

THEORISING THE KING: IMPLICIT AND EXPLICIT
SOURCES FOR THE STUDY OF TIBETAN SACRED KINGSHIP

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In this paper I would like to point out what I see as the virtue of openness to theoretical and comparative models in the study of Tibetan traditions, and in particular that of kingship.¹ To promote such an orientation as a virtue in this particular time and place may well be an exercise in preaching to the converted. “Tibetan studies” or “Tibetology” is largely a cover-term, within which exist many well-developed fields of study with their own methodologies. And for quite a long time now scholars have been engaged in transferring knowledge from other fields in a process that has led to greater methodological sophistication. Therefore while I shall describe below some attitudes that are suspicious of theoretical and comparative approaches, and while I shall invoke the “myth of the merely descriptive,” I feel there is a real possibility that I am erecting here nothing but a straw man, and one which, happily, seems to be trampled under the feet of the prevailing Tibetan studies tutelary divinity. Even so, vanquishing such an imaginary opponent has a long and illustrious history in Tibetan rhetoric and elsewhere, and I offer this present rendition more as a confirmation and celebration of what I perceive to be the current trend towards methodological and theoretical curiosity than as a doctrinaire statement of how things ought to be done.

As a point of departure, I shall briefly revisit Giuseppe Tucci’s description of Tibetan kingship, to date the most influential and almost the only work dedicated solely to this topic. Without going into forensic detail, I will suggest that although his description of the kingship was grounded in original Tibetan sources, his organisation and interpretation of this material was indebted, albeit silently, to the prevailing theoretical models of his day, and in particular those put forward by Sir James Frazer. I choose this means of entry not necessarily to promote Frazer, nor to criticise

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Tucci—for Tucci is in many ways an exemplar of the orientation I here champion—but to start from a convenient point of departure for making explicit what I assume to be implicit in Tucci's work, namely, an engagement with comparative and theoretical scholarship on kingship. I shall demonstrate this approach by presenting sketches of an analysis of a central myth of Tibetan kingship, that of *Dri gum btsan po*. Here, a consideration of some comparative models will lead to questions and problems that would not have arisen were my analysis to imagine itself as being purely descriptive. I shall conclude by stating the obvious: at the present stage in the history of Tibetan studies, we must be open to almost any comparative material, and should strive as far as possible to make explicit our own theoretical and methodological biases.

Giuseppe Tucci and the shadow of Sir James Frazer

Scholars have approached Tibetan kingship from a variety of angles, but rarely have they treated it as a topic unto itself such that it can be brought into dialogue with the study of kingship cross-culturally. As a result, most of the work is descriptive and tends to lack any *explicit* theoretical orientation. This is slightly surprising given that Tibetology developed partly as an outgrowth of Indology, which enjoys a long tradition of engagement with the topic of kingship both in India and Southeast Asia. The origins of Tibetology in the nineteenth century and its blossoming in the middle of the twentieth century were also roughly contemporaneous with a strong current of comparative anthropological studies of sacred kingship by such theorists as Sir James Frazer, Arthur Maurice Hocart, and Ernst Kantorowicz.² Amid such comparative areal and theoretical models, however, the institution of Tibetan kingship remained largely ignored up until the middle of the twentieth century. The watershed moment came with a 1955 paper by Giuseppe Tucci (1894–1984), “La regalità sacra nell’antico Tibet,” presented at the eighth International Congress for the History of Religions, held in Rome with the theme “The Sacral Kingship/La Regalità Sacra.”³ The congress played host to scholars approaching the institution of sacred kingship from different methodological angles, ranging from anthropological to psychoanalytical, and included influential papers by David Snellgrove on the concept of divine kingship in tantric Buddhism, and by Jean-Paul Roux on the celestial origin of Central Asian kings based on the Orkhon inscriptions.⁴

Although qualifying his work as provisional and preliminary, Tucci wrote with authority, outlining what he saw to be the

² Frazer 1915; Hocart 1927; and Kantorowicz 1957.

³ Tucci's paper was published in Italian in the proceedings (Tucci 1959), and in English in the journal *East and West* (Tucci 1955).

⁴ Snellgrove 1959; Roux 1959.

principles of the Tibetan kingship, in particular the magical, divine, and life-giving qualities of the king himself. Tucci argued that the Tibetan king was ancestralised, such that each incumbent was the avatar of the ancestral spirit, and therefore reigned simultaneously on both the celestial and terrestrial planes. Further, he claimed that the ancestral spirit's presence in the son occurred at the age of thirteen, signifying maturity, fertility, and eternal youth, and that this coincided with the removal of the father, in whom the spirit ceased to be present. Tucci held that this removal was achieved through ritualised regicide, a practice that he perceived behind the many assassinations that occurred during the imperial period.⁵ On this point Tucci cites the *Royal Genealogy*.⁶ After the *Royal Genealogy* lists the first seven rulers, it states: "Concerning these, when the son was able to rein a horse, the father went to heaven."⁷ Tucci interprets this passage as follows: "[w]e must not fail to notice an important fact that accompanies the fitness acquired by the heir to the throne. As soon as he attains it, his father—so we read in several places—ascends to heaven, which is the common expression used to indicate death. In other words, the father dies, that is, is presumably eliminated."⁸ Tucci elaborates on the theme of "fitness" by also pointing to the necessity that the king be of sound body and mind in order to rule and ensure the well-being of the kingdom.

Tucci also pointed out passages in a variety of Tibetan sources in which the king is likened to rain and is a symbol of fertility. He summarised the king's role as "that of keeping off epidemics, causing the rain to fall, assuring fertility, in other words that of maintaining the cosmic and social order intact and in due working order."⁹ Anticipating some of the preoccupations of those who would take up and refine his researches, Tucci also noted the titles and epithets of the kings, such as *sprul*, which he took to mean "magic power," *btsan po*, which he related to "power mainly of a chthonian [*sic*] character," and *lha sras* and *lde sras*, both defined as "divine son" or "son of gods."

Tucci described the king as guaranteeing and transmitting four powers: the religious law (*chos*); "majesty" (*mnga' thang*); government or temporal power (*chab srid*); and his "helmet" (*dbu rmog*), the latter qualified as "the visible emblem of the magic power of the king."¹⁰ Of these four, the religious law was entrusted to the sacerdotal class, and temporal power to the ministerial class, creating what Tucci described as the triumvirate of king, the "head shaman," and the chief minister. Although at the apex of this triumvirate, the

⁵ Tucci 1955: 199–200.

⁶ PT 1286.

⁷ 'dI yan chad 'dra' ste / sras chlbs ka thub na / yab dgung du gshegs so //; Bacot *et al.* 1940–1946: 87; PT 1286, l. 46.

⁸ Tucci 1955: 199.

⁹ *Ibid.*: 200.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*: 199–200.

king was viewed, according to Tucci,¹¹ only as a *primus inter pares* by his ministerial aristocracy, and was essentially a “sacred but inert symbol.”

In crafting this description of the Tibetan kingship, Tucci drew on a variety of Tibetan sources, many of which were Buddhist religious histories from long after the collapse of the Tibetan Empire. As a result, some of the information he presents, such as the practice of succession at the age of thirteen, is contradicted by contemporary administrative records such as the *Old Tibetan Annals*.¹² More interesting for our present purposes, however, is Tucci’s interpretation of the material, particularly his contention that the king was a sort of avatar, incarnating in himself the ancestral spirit for the duration of his reign, and then passing it on to his heir upon his ritualised death. I do not wish to here dispute Tucci’s reading; this point, along with his statement that the king maintains the cosmic and social order, can certainly be taken away from a reading of Tucci’s Tibetan sources. Rather, I wish to point out that these are also salient themes in Frazer’s work.

It might be useful here to summarise very briefly the core of Frazer’s theories on kingship so that it will become clear exactly what I mean by implying that these somehow informed Tucci’s seminal article. In *The Golden Bough*, a massive comparative study of mythology and religion, Frazer focused in particular on sacred kingship and put forward two hypotheses as to its nature.¹³ The first, more enduring hypothesis is that the body of the king is associated with the body politic such that the king’s health and well-being mirror that of his kingdom and ensure its fertility and prosperity. The logical consequence of this is that the king must be removed before his old age precipitates the degeneration of the kingdom, and this removal is often achieved through ritualised killing.¹⁴ According to Frazer’s second hypothesis, the king absorbs the collective evil or negativity of his kingdom and serves as a vessel for carrying this away. This explains the constant rituals for the purification of the king, and the ultimate purification—his ritualised killing and replacement with a successor.

Tucci was a great man of his era, and remains one of the most celebrated, if also one of the more polarising figures in Tibetan and Buddhist studies. As a public intellectual, he had personal and professional connections with such luminaries as Mircea Eliade and Carl Jung.¹⁵ In his academic work he was broad-minded, often

¹¹ *Ibid.*: 197.

¹² Dotson 2009: 26–27.

¹³ Frazer 1915.

¹⁴ A useful summary of Frazer’s main theories of kingship can be found in Quigley 2005: 9–10.

¹⁵ Tucci appears as a character—a seventy-year-old professor—in Eliade’s novel *Youth Without Youth*, adapted for the screen in Francis Ford Coppola’s 2007 film of the same name, where Tucci is played by the actor Marcel Iures. Jung wrote a preface to Tucci’s book, *The Theory and Practice of the Mandala*.

drawing cross-cultural parallels.¹⁶ If not aware of Frazer's work directly—e.g., through reading parts of *The Golden Bough*—Tucci, as an active participant in the intellectual epistèmes of his era, almost certainly had at least some exposure to Frazer's ideas. This is not something that I wish to establish by any sort of detailed analysis of Tucci's work or biography, but I will note that one reviewer of the Rome proceedings quipped that "Frazer's shadow, more than any other, hung over the congress in Rome."¹⁷

Ngar la skyes and his role in the myth of Dri gum btsan po

In a brief presentation of Tucci's article on Tibetan kingship we have observed the following: there is evidence in primary sources for all that Tucci describes, and his focus on the Tibetan king's life-giving qualities and emphasis on ritualised regicide also fits very well with a Frazerian analysis, with which he was likely familiar. Does this problematise Tucci's work? Maybe. The presence of such themes in Tucci's presentation of Tibetan depictions of sacred kingship could equally be read as a vindication of Frazer. My minimal position—that Tucci had at least some indirect exposure to Frazer's theories—serves to explain, I think, why Tucci emphasised the categories he did. Already this is a step forward.

As an exercise, let me now use an example to make explicit what I suspect was implicit in Tucci's analysis, namely, Frazer's theories on kingship. I shall also draw on more recent theoretical elaborations, mostly by anthropologists of Africa and South Asia. In doing so, I shall try to navigate between the Scylla of theory-driven research on the one side and the Charybdis of the myth of the merely descriptive account on the other. Here I will demonstrate how theory opens a series of doors. The workaday philological methods link the term *ngar* and the name Ngar la skyes, reveal motifs of his royal birth, and disclose his key role in a narrative that is framed as a *glud* or "ransom" ritual. Here to describe is to explain, but theory asks us "so what?". To this elementary question Frazer

¹⁶ In a short article on the symbolism of Bsam yas Monastery, for example, Tucci (1956: 28) relates it to Borobudur and to Phnom Bakeng in Angkor.

¹⁷ "On pourrait dire que l'ombre de Frazer, plus que toute autre, a plané sur le Congrès de Rome" (Caquot 1960: 81). One cannot fail to appreciate here Caquot's comical equation of Frazer with a dead Caesar and the conference participants with Roman senators. Were one to take a more "forensic" approach, which I do not think is necessary, one could list the features in Tucci's sources that he foregrounded, along with those that he passed over silently. One instance of foregrounding that suggests to me Tucci's awareness of Frazer and perhaps also of Hocart is his pointing to the royal lustral bath in the *Glegs gzhi bstan pa'i byung khung*; the lustral bath is a key element in both Frazer's and Hocart's analyses of sacred kingship, and while it is present in Tucci's source (and also features, for example, in the *Dbā' bzhed*; Wangdu and Diemberger 2000: 56–57), its role is not so central as to be remarkable to anyone but those who, presumably aware of its role cross-culturally, have developed an eye for it.

points to *X* and other theorists point to *Y*, and their indications open up new questions about, among other things, royal doubles, coronation, and royal funerals. I will argue that we are enriched by these questions, and will leave it to the reader to assess whether or not theory has contaminated my findings (that is, contaminated them beyond the usual “contamination;” see “Conclusions”).

The myth of Dri gum btsan po / Gri gum btsan po is one of the most well known and most often studied of Tibet’s myths.¹⁸ The earliest version of this myth is included as the first chapter of the *Old Tibetan Chronicle*, and the myth is alluded to in the Kong po Inscription. It was elaborated in later histories from the *Bka’ chems ka khol ma* onwards, with fascinating thematic variations. Apart from its textual history, the people and places of the myth of Dri gum btsan po—his two or three sons, his killer Lo ngam rta rdzi, the kingmaker Ngar la skyes / Ru las skyes, and Dri gum himself—are the subject of local oral traditions from southeastern Tibet to Gtsang.¹⁹ The myth and its history is one of the richest and most interesting topics in the field of Tibetan studies, and here I shall only offer a sketch of an analysis of the oldest extant version by way of demonstrating the utility of drawing on comparative and theoretical materials.

Before highlighting a few specific points, I present here a brief outline of the myth as it appears in the *Old Tibetan Chronicle*:

1. The prince is wrongly given an ill-starred name, Dri gum btsan po
2. Dri gum is disturbed by his name
3. Dri gum challenges Lo ngam rta rdzi to fight him
4. Lo ngam’s strategy (requests Dri gum’s royal weapons, chooses battle site)
5. Lo ngam kills Dri gum in battle in Myang ro Sham po after Dri gum’s god deserts him
6. Dri gum’s corpse is cast into the river, and seized by a river spirit / serpent spirit (*klu mo*)
7. Dri gum’s sons, Nya khyi and Sha khyi, are exiled, and flee to Kong po
8. Rhya mo and Sna nam kill Lo ngam with poisoned dogs
9. Rhya and Bkrags clans fight
10. Only one woman of Bkrags survives, bears son Ngar la skyes
11. Ngar la skyes searches for the king’s sons and for the corpse of the king

¹⁸ For translations and studies of this crucial myth, see Bacot *et al.* 1940–1946: 123–128; Haahr 1969: esp. 401–406; Macdonald 1971: 221–227; Cutler 1991; Karmay 1998b; Hill 2006; Kapstein 2006: 38–42; and Zeisler 2011. For a translation of the *Rgyal rabs gsal ba’i me long* version, see Sørensen 1994: 141–145, and 141, n. 372, which gives references to versions in several later sources.

¹⁹ Hazod 2007a, forthcoming.

12. *Klu mo* requests ransom of a child with bird eyes in exchange for Dri gum's corpse
13. Ngar la skyes goes home to ask his mother to mend his boots and give him more food
14. Ngar la skyes finds such an ornithomorphic child; the mother of the child demands, in exchange for her child, that certain protocols be followed at royal funerals. Ngar la skyes agrees
15. Ngar la skyes gives the child to the *klu mo* as a ransom, the corpse is recovered, Nya khyi performs funeral, and Sha khyi goes to avenge his father's death
16. Dri gum's tomb is built on Mt. Gyang to
17. Sha khyi and army go through Pyi, portents are bad
18. Sack of Myang ro Sham po; 100 male and 100 female Lo ngam die
19. Sha khyi returns to Pyi triumphant, portents are good
20. Sha khyi is given the name Spu de gung rgyal (and enthroned as king).

The myth of Dri gum btsan po in the *Old Tibetan Chronicle* contains within it echoes of Tibetan ritual narratives and Indian epic literature, but its core can be identified as the ransom (*glud*) narrative, in which the body of the deceased king is recovered through a ransom involving an ornithomorphic child that is then exchanged for the royal corpse. The agent who drives the narrative forward, and, one might say, the protagonist of the story, is Ngar la skyes, a precocious child who is the sole survivor of a war that wiped out the rest of his entire clan. His search for his deceased lord leads him to the serpent spirit or river spirit (*klu mo*) 'O de ring mo, in whose bowels lies the corpse of Dri gum btsan po. The *klu mo* 'O de ring mo tells Ngar la skyes that she will give up the body of the king in exchange for a particular ransom: a child with eyes that open from below like those of a bird. Ngar la skyes' quest for such a ransom for the corpse then takes him back to his mother where the narrative, perhaps reminding us that he is a mere child, has Ngar la skyes ask her to fix his boots and give him food for his journey. After this, Ngar la skyes finds a child who fits the description of the ransom that the *klu mo* had demanded as an exchange for Dri gum's corpse. Again, nothing is given without an exchange, and the child's mother demands that Ngar la skyes assent to a series of fascinating requests for how one should celebrate royal funerals—one basis for the claim that this is an aetiological myth of the royal funeral, or a narrative back-story to a funeral rite. Ngar la skyes agrees to follow the mother's requests, and leads the child away. He then casts the child into the river in exchange for the corpse of the king. The king is buried, and one of the king's sons conquers Myang ro Sham po and takes his rightful place on the throne in Pyi.

I would like to make a few comments on this, the narrative core of the myth, and on the figure of Ngar la skyes (also spelled Ngar le skyes). First, his birth to the sole survivor of a disastrous war marks him off as a kingly figure within the tradition of Indian epic represented both by the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*.²⁰ The motif of Ngar la skyes' birth is similar to that of Malyapanta in the Old Tibetan *Rāmāyaṇa*: the god Vaiśravaṇa kills Yaḡśakore and all of the demons, sparing only Yaḡśakore's son, Malyapanta, who survives because he is sewn into a sack.²¹ When he grows up, he asks, "All neighbours in the land have parents and relatives. Where are my parents and relatives?"²² He then vows to take revenge on the gods. Nearly the same words come from Ngar la skyes' mouth in the *Old Tibetan Chronicle*: "If every man in any every case has a lord, where is my lord? If every man in every case has a father, where is my father?"²³

The royal nature of the motif of Ngar la skyes' birth is also apparent in the Tibetan Buddhist appropriation of the *Mahābhārata* to fashion an origin myth of the first Tibetan king that links him with Buddhist India. According to the "proclaimed Buddhist tradition," a Kaurava son escapes to Tibet and becomes the first Tibetan king, Gnya' khri btsan po. In this version, Dhṛtarāṣṭra has ninety-nine sons and Pāṇḍu has five superhuman sons. They fight, Tha dkar kills all but one of the ninety-nine sons, and captures the sole survivor, Ru pa skyes, who is placed in a box and thrown into the Ganges. Found by King Bimbisāra, he is recognised as a prophesied emanation of Mahākaruṇa. Invited back by the Pāṇḍavas, Ru pa skyes still fears them, and escapes to Tibet, where he meets twelve men who make him king.²⁴ Apart from a royal birth motif identical to that of Ngar la skyes, the tale also includes the widespread image of someone being placed in a casket and cast into the waters, a motif not only relevant to Dri gum Btsan po, but also to Sītā (Rol nyed ma) in the Tibetan *Rāmāyaṇa*, and to the tale of Pe har's arrival at Gnas chung, among several others.²⁵

²⁰ On this point, see Haahr 1969: 156, 163. The *Rāmāyaṇa* was known in Tibet and manuscript fragments were found in Dunhuang, on which see de Jong 1989 and 1994.

²¹ de Jong 1989: 5–6.

²² yul myi khyim tse thams cad la // pha ma dang gnyen bzhes yod na // bdag gyi pha ma dang / gnyen bshes ga re snyam na; ITJ 737 (2), l. 21–22; de Jong 1989: 6, 90.

²³ myI gang bya gang la rjo bo yod na nga 'i rjo bo gar re / myi gang bya gang la / pha yod na nga 'i pha ga re; PT 1287, l. 28–29.

²⁴ Karmay 1998c: 303–305. Later Tibetan histories that place the first Tibetan king in India and refer to Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas all explicitly draw on the commentary on the *Devatāvīmarśastuti* by Prajñāvarman, a Bengali pandit who helped with Tibetan translation in the second half of the eighth century. This work was translated in the eleventh century and seems to be the main source for the Ru pa ti / Ru pa skyes narrative (Roesler 2002: 163, 167).

²⁵ This point was also noted in Kapstein 2003: 784, n. 106. On accounts of Pe har's removal from Tshal Gung thang to Gnas chung, see Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1998

Apart from the motif of his royal birth, another key for understanding Ngar la skyes' role in the narrative is the meaning of his name. Unfortunately, this problem has been sidestepped or ignored by Tibetan tradition, and overlooked by most scholarship. In the earliest version of the myth, Ngar la skyes is the son of Ru la skyes, who was killed by the Bkrags clan. In most later versions, however, the role of kingmaker and protagonist is played by Ru la skyes, though with his name usually amended to Ru las skyes. As is often the case with poorly understood or archaic names, these are given folk etymologies by later commentators. In later versions of this myth, the motif of the sole survivor of clan warfare is generally absent, and in place of Ngar la skyes we find Ru las skyes (literally, "Born from a Horn"), who is the magical offspring of Gri gum btsan po's wife by the mountain god Yar lha sham po—*mutatis mutandis*, a royal pedigree.²⁶ In this later tradition, this magical boy is also known as "Self-Nourished" (Ngar sos po), partially preserving the name Ngar la skyes, albeit with a folk etymology.²⁷ Bacot and Tous-saint offered a fairly similar reading of Ngar la skyes as "né de lui-même."²⁸ Haarh, offering a characteristically inspired reading, sees Ngar la skyes as a "yi dwags or manifestation of the killed, but unburied king."²⁹ Zeisler rejects all of these readings on solid lexical and grammatical grounds, and leaves the name untranslated. In a note, however, she reviews the lexical meanings of *ngar*, and suggests translating Ngar la skyes/ Ngar le skyes with "born from the strength/ thickness/ front side/ stalk/ corner."³⁰ Those readings

[1956]: 104–107; Sørensen and Hazod 2007: 216–219; and Hazod 2007b: 627–630. The appearance of this motif in the life story of Vairocana—as told in the *Vairo 'dra 'bag* and, briefly, in the *Zangs gling ma* of Nyang ral Nyi ma 'od zer (1124–1196?)—may also contain traces of the royal double motif I shall briefly examine below. Here, to avoid having to kill Vairocana, King Khri Srong lde brtsan has a look-alike beggar placed in a cask and thrown in the river (Karmay 1988: 26–27; Kunsang 1993: 95–96).

²⁶ For the narrative in the *Rgyal rabs gsal ba'i me long* and references to the same narrative in other sources, including the *Mkhas pa'i dga' ston*, see Sørensen 1994: 142. Ngar la skyes' transformation over time in Tibetan narrative is also briefly related in Macdonald 1971: 224–225. The transformation of Dri gum's name to become Gri gum is part of the same process of folk-etymologising, "amending," and writing over names and terms whose meanings have been forgotten.

²⁷ While the tradition of folk etymologies often reveals a poor understanding of obscure or archaic elements found in early Tibetan personal and place names—and sometimes gives rise to spurious episodes that form part of collective memory, often misread by others as history (e.g., King Mes ag tshoms, the "Bearded Grandfather" is remembered as marrying a young Chinese princess, when contemporary administrative records do not tell us of this nickname and reveal that he was pre-pubescent at the time of his marriage; Petech 1967: 257–258; Dotson 2009: 25)—it also demonstrates the importance of the lexical meaning of Tibetan names. This is true above all in the myth of Dri gum btsan po, where it is Dri gum's mis-naming that begins the myth and precipitates the crisis that must then find resolution.

²⁸ Bacot *et al.* 1940–1946: 125, n. 6.

²⁹ Haarh 1969: 156.

³⁰ Zeisler 2011: 106, 147–148.

that shift the focus onto Ru las skyes in order to gloss over the name Ngar la skyes basically forfeit the problem. The others, excepting Zeisler, either alter the name Ngar la skyes (e.g., to Ngar sos po), or focus on something other than the possible meaning of this name.

I submit that one clue for understanding his name is his role in the narrative: he is the bearer of the ransom for the king. This calls to mind what we find in later rites of state involving the ransom ritual, such as the famous *glud 'gong rgyal po* ceremony instituted in the seventeenth century under *sde srid* Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho (1658–1705) and practised up until the middle of the twentieth century.³¹ In this festival, two men are appointed to, among other things, bear away an effigy of the Dalai Lama, which is deposited in a special temple in Bsam yas monastery. But apart from acting as the bearers of the ransom effigy, which will soak up all of the evil and ill will that would otherwise target the person of the Dalai Lama, the men themselves also act as repositories for the very same. There is, in other words, a blurring of lines between the ransom and its bearers. At once the valiant agents of the removal of Tibetan society's collective evil, they also embody it, and are themselves driven out as much as they are sent to bear away an effigy. This blurring of lines, or near identification of the bearer with the effigy, is also pertinent to Ngar la skyes, whose complete disappearance from the narrative after committing the child to the waters and to the *klu mo* has not hitherto been satisfactorily understood. He is the protagonist of the narrative, but after performing his role and making the exchange with the *klu mo*, there is no further mention of him whatsoever, and the action passes to Dri gum's sons, their burial of their father, and reclaiming of the throne. This disappearance is not, however, a failing of the narrator or a clumsy transmission error. In fact, it confirms what I think is the correct reading of Ngar la skyes' name. In ritual literature concerning the ransom rite, a *ngar mi* or *ngar glud* is an effigy or figurine of the person for whom the ransom is performed.³² Great care is taken in fashioning these figurines, which are often adorned with the hair and clothes of the beneficiary or "patient." Hence the significance of the royal motif of Ngar la skyes' birth: to ransom a king, one must give a royal effigy in exchange. These facts, along with the larger ransom context of the Dri gum btsan po myth in which he appears, and his particular role within it, allow us to understand the peculiar name Ngar la skyes / Ngar le skyes as "Born for the Ransom [of Dri gum btsan po]." This explains also the curious fact that Ngar la skyes disappears as soon as the ransom is given to the serpent spirit, which, while fairly jarring from

³¹ On the *glud 'gong rgyal po* ceremony see Karmay 1998a: 348–359; Richardson 1993: 60–73; and Guidoni 1998. The latter includes extensive references to scholarship on this topic. In his article, Karmay studied this ritual in great detail, and also noted the importance of the ransom rite to Tibetan kingship and purification.

³² Karmay 1998a: 340–341.

a narrative standpoint, is in perfect accord with the logic of the ransom rite.

Making theory explicit: Ngar la skyes as scapegoat

In his brilliant article on ransom rites, Samten Karmay argues against the use of the term scapegoat, employed by Alexandra David-Neel and others, to describe the ransom rite or the ransom itself. Citing Frazer's work on the scapegoat, he makes the point that the ransom rite is about exchange, and not the "transfer of evil onto another," which he sees as characterising the annual ritual of Yom Kippur.³³ In this way Karmay asserts that the *glud 'gong rgyal po* ceremony has a different conception that bears no relation to the concept of the scapegoat.³⁴ This objection dovetails with a familiar argument about cultural specificity and terminological precision with regard to the culture under study. I take this larger point, and agree with it in much the same way that I generally agree with Christopher Beckwith's point that when translating the Tibetan term *btsan po*, one should use "emperor" and not "king," since the term designates a ruler superior to all others, who lays claim to the entire world.³⁵ Here, however, as I am explicitly engaging with scholarship on *kingship* (and since "emperors" seems to be too much of a mouthful), I have used such titular anomalies as "King Khri Srong lde brtsan" in order to advertise the fact that I am examining the applicability of theories of kingship to Tibetan beliefs surrounding the *btsan po*. Similarly, going back to Frazer, there is a large body of comparative and theoretical literature on scapegoats in relation to kingship, and I use the term scapegoat here in considering the role of Ngar la skyes in the ransom of Dri gum btsan po not to undermine the specificity of the Tibetan *glud* rite by applying a universalising typology, but to ask what scholarship on the scapegoat has to offer our reading of the myth of Dri gum btsan po in all its complexity.

In the brief summary of Frazer's hypotheses concerning sacred

³³ Karmay 1998a: 340.

³⁴ Karmay places the focus on "exchange" and "cheating," both etymologies of *glud* and the related term *btsu*. The ransom is thus a matter of trading with/cheating the supernatural by giving something that is or appears to be equivalent. This is certainly the core logic of the ransom rite, but one need only focus on the ransom or effigy (*glud* or *ngar* or *ngar mi*) itself, and ask after its fate, to see that the patient/client—either a person or a community—achieves its own well being by diverting harm from itself to the ransom or effigy. This is in fact the basis of the scapegoat. I do not think that the concept of the scapegoat and the principles of exchange and deception informing the ransom rite are in any way mutually exclusive, and believe that the concept of the scapegoat can be deployed to illuminate the Tibetan *glud* rite. For a more detailed affirmation of the relevance of the concept of scapegoat to the *glud 'gong rgyal po* ceremony, drawing on René Girard and other theorists, see Guidoni 1998: 97–100.

³⁵ Beckwith 1987: 14–15, n. 10.

kingship, it will be recalled that according to the second hypothesis the king absorbs the collective evil or negativity of his kingdom and serves as a vessel for carrying this away. This is also referred to as his “scapegoat” function, and Lucien Scubla, drawing on the work of René Girard, has recently insisted on the primacy of this role by arguing that the king is first and foremost a scapegoat, and that the king’s function as source of social good emerges from this role as absorber of all social evil.³⁶ Another scholar who has recently reassessed Frazer and upheld the importance of some of his observations, particularly as they concern scapegoat kings in Africa, is Luc de Heusch. Like many other commentators, de Heusch takes issue with Frazer’s evolutionary bias. He insists, however, on the centrality of the institution of ritualised regicide, and echoes Frazer by emphasising both of Frazer’s hypotheses concerning the life-giving role of the king and the scapegoat king.³⁷ To begin with the concept of the scapegoat king, de Heusch marshals two types of examples. First, there are those where the king himself is a scapegoat for his kingdom’s ills, such as drought or disease. It follows then that the king is ritually killed and replaced with a new king. Second, there is the example where the king’s life-giving aspect is divided from his scapegoat aspect, the latter being constellated in a surrogate or a double. De Heusch also distinguishes between two types of ritualised regicides: those that conform to Frazer’s first theory—that a life-giving king cannot become decrepit and must therefore be killed and replaced before the onset of old age and infirmity; and those that conform to the second theory—that the king is a scapegoat who absorbs the inauspiciousness of his subjects and serves as a vessel for carrying this away.³⁸ Closer to the Tibetan cultural area, Marie Lecomte-Tilouine has written about an instance of a royal double as a scapegoat in a Nepalese rite of state. Here a Brahmin, by eating part of the dead king, becomes a “monstrous royal double” and is expelled on an elephant, thereby purifying the king and the kingship.³⁹

Even from these scant examples, and without giving a full genealogy of scholarship on scapegoat kings (which is immense), we can see that the ransom narrative in the myth of Dri gum btsan po lends itself to an analysis along the lines of Frazer’s theory of the scapegoat king and its later elaborations, not least of which the observation that the king’s life-giving aspect and his scapegoat aspect can be divided, with the latter role embodied by a royal double or scapegoat.⁴⁰ Marked off from the motif of his birth as a suitable stand-in for the king, Ngar la skyes is a royal double

³⁶ Scubla 2005: 42, 47.

³⁷ de Heusch 2005: 34.

³⁸ *Ibid.*: 29–32.

³⁹ Lecomte-Tilouine 2005: 112.

⁴⁰ On the constellation of the functions of sacred kingship in more than one being, see also Scubla 2005: 46–47.

suitable for a ransom. Beyond that, he is also the bearer of a sort of “monstrous royal double”—the ornithomorphic child who is the explicit ransom for the body of the king. Here it is not a question of the ritual killing of a scapegoat king, but of the victimisation of a royal double, who is cast away in order to recover the body of the deceased king and to clear the way for the coronation of a successor. The clear implication is that this was a charter myth for a ransom rite performed in the course of a royal funeral, but this could easily form a part of other royal rites of renewal, such as the coronation, or even an annual rite like the *glud 'gong rgyal po* ceremony.⁴¹

Here I have privileged an analysis that employs the concept of the scapegoat because Ngar la skyes' role in the myth of Dri gum btsan po invites such a reading. This is by no means to insist on the exclusivity of this reading; one could equally consider the role of directionality in the ransom narrative, where the corpse of Dri gum btsan po travels in an “expelling” movement downstream to Kong po, the symbolic end of the river Gtsang po, and then his heir travels in a “recovering” movement upstream to win back the throne.⁴² Or, one could point out how Ngar la skyes' role in the various versions of the myth relates to what Beckwith refers to as the “First Story” common to many Central Eurasian peoples, where we often find the motif of a miraculous child overthrowing an evil king.⁴³ There are

⁴¹ Deriving ritual practice from charter myth is ill advised, and there are many examples of a given rite seeming to have little or no connection to the charter myth that supposedly informs it. Were one to assume, foolishly, a one-to-one relationship between myth and ritual in this case, the ritual would probably involve placing the victim, a double of the king, in a vessel and then casting this into the river. These qualifications notwithstanding, it is no surprise that this part of the narrative is whitewashed or excluded in later Buddhist versions of the myth of Dri gum btsan po.

Haarh, it should be noted, also took the myth of Dri gum btsan po to be an aetiological myth, and understood Ngar la skyes to be a sort of royal double. In Haarh's thesis, the myth is the precursor to royal burials: it tells us why a king must die (he is unsound of either body or mind) and how he must be buried (Haarh 1969: 116, 329, 340, 342). While he may have erred in some of the details, Haarh was perceptive to argue that Ngar la skyes acts as a monstrous royal double, and I must acknowledge my debt to him on this point.

Further to the issue of the monstrous royal double, and returning to the *glud 'gong rgyal po* ceremony—in many ways the successor to the type of ceremony that the myth of Dri gum btsan po would seem to empower—Karmay demonstrates that Pe har, Tibet's wrathful deity *par excellence*, and the destination of the Dalai Lama's effigy according to some accounts, is explicitly constructed as a monstrous royal double of King Khri Srong lde brtsan (742–c. 800), and, by extension, of the Tibetan ruler in general (Karmay 1998a: 364; see also Walter 2009: 197, n. 1).

⁴² On the intentionality of upstream and downstream movements in the context of the *glud* rite, drawing also on models of directionality in ritual from ethnographies of the contemporary Tibetan cultural area, see Dotson 2008. The vertical axis is also relevant here, and can be brought to bear on the movement of Dri gum's corpse from the river to the mountain.

⁴³ Beckwith 2009: 1–2, 12. Beckwith's analysis of this origin tale acknowledges that it belongs to a body of beliefs going back to the Proto-Indo-Europeans. Indeed his schematisation of the “First Story” bears a resemblance to the expositions of

many other possible readings. In mentioning this comparative example from Central Eurasia, though, I would also like to point out that our areal presuppositions come to bear on what sort of comparative data is deemed relevant to the study of Tibetan kingship. It is by now a commonplace to remark that the Sinologist sees everywhere in Tibet uncanny resemblances to China while to the Indologist a shared cultural substratum between India and Tibet seems self-evident. To this we might also add the Central Eurasianist finding in Tibet persuasive traces of the Central Eurasian Culture Complex. In many ways, Tibet is neither fish nor fowl, and this means that several different areal memberships can be argued for persuasively, including also Central Asia or upland Southeast Asia. This is a blessing, as it opens up a wealth of comparative material that is of relevance to Tibetan kingship, be it the role of Avalokiteśvara in the royal cult in Sri Lanka or the *Scripture for Humane Kings* in fifth-century China.⁴⁴ The real danger of this approach lies not so much in admitting comparative examples from too far afield, but rather in narrowing one's comparative field too severely and thereby excluding relevant material.

Conclusions

By engaging with comparative scholarship on sacred kingship, we have illuminated one possible reading of the myth of Dri gum btsan po. But this reading is not definitive, and, far from closing the enquiry, it prompts us to pose a number of further questions. Among these: Is the Tibetan king presented as the embodiment of his kingdom? Does the Tibetan king guarantee fertility and well-being? Has the kingship transmuted good conduct into transcendent law? Is the model of the king as a sort of sponge for his kingdom's collective evil relevant to the Tibetan kingship? Is there evidence for ritualised regicide? How was the king ritually separated from the rest of the populace? Were there central rituals for purifying the king? Questions such as these reward our engagement with comparative and theoretical scholarship on kingship.

Employing a comparative perspective is not an end in itself. We must always ask ourselves what is gained by adopting a given model or method. If we can say, for example, that the assassination of the Tibetan emperor Glang dar ma around 842 fits Frazer's ideas concerning scapegoat kings, or that Tibetan descriptions of the first mythical emperor Gnya' khri btsan po largely conform to Frazer's model of a life-giving king, do we gain anything by doing so? Or are these episodes then merely overlaid with a new set of assumptions that magnify some of their features while diminishing others?

the story of the hero in comparative mythology, as found, for example, in the works of Otto Rank (1909) and Lord Raglan (1936).

⁴⁴ See Holt 1993 and 2004; and Orzech 1998.

Furthermore, has exposure to comparative studies biased our reading of the ransom narrative in the myth of Dri gum btsan po? This recalls the same question asked above about whether or not his apparent exposure to Frazer's ideas problematised Tucci's description of Tibetan sacred kingship. Without accusing Tucci of engaging in this practice, one can see that there is a danger of theory driving research and filtering results. "Theory-driven research" is akin to "ideologically motivated research" in that it is generally regarded with a wary eye, prescribed to be used only with great care, and even then at the risk of infection. Sometimes it is shunned entirely. This is why some can—in this case unfortunately—dismiss out of hand works like Bogoslovskij's by simply applying the label "Marxist."⁴⁵ It also pertains to how one reads scholarship published in the People's Republic of China, and informs suspicion of "nativist" or overly emic scholarship.⁴⁶ There is also in some quarters an apparent aloofness with respect to theory and methodology according to which it is largely an indulgent distraction from the everyday work of documenting, translating, editing, and so forth. Such a position does have a point: often theoretical and ideological claims are superficial or naive, and amount to little more than name-dropping or demonstrating proficiency with a proprietary jargon. And theoretical discussions often puff themselves up like a meringue, giving the immediate impression of substance but ultimately leaving one unsatisfied. From this perspective, theoretical and methodological concerns are viewed almost as a contagion or a virus.

Be that as it may, if we do not deign to concern ourselves with theory, we risk falling into a default position of presenting our own scholarship as merely descriptive, when it is necessarily situated not only in its own epistème (or, in Paul Veyne's terms, within its own "program of truth"), but also within a number of assumptions, some more conscious and some more articulated than others.⁴⁷ As we know from theorists of narrative such as Hayden White and Paul Ricœur, narrative is not a neutral form, but one with its own set of time-and-place-specific frames, tropes, and microforms. The arguments for and against narrative description in the humanities, particularly history, have been well documented by Ricœur, White, and Veyne in their comments, among other things, on the essentially anti-narrative *Annales* school of French historiography.⁴⁸ Ricœur and Frank Kermode⁴⁹ have also gone further and considered whether or not the narrativising impulse—to, in Ricœur's terms, prefigure our experience before it happens and refigure it after the fact, or, in

⁴⁵ Bogoslovskij 1972.

⁴⁶ For an informative discussion of academic methods and nativist scholarship in the context of Bon studies, see Blezer 2010, esp. p. 34ff.

⁴⁷ See Veyne 1988.

⁴⁸ White 1987: chapter 2; Ricœur 1989: 95–174; Veyne 1970: esp. 111–121.

⁴⁹ Kermode 2000.

Kermode's terms, to dramatise the in-between by way of knowing that the beginning (like the tick of a clock) will be followed by the end (the tock)—is fundamental to human existence. Ricœur asserts that even ostensibly anti-narrative historiography with a focus on, for example, *la longue durée*, cannot escape the logic of plot, that is, the organisation of narrative.⁵⁰ Roland Barthes, in *S/Z*, demonstrates in meticulous detail the plurality of codes at work in narrative, using Balzac's *Sarrasine* as his example text.⁵¹ All description encodes a plurality of readings. It is all, to put it negatively, contaminated. To approach the matter differently, our scholarship is informed by a number of codes, the persuasive nature of which will depend, among other things, on the epistèmes or "programs of truth" of one's time and place. While we are too much imbricated within our epistème to discern its structures or its scaffolding, we are not so innocent as to be ignorant of codes we deploy, for example, in narrating history or in describing a festival. To engage these codes explicitly is not only to become more self-aware in our craft, but also to open up our presuppositions for scrutiny, and to negotiate identity within and across disciplines.

Happily, the trend as I see it is away from Tibetan exceptionalism, exclusivity, and the merely descriptive account. I must also make the point that in conversations with colleagues, I see a depth of comparative and theoretical engagement that is not always acknowledged in assessments of the field.⁵² To the extent that Tibetan studies configures itself as a discipline (if Tibetan studies is a discipline and not a cover term for several disciplines), it tends to display insecurity and what amounts to an inferiority complex with respect to other fields of study. Where this leads to engagement (e.g., with textual criticism, palaeography,

⁵⁰ Ricœur 1989: 214.

⁵¹ See especially Barthes 1974: 15–30.

⁵² This seems an opportune place to point out that the superb works of Macdonald (1971) and Stein (1981, 1984, 1985), though they did not explicitly cite their influences, were also informed by a high degree of theoretical sophistication. Amy Heller, who studied with both Macdonald and Stein, informed me of how Stein directed her to Roland Barthes' *S/Z* for inspiration in deconstructing and reconstructing Tibetan rituals and narratives, and how Macdonald pointed her towards Paul Veyne's *Les Grecs ont-ils cru à leurs mythes?* and its Foucauldian formulation of different "programs of truth" defining each epoch or culture. (This is certainly not to assert that familiarity with the work of Roland Barthes is the *koine* of methodological and theoretical sophistication.) Naturally, other ostensibly descriptive accounts of Tibetan kingship, like those of Haahr (1969), and Ramble (2005) also belie an engagement with theory and an awareness of comparative models. Waida 1973 (drawing largely on a Central Asian and Siberian "shamanic" model), Hazod 2000: 212–213 (drawing on an explicitly Frazerian "'sympathetic relationship' ...between the soul of the land and the divine body of the king" as the basis for the *sku bla* cult), and Walter 2009: 93–95 (drawing on Central Eurasian models and also relating the Tibetan emperor's body, or *sku*, to Kantorowicz's theory of the "king's two bodies" in medieval European political theology) explicitly discuss comparative theoretical models and their bearing on Tibetan kingship.

hagiography, oral-formulaic theory, or material cultural studies), this initial perception of something lacking leads to a powerful transfer of knowledge and methods. Observing these trends, I do not have the impression that Tibetologists are a group of euhemerists or positivists or true believers in the myth of the merely descriptive in need of proselytising. If anything, I am here cheerleading the current trends of knowledge transfer from other disciplines and the opening of Tibetan studies to comparative work with other fields of study.

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