

# Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines

The Tulku (*sprul sku*) Institution  
in Tibetan Buddhism

Edited by

Daniel A. Hirshberg, Derek F. Maher,  
& Tsering Wangchuk



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## Preface: The Tulku (*sprul sku*) Institution in Tibetan Buddhism

Daniel A. Hirshberg, Derek F. Maher, and Tsering Wangchuk

(University of Mary Washington, East Carolina State University,  
University of San Francisco)

n the eve of the Buddha's enlightenment experience in Bodhgaya, India two and a half millennia ago, his hagiographies report that he fell into a deep contemplative reverie through which he was able to recall his five hundred previous births. He remembers the conditions of each birth, the causes that had impelled it, and the karmic implications of his own and others' conduct during each lifetime. These memories, gathered together in popular collections such as the *Birth Stories of the Buddha* or *Jātaka Tales*, have persisted as a core conception throughout the history of Buddhism: reincarnation meaningfully connects consecutive lifetimes of single individuals, and their remembrance, both as the authentication of genuine realization and as pedagogical tools, is documented in some of the earliest evidence of the religion.

Over time, particularly as the Mahāyāna forms of Buddhism articulated more elaborate conceptions of the metaphysical nature of Buddhahood, efforts were made to provide an account for its precise nature and functioning. The *Mahāyānasūtrālaṅkāra*, one of the Five Treatises of Maitreya, is the earliest Buddhist source that introduces the concept of three buddha bodies (*sku gsum, trīkāya*). The reality body (*chos sku, dharmakāya*), blissful body (*longs spyod rdzogs pa'i sku, sambhogakāya*), and emanation body (*sprul pa'i sku, nirmānakāya*) manifest simultaneously in countless universes as the culmination of the path tread by a bodhisattva for eons. In its strict early doctrinal use of the term, *tulku* refers to the earthly, corporeal manifestation that appears in the impure world, with the classic Indian example being Śākyamuni Buddha himself.

From the earliest forms so far identified in Tibet, the concept, function, and personification of tulku can be seen to serve a multiplicity of societal needs, and up to the present day, it continues to provide a framework within which new problems and opportunities are addressed. Once indigenous Tibetan lineages

became well-established and long-lived, more Tibetan personalities populated incarnation lineages, and the identification of incarnations could serve to establish symbolic connections along regional, noble, patronage, doctrinal, or other lines, as the situation demanded. Variations on the model of catenate incarnation began to appear, including deity emanation, co-incarnation, and female tulku lineages.

In time, the tulku concept proved to be so adaptable and enduring that attendant cultural forms were invented, such as the various means of identifying tulkus by lottery or divination; the practice of transmitting estates or labrang through the generations of incarnations; the institution of appointed regents—sometimes tulkus themselves—who maintained continuity following the death of one member of the series and during the minority of the successor; the relationships between great tulkus and their powerful transnational patrons from China, Manchuria, and Mongolia; complex multi-generational networks of tulkus serving as each other's teachers and disciples, sometimes transcending ethnic and national divisions; and finally, the elaborate ideologies through which key tulkus defined a national identity with architectural, artistic, liturgical, ritual, and symbolic dimensions. The tulku model provided a political counterpoint to the power of the nobility, a rallying point during times of national turmoil, and a means of succession among celibate monastics.

Since the Communist upheaval in Mongolia nearly a century ago, and especially in the decades since the Dalai Lama went into exile in 1959, an entirely new set of forces have shaped Tibet, the Himalayas, and the larger Inner Asia sphere in which the influence of Tibetan culture has been felt. Soviet and Maoist anti-religious pogroms, world wars, the encroachment of modernity, the encounter with contemporary science, exile, and globalism have all called forth new forms of cultural adaptation, many of them configured in terms of the tulku institution. This varied cultural expression has served in bewilderingly diverse ways, and it promises to continue to do so.

In sum, it is in Tibet that the concept of tulku as “magical emanation” finds its most prolific use, elaboration, and innovative application, whereby it comes to serve a variety of social, political, economic, and religious objectives. Many volumes have explored the religious histories of individual tulku lineages, especially the Dalai Lamas, the Pañchen Lamas, and the Karmapas, and yet few efforts have been made to give a general account of the nature of the tulku institution.

To address this particular gap, a conference was held at the University of San Francisco on February 15–16, 2013. Convened and hosted by Tsering Wangchuk, one of the co-editors of this special

issue, and sponsored by both the University of San Francisco and East Carolina State University,<sup>1</sup> the conference attracted the papers in the present volume, and one other has been added as well.<sup>2</sup>

In the preliminary planning that led up to the conference, several questions were posed. What is a tulku? How did the institution originate? How does it connect to antecedents in classical Indian Buddhism? What purposes did it serve in Tibet and the cultural regions influenced by Tibetan Buddhism? The editors sought to include scholarly voices that were diverse in terms of disciplinary methodology, regional focus, doctrinal tradition, and temporal period. In the end, the collection gathered here represents, we feel, the broadest and most comprehensive discussion of this fascinating institution available. If this issue has one single organizing thesis, it is that the tulku institution evolved into such a creative and versatile model that it could be employed to address a diverse array of social, historical, political, economic, and religious. The fine scholarship of the contributors elaborates this thesis in splendid detail, attesting to the ongoing vitality, adaptability, and utility of the tulku institution.

The editors wish to thank all the scholars who contributed papers to the conference and to this special issue, the donors who supported this effort, and the hardworking support staff at the University of San Francisco for their efforts during the conference. Derek and Tsering, the original editors of the volume, would like to express their gratitude to Dan Hirshberg, who joined the editorial team later, completed the final editing, formatting, and typesetting, and submitted the volume for publication with *Revue d'Études Tibétaines*. We also thank Jean-Luc Achard of *RET* for his help in facilitating a swift release of this special issue. Last, the editors and contributors elected to retain Tibetan phonetics in the body of the text so as to preserve its accessibility to non-specialists. Wylie transliteration is provided at first occurrence, in footnotes, and/or appendices.



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<sup>1</sup> USF sponsors: College of Arts and Sciences, Department of Theology & Religious Studies, Asian Studies Program, International Studies Program, and Peace & Justice Studies Program. ECSU sponsors: Academic Affairs, Division of Research and Graduate Studies, Harriot College of Arts and Sciences, Religious Studies Program, and Department of Student Involvement & Leadership.

<sup>2</sup> Gray Tuttle's paper was not presented at the conference.

## On Tulku Lineages

José Ignacio Cabezón

(University of California, Santa Barbara)

**L**achen Kunga Gyaltzen's *History of the Kadam Tradition* recounts an interesting exchange that is said to have taken place between Atiśa and some of his disciples:

Some Tibetan teachers—Geshé Chakdar (Phyag dar) and others—once asked Atiśa to write down the story of how he had reincarnated in the past, how he would be born again in the future, and how he would be enlightened. The Lord replied, “Have you never recited [the *dhāraṇī* of] *Uṣṇiṣa*?” “We have indeed,” they replied. Atiśa said, “In the *Uṣṇiṣa*, it says, ‘This will eventuate in destruction. It will plunge a dagger into your plans, which will be obstructed and rendered powerless.’ Likewise, when you use words to stab the scriptures and the lama’s special instructions, blessings degenerate. It is therefore inappropriate to write down either the literal words or implied meaning [of what the lama tells you].” It is said that Chakdar took this advice to heart, and accomplished his spiritual qualities in secret.<sup>1</sup>

This slightly cryptic passage from a fifteenth-century history of the Kadampa tradition captures something important about attitudes concerning the identification of peoples’ past and future lives. Whether or not the repartée between Atiśa and his students actually took place, the passage shows, on the one hand, that Tibetans have long been fascinated with peoples’ reincarnations, especially the reincarnations of famous saints.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, the passage

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<sup>1</sup> Las chen, *Bka’ gdams chos ‘byung*, 163.

<sup>2</sup> The historian Sönam Gyaltzen (Bsod nams rgyal mtshan, 1312-1347) preserves a story in which the Tibetan emperor Trisong Detsen (Khri srong lde’u btsan) asks Padmasambhava about where his deceased parents had been reborn. Master Padma replies that his father had been reborn as an Indian scholar and would later return to Tibet at the time of his grandson. The mother, he states, had been born to a poor couple in Zangkar (Zangs dkar). Sakyapa Sönam Gyaltzen 1996,

undercuts this fascination. Atiśa (b. 972/982) is being asked by some of his students to write about his own past and future lives. Atiśa never denies that he is privy to this information. Rather, he refuses to make the information public on the grounds that this would require him to divulge a secret that imperils the spiritual life.<sup>3</sup> It is not so much that Atiśa's incarnation history is too personal to narrate—privacy, in this sense, is a modern notion, not an ancient one—but that the details of one's spiritual life in general, and one's incarnation history in particular, is something that ought to be kept secret.

Despite Atiśa's admonitions, Tibetans have long been fascinated with identifying peoples' past lives, both their own and others. Beginning, it seems, about a century after Atiśa, Tibetans begin to claim themselves (and others) to be the reincarnations of former Tibetan saints, of Indian masters, and even of enlightened beings. These narratives of incarnation over multiple former lifetimes would become an important part of hagiographies, but they would also give rise to a separate genre of literature, the incarnation lineage.<sup>4</sup>

Incarnation lineages are accounts of lamas' multiple past lives. A variety of Tibetan terms are used to designate them:

- *kutreng* (*sku phreng*): rosary of incarnations
- *kutreng rimjön* (*sku phreng rim byon*): the successive line of incarnations in the form of a rosary, where each "bead" represents a distinct life

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234. Also see Kapstein 2002, chapter 3, on the tale of the reborn princess. While we cannot be certain of the antiquity of these stories, it is nonetheless a testament to the fact that Tibetans situate the fascination with rebirth as far back as the imperial period.

<sup>3</sup> That this sentiment was widespread in Kadampa circles can be witnessed by Dromtönpa's ('Brom ston pa) objections when Ngok Lekpai Sherap (Rngog legs pa'i shes rab) asks Atiśa to reveal Drom's past lives. "Lord," says Dromtönpa, "what is the use of your teaching all of the ways in which I have wandered through saṃsāra? ... Please do not bring my heart out into the open" (*bdag 'khor bar 'khyams tshul mang po bstan pa la dgos pa ci bdogs/ ... bdag gi snying phyir ma 'don*). Despite Dromtönpa's protestations, Atiśa agrees to Ngog's request with the proviso that Ngok never reveal these teachings to others (*gzhan la bshad du mi rung*). This is to no avail, apparently, since Dromtönpa's past lives become the basis for a text known as the *Teachings Concerning the Son* (*Bu chos*). The Tibetan is found in *Jo bo rje dpal ldan a ti sha'i gsung 'bum*, 158; see also Jinpa 2008, 455–56.

<sup>4</sup> A lama's *kutreng* can often be explored using different media. For example, hanging paintings (*thang ka*) and mural art (*ldebs ris*) depicting a saint's past incarnations are one entrée into this subject. There are many such artistic examples. See the brief but important discussion on "Tibetan Lineage Paintings" by Jeff Watts. And for an example, see the set of seven thangka of the pre-incarnations of Longdöl Lama (Klong rdol bla ma ngag dbang blo bzang, 1719–94) on the website "Longdol Lama Incarnation Lineage Painting Set." My sources in this essay, however, are classical texts, chiefly histories and hagiographies.

- *kyepairap* (*skye pa'i rabs*), or *trungrap* (*'khrungs rabs*): the narratives of rebirths
- *kyewa rimgyü* (*skye ba rim brgyud*), or *ku kyepai gyü* (*sku kye pa'i brgyud*): the lineage of rebirths

The tradition of writing about multiple past lives has Indian antecedents. The *Jātaka*, for example, are stories of the Buddha's own past lives as a bodhisttva, but the *Jātaka* does not claim to be an account of the Buddha's lives in chronological order, as the Tibetan *kutrengs* purport to be.<sup>5</sup> Tibet may be unique among Buddhist cultures in having created "historical" accounts of the lives of saints across multiple lifetimes.<sup>6</sup>

*Kutrengs* or *trungraps* are sometimes independent texts, but they are more frequently found as an important part of many (although certainly not all<sup>7</sup>) Tibetan hagiographies. The lives of Tibetan saints often begin with accounts of such past incarnations. When does the tradition of creating *kutrengs* begin, and how does it evolve? Who decides that someone is the reincarnations of one or more past masters? How are these decisions made? Is there a logic to them? What are the motivations for constructing *kutrengs*? These are some of the broader questions that interest me. One of the most interesting sources for the investigation of the construction of *kutrengs* is the incarnation lineage of the Changkya (Lcang skya) lamas. But before turning to that specific example, a bit of background is necessary.

Tibetans start to be identified (or they declare themselves) the incarnations of previous masters beginning, it seems, in the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries. Although the Karmapa incarnations are frequently said to be the oldest incarnation lineage in Tibet,<sup>8</sup> some Kagyü, Kadam, and Zhiché texts suggest that there were

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<sup>5</sup> The *Jātaka* is also highly stylized and reads more like a moral-didactic literature than as a historical account of the Buddha's past lives. There is little evidence that Indian Buddhists were very concerned with identifying their own or others' past lives, although see van der Kuijp 2005, 28, for a discussion of the phrase "the incarnation of the Lord" (*rje btsun gyi sprul pa'i sku*) that is found in the literary corpus attributed to Advayavajra.

<sup>6</sup> Fabio Rambelli (personal communication) has reported to me, however, that there was such a tradition in Japan, certainly in regard to the emperor Shotoku Taishi, but perhaps more widely.

<sup>7</sup> To cite just one example of a hagiography in which this is missing, the life of Chak Lotsawa Chöjé Pal (Chag lo tsā ba chos rje dpal, 1197–1263/4) compares the signs that accompany his birth and death to those same events in the life of the Buddha, but it never identifies him as the incarnation of a past Buddhist master or bodhisattva. See Roerich 1959.

<sup>8</sup> The tradition that the Karmapas are the oldest incarnation lineage in Tibet can be dated to at least the time of 'Gos lo tsā ba, *Deb ther sngon po* 1984, 615; Roerich 1976, 519—that is, to the fifteenth century. 'Gos lo calls the Karmapas the "first

instances of tulku identification that predate the Karmapas. Leonard van der Kuijp has mentioned two such instances among early Kadampa monks who flourished in the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries; he considers these to be the earliest attested cases of Tibetans representing themselves as reincarnations of prior Tibetan masters.<sup>9</sup> But there are other accounts of early Tibetans remembering their past lives (*sku skye ba dran pa*) or of being identified as tulkus.<sup>10</sup> For example, Gampopa (Sgam po pa, 1079–1153) is said to have recognized Layak José (La yag jo sras) as a reincarnation of one of his former students: “You, José, are [the incarnation of] a disciple of my early life who, due to certain [karmic] conditions, died [at an early age] and was reborn as you; but this time around you should live a long life.”<sup>11</sup> An early biography of the Zhiché master Gyalwa Tené (Rgyal ba te ne, 1120/27–1217) reports that he remembered his past life as Mal Tsöndrü Lama (Mal brtson ‘grus bla ma) when he was just three years old.<sup>12</sup> Lama Zhang (Zhang g.yu grags pa brtson ‘grus grags pa, 1122/32–93), a contemporary of Gyalwa Tené, tells us that “people said” he was an emanation (*sprul pa*).<sup>13</sup> Kyopa Jigten Gönpö

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successive line of incarnations” (*sprul pa’i sku rim pa dang po*). He calls the Zhamar (Zhwa dmar) incarnations the “second successive line” (*rim pa gnyis pa*); ‘Gos lo, *Deb sngon*, 651; Roerich 1976, 552.

<sup>9</sup> van der Kuijp 2005, 28–29. On some past incarnations of Chayulba (Bya yul ba), see also Roberto Vitali’s facsimile edition of Zhang zhung pa dpal ‘byor rgya mtsho, *Chos ‘byung mkhas pa’i yid ‘phrog* in Vitali 2012, 29 and 76–77.

<sup>10</sup> The twelfth-century Kadampa master Chilbuwa (Spyil bu ba) is said to have remembered his past lives. The master Namkha Gyaltsen (Nam mkha’ rgyal mtshan) is also said to have remembered his past lives in both India and Tsang (Gtsang). And the first Shamar, Tokden Drakpa Sengé (Rtogs ldan grags pa seng ge, 1283–1349), is said to have had a vision of Gampopa which caused him to remember his past lives. See ‘Gos lo, *Deb sngon*, 283, 343, 625, 745.

<sup>11</sup> The particular source for this is, however, late: ‘Gos lo, *Deb sngon*, 561; Roerich 1976, 471.

<sup>12</sup> Tené’s biography, written by one of his direct disciples, states that one day, out of the blue, the child asked his mother about Lama Mal’s home district. The mother replied that Lama Mal hailed from Lhodrak Rong (Lho brag rong) and asked the boy why he wanted to know. Tené announced that it was because he was Lama Mal’s reincarnation. Tené was subsequently identified as the reincarnation (*sku skye ba*) of “a great adept” by several visiting lamas, including Gampopa and Loro Rechungba (Lo ro ras chung ba, 1085–1161). Each claimed that the child was a reincarnation and insisted on imparting to him their respective lineages. This can obviously be read as a way of rhetorically portraying Tené as a vessel for many different lineages popular in his day, including those of Milarepa (Mi la ras pa). At the age of twenty-two, Tené decided to make a trip to the home of his previous incarnation in Lho brag rong. The biography of Tené is contained in the *Zhi byed brgyud pa phyi ma*, 401–19. It was written by Zhikpo, the brother of Rok Bendé Sherap (Rog bande shes rab, 1166–1244). The relevant passage concerning Tené’s past life is found on pp. 402–03.

<sup>13</sup> The line is found in Lama Shang’s *Self-Eulogy*; see Yamamoto 2009, 53.

(Skyobs pa 'Jig rten mgon po, 1143–1217), the founder of the Drigung Kagyü school, was also recognized as an incarnation by his teacher, Pagmo Drupa Dorje Gyalpo (Phag mo gru pa rdo rje rgyal po, 1110–70).<sup>14</sup> Finally, the twelfth-century *Testament of Ba* mentions that the imperial period monk Ba Selnang (or in some versions Ba Sangshi) was recognized by “a clairvoyant Chinese monk” as the incarnation of a bodhisattva.<sup>15</sup> The text also states that Śāntarakṣita recognized

<sup>14</sup> There is a fascinating passage found in a work written by Phakmo Drupa direct disciple, Sherap Jungné (Shes rab 'byung gnas, *Chos rje 'jig rten mgon po'i rnam thar*, 1–2). The passage reads:

It was widely known that... the Lord [Phakmo Drupa] told the Precious Lord [Jikten Gönpö] that he was a tenth-level bodhisattva. But the Precious Lord did not believe it, stating, “Is there such a thing as being a tenth level bodhisattva without knowing it?” Geshé Trashi Gangpa (Bkra shis sgang pa, b. twelfth century), citing many reasons, also considered the Precious Lord [Jikten Gönpö] to be the Lord of Secrets, Vajrapāni.

The work goes on to provide further interesting details of Jikten Gönpö's response to his lamas' assertions that he was an incarnation:

Asked whether this was so, [Jikten Gönpö] replied, ‘While both [my lamas'] claims [concerning my status as an incarnation] are in agreement, what was their real purpose in claiming that I am a tenth-level bodhiattva or the Lord of Secrets? [By this claim they meant that] the nature of my own mind is [one with] the realization of mahāmudrā. Both the ultimate *bodhicitta* and the conventional mental resolve to reach enlightenment [for the sake of others] are the same in all of the buddhas of the three times... They are also the same in all sentient beings of the three worlds, and that is why they ripen and liberate all sentient beings.

The passage suggests that Jikten Gönpö reinterpreted his lamas' claims concerning his status as a way of making a broader doctrinal point concerning the immanence of buddhahood. On Jikten Gönpö's life, see also Ta tshag, *Lho rong chos 'byung*, 352–65. See also the fourth Shamar's homage prayer in 'Jig rten gsum gyi mgon po'i yon tan, 176. In that prayer, Jikten Gönpö is identified as having been prophesied by Tāra. The tradition of Jikten Gönpö as Nāgārjuna's incarnation appears to be quite old, dating as far back as Tropu Jampa Pal (Khro phu Byams pa dpal, 1172–1236). It is sometimes said to derive from a prophecy made by a Sinhalese arhat. See, for example, Shes rab 'byung gnas, *Chos rje 'jig rten mgon po'i rnam thar*, 6–7; Padma dkar po, *Chos 'byung*, 424–25; and van der Kuijp 1994, 599–600, 609–11. Van der Kuijp dates the tradition connecting Jigten Gönpö to Nāgārjuna to 1188—that is, to Jikten Gönpö's own lifetime. This is not the only case of someone being prophesied by a Sinhalese saint. Padma dkar po, *Chos 'byung*, 284, states that Sangyé Wöntön (Sangs rgyas dbon ston, twelfth century) had also been so prophesied.

<sup>15</sup> Mgon po rgyal mtshan, ed., *Sba bzhed*, 24: *hwa shang mngon shes can na re/ khyod ni byang chub sems dpa' rta skad ces bya ba'i sprul pa yin*. Other versions of the text identify the bodhisattva as Wild Horse (Rta rgod) or Wild Horse's Neigh (Rta rgod skad), suggesting an association to Hayagrīva, the horse-headed, wrathful manifestation of Avalokiteśvara. See Wangdu and Diemberger 2000, 49. Of

Selnang as a disciple from a past life and, in another instance, that Śāntarakṣita caused the emperor Trisong Detsen to remember that they had prayed together for the conversion of Tibet at the time of Śākyamuni.<sup>16</sup> Because the *Testament of Ba* was compiled centuries after the events that it portrays, we cannot of course assume that it represents actual imperial-period events or views. Nonetheless, the *Testament of Ba* provides us with something of a window into the views of twelfth-century Tibetans concerning the identification of incarnations.

Today, the identification of tulkus is a fairly routinized process. Although there are certainly exceptions, students of a deceased teacher will nowadays search for possible candidates and present the options to a high-ranking lama, who will then choose a specific child, often through some form of divination. But this procedure appears to be relatively late. I have found no old texts that describe the identification of tulkus in precisely this way. Instead, older sources suggest that incarnate lamas are usually identified in one of three ways: (1) a child declares himself to be a reincarnation;<sup>17</sup> (2) the child is identified by his teacher as an incarnation;<sup>18</sup> and (3) the child is

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course the *Sba bzhed* and other early works like the *Bka' chems kha khol ma* also famously identify the Tibetan emperor Songtsen Gampo (Srong btsan sgam po) as the incarnation (*sprul pa*) of Avalokiteśvara. The dating of the *Sba bzhed* is a notoriously difficult issue (see Wangdu and Diemberger 2000, xii–xiv), but given that the passage in question seems to be found in all versions, it can probably be dated to at least the twelfth century.

<sup>16</sup> The passage concerning the emperor appears only in the *Dbā' bzhed* and not in the *Sba bzhed*; Wangdu and Diemberger 2000, 46. The lines concerning Salnang read: "You generated the mind directed at enlightenment many lifetimes ago. And those many lifetimes ago you were the best of my spiritual sons who generated the mind directed at enlightenment, and you were called Yeshé Wangpo." *tshē rabs du ma'i sngon rol nas sems bskyed pa yin te/ tshē rabs du ma'i sngon rol nas sems bskyed pa'i chos kyi bu rabs yin/ ming yang ye shes dbang por bdags so zhes gsungs; Mgon po rgyal mtshan, ed., Sba bzhed, 12.*

<sup>17</sup> For instance, the fourth Karmapa Rölpa Dorjé (Rol pa'i rdo rje, 1340–83) is said to have declared himself the reincarnation of the Karmapa at age three; see Ta tshag pa, *Lho rong chos 'byung*, 243: *dgung lo gsum pa la/ nga karma pa'i skye ba yin/ yab yum la dpag tu med pa gsungs.*

<sup>18</sup> For example, at the beginning of the biography of his predecessor, Karma Pakshi, the third Karmapa Rangjung Dorjé (Rang byung rdo rje, 1284–1339) states that Pakshi was recognized as the reincarnation of the first Karmapa Düsum Khyenpa (Dus gsum mkhyen pa) by his first teacher, Pongrakpa (Spong rag pa) or Pomdrakpa (Spom brag pa, 1170–1249), and subsequently by other lamas and deities as well. Rang byung rdo rje, *Bla ma rin po che'i rnam par thar pa*, 257f. See also Ta tshag pa, *Lho rung chos 'byung*, 235; and Padma dkar po, *Chos 'byung*, 404. In the *Lho rong chos 'byung* the recognition is not very explicit: "You are someone blessed by the dākinīs." Padma dkar po states that "[the child] was slightly unsure of his identity, and Rinpoche Pomdrakpa recognized him;" *ngo sprod cung*

identified by former students, who then build consensus for their view.<sup>19</sup> These three methods are, however, neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive.<sup>20</sup>

Miracles often play an important role in the narratives of the identification of tulkus. Such is the case with Aro Yeshé Jungné (A ro ye shes 'byung gnas, tenth–eleventh century)<sup>21</sup> and with Zurchungwa Sherap Drakpa (Zur chung ba shes rab grags pa, 1014–74). Regarding the latter, the *Blue Annals* of Gö Lotsawa ('Gos lo tsā ba gzhon nu dpal, 1392–1481) tells us that while Zurchungwa was still a boy, his father, Wugpa Lungpa ('Ug pa lung pa Shākya 'byung gnas, a.k.a. Zur chen, 1002–62), saw him circumambulating a stūpa without his feet touching the ground. This caused Wugpa Lungpa to think, “Well then, it seems like this [child] is an incarnation.”<sup>22</sup>

*zad ma mkhyen pa rin po che spom brag pas ngo sprad*. On Pomdrakpa, see Alexander Gardner's entry in *Treasury of Lives*.

The third Karmapa himself is said to have been recognized (*mngon mkhyen*) by Orgyenpa (O rgyan pa, 1229/30–1309). Padma dkar po, *Chos 'byung*, 406, recounts the story of Orgyenpa's clairvoyant knowledge that the child would arrive the following day. The master prepared a throne higher than his own. When the boy arrived, he immediately climbed on the throne without any fear. Orgyenpa asked him, “Boy, why are you sitting my lama's throne?” The boy replied, “I am that lama, and I have a favor to ask of you.” According to this account, therefore, Rangjung Dorjé recognized himself.

<sup>19</sup> For instance, the *Blue Annals* tells us that the second Shamar (Zhwa dmar Mkha' spyod dbang po, 1350–1405) “was accepted as the reincarnation of [the first Shamar] Tokden Drakpa Sengé by some of [Drakpa Sengé's] former students.” 'Gos lo, *Deb sngon*, 637.

<sup>20</sup> Prophecy or scripture (*lung bstan*) can also play a role in establishing an individual as a reincarnation, but scripture is usually not the primary mode for recognition, being instead used after the fact to bolster a decision that has already been made. Nor is the identification of tulkus always put into the mouth of human beings. On occasion it is a supernatural agent who identifies someone as an incarnation. A biography of Marpa (Mar pa Chos kyi blo gros, 1012–1100) tells us that the translator Yönten Bar (Yon tan 'bar, eleventh century), while traveling in India, received the news that Marpa was the reincarnation of Dombi Heruka from a magical yogini. In any case, instances of identification of tulkus by supernatural agents, as in this case, are relatively rare. On the tale concerning Yönten Bar and the yogini, see Khenpo Khonchog Gyatsen 1990, 99. The origin of the tradition that Marpa was an incarnation of Dombi appears to be a terma, the *Mkha' ri'i zhus lan*, on which see Roberts 2007, 77.

<sup>21</sup> See the famous story of the miraculous birth and miracles of Aro preserved in 'Gos lo, *Deb sngon* 1984, 1162f; Roerich 1976, 999f.

<sup>22</sup> 'Gos lo, *Deb sngon*, 148: 'o na 'di sprul pa'i sku zhig yin. Roerich 1976, 115. For a similar magical story serving as evidence of Zhigpo Dütsi's (Zhig po bdud rtsi, 1149–99) status as an incarnation, see 'Gos lo, *Deb sngon*, 172; Roerich 1976, 135. Similar claims are also made about the Kagyü masters Yang Gönpa (Yang dgon pa, 1213–58) ('Gos lo, *Deb sngon*, 806; Roerich 1976, 688) and Trimkhang Lotsawa (Khrims khang lo tsā ba bsod nams rgya mtsho, 1424–82) ('Gos lo, *Deb sngon*, 942f; Roerich 1976, 805f).

Eventually, almost every famous Tibetan saint gets incorporated into the *kutreng* of one or another later Tibetan lama. For example, among Kagyüpas, Marpa (Mar pa chos kyi blo gros, 1002/1012–97/1100) reincarnates as Rinchen Zangpo (Rin chen bzang po, 1243–1311), and Milarepa (Mi la ras pa, 1040/52–1123/35) as Götsangpa (Rgod tshang pa mgon po rdo rje, 1189–1258).<sup>23</sup> Dromtönpa (‘Brom ston rgyal ba’i ‘byung gnas, 1004/5–64) incarnates as the Dalai Lamas, and Atiśa as the Pañchen Lamas. And with the rise of the treasure traditions in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, a number of Nyingma lamas come to be identified as the reincarnations of Tibetan kings and imperial period scholars and saints.<sup>24</sup> I found, much to my surprise, that there was even an incarnation of Tsongkhapa (Tsong kha pa blo bzang grags pa, 1357–1419), namely Shantipa Lodrö Gyaltzen (Shanti pa blo gros rgyal mtshan, 1487–1567), an important Gelukpa master and royal monk of the kingdom of Gugé.<sup>25</sup> Often, a single saint gets incorporated into more than one lineage—even into the *kutreng* of lamas of a different school—and this seems to have posed little problem, although there are exceptions.<sup>26</sup>

The identification of Tibetans as the incarnations of *Indian* masters accompanies a shift in Tibetans’ self-perception, for if Indian masters were incarnating in Tibet, it implied that the Land of Snows was becoming a bit less “barbarous,” and perhaps even that Buddhism’s center of gravity was shifting across the Himalayas from India to Tibet.<sup>27</sup> There are many accounts of Tibetan masters of the early *chidar* (*phyi dar*) or “subsequent dissemination” from the mid-tenth century being identified as reincarnations of Indian saints, but the texts that make these connections are often late, so it is difficult to know how old these traditions really are. For example, later biographies of the great translator Rinchen Zangpo (Rin chen bzang po, 958–1055) mention that he had five previous Indian

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<sup>23</sup> This is mentioned in TBRC, but I have not yet found this in Götsangpa’s biographies. The fourth Trungram Gyatrul (b. 1968) is also considered an incarnation of Milarepa. Milarepa also gets included, much later, in the Drakar (Brag dkar) incarnation line; see Roberts 2007, 76.

<sup>24</sup> The Dodrupchen (Rdo grub chen) lamas are said to be incarnations of Padmasambhava and the ‘Khrul zhig incarnations of Śāntarakṣita, Thonmi Sambhota, and Vairocana.

<sup>25</sup> On this figure, see Vitali 2012, 53 and 159–164. See also Roberts 2007, 76, where Tsongkhapa is included (along with Milarepa) in the lineage of the Drakar Lamas.

<sup>26</sup> For example, the famous Sakya Lama Phakpa (‘Phags pa blo gros rgyal mtshan, 1235–80) gets incorporated into the lineage of the Dalai Lamas. Van der Kuijp 2005, 17 reports that members of the Sakya royal family were disinclined to consider the third Dalai Lama, Sönam Gyaltzen (Bsod nams rgya mtsho, 1543–99), the reincarnation of their ancestor.

<sup>27</sup> Kapstein 2003, 776.

incarnations,<sup>28</sup> but these Indian pre-incarnations are not mentioned in Rinchen Zangpo's earliest biography.<sup>29</sup> Likewise, Ju Mipham ('Ju mi pham, 1846–1912) records that Atiśa recognized Rongzom Chökyi Zangpo (Rong zom chos kyi bzang po, 1042–1136) as the reincarnation of the Indian yogi Kṛṣṇācārya, but we have no early source verifying this.<sup>30</sup>

The third Karmapa's biography of his predecessor, Karma Pakshi, ends with a long discussion of the latter's previous Indian, Nepalese, and Tibetan pre-incarnations, thirteen in all, but it is difficult to know whether these are the actual words of Karma Pakshi. In any case, this portion of the biography is extremely interesting. It is penned as a first-person report of what Karma Pakshi himself said about his past lives.<sup>31</sup> The narrative is governed by a certain logic wherein most if not all the past lives are meant to account for some particular

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<sup>28</sup> The five are: (1) Nyan thos chen po 'phags pa yul 'khor skyong, (2) the master Ka min chen po, (3) the master Spros pa med pa, (4) the siddha Shin ka ba chen po, and (5) De ba bha ma.

<sup>29</sup> The earliest biography of Rinchen Zangpo is probably the mid-eleventh-century work written by his direct disciple Gugé Trikhanga (Gu ge khri thang pa dznya na shrī, *Rin chen bzang po 'khrungs rabs*, 51–128). The various editions of this text and related scholarly literature have been discussed by Martin 2008.

<sup>30</sup> Given Mipham's dates, the source of this story is therefore quite late. However, 'Gos lo, *Deb sngon*, 207 (Roerich 1976, 164) also states that Rongzom was considered to be an incarnation (*sprul pa'i sku grags pa*), but 'Gos lo does not specifically mention either Atiśa or Kṛṣṇācārya. See also Rich 2008.

<sup>31</sup> Another work attributed to a Karmapa—this time to the first Karmapa Düsum Khyenpa—also purports to be an account of the Karmapa's ability to know past and future lives. The passage is found in the fourth chapter of a work by the third Karmapa: Rang byung rdo rje, *Dus gsum mkhyen pa seng ge sgra'i rnam par thar pa*, 20–24. Asked where “the great former lamas were born, how many disciples they had, and what activities they performed,” Düsum Khyenpa goes on to identify different masters' incarnations. For instance, “Lama Marpa incarnated as a pandita near Śrī Parvata in south [India], in the city of Trinakara (Phri na ka ra). Later he became a yogi and benefitted many beings. Lama Lhajé [Gampopa] incarnated in the Indian kingdom of Karnapana (Ka rna pa na), which is in between India and Kashmir. His name was \*Śāntivarma (Zhi ba go cha). For a time he was in monks' robes; and for a time he was a yogi. He benefitted sentient beings through his various activities. It seems he had about forty disciples [and so forth].” The text seems to be concerned principally with establishing the reputation of the first Karmapa as someone who was gifted with the ability to know other people's rebirth, although it is also an important register of important lamas, a kind of “who's who.” The Fifth Dalai Lama also had the reputation of being able to identify the past lives of others, as witnessed by a host of small ritual texts in the form of “homage through past lives” (*khrungs rabs gsol 'debs*) that he composed on behalf of various lamas of his day. This is perhaps as good a point as any to make a point that should be fairly obvious: when a lama recognizes a tulku or identifies someone's past life, this act not only legitimizes the individual being recognized, it also reinforces the status of the recognizing lama as an extraordinary individual.

personality trait, ability, or even physical attribute that he possessed. For example, three past incarnations (the first, fifth, and seventh) are used to explain why Karma Pakshi had an interest in and mastery of the Nyingma tantras. Two other incarnations (the second and ninth) account for his expertise in exoteric Mahāyāna. His mastery over gods, demons, and protectors are explained by three other past lives. Consider a few examples of the rhetoric of this text:

The thought occurred to me that I must have been Shenré Thul (Gshen re thul). This is why, through the grace of Master Padma, I can [now] tame the gods and demons of Kham (Khams)...

The fact that nowadays I have repeated visions the Great Brahmin [Saraha], of Maitripa, and of Teüpuwa (Te'u pu ba) is due to my past connections to them...

After that rebirth, I was the Indian yogi Buddhabodhi (Buddha bod de). Having exhibited many signs of accomplishment and having converted many non-Buddhists, I helped many beings to accomplish the goal of putting an end to birth. It seems that it is because of this [rebirth as an Indian tantrika] that nowadays I have a black beard and a predisposition to tame the wicked.

In the very next rebirth I was the lord of yogis Nyaksewa (Nyag se ba).<sup>32</sup> This is something that occurred to me while traveling in the mountains. It is because of these past propensities that nowadays I stay in the mountains and engage in various activities there.

Because of the residues of those past activities, in the present, when I wish to do the smallest activity, even foolish jokes are enough to forcefully bring about a result, whether beneficial or harmful.<sup>33</sup>

The implicit logic here seems to be, "In order for me to be like this in the present, I must have had a connection to such and such an Indian saint in the past," or "I must *have been* so and so." I find this work fascinating because it hints at how some Tibetans thought about the process of deciding past incarnations—namely, that it was a way of explaining someone's personality, abilities, and even someone's

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<sup>32</sup> Many sources document the fact that Karma Pakshi claimed that Nyaksewa was none other than himself, perhaps the first instance of a lama claiming to have two simultaneous embodiments, in this case one as Nyaksewa and the other as Düsum Khyenpa.

<sup>33</sup> The implication seems to be that because of his past propensities, he could accomplish all of his aims easily—even if he just joked about them.

physical appearance. The text is also interesting because of its rhetoric, which displays a certain modesty, and even hesitancy: “It *seems* that I was so and so.” Although focused chiefly on the past and on India, Pakshi’s biography ends with a brief discussion of his future incarnations in various Buddha fields. It is in this context, almost as an aside, that Pakshi declares himself to be the incarnation of the first Karmapa Dūsum Khyenpa (Dus gsum mkhyen pa, 1110–93).<sup>34</sup>

In any case, many of the major saints and siddhas of India eventually came to be included in Tibetan incarnation lineages. One has only to think of the Phakpa Lha (‘Phags pa lha)<sup>35</sup> and Zhiwa Lha (Zhi ba lha)<sup>36</sup> lamas who were considered the Tibetan incarnations of Āryadeva and Śāntideva, respectively. Delek Gyaltzen (Bde legs rgyal mtshan, 1225–81), a student of Götsangpa (Rgod tshang pa, 1189–1258), was believed to be the reincarnation of Maitripa,<sup>37</sup> and Dolpopa (Dol po pa shes rab rgyal mtshan, 1292–1361) the incarnation of the Kalkī Puṇḍarika of Kālacakra fame.<sup>38</sup> Pañchen

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<sup>34</sup> It is noteworthy that none of the five past lives of the Karmapas mentioned by ‘Gos lo tsā ba coincide with those found in Rang jung rdo rje’s biography of Karma Pakshi. ‘Gos lo’s list is found in, *Deb sngon*, 563; Roerich 1976, 474. It includes:

1. Prajñālaṅka, a disciple of Nāgārjuna
2. Kāmadhanu, a disciple of Saroruha
3. Dharmabodhi, a saint from southwest Jambudvīpa, who accomplished the siddhi of Avalokiteśvara
4. Gyalwa Chokyang (Rgyal ba mchog dbyangs), a minister of King Trisong Detsen, who received empowerment from Padmasambhava and obtained the siddhi of Hayagrīva
5. Potowa (Po ta pa [sic] rin chen gsal, 1027–1105), who was the immediate predecessor of the first Karmapa Dūsum Khyenpa. Gampopa, Dūsum Khyenpa’s teacher, studied under Sharawa Yönten Drak (Sha ra ba ton tan grags, 1070–1141), who himself had studied under Potowa. Hence, there is a teacher-student lineage connection between the first Karmapa and Potowa through the figures of Sharawa and Gampopa.

These five pre-incarnations of the Karmapas are interesting. The first associates the Karmapas with the founding figure of Mahāyāna Buddhism; the second with a tantric siddha; the third with the deity Avalokiteśvara; the fourth with the Tibetan imperial period and with the wrathful manifestation of Avalokiteśvara, Hayagrīva; and the fifth with an important master of the Kadampa school.

<sup>35</sup> The online biography by Samten Chöphel in the Treasury of Lives also identifies the first Phakpa Lha as the incarnation of the Indian saint Mitrāyogī and of the Tibetan translator Kawa Paltsek (Dka’ ba dpal brstegs). It was the lama himself who, while still a youth, declared himself to be the incarnation of Āryadeva.

<sup>36</sup> The Zhiwa Lha incarnations begin with Palden Chokdrup (Dpal ldan mchog grub, 1454–1523), a student of the first Phakpa Lha.

<sup>37</sup> ‘Gos lo, *Deb sngon*, 805.

<sup>38</sup> This was the case, apparently, during Dolpopa’s own lifetime. See Sheehy 2007, 285n140.

Sönam Drakpa (Paṅ chen bsod nams grags pa, 1478–1554) was considered to be the reincarnation of the Kashmiri Pandit Śākyaśrī (Kha che paṅ chen Shākya shrī, 1127–1225 ) and also of Butön Rinchen Drup (Bu ston rin chen grub, 1290–1364).<sup>39</sup> And Butön, in his own lifetime, had been identified as the reincarnation of the Kashmiri Pandit. Paṅchen's biographer undoubtedly knew this, and by associating Paṅchen with Butön, he understood that he was thereby also "inheriting" Butön's past life as Śākyaśrī. This tactic of subsuming the past incarnations of a given lama into new lineages will be important when we examine more complex *kutrengs*, like that of the Dalai Lamas and the Changkya lamas.

A few Tibetans were considered not simply the reincarnations of human beings, but also the emanations of buddhas, bodhisattvas, or deities. The deification of important Tibetan masters, though often a later move, is nonetheless an important part of many *kutrengs*. Marpa, for example, is said in some sources to be an emanation of Cakrasaṃvara; Milarepa—probably much to his dismay—an emanation of the deities Vajradhāra, Vairocana, and Mañjuśrī;<sup>40</sup> and Gampopa was considered the incarnation of a bodhisattva.<sup>41</sup> Palkyi Dorjé (Dpal kyi rdo rje, ninth century), the killer of Langdarma, was later portrayed as an emanation of the wrathful deity Vajrapāni.<sup>42</sup> So too was Drophuḱpa (Sgro phug pa, 1074–1134), the son of Zurchungwa.<sup>43</sup> Three Tibetan students of Atiśa came to be identified with the so-called Threefold Protectors (Rigs gsum mgon po): Dromtön with Avalokiteśvara, Ngok Legpai Sherap with Mañjuśrī, and Khutön (Khu ston brtson 'grus g.yung drung, 1011–75) with Vajrapāni.<sup>44</sup> Yaktön Sangyé Pal (G.yag ston sangs rgyas dpal, 1350–

<sup>39</sup> Lha dbang blo gros, *Bsod nams grags pa'i rnam thar*. From the colophon, the work appears to have been written by a direct disciple shortly after Paṅchen's death. The biography (p. 49) also tells us that it was well known that Paṅchen considered himself "an incarnation of a great former Kadampa lama" (*bka' gdams gong ma chen po zhig gi rnam sprul yin*).

<sup>40</sup> See Roberts 2007, 76–77.

<sup>41</sup> Indeed, in one song, directed at the three men from Kham, Gampopa proclaims himself to have been the bodhisattva Candraprabha (Zla ba 'od). The name of the bodhisattva is in fact part of Gampopa's Tibetan name (Zla 'od gzhon nu). See Stewart 1995, 98.

<sup>42</sup> Sakyapa Sonam Gyaltzen 1996, 209.

<sup>43</sup> Roerich 1976, 12.

<sup>44</sup> This is found in a work by the second Dalai Lama; see Jinpa 2008, 521–22. There is another tradition that identifies Dromtönpa's three students, the so-called three brothers, as the incarnations of the *rigs gsum mgon po*—Potowa as Mañjuśrī, Chen Ngawa (Spyan snga ba, 1038–1103) as Vajrapāni, and Buchungwa (Bu chung ba, 1031–1107/9) as Avalokiteśvara. On the three brothers as the incarnations of three of the sixteen arhats, see Davidson 2005, 251.

1414) was considered an emanation of Maitreya.<sup>45</sup> So too was Tsongkhapa, according to his “Extremely Secret Biography,” but more important, Tsongkhapa eventually came to be considered an emanation of Mañjuśrī.<sup>46</sup> So too was the great translator Rinchen Zangpo<sup>47</sup> and the famous scholar Sakya Paṇḍita (1182–1251).<sup>48</sup> The Karmapas and the Dalai Lamas came to be considered emanations of Avalokiteśvara, and the Paṅchen Lamas emanations of Amitābha. It is worth noting that these association of historical persons with supernatural agents does not ordinarily happen immediately. The apotheosis of Tibetan saints usually occurs a generation or more after their death. Perhaps enough time had to pass so that the lamas’ human foibles could be forgotten.

What motivated Tibetans to take this additional bold step and claim that some individuals were manifestations of enlightened beings? It is possible that as more and more Tibetans came to be identified as reincarnations of former *human* beings, the greatest lamas had to be distinguished and set apart from ordinary tulkus, and hence the tradition of associating high lamas with divine beings. The highest lamas—what in the Geluk tradition are called the “great lamas” (*bla ma che khag*)—not only had long incarnation lineages as human beings extending back to India, but more importantly, their higher status was often guaranteed by suggesting that their lineage had a divine origin.

Most developed *kutrengs* or *trungraps*—which is to say ones that attempt to provide extended, quasi-historical accounts of the past rebirth of lamas—probably begin only in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but there are some earlier, important examples. One of the most interesting has to be a Kadampa work known as the *Teachings Concerning the Son* (*Bu chos*), the second half of the *Book of Kadam* (*Bka’ gdams legs bam*). The *Son Teachings* is a mammoth work that contains narratives of the past Indian lives of Atiśa’s chief disciple, Dromtönpa. No former Tibetan life is mentioned, which is understandable given the Kadampas’ Indo-centrism.<sup>49</sup> The past life narratives found in the *Son Teachings* are highly stylized, so much so

<sup>45</sup> This is mentioned in a verse of homage found at the beginning of Ngag dbang chos grags, *Pod chen drug gi ’bal gtam*, 4.

<sup>46</sup> The “Very Secret Biography” is found in *Rje’i rnam thar shin tu gsang ba*. The biography tells the tale of how, as a bodhisattva in a past life, Tsongkhapa received the prophecy of his future enlightenment as the Tathāgata Lion’s Roar. See also Ary 2007.

<sup>47</sup> Padma dkar po, *Chos ’byung*, 266.

<sup>48</sup> Rin spungs Ngag dbang ’jigs med grags pa (sixteenth century), *Sa paṅ rtogs brjod*, 34, 238. See also Padma dkar po, *Chos ’byung*, 287.

<sup>49</sup> The Tibetan is found in *Jo bo rje dpal ldan a ti sha’i gsung ’bum*, 157–591. A portion of the work has been translated in Jinpa 2008, 455–520.

that the work reads more like the *Jātaka* than like later *kutrengs*, which is to say that the lives described in the *Son Teachings* have little real biographical or historical depth. That being said, the *Son Teachings* are considered Dromtön's *trungrap*, making it one of the longest such texts dealing with the past lives of a Tibetan lama.<sup>50</sup>

Very shortly after the death of the first Dalai Lama Gendun Drup (Dge 'dun grub, 1391–1474)—and perhaps even during his own life—he came to be considered an incarnation of Dromtönpa. Leonard van der Kuijp has explored some of the historical reasons for the association of these two figures, but there are also implications that bear on the topic of *kutrengs*. If the first Dalai Lama was an incarnation of Dromtönpa, it meant that the Dalai Lamas thereby “inherited” all of the past lives of Dromtönpa, which of course meant that later biographers of the Dalai Lamas could lay claim to the *trungrap* of Dromtönpa found in the *Son Teachings*. And this is precisely what we find. To take just one example, the five-volume collection of the lives of the first thirteen Dalai Lamas published in Dharamsala in the 1970s incorporates all twenty-two of Dromtön's lives from the *Son Teachings*, casting them as pre-incarnations of the Dalai Lamas without any hint that these lives have been lifted out of the *Son Teachings*. Whatever other implications there may have been to associating the Dalai Lamas with Dromtön, this decision had one important religious implication. It meant that the Dalai Lama's *trungrap* could, as befitting his rank, be greatly expanded and taken back to prehistoric times in India, to the age of past buddhas. We find a similar strategy in the case of the Changkya lamas.

Fully developed *kutrengs*, the way we have them today, as mentioned earlier, are a relatively late phenomenon, belonging mostly to the period after the sixteenth century. But we do have some earlier important examples. The earliest datable *kutreng* known to me

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<sup>50</sup> The date of *Book of Kadam* is not altogether certain. The first to write down the work in its entirety, Khenchen Nyima Gyaltsen (Mkhan chen nyi ma rgyal mtshan, 1225–1305), tells us that he completed the book in 1302, but Thupten Jinpa believes that there must have been an archaic version of the work that dates to earlier times. Jinpa also mentions the fact that the twenty-two stories of Dromtön's past lives are (at least according to later sources) are mentioned in a work by the early thirteenth-century Kadampa master Nam mkha' rin chen. See Jinpa 2008, 22–28. That being said, the earliest biography of Dromtön that I know of, written in the middle of the thirteenth century, does not discuss his past lives at all. This biography, written by Chim Namkha Drak (Mchims nam mkha' grags, 1210–85), is in fact a refreshingly straightforward and non-stylized work (Mchims nam mkha' grags, *Dge bshes ston pa'i sku mche ba'i yon tan*). It is noteworthy that the author of this biography, Chim, was a teacher of Khenchen Nyima Gyaltsen, the author/compiler of the *Book of Kadam*. In any case, the *Teachings Concerning the Son*, even if not written down until 1302, and even if highly stylized, contains one of the earliest lengthy sources of the past lives of a Tibetan lama.

is found in a short autobiographical work of the Kagyü master Nyaksewa (Nyag se rin chen rgyal mtshan, 1141–1201), one of the four chief students (*nye ba'i sras bzhi*) of Phakmo Drupa.<sup>51</sup> The relevant lines from Nyaksewa's work read:

In the presence of Vajradhāra, [I was] Limitless Light of Good Qualities (Tshad med yon tan 'od).  
 In the presence of Telo[pa], I was \*Prajñākīrti (Shes rab grags pa)  
 In the presence of Nāropa, they called me the translator Dromtön ('Brom ston).  
 In the presence of Marpa, they called me Ngoktön Chödor.<sup>52</sup>  
 In the presence of Mila, I was Rechung Dorjé Drak.<sup>53</sup>  
 In the presence of Dakpo [i.e., Gampopa], they called me Saltön Gomsha (Gsal ston sgom zhwa).  
 In the presence of Pakdru, I am like a son,  
 One of the four men who benefits these teachings.<sup>54</sup>

This brief but important passage is testament to the fact that even before the second Karmapa was born, there were already Kagyü masters who were tracing their incarnation lineages all the way back to Vajradhāra and associating themselves with the seminal figures of the early Kagyü lineage. The first two incarnations—Limitless Light and Prajñākīrti—are of course pre-historical, and the association of Dromtön with Nāropa is problematic since Dromtön (assuming this is a reference to Atīśa's disciple) never went to India. But the next two names *are* historical figures, important disciples of Marpa and Milarepa, respectively. In any case, even if not a very developed

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<sup>51</sup> Nyaksewa founded the monastery of Lé (Gles) or Né (Sne) in Kham. Much later, in the seventeenth century, he came to be included in the incarnation lineage of the Drakyap (Brag g.yab) lamas. For a compilation of the known texts of Nyag se ba, see Dge bshes gle dgon thub bstan byang chub and Bkra shis tshe ring, eds., *Grub thob nyag re se bo'i skyes rabs*, 106f. One of these contains the enigmatic claim, found in both the writings of Nyag se ba and in the *Blue Annals*, that the second Karmapa, Karma Pakshi, considered Nyaksea “to be Karma Pakshi” (*karma pakshi yin zhes karma pakshi rang gis zhal gyis bzhes so*), perhaps a reference to the fact that they were of a single mind-stream (*rgyud gcig*). Karma Pakshi is said to have implied that the Karmapas and Sharmapas were also of one mindstream. Nyaksewa's life story is also mentioned in Ta tshag pa, *Lho rong chos 'byung*, 341–42.

<sup>52</sup> The Tibetan reads Rngog/Rdzogs ston chos rdor, which refers to Ngok Chöku Dorjé (Rngog chos sku rdo rje, 1036–97), one of Marpa's disciples.

<sup>53</sup> Ras chung rdo rje grags (1085–1161) is often considered one of Milarepa's two chief disciples.

<sup>54</sup> Dge bshes thub bstan byang chub and Bkra shis tshe ring, *Grub thob nyag re se bo'i skyes rabs*, 15–16.

*kutreng*, this must be reckoned as one of the earliest instances of a Tibetan identifying his past reincarnations over multiple lives. Through this rudimentary list of past lives Nyaksewa creates important associations with the transcendent past, with India, and with the generations of Tibetan masters that immediately preceded him.

We find a similar pattern in the case of the Shamar incarnations.<sup>55</sup> The first Shamar is reckoned to be the great Tokden Drakpa Sengé (Rtogs ldan grags pa seng ge, 1283–1349). He studied at the philosophical college of Sangpu (Gsang phu) for seven years before becoming a disciple of the third Karmapa Rangjung Dorjé. By the time of Gö Lotsawa in the late fifteenth century, we find six figures—two Indian, one Nepalese, and three Tibetan—mentioned as the Shamar's pre-incarnations. These include:

1. \*Dāsananda (Khol po dga'), a disciple of Tilopa
2. \*Sarvavid (Kun rig), a brahmin from Jalandhara who was a disciple of Nāropa
3. Shönu Sangchö (Gzhon nu gsang chos), a Nepalese disciple of the Indian teacher Vajrapāni, who is said to have traveled to Tibet to meet Milarepa (1040/52–1123/35),
4. Tsultrim Pal (Tshul khirms dpal, 1096–1132), a Tibetan who studied under Gampopa
5. Namkha Ö (Nam mkha' 'od, 1133–99), a student of the first Karmapa
6. Trashi Drakpa (Bkra shis grags pa, 1200–82), a disciple of the second Karmapa

The later tradition would also associate the Shamarpas with the deity Amitābha, but that is not found here. The motivation for this *kutreng* is not unlike what we find in the case of Nyaksewa: to cast the Shamar incarnations as direct disciples of the most important figures of the Karma Kagyü tradition: of the two Indian siddhas Tilopa and Nāropa (nos. 1 and 2); of two important Tibetan lineage masters, Mila and Gampopa (nos. 3 and 4); and of the first two Karmapas (nos. 5 and 6). Notice that great care has been taken to insure the historical plausibility of the three Tibetan figures (nos. 4-6) and the first Shamar Rinpoche, who was born in 1283, with neither gaps nor overlaps between the death of one individual and the birth of the next. This

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<sup>55</sup> On the Zhamar incarnation lineage, see 'Gos lo, *Deb sngon*, 617; Roerich 1976, 521f. The *Blue Annals* also tells us that late in life Tokden Drakpa Sengé had a meditation experience in which he recalled his former lives. 'Gos lo, *Deb sngon*, 625; Roerich 1976, 528.

*kutreng*, we might say, is truly elegant and aesthetically pleasing, a lineage that is beautifully symmetrical and also historically plausible.

Another relatively early *trungrap* is, ironically, not of a Tibetan but of an Indian saint. Dan Martin dates the collection known as the *The Early, Middle, and Late Pacification Corpus* (Zhi byed snga bar phyi gsum kyi skor) to the first decade of the thirteenth century.<sup>56</sup> The collection contains an interesting biography of Phadampa Sangyé (Pha dam pa sangs rgyas, d. ca. 1117).<sup>57</sup> The work recounts how Dampa first attained faith in Buddhism at the time of a bygone buddha and how he became a bodhisttva at the time of Śākyamuni, who prophesied that he would “subdue the beings of the barbarous region of Tibet.” After a stint in Tuṣita, the bodhisattva was reborn as pandits in various parts of India for seven successive rebirths. Later in the work, Dampa is also identified as the reincarnation of the Tibetan king Nyatri Tsenpo, of the Indian siddha Kṛṣṇācārya, and of various other Indian monks and yogis. Even if this is a kind of *kutreng*, as with Dromtön’s past lives in the *Son Teachings*, the depiction of Dampa’s former Indian incarnations is so stylized that it has little historical depth. Indeed, the biography as a whole is more concerned with geography than with biography or chronology. It’s chief goal is to show that Dampa lived and traveled just about everywhere in India and Tibet; that he chose to settle down in Dingri; and that the little village of Dingri should therefore be considered unique in the Buddhist world.

Finally we come to our last example, the lineage of the Chankya lamas’ past lives. The Changkya *kutreng* is especially interesting because it provides us with a window into the diachronic development of an incarnation lineage: how a lineage is manipulated and how it changes over time. The story of the Changkya lamas’ *kutreng* actually begins with a much earlier figure, Khöntön Paljor Lhundrup (‘Khon ston dpal ‘byor khun grub, 1561–1637).<sup>58</sup> Khöntönpa was born into the famous Khön (‘Khon) clan, whose members include the founders and present-day throne holders of the Sakya School, but both Khöntönpa and his father also figure prominently in the lineage of the *Magical Net* or *Secret Essence Tantra* (*Gsang ba’i snying po*), the most important text of the Mahāyoga class of Nyingma tantra. Khöntönpa also wrote an important work that,

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<sup>56</sup> Martin, “Padampa’s Animal Metaphors,” (n8) states that the collection presently available to us dates to ca. 1240, but that it is based on gold-ink manuscript scribed between 1207 and 1210.

<sup>57</sup> ‘Dzam gling mi’i skyes mchog, 332–36.

<sup>58</sup> My research on ‘Khon ston dpal ‘byor lhun grub has appeared in two publications: (1) The Dalai Lama, Khöntön Peljor Lhundrub, and José Ignacio Cabezón 2011, and (2) Cabezón 2009.

while most closely resembling a Mahāmudrā practice manual, has a much broader agenda: to create a synthesis of Kagyü Mahāmudrā, Nyingma Great Perfection, and Geluk Madhyamaka.<sup>59</sup> Despite his interest in the teachings of other schools, Khöntön Paljor Lhundrup was a devoted Gelukpa. After the death of his father, he enrolled at Dakpo College (Dwags po grwa tshang) and later at Sera Jé (Se ra byes), eventually becoming the fifteenth abbot of the Jé College in 1605. He is also counted in the Geluk “stages of the path” (*lam rim*) lineage. Khöntönpa was one of the Fifth Dalai Lama’s early teachers, and the Great Fifth wrote his biography,<sup>60</sup> a work that contains a *ktreng*. Khöntön Peljor Lhundrup was, like the Fifth Dalai Lama himself, a Geluk master with strong pan-sectarian interests, something that the Dalai Lama himself confirms (*ris med chos la mkhyen pa che ba*). Here is the list of Khöntönpa’s past lives found in the fifth Dalai Lama’s biography of his teacher.

1. Arhat Chunda (Dgra bcom pa Tsunda), “a disciple of Śākyamuni”
2. Śākyamitra (Shākya bshes gnyen), a disciple of Nāgārjuna and a lineage holder of the latter’s Guhyasamāja teachings
3. Kawa Paltseg (Ska ba Dpal brtsegs, eighth century), one of the great Tibetan translators of the imperial period
4. The great Nyingma adept Dropukpa (Gsang sngags rnying ma’i grub chen sgro phug pa, b. eleventh century)
5. Chenrezik Wang Sisiripa (Spyan ras gzigs dbang si si ri pa), an accomplished Avalokiteśvara yogi
6. Sakyapa Lodrö Gyaltsen (Sa skya pa blo gros rgyal mtshan, 1235–80); that is, Chögyal Phakpa, the nephew of Sakya Paṇḍita
7. Lama Dampa Sönam Gyaltsen (Bla ma dam pa bsod nams rgyal mtshan, 1312–75)
8. Jamchen Chöjé Shakya Yeshé (Byams chen chos rje śākya ye shes, 1354–1435), a disciple of Tsongkhapa and the founder of Sera Monastery; but note that Jamchen Chöjé was born twenty-one years *before* the death of the previous incarnation, Lama Dampa
9. Sera Jetsun Chökyi Gyaltsen (Se ra rje btsun chos kyi rgyal mtshan, 1469–1544), the author of the textbooks (*yig cha*) of the Jé College of Sera

<sup>59</sup> That text is the *Wish-Fulfilling Jewel of the Oral Tradition* (*Snyan brgyud yid bzhin nor bu lta ba spyi khyab tu ngo sprod pa’i khrid yig*). I have translated the work in *The Dalai Lama et al.*, 2011.

<sup>60</sup> Dalai Lama V Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho, *Dpal ‘byor lhun grub kyi rnam thar*.

## 10. Khöntön Paljor ('Khon ston dpal 'byor, 1561–1637)

A lot could be said about this fascinating *kutreng*, but suffice it to note that part of the Fifth Dalai Lama's agenda is to capture Khöntönpa's pan-sectarian interests. Indeed, this may be the logic that drives the list. The lineage contains two Indian lives (numbers 1 and 2), two Nyingma lives (3 and 4), two Sakya lives (6 and 7), and two Geluk lives (8 and 9). A life as a practitioner of Avalokiteśvara punctuates the *kutreng* in the middle (number 5). The incarnation lineage therefore perfectly captures Khöntönpa's ecumenicity—or *almost so*, for the fifth Dalai Lama's list notably contains no Kagyü or Jonang lives, and this despite the fact that the Fifth Dalai Lama acknowledges in his biography that Khöntönpa also studied these traditions. The absence of Kagyü and Jonang past lives is hardly surprising given that the text was authored during the period of Geluk-Kagyü political strife in central and western Tibet. There is one problem with a date (no. 8) but otherwise the *kutreng* is carefully constructed, being both historically plausible and beautifully symmetrical.

What does Khöntönpa's incarnation history have to do with the Changkya lamas? About 130 years after the death of Khöntönpa, during the lifetime of Changkya Rolpai Dorjé (Lcang skya rol pa'i rdo rje, 1717–86), the third Pañchen Lama Palden Yeshé (Dpal ldan ye shes, 1738–80) decided that the Changkya Lamas need a *kutreng* that they could call their own.<sup>61</sup> He looked around and found an incarnation lineage that was available. It happened to be the *kutreng* of Khöntönpa.<sup>62</sup> Palden Yeshé then "poached" this lineage, making two additional modifications: he added an Indian Yamāntaka Yogi (Darpana Acharya) and a Kadampa Geshé (Langri Thangpa).

Over the next 200 years, each successive Changkya incarnation was of course added to the list. Besides the Changkya Lamas, three additional modifications were made. Changlung Pandita (Lcang lung paṇḍita) added Buddha Amitābha at the head of the list around 1790, thereby suggesting Changkya's apotheosis, and the third Thuken (Thu'u kwan) added two Kagyü Lamas—Marpa and Tsangnyön Heruka—around 1793, thereby rounding out the *kutreng* so that it now included members of most of the major schools of Tibetan Buddhism. By the early eighteenth century, there was obviously

<sup>61</sup> Most of the discussion that follows concerning the incarnation lineage of the Changkya lamas is based on Karl-Heinz Everding's exhaustive research, found in Everding 1988, but see also E. Gene Smith's "Introduction" to *The Collected Works of Thu'u-bkwan*.

<sup>62</sup> This is true despite the fact that the Changkya Lamas are not associated with Sera—a small price to pay for finding a suitable *kutreng*.

sufficient temporal distance from the rivalries between Gelukpas and Kagyüpas that Kagyü lamas could now safely make it into the Changkya *kutreng*. This is what the resultant *kutreng* of the Changkya lamas looks like today.

1. **Buddha Amitābha (Sangs rgyas snang ba mtha' yas, added c. 1790)**
2. Arhat Chunda
3. Śākyamitra
4. **Darpaṇa Ācārya (Darban ātsarya), an Indian Yamāntaka yogi (added by the Third Paṇchen Rinpoche)**
5. Kawa Paltsek
6. Dropukpa
7. Chenrezig Wang Sisiripa
8. **Marpa (added ca. 1793)**
9. **Kadampa Geshé Langri Thangpa (Bka' gdams pa glang ri thang pa rdo rje seng ge, 1054–1123; added in 1776 by the Third Paṇchen Lama)**
10. Sakyapa Lodrö Gyaltzen
11. Lama Dampa Sönam Gyeltzen
12. **Tsangnyön Heruka (Gtsang smyon he ru ka, 1452–1507; added ca. 1793)**
13. Jamchen Chöjé Shakya Yeshé
14. Sera Jetsun Chökyi Gyaltzen
15. Khöntön Paljor
16. Khedrup Drakpa Öser (Mkhas grub grags pa 'od zer, d. 1641), whose seat was at Gönlung Jampa Ling Monastery. Since he lived a long life, he must have been born substantially before Khöntön Rinpoche died. Drakpa Öser served as abbot of Gönlung 1630–33.
17. Changkya I Ngawang Losang Chöden (Lcang skya ngag dbang blo bzang chos ldan, 1642–1714), who served as abbot of Gönlung from 1688 to 1690.
18. Changkya II Yeshé Tenpai Drönmé (Lcang skya ye shes bstan pa'i sgron me, 1717–86), a.k.a. Changkya Rolpai Dorjé, abbot of Gönlung in the last half of the 1760s.
19. Changkya III Yeshé Tenpai Gyaltzen (Lcang skya ye shes bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan, 1787–1846)
20. Changkya IV Yeshé Tenpai Nyima (Lcang skya ye shes bstan pa'i nyi ma, 1849–59/75)
21. Changkya V Losang Yeshé Tenpai Gyatso (Lcang skya blo bzang ye shes bstan pa'i rgya mtsho, 1860/78–1870/88)
22. Changkya VI Losang Palden Tenpai Drönme (Lcang skya blo bzang dpal ldan bstan pa'i sgron me, b. ca. 1871 or 1890/91).

23. Changkya VII Chöying Yeshé Dorjé (Lcang skya chos dbyings ye shes rdo rje, 1891–1957/58), who died in Taiwan.
24. Changkya VIII Dönyo Gyatso (Lcang skya don yod rgya mtsho, b. ca. 1980), identified at age eighteen by His Holiness the Dalai Lama, who ordained him in 2004. He presently studies at the Gomang College of Drepung Monastery in India.

In his last meeting with Khöntönpa, the Fifth Dalai Lama asked his teacher, quite directly, where he intended to be reborn. The master replied that if he had any choice in the matter, he would *not* be reborn in China, Mongolia, or, for that matter, anywhere in Tibet. Lest the reader assume from this response that Khöntönpa had seen too much strife on the Tibetan plateau and was ready to exit the Central Asian sphere altogether, the Dalai Lama assures us that his teacher's words should not be taken literally.<sup>63</sup> Be that as it may, Khöntönpa's reply to his student may explain why no further incarnations of Khöntön Paljor Lhundrup were identified and why his *kutreng* remained dormant for over a century, ready to be taken up by the students of the Changkya lamas. I sometimes wonder what Khöntönpa would have thought about having his *kutreng* poached by the likes of Changkya lamas. As a final resting place for his past lives, this is surely not a bad one at all.

### Conclusion

Research often begins with a hunch; mine was relatively simple. My initial hypothesis was that as one investigated the history of the institution of the tulku, one would find that the earliest instances of tulku identification would involve Tibetans identifying themselves (or someone else) as the incarnation of another single individual. I further expected that *kutrengs*, or multiple-life incarnation lineages, would be a later historical development. Although my research is still in its early stages, there is already reason to believe that this simple hypothesis is in fact false. The cases of Nyaksewa, of the early Karmapas, of the *Book of Kadam*, and of the life of Phadampa Sangyé suggest that Tibetans started to think about the multiple past lives of lamas from very early times, indeed from the beginning of the tulku

<sup>63</sup> Dalai bla ma V Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho, *Dpal 'byor lhun grub kyi rnam thar*, 40a: rang dbang 'dus pa zhig dka' bar 'dug kyang/ rgya hor dbus gtsang sogs su skye ba len 'dod ni med ces bka' phebs/ de yang thugs dbang mi 'dus pa sogs ni dgongs pa can du nges shing/.

tradition itself. Definitive conclusions about broad patterns cannot, of course, be made on the basis of a small sample, but so far the historical data suggests that multiple-life incarnation lineages are much earlier than I had originally presumed. In retrospect, this is not altogether unexpected. Once people begin to wonder who they (or their teachers) were in their last life, it is natural that they should also begin to wonder about who they might have been in even earlier lives.

How do Tibetans decide which individuals to include in a *kutreng*? As academics, the temptation is to always read these choices in strictly socio-political terms: "How do the politics of the day influence the choice of what lamas to include in a *kutreng*? What does the tradition stand to gain by including some lamas in a *kutreng* and excluding others?" Such questions are obviously important. As I have suggested, they are crucial to understanding the lack of Kagyüpas in Khöntön Paljor Lhundrup's *kutreng* and their sudden appearance in the *kutreng* of the Changkya lamas. That being said, it would be foolish to think that *all* such choices are politically motivated or that intersectorian rivalries always lurk in the background. Other motivations also obviously exist. While the authors of *kutrengs* rarely discuss their own reasons for their choices, we can often read between the lines to come to some conclusions. The emic view seems to be that such choices are motivated by three factors: (1) to establish teacher-student relationships between a tulku and important masters of the past, (2) to situate these high lamas within the lineage or vis-à-vis other institutions, like monasteries, and (3) to explain the idiosyncrasies of individuals' lives (why, in the present, a lama has certain abilities, powers, predilections, and even certain physical characteristics). As more incarnation lineages are explored, other motivations will undoubtedly emerge.

*Kutrengs* function to create a distinctive kind of personal identity, one that is obviously different from what we are used to in the modern West. These incarnation lineages suggest that to understand fully who people are, we must understand who they were. Most biographies, of course, are also interested in exploring lamas' past, as when they try to explain their adult life by reference to episodes in their childhood. But the *kutrengs* obviously go much further. Spanning many lifetimes, the *kutrengs* suggest that it is impossible to really know who a person is unless one knows who they were over their multiple past lives. This is undoubtedly true of everyone (we all have incarnation histories, according to Buddhism) but our texts are obviously not concerned with the string of past lives of ordinary people but only with that of lamas, those individuals whose identity is truly worth knowing. That identity, the *kutrengs* suggest, can only

be understood through fathoming the distinctive identity of other individuals: both who those individual tulkus *were*, and those with whom, over many different lives, they had important interpersonal relationships.

One can only imagine what it is like to have such a broad sense of identity that extends over hundreds and even thousands of years; what it is like to be the type of tulku who has a *kutreng*. Having a sense of identity spanning multiple lives has obviously proved burdensome to some tulkus. One has only to think of the case of the rebellious Sixth Dalai Lama. But I imagine that in some instances it must also have been liberating, providing tulkus with multiple models of a well-lived life from which to choose. The present Dalai Lama, for example, has on numerous occasions discussed his strong affinity to the Great Fifth. In any case, the investigation of first-person perspectives—what it's like to be the type of person who has a *kutreng*—brings us into the realm of phenomenology, which lies beyond the scope of this paper. Hopefully, this short essay will have provided some historical context for exploring this and other lines of inquiry concerning those unique individuals whose identity is believed to span multiple lifetimes.

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# Pattern Recognition: Tracking the Spread of the Incarnation Institution through Time and across Tibetan Territory

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**T**ithin the limits of my sources, I will outline here the spread of incarnation lineages across time and throughout Tibetan territory. The cultural institution of children being understood as rebirths (*yang srid*, but more commonly *tulku*, *sprul sku*) of important Buddhist teachers allowed for a concentration of charismatic, economic, and social power that had dramatic consequences for Tibetan society. While scholars have treated the origins of the first and most important of these lineages (the Karmapa, Dalai, and Pañchen Lamas), no one has attempted to write a general history of the growth of the institution. I have compiled a list of nearly 500 incarnation series for which I have determined the rough start date as well as the location of the seat of the incarnation. I also have information on the location of roughly an additional 1000 incarnations series for which the start date is not known. I use this data to trace the growth of the institution and its spread throughout Tibet. This has been a daunting task for one person to undertake, even with the help of research assistants, but the initial results are quite compelling.

Most publications about reincarnate lama lineages have been focused on a few key figures in Central Tibet, while reincarnation lineages from Eastern Tibet, the details of which I will discuss at the end of this article, have received less scholarly attention until fairly recently. In contrast to this pattern, the greatest concentration of reincarnate lineages is found in Amdo (with over 400 named lineages out of a total of more than 1000 throughout Tibet), while even Kham (with some 374 lineages) has over twice the number of Central Tibet (with 150 lineages). Mapping these lineages give us some sense of the regional spread of these incarnation lineages, but the only way to assess their development over time is if a start date for a lineage can be determined, and this is necessarily a smaller number of cases, as shown in Figure 1. As for the cumulative totals of named, unnamed,

and undatable lineages, I will discuss what they indicate at the end of this essay.

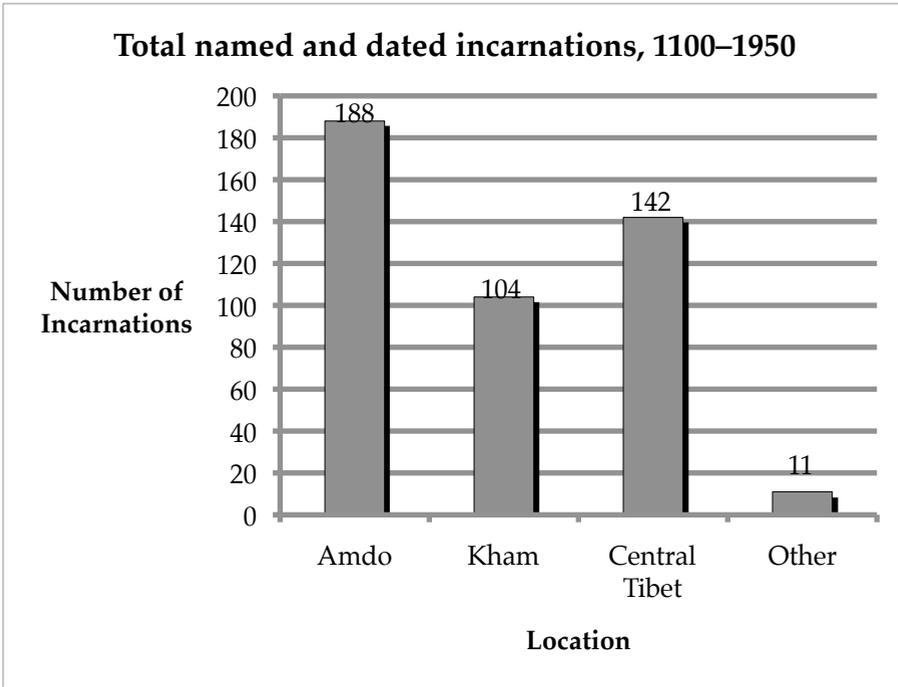


Figure 1.

While the institution of reincarnate lama clearly developed in Central Tibet, especially from the thirteenth century, it saw its greatest flourishing in Amdo, from the late seventeenth century, as shown in Figure 2. The rise and fall in particular religious traditions or regions at different times will be discussed below. It is worth noting not just Central Tibet's *early* leadership in this field, but also its steady and almost continuous decline starting already in the seventeenth century, when Central Tibet was otherwise thought to be at its pinnacle of intellectual and cultural development. Amdo's meteoric rise in new incarnations in the seventeenth century really alters the way that we can understand the spread of this institution beyond the confines of Central Tibet. The fact that the people of Amdo embraced this institution so readily and allowed it to flourish indicates both a wealth of economic resources as well as a level of devotion unprecedented elsewhere. My main explanation for this trend is that there was a more atomized quality to Amdo society, in which each community seemed able and willing to support its own

reincarnate lama(s). But, this was only an option because of what must have been a real economic wealth in this region, since the foundation of each incarnation series depended upon generous donations to support the education, upkeep of staff and structures, and (sometimes substantial) material upkeep of these lamas. The erratic growth and decline in the rate of new incarnation recognition in Kham is more difficult to understand and may simply reflect the lack of detailed information on the dates that most of the incarnation lineages of Kham started, though I do have one theory to propose, as follows.

When one compares Figures 2 & 3, it is quite obvious that the incredible growth in Amdo was closely linked to the rise of the Geluk tradition and its spread there. On the other hand, possibly part of the explanation for the relatively slow rate of growth in Kham might be due to the relative strength of the Kagyü and Nyingma traditions in this region. Both of these traditions are marked especially by devotion to charismatic practitioners, which is more difficult to reproduce over a series of rebirths, in contrast to the more academic scholar that the Geluk educational system was so successful at generating with some consistency.

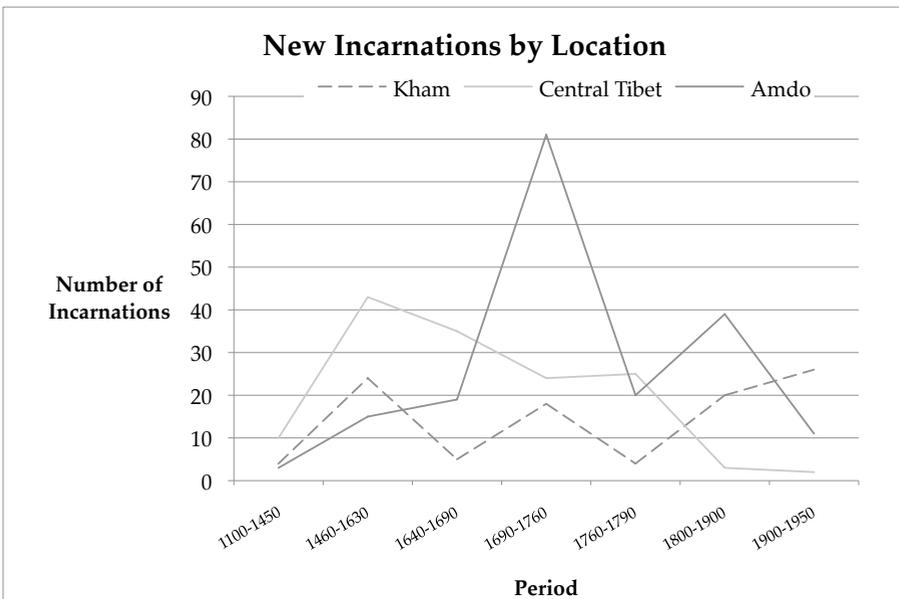


Figure 2.

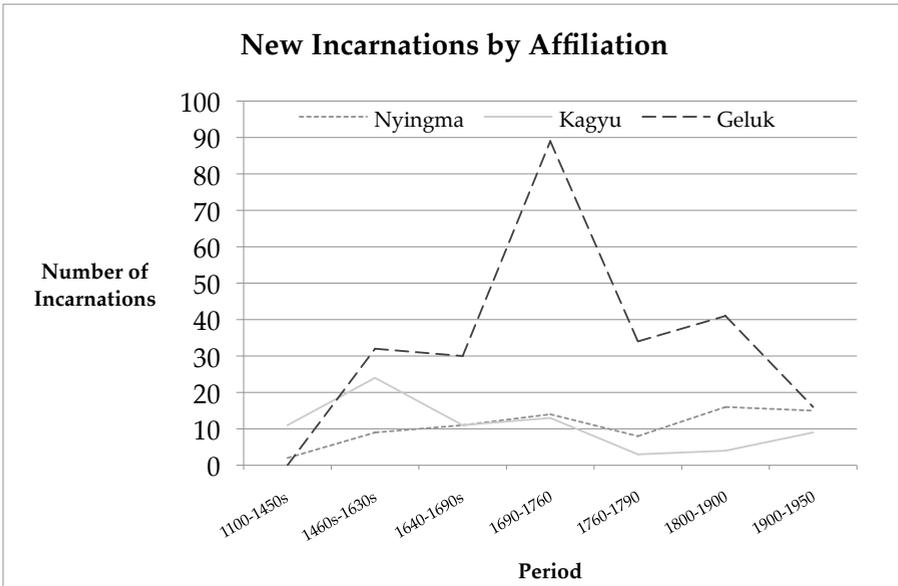


Figure 3.

The coincident spike in both Amdo and Geluk incarnation recognition in the eighteenth century is the most important finding of this study, as it indicates a phenomenon that has gone completely unnoticed in our field. This finding is clearly connected with so much else that we need to understand to make sense of modern Tibetan history. The main driver of this innovation may simply have been the vast expansion of massive Tibetan Buddhist institutions in the east, which outstripped the growth of such institutions in Central Tibet by the eighteenth century. Accompanying this growth, there was a shift of cultural innovation to the east, with figures like Sumpa Khenpo and the Tsenpo Qutughtu writing world geographies and the Changkya and Thuken incarnations writing influential doxographies, the latter of which included references to Daoism, Chinese Buddhism, and Christianity.<sup>1</sup> Other Amdo scholars, among them the Akyā Qutughtu (who served as a secretary to Changkya Rölpaï Dorjé in Beijing), introduced Johannes Kepler's model of planetary motion to the Amdo Tibetan monastic establishment, and further translations of Kepler's work (from the Chinese) followed.<sup>2</sup> Another innovation included the consolidation of the diverse teaching faculties in Lhasa (religious philosophy, tantra, and medicine) within the context of

<sup>1</sup> Yongdan 2013; Kapstein 2012; Tuttle forthcoming; Blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma, and Jackson, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Yongdan 2013; Yongdan 2011.

single massive Gelukpa monasteries, which also sometimes included specialized faculties for teaching religious dance as well as specific tantric traditions, such as that of the Hevajra tantra or the Kalachakra tantra, with its complicated mathematical traditions. Later, the development of Gelukpa teaching institutions seemed to inspire a response from other Buddhist traditions such as the Nyingma and Kagyü, which developed formal teaching institutions (called *shedra*) in Kham that followed their own set of texts leading to formal degrees.

As is obvious from figure 4, the overall rate of new incarnation lineage recognition steadily increased from the twelfth century through the seventeenth century, and then declined until it saw a small rally in the early twentieth century. The most significant change in the whole history of this incarnation (up to 1950) occurred in the seventeenth century: the first period in Tibetan history that saw an average of nearly one new incarnation lineage established each year—a dramatic increase (quadrupled) from previous centuries, as I will detail below.

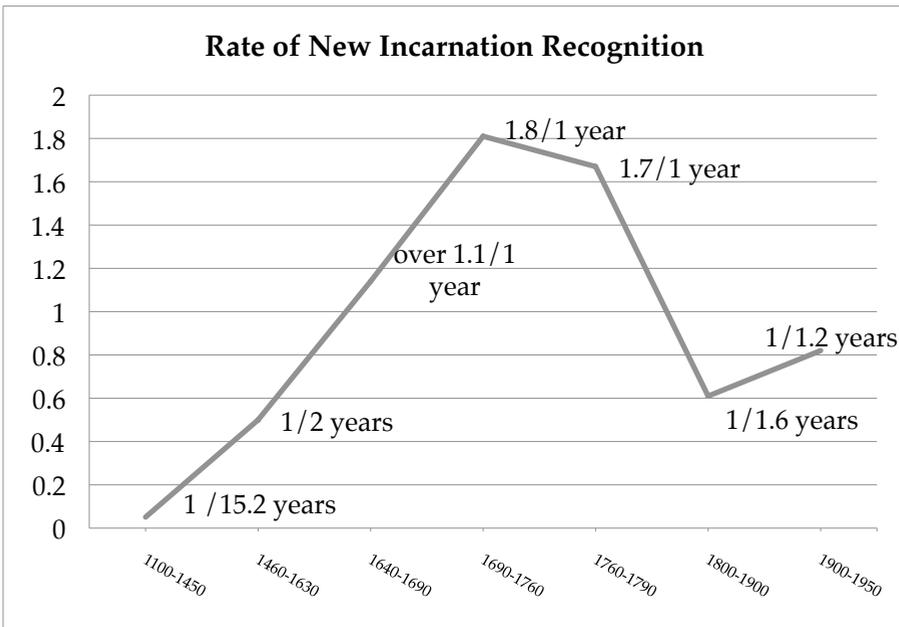


Figure 4.

The correlation between the rise in the rate of Geluk incarnations and that of Amdo incarnations mentioned above is confirmed in figure 4.

Mapping out the patterns of new reincarnation lines helps trace the spread of one of the most important institutions in Tibetan history. Since this institution was generally an expensive one to support, these trends probably also reveal patterns of wealth distribution, something that is generally very difficult to assess in Tibetan history given the nature of our sources. For example, one can hypothesize that Amdo may have been home to more incarnations because it had so few noble families to support, relative to both Central Tibetan and Kham. In fact, by the twentieth century, the only Tibetan noble families I know of in Amdo were those of Rebgong and Choné, and both of these families had incarnation lineages within them, to help shore up a system of joint political and religious rule.

A study of this topic also tells us something of the historic basis for the current significance of incarnations. The Tibetan institution of incarnation was not a case of a few isolated or exceptional figures, which is the impression one might get by comparisons of the Dalai Lama to the Pope. However, in Tibetan regions there were over fifteen hundred of these miraculous figures. It was something more akin to the saints in the Catholic tradition, with all the saints being alive at the same time and recognized as such from birth. In other words, I do not think there is another religious tradition like this in the world. As much as I try not to contribute to the idea of Tibet as an “unique” place in the world, I do think Tibetan Buddhism, as an institutional religion with such a large body of reincarnate figures is exceptional in world religions, since each of these figures is understood to be miraculous in their ability to choose their rebirth and so forth.

### *1. Methodology and Sources*

Here I discuss my methodology for collecting the data examined here. I amassed data on the names, locations and dates (if possible) of as many incarnation series as I could find through the fall of 2012, and as new sources became available I asked my research assistant Tsehua jia (Tshe dpal rgyal) to continue adding data. Because I was especially focused on the datable origins of incarnation lineages, I typically count the start date from the recognition of the second reincarnation (*yangsi*, which could be translated as “recurrent existence”) in any series, as this usually marks the date of the start of the lineage. This is because what most commonly happened with the recognition of an incarnation series was that upon the death of a prominent and charismatic man (with few exceptions they were men), his followers would find his reincarnation. Thus, the series usually

cannot be said to have properly started until this recognition took place. One exception would be the rare cases in which the first in a lineage is recognized as an emanation (*tulku*, and not *yangsi* in this case) in his lifetime, as with the 1539 enthronement of the first Simkhang Gongma incarnation, Sonam Drakpa (1478–1554). Other exceptions include that of the third Dalai Lama, since the title of Dalai Lama only dates to 1578, from his meeting with the Mongol Altan Khan, who gave him the title.

In general, when I did not have other information, I assumed that the start date of an incarnation series usually took place in the first decade of the life of the person described as the second incarnation. But sometimes the recognition of the second incarnation in a series would come much later than might have been normally expected; once again, the case of the Dalai Lamas serves as an example. The Drukchen or Gyalwang Drukpa lineage traces its origins back to a figure that died in 1211, but the first person to be recognized as a reincarnation in the line (the second in the lineage) was not born until 1428. At other times, conflicts over whom the correct incarnation was led to shorter, but significant, delays. For instance, the second Jamyang Shepa was not born until seven years after the first had died, and he was not formally recognized until 17 years after the death of his predecessor. But in general, after one figure died, another person born within a few years would be recognized as the reincarnation within a few years of their birth, and most of my start dates are based on this assumption. In any case, since the periodization that I have generated for the shifts in incarnation recognition range across centuries or several decades at a minimum, the exact start date is less essential than getting a general sense of the patterns of recognition across time.

Nevertheless, before I get into the details, I do have a few caveats. First, this is very much a work in progress and hard data is very difficult to generate on a large scale. Second, I am certain I have made mistakes in assigning various historic figures to certain traditions and periods, but I hope that the large number of data points will make these errors less relevant to the patterns I describe here. Finally, the sources I have are much richer for Amdo, which therefore favors the Geluk and Nyingma traditions that are strong there. Still, I have little reason to doubt the overall patterns, though I would welcome additional research, especially into Kham and Central Tibet, that might add to or alter the dataset or to my interpretations. I chose to use the modern divisions of Tibet (Central Tibet, Kham, and Amdo) simply as an expedient. Even though such terms were not used consistently over the centuries, they are well recognized now and the

contemporary sources I mostly used to generate this data often utilized these rubrics as well.<sup>3</sup>

As for my sources, the data I have compiled here comes mainly from ten published works (two of which have three volumes), as well as surveys of all available online resources (as of 2012), such as Dan Martin's parsing of the early nineteenth-century list of incarnations made for the Qing amban of Central Tibet, the Tibetan Buddhist Resource Center, the Treasury of Lives, and various Wikipedia collections (in German and English, such as [www.rigpawiki.org](http://www.rigpawiki.org)).<sup>4</sup> The strong representation of Amdo materials is found in recent publications from the People's Republic of China. Two Chinese language books (Pu 1990; Nian and Bai 1993) produced by scholars who read Tibetan historical sources and interviewed local people in Tibetan provided the original impetus to this work.<sup>5</sup> These latter two works relied heavily on systematic fieldwork conducted in the 1950s as part of China's efforts to understand the local context of areas newly brought under Communist control. These investigation reports (*diao cha ji*) have never been published, but they were apparently consulted in the late 1980s as researchers attempted to update and summarize the status and history of all Tibetan monasteries in the areas covered (Qinghai and Gansu for the 1990 volume, Qinghai only for the 1993 volume). Additional materials, mostly part of the cultural and historical materials (*wenshi ziliao/rig gnas lo rgyus*) offices of various prefectures, have added to this

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<sup>3</sup> A source as late as 1698 (Desi Sangyé Gyatso's *Golden Beryl*; Sde srid Sang rgyas rgya mtsho, *Dga' ldan chos 'byung beedurya ser po (Yellow Beryl, the Religious History of the Ganden[pa])*. Ziling: Krung go bod kyi shes rig dpe skrun khang, 1989 [1698].) does not use these standard three divisions to organize his distribution of Geluk monasteries across the Tibetan Plateau. By the eighteenth century, however, these geographic terms seem to have stabilized somewhat into the meanings we understand today.

<sup>4</sup> Bärlocher 1982; Pu 1990; Nian and Bai 1993; Yan & Quedan [Chos ldan] 1993; Zhongguo renmin zhengzhi xieshang huiyi and Gannan Zangzu zizhizhou weiyuanhui wenshi ziliao weiyuanhui 1991–95; Zhongguo Zangxue yanjiu zhongxin 1995; Tianzhu Zangzu zixixian weiyuanhui wenshi ziliao weiyuanhui 2000; Bstan 'dzin 2000; Rdo rje rin chen, Klu tshang, Blo bzang lhun grub rdo rje, et al. 2009; Farber 2005.

<sup>5</sup> I want to thank the late Gene Smith for launching this database and the work of Yudru Tsomu and Cameron Warner under Gene's guidance. The list of monastery names they started and Karl Ryavec's encouragement over the years led me to compile this database, with significant help from research assistants in later years, especially Tshuejia/ Tshe dpal rgyal. I am grateful to them all. The monastery data can now be found on a variety of websites, in various forms, most notably: <http://tinyurl.com/THLmap> & <http://worldmap.harvard.edu/maps/tibet>. A helpful list of incarnation data, though not identical to my own work, can be found at the Tibetan Buddhist Resource Center: <http://www.tbrc.org/#!persons/tulkus>.

picture by filling in gaps in our knowledge of monasteries in southern Gansu (Tib. Kan lho) and Ngawa (Ch. Aba) prefectures. The three-volume Gansu survey is the only one of these sources to come out in a bilingual edition, though the earlier volumes at least include the name of the monasteries in Tibetan. Additional materials on Gansu monasteries and their inhabitants were published in Chinese—with many Tibetan proper names given in Tibetan—in 2000 (for Pari (Dpa' ris) county) and in Tibetan in 2009 (for all of Tibetan Buddhist areas of Gansu). Thus, coverage for Amdo is both comprehensive—including parts of Amdo in Gansu, Qinghai, and Sichuan provinces—and multilingual.

Kham is also fairly well represented in the sources, with the Qinghai volumes covering Yushu (Yul shul) prefecture and a three-volume Tibetan-language monastery survey covering Kardze prefecture (1995). Unfortunately, significant parts of Kham in the Tibetan Autonomous Region and Yunnan are not covered by any of these sources, so this no doubt contributes to some underrepresentation of the number of Kham incarnations. On the other hand, many more Khampas than Amdowas escaped into exile in the 1950s, and they are well represented, along with Central Tibetans, by two works dealing with exiled lamas (Bärlocher 1982; Farber 2005) as well as Wikipedia entries on popular figures with followers in the West. Finally, the incarnations of Central Tibet were recorded in the first systematic survey of incarnation lineages, dating from the early nineteenth century, commissioned by a Qing amban. This list, compiled in 1816 and updated in 1820, includes 124 Central Tibetan incarnation lineages (and about seven Khampa and 32 Amdowa lineages).<sup>6</sup> Considering all these sources together, we really have a very impressive body of knowledge about the incarnation lineages of Tibet, especially from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and these modern sources often trace the successive reincarnations back through the centuries.

In any case, the core of this article will explore the changes over time measured mainly against religious traditions (Geluk, Kadam, Kagyü, Nyingma, etc.) and locations of each tulku lineage.

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<sup>6</sup> Dan Martin's Romanized version of this list was originally included on the Tibetan and Himalayan Digital Library site but was lost when the site was redesigned as the Tibetan and Himalayan Library. His work was based on the reproduction of the original list found in Mi 'gyur rdo rje, Ma grong 1991 in the section entitled, "'bod dang / bar khams / rgya sog bcas kyi bla sprul nmams kyi skye phreng deb gzhung,'" 281–369.

2. *Periodization of Major Shifts in Rate of Recognition or Location*

1) The first temporal division I observed in the data was a period of very slow growth from around 1100 to the 1450s.<sup>7</sup> For this period of 350 years, we only have records of eighteen incarnation lineages, which yield an average rate of only one new incarnation every nineteen years.

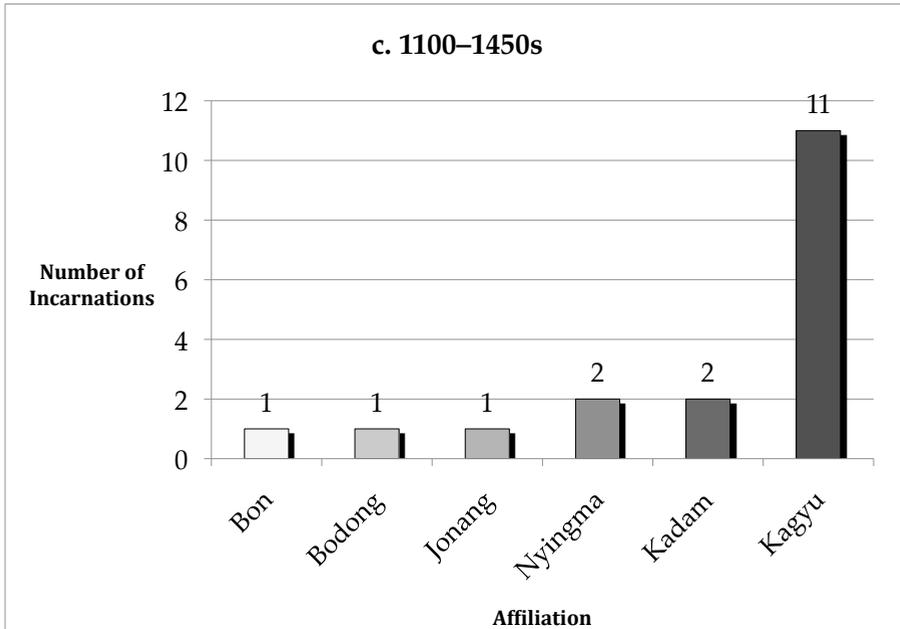


Figure 5.

Even if we skip the outlying earliest incarnation (around 1100) and only calculate from the second earliest incarnation (around 1200), the rate is still only about 1 new incarnation every thirteen years. Not surprisingly, given the fame of several of the earliest and most enduring incarnation lineages, the Kagyü tradition dominates this early period, with nearly two-thirds of the lineages (eleven as compared to the combined total of the other seven across the other traditions).

Three other interesting aspects of the early incarnation lines were their diversity, durability and the relatively frequent occurrence of female incarnations. There were six traditions (Bön, Bodong, Jonang,

<sup>7</sup> Van der Kuijp (2013) was essential for providing data on the earliest incarnation series.

Nyingma, Kadam, and Kagyü) represented in these earliest years, a variety that would never be repeated. In Central Tibet, only about half of those recognized seemed to have lasted past a generation, and most of these were Kagyü. These included the Black and Red Hat Karmapas, as well as the Drukchen/Gyalwa Drukpa, Garchen, Taisitu and Samding Dorjé Phakmo (in the Bodong tradition) incarnations. Also in Central Tibet, there were proportionally more female incarnations (three of ten), though only one endured to the present (the Samding Dorjé Phakmo lineage). In Eastern Tibet, early historic records are scarce, so it is only by persisting that incarnations were remembered at all, and those that are recorded endured for fourteen to eighteen generations.

In this early period, Central Tibet led in the production of new incarnations series, with more than the other two regions combined. The trend of Central Tibetan dominance lasted some 600 years, until about the year 1700. Given Kham's closer relations with Central Tibet, it is not surprising that its status as the second most productive region for new incarnations lines lasted until around the 1640s, as I will describe below.

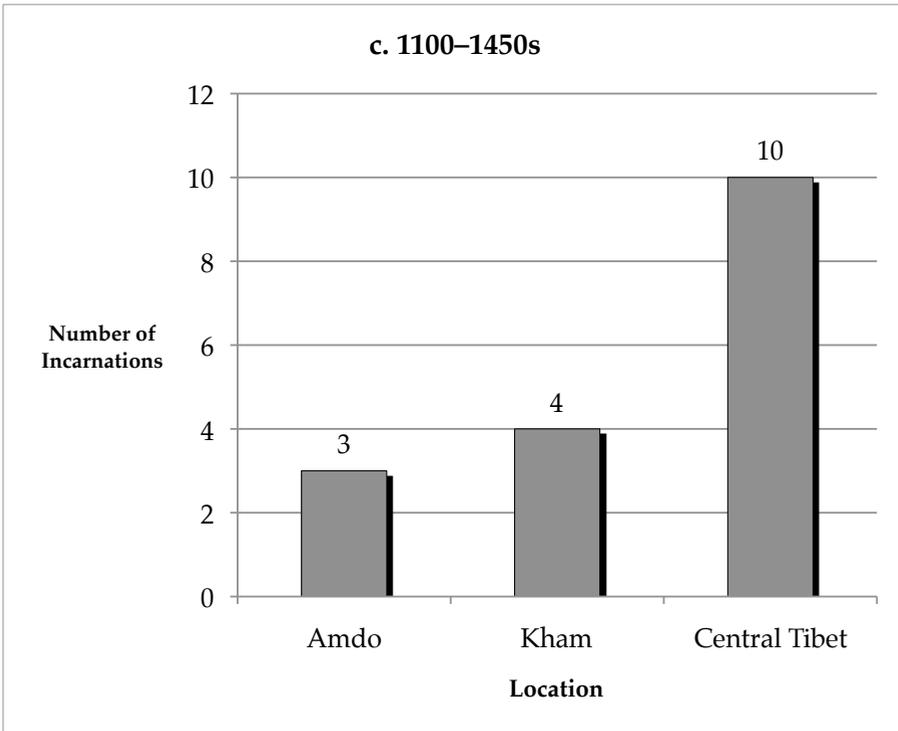


Figure 6.

2) The second period was distinguished by a dramatic increase in recognition of new incarnations series, closely associated with the advent of the Geluk tradition. From the 1460s to the 1630s, there were 85 new incarnation lineages recognized, yielding a rate of one new series every two years. Given the rise of the Gandenpa (later Geluk) tradition and its equally dramatic leadership in the number of new incarnations in this period (with thirty-two new lineages), the rise of this new order was the cause of the veritable explosion of this institutional innovation. The growing competition between the Kagyü and Geluk traditions and their supporters correlates with the introduction of new incarnation lines in this period.<sup>8</sup> Tucci (2013) and Wylie (2013) have discussed the warfare and monastery building (and destruction or forced conversions) that accompanied the rising conflict between the Geluk and Kagyü traditions and their political supporters.

Similarly, we can see the results of a rising “competition” in the number of new incarnations. This is not surprising given the economic basis of this institution. Starting a new incarnation lineage often meant securing the economic support of donors such that the lineage would have an estate, one or more residences, and other resources needed to support the education and prestige of each new generation. Thus, tracking new incarnations may be used to give us an indication of the relative strength and popularity of particular traditions. While the Kagyü tradition also demonstrated dramatic growth in this period, with twenty-four new incarnation lines (including one female one)—more than four times the rate of the earlier period (shifting from one new lineage every thirty-one years to one every seven years)—they could not keep up with the pace of Geluk growth (one new lineage every five years). We might even see in these trends a predictive indication of future Geluk success in this struggle. For instance, from the 1460s to the 1520s, the Geluk had over three times as many new incarnations lines as the Kagyü tradition (thirteen versus four), despite the close relations of the Kagyü tradition with the Rinpung rulers of Central Tibet.

Another interesting trend in this period was the narrowing of the range of traditions that recognized new incarnations, relative to the previous period. While there are some eleven incarnations for which I could not identify an affiliated tradition, the remaining eleven new incarnations for this period were limited to those of the Jonang (with two) and the Nyingma (with nine) traditions. In the case of the

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<sup>8</sup> Of course, the sources recording new incarnations series may have been lost or destroyed following the defeat of the Kagyü and their supporters in 1642 and subsequent forced conversions of monasteries and monks.

Nyingma tradition, their first seven new incarnations were recognized (in Central Tibet) between the 1460s and the 1560s, and the last two were recognized (in Eastern Tibet) in the last fifteen years of the period, so there was a distinct half-century in which no new Nyingma incarnations were found. Given the close correspondence between the end of finding new Nyingma incarnations in Central Tibet and the rise of the Kagyü-affiliated Tsang-based regime of Karma Tseten and his heirs (1565–1642), who vied for power with the heirs of the previous Phakmodru regime based in the Lhasa valley, the increasingly militarized conflict between Ü and Tsang may have led to a polarization of the political and economic leaders (who could support new incarnations) along the lines of either the Geluk or Kagyü traditions. This theory is supported by the fact that new Nyingma incarnations were not recognized again in Central Tibet until the 1640s, when this conflict had been decided in favor of the Geluk (led at the time by the Fifth Dalai Lama, who was a strong supporter of the Nyingma tradition).

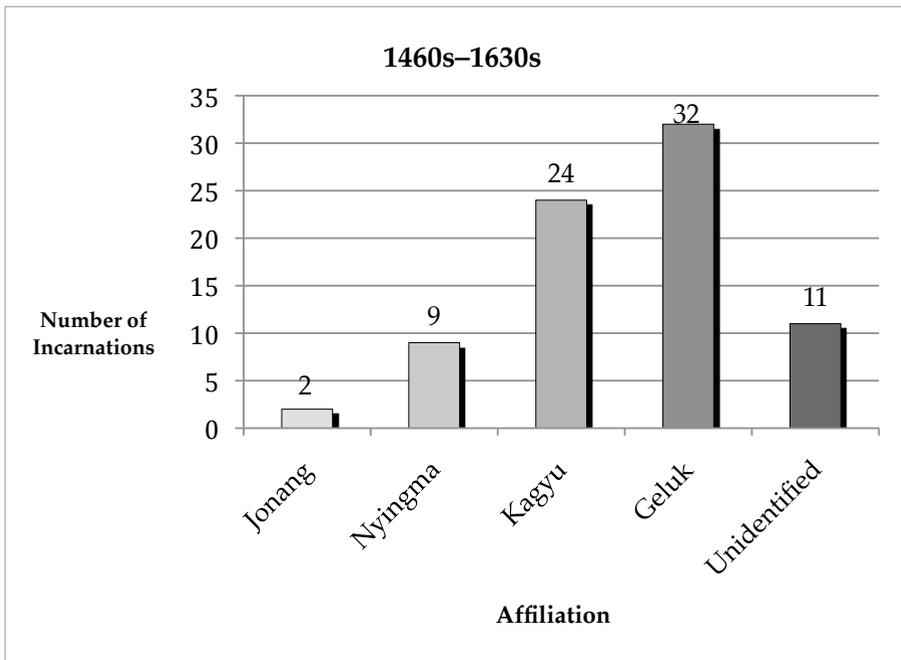


Figure 7.

Finally, in terms of regional growth, Central Tibet remained the leading region with forty-three new lineages, but Kham’s number (24) grew to over 30% of the new incarnations for the first time. In

fact, this period marked the zenith of incarnation lineage growth in Kham until the first half of the twentieth century. Although I have made no special effort to survey the growth of incarnations outside the current borders of the People's Republic of China, this period also marks the start of slow but steady growth of incarnation series in Bhutan. As for the three major regional divisions of Tibet, Amdo was the slowest to develop new incarnations in this period, both in absolute terms and in the relative rate of increase. But this was the last period in which Amdo was to fall in third place relative to Central Tibet and Kham.

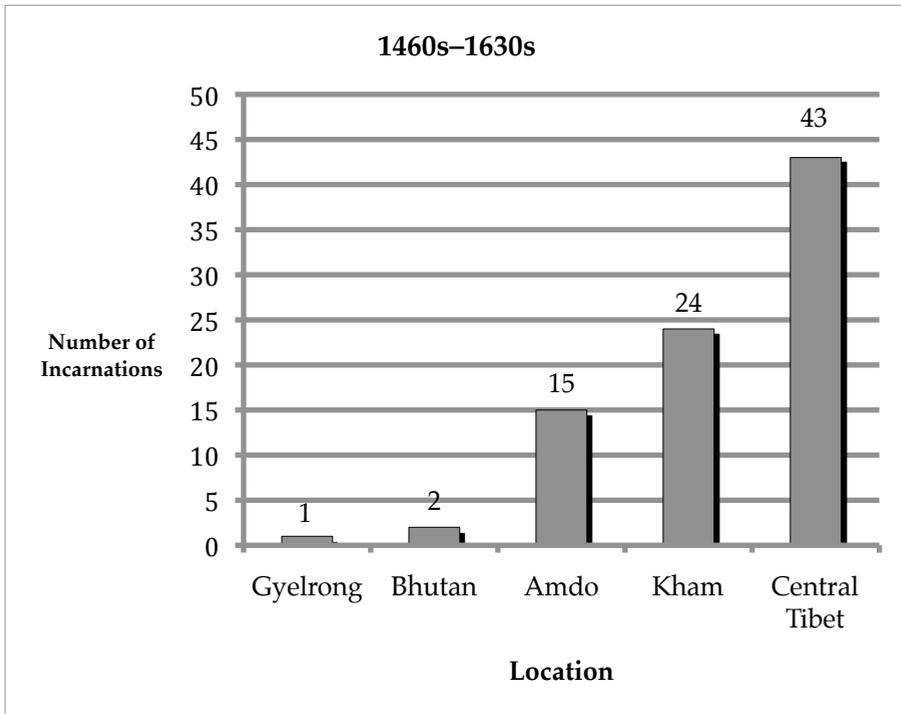


Figure 8.

3) The third period that was suggested by the data lasted from 1640 to 1690 and was marked by another dramatic uptick in incarnation series; doubling the rate of the previous period to over one new series being recognized each year. Given the 1642 success of the Geluk in the struggle against their rivals, it is not surprising that thirty new Geluk incarnation lineages were the majority of the fifty-seven new lines in the subsequent fifty years. Nor is the growth of Nyingma tulku lineages especially surprising since the fifth Dalai

Lama was such an avid supporter of this tradition. However, the continued increase in the rate (1/4.5 years instead of the previous rate of 1/7 years) of the recognition of Kagyü incarnation lineages suggests that things were not as bleak for the Kagyü tradition as we are usually led to believe by the sources. And most of this growth took place in Central Tibet, contrary to what one might have expected in this period.

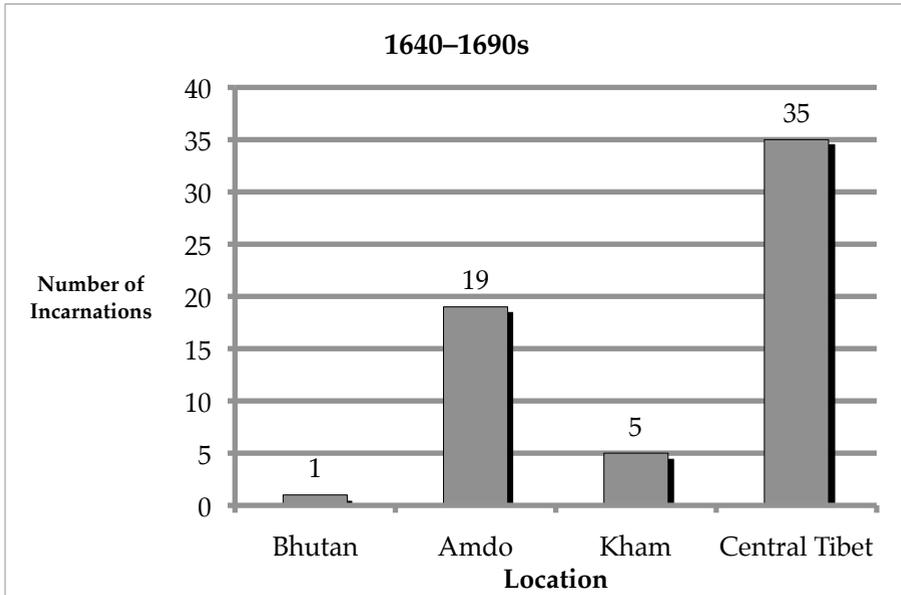


Figure 9.

In fact, probably the most dramatic finding for this period is the drop off in the recognition of incarnation lines in Kham (down to one every ten years, versus one every seven years in the previous period). Compared to the rate observed for the period in general (one every other year), this marks Kham as real anomaly in this period. I wonder whether the Qoshot Mongols' wars against the kings of Beri and Jang Satam (based in Lijiang) might have been more devastating to this region than previously understood.<sup>9</sup> Or were the exactions of the Qoshot Mongol rulers, who controlled eastern Kham until the 1720s, so severe that they limited the resources necessary to recognize new incarnation lines? Until someone more knowledgeable about Kham history explores these questions, we can only speculate about this unusual development. In any case, this slowing growth in Kham

<sup>9</sup> Schwieger 1999.

meant that Amdo ranked second for the first time in history, with almost one third of new incarnations. This growth was almost exclusively that of new Amdo Geluk incarnations (only one Nyingma), marking a trend that would accelerate dramatically in the next period.

4) The fourth period lasted for some seventy years (c. 1690–c.1760) and was characterized by a near doubling of the rate of increase and a dramatic shift of new incarnations to eastern Tibet, Amdo in particular. This period also marks the zenith of Geluk new incarnations, with an average of well over one new lineage recognized per year.

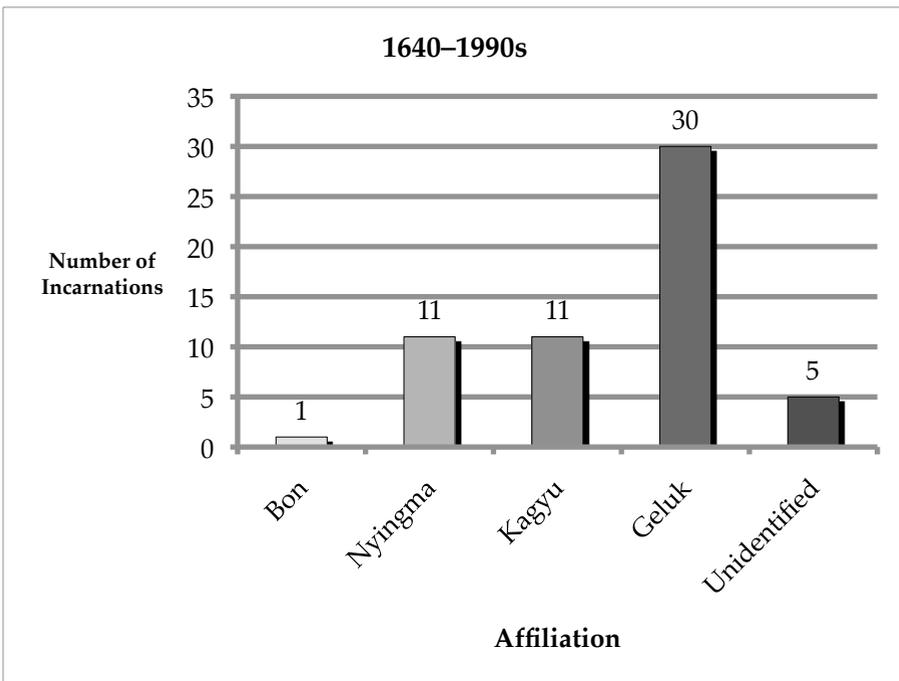


Figure 10.

Overall, with a total of 127 new incarnations in this period, the rate nearly doubled to almost two new incarnations each year. With only one quarter of new tulku lineages (twenty-four versus eastern Tibet's ninety-nine), this was the first time Central Tibetan's share had dropped below half of the total. Specifically, the period was marked by an unprecedented increase in Geluk incarnations, especially in Amdo (more than 60% of the total for this period) and a decrease in

Kagyü and Nyingma incarnations in Central Tibet. While the total rate of Kagyü and Nyingma new incarnations remained about the same as the previous period, the location of the majority of new lines shifted away from Central Tibet (ten) to eastern Tibet (sixteen).

I surmise that this shift was linked to the end of the fifth Dalai Lama’s reign and the polarization of traditions, especially in Ü, after the reign of terror visited on non-Geluk traditions in the brief period of Dzungar Mongol rule (1717–20). While the fifth Dalai Lama died in 1682, his death was kept hidden, and respect (for the Nyingma tradition at least) endured as long as Desi Sanggyé Gyatso ruled in his stead, effectively until his own death in 1705. This supposition that the hardening of sectarian boundaries may account for these changes is further supported by the fact that of the six new Nyingma or Kagyü incarnations in Central Tibet after the death of the fifth Dalai Lama was revealed, the majority of those I could locate took place distant from Lhasa, mostly in Tsang (Riwoché, Gyantsé, Rinpung) and only around the time that Pholhané came to power in 1728. Pholhané, who hailed from Tsang, was well-known as a supporter of the Nyingma tradition.

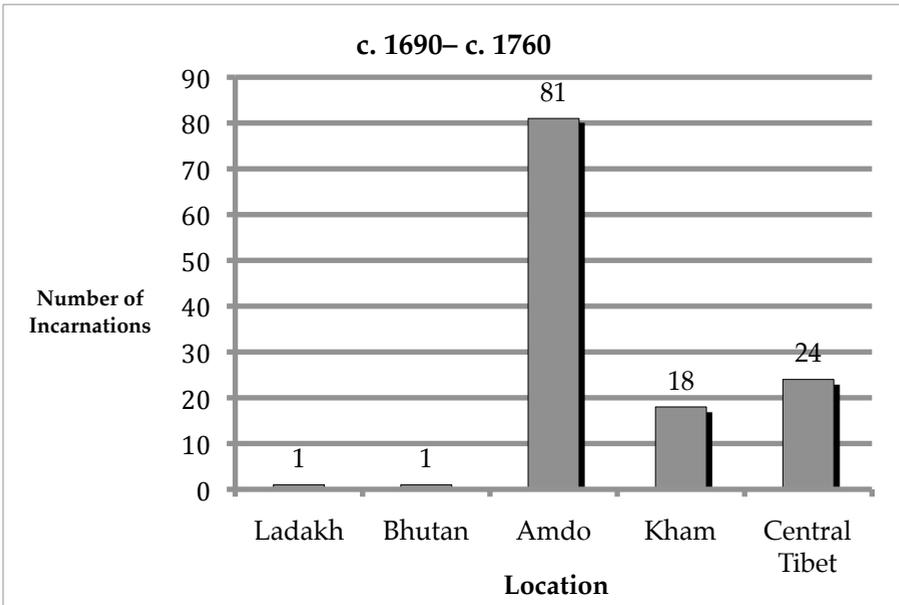


Figure 11.

While one might be tempted to explain the overall drop in the rate of new incarnations in Central Tibet by the frequent conflict (both external invasions and civil war), Amdo was also subject to

devastating disturbances in this period, yet new incarnations grew there at a rate never before seen anywhere in Tibet. For instance, the Qoshot Mongol overlords of Amdo were involved in fending off Dzungar troops in 1717, they participated in a major campaign to drive the Dzungars from Central Tibet in 1720, and then were involved in internal power struggles for control of Amdo until 1724. When full scale fighting with Qing China broke out in 1724, many of Amdo's most prominent Geluk monasteries were destroyed. Yet growth in the number of new incarnations reached dramatic new levels despite this turmoil.

This again has to be seen in contrast with Kham, which despite remaining largely undisturbed by invasions or civil war saw only very limited growth in this period (at a rate of one new incarnation every four years). I must remind the reader that all these figures are based on datable incarnation series, and given the destruction visited on Kham in the early twentieth century, this decline may simply reflect an ignorance of the starting dates of numerous Kham incarnations. After all, the number of Kham incarnations for which we cannot estimate the starting date of the series outstrips all other regions (270 versus 240 for Amdo and only eight for Central Tibet). Nevertheless, given the relative decline versus earlier and later periods, this pattern still seems significant.

Looking ahead, while this period saw the highest overall growth of new incarnations in Tibetan history, the overall rate did not drop much until the advent of the nineteenth century. Thus, the next periodization scheme is not based on dramatic shifts in the rates of new incarnations as in earlier divisions, but instead on the shift back to Central Tibet as the locus of new incarnations.

5) The fifth period from the 1760s–1790s was characterized by a return to Central Tibetan dominance of new incarnation lines and a steep decrease in the rate of new lines being recognized in Kham. The new recognition of Khampa incarnation was nearly cut in half from the rate of 1/4 years in the previous period to 1/7.5 years in this period. Amdo saw a small decline in the rate of new incarnations.

By contrast, Central Tibet again regained the lead in the recognition of new incarnation series (25 total). This was exactly half of the 50 new incarnations in this 30-year period. Across all of Tibet, this period yielded an overall average of 1.7 new incarnations per year showing only a very slight decline from the previous period. This return to new incarnations being recognized in Central Tibet seems to correspond to a return to lama leadership in Central Tibet. There was a rise in new recognitions after the reincarnate lama regents were given authority to rule Central Tibet in 1757 (starting

with the Demo Rinpoché).<sup>10</sup> One wonders whether these new incarnations might reflect the same sort of reward for support that was evident among noble families after the political shifts that brought the fifth Dalai Lama to power, but in this case, it may be that key lamas along with their staff and supporters were given this enduring privilege of reincarnating, analogous the right to pass on noble prerogatives through a bloodline.<sup>11</sup>

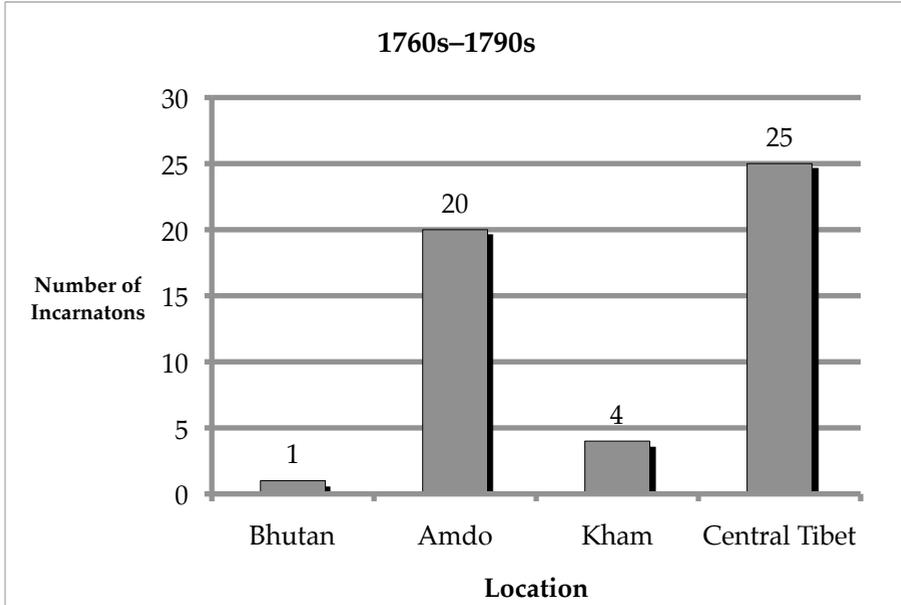


Figure 12.

Or maybe it was just the relative flourishing of religious diversity in an atmosphere no longer ruled by civil officials (as Pholhané and his son had governed from 1728–50). After all, it does not seem that all the incarnations of Central Tibet in this period were Geluk. Based on the names of some of these figures, maybe as many as four were Nyingma and one may have been Sakya, since his incarnation was associated with Nalendra. Likewise, in Amdo, new Nyingma incarnations (four) were almost as common as Geluk (six). For this reason, this period can be described as the start of the steady increase in the rate of new Nyingma incarnation series relative to the other traditions.

<sup>10</sup> See Petech 1988.

<sup>11</sup> Petech 2013; Goldstein 2013.

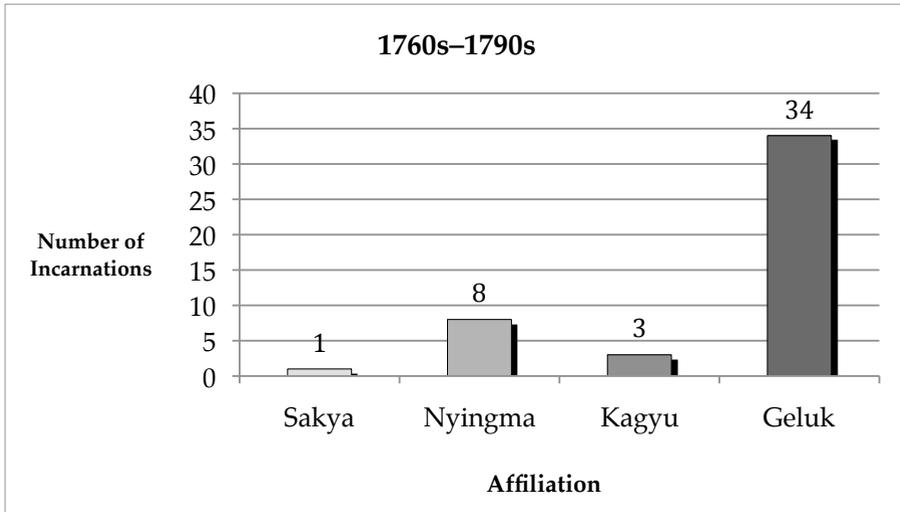


Figure 13.

6) The sixth distinct period corresponds closely with the nineteenth century, a period marked by a dramatic decrease in new incarnation lineages throughout Tibet, but especially in Central Tibet. Over this 100-year period, there were only 61 new incarnations, slowing the rate to only one incarnation every 1.6 years, or a third less than during the previous century. Amdo returned to the lead in the number of new incarnations, with around 60% of newly recognized lineages (39 versus 23 in all other regions). Meanwhile, Kham and Central Tibet switched roles, with Central Tibet seeing almost no new incarnations (three) versus Kham's 20 new tulku lines (a third of new incarnations). In terms of affiliation, the Geluk maintained the lead they had held since the tradition was established. But for the first time, new Nyingma lineages made up a significant portion (33%) of new incarnations.

Once again, the overall slowing in the rate of growth is not easily explained by politics. The areas that experienced the greatest social and political turmoil (Kham from the violent consolidation under Gönpo Namgyel and Amdo from the late nineteenth-century Muslim rebellions) still experienced the most growth. That said, from all the available evidence, Tibetan trade was booming, especially on the eastern edges of Tibet, so there were plenty of resources to support new incarnation lineages.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, there was a lot of

<sup>12</sup> Wim van Spengen 2013; Makley 2007, 70–71. Makley also cites a Chinese source, which said that “in the early twentieth century the wealthiest trulkus could have

religious innovation on-going in Eastern Tibet, especially Kham, so one would expect that this would lead to an increase in reincarnations as the leaders of the new schools (*shedra*) and other charismatic lamas passed away.

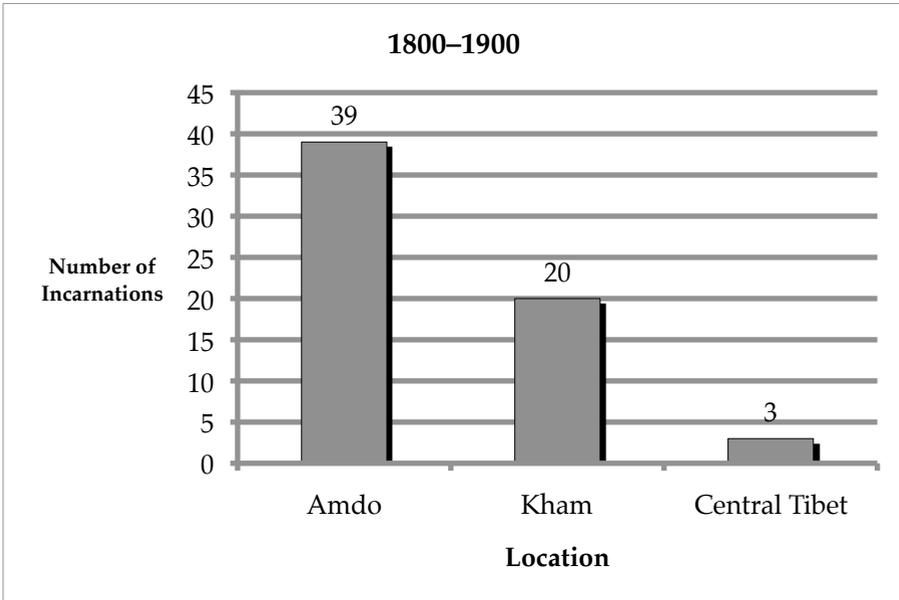


Figure 14.

This trend was in evidence both in Amdo with Shabkar and in Kham with figures like Dodrupchen and Jamyang Khyentsé Wangpo (1820–92), who was understood to be the incarnation of the eighteenth century Jikmé Lingpa and who reincarnated into multiple recognized lineages after his death:

1. a body incarnation: Dzongsar Monastery's Jamyang Chökyi Wangpo (1894–1909);
2. an activity emanation: Kathok Monastery's Khyentsé Chökyi Lodrö (1893–1959);
3. a speech emanation: Palpung Monastery's Karma Khyentsé (1896–1945);
4. an activity emanation: Dzokchen Monastery's Guru Tsewang (1897–?);

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capital of up to a million *baiyang* (Yuan Shikai silver dollars) in addition to owning herds and farmland (Zhang Guangda 1993a)." Makley 2007, 297n26.

5. and later, a mind incarnation: Shechen Monastery's Dilgo Khyentsé (1910–91).

In other words, this initial new incarnation line (Jamyang Khyentsé Wangpo) accounted for one quarter of all the new tulku lineages in Kham during the nineteenth century.

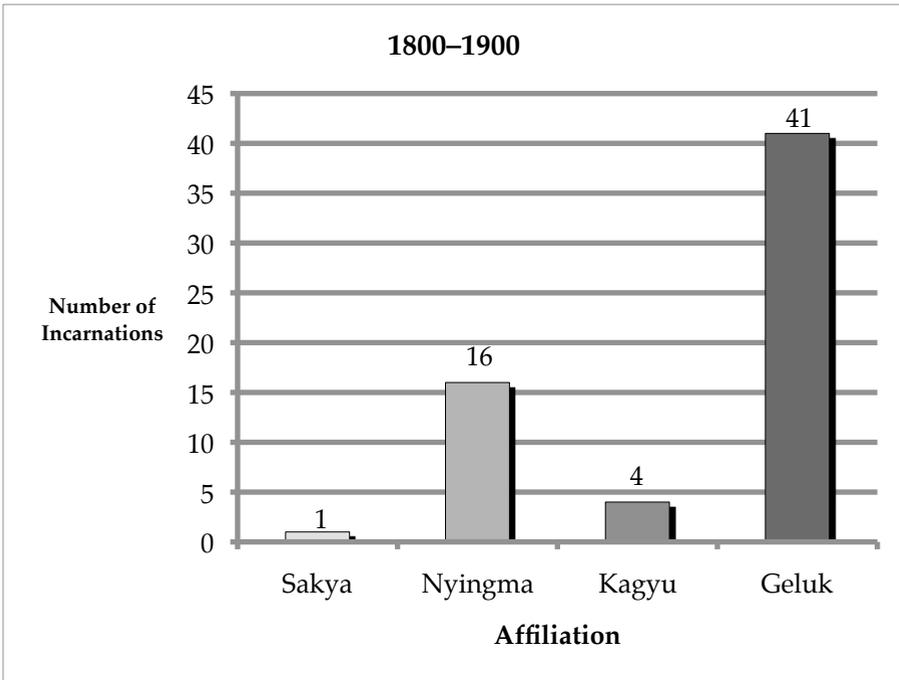


Figure 15.

7) The seventh and final period under consideration here is the first half of the twentieth century. These 50 years saw the advent of 41 new incarnation series, so the rate of recognition increased again slightly, to one every 1.2 years. This period saw much more even distribution between the four main traditions. Regionally, the earlier trend of increasing growth in Kham accelerated to generate over 50% of new incarnations in this period. This is all the more remarkable given the tremendous death and destruction visited on eastern parts of Kham during this period, especially by Zhao Erfang and again later by a host of warlords during the Republican Chinese period.

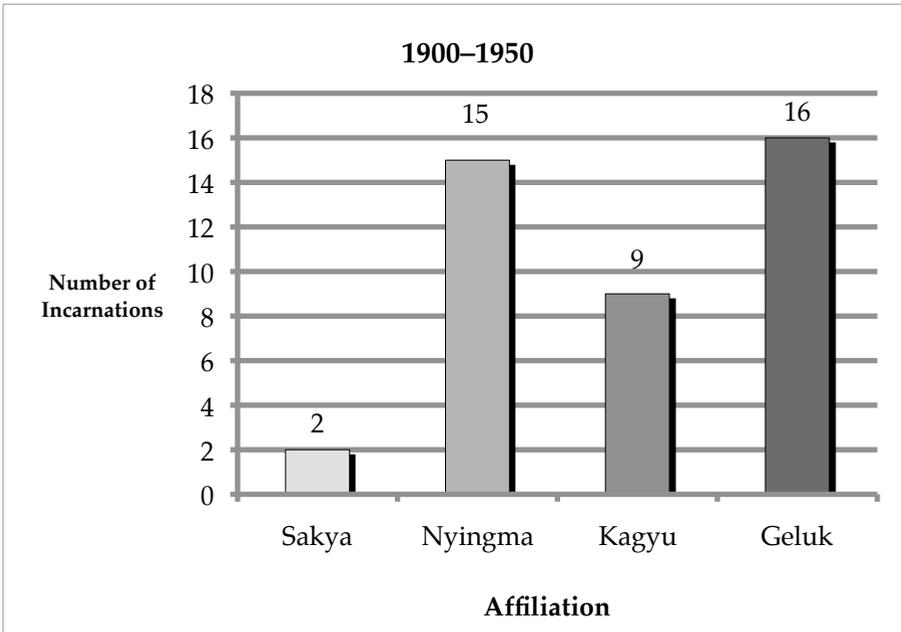


Figure 16.

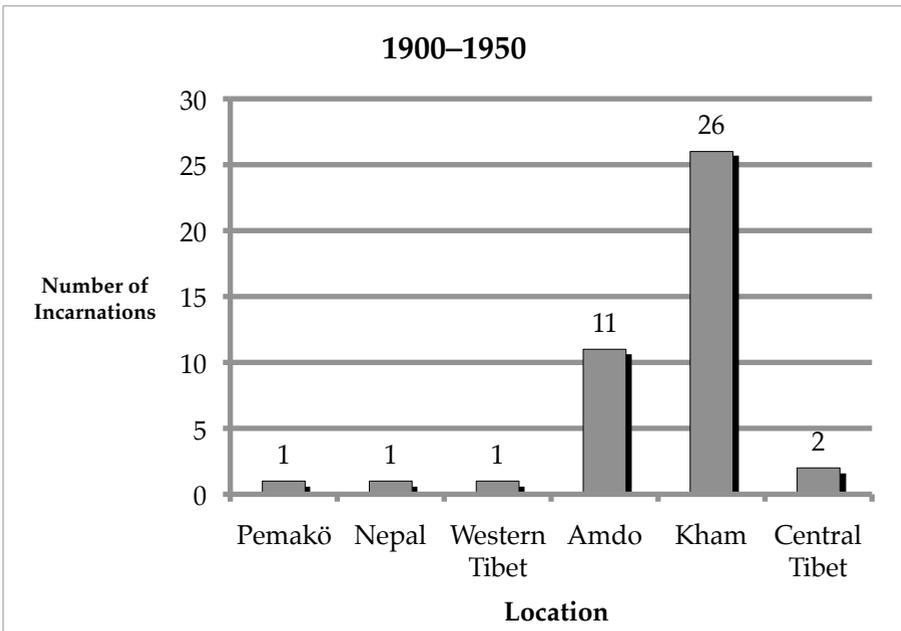


Figure 17.

Outside of Kham, Amdo was once again the only region that saw significant, if much slowed, growth. I suspect the destruction of so many of northeast Amdo's Tibetan Buddhist establishments in the Muslim rebellions of the previous century had a significant impact in this case. The distribution of other new incarnations across the Tibetan plateau is also remarkable at this time, with new lineages in western Tibet, Pemakö, and Nepal.

### 3. *The Patterns of Change across Tradition, Time, and Territory*

If we step back from the details of each period and try to look at the cumulative totals for each tradition and region, as well as rates of change over time for the whole Tibetan Plateau, we can discern patterns that were not necessarily obvious in any individual period.

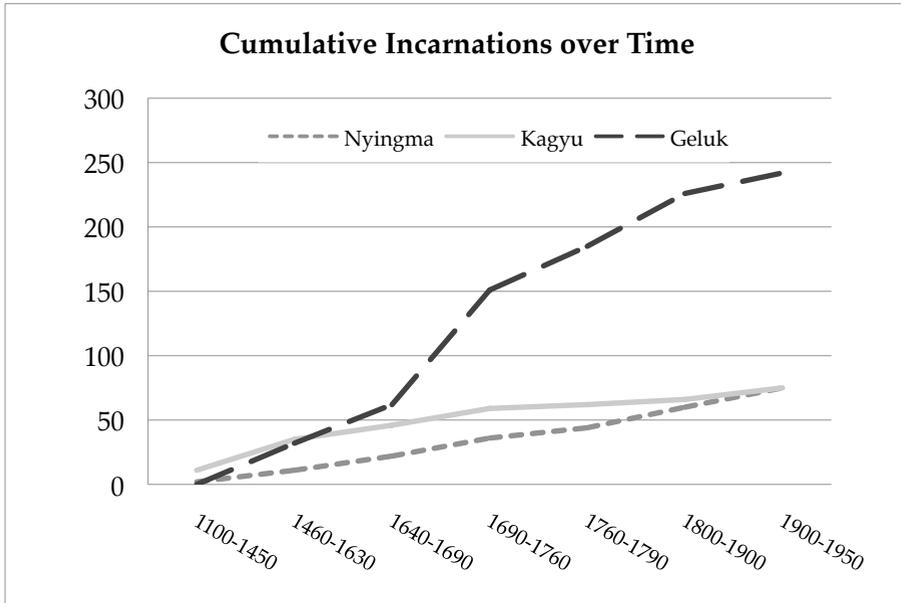


Figure 18.

For instance, when we look at cumulative totals of all the dateable incarnation series by tradition, we see that the Nyingma and Kagyü traditions are exactly evenly matched, with each at 75 incarnation lines. But if we compare this with cumulative totals for each tradition, regardless of whether or not we know their start dates, the Kagyü tradition (149 lines) is significantly better represented than the Nyingma (105 lines), as shown in Figure 20. So what we seem to have

is a better record of Nyingma incarnations' starting dates, which may reflect their relatively greater presence in Amdo (and the more detailed publications about this region).

That said, the abundance of Amdo sources has not resolved all outstanding questions about the origin dates of incarnation lineages, as shown in Figure 19.

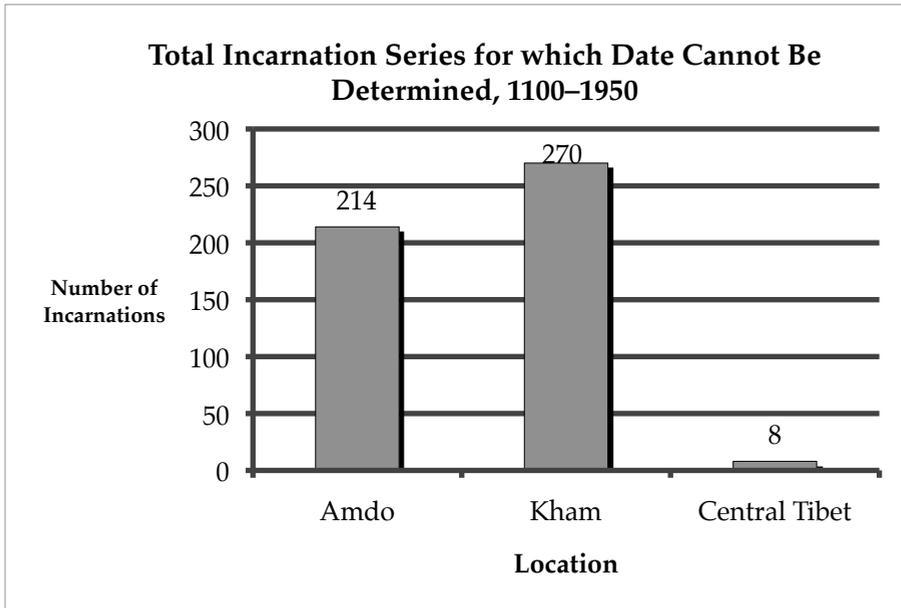
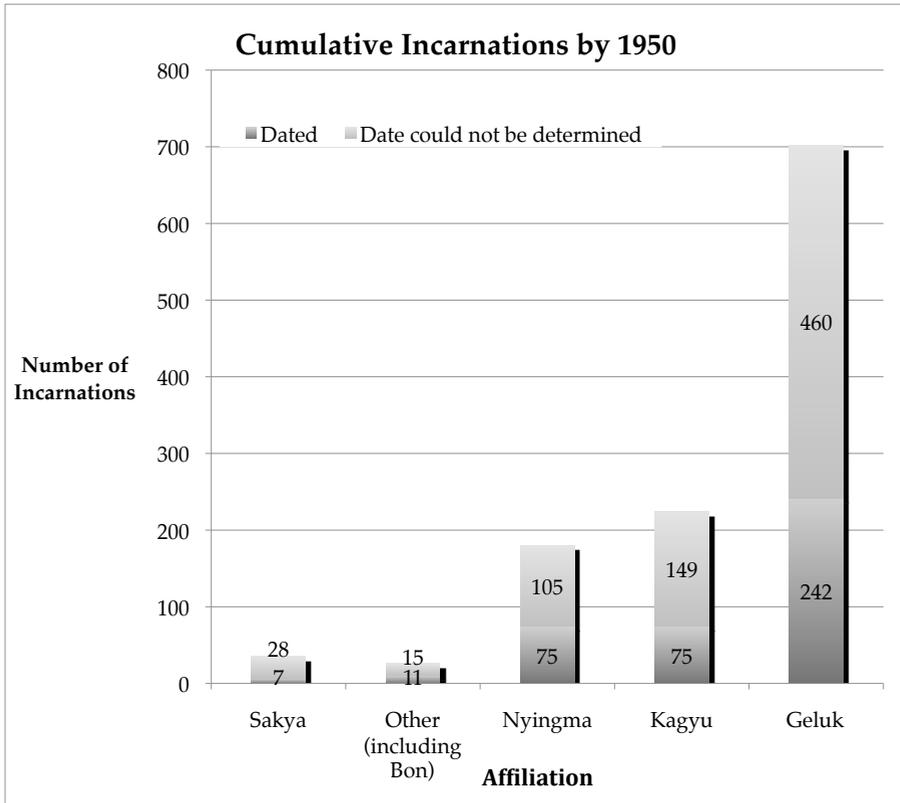


Figure 19.

I suspect there are other problems with our sources. On the one hand, our ignorance of many of the Kagyü tradition's tulku lineages start dates is no doubt due to the limited sources on Kham incarnations. On the other hand, I would also guess that the fact that we *are* able to date almost all the Central Tibetan tulku lines is an indication that we do not have sufficient information from that region to be certain that we have data on all the minor incarnations from there. Following the pattern in the two other major areas of Tibet, it would seem that we should have records of additional minor incarnation series about which we knew only the most basic information (where they were based, etc).

In any case, the most impressive finding of these cumulative comparisons is the stunning number of Geluk incarnation series, with far more than all the other traditions combined (702 versus 470; see figure 20).



*Figure 20.*

While this is not entirely surprising, given the dominance of the Geluk tradition both politically and in terms of numbers of monasteries and resources since the 1640s, this disproportionate growth of Geluk incarnations has not been noticed or studied. When we attend to only the most charismatic and scholarly tulkus (as is mostly the case in this volume as well) rather than the larger trends or less prominent tulku lineages, we miss a key part of Tibetan society and religion that has scarcely been documented. Martin Mills' important work on a monastery and its main incarnation in Ladakh reveals something of what can be gained by this sort of attention to out of the way places and less well known people. And as he demonstrated in his study, insights gained from these localities can help us understand better-known religious figures in Tibetan history.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Mills 2003.

When we consider the regional distribution, as shown in Figure 21, we can again see an opportunity to explore a new direction in future studies.

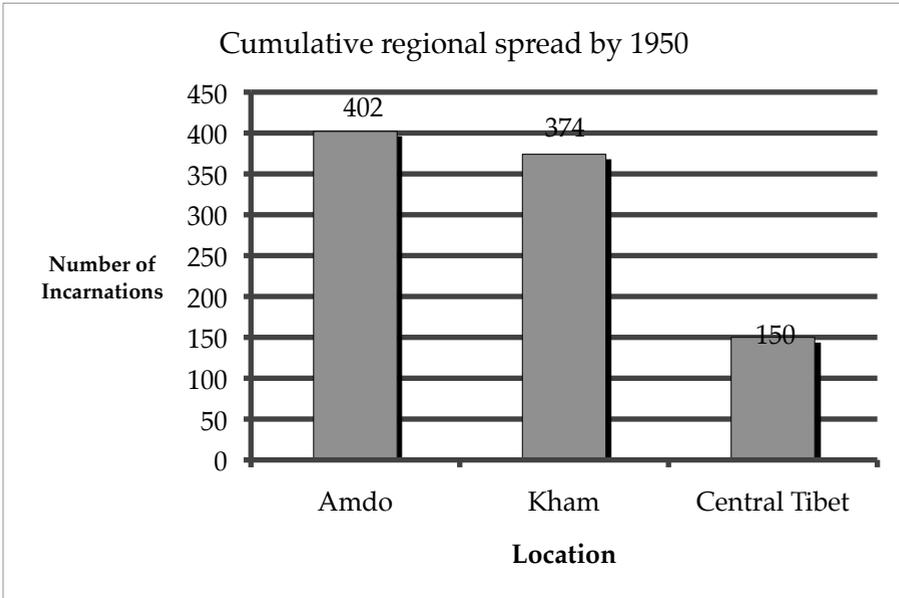


Figure 21.

So far, a great deal of the published work on reincarnate lamas has been devoted to those from Central Tibet (most of the Karmapa, Dalai and Pañchen Lamas).<sup>14</sup> In contrast, attention to the history of

<sup>14</sup> Not all the lamas in these three main lineages were born in Central Tibet (e.g. the 10<sup>th</sup> Karmapa from Golok, 6<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama from Tawang, and the 10<sup>th</sup> Pañchen Lama and 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, both from Amdo). On the Karmapas: Richardson 1958–59; Douglas and White 1976, Dus gsum mkhyen pa, et al. 2012; Debreczeny, et al. 2012. On the Dalai Lamas: Bell 1987; Kutchner 1979; Aris 1989; Ya 1991; Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho 1999; Brauen, et. al. 2005; Ngawang Lhundrup Dargyé and Wickham-Smith 2011. On the Pañchen Lamas, see Schmidt 1961; Loo 1970; Ya 1991, Jagou 2011. For other reincarnate lamas from Central Tibet, see Gyatso 1998; Diemberger 2007. Although the pattern is largely the same for all the late twentieth-century modern, western-influenced autobiographies of lamas who have taught in the West, I am not considering those here. A list of these, with summaries, can be found here: <http://www.tibetanculture.weai.columbia.edu/tibetan-biographies/>. There have also been a number of recent devotional publications on Nyingma masters that include attention to reincarnate lamas, such as 'Jam dbyangs rdo rje [Smyo shul Mkhan po] and Richard Barron (2005), but only Thondup (1996) includes dated historical detail. Relatively few scholarly monographs have been written about any reincarnate lamas, as detailed below.

reincarnate lamas from eastern Tibet has mostly not made it much beyond the dissertation phase.<sup>15</sup> With the exception of the Changkya incarnations and Labrang monastery's incarnations, there have been almost no published monographic studies of reincarnated lamas outside of Central Tibet.<sup>16</sup> Thus, the level of publication on lamas from each of these regions is inversely proportionate to the cumulative numbers of incarnate lama lineages in each region. Central Tibet had the fewest (150), while Kham (374) and Amdo (402) each have more than double that number.<sup>17</sup> Of course, one explanation for this attention to Central Tibet lamas may be precisely that the presence of such prominent leading lamas in Central Tibet constrained the development of other incarnate lama lineages in this region.

I do not expect that this short article will generate a flood of new data collection or analysis from other scholars addressing the same sorts of issues, especially since this sort of analysis is so rare in Tibetan studies. However, I do hope that those who know of relevant details or sets of data will offer corrective criticism or contributions to this topic (especially adding information about Kham, which may be under-represented here). I am quite aware that I have missed or failed to note important incarnation lines. I have been repeatedly humbled by the sheer volume of the data that is available and just as often had a feeling of futility in trying to assess it all. But as I hope

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<sup>15</sup> Gene Smith's early work, some of which was collected in Smith 2001, was exceptional for attending to figures from Eastern Tibet. Amdo and Kham have also fared well among recent doctoral students, though none of this work has been published in book form yet. For Amdo, see: Wang 1996; Karsten 1996; Maher 2003; Illich 2006; Jacoby 2007 (revised version under contract); Gayley 2009; Willock 2011, Sullivan 2013. For Kham, see: Gardner 2006, which covers 'Jam mgon Kong sprul (1813–99), on whom, see also the translated biography: Kong sprul Blo gros mtha' yas and Richard Barron 2003; Ronis 2009; Schapiro 2012. For translated biographies of Amdo lamas, see Shabkar 1994; Ngawang Lhundrup Dargyé; Simon Wickham-Smith, trans. 2011.

<sup>16</sup> Berger 2003; Nietupski 2009, 181-214; Neitupski 2011; Bogin 2005 (revised version under contract); for Kham: Sagaster 1967; Schwieger 1989.

<sup>17</sup> The problem with Kham sources is that the origins of relatively few (107) of these lineages can be easily dated, but recent work (in 2016) by my research assistant Sonam Tsering turned up an additional 70 names of incarnation lineages in the Dkar mdzes region of Kham in a survey of the prefectures' monasteries (Krung-go'i Bod kyi shes rig zhib 'jug lte gnas kyi chos lugs lo rgyus zhib 'jug so'o, et al. 1995). This confirmed my earlier suspicion that if we had better sources on the parts of Kham that are part of the Tibetan Autonomous Region, Kham might actually turn out to be the most prolific region for incarnation lineages. Since this new information came in after this paper had been copy-edited for final publication, I have not added the additional 70 Kham incarnation lines to the bar graph in figure 19 (or elsewhere in this paper).

this article (and certainly this special issue) demonstrates, understanding reincarnation lines is of crucial importance, both for explaining Tibet's past, but also for making sense of Tibet's present and future.

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## A Post-Incarnate Usurper? Inheritance at the Dawn of Catenate Reincarnation in Tibet

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 Prior to the earliest institutional reincarnates like the Karmapas, Nyangrel Nyima Özer (Nyang (archaic: Myang) *ral nyi ma 'od zer*, 1124–92) relied on the recollection of an unbroken sequence or catenate series of preincarnations as the karmic basis for his recovery of the treasures (*gter*). In contrast to the later treasure tradition, these were uniformly material texts and relics in twelfth-century Tibet.<sup>1</sup> As a scion of the ancient Nyang clan and the first documented claimant to the reincarnation of emperor Tri Songdetsen (Khri Srong lde btsan, d. ca. 800), Nyangrel was heir to orally transmitted lineages of tantric praxis as well as those treasures that were only recently recovered. As the end of his life approached, he explicitly entrusted the continuity of both legacies to his son, Namkhapel (Nam mkha' dpal, d. 1235?), who subsequently passed them to his son, Ngadak Loden Sherab (Mnga' bdag blo ldan shes rabs, thirteenth century)<sup>2</sup> as had been done for generations of Nyang clan adepts.

And yet despite this clear line of transmission, Guru Chöwang (Gu ru chos kyi dbang phyug, 1212–70) appears to have positioned himself as an heir to that inheritance. By declaring that he was none other than the reincarnation of Nyangrel himself, he challenged the singular authority of Nyangrel's descendants and instigated what may be the earliest confrontation between patrilineal and reincarnate inheritance in Tibet. This article considers the ways in which Guru Chöwang constructed his claim through the remembrance of his and Nyangrel's shared preincarnations, his displacement of Nyangrel in

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<sup>1</sup> See Hirshberg 2016, chapter 3.

<sup>2</sup> For a short biography of Mnga' bdag blo ldan shes rabs, see "*Ngo mtshar grub thob kyi rnam thar*" in *Bka' brgyad bde gshegs 'dus pa'i chos skor* I (Dalhousie: Damchöe Sangpo, 1977), 89–94. This text contains short biographies for the eight successive abbots of Smra'o lcos after Nam mkha' dpal.

prophecies concerning the coming of an enlightened treasure revealer, and through devising a typology of *tulku* that reassured him of his rebirth as Nyangrel. In conclusion, I will attempt to discern the effects of Guru Chöwang's claim on the patrilineal inheritance of Nyang.

### 1. *Introducing a Series, and Molding It to Prophecy*

Guru Chöwang was an important disciple of Nyangrel's second son and chosen heir, Namkhapel, who likely died when Guru Chöwang was in his twenties. Perhaps not long after the death of Namkhapel, Guru Chöwang laid claim to a share of the Nyang clan's prestige by identifying himself as Nyangrel's reincarnation, which foremost relied upon his recollection of the precise sequence and details of their former lifetimes. In producing a series of short preincarnation narratives for the *Eight Pronouncements* (*Bka' rgya brgyad ma*), Guru Chöwang filled in the details for the lives that appear to have been merely suggested, framed, or enumerated by Nyangrel. While Nyangrel repeatedly states that he remembered a finite sequence of fifteen or sixteen preincarnations in the biographies of his life, nowhere within them does he name or describe any except emperor Tri Songdetsen.<sup>3</sup> Nyangrel was therefore among the first Tibetans to introduce catenate reincarnation and recall his past lives as a chronological series of incarnations in real historical time, but the actual narratives for those preincarnations were developed by Guru Chöwang and independently inserted into both of Nyangrel's biographies in later centuries.

Since Guru Chöwang's legitimacy rested on his status as Nyangrel's reincarnation, the narration of their shared preincarnations would indeed be compelling evidence in support of this claim,<sup>4</sup> which leads to the main questions of this article: in this period just before catenate reincarnation gained greater prominence

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<sup>3</sup> Fifteen preincarnations are asserted throughout the *Stainless Proclamations*, whereas sixteen are asserted throughout the *Clear Mirror*. These tallies reflect the total number of preincarnation narratives that immediately precede the primary biographies of Nyangrel in each text. Given the unequivocal prophecy in all recensions of Nyangrel's *Copper Island* biography of Padmasambhava that the seventeenth incarnation of Tri Songdetsen would be the enlightened treasure revealer, Nyangrel was equally unequivocal in his claim to sixteen preincarnations as counted in the *Clear Mirror*. The primary biography of the *Stainless Proclamations* was manipulated to correspond to the number of available preincarnation narratives in Guru Chöwang's *Eight Pronouncements*, which was the source for those narratives. See Hirshberg 2016, 64–70.

<sup>4</sup> This introductory paragraph is adapted from Hirshberg 2016, 63.

in Tibet, what were Guru Chöwang’s objectives in self-identifying as Nyangrel’s reincarnation, and how did he support that claim? Guru Chöwang’s biographical materials offer as validation a visionary encounter with Padmasambhava, the eighth-century tantrika invited by Tri Songdetsen to help establish Buddhism in Tibet, where their exchange functions as a mnemonic for the recollection of his past lives, and the authentication of his reincarnate status as well.

To begin the *Eight Pronouncements*, Guru Chöwang identifies himself in the first-person and proceeds to recount how he came to remember his preincarnations. When practicing in solitary retreat during the fire monkey year of 1236–37, Guru Chöwang beheld a magical appearance (*sprul snang*) of Padmasambhava surrounded by a retinue of maṇḍala deities.<sup>5</sup> From the center of this wondrous display, Padmasambhava briefly describes Guru Chöwang’s first four preincarnations but compels him to remember the rest on his own. Guru Chöwang then gazes into a white silver mirror and perceives an additional thirteen preincarnations that he initially describes with formulaic couplets that name little more than the preincarnation and his parents (as will be discussed in greater detail below, all are male).

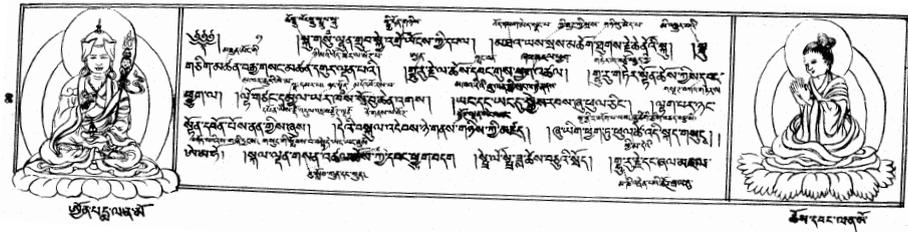


Figure 1 – Guru Chöwang (in añjali, at right) supplicating Padmasambhava on the first folio (verso) of the *Eight Pronouncements* (*Bka' rgya brygad ma*, 66).

After discerning these basic details in the mirror and thereby producing a slightly annotated list in the text, Guru Chöwang proceeds to dictate a short biography for each preincarnation just catoptrically divined. Emperor Tri Songdetsen is referenced only by his imperial title, *btsan po* in the initial series and *btsad po* in the narratives (hence the brackets in Table 1 below), but his activities and associates in the narrative definitively identify him as the renowned eighth-century emperor. Betraying the first of many issues in the textual transmission of this sequence, Tri Songdetsen is the first

<sup>5</sup> *Bka' rgya brygad ma*, 66.5 only includes the animal component of the year (*spre*), but *Skabs brygad ma* includes the element as well (*me spre'u*, 30.5), thereby specifying that this vision occurred in the fire monkey year of 1236–37.

incarnation to be narrated but not the first to be enumerated: it is only after the first four incarnations in the initial series that enumeration begins. The “first” incarnation is actually the fifth to be named, and only those recollected by Guru Chöwang, which exclude Tri Songdetsen, are enumerated in the proceeding narratives, whereas those described by Padmasambhava are not counted in either set.

<b>Incarnations and their Enumerations initiating <i>Bka' rgya brgyad ma</i></b>		
	<b>Initial Series</b>	<b>Proceeding Narratives</b>
Dictated by Padmasambhava	Brother in Magadha	Brother in Magadha
	Btsan po [Khri srong lde btsan] 'Od mtha' yas	Btsad po [Khri srong lde btsan]
	Ral pa can	
	1. Chos ldan	1. Chos ldan
Divined by Guru Chos dbang while gazing into a mirror	So gar rigs byed mkhan	2. So la garba
	U bhi mkhan po	3. U bhi sa 'dzin
	Dharma ra dza	4. Dharma ra dza
	U dur pha la	5. U dur pha la
	E snang 'od	6. E snang 'od
	Bsod nams rin 'byung	7. Bsod nams rin 'byung
	A dha ri bhi	8. Ya dha ri bhe
	Sho dha ra ka	9. Sho dha ra ka
	Dha ri ka sha	10. Dha ri mu ka/kha sha
	Sing nga	11. Sing nga śri
	Rje rigs pu rna tri	12. Rje'u rigs pu rna kri
	Nyi ma'i 'od zer	13. Nyi ma'i 'od zer
	Gu ru chos dbang	14. Gu ru chos dbang
	Tallied as 17 total (3+14)	

Table 1 – First lists of incarnations presented in Guru Chöwang's Eight Pronouncements

This idiosyncratic schema results in Guru Chöwang enumerating his fifth incarnation as the first, his sixth as the second, and so on, even though the final tally counts all but one of his preincarnations together. Thus excluded, the very first preincarnation, one of the three brothers from “Maguta” (Magadha) who built the Jarung Khashor stupa (*Mchod rten bya rung kha shor*) at what is now Boudhanath in the Kathmandu valley, appears to be the sole preincarnation to Guru Chöwang's preincarnations; although there are seventeen total preincarnations named in the initial series, only sixteen are tallied in the sum. This lifetime was most likely inserted later in order to align with what became the standard karmic pretext

for the preincarnations of Tri Songdetsen, Padmasambhava, and Śāntarakṣita,<sup>6</sup> but his exclusion from the sum in the *Eight Pronouncements* may also represent an attempt to cohere with a crucial aspect of treasure prophecy. Forged by Nyangrel in what would become renowned as his *Copper Island Biography* of Padmasambhava (*Rnam thar zangs gling ma*), it states that the seventeenth incarnation of Tri Songdetsen would be the enlightened treasure revealer.<sup>7</sup> If the brother from Magadha is counted, Guru Chöwang would be the eighteenth incarnation, thereby forfeiting the prestige of the seventeenth to Nyangrel. This preincarnation to his preincarnations was apparently introduced later along the recensional process by someone unaware of this prophecy, as well as the critical importance of Guru Chöwang's adherence to its terms. As we shall see, Guru Chöwang himself seems to have been unaware of it as well, at least initially.

Well after Guru Chöwang's first dialogue with Padmasambhava in the *Eight Pronouncements*, his gazing into the mirror to discern the basic biodata of his preincarnations, and his subsequent first-person narration of them, there is another exchange where Padmasambhava enumerates the thirteen preincarnations that had been glimpsed by Guru Chöwang in the mirror previously. In this distinct section, Padmasambhava relies on formulaic couplets that repeatedly state, "When you were born as [name] in your [ordinal number] birth, I, Orgyen Padmasambhava, was [name/title/occupation]."<sup>8</sup> Since the vision of Padmasambhava in the *Eight Pronouncements* is framed as a single encounter that occurred in 1236–37, this content is dissonant because Padmasambhava now tells Guru Chöwang about the very births he had previously compelled him to recall on his own. While this may function quite effectively as the corroboration of an enlightened witness, no reference to the original episode is made, and instead it appears redundant. The question and its reply occur in a narrative vacuum, unprecedented and distinct from any other content in the *Eight Pronouncements*. It thus appears to be a variant of

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<sup>6</sup> A later version of this narrative defines a fifteenth-century treasure, which is said to have been revealed in the thirteenth century (for a translation see Dowman 1973), but an ancestor of the karmic connection shared between these three individuals may be attested in the *Testimony of Ba (Dba' bzhed)*. Shortly after arriving in Tibet, Śāntarakṣita reminds Tri Songdetsen that they guarded a temple together in the time of a previous Buddha (Wangdu and Diemberger 2000, 45–46), which prefigures their construction of Samyé Monastery with the aid of Padmasambhava.

<sup>7</sup> *Zangs gling ma* H, 79b2–4. *Zangs gling ma* A, 134 corresponds to the translation in Kunsang 1993, 136. Also, see *Me tog snying po* K, 352.1–5; M, 254.3.4–6.

<sup>8</sup> *Bka' rgya bryad ma*, 113.5–114.7.

the same episode near the beginning of the text, but here Guru Chöwang does not recollect his preincarnations himself; it is Padmasambhava who fulfills his request to explain the connections they shared in previous lifetimes. When comparing these various sets of Guru Chöwang's preincarnations, there is a range of orthographical variants and some ordinal displacement for the incarnations, but here it appears quite definitive, having come from the mouth of the omniscient Padmasambhava himself, that Guru Chöwang had only thirteen preincarnations through Nyangrel. This being the case, Guru Chöwang is not the reincarnation of Tri Songdetsen, who is among those omitted, nor his prophesied seventeenth incarnation as the great treasure revealer.

In proceeding through the *Eight Pronouncements*, Guru Chöwang repeatedly asks Padmasambhava variations of the same question concerning his preincarnations, and yet he receives a diverse range of replies. While Padmasambhava answers that Guru Chöwang had as many as 47 preincarnations at one point in the text, and "countless" preincarnations in another, thirteen is the number that appears most consistently. Despite the initial episode listing seventeen preincarnations total, even the presumably authoritative tally in the colophon states that Guru Chöwang had only thirteen. Reviewing the discrepancies here, it becomes clear that Guru Chöwang (and/or his biographers) failed to accord with Nyangrel's treasure prophecies in their earliest claims. Likewise, given that Tri Songdetsen, the karmic foundation of Nyangrel's treasure prophecy and recoveries, is excluded from so many of Guru Chöwang's preincarnation series in the *Eight Pronouncements*,<sup>9</sup> the emperor's eventual inclusion within it is revealed to be a strategic (and relatively late) amelioration of Guru Chöwang's claim to the reincarnation of Nyangrel.

Given the repetition of thirteen preincarnations, these sets must be among the earlier iterations of Guru Chöwang's preincarnations to be closed and normalized. The preincarnations of Tri Songdetsen, Ötayé ('Od mtha' yas), and Relpachen (Ral pa can) were added later to bump the sum and accord with Nyangrel's treasure prophecy, and the brother from Magadha was added even later by someone who remained in ignorance of it. The series and narratives that initiate the *Eight Pronouncements* are therefore the most manipulated sets of preincarnations within it; these are the latest and most refined

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<sup>9</sup> Elsewhere in the text Padmasambhava confides a few details from the life of "Dharmarāja Khri srong" in two sections devoid of other preincarnations (*Bka' rgya brgyad ma*, 104.3–7 and 138.3–139.2); the latter focuses on the queens. Emperors Khri srong lde btsan and Ral pa can are both listed in yet another series, but there 'O mtha' yas is absent between them (*Bka' rgya brgyad ma*, 115.6–7).

attempts to align Guru Chöwang's claim with Nyangrel's prophecies within this particular text, and it is this most refined series that eventually becomes integrated into both of Nyangrel's biographies. Perhaps this was accomplished posthumously by Guru Chöwang's disciples, who lived in close proximity to Nyangrel's familial and lineal descendants, likely received teachings from them, and left much evidence of their manipulation of Nyangrel's *Clear Mirror Biography* to explicitly promote Guru Chöwang's claim.<sup>10</sup> In sum, these internal issues reflect the fragmentary nature of the *Autobiographies and Instructions of Guru Chöwang* (*Gu ru chos dbang gi rang nam dang zhal gdams*), where this compendium sometimes draws similar materials under a single title with little attempt at integration.

This being the case, Guru Chöwang's recurring queries to Padmasambhava about his preincarnations represent variant renditions of the same narrative at different stages of its development; these are not distinct scenarios but repetitions of the same episode. A more refined version now initiates the *Eight Pronouncements*: excluding the brother from Magadha, an even later contaminant,<sup>11</sup> this is the series that best accords with the *Copper Island* prophecy specifying the seventeenth incarnation of Tri Songdetsen as the enlightened treasure revealer. With the integration of the preincarnation series and narratives into Nyangrel's biographies, their recensional journey continued. The *Clear Mirror* still inherited and preserved many of the same discrepancies, and likely introduced some new ones, but the editors of the *Stainless Proclamations* successfully resolved many of the more glaring inconsistencies highlighted above. For one, they finally smoothed the enumeration into a single continuous series from the first incarnation of Tri Songdetsen to the final one, Nyangrel.

## 2. Narrating the Details

En route to his last rebirth, Guru Chöwang's preincarnation narratives depict a series of persons, always male and almost always

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<sup>10</sup> These remain preserved in the biography as several interlinear notes that explicitly identify Guru Chöwang as the reincarnation of Nyangrel. See Hirshberg 2016, 70–82 and Phillips 2004, 166–68.

<sup>11</sup> Some of these questions concerning the transmission of Guru Chöwang's biographical materials and their manipulation might be answered by additional recensions, but only one version survives and we are fortunate to have even that. For a discussion of how this compendium became available, see Phillips 2013.

royalty, whose lives are defined by finding and propagating the Buddhist doctrine. Through the process of refinement described above, the first life becomes none other than the eighth-century emperor Tri Songdetsen, and the penultimate life is the great treasure revealer Nyangrel. In the lives between, the various bastions of Buddhist Asia predominantly serve as their former areas of activity: Bodh Gaya, Śrī Lanka, Zahor, Nepal, Khotan, and various regions of Tibet all serve as backdrops for prior training, though the narratives employ few cultural, environmental, or geographical details to distinguish these places by more than name alone.

With a range of guises, Padmasambhava appears to every single one of Tri Songdetsen's reincarnations, or Nyangrel and Guru Chōwang's preincarnations. His most common manifestation is as a yogin, but Padmasambhava also appears as a monk, a master illusionist, and like a Śaiva mendicant with dreadlocks wrapped around his head while holding a trident-*kaṭvaṅga*. The primary implication is that Tri Songdetsen, in various places with different names at distinct times, continued to receive and train in the doctrines of esoteric Buddhism under the tutelage of Padmasambhava, who repeatedly empowers him to fulfill his destiny as the great treasure revealer. Most important among these details is the lists of teachings and transmissions received, as they establish a connection to virtually every cycle Nyangrel recovered as treasure in his life, many of which were then found in new iterations by Guru Chōwang.

While emperors Tri Songdetsen and Relpachen are eminently historical, and Nyangrel himself died only two decades before Guru Chōwang's birth, there are few chronological markers to specify a time period within these narratives, but several recount that their protagonists studied with renowned historical gurus and thereby provide a general indication of their era. According to the *Eight Pronouncements*, Énang-ö (E snang 'od) is a disciple of the great translator from western Tibet, Rinchen Zangpo (Rin chen bzang po, 958–1055).<sup>12</sup> Sönam Rinchung (Bsod nams rin 'byung) studies with Zurpoché Shakya Jungné (Zur po che Śākya 'byungs gnas, 1002–62), a patriarch of the imperial Zur clan.<sup>13</sup> At Wu Tai Shan Shodharaka is a Chinese disciple of Vimalamitra (eighth–ninth centuries?), thus this preincarnation narrative borrows from Vimalamitra's biographical traditions that depict his travels to China, which some critics assert

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<sup>12</sup> *Bka' rgya brygad ma*, 84.4; *Gsal ba'i me long*, 297.6; *Dri ma med pa*, 43.4.

<sup>13</sup> *Bka' rgya brygad ma*, 85.7; *Gsal ba'i me long*, 308.1; *Dri ma med pa*, 59.2. In the last, it is Zur **bu** Śākya 'byung gnas, perhaps confusing Zur the elder with his son (*bu*). The personal name leaves no doubt as to his identity, however.

was the source of the Great Perfection teachings associated with him.<sup>14</sup> Also, some sources attest that Vimalamitra never died, so this incarnation is not necessarily out of sequence chronologically. Dharimukasha studies Mahāmudrā with the famed Bengali siddha Nāropā (d. 1041–42?), who is among the most celebrated forefathers of the Kagyü lineages.<sup>15</sup> Also, lest one mistake him for a somewhat homonymous and historically problematic figure, Sing nga śri is described as the king of Zahor, so there is no correlation intended between him and Śrīsimha, who is often featured among the earliest human masters of the Great Perfection.<sup>16</sup>

Finally, the only preincarnation narrative that appears in Guru Chōwang's *Eight Pronouncements* that is excluded from both of Nyangrel's biographies is, as would be expected, the *pre*-incarnation narrative describing the life of Nyangrel himself. This *précis* is discarded in Nyangrel's complete biographies for their extended accounts of his person and activities. Guru Chōwang's succinct overview of Nyangrel's life is on par with those of the other preincarnations in length, and it concurs with the more generic details of Nyangrel's primary biographies. Whereas the *Clear Mirror* and the *Stainless Proclamations* then progress into the biography of their protagonist, the final incarnation and prophesied treasure revealer, Nyangrel, the *Eight Pronouncements* displaces the prestige of that position for Guru Chōwang. The stories of Guru Chōwang's life are reserved under several distinct titles within the compendium. In the *Eight Pronouncements*, Nyangrel is merely the penultimate preincarnation of Guru Chōwang rather than the ultimate reincarnation of Tri Songdetsen. All evidence indicates that this was not how Nyangrel conceived of himself nor the transmission of his lineage, however, and that his legacy was hijacked to some degree by a post-incarnate usurper who relied on the very innovations that Nyangrel developed. The grandeur of this claim may not have been

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<sup>14</sup> *Bka' rgya brgyad ma*, 90.2 and 90.3; *Gsal ba'i me long*, 303.1 and 303.2. His name is spelled Bhi ma la mu tra and Bye ma la mu tra respectively, which are among several variants (for example, see Kapstein 2008, 280). For a recent problematization of Chan's alleged influence on the Great Perfection, see van Schaik 2012.

<sup>15</sup> *Bka' rgya brgyad ma*, 91.2; *Gsal ba'i me long*, 310.1; *Dri ma med pa*, 62.5. For a translation of an eyewitness account of Naropa, as well as the controversy as to whether Marpa met him or not, see Davidson 2005, 141–46.

<sup>16</sup> *Bka' rgya brgyad ma*, 93.5; *Gsal ba'i me long*, 304.4; *Dri ma med pa*, 47.3. Samten Karmay provides several conflicting depictions of this individual in Nyingma sources. To name a few, he is presented as an Indian guru of Vairocana, a Chinese guru of Vimalamitra, and a prince of Singhala. See Karmay 2007 [1988], 22n18.

lost on Guru Chöwang himself, and we find some instances where he doubts his self-designated status and seeks additional assurances.

### 3. *The Persistence of Doubt, and a Scathing Critique*

Despite the visionary replies of Padmasambhava and personal divination of his own preincarnations, the *Eight Pronouncements* presents Guru Chöwang as unsure that he is the authentic reincarnation of Nyangrel. Later in the text, this uncertainty compels Guru Chöwang to query Padmasambhava about the nature, definitions, and divisions of the three buddha bodies (*sku, kāya*). Padmasambhava subsequently divides these into a hierarchy descending in triplets from the dharmakāya of the dharmakāya, to the sambhogakāya of the dharmakāya, and so forth, all the way down until Padmasambhava reaches the ninth and lowest possible status, whereupon he finally declares to Guru Chöwang that “You are the *nirmāṇakāya* of the *nirmāṇakāya*” (“the tulku of the tulku”), or “the magically-emanated reincarnation of the magically-emanated reincarnation.”<sup>17</sup> Given the hierarchy presented, this denotes a precise ontological status and function but may also just confirm Guru Chöwang’s claim to the reincarnation of Nyangrel. From the latter perspective, Padmasambhava simply states that Guru Chöwang is the magically-emanated reincarnation of another magically-emanated reincarnation, Nyangrel.

Despite Padmasambhava’s confirmation, Guru Chöwang retains some doubt since in reassessing his status with this new information, he decides to compare himself against the preeminent example of all tulkus, Śākyamuni Buddha, who was born with excellent physical features, from thousand-spoked wheels on the soles of his feet to a protrusion at the crown of his head. The *Stainless Proclamations* attests that Nyangrel was born with eight great marks on his body, two of which are shared with the Buddha, and thereby serve to confirm Nyangrel’s status as a magically-emanated reincarnation.<sup>18</sup> Conversely, Guru Chöwang proceeds through a rather thorough accounting of his own physical features in search of any sign that he too is a tulku, but he seems to become increasingly discouraged in repeatedly discovering that each mark “does not appear on me,

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<sup>17</sup> *Bka' rgya brgyad ma*, 109.4.

<sup>18</sup> *Dri ma med pa*, 87.1–88.2. Other than the protuberance on the crown of his head and dharmacakras on the soles of his feet, the rest of Nyangrel’s eight physical marks draw on tantric symbols unattested in the common exoteric tradition.

Chöwang.”<sup>19</sup> Thus unconvinced for lack of evidence, Guru Chöwang once again asks Padmasambhava about his preincarnations in order to confirm that he really is the reincarnation of Nyangrel. The *Eight Pronouncements* thus presents Guru Chöwang as unsure of his own claims, but he was not his only skeptic.

It may be relevant to note that while Nyangrel was received with some skepticism in his life, Guru Chöwang became the target of scathing critique by some prominent contemporaries. As the treasure movement progressed from localized nascence to broader popularization, perhaps it provoked a more explicit counter-response, but this attempt at character assassination reflects a vehement rejection of Guru Chöwang, his claims, and his products. In one early, unvarnished example of anti-treasure rhetoric, Chak Lotsawa Chöjépel (Chag lo tsa ba chos rje dpal, 1197–1263/4) derides the treasures in general but singles out Guru Chöwang in particular. Having suggested that the true Padmasambhava was soon followed by an imposter who hid these so-called “treasures,” he writes:

After this, countless perverse doctrines spread. Having declared, “these are treasure texts,” the one called Guru Chöwang, who was cursed when a king demon entered his heart, bragged about countless perverse doctrines. When nāgas, māra demons and king-sorcerer demons gathered around the perverse doctrines that were fabricated by him, leprosy and psychosis and so forth arose [in him], which were taken to be signs of accomplishment. Such doctrines and so forth that were drawn from treasures are not authentic.<sup>20</sup>

Chöjépel takes aim at the treasures and thus implicitly at Nyangrel’s legacy, but the harshest words are reserved for Guru Chöwang specifically—and personally. He calls out Guru Chöwang as a braggart, a demoniac, a fabricator of false doctrines, and a vector of disease. An excerpt attributed to Butön within the same text attests that Guru Chöwang died of leprosy,<sup>21</sup> so this polemic karmically connects Guru Chöwang’s fatal illness to his severely negative actions, which were fomented by psychosis and possession. But why was Nyangrel spared more explicit inclusion here? Chöjépel was certainly aware of Nyangrel’s treasure doctrines and recoveries: his father, Chak Lotsawa Dratsom (1153–1216), presided over Nyangrel’s

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<sup>19</sup> *Bka’ rgya brgyad ma*, 109.5.

<sup>20</sup> *Snags log sun ’byin gyi skor*, 13.5-14.2. For other translations, see Martin 2001, 114 and Doctor 2005, 32.

<sup>21</sup> Martin 2001, 114n18.

funeral at the request of Namkhapel, thus their lineages seem to have shared a close connection. Perhaps Chöjépel retained an affinity for the descendants of the Nyang clan and strove to insulate them against the claims of a competitor? Whatever his motivation, the contempt he held for his contemporary seems especially personal; Chöjépel condemns Guru Chöwang as a total fraud.

Whether Guru Chöwang's confessed doubts in the *Eight Pronouncements* are an implicit response to the disbelief of vitriolic critics, a kind of deferential literary device,<sup>22</sup> or a genuine concern, Guru Chöwang questions his own status as Nyangrel's reincarnation, but he successfully appropriated at least the legitimacy of his line and legacy through relying on the very innovation that Nyangrel used to validate his own treasure recoveries, catenate reincarnation. This provided Guru Chöwang with an enhanced karmic foundation of reincarnate descent to pursue his own recoveries: subsequently recognized as the second of the "treasure-revealing kings" (*gter ston rgyal po lnga*), Guru Chöwang's legitimacy was predicated in part on the basis of his being the reincarnation of the very first of them, Nyangrel. He soon established himself at Nézhi Zhitro (Gnas gzhi zhi khro) temple just a few kilometers downstream from Mawochok (Smra'o lcogs), Nyangrel's hermitage, home, and lineal seat.

Perhaps an echo of competitive tension, there is a dissension implicit in Nyangrel's two primary biographies that may indicate their transmission through the hands of these two distinct but closely related communities. One accepted that Guru Chöwang was Nyangrel's reincarnation, and they supported this claim by emending the *Clear Mirror*, as evidenced by several interlinear notes within it. The other community consisted of Nyangrel's patrilineal descendants and their disciples at Mawochok, who appear to have ignored (if not rejected) Guru Chöwang's claim and preserved the *Stainless Proclamations*, which consistently and unequivocally presents Nyangrel as the final reincarnation of Tri Songdetsen. Regardless, it is clear that Guru Chöwang actively and successfully established his own lineage with significant reliance on his reincarnation claim, which was shaped over time to accord with Nyangrel's prophecies, but did he take these steps in an attempt to requisition the spiritual and/or material inheritance of Nyang?

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<sup>22</sup> For a discussion of the rhetoric and function of doubt for later treasure revealers, see Gyatso 1998, 161–62, 168–69.

#### 4. Naming Heirs, Establishing Hierarchy

Nyangrel bequeathed his lineage and property to his second son and foremost heir, Namkhapel, which Namkhapel then passed to his son and “sole supreme heir,” Ngadak Loden Sherab. While Guru Chöwang is indeed listed among the main disciples of Namkhapel, he is counted as one of his four great heirs, who are ranked beneath Namkhapel’s one son, two cherished disciples, and three scholarly students in the descending hierarchy of his inheritance.<sup>23</sup> During Namkhapel’s lifetime, it thus appears that Guru Chöwang remained a humble disciple and did not attempt to exceed his position, but this may have changed not long after Namkhapel’s death. In contextualizing the recollection of his preincarnations, Guru Chöwang states that his encounter with Padmasambhava occurred in the fire monkey year of 1236–37.<sup>24</sup> If Namkhapel died in 1235–36, which admittedly is one of a few possibilities (his dates are contradictory across sources), this vision and its attendant recollection occurred a very short time thereafter. If this is the case, Guru Chöwang’s declaration may have been spectacularly coincidental if not opportunistic.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, his claim as Nyangrel’s reincarnation is absent from Namkhapel’s biography, perhaps suggesting that it was not made while his guru was alive. Instead, Namkhapel’s biography now concludes with an extended episode that ascribes a unique prominence to Guru Chöwang despite his earlier naming much further down the line of inheritance.

In this episode of Namkhapel’s biography, Guru Chöwang is in secluded retreat when a *ḍākinī* manifests to inform him of his master’s death. After performing devotional overtures and returning to Mawochok, Guru Chöwang is welcomed by Namkhapel’s son, Loden Sherab, who would have been his foremost competitor as the

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<sup>23</sup> *Yid bzhin nor bu’i ’phreng ba*, 441–42.

<sup>24</sup> *Skabs brgyad ma*, 30.5–6.

<sup>25</sup> Both the *Clear Mirror* and Namkhapel’s biography, *Garland of Wish-fulfilling Jewels*, attest that he was born in a monkey year (most likely 1164–65), but the same biography also states that he was twenty-three when Nyangrel died in 1192, which would suggest a birth date in 1169–70. *Garland of Wish-fulfilling Jewels* reports that Namkhapel died in a wood monkey year (1224–25) at the age of sixty-six, but this conflicts with his aforementioned birth in the monkey year since his age is not divisible by twelve (*Yid bzhin nor bu’i ’phreng ba* A, 456.1; B, 235.7–236.1; C, 77.1). If we favor the other piece of data stating that Nyangrel died when Namkhapel was twenty-three, then Namkhapel was born in 1169–70 and died in 1235–36 at the age of sixty-six, just one year before Guru Chöwang declared himself the reincarnation of his father, Nyangrel. For a similar analysis with regard to establishing Nyangrel’s dates, see Hirshberg 2016, 204n357; for another with slightly different conclusions, cf. Sørensen et al. 2007, 473n117.

designated patrilineal heir to the Nyang transmissions. Loden Sherab and the elders say, "It is excellent that Chöwang has arrived," thus this episode promotes Guru Chöwang as the ideal deferential disciple, but this content and its inclusion here has the whiff of propaganda in that it contributes very little to the biography of Namkhapel and ultimately serves to elevate Guru Chöwang by injecting him into the narrative under a devoutly positive light.<sup>26</sup> Despite its inclusion in all available versions, the entire section stands out as a contaminant quite distinct from the rest of the narrative. It is the only section in which the focus shifts to someone other than its protagonist, Namkhapel, and the episode is strikingly incongruent with the rather minor status ascribed to Guru Chöwang previously. With this insertion here and the interlinear notes in the *Clear Mirror Biography* of Nyangrel, we begin to discern a pattern of literary embellishment in which Guru Chöwang and/or his supporters actively manipulated the biographies of Nyangrel and his descendants to enhance Guru Chöwang's claim. So what did he seek in making it, and what impact did it have on the patrilineal inheritance of Nyang?

If there was any conflict that arose from Guru Chöwang's claim as the reincarnation of Nyangrel, it is not recorded in Namkhapel's biography nor is it attested in that of his son, Loden Sherab, though the latter narrative is brief, uniformly laudatory, and addresses little more than his treasure recoveries and contributions to Mawochok. While I have yet to find any direct reaction to Guru Chöwang's claim among the patrilineal descendants of the Nyang clan, he appears to have oriented himself as *a* supreme heir of the lineage if not *the* supreme heir; after all, Namkhapel is Nyangrel's son, but Guru Chöwang *is* Nyangrel. This subordination is made explicit in a distinct visionary text where Padmasambhava reveals to Guru Chöwang that when he was Tri Songdetsen, Namkhapel served as his minister, Dorjé Nyingpo. Guru Chöwang's own guru is thus demoted to an inferior position in their past lives with the implication that it applied to their most recent ones as well.<sup>27</sup>

When these various elements of Guru Chöwang's claim are assessed together, there first appears to be something of a multipronged assault on the patrilineal inheritance model of the Nyang clan. By virtue of claiming to recollect his preincarnations and especially his penultimate life as Nyangrel, Guru Chöwang undermines the very basis of his own guru's authority as the son and

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<sup>26</sup> *Yid bzhin nor bu'i 'phreng ba*, 463.2–3. For a translation of the entire episode, see Phillips 2004, 155–56.

<sup>27</sup> "Zhus lan bdun las 'di mnga' bdag gis zhus lan rin po che" in *The Autobiographies and Instructions of Guru Chos-kyi dbang-phyug II*, 498.3–7. Phillips 2004, 172–73.

designated heir of Nyangrel himself. Rather than kowtow to the mundane machinations of automatic patrilineal inheritance, Guru Chöwang stakes a new kind of claim in striving to supersede it. As the reincarnation of Nyangrel, we may assume that Guru Chöwang could have presented himself as the supreme heir to his lineage, which would indeed accord with how reincarnate inheritance functions in Tibetan lineages in the present, yet this does not appear to have been among Guru Chöwang's expectations or objectives. Rather than requisitioning the spiritual and material inheritance of Nyang, Guru Chöwang only appropriated the karmic narrative and prestige of his treasure-revealing predecessor, as well as the authority to recover new treasures by means of them. He thereby successfully usurped some of Nyangrel's prerogative for scriptural production, and deserves credit for the many collections he "revealed," but rather than lay claim to the abbacy of Mawochok and launch a direct challenge to patrilineal inheritance through a new primacy founded on reincarnation, Guru Chöwang was satisfied to establish his own temple just down the river. Mawochok remained under the abbacy of Nyangrel's descendants for generations. One interesting aside, however, is that Mawochok's current abbots claim to be patrilineal descendants of Guru Chöwang rather than the reincarnations of him (and Nyangrel), so while this material inheritance eventually passed to Guru Chöwang's line, patrilineage has remained the determining factor to the present.<sup>28</sup>

### 5. Conclusion

Further research is required to elucidate the exact process of this ascension, but there is no doubt that the authentication gained through Guru Chöwang's status as Nyangrel's reincarnation empowered him to recover his own treasures and establish his own lineage. And yet he did not appear to use his reincarnate status to promote himself as a new kind of heir that could—or even should—supersede the patrilineal inheritance model of the Nyang clan. While reincarnate inheritance is definitive of many Tibetan Buddhist lineages today, Karmapa II Karma Pakshi (1204/6–83) had only been recognized as the reincarnation of Dusum Khyenpa (Dus gsum mkhyen pa) as late as 1226, just one decade before Guru Chöwang

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<sup>28</sup> In his history and inventory of Mawochok, a late twentieth-century abbot claims to be a descendant of Guru Chöwang. See *Smra bo lcog kun bzang bstan 'dzin rgya mtsho* 1994, 33.

reports his vision of Padmasambhava and stakes his claim.<sup>29</sup> Given that Nyangrel only professed his catenate reincarnation series about a century prior, which was neither forwarded nor established as an inheritance model in his time, Guru Chöwang may not have even considered the possibility of positioning himself as a reincarnate heir to Nyang's material and lineal inheritance. This may not have seemed even remotely viable given its lack of precedent.

Rather than a vertical attempt to ascend a hierarchy and usurp an inheritance, we might recognize in Guru Chöwang's claim a new and innovative version of a more common lateral. As occasionally occurs in Buddhist history to the present, when a charismatic underling begins to chafe at the monopolization of lineal authority, it forces a more creative route to transcend the limitations of their position and become a religious leader in their own right. As a disciple of Nyang-clan scions in the backwaters of Lhodrak, southern Tibet, Guru Chöwang persisted under a very local hegemony led by an exclusive patrilineage that had survived the collapse of the empire and persevered for centuries. Yet he injected himself into that line by claiming to be an heir—not in the ancient way of blood, bone, and clan—but in the emerging model of catenate reincarnation.

While Guru Chöwang's visionary validation of that claim alleges to be inspired by omniscience as the corroborative product of attainment, the variance of his preincarnations and their enumeration in the *Eight Pronouncements* indicates that his claim to Nyangrel's reincarnation was very much a work in progress. It was repeatedly reformulated to incorporate Nyangrel's own prophecies in the progressive refinement of Guru Chöwang's legitimation strategy, which was bolstered by manipulating the biographies of both Nyangrel and his son. Nevertheless, by innovating reincarnation theory to seize a position of religious and scriptural authority, Guru Chöwang was, in this way at least, an authentic heir of Nyangrel.

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<sup>29</sup> Manson 2009, 31–32.

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# “I am a god, I am a god, I am definitely a god” Deity Emanation and the Legitimation of Sönam Peldren

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**S**cholars and non-specialists alike are familiar with the Tibetan “tulku” (*sprul sku*) institution, most often thought of as the uniquely Tibetan institutional practice of selecting certain young children and “recognizing” them as reincarnations of deceased religious teachers. Numerous ethnographic and literary-historical descriptions document this process;<sup>2</sup> several films and autobiographies explore the experience of these figures;<sup>3</sup> a non-heritage tulku even commented on his own experiences in a paper entitled, “So What’s It Like to Be A Tulku? Western Reincarnations and Their Roles Within the Tibetan Tulku Institution” at the conference which led to this special issue.

As Diemberger and others have pointed out, however, “the notion of a *tülku*, a Tibetan word that literally means ‘the emanated body of the Buddha,’ with which most reincarnations are currently designated, encompasses both incarnation and reincarnation.”<sup>4</sup> In his seminal 1978 analysis of the historical roots of the reincarnation system in Tibetan Buddhism, Wylie distinguishes between the long-standing Mahāyāna tradition of recognizing an historical personage as an emanation-body (*sprul sku*, *nirmāṇakāya*) of a buddha or bodhisattva, and the related but distinct Tibetan tradition of recognizing successive human rebirths as incarnations of both a deity

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The Tibetan for the quote in the chapter title is *lha yin lha yin lha yin nges*.

<sup>2</sup> Aziz 1976; Bärlöcher 1982; Tenzin Gyatso 1991; Brauen ed. 2005; Chayet 1985; Diemberger 2007; Tsering 1993; Tsering 1994.

<sup>3</sup> *My Reincarnation* 2012; *Tulku* 2001; *Unmistaken Child* 2009; Trungpa 2010 (4<sup>th</sup> edition); Norbu and Turnbull 1968.

<sup>4</sup> Diemberger 2007, 242. See also Germano and Gyatso 2000; Van der Kuijp 2005; Wylie 1978.

and an historical figure.<sup>5</sup> Wylie points out that belief in the ability of a Buddha to emanate in human form “dates from the early days of Mahāyāna Buddhism and is widely accepted in conjunction with the *bodhisattva* ideal.”<sup>6</sup>

Twenty-seven years later, Leonard van der Kuijp picked up the thread of Wylie’s discussion of the historical roots of the Tibetan tulku institution.<sup>7</sup> While devoting the bulk of his article to refining Wylie’s claims about the historical basis of the practice of recognizing humans as reincarnations of previous human Buddhist masters, van der Kuijp also discusses early Tibetan examples of the Mahāyāna tradition of recognizing human emanations of specific bodhisattvas. Pointing specifically to the eleventh-century “Kakholma Testament” (*bka’ chems ka khol ma*) and its assertion of the “ontological equivalence of Songtsen Gampo with Avalokiteśvara” as one of the earliest (if not *the* earliest) Tibetan instances of recognizing Avalokiteśvara as the patron bodhisattva of Tibet, van der Kuijp suggests that the innovation was followed by other eleventh-century Tibetan works’ elaborations on “the motif of the ‘Three Protectors of Tibet,’” in which the Tibetan rulers Songtsen Gampo, Tri Songdetsen, and Ralpachen were retroactively equated with Avalokiteśvara, Mañjuśrī, and Vajrapāṇi, respectively.<sup>8</sup> By the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in Tibet, according to van der Kuijp, such claims of deity emanation had spread and were used both to explain and enhance the power and prestige of contemporary religious figures, with lineages such as the Sakya recognizing its religious leaders as emanations of Buddhist deities.<sup>9</sup> While going on to note that “equating Bodhisattvas with rulers was not new, neither in the Subcontinent nor in early Tibet,” van der Kuijp concludes that the idea that specific, recognized, and powerful bodhisattvas could take (and, indeed, had taken) human form as political rulers had no precedent in Tibet prior to the eleventh century.<sup>10</sup>

In contrast to these examples of retroactively recognizing the emanation status of previous historical figures, and of deity emanation as one of many interpretative strategies with which to enhance religious reputations, we understandably have less information about the process by which a charismatic, non-

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<sup>5</sup> The word *yang srid* is also sometimes used to describe the reincarnation of an historical figure, although this term is used to refer to the rebirth of ordinary sentient beings in saṃsāra as well.

<sup>6</sup> Wylie 1978, 579.

<sup>7</sup> Van der Kuijp 2005.

<sup>8</sup> Van der Kuijp 2005, 26.

<sup>9</sup> Van der Kuijp 2005, 28.

<sup>10</sup> Van der Kuijp 2005, 28.

institutionally affiliated individual in Tibet, a “self-made saint,” relies on the older, Mahāyāna hermeneutic of deity emanation to establish his or her own public religious persona, to the near total exclusion of other forms of legitimation. This use of the hermeneutic of deity emanation is particularly veiled in the case of historical figures that existed on the margins of political, social, and religious institutions of authority. This chapter explores how one such marginal Tibetan figure and her biographers appear to have relied on culturally accepted ideas about the ability of the divine to manifest in this world in order to establish her religious authority, with little recourse to other avenues of legitimation.

### 1. Background

The figure at the center of my discussion is a Tibetan woman named Sönam Peldren (*bsod nam dpal 'dren*). Sönam Peldren's dates are still unclear. While her termini may be anywhere from the late-twelfth to the mid-sixteenth century, we have good reason to narrow this down considerably: 1328-1372 represents her most likely lifespan.<sup>11</sup> Sönam

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<sup>11</sup> Sönam Peldren's exact historicity remains elusive. The biography of Sönam Peldren, discussed further below, is unusual in that it provides specific dates (that is, a day, month, and year) for almost all of the episodes it describes from Sönam Peldren's life. Unfortunately, the text never references the twelve-year Tibetan calendrical cycle (*rab 'byung*) of those dates: thus, the text does not provide information that allows readers to discern in which year (within a 60-year cycle) the events took place. Moreover, the biography portrays Sönam Peldren's life as marked by an almost total lack of contact with religious and political institutions and teachers; although this absence of clear religious and political affiliations is one of the more interesting features of Sönam Peldren's legacy, as I discuss below, the lack of reference to historical events, institutions, or noteworthy persons deprives the reader of clues that would allow us to infer exactly when Sönam Peldren lived.

The biography states that Sönam Peldren was born “at dawn on the seventeenth day of the tenth month, in the kingly year of the earth male dragon, on the first day of the new year” (*de nas gnam lo rgyal po pa pho 'brug gi lo zla ba bcu pa'i tshes bcu bdun snga dro la / ye shes dbyings kyi mkha' 'gro ma / skar ma rgyal la legs par 'khrungs /*) and that she died on the “twenty-third day of the fifth month of the water male mouse year” (*chu pho byi ba lo zla ba lnga pa'i nyi shu gsum gyi nyin par /*). As these passages do not specify the exact twelve-year Tibetan calendrical cycle of either the earth dragon year of her birth or the water mouse year of her death, the reader is left to decipher exactly when Sönam Peldren's 44 years of life took place.

The text contains references to just two religious teachers, both unnamed: one is identified simply as the *Taklung lama* (*stag lung*) and the other as the *Barom lama* (*'bab rom*, most likely a variant spelling of *'ba' rom*). As both the *Taklung* and the *Barom* lineages of the *Kagyü* (*bka' brgyud*) school were initially established in the

Peldren was an ostensibly illiterate nomadic woman who, despite lacking religious training, practice, and connections to religious institutions, possessed a strong religious vocation. She was born in Central Tibet in Dam Shö (*'dam shod*) near the Nyenchen Thanglha (*gnyen chen thang lha*) mountain range.<sup>12</sup> She lived and traveled in central Tibet until the age of thirty, at which point she traveled with her husband and fellow nomadic group to eastern Tibet, or Kham (*kham*s). Sönam Peldren traveled in Kham for the next fourteen years until her death at age forty-four in a place called Ya Nga (*ya nga*) near what is now the city of Chamda (*lcam mda'*) in today's Driru county (*'bri ru*; sometimes also called Nakshö Driru, *nag shod 'bri ru*) in the Tibet Autonomous Region.<sup>13</sup>

The most extensive source of information we have about Sönam Peldren is a text that we may consider Sönam Peldren's biography, although the work lacks a comprehensive title.<sup>14</sup> I have two versions of the text;<sup>15</sup> both versions are molded into the form of Tibetan

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mid-to-late-twelfth century, it seems likely that the earliest Sönam Peldren could have lived would be 1268-1312 or 1328-1372.

Sources external to Sönam Peldren's biography help establish a back-end date for Sönam Peldren's lifetime. According to Hildegard Diemberger, an unpublished sixteenth- to seventeenth-century text, "The Collected Works of Bodong [Choklé Namgyal]" (*dpal de kho na nyid dus pa las bo dong chos 'byung*), asserts that Chökyi Drönma (*chos skyid dron ma*, 1422-1455), founder of the Samdhing Dorjé Phakmo (*bsam ldng rdo rje phag mo*) institution and lineage, had previously incarnated as Lakṣmīkarā, Maṇḍaravā, Sönam Drenma (supposedly the consort of Phakmodrupa Dorjé Gyalpo,) and "as the ḍākinī Sönam Peldren at Dam Shöd in Kham." Diemberger 2007, 72-3.

Given Sönam Peldren's biography's brief allusions to Kagyu lineages, and assuming that the "History of Bodong" is correct in claiming that Sönam Peldren lived before Chökyi Drönma, Sönam Peldren's dates can be narrowed to 1268-1312 or 1328-1372. For the sake of simplicity and until this timeframe can be further refined, I simply use the later, more conservative time frame of 1328-1372.

<sup>12</sup> According to Bellezza, *'dam shod* is also called *'dam-shod snar-mo*, and approximates the present day *'dam-gzhung* county. Bellezza 2005, 180. Thank you to Jann Ronis for this reference.

<sup>13</sup> See Riwang Tenzin 2002, 368-374 for more information about *ya nga*.

<sup>14</sup> *Bsod nam dpal 'dren rnam thar*, unpublished manuscript.

<sup>15</sup> The biography of Sönam Peldren briefly mentions that multiple versions of Sönam Peldren's life story exist in varying stages of completeness; former residents of the nunnery associated with Sönam Peldren informed me that there are many copies of different versions of the biography of Sönam Peldren in and around her death site in Ya Nga Chamda village.

I am currently in possession of copies of two different versions of Sönam Peldren's biography. I received the first version of the text, or "Manuscript A", from the historian Tashi Tsering of the Amnye Machen Institute in Dharamsala, H.P., India. This text is handwritten, in cursive script (*dbu med*) and contains single-sided folios numbered to 251, some of which are now missing. The second version of the biography is a copy of a text belonging to a monk named Tenzin Engsal (*bstan 'dzin dbyings gsal*, phonetic transcription of his design), originally

spiritual biography known as “liberation story” or *nam thar* (*rnam thar*), replete with divisions common to the genre such as outer, inner, secret, and songs of realization.<sup>16</sup>

The work’s authorship is attributed primarily to Sönam Peldren’s husband, Rinchen Pel (*rin chen dpal*), with the text containing multiple descriptions of his recording Sönam Peldren’s words throughout the course of their married life. While the text presents itself as the written transcription of a cohesive biography orally narrated by a single storyteller, we must handle the label “biography” carefully, along with our assumptions about authorship practices that we attribute to the term. As Gyatso observes about Tibetan writing practices:<sup>17</sup>

What is labeled biography not infrequently turns out to have been dictated by the subject to a scribe. Even biographies composed centuries later reproduce passages, from either oral or written sources, that originate with the subject. On the other hand, works that are considered autobiography are often completed and sometimes edited by the subject's disciple.

The text's own description of Sönam Peldren’s collaboration with scribes, its emphatic attribution of the composition of “songs of realization” (*mgur*) to Sönam Peldren herself, and its extensive first-person quotations of Sönam Peldren’s speech, render it plausible that Sönam Peldren herself was involved in some capacity in the composition of aspects of her life story; these and other features also make it reasonable to consider the text a document composed and

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from Chamda near Sönam Peldren’s death site, and currently residing in Dharamsala, H.P., India. Tenzin Engsal generously allowed me to photocopy his personal copy of the Sönam Peldren biography, which he received from his teacher Khadro Kunsang Sangmo (ca. twentieth century). This text, or “Manuscript B,” is 472 double-sided folios long, or 944 folio sides total; its text is handwritten in a large, clear cursive on new yellow paper; and it seems to be a facsimile, as is evidenced from double-printing on several folios.

The different manuscripts have many spelling variations and differing section titles between them. Moreover, Manuscript B features additional words, lines, and even short passages that are wholly missing from Manuscript A. A more significant difference is that Manuscript A contains three additional sections not found in Manuscript B, including an unusual feast offering (*tshog*) of which Sönam Peldren is the recipient. Manuscript B, on the other hand, contains the autobiography of Rinchen Pel, which accounts for the text’s vastly greater length.

<sup>16</sup> For discussions of the various meanings and translations of the Tibetan term *nam thar*, see Gyatso 1998, 6 and Schaeffer 2004, 5.

<sup>17</sup> Gyatso 1997: 103.

compiled over time by multiple authors and scribes, including the subject herself.

According to this biography, one of the most distinctive features of Sönam Peldren's life was her repeated claim that while her external appearances were admittedly humble, they masked an internal reality of enlightened realization. Sönam Peldren called on many images of female enlightenment to describe her internal reality; most specifically, Sönam Peldren claimed that although she appeared to have an ordinary female body, in actuality she was an enlightened emanation form (*sprul sku*) of a buddha. The precise identity of the source of this enlightened emanation varies throughout the course of the text. As is discussed below, the biography's opening stanzas trace Sönam Peldren's genesis both to the "great mother" emptiness (*yum chen*) and to Dorjé Naljorma (*rdo rje rnal 'byor ma*, Vajrayoginī).<sup>18</sup> Additionally, the narrative voice refers to Sönam Peldren throughout the text with the generic title "*ḍākini*" (written as the phonetic transcription of the Sanskrit term, *dA ki ni*; the variant terms *ḍākima* and *ḍākki* also appear in the text in reference to Sönam Peldren). In yet other places, both the narrator and Sönam Peldren herself discuss the saint as an emanation of the wrathful Buddhist goddess Dorjé Phakmo (*rdo rje phag mo*) and her body as a "conqueror's mandala" (*rgyal ba'i dkyil 'khor*).<sup>19</sup>

The biography tells us that Sönam Peldren's husband and community met these varied claims to divinity with bewilderment at some times, and at others with outright scorn and ridicule. After a miraculous death, however, Sönam Peldren's professions of divine identity were corroborated by her previously skeptical husband, first when Rinchen Pel discovered relics in his wife's remains, and later again when he experienced a series of posthumous visions of his wife, who appeared before him in the glorious form of Dorjé Phakmo.

In this chapter, I focus on three, qualitatively different examples of both Sönam Peldren and her biographer(s) using the hermeneutic of deity emanation to assert her religious pedigree. Following a brief introduction to these passages, I discuss what is unusual about the appearance of deity emanation in the Sönam Peldren biography.

<sup>18</sup> *Bsod nam dpal 'dren rnam thar*, Manuscript B, folio 1b.

<sup>19</sup> *Bsod nam dpal 'dren rnam thar*, Manuscript B, folio 43b.

*2. Narrative Voice: Using Hagiographical Conventions to Trace  
Sönam Peldren's Emanation Status*

The first example of the text's use of deity emanation to establish Sönam Peldren's religious authority is found in the biography's opening passage. This passage explicitly asserts that Sönam Peldren is the final product of a series of unfolding layers of a divine source that the text alternately labels the "Vajrayoginī" and "Dorjé Naljorma."<sup>20</sup> Because the text takes great care to detail Sönam Peldren's precise relationship to this divine basis, I quote the opening passage in full:

Homage to Vajrayoginī!

While in general the Great Mother, who produces and sports with all the Buddhas of the three times, arrives in many [forms], the Conqueror Dorjé Naljorma is herself unique. Furthermore, Dorjé Naljorma is said to be three: the meaning of Dorjé Naljorma, the sign of Dorjé Naljorma, and the form of Dorjé Naljorma.

Regarding the meaning of Dorjé Naljorma: the meaning is described in the "Perfection of Wisdom"; the emptiness of appearance, the emptiness of sound, and the emptiness of awareness are indistinguishable, and [they] are the abiding manner of mind itself. It is also said in the Great Mother "Perfection of Wisdom" that the natural condition of the ground is called the Great Seal.

Regarding the sign of Dorjé Naljorma, it is said: "Of all the seed syllables, 'Ah' is supreme, arising and emanating from the center of the navel. Praise to and prostrate before the venerable queen who subjugates the sky-goers!" The meaning of this phrase is this: the inner heat at the navel resides as a mass of light in a short 'Ah.'

Finally, the form of Dorjé Naljorma is said to be three: the Truth Body Wisdom Sky-Goer, the Enjoyment Body Wisdom Sky-Goer, and the Emanation Body Wisdom Sky-Goer.

Regarding Truth Body Wisdom Sky-Goer: [this is] the Great Mother, who creates and sports with Dorjé Chang and all the assorted Bliss-Goers in the Highest Pure Land.

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<sup>20</sup> Please note that where the Tibetan text uses transcribed Sanskrit, I give the transcribed Sanskrit term. Where the Tibetan text uses a Tibetan name for a place, human, or deity, I give the Tibetan in phonetic transcription. I translate all other terms into English.

Regarding the Enjoyment Body Wisdom Sky-Goer: Orgyen Jalendra, the twenty-four lands, and the thirty-two abodes are the abodes of the main female [deity].

Regarding the Emanation Body Wisdom Sky-Goer: [she] tirelessly manifests in whatever body is appropriate to benefit all sentient beings. Emanating in a form appropriate to each of the six classes of beings [residing] below the ground, on the ground, and above the ground, she gives doctrinal teachings in the language appropriate [for that realm].

In order to benefit sentient beings now in this place above the ground, the Wisdom Sky-Goer Sönam Peldren descended from within the Emanation Body and arrived in a place called Dam Shö, in the Nol district, in a low-lying place of the excellent place deity the Nyenchen Thanglha, in the dwelling place called Tashipa Jang Gyap. [She was of the] excellent and noble clan, the great male ancestral line of Dong, of the early, distinguished division of the Dong clan. Her father's name was Yöndak Ngoli, her mother was called Nasang Chötso, and as husband and wife the couple had four children: two boys and two girls.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>21</sup> *Bsod nams dpal 'dren rnam thar*, Manuscript B, folios 1b-4b: *na mo badza yo gi ni ye / spyir dus gsum sangs rgyas thams cad bskyed dang rol pa'i yum chen ni / mang du byon pa yod lags kyang / bcom ldan rdo rje rnal 'byor ma / gcig su nyid kyi 'gyur yin te / da yang rdo rje rnal 'byor ma la yang gsum du gsungs ste / don gyi rdo rje rnal 'byor ma dang / brda yi rdo rje rnal 'byor ma dang / rtags kyi do rje rnal 'byor ma dang gsum du gsungs ste / don gyi rdo rje rnal 'byor ma ni / smra bsam brjod med shes rab pha rol phyin zhes brjod bya'i don ni / snang stong grags stong rig stong dbyer med pa sems nyid kyi bzhugs tshul te / yum chen mo shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin ma yang zer / gzhi yi gnas lugs phyag rgya chen po bya ba de yin / brda yi rdo rje rnal 'byor ma ni / a ni yig 'bru kun gyis mchog / lte ba'i dbus nas 'byung zhing 'phro / mkha' 'gro ma rnams dbang du bsod / rje btsun ma la phyag 'tshal bstod / ces brjod bya'i don ni / lte bar gtum mo a thung gi tshul du 'od kyi phung por bzhugs pa de yin / rdags gyi rdo rje rnal byor ma la yang gsum du gsungs / ste / chos sku ye shes kyi mkha' 'gro dang / longs sku ye shes kyi mkha' 'gro dang / sprul sku ye shes kyi mkha' 'gro dang gsum du gsungs pa ni / chos sku ye shes kyi mkha' 'gro ni / 'og min du rdo rje 'chang la sogs bde gshegs thams cad bskyed dang rol pa'i yum chen du bzhugs pa rnams yin / longs sku ye shes kyi mkha' 'gro ni / o rgyan dza len rdha ra dang yul nyi zhu rtsa bzhi gnas sum cu so gyis ni gtso mo'i tshul du bzhugs pa rnams yin / sprul sku ye shes kyi mkha' 'gro ni / sa stong sa bla sa 'og rnams su rigs drug gang la gang 'dul gyi rang rang gi gzugs su sprul nas rang rang gi skad kyi chos don pa dang / sems can gyi don la snyel ba med par gang la gang lul gyi tshul du bzhugs pa rnams yin / da lta sa stong 'di na sprul sku ye shes kyi mkha' 'gro'i nang nas yul 'dir sems can gyi don du / ye shes mkha' 'gro bsod nams dpal 'dren byon pa'i yul la mtshan gsol 'dam shod snol ma'i ljongs / yul lha khyad 'phags gnyen chen thang lha'i gzhol / gnas mal la bkra shis pa byang rgyab bya ba der / rigs bzang khrung btsun pha chen ldong gi rus / khyed par nang tshan snga ldong rigs / yab la mtshan gsol yon bdag sngo li bya / yum du gnas bzang chos mtsho bya ba dang / yab yum de gnyis bza' mir sprul pa'i sras / ming po gnyis sring mo gnyis dang bzhi /*

As is common for opening passages of Tibetan hagiographies, the authors of the text take great care to delineate a religious lineage for Sönam Peldren. This project—part map of a divine cosmos, part genealogy of a specific saint—is not just about tracing origins, however. Its greater import lies in the assertion of a specific worldview, replete with its own hierarchy, and then in locating its subject's pre-eminent place within the hierarchy of that world. One purpose of this opening passage is clearly to trace Sönam Peldren's ancestry. However, while the passage summarily provides a few facts about Sönam Peldren's human ancestry, noting her parents' names and claiming connections to the Dong (*ldong*) clan (one of the six original clans of Tibetan people descended from the mythical union of the monkey and the rock ogress),<sup>22</sup> Sönam Peldren's non-human lineage is delineated in far greater detail. According to this passage, while Sönam Peldren did have human parents, her "true" ancestry could be traced back through the three "bodies" (*sku*) of Dorjé Naljorma, and ultimately to the "Great Mother" emptiness itself, the source of all Buddhas, and a far more impressive ancestry to be sure.<sup>23</sup>

The opening passage of Sönam Peldren's biography is perhaps the text's most elaborate description of Sönam Peldren's relationship to a divine source via deity emanation; however, the biography's narrative voice emphatically echoes variations of the same theme throughout all sections of the biography. Many of these references to Sönam Peldren as an emanation take the form of brief verses of praise, such as hailing Sönam Peldren as "the *dākinī* who is the heart emanation of the Great Mother,"<sup>24</sup> "the supreme emanation form Sönam Peldren,"<sup>25</sup> and simply "the emanation called Sönam Peldren."<sup>26</sup> Other references to Sönam Peldren's origins mimic, in an abbreviated fashion, the sequential unfolding of emptiness into form

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<sup>22</sup> See Gyaltzen 1996: 77-79 and Kapstein 2006: 33-35 for further discussion of this origin myth and its significance for Tibetan clan affiliations.

<sup>23</sup> As noted above, it is not uncommon for the opening stanzas of Tibetan hagiographies to equate their subjects with Buddhist deities. However, the length and detail of the description of Sönam Peldren's divine source strike me as noteworthy, particularly in contrast to the absence in Rinchen Pel's biography of a comparably detailed discussion of divine lineage. I am currently translating Rinchen Pel's biography in order to more closely compare these two texts.

<sup>24</sup> *Bsod nams dpal 'dren rnam thar*, Manuscript B, folio 45a: *yun chen thugs las sprul pa'i dAk+ki*

<sup>25</sup> *Bsod nams dpal 'dren rnam thar*, Manuscript B, folio 165b: *sprul ba'i sku mchog bsod nams dpal 'dren*

<sup>26</sup> *Bsod nams dpal 'dren rnam thar*, Manuscript B, folio 80b: *sprul sku bsod nams dpal 'dren bya ba de*

found in the opening passage of the biography, such as the following verse of praise for Sönam Peldren:

The Truth Body is the Great Mother Perfection of Wisdom, the  
Enjoyment Body is Dorjé Phakmo, and the Emanation Body is  
Sönam Peldren...<sup>27</sup>

By describing the various stages of the unfolding of the “Great Mother” emptiness into form, and labeling Sönam Peldren as a deliberate emanation of emptiness, Dorjé Naljorma, or Dorjé Phakmo, the text’s authors take care to repeatedly assert Sönam Peldren’s ontological identity as an emanation body.

### 3. Sönam Peldren’s Voice: Speaking Her Identity

In addition to this narrative assertion of Sönam Peldren’s emanation body status, the biography contains several passages of lengthy first-person quotations, in which Sönam Peldren makes explicit assertions about being an emanation of a deity. One such passage appears in the biography’s “inner” section, “The Clairvoyance Cycle, [or] The Inner Biography Concerning the Nature of the Mind of the Wisdom Dākinī Sönam Peldren,”<sup>28</sup> which contains descriptions of the last year of Sönam Peldren’s life. In this passage, Sönam Peldren’s husband Rinchen Pel calls his wife a “demon” (*dre*) after she loses a ritual dagger (*phur bu*).<sup>29</sup> Sönam Peldren’s lengthy and revealing retort follows:

Again one day, [Sönam Peldren] lost a metal ritual dagger, and Rinchen Pel said, “You are like a demon, not knowing how to keep even a little thing.”<sup>30</sup>

Again the Dākinī said, “Even if you call me a demon, I am not. Say anything about me: each person will bear the burden of their own misdeed.”

<sup>27</sup> *Bsod nams dpal 'dren rnam thar*, Manuscript B, folio 80b: *chos sku yum chen shes rab phar phyin dang / longs sku rdo rje phag mo dang / sprul sku bsod nams dpal 'dren dang / Again, beyond occasional references to Rinchen Pel as “hero” (dpa' bo), such lengthy prefaces are lacking in Sönam Peldren’s husband’s biography.*

<sup>28</sup> *Bsod nams dpal 'dren rnam thar*, Manuscript B, folio 45a: *ye shes mkha' 'gro bsod nams dpal 'dren gyi thugs rgyud gshis kyi gnas lugs nang gi rnam thar mngon shes skor bzhugs*

<sup>29</sup> *Bsod nams dpal 'dren rnam thar*, Manuscript B, folios 49a.

<sup>30</sup> Tentative translation.

Again Rinchen Pel said, "Well, if you aren't a demon, are you a god?"

Again the *Ḍākinī* said,

"I am a god, I am a god, I am definitely a god.

Although you don't see me as a god, I am a god:

for just as the Buddha subdued *Māra*,

so am I a god who protects all afflicted sentient beings  
with great compassion.

When you see me as a god, I am definitely a god.

I am a god of a god.

I am a god, a heart-emanation of the great mother

Dorjé Phakmo, the highest sphere of the supreme  
secret mantra.

I sold the dagger as if it were a cheap pot.

Look all you want: it isn't here."<sup>31</sup>

In this passage, Sönam Peldren makes the claim that whether or not Rinchen Pel recognizes it, she, Sönam Peldren, is as an emanation of Dorjé Phakmo. The exact relationship between Sönam Peldren's selling the ritual implement "as if it were a cheap pot" and her assertion of internal divinity is somewhat unclear: it seems that Sönam Peldren treats a religious object irreverently so as to illustrate the point that external appearances (such as her own her appearance as an illiterate, nomadic woman) should also be treated lightly.

The passage's primary relevance, however, lies in Sönam Peldren's unequivocal assertion of her divine identity as a deity or god (*lha*).<sup>32</sup> While the biography's opening passage, quoted in the previous section of this paper, traces Sönam Peldren's roots to Dorjé Naljorma, here Sönam Peldren references instead Dorjé Phakmo, the "Vajra Sow," as the source of her identity. In some ways, of course, this is not surprising: scholars such as Elizabeth English have

<sup>31</sup> Last line, tentative translation. *Bsod nams dpal 'dren rnam thar*, Manuscript B, folios 50b-51a: *yang nyin gcig mi la blugs pa'i phur bu 'gar yar cig yod pa de / bor nas mi snang bas / rin chen dpal gyis / 'dre 'dra ba re byed nas se ra re yang nya ra mi shes bdo zhus pas / yang dAk+ki'i zhal nas / 'dre 'dra le zer ba yang min / nga la ci bzlas 'dra yang rang rang gi sgrib pa re khur ba yin gsungs pa las / yang rin chen dpal gyis / 'o na 'dre min na lha gcig e ma yin zhus pas / yang dAk+ki'i zhal nas / lha yin lha yin lha yin nges / khyed gyis lhar ma mthong yang lha yin te / sangs rgyas kyis bdud btul ji bzhin du / nyon mongs sems can thams cad kun / thugs rje chen pos skyobs pa'i lha / lha ru mthong na lha yin nges / lha yi nang gi yang lha yin / yang rtse gsang sngags mchog gi klong / yum chen rdo rje phag mo yin [possibly a scribal error for "yi"] / thugs kyi sprul pa'i lha yin no / phur bu blun po'i [likely blugs pa, as in first line] zangs chung*

<sup>32</sup> Please note that throughout this essay, I alternately translate the Tibetan word *lha* as "deity" and "god".

extensively explored Dorjé Phakmo's close relationship, often indistinguishably so, to the Dorjé Naljorma who features so prominently early in Sönam Peldren's biography.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, the wrathful Dorjé Phakmo is one of the preeminent female deities in the Tibetan Buddhist pantheon. The popularity of this Buddhist deity and her associated religious practices is such that the fifteenth-century historical survey the *Blue Annals* claims that "the majority of Tantric yogins in this Land of Snows were especially initiated and followed the exposition and meditative practice of the system known as Phag-mo gzhung-drug ['The Six Texts of [Dorjé] Phakmo']."<sup>34</sup>

What seems to be of significance here, then, is Sönam Peldren's insistence that she is more than what others perceive, even when those others are as familiar with her as her own husband. In this passage, and in others like it in the biography, Sönam Peldren bases her religious authority not on being a reincarnation of a previous human, nor on teachings received or realizations acquired through religious practice, but instead on the simple assertion that she is an eruption of the divine into this world. The boldness of Sönam Peldren's claim to divinity is exceeded only by the audacity of the manner in which she makes her assertion: in one short paragraph Sönam Peldren repeats, no fewer than eight times, the refrain, "I am a god" (*lha yin*).

#### 4. Sönam Peldren's Body: Being a God

The last example I present in which the Sönam Peldren biography uses the framing device of deity emanation to assert the religious pedigree of its subject is notable not just for its quotation of Sönam Peldren's speech, but also for its description of Sönam Peldren's physical actions. The passage in question also appears in the "inner" section of the biography:

One day, when [the nomad group] was staying on a sunny mountain range, the Ḍākinī discarded her top. When she got up she cut her thin belt and, discarding this, peeled off [her skirt.]

Rinchen Pel said, "All of your basic needs have been discarded: clothing, food, shoes, even your *rtsa re* [meaning unclear]. At the end you even undid your belt and cut it into a

<sup>33</sup> See English 2007 for a particularly thorough exploration of the deity. See also Allione 2000, 107-118; Willis 1987; Diemberger 2007.

<sup>34</sup> Roerich 1998, 390. This text is a meditation manual traditionally attributed to Lakṣmīnkārā, said to be the sister of king Indrabhūti and a teacher of Virūpa.

mere sliver. Now your entire body is uncovered and naked, [but] you don't even seem ashamed!"

The Dākinī replied:

"Severing the belt from the waist was severing the 'self' at the root.

Discarding clothing from my back was discarding the covering of the two [hindrances to meditation]: drowsiness and agitation.

Uncovering the naked body was uncovering naked awareness.

Displaying the vagina, the female sign, was presenting the basis of faith.

Singing this little song from my mouth is the dawning of realization in the mind.

Not engaging in religious practice is the shamelessness of experience and realization."<sup>35</sup>

This passage, and the actions it records, is intriguing on many levels. The notion of a woman stripping naked on a mountain range to demonstrate a religious teaching is distinctive. Moreover, the passage, like others in the biography, is notable for similarities to an episode in Milarepa's life story: not only does Sönam Peldren's seven-syllable verse mimic that of Milarepa, but the passage recalls the famous episode that appears in many biographies of Milarepa, in which the saint's clothes fall off his body during his practice of inner heat, after which he chastises his aunt and sister for feeling ashamed (*ngo tsha*) about his nakedness.<sup>36</sup>

While these similarities are intriguing, the image of Sönam Peldren standing naked and using her female body as a metaphor to illustrate tantric principles also calls to mind another image: that of a dancing, naked, and transgressive female tantric figure appearing at the center of her own maṅḍala, as is found in a variety of Tibetan

<sup>35</sup> Bsod nams dpal 'dren rnam thar, Manuscript B, folios 60b-61a: *yang nyin cig nyi rar bsdad nas yod tsa / dAk+ki se stod phud nas yod tsa / yar 'gro ba langs nas song ba'i dus su / ska rag phra mo cig yod pa de chad nas / gos de phud nas shus nas byung ba'i dus su / rin chen dpal gyis / rang la dgos pa'i gos zas lham rtsa re yang mi byed nas / tha ma rang ska rag tsam yang mi byed the gu ba dag tsam de chad nas thal / da kun lus gcer bur 'bud nas ngo yang tsha rgyu mi snang zhus pas / yang dAk+ki'i zhal nas / rked kyi ska rag chad pa de / nga bdag rtsad nas chad pa yin / rgyab nas gos kyang bud pa de / bying rgod gnyis kyi gos kyang bud pa min / lus po gcer bur bud pa de / rig pa gcer bur bud pa yin / mo rtags bHa ga bstan pa de / dad pa'i rten cig bzhag pa yin / kha nas glu chung len pa de / sems la rtogs pa shar ba yin / tshul chos spyod pa med pa de / snyoms rtogs ngo tsha med pa yin gsungs /*

<sup>36</sup> This episode appears in stories recounting the life of Milarepa as early as the twelfth century in Lama Zhang's "The Life of Milarepa" (Tib: *bla ma mi la ras pa'i rnam thar.*) See Quintman 2006, 96.

Buddhist visualizations and artistic representations. The Tibetan canon contains many ritual texts dedicated to Dorjé Naljorma and Dorjé Phakmo in particular. In her extensive work on the subject, English describes and interprets these images of the dancing, naked Dorjé Phakmo maṅḍalas:

Altogether, Vajravārāhī reveals her passionate and abandoned nature through her exultant nakedness, her blood-red color, and her hair, which flies loose in defiance of socio-sexual constraint.<sup>37</sup>

By stripping naked on a mountaintop and delivering a lecture to her husband about the principles of tantric Buddhism, it is possible that Sönam Peldren or her biographers consciously used her naked body to reference iconographic depictions of either *dākinīs* in general, or of Dorjé Phakmo and Dorjé Naljorma in particular.<sup>38</sup> In so doing, Sönam Peldren not only literally embodied the rhetoric of transgression found in tantric religious practices, but also used her body to mimic the visual, artistic representations of wrathful female deities like Dorjé Naljorma and Dorjé Phakmo in order to provide a particularly literal Tantric teaching of her own.

### *5. Conclusion*

In closing, I would like to raise a few questions about the significance of these claims. Namely, are declarations that a Tibetan woman was a deity emanation really all that noteworthy? Stated differently, is it remarkable that hagiographers use the conventions of their genre to claim divinity for their subject? Is it so significant that a Tibetan woman used her speech to verbally assert her identity as a deity, and her body to physically mimic artistic depictions of naked dancing female Buddhist icons? After all, isn't belief in the very possibility that the divine can manifest in human form what underlies the tulku institution that is the subject of this volume?

The answer to these questions is twofold. On the one hand, no, it is of course not uncommon for a Tibetan religious figure to be equated with one or another Buddhist deity, usually by his or her biographers or community of believers. In fact, by the reckonings of some reincarnation lineage genealogies that begin to appear in the

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<sup>37</sup> English 2002, 159.

<sup>38</sup> Thank you to David Germano for reading and discussing this passage of the biography with me.

late sixteenth or early seventeenth centuries, Sönam Peldren is an early incarnation of one of the most famous female tulku institutions in Tibet: the Samdhing Dorjé Phakmo, a reincarnation lineage that to this day invests its institutional power in a female tulku who is believed to be both an emanation of the deity Dorjé Phakmo, as well as the reincarnation of all the previous historical women who were emanations of that same deity. The Samdhing Dorjé Phakmo tulku institution's historical roots lie in the life of Chökyi Drönma (*chos skyid sgron ma*, 1442-1455/6), whose biography and history Diemberger translates and explores.<sup>39</sup> There is no evidence that Chökyi Drönma had any contact with or knowledge of Sönam Peldren; instead, Diemberger demonstrates that Chökyi Drönma masterfully drew on prevailing Tibetan beliefs in deity emanation, her royal family's extensive political ties, and her relationships with well-known religious teachers to establish both her own religious reputation and an enduring reincarnation institution.

A religious biography completed two years before the princess-turned-nun's death asserts that Chökyi Drönma's divine source allowed her to "choose" to take birth in a politically well-connected family. The text goes on to describe that Chökyi Drönma's true identity as Dorjé Phakmo was corroborated by many significant religious leaders of her day, including two with whom she shared close, public relationships: Bodong Choklé Namgyal (*bo dong phyogs las rnam rgyal*, 1376-1451)<sup>40</sup> and Thangtong Gyalpo (*thang stong rgyal po*, 1385-1464). The biography describes Chökyi Drönma's ordination ceremony, conducted by Bodong Choklé Namgyal himself; it names specific religious teachings and empowerments that he and other prominent teachers gave Chökyi Drönma over the course of her life, and describes their supervision over her meditation retreats.<sup>41</sup> The biography even includes a copy of a letter supposedly written by Thangtong Gyalpo and sent ahead of Chökyi Drönma on her journeys to "all the areas of the country, including the Four Horns of central Tibet, the three places called Chayul, Dakpo, and Kongpo, and the three places called Lokhathra, Minyak, and Churug Mon Atsara."<sup>42</sup> In this letter, Thangtong Gyalpo not only uses his personal influence and reputation to request "every local ruler in central Tibet" to "please welcome [Chökyi Drönma] and give her adequate support at her departure," but he even states explicitly that Chökyi Drönma's "secret name," or identity, is Dorjé Phakmo, echoing a sentiment that,

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<sup>39</sup> Diemberger 2007.

<sup>40</sup> See Maher 2017 in this special issue.

<sup>41</sup> Diemberger 2007, 173.

<sup>42</sup> Diemberger 2007, 222.

according to the biography, had been previously uttered by Bodong Choklé Namgyal early in his relationship with Chökyi Drönma.<sup>43</sup>

It is in these very details of Chökyi Drönma's remarkable life, however, that we find a second answer to questions about the significance of Sönam Peldren's claims to deity emanation status. For it is the extensive corroborating details that accompany Chökyi Drönma's biography's claims of its subject being a deity emanation that highlight just what is *missing* from Sönam Peldren's biography.

Compared to Chökyi Drönma's life of privilege and social embeddedness, Sönam Peldren's biography paints a portrait of a dramatically different kind of life. The biography's opening passage, quoted in full above, contains a brief reference to Sönam Peldren's ancestral ties to the Dong clan. Beyond this single remark, references to socially, politically, or religiously powerful institutions or people are strikingly absent from the biography. The biography does not contain a single discussion of Sönam Peldren receiving religious teachings or instructions at any point in her life, from either human or divine figures. In fact, the text does not contain a single description of Sönam Peldren's having relationships of substance with any religious teachers at all: the text features only passing references to Sönam Peldren encountering religious professionals that depict the exchanges as transactional and perfunctory in nature, and as not including any formal transmission of religious doctrine, lineage, or education.

In addition to this portrayal of a life lived far removed from the circles of religious power, practice, and influence, the text lacks descriptions of episodes in which Sönam Peldren's religious knowledge or claims of divinity are validated by other figures. Indeed, whereas Chökyi Drönma's biography is notable for its depiction of a life of privilege, power, and esteem, Sönam Peldren's life story is characterized by its extensive descriptions of the contempt and doubt that the subject inspired in her husband, family, and nomadic community with her religious claims of internal realization, her "ugly" body, and her female gender, not to mention her impertinence and lack of humility.<sup>44</sup> Reading these accusations, the reader is struck by how unusual it is that Sönam Peldren's unconventional persona provided the material for sainthood: not only does Sönam Peldren appear to have been an illiterate nomadic woman without any access to religious figures or teachings, but the most pervasive theme of Sönam Peldren's life story is the consistent

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<sup>43</sup> Diemberger 2007, 222.

<sup>44</sup> *Bsod nams dpal 'dren rnam thar*, Manuscript B, folio 60a: *ngan pa*.

doubt and sometimes contempt with which her family and peers met her claims and teachings.

The absence in the biography of references to contemporaries who conferred legitimacy upon Sönam Peldren's claims to divinity is distinctive. I suggest that what is unusual about the case of Sönam Peldren is not that she and her biographers draw on the hermeneutic of deity emanation, which as Wylie and van der Kuijp, as well many contributors to this volume, demonstrate is a practice with a long history in Tibetan culture, and one that seems to have predated Sönam Peldren by some centuries. Instead, I suggest that the biography of Sönam Peldren is unusual for its reliance on the hermeneutic of deity emanation to establish the religious pedigree of its subject, to the near-total exclusion of other means of religious legitimization. Whether it is hagiographical conventions tracing Sönam Peldren's source to a divine origin, or quotes of the saint herself verbally asserting her identity as Dorjé Phakmo, or descriptions of the saint's unusual physical miming of artistic representations of transgressive female deities, I suggest that what is striking about the biography of Sönam Peldren is its willingness to rely, at least rhetorically, solely on the hermeneutic of deity emanation to establish the religious legitimacy of its subject.

In this way, Sönam Peldren's biography seems to add a peculiar twist to van der Kuijp's observations about declarations of the deity emanation status of religious leaders observed in the Kakholma Testament and subsequent Tibetan religious institutions. Van der Kuijp describes deity emanation status as applied retroactively, in part as a means to lend a religious interpretation for the political and religious success of previous historical figures. In short, van der Kuijp observes that figures gained political, social, or religious success, and the hermeneutic of deity emanation was used post facto to both explain and reinforce that success. With Sönam Peldren, however, the reverse seems to have been true: throughout the life story of Sönam Peldren, the deity emanation hermeneutic was used not to explain the subject's religious, political, and social success. Instead, the struggle to attain such success seems to have been one of the defining aspects of the saint's life, and it was likely a force motivating the composition of her biography.<sup>45</sup> Instead, deity emanation functioned to both excuse and explain the subject's claims *despite* her lack of political, social, and, at least initially, religious success. In the case of Sönam Peldren's biography, it seems that deity emanation was an answer not to the question, "Who are you?" from faithful followers, but instead a rebuttal to the question, "Who do you think you are?"

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<sup>45</sup> See Bessenger 2010, Chapter Two, for further discussion.

from skeptics. With few other means of legitimation available to her and her biographers, it seems that Sönam Peldren's sainthood was crafted with the materials at hand: a narrative, a voice, a body, and a shared belief that the divine can manifest in this world, even in the unlikeliest of places.

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## Revival and Renewal through Reincarnation: The Bodong Tradition, Then and Now

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**I**t is frequently noted that Tibetans are fond of recounting the past, a notable contrast to India which has served as a model for Tibet in so many other ways. Autobiographical, biographical, and historical writings in Tibet come in many overlapping subgenres and are intended to fulfill a range of objectives. While a broad range of these materials mainly employ a rigorous historiographic methodology and provide detailed and highly reliable accounts of the past, there is also a contrary current of literature that appeals to miraculous events, magical acts, and stunning coincidences; sources will sometimes dip into the fantastic as a means of inculcating a sense of inexplicable wonder and inspiring the faithful. The incredible, the unbelievable, the narrative elements that strain objective reality are, ironically, felt to be the very things that are best able to verify the sacrality of religious figures, institutions, and the teachings they carry through time. Accounts of marvelous reincarnations are among the most prevalent and significant features of Tibetan narrative writing, legitimizing religious leaders and the teachings they convey.

While the notion that sentient beings reincarnate in different life forms is found throughout the Buddhist world, Tibetans are best known for developing this concept to include a complex of beliefs relating to the tulku, the reincarnation of a spiritually important person through a series of identifiable lifetimes. This brilliant social innovation has shaped Tibetan culture in diverse ways since it was introduced, as it has come to fulfill numerous cultural purposes, providing for, among other things, institutional continuity, a means of succession among celibate luminaries, a route to legitimacy, a token for various forms of identity, a method for inculcating faith, and a structural counterpoint to the concentration of wealth and power among the nobility. As this collection of papers demonstrates, the dynamism and versatility of the tulku institution has caused it to flourish and endure, and it has become so important to Tibetan

culture that it shows up as the solution to a broad array of problems confronted by Tibetan society. In this paper, I will show how the tulku institution has been deployed to animate a revival movement and to unify a community's collective resources and efforts to maintain their group identity in light of the pressures of occupation and exile.

The territory of the Porong (*spo rong*) kingdom is a high mountain region on the Tibetan Plateau, framed to the north by the Tsangpo River and to the south by the section of the Himalayan Mountains stretching from the Langtang Range to Mount Everest along the Nepali border, with the Pelkhyü Lake (*dpal khud mtsho*) and the border town of Kyirong (*skyid grong*) to the west, and the small city Lhatsé (*lha rtse*) to the east.

The Porong people claim a political identity based on the notion that their ancestral leaders descended from the Dong (*ldong*) clan, one of the six original clans of the ancient period. A fourteenth century scion of the family, Burwa, was an official in the service of Situ Chökyi Rinchen (d. 1402), the ruler of one of the fourteen myriarchies governed from Sakya.<sup>1</sup> Even as the political map was redrawn many times throughout the centuries, with a sequence of rulers assuming power over the area, the Porong people, living on the periphery of the Tibetan-speaking world, managed to maintain their self-perception of retaining a distinct character and identity as a semi-autonomous jurisdiction.<sup>2</sup>

At the same time, the people of Porong also configure their self-image through their participation in the religious history of Buddhism in Tibet. One of the sons of the lineage of ancient rulers is said to have been among the first seven ordained monks in Tibet in the eighth century. Likewise, the region played host to many of the consequential visitors who visited from beyond the Himalayas, including Padmsambhava in the eighth century and Atiśa (980-1054) in the eleventh century. And Porong figured in the transfer of knowledge from India to Tibet during the establishment of the Kadampa lineages that revived large scale monastic Buddhism.

### 1. *Bodong Pañchen Choklé Namgyal: The Pride of Porong*

The most significant contribution the Porong region made to the elaboration of Tibetan Buddhism is in the person of its favorite son,

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<sup>1</sup> Ramble 2002, 62-63.

<sup>2</sup> See Shakabpa 2010, chapter 5 and Dreyfus 2006 on the political background to the evolving alliances and patronage relationships during this period.

Bodong Paṅchen Choklé Namgyal (*bo dong paN chen phyogs las rnam rgyal*, 1375/6-1451), a fifteenth century spiritual savant and scholarly polymath, famous in western Tibet during his own lifetime and renowned throughout the Tibetan-speaking world subsequently. Among the most prolific authors in world history, Bodong Paṅchen composed treatises on all areas of Tibetan knowledge, focusing especially on tantra. His *Collected Works* is contained in 137 volumes and nearly a thousand distinct texts, and he reportedly kept as many as twenty scribes occupied at once as he simultaneously recited passages on distinct topics to each of them while circumambulating a stūpa. His scholarly production was said to flow like a river.<sup>3</sup>

Bodong Paṅchen became the twenty-third abbot of Bodong É Monastery, the most notable scholastic monastery in the local region during his time, and the already considerable reputation of Bodong É Monastery increased dramatically under his abbacy.<sup>4</sup> Eventually, the name of the monastery became synonymous with his intellectual and spiritual legacy. Initially, the influence of the Bodong tradition remained limited to the area around Lhatsé and Shigatsé in Tsang, the intellectual and spiritual center of the tradition, although it began to spread slowly into the Himalayan region to the south and southeast, in Nepal, and eventually to parts of what is now Arunachal Pradesh, in eastern India.

Articulating a strong link with Indic models of Buddhism, Bodong Paṅchen was an expert Sanskritist with strong links to India just as these qualities were on the decline in Tibet. He was deeply knowledgeable about all traditional branches of learning, including medicine, astrology, grammar, poetics, and all fields of Buddhist thought. He specialized, if such can be said of someone with such learning and diverse writings, in tantra. At the same time, he was said to be skilled in sports, as well.<sup>5</sup>

Bodong Paṅchen attracted a large following during his lifetime, including the famous female saint, Chökyi Drönma (*chos kyi sgron ma*, 1422-1455/6) whom he identified as an emanation of the deity Dorjé Phakmo (*Vajravārāhi*) and who is sometimes said to have been the origin of Tibet's first female tulku lineage.<sup>6</sup> Chökyi Drönma studied with Bodong Paṅchen during the final nine years of his life, and

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<sup>3</sup> For a partial Table of Contents to his work, see <http://mypage.direct.ca/w/wattj/txt/bodong-1.txt>. See also Rechung 1984 and Chok 2005, 120.

<sup>4</sup> Rechung 1984.

<sup>5</sup> Diemberger et al. 1997.

<sup>6</sup> Van der Kuijp 2005 identifies a previous case in Drowa Zangmo (*'gro ba bzang mo*, thirteenth century).

remained in the circle of his followers thereafter, taking a leadership role in compiling and editing his corpus of writings.<sup>7</sup>

However, after an initial period of flourishing, the active study of his intellectual tradition eventually began to decline and became dormant due to external causes. First of all, the rise of the Bodong tradition found itself in a competition for resources with the already emerging Geluk movement of Bodong's older contemporary, Tsongkhapa (*tsong kha pa*, 1357-1419), with which Bodong Pañchen was closely associated. Bodong was nineteen years younger than Tsongkhapa, and apparently never met him, but he is listed as a teacher to a few of Tsongkhapa's premier disciples, including the first Dalai Lama Gendundrup (*dge 'dun grub pa*, 1391-1474) and Khedrup Jé Gelek Palsang (*mkhas grub rje dge legs dpal bzang*, 1385-1438). The ideological harmony between the two lineages is also evident in the fact that much of Bodong's *Stages of the Path* text is liberally borrowed from Tsongkhapa's writings on the same theme.<sup>8</sup>

Also, during this time period, political power was drifting to the east. Increasingly, the religio-political story in central and western Tibet was configured in terms of the strengthening power of the Kagyü lineage headed by the Karmapa and his allies within the Rinpung leadership in Tsang as opposed to the Geluk lineage led by the Dalai Lama who were supported by patrons based in Lhasa. Also over the horizon, the influence of Mongol armies on the side of the Gelukpas centralized political and religious rule dramatically. Smaller and more decentralized lineages had little chance to prosper in this environment. For these reasons, serious study of the philosophical foundations of Bodong Pañchen's writings or the lineage he inaugurated withered over time, and patronage flowed to the more prominent players instead of the Bodongpas.

Already by the mid-seventeenth century, as decades of turmoil, war, and strife gave way to a new Geluk hegemony under the fifth Dalai Lama Ngawang Losang Gyatso (*ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho*, 1617-1682), a range of rival lineages were suppressed or suffered from a lack of patronage, and many religious institutions were converted to the Geluk curriculum. The Bodong lineage was a casualty of this kind, being largely proscribed due in part to an error prevalent among Geluk scholars—including the fifth Dalai Lama and his regent Desi Sangyé Gyatso (*sde srid sangs rgyas rgya mtsho*, 1653-1705)—that wrongly conflated the Bodong lineage with the Jonang lineage, which was much despised by the Gelukpas. This error, based on a confusion between the names of Jonang Choklé Namgyal (1306-

<sup>7</sup> Diemberger 2007. See also Bessenger 2017.

<sup>8</sup> Oral communication with Tenzin Tsepag, who is translating the Bodong text.

1386) and Bodong Choklé Namgyal, demonstrates that the Bodong tradition had already become dormant. Gene Smith suggests an ideological reason for the confiscation, noting that there were apparently no people around who could correct the mistaken supposition that Bodongpas advocated the other-emptiness (*gzhan stong*) view so reviled by Gelukpas.<sup>9</sup> As many as thirteen monasteries in Ü-Tsang following the Bodong curriculum were converted to Geluk monasteries. Charles Ramble posits an alternative theory based in political affiliations:<sup>10</sup>

The confiscation was the result of a dispute between an uncle and a nephew in the ruling Burwa clan. It is not clearly stated, but nevertheless implied, that while the uncle was a supporter of the Dalai Lama, the nephew was backing Tsang. The matter was resolved in the following generation. The new Jewön was apparently trusted by Lhasa—his elder brother had taken his vows in Drepung monastery from the Dalai Lama himself—and when he came of age the principality was returned to the Burwa family, together with all its subjects and religious and political institutions. The territorial boundaries of Porong were later reconfirmed in an edict issued in 1703 by the Sixth Dalai Lama.

Part of the intrigue of this period of Tibetan history is that the ideological and the political are deeply entangled.

According to the oral tradition, the Bodong master himself prophesied that his Bodong tradition would decline and be revived five centuries after his death by a future reincarnation from his spiritual lineage.<sup>11</sup> In recent decades, it would seem, that revival has commenced through the efforts of a group of people from the Bodong region of Tsang. It is to those events that we now turn.

## 2. *A Vulnerable Identity*

The border between Tibet and Nepal has always been porous, and a small but steady flow of pilgrims and traders have crossed back and forth through the network of mountain passes and herders' trails. With the arrival of the Chinese at the beginning of the 1950s, Porongwas, among many others along the borderlands, made skillful

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<sup>9</sup> Smith 2001, 180.

<sup>10</sup> Ramble 2002.

<sup>11</sup> Oral communication with Dawa Dhargye, the father of the tulku, Tenzin Thutop Jikdrel Rinpoché.

use of their location on the edge between two lands. Both material wealth and religious treasures were moved across the frontier for safe-keeping until it became clear how enduring the Chinese presence would become. Many times in the past, Mongol, Sikh, Gurkha, Ladakhi, or Chinese armies had passed through their territory on the way to conflicts with others, but they had not stayed long in the forbidding landscape. While the Porongwas waited on the edge of their seats, on the edge of their territory, to see what would happen next, they began to establish links to the growing numbers of Tibetans in Nepal, and contingency plans were developed.

In 1959, as word spread that the Dalai Lama had fled for exile in Tibet, tens of thousands of Tibetans gathered up their most sacred objects and slipped across the border into exile. These perilous journeys, well-attested in countless biographies by now, ranged from month-long treks to short hikes over the next hillside. Given their proximity to the border with Nepal and the relative absence of Chinese troops in the region, a comparatively large number of people from the Porong region were able to escape. A mule train was organized to carry texts to safety from the Bodong monastic libraries, including most notably the *Collected Works of Bodong Pañchen Choklé Namgyal*; however, some of the mules were captured by Chinese security forces at Kyirong, and the texts from those animals were placed in a temple that was used episodically in the following years as a storehouse and as a barn. Those texts were probably destroyed there in 1974. The surviving texts were deposited at Tibet House in Delhi.<sup>12</sup>

A large number of relics and religious treasures were also brought into exile by the people of Porong in the later 1950s and early 1960s, including a gilded clay image of Bodong Pañchen; declared to be a striking resemblance of the master, he fashioned it himself. A photograph of it figures prominently on the website of the Bodong Research Publication Centre.<sup>13</sup> While a number of other relics were lost in the confusing and inadequate effort to catalog sacred objects arriving in great numbers in Dharamsala, India—the center of the government-in-exile and the home of the Dalai Lama—this statue of the seated master was preserved in a community of exiled Porongwas that was forming in Nepal. The Porongwas, accustomed to the cool temperatures in Tibet, found the summer heat in Kathmandu to be oppressive, and so they established an annual migration pattern for themselves, spending the coolest months in

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<sup>12</sup> Oral communication with Dawa Dhargye.

<sup>13</sup> Bodong Research Publication Centre,  
[http://www.buddhistcharity.org/GesheInfo/bodong\\_org.pdf](http://www.buddhistcharity.org/GesheInfo/bodong_org.pdf).

Kathmandu and avoiding the summer heat by ascending to altitude in the Langtang Range on the northern edge of Nepal, just across the border from Porong. Out of devotion to the statue, they carried it with them as they ascended and descended throughout the year, despite its fragility, antiquity, and considerable size.

By the 1970s, the small community of exiled Porongwas in Nepal resolved that they must preserve the statue and revive the Bodong tradition, with the two projects seeming to be thoroughly intertwined. Some of them began to find some measure of financial success through the manufacture of carpets and other crafts, while other Porongwas ended up immigrating to Switzerland in significant numbers, gaining comparative prosperity and success. But despite being distributed through Switzerland, Nepal, and the Porong homeland, the regional identity among the Porongwas remained strong, and they maintained close contact with each other, enabling them to undertake collective action in service of reviving the tradition of Bodong Paṅchen.

In 1984 and 1985, Porongwas living in exile gathered together all of the sacred relics from their region and deposited them in one place, the home of a layman named Tashi Dorjé, just to the north of the Boudhanath Stūpa in Kathmandu. By 1989, they had managed to construct a small monastery to hold the artifacts, to house a few monks, and to serve as the locus of their ongoing efforts to promote the Porong identity and preserve the Bodong tradition. Although there were some monks from the Porong region, none of them was particularly learned in the Bodong tradition. At most, they knew a few prayers that had been written by Bodong Paṅchen. But the intellectual examination of the scholastic monk had truly become dormant.

Among the Porong laity living in exile, there was a great appetite to recover the Bodong tradition. Lay people felt it was necessary to remind the Tibetan world of the great importance of Bodong Paṅchen. But also, they felt driven to revive his memory as an expression of their regional identity. A general consensus emerged among Porongwas that they needed to work collectively to revitalize and renew the tradition.

### *3. Revival in Exile*

During the final decade of the twentieth century, with large numbers of Tibetans in exile in India, Europe, and elsewhere, a series of events unfolded that have indeed permitted a renewal of the Bodong tradition. The pivotal roles were played by two Tibetans born in the

region of Tsang near Bodong É Monastery, one of them a little-known monk by then living in Switzerland and the other a prominent monk living in Dharamsala, India. The Porong monk living in Switzerland, Tsering Damchoe, experienced a series of astounding dreams and visions in the 1990s that puzzled him at first, but eventually convinced him he would participate in reestablishing the Bodong tradition.<sup>14</sup>

The imagery in the dreams and visions was richly detailed, including the vision of a man riding a blue horse, blue lights, and other details, but he was uncertain as to how he should interpret these signs. Additionally, in the apparitions, Tsering Damchoe encountered a small boy who insisted that the monk identify his new incarnation. Knowing that it was said that Bodong Pañchen Choklé Namgyal himself would not reincarnate, having achieved enlightenment, Tsering Damchoe thought another Bodong lineage holder might be reborn again. However, for the years these visions endured, Tsering Damchoe could not understand what he was supposed to do in response to the vision child's insistent demands. There was not enough information for him to make any clear determination of how to respond, and out of humility, he also felt unqualified to serve in this capacity; usually great and exalted figures were charged with identifying reincarnations. What was a simple man of his standing supposed to do in this regard? Still the visions persisted, and he dutifully recorded them all.

In 1990, a health crisis resulted in a rush to the hospital for Tsering Damchoe, eventuating in his being declared dead in a Zurich hospital. In his process of dying, he had a vision in which he was slapped sharply across the face and told, "You are always bothering me." In the kind of narrative turn of events that often populates Tibetan stories of this kind, after Tsering Damchoe's corpse was removed to a morgue room in the hospital, his health improved. Some hours later, he was discovered sitting cross-legged on the metal gurney on which his previously dead body has been arranged; the shocked nurse went shrieking from the room to call for help.

After many more visions, finally, in 1996, he received a pivotal final dream in which the demanding boy said, "I am the one you are looking for." In the vision, the child then revealed a vision of his mother and his father. Immediately, Damchoe recognized a couple with whom he was acquainted from the Porong community; he knew

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<sup>14</sup> The following account is based on extensive in-person interviews with Geshé Pema Dorjee, the prominent monk in Dharamsala mentioned above; Dawa Dhargye, the father of the incarnation in Kathmandu, Nepal; and the dossier of information submitted to the Dalai Lama as the basis for the identification of the new incarnation, including the visions of Tsering Damchoe.

that they were then living among the Porong people that had gathered around the small monastery in Boudhanath, Nepal. Despite the time difference, he immediately called Kathmandu to speak to Dawa Dhargye, the father in the vision, asking him if he had a son. Upon hearing an affirmative reply from Dawa Dhargye, Tsering Damchoe responded, "He is my lama."

Dawa Dhargye was a successful carpet manufacturer who already had an acute interest in his Porong heritage and the Bodong tradition. He was stunned to think that his own son could be a prominent incarnation of the Bodong lineage, and that he might play a role in the revitalization that had long been a collective wish for the Porong people. As Tsering Damchoe explained his series of visions, Dawa was, however, circumspect about the impact this would have on his family. His son was his only male heir. If he became a monk, the family lineage would be severed.<sup>15</sup>

For a week, Dawa did not reveal the phone call he had received from Switzerland, as he reflected on the curious incidents he could recall from the past. His son had folded a cloth normally used for wrapping Tibetan manuscripts into the form of a paṇḍita's teaching hat. Even as a wee boy, he had taken a thread he found in the home, split it into eight strands, and solemnly dispensed it to family members, as a lama might do to transmit blessings.

When Dawa Dhargye finally resolved to tell his family about the news, his wife also exhibited mixed feelings about having their only son become a monk. A nun in the family was immediately overjoyed. A short time later, the family called a meeting of the senior people in the Porong families around Kathmandu so they could discuss the impact of the exciting new possibility. At once, people understood how significant this turn of events could be, but they understood the downside of what it could mean for the family. They remarked, "If you give up your son, great. But if not, what can we do?"

Finally, it was decided that the matter should be referred to the Dalai Lama for his determination. A complete record of Tsering Damchoe's visions was submitted to the Dalai Lama, and within two days, he had performed a divination that convinced him that the child in Nepal was the reincarnation, not of Bodong Paṅchen Choklé Namgyal, but rather of Bodong Paṅchen's most prominent teacher, Paṅchen Sonam Gyeltsen (*paṅ chen bsod nams rgyal mtshan*, b. fourteenth century). The Dalai Lama issued a letter confirming the identification.

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<sup>15</sup> He remembered how anxious he had been to have a son, and how he had appealed to a lama, Penpa Geshé, requesting spiritual assistance in gaining a son. As is customary, the lama prescribed a series of religious activities, and in due time, the boy was born.

In a 1996 letter written by Tsering Damchoe to the Porong community, he made the case that the discovery of an incarnation would be a rare and precious opportunity to accelerate the revitalization of the Bodong tradition. He beseeched his fellow Porongwas to accept the incarnation, writing:<sup>16</sup>

Today we are in an auspicious situation: at the same time as a Bodong monastery has been built, there is a young incarnation of an exalted Bodong lama, through the blessings of our lamas and dharma protectors. This is glorious and marvelous. If we fail to make use of this opportunity to preserve the Bodong tradition, it would be like letting the precious jewel slip out of our hands. This occurred in the past, and if we are not careful, we could once make the same mistake. Through the blessings of our lamas and Dharma protectors, Bodong Lama Sonam Gyaltzen has come, and this is our great responsibility. The prophecies make me feel one hundred percent confident that if we take good care of this lama, give him the best education, and bring him up in the way he deserves, the tradition of Bodong Choklé Namgyal will flourish again as it did in centuries past. However, if we do not recognize this lama today, it would present difficulties for such lamas to return often in future. In that case, I doubt if the Bodong tradition would thrive.

Both the community and the family embraced the five-year-old child as the real tulku, and when the Dalai Lama confirmed the identification, community members felt the fate of their religious and regional identity had pivoted.

The father of the tulku, Dawa Dhargye, in particular, came to embrace the new reality implied by his son's identification. Already active in the community, he assigned himself the role of becoming the community's memory. He interviewed most of the elders from the community, compiling a thick narrative of Porong history, the oral history of the exile community from Porong, and the textual evidence from the past. Much of what I have learned about these events springs from interviews with Dawa Dhargye and from the two Tibetan-language volumes he has written collecting together the history of the Bodong lineage and especially the Porong community.<sup>17</sup> He has even managed to visit Porong communities within Tibet

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<sup>16</sup> Dawa Dhargye provided me a copy of the letter as part of the dossier of information about the case.

<sup>17</sup> Dhargye 2009.

while in disguise to learn more about the region's history and to provide assistance to the people who remain there.

His son, Tenzin Thutop Jikdrel Rinpoché (b. 1992), was enthroned at Porong Pemo Chöding Monastery in Kathmandu in April 10, 1997. He later moved to a newer monastery nearby in 2005, and he now studies at Sera Jé Monastery in Bylakuppe in South India. The pivotal event of the identification of this tulku enlivened the interest of monks and lay people from the Porong area of Tibet, both those in Tibet and those in exile, stimulating the founding of new institutions, the patronage of monasteries and nunneries, the collection of significant Bodong-related artifacts and texts, and the enrollment of scores of young novice monks and nuns from Bodong-connected families.

#### *4. Rebuilding the Bodong Monastery*

Much of the rest of what I have learned about these events comes from a series of interviews I conducted with the monk Geshé Pema Dorjee in 2011 and 2012. Back in 1998, when Tsering Damchoe received a visit in Switzerland from Geshé Pema Dorjee, Tsering Damchoe implored him to take on the task of reviving the Bodong tradition. Geshé Pema Dorjee is a Geluk scholar who the Dalai Lama had previously appointed to various prominent administrative posts in the Tibetan government-in-exile in India, including principal of the large campus of the Tibetan Children's Village in Dharamsala, director of the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics (IBD), and founding director of the Sarah campus of IBD. He was initially resistant to the idea of participating in the renewal of the Bodong tradition about which he knew little. His only real qualification, he thought, was that he too was from the Porong region. One could add his widely respected administrative abilities and his institutional experience.

However, Tsering Damchoe was insistent, and so Geshé Pema Dorjee offered to develop a plan through which such a renewal might be realized. When Pema Dorjee presented his proposal to the Dalai Lama, the latter requested that he take on the leadership of the initiative. The Dalai Lama, aside from wishing to see all lineages prosper, took a special interest in the Bodong tradition because the first Dalai Lama had studied it as a direct discipline of Bodong Pañchen Choklé Namgyal.

Among Pema Dorjee's first acts was the founding of a special research institute, the Bodong Research and Publication Centre, to edit and publish key Bodong literature. Talented young scholars were hired, including Chok Tenzin Monlam, a student of Geshé Pema

Dorjee, who had studied at the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics and received his Ph.D. from the University of Delhi with his dissertation on the *Feast of Marvels*, a biography of Bodong Pañchen Choklé Namgyal. Chok Tenzin Monlam went on to serve as the head of research at the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives and also as research scholar at the Bodong Research and Publication Centre. Geshé Pema Dorjee traveled across the world seeking sponsors for various aspects of the work, a natural talent that had animated his earlier administrative assignments.

A broad range of Bodong-related textual material was gathered for study, and Geshé Pema Dorjee also oversaw the development of a formal monastic curriculum drawn from Bodong Pañchen's writings. The Centre has published a series of key critically edited texts from the Bodong canon, including standard philosophical works, rituals, prayers, songs, etc. Researchers have especially sought out texts that were not originally included in Bodong's *Collected Works*. In an ongoing project, he has sought out living transmission lineages (*lung*) for as many Bodong teachings as possible.

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, narratives that are intended to inculcate faith and confidence in a sacred community frequently highlight the incredible. The account of Tsering Damchoe's death in the hospital and his subsequent improvement certainly falls into this category. The participants in the revitalization of the Bodong tradition like to narrate the various coincidences that have marked the process. In another such example, Geshé Pema Dorjee found himself at Tibet House in Delhi doing some research in the archival records relating to Bodong Choklé Namgyal when the librarian mentioned how surprised he was that although few people ever consulted that particular body of literature, there was at that moment another figure in the library who was also researching Bodong Choklé Namgyal. This other person was an Indian from Lumla, Anurachal Pradesh, a remote area twenty miles to the east of Bhutan and 40 miles to the south of the Tibetan border. The area has long been under the influence of Tibetan religion and culture, although the people themselves are not Tibetan. The visitor from Lumla, whose name is unfortunately not known to me, was overseeing a small revitalization effort himself. In his very poor area of India, people became interested in rebuilding their Buddhist heritage. They were also interested in developing educational and medical infrastructure that would help to improve their lives. As part of their effort to improve their community, they decided that they should try to find a way to send some of their children to Buddhist monasteries and nunneries throughout the Himalayan region.

Since in the distant past the region has been religiously affiliated with the Bodong tradition, the delegate from Lumla had gone to Tibet House in Delhi to attempt to learn more about Bodong and what remained of the religious tradition that sprang from him. The librarian at Tibet House was surprised that two people with no other connection were sitting across the library from each other, requesting Bodong sources. When the librarian introduced them, a natural alliance formed. As Geshé Pema Dorjee describes the meeting, "We had a monastery without many monks, and they had potential monks without any monastery."

In the following years, a few dozen boys from the Lumla area were established as novice monks at the Porong Pemo Chöding Monastery in Kathmandu. At the same time, four bright young monks were sent from Kathmandu to the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics in McLeod Ganj, where they learned debate, gained an overview of the standard Geluk model of Buddhist scholastic education, and began their study of Bodong's writings. After several years, these young men were able to return to Kathmandu to take on responsibilities for teaching the youth from Lumla. One of them, a young man named Trinlé, with a sparkling intelligence and an appetite for European philosophy, now manages the monastery.

Even as he raised money for the research institute in India and the monastery in Kathmandu, Geshé Pema Dorjee raised large sums of money and ongoing support from donors in Europe, Israel, and the United States to build both a nunnery and a small clinic in the Lumla region of Anurachal Pradesh, fortifying the religious connection between the Porong people, the Bodong tradition, and the Indians in that remote area. A symbiotic relationship seems to have emerged. The poor people of Lumla are benefitting by an influx of resources, medical attention, educational opportunities for their children, and a renewed religious identity. The Porong community, intent on revitalizing the religious tradition of their most significant regional figure, Bodong Choklé Namgyal, benefit by having a population of monks and nuns to continue the tradition, populate their institutions, and serve the new tulku.

When spending time with Geshé Pema Dorjee, his mobile phone rings frequently, and his contacts are sprinkled around the world. Patrons in Sweden visit India and Nepal often and support his various endeavors, sponsoring young monks and nuns from Lumla and visiting the health clinic in Anurachal Pradesh to check on progress. Partners in Israel and the United States call to visit and to hear updates on some project of common interest. He relishes putting people with common interests in contact with one another and arranging for meetings. And all of those interested in the interrelated

projects that occupy him can follow the details on his Facebook page, the Facebook page devoted to Porong Monastery in Kathmandu, or a Blogspot archive maintained since 2008 by Geshéla's supporters in Sweden.

While the revival of the Bodong tradition that has taken place thus far would not have been possible without Geshé Pema Dorjee's energy, enthusiasm, and organizational talents, it would appear that his own involvement would not have been triggered were it not for the events that eventuated in the identification of a new tulku capable of linking the contemporary crisis of exile and the quest for renewal with those ancient and now dormant roots of Porong self-image. Among the many functions the tulku institution has served through time, the revival of a community's identity is among them.

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## Recounting the Fifth Dalai Lama's Rebirth Lineage

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Faced with something immensely large or unknown, of which we still do not know enough or of which we shall never know, the author proposes a list as a specimen, example, or indication, leaving the reader to imagine the rest.

—Umberto Eco, *The Infinity of Lists*<sup>2</sup>

**I**ncarnation lineages naming the past lives of eminent lamas have circulated since the twelfth century, that is, roughly around the same time that the practice of identifying reincarnating Tibetan lamas, or tulkus (*sprul sku*), began.<sup>3</sup> From the twelfth through eighteenth centuries it appears that incarnation or rebirth lineages (*sku phreng*, *'khrungs rabs*, etc.) of eminent lamas rarely exceeded twenty members as presented in such sources as their auto/biographies, supplication prayers, and portraits; Dölpopa Sherab Gyeltsen (Dol po pa Shes rab rgyal mtshan, 1292–1361), one such exception, had thirty-two. Among other eminent lamas who traced their previous lives to the distant Indic past, the lineages of Nyangrel Nyima Özer (Nyang ral Nyi ma 'od zer, 1124–1192) had up

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<sup>2</sup> Eco 2009, 49.

<sup>3</sup> In addition to early Bka' gdams pa examples noted by Leonard van der Kuijp, José Cabezón has found anecdotes of Bka' brgyud and Zhi byed identifications from roughly the same period, reportedly from the first half of the twelfth century. Cabezón has further traced the earliest datable incarnation lineage yet found to an autobiographical work of the Bka' brgyud master Nyag se Rin chen rgyal mtshan (1141–1201). van der Kuijp 2005, 28–29; Cabezón 2017, 4–6, 14–16.

to seventeen; those of Pañchen Lobzang Pelden Yeshé (Pañ chen Blo bzang dpal ldan ye shes, 1738–1780), up to twenty including his emanational source Amitābha; that of the Zhamar (Zhwa dmar) tulku lineage, ten as recorded in the fifteenth-century *Blue Annals*, adding up to sixteen by the end of the eighteenth century.<sup>4</sup> By comparison the fully elaborated rebirth lineage of the Fifth Dalai Lama Ngawang Lobzang Gyatso (Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho, 1617–1682) identified seventy-eight members near the end of his lifetime (Appendix A, middle and right columns). What could explain such an extraordinarily abundant lineage? And, as Umberto Eco encourages us to ask, what does it invite us to imagine?

In this article I argue that lengthy rebirth lineages of the Fifth Dalai Lama articulated and promoted two complementary projects of the Ganden Podrang (Dga' ldan pho brang) court. One was an aesthetic associated with the phrase *sizhi püntsok* (*srid zhi'i phun tshogs*), which may be translated as “existence and peace replete” or “all the marvels of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*.” This aesthetic of abundance embraced and celebrated material wealth, variety, numerousness, and a vision of inclusiveness as the ethos of the court. It also supported a second project: a fresh paradigm of kingly rule and legitimacy based on embodied qualities expressed through the Dalai Lama's rebirth lineage. While they strove to refashion religio-political discourses and practices in the seventeenth century and beyond, these projects had their limits amidst bitter sectarian and regional conflicts. Nevertheless, the legacy of the Great Fifth's rebirth lineages extended well beyond his court, impacting the subsequent formation of Gelukpa incarnation lineages across Asia.

I begin by analyzing two large lineages, a lineage of fifty-eight members painted in the Red Palace of the Potala as well as a lineage of seventy-eight members produced through a supplication prayer, thangka paintings (*thang ka*), and biographical writing. Completed near the end of the Fifth Dalai Lama's life, these were preceded by several earlier, shorter rebirth lineages. I sort out and compare these various versions in order to uncover the process of expanding his rebirth lineage and the implications for Tibetan kingship that they entailed. Next, I explore how the multisensory environments of rebirth lineage productions—poetry, painting, and recitation—cultivated a paradigm of Buddhist kingship through the aesthetics of abundance and the dynamics of prayer. Finally, I consider the impact of the Fifth Dalai Lama's rebirth lineages and circle back to the questions of listmaking and numerality.

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<sup>4</sup> Hirshberg 2016, 55–84; Cabezón 2017, 16; 'Gos Lo tsā ba 1979 (1949), 520–32, 540–45, 546–552.

The court of the “Great Fifth”—as Ngawang Lobzang Gyatso widely became known—is credited not only with unifying Tibet politically, but with making a lasting impact on major aspects of Tibetan religious and cultural traditions. Their grand achievements include the architecture and art of the Potala Palace along with substantial expansion of the Jokhang Temple complex in Lhasa; the institution of major annual festivals, especially focused on Lunar New Year; and the compilation and dissemination of systematic writings in the recognized “fields of learning” (*rig gnas*, Skt. *vidyāsthāna*): Buddhist doctrine, ritual, and history, as well as other fields such as poetics, medicine, and astrology. The literary and artistic production of the Fifth Dalai Lama's rebirth lineages must thus be understood as one particular area among an array of culture-making projects.<sup>5</sup> Although it is well beyond the scope of this essay to analyze the full range of the Ganden Podrang's activities, in future publications I intend to address further aspects of cultural production by the Fifth Dalai's court.

### 1. Wondrous Plenitude

“Existence and Peace Replete” (*srid zhi'i phun tshogs*) is the resplendent name that was bestowed on the main assembly hall of the Red Palace in the Potala, which was completed in 1694 and also called the western grand hall (*tshoms chen nub*) to distinguish it from the eastern grand hall (*tshoms chen shar*) of the White Palace completed in 1648.<sup>6</sup> Anyone who has entered this space is immediately struck by its imposing scale and majestic grandeur. With eight tall pillars and thirty-six shorter pillars, it has an estimated area of 370 square meters, and a height exceeding six meters (Fig. 1).<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> For an excellent overview of the Fifth Dalai Lama and previous scholarship on his history and cultural achievements, see Schaeffer 2005, especially 280n1.

<sup>6</sup> Some recent publications also refer to the eastern grand hall in the White Palace by the name *srid zhi'i phun tshogs*, but it is unclear to me when or how this latter usage began to circulate. Materials attributed to the Fifth Dalai Lama that I have read simply refer to it as the “grand hall” (*tshoms chen*), the “grand hall of Potala Palace,” (*pho brang po ta la'i tshoms chen*), or some variant thereof. In Sde srid Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho's supplement to the Fifth's autobiography, we find multiple references to the Red Palace's grand hall with this particular name, e.g. “the new grand hall Existence and Peace Replete” (*tshoms chen gsar pa srid zhi'i phun tshogs*). In any case, I would concur that many visual elements I associate with the aesthetic of *srid zhi'i phun tshogs* are also found in the White Palace's grand hall, albeit in earlier stylistic forms. Sde srid Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho, *Supplement to Fine Silken Dress*, vol. 6, 135b3=270.3.

<sup>7</sup> Phun tshogs tshe brtan 2000, 263. For additional images of this hall see Jiang Huaiying 1996, vol. 2, Pls. 146–165; Phun tshogs tshe brtan 2000, 84–102.

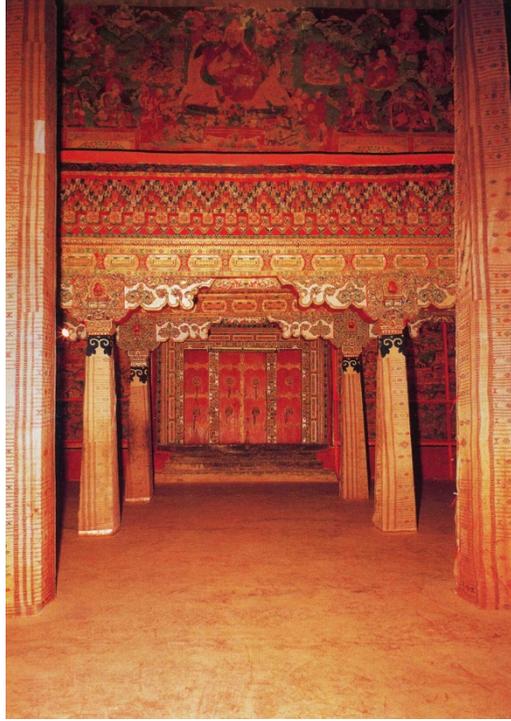


Fig. 1. “Existence and Peace Replete” grand hall, Red Palace, Potala, Lhasa, completed 1694.  
(After Phuntsok Namgyal 2002, 124. By permission of Homa & Sekey Books, [www.homabooks.com](http://www.homabooks.com))

The wall painting program features Dalai Lama rebirth lineage portraits and narrative scenes from the Great Fifth’s life. While the paintings have undergone restoration—as have the paintings in the Eastern Great Hall—elements of the original design may still be discerned in consultation with textual sources.

On the ground level are portraits of principal lineage figures (Fig. 2) accompanied by smaller figures and narrative scenes of the Fifth Dalai Lama’s life, which also serve as visual transitions between the iconic figures (Figs. 1, 3). It begins on the north side of the west wall with the buddha Ödzé Yeshétok (‘Od mdzad ye shes tog, Skt. \*Prabhākarajñānaketu), in whose presence the bodhisattva Chenrezik (Spyan ras gzig, Skt. Avalokiteśvara) is said to have generated the aspiration for supreme awakening 991 eons (*skal pa*, Skt. *kalpa*) ago.<sup>8</sup> According to the catalog of the Great Fifth’s funerary *stūpa* and other contents of the Red Palace by Desi Sanggyé Gyatso (Sde srid Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho, 1653–1705), the remaining procession of figures as the viewer circumambulates clockwise around the hall are the

<sup>8</sup> Sde srid Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho, *Supplement to Fine Silken Dress*, vol. 4, 14a2=31.2.

buddha Öpakmé (Skt. Amitābha) followed by Chenrezik on the north wall; the Tibetan imperial kings Songtsen Gampo and Trisong Detsen (Fig. 2), along with the Indic king Könchok Bang (Dkon mchog 'bangs) on the east wall; the Indic prince Depa Tenpa (Dad pa brtan pa) and the Nyingma (Rnying ma) treasure revealer Nyangrel Nyima Özer on the south wall; and the First Dalai Lama Gendün Drub (Dge 'dun grub) on the west wall.<sup>9</sup> Apart from the two buddhas who are biographically linked with Chenrezik, the remaining figures are all members of the Dalai Lama's rebirth lineage, that is, his emanational source (Chenrezik) and preincarnations. The lineage portraits are larger than life, with seated figures at a height of 1.5 meters and the



Fig. 2. Emperor Trisong Detsen, from a series of Fifth Dalai Lama rebirth lineage wall paintings. "Existence and Peace Replete" grand hall, Red Palace, Potala, Lhasa, 1690–1694. (After Henss 2014, vol. 1, fig. 161. Photo 1981 by permission of author.)

<sup>9</sup> As most of the assembly hall was not accessible for study at the time research was conducted, I was able to make only limited observations at considerable distance from the wall paintings. The description in Sde srid Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho's catalog of the Fifth Dalai Lama's funerary *stūpa* is partly reproduced in Phun tshogs tshe brtan's book on Potala murals, and generally agrees with a modern Tibetan-language guide to the Potala; it differs somewhat from Samten Karmay's description of the principal figures based on observations made in 1995. The iconic portrait of Dad pa brtan pa appears to have been replaced by one of 'Brom ston. Sde srid Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho, *Sole Ornament*, vol. 1, 285a3–285b5=579.3–580.5; Phun tshogs tshe brtan 2000, 263–271; Karmay 2005, vol. 2, 109–118; Ljongs rig dngos do dam u yon lhan khang 2007 (1987), 54–55.

standing Chenrezik at a height of two meters.<sup>10</sup> The Desi's catalog continues by listing fifty-seven members of the Dalai Lama's rebirth lineage painted on the walls above the balustrade (*seng g.yab*), beginning with the Fifth Dalai Lama (Fig. 1).<sup>11</sup> Except for Chenrezik, all of the Dalai Lama rebirth lineage members portrayed on the main walls reappear as portrait subjects on the walls above the balustrade, as documented in the left column of Appendix A. This brings the total number of Dalai Lama rebirth lineage members portrayed in the grand hall to fifty-eight.



Fig. 3. The Fifth Dalai Lama meets the Shunzhi emperor. Detail of wall paintings. "Existence and Peace Replete" grand hall, Red Palace, Potala, Lhasa, 1690–1694.

(After Phuntsok Namgyal 2002, 125. By permission of Homa & Sekey Books, [www.homabooks.com](http://www.homabooks.com))

<sup>10</sup> Measurements are provided for all current lineage portraits except that of the First Dalai Lama. Jiang Huaiying et al. 1996, vol. 2, 536–37.

<sup>11</sup> Sde srid Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho, *Sole Ornament*, vol. 1, 285b5–286b4=580.5–582.4.

If the titular phrase “existence and peace replete” signified the wondrous plenitude of *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, then the Red Palace's grand hall simulated that glorious reality in three-dimensional space, and asserted that the Dalai Lama's rebirth lineage was integral to its expression. From all sides and from above, the viewer's gaze was returned by enlightened beings in their buddha and bodhisattva forms, powerful kings and noble princes, venerated and charismatic scholars and adepts. The New Menri (*sman ris gsar pa*) style pioneered by Tsangpa Chöying Gyatso (Gtsang pa Chos dbyings rgya mtsho) was well suited to depicting the array of cosmic and worldly beings in myriad settings, with its vivid use of color, lively postures and facial expressions, dynamically flowing robes, and finely detailed ornamentation (Figs. 2, 3).<sup>12</sup> The aesthetic of extravagant adornment extended to—and was intensified by—other surfaces and objects such as the carved and brightly painted pillar brackets, frames, and balustrade; richly brocaded hangings; the draped and cushioned high throne; and other furnishings that were in use by the Ganden Podrang court (Fig. 1). Populated by the Ganden Podrang court and its visitors, resounding with ritual instruments and human voices, the multisensory effect would have been complete. We might echo a line from the Fifth Dalai Lama's Sukhāvati prayer that asks, after describing its array of wonders, “Is everything in existence and peace replete heaped in a mass in this place?”<sup>13</sup>

Amidst this overwhelming environment several themes emerge in the key of abundance. First, material wealth is celebrated through the radical ornateness of the grand hall itself, where hardly a surface is left unembellished from its finely carved and painted architectural details to the gold-embroidered brocades. It is further mirrored in the wall paintings, with their unabashed depiction of the riches of cosmic buddhas and bodhisattvas along with that of earthly kings through details such as the layering of intricately patterned robes and the jewelled garlands and pendants bedecking the palaces of Amitābha, eleven-headed Chenrezik, and the Shunzhi emperor alike (Figs. 2, 3). Prosperity, the space suggests, is not to be abandoned along with *samsāra* but enjoyed and shared even by those who have reached the summit of spiritual practice. Second, the aesthetic of “existence and peace replete” entails salutary and delightful variety, expressed

<sup>12</sup> Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho, *Fine Silken Dress*, 286. The 1648 wall paintings in the White Palace's grand hall—executed under the chief artistry of Gtsang pa Chos dbyings rgya mtsho—exhibit greater dynamism, whimsy, and subtlety than their 1694 Red Palace counterparts. Nevertheless, the Red Palace wall paintings retain basic elements of the New Sman ris style.

<sup>13</sup> Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho 1991–95, *Collected Works*, vol. 16, 192a1=389.1.

through the different bodies inhabited by Chenrezik through time and space as the Dalai Lama lineage, the alternating of built and natural environments (Figs. 2, 3), along with the diverse appearances and activities of all sorts of beings in worlds both earthly and celestial. Third, the quality of sheer numerousness is striking: buildings and landscapes teem with people, the sheer number of scenes defy mental grasp, while the fifty-eight portraits of Dalai Lama lineage figures—six of them repeated—permeate one's awareness from every angle.<sup>14</sup> It was not expected that any viewer could identify and name all fifty-eight iterations, or even that she could see all of them clearly. Rather, what mattered was the recognition that these portraits were all precious bodies of Chenrezik *qua* Dalai Lamas, and that there were so very many of them, more than most people could name or imagine.<sup>15</sup>

A lineage of fifty-eight figures might seem like plenty to accomplish the Ganden Podrang court's vision of abundance, filling as enormous a space as the Red Palace's grand hall. More than a decade earlier, however, an even larger lineage had already been conceived and executed in poetic prayer and in painting. *Yangchen's Lute* (Dbyangs can rgyud mang ma), a lengthy supplication prayer to the Dalai Lama lineage, is preserved in the Fifth Dalai Lama's extensive catalog of "support" objects instantiating liberated body, speech, and mind (*sku gsung thugs rten*).<sup>16</sup> According to the colophon, it was composed by the Fifth Dalai Lama and scribed by Targyépa Lobzang Wangpo (Mthar rgyas pa Blo bzang dbang po). Although the text itself lacks a title in the catalog, Desi Sanggyé Gyatso's biographical supplement to the Fifth Dalai Lama's autobiography and diaries, *Fine Silken Dress* (Du kū la'i gos bzang), briefly mentions an extensive supplication prayer to the Dalai Lama lineage, titled *Yangchen's Lute* and composed by the Great Fifth himself.<sup>17</sup> "Yangchen's lute" are the opening words of the text in question, in honor of the goddess of music, poetry, and learning, also known by her Sanskrit name Sarasvatī. The main text is composed entirely in verse. After the Fifth Dalai Lama, who is treated as the first lineage member, each member of the rebirth lineage is marked in the text

<sup>14</sup> Phun tshogs tshe brtan assesses the number of wall painting sections at a total of 2,251. Phun tshogs tshe brtan 2000, 263.

<sup>15</sup> My analysis about recognizing the group as a whole rather than each and every single individual is inspired by the argument Rob Linrothe has made about the eighty-four *mahāsiddhas*—another large group—painted on the colossal Mañjuśrī's *dhotī* in the Alchi Sumtsek. However, the emphasis on numerousness is my own. Linrothe 2001.

<sup>16</sup> Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho, *Yangchen's Lute*, 99b–107b=200–216.

<sup>17</sup> Sde srid Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho, *Supplement to Fine Silken Dress*, vol. 4, 136b2=278.2.

with a numerical annotation (Appendix A, middle column). Each figure is supplicated with a single stanza except for the Great Fifth and Chenrezik, who are each praised and supplicated with multiple stanzas. Including the versified conclusion there are a total of ninety-six stanzas; together with the prose colophon and embedded notes, the text runs a length of eight and a half folios with six lines per side.

*Yangchen's Lute* was produced in coordination with a set of sixty-five thangka scroll paintings illustrating the Fifth Dalai Lama's rebirth lineage, called *Array of Avadānas* (Rtogs brjod kyi zhing bkod). The thangkas were sponsored by Desi Sanggyé Gyatso. Work on this large-scale visual production, which began in the Iron-Monkey year of 1680, was completed the following year. The text of *Yangchen's Lute* was likely completed shortly before or in concert with the painting work; the colophon states that it was recited while seed syllables were being written on the backs of the paintings as part of the consecration ritual.<sup>18</sup>

Although the thangkas themselves are not known to be extant, a number of details are known, including the identity of the head painter, Gönpö Tsering from Mentang (Sman thang nas Mgon po tshe ring)—that is, as a painter of the New Menri style.<sup>19</sup> The Desi describes in sumptuous detail the materials he sponsored for making these lineage thangkas in full color, including “cotton cloth as thin as an eggshell” as the support for the painted area; approximately an ounce of “cold gold” (*grang gser*), along with colors “in abundance” such as azurite, malachite, orpiment, and indigo pigments; green “old *khati* (*kha thi*)” silk brocade for the fabric border (*gong gsham*)—ranked first among textiles in the Fifth Dalai Lama's autobiography, likely in part for its antique status;<sup>20</sup> red and yellow *khati* for the narrow borders (*'ja'*) framing the painting; embroidered Chinese *dingpön* (*ding phon*) satin for the brocade patch (*mthongs 'jug*) on the central thangka in the set; “Mongolian satin” with phoenix and dragon figures on a red background of dragons and clouds for the brocade patches on the remaining thangkas; and not one but two layers of dust covers (*zhal khebs*) made of two different kinds of silk.<sup>21</sup> All told, the Desi reports, the value of the materials for the sixty-five thangkas was 464.625 *sang* (*srang*) of silver (approaching ten pounds

<sup>18</sup> Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho, *Yangchen's Lute*, 107b1=216.1.

<sup>19</sup> Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho, *Yangchen's Lute*, 107b2=216.2.

<sup>20</sup> Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho, *Fine Silken Dress*, vol. 3, 241.

<sup>21</sup> For identifying Tibetan textile terms, I have relied on Joachim Karsten's unpublished work on the subject. Karsten n.d.

in weight); the expenses for labor and offerings associated with its production totaled 854.665 *sang* of silver (nearly eighteen pounds).<sup>22</sup>

While the Desi does not comment on the composition of the painted designs, we may infer from comparable productions that most scrolls would have consisted of central figures accompanied by smaller figures, sites, and/or narrative scenes associated with them. According to the colophon of *Yangchen's Lute*, two scribes wrote inscriptions on the *thangkas* for each of the central figures, presumably the verse supplications themselves.<sup>23</sup> The earliest extant *thangkas* depicting the Fifth Dalai Lama's rebirth lineage likely date to the late seventeenth century; this set originally consisted of nineteen *thangkas*, but only seven are extant and are divided among various collections.<sup>24</sup> A later lineage *thangka* design that may have been based on, or borrowed elements from, *Array of Avadānas* was made for the Seventh Dalai Lama in thirteen block-prints at the Narthang Monastery Printing House. A complete set of painted copies in the gold *thangka* style (*gser thang*) is held in the collection of Tibet House New Delhi.<sup>25</sup> In this design the Seventh Dalai Lama serves as the central figure of the set, while other lineage members are depicted in three-quarter profile facing the center.

Returning to our *thangka* set in question, *Array of Avadānas*, given its name it may have included more detailed narrative scenes as observable in numerous *avadāna* *thangka* designs.<sup>26</sup> With seventy-eight lineage members appearing on sixty-five *thangkas*, some *thangkas* would have featured more than one lineage figure. By way of comparison, another later set of seven Dalai Lama lineage *thangkas*—ending with the Ninth Dalai Lama—groups together up to four lineage members in a single composition.<sup>27</sup> Apart from the central *thangka* where the Fifth Dalai Lama's portrait is dominant, the compositional strategy of each of the remaining *thangkas* is relatively decentralized; moreover, the lineage members are not

<sup>22</sup> Sde srid Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho, *Supplement to Fine Silken Dress*, vol. 4, 201a1–201b3=407.1–408.3.

<sup>23</sup> Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho, *Yangchen's Lute*, 107b3–107b4=216.3–216.4.

<sup>24</sup> Henss 2005, 264. For example, an image of 'Brom ston from this set may be viewed as HAR item no. 85968 at: <http://www.himalayanart.org/items/85968> (last accessed January 20, 2017).

<sup>25</sup> Images of the complete Tibet House New Delhi set may be viewed at: <http://www.himalayanart.org/search/set.cfm?setID=686> (last accessed December 30, 2016).

<sup>26</sup> For studies of *avadāna* *thangka* paintings see Lin 2011.

<sup>27</sup> For a detailed analysis of this set see Sørensen 2005b, 242–57. Images of the complete set may also be viewed as HAR items no. 65850–65856 at: <http://www.himalayanart.org/pages/dalaiset7/index.html> (last accessed January 20, 2017).

grouped in strict chronological order. When mounted for display, the sixty-five *thangkas* of *Array of Avadānas* must have made for an impressive sight; to fit them consecutively in a single space would have required a grand assembly hall such as those of the White or Red Palaces of the Potala, or the main assembly hall of Drepung Monastery. We may conclude that the *thangkas* would have shared the aesthetic values of wealth, variety, and numerousness found in the Red Palace's grand hall, as well as the New Menri style of the wall paintings.

## 2. Expanding the Rebirth Lineage

It is uncertain how widely the supplication prayer *Yangchen's Lute* was known and recited, or with what frequency and duration the *Array of Avadānas* was displayed. Nevertheless, the extensive lineage developed through these productions was more widely circulated through the Desi's biographical supplement to *Fine Silken Dress*, where all seventy-eight members of the lineage appear in his prose account (Appendix A, right column). There they are not numbered and do not always appear in the same sequence as in *Yangchen's Lute*. Moreover, while the lives of most are narrated through plots ranging from a few lines to several pages each, some—particularly the lesser-known kings of the imperial period—are merely mentioned by name.<sup>28</sup>

The relationship between lineage members in *Yangchen's Lute* and corresponding narratives in the Desi's supplement to *Fine Silken Dress* can be illustrated with the following example from *Yangchen's Lute*, numbered fifth in the lineage:

Born the son of Legkyé, *paṇḍita* in the ocean of Vedas,  
 He saw that saṃsāric existence was like a pit of fire,  
 vowed pure conduct before Lodrö Jikmé, and  
 took up the path of liberation: supplications to Selwa!<sup>29</sup>

The stanza offers certain details about the protagonist Selwa (Gsal ba), such as his father's name (Legs skyes) and brahmanical status

<sup>28</sup> This has led to different enumerations of the Fifth Dalai Lama's lineage in the Desi's biographical supplement, with Ahmad listing fifty-nine in his table of contents and Ishihama listing sixty-seven (in all cases I have included the Fifth Dalai Lama as part of the count). Sørensen also provides alternate lists of the Fifth Dalai Lama's lineage. Ahmad 1999, vii–x; Ishihama 1992, 238–41; Ishihama 2015, 182–87; Sørensen 2005a, 58; Sørensen 2005b, 247–48.

<sup>29</sup> Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho, *Yangchen's Lute*, 101a3–101a4=203.3–203.4.

along with the bare bones of a plot, but is too attenuated to convey much information on its own. It does not, for example, communicate that Selwa lived in the city of Kapilavastu, or that he went to a lake full of geese there and was told by them to seek out the brahmin monk Lodrö Jikmé (Blo gros 'jigs med), or how, after ordaining as a monk with him, Selwa practiced diligently for fifty-five years. It does assume a learned, courtly audience familiar with Indic references and with a classical poetic style dependent on metaphor, simile, and other recognized figures of speech. In these respects it resembles condensed poetic accounts of the buddha Śākyamuni's lives that were also produced by the Fifth Dalai Lama's court to accompany large-scale painting sets.<sup>30</sup>

The plot details are provided in the fourth volume of the Desi's supplement to *Fine Silken Dress*, which was completed after *Yangchen's Lute*. In this regard, the section of the Desi's supplement treating previous lives of the Fifth Dalai Lama may be regarded as an explanatory commentary to the condensed verses of *Yangchen's Lute*. While the sources for these narratives predate both texts—a point I will return to below—*Yangchen's Lute* may in fact serve as the textual authority that preceded and determined the lineage of the Fifth Dalai Lama's incarnations that appears in *Fine Silken Dress*. This would be consistent with Vostrikov's observation that lineage supplication prayers ('*khrungs rabs gsol 'debs*) are the genre through which incarnation lineages are compiled, and thus "serve as official acts specifying the previous incarnations of a person."<sup>31</sup> Given the ritual use of supplication prayer in liturgical recitation, one may surmise how this genre would be considered authoritative. While differing biographical accounts could vary in their mentions and omissions of previous lives, a supplication prayer adopted for liturgical use would be repeated, memorized, and internalized. Through this process, it would become the standard with which its performer would compare other sources.

The Ganden Podrang's vision of "existence and peace replete"—accomplished through the Fifth Dalai Lama's extraordinarily large rebirth lineage productions—was elaborated late in his court's reign; he was already ill in 1680 when work on *Array of Avadānas* began, and passed away long before Desi Sanggyé Gyatso completed construction of the Red Palace and the writing of his biographical supplement. Before the activities of the Desi, the Dalai Lama's rebirth lineage was much shorter. The 1494 biography of Gendün Drub—posthumously recognized as the First Dalai Lama—by Pañchen

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<sup>30</sup> Lin 2011, 37–50.

<sup>31</sup> Vostrikov 1936, 97.

Yeshé Tsemo (Paṅ chen Ye shes rtse mo, b. 1433) mentioned only four lineage members: his emanational source Chenrezik, Songtsen Gampo, Dromtön Gyalwé Jungné ('Brom ston Rgyal ba'i 'byung gnas)—chief disciple of Atiśa and founding figure of the Kadampa (Bka' gdams pa) tradition—and Gendün Drub himself. How the lineage expanded to such massive numbers in the Fifth Dalai Lama's lifetime, thus lending itself to the aesthetics of abundance explored above, is investigated in the remainder of this section. As I will suggest, it also supplied elements for a fresh paradigm of kingship as understood through embodied lives.

As is well known, multiple lineage supplication prayers for the same tulku could be composed, and these could also vary in the number of lineage members invoked. Such was the case for the Fifth Dalai Lama. The Desi classifies *Yangchen's Lute* as the large or secret version of the lineage, but also mentions two other rebirth lineage supplication prayers attributed to the Fifth Dalai Lama: a short or outer version called "Lobzang the Victor" and a middle-length or inner version called "Compassion for the World." These short and middle-length versions are said to name only sixteen members of the rebirth lineage.<sup>32</sup> These two lineage lists may have been very similar to, if not the same as, the list in another prominent text in the Fifth Dalai Lama's collected works, thirteen folios in length and briefly titled *Clear Mirror* (Gsal ba'i me long).<sup>33</sup>

*Clear Mirror* was written to accompany a set of thangkas of the Great Fifth's rebirth lineage, called *Rebirth Lineage Array* ('Khrungs rabs kyī zhing bkod). It contains a list of sixteen lineage members plus the Fifth Dalai Lama himself as the seventeenth; while they are not numbered, individual members are marked by annotations embedded in the text. Comparison with rebirth lineage members mentioned in the Great Fifth's 1646 biography of the Third Dalai Lama indicates that most of the list in *Clear Mirror* had already been established by that date (Table 1). As Ishihama has noted, paintings of the Dalai Lama rebirth lineage were also appearing in prominent places within the first decade of the Ganden Podrang government, from 1642 to 1651.<sup>34</sup> While the colophon to *Clear Mirror* does not provide a date, it states that the text was composed by the Fifth Dalai

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<sup>32</sup> *Blo bzang rgyal ba ma* and 'Gro la rjes rtse ma. I have not located works with these titles in the Fifth Dalai Lama's collected works. According to the Fifth Dalai Lama's autobiography and diaries, late in 1665 he gave oral transmission for *Blo bzang rgyal ba ma*. Sde srid Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho, *Supplement to Fine Silken Dress*, Vol. 4, 136b1–136b2=278.1–278.2; Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho, *Fine Silken Dress*, vol. 2, 12.

<sup>33</sup> Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho, *Clear Mirror*, 1a–13a=577–601.

<sup>34</sup> Ishihama 1993, 48–49.

Biography of First Dalai Lama, 1494	Biography of Third Dalai Lama, 1646 <sup>a</sup>	<i>Clear Mirror</i> , 1649?
		[DL5] Ngawang Lobzang Gyatso
Chenrezik	Chenrezik	Chenrezik
		Jikten Wangchuk
		Könchok Bang
	Nyatri Tsenpo	
	Lha Totori Nyanshal	
Songtsen Gampo	Songtsen Gampo	Songtsen Gampo
	Trisong Detsen	Trisong Detsen
		Tri Relpachen
Dromtön	Dromtön	Dromtön
	Khaché Gönpa	Khaché Gönpawa
	Sachen Künga Nyingpo	Sachen Künga Nyingpo
	Zhang Drowé Gönpo	Zhang Drowé Gönpo
	Ngadak Nyang Nyima Özer	Ngadak Nyang
	Lhajé Gewabum	Lhajé Gewabum
[DL1] Gendün Drub		[DL1] Gendün Drub
		[DL2] Gendün Gyatso
		[DL3] Sönam Gyatso
		[DL4] Dechen Chögyal

Table 1. Expansion of the Dalai Lama Rebirth Lineage, 1494–1649?  
(for Wylie transliteration see Appendix A)

Lama at the request of “Püsang, the temple caretaker and madman.”<sup>36</sup> I tentatively propose a date of 1649 based on a similar reference to rebirth lineage thangkas that were made at the request of “Püsang the madman” in the corresponding year in the Fifth Dalai Lama’s autobiography.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho, *Chariot for an Ocean of Feats*, 2b6–4a3=34.6–37.3.

<sup>36</sup> *spus srang pa dkon gnyer smyon pas bskul ba’i ngor/\_za hor gyi ban dhes pho brang chen po po ta lar sbyar ba’i yi ge pa ni ngag dbang dge legs so//*. Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho, *Clear Mirror*, 13a6=601.6. On the usage of “madman” and related terms for Buddhist masters, see Larsson 2012, 6–22.

<sup>37</sup> *spus srang smyon pas bskul nas ’khrungs rabs bris thang bri ba’i zhing bkod*. Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho, *Fine Silken Dress*, vol. 1, 301. A previous attempt by Lange to date this text to 1673–1676, while much later in his lifetime, would still place it before the completion of both *Yangchen’s Lute* and the Desi’s supplement to *Du kü la’i gos bzang*. While I am not fully clear on Lange’s argument, it seems that she is comparing *Clear Mirror* with a text dated to 1673 that similarly uses the epithet *Za hor gyi ban dhe* and the Potala as the named location, and further that she is citing another text scribed by Dpal grong sngags rams pa Ngag dbang dge legs dated to 1676. However, as early as 1644 colophons scribed by Ngag dbang

Comparing the earlier list of seventeen in *Clear Mirror* with the list of seventy-eight in *Yangchen's Lute* (Table 2), it is clear that most of the expansion was effected by adding preincarnations from the Indic world (lineage nos. 3–36) and from Tibetan imperial succession (lineage nos. 37–48, 50–58). Addressing each member of the lineage is well beyond the scope of this article; in the remainder of this section I limit myself to a few remarks on the source of the Indic preincarnations, and how they contributed to the Dalai Lama lineage. The colophon to *Yangchen's Lute* states that its stories are from the *Book of Kadam* (Bka' gdams glegs bam), supplemented by various other sources. The *Book of Kadam* was compiled in 1302 as a collection of religious instructions, dialogues, stories, rituals, and prophecies attributed to the Indian master Atiśa and his chief disciple, the Tibetan layman Dromtön Gyalwé Jungné. It became a foundational text for the Gelukpa, and as mentioned earlier, Dromtön had already been identified as a previous birth of the Dalai Lamas by the end of the fifteenth century.<sup>38</sup>

<i>Clear Mirror</i>	<i>Yangchen's Lute</i>	Sources and/or identifications
[1.] Fifth Dalai Lama	[1.] Fifth Dalai Lama	
[2.] Chenrezik	2. Chenrezik	
[3.] Jikten Wangchuk	3. Jikten Wangchuk	<i>Mañi Kabum</i> : preincarnation of Songtsen Gampo
	4. *Nangwa	"Teachings for Ngok," <i>Book of Kadam</i>
	5. Selwa	
	6. Chakmé	
	7. Küntuga	
	8. Lhakyé	
[4.] Könchok Bang	9. Könchok Bang	
	10. Depa Tenpa	
	11. *Pelzang	
	12. Depa Rابتu Tenpa	13. Rebirth in China; sole rebirth outside Indic world in "Teachings for Ngok"
	13. Lodrö Pel	
	14-25. Gadzin, up through Gendün Pel	"Teachings for Khu," <i>Book of Kadam</i> , all located in the Indic world
	26-36. Rāja to Kyabjin	

dge legs used the epithet *Za hor gyi bande*, and references to *pho brang chen po po ta la* were appearing in the Fifth Dalai Lama's collected works by 1649. I am grateful to Nicole Willock for her assistance with translating the German; all errors remain my own. Lange 1969, 212–14; cf. Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho, *Collected Works*, vol. 25, 1a6=7.6; Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho, *Collected Works*, vol. 22, 86a–87a=359–61.

<sup>38</sup> For English-language studies and partial translations, see Ehrhard 2002, Miller 2004, Jinpa 2008.

	37-48. Nyatri Tsenpo to Dertrin Tsen	Tibetan imperial lineage
	49. Midak Tsuklakdzin	King of Zahor in Padmasambhava's time
	50-53. Sajö Drapung Tsen to Namri Songtsen	Tibetan imperial lineage
[5.] Songtsen Gampo	54. Songtsen Gampo	
	55. Düsong Marjé	
	56. Tridé Tsukten	
[6.] Trisong Detsen	57. Trisong Detsen	
[7.] Tri Relpachen	58. Ngadak Tri Rel	
	59. Chögyel Gewapel	
[9.] Khaché Gönpawa	60. Khedrub Gönpa	Kashmiri Buddhist master
[8.] Dromtön Gyalwa	61. Dromtön Jé	Chief disciple of Atíśa
[10.] Sachen Künga Nyingpo	62. Künga Nyingpo	Sakya founding figure
[11.] Zhang Drowé Gönpa	63. Yudrak Drowé Gönpa	Lama Zhang, founder of Tselpa Kagyü
	64. Ya Zangpa	Yazang Kagyü master (1169-1233)
[12.] Ngadak Nyang	65. [Nyangrel] Nyima Özer	Nyingma treasure revealer
	66. Guru Chöwang	Nyingma treasure revealer
	67. Sumtön Yeshé Zung	Teacher transmitting medical tantras ( <i>rgyud bzhi</i> ) (12th c.)
	68. Pakchen Chökyi Gyelpo	Nephew of Sakya Paṇḍita, named spiritual leader of Tibet by Khubilai Khan
[13.] Lhajé Gewabum	69. Gewabum	Restored dikes of Lhasa to prevent flooding
	70. Padmavajra	Nepalese <i>paṇḍita</i>
[14.] [DL1] Gendün Drub	71. [DL1] Gendün Drub	Considered one of Tsongkhapa's seven principal disciples
	72. Lodrö Gyeltsen Pel	Reincarnation of Sachen Künga Nyingpo (no. 62)
	73. Khyenrab Chökyi Jé	Sakya lama, Zhalu tradition
[15.] [DL2] Gendün Gyatso	74. [DL2] Gendün Gyatso	Served as abbot of Tashilhünpo, Drepung, and Sera
	75. Terchen Pema Wang	Nyingma treasure revealer Ngari Pañchen
	76. Chögyel Wangpödé	Predicted reincarnation of Trisong Detsen (no. 57)
[16.] [DL3] Sönam Gyatso	77. [DL3] Sönam Gyatso	Full title including "Dalai Lama" given by Altan Khan, Tümed Mongol
[17.] [DL4] Dechen Chögyal	78. [DL4] Yönten Gyatso	Altan Khan's great-grandson born in Mongolia

Table 2. Expansion and Textual Sources of Yangchen's Lute (for Wylie transliteration see Appendix A)

The *Book of Kadam* is indeed the main source for lineage reconstruction in the section of *Yangchen's Lute* dealing with previous existences from the Indic world, which draws from the latter part of the *Book of Kadam*, known as the "Son Teachings" (*Bu chos*). The "Son Teachings" are further divided into teachings for the two disciples of Dromtön: Ngok Legpé Sherab (Rngog Legs pa'i shes rab) and Khutön Tsöndrū Yungdrung (Khu ston Brtson 'grus g.yung drung). The sections are simply referred to as "Teachings for Ngok" (*Rngog chos*) and "Teachings for Khu" (*Khu chos*). The "Teachings for Ngok" contain a sequence of twenty chapters in which Atiśa recounts previous lives of Dromtön at Ngok's request, styled after the *jātaka* and *avadāna* genres.<sup>39</sup> These twenty lives are replicated in sequence in *Yangchen's Lute*, as lineage numbers four through ten and twelve through twenty-five. The two additional lineage members can be accounted for as plots of earlier lives embedded within chapters of "Teachings for Ngok." In the chapter on Selwa (lineage no. 5) the protagonist relates a prediction from a previous life as Nangwa (Nang ba, lineage no. 4): he is hanging around the town gate when Siddhārtha Gautama happens to pass by. Prince Siddhārtha tells him not to stand there idly and waste this human life. He further predicts that Nangwa will be reborn as a brahman youth named Selwa who will act wisely in accordance with karma, undertake meditative practices, and work for the welfare of sentient beings.<sup>40</sup>

Similarly, in the *Book of Kadam* chapter on Depa Rabtu Tenpa (Dad pa rab tu brtan pa, lineage no. 12), an embedded tale of one of his previous existences as the king Pelzang (Dpal bzang, lineage no. 11) is narrated, this time in verse. Pelzang had two ministers: Pel (Dpal), Minister of the Exterior, and Peldrub (Dpal grub), Minister of the Interior. Being childless, the king and queen treated the ministers like sons and bestowed political authority upon them. Pel was jealous of Peldrub's inside position that made him privy to confidential information (*snying gtam*), and plotted to usurp power. Sensing that all was not well, the king made offerings to the Three Jewels, constantly keeping wholesome thoughts in mind. Before long, the jealous minister Pel died. The king gave much wealth to Peldrub and passed away soon after. The story concludes:

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<sup>39</sup> I have not found sources among canonical *jātaka* and *avadāna* literature, nor from *sūtra* literature, from which the names or plots are copied. Nevertheless, perhaps it should not be surprising if the compilers of the *Book of Kadam*—or the oral sources that preceded them—were sufficiently familiar with the conventions of the *jātaka* and *avadāna* genres to deliver narratives in their style.

<sup>40</sup> Jo bo rje dpal ldan A ti sha, *Kadam Son Teachings*, 4–5.

Peldrub assumed royal duties,  
 Venerated the Three Jewels for the king's sake,  
 Was loving to his subjects, protected the commoners,  
 And was praised and honored by all.<sup>41</sup>

The decision to extract these two full-fledged lineage members and compose separate narratives for them is telling. The story of Nangwa links the Fifth Dalai Lama to the time, place, and person of Śākyamuni. While the inclusion of other preincarnation narratives from the *Book of Kadam* maps his lives across various kingdoms of the Indic world at unknown points from the distant past, this one locates him as a special individual who—however fleeting his encounter with the latest buddha of our eon—was singled out by him for a prediction of his future demonstration of good Buddhist deeds.

As for King Pelzang and his ministers, the extraction of their narrative takes on heightened significance in light of events at the Fifth Dalai Lama's court around the period when *Yangchen's Lute* and *Array of Avadānas* were completed. The Desi quotes the entire embedded story from the *Book of Kadam* in his supplement to *Fine Silken Dress*, in the fourth volume, which was completed in 1682.<sup>42</sup> Given the Desi's status as the favorite and the heart-disciple of the Great Fifth, the "confidential information" (*snying gtam*) enjoyed by the virtuous interior minister and jealously coveted by the evil exterior minister may also be understood as the "heart advice" passed on from lama to disciple. Both the troubles among the king's ministers and the king's death shortly after the determination of his successor parallel the events of this period. Sanggyé Gyatso had been appointed in the position of Desi (regent) in 1679, in the wake of scandal surrounding the previous regent and monk, Lobzang Tutob (Blo bzang mthu stobs), who stepped down in 1676 after it came out that he was keeping an aristocratic woman as a mistress.<sup>43</sup> The Fifth Dalai Lama would pass away in 1682, although the Desi would keep this secret until after the Red Palace was completed in 1694.

As is well known, events would not conclude as happily for the Desi as they would for his mythological double, the interior minister Peldrub.<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, the effort to identify Nangwa and King

<sup>41</sup> Jo bo rje dpal ldan A ti sha, *Kadam Son Teachings*, 307.

<sup>42</sup> Sde srid Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho, *Supplement to Fine Silken Dress*, Vol. 4, 46b5–47a3=96.5–97.3.

<sup>43</sup> Richardson 1980, 339–40.

<sup>44</sup> Despite the narrative parallels before the Sde srid's fall from power, Dpal grub does not appear in the rebirth lineage of the Sde srid. This may be due to its potentially controversial content, and/or the fact that it was an embedded narrative in the Dad pa rab tu brtan pa episode of *Bka' gdams legs bam*; there is no

Pelzang as distinct members of the Fifth Dalai Lama's rebirth lineage highlights three important aspects of his court's project to reshape his personhood near the end of his life. The first was to convey the temporal continuity of his successive lives. While great leaps in time from one lineage member to the next were evident in earlier, shorter lists, efforts to lengthen the list in *Yangchen's Lute* filled in the gaps between his lives in the distant Indic past and his earliest rebirths in Tibet. The second was to emphasize the Dalai Lama's participation in Indic culture and society through these additional previous lives, thereby making it a noticeably more significant dimension of his personal history. In particular, the story of Nangwa anchored the Dalai Lamas' rebirth lineage in the historical and auspicious time and place of Śākyamuni. The third aspect of their project was to affirm parallels between the distant Indic past and their present moment in late seventeenth-century Tibet. Through stories like that of King Pelzang and his minister, details of past lives became grippingly immediate, replaying through concerns about leadership transitions within the Ganden Podrang government. These three aspects extended beyond efforts to emphasize the Fifth Dalai Lama's cosmic origin as Avalokiteśvara, his link to the Tibetan imperial past, or his place in the line of Tibetan rebirths predicted to Könchok Bang (lineage no. 9), points that have been previously documented.<sup>45</sup> They constituted elements of an alternative paradigm of kingship that was based on the embodied qualities of personhood, as exemplified through a multiplicity of incarnations. Past lives could be called upon to interpret and refashion the religio-political dynamics of the present. In the following section, I explore further implications of this paradigm for Tibet under the Ganden Podrang.

### 3. A Kingship of Embodied Lives

The aesthetics of "existence and peace replete" apparent in the grand hall of the Potala's Red Palace, and in the lineage of *Array of Avadānas*, recur in other texts attributed to the Fifth Dalai Lama, where they further build this paradigm of embodied qualities. Here it

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corresponding rebirth lineage member for the Sde srid from the embedded Snang ba narrative, either. Instead the Sde srid's lineage contains the king Zla ba dbang po (Skt. Sucandra) that bears no relation to Snang ba other than being contemporaneous with him; this king was the one who requested the buddha Śākyamuni to teach the Kālacakra Tantra at Śrī Dhānyakaṭaka. *The Collected Works of Liturgy of the Gnas-chuñ Rdo-rje-sgra-deyañs-gliñ Monastery*, 3b2-3b3=6.2-6.3; Ishihama 1992, 238; Ishihama 2015, 182.

<sup>45</sup> Ishihama 1993; Karmay 2007, 132.

appears at the close of an undated prayer of supplication and aspiration directed toward the Dalai Lama rebirth lineage:

I supplicate the illusory incarnations of the white lotus holder  
 who manifested as earthly lords in the noble land of India  
 and the snowy land of Tibet, such as Könchok Bang,  
 Songtsen, Lhé Metok, Relpachen, and Gewapel. | 11 |

I supplicate those who manifested as excellent preceptors:  
 Gyalwé Jungné, the greatly kind Sakyapa,  
 Yudrak Zhangtön, Nyimé Özer,  
 and the life-trunk of weal and joy in Tibet, Gewabum. | 12 |

I supplicate those who performed the play of emanation,  
 who became fields of merit by dint of  
 erudition and adeptness at the crown of the ethical Saṅgha to  
 place the assembly of disciples in the ocean of wisdom—  
 scripture and realization. | 13 |

I supplicate Ngawang Lobzang Gyatso,  
 a firefly trailing the stratum of sun and moon  
 who is graciously accepted by the excellent ones who have  
 come before  
 by being overrated on the activation of his good propensities.  
 | 14 |

By the virtue of this prayer may the welfare of Dharma and  
 beings always prevail!  
 From the golden hands of merit of myself and others  
 may hundreds of thousands of silver coins—existence and  
 peace replete—  
 unceasingly stream until buddhahood is attained! | 15 |

This prayer of supplication and aspiration was composed by  
 the venerable monk of Zahor upon the request of the ruler  
 from Dakpo Bhrum; the scribe was Nesarpa Jamyang.<sup>46</sup>

Well-educated reciters, auditors, and readers would recognize the image of golden hands from narratives such as the forty-fourth episode of the *Wish-Fulfilling Vine of Bodhisattva Stories* (Byang chub sems pa'i rtogs brjod dpag bsam 'khri shing, Skt. Bodhisattvāvadāna-kalpalatā). In a previous life the buddha Śākyamuni was born as

<sup>46</sup> Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho, *Collected Works*, vol. 15, 107b1–b6=430.1–430.6.

Hiraṇyapāṇi or “Golden Hands” (Gser gyi lag pa), from whose hands gold marvelously appeared. Furthermore, every morning a hundred thousand silver coins issued forth from each of his hands, thus making him a wish-fulfilling tree of riches.<sup>47</sup> This image of endless riches serves as a metaphor for *sizhi püntsok*, “existence and peace replete” or “all the marvels of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa.” It is what an advanced bodhisattva has the capability and compassion to provide to everyone, granting worldly delights as well as the ultimate bliss of liberation.

Framed within the dedication of merit at the end of this supplication prayer, the allusion opens up an even more amazing possibility. Just as Śākyamuni provided all this in the past, so now the reciter imagines “myself and others” doing the same. The final verse reminds us that rebirth stories inspire people to emulate spiritually liberated beings, such as those in the Dalai Lama lineage who are praised as earthly rulers, teachers, and adepts (stanzas 1–3). As author, the Fifth Dalai Lama's humble self-positioning in relation to his predecessors (stanza 4) helps his audience conceive that while their karmic state may be modest at the present moment, one day they too may become wish-fulfilling trees lavishing all the marvels of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*.

If the bodhisattva's hands grant the silver coins, the bodhisattva himself is the treasury of *sizhi püntsok*. The latter is the very image we find in the opening stanza of another text attributed to the Fifth Dalai Lama, a condensed verse adaptation of the *Wish-Fulfilling Vine* written to accompany wall paintings in the main assembly hall of Drepung (‘Bras spungs) Monastery completed in 1654:

Treasury of all that's good in existence and peace,  
lavishing weal and joy, king of wish-fulfilling gems,  
famed as Śuddhodana's son with a white parasol,  
circling up to the peak of existence: homage to him!<sup>48</sup>

The person of the buddha Śākyamuni—here called by the epithet Śuddhodana's son—is the “treasury” (*mdzod*) of “all that's good in existence and peace” (*srid dang zhi ba'i dge legs kun*), a variant expression of *sizhi püntsok*. That person is hardly limited to the physical frame of Siddhārtha Gautama; he is the person of countless lifetimes, who has cycled through various lives on his bodhisattva path “up to the peak of existence.” All along the way he is a “king of

<sup>47</sup> Kṣemendra (Dge ba'i dbang po) 2004, 226; Kṣemendra 1989 (1959), 278.

<sup>48</sup> Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho, *Collected Works*, vol. 16, 65b2=136.2.

wish-fulfilling gems," one who bears the "white parasol" of kingship while "lavishing weal and joy" for all.

As *Yangchen's Lute* tells us, the person of the Fifth Dalai Lama is another such treasury of wondrous plenitude:

Supplications to enter the ocean of majestic wisdom  
on the ferry to awakening by receiving wholesome impressions:  
flowing speech singing the song of Yangchen's lute,  
a mind that's mastered the ten fields of learning.<sup>49</sup>

As one might expect in a Tibetan literary work composed in the classical style (*snyan ngag*, Skt. *kāvya*), it begins by invoking Yangchen (Skt. Sarasvatī), Indic goddess of wisdom and learning, of eloquence and euphony in speech, poetry, and music. The title *Yangchen's Lute*, then, both refers to the opening words of the prayer while also calling attention to the aesthetic qualities of the text.<sup>50</sup> While Sarasvatī is known as both goddess and river in India, the water imagery here recalls verses of praise Tibetans have attributed to Kālidāsa and preserved in the Tengyur. There she is instead compared to an ocean that washes away torment with powerful waves of compassion, an ocean that is the source of the wish-granting jewel, fulfilling hopes and coming to the aid of deluded and bewildered beings.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> The block-print contains a number of orthographical errors; corrections are suggested in cited passages of this text. Here read 'jug for 'drug with Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho 2009, vol. 21, 125. Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho, *Yangchen's Lute*, 99b4=200.4.

<sup>50</sup> Given the highly developed state of monastic and aristocratic education in this period, a significant number of people at the Fifth Dalai Lama's court and beyond were more than sufficiently educated to have appreciated—or critiqued—the literary qualities and content of the lineage prayer, *Yangchen's Lute*, as well as the aesthetic qualities of the paintings under discussion. Several individuals involved in these rebirth lineage projects were among the educated élite, beginning with the Sde srid as patron of *Array of Avadānas*, along with the three proofreaders of its inscriptions, which were apparently based on the verses of *Yangchen's Lute*. The proofreaders were eminent scholars who played central roles in the court's textual projects: 'Dar pa Lo chen Ngag dbang phun tshogs lhun grub was the leading Tibetan scholar of Sanskrit at court, Rnam gling Paṅ chen Dkon mchog chos grags was vital to the transmission of grammatical and literary arts, and Pha bong kha pa 'Jam dbyangs grags pa was considered the Great Fifth's most important scribe. He was a learned monk and Rdzogs chen adept who edited the third and final volume of his diaries; he also worked with Sde srid Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho to build the Red Palace of the Potala. Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho, *Yangchen's Lute*, 107b1–107b2=216.1–216.2; TBRC P2947, P2382, P2277; Karmay 1988, 8.

<sup>51</sup> Nag mo'i khol [Kālidāsa], *Praise of Sarasvatī*, 345a2–345a3=689.2–689.3. An early translation was prepared by F. W. Thomas based on a different exemplar (Thomas 1903). The Fifth Dalai Lama's work alludes to Kālidāsa and Sarasvatī

In the mannered style of classical Tibetan poetry, Yangchen and her lute (*rgyud mang*, Skt. *vīṇā*) suggest further metaphorical congruence. Whose speech also sings the flowing song of her lute, and who else is being supplicated? The answer is hidden in the text: it is the Fifth Dalai Lama, whose name—Ngawang Lobzang Gyatso, “Master of Speech, Excellent-Minded Ocean”—is integrated into the stanza’s imagery.<sup>52</sup> By embedding his name, the verse draws the supplicant, listener, or reader into the imaginative and relational world of the prayer, where the supplicant is ferried to the far shore of liberative awakening through the compassionate aid of the Dalai Lama. In this world, the person of the Dalai Lama is dispersive and comprises a complete sensory environment: he is the ocean under one’s feet, the song in one’s ear, the wisdom imprinting one’s mind. He is also the implied boat-captain guiding one across *saṃsāra*, a metaphorical role for buddhas and bodhisattvas that is widespread in canonical and post-canonical sources. Like the buddha, the Fifth Dalai Lama is a “treasury of all that’s good in existence and peace.”<sup>53</sup>

The potential of such imagery-laden language is more than figurative in Tibetan and Buddhist contexts. In addition to appearing in the illusory human forms most commonly identified as tulkus or emanational bodies (*sprul sku*, Skt. *nirmāṇakāya*), an awakened being such as Chenrezik is considered capable of manifesting his or her presence in myriad other forms. In narratives of the *Kāraṇḍavyūha-sūtra*—an important Sanskrit source on Chenrezik for Tibetan Buddhists—the bodhisattva emanates in the form of rays of multicolored light, a bee whose buzzing is the sound of homage to the Three Refuges, a disembodied voice granting the six-syllable mantra, the burning wick of a lamp that warns the seafarer Simhala he has landed on an island of *rākṣasī* demonesses, and then the horse that safely carries him home. Moreover, each pore of Chenrezik’s body is described as containing world systems unto themselves populated by buddhas, bodhisattvas, and other beings, to be marveled at by the spiritual aspirant Sarvanīvaraṇaviṣkambhin who travels through them.<sup>54</sup> The *Maṇi Kabum* (Maṇi bka’ ’bum)—a key Tibetan text that emerged in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries—

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several stanzas later. Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho, *Yangchen’s Lute*, 100a2–100a3=201.2–201.3.

<sup>52</sup> Given syntactical differences between Tibetan and English, it was beyond my abilities to retain the same sequence in translation.

<sup>53</sup> Similar imagery is invoked in the full title of the catalog to the Fifth Dalai Lama’s funerary *stūpa* as well as the Red Palace of the Potala in which it is housed: it is a “boat for crossing the ocean to the island of liberation, a treasury of blessings” (*thar gling rgya mtshor bgrod pa’i gru rdzings byin rlabs kyi bang mdzod*). Sde srid Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho, *Sole Ornament*.

<sup>54</sup> Studholme 2002, 131–54; Lienhard 1993.

expands this vision by narrating how Chenrezik radiated light from his body, creating many world systems containing emanational bodies of buddhas and bodhisattvas. In each world system with its southern continent of Jambudvīpa there is also a Land of Snows, a Tibet with its own Chenrezik who appears as the emperor Songtsen Gampo.<sup>55</sup>

The opening stanza of *Yangchen's Lute* refracts these cosmological visions from the distant past by singing of Chenrezik's continued appearance for Tibetans. Like the Indic spiritual aspirant of the *Kāraṇḍavyūha-sūtra*, the supplicant of *Yangchen's Lute* can encounter Chenrezik through limitless media, of which his bodily manifestation as the Dalai Lama is only one. These include the words of *Yangchen's Lute* itself—attributed to the Fifth Dalai Lama—as well as its imagined oceanic realm that conduces to liberation by surrounding and engaging with one's senses, like the worlds within Chenrezik's pores. As the *Maṇi Kabum* affirms, Tibet itself is one such liberative realm that not only contains a resident Chenrezik in the human form of Songtsen Gampo and his rebirths, but *is made of* the bodhisattva as another one of his illusory emanations. *Yangchen's Lute* extends this embodiment in historical time and place to its late seventeenth-century setting, when the Fifth Dalai Lama is recognized as the latest of Songtsen Gampo's rebirths in Tibet. At the same time, it recalls how Chenrezik exceeds his body to surround and support others' bodies, and to enter their minds. Its poetry invites the supplicant to engage simultaneously with the particularity of the bodily manifestation called "Ngawang Lobzang Gyatso," and with the expansive personhood of the Dalai Lama-as-Chenrezik comprising pervasive sensory media in countless times and places.

A similarly encompassing environment would have been created by the display of *Array of Avadānas*, and was also effected in the grand hall of the Potala's Red Palace. Unlike the imaginary water-world evoked through language in the opening stanza of *Yangchen's Lute*, through portrait painting the person of the Dalai Lama is visibly proliferated into dozens of bodies, surrounding its contemporaneous viewer in a cosmic vision from Chenrezik's beginning nearly a thousand eons ago to the here and now of late seventeenth-century Tibet. Immensities of scale co-exist both in the display space of the grand hall, as well as in the expanse of time and space compressed into it, from distant buddha-fields to India to Tibet. Giovanni da Col has written from an ethnographic perspective that a Tibetan

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<sup>55</sup> Kapstein 2000, 151.

Being has to be conceived *in time*, being not a singularity but a multiplicity, not one life but a multiplicity of lives and perspective: *the sum of all the perspectives* it will traverse during the course of the virtually infinite extension of its possible lives.<sup>56</sup>

The painted multiplicity of the Dalai Lama's rebirths—fluctuating through different physical frames—makes this mode of conception instantaneously explicit. Ordinary beings are unable to perceive their past and future lives and how these are implicated in the present moment, but the Fifth Dalai Lama, it is suggested, is capable of perceiving the continuum of his lives. He thereby makes it possible to begin to imagine the “sum of all perspectives” that make up a certain kind of person, a tulku who is an emanation of a cosmic bodhisattva. This is approximated by the visual display of his rebirth lineage, which immerses its viewers in a more temporally marked fashion than the metaphorical opening verse of *Yangchen's Lute*. As with *avadāna* stories in which beings have recurring relationships with the buddha Śākyamuni across plural lifetimes, the viewer may be reminded that he or she received karmic impressions from the Dalai Lama in a previous life, making it possible to encounter him again in the present through painting (and perhaps the physical frame of his human body), and yet again in future lives.

Other forms of sensory experience were made available to the supplicant as well. While the coordinating *Array of Avadānas* thangkas were being sketched and consecrated, *Yangchen's Lute* was recited by Paldrong Ngakrampa.<sup>57</sup> Recognized by title as a tantric master, Paldrong Ngakrampa Ngawang Gelek (Dpal grong Sngag rams pa Ngag dbang Dge legs) was also credited as a scribe for hundreds of works attributed to the Fifth Dalai Lama, including other prayers accompanying sets of rebirth lineage paintings of the Dalai Lamas.<sup>58</sup> His act of reciting the supplication prayer vocalized the “flowing speech” attributed to the Great Fifth, so that listeners would receive the wholesome karmic impressions (*bag chags*, Skt. *vāsanā*) promised in the text, predisposing them to future awakening.<sup>59</sup> The range of usage in Buddhist terminology permits an

<sup>56</sup> da Col 2007, 229.

<sup>57</sup> Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho, *Yangchen's Lute*, 107a6–107b1=215.6–216.1.

<sup>58</sup> Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho, *Collected Works*, vol. 15, 577–601; vol. 21, 388–390, 504–506.

<sup>59</sup> Although cannot be verified that the Fifth Dalai Lama himself composed this work—it was completed late in life when he was quite ill—it must be remembered that the Fifth Dalai Lama may well have ritually authorized others to perform the work of writing for him through *abhiseka* empowerment, as he did

alternate translation of “receiving wholesome impressions” (*bzang po'i bag chags thos*) as “learning excellent dispositions,” wherein “hearing” (*thos*, Skt. *śruta*) can convey both a more passive state of receiving as well as a more active state of learning that is the gateway to reflection (*bsam*, Skt. *cintā*) and cultivation (*sgom*, Skt. *bhāvanā*), known collectively as the threefold training (*bslab pa gsum*, Skt. *trīśikṣā*).<sup>60</sup> In this latter sense the supplicant is learning the excellent dispositions modeled by the Great Fifth, as illustrated by his rebirth narratives that are the main subject of *Yangchen's Lute*. The embodied qualities of the king—in all their wondrous plenitude and perfection—could be acquired by his supplicants.

Some of the king's qualities over his many lifetimes were already reflected in his supplicants as the people of Tibet. Among the Dalai Lama's preincarnations were not only Gelukpas, but also leaders of Nyingma, Sakya, Tselpa Kagyü, and Yazang Kagyü lineage traditions (Appendix A, lineage nos. 65, 66, 75; 62, 68, 72, 73; 63; 64). The person of the Dalai Lama was capacious enough, his rebirth lineage asserted, to encompass all these as well as the dynastic ancestry of Tibetan imperial rulers (lineage nos. 37–48, 50–58). If the claiming of these eminent figures for the Dalai Lama might be perceived as an act of appropriation, it could equally be interpreted as an expression of obligation that these Buddhist lineage traditions and ancient clans would be protected and accommodated under the aegis of the Ganden Podrang. In addition to wealth, variety, and numerousness, the aesthetics of abundance articulated by the Dalai Lama's rebirth lineage also promoted a vision of inclusiveness for the subjects of Tibet.

Amidst the highly politicized and turbulent dynamics of the seventeenth century, however, this was a selective form of reconciliation and inclusion. The rebirth lineage excluded groups that did not enjoy the favor of the Fifth Dalai Lama's court. Omitted from the list were the Karma Kagyüpa (Karma bka' brgyud pa) and Jonangpa (Jo nang pa), who were both forced into exile by the Ganden Podrang in the wake of political and territorial power struggles. Also excluded were the Bönpo (Bon po) who, despite improving fortunes by the end of the Fifth Dalai Lama's lifetime, continued to be marginalized as non-Buddhist. To return to the

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elsewhere. I thank Janet Gyatso for this observation in response to other materials attributed to the Fifth Dalai Lama that I presented at the Harvard Buddhist Studies Forum.

<sup>60</sup> It may be useful to analyze such doubled language in terms of bitextuality, to borrow Yigal Bronner's term for *śleṣa* and related practices in Sanskrit *kāvya* (Bronner 2010). A Western-language study of bitextuality and bitextual figures (*sbyar ba*) in Tibetan *snyan ngag*, adapted from *kāvya*, has yet to be undertaken.

extended metaphor laid out at the opening of *Yangchen's Lute*, the diffused person of the Fifth Dalai Lama was oceanic enough to contain a cosmologically expansive conception of Tibet, spanning from timeless and remote buddha-fields to India and Tibet, and even stretching to accommodate preincarnations in Nepal, China, and Mongolia (lineage nos. 70, 11, 78). Yet this did not preclude the specificity of his rebirth history in Tibet, which did not or would not include figures from major religious lineage traditions with whom the Gelukpa had come into conflict. For the Ganden Podrang, accommodation of these groups would have to wait until a future time.

Even taking these omissions into account, the ambitious sweep of the Fifth Dalai Lama's rebirth lineage was unprecedented. As Ernst Kantorowicz's classic study of kingship has shown, Tudor jurists conceived of the king as having two bodies, a "body natural" that consisted of his mortal physical frame and the "body politic" that encompassed his "Office, Government, and Majesty royal" and also the totality of his subjects.<sup>61</sup> But they may never have imagined that the body politic could be embodied in the king's person through his manifold lives, thus reflecting back both the diversity of his subjects and the very best that the Buddhadharmā had produced in Tibet and beyond. Nor could they have imagined that the subjects of the king could aspire to attain the same spiritual heights as the king himself, the very "peak of existence," giving them a place in the vast continuum of cosmological space-time. Yet these are the possibilities that the Fifth Dalai Lama's long rebirth lineages asked the people of Tibet to imagine.

#### 4. *Beyond the List*

The Fifth Dalai Lama's court was hardly the first to articulate a cosmological vision that made the Indic world a significant part of an eminent Tibetan lama's personhood through rebirth lineage, as the appearance of the *Book of Kadam* several centuries earlier attests. Nor were they alone in attending to temporal implications of rebirth lineage and personhood. Sophisticated rebirth lineage work among the Jonangpa should also be noted. Dölpoṅpa placed himself favorably amidst the temporal decline of the *yugas* by identifying his preincarnation as the king of Shambhala Kalkī Puṇḍarīka and claiming his teachings from a perfect age. Beyond this he also identified himself as the Kagyü master Drigung Kyobpa Jikten

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<sup>61</sup> Kantorowicz 1997 (1957), 9, 13.

Sumgön ('Bri gung Skyob pa 'Jig rten gsum mgon, 1143–1207), the Indian philosopher Nāgārjuna, as well as Chenrezik and Songtsen Gampo.<sup>62</sup> Overlapping with the Fifth Dalai Lama's time, Jonang Tāranātha (1575–1634) located many of his preincarnations in the Indic world, including the *mahāsiddha* Kṛṣṇācārya as well as ones with the prior buddha Vipāśyin and the buddha Śākyamuni while preaching the *Mahābheri Sūtra*.<sup>63</sup>

However, from the late seventeenth century onward the aestheticized vision of the Fifth Dalai Lama's court had more widespread impact across the Tibetan cultural world. The rebirth lineages of the Pañchen Lamas, the Changkya (Lcang skya) tulku lineage, and the Qianlong emperor evince comparable concerns with Indic and Tibetan imperial-era preincarnations, the embodiment of qualities through rebirth lineage, and models of kingship.<sup>64</sup> The dramatic increase of tulku lineages during the seventeenth century, especially among Gelukpa—as documented by Gray Tuttle in his contribution to this issue—invites further research on how models set forth by the Fifth Dalai Lama's court for the personhood of tulkus and the production of their rebirth lineages may have been adopted, adapted, and revised. Moreover, although the value of numerousness in rebirth lineage production may have been hard to imitate—apart from respect for the Dalai Lama's uniquely elevated status, there was the problem of the sheer material resources needed for visual lineage production, not to mention the space to accommodate them—other aspects of the aesthetics of abundance were taken up in later courtly settings of Tibet, as I will discuss in future work.

I close by returning to the question of numbers. As we have seen, earlier versions of the Fifth Dalai Lama's rebirth lineage were referred to as consisting of sixteen members—a nice, round, symmetrical number. Dölpopa Sherab Gyaltzen's biography consisted of thirty-two lifetimes, matching the number of a buddha's major marks (*mtshan bzang po*, Skt. *lakṣaṇa*) and thus gesturing to the culmination of his own path to buddhahood.<sup>65</sup> But why construct a lineage of seventy-eight members? While it has been argued that the Dalai Lama's rebirth lineage made a point of including many earthly kings in their lineage in order to have a free hand with Tibetan politics, this does not explain the full range of narratives included in *Yangchen's Lute* or the supplement to *Fine Silken Dress*.<sup>66</sup> One such

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<sup>62</sup> Kapstein 2000, 106–116.

<sup>63</sup> Templeman 2009.

<sup>64</sup> In a forthcoming publication, Wen-shing Chou discusses the cultural production of these three rebirth lineages at the Qianlong court.

<sup>65</sup> Kapstein 2000, 106.

<sup>66</sup> Staël-Holstein 1932.

narrative drawn from the *Book of Kadam* is simply titled "Hare" (*ri bong*). But unlike the well-known *jātaka* of the virtuous hare who jumps into a fire to offer himself as food, this hare naughtily eats tender rice stalks before they are ready to be harvested, and then laughs at the poor farmer who tries to catch him. Further adventures ensue; though the hare utters some verses of Dharma here and there, there is no indication that they benefit anyone in the story.<sup>67</sup>

Rather, it seems that an attempt at fullness was being made. Whereas a lineage of sixteen highlighted the most important of the Dalai Lama's past lives, a lineage of seventy-eight could serve as a sufficiently thorough accounting of the Dalai Lama's lineage given the sources that were available. Even if some individual stories in the *Book of Kadam* were of unclear hagiographic value, the cumulative effect from proceeding through all seventy-eight lives in prayer recitation, viewing, or reading, would have been one of majestic abundance. It would have approached the effects of taking in the 108 episodes of the *Wish-Fulfilling Vine of Avadānas*, the largest anthology of the buddha Śākyamuni's lives commonly known to Tibetans, and one that was particularly promoted by the Fifth Dalai Lama's court.<sup>68</sup> Even so, Desi Sanggyé Gyatso recognized the limits of representation. On the topic of emanating beings, he states that they "display bodily arrangements as numerous as the infinite buddha-fields, working for the benefit of beings. Even in this buddha-field, the number of excellent and ordinary rebirth lineage stories defies the imagination. So how could it be within the range of an ordinary person's understanding?"<sup>69</sup>

As the opening epigram indicates, Umberto Eco has suggested that verbal and visual lists can present a "topos of ineffability."<sup>70</sup> The extent of the rebirth lineage may signify the advanced spiritual state of the Fifth Dalai Lama, who, it is implied, is able to recall many lives both distant and proximate. Yet unlike the auspiciously complete number of 108, the number seventy-eight is striking for its incompleteness. While a lineage of seventy-eight may have exhausted its compilers' sources, it does not have the appearance of an exhausted chain of rebirths. *Yangchen's Lute*, then, may gesture to a lineage that can extend infinitely into the past and indefinitely into the future, that indefinite vanishing point echoing the bodhisattva's vow to serve until all beings are awakened.

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<sup>67</sup> Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho, *Yangchen's Lute*, 103a3–103a4; Sde srid Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho, *Supplement to Fine Silken Dress*, Vol. 4, 68a3–69a2=139.3–141.2.

<sup>68</sup> Lin 2011, chapter 1.

<sup>69</sup> Sde srid Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho, *Supplement to Fine Silken Dress*, Vol. 4, 136a6–136b1=277.6–278.1.

<sup>70</sup> Eco 2009, 49.

*Appendix A*  
*Dalai Lama Rebirth Lineage Members, ca. 1680–1694*

<i>Sole Ornament</i> , Western Great Assembly Hall, Red Palace, Potala (ca. 1694) <sup>71</sup>	<i>Yangchen's Lute</i> (ca. 1680)	<i>Supplement to Fine Silken Dress</i> (1682) <sup>72</sup>
A1. Sangs rgyas 'Od mdzad ye shes tog		
A2. 'Od dpag med		
B1 (gtso bo). Rje bla ma chen po	[1.] Fifth Dalai Lama	<b>78.</b> Thams cad mkhyen pa Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho: 137b3ff., 234ff.
A3. Thugs rje chen po	2. Spyran ras gzigs	1. Spyran ras gzigs: 8b2–30a6, 77b1–81b4; 24–42, 127–34
B2. 'Jig rten dbang phyug	3. 'Jig rten dbang phyug	2. Rgyal po 'Jig rten dbang phyug: 30a6–33b1, 43–47
B3. Khye'u Sngang ba	4. Sngang ba	3. Khye'u Sngang ba: 33b1–33b4, 47–48
B4. Khye'u Gsal ba	5. Gsal ba	4. Khye'u Gsal ba: 33b4–35b1, 48–51
B5. Rgyal bu Chags med	6. Chags med	5. Rgyal bu Chags med: 35b1–37b1, 51–55
B6. Rgyal po'i sras Kun tu dga'	7. Kun tu dga'	6. Rgyal po Kun tu dga': 37b1–38a3, 55–56
B7. Lha skyes	8. Bsod nams 'phel gyi brgyud [Lha skyes]	7. Rgyal bu lha skyes: 38a3–39a4, 56–57
A6, B8. Dkon cog 'bangs	9. Dkon cog 'bangs	8. Dkon cog 'bangs: 39a4–43a6, 57–65
A7, B9. Dad pa brtan pa	10. Dad pa brtan pa	9. Dad pa brtan pa, 43a6–46b5, 65–70
B10. Rgyal ba dpal [bzang]	11. Dpal [bzang]	10. Dpal bzang: 46b5–47a6, 71
B11. Dad pa rab brtan	12. Dad pa rab tu brtan	11. Dad pa rab tu brtan pa: 47a6–48b4, 72–74
B12. Blo gros 'phel	13. Blo gros 'phel	12. Rgyal bu Blo gros 'phel: 48b4–50b4, 74–78
B13. Khye'u Dga' 'dzin	14. Dga' 'dzin	13. Khye'u Dga' 'dzin: 50b4–52b1, 78–81
B14. Dge bsnyen btsun pa	15. Dge bsnyen btsun pa	14. Dge bsnyen btsun pa: 52b1–53a1, 81–82

<sup>71</sup> The sequence of entries in this column has been arranged to correspond horizontally with the earlier lineage sequence of *Yangchen's Lute* in the middle column. Entries are numbered according to their order of appearance in this section of the text; "A" designates paintings on the ground floor, while "B" designates paintings on the walls above the balustrade. Sde srid Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho, *Sole Ornament*, vol. 1, 285a3–286b4=579.3–582.4.

<sup>72</sup> The sequence of entries in this column has been arranged to correspond horizontally with the earlier lineage sequence of *Yangchen's Lute* in the middle column. Entries are numbered according to the the order of appearance of their biographical narratives in this text. The numbers of entries that appear in a different sequence than *Yangchen's Lute* are marked in bold font. Page citations refer to Sde srid Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho, *Supplement to Fine Silken Dress*, vol. 4, and Ahmad's translation respectively.

B15. [Nor bzang] Rin cen dpal	16. Nor bzang	15. Nor bu bzang po: 53a1–54a2, 82–84
B16. Khye'u Zla ba	17. Zla ba	16. Khye'u Zla ba: 54a2–55a4, 84–86
B17. Rin chen snying po	18. Rin cen snying po	17. Khye'u Rin chen snying po: 55a4–56a5, 86–88
B18. Khye'u Padma	19. Padma	18. Khye'u Padma: 56a5–57a6, 88–91
B19. Khye'u 'Od zer	20. 'Od zer	19. Khye'u 'Od zer: 57a6–58b4, 91–93
B20. Khye'u Byams pa	21. Byams pa	20. Byams pa: 58b4–60a2, 93–96
B21. Seng ge sgra	22. Seng ge'i sgra	21. Seng ge sgra: 60a2–61a6, 96–98
B22. Rgyal po Bde mchog	23. Bde mchog	22. Rgyal bu Bde mchog, or, Ba lang skyong: 61a6–63a3, 98–100
B23. Lha'i rgyal po	24. Lha yi rgyal po	23. Lha'i rgyal po: 63a3–64a1, 100–102
B24. Dge 'dun 'phel	25. Dge 'dun 'phel	24. Khye'i Dge 'dun 'phel: 64a1–65a3, 102–4
B25. Rāja	26. Rāja	25. Pho reng Rāja: 65a3–66a6, 104–6
B26. Ge sar	27. Ge sar	26. Ge sar: 66a6–68a3, 106–9
B27. Ri bong	28. Ri bong	27. Ri bong: 68a3–69a2, 109–11
B28. Lo brgyad byis pa	29. Lo brgyad byis pa	28. Lo brgyad byis pa: 69a2–70a5, 111–14
B29. Rje bo'i rnam pa	30. Rje ba'i rnam par bstan	29. Dzi bo: 70a5–70b5, 114–15
B30. Bram ze Rin cen mchog	31. Bram ze Rin cen mchog	30. Bram ze Rin chen mchog: 70b5–71a3, 115
B31. Bsam gtan bzang po	32. Bsam gtan bzang po	31. Bsam gtan bzang po: 71a3–71b3, 115–16
B32. Dur khrod rnal 'byor pa	33. Dur khrod rnal 'byor pa	32. Dur khrod rnal 'byor: 71b3–72a2, 116–17
B33. Gling phran rgyal po	34. Gling phran rgyal po	33. Gling phran rgyal po: 72a2–72b3, 117–18
B34. Sro long Kun rgyu	35. Sro long Kun tu rgyu	34. Sro long Kun tu rgyu: 72b3–74a6, 118–21
B35. Rgyal po skyabs sbyin	36. Skyabs sbyin	35. Rgyal po skyabs sbyin: 74a6–75b1, 121–22
B38. Gnya' khri btsan po	37. Gnya' khri btsan po	38. Gnya' khri btsan po: 81b4–82a3, 134
	38. Mu khri btsan po	39. Mu khri btsan po: 82a3, 134–35
	39. Ding khri btsan po	40. Ding khri btsan po: 82a3, 135
	40. Mer khri btsan po	41. Mer khri btsan po: 82a3, 135
	41. Gdags khri btsan po	42. Gdags khri btsan po: 82a3, 135
	42. Sribts khri btsan po	43. Sribts khri btsan po: 82a3, 135
	43. Po da gung rgyal po	44. Spu de gung rgyal, or Bya khri bstan po: 82a4, 135
B39. I sho legs	44. I sho legs	45. I sho legs: 82a4, 135
B40. Lde 'phrul gnam gzhung btsan	45. Lde 'phrul gnam gzhung btsan	46. Lde 'phrul gnam gzhung gtsan: 82a6, 135
	46. Se snol nam lde	47. Lde snol nam: 82b1, 135

B41. Pur rgyal byams pas skyong ba rje rgyal <sup>73</sup>	47. Rdzogs pa lde rgyal	48. Lde rgyal po: 82b1, 135
	48. Lder sprin btsan	49. Lde sprin btsan: 82b1, 135
B36. Za hor rgyal po Gtsug lag 'dzin	49. Mi bdag Gtsug lag 'dzin	36. Rgyal po Gtsug lag 'dzin: 75b1-77a2, 123-25
B42. Khri sgra dpung btsan	50. Sa spyod sgra dpung btsan	50. Khri sgra dpung btsan: 82b1-82b2, 135
	51. Khri thog rje btsun	51. Khri thog rje btsan: 82b2, 135
B43. Mi rje Tho ri snyan shal	52. Tho ri snyan shal	52. Lha tho tho ri: 82b2-82b5, 135-36
	53. Gnam ri srong btsan	53. Gnam ri srong btsan: 82b5-83a1, 136
A4. Chos kyi rgyal po Srong btsan sgam po B44. Rgyal ba Srong btsan sgam po	54. Srong btsan sgam po	54. Srong btsan sgam po: 83a1-85b2, 136-41
	55. 'Dus srong mar rje	55. 'Dus srong mang po rje: 85b2-85b4, 141
	56. Khri lde gtsug brtan	56. Khri lde gtsug brtan Mes ag tshoms: 85b4-86a3, 141
A5. Tshangs pa lha'i me tog B45. Khri srong lde btsan	57. Khri srong lde btsan	57. Khri srong lde btsan: 86a3-87b5, 142-46
B46. Mnga' bdag Khri ral	58. Mnga' bdag Khri ral [pa can]	58. Khri ral: 87b5-89a1, 146-48
B37. Chos rgyal Dge ba dpal	59. Chos rgyal Dge ba dpal	37. Rgyal po Dga' ba dpal, or, Dge ba dpal: 77a2-77b1, 125-26
	60. Mkhas grub dgon pa	66. Kha che dgon pa ba: 108a3-108a5, 184
B47. 'Brom ston rgyal ba'i 'byung gnas	61. 'Brom ston rje	59. 'Brom ston rgyal ba'i 'byung gnas: 89a1-91b2, 148-53
	62. Kun dga' snying po	67. Dpal ldan Sa skya pa chen po Kun dga' snying po: 108a5-109a4, 184-85
	63. [Bla ma Zhang] G.yu brag 'gro ba'i mgon po	68. 'Gro ba'i mgon po Zhang rin po che G.yu brag pa: 109a4-110b5, 185-88
	64. G.ya' bzang pa	69. G.yam bzang pa: 110b5-112a2, 188-89
A8. Gter chen Chos kyi rgyal po Nyang ral pa can B48. Gter chen Gong ma Nyi ma 'od zer	65. [Nyang ral] Nyi ma 'od zer	60. Nyang Nyi ma 'od zer: 92a6-94a4, 155-59
B49. Gter chen Chos kyi dbang phyug	66. Gu ru Chos dbang	61. Chos dbang: 94a4-97a1, 159-64
	67. Sum ston Ye shes gzungs	70. Sum ston Ye shes gzungs: 112a2-112b2, 190
B52. Chos rgyal 'Phags pa	68. 'Phags chen chos kyi rgyal po	64. 'Phags pa: 105a4-107b5, 178-82
	69. Dge ba 'bum	71. Lha rje Dge ba 'bum: 112b2-113b5, 190-92
B53. Padmavajra	70. Padmavajra	65. Paṇḍita Padmavajra: 107b5-108a1, 182

<sup>73</sup> This is a tentative identification with Lde rgyal po; the text should perhaps be emended as *sa skyong ba lde rgyal*.

A9, B54. Dge 'dun grub pa dpal bzang po	71. [DL1] Dge 'dun grub	74. Pañ chen Dge 'dun grub: 116a6–119b3, 197–202
	72. Blo gros rgyal mtshan dpal	72. Blo gros rgyal mtshan dpal bzang po: 113b5–114b5, 192–94
	73. Mkhyen rab chos kyi rje	73. Dpal ldan bla ma Rin chen mkhyen rab chos rje: 114b5–116a6, 194–96
B55. Dge 'dun rgya mtsho	74. [DL2] Dge 'dun rgya mtsho'i dpal	75. Thams cad mkhyen pa Dge 'dun rgya mtsho: 119b3–124b1, 202–210
B50. Mnga' ris Padma dbang rgyal	75. Gter chen Padma dbang	62. Mnga' ris Pañ chen Padma dbang rgyal: 97a1–100a6, 164–70
B51. Chos rgyal Bkra shis stobs rgyal	76. Chos rgyal Dbang po'i sde	63. Dharmarāja Bkra shis stobs rgyal dbang po'i sde: 100a6–105a4, 170–78
B56. Bsod nams rgya mtsho	77. [DL3] Bsod nams rgya mtsho	76. Thams cad mkhyen pa Bsod nams rgya mtsho: 124b1–130b6, 211–21
B57. Bde chen chos kyi rgyal po Dpal bzang po	78. [DL4] Yon tan rgya mtsho	77. Rje Yon tan rgya mtsho: 130b6–133a5, 221–25

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# Buddhist Body Politics: Life, Death, and Reincarnation in Transnational Eurasia

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**I**n the summer of 1927, five Buddhist pilgrims appeared in Lhasa, the capital of Tibet. Their formidable journey, which took over a year of travel on foot, camels, and yaks, started in the Buryat-Mongol Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic in Siberia and passed through Mongolian grasslands, the Gobi Desert, Tsaidam swamps, and the high mountain passes of the Tibetan plateau. The lamas enrolled in Lhasa's famous Drepung monastery and embarked on a multi-year curriculum in the Gomang monastic college. It is not known whether they originally planned to stay in Tibet after receiving their degrees; however, it is likely that any impulse to remain in Tibet would have been influenced by the news of the severe repressions of religion that started in Russia in the late 1920s. In the end, they did stay in Tibet, and within a few decades, almost all these men held senior positions in the Tibetan monastic establishment. As the socialist project migrated from Russia to China, however, some of them became victims of Chinese repressions of Tibetan Buddhism, and they perished during the Cultural Revolution.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I have assembled the history of these early Soviet pilgrims in a somewhat piecemeal fashion from the following four sources: oral histories received from Khentrul Rinpoché (the current reincarnation of one of the pilgrims) and Yeshé Lodrö Rinpoché (a disciple of one the other pilgrims); the autobiography of one of the participants, Agvan Nyima; and a brief note by Buryat researcher G. N. Zaiatuev, who mentions a group of five monks sent to Lhasa by the Buryat lama and diplomat Agvan Dorzhiev. Nyima does not state the year of their departure in his narrative. However, the preface written by Yeshé Lodrö Rinpoché sets the date at 1923. Both Khentrul Rinpoché in an interview with me and Zaiatuev in his book set the date to 1927, which I have used here. See Zaiatuev 1991. *Tsanid-khambo Agvan Dorzhiev, 1853-1938 gg.* Ulan-Ude 1996. *Pereprava cherez reku sansary. Avtobiografiia [Crossing the River of Saṃsāra. An Autobiography]. Translated from Tibetan by Bair Ochirov.* Ulan-Ude: Tsentral'noe dukhovnoe upravlenie buddistov Rossiiskoi Federatsii. Other discrepancies in the sources include the number of

Little or nothing was known of the fate of these men in Buryatia until the late 1980s, when the first Buryat lamas newly mobilized by perestroika began visiting Drepung again, by then relocated to and recreated in southern India by the Tibetan exile community, and a thriving home to about 4,500 monks. To their amazement, the first of the late twentieth-century socialist Siberian pilgrims were stunned to discover four of these original five monks alive and well in the tropics. One of these pilgrims was now over eighty years old, while two others lived in the monastery, as they themselves professed, in their *new* bodies. That is to say they were *reincarnations* of the early twentieth-century Buryat pilgrims. The bodies these Buryats acquired were ethnically Tibetan, one from Nepal, and one from the region of Kham in the Sichuan province in China. These two monks subsequently visited Buryatia, had reunions with their Buryat "relatives," and became active members of the Buryat Buddhist revival.

The fourth monk did not seem to have a recognized reincarnation; however, during his life in Tibet, he served as a master to a young Tibetan incarnate lama named Yeshé Lodrö (Yelo) Rinpoché (born 1943). In the early 1990s, Yelo Rinpoché, now in his sixties, had been invited to teach in Buryatia due to his being of "Buryat ancestry" through his master. Today, Yelo Rinpoché, an ethnic Tibetan, resides in Buryatia, speaks fluent Buryat, and has acquired Russian citizenship. Rinpoché's status as a "naturalized foreigner," however, is contested by the distinction between Tibetan lamas with "roots" in Buryatia and those without them, prompting a relatively new discourse on "roots," which might seem incompatible with the otherwise apparent cosmopolitanism of Buryat Buddhists, who have long been conscious of their many border crossings, in both time and space.

To understand the sorts of corporeal mobilities that enabled these border-crossings, this chapter conceptualizes the institutions of Buddhist reincarnation and discipleship as practices of a certain kind of corporeal motion, which includes not only traversing vast Inner Asian territories, but also journeys and relationships between bodies across multiple lifetimes. In the Buddhist view, no body is an isolated unit, but rather each exists as a mosaic of references to other bodies: as Buddhists like to say, "if you wish to know what you were like in the past, look at your present body."<sup>2</sup> That is, the very fact of having a body of a human (as opposed to that of an animal or a hungry ghost,

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monks who were part of this group: while Zaiatuev lists five, both Avgan Nyima in his autobiography and Kentrul Rinpoche in an interview state there were about ten of them.

<sup>2</sup> Lopez 2002, 45.

which are considered unfortunate births) is a result of ethical deeds in past lives. While rebirth and reincarnation involve movements from body to body, tantric discipleship involves transfers of certain symbolic bodily substances that create quasi-kinship relationships between masters and disciples. The movements and relationships between two or more bodies produced by Buddhist corporeal technologies constitute extensive transnational somatic networks, where the meaning of individual bodies is shaped through their relationship with other bodies in the network. Using an analogy with the notion of intertextuality,<sup>3</sup> in this chapter, I look at the phenomenon of reincarnation and discipleship as instances of “inter-bodiment,” where individual Buddhist bodies acquire sociopolitical import through referencing or evoking other bodies. In the case of reincarnation, inter-bodiment is produced through a vertical axis that connects bodies through time, while in the case of tantric discipleship, we have both horizontal and vertical axes, the former connecting living masters with their disciples and the disciples to each other, while the latter refers to the relationships that these masters and disciples had in their *past* lives. I argue that the significance of such religiously inspired inter-body movement has subversive implications that go beyond esoteric religious practices, as they challenge biopolitical regimes of mobility imposed by nation-states on their indigenous populations, complicating the issues of allegiances and loyalties.

Many Buryat Buddhists view the reincarnation of lamas described above as an intentional act with messianic implications: according to this view, the “return” of some of these five original lamas to Buryatia is a result of a preconceived grand plan put in place by these early twentieth-century lamas with the single-minded goal to benefit the development of Buddhism in Buryatia. According to this account, the lamas were supposed to come back to Buryatia after their training in Tibet; however, this plan had been hindered by the Chinese and Russian revolutions, resulting in the Buryat lamas’ death in Tibet. Their subsequent re-emergence in Buryatia in the bodies of Tibetan lamas is viewed as a part of an intentional (but now slightly changed and rather delayed) mission to bring Buddhism back to Buryatia, now as part of global post-socialist religious revival. Similarly, the institution of tantric discipleship enabled these early Buryat monks to take on Tibetan disciples (usually reincarnate lamas from minor lineages), who eventually came back to teach in post-Soviet Buryatia; these figures are now viewed as partially Buryat. As part of the same popular belief, it is supposed that masters and

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<sup>3</sup> Kristeva 1986.

disciples connected in past lives must necessarily meet again in future lives. These culturally specific practices and interpretations of somatic motion can help us rethink the cultural significance of the phenomenon of incarnate lamas, linking the study of reincarnation to social scientific debates on transnationalism, globalization, and mobility.

CASE OF REINCARNATION	CASE OF DISCIPLESHIP
<b>Russian Empire</b>	
(c. early 1900s) Galsan Lekden (Buryat) born in Siberia	(c. early 1900s) Thupten Nyima (Buryat) born in Siberia
<b>Soviet Union → Pre-Chinese Tibet</b>	
(c. 1927) Arrived in Tibet	(c. 1927) Arrived in Tibet
(c. 1950) Became abbot of Drepung Monastery in Lhasa	(c. 1950) Became a senior lama, served as a tutor to a young Tibetan <i>tulku</i> (incarnate lama) (b. 1943)
<b>Chinese Tibet (1950 - )</b>	
(c.?) Died in a Chinese prison	(c. ?) Died during the turmoil in Tibet
<b>China → Nepal (Via Reincarnation) → India</b>	
(c. 1976) Reincarnation born in his friend's family in Nepal	(c. 1959) Young disciple (Yeshe Lodrö Rinpoché) fled to India following the Dalai Lama's exile
<b>India</b>	
(c. 1980) Discovered in Nepal by Tibetan monks from the Indian Drepung, brought to India	(c.1980) Yeshe Lodrö Rinpoché completed his formal monastic education
(c. 1990) Discovered by first post-socialist Buryat pilgrims to India, became conscious of his "Buryatness"	(c. 1990) Rediscovered his Buryat "roots," went to teach first in Mongolia, then Buryatia, learned Buryat, became a naturalized Russian citizen
<b>India → Post-socialist Russia</b>	
(c. 2000) Started to visit and teach in Siberia, reunited with his Buryat "relatives"	(c. 2000) Opened his own monastery in Buryatia, became a major competitor to the official Buryat religious establishment

Figure 1. Inter-body Movement

With the exception of Agvan Nyima, the only one of the original five pilgrims who escaped Tibet and wrote his autobiography,<sup>4</sup> there are practically no published materials that describe these lamas or their fates, a puzzling fact given the dramatic means by which their lives traversed some of the most famous political and religious struggles of the twentieth century. To learn more about these men, and to consider their impact on Buryat cultural politics today, I aimed to recreate some of their same paths by traveling myself between monasteries in Buryatia and southern India. What follows is based on field research and interviews between 2001 and 2008 with the three Tibetan lamas whose lives continued under new auspices. These extraordinary transnational reincarnation and discipleship lineages began in 1920s Soviet Siberia, crossed over to Tibet, Nepal, and India, and eventually came back to post-socialist Russia. There are two types of inter-body movement involved in these lineages: reincarnation lineages involving movement from body to body and tantric discipleship lineages that involve creating certain relationships between two or more bodies. The corporeal practices involved in these border-crossings represent a fusion of religious and political consciousnesses that allows Buryats to preserve a careful balance between a greater Asian Buddhist universe and their loyalties to Russia.

### 1. Reincarnation: Bodies in Flux

Early Buddhist theory postulated that the Buddha had two bodies—the physical body (*rūpakāya*) and the transcendent body of virtuous qualities that was not subject to sickness and death (*dharmakāya*).<sup>5</sup> Later doctrines developed a tri-partite scheme of the Buddha's bodies: *dharmakāya*, in which the supramundane qualities of the Buddha evolved into a kind of transcendent principle of enlightenment, the *sambhogakāya*, a celestial body of the Buddha, and the *nirmanakāya* or “emanation” body, which might be assumed for the purpose of instructing and saving beings in our world, most famously in the form of the historical Buddha himself.<sup>6</sup> In Tibetan, the Sanskrit term for “emanation body” is translated as *tulku* (*sprul sku*) and glossed in English as an “incarnate lama.”

The most famous incarnate lamas are identified with specific buddhas and bodhisattvas. Thus, the Dalai Lama is understood to be

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<sup>4</sup> Nyima 1996.

<sup>5</sup> Lopez 2002, 61-62.

<sup>6</sup> Williams 1989, 167-185.

the human incarnation of the bodhisattva of compassion, Avalokiteśvara, and the Pañchen Lama an incarnation of the buddha Amitābha. The Bogd Gegeen (Jebdzundamba Khutugtu of Mongolia) is considered an emanation of Vajrapāṇi. Transferring the notion of emanation into the secular realm, Tibetan Buddhists have proclaimed sacralized historical figures to be manifestations of deities: Chinggis Khan is considered a manifestation of the fierce bodhisattva Vajrapāṇi, the Qing emperor Qianlong an emanation of Manjuśrī, while the Russian emperors are widely believed to be the emanation of the goddess White Tārā.<sup>7</sup> Secularizing the idea of reincarnate lineages even further by combining it with the Chinese notion of *zhengtong* (“political descent”), Inner Asian rulers often proclaimed themselves reincarnations of their charismatic predecessors, with Altan Khan identifying himself as a reincarnation of Kublai Khan and many other rulers claiming descent from Chinggis Khan.<sup>8</sup> Although, unlike Tibetans, Buryats never developed a formal institution of reincarnation whereby a child is identified as a reincarnation of a previous lama, some prominent lamas were posthumously referred to as incarnates of past masters.

The identification of the successive incarnation of high lamas, an institution that developed in Tibet as early as the eleventh century, ensured the inheritance of leadership and property from one generation to the next at a time when celibate monastic communities replaced noble families—previously the primary patrons of Buddhism—to become centers of Buddhist power and governance. Taking a Weberian view of authority, Turrell Wylie suggested that the institution of reincarnation facilitated the “transition from charisma of person to a charisma of office: a change essential to the establishment of a hierocratic form of government that could survive as an institution regardless of the charisma of any individual.”<sup>9</sup> Focusing on the role of reincarnation in the transfer of property, Melvyn Goldstein demonstrated how features inherent in reincarnation transformed the Tibetan political system itself, resulting in what he called a “circulation of estates,” large blocks of arable land intermittently held by incarnate lamas in power.<sup>10</sup> Besides high incarnate lamas, most dramatically exemplified by the Dalai Lama, the Tibetan tradition had also developed hundreds of minor lineages, in which incarnate lamas are associated with a particular monastery or local region. The personalities we encounter in this essay belong to this category of lesser incarnate lamas.

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<sup>7</sup> Andreyev 2003, 7-8. Rawski 1998, 248.

<sup>8</sup> Rawski 1998, 210, 249.

<sup>9</sup> Wylie 1978, 584.

<sup>10</sup> Goldstein 1973.

Reincarnation has often crossed ethnic boundaries and forged political ties, especially among Tibetans, Mongols, and Chinese, moving even to the West in the late twentieth century.<sup>11</sup> A folk story that Buryat adepts often tell about the origin of the lineage of Mongolian Jebdzundamba Khutugtus describes the Tibetan scholar Tāranātha (1575-1634) who, at the end of his life, asked his disciples where he should be born next. One of them, a Mongol, cried out, "Please be reborn in Mongolia!" Tāranātha was reborn in the noble Mongolian family as Zanabazar (1635-1723), who was recognized as the first Jebdzundamba and subsequently inserted into the lineage of Chinggis Khan and Kublai Khan.<sup>12</sup> Several decades prior to this (in 1588), in a similar strategic and diplomatic move, the Fourth Dalai Lama was identified in a great-grandson of the Mongol leader Altan Khan, becoming the first and only non-Tibetan Dalai Lama at the time when Buddhism was once again starting to take hold in Mongolia.<sup>13</sup> Thus, beyond the issues of leadership and property succession identified by Wylie and Goldstein, reincarnation appears to have been crucial for the spread of Tibetan Buddhism to new regions, most notably its transmission into Mongolia. Transnational reincarnation lineages are produced through somatic networks, which interlink individual bodies into a chain of cosmic relatedness.

## 2. *Discipleship: Lineages in Motion*

If reincarnation can be understood as a movement between bodies, which produces extra-kin and extra-territorial lineages in Tibetan Buddhism, another quasi-kinship practice, known as a master-disciple relationship,<sup>14</sup> creates relationships between two or more different bodies through the symbolic transfer of bodily substances. Incarnate lamas inherit not only property, but also disciples with whom they enter into a special ritual relationship through which the master's power is transmitted to the student. One of the central rituals of tantric Buddhism is the process of the transmission of ritual power known as "initiation" or, literally, "empowerment" (Tib. *dbang*). Through "empowerments," the disciple is initiated into the practice of a particular deity and becomes a part of a certain "buddha-family," which sometimes includes a ritual rebirth and going through the stages of childhood, such as obtaining a new name

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<sup>11</sup> Lavine 1998, 105-110.

<sup>12</sup> For more on the lineage of Jebdzundamba Khutugtus, see Bawden 1961; Humphrey 1994, 21-44; Sanders 2001.

<sup>13</sup> Snellgrove & Richardson 1995 [1968], 184-185.

<sup>14</sup> On tantric discipleship as a quasi-kinship practice, see Mills 2000, 17-34.

and getting one's first haircut and bath. During this ritual, the disciple must imagine his master as the deity, and fellow disciples who attended the initiation led by the same master are called "vajra brothers" and "vajra sisters" (Skt. *vajra*, or thunderbolt, being the central symbol of indestructibility), and are often viewed as "children" of the lama. In some initiations, such as the Kālacakra cycle, disciples must visualize the master in sexual union with a female consort, subsequently visualizing themselves as entering the mouth of the lama, passing through his body to the vagina and then on to the womb of his female consort, from where they are ritually reborn.<sup>15</sup> There is also a point at which a drop of yogurt is placed on each person's tongue. This represents the sexual fluids that have emerged from the vagina of the tantric consort after intercourse with the tantric master. In the higher initiation, one is then supposed to have intercourse with a consort.

Tantric initiation rites involve symbolic transfers of bodily substances to link different bodies into a web of somatic networks. While it might appear that these networks are arbitrarily constituted by previously unrelated bodies, Buddhists believe that these bodies were *already* bound by these relationships in previous lifetimes and the fact that they meet now is a result of karma and good deeds in past lives. The Buddhist view excludes the element of randomness from movements and relationships between bodies. In this light, many contemporary tantric initiations that today increasingly take place in lay, urban, transnational contexts acquire subversive potential as they refuse to accommodate the logics of nation states. Kālacakra initiations, for example, fairly regularly conferred by the Dalai Lama in India (as well as Europe and North America), are gigantic public spectacles attended by thousands of believers from all over the world.<sup>16</sup> Since the Dalai Lama is not allowed to visit Russia due to China's objections, such initiations often become a focal point for lay Buryat adepts to escape the purview of both Russia and China by conducting pilgrimages to India, Europe, or even as far as the U.S. where they become parts of Buddhist networks as new "vajra brothers and sisters" (Rus. *vadrzhnye brat'ia i sestry*), along with thousands of fellow co-religionists from Brazil to South Africa.

For those who cannot afford distant travel, Tibetan émigré lamas living in Russia and visiting lamas from India regularly conduct other tantric initiations in Buryatia. Since Buryatia does not have its own currently living lamas, who would be qualified to conduct such

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<sup>15</sup> Dalai Lama 1999, 94-95. See also Mills 2000, 17-34.

<sup>16</sup> For a behind-the-scenes ethnographic account of the staging of a Kalachakra initiation in New York, see McLagan 2002, 90-115.

rituals, in the post-socialist period, initiations have become the domain of Tibetan incarnates. Their authority, however, is not uncontested, and certain lamas are considered by some Buryats to be more suitable than others to confer empowerments. Enter a new kind of a contemporary Tibetan teacher: the Tibetan of “Buryat ancestry” (literally, of Buryat “roots,” Rus. *s buriatskimi korniami*). Those Tibetan lamas who happen to be either the reincarnations or disciples of an important past Buryat master, are considered better for this role than those with no direct ties to Buryatia.

In order to understand why Buryats today might prefer to receive empowerments from their own “kin,” let us first consider the practices that make Tibetan lamas of “Buryat ancestry” possible, forging transnational ties between the two peoples. While the notion of reincarnation may have been developed in order to ensure the proper succession of religious authority, it also became a means of social mobility. Highly educated and talented monks sometimes became great masters, and after their death, a search for a successor might be initiated, thus founding a new incarnation lineage. This was the case with the two lamas who were originally part of the group of the five Buryat pilgrims to Tibet: by having achieved high status in their previous lives, they forged the beginning of two new trans-ethnic lineages, further expanding the networks of interrelated Buddhist bodies.

The biographies of two incarnate Tibetan lamas with “Buryat roots” demonstrate how bodily technologies of reincarnation and tantric apprenticeship enabled Buddhist subjects, whose mobility was restricted by the modern biopolitical regimes of Russia and China during the socialist period, to create somatic networks that transgress boundaries between nation states, but also between bodies, between life and death, and conventionally defined lines of kinship and ethnicity. This unauthorized inter-body movement complicates issues of allegiances both within the Russian Federation and within the Republic of Buryatia, where these nomadic hybrid bodies present challenges to the current nationalist Buddhist establishment.

### *3. Buryats in Tibet: The Story of Galsan Lekden*

One of the most prominent among the five lamas who arrived in Tibet in 1927 was a Buryat named Galsan Lekden (Buryat name Galsan Arzhigarov). He quickly rose to prominence, becoming an abbot of the Drepung Gomang monastic college, the first Buryat ever to head an important religious institution in Tibet. He was later imprisoned during the Cultural Revolution in China and is reported

to have died in custody. The present incarnation of Galsan Legden known as Khentrul Rinpoché, was born in 1976 in Nepal. As is very common in reincarnation narratives, since the time he started talking, he always said he wanted to join the monastery.<sup>17</sup> When he saw monks, he tried to follow them and when he saw red or yellow fabric, he often tried to grab it and put it on himself. When he was four, monks from Drepung monastery appeared on his doorstep, claiming that the boy was a reincarnation of their former abbot. It turned out that when Galsan Lekden was imprisoned in China, he shared his prison cell with a Tibetan monk who was planning to escape to Nepal. Knowing that his death was near, Lekden asked his fellow inmate if he could visit him in Nepal. Thinking that he was talking about coming to his house in Nepal after the release from prison, Lekden's friend responded, "Yes, of course, you can visit me, and I will do everything to make your stay comfortable." Thus, two lifetimes got conflated in the same conversation. Galsan Lekden died in prison and was reborn into his friend's family in Nepal.<sup>18</sup>



*Image 1. Galsan Lekden conducting an empowerment. Russia, 2008. Photo courtesy of Igor' Iancheglov.*

<sup>17</sup> For accounts of reincarnation and procedures related to the identification of tulkus written by incarnate lamas themselves, see Dalai Lama 1997 [1962]; Norbu 1986 [1960]; Trungpa 2000.

<sup>18</sup> Interview, Drepung, Karnataka, South India, February 2008.

While notions of rebirth are widespread in various cultures and usually happen within ethnic groups, and most often within the same genetic kin groups, reincarnations are not impeded by national borders.<sup>19</sup> From 1977 to 1980, Agvan Nyima, one of the original five Buryat pilgrims and the only one to escape Tibet, served as the abbot of the Gomang College of the newly reestablished Drepung Monastery that has been built in the exile communities in India.<sup>20</sup> During his term, in the late 1970s, he initiated a search for the reincarnation of his old friend. Following all the standard procedures,<sup>21</sup> the search party from Drepung identified a Tibetan boy in Nepal as Galsan Lekden, a Buryat from the Tunka region of southern Siberia, who served as the abbot of the Gomang College of Drepung Monastery in Lhasa during the time of the Chinese takeover. Thus, due to the efforts of his countryman, Agvan Nyima, Lekden became the originator of a new lineage, which has so far spanned four countries and two nationalities. What might such ethnic fluidity, resulting from transnational reincarnations, signify? In 2008, I lived in the South Indian Drepung monastery for several months and sought out this young man to ask how he himself understood this reincarnation process. He summarized:<sup>22</sup>

When I was told I was a reincarnation of Lekden, I was glad, but I didn't feel anything special. It was only when they showed me his picture, I felt something . . . unusual. When they told me my predecessor was a Mongol—I did not know about the difference between Mongols and Buryats at the time—I felt a sense of “us” and “ours,” a sense of pride for being a Mongol, even a feeling of some kind of patriotism, a Mongol patriotism.

It was only in the late eighties—when Khentrul Rinpoché saw the first Buryat monks and pilgrims who started arriving at Drepung from Russia—that he learned about this difference. The first post-

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<sup>19</sup> Anthropological literature abounds with references to notions of rebirth in various cultures, from Native North America to Africa to Melanesia. For a synthesis of many of these sources, see Obeyesekere 2002.

<sup>20</sup> After retiring from his post of the Gomang College abbot, Agvan Nyima taught and worked in Switzerland and Holland. For more on Agvan Nyima (1907-1990), see his autobiography (Nyima 1996).

<sup>21</sup> The standard procedures for the search of a reincarnation include performing a series of divinations to determine the location of the candidates and then examining the candidates' ability to demonstrate some knowledge of their predecessors' identities. The tests include having young boys choose objects belonging to the past incarnation among various objects presented to them.

<sup>22</sup> Author interview, Drepung Monastery, India, January 2008.

socialist Buryat pilgrims who arrived in Drepung, having heard of the reincarnation of their celebrated Lekden, immediately treated him as a high lama, although he was only a teenager at the time. The word about the reincarnated master spread, and eventually, visiting and getting blessings from Khentrul Rinpoché and another former Buryat incarnate living in India, Zhibalha lama, became part of the pilgrim routine on visits to Drepung Monastery.



*Image 2: Galsan Lekden with Buryat pilgrims in India. Drepung Monastery, Karnataka, India, 2008.  
Photo by the author.*

Bodily networks that go beyond nation-states, ethnicities, and borders were also created through routine rituals performed by Buryat pilgrims while visiting Indian monasteries. Among the most sought after experiences are audiences with as many incarnate lamas as possible. While seeing the Dalai Lama is of utmost importance, it is not often possible; however, it is considered especially valuable to visit their fellow “Buryats,” Tibetan lamas Lekden or Zhibalha, while in southern India. (In the north, getting an audience with the traditional leader of Mongolian Buddhists, the ethnic Tibetan Jebdzundamba Khutugtu the Ninth, used to be another major goal before his death in 2012). Although not nearly as elaborate as formal initiations, these visits also provide brief instances of inter-body

movement, namely the transfer of ritual power from the master to his disciples. During such brief audiences, power is transferred as a blessing through a simple touch by the incarnate to the devotee's head, a gentle puff of breath on the face, or the holding and reciting of consecrating verses over various souvenirs purchased from street vendors. After these haptic engagements, the pilgrims are viewed as spiritually charged, and on their return home, many people, in turn, want to touch them to partake of their accreted power. Upon a pilgrim's return home, consecrated souvenirs are distributed—ranging from more elaborate altar pieces bought for close friends and kin to simple threads blessed by the lamas to be worn on the wrists and necks given to other acquaintances.



*Image 3: Zhibalha Rinpoché, another Tibetan lama with “Buryat roots,” with Buryat pilgrims in India. Drepung Monastery, Karnataka, India, 2008. Photo by the author.*

When asked of his impressions of Buryatia, Lekden said he was surprised by how many people wanted him to conduct the rituals of tantric empowerment. His surprise is understandable, for, until recently, most rituals of this kind have been restricted to the monastic establishment. It is with the spread of Buddhism to the West and modernization of Tibetan Buddhism in exile by the Fourteenth Dalai Lama that it became common practice for lay people to be initiated

into the tantric “families.”<sup>23</sup> Lekden bemoaned the fact that some lay Buryats seemed to be more interested in receiving high-level initiations than getting a good grasp on Buddhist fundamentals, which he addressed in his public lectures. While he ascribed it to the “shamanistic” Buryat obsession with ritual, I would suggest the Buryat interest in receiving empowerments from a Tibetan lama with “Buryat roots” hinges on their belief in its greater efficacy precisely because it expands their inter-body networks from the local to transnational level. On the one hand, through empowerments, lay people become incorporated in the global Buddhist “families” of deities, incarnate lamas, and monks. On the other hand, by receiving empowerments from someone whose body itself acts as a link to Buryat pre-revolutionary “golden age,” they gain additional power through reconnecting with specifically *Buryat* Buddhist kin and ancestors.

Reincarnation presents a type of inter-bodiment, where certain persons acquire sociopolitical power via their capacity to reference their previous bodies. Nomadic personae of the incarnates cross geopolitical borders, as well as transcend the borders between life and death and between classic ethnic identifications while involving their lay followers into complex webs of corporeal networks. These networks challenge biopolitical regimes of mobility, producing complex transnational allegiances based on beliefs and values often incompatible with the logics of the larger nation-states and local nationalist politics. Since the eleventh century, Tibetan Buddhism has become a translocal religion, reaching far beyond its Himalayan homeland, through the existence of incarnate lamas who were able to transcend site-specific allegiances or, in more recent times, who were able to “think and feel beyond the nation.”<sup>24</sup> During the early Soviet socialist period, these transnational flows were mostly unidirectional, flowing outward from the USSR to allow Buryat pilgrims to cross borders and perhaps even recruit co-religionists into the Soviet fold. These ties were discontinued at the turn of the 1930s, when Soviet internationalists abandoned their efforts to draw Tibet into its orbit.<sup>25</sup> Today this Buddhist transnationalism has resumed in both directions, with the locus of authority for Buryat Buddhists relocated from Lhasa to Dharamsala, the current seat of the Dalai Lama and Tibetan government in exile, and to South India where the three main Geluk monastic seats have been recreated. While thousands of Buryat pilgrims visit Tibetan communities in India every year, since the mid-

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<sup>23</sup> An exception is the Kalachakra initiations, which were public in traditional Tibet.

<sup>24</sup> Cheah & Robbins 1998.

<sup>25</sup> Andreyev 2003, 385-395.

1990s, Buryatia has become the center of Tibetan emigration to Russia. Tibetan lamas have had great success in post-socialist Buryatia as religious teachers, promoting an array of cosmopolitan subjectivities in an already pluralist Siberian republic. Below, I consider how another type of inter-bodiment, that of the master-disciple relationship, creates relationships between different bodies via the transfer of symbolic substances, complicating religious and ethnic politics in post-socialist Buryatia. This process is well illustrated by Yelo Rinpoché, the Tibetan incarnate lama mentioned above who resides in Buryatia.

#### *4. Tibetans in Buryatia: The Story of Yelo Rinpoché*

Yelo Rinpoché was born in Lithang in eastern Tibet in 1943. At the age of three, he was recognized as the fourth incarnate lama in his lineage. One of his early teachers was the Buryat lama Zhibalha, one of the original five lamas mentioned earlier in this article. When Yelo was thirteen, he entered the original Drepung Monastery in Lhasa where one of his main masters was Thupten Nyima, one of the five original Buryat pilgrims. Later, he escaped to India where he completed his monastic education under Agvan Nyima, who proved to be his next major Buryat teacher. After the collapse of socialism, he expressed interest in being sent to teach in Mongolia, where he spent a year mastering the Mongolian language. When Yelo Rinpoché first arrived in Mongolia, he attempted to locate the birthplace and find relatives of his "root" teacher, Thupten Nyima, who, he thought, was a Mongol. It is at that time, in Mongolia, he was told, that his teacher's native land was across the border to the north, in Siberia, and that his late teacher was, in fact, a Buryat.<sup>26</sup> Subsequently, when, in the early 1990s, Buryats started asking the Dalai Lama to send them a master to teach at the Ivolginsk Monastery, which houses the largest monastic university in Buryatia and serves as the seat of the Khambo Lama, Yelo Rinpoché gladly accepted.

Yelo Rinpoché arrived in Buryatia with his Tibetan disciple Tenzin, received Russian citizenship, and permanently settled in Ulan-Ude. He was initially sponsored by the official Buryat Buddhist establishment to teach at Ivolginsk; however, due to the ongoing conflicts with the local religious establishment, he departed and

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<sup>26</sup> Interview, Ulan-Ude, Buryatia, Russia, July 2001. See also my ethnographic documentary devoted to his life in Buryatia, where personally narrates his story. Bernstein 2002.

opened his own monastery on the outskirts of the city in 2004, along with several lay “dharma centers” in major Russian cities.

The cornerstone of the tensions between these two major figures in Buryatia—the Khambo Lama and Yelo Rinpoché—lies in the Buryat relationship with the Tibetan world and the Buddhist world in general. As I have discussed elsewhere, there is currently a deep schism between religious leaders in the Republic over issues of the identity and future of Buryat Buddhism.<sup>27</sup> While some are convinced that it should be modeled as much as possible on contemporary Tibetan Buddhism, others vehemently resist any foreign involvement or influence. The official leader of Buryat Buddhism, Khambo Lama Damba Aiusheev famously advocates “indigenous” Buryat Buddhism, which, in his view, is equal to (or in some versions of this argument, even superior to), but separate from Tibetan and Mongolian Buddhisms. Other leaders, in contrast, resist the appellation of “Buryat,” arguing that there is only one Buddhism and that such distinctions are based on erroneous nationalist feelings, incompatible with the true Buddhist doctrine. To make matters more complicated, the Russian central government, from Catherine the Great to President Medvedev had always fostered notions of ecclesiastical self-government, since having a religious community on the former empire’s borderlands subordinated to foreign leadership would complicate borders and loyalties. As we shall see, the ways in which these political allegiances manifest themselves through religious forms are manifold and complex.

Being one of the most powerful and respected religious figures in contemporary Buryatia, Yelo Rinpoché’s extraordinary status as an incarnate lama presents challenges for the Khambo Lama, who, on many occasions, has expressed resentment of the fact that Tibetans open their monasteries in Buryatia. While both Yelo Rinpoché and the Khambo Lama are widely popular religious leaders in the Republic, interestingly, the Khambo Lama emerged as a truly populist leader who works and speaks for the nation and evokes feelings of Buryat pride, while Yelo Rinpoché is mostly favored by Buryat intelligentsia in search of esoteric teachings. While the Khambo Lama is not a reincarnation but an elected leader, Yelo Rinpoché’s status as an incarnate lama causes him to be in high demand for conducting tantric empowerments. Because Buryatia does not have an institutionalized tradition of incarnate lamas, the status of Yelo Rinpoché is technically higher than anyone else in the Republic, which intensifies the tensions already present in Buryat religious politics.

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<sup>27</sup> Bernstein 2013.



*Image 4: Yelo Rinpoché with his disciple Tenzin. Buryatia, 2001. Photo by the author.*

While tulkus have an extraordinary status everywhere in the Tibetan Buddhist world, in Buryatia, even regular Tibetan lamas are usually viewed by lay people as charismatic, possessing special powers via a certain fetishization of Tibetan mystical “otherness.” Tibetan lamas in Buryatia often enjoy a strong following, even if their reputation becomes questionable. Unlike lay people, some members of the Buryat clergy, especially those who have spent many years in India with Tibetans, sometimes express skepticism and even cynicism regarding their fellow coreligionists. These views, passed unofficially through rumors and private conversations, which in a tightly-knit Buddhist community of Ulan-Ude quite quickly become public, creating a resentment that undermines Tibetan monastic emigration in Buryatia. A common view of some of the monks is that Tibetans “failed” in Buryatia, understanding “failure” in terms of the impossibility of introducing Tibetan model of monastic education in Buryatia and educating the public appropriately. Celibacy and

monastic discipline are usually invoked in this discourse of “failure”, as their absence in Buryatia is often explained by the incompatibility of Buryat and Tibetan “mentality,” with Buryats being said to be unable to subdue their “nomadic” and “wild” temperament into the rigid monastic structures of Tibetan Buddhism. But perhaps most crucially and most commonly, Tibetans are thought to be bound to failure in Buryatia because they do not have “roots” there. In other words, Tibetans in Buryatia who are not part of common somatic networks are often thought not as great teachers and bodhisattvas, but alien intruders inherently incapable of understanding local realities and merely out to profit from the ever-growing religious marketplace.

The pervasiveness of the biologicistic discourse on “roots” is especially striking, given that the Buddhist transnational and transcultural model of kinship is specifically designed to undermine this very ideology. To demonstrate how inter-body movement is being negotiated in local religious politics, in the remainder of this essay I examine how the debates around one particular ritual during the summer 2008 became an arena through which competing notions of “roots” were expressed. In this context, Yelo Rinpoché’s “Buryat ancestry” through his master Thupten Nyima placed him in a special position in the “roots” debate, thus exemplifying how such corporeal networks can play into the complex cultural politics in the region.

### 5. *Buddhist Ritual Wrought Anew*

Some of the central seasonal rituals in Buryatia are ritual offerings called *oboo*. An oboo refers to a cairn usually built on mountain tops to mark the residence of the so-called “land master” spirits.<sup>28</sup> Land master spirits are linked to both kinship and territorial groups, with all residents of adjacent villages often gathering for a communal ritual. Oboo rituals are rarely missed by Buryats, even those who are not actively involved in any kind of religious practice. Many, especially those who reside outside Buryatia, time their summer vacations to correspond with these events. During the months of May and June, Buryats come back to their native villages to attend the ritual and reconnect with numerous relatives. While oboo rituals can be performed by shamans and knowledgeable elders, here I focus on the rituals performed by Buddhist lamas.

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<sup>28</sup> See Abaeva 1991; Humphrey 1999 [1983], 422-423; Humphrey & Sneath 1999, 123-134.

The lama is supposed to perform a certain tantric visualization, generating himself as the wrathful Buddha Yamāntaka or the wrathful bodhisattva Vajrapāṇi, and then, as Yamāntaka or Vajrapāṇi, address “land master” spirits, asking them for protection, help in worldly affairs, and various blessings. People attending the ritual bring copious offerings of various foods and drinks, which are offered to the deities according to an established ritual scenario and are consumed during the communal feast that follows, while the remainders of sacrificed foods are taken home and given to the relatives and friends who were not able to attend. It is widely believed that successful oboo rituals bring rain, much needed during the usually dry months of May and June. Yet what happens if a ritual fails? During the summer of 2008, when I was in Buryatia, June was extremely dry, despite all of the oboo rituals that had been performed.



*Image 5: Oboo ritual. Buryatia, 2008. Photo by the author.*

The “pro-Tibetan” faction immediately declared that the oboo rituals performed by Buryat lamas failed because they made the *wrong* kinds of offerings, offerings that were not considered to correspond to “true” Buddhism. Meat and alcohol as food sacrifice became the most contested issues in this debate. Both personal and

ritual consumption of meat and alcohol had always been controversial in Buddhism, and such practices vary widely between different schools and national traditions. As far as monastic rules go, while alcohol is explicitly prohibited in the early vinaya, meat-eating is not prohibited as long as the animal was not slaughtered to feed the monk.<sup>29</sup> Despite the fact that there is no direct prohibition of the use of meat in early sources, there is a contemporary tendency to view those who abstain from meat as “better Buddhists,” particularly widespread in modernized and Western interpretations of the “non-violence” doctrine.<sup>30</sup> Although offerings to wrathful deities, both in Tibet and Mongolia, typically include meat and alcohol, some modernist Buryats seem unaware of it and think of this as only a *Buryat* tradition that somehow perverted more authentic forms of Buddhism due to the influence of native shamanism. This particular construction of Buddhist authenticity built on an imagined earlier, purer version recently provoked controversy regarding the ritual use of meat and vodka in Buryatia (including animal sacrifice in shamanic rituals). Oboo rituals, especially notorious for the copious amounts of vodka brought, offered as libations, poured on the ground, and consumed in what often turns into a post-oboo ritual drunken revelry (as soon as the presiding lamas leave) became the highest stake in this debate.

“When Bakula Rinpoché,<sup>31</sup> a famous Buddhist master from India, came here, he was stunned to see all this vodka poured into the ground. He said, ‘Look, your spirits are all drunk! No wonder you cannot get any help from them. How can a drunken spirit help anyone?’” one Buryat Buddhist lama related to me. Similarly, a Buryat nun who currently lives in India commented that when she attended such an oboo ritual, she had a vision, in which she was able to communicate with the land master spirit to whom the offerings were being made. “The spirit told me that he was a vegetarian since Buddhism was established in this area; however, no one brought him his favorite cottage cheese (Rus. *tvorog*) for a long time. The spirit complained that all they brought him was meat, which he did not eat.”

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<sup>29</sup> Tibetan monasteries never served any food to monks, other than tea and tsampa. In the Indian Drepung, this is still the case, except that they now also serve noodles, rice, vegetables, and yogurt. Meat is not proscribed, however: monks who have the means to buy it from local vendors sometimes cook it in their dormitory kitchens.

<sup>30</sup> For an informative overview of the various Buddhist attitudes to vegetarianism, see Harvey 2000.

<sup>31</sup> The late Bakula Rinpoché, a prominent incarnate Buddhist lama from Ladakh in northern India, worked as a minister for the Indian government under Indira Gandhi. In 1990, he had been appointed an Indian ambassador to Mongolia, which enabled him to visit the USSR and later, postsocialist Buryatia.

The spirit asked the nun to kindly call her relatives who were going to attend an oboo during this season and make sure that the rules of vegetarianism be more strictly followed.



*Image 6. Oboo offerings. Buryatia, 2008. Photo by the author.*

The “anti-Tibetan” faction represented by some lamas I interviewed during this period, however, insisted that offering meat and alcohol was a “Buryat tradition.” They claimed that unlike shamanist oboos, what they offered was not “really” vodka, but a special substance referred to as “nectar” into which vodka is transformed through appropriate prayers and visualizations.<sup>32</sup> The real reason for the failure of the ritual, they claimed, was that local spirits would not “take instructions” from “foreigners” (Tibetans) who tried to meddle in their affairs. (The obstacles here are imagined specifically in blood kinship terms as opposed to those of spirits’ linguistic competence, since the ritual is almost always conducted in classical Tibetan). Interestingly, the Tibetan incarnate lamas with Buryat roots discussed above were perhaps the only ones who have

<sup>32</sup> Although lamas invoke this fact as a “Buryat tradition,” this is true for Tibetan Buddhist tantric ritual in general.

been somewhat exempt from these accusations, because, according to the Buddhist view of kinship, they “are” Buryat via their quasi-kinship relationship with their respective Buryat predecessors.

Indeed, the ability to establish peaceful relationships with local spirits is central to any lama’s legitimacy in Buryatia, both Buryat and foreign alike. When Zhibalha Rinpoché, another Tibetan lama with Buryat “roots” mentioned earlier in this chapter, visited Buryatia and the Aga region in 2004 (the native region of his previous incarnation), the elders informed him of the lack of rainfall. He conducted several offerings to local spirits on the mountaintop and near the river, and within a couple of days there was a heavy downpour. “I felt that the local spirits were favorably inclined to me,” he said when I interviewed him in his residence in Drepung Gomang Monastery in India in 2008.<sup>33</sup> Buryat elders also took Zhibalha’s capacity to pacify the local spirits to be a sign of his legitimacy to act as a lama in Buryatia. Thus, his journey has been locally understood not as a visit by a foreign lama, but as a return by a “Buryat” lama finally arriving in his “homeland.”<sup>34</sup> While Zhibalha Rinpoché was still relatively unknown to the wider Buryat public at the time of his first visit, Yelo Rinpoché is a very public figure, and his every step is subject to scrutiny.<sup>35</sup>

Thus, exempt from blame on the oboo front, Yelo Rinpoché was still reproached by his detractors for doing too many “flashy” tantric empowerments, as opposed to the unglamorous work of spreading the dharma through regular teachings. However, since there are currently no Buddhist teachers of such high status in Buryatia with all the appropriate initiations (a lama must have received an initiation in order to confer it), Yelo Rinpoché remains the most qualified lama for these empowerments. As mentioned above, Khentrul Rinpoché—the Tibetan lama from India and another incarnate lama with Buryat

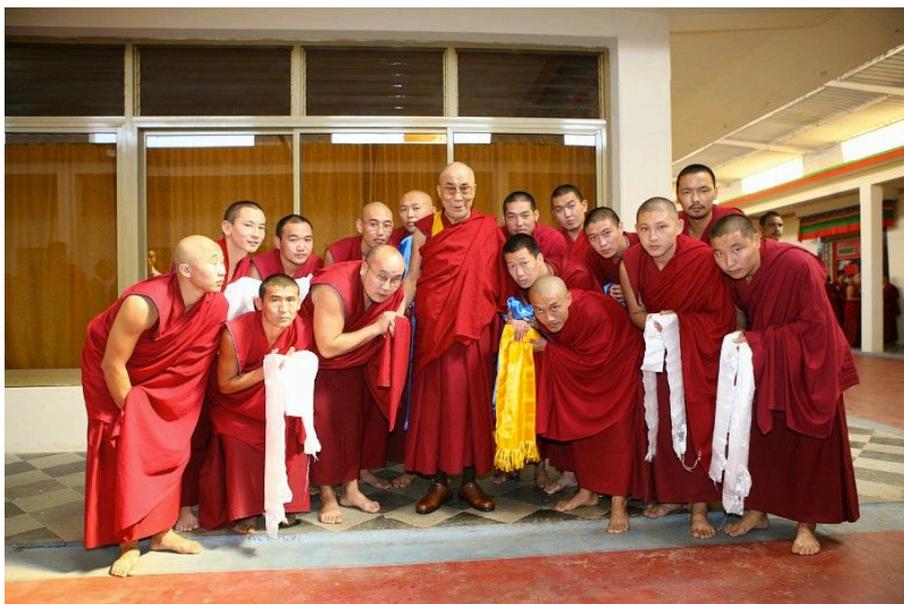
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<sup>33</sup> Interestingly, he used Tibetan terms for locality spirits, such as *yul lha* and *gzhi bdag*, to refer to Buryat “landmaster” spirits. Interview with Zhibalha Rinpoché, Drepung Gomang monastery, India, January 2008.

<sup>34</sup> Interview with Zhibalha Rinpoché, Drepung Gomang monastery, India, January 2008.

<sup>35</sup> Zhibalha Rinpoché also became a key figure in the Buddhist revival in Tuva, where he has been residing for a large part of the year since 2008. His “Buryat” connection is very important for Tuvans, who also view him as “ours” (Ksenia Pimenova, personal communication, 2011). Although Tuvans are a Turkic group with strong Mongolian influences, Zhibalha himself (similarly to other Tibetan lamas familiar with the Buddhist peoples of the Russian Federation) believes Buryats, Kalmyks, and Tuvans to be “people of Mongolian ethnicity” (Tib. *sog po mi rig*) (Interview with Zhibalha 2008). Similarly, Khentrul Rinpoché occasionally visits Kalmykia. As I was updating this piece for publication in late 2016, I learned that Zhibalha Rinpoche got deported from Russia in October 2015 on the request of the Federal Security Service, and that his residency was annulled.

“roots”—was surprised by how many people approached him to conduct empowerments when he visited Buryatia. Since empowerment rituals structure the Buddhist community in kin-like ways (Mills 2000), I suggest that these lamas are sought out by Buryats not only because they are internationally renowned and qualified masters, but also because by acquiring these Tibetan lamas as their symbolic kin, Buryats also reclaim and reincorporate their own past masters into their somatic networks and the current body politic. In other words, these incarnate Tibetan lamas with “Buryat” roots are in particularly high demand in Buryatia, not only for their “reproductive” ritual capacity, but because they evoke and reference, via inter-bodiment, their Buryat predecessors. While the bodies of Yelo Rinpoché and Khentrul Rinpoché serve as the crucial links in bringing Buryats into the new transnational and pan-Asian “vajra families,” forging post-Soviet religious ties, and transforming geopolitical imaginaries, they also reconnect Buryat believers with specifically Buryat key religious personalities of the past.



*Image 7. The Dalai Lama with Buryat monks studying in India. Drepung Monastery, Karnataka, India, 2008. Photo courtesy of Igor' Ianchevlov.*

Inter-body movement enabled by the practices of reincarnation and tantric discipleship blurs the lines of political and ethnic alliances. Despite being an ethnic Tibetan, the present Khentrul Rinpoché, by virtue of being a reincarnation of a Buryat monk, has become an

important figure in the post-Soviet Buryat Buddhist revival. He is also a source of considerable pride for Buryats. Not only was he the only Buryat to preside over a famous Tibetan monastic college, he mastered the process of death and rebirth to be reincarnated outside of Chinese-occupied Tibet in order to eventually engineer his “return” to Buryatia, re-linking ordinary Buryats with Buddhist deities. Incarnation here emerges as an empowering technology for mobility and border-crossing, which challenges state-imposed regimes of mobility and reinterprets the notions of life and death. In the case of Yelo Rinpoché, who is an apprentice of not one but three Buryat lamas,<sup>36</sup> the Buddhist institution of master-disciple relationship, which creates kin-like corporeal networks between the master and his disciples through tantric ritual, similarly unsettles the issues of loyalties and allegiances. While some nationalist-leaning Buddhist leaders resent their superior status as detrimental to indigenous self-determination, others view them as “ours” (*Rus. nashi*), descendants of the great Buryat lamas Galsan Lekden and Thupten Nyima who intentionally transcended both death and Soviet and Chinese controls of mobility only to reemerge in post-socialist Buryatia to renovate the religion in these troubled times.

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<sup>36</sup> As a young boy in Lithang, Yelo Rinpoché received basic Buddhist instruction from Zhibalha Rinpoché. He also received teachings from Agvan Nyima at the Indian Drepung Monastery (Interview, 2001, Ulan-Ude).

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# The Revival of the Tulku Institution in Modern China: Narratives and Practices

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Given the choice, I would transmigrate to Tuṣita Heaven and not reincarnate. If I must be reborn, then find a child, who cannot only recite flawlessly from memory the *Great Exposition on the Stages of the Path* (*Lam rim chen mo*) and the *Great Exposition on the Stages of Mantra* (*Sngags rim chen mo*), but who also does not stop uttering this even when being chased by a wild dog; only such a child would be my reincarnation.<sup>1</sup>

**W**hat child could perform such an impossible feat? Arik Geshé Chenmo Jampa Öser's (*A rig dge bshes chen mo* Byams pa 'od zer, 1728-1803)<sup>2</sup> trenchant last testament chided his disciples for imploring him to reincarnate, yet he did not deride the tulku institution itself. In his autobiography, the Sixth Tséten Zhabdrung, Jikmé Rikpai Lodrö (*Tshe tan zhabs drung 'Jigs med rigs pa'i blo gros*, 1910-1985) retold Arik Geshé's story with a similar didactic purpose, in order to analytically expound "the Tibetan-Mongol system of reincarnation."<sup>3</sup> Yet when Arik Geshé's incisive words were re-employed for a twentieth century audience, the socio-political cornerstones of the tulku institution had undergone dramatic restructuring.

Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China (P.R.C) in 1949, Tibetan cultural-religious practices, including the tulku

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in Tséten Zhabdrung 2007, 59.

<sup>2</sup> Arik Geshé recognized and taught Shingza Paṇḍita Losang Dargyé Gyatso (*Shing bza' pan di ta Blo bzang dar rgyas rgya mtsho*, 1752-1824); Cf. Tsering Namgyal, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Tséten Zhabdrung 2007, 54 used the term "*bod sog gi sku skye'i lam lugs*" for the "Tibeto-Mongol system of reincarnation." In this article, with few exceptions, I translate the relevant Tibetan terms as follows: "*sprul sku*" as "emanation body" (Sanskrit: *nirmāṇākāya*); "*yang srid*" as "reincarnation"; and "*sku skye*" as "rebirth" or "to be reborn." In some cases, such as here, "*sku skye*" is translated as "to reincarnate."

institution, have withstood epic changes. In the 1980s, after twenty years (ca. 1956-1976) of decimating attacks on all aspects of Tibetan culture, Geluk Buddhist leaders cautiously participated in reviving the system of recognizing reincarnate lamas in a nation-state that ideologically reviled religiosity but tolerated expressions of ethnic-cultural identity. This paper considers how Geluk Buddhists within the P.R.C. provided models and suggestions to ensure the survival of the tulku institution despite political vicissitudes. The first section of this paper analyzes Buddhist narratives from the past that show a path for the future of tulkus; a future in which the import of education and ethical behavior are paramount. The second section examines the surprisingly divergent practices involved in reviving two related reincarnation lineages in the wake of the Cultural Revolution. A comparison of recognition processes based on the factors of age and types of education serve as indicators of how local actors adapt traditional practices in response to both internal pressures of Geluk authority and to the external pressures of the state.

### 1. *Tséten Zhabdrung's autobiography and the Tséten incarnation lineages*

Tséten Zhabdrung Jikmé Rikpai Lodrö, one of the few Geluk Buddhist monastic scholars to have survived twenty years of relentless attacks on Tibetan religious culture, took measures to revive the tulku institution in the 1980s. His vision of what it meant to be a tulku and the importance of reincarnation for Tibetan culture can be found in his autobiography, which was circulating widely by the 1990s, a decade after the author's death in 1985 at age 75. The Buddhist polymath had started writing his own life story in 1962<sup>4</sup> when a group of his disciples led by Shardong Rinpoché Losang

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<sup>4</sup> Tséten Zhabdrung (2007, 265) stated,

“In my fifty-third year in the Water Tiger Year (1962) on the auspicious day of the winter solstice, Shardong Choktul Losang Shedrup Gyatso (Shardong mchog sprul Blo bzang bshad sgrub rgya mtsho), Mani Tulku Jikmé Lekshe Drayang (Ma ñi'i sprul sku 'jigs med legs bshad sgra dbyangs), Rikhu Tulku Gendun Ngawang Tendar (Ri khud sprul sku Dge 'dun ngag dbang bstan dar), accompanied by my students—Dzongnang Tsering Dorjé (Rdzong nang Tshe ring rdo rje) and Tuwa Lama Tseten (Mthu ba bla ma Tshe brtan)—presented me with a long silk khatag and various high quality articles, and then urged me to write my own biography (*rnam thar*) using clear words and an intelligible style mixing both poetry and prose. They insisted that this would be diligent advice for the benefit of present and later disciples and devotees. Under these auspicious circumstances, I immediately agreed to their urgent requests.”

Shédруп Gyatso (Shar gdong rin po che Blo bzang bshad sgrub rgya mtsho, 1922-2002)<sup>5</sup> implored their teacher to take up this task. Missing among this cohort was the Thirteenth Tséten Khenpo Jikmé Rikpai Nyingbo (Tshe tan mkhan po 'Jigs med rigs pa'i snying po, 1910-1958), who had shared the throne of Six Garwaka Monasteries with the Sixth Tséten Zhabdrung Jikmé Rikpai Lodrö for nearly 40 years. The events surrounding the tragic death of the Thirteenth Tséten Khenpo Jikmé Rikpai Nyingbo remain unclear with some reports that he was shot by troops when they stormed Tséten Monastery; others stated that he died in the lorry ride on the way to Nantan Prison in Xining. The Sixth Tséten Zhabdrung had been residing in Beijing at that time, so he had been spared, at least temporarily, the horrible fate of most of his fellow monks in 1958. Soon after the official denouncement of the Pañchen Lama Chökyi Gyeltsen (Chos kyi rgyal mtshan, 1938-1987) in 1964,<sup>6</sup> Tséten Zhabdrung was also imprisoned, serving almost twelve years in Xining's Nantan Prison. He received release on medical parole in 1976. After recovering, the monk began the task of re-writing his autobiography, *Ambrosia for the Ear: Truthful Discourse by Jikmé Rikpai Lodrö, himself a Disciple of the Powerful, Matchless Shākya*. Chronologically this text ends in the autumn of 1978, when the author accepted a professorship at Northwest Nationalities University (Ch. Xibei minzu daxue; Tib. Nub byang slob grwa chen mo) in the capital of Gansu Province, Lanzhou. The remaining years of his life story were penned by two different disciples in two addenda, both included in the 2007 copy of the Sixth Tséten Zhabdrung Jikmé Rikpai Lodrö's thirteen-volume *Collected Works* (*gsung 'bum*). According to one addendum, Tséten Zhabdrung Jikmé Rikpai Lodrö met with other Geluk leaders in Beijing in 1983 where they discussed crucial changes to the process of recognizing reincarnate lamas within China.

Nearly a decade after the death of the Sixth Tséten Zhabdrung (1985), some of these recommendations would be applied in the revival of the two incarnation lineages at the group of temples and monasteries collectively referred to as the Six Garwaka (Sgar ba kha drug) Monasteries. They are located in the low-lying mountains of

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<sup>5</sup> Shardong Rinpoche was a major figure in the continuation of the revival of Tibetan culture and Buddhism in Amdo up until his death in 2002. He rebuilt Jakhyung (Bya 'khyung) Monastery and played an important role in the building of Tséten Zhabdrung's reliquary stupa at Dentik Monastery. He was also a professor at Qinghai Nationalities University teaching Tibetan history, language and culture there.

<sup>6</sup> Tibet Information Network 1997.

present-day eastern Hualong County (in Jinyuan Township) and western Minhe County of Qinghai Province. The main mother monastery is Tséten Monastery (Tib. Tshe tan; Ch. Xing'er 杏儿 Caidan 才旦), after which the two incarnation lineages are named. Tuwa Monastery (Tib. Mthu ba; Ch. Tuwa 土哇), traditionally a retreat center, also became a small printing house under the leadership of Tséten Zhabdrung Jigmé Rikpai Lodrö in the 1930s. Dentik Monastery (Tib. Dan tig; Ch. Dandou 丹斗) is historically the most important of the six monasteries as many believe that Lachen Gongpa Rabsal (bla chen dgongs pa rab gsal, 953?-1035?) took his monastic vows here in the late tenth century. The three other hermitages are: Chenpuk (Tib. Gcan phug; Ch. Zhaomuchuan 赵木川), Katung (Tib. Ka thung; Ch. Gadong 尕洞), and Gongkya (Tib. Kong skya; Ch. Gongshenjia 工什加). The dual spiritual leadership of Tséten Zhabdrung and Tséten Khenpo (Tshe tan mkhan po) followed historical precedent dating back to the early eighteenth century.<sup>7</sup> The shared governance over the Six Garwaka Monasteries was violently disrupted when the Thirteenth Tséten Khenpo was murdered in 1958 and the Six Garwaka Monasteries were partially demolished by Communist zealots, and subsequently closed until the early 1980s. The Sixth Tséten Zhabdrung was the sole surviving tulku of these monasteries once they were reopened. It was only after his death that both the Fourteenth Tséten Khenpo and Seventh Tséten Zhabdrung were installed within a few months from one another to continue the historical tradition as “dual throne-holders.”

## 2. *Looking to past narratives for the future of tulku*

When Arik Geshé maintained his preference for rebirth in Tuṣita Heaven, he was not alone. Many autobiographies and memoirs, especially those from eastern Tibet (both Khams and Amdo) gave voice to what Matthew Kapstein identified as a “fundamental tension between the socially-constructed role of the tulku and the self-identity of the person concerned.” Some of these authors expressed doubt over their recognition including: Amdo Tertön Rigzin Düjom Dorjé (A mdo gter ston Rig 'dzin bdud 'joms rdo rje, ca. 1857-1921), Jamgön Kongtrül Lodrö Thayé ('Jam mgon kong sprul blo gros mtha' yas, 1813-1899), and Gungthang Tenpé Drönmé (*Gung thang bstan*

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Tséten Zhabdrung 2007, vol. 3.

pa'i sgron me, 1762-1823).<sup>8</sup> Other authors, such as Dza Paltrül Rinpoché (Dza Dpal sprul rin po che, 1808-1887) contemptuously attacked the tulku institution. Reportedly he not only had counseled his disciples against looking for his reincarnation, but maintained that they would go to the Avīci Hell realm if they searched for his rebirth, because of the evils entailed with the tulku system.<sup>9</sup> So when Tséten Zhabdrung Jikmé Rikpai Lodrö wrote about the good, the bad, and the ugly of the Tibetan and Mongolian system of reincarnation in his autobiography, this act was not particularly novel. Many scholars before him had analyzed and critiqued this institution in the past. Nonetheless, Tséten Zhabdrung's writing on this topic are valuable due to: 1) the fact that this act of writing was undertaken in a volatile political climate; 2) the depth of his analysis of the tulku system through Tibetan historical narratives; 3) the didactic argument in this treatise; and 4) the application of his recommendations on changing aspects of tulku recognition that were enacted after his death.

When Tséten Zhabdrung took up his pen to complete his autobiography, *Ambrosia for the Ear: Truthful Discourse*, the social fabric that had supported all of the great savants mentioned above had been dismantled. No political or social incentives lured him into discussing historical narratives of the tulku system, much less to uphold this Tibetan institution. So why address this topic in his autobiography? This choice of subject matter was one of many vital lessons on Tibetan history and culture that needed to be taught to a generation of Tibetan youth that had received little or no education in their own language and culture due to a hostile political climate.<sup>10</sup> Tséten Zhabdrung's analysis of the tulku system was written under unprecedented circumstances. He revisited past narratives to re-build a foundation that would ensure a future for this important Tibetan cultural institution in modern China. Despite writing in socialist China, his message did not carry state propaganda. Rather his vision was informed by Buddhist teachings and Tibetan history.

Through a careful selection of historical narratives, the Buddhist polymath showed how the "unwholesome roots"<sup>11</sup> of avarice and ignorance in the tulku institution were to be remedied through an

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<sup>8</sup> Kapstein 2002, 109.

<sup>9</sup> Kapstein 2002, 102.

<sup>10</sup> While many accounts detail the horrors of the Cultural Revolution, Pema Bhum's autobiography (2001) told of how Tséten Zhabdrung's and other monastic scholars' language books were labelled as "poisonous weeds," and how some young students clandestinely copied their writings in order to learn Tibetan.

<sup>11</sup> The three unwholesome roots or three poisons refer to the three roots of suffering, the defilements of ignorance, attachment, and aversion.

education based on Buddhist ethics. Tséten Zhabdrung Jikmé Rikpai Lodrö exposed the “bad and ugly” side of the tulku system by relaying popular stories and disclosing the motivations of greedy parents found in historical texts. A humorous anecdote mocked the greed of an incarnate lama from western Bāyan (Ch. Hualong) County. When a tulku had gone to visit his patron, the donor held his son in his arms and jested to the lama, “Alak tsang<sup>12</sup> is my son an incarnate lama? He keeps asking me for this and that!”<sup>13</sup> This clever anecdote comically articulated the most blatant tension in the tulku system. On one hand, a tulku is supposed to renounce worldly attachments; while on the other hand, a tulku inherits enormous wealth, generating a system that creates the causes and conditions for attachment and avarice.<sup>14</sup> As Tséten Zhabdrung explained:

When an old monk passes away, then a search is made for a so-called “tulku” (*sprul sku*) or “zhabdrung” (*zhabs drung*). When an “old ngak-pa” (*sngags rgan*) dies, then a search is conducted for a so-called “ku-lo” (*sku lo*) or “kuba” (*sku 'ba'*). After this, people use them in whatever way they can as a base for business to amass material things by merely chanting and without studying anything meaningful; in every way possible they deceive ignorant people. For someone who cherishes the Teachings, this is certainly horrifying.<sup>15</sup>

His admonishment of those who took advantage of this sacred institution for their own financial gain echoed the voice of a much earlier Amdo scholar. Sumpa Paṅḍita Yeshé Peljor (Sum pa pan di ta Ye shes dpal 'jor, 1704-1788) found fault in greedy parents:

...a few parents falsely proclaim their son, who had been born before the death of a lama, as his incarnation. Other people will replace an incarnate lama who dies young with a youth of the same age. They are doing this only as a means to attract wealth and property.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> In Amdo dialect, this is an honorific term addressing a high teacher, a synonym for “Rinpoche.”

<sup>13</sup> Tséten Zhabdrung 2007, 59-60.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Kapstein 2002, 109.

<sup>15</sup> Tséten Zhabdrung 2007, 58.

<sup>16</sup> Cited in Tséten Zhabdrung 2007, 58.

For Tséten Zhabdrung, Tibetan Buddhist scholars of the past addressed the pernicious avarice of the tulku system.

At the root of all this avariciousness—cheating lamas, amassing material wealth, covetous parents, making false claims—lies ignorance. As a Buddhist teacher Tséten Zhabdrung stressed ignorance as the foundation of other afflictions, especially attachment. He again drew upon historical narratives to prove his point, such as citing the following verse attributed to the Fifth Dalai Lama Ngawang Lobsang Gyatso (Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho, 1617-1682):

An ignorant child adorned in silk brocade  
Sits haughtily upon a beautiful throne,  
Poised among a group of officials, I suspect that, like a fog,  
He destroys the Lotus Garden of the Buddhist teachings.

He misconstrues helping and benefiting sentient beings as  
Persuasion, brawn, wealth, deceit, and cunning  
And abandons the practice of the Ten Good Deeds;  
That type of Buddha is certainly a mistake.<sup>17</sup>

The verse sharply focuses in on the child's ignorance as the main cause of a whole host of other negative behaviors. The following verse, also credited to the Fifth Dalai Lama, has a strong resonance of a social commentary while reiterating ignorance as the root problem:

In these times, the educated and knowledgeable are called  
'ordinary,'  
While the uneducated and ignorant are considered 'holy.'  
This country confuses gold and black ink;  
It may be called "the Center,"<sup>18</sup> but is similar to an uncivilized  
city.<sup>19</sup>

As alluded to in these above verses, ignorance carries with it a host of connotations including: obliviousness "like a fog", "misconstruing" the goal of helping sentient beings, and feigning holiness. Ignorance mainly, however, seems to be a genuine lack of knowledge and education. Tséten Zhabdrung's citation of Cangkyia Rolpai Dorjé's

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<sup>17</sup> Cited in Tséten Zhabdrung 2007, 58.

<sup>18</sup> The Tibetan term for "Center" is "*yul dbus*," which could be a reference to India proper, but seems more likely to be Lhasa here.

<sup>19</sup> Cited in Tséten Zhabdrung 2007, 58-59.

(Lcang skya Rol pa'i rdo rje, 1717-1786) verse serves to illustrate this point:

During childhood, lacking time to study and contemplate,  
 A child becomes a piece of merchandise parading silk  
 brocade,  
 Improperly enjoying funerary repast,  
 While receiving prostrations, veneration from monks.<sup>20</sup>

These narratives read to together in Tséten Zhabdrung's autobiography reinforce a clear didactic point concerning the negative aspects of the tulku institution. At the root of all these harmful behaviors lies the ignorance of a child, a youth who happens to be recognized as an incarnate lama by members of his society. Without a proper education, people venerate the boy solely for his status.

Although Tséten Zhabdrung pointed out the negative aspects of the tulku institution as found in historical texts, similar to Arik Geshé, he did not reject it outright. Despite the volatile political atmosphere at the time of writing, he highlighted two interrelated aspects of this tradition to be held in high esteem: 1) the cultural value of this Tibetan-Mongol institution; and 2) the esoteric mastery involved in transferring one's consciousness at death.

While Tséten Zhabdrung's research was not concerned with the origins of the tulku system,<sup>21</sup> he demonstrated the historical process of its development into a tradition and acknowledged the esoteric mastery involved in consciously directed rebirth. Sections of Sumpa Paṇḍita's writings were used to exemplify the tulku institution as a custom in Tibet and Mongolia:

Even though there was without doubt a rosary of births of great lamas, constant as waves on the ocean, for example: the luminaries of the past—the Buddha Śākyamuni; the Six Ornaments: Nāgārjuna, Āryadeva, Asaṅga, Dignāga, Vasubhandu and Dharmakīrti; the Two Supreme Ones: Śākyaprabha and Gunaprabha; the Eighty Mahāsiddha; paṇḍit and siddha of Nepal and Kashmir; Marpa; Milarepa; Butön; and Tsongkhapa, there was no discourse on reincarnation in their respective birth places either due to the idea of going to a Pure Land or that being born as incarnate lama was not a

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<sup>20</sup> Cited in Tséten Zhabdrung 2007, 58-59.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Wylie 1978; van der Kuijp 2005.

common custom at that time and place. Nevertheless, in Tibet, taking form as a “zhabdrung” (*zhabs drung*), “tulku” (*sprul sku*) or “rebirth” (*sku skye*) had not yet been adopted, but many people intentionally directed their consciousness to be born on earth in order to benefit the Dharma. Later, the tradition gradually spread in Ü, Tsang, Do-kham, and Mongolia.<sup>22</sup>

First and foremost this passage focuses on the historical presence of many great Buddhist luminaries prior to the establishment of the tulku tradition. Secondly it recognizes that the development of the tulku institution as occurring over time to eventually become an established custom in Tibet and Mongolia. Sumpa Pandita, similar to other authors cited above, reminded his readers of the inherent conflict of interests in the recognition process. Nonetheless, he also emphasized the authenticity of some tulku:

Besides them, it is extremely rare for people to be recognized as an incarnate lama; especially for any people who are very devout but not very famous, wealthy or powerful in this world; and also rare for those people, who do not grasp at the self or at this-worldly wealth, or who don't have wealthy monk disciples, or those people with meager means e.g., Milarepa. Moreover, from my impression, a few lamas with good and bad qualities are nevertheless subjected to insistent requests by monks and students regarding the prophecy to search for their next incarnation; in some cases this is real, but in others this is uncertain.<sup>23</sup>

Despite the human failings of this institution, Sumpa Paṇḍita's writings articulated a belief in the possibility of transferring one's consciousness at death. This seems to have been shared by Tséten Zhabdrung as he provided further examples of this.

For evidence of this ability, Tséten Zhabdrung turned to biographical writings. He retold the story of the Second Dalai Lama Gendün Gyatso (Dge 'dun rgya mtsho, 1475-1542) as a child that proved his remarkable abilities to remember his past life connections with the great Buddhist scholar and practitioner Jé Tsongkhapa Losang Drakpa (Rje Tsong kha pa Blo bzang grags pa, 1357-1419). When the future Second Dalai Lama was still a toddler sitting on his father's lap, upon hearing the sound of thunder in the sky, he said to

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<sup>22</sup> Cited in Tséten Zhabdrung 2007, 56-57.

<sup>23</sup> Cited in Tséten Zhabdrung 2007, 56-57.

his father, "That must be similar to the sound of Master Losang Drakpa giving Dharma teachings." The father asked, "How is it similar to Master Losang Drakpa giving Dharma teachings?" He then responded with a passage from the *Ornament for the Mahāyāna Sūtras*:

Rely on a Mahāyāna teacher who is disciplined, calm,  
thoroughly pacified;  
Who has superior knowledge, diligence, and a wealth of oral  
transmissions,  
Who has realized emptiness, has skill in instructing students,  
Has great compassion, and has abandoned all regrets.<sup>24</sup>

The Second Dalai Lama Gendün Gyatso had recalled this from Dharma teachings given by Tsongkhapa to the First Dalai Lama Gendün Drup (Dge 'dun grub, 1391-1474). Accepting the validity of this narrative, Tséten Zhabdrung reasoned that an "authentic" incarnate lama must exhibit certain behaviors, such as those demonstrated by the Second Dalai Lama. Tséten Zhabdrung's belief in the ability of certain great masters to transfer their consciousness is attested to in the biographies of Sumpa Pañḍita Yeshé Peljor and Jamyang Shépa Jikmé Gyatso ('Jam dbyangs bzhad pa 'Jigs med rgya mtsho, 1762-1836).<sup>25</sup> An authentic rebirth possessed *yonten* (*yon tan*), "qualities" or "virtues" such as those listed above, but also in the sense of demonstrating a profound understanding of Buddhist concepts such as karma.

For Tséten Zhabdrung it was certainly possible to direct one's consciousness at death, but that had to be coupled with intellectual education as well as ethical development of a tulku. This point was particularly salient for the reestablishment of the tulku institution in the 1980s. Both knowledge and ethical comportment were imperative for all tulku. Tséten Zhabdrung warned that a lack of knowledge of Buddhist concepts e.g., karma and the *trikāya*—the three bodies of the Buddha—could have a negative impact on the levels of realization a Buddhist practitioner had achieved.<sup>26</sup> No longer citing historical texts, Tséten Zhabdrung openly criticized tulkus who claimed this status but lacked Buddhist knowledge:

Bodies of the Buddha are the three: Truth, Enjoyment, and  
Emanation;

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<sup>24</sup> Cited in Tséten Zhabdrung 2007, 54; Cf. Tsongkhapa 2007, 71.

<sup>25</sup> Tséten Zhabdrung 2007, 56-60.

<sup>26</sup> Tséten Zhabdrung 2007, 56.

Only a Buddha manifests an emanation body.  
 I admit that those lamas, who can't even count the three  
 Buddha bodies,  
 Are really deluded to claim themselves as authentic emanation  
 bodies!

How could a lama who didn't even understand the concept of "emanation body" claim to be one? For Tséten Zhabdrung knowledge and education were far more important than the status associated with being recognized as a tulku. Tséten Zhabdrung even took this logic one step further. He argued that religious figures should be venerated only if they are learned and ethical:

Revering a Buddhist teacher befits ordinary people  
 When the lama possesses knowledge, follows vows chastely,  
 With pure intentions and few desires, then  
 Needless are methods--gazing into butter lamps and rolling  
 tsampa balls.<sup>27</sup>

The butter lamps and tsampa balls symbolize the divination methods used in the tulku recognition process. These are unimportant as long as a lama demonstrated the virtues of Buddhist knowledge and ethical comportment. Tséten Zhabdrung's textual analysis of the tulku institution in Tibetan histories and poetic commentary admonished tulku in the present who transgressed Buddhist ethics; he also promoted education as the remedy to the ills of avarice and ignorance. Tséten Zhabdrung, similar to the Buddhist polymaths he had cited, wrote within the conventions of the established religious elite. Yet Tséten Zhabdrung lived in a tumultuous time, when the traditional Tibetan hierarchy had been violently dismantled. His writings on the topic of the "Mongolian and Tibetan system of reincarnation" served a didactic function to place value on receiving an education in Tibetan history, language, and culture for the purpose of reviving Tibetan Buddhism in post-Cultural Revolution China. Many of his suggestions on tulku recognition were applied in the revival of the two Tséten incarnation lineages after his death.

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<sup>27</sup> Tséten Zhabdrung 2007, 60.

3. *From narratives to practices:  
The revival of the Tséten incarnation lineages*

The two current tulku of the Six Garwaka Monasteries, the Seventh Tséten Zhabdrung and Fourteenth Tséten Khenpo, were both enthroned in 1993. Their recognition and subsequent education occurred within the space of state-controlled religion within China as regulated by the dual party/government structure. The state-level channels which govern the space of religion include both the State Administration for Religious Affairs and the United Front Work Department (Ch. Tongyi zhanxian bu). The United Front Work Department provides the ideological guidance of the Party, while the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA) governs and implements the state's religious policies. These government organizations claimed "rule on the management of reincarnations of Tibetan living Buddhas" in 2007, effectively placing control over the future recognition of tulku in the hands of the state.<sup>28</sup> In the case of the two Tséten incarnation lineages, in 1993, the political space governing the recognition of incarnation lineages was ambiguous, leaving room for local agents to enact the tulku recognition processes in dissimilar ways, despite the geographical proximity and historical precedents binding these two lineages together. The recognition of the Seventh Tséten Zhabdrung took place temporally shortly after the enthronement of the Fourteenth Tséten Khenpo in 1993. This order of enthronement followed historical precedent because the position of Tséten Zhabdrung was subordinate to that of Tséten Khenpo, who had been the first of the two incarnation lineages, founded in the seventeenth century with the rise of Geluk power in Amdo.<sup>29</sup> The group of Six Garwaka Monasteries ceased functioning in 1958 and reopened around 1981.<sup>30</sup>

The reopening of the Six Garwaka Monasteries in the early 1980s was due to policy shifts permitting Tibetans to "exercise [ethnic] nationality autonomy."<sup>31</sup> In 1982, the Party issued *Document 19, the Basic Viewpoint and Policy on the Religious Question during Our Country's Socialist Period* that allowed for the promotion of religious activities within certain parameters. These policy shifts promoted

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<sup>28</sup> Xinhua News Agency, 2007.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Nietupski 2011.

<sup>30</sup> According to the local county gazetteer, the *Hualong xianzhi* (1994, 134-136), all the villages of Hualong County were turned into communes on September 1, 1958. According to personal communication (September 2008), the reopening of the monasteries was a gradual process beginning in 1981.

<sup>31</sup> Wang Yao 1994, 287.

moderate acceptance of expressions of Tibetan ethnic and cultural identity in public discourse. In this context, the Sixth Tséten Zhabdrung and other surviving Tibetan Buddhist hierarchs were called upon to restore Tibetan traditions and educate the youth, especially those born from 1958 onward, many of whom as a result of harsh socio-political policies, had received little or no education in their language, history, or culture. As part of this process of reviving Tibetan cultural practices, the Sixth Tséten Zhabdrung met with the Tenth Pañchen Lama and other Geluk hierarchs (including Alak Sertri and Jamyang Shépa) in Beijing in 1983. At a gathering of the Buddhist Association of China, they discussed the situation of recognizing incarnate lamas after the Cultural Revolution.<sup>32</sup> The Buddhist Association of China serves as a bridge between Buddhists and the state, and as such, it is one of the key channels for coordinating the “coexistence of the state and religion.”<sup>33</sup> The Buddhist hierarchs deliberated on the necessary attributes of incarnate lama. One of the new measures included raising the age of recognition. In this meeting, Tséten Zhabdrung is reported to have suggested that, “based on the current situation, past biographies and teachings from the Buddhist canon, commentaries and Valid Cognition texts... in earlier times, a child of three or four was sought out and then placed upon the throne with a ceremonial kathag.”<sup>34</sup> Now the times had changed, and, “it would be beneficial if a child from age 12-13 to the age of 15 showing signs of intelligence and good moral standing was chosen.” The recommendation was that it would be best if a divination would be conducted only after three factors: age, intelligence, and moral character, had been established. According to this report, then, it was still proper to use the method of divination in recognizing an incarnate lama, but the youth should be of the correct age, intelligence, and moral disposition. This proposal was reportedly supported by the Tenth Pañchen Lama.<sup>35</sup> Efforts to verify these events in other external sources, such as the publication by the Buddhist Association of China (*The Voice of Dharma*, Ch. *Fayin*) have not yet been successful. Yet, the veracity of this discussion is not the focus here.

More importantly is the fact that this event was reported in Tséten Zhabdrung’s *Collected Works*, written by his disciples. The

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<sup>32</sup> Tséten Zhabdrung 2007, 1: 356.

<sup>33</sup> Ashiwa 2009, 59.

<sup>34</sup> Tséten Zhabdrung 2007, 1: 357.

<sup>35</sup> This report was written by Jikmé Tekchok (‘Jigs med theg mchog) at the behest of Shardong Rinpoché and is found in the addendum to Tséten Zhabdrung’s autobiography (2007, 1: 402).

inclusion of this account can be understood in two ways. On one hand, it can be read as a general concern of Tibetan Buddhist communities in China on important factors in the recognition of tulku. The recommendation that a child should be recognized only in their teenage years may have been a concession for the reinstatement of the tulku institution that was in accord with government law as stated in *Document 19*:

It will absolutely be forbidden to force anyone, particularly people under eighteen years of age, to become a member of a church, to become a Buddhist monks or nun, or to go to temples or monasteries to study Buddhist scriptures.<sup>36</sup>

The proposal to raise the age of recognition could be a careful negotiation between the external pressures of the state policy on Buddhism and the wishes of the Buddhist community to revive the tradition. On the other hand, this account can be also read as a reference to the revival of the Tséten incarnation lineages. Tséten Khenpo's reincarnation had not been recognized in 1983. The monk biographer, Jikmé Tekchok, was likely concerned with the future of his own monastic communities. All involved understood that the continued rebuilding of monastic communities was dependent on leadership, so perhaps the age restriction was a concession in order to restore the Tséten Khenpo incarnation lineage. The analysis penned by the Sixth Tséten Zhabdrung above lacked any clear commentary promoting an age restriction on the recognition of tulku even though the themes of education and ethics were evident. Despite these recommendations at the 1983 Beijing meeting, the Sixth Tséten Zhabdrung never witnessed the recognition or education of the next Tséten Khenpo incarnation. It took a decade after this meeting in 1983 for the recognition of the two Tséten throne-holders.

The recognition of the Fourteenth Tséten Khenpo Nominhan Ngawang Losang Tenpé Gyeltsen (Ngag dbang blo bzang bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan, b. 1965)<sup>37</sup> followed the suggestions of the 1983 Beijing meeting, including the age restriction. The Fourteenth Tséten Khenpo was recognized when he was much older—at age twenty-six. He was only recognized after proving his intellectual and moral aptitude to

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<sup>36</sup> Cited in MacInnis 1989, 15.

<sup>37</sup> The Fourteenth Abbot of Tseten Monastery is Vice Director of the Buddhist Association of Eastern Qinghai (Ch. Haidong; Tib. Mtsho shar), the Vice Chairman of Minhe County to the National Committee (Ch. zhengxie; Tib. srid gros) of the CPPCC (Chinese People's Political Consultative Committee) and the Chairman of Minhe County's Buddhist Association.

uphold monastic discipline. He was born in 1965, almost eight years after the murder of his predecessor. His biography compiled by the monks at Dentik stressed that he showed aptitude at public primary and middle school. "When he went to school, whoever came in his presence, remarked that he was not like the other children who liked to play all the time. Many people thought he was an incarnate lama."<sup>38</sup> After graduating from Xunhua Minority Middle School, he worked at the Nationalities Performing Arts Center, and traveled to Central Tibet. Then in 1986, he decided to become a monk while residing at Dentik Monastery. In 1991, after studying and working at nearby Kumbum Monastery for more than five years, he was recognized as the incarnation of the former Tséten Khenpo Jikmé Rikpé Nyingpo. On the twelfth day of the ninth month of 1993, he was enthroned at Tséten Monastery, then enthronement at the other five monasteries followed. After his recognition, he studied at China's Tibetan Language Division of the Higher Buddhist Studies Institute (Zhongguo Zangyuxi gaoji foxueyuan 中国藏语系高级佛学院) located in Beijing. Since 1987, this institute has been charged with educating all officially recognized incarnations, so that, "Upon graduation, they return to where they came, working hard for unification of the motherland, ethnic unity, social stability, and local economic construction."<sup>39</sup> Since Tséten Khenpo returned to Dentik, he has continuously initiated important social projects for the larger monastic community. He had a water-well tapped so that the monks would have running water and had electricity lines laid to the monastery. His recognition met all of the three criteria: correct age, intelligence, and moral disposition, outlined at the 1983 Beijing meeting. This was not the case for his counterpart.

The Seventh Tséten Zhabdrung Losang Jampel Norbu (Blo bzang 'jam dpal nor bu, 1988) is the son of the Sixth Tséten Zhabdrung Jikmé Rikpai Lodrö's younger brother. Unlike Tséten Khenpo, he took his novice monk vows when only five years old as part of his enthronement ceremony. As a youth, he did not receive an education at state-run schools, but rather was educated at Jakhyung (Bya khyung) Monastery. His root lama was the Sixth Tséten Zhabdrung's disciple Shardong Rinpoché, who also ordained him with his *getsül* (dge tshul) vows. Up until Shardong Rinpoché's death in 2002, he studied at Jakhyung Monastery. The community ensured that he received a traditional monastic education, unlike many of his generation. Similar to Tséten Khenpo, he continues to be an active

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<sup>38</sup> Willock 2008, 3.

<sup>39</sup> China Internet Information Center, 2006; Cf. Tuttle 2005.

leader in his monasteries even though he has returned his vows. He also assists in the distribution of the Tséten Zhabdrung Award Fellowship.<sup>40</sup> This scholarship fund was founded by the Sixth Tséten Zhabdrung in his lifetime to help students in financial need obtain an education at the Northwest Nationalities University. It was expanded to meet the needs of students at the Xunhua Tibetan Language Middle School in 2007.

Local members of the monastic communities charged with the responsibility of recognizing and educating the two incarnate lamas have created the space to reinstate the two Tséten throne-holders nearly thirty-five years after the death of Tséten Khenpo, and almost a decade after the death of the previous Tséten Zhabdrung. While the two Tséten tulkus remain active in their shared communities, this brief comparison shows some of the inconsistencies in the project of tulku recognition today.

#### *4. Concluding remarks*

The historical narratives outlined in the first part of this paper showed that the Sixth Tséten Zhabdrung drew upon Tibetan historical texts in order to uphold certain Buddhist ideals that could be used as model for the future of the tulku institution in China despite a tenuous political climate. Tséten Zhabdrung's analysis and commentary on the tulku system served a didactic purpose—to emphasize what he viewed as two of the most important qualities in a Buddhist teacher: to be knowledgeable, especially in Buddhist doctrine, and ethical. When the political tide shifted to allow for local agents to search for the two Tséten throne-holders, those charged with this position drew upon their deceased teacher's advice, which they had received verbally during his lifetime and remembered through the written words of their lama's autobiography. Certainly the two Tséten throne-holders embodied the characteristics of knowledge and ethics following Tséten Zhabdrung's recommendations. Although these leaders continue the historical tradition as "dual throne-holders," the discrepancies in the age of recognition of both tulku and the different types of education that the two tulku received indicates that the application and interpretation of what was meant by education and ethics were dissimilar. These cases indicate how local actors adapt traditional practices in varying ways

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<sup>40</sup> Qinghai News, 2007.

in order to balance the needs of the local communities and state pressures.

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# Embodying Lama's Vision: A New Reincarnation Lineage in the Tibetan Exile Community

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**P**hrases such as “lama factory” (*bla ma factory*)<sup>1</sup> and “lama’s time” (*bla ma’i dus tshod*)<sup>2</sup> are quite common among Tibetans living in exile in India these days. These expressions signal, among other things, an increase in the number of reincarnations in the exile communities. The growth in the number of incarnate beings has much to do with interest in Tibetan Buddhism among Western and East Asian supporters<sup>3</sup> and with Tibetan religious elites’ enthusiasm for the preservation of their religion in exile and in the Buddhist Himalayan regions.<sup>4</sup> One such new reincarnation lineage is that of Losang Gyatso (*blo bzang rgya mtsho*, 1928-1997),<sup>5</sup> the former

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<sup>1</sup> It refers to a contemporary family in exile that has recognized a number of its own family members as incarnate beings over the past few decades. Tibetans in exile use the phrase sarcastically to talk about the representation of the reincarnation phenomena in exile. This is not to say that they do not believe in the reincarnation system.

<sup>2</sup> This term is a satirical take on the growing number of incarnate lamas in exile and also on the wealth and popularity they receive in the global world. Even in a small Tibetan settlement in northern India, there are three young incarnate lamas compared to thirty years ago when there was none. Two are historical, and one is a newly established incarnate lineage. One spends the majority of his time abroad and occasionally visits his monasteries back in Tibet and India, and the other two are receiving monastic education in India. The term “historical” is used here to refer to those incarnate lamas whose predecessors came from a lineage that had already been established in Tibet prior to the 1959 exile.

<sup>3</sup> See Lopez 1999 and Moran 2004.

<sup>4</sup> For an excellent piece of writing on what it means to preserve Tibetan culture in general and Tibetan music in particular, see Diehl, 2002, especially Chapter 2.

<sup>5</sup> I will refer to him as Genlak, a respectful term meaning “teacher,” in this article. In many ways this paper is personal, as I studied under Genlak for a decade, and the topic of reincarnation has always piqued my interest on many levels. It is, as Kirin Narayan (1989, 9) says best, not an article about “the exotic,” rather it is “in many ways a deepening of the familiar.” “Familiarity” or Clifford Geertz’s “deep hanging-out” can also lead to layers of complexities. As Narayan (1989, 10)

director and teacher of the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics (IBD).<sup>6</sup> What follows are a brief life-story of Genlak (*rgan lags*),<sup>7</sup> the narratives surrounding the recognition of the new incarnation, and a contextualization of the stories within the exile community.

Genlak was born in Kongjorawa (*kong jo ra ba/ kong rtsed ra ba*) in Kham (Yunan Province) in 1928 and became a monk at his local monastery at the age of five. After spending twelve years at the local monastery, he finally made a long trip to Drepung Losaling (*'bras spungs blo gsal gling*) monastery in Lhasa to undertake the Geluk (*dge lugs*) scholastic education. At Losaling Monastery, he studied the usual Tibetan Buddhist scholastic topics, such as perfection of wisdom (*phar phyin*), epistemology (*tshad ma*), middle way (*dbu ma*), and monastic discipline (*'dul ba*) for over a dozen years.<sup>8</sup> In 1959, following the escape of His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama<sup>9</sup> after the Chinese takeover of Tibet, Genlak also fled into India.

In India, Genlak first lived with fellow monks in Dalhousie in the state of Himachal Pradesh and later went unwillingly to Dharamsala to receive a teacher training course in the Tibetan language. As he reminisces in his memoir, "I did not want to become a school teacher, such activity was tied up in my mind with non-monk activity...."<sup>10</sup> He further recalls, "In a [non-monastic] school I was going to have to teach writing, grammar, and poetry, and never mind teaching others, I was no good at those subjects myself. 'I will never be a successful school teacher,' I thought."<sup>11</sup> While he was initially reluctant to undertake the training and was ambivalent about its efficacy, one piece of advice given by His Holiness, according to Genlak, stuck in his mind and continued to inspire him for the rest of his life. As he recollects:

That talk [on the importance of the education of the Tibetan youth] by His Holiness filled me with inspiration and

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observes, "Familiarity with the situation has also made me aware of complexities that I cannot glibly simplify."

<sup>6</sup> For detailed official accounts of the institute, see Gyatso 2003, 3-114.

<sup>7</sup> For detailed biographical information on the life of Genlak, see Sparham 1998.

<sup>8</sup> See Dreyfus 2003, Chapter 6 on Tibetan monastic curriculum.

<sup>9</sup> Henceforth, His Holiness, unless otherwise specified.

<sup>10</sup> Sparham 2008, 302.

<sup>11</sup> Sparham 2008, 304. Georges Dreyfus (2003, 132) states, "Ge-luk students tend to focus exclusively on the inner science and logic, the first two of the standard five major branches." So, while Genlak learned Buddhism and Buddhist epistemology, which are included in the first two of the five major sciences, he never learned grammar, poetry, etc. that are considered as "external and secondary," to use Dreyfus' words. For a short discussion of the five major and minor sciences, see Dreyfus 2003, 101-106.

removed all my doubts. I felt at ease and dedicated myself to this new vision of life that His Holiness had set before us. Whatever I might say, think, or do would be in line with his vision. I would put all my effort into learning how to be a school teacher and into teaching the children of Tibet.<sup>12</sup>

Upon successfully completing the teacher training course in 1963, Genlak was sent to Mussoorie, another small town in northern India, to teach Tibetan language at a Tibetan elementary school. He assumed other duties over the next many years of his stay in Mussoorie. So, the majority of his early life in India was spent within a non-monastic setting, which ultimately seems to have shaped his perception of the role of education for the Tibetan youth within the Tibetan exile community.

In 1973, Genlak was called upon by His Holiness to serve as the director of his newly-founded IBD in Dharamsala. This was a major turning point. Genlak assumed the position and served as director of IBD for the rest of his life. IBD was originally established for Tibetan students with a modern secular education who wanted to study Buddhism in a “non-traditional”<sup>13</sup> environment, which also entails maintaining a non-sectarian approach to other schools of Tibetan Buddhism. As Genlak says in his *History of the Dialectic School*, “Although the characteristic [of the institute] is Mahāyāna, it retains a non-sectarian or common approach to the four schools of Tibetan Buddhism.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Sparham 2008, 306.

<sup>13</sup> I am employing the phrase “non-traditional” based on this passage wherein Genlak uses the Tibetan word “*sngar srol*” (old custom or tradition) in contrast to “*deng dus*” (modern). He says, “One reason is that although there are many monasteries that have been built in many areas in India, the administrators of these monasteries are overly attached to their habituated old tradition. Because of that, the Tibetan youth who attended modern schools are not fond of this.” “*rgyu mtshan ni rgya gar sa khul du bod kyi dgon sde mang po gsar 'dzugs thub yod kyang/ de tsho'i 'gan 'dzin rnam pa ngan lang shor ba'i sngar srol la gces 'dzin che drags pas/ deng dus slob grwar 'grims pa'i gzhon nu tsho de la dga' mos mi byed pa red/*” Gyatso, 2003, 16. For His Holiness' remarks about the objectives for the establishment of Institute of Buddhist Dialectics, see Sparham, 310. For Dreyfus' personal account of the early period of IBD, see Dreyfus, 2003, 72-74.

<sup>14</sup> *rnam pa ni theg pa chen po'i chos lugs yin yang/ bod du dar ba'i chos lugs bzhi thun mong ba'am ris med du gnas/* See Gyatso 2003, 30. However, Genlak points out that there is a debate over the non-sectarian nature of IBD since it offers courses using commentaries authored by Geluk authors such as Tsongkhapa Losang Drakpa (*tsong kha pa blo bzang grags pa*, 1357-1419), Gyaltsap Darma Rinchen (*rgyal tshab dar ma rin chen*, 1364-1432), and Panchen Sonam Drakpa (*pan chen bsod nams grags pa*, 1478-1554), whose texts are studied at Losaling Monastery, where both His Holiness and Genlak received their monastic education (Gyatso 2003, 30). He acknowledges that the institute needs to make improvements on the non-

While the course curriculum has changed over the history of IBD, currently, a decade long program of study based mainly on Geluk commentaries on the perfection of wisdom, epistemology, and middle way culminates in a degree equivalent to an M.A. Upon completion of these courses, students can take courses for four more years on higher knowledge (*mngon pa mdzod*), monastic discipline, and the doctrinal views (*lta grub*) of Nyingma (*rnying ma*), Kagyü (*bka' brgyud*), and Sakya (*sa skya*) schools of Tibetan Buddhism. After that, one can study Tantra for two more years, completing a program of study called the Rimé Geshé (*ris med dge bshes*) degree,<sup>15</sup> which as Chung Tsering (*chung tshe ring*) notes, "is a term designated to those Geshés who have completed the study of all four schools—Nyingma, Kagyü, Sakya, and Geluk—of Tibetan Buddhism."<sup>16</sup> In concurrence with these Buddhist scholastic courses, students also take classes in classical Tibetan grammar, poetry, and English.<sup>17</sup>

Graduates of IBD are expected to pursue either the path of contemplation by devoting their lives to meditation or undertake civic professions within Tibetan society, such as teachers, translators, and Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) officials.<sup>18</sup> IBD, therefore,

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sectarian nature of the school. See Gyatso 2003, 41. At monthly meetings I observed at IBD in the early 1990s, some student-monks argued that if the institute could not ritually observe the death anniversaries of the founding fathers of other schools of Tibetan Buddhism, they should not have to ritually observe the death anniversary of Tsongkhapa, the founder of the Geluk School of Tibetan Buddhism. The concerns raised at these meetings, according to some students, demonstrate that the institute is not only Geluk-leaning in terms of commentarial studies, but also, the bias in favor of Geluk was evident in the religious ceremonies that were observed. The historical significance of attaching the label of "non-sectarian" to the identity of IBD should be understood within the context of the Shukden controversy in exile. As Dreyfus (1998, 255) states, "The situation began to deteriorate in 1975, a year which can be described as the Ge-luk *annus terribilis*. In this year, a book written in Tibetan about Shuk-den by Dze-may Rin-bo-che (*dze smad rin po che*, 1927-1996) was published. Retrospectively, we can say that the whole affair started from this book and the Dalai Lama's reaction to it."

<sup>15</sup> See Dreyfus, 2003, 254-260, on different types of traditional Geshé titles. Notice that Rimé Geshé is not found there.

<sup>16</sup> For the original Tibetan passage, see Chung Tsering 2013, 224. Chung Tsering further goes on to say that, "It is not only new in exile, it is perhaps the first one in the history of Tibetan [Buddhism]. There have been ten Rimé Geshés so far, and among them one was a woman."

<sup>17</sup> See *Information Brochure*, 13-14. Notice that Hindi is not taught at IBD despite the fact that it is the language that is spoken to interact with local Indians. Also, see n11.

<sup>18</sup> As Chung Tsering (2013, 224) emphasizes, "One of the regular remarks that the late Genlak made was 'I do not need any scholars who are difficult to support.' What he meant was that he would not support those lazy scholars with only scholarly persona. If the society were to support such scholars, they would just

emphasizes the importance of “productivity,”<sup>19</sup> to use Peter Moran’s term, within a monastic culture. It could be argued that IBD, given the exile context, purports to produce “ideal modern Tibetan monastics” (*deng dus kyi grwa pa tshad ldan*)<sup>20</sup> in both the religious sphere through their non-sectarian approach, and in a non-monastic context through their social engagement.<sup>21</sup>

Genlak’s influence on traditional Tibetan education in Dharamsala extended beyond IBD. In 1992, after almost two decades as IBD director, he began expanding IBD’s educational mission by creating the new institute, referred to as the College for Higher Tibetan Studies (CHTS), in a place called Sarah, a 30-minute taxi-ride from IBD. A naughty, tipsy child<sup>22</sup> from a small town in Kham had

show their scholarly persona without doing any work. What Genlak really needed was [graduates] who could get involved in the society and do some hands-on work. This is what Genlak said repeatedly.” For a brief list of graduates serving in different capacities, see Chung Tsering 2013, 224-227.

<sup>19</sup> Moran (2004, 105) argues, “Both the Chinese government and Tibetan exiles have taken up modern discourses of productivity, in which merely being a resident of a monastery, wearing robes and trying to observe the discipline is not enough. Instead, what is required is that one be a particular kind of ‘student,’ and eventually, hopefully, a scholar or meditator who upholds tradition.” Pamela Logan speaks of a similar sentiment that she heard from many Tibetans about incarnate lamas in Tibet, “as scholar Palden Nyima writes in an unpublished article: “These [Living] Buddhas often are of no help to the people, have little understanding of Buddhism, and simply live a good life at the expense of the common people.” This opinion is shared by many educated Tibetans.” See Logan, 23.

<sup>20</sup> McMahan (2008, 28) provides a useful description of several ways to be a Buddhist in the contemporary world. He groups them into “a Western Buddhist sympathizer,” “Thai lay woman,” “American Dharma teacher,” “traditional monk,” and “Asian modernizer,” and he argues, “I want them, first, to show the profound differences between the extremes of traditional and modernist forms of Buddhism; second, to illustrate some of the ways tradition and modernism are sometimes intertwined; and third, to deal with themes that are prominent today but can be traced back to the formative period of Buddhist modernism.” “Ideal modern Tibetan monastics” falls somewhere in between “traditional monk” and “Asian modernizer.”

<sup>21</sup> I am not suggesting that “non-sectarianism” or “social services in a non-monastic setting” were not present in traditional Tibet or in Tibetan Buddhism before 1959, but rather the context in which these occur cannot be oversimplified. For instance, McMahan (2008, 250) argues, “Certainly Buddhism throughout its history has carried forth various programs of both introspective contemplation and sociopolitical engagement—forest monks and ascetics in mountain caves as well as Dalai Lamas as political leaders and monks as advisors to kings. But the conditions that have produced the contemporary spectrum of personal spirituality and socially engaged Buddhism are uniquely formed by crossfertilizations between Buddhism and the discourses of modernity, along with their late modern articulations.”

<sup>22</sup> The words “naughty” and “tipsy” come from Genlak’s memoir where he talks about how people would refer to him as “naughty” and how much he enjoyed

now become an institution builder on the other side of the Himalaya. Although CHTS was not ceremonially inaugurated by His Holiness until 1998, almost a year after the unnatural death of Genlak, courses had already begun to be offered there prior to his demise. CHTS primarily offers classes on Tibetan language, history, poetry, and Buddhism. Their course curriculum in brief is as follows:<sup>23</sup> one-year further study course in Tibetan language for high school graduates or students with an equivalent degree; three-year advanced Tibetan literature course; two-year teacher training course for primary school teachers; and one and a half year graduate teacher training course.<sup>24</sup> Compared to IBD (which has 'Buddhist' in the name), the sister school purports to put "a greater emphasis to (sic) secular subjects."<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, CHTS places greater emphasis on the civic service or social work component at its core, as their brochure describes.<sup>26</sup> Chung Tsering observes that CHTS has greatly benefitted the Tibetan exile community by producing graduates who work in varying capacities.<sup>27</sup> So, while IBD boasts of creating ideal monastics, CHTS fosters ideal Tibetan citizens (*bod pa tshad ldan*) in education and service within the exile community. As many of Genlak's inner circle claim, CHTS was considered to be the fulfillment of Genlak's vision or dream.

Not only was Genlak an administrator, he was also an educator of Buddhist doctrine and Tibetan literature at IBD. Moreover, unlike many other traditional Geluk scholars,<sup>28</sup> Genlak was a prolific writer,<sup>29</sup> who wrote on topics ranging from advice to his fellow Tibetans on the problems of alcoholism (*chang rag gi nyes dmigs*) to commonly appearing subjects (*chos can mthun snang ba*) of the Madhyamaka School to the criticism of the controversial Shukden

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drinking alcoholic beverage as a child before becoming a monk. See Sparham 1998, 28.

<sup>23</sup> Sparham 1998, 23-25.

<sup>24</sup> According to *Information Brochure*, the Department of Education of the Central Tibetan Administration formally recognized CHTS in 2001, and the Public Service Commission of the CTA "began to accept CHTS degrees and diplomas as valid for government recruitment and on a par with those granted by Indian universities" in 2006. See *Information Brochure*, 21.

<sup>25</sup> *Information Brochure*, 23.

<sup>26</sup> *Information Brochure*, 23 and compare it with that of IBD's "Aims and Objectives" on 11.

<sup>27</sup> For a list of graduates in different programs from CHTS since its inception, see Chung Tsering 2013, 230-231.

<sup>28</sup> See Dreyfus 2003, 120-123, where he discusses the "discouragement of writing" at Drepung, Sera, and Ganden monasteries.

<sup>29</sup> His writings have been compiled into a nine-volume collected works published by Institute of Buddhist Dialectics, Dharamsala.

(*shugs ldan*) deity worship.<sup>30</sup> Like many other contemporary Tibetan religious figures of his stature, he traveled widely to different parts of the world for various purposes, such as representing the CTA or His Holiness, and raising funds for IBD and the establishment of CHTS.

While the public Genlak is known for his service as an administrator, teacher, writer, and loyal disciple of His Holiness, the individual, human Genlak could be described as a study in contrasts: he was humble, yet arrogant in many ways; he was flexible and progressive, yet stubborn and conservative; he was as much a believer in Dharmakīrtian logic as he was a believer in the efficacy of ritual propitiation; he was gentle as well as harsh (and sometimes violent) to his students; and he was compassionate, yet short-tempered. Finally, at the age of sixty-nine in 1997, because of his stand against the worship of the Shukden deity,<sup>31</sup> he was stabbed to death in his tiny room in Dharamsala,<sup>32</sup> the very place where he saw a glimpse of hope for the future of Tibet in Tibetan youth.

Because of his long and admirable service at IBD, ordinary Tibetans who knew him respectfully referred to him as "*mtshan nyid rgan*" meaning "IBD teacher," with no other prestigious religious titles such as "*rin po che*" (precious one), "*mkhan po*" (abbot), or "*sprul sku*" (incarnate being).<sup>33</sup> The monk, who lived quite simply for his entire life, is now given a ritually sanctified new body, officially known as Tsennyi Khentul Tenzin Tseten Rinpoché (*mtshan nyid mkhan sprul bstan 'dzin tshé brtan rin po che*), but commonly referred to as Tsennyi Rinpoché (*mtshan nyig rin po che*). He was born on the fourteenth of May, 2001 in Ladakh to Sharma Sahib, a Garsha (*gar sha*) father of Indian citizenship<sup>34</sup> and Lhazöm (*lha 'dzoms*), a Tibetan

<sup>30</sup> For a detailed study of the history of the controversy, see Dreyfus 1998.

<sup>31</sup> Genlak's miscellaneous writings on the issues surrounding the worship of Shukden are found in a volume compiled by his students. For the volume, see Gyatso 1997.

<sup>32</sup> Dreyfus (2003, 303) writes, "In 1996, the Dalai Lama issued a stronger statement against Shuk-den, and a year later Gen Lob-zang Gya-tso and two of his students were brutally murdered in Dharamsala. Nobody has been apprehended but the Indian police have issued indictments against some known followers of Shukden, who escaped into Tibet."

<sup>33</sup> Samdhong Rinpoche (*zam gdong rin po che*), however, says that he had heard that Genlak might have been an incarnation of a famous Geshé nicknamed Nakpoba (*nag po ba*, the dark-skinned one). According to Samdhong Rinpoche, Genlak was referred to as "the dark-skinned one" because of his complexion and perhaps because of his predecessor. See Samdhong Rinpoche, 12-13. Gareth Sparham, the author of Genlak's memoirs, tells me that he never heard from Genlak that he was referred to as "the dark-skinned one" because of Geshé Nakpoba.

<sup>34</sup> Many news reports on the enthronement ceremony of the new reincarnation mistakenly (either intentionally or unintentionally) identify his father as a Tibetan. None of my informants said that the father was a Tibetan, but rather

refugee mother. He was confirmed as the reincarnation of Genlak at the age of five in 2006 by His Holiness, based on his divination (*mo*) result and the recommendation of the IBD representatives who oversaw the search process. He was officially enthroned in 2009 on a day determined through an astrological reading at the main Tibetan temple in Dharamsala. The ceremony was attended by highly ranked Tibetan dignitaries from the CTA. He is currently receiving his Geluk monastic education at Losaling monastery in south India.<sup>35</sup> In addition to his monastic training, he is also learning English and Chinese. He is fluent in Ladakhi, Tibetan, and Hindi.

Since the new body is an extension of his predecessor in the Tibetan Buddhist world, I will examine the narratives that construct the connection between the two bodies or lives.<sup>36</sup> Since the narratives are not available in writing, my account depends on informants' verbal accounts; it is these reports that served as the basis of His Holiness' final decree approving of the identification. I interviewed a dozen people for their insights into this matter in 2012-2013, but the following will focus mainly on information gathered from the following four major informants:<sup>37</sup> Norbu (*nor bu*) was Genlak's grandnephew, and is now a teacher and attendant of the young Rinpoché; Samten (*bsam gtan*) and Tharchin (*mthar phyin*), who trace

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they emphasized that he was from Garsha (*gar sha*), located in the district of Lahaul and Spiti, Himachal Pradesh.

<sup>35</sup> Norbu has this to say about the young Rinpoché's interest in study: "Right now perhaps because of his age he does not really have any interest in studying; he just wants to play. I have to literally stand beside him day in and day out so that he can focus on education. He is a very well-behaved child, though."

<sup>36</sup> As Ian Stevenson (2000, 98) observed among his subjects for his work on rebirth stories in many parts of the world, there are five major features that are seen in a fully developed rebirth case. They are: 1) an elderly person predicts that the dead person will be reborn; 2) someone has a dream about the rebirth of the dead person in a particular family; 3) birthmarks are noted when the baby is born; 4) the child makes statements about the previous incarnation's life; and 5) the child displays unusual behaviors. So, broadly speaking, Tsennyi Rinpoché's case is perhaps nothing unique, but rather operates within a broader practice of framing reincarnation tales. However, what might make the Tsennyi Rinpoché's rebirth distinctive is the Tibetan diasporic context in which it occurred.

<sup>37</sup> I conducted the interviews in Tibetan some of which I have translated in English here. All the names of my informants are pseudonyms. Even in quotes, I have replaced the names of the informants with the pseudonyms. I did not interview Rinpoché's father because of his lack of participation in the identification of Tsennyi Rinpoché. As Samten, one of the informants spoke of the father: "He said he does not care whether he [his son] is a reincarnation [the father used the word "avatār" in Hindi], but he wants his son to grow as a good person." Samten adds that the father is Buddhist. Furthermore, despite several attempts to contact the mother of the young Rinpoché, I was not able to interview her.

their regional background to Central Tibet, work in the administration at IBD; and Drölma (*sgrol ma*) is a sister of Tharchin.<sup>38</sup>

Several years before Tsennyi Rinpoché was born, Genlak, a public figure, left behind powerful material or conceptual markers in a community where they can be easily used as signs for a future reincarnation. The markers include the infrastructures for the two institutes, many IBD graduates who studied under him and who hold prominent public positions in the exile community, Genlak's loyalty and devotion to His Holiness, the physical marks left on Genlak's dead body, and a visible threat posed to non-sectarianism as construed by the folks on His Holiness' side. So, it should not be surprising that discussions and narratives about his first reincarnation ensued after his tragic death.

Soon after the untimely demise of Genlak in 1997, several monastics representing IBD and Phukhang Khangtsen (*phu khang khang tshan*), the monastic hostel to which Genlak belonged when he was at Losaling, had an audience with His Holiness for his guidance and advice on dealing with the loss of Genlak. Norbu was in the audience and summarizes the meeting with His Holiness as follows:

There were four main things that we presented to His Holiness: 1) any lead on Lüdrup's (*klu sgrub*) incarnation,<sup>39</sup> which Genlak had requested but had stalled; 2) His Holiness' advice for Losang Ngawang's (*blo bzang ngag dbang*) family on how to cope with his death;<sup>40</sup> 3) His Holiness' advice on what Genlak's relatives could do in honor of Genlak; 4) any remedy to ward off general problems such as suicide, unnatural death, and other problems that had recently plagued Kongjorawa.

At the meeting, His Holiness addressed these concerns, but he did not mention anything about the possibility of Genlak's reincarnation. Samten also states, "The IBD administration initially did not express any interest (*do snang*) or persistence (*shugs*) on whether Genlak's reincarnation would be found or not." However, in 2001, four years after the initial audience, His Holiness decreed in writing that there would be a reincarnation (*yang srid*) of Genlak and that he would be

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<sup>38</sup> They, thus, form a close-knit group of informants who are related to each other either by blood, regional background, or close friendship in the Tibetan social world.

<sup>39</sup> He is a prominent Rinpoché from Genlak's native hometown.

<sup>40</sup> He was one of the two students who were murdered on the same night. According to Norbu, his father is a respected religious virtuoso in his hometown, so his untimely death was obviously difficult to bear for his family and the local community members.

found in Nepal born to a devout (*chos pa*) Buddhist couple of Nepali citizenship (*bal po'i mi khungs*). A search was immediately carried out, and according to Norbu, "A former student of Genlak basically told IBD that he would collect names from different children in Nepal. He gathered around 500 names from different schools [in Nepal] and gave them to IBD. The institute presented the names to the Private Office of His Holiness (*sku sger yig tshang*),<sup>41</sup> and His Holiness asked IBD to check on one particular child."<sup>42</sup> As the story goes, a search party consisting of Samten and Gendun (*dge 'dun*)<sup>43</sup> went to Nepal to examine the child, but it turned out that the child was born two years before the death of Genlak.<sup>44</sup>

As the search party was beginning to lose their hope in finding the right candidate in Nepal,<sup>45</sup> Tharchin started hearing a story from his sister, Drölma, about an "unusual child" (*spu gu mi dra ba/spu gu ya mstan*), who exhibited "signs and marks that resembled that of Genlak" (*rgan gyi rtags dang mtshan ma yod mkhan*). Contrary to what His Holiness had clearly specified, the child was born in Ladakh to a couple that were neither Nepali citizens nor devout Buddhists.<sup>46</sup> As Samten recalls, "In December, in the winter of 2004, we received a call from [Tharchin's] sister... She said that she knew a couple, Lhazöm and her husband, Sharma Sahib. Their son started talking about a monastery in Dharamsala, and he was quite unusual. We should come up and examine the child." As I asked for more

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<sup>41</sup> It is now known as Ganden Phodrang (*dga' ldan pho brang*) in Tibetan and the Office of His Holiness the Dalai Lama in English.

<sup>42</sup> Norbu adds, "To be honest, I was not there [in Dharamsala]. I did not see any letter from the Private Office of His Holiness asking IBD to examine this particular child."

<sup>43</sup> Gendun is a pseudonym for another person who works in the office of IBD.

<sup>44</sup> Norbu speculates that they went there mainly for another purpose. Since they happened to be in Nepal they dropped by to see the child. It is interesting that the person who collected the names of the potential candidates did not gather their ages.

<sup>45</sup> Norbu has this to say about the rationale behind the remarks that His Holiness made about the Nepal connection: "In retrospect, as I think about why His Holiness said that the reincarnation would be found in Nepal, I later found out that the parents were on a pilgrimage in Nepal in 2001. So, one could not say that what His Holiness said was without base (*ma red zer yag mi 'dug*). At least, that is how I made the connection in my mind (*nga'i sems nang la bang sgrig stang*)." I am reminded of Robert Orsi's (2005, 2) work where he describes religion "as a network of relationships between heaven and earth.... These relationships have all the complexities—all the hopes, evasions, love, fear, denial, projections, misunderstandings, and so on—of relationships between humans."

<sup>46</sup> They are Buddhist, but when asked about their religious orientation, Samten says that the mother went to Tibetan Children's Village school in Ladakh implying that she is not particularly devout. The father does not have much faith in the institution of "avatār" (reincarnation).

information about the narrative that Samten and Tharchin had heard from Drölma, both of them insisted that I speak with her directly.

I took their advice and conducted two interviews with her. I asked her to give her account of the child. She said:

I don't remember that much now, but I will tell you what I remember. Sharma and Lhazöm [the parents of the child] were going to get married in a few days. Lhazöm asked me whether there would be success in their marriage and asked me to do a dream analysis.<sup>47</sup> So, that night I did some dream analysis. In my dream, I saw Sharma and Lhazöm going down to Sarah from an area near Geshélak's (*dge bshes lags*) [i.e., Genlak] room (*bzhugs sa*) in a white Gypsy car. This was before they got married. They arrived at Sarah. There was a black stone surrounded by many snakes. They probably symbolize gems and Nāgārjuna [respectively]. The next day, Lhazöm asked me whether I had a dream. Our shops are next to each other. So, I told her that Geshélak was a great person and perhaps she was going to have his reincarnation (*yang srid*). I did not know that IBD was looking for Geshélak's reincarnation. I assumed (*nga rang rang gi bsam tshul*) that there would be one. Lhazöm told me that she was going to have a baby (*spu gu*) more precious (*rtsa che ba*) than Geshélak. And, I asked her why she would need someone more precious than him. There could not be any one more precious than Geshélak. He was Tenzin Gyatso's (*bstan 'dzin rgya mtsho*) [i.e. His Holiness'] right-hand man (*dpung pa gyas pa*).<sup>48</sup>

As a skilled narrator, Drölma places herself at the center of the story and then weaves together a meaningful narrative thread that connects and complicates the relationship between Genlak, his institutions, monastic scholasticism, and the parents. While she continued to speak for a long time with details "full of boundless possibilities,"<sup>49</sup> I interrupted her at some point and asked her what and when she reported about the child to IBD. She then said:

<sup>47</sup> I asked Tharchin and Norbu whether Drölma practiced any dream analysis. The response that I received from them was a rhetorical question "Did she say that?"

<sup>48</sup> According to Tharchin and Samten, she never mentioned this particular dream to them.

<sup>49</sup> Narayan (1989, 243) argues, "A story's lifelikeness also allows events to become believable within it, even if they should never occur in everyday life. For though the world created by a story is often similar to lived cultural reality, it is also full of boundless possibilities. Within a story, received categories can be combined into fantastic new shapes, and time can jump backward, sideways, or far ahead. Men can be born to virgins, gods can fly through the heavens, objects can change

One day before I told IBD, I brought the child (*spu gu*) to my room and gave chocolate and sweets to him. It was just two of us. I asked him, 'Please tell me what you were in your previous life and I will tell Tenzin Gyatso [His Holiness].' So, he told me that he would tell me everything. He said that he had two students. They fought a lot. [She is referring to the night when Genlak along with his two students were murdered.] He told me the names [of the two student-monks], but I don't remember. The child was probably around three years old then. I felt convinced, and I called Tharchin and told him that the child might be the reincarnation of Geshélak [Genlak]. Please tell this to His Holiness, oracles, and Samten. Tharchin told Samten, but IBD did not really do that much for a while. I called him [Tharchin] again and asked him to tell Tenzin Gyatso. I said I don't have any clairvoyance (*mgnon shes*) or realization (*rtogs pa*). They finally reported everything that I mentioned to His Holiness. They presented a five-page report to His Holiness detailing her descriptions. Within a month or so, they [Samten and Tharchin] said that they would come to Ladakh. Samten told me that if the child was Geshélak's reincarnation that would be great, but if he is not, then what? I got a bit upset and angry and told him that it would be up to His Holiness and the pair of the Red and Black protector deities (*srung ma dmar nag gnyis*).

Having heard stories such as this,<sup>50</sup> so the narrative goes, the search committee informed the Private Office of His Holiness of their report from Nepal and the latest update on the quest. The search for a child born to a devout Buddhist couple of Nepali citizenship thus ended. His Holiness' response arrived quickly, asking IBD representatives to go to Ladakh immediately to examine the child. Samten asked Norbu to accompany him. They flew to Ladakh shortly thereafter. Samten describes his memory of his initial encounter with the child as follows:

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shape, and animals can speak. By stretching conceptions of the possible, narrative transcends the here and now."

<sup>50</sup> It is important for us to keep in mind that stories are told differently to different people even by the same narrator depending on the context. As Narayan (1989, 26) states, "A folktale like 'That's Good, Very Good' can be retold in many ways, both by the same teller and by tellers separated in time and space. The version Swamiji told the couple was by no means an authoritative text. Rather, it was just one among many retellings, using a hodge-podge language and narrative details shaped in performance to a particular set of circumstances."

We told Gen Pemalak (*rgan pad ma lags*) [the caretaker of the residence of His Holiness in Leh, Ladakh, where the informants stayed] about the child. We said that it [the whole search process] was still quite secret (*gsang ba*). Gen Pemalak knew of the child and concurred that he was special. Gen Pemalak took them to the parents' two-storied house. There were some trees in the courtyard. The child did not know that we were coming, but he was standing there as if he was waiting for our arrival. He expressed some familiarity with us.

In the words of Kirin Narayan, stories such as this seem to "dramatize" the abstract Buddhist tenets such as karma, rebirth, *samsāra*, and *nirvāna* "through character and plot."<sup>51</sup> So his initial impression of the child, as the narrative suggests, was that of the child's possible longing for his permanent home based in Dharamsala, far away from his temporary two-storied house. Since the two search members spent some time at the house, I asked Samten whether he observed any other special characteristics about the child. His account continues:

The child said that he had been killed with a knife. We asked him where. He immediately took off all layers of clothes and showed his bare stomach indicating where he was stabbed. This was the most extraordinary (*ya mtshan shos*) instance [that we observed at the parents' house that day]. He was only around five or six years old then. Then, we had the late Genlak's (*rgan dam pa*) chess set with us. Remember Genlak was very fond of chess! Norbu showed the chess set to the child; he really liked it. His mother told him that it was not his, but he kept saying that it was his. They left the chess set with him that night. But one thing that I want to say is that the incarnate does not like meat at all. He does not even eat meat! But the late Genlak loved meat! Other than that, he is very much like the late Genlak.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Narayan 1989, 244.

<sup>52</sup> Drölma adds this to the story: "When they came to the parents' house, Samtenlak had brought a lot of fruit, biscuits, and others. Samtenlak started asking questions to the child, such as, "Who am I?" [to which the child said] "You are my student." And, "Who is this [pointing to Tharchin]?" "This is my relative (*spun mched*)," says the Rinpoché. Samtenlak then says, "You must have beaten him a lot, probably" "No," answers the child. Tharchin started crying, and then he said that Genlak never beat him. They all teared up now." I am reminded again of what Narayan (1989, 91) has to say about narration. She argues that folk

As an administrator, Samten's narrative is less personal, and focuses more on the connection between the child and the institutes. On the other hand, Norbu's story is more personal, making a conscious attempt to create a personal connection between himself and the child since Norbu was Genlak's nephew, student, and attendant, and they were from the same monastery in Kongjorawa. Here is how Norbu recalls his initial encounter:

I think we arrived there in the morning around nine o'clock. Gen Samtenlak recounted the purpose of our visit to Gen Pernalak, who responded by saying, "If that is the child, he must have gone to school by now. You should take a rest and visit the family in the afternoon." I was a bit tired and laid down on the bed in our room. Gen Samtenlak was on his bed on the other side of the room. I had a dream then. I never told this dream to anyone other than Gen Samtenlak, but I think it is okay if I share it with you now. I don't know whether it was a good omen or a bad omen (*rtags yag ga yin sdug ga yin mi shes*). In my dream, I was sitting by a lake and two gold fish started to come close to me.<sup>53</sup> I extended my open palms out in the water and they came straight into my palms. I woke up immediately and shared the dream with Gen Samtenlak, who didn't say much about it. Around four in the afternoon, we went up to the child's place. As we approached the house, I took a glance at the house and saw the kid looking down at us. This is just my personal experience (*nga rang gi tshor sang*). As I saw him for the first time, I had a vivid image of Genlak's face (*rgan lags kyi rnam pa dang gdong pa phra lam mer mjal khan bzo 'dra byung*). As we walked into their house, he really seemed to like me a lot. Perhaps because we brought a lot of toys, such as trucks and airplanes, and some candies. The kid and I started playing with the toys, while Gen Samtenlak and the parents were talking. We bonded very well (*cham po zhe po cig chags song*) within a few minutes and felt very comfortable with him (*bde po zhe po cig chags song*). Every now and then I would tease (*skyag skyag byas*) him by asking, 'Do you know Norbu [referring to himself]?' He would just give me a blank look without saying anything in response.

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stories "are not just told; they are *performed* to audiences, and so they act as a form of theater."

<sup>53</sup> Two golden fish is one of the eight auspicious symbols in Tibetan tradition.

Both Norbu and Samten said that they were impressed by the child's demeanor at their initial meeting with him. Their enchantment with the child would continue over the next few days, as Norbu's story shows: "The following day, we rented a car and went on a pilgrimage to several sacred places in Ladakh. I was very impressed by the kid and how he behaved himself at the sacred sites. I felt that he was very unusual, but I did not know whether he was Genlak." And the day after, as Norbu recalls:

The next day, Drölma invited us to dinner. At some point the child got up and started ripping off a tissue paper on his own and started making something. His grandpa asked him to stop, but he did not. He made something with a head and wings. Gen Samtenlak asked him, "What is it?" He said, "Dha." "What?" asked Gen Samtenlak again. "Dha" the child repeated. Gen Samtenlak looked surprised and immediately said, "Oh, he is trying to say 'Dharamsala'" and asked another question, "Are you coming?" He said, "Yes!" Gen Samtenlak said, "Where are you going to sit?" He pointed at the head of the paper airplane. Gen Samtenlak asked, "Should we come with you?" He nodded in response. Gen Samtenlak asked, "Where should we sit?" He pointed at the tail-end of the paper-airplane.

Upon their examination of the child over this three-day period, as the narrative goes, the administrator and the nephew-disciple confirmed that he was "unusual" or "extraordinary" (*mi 'dra ba/khad mtshar po*). However, both of them stated that they could neither confirm nor deny whether he was the reincarnation of Genlak. Nonetheless, they returned to Dharamsala thinking that they had found a child with some extraordinary signs. Now they would have to report it to His Holiness, as Drölma had recommended in her request to Tharchin and Samten at the beginning of the little-known quest. As per their accounts, they presented a written document to the Private Office of His Holiness soon after their return to Dharamsala from Ladakh. Not long after that, they, along with other IBD representatives, were summoned for a meeting with His Holiness in 2006. At the meeting, nine years after Genlak's death, His Holiness officially confirmed the young child in Ladakh as Genlak's legitimate reincarnation.

### Conclusion

Genlak's life is marked by two major challenges faced by the exile community: (1) the preservation of Tibetan literary culture and religion; and (2) sectarianism. Genlak, as a loyal disciple of His Holiness, devoted his life to addressing both in his writings and through the development of IBD and CHTS. While these contributions may forever influence the younger generation of Tibetans in exile, they could not create the socio-religious connections that a new reincarnate body can.<sup>54</sup> The new body could and does interact with his predecessor's students, receive teachings from His Holiness, and create religious connections with his teachers at Losaling. Genlak's new hybrid body with his language skills (something that Genlak never acquired) could help His Holiness with his broader vision of fostering a non-sectarian attitude among Geluk monastics, educating the younger generation with Tibetan literary tradition, and disseminating Tibetan Buddhism in the Himalayan regions beyond the Tibetan exile community. Using John Strong's idea about the Buddha's relics being an extension of the Buddha's biography,<sup>55</sup> we could contend that Genlak's reincarnation is not only an expression and extension of the predecessor's biography, but also of the predecessor's guru.<sup>56</sup> As His Holiness is in his early eighty, only time will tell us whether the young Tsennyi Rinpoché can fulfill the vision (*dgongs pa sgrub*) of his predecessor's root lama.

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<sup>54</sup> For an excellent study on how an incarnate body can establish such relationship, see Anya Bernstein's article in this special issue (2017) as well as her recent book (Bernstein 2013).

<sup>55</sup> See Strong 2004.

<sup>56</sup> Ordaining monastics, recognizing incarnate beings, giving teachings, traveling throughout the world, writing books, and engaging in politics can all be seen as a part of the activity of the lama (*bla ma'i mdzad pa*).

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# A Transnational Tulku: The Multiple Lives of FPMT's Spanish-Born Lama Ösel

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**I**n this article, I will discuss the unique case of the largely non-heritage Tibetan Buddhist community,<sup>1</sup> the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT), and their young non-heritage reincarnation, Lama Ösel.<sup>2</sup> I will discuss how FPMT and Ösel have both spun Geertzian webs of signification about complexities of tulkus, lineage, guru devotion, and faith that have themselves ensnared and enabled one another in turn.

The case of FPMT's young tulku is unique in that some of the institution's non-heritage followers are agnostic about the notion of reincarnation altogether. In an ethnographic analysis of the conventionalities of faith production, we see that institutions like FPMT secure faith, dispel skepticism, and enable trust in the sangha

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<sup>1</sup> Herein, I use the terms "heritage" and "non-heritage" Buddhists to distinguish between those who came from a markedly Buddhist background from those who did not. I have chosen not to use Jan Nattier's (1998) popular distinction between "elite" and "ethnic" (and "missionary") Buddhists, since it carries the problematic linguistic baggage that: 1) non-heritage Buddhists are definitely economically elite while heritage Buddhists are not (which is patently inaccurate); 2) that all non-heritage Buddhists are white people (an over-generalization, to say the least), *and* that white people are somehow non-"ethnic" (although that flies in the face of the multiplicity of disparate heritage groups amongst American whites). I have also chosen to eschew the use of the word "convert," since some of my FPMT informants refused the appellation, for example, second-generation non-heritage Buddhists whose parents converted to Buddhism, and those who continue to feel connected to their heritage religious identity even as they also practice Buddhism.

<sup>2</sup> This article is primarily, although not exclusively, based on ethnographic work on FPMT and its Maitreya Project that I did from 2005-2007, which was funded by a generous grant from the American Institute for Indian Studies. I have also observed the social media presence by (and about) FPMT and their lamas from roughly 2002 through 2016. Interviews with FPMT interlocutors were confidential, and thus I have changed the names of my informants to protect their privacy.

faith by disciplining one's mind and body with repeated guru yoga<sup>3</sup> bowing and genuflection, and the expectation that one will obey the advice of one's spiritual master. Guru devotion permeates the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, but in translating the practices of guru worship to Western non-heritage devotees it is notable that the path to burgeoning faith is constructed by especially active engagement with, through, and beyond skepticism.

As I trace the many "lives" or transformations of Ösel Hita throughout this chapter, I will make the case that insofar as skepticism is an important strategy in FPMT's work to inspire faith, Ösel's journey into and now out of cynicism is itself providing new models for being Buddhist in the organization.

Although Ösel himself was never my informant (and I've never met him in person), he was considered a guru and celebrity for many of my FPMT informants (the sangha and the committed devotees, at any rate);<sup>4</sup> thus, my anthropological understanding of Ösel's journey is largely being refracted through FPMTers' experience of it. As Ösel is a public celebrity, this paper will address Ösel's many lives within the FPMT social imaginary, and as such, my paper is primarily concerned with the ways that a relatively nascent transnational Buddhist organization has engaged with its most transnational young tulku.

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<sup>3</sup> Guru yoga is an aspect of Tibetan Buddhist practice that entails the visualization of one's guru as a buddha, in order to: 1) purify one's karmas; 2) exalt the guru as teacher; 3) reaffirm the innate capacity of all sentient beings to eventually achieve buddhahood (Powers 1995).

<sup>4</sup> Non-heritage Buddhists are a disparate lot themselves, so I have found it useful to establish subcategories that acknowledge the nature of their commitment at the time of the interview. Based on their interviews with me, I situate my non-heritage FPMT informants on a spectrum ranging from "students" to "devotees" to "sangha." "Students" are active and interested learners, who may or may not self-identify as Buddhist, but feel a connection to some elements of the practice and/or philosophy. FPMT "devotees" have placed their faith and commitment in the gurus of the organization (to be precise, I would add that this does not preclude guru commitments to non-FPMT teachers). "Sangha" have become monastics and dedicated themselves to teaching dharma. These are non-essentialist categories that obviously change over time (perhaps more than once in a person's lifetime). These appellations are also not necessarily linear or progressive, as some informants zig-zagged back and forth between categories during their relationship with FPMT.

### 1. *Ösel's early years*

FPMT was founded in the 1960s by Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche. At the time FPMT was organized, Lama Yeshe was a Tibetan refugee living in exile, and Lama Zopa Rinpoche (a Nepali-born heritage Buddhist) was his student. FPMT was founded at the behest of Western students who begged for dharma teachings. Today, the devotees, monastics, and administrators worshipping at FPMT's global network of over 150 centers are as likely to be from South Carolina (USA) as South Korea (ROK), and the majority of FPMTers are still non-heritage Buddhists.

I will begin Ösel's story where my informants tend to, with the death of Lama Yeshe on March 3, 1984.<sup>5</sup> After Lama Yeshe's death, Lama Zopa Rinpoche took on the work of running and expanding the FPMT empire. By the late eighties, there were fifty FPMT centers worldwide.<sup>6</sup> After a search, Lama Zopa Rinpoche recognized Lama Ösel Hita Torres (born to Spanish parents—who were both FPMT devotees—in February 1985) as the reincarnation of Lama Yeshe; the Dalai Lama confirmed this identification in 1986.<sup>7</sup> Shortly thereafter, Lama Zopa Rinpoche began plans to educate him at a Tibetan monastery in India in the manner he felt befitted a reincarnate lama.

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<sup>5</sup> Lama Zopa Rinpoche noted two different causes for Lama Yeshe's failing health and ultimate demise: 1) he blamed deficiencies in the FPMT sangha's level of devotion; 2) he blamed the "problems regarding our center in England, Manjushri Institute" (Wangmo 2005: 281). In terms of the first cause, Lama Zopa Rinpoche suggested to FPMT devotees that Lama Yeshe could have lived another ten years, but that his lifespan had been dependent on the integrity of the prayers and karma of his followers, who had essentially failed to muster the conviction to keep him healthy (Mackenzie 1988).<sup>5</sup> The second cause, the secession of the Manjushri Institute from FPMT in 1984, was upsetting to Rinpoche not only due to the loss of the physical center, but also because it became the founding "mother centre" of the group called the New Kadampa Tradition. The New Kadampas are one of the groups aligned against the Dalai Lama's restriction on the propitiation of the Shukden deity, and therefore, they are extremely controversial in the milieu of contemporary Tibetan Buddhism. Lama Zopa Rinpoche had reportedly said that the secession of the center was a significant cause in the fast decline of Lama Yeshe's health (Wangmo 2005). For more on the Shukden controversy, see Dreyfus 1999, and for more on the role of the FPMT and the Manjushri Institute, see Kay 2004 and Cozort in Heine and Prebish 2003.

<sup>6</sup> Mackenzie 1988.

<sup>7</sup> Wangmo 2005. Non-heritage, not ethnically Tibetan tulkus are not unheard of, but they are still quite rare. There are several Western tulkus who have been identified by Tibetan lineage holders from all the major Tibetan sects. Most were the boy children of non-heritage Tibetan Buddhist devotees, but there have also been a few adult Western men (Steven Seagal, e.g.) and women (such as Catherine Burroughs, a.k.a. Jetsunma Ahkon Lhamo, e.g.) recognized as tulkus over the past few decades as well.

The FPMT students and devotees I interviewed dozens of years after Lama Yeshe's death were split about whether they believed in Ösel as a tulku. With the caveat that these memories were shared in retrospect, some acknowledged an initial cynicism that they slowly resolved, while others said they were always sure that Lama Zopa Rinpoche and/or the Dalai Lama must be right in their recognition of Ösel. Others maintained a connection to FPMT, but never managed to generate faith in Ösel or to become certain that he was the legitimate successor. As one might expect, this latter perspective is especially prevalent amongst those interviewees who had already phased out of FPMT after Lama Yeshe died; among former FPMTers, there was a great deal of deep-seated ambivalence about the authenticity of the identification.

Vicki Mackenzie, a Buddhist journalist and a devotee of Lama Yeshe, has documented Ösel's life from the time she met him as a 20-month old toddler (1988) to his pre-teen years (1995). In her books, she writes of her own shock at seeing aspects of her former teacher's personality reflected back to her through a child. She discussed how other devotees looked for clues as to whether he was an authentic reincarnation with both hope and doubt. Her two books addressing Lama Ösel read as hagiographies designed to convince the reader that he is a genuine tulku; in part, she does this by highlighting her initial skepticism and describing how she was gradually convinced Lama Ösel was truly Lama Yeshe's reincarnation. That someone who had such extended exposure to him became convinced of his status as a tulku is meant to be understood by others as evidence that they too should become confident of his identification.

Since Lama Ösel's parents were dedicated non-heritage FPMT Buddhists from Spain, they were willing to let Lama Zopa Rinpoche take charge of his education from an early age. At the age of three he was being taught by his parents, by an FPMT Geshé in Spain, and at Kopan monastery by Lama Zopa Rinpoche. At the time, young Lama Ösel traveled often from Nepal to India to Spain and also to many centers all over the world. In 1991, he was sent to a very prestigious Tibetan monastery, the Sera Je monastery in exile, located in the southern Indian state of Karnataka. According to my informants (and his own later public missives on the subject), Lama Ösel often struggled against the traditional Tibetan Buddhist pedagogy of intense memorization, strict discipline, and tightly controlled schedules. After two years, he left the monastery, and the ensuing "crisis" alerted various layers of the FPMT community to some uncertainty about Lama Ösel's future with the organization. Eventually, a resolution was reached, and Lama Ösel returned to Sera

Jé on the condition that his father and a beloved brother could accompany him.<sup>8</sup> He reintegrated into the system at Sera with some special accommodations, and stayed for several more years. After resolving to finally leave Sera Jé after his eighteenth birthday, he took off his monastic robes for good, and went to a private school in Europe. Since Ösel left behind the title, "Lama," I will not use it to characterize him during the years following his eighteenth birthday.

## *2. Waiting for Ösel:*

### *Hopes and anxieties after the abdication of the heir apparent*

During my fieldwork period studying FPMT and their Maitreya Project plan in India from 2005-2007, Ösel Hita was entirely out of the public eye, but he was still a minor celebrity. He had asked FPMTers to leave him alone for the time being, as he pursued a Western education, without FPMT responsibilities. At that time, many of my FPMT informants, especially those who were long-term devotees, regularly whispered to one another about "Lama Ösel" at mealtimes and in line for the bathroom during breaks. His future was a popular topic of discussion amongst devotees at the FPMT centers where I did research.

In a conversation over breakfast at the Root Institute in Bodh Gaya in 2006, I heard the gathered students and devotees talk about the fact that they had heard that "Lama Ösel" was now asking to be called just "Ösel." This gossip was met with some consternation. A devotee from North America, a volunteer at the Root Institute, exclaimed, "He'll always be Lama Ösel to me!" One woman said that his abdication of the title was just a symptom of his humble and nontraditional nature (both qualities that they associated with Lama Yeshe); this comment was met with approval at the table. Although some of the discussants were relatively new to FPMT and what I would call "students," no one at the table expressed doubt about his authenticity during the conversation. Yet, this was not always the case with students at the Root Institute that year. There were many people who saw Ösel as a failed experiment, a strategic choice that blew up in their faces, and while there were occasional discussions about this in the open, most of the real nay-saying about Ösel's authenticity as a reincarnation by students and devotees alike was

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<sup>8</sup> Also, he had specific desires for a replacement tutor, and he asked be given concessions about his food arrangements there (Mackenzie 1995).

done in hushed voices in more private conversations and in confidential interviews.

In the midst of an interview with me in 2006, one informant, a non-heritage devotee, recounted that she heard that Ösel was dressing in “Goth” or “punk rocker” fashions, and he was drawn to the dregs of society—sitting with them and listening to their stories at dirty bars in California. A different American, a non-heritage Buddhist devotee, sounded a bit concerned as she told me that she had heard that he had a Mohawk hairstyle.

My FPMT informants in 2006 and 2007 often noted that he was studying film at a university in North America—some said in Canada and others said in America. While gossip about Ösel’s whereabouts and activities were a source of some consternation and excitement around the dining hall tables of FPMT centers in India in the mid-aughts, the news of his educational pursuits was often met with positivity by many devotees who said that he was learning the film medium in order to benefit the greatest possible number of people. For example, one of my informants, a long-time staff member at FPMT’s Root Institute, told me in 2006 that Ösel was expected to go his own way for a time, and then return to the FPMT fold. She said:

Lama Ösel is pursuing his Western education now. He hasn’t disrobed: since he was never ordained, he was never really robed! He is doing film studies. He is keeping a low profile. He wants to understand what life is like for his students. He had been at a boarding school in Europe for a while and no one there even knew that he was a tulku. One of his friends from there went to Kopan and saw his friend’s photo all over the place. He hadn’t known that Ösel was a lama. [Ösel] doesn’t want Mandala to do any sort of article, since he’s trying to stay out of the spotlight. He’s doing it all his own way. This doesn’t surprise anyone. Lama Yeshe was quite an unconventional lama. He used to drag Lama Zopa Rinpoche to strip clubs and Disneyland. He wanted to understand the world of his students. We expect great things from [Ösel] still, and he will come back to us when he is ready.

There are many devotees like her who always hoped that he would stay active in the organization and take over from Lama Zopa Rinpoche as spiritual director, but there are others who always felt that as a Westerner he would go his own way, and contribute to the

dharma in his own unique manner, becoming a kind-of Buddhist "talk show host."<sup>9</sup>

So although Ösel had left the organization, he had stayed fixed in what Vincent Crapanzano calls the "imaginative horizons" (2004) of FPMT devotees. Their desires, hopes, and anxieties about the future hinged largely upon Ösel, even after several years of radio silence from the young man himself. Ösel's unconventional ways were compared to Lama Yeshe's mores, and anyone who disagreed was often dismissed as having the wrong karma to recognize the truth of the matter.

In the summer of 2009, a controversy ensued regarding Ösel Hita Torres' just published interview with *Babylon Magazine* (Pontones 2009). The article quotes Ösel as saying that he did not consider himself a Buddhist, that he had a very difficult childhood as a tulku, and that he had sometimes felt that he was living a lie; the article quotes Ösel insisting that he will not teach in FPMT in the future as they had hoped, since he had left his robes and monastic education behind. He would be a filmmaker instead. A few media outlets, such as the *Guardian*, sensationalized the interview by emphasizing quotes about the suffering Ösel described in terms of his childhood in seclusion, and by making it appear the rift between FPMT and Ösel was fierce and acrimonious.<sup>10</sup> Soon afterwards, on their website, FPMT posted a letter from Ösel to FPMTers that decried this sensationalism without ever actually refuting the main points or quotes from the *Babylon* article ("Osel" 2009). Ösel did, however, try to ease possible hurt feelings by writing that he was grateful for the opportunity to have lived and studied in India, for although it had been difficult, it had been a formative experience. He worked to assuage the controversy by saying, "FPMT is doing a great job and Lama Zopa Rinpoche is an immensely special person..." He signed it: "Big Love, Ösel."

However, even after the *Babylon* controversy and the subsequent truce, Ösel did not recant his concerns about his upbringing. In 2012, the BBC interviewed Ösel and his mother for a piece called, "the Reluctant Lama" (Jenkins). In the interview, Ösel states that he still harbors misgivings about being raised in a monastery away from his family. Ösel and his mother both painted an unflattering picture of FPMT, especially as regards their handling of his ultimate refusal to return to the monastery: Ösel was apparently pressured to return by FPMT leaders; FPMT vocally blamed his mother for his departure;

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<sup>9</sup> Mackenzie 1995, 207-208.

<sup>10</sup> Fuchs 2009.

and FPMTers told her in no uncertain terms that she should also advise him to return. In the interview, Ösel said he was hounded for years after he left. In the BBC piece, his mother said that she stood by her decision to allow him to give up his title and religious education: "He felt like a clown. He felt he was being used to act as a master, to be seated in a throne, to visit a center, 6000 people coming there to see him and make offerings to him. He saw himself as representing something, or playing a role."<sup>11</sup> However, despite articulating an uncertainty about whether he was actually Lama Yeshe's reincarnation,<sup>12</sup> or whether he was a Buddhist even, in the same interview Ösel expressed interest in taking a more active role in FPMT. Thus, Ösel embodies a public model of moving forward in FPMT, despite some uncertainty and ambivalence.

Ironically, while the controversy started by the Babylon article had caused consternation and ruffled feathers, it actually served as a turning point in the story of Ösel's public relationship with FPMT. The outcome of the kerfuffle was the start of a new "life" for the transnational tulku, one in which he began engaging with FPMT on his own terms, as a non-monastic teacher, documentarian, and neophyte administrator.

### 3. *The return of the prodigal tulku*

Back in 2006, as I listened to devotees fantasize about how Ösel would return, use film to bring FPMT's messages to the Western masses, and lead them into the future, I would nod politely and dutifully write everything down. Personally, though, I sometimes felt that many of my informants were engaging in a communal case of wishful thinking about Ösel's future in FPMT. But I was wrong. Those FPMT devotees and sangha who believed Ösel would someday return to the fold have been rewarded for their constancy and faith: several years after my doctoral research on FPMT wrapped up in 2007, Ösel began to tentatively reengage with FPMT, attending board meetings and doing dharma talks. An open, public "Ösel Hita" page on Facebook, which appears to be managed primarily by Ösel himself, gained Ösel followers from the FPMT fold and beyond. I will

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<sup>11</sup> Jenkins 2012.

<sup>12</sup> On the one hand, Ösel showed a kind of agnosticism about whether he is Lama Yeshe's reincarnation, saying, "I don't think I'm not, but I don't think I'm him." (Jenkins 2012). On the other hand, he seemed to "accept" his identification out of deference to those who recognized him, adding, "I accept it because the Dalai Lama says it" (Jenkins 2012).

return to a more robust discussion of the Facebook page later in this chapter.

In 2012, FPMT devotees' dream that Ösel would use his filmmaking skills for the benefit of the organization came true. FPMT funded Ösel's production of a documentary on FPMT's Buddhist-inspired pedagogy: "Being Your True Nature." Directed by Ösel and Matteo Passigato, narrated by Ösel, and produced by the Foundation for Developing Wisdom and Compassion (and FilmPRO),<sup>13</sup> "Being Your True Nature" documents a gathering in France in August 2011 designed to promote the "Universal Wisdom Education" (UWE) educational platform.<sup>14</sup> The documentary includes interviews with teachers from groups around the world, such as Connie Miller, Alison Murdoch, and Ana Colao, as they worked together to propagate a more streamlined and replicable UWE program. Lama Zopa Rinpoche, the honorary president of the Foundation for Developing Wisdom and Compassion, also offers words of wisdom in the film.

"Being Your True Nature" starts with Lama Yeshe's influence and story; Hita and Passigato also includes clips from Lama Yeshe's teaching in the past, and discusses how Lama Yeshe's teaching inspired the UWE program. In a clip from the archives, Lama Yeshe points out that the root problem is dissatisfaction. On-screen, Ösel offers further commentary in his own words, "So in the end, we're all trying to be satisfied. What is satisfaction? Where does it lie? I mean, unless we live in the moment, you can't really be satisfied—it's impossible. How many people are searching outside, in this materialistic world, you know, full of entertainment and distractions? They are suffering." The film works to define "Universal Wisdom Education" for its audiences. As the camera shows us the gathering participants laughing and smiling through the event, Ösel's voiceover narration explains, "What Universal Wisdom Education seeks is the language that speaks to universal human experience at its simplest and most profound." Teachers in the documentary also define it as ways to help people to find happiness, and finding harmony with themselves through understanding the truth of reality. Alison Murdoch, the director of The Foundation for Developing

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<sup>13</sup> According to the credits, "The Foundation for Developing Compassion and Wisdom was established in 2005 to take forward the vision of Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa" (Hita and Passigato 2012). The credits also note that, "The Foundation for Developing Compassion and Wisdom is institutionally affiliated with FPMT."

<sup>14</sup> More recently, the language has changed again. The term "Universal Education for Compassion and Wisdom" replaced the term "Universal Wisdom Education."

Compassion, explicates how the “16 Guidelines for a Happy Life,” which provide the center point for UWE, are divided into three groups: how we think, how we act, and how we relate to others. Lama Zopa Rinpoche has the last word, sending the audience off with words of advice, and a peal his famous laughter. The film is a 17-minute long promotional video for Universal Wisdom Education.

FPMT’s commitment to funding Ösel’s work is ongoing: devotees can donate directly to a \$24,000 per year “Big Love Fund,” which is used to bankroll Ösel’s creative and educational projects. “Being Your True Nature” is not just a film promoting Universal Wisdom Education; it is also a platform for Ösel’s filmmaking, and more importantly, it serves to authorize his spiritual voice once more within FPMT. In it, Ösel played many roles: director, narrator, and on-camera expert. In effect, the film confirms that central figures in FPMT have institutionally approved of this new Ösel as an FPMT teacher, something that could not necessarily have been assumed after his falling out. Although it is centrally a promotion of UWE, the film also serves as a vehicle for Ösel’s reaffirmation of FPMT, and FPMT’s reaffirmation of Ösel.

#### *4. Big Love on the web: Ösel Hita’s social networks*

Ösel Hita’s open Facebook page has been a fascinating stage upon which Ösel has constructed a public face and through which he has been able to interact with his devotees and well-wishers. The “Public Figure” page is set to allow people to “like” the page, and in doing so they receive Ösel’s updates and posts in their own newsfeed.<sup>15</sup> On September 1, 2013, as I worked on an early draft of this contribution, he had 4,738 “likes,” and therefore his page posts at that point showed up in nearly 5000 newsfeeds (“Osel Hita” 2013). By December 20, 2016, the page had grown to 19,209 “likes” (“Osel Hita” 2016). Ösel Hita’s web presence is not limited to Facebook, the FPMT page or his Wikipedia page. Ösel also has a Twitter account with more than 1000 followers, which mostly seems to be a platform to re-tweet his Facebook updates.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> In 2013, Ösel did have a more personal Facebook page that required someone to send a “friend request” before gaining access (“OzOne” 2013). In 2016, this personal page listed him as “Executive Public Relations Consultant” to FPMT, and an ambassador to Revive Nepal, a non-FPMT-affiliated Spanish non-profit working to help Nepalis after the earthquake in April 2015 (“OzOne” 2016).

<sup>16</sup> “Osel Hita @OselHita” 2016.

It is unclear whether Ösel built the initial page or whether he took it over from the FPMT organization, but it is evident that by 2013, at least, he had taken over as the main person managing posts and comments.<sup>17</sup> In fact, in August 2013, a subscriber questioned (chided?) Ösel, saying “Ösel, are you reallllly connected to facebook 10 times a day (sorry my question but I receive so much news from your site). Greetings from Germany” (“Osel Hita” 2013). To which, Ösel replied several hours later, “haha, maybe once a day?”

In late 2013, the “About” section listed Ösel as an “actor/director” and a “tulku” who would someday take over FPMT (“Osel Hita” 2013). By late 2016, the “About” section introduced him to fans thusly:

Tenzin Ösel Hita (born 12 February 1985 in Bubion, Granada) is a Tibetan Buddhist tulku and aspiring cinematographer from Spain. Ösel was designated soon after his birth as the reincarnation of Lama Thubten Yeshe—making him one of only a handful of Western tulkus—and renamed Tenzin Ösel Rinpoche. Ösel is playing an increasingly important role within the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT), the organization founded by Lama Yeshe, as a Board member. Ösel is continuing to study and gain experience with the aim of eventually taking a leading role within FPMT in the future.<sup>18</sup>

In December 2016, the “About” tab on his Facebook page also included a discussion of his film training, his subsequent interest in cooking, and an effort to start an EcoVillage in Ibiza had been “postponed due to financial difficulties.”<sup>19</sup>

Ösel’s posts on Facebook are sometimes personal tales of his current travels or old photos. When he posts pictures of where he is and what he is doing, he captions them in the first person. The posted pictures run the gamut from recent portraits taken in FPMT centers to baby pictures with Lama Zopa Rinpoche to pictures of Ösel playing the drum.

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<sup>17</sup> In late 2013, there were two administrators listed: a FPMT admin and Ösel himself (“Osel Hita” 2013), but by 2016 the FPMT administrator’s name had been removed from the page (“Osel Hita” 2016). Throughout, posts to this “Public Figure” page were invariably in the first person, which served to create a sense of intimacy with Ösel; therefore, it would come as a huge shock to his followers if he is not actually the one managing his public page.

<sup>18</sup> “Osel Hita” 2016.

<sup>19</sup> “Osel Hita” 2016.

In the past several years that I have been watching Ösel's public Facebook page, roughly 2012 to 2016, the majority of posts on the page have been memes and videos that are re-posted from other sites; the content is usually spiritual (sometimes Buddhist, but also sourced from other traditions) and/or other inspirational quotes and news ("Osel Hita" 2013 & 2016). He re-posts liberally from various other sites, such as "the Mind Unleashed," "Conscious Life News," and the "spiritualist," to name a few, which promoted left-leaning politics, eclectic quotes and thoughts about the cosmos, nutritional cooking and achieving happiness. For example, in December 2016, as I finished work on this section, Ösel re-posted an inspirational quote that had been circulating elsewhere on the web that read: "People are not addicted to alcohol or drugs, they are addicted to escaping reality."<sup>20</sup> Within a few days the quote was liked by more than 300 people and shared by more than 100. Many of the dozen comments, at that point, voiced agreement, but some cautioned against a potentially judgmental message that could be read as insensitive to those people actually trapped in a physical addiction.

The content does seem to matter to fans. Most posts, especially the more personal ones, will get several dozen comments from followers. In 2013, pictures of Ösel from his childhood would garner upwards of two or three hundred "likes."<sup>21</sup> Generic inspirational posts usually get about half as many "likes" as most of Ösel's personal photos; for example, Ösel's repost of the quote, "Peace is the result of retraining your mind to process life as it is, rather than as you think it should be," received 109 "likes" from his Facebook followers. More outlying spiritual posts, especially those that could be easily interpreted to run counter to FPMT teachings tend to get very few "likes" and comments. For example, in August 2013 Ösel re-posted an image, entitled, "The Secret Religion," from "The Universe Explorers" Facebook page, which was about a unified proto-religion; the post, which included some arguably spurious claims and problematic dates for many world religions, was a dud, as only 11 people from Ösel's page "liked" the post.

In 2013, pictures of Ösel teaching at FPMT centers often inspired overwhelming expressions of joy from many breathless commenters. For example, in response to one picture of him teaching, more than two hundred people "liked" the post. Commenters said: "at last"; "more more more"; "is that Osel Rinpoche teaching again? That would be great news for all." Another tulku, Gomo Tulku, replied to

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<sup>20</sup> "Osel Hita" 2016.

<sup>21</sup> "Osel Hita" 2013.

that photo, “you got some crazy likes on this one bro!” An excited commenter wrote under a different picture of Ösel teaching, “you look like Jesus.” Yet another effusive comment from a Facebook fan: “he is a bodhisattva.” Comments are overwhelmingly positive, but Ösel does occasionally get some negative push back. He shared a post on his page that reported on Atlantis and pyramids in the Bermuda triangle, and received far fewer “likes” than usual; one commenter even linked to a “Snopes” fact-checking site to say that the information had been discredited. In reply to a picture posted of Ösel and his then-girlfriend posing on a motorcycle, two commenters chided him for not wearing a helmet.<sup>22</sup>

While Ösel rarely communicates in the comments section with his interlocutors, he does do so occasionally. He will occasionally answer questions posed in comments or thank people for their wishes. Sometimes he will directly engage with particular comments, for example, he joined another commenter in scolding a homophobic interlocutor who suggested that Ösel’s behavior in a picture (holding other men’s hands) was “kinda gay”. Ösel smartly replied: “Love is universal, holding hands is just another way of connecting and sharing.”<sup>23</sup>

Despite noting in 2012 that he did not self-identify as Buddhist (Jenkins 2012), Ösel’s Facebook activity seems to indicate a gradual gravitation back towards an acceptance of Buddhist philosophy and practice, albeit within an eclectic, big tent spiritual framework that is staunchly inclusive of other traditions as well. In 2013, Ösel posted pictures and comments on his Facebook page about a trip back to India, which included a short stint in his old monastery. He posted a quote by Phyllis Theroux, “Mistakes are the usual bridge between inexperience and wisdom” and discussed his trip to Sera Monastery, suggesting to his readers that it had been a mistake for him to leave, or that some of his ambivalence about Buddhism has been a mistake. He captioned the photo thusly:

“These days I’m at Sera Monastery studying with my dear Genla (Teacher) Geshé Gendun Choephel. It is being so wonderful to hear the Dharma in such simple and clear terms, while clearing so many doubts I’ve had during a long time of my life. Understanding the teachings without having to clarify with anybody but myself. It’s been 10 magical days here, and another week to go!! I’m so grateful for the understanding and

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<sup>22</sup> “Ösel Hita” 2013.

<sup>23</sup> “Ösel Hita” 2013.

help i have received. Thank you for the time to find myself, thank you for the patience and dedication dearest Genla. You are like my Father and Mother, and will always be in my heart.”

While his Facebook fans can only guess at what he is specifically saying was a past mistake, they were thrilled that his trajectory back into Buddhist practice was apparently leading him back towards “wisdom.”<sup>24</sup>

In August 2013, on his Facebook page, Ösel promoted his new company, Gomosel, an ethical/charitable business venture. Ösel had started the company with another unconventional, dis-robed Tibetan Buddhist tulku, Gomo Tulku, who is better known for his nascent hip-hop career. In the “About” section of the Gomosel website, Ösel’s biographical sketch explicitly linked his future to FPMT:

“In the last years Ösel is also showing an ever increasing interest in the activities of **Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition** attending its Board meeting as a member, and visiting a lot of **FPMT** centers all over the world. Ösel keeps studying and gaining experience with the aim of taking a leading role within **FPMT** in the future” (bold in the original).<sup>25</sup>

If this language sounds familiar, it should, the “About” section on Facebook in 2016 quoted above read in a similar manner.<sup>26</sup> As of September 1, 2013, the company sold jewelry (earrings and necklaces) on-line, and then offered 20% of the profits to the Maya Daya Clinic.<sup>27</sup> The company also promoted a link with “Mindfulnet Project,” which would donate money on Gomosel’s behalf to the Clinic if the site brought them new consumers. The joint venture was not officially linked with FPMT, but the primary beneficiary, the Maya Daya Clinic is an FPMT offshoot. The jewelry business was on hiatus in 2016; in December 2016, the link to [www.gomosel.com](http://www.gomosel.com) was broken, although the Facebook page specifically dedicated to the joint venture was still extant and being updated with pics of the tulkus periodically even into spring 2016.<sup>28</sup> The failed Gomosel business venture shows that

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<sup>24</sup> “Osel Hita” 2013.

<sup>25</sup> “Osel Hita, About” 2013.

<sup>26</sup> “Osel Hita” 2016.

<sup>27</sup> “Maya Daya Clinic” 2013.

<sup>28</sup> “Gomosel” 2016.

even after returning to the FPMT fold, Ösel aspired to utilize social media to cast a wider transnational Buddhist net.

### *5. Skepticism as a stage on the path*

Faith, and the lack thereof, is at the heart of Ösel's story—both Ösel's faith in FPMT (and Buddhism) and FPMTers' faith in Ösel. Faith and skepticism here go hand in hand to the extent that they even feed upon each other for their own benefit. As an anthropologist studying guru devotion and faith in FPMT, I was often struck by how frequently skepticism itself served as a means towards burgeoning faith.

As an institution, FPMT is so diffuse, de-centralized, and transnational that there is an incredible diversity of opinion, belief, and practice within the organization. Skepticism is not only common, it is considered prudent; it is judicious only up to a point, however, and then it is considered an obstacle. There are FPMT students who are cynical about everything and others who are only doubtful or ambivalent about certain notions, such as guru devotion, reincarnation, or karma. Others have worked through doubt and skepticism and now consider themselves full believers, or devotees, with total (or aspirationally total) faith in the FPMT program and its gurus. In Tibetan Buddhism, faith is a part of advanced practice. As Lama Sherab Dorje put it, "Faith and devotion, like analysis, help you cut through your old way of seeing things."<sup>29</sup>

Lama Yeshe taught that whether one is Buddhist or not, one should be committed to questioning and checking up on one's religious beliefs and practices. He wrote:

...blind faith in any religion can never solve your problems. Many people are lackadaisical about their spiritual practice. 'It's easy. I go to church every week. That's enough for me.' That's not the answer. What's the purpose of your religion? Are you getting the answers you need or is your practice simply a joke? You have to check.<sup>30</sup>

This is generally how FPMTers are supposed to proceed in practice: skepticism is encouraged and actively vocalized and solicited by teachers in the Introduction courses, but after someone commits and

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<sup>29</sup> Sherab Dorje 1998, 50.

<sup>30</sup> Lama Yeshe 2003, 42.

spends years in the organization, there is an expectation that faith will gradually outstrip skepticism.

In the FPMT courses that I attended in 1997, 2000, and 2005-7, there was a constant give and take, in which faith is slowly solicited through the performance of skepticism. During Question and Answer sessions, students and devotees ask challenging personal, philosophical, and theological questions, such as, "What is emptiness and is it the same as nirvana?" and "Can I still consider myself a Buddhist if I don't believe in reincarnation?" Instructors, who are sometimes monastics, answer the questions as best they can, often by referring students to Buddhist narratives from sutras, lessons learned from the co-founding lamas, or to their own personal stories and analogies. Often Buddhist monks and nuns at FPMT will respond to these persistent questions by retelling their own stories of skepticism, and how and why it eventually gave way to faith.

FPMT sangha and teachers often recall and paraphrase a statement attributed to the historical Buddha: "Do not accept my Dharma merely out of respect for me, but analyze and check it the way a goldsmith analyzes gold, by rubbing, cutting and melting it."<sup>31</sup> The verse essentially serves to demonstrate that the Buddha himself prescribes skepticism and questioning as part of the path. When I asked FPMT students and devotees to describe their early days in the organization to me, many of them explicitly referred to the notion that the Buddha (and their Buddhist teachers in FPMT) defer from asking for faith, and instead encourage students to see for themselves. Faith is often derided by newcomers who say that it is the blind faith required by their childhood religions that made it less than attractive in the first place; to these FPMTers, Buddhism was initially appealing because it is a "practice," "meditation," "philosophy," and "way of being," all of which could be empirically tested and tried out. Yet, in the cultural milieu of FPMT, at some point, if a student wants to advance in the organization, skepticism ought to give way to full faith and trust in one's guru.

A final, and oft-expressed, explanation of skepticism in FPMT hinged on the notion of karma: if one is lucky and has good karma, then ultimately one will have faith. According to karma, the Buddhist law of cosmic cause and effect, one's current situation is a result of one's past actions, and one's future actions will be determined by the quality of one's present actions. Doubts and skepticism are often interpreted as a sign of the negative karma and obstacles that are blocking one's way along the path toward enlightenment. For example, Georgianna, a Scottish woman volunteering at the Tushita

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<sup>31</sup> Berzin 2000.

Dharamsala center in 2006, noted that karma plays a very central role in the fact that she does not feel connected to statues. This is a very crucial point to understand about the cultural logics of skepticism in all but the most introductory phases of the FPMT subculture: if you do not believe, then it is your own fault, since your past actions must have caused the impasse. One must then work to burn off negative karmas in order to improve one's situation (and capacity for faith) in the present and future. This explanation is also invoked to explain people's belief in the legitimacy and authenticity of FPMT's gurus and teachers. If someone questioned the infallibility of Ösel or Lama Zopa Rinpoche, then many of my informants would blame the bad karma of the questioner. Devotees believed that their teachers were infallible, and that any failings could be attributed to misunderstanding and/or bad karma on the part of the students and devotees themselves.

The willingness of FPMT teachers to take questions, acknowledge the doubts of new students, recount tales of emerging from skepticism towards faith, and model that path as an ideal one, all serve to shore up the faith of others. Faith is crucial in Tibetan Buddhism; in forms of Vajrayana Tibetan Buddhist practice, devotees are instructed to elevate the guru, the teacher, to the status of a transcendent holy being, so that he or she stands in as the contemporaneous face of the Buddha. This meditative refraction of gurus is a type of symbolic replication. As a practice, it compels the recognition of the replication of identity at the heart of the tulku institution; for believers it confers the emotional tonic of continuity. In some ways similar to the awakened/consecrated statue, which the Buddha embodies, or the multiple buddhas of the past, present, and future whose hagiographies read as copies—there is an affective constancy in the beliefs and practices that emphasize repetition and replication. Tulkus serve to enhance the prominence of the previous lama, and by extension, his and her followers. It can be seen as a form of social reproduction for monastics. In fact, I would argue that replication of faith and skepticism serve an important role in dialectically constituting a sangha, especially a transnational one like FPMT.<sup>32</sup>

The importance of skepticism in FPMT can be understood by contrasting it with a classic example from anthropology. In his chapter entitled "Viscerality, Faith and Skepticism," Michael Taussig

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<sup>32</sup> The co-constitutive nature of skepticism and faith is not unique to non-heritage religious practitioners or communities, but I would posit that the performative nature of enacting skepticism in non-heritage religio-scapes is amplified in contrast to heritage contexts.

revisits Boas' collaboration with George Hunt (a.k.a. Giving-Potlatches-in-the-World), who was a Kwakiutl informant engaged in studying magicians and skepticism. Hunt described to Boas his own efforts to trick the tricksters, and how in his efforts to uncover the magic, he becomes a famous shaman himself. Hunt says that he desires to become a shaman in order to learn if shamans are real or just tricksters. His skepticism compels and feeds his investigation into the tricks of the trade, as it were. Taussig delights in playing with Hunt's stories of his own triumphs over other shamans, their desire for his secrets, and how they simultaneously reveal and confess their tricks to him, for the whole process reveals "the skilled revelation of skilled concealment" that forms the crux of his new theory of magic. Taussig writes,

This we might in truth call a 'nervous system,' in which shamanism thrives on a corrosive skepticism and in which skepticism and belief actively cannibalize one another so that continuous injections of recruits, such as Giving-Potlatches-in-the-World, who are full of questioning are required.<sup>33</sup>

The teaching of shamanism in this context requires questioners and skeptics in order to provide opportunities for the continued skilled revelation of skilled concealments.<sup>34</sup> With this insight, Taussig gives us a framework for understanding the compelling and constant presence in the prayer halls of FPMT of doubt and skepticism about many topics, including reincarnation and the tulku institution: skepticism and belief actively (de)construct each other, so that the fresh faces of FPMT serve to reinvigorate the faith of believers. The multiple forums in FPMT that enact and enable guru devotion all allow for the active participation of skeptics, including the rituals of the Guru Puja, the back and forth of the Question and Answer session, and even the mandate to bow at the waist as lamas approach. This is not only designed to convert skeptics in the long term, but also to strengthen the faith of those who already profess their faith in gurus.

What is so anthropologically fascinating about Ösel's trajectory is that he is himself publicly modeling this method of skepticism so perfectly for FPMT devotees; from believer to skeptic back to believer, Ösel's own journey towards belief will invariably serve to feed the

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<sup>33</sup> Taussig 2006, 138.

<sup>34</sup> Taussig takes the game one step further by noting that the real shaman in the picture is Boas himself, and his faith in the magic of his own rituals of anthropological theory and practice.

faith of some of those whom have embarked on FPMT's Buddhist path. Some FPMT devotees will likely interpret Ösel's long and winding path forward as a kind of manifestation of Lama Yeshe's unconventional pedagogy. To others it will seem that Ösel's replication of their own journeys speaks to the archetype of a Buddhist hero—the archetype of the searching mendicant (like the Buddha himself, perhaps) who actively seeks truth instead of passively receiving it. In the end, Ösel's transformations and many "lives" may capture the zeitgeist of transnational Buddhism better than if he had stayed at Sera Jé to complete his Geshé degree. By recounting Ösel's path thus far, and my FPMT informants' engagement with it, I have shown his central place in the landscape of FPMT's "imaginative horizons." Ösel remains, in effect, at the heart of FPMT's cultural "nervous system," which, like any social imaginary, both enables and ensnares with each new iteration, with each new repetition, and with each new beginning.

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## Reflections on Tulku Institution: Technical and Personal

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**I**n my fifty years of approaching the study and practice of Tibetan Buddhism I have mostly avoided pinning myself down to a certain type of approach, a method, in order to avoid stereotyping and limitation. It is dangerous to self-define, for we switch hats frequently; even the fancy names “methodology” and “hermeneutics” can box oneself in and become a prison as they suggest by their high vocabulary a privileged perspective, as if we know what we are doing. Several of my now elderly colleagues who were enthusiastic truth seekers in their youth but became disillusioned seem to have come to take a perverse self-defeating enjoyment in enforcing the rules of their chosen box on themselves and others. Trying to control what others think of themselves, they have risked becoming a caricature of themselves.

I risk the same here now that I venture to describe my own approach. I also pass on the warning that I have a strong tendency to see my life as a coherent whole; I tend to absorb prior paradigms into the new ones to the point where my sense of coherence likely distorts and diminishes periods of crisis. Even after considerable change, I do not forswear my former self; I find continuity rather than discontinuity. Thus, even though here I will try to force myself to face contrary evidence by deliberately searching for contradictions and discontinuities, I must fail and will inadequately describe my approach to scholarship, missing what others must find as glaring inconsistencies. Anyway, let me give it a try.

On reflection, it seems that I have used four types of critical approaches: the New Literary Criticism of the 1950s, Marxist Criticism, Psychoanalytic Criticism, and Historico-Philosophical Criticism. “Criticism,” of course, does not mean “fault finding” but indicates “an avenue toward heightened awareness.” New Criticism has been my main approach to writing about Buddhism. In the 1950s, New Criticism was a conscious turn away from researchers who felt that literary scholarship should solely focus on historical and sociological concerns and not with the text itself, which they felt

should be left to journalists. The new approach was radical for those who considered attention to the text itself to be beneath rigorous research, an idea that today seems utterly bizarre.

I was educated in New Criticism at Harvard University in 1958-59 in a course taught by Reuben Brower in once-a-week lectures which I always found impenetrable to the point where I left the large, 300-person lecture hall blank, but the twice-a-week sections led by Richard Poirier (later of Rutgers) were fascinating beyond measure. Let me say a little about New Criticism. Brower reflects on his small-unit teaching method in his essay "Reading in Slow Motion" in *In Defense of Reading: A Reader's Approach to Literary Criticism*,<sup>1</sup> in which he admits he cannot stand giving large lectures. He livingly describes his approach as:

"Active amusement," "to stress the play of mind, the play of the whole being, that reading of this sort calls for," and drawing from Coleridge "brings the whole soul of man into activity," and drawing from D. H. Lawrence "offers an appropriate motto for teachers and students of literature: 'If it's never any fun, don't do it!'" and "many if not all of the writers of the past...have assumed reading aloud and a relatively slow rate of intellectual digestion. Literature of the first order calls for lively reading; we must almost act it out as we were taking parts in a play." "Whitehead used to say that the student should feel he is present while the teacher is thinking, present at an occasion when thought is in process." "To translate from Latin and Greek demanded close attention to the printed word, and since the ideas being communicated and the linguistic and literary forms through which they were expressed were often quite unlike those in English, translation compelled the closest scrutiny of meanings and forms of expression in both the ancient and the modern language...One purpose of a course in slow reading is to offer a larger number of present-day undergraduates an equivalent for the older classical training in interpretation of texts."

The translators among us can easily grasp Brower's point that the New Criticism is indeed the old criticism, the way texts were read in classical studies and are still read in translation-intense environments. The focus is on the text—its language, structure, and techniques of expression as tools to express a topic—and indeed even when I use Psychoanalytic or Marxist grids, I employ them to bring

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<sup>1</sup> Brower 1962, 3-21.

more focus to a topic within the text rather than the other way around. For me, these grids do not become the focus when the subject matter being studied is Buddhism; rather, for me the grid allows insight into Buddhist views and practices.

The same is true for what I call Historico-Philosophical Criticism, the placement of the text in its philosophical spectrum. I feel we have to be ready to consider, for instance, that the Tulku institution is a projection of a substantially existent self and a projection of permanence as a defense mechanism against the fundamental teaching of impermanence. Similarly, we have to be ready to see that Tulku assignment can function as a means of economic stability and aggrandizement, serving as a power-base of appointed pseudo-aristocratic power through control of resources by estate managers.<sup>2</sup> Indeed without sociological and anthropological awareness one would be swallowed by the outrageous claims of religious systems, and thus, my mouth watered when I read the list of topics to be offered in this symposium, and as I listened to the presentations, I was so absorbed that it was as if my mind and body were expanding!

Since New Criticism was a conscious turn away from those scholars who felt that literary scholarship should solely be concerned with the historical and sociological concerns and not with the text itself, New Criticism was controversial and was accused of being anti-historical, since it seems to set up a dichotomy between the historical and the immediate, or existential, impact. Indeed, my scholarship may seem to do the same, as I spend so much time with the text, trying to convey its impact as a living, breathing phenomenon. In short, I use a storytelling approach that combines a focus on the text within the larger framework of its historical tradition with materialist exposés of exploitation and sometimes with psychoanalytic revelations of layers of projection and self-deception.

In a history course at Pomfret School, I was absorbed with Marxist attitudes driven by compassion for the downtrodden, and at Harvard I was fascinated with Anthropological relativism born from following out the implications of a brilliant course with Clyde Kluckhohn (famed for his work with Navajos) and Henry Murray (famed for development of the Thematic Apperception Test). Thus, in my youth I had developed a deep and continuing skepticism of church and government. By my college senior year (after a year and half wandering Vermont, Tahiti, and elsewhere), I was set in relativistic nihilism and cynicism. At Harvard, I had a strong, almost violent dissatisfaction with scholarship that cites historical influences

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<sup>2</sup> See Lessing (1942) for his depiction of the Manchu court's jealous hatred of Tulkus in his *Yung-ho-kung*.

on religions as if showing that its attribution of non-contingency to itself also implies that a description of its dynamism is unnecessary; I wanted to scream at professors who neglected the lived impact of systems. I was ripe for an approach that proves effectiveness by way of showing contingency, all the while undermining its absurd claims, such as the Middle Way School.

Also, learning from the Kalmyk Mongolian Geshé Ngawang Wangyal techniques for generating compassion and indeed being deeply challenged by them, I became fascinated with the possibility of positive motivation, and I have concentrated on this, despite others' calling it elitism, ever since. Frankly, I often find little worth reporting when corrupt motivations and actions are uncovered—what else is new! Yet, I continue to be aware of corruption lest I be gulled by it. I choose to concentrate on possibilities of genuine other-interest, despite my context of skepticism.

I consciously seek to give the ideal, and sometimes actual, system a voice by using whatever literary skills I have, all within recognizing that “giving the system a voice” is itself a literary device that claims more than it can deliver. This voice led to my book *Meditation on Emptiness*, which begins with an introduction detailing thirty-two perspectives on the Middle Way School that differ from what was known about the Geluk system outside the Inner Asian sphere at that time. In this book, I sought to avoid the cultural imperialism of claiming a privileged perspective as an observer with a special methodology. I also sought to avoid comparing too many systems—in order to allow the reader to gain entry into a system without excessive comparisons, no matter how relevant. For instance, I read the entirety of Taktsang's *Knowing All Tenets*<sup>3</sup> (purloined by someone else on film from a Japanese university), but I decided to only include bits of it in *Meditation on Emptiness*, not wanting to over-complicate the story.

I am a storyteller, utilizing these various critical attitudes over the course of several volumes to present a multi-layered glimpse of several aspects of a dynamic culture. I am not an exclusivist; I am in the cafeteria, grabbing sustenance from here and there. Look at the somewhat wide variety of my writings and the very wide scope of engagement of my twenty Ph.D. students (twenty-five including those who graduated after my retirement). I am still the delighted

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<sup>3</sup> Taktsang Sherap Rinchen (*stag tshang lo tsā ba shes rab rin chen*, b.1405), *Explanation of “Freedom from Extremes through Knowing All Tenets”*: *Ocean of Eloquence* (*grub mtha' kun shes nas mtha' bral grub pa zhes bya ba'i bstan bcos rnam par bshad pa legs bshad kyi rgya mtsho*).

and enthusiastic auditor of T.R.V. Murti's class at Harvard on the six schools of Indian philosophy.

### 1. The meaning of "Tulku"

Let us take a look at what typical Tibetan monastic texts say about the meaning of Tulku (*sprul sku, nirmāṇakāya*). The topic appears in the treatment of the bodies of a Buddha which are variously enumerated as one, two, three, four, or five.<sup>4</sup> These are more extensive or condensed forms of each other and thus do not indicate a difference of meaning.

one: body of attributes<sup>5</sup>

two: body of attributes and form body

three: body of attributes, enjoyment body, and emanation body (the last two being included within form body above)

four: nature body, pristine wisdom body of attributes, enjoyment body, and emanation body (the first two being included within body of attributes above)

five: nature body, pristine wisdom body of attributes, actual enjoyment body, imputed enjoyment body (such as the body of a tenth ground Bodhisattva), and emanation body (the middle two being included within enjoyment body above).

In an earlier work I rendered Changkya's presentation blended with oral teaching from the magnificent storytelling former abbot of the Gyümé Tantric College Ngawang Lekden this way:<sup>6</sup>

When Bodhisattvas arrive at the end of the continuum of still being a sentient being with obstructions yet to be removed, their body ornamented with a similitude of the marks and beauties of a Buddha becomes a Buddha's enjoyment body. Through the power of former wishes and without any intellection, various emanation bodies are issued from the enjoyment body, appearing simultaneously in countless lands throughout the ten directions and aiding sentient beings in

<sup>4</sup> Changkya Rölpai Dorjé (*lcang skya rol pa'i rdo rje, 1717-1786*), *Clear Exposition of the Presentations of Tenets: Beautiful Ornament for the Meru of the Subduer's Teaching* (*grub pa'i mtha'i rnam par bzhag pa gsal bar bshad pa thub bstan lhun po'i mdzes rgyan*), 506.7ff.

<sup>5</sup> *chos sku, dharmakāya*.

<sup>6</sup> Adapted from Hopkins 1996 (1983), 121ff.

accordance with their interests, dispositions, and beliefs. One does not first become a Buddha and then think about what needs to be done; one responds immediately and without thought or striving to the needs of all sentient beings. The enjoyment body and emanation bodies are achieved simultaneously because (1) both are fruits of training in the equality of cyclic existence and peace; (2) both are fruits of training to produce pure lands for enjoyment and emanation bodies in order to provide bases for sentient beings to gain enlightenment; and (3) both are fruits of training in wisdom and method such that at the time of highest enlightenment there are no obstructions with respect to the perfection of all qualities.

An enjoyment body abides in a Highest Pure Land (*'og min, akaniṣṭha*). Highest Pure Lands are above the seventeen types of lands in the Form Realm and thus are called 'Highest' (literally, 'not below').<sup>7</sup> Each Buddha has their own Highest Pure Land produced by their limitless collections of merit and wisdom as vast as space; it is achieved from a portion of their wisdom and is not composed of particles of matter.

An enjoyment body is said to have five qualities:

1. An enjoyment body is impermanent, but it continuously displays the same type of body ornamented with the marks and beauties of a Buddha; therefore, it is immortal.
2. An enjoyment body continuously speaks the same type of doctrine, that of the Great Vehicle, and thus is a body that enjoys or uses the Great Vehicle doctrine as opposed to the emanation bodies which abide in Pure Lands and preach both Lesser Vehicle and Great Vehicle doctrines.
3. An enjoyment body continuously displays the activities that arise from wisdom and compassion.
4. These activities of body, speech, and mind are performed without striving.
5. Though an enjoyment body does not exist as many different personal continuums, it displays many emanation bodies.

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<sup>7</sup> For Jamyang Shepa's lengthier description of complete enjoyment bodies see Hopkins 2003, 997-1000.

It is said that even though the display of emanation bodies is an enjoyment body, emanation bodies are not enjoyment bodies but are of the same continuum as an enjoyment body.

Through the force of compassion and wishes over countless eons the ultimate wisdom itself appears in the aspect of a body. Each of the parts of the body directly realizes all phenomena and proclaims inconceivable intonations of doctrine; mind and body are no longer separate phenomena. Not only is the enjoyment body an appearance of pristine wisdom itself, but also the pure innumerable phenomena that a Buddha realizes from their own viewpoint are the entity of this wisdom itself. In dependence on others, a Buddha also perceives impure phenomena which have as their final cause afflictive ignorance (the conception that phenomena inherently exist) and non-afflictive ignorance (the appearance of these phenomena as if inherently existent).

Based on the accumulation of inconceivable merit for inexpressible eons and based on repeated, inconceivable, powerful wishes while a Bodhisattva, an enjoyment body continuously displays countless emanation bodies that appear in accordance with the dispositions of beings and act for the sake of furthering their aims of attaining high status as humans and as gods and attaining the definite goodness of liberation and omniscience. Spontaneously and without thought, a Buddha, like a wish-granting jewel, achieves the aims of beings but does not stir for an instant from the sphere of the final nature of phenomena.

There are three main types of emanation bodies:

1. artisans, such as a guitarist, goldsmith, or scribe
2. constructions, such as a tree or a deer
3. supreme beings, who display the twelve activities of a Bodhisattva who becomes a Buddha.

Responding to sentient beings' needs throughout time and space, emanation bodies appear, perform their task without effort, and are withdrawn. Sentient beings' noticing or not noticing them as such depends on their fortune which is formed through the potencies established on the mind by virtuous and non-virtuous deeds. As long as space exists, the various activities of a Buddha, arising from great compassion, come into existence spontaneously and continuously.

With that uplifting introduction, let us come back to earth and take a

slow look at another Tibetan textbook, Jamyang Shepa's *Eloquent Presentation of the Eight Categories and Seventy Topics: Sacred Word of Guru Ajita*.<sup>8</sup> It is a reformulation of the often cryptic poetry of Maitreya's *Ornament for the Clear Realizations*<sup>9</sup> into the prose of definition, divisions, and boundaries so that students can get a handle on the plethora of topics, ideal for our purposes here. Jamyang Shepa cites Maitreya's *Ornament*, I.17:<sup>10</sup>

Nature, complete enjoyment,  
And likewise the others—emanation  
And body of attributes as well as activities—  
Are expressed as the four aspects.

Based largely but not exclusively upon the commentaries by Āryavimuktasena<sup>11</sup> and Haribhadra among the twenty-one commentaries spawned in India on Maitreya's *Ornament*, Jamyang Shepa presents a definition of a fruit body of attributes (*'bras bu'i chos sku*): "A final quality attained through the force of having accumulated the two collections [of merit and wisdom]."<sup>12</sup> From the above-cited stanza Jamyang Shepa draws out the divisions:

When [bodies of attributes] are divided, there are four because there are the four:

1. nature bodies (*ngo bo nyid sku, svabhāvikakāya*)
2. pristine wisdom bodies of attributes (*ye shes chos sku, jñānadharmakāya*)
3. complete enjoyment bodies (*longs sku, sambhogakāya*)
4. emanation bodies (*sprul sku, nirmāṇakāya*)

"Body of attributes" also indicates pristine wisdom body of attributes.

When Denma Lochö Rinpoché, a Great Assembly Tulku (*tshogs chen*

<sup>8</sup> *dnogs po brgyad don bdun cu'i rnam bzhag legs par bshad pa mi pham bla ma'i zhal lung.*

<sup>9</sup> *mngon par rtogs pa'i rgyan/ shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa'i man ngag gi bstan bcos mngon par rtogs pa'i rgyan shes bya ba'i tshig le'ur byas pa, abhisamayālaṅkāra/ abhisamayālaṅkāra-nāma-prajñāpāramitopadeśaśāstrakārikā.*

<sup>10</sup> I.17:

*/ngo bo nyid longs rdzogs bcas dang/ /de bzhin gzhan pa sprul pa ni/ /chos sku mdzad pa dang bcas pa/ /rnam pa bzhir ni yang dag brjod/*

<sup>11</sup> Vasubandhu's student Āryavimuktasena is not to be confused with Bhadanta Vimuktasena.

<sup>12</sup> *bla brang* edition, 29b.4: *tshogs gnyis bsags stobs kyis thob pa'i mthar thug gi yon tan de/ 'bras bu chos sku'i mtshan nyid/*

*sprul sku*) of Losaling College, taught this book upon my invitation at the University of Virginia, he addressed the issue of how the term “body of attributes” (*chos sku, dharmakāya*) is used in two ways:

Is a complete enjoyment body a body of attributes? In general it is, but within a division into the three bodies—body of attributes, complete enjoyment body, and emanation body—a complete enjoyment body is not *that* body of attributes, but it is the general body of attributes.

We can see from this that complete enjoyment bodies and, by extension, also emanation bodies (*sprul sku, nirmāṇakāya*) are divisions of bodies of attributes (*chos sku, dharmakāya*) in its wider sense. Therefore, an emanation body is a body of attributes, a *dharmakāya* in this broader sense.

Jamyang Shepa cites the description of emanation bodies<sup>13</sup> in Maitreya’s *Ornament for the Clear Realizations*, VIII.33:<sup>14</sup>

Those bodies simultaneously bringing about  
 Various benefits for transmigrating beings  
 As long as mundane existence lasts  
 Are the Subduer’s emanation bodies of uninterrupted  
 continuum.

The Khalkha Mongolian scholar Ngawang Palden’s *Meaning of the Words*<sup>15</sup> fleshes out this stanza as:<sup>16</sup> (words appearing in Maitreya’s *Ornament* are in bold)

Those form **bodies simultaneously bringing about the various benefits** of high status and definite goodness for pure and impure **transmigrating beings** without intimacy [for some] and alienness [for others] **as long as mundane existence lasts are the emanation bodies of a Subduer,**

<sup>13</sup> See also Jamyang Shepa’s description of emanation bodies in Hopkins 2003, 1000-1002.

<sup>14</sup> VIII.33: */gang gir srid pa ji srid par/ /'gro la phan pa sna tshogs dag /mnyam du mdzad pa'i sku de ni/ /thub pa'i sprul sku rgyun mi 'chad/*

<sup>15</sup> *Explanation of (Maitreya’s) Treatise “Ornament for the Clear Realizations” from the Approach of the Meaning of the Words: Sacred Word of Maitreyanātha* (bstan bcos mngon par rtogs pa’i rgyan tshig don gyi sgo nas bshad pa byams mgon zhal lung, 2014b), 96a.4ff.

<sup>16</sup> Words appearing in Maitreya’s *Ornament* (2014a) are in bold: *gzugs sku gang gis srid pa ji srid par dag ma dag gi 'gro ba la mngon mtho nges legs kyi phan pa sna tshogs nye ring med par dus mnyam du mdzad pa'i sku de ni thub pa'i sprul sku ste de'ang rgyun ma chad pa yin no/*

which, moreover, are **of uninterrupted continuum**.

This stanza in Maitreya's text is rich with meaning and not at all cryptic. With Ngawang Palden's brief commentary we learn that emanation bodies impartially aim to bring about the benefits of high states within cyclic existence and the definite goodness of liberation from the entire round of uncontrolled rebirth as well as the final definite goodness, attainment of the omniscience of Buddhahood. Emanation bodies also appear continuously as long cyclic existence lasts in the sense that though individual ones may be withdrawn, new ones are emanated.

One might expect Jamyang Shepa to craft a definition of an emanation body based on the evident richness of this stanza, but he does not, instead devising one that at first blush is more cryptic than the source text: a final form body that is posited from the factor of not possessing the five certainties. Harkening back to earlier material, the reference is to attributes only of a complete enjoyment body. Here is Denma Lochö Rinpoché's explanation of the five certainties of a complete enjoyment body:

1. time (*dus nges pa*)
2. place (*gnas nges pa*)
3. body (*sku nges pa*)
4. doctrine (*chos nges pa*)
5. retinue (*'khor nges pa*)

The time is said to be certain because a complete enjoyment body lasts as long as cyclic existence is not emptied of sentient beings. A complete enjoyment body always stays only in the Heavily Adorned Highest Pure land (*'og min stug bkod pa, akaniṣṭha*); therefore, the place is certain. Certainty of body refers to the fact that a complete enjoyment body only displays the thirty-two marks and eighty beauties of a Buddha and does not itself display any other type of body. Certainty of doctrine is that a complete enjoyment body only teaches Great Vehicle doctrine, never Lesser Vehicle doctrine. Its retinue is certain because a complete enjoyment body is surrounded only by Bodhisattva Superiors, not by Bodhisattva common beings, Hearers, or Solitary Realizers.

Denma Lochö clarifies why Jamyang Shepa specifies "final":

It is called a *final* form body because a tenth ground Bodhisattva can emanate bodies that are similar to this and

might be mistaken for them, but such are not emanation bodies.

Jamyang Shepa adds:

The two—this [emanation body] and body emanated by a complete enjoyment body—are equivalent.

From these details, we learn that emanation bodies are emanated by complete enjoyment bodies but are not complete enjoyment bodies. A further terminological point is that even when a complete enjoyment body emanates an emanation in a Highest Pure Land, it is *called* a complete enjoyment body, but it actually is not a complete enjoyment body.

How many types of emanation bodies are there? Typical to this genre, Jamyang Shepa laconically says:

When divided, there are three, consisting of artisan emanation bodies, incarnation emanation bodies, and supreme emanation bodies.

Denma Lochö Rinpoché brings the line to life:

An emanation body of a Buddha that is displaying skill in the arts is an artisan emanation body. For example, the king of artisans (*bzo ba'i rgyal po*) named Vishwakarma (?) (*'bi sho skor ma*) was particularly skilled in making religious statues and so forth; it was he who made the statue of Jowo Rinpoché in Lhasa.

Incarnation emanation bodies are those that take rebirth in various forms for the sake of taming sentient beings. For instance, before the Buddha came to this continent he took rebirth in the Joyous Pure Land (*dga' ldan, tuṣita*) as Dampa Tokkar (*dam pa tog dkar*). Buddhas also take rebirth in the form of, or having the appearance of, animals such as deer, and these are also incarnate [or birth] Emanation Bodies. Any form except that of an artisan or supreme emanation body would fall into this category.

A supreme emanation body is one that tames trainees by way of showing the twelve deeds [descent from the Joyous Pure Land, conception, birth, mastery of the arts, sporting with the retinue, renunciation, asceticism, meditation under the tree of enlightenment, conquest of the array of demons, becoming a Buddha, turning the wheel of doctrine, and

nirvana (passing away)]. Among the many activities, the supreme is that of speech, and thus because this type of emanation body turns the wheel of doctrine for each and every trainee who has the lot to receive it, it is called supreme.

We can conclude from this description that the Tulkus of the Inner Asian Buddhist cultural region are not the third, supreme emanation bodies, because they do not display the twelve deeds, but they could be either or both of the other two—artisans and reincarnate emanation bodies.

A quick scan of the Tibetan authors whose works I have translated reveals that many of them were Tulkus, ranging from Jamyang Shepa to his incarnation Könchok Jikmé Wangpo to Changkya and so on, including Gendun Chöpel. Frankly, I never paid attention nor cared whether those authors were Tulkus or not; my concern was with the content of their writing.

With respect to my living teachers, I have had nineteen Tibetan and two Mongolian teachers of Inner Asian Buddhism:

1. Geshé Ngawang Wangyal of the Gomang College of Drepung Monastic University
2. Geshé Lhundub Sopa of the Jé College of Sera Monastic University
3. Khensur Ngawang Lekden, abbot emeritus of the Tantric College of Lower Lhasa and geshé in the Gomang College of Drepung Monastic University
4. Geshé Gendun Lodrö also of the Gomang College of Drepung Monastic University
5. His Holiness the Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatso
6. Khensur Lati Jangchup Tsultrim Rinpoché, abbot emeritus of and geshé in the Shartsé College of Ganden
7. Khetsun Sangpo Rinpoché, a Nyingma Lama
8. Geshé Tadrin Rapten
9. Dr. Yeshé Donden
10. Khensur Denma Lochö Rinpoché, abbot emeritus of the Namgyal College and geshé in the Losaling College of Drepung
11. Khensur Yeshé Thupten, abbot emeritus of and geshé in the Losaling College of Drepung
12. Khensur Jampal Shenphen, Throne-Holder of Ganden (head of the Gelukpa order), abbot emeritus of the Gyümé Tantric College, and geshé in the Jangtsé College of Ganden
13. Gen Losang Tenzin of the Gomang College of Drepung Monastic University

14. Gen Losang Gyatso of the Losaling College of Drepung Monastic University and Principal of the School of Dialectics, Dharmasala
15. Geshé Thupten Gyatso of the Gomang College of Drepung
16. Geshé Palden Drakpa of the Losaling College of Drepung
17. Geshé Yeshé Thapkhé of the Losaling College of Drepung
18. Khensur Könchok Tsering of the Shartse College of Ganden
19. Lodrö Gyaltsen of Jonang Sé Monastery in Amdo Province, Tibet, then residing in Taiwan
20. Khenpo Tsultrim Dargyé Rinpoché of Jonang Lungkya<sup>17</sup> Monastery in Gadé, Golok in Amdo Province, Tibet
21. Delek Rapgyé,<sup>18</sup> professor at a university in China

Of these twenty-one, one is nonsectarian, the Dalai Lama; one is Nyingma, Khetsun Sangpo; three are Jonang, Lodrö Gyaltsen, Tsultrim Dargyé Rinpoché, and Professor Delek Rapgyé; and sixteen are Geluk. Three are Tulkus recognized by the Tibetan government—the Fourteenth Dalai Lama; Khensur Lati Jangchup Tsultrim Rinpoché; and Khensur Denma Lochö Rinpoché. A reincarnation of the third, Khensur Ngawang Lekden, has been recognized as born in Ladakh in his twenties after having become a monk at Gomang College in Mundgod, South India; he is now called Tenpa Phuntsok Rinpoché; I have not met him though we have corresponded a few times. Khenpo Tsultrim Dargyé Rinpoché is a Tulku (I do not know the recognizing body), and I seem to remember that the renowned scholar Delek Rapgyé is not a Tulku. Again, frankly, I have never been concerned with whether a teacher is a Tulku or not. Even concerning the Dalai Lama, I originally presumed that a governmentally appointed reincarnation could not possibly avoid the pitfalls of such an appointment but was slowly shown to be wrong in 1972 during sixteen days of four- to six-hour lectures on Tsongkhapa's *Stages of the Path to Enlightenment* by the sheer content of his speech, the nitty-gritty detail.

I met with the Tulku Trijang Rinpoché, the Dalai Lama's Junior Tutor (older than the Senior tutor but second to be appointed and thus Junior) only once. Sitting across from each other in a window seat with a small table between us, he took my left hand and read my palm. He warned of a serious, life-threatening illness which we determined would be when I was fifty-one but said that if I survived it, I would have a fairly long life. Some time thereafter I had my only sit-down audience with the Tulku Ling Rinpoché. As I was leaving,

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<sup>17</sup> *lung skya*.

<sup>18</sup> *a khu bde legs rab rgyas*.

out of the blue he said that if I ever underwent an interference I should use such-and-such mantra. I learned how to pronounce the mantra and put it in mind but never really practiced it the way I have practiced several others. When in 1991, in my fifty-first year the doctors had given me up for certain death that evening, I realized in the midst of bodiless immersion in golden light and near failure to recognize the sky's pronouncement of "Paul Jeffrey Hopkins" that Jeffrey is the main name that I was dying, and I began bodilessly reciting the mantra. As a doctor said, "We don't know what brought you back."

There are a couple others in my life that I suspect were Tulkus. In my childhood, there was an old man, much younger than I am now, a boxer who, upon being seriously knocked unconscious, revived and became an insurance salesman out of Utica, NY. He himself bought a lot of insurance before having a heart attack; in recovery he moved a couple of blocks from my home to become my childhood mentor. In many ways, he shaped my life with his life stories and with his occasional encouragement to finish anything and everything that I started. I stuttered a lot, and over and over again he told me how in his fantasy when he would get angry he would wrap a telephone cord around the other person's neck. A couple of times, he told me he would teach me how to fight, and one day outside by their kitchen and dining room he told me to put up my dukes, but when I did, he laughed and laughed right in my face. I suspect that he was a reincarnate emanation body, a Tulku.

There also was a clam-digging drunk, whom we fifteen year olds called Digger; he usually sat at the end of a bar in Bristol, Rhode Island. One night, I looked at him from the other end of the bar slobbering into his beer, moaning and talking to, well, no one, and I thought with unforgettable deep determination, "I am not going to end up like him." And I did not. I suspect that he was a reincarnate emanation body, a Tulku, revealing to me the path I was on.

As for an artisan emanation body I have suspected that Elvis Presley was. He commanded the world's attention and then showed the hollowness and corruption of fame—bloated addiction to chow, drugs, and still more adoration. He showed what it means to be a star, "star" being a designation in the entertainment world quite like Tulku, beautifully compelling with impossible expectations. Consider the Tulku who found the Fourteenth Dalai Lama as a child, Radreng Rinpoché, who though he had been Regent, was miserably executed by the Tibetan government, unless you believe those who claim he volunteered to die.

Let me tell you a few other Tulku stories. In the 1970s, I was studying from time to time with Geshé Rapten in his dirt-floor hut

with a single center-pole, on the level above where I lived in Dharamsala looking down and over to the temple complex, the Private Office, and the Dalai Lama's home. One day, Geshé Raptan related to me that he never wanted to get involved in identifying a reincarnation but was eventually bothered by dreams of his late teacher and was driven to search for him. He just plain did not want get involved in the Tulku stuff, but he felt compelled to do so and did indeed search for his teacher, and to his satisfaction found him, and the boy was installed.

In New Jersey, there was a Tulku from Kumbum serving the Mongolian community who told me that he did not believe in any Tulku except His Holiness the Dalai Lama!

Another Tulku, at our own monastery, remarked that if he was the incarnation of anything, it was of darkness.

Then again, there was the abbot of a tantric college who was a geshé but not a Tulku who before he was appointed Throne-Holder of Ganden (the head of the Gelukpa order), he—a bit like Rodney Dangerfield—joked that people like him were not getting any respect in this life, but once people of their training were reborn as little children, they would be instituted as Tulku and get plenty of respect no matter how stupid they were!

During my stay at Gomang College in Mundgod, South India, I was shocked to observe a senior scholar taking blessing from a boy Tulku on the walkway by rubbing his head into the boy's stomach. It has seemed to me that recognition as a Tulku could easily be fraught with danger, either from becoming arrogant, "I am the great one," or from loss of faith, "If they bow down to stupid me, the whole religion must be dumb."

My cook up on that hill overlooking Upper Dharamsala used to be the Dalai Lama's Tutor Ling Rinpoché's horse tender. He talked about Tulkus as if they were his substantially existent self, but then again warned about how the people had ways of taking care of ones that did not toe the line.

Despite the high-falutin' nature of Tulkus there is also something ridiculous, much like Hollywood "stars," who are inflated to the celestial firmaments so that we can catch their fall—pointing, laughing, and gawking as they fall all the way, whether through age, corruption, or moral affliction. The fallen become objects of gossip—the Tulku addicted to gambling; the Tulku addicted to booze; the Tulku having sex with students—the gossipers drooling over the details. I am reminded of the Tibetan Opera in which Gyalwa Rinpoché is jokingly treated as a buffoon inflated beyond all measure like the Emperor With No Clothes, the very name "Gyalwa Rinpoché" being pronounced with slimy sarcasm and gestures of mock respect,

much as we mockingly use the words "Congressman," "Senator," and "President" in comedy and satire.

On the other hand, I am reminded of a friend who said that some Tibetans put up with fallen Tulkus because they, like fallen Catholic priests (but perhaps not sex offenders), can still perform essential rites. But on still a third hand, there are Tibetans who laugh at the gullible foreigners who lap up the fallen "high lamas'" presence, splashing them with adoration and contributions.

The Tulku institution is ubiquitous in the Inner Asian Buddhist cultural region. Do religious groups in Tibet make themselves significant by having a Tulku? As a late Geshé said about his colleague's search for one, "They need a Tulku." It is like big and little groups in the US needing a president. I like being President of the UMA Institute for Tibetan Studies.

I am deliberately bringing up these cross-cultural comparisons as a prod to colleagues who sometimes criticize others for not including more history and anthropology in their scholarship, but who themselves speak as if they were without any biography, any history. Life-story becomes stylized as academic theorizing that emphasizes history and contingency but without revealing any personal source. We need to keep in mind Carl Jung's statement that most theory is subjective confession.

Similarly, when we go overseas we sometimes tend to see our own culture either in an entirely favorable light or in an entirely unfavorable light. Often our culture is put forward as an example of transparency and fairness, and the old government of Tibet, for instance, is treated like an abysmal failure despite three centuries of relative success. When Americans like myself are overseas, we need to remember that in America we do not even try to provide equal education, equal justice, and equal representation, and that democracy remains a pretended goal, not something achieved or even actually aimed at; in fact it is aimed around—consider gerrymandering. However, when we do take notice of our own inequities, we compare American behavior to Tibetan Buddhist ideals, with the result that Tibetan society is misrepresented as an ideal Shangri-la. When we exaggerate Tibetan culture into being a Shangri-la, this leaves Tibet vulnerable to the innumerable revelations of the emotions of lust and hatred inevitably present throughout the world. Even worse, such simplistic exaggeration prevents noticing the evidence of the heights of Tibet's cultural achievements. My favorite counter-story is of a burly Tibetan man who upon returning to his seat at a religious lecture found his place taken, pulled out a knife, and stabbed the fellow who had taken it.

That sounds like a US freeway gun attack, the difference being the weapon!

Given the huge discrepancy between (1) the doctrinal teaching that emanation bodies are emanated by complete enjoyment bodies and are themselves instances of bodies of attributes (*chos sku, dharmakāya*) and (2) the behavior of many recognized contemporary Tulkus, it is not surprising that a group of laypersons a few decades back approached the Dalai Lama's Tibetan Affairs secretary in his Private Office to request that the practice of recognizing Tulkus be stopped. I was told that the deeply experienced secretary turned his head slightly toward the Dalai Lama's residence and said, "What are you going to do about him?" That was the end of the meeting.

I too have been vexed by this same discrepancy and one day—most likely in 1972—asked the Dalai Lama just what Tulkus are. He replied that the bottom line for being appointed a Tulku is that the person's rebirth is motivated by compassion. Perhaps noticing the puzzlement on my face about the obvious failures, he added that when a horse runs through a field, some flowers are knocked down.

## 2. *Getting personal*

I have been moved to read about the harrowing events of the present Kalu Rinpoché's Tulku servitude. How his exalted stature as a star Tulku began comfortably while his manager was still alive but afterward turned into a form of economic servitude under his new manager and into enforced sexual enslavement by other monks, who obviously have no respect for the supposed hierarchy. What are the parallels here in the US? Professional athletes owned by clubs. Salaried upper level managers in corporations. Sex workers enslaved by pimps. Think about his new manager's brandishing a knife and threatening to kill him and replace him with someone else if he did not cooperate. In how many so-called professions does this happen in the US? "Approve what we are doing, or we will throw you out on the streets, and you will never get a job again!" Think about life-threats and more against whistle-blowers. His honesty, as well as Elijah Ari's openness, have caused me to open up a little about my own history.

In my own case, I was born in the Lying-in Hospital in Providence, Rhode Island, of which I have only memories implanted by my mother. Her green metal bed with me in a bassinette to her left, and a family friend called Uncle Gris (Boynton) who stood at the foot of her bed and announced singing to the tune of a popular musical: "Paul Jeffrey Hopkins is a very famous kid, Paul Jeffrey Hopkins is a

very famous kid." When she related this throughout her life, she was always greatly astonished, "I don't know why he did this."

Here are several snippets from my fifty or so pages of actual childhood memories, that I titled *Reborn in America*:

My first meditations were in the crib. I would be lying there in a neutral state of awareness but then suddenly, much like a wave coming over me, I would remember who I was. It was much like "aha," and then I would be fully present. I remember this happening many times. When I say "this" I mean the change from mere awareness as a person to being a specific person, realizing that I had ended up this way in a new body.

Often in my crib in my upstairs room while still less than a year old, I would be lying on my stomach, and I would visualize or contact a plane of slightly greenish yellow light that passed on a vertical axis down through my mattress. Not quite vertical, a little slanted. I frequently went into that state; it was my chief meditation.

One day when I was sleeping in my first room in my parent's house—the position of the bed was such I may have been in the crib—I woke up running through a field of spearheads or knife heads so that whenever I stepped down, four or five knife heads would go all the way through my foot. With each step, that was happening. That memory remains very vivid for me. I have a sense of pale yellow light associated with it. In Buddhist cosmological lore there is a plain of razors, and of course, this is what I identify as the plain of razors. It is supposedly passed through when one comes out of one of the hot hells.

One funny memory I have is of being set on the toilet in the upstairs bathroom and looking at the toilet paper and realizing this was fantastic paper for texts, since Tibetan texts are written on paper about that size. Long and narrow.

One day, when I was lying on my back in the crib and with my head toward one of the two doors and my feet toward a set of built in drawers, I set my mind in a state of what I would now call emptiness and clarity and rose in an ideal body. I was greatly surprised, because the body that I rose in—in sitting posture—was a smoky pink. I was really

surprised by the lack of brightness to that body. This kind of practice is called deity yoga in Buddhist tantra.

At an earlier time, I was on my stomach with my head to my left side and my hand in front of me. This was during a state of neutral selfhood. I came to, realizing that this was *my* hand in front of me; I stared at that hand that was so small and wrinkled but not old. I couldn't control my hand at all, but I realized that it was mine.

Later, I had gotten so that I could control my legs to some extent. I exercised by moving my left leg out to the side while lying on my stomach. I did this in a few series of six repetitions when my mother was present. My intention was that she notice that I was conscious since I did it a specific number of times, but she did not. I was as if in a prison being held incommunicado.

I remember being in my crib once and deciding that I didn't want people to know that I was fully aware because I would be recognized as a reincarnation, a Tulku, and I felt that would just be terrible. But later on, after I had spent a long time staring at the ceiling of the room and the light fixture, which was a round, flower-like, bronze fixture, and being bored, I decided that indeed I would like to be recognized so I could get rid of the extreme boredom. Boredom may be what caused me to meditate so much during that period.

One day in kindergarten when the teacher, Mrs. Gardner, was about to teach the alphabet and I had a pen and paper, I wrote out the Tibetan alphabet in rows. An interesting thing to me now is that I wrote the capital letters which were used in books, rather than the cursive form used in correspondence. Perhaps I didn't know the cursive form in my past life—which would not be amazing since most scholars did not even know how to write. It was considered a distraction from scholarship. I don't know what she did with that piece of paper. I remember reflecting that the Tibetan letter “sa” ས་ is somewhat similar to the English s, and the letter “ga” ག་ is similar to g.

Left out of that series of memories is being called into a hallway outside the kindergarten room, where my father, mother, Mrs. Gardner, and maybe someone else were. They were conveying with some urgency to me that my alphabet paper had been shown to

“brown” which I took to be some authority (but later in life understood to be Brown University) but no one there identified it as a recognizable alphabet. I was thus saved, by truth or artifice, downright lie, from having to be a freak.

My most striking experiences in kindergarten were being taught things like “The house is red.” The teacher had taught us  $1 + 2 = 3$ , so we knew what the equals sign meant. She had said it meant exactly equivalent, but even this gave me a lot of trouble since in Tibetan logic  $1 + 2$  are not exactly the same as 3, since  $1 + 2$  is a *different* expression from 3. Anyway, she said that that the house is red means the house equals red, which I thought was utterly ridiculous and completely stupid, and of course, it is. One *might* argue about whether  $1 + 2$  is exactly the same as 3, but it can't be argued that a house is exactly the same as red. It was like being reborn in a land of stupidity.

Can you imagine having a sense of the full presence of a mature adult and being subjected to schooling in America? I wasn't so bored in kindergarten, but in first grade it was terrible—Dick and Jane and Spot, horrible. I vividly remember being so bored, sitting in the middle front with this dumb book in my hands. Ugh! One day, sitting on the far left in the front, I was meditating on myself as having a back face which was brilliant yellow. I had managed to make it bright, and I was really surprised when the girl behind me didn't see it. It turns out that the back face of the four-faced deity Kalachakra is yellow.

There were places in the house where I meditated a few times, when I was very small. There was a place in a room by my father's bedroom, a bathroom they never put in. There was a closet in the eaves—it was a saltbox house—with double doors into the closet. On the left side was a place to hang garments, on the right side were drawers; there was red linoleum inside the closet and behind the drawers in the eaves. I looked at the place several years ago; it was very tiny, but I was small at the time. Before I knew how to walk, I crawled in there once and meditated. Another time, I got a cushion (green with red trim) and, crawling, pushed it in there; I sat on the cushion and meditated on a hand scepter called a vajra at the point between my brows, which then split into two, but then each only produced one after another, going out in the shape of a V. In my forties, while reading about Yoga Tantra I found that there is a meditation in which

this is done, but each of them splits into two which ends up being very complicated. In my version, I was facing the wall of the drawers from the back of the closet, which melted in my imagination, and I extended these vajras out from that place. It seems my mother suddenly remembered that I was in there and was worried and called me out. She, of course, couldn't get back there.

Another time I was outside in my baby carriage—with the half-top shifted to the other end so there was a little light coming in where my head was, but not direct sunlight—I remember the corner of the house—and I started doing breath meditation, breathing in and out several times and then holding my breath more and more; I remember going off into yellow light.

Many years later my mother told me that at one point when I was in my baby carriage out there, I almost died because I stopped breathing. When she got to me, I was sweating a brown sweat; she picked me up and blew on my face. Upon being told, I immediately remembered. It was a very uncomfortable feeling. She was smart to do so because it revived me out of my trance. I can vividly remember inhaling and holding the breath, following my breath and holding it a lot, but I don't remember being picked up. I do remember coming to with her breath blowing on my face.

I talked to my mother about having been a monk in the past, and eventually she called in someone to hypnotize me...He tried to hypnotize me. It didn't work, so he had me move toward the sunroom. As far as I know, that didn't work either. I had to say a little bit about this past life thing—that I was a monk in a monastery, I don't think I told him anything else. I was told to forget it. I pretended that it worked. Near the front door, she paid him, \$15 I think, which was a lot of money then...Anyway, after he left, I told my mother that it didn't work at all; she was fed up. What got through to me from that experience, however, was that she considered this to be serious. She would work on me to forget it, telling me that it was imagination. I remember sitting at my desk in my room in the attic on the third floor, connecting the word imagination with the Tibetan word *tokpa* (*rtog pa*). I used to think, is this imagination? She decisively worked her way into my mind through pressuring me to think it was imagination.

Again, I was manipulated into not being a freak in the American

culture of 1945 but was left conflicted in what became repressed forgetfulness. One more memory from childhood sometime between age seven and ten:

One day I was sitting cross-legged on the floor between the piano bench and the window. I developed an intention to translate some of these great books of my—I didn't use the word religion—into English.

Subsequently, despite repressing these memories, turning into a bit of a juvenile delinquent, and then finding a way out at a liberal prep school where students were treated as human beings, the capacity for memory of some conceptual and nonconceptual states was restored through practicing Tibetan exercises for generating the altruistic intention to become enlightened.<sup>19</sup>

Now at age seventy-four I still would not want to be identified as a Tulku despite deeply wanting to continue my study, practice, and work in my next life. The star-like aggrandizement would be an obstacle as would the time-wasting official duties; what I want is not to lose the trained talents that I have now. We all know how quickly those are lost, and I know how I lost them despite having them for a number of years in the current life. What I want is education appropriate to my abilities in these same topics! I don't want to be some manager's puppet and a cog in a temple's or a college's machine used for economic advantage. Also, if anyone thinks in my next life I have any blessings, please read what I wrote in my past life.

### 3. Conclusion

We have a responsibility as academics and fellow human beings to portray a nuanced picture of Inner Asian Buddhism such as the place of Tulkus, for it matters, impacts actual people. Undermining popular views but not presenting a well-rounded picture should not be an option especially in the searing blaze of over a 150 Tibetans trying and often succeeding to burn themselves to death to preserve their culture. Glorifying Tulkus as descents of the divine does not reflect the varied perspectives within the region, and focusing solely on the abuse does not reflect the productivity of many Tulkus over the at least eight centuries of the existence of this institution.

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<sup>19</sup> I have written about my own practice in *Cultivating Compassion* (New York: Broadway Books, 2001); retitled *A Truthful Heart: Buddhist Practices for Connecting with Others* (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 2008).

In September 2012, I was part of a group of two senior professors and two top political consultants who visited President Tsakhiagiin Elbegdorj of Mongolia and his top aide for an hour across from the UN in New York. My first teacher of Tibetan Buddhism was the Kalmyk Mongolian Geshé Wangyal, and I lived in his monastery in a Mongolian community in New Jersey for five years 1963-68. I have used the treatises of several Mongolian scholars written in Tibetan in my scholarship and learned from my Mongolian and Tibetan teachers about the Soviets' murder of over 500 Tulkus, wholesale slaughter—this is why Geshé Wangyal with foreboding left Tibet not long after the Chinese Communist invasion of eastern Tibet in 1950. After a good deal of discussion, the impressive but not at all flashy President Elbegdorj, who had first resisted the Soviets and had twice been Prime Minister only to be removed because of being too intent on uprooting corruption, mentioned that he hoped to reinstate the right of the Mongolian people to appoint Tulkus.

We had already learned about Mongolia's plans to build a new Nalanda, a seminal Indian educational institution whose curriculum and faculty had tremendous influence on the structure and practice of a great many aspects of Inner Asian Buddhism. Of course, given its history of Soviet mass murder of one of its cultural institutions, Mongolia would want and certainly has the right to reinstate it and should! But my advice for this anti-corruption, democratic, freedom fighter is that the great power of Inner Asian Buddhism is its profound educational and meditative systems.

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