

Amye Sgoldong: the hero of the rGyalrong Tibetans

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The rGyalrong Tibetans live at the far eastern border of the Tibetan cultural area in the west of Sichuan Province, in the People's Republic of China (hereafter PRC). They are part of the Tibetan nationality as defined by the present administration of the PRC.

Scholars have long thought that the rGyalrong speak an archaic dialect of Tibetan. Though the classification of rGyalrong is still an issue of debate especially among scholars in the PRC, it is becoming more generally accepted among linguists that rGyalrong is actually a distinct language belonging to the Qiangic branch of the Tibeto-Burman family.

It was also assumed that the rGyalrong Tibetans transmit their culture orally, that is, that they have no tradition of writing. However, recently a collection of texts, written before 1950, has come to light which shows that the rGyalrong did write. They used Tibetan script to write their own language, covering a wide range of subjects – anything from folk tales to religious instruction to wedding speeches. The texts are from a variety of places throughout the rGyalrong area and reflect dialectal differences.

A number of the texts is concerned with the person and cult of Amye Sgoldong, a legendary warrior hero rather similar to King Gesar. In a sample of one hundred texts, eleven are related to Amye Sgoldong, more than ten percent of the total. These texts represent a large variety of genres. There are general histories about Amye Sgoldong; there is a text giving instructions for the celebration of the Amye festival; there are speeches of praise and worship to be chanted or proclaimed at places of worship outside of the home or at the hearth, there is even an opera, complete with instructions for the actors and musicians.

Obviously, Amye Sgoldong took a large place in the consciousness of the rGyalrong Tibetans and in their cultural expressions. But who was he, and why was he so important to the rGyalrong? And are there, in what seems a uniquely rGyalrong tradition, any links with the larger Tibetan ethnicity?

In this paper I will give an overview of the story of Amye Sgoldong, based on the translation of one of the rGyalrong texts. The text provides insight in how the rGyalrong, while maintaining distinctive aspects of their culture, strengthen their identity as part of the Tibetan world through linking rGyalrong persons and events with traditional Tibetan history, religion and worldview.

I will also trace the relevance of Amye Sgoldong in present day life, based on interviews and personal impressions of the Amye Sgoldong festival as presently celebrated in the rGyalrong area.

Finally, I will discuss the possible sources (historical or otherwise) of the person of Amye Sgoldong, based on sources other than the translated text, and see if there is any supportive evidence for a link with the Gesar epic.