

# 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 Aiushev 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-oooboo 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 ooboo 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

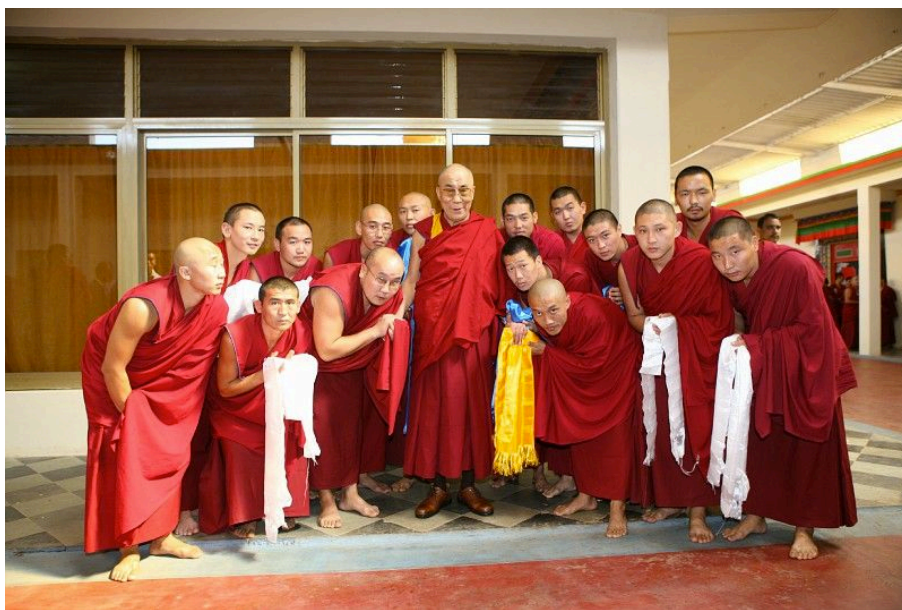
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<sup>33</sup> Interestingly, he used Tibetan terms for locality spirits, such as *yul lha* and *gzhi bdag*, to refer to Buryat “landmaster” spirits. Interview with Zhibalha Rinpoché, Drepung Gomang monastery, India, January 2008.

<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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