

A Tibetan Protector Deity Theogony: An Eighteenth Century “Explicit” Buddhist Pantheon and Some of its Political Aspects

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This article will examine two closely related “theogonic” texts which focus on Tibetan Buddhist protector deities (Skt. *dharmapāla*, Tib. *chos skyong*). The first is the massive *Dam can bstan srung rgya mtsho’i rnam thar* (*The Biographies of the Ocean of Oath-Bound Protectors*) by Sle lung bZhad pa’i rdo rje (1697–1740), which is a vast survey of the mythology and iconography of dozens if not hundreds of different protectors. The second is the much smaller and more focused *A bse’i lo rgyus* (*The (Hi)story of A bse*) by Kun dga’ mi ‘gyur rdo rje (1721–1769). These mid-eighteenth century works are comparatively unique attempts to systematise the exceedingly diffuse Tibetan pantheon of worldly deities. First I will discuss their basic content, structure, and literary significance, arguing that they both appear to be inspired by the structure of generally more systematised Bon po theogonic works, with particular attention paid to the deity A bse/ A gse/ Jag pa me len. Then I will attempt to historically contextualise both texts, arguing that they are direct products of the specific political conditions in which their authors lived and worked.

A “theogony,” named after the famous work by the Greek poet Hesiod, is a composition that gives a systematic account of the origin and genealogical descent of a particular pantheon of deities. Various collections of Tibetan scriptures, in particular the *rNying ma rgyud ’bum* and the Bon po canon, abound in various theogonic origin myths. However, Bon po scriptures, such as the first chapter of the *mDzod phug*, the Bon po version of the *abhidharma*, give narratives of the origin of the world and the concomitant birth of the Bon pantheon in detail unlike anything found in Buddhist scriptures.¹ The closest Buddhist parallels are found in the Mahāyoga tantras of the rNying ma canon. These Buddhist narratives, however, rather than being comprehensive, multi-generational theogonies of an entire

¹ Karmay 1998: 127–132.

pantheon, are instead disconnected origin myths of individual deities, usually deities classified as dharma protectors.² These myths are also technically theogonies, but very abbreviated compared to their Bon po counterparts, and the rNying ma texts usually only describe one generation of descent—the protector in question and his demonic parents.³

While Bon po theogonies are many and often contradictory, there appears to be more of an effort in Bon po scriptures to produce what Bruce Lincoln has termed an “explicit pantheon.” Lincoln defines an “explicit” pantheon as one in which an author imposes a systematic order on “a previously loose, even amorphous collection of gods.” An “implicit” pantheon, by contrast, is “less a fixed system [...] than a repertoire or anthology that remains always-evolving.”⁴ Usually, a certain culture's pantheon shifts from being implicit to explicit when a particular author, either indigenous or exogenous to the tradition, writes a treatise in which he purposely organises and sets out (at least what he personally views as) a canonical or at least semi-canonical vision of how the pantheon exists, including precise theogonic details. A perfect example of such a shift is Snorri Sturluson's (1179–1241) thirteenth century *Prose Edda*, which was the first comprehensive attempt to organise, or make explicit, the Norse pantheon.⁵

I would argue that the disconnected, or at best loosely connected, deity origin myths found in the *rNying ma rgyud 'bum* as well as countless rNying ma *gter ma* cycles constitute an implicit pantheon. What is probably the earliest extant Tibetan Buddhist work that at least begins to attempt to bring systematic order to the rNying ma pantheon of protectors is Sle lung bZhad pa'i rdo rje's *Dam can bstan srung rgya mtsho'i rnam thar* (henceforth DCTS), written in 1734. This text is essentially a massive compilation of protector deity origin myths and iconographical descriptions patched together from mostly rNying ma sources, interspersed here and there with Sle lung's own commentary. It is difficult to say exactly how many deities Sle lung discusses in the text, since it is written as a single continuous narrative, and the descriptions of the different deities (and their many sub-forms and emanations) are deeply nested within each other, creating a recursive labyrinthine effect that is often difficult to

² For a modern collection of these kinds of stories from the *rNying ma rgyud 'bum*, see bsTan 'dzin rgya mtsho 2005.

³ A possible explanation for this is that Bon po theogonies are structurally based on ancient pre-Buddhist Tibetan clan lineages, while Buddhist deity origin stories are based on *jātaka* tales. My thanks to Ulrike Roesler for this suggestion.

⁴ Lincoln 2012: 18.

⁵ For a recent comprehensive study of this figure and his work, see Wanner 2008.

follow. However, Sle lung discusses at least forty major deities,⁶ and they range in rough order from cosmologically superior trans-local Indic deities, such as Śiva and Mahākāla, to more localised Tibetan deities, although they are presented in kathenotheistic succession, with each deity in turn praised as, in some sense, supreme.

Sle lung, in his running commentary, does make the occasional attempt to clarify theogonical descent among the various protectors he discusses. The clearest of these comes in the opening section of the text where he unequivocally declares that the deity Śiva Mahādeva, whom he identifies as the progenitor or literal “god”-father of all other protector deities, is an emanation of Avalokiteśvara.⁷ This clear-cut identification of Avalokiteśvara-Śiva as essentially the universal creator god is taken directly from gTer bdag gling pa’s (1646–1714) *Thugs rje chen po bde gshegs kun ’dus* (TCKD) *gter ma* cycle, which had a massive influence on Sle lung’s teachings in general. Beyond that, however, for every deity after Śiva, Sle lung does not systematically synthesise a cohesive theogony, but rather presents a host of varying accounts from numerous textual sources, most of which appear to have been originally composed in relative isolation from each other, and thus contradict each other. For instance, in a section on the deity rDo rje legs pa, Sle lung gives at least three completely different origin stories, in which three different, unrelated pairs of demonic parents are identified.⁸ Throughout, Sle lung consistently explains away these contradictory accounts by simply rhetorically falling back on the Buddhist doctrine of skilful means which, in part, holds that enlightened deities can appear in a variety of forms based on what is most helpful for their intended audience. Thus, from Sle lung’s perspective, the variant origin myths are all equally true, and part of the Buddhas’ pedagogical display.

While it may be hard to argue that Sle lung’s bricolage text constitutes an “explicit” pantheon as such, there is at least an attempt to impose some structure on an otherwise completely nebulous

⁶ The number forty is largely arbitrary, however, and is based on the chapter division imposed by the editors of the 1979 Leh edition of the text. This edition’s table of contents is problematic for a number of reasons, in part because it occasionally gives minor deities, like Sa yi lha mo, their own chapter, while leaving major deities like rDo rje legs pa to be lost in large sections of text (mis)attributed to some other deity. The eighteen-deity schema imposed in the 2003 Beijing edition, while solving some of the problems of the 1979 edition, introduces similar problems of its own. Both editions underscore the difficulty of attempting to organise Sle lung’s text.

⁷ DCTS: vol. 1, 4. While the DCTS is mainly structured kathenotheistically, there is an argument to be made that Sle lung’s pantheon is actually henotheistic in that it posits Śiva (as a form of Avalokiteśvara) as temporally prior and cosmologically superior to the later deities.

⁸ DCTS: vol. 2, 180.25–205.17.

collection of mythological accounts. While there is no real comprehensive theogony in the DCTS, Sle lung makes numerous textual references to support the view that different deities are in some way genealogically related to each other. Many such references are contradictory but some, such as the idea that Mahākāla is the son of Śiva, appear to be fairly definitive.

The DCTS is not Sle lung's only theogonic text. In 1729, five years before the production of his masterwork on protector deity mythology, Sle lung also produced a *dag snang* ("pure vision") text that describes a definitive (without competing accounts), one-generation theogony of King Gesar.⁹ This text provides a very clear, fully "explicit" pantheon. The story in this text was said to have been told to Sle lung by a deity in a vision during a festival celebrating Gesar's marriage to the goddess rDo rje g.yu sgron ma. In it, Gesar is said to be the youngest of fifteen children, all local worldly deities, produced through the copulation of the god gNyan chen ger mtsho and the goddess 'Bum 'od kyi me tse.¹⁰ Incidentally, it is said in the text that this was a union that was prophesised and encouraged by a Bon po sage, thus perhaps revealing Sle lung's syncretic inclinations.¹¹ This text may also reveal the early stages of Sle lung's desire to formulate and make "explicit" the Buddhist protector pantheon along the lines of a Bon po theogonic template. The DCTS, with its chain of often disconnected and contradictory variant myths ultimately did not fully accomplish such a project, but it appears to have at least begun it.

The extent of the later influence of the DCTS is hard to gauge,¹² but it does seem to have been quite influential at least within Sle lung's immediate circle of disciples. Kun dga' mi 'gyur rdo rje (1721–1769) who was one of Sle lung's students, and is sometimes identified as Sle lung's biological son,¹³ wrote a text a decade after the DCTS entitled *A bse'i byung khungs lo rgyus mdo tsam brjod pa*, or simply *A bse'i lo rgyus* (*The (Hi)story of A bse*, henceforth ABLG). This text is a tiny fraction of the length of Sle lung's and primarily discusses only one protector, A bse, who according to some sources is one of the

⁹ *Dag snang ge sar gyi gtam rgyud le'u* (BRGB: vol. 12, 1–9). My thanks to George FitzHerbert for assistance in translating this text and bringing it to my attention.

¹⁰ At least a few members of this pantheon of fifteen deities are mentioned in the later DCTS, but not in any detail, and Sle lung seems to have been loath to cite his own visionary experiences in the more scholastically rigorous compilation text.

¹¹ It should be noted that Sle lung's main consort, rDo rje skyabs rje, was from a Bon po family (BRGB: vol. 9, 474–475).

¹² It does seem to have had some lasting influence on Tibetan understandings of the Buddhist protector deity pantheon since most of the narratives in Ladrang Kalsang's *The Guardian Deities of Tibet* (1996) are culled directly from the DCTS.

¹³ For instance, in Heller 1992.

three main protector deities of Bon, and the primordial lord of the *btsan* spirits.¹⁴ Interestingly enough, A bse is also named as one of the older brothers of Gesar in Sle lung's pure vision text.

One of the most noteworthy aspects of the ABLG is the identification of A bse, a Bon po deity, as the latest product of a distinctly Buddhist theogony which, unlike in Sle lung's DCTS, is laid out in precise, definitive detail in the first few pages of the text.¹⁵ Kun dga' mi 'gyur rdo rje, also known as g.Yung mgon rdo rje, a possibly Bon-influenced name,¹⁶ appears to have been consciously syncretising the Buddhist and Bon po pantheons along the same lines that Sle lung did in his Gesar pure vision account. And while his theogony appears to rely on Sle lung's DCTS as its main or perhaps only source (though it is not cited directly),¹⁷ Kun dga' mi 'gyur rdo rje produces a single, self-contained, internally consistent account of the genealogical descent of five generations of protector deities, producing a fully "explicit" pantheon.¹⁸ Thus, while most of the deities in question are Buddhist, the literary structure of the account itself appears to have been more influenced by the better developed, more extensive multi-generational Bon po theogonies, like those found in the *mDzod phug*.¹⁹

¹⁴ Karmay 1972: 48, n. 3. See also chapter nine of Heller 1992 for her analysis of both the DCTS and ABLG, in particular relation to the deity Beg tse. The *btsan* are a particular Tibetan class of middle world (as opposed to underworld and heavenly) war deities who are usually depicted as hostile armoured cavalymen.

¹⁵ ABLG: 1–7.

¹⁶ The term *g.yung drung*, meaning "swastika," generally refers to the holy symbol of Bon, and has the same symbolic power that the term *rdo rje* ("vajra") does in a Buddhist context. In fact, since it contains both terms, the name g.Yung mgon rdo rje may have been constructed to be intentionally syncretic.

¹⁷ The main way in which we can tell this is that both men identify Śiva and his consort Umā as the emanations of Avalokiteśvara and his consort *Guhyajñānaḍākinī (gSang ba ye shes mkha' 'gro), which is taken directly from gTer bdag gling pa's *Thugs rje chen po bde gshegs kun 'dus* cycle. It should also be noted that, while A bse is mentioned briefly in the DCTS, he is not discussed in any significant way, and Sle lung does not refer to Bon po sources (Heller 1992: 330).

¹⁸ Heller (1992: 288) argues (correctly) that the pantheon of the ABLG is particularly ('Brug pa) bKa' brgyud pa and Bhutanese in orientation. We will see below how and why this is the case.

¹⁹ However, while these authors are noteworthy for their ecumenical or *ris med* attitudes, it is important to note that neither Sle lung or Kun dga' mi 'gyur rdo rje actually cite Bon sources, and only refer to the Bon po deity superficially by using the name "A bse." Furthermore, as far as I am aware, neither man studied Bon doctrine and teachings in any significant way. Their ecumenicist ethics appear to have been mainly Buddhist in orientation. Sle lung was primarily known for his dGe lugs/rNying ma syncretism. g.Yung mgon rdo rje was technically a 'Brug pa bKa' brgyud *sprul sku*, but was also heavily influenced by rNying ma and dGe lugs pa teachings, being the student of Sle lung (among others), and having

The explicit theogony given in the ABLG runs basically as such: Avalokiteśvara and his consort gSang ba ye shes exist as the primordial couple, who emanate as Śiva and his consort Umā Devī respectively to create the universe. Born to them are the siblings Mahākāla and Śrī Devī. Mahākāla takes the form of *Nāgarākṣa and copulates with a *nāga* woman named sBal mgo khrag mig ma (“Frog-head Blood-eye”). This coupling produces Rāhula, who in the form of Yakṣa ‘bar byed (“Blazing Yakṣa”) mates with gNod sbyin zangs kyi ral pa can (“The Yakṣī with Copper Dreadlocks”). These two produce the brother and sister pair of Beg tse and gDong dmar ma (“Red-faced Woman”), whose incestuous coupling at last produces A bse.²⁰ Beg tse, gDong dmar ma, and A bse are all born from eggs, a motif commonly and particularly found in Bon po creation and theogonic myths.²¹ Once he is hatched from his red copper egg, the text launches into an extended description of A bse himself and his massive retinue of different sub-classes of *btsan* and hybrid *btsan* spirits.

[...] from inside [the egg] came a mind emanation of Glorious Hayagrīva, the terrifying red rock *btsan*, his hair blazing orange and ruffled, his moustache and eyebrows curled like iron hooks. [...] His blood-shot eyes blaze like fire. From his nose issues a cyclonic dust storm, his tongue flashes like red lightning, his thorn-like body hairs spewing shooting stars and apocalyptic fire. He wears a cloak of red silk and leather equipment, three rings on his neck and a leather shield on his back. Having mounted on a courageous, very fast blood-red horse, a wild *btsan* horse [...] he moves like lightning. Merely seeing him robs one’s life-force. Endowed with courage and the radiance of 100,000 suns he overwhelms the triple world. In his hands he holds a red spear and a *btsan* noose and a human heart. In certain cases he flings around the intestines of a *btsan* with his right hand, and with his left he holds an owl of evil omens. He is bedecked with a bundle of 1,000 black snakes and wears iron boots. Thus it is explained. He does not manifest only in a single aspect, but his mode of appearance differs depending on those to be trained. Thus,

studied at ‘Bras spungs monastery (Ardussi 1977: 468, 496 n. 211). Nevertheless, the literary structure of the ABLG appears to have been influenced by Bon theogonical literature, making it likely that g.Yung mgon rdo rje did at least have some working knowledge or exposure to Bon po deity texts.

²⁰ The account in the original text is not quite so simple as related here, since the author gives multiple names for each deity and makes several asides to mention his scriptural sources (all of which are used in the DCTS as well), and beginning with *Nāgarākṣa/Klu mo sbal mgo khrag mig, there are detailed descriptions of the pure lands within which the deities reside, as well as their physical appearance. However, compared to Sle lung’s text, the ABLG account is extremely simple, well organised, and streamlined.

²¹ Karmay 1998: 248–249.

regarding that wild, savage *btsan*, blazing like fire, he is called Red A bse Who Removes the Hearts of Evil Ones or the Red Life Eater. He himself is the king of the enemy gods (*dgra lha*). At the very moment of his birth, from his body there emanated magnetising *bstan* emissaries, with red *btsan* equipment, holding razors and red nooses, mounted on red horses. From his speech emanated murderous dark-red death god emissaries, holding copper blades and hearts and lungs, mounted on maroon horses. From his mind emanated killer black demonic emissaries holding black swords and demon nooses, riding on black horses. [These are] the three [types of] butchers he emanated. From those, in the eastern direction were *gandharva btsan*, 100 white men on 100 white horses. In the southern direction were *yama btsan*, 100 blue men on 100 blue horses. In the western direction were the *nāga king btsan*, 100 red men on 100 red horses. To the north were the *yakṣa btsan*, 60 yellow men on 60 yellow horses [making a] *btsan* entourage of 360 [in total].²²

The description of the retinue continues with different groupings of *btsan* who dwell in different environmental regions, such as mountains or bodies of water, and have correspondingly different appearances, horse mounts, etc.

These [directional *btsan* mentioned above] are also known as the four classes of retinue *btsan*. From these, eight classes of emanated retinue

²² The full passage reads: *de gnyis brdol zhing bcag pa'i nang nas dpal rta mgrin gyi thugs las sprul pa'i brag btsan dmar po 'jigs su rung ba/ dbu skra dmar ser 'bar zhing 'khrug pa/ sma ra smin na lcags kyu 'khyil ba lta bu 'od kyi pa tra tshom bu 'khyil ba/ spyan rtsa dmar po me ltar 'bar ba/ shangs nas rlung nag 'tshub ma g.yo ba/ ljags glog dmar ltar 'khyug cing/ ba spu tsher ma lta bu las bskal pa'i me dpung 'khrug cing skar mda' 'phro ba/ dar dmar gyi 'jol ber dang bse chas gyon pa/ 'khor gsum ske la btags shing bse phub khur ba/ btsan gyi rta rgod mi zan cang shes mdog dmar rdzu phrul myur mgyogs kyi rtsal dang ldan pa la zhon nas glog ltar rgyug pa'i tshul can/ mthong ba tsam gyis srog 'phrog pa/ dpa' rtsal dang ldan zhing nyi ma 'bum gyi gzi brjid dang ldan pa srid gsum gyis bzod par dka' ba/ lag na mdung dmar dang btsan zhags mi snying thogs pa zhiig btsas/ 'ga' zhiig tu g.yas btsan gyi rgyu zhags 'phen pa/ g.yon ltas ngan 'ug bya 'dzin pa/ sbrul nag stong gi chun pos/ brgyan cing lcags lham yu thung [8] gyon pa zhes bshad/ gdul bya'i snang tshul tha dad pa'i mthong lugs gcig ste mtha' gcig tu zhen par mi bya'o/ de ltar btsan rgod gtum po me ltar 'bar ba de ni gdug pa snying 'byin ma a bse dmar po 'am/ srog zan dmar po zhes kyang bya ste dgra lha'i rgyal po 'di nyid yin no/ sku bltams pa'i skad cig de nyid la sku las sprul pa'i btsan g'ing 'gugs byed dmar po btsan chas can spu gri dang zhags dmar thogs nas rta dmar la zhon pa/ gsung las sprul pa'i srog gcod gshin rje'i g'ing dmar nag zangs gri dang glo snying thogs pa rta smug la zhon pa/ thugs sprul sgrol byed bdud g'ing nag po ral gri dang bdud zhags thogs pa rta nag la zhon pa ste gshan pa gsum sprul/ de las shar phyogs dri za'i btsan mi dkar rta dkar brgya/ lho phyogs gshin rje'i btsan mi sgnon rta sngon brgya/ nub phyogs klu dbang gi btsan mi dmar rta dmar brgya/ byang phyogs gnod sbyin gyi btsan mi ser rta ser drug cu ste btsan 'khor sum brgya drug cu' am/ (ABLG: 7.3–8.15).*

btsan arose:²³ god *btsan*, white lords of murder; *nāga btsan*, who produce twisted, multi-coloured lightning; planetary *btsan*, a deep black multitude; *rākṣasa btsan*, nine with blue mouths; *dmu btsan Ya ba skya bdun*,²⁴ many hundreds of sky *btsan*; masters of obstacles who carry knives as a method to inflict pain, with horses and equipment and reins their own colour. From those radiate emanated sky *btsan*, masters of obstacles, grey, with the eyes of mountain pigs, mounted on white-red horses, making the sound of thunder from their mouths and brandishing ritual daggers of meteorite iron, bringing down frost and hail from the mountain tops. The multi-coloured earth *btsan* are of a shiny maroon colour mounted on dark yellow [horses] with white feet, wielding staffs made from *nāga* trees, causing painful illnesses. Water *btsan* are blue with the bodies of calves and the heads of otters, holding black snakes, wearing clothing made from mother-of-pearl and are mounted on blue water horses. They cause leprosy. Red fire *btsan*, the masters of burns, have the heads of goats, and are mounted on fire horses, wielding copper blades. They cause drought, blight and putrefaction. Flying golden-hued wind *btsan* are mounted on red-yellow horses, hold sacks of wind and cause blizzards and storms. These are the *btsan* of the five elements. Furthermore, there are white cliff *btsan*, weak crag *btsan*, grey clay *btsan*, thieving conch *btsan*, trembling stone *btsan*, dust *btsan* with blue clothes, varieties of forest *btsan*, *btsan* of the meadows, constellations and so forth, and despair *btsan*, *btsan* of many thousands of clefts, etc. They came forth like the stars in the sky and the dirt of the earth, and thus they pervade the entire world.²⁵

²³ While the standard Tibetan Buddhist grouping of “eight classes” (*sde brgyad*) of gods and demons is mentioned here, only five, possibly six, classes are listed: *lha*, *klu*, *gza'*, *srin*, *dmu*, and possibly *gnam*, which is not a species that appears in the standard typologies.

²⁴ One name variant for the Bon po *bdud* spirit that is credited with stealing sTon pa gShen rab's horses (Martin 2001: 188, n. 11).

²⁵ *btsan 'khor sde bzhir yang grags/ de dag las sprul pa'i btsan 'khor sde brgyad du byung ste/ lha btsan bsad rje dkar po/ klu btsan rol po glog 'khyu khra bo/ gza' btsan [9] khrom po smug nag/ srin btsan dgu po kha sngon/ dmu btsan ya ba skya bdun/ gnam btsan thogs rje nam skyol gri bo gzer thabs rnams rang mdog gi rta dang chas gos srab can brgya phrag re/ de dag las 'phros pa'i sprul pa'i gnam btsan thogs rje skya ri phag pa'i mig can rta dkar phrum dmar zhon nas zhal nas 'brug sgra sgrog cing gnam lcags kyi phur pa thogs te ri rtse 'grims nas sad ser 'bebs pa/ sa btsan khra bo legs ldan nag po bra nag rting dkar la zhon pa klu shing gi ber ka thogs te gzer nad gtong ba/ chu btsan sngon po be'u'i lus la sram gyi mgo can sbrul nag bzung ste nya lcibs kyi gos gyon pa chu rta sngon po la zhon nas mdze nad gtong ba/ me btsan dmar po tshig rje'i ra'i mgo can chibs su mi rta zhon pa zangs kyi spu gri thogs nas than pa dang btsa' ser 'dren pa/ rlung btsan 'phyo ba gser mdog rta ngang pa chibs pa rlung gi rkyal pa bzung zhing bu yug dang 'tshub ma gtong ba ste 'byung ba lnga'i btsan rnams dang/ gzhan yang g.yang btsan dkar po/ brag btsan sma bo/ se btsan skya rol/ dung btsan rkun bu/ rdo btsan yor po/ g.ya' btsan gos sngon/ nags btsan rmun bu/ spang btsan snar ma sogs mung btsan sul mang stong gi btsan sogs gnam gyi skar ma dang sa'i dreg pa bzhin du byung [10] bas 'jig rten gyi kham thams cad khyab bo/ (ABLG: 8.15–10.1).*

While it might seem that this pantheistic effusion deviates from being precisely “theogonical,” it should be remembered that Hesiod’s *Theogony* contains similarly long lists of comparatively minor deities that are said to pervade the natural world; for instance, the list of nymph daughters of Nereus and Doris that govern various aspects and qualities of the sea.²⁶ The Tibetan vision in the ABLG is quite a bit darker, however, as the teeming hordes of *btsan* in A bse’s retinue, once produced, go on to slaughter beings in the world in every imaginable way until they are subjugated by Hayagrīva, Avalokiteśvara’s wrathful form, of whom A bse is a mind emanation.

It should be noted that this final section of the theogony proper which extensively details the likeness and retinue of A bse, also appears in a much abbreviated form in the DCTS, although the deity is identified by the name “A gse,” which Heller notes is the Buddhist spelling of the normally Bon po “A bse.”²⁷ Sle lung (correctly) attributes the description of A gse and his retinue to the canonical *bTsan gyi rgyal po srog zan dmar po ri dmar 'joms pa'i rgyud* (*Tantra of Subduing the Red Mountain, the Red Life-Eating Lord of the bTsan*).²⁸ Interestingly, this description is given by Sle lung during a discussion of the deity Jag pa me len (also named rDo rje dgra 'dul).²⁹ Indeed, later in the ABLG, Kun dga' mi 'gyur rdo rje states that in Tibet, the protector under discussion is known as “Jag pa me len,” and then implies he is the patron protector of Bhutan.³⁰

The theogonic account, the description of A bse and his legions, and finally the account of his subjugation and empowerment by Hayagrīva, only makes up approximately the first half of the ABLG. The rest of the text can be described as a theological treatise arguing for A bse’s cosmological supremacy. Kun dga' mi 'gyur rdo rje marshals a number of arguments for the deity’s apotheosis, in particular a number of logical jumps related to A bse’s ontological status vis-à-vis soteriologically “higher” deities. For instance, he quotes a scriptural passage that indicates A bse is a form of Hayagrīva. Thus, since Hayagrīva is in turn a form of Avalokiteśvara,

²⁶ Hesiod’s *Theogony* 1953: 60.

²⁷ Heller 1992: 309.

²⁸ Found in the mTshams brag edition of the *Rnying ma rgyud 'bum*: vol. 44, 1016.1–1061.6. The description in question appears on pages 1016–1017. The ABLG appears to highly elaborate this rather simple canonical passage, though whether it is based on another source(s) or Kun dga' mi 'gyur rdo rje’s own epiphany, I do not know.

²⁹ DCTS: vol. 2, 127.

³⁰ ABLG: 17. Why Kun dga' mi 'gyur rdo rje chose to use the name “A bse,” a particularly Bon po name, instead of “A gse” or “Jag pa me len,” when he is entirely relying on Buddhist scriptural sources, hints at (though does not satisfactorily explain) a syncretic intent on the author’s part.

and according to other scriptures, Avalokiteśvara is the ultimate source of all the thousand Buddhas of this fortunate eon, A bse can and should be regarded as the essence of all these Buddhas.³¹ Thus, on one level, the ABLG operates as a theological argument and declaration meant to solidify beyond question an apparently dangerous worldly deity's status within the Buddhist fold. This was likely one of the main goals of the DCTS as well, although on a much larger scale, dealing with a much greater number of deities.

As already noted, the ABLG is, in comparison to the DCTS, laser-focused, restricting its discussion to just A bse, his retinue, and direct godly ancestors. While the DCTS seems to have been Kun dga' mi 'gyur rdo rje's main source, he editorially whittles down the vague and often widely scattered theogonic information alluded to over the course of hundreds of pages in the DCTS, to just a few, very concise pages. This is accomplished through a series of apparently (though not necessarily) arbitrary decisions to cut out certain versions of myths in favour of others. In this way, he follows Sle lung's own editorial work, but goes even further, stripping away variant accounts until only one version is left.

To see how this was done, without belabouring the point, let us examine one particular deity in the theogony: Rāhula. In the DCTS, Sle lung mentions a number of sources that give many different names for Rāhula's parents, but the primary name that is usually given to his father is "Rakṣa glog gi phreng ba." Incidentally, this deity is also mentioned as the brother of A bse in Sle lung's Gesar pure vision text. However, Kun dga' mi 'gyur rdo rje does not use the name "Rakṣa glog gi phreng ba" for Rāhula's father, but a secondary name mentioned by Sle lung, 'Jam dpal *Nāgarākṣa, and identifies this deity as A bse's great-grandfather.

The question is, why did Kun dga' mi 'gyur rdo rje choose to use this particular name instead of *Rakṣa glog gi phreng ba? My contention is that this editorial choice was deliberate in order to emphasise the connection between Rāhula's father and Mañjuśrī, indicated by the "'Jam dpal" part of 'Jam dpal *Nāgarākṣa. Recall that Kun dga' mi 'gyur rdo rje also identifies 'Jam dpal *Nāgarākṣa as a form of Mahākāla, effectively making Mahākāla the father of Rāhula. This paternal relation is not directly supported by any scriptural source mentioned in either ABLG or the DCTS, as far as I have been able to determine. Nonetheless, this is how Kun dga' mi 'gyur rdo rje constructs his theogony.

Thus, in order to construct his clean and well-ordered pantheon, Kun dga' mi 'gyur rdo rje is forced to make several logical jumps

³¹ ABLG: 18.8ff.

between deities by relying on a handful of scattered, seemingly contradictory canonical passages. First, he asserts that Yama equals Mahākāla.³² Second, Yama equals Yamāntaka, who is the wrathful form of Mañjuśrī. Therefore, Mahākāla is ultimately a form of Mañjuśrī. All of this is vaguely alluded to in the DCTS, but then explicitly explained in the ABLG. Separately, Rāhula's father ('Jam dpal *Nāgarākṣa) is *also* identified as a different wrathful form of Mañjuśrī. Thus, Kun dga' mi 'gyur rdo rje's logic goes, Mahākāla (who is the same as Mañjuśrī) must therefore be Rāhula's father. This effectively creates a familial connection between two important protector deities (Mahākāla and Rāhula) that was not previously attested, or at least made explicit, in any scriptural source cited by either Sle lung or Kun dga' mi 'gyur rdo rje, as far as I am aware.

This is one example of how Kun dga' mi 'gyur rdo rje, rather than being satisfied by the conflicting accounts in the DCTS, weaves together disparate textual strands in order to construct a well-ordered theogony and an explicit pantheon. As far as I know, the theogony in ABLG has had little to no lasting impact on Tibetan understandings of the protector deity pantheon generally, either Buddhist or Bon po. Nevertheless, Kun dga' mi 'gyur rdo rje and Sle lung before him appear to be the closest Tibetan Buddhist parallels to Snorri Sturluson, the creator of the systematised theogony of the Norse *Edda*.

Now, to turn to the question of *why* these explicit pantheons (either Norse or Tibetan) were produced; we have already touched on certain literary and cultic explanations for Sle lung and Kun dga' mi 'gyur rdo rje's works. But Kevin Wanner, in his recent study of Snorri Sturluson, has argued that the Icelandic author's work was in large part politically motivated, and was meant as a tribute to the Norwegian court which at that time politically and economically dominated Iceland.³³ I believe that, on one level at least, the authors of the DCTS and the ABLG had similar motivations, and further, that the construction of the pantheons in both works was influenced by political factors.

In the case of the DCTS, Sle lung was well connected to the government of Pho lha nas bSod nams stobs rgyas (1689–1747) who ruled central Tibet from 1729–1747. He met repeatedly with Pho lha nas, and even acted as his spiritual preceptor, in one meeting transmitting protector deity practices and empowerments to the

³² There is a longstanding (logical) connection between Yama (Death) and Kāla (Time) in Indian mythology, see Bhattacharji 1970: 52.

³³ See Wanner 2008, in particular chapter four "Snorri Abroad: Icelandic Exploitation of Cultural Capital."

king.³⁴ Sle lung wrote the DCTS in 1734 during a streak of political and military successes by Pho lha nas, including two invasions of Bhutan during the 1729–1735 civil war in that country resulting in arguably the only successful Tibetan military intervention in Bhutan since the days of the Yar lung Empire.³⁵ There is evidence that Pho lha nas himself may have even personally travelled to Bhutan to help negotiate what was in effect, at least theoretically, a Bhutanese capitulation to the authority of the Qing Empire, via Tibet, in 1733–1734,³⁶ leading to amiable diplomatic relations between Tibet and Bhutan for the first time in over a century. This military and diplomatic success was completed within just a few years of Pho lha nas's rise to power with his victory in the 1727–1728 civil war in central Tibet in which he defeated a coalition of ministers of the dGa' ldan pho brang.

Given Pho lha nas's martial prowess, it is no surprise that Sle lung came to formally recognise the ruler as an incarnation of Yam shud dmar po, an alternate name for Beg tse. Sle lung makes this clear in an account written in 1730 about his meeting with Pho lha nas that year.³⁷ This would have been about a year after Pho lha nas came to power, but Sle lung claims he received a *dākinī* prophecy identifying Pho lha nas with Beg tse around the time of an earlier meeting between the two men in 1726, before the civil war. This claim to godhood is repeated in Pho lha nas's own biography written in 1733.³⁸ Beg tse, as the lord of the *btsan*, is the war god *par-excellence* in the Tibetan pantheon, and strongly associated with the Dalai Lamas.³⁹ Thus, in effectively replacing the institution of the Dalai Lama as the de-facto ruler of central Tibet, it is not surprising that Pho lha nas would embrace Sle lung's recognition of him as Beg tse's emanation. It is also interesting to note that at the beginning of his discussion of Beg tse in the DCTS Sle lung declares that Beg tse is the inner (or esoteric) form of Śiva. This suggests that there may have been an implicit connection between Śiva and Pho lha nas in the

³⁴ See Mi dbang Pho las nas's biography for an account of some of the protector teachings and "life-force entrustments" bestowed upon him by Sle lung, including of a special form of rDo rje legs pa called Thig le rtsal, the twelve bsTan ma goddesses, and Pe har (Tshe ring dbang rgyal 1981: 496). Sle lung is also credited with successfully negotiating the surrender of Pho lha nas's enemies in the 1727–1728 civil war in central Tibet (Shakabpa 2010: vol 1, 447).

³⁵ Ardussi 1997: 69. Ardussi notes that this success earned Pho lha nas special promotion and recognition from the Manchu emperor.

³⁶ Ardussi 1977: 455.

³⁷ BRGB: vol. 9, 283.3.

³⁸ MBTJ: 79. See also Lin 2011: 88–90 for more discussion of Sle lung's identification of Pho lha nas with Yam shud dmar po/Beg tse.

³⁹ Heller 2002: 90.

literary culture of the time as well. Nancy Lin has found further evidence for this in the *dkar chag* of the Snar thang bsTan 'gyur, the production of which Pho lha nas sponsored. Here, Pho lha nas and his rule are described in mytho-poetic terms utilising *purāṇic* Śaivite imagery.⁴⁰ If Sle lung was indeed part of the effort to portray Pho lha nas as the earthly representative of Śiva within the Tibetan religious *imaginaire*, then for that reason the DCTS and its constructed theogony (of which Śiva is posited as effectively the foundational deity) could perhaps, on one level, be interpreted as mythic and literary tribute to the court of Pho lha nas.

Additionally, Sle lung, in the account of his 1730 meeting with Pho lha nas, goes on to make the further claim that since Beg tse has the same essence as all other dharma protectors, Pho lha nas is ultimately an emanation of them all:

Furthermore, it is established in many learned sources that this Yam shud dmar po himself has the same life-force (*srog*) as many haughty spirits such as rDo rje legs pa, Vaiśravaṇa, Tshangs pa dung thod can, Pe har, sKrag med nyi shar, sNyon kha, Thang lha, gZi can, Yama Dharmarāja and because of that this Lord of Men himself is the embodiment of the assembly of the ocean of oath-bound protectors [...]⁴¹

All the named deities mentioned here by Sle lung are discussed, many at great length, in the DCTS.⁴² Given Sle lung's apparent perspective on Pho lha nas, it is hard *not* to interpret the DCTS as, at least in part, a mythic tribute to the Tibetan ruler.

Though Sle lung ultimately identifies him with all protector deities (or at least the male ones), Pho lha nas appears to have had a consistent connection with Yam shud dmar po/Beg tse in particular. This is important to keep in mind as we analyse the possible political dimensions of the ABLG. As we have seen, Beg tse is identified as the father of A bse in the ABLG, a familial connection that is also made in the DCTS. And we have also seen that the ABLG identifies A bse with Jag pa me len, whom Kun dga' mi 'gyur rdo rje identifies as a special patron protector of Bhutan. Indeed, Jag pa me len has historically had a significant popular cult in Bhutan. In the fourteenth

⁴⁰ Lin 2011: 82.

⁴¹ *De yang yam shud dmar po 'di nyid/ rdo rje legs pa/ rnam thos sras/ tshangs pa dung thod can/ pe har/ skrag med nyi shar/ snyon kha/ thang lha/ gzi can/ gshin rje chos kyi rgyal* [287] *po sogs dregs pa du ma dang srog gcig pa'i nges khungs mang zhing rig pas kyang 'grub pas de'i phyir na mi dbang 'di nyid dam can rgya mtsho 'dus pa'i spyi gzugs zhiig go* (BRGB: vol. 9, 286.6–287.1).

⁴² With the possible exception of sKrag med nyi shar, whose name I have seen in passing in the DCTS, but of whom I am not aware of any significant discussion.

century the seventh abbot of Rwa lung monastery, the primary seat of the 'Brug pa bKa' rgyud (which became the state religion of Bhutan), is said to have subdued the deity in Thimphu. From that point on bDe chen phu monastery has been considered the main base of 'Brug pa protector deities in Bhutan, one of the foremost among whom is Jag pa me len (A bse).⁴³ Thus both the DCTS and ABLG genealogically subordinate the premier state protector of Bhutan as the son of the premier state protector of Tibet, thus mythically communicating the political reality of Bhutan's subordination to Tibet after the negotiated settlement of 1735.⁴⁴

Nevertheless, Beg tse's status as Jag pa me len's father also, and perhaps more importantly, communicates a friendly (indeed familial) relationship between the two states. The warming of relations between Tibet and Bhutan after 1735 was in large part thanks to the efforts of none other than Kun dga' mi 'gyur rdo rje himself, who was the Tibetan government's and the Tibetan 'Brug pa bKa' rgyud establishment's main religious diplomat to Bhutan.⁴⁵ 1744, the year the ABLG was written, was also the year that the Tibetan-allied Shes rab dbang phyug (1695–1765) was enthroned as the *sde srid* in Bhutan. This year also saw two Bhutanese 'Brug pa lamas enrolled in the Blo gsal gling College at 'Bras spung.⁴⁶ This was a highly unusual demonstration of religious exchange between the dGe lugs pa and 'Brug pa whose past (often violent) competition often went hand-in-hand with the geopolitical struggles between Tibet and Bhutan. Thus, the ABLG may have been more than a theological treatise bringing a popular worldly deity fully within the Buddhist fold. It may have been written to simultaneously act as a mythic metaphorical political declaration of Bhutan's admission into (and submission to) the sphere of Tibetan power.

Both the DCTS and ABLG raise a host of other literary, cosmological, demonological, psychological, Buddhological, and political questions. Here I have restricted my discussion to a preliminary examination of the general literary structure of both texts and some of their possible political implications. Both texts, particularly the DCTS due to its extensive length and complexity, deserve and require further study.

⁴³ Aris 1979: 176. See also Pommaret 1996: 44.

⁴⁴ Indeed, Tibetan chroniclers employed paternalistic metaphorical language when discussing their dealings with Bhutan. For instance, during a border skirmish in 1669, Tibetan forces burnt down a Bhutanese outpost, and the Tibetan record of this describes the incident in terms of a father punishing his misbehaving son (Ardussi 1977: 322).

⁴⁵ Ardussi 1997: 71–73.

⁴⁶ Ardussi 1977: 471.

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