

Buchen as Storytellers Reading, Telling and Acting out Edifying Stories

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“Their performances take the form of miracle-plays, which are acted in front of an image of their patron saint, which is scenery in the shape of a long screen, covered with quaintly painted pictures to illustrate the legends connected with their beliefs. Music is provided by means of conch shells, cymbals, and guitars; offerings of barley are thrown in the air and the crowd at intervals join with the performers in chanting the prayer Om Mani Padme Hung.” (Buck, 1917)

Lying south-westwards, the Pin Valley, described in Buddhist texts as “the Clouds Valley” is one of four units that make up Spiti today.¹ Hemmed in by high mountains, except where the stream forces its way through a rocky gorge several kilometres long to join the Spiti River, the Pin Valley forms a secluded small world endowed with a very strong identity.² The valley comprises a dozen settlements, which are anything from three to ten kilometres

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¹ Pin (Tib. *sprin*): “clouds”.

² The insulation of the Pin Valley conferred upon it a *de facto* independence, which allowed local chiefs to manage it as they pleased. They insisted on keeping their independence following the annexation of Spiti and the nomination of the Nono of Spiti as governor (*wazir*) of this new province of the British Empire. See Egerton (1864, 28-32).

apart, and houses the only monastery affiliated to the Nyingma 'Old [tantras]' order in Spiti where the Geluk, the 'System of Virtue', prevails (Fig. 1).³

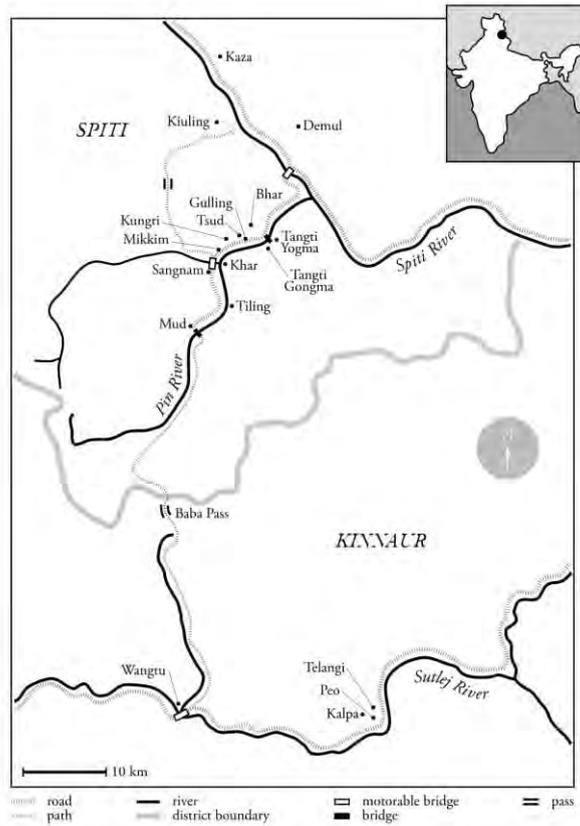


Fig. 1 — Sketch map of the Pin Valley

While until recently the inhabitants had almost no contact with other parts of Spiti, they maintained close ties with the people of Upper Kinnaur, and in particular of the valleys of Wangtu and Peo situated on the right bank of the Sutlej River. Every summer,

³ The Nyingma (Tib. *rNying ma*) order is the least centralised of the Tibetan Buddhism's orders and the most oriented towards Tantric ritual practices. Apart from Geluk (Tib. *dGe lugs*) and Nyingma schools, Spiti also includes a Sakya (Tib. *Sa skya*) monastery.

Kinnauri shepherds lead their flocks of sheep and goats to graze on the upper reaches of the Pin Valley, which is renowned for its lush pastures, and in the opposite direction Pin inhabitants go over the Baba Pass to make provisions of buckwheat and dried fruits and to fetch wood required for building houses or making tools. These moves are not only for economic but also for religious purposes. Indeed, a few priests, native of the Valley, are appointed as caretakers of Buddhist temples and every winter, on the invitation of local Buddhist families, religious practitioners join them to chant religious scriptures and to perform rituals. Among them are the Buchen (Tib. *bu chen*) described in early literature as "magicians [...], whose performances consist of a medley of prayer, song, miracle play, and stone-breaking feats" (Shuttleworth 1922: 254).

1. *Strolling Masters of the Six Syllables*

Origin narratives concerning the Buchen tradition refer to the great Thangtong Gyalpo (Tib. *Thang stong rgyal po*) who was born in Tibet during the last decades of the fourteenth century.⁴ This accomplished yogin and Buddhist master is famous in Tibet and the Himalayan regions for building *stūpas* in order to tame the hostile forces of a given area, and even more so for building iron-chain suspension bridges all over the Tibetan plateau to facilitate communication. In addition, he is said to have organised the first drama group in Tibet to prompt people to turn to religion. It is said that Thangtong Gyalpo felt that if the Buddhist doctrine was merely preached, people would not always listen. On the other hand, religion presented through the medium of play and music would teach in a way that could reach people.⁵ The Buchen perceive Thangtong Gyalpo as their founding preceptor whose teachings were handed down orally from generation to generation and they conceive themselves as his 'great sons' (Tib. *bu chen*), i.e. his main disciples and so like sons. They always pay homage to him by placing a statue

⁴ About Thangtong Gyalpo (1361?–1485), the 'King of the Empty Plain', also known as the 'Iron Bridge Man' (*lcags zam pa*); see C. Stearn, 2007. As the father of the drama tradition; see J. Gyatso 1986.

⁵ This is what people told me in Spiti, but there are many other popular stories about Thangtong Gyalpo and the creation of Tibetan drama. However, none of Thangtong Gyalpo's biographies has ever mentioned his involvement with *A lce lha mo*.

of him on the stage's shrine and by singing a prayer to him during the first part of their performances.

The Buchen masterpiece, *pho bar rdo gcog* (or *rdo gshag*), 'breaking a stone [placed] on the stomach', which is performed to ward off unpleasant circumstances and to prevent hindrances and, more generally to ensure prosperity and fertility, has already been discussed in detail,⁶ I will therefore limit myself here to one of their other skills, that of storytelling.⁷ In fact, Buchen are also renowned raconteurs. Despite the latter being referred to outside Spiti by the epithet *manipa* (Tib. *ma ŋi pa*),⁸ 'the one [who recites] *mañi*', their repertoire not only contains the great compassion mantra dedicated to Avalokiteśvara but also dozens of *namthar* (Tib. *rnam thar*, full liberation [story]),⁹ which imply liberation in the Buddhist sense of the word and which praise the victory of Dharma over heretics (Fig. 2a & 2b).

⁶ The ceremony was described in great detail by George de Roerich who attended it twice in Lahaul in the 1930s (Roerich 1932). Further information is supplied by Hebers (1978, 209-210) who saw it in Ladakh in the 1920s and Prince Pierre de Grèce (1958 and 1962) who attended it in July 1938 at Patseo (Lahaul). Although Tibetologists R. A. Stein (1959) and S. Hümmel (1968) did not attend the ceremony, they analysed it using second-hand data. More recently, in 1988, W. Kahlen claimed to have "discovered" the breaking of the stone, and recorded it in full on 16-mm film, on video, in photographs and with sound equipment. For a contemporary description; see Dollfus 2004.

⁷ The material presented here is based on my own data. I have visited the Pin Valley almost every year since 1999 and I met the Buchen during their tour through Kinnaur and Ladakh, and more recently at Rewalsar Lake or Tso Pema (Tib. *mTsho padma*) near Mandi.

⁸ Buchen were given the name *ma ŋi pa* because of their great dedication to the repetition of Avalokiteśvara's mantra: *ōm mañi padme hūm*. As C. Stearns emphasizes, "this connection is significant because of the traditional ties between the wandering mani devotees, who put on shows of mime and dance to illustrate the teachings of Avalokiteshvara, and the popular opera traditions of dance and theatrical performance known as the Aché Lhamo, believed to be Tangtong's creation."; (Stearns 2007, 23). According to R. A. Stein (1981: 152) the *manipa* tradition goes back to the 12th century, however, H. Havnevik (1998: 103) proposes a later date, suggesting that Khedrup Norzang Gyatso (b. 1478) might be the founder of this tradition in the 15th century.

⁹ Conveniently translated into English as "biography" *rnam thar* is the abbreviation for *rnam par thar pa*, 'to be completely released or delivered', often used to mean release from any further transmigration.



Fig. 2a — Mémé Tsetan from Sangnam village reading a handwritten copy of the story of Lingza Chökyit ©P. Dollfus



Fig. 2b — Mémé Tsering Tobgye from Bhar village reading the story of Drime Künden from a book in a Western format published in Dharamsala. ©P. Dollfus

2. The repertoire

Half of these stories are *délok* narratives. Generally speaking, *délok* (Tib. 'das log, lit., 'those who have returned from the dead') are simple, ordinary people, mostly women, who 'die' and then travel in the netherworld; hells, and less often paradises. After being judged, they are sent back home by the Lord of the Dead to tell people what

they have witnessed, to bring messages from the dead to the living, and to exhort them to perform virtuous actions.¹⁰ The vast majority of *délok* come from the Nyingmapa and Kagyupa milieus, and they see themselves as incarnations of Avalokiteśvara, the bodhisattva who saves beings.

In this *délok* category one finds the narratives of Lingza Chökyit (Tib. *gLing bza' chos skyid*), a housewife, mother of three children, and animal herder in an eastern Tibetan nomadic community, who lived during the sixteenth century; of Karma Wangzin (Tib. *Karma dbang 'dzin*) born in the seventeenth century in southern Tibet, who wanted to devote her life to religion but was sent at a young age to be married to a man chosen by her parents for his social status; of Sangye Chözom (Tib. *Sangs rgyas chos 'dzom*) from Tashigang in eastern Bhutan, who was recognized as an incarnation of Karma Wangzin (Tib. *Karma dbang 'dzin*); of Gelongma Palmo (Tib. *dGe slong ma dpal mo*), a beautiful Kashmiri princess, who became a devout practitioner of Buddhism and, when she contracted leprosy, had to live in isolation and stay miserably alone in a wooden hut built in the middle of the forest; and of Nangsa Öbum (*Snang sa 'od 'bum*), a young Tibetan girl married against her will to a local Lord and who is believed to have lived during the twelfth century in south-western Tibet.¹¹

The narratives follow the same pattern. They all recount stories about women who are native of Tibet, Bhutan, or India (Kashmir), who wanted to devote themselves wholly to religion from a young age, but were not free to fulfil their religious wishes. Lingza Chökyit thus says: "When I was a little girl, I had thought of becoming a nun but my parents and my brothers did not allow it." (ibid.: 503). The same holds true for Nangsa Öbum, 'The Brilliant above a Hundred Thousand Lights'. This beautiful girl was forced to marry the son of a local lord. Soon after she started to be ill-treated and beaten by her in-laws until she collapsed and died. She then travelled to the realm of the dead, but when she met the Lord of the Dead, who knew that she was capable of doing a lot of good if allowed to live longer in the human world, he sent her back home and she became a nun.¹²

¹⁰ On *délok*; see F. Pommaret, 1989, 1997 and 2012.

¹¹ For more information about these *délok*; see Pommaret (1997: 185-193).

¹² For more details of this story; see Bacot 1921, Duncan 1955, Waddell 1974, Wao 1986. As F. Pommaret points out, the Nangsa Öbum story is the only *délok* account that was and continues to be performed to this day as a theatrical play.

To this list that describes a journey to the realm of Hells and *bardo* ('intermediate state' between two lives on earth) can be added the story of Guru Chöwang (Tib. *Gu ru Chos dbang*, 1212–1273), a great Nyingmapa 'treasure-discoverer' (Tib. *gter ston*), who went to the netherworld to free his mother. While the narrative describes the experience of *bardo* and recounts at length the cold and the hot hells, and the torture endured by people who had committed sins and the reasons for their punishment, it is not really a *délok* story because, as F. Pommaret (1997: 499) clearly argues, "the saint does not 'die' but, through his magical power, goes to hell with a definite purpose: to save a person who is close to him."¹³

Other *namthar* celebrate Tibetan Buddhist heroes and, contrary to *délok* narratives, focus on miraculous events, superhuman actions, or accounts of superior virtues. One can quote the story of Chögyel Norzang (Tib. *Chos rgyal nor bzang*) which retells how a Khadoma (Tib. *mkha' 'gro ma*, 'female sky goer'), caught by a hunter with a magic lasso, becomes the wife of King Norzang; the story of Prince Drime Künden (Tib. *Dri med kun ldan*) that describes how he sacrificed his own life to give alms to others and finally became a Buddha;¹⁴ the tale of Pema Öbar (Tib. *Padma 'od 'bar*),¹⁵ which recounts one of Padmasambhava's former lives and takes place a thousand years ago in India under the reign of a 'heretic' king who was opposed to Buddhism; the story of Zugi Nyima (Tib. *gZugs kyi nyi ma*),¹⁶ about a beautiful, kind-hearted queen who suffered because of the jealousy of another queen; and the tale of Drowa Zangmo (Tib. *'Gro ba bzang mo*),¹⁷ which recounts the adventures of her two children fleeing a jealous She-demon whom their father King Kalawangpo (Tib. *Ka la dbang po*) had married earlier and who had decided to kill them.¹⁸

¹³ For a summary of this narrative; see Pommaret 1989 and 1997.

¹⁴ For a translation into French of the eponymous play; see Bacot 1921, Waddell 1974, Duncan 1967.

¹⁵ See Blondeau 1986.

¹⁶ See Bacot 1957.

¹⁷ See the translation in English of the play by Josayma (s.d) and by Duncan 1955; in French by Bacot 1921.

¹⁸ Strangely enough, this repertoire includes neither the life of *Ma gcig lab gyi sgron ma* nor, more importantly, the life of Milarepa (Tib. *Mi la ras pa*), one of the most famous accounts in the Tibetan cultural area, especially in the high Tibetan valleys of Nepal and for which there exist numerous sets of narrative paintings.

			délok	thangk a	drama	AL
1	Chögyel Norsang	<i>Chos rgyal nor bzang</i>			X	X
2	Drime Künden	<i>Dri med kun ldan</i>		2	X	X
3	Sukyi Nyima	<i>gZugs kyi nyi ma</i>				X
4	Nangsa Öbum	<i>Snang sa 'od 'bum</i>	X	3	X	X
5	Drowa Zangmo	<i>'Gro ba bzang mo</i>		7		X
6	Pema Öbar	<i>Padma 'od 'bar</i>		3		X
7	Chungpo Dönyö Döndup	<i>Gcung po don yod don grub</i>				X
8	Gyasa Besa /Gyemo gonjor	<i>rGyal bza' bal bza / rGyal mo gong 'byor</i>			X	X
9	Gelongma Palmo	<i>Dge slong ma dpal mo</i>	X			
10	Guru Chöwang	<i>Gu ru Chos dbang</i>	Xa	1		
11	Karma Wangzin	<i>Kar ma dbang 'dzin</i>	X			
12	Lingza Chökit	<i>gLing bza' chos skyid</i>	X	3	X	
13	Sangye Chözom	<i>Sangs rgyas chos 'dzom</i>	X			
14	Dukpa Kunley	<i>'Brug pa dkaun legs</i>			X	
15	Lochen Ratnabhadra	<i>Lo chen ratna bha dra</i>				

Xa : Strictly speaking, Guru Chöwang is not a délok, but a « saviour saint » : he went to hell to liberate his mother.

AL : belonging to Tibetan theater (Lhamo) repertoire

Fig. 3 — Buchen's repertoire

In Tibet *namthar* used to be the basis for very popular dramas known as *A lce lha mo* or, for short, *lha mo*,¹⁹ which were performed by lay actors and actresses, some of them wearing masks. The plot is traditionally presented in the form of a chanted narrative in the course of which the few leading characters come forth and speak. While one actor sings, others backstage sing in chorus. Between the different acts, satire or comic improvisations are performed by buffoons and are greeted by the audience with much laughter. For unknown reasons, this dramatic tradition, which has spread through Bhutan and among Monpa and Sherdukpen communities in Arunachal Pradesh in north-east India, has never flourished in the Western Himalayas despite several attempts to introduce it both in

¹⁹ The name *lha mo* or *A lce lha mo* is not usually explained by Tibetans as having originated from the actors' portrayal of the female roles of goddesses or *lha mo* that are found in the plays. *A lce* literally means elder sister; it is a polite term used to address any female elder.

Ladakh and Spiti in the 1940-50s.²⁰ The same holds true for Tibetan Buddhist regions of northern Nepal, except in Humla district. In Dolpo for example, C. Jest (1973: 376) notes:

“Never in man's memory has there been in the valley performances of religious theatrical plays as is the case in Tibet. Lastly, Dolpo is not on the circuit of actors such as the *A Ice lha mo* groups whose actors, generally from central Tibet or Kham, make a pilgrimage to Mount Kailas.”²¹

This *namthar* repertoire can be read, told or played by the Buchen, but whatever the case, they always open their performance by blowing the conch and reciting the following prayer to Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara and their master, the great *Mahāsiddha* Thangtong Gyalpo:

Let us salute the Teachers!
Bow to the feet of the venerable Lord of Living Beings!
Abide in the spiritual essence of Avalokiteśvara!
Abide in the spiritual essence of the All-Merciful One!
Abide in the spiritual essence of Thangtong Gyalpo!
Abide in the spiritual essence of the sublime Pandita
You, people, recite the six-syllable mantra!
Om maṇi padme hūm!

3. Reading stories

In the Pin Valley, the Buchen act as storytellers during the fasting ritual, Nyungné (Tib. *smyung gnas*), which revolves around the Bodhisattva of Great Compassion Avalokiteśvara in his eleven-face and thousand-arm form. Staged in winter on dates that vary depending on villages, it lasts four to six days and involves the eight Mahāyana precepts (i.e. do not kill, do not steal, do not have sexual intercourse, do not tell lies, do not take intoxicants, do not take high seats, do not sing, dance or wear ornaments and do not eat after

²⁰ Mipham Otsal (director of Ladakh Theatre Organisation), personal communication.

²¹ My translation. "Jamais, de mémoire d'homme, il n'y a eu dans la vallée de représentations de pièces de théâtre religieux, comme c'est le cas au Tibet. Enfin, Dolpo n'est pas sur le circuit d'acteurs tels les groupes de *a-ice lha-mo*, dont les membres, venant en général du Tibet central ou du Khams font le pèlerinage du Mont Kailas" (Jest 1973: 376).

midday) on the second day, and taking additional vows of abstaining from eating, drinking and talking for twenty-four hours on the third day.²²

On this day, prostrations and prayers start at dawn. The invited Buchen arrives around eight o'clock at the house where the ritual is held. He is not clad in special dress, nor does he wear any particular headgear. After prostrating himself in front of the shrine, and then in front of the lama presiding the ceremony, he sits opposite him. After drinking a few cups of tea and a thick noodle soup for breakfast, both men go next door to the village temple where the lama carries out a libation ritual. Once the ritual is over, the Buchen, holding his prayer wheel and chanting a long vow prayer addressed to Avalokiteśvara, leads a circumambulation of the village, followed by practitioners, mainly women and middle-aged people. Back at the host's house, he sits on a mat among the devotees, takes out one of the *délok* biographies he has brought with him, and begins to read aloud.²³

At the end of every chapter, and some times more often, he chants an invocation to Avalokiteśvara, to which the audience answers by singing in chorus *Om maṇi padme hūm (hrī)*,²⁴ the mantra in six or seven syllables, which is associated with the Bodhisattva of Great Compassion, and which is believed to save sentient beings from the realms of reincarnation. The recitation lasts about four hours and takes place between three separate meditation and practice sessions, which include praises, prostrations, and mantra recitation.

In April 2001, when I attended the Changka ritual in Mud,²⁵

²² On the fasting ritual, see Jackson 1997.

²³ Hand-written copy using *umê* (Tib. *dbu med*), the cursive script, or *uchen* (Tib. *dbu chan*), a block print style used for printing and formal manuscripts, and in the form of traditional Tibetan loose-leaf books or of a booklet in a European format recently printed in Dharamsala. (Himachal Pradesh, India).

²⁴ Since the nineteenth century Western writers on Buddhism have frequently rendered the six-syllable *mantra* as "Hail to the jewel in the lotus!" in English. But, as M. Kapstein (1997: 71) clearly states, this popular Western interpretation is not backed by any known Indian or Tibetan sources. "The Indian interpretation, known also to Tibetan scholars trained in the study of Sanskrit grammar, understands *Manipadme* to be a term of address for Avalokiteśvara, meaning '[possessor of] jewel and lotus', for these indeed are the objects most frequently held by the bodhisattva in his iconographic representation. *Om* and *hum* are purely symbolic expressions, not capable of translation, but commonly used in the formation of mantras."

²⁵ The name Changka is said to be related to the beer (Tib. *chang*) drunk by the men attending the ritual.

Mémé Dorje Phuntsog first read out the life of Gelongma Palmo,²⁶ who is said to have introduced this special fasting practice of purification and merit based on the Buddha of Great Compassion. When she contracted leprosy, her body became covered in swellings that discharged such enormous quantities of pus and blood that she was not allowed to keep company with other people. After building a wooden hut in a forest, she stayed there all alone, totally miserable. One day a yogi came and bestowed upon her the empowerment and blessing of Avalokiteśvara. After he had left, she practised intensively and one night she dreamt of a person clad in white carrying a vase of water, which she used to bathe. As a result, she had the impression that she was totally cleansed of her sickness and suffering. Upon awakening, she found that her disease had in fact completely fallen away like the skin shed by a snake. Delighted, she offered a prayer of profound faith and devotion to Avalokiteśvara who appeared and blessed her.

The next day, a day of silence and strict fasting, Mémé Dorje Phuntsog read the narrative of the venerable Sangye Chözon, a Bhutanese woman who ‘died’ and then went down to hells and up to paradises over a period of seven days:²⁷

“At dawn on the seventh day of the seventh month, all the villagers assembled and they said: ‘The girl is back from the country of the Dead.’ They came to see me and everybody was talking at the same time. My parents and my family gave me all kinds of food and drinks. But, as my body and my mind had been separated for seven days, my throat had dried up and I could not even drink water. [...] Many women, full of faith, looked at me and cried. Some people were jealous and became angry. [...]. But all the people assembled around me begged me to relate to them what happens in the *bardo*.“

During both readings, Mémé Buchen chanted the text as if it were a prayer. He did not use a different voice for each character in the story (i.e. Sangye Chözon, Chögyal Shinjé and his attendants). From time to time, he interrupted his reading to explain some passages in

²⁶ Mémé (Tib. *mes mes*): grandfather; term of address and reference for any elderly men, given as a title of honour for monks and religious specialists, even young ones.

²⁷ *Sangs rgyas chos ‘dzom rnam thar*, Thimphu, 190-192. Quoted by Pommaret (2012: 62).

the colloquial language. The vocabulary in *délok* accounts is simple; stock phrases are often used, making the narrative easy to understand by ordinary people. But all these stories are narrated in the 'Tibetan language' (Tib. *bod skad*), not in the Spiti language and are therefore difficult to understand for the local audience.

"In the past", people told me, the Buchen used to hang on the wall a painting, which corresponded to the story that was being read, to show the different episodes as the story unfolded. Such a practice was attested to in the 1960s by Corneille Jest at Tarap in Dolpo (Nepal), during the fasting ritual, which began there on the fifth day of the first lunar month and ended on the 13th day:²⁸

Premier mois, cinquième jour (19-2-1961)

Religieux et laïcs récitent des prières puis au début de l'après-midi, ils se rendent dans l'enclos de tissage de Tsering Puntsog pour écouter le récit de la vie de Milarepa. [...] Tout le monde prend place autour de la peinture, les uns font tourner leur moulin à prière, les autres égrènent un chapelet; Tsering Puntsog, le lecteur appelé *ma-ṅi-pa*, commence par une invocation à *spyang ras gzigs*, demande sa protection [...] puis entreprend la lecture de la biographie; lorsqu'il convient d'en expliquer un épisode, Tsering Puntsog montre la peinture avec une baguette de fer à pommeau en forme de vajra. A la fin de chaque partie, tout le monde chante en chœur le mantra *ōm maṅi padme hūm*. [...]

[Le lendemain, "jour de silence" (*smyung gnas lkugs pa*)]

[...] Dans l'après-midi, Tsering Puntsog continue la lecture de la biographie de Milarepa; comme les participants ne peuvent pas parler, ils doivent s'exprimer par geste en prononçant la formule *Om maṅi padme hūm*.

[Septième jour]

[...] Dans l'après-midi, suite du récit de Milarepa ; les fidèles font des dons aux conteurs, qui, à son tour, remet les offrandes au temple. [...]

[Huitième jour]

[...] Tsering Puntsog décrit une descente aux enfers, *das' log* (lit. 'retour de la mort'); deux peintures sont

²⁸ See Jest 1973: 332-335.

suspendues dans l'enclos, l'une représente Avalokiteśvara, l'autre illustre le récit d'un voyage aux enfers fait par une personne frappée de mort apparente. Lecture du texte : '*das log bstan-jin chos grong gi srid pa bar do nyong pa'i rnam thar*. [...]

[Neuvième jour]

[...] Dans l'après-midi, Tsering Puntsog lit le récit *nor bzang*, prenant une intonation différente pour chacun des héros. Tout le monde écoute attentivement le récit du roi *nor bzang* qui va lutter contre les hommes sauvages mi rгод, habitant la grande plaine du Nord, le Changthang. [...]

[Dixième jour]

[...] Dans l'après-midi, Tsering Puntsog continue la lecture de *nor bzang*.

[Onzième jour].

[...] Tsering Puntsog lit dans l'enclos l'histoire du roi *dri med kun ldan* ; la peinture porte en son milieu une représentation de *spyang ras gzigs*.

However, during the fasting rituals I attended in the Pin Valley, none of the Buchen did this. Other than on these specific occasions, the Buchen and his helpers may read any story from the former's repertoire during the pilgrimage. Nowadays, most of them spend a few weeks every winter at Tsopema, a holy lake situated near Mandi in Lahaul. On, 'the date of the 10th' (Tib. *tshes bcu*), they performed a ritual in honour of Guru Rinpoche (i.e. Padmasambhava), with whom the lake is associated. Then they lead a number of circumambulations around the lake, followed by pilgrims, and lastly, sitting on the grass on the shore of the lake, they read the life of the child Pema Öbar, which fits in especially well with the sacred place because it deals with one of Padmasambhava's former lives (Fig. 4).

4. Telling stories

Once or twice a year, the Buchen journey in a small group, including two or more assistants and helpers, either monks or lay people. These tours, often for both religious and trade purposes, may take them away from the Pin Valley for about six months a year.

At the beginning of the summer, when the mountain passes are free from snow, they start on their journey to Ladakh, taking horses

with them to sell. When the men reach encampments or settlements, they stay there for four or five days, taking time to hold trade negotiations and to stage religious performances. They chant mantras, recite edifying stories and perform the Breaking the Stone ceremony. They receive food, wool, or money as a fee. In former times they were occasionally given sheep and goats, which they brought back home. With the money they get from the sale of their horses, they purchase yaks, skins, blankets, sacks made of sheep or yak wool, and a little pashmina.

During the months of June-July 2000, Mémé Tsering Tobgye from Bhar set out on a journey to Ladakh Changthang. He was accompanied by Tsetan Tobgye, one of the two Buchen from Sangnam, two young lamas native of Bhar, and a fellow trader. They left with nineteen horses and came back home six weeks later for the harvest season leading a small caravan of fifteen yaks, both males and females, carrying on their backs rugs, blankets, and sacks of wool. They stopped at Shara, a village situated in the Indus Valley, to pay homage to the Ladakhi *manīpa* living there, to bow in front of the Thangtong Gyalpo statue kept in his prayer room, and to ask him permission to practice their art before going any further.



Fig. 4 — The Onba from Khar village reading the story of Pema Öbar to Pilgrims in Tsopema (Mandi). ©P. Dollfus

In the past, the Buchen used to travel for three months, going first to Demchok and even further, and then walking back westwards along the Indus River as far as central Ladakh, visiting the monasteries on their way.²⁹ Since the 1962 Sino-Indian Border conflict, they have opted for shorter trips, travelling North through Ladakh Changthang, then down to the Indus Valley as far as Choglamsar near Leh, where Tibetan refugees and Ladakhi nomads have settled over the last decades. They complain that Ladakh has changed a lot and that the people no longer value their skills.

Alternatively, the Buchen spend the winter in Spiti and Kinnaur. They start their long journey in November, staying a few months at the same place and living with any family that invites them. They tell stories every day for three or four hours in the evening, and eventually perform the Breaking the Stone ceremony. Wherever the Buchen sing *mani*, read *namthar* or perform rituals, they are provided with plenty of food and beer. Households where a woman is pregnant or a girl has recently married are said to be especially generous, because chanting mantras and reciting biographies are good deeds, which bring happiness and good luck. The Buchen return home in March or April in time for ploughing and sowing, loaded with local Kinnauri products such as apples, dried apricots, nuts and buckwheat.

During these journeys the Buchen do not usually read stories but recite them from memory, consequently, each performance is unique and is highly dependent on the audience. As they recite tales in a sort of sing-song manner, they show on the large paintings they have unrolled pictorial representations of the most remarkable episodes they are retelling, pointing at them with a *vajra*-head iron rod (Fig. 5).³⁰

People listen carefully, laughing or crying according to the situation.

²⁹ On the routes from Demchok to Spiti and Ladakh; see Lange 2017 in the present volume.

³⁰ On the visual and material culture as part of the Buchen's paraphernalia; see Sutherland 2017 in the present volume.



Fig. 5 — Mémé Dorje Phuntsog from Mud village telling the story of Drowa Zangmo in Choglamsar (Ladakh). ©P. Dollfus

I do not know what the situation was in the past but these days in the Pin Valley there are few well preserved narrative paintings that are used for this purpose. Three depict in more or less detail the judgement of the dead and the terrifying Buddhist Hells and can be used to illustrate any *délok* story. Indeed, all *délok* narratives follow the same scenario: first, the *délok* is introduced to the audience by his or her name, the names of his or her parents and his or her birthplace. Then sickness leads him or her to sudden death and, consequently, to their first contact with the netherworld. Then there follows his/her first encounter with the attendants of the Lord of the dead, the crossing of a bridge, the journey into the hells – both hot and cold – and the realm of the ghosts, then the meeting with the Lord of the dead and his minions, the instructions, and the return home.

One of the other scroll paintings depicts the story of Nangsa Öbum, while the other five describe the story of Drowa Zangmo. The oldest *thangka* of this group of five was painted by an artist from Demul village; later a copy was made at the request of another Buchen. The three other paintings, which are identical, were made one or two decades ago by Sonam Angdu, a painter from Kaza (i.e. Spiti headquarters), who is still alive. Each painting is very colourful and covered in tiny old-fashioned scenes. The most recent ones are accompanied by inscriptions written in black ink, which explain the

meaning of these scenes and give the name of the characters (Fig. 6a and 6b).



Fig. 6a — A Thangka illustrating the story of Drowa Zangmo painted by Sonam Angdu (early 21st century). © P. Sutherland



Fig. 6b — A Thangka illustrating the story of Drowa Zangmo painted by Sonam Angdu (early 21st century) – detail. © P. Sutherland

Tibetan culture lends great importance to reciting memorized texts. Both monks and religious specialists have to memorize numerous books and prayers. The same is true here. The Buchen read the story over and over again, until it literally enters into them, possesses them.³¹ But contrary to Western actors who are given a new play, they do not learn it by heart, verse by verse, stanza by stanza.

Regardless of which story is recited, some of the specific details may be forgotten or changed, but no mistakes must be made regarding the main characters, place names, and names of important things (e.g. horse, dog, and so on). During the performance, even though tiny details or inscriptions painted on the *thangka*, which is hung on a wall or fixed to a rope between two poles, do not help the audience to follow the story, as they are often too far away to see them properly. Yet, they provide the Buchen with visual cues and help him remember the stages in the story. Contrary to other such paintings which are neatly organized into sections and boxes, and where the events unfold starting from the lower left and moving to the top, like in the paintings depicting Milarepa and scenes of his life, which were collected by Jacques Bacot in Eastern Tibet in 1910,³² the dozen *thangkas* I saw in the Pin Valley appear to have been executed in a rather sloppy manner and therefore the storyteller has to jump from one place to another in an apparent disorderly fashion. In addition, only some episodes and characters are represented. Therefore the Buchen may come back to the same picture several times in the course of his account. This is the case for instance of the five *dākinī* aspects (Tib. *mkha' 'gro ma sde lnga*) that figure only once on the painting depicting Drowa Zangmo *namthar* but appear many times during the story, or of the king's beloved female dog, etc.

Just like when they read, the Buchen alternate sung sequences with spoken sequences where they explain the story told in the local language; the duration of the performance is very variable and depends largely on the context and the public. The storyteller may or

³¹ Contrary to the storytellers specialized in the Gesar epic (*sgrung mkhan* or *sgrung pa*), I have never heard of Buchen inspired through dreams or possession (*babs*), through enlightenment (*dag snang*), through 'treasure hidden in the heart' (*dgongs gten*), or by circular light (*pra phab*), whereby the narrator places a mirror, or any reflecting surface, in front of him and sings bit by bit to the audience what he sees in the mirror.

³² On these paintings, see Dollfus 1991.

may not elaborate on certain events. That is why an account is never the same from one session to another, even when the same storyteller tells the same story based on the same painting.

The same is true when the Buchen sing accompanied by music played on a string instrument, a long-necked lute, *dranmyen* (Tib. *sgra snyan*) or a kind of fiddle, *piwang* (Tib. *spyi dbang*).

They improvise their own tunes and alter them as much as they like. If you ask them to repeat the same song several times, the tunes will be different each time.

5. Acting out stories³³

From time to time the Buchen may also enact some of the stories from their repertoire. However, from what I know, even in former times the Buchen never fully staged these plays.³⁴ They only recounted some sequences and these sketches were and still are always combined with other performances such as the ritual of the Breaking of Stone, the recitation of *namthar* or of sacred Buddhist scriptures. For example, during winter 2013-14, the four-member team led by Pema Tundup, a 40-year-old Buchen from Mikkim village, went to Kinnaur. All Buchen say that they enjoy visiting Kinnaur very much. The people are friendly and generous, and never treat them as fools or scroungers. The audience bursts into tears when hearing the self-sacrifice of Nangsa and other pious characters, and listens with special attention to the description of the hells and the punishments awaiting those who do not behave properly.

Pema Tundup and his troupe stayed more than a month in Rispa where they read the Kangyur and performed a (Breaking the) Stone ceremony, then one week in Nesang, and a month and half in Kunu-Charang, two small villages a few kilometres apart. There, besides Buddhist canonical texts, they read the story of Pema Öbar and of Drowa Zangmo, performed two Stone rituals in each village, and

³³ Unfortunately, despite my numerous attempts, I have never had the opportunity of attending a whole play. The information I have gathered so far comes from the Buchen themselves or from spectators.

³⁴ At rGyal mkhar chos rdzong, near Rinlung in Tibet, there were traditionally two companies—one of *A Ice lhamo* actors, one of storytellers or *manipa*. They acted out the same repertoire. But while the former staged the stories *in extenso* (Tib. *rgyal rabs rgyas pa*), the latter retold only short versions (Tib. *rgyal rabs khug pa*). I. Henrion-Dourcy, personal communication.

they acted out three 'dramas': Lingza Chökyit and her travels into the Hells; the Prince Drime Künden; and one play featuring a royal wedding, probably that of the Tibetan King Srong btsan sgam po with two princesses, one from China and one from Nepal (Fig. 7).



Fig. 7. A performance of *Drime Künden* in Lara (Feb. 2004). © P. Sutherland

The Buchen perform plays drawn from the Tibetan drama repertoire,³⁵ but in a completely different manner. The troupes are much smaller and are generally exclusively made up of three to four men. Besides the Buchen or Lochen (Tib. *lo chen*), who is the leader of the troupe, there is his right-hand man known as Onba, then a man who knows how to dance and twirl around called Lhamo and one or two Nyama helpers.³⁶ When travelling, the Buchen carry with them the wooden box (Tib. *thang rgam*) containing the statue of Thangtong Gyalpo and their costumes and ornaments which are

³⁵ The traditional repertoire of *A lce lha mo* includes nine plays drawn from both religious and historical literature: *Gcung po don yod grub*, *Chos rgyal nor bzang*, *Ras chung rdo rje grags pa'i rnam thar*, *Rgyal bza' bal bza'*, 'das log S nang sa 'od bum; *Dri med kun ldan*; 'Gro ba bzang mo, *Gzugs gi nyi ma*, *Padma 'od 'bar*.

³⁶ Onpa/Onba (Tib. *rngon pa*, lit. 'hunter'), popularly known as *lug rdzi*, 'shepherd', by the audience in Spiti, and Lhamo (Tib. *lha mo*, lit. 'female celestial being or goddess') are the names given to two of the three main characters carrying out the specific ritualised performance to prepare the stage for the unfolding Buddhist story that will follow in Tibetan drama performances, a *lce lha mo*. However, while Lhamo, in our case, wears a five-lobe crown (Tib. *rigs nga*) and is dressed more or less like his Tibetan *alter ego*, this is certainly not the case for Onba. Nyama (Tib. *nya ma*) means 'hearer of a Lama, without being a regular disciple', according to Jäschke's dictionary.

difficult to find locally; robes made of brocaded silk, Tibetan boots, round hats with red fringes that were worn by Tibetan officials in the past and which are still used in Spiti for wedding ceremonies, some jewellery and a *perak* (i.e. the elaborate headgear studded with turquoise that women wear for ceremonial occasions).

The performances take place outdoors with the audience arranged on all sides of the actors. There is no stage and no dressing room. The scenery is minimal. One or two low tables, a chair which in the course of the play becomes a throne, a mountain, or a huge lotus, just to name a few, and simple objects, mats and the like, and also a large kettle of tea and a big pot of *chang* (local beer). Contrary to Lhamo troupes, the actors do not have any script, the dialogues are spoken, not sung, and are usually rather brief. Sitting in a corner, one of the members of the troupe, usually the main Buchen, reads the *namthar* and, at the same time, plays the roles of hieratic (and rather static) characters: king, prince, lama, etc. In addition, he sings and plays the Tibetan lute or a kind of fiddle during the interludes.

Onpa plays roles that require real acting talent and which hold together the play. He must know how to make an impression on people, how to make them laugh, cry and tremble with fear. Finally, Nyama plays supporting roles, lesser roles not unlike the role of an extra, even when he plays the hero or heroine in the play.

Let us take for example the play *Drowa Zangmo*, which was performed last winter by Pema Tundup and his friends. Pema Tundup himself played the role of King Kalawangpo dressed in a magnificent Tibetan-style brocade gown, one shoulder uncovered with the sleeve dangling down, wearing the red-fringed hat of Tibetan officials and big Tibetan boots that lent him a military gait. Onpa played Hachang Dümo, the extremely evil ogress and former wife of King Kalawangpo; her tousled hair gathered together into a thick strand and held with butter, her black face coated in soot which is made even more frightening with prominent fangs drawn on it, and her dress dirty and ripped. And the Nyama played various minor roles, such as Drowa Zangmo; dressed like a princess with a lovely woollen robe tied at the waist with a beautiful belt, a *perak* on the head, and as many ornaments as possible (e.g. earrings, strings of beads made of turquoise, coral and pearls, bracelets); the Butchers, the elder and the younger one; then the Fishermen with their faces painted in red, and dressed in rags carrying long fearsome knives. Lastly, the prince and princess (King Kalawangpo and Drowa

Zangmo's children) were portrayed by children from the village that hosts the performance. They were dressed in their best clothes, their faces slightly lightened with barley flour to give them a light complexion typical of the nobility.

The characters are usually played in a comic manner, although they have their serious and even dramatic moments. In *Drowa Zangmo* during the search for the king's lost bitch, the minister and the king's servant looked in the audience, making funning comments while checking behind the altar, in the baskets of food, and even in the folds of a robe worn by an old woman in the audience. In the episode where Hachang Dümo pretends to suffer from a serious illness that can be treated only by eating the hearts of the royal children, Onba who was playing the role, blew things up out of proportion. Lying down on a putrid skin rug, he made unbearable cries of anguish and suffering, provoking in the audience extreme emotions which went from joy to terror and from laughter to tears.

In the past, some of the actors used to wear masks. Mémé Sherab, now a retired Buchen, remembers that many years ago when he was young, his father used to act out the stories of Drime Künden. The old man still has in his house a painted narrative scroll depicting Drime Künden's *namthar* and a blue triangular mask adorned with cowry shells that was specially worn by the recitant of Tibetan drama. Another Buchen showed me a mask with prominent fangs depicting the ugly female demon Hachang Dümo.

Today, the masks have been replaced by makeup. Three colours are used: a dark colour made of soot mixed with oil; a light colour made from roasted barley flour and water; and a red colour extracted from the root of a plant called *dimok* ('*bri mog*, *Arnebia euchroma*) and which is now very often replaced by red lipstick.

Before leaving a place, the Buchen blows a conch shell one more time to bring together the crowd. Then he reads aloud a list of benefactors, first giving their names and then describing precisely how much everyone has offered in terms of food, clothing, and money. Every benefactor is heartily thanked and an *om maṇi padme hūm* is chanted on their behalf. Finally, the Buchen organises a *chedo* (Tib. *mched do*, "pair of sisters/brothers") ceremony, very similar to the pairing of *chos spun* (i.e. 'religious siblings') that takes place in Ladakh. Each of the men and women present give a small personal possession (e.g. a ring, necklace, safety pin, prayer beads). The Buchen gathers these items, pairs them off randomly, and finally

holds them up for identification. The owners of the paired articles become *chedo* partners throughout their lives, well into old age.

In 1932, George de Roerich prophesized: "These ceremonies represent a vanishing art, closely inter-woven with religious beliefs and magic practices. A few decades more and the Land of Snows will see the last of its religious actors."³⁷ The future proved him wrong. Today there are eleven Buchen in the Pin Valley and the Buchen from Shara in Ladakh should be finishing his apprenticeship this year to take up the tradition perpetrated by his ancestors. However, though they still perform the Breaking the Stone ceremony for local people, this performance is reserved more and more for fairs to promote local folklore or upon special request by tourists, journalists, photographers and filmmakers. Recounting or acting out *namthar* has met with less success. Watching a performance where someone chants for three-four hours in an incomprehensible language is not quite as funny and visually attractive for foreigners as the Breaking the Stone ritual and the preceding spectacular sword dance in which the Buchen first pierces his cheek with a long needle or a trident, then points the two swords towards his belly, straightens up and balances himself on the tips of the sword which are placed either in his armpits, or on his bare abdomen; or perhaps what is more fascinating is when he does the same with one blade holding the tip under his neck or inside his mouth.

Times have changed. More and more people spend the day away from home, working as government servants in schools, hospitals, or banks. Children attend school often far from their native village. During the winter, only elders roam around when they are not on pilgrimage tours elsewhere in India or in Nepal. In fact, more and more people, natives of Spiti and Upper Kinnaur, now spend the cold season elsewhere. They rent a room for several weeks in auspicious places such as Tso Pema,³⁸ where Padmasambhava is said to have transformed his funeral pyre into a lake, or in Bodhgaya to attend the Dalai Lama's teachings. There, they spend the time reciting *mani* and making circumambulations, enjoying the sun in places that have a

³⁷ Roerich 1932: 40.

³⁸ As it says in the Great Treasure of Blessings, the king of Zahor and his ministers arrested Padmasambhava and his consort Mandarava and burned Padmasambhava alive, but he transformed the pyre into a lake and was found sitting on a lotus blossom in its centre. In the 1960s Dudjom Rinpoche built on its banks a Nyingmapa monastery. Other monasteries and temples were built later.

milder climate than the windy and icy heights of Spiti and its borderlands. Parallel to this, people who stay at home prefer to invite the Buchen to read Buddhist scriptures and eventually *namthar* than to retell or enact these edifying stories. According to the Buddhist clergy, it is more meritorious and, for the host, much easier. You do not have to be there; you only need a nice room with a *bukhāri* (i.e. a wood burning stove) to warm it and somebody to cook meals.

Everywhere throughout the Himalayas, generalised merit-making practices such as reading texts and chanting mantras, prostrations and pilgrimages are on the rise, and former local religious practices are slowly dying out or are being rehashed for cultural/tourist purposes, whenever they are colourful enough.

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