


Curating a Treasure: The *Bka' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa* in the Development of Rnying ma Tradition

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he *Sugata-Assembly of the Eight Teachings (Bka' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa)* has been a deeply consequential revelation cycle (*gter ma*) for Tibet's eldest Buddhist denomination, the Rnying ma.¹ As one of the main revelations produced by Tibet's "First Tertön King," Nyang ral nyi ma 'od zer (1124–1192), it contributed much to Nyang ral's seminal curation of the tantric tradition: an effort which would effectively define Rnying ma identity and, in some regards, the contours of Tibetan Buddhism altogether.² Over eight centuries in Tibet, the *Bka' brgyad* has consistently served as a resource for adepts and institutional figures in undertaking self-cultivational ritual practice, in the historiography of Tibetan Buddhism's origins, and in the organization of tantric knowledge. As a definitive cycle bringing together several of the main "wrathful" (*khro bo*) deity systems of classical Mahāyoga tantras, the *Bka' brgyad* supplied an imaginal world and set of ritual idioms which would be central to the Rnying ma pa approach to tantric practice. It also contributed much to the assimilation of Buddhism in Tibet, as it enfolded the ritual culture and lore of Tibet's autochthonous gods into its distinctive tantric program. Additionally, its formats were employed as a framework for organizing tantric knowledge in the anthologization efforts of the Rnying ma between the 15th and 19th centuries. Thus, the *Bka' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa*

¹ English translation of the title *Bka' brgyad* has not yet reached standardization. Frequent translations include "Eight Instructions," "Eight Precepts," "Eight Proclamations," "Eight Commands," "Eight Logos," "Eight Practice Instructions," etc. This inconsistency owes to the multivalence of *bka'*, which can be used as an honorific for "speech" (*gsung ste skad cha'i zhe sa*; e.g., *rgyal po'i bka'*), or to mean the discourse of the Buddha (Skt. *buddhavacana*). See *Bod rgya tshig mdzod chen mo*, s.v. "Bka'." For the sake of simplicity, I have settled on "Eight Teachings," although Chögyam Trungpa's argument for "Eight Logos" is also compelling, see Trungpa 2013: 645–665.

² See Hirshberg 2016; Doney 2013; Gyatso 1986 & 1993; and Germano 2005 for more on Nyang ral nyi ma 'od zer's influence on Tibetan religious literature and historiography.

supplied many enduring features of the Rnying ma pa's distinctive identity, while consistently serving as a resource for lineage masters in their efforts to articulate, reform, and bolster their "Early Translation Ancient School" (Snga 'gyur Rnying ma).

While tradition regularizes the story of such a scripture to yield the impression that this cycle functioned consistently over time, a literary-historical perspective suggests something different. A history of the *Bka' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa's* treatment in Tibet reveals how this particular cycle was actively curated, reimagined, and positioned within shifting institutional contexts, often in response to extrinsic pressures facing its custodians. We may trace the development of the *Bka' brgyad* over several centuries, and through several critical historical junctures, to see how this cycle and its accompanying myth and ritual complexes were engineered to provide resources for communities in search of responsive shifts in identity. In this, we can see the degree to which the use and received meaning of a scriptural cycle is contextually determined and its significance continually reimagined to supply resources for practitioners and institutional figures in their attempts to articulate denominational identities.

In the case of the *Bka' brgyad*, we will see how this process unfolded in three specific contexts: (1) in its initial development in the post-fragmentation period of the 9th through 12th centuries, (2) in the tumult of 16th- and 17th-century Central Tibet on the eve of Dga' ldan supremacy and the rise of Smin grol gling, and (3) in 18th- and 19th-century Sde dge during politically contentious decades that saw the further institutionalization of the Rnying ma pa. In each of these contexts, the *Bka' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa* met with ecclesiastical treatments that leveraged its basic mythologies, ritual programs, and doctrinal formats to yield scriptures and ritual texts which could be utilized in the myriad attempts of Rnying ma pas to respond to various extrinsic pressures. While a comprehensive survey of these developments is beyond the scope of this article, a cursory history of the *Bka' brgyad's* treatment in Central and Eastern Tibet will hopefully demonstrate some of the ways that a major cycle is reworked under the custody of institutional figures. While it is my thesis that such reworkings were often in response to shifting extrinsic pressures, proof for causation over correlation will require further research. My initial interpretation of the *Bka' brgyad's* treatment within the context of the history of the Rnying ma is therefore meant to provide some preliminary directions for interrogating the connection between social-historical contexts and the treatment of scriptural corpora in Tibet.

1. What Is the Bka' brgyad?

The Bka' brgyad consortium of revelation cycles refers to scriptural corpora centering on eight principal (although there are actually nine) wrathful tutelary deities. The *Bka' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa* seems to be the first comprehensive cycle devoted to this particular complex of deities, although at least five of the Bka' brgyad's icons were present in tantric cycles of Indian origin. In Tibet, Nyang ral's *Bka' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa* was followed by major Bka' brgyad revelation cycles produced by Gu ru Chos kyi dbang phyug (1212–1270) in the 13th century and Rig 'dzin rgod ldem (1337–1408) in the 14th, plus several smaller cycles revealed by Rnying ma and Bka' brgyud masters over the centuries.³ But Nyang ral's *Bde gshegs 'dus pa* remains the preeminent of these, initially supplying the important mythologies and ritual formats which would undergird future Bka' brgyad revelations.⁴

The Bka' brgyad brings together five important icons from Indian tantric tradition, plus four others of less certain provenance. The Bka' brgyad deity mandalas of certain Indian origin are those of: Che mchog (Skt. Mahottara Heruka), Yang dak, or Sri khrag thung (Skt. Vishuddha Heruka), Gshin rje (Skt. Yamāntaka), Rta mgrin (Skt. Hayagrīva), and Rdo rje phur ba (Skt. Vajrakīlaya).⁵ The remaining four mandalas—those of Bla ma rig 'dzin (Skt. *Guru Vidyādhara), Ma mo rbod gtong (Skt. *Matārah), 'Jig rten mchod btsod (Skt. *Lokastotrapūjā), and Dmod pa drag sngags (Skt. *Vajramāntrabhiru)—may have their origins within the Bka' brgyad cycle itself, although the *Rnying ma rgyud 'bum* putatively categorizes

³ According to Kaḥ thog rig 'dzin tse dbang nor bu's Bka' brgyad history, Nyang ral's *Bde gshegs 'dus pa* was the "enlightened action" (*phrin las*) treasure; Chos dbang's *Gsang ba yongs rdzogs* was the "enlightened qualities" (*yon tan*) treasure; Rgod ldem's *Drag po rang shar* was the "enlightened speech" (*gsung*) cycle; Padma gling pa's *Bka' brgyad me long* was the "enlightened mind" (*thugs*) treasure; and Bsam gtan gling pa's *Bka' brgyad yang gsang dregs 'dul* cycle was the "enlightened body" (*sku*) revelation. O rgyan gling pa's *Bka' 'dus chos kyi rgya mtsho* was especially comprehensive, embodying all enlightened qualities. Thus, the five-fold concept of enlightened body, speech, mind, quality, and action is said to be encapsulated in the complete set of Bka' brgyad revelations. Kaḥ thog rig 'dzin Tsho dbang nor bu 2006: 400.

⁴ An exception to the prominence of Nyang ral's *Bka' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa* is the preference of Byang gter institutions for Rgod ldem's *Drag po rang shar*. Chos dbang's *Gsang ba yongs rdzogs* was also an influential cycle for figures such as Klong chen rab 'byams (1308–1364), and 'Gyur med rdo rje (1646–1714), both of whom purportedly received the *Gsang ba yongs rdzogs* empowerments at a young age, see Klong chen rab 'byams 2009: 184 and Dudjom 1991: 825–827.

⁵ See Boord 1993:1–8, 39–70 for his argument for the Indian origins of Vajrakīlaya. Also see Cantwell and Mayer 2008: esp. 1–40 for their discussion of the search for the origins of the tantric tradition of Vajrakīlaya.

some Indian tantric materials under the template of these Bka' brgyad sub-cycles.⁶ The *Bka' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa* also contains elements drawn from the Net of Magical Emanation (Sgyu 'phrul drwa ba, Skt. Māyājāla) genre of Mahāyoga tantra, specifically the Five Sugata Family (Bde gshegs rigs lnga) mandala, the Peaceful-Wrathful (Zhi khro) deity complex, and the wrathful mandalas of taming (*'dul ba*) and liberation (*sgrol ba*). But whereas Magical Emanation tantras such as the Secret Nucleus (Gsang ba'i snying po, Skt. Guhyagarbha) mostly focus on the peaceful deity mandalas to communicate important tantric doctrines, the Bka' brgyad cycles favor the wrathful mandala as the foundation for a distinctive approach to self-cultivation and harm-averting ritual practice.

The *Bka' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa* also includes many rites for the aversion of obstructive forces. In the Bka' brgyad corpus, these hindering entities are identified as the autochthonous gods and spirits of Tibet, generally known as the "Eight Classes of Gods and Demons" (*lha srin sde brgyad*). In the edition widely regarded by Rnying ma pa ecclesiasts in Eastern Tibet as the definitive corpus of the *Bka' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa*—a 13-volume edition published at Kaḥ thog Monastery, probably sometime in the early 20th or late 19th century—violent exorcistic *bzlog pa* rites are by far the most prevalent type of ritual activity, and, by some measures, the most prevalent topic in the entire corpus.⁷ These apotropaic, or harm-averting, rituals enfold uniquely Tibetan characters and ritual protocols into classical Mahāyoga tantric formats. In fact, many of the *sgrub thabs* (Skt. *sādhana*), *bzlog pa*, and mytho-historical narratives included in the *Bka' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa* tantras incorporate the autochthonous gods and spirits of Tibet in their tantric mythologies, self-cultivational practices, and harm-averting ritual programs. The Bka' brgyad was thus a hybrid tradition, and it played an important role in the assimilation of Buddhism in Tibet as it worked to render tantric ritual traditions resonant for new Tibetan audiences.⁸

⁶ The Sde dge edition of the *Rnying ma'i rgyud 'bum* organizes the Accomplishment Class of Mahāyoga in two subcategories: the Two Revealed Treasures (Gter byon gnyis) and the Eight Transmitted Cycles (Bka' ma brgyad). The Two Revealed Treasures include the general and individuated tantras of Nyang ral's *Bka' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa*, as well as Sangs rgyas gling pa's *Bla ma dgongs 'dus* revelation. The Eight Transmitted Cycles contain transmitted (i.e., not *gter ma*) texts organized under headings of the eight Bka' brgyad Herukas. However, some of these texts are extracted from the *Bka' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa* and other Bka' brgyad revelation cycles, while some of them do seem to be first-dispensation texts cross-listed in the *Bka' 'gyur* and *Bstan 'gyur*. For more on the Bka' brgyad's inclusion in the *Rnying ma'i rgyud 'bum* and other Rnying ma anthologies, see Trautz 2019: 147–165.

⁷ Nyang ral nyi ma 'od zer 1978: passim.

⁸ See Samphel 2008.

Bka' brgyad lore holds that the cycle was initially dispensed by *dākinīs* to eight tantric masters, the Rig 'dzin brgyad, in India at the Bsil ba'i tshal (Skt. Śītavana) charnel ground near Rājagṛha.⁹ From there, it was brought by Pad ma 'byung nas (Skt. Padmasambhava), to Tibet, where it was bestowed to the Emperor Khri srong lde btsan (r. 755–794) and a retinue of eight close disciples at Bsam yas chims phu.¹⁰ According to tradition, it was then concealed for future discovery by Khri srong lde btsan's incarnation, Nyang ral nyi ma 'od zer himself. Thus, the *Bka' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa* was an early example of physical *gter ma*, recording a scriptural tradition thought to be of decidedly Indian origin.

As Daniel Hirshberg points out, the procedures for early *gter ma* revelation had yet to be standardized in Nyang ral's time. Prior to the distinction between *sa gter* and *dgongs gter*, revelation involved a suite of techniques, including visionary encounter, archeology, and textual tradency.¹¹ As Robert Mayer suggests, the retrieval of *Bde gshegs 'dus pa* materials from Mkho mthing may have indeed involved the physical extraction of imperial-period texts from within the temple's walls.¹² However, despite the tradition's claim of Indian origins, the literary evidence available to us suggests that the *Bde gshegs 'dus pa* was incubated in Tibet, perhaps a bit before the time of Nyang ral. Evidence for this view, which will be reviewed below, includes the absence of this particular arrangement of Bka' brgyad deities and their ritual protocols from any documentably Indian tantric sources, and also the inclusion of specifically Tibetan gods and spirits in the mythology and ritualism of the Bka' brgyad.¹³

As for its revelation by Nyang ral in the mid-12th century, while

⁹ This story is recorded in the *Bka' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa bka' byung tshul*, an auto-historical revelation text that seems to have been part of the *Bka' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa* cycle from an early point, see Nyang ral nyi ma 'od zer 1978 vol. 1: 243–284. Also see Dudjom 1991: 481–483.

¹⁰ The recipients of the *Bka' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa* at Bsam yas are said to have been: Khri srong lde btsan, Nam mkha'i snying po, Gnubs chen Sangs rgyas ye shes, Rgyal ba mchog dbyangs, Ye shes mtsho rgyal, Dpal gyi ye shes, Rlangs chen Dpal gyi seng ge, and Bai ro tsa na. Nyang ral nyi ma 'od zer 1978 vol. 1: 257–259. Also see Dudjom 1991: 482–483.

¹¹ Hirshberg 2016: 139.

¹² See Hirshberg 2016: 135 and Mayer 2015: 228–229.

¹³ The inclusion of specifically Tibetan gods in a cycle of purportedly Indian origin did not go unnoticed by Tibetans. 'Gos lo tsa ba Gzhon nu dpal (1392–1481) reports on criticisms directed to the Bka' brgyad in this regard and seems to agree with those who asserted the Tibetan provenance of the *Ma mo rbod gtong*, *'Jig rten mchod bstod*, and *Dmod pa drag sngags* sub-cycles. However, 'Gos adjudicates the matter by suggesting that these cycles' origins with Padmasambhava still qualifies them as valid tantric scriptures, see Go Lotsawa 1949: 107.

the normative account gives us the story of Nyang ral clandestinely retrieving the *Bka' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa* in 130 texts from "behind" (*rgyab nas*) the main Vairocana (Tib. Rnam par snang mdzad) statue at Mkho mthing Temple in Lho brag, there are actually several divergent accounts found within Bka' brgyad-associated literature. The account of the Mkho mthing revelation is told in Nyang ral's most widely circulated biography, the *Gsal ba'i me long*. But a different, and perhaps older, account is provided by the less-well-known *Dri ma med pa'i bka' rgya can* hagiography.¹⁴ According to the *Dri ma med pa*, Nyang ral received some version of the *Bka' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa* from his own lamas, Bla ma ra shag (a.k.a Bsod nams rdo rje, c. 12th century) and Gter ston Grub thob dngos grup (12th century).¹⁵ This suggests that the *Bka' brgyad* was already in circulation, and, as Hirshberg suggests, its "revelation" by Nyang ral may have simply involved the texts returning to their rightful owner in the person of Khri srong lde btsan's reincarnation (i.e., Nyang ral).¹⁶ Even where the *Gsal ba'i me long's* narrative of the Mkho mthing revelation prevailed, as it has across most Rnying ma oral and literary traditions, there has long been ambiguity around the degree to which the *Bka' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa* represents the revealed (*gter ma*) or transmitted (*bka' ma*) type of textual dissemination. Historical introductions to Tibetan editions of Bka' brgyad materials often refer to Nyang ral's "mixing the rivers of *bka' ma* and *gter ma*" (*bka' gter chu 'dres*) in his treatment of the Bka' brgyad cycle. This turn of phrase may be traceable to Mnga' ris Pañ chen Pad ma dbang rgyal's (1487–1542) historical commentary on the Bka' brgyad, wherein he outlines both transmitted and revealed lineages of the *Bka' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa*.¹⁷ Mnga' ris concludes that the lineage of a transmitted *Bde gshegs 'dus pa*, sometimes called the "Bka' ma bka' brgyad," or "Bka' ma brgyad," which was passed down in an unbroken line from the imperial period, and which Nyang ral received from Ra shag and Dngos sgrub, effectively ended

¹⁴ "Sprul sku mnga' bdag dag chen po'i skyes rabs mams thar dri ma med pa'i bka' rgya can," in Nyang ral nyi ma 'od zer 1978 vol. 1: 1–176. "Gsal ba'i me long in Bka' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa'i chos skor," in Nyang ral nyi ma 'od zer 1980 vol. 2: 199–381. Also see Hirshberg 2016 for his thorough analysis of the history and relationship between Nyang ral's biographical texts.

¹⁵ Nyang ral nyi ma 'od zer 1978 vol. 1: 92. This passage reports that Nyang ral received the 20 *Bde gshegs 'dus pa* tantras and teachings, along with the practice methods (*rgyud lung nyi shu sgrub thabs phro mo dang bcas pa*) from Bla ma Ra shag, and the Bka' brgyad empowerments and instructions (*gsang sngags sgrub pa bka' brgyad kyi dbang bka' gdams ngag dang bcas pa*) from Gter ston Dngos grup.

¹⁶ Hirshberg 2016: 102, 104.

¹⁷ Mnga' ris Pañ chen, "'Chad thabs mun sel nyi zla'i khor lo," in Nyang ral nyi ma 'od zer 1978 vol. 1: 177–242, specifically, see: 218–219.

with Nyang ral's revelation at Mkho mthing, whereafter all *Bde gshegs 'dus pa* materials were subsumed under Nyang ral's treatment of the corpus.¹⁸

Interestingly, there may be evidence for a pre-Nyang ral iteration of the *Bka' brgyad* in an obscure tantra with various titles found nestled in several editions of the *Rnying ma'i rgyud 'bum* and also included in some of the major *Bka' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa* editions. This text is variously known as the *Bde gshegs 'dus pa'i rgyud*, the *Zhi khro 'dus pa*, or the *'Byed pa lde mig gi rgyud*, among other aliases.¹⁹ This tantra includes the same basic iconographical elements as the *Bka' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa's* root tantra, the *Rtsa ba'i rgyud kyi rgyal po*, but more closely resembles Indian Māyājāla doctrinal templates and narrative style. Such isomorphisms with Māyājāla tantras include the centrality of the Five Sugata Family (Bde gshegs rigs Inga) mandala, the elevation of the Peaceful-Wrathful (Zhi khro) deity complex, as well as a doctrinal orientation strongly evident in Māyājāla scriptures, but replaced with a strong ritual orientation in Nyang ral's *Bka' brgyad* revelation. This *Bde gshegs 'dus pa'i rgyud* also includes a hybrid cast of characters of both Indian and Tibetan provenance, ranging from rival Hindu gods (as in the Guhyagarbha's wrathful mandala), to the Tibetan imperial god, Yar lha sham po, along with various *btsan* spirits. This iconographical hybridity suggests that this text developed in Tibet, and, given the presence of characters such as Yar lha sham po and other *btsan* spirits associated with imperial lore, may have been incubated in the imperial period or shortly thereafter. This tantra was perhaps an initial iteration of the *Bka' brgyad* system transmitted to Nyang ral by Ra shag and Dngos sgrub, just as the *Dri ma med pa* biography asserts, and likely provided the iconographical template for Nyang ral's revelation.

Also worth mentioning is a Sems sde cycle called the "Bka' brgyad rdzongs 'phrang." Mnga' ris Paṅ chen reports that completion stage (*rdzogs rim*) and Sems sde contemplation was an important feature of *Bka' brgyad* training,²⁰ and Ngag dbang dpal bzang likewise tells of his reception of the *Rdzong 'phrang* cycle at Kaḥ thog four centuries later.²¹ As exemplars of Sems sde literature, the *Rdzongs 'phrang* texts are understood to participate in the "transmitted" (*bka' ma*) family of

¹⁸ Nyang ral nyi ma 'od zer 1978 vol. 1: 200.

¹⁹ This text may be found in the following *Rnying ma'i rgyud 'bum* editions: Mtshams brag vol. 23 text 449; Sde dge vol. 15 text 250; Dpal brtsegs vol. 18 text 240. See *Rnying ma'i rgyud 'bum*. Tibetan & Himalayan Library: The Catalogue of the Master Edition of the Collected Tantras of the Ancients. <http://www.thlib.org/encyclopedias/literary/canons/ngb/catalog.php#cat=ng>. Accessed May 19, 2020.

²⁰ Nyang ral nyi ma 'od zer 1978 vol. 1: 199–200.

²¹ Palzang 2013: 145.

tantric scriptures, and Mnga' ris Paṅ chen provides a transmission history that stretches back to Gnubs chen sangs rgyas ye shes and other first-dispensation masters.²² Thus, we have further evidence for a pre-Nyang ral iteration of Bka' brgyad materials. However, as this lineage's first historical figure is Gnubs chen, we cannot conclude that it had truly Indian origins.

In sum, there appears to be evidence for Bka' brgyad traditions that pre-date Nyang ral's revelation. These early Bka' brgyad traditions may have included a Mahāyoga tantra centering on the eight Bka' brgyad Herukas, as well as a Sems sde tradition which was evidently maintained from the 9th century onward. So, while the Bka' brgyad is widely known as an early example of revelation literature, elements of it may have indeed circulated in Tibet before the time of its revealer, Nyang ral nyi ma 'od zer.

2. *The Bka' brgyad's Development and Impact in the 12th–15th Centuries*

As Ronald Davidson, David Germano, Jacob Dalton, and Matthew Kapstein (among others) have shown, the period immediately following the “age of fragmentation” (*sil bu'i dus*, 842–early 12th century) was a time of intense competition and creativity across the Tibetan Plateau. During this time, Snga 'gyur communities faced pressure from several fronts: from emergent neoconservative rulers in Gu ge, from new monastic institutions under the support of ascendant aristocratic houses in Central Tibet, and from the importation of exciting new tantric traditions from India, proffered by charismatic translator-adepts.²³ In this environment of competition and innovation, Tibetan religious institutions took on never-before-seen formats, most notably introducing the involvement of powerful clans with the leadership of emerging monastic strongholds such as Sa skya and Gsang phu. Additionally, as the Eastern Vinaya-based monasteries of Central Tibet gained wealth and influence, rivalries erupted around sacred sites, resulting, for example, in the razing of Lhasa's two most important shrines: the Ra mo che and Jo khang temples, as well as the destruction of several temples at Bsam yas in 1106.²⁴

All told, the general instability surrounding the rivalries of powerful new institutions, and the celebrity of Gsar ma translator-adepts, would have certainly detracted from the stability and

²² Nyang ral nyi ma 'od zer 1978 vol. 1: 218.

²³ Davidson 2004: 117–160. Also see Germano 2005, Kapstein 2000, and Dalton 2011 & 2016.

²⁴ Yamamoto 2009: 35.

influence of the Early Translation chieftain-priests, leaving the loosely-associated Snga 'gyur communities in need of competitive resources for bolstering their nascent identity. The *Bka' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa*, for a number of reasons, would have been just such a resource. Its ultra-fierce iconography and mythological narratives would have been emboldening to the Snga 'gyur practitioners, whose embrace of such idioms had been directly challenged by the Gu ge kings.²⁵

This is not to suggest that it was only within Snga 'gyur communities that the wrathful idiom flourished; it is absolutely the case that Heruka iconography and wrathful soteriology were present in the traditions that emerged from the Second Spread (*phyi dar*) of tantra in Tibet. However, the Rnying ma, who were in no small degree under the influence of Nyang ral nyi ma 'od zer's tremendous literary vision, would come to incorporate the wrathful and ritualistic tantrism of the *Bka' brgyad* into a complex of idioms distinctive of Snga 'gyur Rnying ma pa religiosity. The resulting matrix of doctrines and idioms yielded an elevation of harm-averting ritual as soteriological practice, a commitment to wrathful iconography as expressive of the Buddhology of pristine cognition, and a subordination of all forms of Buddhist doctrine and practice to Mahā Ati under the rubric of the Nine Vehicles (Thegs pa dgu). While some of these formats are discernable in Indian Mahāyoga scriptures, they gain a distinctive character and emphasis in Snga 'gyur tantric literature. Indeed, each of these features is strongly present in the *Bka' brgyad* cycle's ritual programs and mythological narratives. For example, the self-cultivational rituals of the so-called worldly (*'jig rten pa'i*) mandalas of 'Jig rten mchod bstod and Dmod pa drag sngags revolve around geomantic and thaumaturgical themes resonant with Tibet's indigenous ritual culture. At the same time, the framing narratives of the *Bka' brgyad* root tantras center on the cosmogenesis of wrathful mandalas out of the naturally expressive character of a pristine cognition, a Buddhology most fully articulated in the mystical rhetoric of the ultimate vehicle of Ati. Taken together, these features define the *Bka' brgyad* cycle in terms of its elevation of the wrathful idiom and the advancement of a distinctive vision for the soteriological value of harm-averting ritualism.²⁶ Moreover, this approach to tantric practice was coordinated with an emergent conception of the harm-averting ritual adept as the paradigmatic Buddhist master: an image strongly advanced by Nyang ral nyi ma

²⁵ Karmay 1998: 3–15.

²⁶ See Trautz 2019: 204–232 for a detailed analysis of these features in the context of the *Bka' brgyad rtsa ba rgyud kyi rgyal po*.

'od zer himself in his curation of Padmasambhava lore.²⁷

The incorporation of characters and ritual idioms derived from indigenous ritual culture would have been specifically bolstering to the Snga 'gyur adepts, many of whom, like Nyang ral, were professional ritualists known for performing harm-averting rites for livelihood. Such ritualism has ancient origins on the Tibetan Plateau and across the Himalaya, where propitiation of natural forces embodied as environmental gods and demons was (and continues to be) an essential element of daily life. Entities such as the fearsome *btsan po*, the cannibalistic *srin po*, the tempestuous *ma mo* goddesses, the aquatic *klu*, and the powerful white *lha*, are all thought to be active participants in the fortunes of humans. With the introduction of Buddhism, these entities were hybridized with characters from Indian pantheons, resulting in a complicated milieu of divine, semi-divine, and demonic entities with which ritual adepts were supposed to interact. By the 9th century, we see attempts to standardize these entities in a rubric known as the Eight Classes (the *Sde brgyad*), which Nyang ral placed at the center of the *Bka' brgyad's* tantric mythology and ritualism.²⁸ The *Bka' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa* thus constellates the soteriological and apotropaic dimensions of tantric practice around uniquely Tibetan (or hybridic Indo-Tibetan) ritual idioms, a development which would play a strong role in the institutional profile and emergent denominational identity of the Rnying ma pa. We can thus imagine how the *Bka' brgyad* became a resource for a community whose leaders were already valued for their harm-averting ritual prowess.

Finally, in collating the non-Māyājāla deity systems which had been circulating in Snga 'gyur communities—systems such as

²⁷ See Nyang ral nyi ma 'od zer 1989.

²⁸ The codification of the Eight Classes of Gods and Demons (*dregs pa sde brgyad*, *lha ma srin sde brgyad*, or sometimes *sprul pa'i sde brgyad*) is first evidenced in Gnubs chen Sangs rgyas ye shes's 9th-century liturgy, the *Sde brgyad gser skyems*. In the *Bka' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa*, the *Sde brgyad* include the *klu*, *gza'*, *bdud*, *lha*, *dmu*, *gnod spyin*, *srin po*, and *bgegs* demons. *Ma mo* are also sometimes included in the *Sde brgyad* lists. Subcategories of the Eight Classes include the *srid pa'i lha*, *pho lha* and *mo lha*, *gsang sku'i lha*, *srid pa'i ma mo*, *btsan*, and other specifically-named entities. Lists of the *Sde brgyad* gods and spirits are notoriously idiosyncratic, even within a single corpus such as the *Bde gshegs 'dus pa*. Thus, it seems that the very idea of "Eight Classes" was an important signifier for Tibet's autochthonous gods and demons, which were ordered by the *Sde brgyad* rubric for the purpose of clerical ritual interventions. In the *Bka' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa*, we see these entities involved in the preparation and concealment of *gter ma*, incorporated into the mythic narratives and deity mandalas of the root tantras and also targeted in the copious harm-averting ritual practices that fill out the *Bka' brgyad* ritual cycles. See Samphel 2008; Gnubs chen Sangs rgyas ye shes 1997; and Dudjom 1991: 254–266.

Hayagrīva, Yamāntaka, and Vajrakīlaya—the *Bka' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa* provided a new canon with its own idioms, ritual programs, and mythology. Though some attempts had already been made to anthologize the Snga 'gyur inheritance of tantras transmitted from India, the tremendous scale and comprehensive scope of Nyang ral's *Bka' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa* may be interpreted as a further attempt to collate materials into a consolidated doctrinal and practical identity.²⁹ By bringing together tantric traditions which had long sustained the Snga 'gyur into one corpus, Nyang ral was able to communicate a coherent identity for what had been a diverse and localized collection of tantric Buddhist communities. This collation had doctrinal, historiographic, and vocational implications, and was an important part of Nyang ral's overarching project of shifting authority towards the Snga 'gyur and its imagined history in the Tibetan imperium.

In this, we should remain cognizant of Nyang ral's overarching authorial identity. Nyang ral nyi ma 'od zer's incredible body of work was essentially a historiographic one, bolstered by doctrinal and ritual works with their own distinctive myth and ritual formats. As curated by Nyang ral, the *Bka' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa* participated in an emergent vision of Rnying ma—and of Tibetan Buddhist—religiosity, one that included a re-imagining of the legacy of the Tibetan imperium, a recourse to both the transcendental mysticism and the wrathful ritualism that ran through Snga 'gyur practice, and the elevation of the harm-averting ritual adept as the paradigmatic Buddhist master.³⁰ By incorporating these elements, the *Bka' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa* would have resonated for the Early Translation practitioners, and we see it rapidly come to stand at the center of Rnying ma orthodoxy. Mnga' ris Pañ chen tells us, for example, that, by the 16th century, 151 exegetical commentaries on the *Bka' brgyad* were in circulation, dozens of practice lineages persisted across central and southern Tibet, and that “in Dbus, Gtsang, Mdo, and Khams, the *Bka' brgyad* had especially spread.”³¹

While the influence of the *Bka' brgyad* in an emergent religious identity for the Snga 'gyur seems clear, what is less directly provable is the connection between the developments in the treatment of this

²⁹ Dalton interprets the emergence of the *Zur bka' sde* corpus as an early anthologization effort, reflecting the Snga 'gyur's inheritance of Indian tantric materials (2016: 49).

³⁰ See Germano 2005 for his description of Nyang ral's attempts to incorporate both “pristine” and “horrific” idioms of tantric contemplation in his overarching oeuvre. Also see Nyang ral nyi ma 'od zer 1988 & 1989 for his prominent historical literature.

³¹ *deng sang dbus gtsang dang/ mdo khams kong po sogs na dar ba'i bka' brgyad pal cher rnams ni/* (Nyang ral nyi ma 'od zer 1978 vol. 1: 205–206).

scriptural literature and the socio-political context surrounding the emergence of Snga 'gyur institutions and communities. Few sources from the post-fragmentation period speak directly to the impact of contestations that gripped Central Tibet, and there are essentially no sources from this period that theorize ritual practice in terms of its use as a response to extrinsic social pressures. Thus, the theory that the Bka' brgyad emerged and was curated in response to extrinsic pressures facing the Snga' gyur is a preliminary hypothesis deserving further research. However, my interpretation will proceed in this vein, as I believe it provides a compelling model for understanding the development of a scriptural tradition within specific historical contexts, and it is clear that new treatments of the Bka' brgyad and other tantric cycles so often accompanied accelerated institutional transformations. At stake is a methodological question about the use of religious literature as historical evidence: an obviously important issue for historians of religions, but beyond the scope of the present article to fully address.

3. *Bka' brgyad Ritual and Rnying ma Institutions in the 16th–17th Centuries*

Political dominance over Central Tibet alternated between Mongol-backed Sa skya and the Bka' brgyud-affiliated Phag mo gru clan from the 13th until the 17th century. By 1613, the Phag mo gru pa had been eclipsed by the Gtsang pa aristocracy, while Dga' ldan would align with Gushri Khan's Mongols to achieve a long-lasting dominance over Central Tibet beginning in 1642. As James Gentry observes, it was during this period of instability, and in the 16th and 17th centuries in particular, that ritual mastery became a valuable commodity in rival factions' attempts to exert control over political events.³² Indicative of this trend was the prominence of Blo gros rgyal mtshan, also known as Sog bzlog pa, the "Mongol Repeller," (1552–1624). Sog bzlog pa was a student of Zhig po gling pa Gar gyi dbang phyug rtsal (1524–1583), whose revealed ritual text, *The 25 Ways of Averting Armies (Dmag bzlog nyer lnga)*, was deployed by Sog bzlog pa under the patronage of Gtsang as they fended off the initial incursions of Dga' ldan's Mongol mercenaries.³³ Sog bzlog pa also inherited the *Bka' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa* from a 'Bri gung Bka' brgyud lineage. We should not be surprised to find the Bka' brgyad in the resume of this ritual master, as harm-averting ritualism with a violent (and, as James Gentry observes, "object-based") orientation was a definitive

³² Gentry 2013: 52.

³³ Gentry 2013: 47–56.

feature of the highly-valued ritual program proffered by figures like Sog bzlog pa.

One of Sog bzlog pa's main disciples was Gong ra lo chen Gzhan phan rdo rje (1594–1654), a polymathic lama who would be a critical figure for the Rnying ma lineage in general, and for the Bka' brgyad tradition in particular. Gong ra was the principal lama to Phrin las lhun grub (1611–1662), the father and root lama to Gter bdag gling pa, 'Gyur med rdo rje (1646–1714), the founder of Smin grol gling. According to 'Gyur med rdo rje's short biography of Gong ra, and from information gleaned from references in other biographical sources, Gong ra supposedly edited an early *Rnying ma'i rgyud 'bum*, an edition of the *Man ngag sde'i rgyud bcu bdun*, and a comprehensive edition of the *Bka' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa*, all from his scriptorium at Nges gsang rdo rje gling in Gtsang.³⁴ Unfortunately, it seems that none of these editions survives, having been destroyed when the 5th Dalai Lama banned the works of “the trio of Snang, Sog, and Gong” (i.e., Zhig po gling pa, Sog bzlog pa, and Gong ra).³⁵ Of the *Bka' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa* editions in circulation today, the two most widely-circulated editions—one from Kaḥ thog and the other from Mtshams brag in Bhutan—claim to be descended from Gong ra's redaction.³⁶ While these two editions are quite different in some regards, they do share a basic structure, and entail a similar density of apotropaic ritual texts. The Kaḥ thog edition, for example, boasts at least 55 major exorcism (*bzlog pa*) texts, making it the most prevalent topic in the corpus. Other prominent elements include rites of exorcism (*bzlog pa*), effigy sacrifice (*gtor bzlog*, *gtor zor*) and impalement (*gzer kha*), invoking and dispatching unseen forces (*rbod gtong*), and mantric cursing (*dmod pa* and *drag sngags*). It may be the case that this iteration of the Bka' brgyad as a repository for harm-

³⁴ 'Gyur med rdo rje's biography of Gong ra tells us that he assembled the *Rnying ma rgyud 'bum* three times, see 'Gyur med rdo rje 1998 vol. 3: 90. Gong ra's *Curation of the Seventeen Esoteric Tantras of the Great Perfection* is registered by Gentry 2013: 467n961. And the English-language introduction to the Mtshams brag edition of the *Bka' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa'i chos skor* suggests that Gong ra was the initial editor of the parent edition to the 13-volume *Bka' brgyad chos skor* editions, see Nyang ral nyi ma 'od zer 1980: 5.

³⁵ Gentry 2013: 480. Also see Gu ru bkra shis 1990: 448 and Smith 2004.

³⁶ This claim regarding the provenance of the *Bka' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa* with Gong ra is weakly substantiated. Beyond the claim as it is made in the Mtshams brag's preface, there are but a few colophonic references to Gong ra's editorial role, including the colophon of the *Zhi khro rtsa ba'i rgyud* which specifies Gong ra's role in curating (*bzhengs pa*) this version of the text. It is not clear why the Mtshams brag editors took these colophonic references to suggest that Gong ra had edited the entire corpus, and perhaps they were drawing on received information regarding the provenance of the major *Bka' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa* editions as they were transmitted in Bhutan and Khams.

averting and thaumaturgical ritual practice had its origins in Gong ra's edition, which was curated within his context of the commodification of intercessory ritual magic in a particularly contentious context. Whether Gong ra's curation of the corpus was a matter of simply publishing materials that he had received in a coherent package, or whether he scoured Central Tibet to bring together Bka' brgyad-associated materials, we do not yet know. But we do see the *Bka' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa* increasingly become a repository for apotropaic ritual knowledge between the 17th and 20th centuries. It is worth noting that this association of the Bka' brgyad with harm-averting ritualism contrasts with Mnga' ris Paṅ chen's description of Bka' brgyad tradition, which emphasizes the self-cultivational practice of *bskyed rim* and *rdzogs rim* under the close tutelage of Snga 'gyur masters.

At Smin grol gling, 'Gyur med rdo rje and his brother, Lo chen Dharma śrī (a.k.a. Ngag dbang chos dpal rgya mtsho, 1654–1717), made an effort to streamline Bka' brgyad rituals into a single ritual cycle, the "Smin gling system" (*bka' brgyad smin gling lugs*), which could be practiced as part of liturgical life at the monastery.³⁷ As Jacob Dalton and Kurtis Schaeffer have observed, the curation of ritual cycles at Smin grol gling replicated the institutionalization of ritual at Dga' ldan and was related to efforts to consolidate authority and articulate institutional identity.³⁸ These revisions of institutional ritual practice at Smin grol gling resulted in a ritualism that involved a cast of professional officiants, in formats that could be carried out in communal settings over a few days, and were suited to public audiences. This kind of approach to ritual practice was a revolution for the Rnying ma pa, establishing a newly institutionalized identity for the Ancient School moving forward; the large "Mother Temples" of Eastern Tibet would each adopt the Smin gling system for their regular Bka' brgyad ritual intensives (*sgrub chen*), which are still performed either in commemoration of Padmasambhava's life, or to dispel obstacles at the end of the lunar calendar.³⁹ There was no analogous curation of Bka' brgyad tantras or doctrinal commentaries at Smin grol gling, evidencing the development of a ritual-centric attitude towards the *Bka' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa* which would reverberate in Smin grol gling's affiliated institutions for the following centuries.

³⁷ 'Gyur med rdo rje 1977.

³⁸ Dalton 2016: 97–114. Also see Dalton 2006 and Schaeffer 2006.

³⁹ This is not to suggest that it was at Smin grol gling that the Bka' brgyad *sgrub chen* was initially conceived. As Cantwell (2019: 156) suggests, there is evidence that Nyang ral's lineal descendants had organized textual materials for the performance of regular ritual intensives at Smra bo lcog.

4. *The Bka' brgyad in 18th- and 19th-century Khams: Revelation, Ritual, and Anthologization*

From Central Tibet, the Bka' brgyad cycle spread east, with Bka' brgyad study and practice becoming an important feature of temple life at the major Rnying ma monasteries in Khams. As the autobiographical accounts of people like Ngag dbang dpal bzang (1879–1941) and 'Jam mgon kong sprul (1813–1899) attest, the Bka' brgyad was an important source of liturgical and contemplative knowledge at the great Rnying ma institutions around Sde dge in the 18th and 19th centuries.⁴⁰ It was also a source for ritual mastery that secured the fortunes of lamas in the service of the Sde dge king (and sometimes his enemies). The Bka' brgyad Great Accomplishment Rites (Bka' brgyad sgrub chen) would be instituted across Rnying ma temples, while Khams pa *gter ston* would prolifically reveal their own Bka' brgyad materials. The Bka' brgyad was also implicated in the anthologization efforts of Rnying ma ecclesiasts in the 18th and 19th centuries as new canons of scriptural and ritual texts were developed alongside the growth of Rnying ma temples. In these new canons, the *Bka' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa* was either included outright, or deployed as a template for the organization of Mahāyoga knowledge altogether.⁴¹ All told, it is clear that the Bka' brgyad was a central feature of an increasingly institutionalized identity for the Rnying ma denomination between the 18th and 20th centuries.

The development of a highly institutionalized iteration of Rnying ma religion in the 18th and 19th centuries may be understood in the broader context of political contestations that embroiled Sde dge.⁴² While it is not universally accepted amongst historians of Eastern Tibet that the rise of major institutions in the 18th through 20th centuries was exclusively in response to inter-institutional competitive pressures (specifically, the rising influence of Dga' ldan in Eastern Tibet), I suggest that the kinds of contestations surrounding Sde dge must have inflected the development of ecclesiastical institutions in this period.⁴³ The 18th century saw

⁴⁰ See Kongtrul 2003 and Palzang 2013.

⁴¹ See Trautz 2019: 147–165 for an overview of the Bka' brgyad's inclusion in Rnying ma anthologies.

⁴² See Hartley 1997.

⁴³ Paradigmatic of this debate is Alexander Gardner's suggestion that the so-called non-sectarian (*ris med*) movement of 19th-century Khams was actually a pan-sectarian (but decidedly non-Dge lugs pa) response to the growing dominance of Lhasa's Dge lugs institutions, see Gardner 2006: 145. Thubten Phuntshok, on the other hand, dismisses the idea that the development of major religious institutions around Sde dge had anything to do with the growing influence of Dga' ldan in Eastern Tibet (personal communication, October 2017).

periodic power shifts in Eastern Tibet between Lhasa, the Qing, and other regional polities. The Sde dge kingdom maintained autonomy through much of this tumult, but was subject to a momentary conquest by the warlord Dgon po nam rgyal (1799–1865) in the 1860s and *de facto* colonization by Lhasa, followed by a period of Qing rule.⁴⁴ As Alexander Gardner observes, between the late 1860s and 1918, Sde dge was essentially at the forefront of a centuries-long struggle between Lhasa and China to define their mutual borders: something of growing importance to the Qing as it began to transform its self-concept from an older model of concentric spheres of imperial influence towards a defined nation-state with definite borders.⁴⁵

In the midst of this, Sde dge and its ecclesiastical leaders strove to maintain autonomy not just for the kingdom, but for the region of Khams altogether. They would do this in part through new religious formats and identities. Such ecclesiastical developments included the growth and reformation of major monastic institutions, the formation of new scriptural canons, the development of ecumenical approaches to exegesis and practice, an efflorescence of *gter ma* revelation, the development of public tantric ritual programs (*sgrub chen*), the inception of comprehensive curricula for exegetical study of exoteric and esoteric traditions (*bshad grwa*), and the close involvement of luminary masters with the Sde dge court. Many of these developments mirrored the highly institutionalized and politicized practice of Buddhism as it had been deployed by the Dge lugs reform tradition and the Dalai Lama's Dga' ldan pho brang. Just as at Smin grol gling, the Rnying ma temples replicated these modes of institutionalized Buddhism, while incorporating their own distinctive traditions by including the study and practice of transmitted and revealed tantric corpora. The *Bka' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa* was an essential element of this mix, as it was understood to represent the Rnying ma's unique tantric inheritance and was regarded as paradigmatic of the origins and structure of tantric knowledge.

The *Bka' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa* became important in liturgical life at Kaḥ thog, Zhe chen, Dpal yul, and Rdzogs chen monasteries. Ngag dbang dpal bzang tells of receiving extensive training in the *Bka' brgyad* under the 3rd Kaḥ thog si tu, Chos kyi rgya mtsho (1880–1923), and we also learn of Dge rtse Paṅ chen 'Gyur med mchog grub's (1761–1829) encounter with the *Bde gshegs 'dus pa* when he first arrived at Kaḥ thog in the late 18th century.⁴⁶ The 13-volume Kaḥ thog edition of the *Bka' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa* was published at the

⁴⁴ See Tsomu 2014.

⁴⁵ Gardner 2006: 152.

⁴⁶ Palzang 2013: 149.

printing house there, perhaps in the early 20th century under the supervision of an elderly Chos kyi rgya mtsho, or immediately thereafter. Prior to that, there seems to have been a nine-volume edition, which Kong sprul claims was published at Sde dge Par khang, and which circulated at places like Zhe chen and Kaḥ thog.⁴⁷ Perhaps this nine-volume edition more closely reflected Gong ra's parent collection, although we cannot know for sure. Why it was expanded to 13 volumes, we also do not know, although it is worth noting that the 3rd Kaḥ thog si tu, Chos kyi rgya mtsho, seems to have been particularly fond of the *Bde gshegs 'dus pa* and its rituals, using it as a sourcebook for liturgical life at Kaḥ thog.⁴⁸ Indeed, volumes 10 through 13 of Kaḥ thog's edition of the *Bka' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa* exclusively feature supplementary rites, mostly for the violent aversion of obstructive forces. Many of these rituals have been incorporated into the Great Accomplishment ritual manuals (*sgrub skor*) for the Rnying ma Mother Temples.

As for Kong sprul, he received the *Bka' brgyad* at numerous temples, including at Zhe chen, where the First Zhe chen dbon sprul Mthu stobs rnam rgyal (1787–1854) had curated an extensive *Bka' brgyad* ritual manual based on the Smin gling tradition, and also through the Zur mang *Bka' brgyud* lineage.⁴⁹ Indeed, from the 18th century onward, the monasteries of Dpal yul, Kaḥ thog, and Rdzogs chen all harbored *Bka' brgyad* ritual traditions allegedly derived from Smin grol gling. Supplementing the Smin gling lugs with rites distinctive to each institution, these monasteries produced unique ritual manuals to be followed in the context of annual *sgrub chen* ceremonies, or to be drawn on as a sourcebook for *ad hoc* rites. Kong sprul reports on the prominence of such *Bka' brgyad* rituals in his own resume of professional ritual activities: a professional function

⁴⁷ Kongtrul 2003: 217, 283. A nine-volume manuscript edition of the *Bka' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa* from Eastern Tibet has recently been digitized by the Buddhist Digital Resource Center in Chengdu with no identifying information (TBRC: W2PD20239). It is quite possible that this edition is the very nine-volume one mentioned by numerous 18th-century sources. Interestingly, a ten-volume *Bka' brgyad*, digitized under the supervision of Karma Phuntso for the British Library's Endangered Archives Programme, has been found at Phur sgrub dgon, near Thimpu. Phuntso speculates that these manuscripts date from between the 17th and 19th centuries. A cursory analysis shows significant similarities to the nine-volume edition from Khams, and a picture thus emerges of the ongoing transmission of *Bka' brgyad* corpora—first in the nine-volume, and, later, the 13-volume format—from Kaḥ thog to Bhutan between the 18th and 20th centuries. British Library Endangered Archives Programme, EAP 310/1. <https://eabl.uk/collection/EAP310-3-1>. Accessed May 19, 2020.

⁴⁸ Palzang 2013: 129.

⁴⁹ Kongtrul 2003: 63.

he would use to his advantage in navigating the hazards of Sde dge's shifting political fortunes.⁵⁰

'Jam mgon kong sprul was not the only Sde dge "non-sectarian" (*ris med pa*) to work with Bka' brgyad materials. 'Jam dbyangs mkhyen brtse' dbang po (1820–1892) received the *Bka' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa* from 'Jam mgon kong sprul, and was said to have attained mastery of the Bka' brgyad in dream-visions, while his *gter ston* associate, Mchog gyur gling pa (1829–1870) himself revealed a Bka' brgyad cycle which was deemed especially comprehensive. Other treasure revealers also specialized in Bka' brgyad revelations, especially in the wilds of Nyag rong, where Rang rig rdo rje (a.k.a. Sku gsum gling pa, 1847–1903) was said to have revealed over 100 Bka' brgyad *gter ma* texts in the remote Upper A bse Valley alone.⁵¹

Beyond ritual practice and treasure revelation, the *Bka' brgyad* became a subject of exegetical treatment, and 'Ju Mi pham rgya mtsho's (1846–1912) commentary, the *Bka' brgyad rnam bshad*, would become a central element of the *bshad grwa* curricula at Dpal yul and at Rdzogs chen's monastic colleges. Kaḥ thog also incorporated the Bka' brgyad into the curriculum there, using an analysis of the *Bka' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa's Phyi ma'i rgyud* as a main source for unpacking Mahāyoga practice.⁵²

Perhaps most enduringly, the Bka' brgyad was deeply implicated in Rnying ma canon-formation in this period. As early as the 15th century, we see the 15 tantras of the *Bka' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa* included in early iterations of the *Rnying ma'i rgyud 'bum*, as evidenced in the Bhutanese Sgang steng edition.⁵³ Stag sham nus ldan rdo rje's (a.k.a. Bsam gtan gling pa, 1655–1708) 17th-century edition, for which we only have the *dkar chag*, also contains the 15 Bka' brgyad root tantras in the same order as they appear in later *Rgyud 'bum* editions.⁵⁴ The Sde dge *Rgyud 'bum*, edited by Dge rtse Ma ha paṇḍita and based on a previous edition of 'Jigs med gling pa (1729–1798) includes the same selection of Bka' brgyad materials, but expands things by utilizing a Bka' brgyad rubric to organize all sorts of Mahāyoga materials to fill out the Accomplishment Class (Sgrub sde) of Mahāyoga scriptures. In this, the 15 foundational tantras of Nyang ral's Bka' brgyad revelation are categorized as the *Bka' brgyad*

⁵⁰ Kong sprul's autobiography recounts many occasions on which he was asked to complete Bka' brgyad *sman sgrub* and *sgrub chen* rituals for the aversion of obstacles on behalf of temples, masters, and aristocrats. For example, see Kongtrul 2003: 141, 147, 170, 174, 180, 186, 225.

⁵¹ Nyag bla rang rig rdo rje 2005 vol. 19.

⁵² Field interviews with *bshad grwa* students and instructors at Kaḥ thog Rdo rje ldan, Sichuan, the People's Republic of China, August, 2015.

⁵³ See Cantwell and Mayer 2006.

⁵⁴ Stag sham nus ldan rdo rje n.d. vol. 4: 43–70.

bde gshegs 'dus pa, one of two cycles comprising the Two Treasures (Gter gnyis) sub-category (the other being Sangs rgyas gling pa's *Bla ma dgongs 'dus*). However, all sorts of other non-Māyājāla Mahāyoga tantras, mostly verifiable to be of First Dispensation provenance (and therefore of the "transmitted" rather than "revealed" variety) are also included in the category of the Eight Transmitted Teachings (Bka' ma brgyad). Some of these texts have nothing to do with Nyang ral's *Bka' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa* revelation cycle, but they are here arranged under the sub-headings of the eight Bka' brgyad deities, as if this eightfold format represented an inherent taxonomy of non-Māyājāla materials from India. We also see this use of the Bka' brgyad rubric in other anthologies, such as in the *Rin chen gter mdzod* and in the *Rnying ma bka' ma*, which echo this predilection for organizing materials under the headings of the eight Bka' brgyad deity systems. In these cases, a Bka' brgyad rubric was utilized to organize otherwise free-floating texts as if they were part of a single dispensation of related materials.

The origins of this idea are explicitly articulated in the Bka' brgyad's auto-history, a *gter ma* text called the *Bka' brgyad bka' byung tshul*. This fascinating text, which inspired Mnga' ris Paṅ chen's 16th-century research and was closely linked to material at the heart of O rgyan gling pa's (1323–1360) 14th-century *Bka' thang sde lnga* revelation, gives a comprehensive account of the dispensation of some 240 non-Māyājāla Mahāyoga tantras in the context of the Bka' brgyad's initial revelation to the Eight Vidyādhara at the Śitavana charnel ground. According to this account, each of the Eight Vidyādhara was bestowed dozens of tantras having to do with the deities featured in the Bka' brgyad revelation.⁵⁵ This narrative undergirds the status of the *Bka' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa* as a canon for such materials, linking the Bka' brgyad to a broader scriptural taxonomy. Literary-historical evidence available to us, however, suggests no evidence outside of Bka' brgyad lore for a specifically collative relationship between these materials in India.

At any rate, the sensibility that these tantras—all sorts of scriptures featuring deities such as Hayagrīva, Yamāntaka, Vajrakīlaya, and so forth—participated in a single dispensation in mytho-historical India undergirded the development of the term *sgrub sde* to refer to non-Māyājāla tantric scriptures. The term *sgrub sde* also suggests a praxical orientation to these materials, and it is certainly the case that the *Bka' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa* does not

⁵⁵ "Bka' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa bka' byung tshul," in Nyang ral nyi ma 'od zer 1978 vol. 1: 231–272 and "Dkar chag gsal ba'i sgron me," in Nyang ral nyi ma 'od zer 1978 vol. 1: 615–660.

demonstrate the doctrinal or philosophical complexity of Māyājāla tantras such as the Guhyagarbha.

It is as of yet unclear where the term *sgrub sde* is first used. Mnga'ris Paṅ chen uses the term in the plural—*sgrub sde rnams*—to refer to each of the eight sub-cycles of the Bka' brgyad (e.g., the Accomplishment Class of Hayagrīva, the Accomplishment Class of Vajrakīlaya, etc.).⁵⁶ But it seems that the use of the term to refer to a broad category of materials with both revealed and transmitted elements is a later formulation and probably related to the efforts of early *Rgyud 'bum* editors to organize Mahāyoga materials not otherwise included in the great *Bka' ma* cycles.

5. Conclusion

In summary, the Bka' brgyad was clearly an essential element of Rnying ma tradition in the 18th through 20th centuries in Eastern Tibet. Between its curation as a regular liturgical cycle at the Rnying ma pa's most important temples, its ongoing appearance in the resumes of treasure revealers, its use as a source for professional ritualism, its utilization as an exegetical template in an increasingly formalized sense of religious education, and as a rubric for the organization of tantric scriptures, the *Bka' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa* played a central role in how the Rnying ma denomination worked to define its institutional identity. In its participation in these diverse modes of religious practice, exegesis, and canon formation, the Bka' brgyad's function had expanded to participate in nearly every dimension of Rnying ma pa religious life. Of course, the *Bka' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa* was not necessarily the most important cycle in the Rnying ma literary inheritance: transmitted scriptural traditions such as the *Guhyagarbha* and the *Dgongs pa 'dus pa'i mdo*, and the transcendental mysticism of the Snying thig corpus, were continually maintained as staples of the Rnying ma's distinctive approach. But, as Jacob Dalton observes in regards to the *Dgongs pa 'dus pa'i mdo*, the treatment of a scriptural tradition—especially in its ritualization in institutional settings—addresses perceived gaps between the offerings of canonized materials and the needs of its custodians.⁵⁷ We can thus interpret the changes endured by the Bka' brgyad as evidence for the continual leveraging of its myth and ritual templates to supply resources for the articulation of identity for the Rnying ma pa. As I aver, we especially see the active curation of the Bka' brgyad

⁵⁶ Nyang ral nyi ma 'od zer 1978 vol. 1: 201.

⁵⁷ Dalton 2016: xv.

cycle in historical contexts which found Rnying ma communities facing extrinsic pressures: in the competition and contestation of the post-fragmentation period, during the tumult preceding Dga' Idan's rise and the subsequent reinvention of the Rnying ma as a fully institutional denomination at Smin grol gling, and in the response of religious institutions to the various pressures surrounding Sde dge in the early modern period. In each of these settings, the Rnying ma was called to define itself in relation to extrinsic political and ecclesiastical pressures. The Bka' brgyad was one critical resource for this effort. Admittedly, a direct correlation between the curation of scriptures such as the Bka' brgyad and developments in the social and political history of Tibet is not self-evident. Tibet's history is arguably defined by inter-institutional and regional contestations that left every kind of institution—political and religious—in a perpetual position of competition and response. Given a constant state of contestation, developments in religious tradition do not necessarily reflect concerted efforts to re-author institutional identities. However, the historical contexts addressed above were associated with sudden changes in the profile of the Rnying ma, culminating in the eruption of new scriptures, the inception of new institutions, and the rapid transformation of Rnying ma religiosity. The *Bka' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa* was implicated in each of these major shifts in how the Rnying ma imagined and articulated itself. It is thus tempting to correlate transformations in the reception of the Bka' brgyad with the social and political contexts that stimulated the transformation of the Rnying ma. From this perspective, the development, curation, and transformation of scriptural corpora may serve as evidence for gauging the impact of contextual social, political, and cultural changes.

From the beginning, the *Bde gshegs 'dus pa* was positioned within Nyang ral's seminal constellation of religious literatures to remain firmly at the heart of Rnying ma efforts to exert a distinctive religious identity, yet it also had to endure changes to meet the shifting needs of its custodians. Thus, this proto-canon of ritual materials and obscure mythologies that, somehow, came to Nyang ral nyi ma 'od zer in a remote valley in southern Tibet came to be so much more: it supplied a vast trove of ritual knowledge for averting harms of all kinds, it was a template for communal ritualism, and it provided a taxonomy reflecting the very structure of esoteric knowledge. In this, the *Bka' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa* achieved a foundational stature, supplying a distinctive idiom of wrathful soteriology, a protectively violent ritualism, and a vision of ritual mastery with resonance for a community of practitioners striving to imagine themselves at the center of the history of sacred Dharma in the Land of Snow.

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