

# Favorable Ferocity: The Byang gter Rites that Invoke the Wrathful Deity Khro chu dug sdong

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## Introduction

**I**n tantric Buddhist ritual, practitioners invoke wrathful (*khro bo*) deities to quell internal afflictions and eradicate external enemies. These deities display a ferocious exterior— faces grimacing, hands wielding weapons, and feet trampling victims. They inspire fear in all beholders; yet, like their peaceful counterparts these deities are fully enlightened buddhas and thus possess ultimate compassion toward all sentient beings. In fact, the very wisdom that is a product of the enlightened mind radiates from their bodies causing nearby enemies to faint and die. One of the fiercest deities of the wrathful Buddhist pantheon is Yamāntaka/Yamāri (Tib. gShin rje gshed; “The Ender of Death”).<sup>1</sup> Several forms of Yamāntaka exist in the Tibetan Buddhist ritual program, including a unique form called Khro chu dug sdong (“The Poisonous Bronze Tree”).<sup>2</sup> This form is found in

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<sup>1</sup> Tibetan sources often use the name gShin rje gshed to refer to a variety of deities who are wrathful versions of Mañjuśrī including Yamāntaka, Yamāri, and sometimes Vajrabhairava. For the remainder of this article, I will simply use Yamāntaka as a deity type which reflects the ambiguity in the Tibetan sources.

<sup>2</sup> This phrase is clearly a name of a distinct textual cycle in the Byang gter collection. Here I follow previously published English sources such as Jackson 2015 that have understood this to denote the deity’s name as well. Several Khro chu texts support this reading. For example, the text entitled *Khro chu’i mar me khrag gsod* (vol. 24, pp. 329-32) begins with an homage to Las kyi gshin rje khro chu dug gdong nag po. Furthermore, mTshan nyid sPrul sku ’Jam dpal nor bu’s (1892–1960) descriptions of the deity use “khro chu” as part of a proper name, for example gShin rje khro chu dug gdong and Las kyi gshin rje gshed khro chu dug gdong (pp. 200; 202). The English translation of the name is based on a Sanskrit rendering (*viṣaṃkṣa*) of Byang gter master C.R. Lama (1922–2002) written in the preface to his edition of the *Zab gsang mkha’ ’gro gsang mdzod* (p. 11). This reading fits well with the cited *tantra* in the Khro chu texts called the *Sman sdong rgyud*, perhaps as a medicinal tree. However, the deity’s name appears in other textual collections consistently as Khro chu dug gdong (rather than “sdong”), for example in ’Jam dpal nor bu’s

the Tibetan Buddhist revealed textual tradition of the enigmatic, eleventh-century sorcerer rGya Zhang khrom.<sup>3</sup> This article examines the ritual program of the mighty Khro chu as it appears in the recent Byang gter anthology, *Byang gter chos skor phyogs bsgrigs*.<sup>4</sup> This compilation contains a variety of texts dedicated to the three main aims of Khro chu—protecting (*bsrung*), repelling (*bzlog*), and killing (*bsad*). These aims are accomplished by a combination of visualization sequences and manipulation of tangible, material ritual objects. Characteristic of Buddhist texts that invoke wrathful deities, these texts employ the horrific and macabre to signal and activate the power of this deity, and hence his practitioners, to conquer any obstructions that hinder Buddhist teachings. The texts that invoke Khro chu's sequential three aims (protecting, repelling, and killing) exhibit an escalation of brutality and directed action toward enemies. Thus, this group of texts unveils the distinctions in the Buddhist ritual repertoire between protection and destruction; that is, between defensive and offensive aims.

### 1. *Khro chu dug sdong*: a subcategory of Yamāntaka-type deities

Yamāntaka-type deities (including Yamāri, Vajrabhairava, etc.) are wrathful versions of the peaceful Buddhist deity Mañjuśrī, the bodhisattva of wisdom. Practitioners invoke these deities to eliminate internal afflictions such as those arising from the three poisons (greed, hatred, delusion). For example, one Khro chu text in this collection instructs practitioners to visualize a peacock, snake, and pig (representations of the three poisons) on top of a lotus and sun at the center of one's heart. Then, the text directs the practitioner to visualize a white *hūṃ* in the middle. From this important seed syllable, light rays

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forementioned collection of rites propitiating this deity and the texts in the *Rin chen gter mdzod chen po'i rgyab chos*. Thus, another possible translation of this name would be "Visage of Molten Poison." A third possibility is reading "sdong" as a verb, meaning to join together. Indeed, Khro chu is described as the accumulation of three entities and in at least one text is called Gnam lcags khro chu dug sdong (*gShin rje'i bsrung ba'i man ngag gab yig*, vol. 24, p. 232). These three substances (*gnam lcags*, *khro chu*, and *dug*) are elsewhere described as the materials of each *mchod rten* that is atop each of his three heads (*Las kyi gshin rje khro chu dug sdong gi rtsa ba'i sgrub thabs 'grel pa lag len gsal sgron*, vol. 24, p. 92). Thus, this practice/deity might be better understood as the joining of the three: meteoric metal, bronze, and poison. Further research must be conducted to clarify these differences and related meanings. For the sake of consistency and reflection of the Byang gter compilation, I will use the "sdong" spelling throughout this article.

<sup>3</sup> See Esler 2022 for an introduction to this figure and his ritual program.

<sup>4</sup> A 63-volume collection of the revealed texts and their commentaries compiled under the auspices of the current Rig 'dzin chen mo and completed in 2015. For an introduction to this expansive volume, see Arguillère 2022.

arise and scorch the three poisons.<sup>5</sup> Thus, one main aim of fierce deity practice is to tame one's own mind, further ripening it toward the ultimate Buddhist soteriological goal of enlightenment. Yet, Yamāntaka-type deities like Khro chu are also called upon to destroy external, rival enemies. These enemies are manifold; many are entities of the unseen realm. In this collection, those enemies include earth spirits (*sa bdag*), king spirits (*rgyal po*), and several other demonic entities (*'dre*). Furthermore, these rites are often aimed at human enemies, including non-Buddhists (*mu stegs pa*) and rival sorcerers (*byad ma*) from both the Buddhist and Bon po varieties.<sup>6</sup> The ability to overcome both these internal and external hindrances directly arises from the ferocity of the meditational deity (*yi dam*).

This logic of the tradition is homeopathic in nature—"like" conquers "like." In order to vanquish enemies, one must become equally terrifying and savage. Yamāntaka, as his name implies, appropriates the image of his ghastly foe to slay the personification of death in the Buddhist world—King Yama. Of course, this points to a more profound meaning of overcoming death in the sense of escaping the realm of *saṃsāra*. The prominent tantric Buddhist myth of the taming of Maheśvara/Rudra exemplifies the concept of appropriating fierce traits to subjugate enemies. Briefly recounted here in the most general form: a pre-demonic Rudra becomes angered by misunderstanding the Buddhist teachings. In response, he lives a life of indulgence, falls to hell, and eventually is born on earth where he must be subjugated by a collective effort of buddhas. He is finally conquered by the pinnacle of wrathful power exuded by a Heruka buddha ("a blood-drinker"; *khrag 'thung*).<sup>7</sup> Thus, the rise of the wrathful deity, and hence the *raison d'être* of the tantric ritual program, stems from the necessity to overpower an awful demon, Rudra. Rudra is the personification of ignorance in regard to the Buddhist teachings and, by extrapolation, any force or entity forming a blockade to the Dharma. In the case of Khro chu dug sdong, I suggest his name signifies that he is a poison, a toxin meant to obliterate opponents and

<sup>5</sup> *sMan sdong gi zin bris | Khro chu dug sdong gi bdud bzhi gshed dbab shog dril*, vol. 24, pp. 208–9: *dang po stong pa'i ngang las | rang gi snying gar padma dang nyi ma'i steng du | rma bya tshon gang pa gcig | sprul tshon gang gcig | phan tshon gang pa gcig dang gsum bsam | dbus su hūṃ dkar po gcig bsam | hūṃ de las 'od zer byung bas | dug gsum po de bsreg par bsam*.

<sup>6</sup> The eclectic mix of enemies in this compilation supports Aleksandra Wentka's claim that tantric Buddhist texts aimed at enemies include a multitude of "others" not exclusive to non-Buddhists, i.e., Śaiva tantrists (Wentka 2022).

<sup>7</sup> For a more in-depth discussion of various textual traditions that contain this myth, its content, themes, and various permutations see Davidson 1991, Dalton 2011, and Bailey 2022. The retelling here is based on Jacob Dalton's translation of the tale from the *Compendium of Intentions Sutra* (Dalton 2011: 159–206 [see esp. 159–164]).

the inner poisons of the mind; in other words, his poison cures poison. Indeed, allusions to the Rudra myth itself appear in the Khro chu rites, reinforcing the importance of this basic tantric mythology and foe typology. For example, in this collection, a Khro chu rite to suppress demonic enemies (*dgra sri*) is further described in the text as a weapon which liberates vow-breaking *rudras*.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, the ritual program of Yamāntaka-type deities (including Khro chu) exemplifies the seemingly oxymoronic *compassionate violence*. Here, the ferocious is favorable as it aligns with the ultimate goal of Buddhism. In this way, the wrathful that conquers demonic foes is used as a religious mechanism of righteousness. And thus, as it is written in the texts themselves, these acts must only be performed with the proper intent to protect and uphold the Dharma, that is, with complete and utter compassion aimed at the liberation of all sentient beings from the cycle of *saṃsāra*. Several rites in the Khro chu collection reflect this necessity of correct intention and orientation to the world with the phrasing *snying rje dang mi dmigs pa gal che*,<sup>9</sup> which could be translated as “compassion without reference to the object is essential.” Non-reference to the object in this sense is to be devoid of clinging to conventional discursive thinking, desires, or aversions toward an object, such as a victim of the rite. The tradition is acutely aware that these conditions may not be met, and that it is possible to perform these rituals without a pure compassionate intent. This is especially the case in the age of the degeneration of the Dharma, a time described in Yamāntaka-deity texts as rampant with evil sorcerers. As such, elements of apocalyptic narratives are prominent in the Khro chu texts; they create a sense of urgency in protecting the Buddhist teachings lest they disappear from the world. For example, the same text mentioned above which liberates vow-breakers, also describes the rite as a “life pillar which protects the Buddhist teachings in the end-age.”<sup>10</sup>

Since these texts contain such fierce, formidable power, Yamāntaka-invoking rituals are a double-edged sword. Of course, they can overcome the pitfalls of *saṃsāric* existence, but they can just as likely exact destruction upon the world. Considering these rituals could be used to harm others or denigrate the Dharma (by those with

<sup>8</sup> *Jam dpal gshin rje gshed khro chu dug sdong gi las mtha' dgra sri mnan pa'i gdams ngag*, vol. 24, p. 177: *dam nyams ru tra bsgral ba'i mtshon char shog*. As Bailey points out, it is not uncommon to see *rudra* in this context as a “species or epithet that seems to indicate a demonic moral character...corresponding to the classic type of encosmic daemons in Buddhism” (Bailey 2022, p. 102).

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, *bSrung zlog bsad gsum gyi zhal gdams*, vol. 24, p. 250.

<sup>10</sup> *Jam dpal gshin rje gshed khro chu dug sdong gi las mtha' dgra sri mnan pa'i gdams ngag*, vol. 24, p. 177: *dus kyi mtha' mar sangs rgyas bstan pa bsrung ba'i srog shing*.

the incorrect intent and orientation as described above), the tradition warns that the texts describing the details of practice should not be disseminated. In fact, out of the approximately 100 texts in the Khro chu sections of the Byang gter collection, at least 13 of them contain explicit warnings not to disseminate this material. Most of these 13 contain a more generalized warning not to spread this teaching, yet others relay more direct consequences. For example, the text entitled “The Secret Manual of Pith Instructions for Yama’s Protection” warns that if one disseminates this text, one’s life force will meet an untimely end.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, a text that gives instructions on conducting a fire ritual (Skt. *homa*) notes that if these sealed words are spread to those who are not worthy recipients, obstacles will arise.<sup>12</sup> Generally, as an esoteric modality, the tradition controls tantric knowledge by requiring a special initiation or empowerment (*dbang*) into a particular deity’s ritual program. Although in practice, initiations are often given in public on wide scale (and even online, especially in a post-Covid world), in theory, access to these teachings are purportedly highly guarded. Regardless of wider access afforded by modern technologies and the impetus toward digital preservation, there remains a strong emphasis on secrecy, especially in the context of the wrathful deities. The textual traditions here reflect those concerns. Suffice to say, then, that Khro chu’s ritual program as found in the Byang gter collection follows the common tropes of Yamāntaka-type deity ritual program. He serves as an archetypal Heruka, a formidable foe to the enemies of the Dharma in all their forms.

## 2. Khro chu dug sdong as a distinct deity in the Byang gter and beyond

In the Byang gter compilation, the Khro chu dug sdong cycle appears in the section dedicated to Yamāntaka Master of Life (gShin rje tshe bdag); thus, we can surmise that the tradition considers Khro chu as a subcategory of this particular Yamāntaka deity. The compilation contains a total of ten volumes dedicated to Yamāntaka Master of Life (volume 18–27), two of which are dedicated to Khro chu (volumes 23 and 24);<sup>13</sup> however, a few texts affiliated with Khro chu can be found

<sup>11</sup> gShin rje’i bsrung ba’i man ngag gab yig, vol. 24, p. 234: *spel na tshe srog dus mtha’ bsdus*.

<sup>12</sup> Khro chu’i ‘phrin las kun ’dus sbyin sreg cho ga, vol. 23, p. 57: *gnod (=snod) med la spel na bar chad ’byung zer*.

<sup>13</sup> Some texts in these volumes invoke other deity types from Zhang khrom’s treasures, including the Blazing Razor (Me’i spu gri) Yamāntaka and Vajroṣṇīṣa (rDo rje gtsug tor). These deities boast a variant iconography compared to the main descriptions of Khro chu. It is unclear why these texts are included in these volumes, but the content and intent of the rites are similar to Khro chu’s ritual

outside these two volumes in volume 26 and 27. These sections of the compilation (which include Khro chu) fall into the category of what Stéphane Arguillère has described as the Byang gter in the “broadest sense,” meaning that they are not part of the core of treasures as revealed by main Byang gter treasure revealer Rig ’dzin rGod ldem (1337–1409) but are part of the larger system as collated under the collective auspices of the Byang gter masters over time.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, tradition says that the Khro chu texts are the treasure discoveries of rGya Zhang khrom (eleventh century). Furthermore, many of the texts in this volume (in all their forms, including various manuals and instructions, summarizing, narrating, or commenting upon the core treasures) are attributed to Byang gter lineage holders with diverse affiliations. In fact, the colophons of these materials reflect the transmission activities of this cycle within both the bKa’ brgyud and dGe lugs pa sects. For example, the bKa’ brgyud tradition is cited in an inventory of the treasures (*kha byang*).<sup>15</sup> In some cases, bKa’ brgyud patriarchs such as *gter ston* Rig ’dzin Chos kyi grags pa (1595–1659), the first Chung tshang throne holder and an important figure in the various Yamāntaka lineages of the ’Bri gung bKa’ brgyud, are mentioned.<sup>16</sup> Chos kyi grags pa is specifically cited in the text expounding Khro chu’s powerful razor practice (*spu gri ngar ma*), a practice scroll that describes the ritual preparations of Khro chu for the approach, accomplishment, and activities (*bsnyen sgrub las*), and a practice manual that liberates all poisons (*gdug pa kun sgröl*).<sup>17</sup> Notably, the Fifth Dalai Lama (1617–1682) also received the Khro chu teachings,<sup>18</sup> and he is thus cited as an important figure in this collection. Indeed, the Khro chu and other Yamāntaka cycles of the Byang gter may prove to be an important link elucidating the sharing of ritual knowledge between the rNying ma, ’Bri gung, and dGe lugs pa despite the intense political struggles between the dGge lugs pa and the gTsang pas (who were allied with ’Bri gung Chos kyi grags pa via

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program. See Arguillère’s article in this publication for an overview of these ten volumes.

<sup>14</sup> Arguillère 2022, pp. 9–10.

<sup>15</sup> *gShin rje khro chu dug sdong nag po’i kha byang gdug pa kun sgröl gyi don gsal bar byed pa las rab ’byams rgya mtsho*, vol. 24, pp. 501–29.

<sup>16</sup> See Arguillère’s article in this publication for more information on the appearance of ’Bri gung Chos kyi grags pa in the various Yamāntaka volumes in the collection.

<sup>17</sup> *’Jam dpal gshin rje khro chu dug sdong nag po’i las mtha’ spu gri ngar ma*, vol. 23, pp. 113–83; *gShin rje khro chu dug sdong nag po’i bsnyen sgrub las gsum gyi bca’ gzhi lag len gyi shog dril*, vol. 24, pp. 61–87; *’Jam dpal gshin rje gshed khro chu dug sdong nag po’i las byang gdug pa kun sgröl*, vol. 24, pp. 453–99. The middle text also appears in the *Rin chen gter mdzod chen mo*, vol. 18, pp. 707–33.

<sup>18</sup> The Khro chu received teachings appear in the third volume of his *gSung ’bum* (pp. 44–53).

marriage) during the seventeenth century.<sup>19</sup>

That is not to say that the rNying ma Byang gter masters are absent from the tradition's attribution in the collection. It is clear in the colophons that rNying ma Byang gter masters were also active in creating content for this cycle as it is presented here. For example, a text that describes the method of offering *gtor ma* to Khro chu as a daily practice is said to be a decree of Blo bzang padma 'phrin las (1641–1717), the emanation of Rig 'dzin Ngag gi dbang bo (1580–1639), and written by Byang gter patriarch Zur gyi jo sras rig pa in accordance with the sayings of Rig 'dzin mnga' ris chen.<sup>20</sup> More research must be conducted to determine exactly how these texts as a given cycle have circulated and been presented in the various collections across sectarian boundaries. Both Blo bzang padma 'phrin las and Chos kyi grags pa had close ties to the Fifth Dalai Lama. Prior to this, the 'Bri gung pa had a special relationship with the Byang gter tradition via the relationship of Rin chen phun tshogs (1509–1557) and Legs ldan bdud 'joms rdo rje (1512?–1625?).<sup>21</sup> So, it is not surprising that this core of treasures was practiced by each, crossing sectarian boundaries.

The lineage supplication found in this compilation gives the following sequence leading to Rin chen phun tshogs: Khro chu; Śākyamuni Buddha; dGe slong 'char ka (a chief disciple of the Buddha); 'Jam dpal gshin rje (= 'Jam dpal bshes gnyen; Mañjuśrīmitra);<sup>22</sup> Padmasambhava; Khrag 'thung nag po; Nor bu 'dzin (Vasudhara); gNubs chen Sangs rgyas ye shes; rGya Zhang khrom; Don yod rdo rje; Rol pa'i rdo rje; sNgags 'chang Karma siddhi; *dKa' bzhi'i mtshan ldan*; Nyi ma bcu drug pa; Kun dga' rgyal mtshan; Byang chub dpal mo (15<sup>th</sup> century); Tshul khrims rgya mtsho (15<sup>th</sup> century); 'Bri gung gNam lcags me 'bar (aka Rin chen phun tshogs). After Rin chen phun tshogs, the next name in the lineage is bKra shis rgya mtsho, then Kun dga' tshe mchog, followed by *rJe btsun* Ngag dbang ye shes grub pa (16<sup>th</sup> century) whose student was Padma 'phrin

<sup>19</sup> See FitzHerbert 2018, pp. 65–66, Sobisch 2020, pp. 16–20, and Batsang's article in this publication.

<sup>20</sup> This attribution is found in *'Jam dpal khro chu'i nyams bzhes rgyun khyer*, vol. 23, pp. 385–89. Perhaps Zur gyi jo sras rig pa is Zur chen Chos dbyings rang grol (1604–1657) and Rig 'dzin mnga' ris chen is Legs ldan bdud 'joms rdo rje (1512?–1625?); however, further research must be conducted to confirm this speculation. Indeed, given the context as a decree from Blo bzang padma 'phrin las, the Zur mentioned here may be a later patriarch. It is also plausible that Rig 'dzin mnga' ris chen is Legs ldan bdud 'joms rdo rje's brother Padma dbang rgyal (1487–1542).

<sup>21</sup> See Valentine 2013 for a robust study on the incarnations of the Lords of the Northern Treasure, including these prominent figures.

<sup>22</sup> In the Fifth Dalai Lama's *gSung 'bum*, this name reads 'Jam dpal bshes gnyen (Vol. 23, p. 736, MW2CZ5990). 'Jam dpal gshin rje as it is written in the Byang gter compilation is most likely an error.

las' teacher, Zur chen Chos dbyings rang grol (1604–1657).<sup>23</sup> Without further research it is still unclear exactly who received what teachings from whom in regard to the more prominent figures of the Byang gter, but based on this lineage supplication it very well may be the case that the Khro chu teachings came down from 'Bri gung Rin chen phun tshogs (at least in some capacity).<sup>24</sup>

Nonetheless, based on these lineage inclusions and various citations, it is clear that this deity's cycle is important to an array of great Buddhist masters from the past, but it is also worth mentioning that Khro chu is present in the Bon treasures as well.<sup>25</sup> It has been noted by several scholars that there has been mutual borrowing and influence between Buddhist practices and Bon practices, particularly in the sense of the g.Yung drung Bon religious system. However, that is not to say with certainty that these two traditions of Khro chu parallel one another. In studying a similar phenomenon in the context of Vajrakīla texts, Cathy Cantwell and Robert Mayer found differentiations between the two cycles, Buddhist and Bon.<sup>26</sup> More research is required to determine if there are similarities amongst the Khro chu Buddhist texts and the Bon treasure repositories.

In his study of 'Bri gung paintings, David Jackson discusses the interesting iconographic elements of the Khro chu form of Yamāntaka, highlighting that his retinue deities are zoomorphic, a trait he claims is indicative of Bon po deity iconography.<sup>27</sup> Animal-headed entities are

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<sup>23</sup> Vol. 26, pp. 413–18. Note, this lineage list mostly mirrors David Jackson's list (citing Olaf Czaja) in regard to the Khro chu painting he discusses (p. 160). However, after Rin chen phun tshogs, this lineage list reads, *Bla ma Rin chen dpal ba*, *mKhas grub* Sangs rgyas rin chen, and Chos kyi grags pa.

<sup>24</sup> The compilation is multilayered. There is not a clear core, and it is a product of various creative hands. For example, one text identifies Chos kyi grags pa as the creator of practice manuals, including a set of illustrations (vol. 23, p. 14-15). Thus, as the teachings have flowed from master to disciple, at times with the creation of new materials along the way, the textual tradition becomes a veritable web of texts simply pointing to a core cycle lineage. Furthermore, it is equally unclear whether or not the larger cycle of Byang gter Yamāntaka teachings (as Tshe bdag nag po) is transmitted as a complete unit. Esler mentions three distinct lineages of transmission related to this cycle as enumerated in an empowerment transmission (2022, p. 197-99), which deviate from the Khro chu lineage here. But importantly, as Esler notes, these lineages seem to coalesce toward Legs ldan rdo rje as the prominent Byang gter transmitter with the main 'Bri gung connection through Rin chen phun tshogs.

<sup>25</sup> Khro chu appears in *gTer ston* bDe chen gling pa's (1833–1893) treasures as described and catalogued by Jean-Luc Achard (pp. 3-17). Further investigation is required to compare these two cycles in content and transmission.

<sup>26</sup> Cantwell and Mayer 2013.

<sup>27</sup> Jackson 2015, p. 159. I take Jackson's use of Bon po in this context as generally pre-Buddhist and not later institutionalized forms of Bon as a distinct tradition. Indeed,



present in illustrations appended to the Khro chu cycle in the *Rin chen gter mdzod chen po'i rgyab chos*, which mirrors most of the content presented here in the Byang gter volume. For example, the illustration of a killing circle that enrages the three poisons (*gdug gsum 'khros pa'i gsad 'khor*) displays an entity with three animal heads and six arms, similar to the general iconography of Khro chu himself that is described below (three heads, six arms).<sup>28</sup> The traits of these Khro chu entities may be inspired by archaic deities that represent a general pre-Buddhist pantheon.

Lastly, to further emphasize the importance of Yamāntaka practices and their histories, it would be remiss not to mention current practices that stem from these cycles. Yamāntaka practices in general are still important to a variety of contemporary communities.<sup>29</sup> They are considered to provide protection for the community, particularly in clearing out negative forces at the beginning of the new year. The rituals invoking the specific Khro chu form of Yamāntaka are still practiced at the 'Brug pa bKa' brgyud Khams pa sgar Monastery in Himachal Pradesh, India. These rituals were recorded during the 1990s by David Lewiston.<sup>30</sup>

The Khro chu transmission is a power-invoking tradition that spans a multitude of textual forms and it is clearly shared throughout various Tibetan Buddhist traditions. It is not surprising the Khro chu cycle comprises a significant portion of the Yamāntaka texts within the Byang gter collection. He serves as an important means to conquer afflictions and enemies even in modern ritual programs. The remaining sections of this article will be dedicated to a more specific introduction to Khro chu's history and practice as they appear in the texts collected in the Byang gter compilation.

### *3. The traditional story of Khro chu's rise and his subsequent textual tradition as presented in the Byang gter*

Parallel to the aforementioned tales of the subjugation of Rudra, the rise of Khro chu begins with the need to overpower the enemies of the Buddhist Dharma.<sup>31</sup> This particular narrative harkens back to the time

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given the purported Nepali provenance of these texts, these interesting traits might stem from outside the immediate Tibetan cultural sphere altogether.

<sup>28</sup> *Rin chen gter mdzod chen po'i rgyab chos*, vol. 19, pp. 473-75.

<sup>29</sup> See Sihlé 2010, Low 2013, and Gentry 2017.

<sup>30</sup> Lewiston 1998. Based on social media presence, this group practiced the Khro chu sgrub chen at the beginning of the New Year in 2023.

<sup>31</sup> The summary of the story here is based on *Rigs gsum 'dus pa 'jam dpal khro chu dug sdong nag po'i bsnen pa'i ye ge rin chen ke ta ka* in the Byang gter collection (vol. 23, p. 1-44) and 'Jam dpal nor bu's *bCom ldan 'das 'jam dpal las kyi gshin rje khro chu dug*

of Śākyamuni Buddha and his encounters with the six non-Buddhists (*mu stegs pa*). In this version of the tale, all of the non-Buddhist teachings are gathered together, and due to that, all the teachings of the Buddha, his temples and so forth are destroyed. In response, Mañjuśrī is thrown into despair and becomes enraged. He emanates as Yamarāja, Las kyi gshin rje (i.e., Khro chu dug sdong). In a ferocious display of power, all the non-Buddhists faint and die. It is said that their textbooks burst into flames, and not a single one of their teachings survive. In the end, of course, the teachings of the Buddha flourish.

In the context of this tale and the general history of the deity, the texts describe specificities of Khro chu that distinguish him from other types of Yamāntaka. Most prominently, he is described as a trinity of sorts, the aggregation of 'Chi bdag, Srog bdag, and Tshe bdag. These three Tibetan terms are all generally alternative names for Yamarāja, the Lord of Life/Death. 'Chi bdag literally means "lord of death," *srog bdag* "lord of the lifeforce" and *tshe bdag* "lord of life." In Yamāntaka text cycles, these names specifically designate types of emanations visualized during practice. As described in these Khro chu texts, 'Chi bdag is the body emanation (*sku sprul*), Srog bdag is the mind emanation (*thugs sprul*), and Tshe bdag is the speech emanation (*gsung sprul*).<sup>32</sup> Some texts in this collection elaborate on his tripartite nature and differentiate between an outer, inner, and secret characteristic (*mtshan*).<sup>33</sup> The outer is as just described, the aggregation of 'Chi bdag, Srog bdag, and Tshe bdag. The inner is the aggregation of 'Jam dbyangs (Mañjughoṣa), rTa mgrin (Hayagrīva), and Phyag rdor (Vajrapāṇi). In this sense, as the title of the first text in the Khro chu section implies, he is the amalgam of the Buddhas of the three families. Interestingly, this also parallels the coming together of the three buddha types in the Rudra subjugation myth—the common *buddha*, *padma*, and *vajra* distinction. In regard to the secret, the Byang gter compilation texts and 'Jam dpal nor bu describe him as the *dharmakāya*, *sambhogakāya*, and the *nirmāṇakāya*.<sup>34</sup> However, 'Jam dpal nor bu's text also describes Khro chu specifically as the *nirmāṇakāya* aspect. It is unclear whether Khro chu is simply this first trinity or ought to be

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*gdong gi lo rgyus zin bris mdor bsdus rab tu gsal ba* (vol. 1, pp. 199-215) in his Khro chu cycle.

<sup>32</sup> There are variations in these distinctions across different cycles in the Byang gter compilation. For example, sometimes Tshe bdag is described as the mind emanation and Srog bdag as the speech emanation.

<sup>33</sup> *Rigs gsum 'dus pa 'jam dpal khro chu dug sdong nag po'i bsnyen pa'i ye ge rin chen ke ta ka*, vol. 23, p. 6.

<sup>34</sup> *Bcom ldan 'das 'jam dpal las kyi gshin rje khro chu dug gdong gi lo rgyus zin bris mdor bsdus rab tu gsal ba*, vol. 1, p. 202.

understood as all three of these trinities. Indeed, most texts that describe him simply list that he is the aggregation of the three emanations of *yamas*, and these latter distinctions are common to buddhas more generally. Furthermore, the first text of the compilation cites a *tantra* that relates these three characteristics to the three *samādhis* (*ting nge 'dzin rnam pa gsum*). This relegates the accomplishment of Khro chu to the first *samādhi*, simply the outer. Whereas the second is the combination of Mañjuḥṣa, Hayagrīva, and Vajrapāṇi, described as the accomplishment which is the protector of the three families (*rigs gsum mgon po*). The third is the three bodies of the buddha, as the accomplishment of the ground, path, and fruit (*gzhi lam 'bras*). This text also delineates Khro chu as the front generation (*mdun bskyed*), whereas 'Jam dpal tshe bdag nag po (Black Mañjuśrī Master of Life) is described as the self-generation (*bdag bskyed*).<sup>35</sup> However, these differentiations are not clear in other texts in the collection. More research must be conducted in order to further unravel these peculiar distinctions.

Nonetheless, existing as the amalgam of these three ('Chi bdag, Srog bdag, and Tshe bdag) is the main distinguishing feature of this meditational deity across most of the Byang gter Khro chu texts. The texts describe this grouping as extremely powerful; the targets in these rites are said to be crushed to dust in a single moment. The destruction is swift, and there is no antidote. Furthermore, Khro chu's ritual program is described as a fearsome practice, for if a practitioner is not careful, he surely can bring about his own demise (*rang gshed rang la dbab pa*). Because these rites are so treacherous for the practitioner himself, the texts warn that they should not be carried out in one's own home; more suitable places include the top of mountains or any location that is terrifying.<sup>36</sup>

In addition to his mythology and the distinct features of Khro chu himself, the texts present a traditional history of the transmission, most notable as outlined in the first text in volume 24.<sup>37</sup> This text cites the

<sup>35</sup> *Rigs gsum 'dus pa 'jam dpal khro chu dug sdong nag po'i bsnyen pa'i ye ge rin chen ke ta ka*, vol. 23, pp. 18-19.

<sup>36</sup> *Khro chu dug sdong gi lo rgyus*, vol. 24, pp. 1-6.

<sup>37</sup> *Khro chu dug sdong gi lo rgyus*, vol. 24, pp. 1-6. Interestingly, another compilation of Khro chu texts, the 'Jam dpal khro chu dug gdong nag po'i sgrub skor of the *Rin chen gter mdzod chen po'i rgyab chos*, that is almost identical to the texts compiled here in the Byang gter tradition, places this history in the first volume of the Khro chu materials (Vol. 18). The first text that appears in Vol. 23 of the Byang gter collection contains much of the same information; however, it is not specifically identified as a history (*lo rgyus*). Another significant difference between these two compilations is the inclusion in the *Rin chen gter mdzod chen po'i rgyab chos* of a variety of illustrations of the deity and various magical devices that are absent in the Byang gter compilation. Rather, the Byang gter compilation appends various other rites

*Zla gsang nag po rgyud* (“Mysterious Black Companion Tantra”), a *tantra* in the Mañjuśrī body section in the Mahāyoga portion of the *rNying ma rgyud 'bum*.<sup>38</sup> The history as relayed here focuses on the exploits of the three main figures of the lineage supplication described above: Vasudhara, gNubs chen Sangs rgyas ye shes,<sup>39</sup> and the treasure-revealer rGya Zhang khrom. For example, the text claims that the deity’s main *sādhana* was composed by Vasudhara. Vasudhara is said to have placed his compositions in an iron vessel and hid them as a *gter ma*. The text specifies a root commentary of the *gShin rje nag po* and also claims it was composed by Vasudhara and subsequently entrusted to gNubs chen. These teachings were then hidden by gNubs chen Sangs rgyas ye she in Bal yul Bum thang ke ru, to be revealed by his later incarnation rGya Zhang khrom. As in the previous sections of mythologies, this history emphasizes the destructive possibilities of these teachings, particularly in outlining the movements of Zhang khrom as he travels between Nepal and the western part of gTsang “liberating” (*bsgral*)<sup>40</sup> many Bon pos along the way.

4. *Khro chu’s ritual program in the Byang gter: elements of horror and brutality in the aims of protecting, repelling, and killing*

The ritual program of Khro chu is accomplished via a combination of visualization practices and physical ritual actions. The three central aims in the Khro chu ritual program are protecting, repelling, and killing. The latter two, I argue here, display an escalation of brutality within their descriptions and a more overt direction toward a specified target. The texts of the Khro chu cycle (like Buddhist deity yoga texts in general) explicate detailed visualization sequences of the deity, his consort, and his retinue. Thus, the proper description of the deity is quite important to the practice and often appears at the beginning of

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that invoke different deities such as Vajroṣṇīṣa in the section in which the images appear in the *Rin chen gter mdzod chen po’i rgyab chos*.

<sup>38</sup> See Trautz 2019 for a discussion on the history of the bKa’ bryad deities in the treasures of mNga’ bdag Myang ral Nyi ma ’od zer (1124–1192) and how this distinction became a common doxographical schema for rNying ma *tantras*. Also see Arguillère’s article in this publication which discusses the development of this *tantra* prior to this designation within the bKa’ bryad schema. Note that *zla gsang* in this *tantra* appears in Sanskrit as *guhyaçandra*. Elsewhere (Brown 2024), I have followed the Sanskrit as meaning *Moon’s Mystery*, but this of course could be a later addition. Indeed, the Sanskrit *çandra* as moon connotes the moon as a companion to the sun. Further research focused on the rNying ma Yamāntaka *tantras* in the *rNying ma rgyud 'bum* may reveal a better understanding of the title’s meaning.

<sup>39</sup> For more information about the figure of gNubs chen, see Esler 2014 and Dalton 2014.

<sup>40</sup> A euphemism for killing.

the texts in this compilation. The texts describe Khro chu dug sdong as a deity with three heads and six hands. In his right hands he wields battle axes, and in his left hands he holds the hearts of his enemies. His lower body is a three-sided iron (or bronze in some texts) dagger. Images of Khro chu show this dagger piercing the bodies of his victims.<sup>41</sup> As he rises up in this form, his body produces a formidable blazing fire of pristine wisdom which causes all the non-Buddhists (*mu stegs pa*) to faint and die.<sup>42</sup>



Fig. 1 — Khro chu dug sdong. Image courtesy of the Library of Congress (LCCN-81-901844)

<sup>41</sup> The image here is a magical device (*'khor lo*) depicted in the illustrations appended to the *Rin chen gter mdzod chen po'i rgyab chos*, vol. 19, pp. 523-26. Also see Jackson 2015, p. 160.

<sup>42</sup> *Rigs gsum 'dus pa 'jam dpal khro chu dug sdong nag po'i bsnyen pa'i ye ge rin chen ke ta ka*, in *Byang gter chos skor phyogs bsgribs*, vol. 23, p. 5.

Khro chu is described by the texts to have a consort rivaling his own ferocity. One text in this collection, appearing in volume 24, introduces her *sādhana* and is dedicated solely to her description.<sup>43</sup> The text is attributed to gNubs Sangs rgyas ye shes and is said to have been discovered by rGya Zhang khrom. The text describes her as his secret consort, named Dun tig nag mo. Unlike her three-faced, six-handed partner, she has only one face and four hands. Her body is hued dark blue, and she boasts four protruding fangs jutting from her gaping mouth. She has three eyes that are spread wide apart. Her dark brown mane blazes upward to the sky, and in accordance with her wrathful countenance, each of her hands brandish frightening accoutrements. In her upper right hand, she wields a sword and in her lower right hand, an iron hook. In her upper left hand, she holds a skull filled with blood (*thod khrag*) and in the lower hand, a chain. Although her body is coiled around the male, and thus inextricably linked to him, the ritual prescriptions call for special offerings and *mantra* recitations specifically directed toward her. The text describes the *vāyu* (*rlung*) of fire becoming turbulent from her center. Furthermore, the text designates her a veritable butcher (*bshan pa mo*), an executioner of enemies. She uses her sword to behead the bodies of the enemies and her iron hook to grasp the hearts of vow-breakers and sorcerers. She binds their extremities and feasts on their hearts and blood. After such an overtly violent, macabre scene, the text concludes that this is an act

<sup>43</sup> *Khro chu sdong gi yum gsang ba dun tig gi sgrub thabs*, vol. 24 pp. 156-158: *Khro chu'i man ngag tu* | (note: *yang gsang rmad du byung ba*) | *yum gsang ba dun tig nag mo khro chu dang sbyor ba ni* | *gnubs sangs rgyas ye shes kyis mdzad pa'i* | *yum gsang ba dun tig nag mo zhal gcig phyag bzhi ma* | *'jigs pa'i cha byad can* | *mche ba bzhi rab tu rtsigs pa* | *spyang gsum rab tu bsgrad pa* | *ral pa kham nag gyen du 'bar ba* | *phyag g.yas kyi dang po na ral gri* | *'og ma na lcags kyu* | *g.yon gyi dang po na thod khrag* | *'og ma na lcags sgrogs bsnam pa* | *zhabs gnyis yab kyi lte bar 'khril ba'o* | *yab sngags kyi sham du 'di sbyar* | *ru rag mo raksha ma bhyo bhyo dzah dzah* | *zhes bsrung ba'i dus su sbyar* | *yum sngags thun mgor brgya re yan mi 'dogs pa man ngag yin* | *rgyun du yum la'ang gtor ma 'bul* | *bstod pa 'di yang bya* | *bhyo me rlung 'tshub ma'i klong dkyil nas* | *'jam dpal gshin rje'i bka' bsgrub ma* | *drag po'i las rnams sgrub pa'i bshan pa mo* | *sku mdog mthing nag zhal gcig phyag bzhi ma* | *'jigs pa'i zhal gdangs mche ba rab tu rtsigs* | *spyang gsum rab bsgrad dbu skra gyen la 'bar* | *phyag g.yas dang po gnam lcags ral gri 'phyar* | *dam nyams byad ma'i mgo lus tshal par gtong* | *'og ma lcags kyu nag po bsnam pa ni* | *dam nyams dgra bo byad ma'i snying nas 'dzin* | *g.yon gyi dang po thod khrag bsnam pa ni* | *dam nyams byad ma'i snying khrag zhal du gsol* | *'og ma lcags sgrogs nag po bsnam pa yis* | *dam nyams byad ma'i yan lag gru gur sdoms* | *drag po'i las mkhan bshan pa mo la bstod* | *dam rdzas rgyan gyi gtor ma 'di bshes la* | *thugs dam rgyud bskul bcol ba'i 'phrin las mdzod* | *zhes bstod do* | *sa ma ya* | *rgya rgya rgya* | *gter rgya* | *sbas rgya* | *gab rgya* | *dun tig ma'i yum sgrub 'di* | *gnubs sangs rgyas ye shes kyis mdzad nas* | *bum thang ke rur sbas pa* | *rgya zhang khrom gyis gter nas gdan drangs pa'o* | *sa ma ya* | *rgya rgya rgya* | *gcig rgyud ma gtogs spel mi rung ngo* | *spel na gshin rje'i chad ma 'ong ngo* | *sa ma ya* | *rgya rgya* | *gter rgya* | *sbas rgya* | *gsang rgya*.

of exalted enlightened activity (*'phrin las*) that activates the deity (*thugs dam rgyud bskul bcol ba*). Again, the correct understanding and orientation to the world is emphasized as required for this practice. It is worth noting that in this text, rather than a focus on her as a conduit for Khro chu's own practice, she is described (although physically joined to Khro chu in a *yab yum* formation) as having a power of her own. Indeed, this text stands alone, and it is not connected directly to the description of Khro chu himself and his specific visualization sequence. Nonetheless, these ferocious details of both deities transmute into a power that is capable of crushing enemies.

Once the Khro chu deity is visualized correctly, the practitioner creates an entire universe that is also filled with treacherous, horrific objects to either protect or destroy. The Khro chu visualization sequences specifically describe eight protective *vajra* domes (*gur khang*) made of various materials including fire, molten iron, and a myriad of weapons. Another prominent structure in these visualization sequences is the "palace" (*gzhal yas khang*), again linked to horrific scenes. One particularly gruesome scene depicts a charnel ground with human flesh, the smell of rotten decomposing corpses, corpses burning with raging flames, all described as leftovers to be devoured by carnivorous animals.<sup>44</sup> Each detail serves as another layer to create a visualized world suitable for the wrath of Khro chu dug sdong. To be sure, these domes and palaces serve as the building blocks to construct an effective world in a three-dimensional universe to exact power over one's own created domain.

The three main aims of Khro chu (protecting, repelling, and killing) are accomplished through these visualization sequences and reciting *mantras* that are particular to each aim. In what follows, I will briefly describe two texts that jointly contain all three aims of Khro chu in order to compare how each aim is narrated. The first text is from a work in volume 24 entitled *Poisonous Bronze Tree's Instructions of the Three: Protecting, Repelling, Killing, and a Few Others*.<sup>45</sup> The instructions in this text begin with visualizing Khro chu and his retinue. After this initial sequence, special instructions in regard to the three aims follow. The first outlines the method of protection. This method includes the series of *vajra* domes mentioned above, weapons, fire, and other dangers. There is, however, no explicit victim mentioned here. In contrast, the instructions for the repelling sequence require self-visualization as Yamāntaka and a visualization sequence of several objects inside one another: a 'Chi bdag, a fierce *vajra*, a nine-headed

<sup>44</sup> *Rigs gsum 'dus pa 'jam dpal khro chu dug sdong nag po'i bsnen pa'i ye ge rin chen ke ta ka*, vol. 23, pp. 20-23.

<sup>45</sup> *Khro chu dug sdong gi bsrung bzlog bsad gsum gyi zhal gdams dang gzhan yang kha shas*, vol. 24, pp. 39-56.

scorpion of iron, a vow-breaker, and within the latter, a wheel of razors. Notably, this sequence explicitly names a vow-breaker as the target. The rite continues with particularly violent imagery as the practitioner must imagine casting the victim in brass to burn. The text explicitly states that the root of life (*srog rtsa*) of the enemy is violently cut (*dmar myal=dmyal*). Likewise, the killing visualizations require the practitioner to imagine an enemy shaking spontaneously in a triangular demon box (*thun khung*). Moreover, the text outlines a color sequence corresponding to each aim, in typical fashion. The protective aim is white, while the repelling and killing aim visualizations are both black. Thus, it is apparent that the tradition, through the descriptions of visualizations, makes a distinction between protection on one hand, and the more destructive and offensive aims of repelling and killing on the other.

This escalation of brutality and the targeting of a particular enemy is further demonstrated in a rite in another text of volume 24 similarly entitled *Instructions on Protecting, Repelling, and Killing*.<sup>46</sup> The sequence for the protecting aim includes visualizing buddhas and manipulating light rays (particularly to burn the three poisons). In contrast to the protective sequence above, this aim includes a target; however, the description of attacking that victim is not as extremely violent compared to the other two aims. In this protective visualization, one simply draws all maleficent beings on the tip of the light rays. In the following repelling sequence, in contrast, the maleficent beings are beaten to death in a much more visceral feat. The killing sequence instructs the following: imagine the form of a terrifying male *yama* wielding a slaughtering knife, and behind that, envision that he carries a butcher's bag. With the knife, the flesh and bone of the sorcerers and maleficent beings (*byad ma gnod byed*) are cut and then put into the butcher's black bag.

As evidenced in both rites, there is clearly a dichotomy created here between protective and destructive aims, even though the tradition specifies a tripartite schema for Khro chu.

*5. Two Khro chu rites: gruesome ritual materiality,  
connecting the mundane world to the visualized world*

One unique aspect of the practice of Yamāntaka-type deities that is also apparent in the ritual program of the Khro chu dug sdong is the emphasis on fierce magic<sup>47</sup> allowing practitioners to conquer mundane

<sup>46</sup> *bSrung zlog bsad gsum gyi zhal gdams*, vol. 24, pp. 245-50.

<sup>47</sup> Elsewhere I have outlined a tentative definition of magic, briefly defined as any act (in the larger umbrella category of religion) that aims to manipulate a specified



concerns in addition to eradicating negative emotions. To be sure, practitioners utilize the ritual program of Khro chu to approach both pragmatic and soteriological goals. Many ritual texts in the Khro chu volumes include magical recipes to attack enemies and at least one serves the function to heal. I will give a tentative translation for two rites that demonstrate these types of practice:

The Killing-blood Butter Lamp of Khro chu:<sup>48</sup>

Homage to Las kyi gshin rje, the Black Poisonous Bronze Tree! [This is] gShin rje khro chu's method of the killing-blood butter lamp. Set up a four finger-length wick in a sacrificial pit, in the center, the heart of all effigies (*nya'o=nya bo*). All the effigies, the sorcerers along with their gods are greedy and weak with no refuge. Their form is black in color, repulsive, their bodies emaciated. From their eyes, chest, and the nine orifices [of their bodies], blood and pus leak. From collecting that, the wick is formed. As for the blood [to be used] for the killing butter lamp:

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target with the activation of power, employing sympathetic means to mitigate and/or intensify risk (Brown 2024).

<sup>48</sup> *Khro chu'i mar me khrag gsod*, vol. 24, pp. 329–32: *Las kyi gshin rje khro chu dug gdong nag po la phyag 'tshal lo | gshin rje khro chu'i mar me khrag gsod byed thabs la | nya'o dgu'i snying dkyil du 'brub khung la sdong bu sor bzhi pa btsugs | nya'o thams cad byad ma lha dang bcas | ham pa rid pa skyabs dang bral ba mdog nag pa gzugs mi gdug {corr. sdug} pa lus rid pa mig dang brang dang bu ga dgu nas khrag dang rnag 'dzag pa | de 'dus pa las sdong bu la skyed | mar me bsad pa'i khrag ni | gri khrag la sogs khrag sna yod tshad bsdus mar me bsad pa'o | kho'i srog rtsa snying rtsa khrag rtsa lus ngag yid gsum dang bcas pa | nag gis skems dug khrag gis bsad par bsam la mar me bsad pa'o | (note: gnad nas bskul ba ni) | hūm | las kyi gshin rje khro chu dug gdong nag po'i sku | zhal gsum phyag drug 'jigs pa'i sku | phyag na dgra sta tsitta bsnams | sku la dur khrod chos kyiis brgyan | rked pa chu srin brngam zhal can | sku smad khro chu'i phur pa yis | byad ma 'bum gyi srog snying gzer | 'khor du gshin rje bye ba dang | las gshin sa ya 'bum gyis skor | khyed kyi thugs dam dus la babs | yid la gnag pa'i byad ma lha dang bcas | zhal du btap po kha ram khā hi | myur du sgrol cig a ra li | nya bo byad ma lha dang bcas pa | phyed ma (note: brlag) la stang bar bsam | hūm | sku las sprul pa'i bya khyung rgyal po ni | khyod kyi thugs dam dus la babs | yid la gnag pa'i dgra bo byad ma lha dang bcas | zhal du 'bul lo kha ram khā hi | myur du sgrol cig a ra li | (note: rta mgrin bskul ba ni) | hūm | gsung gi sprul ba rta mgrin rgyal po ni | khyed kyi thugs dam... yid la gnag pa'i dgra bo... zhal du 'bul lo... myur du sgrol cig... (note: phyag rdor bskul ba ni) | hūm thugs kyi sprul pa phyag na rdo rje ni | khyed kyi thugs dam... yid la gnad pa'i... zhal du 'bul lo... myur du sgrol cig... (note: 'chi bdag nag po bskul ba ni) | hūm | 'chi bdag nag po'i thugs dam dus la babs | yid la gnag pa'i... zhal du 'bul lo... myur du sgrol cig... (note: tshe bdag nag mo bskul ba ni) | hūm | tshe bdag nag po'i thugs dam dus la bab | yid la gnag pa'i dgra bo byad ma lha dang bcas | zhal du 'bul lo kha ram khā hi | myur du sgrol cig a ra li | (C: zhes gsungs so sngags logs na yod | mar me khrag gsod rdzogs so | dge'o | rje btsun dam pa kun dga'i mtshan can gyi phyag dpe ngos nas bshus so | sngags ni bla ma'i zhal las shes).*

various types of blood, for example, the blood [from a person killed with] a knife, are collected all together [and] and the butter lamp is extinguished. Visualize that the root of his life-force, the root of his heart, and the root of his blood, along with his body, speech, and mind, all three, are dried up by the darkness, killed with the poison blood, and [while visualizing] extinguish the lamp.

(*Regarding exhortation from the heart*): *hūṃ*, the terrifying body of Las kyi gshin rje, the Black Poisonous Bronze Tree, with three faces and six hands. In his hands, he brandishes the hearts of his enemies. His body is adorned by charnel ground ornaments. On his waist he has the face of a raging water dragon. Because his lower half is a bronze dagger, it is a nail in the vital heart of a hundred thousand sorcerers. He is surrounded by ten million *yamas* (*gshin rje*), and millions of *karmayamas* (*las gshin*). At the time your *yidam* descends, the sorcerers, which have hostility in the mind, along with their gods, are offered to the mouth of the deity; *kha ram khā hi*: liberate quickly, *a ra li*. Visualize as the effigies, the sorcerers along with their gods are emptied (*crushed*) to dust.

*Hūṃ*. Regarding the King Garuḍa which emanates from the body: at the time your *yidam* descends, the enemies, which have hostility in the mind, the sorcerers along with their gods, are offered to the mouth of the deity; *kha ram khā hi*; liberate quickly, *a ra li*.

(*Regarding the entreaty of Hayagrīva*): *hūṃ*. Regarding the King Hayagrīva, emanation of speech: at the time your *yidam* descends, the enemies which have hostility in the mind, the sorcerers along with their gods, are offered to the mouth of the deity; *kha ram khā hi*; liberate quickly, *a ra li*.

(*Regarding the entreaty of Vajrapāṇi*): *hūṃ*. Regarding Vajrapāṇi, the emanation of mind, at the time your *yidam* descends, the enemies which have hostility in the mind, the sorcerers along with their gods, are offered to the mouth of the deity; *kha ram khā hi*; liberate quickly, *a ra li*.

(*Regarding the entreaty of 'Chi bdag nag po*): *hūṃ*. At the time the *yidam* descends, which is 'Chi bdag nag po, the enemies which have hostility in the mind, the sorcerers along with their gods,

are offered to the mouth of the deity; *kha raṃ khā hi*; liberate quickly, *a ra li*.

(Regarding the entreaty of *Tshe bdag nag mo*[=po?]): *hūṃ*. At the time the *yidam* descends, which is *Tshe bdag nag po*, the sorcerers along with their gods, are offered to the mouth of the deity; *kha raṃ khā hi*; liberate quickly, *a ra li*.

(Thus, it is said, the separate mantras, completing the killing-blood butter lamp. Blessed. Transcribed from the point of view of the book of *rJe btsun dam pa* named *Kun dga*. Regarding the mantras, one can learn them from the mouth of the lama.)

It is unclear whether or not this practice is to be carried out in real, tangible space. The text uses the word to visualize (*bsam*). Elsewhere I have argued that similar ritual recipes often contain clues of actual practice (beyond the imagination of visualization sequences) as there are mentions of alternative objects that one can replace if the main object is unavailable to the practitioner for one reason or the other.<sup>49</sup> Unfortunately, there are no such clues here. It seems likely, however, that this ritual is taking place in one's own mind as well as in material reality since the ritual instructs the practitioner to visualize and to extinguish the lamp. It is certainly in the realm of possibilities that this is a visualization sequence augmented by ritual objects, with a more brutal lamp imagined while the practitioner works with a tangible butter lamp in front of him. In fact, the visualized sequences might be the conduit to form the sympathetic connections of magical aims to the material world. If this is not the case, perhaps this provokes the question of whether or not we can speak of a materiality without tangible material objects. I would argue that we must consider a materiality in visualizations since these visualizations point to actual objects, and especially objects that signify certain behaviors. In this example, the lamp is implemented in an inversion to its normal purpose of offering and bringing auspiciousness. Here, it is used to extinguish and bring darkness. These inversions are common in magical recipes particularly in regard to sorcery, or fierce aims.

The following rite is more obviously an example of a ritual that employs actual material substances, and of course in the case of *Khro chu*, stained, impure, substances.

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<sup>49</sup> Brown 2024.

From the general gShin dug sdong nag po: the Female Beneficial Remedy and the Female Footprint Offering Mantras.<sup>50</sup>

Homage to Yamarāja! In a stove,<sup>51</sup> mix together the dirt of a woman's footprint and the urine of a donkey, the dung of a bearded goat, Guinea pepper, and dried ginger. Having mixed those, offer the three hundred mantras. Regarding the mantras: *gu gu ra tsa ti khug ti khug | shag shag | rgob rgob*. When releasing, recite twenty-one mantras in the dirt of the *zhi dha* foot print. And if scattered, release [from the ailment] will occur: *gu gu ra tsa gtor gtor ab che ag che*. This is the method of casting down the female illness [a list of various ingredients follows].

Not only is this ritual a good example of mundane magic activated by impure, potent ritual substances, it does so by forming a sympathetic link to a specific person via contagion. An object the female subject has touched, in this case dirt left behind from a footprint, is used to affect the subject from afar.

### Conclusion

The ritual practice of Khro chu dug sdong is a fascinating form of Yamāntaka practice, characterized by ferocious imagery and gruesome recipes to conquer the most formidable of dharmic foes. His

<sup>50</sup> *sPyi gshin dug sdong nag po las bud med sman phan dang mo rjes 'bul sngags*, vol. 23, pp. 273–75: *Ya ma ra tsa la na mo | na ri la khyis rashtsātaba'i thab la | bud med kyi rkang rjes kyi sa dang | bung bu'i gcin dang ra rgya bo'i ril ma | g.yer ma | bca' sga | de rnams bsres nas sngags sum brgya btab nas | sngags ni | gu gu ra tsa ti khug ti khug | shag shag | rgob rgob | 'grol na | zhi dha rkang rjes kyi sa la sngags 'di nyi shu rtsa cig bzlas la gtor na grol lo | gu gu ra tsa gtor gtor ab che ag che | bud med cham la 'bebs thabs so | om̄ (note: mar khu) agne ye swahā | om̄ bho dhe (note: yam shing) bhi kṣa ye swahā | om̄ (note: til) sarba pā paṃ ha na badzra ye swahā | om̄ badzra (note: 'bras) rgyu sha ye swahā | om̄ a (note: ku sha) pra ti ha ta badzra ye swahā | om̄ ma hā badzra a (note: phye mar) kṣa ye swahā | om̄ badzra (note: gro) gha ma ri ye swahā | om̄ sarba (note: ku sha) artha siddhi ye swahā | om̄ badzra a (note: dur ba) yu she swahā | om̄ (note: zho zan) badzra sa ma de swahā | om̄ badzra mahā (note: nas) bhe ga ye swahā | om̄ badzra (note: 'bras) gha ma ri swahā | om̄ badzra bhi dza ye (note: so ba) swahā | om̄ sarba pa (note: sran ma) rang ye swahā | om̄ badzra dam (note: so rtsi) bu la ye sāhā | om̄ ma hā shrī pha ma dha ni (note: 'bru sna) swahā | om̄ ma hā ba (note: zho zan) la ye swahā | om̄ teng ga ga ni (note: shing thog) ga ga ni bhi lo ki ti hūṃ phaṭ swahā | om̄ badzra (note: gos bzung) wa ḍa ye swahā | om̄ (note: kun las 'gre'o) a ni dza la ram haṃ.*

<sup>51</sup> The Sanskrit rendering (*rasācāṭava*) in this sentence is unclear. Perhaps this is a misrendering of a Sanskrit compound beginning with *rasa* as an elixir or flavoring (a stove flavored by [the fluids of] a woman and dog). Another possibility is describing the *thab* as a *cātvala* (hole for sacrificial fire) but misspelled and part of an unknown compound.

ritual program reveals how the Tibetan Buddhist tradition delineates protective and destructive aims since it exhibits increasingly brutal means to subdue one's enemies. This cycle is important as a component of the Byang gter Tradition and appears in the collected works of many important Buddhist masters past and present. It is my hope that further investigation of the Byang gter materials, along with comparisons to various other compilations such as those in 'Bri gung Chos kyi grags pa's collected works will unveil the intricacies of this shared practice as it has been developed by multiple hands across time and sectarian boundaries.

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