


“Giving a Meaning to an Illusory Wealth.” A Trader’s Pilgrimage

Lucia Galli

s most human ritual activities, pilgrimage is riddled with complexity – no journey is holier and worthier than the one paid to that which is sacred. Distance is measured not in days and nights, but in movements of the soul: pilgrimage is first and foremost a spiritual experience,¹ punctuated by bodily exertions – fatigue, physical and emotional, is part and parcel of the purifying process embarked by pilgrims. This is particularly evident in the case of Tibetan pilgrimage, or *skor ba* (“circumambulation”), wherein the believers pace their progressions through full body prostrations, in a humbling display of stamina and devotion.

A specific ritual culture of pilgrimage begins to develop in Tibet between the late 10th and late 13th centuries, a period often referred to as the “later propagation of Buddhist teachings” (*bstan pa phyi dar*). According to Toni Huber,² all the basic characteristics of pilgrimage as it emerged in Tibetan societies are derived from earlier Indian models, gradually elaborated and adapted to the indigenous ritual practices.³

The pre-Buddhist cultural representation of the physical environment – what Furst defines an “ecological belief system”⁴ – imagined it to be populated by a host of deities and spiritual forces, such as the *yul lha*, the *gnyan*, and the *btsan* spirits, the latter a fact reflected in the later historians’ accounts of the early period, wherein the need to tame the land (i.e. its supernatural inhabitants) features as a literary *topos*. Even though the origin of land taming rituals is

¹ The “inward movement of the heart”, to borrow from Turner and Turner ([1978] 2011, 8).

² Huber (2008, 60).

³ Despite the lack of textual evidence about the existence of any ritual systems akin to pilgrimage prior to the introduction of Buddhism in Tibet, indigenous religious life was characterised by a belief in the sacred nature of mountains, lakes, and caves, and it seems safe to assume that Indian models of pilgrimage were superimposed on non-institutionalised indigenous beliefs, in what is a still ongoing synthetic process (Buffetrille 1998, 19).

⁴ Furst (1994, 3).

undoubtedly Indian, the emphasis in later Tibetan tradition seems to have shifted from what was envisioned as a military and pragmatic operation to a more spiritual and soteriological understanding.⁵

The superimposition of Buddhism on the framework of indigenous belief systems reveals “worlds within worlds, where the inner realm of the soul appears in the guise of the external world and viceversa”,⁶ since “mountains, lakes, rivers, caves, and passes constitute the geographicity of the Tibetan pilgrim world”.⁷ A great deal of architectural terminology recurs in the description of these landscape “dwellings”, often presented as the “palaces” (*pho brang*) of the Tantric deities abiding in them.⁸ The same concepts apply to certain human-made objects, such as buildings (e.g. *stūpa*, religious icons) or even particular persons (e.g. the Dalai Lama), considered to be temporary or permanent bodily “residences” of deities.

Although indigenous Tibetan spirits of the land, such as the *yul lha*, are typically worshipped by offerings and prayers for protection rather than pilgrimage and circumambulation, the performance of the latter forms of worship is central to the Buddhist sacred places (*gnas*) of Tibet. The Tibetan compound expressions *gnas skor* and *gnas mjal*, respectively “going around a *gnas*” and “meeting/encountering a *gnas*”, clearly convey the kinetic character of pilgrimage,⁹ in its sense of a movement around or toward a sacred object.¹⁰ Loosely translated as “abode”, a *gnas* is specifically used in a religious context to indicate the location or residence of a superior being belonging to the Buddhist pantheon: as an “empty” three-dimensional embodiment of the deity or spirit, the *gnas* physically “signals” the supernatural entity and facilitates the interaction with it.¹¹

The concepts of both circumambulation of and direct encounter with an “abode” is directly derived from the Indian ritual models of *pradakṣiṇā*¹² and *darśana*,¹³ since *gnas* receive a status and a treatment comparable to those accorded to sites associated with the Buddha in Indian Buddhism.¹⁴ The orthodox representation of pilgrimage heavily relies on classical concepts of *karma* and merit (*bsod nam*s; Skt. *punya*). In this view, a ritual journey results in the accumulation of

⁵ Samuel (2005, 108-109).

⁶ Sumegi (2008, 18).

⁷ van Spengen (1998, 39).

⁸ Huber (1999a, 81).

⁹ Turner and Turner ([1978] 2011, xiii).

¹⁰ Huber (1999a, 83), van Spengen (1998, 37).

¹¹ Huber (1999b, 14).

¹² Ritual circumambulation from left to right of a person or object.

¹³ It refers to the visual perception of the sacred, the act of seeing and being seen by the deity.

¹⁴ Huber (2008, 60-61).

merit – necessary for a future rebirth on a higher level of cyclic existence (Skt. *saṃsāra*) – and prepares the individual for the ultimate liberation (Skt. *nirvāṇa*).¹⁵

At a pilgrimage site, the sacred object and its actual physical surroundings relate synecdochically with the moral and supernatural virtues of the enlightened being associated with them. A *gnas* is considered to be a source of “sacred energy” or “empowerment” (*byin rlabs*), a concept popularly understood as a “field of power” created by the emanations, in space and time, of the deity’s energy.¹⁶ Power in various forms is exchanged, not only symbolically but substantially. *Byin rlabs* is transferred continuously through contact;¹⁷ spots in the physical environment, the ontological essence of which has been modified by *byin rlabs*, become in turn sources of empowerment. The desire to be blessed leads pilgrims to collect and carry away the substances found at the holy place, such as stones, water, earth or talismans, thus fostering an exchange economy where individual lamas and representatives of monastic communities supply empowered items to pilgrims in return for donations.¹⁸

In the analysis of pilgrimage activities, the economic dimension represents a methodological key issue; to borrow Preston’s words,

virtually every pilgrimage is associated with a field of economic exchange, as in fairs, carnivals, and permanent or temporary marketplaces. Materials are redistributed as pilgrims enter sacred centers, then disperse.¹⁹

Since economic and socio-economic transactions are an essential feature of the complex system of pilgrimage, no study of the ritual and cosmological aspects of this ritual activity can disregard the economic side of it:²⁰ money, tea, and scarves were donated to monks in exchange for blessing, initiations, medical pills, food, and lodging. Ritual “souvenirs” were actively sought and collected in order to be shown and possibly shared with those who did not or could not make the journey, thus extending the impact of the pilgrimage to others.²¹ As a matter of fact, pilgrimage may arguably be understood as a complex circulative system “strongly vectored toward specific places ranging from local to national and even supranational”,²² a

¹⁵ Huber (1999b, 12).

¹⁶ Huber (1999b, 15).

¹⁷ Huber (1999b, 61).

¹⁸ Huber (1999b, 15; 2008, 61).

¹⁹ Preston (1992, 43).

²⁰ McCarriston (2011, 28), Mack (2010), Buffetrille (2003, 327).

²¹ Mack (2010).

²² Bhardwaj (2009, 49).

dynamic and self-organised structure depending on the existence of centres that possess a strong attractive power – a “spiritual magnetism”.²³

Lhasa was – and still is – a supreme focus of *skor ba*, the hub of a pilgrimage network whose routes extended throughout Tibet and well beyond its geographical and cultural boundaries. Although Tibetans had for centuries ventured into the Kathmandu valley for trading and pilgrimage, especially during wintertime, it was in the early 20th century that journeys to places outside the Tibetan cultural sphere of influence, in particular India, became more and more frequent.²⁴ The development of pilgrimage circuits and networks, trodden year after year by generations of devotees, led to a robust literary tradition that played a fundamental role in the process of negotiation, interpretation, and appreciation of the holy places visited by pilgrims during their ritual journey, in many ways providing them with a textual “map” of their surroundings as well as their place in it.

The dual nature of the pilgrimage – sacred and profane, shared and private – is particularly evident in the accounts kept by Kha stag 'Dzam yag, a Khams pa trader-cum-pilgrim who recorded thirteen years of his life (from 1944 to 1956) on paper-scrolls, carefully annotating impressions, encounters, and events as he lived through them. The peculiarities of his *nyin deb* and, in particular, its debatable inclusion in the diaristic genre have been examined elsewhere;²⁵ here, my aim is to address the core of 'Dzam yag's narrative – that is, pilgrimage and ritual activities – by engaging in a literary analysis of the *nyin deb* itself, for any textual utterance is not crated in vacuum, rather is inscribed in webs of cultural, social, political, and literary significance – to understand a text means therefore to be aware of the social conception and cultural codes inherent to the context in which it is produced. Whereas the socio-economic approach allows discussing religion as an independent variable vis-à-vis economy, the understanding of the journal as a narrative text connected to others sheds light on the sense-making and sense-giving processes at work during a pilgrimage to sacred places.

Although filled with notes of religious visits and offerings, the narrative presents an inner dichotomy that extended beyond the apparent geographical rationale to a more subtle and intimate reason. The two *loci* emerging in 'Dzam yag's account – Tibet proper on one hand and the “holy lands” of India and Nepal on the other – cannot but reflect the inner changes of the author, who gradually morphs

²³ Preston (1992, 33).

²⁴ van Spengen (1998, 43).

²⁵ Galli (2019a).

from “beggar” (*sprang*), ousted from his ancestral land, to financially assured “trading agent” (*tshong dpon*). As such, attention will be brought exclusively to the ritual activities performed in Tibet, interpreting them in light of their socio-economic importance; the aim is to identify the power that religious communities wielded by taking into consideration the amount of money generated by pilgrimages and the diverse intentions and expectations driving the devotees. The present discourse is conceived as complementary to the analysis of pilgrims as spiritual tourists presented elsewhere.²⁶

Ritual Activities and Pilgrimage in Tibet

The richness of ritual practices associated with pilgrimage to sacred spaces and powerful places in Tibet is such as to constitute a field of research in its own right. The complexities of the historical and social interactions, as well as the high degree of syncretism and assimilation, contributed to the development of an extraordinarily broad range of rituals and rites, the origin and meaning of which never fail to enthrall the scholars. Whereas earlier studies tended to engage with pilgrimage practices through the literary medium,²⁷ by the late 1990s the trend shifted towards a more anthropological approach; moving from the texts to the field, scholars started investigating the way the Tibetan practitioners themselves relate to a certain cult apparatus or system of values.²⁸ When dealing with textual sources, it is in fact important to remember their *prescriptive* nature and therefore refrain from treating them too casually “as though they were actually *descriptive* of local thought and action”.²⁹

Whereas it is indisputable that native practitioners actively draw from a shared pool of symbols, categories, and metaphors, they do so in accordance with the context in which they operate. Pilgrimage literature is therefore important in providing guidance to sacred places, but, at the same time a “different, apparently conflicting, geographical conception”³⁰ could be held simultaneously by those who visit holy sites. In his journal ‘Dzam yag admittedly relies on oral sources – in the form of caretakers and villagers – but also on various forms of pilgrimage texts, in particular “catalogues” (*dkar chag*) and “guidebooks” (*gnas yig*); several of the descriptions of

²⁶ Galli (2020).

²⁷ Pilgrimage literature, as textual expression of sacred geography, records information about the holy environment, its spatial orientation, and its modifications through time.

²⁸ McKay (1998, 4-5), Huber (1999b, 10).

²⁹ Huber (2008, 35, my emphasis).

³⁰ Ramble (1999, 4).

places jotted down by the author were in fact based on *gnas yig* and local narratives.³¹

*Pilgrimage Activities: The Mundane Aspect of
'Dzam yag's Spiritual Quest, 1944-1952*

Whereas from 1952 up to 1959, 'Dzam yag's religious life mostly revolved around esoteric rituals and monetary offerings, the situation prior to his appointment as *tshong dpon* of the Khang gсар bla brang at Ngor E wam chos ldan was rather different. From 1944 to 1951, the author embarked on a series of pilgrimages to sacred places and powerful "spaces" on the Tibetan plateau, with the intent of cleansing his *karma* and consequently improving his social and financial conditions, the latter a fact inherent to the indigenous understanding of the practice:

[...] pilgrimage is generally defined as a journey to a sanctified place, undertaken in the expectation of *future spiritual and/or worldly benefit*.³²

While the last years covered by the *nyin deb* show a man mostly concerned with the accumulation of merit for his next life, the period immediately following 1944 portrays quite a different person. At that time, the loss of his financial means and the increasing difficulties in making a living in his native land prompted 'Dzam yag to a drastic change of life,³³ that the trader's own narrative largely ascribes to bsTan pa'i snying po, a visiting master from sKyo brags.³⁴

³¹ For instance, while passing through 'Dam gzhung rdzong on his way from Nag chu to Lhasa, 'Dzam yag paid a local boy, no more than 15 years old, to guide him to the *stūpa* of Sha ra ba (an important 12th-century bKa' gdams pa lama) and show him what remained of a great monastery established there by the master. The notes include an extract from the *dkar chag* of the holy place (Kha stag 'Dzam yag 1997, 82-83; see Roesler and Roesler 2004, 55-73 for a reproduction of the *dkar chag* in full). In the 12th month of the Fire Pig Year (January 1948), during his visit to sMra bo lcog, a rNying ma monastery belonging to the mNga' bdag lineage in Lho brag, 'Dzam yag records having borrowed a *gnas yig* of the place from one of local lamas (Kha stag 'Dzam yag 1997, 110). In the late part of the Earth Mouse Year (1948), while in Kathmandu, the author laments the impossibility of visiting all the sacred objects and sites mentioned in the various *gnas yig* he had access to, thus demonstrating the importance that such texts had in shaping Tibetan pilgrims' activities and expectations (Kha stag 'Dzam yag 1997, 156).

³² McKay (1998, 1, my emphasis).

³³ On the events that led to the author's exile from his ancestral land (*pha yul*) in the sGa pa area of Khams, see Galli (2019b).

³⁴ sKyo brags bsTan pa'i snying po apparently had a vision concerning 'Dzam yag's near future and instructed the trader accordingly: "Not long from now, beyond the 10th day of the 10th month of the Monkey Year (November 25, 1944), without

In a short poem written after his first pilgrimage to India,³⁵ the trader ponders on past events, comparing his situation to that of the great Tibetan saint Mi la ras pa (c. 1052-c. 1135):³⁶

Because the lord of Rab shis (i.e. 'Dzam yag's *pha yul*) expropriated all of Kha stag 'Dzam yag's wealth – just like in the past Mi la ras pa was robbed of his heritage by his paternal uncle and aunt – I (i.e. Kha stag 'Dzam yag) could not stay in my homeland and wandered to the borders. Having wandered to the borders, I reached the central province of dBus, and even though I had to be under cover [by keeping a low profile], my eyes could see far and wide. Having abandoned [the hope to return to] my fatherland, I obtained peace of mind;³⁷ having circumambulated the supports and sacred places of the four regions of Central Tibet and paid homage to the [two] forms of Buddha Śākyamuni [in Lhasa], I dedicate a prayer, out of equanimity and compassion, to all sentient beings – whether enemies, friends, or people [having] neutral disposition

delay, go on a pilgrimage without a [specific] direction – [whether it is] Central Tibet or Gangs Ti se (i.e. Kailash), it will be good for both your present and future life" (*da ni yun ma ring bar spral zla 10 tshes 10 phan ma 'gyangs pa | dbus gtsang dang gangs ti se'am phyogs med kyi gnas bskor du song dang | 'di phyi gnyis nas bzang ngo*) (Kha stag 'Dzam yag 1997, 12).

³⁵ Already in Kalimpong for business, 'Dzam yag joined a group of pilgrims from Tre hor and set off to the holy places of northern India on the 28th day of the 12th month of Wood Bird Year (January 30, 1946) (Kha stag 'Dzam yag 1997, 53-55); see Galli (2020).

³⁶ The dates of the birth and death of the saint adopted here are the ones provided by the *yogin's* most famous biographer, gTsang smyon Heruka (1452-1507). Early literary sources largely disagree on the year of Mi la ras pa's birth – usually listing the animal but not the element of the sexagenary cycle – and on his lifespan. The problematic identification of Mi la ras pa's dates has bedeviled European and North American scholarship. Alexander Csoma de Kőrös, the first Western academic to address the saint's chronology, miscalculated the date of Mi la ras pa's birth provided in the chronological tables of *sde srid* Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho's *Vaidūrya dkar po*, converting the Iron Dragon Year to the Gregorian year 1038 instead of 1040, an error that lingered in scholarship up to the early 20th century. The tradition of dating Mi la ras pa's birth to an Iron Dragon Year was overshadowed in Tibet, and consequently in the West, by the appearance of a new chronology provided by gTsang smyon Heruka's version. According to the latter, the saint was born on a Water Dragon Year, corresponding to 1052. For a detailed study on the vagaries of Mi la ras pa's dates, see Quintman (2013); on 'Dzam yag's self-identification with the hermit-saint Mi la ras pa, see Galli (2019a).

³⁷ The same concept recurs again in a note dated on the Iron Tiger Year (1950); in this case the author supports his reflections on the presence of a silver lining hidden in apparently negative events by making reference to the *Nītiśāstra* (Kha stag 'Dzam yag 1997, 193).

[towards me].³⁸

The association with *Mi la ras pa* is telling of 'Dzam yag's attitude at the time. Betrayed, lost, and struggling to come to terms with slander and community estrangement, he turned, as many others before and after him, to the traditional answer to the sudden emergence of obstacles and difficulties: pilgrimage. By prostrating and circumambulating, pilgrims in fact surrender themselves to the kindness of the deities, bodily engaging in the psychophysical cleansing of defilements and sins and absorbing of the blessings of the sacred places.³⁹ By defining himself as a *gsar sprang*, a "new beggar",⁴⁰ 'Dzam yag placed himself within the tradition of the itinerant pilgrims, wandering lay practitioners – "professional pilgrims"⁴¹ – who were accustomed to travel throughout the Tibetan cultural world.⁴²

Between 1945 and 1951, 'Dzam yag visited Lhasa and the surrounding areas at least three times, went to Lake Manasarovar and Mount Kailash once, and had innumerable occasions to pay homage to the most sacred monastic establishments of the central provinces of dBus and gTsang. Despite metaphorically donning the humble robe of a pilgrim, his status as trader differed from that of the average *gnas skor ba*. His socio-economic conditions and his familiarity with influential Eastern Tibetan merchants gave him the unique chance to directly interact with masters and reincarnates, requesting divinations, private meetings, and blessings from them.

Phyogs med and Ris med: The "Unbiased" Wanderings of a New Beggar

It would be impossible in the present article to provide a complete list of all the places – monasteries, hermitages, mountains, lakes, springs, and other sacred spaces – mentioned in the *nyin deb*. Throughout his pilgrimages – be they regional, superregional, or international – the trader shows a remarkably non-sectarian and

³⁸ *sngar zhig mi la'i pha nor rnams | a khu a nes 'phrog pa bzhin | kha stag 'dzam yag rgyu nor kun | rab shis dpon pos 'phrog rkyen gyis | rang yul ma chags sa mtha' 'khyams | mtha' ru 'khyams pas dbus su slebs | mgo bo btums pas rgyang mig mthong | pha yul spangs pas zhe sdang zhi | dbus gtsang ru bzhi gnas rten skor | jo shaka [sic] rnam par zhal mjal nas | dgra gnyen bar ma thams cad la | btang snyoms byams pas bsngo smon brjod ||* (Kha stag 'Dzam yag 1997, 55).

³⁹ Huber (1999b, 16).

⁴⁰ Kha stag 'Dzam yag (1997, 4).

⁴¹ van Spengen (1998, 46).

⁴² There are many examples of wandering pilgrims within the Tibetan tradition. For a study of some of these figures, see for instance, Ricard (1994), Ramble (1995), Kværne (1998), Havnevik (1998), Quintman (2013, 2015).

unbiased approach, in perfect accordance with the tenets promulgated by the *ris med* "movement".⁴³

Born and raised in an environment imbued with non-sectarian values,⁴⁴ 'Dzam yag's receptivity towards an impartial appreciation of all religious traditions is hardly surprising. Albeit educated in a dGe lugs establishment – the largest in the area of sKye dgu mdo – he received empowerments and teachings from masters of different schools, showing a deep understanding of the *Lam 'bras* ("Path and Result")⁴⁵ system and literature as taught by the Sa skya. 'Dzam yag's non-sectarianism transpires clearly from his notes, yet it is in the foreword of the edited version of the *nyin deb* that his support to religious non-sectarianism is first expressed and clearly verbalized.⁴⁶

⁴³ On the problematic identification of *ris med* as "movement", see, for instance, Samuel (1993), Gardner (2006), Powers (1995), Oldmeadow (2012), Turek (2013), Deroche (2018).

⁴⁴ By the mid-19th century, the territories of sGa pa and sDe dge saw the spread of non-sectarianism and inclusiveness, ideas already present in Tibetan Buddhism, but fostered by the activities of teachers and *sprul sku* belonging to different traditions. Scholars such as dPal sprul O rgyan 'jigs med chos kyi dbang po (1808-1887), 'Jam dbyangs mkhyen brtse dbang po (1820-1892), 'Jam mgon Kong sprul Blo gros mtha' yas (1813-1899), and 'Jam mgon Mi pham rgya mtsho (1846-1912) took the lead of the *ris med* revival, the main aim of which was "to counteract the sectarian disputes and violence that frequently marred Tibetan Buddhism" (Karma Phuntsho 2005, 50). The interregional conflicts that in past centuries had placed different schools in opposition to each other had assumed a more local aspect in the 18th century, focused in particular in the area of sDe dge (Powers and Templeman 2012, 336; Yudru Tsomu 2015, 59-61). The dGe lugs missionary efforts and the forced proselytising that followed the defeat of mGon po nam rgyal by the Lhasa army (1865) deeply concerned the *ris med* masters, who perceived the dGe lugs scholasticism based on the *bsdus grwa* literature as excessively rigid, verbose, and arid. In an attempt to counteract a homogenisation of the Buddhist traditions through the adoption of the dGe lugs curriculum, the *ris med* teachers promoted a "reorientation of religious study to the Indian originals and an eclectic approach of professing the essential teachings of all Tibetan traditions in spite of one's own religious affiliation" (Karma Phuntsho 2005, 51).

⁴⁵ The tantric tradition of the *Lam 'bras* ("Path and Result") was initially received by 'Brog mi Lo tsā ba Shākya ye shes (993-1077?) from the Indian master Gayadhara (d. 1103). 'Brog mi translated a number of Tantric scriptures and commentaries, including the *Hevajra Tantra* and Virūpa's *rDo rje tshig rkang* ("The Vajra Verse"), the basic text of the *Lam 'bras*. Contrary to other esoteric systems passed down through a series of Indian teachers, the *rDo rje tshig rkang* did not rely on written texts: 'Brog mi's translation continued to be orally transmitted and memorized for hundreds of years, before being eventually written down. Over the centuries, the different lineages of the *Lam 'bras* were slowly absorbed into the Sa skya school, currently the only holders of the tradition of the "Path and Result" in Tibetan Buddhism (Stearns 2001, 6-8).

⁴⁶ Considerable information concerning the persona of Kha stag 'Dzam yag is provided in the foreword of the *nyin deb*. I am here referring to the description of the funerary rites following his death and the commemorative discourse offered

It is plausible that the trader did not perceive his eclectic and inclusive approach as an element worth of mentioning, as it was part and parcel of the cultural and spiritual environment that surrounded him.

In his pilgrimages inside and outside Tibet, 'Dzam yag appears to adhere to the well-known tradition of roaming without a fixed destination (*phyogs med*), an attitude he shared with many other wandering pilgrims. In reality, far from being the outcome of impromptu decisions, his religious visits followed precise agendas and were strongly dependent on his business activities.

Even though the search for mundane results – be they good health, financial security or social stability – appears to have fueled the majority of the religious activities carried out by 'Dzam yag between 1944 and 1952, the visits paid to Lhasa and the travels through the southeastern region of Lho kha, the pilgrimage to Lake Manasarovar and Mount Kailash, as well as the numerous meetings he had with the retired head (*mkhan zur*) of the Thar rtse bla brang of Ngor represent, for different reasons, some of the most significant events experienced by the trader in the 1944-1952 period. In the following paragraphs, passages from the *nyin deb* regarding those activities will be presented and discussed through economic and literary lenses. The application of two different but equally valid heuristic devices provides a better understanding of the value of 'Dzam yag's experiences, placing them within their social and cultural context.

Lhasa

'Dzam yag's *nyin deb* accounts for three distinct visits to Lhasa. Even though business was the main reason behind these visits – occurring a few months apart from each other – the trader does not offer any details about either the trade in which he was involved or the networking in which he engaged. The journal omits the mundane aspects of his stay in Lhasa: as creator of his own narrative, 'Dzam yag does not diverge from the image of the pious and humble man he chose for himself. The few references he makes to financial transactions and trips to the market are almost lost among the countless visits he paid to the sacred sites of the town. His sojourns in Lhasa were organised around a routine of circumambulations, prostrations, and offerings to the major religious "supports" (*rten*).

The first of 'Dzam yag's recorded visits dates to the 20th day of the

by Kha stag O rgyan chos 'phel, head of the meditation centre of the Karma bKa' brgyud monastery of Kha 'gu dgon in sGa pa (Kha stag 'Dzam yag 1997, 6-7).

9th month of the Wood Bird Year (October 25, 1945). As soon as he reached the town, the trader headed to the Ra mo che to pay homage to the images of Avalokiteśvara (Thugs rje chen po) and Jo bo yid bzhin nor bu,⁴⁷ to each of which he offered Chinese silk: the fabric, being of one arm's-length, was beautifully decorated with drawings of the three longevity deities (*tshē lha rnam gsum*). The next day he set off at dawn to complete the external circumambulation (*phyi'i gling skor*) of Lhasa, and reaching the Ra mo che from the north, he offered an arm-span long scarf embroidered with an image of Amitāyus to the Jo bo Mi bskyod rdo je,⁴⁸ prostrating in front of the image and concluding his visit with several circumambulations of the shrine of Amitāyus. The predominant role played by the longevity deities – in particular Amitāyus – in this phase of 'Dzam yag's life is indicative of the uncertainties he was facing at the time. His main concerns regarded his poor health⁴⁹ and the strain placed on it by his financial difficulties; by entrusting himself to the deity of infinite life, the trader clearly hoped to cleanse the defilements and bodily imbalances at the root of his sicknesses.

On the 22nd of the 9th month (October 27, 1945), the auspicious day of the descent of the Buddha from Tuṣita,⁵⁰ he offered clarified butter for the replenishment of the golden lamps in front of the statues of the eleven-faced Avalokiteśvara (Thugs rje chen po bcu gcig zhal) and, while a rich sponsor donated to the Jo bo yid bzhin nor bu a large golden lamp filled with butter, he made an offering for the gilding of the image (*gser gsol*). He then paid a visit to Jo bo Mi bskyod rdo je at the Ra mo che, refilling the lamps in front of the image twice and burning some *gser yig*.⁵¹ Leaving the shrine, 'Dzam

⁴⁷ "Lord [who is] the wish-fulfilling jewel". Statue portraying Buddha Śākyamuni at the age of twelve. It was brought as dowry by Wen Cheng Kong jo, the Chinese wife of the Tibetan king Srong btsan sgam po (ca. 604-650); see Sørensen (1994).

⁴⁸ "Lord [who is] the unmovable *vajra*". Statue portraying Buddha Śākyamuni at the age of eight. It was brought as dowry by Bhṛkuṭī (Lha cig khri btsun), the Nepalese wife of the Tibetan king Srong btsan sgam po; see Sørensen (1994).

⁴⁹ 'Dzam yag suffered from a chronic rheumatic disorder that made him prone to recurrent bouts of fever; see Kha tag 'Dzam yag (1997, 17-18) for the first mention of his condition.

⁵⁰ In Buddhist cosmology, Tuṣita is the fourth highest of the six heavens within the sensuous realm (Skr. *kāmadhātu*) and abode of bodhisattvas. It is from Tuṣita that the deity Śvetaketu departed to incarnate as Śākyamuni in Māyā's womb. The festival mentioned by 'Dzam yag celebrates the auspicious event; see Buswell and Lopez (2014, 930).

⁵¹ Pieces of paper on which the name of a dead person is written with gold ink. Their burning is perceived as a commemorative offering. Since 'Dzam yag does not provide any explanation why he made those offerings, only speculations can

yag returned to the gTsong lag khang, where he donated “drop-offerings” (*mchod thigs*)⁵² to all the images of the three-story building, fervently praying for the welfare of all beings. At the end of his visit, he reached the market, where he purchased several books (*dpe cha*), among which was a *dkar chag* of Lhasa.⁵³ In a note dated to the 3rd day of the 10th month of the Wood Bird Year (November 7, 1945), 'Dzam yag recalls having caught a glimpse of the 14th Dalai Lama, who was at the time travelling in a palanquin from his summer residence at the Nor bu gling ka to the Po ta la: the event was received by the traveller with great joy and perceived as an extremely auspicious sign.⁵⁴

During his nine-day stay, the trader covered the entire length of the *gling skor*⁵⁵ daily and paid homage to the main holy objects of the principal temples and shrines, exerting himself for the accumulation of merit. The lack of substantial means was clearly a major concern for 'Dzam yag: being used to having at his disposal considerable wealth, the trader-turned-pilgrim struggled to adjust to his new conditions. A pilgrimage to Lhasa was for many Tibetans the accomplishment of a lifetime, and even though it is evident from the journal that the trader had been to the holy places of dBus before, the limitations imposed by his predicaments pushed him to exert himself through an active engagement in ritual activities such as prostrations and circumambulations, the physical strain of the body compensating for the dearth of financial offerings. Refilling of butter lamps, donations of ceremonial scarves (*kha btags*), and the occasional gift of 2 or 3 *srang* were the only material offerings 'Dzam yag could afford at the time – what was lacking in monetary terms was nevertheless amply compensated by prostrations, circumambulations, and prayers. In his daily visits to the sacred sites of Lhasa, the trader joined the constant flow of devotees and pilgrims who engaged in similar acts of worship and faith, thus creating and preserving a devotional pattern claimed to provide mental clarity

be advanced. It is possible that the trader was acting as a proxy and that the burning of the *gser yig* was made on behalf of an acquaintance of his.

⁵² Offering consisting in drops of clarified butter or oil used to refill lamps previously offered by other devotees.

⁵³ 'Dzam yag does not elaborate on the nature of the *dkar chag*; it seems plausible that it may have been the famous catalogue of the main temple of Lhasa known as *Lha ldan sprul ba'i gtsug lag khang gi dkar chag shel dkar me long*. Composed by the 5th Dalai Lama Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho in 1644, it consists of a detailed description in verse of the *rten* contained in the gTsong lag khang. Each stanza is followed by a prose paraphrase. For a brief overlook of the text, see Vostrikov ([1962] 1970, 222-223).

⁵⁴ Kha stag 'Dzam yag (1997, 43-44).

⁵⁵ Lit. “outer circumambulation path”; it enclosed the centre of Lhasa, the Po ta la, and lCags po ri for a total length of 8 km.

and emotional happiness.⁵⁶

On one of his last days in Lhasa, the trader ventured to the top of dMar po ri to visit the Po ta la palace; at the foot of the hill, he met a monk official (*rtse drung*) on his way to the *drung ja*, the compulsory daily tea meeting all monk officials were expected to attend. Hearing about 'Dzam yag's intentions, the official suggested an alternative route to him,

“Since it is very important for your obtaining an auspicious outcome, you should go up to pay homage to the rTse Po ta la from the ‘Path of Liberation’ through the northern passage; on the way down, you should descend through a different gate.”⁵⁷

Following the official's advice, the trader climbed up the “Path of Liberation”, and once inside the palace he visited some of its major sacred objects, such as the statue of Ārya Lokeśvara, self-originated from a white sandalwood tree;⁵⁸ the footprints of Padmasambhava and Tsong kha pa; and many self-arisen *ma ni* stones. Three times he circumambulated the golden reliquary (*gser sdong 'dzam gling rgyan gcig*) built by the *sde srid* Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho to host the remains of the 5th Dalai Lama, and the relief *maṇḍala* models (*bkod pa*) in gilded copper of the celestial palaces of the tantric deities Kālacakra, Guhyasamāja, Cakrasaṃvara, and Vajrabhairava.

The journal accounts for a total of three visits to Lhasa, all occurring within a few months from each other; after his sojourn there in the Wood Bird Year (1945), 'Dzam yag returned to the holy city two more times in the Fire Dog Year (June-July 1946 and January 1947). From the Fire Pig Year (1947) onwards, the trader enjoyed a greater stability – culminating in his taking residence in gZhis ka rtse.

⁵⁶ “At that time [9th month of the Wood Bird Year (October 1945)], during my nine-day stay in Lhasa, almost each day I did an outer circumambulation and visited the holy sites without interruption [...] I was happy” (*de'i skabs nga rang lha sar zhag dgu tsam 'dug ring phal cher gling bskor re dang lha mjal re ma chag pa byas [...]* *blo sems bde ba'i ngang la gnas* (Kha stag 'Dzam yag 1997, 43).

⁵⁷ *khyed rang rten 'brel gyis gnad 'gag che bas | rtser mchod mjal 'gro ba la yar lam byang brgyud thar lam nas 'gro dgos | mar shog sgo gzhan zhig nas 'bab rgyu kha yong* (Kha stag 'Dzam yag 1997, 43).

⁵⁸ According to the *Ma ni bka' 'bum* (lit. “The One-Hundred Thousand Pronouncements [Regarding] [the Prayer] Maṇi”), the statue was one of a set of four, known as “The Four Brothers Ārya [Avalokiteśvara],” self-originated from the trunk of a white sandalwood tree. The images appeared at the time of Srong btsan sgam po, who, informed by a vision of the existence of the statues in a grove in Nepal, entrusted the task of “inviting” the deities to Tibet to a monk. The latter, emanated from a hair placed between Srong bstan sgam po's eyebrows, is often referred to as *sprul ba'i dge slong* (Buswell and Lopez 2014, 526); see Sørensen (1994).

Increasingly engrossed in his trading and sponsoring activities in gTsang, 'Dzam yag's "obsession" for Lhasa waned, replaced by a more consistent participation in the ritual life of the monastic establishments of bKra shis lhun po and Ngor E wam chos ldan, closer to his main base in gTsang.

The first of these subsequent visits to the holy city dates to the 13th day of the 5th month of the Fire Dog Year (June 12, 1946), two days before the "universal incense offering" (*'dzam gling spyi bsangs*). On that occasion, the trader joined the celebrations at Se ra monastery, paying homage to the Karma shar lha⁵⁹ and burning incense in honour of the goddess rDo rje sgrol ma. During his brief sojourn, he visited the main sacred objects of the gTsug lag khang, Ra mo che, and rTse Po ta la, stopping by the Zhol printing house (*par khang*) to pay homage to the "speech supports" (*gsung rten*) that were created there. During his stay, the trader actively engaged in circumambulations, counting 265 *skor ra* of the Jo khang and 265 *skor ra* of the Jo bo Mi bskyod rdo rje. On the 4th day of the 6th month (July 2, 1946) he attended the restoration ceremony of the holy objects and images of the gTsug lag khang led by the 14th Dalai Lama; 'Dzam yag was able to catch a glimpse of this incarnation of Avalokiteśvara, which prompted him to make an aspirational prayer. On the 30th day of the 6th month (July 28, 1946), on the auspicious day celebrating the murder of Glang dar ma, people from the four districts of Lhasa, the various monastic centres, and the nearby villages came to celebrate, and the Tibetan opera (A lce lha mo) was performed at Nor bu gling ka.⁶⁰

The last of the recorded visits of 'Dzam yag to Lhasa began on the 7th day of the 12th month of the Fire Dog Year (January 29, 1947) and is presented in the journal as a mere list of offerings made to the different religious "supports" of the main temples and shrines; despite the brief stay – only five days – the trader donated a considerable amount of gold and tea, showing the desire to "compensate" the deities for having shown him their favour.⁶¹

Between the first and the third visit, 'Dzam yag embarked on a series of long-distance business ventures that significantly increased his financial means. In the months prior to his second visit (5th month of the Fire Dog Year, July 1946), he contributed a considerable amount of money (100 *srang*) to the realisation of copies of the

⁵⁹ Oracle connected to Se ra monastery and celebrated during the *'dzam gling spyi bsangs* festival.

⁶⁰ Kha stag 'Dzam yag (1997, 67-70).

⁶¹ Kha stag 'Dzam yag (1997, 77-78).

thirteen volumes of the *gZhung chen bcu gsum*⁶² to be donated to the scriptural college (*bshad grwa*) of Ngor.⁶³ His last visit to Lhasa, dated to the 12th month of the Fire Dog Year (January 1947), was preceded by a thirty-two day stay in Nag chu, a period spent by the trader dealing in wool; it is plausible therefore that the increase in monetary liquidity was mainly due to the successful trade business carried out prior to his final journey to the town.

Between 1944 and 1952, 'Dzam yag travelled extensively inside and outside the plateau,⁶⁴ sometimes dealing on his own behalf and sometimes as a proxy for others, either religious or lay. The trader's visits to Lhasa and, especially, the way he chose to narrate them in his *nyin deb* are exemplary of the ontological predicament to which he recurrently falls prey, namely his incapacity to reconcile material and mundane needs with religious and soteriological desires. Whereas in the journal 'Dzam yag is free to reconstruct the events in a different light, presenting his trips to Lhasa as pilgrimages, in reality they were incidental visits made possible by his business. Despite his efforts to hide such concerns within the lines, the market, the sales and purchases, the business meetings, and the travel arrangements loom in the background, always threatening to disrupt his religious practices and spiritual concentration.

*Travelling through Lho kha: Yar lung and the Sacred Places Connected to
Padmasambhava, Mar pa, and Mi la ras pa*

It has been repeatedly stated that the experience of a pilgrimage does not take place in a cultural or, even more importantly for our discussion, a literary vacuum. A wealth of literature has been produced on sacred sites in Tibet,⁶⁵ and 'Dzam yag's experiences and ritual activities place themselves within a long tradition. Textual sources – whether oral or written – not only acknowledge and validate the sacrality of a place but also provide a frame of reference without which the pilgrimage itself would be meaningless. The descriptive and prescriptive nature of pilgrimage literature acts as an

⁶² Thirteen classical treatises on Buddhist philosophy translated from Sanskrit into Tibetan. Since the 20th century, the thirteen texts, the topics of which range from *Vinaya* to *Abhidharma* to *Madhyamaka*, are at the core of the *sūtra* curriculum in the rNying ma and Sa skya institutions, due to the efforts of mKhan po gZhan dga' (1871-1927), who composed commentaries on these scriptures, availing himself of Sanskrit materials; see Pearcey (2015).

⁶³ Kha stag 'Dzam yag (1997, 62).

⁶⁴ Between the end of 1945 and the beginning of 1950, 'Dzam yag visited the holy sites of Buddhism in northern India and Nepal (Galli 2020).

⁶⁵ For a bibliography of Tibetan-language guidebooks to sacred places inside and outside the plateau, see, among others, Bründer (2008, 15-108).

authoritative force molding and influencing the perception of the pilgrims and represents a meaning-making framework from which 'Dzam yag's narrative does not depart.

As previously hinted, references to *dkar chag*, *gnas yig*, and local accounts are scattered throughout the journal, and often represent the backbone of many of the author's descriptions. A well-read individual, 'Dzam yag had been exposed to a wide array of different textual sources which he seems to have interiorised as a subconscious structure of understanding and motivation, providing the moving force to his ritual journeys. The *nyin deb* develops over a constant, albeit often silent, dialogue with and between such textual utterances, in a game of cross-references and intertextuality that gives meaning and value to the trader's personal undertaking.

From an academic point of view, the peregrinations undertaken by the trader throughout the 1944-1952 period do not differ from the extended pilgrimages made by both the 1st rDzong gsar 'Jam dbyangs mKhyen brtse'i dbang po Kun dga' bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan (1820-1892) during the second half of the 19th century⁶⁶ and the 3rd Kaḥ thog Si tu Chos kyi rgya mtsho (1880-1925) in 1920.⁶⁷ Even though no mention is made by the trader of either rDzong gsar Rin po che's or Kaḥ thog Si tu Rin po che's narration, it is safe to say that 'Dzam yag's wanderings, although ostensibly spontaneous in their nature, situated themselves within a precise mental and literary framework. The superimposition of narratives on the landscape is after all a part of the constant process of Buddhisation as well as an expression of the way through which Tibetans come to understand the world around them.

A pilgrimage is a journey on a physical as well as a supermundane plane, the understanding of which requires the employment of specific lenses and tools, literature on sacred geography being one of them. An analysis of the trader's journey to Lho kha, a southeastern region of the Tibetan plateau strongly associated with the Yar lung dynasty and the figure of

⁶⁶ I am here referring to the famous *dBus gtsang gi gnas rten rags rim gyi mtshan byang mdor bsodus dad pa'i sa bon*, as recorded in the master's collected writings (*gsung 'bum*) by the disciple *dge bshes Karma bKra shis chos 'phel*. An English translation of this work – based on preliminary drafts by Alfonsa Ferrari that had been later completed and edited by Luciano Petech with the collaboration of Hugh Richardson – was published in 1958. For an updated analysis of mKhyen brtse'i dbang po's work, see Akester (2016).

⁶⁷ The 3rd Kaḥ thog Si tu was a student of 'Jam dbyangs mKhyen brtse'i dbang po. In his pilgrimage through Central Tibet, he demonstrated that he shared his master's predilection for the rNying ma, bKa' brgyud, and Sa skya establishments. The Kaḥ thog Si tu's pilgrimage is recorded in his work titled *dBus gtsang gi gnas yig*; see Chos kyi rgya mtsho (1972) and Everding (2017).

Padmasambhava, ought to take into consideration the intertextual nexus hidden behind the mere listing of toponyms. The choice of places to visit is in fact far from being casual, but rather corresponds to a precise social, religious, historical, and cultural interpretation of the sacredness of the Tibetan plateau.

Having set off from bSam yas, 'Dzam yag and his nephew and business assistant Blo 'jam entered Lho kha, and after having visited the complex of Kun bzang nag khrod,⁶⁸ founded in 1158 by Phag mo gru pa rDo rje rgyal po (1110-1170),⁶⁹ they reached Zangs ri mkhar dmar, a Phag mo gru monastery and an important site in the transmission of *gcod* teachings,⁷⁰ on the 12th month of the Earth Mouse Year (January 1949). The complex is mainly renowned in connection to the activities of Ma gcig lab sgron ma (1055-1149),⁷¹ a Tibetan *yogini* from whom several lineages of the *gcod* practice originated. Her meditation cave, located on the western side of Zangs ri mkhar dmar, was particularly renowned for the presence of many "self-originated" *rten*, to which the trader offered 25 *srang*. In the late afternoon 'Dzam yag and Blo 'jam crossed the gTsang po river and moved southeastwards to rTsed thang dgon.⁷² The bKa' brgyud monastery was established in 1350 by Si tu Byang chub rgyal mtshan (1302-1364), the founder of the Phag mo gru dynasty and ruler of Tibet from 1354 until his death.⁷³ The monastery was later converted into a dGe lugs establishment and became known as rTsed thang lnga mchod grwa tshang, since its monastic community used to pay

⁶⁸ Most of 'Dzam yag's information on the establishment is drawn from a *gnas yig* and an abridged version of the *rnam thar* of Phag mo gru pa rDo rje rgyal po. According to the tradition, the latter founded the monastery of Kung bzang po'i gnas khrod with the intent of taming the whole world, the fame of the establishment shining bright like the full moon in the sky (Kha stag 'Dzam yag 1997, 93-94). For a short biography of Phag mo gru pa rDo rje rgyal po, see Mi nyag mgon po et al. (1996-2000, 63-69).

⁶⁹ On the history of the ruling house of the Phag mo gru pa and the role played by Phag mo gru pa rDo rje rgyal po in its political and religious affirmation, see Czaja (2013, 71-77).

⁷⁰ Lit. "cutting-off", the *gcod* tradition, attributed to Ma gcig lab sgron, was a system that combined teachings and precepts from the Indian *sūtra* with the *yoginī*'s personal meditation experiences derived from the *Prajñāpāramitā* and Vajrayāna instructions. Her technique, unique and often referred to as "The Cutting-Off [Ritual] of the *Mahāmudrā*" (*dam chos phyag rgya chen po'i gcod yul*), was adapted to the different needs of her disciples, thus creating diverse meditation methods that eventually generated separate lineages (Edou 1996, 6). For a description of the practice, see Edou (1996, especially 39-56) and Harding (2003).

⁷¹ On the figure of Ma gcig lab sgron ma, see, among others, Allione (1984), Gyatso (1985), Edou (1996), Kollmar-Paulenz (1998), Orofino (2000), Harding (2003).

⁷² Kha stag 'Dzam yag (1997, 96-97).

⁷³ On the rise of the Phag mo gru pa under Byang chub rgyal mtshan, see Czaja (2013, 111-141).

*Inga mchod*⁷⁴ to dGa' ldan chos 'khor.⁷⁵

From rTsed thang dgon, the two pilgrims moved to Yar lung Shel brag, a meditation cave where Padmasambhava is said to have dwelled for three years, during which he received visions of peaceful and wrathful deities. The place contained many blessed objects, such as a speaking statue of Guru Rin po che, twenty-one self-originated Tārā, footprints of the tantric master, and symbolic letters (*brda yig*) written by the *ḍakini*.⁷⁶ 'Dzam yag and Blo 'jam's pilgrimage through Yar lung mirrors the itinerary described in mKhyen brtse's and Kaḥ thog Sit tu's guides; from Shel brag, the two headed down to the plain of rTsed thang, visiting the shrine of rTsed thang g.yu, founded by the mother of king Khri srong lde brtsan, and believed to be the place where gNya' khri btsan po⁷⁷ descended from heaven (Kha stag 'Dzam yag 1997, 102). Moving southwards from the plain, they reached Ras chung phug, a monastery erected near the meditation cave of the bKa' brgyud master Ras chung pa (1084-1161); the complex presented many elements related not only to the latter but to other representatives of his aural lineage (*snyan brgyud*) as well.⁷⁸

In recording mKhyen brtse's pilgrimage in Yar lung, his guidebook presents a circular path including six chief destinations: three sanctuaries (*gnas gsum*) – Shel brag, Khra 'brug,⁷⁹ and either Ras

⁷⁴ Religious fee paid in support of the celebration for the anniversary of Tsong kha pa's death on the 25th day of the 10th month.

⁷⁵ 'di ni thog mar tā yi si tu byang chub rgyal mtshan gyis phyag btap pa'i bka' brgyud pa'i dgon pa grags can rtsed thang dgon zhes pa de yin 'dug pa la | phyis su rje tsong kha pa'i mdzad 'phrin rten 'brel las grub mtha' dge lugs pa chags shing | 'jam dbyangs gyang thims ma zhes pa'i gyang dang | jo bo rje'i thugs dam gyi rten thub pa gser gling ma sogs dus 'gyur ma byung bar du mjal rgyu yod la | dge 'dun zhal grangs kyang brgya lhag yod | Inga mchod ces pa ni chu lho rgyud du dga' ldan Inga mchod thog mar gtong mkhan dgon de yin stabs mtshan de ltar thogs par 'khod (Chos 'phel 2002, 42).

⁷⁶ Kha stag 'Dzam yag (1997, 100-101).

⁷⁷ According to a pre-Buddhist version of the myth of the sacred sovereignty of Tibet preserved in a Dunhuang manuscript, gNya' khri btsan po was the first of the divine kings to descend from heaven to rule the country. For a detailed bibliography on the topic, see Kværne (1981).

⁷⁸ A system of liturgies, ritual manuals, and tantric commentaries, together with their aural instructions, based primarily on the *Cakrasaṃvaratantra*. Promulgated by the Indian *siddha* Tilopa and Nāropa and transmitted in Tibet by Mar pa and Mi la ras pa, they were received by Ras chung pa and consequently became known as *ras chung snyan brgyud*. The teachings of the most prominent disciples of Mi la ras pa – Ras chung pa (1084-1161), sGam po pa bSod nam rin chen (1079-1153), and Ngan rdzongs ras pa (b. late 11th century) – were later codified as the "Three cycles of aural lineage instructions" (*sNyan brgyud skor gsum*) by the 15th-century *yogin* gTsang smyon Heruka, also known as the author of Mi la ras pa's *rnam thar* (Buswell and Lopez 2014, 699).

⁷⁹ For a detailed historical-philological and anthropological study dedicated to the history and cult of the temple of Khra 'brug, see Sørensen et al. (2005).

chung phug or 'Om bu lha khang⁸⁰ – and three *mchod rten* or *rten gsum* – rTag spyan 'bum pa, dGon thang 'bum pa, and Tshe chu 'bum pa.⁸¹ The presence of the same locations in 'Dzam yag's *nyin deb* proves the existence of a recognised and accepted pilgrimage route through Lho kha, and further confirms the prescriptive power of textual utterances in the sense-giving and sense-making processes at the core of sacred geography: the recorded experiences of previous Buddhist masters provide frames of meaning and interpretative schemas that the devotees employ in their relation with the surrounding environment.

'Dzam yag and Blo 'jam's pilgrimage through the southeastern region of Lho kha echoes almost in every detail the route travelled a century earlier by mKhyen brtse. From rTsed thang they moved towards the south of the gTsang po; following the river upstream, they passed through the Yar lung region, reaching Lho brag, the birthplace of Mar pa (1000?-1081?) and a bKa' brgyud stronghold. Before leaving Lho brag and heading towards gTsang and rGyal rtse, our pilgrims visited two other important places connected to the popular narrative of Mi la ras pa, namely Sras mkhar dgu thog⁸² and Lho Gro bo lung. Both complexes, the first a towered fortress⁸³ and the second a hermitage, hosted the saint's master Mar pa, and became important superregional pilgrimage sites.

It has been stated that the value of a pilgrimage depends on the efforts made by the pilgrim. Between 1944 and 1952, whereas the lack of economic means was a main concern and the reason behind many of the exertions to which 'Dzam yag submitted himself, it also forced him to actively commit to the most physical aspects of the pilgrimage, often at the cost of his own health. In the passage below, the trader reflects on the limitations of his own body and the illusory control man has over time, closing with a typical Buddhist reflection on the necessity to engage in pious activities while one can. This latter passage – a quote from Pha dam pa Sangs rgyas, the famous but elusive 12th-century *Zhi byed* ("Pacification") master⁸⁴ – is also a

⁸⁰ The compiler of the guide admits the existence of a controversy over the identification of the third *gnas*; see Ferrari (1958, 49) and Dowman (1988, 173).

⁸¹ Ferrari (1958, 49-50), Dowman (1981, 173).

⁸² Sras mkhar dgu thog (lit. "Nine-story tower [of] the son") was built by the saint as a form of ascetic penance and initiation price. The compound *sras mkhar* may be a hypercorrection of *gsas mkhar*, a Bon term meaning "temple"; the term *gsas* (lit. "god") is an authentic non-Tibetan word. I am grateful to Per Kværne for sharing his knowledge on the topic (private conversation, March 2017).

⁸³ On Mi la ras pa's trial of the towers and the political and religious meaning behind it, see Gianotti (1991).

⁸⁴ On the Indian Tantric master Pha dam pa Sangs rgyas and his teachings, see, among others, Aziz (ed., 1978/79).

display of his knowledge of the Buddhist traditions:

On different occasions in the past, I did not go to the top [of the Sras mkhar tower] because I had heavy loads [with me] and I could only circumambulate it from the outside. The following day, at sunrise, I armed myself with courage, and even though I only did a single circumambulation, it was a rather strong sensation for my body. As for the youngsters, they do not think much of doing many circumambulations [...] As Pha dam pa said, "If one cannot engage in ascetism at the time of his or her blooming youth, then, when one reaches old age, there is no hope he or she can do that." One should engage in religious hardships when young [because] when one gets old everything is difficult.⁸⁵

Trade, although hinted at by the fact that he is carrying heavy loads with him, is not addressed explicitly and is entirely overshadowed by the religious activity.

Pilgrimage to mNga' ris

Gangs Ti se and mTsho Ma pham

On the 1st day of the 5th month of the Earth Ox Year (June 27, 1949), 'Dzam yag joined a group of pilgrims on their way to Mount Kailash via southwest Tibet, thus fulfilling a long-awaited wish of his. Before setting off, the trader commissioned the performance of a day-long ritual at bKra shis lhun po by four monks⁸⁶ in order to dispel whatever obstacles might arise on his way. On their way from gTsang to mNga' ris, 'Dzam yag and his companions stopped by renowned monastic establishments, such as sNar thang dgon, Sa skya dgon, and Ding ri glang 'khor dgon. At the latter, the trader paid homage to the meditation cave of Pha dam pa Sangs rgyas, the founder of the complex; the caretaker, a certain dPa' bo dbang 'dus,

⁸⁵ *sngar dus dang mi 'dra ba bgrang bya yis khur lci bas mtha' bskor las rtse bskor 'gro ma phod | phyi nyin nyi ma 'char ba dang mnyam du sems la dpa' bskangs nas gos rkyang du skor ba gcig thon tsam byung yang | lus la tshor ba che tsam 'dug | gzhon pa rnams ni grangs mang skor ba la ngal ba cher med pa 'dra [...]* pha dam pas kyang gzhon sha rgyas kyi dus su dka' thub ma byas na | rgas dus 'byung bas mi len {ding ri ba} | zhes gsungs pa'i gzhon pa so dkar gyi dus su chos la dka' thub dgos shing rgas tshar na yong ba dka' mo 'dug (Kha stag 'Dzam yag 1997, 116). The presence of the term *ding ri ba* (lit. "native of Ding ri") seems to suggest a quote from Pha dam pa Sangs rgyas' *Ding ri brgya rtsa ma*, a famous series of aphorisms addressed by the master to the people of Ding ri.

⁸⁶ For their ritual performance, the monks received a statue of the value of 60 *srang* (Kha stag 'Dzam yag 1997, 158).

collected water from a nearby spring and allowed 'Dzam yag to drink it and use it for ablutions.⁸⁷ The sacred mountain of Jo mo glang ma (Mount Everest), visible to the south of Ding ri, was honoured with offerings to the bsTan ma bcu gnyis.⁸⁸ Although aware that the area brimmed with many holy places – sacred to Bon po and Buddhists alike – 'Dzam yag refrains from leaving the relative safety of the group to venture out on the trail on his own, a decision he ascribes to the train of mules entrusted to him by the *tshong dpon* Nyi ma phun tshogs.⁸⁹ As pointed out by Alex McKay, numerous were the lay travellers whose economic existence revolved around trading at pilgrimage sites, and that raises the wider question of when pilgrimage ended and secular lifestyle started;⁹⁰ in 'Dzam yag's case, the two activities were inextricably intertwined.

During the two months spent in the western province of mNga' ris,⁹¹ 'Dzam yag and his companions visited the most important sites connected with the figures of Padmasambhava and Mi la ras pa, for Buddhist visitors the main characters in the narrative fueling the sacredness of the Kailash-Manasarovar complex. Even though Mount Kailash – or Gangs Ti se, as the Tibetans refer to it – has come to embody a universal sacred site for Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike, the history of the place has gone largely unexplored, its status accepted without any attempt at critical analysis. Despite being supported by the claims of modern commentators,⁹² textual proof of an early established sacrality of Mount Kailash and Lake Manasarovar has yet to be found. The mountain described in ancient

⁸⁷ Even though Tibetan pilgrims rarely bathe in sacred waters (Huber 1999b, 17), in his journal 'Dzam yag makes several references to the use of water collected from holy springs for the purpose of ablution (*khrus*).

⁸⁸ Twelve female local spirits who were converted by Padmasambhava and bound to protect Jo mo glang ma, which is considered to be one of the five most sacred mountains of Tibet; see Nebesky-Wojkowitz (1956, 181-198).

⁸⁹ The reference to pack animals strengthens the assumption that in the years between 1944 and 1952 'Dzam yag's religious visits and pilgrimage activities were highly dependent on business arrangements and logistics. It should be also recalled that sPu hreng was an ancient trading post attracting, as late as the 1950s, numerous traders, peddlers, and pilgrims from all over Tibet and beyond. I am grateful to Franz Xaver Erhard for the information (private conversation, June 2017).

⁹⁰ McKay (1998, 8-9).

⁹¹ 'Dzam yag adheres to the traditional tripartite division of mNga' ris (sTod mnga' ris skor gsum) in the Snow Land of sPu hreng (sPu hreng gangs kyi skor), the Slate Land of Gu ge (Gu ge g.ya' yis skor), and the Water Land of Ru thog (Ru thog mtsho yis skor) (Kha stag 'Dzam yag 1997, 168-169).

⁹² In his *Ti se gnas bshad*, the 34th 'Bri gung bKa' brgyud dKon mchog bstan 'dzin Chos kyi blo 'gros (1801-1859) provides four different descriptions of Mount Ti se, according to the views of non-Buddhists, Hindus, Hinayāna followers, and Vajrayāna practitioners respectively; see Huber and Rigzin (1995, 14-15).

Indic texts is in fact a heavenly landscape bearing little, if any, resemblance to the earthly complex.

As for Tibetan historical sources on Kailash-Manasarovar, any reference to a holy mountain retains the features of a literary trope, a metaphor rather than a specific place with unique geographic features. Elevated to being a sacred centre in the 11th century, Mount Kailash soon became a topic of controversy among representatives of different schools of Tibetan Buddhism, due to the instrumentalisation of Indic cosmology and prophetic schemata by the bKa' brgyud subsects.⁹³ Additionally, at the time of the first textual compositions, the focus of sacredness was not the mountain itself but the lake later identified with Manasarovar,⁹⁴ called in Tibetan Ma pham and considered to be the abode of serpent spirits (*klu*; Skt. *nāga*).⁹⁵ The Buddhisation⁹⁶ of Kailash-Manasarovar was part of a multi-dimensional and wider process of transference of Indic Buddhist sacred geography to the Tibetan plateau by hierarchs of the various branches of the bKa' brgyud school, a transformation that occurred mainly on a mythological level, through the superimposition of the *maṅḍala*⁹⁷ of the Tantric deity Cakrasaṃvara ('*Khor lo bde mchog*)⁹⁸ onto the landscape and its concurrent association with the activities of Padmasambhava and Mi la ras pa.⁹⁹

The assimilation of territorial deities (*yul lha*) into the Buddhist

⁹³ On the sacred geography controversy and the development of Tantric Buddhist pilgrimage sites in Tibet, see Huber ([1990] 2003).

⁹⁴ Early Tibetan sources conformed to wider Indic beliefs attributing a major spiritual reverence to bodies of water rather than mountains (McKay 2015, 2-3). Bodies of water – whether lakes or springs – appeared to have been often perceived as sacred; at the beginning of the Earth Mouse Year (1948), 'Dzam yag records the performance of seven circumambulations around Phu ma g.yu mtsho, a saltwater lake in Upper Lho brag, considered to be an important pilgrimage site (Kha stag 'Dzam yag 1997, 131; Richardson 1998, 324).

⁹⁵ With the "opening" of the pilgrimage route by the 'Brug pa master rGod tshang pa mGon po rdo rje (1189-1258), the central ritual observance of Buddhist pilgrimage to the site shifted from the circumambulation of Lake Manasarovar to the circumambulation of the mountain (McKay 2015, 302).

⁹⁶ The Buddhist "conquest" of Tibet was a multi-levelled process, in which fundamental aspects were the subjugation ('*dul ba*) of the landscape and its autochthonous deities. For a discussion on the process of Buddhisation, see Huber (1997, 246), Buffetrille (1998, 18-34), McKay (2015, 275).

⁹⁷ On the origin and importance of the *maṅḍala* model in sacred geography, see Macdonald (1997), Huber (1999b, 26), McKay (2015, 308-312).

⁹⁸ Crucial in the establishment of Kailash as *gnas ri* was not a single ritual event – whether Mi la ras pa's claim or rGod tshang pa mGon po rdo rje's "opening" of the circumambulation route – but rather the myth of the subjugation of the Śaivite deity Maheśvara by Cakrasaṃvara, an event understood to have occurred in mythological times (McKay 2015, 313).

⁹⁹ McKay (2015, 6-7).

pantheon and their transformation into sacred mountains (*gnas ri*)¹⁰⁰ has been the topic of several studies¹⁰¹ and does not need to be reexamined at present. Nevertheless, in the case of Kailash-Manasarovar, the absence of traces solely ascribable to a *yul lha* cult, and the prominence of elements typical of a Buddhist sacred mountain, such as circumambulations, the “opening” of the site by a historical figure, and the “ritual appropriation of space, in which written sources serve an important function”,¹⁰² seem to strongly indicate that Ti se was rather detached from the local context and its sacrality came almost completely from the overlaying of Buddhist concepts.¹⁰³

The modern perception of Kailash as “the most sacred place in Tibet”¹⁰⁴ for Hindus, Buddhists, and Bon po actually dates to the 20th century and is largely due to the convergent efforts of outsiders – be they Europeans, Indians, or Central or Eastern Tibetans, all of whom were nurturing and promoting their own images of the mountain realms.¹⁰⁵ 'Dzam yag, too, contributed to the establishment of the Kailash myth, joining the thousands of pilgrims who constantly journeyed to the province of mNga' ris. In his journal, the trader completely endorses the narrative of Kailash as *axis mundi*,¹⁰⁶ adhering to the popular tale of Mi la ras pa's conquest of the mountain and the conversion of the Bon po master Na ro Bon chung. While ascending the massif, 'Dzam yag and his companions halted in front of the cave where the Bon po was supposed to have meditated, giving the trader an occasion to jot down an abridged version of the famous episode of Mi la ras pa's life story, thus unconsciously engaging in an intertextual dialogue that is at the core of an ongoing

¹⁰⁰ Whereas the origin of the *yul lha* is intimately connected with the process of identity construction of the local tribes – for whom the mountain served as an identity marker – *gnas ris* were usually the outcome of a programme of superimposition of external cosmogonies, be they Buddhist or Bon (McKay 2015, 273-274).

¹⁰¹ See in particular Huber (1999b).

¹⁰² Karmay (1994, 115).

¹⁰³ McKay (2015, 274-275).

¹⁰⁴ McKay (2015, 8).

¹⁰⁵ McKay (2015, 9).

¹⁰⁶ As pointed out by McKay, “the modern understanding of Kailas-Manasarovar as a ‘World mountain’ is largely shaped by Indic perspectives and owes little to Tibetan understandings of the sites” (2015, 273). In canonical Indic Buddhism there are various references to a heavenly mountain named Kelasa, but the late Mahāyāna-Tantric forms of Buddhism that spread in Tibet after the 11th century interpreted the sacred geography of the territory in a very different way. The concept of “World mountain”, passed down in Tibet during the first dissemination of Buddhism (*snga dar*; 7th-9th centuries), was not related to or identified with Ti se or any other earthly complex, since mountains were used as metaphors (McKay 2015, 278). See also Huber ([1990] 2003).

meaning-making process of sacred geography.

As 'Dzam yag renders the legend, the great Buddhist saint visited the sacred place at the end of the 11th century; at the time of crossing one of the mountain passes, he was welcomed by a party of *dakini* and local deities by whom he was offered the mountain as a place of meditation for him and his disciples. The place came to be known as mGur la, the "Song's Pass", in celebration of Mi la ras pa's performance of a song (*mgur*) as a gesture of gratitude to the deities; in his notes, the trader records the presence of footprints on the surrounding rocks, just one of the several wondrous signs left by spiritual masters who on different occasions visited the holy mountain.¹⁰⁷

The region of sPu hrengs in mNga' ris rose to fame mainly due to the activities of the 'Bri gung and Karma subsects,¹⁰⁸ who engaged in an active conversion of landscape and local deities, thus more sharply defining the doctrinal identity of Buddhism and sectarian orders.¹⁰⁹ The local narrative embraced the process of Buddhisation, presenting the area as a *locus* of interest, mentioned by the Buddha himself, and filled with auspicious geomantic signs. In his journal, 'Dzam yag lists some of the holiest spots,¹¹⁰ recalling the importance held by sPu hrengs in many traditions, and the necessity for the pilgrim to rely on the experiences of supreme beings as narrated in their accounts, since personal defilements may prevent the devotee from fully perceiving the sacredness of the place, its blessed essence hidden beneath its mundane and earthly aspect. The *nyin deb* reiterates the myth of an early sacrality of Kailash-Manasarovar: drawing from the biographies (*rtogs brjod*) of Mar pa and Mi la ras pa,

¹⁰⁷ Kha stag 'Dzam yag (1997, 167).

¹⁰⁸ Gangs Ti se and Ma pham soon became a field of dispute between the two bKa' brgyud subsects. By the late 12th century, the favourable socio-political condition of mNga' ris had attracted so many renunciates that the rights to practice at the sacred sites became a matter of contestation by the various bKa' brgyud followers. The dispute was finally settled around 1215 with the predominance of the 'Bri gung and the consequent institutionalisation of a stable and organised form of pilgrimage; see Vitali (1996, 407) and McKay (2015, 300-301). For a study and partial translation of 'Bri gung chung tshang's *Ti se gnas bshad* ("Guidebook to Ti se"), see Huber and Rinzin (1995, 10-47).

¹⁰⁹ McKay (2015, 290-291).

¹¹⁰ The trader listed Lang ka sPu reng ("Lang ka [the demon that chose] sPu hrengs [as its abode]"), rGyal bu Nor bzang gi brang ("Palace of the Prince Nor bu bzang po"), b'Tsun mo nyis stong gi phug pa ("Cave of the 2,000 Queens"), Yid 'phrog lha mo nam mkhar 'phur ba'i bya skyibs a sur nam phug ("Asura Sky Cave, a rock-shelter or cave from where Beautiful Goddess flew in the sky"), Chu mig mthong ba rang grol ("Holy Spring the mere sight of which liberates from *Samsāra*"), and Klu chen bzhi yi pho brang ("Palace of the Four Great *Nāgas*") (Kha stag 'Dzam yag 1997, 169).

'Dzam yag presents a place the holy nature of which had been recognised by the Buddha himself, an acknowledgement further confirmed by Mi la ras pa's claim to the lake and mountain.¹¹¹ According to the Buddhist narrative,¹¹² the dispute between the saint and Na ro Bon chung mirrors the opposition, already existing as early as the 11th century,¹¹³ between Buddhism and the indigenous tradition in the form of Bon: "the two belief systems used their own formulations of indigenous categories of deities and ways of seeing the landscape as part of that contestation".¹¹⁴ The competition between the magical powers of two renunciates, the Buddhist Mi la ras pa and the Bon po Na ro, is traditionally presented as the moment in which Gangs Ti se (Mount Kailash) became established as *gnas ri*, a sacred Buddhist mountain. There are many accounts of Mi la ras pa's reasons to travel to Ti se:¹¹⁵ whether it was for the benefit of the nomads¹¹⁶ or at the advice of his master Mar pa, the saint is accredited to have visited the site in 1093, and his presence began to be framed in terms of a Buddhist versus Bon competition that ended with the superimposition onto the place of the *maṇḍala* of Cakrasamvara, Mi la ras pa's tutelary deity. As correctly stated by McKay,

The predictions attributed to Marpa or Naropa concerning Milarepa's achievements were [...] retrospective validations rather than historical explanations, for the truths they contain exist in the world of myth.¹¹⁷

The first claims to an early sacrality of Ti se were advanced by 'Jig rten mgon po (1143-1217), the founder of the 'Bri gung pa, a century after Mi la ras pa's visit to mNga' ris. The first practitioners, sent to Kailash, Tsa ri, and La phyi by the 'Bri gung masters Gling ras pa (1128-1188) and 'Jig rten mgon po, attracted others, thus contributing to the progressive institutionalisation of a pilgrimage practice to these sites sacred to the bKa' brgyud.

¹¹¹ Kha stag 'Dzam yag (1997, 169).

¹¹² The existence of Na ro Bon chung was unknown in the Bon religion and appears to be a creation of later Buddhist narrative (Martin 2001, 118-119).

¹¹³ Rin chen bzang po (958-1055) "selected only those places for establishing (temples) [...] which were either the centres of Bon-po faith or the local gods" (Thakur 2001, 35). See also Thakur (2011).

¹¹⁴ McKay (2015, 291).

¹¹⁵ Different reasons for Mi la ras pa's presence at Ti se are for instance given in *The Blue Annals* (1476) and Mi la ras pa's biography (1488) (McKay 2015, 292). For a detailed study of Mi la ras pa's biographies, see Quintman (2015).

¹¹⁶ Roerich (1949, 433).

¹¹⁷ McKay (2015, 295).

'Dzam yag adheres to the 'Bri gung subsect's narrative of the mountain as a place praised by the Buddha and Padmasambhava and blessed by Atiśa and the five hundred *arhat*.¹¹⁸ As the trader explains in his journal, many arguments were advanced by 'Bri gung representatives supporting the holiness of Gangs Ti se, and their praises found resonance in the words of the 4th Panchen Lama Blo bzang chos kyi rgyal mtshan (1570-1662). Nonetheless, confusion was caused by a few disciples of Kun dga' rgyal mtshan (1182-1251), commonly known as Sa skya Paṇḍita, who passed judgment on the validity of Ti se as a pilgrimage site, with no other reason than mistaken loyalty to their master's position.¹¹⁹ Whilst at the time of 'Dzam yag's pilgrimage the circumambulation of Mount Kailash was a well-established superregional ritual activity, the bKa' brgyud projection of the *maṇḍala* of their tutelary deity onto the mountain had not gone uncontested at the time of its formulation. Some of the claims that were integral to the process of Buddhisation soon became the subject of criticism, most notably by Sa skya Paṇ chen,¹²⁰ who openly condemned some of the new tendencies in Tibetan sacred geography and pilgrimage. In his 1232 *sDom gsum rab dbye* ("Discrimination of the Three Vows"), the scholar engaged with the current themes of the time, overtly refusing the identification of the Snow Mountain and the Anavatapta Ocean mentioned in the *Abhidharmakośa* and in the *Śrīkālacakratantra* with Ti se and Ma pham respectively, justifying his positions with a strict adherence to the original Indian texts.¹²¹ Nevertheless, the same textual sources backing Sa skya Paṇ chen's refutation of Ti se as *axis mundi* recur in 'Dzam yag's diary more than 700 years later, in a section describing the geomantic features of the massif.¹²²

As for the four rivers that look like they were pouring down
from the mouths of mountains [resembling] four living beings:

¹¹⁸ According to the tradition, there were five hundred disciples who attended the First Council held at Rājagṛha after the passing away of the Buddha.

¹¹⁹ Sa skya Paṇḍita's criticism of the identification of Tibetan sacred mountains with the Indian cosmology was upheld by the Sa skya. The bKa' brgyud pa, who had many hermitages in the Kailash region, argued against Sa skya Paṇḍita's stance, see for example the 6th Chung tshang Rin po che's "Guide to Mt. Ti se" (*Gangs ri chen po ti se dang mtsho chen ma dros pa bcas kyi sngon byung gi lo rgyus mdor bsdus su brjod pa'i rab byed shed dkar me long*). See Kha stag 'Dzam yag (1997, 170).

¹²⁰ Huber (1997, 274; [1990] 2003, 397-403), McKay (2015, 317).

¹²¹ Huber ([1990] 2003, 398).

¹²² A very similar description of the four rivers hailing from animal-shaped mountains appears in Sa skya Paṇ chen's *sDom gsum rab dbye* (in Huber [1990] 2003, 399). The two passages differ only on the nature of one the animals; whereas the *sūtra* presents an ox, 'Dzam yag's journal reports a peacock.

[starting] from the east, [the rivers] fall [from] the mouth of the excellent horse to Grog shog, [from the beak of] the peacock to sPu hrengs, [from the mouth of] the lion to La dwags, [from the mouth of] the elephant to Gu ge, and these are [signs] for everyone to see.¹²³

The main points in Sa skya Paṅ chen's criticism of the shifting of sacred places from India to the Tibetan plateau lay in his concern for the way the Buddhist *tantra* were interpreted and practised, and his desire to demonstrate the falsehood of the specific sacred geography formulated for their own political and religious advantage by certain sects of Tibetan Buddhism. To use Huber's words, "not only do Ti-se and Tsa-ri fail to qualify as such sites [i.e. holy places], but there is nothing whatever to be gained by Buddhists performing pilgrimage to them".¹²⁴ Sa skya Paṅ chen's position was upheld by his disciples, and, according to 'Dzam yag, contributed to "generating uncertainty among all beings".¹²⁵ Despite the general opposition of the Sa skya pa though, Ti se – as well as the other two main bKa' brgyud holy mountains, La phyi and Tsa ri¹²⁶ – kept gaining credibility as holy sites, and pilgrimage activities grew exponentially since the "opening" of the route in the mid-13th century.

Another point of discussion among pilgrims was the number of circumambulations (*skor ra*) to be performed in order to cleanse one's own *karma*. According to the 'Brug pa master gTsang pa rgya ras (1191-1211), quoted by 'Dzam yag, one *skor ra* purified the obscurations of a lifetime, ten *skor ra* atoned for the defilements of an aeon (*skal pa*; Skt. *kalpa*), while the completion of one hundred *skor ra* ensured the obtainment in a single lifetime of the eight good qualities and the ten signs of successful practice. For the locals however, thirteen was the number of circumambulations sufficient for the purification of one's own sins; as 'Dzam yag records in his *nyin deb*, thirteen was in fact the number of *skor ra* performed by a Khams pa woman who accidentally killed her child while crossing the sGrol ma pass. With her mind clouded by thirst and fatigue, the woman forgetfully immersed herself into the water of a 'khrus mtsho (lit. "ablution lake"), causing the death of the baby she was carrying on

¹²³ *ri srog chags 'dra ba bzhi yi kha nas 'bab pa'i kha 'bab kyi chu bo chen po bzhi ni | shar nas rta mchog kha 'babs grog shog yul la 'bab | rma bya kha 'bab spu hrengs yul la 'bab | seng ge kha 'bab la dwags yul la 'bab | glang chen kha 'bab gu ge gi yul la 'bab pa sogs kun gyis mthong ba yod cing 'dug* (Kha stag 'Dzam yag 1997, 170).

¹²⁴ Huber ([1990] 2003, 400).

¹²⁵ *skye bo kun 'phyang mo nyug tu gyur* (Kha stag 'Dzam yag 1997, 170).

¹²⁶ Ti se, La phyi, and Tsa ri were understood as representing respectively the Body, Speech, and Mind of Cakrasaṃvara, the tutelary deity of the bKa' brgyud (McKay 2015, 313).

her back. Grieving and moaning, she started prostrating, completing thirteen circumambulations of the mountain, at the end of which a footprint appeared on the rock, symbolising the cleansing of her defilements.¹²⁷ The *'khrus mtsho* was later sealed with a lid, and the access to its water was limited to a few days a year; 'Dzam yag and his companions were fortunate enough to visit the place on one of those rare occasions, thus having the chance to bathe and make offerings there.¹²⁸

Once on the other side of the mGur pass, the pilgrims resumed their journey through sPu hrengs, camping for the night at a village near rTsa bu lha khang, formerly a branch monastery (*dgon lag*) of the Sa skya establishment of gTsang Byang chub gling. The next day the group visited the Sa skya complex of 'Khor chags dgon, paying homage to the 'Khor chags Jo bo rigs gsum mgon po.¹²⁹ Even though the three images enjoyed similar fame and devotion in the region, the legend behind the creation of the Mañjuśrī statue caught 'Dzam yag's fascination, prompting him to record an abridged version of it in his journal. According to local tradition, in the 10th century the place was visited by seven Indian *ācārya*, each of whom carrying a load of silver. Tired and eager to move on, they entrusted the precious metal to the local *dharma* king and bodhisattva (*chos rgyal byang chub sems dpa'*),¹³⁰ on the understanding that, if none of them came to reclaim the loads in the next three years, the silver would be his. The ruler did as requested, and, when the third year came and went, he sought the advice of a pious lama; assured that the silver was a sign of spiritual accomplishment, the king summoned the best Tibetan craftsmen with the intention of commissioning the creation of a supreme statue. Before the artists could touch the metal though, an image of Mañjuśrī self-originated from it. The king ordered for the blessed statue to be transported from the plain of Bye ma'i thang to the dKar dung castle, but at the moment of crossing the flat river banks of the rMa bya kha 'bab, Mañjuśrī spoke, affirming his desire to stay in the place where he was formed.¹³¹ A monastery was built

¹²⁷ Kha stag 'Dzam yag (1997, 171).

¹²⁸ Kha stag 'Dzam yag (1997, 172).

¹²⁹ Statues portraying the Lords of the Three Families, e.g. the bodhisattvas Avalokiteśvara, Mañjuśrī, and Vajrapāṇi.

¹³⁰ Vitali (1996, 258-265) suggests the name king Lha ldan as possible founder of the Rin chen brtsegs pa'i gtsug lag khang and sponsor of the silver statue of Mañjuśrī. See also Orofino (2007, 87-88).

¹³¹ "In this place I was formed, in this place I want to stay" (*nga yang 'di na 'khor | chags yang 'di na chags*). The complex of 'Khor chags dgon lies on the riverbanks of rMa bya kha 'bab; despite differing on the identity of the founder, historical sources agree on dating its erection to 996. According to the *'Khor chags dkar chag*, written in 1880 by Ngor Khang gsar mkhan po Ngag dbang bsod nams rgyal

by the king to host the *rten*, and the other two Jo bo statues – Avalokiteśvara and Vajrapāṇi – were added by the king rNam lde mgon in the 13th century.¹³²

The end of the circumambulation route of Kailash, accomplished by the pilgrims on the 19th day of the 7th month of the Earth Ox Year (September 11, 1949), was marked by the presentation of a universal incense-offering (*'dzam gling spyi bsangs*) to Gangs Ti se.

By the end of the 1940s, the sacred geography controversy over Gangs Ti se/Mount Kailash had reached an impasse: while most of the pilgrims, including 'Dzam yag, accepted the bKa' brgyud identification of the complex with a proper Tantric pilgrimage site, only a few Sa skya pa – mainly lineage holders and scholars – still refused to include the mountain among their pilgrimage destinations. Although adhering to the bKa' brgyud interpretation of Ti se as a site connected to the *Cakrasaṃvaratantra*, 'Dzam yag remained strictly *ris med* in his approach. His critical remark regarding the followers of Sa skya Paṇḍita, blamed for the confusion regarding the value of the complex as pilgrimage destination, did not affect his decision to visit most of the Sa skya establishments in sPu hrengs. It is also worth recalling at this point the personal connection the trader entertained with the Sa skya centre of Ngor in general and with the head of the Khang gsar bla brang and former 65th Ngor mKhan chen Ngag dbang blo gros gzhan phan snying po (alias Dam pa Rin po che, 1876–1953) in particular – in light of that, the non-sectarian acceptance of Ti se as a Tantric site by 'Dzam yag can be fully appreciated.

From mNga' ris to gZhis ka rtse

After the offering, the group started to head back to gTsang, leaving behind the western province of mNga' ris and reaching Ri bo bkra bzung, a location mentioned in legendary narratives of Padmasambhava. 'Dzam yag calls it a “supreme sacred place prophesised by Śākyamuni Buddha,”¹³³ and briefly recalls its connection to the Indian tantric master. It was said that, on his way to U rgyan from Central Tibet, Padmasambhava spent seven days at Ri bo bkra bzung; the place, blessed by his presence, was filled with wondrous signs, such as the appearance of an eight-year-old

mtshan, the 'Khor chags *gtsug lag khang* was originally built to house the silver Jo bo; in his journal, 'Dzam yag refers to the *dkar chag* as the main textual source he consulted on the local history of the place (Kha stag 'Dzam yag 1997, 167-168). For more information on the monastery of 'Khor chags dgon, see Orofino (2007).

¹³² Orofino (2007, 88).

¹³³ *shākya thub pas lung bstan pa'i gnas chen* (Kha stag 'Dzam yag 1997, 185).

Vajrakumāra (rDo rje gzhon nu), a blue *hūm* symbol of speech, and a self-arisen five-pointed *vajra*. The master left his footprint in the cave where he meditated, and a shrine was built at the retreat place to host images, the most important of which was a speaking statue of Padmasambhava, handmade by the *gter ston* Rig 'dzin rGod kyi ldem 'phru can (1337-1409).¹³⁴

The next stop in the pilgrim's journey back to gZhis ka rtse was Ngam ring chos sde, an ancient monastery and seat of the La stod byang rulers. As 'Dzam yag records, at the time of the kings of gTsang, the throne holder enjoyed power and wealth, but the rise of Güshri khan and the defeat of the gTsang dynasty led to a loss of prestige for the monastic complex,

[Ngam ring chos sde] deteriorated, and insects were making nests inside the ear of the Maitreya statue.¹³⁵

Things changed with the conversion of the monastery from Sa skya to dGe lugs in 1650; at the time of his visit, 'Dzam yag records the presence of three hundred monks and praises the pristine condition of the monastic "supports". In his journey through the western areas of gTsang, the trader passed by many monasteries that, just as Ngam ring chos sde, had been converted to dGe lugs pa in the 17th century, following the orders of the 5th Dalai Lama. That was, for instance, the case of Lha rtse chos gling: founded in 1250 as a Sa skya establishment, the complex became of paramount importance for the dGe lugs after its reformation in 1649. As 'Dzam yag rightly points out, Lha rtse chos gling was the fourth of the thirteen monastic seats that were converted in the region during that period.¹³⁶ At the time of

¹³⁴ Treasure discoverer who initiated the Northern Treasures (*byang gter*) tradition, Rig 'dzin rGod kyi ldem 'phru can was born in gNyan yul, on the eastern side of Ri bo bkra bzang. According to legend, at the age of twelve, three feathery growths appeared on his head, thus gaining him the appellation of *rgod kyi ldem 'phru can* (lit. "having the crest of a vulture"); by the time he was twenty-four, the number of feathers had grown to five. See Powers and Templeman (2012, 584).

¹³⁵ *dgon de nyams chag gyur nas | dgon de'i byams chen khyad 'phags de'i snyan du 'bum yis tshang bcas* (Kha stag 'Dzam yag 1997, 177).

¹³⁶ The rise to power of the dGe lugs in 1642 was followed by a series of forced conversions, especially in the 1680s and 1690s, when the regent Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho set aside the more tolerant religious views of the 5th Dalai Lama, increasing the number of establishments – especially bKa' brgyud and Bon – converted to dGe lugs. In case of conversion, the original name of the monastery was preceded by the word *dga' ldan*, following the example of the establishments newly founded by the 5th Dalai Lama. On the conversion of Lha rtse chos gling, see Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho (2009, vol. 5, 205-210). A description of the complex is provided by the 3rd Kaḥ thog Si tu Chos kyi rgya mtsho (1880-1923/1925) in his *dBus gtsang gnas yig* (1972, 330-333).

the trader's visit, the monastery hosted more than four hundred monks, to each of whom he donated as individual offering 1 *zho*, adding to that 500 *srang* for the *bla brang*. Before setting off from Lha rtse chos gling, 'Dzam yag completed a circumambulation of the monastic complex, the fortress (*rdzong*), and the village.¹³⁷

On the 24th day of the 9th month of the Earth Ox Year (November 14, 1949), the group of pilgrims stopped by Padma sgrub phug, the meditation cave of gNubs Nam mkha'i snying po (8th-9th century)¹³⁸ in the rGyang yon mo valley, where the *gter ston* Rig 'dzin rGod kyidem 'phru can had accepted the *gSol 'debs le'u bdun ma*¹³⁹ as *gter ma*.

Leaving rGyang behind on the 28th day of the 9th month of the Earth Ox Year (November 18, 1949), the group reached the hermitage of mDzad pa, residence of the sKyabs mgon mDzad chen Rin po che, who bestowed on them the profound empowerment of Nā ro mkha' spyod,¹⁴⁰ for which 'Dzam yag offered an initiation fee of 18 *srang*, to which he added 16 *srang* to be divided among the thirteen monks present.¹⁴¹ After that, they passed through Grwa dar mo che, the seat of the Sa skya *gter ston* Tshar chen Blo gsal rgya mtsho (1502-1566)¹⁴² and approached the peak of Lha rtse rdzong, a place blessed by 'Phags pa. According to the local tradition,¹⁴³ those who died there would be saved from the lowest rebirths regardless of the amount of sins accumulated in their life. Having completed a series of prostrations and circumambulations, the pilgrims proceeded towards

¹³⁷ Kha stag 'Dzam yag (1997, 177).

¹³⁸ One of the first seven Tibetans to be ordained by Śāntarakṣita and counted as one of the twenty-five main disciples (*rje 'bangs nyer lnga*) of Padmasambhava.

¹³⁹ "The Seven-Chapter Reverential Petition (to Padmasambhava)", a hidden treasure said have been concealed by Mu khri btsan po, son of king Khri srong lde'u btsan, discovered by the latter's reincarnation bZang po grags pa, and entrusted, together with other *gter ma*, to sTon pa bSod nams dbang phyug in 1365, who handed them on to Rig 'dzin rGod kyidem 'phru can; see Boord (2013).

¹⁴⁰ Lineage of instructions on Vajrayoginī as transmitted from the deity to Naropa.

¹⁴¹ Kha stag 'Dzam yag (1997, 180).

¹⁴² The 13th Zhwa lu abbot and one of the most important *Lam 'bras* masters, together with Sa chen Kun dga' snying po (1092-1158) and Ngor chen Kun dga' bzang po (1382-1456). He received from his master Kun spangs rDo ring pa the *slob bshad* ("Explanations for the Disciple"), a special transmission of oral esoteric instructions on the *Lam 'bras*. While Tshar chen began to write down some of these instructions, the responsibility of recording his definitive explication of the Hevajra practice according to the *slob bshad* tradition fell to his main students 'Jam dbyangs mkhyen brtse'i dbang phyug and Mang thos klu sgrub rgya mtsho (Stearns 2001, 41-42). For a biography of Tshar chen Blo gsal rgya mtsho, see Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho (2009, vol. 12, 266-434).

¹⁴³ 'Dzam yag ascribes the origin of the toponym, a corruption of the original Lhags rtse, to 'Phags pa, who moved by the beauty of the place at dawn, named it "The Peak (*rtse*) Reached (*lhags*) [by the Sun]" (Kha stag 'Dzam yag 1997, 181).

gZhis ka rtse, visiting in succession the meditation cave of the *mahāsiddha* Gayādhara (994-1043), located northeast of the fortress of Lha rtse, the Sa skya establishment of Mu gu lung dgon, seat of 'Brog mi lo tsā ba (ca. 992-1043), and the small Jo nang monastery of Char lung rdo rje brag rdzong. Despite being at a walking distance from the latter, 'Dzam yag could not persuade his companions to visit the place in the Mu gu valley where Gayādhara was said to have taught the *Lam 'bras* and where his disciples' meditation caves lay in ruins.¹⁴⁴

From Lha rtse rdzong the pilgrims turned towards the heartland of the Jo nang school, reaching what used to be its most famous establishment, Phun tshogs gling, before its forced conversion to the dGe lugs school in 1635.¹⁴⁵ 'Dzam yag provides a detailed description of the complex and the stories connected to it; in particular, he records the presence of a set of footprints left by 'Jam dbyangs chos rje bKra shis dpal ldan (1379-1449), the founder of 'Bras spungs monastery, who used to travel back and forth between the foot of the mountain and its peak.¹⁴⁶

The outbreak of an epidemic in the area of gYu thog dgon discouraged the group from attending the ritual dances (*'cham*) performed at the monastic complex, redirecting them to the plain of Shab dkar po,¹⁴⁷ a place renowned for the activities of Rwa lo tsā ba rDo rje grags (1016-1128/1198). According to the popular narrative, the master ploughed and spread seeds on the dry and hard soil of the plain, obtaining overnight a harvest sufficient to feed the famished locals, whose fields had been drought-stricken. In his notes, the trader cannot help but remark on the average-looking condition of the place, reclaimed centuries before by the lords of gTsang and used since for agricultural purposes, regardless of any blessings bestowed by Rwa lo tsā ba on the field; taking a cue from that, 'Dzam yag quotes a passage from the "Golden Light Sūtra" (*gSer 'od dam pa'i mdo*), pondering on the ways the actions of rulers and ministers may negatively affect their subjects.¹⁴⁸ From Shab dkar po, the pilgrims passed by Bo dong gYu thog dgon¹⁴⁹ and Rog gtso dgon.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁴ Kha stag 'Dzam yag (1997, 181-182).

¹⁴⁵ The conversion was marked by the change of name from rTag brtan Phun tshogs gling to dGa' ldan Phun tshogs gling. The monastery, founded in 1615, was the seat of Kun dga' snying po, better known as Tāranātha. As correctly recorded by 'Dzam yag (1997, 182), Tāranātha had been recognised as the reincarnation of Kṛṣṇācārya (Nag po spyod pa), one of the eighty-four *mahāsiddhas*, by mKhan chen Lung rigs rgya mtsho, a 16th-century Jo nang master.

¹⁴⁶ Kha stag 'Dzam yag (1997, 182).

¹⁴⁷ Also known as Shab rjed gling.

¹⁴⁸ Kha stag 'Dzam yag (1997, 185).

¹⁴⁹ The monastic seat of Khro phu lo tsā ba Byams pa dpal bzang (1173-1225).

The five-month journey to Gangs Ti se via gTsang ended on the 13th day of the 10th month of the Earth Ox Year (December 3, 1949) with the arrival of 'Dzam yag and his companions to gZhis ka rtse; although presented by the trader as a pilgrimage, it is clear from the details provided in the account that the religious visits were once again collateral to more pressing financial matters.¹⁵¹

Visits to mKhan zur Thar rtse Rin po che

I will conclude the section on the pilgrimage route and ritual activities carried out by 'Dzam yag in Tibet with an analysis of the visits he paid to the retired head (*mkhan zur*) of Thar rtse bla brang. Meetings such as these were generally motivated by mundane rather than spiritual purposes: the distress caused by an ambiguous socio-economic status and the fear of being involved in risky business ventures, as well as the choice of a suitable pilgrimage venue were legitimate causes of concern to which the trader struggled to find an answer. Resorting to divination – whether dice, dough-balls, rosaries, or interpretation of accidental signs¹⁵² – is a practice integral to Tibetan cultural life and seamlessly integrated into the Buddhist sphere. By consulting a diviner or medium, virtually any challenging situation can be assessed and dealt with: the application of appropriate remedial actions (i.e. rituals), to be performed by either the petitioners themselves or a spiritual professional, allows for the removal of obstructions and the purification of defilements.

Mundane events concerning health, business, and everyday uncertainties fueled the layman's desire for divination, and 'Dzam yag was certainly not alone in his quest for answers. The more renowned the master, the more sought-after his services: private meetings were therefore rare and often the outcome of consistent patronage. The relationship between 'Dzam yag and Thar rtse Rin po che – as it emerges from the pages of the *nyin deb* – appears to predate the audience granted on the 4th month of the Fire Dog Year (May 1946), the first of the ten encounters recorded in the journal. It is worth quoting the section extensively, as it features elements that are characteristic of the interaction between the two of them:

¹⁵⁰ According to the local story, a *dge bshes* of the monastery, envious of Rwa lo tsā ba's accomplishments, started to harass the master, who, in a magical display of his *siddhi*, turned the *dge bshes* into a donkey (Kha stag 'Dzam yag 1997, 186).

¹⁵¹ Suffice to recall 'Dzam yag's grudging decision to refrain from visiting the sacred sites surrounding Ti se in consideration of the caravan of pack animals entrusted to him by the *tshong dpon* Nyi ma phun tshogs.

¹⁵² On Tibetan divination, see Tseten (1995).

After having given it some thought, and still doubting whether I should go towards the central province of dBus or on a pilgrimage to the Snow Mountain of Upper Tibet (i.e. Mount Kailash), as the proverb goes – “if you don’t know it yourself, ask a lama” – I requested the old Thar rtse abbot for a divination, and [it] turned out very auspicious [for my] going that year to either Lhasa, Nag chu, or Rong po.¹⁵³

Faithful to his pragmatic nature, 'Dzam yag opted for the dBus province; at the time, with neither wealth nor trading goods, he accepted to deliver 100 loads (*do po*) of butter to Lhasa on behalf of bKra shis nor bu, the treasurer of the Gra'u household in gZhis ka rtse. The task allowed him to earn money and, at the same time, to go on a pilgrimage to the holy city.¹⁵⁴

Many were the meetings requested and granted in the following years: 'Dzam yag met the Rin po che twice¹⁵⁵ when the latter was still acting as abbot, and seven times after the Iron Tiger Year (1950), when the master renounced his role of monastic head (*mkhan po*)¹⁵⁶ and retired to lead a spiritual life at the Chu bzang ri khrod,¹⁵⁷ where the trader visited him regularly until his passing away in 1952. The first of these encounters in the new abode occurred on the 3rd month of the Iron Tiger Year (April-May 1950), when the trader was on his way to 'Dzam thag; on that occasion, he offered him a *bka' btags* of the value of 40 *srang*, some medicine made from the fruits of Myrobalan,¹⁵⁸ a self-arisen stone glittering in gold, and a divination dice (*zho mo*) painted with Indian enamel. Before leaving, 'Dzam yag, uncertain on the direction to take for cutting the best deals with the nomads, requested the Rin po che to perform a divination on the matter. The spiritual connection between 'Dzam yag and the master, who was at the time living in seclusion, is a recurrent theme in the journal, and it is rather telling that all the meetings occurring between the two of them concern mundane affairs.

On the 5th month of the Iron Tiger Year (June-July 1950), while on

¹⁵³ *nyam blo 'ga' btang nas da ni dbus phyogs la 'gro'am | stod gangs ri gnas skor 'gro'am snyan pa'i the tshom skye ba'i ngang zhig tu rang gi mi shes bla mar dris zer ba'i dpe bzhin du | bdag gis thar rtse mkhan rgan la brtag pa zhus nas | da lo lha ldan nam | nag chu'am rong po phyogs la bskyod shin tu bzang babs* (Kha stag 'Dzam yag 1997, 65-66).

¹⁵⁴ Kha stag 'Dzam yag (1997, 66).

¹⁵⁵ On the 10th month of the Earth Mouse Year (November 1948) and on the 2nd month of the Earth Ox Year (March 1949).

¹⁵⁶ Thus becoming an “ex-abbot” (*mkhan zur*).

¹⁵⁷ Hermitage on the west side of U 'yug mda' mdo.

¹⁵⁸ The fruits of *Terminalia chebula*, commonly known as Chebulic Myrobalan, are considered to be a panacea in both Ayurvedic and Tibetan medicine; see Dash (1976).

his way back from 'Dzam thag, the trader paid another visit to mKhan zur Thar rtse Rin po che, seeking and receiving the empowerment and the protection circle (*srung 'khor*) of mGon dkar yid bzhin nor bu,¹⁵⁹ paying 8 *srang* as initiation fee.¹⁶⁰ Five months later, he returned to Chu bzang, looking for direction on matters related to business: the divination performed by the ex-abbot suggested the sale of the wool the trader had purchased. Following the master's instructions, 'Dzam yag maximised his gain and happily used the profit to support his offerings.¹⁶¹

The trader met the mKhan zur, who was at the time rather old, two more times before the latter's death; the last meeting took place during the 1st month of the Water Dragon Year (February-March 1952) in gZhis ka rtse. The master, who was on his way to Khams, bestowed on 'Dzam yag and a few other fortunate disciples an Amitāyus-Hayagrīva initiation. On that occasion, knowing that the Rin po che was heading to sGa pa, the trader invited him to his house for dinner, and after asking him for a divination about present and future events, he produced a blessed statue of Mañjuśrī, which he had been entrusted with by a relative of his root-guru (*rtsa ba'i bla ma*) rDo rje 'chang Ra nyag sKal bzang rnam rgyal dpal bzang po. mKhan zur Thar rtse Rin po che, moved by the gift, accepted the statue as *rten* and reciprocated with a statue of rDo rje 'chang, to be given to the relative of the trader's root-guru. The acting as a middleman between two religious figures is indicative of the kinds of social interactions 'Dzam yag was involved in just a few months shy of his appointment as *tshong dpon* of the Khang gсар bla brang, one of Ngor's four main lama palaces.¹⁶² The Water Dragon Year (1952) marks a change in the trader's approach to life: no more divinations were to be sought by 'Dzam yag, whose main concerns shifted from a mundane to a soteriological plane – or, to use Geoffrey Samuel's terms, from a "pragmatic" orientation, inspired by his difficult social and financial situation, to a more "bodhi-oriented" approach as soon as his circumstances allowed this.¹⁶³

¹⁵⁹ "The White Protector Wish-fulfilling Jewel", the main variant form of the black or blue-black six-armed Mahākāla. The deity is usually evoked to eliminate spiritual and material poverty and to bring abundance.

¹⁶⁰ Kha stag 'Dzam yag (1997, 191).

¹⁶¹ Kha stag 'Dzam yag (1997, 206).

¹⁶² On Ngor's lama palaces, see Heimbel (2017, 267-268 and esp. n. 237), Jackson (1989, 49-50, n. 2), and Jackson (2001: 90). I am grateful to Jörg Heimbel for referring me to these sources (private conversation, January 2021).

¹⁶³ Samuel (1993, 31).

*Ritual Activities: The Soteriological Aspect of
'Dzam yag's Spiritual Quest, 1952-1956*

Whereas in the period between 1944 and 1952 the extemporaneous nature of 'Dzam yag's visits to religious places on the plateau was largely influenced by the precariousness of his situation, his appointment as *tshong dpon* of the Khang gsar bla brang at the end of 1952 marked the emergence of a recognisable pattern in his movements. Before delving deeper into the activities carried out by 'Dzam yag in the last years of his life, the events that led to such a significant change in the trader's situation deserve to be brought to attention and analysed.

On the 23rd day of the 6th month of the Water Dragon Year (August 13, 1952), 'Dzam yag attended the oral transmission (*lung*) of the *Lam 'bras* teachings bestowed at Ngor by the head of the Khang gsar bla brang Ngag dbang blo gros gzhan phan snying po.¹⁶⁴ Among the practitioners, there were the eight-year-old head of the Sa skya sGrol ma pho brang Ngag dbang kun dga' theg chen dpal 'bar 'phrin las dbang gyi rgyal po,¹⁶⁵ his mother sPel chung, the former 70th abbot of Ngor and head of the 'Phan khang bla brang Ngag dbang mkhas grub rgya mtsho (1917–1969), and bDag chen Rin po che 'Jigs bral bdag chen sa skya (1929–2016),¹⁶⁶ who opened the ceremonies with a longevity prayer dedicated to Ngag dbang blo gros gzhan phan snying po. During his five-month stay at Ngor, 'Dzam yag had the opportunity, to use his own words, to “outshine [his] friends and *dharma* brothers”,¹⁶⁷ he offered to the Sa skya Khri 'dzin a rosary of prayer beads (Skt. *mālā*) made of amber and adorned with three

¹⁶⁴ The *Lam 'bras* was usually bestowed on an annual basis by the incumbent abbot of Ngor. If the latter was prevented from giving the teaching cycle, due to ailments, absence or death, a senior master would provisionally replace him as acting abbot. I thank Jörg Heimbrel for this information.

It is worth noticing that in 1952 the Dam pa Rin po che was not the incumbent abbot; at the present only speculations may be offered as to why the task of bestowing the *Lam 'bras* teaching fell on him. For an in-depth study of the Ngor tradition, with particular reference to the figure of his founder Ngor chen Kun dga' bzang po (1382–1456), see Heimbrel (2017). For a brief abbatial history in English recording the dates, tenures, and bla brang affiliation etc. of the successive abbots, see Heimbrel (2017, 513–546).

¹⁶⁵ Representative of the sGrol ma pho brang, one of the two extant branches of the 'Khon family lineage, the ancient hierarchs of Sa skya, he was recognised as the 41st Sa skya Khri 'dzin by the 14th Dalai Lama in 1951 and officially enthroned in 1959.

¹⁶⁶ The bDag chen Rin po che was the representative of the other surviving branch of the 'Khon family, the Phun tshogs pho brang.

¹⁶⁷ *da res grogs rdo rje spun rnams las mchog du gyur pa* (Kha stag 'Dzam yag 1997, 218).

pieces of coral, pleading him to be accepted as his disciple.¹⁶⁸

On the 17th of the 8th month of the Water Dragon Year (October 5, 1952), the trader joined his *dharma* brothers in the offering of common tea¹⁶⁹ and individual distributions (*sku 'gyed*) of money, food, butter lamps, ceremonial scarves, and other “excellent things”¹⁷⁰ for a total of 850 *srang*. Less than a month later, on the 14th of the 9th month (October 31, 1952), on the death anniversary of Sa chen Kun dga' snying po (1092-1158),¹⁷¹ Dam pa Rin po che, who was at the time 77, bestowed the profound empowerment (*zab dbang*) of Amitāyus, followed the next day by the Amitāyus-Hayagrīva initiation granted by the 41st Sa skya Khri 'dzin. Longevity rituals – believed to increase the merit and the lifespan of those fortunate enough to receive them – were undoubtedly some of the most requested and frequently performed esoteric ceremonies. As recorded in the *nyin deb*, the bestowal of the Amitāyus empowerment by Dam pa Rin po che attracted thousands of monks and lay people – regardless of age, status, and gender – and an impromptu encampment sprang up outside Ngor to host them. During the period spent by the trader at the Ngor establishment, a third longevity ritual was sponsored by Zhwa lu Rin po che: the ceremony, led by Dam pa Rin po che, was performed in the presence of the Thar rtse reincarnate and incumbent abbot of Ngor, the 74th Ngor mKhan chen 'Jam dbyangs Kun dga' bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan (1933–1987),¹⁷² bDag chen Rin po che, the latter's consort, and the general assembly of lamas and monks.

The active participation in the *Lam 'bras* teaching sessions and esoteric rituals, as well as the close friendship which tied him to the wealthy and well-connected *tshong dpon* Rin chen rdo rje, appear to have been the main factors at play in determining 'Dzam yag's change of fortune. As recorded in a note dated to the 22nd day of the 9th month of the Water Dragon Year (November 8, 1952), Rin chen

¹⁶⁸ Kha stag 'Dzam yag (1997, 218).

¹⁶⁹ The *dgon pa* were financially supported by a combination of instituted income (coming from the accumulation of non-monetary assets and lucrative activities such as the buying, selling, and lending at interest of both land and seed resources) and ritual sponsorship. For rituals performed in the main prayer hall of the monastery, the sponsors were requested to provide the so-called “common tea” (*mang ja*) – several cups of butter tea accompanied by roasted barley flour (*rtsam pa*) – to be served to the whole gathering (Mills 2003, 62-63). On Ngor's practice of collecting offerings (*'bul sdud*), see Heimbel (2020).

¹⁷⁰ *gya nom pa* (Kha stag 'Dzam yag 1997, 220).

¹⁷¹ The first of the five Sa skya patriarchs (*sa skya gong ma rnam lnga*).

¹⁷² 'Jam dbyangs Kun dga' bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan was recognised as an incarnation of 'Jam dbyangs Kun bzang bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan, the 63rd abbot. His tenure was c. 1951–1954. I am grateful to Jörg Heimbel for this clarification (private conversation, January 2021). See also Heimbel (2017, 544).

rdo rje contributed to the installment of a gilded copper statue of Avalokiteśvara in the new shrine, the construction of which had been sponsored by Thar rtse Rin po che.¹⁷³ 'Dzam yag was among those who offered common tea, rice soup, and individual distribution of money to the assembly led by Dam pa Rin po che, and including the 41st Sa skya Khri 'dzin, Thar rtse Rin po che, and the ex-abbot (*khri zur*) 'Phan khang Rin po che. On that occasion, the trader donated 245 *srang*, quite a fortune considering his financial means at the time.

On the 2nd day of the 11th month of the Water Dragon Year (December 18, 1952), the day before the end of the *Lam 'bras* teachings,¹⁷⁴ 'Dzam yag brought to completion 1,300 circumambulations of the fifteen *mchod rten* of Ngor,¹⁷⁵ dedicating the accomplishment to the merit of all beings. The increasing relevance placed by the trader on circumambulation practices is indicative of a shift in priorities: while in the years preceding 1952, the performance of activities such as prostrations, circumambulations of "supports", and sponsorship of rituals mainly aimed at the achievement of mundane results, from the end of the Water Dragon Year (1952) onwards, 'Dzam yag became more and more concerned with the afterlife and consequently with the accumulation of merit.

From 1953 up to 1959, the trader travelled regularly throughout the provinces of dBus and gTsang, going from the nomadic areas of Nag chu and Byang thang to the trade hubs of northern India and Sikkim. The increase in 'Dzam yag's financial means was concurrent with an intensification of both his devotional practices in bKra shis lhun po and his active participation in empowerment sessions. In the years immediately preceding the Chinese invasion, the focus of 'Dzam yag's spiritual activities shifted from spontaneous pilgrimages to sacred places to what can be considered a programme of systematic donations to different monastic communities. In its last pages, the *nyin deb* ceases to be a journal and turns into a ledger: empowerments and teachings are listed one after the other, together with the amount of money and goods given in exchange for the blessings received, in a constant flow of offerings – a glimpse of what

¹⁷³ Kha stag 'Dzam yag (1997, 222).

¹⁷⁴ The *Lam 'bras* was traditionally given during the monastic winter term. According to that schedule, the annual teaching commenced on the 25th day of the 10th month and was completed about the 18th day of the 1st month of the following year; see Heimbel (2017, 399). It must be noted that the bestowal reported in the *nyin deb* fell outside these dates. I thank Jörg Heimbel for drawing my attention to this detail (private conversation, January 2021).

¹⁷⁵ The author mentions in particular the reliquary of Ngor chen Kun dga' bzang po (1382-1456) and the eight Sugata *stūpa* built by the latter's disciple and successor to the throne of Ngor, Mus chen Sems dpa' chen po dKon mchog rgyal mtshan (1388-1469). On these *stūpas*, see Heimbel (2017, 389 and esp. n. 798).

the wealthy sponsors were willing to bestow in their quest for "accumulation of merit" (*bsod nams kyi tshogs*). Despite being quantifiable, the merit (*bsod nams*; Skr. *punya*) accumulated from the sponsorship of a ritual was, at least theoretically, independent from the extent of the offering made, since the purity of the faith and the sense of sacrifice with which the alms were given are considered the only relevant aspects.¹⁷⁶

While the impact of a substantial donation may have been tangential in spiritual terms, the same could not be said about its social impact: the display of pious generosity was unquestionably expected from the richest strata of society. Constant meaning-making processes were at play to accommodate the mundane business activities with the spiritual detachment encouraged by the Buddhist teachings; donations to monastic communities contributed to redeeming the donor's *karma* by neutralising the sinful and contaminating nature of money dealing.¹⁷⁷ As early as the 1st month of the Iron Rabbit Year (February 1951), on the occasion of the sMon lam ceremony in Lhasa, 'Dzam yag offered scarves, common tea, and individual donations to the regional dormitories (*khang tshan*) gathered in prayer,¹⁷⁸ for a total of 5,550 silver *srang*, thus "giving a meaning to an illusory wealth".¹⁷⁹

The author often describes his business affairs as temporary distractions¹⁸⁰ or "heedless actions",¹⁸¹ the value of which rests in their being a support to the ritual activities of the *samgha*.

The improvement of 'Dzam yag's financial means and his consequent success in business brought about changes in his approach to spirituality. At the time of his departure from Rab shis, 'Dzam yag was still very uncertain about his future; despite realising

¹⁷⁶ Mills (2003, 61).

¹⁷⁷ In his memoir, A 'brug mGon po bkra shis candidly admits that he "felt that in making these offerings [he] was making the right use of [his] wealth" (Andrugtsang 1973, 10).

¹⁷⁸ The author also mentions the presentation of letters requesting refuge (*skyabs iho*) and prayers to be dedicated to someone's merit (*bsngo yig*), thus showing the rather common practice of acting as a proxy for those who could not physically attend certain ceremonies or religious feasts (Kha stag 'Dzam yag 1997, 199).

¹⁷⁹ *sgyu ma'i nor la snying po blangs so* (Kha stag 'Dzam yag 1997, 199).

¹⁸⁰ "Having finished to clear my debts and collect my loans from close friends and regular customers of sKye dgu mdo, I spent some time thinking and focusing on worldly affairs" (*skye mdo'i dga' grogs dang | tshong shag rnam la phar sprad tshur bsdus kyis bya ba rnam zin par byas nas | 'jig rten gyi chos nyid la yid gtad pa dang dran tsam re byas [...]*) (Kha stag 'Dzam yag 1997, 13).

"I rested [in Nag chu] and got myself engrossed in worldly affairs by giving with the one hand and collecting with the other" (*phar sprod dang tshur bsdus kyis 'jig rten gyi bya ba la g.yengs shing ngal gsos*) (Kha stag 'Dzam yag 1997, 82).

¹⁸¹ *bag med kyi bya ba* (Kha stag 'Dzam yag 1997, 211).

quite early that the chances of ever returning to his home region were rather slim,¹⁸² he felt reluctant to commit himself to any particular course of action. sKyo brags bsTan pa'i snying po's injunction was not a providential catalyst of future events, but rather an expression of the general understanding of pilgrimage as a redemptive and purifying activity; by paying homage to the sacred places of Tibet, pilgrims actively sought to cleanse their sins and embodied defilements, perceived as the root of one's own bad *karma*.¹⁸³

Prescriptive narratives, such as pilgrimage literature and *rnam thar*, have often explained and justified pilgrimages – as well as other religious rituals – through a common set of themes, including specific “models” (*dpe*) related to

[...] defilement and purification; illness and healing; influencing the course and processes of physical life, death, and future life (e.g., rebirth and final liberation from it); gaining efficacy in the phenomenal world or powers to influence its operation; the extension of perception beyond the mundane limits of space and time; the coercion and conversion or destruction of that which is perceived as an obstruction or a threat; and maintaining advantageous contacts and identifications with nonhuman forces in both the local and universal cosmos.¹⁸⁴

In the same vein, between 1944 and 1952, 'Dzam yag actively sought, through the bodily engaging activity of pilgrimage, to cleanse and purify what he considered to be the outcome of previous misdeeds. The main concern behind these activities seems to have been his fortune in the present life, a concern presumably triggered by the

¹⁸² “On the 6th day of the 5th month of the Wood Bird Year (June 16, 1945), feeling sad because there was no turning back home for me and deeply missing the kindness and blessings of my root-lama, since I had nothing I could rely on for protection anymore apart from the Three Jewels, after setting my mind on all the holy places of dBuś [that I would visit] one after the other, I took off like a bird.” (*bya lo'i zla 5 tshes nyin bdag la pha yul du 'khor sa med pas yid skyo ba'i ngang | dus rgyun du skyabs dkon mchog gsum las med pas | rje bla ma'i bka' drin dang byin rlabs dran lhang nge ba'i ngang | rim gyis dbus kyi lha rten rnams snying gi dkyil du bzhas nas bya nam 'phang la spyod pa bzhin song ngo*) (Kha stag 'Dzam yag 1997, 24).

¹⁸³ Defilement (*sgrib pa*) and sin (*sdig pa*) are considered to be “negative, obstructive, unlucky, and even threatening (to health, longevity, fertility, prosperity, etc.) aspects of ordinary human social and material existence” (Huber 1999b, 16). Pilgrimage is conceived as an effective way of removing and purifying embodied *sgrib pa* and *sdig pa*, by cleansing the psychophysical person, through either the actions of the pilgrim's body (e.g. prostrations, circumambulations) or the transformative effect of contact with the sacred place (*gnas*) (Huber 1999b, 16-17 and 150).

¹⁸⁴ Huber (1999b, 11).

dramatic events he had gone through. Therefore, the consistent and frequent requests for divinations could be similarly interpreted as a means to gain some insights in how to improve his social and financial situation.

It seems that the relative stability brought by the appointment as *tshong dpon* caused the author's apprehensions to shift from the present to the future; the mundane success and a considerable flow of income waned in favour of a more detached approach to life. His energies focused on obtaining mental clarity and spiritual purity; the money gained through business transactions was valued only in relation to the kind of offerings that it allowed him to make.

Conclusive Remarks

I will conclude my contribution with an analysis of the last five years covered by the *nyin deb*, thus briefly engaging with the issue represented by the intertwining of economy, religion, and politics in 20th-century Tibet. While the economic power wielded by Eastern Tibetan traders in the decades preceding 1959 deeply influenced the socio-political environment of the dGa' ldan pho brang government,¹⁸⁵ it also played a vital role in the life and existence of religious communities. In time of dire needs, spiritual support is much sought after, and it is therefore not surprising that between 1949 and 1959 a great number of esoteric rituals and rites were held with the intent of exorcising obstructions and stimulating the emergence of favourable conditions. An example of the kind of ceremonies performed at that time is provided in a note dated to the 4th day of the 3rd month of the Wood Horse Year (April 7, 1954), when the 10th Panchen Lama bestowed a Kālacakra empowerment at bKra shis lhun po, under the sponsorship of Tre hor gZigs rgyab Rin po che.

'Dzam yag records the various stages of the ritual, spanning over almost two weeks, and attended by "hundreds of thousands of disciples",¹⁸⁶

[o]n the 4th day, the Panchen Lama started the initiatory rites¹⁸⁷ for the Kālacakra. On the 9th day, the preparatory rituals¹⁸⁸ of

¹⁸⁵ Several studies have been dedicated to the topic; see, among others, Goldstein (1989), McGranahan (2002), Harris (2013), Travers (2013, 2018).

¹⁸⁶ *slob bu 'bum phrag las brgyal ba* (Kha stag 'Dzam yag 1997, 232).

¹⁸⁷ Through the initiatory rites (*dbang*; Skt. *abhiṣeka*) the practitioner is *empowered* and as such he is deemed ready to receive the instructions and hear the *tantra*.

¹⁸⁸ Any ritual consists of three parts: the preparatory part (*sta gon*), the main part (*dnagos gzhi*), and the concluding part (*mjug chog*); see Bentor (1996, 96).

the great empowerment [were carried out according to] the dPal mo transmission of Thugs rje chen po ("Great Compassionate One", i.e. Avalokiteśvara). On the 10th day, the main body [of the empowerment was given]. On the 14th day, preparations were made for the Kālacakra empowerment. On the 15th day, the main body [of the practice was performed]. On the 16th the high initiations [were bestowed]. On the 18th there was the reading transmission of the fulfilled supreme higher initiations,¹⁸⁹ *The Hundred Deities of Tuṣita*,¹⁹⁰ *The Aiming at Loving-Kindness*,¹⁹¹ and so on, and circumambulations of the Gaṇacakra offerings [were made] in three stages. As a sign of gratitude, Tre hor gZigs rgyab Rin po che offered the payment of the initiation price twice, once before [the beginning of the ritual] and once after [its conclusion].¹⁹²

The passage continues by listing other items donated by Tre hor Rin po che as part of the thanksgiving for the teachings (*gtang rag*) – sacred objects, jewels, substantial amounts of gold and silver in different forms of currency,¹⁹³ and non-monetary articles.¹⁹⁴ As a gift for the profound empowerments obtained, the trader and his nephew

¹⁸⁹ The four high initiations (*dbang gong ma*) and the four supreme higher initiations (*dbang gong chen yongs su rdzogs pa*) can be understood as comprising two vase initiations (*bum pa'i dbang*; Skt. *kalaśābhīṣeka*), two secret initiations (*gsang ba'i dbang*; Skt. *guhyaābhīṣeka*), two knowledge-wisdom initiations (*shes rab ye shes kyi dbang*; Skt. *prajñājñānābhīṣeka*), and the provisional word initiation followed by the definitive word initiation (*tshig dbang rin po che*); see Bstan 'dzin rgya mtsho and Hopkins (1985, 68).

¹⁹⁰ *The Hundred Deities of Tuṣita* (*dGa' ldan lha brgya ma*) is a prayer dedicated to Tsong kha pa, and expression of the devotion to one's own *guru*.

¹⁹¹ *The Aiming at Loving-Kindness* (*dMigs brtse ma*) is a famous prayer to Tsong kha pa.

¹⁹² *shing pho rta lo zla 3 tshes 4 la paN chen snang ba mtha' yas kyis dpal dus kyi 'khor lo'i bka' dbang rin po che slob bu 'bum phrag las brgal bar gnang ba'i yon bdag tre hor gzigs rgyab rin po ches zhus | tshes 4 nyin dus 'khor slob ma rjes 'dzin | tshes 9 nyin ihugs rje chen mo [*po] lugs kyi dbang chen sta gon | tshes 10 nyin dngos gzhi | tshes 14 la dus 'khor dbang gi sta gon | tshes 15 la dbang chen dngos gzhi | tshes 17 nyin dbang gong ma | tshes 18 nyin dbang gong chen yongs su rdzogs pa dang | dga' ldan lha brgya dang | dmigs brtse ma bcas kyi ljags lung | tshogs kyi 'khor lo rim pa gsum du bskor te | gzigs rgyab rin po che nas 'bul chen thengs gcig sngon du phul zin pa dang | thengs gnyis pa dbang yon bka' drin gtang rag gi 'bul pa* (Kha stag 'Dzam yag 1997, 232-233).

¹⁹³ 106 *tolā* (Indian weight measure equal to 11.34 gr) of gold, 180 *rdo tshad* (Tibetan weight measure equal to 1.81 kg) of silver Chinese *rta rmig* (coin shaped as a horse's hoof), and many Chinese silver coins (*dā yang*) in sealed bags (Kha stag 'Dzam yag 1997, 233).

¹⁹⁴ Among the items listed there are many rolls of brocade made of five types of silk, 500 woolen pouches each containing 5 *rdo tshad* (1.81 kg) in silver *zho*, sweets, brown sugar, fruits, butter, several bags of barley, 200 bags of rice, 50 boxes of fine tea, and 50 bags of tea balls (Kha stag 'Dzam yag 1997, 233).

Blo 'jam offered a pair of high-quality ceremonial scarves (*nyin mo bde legs*) of the length of an arm-span and several silk scarves (*zub she*) having a value of 240 *srang*. To that they added 670 *srang* worth of margarine (*shing mar*) to be used for the golden lamps of bKra shis lhun po's shrines.

Though the accumulation of wealth is not much of an issue in Buddhist societies as far as the laity is concerned – on the contrary, material success is considered a sign of virtue, a result of good *karma* – the *attitude* the individual holds towards it does raise ethical questions since greed or desire would be considered expressions of attachment. The question of how to deal with wealth is addressed already in early Buddhism, and in many passages of the *Āṅguttara Nikāya* the Buddha indicates the support of spiritual teachers and monks to be a proper use of wealth.¹⁹⁵ Such sponsorship of the *saṃgha* by the wealthy laity lay at the heart of the Buddhist communities and was thought to increase the merit of the donors and thus improve their *karma*. Similarly, in Tibetan Buddhism the sponsorship of rituals for improvement of one's own physical and social conditions is common practice, and the *nyin deb* contains several examples of rites paid for by either the author or an acquaintance of his. In the aftermath of the great flood that hit gZhis ka rtse and rGyal rtse in 1954, for instance, Rin chen rdo rje, 'Dzam yag's friend and business partner, sponsored a five-day recitation of the bKa' 'gyur "with the intent of exorcising any obstacles to favourable conditions".¹⁹⁶ The ritual was performed by one hundred and twenty-three monks, each of whom received 6 *srang* a day as individual donation. Inspired by his friend, the author added one *srang* a day per monk, totalling 615 *srang*.¹⁹⁷

In the following months, other empowerments took place at bKra shis lhun po; several of them were led by Chu dbar Rin po che, a reincarnate lama from sNye thang Rwa stod, residing in the Tantric (*gsang sngags*) *bla brang* in gZhis ka rtse. During his stay, the master visited bKra shis lhun po and bestowed the initiation (*rjes dbang*) of rTa Phyag Khyung gsum,¹⁹⁸ and a Tārā empowerment transmitted by the bKa' gdams pa lineage of Lho brag grub chen Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan (1326-1401), marking the end of the session with the donation of a statue of Tārā. 'Dzam yag offered 34 *srang* as a sign of

¹⁹⁵ Essen (2011, 64).

¹⁹⁶ *rkyen bgegs bar chad bzlog phyir* (Kha stag 'Dzam yag 1997, 235).

¹⁹⁷ Kha stag 'Dzam yag (1997, 235).

¹⁹⁸ The three tutelary deities Hayagrīva (rTa mgrin), Vajrapāṇi (Phyag na rdo rje), and Garuḍa (Bya khyung).

appreciation; the trader was so impressed by Chu dbar Rin po che¹⁹⁹ that he openly professed his devotion and his intention to become one of the lama's devotees. At that time, 'Dzam yag commissioned 23,500 *tsa tsa*²⁰⁰ of the Tshe lha rnam gsum²⁰¹ to be dedicated to his parents' merit, making an offering to the craftsman of a bronze vase of very good quality, clothes and shoes, and a few silver coins.²⁰²

Khams pa traders were among the most generous supporters of Central Tibetan monastic communities, often competing with each other in an amicable way.²⁰³ The Wood Horse Year (1954) was a period of great financial expenditure for 'Dzam yag and some of his closest companions: on the 4th day of the 6th month (July 4, 1954), the trader joined the already mentioned Rin chen rdo rje in a common donation for the performance of a *One-Thousand Offering* (*stong mchod*)²⁰⁴ held at Sa skya dgon. While Rin chen offered to the Sa skya *sprul sku* two statues – a gilded copper Avalokiteśvara with a thousand hands and a human-sized Buddha – 'Dzam yag contributed with a little more than a *rdoḡ po*²⁰⁵ of silver, to which he added 8 *nyag*²⁰⁶ of butter.²⁰⁷

The *nyin deb* reveals that donations were not limited to specific religious occasions or institutions but were distributed to various monasteries of different denominations and lineages along 'Dzam yag's travel routes. On the 28th day of the 11th month of the Wood

¹⁹⁹ Apparently, Chu dbar Rin po che recited by heart the entire oral tantric instructions, without ever looking at the scriptures (Kha stag 'Dzam yag 1997, 236).

²⁰⁰ Small relief images traditionally made of clay and usually presented for extensive offerings.

²⁰¹ The three deities of longevity, Amitāyus (Tshe dpag med), White Tārā (sGrol dkar), and [Uṣṇīsa-]Vijayā (rNam rgyal ma).

²⁰² Kha stag 'Dzam yag (1997, 236).

²⁰³ As early as the 30th day of the 8th month of the Earth Mouse Year (October 2, 1948), 'Dzam yag followed the virtuous example of his *dharmā* friend and business companion Rin chen rdo rje: while the latter offered a distribution of 3 *zho* to each monk and lama attending the general assembly at bKra shis lhun po, followed by a *mang ja* and 8 *zho* distribution to each member of the Tre hor monastic college, the author distributed one *srang* to each monk and lama sitting at the general assembly, and one *zho* to each member of the Tre hor monastic college, plus a couple of *srang* to the chant leader for the recitation of particular prayers. He also bought 9 *zho* worth of incense, for a total amount of 532 *srang*, a substantial sum considering his finances at the time (Kha stag 'Dzam yag 1997, 140).

²⁰⁴ The name of the festival, celebrated by the Sa skya pa every year on the 4th day of the 6th lunar month, refers to the lighting of a thousand butter lamps to commemorate the sixteen *arhat* (Powers 1995, 229).

²⁰⁵ Weight measure equal to 1.81 kg.

²⁰⁶ Weight measure equal to 120 gr.

²⁰⁷ Kha stag 'Dzam yag (1997, 236).

Horse Year (January 21, 1955), he offered a *tamka* to each monk and lama sitting at the great assembly of bKra shis lhun po, donating silk scarves, butter and 8 balls of tea for the *mang ja*, and 3 *zho* as individual distribution to the members of the rGya Khang tshang,²⁰⁸ for a total sum of 1,144 silver *srang*. In the following weeks, the trader moved to Kalimpong for business; on the road he stopped by: the bKa' gdams seat of sNar thang dgon; a small 'Brug pa bKa' brgyud monastery at Jo mo kha rag, a sacred mountain in gTsang province; and the seat of the Karma pa, mTshur phu, in sTod lung. There he offered a *tamka* to each monk and lama, and butter and tea for the *mang ja* for a total of 400 silver *srang*, to which he added 40 *srang* for the performance of a Tārā ritual (*sgrol chog*). While crossing the village at the foot of the monastery, he recognised in a *tsa tsa* maker an old friend of his from whom he commissioned 10,000 images of the Three Longevity Deities (Tshe lha nam gsum). He paid homage to other small monastic and tantric communities on his way to Sikkim, offering money and ceremonial scarves for a total amount of 180 *srang*.²⁰⁹

The routine of donations, offerings, and circumambulations continued almost without interruptions up to second half of the 3rd month of the Wood Horse Year (April 1954), until 'Brug pa Chos mgon rtse sprul Rin po che,²¹⁰ who had lived most of his life in a meditation centre that he himself had established at the sacred mountain of Jo mo kha rag, set off on a journey to pay homage to the most important religious sites of gTsang, e.g. bKra shis lhun po, rGyal rtse, sNar thang, etc., before secluding himself in retreat. Interestingly, 'Dzam yag offered the master various kinds of medicines (*smān*)²¹¹ and soil and water that he had gathered from the

²⁰⁸ The area of recruitment (*thob khongs*) of the dormitory was the region wherefrom 'Dzam yag hailed (Kha stag 'Dzam yag 1997, 237).

²⁰⁹ Kha stag 'Dzam yag (1997, 238).

²¹⁰ The 8th 'Brug pa Chos mgon sprul sku, also known as bShad sgrub chos kyi nyin dge. See TBRC P8LS12750.

²¹¹ Herbal medicines were considered items of luxury trade, frequently collected by pilgrims during their visits to sacred places. Pilgrimage sites and monasteries often hosted centres of production and sale of medicinal herbs, used to cure many temporary and chronic illnesses (van Spengen 1998, 41-42). As many other Tibetans, 'Dzam yag made extensive use of *smān* and *smān grub*, the latter being a medicine that had undergone a process through which it was "perfected, consummated, activated and made ready to heal" (Craig 2011, 218). Far more powerful than the average herbal pill, *smān grub* are deemed able to cure any acute and/or chronic illnesses, the causes of which are considered to be karmic rather than the outcome of natural imbalances; on *smān grub* rituals, both in Buddhist and Bon settings, see, among others, Cantwell (2015) and Sehnalova (2017).

holy sites he had visited.²¹² The collection of items from places considered to be “blessed” (*byin gyis brlabs*) is a common practice in Tibetan Buddhism, and it is part of the experience of pilgrimage as a communal activity: the harvesting of the “blessings” (*byin*) of the sites through portable items, such as stones, pinches of soil or dust, water, etc., allows for either a direct consumption of the power of the place or its transportation and further distribution, as in this case.²¹³ The gifts were presumably meant to protect or invigorate the master during his journey and following retreat.

On the occasion of the Wood Horse Year (1954) Sa ga zla ba,²¹⁴ 'Dzam yag and his nephew Blo 'jam offered alms to beggars and gave individual distributions to the monks and lamas seated in the great assembly of bKra shis lhun po, for a total amount of 900 *srang*.²¹⁵ Around the same time, a request sent by the incarnation of Tre hor gdong thog²¹⁶ reached gZhis ka rtse. The *sprul sku*'s monastic complex, hosting a community of one hundred monks, was in urgent need of restoration. The plea for financial support had been entrusted to a few messengers and addressed to “people of good will.” 'Dzam yag answered by providing 10 bundles (*bag cha*) of red dye for the painting of the shrine of the protector deities (*srung ma khang*) and 25 Chinese silver coins to be used as capital endowment and source of income for the monastic community.²¹⁷

I will close this section with a note dated to the 15th of the 8th

In a note dated to the 1st month of the Mouse Year (February 1948), while visiting Lha yag gu ru lha khang, the seat of the *gter ston* Gu ru chos kyi dbang phyug (1212-1270) in Lho brag, 'Dzam yag reports that he was called to assist a local woman who had fallen ill during the night. Not knowing what the cause of her sickness was, since her family swore that she had no shortcomings, 'Dzam yag prayed to the Three Jewels and by dawn her condition seemed to have improved. Suddenly, though, her bodily functions failed; concerned for the woman's life, the trader decided to part with his precious *smam grub* and gave her two of the pills he had obtained from the Karma pa, together with some salt used to dry the corpse of rDo rje 'chang sKal bzang rnam rgyal. By his own admission, at the time of his departure he did not know if the remedies had been of any benefit, but the family of the woman appeared to be happy since they thanked him with beans and lentils for his mule and one *rdo* of meat and a plate full of rice and porridge (Kha stag 'Dzam yag 1997, 129-130).

²¹² Kha stag 'Dzam yag (1997, 239-240).

²¹³ Huber (1999b, 15).

²¹⁴ One of four major Buddhist celebrations, it occurs on the full moon (15th day) of the 4th lunar month of the Tibetan calendar. It celebrates Buddha Śākyamuni's birth, enlightenment and *parinirvāṇa*.

²¹⁵ Kha stag 'Dzam yag (1997, 240).

²¹⁶ Tre hor gdong thog Ngag dbang theg mchog bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan (b. 1933). The *sprul sku* is mentioned in Martin and Bentor (1997, 187) as the author of a chronology of the most important events in Tibetan history.

²¹⁷ Kha stag 'Dzam yag (1997, 241).

month of the Wood Sheep Year (October 1, 1955), concerning the consecration and offering of a gilded copper *mchod rten* having the height of an arrow. The *mchod rten*, commissioned in the Water Dragon Year (1952), required three years to be brought to completion; the meticulous nature of the trader appears evident in his careful listing of both the items gathered in the assemblage of the *mchod rten* and their respective costs. The consecration of the *mchod rten*, for the realisation of which 'Dzam yag paid 6,874 silver *srang* and 5 *zho*, started on the 1st day of the 6th month of the Wood Sheep Year (July 20, 1955); the ritual continued on the 4th day (July 23) with a Gaṇacakra celebration. The *mchod rten* was eventually sent to Lhasa and donated to the Rwa sa 'phrul snang Jo khang.²¹⁸

The way in which the realisation and completion of the *mchod rten* is presented is emblematic of 'Dzam yag's attitude as it emerges through the pages of his journal. The difficulties inherent in a categorisation of the *nyin deb* have been discussed elsewhere;²¹⁹ it will therefore suffice to mention just a few key elements in the present context. The *nyin deb* is a personal narrative in which different literary genres converge – it is concurrently a diary, a ledger, a guidebook, and a travelogue; its contents have passed through a cultural and literary filter to accommodate the mind-frame of 'Dzam yag who embodies simultaneously the author and the intended reader. The journal was in fact a *private* document used by the trader to keep track of his transactions, encounters, travels, and offerings – in that being a remarkable attestation to the economics of merit at the core of Tibetan Buddhism.

The last years covered by the *nyin deb* include a succession of circumambulations of the outer and inner circuit of bKra shis lhun po,²²⁰ and various offerings to the different monastic communities visited in the course of his business trips. As mentioned earlier, at the end of his life the author's concerns are directed towards the next life; the accumulation of fortune is no longer an aim but a tool, and time and money are dedicated to increasing the merit of all beings. The economic pull of the Khams pa traders eventually yields to the eschatological power of spirituality, and religion becomes, in the

²¹⁸ Kha stag 'Dzam yag (1997, 241-243).

²¹⁹ Galli (2019a).

²²⁰ The meticulous nature of 'Dzam yag is evident in his accurate recording of the numbers of circumambulations made within a specific amount of time. For instance, on the 16th day of the 9th month of the Wood Sheep Year (November 1, 1955), he calculated that between the 5th day of the 3rd month of the Wood Sheep Year (April 27, 1955) up to that day, he had completed 196 outer circumambulations and 2,240 inner circumambulations, the merit of which he dedicated to all beings (Kha stag 'Dzam yag 1997, 243).

equation of life, the independent variable around which everything else revolves.

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