Few Westerners have been to Golok. Many have contributed to its bad reputation. Nomads of what today is Golok Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in China’s Qinghai Province, were, over decades of Western attempts to explore Tibet, portrayed as bandits and outlaws. Reading travelledogues of Western travellers, who describe the dangers of meeting with Golok brigands, it becomes clear that few have ever really encountered any Golok or their territories. One man did was Joseph F. Rock (1884-1962), a botanist working for Harvard’s Arnold Arboretum. Emilia Sulek dug into Rock’s diaries.

Fig. 1 (above) The once unoccupied Amnye valley is now home to the Snowland Nomad Girls’ school. Photograph courtesy of author.

Fig. 2 (below) Obo (collection of sticks and rocks where the clan burns its incense to the gods) at the foot of Amnye Machen mountain which Rock writes of in his diary. Photograph courtesy of the author.

JOSEPH F. ROCK IS A SCHOLAR remembered, principally, for his studies on the writing and belief systems of the Naxi people. His studies on the writing and belief systems of the Naxi people, one could use them instead of a map. Take, for example, Rock’s expedition to Golok. Some of these descriptions are so detailed that it’s almost as if it was taken in a photo atelier on some chic American or European boulevard. However, Rock wasn’t always as composed and self-contented as it might have seemed.

“A story related by William Simpson explains the reasons why their expedition to Amnye Machen was cut short. One day Rock was annoyed by the smoke from some nomads’ jumper offerings. He lost his temper and kicked the fire apart. The nomads were enraged, and only Simpson’s intervention saved Rock’s life, so the story goes.” Eventually Rock was forced to say farewell to his dream of approaching the mountain. His only compensation was that the mountain he travelled through had not been trod by other Westerners. Instead, in his writings he constantly claims to be the first in this terra incognita of Golok.

From being an invaluable anthropological source, the value of Rock’s diary lies also in its capturing of the poverty of the human condition during such arduous explorations. It’s clear from his writings that Rock found himself, at times, to be lost in the world he tried to research, another world, parallel to his own, but unknown.

“I feel that I am too much of a city man. I like city life and the comfort it gives. That is why I don’t like to be away from the city for long periods of time. I feel it is more restful and relaxing.”

References


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Notes
1. Except when otherwise indicated the numbers refer to pages of Walravens’ book.
2. The story according to Robert Carlson of Wheaton.

I owe my thanks to Ray Smith for providing me with it. Another version of the Rock-Simpson cooperation holds that Rock sent his interpreter back to Labrang after only five days of travelling together (Sutton 1974: 135).


ROCK RECORDS his conversations and observations, the region is not as empty as it was during Rock’s expedition. The view of the red bluff a little distance ahead. This promontory crowned by the Yonzhis’ encampment, a foreign traveller who described the dangers of meeting with Golok brigands, it becomes clear that few have ever really encountered any Golok or their territories. One man did was Joseph F. Rock (1884-1962), a botanist working for Harvard’s Arnold Arboretum. Emilia Sulek dug into Rock’s diaries.

It is exceedingly difficult to move about here as each tribe is at feud with the other, and one does not dare go into the territory of the other” (pp.102-103).

Even though Rock did not dwell long among the nomads of Golok, he is, a valuable source of information on them. Many of the names he mentions in the diary are appearing for the first and only time in Western literature. Also significant in that Rock recognises that the area is home to a number of tribes that don’t fall under the ‘Golok’ label for linguistic, historical and complex cultural reasons. These groups see themselves as distinct, only sharing the place they live with the Goloks. This was the case with the Yonzhi tribe, attacked by the Ma’s clannish incursions in the decades following Rock’s arrival. In one of the battles the Aba tribe, the tribe’s chief, was killed. ‘They acknowledge no authority, do not pay taxes and are absolutely a law unto themselves’ (p.110), Rock says. The Ma’s incursions were indeed about the Yonzhis refusal to pay taxes. Rock’s people passed through the valley where the tribe’s chief was encamped. A foreign traveller who searched for plants in the highlands is remembered by today’s Yonzhi chief. A man in his eighties, he was born around the year when Rock was trying to get to Amnye Machen.

A reader that knows Rock’s most famous book, The Amnye Machen Range and Adjacent Regions. A Monographic Study (1956), might argue that the information in Rock’s diary repeats itself on the pages of his Amnye Machen magnum opus. Why then should one bother to read these passages again? The diary formed the basis for Rock’s future writing – the Amnye Machen book, and popular articles for National Geographic Magazine (c.f. Rock 1930). Rock felt an urge to share his knowledge with the public, but the diary he wrote largely for himself. Rock’s diary is better written than the Amnye Machen book. It’s interesting to see how he evaluated his fieldnotes, censored himself and transformed his informal discourse with himself into a more formal one with the readers.

During these days in Tibet, Rock encountered all the problems that a scholar on a field trip can face. Many travellers to Tibet lacked good interpreters. Rock seemed to have worked with a good one, a missionary from Labrang, William E. Simpson. However, Rock complained:

“...I’m sorry to report that even little Choni situated on the edge of nowhere has been ordered by Lanzhou to hoist the Red Flag. (...) and so we are truly under a Red regime, but the prince has little love for the Reds as he have” (p.219).

In another letter he promises: ‘I can definitely say that if I ever get out alive, China will see me no more, or rather never again’ (p.176).

In fact, Rock stayed much longer. He shared the fears that many a fieldworker has on his way home:

‘...I dread the idea of the lonely life in an American city. I am afraid I shall be much more lonely in America than here in this lonely wilderness’ (p.219).

Rock’s diaries show more the more human face of a person that, for many, might have seemed slightly ‘inhuman’ given his famous preference for European food served on fine china with a linen table-cloth and napkins. Something which he only gave up under the most dire circumstances. He played arias of Enrico Caruso to the nomads he met on his way. ‘They screamed with laughter at the most pathetic passages’, Rock commented (p.36). He considered it a great sigh of relief when his hero’s Fitzgerald who dreamed of building an opera house in the city of Iquitos, Peru. Just like the protagonist in Herzog’s film, Rock dressed smartly, and liked to wear a shirt, a necktie and jacket to meet the local chieftains. How in a photo showing him with the prince of Choni he looks as fresh and pressed as if it was taken in a photo atelier on some chic American or European boulevard. However, Rock wasn’t always as composed and self-contented as it might have seemed.

“...I feel that I am too much of a city man. I like city life and the comfort it gives. That is why I don’t like to be away from the city for long periods of time. I feel it is more restful and relaxing.”

After his return from his trip to Amnye Machen, Rock sent his interpreter back to Labrang after only five days of travelling together (Sutton 1974: 135).