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**The Tibetan Fiery Way to Nirvāṇa:
Reflections on Old Tibetan *mya ngan*¹**

Abstract

Studying Old Tibetan (OT)² documents can help us to unravel and thus better comprehend particular stages in the development of a lexeme that at first view gives the impression of having been coined in its ultimate form in only one step. Using the oldest extant sources on written Tibetan I will attempt to puzzle out the history of the compound *mya ngan* and to demonstrate the influence a multilingual and multicultural environment of Central Asian oases could have wielded on the formation of Tibetan language. The paper also endeavours to trace the origins of one of the most important Buddhist terms in Tibetan:

¹ The Tibetan script is transliterated according to the principles put forward in Wylie 1959. Tibetan proper names and toponyms are hyphenated in order to enhance their readability in the text flow. Only the first letter (even if not the root consonant) is capitalised. Unless otherwise stated, passages quoted from OT sources were transliterated by myself on the basis of scans made available by the IDP and Gallica. With regard to the inscriptions, the texts as published by Richardson (1985) and Li & Coblin (1987) were accepted. No special signs are used for transliterating Old Tibetan texts; this concerns letters as well as punctuation marks. Accordingly, the so-called ‘reversed *gi gu*’, encountered frequently in the analysed documents, is transliterated as a regular *gi gu*. The Old Tibetan orthography is strictly followed. No distinction is made in the transliteration between a single and a double *tsheg*. Punctuation marks other than *tsheg* and *shad* (transliterated as a space and a slash respectively) are not accounted for. Multiple *shads* are reduced to two. If not otherwise noted, all the passages from Tibetan texts were translated by myself.

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² I use the label ‘Old Tibetan’ to refer to the language(s) of the non-translatory Tibetan documents discovered in Central Asian oases (Dunhuang, Turfan, etc.) and of the inscriptions from Central Tibet. No claim is made to define the linguistic traits of the ‘Old Tibetan’ as against the ‘Classical Tibetan’ (CT) language.

mya ngan las 'das pa. It is perplexing and indeed rather uncommon that a nominalised verbal phrase of five syllables was chosen to render a simple Sanskrit lexeme – *nirvāṇa*.

Keywords: Old Tibetan, semantic change, Buddhist terminology, toponymy, *nirvāṇa*, *mya ngan*, *mya ngam*, Flaming Mountains, afterlife, Manichaeism, religious vocabulary, Central Asia, Turfan

I. One of the most crucial Buddhist terms is rendered in Tibetan as *mya ngan las 'das pa*, lit. “what has passed over *mya ngan*”. It translates the Sanskrit term *nirvāṇa* (Mvy: 1725). The Tibetan phrase is frequently found in an abbreviated form as *myang 'das* (see BCRD). One hypothesis would be to reconstruct *mya ngan* – which constitutes a part of the phrase *mya ngan las 'das pa* – as **myang ngan*, lit. “a bad experience”. In that case, *myang 'das* would have preserved the original form of the first constituent of the compound *mya ngan*. I will come back to this proposal in section II.5. There I will argue that although the above etymology of *mya ngan* seems very appealing it does not offer plausible solutions to a few perplexing issues. To start with, the Sanskrit term *nirvāṇa* is a noun derived from the prefixed verbal root *nir-√vā* “to blow (as wind); to cease to blow, to be blown out or extinguished; to be allayed or refreshed or exhilarated” (MW: 557b). This means that Tibetans chose a nominalised verbal phrase, *mya ngan las 'das pa*, to express an idea originally denoted by a simple lexeme. Moreover, in *Mahāvīyutpatti* (2254), the Tibetan compound *mya ngan* is the only equivalent of Skt. *śoka* “burning, hot; flame, glow, heat; sorrow, affliction, anguish, pain, trouble, grief for” (MW: 1091a) – itself a derivative of the verb *√śuc* “to shine, flame, gleam, glow, burn; to suffer violent heat or pain, be sorrowful or afflicted, grieve, mourn at or for” (MW: 1081a). The oldest Sanskrit-Tibetan dictionary – *Mahāvīyutpatti* – only glosses this one equivalent of *śoka*.³

Therefore, the pertinent questions are: why did Tibetans choose *mya ngan las 'das pa* to translate Skt. *nirvāṇa*? Why did they choose *mya ngan* to render formations as etymologically different as *śoka* and *nirvāṇa* in Sanskrit? Was there any common semantic denominator of these two terms?

In the paper I hope to be able to demonstrate to what extent knowledge of compounding rules and morphological changes in OT can contribute to our understanding of some culture-bearing terms. I would like to emphasise that to the best of my knowledge no etymology of the term *mya ngan* has been proposed so far. This paper is but a first attempt at untangling one puzzle in the history of Tibetan language formation under the influence of Buddhism.

³ The dictionary of Lokesh Chandra (2007: 634a–b) provides three equivalents for *śoka*: *gdung ba*, *mya ngan*, and *thugs ngan*. The last compound seems to be a respectful form for *mya ngan*.

II.1⁴ As the glosses quoted for $\sqrt{suc} \sim \acute{s}oka$ and $nir\text{-}\sqrt{v\acute{a}} \sim nirv\acute{a}ṇa$ already demonstrate, both Sanskrit roots belonged to one semantic field with FIRE: fire burns and fire extinguishes. And indeed one also finds the compound *mya ngan* in OT sources in the variant form *mye ngan*. Let us first look at examples concerning the term for *nirvāṇa*⁵:

(1)

*myi gnas pa'i mya ngan las 'da's pa'i yon tan dang ldan ba ji snyed
bzhugs pa thams cad la phyag 'tsal lo // (PT 16: 23r1)*

[They] paid homage to all provided with the virtue of the *nirvāṇa* of non-abiding (Skt. *apratīṣṭhitanirvāṇa*), as many as there were abiding.

(2)

*byang cub kyi sa bcu ni non te / myi gnas pa'i mya ngan las 'das par
smon to // (PT 16: 32v4)*

[We] prayed for the *nirvāṇa* of non-abiding after having overcome ten stages of enlightenment.

It seems obvious from (1) and (2), in which *myi gnas pa* determines *mya ngan las 'da's pa*, that the latter term was understood as a noun.⁶ However, other passages attest to the originally verbal character of the phrase *mya ngan las 'das pa*:

(3)

*lha'i longs spyod kyi rgyan (27v3) thams cad kyis brgyan pa na / mya
ngan las 'da' ba'i mying myi srid pa na bzhugs shing 'jig rten las 'das
pa'i skyid pa phun sum tshogs pa thams cad kyis brgyan pa'i zhing na
/ sems (27v4) can gyi don mdzad (PT 16)*

Adorned with all the ornaments of the gods' enjoyments, while abiding in the non-existing name of those who pass over *mya ngan*, [he] works for the welfare of sentient beings on the field of those ornamented with all the superior joy of those who surpassed the world.

A similar verbal usage of *mya ngan las 'da'* is also abundantly attested in canonical literature (see BCRD).

⁴ The following discussion contains all OT attestations of the terms that could be traced in the available sources on OT, i.e.: TLTD, Thomas 1957, Taube 1980, Richardson 1985, Li/Coblin 1987, Takeuchi 1995, Takeuchi 1998, OTDO.

⁵ Rolf Stein has noted that both forms, *mye ngan las 'das pa* and *mya ngan las 'das pa*, render Skt. *nirvāṇa* in Tibetan translations that use the Indian vocabulary, but only *mye ngan las 'das pa* in translations that use the Chinese vocabulary (1983: 163). I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to Stein's paper in this connection.

⁶ In a fragmentarily preserved document Tu 30a, the phrase *mya ngan las 'das pa chen po* (r1; *apud* Taube 1980: 118, text 78) renders Skt. *mahāparinirvāṇa* (Mvy: 1370 = *yongs su mya ngan las 'das pa chen po*). This is another instance of a nominal usage of the term under discussion.

On the other hand, OT sources attest to an analogous twofold (nominal and verbal) usage of the phrase *mye (!) ngan las 'da'/'das pa*:

(4)

bsgrub pa'i chos dang nyon mongs pa dang sdug bsngal thams cad nye bar zhi ba'i mye ngan las 'das pa' thob par gyur pa'i chos dang // gsung [rab] sde bcu gnyis chos kyi sku 'i rgyu las byung ste / (Or.15000/379: r2; trslr. after Takeuchi 1998.2: 159, text 491)

The *dharma* of those who have reached *nirvāṇa*, that allays the *dharma* of completion and all misery and suffering, and the twelve divisions of scriptures occurred from the substance of the *dharmakāya*.

Another nominal usage is attested in PT 849: 76 – a Tibetan-Sanskrit glossary – where *mye ngan la* (sic) *'das pa* renders *pa ri ni ri pa na*, i.e. Skt. *parinirvāṇa*.⁷ The just cited Or.15000/379 also contains the phrase *mye ngan las 'da' bar bzhed*, lit. “to wish to pass over *mye ngan*” (l.10; *apud* Takeuchi 1998.2: 159). Although the sentence is only fragmentarily preserved, it seems obvious that *mye ngan las 'da'* should be read as a verbal phrase, just as in our next example:

(5)

(v18-3) *bdag dang sems can kun yongs su mye ngan las 'da' par byol la //* (PT 239)

Give a way to me and to all sentient beings who fully (*yongs su*) pass over *mye ngan*!⁸

Apart from its occurrence in the expression *mya ngan las 'da'/'das pa*, *mya ngan* is also independently attested⁹:

(6)

myi dga' zhing 'dug pha' / (345) / *las mya ngand sangs pa'i ngo //* (PT 1047, *apud* OTDO)

the sign that after [one] was being unhappy *mya ngand* disappears;

(7)

myi dga' ba la mya ngan sangs pha'i ngo // (PT 1047: 385, *apud* OTDO)

for those who are unhappy the sign of *mya ngan* to have disappeared;

⁷ Cf. Hackin 1924: 19. I wish to thank Johannes Schneider for drawing my attention to this record.

⁸ Another instance of a verbal usage is the partly preserved [-] *ngan las 'da'* in Or.15000/494: r10.

⁹ Because *mya ngan* as an equivalent of *śoka* is sufficiently documented in canonical texts as well as in lexicographical works (cf. LCh: 617f., Negi.10: 4519ff.) and there is absolutely no doubt about this equation I do not deem it necessary for the present discussion to proliferate quotations by adding passages from canonical works. Including canonical texts, that only attest to meanings and forms known anyway from lexicographical works, would massively extend the scope of the paper without providing any new and qualitative contribution to it.

(8)

(28) *bdag chag tshe ngan pa la babste myi dga' ba'i mya ngan bsangs pa'i chang glud do zan byin no zhes* (ITJ 733, *apud* OTDO)

[One] offered us, who were living in bad times, food [and] gave beer, that removed *mya ngan* of unhappiness.

Likewise in this case we come across the variant reading *mye ngan*:

(9)

(r1-1) *ring gur bso* (read: *snga*)¹⁰ *ba' // gnyen yid la gcags pa'i mye ngan // bsang ba'i phyir / smrang dar bzos* (PT 239)

An earlier body-tent: in order to remove *mye ngan* of a dearly (lit. in heart) beloved kinsman, [one] made a cloth [with a] narrative of origin.

(10)

bdag shi ba'i phyi na yang / (253) phangs pa'i mye ngan gzhagi // myi phangs pa'i / shir dga' ba myi gzhago // (PT 1283a¹¹, *apud* OTDO)

While even after my death *mye ngan* of the loss shall be put down, happiness about death of those who do not spare [themselves] shall not be put down.

The following juxtaposition gives us an overview of the phrases and OT texts in which *mya/mye ngan* occurs:

<i>mya ngan</i>	<i>sangs</i>	PT 1047
	<i>bsangs</i>	ITJ 733
<i>mye ngan</i>	<i>bsang</i>	PT 239
	<i>gzhag</i>	PT 1283a

Furthermore, we observe that a particular form of the compound occurs consistently in each document:

<i>mya ngan</i>	PT 16, PT 1047, ITJ 733
<i>mye ngan</i>	PT 239, PT 1283a, Or.15000/379

To conclude, *mya ngan* and *mye ngan* occur in a complementary distribution in OT records. Their identity is also secured by the shared phrases (*mya/mye ngan las 'da' &*

¹⁰ For this reconstruction, see Bialek, forthcoming, s.v. *dbon lob*.

¹¹ The manuscript PT 1283 contains two distinct texts written probably by the same scribe (cf. Venturi 2008: 1). I refer to the first text as PT 1283a (Il.1–532) and to the second text as PT 1283b (Il.533–642).

*mya/mye ngan (b)sang(s)*¹²). From the examples (6)–(8) & (10) it appears that *mya/mye ngan* was regarded as an antonym of happiness (*dga' ba*). The only examples of the independent form *mye ngan*, i.e. (9) & (10), come from passages that discuss rites or behaviours which are related to death.

From the examples (6)–(10) it seems obvious that *mya/mye ngan* belonged to the vocabulary of emotions. Taking into account the fact that the abbreviated form of *mya/mye ngan las 'das pa* is *myang 'das*, *mye ngan* appears to be the *lectio difficilior*. This hypothesis is also supported by the absence of the latter form in later literature – neither BCRD nor TBRC provide any instance of *m(y)e ngan* that could be identified with the present lexeme.

In order to better understand the original form and meaning of the compound *mya/mye ngan* as well as its later semantic development, I should quote other examples of phrases with the verb '*da*'/'*das*' from OT sources. Only expressions with a complement in delative (*las*) have been considered (citations after OTDO and Takeuchi 1998.2):

<i>'jig rten</i>	<i>las 'das</i> (PT 16; ITJ 751; 'Phyong; Skar; Or.15000/379: r9) “to pass over the world”
<i>'jigs pa lnga</i>	<i>las shin du 'das</i> (Or.15000/455: r3) “to utterly pass over the five fears”
<i>mtha'</i>	<i>las 'das</i> (ITJ 751) “to pass over the boundaries”
<i>dpag pa</i>	<i>las 'das</i> (PT 16) “to pass over the measure”
<i>sri zhu bya ba</i>	<i>las 'da'</i> (PT 1283a) “to pass over the deed [of showing] respect”

To these I shall add expressions found in later lexicographical works:

<i>bka'</i>	<i>las 'da'</i> “to transgress a commandment” (J: 275a)
<i>khriims</i>	<i>las 'da'</i> “to transgress a law” (J: 275a)
<i>grangs</i>	<i>las 'das pa</i> “surpassing number, innumerable” (J: 275a)
<i>chos</i>	<i>las 'da'</i> “to abandon one’s religion” (J: 275a)
<i>brjod</i>	<i>las 'das pa</i> “unspeakable, indescribable” (D: 680a)
<i>blo'i yul</i>	<i>las 'das pa</i> “surpassing the understanding; inconceivable” (D: 680a)
<i>tshad</i>	<i>las 'da'</i> “to exceed the measure” (J: 275a)
<i>bsam bya'i yul</i>	<i>las 'das</i> “surpassing the understanding or imagination, inconceivable” (J: 275a)
<i>lha</i>	<i>las 'das pa'i spos</i> “incense surpassing that of the gods” (J: 275a)

¹² For the phrases *mya/mye ngan (b)sang(s)* compare the expressions *mya ngan 'tshang* glossed in Mvy: 6166 for *aśokam* and *mya ngan bsang ba* equated by Negi with *śokaprahāṇam* (10: 4532b); Skt. *aśoka* “not causing sorrow; not feeling sorrow” (MW: 113c), *prahāṇa* “relinquishing, abandoning, avoiding” (MW: 700c).

Here we observe a process of metaphorisation of 'da' (especially in later sources) that started from the most literal meaning "to pass (over)".

Returning to *mye ngan*, its literal meaning would be "a bad fire". There is one particular usage of *mye ngan* that has not been mentioned yet:

(11)

mye ngan zhig 'ong bar ston / (PT 1045: VI-7, *apud* Bacot 1913: 447;

ITJ 747: VII-8, *apud* Nishida 2014: 341)

[The divination] shows that a *mye ngan* will come.

Bacot (1913: 447) and Nishida (2014: 325) understand *mye ngan* in (11) literally as "incendie" and "evil fire". In both texts, the divination immediately preceding the one under discussion concerns *yul ngan* (Bacot: "fléau"; Nishida: "tempest"). It is interesting to note the morphological parallelism between *yul ngan* and *mye ngan*. I will come back to this issue below (see section II.6) but now I will refer to this formation as *mye ngan*¹¹.

A survey of lexicographical sources has yielded that *mye* (CT *me*) in written Tibetan was never used to refer to feelings or emotions.¹³ Thus, we would have to understand *mye ngan las 'da'* literally as "to pass over a bad fire", with *mye* being the head of the compound *mye ngan*. In the above list of arguments attested with the verb 'da' we don't find any lexeme that resembles "fire" in its semantics. And yet we can be certain that *mye* is the proper reading of the first syllable. Fire has previously been ascertained as the common semantic denominator of Skt. *śoka* and *nirvāṇa* – both are rendered in Tibetan by means of the compound *mya/mye ngan*. Etymologically *nirvāṇa* means "blown or put out, extinguished (as a lamp or fire), set (as the sun), calmed, quieted, tamed, dead, deceased (lit. having the fire of life extinguished), lost, disappeared" (MW: 557c). However, the Tibetan phrase *mye ngan las 'da'* cannot be understood as "for a bad fire to extinguish" – *mye ngan* is not the subject of the verb 'da' but its complement. Furthermore, a phrase of similar meaning is attested in Nangchen: *nda*: (= WT 'da') nCA "with ?me to extinguish (fire)" (CDTD.V: 627) and in Amdo: *mye 'da' thal* "The fire goes out." (AMK: 605a). It proves that the expression "for fire to extinguish" requires *me* in absolutive as the subject of the verb 'da'.¹⁴ What we now know is that the original

¹³ Compare phrases and compounds listed, e.g., in Jäschke's or Das' dictionaries s.v. *me*, none of which has any connotation with sensations or emotional states. Neither is any related sense attested in modern compounds formed with the constituent *me* (cf. CDTD, DED, AMK). Instead, the metaphorisation "burning" > "suffering pain" > "being afflicted" occurred in Tibetan in verbs denoting the action of burning, like *'tshig* ("of any violent pain", J: 459a) and *'bar* ("also in reference to the passions", J: 392a). In a private conversation (24.03.2017) Johannes Schneider remarked that "fire" occurs frequently in connection with "anger, wrath" in Buddhist canonical literature. The respective phrases are: *khros pa'i me* or *khro ba'i me* (see BCRD). To these one could also add *chags pa'i me* for Skt. *rāgāgni* "fire of lust" (Silk 2008: 161). It seems obvious that these are cases of literal renderings of Sanskrit phrases and their connotations are extrinsic to Tibetan imagery. From Tibetan perspective more accurate are expressions like *khro ba'i sems* [...] *bsregs* or *bud shing gis sbar ba'i khro ba'i sems* (cf. BCRD).

¹⁴ Thomas interprets the OT phrase *mye skrad* (Or.15000/6: r2) as "to put out the fire" (TLTD.2: 450). The manuscript reads *skad* but Takeuchi (1998.2: 20, text 60), following Thomas, amends it to *skrad*. They obviously

Tibetan term for *nirvāṇa* contained a word for fire (*mye*; ~ Skt. *śoka*) and, by analogy with Skt. *nirvāṇa*, described a state of passing over a disadvantageous state or situation.

II.2 Later lexicographical sources attest to one more alternation that concerns the morpheme *mya/mye* in the first syllable of a compound. Let us first look at the OT attestations of the formation *mye ngam*:

(12)

de nas byang phyogsna // mye ngam bye ri rgyud chen po zhigis chode / zha ma (582) *kha gan gyis // dmag drangsna // dmag ni ma thar //* (PT 1283b)
 Thereafter, to the north, being cut off by a great *mye ngam*, a chain of sand-mountains, if *Zha-ma-kha-gan* would lead the army [there], the army would not get through.

Clauson (1957: 13) identifies *Zha-ma-kha-gan* with the last khagan of the Turkic Empire, *Özmiş Khagan* (742–4).

(13)

'di rnam gyi gyab phyogsna / mye ngam bye ri rgyud ched po / pha rol na (601) *gnam gyi rgyal po sde gnyis mchiste //* (PT 1283b)
 Behind these, a great *mye ngam*, a chain of sand-mountains; on the other side, there are two tribes of the kings of *Gnam*.

(14)

de nas // khyis / rnga mo bchu dang / chi 'dod dgu // dang // mye ngam bye ri rgal (609) *ba'i chu bkal te / slar btang nas / drugu yul du phyino //* (PT 1283b)
 Thereafter, having commissioned ten camels, nine necessities (lit. what was needed) and water for crossing *mye ngam*, sand-mountains, the dogs sent [them back and they] went to the land of *Dru-gu*.¹⁵

(15)

de'i byang phyogsna // mye ngam bye ri rgyud gyi pha rol na / myi ud (625) *ha dag leg zhes bgyi ba // rkang pa / ba lang gi rmyig pa chan* (read: *can*) *la // lus la spu* (626) *shol shol po zhis mchis / myi sha la 'tshal //* (PT 1283b)
 To the north of this, on the other side of *mye ngam*, a chain of sand-mountains, there are men called *Ud-ha-dag-leg* having feet with ox-hooves and plenty hair on [their] bodies. [They] eat human flesh.

relate it to the CT verb *skrod* “to expel, drive out, eject” (J: 33b) although I was not able to trace its use with “fire”.

¹⁵ The sentence structure suggests that the dogs (*khyis*) are the subject of the verbs *bkal* and *btang*.

Clauson (1957: 17) proposes to identify *mye ngam bye ri rgyud* in (15) with the Kyrgyz Ala-Too Range (previously Alexander Range).

(16)

mye ngam ched (3v76) *po la skal mas nas 'dug pa las / gnam gi lhas char phab nas / skom rnyed pa dang 'dra //* (ITJ 738, *apud* OTDO)

[He] is like a one who, upon staying by fate in a great *mye ngam*, acquires drink after rain was sent down by the gods of the sky.

The examples (12)–(15) stem from reports prepared for a king of Hor (*hor gyi rgyal po*, PT 1283b: 536). The reports are concerned with rulers who reign over the lands to the north of the Hor king; *mye ngam* occurs in reports three, four and five as discerned by Clauson (1957: 11). According to the latter author, the fourth report (starting in line 591) concerns the tribes located to the north of 'Bug-chor, whereas the fifth one (l.616–) concerns those living to the west of 'Bug-chor (*ibid.*, p. 12). The term 'Bug-chor “correspond à la transcription chinoise du titre royal de Qapγan” (Clauson 1957: 12). The Chinese transcription was 默啜 *mochuo* and it referred to Qap(a)ghan Qaghan who reigned over the Eastern Turks from 692 to 716 (cf. Clauson 1957: 12–3; Beckwith 1987: 58). The term also occurs in the *Old Tibetan Annals* in the year 720/1. Thus, in OT 'Bug-c(h)or seems to have denoted Eastern Turks in general. Clauson speculates that Tibetans took over the Turkic royal title to refer to Eastern Turks because they came across the latter peoples during the reign of this very ruler (*ibid.*). According to Clauson, the core of the Eastern Turkic Khaganate was located around Karabalghasun (other names: Ordu-Baliq, Mubalik) on the Orkhon River (*ibid.*, p. 13).

From (14) we can infer that one had to cross *mye ngam bye ri rgyud* on the way to the land of Dru-gu. The latter term denoted Western Turks in OT. Since in PT 1283b *mye ngam* is used to refer to geographical regions a considerable distance from each other, we can state that it was not understood in this text as a toponym but rather it described a particular kind of landscape formation. In (12) we read that an army would not be able to pass through a *mye ngam bye ri rgyud*. From (14) we gather that camels and water were needed to cross it, while (16) contrasts a condition of staying in a great *mye ngam* with acquiring drink from the rain. These descriptions suggest that *mye ngam* was a region devoid of water. This confirms the identification of *mye ngam* with the CT *mya ngam* already proposed by Bacot (1957: 146f.) and Thomas (1957: 155). *mya ngam* is also found in OT sources, cf.:

(17)

de nas byang pyogs (r9) *su drangs te mya ngam la thug //* (ITJ 834)

Further, having led [the boundary] towards the northern direction, [it] reaches a *mya ngam*.

(18)

*nu[b] dang byang mya ngam la thug // (ITJ 834: r17)*To the west and north [the boundary] reached a *mya ngam*.

(19)

*phong zhing dor bco lnga khule mo ngan na mcis pa'i / (10) mtshams ni // shar mya ngam la thug (ITJ 1243; trslr. after TLTD.2: 364, Ch.79.xiv.5)*As concerns the boundaries of fifteen *dor* of a poor land in Khule-mo-ngan, in the east [they] reach a *mya ngam*.

(20)

*de nas bye zho ja ga yur ba gya gyus drangs the / (27) yur ba'i mjug / tho p(h)yag rgya can mchis pas mya ngam rked du bcad nas // (ITJ 1243; trslr. after TLTD.2: 365, Ch.79.xiv.5)*Thereafter, having windingly led a Bye-zho-ja-ga¹⁶ conduit, because at the end of the conduit there is a cairn with an official seal, [one] cut across (lit. cut in the middle [of]) a *mya ngam*.

(21)

*mya ngam dang rtsi shing (Or.15000/182.1: r2)**mya ngam* and fruit-trees¹⁷

The examples (17)–(20) stem from texts that concern demarcation of land units. They inform us that a particular land unit extended in the given direction up to a *mya ngam*. This allows us to identify the OT *mye ngam* with this *mya ngam* and with the CT *mya ngam* as denoting a kind of landform, broadly speaking.

II.3 The detailed lexicological analysis of the present section is intended to elucidate the complicated semantic relationships between several terms from languages that are known to have been used in Central Asia between the 7th and the 10th century. The survey concentrates on the occurrences of the compound *mya ngam* and its possible derivations (or distorted forms) in diverse renderings of foreign terms. The approach aims at unraveling intricate correlations in the patterns of metaphorisation and in the imagery of peoples inhabiting the region. It is hypothesised that connotations shared by the terms in various languages were transmitted between the languages due to the common cultural background of their users. It is hoped that a closer examination of the term *mya ngam* from a broader perspective can help to explain its hypothesised semantic development.

¹⁶ This seems to be a bilingual formation consisting of a Tibetan part (*bye zho*) and most probably its equivalent (*ja ga*) in another language that remains to be identified.

¹⁷ The fragmentary character of the document (cf. Takeuchi 1998.2: 80, text 246) does not allow for restoring the sentence structure. Thomas (TLTD.2: 362-3) also reads **mya ngam* for the fragmentarily preserved *ngam* in ITJ 835: r1.

A graphic overview of the overlapping semantic fields of the discussed terms is added at the end of the section (see p. 43).

One finds CT *mya ngam* glossed as: “maruḥ” (Mvy: 5278), “[Manchu] gobi, [Mongolian] γobi, [Turkic] čöl yer, [Chinese] 瀚海 *hàn hǎi*; Sandwüste” (Corff.1: 01553), “a fearful desert” (J: 420b), “*maru* a fearful sandy desert” (D: 978a), “maruḥ, jaṅgalam, aṭavikāntāraḥ; māraṅḥ” (Negi.10: 4532b). But the situation around *mya ngam* complicates if we look at the Tibetan translation of Candragomin’s *Śiṣyalekha*.¹⁸ Verse 37d of the Sanskrit text (Hahn 1998: 76) contains the term *marutā* (a derivative of *maru*) rendered in most Tibetan editions as *mya ngan* (!) *nyid* – an obvious error for *mya ngam nyid* that is actually attested in Tsong-kha-pa’s *Lam rim chen mo* and in the Sde-dge canon. Sanskrit *maru* also occurs in verses 110d, 111d and 112d (cf. Hahn 1998: 124–6). The preserved Tibetan editions provide either the correct reading *mya ngam* or again the erroneous *mya ngan*.

An interesting derivative of *mya ngam* is quoted by Das, unfortunately without providing the source for it: *mya ngam byed* “*kuḍmala* bud; a hell” (D: 978a, s.v. *mya ngam*). Another derivative worth mentioning is *mya ngam thang* glossed in Tshe-ring-dbang-rgyal’s dictionary as “adhvanni” (132r1).¹⁹ In a private communication, Johannes Schneider has proposed to amend the obviously corrupt Sanskrit term with **adhvāgni* (email: 13.03.2017).²⁰ The latter lexeme occurs also in Das’ dictionary: *mya ngam thang* “*adhvāgni* a desert” (978a, s.v. *mya ngam*), again without indicating the source.²¹ The Sanskrit terms worth an elucidation are:

<i>maru</i>	“a wilderness, sandy waste, desert; a mountain, rock; ‘the desert-like penance,’ i.e. abstinence from drinking” (MW: 790a);
<i>kuḍmala</i>	“filled, with buds; a bud (sometimes written <i>kuṭmala</i>); a particular hell” (MW: 289b); “ ¹ sich öffnend (von einer Blume); ² eine sich öffnende Knospe; ³ eine Art Hölle” (Böht.2: 317) ²² ;
<i>adhvāgni</i>	lit. “fire on the way/spot” < <i>adhvan</i> + <i>agni</i> : <i>adhvan</i> “a road, way, orbit; a journey, course; distance; time; means, method, resource; the zodiac (?), sky, air; a place” (MW: 23c); “ ¹ Weg, Reise; ² Zeitabschnitt, Zeitraum, Zeit” (SWTF: 42a); <i>agni</i> “fire, sacrificial fire” (MW: 5a).

¹⁸ The data quoted from *Śiṣyalekha* are based on an unpublished index that I prepared for the late Prof. Hahn a few years ago. The index includes glosses from the Sanskrit and collated Tibetan versions as well as from two Tibetan commentaries: *Śiṣyalekhaṭṭippana* and *Śiṣyalekhavṛtti*. The texts had been collated by Prof. Hahn. The Sanskrit text together with an English translation has been published in Hahn 1998.

¹⁹ Negi glosses *mya ngam thang* as “maruḥ; marusthalam; marusthalt; marutaṭam” (10: 4533a–b).

²⁰ The amendment has originally been suggested by Friedrich Wilhelm within the Wörterbuchprojekt der Kommission für zentralasiatische Studien der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften.

²¹ Compare also the phrase *mya ngam gyi thang* “chu med thang dben sa lta bu’am dgon dung ’jigs gnas lta bu” (GC: 652a).

²² Mvy glosses a derivative of *kuḍmala*, i.e. *kuḍmalaka-jātam*, as “me tog kha ’bus pa” (6229).

For *kuḍmala/kuṭmala* we could also quote one of the meanings of the verb $\sqrt{kuṭ}$: “to be warm, burn” (MW: 288a), and its cognates $\sqrt{kuṇḍ}$ “to mutilate; to burn, to protect” (MW: 289c), “brennen, beschützen” (Böht.2: 319) and $\sqrt{kūḍ}$ “brennen machen” (Mayrhofer.1: 385).²³ A mention of burning, albeit marked as doubtful, is also made by Edgerton in his explanation of the term *kuṇḍana* “(to the root of *kuṇḍa*; but the Skt. Dhātup[āṭha] assigns to this root the m[eanin]g *burn* as well as *mutilate*), prob[ably] *mutilation* (barely possibly, *burning*), in a list of tortures in hell” (Edg: 185b). The only occurrence of *mya ngam byed* that I was able to trace concerns its use as a definiens of Skt. *ka tsa mā la* in Jayaśrīñāna’s *Skad dod gcig gis don du mar ’jug pa’i mngon brjod nor bu’i phreng ba* (D 4454, sna tshogs, po 229r1; *apud* BCRD): “ka tsa mā la. mya ngam byed. klu’i dbye. ral pa’i khyad par la”. *ka tsa mā la* can be identified with Skt. *kacamāla* “smoke” (MW: 242c) – another term from the semantic field of FIRE.²⁴

With regard to *adhvāgni*, it appears that in *mya ngam thang* it is the last morpheme, *thang*, that corresponds to Skt. *adhvan*. The latter term is regularly rendered in Tibetan with *lam* or *dus* (cf. Mvy: 151–3, 360, 5334, 7658, 8321, 8401). Interestingly, the two aspects of EXTENSION, i.e. spatial (*lam*) and temporal (*dus*), are similarly ‘united’ in the Tibetan term *thang* with its basic meaning “flat country, a plain, steppe” but also “a moment, a little while” (J: 228a-b).²⁵ This double nature of *thang* is mirrored in the wide spectrum of its Sanskrit equivalents: *sthalī* (Mvy: 5277), *sthala* (Mvy: 6987), *dhanvan* (Mvy: 6988; falsely: *dhanvani*), *kṣana*, *pala*, *lava* (LCh: 338b).²⁶

It is still difficult to compare the word-formation of the Sanskrit terms *kuḍmala*, *kacamāla* and *adhvāgni* with their assumed Tibetan equivalents *mya ngam byed* and *mya ngam thang*. The following juxtaposition based on the quoted Tibetan sources could be sketched:

²³ Following Emeneau (1969), Mayrhofer considers Skt. *kuḍmala* as a loanword from a Dravidian language (3: 100–1).

²⁴ The Skt. *kaca* is glossed as “the hair (esp. of the head); a cicatrix, a dry sore, scar; a band, the hem of a garment; a cloud; beauty, brilliancy” (MW: 242c) from which only the sense “cloud” could be reasonably connected to the meaning “smoke”. To his entry on *kacamāla* Böhtlingk adds a remark: “Vielleicht nur eine fehlerhafte Variante für *khatamāla*” (2: 16). *khatamāla* is glossed as “a cloud; smoke” (MW: 334b). *kacamāla* and *khatamāla* are attested only lexicographically. There is yet another term assumed by lexicographers to be a misspelling for *khatamāla*: *karamāla* “smoke (probably a corruption of *khatamāla*)” (MW: 255a).

²⁵ For a detailed discussion of the semantics of *thang*, see Białek, forthcoming, s.v. *mnga’ thang*.

²⁶ Skt. *sthalī* “= *sthala*” (MW: 1262a); *sthala* “a chapter, section; a heap of artificially raised earth, mound; an eminence, tableland; soil, ground; place, spot; dry land, firm earth; a flat surface, roof” (MW: 1261c–2a); *dhanvan* “a bow; rain-bow; dry soil, shore; a desert, a waste” (MW: 509c); *kṣana* “any instantaneous point of time, instant, twinkling of an eye, moment” (MW: 324c); *pala* “straw; weight; fluid measure; measure of time” (MW: 609c); *lava* “the act of cutting, reaping, mowing, plucking or gathering; that which is cut or shorn off, a shorn fleece, wool, hair; anything cut off, a section, fragment, piece, particle, bit, little piece; a minute division of time; a moment; a degree” (MW: 898b).

<i>mya ngam byed</i>	¹ <i>kuḍmala</i> “a bud; a hell” ²⁷
	² <i>kacamāla</i> ~ <i>karamāla</i> ~ <i>khatamāla</i> “smoke; cloud”
<i>mya ngam thang</i>	<i>adhvāgni</i> ~ “fire on the way/spot”
<i>mya ngam</i>	~ <i>āgni</i> “fire”
<i>thang</i>	~ <i>adhvan</i> extension
	<i>maruḥ</i> ~ <i>marusthalam</i> ~ <i>marusthalī</i> ~ <i>marutaṭam</i>

We recall that the first meanings of *kuḍmala* are given as “sich öffnend (von einer Blume); ²eine sich öffnende Knospe”. Interestingly, the Middle Persian Manichaean *Kephalaia* text reveals a compelling relationship between fire and flowers: “And at the coming of *Āz* three ways of death are revealed, the hidden fire and the visible fire (both leading) to transmigration (*wrdyšn*), and (good) smell and flowers to paradise.” (*apud* Sundermann 2003: 335–336). Sundermann further elucidates that “[i]n this text fire in man and fire on earth are taken as manifestations of *Āz* which lead to rebirth [...]. But *Āz* contributes [...] also to the redemption of the human souls by ‘good smell’ and ‘flowers’.” (*ibid.*, p. 336).²⁸ At the individual level, the demoness *Āz* emerges at the time of death as we read in a Manichaean Chinese text: “When the body of flesh perishes, the Demon(ess) comes out.” (Kósa 2011: 21). At the macrocosmic level, “Great Fire” is a conflagration of the world that will last for 1468 years (Ogden 1930: 103). Could it be that Sanskrit *kuḍmala* and Tibetan *mya ngam byed* were coined independently to render the same, originally Manichaean, eschatological concept?

It is by far not obvious that Sanskrit lexemes *kacamāla*, *karamāla*, and *khatamāla* possess a parallel word-formation with the last constituents going back to *-māla*. As a matter of fact, Böhtlingk analyses *khatamāla* “¹Wolke; ²Rauch” as *kha+tamāla* (2: 596), lit. “a dark-barked tree in the sky”. Here one could once more recall the Manichaean “Great Fire” which the *Sermon on the Light Nous* “compares with the **trunk of the dark tree** of *Āz*” (Sundermann 2003: 335; emphasis – JB), cf.: “Der finstere Baum (Parth. *d’lwg t’ryg*; Sogd. *t’r kw wn*) ist [die Gier] (i.e. *Āz* – JB). Und sein Stamm ist das Große Feuer (Parth. *dwr wzrg*; Sogd. *’tr RBk*).” (Sundermann 1992: 75, 94a & 94b). We can reasonably assume that “trunk of a dark tree” or “dark-barked tree” are metaphors for smoke that rises from a burning fire. There seems to be yet another linkage between the Manichaean *Āz*, “Demoness of Greed” (for this translation, see Kósa 2011: 21), and Skt. *khatamāla* understood as “a dark-barked tree (Skt. *tamāla*) on the sky”. The word *āz* is derived from the Avestan verbal root *āz-* “strive for, endeavor to” (EI; <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/az-iranian-demon>; 20.05.2017) whereas Skt. *tamāla* comes from *√tam* “¹den Athem verlieren, ersticken; ²stocken; ³begehren, verlangen” (Böht.3: 250; cf. also Mayrhofer.1: 626). From the same Skt. root the noun *tamas* is derived: “darkness, gloom; the darkness of hell, hell or a particular division of hell” (MW: 438a). Whether

²⁷ The only source for the equation *kuḍmala* = *mya ngam byed* remains the dictionary of Sarat Chandra Das who quotes it without any references.

²⁸ Was it this kind of association of flowers with fire that influenced the folk etymology *me tog* “flower” from the original *men tog*? For a tentative etymology of the OT *men tog*, see Bialek, forthcoming, s.v. *ngang ngur*.

as an independent formation or rather as a loan from Sanskrit, the Manichaeic Sogdian *tm-* “hell” is obviously cognate to *tamas* (Mayrhofer.1: 626).²⁹ As indicated above, the meaning “a particular hell” is also ascribed to Skt. *kuḍmala* – our first equivalent of T. *mya ngam byed*.³⁰

In the final analysis, on the Sanskrit side, we have another three terms that could be connected to the semantic field of FIRE: *kacamāla* (< *khatamāla*) “smoke”, *kuḍmala* “a particular hell”, *adhvāgni* “fire on the way/spot”.³¹ On the Tibetan side, we have *mya ngam byed* and *mya ngam thang*, the latter paraphrased in GC with *dgon dung* “a sandy

²⁹ Skt. *tamas* is glossed in Mvy as “mun khrod” (2969-71) whereas *tamāla* is transcribed as *ta mā/ma la* (6180/6254).

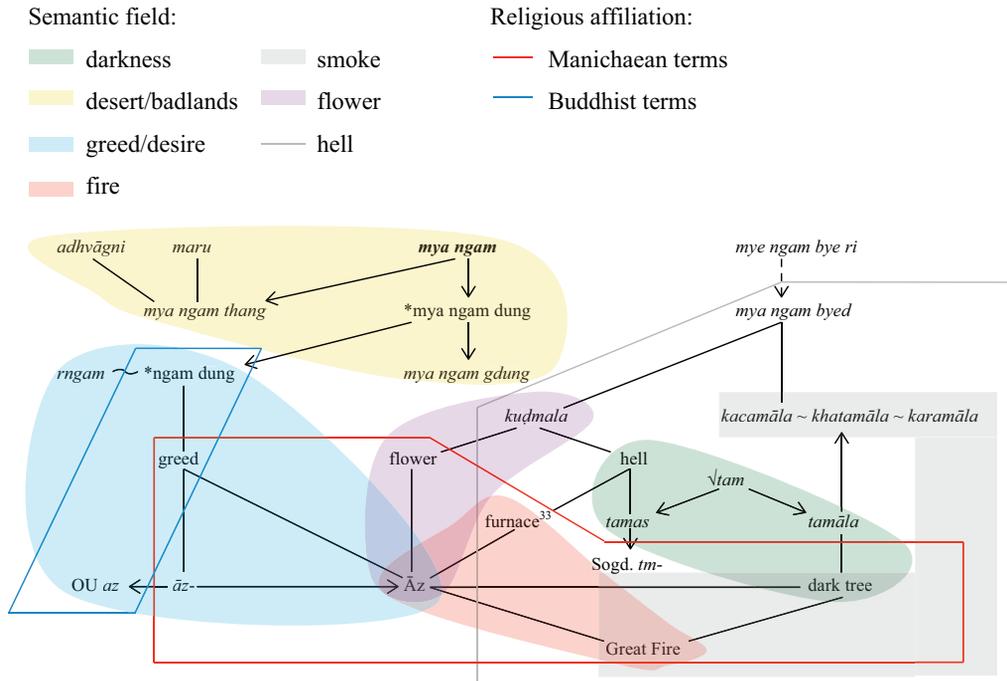
³⁰ There is yet another puzzling Tibetan formation resembling the semantics of the Iranian *āz*. Whereas in Manichaeism the demoness *Āz* is a personification of greed, in Zoroastrian Middle Persian texts *Āz* represents gluttony (EI; <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/az-iranian-demon>; 20.05.2017). Now, Jäschke glosses *ngam dur can* as “given to **gluttony** and drinking” quoting *Bstan ’gyur* as his source (126b; emphasis – JB). According to BCRD, the form *ngam sdur can* is attested in Maudgalyāna’s *Rgyu gdags pa* in a list of characteristics ascribed to beings that changed their existence (i.e. died) after having been brown bears (D 4087, mngon pa, i 169r7. I was not able to trace the form *ngam dur can*. The morpheme *sdur* is followed by a question mark on ACIP; <http://tibetan.works/etext/reader.php?collection=tengyur&index=4087#169A>; 21.05.2017). It seems that the morpheme *ngam* could be connected to the verb *rngam* “to pant for, to desire ardently” (J: 134a; for the historical connection between *ngam* and *rngam*, see Bialek, forthcoming, s.v. *ngam len*) to which the derivative *rngam can* “greedy, avaricious, covetous” (J: 134a, s.v. *rngam pa*) can be adduced. Thus, Tibetan *rngam* would be a perfect semantic equivalent of both verbs, the Avestan *āz-* and Sanskrit *√tam*. In Buddhist Uyghur, *az-* (a loan from Middle Persian; Clauson 1972: 277a) renders Skt. *tr̥ṣṇā* – the cause of rebirth (EI; <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/az-iranian-demon>; 21.05.2017). Tibetan equivalents of the latter term include “skom (pa), ’dod pa, bzhed pa, sred (pa)” (LCh 2007: 267b). *dur/sdur* should in all probability be amended to **dung*, Tabo “ncAD to desire, to love strongly, to be eager” (CDTD.V: 593; cf. also *dungs pa* “secondary form of *gdungs pa*, love”, J: 253a), itself a cognate of the commonly occurring *gdung* “to desire, to long for” (J: 266b). *dur* for the original **dung* can be easily explained as a scribal error. It seems now that Tibetan **ngam dung can* should be rendered as “greedy”. The etymological meaning of the morpheme **dung* was however *“dry; thirsty”* which is confirmed by the Western Kiranti data: Bahing *doṅ* “(vi.) dry”, Hayu *doṅ* “(vi.) dry up” (STEDT; <http://stedt.berkeley.edu/~stedt/cgi/rootcanal.pl/gnis/?t=dry>; 21.05.2017) and additionally by the Tibetan compound *dgon dung* “jāṅgala” (Mvy: 5299; Skt. *jāṅgala* “trocken, spärlich bewachsen”, Mayrhofer.3: 209; cf. also CT *dgung* “4to be dried”, J: 266b), “die Wüste, Sandwüste, Gobi” (Sch: 86a) < *“dry wilderness”*. Another related lexeme is attested twice in the Tibetan translation of Kṣemendra’s *Bodhisattvāvadānakalpalatā* (D 4155, skyes rab, khe) – *mya ngam gdung* – once as a verbal phrase (184r4), once as a compound (264r2). I suppose that **ngam dung-* and *mya ngam gdung* are folk etymologies going back to **mya ngam dung*, lit. “dry badlands” (cf. *dgon dung*). In the case of *mya ngam gdung*, the last morpheme **dung*, not being recognised anymore, has been replaced by the better known *gdung* – in the context of desert most probably associated with the meaning “to be dried”. What has happened to **mya ngam dung* on its way to **ngam dung-* is more mysterious. One hypothesis would be that *dung* has been associated with *gdung* (inspired by the already existing *mya ngam gdung*?) and the whole formation re-interpreted as *“torment of a desert”* > *“thirst”* > *“desire”* (at this stage the syllable *mya* must have been left out due to the association of *ngam* with the verb *rngam*) > *“greed”*.

³¹ One needs to emphasise that all Sanskrit terms appearing in the above discussion are scarcely attested in literary sources. Apart from *kuḍmala* in the meaning “a bud”, the remaining lexemes are known only from lexicographical sources. Although this observation alone would make the above discussion futile, it is a fact that *mya ngam thang* and *mya ngam byed* are attested in canonical sources in descriptions of places that are haunted by fire, hot and destitute of water (see BCRD). I have decided to present the above data in the hope that other scholars could shed more light on the issue in the future.

desert, sands” (J: 87b) and *'jigs gnas* “lit. a fearful place; a cemetery, where dead bodies are left or disposed of” (D: 458a).

The Sanskrit and Tibetan terms surveyed above have multiple points of tangency with some vital terms of the Manichaean mythology. Their common denominator is a particular concept of afterlife connected to the notions of fire, smoke, hell, darkness, desert, and thirst. It seems thus that *mya ngam* was perceived as an adequate equivalent to render a set of terms that were apparently used in textual contexts that concerned afterlife.³² The usage of *mya ngam* to form a Tibetan counterpart of *adhvāgni* indicates the persisting connotation of the former term with “fire”, i.e. OT *mye*. If we reconstruct *mya ngam byed* as **mya ngam bye*, we acquire a formation highly resembling the OT *mye ngam bye ri*. I venture the hypothesis that *byed* in *mya ngam byed* has either resulted from a scribal error or is a folk etymology: *mye ngam bye ri* > **mye ngam byer* > *mya ngam byed* “a particular hell”.

By way of recapitulation, the following graphics presents the semantic relationships between the lexemes quoted heretofore from various languages:



³² It seems probable that the Tibetan lexemes were coined not directly on the basis of the Sanskrit terms but, for instance, Chinese, Parthian, Sogdian, or Uyghur. *mya ngam byed* and *mya ngam thang* might have been coined earlier, during the Old Tibetan phase of the language, and re-used later to translate the respective Sanskrit terms.

³³ For the connotations of this term see below, p. 50n51.

To sum up the foregoing discussion, the two terms known from CT sources, *mya ngan* and *mya ngam*, are attested in OT records in two variants each: *mya/mye ngan* and *mya/mye ngam*. There was a tendency in the history of the language to replace the less known and morphologically (as well as semantically) non-transparent *mya ngam* with *mya ngan*, as observed in *Śiṣyalekha*. It has also been stated that the spelling *mye* for the first syllable of *mye ngan* seems to be confirmed as correct by the etymology of the Sanskrit lexemes *śoka* and *nirvāṇa*. It has been argued that *mye* in the sense “fire” neither can be the head of the delative-complement of the verb ‘*da*’ nor could it have undergone any metaphorical extension of the meaning. The textual evidence proves that *mye ngan* and *mye ngan las ’das pa* are older than *myang ’das*.

II.4 I put forward the hypothesis that both lexemes, *mya/mye ngan* and *mya/mye ngam*, are derived from the original **mye ngam*. Before I try to trace the semantic and morphological changes both have undergone, I shall propose a tentative explanation of the term *mye ngam*.

We have seen that *mye ngam* referred to an area that lacks water and is difficult to cross. Moreover, in examples (12)–(15) *mye ngam* acquired an apposition: *bye ri rgyud* “chain of sand-mountains” or *bye ri* “sand-mountains”. The morpheme *mye* could point to high temperatures prevailing there or at least connoted with this kind of area. Since no terrain corresponding to this picture is found in Central Tibet (not even on the Tibetan Plateau) and the term itself seems to have been a descriptive one, I assume that it was borrowed into Tibetan. This assumption is made more probable if we consider that the most complete phrase describing this kind of landscape (i.e. *mye ngam bye ri rgyud*) stems from a text that was originally written in a Turkic language, perhaps Uyghur (OT *hor*).³⁴ It cannot be excluded that *mye ngam* was coined (by non-native speakers of Tibetan?) for the sole purpose of translating texts such as the reports for the Hor king, geographical accounts or itineraries.

Regarding the origins of the Tibetan term *mye ngam*, there are two possibilities: 1. it is a loan translation; or 2. it is a folk etymology of a loanword. The only candidate I can put forward as a prototype for *mye ngam* is the toponym ‘Flaming Mountains’ (42°54'5.97"N 89°37'27.45"E; see the map on p. 52), also known as ‘Fire Mountains’, or ‘Gaochang Mountains’ from the Chinese name of the ancient oasis city Gaochang.³⁵ In Wikipedia

³⁴ Clauson even asserts that the texts of the reports for the Hor king (i.e. PT 1283b: 533–643) were translated into Tibetan from a Chinese version (1957: 13), itself a translation from a Turkic language of the original.

³⁵ According to HCCA (4.1: 200) and Zhang/Rong (1998: 14), this old Chinese name was borrowed into Old Uyghur as Kocho/Qocho and used from the ninth century onwards. The history of the place-name Gaochang is provided in more detail in Francke 1907: 28ff. In the following I will briefly sketch Francke’s account. During the Han dynasty, in 48 B.C., Chinese established a military settlement in a place where the ruins of Idikutšahri are found today (42°51'7.93"N 89°31'41.05"E). The place was called Tiandi 田地 (“Feldland”, *ibid.*, p. 31n2), Tiandi-cheng 田地城 or Gaochang-lei 高昌壘 (“der Schutzwall des hohen Gedeihens”, *ibid.*, p. 31; Wylie A. 1882: 110: “Kaou-chang wall”). On these Francke writes: “T’ien-to (“Feldland”) scheint auch ein rein chinesisches Name zu sein; vielleicht ist es die Übersetzung einer ältern einheimischen Bezeichnung. Jedenfalls ist schwer zu entscheiden, welcher von beiden Namen (i.e. Tiandi or Gaochang – JB) zuerst aufgekommen ist. Die Han-Annalen

one finds the following description: “[The Flaming Mountains] are barren, eroded, red sandstone hills in Tian Shan Mountain range, Xinjiang, China. They lie near the northern rim of the Taklamakan Desert and east of the city of Turpan (i.e. Turfan – JB). Their striking gullies and trenches caused by erosion of the red sandstone bedrock give the mountains a flaming appearance at certain times of the day”.³⁶ I was also able to find a few rather sketchy mentions of the mountains in accounts of Western scholars who explored the area in the 19th and 20th centuries. Below, I quote several descriptions, in which the most remarkable traits of the area are addressed (like the fire-like colour, heat, smoke), with the intention to disclose the uniqueness of the Flaming Mountains. It is assumed that their fearsome appearance has given rise to local legends and stimulated the imagery of those who have heard the stories while visiting the neighbouring regions³⁷:

• Le sel nommé (en chinois) *nao-cha* (en persan *nouchader*) et aussi sel de Tartarie, sel volatil, se tire de deux montagnes volcaniques de la Tartarie centrale; l’une est le volcan de Tourfan, qui a donné à cette ville (ou pour mieux dire à une ville qui est située à trois lieues de Tourfan, du côté de l’est) le nom de Ho-tscheou, ville de feu; l’autre est la montagne Blanche, dans le pays de Bisch-balikh; des deux montagnes **jettent continuellement des flammes et de la fumée**. Quant à la montagne de Tourfan, on en voit continuellement sortir **une colonne de fumée**; cette fumée est remplacé le soir par **une flamme semblable à celle d’un flambeau**. [...] On appelle cette montagne le Mont-de-Feu. (Rémusat 1825.1: 209, *apud* Laufer 1919: 507–8n4)³⁸;

kennen beide noch nicht.” (ibid., p. 31n2). Shortly afterwards Gaochang began to denote the whole surrounding area. The name Gaochang was again officially introduced during the Sung dynasty and ceased to be used at the beginning of the 13th century with the conquest of the region by the Mongols. At that time the name Karakhoja (Francke: Karakhodja “der schwarze Prinz”, p. 35) was introduced. The latter name was transcribed into Chinese as Helahuozhe 合刺火者 from which one coined the Chinese name Huozhou 火州 during the time of the Ming dynasty. As against the latter statement, already *Xiyoulu* 西遊錄 (a travel account from the 13th century written by Yelü Chucai 耶律楚材 and quoted by Bretschneider) mentions the name Huozhou, cf.: “South of the city (of Bishbalik), 500 *li* distant, is *Huo chou*, the same place which at the time of the T’ang was called *Kao ch’ang*, and also *Yi chou*.” (1888.1: 16). According to Bretschneider, Yizhou (= Hami) is a mistake of Yelü Chucai (ibid., p. 16n13).

³⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flaming_Mountains#cite_note-6; 18.02.2017.

³⁷ The identification of the respective passages has been an arduous work mainly due to inconsistency in transcription even within one book and, of course, divergent transcription systems applied by various scholars. The application of same-sounding or similar toponyms to different areas is yet another problem. I only quote passages from the text contexts of which I could ascertain they concerned the mountains on the northern edge of the Turfan Depression. Added emphasis in bold is mine. For the localisation of the places mentioned in the accounts, see the attached map, p. 52.

³⁸ The passage is a quotation from “the Japanese edition of the cyclopædia *San ts’ai t’u hui*” translated by Rémusat (Laufer 1919: 507n4). Humboldt (1850: 85) provides the following description of the local ‘volcano’: “[...] the still active volcano of Turfan (or volcano of Ho-tscheu or Bischbalik), almost midway between the meridians of Turfan (Kune-Turpan), and of Pidjan. The volcanic eruptions of the Thian-schan chain, recorded by Chinese historians, reach as far back as the year 89 A.D., when the Hiongnu of the sources of the Irtysh were pursued by the Chinese army as far as Kutch and Kharaschar. The Chinese General, Teu-hian, surmounted the Thian-schan, and saw ‘the Fire Mountains which send out masses of molten rock that flow for many Li.’” It seems that volcanic eruptions occurring in historical times in the Tianshan Mountains were confused with the red

- The country of *Huo chou* is very mountainous. The mountains are **of a bluish-red colour, like fire**, hence the name fire city (district). (Bretschneider 1888.2: 187);

- The *Huo yen shan* (fire mountains) lies east of the city of Liu ch'eng.³⁹ The Sung History gives the following account of this mountain: – “North of *Pei-t'ing* (believed to answer the present Urumtsi) is a mountain, the interior of which contains *nao sha* (sal ammoniac). **Inside there is a perpetual fire, and the smoke sent out from it never ceases.** Clouds of fog are never seen around this mountains. In the evening the **flames issuing from it resemble torch-light.**” (Bretschneider 1888.2: 190)⁴⁰;

- To the south-east of T'u-rh-fan (= Turfan – JB) is a mountain ridge entirely destitute of vegetation. Here **the sun-blaze is insupportable**, wherefore these mountains have been named *Huo yen shan*, or “fire mountains”. (Bretschneider 1888.2: 202 citing *Xiyu wenjian lu* 西域聞見錄 written in 1777);

- In den *Ming shi* wird der Name *Huo chou* davon hergeleitet, daß “in jener Gegend **zahlreiche Berge sind von grünroter Farbe wie Feuer** (huo 火)”. In der Tat lautet der Name dort auch *Mihr* (密爾 iranisch “Sonne”) *Huo chou*. (Francke 1907: 35n3);

- [...] a steep little range of **bright-red sandstone mountains** which rise about two thousand feet and run east and west at the foot of the main northern range and parallel to it. Because of the colour the Chinese call the little range the “Fire Mountains.” From this has arisen the fiction, commonly repeated in books of travel and reference, that there is an active volcano in the region. (Huntington 1907a: 269);

- On the north side of the fault, a part of the earth's crust has been pushed up, and forms a little range with southward facing **scarp of bright red sandstone. The redness of the range** has given rise to the name “Fire Mountains” among the Chinese, and has come the erroneous assertion that there is an active volcano in Central Asia. [...] While the Fire Mountains were being uplifted, the streams from the Bogdo range cut gashes across it, the **narrow red canyons** mentioned above, which penetrate into the very heart of the northern piedmont gravels, and drain the hollow between the ranges. (Huntington 1907b: 306–307);

- One feature alone, **the little red range** (i.e. Flaming Mountains – JB) along the fault-line, redeems Turfan from being utterly commonplace and almost uninhabitable. (Huntington 1907b: 309);

or fire-like appearance of the Flaming Mountains and so the ‘transfer’ of an active volcano to the neighbourhood of Turfan took place.

³⁹ “Liu ch'eng, or, as the name is also written, Lu-chen or Liu-chen, is the same as the country of Liu chung (in the middle of willows) at the time of the Han dynasty [...]” (Bretschneider 1888.2: 184). Liu ch'eng is identical with Hedin's Lukchon, Stein's Lukchun and modern Liucheng (42°44'42.86"N 89°45'27.73"E).

⁴⁰ The passage is cited by Bretschneider after the Ming Geography. The following note is added by the author who has obviously noticed the inconsistencies in the native narratives: “The above account of the fire mountain is borrowed from Wang Yen te's narrative, according to which this mountain lies north of Pei t'ing. But then the Ming Geography is wrong in referring this account to a mountain situated east of Liu ch'eng. The *Si yü wen kien lu* (last century) states that to the south-east of Turfan there is a chain of sandstone mountains entirely destitute of vegetation, and as the sun's beams heat exceedingly the rocks, the name “fire mountain” has been applied to them.” (ibid., p. 190n964).

• **The narrow and forbidding-looking gorge** (the Turks call it *āghiz* or mouth) of Sāngim⁴¹ is remarkable for the great number of monasteries, cave temples, and stūpas it contains. (Le Coq 1909: 314);

• Starting from the east, I first visited **the cañon-like gorge** above the picturesque little township of Toyuk⁴², where **the steep cliffs of reddish sandstone** on either side are honeycombed by numerous small caves, or show ruined temples built on their ledges. (Stein 1912.2: 359);

• The mountain, rising behind the monastery settlement⁴³, is snow-white in colour, but regularly **flooded with crimson under the rays of the rising and setting sun**. (Le Coq 1928: 90);

• The springs above mentioned and some others farther to the north-west rise at the foot of these forbiddingly bare outer hills, which from **the red colour of their clay and sandstone** and their **terrific summer heat** are appropriately known to the Chinese as the ‘Fire Mountains’. (Stein 1928.2: 637);

• In many of the older maps of Chinese Turkistan a volcano is marked in the neighbourhood of Kucha, but there appears no explanation of how this mysterious mountain ever found itself on European maps. Perhaps it was due to a muddle similar to that caused by the sandstone hills of Turfan being called the “Fire Mountains” by the Chinese, which led Western geographers to expect volcanic traces in that area. (Schomberg 1931: 468);

• A small **chain of red mountains** coming from the E[ast] appeared on the left at a distance of a few miles. (Mannerheim 1969.1: 358);

• From Toyuk the road runs over the same plain of barren sand, löss and gravel. On the left we had the same **red mountains** Qizil tagh and on the right at a great distance a few trees and houses. (Mannerheim 1969.1: 361);

• 3½ miles from the edge of the oasis the plain, which had so far been level and slightly inclined to the south, became uneven and formed sand-hills or very low disconnected mountains. About 3 miles further we passed a **smoky cave**, 1 ½ sq. metres in size, dug in a sand-hill. (Mannerheim 1969.1: 362–3).

As has been stated, the name Huozhou, lit. “Fire district”, was used at least as far back as the 13th century. The motif of ‘flaming mountains’ has been picked up by Wu Cheng’er (16th c.) in the 59th chapter of his *Journey to the West* – a poetic adaptation of the Buddhist monk Xuanzang’s travels to India.⁴⁴ From the above account of Mannerheim

⁴¹ = Singim Aghiz of Mannerheim (1969.1: 360). Modern romanized name is Sengim (42°56’41.16”N 89°38’40.41”E).

⁴² 42°50’32.73”N 89°40’48.85”E.

⁴³ That is the Bezeklik Thousand Buddha Caves that are situated in a gorge of the Flaming Mountains.

⁴⁴ The following passage describing the Flaming Mountains can be cited from Yu’s translation: “‘May I ask the Gong-gong why it is that such intense heat returns to the autumn of your noble region?’ ‘Our humble region,’ replied the old man, ‘is named the Mountain of Flames. There’s neither spring nor autumn here; all four seasons are hot.’ ‘Where is this mountain?’ asked Tripitaka. ‘Is it on the way to the West?’ ‘You can’t go to the West,’ replied the old man, ‘for that mountain, about sixty miles from here, sits squarely on the main road. It’s covered with flames for over eight hundred miles, and all around not even a single blade of grass can grow. If you walk on this mountain, you will turn to liquid even if you have a bronze skull and an iron body.’” (2012.3: 120).

we can infer that the name ‘Red Mountain’ (his: Qizil Tagh) was still in usage in the 1900s. The same name is spelled Kysyl-tau on Regel’s map (1881: Tafel 18).⁴⁵ The Chinese modern name of the mountains is 火焰山 *huoyanshan*, lit. “fire-flame mountains”. It seems legitimate to assume that there has existed a long-standing local tradition of using metaphors focused around the notion of fire when referring to this part of the Tianshan range.

From the short account of the history of the name Gaochang (see above) one can infer that the town in which the respective rulers resided was given a name depending on the actual political situation (Han Chinese: Tiandi/Gaochang > Uyghur: Qocho/Idikutšari > Sung Chinese: Gaochang > Mongol: Karakhoja). However, locally and in a non-official discourse among people, the surrounding area was referred to by alluding to the topographic features of the Flaming Mountains. This is not surprising given the exceptional character of this area of land as the hottest place in China⁴⁶ and “flaming” red at certain times of the day.⁴⁷

Now, returning to the issue of the origins of the Tibetan term *mye ngam*, we shall have a closer look at the Chinese word 火焰 *huoyan* occurring in the modern name of the Flaming Mountains. Below, the forms of the morphemes are provided as reconstructed by Schuessler and Baxter/Sagart:

<i>huǒ</i>	LH huai / OCM *hm̥iʔ “fire” (Schuessler 2007: 290f.) MC xwaX / OC *q ^{wh̥} əjʔ {*[q ^{wh̥}]ʔəjʔ} “fire” (Baxter/Sagart 2014b: 173) ⁴⁸
<i>yàn</i>	LH jam / OCM *lamʔ ? “be flaming up, blazing up (of fire); rising; brilliant” (Schuessler 2007: 553)

Schuessler relates Chinese *huǒ* to the PTB root **mey* fire⁴⁹ – the etymon of the OT *mye*. With regard to *yàn*, the latter author states that it is an endoactive derived from 爂 *yán* (2007: 553):

⁴⁵ Cf. also Bretschneider quoting after the Ming Geography: “The *Ch’i shi shan* (mountain of red rocks) is a picturesque peak north-west of T’u-lu-fan. It bears this name owing to the red colour of its rocks.” (1888.2: 190). According to Bretschneider (ibid., fn.962), this passage has been taken from the History of the Wei (fifth century).

⁴⁶ Cf. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flaming_Mountains; 24.02.2017.

⁴⁷ Modern pictures published by travellers on Google Earth (accessed via: <http://www.panoramio.com/photo/16647926?source=wapi&referrer=kh.google.com>; <http://www.panoramio.com/photo/15489105?source=wapi&referrer=kh.google.com>; 18.02.2017) show smoke channels above the hills of the Flaming Mountains.

⁴⁸ The morpheme has not been included in Baxter/Sagart 2014a.

⁴⁹ For other TB cognates, see STEDT (<http://stedt.berkeley.edu/~stedt/cgi/rootcanal.pl/etymon/2136>; 18.02.2017). Although Thomas quotes one case of *smye* (in Or.15000/265: r4) as a variant reading of the OT *mye* (TLTD.2: 297), a careful examination of the manuscript and comparison with other syllables containing the consonant cluster *smy-* or *sm-* has yielded that the morpheme in question shall be read *mye*. Takeuchi transliterates the syllable as *myi* (1998.2: 119, text 366). Any other occurrence of the syllable *smye* in OT records (cf. OTDO) shall be identified with the CT *sme/rme ba* “dirty” (for a discussion of this lexeme, see Bialek, forthcoming, s.v. *kha sme*). It seems that the incorrect reading *!smye* has influenced later studies in Tibeto-Burman and Sino-Tibetan linguistics. Coblin quotes *smye* as an OT variant of the CT *me* but without providing the source for the citation (1986: 79). Similarly

yán LH *jam* / OCM **lam*, prob[ably] **liam* / ONW *iam* “to blaze, burn” (Schuessler 2007: 552)
MC *hjem* < *[g]^w(r)*am* “burn, blazing” (Baxter/Sagart 2014a: 370)

This root has been related by Coblin (1986: 50) to Tibetan *lcam me ba* (Coblin wrongly: *lcam me pa*) “variegated, shiny, dazzling” to which Schuessler adds *phyam phyam pa* “glittering” (2007: 553). In addition, Schuessler remarks that “[t]he graph 炎 had two different ancient readings, LH *jam* and *wam* → *yán*₃ 炎.” (ibid., p. 552). The latter has been reconstructed as follows:

yán LH *wam* / OCM **wam* “to blaze, burn” (Schuessler 2007: 553).

The first hypothesis could be formulated thus: *mye ngam* is partly a loan translation and partly a folk etymology based on a loanword from the Chinese 火焰. The first syllable has been translated as *mye* perhaps due to the strong association in folklore of the Flaming Mountains with fire. The second syllable is a Tibetan folk etymology based on an approximate pronunciation of 焰 that according to all reconstructions could well have had the *-am* rime as did Tibetan *ngam* at that time.

The second hypothesis: *mye ngam* is a loan translation of a Chinese term, the exact form of which remains unknown. As I argue in Białek (forthcoming, s.v. *ngam len*), the basic meaning of *ngam* seems to have been “a narrow passage; neck”. This morpheme is most probably related to the Chinese 巖 *yán* “cliff, precipice; cave, grotto” (MDBG⁵⁰):

LH *ɲam* OCM **ɲrām* ONW *ɲäm* “be high, lofty (of mountains); precipitous, dangerous” (Schuessler 2007: 552)
MC *ngaem* OC **ɲ^sram* {*[ɲ]^sr[a]m} “rocky, lofty” (Baxter/Sagart 2014b: 99)

The syllable *ngam* is attested in OT records in two other compounds that denote landforms:

ngam grog “durch Uferabsturz am Fluß entstandene Ausbuchtung” (Corff.1: 57a.2301); “ravine, canyon” (Gs: 298a) < lit. “ravine’s torrent”
ngam len “ravine, gorge” < **ngam grog len pa* “one catching ravine’s torrents” (for this reconstruction, see Białek, forthcoming, s.v. *ngam len*)

Schuessler deploys the OT *sme* (sic) in his reconstruction of the Sino-Tibetan root **smey* (2007: 19) and Gong juxtaposes his reconstructed Old Chinese **smjædx* with Tibetan *smye* (2002: 83). It can be surmised that *smye* has been overtaken from Thomas by Coblin and repeated from the latter by Schuessler. After I had written this note, Nathan Hill kindly drew my attention to a paper he had already published on the problem of OT *smye*. I agree with his conclusions that “Thomas is correct to understand this word as ‘fire’, but the text does not read *smye* but simply *mye*. The inclusion of a word *smye* ‘fire’ in Thomas’ glossary is a mistake.” (2013: 69).

⁵⁰ Its semantic variant 岩 *yán* is glossed as “cliff; rocks; mountain” (MDBG).

Accordingly, the intended meaning of *mye ngam* would have been *‘‘a fire-ravine’’⁵¹; an appellation describing the visible features of the Flaming Mountains quite well. We know that the mountains could be crossed only through their valleys – there were no routes leading along the mountain ridges.

The third hypothesis: *mye ngam* is a native formation coined to give a name to a landform not known in Tibet proper but reported, for example, in travellers’ accounts. There are two reasons for rejecting the possibility that the term was coined in situ. Firstly, the presence of Tibetans in the direct neighbourhood of the Flaming Mountains was not as well established, as in Dunhuang for instance, and was rather short-lived. Secondly, *mye ngam* has the tint of an artificial formation and does not look much like a native term. Though one could quote the analogous *me ri* ‘‘fire-mountain, volcano’’ (J: 417b), Jäschke remarks (ibid., s.v. *me*) that the latter term was coined by himself. Curiously enough, the Chinese term for ‘‘volcano’’ is 火山 *huoshan*, lit. ‘‘fire-mountain’’.⁵² Whether this term influenced Jäschke or not, its word-formation indeed suggests that the OT *mye ngam* could have been modeled on a Chinese archetype. If I had to think of a ‘more Old Tibetan’ way to name an area of this description, I would propose **ngam ’bar*, lit. ‘‘burning/blazing ravines’’ or even **ngam mye*, lit. ‘‘a ravine which is/burns like fire’’ (an appositional comparative compound). For the latter term compare the CT *ri me’i lha mo* ‘‘[name] of a goddess’’ (D: 1176b). On the other hand, *mye ngam* (< **mye’i ngam*) can only be understood as ‘‘a ravine of fire’’, in which case the semantic relation expressed by the underlying genitive is hardly identifiable.⁵³

The fourth hypothesis: *mye ngam* is a truncated form of **mye ri ngam* (< *[*mye+ri*]_#*ngam*), lit. ‘‘a ravine of a fire-mountain’’.⁵⁴ The elucidations made for hypotheses two and three would apply here as well. The advantage of this reconstruction would be that it better addresses the descriptions of the area as transmitted in various sources. On the one hand, in many reports a mention is made of steep ravines or gorges that run through the mountains. On the other hand, if an account alludes briefly to a fire-like appearance, it always speaks of mountains and not ravines. From the information gathered on the Flaming Mountains we can conclude that three features were being locally associated with this area across the centuries: red or fire-like colour of the mountains, ravines and high temperatures.

⁵¹ In a Middle Persian Manichaean text found in the Turfan Collection (M 3845) we read that at the end of the world Āz will be thrown ‘‘into that furnace (*qwrǰ*) and prison’’ (Sundermann 1978: 487f.). *qwrǰ*, MP /kūrag/ (Durkin-Meisterernst 2004: 215a), has been explained by Henning as ‘‘furnace, kiln’’ and related to the New Persian *kūra* (1937: 84). Steingass (1963: 1060b-61a) glosses the latter lexeme as ‘‘hard ground excavated by a torrent; a fire-place; a smith’s forge; a furnace; a brick-kiln; a lime-kiln’’, among others, and relates it to *kaura* ‘‘[a] channel hollowed out by a torrent; a torrent; a river-shell or worm’’ (ibid., p.1060b). Other Manichaean documents speak of a tomb (Sundermann 1978: 492n46 & 47) or an abyss (Boyce 1952: 439) instead of the above mentioned furnace.

⁵² According to Matisoff, the term for ‘‘volcano’’ is formed from ‘‘fire’’+‘‘mountain’’ also in other languages (2004: 352). Beside Chinese, he quotes Japanese and Icelandic compounds as further examples.

⁵³ For a discussion of the semantics of the genitive particle in the underlying structures of OT compounds, see Bialek, forthcoming, chapter *Compounding in Old Tibetan*.

⁵⁴ For the rules of truncation in OT, see Bialek, forthcoming, chapter *Compounding in Old Tibetan*.

To sum up, hypotheses two and three strongly suggest that the OT *mye ngam* was a non-native term. The above discussion has focused around possible Chinese prototypes of the compound. However, a faint indication exists that a Turkic term could be taken into account instead. To wit, neighbouring the Flaming Mountains to the east and east-southeast, the following area of land is found: “the Kum Tagh, or Sand Mountains, huge heaps of dark, heavy sand, which have been piled up by the fierce west and northwest winds of springs to a height of four, five, and even six hundred feet, with steep, unbroken slopes from top to bottom.” (Huntington 1907b: 308). The ‘Kum Tagh’ described by Huntington borders on the Turfan Depression in the east.⁵⁵ Worth noticing is the fact that the Kumtag Desert (in a broader sense) is referred to even today by its Turkic name, transcribed into Chinese as 库姆塔格沙漠 *kumutage shamo*. The word *kum-tagh* is a common noun with the literal meaning “sand-mountain” (cf. *bye ri*) attested in varying forms in many Turkic languages. It occurs as a toponym many times across Central Asia and taken alone is not of much value.⁵⁶ However it is conspicuous that no native Chinese term has been used in this part of Asia to name this kind of land formation. The only exception I could ascertain concerns the *Central Asia Atlas* by Sven Hedin where the Kumtagh Desert as delimited by Huntington is called Sha Shan.⁵⁷ It is obviously a transcription of the Chinese 沙山 *shashan*, lit. “sand mountain”.

We now recall that PT 1283b speaks of *mye ngam bye ri*, lit. “fire-ravine(s), sand-mountain(s)”. The compounds *mye ngam* and *bye ri* are not separated by any grammatical morpheme, so they must be understood as forming an appositional phrase. The co-occurrence of two rather uncommon lexemes in a text and the proximity in space of two areas – one of which (the Flaming Mountains) is eminently remarkable – suggests that this was exactly the context in which the Tibetan compounds were coined: to translate a text that narrated the geographical details of the respective regions. Thus, *mye ngam* and *bye ri* were invented as toponyms by a literal rendering of the original terms either

⁵⁵ 42°41'37.87"N 90°16'9.83"E. It appears that nowadays the name Kumtag Desert is most commonly applied to a larger area stretching between the eastern end of the Flaming Mountains, Dunhuang and the lake Lop-nor. As opposed to Huntington, some scholars use the name Kumtag Desert in a narrower sense to refer to the area beginning south of Lop-nor and stretching eastward towards Dunhuang. Stein's usage of the toponym Kum tagh in this region follows Huntington (see: <http://dsr.nii.ac.jp/digital-maps/stein/place-names/map/>; 18.02.2017).

⁵⁶ Another Kum tagh is marked on the Map No. 8 in Stein 1928, vol. 4.

⁵⁷ Map NK 46 accessed via Digital Silk Road: <http://dsr.nii.ac.jp/toyobunko/E-290.38-HE01-003/V-1/>; 19.02.2017. The Flaming Mountains are left unnamed in Hedin's *Atlas*. An unusual description of the Kumtagh Desert is quoted by Breidschneider from the Ming Geography: “*Han hai* (the characters mean northern sea) is the name applied to the land (desert) stretching from the city of *Liu ch'en* (i.e. Liucheng – JB) eastward. There is nothing but sand and stones. [...] *Han hai* is a foreign name used by the barbarian tribes to designate this desert.” (1888.2: 191–2). In a note elucidating the origins of the name *Han hai* Breidschneider writes: “*Han hai* is an ancient Chinese name to designate the Mongolian (i.e. Gobi – JB) desert, and especially, it seems, the elevated north-western part of it. [...] On modern Chinese maps the desert east of Hami bears the name of *Han hai*.” (1888.1: 15n9). It seems obvious now that the designation *Han hai* is an erroneous transposition when applied to the desert area east of Liucheng.

from Chinese or from a Turkic language.⁵⁸ From the word-formation of the Tibetan compounds it can be inferred that their foreign prototypes were originally meaningful common nouns, most likely with more than one referent (cf. *kum-tagh*).



Map based on satellite photo: 5/2013; Image © 2016 Digital Globe

⁵⁸ When discussing the source language it is worth recalling that *Mingshi* adds an assumably Iranian term, *mīhr* “sun” (Francke 1907: 35n3), to the native Chinese *huozhou* (see above, p. 46). Has Chinese historiographical tradition preserved traces of local Indo-European toponyms preceding the Turkic and Chinese ones? Be that as it may, the reference to an Iranian term suggests a long-standing local tradition of using metaphorical expressions based on the notion of fire to name the Flaming Mountains.

I was not able to trace a comparable toponym with a reference to “fire” or “flame” in any of the languages attested in documents from the 7th to the 11th century in the region around Turfan. It occurs that texts composed in Tocharian, Old Uyghur, Old Turkic, Sogdian, Middle Persian or Parthian, being most frequently concerned with religious matters, hardly ever contain any toponyms. I would like to thank Prof. Dr. Desmond Durkin-Meisterernst, Prof. Dr. Jens Peter Laut, Prof. Dr. Melanie Malzahn, and Dr. Jens Wilkens for offering valuable clues to the issue.

Since no such landforms exist in Tibet or on the Tibetan Plateau that could reasonably be called *bye ri*, i.e. “sand-mountains”, I assume that this term is also a loan translation. Bacot reads too much into Vaillant’s account when stating “Expression littérale, *bye-ri*, et (sic) employée par le Dr Louis Vaillant dans son récent *Rapport sur les travaux géographiques faits par la mission archéologique d’Asie Centrale (Mission Pelliot 1906–1909)*, p. 96, pour décrire et expliquer une formation ancienne de dunes, large de quinze kilomètres, dans la région de Chatcheou (= Dunhuang – JB).” (1957: 150n24). On pages 95–6, Vaillant presents a description of “montagnes de sable” (1955: 96) but without ever using the Tibetan term *bye ri*. It seems that his account concerns the Kumtag Desert (in the narrower sense) located to the west of Dunhuang, between Lop-nor and Dunhuang.

II.5 What seems to have happened after the coinage of the compound *mye ngam*, can be sketched in the following stages:

1. *mye ngam* = toponym ‘Flaming Mountains’
2. a common noun denoting a landform that is extremely strenuous for travellers and characterised by high temperatures = “inhospitable region, badlands, wilderness; desert”
3. the physical state of being in a desert-like condition, i.e. devoid of water, suffering (from the heat) and lost
4. a mental state = “affliction, misery”

The semantic development outlined above must not be understood as having proceeded linearly. I will comment on each stage below.

As I have argued previously, the OT term *mye ngam* has been coined as a toponym (= modern the Flaming Mountains) in a context of naming the very geographical area that was referred to in the source language (most probably a Turkic one) by means of a common noun, or at least a lexeme that was transparent regarding its meaning and word-formation. *mye ngam* might have been coined concurrently with *bye ri* since the terms in the source language referred to areas of land adjacent to each other (i.e., the Flaming Mountains and the Kumtagh Desert). I doubt whether the *Reports for the king of Hor* (PT 1283b: 533–642) was the original textual context in which *mye ngam* was used for the first time. Namely, we observe that all the sentences that contain the phrase *mye ngam bye ri* (*rgyud*) are immediately followed by some legendary stories. The person of Zha-ma-kha-gan, occurring in direct connection with (12) and (13), seems to function as a text-external reference point for the author(s) of the text and is not involved in the plot.⁵⁹ It can be reasonably assumed that the usage of *mye ngam bye ri* in legends was the first step for *mye ngam* and *bye ri* towards losing their toponymic character. PT 1283b perfectly attests to this phase in the semantic development of *mye ngam* immediately preceding stage 2: (a) it preserves its etymological form *mye ngam*, (b) it still co-occurs with *bye ri*, but (c) the whole phrase is taken out of its original geographical context and feeds legendary accounts.

At stage 2, *mye ngam* occurs completely detached from *bye ri* (16). Its semantic development towards “inhospitable region, badlands, wilderness; desert” was most probably triggered by formidable and fearsome descriptions of the landform it originally denoted. This agrees with the way the Flaming Mountains have been presented in travellers’ accounts and in literature generally. Accounts of the distinctive nature and features of the Flaming Mountains, already of ill fame, have been generalised and applied to all uninviting areas.⁶⁰ It is worth emphasising that not many Tibetans of yore had an opportunity to see

⁵⁹ Venturi proposes the year 744 as *terminus post quem* for the redaction of the original text on which PT 1283b is based (2008: 7) and the end of the 8th century for the particular copy at our disposal (*ibid.*, p. 8). It is left for future research to determine whether these dates (if correct) can be used in dating the proposed semantic change of *mye ngam*.

⁶⁰ Apparently the Chinese toponym *huoyanshan* 火焰山, i.e. the Flaming Mountains, has also acquired a figurative meaning, since MDBG also glosses it as “insurmountable obstacle” (<https://www.mdbg.net/chindict/chindict.php?p=worddict&wdrst=0&wdqb=%E7%81%AB%E7%84%B0%E5%B1%B1>; 26.02.2017).

the Flaming Mountains in person. On the other hand, many of Dunhuang's inhabitants or visitors certainly heard legends about 'flaming' mountains. The generalisation of the meaning – facilitated by the detachment of *mye ngam* from the toponym 'Flaming Mountains' – allowed for a subsequent change in the morphology. I assume that two factors contributed to the shift *mye ngam* > *mya ngam*: 1. vowel assimilation ($e > a / _σCa$)⁶¹; and 2. secondary influence from *mya ngan* due to negative connotations of both lexemes (see below). Despite the semantic and morphological changes *mye ngam* underwent, the original connotation with fire and fire-related phenomena seems to have been preserved even in *mya ngam*. I have noted the usage of *mya ngam* in the formation *mya ngam byed* which is attested in two meanings: "a hell" and "smoke" (see above), and in *mya ngam thang* that translates Skt. *adhvāgni* (*agni* = *mye*). Again, their common semantic denominator could have been FIRE: hell as a place with burning fire and smoke that accompanies fire. We recall that smoke was also regularly mentioned in connection with the Flaming Mountains.⁶²

Dissociated from the toponym 'Flaming Mountains' but retaining the association with the hardness of conditions prevailing there, the semantics of the compound *mye ngam* evolved further. From denoting a fearsome area (semantic field: LANDFORM) it shifted to physical conditions related to, or resulting from, staying in such an area (stage 3).⁶³ One can recall the meaning "the desert-like penance," i.e. abstinence from drinking" (MW:

⁶¹ Vowel assimilation in OT compounds has been documented in Bialek, forthcoming, chapter *Compounding in Old Tibetan*. By way of example one could quote: *lhe rneggs* < *lho rneggs*; *lha bal* < *lho bal*; *dog mon* < **dog mun*. No general patterns governing vowel assimilation in OT could be identified; both regressive and progressive assimilations are attested. However, if one of the syllables of a compound had the vowel *a*, there seems to have been a weak tendency for this vowel to dominate the assimilation process: eight out of twelve documented compounds conform to this pattern.

⁶² Interestingly, the Tocharian B term for "desert, waste", *pālkiye* (lit. "the burning place"), is assumed to be a derivative of the verbal root **pāl-* "burn (intr.); burn (tr.), torture" (Adams 2013: 404–5). A similar derivation could be suggested for Sogdian *δγšt-(h)/dxšt-(^l)* "plain, desert" (Gharib 1995: 140a, 147b), for which compare: *δγ-* "(to) burn" (ibid., p. 139b), *δγ'n* "ardent, fiery" (ibid., p. 139b), *δγs-* "(to) be burned, (to) get ripped" (ibid., p. 140a), *dxš* "(to) give pain, (to) hurt" (ibid., p. 147a).

⁶³ For a similar semantic development from LANDFORM to PHYSICAL CONDITION compare *yul ngan*:

'ol za' lcham bus bltas (r105) *shing gzigs na' / brag rgyal thang po'i / yul ngan sa dogs ste / 'ol bu dga' dang na / pha yul phrog snyam ste / yab yul phrog snyam ste /* (PT 1285)

When Lcham-bu, the lady from the 'Ol [clan], got an insight, [she] thought that the badlands of Thang-po, the ruler of Brag, were valleys [and that she] was deprived of [her] fatherland in 'Ol-bu-dga'-dang.

re shig (r147) *re shig na' / tha nga bal mo thang zhig / nags yul / deng ba' / yul ngan sa dog ste // pha la thugs chad yab la thugs chad de / bal dug glang mchin* (r148) *ma nyin sum byib du byib /* (PT 1285)

One day, one day, Tha-nga-bal-mo-thang, [thinking that] the badlands [of] Deng-ba, the land of Nags, were valleys [and] despairing over [her] father[land], kept secret three days long the poison of Bal, the ox-liver-poison.

yul ngan 'ong bar ston (PT 1045: VI-6, *apud* Bacot 1913: 447; ITJ 747: VII-7, *apud* Nishida 2014: 341)

[The divination] shows that a *yul ngan* will come.

In the first two passages *yul ngan* can only be read literally as denoting "a bad land; badlands", i.e. a land with unfavourable conditions for humans to live. In this meaning it also renders Skt. *kudeśa* in Nāgārjuna's *Prajñāsāta* (cf. Hahn 1990: 120). The third quotation attests to a figurative meaning that can be most generally rendered with "unfavourable (physical) conditions (for a human)". This semantic shift is also evidenced in lexicographical sources

790a) of Skt. *maru* – the main Sanskrit equivalent glossed in lexicographical sources for *mya ngam*. This semantic shift was accompanied by the change from *mye ngam* to *mye ngan* (folk etymology; cf. Eng. *badlands*) connoted with **bad**, *ngan*, (physical) conditions prevailing in the wilderness. It seems that the only OT evidence for this semantic development is (11) analysed in more detail in II.6 below.

Lastly, the state of physical exhaustion and hardship was extended to the sphere of psyche, yielding the next change of meaning: “affliction, misery”, i.e. a state of being mentally distressed (stage 4). It seems justified to assume that the shift from the semantic field PHYSICAL CONDITION towards MENTAL STATE – both with strong negative connotations – was facilitated by the usage of *mye/mya ngan* in contexts concerning death, funeral rituals and (foremost) perils of the afterlife. Compare hereto the examples (9) and (10). The special association of the compound with the sphere of death goes back to *mye/mya ngam* and its usage in the topography of the afterlife that is evidenced by the compounds *mya ngam byed* and *mya ngam thang*. Heat, flames of fire, exhaustion, suffering: all of these form a catalogue of characteristics of a hell in many cultures but also recur regularly in the descriptions of ... the Flaming Mountains. We find traces of the association of the term *mya ngan* with death even in later language: *mya ngan* “Unheil, Mißgeschick, Heimsuchung, Schicksalschlag, Trauer” (Corff.1: 6652)⁶⁴, Dzongkha “grief, distress, broken-heart, bereavement, misery, poignancy, slough, mourning, heartbreak” (DED), “mourning, suffering” (Gs: 822a), Dingri, Shigatse, Dartsedo, Kardze, Rkangtsha, Chabcha, Mdzorganrabar, Shando, Rmastod “mourning” (CDTD: 6386); *mya ngan can* “bereaved, mournful” (DED); *mya ngan byed* “durch Grabopfer Eltern und Großeltern Kindespflicht erzeugen” (Corff.1: 6674), “to lament, to wail” (J: 420b), “to grieve, to mourn” (Gs: 822a); *mya ngan zhu* “to grieve, to mourn” (Gs: 822a); *mya ngan sel* “to console mourners” (Gs: 822a); *mya ngan bsal* “the time of mourning is at an end” (J: 420b).

In the light of the above analysis, the Buddhist technical term *mye/mya ngan las 'das pa* could be rendered literally as “what has passed over mental state of distress”. By analogy with *'jigs pa las 'das pa* (see above), *mye/mya ngan* should be understood here as denoting a mental rather than a physical state. The etymology of Skt. *nirvāna* and the connotation of the term with fire suggest that the same connotation was still present in *mye/mya ngan* when *mye/mya ngan las 'das pa* was coined. One could even reasonably claim that rather than in Central Tibet the Tibetan term was first coined in Central Asian areas that were under Tibetan control, for instance, in Dunhuang. Moreover, because the idea of passing over a danger in the afterlife was unanimously connected to the image of crossing a ford or a mountain pass in OT imagery, it appears probable that *mye/mya ngan las 'das pa* was invented in circles dominated by non-native speakers of Tibetan.⁶⁵

where *yul ngan* is glossed as “tempest; public calamities, such as famine, murrain etc.” (J: 513a, s.v. *yul*). For a detailed discussion of *yul ngan* in the last example, see section II.6 below.

⁶⁴ The glosses quoted here from Corff are contained in the chapters *Mya ngan dang shid kyi skor dang po/ gnyis pa* “Trauer bei Todesfällen” (Corff.1, §§ 8.8 & 8.9).

⁶⁵ It seems likely that *mye ngan las 'das pa* was coined as a metaphoric expression for *nirvāna* understood as a state beyond or transcending (*las 'das*) *mye ngan*. This would suggest that *mye ngan* was a metaphor of

The last important issue that should be addressed when discussing the sound changes is the shift *mye* > *mya*. To wit, from what we know about the historical orthography of Tibetan languages, *ya btags* preceding a non-front vowel (e.g., *a*) has been retained in the script in CT; whereas the same letter written before front vowels (i.e., *e* & *i*) in OT documents for instance, has been abandoned and shows no reflexes in the majority of modern spoken varieties of Tibetan. The only exception concerns some of the Eastern Kham and Amdo Tibetan dialects (cf. the respective entries in the CDTD). Therefore, it is argued that the change *mye* > *mya* could originally have occurred only in a dialect in which the combination of the letters *my* was pronounced [*mj*] or rather, more correctly, [*mʲ*], disregarding the quality of the following vowel.⁶⁷

II.6 One passage that is particularly difficult to interpret was quoted above as (11). Because it constitutes a sentence of a divination, it is extremely concise and lacking any textual context. It seems that one should analyse it together with the clause that precedes it:

(22)

yul ngan 'ong bar ston (PT 1045: VI-6, *apud* Bacot 1913: 447; ITJ 747: VII-7, *apud* Nishida 2014: 341)

[The divination] shows that a *yul ngan* will come.

As I have argued above (see p. 54n63), *yul ngan* cannot be comprehended here literally as “a bad land; badlands”. Instead, two other interpretations, both figurative, have to be taken into account: 1. “unfavourable (physical/external) conditions (for a human)”⁶⁸; or 2. “calamities”. Similar ambiguity is encountered in (11). We can juxtapose the two clauses:

<i>yul ngan 'ong</i>	<i>mye ngan 'ong</i>
1. !“bad land comes”	“bad fire comes”
2. “unfavourable (atmospheric) conditions come”	“desert-like conditions occur”
3. “calamities occur”	“affliction occurs”

In PT 1045 and ITJ 747 the following semantic classes occur in the subject slot of *'ong*⁶⁹:

1. Animate being (*lha btsun, rkun po, zhang lon, pho nya, rings pa, gcan zan, myi rgod, bram ze, gnyen, phyag byed pa, bu yug, bud myed dkar*)

⁶⁷ On *ya btags* as representing “a feature of palatalization /j/ which indicates that the preceding consonant is palatalized” see Hill 2012: 393ff.

⁶⁸ In Mvy: 7186 *yul ngan* is provided with the synonym *rmus pa* and both render Skt. *durdina* “a rainy or cloudy day, bad weather; cloudy, rainy, dark” (MW: 485c).

⁶⁹ *Apud* Bacot 1913: 447 and Nishida 2014: 341.

mo, dre gdon, grog, khyim tshol, phu nu pho, bu tsha, bu sring dmag pa, bu, bu lon ded pa)

2. Atmospheric phenomenon (*kha char, rlung, char pa*)
3. Message/communication (*spyān 'dran, phrin byang, rgyal po'i bka', mchid, gtam*)
4. Feeling (*'jigs pa, 'tsher ba, bde ba, sngangs pa, 'phags par dga' ba, thams cad dga' ba*)
5. Abstract notion (*zhal lce rḡol ba, brel ba, dgra' bla, dpal, (')tshe ba, thab mo, gyod ka, nor, chad pa*)

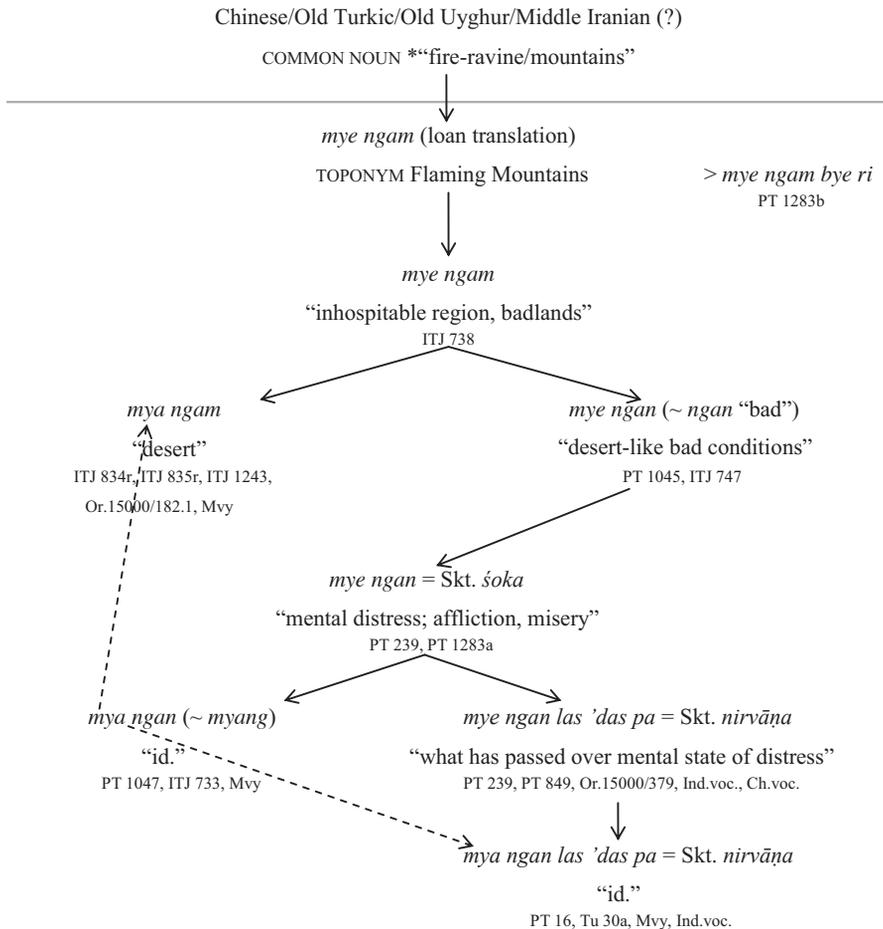
Apart from the first meaning of *yul ngan*, the remaining readings would match the semantic requirements of a subject of the verb *'ong*. There is however one important difference concerning the etymologies of readings 1 and 2/3 for *mye ngan*. As argued in this paper, the second and the third readings go back to the etymological form *mye ngam*, whereas “bad fire” would be a literal reading of the compound *mye ngan*⁷⁰ – historically a distinct formation. As has been demonstrated above (pp. 34–5), at no attested stage of the language does *m(y)e* “fire” seem to have acquired a figurative meaning related to mental states. Thus, we can reject the hypothesis that readings 2 and 3 of *mye ngan* evolved from reading 1, and that in all three cases *mye ngan* is one and the same lexeme. Moreover, the juxtaposition with *yul ngan* – for which the semantic development LANDFORM (~ Skt. *kudeśa*) towards PHYSICAL CONDITIONS prevailing on such an area (~ Skt. *durdina*) is evidenced by the Sanskrit equivalents – suggests that *mye ngan* in (11) is identical with *mye ngan*, as analysed in this paper. Because the form *mye/mya ngan* occurs only with meanings that belong to the semantic fields of PHYSICAL CONDITIONS and MENTAL STATES⁷⁰, and *yul ngan* is not known to have denoted any mental state, the only point of intersection between *yul ngan* and *mye ngan* in the respective text is PHYSICAL CONDITIONS. Accordingly, I propose translating (11) as “[The divination] shows that bad physical conditions will occur.”

III. The semantic development that has naturally emerged in Sanskrit within the word family of √*śuc* (“to burn” > “burning pain” > “pain” > “affliction”) was achieved in Tibetan by ‘manipulating’ the already existing compound *mye ngam*. Its connotation with conditions threatening one’s life made it applicable to descriptions of the perils one is presumably exposed to in the afterlife. Controlling the critical and most vulnerable moments in the cycle of life and death is a fundamental concern of every religion. As can be inferred from textual records (like PT 239 or PT 1042) Buddhist circles were particularly interested in gaining control over rites and beliefs related to death that were adhered to by non-Buddhists on the Tibetan Plateau. These texts attest to great efforts undertaken by Buddhists to replace old concepts with their own while preserving the

⁷⁰ For the meanings from the semantic field LANDFORM the form *mye/mya ngam* was reserved.

ancient terms or changing them slightly (folk etymology) so that they also better ‘embodied’ the new ideas on the surface.⁷¹

The following graph summarises the hypothesised development of the terms that were the subject of this paper⁷²:

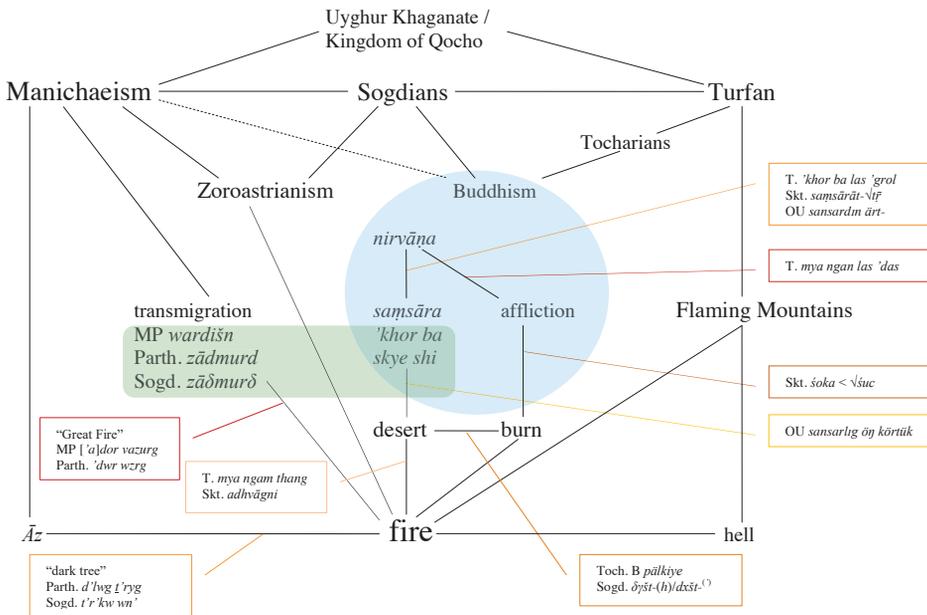


The graphics contains the terms that have been discussed in the paper, as well as their reconstructed meanings and the sources in which they are attested. Although it is self-evident that in none of the OT texts one term is encountered in two forms or with two distinct meanings (i.e. the terms have a complementary distribution in the corpus), far-fetched conclusions concerning the chronology of the texts should be avoided.

⁷¹ A few examples of such a re-interpretation are discussed in Bialek 2015.

⁷² The dotted arrows from *mya* in *mya ngan* to *mya* in *mya ngan las 'das pa* mark the possible secondary influence on the first syllable of the latter compounds.

The proposed semantic and morphological development is not intended as a means for determining the relative chronology of the texts that contain the respective terms.⁷³ First of all, one has to distinguish between the date of a document and the date of a particular manuscript. All the relevant documents are copies and not originals. As a matter of fact, they could be copies of copies of copies, etc. and we do not have any means to ascertain to what extent they are faithful copies.⁷⁴ Secondly, other aspects that could have influenced the actual form of a text should be taken into account as well. As an example one can mention the place where an OT text was compiled (unknown in most cases). Language changes do not occur simultaneously at all places. From this it inevitably follows that in some locations or in some circles meanings or forms might still be used that are obsolete or considered archaic in other places or circles. Notwithstanding the difficulties, I believe that tracing the history of single terms and mapping it on their distribution in OT texts could one day provide *supplementary* support for establishing the relative chronology of OT documents. But doing so on grounds of the reconstructed history of one single term seems inexpedient and certainly premature.



⁷³ The complicated issue of dating OT texts on grounds of their vocabulary has already been addressed by Stein (1983: 154 & fn.14, p. 164).

⁷⁴ One can once more recall the case of the canonical editions of *Śiṣyalekha* that may contain the correct *mya ngam nyid* and *mya ngam* side by side with the erroneous *mya ngan nyid* and *mya ngan*. *Mahāvīyutpatti* (known only from canonical editions), although compiled in 814 (cf. Uray 1989: 13), might likewise have ‘suffered’ from later redactions and editing processes that could have influenced the forms of the lexemes glossed therein. By way of example, it would be unacceptable to state that the change from *mye ngam* to *mya ngam* was completed by 814 because only the latter is glossed in Mvy as “maruḥ”.

As I have argued, the term *mye ngam* has been brought to life as a toponym corresponding to the modern ‘Flaming Mountains’. It seems to be beyond doubt that *mye ngam* was coined as a loan translation – it is of secondary importance whether this was as a toponym or as a common noun to name a (legendary?) region that was perceived as especially perilous.

In the hope that future research could reveal even more significant details related to the discussed issues, I present the salient keywords of the present paper and the assumed semantic and historical relationships between the notions denoted by them (see the graphics on p. 60)⁷⁵.

Abbreviations

’Phyong	’Phyong-rgyas inscription
ABL	ablative
ACIP	Asian Classics Input Project (see Internet sources)
AMK	Ken-zhan-tsung et al. (see References)
BCRD	The Buddhist Canons Research Database (see Internet sources)
Böht	Böhtlingk 1855–75 (see References)
CDTD	Bielmeier et al. (see References)
Ch.voc.	Chinese vocabulary
CT	Classical Tibetan
D	Das 2000 (see References)
DED	Dzongkha-English Dictionary by Dzongkha Commission Committee (see Internet sources)
DSBC	Digital Sanskrit Buddhist Canon (see Internet sources)
Edg	Edgerton 1953 (see References)
EI	Encyclopaedia Iranica (see Internet sources)
GC	Chos-kyi-grags-pa (see References)
GRETIL	Göttingen Register of Electronic Texts in Indian Languages (see Internet sources)
Gs	Goldstein 2001 (see References)
HCCA	<i>History of Civilizations of Central Asia</i> (see References)
IDP	International Dunhuang Project (see Internet sources)
Ind.voc.	Indian vocabulary
J	Jäschke 2003 (see References)
LCh	Lokesh Chandra, 1959–61 (see References)
LH	Later Han Chinese
MC	Middle Chinese
MDBG	Chinese-English Dictionary (see Internet sources)
MP	Middle Persian
Mvy	Sakaki 1965 (see References)
MW	Monier-Williams 2002 (see References)
ncA	non-controllable/absolute
OC	Old Chinese
OCM	Minimal Old Chinese
ONW	Old Northwest Chinese
OT	Old Tibetan
OTDO	Old Tibetan Documents Online (see Internet sources)
OU	Old Uyghur

⁷⁵ The font size depends on the amount of relationships of a particular term: the more relationships the larger the font size.

Parth.	Parthian
PTB	Proto-Tibeto-Burman
Sch	Schmidt 1941 (see References)
SARIT	Search and Retrieval of Indic Texts (see Internet sources)
Skar	Skar-cung inscription
Skt.	Sanskrit
Sogd.	Sogdian
STEDT	Sino-Tibetan Etymological Dictionary and Thesaurus (see Internet sources)
SWTF	<i>Sanskrit-Wörterbuch der buddhistischen Texte</i> (see References)
T.	Tibetan
TB	Tibeto-Burman
TBRC	Tibetan Buddhist Resource Centre (see Internet sources)
TLTD	Thomas 1935–55 (see References)
Toch.	Tocharian
trslr.	transliteration

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