Dispatches to the Spirit World: Orality, Literacy, and Power in Tibetan Letters to Gods and Oracles

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Letters have likely been the most widely produced form of textual expression in human societies.[2] Ranging from official to private, from highly formalized epistles to informal messages, letters assume a variety of literary styles and graphic forms depending on the contexts of their composition and the status of their intended recipients. Not merely textual artifacts, letters are also social artifacts: with their culturally specific conventions of etiquette, phrasing, and graphic presentation, they illuminate how humans position themselves within a larger social order. Ishihama Yumiko, for example, has made skillful use of epistolary theory to map the diplomatic hierarchies conveyed in the letters exchanged between the Fifth Dalai Lama and his regent Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho, the Qing Emperor Kangxi, and the Mongol Khan Dga' ldan.[3]

Occasionally, letters serve as communicative links not only between human beings, but also between the human realm and the world of non-human agents. In China, written communication with the spirit world has taken place since as early as the Shang Dynasty when the imperial ancestors were entreated, through messages engraved on shells and bones, to accept sacrifices and to grant blessings.[4] During China's Zhou dynasty, when writing surfaces expanded to include stone tablets, bronze vessels, tablets of bamboo and wood, letters were buried as a form of delivery to the spirit world, and after the invention of paper in the 2nd century, paper messages were also commonly buried with the dead.[5] Tsuen-Hsuin Tsien has observed that in the Chinese context, "the extensive use of written messages instead of oral prayer to communicate with spiritual beings

1 I thank my anonymous reviewers for their detailed comments that have enriched this article, especially when they disagreed productively with one another.

2 Barton and Hall 2000: 2.

3 Ishihama 1998.

4 Tsien 1962: 4.

5 For example, in the case of treaties. Refer to Tsien 1962: 5.

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(who were supposed to be able to read) was an important factor in contributing greatly to the number of written records we have discovered from ancient times."[6] While not all of these textual examples from China are full-fledged epistles with lines of address, they nonetheless reveal how the power of written communication can extend beyond the human realm to infuse the spirit realm, serving to assimilate non-human agents within a literate bureaucracy.

Like the letters that humans write to other humans, letters to non-human spirits reveal concerns about formality, etiquette, hierarchy, and authority that are expressed in ways particular to the literary cultures in which they appear. Appropriate forms of address are determined on the basis of whether a person is writing to a transcendent being, to a middling divine functionary, or to a familiar local god who sometimes causes trouble. As in the human realm, knowing how to present oneself appropriately to a non-human recipient is critical for securing one's position of power within the dialogue and gaining one's desired outcome from the communication.[7]

In this article, I examine two types of letters to non-human recipients that emerge in Tibetan cultural and linguistic contexts. The first type is letters to territorial deities: the local gods and demons, or more neutrally *numina,* who inhabit humans' shared landscape and whose favor affects the mundane fortunes of the human community. The second type is letters to oracles or dharma protectors: transcendent (*'jig rten las 'das pa*) beings whose power and prophetic instructions support the practice of institutionalized Buddhism. There are so many questions we could bring to these materials: what historical examples do we have of these kinds of texts? Why were they written, and by whom? How were they delivered? Did non-human recipients respond, and if so, how? I will touch briefly on these in the following pages, but the primary questions I will address stem from my background in the study of epistolary literature: how have Tibetan writers positioned themselves and constructed relationships of authority through their letters to non-humans? And second, in dialogue with Walter Ong's *Orality and Literacy*[8] and Geoffrey Samuel's *Civilized Shamans,*[9] what role do orality and literacy play in the construction of these relationships?

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[6] Tsien 1962.
[7] I note Marshall Sahlins' interesting argument that human-deity interactions may actually serve as the original models for (rather than models of) human-human interactions. Refer to Sahlins 2017.
[8] Ong 2003.
[9] Samuel 1993.

1. A triangulation of sources

My analysis is based on several kinds of sources from the Tibetan literary corpus: epistolary manuals, edited letter collections, and archival documents. Because each offers its own contributions and limitations to this investigation, I introduce them in turn.

Epistolary manuals are instructional handbooks that provide example phrasings for letters composed for various ranks and types of recipients. Some epistolary manuals also elaborate on the history, theory, and practice of letter-writing, explaining in detail the symbolism that inheres in the physical and rhetorical features of a well-written letter. In the Tibetan context, script size and style, margins and spacing, modes of address, and seal placement all serve to position the letter writer in a hierarchical relationship to the intended recipient. Without an understanding of epistolary theory as presented in the manuals, it is not easy for a cultural outsider to perceive the careful social work that a Tibetan letter is doing.[10]

While epistolary manuals are theoretical and pedagogical texts with sample letters crafted to exemplify the manual's instructions, edited letter collections provide practical examples of letters: presumably, traces from real life. Edited letters help us understand to what extent the theoretical instructions arranged so elaborately in epistolary manuals reflect actual practice. (The manuals, as it turns out, correspond very closely to examples of printed letters.) Many edited letter collections are accessible today in block-print or modern typeset editions in Tibetan bookstores, libraries, and digital libraries such as the Buddhist Digital Resource Center (formerly the Tibetan Buddhist Resource Center). The sheer quantity and breadth of access to these sources makes them valuable indeed. The short-coming of print editions of manuscript letters, however, is that their physical presentation is much changed from the handwritten documents that the original letters once were. When the text of a manuscript letter is edited for print production, the graphic aspects of script, margins, spacing, and seals that are so richly inscribed with social cues disappear. Aside from the text of the line of address, the rest of the social data that an original letter conveys is erased when edited for print. I address these transformations and their implications elsewhere.[11]

Original archival documents are of key importance for this study, then, because they exhibit the manuscript formatting features that

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[10] Kilby 2019.
[11] Kilby 2020.

convey this valuable social data. Archival letters are rarer and more difficult to access than edited letter collections, however. While some original letters to oracles and dharma protectors have been preserved among the Digital Tibetan Archives Material at Bonn University, a rich and carefully catalogued collection,[12] I have not yet located a historical manuscript letter to a local territorial deity. (How these letters would have been ritually dispatched is a question as yet unanswered: would they be buried, burned, or scattered to the winds? If so, what traces would remain of them for our finding? Or would they have merely been read aloud and disposed of?).

With each of these three kinds of sources offering different purchase for our task, we are fortunate to have extant examples from each in order to triangulate their evidence. We can analyze Tibetan written communications with non-humans in terms of both the semantic and the physical aspects of these letters.

2. Aśoka's letter to the naga king

In this article, I treat the dispatch of letters to non-humans as a Tibetan practice, even though there are interesting comparisons to be made with other cultural contexts, such as China. However, I want to begin by pointing out an Indian precedent for the practice of writing letters to local deities that appears in a collection of scriptural narratives, Kṣemendra's *Wish-Fulfilling Vine of Bodhisattva Tales* (*Byang chub sems dpa'i rtogs pa brjod pa dpag bsam gyi 'khri shing*).[13] Several authors of the epistolary instructional materials examined here quote from this collection directly in their discussion of the history of epistolary practice. The story of King Aśoka's letter to the *nagas* features the famous Indian emperor of the Mauryan dynasty who converted to Buddhism. In the seventy-third episode of the *Wish-Fulfilling Vine*, sea merchants traveling to Aśoka's kingdom are troubled by *nagas*—serpent-like deities who govern the waters and subterranean realm—who repeatedly pirate away their treasures. The merchants appeal to King Aśoka, who sends a letter to the *naga* king commanding him to return the merchants' treasures. In the 18th century artistic production of this episode, designed by Si tu pan chen chos kyi 'byung gnas, the letter to the *nagas* is depicted as being dispatched directly into the ocean.[14] This narrative episode appeals to the authority of Buddhist

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[12] The field owes a debt of gratitude to Peter Schwieger and his team for their extensive work cataloguing these archives.

[13] Kṣemendra 1800.

[14] This narrative is found as story 73 in Kṣemendra (11th century). For an artistic rendering of the story, see Himalayan Art Resources, image ID 65034, from the

kings to issue letters or edicts commanding the obedience of non-human agents in their environs.

3. Instructions for writing to local gods and demons

In an 18th century epistolary manual, Sum pa mkhan po ye shes dpal 'byor offers instructions for writing letters to the eight classes (*sde brgyad*)[15] of gods and demons along with the various landscape *numina* that inhabit the earth along with humans and other animals. An Indian classification, the "eight classes" of spirit beings are considered to be worldly (*'jig rten pa*) rather than transcendent beings. Blinded by the same unenlightened tendencies that the rest of us are, they generally serve their own interests but can be persuaded toward benevolence when reciprocated with offerings or threatened with punishment. Within their control are the various natural phenomena that affect human flourishing: the weather, the ripening of the harvests, the flow of rivers, and the spread of disease. Their power over the forces of nature, along with their moral capriciousness, means that they bring both harm and benefit to the humans who share their habitat. Because these beings are rooted in particular places and integral to the local geography, the humans living in proximity to them must find ways of appeasing them and co-existing with them.

In Tibetan contexts, human interaction with these local gods and demons occurs primarily through ritual action. For propitiating mountain gods, in many Tibetan regions the male inhabitants of a locale establish a cairn (*la btsas*) on the deity's mountain, where they perform annual rites of offering. Interactions with rock and tree spirits (*gnyan*) and serpent spirits (*klu*) usually take the form of ritual presentations of sacrificial cakes (*gtor ma)* along with prayers. The nature of the ritual interaction depends upon the status of the supplicant: lay people address the local gods with respect and petitioning, as one might try to persuade a volatile landlord to lower the rent, whereas religious specialists address local spirits with a posture of authority and by employing ritual techniques of subjugation particular to their specialized training. Letters too are

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Avadāna cycle directed by Si tu pan chen chos kyi 'byung gnas. Also refer to Lin 2011.

15 It is notable that Sum pa mkhan po prioritizes the Indian Buddhist classification for these spirit beings (*sde brgyad*) rather than appealing to a more indigenous Tibetan scheme that classifies the landscape numina as threefold: gods (*lha*), inhabiting the sky and mountain peaks; rock and tree spirits (*gnyan*), inhabiting the middle space, the surface of the land; and serpent spirits (*klu*), inhabiting the waters and underground realm.

ritual objects, as I have discussed elsewhere;[16] they are performative texts that invoke symbols to create or recreate a reality. Examples of letters to worldly deities have been less studied than have the oral and embodied ritual interactions mentioned above, but such texts are not as rare as their near absence from scholarly literature may indicate.

Sum pa mkhan po is a fitting entry point into the practice of writing epistles to local gods and demons because he is a notable example of a high-ranking clerical monastic who writes about folk practices that are often deemed beyond the appropriate purview of institutional Dge lugs Buddhism. His most well-known example of this is his treatise on dice divination (*mo phywa*)[17]; he also wrote on astrology (*nag rtsis*, in contrast to *dkar rtsis*), which aims at interpreting the astral elements in order to secure the mundane benefits of health, power, and fortune.[18] Sum pa mkhan po's inclusion of local gods and demons in his letter-writing manual may be read as another attempt to bridge the distance between institutional Dge lugs Buddhism and the world of local deities, magic, and folk religion.

Sum pa mkhan po's instructions for writing to non-human landscape *numina* appear toward the latter part of his epistolary manual. Because Tibetan epistolary manuals are organized hierarchically, this placement indicates that local gods and demons are among the lower-ranking audiences to whom one might address a letter. In his manual, the letter writer is presumed to be a lama or a yogi: one with specialized tantric expertise and authority. Sum pa mkhan po's manual reads, in my translation:

> Also, those such as lamas and great yogis have methods for sending letters and requests for protection to the eight classes [of gods and demons] who reside in this world, and all the types [of spirit beings] included therein—the local gods and earth gods and territorial gods, and whatever demons there may be—so that they may not afflict others. [Here is] an illustration of such [a letter]:
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> 'The word of the yogi so-and-so, who holds the mantras of the tutelary deities endowed with the seven branches of union:
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> You eight classes of local gods and territorial gods, in the world at large and in particular, here in the place of so-and-so, may you make the teachings of the Sugar Cane One [the Buddha]

[16] Kilby 2019.
[17] Sum pa mkhan po 1975b.
[18] Sum pa mkhan po 1975a.

> increase and, with a mind of love toward beings and creatures, make religion and merit flourish!
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> Many of the ordinary sentient beings of this particular region, by force of the degenerate age, are acting with vile behavior and some renunciants are not protecting the purity of the [monastic] law. Many householders, too, are performing the ten non-virtuous actions and, especially, are digging where the rock spirits live, and agitating the water spirits, and filling [the water] with impurities, and damaging the tree spirits, and so forth——and by so doing, they have crossed your intentions.
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> Even so, recollect the commands established by the Thus Gone Ones and the holy lamas, and keep in mind how the monks and the mantra-holders have always made offerings to you with worship and sacrificial cakes and burnt offerings.
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> Therefore, may you pacify the rough, unpleasant clouds out of season, and hail, and the descent of inauspicious lightning, and destructive lightning [that strikes] with a fierce sound, and the harm of thunderbolts, and the harm of fierce winds, and drought, and so forth——calm these [destructive forces]; and may snow and rain fall in accord with the seasons, and may the thunder sound gently and give way to the flowing of soft, smooth breezes; and may the lakes and ponds, streams and brooks, brim fully without causing harm, and may the harvests of the orchards and crops all increase, and may creatures delight in a feast of well-being; and in all districts, may fortune and virtue and goodness pervade.[19]

This form letter exhorts the local gods to engage in beneficial action and to refrain from destructive action. Sum pa mkhan po acknowledges the role of these localized *numina* in influencing weather, agricultural cycles, and the health of the humans and livestock who rely upon the natural resources within the deities' territory. The interdependence of human and non-human agents manifests here in a relationship that is both hierarchical and reciprocal: hierarchical, because the yogi positions himself as the more powerful and authoritative party in the exchange (as one who holds the mantras of tutelary deities), but reciprocal because even as the writer appeals to the power of oaths that bind these deities to the Buddhist cause, he also makes apologies for human activities that damage the gods'

[19] Sum pa mkhan po 1975c: 59b.3 ff.

habitats and reminds the gods of the offerings they have received, implying that those offerings will continue to be forthcoming.

4. Power, authority, and orality

We can understand the social positioning at play in this letter by means of the epistolary instructions Sum pa mkhan po offers earlier in the manual concerning modes of address, script, and tone and their relationship to one's position in the social hierarchy. Sum pa mkhan po instructs the yogi writing to local gods to employ the *'bru tsa* script (or its relative, the *'bru chung gru bzhi ma*). This is the regal script used by political rulers to express an attitude of "firmness"[20] and to assert authority over the addressee, who receives the letter like "hearing a command."[21] The assertion of the writer's own identity before naming the recipient indicates that the letter writer claims superiority to the recipient. In Tibetan epistolary convention, the name of the higher-ranking of the two parties, whether the writer or the recipient, is always written first; an earlier placement in the text corresponds to a vertically higher placement on the page, which symbolizes hierarchical superiority.[22] At the end of the line of address, it is customary to name the subjects to whom one's order is addressed: in this case, "you eight classes." The use of direct address here is especially subjecting because, as the manual attests, it is a mark of respect to refrain from calling a person's name directly.

The form of address that Sum pa mkhan po prescribes, "by the speech (*gtam*) of the yogi," follows the same form for how political leaders are instructed to address edicts to their subjects: by invoking their word or command (*bka'*), authority (*lung*), or speech (*gtam*), which carry weight because of the ruler's status. With this language, the letter is formulated not as a hierarchically neutral letter to a peer but as an order issued from on high. The writer's self-description as a "yogi who holds the mantras of the tutelary deities" appeals to the specific authority and position of a yogi within a spiritual bureaucracy.

With an understanding of Tibetan epistolary theory, it is clear that this manual's instructions and form letter position the non-human *numina* of the land, rocks, trees, and water as political subordinates to tantric specialists. If we also examine this epistolary form using the lenses of orality and literacy, with an awareness of the different kinds of traces that oral and literate discourses leave on human artifacts, we

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20 According to the *Bod rgya tshig mdzod chen mo,* the *'bru tsa* script conveys "*tshugs ma zur dod kyi nyams*." Zhang 2004 [1993]: 2000.

21 'Ju mi pham rgya mtsho 2007: 1b.4.

22 Kilby 2019: 265–267.

see a strong connection in these letters to worldly deities between power and orality. Even in this written letter, the primary mode of authority invoked in the text is the power of the spoken word: *gtam, bka'*, and *lung* each refer primarily to speech, not written text.

Ong has highlighted some of the interplay between orality tropes and political authority: because the physical body of a political ruler is consecrated and guarded as the seat of power, his or her speech (which is necessarily embodied) transmits charisma and power directly from the source. Rulers do not fill out forms or write petitions to get their way; they merely speak and it is done. The English word "dictator" captures the same assumption that the highest political power manifests in speech, not text. Across cultures, political authority turns again and again to the power of orality because orality is always grounded in the body. Ong writes, "Sound cannot be sounding without the use of power. A hunter can see a buffalo, smell, taste, and touch a buffalo when the buffalo is completely inert, even dead, but if he hears a buffalo, he had better watch out: something is going on. In this sense, all sound, and especially oral utterance, which comes from inside living organisms, is 'dynamic.'"[23] The power of a king or Dalai Lama or yogin is *embodied* power. This is why protecting and ritually consecrating the body of the authority figure is so important: their power is sited in the body. Sound is embodied and internal whereas literacy can be disembodied and external. The authority of the yogi over local landscape *numina* is expressed through distinctly oral tropes in Sum pa mkhan po's manual.

5. From theory to practice: letters to worldly deities

Sum pa mkhan po's full-length model letter reveals much about how one Tibetan Buddhist monastic related to local *numina* by using textual communication to bridge the ideological chasm between institutional Buddhist authority and the power of local spirits. The question remains, however, of the relationship between theory and practice in this case. Were such letters actually written in Sum pa mkhan po's day? Or, is this form letter primarily a literary exercise that creatively appropriates the form of a political edict to assert the power and authority of Buddhist ritual specialists over local gods and demons? These questions are worth interrogating because archival evidence does not always match the idealized schemes constructed by those seeking to establish literary and social norms.

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23 Ong 2003: 32.

I find three reasons to argue that Sum pa mkhan po's form letter reflects common practice, rather than mere idealized theory. First, Sum pa mkhan po takes care to instruct his readers about how this form letter can be adapted to various practical contexts, just as he does with the other examples in his manual. He lists the names of the various tutelary deities whose power one might invoke; he lists the alternative titles that one might substitute for "yogi," depending on one's religious qualifications; he offers a choice among *bka'* and *lung* and *gtam* for the line of address; and he lists different examples of local spirits to whom one might address the letter. For example, he suggests that his letter can be addressed to deities who live in mountains (*ri*), lakes (*mtsho*), rivers (*chu klung*), cliffs (*brag*), cities (*grong khyer*), villages (*grong*), monasteries (*dgon sde*), residences (*gnas khang*), or households (*khyim*).[24] This list is interesting because it includes a wide spectrum of deities, from landscape *numina* to the guardians of monasteries, within the world of ritual literacy. The level of detail and care which with Sum pa mkhan po outlines the possible applications of his letter suggests that he expected this epistolary form to be put into practice.

Second, Sum pa mkhan po seems to assume that monastic engagement with the cult of the local gods is a controversial practice, so he spends much ink justifying the act on philosophical grounds. He appeals to the illusory nature of all phenomena, arguing that although gods and demons are not self-existent (*rang tshugs),* in terms of ultimate truth, even samsara and nirvana do not exist. In other words, gods and demons are no more or less illusory than anything else in the phenomenal universe. He also appeals to the interdependence of human and non-human beings, reminding his readers that these deities have been their own parents in previous births. His quotations from Milarepa to make this point are a deployment of both his philosophical erudition and his folk knowledge to validate a practice that he believes might be seen as unfitting for a Dge lugs monastic.

Thirdly, and most importantly, we have examples of such letters in the edited collections of other prominent lamas and writers across various geographic, historical, and sectarian contexts in Tibet. In the biography of 'Brug pa kun legs (1455–1529), one narrative episode depicts a group of monks approaching the master to complain that hail has damaged their common fields; they ask that 'Brug pa kun legs compose an edict (*bka' shog*) to the eight classes of gods and demons so that the hail will cease.[25] To this reader's delight, we hear the rare voices of the gods and demons in reply as they defend the virtues of

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[24] Sum pa mkhan po 1975c: 935 line 1 ff.
[25] 'Brug pa kun legs 2005: 136 ff.

hail showers, which force the monks to practice dharma instead of miring themselves in worldly agricultural work.

In the collected works of several other religious figures, we find examples of letters written to the eight classes of spirits to reprimand them for obstructing the establishment of religious monuments or institutions. Chos kyi grags pa (17th century) composed a "Letter Sent to the Eight Classes" (*Sde brgyad la springs pa'i yi ge*) on the occasion of the construction of a reliquary stupa.[26] Local *numina* inhabiting the ground or subterranean realms often thwart the construction of buildings in Tibetan tradition, and so must be either persuaded to facilitate the building efforts or ritually subjugated, as in the story of the building of Tibet's first Buddhist monastery at Bsam yas, where Padmasambhava subdued the local spirits who were causing obstructions. Another example comes from the collected works of the seventh Dalai Lama Skal bzang rgya mtsho (1708–1757). It is grouped with a collection of monastic charters (*bca' yig*) and letters of award and appointment: the letter's placement here relates it explicitly to the project of religious institution building, similar to the context of Chos kyi grags pa's "Letter Sent to the Eight Classes." Among the collected writings of the visionary 'Jigs med gling pa (1730–1798) is a letter entitled "Report Sent to the Eight Classes: The *Yaksha's* Earring." This letter's title also invokes orality by reference to the ear, of which the letter's content is the adorning ornament. This letter asserts the power of word (*bka'*), command (*lung*), and speech (*gtam*) and addresses itself "To those manifesting, among others, as evil spirits: listen (*gnyon*)!"[27]

Today, the practice of lamas issuing edicts to tame the behavior of gods and demons (*lha 'dre bka' shog*) continues. At the 2022 International Seminar for Young Tibetologists meeting, whose participants are featured in this special issue, I was fortunate to meet a monk based in India, who described how local lamas often issue these documents to protect people's homes from ghosts or other troubles and post them publicly on the sides of buildings, much like other government permits.

6. Letters to oracles and dharma protectors

Let us contrast these examples of letters to *nagas* and the *sde brgyad* with a different kind of letter: letters to oracles. Fewer of the early

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[26] 'Bri gung chung tshang chos kyi grags pa 1999.

[27] *gzhi ma 'khrul ba'i sangs rgyas rdzogs pa chen po'i bka'/ lam ma nor ba'i dam chos dbu ma chen po'i lung/ 'bras bu ma bcos pa'i rig grol phyag rgya chen po'i gtam/ yongs grub rig pa bde gshegs snying/ ma rig las gyur kun brtags kyis/ gzhan dbar gdon du shar rnams nyon/* 'Jigs med gling pa 1970–1975: 577.

modern epistolary manuals address how to submit letters to oracles and dharma protectors, but such instructions can be found, for example in Nor rgyas nang pa's manual from the late 19th century.[28] As for archival examples of such letters, the Digital Tibetan Archives at Bonn University (DTAB) yields twenty-eight documents tagged with the keyword *lung-zhu* (request for prophecy or divination addressed to the oracles and protector deities; the response is called *lung-lan*). These archival documents are calligraphed on large format paper and marked with the official seals of the oracles. Often the oracular reply to the divination request is recorded in a different and more hurried hand in the large empty space, which I have called the "hierarchy space" and which Hanna Schneider has called the "distance of respect," between the line of address and the beginning of the petition.

Here I will examine DTAB document 563.[29] The letter is addressed in formal, respectful language to "the throne of the white *utpala* toenails of the leader, victor, protector of the teachings Rdo rje drag mo and her two royal chiefs," followed by a large hierarchy space of 15 centimeters, indicating the great respect and humility of the sender. The document summary that was available on the previous DTAB database housed on the Bonn University website assessed the content of the document as follows:[30]

> This is a letter written by the tutor, monastic officials and monks from the *Blo-gsal gling* monastery to the guardian *rDo-rje drag-mo rgyal* and her retinue. The letter contains three enquiries: 1. What kind of prayers are necessary to be performed in order to pacify the obstacles and fulfill the wishes of the (present) abbot and ex-abbots, lamas, reincarnations and monastic officials? 2. What types of prayers are required to eliminate all the physical hindrances that young and old monks may have? After eliminating the hindrances, (what could be done so that) all monks remain in harmony respecting the Vinaya rule completely, and how could the dialectic study and the number of monks be brought to flourish? How could all the desired wealth (expand) without decline, similarly to the "summer river?." 3. Which prayers are efficient to pacify the negative influences affecting either humans or non-human

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[28] Nor rgyas nang pa dbang 'dus tshe ring 1990.

[29] This document is ID 3184 and can also be located with the "Signatory in archives" ID 0563_AA_1_1_20. It is part of the Collection of André Alexander (AA), https://dtab.crossasia.org/3184. Accessed on March 15, 2023.

[30] Previously, the digital collection was hosted at http://www.dtab.uni-bonn.de/tibdoc/index1.htm. When the collection migrated to CrossAsia, it does not appear that all the document summaries migrated as well.

> beings; to (maintain) the inner and outer service for the monastery, [to secure] primary funds for monks' tea, leased (land and fields) in the estate, a herd of leased animals in the North, a religious fund that depended on both humans and wealth, and the great murals in a religious hall *Kun-dga' ra-ba*, which need to be accomplished. Furthermore, there should not be any obstacle to get back all the interest on grain stored in the inner and outer treasure houses; which had been lent to (villagers).

After the oracle was consulted with these requests, Rdo rje drag mo replied with brief oral utterances of the practices the requesting monks should undertake; those utterances are recorded by a scribe in the hierarchy space, numbered to correspond with the numbered list of questions, and sealed with the oracle's seal.

According to Tibetan epistolary conventions, this letter demonstrates that the writers of the letter—the monks and officials of Blo gsal gling— are positioning themselves respectfully below the dharma protector Rdo rje drag mo, the recipient of the letter. When we compare this letter to the letters to local gods and demons, we gain a clearer sense of where lamas and yogis are positioned in Tibetan cosmology: they are higher than the local gods and demons, but they are subordinate to the oracles and protector deities. We should notice too that the petitionary components of this letter (unlike the reply) do not evoke orality tropes. Here, the letter is offered before Rdo rje drag mo's throne as *paperwork*, and the oracle's utterance is transformed by the scribe (in the form of his numbered list) as *paperwork*. In our contemporary experience too, paperwork is a task that underlings perform. A king doesn't fill out paperwork; a king merely speaks and things happen (even if the "thing happening" is that a secretary transcribes his utterance and issues it as a written decree). There is a pattern at play in Tibetan letters to non-human recipients, just as in Tibetan letters to human recipients, where those writing "up" employ tropes of literacy and those writing "down" employ tropes of orality.

Concluding thoughts

Tibetan letters to non-humans skillfully employ tropes of orality and literacy to communicate distinct and unequal power positions within a richly populated cosmos. With the interpretive help of epistolary manuals, Tibetan letters to gods and oracles convey much information about *where* tantric specialists are positioned in the richly-populated landscape of non-human beings as well as *how* they express that

positioning. The roles of orality and literacy are central to claiming or ceding power in these epistolary relationships. These findings encourage further attention in Tibetan Studies to the ways that orality and literacy tropes may be functioning to express hierarchy in a variety of settings beyond epistolary composition.

For example, these findings lead to new considerations regarding Geoffrey Samuel's heuristic of shamanic and clerical Buddhism, which (despite the limitations any heuristic necessarily has) continues to hold purchase in both macro- and micro-historical research in Tibetan Studies. In *Civilized Shamans*, Samuel links literacy to clerical Buddhism and orality to shamanic Buddhism.[31] He is careful not to make too strict of a division between these interplaying modes, emphasizing that the two modalities "go right through all of Tibetan Buddhist practice," and that is exactly what we see in these Tibetan letters to non-humans.[32] For example, a letter is itself a written document, but a letter might call itself a *bka' shog*: the word *bka'* appeals to the authority of spoken word, while the word *shog* means paper. Orality and literacy are necessarily intertwined in epistolary texts, where words are transformed from voice to ink.

Yet even when orality and literacy are intertwined, they can nonetheless be traced within their contexts as performing distinct kinds of work. From Tibetan letters to gods and oracles, we learn that what Samuel identifies as shamanic and clerical modes of Buddhism are integrally tied to hierarchical position within a given relationship or event. In the same epistolary document, or in the same ritual event, the higher-ranking actor assumes an oral/shamanic mode of expression while the lower-ranking actor assumes a literate/clerical mode of expression. Different actors' adoption of either shamanic or clerical orientations within a shared interaction may be largely influenced by their hierarchical positions within that event. In other words, it may not be the event that exhibits clerical or shamanic Buddhist modalities, but rather the actors who assume those modalities in their distinct (and possibly shifting) roles in relationship to others. To push the hypothesis further, I suggest that what Samuel calls "clerical" and "shamanic" modes of Buddhism may have less to do with the aims involved (whether enlightenment or worldly benefits), and more with the social hierarchies at play among the relevant actors.

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[31] Samuel 1993: 19.
[32] Ibid.: 19.

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