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# **Invocation, Possession and Rejuvenation in Upper Tibet**

**The Beliefs, Activities and Lives of Spirit-Mediums Residing in the Highest Land**



**School of Anthropology and Conservation**

**University of Kent**

Thesis submitted to the School of Anthropology and Conservation in compliance with the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of University of Kent

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**John Vincent Bellezza**

School of Anthropology and Conservation  
University of Kent



Supervisors: Miguel N. Alexiades and Jon Mair

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Cover Image

The sacred mountain and lake dyad of Ti-se and Mtsho ma-pang, Western Tibet.

## Abstract

This dissertation comprehensively examines the hereditary links, ritual practices and pantheon of indigenous deities on which the spirit-mediums of Upper Tibet rely. Known as *lha-pa*, *dpa' bo* and *lha-mo*, these specialists in channeling the gods operate in the overlapping Stod and Byang-thang regions of western and midwestern Tibet. This work is based on in-depth interviews and the translation of a variety of Tibetan texts. It utilizes a diachronic model to explicate ethnohistorical dimensions as well as legendary and contemporary aspects of the spirit-mediums through both oral and literary sources. This work, drawing upon a wide range of ethnographic and textual materials to investigate the phenomenon of *lha-bzhugs* (spirit-possession) in Upper Tibet, analyses the way in which its historical and present-day characteristics are interrelated. Thus, the continuity of the tradition of spirit-mediumship and the way in which it has been conceived and preserved, is the underlying theme giving this work its narrative and analytical coherence.

## **Acknowledgements**

Having begun my research more than thirty years ago, the number of fine people who have supported me intellectually, emotionally and materially is vast. I salute them all. I would like to specially thank my principal Tibetan teachers who taught me over a span of many years: H.H. Dalai Lama, the late H. H. Menri Khenpo, Ven. Lopon Tenzin Namdak, and Yungdrung Tenzin. I must also express my heartfelt thanks to my academic supervisors at the University of Kent, Drs. Miguel Alexiades and Jon Mair. To all my other teachers, assistants, colleagues, benefactors, friends, and intimates I bid them well from the bottom of my heart. It is with much gratitude that I acknowledge the contribution of the Tise Foundation in underwriting the expenses incurred in doing my doctoral work. Although my parents are no longer here to see this accomplishment, I know they would have been very pleased. A very special debt of gratitude is due my children who often had to do without a father as I immersed myself in Tibet and adjoining territories. May all be well!

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## **Note on Tibetan Language Terms**

All Tibetan language terms are transliterated according to the Wylie system, except for words that have been introduced into the English language (e.g., lama, Lhasa).

## Chapter 1

### Spirit-mediums past and present: An Introduction to Works Submitted for PhD by Publication

#### General Orientation

This study of spirit-mediums in Tibet is concentrated on the western portion of the Tibetan Plateau, the highest land on Earth save for isolated mountain ranges. The Tibetan Plateau covers some 2,500,000 km<sup>2</sup>, a vast expanse supporting a mosaic of peoples, cultures and languages. The southern and eastern fringes of the Tibetan Plateau are especially rich in ethnological terms, with more than two dozen languages and dialects represented. The Tibetan Plateau is divided among five countries: China, India, Pakistan, Nepal and Bhutan, a truly international territory. Even the majority portion under Chinese control is administratively complex, falling within four different provinces: Xizang, Qinghai, Gansu, and Sichuan. The Tibetan Plateau is more akin to a cradle of civilization, in the sense of a large contiguous region with interrelated cultural and technological systems in antiquity, such as that possessed by her neighbors: China, Persia and India.<sup>1</sup> The contemporary Tibetan Plateau is still home to various cultural and regional groups including the Khampa, Golokpa, Minyakpa, Gyalrangwa, Amdowa, Upa, Tsangpa, Drokpa, Monpa, Adi, Sherpa, Lopa, Töpa, Ladakhi, and Balti, etc.

Agriculture spread widely in Neolithic Tibet, one of the most important building blocks of civilization.<sup>2</sup> Already by the Iron Age, the Tibetan Plateau was home to an impressive range of monuments including citadels, temples and necropolises.<sup>3</sup> These structures, as well as many spectacular material objects, are unique to Tibet (as is the Tibetan human genome), setting her apart from neighboring civilizations. The assemblage of archaeological monuments varies from region to region, indicating that the Tibetan Plateau was already diverse culturally more than two thousand years ago.

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<sup>1</sup> On the concept of Tibet as a civilization, see the seminal works:

Snellgrove, David. and Richardson, H. E. 1968: *A Cultural History of Tibet*. Reprint, Boulder: Prajñā Press, 1980.

Stein, R. A. 1972: *Tibetan Civilization* (trans. J. E. S. Driver). Stanford: Stanford University Press.

<sup>2</sup> See d'Alpoim Guedes, Jade / Lu, Hongliang / Li Yongxian Li / Spengler, Robert N. / Wu Xiaohong Wu / Aldenderfer, Mark S. 2014: "Moving agriculture onto the Tibetan plateau: The archaeobotanical evidence", in *Archaeological and Anthropological Sciences*, vol. 6, pp. 255–269.

<sup>3</sup> On the monumental trappings of early civilization in Tibet, see:

Chayet, Anne. 1994: *Art et Archéologie du Tibet*. Paris: Picard.

Bellezza, John V. 2014: *The Dawn of Tibet: The Ancient Civilization on the Roof of the World*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.

Aldenderfer, M. and Zhang Yinong. 2004: "The Prehistory of the Tibetan Plateau to the Seventh Century A.D.: Perspectives and Research from China and the West Since 1950", in *Journal of World Prehistory*, vol. 18, no. 1, pp. 1–55. Springer: Netherlands.

In the Early Historic period (circa 650–850 CE), the various peoples and cultures of the Tibetan Plateau were unified under the Spu-rgyal dynasty of Central Tibet. That was a time of a strong centralized state, a characteristic political feature of highly stratified societies in the context of empire. The emperors (*btsan-po*) were the first to create a sense of a greater Tibetan nation, built up from the pre-existing proto-nations of the Plateau (Bod, Zhang Zhung, Sumpa, Azha, Minyak, Jang, and Mon, etc.). A major cultural feat of imperial Tibet was the invention of a script for writing the Tibetan language and the subsequent rapid development of Tibetan literature.<sup>4</sup> Subsequently, the introduction of Buddhism helped to further weld the Tibetan Plateau into a web of interrelated cultures, which after the collapse of the Tibetan empire often functioned as discrete regional entities socially and politically.<sup>5</sup>

Buddhist Tibet's high level of spiritual and ethical development is well documented. Under a progression of political regimes, Buddhism has been the predominant religious force for over the last millennium. Buddhism has affected virtually every aspect of Tibetan civilization, encompassing popular customs and traditions, architecture, art, dress, artisanal industries, legal matters, administration, and military considerations, etc. The form of Buddhism that took root in Tibet came directly from India, a mystic and tantric form of the religion known as Vajrayāna. Over the centuries, Tibet established one of the most developed monastic systems in the Buddhist world. Tibetan Buddhist monks come in many guises, including reincarnate lamas, meditators, ritualists, astrologers, physicians, diviners, oracles, artists, artisans, cooks, traders, body guards, and sentries. In addition to those who belonged to Buddhist orders, there were a variety of lay practitioners such as observers of basic vows (*dge-bsnyen-pa*), religious story tellers (*ma-ñi-pa*), medicants (*sprang-po*), and ritualists (*sngags-pa*). Another category of religious practitioners, both lay and monastic, were spirit-mediums (*lha-pa*), those who it is purported called down deities upon themselves. Possession was undertaken to heal the sick, aid the misfortunate and to predict the fate of individuals.

This work is devoted to one kind of spirit-mediums in Tibet: lay practitioners on the highest western reaches of the Plateau. These men and women are mostly Buddhists but there are those among them

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<sup>4</sup> On the acquisition of Tibetan literacy, see:

Sørensen, Per K. 1994: *Tibetan Buddhist Historiography. The mirror Illuminating the Royal Genealogies: An Annotated Translation of the XIVth Century Tibetan Chronicle: rGyal-rabs gsal-ba'i me-long*. Asiatische Forschungen: Monographienreihe zur Geschichte, Kultur und Sprache der Völker Ost- und Zentralasiens, vol. 128. Weisbaden: Harrassowitz.

Wangdu, Pasang and Diemberger, Hilda. 2000: *dBa' bzhed: The Royal Narrative Concerning the Bringing of the Buddha's Doctrine to Tibet*. Philosophisch-historische Klasse, Denkschriften, vol. 291. Wien: Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften.

Schuh, Dieter. 2013: "Tibetischen Inschriften ins Maul geschaut: Beobachtungen zu Stein- und Felsinschriften sowie den Schriften des 7. bis 9. Jahrhunderts in Tibet", in *Nepalica-Tibetica Festgabe for Christoph Cüppers*, vol. 2 (eds. F.-K. Ehrhard and P. Maurer), pp. 143–184. Beiträge zur Zentralasienforschung, vol. 28. Andiastr: International Institute for Tibetan and Buddhist Studies GmbH.

<sup>5</sup> On the introduction of Buddhism and its contributions to Tibetan civilization see, for example:

Kapstein, Mathew T. 2006: *The Tibetans*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Kapstein, Mathew T. 2000: *The Tibetan Assimilation of Buddhism: Conversion, Contestation, and Memory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

*Ibid.*, Sørensen, Per K.; Wangdu and Diemberger.

that adhere to the Yungdrung Bon religion, Tibet's alternative lamaist faith.<sup>6</sup> Like Buddhism, Yungdrung Bon relies heavily on monastic institutions and has a strong contemplative component. Both of Tibet's major religions see themselves as the guardians of the physical and mental well-being of Tibetans and contain a wide range of therapies and rituals for psychological contentment and special rites for environmental harmony. The Bon religion arose circa 1000 CE with the rediscovery and recreation of texts supposedly hidden during a wave of persecution in the late 8<sup>th</sup> century CE. This religion, which shares most of its ethics, doctrines, philosophy and mysticism in common with Tibetan Buddhism, takes its name from the word *g.yung drung* (swastika), conveying its eternal or indestructible nature. As a verb, *bon-[pa]* means 'to recite spells' or to 'express mystic knowledge'. Nevertheless, in Yungdrung Bon conceptions, *bon* has come to assume the same set of connotations as the Sanskrit word *dharma* in Tibetan Buddhism. There is also a more strongly Buddhist influenced form of the religion that evolved in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries CE named 'New Bon' (Bon *gsar-ma*).

Like the unreformed Nyingma sect of Buddhism, Yungdrung Bon holds that there exists an essential state of consciousness, the most fundamental phenomenological form (*kun-gzhi*), which is elucidated in an advanced system of teachings known as Rdzogs-chen. Wed to Buddhist cosmological and ethical traditions, Rdzogs-chen is considered the highest teachings of the Nyingmapa and Yungdrung Bonpo.

It is important to note that *bon* as a generic term is traditionally used as a catch-all category for ancient forms of Tibetan religion, which can be divided into three major historical phases: 1) prehistoric (pre-7<sup>th</sup> century CE; predating the introduction of Buddhism in Tibet), 2) imperial period (circa 630–850 CE; marked by still not well understood interactions with Buddhism), and 3) post-imperial (circa 850–1000 CE; period of cross-fertilization with Buddhism).<sup>7</sup> In this generic *bon* there are two major sources of religious traditions: autochthonous (originating within the Tibetan cultural world) and assimilated (foreign inputs adapted to the Tibetan cultural milieu). The use of *bon* to denote ancient non-Buddhist religion in Tibet probably arose retroactively. In Tibetan texts dating to the imperial and post-imperial periods, *bon* is more narrowly defined as a corpus of non-Buddhist rituals and myths and the priests who promoted it. Moreover, sundry folk religious practices in the contemporary Tibetan world are popularly labeled *bon*.

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<sup>6</sup> On the fundamental doctrines and ecclesiastic organization of Yungdrung Bon, see Karmay, Samten G. 2009: "A General Introduction to the History and Doctrines of Bon" in *The Arrow and the Spindle: Studies in History, Myths, Rituals and Beliefs in Tibet*, pp. 104-156, Kathmandu: Mandala Book Point. Karmay, Samten, G. 2007: "A Historical Overview of the Bon Religion" in *Bon, the Magic Word: The Indigenous Religion of Tibet* (eds. K. G. Samten and J. Watt), pp. 55-81. New York: Rubin Museum of Art. Kværne, Per. *The Bon Religion of Tibet: The Iconography of a Living Tradition*, London: Serindia Publications, 1995.

<sup>7</sup> On the classification of Yung-drung Bon and *bon*, also see: Kværne, Per. 2000. "The study of Bon in the West: Past, present and future", in *New Horizons in Bon Studies* (eds. S. G. Karmay and Y. Nagano), pp. 7–20. Bon Studies, vol. 2. Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology. *Ibid.* Karmay, Samten G. 2009.

It is within this broad religious context that spirit-mediumship arose in Tibet, acquiring both institutional and folk forms.<sup>8</sup> Tibetan spirit-mediums were able to draw from various strata of cultural and religious heritage, creating in the process one of the most eclectic religious practices in Tibet. Nevertheless, it is only in the last two decades that spirit-mediumship has begun to be understood in the depth necessary for careful analysis of the topic and for informed debate. As with so much else of Tibet's cultural wealth, this tradition was little known to the outside world.

Tibet's closure to the world-at-large some three centuries ago by the Manchu overlords and continuing in certain ways to the present day has impeded the outside world's understanding of the region. As a result, Tibet assumed a semi-mythic aura in the West, a perspective that is not amenable to discovering the true nature of her civilization. Commonly, when people think of Tibet, Buddhism comes to mind and they imagine a faraway land of monasteries, esoteric rituals and brightly clad lamas.<sup>9</sup> However, these preconceptions overlook gross social and economic disparities that existed in Tibet (as in virtually all civilized territories). As Tibet declined politically, economically and culturally over the last few centuries, she became easy to write off as a backwater with little relevance to the rest of the world. The hermetic tendencies of some Tibetan ecclesiastic elements only served to strengthen that view. Nevertheless, lofty Tibet and her indomitable inhabitants continue to represent one of humanity's greatest treasures.

The remainder of the Introduction examines comprehensively major elements of the tradition of spirit-mediumship in uppermost Tibet. The various beliefs and practices described are set against more detailed coverage in the various works submitted for this dissertation by publication (see *infra*).

### **Spirit-mediums in Upper Tibet: An anthropological enquiry**

I have been active in the archaeological and ethnographic exploration of Upper Tibet, the vast hinterland of the Tibetan Plateau, for over three decades.<sup>10</sup> Through longstanding acquaintance with the

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<sup>8</sup> On the interface between institutional and folk religious traditions in Tibet, see Samuel, Geoffrey.1993: *Civilized Shamans: Buddhism in Tibetan Societies. Smithsonian Series in Ethnographic Inquiry*. Washington DC : Smithsonian Institution Press.

<sup>9</sup> On the romanticism through which Tibet has been viewed in the West, see Lopez, Donald. 1998: *Prisoners of Shangri-La: Tibetan Buddhism and the West*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

<sup>10</sup> The size of the United Kingdom and Norway combined, this is the western third of the political entity known as the Tibet Autonomous Region, a territory whose borders coincide with the old Tibetan state prior to 1959. The Tibetan cultural world extends across the entire Tibetan Plateau and the Himalayan rim-land, occupying an area of some 2,500,000 km. It is comprised of more than 30 different languages and at least one dozen ancient nations and tribes. On ancient (pre-Buddhist) civilization in Upper Tibet see works by the author such as: 2014a; 2014b: *Antiquities of Zhang Zhung: A Comprehensive Inventory of Pre-Buddhist Sites on the Tibetan Upland, Residential Monuments*, vols. 1, 2. Miscellaneous Series – 28, 29. Sarnath: Central University of Tibetan Studies. Online version, 2011: Tibetan & Himalayan Library (THlib.org). <http://www.thlib.org/bellezza> 2008: *Zhang Zhung: Foundations of Civilization in Tibet. A Historical and Ethnoarchaeological Study of the Monuments, Rock Art, Texts and Oral Tradition of the Ancient Tibetan Upland*. Philosophisch-Historische Klasse Denkschriften, vol. 368. Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften.

highest reaches of the Tibet, I have built up a large network of contacts and friends in the region.<sup>11</sup> A major component of my ongoing researches is the study of healers and oracles who use trance as the pillar of their activities. These men and women are purported to act as vessels for a large pantheon of spirits in human and animal form. I refer to these practitioners as ‘spirit-mediums’, a term whose semantics correspond to Tibetan language terms such as ‘god-man’ (*lha-pa*) and ‘god-woman’ (*lha-mo*). Spirit-mediums enthusiastically aided me in all aspects of my study of their vocation, providing biographical and technical information, holding trance ceremonies, and offering hospitality (crucial in a very sparsely populated and harsh land).<sup>12</sup>

Although historical details remain obscure, the spread of Buddhism was a powerful mechanism in the transfer of ideas and materials to spirit-mediums across the Tibetan Plateau, Himalaya and other regions that came under the sway of Lamaism. High-status oracles of the Buddhist monastic system known as *sku-rten-pa* had a role in disseminating traditions across the Tibetan Plateau and beyond. Nevertheless, some ideological and material trappings of spirit-mediumship predate the emergence of *sku-rten-pa* oracles and appear to have spread independently. To have informed the development of various kinds of spirit-mediums in Tibet before the rise of the monastic oracle, relevant non-Buddhist customs and traditions would have perforce acquired a trans-cultural purview. The archaeological textual and ethnohistorical records at present, however, are insufficient to determine how and in what period earlier elements diffused over the greater region.

The Communist Chinese takeover of territory ruled by the Lhasa government (*sDe-ba gzhung*) in 1959 had a significant impact on the tradition of spirit-mediumship in Upper Tibet. Spirit-mediumship was proscribed during the highly destructive Chinese Cultural Revolution in the 1960s, but in the liberalization period of the 1980s, like other aspects of traditional Tibetan culture, it enjoyed something of a resurgence. Nevertheless, spirit-mediumship in Upper Tibet sits rather uneasily within the official scheme of Tibetan religious regulation ushered in by the Chinese after this time. Although it falls under the category of superstitious thought within Marxist-Leninist ideology, local authorities have often ignored its practice so long as it was done in private. According to some spirit-mediums I interviewed even the families of local officials are counted among their clients. However, since I began meeting spirit-mediums in the early 1990s extraordinary socioeconomic changes have taken place in Tibet, which have had a significant effect on the development and direction of its cultural and religious traditions more generally. While the exact mix of factors exerting pressure on spirit-mediumship in Upper Tibet today have not been well delineated, my research indicates that the number of individuals called to this profession is falling and the civic space for its performance shrinking. Thus, my research work, while not many years old, already enjoys considerable ethnohistorical value.

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<sup>11</sup> Traditionally known as Byang-thang and Stod, Upper Tibet now constitutes the prefecture of mNga'-ris, and parts of the Nag-chu, Lha-sa and gZhis-ka-rtse prefectures of the Tibet Autonomous Region, Peoples Republic of China.

<sup>12</sup> My research was personally supported by the H. H. Dalai Lama from 1997 to 2013. The involvement of the Dalai Lama in my work served as an imprimatur, helping to insure unparalleled access to the spirit-mediums of Upper Tibet.

As explained in *Calling Down the Gods (CDG)*, male spirit-mediums in Upper Tibet are commonly known as *lha-pa* (god-carrier/god-man), *dpa'-bo* (hero, also an epithet of sacred mountains), and *lha 'beb-mkhan/lha-babs-mkhan* (god-descended-one). Female mediums are called *dpa'-mo* (heroine), *lha-mo* (god-woman) and *klu-mo* (water-serpent-woman). In eastern Tibet, other terms for analogous spirit-mediums include *lha-kha* (god-mouth), *lha 'dzin* (god-possessed) and *lha-zhon* (god-ridden).

Traditionally, Tibetans believe that when the *thugs* (mind) or *bla* (animating principle) of a divinity enters a spirit-medium, it variously acts to heal people and livestock, exorcise bad spirits and harmful influences, bring good fortune, and predict the outcome of future events. Among the first Western scholarly accounts of this Tibetan cultural phenomenon are found in late Victorian works by Das (1882) and Waddell (1895),<sup>13</sup> in which they describe the use of a draped arrow (*mda'-dar*) to expel pain and demons, the wearing of the headdress of five diadems (*rigs-Ingga*), reliance on Bon and Buddhist tutelary deities, and the cult of personal and territorial spirits of the indigenous substrate.<sup>14</sup> As my work demonstrates, these remain salient features of spirit-mediumship in Upper Tibet to the present day (the draped arrow and lobed headdress also play a major role in conventional Buddhist and Yungdrung Bon rituals).

Publications selected for this PhD dissertation (for bibliographic details, see addendum, *infra*) examine the legendary origins, hereditary links, ritual practices, pantheon, and trance liturgies upon which spirit-mediums in Upper Tibet rely.<sup>15</sup> This body of work is based on in-depth interviews carried out in Tibet and on the Indian Subcontinent in the 1990s and 2000s. It includes fully annotated translation of a wide variety of Tibetan texts related to spirit-mediumship, as well as transcription and translation of the oral

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<sup>13</sup> Das, S. C. 1882: *Contributions on the Religion and History of Tibet*. Reprint, Delhi: Manjushri Publishing House, 1970.

Waddell, L. A. 1895: *Buddhism and Lamaism of Tibet. With its Mystic Cults, Symbolism and Mythology, and its Relation to Indian Buddhism*. Reprint, Darjeeling: Oxford Book & Stationery Company, 1993.

<sup>14</sup> The draped or festooned arrow is an arrow with colorful clothes, small metal mirror and other objects attached to it used in a wide range of Tibet ritual practices. The headdress with five diadems is a type of headgear typically used in tantric rituals. Each diadem typically contains an image of one of the five directional Buddhas. Bon is the name variously given to an amorphous body ancient religious traditions and to a modern Lamaist region alleged to be its successor. The wide range of Tibetan tutelary deities are those with which monks, ritualists, and lay people have a personal relationship for realizing of spiritual and worldly goals. It is widely held that before the domination of Buddhism in Tibet in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, there existed various religious traditions and cults subsumed under the label 'indigenous substrate'. Some of these ancient traditions, however, are not indigenous per se, as they were borrowed from other peoples and territories in antiquity.

<sup>15</sup> In my book *Calling Down the Gods*, I supply a general orientation introducing the people, places, concepts, and practices of the tradition. Thereafter, the full range of traditional beliefs and practices of spirit-mediumship in Upper Tibet are explored through in-depth interviews with widely respected members of the profession. This contemporary ethnographic perspective is augmented by a Yungdrung Bon text (*Dri med gzi brjid*, 14<sup>th</sup> century), which contains a myth of origins (*cho-rabs*) of spirit-mediumship embedded within the much larger doctrinal framework of an institutionalized religion. According to the Albert Hoffstädt (in personal communication on two different occasions), chief editor of Brill's Tibetan Library Series, *Calling Down the Gods* is the best-selling volume in this collection of more than thirty books.

liturgies. My study utilizes a diachronic model to delineate historical and contemporary aspects of spirit-mediumship, drawing upon a wide range of ethnographic and textual sources to investigate the phenomenon of spirit-possession (*lha-bzhugs*). Thus, the continuity of the tradition, and the way in which it has been conceived and preserved, is the underlying theme that gives this work its narrative and analytical coherence.

The term 'spirit-mediums' accurately sums up their central activity in Upper Tibet: the ability to serve as vessels or mediums for a host of different spirits. According to the testimonies of these practitioners, mediumship occurs when their normal consciousness and personality is replaced by that of a summoned deity. This mediumistic function is the basis of their profession, serving to distinguish spirit-mediums from other types of Tibetan religious practitioners such as ordinary monks (*grwa-pa*), lay ritualists (*sngags-pa*), and story tellers (*sgrung-pa*). Furthermore, all spirit-mediums studied in Upper Tibet are lay practitioners, in contradistinction to monk counterparts who operate in the ecclesiastic setting.

The pervasive cultural impulse of people acting as or becoming deities is one of the pillars on which the Tibetan system of religion is based. Upper Tibetans hold that spirit-mediums serve as incarnate forms of the region's mountain gods as well as a range of other divinities. They widely believe that when the consciousness of a deity enters a spirit-medium the latter acts and speaks on its behalf. Tibetans also observe that under possession of the gods, spirit-mediums heal sick people and livestock, perform exorcisms, bring good fortune to those struck by bad luck, offer sage advice, and predict the course of future events. Local inhabitants have sought their services for centuries, and some spirit-mediums from the region have taken up their vocation in exile on the Indian Subcontinent.

Contemporary spirit-mediums remaining in Upper Tibet appear to have internalized the tradition with a remarkable degree of competency, despite cataclysmic changes in Tibet over the last sixty years. This is substantiated by the vocation's strikingly uniform foundations and articulation throughout Upper Tibet. As ascertained by my fieldwork, spirit-mediums of the region are also distinguished by their peerless behavior. This is the predominant perception of those who live in their communities as well.

### **The study of spirit-mediums: Methodological and theoretical considerations**

The publications selected for this study provide an ethnographic and philological exposition of the thinking and endeavour of spirit-mediums in Upper Tibet. The theoretical premise of the work is built around the retrieval and elucidation of a traditional profession pivotal to the sociocultural integrity of a large part of Tibet. In sundry parts of the world, spirit-mediums are examined through a variety of disciplinary lenses (e.g., cognitive anthropology, social anthropology, ethno-psychiatry, psychoanalysis, etc.), but in the case of Upper Tibet where access to foreign scholars has been extremely limited these are probably better suited as follow-up approaches. As valid as such alternative instruments of enquiry and analysis may be to advancing an understanding of spirit-mediumship, especially in the formulation of interpretive paradigms, they are all dependent on a firm appreciation of its ethnographic and geographic context. It is to this end that my work has been undertaken.



Only through sound documentation of the historical, cultural and linguistic basis of the tradition can other perspectives on spirit-mediums be effectively pursued. Thorough acquaintance with the tradition can inform the direction subsequent research may take.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, intimate knowledge of what spirit-mediums say, do and believe helps guard against methodological overreach, whereby a limited amount of anthropological data is shoehorned into a theoretical template that may lead to excessive decontextualization or overgeneralization.

My field of study can be characterized as Tibetological in nature; that is, the collecting, organizing and analyzing Tibetan cultural materials with the goal of contributing to the informational and theoretical scope of Tibetan studies. Tibetology, my work included, is founded on Tibetan linguistic competency, a mastery of the academic literature, and vigorous engagement with pressing questions in the field. Tibetology relies upon a wide range of methodological and theoretical avenues borrowed from the social sciences and sciences more generally.<sup>17</sup> Tibetologists employ various *modi operandi* in presenting their work ranging from more implicit approaches to well-ordered expositions of the methodology and theoretical assumptions employed. Disparate approaches to the structuralising of materials reflect the diversity of Tibetology, for it encompasses a wide range of disciplines from social anthropology and development studies to philology and archaeology. In this regard, Tibetology is more akin to interdisciplinary area studies than a specific field of research.<sup>18</sup>

The methodology used in my selected publications is geared toward an emic understanding of spirit-mediumship in Upper Tibet and is of two major types: ethnographic and philological. Ethnographic methodology is grounded in *in situ* observations and interviews with spirit-mediums with the objective to uncover as much of their tradition as possible.<sup>19</sup> Thus, trance and pre-trance proceedings, as well as

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<sup>16</sup> Research still pending in Upper Tibet that can benefit from careful documentation of emic aspects of the tradition includes matters revolving around the physiology of the trance state, the epistemology of possession, the medical significance of healing methods, societal representations of religious identity, market economy impacts, and sociopolitical hegemony and assimilation.

<sup>17</sup> On Tibetological methodological approaches to ritual and ethnographic study see, for example, Cabezón José Ignacio (ed.). 2010: *Tibetan Rituals*. New York: Oxford University Press. Kapstein, Matthew T. and Brandon Dotson (eds.). 2007: *Contributions to the Cultural History of Early Tibet*. Leiden: Brill.

Lopez Jr., Donald (ed). 1997: *Religions of Tibet in Practice*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

<sup>18</sup> Disparate of methods and theoretical assumptions are seen even in a single sub-field of Tibetology. For example, in Bon studies, see the variety of approaches used in:

Rossi, Donatella and Karmay, Samten G (eds.). 2009: *Bon, the Everlasting Religion of Tibet: Tibetan Studies in Honour of Professor David L. Snellgrove*, special issue of *East and West*, vol. 59, nos. 1-4.

Karmay, Samten G and Nagano, Y (eds.). 2000: *New Horizons in Bon Studies: Bon Studies 2*. Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology.

Blezer, Henk (ed). 2011: *Emerging Bon: The Formation of Bon Traditions in Tibet at the Turn of the First Millennium AD*. Bonn: International Institute for Tibetan and Buddhist Studies.

<sup>19</sup> For a similar set of ethnographic method employed in the study of spirit-mediums in Tibet, see: Nagano, Sadako. 2000: "Sacrifice and Lha-pa in the Glu-rol Festival of Reb-skong" in S.G. Karmay & Y. Nagano, eds., *New Horizons in Bon Studies* (Senri Ethnological Reports no. 15), pp. 567-649. Odaka: National Museum of Ethnology.

the social and cultural setting in which practitioners and clients interrelate, were recorded in photographs, audio recordings, and extensive descriptions in notebooks. Interviews were systematized over time to collect standardized types of data for compilation and analysis as a prelude to publication. These interviews consisted of over 250 questions, broken down into five major areas (typically, the full complement of questions, when feasible, required ten to fifteen hours conducted over two or three sessions):

1. Personal information regarding the demographic, genealogical, biographical, economic, social status of spirit-mediums.
2. Obtaining recollections on the initiation and childhood experiences of spirit-mediums.
3. Probing the notions, concepts, feelings, and views held by spirit-mediums regarding their profession.
4. Technical information concerning the history, significance and use of ritual costumes, instruments and practices, as well as information on the ordinary religious traditions and worldview of spirit-mediums.
5. Follow-up questions to aid in elucidating and augmenting what was observed and recorded in the field.

A great deal of Tibetan literature and 'oral texts' were translated to carry out my study. These translations were compared with observations and interviews carried out in the field, intensifying my grasp on the historical and cultural milieu in which spirit-mediumship operates. Meeting this objective entailed the application of philological methodologies which can be outlined as follows:

1. Understanding the grammatical, lexical and syntactical content of texts.
2. Appreciating the historical, cultural and sectarian orientation of texts.
3. Utilizing texts to better understand historical and cultural conditions prevailing in Upper Tibet.
4. Applying texts to the study of spirit-mediumship.

Based on these ethnographic methods, the Tibetological nature of the selected publications follows in the footsteps of pioneering work conducted by other scholars.<sup>20</sup> Three studies of Upper Tibetan spirit-

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Balikci, Anna. 2008: *Lamas, Shamans and Ancestors. Village Religion in Sikkim*. Brill's Tibetan Studies Library, vol. 17, Leiden: Brill.

<sup>20</sup> The other studies on the spirit-mediums of Upper Tibet are of article length and are as follows:  
Berglie, Per. A. 1992: "Tibetan Spirit-mediumship: Change and Continuity. Some Observations from a Revisit to Nepal", in *Tibetan Studies. Proceedings of the 5th Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies, Narita 1989*, vol. 2 (eds. I Shōren and Y. Zuihō), pp. 361–368. Narita: Naritasan Shinshoji.

mediums by Berglie (1976; 1978; 1980) examine the initiation practices, sacred geography, pantheon of tutelary spirits, remedial regimen, and trance ceremonies of spirit-mediums, as I do in my work. Nevertheless, my publications expand significantly upon these subjects, affording book length treatment and further study in additional articles. Significantly, my work is founded upon extensive fieldwork conducted in Upper Tibet. Other studies, except for Diemberger's (2005), were made exclusively on the Indian Subcontinent. For example, while Berglie admirably describes the initiation cave of spirit-mediums on the flanks of the Rta-gp range, he is only able sketch its geographic aspect. In addition to my descriptions of the initiation cave obtained in interviews with spirit-mediums in Tibet highlighted in the book *Calling Down the Gods* (hereafter: *CDG*), I visited the highly remote site and give an archaeological description and analysis of it (Bellezza 2014a: 279–281). Moreover, Berglie's articles do not cover textual aspects of spirit-mediumship in Tibet, an extensive resource crucial to placing the tradition within the wider historical and cultural ambit. Like Berglie (1992), Geels (1992) worked with Upper Tibetan spirit-mediums in a Nepalese refugee community. Geels furnishes ethnographic materials on the material repertoire and trance proceedings, offering a psychoanalytical perspective on the trance state. Both Berglie and Geels interviewed the late Karma Wangchuk, as I do in *CDG*. Although there are many areas of convergence in our work, Geels does not appear to be conversant with many Tibetan terms related to spirit-mediumship. Concerned primarily with the psychological dynamic of possession, his article contains only around a dozen transliterations of specialized words, leaving many ritual objects and procedures discussed bereft of their Tibetan language underpinnings. Berglie in his articles displays considerably deeper knowledge of Tibetan, something I pursue a good deal further in the interviews and literary elements of my work.

Diemberger (2005) presents a highly competent Tibetological study of a female spirit-medium in Upper Tibet.<sup>21</sup> The examination of the tradition in its homeland is critical to understanding the social, economic and political context in which spirit-mediums toil. Moreover, the full range of ritual objects can only be studied *in situ*, as practitioners in-exile are considerably poorer in material terms. Diemberger's sketch of the historical development of spirit-mediumship is largely in sync with the analysis I supply in the

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\_\_\_\_1980: " 'Mount Targo and Lake Dangra': A Contribution to the Religious Geography of Tibet", in *Tibetan Studies in Honour of Hugh Richardson. Proceedings of the International Seminar of Tibetan Studies, Oxford, 1979* (eds. M. Aris, Aung San Suu Kyi), pp. 39–43. Warminster: Aris & Phillips Ltd.

\_\_\_\_1978: "On the Question of Tibetan Shamanism", in *Tibetan studies presented at the Seminar of Young Tibetologists* (eds. M. Brauen and P. Kvaerne), pp. 39–51. Zürich: Völkerkundemuseum der Universität Zürich.

\_\_\_\_1976: "Preliminary remarks on some Tibetan 'spirit-mediums' in Nepal", in *Kailash: A Journal of Himalayan Studies*, vol. iv, no. 1, pp. 85–108. Kathmandu: Ratna Pustak Bhandar.

Diemberger, Hilda. 2005: "Female Oracles in Modern Tibet", in *Women in Tibet* (eds. J. Gyatso and H. Havnevik), pp. 113–168. London: Hurst & Company.

Geels, Antoon. 1992: "Ego-Psychology and the Problem of Ecstasy", in *Tibetan Studies. Proceedings of the 5th Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies, Narita 1989*, vol. 2 (eds. I Shōren and Y. Zuihō), pp. 451–464. Narita: Naritasan Shinshoji.

<sup>21</sup> I also present information gleaned from interviews with female spirit-mediums in *CDG* and another published works. See pp. 318, 319 of Bellezza 1997: *Divine Dyads: Ancient Civilization in Tibet*. Dharamsala: Library of Tibetan Works and Archives.

selected publications. However, Diemberger treats sociological and political aspects of contemporary spirit-mediumship, whereas I maintain a narrower focus on vocational elements of the tradition. It should be noted that even shorn of a social and political metanarrative, the vocation is sufficiently vast and complex to warrant far more enquiry than has been possible to date.

### **The ways and means: The vocation of spirit-mediumship in Upper Tibet**

My selected publications detail how spirit-mediumship in Upper Tibet is kept alive by lineages of practitioners, nearly all of which are hereditary. The vocation is inherited from both paternal and maternal ancestors. Some lineages are claimed to extend for nine or thirteen generations, these specific numbers having acquired the import of 'many' or a 'multitude'. They are employed by spirit-mediums to express a long-standing family tradition. I also detail how Upper Tibetan spirit-mediums learn the techniques of their profession and acquire divine allies through the tutelage of elder figures. This is not a vocation chosen voluntarily but is one foisted upon individuals by the deities themselves, or so it is believed by practitioners. Without exception among the more than twenty spirit-mediums interviewed (a considerable proportion of the total number of senior practitioners in the region), possession (especially in the first few years) is a traumatic experience causing much mental and physical distress. Initially, there is a fear that the possessing entity might be a demon rather than a bona fide god. Traditionally, a high lama is invited by the family of the one so afflicted to determine the nature of possession. If the lama ascertains that religiously sanctioned deities are responsible for trances, he performs a consecration ceremony (*rab-gnas*) and blesses the budding spirit-medium, exhorting him or her to lead a wholesome life in order that the deities may find suitable residence in the human body. In the event possession is the result of malevolent influences, an exorcism of the evil spirits is conducted.

My work retails the initiation of a spirit-medium, which takes up to several years and includes devotional practices, trance sittings with senior practitioners, and pilgrimage to holy places. In the pre-Communist period, lamas regularly travelled to Upper Tibet, testing candidates to see if their abilities were up to the grade. This was sometimes carried out as part of a Lhasa government certification process.

The deities and implements used by the spirit-mediums, and the recitations and rites that take place in their trance ceremonies are described in depth in my study. It reveals that the oral and literary dimensions associated with the profession are mutually reinforcing; in both, concepts of authority, practice and utility are entwined. Despite being a non-literate tradition in practice (most older spirit-mediums are illiterate), their vocational lineages (*lha-rgyud*), the deities they exploit (*lha-bdag*) and therapeutic regimen (*sel*, *sri-bcad*, *g.yang-'gugs*, etc.) are reflected in textual sources; the oral informing the written and vice versa. In rites of initiation, sanctification and legitimization, interactions between spirit-mediums and monks and lamas continue to the present day, serving as a bridge between the oral and literary traditions.

The mouthpieces of the gods are depended upon often for healing and divination in Upper Tibet. The perceived ability of spirit-mediums to effectively arbitrate between the world of deities and the earthly community of humans and livestock seems to explain their persistence over time. Having had a widespread, integrated presence in the pastoral communities of Upper Tibet prior to the 1960s certainly

indicates a long-term success of sorts. While a number of factors potentially account for this historical continuity, cultural presumptions of utility and value are bound to have played a key role in the perpetuation of spirit-mediumship. Spirit-mediums are assigned with providing essential remedial services, treating the physically and mentally ill, and giving guidance to those embarking on long trips and new business ventures. Furthermore, they provide these services in a rather egalitarian manner, whereby remuneration received in goods or cash is dependent on the inclination and financial means of the patient or client. In other words, there are usually no fixed rates for their exertions, permitting people of all economic circumstances to avail themselves of their services. Aside from practicing as spirit-mediums, most members of the profession are engaged in animal husbandry and trade like other herders.

Under-developed and politically neglected Upper Tibet in the pre-1959 era was a particularly conducive environment for spirit-mediums. Upper Tibetans report that almost every district had at least one or two of them. There were relatively few monasteries in Upper Tibet and these could be located many miles from herders' settlements, hence assistance from the clergy was not always available. Likewise, there were not enough professional medical practitioners (*Em-chi/sman-pa*) to cater to the health needs of the population. The services of spirit-mediums therefore acted as a substitute to those of lamas and doctors. In some cases, however, so highly respected were spirit-mediums that they were actively sought out as an alternative to other types of religious and medical practitioners. Spirit-mediums had the unique advantage of being culturally invested with the power to act and speak on behalf of the deities. As the gods came alive through them, they represented one of the most tangible and immediate forms of religious expression in Tibet. Highly proficient spirit-mediums were held in awe; tales of their exploits spreading far and wide. Invariably, the great spirit-mediums of past generations were attributed supernatural powers. Their magical abilities are commonly thought to have extended to riding on wild animals, flying in the sky, and incredible feats of healing and physical strength.

As explained in the selected publications, by their own admission, spirit-mediums become the incarnate form of a deity through the evacuation of their own consciousness (*rnam-shes*). They claim their personal identity is substituted for that of the deity, thus their speech and bearing become the deity's. Whatever physiological and psychological factors may be implicated, the possession of spirit-mediums is heralded by radical changes in orality and comportment. Under the perceived dominion of a deity, they perspire profusely, exhibit signs of great physical strain and extraordinary strength, foam at the mouth, and suffer seizures and disappearance of the irises in the back of the head. Many of the remedial or helping spirits of the trance take the forms of eagles, owls, bear, wolves, tigers and foxes, and under their influence spirit-mediums behave in a like manner.

Typically, at the end of a trance spirit-mediums have no recollection of what just transpired. He or she usually has an assistant, a close friend or family member, who will relate what happened when the possessing deity was present. This assistant also participates in the ceremony, bringing whatever offerings or objects the possessing deity calls for, and helps to translate its utterances to patients and clients. The voice of the embodied deity is not always comprehensible to those in attendance because of unusual voice modulation, indistinct enunciation or low amplitude. Also, deities are supposed to

sometimes speak in foreign languages such as 'language of the gods' (*lha-skad*), which can only be interpreted by those of long association with a spirit-medium.

Tibetans generally accept that a genuine spirit-medium can only be host to one consciousness at a time. Spirit-mediums imagine that at the moment of possession their personal consciousness is transferred to a metal mirror (*me-long*) or some other refuge, where it remains in the protective embrace of a tutelary deity until the end of the trance proceedings. Spirit-mediums maintain that the personal consciousness exits from the top of the head while the consciousness of the deity (commonly referred to as 'light rays': *'od-zer*) enters the spirit-medium through other parts of the head, chest or hands. Similarly, spirit-mediums say that when the possessing deity exits from their body, the personal consciousness returns in the same manner as it exited. Whilst inside the body, the deity's consciousness is said to dwell in invisible channels spread throughout living organisms known as *rtsa*. In Tibetan medical theory as derived from Tibetan tantric tradition, these subtle channels give rise to nervous impulses and are responsible for the transmission of consciousness and sensory data. It is not unusual for more than one deity to be involved in a trance ceremony. In that case, deities are reported to wait in bronze mirrors for each other to exit before the next one takes up possession of a spirit-medium.

### **Gods and goddesses galore: The pantheon of spirit-mediums in Upper Tibet**

As described in *CDG*, according to the Yungdrung Bon canonical text *Dri med gzi brjid*, the tradition of spirit-mediumship in Tibet relied upon protective deities known as *sgra-bla* and closely related of classes of spirits bound up in the physical environment such as the *lha* and *gnyan*. Nonetheless, in its present Buddhist-influenced configuration, spirit-mediums in Upper Tibet customarily exploit several types of divinities to accomplish trance states arranged in as many as five hierarchical rungs. In descending order of status and importance they comprise:

1. *Yi-dam* (enlightened tutelary deities)
2. *'Jig-rten las 'das-pa'i srung-ma* (protective deities that have passed beyond the sphere of worldly existence) and *mkha'-'gro-ma* (divine benefactresses)
3. *Lha-ri* (chief mountain gods) and *lha-mtsho* (chief lake goddesses)
4. *Lha-ri 'khor-bcas* (members of the retinue of the mountain gods), *btsan* (martial spirits of mountains) and *lha-mtsho 'khor bcas* (members of the retinue of lake goddesses)
5. Remedial or ancillary servant spirits in anthropomorphic and zoomorphic form

In addition to this hierarchy, the omniscient Buddha himself is thought to be present at trance ceremonies as a kind of witness who exerts a salubrious influence. The first two tiers of deities are presumed to be present at every trance ceremony due to the indispensable nature of their work. These higher deities, while playing an essential role in the trance ceremony, do not possess spirit-mediums, rather they work from the outside. Practitioners customarily believe that no mere human being could withstand their full bodily invasion. Of course in Tibetan tantric tradition, practitioners visualize and

embody higher tutelary deities but without the loss of the personal consciousness, a viscerally less potent form of possession. The deities of the lower three categories vary from trance to trance, although in practice spirit-mediums have several gods with which they are most acquainted.

*Yi-dam* are the patrons of the trance ceremony and many are deified early masters of tantric Buddhism such as Gu-ru rin-po-che and *grub-chen/grub-thob (mahāsiddha)*. Spirit-mediums affirm that they oversee the proceedings of the trance and insure their health and personal integrity. The *yi-dam* are most often deities that spirit-mediums worship in the course of their regular religious observances. In terms of power and ability, all other deities participating in the trance ceremony are regarded as subservient and must heed the spiritual and advice and practical guidance of the tutelary gods.

Below the *yi-dam* in rank are the protective deities, which according to Yungdrung Bon and Buddhist theology, have passed beyond transmigratory existence. They are often referred to as *bstan-srung* (protectors of the doctrine), *bka'-srung* (protectors of the teachings) and *chos-skyong* (defenders of religion). The most popular protectors for spirit-mediums are the great Tibetan protectress dPal-Idan lha-mo and various black figures known as mGon-po (Mahākāla). In some cases, these personalities are the household protective deities (*phugs-lha*) of spirit-mediums. Tibetans commonly avouch that guardian deities defend the interests of the spirit-mediums and those of their patients and clients. Spirit-mediums credit them with preventing demonic entities from interfering in the trance ceremony and inoculate against infection by evil spirits and contaminated substances handled while carrying out healing activities. Spirit-mediums also attest that the protective deities collaborate with the chief possessing deities and help them accomplish their mission during possession.

Another group of deities that have the same or a slightly lower status than the otherworldly protectors are the *mkha'-gro-ma*, the group of wisdom-bearing goddesses in tantric Buddhist tradition. They are best described as the benefactresses of the trance ceremony entrusted with the physical and mental well-being of the spirit-medium. Spirit-mediums say that they serve as hostesses, welcoming and situating other deities participating in the trance who appear from all directions. It is generally held that the *mkha'-gro-ma* do not enter inside a spirit-medium's body.

The main mountain gods found in the pantheon of many of the spirit-mediums are gNyan-chen thang-lha and rTa-rgo dge-rgan,<sup>22</sup> the two most powerful territorial guardians in Upper Tibet. My research indicates that with the possible exception of the mightiest spirit-mediums they do not deign to possess humans. These archetypal father figures and ancestral deities are white in color and ride white steeds. gNyan-chen thang-lha and rTa-rgo dge-rgan are believed to uphold the best interests of the spirit-mediums and patients alike. Spirit-mediums assert that they usually manage the activities of the trance from the sidelines. Like military commanders, they direct their large armies of subsidiary forms and servants to carry out specific procedures on a patient's behalf. gNyan-chen thang-lha and rTa-rgo dge-rgan are paired to gNam-mtsho and Dang-ra g.yu-mtsho respectively. These lake goddesses sometimes participate in trance ceremonies as well, along with their vast entourages of *klu* and *smān* spirits. In

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<sup>22</sup> For detailed information on these mountain gods, see Bellezza 1997. Also see Part Three of *Calling Down the Gods*.

Tibetan religious doctrine, the *lha-ri* and *lha-mtsho* are conceived of as worldly spirits (*'jig rten-pa'i lha*), and if angered can become indisposed to individuals, families and communities. In such instances, the intervention of a spirit-medium is seen as instrumental in restoring the balance between deities and humans.

Typically, the main deity of possession announces its identity to those present at a trance ceremony upon entering the spirit-medium. The possessing deities are frequently subsidiary forms of mountain gods, the most significant of which include Thang-sras-mchor-po (son of gNyan-chen thang-lha), rDo-rje rkyang-khra (member of gNyan-chen thang-lha's circle) and Ngo-dmar lha-btsan and Gangs-lung lha-btsan (red rock mountain spirits in the entourage of rTa-rgo dge-rgan). Spirit-mediums believe that the possessing deities battle demons and harmful forces and receive orders from their corresponding *lha-ri*. Lesser mountain gods are possessing entities in their own right and include most notably bTsan-rgod nam-ra (located in Bar-tha), Rol-pa-skya-bdun (three major brotherhoods in Upper Tibet) and Gangs-ri lha-btsan (located at Mount Ti-se). When these divinities possess a spirit-medium the two chief *lha-ri* (Thang-lha and rTa-rgo) are not present, for they are affiliated to different territories and theogonies.

The possessing deities are thought to control a wide assortment of remedial spirits belonging to their retinues. These are generically referred to by the spirit-mediums as *grib-sbyong* (contamination cleaners) and by the roughly homonymous terms *'jibs-spyang* (sucking wolf) and *grib-spyang* (contamination wolf). They serve as foot soldiers, removing impurities from the body of patients, join in battle with evil spirits and capture errant souls. Helping spirits often assume zoomorphic form and can probably be traced to an early period in the cultural development of Upper Tibet. These prototypic divinities appear in the guise of both wild and domestic animals. For healing and exorcism fierce creatures are used, including wild yaks, wolves, tigers, horned eagles, and hawks, etc. For ushering in prosperity and good luck spirits in the form of livestock are commonplace. Thus, among the armory of remedial spirits we find divine yaks, sheep, and goats, reflecting the pastoral way of life predominating in Upper Tibet.

Similar zoomorphic deities were used by other kinds of Tibetan religious practitioners who are said to have been sometimes transformed into animals themselves. For example, in the quasi-historical Yungdrung Bon text *Rig 'dzin rig-pa'i thugs-rgyud* (12<sup>th</sup> century CE), a prehistoric adept gZing-pa mthu-chen manifested as a wolf in order to recover wandering souls.<sup>23</sup>

### **From on high: The pre-trance and trance speech of spirit-mediums**

Between 1997 and 2007, I conducted interviews with twenty-three spirit-mediums. All but two of these men and women reside in the wide expanses of Upper Tibet (some have since died). Chosen as representative figures of the vocation for inclusion in the selected publications are interviews with three

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<sup>23</sup> See p. 58 of Bellezza 2001: *Antiquities of Northern Tibet: Archaeological Discoveries on the High Plateau. (Findings of the Changthang Circuit Expedition, 1999)*. Delhi: Adroit.



of these individuals: sGrol-dkar (born ca. 1952) of Ra-bang, Karma rig 'dzin (born ca. 1935) of sMad-pa, and Bsam-gtan (born ca. 1951) of bSe-'khor.<sup>24</sup>

The transcription and translation of the trance ceremony recordings reveal an oral tradition of much historical interest and literary value. The trance utterances confirm that the old cult of warrior spirits persisted despite Buddhist inroads in Upper Tibet over the last millennium. The words spoken also bring to light antiquated forms of speech of much linguistic and literary interest.

Although Berglie (1978; 1992), Geels (1992) and Diemberger (2005) provide translations of the utterances of Upper Tibetan spirit-mediums whilst in trance, these consist of short sequences. These authors, offer unannotated translations without the benefit of the Tibetan text, precluding a philological analysis of the materials presented. Borrowing from recordings and translations of the entire ceremonies, I supply a much more complete picture of the liturgical, prosodic and rhetorical traditions of spirit-mediums in my work. This well-rounded treatment of the trance ceremony serves as a powerful tool for assessing the purview of archaic and Lamaist aspects of Upper Tibetan spirit-mediumship.

The three articles selected for inclusion among the selected publications focus on the liturgical and oracular recitations of spirit-mediums in Upper Tibet. An examination of the utterances confirms that spirit-mediumship in Upper Tibet is comprised of distinctive streams of Tibetan religious tradition. Their speech proved highly innovative and adaptable, combining diverse religious sources to create a unique corpus of prayer, verse and narrative sequences. The religious sources for spirit-mediumship in Upper Tibet can be outlined as follows:

1. Mahayāna and Vajrayāna doctrines (Buddhist and Yungdrung Bon canonical and commentarial materials)
2. Tibetan folk culture (oral tradition and customs of pastoralists)
3. gCod cult (radical offerings of the body practices of disparate origins)
4. Gling ge-sar sgrung (Tibet's national epic)
5. Phya-gshen theg-pa (non-Buddhist system of divinatory rituals)

A study of the words and activities of spirit-mediums during trance ceremonies uncovered the basic structure of the proceedings. Its basic components can be ordered as follows:

1. Preliminary Buddhist refuge (*skyabs-'gro*) and aspirant prayers (*smon-lam*) said once spirit-medium has prepared the special altar and donned the ceremonial costume
2. Fumigation and invocation ritual (*bsang/lha-gsol*) for the tutelary and protective deities
3. Libations offering ritual (*gser-skyems*) for the participating divinities

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<sup>24</sup> bSam-gtan appears under an assumed name to protect his identity. This was deemed crucial in the climate of religious intolerance and persecution that has resurfaced in Tibet in recent years. On the other hand, elderly spirit-mediums I have worked with did not want their real identities concealed, feeling that in their final years they had little to fear.

4. Invitation of the deities (*lha spyan-'dren*) to the ritual venue and to the body of the spirit-medium
5. Proclamation of the lineage of the deities (*lha-rabs*). This sequence marks the beginning of possession by the deities of the trance
6. Petitioning of the deities of the trance (*bka'-lung*) in which clients ask questions to the spirit-medium and he or she responds to their requests. Remedial procedures are typically carried out at this time
7. Formulating the prophecy (*lung-bstan brtag-pa*) and presentation of oracular utterances (*lung-bstan*) and advice (*zhal-gdams*)
8. Summoning of good fortune (*g.yang-'gugs*) by deities of the trance
9. The return of the deities to their normal abodes (*gshegs-bskyod*)

One major element of the pre-trance portion of the spirit-mediums' proceedings is the fumigation ritual (*bsang*). It is composed of two parts: the actual fumigation and offerings of incense to deities taking part in the proceedings, and supplications to win their support and protection. Many kinds of divinities are called upon, underlining the eclectic nature of spirit-mediumship in Upper Tibet. The burning of incense is believed to help purify the environment and the worldly classes of spirits that inhabit it, restoring the equilibrium between all beings of the Tibetan cosmos. This is seen as essential to personal well-being and the successful conduct of society. Customarily, a host of higher deities of Buddhism, local mountain gods and lake goddesses and their retinues, and various warrior spirits are entreated in this manner. The fumigation ritual recorded for the spirit-medium Karma rig-'dzin ran for some 237 lines and the one for Pho-bo srid-rgyal was 100 lines in length. Such ritual recitations are excellent sources of information about sacred geographical concepts, including lore documented in texts lost during the persecution of Tibetan religion in the Chinese Cultural Revolution.

As tradition in Upper Tibet would have it, during possession a spirit-medium's body no longer contains his or her psyche or personality; it has become a receptacle for a divine consciousness working through his corporeality. The very moment this is supposed to occur, spirit-mediums cry out *phaṭ!*, a sacred ejaculation that heralds a clean break from the confines of the ordinary consciousness.

During possession spirit-mediums typically jump to their feet and begin to dance, sometimes wildly, while sounding their musical instruments. Their breathing becomes heavier and manner more excited, and their words are pronounced with much gusto. The recitations of some spirit-mediums open with *yā ah ha*, a non-lexical utterance that lyrically express elation and triumph. Spirit-mediums conceive that during this time they are being overwhelmed by the possessing deities and helping spirits that appear before the mind's eye. The presiding god of the trance is usually announced in a dramatic but stately style.

In the first stage of possession spirit-mediums divulges the names and descriptions of various divine figures in a colorful procession of personalities and images (*lha-rabs*). They articulate the origins, names and appearances of the deities, frequently singing these lines quickly and forcefully. It is during this sequence of the trance ceremony that the presiding god announces its identity through the spirit-medium. The deity directly addresses those in attendance but does not immediately reveal who he or she is. Instead, the god or goddess describes its place of residence in cryptic language. The god

challenges observers to tease out his identity by imparting a list of clues. This manner of communicating is closely aligned to the non-Buddhist riddle format of ancient times known as *lde'u*. In conformance with the *lde'u* format, deities speaking through spirit-mediums rely on figurative and symbolic language to reinforce their renown and extraordinary qualities. The verses spoken in the *lha-rabs* often contain archaisms, most notably a remarkable verb morphology now seen only in non-lexical trisyllabic verse ornaments.<sup>25</sup>

After the description of the divine overseer of the trance is completed, spirit-mediums usually launch into the entrusting of activities (*'phrin-bcol*) to protect and usher in good fortune for those in attendance, a prime purpose of most proceedings. The entrusting of activities is also a mainstay of Tibetan tantric ritualism, but in the liturgies of spirit-mediums in Upper Tibet they are shorn of the philosophical content that invests tantric practice with its meaning and form. Some of the unadorned verses allude to an indigenous tradition, which like so many other customs and traditions subsequently came under the organizing influence of tantricism. In this interval of the trance ceremony a good many warrior spirits (*dgra-lha/sgra-bla*) are summoned.

According to the Yungdrung Bon tradition, martial spirits were the mainstay of spirit-mediumship in ancient Tibet. These spirits are believed to have spoken through ancient mediums and carry the epithet, 'warrior spirits of existence' (*srid-pa'i sgra-bla*), and have been elevated to a high theological status in Yungdrung Bon. In terms of personality, appearance and the manner of entreaty, they closely resemble powerful mountain gods used by the spirit-mediums of Upper Tibet today. The *sgra-bla* (known to Tibetan Buddhists as *dgra-lha* and in Old Tibetan manuscripts as *dgra-bla*) occupy an important place in the liturgies and labors of today's spirit-mediums in Upper Tibet. The prominent place of these deities in spirit-mediumship is indicative of the non-Buddhist cultural ground upon which the tradition partly rests. Although difficult to establish with the information available at present, the prominent role of warrior spirits in the liturgies lends credence to an early historical attribution. Among the warrior spirit are those that manifest as vultures, lions and tigers, three of the best known zoomorphic forms of *dgra-lha*.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> For example, in the *lha-rabs* of bSam-gtan, he declaims: "The blue water spirit has many fluttering {shoulder cloths}" (*klu sngon-mo {dpung-dar} shig-ge yod /*)..."His *btsan* horse with a rippling banner of the fierce red ones" (*btsan-rta la btsan-dar nyil-le zhig /*). In these two verses, *shig-ge* and *nyil-le* are predicates, rare instances in Tibetan of verbal forms of non-lexical embellishments; in this case *shigs se shig* and *nyi li li*. See "Spirit-mediumship in Upper Tibet: The Vocation of one expert practitioner", *infra*.

<sup>26</sup> For example, in the *lha-rabs* of the spirit-medium Pho-bo Srid-rgyal we find the following verses: "*Bswo, bswo!* Listen! the sparkling snow mountain of sunrise; I praise the *dgra lha* with the likeness of the white lioness. Listen! I invoke you, white lioness with the very big (*bung se*) turquoise mane. Listen! fulfill their wishes wherever they might go. I invoke you, be the good guide in whatever country they stay" (*Bswo bswo gangs tse re nyi ma rang shar de da kho re / seng dkar mo 'dra le'i dgra lha bswo ya' kho re / seng dkar mo'i g.yu ral bungs se bswo kho re / Sa gar song sa la bsams don sgrubs A kho re / yul gar bsdad sa la kha 'dzin mdzod shog bswo /*). See "The liturgies and oracular utterances of the spirit-mediums of Upper Tibet: An Introduction to their *bSang* Rituals", *infra*.

After the completion of the *lha-rabs*, if the trance ceremony is being convened for curative purposes, the presiding god and his retinue get down to the work of treating patients often through sucking out impurities (*'jibs-sbyangs*) from their bodies. Another fundamental remedial procedure is the summoning of the good fortune potentiality (*g.yang*). Sometimes various prophecies are made for those in attendance as well. Finally, having completed their mission to aid human beings, the chief possessing figure and his/her circles of spirits return to their sundry abodes, marking the end of the trance ceremony.

### **The continuing legacy: Historical aspects of spirit-mediumship in today's Upper Tibet**

Through numerous case studies, the selected publications demonstrate that spirit-mediums remain a vital component of religious and therapeutic systems traditionally relied upon in Upper Tibet. With its long history of continuous expression, their vocation embodies an ideology and praxis containing traits of both non-Buddhist and Buddhist religions. Spirit-mediumship constitutes one of the most robust examples of an older cultural inheritance persisting in the region. Yet, despite a wide range of indigenous traditions informing it in Upper Tibet, these have been systematically assimilated to Buddhism, indelibly marking the vocation. My work illustrates how spirit-mediumship assumed a mantle of legitimacy, philosophical structure, liturgical language, and ritual regimen closely aligned to tantric Buddhism, which has dominated the religious-scape of Tibet for the last millennium.

The Buddhacisation of the canonically non-Buddhist phenomenon of impersonating or embodying spirit entities is neatly recapitulated in an origins myth popular among Upper Tibetan practitioners. As relayed in *CDG*, spirit-mediums state that Gu-ru rin-po-che, the renowned tantric Buddhist master of the 8<sup>th</sup> century CE, initiated four lineages of spirit-mediums in the four cardinal directions of Tibet. Senior spirit-mediums affirm that they are part of these quadpartite lineages which have continued to the present day in an unbroken transmission of the profession. Nevertheless, the Buddhist origins of spirit-mediumship in the oral tradition are incomplete, reflecting the syncretism of the Tibetan mythos and the proselyting activities of monastic institutions. The Buddhist remodeling of mythic origins is best seen as a byproduct of wholesale cultural historical changes in both the literary and oral spheres. This transformation occurred during the transition from pre-existing religious cults to Buddhism and the attendant reorganization of religious life in Tibet in the post-imperial period (ca. 850–1000 CE) and for several centuries thereafter.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> See Bellezza 2014d: "Straddling the Millennial Divide: A case study of persistence and change in the Tibetan ritual tradition based on the *Gnag rabs* of Gathang Bumpa and Eternal Bon documents, circa 900–1100 CE", in *Revue d'études tibétaines*, vol. 29, pp. 155–243. Paris: CNRS.

[http://himalaya.socanth.cam.ac.uk/collections/journals/ret/pdf/ret\\_29\\_07.pdf](http://himalaya.socanth.cam.ac.uk/collections/journals/ret/pdf/ret_29_07.pdf)

2018: *Written in Stone: A Comprehensive Inventory of Early Rock Inscriptions in Upper Tibet (ca. 700–1400 CE)*, in *Tibet Archaeology*, "Flight of the Khyung", February, March, April, and May 2018. <http://www.tibetarchaeology.com/february-may-2018/>

2017-2018: *A Comprehensive Survey of Stepped Shrines in the Rock Art of Upper Tibet: With Archaeological, Cultural and Historical Comments*, in *Tibet Archaeology*, "Flight of the Khyung", November and December 2017, January 2018. <http://www.tibetarchaeology.com/january-2018/>

As expounded upon in my work (2008: 201–205), Buddhist-inspired ideas about spirit-mediumship mirror wider cultural processes that have been in operation for centuries involving religious conversion, popular social changes, realignment of political and economic forces, and the engineering of the literary record. The formation of a cultural dialectic regarding spirit-mediumship was not simply a matter of intellectual persuasion but rather a multivariate dynamic with geographical, sectarian, ideological, and affective facets. As discussed in *CDG*, the overall effect of this process of religious transition is that most spirit-mediums as well as the population at large in Upper Tibet see spirit-mediumship as a thoroughly Buddhist affair. Conceptions about the nature of possession, motivations for practicing, and perceptions associated with its execution are articulated using a Buddhist vocabulary and exercised under Buddhist auspices. For instance, the mountain gods and other deities of possession are regarded as legitimate, oath-bound protectors of the Buddhist doctrine. Similarly, the costumes and implements of spirit-mediums are viewed as part of the tantric dispensation of Tibetan Buddhism.

The tantric Buddhist orientation of spirit-mediumship in Upper Tibet notwithstanding, a major historico-cultural font of the ritual performances is decidedly non-Buddhist in composition. This earlier cultural layer is recognized in Tibet's alternative lamaist religion, Yungdrung Bon.<sup>28</sup> Yungdrung Bon fosters its own theological picture and historical narrative, differing in crucial ways from those of Tibetan Buddhism. According to Yungdrung Bon, spirit-mediums were active in Tibet in prehistoric times (pre-650 CE). Yungdrung Bon maintains that its ancient religious heartland was the Zhang-zhung kingdom in Upper Tibet. *CDG* documents the Yungdrung Bon propagation of mytho-historical notions related to the origins of Tibetan spirit-mediumship. Buddhists scarcely recognize this view of prehistoric roots, which have been codified and set down in Yungdrung Bon canonical texts. The Yungdrung Bon literary record, therefore, is uniquely suited as a heuristic tool for better gauging the breadth of spirit-mediumship in the region. Although the Yungdrung Bon account of the origins of spirit-mediumship may be no more historical in makeup than the Buddhist Gu-ru rin-po-che myth, it is far more elaborate and inclusive, furnishing an enhanced emic perspective on the tradition.

As elaborated in *CDG*, there are scant but tantalizing descriptions in Yungdrung Bon texts of early mediumistic activities set in prehistoric times. The most influential of these is *Dri med gzi brjid*, the largest biography for the legendary founder of Yungdrung Bon, sTon-pa gshen-rab. In an elaboration of the origins and contents of the nine vehicles or systems of religious teachings found in this text (14<sup>th</sup> century CE), mention is made of an oracular tradition in the first vehicle, Phya-gshen theg-pa. Called 'mantic directives of the god of primordial power' (*ye-dbang lha yi bka'-babs*), this revelatory tradition is presented as one of four systems of divination used in the prehistoric era to formulate the prognoses of

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<http://www.tibetarchaeology.com/december-2017/>

<http://www.tibetarchaeology.com/november-2017/>

<sup>28</sup> Although most spirit-mediums in Upper Tibet are Buddhists, the Yungdrung Bon religion is observed in three enclaves in Upper Tibet, west of Nag-chu City: sPo-che in gNam-ru (dPal-mgon county), Dang-ra g.yu-mtsho in Nag-tshang (Nyi-ma county), and Nyi-gzhung in Phyogs-bcu (mTsho-chen county). However, the latter enclave was recently fully converted to Buddhism. Among the last Yungdrung Bon spirit-mediums at Dang-ra g.yu-mtsho was an elderly woman named Sri-thar sgröl-ma whom I had the chance to interview briefly in 1995. Neighbors report that she passed away ca. 2000.

patients. Composed as a hagiography, the historicity of Yungdrung Bon claims of great antiquity for Tibetan spirit-mediumship remain uncorroborated.

In the three articles covering the actual words spoken in the trance proceedings selected for inclusion in this dissertation, I further address questions regarding the historical origins and development of spirit-mediumship in Upper Tibet, summing up what can be asserted as per the current state of our knowledge. While the doctrinal rationale and ritual cast of Upper Tibetan spirit-mediumship is largely Buddhist in nature, the role of native mountain and lake deities in possession, the protective cult of warrior gods (*dgra-lha*), the striking zoomorphism of healing spirits, and the use of ritual instruments such as the draped arrow and flat bell are conspicuous examples of traditions that appear to be of indigenous cultural inspiration. However, native cultural traits in Upper Tibetan spirit-mediumship are difficult to historicize with any certainty. Although certain older cultural elements may have survived intact as relics, most were subject to assimilative processes, whereby they were revamped or reimagined within the compass of Buddhist thought and endeavor.

The earliest literary references to spirit-mediums and the gods revealing themselves through the mouth of humans (*lha-bka'*), both male and female are found in non-Buddhist manuscripts, composed ca. the 8<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> century CE (*CDG*: 10–12). *Lha-bka'* as an oracular function appears to be represented in the Old Tibetan manuscript Pt. 126. This Dunhuang text records a conversation between two lordly figures belonging to the Dmu and Phywa, twin proto-lineages of Tibet. It is not clear however, whether these two individuals represent gods or men. The dialogue they have appears to be related to the acquisition of a lineal deity by the Phywa. In order to obtain a protective god, the Dmu figure is entreated with complimentary words and feted with various offerings. In one excerpt, the Phywa lord requests the directives of the deity but it is not clear whether this is an allusion to an oracular event or a royal decree. If indeed these passages describe a divine prophecy and are not culturally unexampled, they point to the existence of a well-established institution of spirit-mediumship during the time of the Tibetan empire. The account begins with the speech of the Dmu and ends with that of the Phywa who has a proper name in the text:

...I, the humble one, have come here today. You have requested such essential advice/instructions (*bka'-lung*) but please do not avail upon me. Our father and paternal uncle have not come. We will consult with our father and paternal uncle. Then we will give you the advice." sKu-gnyen 'phrul said, "I am very happy that you came here today without caring about the difficulty faced by your horse. I the humble one have seen something of the face of the god. I am obeying the *lha-bka'*. Please confer upon me something of the instructions."<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> For the Tibetan text, see Imaeda *et al* 2000, *Pelliot 126*, lns. 0155-0159: *bdag cag ngan pa mchis pa dang gi gdugs la / 'di 'dra ba'i bka' lung gnyan po g.yar du stsal pa yang / g.yar tshod ma mchis / bdag cag kyi (= gi) yab khu dag kyang ma rdzogs / yab khu dag dang bka' gros bgyis la / de nas khyed cag la bka' lung dag sbyin gis (= gyis) / sku gnyen 'phrul gyi zha (= zhal) snga nas / deng gi gdugs la gor bu'i zhabs tshogs la ma gzigs te gdan gshegs su ngang ba glo ba dga' bdag cag ngan pa lha zhal tsam mthong / lha bka' nyan cing mchis na / bka' stsal pa tsam du ci ngang /*. As many uncertainties related to grammar, vocabulary and syntax in Dunhuang manuscripts remain unresolved, the translation I have provided approximates the import and meaning of the passage.

Direct communications between archaic *bon* and *gshen* priests and deities are recorded in other Old Tibetan literature, presupposing intimate exchanges, which in certain cases must have included actual spirit possession or other mediumistic activities. In one Old Tibetan manuscript of the Gathang Bum-pa collection (composed ca. 850–1000 CE), there is a dialogue between priests and the divine royal progenitor of the sPu-rgyal dynasty, Yab-bla bdal-drug.<sup>30</sup> In another ritual narrative of the same manuscript, a *gshen* priest is in direct contact with Lha-bo lha-sras, a god of the afterlife.<sup>31</sup> These episodes are presented as actual physical encounters between humans and gods, illustrating the intimate link thought to exist between these two categories of beings a millennium or more ago.

The Dunhuang and Gathang Bumpa texts also document ritual objects and practices still employed by Upper Tibetan spirit-mediums. Mention of the flat bell, draped arrow and turban are particularly noteworthy because they still play an important role in the proceedings of today's spirit-mediums. Likewise, spirit-mediums, as well as monks and lay religious practitioners (*sngags-pa*), still carry out ransom rites (*glud*) and rites of propitiation (*gsol-kha*) of the kind first noted in Old Tibetan literature. A mountain god exploited by Upper Tibetan spirit-mediums, Thang-lha ya-bzhur, as well as generic classes of environment-bound spirits (*yul-lha*, *sman*, *bdud*, *klu*, *gnyan*, *btsan*, etc.), are also documented in Old Tibetan texts in non-Buddhist or archaic contexts.

Many elements of Upper Tibetan spirit-mediumship that appear to be of non-Buddhist origin and character have cognate forms in the spirit-mediumship or shamanism of Inner Asia and the Himalayan rim-land. Cross-cultural buttresses Tibetan textual sources, indicating that Buddhist influences on Upper Tibetan spirit-mediumship comprise a superstructure built upon an older cultural foundation.

### **Not alone: The greater Tibetan tradition of spirit-mediumship**

The term shaman/shamanism is applied worldwide in disparate cultural, geographic and historical contexts, beclouding its value as standard nomenclature in the study of religion.<sup>32</sup> Even when the term shaman/shamanism is defined according to a specific set of attributes in academic work, its scope and meaning in aggregate have expanded well beyond the defining categories given by Eliade.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, the word shaman is employed in popular parlance to describe a whole host of religious vocations and

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<sup>30</sup> See Bellezza 2010: "gShen-rab Myi-bo: His life and times according to Tibet's earliest literary sources", in *Revue d'études tibétaines*, no. 19, pp. 31–118. Paris: CNRS.

[http://www.himalaya.socanth.cam.ac.uk/collections/journals/ret/pdf/ret\\_19\\_03.pdf](http://www.himalaya.socanth.cam.ac.uk/collections/journals/ret/pdf/ret_19_03.pdf)

<sup>31</sup> For a translation and explication of this encounter, see *ibid.* Also see pp. 34–37 of Bellezza 2013: *Death and Beyond in Ancient Tibet: Archaic Concepts and Practices in a Thousand-Year-Old Illuminated Funerary Manuscript and Old Tibetan Funerary Documents of Gathang Bumpa and Dunhuang*. Philosophisch-Historische Klasse Denkschriften, vol. 454. Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften.

<sup>32</sup> See CDG, pp. 20–23. For a useful critique of the universalistic and static models of shamanism (using concepts and methods in cognitive psychology), as seen through the prism of religious and social practices of Daur Mongols, consult Humphrey, Caroline and Onon, Urgunge. 1996: *Shamans and Elders: Experience, Knowledge, and Power among the Daur Mongols*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>33</sup> Eliade, Mircea. 1964: *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (trans. Willard R. Trask). Princeton: Princeton University Press.

phenomena. For these reasons, I have elected to refer to the vocation of trance engagement and its attendant ritual and linguistic features using the more self-explanatory term: spirit-mediumship. When spirit-mediums perform divination or make utterances about the future they can also be described as oracles or soothsayers, but these terms do not convey the more dominant curative and restorative functions of practitioners.

Spirit-mediums also known as *dpa' bo* and *lha-pa* are active across the Tibetan Plateau and Himalayan rim-land.<sup>34</sup> Some of their beliefs, practices and tools allude to common historical origins. These seem to account for certain parallels in the development of various regional traditions of spirit-mediumship. Some broad themes concerning possession on the Tibetan Plateau are assignable to ingenerate parallels, while other aspects of the wider tradition of spirit-mediumship are liable to be culturally and historically interrelated. Interlinked traits appear to include specialized or peculiar aspects of the vocation.

To more fully appreciate the broad scope of comparable traditions in spirit-mediumship on the Tibetan Plateau and in the Himalaya, some examples are given (see CDG, pp. 25–34). Like the spirit-mediums of Upper Tibet, the male *dpa' bo* and female *bsnyen jo-mo* of Sikkim, Bhutan and the southern Tibetan borderlands pursue a hereditary vocation and act as vehicles for protective spirits, dance holding a small drum (*rnga-chung*) and flat bell (*gshang*).<sup>35</sup> In A-mdo (northeastern Tibet), spirit-mediums practice more freely than in Upper Tibet and participate in high-profile fortune-bestowing communal festivals.<sup>36</sup> They play an officiating role at the summer solstice connected *glu-rol* festival (performed to insure the well-being of the community, crops and livestock) of Rab-skong. As in Upper Tibet, A-mdo spirit-mediums predict the success of economic ventures and determine the luck of individual households in the coming year.

*Lha-pa* and *lha-mo* (female mediums) with similar functions to those found in Upper Tibet practice in contiguous Ladakh (La-dwags), where they are believed to cure illnesses, conduct divination, and exorcise evil spirits. In keeping with Yungdrung Bon and Buddhist tradition, spirit-mediums in both regions work for the benefit of sentient beings, healing humans and animals. The *lha-pa* of Ladakh tend to follow an inherited profession, as in adjacent Upper Tibet. As a prelude to becoming a spirit-medium in Ladakh, individuals often suffer mental disturbances, as they do in Upper Tibet. The principal possessing deities of Ladakh are invoked by reciting a libation offering (*gser-skyems*) with a hand drum (*qa-ma-ru*) in the right hand and a Buddhist bell (*dril-bu*) in the left,<sup>37</sup> whereas in Upper Tibet spirit-

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<sup>34</sup> For the greater tradition of spirit-mediumship in Inner Asia, see CDG, pp. 20–25.

Also see: *ibid.* Nebesky-Wojkowitz, R. D. 1956, pp. 538–554.

Hoffman, Helmut. 1961: *The Religions of Tibet* (trans. K. A. Verlag). London: Simson Shand.

<sup>35</sup> On the *dpa'-bo* and *bsnyen jo-mo*, see pp. 425–428 of Nebesky-Wojkowitz, R. D. 1956: *Oracles and Demons of Tibet. The Cult and Iconography of the Tibetan Protective Deities*. Reprint, Kathmandu: Tiwari's Pilgrims Book House, 1993.

<sup>36</sup> For spirit-mediums in A-mdo and their community festivals, see Nagano, Yasuhiko. 2000: "Sacrifice and *lha.pa* in the *glu.rol* festival of Reb-skong", in *New Horizons in Bon Studies. Bon Studies 2. Senri Ethnological Reports 15* (eds. S. G. Karmay and Y. Nagano), pp. 567–651. Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology.

<sup>37</sup> See Day, Sophie. 1990: "Ordering spirits: The initiation of village oracles in Ladakh", in *Wissenschaftsgeschichte und Gegenwärtige Forschungen in Nordwest-Indien*, pp. 206–222. Dresden: Staatliches Museum für Völkerkunde.



mediums customarily invoke the deities with a flat bell (*gshang*), a ritual instrument of non-Buddhist origins. Also, the divinities of Upper Tibet tend to be more powerful members of the indigenous Tibetan pantheon than the Ladakhi spirits. The spirit-mediums of Upper Tibet have not experienced the same degree of interference from the ecclesiastical establishment as their counterparts in Ladakh. This, at least in part, is due to their physical isolation from major monastic centers.

The *lha-pa* of Ladakh use the mirror as a temporary residence of the deities, and a *mda' dar* (festooned ritual arrow) to call spirits, as a support of deities and as a symbol of prosperity,<sup>38</sup> mirror and arrow practices of the spirit-mediums of Upper Tibet as well. The Ladakhi *lha-pa*, whose deity-possession is marked by the donning of the *rigs-linga* headdress, perform drum divination, speak in Tibetan and suck impurities (*grib*) causing illness from their patients with the drum,<sup>39</sup> just as is done by their peers in Upper Tibet. Ladakhi *lha-pa* remove *grib* in the form of black and other-colored mucus,<sup>40</sup> a common occurrence in Upper Tibet as well. A wolf deity of a female spirit-medium in Ladakh<sup>41</sup> is also reminiscent of the Upper Tibet tradition. The spirit-medium of the deity gZhon-nu mdung-lag, a territorial deity in western Zangs-dkar, belongs to the same general tradition as his counterparts in Ladakh and Upper Tibet. He is a layman coming from one of various clans, and is perceived to have curative, diagnostic and mantic functions.<sup>42</sup>

*Lha-pa* are also found in Spiti (sPyi-ti), where their practice is influenced by traditions originating in both Upper Tibet and cis-Himalayan regions of Himachal Pradesh.<sup>43</sup> Among the functions of the *lha-pa* of Spiti are the curing of diseases, the exorcising of demons and fortune-bestowal. The *lha-pa* of Spiti are active at three communal celebrations: Nam-rgan (a harvest festival), Lo-gsar (Tibetan Lunar New Year), and the *bsod-nams lo-gsar* (winter solstice). Due to legal measures instituted under the Communist regime, Upper Tibetan spirit-mediums no longer participate in communal observances.

The *lha-pa* of the Sherpas (Shar-pa) usually pursue a hereditary profession and are chosen involuntarily by the deities.<sup>44</sup> The spirit-mediums of the Sherpas are attributed with the ability to diagnose the cause of illness and misfortune, the power of healing, deities that inhabit mirrors, and the ability to speak in the language of the gods, common characteristics of spirit-mediums in Upper Tibet as well.

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Yamada, Takako. 1995: "The Ladakhi Shaman as Performer of Oneness with Local Gods, *Lha*", in *Shamanism in Performing Arts* (eds. Tae-gon Kim and M. Hoppál), pp. 89–95. Budapest: Akadémia Kiadó.

Day, Sophie. 1989: "Embodying Spirits. Village Oracles and Possession Ritual in Ladakh, North India", PhD dissertation, London School of Economics.

<sup>38</sup> Day 1990, pp. 211, 214, 215.

<sup>39</sup> Yamada, *ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> See p. 144 of Srinivas, Smriti. 1998: *The Mouths of People, and the Voice of God. Buddhists and Muslims in a Frontier Community of Ladakh*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

<sup>41</sup> Day, *ibid.*, p. 211.

<sup>42</sup> See pp. 29, 37 of Riaboff, Isabelle. 1996: "gZhon nu mdung lag, Mountain god of Zanskar", in *Reflections of the Mountain. Essays on the History and Social Meaning of the Mountain Cult in Tibet and the Himalaya* (eds. A.-M. Blondeau and E. Steinkellner), pp. 23–37. Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften.

<sup>43</sup> Information on the spirit-mediums of Spiti comes from my own field research.

<sup>44</sup> On Sherpa spirit-mediums, see Fürer-Haimendorf, Christoph, von 1979: *The Sherpas of Nepal: Buddhist Highlanders*. Reprint, Delhi: Sterling Publishers Ltd.

Pp. 186–194 of Adams, Vincanne. 1996: *Tigers of the Snow and other Virtual Sherpas*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

The Gurung and Tamang spirit-mediums of Nepal also have certain practices and beliefs closely related to the spirit-mediums of Upper Tibet. The most common ritual implement of these groups is the drum, which is used in trance ceremonies for calling the deities. In the spirit-mediumship of the Gurungs of central-west Nepal, the central cosmological element is a world tree that interconnects the three spheres of the universe (*srid-pa'i-gsum*).<sup>45</sup> In Upper Tibet we find the world mountain as the *axis mundi* fulfilling the same function. The Tamang *bombo* of Nepal perform healing rituals in which evil spirits are banished, lost souls (*bla*) recalled, the future told, and good fortune bestowed,<sup>46</sup> practices also found in Upper Tibetan spirit-mediumship. In the northwestern Nepal district of Humla ('Om-lo) exist spirit-mediums called *dha-mi* and those who officiate at their trance ceremonies, the *bhrang-ris*. Both types of officiants wear white woolen garments and white cotton turbans. Spirit-mediums in Upper Tibet report that they also once wore turbans, an ancient form of headgear in Tibet. As in Upper Tibet, the function of the *dha-mi* trance is to insure the welfare of individuals, the community and livestock. They also make pronouncements about the future through divination.

The most famous class of spirit-mediums in Tibet prior to 1959 was the *sku-rten-pa* (body supporter), who was possessed by powerful Buddhist protective gods (Chos-skyong) such as Pe-har and Tshangs-pa (Brahma), as well as by malevolent spirits of the *gshin-'dre* and *rgyal-po* classes of demons. The *sku-rten* profession was open to both men and women of all social classes.<sup>47</sup> As is well known, the Lhasa government used the pronouncements of the *sku-rten-pa* for formulating policy, thus their social status was much higher than the village- and encampment-based spirit-mediums of Upper Tibet. Some *sku-rten-pa* consorted with spirits of a more recent pedigree such as the infamous Shugs-ldan, instead of autochthonous protective deities like the mountain gods, a major distinction in the traditions of spirit-mediumship pursued in Upper Tibet and in the old capital, Lhasa. Like Upper Tibetan spirit-mediums, the *sku-rten-pa* were often laymen, and the costumes, paraphernalia, mirrors, and vulture feather plumes used by both groups bear much resemblance. Similarly, the *sku-rten-pa* could display supernatural strength as when twisting a steel sword blade. There is a famous photo of the result of this feat in the October 1935 issue of *National Geographic Magazine*.

The most famous and powerful *sku-rten-pa* is the gNas-chung oracle for rDo-rje grags-ldan, the leader of the sKu-lnga group of protective deities, whose principal emissary is Pe-har, a major protective deity of all Tibetan Buddhist sects. The present state oracle, the Ven. Thub-bstan dngos-grub (born 1958), reports that before his first possession in 1987, he experienced strange headaches, emotional agitation, and bled from the mouth and nose.<sup>48</sup> The costume worn by Thub-bstan dngos-grub is called *lha'i chas* (divine costume), and he states that it is of the type used by the Tibetan epic hero Gling ge-sar and warrior deities known as *dgra-lha*. Although Thub-bstan dngos-grub is a high oracle, he reports that in

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<sup>45</sup> See pp. 6–8 of Mumford, Stan R. 1990: *Himalayan Dialogue: Tibetan Lamas and Gurung Shamans in Nepal*. Kathmandu: Tiwari's Pilgrims Book House.

<sup>46</sup> See pp. of 151–163 of Holmberg, David H. 1989: *Order in Paradox: Myth, Ritual and Exchange among Nepal's Tamang*. Cornell: Cornell University Press.

<sup>47</sup> See pp. 262, 277, 278 of Havnevik, H. 2002: "A Tibetan Female State Oracle", in *Religion and Secular Culture in Tibet, Tibet Studies II* (ed. H. Blezer), pp. 259–288. Leiden: Brill.

<sup>48</sup> See p. 26 of 1992: *Tibetan Bulletin: The Official Journal of the Tibetan Administration*, July/August, pp. 18–29 (*Nechung Marks Padmasambhava's Birth Anniversary, Ne-chung—"The State Oracle" History of Nechung Monastery and Mediums of Nechung*). Dharamsala: Department of Information and International Relations.

certain instances he makes prophecies for members of the general public, such as when recommending a specific hospital for a critically injured person. The state oracle also has a healing function carried out by spitting black tea on people, bringing him into functional correspondence with remedial procedures of spirit-mediums in Upper Tibet.

### **Impact on contemporary scholarship: Harnessing the work in academic discourse**

My book, *Calling Down the Gods*, enjoys ongoing citation in a wide range of academic works, underscoring its up-to-date relevance despite being published thirteen years ago. A survey of these citations demonstrates that its interviews, textual translations, annotations, and analyses have been of value to scholars working in diverse fields, including textual studies, ritualism, social anthropology, Buddhism, and shamanism. The widespread use of *CDG* in academia vindicates its prime purpose: to serve as a major reference work regarding spirit-mediumship and allied literary traditions. Being a major source book endows the work with lasting scholarly appeal. This compendium function of the book is asserted in a critical review.<sup>49</sup>

I shall review a cross-section of academic publications that cite *CDG*. These articles, books and PhD dissertations have been published in no less than a dozen different countries. It should be noted that the survey offered here to illustrate the book's significance to Tibetan studies is incomplete. Some scholarly works that cite my book are behind paywalls and an indeterminate number have not yet come to my attention.

One major area that *CDG* has proven its worth is in the study of Tibetan ritual traditions. In his article on ancient sacrificial deer rites, Ramble (2012: 512, 521–524) supports the importance of deer in Tibetan oracular traditions as well as the key Tibetan concept of *g.yang* (good fortune capability) with materials found in my book.<sup>50</sup> Martin's (2014: 82, 85) article on rituals practiced by the Buddhist master Pha dampa sangs-rgyas (11<sup>th</sup> century) maintains that the classic study of Tibetan protective deities by Nebesky-Wojkowitz (1956) and my book are the two pivotal resources in understanding interpenetrated archaic aspects (*CDG*: 82, 85).<sup>51</sup> In an article on birds in the collection of early ritual texts known as the *Gnyan 'bum*, Daniel Berounský (2016: 531) refers to my translation of a passage in the text *Mi'u rigs bzhi lha*, which describes avian totems of four of the major national lineages of Tibet (*CDG*: 211).<sup>52</sup> In his discussion of the Rol-po skya-bdun brotherhood in the ritual text *Klu 'bum nag po*, Dotson (2008: 61)

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<sup>49</sup> Bryan J. Cuevas, Bryan, J. 2006: Review in *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 65 (no. 4), pp. 814–815. Association for Asian Studies.

<sup>50</sup> Ramble, Charles. 2012: "The Deer as a Structuring Principle in Certain Bonpo Rituals", in *Cultural Flows across the Western Himalaya* (eds. Krasser et al.), pp. 509–540. Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften.

<sup>51</sup> Martin, Dan. 2014: "The Gold Drink rite. Indigenous, but not simply indigenous", in *Mongolo-Tibetica Pragensia '14. Ethnolinguistics, Sociolinguistics, Religion and Culture*, vol. 7 (no. 2), pp. 79–95. Special Issue: Indigenous Elements in Tibetan Religions. Prague: Charles University.

<sup>52</sup> Berounský, Daniel. 2016: "Bird Offerings in the Old Tibetan Myths of the Nyen Collection (*Gnyan 'bum*)", in *Archiv Orientální*, vol. 84, pp. 527–558. Prague: Oriental Institute (CAS).

notes my work as the source for the study of this archaic group of deities (*CDG*: 287–302).<sup>53</sup> Dotson (2015: 12) in his article on dice divination also refers to my book in conjunction with wool and ritual good fortune (*CDG*: 146–151, 456–483).<sup>54</sup>

*CDG* has also been invoked to clarify or supplement a wide range of other Tibetan cultural matters. In her book on Buddhism, shamanism and dreamlike states, Sumegi (2008: 129), commenting on the twin functions of spiritual and political authority invested in sacred mountains, refers to the exploitation of wrathful deities by Buddhism and Yungdrung Bon as a mechanism of social control as well as Buddhist clerical appropriation of spirit-mediumship to foster religious authority, using my book (*CDG*: 261).<sup>55</sup> Sumegi (2008: 141) also invokes my work in understanding the shamanic and Indian esoteric practice of providing the entire body of a practitioner as an offering to spiritual entities (*CDG*: 90). Filippi, in his article on the spirit-mediums of Arunachal Pradesh (2008: 13, 35), exploits my tome to link monastic oracles with territorial deities and for speculating on the possible origins of spirit-mediumship (*CDG*: 28–32, 344–354).<sup>56</sup> Liu's study on Zhang Zhung customs and language (2014: 184) refers to information on an ancient dance known as *shon* in my work (*CDG*: 277, 278).<sup>57</sup> Petra Maurer's article on the social and cultural functions of the horse in contemporary Tibet (2013) cites comparable material on horse-racing warrior spirits from my book (*CDG*: 379, 385).<sup>58</sup> Bell, in his article on the state oracle of Nechung (2016: 177), refers to the Yungdrung Bon treasure holder Gu-ru rnon-rtse as seen in my work (*CDG*: 97).<sup>59</sup> In an article on folk cultural traditions in eastern Tibet, Da Col (2012: 93) cites *CDG*, along with books by Samten Karmay and Namkhai Norbu, as a source for the very important Tibetan concept of *g.yang* (good fortune capability).<sup>60</sup> Huber (2012: 213), in his article on traditional hunting on the Byang-thang cites a passage in my work, linking mountain deities of Seng-'khor with hunting lore (*CDG*: 101).<sup>61</sup>

*CDG* has also been cited as a general reference on Tibetan spirit-mediumship and allied traditions in several works. Gouveia and Hillis (2014: 293) describe the salient features of my book as a prelude to

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<sup>53</sup> Dotson, Brandon. 2008: "Complementarity and Opposition in Early Tibetan Ritual", in *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 128 (no. 1), pp. 41–67. American Oriental Society.

<sup>54</sup> Dotson, Brandon. 2012: "The call of the cuckoo to the thin sheep of spring: healing and fortune in Old Tibetan dice divination texts", in *Tibetan and Himalayan Healing: An Anthology for Anthony Aris* (eds. C. Ramble and U. Roesler). Kathmandu: Vajra Publications, pp. 148–160.

<sup>55</sup> Sumegi, Angela. 2008: *Dreamworlds of Shamanism and Tibetan Buddhism The Third Place*. Albany: SUNY Press.

<sup>56</sup> Filippi, Gian Giuseppe. 2008: "Oracles and Shamans in Arunachal Pradesh", in *Central Asiatic Journal*, vol. 52 (no. 1), pp. 11–35. Harrassowitz Verlag.

<sup>57</sup> Liu, Yu-shan. 2014: "Rethinking the Recently 'Discovered' Bon/Zhangzhung Traditions: the Case of Yungdrung Shon Dance (g.yung drung shon rtsed)", in *Journal of Research Institute: Historical Development of the Tibetan Languages*, vol. 51, pp. 271 – 289. Kobe: Research Institute of Foreign Studies.

<sup>58</sup> Maurer, Petra. 2013: "Pferderennen und ihre Bedeutung in Tibet", in *Nepalica-Tibetica: Festgabe für Christoph Cüppers* (eds. F-K Ehrhard and P. Maurer). Beiträge zur Zentralasienforschung, vol. 28, pp. 57–74.

<sup>59</sup> Bell, Christopher. 2016: "The Nechung Record", in *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines*, no. 36 (October), pp. 143-249. Paris: CNRS.

<sup>60</sup> Da Col, Giovanni. 2012: "The Elementary Economies of Dechenwa Life: Fortune, Vitality, and the Mountain in Sino-Tibetan Borderlands", in *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Social and Cultural Practice*, vol. 56 (no. 1), pp. 74–98, *Cosmologies of Fortune: Luck, Vitality, and Uncontrolled Relatedness*. Berghahn Books.

<sup>61</sup> Huber, Toni. 2012: "The Changing Role of Hunting and Wildlife in Pastoral Communities of Northern Tibet", in *Pastoral practices in High Asia: Agency of 'development' effected by modernisation, resettlement and transformation* (ed. H. Kreutzmann), pp. 195–215. New York: Springer.

presenting the oracular functions of the high protector Pe-har.<sup>62</sup> In his work on the eastern Tibetan sacred mountain Kha-ba dkar-bo, Da Col (2007) cites my volume as the source for Tibetan 'shamanism'.<sup>63</sup> Similarly, in an applied anthropology project on tourism, climbing and sacred mountains in eastern Tibet, Tate-Libby mentions my book as a main resource on shamanistic aspects of *bon*.<sup>64</sup> In his doctoral dissertation, Liu (2012: 30, 34) credits *CDG* as a repository for contemporary Bon rituals and Tibetan mountain deity cults, as well as using more specific references from the work.<sup>65</sup> Another PhD dissertation on Ladakhi folksongs by Dinnerstein (2013: 35), showpieces my multidimensional definition of Bon.<sup>66</sup> Berounský (2012: 25, 26) also uses my book as a general reference to the customs and practices of spirit-mediums.<sup>67</sup>

## Conclusion

The publications selected for this PhD dissertation on spirit-mediumship in Upper Tibet have brought to the fore a significant body of heretofore unknown ethnographic, ritual and linguistic materials useful in achieving a more complete understanding of the character and scope of Tibetan religious phenomena. Specifically, information on rituals and myths for the pantheon of environmental and personal spirits, oral aspects of Tibetan prosody, concepts of disease and well-being, and the occupational composition of traditional society have all been augmented by this study. The study of the proceedings of trance ceremonies casts new light on the significance of liturgical texts, helping to account for the precedence of certain beliefs and practices in Tibet (eg., purification rites, zoomorphic depictions of the divine, warrior spirits, and ritual instrument and costume use, etc.). The trance utterances of spirit-mediums detailed in my publications open a new chapter of 'folk literature' to linguistic scrutiny. My research work on spirit-mediumship in Upper Tibet and allied textual sources has also uncovered invaluable evidence for appraising the historical complexion of religion in the region before the emergence and domination of Buddhism. Moreover, my findings on spirit-mediums introduce previously unavailable materials for a deeper appreciation of assimilative forces contributing to the eventual triumph of Buddhism in Upper Tibet, a theme I repeatedly return to in my textual, archaeological and epigraphic researches. Finally, my scholarly toils serve as a portal for the examination of spirit-mediums using alternative methodologies and perspectives.

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<sup>62</sup> Gouveia, Ana Paula Martins and Hillis Gregory A. 2014. "Práticas Oraculares Tibetanas: O Caso do Oráculo Nechung", in *Debates do NER*, vol. 15 (no. 25), pp. 291–310. Porto Alegre: *Debates do NER*.

<sup>63</sup> Da Col, Giovanni. 2007: "The View from Somewhen: Events, Bodies and the Perspective of Fortune around Khawa Karpo, a Tibetan Sacred Mountain in Yunnan Province", in *Inner Asia*, vol. 9 (no. 2), pp. 215–235, Special Issue: Perspectivism. Leiden: Brill.

<sup>64</sup> Tate-Libby, "Climbing, Tourism and Sacred Peaks: A Research Project in Southwest China", in *News: A Publication of the Society of Applied Anthropology*, vol. 22, no. 2.

<sup>65</sup> Liu, Yu-shan. 2012. A Minority Within a Minority: Being Bonpo in the Tibetan Community in Exile, PhD dissertation, The University of Edinburgh.

<sup>66</sup> Dinnerstein, Noé. 2014. "Ladakhi Traditional Songs: A Cultural, Musical, and Literary Study" PhD dissertation, City of New York University.

<sup>67</sup> Berounský, Daniel. 2012. "The murdered king protecting fields: A Tibetan deity-medium from the Bonpo village in Amdo", in *Mongolo-Tibetica Pragensia '12. Ethnolinguistics, Sociolinguistics, Religion and Culture*, vol. 5 (no. 1), pp. 21–50. Prague: Charles University.

The spirit-mediumship of Upper Tibet, despite being buffeted by a host of legal, social and economic forces, has proven very resilient. Spirit-mediums continue to channel the gods for compelling reasons, for the health and well-being of individuals and communities are thought to hang in the balance. Cultural pride and faith in traditional methods of doing things certainly play a part in the ongoing activities of spirit-mediums as well. In this regard, they are a viaduct between the sureties of the past and the ecological and cultural tumult of the present. As with many other traditions passed on orally from generation to generation, be it clan lore, territorial deity cults or local historical accounts, the survival of spirit-mediumship in Upper Tibet is not assured. Nevertheless, so long as there are brave and able men and women called to the vocation, we have good reason to be optimistic about the fate of this hoary tradition.

**Addendum: List of published materials approved for submission (total: 61,966 words)**

The peer-reviewed publications selected to meet the requirements of PhD by publication furnish a comprehensive picture of the tradition of spirit-mediumship in Upper Tibet. The materials included in this submission cover all major elements of invoking numinous entities for curative, protective and oracular functions by individuals who serve as spirit-mediums. This work constitutes the most thorough enquiry into the origins, beliefs and practices of spirit-mediums in Upper Tibet conducted to date. Furthermore, except for a study by Hilda Diemberger (see above), who interviewed a female spirit-medium in a fringe region of Upper Tibet (Ngam-ring), my efforts are the only ones to be conducted in situ, significantly widening the scope of enquiry. The selected publications are based on information and observations obtained on fourteen expeditions to Upper Tibet conducted between 1994 and 2007.

Primarily to address questions raised in *CDG*, additional fieldwork was conducted in the mid-2000s, leading to the publication of three additional articles. Selected for submission, they were published in 2011, 2012 and 2015. These works explore liturgical and linguistic elements of the tradition of spirit-mediumship in Upper Tibet. Although extensive observations and interviews concerning the trance ceremonies were made for *CDG*, the actual words spoken by performing spirit-mediums largely escaped documentation. To address this lacuna in the study, I produced seventeen audio recordings of trance ceremonies.

They publications selected for inclusion in this study are as follows:

2005. *Calling Down the Gods: Spirit-Mediums, Sacred Mountains and Related Bon Textual Traditions in Upper Tibet*. Tibetan Studies Library, vol. 8. Leiden: Brill.

Part One: General Orientation

- i) Introduction to the spirit-mediums of Upper Tibet
- ii) The greater tradition: cross-cultural comparisons

Part Two: Interviews Conducted with Spirit-Mediums

- xii) Sgrol-dkar, born circa 1952
- xiv) Karma rig-'dzin, born circa 1935

Part Four: Spirit-Mediums in the Bon Literary Tradition

i) The origin of the tradition of spirit-mediumship

Bibliography

Word count: 36,688<sup>68</sup>

2011. "The liturgies and oracular utterances of the spirit-mediums of Upper Tibet: An Introduction to their *bSang* Rituals", in *Revue d'études tibétaines*, no. 20, pp. 5–31. Paris: CNRS. [http://www.himalaya.socanth.cam.ac.uk/collections/journals/ret/pdf/ret\\_20\\_01.pdf](http://www.himalaya.socanth.cam.ac.uk/collections/journals/ret/pdf/ret_20_01.pdf)

Word count: 9907

2012. "Spirit-mediumship in Upper Tibet: The Vocation of one expert practitioner", in *Bulletin of Tibetology*, vol. 48, no. 2, pp. 7–32. Gangtok: Namgyal Institute of Tibetology.

2011. *Ibid.*, in *Exploring Tibet's History and Culture. Proceedings of the International Conference held in New Delhi, 2009* (ed. P. Roy), pp. 379–410. Samyak Vak Series, vol. 17. Varanasi: Central University of Tibetan Studies.

Word count: 8414

2015. "The Voice of the Gods in Upper Tibet: The trance-induced invocations and songs of praise of the spirit-medium Phowo Sridgyal", in *The Illuminating Mirror* (eds. O. Czaja and G. Hazod), pp. 15–40. Contributions to Tibetan Studies, vol. 12. Wiesbaden: Dr. Ludwig Reichert Verlag.

Word count: 13,196

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<sup>68</sup> This book is 232,000 words in length. Due to word count limits regulating the award of PhD by publication, only certain representative sections of the work are treated here. Part Three ("The Mountain and Lake Deities of the Spirit-Mediums") and Part Five ("Bon Literary References to the Ritual Implements and Practices of Spirit-Mediums") were not selected, as they pertain to collateral literary and philological features in the study of spirit-mediums.

## CHAPTER 2

*Calling Down the Gods: Spirit-Mediums, Sacred Mountains and Related Bon Textual Traditions in Upper Tibet* [Excerpts]

Bellezza, J. 2005. *Calling Down the Gods: Spirit-Mediums, Sacred Mountains and Related Bon Textual Traditions in Upper Tibet*. Tibetan Studies Library, vol. 8. Leiden: Brill.



SPIRIT-MEDIUMS, SACRED MOUNTAINS  
AND RELATED BON TEXTUAL  
TRADITIONS IN UPPER TIBET

CALLING DOWN THE GODS

BY

JOHN VINCENT BELLEZZA



BRILL  
LEIDEN · BOSTON  
2005

## PART ONE: GENERAL ORIENTATION

### i) *Introduction to the spirit-mediums of Upper Tibet*

On the loftiest reaches of the Tibetan plateau are a small group of extraordinary men and women who carry out the most ancient of esoteric practices. They are the vehicles of the gods, the spirit-mediums for the ancestral and protective deities. Still today, in perilous rites of possession, the spirit-mediums claim to call down the gods while purging their own egos, and in thought, word and deed become the very embodiment of these supernatural beings. Their revelations are believed to vitally join the divinities and society together in a pact of mutual benefit and understanding, which has left a lasting mark on the religions of Tibet. This primeval impulse, of people becoming gods, is one of the pillars on which the Tibetan system of religious beliefs and rituals was founded.

This work examines the spirit-mediums that hail from the vast upper regions of northwest Tibet.<sup>1</sup> The spirit-mediums of Upper Tibet, both men and women, serve as the incarnate form of the region's chief mountain gods, as well as a range of other divinities. It is believed that when the consciousness of these deities enters the spirit-mediums the latter act and speak on their behalf. It is commonly held in Upper Tibet, that under the possession of the gods, the spirit-mediums heal sick people and livestock, exorcise evil spirits, bring good fortune to those struck by bad luck, and predict the outcome of future events. Local inhabitants have sought their services for centuries, and some spirit-mediums have taken up their vocation on the Subcontinent, in exile.

This work demonstrates that the spirit-mediums of Upper Tibet are locally important religious and medical practitioners with a long legacy of tradition behind them. The significance of the spirit-mediums therefore lies not only in the richness of their practice and

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<sup>1</sup> This Upper Tibet territory comprises the overlapping areas known as sTod and Byang-thang. These areas now constitute the prefecture of mNga' ris, and parts of the Nag-chu, Lhasa and gZhis-ka-rtse prefectures of the Tibet Autonomous Region.

the many curiosities associated with it, but in the historical depths it discloses. Of all the traditional professions still surviving in Upper Tibet spirit-mediumship is the one that best exemplifies the remaining non-Buddhist culture of the region. In the course of this study of spirit-mediums we will open a window onto the vista of Upper Tibetan culture, revealing a multidimensional inheritance that has indelibly imprinted Tibet's Buddhism. Over the centuries, these native and Buddhist aspects of local culture have merged to form the tradition of spirit-mediumship now found in the region.

The non-Buddhist and primarily indigenous heritage of Upper Tibet reflects patterns of belief, ritual and tradition that developed prior to or independent of the Buddhist cultural patrimony. As this work will repeatedly make evident, according to views widely held in the Bon religion, the antecedents of this heritage extend far into the past. In the Bon view, the spirit-mediums divulge a traditional mode of living expression at variance with the Indian Buddhism that has so come to dominate Tibet. In other words, the spirit-mediums are vibrant testimony to an alternative or Bon paradigm of Tibetan culture, one that is conceived of as being anchored in the pre-Imperial history of the Plateau. While pre-Imperial origins for this cultural phenomenon cannot be adduced with the ethnographic and textual materials at our disposal, it is clear that many aspects of spirit-mediumship reflect an indigenous orientation. That is to say, the deities they call down are wedded to the Upper Tibetan landscape, flora and fauna, and their costumes and rituals exploit local produce and products.

I have chosen to designate those who act as human vessels for the deities 'spirit-mediums' because this term most accurately sums up their central activity: the ability to embody or be mediums for a host of different spirits. According to the testimonies of the spirit-mediums, this mediumship occurs at the flight of their normal consciousness and personality, and subsequent colonization of their mind and body by the summoned host deity. This mediumistic function is the basis of their profession and serves to distinguish them from other types of Tibetan religious practitioners. I have avoided the use of the term 'shaman', which is sometimes employed to describe similar religious functionaries in various cultures, because of its uncritical usage in popular parlance. This term is also used in scholarly literature to describe highly disparate cultural phenomena worldwide, thus its signification has become modifiable in accordance with the

needs at hand. When the spirit-mediums perform divination or make utterances about the future they could also correctly be described as oracles, but this term does not convey their more important curative and restorative functions.

Drawing upon a wide range of ethnographic and textual materials to investigate the phenomenon of spirit-mediumship in Upper Tibet, this work analyses the way in which its mythic, historical and present day characteristics are interrelated. The alleged continuity of this tradition over many centuries, and the way in which this is supposed to have been fostered, is the underlying theme that gives this book its narrative and analytical coherence.

This is a Tibetological work that focuses on the culture and traditions of the spirit-mediums and is therefore based primarily on Tibetan textual and oral sources. I have utilized a diachronic perspective based on a comparison of the legendary and contemporary components of the tradition of spirit-mediumship. These past and present-day facets are enshrined in both the oral and literary traditions. This work therefore is modeled upon an ethnohistory, however, the data at my disposal does not permit the vigorous application of the methodologies relied upon by this discipline. The historically ambiguous nature of many of the materials presented means that a corroboratory chronology to serve as a benchmark for ethnohistorical discourse is largely lacking. As such, this work might be best described as a legendary history of spirit-mediumship in Upper Tibet, one that is derived from the relevant corpus of written documents and oral traditions.

From the few extant literary sources, we will examine the fabulous origins of the spirit-medium profession. This work also includes a general study of texts that elucidate the deities, ritual practices and ceremonial equipment of the spirit-mediums. I have elected to base most of my research on Bon texts because it is this religion that squarely claims the tradition of spirit-mediumship (*lha-bzhugs*) as its own. According to Bon tradition, Bon spirit-mediums were active in pre-Imperial times (what is also generally referred to as the pre-Buddhist period) prior to 630 CE. Other reasons why the Bon literary tradition is most applicable to this field of study is because by its own reckoning its ancient religious heartland was Upper Tibet, the region known as Zhang-zhung. Moreover, according to the Bonpo, many of the deities resorted to by the spirit-mediums were part of the archaic native tradition of this region. The Bon literary record

therefore, is uniquely suited as a heuristic tool to uncover the breadth and significance of the tradition of spirit-mediumship.

The deities and implements used by the spirit-mediums, and the rites and rituals that take place in their trance ceremonies, will be described in detail. This exposition is based on two major elements: 1) an elaboration of how the oral and literary traditions inform one another in the area of indigenous religious tradition; and 2) a portrayal of the pre-Imperial pedigree of spirit-medium culture in Bon historico-ritual notions (narratives presented as having a historical basis in Bon ritual literature). This work will also pay close attention to the vocational lineages (*lha-rgyud*) and the spirit-mediums' perceptions of what constitutes possession.

As this work is ethnographic and philological (the study and interpretation of literary texts) in nature, areas such as anthropological musings, social theory and ethno-psychiatry do not play a part. As valid as these alternative disciplines are to understanding the phenomenon of spirit-mediumship, especially as interpretive tools, they will have to await further inquiry. By compiling a descriptive work on the spirit-mediums of Upper Tibet, I hope to facilitate future study into the many curious matters that fall outside the ambit of this book. Subjects for further research include, among others, questions concerning the physiology of the trance state, the epistemology of possession, and the medical basis of the healing instrumentalities exploited by the spirit-mediums.

In Upper Tibet, male spirit-mediums are commonly referred to as *lha-pa* (god-carrier/god-man), *dpa' bo* (hero, also an epithet of sacred mountains), and *lha 'beb-mkhan/lha-babs-mkhan* (god-descending-one). Female mediums are called *dpa' mo* (heroine), *lha-mo* (god-woman) and *klu-mo* (water-serpent-woman). In this work, I have elected to apply the term *lha-pa* as the equivalent of a male spirit-medium (or simply medium) because it most appropriately describes the core activity of the profession; the embodiment of the deity. The eminent Tibetanist R.A. Stein (1972: 188) described the *lha-pa* and *klu-pa* (male mediums for the water spirits) as shepherds who serve as receptacles for local deities, which succinctly characterizes the practice in Upper Tibet.

In eastern Tibet, other terms for analogous spirit-mediums include *lha-kha* (god-mouth), *lha 'dzin* (god-possessed), *lha-zhon* (god-ridden), while *'dre 'dzin* refers to those afflicted by demonic possession—characterized by unwanted seizures, convulsions and super normal strength

(Ekvall 1964: 273). In festivals renewing the annual link between the *phywa* mountain deities and communities in Bhutan and rTa-dbang, men from the most influential families, called *lha-mi* (god-men), embody these deities (Pommaret 1996: 52).

*Lha-pa*, the mouthpieces of the gods, are most often depended upon for healing and divination (cf. Ekvall 1964: 27, 273). Their perceived ability to effectively arbitrate between the gods and community seems to explain their persistence over time. Their widespread, integrated presence in the pastoral communities of Upper Tibet is best seen as reflecting the long-term success of the *lha-pa*. They are attributed with providing essential remedial services, healing the physically and mentally ill, and giving guidance to those embarking on long trips and new business ventures. Moreover, they provide these services in a rather egalitarian manner where the remuneration received in goods or services is dependent on the inclination and financial means of the patient or client. In other words, there are not fixed rates for their exertions, permitting people of all socioeconomic rungs to avail themselves of their services. This utilitarian factor helps to explain their continued survival in Upper Tibet despite 50 years of Communism, which views such reliance on deities as superstitious and anti-modern. Aside from practicing as spirit-mediums, the *lha-pa* are engaged in animal husbandry and trade like other herders. This is an indication that they only receive a supplemental income from their specialized religious activities.<sup>2</sup>

Under-developed and politically neglected pre-Communist Upper Tibet was a particularly conducive environment for the spirit-mediums, and every district had at least one or two of them. There were relatively few monasteries in Upper Tibet and these could be located scores of miles from the settlements of the herders, thus vital assistance from the clergy was not always available. Likewise, there were not enough professional medical practitioners (*Em-chi/sman-pa*) to cater to the health needs of the population. The *lha-pa*'s services therefore acted as a substitute to those of the lamas and doctors. In some

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<sup>2</sup> It is not known whether the altruistic fashion in which services are offered by the contemporary spirit-mediums was always the norm. In earlier times, when the *lha-pa* were endowed with far more prestige and power, more socially exploitative transactions may also have prevailed. It is reported that the fees of many of the high-status *sku-rten* (oracle-priests) of central Tibet, in the pre-Communist period were very considerable for ordinary people (Nebesky Wojkowitz 1956: 455).

cases, however, so highly respected were the *lha-pa* that they were actively sought out as an alternative to other types of religious and medical practitioners. They had the unique advantage of being culturally invested with the legitimacy of acting and speaking on behalf of the deities. As the gods came alive through them, they represented one of the most tangible and immediate forms of religious tradition in Tibet. Highly proficient spirit-mediums were held in awe; tales of their exploits spread throughout the locale and beyond. Invariably, the great *lha-pa* of past generations were attributed supernatural powers. Their magical abilities are commonly thought to have extended to riding on the backs of wild animals, flying in the sky, and incredible feats of healing and strength.

Probably the first scholarly description of Tibetan spirit-mediums is found in Sarat Chandra Das's 1882 work *Contributions on the Religion and History of Tibet* (p. 11). This involves Bon priests who invoke and are then possessed by a tutelary deity referred to as *bka' bab*<sup>3</sup> and *thab-lha* (god of the hearth). While under the influence of the gods, the medium is led to a defiled hearth where he plants a *mda' dar* (festooned arrow), thereby ridding it of the disease-causing contamination. Das notes that sullyng the hearth angers the subterranean *sa-bdag* spirits, a belief with much currency still today. Another late Victorian work on Tibetan culture furnishes a more detailed description of the *lha-pa* (called *lha-kha/lha-bka'*) (Waddell 1895: 482–483). In this account, which generally holds true for today's spirit-mediums of Upper Tibet, they function to relieve pain. In their practice they place one end of a festooned arrow on the afflicted area of the patient and suck with the mouth on the other side, thus expelling the demon from this part of the body. The *lha-pa* are described as wearing a mirror over the heart and the five-lobed *rigs-lnga* headdress of mystic [Vajrayana] Buddhism. Waddell relates that at the beginning of the trance ceremony Gu-ru rin-po-che and the Buddha are invoked. First to appear at the trance is the tutelary deity who brings the *klu* and *'dre* spirits with him. The spirit-medium also offers incense and libations to the *yul-lha* (god of the locale), which appears in the *lha-pa's* mirror.

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<sup>3</sup> This may refer to the god Phu-wer, the tutelary deity of the ancient Bon tradition of *ye-dbang lha yi bka' bab/babs* (commands of the god of primordial power). For a detailed description see Part Four, section ii, pp. 348–350.

By their own admission, the spirit-mediums, through the displacement of their consciousness (*mam-shes*),<sup>4</sup> actually become the incarnate form of the deity. They claim that their personal identity is substituted for that of the deity, thus their speech and bearing become that of the deity (cf. Ekvall 1964: 273, 274). Furthermore, it is averred that just split seconds before bodily entry, the consciousness of the *lha-pa* exits and is replaced by that of a deity. The possession of the spirit-medium is referred to as *lha 'bab-pa* (deity descending) and *lha-bzhugs* (deity residing), and is marked by radical changes in speech and comportment. Typically, possession occurs after the necessary invocations and offerings have been made to the various gods. Under the influence of a deity, the *lha-pa* commonly exhibit profuse perspiration, signs of great physical strain, extraordinary strength, seizures, foaming at the mouth, and disappearance of the irises in the back of the head. Many of the remedial or helping spirits of the trance take the forms of eagles, owls, bear, wolves, tigers and foxes, and under their possession the *lha-pa* behaves in a like manner. The spirit-mediums make calls and cries like animals and imitate their movements and actions. They growl like tigers and bears, howl like wolves and cry out like raptors. The helping spirits therefore, can often be identified by observers through the outward behavior of the spirit-medium.

As a *lha-pa* is widely believed to have become the deity, at the end of the trance there is no recollection of what transpired during it. He or she usually has an assistant, a close friend or family member, who will relate what happened in the séance (the period in which the possessing deity was present). This assistant also helps in the ceremony, bringing whatever offerings or objects the deity calls for, and helping to translate its utterances. The voice of the deity is not always comprehensible to those in attendance because of unusual voice modulations, indistinct enunciation and low amplitude. Also the deities sometimes speak in foreign languages such as *lha-skad* (language of the gods), which can only be interpreted by those of long association with the *lha-pa*.

It is generally accepted that a true *lha-pa* can only be host to one consciousness at a time. It is usually imagined that at the moment

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<sup>4</sup> The long form is *mam-par shes-pa*, a word of Sanskrit origin (*vijñāna*). Alternatively, some spirit-mediums believe that their consciousness principle is the *bla* (soul) or *thugs* (mind).



of possession his own consciousness is transferred to a metal mirror (*me-long*), where it remains in the protective embrace of a tutelary deity until the end of the trance ceremony. Spirit-mediums maintain that the personal consciousness exits from the top of the head while that of the deity (commonly referred to as 'od-zer) enters the spirit-medium through other parts of the head or hands. Moreover, it is thought that when the possessing deity exits from the spirit-medium's body, the personal consciousness returns in the same manner as it had exited. Whilst in the body of the *lha-pa*, the deity's consciousness is said to dwell in the invisible channels spread throughout living organisms; these are known as *rtsa*. In Tibetan medical theory these subtle channels give rise to nervous impulses and are responsible for the transmission of consciousness and sensory data. It is not unusual for more than one deity to be involved in a trance ceremony. In that case, the deities are reported to wait in the *me-long* for one another to leave the spirit-medium before the next one takes possession.

As we shall see in Part Two, according to most spirit mediums, the origins of the *lha-pa* can be traced to Gu-ru rin-po-che, the Eighth century Vajrayana adept. He is said to have initiated four lineages of spirit-mediums, spanning the four cardinal directions of Tibet. Senior spirit-mediums affirm that these lineages have continued to the present day in the unbroken transmission of their profession. However, the Buddhist origin of spirit-mediumship in the oral tradition of Upper Tibet is probably apocryphal, reflecting the syncretism of the great Tibetan mythos. I embrace the view that this probable remodeling of mythology is the result of a historical revisionism (in both the literary and oral tradition), which occurred in the transition from pre-existing religious systems to Buddhism. In this context, the Buddhacization of spirit-mediumship in Upper Tibet appears to be one strand in the reorganization of, and estrangement from, antecedent religious tradition.

As shall be discussed in detail in Part Four, Bon legendary material purports that mediumistic cultural phenomena pre-date the Eighth century Gu-ru rin-po-che. From a comparative perspective, this seems entirely feasible as cultures throughout the ancient world relied on oracles and mediums for various religious and social functions, as do the world's remaining subsistence tribes. I am of the opinion that Bon literature and the Upper Tibetan oral tradition do indeed preserve to varying degrees of integrity myths, practices and traditions (such as those involving spirit-mediumship), which pre-date the intro-

duction of Buddhism onto the Plateau. As archaeological evidence mounts for the existence of a sophisticated sedentary culture in Upper Tibet in pre-Imperial times, I am inclined to see this data as supporting Bon historical and ritual conceptions about the relative antiquity of their religion and culture. This antiquity however, cannot be established as a historical fact from the literary and oral sources presented in this work, and must perforce remain the author's hypothesis. While it is clear that cultural continuity between the pre-Buddhist and Buddhist periods cannot be posited using the philological and anthropological methodologies at our disposal, I hasten to add that this does not disprove the cultural antiquity of spirit-mediumship, or even render it unlikely.

In Parts Two to Five, I examine numerous cultural and religious traditions that are largely non-Buddhist in nature and indigenous in orientation. In this context, indigenous tradition can be defined as that which sprung up or was redeveloped in Tibet, while the term non-Buddhist adverts religious content that falls outside the bounds of popular and canonical Buddhism. The indigenous or native tradition is inextricably related to the Tibetan physical environment and the living creatures that reside in it. The cults of the divine yak and ancestral mountain gods are two examples of indigenous culture among many that I explore, utilizing the oral and literary records of Upper Tibet. As we shall see, Bon categorically maintains that many of the indigenous traditions treated in this work originated in the Bon of the pre-Imperial period. This begs the question: if native tradition does not, at least in part, derive from early or precursory forms of Bon as the pre-Imperial religion of Upper Tibet, what perchance was the makeup of the culture and religion of the region?

I uphold that it is not warranted to assume that the Tibetan plateau proto-tribal cultures of pre-Imperial times were fully divorced from all currently circulating cultural materials. To do so would effectively deny Tibet's distinctive identity (with its attendant unique ethnic and linguistic components), essentially seeing it instead as a historical offshoot of an Indian or other neighboring civilization. Alternatively, one might argue that all traces of Tibetan pre-Imperial cultures were annihilated. Both of these conclusions, of a historical Tibet with no antecedents or direct links to a largely indigenous paleoculture, appear nonviable to me. Yet, even if we are willing to entertain the possibility that Bon literature and the oral tradition encapsulate pre-Imperial cultural materials, questions of which ones

and in what form loom large. These are exceedingly difficult to answer and will remain so until new sources of textual and archaeological information become available for analysis.

Regarding the cultural orientation of Tibet, I present the standpoint that a reconfiguration of its historical discourse, resulting from an obscuring and dissolution of early religious and mythic forms, caused Tibetans to become ever more remote from their pre-Imperial cultural heritage. The cultural history of Tibet over the last millennium would seem to testify to a relentless suppression, assimilation and reconstruction of antecedent legacies in an effort to bring them in compliance with Buddhist sensibilities and tradition. This holds true for both Buddhists and Bon-po despite the latter viewing themselves as the legitimate successors of pre-Imperial culture. This assembling over the centuries of Buddhist-inspired ideas about cultural history and identity can only have been a highly complex process, involving popular social changes, political conditioning and the engineering of the literary record. It must also be pointed out that the formation of a dialectic about cultural development could not have been a uniform or linear process but rather a variable phenomenon—reflecting myriad geographical, sectarian and temporal contexts. Returning to Upper Tibet, we find evidence of these potential cultural historical developments in the following three main areas:

- 1) Buddhacization of the indigenous pantheon and ritual practices.
- 2) Concocted Gu-ru rin-po-che, Ge-sar epic and foreign occupation legends woven around many pre-Buddhist archaeological sites and sacred geographic entities.<sup>5</sup>
- 3) The loss of clan-based traditions and social organization.

Historically, the earliest references to mediums and the gods revealing themselves through the mouth of humans (*lha-bka'*), both male and female, appear to be found in the Tun-huang manuscripts written circa the Eighth or Ninth century (Stein 1972: 232). In *Pelliot 1047*, a divination manuscript, there is mention of elderly female mediums for the nine *mu-sman* sisters (mountain and lake goddesses), who could predict the future and prescribe funerary rites for the

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<sup>5</sup> The Buddhacization of the indigenous pantheon of Upper Tibet is a theme found in Bellezza 1997. For the legends and myths surrounding pre-Buddhist archaeological sites in Upper Tibet see Bellezza 2001; 2002a.

deceased (Macdonald 1971: 274, 275, 294, 295).<sup>6</sup> In Bon quasi-historical literature, *lha-bka'* is assigned to a Bon-po specialist in divination from Bru-sha (Gilgit), who was one of three *gshen* priests summoned to carry out the funerary rites for the slain Gri-gum btsan-po, the eighth king of Tibet (Stein 1972: 232). This account places the practice of spirit-mediumship 25 dynastic generations before the first major introduction of Buddhism in Tibet during the reign of King Srong-btsan sgam-po. Like so many other attestations made in the literature however, we have no means at our disposal to verify the historicity of this claim.

*Lha-bka'* as an oracular function is possibly represented in the Tun-huang manuscript *Pelliot 126*. This text records a conversation between two lordly figures belonging to the dMu and Phywa, who were very important proto-tribes of Tibet. It is not clear however, whether these two individuals represent gods or men. The discourse they hold with one another appears to be related to the acquisition of a tribal deity by the Phywa. In order to obtain a protective deity, the dMu is entreated with complementary words and feted with various offerings. In one excerpt, the Phywa lord requests the directives of the deity but it is not certain whether this is an allusion to an oracular event or a kingly decree. If indeed these passages describe a divine prophecy and are not culturally unexampled, they seem to point to the existence of a well-established institution of spirit-mediumship in the Imperial period (617 to 846). The account begins with the speech of the dMu and ends with that of the Phywa who appears to have a proper name in the text:<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> In a Buddhist polemical attack on female practitioners called *bon-mo* found in a Tun-huang manuscript (India Office 220) it notes that they make prophecies and extort people to carry out animal sacrifices to spirits such as the *lha*, *'dre* and *srin-mo* (Stein 2003: 593, 594).

<sup>7</sup> See Imaeda *et al.* 2000, *Pelliot 126*, lns. 0155–0159. As the many uncertainties in the Tun-huang manuscripts related to grammar, vocabulary and syntax remain unresolved, the translation provided here must be viewed only as an approximation of the intended import of the passages. The excerpt reads: *bdag cag ngan pa mchis pa dang gi gdugs la / 'di 'dra ba'i bka' lung gnyan po g.yar du stsal pa yang / g.yar tshod ma mchis / bdag cag kyi (= gi) yab khu dag kyang ma rdzogs / yab khu dag dang bka' gros bgyis la / de nas khyed cag la bka' lung dag sbyin gis (= gyis) / sku gnyen 'phrul gyi zha (= zhal) snga nas / deng gi gdugs la gor bu'i zhabs tshegs la ma gzigs te gdan gshegs su gngang ba glo ba dga' bdag cag ngan pa lha zhal tsam mihong / lha bka' nyan cing mchis na / bka' stsal pa tsam du ci gngang /.*

“... We the humble ones have come here today. You have requested such essential *bka' lung*<sup>8</sup> but please do not avail upon me. Our father and paternal uncle have not come. We will consult with our father and paternal uncle. Then we will give you the *bka' lung*.” sKu-gnyen 'phrul said, “I am very happy that you came here today without caring about the difficulty faced by your horse. I the humble one have seen the face of the god. I am obeying the *lha-bka'*.”<sup>9</sup> Please confer upon me the *bka'*.”

There are scant but tantalizing descriptions of early mediumistic activities set in the pre-Imperial period in later Bon ritual texts as well. In a 14th century account of the Phya-gshen theg-pa, the first vehicle or system of teachings taught by the founder of the Bon religion, gShen-rab, mention is made of an oracular tradition called *ye-dbang lha yi bka' babs* (mantic directives of the god of primordial power), which was revealed through the *gshen* religious adepts (see fn. 3). According to Bon tradition, this revelatory tradition was one of four systems of divination used in pre-Imperial times to formulate the prognosis of patients. The class of Bon gods who spoke through the ancient mediums is believed to have been the *srid-pa'i sgra-bla*, which in personality, appearance and the manner they are entreated, closely resemble the powerful mountain gods used by the *lha-pa* of today. Bon doctrinal assertions about the types of deities the contemporary mediums depend on, their ceremonial equipment and the rituals they perform under possession, all suggest that they are close successors to this conceived pre-Imperial mediumistic tradition of *srid-pa'i sgra-bla*. If indeed this amounts to actual evidence of a historical continuity in the tradition of spirit-mediumship between the prehistoric and historic periods, the fact that Upper Tibet has clung on to so many other native customs and traditions<sup>10</sup> can be taken as associative evidence. It also must be noted that this Bon predicated continuity of tradition appears to be mirrored in the archaeological record of Upper Tibet. For example, archaic animal motifs in rock art<sup>11</sup> and *thog-lcags* (heterogeneous class of copper alloy

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<sup>8</sup> It is not certain if *bka' lung/bka'* denotes the instructions or advice of a king, or whether it refers to a divine prophecy.

<sup>9</sup> In this context, *lha-bka'* refers either to the utterances or directives of a kingly figure, or the revelations of a deity.

<sup>10</sup> For a synoptic account of indigenous religious rituals and practices see Tucci 1980, pp. 163–212.

<sup>11</sup> For a survey of perdurable rock art motifs see Bellezza 2000; 2001, pp. 190–224; 2002a, pp. 125–147; 2002b.

artifacts) seem to have persisted well into the historic period, as possibly did early monumental architecture. Whatever their historical genesis, the cultural materials presented in this study indicate that the spirit-mediums of Upper Tibet retain one of the greatest proportions of native (if not atavistic) qualities still exhibited among Tibetan religious functionaries.

From a Bon doctrinal perspective, the pre-Imperial mediumistic legacy seems to survive, albeit in attenuated forms, among the *lha-pa* of Upper Tibet (most of whom are Buddhists). Nevertheless, there is no question among Tibetan observers, whatever their religious persuasion, that the spirit-mediums have been heavily influenced by Buddhist thought and the Buddhist pantheon. Buddhist culture has spread so deeply that most spirit-mediums perceive themselves as pursuing a tradition whose roots lie in Buddhism, scarcely recognizing the alternative Bon view of pre-Imperial cultural antecedents. The conceptions held by the spirit-mediums about the nature of possession, motivations for practicing, and the perceptions associated with its execution, have transformed the spirit-mediumship of Upper Tibet into a thoroughly Buddhist affair. It is envisioned and expressed in Buddhist language and fully exercised under Buddhist auspices. The mountain gods and other deities of possession are therefore not seen as vestiges of an olden tradition but rather as legitimate, oath-bound protectors of the Buddhist doctrine. Similarly, their costume and implements are not assigned a Bon identity but for the most part are viewed as part of the great Vajrayana tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. The only exception to this general state of Buddhist orchestrated practice is the spirit-mediums who adhere to Bon, but few remain in the Bon enclaves of Upper Tibet.<sup>12</sup>

In the remaining section of this general introduction to the spirit-mediums of Upper Tibet, I will summarize the salient features of their tradition and the perceptions they have regarding it. Detailed accounts of these topics are found in the interviews contained in Part Two of this work.

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<sup>12</sup> Two of the Bon enclaves in Upper Tibet are sPo-che in gNam-ru (dPal-mgon county) and Dang-ra g.yu-mtsho in Nag-tshang (Nyi-ma county). See Bellezza 1997; 2001 for information on these areas. Among the last Bon-po spirit-mediums of Dang-ra g.yu-mtsho was a woman named Sri-thar sgröl-ma (Bellezza 1997: 318, 319). It is reported that she passed away circa 2000.

In its original form as conceived by the Bon-po, the tradition of spirit-mediumship in Upper Tibet appears to have solely depended on the pantheon of spirits bound in the physical environment such as the *lha*, *btsan*, *gnyan* and *klu*, as well as related protective deities called *sgra-bla*. In its present Buddhist-influenced configuration, spirit-mediums in Upper Tibet customarily rely on several types of divinities to accomplish trance states. These deities of the contemporary trance ceremony are arranged in as many as five hierarchical tiers, and in descending order of status and importance include:

- 1) *Yi-dam* (enlightened tutelary deities).
- 2) *Jig rten las 'das pa'i srung-ma* (protective deities that have passed beyond the sphere of worldly existence) and *mkha' 'gro-ma* (benefactress deities).
- 3) *Lha-ri* (chief mountain gods) and *lha-mtsho* (chief lake goddesses).
- 4) (*Lha-ri*) *'khor-bcas* (members of the retinue of the mountain gods), *btsan* (martial spirits of mountains) and (*lha-mtsho*) *'khor bcas* (members of the retinue of lake goddesses).
- 5) Remedial or ancillary servant spirits in anthropomorphic and zoomorphic form.

In addition to these deities, as with other Tibetan religious phenomena, the omniscient Buddha himself is thought to be present at the trance ceremonies as a kind of witness who exerts a salubrious influence. My research indicates that the first two hierarchical tiers of deities are present at every trance ceremony due to the indispensable nature of their work. The deities of the three latter categories vary from trance to trance, although in practice the *lha-pa* have several gods that they are most acquainted with. With some exceptions, before the onset of the trance, it is not known which god and entourage will possess the spirit-medium. Typically, his or her identity is learned when the deity announces its presence to those in attendance at the ceremony.

The *yi-dam* are usually the deified early masters of Vajrayana Buddhism, Gu-ru rin-po-che and the *grub-chen/grub-thob* (*mahasiddha*). They oversee the proceedings of the trance and take special care of the health and personal integrity of the *lha-pa*. They are in essence, the patrons of the ceremony. The *yi-dam* are usually the deities that the spirit-mediums worship in the normal course of their religious observances. The spirit-mediums state that all other deities of

the trance are subservient to them in terms of power and ability, and must heed their spiritual guidance and advice. Mirroring Buddhist practice, the Bon-po *lha-pa* of Upper Tibet possibly had tutelary gods such as Ge-khod and Me-ri, but there is little documentary evidence of this remaining.

Below the *yi-dam* in importance are the protective deities, which according to Bon and Buddhist theology, have passed beyond trans-migratory existence. They are often referred to as *bstan-srung* (protectors of the doctrine), *bka' srung* (protectors of the teachings) and *chos-skyong* (defenders of religion). The most popular ones of the spirit-mediums are the great Tibetan protectress dPal-ldan lha-mo and the various black protectors known as mGon-po (Mahakala). The Bon-po spirit-mediums of Upper Tibet probably had divinities like Srid-pa'i rgyal-mo or sTag-la me 'bar as their protective counterparts.<sup>13</sup> As we shall see, in some cases these protectors represent the *lha-pa*'s household or family protective deity. The *lha-pa* believe that the protector deities defend their interests and those of their patients and clients. The mediums allege that they prevent demonic entities from interfering in the trance ceremony, and guard against the infection of the *lha-pa* by the evil spirits and contaminated substances they must handle while carrying out healing activities. It is also commonly attested that the protective deities collaborate with the chief possessing deities and help them to accomplish their mission. The higher deities, while playing an essential role in the trance ceremony, do not possess the spirit-mediums. They rather work from the outside, as it is customarily believed that no mere human being could withstand their bodily invasion.

Another group of deities that have the same or a slightly lower status than the high protectors are the *mkha' 'gro*, the group of wisdom-bearing goddesses in the Vajrayana tradition. From the various accounts of the *lha-pa*, they are best described as the benefactresses of the trance ceremony, responsible for the physical and mental well-being of the *lha-pa*. At the trance ceremony they have an active role

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<sup>13</sup> I base my observation on the fact that celebrated Buddhist *phugs-lha* (family protectors) are identical to the protectors of the spirit-mediums. My research demonstrates that in the Bon enclaves of Upper Tibet, most *phugs-lha* are popular Bon protective deities such as Srid-pa'i rgyal-mo, A-bse, Mi-bdud, Hur-pa, and sTag-la me 'bar. It therefore seems most probable that these deities were likewise the protectors of Bon spirit-mediums.



monitoring the subtle channels of the spirit-medium's body, not to mention the integrity of his headdress and costume. They are also said to serve as hostesses, welcoming and situating the other deities participating in the trance who appear from all directions. The caretaking consciousness of the *mkha' 'gro* surrounds the spirit-medium for the duration of the trance. It is generally held that the *mkha' 'gro* do not usually enter inside the spirit-medium's body. According to the spirit-mediums however, they are a source of much reassurance, as quite a leap of faith is needed to abandon one's body to a foreign entity.

The chief mountain gods (*lha-ri*)<sup>14</sup> found in the pantheon of many of the spirit-mediums are gNyan-chen thang-lha and rTa-rgo dge-rgan.<sup>15</sup> These are two of the most powerful mountain gods in Upper Tibet. My researches show that with the possible exception of the mightiest of *lha-pa*, they do not deign to possess the bodies of humans. These archetypal father figures and ancestral deities are white in color and ride white steeds. They are believed to function to uphold the best interests of the spirit-mediums and patients alike. It is said that they usually manage the activities of the trance from the sidelines, yet they are aware of everything that is happening. I employ the analogy of a military operation to describe their actions: like generals on the battlefield, they direct their large armies of subsidiary forms and servants to carry out specific procedures on the patient's behalf. The *lha-ri* gNyan-chen thang-lha and rTa-rgo dge-rgan are closely tied with their mates, gNam-mtsho and Dang-ra g.yu-mtsho respectively. These lake deities sometimes participate in the séance as well, along with their vast entourages.

Among the spirit-mediums (as in Tibetan doctrinal assertions), the *lha-ri* and *lha-mtsho* are conceived of as worldly spirits (*jig rten-pa'i lha*), and if angered can become indisposed towards someone. In this case, they are believed to have the power to harm people and animals and even unleash plagues. If such a situation has developed, Tibetans traditionally feel that it is the *lha-pa's* intervention that can restore the balance between the *lha-ri* and patient, thereby effecting a cure. Ancient lake goddesses such as gNam-mtsho phyug-mo and

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<sup>14</sup> For a general description of the *lha* see Tucci 1949, p. 720.

<sup>15</sup> For a comprehensive review of the textual and oral-based traditions pertaining to these deities and their large retinues see Bellezza 1997.

Dang-ra g.yu-mtsho, and their retinue of *sman* and *klu-mo* spirits, also possess certain spirit-mediums. Other patronizing female deities are related to dPal-ldan lha-mo and may represent vestigial forms of goddesses who have all but lost their original identities. Tibetans commonly believe that many indigenous goddesses are either manifestations of dPal-ldan lha-mo or members of her huge retinue.

According to the spirit-mediums, the main subsidiary form of gNyan-chen thang-lha that possesses them is his son Thang-sras-mchor-po. He is popularly said to inhabit a sharp peak located just north of the Thang-lha massif. It is reported that Thang-sras mchor-po actually enters the *lha-pa* and discharges the work of healing or prognostication. These functions are also commonly carried out by rDo-rje rkyang-khra, a deity usually thought of as being a member of gNyan-chen thang-lha's circle of gods. His residence is well known to the *'brog-pa* (shepherds); an outcrop in a vast plain situated north of dPa' mtsho, in gNam-ru (dPal-mgon county). The lesser forms of rTa-rgo most often involved in possession are the *btsan* deities<sup>16</sup> Ngodmar lha-btsan and Gangs-lung lha-btsan, mountains located in the northern half of the rTa-rgo range. They have precisely the same function as Thang-sras mchor-po and rDo-rje rkyang-khra. I equate these deities with military officers who use the senses and body of the *lha-pa* to battle demons and harmful forces. They receive their orders from their corresponding *lha-ri*, which is also present at the séance but characteristically occupying a less intimate location outside of the spirit-medium.

A survey of the spirit-mediums shows that the other main possessing mountain gods are bTsan-rgod nam-ra, Rol-pa-skya-bdun and Gangs-ri lha-btsan, which also belong to the *btsan* class of protective deities. Spirit-mediums report that they act independent of the two chief *lha-ri* (Thang-lha and rTa-rgo), and when they are present at the trance ceremony the chief *lha-ri* are not, for they are affiliated to different territories and theogonies. Consequently, when these *btsan* deities are involved one of the five tiers of the divine hierarchy is effectively removed. The spirit-mediums are quick to point out however, that this has no bearing on the effectiveness of a *lha-pa* or the nature of his work.

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<sup>16</sup> For a general description of the *btsan* see Tucci 1949, p. 719.

bTsan-rgod nam-ra, one of the most important *btsan* of the Byang-thang, is widely known to inhabit a black mountain in Bar-tha township, Nag-chu (Nag-chu county). Another important *btsan* is Gangs-ri lha-btsan the *gnas-bdag* (protector of a holy place) of the celebrated mountain Gangs rin-po-che/Gangs-dkar ti-se. There are reported to be several mountains across Upper Tibet occupied by the group of seven *btsan* known as Rol-pa skya-bdun. They include A-dmar rol-pa skya-bdun of sGer-rte, Da-dben rol-pa skya-bdun of gZhung-pa ma-mtshan, bKra-shis-do rol-pa skya-bdun of gNam-mtsho, and Thonkha' rol-pa skya-bdun of Ra-bang. Some *'brog-pa* claim that all of these Rol-pa groups were once possessing deities of the spirit-mediums. There is also the deity Dam-can mgar-ba nag-po, the divine blacksmith, who also acts in the role of a mountain deity. According to many informants, his main mountain abode is located on the border of sGar-sde and sNye-mo, southwest of Thang-lha. In addition to the various mountain spirits, some *lha-pa* are possessed by A-stag klu-mo, a heroine of the Gling ge-sar epic, who is supposed to have been an ancient ruler of Yar-khams in Upper Tibet.

The possessing deities are thought to control a wide assortment of remedial spirits who belong to their retainers. These are generically referred to by the spirit-mediums as *grib-sbyong* (contamination cleaners) and by the roughly homonymous terms *'jibs-spyang* (sucking wolf) and *grib-spyang* (contamination wolf). They are the 'foot soldiers' that remove impurities from the body of patients, do battle with evil spirits and capture errant souls. As already noted, these helping spirits often assume zoomorphic forms. This peculiar class of deity can possibly be traced to an early period in the cultural development of Tibet. They are potentially represented in the prehistoric rock art of the region, which seems to include various theriomorphic figures, but at this time archaeological corroboration is lacking. Similar zoomorphic deities were also used by other kinds of Tibetan religious practitioners, and they themselves were sometimes transformed into animals. For example, in the 12th century quasi-historical Bon text *Rig 'dzin rig-pa'i thugs-rgyud*, the Zhang-zhung era adept gZing-pa mthu-chen manifested as a wolf in order to recover wandering souls (Bellezza 2001: 57, 58). In the biography of the Dol-po lama dPal-Idan blo-gros (1467–1563), it relates that the *yul-lha* (deity of the locale) Nam-stod, in the form of a sheep with a reddish brown face, helped him retrieve the soul of a sick person (Hazod 1996: 96). Likewise, a rare funerary manuscript of the Na-

khi of the southeastern Tibetan borderlands, records that the stolen soul of a priest was reclaimed with the aid of his white dog, a chicken, white crane, pig, black duck, bear, pheasant, and other animals (Rock 1972: 471, 472).

Spirit-mediumship in Upper Tibet has been kept alive by lineages of practitioners, nearly all of which are hereditary. The profession is inherited from both one's paternal and maternal ancestors. The most prominent spirit-mediums are thought to be heirs to lineages many generations old. In some cases, so great in length was this succession of forebears that the *lha-pa* claim it extends for nine or thirteen generations. In the Tibetan language, these numbers have acquired the import of 'many' or a 'multitude', and are metaphorically employed by the spirit-mediums to express a long-standing family tradition. Spirit-mediumship constituted one of the region's great oral traditions, and most of the *lha-pa* appear to have been illiterate. My research proves that they learned their techniques and acquired their deities through tutelage and not through book knowledge. In fact, it does not appear that a manual was ever written to teach aspiring *lha-pa* how to practice. To the contrary, this is not a vocation chosen voluntarily but foisted upon one by the deities themselves. The *lha-pa* hold that unless the deities specially select one, there is little chance of learning how to become their vehicle.

Without exception among those spirit-mediums interviewed, possession by the deities, especially in the first few years, is a traumatic experience that causes much distress; even mental and physical illness. Initially, there was always the anxiety that the possessing entity might be a demon instead of a bona fide god. It was explained to me that the family of the aspiring candidate usually called in a high lama to determine the nature of possession. The lama would bless the *lha-pa* and exhort him or her to lead a wholesome life so that the deities could find suitable temporary residence inside the body. The spirit-mediums note that in the event a person was under malevolent influences, an exorcism of the evil spirits was conducted. The initiation of a *lha-pa* could take up to several years and included Buddhist or Bon devotional practices, trance sittings and pilgrimage to holy places. In the pre-Communist period, lamas regularly tested spirit-mediums to see if their abilities were up to the grade.<sup>17</sup> This

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<sup>17</sup> The initiation of a *lha-pa* under the auspices of a *btsan* deity called bTsan-rje

was sometimes carried out as part of a Lhasa government certification process. In the time of the 13th Dalai Lama, *lha-pa* were supposed to be required to seek approval from the government sponsored gNas-chung oracle. Only authentic spirit-mediums were given permission to practice, and they were required to make annual offerings to the gNas-chung oracle as a kind of tribute.<sup>18</sup>

ii) *The greater tradition: cross-cultural comparisons*

As has been noted (Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1956; Hoffman 1961), Tibetan religions contain certain elements in common with what are broadly called the shamanistic/shamanic religions of central and north Asia, the *locus classicus* of the shaman. However, the nature of these cultural parallels cannot be satisfactorily elucidated, due to the highly obscure historical and ethnological factors at play. At present, the agents of ethnohistorical formation involved do not readily lend themselves to scientific analysis.

As shown below, the practices and ritual implements of the *lha-pa* of Upper Tibet share many affinities with central and north Asian shamanism. In my view, the existence of these analogous traditions embedded in the substrate of cultures distributed over Inner Asia suggests that there are indeed deeply buried genetic linkages. Postulating an interrelated Inner Asian tradition of spirit-mediumship presupposes a high degree of cultural diffusion, and this was potentially effected through trade, conquest, intellectual exchange, and tribal assimilations over a period of no less than 3000 years (from the Eneolithic to Yuan dynastic period).

In earlier works, I have used comparative archaeological data to evince Iron Age cultural links between Upper Tibet and her northern neighbors.<sup>19</sup> My research indicates that archaeological assets with

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snying-krung is described by Tucci (1980: 203, 204). It was conducted by a lay religious practitioner called a *sngags-pa* and entailed recovering a hidden *bla-rdo* (soul stone) for the purposes of divination. The *lha-pa* called *pra-rten* (support of divination) in order to be successful, had to see all the good and bad things in the world using his mirror.

<sup>18</sup> This information came from the current gNas-chung *sku-rten-pa* Thub-btsan dngos-grub, in personal communication.

<sup>19</sup> Paleocultural affinities between the pre-Buddhist archaeological heritage of Upper Tibet and the Scytho-Siberian archaeological record of Inner Asia are thoroughly examined in Bellezza 2002a.

similar morphological, constructional and design features, which are found in Upper Tibet, Mongolia and the Altai, can probably be traced to the Scytho-Siberian period of the First Millennium BCE. In religious historical terms, this temporally corresponds with the so-called pre-shamanistic period in central and northern Asia and the pre-Imperial period in Upper Tibet. These archaeological parallels however, do not necessarily confirm that the *lha-pa* and shamans of central and northern Asia are successors to a tradition sufficiently long-lived to be represented in an interrelated Iron Age cultural heritage. Unfortunately, parallel lines of cultural development and refusal for subsequent periods are no less abstruse. Albeit both types of practitioners are representative of well-established traditions, our search for historical ties between the *lha-pa* and shamans of central and north Asia is stymied by a lack of documentary evidence. Until the required breakthroughs in the fields of comparative archaeology and ethnohistory occur, we will not have the means in our grasp to accurately evaluate the analogous traditions of Upper Tibet and her northern neighbors.

Before we examine traditions that might be held in common by the *lha-pa* and their northern counterparts, let us place shamanism in a historical perspective. Strictly speaking, shamanism is a Turco-Mongolian cultural phenomenon involving various religious functionaries who refer to themselves as shamans.<sup>20</sup> In addition to healing and divination, the shamans of Central Asia and Siberia serve as psychopomps who escort the souls of the dead to the afterlife (Hultkrantz 1996: 9–11). In Tibetan religion, this later function as a guide of the dead has been entirely assumed by the Bon and Buddhist lamas. It is theorized that the roots of shamanistic ideology can be traced to the division of labor and the establishment of class societies, which in south Siberia occurred at the end of the Neolithic and the onset of the Metal Age (Second and First Millennium BCE) (Mikhajlov 1984: 100). It is thought by some specialists that an archaic pre-shamanistic religion spread widely among the Siberian

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<sup>20</sup> For a general discussion of what constitutes a shaman in Asia see Lewis 1984; Gilberg 1984; Hultkrantz 1996. The term shaman is also used as a general term for highly disparate practices the world over, predicated on a disassociation of cultural context and the reduction of diverse linguistic, symbolic and historical systems into a single objectified phenomenon. For a critical discussion of this topic see Holmberg 1989, pp. 143–145; Hoppál 1992a, pp. 129–131.

aborigines, characterized by ancestor cults, hunting rituals, and the worship of mountain spirits and other natural objects (Taksami 1984: 451, 452). As regards certain shamanistic attributes, particularly ritual implements and costume, it would appear that they were part of the pre-Turk cultural substrate (Vajnsštejn 1984: 367). However, the emergence of shamanism is difficult to gauge using archaeological evidence, as dead shamans and their ritual accouterments were often placed on raised platforms and subject to rapid decomposition (Jacobson 1993: 206–208). Nor does there exist a scholarly consensus on the application of rock art to the study of the origins of shamanism (Hoppál 1992b: 132–134). Archaic Siberian petroglyphs of horned and masked figures cannot be identified as shamans due to a lack of irrefutable archaeological evidence (Jacobson 1993: 206–208). In order to regard ancient petroglyphs as shamanistic one has to posit nebulous cultural associations. These entail viewing contemporary shamanism as heir to ancient Turco-Mongolian religious traditions and that these, in turn, can be understood in the context of Scytho-Siberian archaeological data (Francfort 1998: 313). Needless to say, the same types of cautions, regarding relating observable anthropological activity to archaeological evidence, apply in any attempt to compare Upper Tibetan rock art with the traditions of the *lha-pa*. Central Asian shamanism, as we now know it, is the result of widespread movements of the Huns, Turks, Khitans and Uighurs in Yuan times (Mikhajlov 1984: 97). It is a syncretistic phenomenon containing elements of early cults, which were affected by Buddhism, Hinduism, Zoroastrianism and other oriental religions (*ibid.*: 98). Although ethnically specific, strong similarities in shamanism exist in areas such as mythology, ritual, the structure and composition of the pantheon, and religious terminology (*ibid.*: 98, 99).

Despite not being able to elucidate the ethnological and historical factors that may have given rise to the various traditions shared by the *lha-pa* and shamans, it is important to enumerate these traditions in order to gain an appreciation of the degree of affinity that exists between these religious functionaries. These similarities in practice, ritual implements and deities, in functional terms, reflect wide-ranging traditions of deity possession. The shamanistic cultural groups noted in the next several paragraphs all hail from various areas of central and northern Asia. In the latter part of this section, I will undertake a comparative study of the *lha-pa* and their counterparts in other Tibetan regions and allied cultures. Coming closer afield to Upper Tibet many congruencies in spirit-mediumship are discern-

able. These parallels in Bodic tradition have both historical and ethnic dimensions.

The *me-long* (circular metal mirror), along with the drum and *gshang*, is the most important ritual implement of the *lha-pa*. It functions as the residence of the possessing deities and their retinue of remedial spirits, and as the abode of the spirit-medium's *mam-shes* (consciousness), *bla* (soul) or *thugs* (mind) during the trance. Likewise, for the Nanai Shamans of Inner Asia brass mirrors (*toli*) served as the receptacle of their various spirits (Smoljak 1984: 246). Among those residing in the mirror were deer and dogs that dispatched souls to the land of the dead (*ibid.*: 245). The most prized Tibetan *me-long* are ancient specimens that are believed to have fallen from the sky, and are called *thog-lcags* (primordial/thunderbolt metal). These are handed down for generations in family lineages of *lha-pa*, or discovered in hidden places. More than 2000 years ago, brass mirrors spread throughout south Siberia (Smoljak 1984: 246) and likewise, were later highly coveted by groups of shamans in Central Asia and Siberia. Some shamans hung ancient bronze mirrors, which were considered a powerful protecting spirit, on their coats (Vajňštejn 1984: 365). In Mongolia, shamans wore metal mirrors (*toli*) with an apotropaic function fastened to their aprons, and on their chest and back (Heissig 1980: 19). Tibetan *lha-pa* often wear plain *me-long* or ones embossed with the Tibetan calendar on their chests for protective purposes.

An important implement of the *lha-pa* of Upper Tibet is the *mda'* *dar*, a festooned arrow used for attracting good fortune and exorcising demons. The Buryat shamans and other peoples of Siberia also used an arrow in various religious ceremonies (Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1956: 543, 544), as did the Mongolians for divination purposes (Šarkozi 1984: 331). In the hunting rituals of the Khitans (ruled northern China from 907–1125), the arrow symbolized the male, as is frequently found in Inner Asia (Baldick 2000: 6, 31), with Tibet being no exception. The Khitans also used the arrow in rituals to expel demons (Francke 1983: 11). Similarly, a celebrated instrument of both the *lha-pa* and shamans of Central Asia and Siberia is the drum. Siberian shamans have drum-skins made of consecrated deer-hide (Jacobson 1993: 176, 177), while drum-skins made of gazelle-hide and snake-skin are known among the spirit-mediums of Upper Tibet. Other analogies between the respective groups involve the use of raptor feathers in headdresses, and the burning of juniper incense. For example, the male and female shamans of Tuva stick eagle and owl feathers in their conical cap headdresses (Djakonova 1996: 158,



159, 163), while the spirit-mediums of Upper Tibet use a plume of vulture feathers in similarly shaped conical caps (*btsan-zhwa*).

Great feats of strength and magic have been attributed to both the spirit-mediums of Upper Tibet and their northern shaman counterparts. Among the *lha-pa* of Upper Tibet, it is common to divide their profession into three categories of ceremonial proficiency: superior, average and inferior. A congruous tradition was found among the Yakut shamans, who were divided into three categories: great, average and weak, judged by the amount of spirits under their control (Alekseev 1984: 269). The *lha-pa*, in conformance with an ancient Tibetan cosmological concept, divide the universe into three vertical spheres (*srid-pa-gsum*). Similarly, the Tuvans divided their universe into two or three vertically-oriented spheres (Vajňštejn 1984: 354). The Nanai also had a tripartite vertically-oriented universe (Okladnikov 1981: 19), as did the Yakuts (Hatto 1970: 10) and Evenks (Vasilevich 1963: 48, 49, 72). Another striking similarity between the *lha-pa* and shamans of Central Asia and Siberia is the general use of a sucking technique to remove impurities that cause diseases. Moreover, the vocation of shamans in Siberia is often hereditary, as it is among the *lha-pa* (cf. Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1956: 549, 550). For divination the Evenki shamaness uses a device made of nine threads (Bulatova 1997: 240), while nine threads are used in the healing rituals of certain spirit-mediums of Upper Tibet.

The spirit-mediums practicing in Upper Tibet have mountain gods who serve as patrons and officiate over the trance ceremony, and subsidiary forms of mountain deities who actually possess them and carry out various functions. Khaka shamans also invoked mountain spirits during their rites for assistance and protection, and the Kumandin shamans could have their clan's mountain spirit as a patron deity (Alekseev 1984: 271, 272). Kachin shamans had mountain deities as helping spirits in both zoomorphic and anthropomorphic forms, including figures mounted on horses, white and black birds, wolves, bears, dogs, elk, chamois, frogs, snakes and lizards (*ibid.*: 272). Kizil shamans also seemed to have had helping spirits in the form of mountains and bodies of water (*ibid.*: 272). The Tuvan shamans had helping spirits (*ēren*) in the form of eagles, owls, falcons, bears and wolves.<sup>21</sup> The main function of the *ēren* was to protect humans

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<sup>21</sup> See Vajňštejn 1984, p. 355; 1996, pp. 168, 169.

from the demons of disease, which could be expelled by the spirits of animals (Vajnštejn 1996: 168, 169). These iconographic forms and functions of the *ēren* are reflected in the helping spirits of the spirit-mediums of Upper Tibet as well. There is also common ground between the two geographic traditions of mediumship in the articulation of these helping spirits in the trance ceremony. The Tuvan shamans imitate the voices of a variety of animals including bears, wolves and eagles (Kenin-Lopsan 1997: 132), as do their counterparts in Upper Tibet. Among the shamans of Tuva, helping spirits were also the master-spirits of sacred mountains, and their costume symbolized a bird, which was probably a helping spirit (Alekseev 1984: 272, 275). Mountain remedial spirits in the form of raptors are likewise common among the Tibetan spirit-mediums. Various Turco-Mongolian groups such as the Kachins and Sagais believed that the mountain and clan spirits rode horses of different single colors (Potapov 1996: 112, 113), another tradition that finds resonance in Upper Tibet.

The possessing deities of the *lha-pa* control their circles of helping figures—remedial spirits in zoomorphic and anthropomorphic form—involved in therapeutic activities. The most common animal spirits of the *lha-pa* are bears, wolves and carnivorous birds, with foxes, dogs and other animals also known. Clear functional parallels exist in the shamanism of the Altai and Siberia. For example, the Yakut shamans had a main assistant (could be ancestor or deity of the sky) in the form of an elk, bear, stallion, wolf or ox, who would mediate between people and other groups of spirits (Alekseev 1984: 269). They also had helping spirits in the guise of humans and animals (*ibid.*: 269). The Tölös, a Southern Altaian ethnic group, had patronizing and helping spirits in the shape of bears, wolves and snakes (*ibid.*: 270). The Evenk shamans had deputy spirits in the shape of elk, reindeer, bears and eagles (Anisimov 1963: 96, 97). Todji shamans also had animals, ravens, eagles and hawks among their helping spirits (Alekseev 1984: 275). Likewise, Dolgans shamans have fox and wolf helpmates (Nebesky-Wojkowitz: 541). A Nivkhi shamaness of Sakhalin is documented appealing to a grandfather tiger to have pity and help her not fall ill (Taksami 1996: 104). The tiger as a remedial spirit is also used by spirit-mediums in Upper Tibet.

Spirit-mediums known as *dpa' bo* and *lha-pa* are active in regions across the Tibetan plateau and Himalayan rim-land. They are more or less related to their counterparts in Upper Tibet, in terms of

practice and historical origins. One group exhibiting archaic traditions are the male *dpa' bo* and female *bsnyen jo-mo* of Sikkim, Bhutan and the southern Tibetan borderlands. Like the *lha-pa* of Upper Tibet, this is often a hereditary vocation in which the mediums act as vehicles for their personal protective spirits, and at one time danced holding a small drum (*mga-chung*) and flat-bell (*gshang*) (Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1956: 425–428).<sup>22</sup> The important oracle of the sKur-stod district of Bhutan, called the *ger-bdag dpa' bo*, wears the *btsan-chas* (dress of the *btsan*), plays the *da-ma-ru* hand-drum and sucks illness-causing poisons from his patients (Yablonsky 1997: 1095, 1096), all practices found among the spirit-mediums of Upper Tibet.

In A-mdo, *lha-pa* practice more freely than in Upper Tibet and participate in high-profile fortune-bestowing communal festivals. *Lha-pa* play an officiating role at the summer solstice connected *glu-rol* festival (performed to insure the well-being of the community, crops and livestock) of Rab-skong (Nagano 2000). These functions of the A-mdo spirit-mediums are of course matched by their opposite number in Upper Tibet. The senior *lha-pa* of Rab-skong is possessed by a martial spirit named dGra 'dul dbang-phyug and the younger *lha-pa* by a spirit called Blon-po, both of which are in the circle of the mountain god A-myes rma-chen spom-ra (*ibid.*: 576). The senior *lha-pa* performs a divination with a black yak horn to predict the success of the festival and the outcome of the next harvest, as well as determining the luck of individual households in the coming year (*ibid.*: 577, 578, 580, 586, 587). The *glu-rol* also includes the *klu-bsangs* (offerings to water spirits) rite held in a brook, which is performed by the *lha-pa* (*ibid.*: 577). Offerings to the *klu* also play an important part in the rituals of the *lha-pa* of Upper Tibet.

*Lha-pa* and *lha-mo* (female mediums) with functions similar to those found in Upper Tibet are known in conterminous Ladakh (La-dwags), where they are believed to cure illnesses, conduct divination, and exorcise evil spirits (Day 1990: 206, 208).<sup>23</sup> In keeping with Bon and

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<sup>22</sup> The *mun* and other Lepcha spirit-mediums of Sikkim also usually represent hereditary professions (Gorer 1987: 215). For a study of the ritual activities (propitiation of personal deities, harvest offerings, etc.) of the *dpa' bo* in the Sikkim village of Tingchim see Balicki Denjongpa 2002.

<sup>23</sup> In an early 20th century account of divination, the *Wazir* of Ladakh ordered two *lha-pa* to go into trance near a *lha-tho* (stone altar) of a sacred grove and identify a thief and his whereabouts (Ribbach 1979: 191, 192).

Buddhist tradition, spirit-mediums of both regions work for the benefit of sentient beings, healing both humans and animals. The *lha-pa* of Ladakh tend to follow an inherited profession (*ibid.*: 208), as they do in adjacent Upper Tibet. As a prelude to becoming a *lha-mo* in Ladakh, women can suffer from mental disturbances (Schenk 1993: 333), as they do in Upper Tibet. The principal possessing deity of the *lha-pa* of Ladakh is commonly a village *yul-lha*, *khyim-lha* (household deity) or *lha 'dre* (in this context: minor deity or ghost), and is invoked by reciting a *gser-skyems* (libation offerings) with the *da-ma-ru* in the right hand and a *dril-bu* (Buddhist bell) in the left.<sup>24</sup> A similar manner of invoking deities is found among the *lha-pa* of Upper Tibet; however, they use the Bon *gshang* instead of the Buddhist bell. Also, the divinities of Upper Tibet tend to be much more powerful examples of the indigenous Tibetan pantheon than the Ladakhi deities. The *lha-pa* of Ladakh generally have an inferior or ambivalent status in society, and do not come from the aristocratic clans (Day 1990: 207, 208, 216). On the other hand, while their status falls far below that of incarnate lamas, the *lha-pa* of Upper Tibet have not been as dominated by the lamaist ecclesiastical hierarchy as their counterparts in Ladakh, at least in part due to their isolation from major monastic centers. This helps to explain why the *lha-pa* of Upper Tibet can belong to the most prominent clans of the region.

The *lha-pa* of Ladakh use the mirror as a temporary residence of the deities, and a *mda' dar* (festooned ritual arrow) to call spirits, as a support of deities and as a symbol of prosperity (Day 1990: 211, 214, 215); mirror and arrow practices of the *lha-pa* of Upper Tibet as well. Likewise, the Ladakhi *lha-pa*, whose deity-possession is marked by the donning of the *rigs-nga* headdress, perform drum divination, speak in Tibetan and suck *grib* (impurities) causing illness from their patients with their drum (Yamada 1995), just as is done by their peers in Upper Tibet. Ladakhi *lha-pa* remove *grib* in the form of black and other-colored mucus (Srinivas 1998: 144), a common practice in Upper Tibet as well. A wolf deity of a *lha-mo* in Ladakh (Day 1990: 211) is also reminiscent of the Siberian and Upper Tibet traditions. The Ladakhi *lha-pa* diagnose misfortune caused by a conflict between a newlywed couple's protective deities (Srinivas 2001: 133–134).

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<sup>24</sup> See Day 1990, pp. 209, 211, 212, 216; Yamada 1995, pp. 88, 89, 93.

This too is one of the functions of spirit-mediums in Upper Tibet.

The *lha-pa* of the *btsan* deity gZhon-nu mdung-lag, the *yul-lha* of western Zangs-dkar, belongs to the same general tradition as his counterparts in Ladakh and Upper Tibet. Like the spirit-mediums of Upper Tibet, he is a layman coming from one of various clans, and is perceived to have curative, diagnostic and mantic functions (Riaboff 1996: 29, 37). The Zangs-dkar *lha-pa* wears the *rigs-lnga* headdress and plays the *da-ma-ru*, and still has important community functions (*ibid.*: 36, 37). In the Upper Tibet of the Communist period, the participation of *lha-pa* in community festivals has been abolished. The most famous *sku-rten* (oracle-healers) in Ladakh are two monks from the Sa-skyapa monastery of Mang-spro, who incorporate a local deity, Rong-btsan dkar-dmar.<sup>25</sup> As with *btsan* deities in Upper Tibet, Rong-btsan is subordinate to Buddhist protectors such as mGon-po, illustrating how the tradition of spirit-mediumship has been accommodated to Buddhism. Likewise, Rong-btsan addresses concerns about physical and mental health, community happiness, and the forecasts for crops and other matters.

*Lha-pa* are also found in sPi-ti (Spiti), where their practice is influenced by traditions originating in both Upper Tibet and cis-Himalayan regions of Himachal Pradesh.<sup>26</sup> Among the functions of the *lha-pa* of Spiti are the curing of diseases, the exorcising of demons and fortune-bestowal. The *lha-pa* of Spiti are active at three communal celebrations: Namkin (a harvest festival), Lo-gsar (Tibetan Lunar New Year), and the *bsod-nams lo-gsar* (winter solstice). In a winter fortune-bestowing ritual, the *lha-pa* bSod-nams tshe-ring of Brag-mkhar became possessed by the local *yul-lha* Jo-dar. During the trance, which took place in his kitchen, he wore a special turban (*lha-thod*) for the performance and held a vase and a bundle of peacock feathers. While possessed by Jo-dar, bSod-nams tshe-ring stood up in bare feet and congenially conversed about the value of Buddhism. The end of the possession was marked by a squeal as the *lha-pa* fell to a sitting position.

In Spiti, there is a winter solstice festival called *lha-gsol* (deity propitiation) held in honor of the various *yul-lha* to insure the well-being

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<sup>25</sup> For information on the mediumship of Rong-btsan see Tewari 1987.

<sup>26</sup> This information on the *lha-pa* of Spiti was collected by the present author on a field trip to the region, in 1992.

of the community in the coming year. In the village of Ta-po, the local *yul-lha* sMan-skyong has no voice and can only be reached by the *lha-pa* when a monastic protectress named rDo-rje chen-mo, one of three sisters residing in the vicinity, possesses him. In the *lha-gsol* of 1992, the *lha-pa* was clad in a *lha-thod* turban. In his right hand, he held an instrument called a *pho-brang*, a staff with many hanging colored ribbons surmounted by a trident, which serves to call down the deity. Under the possession of rDo-rje chen-mo the *lha-pa* spoke in a garrulous fashion about the need of the villagers to carefully protect their culture and traditions. Before the trance ended, the *lha-pa* tossed a handful of barleycorns at the bottles of *chang* (beer) and *ghanti* (spirits) brought by each household of Ta-po. The bottle into which a kernel of barley landed was the one selected by rDo-rje chen-mo to be offered to the *yul-lha*. Afterwards, this bottle of alcohol and *rlung-rta* (prayer flags) attached to juniper boughs, from each household, were carried by male members to the shrine of sMan-skyong.

The *lha-pa* of the Sherpas (Shar-pa) usually pursue a hereditary profession, and are chosen involuntarily by the deities (Fürer-Haimendorf 1979: 255). The Sherpa *lha-pa* use the *rigs-nga* head-dress, which sometimes has feathers.<sup>27</sup> The spirit-mediums of the Sherpas are attributed with the ability to diagnose the cause of illness and misfortune, the power of healing, deities that inhabit mirrors, and the ability to speak in the language of the gods,<sup>28</sup> common characteristics of the *lha-pa* of Upper Tibet as well.

In Tibet, the most famous class of spirit-mediums were the *sku-rten-pa* (body supporter),<sup>29</sup> which were possessed by powerful protectors such as the god Pe-har and Tshangs-pa (Brahma), as well as by malevolent ghosts of the *gshin 'dre* and *rgyal-po* classes of demons. The *sku-rten* profession was open to both men and women of all social classes (Havnevik 2002: 262, 277, 278), as are mediumistic activities in Upper Tibet. In formulating policy, the old Tibetan

<sup>27</sup> See Fürer-Haimendorf 1979, p. 256; Adams 1996, pp. 186–194.

<sup>28</sup> See Fürer-Haimendorf 1979, p. 261; Adams 1996, pp. 186–194.

<sup>29</sup> The *Pe-har* oracle is also commonly called *chos-rje* (lord of religion), *chos-skyong* (protector of religion) and *chos-rgyal* (king of religion). For descriptions of the *sku-rten-pa* and their trances see Waddell 1993, pp. 478–482; Rock 1935; Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1956, pp. 409–454; Prince Peter 1978; Tibetan Bulletin 1992; Havnevik 2002; Byang-ngos-pa tshe-g.yang 2002.

government used the pronouncements of the *sku-rten-pa*, thus their social status was much higher than the *lha-pa* of Upper Tibet. However, those that relied on dangerous spirits of a more recent pedigree, instead of autochthonous protective deities like the mountain gods, indicate that these *sku-rten-pa* belonged to an alternative (historically derivative?) tradition of spirit-mediumship. Like the *lha-pa*, the *sku-rten-pa* were often laymen, and the costumes, paraphernalia, mirrors, and vulture feather plumes used by both groups bear much resemblance. Similarly, the *sku-rten-pa* could display supernatural strength as when twisting a thick steel sword blade.<sup>30</sup> The most famous and powerful *sku-rten-pa* is the gNas-chung oracle for rDo-rje grags-ldan, the leader of the sKu-lnga group of protective deities, whose principal emissary is Pe-har, the chief of the dGe-lugs-pa sect protective deities. The current oracular tradition was initiated in 1542 (Tibetan Bulletin 1992: 23). The present oracle, the Venerable Thub-bstan dngos-grub (born 1958), reports that before his first possession in 1987, he experienced strange headaches, emotional agitation, and bled from the mouth and nose (*ibid.*: 26). These kinds of physical and mental disturbances also affect the *lha-pa* of Upper Tibet. In trance, the Pe-har oracle speaks in a poetical language (*ibid.*: 28), a phenomenon known among the spirit-mediums of Upper Tibet as well.

Many of the practices and traditions of the Pe-har *sku-rten-pa* have never been written down and remain highly secret.<sup>31</sup> The deity Pe-har is the *'phrin-las* (activity) and main manifestation of a group of deities known as sKu-lnga. Although Pe-har has passed beyond the sphere of worldly existence, as *gtso-bo* (chief) of the *lha-srin sde-brygad* (eight orders of elemental spirits), he has a close affinity with the mountain gods and other indigenous deities. The costume worn by the Pe-har *sku-rten-pa* is called *lha'i chas* (divine costume), and he says that it is of the type used by Gling ge-sar of the Tibetan epic and the warrior deities known as *dgra-lha*. It consists of a helmet and cuirass, which are worn by mountain gods and by Tibetan warriors

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<sup>30</sup> See Rock 1935, p. 478; Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1956, p. 420; Ekvall 1964, pp. 273, 274.

<sup>31</sup> The information on Pe-har and his *sku-rten-pa* in this and the following two paragraphs came from the present oracle Thub-bstan dngos-grub, the 14th member of the lineage, in personal communication. He kindly acceded to be interviewed in March and April of 2003.

as well. The Pe-har *sku-rten-pa* reports that the headdress he uses is the *dbu-rmog* (helmet), and is surmounted by the *lcog-dar*, five sets of pennants and white *bya-rgod* (vulture) plumes.<sup>32</sup> He explains that these feathers symbolize that the *chos-skyong* Pe-har is the highest of protectors, as the vulture is the highest-flying and most powerful of birds. The vulture feather plumes used by the *lha-pa* likewise have an exalted symbolic position. On this subject Thub-bstan dngos-grub, the Pe-har *sku-rten-pa*, writes:<sup>33</sup>

The vulture feather decorating the top of the *lcog-dar* is a sign that the vulture has the ability to fly enduringly to the bounds of the divine path (sky), and it has the power to conquer the entire realm of evil, the perpetrators of the flight of wicked thought and activities. The amassed plume on top of the *lcog-dar* is a sign of the holder having comprehended the [Buddhist] view.

Pe-har *sku-rten-pa* observes that on the front of the *dbu-rmog* helmet are five *thod-skam* (skull diadems) which, like the diadems on the *rigs-lnga* crown of the mediums of Upper Tibet, represent the rGyal-ba rigs-lnga (the Buddha orders of the five directions of the cosmos). The Pe-har *sku-rten-pa* wears a mirror on his chest called a *dam-gsal me-long*, as do certain *lha-pa*. He alleges that these mirrors have the capability to reflect all phenomena, in their true nature, as being empty of inherent existence. The *sku-rten-pa* notes that *Hri* is embossed on his *me-long*, the *sa-bon* (seed syllable) of the Buddha 'Od-dpag-med, the *yi-dam* rTa-mgrin and the *srung-ma* gNas-chung chos-skyong (rDo-rje grags-ldan and his circle of five plenipotentiary forms, the sKu-lnga). These three categories of deities have the same enlightened nature. It will be recalled that among the lower status *lha-pa*, the Buddha, *yi-dam* gods and high protectors form three hierarchical

<sup>32</sup> The *dbu-rmog* is regularly used by the mountain deities and is mentioned in Imperial period inscriptions as a symbol of kingly power. In the incense offering text entitled *Khyad gter gyi dgra lha dbang bstod gzhan phan rol ba* (found in *bSang mchod phyogs bsgribs*, edited by bSod-nams 'bum, pp. 99 to 104), concerning the *rtan* (tabernacle or support) of the *dgra-lha*, it is written (p. 101): "A [feather] of the king of the birds, the vulture, embellishes the peak [of the helmet]. This wonderful iron helmet is erected as the *rtan* of the mighty *dgra-lha*." (*rtse la bya rgyal rgod pos mtshon / ya mtshan can gyi lcags zhwa 'di / dgra lha gnyan po'i rten du btsugs /*).

<sup>33</sup> This passage was specially written for this work. It reads: *lcog dar gyi rtser bya rgod kyi spus brgyan pa ni bya rgod kyis lha lam mthar thug pa'i nam 'phangs gcod pa'i nus shugs dang ldan pa 'di nyid kyis / ngan g.yo'i 'phur lding g.yo byed nag phyogs kyi sde thams cad bcoms nus pa'i brda's mtshon pa dang / lta ba ldeng dang ldan pa'i rtags su lcog dar kyi rtser rgod kyi thul lu spungs pa'o /*.



layers overarching the actual deities of the trance. The *mga-chen* (big drum) used by the *sku-rten-pa* functions in the same way as those of the spirit-mediums of Upper Tibet. Thub-bstan dngos-grub states that it is used to call the deities because it produces a sound reminiscent of a dragon's roar, which is pleasing to them. While the *mda'dar* and various animals do not figure in the trance of the *sku-rten-pa*, he points out that effigies of animals and arrows are used to propitiate the sKu-linga in rituals such as *mdos* (enticements), *rten 'bul* (support offerings), and *g.yang-sgrub* (good fortune empowerment).

Although the Pe-har *sku-rten-pa* is the state oracle, in certain instances he makes prophecies for members of the general public, such as when he recommends a specific hospital for a critically injured person. He also has a healing function that is carried out by spitting black tea on people. He affirms that this action has the power to remove diseases. While in trance, black tea is also spat on barley-corns to produce a highly coveted charm called *phyag-nas*. *Phyag-nas* is popularly believed to be able to heal diseases, eliminate nightmares, and bring good luck to travelers and business people. At the beginning of the trance, the Pe-har *sku-rten-pa* dances with a bow in his left hand (an arrow is at his side) and a saber in his right hand. When the dance finishes he throws the bow and sword down, signaling that all obstructions have been expelled (*bgegs-sgröl*). These curative, general-welfare, and exorcistic functions bring the *sku-rten* in close correspondence with the *lha-pa*. Instead of the rainbow-like *'od-zer* (radiant consciousness) of the *lha-pa*, the Pe-har *sku-rten-pa* states that he is possessed by a consciousness principle called *ye-shes sems-dpa'* (wisdom thought). He remarks that it is invisible and wind-like. Just before possession, both the *lha-pa* and Pe-har *sku-rten-pa* experience unusual perceptions and bodily sensations.

The last female state oracle of Tibet, Blo-bzang tshe-sgron was a medium for the *bstan-ma* goddesses and rDo-rje g.yu-sgron-ma,<sup>34</sup> who would advise on health matters and daily problems. These types of deities are doctrinally related to the lake goddesses of Upper Tibet, and their activities also find expression among the lake divinities. Other parallels between the female state oracle and the *lha-pa* of Upper Tibet include: hereditary lineages, purification of the body as

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<sup>34</sup> This information on Blo-bzang tshe-sgron comes from Havnevik 2002; Byang-ngos-pa tshe-g.yang 2002.

a prerequisite of mediumistic activity, avoidance of tobacco, and the entry of the possessing deities through the fingers. Another important female medium from Lhasa, A-ne lo-chen of Shug-gseb monastery, was possessed by a *btsan-rgod* (*btsan* class spirit) and various local deities (Schenk 2002: 275, 276), the backbone of spirit-mediumship in Upper Tibet.

The Gurung and Tamang spirit-mediums of Nepal also have certain practices and beliefs that appear to be historically interconnected with those of the *lha-pa* of Upper Tibet. For one thing, the most common ritual implement of these groups is the drum, which is used in the respective trance ceremonies for calling the deities. In addition to Tibetan Buddhism, the Gurungs of central-west Nepal practice a Siberian type of shamanism, the central cosmological element being a world tree that interconnects the three spheres of the universe (Mumford 1990: 6–8). In Upper Tibetan mythology, the sacred mountains fulfil the same function, bridging the three realms of existence (*srid-pa-gsum*). The Gurungs have two types of shamans, including the *paju* (*pha-jo*) whose tutelary deities are in the form of a male or animal (*ibid.*: 119). In an elaborate ceremony, the *paju* enters into trance and searches for the lost souls (*bla*) of patients by ascending a mountain, tree and ladder to the upper world (*dmu'i go 'phang ?*), and by descending into the underworld (*khro dmyal-sa ?*) (*ibid.*: 169–172). In Upper Tibet, it is the possessing deities and their helpers that search for errant *bla* (souls).

Like the *lha-pa* of Upper Tibet, the Tamang *bombo* of Nepal perform healing rituals in which evil spirits are banished, lost souls (*bla*) recalled, the future told, and good fortune bestowed.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, the *bombo* honor a personal *btsan*, and it is the *btsan* that is responsible for revelations, as well as being a main possessing deity.<sup>36</sup> The central role played by the *btsan* deities has clear parallels with the Upper Tibet tradition of spirit-mediumship. The *bombo* also invoke a mountain deity queen Jo-mo g.yang-ri rgyal-mu (Schmid 1967: 85, 86). Another correspondence between the *lha-pa* of Upper Tibet and the Tamang *bombo* is the use of the *khyung* (mythic horned eagle) in certain healing rituals. When exorcising the *si* (Tibetan: *sri*) demons,

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<sup>35</sup> For the functions of the *bombo* see Peters 1998, p. 55; Holmberg 1989, pp. 3, 142, 159, 160; Schmid 1967, p. 86.

<sup>36</sup> See Holmberg 1989, pp. 151–153, 159, 160, 162, 163.

the *bombo* calls a *khyung* into his body and dances fiercely about with a dog skull in his mouth (Holmberg 1989: 162). In Upper Tibet, a fox skull is sometimes used in rituals to exorcise the *sri* demons. The cis-Himalayan shamans of various ethnic groups in Nepal often wear a long white gown, white turban and a headdress with peacock or pheasant feathers.<sup>37</sup> As we shall see, vestigial turbans (*thod*) and vulture feathers are also used by the *lha-pa* of Upper Tibet, recalling the costume of the ancient Bon priests called *gshen*.

In the northwestern Nepal district of 'Om-lo (Humla) exist spirit-mediums called *dha-mi* and those who officiate at their trance ceremonies, the *bhrang-ris*.<sup>38</sup> The latter is the *lha-gsol-mkhan*, the one who burns incense and invokes the deities, often in the local dialect. Like the *lha-pa* of Upper Tibet, the *bhrang-ris* use the *gshang* bell. Both types of functionaries of 'Om-lo wear white woolen garments and white cotton turbans. The function of the *dha-mi* trance is to insure the welfare of individuals, the community and livestock. They also make pronouncements about the future through divination. Purification by bathing is an important preparatory practice for the *dha-mi*, and they often make pilgrimage to mTsho ma-pham, in western Tibet. As with many of the *lha-pa* of Upper Tibet, the *dha-mi* wear their hair unshorn and piled on top of the head. Among their possessing deities are *yul-lha* and Buddhist protectors. The *dha-mi* Padma from the village of sTod, is a spirit-medium for three aspects of Gangs-dkar (Gangs-rin-po-che), a god who only accepts *dkar-mchod* (offerings not involving the taking of life): dKar-po dung-ldan (White Conch One), Ser-po gser-ldan (Yellow Gold One) and sNgon-po g.yu-ldan (Blue Turquoise One). While pacific mountain god manifestations are also common among the spirit-mediums of Upper Tibet, the particular possessing form of Gangs-rin-po-che, Gangs-ri lha-btsan, is a wrathful red-colored deity. In the vicinity of Bar-khang, in 'Om-lo, there are around twenty families, including *bhrang-ris*, who believe that they immigrated in the distant past from Khyung-lung, in Upper Tibet.

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<sup>37</sup> Color photographs of a Rai shamaness attired in this manner are found in Müller *et al.* 2002, pp. 45, 46, 173.

<sup>38</sup> This information on the *dha-mi* of 'Om-lo came from Nag-ru dge-legs sbyin-pa, a librarian at Khri-brten nor-bu-rtse monastery, Kathmandu. In 2002, he was part of an Oxford University film team studying the *dha-mi*.

intones “*phat, phat, phat*”<sup>128</sup> on rice grains and hands them to the patient. These are kept for her protection.

8:59: Pho-bo lha-dbang speaks in *lha-skad* while playing the *mga-chung* and *gshang*. A-stag klu-mo is consulting with her retinue about the status of the second patient.

9:00: Not speaking, the *lha-pa* lightly strikes his *dam-gsal me-long* with the *gshang*.

9:01: In a more ordinary tone of voice A-stag klu-mo discusses the prognosis of the absent patient. The eldest son records what has been said. The patient attending the ceremony moves away from the *lha-pa*.

9:03: The *lha-pa* resumes his lyrical chant while playing his *gshang* and *mga-chung*. This interval marks the process of conveying the deities and other beings in the *gling* back to their respective abodes. This is called *sgo-rgyab* (closing the doors). The process is the reverse of the advent of the deities; first the *phyi-gling* is closed, followed by the *bar-gling* and *nang-gling*. As this occurs the *rtsa* channels of Pho-bo lha-dbang are also being closed down. A-stag klu-mo offers his *rigs-lnga* to the *lamas* and *yi-dam*.

9:10: The *rigs-lnga* falls off Pho-bo lha-dbang’s head, marking the end of the trance. He sits quietly for a few minutes.

xii) *sGrol-dkar, born circa 1952*

Interviewed in Ru-thog, June 5 and 6, 2002.

sGrol-dkar<sup>129</sup> is a *lha-mo* (female spirit-medium) for a large range of familiar Upper Tibet divinities. sGrol-dkar is probably the most respected of the few spirit-mediums currently practicing in Ru-thog. She reputedly has highly developed curative capabilities and attracts patients from several different townships. She reports going into trance scores of times per year, and as many as three times in a single day. sGrol-dkar states that patients often come to her out of desperation not knowing where else to turn for emergency medical care, and that she acts out of a compulsion to help them. Among Ru-thog’s natives sGrol-dkar is also commonly referred to as a *klu-mo*,

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<sup>128</sup> Powerful mantra for dispelling demons and harmful influences.

<sup>129</sup> In order to protect the identity of this individual, I have employed a pseudonym in this account.

because of her reliance on this class of deities. Originally, her family came from Ri'u Am-chung (Little Mountain Small Formation), in northeastern Ru-thog. Circa 1972, they and around 30 other families were resettled in the southern portion of the county.

sGrol-dkar states that her maternal uncle Nor-rtse, who passed away more than 30 years ago, was also a spirit-medium. She believes that he was part of a hereditary line of spirit-mediums, the genealogical history of which has been lost. sGrol-dkar says that her paternal lineage was comprised of *sngags-pa*. Due to her hereditary predisposition, deities began to possess her at the age of 25.<sup>130</sup> She reports that these possessions caused her to suffer mental disturbances and neurological disorders in the limbs. After two years of these afflictions, on the full moon day of the 12th lunar month, the possessing deities first spoke through sGrol-dkar, marking the start of her career as a *lha-mo*. sGrol-dkar says that from that time, she became successful in embodying the deities at will, and has practiced now for more than two decades.

sGrol-dkar reports that during the early years of practice, while in trance, she would often condemn the destruction and prohibition of Tibetan religion that took place in the 1960s and 1970s. She says that during these occasions her possessing deities would exhort onlookers to resume their traditional religious customs and practices. Among the most important of these, according to sGrol-dkar, are the offerings and other ritual observances for the indigenous pantheon of Upper Tibet. While in trance, she would encourage the practice of *lha-gsol* and *klu-gsol* rituals as an instrument for insuring personal and community well-being. From what I could gather from various informants, sGrol-dkar has had a fairly significant role in the restitution of Tibetan religion in her corner of Ru-thog.

sGrol-dkar mentions that an older female relative of hers, who fled many years ago to nearby La-dwags, is also a *lha-mo*. She helped

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<sup>130</sup> Her initiation into spirit-mediumship coincided with the period of liberalization and the disbanding of the pastoral collectives that occurred at the end of the 1970s. The breakup of the communist collectives and the reestablishment of the traditional family structure as the basic unit of production allowed the degree of privacy and confidentiality needed for sGrol-dkar's practice to flourish. Her adoption of the spirit-medium vocation was part of the larger resurgence of traditional activities that occurred after the period of brutal repression in the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Her general acceptance in the stockbreeding community as a *lha-mo* can be explained by the fact that she is considered one of the region's most valued healthcare providers.

sGrol-dkar procure her *gshang*. sGrol-dkar remarks that she obtained her *nigs-nga* headdress in trade from India, while her brass *gling* and *da-ma-ru* were donated by an elderly *sngags-pa* from sDe-rog, in Ru-thog. The *mda' dar* sGrol-dkar uses was bestowed upon her by the main monastery in Ru-thog, Lhun-grub chos-lding. By her own admission, sGrol-dkar had no formal training or initiation as her older family members had passed away by the time she began to practice as a medium. She believes that she managed to become an adept *lha-mo* primarily because of her ancestral link with the profession and its deities. sGrol-dkar claims that all her knowledge of healing, deities and regional lore were revealed to her in trance by the divinities themselves. She cites her tutelary gods and the few spiritually-minded people she came in contact with as assisting her in this process. Clearly, the great faith she has in her lamas and divine protectors has played an important role in her mastery of spirit-mediumship. It also appears to me that sGrol-dkar's perseverance, courage and fortitude were also instrumental in the resuscitation of spirit-mediumship in Ru-thog.

sGrol-dkar states that her patrons of the trance are the Karma-pa, the lamas of her paternal lineage. The other patron of the séance activities is Gu-ru rin-po-che. She says that she begins her trance ceremony with prayers to the Karma-pa and the eight manifestations of Gu-ru rin-po-che, the Gu-ru mtshan-brgyad. sGrol-dkar is illiterate; all invocations to the gurus and deities are therefore done by heart. The main protector of the séance is dPal-ldan lha-mo. Another high protective god is the crow-faced sGo-srung mgon-po bya-rog. According to sGrol-dkar, other deities that serve as guardians during the trance are her *phugs-lha* (family protective deity) Dam-can mgar-ba nag-po and her *mo-lha* (maternal protective deity) Dung-skyong dkar-mo, a *klu-mo* that resides at Ri'u Am-chung. She believes that during the ceremony, an aspect of all the divine participants and protectors of the trance come to reside in her *gling*. She divides the *gling* into the typical three concentric bands representative of the three domains of the universe: sky, earth and underworld. However, she is not familiar with the way in which the deities arrange themselves in the mirror. At the moment of possession, sGrol-dkar thinks that her *mam-shes* (consciousness) is conveyed to the *gling* and guarded over by dPal-ldan lha-mo.

sGrol-dkar maintains that the most important patronizing deity involved in trance ceremony is gNyan-chen thang-lha. He is said to

officiate over the proceedings of the trance, regulating the activities of the various possessing deities. A primary pair of possessing deities are Thang-lha'i klu-btsan, a female-male dyad in the circle of gNyan-chen thang-lha. Another possessing pair of deities consisting of a *klu-mo* and *btsan* is simply called by sGrol-dkar Ru-thog klu-btsan, after their place of residence.<sup>131</sup> She refers to this divine husband and wife as *Myes-myes* (grandfather) and *I-pi* (grandmother) respectively, and they are thought of as the ancestral couple of Ru-thog.<sup>132</sup> However, sGrol-dkar says she does not specifically know how they gave rise to the living beings of the region. sGrol-dkar's most common possessing deity is Ngur-ru byang-btsan of O-byang, wearer of the *rigs-lnga*.<sup>133</sup> Another *btsan* deity that sGrol-dkar says possesses her is bTsan-rgod nam-ra of Bar-tha. As with other spirit-mediums, she notes that the fierce *btsan* deities participate in exorcising evil spirits and in healing rites. Another deity that she claims takes hold of her is Ge-khod dbang-thang dkar-po, the chief *yul-lha* of Ru-thog.<sup>134</sup> His

<sup>131</sup> It is unclear which mountain sGrol-dkar refers to. The female aspect of Ru-thog (Klu-btsan mchor-mo) is most probably the deity popularly known as Nya-ni, the chief *klu-mo* of Ru-thog proper. This locale is also known as rDzong-ri, mDzomo ru-rdzong, and mTsho-mo ru-rdzong after the ancient fortress located there. For archaeological information on this locale see Bellezza 2000, pp. 102–104.

<sup>132</sup> It is a common custom in mNga' ris (particularly in Ru-thog, sGar and rTsa-mda') to refer to the various female *yul-lha* and *klu-mo* as *I-pi* (grandmother) and the male *yul-lha* as *myes-myes* (grandfather).

<sup>133</sup> The name of this deity is also inverted to read Byang-btsan ngur-ru. It is the *yul-lha* of O-byang (also called No-ma-ni, which in the language of La-dwags means 'Country of Residence that Sprung Forth from the Earth'), located on the north shore of Ru-thog's mTsho-mo ngang-la. According to legend, it came to this place in the form of a duck from gNas-chung monastery, in Lhasa. It was one of four Ngur-ru deities that flew off in the cardinal directions. Ngur-ru byang-btsan flew north from gNas-chung and circled Ru-thog's Lhun-grub chos-lding monastery three times before it landed near a *ma-ni* wheel in O-byang. It exhibited wonderful signs and then flew off to mGon-po lha-ri. A shrine called Byang-btsan ngur-ru btsan-khang came to be founded at both of these locations. See Chos-ngag, pp. 173–174.

<sup>134</sup> This sacred mountain (33° 18" north latitude / 79° 46" east longitude) is also commonly called Ge-khod gnyan-lung. In the local sTod dialect the pronunciation and spelling of Ge-khod has been corrupted to rGyab-sgog or rGya 'og. However, according to local experts such as the head lama of the Ru-thog monastery, Myes Blo-bzang bstan-pa (born circa 1932), there is no question that the original spelling was Ge-khod. This is corroborated by Bon literary sources. In the local oral tradition, Ge-khod was the *lha-ri* (divine mountain) of the ancient Hor, who once occupied Ru-thog. The Hor are commonly thought to have come from the region known in Chinese as Xinjiang (Eastern Turkestan) during the time of the epic hero Gling ge-sar. Their leader, bShan-pa sme-ru-rtse, lent his name to the old citadel at Ru-thog. For more information on Ge-khod and his Bon origins see Part Four, section iii p. 399 (fn. 197), pp. 415–417.

main function is reported to be the execution of the *lha-gsol*, a ritual conducted for the benefit of individual patients as well as the locale. The *lha-gsol* consists of invocations and offerings to the *yul-lha*. sGrol-dkar adds that Ge-khod's mate, the *klu-mo* Klu-btsan mchor-mo, also takes part in séances. According to her, two other key *klu-mo* are Khyung-sprug dkar-mo (White Girl Khyung) and Klu-mo rgya-bkra mchor-mo (a multi-colored hawk). Khyung-sprug dkar-mo has a host of *khyung* with the same appearance as herself. Both of these *klu-mo* are said to reside in the great lakes of Upper Tibet such as mTsho ma-pham. However, in keeping with their ornithomorphous appearance, they also have a celestial identity.<sup>135</sup>

sGrol-dkar reports that she mostly sucks out *grib* that cause illness in her patients by using the *gshang*. sGrol-dkar states that the remedial spirits who carry out the removal of impurities include Thang-lha'i khyi-rgod rag-pa (Thang-lha's Tawny Wild Dog), Thang-lha'i 'brong-dur rag-pa (Thang lha's Tawny Cemetery Wild Yak), Thang-lha mi-dkar rta-dkar (resplendent white men mounted on white steeds in the circle of Thang-lha), Za-roq spyang-gu spun-dun (seven brothers in the form of wolves), and Bya-khyung-rgod (an eagle-like spirit). Another deity that presides over the sucking out of contamination (*'jibs-rogs*) is A-dmar rol-pa skya-bdun of sGer-rtse. sGrol-dkar also uses a *rdo-rje* to rid patients of harm-causing influences, and a *mda'dar* for the bestowal of good fortune.

sGrol-dkar accepts that the Thang-lha, Ge-khod, Ru-thog, and other *klu-mo* cure diseases attributed to this class of deities such as skin ailments and arthritis. The various *klu-mo* also function to heal sick livestock. She also notes that the *klu-mo* are responsible for restoring the *phywa-g.yang* (fortune capability) of patients through the *g.yang gugs* ritual. Another important possessing *klu-mo* is Lha-mtsho mchor-mo, which sGrol-dkar equates with Thang-lha's mate gNam-mtsho phyug-mo.<sup>136</sup> sGrol-dkar considers that Lha-mtsho mchor-mo might

<sup>135</sup> This mythic theme is also found in Bon offering texts for the lake deities. For example, in *Srid pa'i lha chen ri mtsho gnas bdag lam dral mchod bstod*, by Nyi-ma bstan 'dzin (born 1813), Dang-ra g.yu-mtsho (mTsho-phyug g.yu-mtsho) has the shape of a *khyung* and is the abode of the celestial mother deity gNam-phyi gung-rgyal. See Bellezza 1997, p. 345.

<sup>136</sup> From a Buddhist doctrinal perspective however, it is likely that sGrol-dkar is actually channeling a subsidiary form or emanation of gNam-mtsho rather than the primary goddess herself. It is generally thought that goddesses such as gNam-mtsho are too powerful for mediums to embody.



actually be just a different form of the Thang-lha'i *klu-mo*. She describes her as green in color and wearing green aqueous garments. Lha-mtsho mchor-mo's most important function is to restore the ecological balance of the region, which sGrol-dkar believes is being adversely affected by mining, fishing, the mass killing of insects, and other harmful activities. This is realized through a *gyang 'gugs* ritual carried out on behalf of the lakes of Upper Tibet. This ritual helps to increase the milk production of livestock. Lha-mtsho mchor-mo also frequently participates in a ritual to insure that the personal protective spirits of a newly wed couple are in concordance with one another. While under the possession of the *klu-mo* sGrol-dkar conducts the *klu-gsol* ritual, which entails the offering of juniper, sandalwood and *spos-dkar* incense to the *klu*, as well as the first portions (*phud*) of milk, spring water, tea, and grains.

sGrol-dkar explains that the various *klu-mo* officiate over their own *klu-gsol* and *gyang 'gugs* rituals, giving them a degree of effectiveness only possible for divine ritualists. Likewise, Ge-khod and Thang-lha conduct their own *lha-gsol*. She points out however, the offerings they make are not merely for their own satisfaction but for the entire pantheon of environment-bound deities of Upper Tibet. Perhaps most importantly, according to sGrol-dkar, the assemblage of offerings is also proffered to the higher Buddhist deities, thereby bringing pleasure not only to worldly deities but to those who have passed beyond the sphere of mundane existence. While possessed sGrol-dkar says that she often instructs patients to do their own *lha-gsol* and *klu-gsol*, as well as make pilgrimage, build *mchod-rtan* and carve *ma-ñi* stones. sGrol-dkar claims that these activities are prescribed by the deities to eliminate *gnod-pa* (harm) and *bar-chad* (obstacles) that cause misfortune and illness.

To favorably influence the weather, sGrol-dkar undertakes to be possessed by a goddess called Ma-ne-ne or Khro-mo nag-mo, who she reports is the elder sister of the epic hero Gling ge-sar.<sup>137</sup> This deity is said to be able to avert hailstorms and other destructive weather by her association with the sky-dwelling *mkha' 'gro-ma*. sGrol-dkar states that invocations to Gling ge-sar and Gu-ru rin-po-che are also an instrumental part of the ritual to affect the weather.

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<sup>137</sup> Stein (1981: 6) reports that Ma-ne-ne is the same as Gung-sman rgyal-mo, the heavenly aunt of Ge-sar, and his advisor and protectress.

Other deities that play a part include the savioress sGrol-ma dkar-mo and Tibet's main *gcod* figures, Pha dam-pa sangs-rgyas and Ma-cig lab-sgron. The latter personality is reported by sGrol-dkar to have a close correspondence with Ma-ne-ne.

On June 5, 2002, I had the privilege of observing sGrol-dkar perform a *gyang 'gugs* ritual while in trance. It was decided that we would seek good fortune for my High Tibet Circle Expedition that was then in progress, as well as for the countryside in general. The main possessing deity of the trance ceremony was Lha-mtsho mchor-mo. sGrol-dkar's husband acted as her assistant, helping in the ritual performances. Her husband also kindly helped to interpret the various activities and utterances of the trance for me. The séance was held in the evening after the milking and corralling of the ewes and goats. The basic structure of the trance ceremony was as follows:

- 1) Altar set up and costume donned.
- 2) Buddhist invocations made.
- 3) Deity enters sGrol-dkar.
- 4) Deity invokes the Karma-pa and pays her respects to him and his lineage.
- 5) Lha-mtsho mchor-mo formally announces her identity.
- 6) The various *klu-mo* and other local deities are invoked, and the *klu-rgyud* (lineage of the female *klu*) proclaimed.
- 7) *g.Yang 'gugs* ritual performed. A major component of it is the *klu-gsol*. sGrol-dkar figuratively and literally offers a variety of objects to the *klu-mo* and the mountain deities, and chants their praises. The offerings and eulogies are also directed to the pantheon of Buddhist deities.
- 8) *g.Yang 'gugs* ritual consummated.
- 9) Trance ends.
- 10) Thanksgiving prayers made by sGrol-dkar, and ritual paraphernalia stowed away.

Now let us look at the trance ceremony in more detail. It reveals that the various *klu-mo* and lake deities are responsible for personal well-being, individual and community prosperity, and ecological harmony.

21:55: A small altar is set on the west side of the single-room house. It is located opposite the entrance, as is customary. It consists of a metal trunk upon which a cloth is spread. Barley grain

and *rtsam-pa* (parched barley meal) are sprinkled over the tablecloth. The family's permanent altar is a larger metal trunk situated higher up. On this altar is the family's *mda' dar*, the *rten* (receptacle) for their paternal protective deities. These include the husband's *pho-lha* Rab-brtan rgyal-po, evidently a protector of the old Rab-brtan monastery in Ru-thog, and his *phugs-lha*, the *klu-mo* of sDe-chos valley (in sDe-roq township, Ru-thog), A-ma mdzes (Beautiful Mother). Hanging on the wall near the permanent altar is the *klu-dar sngon-mo* (blue flag of the female *klu*), the *rten* (support) for sGrol-dkar's *mo-lha*, Dung-skyong dkar-mo. sGrol-dkar reports that these personal protective deities exert a positive influence on the séance, helping to defend her and the participants against harm. On the ceremonial altar a modest array of offerings are placed. These include a small bowl of juniper and *gangs-spos*<sup>138</sup> incense, a candle, an oil lamp, tiny vessels of black tea, milk, water and salt, and a *rdo-tje*. There is also a bowl heaped high with *rtsam-pa* in which the *gling*, another *rdo-tje* and a small photo of the *lha-mo 'tshogs-zhing* (depiction of dPal-ldan lha-mo and her retinue) are inserted.

22:10: sGrol-dkar dons her green *stod-khebs* (mantle) and a kerchief while reciting *skyabs 'gro* (Buddhist refuge prayers) and dedicatory prayers for the well-being of all sentient beings. The incense is lit.

22:15: She recites *gsol 'debs* (devotional prayers) to the Karma-pa while putting on her *rigs-lnga*. The *rigs-lnga* features images of the Gyal-ba rigs-lnga in the diadems, and many cloth streamers and *kha-btags* (offering scarves) hang from it. These cloth items are sometimes given to patients for their well-being and protection after the séance is completed. After arranging her *rigs-lnga*, sGrol-dkar begins to play the *da-ma-ru* with the right hand and the *gshang* placed in the left hand while facing the altar. As she plays she gently rocks back and forth.

22:17: This is the time it is believed that the presiding deity enters sGrol-dkar. This moment is marked by a slight jerk of the body and the rolling back of her eyes.

22:18: Devotional prayers to the Karma-pa are still being recited. The tempo of playing the *da-ma-ru* and *gshang* picks up.

22:20: There is more vigorous movement of sGrol-dkar's body and the pitch of her voice intensifies as she invokes the lineage lamas,

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<sup>138</sup> An aromatic creeping plant that grows on the flanks of Gangs rin-po-che and other high mountains.

the *mkha' 'gro-ma*, mTsho ma-pham, and Gangs rin-po-che. The presiding deity, Lha-mtsho mchor-mo, then identifies herself. While being possessed by this goddess sGrol-dkar's voice varies greatly. At times it is soft and measured, at other times high pitched and piercing. Her facial expressions also change from contemplative to somewhat contorted. At times she is wrathful and intense, at other times during the trance deeply absorbed. It is a fine ceremonial performance rich in nuance and emotion.

22:22: sGrol-dkar stops playing her instruments and chants the *klu-rgyud*. In it the various *klu-mo* and Upper Tibetan lake deities are mentioned by name. The *klu-rgyud* affirms their ancient origins and that they come under the auspices of Buddhism, legitimizing their role in the ceremony. The *klu-rgyud* also notes that these female deities are led by dPal-ldan lha-mo; however, it provides no cosmogonic lore (this belonging to a nearly extinct phase of the region's cultural legacy). The *mkha' 'gro* are also invoked. Occasionally, the chanting is punctuated by “*sngeg, sngeg, sngeg*”—the sound of the rustling of the wings of the duck deity Ngur-ru sman-pa dkar-po.<sup>139</sup> Subsequent to the trance, sGrol-dkar notes that this male *klu* is a divine physician figure in the retinues of Lha-mtsho mchor-mo and the *klu-mo* of Ru-thog.

22:28: sGrol-dkar (the presiding deity) pays her respects to a number of Buddhist personalities and deities while playing the *ḍa-ma-ru* and *gshang*.

22:32: The *gyang 'gugs* sequence of the trance ceremony begins. Invoking the local deities sGrol-dkar stops playing and picks up the *rdo-rje* resting on the altar and begins waving it around. At times she dips it into the bowl of milk. This is done while invoking the auspicious creatures in Lha-mtsho mchor-mo's retinue. These include the three fish of the *klu*, *srin-nya* (a mythical carnivorous fish), *dung-nya* (conch fish) and *gyu-nya* (turquoise fish); the deer of the *klu*;<sup>140</sup>

<sup>139</sup> A *lha-mo* undergoing initiation in Ladakh is recorded as rhythmically chanting the similar sound ‘*nja nja nja*’ (Schenk 1993: 337), but the significance of this utterance is not addressed in this paper.

<sup>140</sup> The deer is one of the most auspicious animals in Upper Tibet, despite being extinct in most of the region. The white-lipped deer (*Cervus albirostris*) is still found on the eastern fringes of the Byang-thang (Schaller 1998: 143, 144). Deer are represented in the circle of various indigenous deities who also occasionally appear to manifest in the form of this animal. In propitiatory rituals deer are therefore often offered to these deities. In Ladakh, the ibex assumes these same types of functions.

and the *thang-dkar* of the *klu*. Her husband explains that it is thought that through the invocations all of these magical creatures are thought to be present at the ceremony. The jewel of the *klu* is also mentioned.

22:37: sGrol-dkar resumes playing the *da-ma-ru* and *gshang*, keeping the *rdo-rje* in her left hand.

22:38: She stops playing and seeks the blessings of Gu-ru rin-po-che and the Karma-pa.

22:43: sGrol-dkar decries the recent vandalism of Ri'u dgon-pa, a superb ancient temple in Ri'u Am-chung. This is interspersed with offerings to the *klu-mo*, which include the blue female goat of the *klu*, the blue ewe of the *klu*, the blue female yak of the *klu*, and the blue mare of the *klu*. Other offerings specified are various medicinal substances, various types of incense, and precious substances such as gold, silver, conch, carnelian, turquoise, pearls, and coral. The *klu'i nor-bu bya-rigs* (types of jewel birds of the *klu*) are also figuratively offered. These include the peacock, duck, cuckoo, partridge and *thang-dkar*.

22:46: Reference is made to the raising of a *dar-lcog* (prayer flag mast) for the *klu-mo* and the *bsod-nams* (merit) it brings. The offerings and raising of the *dar-lcog* are also directed to a male deity named dGra-lha rta-thod dkar-po (White Horse Turban dGra-lha). I later learn that this counterpart of the *klu-mo* is also instrumental in insuring an individual's good fortune.

22:50: sGrol-dkar condemns the destruction of the environment in Ru-thog. She cites mining, fishing and the killing of insects as examples.

22:52: She recites the heroic deeds of Thang-lha and other deities, noting that it is beyond the ability of anyone to record all of them. This might have been a reference to me, as I was feverishly engaged in trying to write down all of sGrol-dkar's utterances. Thang-lha and the other mountain gods are known as the protectors and patrons of people.

22:55: sGrol-dkar turns to me and asks if I have had enough good fortune bestowed upon me. I reply affirmatively. She then pays her respects to the Buddhist deities, and then invokes Nam-ra, Rol-pa skya-bdun and A-myes rma-chen spom-ra.

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For example, in one account of *lha-pa* in Ladakh, three ibex are said to have accompanied them for some distance, an auspicious sign (Srinivas 2001: 144).

22:59: All the ingredients on the altar are now fully consecrated. sGrol-dkar directs her husband to take the vessel of milk from the ceremonial altar and offer it to all the deities at the family's permanent altar.

23:00: Consummation of the *gyang 'gugs* ritual takes place. The vessel of milk is returned to sGrol-dkar, who then repeatedly sprinkles its contents with her *rdo-rje* on all present in the room. This is done while invoking the *klu-mo*. Her husband then offers each person a small spoon of milk to drink.

23:04: The vessel of milk is returned to sGrol-dkar who places it and the remaining contents back on the ceremonial altar. She then blows several times on her *rdo-rje*, simulating the sound of the conch.

23:06: She picks up barley grains from the altar and scatters them around the room as a blessing. She then vigorously plays her *damaru* and *gshang* while strongly shaking her head.

23:08: sGrol-dkar's *rigs-lnga* falls off her head, signaling the end of her possession. She begins to softly recite Buddhist prayers as she methodically stows away her ceremonial equipment.

xiii) *Pho-bo mtsho-rgyal, born circa 1939*

Interviewed in Ru 'thor township, 'Brong-pa, June 10 and 11, 2002.

Pho-bo mtsho-rgyal states that he belongs to the Kya-kya clan, which according to local tradition, is one of the six original clans of Ru 'thor (region also known as A-rnams byang-ma).<sup>141</sup> There are a number of practicing *lha-pa* in Ru 'thor but Pho-bo mtsho-rgyal seems to be the one held in highest repute by his fellow *'brog-pa*. His legitimacy stems from the long line of spirit-mediums in both his family and his wife's family. Pho-bo mtsho-rgyal is a soft-spoken, diffident man, who like most of Upper Tibet's other spirit-mediums, derives his livelihood from the family's livestock. He spends most of the day taking his herds to graze, limiting the amount of time he could spare for our interviews.

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<sup>141</sup> The other five clans are: Gu-rub, 'A-ba, Phyug-rtsang, bDod, and sTag-rtse. These six clans are said to be the original worshippers of Ru 'thor's sacred mountain, the *pho-lha* bKa' lha-btsan. The *mo-lha* of these six clans is the nearby mountain Chu-yig and the lake Rin-chen shor 'ur mtsho. According to elders, the real name of their region is Rus 'thor (Dispersed Clans), so called because it has been enriched by a diverse mixture of clans over history.

Dzam-dkar klu-mo (White World Klu-mo). These latter two deities are reported by Pho-bo mtsho-rgyal to dwell in the lakes of Upper Tibet.

The drumheads of Pho-bo mtsho-rgyal's *da-ma-ru* are made of gazelle skin, which he says produce a sound especially pleasing to the deities. His old *gshang* is also highly prized by him for its attractive sound. His *rigs-lnga* features images of the rGyal-ba rigs-lnga Buddhas. The wings attached to it have the eyes of the *khyung* painted on them. Pho-bo mtsho-rgyal explains that these eyes guard the subterranean realm and the beings that reside in it. His red peaked cap worn under the *rigs-lnga* is called *btsan-zhwa*, and is decorated with the eyes of the *btsan*. This hat is said to attract the *thugs* (mind in the form of radiant light) of the possessing deities. On the top of the *btsan-zhwa* is a bunch of downy *thang-dkar* feathers. Pho-bo mtsho-rgyal explains that the *thang-dkar* bird is a *srid-pa'i lha* (god of existence) that acts to protect the medium. Pho-bo mtsho-rgyal uses three *gling* in an arrangement customary of many *lha-pa*: *phyi-gling*—assembly point for the *lha* (among which is Lha-chen dkar-po, who apparently is a form of the Indian deity Brahma); *bar-gling*—assembly point for the *btsan*; *nang-gling*—assembly point for the host of *klu*, and the place where, according to Pho-bo mtsho-rgyal, his *thugs* is conveyed during the possession.

In the *gyang 'gugs* ritual, Pho-bo mtsho-rgyal employs the *mda' dar* for attracting *tshé-gyang* (good fortune of life capability) and *nor-gyang* (good fortune of wealth capability) to his patients. He uses a *phur-pa* (ritual dagger) for removing harmful influences from those he is treating. To purify defilments he conducts *khrus* (ablutions), and to cure diseases caused by the *sa-bdag* (earth spirits) he uses hot black sand that is empowered with mantras. He believes that this magical sand when thrown upon patients is a potent weapon against the *sa-bdag* of the underworld.

xiv) *Karma rig 'dzin, born circa 1935*

Interviewed in sMad-pa township, Shan-rtsa, September 26–28, 2002

Karma rig 'dzin reports that he is a ninth generation spirit-medium on his father's side. His circumstances are very modest and he subsists on a small herd of livestock. A quiet man of much dignity, he was pleased to answer my many questions when he learned that I was writing a book about the spirit-mediums of Upper Tibet.

Karma rig 'dzin affirms that he belongs to the north lineage of the illustrious Zur-bzhi lha-babs bzhi, the original four lineages of spirit-mediums in Tibet.<sup>146</sup> He believes that these four primordial *lha-pa* of the cardinal directions were reincarnations of Buddha figures: east—rDo-rje sems-dpa'; south—Rin-chen 'byung-gnas; west—sNang-ba mtha' yas; and north—Don-yod grub-pa. According to Karma rig 'dzin, a hallmark of belonging to the premier *zur-bzhi* lineage is that the possessing deities reside in the five main subtle energy channels: *dbu-ma* (central channel), *rkyang-ma* (right collateral channel), *roma* (left collateral channel), *snying-phrom* (channel in middle of the back), and *stong-nyid* (channel centered in the sternum). He adds that lesser spirit-mediums cannot be so fully possessed by the deities as they do not have full access to the subtle channels.

According to Karma rig 'dzin, in early times members of the Zur-bzhi lha-babs bzhi could do great magical feats such as ride vultures and eagles, but gradually their power diminished due to increasing *grib* (contamination). He says that the original *zur-bzhi lha-pa* were god-like individuals, however, by being born human they suffered a certain amount of general defilement, which has mounted over the generations. Still, his family lineage produced strong spirit-mediums, and Karma rig 'dzin believes that his paternal uncle performed operations with his *phyi-gling*. Karma rig 'dzin has one son and daughter, neither of whom practices as a spirit-medium.

Both Karma rig 'dzin's mother and father were spirit-mediums. His father belonged to the Rag-shi clan and was born in sMar-khams, Khams. His father was a spirit-medium for many of the same deities as himself (as well as being a Ge-sar bard). Karma rig 'dzin's mother hailed from 'Dam-gzhung and belonged to the mGar-ba clan. She was a medium for the famous *btsan* of gNam-ru, rKyang-khra. Karma rig 'dzin states that he was born while his parents were on pilgrimage to Gangs rin-po-che; his mother passed away one week later. Karma rig 'dzin and his father remained in western Tibet. He states that at age eleven he began having visitations from the deities. He reports seeing apparitions of the *yul-lha* mounted on horses, deer and *rkyang*. He would also see the *yul-lha* as resplendent ancient Tibetan military marching figures attired in armor and brandishing weapons. In this period he had fearful hallucinations of standing

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<sup>146</sup> The medium Pho-bo lha-dbang is also a member of this original Buddhist lineage. See pp. 114, 115.



skeletons with beating hearts and plagues of strange insects. He also recalls suffering from many ailments including bleeding from the mouth, severe backache and heart pain.

Karma rig 'dzin states that when he was twelve years old, he met the 16th Karma-pa, who said that he and his father would find a certain lama that could help him. At age thirteen, after making pilgrimage to Buddhist holy sites in Nepal including the Kathmandu Valley, he and his father reached Na-bkra monastery in the vicinity of sKyid-grong/sKyid-rong. Here they met Lama Thub-bstan ngag-dbang 'jigs-med, who performed the *rtsa-rgo phye-ba*—the opening and purification of the subtle energy channels, for Karma rig 'dzin. He notes that this ritual included *khru*s (ablutions) and *rab-gnas* (consecration) procedures. Another procedure of the *rtsa-rgo phye-ba* was the binding of the ring fingers with strings to prevent unwelcome intrusions from the deities. According to Karma rig 'dzin, any manner of god or demon can enter the body through the openings in the ring fingers and it is far more efficacious for the possessing deities to enter the medium from other bodily portals. He says that the *lha* enter via the top of the head, the *btsan* from the right shoulder, and the *klu-mo* and *mkha' 'gro* from the left shoulder. Lama Thub-bstan taught him how to distinguish between the *lha* and *'dre* (good and bad spirits). He also instructed him on how to recognize the various deities in the *me-long*, and how to diagnose diseases and other problems using the *me-long*. Karma rig 'dzin declares that at the completion of his four month tutelage with Lama Thub-bstan, he became a fully initiated *lha-pa*.

Karma rig 'dzin observes that his father was a medium for an entity called 'Bum-rdza but because this was a *mi-shis btsan-skyes* (a person dies a *btsan* is born) type spirit, Lama Thub-bstan forbade him to embody it. Karma rig 'dzin learned about the pantheon of deities and their various residences largely from his father (who died when he was eighteen years old). For instance his father explained that Gangs-ri lha-btsan was the deity of the upper regions, rTa-rgo the deity of the middle regions, Thang-lha the god of the lower regions, and sPom-ra was the god who ruled over the lowest regions (of the Tibetan Plateau). Between age fifteen and sixteen, Karma rig 'dzin was in the rTa-rgo region with his father on pilgrimage. He was intent on visiting Shod-tram phug, the cave sacred to the spirit-mediums on the inner (eastern) flanks of Ngo-dmar lha-btsan. He says that initially, he was prevented from entering Shod-tram phug

by the rTa-rgo deities so he performed several times in the general vicinity. He believes that he was then recognized as a *lha-pa* by the rTa-rgo deities and permitted to enter the cave. Inside he found the seat and altar of O-rgyan padma 'byung-gnas (Gu-ru rin-po-che), and the seat of Ngo-dmar lha-btsan. Karma rig 'dzin was unable to take these seats so he made his altar before them. He notes that by going into trance in Shod-tram phug a spirit-medium's practice is improved; many however are unable to gain access to the cave.

As regards the origin of Shod-tram phug, Karma rig 'dzin recounts an old legend that apparently circulated around the region. This tale of the unprecedented defeat of the Vajrayana hero Gu-ru rin-po-che is related to the Bon territorial control of the rTa-rgo region:<sup>147</sup>

The huge stone forming the roof of Shod-tram phug rests on four boulders. On the ceiling of the cave are the head and shoulder prints of Gu-ru rin-po-che, created when he magically raised the height of the cave to impress the rTa-rgo deities. When Gu-ru rin-po-che reached the region, he met rTa-rgo at rTa-rgo 'phrang (cliffs on south side of Dang-ra g.yu-mtsho). rTa-rgo asked who he was, to which Gu-ru rin-po-che replied that he was a vagrant. The mountain god retorted that he was no such person but rather the master Padma 'byung-gnas, the one responsible for subduing all the *lha-srin sde-brgyad* (orders of elemental spirits). Gu-ru rin-po-che then admitted his true identity. rTa-rgo challenged him to a contest of magic to which he agreed. rTa-rgo told Gu-ru rin-po-che to remain at rTa-rgo 'phrang and that he would try to catch him with his copper lasso. rTa-rgo flew up to his mountain-top palace and threw down his lasso but Gu-ru rin-po-che disappeared into rays of light. Not to be outdone, the mountain god made a lasso of light rays and was successful in binding the Vajrayana master as light rays easily interact with one another. Having bound Gu-ru rin-po-che, rTa-rgo pulled him up to his palace, and the great guru conceded that rTa-rgo was an excellent magician. The mountain deity requested that Gu-ru rin-po-che stay for three years to teach him meditation. rTa-rgo then announced that he was going to build a *mtshams-khang* (meditation house) for him. The mountain god asked that while he was gone Gu-ru rin-po-che remain in his palace and enjoy any of its treasures. The Vajrayana master looked around but he could only find a black cat in a corner. When rTa-rgo returned from his construction project he found Gu-ru rin-po-che staring at the cat and asked what he was looking at. Gu-ru rin-po-che answered that he could

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<sup>147</sup> Other legends and myths that establish Bon jurisdiction over rTa-rgo are found in Bellezza 1997, pp. 293–295.

find nothing in the palace but this black cat. rTa-rgo replied, “Although your magical power is very great, you could not find any of my treasures. This black cat is actually a black bear, my *gter-bdag* (treasure guardian), and behind where you are standing are the three keys to treasures.” Suffering such a humiliation Gu-ru rin-po-che was unable to open rTa-rgo up as a Buddhist *gnas* (holy place). To demonstrate his power Gu-ru rin-po-che decided to go to Shod-tram phug, the meditation house that rTa-rgo built for him, and raise the ceiling.

Karma rig 'dzin cautions that it is important for a spirit-medium not to wear the clothes of a deceased person or of someone who has committed incest. Pilgrimage to 108 cemeteries, 108 springs, 108 mountains and 108 *mgon-khang* (chapels for protective deities) greatly enhances the power and practice of a *lha-pa*. He adds that he has completed all these pilgrimages save for the 108 cemeteries.

According to Karma rig 'dzin, Gu-ru rin-po-che oversees the proceedings of the trance ceremony, and plays a protective and benedictory role. He is the subject of invocations at the start of the séance. Karma rig 'dzin states that during the trance he has five main protective deities: front—Ma-lus stong-nyid mkha' 'gro (Thorough Emptiness mKha' 'gro); back—dGra-lha gnyan-stag dmar-po (Red Tiger gNyan dGra-lha); right—bTsan-rgod jag-pa me-len, left—mGon-po ber-nag (Black Cloak mGon-po); and overhead—Lha-chen tshangs-pa (Brahma).

Earlier, Karma rig 'dzin used the customary three *me-long* (*phyi-gling*, *bar-gling*, *nang-gling*) but these and his other ritual implements (some of which came from Lama Thub-bstan) were confiscated during the Chinese Cultural Revolution. He was also imprisoned at that time. Karma rig 'dzin now makes do with one *me-long* divided into three concentric *gling*.

According to Karma rig 'dzin, the *phyi-gling* is where the mountain divinities gNyan-chen thang-lha and rMa-chen spom-ra, as well the 80 *rgya-gar lha*, headed by the *grub-chen* (great adepts) Thang-stong rgyal-po and Sa-ra-ha, assemble. He maintains that in general, the 80 *rgya-gar* spirits do not possess him but rather serve a protective function at the séance and provide *sngags* (spells) for the healing of certain types of wounds. He states that some of the *rgya-gar* are Indian *gzhi-bdag* who work to defend Buddhism. Among them are rGya-gar cam-cam bla-ma, rGya-gar yar-rtse'i bla-ma, rGya-gar yar-rtse'i dbudkar bla-ma, rGya-gar me-ri dmar-po, rGya-gar A-tsa-ra sngon-po, and rGya-gar chos-bsgrub bla-ma. However, Karma rig 'dzin does

not know where these deities reside nor anything about their origins.<sup>148</sup> He believes that there are two *rgya-gar* deities involved in possession: A tsa-ra sngon-po (in handicapped cases) and rGya-gar ri-bkra mchor-po (in a variety of diseases). The latter has two special remedial deities: sPyang-gdong sngon-po (Blue Wolf Face) and 'Ug-gu mchuring (Long Beak Owl). In lieu of their curative function, the *rgya-gar* group is offered incense and *gser-skyems* (libations) during the trance ceremony.

Karma rig 'dzin tells that the *bar-gling* is for the hosts of *btsan*. These include the Rol-pa skya-bdun or 'Bar-ba spun-bdun, which reside on a mountain in Nag-tshang (Nyi-ma county) called Zangs-ri (Copper Mountain). According to him, other *btsan* are rTa-rgo ngo-dmar lha-btsan, Gangs-ri lha-btsan, Nam-ra, Go-ra (*btsan* mountain in gNam-ru), and bSam-yas bshan-pa dmar-po. Karma rig 'dzin's most frequent possessing deity, the protector of the sTag-lung subsect, bDud-btsan dmar-po also takes up residence in the *bar-gling*, as does dGra-lha gnyan-stag dmar-po.

Karma rig 'dzin reports that the *nang-gling* is the convocation site for the various orders of *klu-mo* and *mkha' 'gro-ma*. Karma rig 'dzin has five main *mkha' 'gro*, pacific deities that protect him and the activities of the trance ceremony. He also notes that they also dispense benedictions as do lamas. Called the mKha' 'gro sde-lnga, this diverse group includes rGyang-grags mkha' 'gro (of the eponymous monastery located in the inner circuit of Gangs ti-se), dPal-ldan dung-skyong lha-mo, 'Bri-gung A-phyi chos-sgron, mKha' 'gro ye-shes mtsho-rgyal (consort of Gu-ru rin-po-che), and mKha' 'gro 'brong gi dbang-po. Karma rig 'dzin claims that in addition to the mKha' 'gro sde-lnga, there are 1500 other *mkha' 'gro* that appear in the *nang-gling*. He says that these constitute the circle of A-ne gung-sman rgyal-mo, a pacific deity mounted on a lion (in the retinue of dPal-ldan lha-mo). She is said to wear a golden *rigs-lnga* and brocades made of precious substances. In her left hand she holds a *dril-bu* (Buddhist bell) and in her right a *da-ma-ru*. She has rainbow-colored boots and tucked in her sash is a *rkang-gling* (thigh bone trumpet).

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<sup>148</sup> The identity of the *gzhi-bdag* component of the *rgya-gar* group is particularly enigmatic. It would appear that they are either ancient deities of Himalayan origin or the protective spirits of early Indian Buddhist masters.

Karma rig 'dzin states that his most important possessing deity is bDud-btsan dmar-po, the great sTag-lung bka' brgyud protector.<sup>149</sup> He is said to ride a black horse. In his right hand, he grasps the reins of his horse and in his left hand he holds aloft an iron *mdung-dar* (spear with flag). Moreover, Karma rig 'dzin envisions bDud-btsan dmar-po as attired in a copper helmet and armor, and with a tiger-skin quiver and leopard-skin bow case.

Karma rig 'dzin is unequivocal: the mountain gods that possess him do so to help patients. He adds that if they are unable or unwilling to provide assistance they will refer patients to a lama, *sngags-pa* or medical doctor. Karma rig 'dzin alleges that during séances involving gNyan-chen thang-lha, this mountain god remains on the crown of his head directing the activities of his circle of deities. According to him, the possessing members of gNyen-chen thang-lha's retinue include:

- 1) Thang-sras mchor-po (especially efficacious in childhood diseases).
- 2) Thang-lha yar-bzhur, an infrequent possessor who Karma rig 'dzin considers a minister (mainly functions to cure swelling conditions).
- 3) Thang-lha'i g.yag-gshog gwa-pa (White-Faced Wild Yak of Thang-lha, effective in preventing the loss of cattle and to increase the numbers of yaks).
- 4) Thang-lha'i lha-lug gwa-pa (White-Faced Divine Sheep of Thang-lha, effective in preventing the loss of sheep and to increase the size of the sheep flocks).

These possessing forms of Thang-lha can employ Thang-lha khyi-rgod rag-pa as a remedial spirit who is said to be able to cure rabies, the dangerous disease known as *sa-btsog* and certain arthritic ailments.

Karma rig 'dzin states that another deity that possesses him is rTa-rgo ngo-dmar lha-btsan. His remedial spirits are Khyi-rgod rag-pa, Wa-skya lag-dkar (Light Gray Fox with White Paws) and Dom-nag mchor-po (Handsome Black Bear). The *lha-pa* believes that these three helping spirits are effective in a variety of diseases. The possessing deity Rol-pa skya-bdun/'Bar-ba spun-bdun has Zangs-ri meri 'khyug-chen (Rapid Movement Fire Mountain Copper Mountain)

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<sup>149</sup> For a doctrinal assessment of this deity see Part Two, section i, pp. 58–63.

as its remedial spirit. Karma rig 'dzin shares that Gangs-ri lha-btsan is his *skyes-lha* (birthplace god) and only very infrequently takes possession of him. Another possessing deity is one of the *btsan* protectors of bSam-yas monastery, bSam-yas bshan-pa dmar-po. Karma rig 'dzin relates that possession of this god occurs when patients suffer from a lethal condition. He envisages bSam-yas bshan-pa dmar-po as riding a red horse with a white muzzle, white spot on the forehead and white hoofs. He wears a copper helmet and armor, and holds a copper lasso in his right hand and a red *mdung-dar* in his left. The bSam-yas *lha 'khor* also includes Pe-har, the *bshan-pa* (butcher) deities, and bSam-yas 'brong-dur (bSam-yas Cemetery Wild Yak), a helping spirit that cures cattle diseases.

Although Karma rig 'dzin points out that he is not possessed by the *btsan* Go-ra and Nam-ra during séances he has seen their remedial spirits in his *bar-gling*. They are Thog-khyi dmar-po (Red Thunderbolt Dog) and Zangs-khyi dmar-po (Red Copper Dog) respectively.

Karma rig 'dzin claims that for a horse disease known as *rta-khyung nad*, he is possessed by manifestations of rTa-mgrin, the horse-headed Buddhist *yi-dam*, and that at that time he conducts a *gsol-kha* (propitiation ritual) directed towards rTa-mgrin. He thinks that there are three manifestations of rTa-mgrin involved: Khro-bo rta-mgrin dmar-po, Se-ra'i rta-mgrin and bKa' phrung drag-btsan. In this *gsol-kha* ritual a *rdo-rje* is used.

Karma rig 'dzin uses his *ḍa-ma-ru*, drum, *gshang*, and *zangs-gling* (copper horn) to call both the patron and possessing deities to the trance venue. Before the Chinese Cultural Revolution, he used the *rigs-lnga* headdress but since then he has been unable to obtain another one. He reports that its *gshog-khra* (multi-colored wings) were ornamented with the watchful eyes of the *khyung*. The right *gshog-khra* symbolized the tiger *'jibs-spyang* (helping spirit) while the left *gshog-khra* symbolized the wolf *'jibs-spyang*. Now he uses just the *btsan-zhwa*, the red peaked cap decorated with the eyes of the *btsan*. For some trances he uses a plume of *thang-dkar* (lammergeier) feathers on his *btsan-zhwa*. Karma rig 'dzin states that the *thang-dkar* is the bird of the *lha* and the representative of the mKha' 'gro sde-lnga. Another type of headdress he has worn is called *lha-thod*, a kind of kerchief that wraps once around the head from which cowry shells hang. According to Karma rig 'dzin, *lha-pa* once used helmets, armor, spears, and bow and arrows in their trances. He notes that the *lha*

have white weapons, the *btsan* red weapons, and the *klu* turquoise colored armor and armaments.

Karma rig 'dzin states that invocations for the trance ceremony begin with the figures who exercise an officiating and benedictory role and are generally mentioned in the following order: Gu-ru rin-po-che, Zhi-ba drag-po gsang-ba gsum (the pacific, wrathful and secret retinue of Gu-ru rin-po-che), His Holiness the Dalai Lama, His Holiness the Karma-pa, His Holiness the Sa-skya gong-ma, the Paṅ-chen bla-ma, and rGyal-tshab rin-po-che. After his donning of the *btsan-zhwa*, these invocations are followed by those to Lha-chen tshangs-pa (chief of the *lha*), gNyan-chen sku-lha sger-mdzod (sp.?) (chief of the *dgra-lha*) and Klu gtsug-na rin-chen (chief of the *klu*). Karma rig 'dzin is under the impression that the entire pantheon of the three planes of existence is subsumed under the leadership of these latter three deities, explaining their importance to the ceremony. He observes that the palace of Lha-chen tshangs-pa is located on gNyan-chen thang-lha while the one for gNyan-chen sku-lha is found on a locale between Thang-lha and Thang-sras mchor-po. Other invocations are for the *rgya-gar* group.

Karma rig 'dzin asserts that at the moment of possession, the deity's 'od-zer (radiant consciousness) enters him while his 'od-zer is simultaneously transferred to the *bar-gling* for safe-keeping, for the duration of the trance. He professes that the 'od-zer of the *lha* is white, the 'od-zer of the *btsan* yellow, the 'od-zer of the *mkha'* 'gro green, and that the 'od-zer of the *klu-mo* is blue. He further remarks that as all these deities are present at the trance a rainbow light descends upon the venue.

Karma rig 'dzin holds that harmful forces and elemental spirits are either 'dul-ba (subdued) or *zlog-pa* (repelled) or in some cases, bound to an oath to protect the Buddhist doctrine. When the *sabdag* and twelve *brtan-ma* goddesses are the source of problems they can be appeased through offerings (*bskang-ba*). However, when the *klu*, *gnyan*, *the'u-rang*, 'byung-po<sup>150</sup> and *bram-ze* (demons in guise of brahmins) spirits are at the root of sickness they must be subdued (*thul-ba*).

Karma rig 'dzin insists that the circles of Dang-ra g.yu-mtsho and Ma-pham g.yu-mtsho do not possess him; however, they participate

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<sup>150</sup> Probably analogous with the Indian *bhuta* demons (Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1956: 300), which haunt charnel grounds.

in the *klu-gsol* ritual. Under the leadership of the *brtan-ma* goddess rDo-rje kun-grags ma,<sup>151</sup> members of gNam-mtsho-phyug-mo's entourage often take possession of the spirit-medium to conduct the *klu-gsol*, which has both an apotropaic and fortune-bestowing function. The possessing forms of gNam-mtsho include gSer-khrab phyug-mo (Golden Cuirass Riches Woman), Dung-khrab phyug-mo (Conch Cuirass Riches Lady), Me-tog g.yang-mdzes (Beautiful Good Fortune Flower), and Sa yi klu dung-skyong dkar-mo (Klu of the Earth White Conch Protectress).

Karma rig 'dzin states that when the female retainues of gNam-mtsho, Dang-ra g.yu-mtsho and Ma-pham g.yu-mtsho create difficulties for a person they can be the object of a *klu-gsol* ritual. For instance, the *mo-lha* (personal deity of females) often belongs to the retainues of the great lake goddesses, and if angered or defiled she can bring sickness and misfortune to a household. Karma rig 'dzin notes that the *klu-gsol* is held while he is in trance. He affirms that the presents offered during the *klu-gsol* are conveyed to the lake spirits by the great goddess dPal-ldan skyong-ma (dPal-ldan lha-mo). Karma rig 'dzin cites that for the *klu-gsol* an incense mixture containing *spang-spos* (*Nardostachys grandiflora*), *phur-mong* (probably *Micromeri tarosma*), *ba-lu* (*Rhododendron primulaeflorum*), *sro-lo* (probably *Rhodiola crenulata*), and *rtswa ku-sha* (*Thysanolaena maxima*) is used to propitiate the deities. Also needed for the ritual is the milk of either a white yak, orange goat or white-faced sheep. This milk is placed in a vessel with the *phyi-gling* and covered with a piece of cloth. The *mda' dar* is placed on top of the vessel. Invocations are then recited to the presiding deity, which is either a member of gNam-mtsho phyug-mo's retainue, a *mkha' 'gro* or a deity in the circle of dMag-zor rgyal-mo. After the prayers the *phyi-gling* is removed from the vessel and the milk stirred. Then the milk is spooned on to the *phyi-gling* and allowed to drop back into the vessel. The resultant liquid is given to patients to drink as well as sprinkled upon them. Karma rig 'dzin says that it is also added to various springs, resulting in rain within 24 hours, thus the *klu-gsol* is highly effective in times of drought.

Karma rig 'dzin discloses that when a patient has become ill due to an angry *pho-lha*, a *lha-gsol* ritual is held to pacify it. For the

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<sup>151</sup> The chief of the brTan-ma bcu-gnyis, a group of twelve powerful territorial goddesses primarily of Byang-thang origin. For a review of this goddess see Bellezza 1997, pp. 107, 127, 128 (fns. 22–25); Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1956, pp. 181–198.



*lha-gsol* the possessing deity is usually one of the mountain gods in the circle of Thang-lha or sPom-ra but other deities can also be involved. The *lha-gsol* entails the burning of incense and *gser-skyems* (libations offerings). Karma rig 'dzin may also prescribe the erection of a new *mda' dar* on the patient's altar and the wearing of new clothes. Another aspect of the *lha-gsol*, especially for dying people, is the freeing of animals (*tshe-thar*), particularly an old goat. *Tshe-thar* can also be prescribed for *bar-chad* (obstacles to a person's health and happiness) conditions. To appease the anger of a *phugs-lha* (identical or closely related to the *pho-lha*) specially colored livestock are gifted to it. According to Karma rig 'dzin, these divine animals constitute a separate category of offering from the *tshe-thar*. If the *phugs-lha* of the patient is gNyan-chen thang-lha or the white form of rTa-rgo, the possessing deity prescribes a white yak or white sheep. For *btsan phugs-lha* such as rTa-rgo lha-btsan and Jag-pa me-len, a *lug dmar-rtsa* (sheep with a reddish face) and an all-red goat or a *gyag kham-pa* (bay-colored yak) are gifted to the *phugs-lha*. Bluish female yaks, sheep and goats are offered to *phugs-lha* that are *klu-mo*. If a patient has no livestock, he is directed by the possessing deity to offer a *mda' dar* to his *phugs-lha*.

Karma rig 'dzin observes that another healing ritual performed in trance by bDud-btsan dmar-po is the *tshe 'gugs* (long life summoning), which entails the mediation of the possessing deity with the patient's *tshe-lha* (long life god). For this ritual a turquoise, two pieces of coral and a conch are provided by the patient. The *tshe 'gugs* is designed to establish a harmonious relationship between the *phugs-lha* and *tshe-lha*. It can also entice a patient's *bla* to return if it has been errant. Karma rig 'dzin maintains that a patient whose *bla* is wandering has no *rlung-rta*, the force regulated by the *dgra-lha* that makes a person lucky and successful. During the ritual the possessing deity bDud-btsan dmar-po invokes the Tshe-lha rnam-gsum (Longevity Triad, consisting of Tshe-dpag-med, sGrol-dkar and rNam-rgyal-ma). By using the jewels provided, the possessing deity convinces the *phugs-lha* and *tshe-lha* to dwell cooperatively with the patient.

Karma rig 'dzin says that he performs a ritual for newlyweds called *lha-khro klu-dogs* (angry god anxious *klu*) in order to harmonize the respective family protectors. For the ritual the groom must bring a white *kha-btags* (scarf) and the bride a blue *kha-btags*. He affirms that the reconciliation of the protectors occurs when he affixes the two scarves to the couple's *mda' dar*. Karma rig 'dzin states that the

possessing deities at the *lha-khro klu-dogs* belong to the circles of Thang-lha and sPom-ra; alternatively, the ritual is performed by a *rgya-gar* deity or bDud-btsan dmar-po.

Karma rig 'dzin explains that the main types of *grib* causing sickness are: *sme-grib* (pollution resulting from incest, murder, etc.), *shi-grib* (pollution resulting from being in contact with dying people), *ro-grib* (pollution resulting from contact with corpses), *nyams-grib* (pollution caused by eating meat from animals killed by carnivores), *btsog-grib* (pollution from contaminated water and earth and diseased meat), *gza' grib* (pollution created by bad planetary alignments), and *dam-grib* (pollution resulting from breaking religious vows). Karma rig 'dzin mainly uses his *zangs-gling* (copper horn) to suck out *grib* from the bodies of patients. He says that this method of healing is best suited for the *sa-btsog* disease, rabies and *gza' grib*. Although the sucking method is effective in other types of *grib*, Karma rig 'dzin advises against it because it can drain patients of their vital energy like that bound up with beneficial 'insects'. These include *lus 'bu* (insect that regulates growth), *bsod-nams 'bu* (insect that ensures good luck), *dbang-thang 'bu* (insect that regulates abilities).

Karma rig 'dzin states that another method of cleansing *grib* is *khrus-chu*, a concoction of various indigenous herbs and different colored flowers. This liquid is placed in a vessel in which a *me-long* is added. If the procedure to make it has been successful, the *khrus-chu* will be multi-colored in sunlight, representing the different classes of deities. When sprinkled on patients the *khrus-chu* is also effective in pacifying an angry *pho-lha*.

Karma rig 'dzin avers that while he is in trance he uses a mixture of white, red and black sand, white, red and black crushed stones, and *A-gar-ru* (*Aquilaria*) for removing harm caused by the *mgon-po*, *rgyal-po*, *the'u-rang*, *bram-ze*, and *mi-shis btsan-skyes* type demons. This mixture is thrown on patients to exorcise harmful influences and demons. For the very weak however, this exorcistic method cannot be used and the *mda' dar* is employed instead. The *mda' dar*<sup>152</sup> is waved over the patient, thereby exorcising the demons and effecting a cure. The *mda' dar* is also used to whack and stab at afflicting

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<sup>152</sup> It consists of a bamboo shaft with an arrow-point on which various colored clothes, and a sling with the *chu-mig dgu-sgril* (a braiding technique with 'eyes', a symbol of the *dgra-lha*) are attached.

agents. Karma rig 'dzin reports that a *mdung-dar* (lance with flag) was once used by spirit-mediums for the same purpose.

Karma rig 'dzin also says that he practices a wrathful ritual known as *sri-gnon* (pressing down the *sri*) to eliminate misfortunes caused by the pernicious *sri* demons. A narrow hole one cubit in depth is dug, and nine different women spin wool yarn of nine different colors. While in trance, he ties nine knots, spaced three fingers apart in the string braided from the nine pieces of yarn. Each knot is sealed with *la-cha* (shellac), symbolizing that the *sri* is bound and sealed and thus they cannot cause any more trouble. The nine knots symbolize that the offending *sri* will be bound for nine years, nine months and nine days. The string is tied around a black cloth covering a fox skull.<sup>153</sup> The *sri*, are forced into this ritual prison by invoking the rGyal-ba rigs-lnga Buddhas. During the *sri-gnon* the various types of *sri* demons are named as a prelude to their imprisonment. According to Karma rig 'dzin, each group of *sri* is neutralized and defeated by a special deity that is invoked during the ceremony:

Pho-sri gsad-gar gyi gdong (Face of Slaughtering Dance Sri of Males) defeated by bDud-btsan dmar-po.

Mo-sri rgya-mtsho 'gram (Ocean Shore Sri of Females) defeated by dMag-zor rgyal-mo.

Chung-sri chu-mo'i 'gram (Edge of the Spring Sri of Children) defeated by Thang-sras mchor-po.

Than-sri than-pa'i 'og (Drought Below Sri of Drought) defeated by the *klu-mo* (?).

sGo-sri go-kha'i 'gram (Berm of the Hearth Sri of Livestock) is defeated by Thang-lha'i lha-g.yag dkar-po.

Phugs-sri dar-lcog 'og (Below the Prayer Flag Mast Sri of Domestic Affairs) is defeated by gNyan-chen thang-lha and other *lha*.

dGra-sri la-btsas 'og (Below the Cairn Sri of the Enemy) defeated by dGra-lha gnyan-stag dmar-po.

Once the *sri* are defeated and imprisoned the fox skull is buried in the hole dug for this purpose.

During my visit, Karma rig 'dzin graciously agreed to go into trance and allow it to be photographed. It was decided that the purpose

<sup>153</sup> For analogous rituals conducted to counteract the malignant influence of the *sri* see Nebesky-Wojokowitz 1956, pp. 516–518.

of the trance was to divine the ongoing success of the autumn phase of my High Tibet Circle Expedition, launched in collaboration with the Tibetan Academy of Social Sciences. I had hoped to document a healing ritual, but a suitable patient could not be located in time. Karma rig 'dzin warned that the deities could not be summoned for inconsequential or whimsical purposes and that our only alternative was to perform a divination. The material aspects of the trance ceremony were rudimentary, reflecting the *lha-pa*'s modest economic position. The possessing deity was bDud-btsan dmar-po, who speaks in *dbus-skad* (central Tibetan dialect). Other deities are said to speak in strange dialects thus necessitating an interpreter (usually one of Karma rig 'dzin's close friends).

19:00: Preparations for the trance begin. Karma rig 'dzin hangs his drum on a line that is suspended from the rafters of his tiny one-room house. The altar is a wooden crate that also suffices for everyday religious use. A cloth on which much barleycorn is sprinkled covers the altar. On the altar are three vessels of water, one vessel of black tea, the *gling* and another *me-long* that are placed one in front of the other and embedded in a heaped plate of barleycorn, butter lamps, a small stone in the form of gNyan-chen thang-lha, and two other sacred stones. No photographs are used at the ceremony. After arranging his altar, Karma rig 'dzin dons a red shirt and the peaked brocade *bsang-zhwa* (incense hat).

19:18: Karma rig 'dzin lights the butter lamps and begins his prayers while his wife burns juniper incense. He starts playing his *gshang* and drum.

19:19: Karma rig 'dzin blows the *zangs-gling* three times. Invocations to Thang-lha, the *mkha' 'gro* and a host of other indigenous deities are made while facing in an eastern direction. The dominant subjects are Thang-lha and the *dgra-lha*. During these invocations he plays his *gshang* and drum quite briskly.

19:27: The *lha-pa* places his *gshang* down and bangs more slowly and deliberately on the drum. Invocations still stress the indigenous pantheon of Upper Tibet.

19:31: Various lamas are invoked.

19:35: Karma rig 'dzin stops playing his drum. He waves his *mda' dar* aloft and sprinkles barleycorn around the room. His wife takes a vessel of water from the altar and offers it outside to the deities. He now waves his *mda' dar* while exclaiming, *ki ki bswo bswo* (heralds the deities).

19:37: Karma rig 'dzin picks up his *btsan-zhwa* and holds it over his face while reciting prayers to Gu-ru rin-po-che, the Buddhas, Karma-pa, and other lamas.

19:39: He places *btsan-zhwa* on his head and slings *mda' dar* over his left shoulder.

19:40: Karma rig 'dzin plays his drum and *gshang*. His speech becomes more song-like.

19:42: Pace of playing intensifies and his head begins to rock back and forth.

19:44: I later confirm that possession is thought to occur as Karma rig 'dzin jumps up to his knees. He chants praises to the indigenous deities without musical instruments, facing in a southern direction. His voice has a shallow quality to it. The main groups of *btsan* and *klu* of gNam-mtsho and Thang-lha are invoked, as are Dang-ra g.yu-mtsho, rTa-rgo and bDud-btsan dmar-po. The *lha-pa* relates that these are the protectors of the north. He mentions that Ge-sar is the hero of the world. The *rgya-gar* gods including Sa-ra-ha and the *mkha' 'gro* are also invoked. The primordial nature of the deities and their protective functions are noted.

19:54: My Tibetan colleague offers a *kha-btags* to Karma rig 'dzin, who then addresses him with a number of questions in a deep, authoritative tone. Speaking close to his drum, which causes his voice to resonate, he says, "Why have you come here today? Where are you from? What do you want?" My colleague replied that we are researching sacred mountains and that he resides in Lhasa. The *lha-pa* reacted by saying, "But where are you originally from?" The appropriate answer is given. Karma rig 'dzin then demanded to know why we were inquiring about the history of *lha-pa*, lamas and old men. My colleague answered that I am writing a book about Tibetan history. The spirit-medium rejoined, "Who is it for?" and my colleague answered, "For people at university." The medium retorted, "Where were you during the ten years of prosecution?" Karma rig 'dzin then speaks of the Chinese Elephant Mountain of 'Jam-dpal dbyangs, and the Ri-bo mched-linga (Five Marchmounts of China). He enjoins, "Now that Tibet is part of China, it is imperative that the laws of China are followed." The *lha-pa* then proclaims that the Tibetans are descended from the Brag srin-mo and Bodhisattva, the head of the *lha* is Ge-sar, the head of the *btsan* is Gangs-ri lha-btsan, and the leader of religion is Gu-ru rin-po-che. Finally, he pronounces that our expedition would be successful in

all ways, and that he (bDud-btsan dmar-po) would talk to Gangs-ri lha-btsan on our behalf.

20:02: Karma rig 'dzin resumes playing the drum and *gshang*. He holds both the *gshang* and *mda' dar* in his left hand. His voice has a song-like quality and his head shakes wildly.

20:04: Suddenly all activity stops, marking the end of the trance. He sits motionless for about one minute. Then, as he removes his costume, he asks about his performance.

xv) *Pho-bo chu-bzang, born circa 1924*

Interviewed in Brag-po township, sGer-rtse, October 11, 2002.

Pho-bo chu-bzang is held in high esteem and regarded with a certain amount of awe, in northern sGer-rtse county. He is reported to be the senior-most *lha-pa* of the region. Pho-bo chu-bzang is a highly pious and reticent man, and he normally does not meet with anyone but his close family members. Visitors are discouraged from seeing him except when in dire need of his services. Pho-bo chu-bzang however, kindly agreed to be interviewed for this book.

Pho-bo chu-bzang reports that in his paternal clan (Phyug-tshang) there have been spirit-mediums for nine generations. He says that his grandfather Padma and his paternal uncle dKar-bsam were mediums for the same deities as himself: rTa-rgo ngo-dmar lha-btsan and Rol-pa skya-bdun. None of his eight children work as spirit-mediums. Pho-bo chu-bzang says that he knows few details about his family because his father died when he was fifteen years old, and soon thereafter his mother and sisters left their native region (mTsho-khrid, western Nag-tshang) on pilgrimage to Gangs rin-po-che. On the way back, his sisters married in sGer-rtse, so he settled there as well. He has lived in various parts of Brag-po township before moving to his present location about ten years ago.

Pho-bo chu-bzang states that the deities of his paternal lineage first possessed him at age eighteen. He says that he was aided by a lama in sGer-rtse named Karma yon-tan, also known as Bla-chen rin-po-che. Bla-chen rin-po-che diagnosed that he was being visited by authentic deities. He performed the *rtsa-sgo phye-ba* ceremony for Pho-bo chu-bzang, which consisted of ablutions, consecration and binding the ring fingers while conducting a *gcod* ritual. The lama informed Pho-bo chu-bzang that after three days he could remove

## PART FOUR: SPIRIT-MEDIUMS IN THE BON LITERARY TRADITION

### i) *The origin of the tradition of spirit-mediumship*

The Bon religion attributes its founding to sTon-pa gShen-rab, a divine figure believed to have lived well before the time of the historical Buddha. The activities and teaching of this great legendary personality are recorded in various biographical sources. The longest of these is called *mDo dri med gzi brjid*, and in published form it runs to some twelve volumes.<sup>1</sup> This biography of the founder of Bon is said to have been composed in the distant past by sTang-chen dmu-tsha gyer-med and transmitted through a vision to sPrul-sku blo-ldan snying-po (born 1360), who committed it to writing. It contains a large body of biographical, hagiographic and doctrinal material, as well as Bon mythological and historical references derived from diverse sources.

The *gZi brjid* details the nine branches or vehicles of the Bon religious teachings, as first propounded by gShen-rab in a celestial kingdom to a group of divine beings.<sup>2</sup> The first of these vehicles (*theg-pa*) is called Phya-gshen, which describes the Bon systems of astrology, healing rites, therapies, and divination.<sup>3</sup> These are delineated in a common part (*shyi yi sde*) and a special part (*sgos kyi bye brag*). The system of divination is subdivided into four separate branches (*sgos su mam bzhi*), relating to divination by knots, divination by other instruments, divination by dreams, and the commands of deities (*lha yi bka' bab*). This latter subdivision is a kind of oracular utterance, and it is from this type of divination that the tradition of spirit-mediumship is attributed. As such, the Bon tradition clearly upholds the

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<sup>1</sup> For a biographical overview of gShen-rab, see Kvaerne 1986. For an English translation of a Bon religious history (*bstan 'byung*) refer to Karmay 1972. In the Tun-huang manuscripts gShen-rab myi-bo/gShen-rabs kyi myi-bo is mentioned at least six times as a priest who performs a funeral rite (cf. Stein 2003: 598–600).

<sup>2</sup> These nine vehicles are detailed from *gZi brjid* excerpts in Snellgrove 1967. An introduction to the contents of the *gZi brjid* is found in Snellgrove 1967, pp. 3–8.

<sup>3</sup> For an exposition of Phya-gshen theg-pa derived from the *gZi brjid* see Snellgrove 1967, pp. 24–41.

antiquity of spirit-mediumship, placing its origin in a time even before the existence of the Zhang-zhung kingdom. While this claim in itself cannot be taken as a serious historical argument, it is indicative of the length of time encompassed by the legendary associations that are connected to the tradition of summoning deities into one's person.

The excerpt of the *gZi brjid* translated below pertains to the importance of the Phya-gshen teachings, and the way in which they are enumerated and classified. It is in this context that the role of the oracular tradition in the Bon religion is framed. Most importantly, the *gZi brjid* explicitly states that divination and the other systems enumerated in Phya-gshen are to be practiced with honesty and integrity on behalf of all living beings. The ethic of practice set forth here is one that is still embodied by the *lha-pa* of Upper Tibet. My association with the spirit-mediums indicates that this altruism helps to define the current tradition, and distinguishes it from other forms of spirit-mediumship, where self-aggrandizement or political calculation play a prominent part. While it may be argued by the skeptical that Bon and Buddhist teachings in Tibet have always appeared as a commodity to be merely bought and sold, my experiences with the spirit-mediums of our times establishes that there is far more to their motivations than mercenary intent. To the contrary, my findings demonstrate that in terms of motivation and commitment, the *lha-pa* of Upper Tibet are to be lauded—for they embody the ideals of Bon (as well as Buddhist) practice.

In this *gZi brjid* excerpt the grandeur and solemnity of the revelation of the Bon doctrines by sTon-pa gShen-rab are amply conveyed.<sup>4</sup> It begins with the assembling of a divine convocation and the revelation of the profundity of the teachings (paras i, ii). gShen-rab discloses the telos, which is the infinitely compassionate mind (para ii). Derived from this fundamental reality, the Phya-gshen vehicle is presented as an instrument for alleviating suffering (para iii). The elaborate classification system of the Phya-gshen teachings is then presented to the audience (paras iv–vii):

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<sup>4</sup> See vol. 2, pp. 384, ln. 7 to 387, ln. 12, of the *gZi brjid* published by Bodljongs bod-yig dpe-mying dpe-skrun khang, Lhasa: 2000. This section of the biography is entitled: 'Dus pa rin po che'i rgyud dri ma med pa gzi brjid rab tu 'bar ba'i rgyud (= *mdo*) las rgyal bus bka' khrims bstsal ba'i mdo, pp. 283–499.



(i) At that time, when Prince sTon-pa gshen-rab was one year old,<sup>5</sup> he stayed together with rMa-lo and g.Yu-lo<sup>6</sup> at the Bar-po so-brgyad castle. At that time, on the very top of Ri-rab (Highest Mountain), in the country of the *phyā*<sup>7</sup> called sNang-ldan g.yu-rtse (Radiance Turquoise Peak), inside the castle of sTegs-pa yang-thog, there was a *phyā-gshen*<sup>8</sup> known as Legs-rgyal thang-po,<sup>9</sup> the son of the father of the *phyā* rJe-ring nam. The one hundred children of the *phyā* prince [Legs-rgyal] assembled and arrived at the castle of Bar-po so-brgyad. Then they gathered around sTon-pa, prostrated and presented him with offerings. Phya-gshen gtsug-phud offered a jeweled *ma 'dal*<sup>10</sup> with small piles of grain placed in it, and entreated sTon-pa: “Sacred teacher, the lamp who protects and sees to the welfare of living beings, holy prince, the laudable one venerated by gods and men, the Swastika<sup>11</sup> Bon [teachings] are extremely wide and innumerable. From the middle of your mind<sup>12</sup> reveal the essence of the relevant teachings to all us disciples.” They thus made their request.

(ii) Then with a smiling countenance, Prince [sTon-pa] did speak: “Listen Phya-gshen gtsug-phud and other disciples, the time in which you have requested the teachings is eminently appropriate. The g.Yung-drung Bon [teachings] are extremely wide and innumerable, however they can be summarized and aggregated into nine vehicles. The view<sup>13</sup> descends from above, while the activity<sup>14</sup> climbs up from below. Ultimately, the essence of the doctrine can be distilled into one highest truth (*don-dam*), which unequivocally is the true basis of reality (*kun-*

<sup>5</sup> Equivalent of 100 human years.

<sup>6</sup> These two figures were early disciples of sTon-pa shes-rab, who came to the mystical land of 'Ol-mo lung-ring as swallows. For background information on 'Ol-mo lung-ring see Martin 1995; 1999.

<sup>7</sup> Also spelled *phywa*. An early tribe and type of cosmogonic deity. Also refers to the first vehicle of the Bon doctrine.

<sup>8</sup> Bon religious practitioner of the first stage of teachings, the Phya-gshen. He belonged to the divine lineage of the *phyā*.

<sup>9</sup> Also known as Phya-gshen gtsug-phud.

<sup>10</sup> Common offering object consisting of graduated rings placed on top of one another, which are filled with grains and precious substances.

<sup>11</sup> g.Yung-drung. This literally means ‘everlasting’ or ‘unborn and undying,’ an epithet of the Bon religion.

<sup>12</sup> *Thugs kyi dkyil nas*. An expression meaning ‘with a high degree of forethought and concentration’.

<sup>13</sup> *lTa-ba*. In this context denotes the rDzogs-chen system of liberation. rDzogs-chen, a philosophy and methodology for mind training, comprises the highest vehicle of the nine vehicles of Bon. For further information see Tenzin Wangyel 1993; Tenzin Namdak 1995; Bru-sgom rGyal-ba g.yung-drung 1996; Reynolds 1996; Rossi 2000.

<sup>14</sup> *sPyod-pa*. Denotes the way of life namely, the fundamental activities of renunciation and non-violence.

*gzhi*), the infinitude of the all-compassionate mind. Nevertheless, the methods to guide sentient beings have to be shown. Accessing the portal of Phya-gshen, the first vehicle, increases the happiness of living existence, the joy and comfort of living beings.”

(iii) Having reached 100 human years or one *gshen* year, sTon-pa said: “In the following manner, I will explain the Bon portals one after another, beginning by explaining the first vehicle, Phya-gshen. Clearly distinguish what harms and what benefits by examining good and bad signs. Gauge the precise extent [of conditions] honestly, without deceit, and truthfully, without falsehood. Cure illness, rescue the dying, and increase the welfare, fortune and life [of people]. The prosperity and benefits to living beings will inevitably unfold in succession. Even [the value of] a moment’s benefit is incomprehensible. In Bon, the superior state is the happiness of sentient beings. Therefore do whatever is required for their benefit and well being. Also provide for their body and life-force. Let the aspiration for the happiness of all be your basis, not selfishness, but indeed be dedicated to living beings. Keep this in the middle of your mind, Phya-gshen gtsug-phud.” So spoke [sTon-pa].

(iv) Again [gTsug-phud] addressed [sTon-pa]: “Respected Prince sTon-pa, from what you have taught, the g.Yung-drung Bon [teachings] are extremely wide and innumerable, yet they can be epitomized into nine vehicles. From the Bon portal of Phya-gshen, the lowest vehicle, comes a common part and a special part. How exactly are these enumerated”, asked [gTsug-phud]. “What is the essence of the activities and observances? Finally, what are the significance and benefits? Most certainly, please confer the teachings upon me.” Thus spoke [gTsug-phud]. Then spoke sTon-pa, saying: “Listen intently Phya-gshen gtsug-phud. The Bon portal of the Phya-gshen vehicle has two common parts: *gto*<sup>15</sup> and therapies (*dpyad*). The special part is enumerated and shown in four sections: *pra-ltas-mo* (divination by signs and omens), *snang-mthong-rtsis* (astrological perception), *na-gso-gto* (rites to cure diseases), and *’chi-bslu-dpyad* (therapies rescuing from death). You must know these four different sections.”

(v) “In the gloomy darkness of ignorance, the cycle of illusory existence, the six types of living beings<sup>16</sup> are tormented by disease [and its cause] ignorance. Through divination examine the good and bad signs. By astrology perceive the good and evil through calculation. Heal those who have become sick and cure by therapy those who are

<sup>15</sup> *gTo* are various types of rites in which protective deities are invoked. They are carried out for the benefit of living beings. See Norbu 1995, pp. 170–173, 264 (fn. 1), Karmay 1998, pp. 246–248.

<sup>16</sup> *Gro-ba rigs-drug*: 1) *lha* (gods), 2) *lha-min* (titans), 3) *mi* (humans), 4) *byol-song* (animals), 5) *yi-dwags* (famished ghouls), and 6) *dnyal-ba pa* (hell beings).

dying. Both [divination and therapy] will fail if the life-potential [of the patient] has been expended. Even at that time, by the ephemeral truths of conditional reality,<sup>17</sup> [using divination and therapy the patient] will be fine for three days, and the benefit and virtue of this is incomprehensible. Phya-gshen gtsug-phud, keep this in the middle [of your mind].” Thus spoke [sTon-pa].

(vi) Again, Legs-rgyal thang-po entreated, “Respected Prince sTon-pa you have said that in the common part, *gto* (beneficial rites) and therapies are enumerated, from which four special parts are enumerated. The benefits to living beings notwithstanding, I am not able to distinguish very much. How is divination enumerated? How is astrology enumerated? How is *gto* enumerated? How are therapies enumerated? Concerning the four parts, divination, astrology, *gto* and therapies, firstly, which comes in the beginning? Intermediately, what are the causes effecting a cure? In conclusion, what comes last?”

(vii) Then sTon-pa spoke, “Listen intently Legs-rgyal thang-po: in divination, astrology, *gto* and therapies, these four, there is an explanation of the common part and an explanation of the special part. These two show how the common part is enumerated and the salient features of the special part. Firstly, in the common enumeration there are 360 divinations, containing the essence of the divination of signs. There are 360 astrological computations containing the essence of astrological perception.<sup>18</sup> There are 360 *gto* containing the essence of the *gto* that heals sickness. There are 21,000 therapeutic methods that contain the essence of therapies that save from death.<sup>19</sup> This is actually how the common part is enumerated. The special part is collected and summarized as follows. There are four types of divination: the *cu-thig* of the manifestation of primordial existence,<sup>20</sup> the prophecies of the *sgra-bla* of primordial knowledge,<sup>21</sup> the dreams of the primordial lords of aspiration,<sup>22</sup> and the mantic directives of the *lha* of primordial power.<sup>23</sup> Knowledge of the four types is imperative.”

<sup>17</sup> There are two types of truths (*bden-pa-gnyis*): conditional truth (*kun-rdzob bden-pa*) and ultimate truth (*don-dam bden-pa*).

<sup>18</sup> For a description of astrology based on the Phya-gshen vehicle see Norbu 1995, pp. 147–162.

<sup>19</sup> For an explication of medicine based on the Phya-gshen vehicle see Norbu 1995, pp. 133–145.

<sup>20</sup> *Cu-thig/ju-thig* is a system of divination based on knotted cords. For a lucid exposition of this system of divination see Norbu 1995, pp. 189–198.

<sup>21</sup> *Ye-mkhyen sgra-bla'i mngon-shes* is the system of divination based on the revelations of the *sgra-bla* of primordial existence.

<sup>22</sup> *Ye-rje smon-pa'i rmi-lam* is the system of divination concerned with the interpretation of dreams, mediated by the *sgra-bla* of primordial existence.

<sup>23</sup> *Ye-dbang lha yi bka' bab/babs* is the tradition of deities who make oracular proclamations and initiate activities through the possession of individuals.

The *gZi-brjüd* proceeds to expound upon the classification of the Phya-gshen vehicle. As a part of this gShen-rab briefly describes how the divination rites are to be performed.<sup>24</sup> The altar he prescribes with

<sup>24</sup> The antiquity of the Phya-gshen rituals is attested in the Tun-huang manuscripts. In one passage the practice of divination (*mo-btab*), beneficial rites (*gto*), therapies (*dpyad*), as well as *phya* (prognosis, vital force) are mentioned. See Karmay 1998, p. 247; Stein 2003, p. 596. In the Tun-huang manuscript *IOL 734* (only the transliterated text was available to me) we read: “The one hundred white-headed father *gshen* were assembled. They conducted divination (*mo-btab*) and made\* prognoses (*phya*).” (*po gshen thod kar brgya bsogs te / mo bthab phya bla’gste /*).

\* The precise import of *bla’gste* is not clear.

In *Pelliot 1289* (*Choix de Documents Tibétains Conservés à la Bibliothèque Nationale Complétée par Quelques Manuscrits de L’ India Office et du British Museum*, vol. II), set in a highly obscure context, there is the following line (folio 3, ln. 4): “The *gto* and *dpyad* by Lha-bon ’ol-lcogs.” (*lho (= lha) bon ’ol lcogs kyis\* / gto dang dpyad*).

\* This is followed either by a gap in the text or an additional word.

In *Pelliot 1051* (obtained from same source as above), a divination text of non-Buddhist origin with strong Bon ritual links, there is mention of the familiar personal and territorial deities as spoken by the diviner (lns. 30, 31): “Having found a beneficial divination [result], you will obtain the power to beget children (*srid*). You will not be sick. You have salutary (*’ches*) *sman*, *yul-sa*, *lha*, and *dgra-bla*, so offer to them. It is a very good divination.” (*mo phan thogs pa nyad cing / srid thob bar ’ong ngo / nad myed / sman dang lha yul sa dang dgra bla ’ches pa zhig yod gyis / mchod cig / mo bzang rab bo /*). *Pelliot 1051* also furnishes a more detailed account of divination and the importance of the *dgra-bla* and *lha* as personal protective deities. Two birds dwelling at the capital of Zhang-zhung Khyung-lung rngul-mkhar are used as metaphors to convey the results of the divination (lns. 45–51): “*Kye!* At Khyung-lung ni rngul-mkhar there is a little silver bird with a whitish cast (*dkar-yan*). The wings of the little jade bird are pure. It went to the heights of the blue sky. Down below, at the place once left behind, it consumes, choosing its plump grains\*. The little jade bird was happy with its life. This is the result of that divination of the farmland *’bog A-pa sky\*\**. This divination of you, man, [shows] that your divine glory (*lha-dpal*) will grow like the plants of summertime. The demons (*’dre*) and misfortune (*byur*) will melt away like the snow of springtime. The *dgra-bla* who protect your divine glory are mighty\*\*\*. By great blessings your glory rains down\*\*\*\*. It is well and excellent if you conduct the prognostication (*phya*) of the life-force (*srog*) and the prognostication of military endeavor (*dgra*). From afar a man with happy news and wealth will quickly come. No terror or fear whatsoever will come. You have a great, good glorious *lha*, so unerringly do the religious observances (*rim-gro*) and rituals (*cho-ga*). It is a very good divination.” (*kye khyung lung ni rngul mkhar na / rngul bye’u ni dkar yan pa / dzul (= dzu) bye’u gshogs re dag / dgung sngo ni mtho la gshegs / gshegs gi ni shul yog su / ’bras drug ni tsho mdams shing / gsol cing ni sku i’ tsho / re sked ni rdzul (= dzu) gyi bye’u / ’di ni ’bog A pa gnam / gyi zhing gi mo la bab ste / myi khyod kyī mo ’di ni lha dpal ni dbyar gyi lhum (= ldum) bzhin du skye / ’dre dang byur ni dpyid kyī kha ba ltar zhu ste / lha dpal skyabs dgra bla ni gnyan / dpal byin po ches phabs pas / bzang ngo / srog phya dang dgra phya la btab na bzang rab / lam ring por (= nas) myi zhig dga’ pa’i gtam dang nor zhig dang myur du ’ong / ’jigs pa dang bag tsha ba ci yang myi ’ong te / lha dpal bzang po ches zhig yod gyis / rim gro dang cho ga ma nor par gyis dang / mo bzang rab bo /*).

\* *’Bras-drug* refers to grains but the exact signification of *drug* is not clear.

\*\* The meaning of *’bog A-pa* is not known.

its white felt mat, and a simple array of offerings, very much resembles the one used by the *lha-pa* of Upper Tibet. The use of incense to attract the deities, and offerings of barleycorn, beverages, and the ritual role of the arrow are all elements present in the contemporary séance. The rectitude of the officiant of the divination rites is stressed in the text. Likewise it is believed that only those who lead a virtuous life can prevail as authentic *lha-pa*.<sup>25</sup>

(viii) Firstly, there is divination by examining the signs. Blue barley is placed on a small white felt mat on the earth.<sup>26</sup> A lamp of turquoise<sup>27</sup> is suspended from an erected arrow,<sup>28</sup> the castle of the life-force.<sup>29</sup> The smoke of necturous wood should rise up. Conduct [the deity of the ritual] with fragrant incense. Give the first part of *phyé-mar*<sup>30</sup> and beverages [to the deity]. Offer libations of *gyu-brang bdud-rtsi*.<sup>31</sup> Reveal the proclamations<sup>32</sup> of the *gshen* practitioners of dBal-bon.<sup>33</sup> Worship Lha-chén phu-wer dkar-po.<sup>34</sup> [In this way] the *cu-thig* manifestation of primordial existence is exacted, the prophecies of the *sgra-bla* of primordial knowledge is practiced, the dreams of the primordial lords of aspiration are examined, and the revealed words of the *lha* of primordial power are observed. Divulge all the patient's history and name [to the deity]. Disclose in a straightforward manner the result of the divination. Record the defects, benefits and life-span [of the patient]. Clearly distinguish and separate the good from the bad. Disclose the truths and falsehoods as an impartial individual. Do in this way so that benefits ensue according to whatever is needed.

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\*\*\* Instead of *dgra-bla*, it is also possible that *dgra-bla* and *lha* who protect the glory (*dpal*) is intended here but this is less likely.

\*\*\*\* Much of the word *phabs* (descends) is not legible in the text.

<sup>25</sup> See pp. 390, ln. 20 to 391, ln. 11.

<sup>26</sup> *gZhi-ma*. Can also refer to a table, platform or foundation.

<sup>27</sup> Both the Zhang-zhung and Tibetan word for turquoise are used (*mtsho-ro gyü*). Lamp (*sgron-ma*) is probably a metaphor for a particularly brilliant turquoise.

<sup>28</sup> Both the Zhang-zhung and Tibetan word for arrow are used (*li-mar mda'*). *Li-mar* probably has the connotation of a very sharp arrow.

<sup>29</sup> *Srog-mkhar* (life-force castle) refers to the support of the patient's life-force during the divination ritual. It is a very stable and protected place, invulnerable to attack, so that the life-force cannot be harmed.

<sup>30</sup> Parched barley meal and butter preparation.

<sup>31</sup> Libations of consecrated beer or spirits that are sometimes mixed with herbal ingredients.

<sup>32</sup> *sMrang* are proclamations made by the officiant in order to open up communications with the deity presiding over the rite (cf. Norbu 1995: 163). The *smrang* can include the deity's theogony, origin myths, recognition of the pact between deity and officiant, and request for assistance from deity.

<sup>33</sup> A tantric tradition believed to be of Zhang-zhung origin.

<sup>34</sup> The main *sgra-bla* class deity of the *Phya-gshen* vehicle who is instrumental in divination practices. See Part Four, section ii.

*Transliteration of the gZi brjid excerpts*

(i) de'i tshe de'i dus na / rgyal bu ston pa gshen rab ni / dgung lo gcig bzhes nas / rma lo dang / g.yu lo dang / mkhar bar po so brgyad du thabs gcig tu bzhugs te / de'i tshe ri rab ri yi yang thog nas / yul phya yul snang ldan g.yu rtse ru / phya mkhar stegs pa yang thog nang nas / yab phya rje ring nas (= nam) gyi sras po / phya gshen legs rgyal thang po zhes bya ba / phya sras gyi (= kyi) khye'u brgya tham pa dang 'grog nas / mkhar bar po so brgyad du phebs so / de nas ston pa la bskor ba ni byas / lha phyag ni 'tshal / mchod pa ni phul nas / phya gshen gtsug phud kyis rin po che'i ma 'dal la / 'bru yi tshom bu bkod pa gcig phul nas / ston pa la gsol ba / ston pa'i sgron ma 'gro ba'i dpal dang mgon / rgyal bu dam pa lha mi'i mchod 'os lags / g.yung drung bon la rgya che grangs mang yang / thugs kyi dkyil nas man ngag bcud phyung la / bdag cag 'khor rnam (= rnams) kun la bstan du gsol / zhes gsol to /

(ii) de la rgyal bus zhal 'dzum par mdzad de gsungs pa / nyon cig phya gshen gtsug phud las sogs 'khor / zhus pa'i don la [de] skabs la ran te phog / g.yung drung bon la rgya che grangs mang yang / mdo ru bsdus na theg pa rim dgu 'dus / lta ba yas phub spyod pa mas yar 'dzeg / mthar ni don dam thig le gcig la bsdu / kun gzhi byang chub sems kyi klong du nges / 'on kyang sems can 'dul thabs bstan pa la / dang po phya gshen theg pa'i sgo ru 'jug / 'gro la phan bde snang srid dga' ba bskyed /

(iii) bdag kyang bon sgo rim pa 'chad tshul la / mi lo brgya lon gshen lo gcig lon nas / theg pa dang po phya gshen 'chad par byed / skyon yon pra ltas nyes legs drang shan 'byed / bden rdzun yo drang chag dang tshad la gzhal / nad gso 'chi bslu tshe g.yang dpal gsum bskyed / 'gro la phan bde'i rim pa shugs kyis 'byung / dar tsam de yang yon tan bsam las 'das / sems can dga' ba bon gyi rab ma yin / de phyir gang la gang dga'i phan thog (= thogs) bya / lus srog yin kyang de'i phyogs su gtong / rang 'dod med na 'gro don de yin mod / sems bskyed rtsa ba cha gcig de la thug / phya gshen gtsug phud thugs kyi dkyil du zhog / ces gsungs so /

(iv) de la yang gsol pa / rgyal bu ston pa lags / g.yung drung bon la rgya che grangs mang yang / mdor bsdus theg pa rim dgu gsungs pa'i / theg pa'i tha ma phya gshen bon sgo las / spyi yi sde dang sgos kyi bye brag gi / rnam grangs nges par brjod na du mchis sam

/ spyod dang 'jug pa'i mtshan nyid ji ltar lags / tha ma don dang yon tan ji ltar lags / nges par bdag la bka' zhig stsal du gsol / ces zhus so / de la ston pas bka' stsal pa / nyon cig phyas gshen gtsug phud nyon / phyas gshen theg pa'i bon sgo la / spyi ru gto spyad (= dpyad) gnyis yin te / sgos su rnam grangs bzhi ru bstan / pra ltas mo dang snang mthong rtsis / na gso gto dang 'chi bslu dpyad / rnam pa bzhi ru shes par bya /

(v) 'gro drug sems can ma rigs pas / 'khrul 'khor mun pa'i smag rum na / ma rig nad kyis gdung ba la / bzang ngan pra ltas mo yis rtags (= brtag) / legs nyes snang mthong rtsis kyis gzhal / na bar gyur na gto yis gso / 'chi bar gyur na dpyad kyis bcos / las kyis 'chad na gnyis ka sdug / kun rdzob re zhig bden pa tsam / dus la bab kyang gung gsum bde / de gyur yon tan bsam las 'das / phyas gshen gtsug phud dkyil du zhog / ces bka' stsal to /

(vi) de la yang gsol ba / rgyal bu ston pa gshen rab lags / spyi ru gto dpyad rnam grangs las / sgos su rnam grangs bzhi bzhi gsungs pas / 'gro la phan pa de ltar te / da rung cung tsam shan ma phyed / mo la rnam grangs du ru mchis / rtsis la rnam grangs du ru mchis / gto la rnam grangs du ru mchis / dpyad la rnam grangs du ru mchis / mo rtsis gto dpyad rnam pa bzhi / dang po thog mar gang gis snga / bar du gso rkyen gang gis byed / tha ma las mtha' gang gis bsdu /

(vii) de la ston pas bka' stsal pa / nyon cig legs rgyal thang po nyon / mo rtsis gto dpyad bzhi po las / spyi ru bshad dang sgos kyi bshad / spyi ru rnam grangs bstan pa dang / sgos su 'dus so 'dzin pa gnyis / thog mar spyi yi rnam grangs las / pra ltas mo yi mtshan nyid la / mo pra sum brgya drug cu mchis / snang mthong rtsis kyi mtshan nyid la / gab rtse sum brgya drug cu mchis / na gso gto yi mtshan nyid la / gto thabs sum brgya drug cu mchis / 'chi bslu dpyad kyi mtshan nyid la / dpyad thabs nyi khri gcig stong mchis / spyi ru bstan pa'i rnam grangs nges / sgos su bsdu pa'i 'dus so la / mo la rnam pa bzhi yin te / ye srid 'phrul gyi cu thig dang / ye mkhyen sgra bla'i mngon shes dang / ye rje smon pa'i rmi lam dang / ye dbang lha yi bka' bab dang / rnam pa bzhi ru shes par bya /

(viii) dang po mo pra brtag pa yang / gzhi ma ling phying dkar po la / sngon mo nas kyi sgron ma blug / mtsho ro g.yu yi sgron ma

btags / li mar mda' yi srog mkhar btsug / bdud rtsi shing gi dud  
 pa sbreng / dri zhim spos kyis gshegs shul mtshon / phye dmar 'ol  
 dkon phud kyis mchod / g.yu brang bdud rtsi skyems kyis gsol /  
 bsgrub (= sgrub) gshen dbal bon smrang gis bkrol / lha chen phu  
 wer dkar po mchod / ye srid 'phrul gyi cu thig bdar / ye mkhyen  
 sgra bla'i mngon shes bsgrub / ye rje smon pa'i rmi lam brtag /  
 ye dbang lha yi bka' bab bya / snga ltang thams cad ming nas  
 bzung / phyi ltang thams cad thig la btab / skyon yon tshe tshad  
 yi ger bris / bzang ngan legs nyes drangs (= drang) shan phyen /  
 bden rdzun srid pa'i gzu'o bya / gang la gang dgos ji bzhin du /  
 phan gdab rim pa de ltar bya /

The system of divination known as the 'Mantic Directives of the *Lha* of Primordial Power' (*ye-dbang lha yi bka' bab/babs*), which embraces the tradition of spirit-mediumship, has been commented upon by the eminent Bon scholar Lopon Tenzin Namdak.<sup>35</sup> In this context, the word *bka' babs* refers to the revelations or prophecies made by the deities. In his unpublished commentary on the *Phya-gshen* vehicle he writes that the class of deities known as *srid-pa'i sgra-bla* (*sgra-bla* of existence) appears to have been used in ancient times by the spirit-mediums.<sup>36</sup> This tradition gradually fell into obscurity and was replaced by a degenerate tradition in which demonic entities possessed spirit-mediums:<sup>37</sup>

It appears that the fourth part<sup>38</sup> concerns the various *sgra-bla* of existence. Although there may be cases of this, the authentic tradition declined as worldly *dregs-pa*,<sup>39</sup> divisions of *g.yen*,<sup>40</sup> ghosts afflicting the

<sup>35</sup> Slob-dpon bsTan 'dzin nam-dag. The chief scholar of sMan-ri monastery is now residing in the Kathmandu valley at his monastery Khri-brten nor-bu rtse.

<sup>36</sup> This commentary is entitled *Phywa gshen theg pa'i nam bshad gsal byed me long*. It was written in 'khyug (cursive script). See pp. 13, 14.

<sup>37</sup> In the 1950s, the Tibetan government and ecclesiastical establishment commonly patronized oracles who relied on the malevolent spirits of deceased individuals (*gshin 'dre* and *rgyal-po*). These ghosts seemed to have attained a religious status well beyond that enjoyed by the mountain gods. See Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1956, pp. 417–421, 432–439.

<sup>38</sup> Refers to the fourth system of divination *ye-dbang lha yi bka' bab*.

<sup>39</sup> Spirits of various kinds having an angry nature.

<sup>40</sup> Comprised of 33 types of non-human beings inhabiting the environment (*g.yen-khams sum-cu-rtsa-gsum*), which are vertically divided into the upper, intermediate and lower spheres. Included among them are the elemental spirits often cited in this work such as the *lha*, *dmu*, *gnyan*, *btsan*, *bdud*, *sman*, *klu*, *'dre*, and *srin*. See Norbu 1995, p. 252 (fn. 2).



living and dead, and their support inside the body, were used to advise on and determine future activities. Reliance on these [decadent] traditions was greatly propagated in Tibet especially by the Tibetan government, which had supreme confidence in such traditions [to discern innermost thoughts and sentiments]. However, the ancient tradition is authentic, and we cannot say that the support of the *bsen-mo*<sup>41</sup> inside the body at present is the same. The source of the authentic tradition is no longer clearly discernible [in the contemporary tradition].

The adoption of what appears to have been a degenerate tradition of spirit-mediumship, and its impact on Tibetan culture and society in the pre-Communist period, is beyond the scope of this study. However, it must be said that it appears to have had a strong social effect, contributing to strained sectarian relations and the depreciation of the native divinities. The *lha-pa* of Upper Tibet were not generally held in high esteem by the lamaist religious establishment of Tibet, due to their reliance on lower ‘worldly’ deities and their modest socioeconomic status. As we have seen, however, their practice does in fact, emulate the Bon ideal of selfless-service on which the Phya-gshen traditions are based. It should also be noted that the institution of oracles in Lhasa was, with its aristocratic patronage, prone to satisfying the whims of the rich and powerful. In contrast, in the harsh environmental and economic conditions of Upper Tibet, the spirit-mediums of today are impelled to remain truer to the altruistic ideal of the Phya-gshen, and provide for the vital needs of their community. Also, the question of legitimacy and antiquity favors the *lha-pa* of Upper Tibet over those mediums who were possessed by ghosts of the murdered and deities of foreign pedigree. There are many correspondences between the *lha-pa*’s autochthonous mountain gods and the *sgra-bla* of primordial existence on which the ancient tradition of spirit-mediumship is alleged to have depended. These functional parallels and their possible historical interconnections warrant close analysis in section iii.

*Transliteration of Phya-gshen commentary excerpt*

bzhi pa ni srid pa'i sgra bla sogs kyi skor la bsten pa yod srid kyang  
 / de 'dra'i khungs ldan gyi srol nub nas / 'jig rten gyi dregs pa  
 g.yen sde dang / shi gson 'dre rgod gang dag khog tu bsten nas /  
 ma 'ongs pa'i bya byed kyi gros thag chod pa'i blo 'gel ba 'di rnams

<sup>41</sup> A kind of female demon. Referred to here as an example of a pernicious spirit.

kyi srol bod du dar khyab che zhing / khyad par du bod gzhung  
gis kyang blo phugs gtad sa 'di lta bu'i lugs red / 'on kyang gna'  
bo'i lugs khungs yod dang / deng dus kyi bsen mo khog brten gnyis  
mtshungs zhes smra bar mi nus te / sngar lugs kyi khungs gsal bar  
ma mthong ngo /

ii) *Phu-wer*

As we have seen in the *gZi brjid*, gShen-rab states that the deity of the four systems of divination found in the *Phya-gshen* vehicle is *Phu-wer dkar-po*. *Phu-wer* appears to be the Zhang-zhung equivalent of 'Gegs-rgyal (Obstruction Conqueror). By its inclusion in gShen-rab's biography this deity enjoys very ancient legendary origins. *Phu-wer dkar-po* is closely related to the *sgra-bla* class of deities, but has an irenic, not martial character. A Bon divination text for *Phu-wer* survives in the *Mi-pham gsung 'bum* of the rNying-ma scholar Jam-mgon 'ju mi-pham rgya-mtsho (1846–1912).<sup>42</sup> This text is attributed to *Dran-pa nam-mkha'*, one of at least two personalities, who lived no later than the Eighth century.<sup>43</sup>

While it is not at all clear if *Phu-wer* was ever a deity that possessed spirit-mediums, his participation in a ritual to divine the future finds resonance in rituals that are part of the modern trance ceremony of indigenous deities. In both the ancient and modern variants of the divination ritual, use of the *mda' dar* and *me-long* are made.

<sup>42</sup> One of the most eminent figures in the non-sectarian movement. For background information see Smith 2001, pp. 230–233.

<sup>43</sup> The colophon of this text reads: “The performance of the *Phu-wer* of speech\* is easy to do and the consummation quick. I Bla-chen [dran-pa nam-mkha'], on behalf of future beings [authored] this essence of the method of performance of the *Phu-wer* sisters and brothers as a pithy explication of divination and omens [rituals]. It was given to Lha-btsan rgyal-po (a mountain deity) of mDo-gam (eastern Tibet). This text looks like a wish-fulfilling jewel. May those who have a karmic connection with it make its acquaintance” (*phu wer gsung gi sgrub pa ni / bya ba sla la dngos grub myur / bla chen bdag gis phyi rabs don du / mo spra don 'dus pa phu wer leam dral sgrub thabs yang bcud / mdo gam lha btsan rgyal po la gtad / 'di ni yid bzhin nor bu 'dra / las 'phro can dang 'phrad par shog /*). This text, *Phu wer phya gshen mo mthong gi sgrub pa* (*The Performance of the Lucid Prognostication of Phya-gshen Phu-wer*), is one section (nos. 844–847) of a chapter entitled *Srid pa 'phrul gyi ju thig gi dhyad don snang gsal sgron me bzhuks* (*The Bright Lamp of the Diagnosis of the Ju-thig of Miraculous Existence*), which is found in volume 7a of *Mi-pham's gSung 'bum* (*Collected Works*) (sDe-dge dgon-chen, vol. 16). *Mi-pham* appropriated this text in its entirety from the Bon-po without alteration.

\* Most deities have body, speech and mind performances, relating to their different functions and applications.

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## CHAPTER 3

The liturgies and oracular utterances of the spirit-mediums of Upper Tibet: An Introduction to their *bSang* Rituals

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# The Liturgies and Oracular Utterances of the Spirit-mediums of Upper Tibet — An Introduction to their *bsang* Rituals —

John Vincent Bellezza  
(Tibet Center, University of Virginia)

## Introduction

**I**n this paper, I present an introduction to the *bsang* (fumigation/incense purification) rituals of the spirit-mediums of Upper Tibet (sTod and Byang-thang).<sup>1</sup> This work, as the first in a series, introduces the liturgies and oracular utterances of the spirit-mediums, which include a wide range of ritual procedures and pronouncements. The spirit-mediums (*lha-pa/lha-mo*, *dpa'-bo/dpa'-mo*) occupy an important place in the social and religious life of Upper Tibet. It is widely held that under the possession of deities they dispense healing therapies of both a physical and psychological nature. They are also believed to protect livestock and the countryside against harm, offer sage advice, and make declarations concerning the future course of events. In my book on the cultural history of the spirit-mediums of Upper Tibet (2005), I describe the trance ceremonies in some detail but do not present their recitations and dialogues *verbatim*.<sup>2</sup> The actual words of the spirit-mediums constitute a fascinating and telling aspect of the trance proceedings from both a literary and historical perspective. These utterances are made in a variety of regional dialects (dBus, gTsang, sTod, and Hor), and in a cant peculiar to the *lha-pa* known as the 'language of the gods' (*lha-skad*).

Between 2004 and 2006, I made a series of recordings of trance ceremonies (*lha-bzhugs*) convoked by prominent spirit-mediums of the

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<sup>1</sup> The delivery of this paper at the International Association of Tibetan Studies conference in 2006 and travel to Bonn from the Indian Subcontinent was made possible through a generous grant awarded me by the Lumbini International Research Institute (Nepal), an institution dedicated to the advancement of Buddhist studies. Grants for fieldwork in Upper Tibet and the procurement of high quality portable sound recording equipment came from the Asian Cultural Council (New York), and the Donald and Shelley Rubin Foundation (New York). These fine organizations supported my research work from 2002 until 2008. In this project to record the words of the spirit-mediums, I also warmly acknowledge the assistance of the Tibetan Academy of Social Sciences and the Tibet and Himalayan Digital Library.

<sup>2</sup> A pioneering study of the activities of spirit-mediums of Upper Tibet was made by Berglie 1980; 1978; 1976. An excellent overview of Tibetan spirit-mediums is found in Diemberger 2005. I consider this work highly complementary with my treatise on the cultural history of spirit-mediums (2005), in that Diemberger treats sociological and political aspects of contemporary spirit-mediumship, whereas I do not.



region.<sup>3</sup> From the digital recordings I undertook the rigorous task of transcription and translation. Translations have been prepared for the proceedings of the trance ceremonies of ten different spirit-mediums, in part or in whole. These individuals dwell in the *'brog-pa* (herder) communities of the great Tibetan upland between gNam-ru in the east and Ru-thog in the west. The work of transcription and translation was carried out in collaboration with Yungdrung Tenzin, a Bonpo scholar of exceptional ability. In addition to well known ritual materials available in written form, highly unusual liturgical sequences are also represented in the transactions of the trance ceremony. These mostly belong to the *bsang* (fumigation) and *gser-skyems* (libations) types of ritual dispensation. The trance proceedings also reveal a scarcely known genre of 'oral literature', the purported words of the deities as spoken by their human mouthpieces. This highly colorful and evocative material includes poetic recitations about the lineages and activities of the deities, discourses on religious topics, the counseling of clients, and prophecies with wide-ranging implications.

The hallmark of the words of the spirit-mediums is its stunning diversity; it encapsulates a wide spectrum of Tibetan ritual observances. To my knowledge, no other ethnographic or literary source demonstrates such a rich and unmodified juxtaposition of ritual themes derived from disparate cultural sources. In the liturgical traditions of Tibetan texts, content is dictated by sectarian compulsions with their prescribed doctrinal conventions and stipulated modes of literary presentation. On the other hand, the oral tradition of the spirit-mediums is far more eclectic and elastic. Liturgical strands from Bon, *bon* and the various sects of Buddhism are woven into recitations without critical hesitation.<sup>4</sup> The ordering of the oral liturgies is also much more fluid as it is not tightly bound by established literary tradition. As such, native and Buddhist deities, concepts and practices are interchangeable throughout the recitations, sitting right next to each other in apparent concord. Generally speaking, this eclecticism reflects the development of Upper Tibet's religious and cultural heritage over many centuries (probably from pre-Buddhist times onwards). Ancient indigenous

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<sup>3</sup> This work was carried out on the High Tibet Welfare Expedition (2004), the Tibet Upland Expedition (2005) and the Tibet Highland Expedition (2006).

<sup>4</sup> I use *bon* written in the small case here and in other instances in this paper, to refer to the entire corpus of non-Buddhist religious traditions in Tibet. In this work, no attempt is made to differentiate ancient indigenous traditions from later folk practices, and I concede that both may be bound up in the term *bon*. On the other hand, I employ the proper name (Bon) to refer to doctrines, deities and concepts directly derived from the literature of the Eternal Bon religion, an integral institutionalized faith that emerged in the late tenth century. I make this distinction to avoid necessarily equating non-Buddhist traditions with the ecclesiastic establishment of Eternal Bon and its many Buddhist inspired foundations. I hasten to add that the Bon-po (and the Buddhists for that matter) do not normally make this distinction, seeing the two types of *bon*/Bon as largely one in the same. Surely, the historical continuity that Tibetans predicate their position on has much validity (I begin to grapple with this extremely complex subject in *Zhang Zhung: Foundations of Civilization in Upper Tibet* (2008), nevertheless, the different pedigrees of tradition that make up the religious fabric of Tibet could be overlooked if only one word was used to designate them all. Bjerken (2004: 43–48) furnishes a critical discussion about the tripartite systems of classification of Tibetan religion studied by Stein and Tucci. As Bjerken makes clear, the dividing line between Buddhism/Bon and the so-called 'popular religion', 'nameless religion', or 'folk religion' is hazy indeed. That is to say, the allotment of a particular custom, tradition or belief in one category or the other is not always possible with any degree of certitude.

traditions and the various schools of Buddhism have conspired to leave their mark on the culture of Upper Tibet in a syncretistic arrangement. This is mirrored in the uncritical and embracing fashion in which the spirit-mediums conceive of their profession. In fact, the trance ceremonies and their philosophical basis are one of the best living examples of old religious and imported Buddhist concepts and practices existing side by side in the culture of Upper Tibet.<sup>5</sup>

The main bodies of ritual tradition represented in the trance ceremonies include that found in:

- Mahayāna and Vajrayāna doctrines
- Tibetan folk culture
- gCod cult practices
- The Gling ge-sar epic
- Bon Phya-gshen traditions

The *bsang* ritual usually occurs after Buddhist refuge prayers (*skyabs-'gro*) and aspirant prayers (*smon-lam*) are said. The *bsang* is a crucial part of the pre-trance invocations, which are intended to attract the attention of the relevant deities and make them amenable to assisting the spirit-medium. It has two parts: the actual fumigation of the deities with incense (*bsangs*) and the supplications to them (*lha-gsol*). Ordinarily, a long line of divinities are beckoned and cleansed with fragrant incense. The use of incense is not merely an offering but is intended to purify the deities and restore their equilibrium. It is commonly believed that the environment-bound pantheon is of a limpid composition (*gtsang-rigs*) and is especially prone to being contaminated by anthropogenic activities of a negative character. In order to counteract the harm wrought upon the gods and to insure that the ritual venue is suitably clean, incense is burnt throughout the *bsang* ritual and for the duration of the trance ceremony.<sup>6</sup> One focus of the *bsang* ritual of the spirit-mediums is the possessing deities of the trance. Typically, many different mountain gods and lake goddesses are mentioned by name, and some description of them may also be given. In addition to divinities native to Upper Tibet, great mountain gods of other areas of Tibet may also be invoked. As part of the *bsang* the so-called higher deities of Buddhism are also entreated. These include the sky-goers (*mkha'-'gro*), mGon-po (Mahākāla) and other Buddhist and Bon protectors (Chos-skyong/Bon-skyong). The *bsang* is composed in verse but unlike some of the textual variants of the ritual, the syllabification of the lines is not strictly regimented. The tone of language and style of chanting of the spirit-mediums tend to be stately and lyrical as befits a sacred ritual.

<sup>5</sup> Diemberger's (2005: 146–148) analysis of the historical development of spirit-mediumship in both pastoral and agricultural regions of Tibet is largely in sync with what I propound here. She considers that the spirit-mediums are the embodiments of ancestral and territorial deities of pre-Buddhist origin as well as being involved in Buddhist tantric practices. She further observes that these two bodies of disparate tradition are part of a two-way assimilative process that has been informing the religious life of Tibet for centuries.

<sup>6</sup> For an authoritative introduction to the themes and applications of the *bsang* ritual, see Karmay 1998, pp. 380–412. Karmay (*ibid*: 387) stresses that the cult of indigenous deities as ancestral figures for localized populations has an integral place in the *bsang*.

**KARMA RIG 'DZIN** (born circa 1935)*i. Biographical sketch*

Karma rig-'dzin hails from Mad-pa, in Shan-rtsa county. He is a man of considerable moral authority, which is derived from the great respect 'brog-pa of the region have for him. Karma rig-'dzin is frequently sought out by fellow herders to remedy a wide range of human and veterinary ailments. Initial interviews with him were conducted in 2002 and these are described in *Calling Down the Gods* (pp. 154–169). Both his father and mother were spirit-mediums for deities indigenous to the Byang-thang. Karma rig-'dzin reports that he belongs to the Zur-bzhi lha-babs bzhi (Four God Descending Ones of the Four Corners), an illustrious lineage of *lha-pa*, which as he sees it, originated in primordial times. He is a medium for the gNyan-chen thang-lha and rTa-rgo circles of mountain gods, and for bDud-btsan dmar-po, a chief protector (*srung-ma*) of the sTag-lung bka'-brgyud subsect.<sup>7</sup>

*ii. The structure of the trance ceremony*

The trance ceremony from which a digital sound recording was made was convened by Karma rig-'dzin in sMad-pa, on May 17, 2004. Its purpose was to divine the road ahead for drivers who were accompanying part of the High Tibet Welfare Expedition. The presiding deity was the sTag-lung protector bDud-btsan dmar-po. The resulting transcription was checked with the *lha-pa* on April 27, 2006. Only the pre-trance portion of the proceedings could be reviewed by Karma rig-'dzin, as he has no recollection of what transpires after the 'descent of the gods'. The liturgical and oracular sequences of the trance ceremony were structured as follows:

1. Fumigation of the deities ritual (*bsang/lha-gsol*) (transpired between zero seconds, zero minutes and 12 minutes, 23 seconds of the trance ceremony = 00:00 to 12:23). This is a rather deliberate and cadenced portion of the ceremony with the somewhat subdued playing of the drum (*rnga*) and flat bell (*gshang*).
2. Libations offering ritual (*gser-skyems*) (12:24 to 17:31). This is a faster paced ritual but one in which the enunciation of the words is still relatively clear.
3. A discourse about Karma rig-'dzin's *lha-pa* lineage (18:06 to 20:00). This is primarily made to educate those in attendance about his trance practices.
4. A discourse about sundry historical and contemporary topics (20:01 to 28:00).
5. Prayers directed to specific deities (*gsol-ba 'debs*), refuge prayers (*skyabs*) and dedicatory prayers (*smon-lam*) (28:00 to 30:58). This portion of the

<sup>7</sup> Part of a triad of special protectors of the sTag-lung-pa, which also includes g.Ya'-dmar and dGe-bsnyen. For an account of their history, see Bellezza 2005, pp. 56–63.

ceremony consists of slow, distinct enunciations without musical instruments.

6. Invitation of the deities (*lha spyan-'dren*) to the ritual venue and body of the *lha-pa* (30:58 to 36:50). This segment begins slowly and methodically but gradually the tempo increases. It features just the drum.

7. Proclamation of the lineage of the deities (*lha-rgyud smos-pa*) (36:51 to 57:42). This sequence marks the beginning of possession by the deities of the trance. It consists of a long litany of names and descriptions of indigenous deities in verse. This is a musical segment with a euphony characteristic of many Upper Tibetan spirit-mediums. The canticle divulges the iconography of numerous divine figures in a lilting but dignified fashion. Just the drum is sounded in this interval.

8. The petitioning of the deities of the trance (*bka'-lung*) in which clients ask their questions to the *lha-pa* and he responds to their requests (57:43 to 1-03:16). More lore about the gods is also pronounced. In this conversational segment, the voice of Karma rig-'dzin has the same qualities it had during the pre-trance discourses. His possessing deity, sTag-lung bdud-btsan dmar-po, likes to speak to clients in the dialect of dBus, revealing his Central Tibetan origins.

9. Formulating the prophecy (*lung-bstan brtag-pa*) (1-03:17 to 1-05:47). This portion of the trance ceremony is highly lyrical and features the playing of the drum.

10. The oracular utterances (*lung-bstan*) and advice (*zhal-gdams*) of the *lha-pa* (1-05:49 to 1-10:14 approximately). This segment consists of a disquisition in which the fate of the client is pronounced and religious advice given, as well as a diatribe against the excesses of the old Tibet government.

11. The return of the deities to their abodes (*gshegs-bskyod*). The trance proceedings terminate with praises to the deities as they retreat from the *lha-pa's* body and ritual venue (this part of the ceremony was not recorded).

### iii. The *bsang*

Here for inspection, I present all of Karma rig-'dzin's *bsang* ritual. Normally, most trance ceremonies are prefaced with Buddhist prayers in which refuge is taken and the protection of the Buddhist divinities sought. In this ceremony however, the introductory prayers were dispensed with because Karma rig-'dzin had already made his daily religious observances. As I have commented (2005: 14), it is likely that before the Buddhacization of Upper Tibet, spirit-mediums relied solely on native deities such as those that dominate this *bsang*.<sup>8</sup> In any case, as we shall see, its liturgical structure has many *bon* or non-Buddhist characteristics. A cross-section of male and

<sup>8</sup> In Zhang Zhung (2008), I examine textual passages that specify the role of elemental spirits in the archaic funerary rites, which were designed to convey the consciousness principles of the deceased to the ancestral afterlife.

female deities inhabiting a large swathe of territory between gNam-mtsho and Dang-ra g.yu-mtsho are invoked during Karma rig-'dzin's fumigation ritual, reinforcing its regional orientation. Many lines in the *bsang* end in the verb *bsang* [*ba*] (I/we fumigate).<sup>9</sup>

The *bsang* of Karma rig-'dzin begins with the *lha* and *klu* of the dichotomous universe (composed of heaven and earth) (ln. 1). This heralding of the deities of the upper (*yar*) and lower (*yog*) realms is one of many *bon* features in this *bsang*. It is made clear that this ritual is also a *khrus* (ablutions) type, which is carried out by the sprinkling of water during the recitations (ln. 2). The first gods mentioned by name are atmospherical in quality and represent personal tutelary deities of Karma rig-'dzin in his role as a spirit-medium (lns. 4, 5). This is immediately followed by the invocation of the *mkha'-'gro*, those sky-treading benefactresses that occupy a fundamental place in the pantheon of Buddhism (ln. 6). The non-Buddhist character of the *bsang* reasserts itself with the *dgra-lha*/*sgra-bla* and *wer-ma* (a closely related class of martial spirits) (lns. 7–9). According to the Bon religion, the *sgra-bla* formed the mainstay of the pre-Buddhist tradition of spirit-mediumship. Known as *lha yi bka'-bab* (the commands of deities), this oracular system is found as part of *Phya-gshen theg-pa*, or the first vehicle of Bon teachings. To this day, the *dgra-lha* command a key position in the various curative and protective rites of the trance ceremonies of Upper Tibet. Another mainstay of the native Tibetan tradition is the words *ki* and *bswo*/*bsu*, which are commonly used in the *bsang* and *lha-gsol* rituals to awaken, invoke and praise the deities (lns. 11–17). Essentially, these words are employed to call to action the deities of the trance ceremony:

ln. 1: You are the *lha* and *klu* doctrine protectors (*bstan-srung*) of the four directions of dBus and gTsang in the center (*bar dbus gtsang rubzhi/ lha klu bstan-srung khyed rnams* /).

ln. 2: I invite you to come to this incense (*bsang*) and ablutions (*khrus*) [ritual] (*bsang dang khrus la spyan-'dren gshegs su gsol* /).

ln. 3: *Om A hum*.

ln. 4: I fumigate (*bsang*) gNam-bdag sgo-lha khyung-rdzong (Sky Master Portal Lha Horned Eagle Fortress) (*gnam-bdag sgo-lha khyung-rdzong bsang* /).

ln. 5: I fumigate rNam-sras thog-lha me-'bar.<sup>10</sup>

ln. 6: I fumigate all the sky-goers of formless emptiness (*ma-lus stong-nyid mkha'-'gro bsang* /).

ln. 7: I fumigate the three hundred and sixty *wer-ma*.

ln. 8: I fumigate the *dgra-lha* of the eye beholders (*lta-ba mig gi dgra-lha bsang* /).

ln. 9: I fumigate the *dgra-lha* of the ear listeners (*nyan-pa rna-ba'i dgra-lha bsang* /).

ln. 10: *Om A hum* (repeated many times). <The drumming begins>

ln. 11: I call the *lha* saying *ki ki* (*lha ki ki zer kyin 'bod-pa yin* /).

ln. 12: I invoke you saying *bswo bswo* (*bswo bswo zer kyin bswo ba yin* /).

<sup>9</sup> Karmay renders *bsang-ba* as 'let us purify' or 'it must be purified' (1998: 382). I have elected to use a more direct and simple phrasing in my translation, which is reflective of the candid spirit of the rituals conducted by the spirit-mediums.

<sup>10</sup> This deity appears to be a composite form combining the wealth god rNam-thos-sras with a celestial figure Thog-lha me-'bar (Blazing Thunder God).

ln. 13: *Ki* and *bswo* are the {invitation} [words] of the *lha* (*ki bswo lha yi spyan* {*drangs so*} /<sup>11</sup>).

ln. 14: *Yā* (Ah yes), I call the *lha* saying *ki ki* (*yā lha ki ki zer kyin 'bod-pa yin /*).

ln. 15: I invoke you saying *bswo bswo*.

ln. 16: *Ki* and *bswo* are the callers of the *lha* (*ki bswo lha yi 'bod-pa yin /*).

ln. 17: *Ki ki ki la bswo bswo bswo!*

ln. 18: *Hum hum ma ra yo phat!*<sup>12</sup>

<The *lha-pa* blows his copper horn (*zangs-gling*) several times and begins to play his *gshang*>

A number of important gods are invoked next in the *bsang*, including the chiefs of the *lha*, *gnyan* and *klu*, the spirits of the three planes of existence (*srid-pa gsum*) (lns. 19–21). Although well known Buddhist gods are represented here, the tripartite cosmos (*steng*, *bar*, *'og*) alluded to is yet another *bon* motif of Karma rig-'dzin's *bsang*. The Tibetan astrological gods are also singled out for special mention: the *lha* of the twelve *lo-skor* (duodecimal calendrical system), the *lha* of the nine *sme-ba* (basic constructs of existence), and the *lha* of the eight *spar-kha* (astrological trigrams) (lns. 24–26). After some repetition in the names of deities mentioned, there is a litany of Buddhist protectors (lns. 34–41). The identity of the last god/gods in this interval, Mi-mgon lcam-dral mchor-po, is not clear. The goddess of gNam-mtsho, gNam-mtsho phyug-mo, is invoked next in the liturgy (ln. 43). According to Karma rig-'dzin, this is ordinarily followed in his *bsang* by an enumeration of the goddess auxiliaries of the four cardinal directions of gNam-mtsho. He calls these subsidiary figures *gter-bdag* (treasure mistresses). They include: east – Klu-mo dung-khrab dkar-mo (residence: gNam-mtsho do?), south – Me-tog g.yang-mdzes phyug-mo (residence: mGar lha-mo gdong?), west – Sa-klu dung-skyong dkar-mo (residence: Ti-rang smug-po do?), and north – Klu-mo gser-khrab ser-mo (residence: Sems-mtsho).<sup>13</sup> In this particular ritual, however, the quartet of subsidiary gNam-mtsho goddesses was omitted. Finally, in this sequence all the invoked deities are invited to the ritual venue in order to win their favor:

<sup>11</sup> Brackets designate uncertain readings of the *lha-pa*'s utterances.

<sup>12</sup> This mantra is usually said for dispatching deities. It does not seem particularly appropriate this early in the *bsang* ritual. One might view this as an example of how the largely illiterate spirit-medium community of Upper Tibet is not especially versed in liturgical traditions, but this is actually not the case here. The spirit-mediums sometimes purposely dispense with liturgical conventions that other types of ritualists (monks, *sngags-pa*, etc.) feel compelled to follow. For his peers, the early use of this mantra is a demonstration of the great power that spirit-mediums such as Karma rig-'dzin are reputed to have, for he is invested with the capability to summon the gods with only a minimum of formalities.

<sup>13</sup> There is also a rNying-ma tradition of four goddesses of the cardinal directions. These divinities dwell around the four bathing heads (*khrus kyi sgo-mo bzhi*) of gNam-mtsho and are conceived of along the lines of the *'phrin-las bzhi* tantric scheme of worship and ritual dispensation (pacific, expanding, empowering and wrathful modes). See Bellezza 1997, pp. 103, 104. This textual tradition may possibly represent the Buddhist adoption of gNam-mtsho's four *klu-mo* acolytes. In any case, as their names indicate, two of Karma rig-'dzin's *klu-mo* don armor made of gold and conch. According to Bon ritual tradition, it was customary for Zhang-zhung goddesses to be clad in such a fashion. For example, four lake goddesses of far western Tibet are described with armor and helmets in the *Zhang chung me ri'i sgrub skor* (Bellezza 2008: 329–331).

- ln. 19: I fumigate the {defending} Lha-chen tshangs-pa dkar-po (Brahma) (*{skyongs} lha-chen tshangs-pa dkar-po bsang /*).
- ln. 20: I fumigate the great *gnyan* sKu-lha ger-mdzod.
- ln. 21: I fumigate the great *klu* gTsug-na rin-chen.
- ln. 22: I fumigate the *sa-bdag* and twelve *brtan-ma*.<sup>14</sup>
- ln. 23: I fumigate the earth-holder Lag-pa chen-mo.
- ln. 24: I fumigate the *lha* of the twelve *lo-skor*.
- ln. 25: I fumigate the *lha* of the nine *sme-ba*.
- ln. 26: I fumigate the *lha* of the eight *spar-kha*.
- ln. 27: I fumigate gNam-bdag sgo-lha khyung-rdzong.
- ln. 28: I fumigate rNam-sras thog-lha me-'bar.
- ln. 29: I fumigate all the sky-goers.
- ln. 30: I fumigate the 360 *wer-ma*.
- ln. 31: I fumigate the *dgra-lha* of the eye beholders.
- ln. 32: I fumigate the *dgra-lha* of the ear listeners.
- ln. 33: I invite you here to this place of repose (*'dir bzhugs gnas la spyan-'dren no /*).
- ln. 34: I fumigate Lha-btsan rdo-rje 'bar-ba (Blazing Adamantine Lha-btsan).
- ln. 35: I fumigate bTsan-rgod jag-pa me-len (Wild bTsan Plunderer Fire Bearer).<sup>15</sup>
- lns. 36-37: I fumigate mGon-po chos-skyong ber-nag (Black Tent mGon-po Buddhist Defender).<sup>16</sup>
- ln. 38: I fumigate all the black (*rog-po*) mGon-po chos-skyong (mGon-po Buddhist defenders).
- ln. 39: I fumigate the Buddhist defender Bya-rog gdong-can (Black Bird-Headed One).<sup>17</sup>
- ln. 40: I fumigate Phyag-drug gser-khrab (Six Armed Golden Cuirass).
- ln. 41: I fumigate Mi-mgon lcam-dral mchor-po (Defender of Humans Bothers and Sisters of Riches).
- ln. 42: I invite you here to this place of repose.
- ln. 43: I fumigate the mother gNam-mtsho phyug-mo.
- ln. 44: I fumigate the owners of treasures of good fortune outcome (*las 'phro gter gyi bdag-po bsang /*).
- ln. 45: I invite you here to this place of repose.

The goddesses of the four cardinal directions around the rTa-rgo/rTa-sgo range are accorded more detailed treatment in the *bsang* (lns. 46–59). Despite being a devout Buddhist, Karma rig-'dzin admits that the rTa-rgo divinities could not be effectively brought into the Buddhist fold and retain a fundamental Bon/*bon* identity (Bellezza 2005: 157, 158). Only two of the directional goddesses are mentioned by name but all four belong to the *klu-mo* class. They are benevolent figures responsible for the protection of the

<sup>14</sup> The brTan-ma/bsTan-ma bcu-gnyis are examined in Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1956, pp. 181–198.

<sup>15</sup> A *btsan* especially popular among the 'Brug-pa bka'-brgyud, which is also a common protective figure in the monasteries of other Buddhist sects in Upper Tibet and among the spirit-mediums.

<sup>16</sup> This appears to be a native protector of the black yak hair tent (*sbra-nag*) of the 'brog-pa who came to be assimilated to Mahākāla.

<sup>17</sup> The personal guardian of the founder of the Bhutanese state, Ngag-dbang bstan-'dzin rnam-rgyal (Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1956: 241).

local 'brog-pa and their social and economic interests.<sup>18</sup> As is often found in the *lha-gsol* and *bskang-ba* (appeasement and expiation rituals) and in the utterances of the bards (*sgrung-mkhan*), Karma rig-'dzin uses trisyllabic indicators (*sha ra ra*, *spungs se spung* and *brengs se breng*) to vividly describe the goddesses of rTa-rgo, a native poetical device:

ln. 46: I fumigate the mistress of the east side of rTa-rgo, Klu-mo dung-skyong dkar-mo (*rta rgo shar gyi bdag po (= mo) la / klu-mo dung-skyong dkar-mo bsang /*).

ln. 47: She rides on a white lioness mount (*chibs su seng-ge dkar-mo bcibs /*).

ln. 48: I fumigate the mistress on the south side of rTa-rgo, the protectress of every human generation (*rta-rgo lho yi bdag-po (= mo) la / mi-rabs yongs kyi srung-ma bsang /*).

ln. 49: She rides on a striped tigress mount (*chibs su stag-mo ris-bkra bcibs /*).

ln. 50: She has yellow golden armor *spungs se spung* (conveys that the armor is piled high).

ln. 51: I fumigate the mistress on the west side of rTa-rgo, Dung-skyong dkar-mo of the earth *klu*.

ln. 52: She rides on a yellow orange (*ngang-ma*) female hybrid yak (*chibs su mdzo-mo ngang-ma bcibs /*).

ln. 53: She has a draped arrow in her right [hand] and a jewel in the left (*mda'-dar g.yas dang rin-chen g.yon /*).

ln. 54: Her tray of jewels (*rin-chen nor gzhong*) *spungs se spung* (conveys that the jewels are heaped high).

ln. 55: I fumigate the mistress of the north side of rTa-rgo, the protectress of humans, wealth and life, these three (*rta-rgo byang gi bdag-po (= mo) la / mi nor tshe gsum, srung-ma bsang /*).

ln. 56: She has a golden helmet on her head *brengs se breng* (conveys that the helmet is quivering).

ln. 57: She rides on a spirited big mule mount (*chibs su rgya drel rol-mo bcibs /*).

ln. 58: The big mule trots in a fine manner *sha ra ra* (conveys the unstoppable quality of the trotting) (*rgya drel 'gying 'gros sha ra ra /*).<sup>19</sup>

ln. 59: It has the five types of jewels (*rin-chen sna-lnga*)<sup>20</sup> *spungs se spung* (conveys that there are great heaps of them).<sup>21</sup>

In the next sequence of the *bsang*, a litany of goddesses who dwell in the g.Yag-pa and Nag-tshang regions is enumerated. All of these figures in one form or another are *klu-mo* who reside in the great lakes and mountains of the Byang-thang. Nevertheless, their residences are not all identifiable by Karma rig-'dzin. rGyal-gangs lha-mo is the goddess of the highest mountain

<sup>18</sup> The *bsang* ritual of the *lha-bon* priests of Dzar (in Glo) also petitions four local divine benefactresses; these are collectively known as *mo-rgyud* ([divine] female lineage). The *bsang* recitations of the *lha-bon*, as part of the *ka-lag bi-pa* ceremony, are studied in Ramble 1998, pp. 129–132.

<sup>19</sup> 'Gying denotes a fine and imposing or majestic bearing.

<sup>20</sup> Gold (*gser*), silver (*dngul*), turquoise (*g.yu*) coral (*byu-ru*), and pearl (*mu-tig*), with some substitutions permitted.

<sup>21</sup> This line either refers to the Goddess herself or to her mule mount.



(6444 m) in the meridian range just west of Shan-rtsa, but even she has a *klu-mo* persona (ln. 64).<sup>22</sup> Mu-tig dar-la g.yu-mtsho resides in the eponymous lake of Ba-tsha, in g.Yag-pa (ln. 63); sKe-rengs/sKe-ring 'bum-mtsho phyug-mo is the goddess of sKe-ring mtsho, in Shan-rtsa (ln. 65); and Ngang-bzang klu-bkra mchor-mo is the goddess of Mu-skyu mtsho, in sMad-pa (ln. 66). The prominent position of the *klu-mo* in the *bsang* reflects the potent role they have in the religious life of the Byang-thang. As archetypal divine females (*mo-lha*), the *klu-mo* goddesses are the epitome of fertility, nurture of the young, and insurance of healthy crops and flocks. Accordingly, they have a critical function in the curative and apotropaic rites of the *lha-pa*:

ln. 60: I fumigate Klu-mo dung-seng dkar-mo (White Conch Lion Female Klu).

ln. 61: I fumigate Klu-mo cang-seng g.yang-lha.

ln. 62: I fumigate the *dgra-lha* of the thousand (innumerable) human generations (*mi-rabs stong dgra-lha bsang l*).

ln. 63: I fumigate Mu-tig dar-la g.yu-mtsho.

ln. 64: I fumigate rGyal-gangs lha-mo drel-bzhon (Mountain Queen Goddess Rider of the Mule).

ln. 65: I fumigate sKe-ring 'bum-mtsho phyug-mo.

ln. 66: I fumigate Ngang-bzang klu-bkra mchor-mo (Good Goose Bright Klu of Riches).

ln. 67: I fumigate the *dgra-lha* of the thousand human generations.

The consequent figures to undergo purification with incense are the gods of rTa-rgo (thought to mean 'snow mountain' in the language of Zhang-zhung), a group known as rTa-rgo mched-bdun rol-brgyad (lns. 68–76). The names of the individual members in Karma rig-'dzin's *bsang* differ significantly from those found in the relevant *gsol-kha* literature, a sign of the inherent fluidity of the oral tradition.<sup>23</sup> The gods of the rTa-rgo range are important possessing figures of spirit-mediums in much of the Tibetan cultural world, a legacy perhaps of the prominence they are supposed to have enjoyed in ancient times. According to Bon tradition, rTa-rgo was the soul rock formation (*bla-brag*) of the Zhang-zhung kingdom. In any event, this region is very rich in pre-Buddhist (archaic cultural horizon) monumental ruins. The most valuable figure in the rTa-rgo brotherhood for Karma rig-'dzin and other spirit-mediums is Ngo-dmar lha-btsan (a chief possessing deity), and this is reflected in his mention twice in the *bsang*. The god sGo-bdag (Master of the Portal) (ln. 77) and the three 'Om-thang deities (lns. 80, 82, 86) are well known members of the rTa-rgo group and occupy

<sup>22</sup> According to the manuscript *gNyan chen g.ya' spang pa'i mchod sprin nam mkha' 'brug sgra* (*Voice of the Dragon of Space: Cloud Offerings to the Great gNyan of the Slate [Mountain] and Meadow*), compiled at rTa-nag thub-bstan (a Sa-skya monastery in bZhad-mthong-smon) by the abbot Ngag-dbang bstan-pa'i rdo-rje (folio 4a, 4b): "The mistress wife and noble woman of the only man gNyan-chen g.ya'-spang (a mountain god of Shan-rtsa) is Shel-tsha gangs kyi rgyal-mo (rGyal-gangs lha-mo), the white woman of conch with a marvelous turquoise visage. You are the attractive woman at the margin of the slates and meadow. In your hand you hold a *ga'u* (a container for sacred substances) of crystal. You ride on a white lion mount. You are surrounded by a circle of one hundred thousand *gangs-sman*. Your secret name is Gangs-klu sman-cig ma (Only sMan Mountain Klu Woman)"

<sup>23</sup> For these standard lists of the rTa-rgo mched-bdun rol-brgyad, see Bellezza 1997; 2005.

prominent landforms in the vicinity.<sup>24</sup> Nag-mer gser-mtsho phyug-mo is the protectress of a small holy lake situated high up on the flanks of Ngo-dmar lha-btsan (ln. 78). This pilgrimage lake is popularly conceived as being the right eye of the goddess Dang-ra g.yu-mtsho.<sup>25</sup> Shod-tram phug, a vital location for the initiation of spirit-mediums, is also located on the flanks of Ngo-dmar lha-btsan (ln. 79).<sup>26</sup> According to Karma rig-'dzin, the *btsan* yaks noted in the ritual are the *nor-bdag* of rTa-rgo, the divine protectors of yaks and other livestock (ln. 81). Another livestock god noted is the *lha-lug* or 'divine sheep', the protector of sheep and ally of spirit-mediums (ln. 87). The rTa-rgo gods are described in colorful language characteristic of *bon* liturgical traditions (lns. 83, 84, 87, 88), a form of verse that has spread to Buddhist texts and especially those of the Bon religion:

ln. 68: I fumigate Byang-btsan rta-rgo dkar-po (White Snow Mountain Northern bTsan).

ln. 69: I fumigate rTa-rgo dge-rgan rogs-cig (Only Friend Venerable Old Snow Mountain).

ln. 70: I fumigate Yon-tan chos-rgyal 'bum-me (Dharma King of Excellence One Hundred Thousand Fires).

ln. 71: I fumigate rTa-rgo Gangs-bzang lha-btsan (Snow Mountain Good Mountain Lha-btsan).

ln. 72: I fumigate rTa-rgo gangs-thig btsan-dmar (Snow Mountain Snow Spots Red bTsan).

ln. 73: I fumigate rBa-rong lha-btsan smug-po.

ln. 74: I fumigate rTa-rgo lcags-nag dgu-khri.

lns 75, 76: I fumigate rTa-rgo ngo-dmar lha-btsan (Snow Mountain Red-Faced Lha-btsan).

ln. 77: I fumigate sGo-bdag lha-btsan spun-bdun (Master of the Portal Seven Lha-btsan Brothers).

ln. 78: I fumigate Nag-mer gser-mtsho phyug-mo (Overflowing Blackness Golden Lake of Riches).

ln. 79: I fumigate rTa-rgo shod-tram phug-pa.

ln. 80: I fumigate rTa-rgo 'om-thang gong-ma.

ln. 81: The thunderous grunts (*ngar-skad*) of the *btsan* yaks *di ri ri* (conveys a thunderous sound).

ln. 82: I fumigate rTa-rgo 'om-thang bar-pa.

ln. 83: The sound of the *btsan* army *di ri ri* (*btsan-dmag skad-sgra di ri ri* /).

ln. 84: Their arrow, spear, the bow and arrow and sword *shigs se shig* (conveys a quaking motion) (*mda' mdung 'khor-gsum shigs se shig* /).

ln. 85: I invite you here to this place of repose.

ln. 86: I fumigate rTa-rgo 'om-thang 'og-ma.

ln. 87: The bleating (*'ba'-sgra*) of the *lha-lug di ri ri* (conveys a very sharp sound).

ln. 88: The whistles (*bshug*) of the *btsan* men *kyu ru ru* (conveys a whistling sound).

ln. 89: Please come to this place of repose.

<sup>24</sup> The shrine of sGo-bdag on the rTa-rgo 'phrang and that of 'Om-rong ('Om-thang) are described in Bellezza 1997, pp. 315, 327 (n. 43), 398.

<sup>25</sup> For lore about this holy lake, see Bellezza 1997, p. 404.

<sup>26</sup> Information on this cult cave is found in Bellezza 1997, p. 403; 2005, pp. 70, 71, 156–158.

ln. 90: Please come, we invite you for *tshogs* (ritual cakes) (*tshogs la spyan-'dren gshegs su gsol /*).

The next interval of Karma rig-'dzin's *bsang* is devoted to the Mount Ti-se (Gangs rin-po-che) region, many of the places and deities of which are well known (lns. 91–100). Some of the great pilgrimage centers located around Ti-se are mentioned by name in this litany (lns. 91, 95, 96, 98). The sky-treading goddess of rGyang-grags monastery on the inner circuit of Ti-se is a substantial cult figure for many of Upper Tibet's spirit-mediums (ln. 94). She appears to be a native protectress of the locale that was subsequently brought into the Buddhist pantheon. The goddess rJe-btsun grol-ma dkar-sngon is said to be the guardian goddess of sGrol-ma la, the famous pass straddling the high point of the Ti-se pilgrim's circuit (ln. 97). dMag-zor rgyal-mo/dPal-ldan lha-mo is Tibetan Buddhism's most important protectress, a key defender of the trance ceremony:

- ln. 91: I fumigate the great lake Ma-pham g.yu-mtsho.
- ln. 92: I fumigate the great *klu* gTsug-na rin-chen.
- ln. 93: I fumigate Lha-dbang rdo-rje g.yu-sgron (Adamantine Power Lha Turquoise Lamp).
- ln. 94: I fumigate rGyang-grags mkha'-'gro dkar-mo.
- ln. 95: I fumigate the great holy place (*gnas-chen*) sPre-ta pu-ri.
- ln. 96: I fumigate the great holy place Gangs-dkar ti-se.
- ln. 97: I fumigate rJe-btsun sgrol-ma dkar-sngon (White and Blue Noble Queen Savioress).
- ln. 98: I fumigate the cemetery (*dur-khrod*) bSil-ba tshal.<sup>27</sup>
- ln. 99: I fumigate the mistress of the cemetery dMag-zor rgyal-mo.
- ln. 100: I invite you to this place of repose.

The following sequence is mostly dedicated to the *dgra-lha*, the warrior spirits of Tibet (lns. 101–129). Several celebrated *btsan* of Upper Tibet are also offered purification in this interval (lns. 101, 102, 104). The *dregs-pa* are likewise heeded (a large class of minor deities of diverse origins) (ln. 111), as well as Kha-'dzin and sKyes-bu chen-po, appellations for any manner of indigenous gods (lns. 108, 109). The *dgra-lha* act as personal protectors and patrons, achieving their ends through aggressive actions and militaristic means. This extremely popular class of gods has been amalgamated to Buddhist doctrines and notions of piety, but here in the *bsang* of Karma rig-'dzin they retain their indigenous character as mercenary spirits. The *dgra-lha* are unabashedly beseeched to provide for the needs of their supplicants and to destroy enemies. As noted, according to the Bon tradition, the *dgra-lha* (*sgra-bla*) were the original objects of possession for Tibetan spirit-mediums.<sup>28</sup> The conspicuous place of these deities in Karma rig-'dzin's *bsang* ritual lends credence to this assertion, as does the central placement of the *dgra-lha* in many of the curative, apotropaic and fortune-bestowing rites of various trance ceremonies:

<sup>27</sup> Originally a great charnel ground in India. The Ti-se counterpart is located above 'Bri-ra phug monastery on the trail leading to the sGrol-ma la.

<sup>28</sup> The tradition of Bon *sgra-bla* in spirit-mediumship is comprehensively examined in Bellezza 2005.

- In. 101: I fumigate bTsan-rgod rol-pa skya-bdun.<sup>29</sup>  
 In. 102: I fumigate the great bTsan 'bar-ba spun-bdun.  
 In. 103: I fumigate gNyan-stag dmar-po of the *dgra-lha*.  
 In. 104: I fumigate Zangs-ri 'bar-ba btsan-rgod.  
 In. 105: I fumigate the *dgra-lha* of the father (*pha*) and paternal uncle (*A-khu*).  
 In. 106: I fumigate the *lha* of the mother (*ma*), maternal aunt (*sru-mo*) and maternal uncle (*zhang*).  
 In. 107: I fumigate the four brothers of the long-life lineage (*tshe-rabs*).  
 In. 108: I fumigate Kha-'dzin (Great Advisor) and your circle.  
 In. 109: I fumigate sKyes-bu chen-po (Great Holy Man) and your circle.  
 In. 110: I fumigate Ye-shes chen-mo (Great Wisdom Mother) and your circle.  
 In. 111: I fumigate the *dregs-pa* (haughty ones) and your circle.  
 In. 112: I invite you here to this place of repose.  
 In. 113: I fumigate dGra-lha me-stag dmar-po (Red dGra-lha Sparks).  
 In. 114: I fumigate Mi-bdun rta-bdun (Seven Men Seven Horses).  
 In. 115: I fumigate the *dgra-lha* of the swift ones (*myur-mgyogs-can*).  
 In. 116: I fumigate the *dgra-lha* of abiding virility and bravery (*dpa' rgod 'dzoms-pa*).  
 In. 117: I fumigate the *dgra-lha* of indomitable bravery (*dpa'-snying che-ba*).  
 In. 118: I fumigate the *dgra-lha* of abiding swift power (*mthu-myur 'dzoms-pa*).  
 In. 119: I fumigate the *dgra-lha* of the cutter of the life-force of the enemy (*dgra-srog gcod-pa*).  
 In. 120: I fumigate the *dgra-lha* that plunders the enemy's wealth (*dgra-nor 'dzoms-pa*).  
 In. 121: You *dgra-lha* and your circles please come here (*dgra-lha 'khor-bcas gshegs su gsol /*).  
 In. 122: I fumigate the great army (*dmag-dpung chen-mo*) of *dgra-lha*.  
 In. 123: You are mounted on an onager with a white muzzle (*chibs su kha-dkar rkyang-bo bcibs /*).  
 In. 124: Always be our advisor and befriend us (*kha-'dzin yun du 'grog-par gyis /*).  
 In. 125: { / / }<sup>30</sup> *thibs se thib* (conveys a convergence of great numbers of spirits).  
 In. 126: Surrounded by a circle of one hundred thousand *dgra-lha* (*'khor-yang dgra-lha 'bum gyis bskor /*).  
 In. 127: I fumigate the 920,000 *dgra-lha*.  
 In. 128: I fumigate 990,000 *dgra-lha*.  
 In. 129: I invite you here to this place of repose.

The next portion of the *bsang* contains a welter of divinities in which little attempt is made to separate one type from another (Ins. 130–155). It begins with the *btsan* of Bar-tha, Go-ra, gNam-ru, and another named *btsan* (Ins. 130–132), as well as the *ma-sangs* (ancestral spirits) and *wer-ma* (warrior

<sup>29</sup> A study of this *btsan* brotherhood popular in Upper Tibet is made in Bellezza 2005.

<sup>30</sup> This pair of slashes enclosed in brackets designates that one or more words in a line are inaudible.

spirits) (lns. 131, 133). The *dgra-lha* are described using quaint similes of the Upper Tibetan oral tradition (lns. 134–137). In the midst of these diverse gods dPal-ldan lha-mo is invoked (ln. 139). In the Buddhist tradition, she is often viewed as the chief (*gtso-mo*) of these kinds of local and elemental spirits but in the *bsang* of Karma rig-'dzin she has an intimate place among them rather than being singled out for special treatment. Among more mountain gods and elemental spirits, the *dgra-lha* are again cited (ln. 149, 150). In the purification of the great mountain god of southern Tibet Yar-lha sham-po (ln. 152) and 'Od-lde spu-rgyal (ln. 153), an ancestral king, the caesura *ni* is added to the lines for greater emphasis. This grammatical structure is likewise encountered in the Dunhuang manuscripts and ancient *gsol-kha* literature:

- ln. 130: I fumigate Nam-ra and bTsan-rgod go-ra.
- ln. 131: I fumigate the *ma-sangs*, rKyang-khra and others.
- ln. 132: I fumigate Zog gi bdud-btsan smug-po.
- ln. 133: I fumigate the three hundred and sixty *wer-ma*.
- ln. 134: I fumigate the *dgra-lha* who are like a herd of congregating yaks (*dgra-lha 'brong khyu rub 'dra bsang /*).
- ln. 135: I fumigate the wielders of swords (*gri bzung*) who are like a herd of congregating yaks.
- ln. 136: I fumigate the spear holders (*mdung bzung*) who are like a mob.
- ln. 137: I fumigate the bow holders (*gzhu bzung*) who are like a congregating herd of onagers.
- ln. 138: I fumigate the red butcher of bSam-yas (a *btsan* deity).
- ln. 139: I fumigate dPal-ldan dmag-zor rgyal-mo.
- ln. 140: I fumigate 'Brong-dur rog-po of bSam-yas (a wild yak god).
- ln. 141: I fumigate A-myes rma-chen spom-ra (the great mountain god of A-mdo).
- ln. 142: I fumigate the three hundred and sixty orders of *rma*.
- ln. 143: I fumigate the excellent southern world (*lho yi 'dzam-bu-gling mchog*).
- ln. 144: I fumigate the three hundred and sixty circles of *klu*.
- ln. 145: I fumigate gNyan-chen thang-lha of the west.
- ln. 146: I fumigate the 360 circles of the *gnyan*.
- ln. 147: I fumigate Lha-mtsho spos-gnas of the north.
- ln. 148: I fumigate the three hundred and sixty circles of *btsan*.
- ln. 149: I fumigate all the mighty *dgra-lha*,
- ln. 150: Roving in all directions, east, south, west, and north (*shar lho nub byang kun 'grogs-pa'i / dgra-lha gnyan-po thams-cad bsang /*).
- ln. 151: I fumigate the *rma* fraternal lineage (*rabs-mched*) and the brothers and sisters (*lcam dral*).
- ln. 152: I fumigate that Yar-lha, yes, sham-po (*yar-lha de ni sham-po bsang /*).
- ln. 153: I fumigate that 'Od-de, yes, spu-rgyal.
- ln. 154: I fumigate gNyan-po sku-lha ger-mdzod.
- ln. 155: I invite you here to this place of repose.

The next sequence of the *bsang* is dedicated to the gNyan-chen thang-lha group (lns. 155–165). It brings the zoomorphic circle of this mountain pantheon to the fore (lns. 160–164). These are well known remedial spirits of

the Upper Tibetan spirit-mediums, mirroring the dominance of the pastoral way of the life in the region:

- In. 155: I fumigate gNyan-chen thang-lha of the world.
- In. 156: I fumigate Thang-sras mchor-po of gNyan-chen thang-lha.
- In. 157: I fumigate Thang-lha yar-bzhur btsan-po.
- In. 158: I fumigate Thang-lha'i dge-bsnyen dkar-po.
- In. 159: I fumigate the circle of three hundred and sixty *gnyan* of Thang-lha.
- In. 160: I fumigate the white *lha-rta* (divine horses) of Thang-lha.
- In. 161: I fumigate the *lha-nor gwa-pa* (divine yaks with a white face) of Thang-lha.
- In. 162: I fumigate the *lha-lug gwa-pa* (divine sheep with a white face) of Thang-lha.
- In. 163: I fumigate the *lha-ra ngang-ba* (orange divine goats) of Thang-lha.
- In. 164: I fumigate the *khyi-btsan dmar-po* (red *btsan* dogs) of Thang-lha.
- In. 165: I invite you here to this place of repose.

The ensuing sequence begins with the Rong-lha / Rong-btsan gods of Khams, a celebrated group of *yul-lha* (Ins. 166–168). The rest of the sequence is primarily directed towards the rGya-gar ('India'), a diverse class of possessing and remedial gods (Ins. 169–190). These include Indian Buddhist tantric adepts of yore (Ins. 171, 177); Thang-stong rgyal-po, the fifteenth-century Tibetan mastermind (In. 172); and a variety of cult gods involved in the proceedings of the trance ceremony. Also, famous personages of the *gcod* tradition, Pha dam-pa sangs-rgyas and Ma-cig lab-sgron, are heralded (Ins. 174, 175). These twelfth-century historical figures act as patrons and protectors of the trance. Each line ends in the typical fashion with the verb *bsang*:

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| In. 166: Rong-lha rgyal-mtshan of the south.                 | In. 176: Adepts of the <i>gcod</i> lineage |
| In. 167: Rong-btsan kha-ba dkar-po                           | In. 177: Sa-ra ha-pa                       |
| In. 168: Three hundred and sixty valley Rong-lha.            | In. 178: sNgags-chen hum-nag me-'bar       |
| In. 169: <i>Lha</i> lineage of eighty <i>rgya-gar</i>        | In. 179: Invitation                        |
| In. 170: rGya-gar me-ri dmar-po                              | In. 180: rGya-gar me-ri dmar-po            |
| In. 171: Eighty <i>sngags</i> lineage <i>rgya-gar</i>        | In. 181: rGya-gar A-tsa sngon-po           |
| In. 172: The adept ( <i>grub-chen</i> ) Thang-stong rgyal-po | In. 182: rGya-gar ri-brag mchor-po         |
| In. 173: Yum-chen kun-dga' blo-gros                          | In. 183: rGya-gar { / }                    |
| In. 174: Pha-cig dam-pa sangs-rgyas                          | In. 184: rGya-gar { / }                    |
| In. 175: Ma-cig yum kyi sgron-ma                             | In. 185: rGya-gar { / }                    |
|  | In. 186: rGya-gar yar-rtse bla-ma          |
|  | In. 187: rGya-gar chos-sgrub bla-ma        |
|  | In. 188: Yar-rtse dbu-dkar bla-ma          |
|  | In. 189: White vulture of the west         |
|  | In. 190: Invitation                        |

Consequent invocations in the *bsang* are for A-ne gung-smān rgyal-mo (Noble Woman Benefactress of the Heavens Queen), a personality of the Gesar epic, who appears to be modeled on the ancient goddess gNam-phyi gung-rgyal (Celestial Grandmother Queen of the Heavens) (lns. 191–213):

On the right side of the eight [parts] of heavens, on the left side of the eight [parts] of the heavens, between the horns of the male wild yak of the white clouds, in the precious house of crystal, I fumigate A-ne gung-smān rgyal-mo. On your head you wear a golden crown of five diadems (*rigs-lnga*). Your golden crown of five diadems *thibs se thib* (conveys a sparkling). You have the conch [white] face of the full moon. Your eyes are like the great star at dawn. In your right hand you hold the *ḍaru* of acacia (*seng-ldeng*)<sup>31</sup> with hangings (*'phur-ma*). The melodious sound of the *ḍaru khro lo lo* (conveys a musical sound). In your left hand you hold a white silver bell. The melodious sound of your bell *khro lo lo*. From your mouth you blow a human thighbone trumpet (*rkang-gling*). The sound of the human thighbone trumpet *di ri ri* (conveys a thunderous sound). On your body are precious ornaments. Also, you are surrounded by a circle of one hundred thousand *mkha'-'gro*. You ride the white lioness below you. You lead the blue dragon behind you. On the plain you lead a black (*rog-mo*) cow. I fumigate the chief of the one hundred thousand *mkha'-'gro*. I invite you here to this place of repose.<sup>32</sup>

The next sequence of Karma rig-'dzin's *bsang* recitations are for a collection of tantric tutelary deities (*yi-dam*), Buddhist protectors (Chos-skyong) (lns. 214–228), as well as for a couple native goddesses of Tibet. These latter figures are the well-known mountain goddess of the gNyan-chen thang-lha range, Jo-mo gangs-dkar, and the long life quintet Tshe-ring mched-lnga (lns. 214, 219). Once again, we see the intertwining of diverse classes of deities with no regard for their relative doctrinal status. Reference to the 360 horse-headed tutelary gods uses a numerical ascription common in the Bon tradition (ln. 226). All of these lines of the liturgy end with the verb *bsang*:

ln. 214: rGya-gar jo-mo gangs-dkar  
 ln. 215: mKha'-'gro sgron gyi dbang-mo  
 ln. 216: mKha'-'gro ye-shes mtsho-rgyal  
 ln. 217: dPal-ldan dung-skyong lha-mo  
 ln. 218: 'Bri-gung A-phyi chos-skyong  
 ln. 219: dPa'-mo tshe-ring mched-lnga  
 ln. 220: Invitation

<sup>31</sup> In a Bon mythic origins of the drum (*rnge-rabs*) text, acacia is recorded as one of five different types of wood growing around the world mountain Ri-rab, from which the primeval *gshen* sTag-la me-'bar made drums. See Bellezza 2005, pp. 425–427.

<sup>32</sup> *dgung-gnam brgyad gi g.yas zur na / dgung-gnam brgyad kyi g.yon zur na / sprin-dkar 'brong-pho'i rwa bar na / rin-chen shel gyi khang chen na / A-ne gung-smān rgyal-mo bsang / dbu la gser gi rigs-lnga gsol / gser gyi rigs-lnga thibs se thib / zhal ras bco lnga'i dung zla la / spyān-mig tho-rang skar-chen 'dra / phyag g.yas seng-ldeng ḍaru bsnams / ḍaru gsung-snyān khro lo lo / phyag g.yon dngul-dkar dril-bu bsnams / dril-bu gsung-snyān khro lo lo / zhal nas mi rkang-gling-bu 'bud / mi rkang skad-sgra di ri ri / sku la rin-chen rgyān-cha la / 'khor yang mkha'-'gro 'bum gyis bskor / 'og la seng-ge dkar-mo bcibs / rol la g.yu-'brug sngon-mo khrid / thang la ba-mo rog-mo khrid / mkha'-'gro 'bum gyi gtso-mo bsang / 'dir bzhu-gnas la spyān 'dren no |.*

- In. 221: Khro-bo rta-mgrin dmar-po
- In. 222: Yi-dam rdo-rje 'jigs-byed
- In. 223: Yi-dam kha-gsung brag-btsan
- In. 224: Khro-bo rngam-chen 'bar-ba
- In. 225: Se-ra rta-mgrin 'bar-ba
- In. 226: Three hundred and sixty rTa-mgrin
- In. 227: Invitation
- In. 228: Invitation to partake of *tshogs*

The final part of the *bsang* returns to native deities of Upper Tibet, not all of which can be identified by Karma rig-'dzin (lns. 229–237). All lines terminate in the customary fashion with *bsang*. Although, he is not yet fully possessed, Karma rig-'dzin discloses that this interval was orchestrated by the gods themselves. He states that this is so because he has no recollection of what was spoken and this is not the way in which he would customarily end his *bsang* ritual. It seems as though the native divinities of Upper Tibet are exercising the right to be the last ones heard in the liturgy. In the *bsang*, they co-inhabit the liturgy with the so-called higher gods of Buddhism with no apparent contradiction or conflict. Here the two streams of Tibetan religious tradition, lamaist and non-lamaist, exist side by side as if each one was oblivious of the other. The deities of both categories appear to be able to fulfill the same protective and patronizing role, intimating that the Buddhist gods may not be as essential to the trance ceremony as they are unswervingly stated to be. This would seem especially true if one takes a long view of the history of Upper Tibetan spirit-mediumship:

- In. 229: Lha-btsan mi-dkar (White Man Lha-btsan)
- In. 230: Lha-ri { // }
- In. 231: Lha-ri mi-bkra rta-bkra (Divine Mountain Shining Man Shining Horse)
- In. 232: sKya-rengs and her circle, the assembly of *lha*
- In. 233: bTsan-rgod {byang-chub} grags-pa
- In. 234: {g.Yu-lung brag-btsan jo-bo}
- In. 235: {g.Yu-'od} tsha-tsha dmar-po
- In. 236: { // } Gangs la nyi-shar
- In. 237: Invitation

### PHO BO SRID RGYAL (born circa 1927)

#### *i. Biographical sketch*

Pho-bo srid-rgyal, a kind and gracious man, is gNam-ru's senior-most *lha-pa*. I first had the privilege of interviewing him in 2003 (October 31 to November 2). Pho-bo srid-rgyal's paternal clan is sBa-pha and his maternal clan gDong-pa. He worships a paternal clan god (*rus-lha*) named Khams-btsan, divulging his ancestral origin in eastern Tibet some generations ago. His main gods of possession are Thang-lha mi-dkar rta-dkar (the Thang-lha group), rKyang-khra (the main *btsan* of gNam-ru) and bTsan-rgod nam-ra (the main *btsan* of Bar-tha), all well known figures in the eastern Byang-thang. Pho-bo srid-rgyal's mentor was the famous spirit-medium of Ring-pa,



dPon-skyā mGon-po dbang-rgyal (died circa 1974), the father of the late dPon-skyā lha-dbang.<sup>33</sup> Pho-bo srid-rgyal states that when the two spirit-mediums went into trance together they would perform *bsang* and *gser-skyems*, to strengthen the bonds between themselves and the deities. This was necessary so that they would prove reliable partners in the service of the community. Pho-bo srid-rgyal notes that at the age of 25, a consecration ceremony (*rab-gnas*) was made for him by the high lama Sa-skyā gong-ma. His final act before becoming a fully empowered spirit-medium was to undertake an 11-day pilgrimage around gNam-mtsho. Pho-bo srid-rgyal reports going into trance many dozens of times per year. He has no set fee schedule and treats the indigent free of charge. Those who can afford to pay for his services offer either money or livestock. In many ways, his regimen of curative rites resembles that of the great dPon-skyā lineage to which he is connected through tutelage. He observes that none of his four children practice as spirit-mediums.

*ii. The structure of the trance ceremony*

The trance ceremony from which a recording was made was held on the morning of May 21, 2004. The presiding deity of possession was rKyang-khra (Variegated Onager), considered to be a son of gNyan-chen thang-lha.<sup>34</sup> The purpose of the trance was to bless the participants of the ongoing High Tibet Welfare Expedition, which had suffered a number of logistical setbacks. The liturgical and oracular sequences of the trance ceremony were structured as follows:

1. *bsang* (3:47 to 9:20). A rhythmic chant. Near its end the pace of the recitations picks up in intensity until most of the last 14 lines of the ritual are inaudible. The *bsang* is made to the accompaniment of the drum and *gshang*. The *bsang* ritual culminates in the gods entering Pho-bo srid-rgyal, a development marked by his crying, “*phat!*”
2. *Lha-rabs* (proclamation of the lineage of the deities) and ‘*phrin-bcol* (entrusting of activities to the deities) (9:21 to 29:20). This section of the trance ceremony is characterized by poetic and often cryptic descriptions of the deities and their places of residence. The officiating god rKyang-khra announces his identity to those in attendance only well into this portion of the proceedings. Pho-bo srid-rgyal as this *btsan* spirit conjures a long line of protective *dgra-lha* and livestock deities. Interspersed between these native gods are occasional lines appealing to Buddhist protectors and sky-goers but very few proper names are articulated. Under possession, the timbre of the *lha-pa*'s voice is shallower. He plays his drum regularly and sometimes his *gshang* as well. The descant melody changes in pitch and tempo several times during this segment.

<sup>33</sup> The family history and activities of the *lha-pa* dPon-skyā/Pho-bo lha-dbang are detailed in Bellezza 2005, pp. 110–141.

<sup>34</sup> Information on this *btsan*, derived from the oral and literary traditions, is found in Bellezza 2005.

3. *Lung-btsan* (the declamation of prophecies) (29:21 to 34:35). The gods declare that the High Tibet Welfare Expedition would indeed prove successful with all its aims being realized. There would however be challenges and we are told, “You make the prayer of clearing obstacles whatever place you go” (*khyod sa-gar song-bar chad lam sel thon /*). This segment also features the use of the drum and *gshang*. The enunciation of the words tends to be clear and measured, and the manner of chanting rhythmic.

4. *gShegs-bskyod* (the retreat of the deities from the *lha-pa* and the return to their abodes) (34:36 to 39:30). rKyang-khra orders back the hosts of helping spirits under his charge to their homes in picturesque and stimulating language. The impression is one of tremendous activity taking place. This last part of the trance ceremony is musically identical with the preceding section; they are only differentiated from one another by what is being sung. The *lha-bzhugs* culminates with the word *phaṭ*, indicating that Pho-bo srid-rgyal has returned to his normal frame of consciousness.

### iii. The *bsang*

The fumigation ritual of Pho-bo srid-rgyal begins in a conventional fashion with a Buddhist dedication (lns. 1–16). Technically speaking, it is not possible to fumigate or make any other type of action that could have any impact on the Buddha or other-worldly Buddhist protectors (*'jig-rten las 'das-pa'i srung-ma*). In this theological context, the *bsang* becomes an offering of incense (*bsang-mchod*) rather than a cleansing procedure. In the first step of the performance, Pho-bo srid-rgyal calls upon the assistance of and takes refuge in Buddhism and its tutelary deities (*yi-dam*), sky-goers (*mkha'-'gro*), and protectors (*srung-ma*). This reflects the hierarchal arrangement of the deities in the trances of Upper Tibet; those of Buddhism watch over and orchestrate the actions of the ‘lesser’ divine members of the ceremony. It is popularly held by the spirit-mediums that all the transactions of the trance are made under the auspices of the Buddhist gods, which have full discretion over the spirits incumbent in the physical environment:

ln. 1: *Om A hum bdzra gu-ru padma siddhi hum.*

ln. 2: I offer the lama Dharma protector {/ /} purification (*bla-ma chos-skyong {/ /} bsang /*).

ln. 3: I offer the objects of refuge Triple Gems purification (*skyabs gnas dkon-mchog gsum-po bsang /*).

ln. 4: I offer the assembly of pacific and wrathful tutelary deities purification (*yi-dam zhi khro'i lha tshogs bsang /*).

ln. 5: I offer the sky-goers, wealth *lha* and Buddhist Doctrine defenders purification (*mkha'-'gro nor-lha bstan-skyong bsang /*).

ln. 6: Please receive these holy offerings (*mchod-pa dam-pa 'di bzhes la /*).

ln. 7: Please receive this adamant libation (*rdo-rje gser-skyems 'di bzhes la /*).

ln. 8: Please carry out the activities to which you are entrusted (*bcol-ba'i phrin-las sgrub gyur cig /*).

Ins. 9 to 16: <consists of a nearly identical repetition of the above lines>

Once the dedication is complete, there is a litany of Buddhist protective deities, some of which were originally enlisted from the indigenous pantheon (Ins. 17–28). These protectors (both minor and important) hold positions between the rarefied ontological plane of Buddhas and tantric tutelary gods and that of the genii loci. Like commanders on the battlefield, the Buddhist protectors mediate between the Buddhist sovereigns and the indigenous spirits (the foot troops who carry out the work of healing and combating demons). The *lha-srin sde-brgyad* are the eight orders of elemental spirits as conceived in Buddhist tradition (ln. 29). They are found in the retinue of many a Buddhist protector. Each line of this segment of the ritual ends with *bsang* (I/we fumigate), as does much of the rest of the liturgy:

- ln. 17: I fumigate Lha yi dbang-po brgya-byin (Indra).
- ln. 18: I fumigate Lha-min dbang-po thag-bzang (a king of the demigods).
- ln. 19: I fumigate Klu yi rgyal-po {dga'-po} (a king of the *klu*).
- ln. 20: I fumigate Mi'am skyes-mchog.
- ln. 21: I fumigate gNod-sbyin gang-ba bzang-po.<sup>35</sup>
- ln. 22: I fumigate the Dharma defender Ma-ha ka-la (mGon-po).
- ln. 23: I fumigate gNod-sbyin shan-pa gri-thogs.<sup>36</sup>
- ln. 24: I fumigate Srin-po {g.yu yi srog-bdag}.
- ln. 25: I fumigate bDud-po re-ti 'gong-yag.<sup>37</sup>
- ln. 26: I fumigate Chos-skyong gnod-sbyin dmar-po.<sup>38</sup>
- ln. 27: I fumigate Lha-mo {cang-seng blo-ldan}.
- ln. 28: I fumigate dGe-bsnyen rdo-rje {legs-pa}.<sup>39</sup>
- ln. 29: I fumigate the *lha-srin sde-brgyad* and their circles.
- ln. 30: Please carry out the activities to which you have been entrusted.

Now the focus of the *bsang* shifts to the native pantheon but with the generic kinds of figures found throughout the Tibetan cultural world. Perforce, many of these gods and goddesses have assumed Buddhist iconographic forms and classifications. Unlike the *bsang* of Karma rig-'dzin, very few deities specific to the Upper Tibetan environment are heralded by Pho-bo srid-rgyal. I am of the opinion that the more standardized *bsang* of Pho-bo srid-rgyal is a liturgical innovation whose origin postdates the genre recited by Karma rig-'dzin. Although there is an interpenetration of Buddhist

<sup>35</sup> This god belongs to a subdivision of the Dregs-pa sde-brgyad known as Phyi yi sde-brgyad. This division of deities is commonly invoked during magic ceremonies. See Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1956, p. 254.

<sup>36</sup> This god is part of a subdivision of the Dregs-pa sde-brgyad known as gSang-ba'i sde-brgyad (Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1956: 255, 259).

<sup>37</sup> Originally, a chief *bdud* in the retinue of the Bon deity Mi-bdud 'byams-pa. According to Buddhist reckonings, he is a member of a subdivision of the Dregs-pa sde-brgyad known as gSang-ba'i sde-brgyad (Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1956: 255, 259, 274, 288).

<sup>38</sup> This is the well known protector Tsi'u dmar-po, a chief of the *btsan*. This god is scrutinized in Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1956, pp. 166–176.

<sup>39</sup> An important protector who resides in sGar-sde. He is studied in Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1956, pp. 154–159; Bellezza 2005, pp. 302–311.

deities in Karma rig-dzin's *bsang*, it is largely founded upon native or *bon* liturgical traditions.

The first deity mentioned, Klu-rgyal dung-skyong, is a popular king of the *klu* who is believed to reside in many places across the plateau (ln. 31). Reference to the *dgra-lha* of the right shoulder and the *ma-mo* of the left shoulder is an old Tibetan belief concerning the relative position of gender-specific protectors on the human body (lns. 38, 39). In addition to the ubiquitous *sde-brgyad* and *lha-btsan* (lns. 40, 41), there are what appear to be personal guardians who reside inside the human body (lns. 42, 43). Localized and astrological divinities are accorded a number of lines in the recitations (lns. 44, 49–53). These are immediately followed by celebrated Buddhist *sa-bdag* (earth sovereigns) (lns. 56, 57). Two lines are also devoted to the 'go-ba'i *lha-lnga*, the quintet of guardian spirits who are thought to have various seats on the human body (ln. 60, 61):

- ln. 31: *Kye!* We offer to the excellent *klu*, Klu-rgyal dung-skyong.  
 ln. 32: Nag-po { / / }.  
 ln. 33: { / / / }.<sup>40</sup>  
 ln. 34: In the center (*dbus-phyogs*).  
 ln. 35: To the *sde-brgyad* and their retinues in [all] directions (*phyogs gi sde-brgyad 'khor-bcas la /*),  
 ln. 36: Receive this adamantine libation,  
 ln. 37: And please carry out the activities to which you have been entrusted.  
 ln. 38: I fumigate the *dgra-lha* manifestations of the right shoulder (*dpung g.yas dgra-lha'i sprul-pa bsang /*).  
 ln. 39: I fumigate the *ma-mo* manifestations of the left shoulder.  
 ln. 40: I fumigate the *sde-brgyad* manifestations of the right side of the body (*glo g.yas sde-brgyad sprul-pa bsang /*).  
 ln. 41: I fumigate the *lha-btsan* manifestations of the left side of the body.  
 ln. 42: I fumigate the *gza'-bdud* and *gnyan-bdud* manifestations [in],  
 ln. 43: The eyes, heart and liver, these three (*mig dang snying dang mchin-pa gsum/ gza'-bdud gnyan-bdud sprul-pa bsang /*).  
 ln. 44: *gZhi-bdag* manifestations and their retinues,  
 ln. 45: Carry out the activities to which you have been entrusted.  
 lns. 46–48: <a largely repetitive sequence pertaining to Buddhist protection and refuge>  
 ln. 49: I fumigate the seventy-five *dpal-mgon* (minor protectors often of the *yul-lha* class).  
 ln. 50: I fumigate the haughty (*dregs-pa*) *lha-srin sde-brgyad*.  
 ln. 51: I fumigate the five orders (*sde-lnga*) of Srid-pa'i *gza'-chen* (Great Planets of Existence).  
 ln. 52: I fumigate [the deities] of the year, month, day, and time { / / } (*lo zla zhag dus { / / } bsang /*).  
 ln. 53: All the *yul-lha* and treasure protectors,  
 ln. 54: With your retinues please receive this libation (*yul-lha gter-srung ma-lus pa/ 'khor-cas gser-skyems 'di bzhes la /*).

<sup>40</sup> Three slashes enclosed in brackets designates that an entire line in the recording is incomprehensible.

- In. 55: Carry out the activities to which you have been entrusted.  
 In. 56: I fumigate Sa-bdag hal-khyi nag-po (a deity of astrology and divination).<sup>41</sup>  
 In. 57: I fumigate Sa yi lha-mo brtan-ma (an earth goddess).<sup>42</sup>  
 In. 58: I fumigate the Dharma protectors and the great kings *sde-brgyad*.  
 In. 59: I fumigate the seventy-five mGon-po.<sup>43</sup>  
 In. 60: I fumigate all the *gzhi-bdag* of this country (*yul 'di'i gzhi-bdag thams-cad bsang /*).  
 In. 61: I fumigate the *pho-lha* (god of males), *dgra-lha* and *srog-lha* (god of the life-force).  
 In. 62: I fumigate all the *mo-lha* (goddess of females) and *zhang-lha* (uncle god).

Indigenous and Buddhist deities are unabashedly interwoven in the next segment of the *bsang* (Ins. 63–69). One might see this as a sign of the tremendous commitment that Pho-bo srid-rgyal has to Buddhism and indeed, this is the case. Although he will soon be possessed by local spirits and his consciousness replaced by theirs, his faith lies squarely with the divinities and tenets of Vajrayāna Buddhism. His religion, his conceptual and affective beacon, will see him through the difficult transition and keep him safe while his own consciousness rests somewhat precariously in the mirror (*gling*) of the trance ceremony. Yet, I think the interposition of native and Buddhist motifs must be seen in a historical light as well. These represent two cultural categories of largely independent historical genesis that have become intermingled over the centuries. Without critical self-reflection on the part of contemporary *lha-pa*, indigenous and Buddhist religious traditions have been brought together in the *bsang* as mutually beneficial forces, which reinforce the efficacy of one another. At least as regards the trance ceremonies of the spirit-mediums, these disparate traditions can be seen as having an equivalent function and worth. Pho-bo srid-rgyal concludes these recitations by offering the deities and his root lama the purification of incense (Ins. 71–73):

- In. 63: To all the *gzhi-bdag* of tangible existence and their circles,  
 In. 64: Please receive these adamantine offerings and incense (*snaug-srid gzhi-bdag 'khor-bcas la / rdo rdo-rje bsang mchod 'di bzhes la /*).  
 In. 65: Carry out the activities to which you have been entrusted.  
 In. 66: I fumigate the glorious lamas of {ordinary and special consummations} (*{mchog thun dngos-grub} bsang /*).  
 In. 67: I fumigate the pilgrimage protectors of the ocean of Buddhist scriptures and sky-goers (*rgyud-sde rgya-mtsho'i gnas-srung mkha'-'gro bsang /*).  
 In. 68: Mother protectors, *sa-bdag* and {Tshe-ring} mched-lnga to you,

<sup>41</sup> According to the *Vaidūrya dkar po*, this well known *sa-bdag* has human, canine, avian, and serpentine anatomical features (Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1956: 264).

<sup>42</sup> According to the *Vaidūrya dkar po*, she holds a vessel at her breast and is yellow in color (Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1956: 264, 265).

<sup>43</sup> The various mGon-po often appear in a group of seventy-five members. They are described in detail in Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1956, pp. 38–67.

ln. 69: I give offerings of incense, perfectly carry out our wishes (*ma-mgon sa-bdag* {*tshe-ring*} *mched-lnga la / bsang-mchod 'bul-lo bsam-don lhun-'grub mdzod /*).

ln. 70: *Om Arya kro ta hu lu sarba tista bdzra hum phaṭ.*

ln. 71: I fumigate the three hundred and sixty *yi-dam*.

ln. 72: I fumigate the root lama of myself in this period (*rang-rang dus da rtsa-ba'i bla-ma bsang /*).

ln. 73: {I fumigate} the twelve *brtan-ma*.

The last segment of Pho-bo srid-rgyal's *bsang* has a very different quality about it than the previous ones. For one thing, the chanting is now much more musical and the tempo livelier. The pace of the performance picks up to the point that many of the last lines are completely inaudible. It is thought that the deities of the trance having been beckoned to the ritual venue are descending upon the spirit-medium's *gling* and his very body. As his own consciousness begins to dim, he beseeches his Buddhist allies to remember and help him (lns. 74–77). In the recitations he asks them to 'be aware of him' or 'think about him', rendered by the verb *mkhyen*. In a last self-conscious act he earnestly prays to his root lama (*rtsa-ba'i bla-ma*) to stay with him (ln. 78). The moment of possession is drawing close for Pho-bo srid-rgyal because in rapidly sung lines he announces the presence of its gods. First they appear as a generic group, merely known as the *sde-brgyad* (ln. 80). But in the course of scant seconds, the chief of the possessing spirits is made known to the spirit-medium; it is an aspect of the great mountain god gNyan-chen thang-lha in his most pacific form (lns. 81–86). As Pho-bo srid-rgyal's consciousness slips from his body, this god is described in the guise of a long life deity holding a silver urn and draped arrow. Other lines follow but most of them are incomprehensible and what can be gleaned has little context (lns. 87–99). The import of these recitations appears to be that more and more gods and goddesses are entering the spirit-medium and *gling*, as his consciousness is displaced to a special site in the *gling*:

ln. 74: *Kye!* Please think about me tutelary god Gu-ru drag-po (*yi-dam gu-ru drag-po mkhyen /*).

ln. 75: Please think about me great mothers (*yum-chen*) and sky-goers.

ln. 76: {///}

ln. 77: Please think about me the root lama of myself.

ln. 78: I pray to you, please stay above the crown of my head (*gsol-ba 'debs so spyi-bo'i gtsug du bzhugs /*).

ln. 79: {///}

ln. 80: Circle of *lha sde-brgyad* {/ /}.

ln. 81: The power master of the world *lha* ('*dzam-gling lha yi mthu bdag /*).

ln. 82: Thang-lha of the world ('*dzam-gling thang-lha*).

ln. 83: The world's master of power gNyan-chen thang-lha ('*dzam-gling mthu-bdag gnyan-chen thang-lha /*).

ln. 84: You ride on a light orange horse of the *lha* mount (*chibs su lha-rta ngang-dkar bcibs /*).

ln. 85: You {hold a draped arrow} in your right hand (*phyag g.yas {mda'-dar bsnam} /*).

In. 86: You hold a white silver urn (*dn̄gul-dkar bum-pa*) in your left hand.

Ins. 87–89: { / / / }

In. 90: Great mothers and sky-goers { / / }.

Ins. 91–96 { / / / }

In. 97: bTsan-rgod nor-bu spun-bdun (Wild bTsan Jewel Seven Brothers).

Ins. 98, 99 { / / / }

In. 100: *phaṭ!*

Relying on the borrowed body of the *lha-pa*, rKyang-khra announces his identity after vividly describing his abode. The god warbles, “Hey (*A kho-re*), the borrowed body of me, yeah (*nga*), gZugs mchor-po (Handsome Body). Hey, if you do not know the body of me, yeah, bTsan mchor-po (Handsome bTsan), yeah, it is me the eastern {jewel of} the world, hey, known as rKyang-khra.”<sup>44</sup> Poetic and often enigmatic verses mark the utterances of the possessing deities. I shall explore these and other verbal aspects of the trance ceremonies of Upper Tibet in due course.

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<sup>44</sup> *nga gzugs mchor po'i rang lus la A kho re g.yar po de / nga btsan mchor po'i rang lus la A kho re ma shes na / nga shar {nor bu'i} 'dzam gling la A kho re rkyang khra zhig zlo /*. Diemberger (2005: 113–115) provides an unannotated translation (Tibetan words phonetically rendered, and without the benefit of the Tibetan text) of a possessing deity, an emanation of rTa-rgo, announcing his presence in old style language to those in attendance. This occurred in the trance ceremony of a female spirit-medium (*lha-bka'-ma*) from Ngam-ring.

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*P1: Karma rig-'dzin donning his ritual attire before the start of the trance ceremony.*



*P2: Karma rig-'dzin as the god bDud-btsan dmar-po receiving an offering scarf (kha-btags) from one of the supplicants. Note the mda'-dar in the left hand of the spirit-medium.*



*P3: Pho-bo srid-rgyal with an assistant preparing the altar for his trance ceremony.*



*P4: Pho-bo srid-rgyal possessed by Kyang-khra forcefully recalls the lineage of the deities while playing his big drum (rnga-chen) and gshang.*

## CHAPTER 4

Spirit-mediumship in Upper Tibet: The Vocation of one expert practitioner

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# SPIRIT-MEDIUMSHIP IN UPPER TIBET

## The vocation of one expert practitioner<sup>1</sup>

JOHN VINCENT BELLEZZA

*Senior Research Fellow, Tibet Center,  
University of Virginia*

### INTRODUCTION

This paper introduces a prominent shaman or spirit-medium from Upper Tibet named Lha-pa bSam-gtan (Lhapa Samten).<sup>2</sup> The standing he enjoys among his peers signals that he is among the most highly respected spirit-mediums in sTod and Byang-thang. Despite facing formidable administrative and legal obstacles, the spirit-mediums of the Tibetan upland are still active today. Known in Tibetan as *lha-pa*, *lha-mo*, *dpa'-bo*, *dpa'-mo*, *klu-mo*, etc., these indomitable men and women are believed to embody various divinities for the benefit of their communities. Many of the deities purported to participate in the trance ceremonies also have their abodes in the vast Tibetan upland, while others are of Indic origin. Spirit-mediumship (*lha-'babs*) constitutes one of the most intriguing and least studied religious phenomena in Tibet. It is predicated on the perceived possession of human beings by spirits as a special method of healing and prognostication, with resonance the world over.<sup>3</sup>

- 1 The fieldwork upon which this paper is based was generously supported by financial contributions from the Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation (New York). The transcription of Lhapa Samten's utterances and its translation into English was made with the assistance of Yungdrung Tenzin, a Tibetan literato from sTeng-chen with whom I have worked for many years.
- 2 To protect the identity of this individual he appears in this paper under an assumed name. The tradition of spirit-mediumship is considered very sensitive and is officially discouraged in the Tibet Autonomous Region.
- 3 In *Calling Down the Gods* (2005: 37), I announce that important spirit-mediums hailing from Upper Tibet not appearing in this work would be given due attention in subsequent publications. In the mid-2000s, I did indeed interview several more eminent practitioners, making audio records of their utterances during trance ceremonies. This paper and one delivered at the International Association of Tibetan Studies conference in Bonn, in 2006 (see Bellezza 2011), initiate the process of presenting this ethnographic and linguistic material. Studies of the spirit-mediums of Upper Tibet have also been made by Berglie 1980; 1978; 1976; Diemberger 2005.



The tradition of spirit-mediumship flourished in the Tibetan highlands for untold centuries. It is widely reported that spirit-mediums were active in virtually every corner of this vast region; its pastoral and agrarian settlements supporting many of these esoteric practitioners in the pre-modern period. My fieldwork indicates that nowadays there are only around two dozen senior spirit-mediums left in the entire region, representing a precipitous decline in their numbers over the last fifty years.

Spirit-mediumship in Upper Tibet is characterized by a system of healing and augury heavily dependent on Buddhist philosophy and praxis. Traditionally, the channeling of the gods relied on the sanction and patronage of Lamaist authorities. The most important function attributed to these religious figures was the ability to discern authentic practitioners from charlatans and those considered demonically possessed. This was accomplished through the use of various methods of divination and special powers of insight. Despite coming under the auspices of lamas, in the very sparsely populated Byang-thang, spirit-mediums were able to maintain a high degree of socio-cultural autonomy due to the paucity of major Buddhist and g. Yung-drung (Eternal) Bon monastic centers in the region.

While the doctrinal basis and ritual cast of Upper Tibetan spirit-mediumship is largely Lamaist in nature, non-Buddhist customs and traditions are also quite well conserved.<sup>4</sup> The role of native mountain and lake deities (*lha-ri*, *lhamtsho*) in possession, the protective cult of warrior gods (*dgra-lha*), the striking zoomorphism of healing spirits, and the use of ritual instruments such as the draped arrow and flat-bell remain conspicuous elements of Upper Tibetan spirit-mediumship that all appear to be of indigenous cultural inspiration. Nevertheless, the native cultural traits in Upper Tibetan spirit-mediumship are difficult to historicize with any certainty. The origins of some of these non-Buddhist features, as part of an archaic cultural substrate, are likely to predate the introduction of Buddhism in Tibet. Although certain older cultural elements may have survived intact as unchanged relics, others were subject to assimilative processes, whereby

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For studies of household spirit-mediums from various other Tibetan regions see, for instance, Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1956; Havnevik, 2002; Nagano 2000; Tucci 1980; Stein 1972; Balikci 2008.

- 4 The Buddhist tradition has had much more influence in the constitution of a higher status class of spirit-mediums known as *sku-rten*. The ritual paraphernalia and practices of the *sku-rten* oracles exhibit fewer indigenous cultural traits than do the household spirit-mediums of Upper Tibet. Unlike the folk practitioners of upland Tibet, the *sku-rten* tradition developed in an ecclesiastic environment with many of its functionaries being monks. For information on the *sku-rten*, see, for example, Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1956; Rock 1935; Kevil 1964; Tibetan Bulletin 1992; Waddell 1895; Prince Peter 1973.



they were revamped or reinvented within the compass of Lamaist thought and endeavor.

Spirit possession is alluded to in Old Tibetan language texts composed during the early historic period (circa 650–1000 CE). While this religious phenomenon does not appear to be explicitly depicted, the non-Buddhist cultural structures that came to surround spirit-mediumship are given much expression in these writings. The utterances or directives of a deity (*lha-bka'*) are noted in the Dunhuang text Pt 126.<sup>5</sup> Direct communications between the archaic *bon* and *gshen* priests and deities are recorded in Old Tibetan literature as well, presupposing intimate exchanges, which in certain cases may have included actual spirit possession or some other mediumistic activity. In one Old Tibetan manuscript of the dGa'-thang 'bum-pa collection, there is a dialogue between priests and the divine royal progenitor of the sPu-rgyal dynasty Yab-bla bdal-drug. In another ritual narrative of the same manuscript, a *gshen* priest is in direct contact with Lha-bo lha-sras, a god of the afterlife.<sup>6</sup> These episodes are presented as actual physical encounters between humans and gods, and serve to illustrate the powerful link thought to exist between these two categories of beings a millennium or more ago.

The Dunhuang and dGa'-thang bum-pa texts also document a number of ritual objects and practices still used by Upper Tibetan spirit-mediums. Mention of the flat-bell, draped arrow and turban are particularly noteworthy because they have a very important part to play in the ritual proceedings of today's spirit-mediums. Likewise, spirit-mediums, as well as monks and lay religious practitioners (*sngags-pa*), still carry out ransom rites (*glud*) and rites of propitiation (*gsol-kha*) of the kind first noted in Old Tibetan literature. These ritual performances are decidedly Tibetan in composition and non-Buddhist in orientation. A mountain god exploited by Upper Tibetan spirit-mediums, Thang-lha ya-bzhur, as well as generic classes of environment-bound spirits (*yul-lha*, *sman*, *bdud*, *klu*, *gnyan*, *btsan*, etc.) are also documented in Old Tibetan texts in non-Buddhist or archaic contexts.

While Old Tibetan texts merely hint at spirit-mediums being part of the early historic Tibetan religious arena as part of an indigenous tradition, Eternal Bon literature is unequivocal in this regard. *mDo dri med gzi brjid*, a biography of sTon-pa gshen-rab composed in the 14<sup>th</sup> century CE, classifies spirit-mediumship in the first vehicle of Eternal Bon teachings known as Phya-gshen. Referred to as

5 See Bellezza 2005, pp.11, 12. For *lha-bka'*, also see Stein 1972, p.232. For references to priestesses (*bon-mo*) that may possibly have been spirit-mediums in Pt 1047, see Macdonald 1971, pp.274, 275, 294, 295. On the *bon-mo*, also see Bellezza forthcoming.

6 For a translation and explication of this dGa'-thang 'bum-pa text, see Bellezza 2010.





Ye-dbang lha yi bka'-babs (Mantic Directives of the Gods of Primordial Power), it is one of four main methods of conducting divinations found in the Phya-gshen vehicle.<sup>7</sup> These teachings are thought to have been introduced into Tibet in remote antiquity by the Eternal Bon founder sTon-pa gshen-rab. Although this *mDo dri med gzi brjid* account is patently mythical in nature, like Old Tibetan literature, it does suggest that spirit-mediumship in an elementary configuration arose in Tibet prior to the spread of Buddhism.

Many elements of Upper Tibetan spirit-mediumship that appear to be non-Buddhist in origin and character have cognate forms in the spirit-mediumship or shamanism of Inner Asia and the Himalayan rimland. This cross-cultural evidence buttresses Tibetan textual sources, which indicate that Buddhist influences on Upper Tibetan spirit-mediumship comprise a superstructure built upon an older cultural foundation.

#### THE PROFESSIONAL LIFE OF LHAPA SAMTEN,

I interviewed Lhapa Samten on September 23–25, 2005. Lhapa Samten is an affable and prudent family man. He was born in the Rabbit Year (1951) and resides in what is now the southern part of sGer-rtse rdzong (this area is traditionally known as bSe-'khor). His mother belonged to the Hor clan and his father was a member of the Dus-ngas clan, one of the oldest genealogical groupings in bSe-'khor.<sup>8</sup> Lhapa Samten's mother's sister, a nun named 'Bum-rdzi (sp.?), was also a spirit-medium, as well as a disciple of the celebrated rNying-ma lama Padma bDe-rgyal. Circa 1890, bDe-rgyal rin-po-che was responsible for founding Nam-mkha' khyung-rdzong, a monastery in sPu-rang. Lhapa Samten was a student of Khams-pa'i dpa'-chung (1912–2005), a highly renowned spirit-medium who resided in gZhung-pa ma-tshan.<sup>9</sup> It was from him, that the much younger *lha-pa* learned how to become a vehicle fit for the gods.

Lhapa Samten first went into trance at the relatively late age of twenty-five, that is, after the end of the Chinese Cultural Revolution. During the extremely trying times of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, many traditional Tibetan practices were proscribed. Spirit-mediums were forced to stop practicing; some never to call upon the gods again even during the period of liberalization in the 1980s. Lhapa Samten states that the primary reason for summoning the deities into his body is to heal diseases afflicting human beings. He does not demand any set payment from those who seek him out, as I observed during one of his trance ceremonies.

7 For further information on spirit-mediumship in the Phya-gshen vehicle, see Bellezza 2005, pp.344–355.

8 For a review of the clans of bSe-'khor, see Bellezza 2008, p.268.

9 For an account of this distinguished individual, see Bellezza 2005, pp.85–87.





Lhapa Samten is a medium for the rGya-gar gods, gNyan-chen thang-lha's retinue of spirits, *nor-lha* (wealth gods), and A-stag-klu-mo / dPa'-mo A-stag. His family protective deities (*phugs-lha*) Klu-mtsho sngon-mo and Thang-lha dkar-po also participate in the trance ceremony as personal guardians. Spirit possession is regarded as very serious and potentially dangerous work, which requires divine patrons and defenders of various kinds. The higher gods of Buddhism, which are always invoked at the beginning of the trance ceremony and in whom spiritual refuge is taken, act as the overall guarantors and regulators of the proceedings. The *phugs-lha* Klu-mtsho sngon-mo and Thang-lha dkar-po are prototypic deities of females and males respectively. They belong to an indigenous tradition assimilated into the Buddhist pantheon. Thang-lha dkar-po is the mountain god gNyan-chen thang-lha in his white or pacific form, a very popular household protector and patrilineal god (*pho-lha*) among the shepherds (*'brog-pa*) of Upper Tibet. Klu-mtsho sngon-mo is the goddess of the sparkling blue lakes of the Tibetan upland, the counterpart and consort of mountain gods such as Thang-lha dkar-po.

The rGya-gar (India) group of Lhapa Samten contains a diverse collection of spirits of both Indic and native origins. It includes rGya-gar g.yu-bkra, Lha-chen yab-yum, Lha-chen blon-po 'gros-mthun (sp.?), and Lha yar-rgan tshangs-pa dkar-po. Also known as Lha-rgan dkar-po, this latter figure is the Tibetan form of the god Brahma.<sup>10</sup> According to Lhapa Samten, Lha-rgan dkar-po resides in the *gsum-bcu rtsigs-pa'i zhal-yas* (numinous palace of the walls of thirty). This appears to be a reference to the *sum-bcu rtsa-gsum*, the thirty-three realms of the spirit world, as found in ancient Iranic, Indic and Bodic traditions. It is customary in the Upper Tibetan world of spirit-mediumship for each main god of possession to supervise a circle of healing spirits. It is these helping spirits that actually carry out the hard work of curing the afflicted. This often entails removing gross impurities from the bodies of patients. Lhapa Samten reports that the helping spirits of the rGya-gar gods includes Dung-khyi spun-gsum (Three Conch Dogs Siblings), Gling dkar-po skya-bo mig-bzhi (Light-colored Dog with Four Eyes), Thang-dkar (Lammergeyer), 'U-lu mchu-ring (Long-Beaked Owl), and Glag-mo rked-dkar (Eagle White Medial [Feathers]).

Lhapa Samten is also a medium for the *nor-lha* group of wealth bestowing deities. These figures are of two major kinds: those of native sources and those of Indic persuasion. Arya dzam-bha-la is the famous Indian god of wealth, which became entrenched in Lamaist religions as well. For Tibetans, he is the guardian of all forms of prosperity, a deity serving both individuals and the state. The indigenous *nor-lha* of Lhapa Samten are primarily represented by

10 For a detailed description of this deity, see Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1956, pp.145–153.







a group known as rGya-gar nor-lha bcu-gsum, but there are other examples as well. According to the spirit-medium, his thirteen rGya-gar nor-lha originated in India with Arya dzam-bha-la. However, this assignment of cultural origins is largely fictive, the unspoken aim of which is to draw native divinities into the fold of Buddhism.

The *nor-lha* controlled or owned (*lha-bdag*) by Lhapa Samten are a big and colorful group of spirits. He explains that a significant number of them are in the form of livestock. The *nor-lha* that appear in the trance ceremony serve as *g.yang-'gugs* (good-fortune summoning) instruments for humans, livestock and the countryside. They are attributed with curing diseases and removing obstacles to well-being. They not only bestow wealth but bring other kinds of good fortune such as good health and long life. Lhapa Samten avers that the *nor-lha* do not appear as individual animals but rather participate in the trance as great herds of zoomorphic spirits overwhelming disease and misfortune. According to him, these *nor-lha* first appeared with the emergence of existence (*srid-pa chags-pa*), a popular cosmogonic theme in Tibet. Two *nor-lha* that typify this focus on the primordial are Srid-pa chags-pa'i lha-lug (Divine Sheep of the Emergence of Existence) and bsKal-pa chags-pa'i lha-lug (Divine Sheep of the Emergence of the [First] Epoch).

Among the *nor-lha* are those connected to Gling ge-sar, Tibet's epic hero. They include rGya-gar lu-gu spun-gsum (Three Indian Lamb Siblings), Dung-dkar-po lu-gu spun-gsum (Three White Conch Lamb Siblings) and Gling ge-sar lha-lug spun-gsum (Three Divine Sheep Siblings of Gling Ge-sar). These three triads of spirits are said to have Lha-chen tshangs-pa dkar-po (the Tibetan form of Brahma) as their father. Another *nor-lha* in King Ge-sar's entourage is rGya-gar nor-lha sngon-bkra (Bright Blue Indian Wealth God), the wealth-summoning spirit of A-ne gung-sman rgyal-mo, the aunt of the epic hero. This zoomorphic spirit is said to have three spots (*thig-ma*) on its back, which function to attract good fortune and long life. Ra yi lha ni tshed-tshed is the divine goat spirit of rGan A-khu, an epic figure who is said to have reared it in the pasturelands of Tibet. This caprine *nor-lha* is specifically used in the trance ceremony for bestowing long life.

Other notable members of Lhapa Samten's *nor-lha* are Dung dkar-po rwa-co 'khyil-rtse (White Conch Spiraling Tips of the Horns), Dung dkar-po 'dra-lug zhis (sp.?) (a conch white sheep with a smooth coat of wool) and Dung gi rnga-ma shang-tse-shang (a sheep with a spreading white tail). The Klu yi lu-gu spun-gsum (Three Lambs of the Water Spirit Siblings) are blue colored except for their legs and bellies, which are white from swimming in a lake of milk. The Srid-pa chags-pa'i btsan-lug are sheep of the *btsan* spirits with a reddish undercoat,





orange wool and the horns of the argali (*gnyan*). The bTsan dmar-po lu-gu spun-gsum are in the form of red lambs. Lhapa Samten traces the origin of these three supernatural lambs to the mGur-lha, the thirteen royal mountain divinities of the Central Tibetan sPu-rgyal dynasty of ancient times.

gNyan-chen thang-lha is the most powerful mountain god of the eastern third of the Byang-thang, but his spiritual influence is also very much felt in Central Tibet.<sup>11</sup> Given his wide geographic purview he is often referred to as a *spyi-lha* (universal god), a distinction bestowed on only the most important divine mountains (*lha-ri*) of Tibet. gNyan-chen thang-lha is a special protector of the Dalai Lamas and there is a chapel dedicated to him in the upper level of the Potala. Besides his household protector, the most important member of gNyan-chen thang-lha's retinue for Lhapa Samten appears to be Lha-g.yag dkar-po, a divine white yak. Lhapa Samten states that Lha-g.yag dkar-po is also found in the circle of Lha-chen tshangs-pa dkar-po. This *nor-lha* is very popular with other spirit-mediums in Upper Tibet as well.<sup>12</sup>

A-stag klu-mo is a major personality in the Gling ge-sar epic and goddess of the trance for Lhapa Samten. She is also a popular possessing goddess among other spirit-mediums of Upper Tibet. A keen huntress and warrior, A-stag klu-mo was befriended by Ge-sar during his campaign against dDud klu-btsan, the ruler of Yar-khams in the eastern Byang-thang. This goddess is particularly active in trance ceremonies as a wrathful figure in charge of exorcistic rites. According to Lhapa Samten, the *nor-lha* helper of A-stag klu mo is in the form of a wild yak (*'brong*) with a white snout, tawny body and the white and brownish horns of the mythical horned eagle of Tibet known as *khyung*.

Lhapa Samten uses a copper alloy circular mirror (*gling*) to direct and shelter the deities during possession. It is thought that the consciousnesses (*rnam-shes*) of the presiding deities cluster around this mirror and are reflected in various directions as per their ritual activities. The *gling* used by Lhapa Samten is divided into three concentric circles, each of which enshrines the consciousness of different types of deities. These three circles symbolize the *srid-pa'i gsum*, the three vertical tiers of existence: upper or celestial (*steng*), middle or terrestrial (*bar*) and lower or telluric (*'og*). The outer circle of the mirror is called *phyi-gling pad-ma dab-brgyad* (eight-petaled lotus of the outer world), the assembly

11 For an in-depth survey of this god, see Bellezza 1997; 2005.

12 According to an Eternal Bon text for summoning good fortune, Lha-g.yag dkar-po is the emblem and protector of the 'Bru / 'Gru Tibetan proto-lineage. Considered a *srid-pa'i sgra-bla*, this ancestral figure appears with three other divine animals as the defining symbols of four main lineages of ancient Tibet. See Bellezza 2005, pp.403, 404.





point of the army of the *lha* (*lha-dmag*). The *lha* are white-colored deities of the heavens and lofty mountains. The *phyi-gling* is also reserved for the higher or otherworldly deities of Buddhism, which are believed to nominally occupy it in the same manner that the Buddha is believed to be present in properly consecrated images. Strictly speaking, the consciousness of the high gods of Buddhism and Eternal Bon is all-pervading and cannot be wholly contained in any object. The *bar-gling* (middle world) is the assembly point for the *btsan* armies. The *btsan* are a common class of fierce warrior gods, typically red in color, which are characteristic of the intermediate world. They are said to inhabit rocky mountains, gorges and boulders, especially those red in color. The *nang-gling* (inner world) is the assembly point of the *klu* and *mkha'-'gro*. The *klu* are water spirits analogous to the *nāga* of Indic tradition, while the *mkha'-'gro* are the sky-treading wisdom goddesses of Vajrayāna Buddhism.

Lhapa Samten states that he offers his heart, lungs and other organs to the mountain gods and other divine protectors before being possessed. This is done to express his absolute devotion and trust in the officiating deities of Buddhism. The radical practice of offering one's body parts is derived from the esoteric *gcod* tradition, which purportedly permits adherents to quickly cut through mental obscurations and other obstacles to higher spiritual realization. In preparation for being overtaken by the gods, Lhapa Samten also invokes the mistress of the subtle energy channels of the body (*rtsa-bdag*). It is through these nerve-like conduits that the consciousness of the deities must pass in order to take hold of the spirit-medium. The *rtsa-bdag* of Lhapa Samten is *dMag-zor rgyal-mo*, a form of the great Buddhist protectress *dPal-ldan lha-mo*. She is said to take up residence at the threshold of his subtle channels at the beginning of the trance ceremony. Lhapa Samten believes that *dMag-zor rgyal-mo* enables the divinities to descend and enter his body. Lhapa Samten holds that at the moment of possession, his consciousness is conveyed into space (*nam-mkha'*), where it comes under the care of the *lha*.

Lhapa Samten, like other spirit-mediums of Upper Tibet, reports that while the deities are present in his body, he as an individual ceases to inhabit that body. When disassociated from his body, Lhapa Samten exists in a state of suspended animation of which nothing is known or recollected. The spirit-medium states that knowledge of what is said and done in trance comes from querying observers. The loss of self in such a pronounced way is a daunting prospect, thus the trance ceremony is not resorted to lightly. There must be real need warns Lhapa Samten, lest he incurs the wrath of the gods and even the prospect of the permanent annihilation of his psyche.





## THE LITURGICAL STRUCTURE OF THE TRANCE CEREMONY

The trance ceremony I observed was convened at night in Lhapa Samten's black yak-hair tent. The tent was full of family members and neighbors who had come out of curiosity or to be healed by the power of the gods. An improvised altar for the ceremony was erected in front of the family altar. It was covered copiously in barleycorn upon which a butter lamp, bowl of tea and a few other offering objects were placed. A photograph of the young Karma-pa also graced the altar ad hoc. The *gling* used in trance ceremonies was inserted upright into a bowl of barleycorn.

The preliminary invocations to the deities and other prayers began at 21:35. During these first recitals, Lhapa Samten wore a white cotton kerchief on his head. Called a *ras-thod*, this piece of cloth is said to represent a turban. More elaborate turbans are still used occasionally by Upper Tibetan spirit-mediums. The turban is often considered to be the original headgear of the spirit-mediums of the region, and its use appears to have been widespread in ancient Tibet. This style of head covering is noted in Old Tibetan documents of the early historic period. As regards spirit-mediumship, the turban appears to have been gradually replaced by the five-lobed crown of Vajrayāna known as the *rigs-lnga*. To begin his invocations, Lhapa Samten also wore a brocade mantle over his shoulders, the *stod-khebs*.

The ritual instruments of choice during the ceremony were the hourglass-shaped hand-drum (*da-ma-ru*) and the flat-bell (*gshang*), standard articles used by the spirit-mediums. The *gshang* is mentioned in Old Tibetan documents as one of the archetypal ritual instruments of the legendary priest gShen-rab myi-bo.<sup>13</sup> As the name indicates, the *da-ma-ru* is of Indic origins. In addition to the *da-ma-ru*, large hanging drums (*rnga-chen*) are also popular in the liturgies of the spirit-mediums of Upper Tibet. The *rnga-chen* is cited in Old Tibetan sources describing archaic ritual performances. During the initial prayers, Lhapa Samten also briefly used the Buddhist-style bell (*dril-bu*).

The observed trance ceremony of Lhapa Samten can be divided into three major parts: 1) the pre-possession-state liturgy, 2) the possession-state liturgy and 3) the post-possession-state liturgy.

### 1. Pre-possession-state liturgy

The pre-possession portion of the trance ceremony was conducted with only a little playing of the drum and Buddhist bell. Usually, most of the preliminary prayers are recited while spirit-mediums sound drums and bells. In this particular case, I had requested Lhapa Samten to limit the initial playing of ritual instruments

<sup>13</sup> See Pt 1289 (Stein 2003: 599), and the dGa'-thang 'bum-pa *byol-rabs* text (Bellezza 2010).





as much as was possible, in order to obtain a clear audio recording of his words. The cadence of the pre-possession state recitations was rapid and decisive, as is common in these types of liturgies. The words were articulately enunciated, facilitating the production of a reliable transcription. The pre-possession state consisted of the recitative elements as outlined below:

*sKyabs-'gro* (refuge prayer), duration: 1 minute, 2 seconds

Lhapa Samten began the trance ceremony by taking refuge in the Triple Gems (dKon-mchog gsum) of Buddhism (Sang-rgyas, Chos and dGe-'dun).

*gSol-'debs* (devotional prayers), duration: 31 seconds

The chanting of prayers primarily to O-rgyan padma 'byung-gnas (Gu-ru rin-po-che). This recitation was slow, deliberate and lyrical, and was accompanied by the playing of the *ḍa-ma-ru* and *dril-bu*.

*sPyan-'dren* (invitational prayers), duration: 19 seconds

The precious lamas and deities were invited to participate in the trance ceremony. In addition to the lamas with which Lhapa Samten has a bond, the high tutelary gods (*yi-dam*), sky-goers (*mkha'-'gro*), religion protectors (*chos-skyong*), territorial deities (*yul-lha*), and masters and mistresses of places (*gzhi-bdag*), in that order, were invited to the ritual venue.

*bSang cho-rabs* (origins of incense narrative), duration: 13 seconds

The myth of origins of incense was recited, a prefatory liturgy derived from ancient sources that has been integrated into Lhapa Samten's trance proceedings.

*bSangs-gsol* (propitiation with incense), duration: 4 minutes, 45 seconds

A large variety of deities were propitiated through the use of incense as a fumigant. This served to call the various participating divinities to the ritual venue, where they were offered purifying aromatic substances and appealing words. The first deities invoked were divine lamas and higher Buddhist gods, as is customary in the Lamaist *bsangs-gsol*. Next, many members of the native pantheon of Tibet, the *yul-lha* and *gzhi-bdag*, were entreated. As part of the fumigation activities, Lhapa Samten requested the deities to provide him with assistance. They were specifically asked to avert the misfortune of the demons and summon the divine qualities of well-being.

Gling ge-sar *sgrung* (ballad of Gling ge-sar) followed by another *gsol-'debs*, duration: 1 minute, 21 seconds





Various figures of the Gling ge-sar epic are invoked and described using richly imaginative language. The warrior spirits known as *dgra-lha* / *dgra-bla* / *sgra-bla* also figure in the invocations.

*Slob-bstan* (advice) and *smon-'dun* (aspirations), duration: 47 seconds  
The advice and aspirations expressed pertained to the Tibetan hearth and home.

*Lung-bstan* (prophecies) and other enigmatic utterances, duration: 1 minute, 34 seconds

At the beginning of this interval Lhapa Samten picked up his *rigs-lnga* crown. The prophecies were highly allegorical and difficult to understand. That Lhapa Samten made them in a transitional state of consciousness illustrates that he enjoys a considerable degree of moral authority among his peers. In the recitations were lines such as, "You know where both the vulture and I go. The vulture goes into space." This signaled the imminent departure of Lhapa Samten's consciousness from his body and its transport to the heavens.

*Bla-ma mchod-pa* (litany of lamas and Buddhist prayers), 1 minute, 28 seconds  
Lhapa Samten recites the names of many prominent contemporary Tibetan religious figures.

*bSangs-mchod* (incense offerings), duration: 1 minute, 13 seconds  
Incense is offered to indigenous deities, figures in the Gling ge-sar epic, higher Buddhist deities, and the lamas.

## 2. Possession-state liturgy

The possession state consisted of the following recitative elements:

Announcement of the advent of the deities (*lha-zhal*), duration: 7 minutes, 57 seconds

The various deities of the trance ceremony began to be seen by Lhapa Samten as they took up their customary positions in the *gling* and on his body. At the beginning of this interval Lhapa Samten placed the *rigs-lnga* on his head and tied it firmly. The five diadems of the *rigs-lnga* each contain a different image of the Directional Buddhas (rGyal-ba rigs-lnga). Affixed to each side of the *rigs-lnga* is a rainbow-colored fan-like wing (*gshog-pa*). These large and showy accouterments simulate the consciousnesses of the deities descending upon the spirit-medium. The divine consciousnesses are envisaged as colored light, each color of the rainbow representing a different class of spirit. To begin with, the





chants had a slow and deliberate rhythm and were accompanied by the *da-ma-ru* and *gshang*. The enunciation of the words had a solemn and evocative quality, as befitted a watershed in the mental state of the spirit-medium. The tempo of playing gradually intensified as more and more deities made their appearance known to Lhapa Samten.

The prayers and aspirations of the deities, duration: 2 minutes 10 seconds  
The deities make their obeisance to the Buddha and high lamas and through Lhapa Samten announce their willingness to be of service to the proceedings. This interval of the trance ceremony was recited in a more lively fashion and without ritual instruments.

Resumption of the advent of the deities interspersed with their saying Buddhist prayers, duration: 11 minutes, 30 seconds  
These recitations were made with the *da-ma-ru* and *gshang* in a tempo that gradually grew in speed and intensity. Lhapa Samten came to his knees from a sitting position. Sometimes he played his ritual instruments in a very vigorous manner with outstretched arms. After three minutes Lhapa Samten jumped to his feet and began dancing around wildly, while he continued to sound his *da-ma-ru* and *gshang*. He returned to his knees before the end of this interval of the trance ceremony. The words of the liturgy were uttered with much gusto as Lhapa Samten's breathing became heavier and his manner more excited. Many lines of the recitations opened with *yā ah ha*, words that poetically express elation and triumph. It is believed that during this interval the spirit-medium is being overwhelmed by the possessing deities and helping spirits that appear before his mind's eye.

*Lha-'babs* (consciousness of the spirit-medium fully displaced by those of the deities), duration: approximately 20 minutes

Lhapa Samten sprang to his feet again and began making grunting noises, while playing his ritual instruments. This is believed to mark the definitive possession of the spirit-medium by the deities. The speech of Lhapa Samten was forceful and agitated. Lhapa Samten first announced the identity of the god he had become. We learned that the patronizing god belongs to the rGya-gar group. Lha-bSamtan then turned to those in attendance and solicited a response from them. The interlocutor (*bka'-lung*), a neighbor of Lhapa Samten, approached the spirit-medium on behalf of members of my Tibet Upland Expedition, which was then underway. A *bka'-lung* participates in nearly all Upper Tibetan trance ceremonies as an intermediary between spirit-mediums and patients. Due to the unusual





forms of diction employed, the speech of the spirit-mediums can be very difficult to understand, requiring a person who has long acquaintance with his or her utterances to translate them. In some cases, spirit-mediums speak in non-Tibetan languages such as *lha-skad* (language of the gods), requiring the *bka'-lung* to learn a new tongue. The *bka'-lung* is typically also the ritual assistant, conveying *tshogs* (sacred cakes), *khros* (lustral agents) and other offerings to the deities. He or she helps manage the ceremonial affairs as well, indicating when patients may approach the spirit-medium and what they should do.

*'Jibs-sbyangs* (sucking out of contamination), duration: approximately 7 minutes  
*'Jibs-sbyangs* is a method of healing popularly used by the spirit-mediums of Upper Tibet. It entails the drawing out of disease-causing impurities from the bodies of patients. Typically, as in this case, the spirit-medium places one end of a white scarf (*kha-btags*) on the afflicted part of a patient's body and the other end against his *da-ma-ru* and *gshang*. The spirit-medium then sucks on his ritual instruments, making a deep gurgling sound in the process. In the *'jibs-sbyangs* of Lhapa Samten there were four patients all of which were local *drokpas*. The first patient was a man. Lhapa Samten worked on his back several times for a total of three minutes. After each procedure, the spirit-medium displayed a blackish substance on his *da-ma-ru* and *gshang* for all to see. This is understood to be the disease-causing contamination or *grib* that had been removed from the body of patient. These impurities are sometimes envisioned as being in the form of worms. Tibetans believe in many types of *grib*, each causing different kinds of sickness. The second and third patients were children. *'Jibs-sbyangs* was performed on each of them only once and for short duration. The fourth and final patient was a woman clutching a baby. Her procedure was also performed quickly. Perceived as a highly potent treatment, *'jibs-sbyangs* is used judiciously as befits a highly effective tool of healing. The length of time that an individual *'jibs-sbyangs* lasts is a function of the seriousness of the illness and the age of the patient. It is commonly thought that children cannot tolerate this curative technique as well adults can.

The withdrawal of the deities back to their abodes and *lha-gsol* (deity propitiation), duration: approximately 4 minutes

This is the period in which it is believed that the deities return to their own residences, leaving Lhapa Samten's body, *gling* and other ritual objects. During this interval, the spirit-medium resumed chanting and playing his *da-ma-ru* and *gshang*, while the *bka'-lung* tossed spoonfuls of water towards the altar, as part of the *khros*, the propitiation and purification of deities using water. The cadence of







the spirit-medium's playing and speech continued to intensify, culminating in the *rigs-lnga* falling from his head. This marked the decisive end of the possession, the final withdrawal of the patronizing deities to their respective divine abodes.

### 3. Post-possession-state liturgy

Lhapa Samten went on to intone prayers of thanksgiving for a successful trance ceremony. This transpired as he removed his ceremonial dress and stowed away the ritual paraphernalia of the night. The descent of the deities and their taking possession of Lhapa Samten is viewed as a highly consequential and mysterious event, welcomed only in that it is required to assist those in need. The trance carries no small hazard as the capability of the gods is perceived as being immeasurably beyond that of human beings. The deities are also unpredictable and can direct their ire on patients and spectators in an instant. For these reasons, Lhapa Samten regularly expresses gratitude to his Buddhist protectors and the other deities for keeping him safe and sound, particularly just after being released from the possession state.

#### SELECTED READINGS FROM THE TRANCE CEREMONY

Lhapa Samten is a speaker of the sTod dialect, as the readings below demonstrate. At the beginning of the trance ceremony, just after taking refuge in the Triple Gems, devotional prayers (*gsol-'debs*) are said to call upon the master of all the worldly deities, O-rgyan padma 'byung-gnas. This great Vajrayāna master of the 8<sup>th</sup> century CE is beseeched to grant his support to Lhapa Samten, that he may be protected and his work as a vessel of the gods successful:

Please be aware of us precious lamas (*bla-ma rin-po-che mkhyen-no* /)  
(2 times).

I pray to O-rgyan rin-po-che (*O-rgyan rin-po-che la gsol-ba 'debs* /).

May negativities, defects and obstacles not appear (*'gal rkyen bar-chad mi tshogs 'byung shog* /).

May I realize my wishes and the things of happiness (*mthun-rkyen bsam-pa 'grub-pa par shog* /).

Please confer special and ordinary attainments (*mchog thun-mong dngos-grub stsal du gsol* /) (2 times).

When you reside in the borrowed body [may] the obstacles of the earth, water, fire and wind elements [not appear] (*sa chu me rlung 'byung-ba'i bar-chad ni / khyod lus g.yar-po khyod ni sdod-pa'i dus* /).

I pray without ambivalence or hesitation (*yid-gnyis the-tshom med par gsol-ba 'debs* /).

Please be aware of me goddesses of the four elements of O-rgyan (*O-rgyan 'byung-ba bzhi yi lha-mo mkhyen* /).





There is no doubt that the elements are pacified (*'byung-ba rang-sar zhi bar the-tshom med /*).

I pray to O-rgyan padma 'byung-gnas.

Please bless me that my wishes are miraculously realized (*bsam-pa lhun gyis 'grub-par byin gyis rlobs /*) (2 times).

After the *gsol-'debs* the next sequence in the trance ceremony is the incense origins tale. This is a kind of *smrang*, a narrative which proclaims the source of an important ritual tradition before its actual execution. Traditionally, the *smrang* were spoken to add weight and legitimacy to both the ritual performances and performers.<sup>14</sup> The *smrang* comprise a crucial component of archaic rituals in Old Tibetan literature. The incense origins tale of Lhapa Samten is a type of *smrang* that came to be known as *cho-rabs* (ritual origins myth) in Eternal Bon and Buddhism.<sup>15</sup>

*Cho-rabs* do not ordinarily occupy as important a position in Lamaist rituals as do the *smrang* in archaic rituals. Broadly speaking, deities of an Indic pedigree supplanted indigenous Tibetan historical accounts as the primary legitimizing instrument of Lamaist rituals. The authenticating function of the *smrang* was derived from them being construed as the historic precedent and ancestral prototype of rituals. In Lamaism, this sanctioning mechanism was largely replaced by the interposition of the so-called otherworldly (*'jig-rten las 'das-pa*) deities. Lamaist ritual performances are said to be carried out under the auspices of the Buddha and other higher gods; those having passed beyond the sphere of worldly existence.

Despite the different doctrinal positions origins myths occupy in the archaic and Lamaist religious traditions, certain grammatical and narrative elements are common to both, having been retained to the present day. In the incense *cho-rabs* of Lhapa Samten, the question and answer format belongs to the corpus of indigenous *smrang*. The most conspicuous ancient etiologic theme in his *chos-rabs* is that of the sky as the ultimate source of sacred phenomena.<sup>16</sup> Another

14 For an explication of the *smrang* and various ritual precedents, see Norbu 1995; Karmay 1998, Bellezza 2005; 2008; 2010; forthcoming.

15 The incense origins myth of Lhapa Samten is reminiscent of *cho-rabs* for incense in Eternal Bon literature. For these *cho-rabs*, see Norbu 1995, pp.109–112; Bellezza 2005, pp.446–450.

16 The cosmogonic aspects of the sky or heavens can be found in various Dunhuang documents. For example, in Pt 1038 the origin of the Tibetan kings (*btsan-po*) is directly connected to the apex of the sky. A similar theme is found in Pt 1134, where the genealogical source of important funerary priests (*dur-gshen*) and other prominent figures is traced to the heavens (*gnam, dgung*). Similarly, the sky as the nexus of origination in Eternal Bon etiologic accounts permeates many vestigial archaic



cosmogonic theme of considerable antiquity found in Lhapa Samten's incense origins myth is that of the sky and earth as the dyadic source of existence and its various aspects.<sup>17</sup> The essential form of his *cho-rabs* appears to have been propagated by successive generations of spirit-mediums over a substantial period of time as an oral tradition, not something borrowed from textual sources. Nonetheless, such longstanding continuity in the absence of independent documentary evidence is extremely difficult to substantiate.

The *cho-rabs* begins with the word *kye*, an exclamation used in the oral and textual traditions to gain the attention of the deities:

*Kye, Kye!* From where does the substance of incense originate (*bsang gyi rgyu de gang nas byung /*)?

The substance of incense originates in the sky (*bsang gyi rgyu de gnam nas byung /*).

From the sky comes the thunderous sound of the father (*gnam nas yab kyi 'brug cig ldir /*).

From the mother the lightning of the earth strikes (*yum nas sa yi glog cig 'gyu /*).

At the land of rTa-rgo'i gangs-thig it is the bubble of the ocean water (*sa-yul rta-rgo'i gangs thig la / rgya-mtsho chu yi lbu-ba yin /*).<sup>18</sup>

It is the potency of the *bzang-drug*<sup>19</sup> medicines (*bzang-drug sman gyi nus-pa yin /*).

I fumigate you with the smoke of fragrant incense (*dri-zhim spos kyi dud-pas bsang /*).

I fumigate you with the blazing golden leaves of birch (*gser-lo 'bar-ba'i stag-pas bsang /*).

I fumigate you with the blazing turquoise leaves of juniper (*g.yu-lo 'bar-ba'i shug-pas bsang /*).

I fumigate you with the blazing conch leaves of Artemisia (*dung-lo 'bar-ba'i mkhan-pas bsang /*).

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traditions. A cosmogony centered upon the Queen of the Klu in the text *Klu 'bum khra bo* is among the earliest Eternal Bon sources describing the generative function of the heavens. See Bellezza 2008, pp.278, 344, 346, 384, 511.

17 For numerous examples of this fundamental cosmogonic theme in the oral tradition, Eternal Bon and Old Tibetan documents, see Bellezza 1997; 2005; 2008; forthcoming.

18 rTa-rgo'i gangs-thig refers to the rTa-rgo / rTa-sgo range in the central Byang-thang. Ocean appears to be an allusion to the sacred lake that lies at the foot of the rTa-rgo Range, Dang-ra g.yu-mtsho. According to Eternal Bon sources, Dang-ra is the Zhang Zhung word for ocean.

19 The six superlative medicines: *cu-gang* (bamboo concretion), *gur-gum* (saffron), *dza-ti* (nutmeg), *sug-smel* (cardamom), *li-shi* (clove), *ka-ko-la* (*Amomum subulatum*).

I fumigate you with the blazing copper leaves of rhododendron (*zangs-lo bar-ba'i ba-lus bsang l*).

I fumigate you with the blazing tree leaves (*shing-lo*) of *phur-mong*.<sup>20</sup>

I fumigate you with the fragrant smoke of *spos-dkar*.<sup>21</sup>

Subsequent to the incense *cho-rabs*, a great many deities are invoked by Lhapa Samten in an incense ritual (*bsangs-gsol*). The trance ceremony had been underway for more than eleven minutes when Lhapa Samten picked up his hand-drum to continue his recitations. The quality of his voice had changed dramatically as had the rhythm of the words spoken. This marked a distinctly different phase of the trance ceremony. Later when analyzing the recording of the proceedings, I realized that this heralded the advent of the deities, a transitional stage on the way to full-blown possession. In a visionary sequence, Lhapa Samten described the various gods that were entering his consciousness. The changes in the spirit-medium's outward behavior were quite subtle at that time, and it was not very apparent that his consciousness was in the process of being displaced by that of the divine, as Tibetans would perceive this ontological transition. In situ, the recitations are hard to hear and understand.

Once Lhapa Samten was fully possessed he first described the three concentric circles of the *gling* or ritual mirror, a ritual representation of the three realms of existence (*srid-pa gsum*). The chief possessing god then disclosed his residence, name and appearance. The god announced that he is sKu-lha dkar-po yangger, a member of the rGya-gar group. This deity also made known that he was accompanied by his divine armies of *lha*, *klu* and *btsan*. During the period of possession, Lhapa Samten began many lines with the word *yā* and/or *nga*, exclamations used in Upper Tibetan dialects, which are roughly equivalent to the English 'ah', 'oh' or 'well'. In some instances, it is very difficult to distinguish *yā* from *nga* in the utterances of Lhapa Samten:

*Yā*, the mandala of the *lha* army of myself (*yā, rang-rang lha-dmag dkyil-'khor red l*).

*Nga*, [these are] the three realms, the outer realm, inner realm and middle realm (*nga gling phyi gling nang gling bar gling gsum l*).

The realm, the outer realm has an eight-petaled lotus mandala (*gling phyi gling la dkyil-'khor padma 'dab-brgyad yod l*).

The realm, the inner {...}<sup>22</sup> mandala.

The *lha* army and *klu* army [and other] assembled armies are the *lha*

20 *Micromeri tarosma?*

21 *Shorea robusta*.

22 This set of brackets designates that one or more words spoken by the *lha-pa* are inaudible in the recording.

and *klu* doctrine protectors of myself (*lha-dmag klu-dmag dmag-tshogs rang-rang la lha klu bstan-srung red /*).

*Nga*, from the resplendent domain of the mind and joyous *lha* is the uppermost white divine valley in the west (*nga lha dge dang 'o de sems dbyings nas / nup lha lung dkar-po 'i yang gong yin /*).<sup>23</sup>

I am the *lha* sKu-*lha* dkar-po yang-ger (*lha sku lha dkar-po 'i yang-ger yin /*),

The white *lha* on the divine horse (*nga lha-rta gong nas lha dkar red /*), *Nga*, the white *lha* with many multi-colored fluttering cloths (*nga lha dkar-po dar-tshon shig-ge red /*).<sup>24</sup>

There are thronging divine horses with white muzzles (*lha-rta kha-dkar nyig-se red /*).<sup>25</sup>

{//}

{//}

From the apex of space, the blue *klu* valley in the west (*nup klu-lung sngon-po 'i gong-dbyings nas /*),

*Nga*, also from the peak of the multicolored *klu* castle (*nga klu-mkhar*

23 The signification of the first clause of this sentence is ambiguous. The reading presented here is only possible if 'o = 'od (resplendent).

24 That the god's cloths are many and in a dynamic state of movement are conveyed by the verb *shig-ge*. *Shig-ge* appears to be an archaic word retained in the sTod dialect, particularly by the spirit-mediums and bards (*sgrung-pa*). The non-lexical form *shigs se shig* appears in Tibetan prosody as a trisyllabic conveyor of movement at the termination of a line of verse. As a kind of *sgra-rgyan* (literally: 'sound ornament'), trisyllabic conveyors are employed as an embellishment, greatly enhancing the vibrancy and impact of verses in a variety of Tibetan literature. For examples of *shigs se shig* in *gsol-kha* texts dedicated to mountain gods, see Bellezza 2005, pp.230, 267, 271. Other examples of what appear to be archaic verbs in the recitations of Lhapa Samten (*nyig-se, nyi-le, kyi-le, dir-re, rong-se, thag-se*) are noted below. The use of such words as predicates is virtually unknown in Classical Tibetan, while the trisyllabic conveyors of color, sound and movement can be traced to Old Tibetan literature where they primarily appear in non-Buddhist ritual contexts. Historically speaking, the use of related verbified forms in sTod ritual speech readily admits of two hypotheses: these predicates either gave rise to the trisyllabic conveyors or were derived from them. A comparative linguistic study of trisyllabic conveyors in song and poetry and related predicates in the oral tradition of Upper Tibet may contribute to a better understanding of the historical development of Bodic verb morphology.

25 *Nyigs-se* is ostensibly an archaic verb conveying that objects are pressing or jostling against one another.

26 This set of brackets designates that an entire line of the recitation is largely inaudible in the recording. This line has something to do with summoning of a type of *lha*.

27 This line has something to do with a division of the *lha*.



*khra-mo 'i yang rtse nas /*),

*Nga*, there is a blue *klu* on a blue horse (*rta-sngon gong la klu-sngon zhig /*).

The blue *klu* has many fluttering {shoulder cloths}<sup>28</sup> (*klu sngon-mo {dpung-dar} shig-ge yod /*).

*Nga*, the horses of the *klu* are thronging.<sup>29</sup>

{A gathering mass of multicolored sparks} (*{me-stag khra yi dpung-tshogs /}*).

*Nga*, from the apex of space, the red *btsan* valley in the west,

*Nga*, also from the summit of the multicolored *btsan* house (*nga btsan-khang khra-mo 'i yang steng nas*),

There is a red *btsan* on a red horse (*rta-dmar gong gi btsan-dmar zhig /*).

*Nga*, a red *btsan* with sparks spreading forth (*nga btsan dmar-po me-stag 'phro-le zhig /*),

His *btsan* horse with a rippling *btsan* banner (*btsan-rta la btsan-dar nyil-le zhig /*).<sup>30</sup>

*Nga*, when the *btsan* army of India enters [me], a conflagration of the red *btsan* whirls around (*nga rgya-gar btsan-dmag zhugs yong dus / btsan-dmar-po 'i me-dpung kyi-le zhig /*).<sup>31</sup>

*Nga*, the *bstan* army with sparks spreading forth.

*Nga*, the warriors consolidate {the lineage of birth} (*nga rgod-po 'i {skye-rgyud} 'dzoms yong red /*).

*Nga*, these *lha* {are as much as that} (*nga lha de dag {de tsam yin}*).

Lhapa Samten continued to divulge the identities of the various deities that had possessed him, a colorful procession of mainly indigenous figures. The language employed was direct and lyrical, a vibrant form of poesy largely derived from the native tradition of composition interlarded with materials of Buddhist doctrinal and iconographic inspiration.

After various prophecies were proclaimed by the presiding god sKu-lha dkar-po yang-ger, the spirit-medium prepared for the removal of illness-causing contamination from the bodies of the patients. Before he began the '*jibs-sbyangs*', he announced the arrival of special deities that oversee this ritual technique. By

28 Bracketed words designate uncertain readings.

29 This is the incomplete translation of the line: *nga klu-rta kha {dar} nyig-se zhig /*.

30 The verb *nyi-le* conveys the movement of the banner slapping against itself in a strong wind. This verb is represented in the trisyllabic conveyor *nyi li li*. For the use of *nyi li li* in an Eternal Bon invocation to the *srid-pa 'i sgra-bla*, see Bellezza 2005, p.385.

31 What appears to be another archaic verb, *kyi-le*, is found in the trisyllabic conveyor of circular movement *kyi li li / khyi li li*. For the use of these three syllables in ritual prosody, see Bellezza 2005, pp.266, 320, 459; 2008, pp.333, 432.



the end of this recitation Lhapa Samten was barking like a dog:

*Ngā*, know (*mkhyan*) the sucker cleanser (*'jib-sbyang*) Pho-gdong ro-gpo (a black wolf).

Come sucker army with the gathering mantle of resplendence (*'jib-dmag 'od-snang thib-se shog /*).<sup>32</sup>

I will not do many sucking procedures (*nga mang-po'i 'jib-sbyang las ni min /*).

*Ngā*, come sucking conduit with the attending *lha* (*ngā 'jib-rkang lha la brten nas shog /*).

*Ngā*, come sucking conduit with the attending *klu*.

*Nga, klu* {...}.

*Ngā*, come *klu* army with a thundering thunderous sound (*ngā klu-dmag 'ur-sgra dir-re shog /*).<sup>33</sup>

*Ngā*, come sucker cleanser red wolf (two times).

*Yā*, come sucker cleanser red wolf.

The last part of the possession-state was the withdrawal of the deities from Lhapa Samten's mind and body. This occurred right after the *'jibs-sbyangs* was completed. As in other sequences of the trance ceremony, Lhapa Samten, as the mouthpiece of the deities, declaimed precisely what activities were taking place in a divine world invisible to humans. Here he advertised the retreat of the various *lha*, *klu* and *btsan* as they left his body. During these recitations the interlocutor (*bka'-lung*) thanked the deities for their participation. Lhapa Samten's voice trailed off until it was completely inaudible. Presumably, this shift from the articulated to complete silence corresponded to the very last deities of the trance ceremony returning to their divine abodes. The last spirits to leave the ritual venue were the *btsan* army of India. Once all the spirits were gone from his body, it could once again become the vessel of Lhapa Samten's personal consciousness:

*Yā*, know the *lha* army with the gathering masses of chiefs and retainues (*yā lha-dmag gtso-'khor thib-se mkhyen /*).

{*Yā*}, the *lha* army {of the divine queen snow lion}.

*Yā, nga*, when the *lha* army of India is moving (*yā nga rgya-gar lha-dmag bskyod dus de /*),

*Yā*, the superior *lha* are standing erect in rows in the sky (*yā lha gong-*

32 The verb *thib-se* (amassing, thickly gathering; as in clouds or fog) is represented in the trisyllabic conveyor *thibs se thib*. For instances of this non-lexical ornament in Tibetan literature pertaining to deities, see Bellezza 2005, pp.184, 189, 245, 359.

33 *Dir-re* (thundering) is a verb represented in the trisyllabic conveyor *di ri ri*. For examples of this trisyllabic conveyor, see Bellezza 2005, pp.266, 290, 320.



*ma gnam la rong-se yod /*).<sup>34</sup>

*Yā, nga*, there are blue rainbows meandering along the earth (*yā nga 'ja'-tshon sngon-mo sa la 'khyugs /*).

*Yā, nga*, the *klu* army of India is going (*yā nga rgya-gar klu-dmag phebs-le red /*).

*Yā*, between both {...} rainbows.

*Yā, nga*, the *btsan* army of India is going.

*Yā*, there is a {white *lha*} on a white horse (*yā rta-dkar gong la {lha-dkar} zhig /*).

*Yā*, the superior *lha* with the rippling banner (*yā lha gong-ma dar-tshon shig-ge red /*).

*Yā*, there is a blue *klu* on a blue horse.

*Yā*, the blue *klu* with the shoulder cloth *thibs se thib* (*yā klu sngon-mo dpung-dar thibs se thib /*).<sup>35</sup>

*Yā, nga*, there is a red *btsan* on a red horse,

*Yā*, the red *btsan* with sparks spreading forth (*yā btsan dmar-po me-stag 'phro-le de /*).

{///}

{///}

*Yā*, the eighty adepts of India (*yā rgya-gar grub-chen brgyad-cu de /*).

*Yā, nga*, there is the *lha* army with clicking smacks [of the lips] (*yā nga lha-dmag rkan-sgra thags-se yod /*).<sup>36</sup>

*Yā, nga*, I call upon the thousands of *lha* armies of India (*yā nga rgya-gar lha-dmag stong la 'bod /*).

{///}

{There are} thousands of divisions of *btsan* armies of India.

## CONCLUSION

The spirit-mediumship of Lhapa Samten is a syncretistic affair where traditions of Tibetan and Indic pedigrees mingle freely with one another. Historically speaking, it appears that a body of archaic cultural lore interpenetrated by Buddhist practices and beliefs led to the composite phenomenon of spirit-mediumship we know today in Upper Tibet. The timeline involved in this is mixing and matching of disparate cultural traditions, however, is still hazy. We might hypothesize

34 The verb *rong-se* (placing erect in rows) is represented in *rongs se rong*. For an example of this trisyllabic conveyor, see Bellezza 2008, p.336.

35 *Thibs se thib* conveys that the cloth is a thick fluttering mass.

36 The verb *thag-se* (clicking, snapping, chattering) is represented in the trisyllabic indicator *thags se thag*. For this poetic embellishment, see Bellezza 2005, p.267.





that ancient Tibetan traditions were progressively eroded in favor of those of a Buddhist persuasion, but this is not likely to have been a simple linear process. The give and take of assimilation and retrenchment are liable to have been complex cultural historical themes in the constitution of spirit-mediumship. Sectarian and geographic factors may also have played a part in the loss of Bodic concepts and customs and the adoption of Indic variants over the course of the last millennium.

Whatever its precise origins and development, the spirit-mediumship of Upper Tibet, despite being threatened by a host of legal and social forces, has proven very resilient. The spirit-mediums continue to channel the gods for compelling reasons, for the health and well-being of individuals and communities are thought to hang in the balance. Cultural pride and faith in traditional methods of doing things certainly play a part in the continued existence of spirit-mediums as well. In this regard, they are a bridge between the sureties of the past and the ecological and cultural tumult of the present. As with many other traditions passed on orally from generation to generation in Upper Tibet, be it clan lore, territorial deity cults or local historical accounts, the survival of spirit-mediumship in the region is not assured. Nevertheless, as long as there are brave and able men and women such as Lhapa Samten, we have good reason to be optimistic about the fate of this hoary tradition.

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Lhapa Samten as the chief possessing god sKu-lha dkar-po yang-ger





Lhapa Samten as the red wolf helping spirit of the *'jibs-sbyangs* curative procedure

## CHAPTER 5

The Voice of the Gods in Upper Tibet:  
The trance-induced invocations and songs of praise of the spirit-medium Phowo Sridgyal

Bellezza, J. 2015. "The Voice of the Gods in Upper Tibet: The trance-induced invocations and songs of praise of the spirit-medium Phowo Sridgyal", in *The Illuminating Mirror* (eds. O. Czaja and G. Hazod), pp. 15–40. Contributions to Tibetan Studies, vol. 12. Wiesbaden: Dr. Ludwig Reichert Verlag.

## The Voice of the Gods in Upper Tibet The Trance-induced Invocations and Songs of Praise of the Spirit-medium Phowo Srigyal<sup>1</sup>

*John Vincent Bellezza*

### I. Introduction

This paper is devoted to Phowo Srigyal (Pho bo srid rgyal), probably the most highly esteemed contemporary spirit-medium of Gnam ru (Dpal mgon County), in the eastern Changthang (Byang thang). This work presents a short biography of Phowo Srigyal and records the actual words spoken by him in trance. A kind, courteous and hospitable man, Phowo Srigyal was born in the Year of the Rabbit (1927). He has practiced as a spirit-medium since his youth in the early 1950s.

Phowo Srigyal readily acceded to being interviewed and to going into trance on three different occasions, fully cognisant of my intention to publish accounts of our meetings. I first met Phowo Srigyal in 2003 (October 31–November 2) and again in 2004 (May 20–22). That was a time when a number of research projects involving foreigners had been sanctioned by the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) authorities. In that period, my fieldwork was sponsored by the Tibet Academy of Social Sciences (TASS) in Lhasa.<sup>2</sup>

My initial study of Phowo Srigyal included a biographical profile and a description of the structure of his trance ceremony.<sup>3</sup> The main focus of that paper was the fumigation ritual (*bsang*), one of the first parts of the proceedings, which is carried out to invoke and please the deities of the trance.

Phowo Srigyal's winter residence (*gzhi ma*) is on the west side of the Ja dkar gtsang po valley, not far from the township headquarters known as Man thang. He also spends time in a summer house that he shares with his son-in-law. It is located north of his winter residence, near the main bridge over the Ja dkar gtsang po. The interviews of 2003 were conducted at his winter house while those of 2004 were held at his summer residence.

During our time together Phowo Srigyal appeared remarkably fit for his age. I have not had contact with him since 2004, however, and do not know how he is still faring. Phowo Srigyal

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1 The project to collect information about the spirit-mediums of Upper Tibet was enabled by a generous fellowship awarded by the Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation (New York) and the Asian Cultural Council (New York), in 2003 and 2004. These esteemed organisations made monies available for the purchase of professional quality audio recording equipment, which was essential in the difficult conditions of Upper Tibet. The Rubin Foundation and the Asian Cultural Council subsequently supported the translation of the materials collected and more recently the writing of this paper.

2 The expeditions of 2003 (High Tibet Antiquities Expedition) and 2004 (High Tibet Welfare Expedition) were conducted as part of a joint agreement between the Tibetan Academy of Social Sciences and the University of Virginia.

3 See Bellezza 2011a; also see Bellezza 2009. For other studies of Upper Tibetan spirit-mediums, see Bellezza 1997; 2005; 2012; 2014a; Berglie 1976, 1978, 1980.

is an alert and intelligent man and along with his cooperative nature this made collecting information from him a pleasant and straightforward process. Phowo Srigyal married when he was around 29 years old; his wife is six years his junior. The couple have three girls and one boy, none of which practice spirit-mediumship. Phowo Srigyal is also a herder (*'brog pa*) and spends much time tending livestock.

Phowo Srigyal's father's clan is called Sba pha and his mother's clan is Rdong po. He worships a paternal clan god (*rus lha*) named Khams btsan, a *btsan* (class of aggressive red-colored spirits) that he believes originated in Khams. Reportedly, both his maternal and paternal lines have been in the area for numerous generations, but his clan god seems to indicate migration from the east of at least part of his family.

In the 1990s and 2000s, the local authorities tolerated Phowo Srigyal's mediumistic activities, as he is reputed to have helped many people in his home area. Phowo Srigyal reports going into trance dozens of times a year. Patients often come in vehicles in groups of two to four. There is no set fee schedule for his services and Phowo Srigyal treats the indigent free of charge. Those who can pay offer money or livestock.

## 2. Initiation as a spirit-medium

Phowo Srigyal's paternal uncle, Dpa' bo dbang 'dus, was a medium for Rta sgo lha btsan, a famous mountain god of the central Changthang. Through his paternal lineage, Rta sgo lha btsan is Phowo Srigyal's household protective god (*phugs lha*). Dpa' bo dbang 'dus died when Phowo Srigyal was in his early teens. It was not until reaching his early 20s that Phowo Srigyal first became possessed by spirits. As often happens to people so afflicted in Tibet, this caused psychological distress, heart pains and general body discomfort. Phowo Srigyal sought help from Gnam ru's most powerful spirit-medium of the time, Dpon skya mgon po dbang rgyal of Ring pa, a location less than a day away on horseback.<sup>4</sup> Dpon skya mgon po dbang rgyal cautioned him not to attempt to practice as a spirit-medium (*lhapa; lha pa / dpa' bo*) until all prerequisite conditions had been met. Learning the correct techniques for becoming a receptacle of the deities was imperative, lest harm come to Phowo Srigyal.

For several years, Dpon skya mgon po dbang rgyal helped Phowo Srigyal, and he carried out the 'opening the door of the subtle channels' (*rtsa sgo phye ba*) for him. This ritual procedure is designed to purify the subtle energy channels of the body and prepare them for entry of the consciousness of bona fide deities. It entails a battery of ablutions and bodily consecration. As part of opening the door of the subtle channels, the ring fingers of Phowo Srigyal were bound with cords to prevent the intrusion of evil spirits, which it is believed could cause havoc. Initially, the focus was on the ring finger of the left hand in order to regulate access to the subtle channels. Dpon skya mgon po dbang rgyal and Phowo Srigyal customarily went into trance together on the 1st, 8th and 15th of each lunar month. The young *lhapa* was made to describe the many visions that appeared in ritual mirrors of polished metal. Whilst in trance, the two men would offer libations (*gser skyems*) and incense (*bsangs*) to the deities.

4 For information on Dpon skya mgon po dbang rgyal and his son Dpon skya lha dbang, see Bellezza 2005: 110–141. As might be expected, the tradition of spirit-mediumship of the Dpon skya *lhapa* and Phowo Srigyal are similar.



The period of apprenticeship with Dpon skya mgon po dbang rgyal served to acquaint Phowo Srigyal with the deities and strengthen the concord between them, making the gods and goddesses reliable partners in service to the community. Dpon skya mgon po dbang rgyal cautioned Phowo Srigyal that a *lhapa* was to practice solely for the benefit of sentient beings. The great *lhapa* of Ring pa also explained to him the various healing techniques administered during the trance ceremony (*lha bzbugs*).

Dpon skya mgon po dbang rgyal empowered Phowo Srigyal by allowing him to use his *rigs lnga* headdress and other ritual equipment. The senior *lhapa* also gave him many ceremonial implements. Unfortunately, these were confiscated by the authorities during the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Phowo Srigyal's initiation as a *lhapa* was completed at twenty-five years of age. At that time, the high lama Sa skya gong ma was visiting the region. His Eminence performed ablutions and a consecration for Phowo Srigyal, consummate ritual acts in his tutelage as a spirit-medium. Nevertheless, before he could begin practicing independently, Phowo Srigyal was directed to circumambulate Gnam mtsho, the largest lake in the Changthang. During this pilgrimage of several hundred miles, Phowo Srigyal visited sacred sites, made prostrations and touched his head to holy objects, etc.

### 3. The deities of the trance ceremony

All spirit-mediums of Upper Tibet depend on higher Buddhist deities to sanction and supervise the trance ceremony. The ordinary form of the celebrated 8th century CE Vajrayāna saint, Padma 'byung gnas (O rgyan rin po che), acts as Phowo Srigyal's 'back support' (*rgyab rten*), his chief protector and patron. The special patron of the trance proceedings is the fierce form of Padma 'byung gnas, Gu ru drag po. Phowo Srigyal reports that the pentad of Buddhas known as Rgyal ba rigs lnga prevent obstacles and disturbances from all directions, which could adversely affect the possession ceremony. The sky-treading goddesses of Vajrayāna Buddhism, the *mkha' gro*, act as benefactresses of his trance.

The three main deities that actually take possession of Phowo Srigyal are well known mountain gods of the eastern Changthang: Thang lha mi dkar rta dkar (God of the Plain White Man White Horse), Rkyang khra (Variegated Wild Ass) and Btsan rgod nam ra.<sup>5</sup> In addition to requisitioning the body of the *lhapa*, these figures oversee and regulate the trance ceremony. They function to dispatch allied spirits and discharge a protective role, helping to keep Phowo Srigyal safe and sound during the proceedings.

Thang lha mi dkar rta dkar hails from the highest peak of the Gnyan chen thang lha range. Phowo Srigyal characterises this god as peaceful (*zhi ba*), white in color and clad in yellow armor and helmet. Thang lha mi dkar rta dkar is said to wear white clothes because he treats the ailments of both people and livestock without distinction. According to Phowo Srigyal, this god holds a spear with a white ensign (*mdung dar*) in his right hand and a bell (*dril bu*) in the left hand. In addition to denoting the main figure, Thang lha mi dkar rta dkar refers to this god's circle of white spirits, which are also mounted on white horses. Phowo Srigyal affirms that Thang lha's consort, Lake Gnam mtsho, has a function in the trance ceremony but he is not clear about the specifics. Phowo Srigyal and his wife conceive of Thang lha and Gnam mtsho in the traditional fashion as the archetypal father and mother of the herding community (*'brog pa'i sde*).

5 For detailed lore about these three gods derived from both the oral and literary traditions of the region, see Bellezza 1997; 2005.

The god Rkyang khra resides on a hilltop in the middle of a vast plain in Gnam ru. Phowo Srigyäl notes that he has both peaceful (*zhi ba*) and wrathful (*drag po*) forms. In his white or peaceful aspect he assumes the appearance of a *lama*. In his wrathful form he is a *btsan* spirit brandishing a spear with a red flag. Phowo Srigyäl says that Btsan rgod nam ra is also a wrathful red-colored deity, holding a spear with a red flag in his right hand and a ritual dagger (*phur pa*) made of an iron-rich alloy (*khro*) in his left. This god inhabits a lofty black mountain in Bar tha. The descriptions of the three main gods of the trance provided by Phowo Srigyäl are in line with iconographic lore found in Tibetan invocatory (*gsol kha*) and propitiatory (*bskang ba*) ritual literature.

In addition to the major possessing deities, spirit-mediums of Upper Tibet commonly rely on a pantheon of lesser spirits. These diverse remedial spirits come in both anthropomorphic and zoomorphic form. They are entrusted by the presiding deities of the trance with conducting various healing rites. Phowo Srigyäl reports that his possessing deities, Rkyang khra and Btsan rgod nam ra, have three main remedial spirits. They are Ri spyang sngon khra (Blue Striped Mountain Wolf), Rgya stag khra bo (a male tiger) and Bya khyung (Horned Eagle Bird). Bya khyung is allegedly effective in removing hard to access disease-causing contamination. This ornithic spirit is also said to cure head diseases and mental disorders. Rgya stag khra bo cures diseases of the body cavity, while Ri spyang sngon khra treats blood diseases and some internal conditions.

The remedial spirits of Phowo Srigyäl often treat diseases by sucking out perceived impurities from a patient's body. These defilements are generally known as *grib*. According to Phowo Srigyäl, three widely occurring types of *grib* are 'defilement of the planets' (*gza' grib*), said to cause mental and mental conditions; 'defilement caused by very serious transgressions' (*dme grib*) implicated in mental and physical health disorders of various kinds; and 'blood defilement' (*khrag grib*), the cause of heart and circulatory diseases. This method of healing is known as 'cleansing through sucking' (*'jibs sbyangs*), and it is widely used by other spirit-mediums in Tibet and adjoining Himalayan regions. When performing cleansing through sucking, Phowo Srigyäl employs a white offering scarf (*kha btags*), one end of which is placed in his mouth and the other end on the contamination-laden part of the patient's body.

Phowo Srigyäl avers that the three or four Mi dkar rta dkar gods of Thang lha who possess him do not perform cleansing through sucking. They are rather peaceful spirits. Among this group is the 'god of sheep' (*lug lha*), whose main function is the protection and propagation of sheep. The god of sheep, as a paragon of prosperity and good fortune, is also instrumental in aiding human beings. As compensation for their assistance during the trance ceremony, the Mi dkar rta dkar gods are figuratively or literally presented with white sheep. Phowo Srigyäl maintains that Thang lha's retinue of white spirits is crucial in propitiating the personal deities of patients, for it also belongs to these same categories of numinous beings. These objects of divine supplication are the protector of males (*pho lha*), the clan god (*rus lha*) who guards the life-force (*srog*), and the warrior protector of an individual's health and interests (*dgra lha*). Other members of the Thang lha mi dkar rta dkar group are the gods of wealth (*nor lha*) who appear in the guise of white yaks. The personal deities function much like the god of sheep.

Phowo Srigyäl observes that the local territorial deity (*yul lha*), Btsan rgod gtor gtsug, plays no part in the trance ceremony. Nor do his two household protectors (*phugs lha*). The popular class of female water spirits called *klu mo* do however have a curative role, particularly for livestock. Phowo Srigyäl states that the female water spirits work under the supervision of the Buddhist liberators Rje btsun Sgrol ma dkar mo and Rje btsun Sgrol ma sngon mo.

#### 4. The ritual objects and costume of the trance ceremony

As with other spirit-mediums of Upper Tibet, the two main ritual instruments of Phowo Srigyäl are the drum (*rnga*) and flat bell (*gshang*). The drum he currently uses was given to him by a *lama* named Bsod pa, who came from Mkhar chung (sp?) in Khams. The drum Phowo Srigyäl performed with before the Chinese Cultural Revolution had a drum-skin of a blue sheep on one side and the skin of goat on the other side, which he says imparted a particularly pleasing sound. His flat bell is also a post-Chinese Cultural Revolution acquisition and has an elaborate brocade streamer (*dar 'phan*) with a copper 'endless knot' (*dpal gyi be'u*) sewn onto it. The flat bell was bequeathed to him by the family of a spirit-medium named Lha pa dbang phyug. This *lhapa* from Ring pa also channeled Rkyang khra. Phowo Srigyäl states that he died circa 2000 at around eighty-two years of age.

Another key ritual implement is the hourglass-shaped hand-drum with two heads (*da ma ru*). The one Phowo Srigyäl plays is of recent manufacture and it has an elaborate brocade tail. He stresses that the drum, flat bell and *da ma ru* are essential for the proper execution of the trance ceremony.

As part of the trance ceremony Phowo Srigyäl wears the peaked red brocade hat typical of spirit-mediums, which is known as the 'hat of the *btsan*' (*btsan zhwa*). On top of it is a plume consisting of a single peacock (*rma bya*) feather and the downy white feathers of the lammergeyer (*thang dkar*). Phowo Srigyäl believes that lammergeyer feathers are a *rlung rta* (a good luck force borne on a celestial horse) attracting device and cleanse any contamination (*grib*) with which he may be infected. The headdress of five diadems he places over the hat of the *btsan* spirits is called a *rigs lnga*. His *rigs lnga* is an antique presented to him by the family of the late Lha pa dbang phyug. It has an eye painted on each of the two fan-like extensions known as 'wings' (*gshog pa*). These eyes are thought to guard against contamination caused by the planetary spirits (*gza*). The wings are made of cotton and are painted with colorful stripes, which Phowo Srigyäl calls 'sky rainbow' (*nam mkha' 'ja' mtshon*). The cotton covering of the wings is supported by a wooden frame and slivers of bamboo. As part of his standard ritual costume, Phowo Srigyäl wears a red brocade mantle (*stod khebs*) over his upper torso.

During the trance ceremony, Phowo Srigyäl sometimes wields an old ritual dagger with a black streamer (*phur dar*) as an exorcist instrument. The symbol of Vajrayāna Buddhism par excellence, the ritual thunderbolt (*rdo rje*) is envisaged as a healing instrument that can cut through the toughest obstacles in a patient's life. Another important piece of ritual equipment is the draped arrow (*mda' dar*). According to Phowo Srigyäl, the arrow draped in rainbow-colored and white cloths functions to remove diseases. It also acts as a long-life summoning (*tshé 'gugs*) and soul summoning (*bla 'gugs*) instrument. In the long-life and soul summoning rituals, the draped arrow is used to propitiate a patient's clan god, household protector and warrior spirit companions. During these rituals Phowo Srigyäl repeatedly waves the arrow around the patient. Save for the drum, Phowo Srigyäl's ritual gear is stored in pair of locally woven saddle bags.

A key ritual instrument for facilitating the possession state is the metal mirror (*me long*). Usually made of various copper alloys, it is believed to store and direct the consciousness of the deities that participate in the trance ceremony. Before the Chinese Cultural Revolution, Phowo Srigyäl used three mirrors to effect the trance state, one for the deities of each level of the three-tiered universe (*srid pa'i gsum*): 1) heavens, 2) earth's surface, 3) the waters and below the earth. Now he only has two ritual mirrors. The mirror called 'outer world' (*phyi gling*) is for Thang lha and his circle of spirits and other important gods (*lha*), most of which reside in the upper or celestial

realm. His other mirror is a receptacle for the deities of the 'middle world' (*bar gling*) and 'inner world' (*nang gling*). The middle world mirror captures and reflects the consciousness of the divine inhabitants of the terrestrial dimension. These include red-colored gods such as Rkyang khra and Btsan rgod nam ra and their retinues. The inner world mirror embodies the consciousness of the sky-treading *mkha' gro* goddesses and the female water spirits (*klu mo*).

As do other spirit-mediums of Upper Tibet, Phowo Srigyäl believes that at the moment of possession, the consciousness of the presiding deity strikes the ritual mirror before being relayed inside his body via the head and upper torso. During possession the lead deity resides in the central subtle energy channel (*dbu ma*) near his heart. The consciousness of the deity is simply called light rays (*od zer*) by Phowo Srigyäl. He envisions this light or consciousness as being rainbow-colored. Phowo Srigyäl is uncertain where his own consciousness (*rnam shes*) goes for the duration of the possession state. Some Upper Tibetan spirit-mediums say it is stored in the ritual mirror for safekeeping, while others claim that it is conveyed to the heavenly realm of the gods. There is a universal belief among *lhapa* that the personal consciousness and a divine consciousness cannot inhabit the same individual simultaneously. Like a full vessel in which more liquid is poured, one displaces the other.

## 5. The remedial procedures of the trance ceremony

As noted, Phowo Srigyäl holds that the healing of humans is effected through removal of contamination (*grib*) by the cleansing through sucking method. He also says that disorders are ameliorated through the propitiation of a patient's *phugs lha*, *pho lha* and *dgra lha*, using incense and water. In the case of livestock diseases, Phowo Srigyäl resorts to fumigation with aromatic herbs and the sprinkling of barleycorn on animals.

Like other spirit-mediums of highland Tibet, Phowo Srigyäl uses a variety of braided cords (*srung mdud*) for a wide range of apotropaic and curative purposes. While under the possession of the deities these cords are knotted and then blown and spat upon in order to empower them. It is believed that these actions transfer the blessings (*shyin brlabs*) of the possessing deity to the recipient of the knotted cord. Phowo Srigyäl affirms that cords braided from white sheep's wool are useful in many diseases and for preventing obstacles (*bar chad*) and obstructions (*gegs*) in a patient's life. Knotted cords made of white and black sheep wool braided together are effective against arthritis (*grum bu*) and other types of bodily pains. Knotted cords of black sheep's wool prevent diseases of the planetary gods (primarily implicated in various mental and neurological conditions). Phowo Srigyäl adds that knotted cords braided from black and/or white yak hair accomplish the same general purpose as the woolen ones. Cords made from hare's hair are used to prevent livestock epidemics. Knotted cords of brown bear hair are said to alleviate life threatening diseases in humans when other medical means have failed. Phowo Srigyäl keeps a small supply of brown bear hair for such purposes.

Phowo Srigyäl explains that downy feathers from the breast of an owl are beneficial in virtually all diseases, but they are especially effective in maladies caused by the class of demons called *'dre*. They are empowered during the trance by spitting and blowing upon them. The owl feathers are then waved around the patient. Small white feathers from the lammergeyer are thought to augment a patient's good luck energy (*rlung rta*) and abilities (*dbang thang*). Feather charms are empowered by blowing on them whilst under the influence of the deities.

Phowo Srigyal also dispels demons by throwing blessed barleycorn (*phyag nas*) or black sand heated in a cauldron (*slang nga*) on a patient. These things are spat upon to make them especially effective weapons against harmful forces. The action of blowing and spitting conveys the blessings and magical power of the deity. Phowo Srigyal states that hot black sand (*bye nag*) is especially efficacious in warding off diseases known as ‘dirty earth’ (*sa btsog*). It is believed that livestock contract this disease through the soil and pass it onto humans, particularly when animals are butchered. As a preventative measure black sand can be cast over an animal before it is slaughtered.

To halt a series of child deaths in a family thought to be caused by demon killers of children (*chung sri*) and killers of the charnel grounds (*dur sri*), Phowo Srigyal conducts the ‘cutting of the homicidal demons’ (*sri bcad*) ritual. The afflicted mother must prepare a cord made from nine black and nine white strands of yarn braided together. In the middle of this cord a single red string known as the ‘life-force thread’ (*srog skud*) is placed. This collection of cords is wrapped in black cloth and bound with a white offering scarf. During the trance ceremony, the afflicted woman holds one end of this ritual device and Phowo Srigyal the other end. He then ‘cuts’ through the middle of it with a lammergeyer feather. Subsequently, the ritual packet is opened. If all the black and white cords have been cut this is a positive sign, indicating that the homicidal demons have been defeated. In the unlikely event that the red string has been severed this is a very bad omen, requiring elaborate ritual and religious intervention.

## 6. An introduction to the trance ceremony

The first trance ceremony of Phowo Srigyal I observed was presided over by the mountain god Btsan rgod nam ra (November 1, 2003). The second ceremony was superintended by Thang sras mchor po, a son of Gnyan chen thang lha (May 20, 2004). The focus in this paper is on the third possession ceremony (May 21, 2004), the only one of the three to be fully recorded with audio equipment.<sup>6</sup>

The trance ceremony of May 21, 2004, can be divided into seven major parts:

1. Preliminary activities of setting up ritual equipment and donning ceremonial dress
2. Initial invocations (*gsol 'debs*) and fumigation ritual (*bsang*)
3. Proclamation of the lineages of deities (*lha rabs*) and entrusting activities to them (*'phrin bcol*) purportedly uttered by the presiding god of the trance
4. Oracular functions (*lung bstan*) of the presiding god of the trance
5. Summoning of good fortune (*g.yang 'gugs*) by the deities of the trance
6. Return of the deities to their abodes (*gshegs bskyod*)
7. Concluding activities of thanksgiving prayers and the stowing away of ritual gear

This paper presents the *lha rabs* and *'phrin bcol* of Phowo Srigyal. These two liturgical sequences made up about half of the 40-minute trance ceremony (excluding preliminary and concluding activities). The proceedings of the May 21st possession ceremony began at 8:55 AM. Its objective was to insure that the three-month long High Tibet Welfare Expedition (HTWE), which was

<sup>6</sup> The painstaking work of making transcriptions and translations of the materials collected was done in collaboration with G.yung drung bstan 'dzin of Steng chen.

still in its early stages at that time, would be successful. Although I suggested that someone else benefit from the trance proceedings, it was convened on my behalf. Traditionally, a request for such services is made by the interested party and is something not taken lightly.

The special altar for the trance ceremony was already set up from the transactions the night before. After dressing for the occasion, Phowo Srigyäl began his pre-trance invocations and incense offerings (*bsang*). The *bsang* ritual was preceded by Buddhist refuge prayers (*skyabs 'gro*), aspirational prayers (*smon lam*) and other initial supplications (*gsol 'debs*). Along with the *bsang*, this part of the ceremony lasted a little over nine minutes.<sup>7</sup> The *bsang* is not merely an offering of fragrant substances but a method of purifying 'worldly' deities sullied through human activities. The intent of the *bsang* ritual is to attract the attention of a broad range of divinities, in order that they might aid the spirit-medium in his work. The deities do this either through direct participation in the trance ceremony or as observers of the proceedings. Those called upon include Buddhist tutelary gods (*yi dam*), Buddhist protectors (*chos skyong*), female sky-goers (*mkha' 'gro ma*), various mountain gods and lake goddesses, warrior gods (*dgra lha*), and a variety of elemental and personal spirits.<sup>8</sup>

The speech translated in this paper begins at the moment of deity possession, an event marked by Phowo Srigyäl ejaculating the word *phaṭ!* *Phaṭ* is frequently used in Tibetan mantras of a decidedly more wrathful character. It conveys a sense of completion or finality. For Phowo Srigyäl and other Upper Tibetan spirit-mediums, *phaṭ* heralds a clean break with their ordinary consciousness. As tradition would have it, at this point in time, Phowo Srigyäl's body no longer contains his psyche or personality; it has become a receptacle for a divine consciousness working through his body, voice and senses.

Phowo Srigyäl communicates mostly in the local pastoral dialect of western Gnam ru, which exhibits linguistic features of both the *hor skad* and *stod skad* dialects. Phowo Srigyäl's ceremonial elocution is embellished with poetic verses, colorful allusions and religious imagery, adding to the charm and solemnity of the local dialect. The various recitations made allegedly under the influence of the deities are characterised by much vigor and spontaneity. The majority of Phowo Srigyäl's trance speech is derived from ancient prosodic and ritual traditions, and it exhibits many old-fashioned grammatical and lexical traits.

One ancient feature of Phowo Srigyäl's trance utterances is the prolific use of three syllables at the end of a line of verse to vividly convey the sound, movement or appearance of the object or personality spoken about. The use of trisyllabic indicators is already present in the Dunhuang manuscripts. The speech of Phowo Srigyäl is also distinguished by quaint expressions. For example, men are denoted *A pho* (sometimes rendered as *A bo* in the local dialect) or *A pho skyes pa*, an honorific but picturesque term.

According to the G.yung drung Bon religion, spirit-mediumship is included among the four traditions of divination and oracular pronouncement situated in the first vehicle of teachings

7 As with Phowo Srigyäl's liturgies in general, his *bsang* is characterised by a highly diverse selection of divinities. See Bellezza 2011a.

8 The *bsang* liturgy of May 21, 2004, was composed of 100 lines, in addition to 14 or 15 hard-to-understand lines, which were sung as the consciousness of Phowo Srigyäl was supposedly being replaced by that of the possessing deity. Most of these supplementary lines end with the verb *mkhyen*, calling upon various deities to lend their attention and protection to the spirit-medium. Among those invoked are the god of males (*pho lha*), root lama (*rtsa ba'i bla ma*), highest limpid gods (*gsang lha gong ma*), god of the wind (*rlung lha*), Gu ru drag po, and caretakers or guides (*kha 'dzin*). Some of the lines include the lyrical expression *la ya'*, which is without lexical value. It conveys a happy and reverent sense and is also found in Tibetan folksongs of the Changthang.

called *Phya gshen*.<sup>9</sup> The *Phya gshen* system is based primarily on two classes of deities, the *lha* and *dgra lha* / *dgra bla* (called *sgra bla* in G.yung drung Bon). Indeed, it is the *lha* and *dgra lha* that monopolise Phowo Srigyäl's trance-induced liturgies.<sup>10</sup> *Dgra lha* are thought to accompany each male and to confer protection and success in practical endeavors (especially martial ones). Phowo Srigyäl's utterances share much in common with G.yung drung Bon texts dedicated to the *sgra bla*. Some of this literature for the *sgra bla* is thought to date to early times. That contemporary *lhapa* like Phowo Srigyäl rely on *dgra lha* for client healing, protection and augury seems to indicate that the historical origins attributed to spirit-mediumship in G.yung drung Bon are not without merit. It appears that the speech of the spirit-mediums and similar content in G.yung drung Bon texts concerning the *dgra lha* stem from archaic traditions modified to suit the practical demands of a Buddhist dominated religious environment. Despite Buddhist inroads, my study of Old Tibetan grammar and vocabulary suggests that trance-induced invocations for the *dgra lha* retain much of their original form.

Many of Phowo Srigyäl's lines begin with idiosyncratic interjections that furnish little additional semantic value. Rather they enhance the import of his speech by affirming what is being said and by creating rhetorical pauses. The three interjections that Phowo Srigyäl regularly pronounces are *nga*, *dma'* and *ya'*. They are often vocalised in such a way that they become almost indistinguishable from one another. These roughly homophonous words belong to the cant of many Upper Tibetan spirit-mediums, a peculiar feature of their speech. They also appear in verses from the Tibetan epic, *Gling Ge sar*, sung by bards of the Changthang. *Nga*, *dma'* or *ya'* can be translated something to the effect of 'ha!', 'oh, yes!', 'yes, indeed!', or 'aye, aye!'.

The high status of Rkyang khra is clearly signaled in the language of this formidable figure. It is full of the expression *A kho re*, which is used to call someone's attention. *A kho re* is a common means of solicitation equivalent to the English 'hey you!', and rendered in my translation as 'Listen!'. This familiar form is somewhat more polite than simply *kho re*, both of which occur in the vernacular of Khams and in Phowo Srigyäl's speech. This expression is appropriate for a deity when speaking to mere mortal men.

## 7. The *lha rabs* of the trance ceremony

The articulation of the origins, names and appearances of the deities (*lha rabs*) occurs right after the fumigation ritual was completed and designates the beginning of the possession state. It is characterised by a variable lyrical structure. In the *lha rabs* the god speaking through Phowo Srigyäl announces his presence, followed by the proclamation of his divine lineage and that of his circle of helping spirits. It is believed that the presiding god of the trance brings various as-

9 For a discussion of the *Phya gshen* ritual system see, Bellezza 2005: 344–354; Snellgrove 1967: 22–41.

10 The *dgra lha* are indigenous warrior spirits that have become amalgamated in varying degrees to Tibetan Buddhism. In zoomorphic form (tiger, lion, dragon and horned eagle), they occupy the four directions of the *rlung rta* / *klung rta* or so-called prayer flag. On *dgra bla* in the Dunhuang manuscripts, see Stein 2010 (Antiqua V): 267, 268; Bellezza 2005: 349. The *dgra bla* are noted in the Dunhuang divination manuscripts Pt. 1043, 1047, 1051, and ITJ 738. See also Bellezza 2014b: 171f. On the *dgra lha* more generally, consult Waddell 1993 [1895]: 375; de Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1993 [1956]; Stein 1972: 222f.; Karmay 1998. For *sgra bla* in G.yung drung Bon ritual tradition, see Snellgrove 1967; Gibson 1985; Norbu 1995; Clemente 1994; Bellezza 2005; 2008. On the relationship between the bards and *sgra lha*, see Stein 1959. For the cult of *dgra lha* in the liturgies of the spirit-mediums of Upper Tibet, see Bellezza 2005; 2011a: 6, 12.

sistant spirits along with him, which are dispatched to help achieve the therapeutic and oracular aims of the ceremony.

Under possession Phowo Srigyäl sings the lines of the *lha rabs* quickly and forcefully. It is in this part of the trance ceremony that the presiding divinity announces his identity. In the transactions of May 21, 2004, the conducting god was the *btsan* Rkyang khra, a son of the great mountain god Thang lha. As chief of many types of lesser spirits, Rkyang khra is an ideal supervisor of supernatural subordinates and organiser of trance affairs. He directs the circle of helping spirits to carry out specific sanctifying, remedial, apotropaic and oracular functions on behalf of Phowo Srigyäl's clients. Like a great military commander, Rkyang khra fields an army against an opposing force of demonic threats and obstacles to human health and happiness.

In the *lha rabs*, Rkyang khra directly addresses those in attendance, but he does not immediately reveal his identity. Instead, he describes himself and place of residence in cryptic language. The god challenges observers to tease out his identity by furnishing them with a long list of clues. This manner of speaking is closely aligned to the riddle format of yore known as *lde'u*.<sup>11</sup> Like the *lde'u*, the god Rkyang khra relies on figurative and symbolic language to convey his true identity. The first fully comprehensible line exhorts those in attendance to pay close attention to the words of the possessing god. Initially, the god calls himself by the epithet 'Handsome Body' (Gzugs mchor po), but this does not divulge much, because many different gods could be described in a like manner. His place of residence is then described, a magical tent in the midst of plains and mountains, a location in Gnam ru. Rkyang khra does not live there alone, for he informs his audience that he oversees a vast divine army of *lha*. Like humans, this god has warrior spirits (*dgra lha*) that serve him. Finally, after twenty-seven lines of speech Rkyang khra offers his name, dispelling any doubt as to his true identity.

Rkyang khra declares that he is one fathom (*'doms*) in height, the size of an ordinary man. Nevertheless, as befits a divine being, his reach is much greater than that. In acknowledgment of his role in the Buddhist pantheon, Rkyang khra states that he is called from the doorway of a monastery:

1. {###}<sup>12</sup>
2. {###}
3. Ha! That good man encircled by the male{Ge khong}:<sup>13</sup>
4. Listen! listen carefully to me with the ears on the top of your head!
5. Ha! listen! {#} the body of myself {#},
6. Ha! if you do not recognise myself, the *btsan*, like this,
7. Ha! listen! Handsome Body of that home country (*pha yul*) of Sdod le,<sup>14</sup>
8. Ha! listen! if you do not know the father's place far away,
9. Ha! listen! that country in which I, Handsome Btsan, reside,
10. Ha! listen! on the upper plain {of Ba ga thug} in the east,

11 For an introduction to the *lde'u* tradition, see Norbu 1995: 21–34.

12 There are intervals in the speech of Phowo Srigyäl that remain partially or fully inaudible. These are designated in the translation as follows: One or more syllables or words inaudible in a line: {#}. An entire inaudible line: {###}. Words of uncertain readings are bracketed by: {}.

13 The translation of this line is uncertain because the signification of "Ge khong" is unclear. It appears to be the name of a deity or class of deities (*ge*).

14 Sdod le may be an actual toponym but a metaphorical meaning seems more likely.



11. Ha! On the lower plain {of Ba ga thug} in the east,
12. Ha! listen! on the eighteen great secret [paths] {of the precinct} in the east,
13. Ha! listen! on the pass (*la mgo*) of Adamantine Lotus Btsan (Btsan rdo tje padma),
14. Ha! listen! from an egg on the plain that is like a lotus,
15. Ha! listen! in the palace of the adamantine three mountain peaks,
16. Ha! listen! on the lotus headland *ser chen* flower,<sup>15</sup>
17. Ha! listen! there is the {father *lha*}, a self-arising {yellow} *btsan*.
18. Ha! listen! there is the self-erected rainbow lotus tent.<sup>16</sup>
19. Ha! there are {bright} flowers raining down profusely (*thib thib*).
20. Ha! listen! there is the great mass (*spungs se*) of moving and stationary *lha* protectors.
21. Ha! listen! that palace of Handsome Body's residence,
22. Ha! listen! that lotus headland *ser chen* flower,
23. Ha! listen! that sharp pointed (*rgod*) mountain peak encircled by a rainbow like the fashioned *gtor ma* offering of the *btsan* and *dgra lha*,
24. Ha! listen! is the palace of dwelling (*sdod le*) of Handsome Btsan.
25. Ha! listen! that borrowed body of myself, Handsome Body:
26. Ha! listen! if you don't know the body of myself, Handsome Btsan,
27. Ha! listen! it is the one called Rkyang khra, the eastern {jewel of} the world.
28. {Ha! listen! in the very daytime of today},<sup>17</sup>
29. Ha! listen! on the upper great secret [path] of {Bal bu} of the east,
30. Ha! listen! is the borrowed {body} of myself, Handsome One.
31. Ha! listen! there is a tent like a great ring (*A long*).
32. Ha! listen! there is a {shadow} like a clear mirror.<sup>18</sup>
33. Ha! {listen!} the body is one fathom [in height].<sup>19</sup>
34. Ha! listen! in the square door of the castle of the Tibetan monastery:
35. Ha! {listen!} Handsome Body, {by the long-distance body},<sup>20</sup> is the one called.
36. Ha! listen! I am the favorite *lha* of {#} Gdong go ra.<sup>21</sup>

1. {###}
2. {###}
3. *Nga pho* {*ge khong*} 'khor ba'i A pho de l
4. *Mgo ya* 'thod rna bas la A kho re nyan gcig gyis l<sup>22</sup>
5. *Nga* {#} rang lus {#} A kho re {#} nas l
6. *Nga btsan* {di 'dra} rang ngo ma shes na l

<sup>15</sup> This flower has yellow petals and a red corona.

<sup>16</sup> 'Rainbow' refers to the arched shape as well as the color of the tent (*gur khang*).

<sup>17</sup> This is the general import of the line, but the reading itself is uncertain.

<sup>18</sup> This line seems to refer to the god's consciousness in the mirror (*gling*) of the trance ceremony.

<sup>19</sup> This line appears to also mention the tent residence of the god Rkyang khra and the term *rgya bo* (a color?).

<sup>20</sup> *Rgyang lus*. This word probably refers to the manner in which the deity can extend itself over long distances to meet the call of spirit-mediums and the needs of petitioners.

<sup>21</sup> Gdong go ra (Go ra g.ya' dmar) is a well-known mountain spirit in Go ra township, Dpal mgon County (Bellezza 2005: 269).

<sup>22</sup> The equivalent of *A kho re* is placed at or near the beginning of English sentences to prevent the translations from becoming awkward or unwieldy.

7. *Nga gzugs mchor po sdod le'i A kho re pha yul de l*
8. *Nga rgyang ring po'i pha sa la A kho re ma shes na l*
9. *Nga btsan mchor po sdod gi la A kho re pha yul de l*
10. *Nga shar {ba ga thug gi} la A kho re thang stod na l*<sup>23</sup>
11. *Nga shar {ba ga thug gi} thang smad na l*
12. *Nga shar {ba ra'i} gsang chen la A kho re bco brgyad na l*
13. *Nga btsan rdo rje padma'i la A kho re la mgo zhig na l*
14. *Nga thang padma 'dra le'i la A kho re gong nga zhig nas l*
15. *Nga ri rtse gsum rdo rje'i la A kho re pho brang na l*
16. *Nga gdong padma ser chen la A kho re me tog na l*
17. *Nga btsan {ser po yab lha} la A kho re rang shar zhig yod l*
18. *Nga gzha' padma'i gur khang la A kho re rang phub yod l*
19. *Nga {gsal} me tog char pa thib thib yod l*
20. *Nga lha srung ma'i 'gro sdod la A kho re phungs se yod l*
21. *Nga gzugs mchor po sdod gi la A kho re pho brang de l*
22. *Nga gdong padma ser chen la A kho re me tog de l*
23. *Nga ri rtse rgod {#} gzha' 'char le l nga btsan dgra lha'i mchod gtor la A kho re bzhangs 'dra de l*<sup>24</sup>
24. *Nga btsan mchor po sdod le'i la A kho re pho brang red l*
25. *Nga gzugs mchor po'i rang lus la A kho re g.yar po de l*
26. *Nga btsan mchor po'i rang lus la A kho re ma shes na l*
27. *Nga shar {nor bu'i} 'dzam gling la A kho re rkyang khra zhig zlo l*
28. *{Nga dus de ring nyi ma'i la A kho re gong khra zhig na} l*
29. *Nga shar {bal bu'i} gsang chen la A kho re gong ma la l*
30. *Nga {gzugs} mchor po'i rang lus la A kho re g.yar po red l*
31. *Nga rgya A long 'dra le'i la A kho re gur zhig yod l*
32. *Nga gsal me long 'dra le'i la A kho re {grib} zhig yod l*
33. *Nga lus 'doms gang {rgya bo la A kho re gur zhig} yod l*
34. *Nga bod dgon pa'i mkhar sgo la A kho re gru bzhi la l*
35. *Nga gzugs mchor po {rgyang lus la A kho re} 'bod le de l*
36. *Nga gdong go ra'i {#} la A kho re gces lha zhig red l*

## 8. The 'phrin bcol of the trance ceremony

Without interruption Phowo Srigyäl's begins the interrelated liturgy for entrusting activities to the deities (*'phrin bcol*). This moving from one part of the trance ceremony to another is marked by a change in the style of chanting.

The first audible line in the *'phrin bcol* invokes India, the primary source of Buddhist teachings and divinities. Like humans, Rkyang khra has his own root lama, demonstrating that he operates under an oath of loyalty to the Buddha and his doctrine. The origins of these oaths are often

23 Although the ablative case-sign *nas* appears to be spoken by Phowo Srigyäl, this should be read as the locative case-sign *na* here and in many other lines of the *lha rabs*.

24 To prevent the translations from becoming too cumbersome, the interjection *nga l dma' l ya'* is usually ignored when it opens a second or third line of Tibetan rendered into a single English sentence.

traced back to the 8th century CE Buddhist master Gu ru Rin po che. Mention of Buddhism in the *'phrin bcol* of Phowo Srigyal is limited but religiously significant, occurring in what is otherwise a largely archaic recitation.

As is customary in Buddhist tantric tradition, Rkyang khra requests the 'Great Mother' (Yum chen, the goddess of wisdom Prajñāpāramitā) and 'sky-treaders' (*mkha' gro*, female protectors of the tantric doctrine and its practitioners) to accompany and enthusiastically support him. Clearly, such Buddhist deities are viewed as being of higher rank than the presiding god of the trance and his circles of helping spirits. These Buddhist figures however are grafted onto a much more extensive pantheon of native spirits called upon in the *'phrin bcol*:

1. {###}
2. High above is like {#} the *lha* lineage in low<sup>25</sup> India {resides in the ocean}.
3. The root lama of myself, the elder brother resides here.
4. {###}
5. Great Mother mother and the sky-treaders reside here.
6. Mother sky-treaders, do not be of little magical power:
7. The father {Rol po'i} btsan rgod nam ra resides here.
8. {###}
9. Please be the helping friend of the son of the good father.
10. The {noble man (*A bo*)} is the divine mandala of the country of humans.<sup>26</sup>
11. {###}
12. Expand the males<sup>27</sup> of our {#} the square door of Buddhism {#}.<sup>28</sup>

1. {###}
2. {#} 'dra ba'i yar steng nas | dma' rgya gar lha rabs {mtsho la bzhugs} |
3. Pho rang rang rtsa ba'i bla ma bzhugs |
4. {###}
5. Yum chen ma dang mkha' 'gro bzhugs |
6. Ma mkha' 'gro mthu rtsal ma chung la |
7. Pha {rol po'i} btsan rgod nam ra bzhugs |
8. {###}
9. Pha bzang po'i bu la las rogs mdzod |
10. Lha dkyil 'khor mi yul {A bo} des |
11. {###}
12. {#} rang re'i stag shar rgyas pa na | dma' {#} chos sgo gru bzhi de |

The second section of the *'phrin bcol* begins the petitioning of the *dgra lha*, the warrior spirits. The imagery and motifs of Phowo Srigyal's verses are similar to those found in written texts.

25 *Dma'*. This word is a phonetic variant of the interjection *nga*, but here it appears to denote 'low' or 'bottom-land'.

26 Although it is not designated as such, perhaps this line is better understood using the genitive case: "The {noble man} of the divine mandala of the country of humans."

27 *Stag shar*. This old word denotes male heroes and warriors. For textual usages, see Bellezza 2005: 409; 2008: 241.

28 *Chos sgo gru bzhi*. This appears to be a metaphor for the Buddhist doctrine (*Bstan pa*), but the citing of portals is more common in the classification of G.yung drung Bon teachings.

The oral tradition, however, is replete with colloquialisms, the liberal use of interjections, a more fluid structure, and does not mention the *dgra lha* as the protectors of early clans and tribes in Tibet. The *dgra lha*, as Rkyang khra declares, belong to the white or virtuous side of existence (*dkar phyogs*). They are commended by describing their benefits to humanity. It also appears that the female spirits known as *sman* are invoked, as are their counterparts, the *lha*:

1. The protector that want you yourselves, ha! the *dgra lha* of the defenders of the virtuous side.<sup>29</sup>
2. I praise the exalted divinity of the heroic *dgra lha*.
3. Now, the eighty lineages of *lha* {#}.
4. Ha! the square door of the castle {#}.
5. {###}
6. It is said that whatever place you go it is auspicious.
7. In whatever country you reside your aims will be realised.
8. Ha! you utterly destroy {the diseases and suddenly occurring misfortune}.
9. Ha! the male, the noble man, the fine man, the protector worshipped by all the paternal generations, the *dgra lha* encircled by male [spirits].
10. The woman of Sman chung {#}.
11. {###}

1. *Pho rang rang dgos le'i srung ma de l dma' dkar phyogs skyong ba'i dgra lha de l*
2. *Dpa' dgra lha'i lha la ngo so bstod l*
3. *Da lha rabs brgyad cu'i {#} l*
4. *Dma' {#} mkhar sgo gru bzhi de l*
5. {###}
6. *Sa gar song sa la bkra shis zer l*
7. *Yul gar bsdad sa la don gcig 'grub l*
8. *Dma' {nad rigs glo bur} rdul la rlogs l*
9. *Dma' stag shar A bo skyes pa de l dma' pho rabs bsten pa'i srung ma de l dma' stag shar 'khor ba'i dgra lha de l*
10. *Sman chung bu mo'i {#} l*
11. {###}

Next in the *'phrin bcol* ritual a bevy of *dgra lha* and closely related spirits are importuned. The first of these is the sheep god (*lug lha*), who is associated with the renowned sacred mountain, Gnyan chen thang lha. The second god mentioned by Rkyang khra speaking through Phowo Srigyäl is the god of yaks (*nor lha*), which is equated with Mgon po ber chen, a well-known Buddhist protector clad in a black cloak (*ber nag*). *Nor lha* can simply refer to any god of wealth, but in Upper Tibet and other herding communities of Tibet yaks are synonymous with wealth and prosperity. The god of goats called upon is also identified with Mgon po in the form of a titan (*A sur*).<sup>30</sup> Like other deities of livestock, the god of horses (*rta lha*) is a native figure. These

29 The word *pho* at the beginning of the first line does not fit in well grammatically. It may refer to those who are seeking the blessings of the gods.

30 This is Tibetanised Sanskrit for the class of spirits known as *la ma yin*.

deities assume special importance in pastoral Upper Tibet, for the health and welfare of the region's communities depend on yaks, sheep, goats and horses. They are thought to have much influence over the good fortune potentiality (*g.yang*) of animals and humans alike.<sup>31</sup> Tibetans believe that without a sufficient measure of *g.yang*, a person's health and material condition would inevitably decline. Thus livestock divinities are widely propitiated by herders, lay ritualists (*sngags pa*), spirit-mediums.

After the gods of livestock, Rkyang khra conjures various *dgra lha* and *gnyan* (a common class of terrestrial spirits in whose guise many *dgra lha* come). One of these *dgra lha* is named Gnyan stag dmar po, who is known to other Upper Tibetan spirit-mediums as well. Some *dgra lha* are apparently called singers (*glu pa*) and some are *wer ma*, another type of warrior spirit:

1. Ha! the *lug lha* of the white sheep (*g.yang dkar lug*) is the world's Gnyan chen thang lha.
2. Ha! he is surrounded by a circle of hundreds of thousands and millions of *lha*.
3. Ha! today, I invoke<sup>32</sup> the only<sup>33</sup> *lha* {protectors}, the *nor lha* of the grunting yaks, the Buddhist protector Mgon po ber chen.
4. Ha! I praise the only Black Greatcoat Tsha ba rong<sup>34</sup> in the rear.
5. Ha! I praise the *nor lha* of the grunting yaks.
6. Ha! the *ra lha* of the goats (*tshed tshed ra*) is the *ra lha* {titan}Mgon po (Defender).
7. Ha! I invoke the *{zhung nag}*,<sup>35</sup> the only Tsha ba rong.
8. Ha! [I invoke] with black yaks with the deep resonant sound (*sgra ldir*).
9. Ha! I invoke the only *lha* {#} /
10. Ha! the *rta lha* of horses (*'do ba rta*) is the *rta lha* Red Excellent Horse (Rta mchog dmar po).
11. Ha! he is the *lha* of the horses.
12. Ha! today, I invoke the *lha* of the horses.
13. The *dgra lha* of the sons (*skyes pa bu*) is Mighty Red Tiger (Gnyan stag dmar po) of the heroic *dgra lha*.
14. Ha! I invoke the hundred thousand and one million *gnyan* armies.
15. Ha! it is Dgra lha'i dar thul dkar po (White Silk Overcoat Warrior Spirit) of the *dgra lha*.
16. Ha! I invoke the hundred thousand territory protector {singers}.
17. [I invoke] the three *wer ma* of the heroic *dgra lha*, the three lineages of the heroic *dgra lha*.
18. I invoke the protectors of those born with the one-fathom body.

1. *Dma' g.yang dkar lug gi lug lha de l dma' 'dzam gling gnyan chen thang lha red l*
2. *Dma' lha 'khor bye ba 'bum gis bskor l*
3. *Dma' de ring {srung ma'i} lha gcig bswo l dma' ngur mo nor gi nor lha de l dma' chos skyong mgon po ber chen de l*
4. *Rgyab ber nag tsha ba rong gcig bswo l*

<sup>31</sup> For oral and literary traditions surrounding the gods of livestock, consult Bellezza 2005; 2013.

<sup>32</sup> *Bswo*. Located at the end of a grammatical line this word functions as a verb, signifying to 'invoke', to 'praise' to 'propitiate', or to 'fulfill'.

<sup>33</sup> *Gcig*. This word connotes exclusivity or the superlative and is found in the Tibetan literary tradition as well.

<sup>34</sup> This is probably the proper name of a god.

<sup>35</sup> The meaning of this word, if intended, is unknown.

5. *Dma' ngur mo nor gi nor lha bswo l*
6. *Dma' tshed tshed ra yi ra lha de l dma' ra lha {A sur} mgon po red l*
7. *Dma' {zhung nag} tsha ba rong gcig bswo l*
8. *Dma' nor nag rang sgra ldir se l*
9. *Dma' {#} lha gcig bswo l*
10. *Dma' 'do ba rta yi rta lha de l dma' rta lha rta mchog dmar po red l*
11. *Dma' 'do ba rta yi rta lha red l*
12. *Dma' de ring 'do ba rta lha bswo l*
13. *Dpa' skyes pa bu yi dgra lha de l dma' dgra lha'i gnyan stag dmar po red l*
14. *Dma' gnyan dmag bye ba 'bum gcig bswo l*
15. *Dma' dgra lha'i dar thul dkar po red l*
16. *Dma' zhing skyong {glu pa} 'bum gcig bswo l*
17. *Dpa' dgra lha'i wer ma rnam gsum de l dma' dgra lha'i {gdung rabs} rnam gsum de l*
18. *Lus 'doms gang skyes pa'i srung ma bswo l*

Now, nearly ten minutes after the recitations of the *lha rabs* and *'phrin bcol* began, Phowo Sri-gyal stops speaking. He breaks into a long song composed of just one syllable uttered repeatedly: 'e 'e 'e. This syllable frames the song's tripping tempo and lively melody. Without words, it is difficult to know what the possessing god has on his mind. It is as if Rkyang khra is expressing his elation and raw vitality, as he sings a paean to the unfathomably large and mysterious supernatural world over which he rules. Afterwards the warrior spirits are called upon to protect those for whom the trance ceremony is conducted. This constitutes the actual entrusting of the *dgra lha* and other remedial spirits with the essential work expected of them by both the officiating deities and human participants:

1. {###}
2. Ha! I invoke today at this very time.
3. *Bswo, bswo!*<sup>36</sup> I invoke the protectors who surround the excellent men.
4. Listen! you must watch over them wherever they might go.
5. Listen! you must protect them wherever they reside and stay.
6. Listen! those *dgra lha* protecting the sons themselves; I invoke the three mighty tiger brothers of the heroic *dgra lha*.
7. *Bswo, bswo!* Listen! I invoke Dar thul dkar po (White Silk Greatcoat) of the heroic *dgra lha*.
8. Listen! he is the god of the road (*lam lha*) who circles the males.
9. Listen! I invoke the *lha* protectors today at this very time.
10. *Bswo, bswo!* Listen! I invoke the Mighty Red Tiger of the *dgra lha*, who is the body god (*lus lha*) of the good men, the young men (*skyes dar ma*).
11. I invoke the protector who is worshipped by the excellent males.
12. Listen! be the good guide wherever they might go.
13. Listen! be the *dgra lha* {#} of the one-fathom long body.
14. *Bswo!* Be the good guide to the young men.
15. *Bswo, bswo!* Listen! the mother and father territory protectors (*zhing skyong*) of the heroic *dgra lha* are the back support of the good men males.

36 Used at the beginning of a line, *bswo* is an interjection calling upon and praising the deities.

16. Listen! they remove obstacles to long life and sudden misfortunes.
17. Listen! they defeat<sup>37</sup> the types of diseases and the harming 'byung po.<sup>38</sup>
18. Listen! they defeat the blight and disease of sudden onset obstructions.
19. I invoke. Be the back support of those born with the one-fathom long body.

1. {###}
2. *Ya' dus de ring nyi ma'i gong khra nas bswo l*
3. *Bswo bswo skyes pho rab 'khor ba'i srung ma rnams bswo l*
4. *Sa gar songs sa la kha 'dzin dgos mod kho re l*
5. *Gzhis gar bsad sa la mgon skyobs dgos mod kho re l*
6. *Kho re bu rang rang skyobs pa'i dgra lha de kho re l dma' dgra lha'i gnyan stag spun gsum de bswo l*
7. *Bswo bswo dpa' dgra lha'i dar thul dkar po bswo da<sup>39</sup> kho re l*
8. *Stag shar par 'khor gi lam lha red mod kho re l*
9. *Dus de ring srung ma'i lha de bswo kho re l*
10. *Bswo bswo dpa' dgra lha'i gnyan stag dmar po de da kho re l skyes dar ma A bo'i lus lha red mod bswo ya' l*
11. *Skyes pho rab bsten pa'i srung ma red mod bswo ya' l*
12. *Sa gar song sa la kha 'dzin mdzod shog kho re l*
13. *Lus 'doms gang {#} dgra lha mdzod shog kho re l*
14. *Skyes dar ma'i bu la kha 'dzin mdzod shog bswo l*
15. *Bswo bswo dpa' dgra lha'i zhing skyong yab yum de kho re l stag shar pa A bo'i rgyab rten red mod kho re l*
16. *Tshe bar chad glo bur sel le red mod kho re l*
17. *Gnod 'byung po nad rigs btul le red mod kho re l*
18. *Kag glo bur nad gdon btul le red mod kho re l*
19. *Lus 'doms gang skyes pa'i rgyab rten mdzod shog bswo l*

The liturgy continues with the invocation of a lion, vulture and tiger, three of the best known zoomorphic forms of *dgra lha* (the fourth is a dragon):

1. *Bswo, bswo!* Listen! the sparkling snow mountain of sunrise; I praise the *dgra lha* with the likeness of the white lioness.
2. Listen! I invoke you white lioness with the very big (*bung se*) turquoise mane.
3. Listen! fulfill their wishes wherever they might go.
4. I invoke you, be the good guide in whatever country they stay.
5. *Bswo, bswo!* In the good white vulture nest, on the high red rock; I praise the protector who looks like a lammergeyer (*bya thang-dkar*).
6. Listen! your downy lammergeyer wings (*[shog] drug*) *ldir ri ri*.<sup>40</sup>
7. I invoke the flock of {flying} birds *khro lo lo*.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>37</sup> *Btul* (from the local dialect, not a past tense verb).

<sup>38</sup> A class of demons.

<sup>39</sup> *Bswo da* reinforces the summoning of the spirit.

<sup>40</sup> *Ldir ri ri* conveys that the wings are swooshing.

<sup>41</sup> *Khro lo lo* shows that the birds are screeching.

8. Be the *dgra lha* of the males wherever they might go.
9. *Bswo!* Ha! I invoke the tigress in the sparkling forest from Nepal.
10. Listen! I invoke the body *lha* who is like a good red tiger.
11. Listen! I invoke you good red tiger with the six points of convergence spiraling (*nyigs se*) [whorls].
12. Listen! you must be the good guide wherever they might go.
13. Listen! be the protector of the good man with the one-fathom long body.
  1. *Bswo bswo gangs tse re nyi ma rang shar de da kho re | seng dkar mo 'dra le'i dgra lha bswo ya' kho re |*
  2. *Seng dkar mo'i g.yu ral bungs se bswo kho re |*
  3. *Sa gar song sa la bsams don sgrubs A kho re |*
  4. *Yul gar bsdad sa la kha 'dzin mdzod shog bswo |*
  5. *Bswo bswo mtho brag dmar rgod tshang dkar yag la | bya thang dkar 'dra le'i srung ma bswo ya' |*
  6. *Rgod thang dkar thul drug ldir ri ri da kho re |*
  7. *Bya 'dab chags {ur 'phur} khro lo lo bswo |*
  8. *Sa gar song stag shar dgra lha mdzod shog bswo |*
  9. *Bswo nags tse re stag mo bal yul nas da bswo ya' |*
  10. *Stag dmar yag 'dra le'i lus lha bswo kho re |*
  11. *Stag dmar yag 'dzom drug nyigs se bswo kho re |*
  12. *Sa gar song sa la kha 'dzin dgos mod kho re |*
  13. *Lus 'doms gang A bo'i srung ma mdzod shog kho re |*

The next sequence of Phowo Srigyäl's *'phrin bcol* is dedicated to all the divine lineages of Tibet, in order that they may exalt the *dgra lha* of those in attendance at the trance ceremony. Although the ancient genealogical functions of the *dgra lha* are not openly acknowledged, it is clear that they are intimately connected to their human charges:

1. Listen! all the *lha* lineages that are worshipped by the black headed Tibetans, well, are surrounded by one hundred thousand great mother *mkha' 'gro*.
2. Well, listen! I praise the hundred thousand divisions of the *lha* lineage of Tibet.
3. Listen!, may there be auspiciousness without obstacles to their lives.
4. Listen! may their aims be realised without sudden misfortune to their bodies.
5. Well, listen! realise their wishes and fulfill their aspirations.
6. Listen!, may their heroic *dgra lha* have a high position.
7. Listen! may their *dgra lha* [always] encircle their one-fathom long body.
8. Listen! be the guide of the good men wherever they might go.
  1. *Kho re bod dbu nag mchod pa'i lha rabs rnams da kho re | da yum chen mkha' 'gro 'bum gis bskor kho re |*
  2. *Da rgya gar lha rabs 'bum sde bswo kho re |*
  3. *Tshe bar chad med le'i bkra re shis A kho re |*
  4. *Lus glo bur med le'i don re 'grub kho re |*
  5. *Da bsam pa 'grub le'i re ba skongs kho re |*



6. *Dpa' dgra lha'i ngo so mtho le'i shog A kho re l*
7. *Lus 'doms gang dgra lha 'khor le'i shog kho re l*
8. *Sa gar song A bo'i kha 'dzin mdzod kho re l*

Phowo Srigyal now sings the three famous invocatory syllables *ki bswa bswa* and the syllable *'e* a number of times, as he, or rather the god Rkyang khra, communes with the spirits at his behest. Then the drumbeat becomes faster and there is a gap of around a minute without any speech. When Phowo Srigyal begins chanting again his words are inaudible. He is invoking another *dgra lha*, a horse riding spirit under the auspices of Buddhism, who is to act as the guardian of well-being and as the god of travel (*lam lha*):

1. {###}
2. {###}
3. {###}
4. {###}
5. {###}
6. He rides a dark brown horse mount.
7. He is mounted on a stallion of black silk.
8. Ha! {blue-gray} horse {#}.
9. {The gait of the black bear on the way *rongs se rong*}.<sup>42</sup>
10. {###}
11. Ha! {intoning the mantras} *khro lo lo*.<sup>43</sup>
12. The essential teaching of the Buddhist protector *sha ra ra*.<sup>44</sup>
13. Ha! *btsan* {#}.
14. He wears the armor and clothes of black iron on his body.
15. The {laminae} of black iron *si li li*.<sup>45</sup>
16. Black banner:{at his side the flying banner is fluttering}.
17. The black banner is waving *sha ra ra*<sup>46</sup> to the *lha* from afar.
18. The essential teachings of the Buddhist protector *sha ra ra*.
19. Let the losses of the three [types] of disease rebound on the enemy.
20. Envy, losses and epidemics, these three, the malefactors of disease and sudden onset misfortunes and the obstructions are not attached to [the good men].
21. {Seal} the disease of the three malefactors {#}.
22. Annihilate the malefactors and obstructers of the three diseases.
23. {#} {the omen of the enemy} cannot enter.
24. {#} do not prowl.
25. The blight and disease of the three malefactors are not attached to [the good men].
26. Envy, losses, epidemics, these three, {the root of the obstructers} and malefactors, are not attached to [the good men].
27. Ha! be the god of the road of the good men males wherever they might go.

42 *Rongs se rong* describes a running motion, which probably pertains to a horse whose movement is bear-like.

43 *Khro lo lo* conveys bell-like sound.

44 *Sha ra ra* conveys a sense of this protector being steady and unchanging.

45 *Si li li* depicts a jingling.

46 *Sha ra ra* shows that the banner is flapping vigorously.

1. {###}
2. {###}
3. {###}
4. {###}
5. {###}
6. *Chibs su 'do ba bra nag bcibs l*
7. *Dar nag gyi rta pho 'og la bcibs l*
8. *Dma' 'do ba {sngo skya} {#} l*
9. *{Dom nag la rgyu 'gros rongs se rong l}*
10. {###}
11. *Dma' {sngags yig gi mgur ma} khro lo lo l*
12. *Chos skyong gi man ngag sha ra ra l*
13. *Dma' btsan {#} la l*
14. *Lcags nag po'i khrab gos lus la gon l*
15. *Lcags nag gyi khrab {skud} si li li l*
16. *Dar nag gyi {'phur dar log la 'gyur} l*
17. *Lha dar nag gis rgyang g.yug sha ra ra l*
18. *Chos skyong gi man ngag sha ra ra l*
19. *Nad gsum gyi god kha dgra la sgyur l*
20. *Mi kha god kha rims kha gsum l nad glo bur gi gdon bgegs mi 'khor le l*
21. *Gdon gsum gi nad la {kha char} rgyobs l*
22. *Nad gsum gyi gdon bgegs chams la phobs l*
23. *{#} gyi {dgra than} mi zhugs le l*
24. *{#} mi 'grims le l*
25. *Gdon gsum gyi nad gdon mi 'khor le l*
26. *Mi kha god kha rims kha gsum l gdon {bgegs kyi rtsa ba} mi 'khor le l*
27. *Dma' stag shar gyi A bo skyes pa rnam s l sa gar song skyes pa'i lam lha mdzod l*

The liturgy proceeds with invocations to five different triads of equestrian *dgra lha*, which are probably protectors of the four cardinal points and overhead direction. Each group of martial spirits is a different color (white, red, blue, yellow and black):

1. Ha! when they go to the side of the white place, the three white men and white horses of the *dgra lha*:
2. The racing of the white horses *ldir ri ri*.<sup>47</sup>
3. The sound of the nostrils of the swift horses (*mgyogs pa*) *ldir ri ri*.<sup>48</sup>
4. The white man like the rising conch [white] moon, come with the swinging (*ldems se*) golden door of the conch helmet.
5. The seven brother divine birds of white conch, come with the rustling vulture feathers of the white bird.
6. Ha! come as the *dgra lha* of males, the men.
7. Ha! eighty lineages of *lha*, be the good guide.

<sup>47</sup> *Ldir ri ri* conveys the beating of the hooves.

<sup>48</sup> Here *ldir ri ri* communicates a snorting sound.

8. Ha! when they go to{the corner of the red area}, the three red men and red horses of the *dgra lha*:
9. Come red horses chest held high (*rong nge*).
10. Come red men with your clarion singing from afar.
11. Come with your red flapping banners from afar.
12. Ha! {#}.
13. Be the *dgra lha* of the blazing sparks.
14. Ha! today, be the protectors of the men.
15. Ha! when they go to the corner of the blue area, the three blue men and blue horses:
16. The mane of your blue horses is {ornamented} with turquoise.
17. {#} of the blue turquoise *ldir ri ri*.
18. The blue men with the armor of turquoise.
19. The streamers on the crest of the turquoise helmets *rongs se rong*.<sup>49</sup>
20. The lacing (*go lung*) of the [laminar] armor *shigs se shig*.<sup>50</sup>
21. The golden door of the turquoise helmeted heads *rongs se rong*.
22. The singing speech of the Buddhist protectors *ldir ri ri*.<sup>51</sup>
23. The dancing of the Buddhist protectors *sha ra ra*.<sup>52</sup>
24. Ha! today, be the *dgra lha* of the men.
25. Be the good guide of these men.
26. Ha! today {at this very time}, when they go to the corner of the yellow area, three yellow men and yellow horses of the *dgra lha*:
27. {#} of the yellow horse.
28. The manes of the yellow horses {are hanging freely}.
29. Ha! the *klung rta* of the yellow men is higher than the middle of the sky.
30. Ha! the streamers on the crest of the yellow helmets *ldems se ldem*.<sup>53</sup>
31. Ha! come proudly (*rongs se*) with the golden cloth cloak (*lwa ba*).
32. Come with the jouncing (*shigs se*) yellow golden armor.
33. {###}
34. Ha! be the good guide of today's men [so that] the misfortunes of the three diseases are not attached to them.
35. You, defeat the malefactors of the three diseases.
36. {#} you, take care of the obstacles.
37. Ha! {today at this very time}, when they go to the corner of the black area, three black men and black horses of the *dgra lha*:
38. Come black horses {chest} held high.
39. Come with the thunderous speech of the black men.
40. Come with {the rising up golden door}of the black iron [helmet].
41. The sound of the wings of the black bird 'u ru ru'.<sup>54</sup>
42. Come proudly with the cloak of black silk.

49 *Rongs se rong* shows that the crest and streamers are rising high.

50 *Shigs se shig* depicts the movement of all the lacing.

51 *Ldir ri ri* conveys robust singing.

52 *Sha ra ra* conveys many vigorously dancing.

53 *Ldems se ldem* shows that the streamers are blowing from side to side.

54 'U ru ru portrays a thunderous sound.

1. *Dma' sa dkar gyi phyogs la 'gro dus mo l dgra lha'i mi dkar rta dkar gsum l*
2. *Rta dkar gyi rgyug 'gros ldir ri ri l*
3. *Mgyogs pa gyi sna sgra ldir ri ri l*
4. *Mi dkar dung zla shar 'dra de l dung rmog gyi {gser sgo} ldems se byon l<sup>55</sup>*
5. *Dung dkar po'i lha bya spun bdun de l bya dkar gyi rgod sgro ldir re byon l*
6. *Dma' stag shar skyes pa'i dgra lha byon l*
7. *Dma' lha rabs bryad cus kha 'dzin mdzod l*
8. *Dma' {sa dmar gyi khug la} la 'gro dus mo l dgra lha'i mi dmar rta dmar gsum l*
9. *Rta dmar gyi dang kha rong nge byon l*
10. *Mi dmar gyi rgyang glu tse re byon l*
11. *Dar dmar la rgyang gyug lhab be byon l*
12. *Dma' {#}*
13. *Dgra lha me stag 'bar 'bar gyis l*
14. *Dma' de ring skyes pa'i srung ma mdzod l*
15. *Dma' sa sngon gyi khug la 'gro dus mo l dgra lha'i mi sngon rta sngon gsum l*
16. *Rta sngon gyi rngog ma g.yu yis {spud} l*
17. *G.yu sngon mo gyi {#} ldir ri ri l*
18. *Mi sngon de g.yu yi go khrab can l*
19. *G.yu rmog gyi dar 'phru rongs se rong l*
20. *G.yu khrab gyi go lung shigs se shig l*
21. *Mgo g.yu rmog gyi {gser sgo} rongs se rong l*
22. *Chos skyong gyi gsung glu ldir ri ri l*
23. *Chos skyong gyi bro ra<sup>56</sup> sha ra ra l*
24. *Dma' de ring skyes pa'i dgra lha mdzod l*
25. *Skyes pa 'di la kha 'dzin mdzod l*
26. *Dma' de ring nyi ma'i {gong khra la} l sa ser gyi khug la 'gro dus mo l dma' dgra lha'i mi ser rta ser gsum l*
27. *Rta ser gyi {#} l*
28. *Rta ser po'i rngog ma {wang nge zhog} l*
29. *Dma' mi ser gyi klung rta dgung las mtho l*
30. *Dma' ser rmog gyi dar 'phru ldems se ldem l*
31. *Dma' gser {gos} gyi lwa ba rongs se byon l*
32. *Gser khrab ser po shigs se byon l*
33. *{###}*
34. *Dma' de ring gyi mi la kha 'dzin mdzod l nad gsum gyi god kha mi 'khor le l*
35. *Nad gsum gyi gdon de khyed gis<sup>57</sup> thul l*
36. *{#} bar chad khyed gis gzigs l*
37. *Dma' {de ring gi nyi ma'i gong khra la} l dma' sa nag gyi khug la 'gro dus mo l dgra lha'i mi nag rta nag gsum l*
38. *Rta nag gi {dang kha} rong nge byon l*
39. *Mi nag gyi gsung sgra dir re byon l*

55 This last word sounds like *song* but is employed like the verb *byon*, the word choice here and in like occurrences.

56 The particle *ra* adds no extra meaning to the sentence.

57 This is an old grammatical form; in modern usage: *kyis*.

40. *Lcags nag gyi {gser sgo rongs se} byon l*
41. *Bya nag kyi gshog sgra 'u ru ru l*
42. *Dar nag gyi lwa ba rongs se byon l*

The last portion of Phowo Srigyäl's *lha rabs* and *'phrin bcol* again resorts to avian imagery, before making a final request on behalf of the clients of the trance ceremony:

1. Ha! when {#} goes.
2. {###}
3. The wings of the bird *ldir ri ri*.
4. The black wing of the horned eagle *ldir ri ri*.
5. Today, be the good guide of the sons.
6. Ha! may it be auspicious for the body of the good men males wherever they might go.
7. May their aims be realised whatever place they reside.
8. Fulfill their wishes and realise their aims.
9. Ha! I invoke the three brother protectors of the *dgra lha*.
10. You are surrounded by the one hundred thousand great mother *mkha' 'gro*.
11. Eighty lineages of the *lha*, be the good guide.
12. {###}
13. *Phat!*

1. *Dma' {#} 'gro dus mo l*
2. {###}
3. *'Dab chags kyi gshog drug ldir ri ri l*
4. *Bya khyung nag gshog drug ldir ri ri l*
5. *De ring gyi bu la kha 'dzin mdzod l*
6. *Dma' stag shar gyi A bo'i lus po de l sa gar song sa la bkra re shis l*
7. *Yul gar bsdad sa la don re 'grub l*
8. *Bsam pa sgrubs la re ba skongs l*
9. *Dma' dgra lha'i srung ma spun gsum bswo l*
10. *Yum chen mkha' 'gro 'bum gis bskor l*
11. *Lha rabs brgyad cus {kha 'dzin} mdzod l*
12. {###}
13. *Phat!*

After the above verses of the *'phrin bcol* were completed, Phowo Srigyäl moved on to the next part of the trance ceremony without pause, where the god speaking through him, Rkyang khra, made sundry prophecies about those in attendance. This was followed by the summoning of the good fortune potentiality, another labor in which well-being and success were bestowed upon all concerned. Finally, once Rkyang khra and his circles of spirits had completed their mission to aid human beings, they returned to their various abodes, marking the end of Phowo Srigyäl's possession.



Fig. 1. Phowo Srigyal preparing for the trance ceremony, May 21, 2004 (Photo: Bellezza 2004).



Fig. 2. Phowo Srigyal in trance playing his drum and flat bell, May 21, 2004 (Photo: Bellezza 2004).

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