

# ***Bulletin of Tibetology***



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NAMGYAL INSTITUTE OF TIBETOLOGY  
GANGTOK, SIKKIM

The Bulletin of Tibetology seeks to serve the specialist as well as the general reader with an interest in the field of study. The motif portraying the Stupa on the mountains suggests the dimensions of the field.

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BULLETIN OF TIBETOLOGY

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**TIBETAN BIOGRAPHIES**

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## EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

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## THIS ISSUE

The theme for this issue of the *Bulletin of Tibetology* arrived quite naturally when each of the contributors suggested Tibetan biographical traditions as their foci. Despite such thematic coherence, their subjects prove to be quite distinct both by time and tradition, and the articles vary in their objectives as well.

Michael R. Sheehy focuses on a crucial period in the history of the Jonang lineage. These were the 23 years following the death of Tāranātha in 1635 when Jonang, already confronting complications in Tāranātha's succession, came under increasing pressure from the dGa' ldan pa who were aspiring to hegemony. To detail their tactics and the Jonang response, Sheehy presents numerous excerpts from two Jonangpa auto/biographies that he recently recovered. The autobiography of Tāranātha's consort, Phrin las dbang mo (Trinle Wangmo), recounts the master's last words as well as predictions of the challenges to come. The biographer of Tāranātha's successor, bLo gros rnam rgyal (Lodrö Namgyal), describes the young leader's impressions of a troubling audience with the Fifth Dalai Lama. It also preserves a series of visions that precipitated the Jonangpa departure from their mother monastery, rTag brtan gling in central Tibet, to establish a new haven in Amdo. The Jonang continues to flourish there to this day. As he includes excerpts from the Fifth Dalai Lama's biographies as well, Sheehy presents a more complete picture of this critical period of Tibetan history which contrasts the perspectives of the victors with those they suppressed.

The subject of Charles E. Manson's article, Karma Pakshi (1204/06-1283), is the second of the Karmapa hierarchs and thus the first to be recognized as a reincarnate successor in it. By exhaustively comparing his many complete biographies, Manson compiles a critical edition of the historical narrative for this seminal figure of the Karma bKa' rgyud school; he provides a thorough overview of the information available on the birth, education, ordination, training,

career, and death of Karmapa II Karma Pakshi. In addition to the article, two tables are included as appendixes. These list each of Karma Pakshi's pre-modern and modern biographies with the details of their origin and publication.

My article compares the earliest biographies of the first great treasure revealer, Nyang ral nyi ma 'od zer (Nyang rel Nyima özer, 1124-1192). A literary maverick, he developed many of the traditions that now define Nyingma. Although variances between the two biographies renders their historicity unverifiable, a presentation of their episodes reveals two common Buddhist narrative devices that, working in concert, legitimize their protagonist. The first relies on the infallible mechanism of karmic process. Meditative accomplishment and virtuous actions in past lives produce manifestations of enlightenment such as signs, dreams and visions, thereby confirming the protagonist's status as a buddha incarnate (Tib: *sPrul sku*, Skt: *nirmāṇakāya*). The second device utilizes the multivalent potency of Tantric symbols to imbue mundane events with profound significance. These devices may be recognized as nearly ubiquitous throughout the Tibetan tradition of religious biography. In depicting the life of Nyi ma 'od zer, they drive the narrative forward by foreshadowing the life that is to come.

As is often the case in presenting any academic publication, there is a tension between the stylistic standards of the field and accessibility for a broader population to whom our work, ideally, provides some contribution. In our field, among the more problematic is the use of Wylie transcription for Tibetan, which is standard for scholars of Tibetan but illegible to everyone else, including native Tibetan speakers. This is especially challenging for this issue since all of its elements (save one book review) focus almost exclusively on Tibetan materials. In attempting a compromise, Wylie is provided throughout but a phonetic rendering of all personal names, provided in parentheses, follows their first use. As the *Bulletin of Tibetology* is an academic publication, standards from the field of Tibetan studies are given primacy. However, it is the hope of the editors that this will not dissuade non-Wylie readers from the content of the issue, and that the phonetics will prove sufficient to progress through the articles. Names and terms commonly recognized through their phonetic equivalents (Dalai Lama instead of Ta la'i bla ma) remain in that form as well.

In conclusion, I wish to thank the Director of the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology, Tashi Densapa, for his invitation to conduct research at NIT in 2009, Drs. Anna Balikci-Denjongpa and Saul Mullard for facilitating my research during my time there (as well as their invitation



to edit this issue), and Tsultsem Gyatso Acharya for his consistent willingness and skill in deciphering the more challenging sections of Nyi ma 'od zer's biographies. I would also like to extend my thanks to the staff of NIT in general for their help. Last, I am especially grateful to Say-la Yeshe Dorje and his family, Mrs. Dorje, Pema Thobgyal, Pema Lhadon, and little Tenzin Baby-la, who were such kind hosts during my time in Gangtok.



THE JONANGPA AFTER TĀRANĀTHA:  
 AUTO/BIOGRAPHICAL WRITINGS ON THE TRANSMISSION OF  
 ESOTERIC BUDDHIST KNOWLEDGE IN SEVENTEENTH  
 CENTURY TIBET

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Though recent scholarship has shed light on the history of the early Jonangpa in Central Tibet during their formative period of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and it is well-known that the tradition thrived until its downfall in the mid-seventeenth century, little attention has yet been given to the survival of the Jonang transmissions in Tibet from rJe btsun Tāranātha (1575-1635) onwards.<sup>1</sup> In fact, until recently, the Jonangpa were thought by many to have vanished in the mid-seventeenth century as a consequence of their demise under the dGa' ldan Pho brang government headed by the Fifth Dalai Lama Ngag dbang bLo bzang rgya mtsho (Ngawang Lozang Gyamtso, 1617-1682). This is the narrative that has dominated publications about them, driven by both Tibetologists as well as by Tibetans who live outside the remote valleys of Amdo in far eastern Tibet where the Jonangpa have lived for centuries.

Passed orally through the generations as esoteric teachings (*lkog chos*) until the fourteenth century efflorescence of the Jonang tradition, there are two distinct streams of knowledge transmission that the Jonangpa identify with: 1) the sūtra *gZhan stong* (emptiness of other) transmissions of the Great Madhyamaka, and 2) the tantra *gZhan stong* transmissions associated with the Kālacakra-tantra. These two lines were transmitted simultaneously along parallel continuums from their Indian origins up to the Tibetan scholar Dol po pa Shes rab rgyal mtshan (Dolpopa Sherab Gyaltzen, 1292-1361). Synthesizing sūtra and tantra, Dolpopa brought these seemingly disparate systems of Indian Buddhist hermeneutical and exegetical thought together, intersecting the Kālacakra transmission lineage with the *gZhan stong* Great

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<sup>1</sup> I thank Gene Smith for his revealing conversations about Tāranātha and for reading a draft of this article, Cyrus Stearns for comparing translations on key passages, and Leonard van der Kuijp for his constructive feedback on an earlier draft of this paper presented at the American Academy of Religion in Montreal, 2009.

Madhyamaka.<sup>2</sup> These transmissions then continued in succession from Dolpopa and later generations up to the time of the famed Jonangpa scholar, rJe btsun Tāranātha.

In the year 1650, fifteen years after Tāranātha's passing in 1635, the Fifth Dalai Lama, backed by the Mongol army, forcefully prohibited and censored the Jonang study curriculum throughout the dBu and gTsang regions of Central and Western Tibet. Consequently, a dGe lugs college (*bshad grwa*) was instituted at Tāranātha's fortress monastery, rTag brtan dam chos gling. By 1658, rTag brtan gling was officially converted into a dGe lugs establishment, sequestering the Jonangpa. However, as we discover through tracing this history, the transmissions associated with the Jonang lineage continued on from the time of Tāranātha's main disciples beyond the political and military influence of the central dGe ldan pa government in Lha sa.<sup>3</sup>

Reconsidering popular narratives that have come to dominate the legacy of the Jonangpa, this paper is concerned with how the life of the Jonang tradition was sustained immediately after Tāranātha, and its censorship by the dGa' ldan pa. In particular, I am interested in discussing the period of twenty-three years from the death of Tāranātha in 1635 to the takeover of rTag brtan gling in 1658. In doing so, I will draw from unpublished Tibetan life writings that have only recently become available, rare manuscripts that I collected a few years ago while in Amdo. These are life accounts of two of Tāranātha's principle disciples: the autobiography of rJe btsun ma Kun dga' Phrin las dbang mo (Jetsunma Kunga Trinle Wangmo, c.1585-c.1668) who was a major figure in the transmission lineage of *gZhan stong* as well as Tāranātha's consort, and the biography of Ngag dbang bLo gros rnam rgyal (1618-1683) who was regarded as the rebirth of Tāranātha's mother, which was composed by his disciple Kun dga' 'phrin las (Kunga Trinle, 1657-1723). I then present excerpts derived from the autobiography of the Fifth Dalai Lama and the biography of the First Pañchen Lama bLo bzang chos kyi rgyal mtshan (Lozang Chökyi Gyaltsen, 1570-1662) in order to further contextualize some of the events that unfolded during this period.

Though an appraisal of the multiple social and political forces that led to the ultimate demise of the Jonangpa in dBu and gTsang during this timeframe is beyond the scope of this article, a reading of select passages from these auto/biographical sources brings attention to Jonangpa priorities and strategies for transmission. In fact, these life

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<sup>2</sup> On the divisions of *gZhan stong* Madhyamka, see Sheehy (2007), 57-65.

<sup>3</sup> On the history of the Jonangpa up to the present day, see Sheehy, 2009.

writings are among the very few literary accounts that we have from this critical period in Tibetan cultural history when the very survival of both Jonang monastic institutions and their lineage of esoteric knowledge were under threat.

*Phrin las dbang mo's Appeal*

According to the modern Jonang historian mKhan po bLo gros grags pa (Khenpo Lodrö Dragpa, 1920-1975), Tāranātha made several prophetic statements to his closest disciples about the future of his Jonang tradition and the volatile political climate that would transpire in Central Tibet after he died.<sup>4</sup> One of these statements is retold by the female adept rJe btsun ma Phrin las dbang mo. In her autobiographical writings, she reveals an intimate conversation that she had with Tāranātha during his final days about omens that he intuited. Phrin las dbang mo describes Tāranātha as being weary and remorseful at that time, then she recounts,

Once [Tāranātha] came here [to the Ri khrod chen mo at Jo mo nang] alone from rTag brtan gling [Monastery] and he told me, “Earlier a monk from ’Bras’ spungs came by. He was followed by one of his own dharma protectors. He pleaded me to please act towards the benefit of the dGe ldan pa teachings. With intense and fervent devotion from my heart, I accepted that this is the only way.” Then, as if to reiterate this, a day or so later, I received a letter of consultation from the officials at rTag brtan via my nephew. This is what it said: “Excluding the duration that the present precious embodiment is here, the master of this monastic seat must come down in the progeny of our own nephew.” In accord with both these earlier and later omens, the reality is that I cannot take rebirth in a place in order to protect the religion and governance of my family. However, its been conveyed how important it is for me to take rebirth in a place that will benefit the teachings of the ’Bras spungs pa for certain.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> See bLo grags (1992), 59.

<sup>5</sup> See Phrin las dbang mo, 21a, “yang rtag brtan nas ’dir phebs pa gcig la / khar sang ’bras spung kyi grwa pa de ’dra byung / kho rang tsho’i chos skyongs yang rgyab na sleb ’dug / dge ldan pa’i bstan pa la phan pa’i spyir yong dgos zer / snying nas mos gus gdung shugs che bas / lam tsam khas blang yod / khyad par de’i sang gnang (s) gcig / rtag brtan gyi las tshan rnams kyi gros byas pa’i yi ge gcig dbon po la brgyud nas / nged la sprad byung / de’i don la / da lta’i sku skyes rin po che rang ’dir yod ring ma gtogs / de’i (s) rteng la gdan sa’i bla ma ring ri’i [>rang re’i] dbon rgyud la ’dzag pa dgos zer nan chags ’dug / rten ’brel nga phyi ’di gnyis ltar na / (r) dus kyi chos srid skyong par [>sar] skye ba mi len ’brel chos nyid kho [21b] na yin pas / da ni nges par ’bras spungs pa’i bstan pa la phan pa’i sar skye ba len dgos par ’dug gsung / de dus bdag gi spyir sems can thams cad dang dgos su dgon pa ’di tsam gyi ’gangs che ba dang / nges ston [>don] gyi bstan pa la dgongs pa’i sku tshe brtan pa dang / slar sku skyes yang ’di rang gi bstan pa la phan pa

These earlier and later omens (*rten 'brel*) are (a) the monk from 'Bras spungs who was accompanied by a dGe lugs pa protector, and (b) the letter from his nephew stating that his own monasteries' administrators would not allow Tāranātha's progeny to hold the monastic seat at rTag brtan gling after he passed away. While the earlier encounter suggests both a level of direct interaction between the dGe ldan pa administration with Tāranātha as well as a possible clue about the significant role that protectors may have played in this redistribution of religious and political power, the later omen is a specific reference to the strategy of transmitting authority via Tāranātha's bloodline.

In the letter that Tāranātha received, the 'precious embodiment' or 'sku skyes Rin po che' is a reference to one of Tāranātha's close disciples Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho (Sangye Gyamtso, d. 1635), whom Tāranātha appointed as successor to his monastic seat at Rtag brtan gling shortly before his own death.<sup>6</sup> The nephew referred to in the letter is Tāranātha's nephew, Rwa'i dbon po Kun dga' bstan pa (Re Önpö Kunga Tenpa) who was appointed treasurer of rTag brtan gling by another one of Tāranātha's disciples, the ruler (*sde srid*) of gTsang at that time, Kar+ma Phun tshogs nam rgyal (Karma Puntsok Namgyal, 1597-1632).<sup>7</sup>

As a descendent from the twelfth century translator, Rwa Lo tsā ba rDo rje grags (Ra Lotsawa Dorje drak, 1016-1128), Tāranātha was a member of an elite Tibetan family with strong alliances in gTsang. However, despite the content of the letter that he received from his nephew that "the master of this monastic seat must come down in the progeny of our own nephew", the successor to the monastic seat of rTag brtan gling following Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho did not go to his scion. In her autobiography, Phrin las dbang mo responds,

At that point I exclaimed, "You must have compassion for us, consider all sentient beings in general and in particular what is a priority for this monastery [rTag brtan gling]. You must remain steadfast in this lifetime and for the intent of the teachings of definitive meaning [*gZhan stong*]. Then in the future you must take rebirth in order to solely benefit our own [Jonang] teachings!"<sup>8</sup>

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*gcig rang thugs rjes gzigs dgos zhush kyang bka' las.*" See also bLo gros grags pa (*Rje tā ra nā tha'i sku 'das*), 134-135.

<sup>6</sup> See bLo grags (1992), 59.

<sup>7</sup> See Phrin las dbang mo, 19b and bLo grags (1992), 59. On Kar+ma Phun tshogs nam rgyal, see Byams pa thub bstan, 350-353.

<sup>8</sup> See Phrin las dbang mo, 21b, "*de dus bdag gi spyir sems can thams cad dang dgos su dgon pa 'di tsam gyi 'gangs che ba dang / nges don gyi bstan pa la dgongs pa'i sku tshes brtan pa dang / slar sku skyes yang 'di rang gi bstan pa la phan pa gcig rang thugs rjes gzigs dgos zhush kyang bka' las.*"

Tāranātha replied to her,

Everything else aside, even within this entire upper and lower valley, each person has many different opinions. In fact, you are the only one whose mind is pure. Even so, there must be a single objective and a single aspiration in order for everything to be done in solidarity. If words remain merely praise, then nothing will be certain.

Now, I will be moved by the power of what has the most fervent devotion and what is in alignment with these omens. If you know how to change the direction of these omens, then it could be possible for me to benefit these [Jonang] teachings.<sup>9</sup>

According to Phrin las dbang mo's account, this was Tāranātha's final testimony to her about the future of his monastery, the Jonangpa, and his own projections concerning his rebirth. She understood that these concerns occupied his mind, and although her appeal to prioritize their holdings of rTag brtan gling, sustain the *gZhan stong* transmissions, and claim his rebirth were sentiments that she was adamant about, she was unable to persuade him. For it seems that during those dying days, Tāranātha was convinced that forces were set in motion in an irreversible direction.

Tāranātha passed away on March 28<sup>th</sup>, 1635.<sup>10</sup> His successor Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho then immediately took the throne at rTag brtan gling Monastery. However, Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho died unexpectedly not long after Tāranātha and another one of Tāranātha's disciples, Kun dga' Rin chen rgya mtsho (Kunga Rinchen Gyamtso) was appointed to the monastic seat. Rin chen rgya mtsho served as the throne-holder at rTag brtan gling for the next fifteen years. Recalling the uncertainty and fragmentation at that time, Phrin las dbang mo wrote,

Then, sKu skyes Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho Rin po che was appointed to hold the monastic seat at rTag brtan gling, and even though there were several competing agendas at that time, it was when he [Sangs rgya rgya mtsho] passed away that our chief feeling of uncertainty set in. Generally speaking, even though it happened that way, those who were extremely open-minded and those who fell in alignment with popular opinion did not share their intentions with those from the upper echelons.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> See Phrin las dbang mo, 21b, “*gzhan phar (b) gzhas phu mda' 'di kun rang na yang bsam blo mi gcig pa mang / khyod rang gcig bu sems dag pas de ltar yin kyang / thams cad gcig tu 'dril nas blo rtse gcig pa'i gsol ba 'debs pa gcig dgos te dga' kha tsam la ni nges pa med / da ni rten 'brel gang 'grigs dang gdung shugs gang che'i dbang du 'gro / rten 'brel bsgyur phyogs shes na da dung 'di 'i bstan pa la phan pa'ang srid gsung.*”

<sup>10</sup> The date given in both sources is, “*shing mo phag lo'i nag pa zla ba'i nyer brgyad.*” See Kun dga' 'phrin las, 7 and bLo grags (1992), 59.

<sup>11</sup> See Phrin las dbang mo, 20b.

She continued,

At this [rTag brtan gling] monastery, the damage had begun. It was said that we shared the same focus with the ruler (*sde srid*) of gTsang, despite the burden that was taken on at that time. Excluding that year [1635] when we were being led, permissions were not granted and we discussed whether to go or to stay. I certainly did not have any other sentiments.

Even for dharma teachings that following year, whatever permissions were necessarily requested, the response was that they were not granted. Accordingly, we wrote all kinds of petitions. Now, even though we took initiative in this way, we were simply not allowed a representative to make requests. I wondered how this could be advantageous and how we could remain there without doing anything whatsoever.<sup>12</sup>

These reflections raise critical questions about the local sources of authority and tensions at play in the Jo mo nang valley where Rtag brtan gling Monastery is situated just months after Tāranātha's and Sangs rgya rgya mtsho's deaths. From reading Phrin las dbang mo's autobiographical recount, it is evident that although the study curriculum continued at rTag brtan gling during this interlude, imposed restrictions and regulations were increasing. So much so that many, including Phrin las dbang mo her self, started to doubt whether it was worth living there.

#### *bLo gros rnam rgyal's Mission*

After Tāranātha passed away, many of his closest disciples including the young bLo gros rnam rgyal (Lodrö Namgyal), continued to receive teachings and empowerments from Rin chen rgya mtsho at rTag brtan gling.<sup>13</sup> bLo gros rnam rgyal later travelled to bKra shis lhun po in order to meet with the First Pañchen Lama from whom he received several teachings and tantric initiations.<sup>14</sup> According to his biography, after visiting the Pañchen Lama, bLo gros rnam rgyal travelled to Lhasa where he performed prostrations and made offerings to the Jo bo

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<sup>12</sup> See Phrin las dbang mo, 20b-21a and bLo grags (1992), 59.

<sup>13</sup> Here it mentions that he received some of these teachings with Kun dga' chos bsam who was a student of Rin chen rgya mtsho. Kun dga' 'phrin las, 7. In Kong sprul's *gsan yig*, see bKra shis chos 'phel, 1, 16.

<sup>14</sup> Kun dga' 'phrin las writes that he received the empowerments (*dbang*) and explanations (*bka'*) for Nog's threefold cycle (*nog skor gsum*) including the *gsang 'dus* and *dmag zor ma*, as well as a few other teachings. Kun dga' 'phrin las, 7.



Śākyamuni statue before he made his way to visit the Fifth Dalai Lama Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho.<sup>15</sup>

During their visit together, his biography recounts that bLo gros rnam rgyal extensively questioned the Dalai Lama about his views on the Kālacakra and *gZhan stong* Madhyamaka, which they discussed in detail.<sup>16</sup> After their conversation, he asked the Dalai Lama for a contribution towards the communal tea offerings at rTag brtan gling in order to increase his connection with the monastic community there. bLo gros rnam rgyal then gradually headed back to rTag brtan gling Monastery. At this point in the life story, the biographer Kun dga' 'phrin las interjects his own commentary, stating that even though this episode was ultimately detrimental, it was lived with an awareness on the part of bLo gros rnam rgyal that the Dalai Lama had an unspoken agenda, and that what was most important was for their meeting to be conducted without conflict. Kun dga' 'phrin las writes,

This [encounter] was not conducted in a way that was respectful. Even though it didn't take place without partiality nor did it happen with irreverence towards the dharma, still the intent of an altruistic mind was tinged by greed, obsession, and the sort. Nonetheless, it was simply conducted without conflict.<sup>17</sup>

bLo gro rnam rgyal's audience then initiates a series of private meetings between the Dalai Lama and Tāranātha's closest disciples during the course of the next fifteen years.

However, bLo gros rnam rgyal was not interested in negotiating with the Dalai Lama, but instead sought to move the Jonangpa beyond the sphere of the central dGa' ldan Pho brang government's political and military sphere of influence. In fact, it was not long after his conversation with the Dalai Lama in Lhasa that he began to seriously evaluate the long-term ramifications of staying at rTag brtan gling. Though he wrestled with these thoughts and weighed plausible alternative scenarios over the next few years, it was not until he received a series of visionary encounters that he took action. Describing one of these visions, Kun dga' 'phrin las writes in his biography,

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<sup>15</sup> Kun dga' 'phrin las does not indicate where they met, though it was most likely 'Bras spungs.

<sup>16</sup> See Kun dga' 'phrin las, 8.

<sup>17</sup> See Kun dga' 'phrin las, 8, “mi 'jom pa'i btsun de tshul chos ma lags sam / nye ring med pa ma byung nas / phan sems byed pa 'dod zhen yin / zhes sogs kyi don dang mi 'gal ba tsam byas.”

One instant he thought, “Since there are an unimaginable amount of hungry ghosts who cannot see the flow of this stream over the course of the next hundred years, I must do something about all this anguish.”

In the next moment, he saw the form of white Tārā and she said to him, “Son, it’s said that there is a monastery for you: As you go forward, there will be a mountain that is shaped like the body of the deity ’Dzam bha+la, and there will be a vivid and bright monastery there. Imagine how in the future you will go directly to this monastery that I’m pointing out, and that you will remain there in splendid ’Dzam thang without wavering.”<sup>18</sup>

Despite this encounter and his own escalating frustrations, bLo gros rnam rgyal remained in residence at Jonang where he undertook numerous retreats in the mKha’ spyod bde ldan meditation cave above the Great Stūpa as well as in other hermitages throughout the valley. It was during one of these retreat sessions that he had a similar experience, except this time it is described in his biography as a clear vision of Dol po pa who said to him, “Fortunate son, your karmic destiny lies in the eastern direction.”<sup>19</sup> However, bLo gros rnam rgyal interpreted this experience not as an omen or an actual message from a pure vision of Dolpopa, but rather as a hallucination that manifested due to the trickery of multiple inhibiting forces (*gdon bgegs*) within his own mind.

Sometime in late 1656 or early 1657, bLo gros rnam rgyal had a third vision.<sup>20</sup> This time the protector Trak+shad is said to have clearly appeared to him and told him that he must travel to the Khams region of eastern Tibet.<sup>21</sup> By May of 1657, he went to meet and consult with rJe btsun ma Phrin las dbang mo who was then living at the Ri khrod chen mo hermitage above the stūpa. As he discussed his travel plans with her, she contemplated whether to stay at Jonang or travel with him. After prostrating and making offerings at the Great Stūpa, bLo gros rnam rgyal departed. Curiously, his first stop was a return to the Pañchen Lama’s bKra shis lhun po Monastery. Once he then arrived in Lhasa, he went directly to ’Bras spungs where he encountered the mummified body of Rwa Lo tsā ba, Tāranātha’s ancestor. Kun dga’ ’phrin

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<sup>18</sup> See Kun dga’ ’phrin las, 8.

<sup>19</sup> See Kun dga’ ’phrin las, 10.

<sup>20</sup> It is not specified in his biography when exactly this took place, except to place it before 1657. Before the passage on the vision, the text reads, “*sa mo lug gi lo*,” but that would have been the year 1619, which would not have been possible. I am inclined to think this is a misprint and is supposed to read, “*shing lug*,” making it 1655. See Kun dga’ ’phrin las, 11.

<sup>21</sup> See Kun dga’ ’phrin las, 11.

las writes that being in the presence of this mummy was a good omen that pacified bLo gros rnam rgyal's obstacles and realigned him with his mission.<sup>22</sup>

After spending the summer in Lhasa, bLo gros rnam rgyal and his caravan trekked across the vast terrain of the eastern Tibetan highlands and arrived in the valley of 'Dzam thang during August of 1657.<sup>23</sup> That winter, in January of 1658, the same year that rTag brtan gling was officially re-instituted by the dGe ldan pa authorities, bLo gros rnam rgyal performed a long-life ceremony associated with Hayagriva and an empowerment initiation for the Kālacakra as an inauguration at the newly founded gTsang ba Monastery in 'Dzam thang. Named after the province in Central Tibet where the Jonang tradition flourished until the historic moment when this new monastery was established, gTsang ba continues to serve as the central monastic seat for the Jonangpa.

#### *'Jam dbyangs Sprul sku's Instigation*

Seven years after Tāranātha's death in 1635, in the midst of a war torn Central Tibet that was devastated by famine and smallpox, the Fifth Dalai Lama was enthroned by the Mongol military alliance under the leadership of Gushri Khan. Having conquered the Tsang rulers and dismantled their infrastructure of monastic patronage, both the Jonang and Bka' brgyud institutions were imperiled under dGa' ldan pa order. This shift in power is perhaps no better exemplified than with the execution of the ruler (*sde srid*) of gTsang, Kar+ma bsTan skyong dbang po (Karma Tenkyong Wangpo, 1606-1642), a major patron of the Jonangpa who did not accept the Fifth Dalai Lama as successor and protested his enthronement.<sup>24</sup>

In 1642, the same year that the Fifth Dalai Lama was appointed by the Mongol army and the ruler of gTsang was executed, the Mongolian

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<sup>22</sup> See Kun dga' 'phrin las, 12. Here, while he is in Lha sa, it states that he met with a Mongolian King at a place named, "*sha bu'i sar*" and that he encountered the "*bo rod sku*."

<sup>23</sup> It should be mentioned here that Ratnaśrī (1350-1435), a disciple of the early Jonang master Phyos las rnam rgyal (1306-1386) had established Chos rje Monastery in 'Dzam thang in the year 1425. Where bLo gros rnam rgyal founded gTsang ba monastery is adjacent to Chos rje. See Sheehy 2009, 227-228. 'Dzam thang was within Ming territory, and was thereby outside the political influence of the dGa' ldan Pho brang. See Sperling, 159-166.

<sup>24</sup> Kar+ma bstan skyong inherited the role of sde srid of gTsang in 1633, after his father who was the former sde srid of gTsang, Kar+ma Phun tshogs rnam rgyal, died. For a brief discussion on Kar+ma bstan skyong as patron, see Byams pa thub bstan, 353-355; Ruegg (1963), 82; Stearns (1999), 70; and Fendell (1997), 27-30.

child bLo bzang bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan (Lozang Tenpe Gyaltzen, 1635-1723) was claimed by the First Pañchen Lama, the Fifth Dalai Lama, and the State Oracle of Tibet to be the re-embodiment (*sprul sku*) of Tāranātha, the First Khal kha rJe btsun dam pa (Khalka Jetsun Dampa).<sup>25</sup> Interestingly enough, both Phrin las dbang mo's and bLo gros rnam rgyal's life writings recount hearing about this event as good news with the thought of extending prayers for the long lifeline of the boy.<sup>26</sup> However, as the Fifth Dalai Lama writes in his autobiography, it turns out that the fate of rTag brtan gling was to be determined by this young Khal kha.

According to his autobiography, the Fifth Dalai Lama writes that his censorship at rTag brtan gling was due to the imploring of the Khal kha who he refers to as 'Jam dbyangs sprul sku (Jamyang Tulku) throughout his autobiography and identifies as the son of the Mongol King Khal kha Thu shi ye thu (Khalka Tushi Yetu).<sup>27</sup> Commenting on his interaction with the First Khal kha rJe btsun dam pa about rTag brtan gling Monastery, and the resistance of the monks to converting rTag brtan gling into a dGe lugs establishment. The Dalai Lama writes,

'Jam dbyangs sprul sku implored me that it was imperative that a college (*bshad grwa*) at rTag brtan was established... In the year of the Iron Tiger (1650), the philosophical system was consequently converted. However, this was like coating brass with gold since the older [monks] did not change. Not only that, but even the newer [monks] reverted to the earlier [Jonang] teachings that were there. The local authorities expelled them and the older monks were banished to other satellite monasteries. In order to make rTag brtan genuinely dGe lugs, the place was purified, the [monastic] community

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<sup>25</sup> In his biography of the rJe btsun dam pa Khal kha, Ye shes thabs mkhas writes and Lokesh Chandra translates, "On being asked, Pañchen Lama Chos-kyi-rgyal-mtshan, the Fifth Dalai Lama, the State Oracle and others all acclaimed H.H. as the incarnation of rJe btsun Tāranātha." See Chandra, 15. I am working on a paper on this subject titled, "Identity Politics of Re-Embodiment: Lineage Formation in Tibetan and Mongolian Accounts of rJe btsun Tā ra nā tha's (1575-1635) Death and the Birth of Khal kha bLo bzang bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan (1635-1723)."

<sup>26</sup> Phrin las dbang mo, 30a and bLo gros rnam rgyal, 17.

<sup>27</sup> Ngag dbang bLo bzang rgya mtsho, 309. The Dalai Lama's autobiography here identifies 'Jam dbyangs sprul sku as, "khal kha thu she (i) ye thu rgyal po'i sras 'jam dbyangs sprul sku." He is identified in the biography of the First Pañchen Lama, "*'jam dbyangs sprul pa'i sku dpon slob dang thu sh'i thu yab sras.*" See Blo bzang ye shes, 250. Kun dga' 'phrin las also refers to him repeatedly as 'Jam dbyangs sprul sku throughout the biography of bLo gros rnam rgyal. See Kun dga' 'phrin las, 18-19. He was the son of the Mongol King Tu shi ye thu mGon po rdo rje and Queen mKha' 'gro rgya mtsho. His ordination name was Ye shes rdo rje or Jñānavajra. See also Stearns, 25.

was purified, and the name of the monastery was changed to dGa' ldan Phun tshogs gling.<sup>28</sup>

Phrin las dbang mo confirms this in her autobiography, writing that in August of 1650, the philosophical studies curriculum at rTag brtan gling Monastery was revised by the dGa' ldan pa authorities.<sup>29</sup>

A few weeks later, the First Pañchen Lama disembarked to rTag brtan gling Monastery and arrived on the third day of October. While at rTag brtan gling, the Pañchen Lama performed the four levels of Tantric empowerments (*dbang bzhi*) for Guhyasāmja, Cakrasaṃvara, and Yamāntaka along with various authorization rituals (*rjes gnang*) and reading transmissions (*lung*) for numerous dharma protectors. According to his biography, this occasion was marked by an extensive tea ceremony and the Pañchen Lama was greeted by eight hundred monks with traditional auspicious white scarves (*bkra shis kha btags*).<sup>30</sup> After visiting rTag brtan gling, the Pañchen Lama made his way up the Jo mo nang valley to the small nunnery on the mountainside adjacent to the Great Jonang Stūpa where the tea ceremonies resumed and he taught on guru yoga.<sup>31</sup> It is understood that these two events were intended to establish the community of Jonangpa practitioners as correct (*dag pa*) and reset them anew (*gsar*).<sup>32</sup>

However, as is evident in the Fifth Dalai Lama's account, this change was only superficial and the monks at rTag brtan gling and at the mountain hermitage at Jo mo nang continued to transmit the esoteric knowledge of *gZhan stong* and the religious practices of the

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<sup>28</sup> Ngag dbang bLo bzang rgya mtsho, 351. “*jam dbyangs sprul skus rtag brtan du bshad grwa 'dzugs dgos zhuis pa... ltar sde pa zhal bzugs skabs chos 'khor gling pa rnams lo gcig gnyis chos dbar [dpar?] la 'byon dgos tshul gnang 'dug pas gsang sgor phan khyad kyis ma 'gyangs par chos dpar 'degs su bcug / lcags stag grub mtha' bsgyur song ba ra gan gser gsol gyi nam pas rnying pa mi 'gyur bar ma zad gsar pa rnams kyang skyo ma snga btsan du 'gro yin yod 'dug gshis snye thang drung chen can btang ba'i grva rnying rnams dgon lag gzhan du dbyung / rtag brtan du dge lugs kha zhe mtshungs pa'i sa gtsang sde gtsang bzos / dgon pa'i ming dga' ldan phun tshogs gling du btags.*”

<sup>29</sup> See Phrin las dbang mo, 42b. Her phrase is “*grub mtha bsgyur.*”

<sup>30</sup> bLo bzang ye shes, 249. This passage reads, “*rim gyis rtag brtan du slebs te zla ba bcu pa'i tshe gsum nas bzung / gsang bde 'jigs gsum gyi dbang bzhi yongs su rdzogs pa dang / mgon po chos rgyal lha mo sogs kyi rjes gnang dang chos skyong mang po'i lung khor yug tu stsal / der mang ja kha shas dang / grva pa brgyad brgya tsam la bkra shis kha btags re.*”

<sup>31</sup> bLo bzang ye shes, 249. This passage reads, “*de nas jo mo nang du btsun ma rnams la yang bla ma'i nral 'byor gyi chos 'brel dang mang ja sman tse'i kha 'gyed bcas pa byas.*”

<sup>32</sup> bLo bzang ye shes, 249. This passage reads, “*de gnyis su ri khrod pa'i sde nam par dag pa gsar du btsugs.*”

Jonang tradition until the monastery was officially converted into a dGe lugs establishment, and its name was changed from rTag brtan Dam chos gling to dGa' ldan Phun tshogs gling in 1658.<sup>33</sup> This continuity of the particular scholastic and contemplative training that had defined the Jonangpa at rTag brtan gling and the hermitage at the stūpa, then became reason for the dGa' ldan pa authorities to isolate and target *gZhan stong* as radical. Reflecting on the curriculum at the former dGa' ldan Phun tshogs gling, and again making reference to 'Jam dbyangs sprul sku's influence, the Dalai Lama writes,

As is clear, not only is it enormously important for the [monastic] community, but the most worthwhile scholastic curriculum is extremely rare. According to the *sprul sku* of rTag brtan, there was a naïve conviction [at rTag brtan gling] that was reason for a partiality towards *gzhan stong*. By sewing tremendous blasphemy about the followers of the protector Nāgārjuna, many beings blinded themselves and were led to the lower realms where they are prevented from being saved.<sup>34</sup>

With the conversion of the Jonang scholastic curriculum, the printing presses were closed and Tāranātha's silver reliquary was decimated.<sup>35</sup>

Despite these drastic events during 1658, for at least the next decade, the channels of communication remained opened between the Fifth Dalai Lama and Tāranātha's closest living disciples. During January of 1664, Phrin las dbang mo visits the Fifth Dalai Lama in Lhasa and has a favorable exchange, receiving a ritual authorization for the practice of white Tārā and instructions on guru yoga. She also meets briefly sDe srid Sangs rgya rgya mtsho (Desi Sangye Gyatso, 1653-1705). Kun dga' phrin las writes that bLo gros nam rgyal traveled to Lhasa in the year 1668 in order to meet with the Fifth Dalai Lama,

Having arrived in Lhasa during November, he sincerely presented offerings and prostrated to the Jo bo Śākyamuni, and then he exuberantly gave offerings to the omniscient Fifth rGyal dbang [Dalai Lama]. While there, he carefully presented a gift.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Tā la'i bla ma, 521. It should be noted here that a theory about the Dalai Lama's mother being a consort of Tāranātha has also been suggested. See Smith (2001b), 120 and Karmay (2003), 67. Kong sprul gsan yig, 1, 13. It appears as though the passages on his mother in the autobiography were inserted after subsequent revisions were made.

<sup>34</sup> Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho, 2, 22. This passage reads, “*gong gsal gyi par tsho mkho che bar ma zad rin cen tog gi yig cha mams shin tu dkon pa dang rtag brtan sprul skus gzhan stong gi phyogs 'dzin rgyu'i rmongs zhen gyis mgon po klu sgrub rjes 'brang la skur ba chen po btab nas rang gi zhar la skye rgu mang po ngan song du 'khrid pa'i sgo 'gog pa la phan nam snyam.*”

<sup>35</sup> See Smith (2001a), 95.

<sup>36</sup> Kun dga' 'phrin las, 16.

These interactions raise questions regarding to what extent Tāranātha's disciples had interactions and diplomatic relations with the Pañchen and Dalai Lama's after his death, even after negotiations were futile.

*The Historicity of Transmission*

Tāranātha's autobiographical writing ends in the year 1631. Though he describes that summer at the Ri khrod chen mo of Jo mo nang as a period defined by an excellent configuration of the stars and planets (*gza' skar bzang*), the next four years would seemingly convince Tāranātha that political and historical forces did not favor the transmission of his Jonang tradition at rTag brtan gling and its affiliated sites in Central Tibet.<sup>37</sup> If we are to rely on Phrin las dbang mo's account as Tāranātha's final testament, it appears as though he did not only intuit the dGa' ldan pa would expropriate his monastery and intercede with the appointment of his scion, but that his very rebirth would be appropriated for the cause. As the Fifth Dalai Lama's writings tell us, the prompting by the teenage Khal kha rJe btsun dam pa sets the perfect irony for this history to be set in motion.

We find scattered throughout Tāranātha's autobiography clues about how this complex history was taking crescendo. Among the vexing issues that Tāranātha recorded during his lifetime, there are two recurring themes that deserve particular attention in thinking through the escalation of this narrative. One of these issues is his repeated reflections on dissension with the dGa' ldan pa and in particular the authorities at 'Bras spungs Monastery. He writes about the persecution of the dGe lugs pa and the internal conflicts within Se ra and 'Bras spungs starting around the year 1618, and then returns to this theme throughout his life writings. Another issue is the attention that he gives in his autobiography to the sMon 'gro family and his quarrels with them over property and the acquisition of land estates in gTsang. This is particularly of interest because the elusive figure known as sMon 'gro Pañ chen dBang rgyal rdo rje (Möndro Panchen Wangyal Dorje) would later serve as the Sanskrit tutor for the Fifth Dalai Lama and is thought to have fueled the young Dalai Lama's animosities towards Tāranātha.<sup>38</sup> Knowing that these rivals and tensions emerged over property ownership and political quarrels long before the appointment of the Fifth Dalai Lama, and that Tāranātha was well aware of the trajectory of these historical forces, we can begin to reconsider narratives popularized about the historicity of the Jonangpa.

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<sup>37</sup> Tā ra nā tha, 647.

Keeping in mind the audience of these autobiographies, we can not only imagine how these writings were intended to represent historical personalities, but how these accounts might have been scripted, edited, and rearranged in retrospect in order to tell their story. In the case of Phrin las dbang mo, however unlikely it is that her writings were tampered with, it remains possible that excerpts were rewritten in order to reflect the concerns of the dGa' ldan pho brang. Due to the systematic eradication of writings by Jonang authors at that time, the auto/biographical works of both Phrin las dbang mo and bLo gros nam rgyal have only come to surface in the form of hand-written manuscripts that were recopied over the centuries. However, it is important to keep in mind that these texts were discovered in a cache of works by Jonang authors at an active Jonang monastery. So I am confident that their original content was preserved and that these accounts are original. This same degree of legitimization cannot be held for the Fifth Dalai Lama's writings. In fact, we can safely say that his autobiography was rewritten and reprinted several times for the purposes of revisionist history.

Though these biographical recounts do not attempt to address many of the interpersonal and political issues involved in the suppression of the Jonangpa in seventeenth century Tibet, as we start to piece together this larger puzzle of Jonangpa religious history, we can begin to identify certain themes and tropes for their transmission as well as tensions at work within their transmitters. What these various auto/biographical excerpts then begin to suggest is how a compelling narrative about the transmission of Buddhist knowledge emerged. In reading through these selected writings, we read fragments about how the employment of certain strategies of transmission interacted in order to both intervene with the transmission of knowledge as well as contribute to the distribution of knowledge over vast distances and populations for the sake of a religious tradition's identity. These various strategies include foretelling by omens, recognizing nonhuman forces as interlocutors in historical time, maintaining power via bloodline relations, identity politics of rebirth, interpretations of visionary encounters, the scapegoat, risks of acting diplomatically, and the cultural sway of Tantric rituals in Tibet. As these themes, tropes, and tensions are further revealed through the life writings of the individuals who lived through the sustaining of their tradition and the transmission of its knowledge, and oftentimes acted as conduits for it, we discover how these authors contributed to both interruptions and continuities in their own lineages and storylines.



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INTRODUCTION  
TO THE LIFE OF KARMA PAKSHI (1204/6-1283)

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A human life, in chronological terms, is usually measured between birth and death. For a person who makes claims, or for whom claims are made, to have had experience of particular previous lives and to expect future human existences as a specific ecclesiastic figure, the rules of time and mortality could be said to be less rigid. Such a figure was Karma Pakshi (1204/6-1283), reputed to be the emanation of a renowned meditator, Dus gsum mkhyen pa (Dusum Khyenpa, 1110-1193).<sup>1</sup> To investigate the evidence for the activities of Karma Pakshi in one lifetime, it is proposed in this essay to pay particular attention to the more concrete aspects of his time alive in the human physical form that commonly was associated with the name 'Karma Pakshi', before presenting, analysing and assessing the spiritual aspects of his life. In short, in current terms, first focusing on 'the real'. Naturally, the significance of Karma Pakshi's life is more important for the processes he instigated or influenced and the ideas he communicated, but in order to understand better such significance, the physical aspects of his life will first be defined. Such focusing will have a tendency to put aside, for the time being, his visionary experiences. In relation to a thaumaturge renowned for his visions, premonitions and predictions, this is a large exclusion, but it is justifiable as an attempt to delineate the structure of his life in terms of time, place, and physical event before considering the intellectual and spiritual aspects of his life.

A second self-imposed limitation on this consideration of Karma Pakshi's life is to use only accounts which deal with his whole life, rather than include the mere mentions of him that occur in broader histories. This limitation groups together, quite naturally, accounts that have been written by authors of the bKa' brgyud sect because, Tibetan historiography being the somewhat sectarian literature that it is, authors

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<sup>1</sup> Karma Pakshi refers to himself as *dus gsum mkhyen pa'i rnam par 'phrul* ('emanation of Dus gsum mkhyen pa'), in Karma Pakshi, *The Autobiographical Writings of the Second Karma-pa Karma-pakshi*, and *Spyi lan riñ mo: a Defence of the Bka'-brgyud-pa Teachings Addressed to Gyag-sde Pañ-chen* (Gangtok: Gonpo Tseten, 1978), p.11:3. Hereafter abbreviated as Rang rnam or KPRN.

from other sects generally have not been interested in writing a full biography of a figurehead from a different sect.

Thirdly, a limitation of language is introduced: the accounts of Karma Pakshi being consulted here are all in Tibetan. Since 1976 several accounts of the Karmapa hierophants as a series have been published in English (and then been translated into various European languages), and thus each has included a short biographical sketch of Karma Pakshi.<sup>2</sup> I am not yet aware of any modern works originating in other European languages that are about the Karmapas' biographies. The four primary examples in English have derived their accounts from an amalgam of several of the Tibetan literary sources herein to be examined, and some of these amalgams have had added fanciful suggestions (the posited meeting of Marco Polo and Karma Pakshi, for example).<sup>3</sup> In other words, these Western accounts are not of much use for research, although they are interesting in themselves as part of the post-1959 cultural phenomenon of general Western interest in Tibetan Buddhist figures and their histories.

Having determined the criteria for the texts to be considered, the dates of creation of the extant Tibetan text accounts of Karma Pakshi's life range from his alleged autobiographical writings to a work recently published in the early twenty-first century (see Tables A and B). Karma Pakshi's autobiographical work and the biography attributed to his immediate successor in the Karmapa lineage, Rang byung rdo rje (Rangjung Dorje, 1284-1339), are the only two stand-alone accounts of Karma Pakshi's life, while the other accounts either form a part of a sequence of Karma pas or are part of more general histories. To be more specific for these sequential histories, in chronological order of authorship, Tshal pa Kun dga' rdo rje (Tselpa Kunga Dorje, 1304-1364) wrote the first account of Karma Pakshi that appears in a historical work. His almost-contemporary, mKha' spyod dbang po (Khachö

<sup>2</sup> For five English-language accounts of the Karmapas, see Table B: Douglas and White (1976); Karma Thinley (1980); Holmes (1995); Kagyu Thubten Chöling Publications Committee (1999), Martin (2003). Richardson's 1958 article on 'The Karma pa Sect' features Karma Pakshi, but not a biography of him. Richardson asserts the article's purpose is "...to examine some incidents in the relations of its [the Karma pa sect's] principal lamas, especially the Žva-nag-pa, with Mongolia and China" (p.142). v. H.E. Richardson, "The Karma-Pa Sect. A Historical Note. Part I", *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* nos.3/4 (Oct., 1958), pp.139-164 [plus 9 plates]. Part II: *JRAS* nos.1/2 (Apr., 1959), pp.1-18.

<sup>3</sup> The myth persists: see J.C. Harris, "Bernagchen Mahakala" in *Archives of General Psychiatry* vol.66.2 (Feb., 2009), pp.122-3. More accurately, Polo is estimated to have arrived in China to meet Qubilai in 1275 or 1276, yet Karma Pakshi probably left the Mongol court in 1264.

Wangpo, 1350-1405), presents Karma Pakshi's life amongst a series of individual accounts, with individual title pages. Nevertheless, the biographies are part of a series, which the author refers to in a colophon as *dkar rgyud* [sic] *rin po che'i rnam par thar pa rab gsal mchog tu grub pa rgyan gyi phreng ba*.<sup>4</sup> Later, gZhon nu dpal (Shönu Pel, 1392-1481), Tshe dbang rgyal (Tse Wangyal, ?1400-?1468) and dPa' bo gTsug lag 'phreng ba (Pawo Tsuglak Trengwa, 1504-1564/6) wrote more general histories on the development of Buddhist dharma in Tibet (*chos 'byung*), both of which feature a passage on Karma Pakshi's life. Later still, when perhaps the catenate presentation of lineage becomes a standard formula, Si tu Pañ chen (Situ Panchen, 1699/1700-1774), sMan sdong mtshams pa (Mandong Tshampa, ?-1942), Rin chen dpal bzang (Rinchen Pelzang, b.1924), 'Jam dbyangs tshul khriims (Jamyang Tsultrim, b.1942) and rDzog chen dPon slob Rin po che (Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche, b.1965) have serial histories of the Karmapas, in which Karma Pakshi is allocated a chapter or specific passage. It is noteworthy that Tibetan historians have not taken to writing biographies of the individual Karmapas, but instead have preferred to treat the lives of the Karmapas as part of a series.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps the cohesion of a continuous lineage has been perceived by the writers to be more important than the individual achievements. Such a perception might indicate a primary concern with progress as succession rather than as individual accomplishment—the succession is the accomplishment.

To proceed with a collation of the events of Karma Pakshi's life from these sources, the events themselves can be seen in terms of stages that are familiar for most monastic life-stories: birth, education, ordination, training, career, and death.

<sup>4</sup> mKha'-spyod dbang-po, "*Chos kyi rje dpal ldan karma pa chen po'i rnam par thar pa bsam yas lha'i rnga chen*", in *The Collected Writings (gsun 'bum) of the Second Žwadar Mkha'-spyod-dbañ-po* (Gangtok: Gonpo Tseten, 1978), vol. 2, pp.359-360. Hereafter abbreviated as *lHa'i rnga chen* or LNC. TBRC reference: W23928, vol.2. See E.G. Smith, *Among Tibetan Texts* (Boston: Wisdom, 2001), p.40, for a short discussion of the distinction between the usage of bKa' brgyud and bKar brgyud.

<sup>5</sup> The Tibetan Buddhist Research Center (TBRC) has 9 examples of *rnam thar* biographies of a solo Karma pa: W30541 vol.4 (Karma pa I, pp. 158-220; Karma pa II, pp. 256-287); W26749 (Karma pa VIII); W26570 (Karma pa X); W00EGS1016795 (Karma pa X); W23998 (Karma pa X); W1CZ1886 (Karma pa X); W27835 (Karma pa XII); W27921 (=W1KG3831, Karma pa XV).

*Birth and Family*

Several of the accounts of Karma Pakshi's life begin with tracing his previous lives, but without giving much more than an indication of his previous names and places of birth. However, keeping to the more concrete perspective of a life lived in one body, the earliest record of Karma Pakshi's birthplace in these accounts is given in his autobiography as *'bri klung dam pa chos kyi phyug pa'i yul*.<sup>6</sup> The *Deb ther dmar po rnams kyi dang po hu lan deb ther*, completed 63 years after Karma Pakshi's death, identifies the location as *'Bri chu dam pa chos phyug*.<sup>7</sup> All the subsequent accounts are in approximate agreement with this, except for the *Dam pa'i chos kyi byung ba'i legs bshad lho rong chos 'byung ngam rta tshag chos 'byung zhes rtsom pa'i yul ming du chags pa'i ngo mtshar zhing dkon pa'i dpe khyad par can*, which gives *'Bri klong gi stong byi le'i tsag to*.<sup>8</sup> Much later, the eighteenth-century *sGrub brgyud karma kam tshang brgyud pa rin po che'i rnam par thar pa rab 'byams nor bu zla ba chu shel gyi phreng ba* gives firstly *'Bri klung dam pa chos kyi phyug*, then a few lines later is more specific with *Sa stod dkyil le tsag to*, which may correspond to *lHo rong chos 'byung's sTong byi le'i tsag to*.<sup>9</sup> Although the exact location of either place name is not yet precisely determined in the maps and gazetteers consulted, their locations may become evident from local knowledge. The name *'Bri chu dam pa chos phyug* indicates Karma Pakshi's birthplace is close to the *'Bri chu* river, and according to the Tibetan Buddhist Resource Center (TBRC) *Sa stod dkyil le tsag to* is in the *sDe dge rdzong* county.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup> KPRN, p.89:5.

<sup>7</sup> Tshal pa Kun dga' rdo rje, ed. Dung dkar Blo bzang 'phrin las, *Deb ther dmar po rnams kyi dang po Hu lan deb ther* ([Beijing]: Mi rigs Dpe skrun khang, 1981), p.87. Hereafter abbreviated as *Deb ther dmar po* or DTMP.

<sup>8</sup> rTa tshag Tshe dbang rgyal, *Dam pa'i chos kyi byung ba'i legs bshad lho rong chos 'byung ngam rta tshag chos 'byung zhes rtsom pa'i yul ming du chags pa'i ngo mtshar zhing dkon pa'i dpe khyad par can* (Lhasa: Bod ljongs bod yig dpe rnying dpe skrun khang, 1994), p.235. Hereafter abbreviated as *lHo rong chos 'byung* or LRCB.

<sup>9</sup> Si tu Paṅ chen, "*sGrub brgyud karma kam tshang brgyud pa rin po che'i rnam par thar pa rab 'byams nor bu zla ba chu shel gyi phreng ba*", in *Collected Works of the Great Ta'i Si Tu Pa Kun Mkyen Chos kyi Byung Gnas Bstan Pa'i Nyin Byed* (Sansal, District Kangra, Himachel Pradesh: Palpung Sungrab Nyamso Khang, 1990), vol.11, pp.175-176. Hereafter abbreviated as *Zla ba chu shel* or ZBCS.

<sup>10</sup> *Sa stod dkyil le tsag to* is listed as TBRC place reference G949; *sDe dge rdzong* as TBRC G1539. The variations in the names of the place may be due to the authors' geographical perspectives: some were writing in Central Tibet, some were writing more locally to Karma Pakshi's birthplace.

The names of Karma Pakshi's parents are also fairly consistent across the sources, although his autobiography does not mention them, or his family, at all. The earliest detail is from *Deb ther dmar po*, which gives the father's name as 'Tshur tsha rGya dbang (Tsurtsa Gyawang) and the mother's name as Seng ge Sa lang skyid nyid (Senge Salang Kyinyi).<sup>11</sup> The *lHa'i rnga chen*, written approximately forty years after the *Deb ther dmar po*, gives the names rGya dbang 'Tshur tsha sBrang thar (Gyawang Tsurtsa Drangtar) and Seng za Mang kyī (Senge Mangi), which seems a notable variation. The later writers all follow the latter rGya dbang 'Tshur tsha order of names for the father. As for the added 'sBrang thar' epithet, Si tu Paṅ chen has 'sPrang thar', which may be an indicator of 'freedom from bondage', although this jars with the claimed nobility of the family (see below). Regarding the mother's name, by the time of dPa' bo gTsug lag 'phreng ba's writing (1645) she is named as Seng bza' Mang skyid (Sengza Mangi), which is how the later writers give her name (with the occasional fuller 'Seng ge').<sup>12</sup> As for siblings, the *lHa'i rnga chen* is the earliest account to indicate that Karma Pakshi was the youngest child, with which later writers agree.<sup>13</sup> All the accounts, excepting his autobiography, state that he was named Chos 'dzin (Chödzin) as a child.

Karma Pakshi's *Rang nam* or autobiography does not mention his family's origins in detail, merely using the description *btsad po dbu'i rigs*, thus intimating that he was of a nobility family in the dBu region.<sup>14</sup> The *Deb ther dmar po* more generally has *btsad po'i rigs*, 'nobility family'.<sup>15</sup> The *lHa'i rnga chen* gives *btsad po u ri rigs*, and *mKhas pa'i dga' ston* later has *btsad po u'i rigs*, so these two accounts may refer to a U place rather than dBu. Whether the names U and dBu refer to places or to family or clan names requires further research. The *Zla ba chu shel* has *btsad po dbu'i rigs*, adding the detail that the family were anciently related to a royal family disciple of Vimalamitra (*bi ma la mu tra*), Padmasambhava and Nam mkha'i snying po (Namkhai Nyingpo).<sup>16</sup> This royal disciple, sTag Nam mkha'i lha (Tak Namkhai Lha), was the grandson of Khri Srong lde'u btsan (Trisong Detsen,

<sup>11</sup> DTMP, p.87.

<sup>12</sup> Gnas-nang dPa'-bo Gtsug-lag 'phreng-ba, *Chos-'byung mkhas pa'i dga' ston* (Delhi: Delhi Karmapae Chodhey Gyalwae Sungrab Partun Khang, 1980), vol.2, p.26:6. Hereafter abbreviated as *mKhas pa'i dga' ston* or KPGT.

<sup>13</sup> LNC, 12:5. *lHo rong chos 'byung* has Karma Pakshi as the youngest of three brothers (LRCB, p.235).

<sup>14</sup> KPRN, p.89:5.

<sup>15</sup> DTMP, p.87.

<sup>16</sup> ZBCS, p.176:1.

eighth century CE), as he was the youngest of the three sons of Sad na mjing yon (Sena Jingyön). sTag Nam mkha'i lha developed expertise in Buddhist praxis, and it was his brother and three nephews who were 'sent' (*btang*) to the Mi sde area in Khams, yet they kept the name as *dBu*.<sup>17</sup> *Zla ba chu shel* adds that in the fifteenth or eleventh generation thereafter the family went to Sa stod dkyil le'i tsag to, where Karma Pakshi was born. Incidentally, sMan sdong Mtshams pa (Mendong Tsampa), writing a century after *Zla ba chu shel*, stated the gap was thirteen generations—perhaps merely splitting the difference between eleven and fifteen, rather than attempting accuracy.<sup>18</sup> It would appear that these two accounts have made estimates at the number of generations to cover the 350-400 years from sTag Nam mkha'i lha's time until Karma Pakshi's birth.

The year of Karma Pakshi's birth is not incontrovertible. The *Deb ther sngon po* links his birth date to the arrival of Kha che Paṅ chen in Tibet, a Wood Male Mouse year (1204).<sup>19</sup> dPa' bo gTsug lag 'phreng ba takes issue with this, and gives the date as Fire Male Tiger year, 1206, specifically adding that he considers the earlier date in the *Deb ther sngon po* to be incorrect, but not giving any reason for the alternative date. It is the 1206 date that has gained general acceptance within bKa' brgyud pa accounts.<sup>20</sup> Van der Kuijp has drawn attention to an early corroboration, written in 1455, of the 1204 date that agrees with the *Deb ther sngon po* (completed 1478) in linking the date of birth to the arrival of Śākyaśrībadhra (Kha che Paṅ chen) in Tibet.<sup>21</sup> Unfortunately, there is no internal evidence within Karma Pakshi's autobiography that would indicate his birth date or his age at a certain date.

### Education

To move on to Karma Pakshi's childhood, his autobiography simply states that he was able to read at the age of six, and by nine or ten he

<sup>17</sup> ZBCS, p.176:3.

<sup>18</sup> Karma-nges-don-bstan-rgyas, "Chos rje karma pa sku 'phreng rim byon gyi rnam thar mdor bsduḥ dpag bsam khri shing", in *The Collected Works of Sman-sdoñ Mtshams-pa Rin-po-che* (Bir, Himachel Pradesh: D. Tsondu Senghe, 1975-1976), vol.2, p.50:6. Hereafter abbreviated as *dPag bsam khri shing* or PSKS.

<sup>19</sup> 'Gos Lo tsā ba gZhon nu dpal, *The Blue Annals: completed in A.D. 1478* (New Delhi: International Academy of Indian Culture, 1974), p.422:5. Hereafter abbreviated as DTNP.

<sup>20</sup> However, the *lHo rong chos byung* curiously gives *lcags pho rta* year, i.e. 1210 (LRCB, p.235).

<sup>21</sup> L.W.J. van der Kuijp, "Barṣi and Barṣi-s in Tibetan Historical, Biographical and Lexicographical Texts", *Central Asiatic Journal* 39.2 (1995), pp.280-1.



was understanding Buddha's teachings after merely one reading. The subsequent accounts largely agree, in some instances raising the age range for his precocious scriptural understanding to ten or eleven. The autobiography claims that, by resting the mind naturally in its own nature, he had some facility in meditation at this young age, but the autobiography admits that he did not recognize, in Buddhist parlance, the nature of the mind, which later accounts also record. Thus it appears that Karma Pakshi at this age was able to calm the mind in meditation, yet had not achieved insight. This may have spurred him on to seek a teacher. In any event, the autobiography does not mention any reasons for his subsequent meeting with sPom brag pa (Pomdragpa, 1170-?1249), but according to the *Deb ther dmar po* Karma Pakshi was on his way to dBus, Central Tibet, when he met sPom brag pa at Sha bom en route.<sup>22</sup> Most of the accounts do not state Karma Pakshi's age at this first meeting, but the *lHo rong chos 'byung* does give his age as sixteen and the *mKhas pa'i dga' ston* has this meeting happening when the boy was eleven years old.<sup>23</sup> Taking into account the indefinite dates for his birth, the meeting probably happened between 1215 (calculation derived from KPGT) and 1226 (LRCB calculation).

The meeting with sPom brag pa was crucial to the genesis of the Karmapa lineage: it is a feature of the Karmapa reincarnate ecclesiastical succession tradition that after the death of one Karmapa the esoteric instructions and transmissions are passed on to the next Karmapa *in persona* by a 'lineage-holder', usually a favoured adept disciple of the previous Karmapa. Thus the lineage goes on, from Karmapa to 'regent' and on to next Karmapa child, ensuring a degree of continuity of transmission. In this case, the first instance of Karmapa transmission, the transmission line was less direct than it later became because sPom brag pa was a disciple of 'Gro mgon ras chen (1148-1218), who in turn was a disciple of Dus gsum mkhyen pa (1110-1193), known as 'Karmapa' due to his founding of the Karma monastery in Khams in 1147. Thus there was a sequence of two 'regents'. Additionally, Dus gsum mkhyen pa died in 1193 and Karma Pakshi was born eleven or thirteen years later, so this period between prior death to subsequent incarnation is the longest in the 800 years of

<sup>22</sup> Meeting place name given in Karma pa Rang byung rdo rje, " 'Gro mgon ras pa chen po'i rnam par thar pa'o", in *Karma pa Rang byung rdo rje'i gsung 'bum* (Zi Ling: mTshur phu mkhan po lo yag bkra shis, 2006), vol.4 (*Nga*), p.249:6. TBRC: W30541, vol. 4.

<sup>23</sup> LRCB, p.235; KPGT, p.26:6.

the Karmapa lineage.<sup>24</sup> In the thirteenth century, the reincarnation series as an institutional system was not fully established, but was in the process of developing. A significant stage in this early development are the several visions sPom brag pa experienced of Dus gsum mkhyen pa and the association of these visions with Karma Pakshi. In his *Rang nam*, Karma Pakshi states that sPom brag pa remarks "*khyod las 'phro yod pa gcig e ma yin*" ("You are someone with good karmic propensity, aren't you?").<sup>25</sup> This remark may be the beginning of the association of the name Karmapa with the notion of each holder of the title being a 'man of karma', so there may be two possible sources for the title: the man from Karma or the man of karma.<sup>26</sup>

After the initial meeting, sPom brag pa proceeded to instruct Karma Pakshi. The latter's autobiography states that he received tuition in particular on the poetic meditation instructions of Saraha (eighth century CE) and 'recognizing the co-nascent great seal' meditation system of Dwags po lHa rje or sGam po pa (Dwagpo Lhaje, Gampopa, 1079-1153).<sup>27</sup> Having achieved some expertise in this meditation, Karma Pakshi states that he consulted his mentor sPom brag pa, who replied that such practice was adequate for the likes of themselves, but that Karma Pakshi would need to develop skills in the *rlung sems* ('breath and mind') instructions, passed down in the bKa' brgyud tradition from at least the time of Nāropā (956-1041), in order for Karma Pakshi to train future disciples. The later accounts do not emphasise the nature of the transmission adopted by sPom brag pa, indeed it is only the nineteenth-century *dPag bsam khri shing* account that follows the autobiography in mentioning the Saraha and Dwags po lHa rje connection for this stage of transmission.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>24</sup> In all subsequent intervals between death of the previous Karmapa and birth of the next one, the gap has never been more than four years. See table of dates in N. Douglas and M. White, *Karmapa: the Black Hat Lama of Tibet* (London: Luzac, 1976), p.29.

<sup>25</sup> KPRN, p.89:7. With thanks to Tsering Gonkatsang for pointing out the East Tibet idiosyncracies of the phrase *e ma yin*. Later accounts have *las can* rather than *las 'phro* - v. LNC, p.13:4; DTNP, p.423:1; KPGT, p.27:2; ZBCS, p.177:1; PSKS, p.52:4.

<sup>26</sup> Further fuller discussion of the derivation of the title Karma pa will be forthcoming in my thesis on Karma Pakshi; likewise with the name Karma Pakshi.

<sup>27</sup> *bram ze chen po sa ra ha'i mdo ha'i dgongs pa dang dags po lha rje'i phyag rgya chen po lhan cig skyes pa ngo sprod*, KPRN, p.90. Here, 'poetic meditation instructions' refers to Karma Pakshi's use of cod-Sanskrit *mdo ha* for *do hā*.

<sup>28</sup> PSKS, p.53:4.

*Training*

All the accounts do concur on the next major stage in Karma Pakshi's life, his ordination at Ka' thog monastery, where he received the *so so thar pa* (Prātimokṣa) vows from Byams pa 'bum (Jampa Bum), sPom brag pa and sPyan nga Mang phu ba (Jang nga Mangpuwa). At ordination the young man formerly known as Chos 'dzin was given the name Chos kyi bla ma (Chökyi Lama). It is perhaps curious that Karma Pakshi continued his studies at Ka' thog, a rNying ma monastery, but the choice may have had elements of convenience and practicality because mTshur phu was in Central Tibet and the bKa' brgyud monastery (founded by Dus gsum mkhyen pa in 1189) had deteriorated—so much so that when Karma Pakshi eventually arrived at mTshur phu as a middle-aged man he spent time repairing the ruins (*zhig mdzod mdzad*).<sup>29</sup> It would appear that in the early days of lineage succession the institutional stability of mTshur phu monastery had not been strong enough to endure the absence of a charismatic leader.

After ordination, according to the *mKhas pa'i dga' ston*, Karma Pakshi spent time focusing on several of the esoteric practices of Nāropā, namely the heat (*gtum mo*), illusory body (*sgyu lus*) and luminosity (*'od gsal*) practices.<sup>30</sup> He seems to have pursued these practices peripatetically, the accounts variously giving his itinerary in travelling to dGun rgang chen, Ser ko go tshang can, Go tshang brag, Sil ko dgon, sPom brag, sMar khams, sPo 'Bar, Kam po gnas nang, mTsho rong, 'Char slong, rDzi mgo, Slong mdo and then sPung ri for an extended retreat. The first five places are around the sDe dge area (Kaḥ thog monastery is 50 km south-east of sDe dge). According to *dPag bsam khri shing*, Karma Pakshi spent five years at Go tshang brag, but 'five months' is given in *Zla ba chu shel*.<sup>31</sup> The latter text indicates that when Mongols (*hor*) and 'infidels' (*mi log*) harmed the area, sPom brag pa and his disciple moved south to sMar khams (200 km south of sDe dge).<sup>32</sup> The autobiography's reporting of sPom brag pa's death at sMar khams implies that Karma Pakshi was present at the death.<sup>33</sup> Subsequently Karma Pakshi moved on to sPo 'bar, Kam po gnas nang, mTsho rong and then eventually to sPung ri for the important meditation retreat.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>29</sup> KPGT, p.31.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p.27:3.

<sup>31</sup> PSKS, p.56:6 and ZBCS, p.179:7.

<sup>32</sup> ZBCS, p.180:2.

<sup>33</sup> KPRN, p.93:1-4.

<sup>34</sup> ZBCS, p.180-3.

The autobiography remarks on sPom brag pa's death make the death date Earth Bird year (*sa bya*, 1249) given in the eighteenth-century *bsTan rtsis re mig bkod pa* chronologically unfeasible.<sup>35</sup> The latter year date has also been given by several subsequent Tibetan scholars (Sum pa mKhan po (Sumpa Khenpo), Ko zhul Grags pa 'byung gnas (Koshul Dragpa Jungne) and rGyal ba Blo bzang mkhas grub (Gyalwa Lozang Khedrub), Dung dkar Blo bzang 'phrin las (Dungkar Lozang Trinle)).<sup>36</sup> If sPom brag pa died before Karma Pakshi stayed at sPungs ri, then there is, at minimum, a period of eleven years at sPungs ri and six years at mTshur phu to account for before Karma Pakshi travels to China and Mongolia in 1255, so 1249 is not possible. Perhaps an earlier *bya* year (*me bya*, 1237) is possible for sPom brag pa's death, although factoring in a year's stay at Karma dGon and an extensive tour of Central Tibet en route to mTshur phu would make the timeline tight, and 1237 was before the Mongol invasion of 1240. Epstein has suggested, in reference to the *dPag bsam khri shing* account mentioning sPom brag pa's death at around the time of the Mongol attack, that the Mongol incursion relates to Chinggis Qagan's 1227 (fire female pig year) punitive expedition against the Xi Xia kingdom.<sup>37</sup> Such an early date would mean Karma Pakshi went south when he was 23 or 21, and that sPom brag pa died at about age 57. However, this would rather elongate the period between sPom brag pa's death and Karma Pakshi's travel to Mongolia. A death date for sPom brag pa of around 1227-1230 would not contradict internal evidence of a timeline within Karmapa Rang byung rdo rje's biography of sPom brag pa, written about a century after this putative date, but unfortunately Karma pa's biography does not mention precisely a year for the death, despite stating that it

<sup>35</sup> Jam dbyangs bzhad pa rdo rje, "bsTan rtsis re mig bkod pa", in *Kun mkhyen 'jam dbyangs bzhad pa rdo rje'i gsung 'bum ka pa'i dkar chag* (South India: Gedan sungrab minyam gyunphel, 1995), vol.1, p.97.

<sup>36</sup> Sum pa mKhan po Ye shes dpal 'byor, "Phags yul rgya nag chen po bod dang sog yul du dam pa'i chos byung dpag bsam ljon bzang", in *Sum pa mkhan po ye shes dpal 'byor gyi gsung 'bum* (xylograph scan, TBRC: W29227, vol. 1), p.555; Ko zhul Grags pa 'byung gnas & rGyal ba Blo bzang mkhas grub, *Gangs can mkhas grub rim byon ming mdzod* (Lanzhou: Kan su'u mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 1992), p.1021; Dung dkar Blo bzang 'phrin las, *Mkhas dbang Dung dkar Blo bzang 'phrin las mchog gis mdzad pa'i bod rig pa'i tshig mdzod chen mo shes bya rab gsal* (Beijing: Krung go'i bod rig pa'i dpe skrun khang, 2000), p.2288.

<sup>37</sup> L. Epstein, *The Biography of the Second Rgyal-dbang Karma-pa, Karma Barsi: Translation and Annotation*. M.A. thesis. University of Washington, Seattle, 1968, p.63, n.35.

happened during the annual Vaiśākha period.<sup>38</sup> Better evidence for the date of the demise of Karma Pakshi's teacher and transmission-master has yet to be found.

After sPom brag pa's death, Karma Pakshi then settled at sPung Ri, near the sacred mountain Kha ba dkar po, and meditated there for eleven years with a focus on the rGyal ba rgya mtsho (Gyelwa Gyamtso) praxis, yet experiencing a variety of deity visions. At sPungs ri he apparently attracted 500 disciples around him, which indicates that his career as a teacher had begun to develop.

### *Career*

In addition to attracting disciples, it seems that after his eleven-year sojourn in retreat at sPung Ri, Karma Pakshi started to take responsibility for several monasteries developed by Dus gsum mkhyen pa. Firstly, he commissioned a Thugs rje chen po (Mahākaruṇa) statue to be erected at Kam po gnas nang monastery (founded 1164 by Dus gsum mkhyen pa), and then he proceeded north to Karma dgon monastery (founded 1184 by Dus gsum mkhyen pa), where he stayed a year and commissioned a statue of Byams pa (Maitreya). After a vision of dPal ldan lha mo (Palden Lhamo) had exhorted him to proceed to dBus, Karma Pakshi went west to mTshur phu (developed in 1189 by Dus gsum mkhyen pa until his death there in 1193). The *lHo rong chos 'byung* claims that en route to mTshur phu, at the 'Bri khung monastery, Chos kyi bla ma was assigned the name Karma Pakshi.<sup>39</sup> The other accounts do not include this, and it does seem peculiar, as the '*pakshi*' term is considered to be a Mongolian loan-term, but also with Uyghur and Chinese connections.<sup>40</sup> Taking into consideration that Mongol forces had invaded Tibet in 1240, and had failed to sack 'Bri khung monastery, one doubts that the monk ordained as Chos kyi bla ma was

<sup>38</sup> Karma pa Rang byung rdo rje, "*Rin po che pong rag (sic) pa'i rnam par thar pa'o*", in *Karma pa Rang byung rdo rje'i gsung 'bum* (Zi Ling: mTshur phu mkhan po lo yag bkra shis, 2006), vol.4 (*Nga*), p.254:5. TBRC: W30541, vol4.

<sup>39</sup> LRCB, p.236.

<sup>40</sup> v. L.W.J. van der Kuijp, "Baṛši and Baṛši-s in Tibetan Historical, Biographical and Lexicographical Texts" *Central Asiatic Journal*, 39.2 (1995), p.296. Van der Kuijp shows, pp.276-7, that the term *pakshi* and its variants was in Tibetan usage before the Mongol invasion of Central Tibet in 1240, albeit sparingly. It is noteworthy that the six times that Karma Pakshi's autobiography gives his name as *pag shi* (not counting the usage in the titles of the sections) are all in passages describing events at Möngke's court (KPRN, pp.16 (twice), 20, 102, 104 (twice)), i.e. approximately eight years later than Karma Pakshi's first visit to 'Bri khung monastery. Further discussion of the origin of the 'title' Pakshi will appear in my thesis on Karma Pakshi.

named Karma Pakshi by fellow Tibetans in an area that had recently suffered Mongolian invasion.

Proceeding to mTshur phu monastery, Karma Pakshi records briefly that he was there six years, repairing the monastery and attending to the spiritual welfare (*smin cing grol ba*) of his followers.<sup>41</sup> His stay in the area included two tours of the Central Tibet region.<sup>42</sup> The autobiography gives numerous instances of Karma Pakshi's visions while staying at mTshur phu, and also while touring the region. His own account shows little interest in the people met or details of the monastery development—it is more a listing of visionary experiences and the names of the places at which they occurred (as many as 30 visions recorded for this six-year period). His successor, Karmapa Rang byung rdo rje, likewise focuses on recording the visions and where they occurred, but also adds to almost every instance a comment on the vision's symbolic significance (*brdar*). Thus, for example, a vision of Saraha is a sign of achieving *siddhi*;<sup>43</sup> of Slob dpon Pad ma (Loppön Pema, Padmasambhava), a sign of subduing illusory existence;<sup>44</sup> of several Buddhas, a sign of powerful activity,<sup>45</sup> and so on. Karmapa III's *Bla ma rin po che'i rnam par thar pa* indicates, by use of the honorific verb, that it is Karma Pakshi who himself stated (*gsungs*) these significances, but the autobiography itself does not indulge in such elucidations. Two subsequent accounts, *lHa'i rnga chen* and *Zla ba chu shel*, are the only two to repeat many of these correlations between a vision and its significance, probably indicating these two accounts' reliance on the *Bla ma rin po che'i rnam par thar pa* for the vision records. Further investigation of the visions, and their possible patterns and correlations, will be elaborated in a later study of the visions. The accounts under consideration here have amongst them more than thirty different occurrences of visions during the mTshur phu and Central Tibet episodes.

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<sup>41</sup> KPRN, p.98:5.

<sup>42</sup> According to *lHa'i rnga chen* (pp.69-72) and *Zla ba chu shel gyi phreng ba* (pp.193-7), Karma Pakshi travelled through the area south of Lhasa, visiting Tsa ri, gYag sde, Yar chab gtsang po, mGur mo, Bye gling, dBu ri. He returned to mTshur phu and then later went on a tour north of Lha sa, visiting sTag lung, 'Bras skud, Rag ma me shug brag, sTod lung mda'.

<sup>43</sup> LRNT, p.5b:1.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p.5b:3.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p.7a:4.

*Imperial Mongol Politics*

The next major episode in Karma Pakshi's life was his interaction with the two grandsons of Chinggis Qan, Möngke (1207-1259) and Qubilai (1215-1296). Karma Pakshi's autobiography simply states that he was at mTshur phu when an envoy (*gser yig pa*) was sent by Qubilai Qan, requiring the lama's presence at court.<sup>46</sup> After initial prevarication (*'gro 'am mi 'gro the tsom za ba las*), Karma Pakshi decided to accept the invitation (with encouragement from a vision), sent the messenger back, and left for Khams and Mongolia (*hor yul*).<sup>47</sup> Karma Pakshi's account does not give a date for this episode.<sup>48</sup> The decision to go may well have been not an easy one: Karma Pakshi had travelled to avoid marauding Mongols in East Tibet, and the communal memories of the invasion of 1240 in Central Tibet should still have been fresh. In the later accounts, several have the initial meeting with Qubilai Qan taking place at Rong yul gser stod (East Tibet) in 1255. The earliest biographies give no date for this meeting, and it is not until the *lHo rong chos 'byung* that there is an indication that Karma Pakshi was touring in 1255 (*yos bu'i lo*) in Kam chu, mGa', Mi nyag, Yu gur and Hor, after his meeting with Qubilai.<sup>49</sup> The much later *Zla ba chu shel* makes the comment that the two men first met in 1255 when Karma Pakshi was 50 years old.<sup>50</sup> In some modern Tibetan references, the date given is earlier: Dung dkar Blo bzang 'Phrin las's *Lo tshigs dwangs shel me long* gives the year 1254 for the invitation, and the dates chart (*re'u mig*) in the appendix of the *Tshig mdzod chen mo* dictionary refers to Karma Pakshi going to China in 1254.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>46</sup> KPRN, p.98:6 - *gser yig pa btang nas gdan 'dren du byung ba'i dus su*. Repeated verbatim in LNC, p.41:5, and ZBCS, p.198:2.

<sup>47</sup> KPRN, pp.98:7-99:3.

<sup>48</sup> Subsequent events which occurred in west China after the meeting with Qubilai Qan are recorded in a different passage (KPRN, p.14:4) as taking place in the twelfth month of the Hare Year, i.e. early 1256, so his autobiography does seem to indicate the first meeting as being in 1255.

<sup>49</sup> LRCB, p.236.

<sup>50</sup> ZBCS, p.198:6. Qubilai was 40 years old in 1255.

<sup>51</sup> Yisun Zhang, *Bod rgya tshig mdzod chen mo* (Beijing: Mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 1985), p.3230. See also Dung dkar Blo bzang 'phrin las, *Mkhas dbang Dung dkar Blo bzang 'phrin las mchog gis mdzad pa'i bod rig pa'i tshig mdzod chen mo shes bya rab gsal* (Beijing: Krung go'i bod rig pa'i dpe skrun khang, 2000), p.2288. The *Dung dkar tshig mdzod chen mo* article (pp.30-31) on Karma Pakshi states that Karma Pakshi went to *sog yul* to meet Qubilai Qan (*rgyal sras hu pe li*), which seems to be inaccurate, if *sog yul* relates to the Sogdian area. The *Rang rnam* states that after receiving the invitation, Karma Pakshi went to Khams and then *hor yul* (KPRN, p.99:3). The latter geographical term, Hor, is known for being problematic, but

It would appear that this initial collaboration between the two middle-aged men, one a Tibetan visionary and one a Mongol princely warrior, had some success amongst the Mongol court.<sup>52</sup> Then Karma Pakshi decided to leave. Why he made this decision is not explicitly explained. Karma Pakshi is, perhaps diplomatically, always reticent in mentioning his troubled interactions with Qubilai, contrasting significantly with his more forthcoming accounts of successful dealings with Möngke Qan. For this episode, Karma Pakshi merely mentions that he knew of omens that there would be much conflict, and that visionary experiences had indicated a previous connection with the 'northern palace' which necessitated his going north.<sup>53</sup> Later Tibetan accounts of Karma Pakshi's life do not speculate on the reasons for the move, despite the fact that his departure might be seen as considerably important for the history of relations between China and Tibet: the absence of Karma Pakshi from the Mongol court that later governed a unified China left open the opportunity for the young 'Phags pa's (Pagpa) greater influence in the Mongol court ('Phags pa was 20 years old in 1255). 'Phags pa's cooperation with the Mongol dynasty in China has been perceived as setting something of a precedent: the 'patron and priest' relationship which, although the connection was interrupted by Tibetan revolts in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, has become part of the general historical narrative of Tibet's relations with China.<sup>54</sup>

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Karma Pakshi appears to use it in the general sense of 'Inner Mongolia'. In late 1253 Qubilai was in Yunnan on his first campaign proper, subduing the Ta Li (Dali) kingdom (v. M. Rossabi, *Khubilai Khan - His Life and Times* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp.24-25). Apparently, Qubilai returned to his appenage (*ur rdo*) in North China during the eighth moon of 1254 (v. C.Y Liu, "The Yuan Dynasty Capital, Ta-tu: Imperial Building Program and Bureaucracy", in *T'oung Pao*, vol.78, part 4/5 (1992), p.270). Most of the Tibetan accounts have Qubilai with his army meeting Karma Pakshi at Rong yul gser stod, which Epstein (*op.cit.*, p.71, n.111), from an informant, places in an area between Litang and Tachienlu (the latter also known as Kangding or Dar rtse mdo). The whereabouts of Qubilai in 1255 needs to be determined, in order to confirm the Tibetan accounts' record of the meeting with Karma Pakshi in East Tibet in 1255.

<sup>52</sup> KPRN, p.90: *rgyal 'bangs thams cad kyis bkur sti bsnyan bkur rgya chen po bgyis pa.*  
<sup>53</sup> KPRN, p.99: *chags sdang 'khrug pa mang po 'byung ba'i ltas rnams shes par byung zhing sngon gyi 'brel pa'i stobs kyī byang phyogs kyī pho brang du 'gro dgos par bla ma yi dam mkha' 'gro'i bskul ma yang byung.*

<sup>54</sup> v. Ruegg's three works relating to *yon mchod* ('donor and spiritual officiant'), in theory and in practice: D.S. Ruegg, 'mChod yon, yon mchod and mchod gnas/yon gnas: On the historiography and semantics of a Tibetan religio-political concept', in *Tibetan History and Language: studies dedicated to Uray Géza on his seventieth birthday*, edited by E. Steinkeller (Vienna: Arbeitskreis für Tibetische und Buddhistische Studien, Universität Wien, 1991), pp.441-453; D.S. Ruegg, *Ordre Spirituel et Ordre*



Karma Pakshi records that in his travel north, into the Hor region, he had had built the 'Phrul snang sprul pa'i lha khang in just 101 days.<sup>55</sup> In 1256 Karma Pakshi met Möngke Qan, at the latter's 'ur rdo (Mongolian *ordo*, 'nomad palace'), at Qara Qorum. The Mongolian history section in the *mKhas pa'i dga' ston* has a useful account, with year dates, which Karma Pakshi features in. Later accounts acknowledge using *mKhas pa'i dga' ston* as a source, and one suspects that it was particularly the Mongolian history section that proved useful to subsequent writers. However, the earlier *Deb ther dmar po* and *lHa'i rnga chen* also treat the episodes with Möngke in some detail. Curiously, both the *Deb ther sngon po* and the *lHo rong chos 'byung* do not spare much attention on the Mongolian episodes. Karma Pakshi himself included several passages scattered in his autobiography relating to his dealings with Möngke, in particular the royal policies he claimed to have influenced.

Firstly, Karma Pakshi claimed to have converted Möngke and much of the court to Buddhist tenets, after which the ruler seems to have gained some realization of freedom from subjectivity (*gzung 'dzin grol*).<sup>56</sup> The 'conversion' may have followed after a public debate or competition with rival religious figures (Nestorian Christian and Daoist).<sup>57</sup> The autobiography claims that subsequently Möngke instigated a programme of releasing treasury funds to be distributed amongst the subjects, honouring Buddhist morality observances, establishing a rule of no slaughter of animals for three days per month, releasing prisoners, sponsoring the building of new Buddhist structures and the repair of damaged ones.<sup>58</sup> The *lHa'i rnga chen* and *Zla ba chu*

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*Temporel dans la Pensée Bouddhique de l'Inde et du Tibet* (Paris: Collège de France Publications de l'Institut de civilisation Indienne, 1995); D.S. Ruegg, 'The Preceptor-Donor (*yon mchod*) Relation in the Thirteenth Century Tibetan Society and Polity, its Inner Asian Precursors and Indian Models', in *Tibetan Studies*, edited by H. Krasser *et al.* (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1997), vol. II, pp.857-872. On p.860 Ruegg states that the earliest use of *yon mchod* 'as a copulative compound designating the relation between a donor and preceptor' is in the *Deb ther dmar po*, but Karma Pakshi's autobiography uses the term in that sense four times (KPRN, pp.19, 21, 34, 107).

<sup>55</sup> KPRN, p.13:4.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.101:7 - 102:2.

<sup>57</sup> Reference to debate (*rgol*) which Karma Pakshi may have participated in is in LNC, p.43:2. Indications that there was more of a competition (*rtsod pa dang nus pa 'gran pa byas pa*) are in KPGT, p.36:1 and ZBCS, p.203:4 (*rang cag stobs dang rdzu 'phrul 'gran par bya yi shog cig*). See Thiel (1962) and Kubo (1968) for discussions of the religious debates enacted for the Mongol Emperors.

<sup>58</sup> KPRN, pp.102:3 - 104:1.

*shel* quote verbatim the lengthier passage in the autobiography which gives these economic and social policies.<sup>59</sup> In a separate passage, the autobiography presents these policies as almost a list, which *lHa'i rnga chen* again reproduces verbatim and dPa' bo gTsug lag 'phreng ba appears to have used in his *mKhas pa'i dga' ston*, either from the autobiography itself or from the *lHa'i rnga chen* copy of the passage.<sup>60</sup> In the *Rang nam* presentation of these social policies, and in commendation of the meditative abilities of Möngke, Karma Pakshi shows the emperor in a highly favourable light, with no intimation that this was the same man who had a degree of responsibility for the cataclysmic slaughter at Baghdad in 1258.<sup>61</sup>

Before Möngke's death in 1259, Karma Pakshi had decided to return to Tibet, with Möngke's approval. Möngke died while on campaign in China, and after a civil war between the Mongolian qans, Qubilai emerged triumphant as Qagan in 1264. As intimated above, Karma Pakshi is somewhat reticent about his dealings with Qubilai, but it appears from later accounts that Qubilai issued a death warrant against Karma Pakshi.<sup>62</sup> The autobiography describes the edict as a '*ja' sa drag po* ('fierce edict').<sup>63</sup> The earliest record of the tortures Karma Pakshi suffered is in the *Deb ther dmar po*: torture by fire, water, weapons, poison and some sort of head implement with iron spikes (*mgo la lcags gzer btab*).<sup>64</sup> Later records have the tortures happening at two separate periods, so the first four types of torture listed above occur before Karma Pakshi, apparently inviolable, was exiled to the beach area of an ocean. Then after a summons back to court at Cang to, two years later, the head torture, with starvation, was applied. This latter torture Karma Pakshi does record, but with no comment, just adding a record of the visions he experienced at the time.<sup>65</sup> Notably, dPa' bo gTsug lag 'phreng ba used verbatim passages from the *Rang nam* (from the first section, *gDug pa tshar bcod*) for some of the events of

<sup>59</sup> LNC, p.49:1-5; ZBCS, p.204:4-7.

<sup>60</sup> KPRN, pp.16:1-5; LNC, p.41:1-5; KPGT, p.35:1-3. See below in the next paragraph for an indication that dPa'-bo gTsug-lag 'phreng-ba did have access to the *Rang nam*, not just the *lHa'i nga chen*.

<sup>61</sup> T. Allsen, *Mongol Imperialism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), p.83, n.12.

<sup>62</sup> LNC, p.65:4.

<sup>63</sup> KPRN, p.104:4.

<sup>64</sup> DTMP, p.92. Further research into mediaeval Chinese and Mongolian torture techniques may prove more forthcoming, if not somewhat distasteful.

<sup>65</sup> KPRN, p.8:1.

these episodes, and acknowledges the source.<sup>66</sup> The *lHa'i rnga chen* also quotes directly from the autobiography, but does not acknowledge the source for these passages, so perhaps dPa' bo gTsug lag 'phreng ba did have access to the *gDug pa tshar bcod* section of the *Rang rnam*. Also of note is that an additional event is commented on in two modern accounts: during this period Karma Pakshi cut his distinctive beard off, in so doing making the allegorical statement that just as the beard was cut, so too would the royal lineage be cut.<sup>67</sup> This may come from an oral tradition—in recent years (late twentieth century, prior to the publication of these two modern works) the beard-cutting episode has been commonly recounted orally as one of the salient events of Karma Pakshi's life, but there is no indication of the story in pre-modern records.<sup>68</sup>

More generally, the accounts are agreed that eventually reconciliation was agreed between Qubilai Qan and Karma Pakshi, but the latter declined the invitation to stay. The Tibetan accounts present Qubilai as something of a 'malevolent king',<sup>69</sup> whereas Möngke is seen as more the benevolent emperor.

#### *Retirement Years*

After his activity in China and Mongolia, Karma Pakshi returned to Tibet.<sup>70</sup> Several accounts agree, in accordance with Karma Pakshi's statement, that it took him eight years to return from the Mongol court to mTshur phu.<sup>71</sup> However, the autobiography and accounts do not

<sup>66</sup> KPGT, p.41:7.

<sup>67</sup> Rin-chen dpal-bzang, *mTshur phu dgon gyi dkar chag kun gsal me long* (Beijing: Mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 1995), pp.357-8; lDan ma 'Jam dbyangs tshul khriims, *Dpal karma pa sku phreng rim byon gyi mdzad rnam* (Lanzhou: Kan su'u mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 1997), p.74.

<sup>68</sup> v. Karma rGyal mtshan, *Kam tshang yab sras dang dpal spungs dgon pa'i lo rgyus ngo mtshar dad pa'i padma rgyas byed* ([Chengdu]: Si khron mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 1997), p. 31, where the author remarks on the fact that this beard-cutting episode is probably an oral tradition: *lo rgyus du ma zhig ngag rgyun du gleng srol yod*.

<sup>69</sup> e.g. *rgyal po gdug pa can* in KPGT, p.46:3.

<sup>70</sup> The *re'u mig* in Yisun Zhang, *Bod rgya tshig mdzod chen mo* (Beijing: Mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 1985), p.3231, gives the date as 1264. Elsewhere in the Tibetan accounts here considered the year is not specified. Petech (1990, p.16) states that "Only after eight years he [Karma Pakshi] was allowed to return to Tibet." This appears to be a misreading of ZBCS 216:6 (given as source 'KARMA' in p.16, note 42), where it states that Karma Pakshi took eight years to get to mTshur phu from 'Cong to' (probably 'Cang to', ZBCS 215:1).

<sup>71</sup> KPRN, p.105:7.

specify in detail the activity undertaken on the lengthy journey, just a few episodes of healing, peace-making and Buddhist proselytizing are recounted, with the occasional vision. Perhaps much of the time on this slow progress was taken up in Karma Pakshi's ongoing interest in repairing and establishing monasteries.

On Karma Pakshi's return to mTshur phu, he became engaged in commissioning and consecrating statues. His autobiography devotes a whole section, *lHa chen po 'dzam gling rgyan bzhengs pa'i rnam thar*, on the subject of the huge statue he commissioned for the main temple at mTshur phu.<sup>72</sup> The impetus to erect the statue came from a dream he had of a huge Buddha statue (10 spans high, *sku 'dom bcu yod pa*), with an echoing voice telling him that by building such a statue peace would come to the country.<sup>73</sup> This section of the autobiography goes on to give Karma Pakshi's views on consecration, extolling the importance of creating supports for worship, thereby encouraging people to turn to Buddhist ideas. Such practical applications of religious activity are a theme of his later life: constructing and repairing monasteries and stupas, erecting and consecrating statues, encouraging people to sing the *ma ñi* mantras in devotion to the deity of compassion, sPyan ras gzigs (Chenrezig).<sup>74</sup> The *mKhas pa'i dga' ston* refers to an apparent jibe from the courtly 'Phags pa that Karma Pakshi was merely a *ma ñi pa*, perhaps meaning something of a village chanter.<sup>75</sup> However, the *mKhas pa'i dga' ston* passage goes on to present a timeline of Mongol-Tibetan relations leading up to this period and concludes that Karma Pakshi was lama to Möngke Qagan (in 1256) before 'Phags became an imperial chaplain (Qubilai was not *qagan* until 1264), finalising the argument by stating that in any case the term '*ma ñi pa*' had a different connotation in the thirteenth century than at the time of writing (sixteenth century). The argument appears to indicate the author's antithetic concern with the historical perspective of Sa skya pa pre-eminence for this period.

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<sup>72</sup> Richardson described the statue as being 60 feet tall and made of brass, but took no photograph (H.E. Richardson, "Memories of Tshurphu", *Bulletin of Tibetology*, no.1 (1982), pp.31-34. His visits were in 1946 and 1950. The statue was destroyed in 1966 during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution.

<sup>73</sup> KPRN, pp.22-3.

<sup>74</sup> The traditional tune for the claimed Karma Pakshi style of singing of the mantra is not well-known. A current lama, Lama Norlha based in Wappinger Falls, USA, claims to know the traditional tune, and his singing of it has been recorded and the transcribed into Western musical notation by the composer Dirk de Klerk, in 2003, but not published.

<sup>75</sup> KPGT, p.38:2.

Interaction between 'Phags pa and Karma Pakshi is not extensively recorded, which is particularly unfortunate, especially for the times when both were in China (if indeed they met in Qubilai's court). Questions remain about 'Phags pa's role when Karma Pakshi was undergoing hardships at Qubilai's orders. However, 'Phags pa later made two visits to Central Tibet.<sup>76</sup> The *Deb ther dmar po* states that he and Karma Pakshi met at mTshur phu, and they both sat on level seats (presumably a symbolic protocol indicating mutual respect). The latter text then has it that Karma Pakshi was complimentary to 'Phags pa in saying that when he, Karma Pakshi, was the *bla mchod* (chaplain) for Möngke Qan, he saw 'Phags pa as a bodhisattva.<sup>77</sup> This may indicate that they had met at Möngke's court, but not necessarily. In any case, it does hint at an eventually harmonious relationship, whatever may have happened at court more than a decade earlier.

Another encounter Karma Pakshi had in the later years of his life was important in terms of the development and continuation of the nascent Karmapa lineage. At mTshur phu he met with O rgyan Rin chen dpal (Orgyen Rinchen Pel, 1229/30-1309), to whom he entrusted the transmission to pass on to the postulated next incarnation. The nature of the transmission is not elucidated. The earlier accounts give no details of the meeting—it is not until the *mKhas pa'i dga' ston* account that we learn that O rgyan Rin chen dpal's visit lasted just three days.<sup>78</sup> From this passage in *mKhas pa'i dga' ston*, it would appear that elements of the transmission consisted of instructions (*gdams ngag*), an empowerment ritual (the rGyal ba rgya mtsho deity empowerment), and the donation of a black hat, as a vestment symbol of transmission for the next Karma pa. During the rGyal ba rgya mtsho empowerment, Karma Pakshi placed a bowl of barley on O rgyan Rin chen dpal's head and stirred it three times—this seems to have been something of an esoteric 'word-less' transmission, although the author does not comment

<sup>76</sup> Wylie has given the dates of the Central Tibet visits as 1265-1269, and 1276-1280 (death). v. T.V. Wylie, 'The First Mongol Conquest of Tibet Reinterpreted', *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 37.1 (June 1977), pp.103-133. If Karma Pakshi had taken eight years to return to mTshur phu, then the meeting of the two men at mTshur phu must have been during 'Phags pa's second tour of Central Tibet. 'Phags pa convened a religious conference at Chu mig near Sa skya in 1277, but there is no evidence yet discovered that Karma Pakshi attended. *mKhas pa'i dga' ston* (KPGT, p.53:3) has it that Karma Pakshi, aged 72, met 'Phags-pa, aged 43, in the *me glang* year (1277) at mTshur-phu. *Zla ba chu shel* (p.227:5) states they met at gNam (50 km. SW of Lhasa).

<sup>77</sup> DTMP, p.93: *sngar nga mong kha rgyal po'i bla mchod byas pa'i dus su / ngas khyed la byang chub sems dpa' mthong na dga' bar btags pa e ma yin zhes...*

<sup>78</sup> KPGT, pp.56:1-58:1.

on it. The only set of instructions explicitly mentioned in this context are those given on the 'Introduction to Three Bodies' (*sku gsum ngo sprod*).<sup>79</sup>

### *Death*

The demise date of Karma Pakshi is first recorded in the *Deb ther dmar po*—3rd day of the 9th month in the Sheep Year (1283-4), which the later accounts generally agree with. The signs which occurred at his death are the type of signs that might be said to be commonly associated with the death of great lamas in the Tibetan tradition: two suns appearing in the sky, a 'rain of flowers' (*me tog char 'babs*), unusual sounds, and so forth. Karma Pakshi's cremation was undertaken within ten days, at his prior request, and various relics were found thereafter in the cremation ashes: the heart, tongue and eyes of Karma Pakshi, as well as *ring bsrel*—symbolic objects with markings associated with tantric practices (rare conch shells, deity insignia, seed-syllables of deity mantra practices).

The manner of transference of consciousness from Karma Pakshi to the child who became known as his successor, Karmapa Rang byung rdo rje, is best-known in the English language from Roerich's translation of the *Deb ther sngon po*.<sup>80</sup> Unfortunately the *Deb ther sngon po* gives no indication what the author's source for the tale is. However, the earlier work *Deb ther dmar po*, wherein the account of the transference episode is less fulsome, refers to a *Bar do'i rnam thar* text as the source of the author's information for this sequence.<sup>81</sup> Later, the *mKhas pa'i dga' ston*, in a lengthy passage on the transference, refers to a *Rnam thar bar do ma*, which may be the same text.<sup>82</sup> If they

<sup>79</sup> The nature of the *sku gsum ngo sprod* (also the *sku bzhi ngo sprod*) will be explored in further research on the philosophy and practices associated with Karma Pakshi. In the KPRN, Karma Pakshi seems to prefer to extol the virtues of his *sku bzhi ngo sprod* teaching, rather than the *sku gsum ngo sprod*, but without explication (*sku bzhi ngo sprod* references in KPRN, pp.39-40, 45, 49-54, 59, 61-63, 79, 85, 90, 95, 100, 102, 107-116, 120-121, 125-126, 131-132, 135; *sku gsum ngo sprod* does not occur in KPRN). Karma Pakshi's sixteenth-century successor, Karma pa VIII, Mi-bskyod rdo-rje (1507-1554), wrote a four-volume work based on Karma Pakshi's *sku gsum ngo sprod* doctrine, which has yet to be studied (Mi-bskyod rdo-rje, *Skus gsum ngo sprod kyi rnam par bshad pa mdo rgyud bstan pa miha' dag gi e wam phyag rgya* (Gangtok: Gonpo Tseten, 1978), see TBRC reference W23660).

<sup>80</sup> G.N. Roerich, *The Blue Annals* (Delhi; Motilal Banarsidass, 1996), pp.487-8.

<sup>81</sup> DTMP, p.96:8. The near-contemporary *IHa'i rnga chen* also refers to the *Bar do'i rnam thar* in the same context, but does not give the tale of transference in any detail (LNC, p.128:6).

<sup>82</sup> KPGT, pp.918, 923, 925.

are indeed the one text, then to date the text has not been identified, but must have been written post-1283 (Karma Pakshi's death) and pre-1363 (completion of *Deb ther dmar po*), which might suggest it was part of Karmapa Rang byung rdo rje's *gsung 'bum*.<sup>83</sup> Yet *Deb ther dmar po* and *mKhas pa'i dga' ston* both mention a *bar do* work in connection with questions put by a mKhan po gSer khang (Khenpo Serkhang), who may have written the answers in the form of the *Bar do'i rnam thar*. Alas, information on mKhan po gSer khang is also elusive, and no record of him has been found, although he might be identified with the mKhan chen gSer khang.<sup>84</sup> Certainly his period of operation is feasible, but positive identification of the *Bar do'i rnam thar* and its author is not yet possible.

Every human's life-span ends with death. The claims made on Karma Pakshi's behalf—that he was a re-birth of a particular saint (Dus gsum mkhyen pa) and after death was reincarnated as a specific child—are not so unusual in themselves, in a Buddhist context. It is the combination of such claims with the institutional position of ecclesiastical head of several monasteries and the subsequent succession through specifically identified re-incarnations that was a new development, peculiar to Tibetan religious culture. In this regard, Karma Pakshi's meeting with and recognition by sPom brag pa was vital to the formation and continuation of the Karmapa lineage, as was likewise the transmission to O rgyan pa (Orgyenpa) and then Rang byung rdo rje. But in a wider context, the real revolution was in the transferral of property rights from one incarnation to the next, as occurred when Karma Pakshi took over Karma dGon, Kam po gnas nang, and mTshur phu. The grip of familial succession was loosened, if not broken. After Karma Pakshi, the idea and practice of ecclesiastical succession through claimed reincarnation spread widely in Central Asia.

<sup>83</sup> The 2006 edition of Karmapa Rang byung rdo rje's *gsung 'bum* lists in volume 1 (*Ka*), pp.39-43, works that the editors allege were written by Rang byung rdo rje but they did not find them to publish in the collection. At p.42:5 is listed a work titled *Bar do'i rnam thar pa bstan pa*, which may be a likely candidate for this elusive work. v. Karma pa Rang byung rdo rje, *Gsung 'bum* (Zi Ling: mTshur phu mkhan po lo yag bkra shis, 2006), or TBRC: W30541, volume *Ka*, section *Karma pa rang byung rdo rje'i gsung 'bum dkar chag*.

<sup>84</sup> v. P.K. Sørensen & G. Hazod, *Rulers on the Celestial Plain* (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2007), p.105, n.131. Sørensen suggests that Kun dga' rgyal mtshan (1223-1292), also known as gSer khang steng pa, may be identified with mKhan chen gSer khang. Kun dga' rgyal mtshan (TBRC: P1506) was the 8th holder of the abbatial throne of Tshal Gung-thang.

To a degree, the above account of Karma Pakshi's life begins a process of determining his life story, or at least the more concrete aspects of his life. Further research into the issues of people, time and place ('who?', 'when?' and 'where?') is required to make more sure our knowledge of an enigmatic and iconic figure. Then any attempt to address the questions of the 'what?' and 'why?' of the beginnings of the institutionalized reincarnation tradition might be more adequately answered. Karma Pakshi's influence on the consequent cultural history of the Central Asian region was crucial—in that his activity and claims helped form the eventual ecclesiastical succession system—so his intellectual and spiritual life should also be further researched, largely through his writings.

*Tibetan language*

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\_\_\_\_\_ "*Bla ma rin po che'i rnam par thar pa'o / Karma pa'i rnam thar bzhugs so.*" *Karma pa Rang byung rdo rje'i gsung 'bum*. Vol.4. Zi ling: mTshur phu mkhan po lo yag bkra shis, 2006.

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TABLE A: Pre-modern accounts of the life of Karma Pakshi

Author	1 Karma Pakshi	2 Karma pa Rang byung rdo rje	3 Tshal pa Kun dga' rdo rje	4 mKha' spyod dhang po	5 Tshe dhang rgyal	6 gZhon nu Dpal	7 dPa' bo Gtsug lag 'phreng ba	8 Si tu Pan chen	9 sMan sdong mTshams pa
Author birth	1204/06	1284	1304	1350	?1400	1392	1504	1699	--
Author death	1283	1339	1364	1405	c.1468	1481	1564/6	1774	--
Era	13 C	14 C	14 C	14 C	15 C	15 C	16 C	18 C	19 C
Title	<i>Grub chen karma pakshi'i mam thar</i>	<i>Bla ma rin po che'i nam thar pa'o/ karma pa'i nam thar</i>	<i>Hu lan Deb ther dmar po</i>	<i>Chos kyi rje dpal ldan karma pa chen po'i nam par thar pa tsam yas tha'i rnga chen</i>	<i>IHo rong chos 'byang</i>	<i>Deb ther sngon po</i>	<i>Chos 'byang mkhas pa'i dga' ston</i>	<i>sGrub bryud karma kam tschang bryud pa rin po che'i nam par thar pa rab 'byams nor bu zla ba chu shel gyi phreng ba</i>	<i>Chos rje karma pa sku 'phreng rim byon gyi nam thar ndor tsang dpoq bsam khri shang</i>
Title shorthand	<i>Rang nam thar</i>	<i>Bla ma rin po che'i nam thar pa</i>	<i>Hu lan deb ther dmar po</i>	<i>tsam yas tha'i rnga chen</i>	<i>IHo rong chos 'byang</i>	<i>Deb ther sngon po</i>	<i>mkhas pa'i dga' ston</i>	<i>Zla ba chu shel gyi phreng ba</i>	<i>dPag bsam khri shang</i>
Title Acronym	KPRN	LRNT	DTMP	LNC	LRCB	BA	KPGT	ZBCS	PSKS
Title date	? (pre-1283)	? (pre-1339)	1363	? (pre-1405)	1446-1451	1478	1545	1775	1891
Yrs since KP death	—	ca.50	80	ca.120	165	215	262	492	608
TBRC ref	W27319	W30541	--	W23928	W27302 (W2CZ7697)	W7494	W28792	W26630 (W23435)	W30161
Publisher	Gonpo Tseten	mTshur phu mkhan po la yag bkra shis	Mi rigs dpe skrun khang	Gonpo Tseten	Bod ljongs bod yig dpe mnying dpe skrun khang	International Academy of Indian Culture	Delhi Kamapae chodey gyalwae sunggrab partum khang	Palpung sunggrab nyamso khang Sansal, dist. Kangra,	Tibetan Bonpo Monastic Centre
Publ. place	Gangtok	Zi ling	Pe cin	Gangtok	Lha sa	New Delhi	Delhi	H.P.	New Thobgyal, H.P.
Publ. date	1978	2006	1981	1978	1994	1974	1980	1990	1973
Biography location	pp.1-135	Vol.4 pp.256-287	pp.87-94	vol.2 pp.2-87	pp.235-238	pp.422-424	pp.24-59	vol.11 pp.169-256	vol.2 pp.50-108
Length in pages	135	31	7	85	3	2	35	87	58

TABLE B: Modern accounts of the life of Karma Pakshi

Author	1 N. Douglas (& M.White)	2 Karma Thinley, (ed. D. Stort)	3 Karma Blo gros chos dpal bzang po	4 Dun rdor & bsTan 'dzin chos grags	5 Rin chen dpal bzang	6 K. Holmes	7 'Jam dbyangs (shul khrims	8 Kagyü Thubten Chöling Publications Committee	9 Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche (ed. M.Martin)
Author birth	1944	1931	1933	?	1924	1948	1942	---	1965
Author death	---	---	---	---	(extant?)	---	---	---	---
Era	20C	20C	20C	20C	20C	20C	20C	20C	20C
Title	<i>Karmaqa: the Black Hat Lama of Tibet</i>	<i>The History of the Sixteen Karmapas of Tibet</i>	<i>Khams gyam chos kyi rgyal po dpal rgyal dbang Karma pa sku phreng rim byon gyi mdzad rnam u dim ba ra'i chen po</i>	<i>gangs ljongs lo m'tshur phu dgon gyi dkar chag kun gsal me long</i>		<i>Karmaqa</i>	<i>dPal karma pa sku phreng rim byon gyi mdzad rnam</i>	<i>Karmaqa: The Sacred Prophecy</i>	<i>'Brief Histories of the Sixteen Karmapas', in M.Martin, <i>Masic in the Sky</i></i>
Title shortform	---	---	<i>U dum ba ra'i chen po</i>	<i>Gangs ljongs lo rgyas</i>	<i>Kun gsal me long</i>	---	<i>Karma pa sku phreng</i>	---	<i>Brief Histories</i>
Title Acronym	KBH	HSK	UDBR	GJLG	KGML	KHK	KKT	KSP	BHSK
Title date	1976	1980	1986	1993	1995	1995	1997	1999	2003
Yrs since KP death	693	697	703	710	712	712	714	716	720
TBRC ref	---	---	---	W19803	W20850	---	W18133	---	---
Publisher	Luzac	<b>Prajña Press</b>	---	Bod ljongs mi dmanags dpe skrun khang	Mi rigs dpe skrun khang	Altea Publishing	Kan su'u mi rigs dpe skrun khang	Kagyü Thubten Chöling	Snow Lion
Publ. place	London	Boulder, CO	---	Lha sa	Pe cin	Forres, UK	Lan kru'u	Wappinger Falls, NY	Ithaca, NY
Publ. date	1976	1980	1986	1995	1995	1995	1997	1999	2003
Biography location	pp.41-46	pp.47-52	pp.12-15	pp.299-301	pp.347-365	pp.114-115	pp.66-80	p.17	pp.278-279
Length in pages	5	5	3	3	18	2	14	1	2



KARMIC FORESHADOWING  
ON THE PATH OF FRUITION

NARRATIVE DEVICES IN THE BIOGRAPHIES OF  
NYANG RAL NYI MA 'OD ZER

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The earliest accounts of the first great treasure revealer, Nyang ral nyi ma 'od zer (Nyang rel Nyima özer, 1124-1192), are contained within two early biographies. Though both texts contain numerous insertions by later contributors, the core data dealing with Nyi ma 'od zer's life was likely compiled by direct disciples in the early thirteenth century. Titled *The Stainless*<sup>1</sup> and *The Clear Mirror*,<sup>2</sup> these are the main sources consulted in constructing later portraits of the master. Yet in recognizing the many divergences between the two, it appears that little of Nyi ma 'od zer's positivistic past can be confirmed. Only the broad strokes of generalities and basic facts concur whereas the fine details that drive the narrative of his life vary between the biographies such that they compete rather than complement each other. Later biographers, both indigenous and not, selectively wove distinct episodes from each biography into a continuous narrative that, while rendering such issues in the record invisible, succeeded in presenting a coherent, compelling portrait. For a current assessment of Nyi ma 'od zer, however, a less exclusive method provides a more complete introduction to the available information.

For this article, the various historiographical issues in attempting to disentangle the historical from the hagiographical have deliberately been set aside. Instead, the objective is to present the available

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<sup>1</sup> "Sprul sku mnga' bdag chen po'i skyes rabs rnam thar dri ma med pa'i bka' rgya can la ldeb," in *Bka' brgyad bder gshegs 'dus pa'i chos skor*, Vol. 1 (Gangtok: Lama Sonam Tobgay Kazi, 1978), 1-163.

<sup>2</sup> References are to "Bka' brgyad bde shegs 'dus pa'i gter ston myang sprul sku Nyi ma 'od zer gyi rnam thar gsal ba'i me long," in *Bka' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa'i chos skor*, Vol. 2 (Paro: Lama Ngodrup, 1979), 199-381. There is a second rescension of this text that is referred to as *Gsal ba'i me long B* (see Bibliography for publication details).

information concerning the early life of Nyi ma 'od zer with an eye towards presentation rather than historical verification. Whereas a successful pursuit of the latter remains dubious due to a lack of corroborating evidence and a prevalence of contradictory data, the episodes themselves remain as vivid as ever. For this reason, it becomes more viable to focus on the narrative devices used by his biographers, which confirm his status as a buddha incarnate and legitimate his later activities as such.

Throughout the genre of Tibetan religious biography, one prominent device relies on the infallible machinations of karmic process which, enhanced by the multivalent potency of Tantric symbolism, legitimate their protagonist as an authentic adept. Past meditative accomplishments function as causal bases for the manifestation of extraordinary phenomena, which also serve as harbingers of the enlightened activities to come. Loaded with vivid imagery, the dreams and designations, signs and visions imbue mundane events with profound significance, thereby indicating the true nature of relative phenomena while confirming the attainment of those who recognize it. Using Tantric hermeneutics, the reader is empowered to extract the genuine significance of these events just as those who witnessed them. Likewise, proper interpretation allows the reader to discern the narrative's prophetic foreshadowing, thus karmic process manifested in Tantric symbols invites the reader to tread the narrative path to 'complete liberation' (*rnam thar*).

Like the biographies, the discussion below follows the chronological progression of Nyi ma 'od zer's final lifetime. Beginning with his parents' dreams at the time of conception, it progresses through his childhood training and concludes with the series of empowerments that precipitate his adult life. This article thus focuses on the episodes that function as karmic indicators of the life that is to come; his maturation as a prominent Nyingmapa and treasure revealer is reserved for a separate discussion.<sup>3</sup> Unlike later indigenous compilations, an episode from one early biography is not presented in exclusion of another. In order to present the full range of legitimately early information concerning Nyi ma 'od zer, redundant episodes with unique details, such as his birth, are presented contiguously, followed by an independent analysis of each. A discussion of the various

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<sup>3</sup> 'Treasure Revelation in the Tibetan Renaissance' is a distinct chapter in my dissertation.



elements of his extended name, Nyang ral pa can nyi ma 'od zer (Nyang Relpachen Nyima özer), is provided as well.

*Oneiric conception and the arrival of the nirmāṇakāya*

The identities of Nyi ma 'od zer's parents are confirmed in his biographical tradition where both their common and initiatory or secret names (*gsang mtshan*) are provided. His father was Nyang ston chos kyi 'khor lo (Nyangtön Chökyi Khorlo), 'The Nyang teacher, Wheel of Dharma', who continued to hold and transmit the Tantric transmissions of his clan in an unbroken succession. Far less is known of his mother, Jo mo ye shes gron (Jomo Yeshe Drön),<sup>4</sup> 'Lady Lamp of Primordial Gnosis', though *jo mo* is often a title referring to a woman of royal lineage.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps she also hailed from one of the imperial clans, received the title upon marrying into Nyang, or received it posthumously in recognition of her son's dharmic achievements. Little of the parents' own stories remains outside the biographies of their son, however, so it appears that their greatest impact was made in producing him.

The sexual relationship, chemistry and potency they share is somewhat tempered by symbolism and euphemism,<sup>6</sup> but can nevertheless be exposed quite explicitly through interpreting the terms provided. *The Clear Mirror* introduces his mother as 'the female *mudrā*' or consort, specifically referencing her vulva as the 'seal' for his father's phallus, thus passion and sexual intercourse in their relationship as husband and wife is a religious practice, a means to enlightenment.<sup>7</sup> This sets the basis for their invitation of a nirmāṇakāya (*sPrul sku*, the emanation or manifest form of a buddha) through conception. Their secret names detail this even more.

Given that Tantra relies on symbolism to link mundane appearances with their genuine, ultimate aspects, Tantric initiatory names point out the ultimate potential and true nature of the saṃsāric individuals they

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<sup>4</sup> Her common name only appears in *Dri ma med pa*, 84.6, 85.2.

<sup>5</sup> Throughout Nyi ma 'od zer's treasures, Ye shes mtsho rgyal, the Princess of Kharchen, is often referred to simply as Jo mo mtsho rgyal, underscoring her royal pedigree. Within Nyi ma 'od zer's biographical literature, she is designated through a wide array of variants, the longest of which is Ye shes mkha' 'gro mtsho rgyal.

<sup>6</sup> See B.L. Phillips, *Consummation and Compassion in Medieval Tibet* (Ph.D. dissertation at the University of Virginia, 2004), 116.

For a detailed discussion of the mechanics of 'urethral suction' and the need for a 'seal' in sexual yoga, as well as an etymology of the term *mudrā*, see D.G. White, *Kiss of the Yoginī* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2006), 82-3.

designate. Only *The Stainless* provides the secret name of Nyi ma 'od zer's father: rDo rje dbang phyug rtsal (Dorje Wangchuk Tsel), 'Dynamic Expression of the Powerful Lord Vajra'. Each of these terms needs to be considered individually. *rDo rje* (Skt: *vajra*) is one of the most ubiquitous symbols of Tantric Buddhism. Its symbology textually begins with Indra's lightning bolt in the *Rg Veda* which, when striking the earth, was said to produce diamonds, 'the lord of stones'. This is the most literal translation of the Tibetan *rdo'i rje*. In exoteric Buddhist interpretations, the vajra functions as a scepter where it is often paired with a bell. This dichotomy unites the vajra, skillful means, with its counterpart, wisdom, which are ultimately indifferentiable. These are also considered to be masculine and feminine aspects respectively, thus in Tantric applications such as this one the vajra and bell are sexualized. *rDo rje* is 'twilight language' (*dgons phi skad*; Skt: *saṃdhābhāṣā*), a euphemism for the male phallus. *dBang phyug* literally translates as 'having much power', and so nominalized is rendered 'Powerful Lord'. *rTsal*, 'dynamic expression', has the sense that the individual manifests impersonally, objectively, selflessly, as the play of luminosity; s/he is merely a refraction of enlightened awareness in human form. In sum then, for Nyang ston chos kyi 'khor lo or rDo rje dbang phyug rtsal, the 'Dynamic Expression of the Powerful Lord Vajra', sexual potency is a defining characteristic. His wife's secret name testifies that each is the ideal counterpart for the other.

The biographies nearly agree on his mother's initiatory name, with one variant dyad. Whereas *The Clear Mirror* names her Padma bde ba rtsal (Pema Dewa Tsel), 'Dynamic Expression of the Blissful Lotus', *The Stainless* reads Pad+ma dbang chen rtsal (Pema Wangchen Tsel), 'Dynamic Expression of the Great Powerful Lotus'. In addition to the literal translation, Padma dbang chen is also an epithet for Hayagriva, Nyi ma 'od zer's future tutelary deity. Here, his mother's initiatory name indicates that he literally is the son of Hayagriva. Thus there is an additional semantic shift in *The Stainless*, but the fundamental significance remains the same, which is demonstrated by a comparison of the parents' initiatory names. The first term is the key: lotus signifies vulva in Tantric symbolism, thus *pad+ma* is the female counterpart to *rdo rje*. In this way, *The Stainless* juxtaposes the two parents with gendered constructions of the same name: rDo rje (vajra, phallus) to Pad+ma (lotus, vulva); dBang phyug (powerful lord, masculine) to dBang chen (great powerful, gender neutral); rTsal(dynamic expression, gender neutral), which is often appended to secret initiatory

names and is identical in word and meaning here. Given that their Tantric names emphasize the ‘great power’ of their genitalia, Nyi ma ’od zer’s parents are defined by their reproductive potential; their primary purpose within the biographies is to conceive together their destined son.

As is typical when comparing these two biographies, whenever the most general elements of an event concur, their details diverge. Both accounts emphasize that his mother had an auspicious dream at the time of conception, yet the symbols and experiences described therein are distinct and even the exact place of conception differs. *The Clear Mirror* recounts that Nyi ma ’od zer was conceived when his parents copulated within the local monastery:

mNga’ bdag nyang nyi ma ’od zer (Ngadak Nyang Nyima özer) was conceived in the body of his mother... at ’Jod pa ser dgon pa in the earth male rabbit year.<sup>8</sup> Concerning the signs of the *nirmāṇakāya*, in his mother’s dream, countless white lions dissolved into her body and a five-pronged golden vajra, having arisen in the sky, was implanted in her womb. She swallowed an outer ocean in one gulp. By purging that out again, she was filled with the three-thousand-fold universe. She consumed a galaxy into her belly and, having mounted the sun and moon, she circled the four continents. A retinue of ladies tossed flowers, prostrated and circumambulated her. Many light rays radiated into her body. Her body was blissful and vibrating (*’gro ba mgyogs pa*). Her radiance spread and so forth – such were the signs that numerously arose. When she told her husband, they were very happy. The father said, “This is a sign that the one who is coming is the magical emanation of a bodhisattva who will benefit transmigrators.” Having said that, they paid homage and performed healing rituals.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> This would be 1113, which is an error based on an incorrect rendering of the year’s element. Nyi ma ’od zer was born in 1124, so the year of conception was 1123, the water rabbit year of the second *rab ’byung*. The error is repeated in *Gsal ba ’i me long* B, 108.2.

<sup>9</sup> *mnga’ bdag myang nyi ma ’od zer ni/ sap ho yos kyi lo la/ ’jod pa ser gyi dgon par/ ... yum gyi lus sku la bltams/ sprul pa sku’i rtagsu/ yum gyi rmi lam na/ seng ge dkar po grangs med lus la thim pa dang / skar tshogs lto ru zos ba dang / nyi zla zhon nas gling bzhi skor ba dang / bud med tshogs kyis me tog ’thor ba dang / phyag ’tshal zhing skor ba byed pa dang / ’od zer mang po lus la ’phros ba [325] dang / lus bde ba dang ’gro ba mgyogs pa dang / skrag mdangs rgyas pa la sogs pa’i rtags mang du byung nas/ yab la zhus pas/ thugs shin tu mnyes te/ yab kyi zhal nas/ byang chub sems dpa’i sprul p ’gro ba la phan thogs pa cig ’ong pa’i rtags yin gsung nas/ bkur sti dang rim gro che bar mdzad do// Gsal ba ’i me long, 324.3-325.2.*

This account of conception is modeled on the hagiographies of Shakyamuni Buddha, several of which were translated during the dynastic period and thus whose lore, if not the texts themselves, were available to Nyi ma 'od zer and his biographers. One of them, Ashvaghosha's *Buddhacarita*, reads: "Before she conceived she saw in a dream/ a white elephant king/ entering her body, yet she did not/ thereby feel any pain."<sup>10</sup> The white lions above evoke a similar image and significance, thereby imbuing the conception of Nyi ma 'od zer with the arrival of a *nirmānakāya*, a buddha in cyclic existence, which serves as a basis for the legitimation of his later activity, as radical as it may seem (certainly the Buddha was viewed as radical in his time as well). The significance of the golden vajra here represents an oneiric revisioning of sexual intercourse and actual conception. Again referencing her husband's secret name and phallus, the golden vajra is also the sperm that impregnates her.<sup>11</sup> The experience that follows may be taken as a vivid description of her orgasm in both physiological and figurative detail. Tantric language thereby imbues a relatively ordinary event, in this case conception, with its ultimate significance, transfiguring the mundane elements of intercourse into dharmic symbols, rich with meaning that transcends ordinary conceptions of them. In this sense, these terms are not mere euphemisms; they are intended to accurately depict the true nature of these objects and events in symbolic form so as to transcend base preconceptions and present the event as it really is. The one conceived will be a buddha, thus the symbolic values attributed are more true than the mundane trivialities ascertained through ordinary perceptions.

In *The Stainless*, Nyi ma 'od zer's parents are practicing together in the local palace instead of the monastery. The intended symbolism of the mother's dream is more apparent, though the details of their practice are veiled by Tantric terminology as well.

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<sup>10</sup> Ashva-ghosha, *Life of the Buddha*, trans. P. Olivelle (New York: New York Univ. Press, 2008), 3.

<sup>11</sup> The golden vajra implanted in her womb, the male seed, is like a miniature representative of its source. It cannot signify the provenance of the Vajra Buddha Family and its deities because both biographies firmly place Nyi ma 'od zer under the auspices of Padmasambhava in the Lotus Buddha Family. Even here in *The Clear Mirror*, his primary tutelary deity is Hayagriva, the fierce aspect of Amitabha and Avalokiteshvara, the *dharmakāya* and *sambhogakāya* deities of the Lotus Family. Padmasambhava is the *nirmānakāya* who completes this ultimately inseparable emanational triad, which may date as early as Nyi ma 'od zer's time (a supplication to them begins his *Copper Temple Biography* of Padmasambhava). *Zangs gling ma*, 2.1-2.

The two, having opened the maṇḍala of Padma dbang chen, ‘the Great Powerful Lotus’, at the palace of mTshan spyod town, when they were abiding in approach and accomplishment, in the night on the tenth day of the fifth month of a rabbit year (1123), there arose four extraordinary women in the mother’s dream. By placing a red, thousand-petaled lotus-flower with anthers in the shape of a precious jewel on the crown of the mother’s head, it dissolved inside her. The ladies circumambulated her three times. Having strewn four handfuls of multicolored flowers, they declared “This is the dharma king, the last existence of the bodhisattva. Through this birth, he will not return. He will become buddhafied. There is no doubt that those transmigrators who see, hear or remember him will become liberated.” Then they dissolved like a rainbow in the sky and departed. When she awoke the next morning, she prostrated to the father.<sup>12</sup>

Compared to the more explicit imagery and risqué locale of conception in *The Clear Mirror*, on first glance this account is quite conservative and chaste. However, while *padma dbang chen* indicates a sādhana or Tantric liturgy of Hayagriva (‘approach and accomplishment’ are the two stages of deity yoga meditation),<sup>13</sup> there remains a veiled reading of the passage as well. As in the discussion of her name above, it is difficult to ignore that the mother is the ‘dynamic expression’ of the deity and maṇḍala they are practicing; it is a direct reference to her secret name, Padma dbang chen rtsal. Rather than euphemistic symbols conveyed through dream, the sex here is made quite explicit through the description of their ‘opening the maṇḍala of the great powerful lotus’. While the parents are practicing the sādhana of the fierce tutelary deity,<sup>14</sup> Hayagriva, they are also consummating their relationship as husband and wife in conceiving their prophesied son.

<sup>12</sup> *gnyis grong khyer mtshan spyod kyi pho brang du/ padma dbang chen gyi dkyil 'khor zhal phyas nas/ bsnyen sgrub la bzhugs pa'i dus su/ yos kyi lo spre'u zla ba'i tshes bcu'i nub mo/ yum gyi rmi lam du bud med mtshan dang ldan pa bzhi byung ste/ me tog padma dmar po 'dab ma stong dang ldan pa/ ze'u 'bru nor bur in po che'i dbyibs su 'dug pa zhid yum gyi spyi bor bzhag pas khong du thim ste/ bud med bzhis yum la bskor ba lan gsum byas nas/ me tog kha dog mi 'dra ba khyor ba bzhi gtor nas/ 'di ni chos kyi rgyal po ste/ /srid pa tha ma'i byang chub sems dpa' yin/ /skye ba 'di bas mi len mngon sangs rgyas/ /'di ni [86] mthong thos dran pa yis/ /'gro ba grol 'gyur the tshom med/ /ces gsungs te/ nam mkha' la 'ja' ltar yal cing gshegs pa rmis nas/ nang par sad pa dang / yab la phyag 'tshal te/ Dri ma med pa, 85.2-86.2.*

<sup>13</sup> In his *Precious Annals of the Origin of Treasure*, kLong chen rab 'byams lists Padma dbang chen among the six classes of sādhana that were concealed by Padmasambhava at Mon kha seng ge dzong. *Gter 'byung rin po che'i lo rgyus*, 82.6.

<sup>14</sup> There is a tendency, even in the relatively short time of translation from Tibetan to English, to reify a familiar translation without reconsidering the semantic

The imagery indicates that the one conceived within her will be like a wish-fulfilling jewel, satisfying the needs of beings, which is confirmed by the ethereal ladies. Furthermore, a lotus is the throne of all the buddhas, but a red lotus specifies the Padma Family of dhyāna or meditation buddhas, the fierce emanation of which, once again, is Hayagriva. References to red phenomena periodically appear as signs throughout *The Stainless*, reiterating Nyi ma 'od zer's association with Padmasambhava and the deities of that family.<sup>15</sup> In addition, since the father has an auspicious dream on the same night, *The Stainless* intensifies the time of conception:

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connotations of the selection. Already numerous terms are accepted as normative based on their consistent usage and ubiquity, but whose implications in English warrant further discussion. One such term is 'wrathful' (*khro bo*) for the deities that appear in monstrous aspects. Likely derived from Catholic notions of *irae caelestes*, 'divine wrath', it presents a certain onomatopoeic appeal. This term, however, connotes a sense of vengeance and emotional content, both of which contradict the nature of these buddhas according to the tradition. All buddhas, however they manifest, are free from the passions by definition; likewise, vengeance gained through wrath is furthest from their *modus operandi*, which is the selfless benefit of beings. The manifestation of buddha activity takes whatever form is necessary as determined by the context and the needs of beings. 'Wrath' as a translation of *khro bo* in the Tibetan Buddhist context is a misapplication of biblical notions of a God defined by emotive experience, from loving to vengeful, which is incongruent with Buddhist notions of identitylessness, the quelling of emotions, and thus the absence of emotional reactivity. As such, 'fierce' and 'ferocious' are more accurate than 'wrathful'.

These terms describe the appearance and activity of such deities without straying into emotional imputations, and certainly not into notions of anger-based revenge. Ferocity itself might be considered a neutral emotional state of intense potentiality, and one that does not preclude the imminent threat of violence. It is a state of severe provocation certainly, but in response to the needs of beings in this context as opposed to some kind of individual gain. It does suggest something animal in nature; the term is often used to describe animals, but in the case of these buddhas it is necessarily pervaded by the realization of emptiness, enlightened awareness, which transcends the cognitive state of animals and most humans as well. I also prefer 'pacifistic' to 'peaceful' for *zhi ba*: the former describes a state of being for a being, whereas the latter is commonly used as a quaint adjective to describe the scenery.

'Wrathful' is appropriate in some Tibetan Buddhist contexts, however – just not with regard to buddhas. In particular, *drags sngag*, 'wrathful mantra', describes the eighth of the *Eight Sādhana Instructions* accurately. Their purpose is to exact harsh effect in the relative world against specific individuals, human and otherwise. While the mind of the mantrin may not, ideally, be clouded by emotional content, those of the people who sponsor the rite very well may be, thus 'wrathful' is appropriate here.

<sup>15</sup> Red yogin (emanation of Padmasambhava) at *Dri ma med pa*, 93.6; red mass of light dissolves into his heart center at 105.6; vision of Ye shes mtsho rgyal with a red cloak at 106.2; red bird at 107.3...

After hearing her dream, he replied: “I also had a dream. Four extraordinary men arose. They had a white conch with 108 petals spiraling to the right, which they gave to me. They said, ‘This is the white conch of the doctrine. If it is blown, the doctrinal sound of the Great Vehicle will resound. Whoever hears it will become a liberator of transmigrators and a subjugator of wrong views’. Since they gave it to me, I was very pleased. By blowing that, from within the 108 petals of the conch, 108 melodious and beautiful languages arose. Because of that, this sound of my conch was heard in all the lands of Dzam bu gling. This I dreamed. It is a sign that the one to take birth to us will be a prince nirmāṇakāya. It is paramount to keep it very secret.” After saying that, they were very happy.<sup>16</sup>

Numerous adjectives are included to specify the significance of oneiric objects and the father distills the meaning of the dream for the reader, so the symbolic indications of this dream are apparent. One prevalent theme here and throughout the biographies is that Nyi ma ’od zer is a harbinger of the Great Vehicle, despite the fact that he exclusively practices the esoteric Supreme Vehicle (and no where demonstrates an affinity for nor knowledge of sūtra, though its importance is occasionally mentioned in passing). The Vajrayāna is presented as a set of soteric technologies located within the larger rubric of the Mahāyāna as opposed to a category of praxis that can be thoroughly isolated from it.<sup>17</sup> The father’s instinct to keep the pregnancy and Nyi ma ’od zer secret then leads to divergent childhoods within the biographies.

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<sup>16</sup> *rmi lam snyam du gsol bas/ yab kyi zhal nas/ bdag gis kyang ma dang gi rmi lam du/ skeyes bu mtshan dang ldan pa bzhi byung ste/ dung dkar g.yas su ’khyil pa zhid la ’dab ma brgya rtsa brgyad yod pa zhid bdag la gtad de/ ’di ni chos kyi dung chen yin/ ’bud na theg chen chos sgra sgrogs/ gang thos ’gro ba grol ’gyur zhing / log par lta ba zil gyis gnon/ zhes zer te/ bdag la gtad pas/ bdag shin tu dga’ ste dung de bus pas/ dung ’dab brgya rtsa brgyad kyi nang nas/ snyan cing yid du ’ong ba’i skad rigs mi ’dra ba brgya rtsa brgyad byung bas bdag gi dung skad ’di ’dzam bu’i gling thams cad du thos so byas rmis pas/ ’o skor la sras sprul pa’i sku zhid bltams pa’i rtags yin pas/ shin [87] tug sang ba gal che/ gsung ste shin tu mnyes so/ Dri ma med pa, 86.2-87.1.*

<sup>17</sup> There are numerous explanations for this, none of which necessarily exclude the others. One might highlight Tibetan sensitivities to the potential (and actual) abuse of special Vajrayāna technologies, which make their explicit inclusion within the broader spectrum of Mahāyāna prerequisite. Perhaps this is to counter a devolution of these practices to base self-gratification, in practice or in the view of critics, as they still require a striving for the Mahāyāna ideal to benefit all beings. Otherwise, these esoteric practices remain ordinary and there is nothing ‘supreme’ or soteriological about them at all.

According to *The Stainless*, that instinct will prove to be correct upon meeting the child born to them.

While *The Clear Mirror* specifies that Nyi ma 'od zer was born in the same month as Siddartha,<sup>18</sup> it provides little additional information aside from the specific date and a set of extraordinary environmental signs at the time of Nyi ma 'od zer's birth:<sup>19</sup>

When [she was completing] the ninth month [and starting] the tenth, he was born in the constellation pusya during a wood female dragon year (1124). Many wondrous signs such as rainbow-colored tents, lights, sounds, earth-tremors and so forth numerously occurred.<sup>20</sup>

The inclusion of the year's element and, to a lesser degree, the gender is critical given the controversy over the dates of Nyi ma 'od zer's birth and death. *The Clear Mirror* specifies 1124 as the year of his birth, whereas *The Stainless* only remarks that it was a dragon year, thereby failing to identify the twelve-year cycle of his birth and leading to some confusion later. The biographical tradition unanimously agrees that he lived to the age of 69, however, and *The Clear Mirror* details the year of his death as a wood male mouse year (1192).<sup>21</sup> Recent western scholarship concurs that Nyi ma 'od zer was born in 1124 and died in 1192,<sup>22</sup> though the Tibetan tradition remains unresolved.<sup>23</sup>

Despite such issues, what *The Stainless* lacks in date specificity it adds in style:

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<sup>18</sup> Ashva-ghosha, *Life of the Buddha*, trans. P. Olivelle (New York: New York Univ. Press, 2008), 5.

<sup>19</sup> These signs are standard in Buddhist biography, which again demonstrates an authorial awareness of the tradition. Their employment produces an equally legitimizing effect for their subject.

<sup>20</sup> *zla dgu ngo bcu na/ shing mo 'brug gi lo skar ma rgyal la sku 'khrungs te/ 'ja' tshon gyi gur phub shing / 'od dang sgra dang sa g.yo ba la sogs ngo mtshar che ba'i rtags mang du byung ste/ Gsal ba'i me long*, 325.3-4.

<sup>21</sup> *Gsal ba'i me long*, 377.1.

<sup>22</sup> L.W.J. van der Kuijp "Review: On the Lives of Śākyaśrībhadrā (?-?1225)," *JAOS* 114.4 (1994): 604; M. Kapstein, *The Tibetan Assimilation of Buddhism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 261 n. 24; and B.L. Phillips, *Consummation and Compassion in Medieval Tibet* (Ph.D. dissertation at the University of Virginia, 2004), 114-5.

<sup>23</sup> dPa' bo gtsug lag 'phreng ba (1504-1566) revised Nyi ma 'od zer's dates to 1136-1204 based on an episode recorded in the biography of Nyi ma 'od zer's son, Nam mkha' dpal, who invited the Indian paṇḍita Śākyaśrībhadrā to consecrate the reliquary of his father in 1204. Dudjom Rinpoche (following Jamgön Kongtrul's *Precious History of Treasure Revealers*, his main source) favors this latter date. See G. Dorje and M. Kapstein, *The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism, Vol. 2* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1991), 70-71 n. 995.



Then, in the following year, on the eighth day of the eighth month of a dragon year, just as the sun rose in the constellation *pusya*, a son was born. Furthermore, he was untainted by *samsāric* defects and, as for the marks of the Lotus family, his body was white with a ruddy complexion. As for the signs that he would not be born again in existence, there was a finger-tall crest at the crown of his head. As for the signs of having completed all the qualities of the Great Vehicle, the hairs of his head extended down in locks. As for the signs that he had perfected all the qualities of the exalted body of all the ones gone to bliss, his body had a white OM mole on his forehead. As for the signs that he had perfected the sixty melodies of a buddha's exalted speech, there was a red birthmark at his throat center in the form of  $\bar{A}H$ . As for the signs that he had mastered exalted mind, the meaning of birthlessness, there was a black birthmark in the shape of  $H\bar{U}M$  at his heart center. As for the signs that he had perfected the five paths and ten *bhūmis*, there were eight-pronged dharma wheels on his feet. As for the signs that he was victorious over all *māras* and obstacles, he had four fang-teeth. So he was born with these eight great marks on his body.<sup>24</sup>

Just like Siddhartha, Nyi ma 'od zer is born with an array of signs and marks that betray his status as a *nirmāṇakāya*. The conditions of their rebirths within their final lifetimes place them on the verge of enlightenment, with only the karmic residue to effect the vast benefit of beings binding them to *samsāra*, though even this statement is controversial. Indeed, the issue of whether the Buddha (and later, by extension, any buddha) is born enlightened or becomes so continues to provoke animated argumentation on the debate courtyards, with an array of positions detailed at length in the advanced textbooks of various monastic curriculums. Merely underscoring the paradox, the interpretations provided above specify that Nyi ma 'od zer has indeed completed the path and is perfected already, though later

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<sup>24</sup> *de nas phyir lo 'brug gi lo ston zla ra ba'i tshes brgyad la/ skar ma rgyal gyi nyin par/ nyi ma shark ha sras gcig sku bltams te/ de yang 'khor ba'i skyon ma gos shing / padma'i rigs yin pa'i rtags su/ sku sha dkar la dmar ba'i mdangs chags pa/ srid pa'i skye ba de las mi len ba'i rtags su/ spyi bor gtsug tor tshon gang yod pa/ theg pa chen po'i yon tan thams cad rdzogs pa'i rtags su/ dbu skra sil bus sog 'dab tu slebs pa/ bde bar gshegs pa thams cad kyi sku'i yon tan thams cad rdzogs pa'i rtags su/ skra mtshams su sha mtshan dkar po om gyi gzugs su yod pa/ gsung dbyangs drub cu gsung la rdzogs pa'i rtags su mgrin pa na sme bad mar po āḥ'i gzugs su yod pa/ skye ba med pa'i don thugs su chud pa'i rtags su/ snying ga na sme ba nag po hūm gi dbyibs su yod pa/ lam lnga sa bcu mthar phyin [88] pa'i rtags su/ zhabs la 'khor lo rtsi bas brgyad kyi ri mo yod pa/ bdud dang bar chad thams cad las rgyal ba'i rtags su/ tshems mche ba bzhi yod pa/ de ltar ya mtshan che ba'i rtags brgyad dang ldan pa zhig sku bltams te/ Dri ma med pa, 87.1-88.2.*

empowerments will provide further ‘maturation’. The various marks on his body have manifested as confirmation in physical form, resulting in a rather striking appearance that, according to his parents, requires that he be kept secret. Following his birth, they withdraw with their child into a closed retreat where he will spend the first six years of his life and complete the initial stages of his studies.<sup>25</sup>

Nyi ma ’od zer is the protagonist of his own biographies of course, so within the narratives it is appropriate and effective to reduce the roles of his parents in such a way. While his father also functions as his first guru, thereby fulfilling an additional role of primary importance throughout his youth, his mother is solely defined by bearing him and disappears from the narratives thereafter.

### *Early Training*

*The Stainless* attributes Nyi ma ’od zer’s extraordinary capacity for learning to the special environment created in the seclusion of retreat. There, free from the distractions that would inevitably come once people beheld his appearance, the boy could focus on his studies: “Since they were able to keep him secret, [he] learned how to read and so forth. Because of that, he became learned in everything without obstruction and came to know it as in an instant.”<sup>26</sup> They appear to have emerged from strict retreat in his seventh year (1131-2), but *The Stainless* maintains that the parents were able to keep their child hidden until the age of nine and so continued his education in private.<sup>27</sup> *The Clear Mirror* concurs that Nyi ma ’od zer was a gifted child, but attributes his aptitude to familiarity:

In dependence on having diligently studied many times [in former births], from the age of two or three he knew – without requiring any study – how to read and so forth. He also knew without studying the tantras and sādhanas of the three, Yang dag he ru ka, rDo rje phur pa and gShin rje gshed. There arose a zeal for meditation, accomplishment and general dharmic conduct. No one could decide whether he was a nirmāṇakāya or what.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> *Dri ma med pa*, 88.6.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.1.

<sup>27</sup> *Dri ma med pa*, 89.2.

<sup>28</sup> *dang por sbyangs pa mang po mdzad pa’i stobs la brten nas/ lo gnyis gsum nas yi ge klog la sogs pa yang slob mi dgos par mkhyen pa dang / yang phur gshed gsum gyi rgyud dang sgrub thabs kyang ma slabs par mkhyen pa dang / sgom sgrub dang bya*

While *The Stainless* relies on physical signs to confirm Nyi ma 'od zer's sanctity as an actual *nirmāṇakāya*, *The Clear Mirror* introduces other evidence in their stead. His knowledge of various key tantras is particularly compelling as proof for prior lives of intensive practice. As may be expected, the selection of tantras recollected here are not random: Yang dag he ru ka (Skt: Viśuddha heruka), rDo rje phur pa (Skt: Vajrakīla), and gShin rje gshed (Skt: Yamāntaka) are three of the five fierce deities that Nyi ma 'od zer would propagate in his most extensive treasure collection, the *Eight Sādhana Instructions (sgrub pa bka' brgyad)*.<sup>29</sup> Nyi ma 'od zer's affinity and natural aptitude for dharma, particularly that of the esoteric Vajrayāna, are thus made evident in the account provided here. Within *The Clear Mirror*, they serve as preliminary corroboration of the mothers' dream: that the son born to them is indeed a *nirmāṇakāya*.

Further confirmation arrives at the age of seven when Nyi ma 'od zer has the first of many auspicious dreams and visions. Both biographies punctuate his life with the apparition of various divine and semi-divine beings who bestow instructions, encourage practice, and provide companionship and support in lonely times.

When he reached the age of seven, the people in the area danced and played a lot and so forth, but he was unhappy. Having thought compassionately towards transmigrators, he went on vacation in the snows of 'Jod rtse le. In a dream while staying there for one day, there arose four women, white, yellow, red and green. Joined in one melodious voice they said, "Son of the lineage arising from learning, we are your friends. You are the lord of the secret mantra, the oral transmissions (*bka' ma*) and treasures (*gter ma*): please open the treasure doors of the sacred doctrine. Care for those with karmic propensities, the fortunate students. We and you are beyond inclusion and exclusion." Having said that, they faded into the sky. At the time of waking up there were magical apparitions. Then, after returning inside himself, he practiced.<sup>30</sup>

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*cha chos spyod la brtson pa cig byung ste/ kun gyis sprul pa'i sku'am ci yin blos mi 'khyud pa cig byung ngo / Gsal ba'i me long, 325.4-6.*

<sup>29</sup> Corresponding to exalted mind, activity and body respectively, this list accords with the hierarchy based on the five buddha families. Yang dag he ru ka, the representation of the subtlest and purest aspect of reality, is foremost. Conversely, gShin rje gshed is a representation of the grossest aspect, exalted body or form, and so here is listed last. Nyi ma 'od zer's future yidam, rTa mgrin (Skt: Hayagriva), exalted speech, is not mentioned here, but his absence circumvents its requisite placement beneath gShin rje gshed in a hierarchy that descends in degrees of subtlety.

<sup>30</sup> *dgung lo bdun bzhes pa'i dus su [326] yul mi rnams kyi bro dang / rtsed mo la sogs pa mang po zhig byas pa la thugs skyo zhing / 'gro ba rnams snying rje bar dgongs*

This episode is the first mention of treasures in the text and the first indication of what his manifestation as a teacher will be, thus foreshadowing who he will become. Whether ostracized by his own predilections for dharma or concealed in retreat because of his appearance, the biographies present a childhood defined by isolation. There is no record of him having any siblings, thus the beings that make themselves apparent to him are his only companions, providing comfort through the consolation of a loaded future.

*Empowerment and Experience*

While *The Stainless* provides few details of Nyi ma 'od zer's training in his later childhood and teenage years, *The Clear Mirror* presents a more continuous narrative that punctuates this period with several visionary episodes. These are presented as defining moments for the young yogin as they compelled his father to bestow key empowerments, thus maturing him on the path of Tantra as he developed both physically and soteriologically.<sup>31</sup> The first occurs in a dream not long after his encounter with the ladies above.

Yet again, when Nyi ma 'od zer had reached the age of eight (1132), one night he dreamed that the sky was filled with rainbows, and one of the rainbow strands descended and pierced the earth. In the center of that spot was the one called Bhagavan Shakyamuni. He had the guise of an ordained one and sat encircled by many sangha of monks. I went forward to meet him and, after strewing flowers, I requested teachings, at which point I dreamt that Shakyamuni taught the dharma through the door of symbolic language: "When things are thoroughly inverted, clarify them!" Then, when I awoke, the sun was already up. Since it had risen high there was perspiration on my body. My bedding had become damp and I was woozy and scatter-brained, as though I were drunk and on my way to bed. This state endured for a month. Since I told my father, Nyang ston chos

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*nas/ 'jod rtse le'i gangs la skyo sangs la byon te/ zhag gcig bzhugs pa'i rmi lam na/ bud med dkar ser dmar ljang bzhi byung nas/ dbyangs mgrin cig du sdebs nas 'di skad zer/ sbyangs las sad rigs kyi bu/ nged rnams khyed kyi grogs yin te/ /khyed nig sang sngags bka' getr bdag /dam pa chos kyi get sgo phye/ /las 'phro skal ldan slob mo skyong / nged dang khyed la 'du 'bral med/ /zer nas namkhar yal/ de tshe gnyid sad snang ba sgyu mar 'dug /de nas rang gi nang du 'ongs nas sgrub pa mdzad do/ Gsal ba'i me long, 325.6-326.4.*

<sup>31</sup> Vajrayāna relies on empowerment and instruction, which correspond to 'maturation' and 'liberation' (*smin grol*), thus the bestowal of empowerment literally 'matures' the practitioner on the path.

kyi 'khor lo, he said, "It was a good dream, but there may be obstacles," so he bestowed the empowerment of the tutelary deity.<sup>32</sup>

This is one of exceedingly few, quite tenuous references to anything related to sūtra in the biographies. Nyi ma 'od zer remains focused on Tantra throughout, thus the mere mention of Shakyamuni, celibate monks, and exoteric Dharma warrants mention. The actual instruction severs the connection, however, as this cryptic phrase finds few referents in sūtra or even Abhidharma and again seems to point towards esoteric technologies. Likewise, the dream results in Nyi ma 'od zer's empowerment into the maṇḍala of his tutelary deity, so this sūtric-themed encounter is concluded by Tantric reinforcement.

A couple of years later, Nyi ma 'od zer has the first of a series of encounters with Padmasambhava that would occur throughout his life. In this dream, Nyi ma 'od zer receives the four empowerments and rests in the three experiences of bliss, clarity and non-thought – all at the age of ten.

Then, when I had reached the age of ten (1134), one night in a dream the sky, the earth and all the space between were filled by men, women and many riders. After raising aloft parasols, victory banners and flags, the sounds of music from damarus, small cymbals, drums, flutes, bells, large cymbals and so forth resounded in the mountains. At the center of that assembly was the one called Acharya Padmasambhava. The Acharya mounted a white horse, and four ladies lifted the four hooves of his horse. After supplicating him, I also wept. When devotion arose naturally, with a thunderous roar the four ladies lifted their hooves and Padmasambhava arrived before me, bearing a jeweled vase filled with amrita. By completely bestowing the four empowerments in an instant with one

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<sup>32</sup> *yang dgung lo brgyad lon pa'i tshé nub cig rmi lam na/ namkha'ja' yis khengs 'dug pa la/ 'ja'i rkang cig sa la zug nas 'dug ste/ de'i dkyil na bcom ldan 'das shakya thub pa yin zer ba cig sku rab tu byung pa'i cha byad can/ dge slong gi dge 'dun mang pos bskor nas bzhugs 'dug pas/ bdag gis kyang mjal du phyin te me tog gtor nas chos zhus pa'i tshé/ [327] brda'i sgo nas chos gsungs pa cig rmis te/ zhib par log na gsal/ de nas mnal sad pa'i dus na/ nyi ma zhar nas 'dug pa la/ yar bzhengs pas/ sku lus la rngul byung nas/ gzim mal nang chu ru song 'dug cing / de naszi zi bun bun nyal khar chang gis gzir ba lta bu/ zla bag cig tshun byang ngo / yab myang ston chos kyi 'khor lo la zhus pas zhal nas/ rmis bltas bzang te bar chad 'dra 'ong srid gsungs nas/ yi dam gyi dbang skur cig mdzado/ Gsal ba'i me long, 326.4-327.3.*

Based on Erik Pema Kunsang's translation of the same excerpt in Padmasambhava, *Dakini Teachings* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1990), xi. Also reproduced in B.L. Phillips, *Consummation and Compassion in Medieval Tibet* (Ph.D. dissertation at the University of Virginia, 2004), 119 n. 39; and Dudjom Rinpoche, *The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism*, trans. and ed. Gyurme Dorje (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1991), 755.

voice, the three experiences dawned in me. The sky tore, the earth shook, and the mountains trembled. Intrinsic awareness roared like fire, like water churning, like wind howling.<sup>33</sup> When I awoke, dawn had broken and my body was very blissful and light. The appearances of the three experiences were there as before.<sup>34</sup>

Energized by this dream and its subsequent attainment, “he ran to the summits of ’Jod gangs and all the Ri lung and performed for a few days the various accumulations of conduct. Everyone said he was insane or stupid.”<sup>35</sup> Nyi ma ’od zer met detractors and skeptics throughout his life. Despite such criticism, his father continued to train him in private. Various signs of accomplishment, such as clairvoyance, develop in the child. Continuing from above:

The higher perceptions dawned alone. He recognized his past and future lives. He also knew the lifespans of all the students and retinue, as well as their good and bad qualities. Since he asked his father, Nyang ston chos kyi ’khor lo, about those signs, his father said, “The signs and auspicious connections are good,” then the venerable father bestowed an empowerment of the singular [form] of heroic Hayagriva.<sup>36</sup>

Once again, the father bestows empowerment directly following an auspicious dream. The father’s selection of the empowerment is far

<sup>33</sup> ’ur ’ur. The verb is a generic onomatopoeia. Intended for dramatic effect, it mimics the natural sound of various elements, hence ‘roared like fire’ and so forth.

<sup>34</sup> *de nas dgun lo bcu bzhes pa’i tshe/ nub cig rmi lam na/ namkha’dang / sa gzhi/ bar nas thams cad/ skyes pa dang / bud med dang / rta pa mang pos khengs ’dug cing / lag nag dugs dang / rgyal mishan dang / bad an dang / rol mo’i sgra brnyan/ da ma ru dang / ting shag dang / rda dang gling bu dang / dril bu dang / cha lang la sogs pa thogs nas/ sgra ’di ri ri bskor ba byed kyin ’dug pas/ de’i dkyil na slob dpon pad ma ’byung gnas yin zer ba/ [328] rta dkar po gcig la a tsar a cig zhon nas/ bud med bzhis rta’i rmig pa bzhi nas bteg ’dug pa la/ bdag gis gsol ba btab nas spyang chab kyang ston/ mos pa dung dung byas pa’i tshe/ sgra’i ’ur sgra dang bcas pas/ bud med bzhis rta’i rmig pa nas btegs te/ bdag gi mdun du byon nas/ rin po che’i bum pa bdud rtsis gang ba bsname shing / skad cig dus cig la dbang bzhi yongsu rdzogs par bskur bas/ bdag la nyams gsum shar te/ gnam ral ba ’am/ sa g.yos pa ’am/ ri ’bir ba ’am/ rig pa ’ur ’ur yod pa la mnal sad dus/ nam langs ’dug pa la/ sku lus shin tub de la yang ba/ nyams kyi snang ba yang gong bzhin du ’dug ste/ Gsal ba’i me long, 327.4-328.4.*

<sup>35</sup> *’jod gangs kyi rtse dang / ri lung thams cad la rgyag cing / spyod pa’i tshogs sna tshogs pa yang zhag ’ga’i bar du mdzad pas/ mi kun gyis smyon pa ’am lkug pa zhes pa yang byung ngo / Ibid., 328.5-6.*

<sup>36</sup> *mngon par shes pa ’ang ’ba’ zhig tu shar te/ [329] skye ba snga phyi shes pa dang / ’khor slob kun gyi tshad dang / legs nyes shes pa yang byung ngo / rtags de rnams yab myang ston chos kyi ’khor lo la zhus pas/ tan kyi zhal nas rtags dang rten ’brel bzang gsung nas/ pha jos rta mgrin dpa’ bo gcig pa’i dbang bskur te/ Ibid., 328.6-329.2.*

from random; it precisely corresponds to the content of Nyi ma 'od zer's dream. As a narrative device, the dream and subsequent empowerment reinforces the connection between Nyi ma 'od zer and Padmasambhava and foreshadows his treasure activity as the reincarnation of Khri srong lde btsan (Trisong Detsen). Hayagriva then becomes the focus of Nyi ma 'od zer's practice.

The karmic theory implemented throughout is quite simple. The primary basis is that like-causes produce like-results: a grain of barley, when met with the proper conditions, produces a barley sprout. In these biographies, the activities of the former incarnation, emperor Khri srong lde btsan, ripen into the lifetime of the fully enlightened treasure revealer, Nyi ma 'od zer. The primary causes for that final life were thus planted in a former one, and the current life is merely their fruition. Such uncomplicated karmic theory is not especially striking given the pervasive emphasis on Tantric lineages and praxis. The enumerations and relationships of causes, conditions and effects, so thoroughly outlined in *Abhidharma* and debated in monastic curriculums, are absent here. Nyi ma 'od zer and his line were non-institutional, non-monastic Tantrikas; they appear to have little knowledge nor interest in the complexities of Buddhist dialectics. Nevertheless, a respect for them remains prerequisite and the fundamental progression of cause and effect drives the narrative.

Following several years of solitary retreat in a mountain hermitage, Nyi ma 'od zer displays various signs of accomplishment, which are observed by people throughout the area. Signs function as evidence, provided in narrative through the medium of public testimony, that an individual has attained the stages of realization attempted through a specific practice. They demonstrate that the practitioner has meditated correctly and succeeded in the objectives of that meditation. Since the meditator dissolves all notions of self and with them the fundamental separation maintained through dualistic thought, s/he recognizes their own 'identity' to be the deity, which is enlightened awareness itself. When all external phenomena are recognized as the apparent form aspects of the deity, the manifest display of enlightened awareness, and the false conception of self is so thoroughly undermined that there is nothing other than this awareness, the tradition asserts that a manipulation of phenomena deemed 'miraculous' by ordinary beings becomes possible. Such signs are dismissed within a conventional worldview founded on the fundamental laws of an external reality, which is merely the residual effect of ignorance according to Tibetan Buddhism. While these laws are mere constraints, artificial constructs

that confine one within the prison of *samsāra*, signs are *natural*: they demonstrate reality rather than the illusion of assumed limitations, so they fill the pages of Tibetan biographies as vivid evidence of genuine transcendence. An extended description of signs follows the conclusion of a six-year retreat in Nyi ma 'od zer's teenage years:

Between the ages of thirteen and nineteen (ca. 1137-1142), by making seven *bre* of mustard seeds through the practice of Hayagriva's fierce mantra at 'Jod phu ma in the snowy land, many signs of accomplishment also appeared. After water in the vase boiled and fire blazed on the torma, his home in the south was illuminated by firelight. The snows at rTse le melted and accumulated at 'Jod lungs as a lake... His copper *kīla*-dagger neighed three times. Having heard that all over his home area, since many merchants behind the snows had not heard it, they named the hill 'Deaf Pass'. Moreover, he had a vision that his tutelary deity, the singular [form] of heroic Hayagriva, really resided in the opening at the crown of his head. The retinue of deities started dancing and the sound of PHAṬ was heard. The local gods and nagas also prostrated and promised to do whatever he commanded. The steam of his breath shimmered into rainbows. When flames burned from the saliva he spit on the ground, it was also said that [people's] robes and so forth became scorched by touching it. Additionally, 'Jod phu rock has many body imprints and footprints.<sup>37</sup>

The Tibetan for Hayagriva, rTa mgrin, literally translates as 'horse neck'. Its iconography depicts this deity with a horse's head emerging from his crown, so some of the signs associated with the accomplishment of Hayagriva, such as neighing, correspond to this defining aspect. Likewise, since the practitioner realizes oneself as inseparable from this ferocious blazing deity, the resounding of the

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<sup>37</sup> *dgung lo bcu gsum nas bcu dgu'i bar du/ rta mgrin drag sngags kyi sgrub pa nyung dkar bre bdun la/ 'jod phu ma gangs kyi ra bar mdzad pas/ sgrub rtags kyang mang du byung ste/ bum chu khol ba dang / gtor ma la me 'bar nas/ me 'od kyis lho phyogs lung pa gsal ba dang / rtse le'i gangs zhu zhing 'jod lungs ma cho ru 'khyil ba dang / ... zangs kyi phur pas rta skad len gsum du ston/ yul khams thams cad du thos pa las/ gangs rgyab na tshong pa mang po yod pas/ des ma thos nas la'i ming yang 'on lung la kha zhes btags/ gzhan yang yi dam rta mgrin dpa' bo cig pa rta thod kyi khan a dngos su bzhugs pa zhal gzigs/ lha 'khor rnams kyi gar sgyur [330] zhing phaṭ kyi sgra sgrog pa gsan/ yul gyi lha klu rnams kyi kyang / phyag byed pa dang / cig sung gi bka' nyan par dam byas/ zhal gyi rlangs pa 'ja' ru khyugs khyugs 'gro ba dang / zhal chab sa la bor ba las me 'bar te/ gos la sogs pa la phog pas gzhob du song pa yang byung gsung / 'jod phu'i brag la sku rjes dang / zhabs rjes kyang mang du yod cing / Gsal ba'i me long, 329.2-330.3.*



fierce syllable PHAṬ, heat and flame are congruent products of accomplishment.

These signs and others demonstrate that the fixed characteristics of external phenomena have taken on a certain malleability, unbound by the qualities normally attributed to them. In some cases this is quite literal, as when Nyi ma 'od zer impresses his body or feet into solid rock. In others, the nature of an object is completely transformed, as when his spit scorches clothing. Important throughout is that these signs can be clearly witnessed by others, confirming Nyi ma 'od zer's accomplishment, spreading faith among the populace, and authenticating him as a realized teacher.

In addition to confirming the individual's legitimacy, signs also prove that the particular practice is ideally suited for that practitioner. That is, the tutelary deity harmonizes with the secret nature of the person; meditation on the deity actualizes the enlightened potential of the individual, which results in attainment. Signs prove that the empowerment previously bestowed was karmically potent and soteriologically effective, thereby serving as further evidence of the authenticity of the one who bestowed it as well.<sup>38</sup> Since this was none other than his father, it provides additional clout to the continuity and strength of his family lineage.

*The Stainless* offers few details concerning Nyi ma 'od zer's training in his teenage years. Rather than promoting a natural

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<sup>38</sup> There are many rich examples of Nyi ma 'od zer's extra-ordinary abilities throughout both biographies, but *The Stainless* in particular. Another occurs later in life when he has already matured as a teacher:

One day a dog arose in the dharma row. After it took off with an offering cake, one minister hurled a rock [at the dog]. Having struck it on the forehead, [the dog died.] Once [Nyi ma 'od zer] drew a liberation diagram on the corpse, it incinerated the body. Rainbows arose in the sky. Since many relics arose in the bones, the lama [Nyi ma 'od zer] said, "Concerning the end of the teachings in the *kali yuga*, lazy people, bewildered animals, and sentient beings with wrong views will have the oral instructions on the liberation diagram wheel, which buddhifies in an instant. In particular, it is an especially superior [way] to benefit transmigrators." By means of that, all the disciples gave rise to extraordinary devotion free from doubt.

*nyin gcig chos gral du khyi zhig byung nas lha bshos shig khyer nas blon po zhig gis rdo zhig 'phangs pas/ dpral bar phog nas shi ba'i ro la btags grol btags nas ro de bsregs pas/ nam mkha' la 'ja' byung / [108] rus pa la ring bsrel mang po 'byung bas/ bla ma'i zhal nas/ rtsod dus bstan pa'i tha ma la/ /le lo can gyi skyes bu dang / /gti mug can gyi byol song dang / /log lia can gyi sems can rnams/ /skad cig nyid la sangs rgyas pa'i/ /'khor lo btags grol gyi man ngag yod/ /'gro don khyad du 'phags pa yin/ /zhes gsungs pas/ gdul bya thams cad blo the tshom med pa'i mos gus khyad par can skyes so/ Dri ma med pa, 107.5-108.3.*

preponderance for Yang dak he ru ka, rDo rje phur pa and gShin rje gshed from the age of two or three as in *The Clear Mirror, The Stainless* states that he did not receive the empowerments and instructions for these until he was fifteen. In addition, he also received Great Perfection (*rDzogs chen*) transmission at that time, the fourth of ‘the four soul-doctrines of the forefathers’.<sup>39</sup>

*On the significance of the name, Nyang ral pa can nyi ma ’od zer*

As his name includes four distinct elements, a range of abbreviated variants have been used to refer to the master, with mNga’ bdag nyang and Nyang nyi ma ’od zer among the more common ones. Initially this caused some confusion among western scholars, leading one to even conclude that Nyang ral and Nyi ma ’od zer were distinct individuals, which is clearly not the case.<sup>40</sup> In contemporary common usage, one finds that ‘Nyang ral’ is often preferred in Western scholarship, but it is a somewhat artificial convention: it rarely appears alone in Tibetan texts. Colloquially, Tibetans often refer to him simply as Nyi ma ’od zer, hence my adoption of their convention.

*mNga’ bdag*, ‘the sovereign’, is a common epithet for the emperors of the Imperial Period. Here it functions as a recognition and reaffirmation of Nyi ma ’od zer’s status as the reincarnation of Khri srong lde btsan (r. 755-797) in particular, though Khri ral pa can (Tri Relpachen, r. 815-836), another of his prior incarnations, is referred to as *mnga’ bdag* as well. Since the series of Nyi ma ’od zer’s preincarnations was devised posthumously<sup>41</sup> and the treasures of Khri srong lde btsan’s reign pervade Nyi ma ’od zer’s legacy, the epithet in his lifetime referred exclusively to Khri srong lde btsan. Though his treasure colophons provide scant information, one of their most common lines simply describes the treasure as belonging to Khri srong lde btsan: “The sovereign’s scripture was concealed as a precious treasure.”<sup>42</sup> Nyi ma ’od zer’s appropriation of this epithet thus

<sup>39</sup> *bzhi ni yab mes kyi bla chos yin/ Dri ma med pa*, 90.4. For a discussion of *bla* or ‘soul’ documents, see R.M. Davidson, “Imperial Agency in the Gsar ma Treasure Texts during the Tibetan Renaissance,” in *Tibetan Buddhist Literature and Praxis, PIATS 2003*, ed. R.M. Davidson and C.K. Wedemeyer (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 133-7.

<sup>40</sup> A. MacDonald, “Une Lecture des Pelliot tibétain 1286, 1287, 1038, 1047, et 1290,” in *Études dédiées à la mémoire de Marcelle Lalou*, ed. A. MacDonald (Paris: Librairie d’Amérique et d’Orient, 1971), 203 n.59. Cited and refuted in P. Sørensen, *The Mirror Illuminating the Royal Genealogies* (Weisbaden: Harrassowitz, 1994), 7 n. 17.

<sup>41</sup> Proof of this is provided in a separate chapter of my dissertation.

<sup>42</sup> *mnga’ bdag gi phyag dpe: gter rin po cher sbas so:*

reinforces his claim to the treasures as they are, quite literally, his. Likewise, *The Clear Mirror* explicitly states which emperor is designated: “it was determined that [he] was the magical emanation of sovereign Khri srong lde btsan,”<sup>43</sup> but *The Stainless* is ambiguous. Nyi ma ’od zer gains the epithet following the public confirmation of his status as well, but the prior incarnation is unspecified: “[He] came to be renowned as a nirmāṇakāya. [He] was also named mNga’ bdag nyang ral.”<sup>44</sup> The title has no correlation to any political status in his life (he had none), but refers back to the throne he once occupied as the emperor Khri srong lde btsan in a prior lifetime.

The second element of Nyi ma ’od zer’s extended name is spelled *Myang* in pre-classical Tibetan or *Nyang* in classical and contemporary orthography. Its function is congruent with a surname as it designates patrilineal descent from the Nyang clan. Like many Tibetan clan names, ‘Nyang’ was most likely derived as a regional signifier, borrowed from the locale over which these people presided, Nyang po.<sup>45</sup> This covers an area south/south-east of rGyal rtse through which the Nyang river runs.<sup>46</sup> The Nyang clan remained active in this, the ‘right horn’ of gTsang, throughout the Imperial period. Clan competition and peasant insurrections during the period of fragmentation forced some families from their areas of cognomen, but the Nyang clan had acquired other lands and ruled over sBrang mkhar sbre can as Tibet emerged from this era.<sup>47</sup> By Nyi ma ’od zer’s lifetime, his immediate family had settled over 200 kilometers to the south-east in Lho brag, literally and figuratively distanced from power yet with lingering prestige. Such diminished status was in stark contrast to their standing throughout the dynastic period when, as one of Tibet’s Buddhist aristocratic families (*bram ze*),<sup>48</sup> the Nyang clan populated the

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<sup>43</sup> *Gsal ba’i me long*, 325.4.

<sup>44</sup> *Dri ma med pa*, 90.3.

<sup>45</sup> See R.M. Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2005), 80.

<sup>46</sup> In O rgyan gLing pa’s 14<sup>th</sup> century *Lha ’dre bka’i thang yig*, *nyang po* is included as one of three areas which, prior to Padmasambhava, had been dominated by particularly ‘noxious beings’ and were ‘lands of great mischief’. Haarh argues that *nyang po*, along with *dwags po* and *kong po*, form one of the earliest conceptions of ancient Tibet, predating the ascension of *Yar lung* in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. It was not until this time that the latter was introduced as a fourth district to the original territorial paradigm. E. Haarh, *The Yar lun Dynasty* (Copenhagen: G.E.C. Gad, 1969), 272.

<sup>47</sup> R.M. Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2005), 80-1.

<sup>48</sup> This term commonly indicates the Brahmin caste of the Hindu tradition, which is clearly not its meaning here. Yet *bram ze* retains some of its original significance

inner circles of the emperors for generations, rising to prominence and prosperity in lock-step with the Buddhist empire.

*The Stainless* counts Nyi ma 'od zer's father as the eighteenth generation of Nyang clan adepts, whereas *The Clear Mirror* lists him as the seventeenth. Despite this slight discrepancy, both emphasize that Nyang preserved an unbroken practice lineage that focused on the transmission of the ferocious tutelary deities, Yang dag he ru ka, rDo rje phur pa, and gShin rje gshed. *The Clear Mirror* adds Ma mo to the list of cycles preserved by Nyi ma 'od zer's father,<sup>49</sup> thus at least four of the *Eight Sādhana Instructions* (*sGrub pa bka' brgyad*), Nyi ma 'od zer's most extensive treasure collection, were directly transmitted down the family line. In sum, the Nyang in Nyi ma 'od zer's name invokes the past glory of the dynasties, the political legacy of his clan in their successes, and the uninterrupted religious legitimacy of his lineage.

The third element of his name, Ral or even Ral pa can, signifies 'having long hair', 'braids' or, most specifically in this case, the 'dread-locks' of a long-term retreatant.<sup>50</sup> While *The Clear Mirror* is devoid of any explicit explanation of the *ral* in his name, *The Stainless* recounts that Nyi ma 'od zer was born with long hair that extended down to his shoulders. Since *The Stainless* interprets these as confirmation of successful practice or accomplishment in past lives, 'dread-locks' is most likely the best translation; Nyi ma 'od zer was born into the Nyang clan as a baby bearing the matted dreads of a long-term meditator, hence the name 'Nyang ral'. The causal force of prior accomplishment has manifested as a physical feature at the time of birth, marking the boy as very special in the present while promising a loaded future. The sign functions as an intermediary form of karmic foreshadowing. It bridges the divide between primary cause and final result, between realization and complete liberation. With the other marks, his dread-locks are uncommon apparent expressions of karmic inevitability, quite successful in their dramatic effect.

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while stripped of its Hindu specifications. That is, it is a term designating the upper echelons of a social hierarchy, in this case the Tibetan aristocracy. Religiously it denotes a patron family, one who monetarily supports the Buddhist conversion project.

<sup>49</sup> *Gsal ba'i me long*, 348.4.

<sup>50</sup> Nyi ma 'od zer's *ral* may be assumed to reiterate the connection to one of his prior incarnations in particular, Khri ral pa can, but this would be in error. As the succession of Nyi ma 'od zer's past lives was devised posthumously, the link is merely coincidental. Both biographies remain silent on this connection despite the apparent relationship, and they only explain his dread-locks as the result of practice in former lives.

Neither biography recounts the moment he was named Nyi ma 'od zer, 'Light Rays of the Sun', or why, though perhaps it was bestowed as a birth or initiatory name by his father. Tibetans have long requested lamas to name their children and it is common to receive an additional name at the time of empowerment. Since Nyang ston chos kyi 'khor lo was, as his name states, 'The Nyang Teacher', he very well may have named the child himself in holding the roles of both father and guru. Regardless of its source, there is no mention or interpretation of 'Nyi ma 'od zer' at the time of his receiving it. Instead, various figures throughout his biographies come to hint at its significance for him.

In both biographies, there are allusions to the significance of his name. In particular, *The Clear Mirror* describes two individuals who, appearing under mysterious circumstances, bestow instructions and prophesize Nyi ma 'od zer's impending enlightened activity. While practicing in a remote area, certain that 'no one else was around', Nyi ma 'od zer awakes from a dream encounter with a *ḍākiṇī* of primordial gnosis, Rig pa 'khyams med, to find himself in the company of a yogin meditating atop a rock:

Although [Nyi ma 'od zer] did not recognize him, he said to the yogin, "Welcome! What is your name? Who is your family? Where do you live? What is the meaning of your coming here?" Since he questioned him like that, the yogin replied, "As for a name, I have none; I am equal to the extent of space. As for my family, it is the *bram ze* Myang. As for a place, I have none; I wander everywhere. Right now I am meditating on the inexpressible transcendence of mind. Omnipresent, the throne and canopy<sup>51</sup> sun dawns. Great Perfection clarifies the light rays of the sun (*nyi ma'i 'od zer*). Apparent objects and characteristics are liberated into their own ground. Meditate on the gnosis *ḍākiṇī*!"<sup>52</sup>

This is the first direct reference to his name, but the terse composition of the yogin's reply, exacerbated by the constriction of verse, presents a cryptic set of instructions more than an explicit indication of his name's significance. This yogin appears to be the perfected reflection of Nyi ma 'od zer himself, born of the same family, yet released from all fetters and transcendent of all conceptions. It is relevant that the one

<sup>51</sup> *Khri gdugs*, 'throne [and] canopy', is a metaphor for the sun.

<sup>52</sup> *ngo ma shes kyang rnal 'byor pa khyed kyi phebs pa legs/ khyed kyi ming la ci zer rus gang yin/ gnas gang du bzugs/ de ltar don ci la byon dris pas/ rnal 'byor pa de'i zhal nas/ ming med namkha'i mtha' dang mnyam/ /rus ni bram ze myang gi rigs/ /gnas ni nges med kun du 'khyams/ /da lta blo 'das brjod med sgom/ /khyeb brdal khri gdugs nyi ma shar/ /rdzogs chen nyi ma'i zer la gsal/ /snang yul mtshan ma rang sar grol/ bsgom cig ye shes mkha'gro ma/ /gsungs pas/ Gsal ba'i me long, 332.4-6.*

identifying detail the yogin provides is that he too is of the Nyang clan, which vaunts the prestige of this ancestry. The rest eschews identification and location of any kind with expansive Great Perfection rhetoric.<sup>53</sup> The yogin thus recommends the Great Perfection as the final means to ‘clarify the light rays of the sun’, and directs Nyi ma ’od zer to its practice as his concluding imperative.<sup>54</sup> The refractions of relative phenomena (light rays) must be reconciled, recognized as indivisible from their source and ultimate nature (the sun).

Directly following this encounter with the yogin, Nyi ma ’od zer meets a *ma jo* or female lama, who provides more explicit commentary on his name:

E ma! Listen supreme being, yogin: Your venerable father’s lineage is the *bram ze* Nyang. The pure place of enlightenment is the dharmatā endowed with benefit. By means of various activities, you look compassionately upon transmigrators. I am meeting with the sun dawning in the darkness of ignorance. As for the person’s name, having been well-designated as ‘Light Rays of the Sun’, his name also will be renowned as Nyi ma ’od zer.<sup>55</sup>

The *ma jo* concurs that Nyang ral has reached the final stage of practice and predicts his inevitable enlightenment. Metaphorically, he is the rising sun of wisdom dispelling the long night of ignorance. *The Stainless* promotes a similar interpretation when sMyon pa don ldan,

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<sup>53</sup> My thanks to Joel Gruber for pointing this out while reviewing an earlier draft of the article.

<sup>54</sup> Lest we mistake this instruction to ‘meditate on the gnosis *dākiṇī*’ as a Mahāyoga creation stage practice (i.e. deity yoga), her name when translated is ‘Non-wandering Intrinsic Awareness.’ She thus signifies the very pinnacle of calm abiding (*zhi gnas*) and special insight (*lhag mthong*) meditation. The instruction then is to meditate without distraction on *rig pa*, the non-dual object of the Great Perfection.

<sup>55</sup> *e ma gsan dang skyes mchog rnal ’byor pa/ /khyed cho rigs bitsun pa bram ze myang gi rigs/ /dgongs yul dag pa chos nyid don dang ldan/ /nges med spyod pas ’gro ba snying rje gzigs/ /ma rig mun sel nyi ma shar dang mjal/ /skyes bu’i gtshan ni nyi ma ’od zer bzang zer nas/ mtshan yang nyi ma ’od zer du grags so. Gsal ba’i me long, 333.1-3.*

The last two verses have been taken to indicate that Nyi ma ’od zer received his name from the *ma jo*, but the Tibetan here clearly establishes a sequence, designated by the ablative *nas*, whereby the name was already granted and is now merely confirmed. Dudjom Rinpoche, following the first Jamgön Kongtrul, condenses the episode and attributes ‘Nyi ma ’od zer’ to the *dākiṇī* he had been dreaming of previously. Dudjom Rinpoche, *History of the Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1991), 755.

one of Nyi ma 'od zer's later gurus, predicts that he will benefit beings like the rising sun.<sup>56</sup>

*Claiming his karmic inheritance*

While Nyang ston chos kyi 'khor lo's death is not mentioned in either biography, it may be reasonable to deduce that he died when Nyi ma 'od zer was in his late teens. His final activities in the biographies are the transmissions just described. In *The Clear Mirror*, Nyang ston chos kyi 'khor lo is mentioned once more to introduce "the way in which the sovereign [Nyi ma 'od zer] trained his mind in the doctrines of the oral transmissions."<sup>57</sup> Here the father is eulogized as an accomplished practitioner of several Tantric cycles whose continuity survived unbroken from the Imperial period. The implication is that he transmitted all of these to his son, but still there remains no indication that he himself had passed.

The father may have been somewhat older or in poor health, even when Nyi ma 'od zer was born in 1124. *The Stainless* recounts that the locals, in attempt to interpret the various signs that appeared at that time, speculate that Nyang ston chos kyi 'khor lo had died and that these were the 'signs of his nirvāṇa' or death.<sup>58</sup> His father was by far the most significant figure in his life, yet he fades from both biographies after bestowing these transmissions. By the time Nyi ma 'od zer reaches the age of twenty-one (1145), he has sought out and received instructions from other teachers for the first time, which may have been precipitated and necessitated by the death of his father and root guru, Nyang ston chos kyi 'khor lo. It is from this point that Nyi ma 'od zer moves from preparing for his destiny to inheriting it, from establishing the karmic potential for his activity to manifesting it, from serving the treasures in a former life to recovering them. As Nyi ma 'od zer ventures out from the tutelage of his father to receive the instructions and aid of other teachers, including other early treasure

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<sup>56</sup> *Dri ma med pa*, 91.6.

<sup>57</sup> *Gsal ba'i me long*, 348.4.

<sup>58</sup> On the day of his birth, rainbow tents appeared on top of the palace, flowers rained, and the sound of music resounded. Some people in the area said, "The two, the father and mother accomplished Padma dbang chen: this is a sign of their meeting him face to face." Some said, "[These are] the signs of Nyang ston chos kyi 'khor lo's nirvāṇa." Some said, "[When] the three-year old son of Lha cig bsod nams rgyan [died], his corpse was taken to the charnel ground, [but] the wild animals would not eat it and just roamed around. That corpse was taken out and, by practicing *mkha' spyod*, [these] were the signs of [that] accomplishment." *Dri ma med pa*, 88.2-6.

revealers, he approaches the fulfillment of everything that his biographies have thus far foretold.

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## BOOK REVIEW

*Esoteric Buddhism at Dunhuang: Rites and Teachings for This Life and Beyond.* Edited by Matthew T. Kapstein and Sam van Schaik. Leiden - Boston: Brill, 2010, 252 pp., hardcover, ISBN 9789004182035

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This impressive collection of essays is the latest example of the recent, important and matured scholarship derived from years of work with the Tantric manuscripts of Dunhuang. The text begins with a preface that offers some of the more decisive conclusions available regarding the dating of the manuscripts, their relationship to pan-Tibetan thought and praxis, and their pivotal role, as near-direct antecedents, in the formation of the tantric texts of the Nyingma tradition. The subsequent essays provide insight into the complex historical processes that shaped the development of Tibetan Tantra and a view into the esoteric Buddhist world at Dunhuang. For these reasons, the work is a valuable addition to the field of Tibetan Studies.

The editors of the text, Matthew Kapstein and Sam van Schaik, were members of the 2005 panel<sup>1</sup> that inspired the collection. Over the last three decades, Kapstein has made considerable contributions to the field, including dozens of influential articles and numerous books on a wide range of topics concerning Tibetan doctrine, history, and ritual. Van Schaik, often in collaboration with Jacob Dalton (the academic equivalent of a dynamic duo), has worked extensively cataloguing the Dunhuang texts and has recently written some of the most thought provoking articles on the Tibetan Dunhuang collections. In addition, van Schaik is well known within the academic community (and outside of it) for his excellent blog on the Dunhuang manuscripts.<sup>2</sup> Both Kapstein and van Schaik should be congratulated for assembling eminent scholars of Dunhuang texts, for ensuring that most of the manuscripts treated in the collection were reproduced in the final

<sup>1</sup> The panel took place within the September 2005 London colloquium of the International Association of Buddhist Studies.

<sup>2</sup> [www.earlytibet.com](http://www.earlytibet.com)

volume (transliterated in Wylie, they include a critical edition, maps of parallel texts, and several other useful appendices) and perhaps, most importantly, for choosing a collection of essays that demonstrate clear instances of proto-Nyingma Tantric practice, the early development of Tantric vows, Tibetan funeral rites in transition, and early Tantric doctrinal concerns.

The five essays drawing from Tibetan materials are divided into two sections: (1) Rights And Teachings For This Life... (2)...And Beyond. Although the titles of the divisions are quite broad, their framing of the individual works is both clever and functional, situating the contributions within a broader Tantric ‘rubric’ utilizing these same categories. Methodologically, the articles can be divided into two different sections: (1) those focusing on the formation of the Nyingma tantras (and vows) through the process and practice of ‘bricolage’<sup>3</sup> and (2) those concentrating primarily on a single text.

In the first group, Cantwell and Mayer’s chapter is a continuation of their extensive research on *Phur pa* texts and practice. The authors draw attention to strong parallels between the Dunhuang text catalogued as IOL Tib J 331.III and chapters eight through eleven of the *Rnying ma’i rgyud ’bum’s ’Phrin las phun sum tshogs pa’i rgyud*, and discuss the Dunhuang text’s relationship to the main Vajrakīlaya practice of another later tradition, the Sakya school. Cantwell and Mayer argue that IOL Tib J 331.III may be a derivative of a then extant version of the *’Phrin las phun sum tshogs pa’i rgyud* and, if not, at the very least shared a common source. They urge scholars to continue to pursue comparative study enabling a better understanding of whether Dunhuang texts drew on earlier tantras, ‘whether they incorporated and re-embedded selections of Tantric materials found elsewhere, or whether both these processes were at work’ (p. 42-43). This particular essay is distinct from their previous work in that it introduces verses from IOL Tib J 331.III that exemplify a moment in *Phur ba* history where the actual *phur pa* instrument takes on a “deified form” during the *sādhana* practice before being ritually eclipsed by ‘the *heruka* deity and the soteriological aspects of the meditation visualization’ of the later tradition (p. 42). Further expansion on Cantwell and Mayer’s observation that IOL Tib J 331.III is not presented as buddhavacana (‘buddha word’) while the later text, the *’Phrin las phun sum tshogs pa’i rgyud*, is listed as *bka’*, the Tibetan translation of buddhavacana,

<sup>3</sup> ‘Bricolage’ is a cross-disciplinary term first coined by Claude Lévi-Strauss to refer to the creation and/or construction of a work from the materials available, whatever they may be. For more, see Claude Lévi-Strauss’ *The Savage Mind* (1962).

may help facilitate an understanding of the causal processes behind later attribution of tantras to Indian figures such as Vimalamitra, Padmasambhava and, of course, the Buddha.

In the following chapter, Sam van Schaik works with the Mahāyoga samaya vows of Dunhuang texts to map out the relationship between an early diversity of vows and the uniform set of three root and twenty-five branch vows in the orthodox Nyingma tradition, exhibiting the fluidity and evolution of Dunhuang samaya enumerations and those following the development of the New Schools (*gsar ma*). Van Schaik surveys some of the early variation in samaya that later became unified and standardized to meet the needs of the growing monastic communities in Tibet. He also briefly touches on a list of Dunhuang texts demonstrating metaphorical readings of transgressive Mahāyoga vows in the tenth century, providing further evidence for this hermeneutic precedent prior to the introduction of the *gsar ma* schools (p. 70). Consequently, this discovery problematizes the previous narrative that such readings were subsequent to accusations of antinomian practices during the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

Matthew Kapstein then presents a closer look at maṇḍalas, comparing a reference to a ‘Hundred-petalled Lotus’ maṇḍala found in IOL Tib J 318 to the maṇḍalas of the *Sarvadurgatipariśodhanatantra* and the Nyingma ritual cycle, the *Na rak dong sprugs*. Kapstein focuses on the variations of images, texts and sources available to the redactors of the Nyingma Tantric collection from the eleventh to the eighteenth century, citing ‘rather precise’ evidence that the *Na rak* cycle was beginning to take shape prior to the sealing of Mogao Cave 17 in the early eleventh century (p. 174). The strength of the article lies in its insight into the diversity of sources dating back several centuries—oral, textual, and iconographic—involved in the reconstruction process.

In the second section, Kammie Morrison Takahashi contributes a critical edition of an extremely influential text among the Dunhuang cache, the *Rdo rje sems dpa'i zhus lan*, which itself signifies a *bardo* in Tibetan history between what Takahashi calls Indic Mahāyoga and the more ‘fully developed’ Mahāyoga of the Dunhuang collection (p. 92). Takahashi argues the *Rdo rje sems dpa'i zhus lan* is one of the earliest examples in which ritual becomes integrated with ‘philosophic speculation’ (p. 97), a term she employs generically in favor of a more specific treatment of the precise content of the text’s ‘philosophy’. Although a reading of her outstanding critical edition provides evidence of the ‘philosophic speculation’ she argues for, further

discussion of these distinct instances in the text instantiating the novelty of the text's philosophic developments, including a brief comparison with some previous and later tantras and an explicit explanation as to why the text is 'philosophic' as opposed to say 'meditative' or 'poetic', would add precision to her choice of terms.

In his chapter, Yoshira Imaeda hones in on the largely ignored literary form of the *Bar do thos sgrol*. He draws his research from a previous observation by Kawasaki Shinjō (1989), who noted the text often uses a distinct vernacular to directly address the deceased in the second person. This literary form, which lacks an Indian precedent, explicitly includes verses intended for the officiant to recite while sermonizing the funerary ceremony recipient (p. 150). Imaeda studies Dunhuang texts from the *Skye shi ('khor lo'i) lo rgyus* to chart a progression in which indigenous death rites gradually approach Buddhist orthodoxy despite keeping their rudimentary literary format. Imaeda argues that Dunhuang texts from the *Skye shi ('khor lo'i) lo rgyus* designate antecedents to the anomalistic idiom of the *Bar do thos sgrol*, constituting at least one example of Tibetans 'Tibetanising' Buddhism (p. 156). Imaeda may be correct in his assertion, but it seems reasonable to argue that the evolution of the text's content and literary format, when viewed collectively, is equally an illustration of Buddhism 'Buddhicising' the Tibetans or, as is often the case, the two processes engaging in cultural-religious symbiosis.

Katherine Tsiang's lone article addressing Chinese material and Chinese esoteric Buddhism cannot be easily placed within a general summary of the collection. The editors justify its inclusion by citing the original theme of the panel, which was 'intended to explore and to further scholarship on Tibetan and Chinese Tantric Buddhism, as known from the documents discovered at Dunhuang' (p. xiii) and argue that all of the essays, including Tsiang's, 'find strong parallels in the Rnying ma traditions of the eleventh century onward' (p. xvii). As the third of three presentations originating from the panel, Tsiang's analysis of stamped images, painted scrolls, single sheet prints, and *dhāraṇī* sheets discovered at Dunhuang and other tombs throughout China produces a thoughtful and meticulous analysis of the relationship between printing technology and 'ensigillation'.<sup>4</sup> Tsiang elucidates the popularity of protection by esoteric Buddhist *dhāraṇī* sheets and

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<sup>4</sup> Ensiggillation is a term created by Michael Strickmann to describe the medieval Chinese use of a magical seal or stamp for healing the sick or possessed. For more, see the collection of Strickmann's essays edited by Bernard Faure, *Chinese Magical Medicine* (2002).

magical spells along with the role their ‘talismanic function to protect and empower’ played in the development of the printing press (p. 247), which in turn lead to the further dissemination of Buddhist beliefs and practices during the Tang (p. 202).

In the end, the title *Esoteric Buddhism at Dunhuang* is a bit of a misnomer and the text would have benefitted from one or two more contributions by scholars working with Chinese documents. Additionally, while we must thank Brill for their continued dedication to Tibetan Studies (the text under review is volume twenty-five in Brill’s Tibetan Studies Library), better image quality and color prints of the photos accompanying the essays would have gone a long way toward connecting the reader with the one-thousand-year-old materials from Dunhuang.

These petty quibbles are nearly insignificant and I was thoroughly impressed by this contribution. Taken together, the essays are inspiring examples of philology, iconographic analysis, translation, and methodology for those working with Dunhuang texts. Furthermore, each sheds some light upon the ‘murky’ process of esoteric Buddhist development within the ninth and tenth centuries. Consequently, each of the authors have successfully given us more than we had prior to this edition. In the future, it is up to scholars to take up the encouragement kindly provided to build upon their achievements, including research that enables an expanded discussion of the material upon which the Dunhuang texts rely, further detail on the process of redaction and construction by the later Nyingma tradition and, finally, more evidence that instantiates (or challenges) the argument that the Tibetan Dunhuang manuscripts are reflective of pan-Tibetan thought.



## BOOK REVIEW

*Lamas, Shamans and Ancestors. Village Religion in Sikkim.*<sup>1</sup>  
 Anna Balikci. Brill's Tibetan Studies Library 17, Leiden-Boston, Brill  
 2008, 403 pp., hardcover, ISBN 9789004167063

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The relationship that the great religions maintain with local religious practices constitute a privileged area of research in anthropology for good reasons: it is indeed necessary to take into account historical, economic, sociological and political data in addition to religious considerations in order to capture these complex phenomena, and the anthropologist has made it a speciality of combining these different approaches, often thanks to a prolonged fieldwork experience. The work of Anna Balikci presents a particularly successful example of what this tradition can offer. *Lamas, Shamans and Ancestors: Village Religion in Sikkim* is a monograph of a Himalayan Buddhist community that, by following different modalities in the course of its history, developed a form of village religion whereby its shamanic worldview persisted quite independently alongside the Buddhist religion.

The Buddhist Kingdom of Sikkim was founded in 1642 by Nyingma lamas—the “unreformed” school of Tibetan Buddhism. At that time, this small mountain state was populated by the Bhutias or Lhopas who had migrated from Tibet at an earlier date, as well as the Lepchas, an indigenous shamanistic population that, until now, has attracted ethnologists’ attention far more than the Tibetan immigrants ever did. Although Buddhism attempted to absorb the cult of ancestral gods and territorial deities, these rituals have nonetheless remained at the heart of ceremonies performed by both Buddhist village lamas and local religious specialists, or ‘shamans’, who are related to *Bon*—the native religion of Tibet, retrospectively reconstructed, which preceded Buddhism. The author suggests that these different specialists share the

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<sup>1</sup> First published in French: Anne de Sales, « BALIKCI Anna, Lamas, Shamans and Ancestors. Village Religion in Sikkim », *Études mongoles et sibériennes, centrasiatiques et tibétaines* [En ligne], 40 | 2009, mis en ligne le 30 décembre 2009. URL : <http://emscat.revues.org/index1637.html>

same conception of reality: the bodies of individuals (including the notions of health and illness), territory, society and the supernatural are not areas of social life independent of one another, but rather in constant interaction. This worldview, qualified by Balikci as shamanic, is the basis of a division of labour between the religious specialists who coexist without conflict: lamas perform funerary rituals whereas shamans are consulted to postpone the final outcome.

The first part of the book introduces readers to the political and religious history of Sikkim and to 'village religion' and its actors: first the village lama, who practises a non-dogmatic form of Buddhism and, secondly, the clan shaman (*pawo*) and the specialist (*bongthing*) who deals with local deities. The next two sections present the contexts in which these religious specialists interact within a specific village, Tingchim, where the author focuses her monograph. Thus the second part develops the villagers' relationship with their land in terms of its agricultural economy and rituals. The third part centres on the domestic rituals that ensure fertility and prosperity. The household then provides the framework within which members renew their membership of the community and where the shamanic vision of the world remains alive. The last part focuses on the role played by conventional Buddhism in village relations with the state and the outside world. If there were any conflict, it would be between the representatives of conventional Buddhism and the supporters of a more pragmatic form of village Buddhism rather than between village lamas and shamans.

What is especially interesting about this study is that it promotes an understanding of how different elements of social life can converge to produce a particular religious configuration at a certain period, then change into another to produce a new configuration while still preserving certain distinctive features. Thus the persistence of the shamanic worldview is partly due to the fact that Sikkim remained, from its foundation in the seventeenth century until its integration into the Indian Union in 1975, a relatively decentralised state with a weak monarchy that was unable to impose the Buddhist religion on its subjects strictly. The large celibate monasteries, which provided broad political support to the Buddhist monarchy in Central Tibet, could never have been maintained in Sikkim for reasons which are partly demographic: slash-and-burn cultivation is labour intensive, and a family could not afford to lose a son to the monastery. Also, ritual life in Tingchim remained entirely in the hands of the *Bon* ritual specialists until 1910, when a lama came to settle in the village for the first time. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the introduction of



cardamom, a cash crop, combined with the immigration of agricultural labourers from Nepal, changed the situation. The resulting savings in money and time saved allowed the Lhopos, the sole owners of the land, to invest in forms of worship that were both more expensive and more prestigious. The village then “started producing cardamoms at the same rate that it started producing lamas.” In the 1930s, the lamas’ influence spread from funerary rites to community rituals, though the shamans preserved their monopoly on healing rituals until the death of Tingchim’s last shaman in 1997.

Though the Lhopo community’s social life, formerly structured on slash-and-burn cultivation, was based on exchange, the cultivation of cardamom is dependent on Nepalese workers and Indian traders. Since the economic relations that provided the fabric of social life lost their *raison d’être*, the unity of the community now relies upon the ritual sphere, particularly the rituals of the land (such as those held at harvest time) and the life cycle of the household. Membership in the community depends on participation in these often expensive rituals. Furthermore, the domestic rituals reaffirm the shamanic worldview by involving the ancestral gods and deities of the land as the primary supernatural partners. If the end of Sikkim as a kingdom and its integration within the Indian Union in 1975 was to signal the end of state Buddhism, the 1990s nevertheless witnessed a revival of the religion due in part to its growing international popularity, coupled with increasing attention given to the nation’s sacred sites. So, according to the author, the shamanic roots closely associated with Sikkimese identity presently survive in this concern for the environment and in these domestic rituals.

Insofar as the areas of social life respond to and transform one another, the author could have seen the outline of a system that was open to innovation. She preferred instead to focus on the anthropological debate surrounding the relationship between Buddhism and shamanism. The particular value of this work lies in its presentation of an unusually well-documented case study concerned with the social and religious transformation of a Sikkimese village in the twentieth century, something the title does not reveal, but that emerges clearly in the course of reading the book. The plan chosen to expose this complex reality leads to a few repetitions, but the ethnographic material is exceptionally rich, varied and well described. It also opens many avenues for comparison with other Himalayan communities. Anna Balikci’s book is essential reading for anyone interested in this region.



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