag* (locally pronounced *dowak*), representing the Persian *top*, a cannon or gun. A *si la du bogs*, then, is simply a firearm of some sort. (A Central Tibetan document would rather use the expression *me mda'*, literally "fire arrow".) The second example is from an undated letter from a noblewoman of the Muktinath Valley, addressed to the *subbā* Sankarman Serchan (and therefore probably from the 1930s or 1940s), apparently concerning the whereabouts of her missing son. The rather confused account contains the following passage:

> *bu chung ba dpen par (< spen pa) nis (< ni) | rna ma (mna' ma) dkar stog gi (dkar tog gis) bo lis par byis tha spong tsha bzer nas gro (< 'gro) song bzer dug (< zer 'dug) |*
> As far as my younger son Pemba is concerned, according to my daughter-in-law Kartog, he said "*bo lis par byis tha spong tsha*", and then departed.

The untranslated direct speech of the younger son Pemba reproduces the Nepali phrase *bholi parsi thāhā pāunchā*—"We'll find out in a day or two".

More significantly, from the end of the 19th century we find the increasing use of Nepali legal and administrative terms (themselves often derived from Persian or Arabic). This usage is perhaps most conveniently illustrated in tabular form. Table 1 presents a list of fifteen such terms that occur with varying degrees of frequency in Tibetan documents from Baragaon dating from the late 19th to the mid-20th centuries. The Tibetan orthography for these terms is by no means standardised, but only in the case of the last two terms does the table give examples of some of the variants that are to be found.

Seals, Crosses and Digital Prints

The increasing incidence of Nepali administrative and other vocabulary is an obvious symptom of the closer integration of peripheral areas into the orbit of national institutions. A less obvious, but equally significant, indicator is to be seen in the kinds of marks that are used to validate documents. The following section will examine the types of marks that appear in documents from Baragaon, and will attempt to

Table 1: Examples for Tibetan renderings of Nepali legal and administrative terms used in Tibetan documents from Baragaon from the late 19th to the mid-20th centuries.

Found in document	Nepali term	Meaning
a mal ska rtsar	*amāl kacahari*	government court of law
phi ra spa ltar	*phirād patra*	formal letter of complaint
pher ste bha sti	*phirti bādi*	formal response
phar shi pha tar	*prattiutarpatra*	legal rejoinder
bha rdi	*bādi*	petition
brtab shil	*tapsil*	particulars
pha rib	*pharep*	accusation
dzwa her gi bha bri	*jāher bādi*	petition
mug ga 'ja' man	*mukhko jamāni*	verbal testimony
dkal yal na ma	*kāyal-nāmā*	written confession
so dbal	*savāl*	legal manual
sla mor	*lālmohar*	royal edict
ra rdza spang rdza	*rāja pāñca*	five-fold majesty (i.e. king of Nepal)
an/dben	*ain*	legal code
ldan dza ma nis *bdan dza ma nis* *sdan dza ma nis* *sdan mdza ma nis* *ldan mdza' ma ṇi*	*dhan jamāni*	financial guarantor

discern a pattern in changing usage. The earliest document considered here is from 1867, and the latest is from 1993.

Until 1857, the main figure of authority in Baragaon was the duke, *khri thog pa*. In conformity with a policy that had been applied in many parts of Nepal following the country's unification, the dukes were native rulers who, since 1789, had governed on behalf of the Gorkhalis in Kathmandu. In 1857, the government introduced a system of contractual revenue-collection known as *ijāra*. Power at this time shifted to another local aristocrat who had the title of *sku zhabs* ("venerable one"), a common Tibetan term of address or reference for prominent laymen

and clerics. It is not clear whether the latter had the full jural rights of a contractor (*ijāradar*) or if he was the local representative of a southerner who held the contract. The title of *sku zhabs* was held by more than one individual at any given time, suggesting that the title was extended to a family rather than confined to a single person. The seals of these *sku zhabs* appear on several documents, a fact that will be discussed further below. The judicial power of the *sku zhabs* came to an end in the late 19th century when a family from the Thak area, in southern Mustang, secured the monopoly over the salt trade; the new contractors, who were given the title of *subbā*, thenceforth exercised direct control over the entirety of Lower Lo and, to a lesser extent, over Upper Lo as well.

It was not only the political leadership that used seals with which to endorse documents. Plate 1 is an internal agreement among the seventeen households of Lubrak, a community of hereditary Bonpo priests. Until 1887, the community had been exempt from taxation, but in this year the *sku zhabs* (or the contractor whom he represented) withdrew the privilege and imposed on the priests an annual tax of 31 rupees. The village opposed the tax. This document registers the decision to refuse to pay the sum, and also to compensate, from the public coffers, any household that might be raided by the *sku zhabs*' bailiffs with a view to seizing property to the value of the tax owed. Each of the names is followed by a seal, signifying endorsement of the resolution by the representative of the corresponding household. A few features of this document—to which I shall return below—deserve further comment at this stage.

1. The sixth and eighth names in the left row are not endorsed. The numerous possible explanations for the omission include absence from the meeting and simple oversight when the document was being circulated for signature.
2. Four of the signatories have signed with crosses. The name in line 5 of the left column is that of a woman, but we cannot conclude from this that seals were reserved for men and crosses for women. The first two names in the left column belong to men, while the seventh (*dpal bzang*) could be either a man or a woman. The last signatory in the right column, Tshe ring dpal mo, has used a seal.
3. Why the first signatory should have both a cross and seal after his name must remain a matter of conjecture.
4. In a number of cases the same seal is used by more than one signatory. The significance of this will be addressed below.
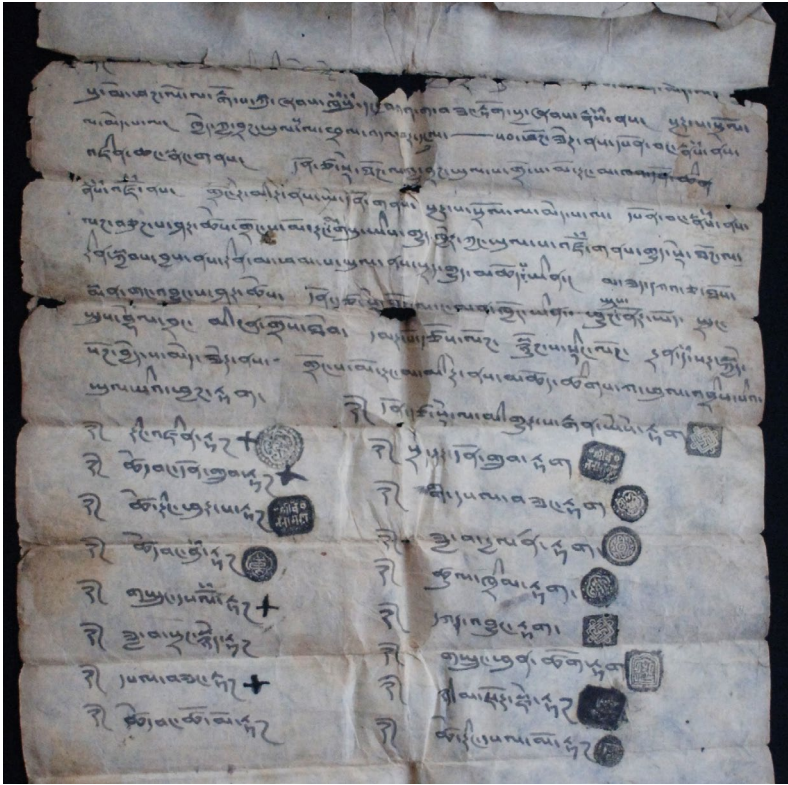
Plate 1: Agreement by the households of the village of Lubrak to oppose the imposition of a new tax (1887).

It is instructive to compare plate 1 with the following document (plate 2), from the same community, but drawn up almost seventy years later in 1956.

All the same households are represented, but now they no longer mark their assent with crosses or seals. Almost all use thumbprints. The method of endorsement that has been used by the one exception—the first signatory—and also by one of the witnesses in the left margin will be examined below. For now, however, I would like to offer some tentative remarks on why the use of seals may have given way to fingerprinting in the Mustang archives.[4] This is related to the increasing presence of Nepali terms in the documents at this time.

4   I have found no information concerning the use of finger- and thumbprints to endorse documents in Tibetan areas. It may be that the available resources—such as the Kundeling archive of Lhasa and the Sikkim Palace archives—will
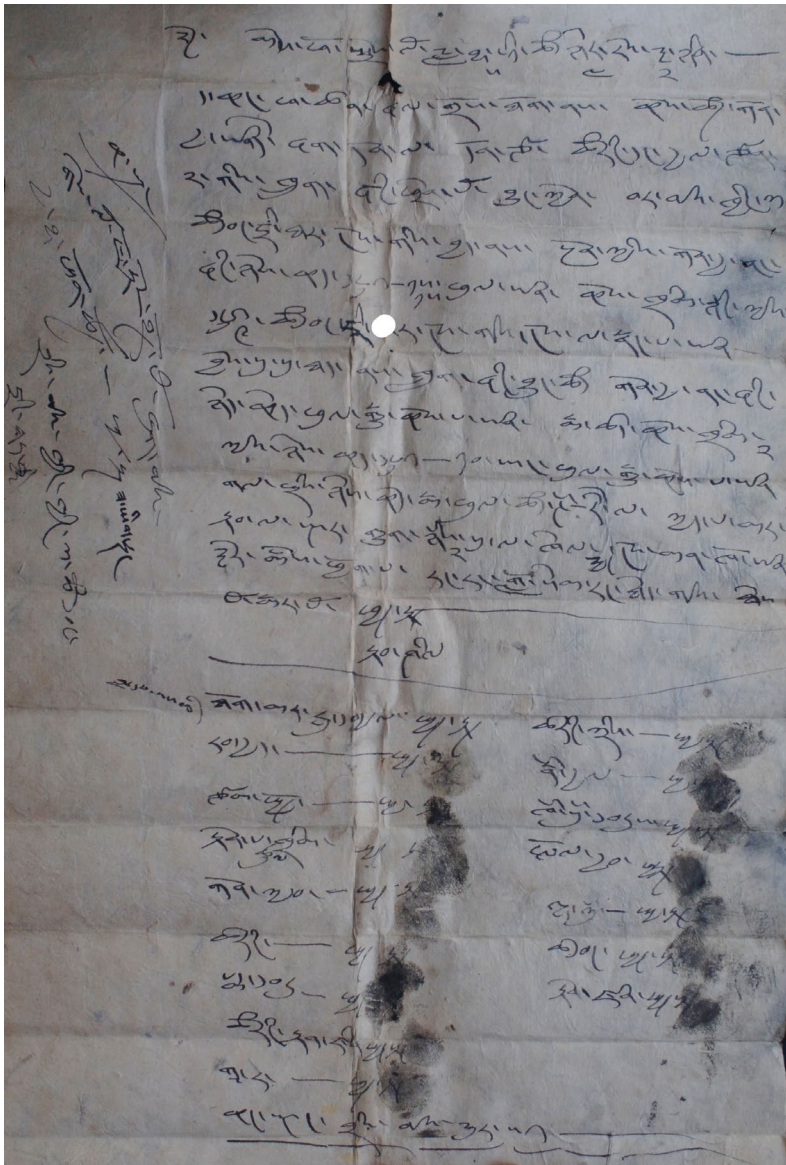
Plate 2: Resolution of a dispute within the village of Lubrak (1956).

A History of Digital Prints

The use of finger-, thumb- and handprints to validate documents, on paper, clay or silk, has a long history in several parts of the world, including China and the Near East. The 13th-century Persian doctor Rashideddin, remarking on the Chinese use of fingerprinting to identify people, observed that "no two individuals have fingers exactly alike" (Cole 2001: 60–61). What, if any, influence these traditions may have had on Tibetan usage is not yet known.

Hand- and thumb-printing were quite commonly practised in Tibet. Although 'finger seals' on contracts are known from as long ago as the Imperial Period (6th to 9th centuries),[5] the best-known examples are related not to the validation of documents but to the blessing of religious texts and paintings.[6]

The expansion of the use of the thumbprints as signatures on legal documents in Mustang is likely to be related to the development of the practice in Nepalese legal usage. A spectacular example of a handprint being used in an official administrative context is to be seen in plate 3, a Nepalese government order, dated 1846 and bearing the handprint of King Rajendra Vikram Shah.[7] In the sense that the print 'empowers' the document with royal authority, the function is not too far removed from the explicitly religious connotations of the endorsement of thangkas by lamas mentioned above.

The "Lepcha Stamp"

It is not known when the use of fingerprinting as a way of signing legal documents became generalised in Nepal, but there is a story concerning the origin of the practice that contains some intriguing clues.[8] Following the assassination of the Sikkimese chancellor Bho lod rNam rgyal phun tshogs around 1826 by the seventh Chos rgyal, a faction

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be an adequate basis from which to advance our understanding, but to the best of my knowledge no such study has yet been undertaken.

5   See Takeuchi 1995.

6   Numerous examples of such manual benedictions may be found on the HAR (Himalayan Art Resources) website (http://www.himalayanart.org/ [accessed 10 July 2017]).

7   The document was microfilmed by the *Nepal-German Manuscript Preservation Project* (reel no. DNA 16/86) and edited by Khatiwoda et al. (http://digi. hadw-bw.de/view/dna_0016_0086/0001).

8   The story was told to me by Ramesh Dhungel.

Plate 3: Handprint of King Rajendra Vikram Shah, 1846 (©National Archives, Nepal).

of Lepchas under Yug Drathub rebelled against the government. The uprising was quelled, and in 1835 several hundred households of Lepchas sought refuge in Nepal (Mullard 2015). They were given land on which to settle and were obliged to sign an agreement setting out the terms of their acceptance. They proceeded to do so by marking crosses against their names, but were told by the Nepalese authorities that this form of signature—which was considered to be a Tibetan practice—was unacceptable, and that they should apply thumbprints instead. There are two Nepali expressions for thumbprint: one is *buḍhī-aūloko chāp*, literally "thumb stamp"; the other is *lepcā* or *lāpce chāp*, which is said to mean "Lepcha stamp". Why the fugitive Lepchas should have given their name to a procedure that was alien to them and (according to the story) already an established procedure in Nepal is not explained. If the use of fingerprinting was, as the story implies, a tradition that was imported or reinforced by foreign influences—specifically from Sikkim—then the Lepcha story may have been associated with it in order to explain the unfamiliar term *lāpce*. In this case, we should not overlook the possibility that *lāpce* may be a deformation of a Tibetan term, such as *lag rjes* (pronounced *lakche*), meaning "hand print".

Colonial Influences

The use of thumbprinting in Nepalese diplomatic practice in Rana times may have been inspired by contemporary developments in British India. As we shall see below, Rana-period documents made extensive use of British titles and even English-language seals, so the idea that thumbprinting was adopted as part of this trend is by no means improbable.

The use of fingerprinting to establish the identity of individuals in legal and criminal contexts was substantially pioneered in India. In the 1850s, William (later Sir William) Herschel was an officer of the Indian Civil Service in Bengal, where the police and judiciary faced persistent problems arising from the difficulty of identifying individuals. These problems took the form of wealthy criminals paying substitutes to serve their prison sentences, families continuing to claim the pensions of deceased relatives, and parties to agreements repudiating their signatures. A watershed moment occurred when Herschel drew up a contract for 2000 mauds of road metalling with a certain Rajyadhar Konai in 1858, and asked Konai to endorse the document with the print of his hand (plate 4).
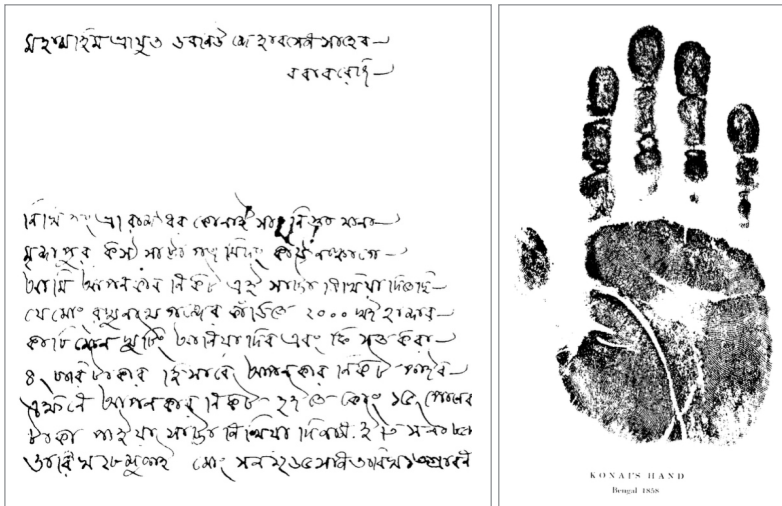
Plate 4: Contract between W. Herschel and R. Konai for 2000 maunds of road metalling (reproduced in Herschel 1916).

According to Herschel,

> [t]he decisiveness of a finger-print is now one of the most powerful aids to Justice. Our possession of it derives from the impression of Kōnāi's hand in 1858. (Herschel 1916: 9)

The system of classifying fingerprints was also subsequently developed in Bengal. The main architect of the system was Sub-inspector Azizul Hacque, a mathematical prodigy who was working under the supervision of Sir Edward Henry of the Bengal Police Force.

Herschel had earlier established that fingerprints remained consistent over time, and were therefore a foolproof way of identifying signatories. He illustrated the limits of the system with a grisly anecdote that does, admittedly, have an apocryphal ring to it:

> As long as I was at Hooghly I was quite satisfied that no will or other deed registered there with the new safeguard would ever be repudiated by the actual executant. I have had to think otherwise since then, because many years afterwards a man … who had given his finger-print before a Registrar repudiated it. He was summoned to give his evidence on oath. It was found that he had cut off the joints of his fingers… (ibid.: 19–20)

The practice of using fingerprints on documents was subsequently initiated in Calcutta in 1877, and was "in full use" by 1878 (ibid.: 20, 22). The only document from Baragaon earlier than this date that seems to bear fingerprints is from 1867. The document (plates 5 and 6) is the settlement of an inheritance dispute within a noble family. Two lords, both with the title of *sku zhabs*, have placed their seals as witnesses. Two other signatories—sKye sar, the (commoner) headman of the village of Purang and another commoner named sTag la seem to have used a different method.
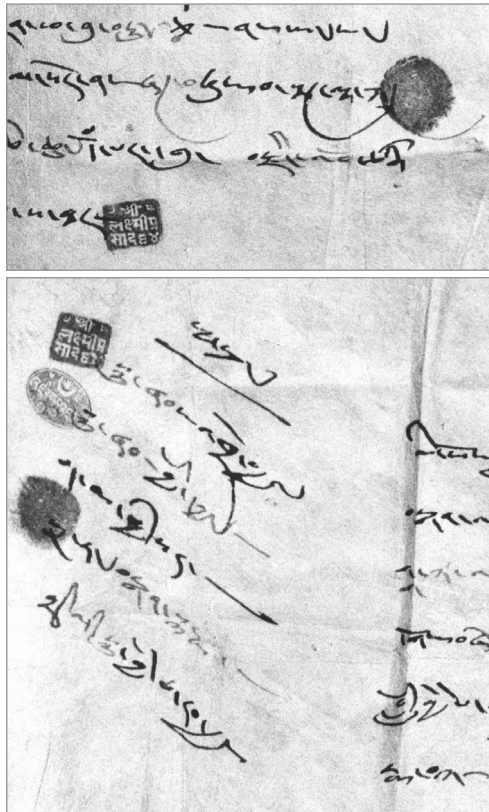
Plates 5 and 6: Details of an inheritance dispute,
from the archive of Baragaon, Mustang (1867).

The marks could be fingerprints, but the fact that no epidermal ridges are visible leaves open the possibility that some makeshift seal may have been used. In the course of an exorcism ritual in Mustang that

I documented in 2010, the procedure required that the troublesome demon be trapped inside a yak horn, sacking tied over the mouth of the horn, and sealing wax applied to the rope. The lama had forgotten to bring his seal with him, and instead affixed the wax using a stick of barberry wood—a procedure reminiscent of the solution devised by Adolphe Schlagintweit in 1855. It is possible that the two marks on this document were produced by some similar method.

The use of thumbprints on documents may have received substantial official reinforcement from Herschel and his successors, but it is certain that the technique was used before that time in parts of the Indian subcontinent. Saul Mullard has informed me of the existence of fingerprinted documents from Sikkim pre-dating 1877. These include a tax agreement of 1789 from Morong, in a north Indian script, and several in both Nepali and Tibetan from the 1840s.

If the marks in plates 5 and 6 *are* fingerprints, their form is nevertheless visibly different from that of the thumbprints that appear on later documents. It may be tentatively concluded that we are dealing with two different traditions: an older, 'indigenous' form that entailed the application of a mark using a fingertip, and a later, British colonial practice of using the pad of the thumb. For the present, however, this suggestion must remain speculative.

Three collections of Nepali documents from Mustang have been published by the late Madhav Karmacharya (1996, 2001a, 2001b). These documents range in date from the late 19th and 20th centuries, and the earliest that can be reliably dated to feature a thumbprint is from 1911. But it is in a later document, from 1924, that we find unequivocal evidence that the thumbprint is regarded not just as a substitute for a seal, but as an inalienable token of an individual's identity. The document is described as a public notice about the abolition of slavery, after the Prime Minister, Chandra Shamsher Jang Bahadur Rana, had officially declared an end to the practice on 13 April of that year. The process of emancipation entailed the validation of a designated form by various parties, notably the slave-owner and the slave, and the procedure is prescribed as follows:

if … the names and addresses of the owners and the names and age of the slaves who have or have been presented are found to be correct, the printed forms designed after the regulations shall be filled in, and the owners, land-agents and people in the neighbourhood shall be made to put their signatures on it [under

their handwriting] and the slaves to do so with thumb-impressions of both hands put in a way to make conch and circle marks (*saṅkha-cakra*) come out distinct, and (on completion of which) the statutory price of the slaves shall be paid to the owners, and the slaves shall be declared liberated. (Karmacharya 2001a: 59, ll. 59–62)[9]

The "conch and circle" motifs are of course a reference to the loops and whorls of the slave's thumbprints, and the insistence that they should be clearly visible indicates that the prints were not merely symbolic, but a means of identifying the individual who had set his mark in this way. As we shall see presently, the practice of validation by signature alone, which is enjoined on the (presumably literate) slave owners, seems to have become a part of diplomatic practice in Tibetan documents of Mustang only much later.

While the principle of using thumbprints is that they are specific to the person who applied them, seals may be associated either with an individual or an institution, such as an office or an enterprise. (This means, of course, that they can be—and often are—stolen.) Some of the seals we have seen are clearly personal, as in plates 5 and 6 where the imprints feature the Nepalese names of the two lords. By contrast, we know that certain seals that were presented to particular Dalai Lamas, for example, were also used by some of their successors (Schuh 1981).

In a document dated 1898, we see the same seal appearing after the names of two different people. These two are a married couple, and the document is a contract for the sale of a field. It is clear then, that the seal represents not the individuals but their household.[10]

This observation provides an important clue as to why the same seal was used by different signatories in the document shown in plate 1. The signatories all represent different houses, so the pairs do not stand for married couples. The explanation is to be found in the fact that there are different categories of households in the communities of Mustang (as indeed in most of Tibet). Each of the signatories in plate 1 represents a domestic unit known as a "house" (*khang pa*). A higher-order category of household is the "estate" (*grong pa*). Some of the houses

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9   I am indebted to Axel Michaels for drawing my attention to this document.
10   Archives from Mustang contain several examples of couples separately affixing the same seal. This shows, among other things, that husbands and wives had equal property rights.

in the list have the status of full *grong pa*, while others are the components of such estates that have split. The fact that seals are shared by the component houses of certain estates suggests, among other things, that the acquisition—or allocation—of these seals took place before the fission of the estates in question occurred.

A point that should be made here is that techniques for the validation of documents vary in the degree to which they are personal. Fingerprints are, in theory at least, inseparable from the individual, while seals may be either personal or institutional. Towards the more impersonal end of the spectrum of possibilities is the cross. While the evidence suggests that the cross may have been increasingly replaced by the thumbprint, it is also the case that they continued to be used in certain circumstances.

In 1942 an agreement was drawn up between a village and a nearby nunnery. The village agreed to allocate to the nunnery the second of any three daughters born to a family, and the representatives of the households validated the agreement with their respective thumbprints. The nuns who were already in the convent were also party to the agreement. However, they endorsed the document not with thumbprints, but with crosses. The formula that precedes the crosses states:

> *spyi legs [lag] skor skyi [gyi] rtags*
> the sign denoting that [the document] has been circulated around
> the group from hand to hand.

The nuns, then, were not signing as individuals but as a collectivity; the crosses were drawn by the scribe, and stand for the fact that each of the nuns had simply touched the document and thereby bestowed her consent. In certain cases, the expression "circulated from hand to hand" does not refer to the document itself, but to a seal that has been applied or to the pen that was touched by all the participants before it was used to mark a cross.

Many documents reveal an interesting form of endorsement that combines the impersonal and the individual. The following document (plate 7) is a contract for the sale of a field in 1890. After the name of the vendor, "Uncle Namkha" (*a kyis nam mkha'*), is a smudged cross. On closer inspection, the curved striations to the lower right are seen to be the epidermal ridges of a thumb. The sign has been produced by marking a cross on the thumb and then, while the ink is still wet, pressing it to the paper.
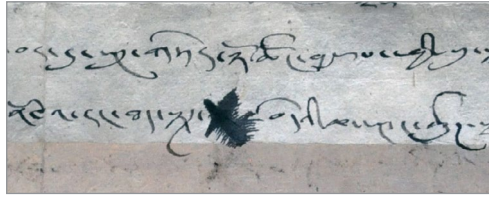
Plate 7: Detail of a contract for the sale of a field from the archive of Upper Tshognam, Mustang (1890). Photo: Agnieszka Helman-Ważny.
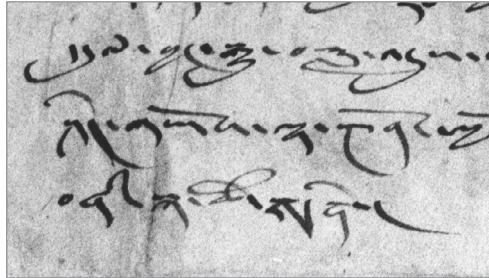

Plate 8: Loan contract from the archive of Baragaon, Mustang (1935).

If, as suggested above, these modifications in the procedures for validating documents reflect the growing influence of Nepalese diplomatic conventions, this influence is even more apparent in the increasing incidence of Nepali terms over the course of time. Before developing this point further, a note of caution should be sunded. The degree to which Tibetan documents exhibit Nepalese features depends on a number of factors, notably the purpose of the document and the identity of the writer and intended readership. As we might expect, documents dealing with local religious affairs, such as the organisation of community rituals, are likely to retain their consistency with traditional Tibetan practice, while those that relate to national institutions have a more Nepalese character in terms of both vocabulary and formulation.

In the second document (plate 2) considered in this article, it was seen that the first of the signatories and one of the witnesses had marked their endorsements not with a seal, thumbprint or cross, but with the syllables *sas yig*. A clue to the meaning of this expression is given in the choice of script that the signatory has used—not the *'khyug* of the rest of the text, but a more formal headless script. And here, in the last two syllables of a document from 1935 (plate 8), we see that the scribe has eschewed the thumbprint in favour of a *sa he*, written in the 'headed' (*dbu can*) Tibetan script.
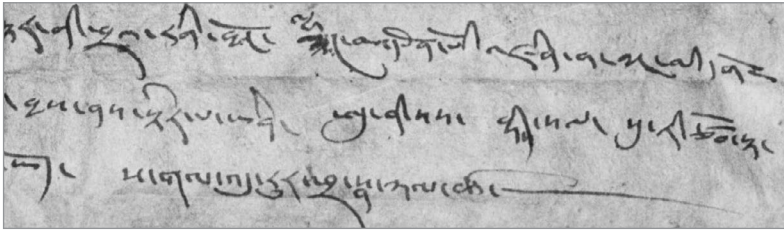
Plate 9: Detail of an official government document from the village of Chongkhor, Mustang (1863). Photo: Dieter Schuh.
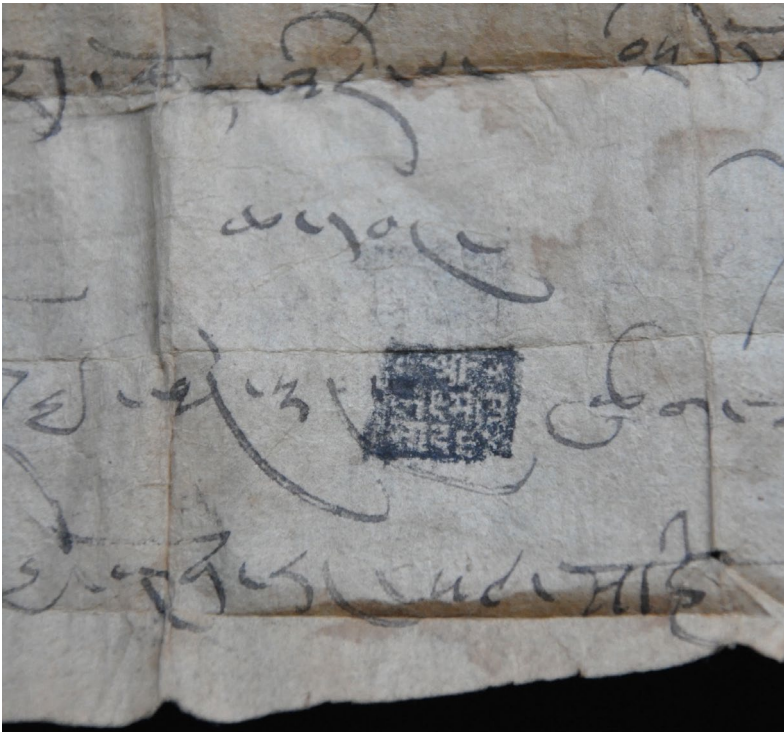

Plate 10: Detail of an agreement concerning a debt from the archive of Lower Tshognam (1912). Photo: Agnieszka Helman-Ważny.

Now, it is sometimes the case that a change of script signifies a formal statement in a language other than Tibetan. The concluding line (plate 9) of a long document—the Tibetan translation of a Nepalese government ruling from 1863—offers an example of just such a shift. The final phrase of the same document reads: *sa gal 'du rur phra sna kal tsha*, which probably represents the Nepali *sakal durusta nakal*

cha ("this copy is identical to the original").[11] In plate 10 (the final word), we see that the same word has been written in Devanāgarī script: *sahi. Sahi* is in fact a Nepali term meaning "signature" (derived from the Arabic *ṣaḥīḥ*). The increasing use of the term *sahi* to replace the older forms of endorsement is illustrated by a document from 1983 (plate 11), where six of the signatories use either *sa yig* or *sa hi* as the Tibetan rendering of *sahi*.

For the first time, in this document, we see an actual signature: *taklā* (for *sTag la*) in Devanāgarī. A decade later, in 1993, we see an even more advanced integration of Mustang into the national and global arena. In this document (plate 12), an agreement regarding the use of the community forest, there are only three thumbprints, all placed by elderly illiterate men (one of whom is the village blacksmith): the others are signatures in Devanāgarī and Tibetan, and now, to the lower right, Roman letters representing the name "Yungdrung".

Conclusion

Today, if two people in Baragaon make a loan contract or a lease agreement for a field, or if two villages resolve dispute over a pasture boundary, the document they draw up will be in Nepali. Until two or three decades ago this would not have been the case: all such documents would have been written in Tibetan. The disappearance of Tibetan as the written medium of secular communication and administration has been rapid and complete. This apparent suddenness conceals the fact that the shift was actually the culmination of a process of transition that had been taking place over the course of more than a century. Educated Tibetans who are familiar with the diplomatic conventions of the Ganden Phodrang government of the Dalai Lamas react with bafflement when confronted with documents from South Mustang. The confusing features include the arbitrariness of the spelling and the presence of terms in the local Tibetan dialect and the Tibeto-Burman Seke language, neither of which have standard written forms. These traits have been perennial features of local documents since the earliest times,

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11 The more commonly attested form of this phrase is: *sakal bamojim nakal durusta cha* (Astrid Zotter, personal communication). The copies of two *lālamoharas* are endorsed with the similar phrase *ruju durusta* ("attested as correct"). See C. Zotter in this volume, Appendix, Documents 1 and 3 (https://doi.org/10.11588/diglit.32508; https://doi.org/10.11588/diglit.30313).
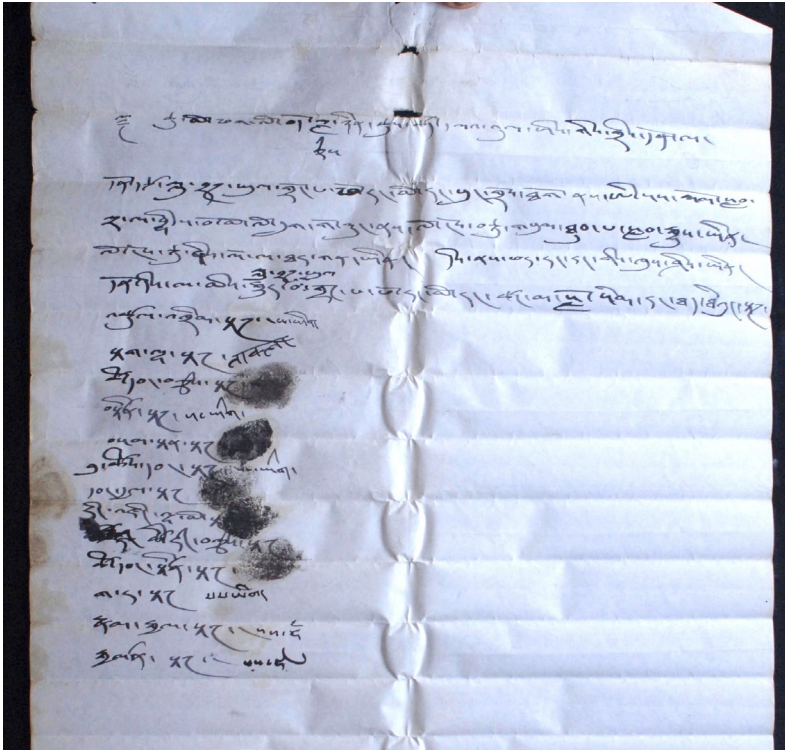
Plate 11: Agreement to open a government school in the village of Lubrak, Mustang (1983).

Plate 12: Agreement concerning forest resource use in the village of Lubrak, Mustang (1993).

and make up what we might think of as the diplomatic sociolect of Baragaon. While our educated Tibetan reader might be bewildered by these varieties, he or she would be completely confused by the unrecognisable words that occupied positions of prominence in the later documents: terms for the issuing office or the intended recipient, for the category of document, the legal status of the protagonists, and even the word for "law". It would also seem very strange to the reader that the documents were validated with thumbprints. Unlike some of the perpetuity clauses and dialect words, these features were not local, but rather symptomatic of the infusion of the conventions of the national Nepalese administration and judiciary into the local legal lexicon. The result was a truly hybrid Tibetan-Nepalese diplomatic practice whose main exponents were local lamas, aristocrats and their scribes. With the coming of age of a generation educated in Nepali in local government schools, the tradition was rapidly displaced. Not only is there no one in Baragaon who can write these documents, there is probably no one now who can even read them.

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